

Friends in Low Places

by L.C. Wells and A.N.D

The full moon illuminated contorted piles of automobiles and stars glimmered in shattered reflectors and patches of frozen ice.

The blonde boy, dressed in a crazy-quilt shirt and pants, had been roaming the junkyard since the middle of the night. He drank in the icy November wind, thick with the smell of decaying upholstery and rust, unafraid of the rats and other predators that also found the junkyard fine hunting. He was after the kind of gear only found in certain cars and had located two such rotting hunks mostly buried under other automobiles. In one, the dashboard had been totally destroyed. However, Mouse had high hopes for the other.

He was pulling free a gear when he heard cars purring up nearby. Instantly, he wiggled backward outside the wreck and crouched in the shadows. After a moment of silence, Mouse moved. Then two sets of car doors slammed shut and the sound of several pairs of feet stopped him. The men's voices cursed as they dragged something towards his heap. The noise stopped on the far side of the pile of wrecked cars. The boy squirmed around until he found a crack that gave him a ground-level view.

Mouse peered through. A man was face down in the door, his arms bound behind him. Squatted in front of him was a dark broad-faced man, bundled in a stark white parka. The dark man dragged up the other's head by the bloody hair.

"So tell me where they are, eh?"

The bound man moaned. A heavy boot kicked him in the side. Mouse cringed, old memories reviving.

The dark man gestured and two of the henchmen pulled the body into a kneeling position. "This is your last—"

"Uh-uh," Mouse heard the prisoner whisper hoarsely. "Without me you ain't got noth—"

The dark man hit him in the face, drawing blood from his nose and mouth. The others let him crash onto the icy ground. The leader drew a gun." A kneecap or ankle—"

Mouse couldn't stand it. His instincts told him to get away as fast as possible. He slid back, his precious gear under his arm. His tousled head caught on something, and the pile above him creaked. He froze. Apparently, the others hadn't heard it. He squirmed backwards.

It was the gear that caused the accident. Its protruding head caught the framework, causing a chain reaction to the pile. Half the pile shifted position loudly.

The dark man shouted orders and his men fanned out. That decided Mouse. He wasn't going to be caught by anyone who beat people. He shoved the heap, causing a small landslide. Men cursed. He pushed again, and the top car went over with a crash. Mouse risked a glance. The car had tipped over a rusty barrel, spilling the filthy oil in a growing puddle. The pile creaked again, and sparks set alight an isolated puddle. The stench of polluted gasoline and fire clogged the air.

The dark man looked frustrated. "Why'd you let go of him?" He snapped at one of his men. "You! Find a crane. Get some water! I'll be back." The others ran to the cars and followed him into the night.

Mouse peered around the corner. No one was in sight. No body. He slunk carefully around the puddle of gasoline and looked carefully at the pile. Nothing. Finally he shrugged and went back for his gear.

Someone sobbed and groaned. Mouse froze. A moan, barely audible. Mouse peered underneath the rusting mangled steel frame that was the bottom of the now-truncated pile.

In an air pocket, his head protected by a seat frame, was the man. One leg was out of sight underneath the frame, while the other was curled protectively against his body.

He stirred, gulping breath, and rolled face up. His body went limp.

Mouse retreated shaking. When he'd shoved the pile, he hadn't been thinking of anything but survival. The wounded man was a responsibility he didn't want. After a moment's indecision, he ran into the darkness towards the Tunnels.

Vincent had been searching for Mouse. Father had been particularly disturbed with one of his recent pilferings, and Vincent had been asked, again, to speak to Mouse about theft. Mouse's best friend, Jamie, divulged reluctantly about the junkyard in Brooklyn, but Vincent hadn't expected to meet him running full tilt for the entrance to the Tunnels there.

He caught Mouse and held him till Mouse regained his balance. "What has happened?"

"Man," Mouse panted informatively. "Man under cars. Come on!"

The leonine man followed him reluctantly. The sky was a fractional shade lighter as morning began dimming the city's night glow. The Expressway in the distance was filling with cars as the night and day shifts changed places. It was too close to daylight for his comfort, after decades of hiding his physical differences in the dark. His tall body was reflected crazily in the tarnished metal as he glided after Mouse. It was as if one of the stone lions in front of the New York Public Library had come to life to walk among the

junkyard, treading fastidiously around frozen ice. His long tattered cloak caught on mangled frames.

Mouse pointed to the trapped man. Vincent surveyed the wreckage and wedged two beams near the body. He and Mouse slowly and carefully dismantled the top of the heap till the man was within reach. Then Vincent slid his hands under the man's shoulders and pulled gently.

The body came half free. One of the beams groaned as the pile shifted. Mouse squirmed inside before he could be stopped. "Leg's caught!" he sang back.

"Mouse, get out—Hold on!" Vincent snarled. He put the man down gently and shifted, bracing the pile. He heaved upwards. Mouse pulled the leg free.

"Out! Pull him gently," Vincent ordered, the stress showing on his face. "Watch out for the gasoline." The boy crawled outside and pulled on the man., till he was outside the pile. Then Vincent relaxed slowly.

The car heap fell. Mouse and Vincent moved the wounded man back away from the toppling pile. The wind blew sparks at them.

Mouse looked from the bloody face to Vincent. "Alive?"

Vincent felt for a pulse in the neck. It was irregular as was the harsh breathing. He softly touched the bloody leg, finding lacerated flesh and heavy bleeding. Finally he laid his cloak over the body.

"He needs a hospital. We must get him away from here. You call a hospital."

"Wait!" Mouse turned his head. "Oh, no! Cars!" Mouse recognized the smooth purrs he'd heard retreat a half-hour before. "It's them!"

The tall man made a split-second decision. "Lead me." He lifted the broken body into his arms. They moved swiftly into the shadows. Mouse led the way to the Tunnel's entrance, glancing back every minute or two to see if they were followed. Behind them they heard loud cursing and the fire's roar. Something exploded.

"Got burned!" Mouse said gleefully. He operated the secret door and they entered. He looked questioningly at the limp man. "Take to hospital now?"

Vincent looked at the battered face. "It would take too much time. I'll take him to Father."

"Father's going to be mad," his companion commented cheerfully.

Thursday

8:30 PM

A tall man in his early seventies stared out at the leaden skies. He wondered if he should call someone, maybe that boy, Friedland, who he worked with years ago. He decided to give his friend extra time. They would be in touch soon, he was sure. He had what everyone wanted. His gnarled hands tightly fastened the weathered blue shutters on the small saltbox-style house near the bay, and hoped it wouldn't snow before he stocked up at the grocery store on Long Island. The Fire Island stores didn't have everything he needed for his guests.

Thursday

10 PM

Vincent and Father had argued as they stitched and bandaged. Father, as usual, worried about the risk of exposing the Tunnels to a stranger, but, as Vincent had known, did not turn aside a man so badly in need of his surgical skills. Fortunately for Father's peace of mind, the man had mumbled incoherently and promptly passed out before realizing where he was. Now Vincent sat alone by his side, listening to the harsh breathing. Father, having finished both his doctoring and quarrelling, was sulking in his study.

Vincent studied what he could see of the bruised face. It had thick eyebrows, a dented nose and tanned skin. The reddish-brown hair was cut, cup-shaped, shorter on the neck. His hands, with several badly bruised fingernails, were calloused. The injury that worried Vincent the most was over the left eye. On one temple was a black bruise which Vincent felt was the reason for the man's unconsciousness. Under the bandages, one eye was completely swollen shut.

Mouse came in softly. "Vincent?"

"Yes, Mouse?"

"Who?"

Vincent looked back at the man. "I don't know. There was no identification in his clothing."

"Bad?" Mouse could see the hump where one leg was protected from the blanket's weight by a basket.

“Yes.”

“But he can be moved in three or four days if all goes well, Mouse,” Father said unexpectedly from behind him.

Mouse cringed apprehensively. He knew he and Father would have a long talk about his trips Above and he wasn’t looking forward to it at all.

“Three or four days, Father?” Vincent questioned.

“A hospital will be better for him than down here,” Father replied firmly. “They might find out who he is as well.”

“Catherine will find that out. I have sent her a message.”

Father waved for Mouse to leave. After he was gone, the old man stumped to the bedside, leaning heavily on his cane. “Vincent, we have to have him out of there as soon as possible. This type of man isn’t going to stay quiet for long. He’ll want to know where he is.”

“I couldn’t leave him there to die, Father,” Vincent said quietly.

Father sighed. “I hope he is worth the risk, Vincent.”

Friday

8:30 AM

Catherine Chandler tossed her expensive leather driving coat over a coat hook and rummaged in one pocket. A small Tunnel boy had waylaid her and given her the bloodstained card. Vincent asked, in a separate note, if she would find out who owned the fingerprints on the front.

She walked through the cold office to the identification area and asked Edie, “Will you do me a favor?”

“Another one?” the black woman teased as she took the card. “My god, what a mess! How was your trip Upstate yesterday? We missed you here.”

“A prison is a prison, whether Upstate or in town,” Catherine laughed. “Just find out who these belong to, will you?”

“Sure. But this is gonna cost you a dinner. And not at the vending machines this time!” Edie slid the card under an optical scanner and punched in a code. It instantly digitized the fingerprints and began running them through the banks.

“Thanks. I’ve got that Perez deposition out at Sing-Sing. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Friday

12:00 Noon

The phone buzzed. The silver-haired man, dressed in a sky blue bathrobe, walked over and picked it up. “Yes?”

“He never arrived,” a voice replied.

Momentarily, the man paused. Then he slammed down the bunch of spring onions he’d been carrying. “What do you mean, ‘he didn’t arrive?’ Surely he had backup!”

“Dammit, I don’t like it any more than you do! Paul brought in the latest reports but nothing on the kids! We’ve been searching since midnight!

“Well what do you want ME to do?”

“Track something. A woman D.A. named Catherine Chandler just ran his fingerprints in the NYPD files. Talk to her. We have to find him before we run out of time!”

“You’re always running out of time!” the man snapped.

Friday

4:45 PM

It took more than four hours for Bill Filker, a low-level manager in the Perez drug family to tell her about the opium end of the business. Catherine hoped the information was good. It would add to a painfully thin file on Frederick Perez. It had taken over an hour to get back into the City against the holiday traffic flow. The office was almost deserted.

The honey-haired blonde jumped as the phone rang unexpectedly.

“Catherine, what are you doing? Edie demanded before she could identify herself. “I ran into a security block on those fingerprints!”

“What?”

“It froze my system blinking “classified!” at me. I just got the screen back!”

“But no name? Darn it. Thanks, Edie.” Catherine hung up and slouched back in her leather chair, wondering what Vincent was up to now.

Several hours later, she dropped the final draft of the Perez transcript on her desk and yawned. She was the only person left in the cold office except for a security guard who had said “hello” as he passed.

The door at the far end of the hall opened and a man entered. “Ms. Chandler?”

She looked up. The man was in his early sixties, sleek, silver-haired and prosperous looking. His clothes had a European cut, the jewelry barely obtrusive and he moved like a career military man. His intense blue eyes were on her.

“Ms. Chandler? My name is Robert McCall. I’m sorry for interrupting you at this hour but you weren’t in earlier when I called.”

“Mr. McCall? Glad to meet you.” She rose and shook hands. “Please have a seat. What can I do for you?”

He studied her. “Ms. Chandler, I am looking for a young colleague of mine who I believe you know.” He slid a photo out of a pocket and laid it in front of her.

She looked at it, puzzled. It was a young man in his early thirties, T-shirt clad, with a wide, devilish smile. Judging from the tackle box perched precariously behind him, he’d been fishing when the picture was taken. The sun glinted off reddish-gold streaks in his hair.

“I’m afraid I don’t know him, Mr. McCall.” She put the photo back on the desk. “Who is he?”

McCall stared at her and she felt a chill. The blue eyes were icy. Are you quite sure Ms. Chandler? I believe you must be mistaken. I was told you were looking for him.”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t know him at all.”

He stood abruptly. “His name is Mickey Kostmeyer and I have to find him immediately. My information said that the D.A.’s office was trying to find him. If you have ANY information please call me immediately.” He handed her a card.

She dropped it on top of the photo. “Your information was obviously incorrect. Now, I have several hours of work yet to do. Good day, Mr. McCall.”

He walked to the door, radiating anger and frustration. “Good evening.”

After he left, she sat back, shaking slightly. Who was he? She tilted the card toward her. *The Equalizer... For when the odds are against you.* Catherine had a feeling that she was now against him, or rather, in his way, and it wasn’t a good place to be. Could this be about the fingerprints? That was the only unusual thing she had done in quite a while. “Vincent, what have you got me into?” she wondered aloud. Then she reached for the telephone. “Records, please. Let’s see who Robert McCall is.”

Friday

11:30 PM

McCall saw Catherine step out onto her balcony, the night wind stirring her hair. The city shone with lights; some blinking, some shimmering as an icy wind blew against the glass in which they were reflected. She pulled her parka around her shoulders and picked up an African violet, abandoned on a warmer day. On the roof of a nearby building, McCall strained to see properly. Stoner had broken in earlier and set bugs in the living room and bedroom, but only one on the balcony. It was set in the plant in her hand. He saw her smile, as she locked the balcony door and he lowered his telescopic lens. His lips thinned in frustration. He slid the telescope into his pack and headed for the street, dropping off the equipment in his black Jaguar. He peered out of the exit door on her floor level just in time to see her enter a down elevator. He counted how long it took to stop running, and calculated that she must be in the basement.

It was dimly lit when he reached it. He caught a glimpse of her entering a door hidden behind some boxes. After a second he followed. She hurried down a ladder and through a ragged hole in the foundations, totally unaware of the shadow following. He watched carefully as she picked through the rubble of the tunnel beyond.

His arm caught her around the neck. "Going to see Mickey, Ms. Chandler?"

She struggled, kicking viciously. He forced her to her knees against the wall.

McCall held her arms tightly behind her. To Catherine it was obvious that he knew exactly what to do to disarm her. She caught a glimpse of a gun tucked into his belt.

"Who do you think you are, McCall?" she said furiously.

You know who I am Ms. Chandler. You checked with Detective Hands after I left. What I want to know is where is Mickey?"

"I don't know anything ABOUT your Kostmeyer!" she protested.

He pulled her upright. "I don't believe you. Where else would you be going down here? Now why don't you just lead the way?"

She stopped fighting for the moment and they walked on. Catherine knew soon they would reach one of the outposts and Vincent would hear of their unwanted visitor. At one of the Tunnel crossings she paused. McCall waited impatiently behind her. She took a step, landed incorrectly and half-fell. He loosened his grip on her arms and she twisted, kicking at his knee. He fell, breaking it with a roll, as she fled into the tunnel.

She heard his footsteps pounding after her, but she dodged into another tunnel. He flicked on a flashlight, but missed her crouched behind an abutment.

McCall cursed under his breath, playing his light on the bare walls. A small stone lion, the sort that topped driveway pillars, startled him. Surprised to see it down here, he touched it, twisting. The head swiveled to one side and he fell into blackness.

Catherine fled at the cry of surprise. Finally, she paused to listen. Nothing. No footsteps, no gunshots. But she was lost. She tapped her code on the pipes that ran along the wall. After a few minutes, Vincent's code came back.

McCall landed on a large mattress. The narrow room was dimly lit with candles that sent light over a myriad of odd metallic refuse piled on a work table and along the hall. He shook his head, dazed. Something moved. With one fluid movement, he rolled off the bed into a crouch, with his gun pointed at the table.

A fat raccoon waddled over the junk. It headed straight for his silver gun, fascinated by the reflection of the candles. He watched it snuffle and paw at the muzzle, then he gently pushed it away. His eyes followed its wandering path over the bric-a-brac. He stood slowly, lowering the gun.

Mouse was terrified. The sudden entrance of an armed man down his express entrance had made him scramble for the cover of the work table. He hoped that Arthur, his raccoon, wouldn't be hurt. The stillness and silence of the intruder was more ominous than curses would have been. He kept his head down and slid backwards toward the entrance.

A hand abruptly hauled him to his feet. He looked down the nose of a gun, then up into eyes that matched any ice in Central Park.

"And what have we here? Come on, what's your name?"

"Mouse," the boy whimpered.

McCall stared at him. "Mouse?" You live down here, correct? All right, Mouse, I want you to take me to my friend."

Mouse was terrified by the gun. He shook his head mutely.

"My friend," McCall suggested again more gently. "Mickey."

Mouse just stared back with huge, terrified eyes. McCall was torn between his desire to rescue Mickey from these strangers and his innate reluctance to terrify a possibly innocent and maybe half-witted person. He sighed and lowered the gun from Mouse's face. The boy relaxed a tiny bit. "Mouse, I am looking for a friend who I think might be down here. Have you seen anyone, any strangers... other than me?"

Mouse's chin went up in false bravado. "Maybe."

McCall's overtaxed patience snapped. He grabbed the front of Mouse's tattered leather jacket, hoisting him onto his toes. "I do not have time for this. Take me to him!"

"Okay, good, okay fine!" Mouse yelped, squirming back out of his grip. "Mouse, take!"

“Good.” McCall hastened after the boy as he scuttled out of the chamber. The outside passage was dark, and McCall paused to let his eyes adjust. Once they had, he glanced both ways. The boy was gone. “Damn!”

Mouse hid around the nearest bend, still shaking from his run-in with the cold, infuriated intruder. He peeked around the corner and saw no one. He hugged himself in self-congratulation. “Stupid topsider. Can’t catch Mou—Oww!” His whisper of triumph turned into a wail as a hand swooped out of the darkness, grabbing his jacket and slamming him hard, face-first against the stone wall.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” McCall hissed. He pressed the gun hard into Mouse’s neck. The boy whimpered. “No more games. No more hide-and-seek. Take me to my friend!”

Mouse was only too pleased to lead the way.

After a long walk they entered a candle-lit study. To one side an elaborately lit stained-glass window flooded the room with gold. Several branches of candles were lit, providing more light. A small black cloisonné lamp sat on a small table beside a chessboard. Bookshelves lined the walls and covered an old-fashioned desk. Reading under an elaborate candlestick, was a man of roughly McCall’s age.

“Father,” Mouse squeaked.

“Mouse? What...” Father stopped as he saw the intruder holding a gun on his young charge. “Let him go,” Father ordered coldly.

McCall met his eyes and neither yielded. He pushed Mouse in front of him as they went down into the study.

Father moved around his desk, leaning heavily on his cane. McCall noted his limp, his heavily lined face, the grey-streaked hair. He walked with authority even with the limp.

“I believe you have Mickey Kostmeyer. Where is he?” McCall said crisply.

Father studied him. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

McCall lost his temper. “I am tired of this runaround! I know he’s down here somewhere!” He fired. The small cloisonné lamp shattered all over Father’s chessboard. Mouse jumped and froze, shivering, almost paralyzed with fear.

Father flinched but did not back down. “What do you want with him?”

“I. Want. To. Talk. With. Him.”

“Come along.” Father led the way. Mouse, still firmly held followed with McCall bringing up the rear.

Father was terribly aware of the danger of this intruder. It was like having a freezing arctic wind following him, a steel sword blade pricking his spine; a murderous danger to

Mouse and himself. What had Vincent's act of impulsive kindness done, to have brought the violence of the World Above to their safe home?

He gestured with his cane to a curtained alcove. "Here."

McCall eyed him suspiciously. "Go inside."

Father drew back the curtain and stepped inside. Vincent's chair was empty, his jacket left carelessly on the back. The room was dim with only one candle lit.

"My God! Mickey!" McCall barked as he looked inside. He let Mouse go and pushed past Father. Mouse clung to the wall, eyes wide, legs slowly giving way.

McCall touched Mickey's neck. He relaxed slightly when he found a pulse. The bandages indicated that someone down here must be a doctor because they were professionally wrapped. He couldn't see Mickey's eyes for the facial bandages. One hand was splinted and the other had two fingers wrapped. It was him though. McCall would never mistake Mickey in any crowd.

"Well?" Father broke the silence. "Is this your friend?"

McCall turned to him. "What happened here?"

Mouse pushed forward. "Men. In junkyard. HIT him. Hard. Wanted to know something."

"Mouse, be quiet!" Father snapped. "Go back to the study."

"What did they want to know?" McCall interrupted. His eyes didn't move from Father.

"We don't know," the other stated. "In fact, until you told me, we didn't even know who he was."

"He hasn't regained consciousness?"

"No. He took quite a beating, especially to the head. It isn't even safe to take him Above."

"Don't do that," McCall said. "Control would have him awake before he has recovered and he — Damn!"

"Who is Control?" Father asked.

McCall tucked the gun back into his belt as he studied the setup. Unless all his instincts were wrong, no harm would come to Mickey down here. But, back in the real world, trouble was waiting impatiently and there was no time to explain this to the old man who obviously just wanted them both to go away. Mickey couldn't be moved. "Has he said ANYTHING at all?"

"Nothing that makes sense. There was no identification on him."

"There wouldn't be. You have no idea of where he was coming from?"

Father shook his head negatively. "We're probably disturbing him with our talk. He needs sleep more than anything. Come back to my study and we'll talk."

McCall touched Mickey's shoulder in sympathy, then followed Father out of the room.

Saturday

1 AM

Vincent found Catherine where she had tapped. She clung to his leather-clad arm.

"Vincent, there's trouble. He's down here."

"Who?" he said urgently.

"I ran the fingerprints you gave me and came up against a security block. Later I had a visitor named Robert McCall, who was looking for a friend of his named Kostmeyer. Is this the man whose fingerprints those are?" She pulled out the photo McCall left behind.

Vincent studied it closely. "I think it is him... but he doesn't look like this now, Catherine."

"What had he said?"

"Nothing. He is unconscious most of the time. When he mumbles he talks of a Stickleback and Fire Island, and hidden children. Who do you think this Kostmeyer is, Catherine?"

She thought for a second. "I think he must be government, maybe FBI or DEA. Robert McCall's a freelance detective, sort of, who calls himself the Equalizer. Detective Hands believes he was a spy before that. He's got a good track record for getting what he wants but bodies litter the landscape when he's done. He has connections so high even Edie can't get his files. What are you going to do, Vincent? He's down here and he's not going to give up on finding Kostmeyer."

He leaned against the stone wall. "Kostmeyer is too weak to move. We will have to take this McCall to his friend, Catherine. Kostmeyer also mumbles about an Agana. The name is very important to him."

"Agana... Are you sure that's what he said? Francis Agana is the head of a South American drug smuggling ring here in New York. He's in competition with Frederick Perez for the trade in Westchester. I took a transcript from one of Perez's men this morning." Catherine shook her head. "Vincent, what are we tangled up in?"

"Do you think Kostmeyer or McCall are involved in drugs?" he queried.

"It's not McCall's style ..." They were interrupted by tapping on the pipes.

"What're they saying?" Catherine asked.

Vincent frowned. "It's Mouse. He's found your McCall, Catherine. He's with Father. I have to go."

"No! Vincent, McCall is dangerous! He could hurt you, expose you to the government ..."

"Catherine, if he is what you say he is, then Father is in danger. I must go."

"Wait!" Catherine clutched his vest in inspiration. "Let me go instead. Maybe I could work a deal ..."

Vincent shook his head sadly and gently removed her hands. "No, Catherine, it is too dangerous and I want to know you are safe."

"But..."

"I will take care not to expose myself needlessly, Catherine. If you follow this pipe for three turnings and go left at the fourth, you will be back to the tunnel leading to Central Park. It is the shortest way."

Catherine sighed. Vincent could be as stubborn as he was protective, and she knew from experience that he would not back down. And every moment they argued, McCall was free to do god-knows-what to Father.

"Be careful, Vincent," she said as he disappeared around a corner.

Saturday

1:30 AM

Catherine finally arrived back in her apartment. The phone rang moments after she shucked her parka.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Chandler, what're you up to?" Her boss' voice showed a touch of anger and more than a little frustration.

"What's up, Joe? Working late?"

"The damn place is crawling with Federal agents and they don't want to talk to me, they want to talk to you! They're putting together a file that would make the KGB green! You'd better get down here."

Catherine sat down abruptly on the edge of her bed. She was tired to the bone. "I'm on my way."

After showering and dressing, she stepped from her apartment building. She waved to a cab, as a large limousine slid up beside her. The driver rolled down the window. "Ms. Chandler?"

She bent down, surprised. "Yes?"

"I'm here to take you to the D.A.'s office."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How did you know --"

He tapped on the car phone. "My boss asked me to pick you up, Ms. Chandler." He held out his identification. "I'm Paul Friedland."

"I see. OK." She slid in on the crushed grey plush velvet seat.

He rolled up the window between them and slid off into the traffic. After a few minutes he looked back and grinned. She was face down in the seat, unconscious from gas.

**

Saturday

1:45 AM

Vincent reached the study just as Father and McCall entered. He roared at the silver-haired intruder and crouched to jump. McCall whirled at the sound, his gun out and aimed, before his eyes fully registered what they saw. For one of the few times in his life, he lost his composure.

"My God!"

"Don't shoot!" Father cried at the same time, limping desperately in their way. He grabbed Vincent's vest and stopped him.

"Father!" Vincent cried in fear of seeing his only parent in danger of being shot in the back.

McCall almost dropped his gun in surprise at hearing him talk. It was fortunate that McCall made it a point never to shoot without knowing there was danger, and that Vincent never attacked with a warning snarl.

"What is THAT?" McCall asked, tilting his gun towards the ceiling.

"He," Father said with heavy emphasis, "is my son, Vincent. Vincent, this is Robert McCall, an associate of the man you rescued the other night."

Vincent stood still, tensed, claws displayed and angry eyes on the intruder. His voice was underscored with a low growl.

"Catherine has told me of you."

McCall raised his eyebrows. "I'll bet she has. " He looked Vincent over, noting the long blonde catlike mane, long canines, furry fingers and sharp claws. Then he met Vincent's cold blue eyes. "And you're the one who found Mickey?"

"Mouse and I brought him down here. Father is a doctor."

McCall glanced between the men who called each other father and son. No visible physical relationship. Strange.

"I see," he said, tucking the gun away.

The tension relaxed. Father brushed the fragments of the lamp off his chair and eased himself down. He propped his cane nearby. "So what now?"

McCall crossed his arms. "Well, that depends on what you can tell me about what Mickey has said."

"What's it all about?" Father inquired.

"Mickey was bringing some children from South America. He was supposed to report yesterday, so that they could be sent on, but he didn't."

"And Catherine —"

"We traced her through the police computer."

"How did your enemies know that Mickey was coming in?" Father cocked his head inquisitively.

McCall stared at the fallen chessmen for a second. "We don't know. There's a leak somewhere. The only thing I know is that our enemies don't have the children. If they had, we'd know about it. Our South American connections would tell us if they had returned."

"It sounds like you have quite an organization. You're telling us a great deal," Father commented. "Why?"

"Who will you tell?" McCall inquired. "This is your escape, your world."

Father frowned uncomfortably. It sounded like McCall was placing a value judgment on him and the Tunnels. That he had run away from responsibility. How dare he? McCall had no idea of the reasons he'd left the world Above. An arrogant, supercilious man full of moral standards which Father felt he probably didn't follow himself.

"It is a place of refuge. Of peace. No violence. " He met McCall's blue eyes. "No guns."

McCall dropped his eyes for a second. "There's too much to do above ..."

"Change your world, Robert McCall," Father commanded. "Leave ours alone. We do well enough." He shifted in his chair. "We will send word as soon as your friend awakens. Surely you can spend your time more usefully than waiting down here."

McCall pursed his lips, nodding. "Will you lead me out then?"

"I will show you the way," Vincent told him. "We can speak of your friend along the way."

Father settled back into his wooden chair as they left. He rested his forehead on one hand. He hadn't had a headache like this since Vincent had first brought Catherine down. Every time they got involved with the upper world, trouble followed, and more fear of revelation. And he trusted Robert McCall just about as much as McCall probably trusted him.

Saturday

7:30 AM

It was barely dawn by the time McCall reached his apartment. He suspected Vincent had taken the long route out. Then he'd had difficulty finding a cab from the Brooklyn docks where he emerged. He tossed his New York Times on the counter and flicked on the kettle. Someone stirred in the living room. McCall pulled his gun.

"Who's there?"

A man in his late sixties, with a lanky build, bow tie and frosted grey hair, unfolded himself from an expensive lounge chair.

"Robert?" Control's low growl was expressionless.

Since McCall had known him for years, he recognized that things were going very badly.

"What are you doing here?" McCall pulled off his black jacket and hung it up.

"I found Mickey," McCall said briskly. He set the kettle to boil. "He was rather beaten up."

"When can I see him?"

"You can't."

"Robert, you can't mean that ..."

Control leaned against the kitchen counter watching McCall's smooth movements as the other pulled two china cups, tea flakes and a strainer from a cupboard.

"He's still unconscious," McCall interrupted. "I don't think the people who have him will let us move him."

"I can take in a team ..."

"Control, are you interested in finding out what Mickey has said?"

“I thought you said – never mind. What did he say?” Control took the cup of tea that McCall had just brewed. “Go ahead.”

“He’s delirious so take it with a grain of salt. We know Mickey got the children into the country but he was intercepted on the ...”

“He never got them to the safe house.”

“Nonsense. He took them to a safe place. That much is clear.”

“Robert, we have men at the safe house in Babylon, which is where they were supposed to go. He never arrived.”

McCall massaged his tired neck muscles. The sunlight was too bright for a man who had been up all night. “What the hell IS going on here, Control? Who are these children?”

Control was silent for a moment. “All right, I suppose you need to know. The boy, Dominic, and the girl, Alicia, are the children of Pablo Agana. You might have heard of him.”

“The drug dealer! My God, Control ...”

“Now don’t get righteously indignant till I’m finished, Robert! For years we’ve gotten information on narcotics from Agana, from marijuana up through cocaine. He’s on the inside of the whole industry. And, despite his reputation, a great deal of his produce is corn and wheat!”

“Yes, well, it’s the other that’s killing people!”

“I’m not going to discuss that right now. Agana has been pressured to sell by his neighbor, Frederick Perez. Agana insisted that we get his kids out of Mexico to his sister here in the US. They’ll stay with her ‘til things settle down. I had Mickey and Paul get them out of Mexico. Mickey was supposed to take them to Babylon while Paul brought in the reports from Mexico. And if you have read today’s Times, you’ll know we got them out just in time.”

“McCall spread it on the counter. “What do you mean?”

“Page 20.”

“The obituaries? My God, It’s Pablo Agana!”

“Robert, we need those children. They’re Agana’s heirs to the whole mess. If the others in the region know the children are safe with their aunt, they have no legal right to take over the land, as they are eyeing to do. The Government has to support the children’s claim. The aunt’s on our side. Pablo Agana had a great deal more than just land. He was big in the shipping industry as well.”

“So whoever has the children controls it all?”

“Correct.” ‘Til they are of age. Perez wants the children because it is the only way he gets the land. Mickey’s the only one who knows where they are!”

McCall stirred his tea. “Who is ‘Stickleback’?”

“Who?”

“Mickey mentioned a ‘Stickleback’ and Fire Island.”

Control pulled his coat from the closet. “Sounds like a nickname. I’ll get on it right away. Damn holiday weekend. No one will be in Systems!”

**

Saturday

8:00 AM

Catherine awakened slowly. She sat with her hands tied to the arms of a hard wooden chair. She could feel an icy chill that sank through the camel’s hair jacket she was wearing. Her eyes were blindfolded. She swiveled her head, attempting to get an idea of her surroundings by sound.

The room was large and echoing. On the right came a growing murmur of voices. Then a door closed. One pair of footsteps walked up to the chair.

“Ms. Chandler. I’m glad you’re awake.” The man’s accent was South American.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

A rough finger stroked her right ear, moving around to her lips. “I would be a fool to answer that, wouldn’t I? You have some information for me, I believe.”

She bit at the finger touching her mouth. It was removed with a curse, then a blow rocked her head.

A man laughed. “That’s not the way with American women.”

“Next time, you do that, you will never walk again,” the South American promised. “Now, where is Mickey Kostmeyer?”

“Who are you talking about?” She tilted her head towards him.

“You ran his damn fingerprints through the computer, bitch,” the other man said. After a second, she recognized it as the driver of the limousine, Paul Friedland. “You must know where he is.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.” Another blow hit her and she bit her lower lip accidentally. The blood made her even more angry. “You’re making a mistake.”

“You haven’t time for this, Perez,” Friedland said. “Get Felipe. He’ll have some drugs in his bag that will make her talk. You really should have used it on Kostmeyer rather than trying to beat it out of him.”

“You talk too much,” Perez retorted. “Do you think she is deaf? She knows who I am now!”

Catherine heard cloth rustle and assumed Friedland was shrugging. “She can I.D. me now. I’ll kill her when we know we’re finished here.”

She restrained a shudder. Perez was one of the top drug smugglers, and the deposition had made clear that he was top in ruthlessness too. Friedland was a fitting companion. *Vincent, where are you?* Her head was muzzy from the blows.

“Ah, Felipe,” Perez called. “The drug.”

The needle slid in with the smoothness of a truck entering a too-small parking place. Catherine’s lips curled in pain. She could feel it taking effect, and all she could do was pray that Vincent would find her before they killed her.

Saturday

10.00 AM

The lighting never changed in Kostmeyer’s alcove, except when Father lit another candle. The older man was seated in Vincent’s chair, an open book in his lap. His mind was on the man in the bed.

Kostmeyer was obviously better than he had been the day before. A naturally healthy constitution had cut in and he was recovering. His bandaged hands moved aimlessly over the bedspread. Finally, he sighed.

Father looked up. That sounded like a purposeful sigh, a conscious sigh. He picked up one hand to check the pulse.

It twisted and grabbed his wrist, half-pulling him from the chair. “Who are you and where am I?” Kostmeyer said foggily.

“Relax. You’re safe and among friends,” Father said soothingly. The hand relaxed slightly and Father pulled free.

Kostmeyer turned his head toward the light he could see dimly through the gauze. “McCall? Robert?”

Father blinked. It had never occurred to him that he could be mistaken for Robert McCall. Still, they both had English accents. “How do you feel?” he prevaricated.

The wounded man tried to sit up and gasped. He fell back. “Damn, that hurts! Why can’t I see anything?”

“You have a cut over your eyes that is quite bad. Please don’t move any more. You’ll just feel worse.”

“Jeeze, I haven’t felt this bad since...”

“What do you remember?” Father wondered if the blows would have blanked his memory. Kostmeyer shifted his wounded leg and gasped. “I didn’t make it in, did I? Had a feeling I wouldn’t when that sedan ... hit me. McCall, you got to get a message ... How long have I been out?”

“Around a day and a half,” Father said.

“Jeffrey must be having a fit! I told him to sit tight ‘til I came back. Remember, old ‘Stickleback Kern’? Did you ever work with him? Maybe not, come to think... I had dinner with him last month and he offered to do anything he could to help any time. I left the kids with him on Fire Island... ‘cause... Friedland’s the leak. He knew about Babylon house.”

Father made a noncommittal sound. He felt uncomfortable lying to the young man, but this was the information that McCall needed to hear.

“When I knew that, I couldn’t take the kids... to Babylon. I lost my tails on the way to Fire Island, but they found me on the way back.” Kostmeyer tried to shift his leg again and paled.

“I said don’t move!” Father said with asperity. “Just rest.”

“I feel like I’m back at Intangible Plastics. Robert, what does Doc Warnick think?” Kostmeyer’s bandaged head turned to him. “Robert? Where are you? You don’t sound like yourself... Damn, they weren’t professionals. Just brutal.” He took a deep breath but the pain was too much. He passed out.

Father watched, frustrated. He couldn’t do anything more for him. Obviously, Kostmeyer was one of those active young men who inhabited a world that Father had gratefully abandoned decades before. The kind of young man who grew up to be Robert McCall and pulled strings for countries to dance to.

Vincent pulled back the curtain. “Father?”

He turned. “Yes, Vincent?”

“Father... something is wrong with Catherine.”

The old man sighed. “I wouldn’t be surprised, Vincent. We are in far deeper waters than usually flood down here. Did you hear what he said?”

Vincent nodded. “You promised McCall—“

"I'll send Mouse up once it gets dark. He's the only one McCall will recognize and listen to... except us."

"That's hours from now," Vincent protested. "Catherine ..."

"What are you feeling?" Father asked.

"It's very faint. Anger and frustration." Vincent shook his head trying to understand. "I can't quite make it out."

"Do you want me to send Mouse out, now?"

"No. No, it wouldn't be worth the risk of him being seen in daylight." Vincent laughed shortly. "He might be arrested."

**

Saturday

11:00 AM

McCall sipped the dregs of his third cup of tea and folded the last sheet of the newspaper. The telephone rang. He picked it up before the first ring was over.

"Hello?"

"Robert," Control's voice boomed. "Do you remember an agent named Jeffrey Kern? His name was 'Stickleback.'"

"Not at all."

"He dealt mostly with the South American's according to the records. Trained Paul Friedland for his first posting. His house on Fire Island was hit by Perez and his men a couple of hours ago. The kids were there."

"How do you know?" The teacup shattered on the counter. "How'd they find out that the children were there? Wait—oh, God."

McCall remembered Catherine Chandler. Vincent had talked with her before he had to talk to him. Vincent had probably told her what Mickey had said. Damn! "Control, did Ms. Chandler ever show up for work?"

"Who? Oh, the attorney. No, not according to Stoner who's there now. Why?"

"She led me to Mickey and probably knew about Kern. They must have made her talk. Control, things are getting out of hand ..."

"Wrong, things are out of hand and we're on the losing edge. Robert, I have people checking all Perez's hangouts in New York. We have the car's make and color."

"How?"

“Nosy neighbors. They heard the shooting and watched before calling the police. Clean, neat job, Robert. They killed Kern and got the kids out in record time.”

McCall mopped up the fragments with a paper towel and dropped the remains in the trash. “Right, then, at least Mickey’s in no more danger. If they have the kids, then they don’t need him anymore. What do you have planned now?”

Control sighed. “I really don’t know. More of the waiting game I guess. We can’t do anything ‘til we find out where Perez has the kids. You say Kostmeyer is safe?”

“Safer than you or me. What about Chandler?”

“We find her and them at the same time, hopefully. And alive.”

Saturday

5:30 PM

Vincent’s fears for Catherine were growing stronger. He accompanied Mouse to McCall’s apartment after dark. Snow was blowing around them, driving people inside so the mismatched pair passed unnoticed in the upscale New York neighborhood. It was a slick coating on the sidewalk, melting on the well-travelled roadway as soon as it hit. They knocked. McCall’s door opened after a minute.

He was favorably impressed by McCall’s apartment. It was decorated in a very personal, if restrained, controlled style. Opposite the front door was a wine rack half-filled with French wine. On the walls hung etchings and prints from around the world. Near the bow window was a bronze Buddha seated on an elegant French Louis XIV table, and an exquisite tusked ivory elephant shared the mantle over the small fireplace with other pieces of African art. On one wall hung a modernistic painting flanked by crowded built-in bookshelves. An open file lay face down on the shiny coffee table. The apartment was a reflection of the eclectic man who faced them.

“Well?” McCall said abruptly.

Mouse glanced mutely at Vincent. He was acutely uncomfortable in the cool cream room.

“Your friend, Mickey, awakened just a few hours ago. He says the children are hidden in —“

“Fire Island. Yes, well, that information has come a little late.” McCall stared at him angrily. “I was reading the file of the man they killed getting them!”

Vincent’s head went up abruptly. “Catherine!”

“What? What is it?” McCall snapped.

“He knows.” Mouse said helpfully from the kitchen where he had wandered. “Catherine needs him. He knows.”

“She’s in pain. And danger,” Vincent whispered.

“I’ll agree with that!” McCall said. “They must have gotten her to tell them about Kern or they’d never have found the house. She’s probably wherever the children are.”

Vincent’s eyes focused on him. “Mickey said that a man named Friedland was the traitor in your organization.”

“McCall stared at him. “My God, Friedland was the one who helped Mickey bring the children into the country! He would have had numerous opportunities to... No, wait a minute.” He considered the situation for a second. “He obviously wants no one to know that he’s the leak or he would have acted earlier.”

“Snatched?” Mouse offered, the food processor lying in pieces in front of him. He’d never seen one that worked and was exploring its features.

The older man looked pained. “Don’t cut yourself on that. Let me call someone.” He punched numbers into the telephone. Moments later, he was connected. “Control? Anything new?”

“Robert, I would have called you if anything turned up. I’m searching through what Stoner got from Chandler’s office.”

“Well, I’ve got something for you. Kostmeyer’s awake. He says that Paul Friedland is your leak.”

Silence. “What are you talking about?” Control said slowly.

“Friedland. That dishwasher-blond boy wonder of Southern Control. Kostmeyer says he sold out.”

The man sighed. “Why am I not surprised? Damn, he was the best we had in Mexico. I guess the whole Cancun network is compromised. What about Kostmeyer?”

“He’s better. Or he wouldn’t be talking.”

Vincent put his clawed hands over the receiver to make sure his voice wasn’t overheard.

“Ask him if he found a transcript in Catherine’s office. She took the deposition of a Perez gang member today. It might mention...”

McCall waved him away. “Control, did you find a transcript in Catherine Chandler’s office?”

“Robert, I have half her office all over my desk right now!”

“Apparently, she took a deposition from one of Perez’s thugs. He might have mentioned where they could be holding her.”

“How’d you know that?” Control said flatly. “Robert, you’re holding out on me!”

Vincent was pacing impatiently, head cocked as he listened to an inner voice. McCall studied him.

“Control, I’ll call you back.”

“Robert ...” Click.

“What is it?” McCall asked.

“She’s in danger. I need to find her,” Vincent said simply.

“Right. I’ll drive.” McCall pulled his black jacket out of his coat closet.

“Mouse, go tell Father what is happening.”

Mouse was oblivious, having discovered McCall’s hidden gun room. He startled as claws landed on his shoulder. Vincent’s eyes blazed with fear and impatience.

“Okay, good, okay fine!” Mouse hurried out, cutting McCall off at the door.

McCall raised an eyebrow towards Vincent.

“He’s actually more verbal than he seems,” Vincent said defensively. “Father will know what we are doing.”

The bucket seat on McCall’s black Jaguar was barely large enough for Vincent. McCall followed his instructions silently, taking the roads that lead up to Westchester and the Connecticut line. Snow effectively masked them from the city, falling in large flakes now, caking the roadway. It was beginning to stick. The Jaguar’s radials made little matter of it as they travelled north. The road was almost abandoned. People had heard of an impending snowstorm and stayed home.

To Vincent, it was a timeless interval. He had never ridden in a car before. He studied the driver, wondering what McCall really did for a living that he could afford the apartment and the car. His expression was familiar to Vincent from watching Kostmeyer for hours. They both had the same tightness to their lips and air of danger. Vincent had never encountered men engaged in espionage before and he found it intriguing. If it hadn’t been for worry over Catherine, he would have loved to discuss the new world with McCall, since he knew the man would have radically different viewpoints from his and Father’s. If he would talk with them. They had gotten off on the wrong foot with McCall in the Tunnels.

Robert McCall was tense. He hated this aimless driving and wasn’t sure if it wasn’t a total waste of time. The hulking figure beside him was quite precise on direction, but still he disliked walking into a situation without any idea of what was waiting for him. He

admitted to himself that these dwellers below had been honest with him and saved Mickey's life, and he owed them. He reluctantly admitted to himself that Mickey was a great deal more than just a colleague. He was like a second son, a son of his work, who didn't reproach him (as his real son did) or make him feel guilty about the past. In addition, Mickey was a consummate professional, trained by McCall himself. They both knew the risks of the espionage business. He wanted to meet the man who would brutally beat his friend that way. McCall wanted to meet him very badly.

The tight streets soon gave way to unlit suburbs and mansions set among acres of land fenced with stone walls, pre-dating the American Revolution. The air was a chill and frosty stream through the narrowly cracked window on McCall's side. Finally, Vincent pointed to an elegant mansion behind high brick walls. The tops were covered with ivy and broken glass. "She's in there."

McCall gave him a disbelieving look. The carphone buzzed urgently. "Hello?"

Control's voice crackled down the line. "Robert, the deposition mentions a house in Burlington. A mansion with a sunken garden. He says Perez takes his distributors there when they need a talking with."

"The sunken garden probably comes in handy. I am outside it right now, Control. It's 1653 Arlington Avenue."

"How'd ...? We'll be there as soon as possible." Click.

McCall turned. "Vincent, I'll go around the front. Don't do anything –"

His words fell on thin air. Vincent was already gone into the swirling flakes.

Saturday

8:40 PM

Dried leaves from long-dead plants skittered across the floor of the unused conservatory. Beyond the long row of etched glass doors a set of stairs led down to an unused fountain. A statue of a rooster crowed at the leaden grey skies, heavy with snow. Next to one door, the dead stem of a palm thrust upright like the last wave of a dying man.

Catherine was cold. Her hands and feet were numb from the electrical wire that tightly tied them. She shook back her hair and smiled weakly at the children next to her. At least this time she could see. She'd heard Friedland and Perez boasting about the raid on Fire Island and how they'd killed a man there. The first she'd known about it was when the children were thrust in the conservatory. The little boy was curled into a ball, sucking his thumb while the girl hugged her knees. She'd tried talking to the girl. Her broken Spanish was barely adequate to order in a restaurant. The girl had worked on

the bonds on Catherine's hands, but she broke and ran when the house door opened. Catherine shook her hands, trying to snap the last wire.

Friedland entered, holding an Uzi, followed by one of the other thugs. He glanced out the etched glass windows, saw nothing threatening, then flicked on the light switch. The room flooded with cold light.

Catherine pushed herself into a sitting position, hiding her now-free hands behind her. The boy whimpered, and the little girl hugged him.

"It's time, Chandler." Friedland pulled her up. One of Catherine's hands came around and slapped the hand that held the Uzi. He cursed. She tripped him and they both fell heavily against one of the etched doors. It shattered.

A roar came out of the dark. Vincent grabbed Friedland's neck. His claws ripped flesh and the fine European cloth, throwing him away from Catherine. The young man hit the base of a leaf-clogged fountain and went limp.

Inside, the other killer was taking deadly aim at the leonine figure outlined in broken glass. One shot from the half-open hall door left the killer sprawled on the floor. McCall was briefly lit by the hall light. "Get them outside!" he ordered, disappearing back into the hallway. The children screamed, their faces hidden against Catherine's jacket. Her eyes met Vincent's wild ones. "Go inside, Vincent. Help him. I'll take care of the children."

The man hesitated momentarily, then stepped into the ruined conservatory. "I will be back."

Catherine hugged the children, then attacked the wire on her legs.

McCall carefully picked his way up the carpeted stairs. While the conservatory was unused, the rest of the house was opulently furnished with gilt-edged mirrors and a heavy chandelier that shook as he passed. He had found no alarms on the doors, leading him to suspect that Perez was leaving shortly.

Voices alerted him to the upper landing. He heard men's laughter and then one door swung open. McCall pressed himself into a shadowy doorway.

"He should be done by now. You dug the hole?"

"Si," a curly haired man stopped in the doorway. "Why did you leave it up to Pretty Boy?"

"One more death we can use on him. One more reason for him to need us."

"As long as you keep him supplied with drugs," the other retorted.

"Si."

McCall nodded. That jibbed with what he had suspected. He struck the man as he passed, and dragged the body inside the darkened room. Then he crept up to the partly opened door.

Inside, one dark man was snapping the buckles on a small suitcase while another, slung with an Uzi, watched.

McCall stepped in. "Don't move. Oh, please don't ..." his words were drowned in gunfire.

**

At the door to the hallway, Vincent looked up, wondering if he should go up.

Outside, Catherine stood, her arms around the shivering children. Her eyes were on the one lit window. She prayed that Vincent hadn't been shot. Suddenly, the glass exploded outward and a body fell, cartwheeling down to land in the bushes in front of the building. The children clung closer.

Then, on the breeze, she heard the sound of sirens.

**

A chill wind howled through the room from the broken window. McCall covered the dark man with his gun. "Frederick Perez, I assume?"

The other stared at him bleakly.

"Mr. Perez, you have been the cause of a man's death just this day, and the severed beating of another. I really suggest that unless you intend to use that hole in your backyard for your own grave, that you put your hands up."

"And who are you?" Perez growled.

"My name is Robert McCall. We have a mutual acquaintance. Mickey Kostmeyer."

The name registered on Perez like a blow. He swung the suitcase in front of him and outwards.

McCall's gunfire ripped through it as he dodged. He ran after Perez as the other fled down the staircase. The chandelier shivered.

McCall saw that Perez would escape before he reached bottom.

Then the man stumbled backward, his hand over his face. A roar filled the hall. From the shadows, Vincent slashed at him. McCall with one shot, cut the chandelier cord. It crashed down, pinning Perez to the floor, knocking him unconscious.

McCall heard sirens growing louder. He met Vincent's eyes. "Chandler?"

"She sent me back for you."

“Unless you want to meet Control, I suggest you leave now.” The first flash of red and blue lit the sky and tires screeched.

Vincent looked out the front door. “I can’t go that way.”

McCall pointed down the hall towards the conservatory. “Out there, through the garden. I’ll get their attention out front. Do you remember how we got here? Take the same route back.”

The leonine man didn’t bother replying, just glided out through the shadows.

Perez groaned. McCall gave him a disgusted look and walked outside.

Control emerged from one of the black Chevy Cavaliers surrounded by his men, all of which McCall thought looked alike. From the same cookie cutter. “Well, Robert, have you cleaned up again?”

“You wanted the children, Control. I wanted Perez.”

“I would also like to have Mickey, whenever you are ready to cough him up.” Control turned to Catherine. “Ms. Chandler, I am very sorry you got involved in all this.”

She smiled, her eyes flicking to McCall. “I’m still not quite sure what I was involved with.”

Control knelt in the snow. “Dominic? Alicia?” The children nodded. He looked up at Catherine. “Are they all right?”

Before she replied, a woman with dark hair and eyes emerged from another car. She called in Spanish and the children abandoned Catherine to run to her.

“The aunt,” McCall said. “I didn’t know she was in New York.”

“She won’t be soon. Ms. Chandler, can I offer you a ride back to the city?” Control asked.

“No, no,” McCall interrupted. “I’ll take her back with me.”

“Robert, I need you here,” Control snapped in a tone at the end of its long-suffering tether. “Ms. Chandler, Stoner will take you back. I would like to talk to you myself later.”

Catherine nodded and went off with the man Control pointed out. McCall bit his lip in exasperation. “I’ll call you when I get in, Mr. McCall.”

Control looked from her to him. “Robert, talk to me now.”

Saturday

10:30 PM

The black Jaguar proceeded slowly through the very heavy snow, following the path it had taken to Arlington Avenue. Finally it slowed under a traffic light several miles from New York.

McCall slid out and looked around. Somewhere... Ah. There.

"Would you like a ride back?" he called. A tall shadow detached itself from the woods. Vincent walked up to the car. "I thought I might find you here."

"This is the path you suggested I take," Vincent said, slightly amused.

"Well, yes, this is what I had in mind as well." McCall started the car after Vincent slid in. "It is a long walk back to Brooklyn."

Vincent smiled. "Will you tell me about what you do?" he asked with exquisite simplicity. "And about Mickey?"

Monday

10 AM

McCall stepped out of a taxi in front of Catherine's apartment building. He'd waited impatiently to hear from her and finally she'd called. He was waved in by the doorman.

Upstairs, the woman opened the door with a smile. Despite the neatly bandaged wrists, she glowed with health.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. McCall."

"And you also, Ms Chandler," he said urbanely. "Feeling better?"

"Much. Please come in. I spent several hours with your friend, Control. I hope our stories matched."

"I will take care of Control if he bothers you more," McCall said flatly. He stopped abruptly when he saw who was lying on the sofa.

"You'll take care of Control? I want to be there." Mickey raised a now-uncovered eyebrow. "Hello, McCall."

"Feeling bettter, Mickey?" McCall asked seriously.

The young man shrugged carefully. "A bit."

"We couldn't keep hin down," Catherine murmured. "So Vincent brought him up here this morning when he was asleep."

“That sounds normal.”

McCall turned to face her. “You heard about Perez?”

“I saw it in today's paper.”

“Despite his injuries, he is going to stand trial. The children are safe with their aunt.”

“So it ends,” Catherine sighed.

McCall walked over to Kostmeyer. “Well friend, it's time we saw Warnick.”

Kostmeyer squinted up, not moving. “Who was the other doctor, McCall? He sounded like you.”

“He's just a friend of mine,” McCall said calmly. “Someone who's related.”

Kostmeyer pulled a face. “Warnick will stick me full of pins and in bed for three weeks. I'll miss the playoffs.”

“Don't be a baby,” McCall advised dryly.

They exchanged grins and Kostmeyer leaned heavily on him as he rose. He turned his head towards Catherine.

“I haven't any idea of what happened, Ms Chander, but ... thank you.”

“Yes, I agree,” McCall echoed. “We owe you quite a bit, Ms Chander. Someday we must do something to repay you.” His words encompassed the entire situation and the Tunnels in that offer.

Catherine smiled. “You're very welcome.”

After she closed the door, she laughed. If she read McCall right, he could be one of the most powerful helpers they could ever have. And God help them if the Tunnels ever needed him.

END