

EYES WITHOUT A FACE

by Kate Nickell

Marshall Sam McCloud - URBAN COWBOY

For once, the night was clear. The ever-present smog had abandoned the city; if he peered through the arching trees, he could almost convince himself that he saw stars glittering above the buildings that towered all around him.

Stars or no stars, it was a good evening to feel the earth under his feet and listen to the night sounds. The afterglow of his evening with Chris Coughlin added an extra warmth to the night; no wine had been bottled that could buoy his spirits like this.

'Maybe she was right; everyone had a little Irish in him on St. Patrick's Day, even a U.S. Marshall from Taos, New Mexico'.

Humming to himself, Sam McCloud moved steadily through the park. Though he enjoyed the green oasis amongst the concrete, he knew that he traveled in a jungle more dangerous than the back country of his native New Mexico. So he watched and listened to sounds beyond his tuneless humming and the rhythmic scrunching of his footsteps.

Bushes rustled to his left. McCloud automatically reached for the .45 Colt nestled against his spine, then paused. The timbre of the voices was all wrong for a gang.... unless New York gangs recruited a lot younger these days. Slowing his steps, his eyes scanned the darkness while he eavesdropped on the hushed debate.

".... told you he was a cowboy! Look at that hat and those boots----"

But where's his horse? ***You can't be a cowboy without a horse....***" The voice rose loudly, certain of victory.

"Left m'horse at home, boys." McCloud tilted his hat back so he could study the thicket on his left more closely.

Silence answered him. He waited patiently, ready to stand there all night if need be. Maybe - there. He spotted a glint, light flashing on metal, and a crackle of leaves underfoot. Grinning, he stepped off the path into the darkness.

"Y'know, it's kinda late for you boys to be out. Where -"

When he reached out to brush aside a branch, the bush expanded with wild rustling as his prey sprinted for new cover. McCloud barreled through the thicket and squinted at the dark shapes racing before him. He dashed after them as they dove behind a tree. He could hear the gravel crunching under their feet, they were off the path, on the grass which gave no sound. Still, he raced in the direction which he was certain they had gone.

But he was too late. The trail ended at a tunnel entrance. A dim yellow light gleamed in its metal cage, casting misshapen shadows around him. McCloud studied the clearing, listening, waiting, but he heard nothing beyond the incessant traffic growl. *'Perhaps they had gone into the tunnel'*; stooping, McCloud inspected the smooth grey concrete sides in the dim light. *'There was no place to hide. After the first few feet, a grate prevented further egress. His quarry couldn't have gone to earth here.... or had they?'*

Dark eyes narrowed as he reached inside the gate and fingered the lock. Letting it drop, he moved to the heavy hinges and studied them. *'No rust - the clasp and hinges looked newly-minted. Someone had taken good care of this place for a reason; maybe the kids belonged to someone who had built his lair here. Why else would someone lock a tunnel grate from the inside?'*

Reluctantly, he decided to give it a rest; this late at night, he wasn't going to solve anything. He'd return when it was light. Then, as he turned to go, something coughed.

McCloud froze; the hairs on the back of his neck rose as primeval instincts kicked in. *'Whatever it was, it sounded like a huge cat; he'd heard one cough like that long ago, when they'd tracked a puma that had turned mankiller. The cough was the only warning that the hunted had become the hunter. So, he mustn't run, mustn't go for his gun. That would mark him as prey.'*

With a calm he didn't feel, he said softly, "You got the drop on me good and proper, friend. What say I turn around real slow like, and we can talk face to face?"

Silence answered him. He sensed something listening to his voice. Neither welcoming nor denying him, it waited patiently. He could hear its breathing as his own breath rasped in his throat. *'Maybe it was testing his patience, to see how he'd make his first move.'*

'Well, if the mountain wouldn't come to him, he'd go to it.' Keeping his hand loose by his sides, McCloud pivoted slowly without shifting his feet. He smiled, uncertain whether his unseen judge would take it as a friendly gesture.

"I'm looking for a coupla kids; they headed this way, but I lost sight of 'em and they got away." He paused, but when there was no answer he decided to keep talking. "This is a rough neighborhood for kids to play in after dark." He grinned wryly. "Heck, it's kinda rough for anyone."

"But not for you?" A whisper rasped at him from the darkness.

'At least the voice sounded sane enough, so that was one less worry about the kids.'

"Well, I've always been a sort of maverick myself; too hard-headed to listen to good advice. But I'm a cautious man, too."

"You carry a gun." Contempt laced the words.

McCloud shrugged it off. "I'm a policeman. Being without my gun is kinda like forgetting to put on my trousers. Did you see those kids, mister?"

A shadow moved from the darkness into the semi-circle of light. "They are safe."

"That isn't what I asked."

"But that is all the answer you shall have." Something hissed, as if machinery had come to life. McCloud stepped back as a heavy sheet of metal slid into place behind the grating.

"Wait a minute!" he yelled. **"I want some answers."** But only his own voice, echoing off the concrete and metal around him, replied.

The next morning, he asked his partner Broadhurst about any unusual sightings in the park. "It was weird, Joe. I was right behind 'em, then they were gone. Vanished into thin air."

McCloud's long-suffering partner glanced up from the police file. "McCloud, no one can disappear, even in New York - at least, not for long. You see these reports?"

Sam peered at the thick sheaf of papers. "Something come up, Joe?"

"Chief Clifford's given us a new assignment. Seems like some kids have gone missing."

"Wouldn't that belong to Juvenile? I mean, runaways ain't usually ..."

Broadhurst dumped the file on his desk. "Take a look at these reports, McCloud. I hope you have a strong stomach."

"What's that got t'do ..." Then his eyes fell on the first photograph; he stared at it for a moment, then shuffled swiftly through the rest. As he went through them a third time, his eyes narrowed as he considered what he'd seen in the park.

'Normally, victims lay sprawled gracelessly where they'd fallen, he'd seen lots of dead men before, but these gave him the creeps. Someone had laid them out neatly, so they reminded him of old Renaissance paintings of corpses. But these were no artist's models of foreshortening. Ropes of thin muscles twisted across the heads, like red and brown wires running crisscross over the skulls. Eyes, horrified at their last vision, stared at him.'

McCloud's common sense told him that it was his imagination, *'since these boys must have been long dead before the skin and hair had been stripped from their skulls. Still, he couldn't shake the notion that death had caught them unprepared.*

Not that anyone was really prepared to die, but these boys weren't victims of random violence.' While he struggled to order his thoughts, McCloud jogged the photos into a neat pile and slipped them into the folder.

"So, what's the connection?" McCloud tapped the file with his finger. "Job, age - height, weight - sex offenders?"

"Negative to the last one - and stop it, will you?"

"Sorry, Joe. Just thinking." The tapping stopped.

"Well, do it more quietly, will you?" Broadhurst sighed and stretched his back and shoulders. "I've been going through them all afternoon, and I still can't find anything really solid to go on."

"Okay... what do we have to start with?" He tipped back the chair and propped his boots on the desk.

Joe nodded. "All right, McCloud, we'll go over it one more time. They say two heads are better than one."

The marshal grinned widely and tilted his hat back. "There ya go."

THE EMPRESS

Twilight had cast its cloak over the city. The daytime dwellers abandoned it for warmer, safer caves outside the city; its nighttime were just waking up and preparing to dine. The predators silently stalked their prey, day and night having little meaning to them. One could take precautions, but no one could avoid all the dangers.

The boy thought he was immune to trouble. Tall, well-built, he just missed being handsome. He jogged through the park, humming softly to the transistor radio, his senses barely registering his surroundings. Nothing to worry about yet, he had thought, it was still light enough to see.

Still, he jumped when something blew softly on his bare shoulder. He jerked away and stared at the woman who smiled languidly at him. She didn't seem dangerous; tall enough to reach his shoulder, she reached up to pull the headphones from his ears; her ring snagged the skin a trifle.

"Da - that hurt! What's the mat ..." His voice died away as he stared into her eyes.

"I am sorry I hurt you; let me make it up to you." She slipped her arm through his. He hesitated, wavering between her appeal and his training program. The woman sidled so her breast brushed against his chest, and his indecision melted. "Besides, you wouldn't let a woman walk through the park by herself after dark, would you?"

He almost pointed out that she had come this far safely on her own, but his mouth wouldn't work. She

steered him from the jogging path onto the concrete, chattering about what fun they would have together. Vaguely, he recalled a promise to phone someone, but it faded beside her presence which threatened to overwhelm his senses. Her perfume flavored the air; he could sense the curves under the classic lines of her clothes and yearned to discover if what he sensed was true.

But she became more evasive as they moved through the city; she spoke; but her words came unstrung in his ears, sounds without sense. Even her face became diffuse when he tried to concentrate on it; a nimbus of light surrounded her, and he blinked as if looking at the sun.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, but the distorted syllables roared in his deafened ears.

He shook his head to clear it; the movement made the ground shift under him at a perpendicular angle, forcing him against the nearest wall for support. She held onto his arms, easing him into a sitting position. Helpless, he heard his breath sobbing in his lungs as darkness swelled around him.

His escort watched as his head fell forwards. Then she reached out and pulled his head up by the hair. Tilting his face this way and that, she inspected the unconscious boy before letting his head drop onto his chest.

A self-satisfied smile tugged at her lips. "Yes, I think you'll do," she purred. "I think you'll do quite nicely."

They'd seen many dead bodies before, but even McCloud looked pale under his tan as they studied the corpse of the newest victim. This one ran true to form; scalped and skinned, the boy stared into the merciless morning sun. There were no other marks of violence, no signs of his attacker, no clues as to why he'd been attacked.

"No sign of robbery," Broadhurst said; he peered at the headphones in its clear plastic bag. "No real signs of blood."

"Yeah, you'd think there'd be big splashes all over the place.... and he's no lightweight. If the killer worked him over somewhere else, then moved him here, we're looking for a pretty hefty man."

"Or a gang." Broadhurst motioned for the coroner's team to take away the body. "The chief isn't going to like this."

Chief Clifford was less than impressed by their reports. "You're telling me that some gang of crazies is slicing and dicing people for the *'fun'* of it?"

"We don't know why they're doing it, chief - or if it is a gang." Broadhurst glanced at his partner, but McCloud remained unusually silent. "We have officers checking out the area."

"You ain't gonna find 'em that way, Joe."

"What's that, McCloud."

"Look, chief, whoever this is, they know their way around real good; no one spots 'em because they blend in so well. If we send in cops, we'll get told what folks think we want to hear...."

"All right, we'll send around some plainclothes ..."

"You don't get m'meaning. I'm saying check out the folks who go down there regular; they know who's new and who's working the streets." He grinned suddenly. "Maybe you can get some mileage out of those mimes they ran in last week."

Clifford's grimace was eloquent, but he nodded. "Get on it, Broadhurst. As for you, McCloud - stay clear of this! I don't want everyone in Central Park to know what the force is doing."

McCloud raised a finger to his forehead as if still wearing his Stetson. "You can count on me, Chief," he said cheerily before he shut the door.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Clifford muttered, then turned his mind to how he could explain dispatching mimes to his superiors.

THE MAGICIAN

The streets were lousy today, and Harold the Magnificent wasn't doing so great himself. He stared blankly at the few bills and oddments of change in the bottom of his top hat. "New Yorkers are a real cheap bunch," he muttered, as he slipped the bills into his pocket.

A rattle of stones behind him made him tense. '*Not muggers, not with everything else*', he thought as he said aloud. "You're wasting your time, mister; all I got on me is some chump change."

"Didn't come for your money, son. Just need you to answer a few questions."

Harry thought that growing up in the Big Apple had prepared him for anything, but the apparition before him deserved a second glance. The man wasn't much taller than he, but the way he looked and moved told Harry that this wasn't someone to mess with. Still, the '*son*' rankled, and he wasn't giving out information for free.

His silence didn't faze the man who leaned against the wall next to Harry's suitcase; chewing on a toothpick, the man scanned the society around them. "Y'know, things have a way of surprisin' you.... Nicest person pulls a knife on you; the bag lady has a fortune..."

"No one dropped any money around here," Harry interposed when the stranger paused. "Take's pretty poor; I'm thinking of moving somewhere else." He buckled the straps of his kit, hefted it, and turned to go.

He rocked back on his heels to avoid running into the man who had somehow blocked the porch without his hearing a thing. Harry considered vaulting the band rails and making a run for it, but he couldn't risk losing his kit. Making the best of it, he seated himself on the rail and studied the opposition.

"Okay, you win. What ya wanna know?"

Since Harry showed no signs of running, the stranger leaned against the rail as he surveyed the street. "Just some straight answers. Your name really Harold?"

"Harry. No one calls me Harold."

"You gotta last name, Harold?" Harry grimaced, but the big man seemed not to notice; when there was no answer, he continued in the same lazy drawl.

"My name's McCloud, Harold. I've been checking on the street performers around the park. Never knew there could be so many clowns outside the circus."

"Mimes," Harry corrected in a lofty tone. "They're just mimes. I, however, practice the ancient art of prestidigitation." His hands passed in front of his leather vest and a deck of cards magically appeared. "Pick a card, any card."

McCloud made a pretense of selecting a pasteboard. "You around here often?"

"Most days, rain or shine. Got your card?"

The cowboy flicked one from the deck. "Got it."

Deep in his routine, Harry forgot his initial wariness. "Don't show it to me - look at it, then put it back." McCloud did so, although his eyes continued to study the scene around them. "Now I shuffle - like so...."

"Uh-huh."

Though McCloud wasn't paying attention, Harry's need for applause kept him working the routine; besides, he still might turn it around. "And here's your card - the queen of hearts!" Harry flipped around the pasteboard with a flourish and grinned at his audience of one.

McCloud grinned, then began to clap. "Not bad - not bad at all. You're pretty good."

"Good? I'm Harold the Magnificent. The quickness of the hand ..."

"... deceives the eye. Well, I wanna know how good your eyesight is, Harold." He handed photos of the murdered boys to Harry. "You ever see any of these boys?"

Putting the deck away, Harry flipped through the photos one by one. At the next to the last one, he stopped and studied it with narrowed eyes. "This one looks kinda familiar - but when I knew him he had a whole head of hair."

"You know him?"

"Maybe - maybe not. What's it to you?"

McCloud heaved a deep breath; Harry hoped he would lose patience and leave. Instead, he said flatly, "He's dead. Someone killed him." Harry made an incoherent sound, but the voice continued inexorably. "Yep, he's dead; so're these other boys. When was the last time you saw him?"

Death was the one thing Harry couldn't treat lightly, though he could barely believe that Steve was dead; he wasn't even eighteen. "Last Tuesday - yeah, last Tuesday, when the moon was full. Makes a perfect spotlight," he said.... "You sure he's dead?"

" 'Fraid so - they found him down by the docks."

"No way----Steve'd never go down there. Too tough a crowd - too dangerous - and no money, besides." Harry's cocky attitude reasserted itself. "Maybe you got the wrong body. So long, mister."

Tipping an imaginary hat, he picked up his kit and stepped past the silent man. He took two steps, then suddenly something struck his shoulder, spinning him around, and he smashed into the wall. His case skittered along the concrete to land next to the curb.

The older man towered over him, suddenly larger and more dangerous. All the laziness had vanished; as the dark eyes bore into his. Harry sensed that he faced a predator. Still, he wouldn't go down without a quip or a fight.

"What'd you do that for?"

"Just wanted to make a point, Harold. You gotta be more careful."

"That's my middle name," Harry gibed, but McCloud didn't smile or shift an inch. "Come on, mister, let me go. You can't keep me here all night."

"Maybe ... not. Maybe I ought to just run you in. Might save your neck." He stepped back, enough to give him some breathing space. "Keep your eyes open; if you see anything unusual - any little thing - contact me. Call police headquarters; ask for Marshall Sam McCloud. They'll get me the message."

Harry tried not to goggle at this bizarre incarnation of the law, then tried to hide his dismay. The law - that was all he needed to have on his tail. Still, he forced a weak grin for the Marshall's benefit.

"Sure - no problem. Sam McCloud, U.S. Marshall. Anything else?"

"Yep - watch your back." McCloud clapped him on the shoulder as he stepped past; Harry tried not to stagger with the blow.

Picking up his case, he headed for the nearest subway station. All the way, he felt eyes watching his every move. So, just before he headed Below, he turned and gave a quick wave. There was no sign of McCloud.

Just the same, Harry took every back route that might lead Below. No one could follow him through

the twisting tunnels. Still, Father's stern expression did nothing to ease the butterflies that threatened to bring up his late supper.

"What could I do, Father? I thought you'd want to know." Harry glanced at Vincent for confirmation, but his friend avoided meeting his eyes.

Father gazed into the flames of the kerosene lamp as if weighing the dangers to his small community. "There was nothing else you could have done, Harold. The information is too important to send as a message, too terrifying to place on the pipes." He smiled grimly. "We cannot risk the panic your news might cause."

"No one has been injured - or reported missing," Vincent murmured from his vantage point. "The danger remains Above for the moment."

"Yeah, but for how long?" Harry heaved his weary body off the case. "The cops don't even know who's behind the attacks."

"While they search Above, we shall secure ourselves Below." Father tapped the papers before him then glanced at Vincent. "Detail the work parties. All entrances should be checked; the patrols warned."

"Well, that's fine for the folks Below, but some of us still live Above, y'know."

"Harold, you are always welcome here." Father returned to his book, the subject obviously closed.

Harry groaned inwardly. "Will you talk to him, Vinnie?" he said as soon as they left the chamber. "Some days, the old man can't see anything that isn't right in front of him. Make 'im see - before it's too late."

Hefting his case, he stalked from the tunnels without a backward glance. This time, he was on his own.

JOURNAL 23,10,77

'Process is nearly complete. Armature drying well; new porcelain fired - did not crack. Poppet should be finished in time for exposition.

Glass eyes received today. Set of green for the black, perhaps; contrast would catch the eye, give an air of mystery to piece.

Landlord came again. Smell reported by some silly neighbor. Ought to take care of her - no one would miss the old biddy, except some absent children. With so many animals of her own, amazing she can smell anything. but there's always someone who can sniff out another's private business, particularly if it's inconvenient.

Must go out today. Final mask needed to complete triptych. Original face cracked under wax application, drying process must be timed more carefully. Perhaps that new polymer bond during final stages?

Check way stations for likely prospects; preparations should be ready by end of week.

THE LOVERS

Autumn slowly declined into winter. Day after day, Harry worked the street; their bleakness mirrored the dull ache he felt every time he went home. He couldn't stay and watch his uncle grow weaker and weaker until the old man simply faded away. His aunt only had eyes and ears for her husband, so he was just a shadow flitting through their twilight days.

He kept away from the tunnels, except to meet Vincent whenever his friend could leave his duties to come Above. They had promised to meet today, but he didn't hold his friend to any half-made promises. Huddled against the wall, he scanned the crowd for likely marks. One more show, and he'd call it a day.

There was a nice clump of folks, smiling, already in a good mood. Summoning a smile he didn't feel, Harry began his spiel. "Don't ever get taken again! Let Harold the Magnificent show you how it's done - the hand is quicker than the eye!" He pulled a quarter from the nearest kid's ear, walked it over his knuckles, then presented it to the kid.

The cheapskate ran off to show it to his folks. Harry grinned as they listened to their offspring. "Magic's all around, even in the Big Apple!"

But obviously not in their mundane souls, for they turned and walked away. "Should've made it a nickel," he muttered before producing flowers from his nonexistent sleeve to present to a girl. She and her friends stayed to watch and giggle, and a few more likely marks gathered around to watch his turn. With luck, this bunch would have some money for the pot.

All the same, he couldn't shake the feeling that something unfriendly was watching his act. The grin didn't falter as he scanned the crowd enraptured, they reacted with ooo's and ahhh's as if on cue. His watcher wasn't with them, so he put the thought aside as he went into the finale. He finished with a flourish and a grand bow that brought him away from the wall and almost into his audience.

The applause brightened the afternoon sun, almost as much as their praise as they walked away. As he bid them farewell, he spared a quick glance into the hat. A twenty - Harry blinked twice, but it was no trick. Someone out there was looking out for him.

Not wanting to press his luck, he decided that it was time to quit. Within minutes, he had packed his gear, his only thought was how fast he could get home and show the old folks how well he'd done.... Maybe he ought to stop somewhere and buy them something special. Nothing fancy, maybe just some treats that Uncle Otto loved but the grocery budget didn't allow.

Some instinct made him check the glass storefront before he left. A black man lounged against the opposite building, his leather jacket buttoned against the coming chill. He was built like a football player and held himself like he was waiting for action; Harry sensed him watching the street although the dark face never changed. For a moment, their gazes met in the glass, then the man shifted position slightly.

Harry stiffened, though he hoped his body and expression hadn't betrayed him. He knew the guy now. Two, three days ago, he'd spotted him outside the fairgrounds. Before that, he had seen him when he'd made his run through town to check out the latest illusions in the magic shops.

Time to move out. Still, though the instincts honed by years of running Below warned him to run for it, Harry wanted to confront this shadow.

A movement nearby distracted him before he could decide whether to yell or cross the street. Something fluttered to the ground. Harry automatically ducked down to pick it up, then stopped in mid-movement and peered upwards.

A lady stood in the store's doorway intently gazing at the coats inside. She looked like some schoolteacher playing hooky; her hair was braided tightly against her skull, and her clothes had a utilitarian look that implied comfort, not style, was her main concern. Pushing her glasses onto her nose with one hand, she peered into her handbag then at the ground.

Harry gave a wide grin. "Hey lady - lose this?"

She squeaked slightly and hugged the handbag against her. Ignoring the reaction, he presented the package with a flourish. "It dropped out of your bag.... You enjoy the show?"

Feeling like a benign wizard, he watched as she dove into the bag, almost scattering its contents onto the sidewalk, murmuring helplessly. "Maybe I did - well, that's one thing and - there's food for my kitties. They're so sweet ... Do you have any pets?"

Thinking of Vincent, he quipped. "Sure do, miss. A big yellow tom. Anything else I can.... do for you?"

He fought to keep his tone light, hoping that his expression had not changed when the woman stared myopically into his face. Her makeup was straight out of the sixties, with heavy black liner around the eyes, pinkish blush and light lipstick that gave her a corpseslike look.

"No - well, yes - yes, you can help me." She gripped his arm above the elbow with a strength that startled him. "Would you please see me home? It gets dark so quickly. Your show was so interesting that I quite lost track of time. You will help me?"

He couldn't say no; even if he wanted to leave, she held him too tightly.... and he couldn't forget what he'd glimpsed hidden among the junk in her handbag.

He'd seen things like it in Aunt Ruthie's kitchen. Big enough to knock out a horse - or crush a man's skull, a meat hammer wasn't much of a weapon against a knife or gun. But if someone, not suspecting, turned his back on her... Harry had to get out of there, but she tightened her grip like a leech. Picking up his rig, he smiled as the woman slipped her arm through his.

Glancing across the street, he noticed that his shadow had disappeared. No help there. *'Keep sharp, mister,'* Harry told himself. *'Your life may depend on it.'*

They blended into the couples strolling towards home. Once or twice he tried to steer her towards the subway station, thinking he could lose her on the platforms, but she clung tightly to him, as if he really was her protector against the coming night.

"You have no idea how evil this city can be a woman alone," she said as they waited to cross the street. She reached up to ruffle his hair; as her fingers brushed the nape of his neck. Harry shuddered and pulled away. Though she smiled at his reaction, he heard a steely note enter the coming burble. "You don't like older women?"

"Ah - it's not that - ma'am ..."

"Tamara. My friends call me Tamara." She punctuated it with a squeeze that numbed his left arm down to the fingertips.

"Right.... Tamara, I gotta make a call." He resolutely steered them towards a phone booth. "My uncle's sick; I promised to check up on him."

To his surprise, the truth worked better than a lie; Tamara peered into his eyes as he repeated the line, adding details about his uncle's illness. "Such a dutiful son.... We should get along like a house afire."

Harry groaned inwardly. *'How could he shake this crazy dame?'*

Tamara insisted on crowding into the booth with him, forcing him to dial the real number. To his relief, his aunt sounded pleased, not surprised, that he had called; but she must have sensed something was wrong when he evaded her questions about his day.

"Your uncle wants to hear from you; just a minute and I'll get him."

The woman shifted next to him, and Harry said quickly. "Listen, Aunt Ruthie, I haven't got much time to talk. Will you phone Sam for me? He's at 555-2353; he'll help you out.... Got it? Thanks.... Give my best to Uncle Otto. G'bye." He hung up the phone and smiled, wondering whether he could break for it and run. "I guess that's a goodbye for us----"

"I wouldn't hear of it." She slipped outside and waited as he collected his gear. "So sweet of you to think of your family.... Now we can get to know one another better."

"Yeah, sure," he answered while he eyed possible escape routes. "Your place or mine? My - my best performances are in private."

Her laughter crackled in his ears as they joined the couples cruising along the edges of the park. Tamara treated him to a hot dog; playing the little mother, she prepared it for him, but he balked when she tried to feed it to him. When she turned to prepare her own treat, he went to work.

Bits of food dotted the sidewalk. The pigeons would have a treat, unless some cop arrived to arrest him for littering. Still, he hoped someone might follow, since he was forced to play Hansel for a crazy woman. He only hoped she didn't turn out to be McCloud's wicked witch.

She turned to smile at him. "Oh, how careless!" she cooed and leaned forward to wipe his lips. "Let me get that----" Tamara dabbed at his face, fussed with his collar.

Something nipped his neck like an off-season mosquito. Harry slapped at it automatically. "What----" Her hands flapped about; the hot dog almost flew from her grip. "Nasty thing! it was a bee, I think.... You aren't allergic to them, are you?"

"No.... no, I'm fine." He tried to meet her eyes, to reassure her so she'd leave him alone. "I----I gotta get home. My folks - they'll wait up for me."

Harry managed to evade her grasping hands as he crossed the street. The building seemed to tilt under his hand, and the ground shifted with each step. Her footsteps clattered alongside him. He almost fell once, but her arm looped around his waist, and she kept him uptight. His suitcase fell from his nerveless fingers as he steadied himself with her help.

"You're sick, poor boy. Let's go to my place; it isn't far. Come along; just take one step at a time...."

He wanted to tell her to leave him there, that he wanted to stay right where he was, but his mouth couldn't form the words. He moved helplessly beside her like the leaves fluttering from the trees behind them.

They found the plundered suitcase lying in an alley, its contents strewn among the garbage. Broadhurst grimaced at the mess then strode to the opposite end of the alley; behind him, McCloud knelt and fingered the crushed artificial flowers.

"We've been going about this all wrong, Joe," he announced.

"Carlsen says they spotted the woman heading towards the park." The black detective stopped to survey the mess. "McCloud - she's alone."

The Marshall's eyes flickered towards his partner then narrowed as he scanned the lowering twilight. "She couldn't've killed him - not enough time to get rid of the body.... Where'd you say he saw her?"

"Down by the park - why?"

McCloud said nothing, just stood chewing his lower lip as he tilted his hat back. A night breeze brushed his cheek. "Mebbe we oughta head down that way. If we find her, well and good, we can backtrack to find the kid."

"----and head her off at the pass?" quipped Joe as the patrol car roared into life.

McCloud grinned at his partner. "There ya go."

They split up outside the park; Broadhurst would check out the street action while McCloud moved out of foot. His hunting instincts were up, so the Marshall headed away from the common walkways filled with joggers and crossed onto the back paths. He'd come this way often, when he traveled between Chris Coughlin's apartment and his hotel; somehow, he figured that Harry might come home to roost. The kid was smart, maybe too smart; if he had guessed the killer had marked him for her next target, he'd try to head for his home territory. With luck, McCloud would find him before he went to ground----and before she did.

His feet dragged like lead weights. The shoestrings tripped him for the third - tenth? - time. His eyelids drooped; each blink required effort. His palms skidded along the mossy outer walls of his concrete shelter; when they were dry, he'd be safe. Harry leaned against the tunnel, gulping for

breath. He couldn't hear anyone behind him, but his ears pounded with his pulse. *'She could be beside him, and he'd never know. Blinking back tears and sweat, he stared at the way he'd come, not really knowing how he'd gotten so far.'*

He couldn't get much farther on his own, and he couldn't go Below, not with her so close. She might see too much - what if she saw Vincent and decided to add his head to her collections? He couldn't chance that.'

With a soft grunt, he pushed away from the wall and stumbled forward. His sneaker strings tangled and tripped him; he fell, unable to stop himself, and sprawled in the muck. As it oozed through his jacket and jeans, he muttered stupidly. "

M'boots and gear are ruined. Father'll kill me."

Cold fingers brushed the nape of his neck. Harry yelped and swung onto his back, but his limbs tangled themselves. Like a broken doll, he stared dumbly at the arched ceiling.

Tamara's face swam into his vision; heedless of the water lapping at her clothes, she knelt beside him and arranged his arms and legs, so he lay tidily before her. Then she traced along his jawline; he noted automatically that she had close-clipped nails, her touch as cold and impersonal as a doctor's.

'Father was a doctor.... Why were his hands so warm and hers so cold?'

Her voice murmured in a soothing hum above him. "Just a nip along the trapezius, then the last cervical - maybe along the hairline would be best - use a wig to finish the likeness." She paused and looked away from him towards the ceiling. "Not the best lighting, but a true artist can always find ways to work around diffi-----"

"Harry!" A man's deep voice reverberated around them. "Harry, be careful."

"Yes, we shall be careful. We don't want to disturb anything; people have such nasty, suspicious minds." She smiled as a flashlight flicked into life.

Harry blinked helplessly as he watched her handbag collapse into two halves. Silver glinted in the neat pockets of the black lining. Tamara adjusted each flashlight so their shadows fell behind her yet shone clearly on his face. Humming to herself, her white hands dipped into the bag once more. She shrugged into a slick apron that covered her from shoulders to calves, then pulled on a surgical mask, gloves and cap. She peered at the dark tunnel where splashes and curses marked the Marshall's progress - but the echoes were getting softer and further apart.

One time, a long time ago, Father had decided to tutor Harry for his science exams. Something about sound and distance and time. He shut his eyes to recall the memory - a mistake, for the solid concrete seemed to melt and spin round and round, carrying him down, away from the light.

The tunnels all looked the same in the flashlight's beam. McCloud peered into the dim circle which glittered on a thin stream of brackish water. He'd gone spelunking in the Rockies once, but this city maze just about had him stumped. He was out of ideas, half-minded to retrace his steps and start down a new trail.

Broadhurst's voice echoed to him. "The chief's got men posted at the tunnel entrances around the park. Nothing can get in or out."

His partner paused, waiting for an answer, but McCloud decided not to reply. He might be closing in on his quarry, and he couldn't chance revealing his position. That crazy woman might slit the boy's throat just to keep him quiet.

"I'm coming, McCloud! Where----"

"Negative, Joe! Stay where y'are. I'm going further down."

As he started to move out, Broadhurst yelled. **"Come back, McCloud! You don't know what's down there----"**

A bend in the tunnel cut off his partner's protests. He guessed that chief Clifford would arrive soon, and Joe didn't want to be saddled with explaining to their irascible superior why a visiting officer was chasing down a murder suspect through the sewers of New York. "Better him than me." McCloud mused wryly. "All the best, Joe. You're gonna need it."

As he glanced back, the narrow beam from the lights behind him winked out. Something stood between him and the lights. McCloud swung the flashlight across the tunnel, but no change. Whatever it was, it was too far away to see his light or chose to ignore it. Maybe he had given it a sign so it could track him down.

Maybe it was the killer. Now that the echoes of Joe's voice had died away, faint sounds murmured around him, beckoning anyone who had ears to hear and understand. McCloud decided to lure the watcher----if there was a watcher----out of hiding.

Setting his flashlight on the flat ridge above the waterline, he crept backwards silently. A slight breeze brushed his face as he turned to survey the way back to the outer world. Good, he was downwind of any pursuit, and the dank smell of the tunnels would cover his scent. As long as he didn't leave any visible tracks, he might evade his pursuer.

McCloud retreated behind a bend in the tunnel, crouching beyond the shadow cast by the light. Now that he was still, he noticed the soft shifting of earth and water. If the woman had abandoned Harry to pursue him, she moved with unnatural silence; he hadn't expected a city girl to be a skilled tracker.

Tiny metallic tappings echoed around him, like hundreds of tiny dwarves smithing horseshoes for elven horses. He listened, wondering if he heard a pattern, but it held no message that he could decipher.

Since he had retreated from the light, the earth weighed heavier on him. Telling himself it was imagination didn't stop the funny feeling that this tunnel bothered him less than New York's manmade barriers to sky and stars. With a little imagination, this concrete maze became a city cousin to the caves he'd explored near Big Bend, though the background squeaking and muttering was traffic instead of bats.

A shadow moved across the flashlight's beam. McCloud stiffened, keeping him breathing slow and soft, he watched the shape loom towards his hiding place. The silhouette was vaguely man-shaped; it had head and hands that searched the darkness for prey.

"I know you are near," it whispered in a man's voice, the tunnel murmuring the words. "You can hear my voice." It paused, but the Marshall decided to outwait the shadow; either it would move on, or he'd get some answers. He hadn't expected a man to be involved with Harry's attacker.

"You are looking for someone; I can help you.... I know these tunnels well." The shadow moved again, blocking the light completely for a moment, then disappeared.

McCloud rose to his feet, then inched towards the light. In the darkness to his left, he glimpsed eyes watching him; darkness concealed the rest of the man. The blue eyes flickered, as if assessing his stance, the sheepskin coat, the Stetson hat, the gun in his hand.

"Put that away; you are safe with me," it murmured.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll keep it with me; you don't know what we might meet down here." Though he wanted to see his guide, he sensed that he'd lose him if he tried to shine any light on the subject. He recalled the voice when the man spoke the second time, had it only been three months since he'd tracked these kids to the tunnels? And if they'd come here for safety, perhaps Harry had fled here for the same reason.

He decided to consider that question later. First, he had to find Harry; and, for the moment he had to

trust this shadow. But it wouldn't hurt to compromise; McCloud slipped the .45 under his waistband, ready to hand; showing his empty hands, he said. "All right, friend, we'll do this your way."

The shadow turned, its cloak whirling in a wide arc. In his old world, McCloud would have laughed at the melodramatic sight, but in this strange labyrinth it seemed appropriate. He silently followed his nameless guide, matching his pace.

The temperature grew cooler; they were descending. The distant rumbling overhead must be a subway, not street traffic. Dim yellow lights marked where passages intersected. The tapping grew louder as they passed some steam pipes; he touched one cautiously. It was cold, almost as cold as the concrete around him. Surely, if it heated a building on street level, it ought to be warm, insulation or no insulation.

Before he could investigate, the shadow glided forward. He glimpsed other dimly lit corridors, and once children's voices echoed nearby. Though he tried to get a closer look, his guide pushed onward; he would come back later. These tunnels were too dangerous to be a kids' playground.

"They are safe where they are," murmured a voice behind him; McCloud peered at the speaker, though he didn't move.

"Kinda strange place for kids to play, friend. What if----"

"They are safe here than in your world. Come-- we must hurry." The shadow retreated, still facing him, then turned and strode away without a backward glance.

"Awfully sure of yerself," McCloud mused as their trail led upwards once more. The tunnel widened---- perhaps it had been an old overflow tunnel leading to the river - the concrete here was rough as if it had been patched and reinforced over the years. Though it was wide enough for two men to stand abreast, he lagged a step or two behind his guide.

After a moment, he realized that the other had stopped moving and approached slowly. "They in there?"

A gloved hand rose to silence him. Another mystery, but one that he shunted aside since their quarry was so close. He hunkered down in the shadows then crept forward.

Brilliant light glared as he peered around the bend. McCloud squinted, waiting until his eyes adjusted, then he counted the standing lights that crisscrossed the chamber formed by the intersection of two tunnels. She had placed the portable lights so no shadows fell on the walls; no way he could skirt around and find a vantage point. He'd have to face her down and hope that she'd be surprised long enough for him to get the boy away from her.

The killer knelt in a circle of light. Her hair was fastened under a net, leaving the face a stark oval, her features painted like a dancer's mask. She raised something to her lips; he tensed, straining to see.

It looked like a grease pencil, like the ones women used to line their eyes - or a surgeon's marker. She leaned forward; the pencil swerved as she traced lines on her victim's neck and face. Then she settled onto her heels to survey her handiwork, her eyes narrowing to thin black lines. Slowly a satisfied smile spread across her dark lips; reaching back, she raised the surgical mask over nose and mouth, tugged latex gloves over her hands, adjusting them like gauntlets over her bare forearms.

Cautiously sliding the Colt .45 from his waistband, he motioned for his shadow to circle along the left wall. No one was there.

He hadn't heard the man, hadn't sensed any movement, so how - another puzzle to put aside, for the woman had turned to take something from her open bag. He had to move while she was distracted, before she got to work on the kid.

Rising from the darkness, McCloud barked. **"Get back from the boy, and raise your hands real slow and easy-like."**

The woman reared back like a cobra, glaring at him over the prone boy; silver glinted under her index finger. "Stay back. One step and I'll slit his throat."

"Nothing doing, lady. You're already in deep trouble. Now back away, and no one'll get hurt."

She chuckled, a throaty purr that suddenly burst into raucous, mocking laughter. "Come closer, and maybe I'll let this one live. There's plenty more like him." She studied Harry's still face and grimaced primly. "Besides, this one wasn't as pretty as I'd thought."

His eyes shifted this way and that, watching for any movement from the tunnels. She'd guessed his location when he'd answered, but she didn't suspect that he had come alone. "Show yourself," she called, glancing from tunnel to tunnel. "And tell your friends to come out. I know they're here."

Before he could answer, a low growl rumbled around them. Startled, she whirled towards the sound. McCloud fired once, above her head; the explosion boomed, reverberating all around them. Pebbles and bits of concrete pattered off his shoulders, a small grey dust storm that grew to a hailstorm of stone.

A larger chunk struck her on the shoulder; the woman cursed as she went down, her hand lashing forward. As he leapt, he knew he'd never make it before she finished the job.

Harry's eyes flickered. Before the scalpel reached his throat, his fingers closed on her wrist and twisted. The metal clattered on the concrete as the Marshall jerked her away from the boy.

She twisted under his hands, madness giving her strength. One hand raked towards his eyes, knocking off his Stetson as he ducked away. "No, you don't; this time, I've got you."

But she was stronger than he'd expected. One hand twisted from his grip and clipped him under the jaw, knocking both of them off-balance. They tumbled together; the woman lunged backwards, to arm's length, then froze, staring over the big man's shoulder. Her mouth formed a square, but no sound emerged.

Suspecting a trick, McCloud did not turn to look. "You've got a lot of questions to answer.... You okay, Harry?"

"Yeah.... I think so." Harry flexed his fingers and grinned. "Everything's present and accounted for. What's wrong with her?"

As he approached, the woman writhed in McCloud's hands. "It's there - waiting in the darkness -- waiting for me----"

"I don't see----"

Suddenly she shrieked and jerked away. McCloud fumbled the grab and caught the apron; she twisted out of it and sped into the opposite tunnel. Jerking free his gun, McCloud yelled. "**Stop now----**"

As he fired, Harry knocked his arm upwards. "You crazy? You'll bring it down on him."

"Who----"

Before McCloud could demand an explanation, concrete cracked around them, stones pelted them as they ducked and ran from the tunnels as they collapsed in a torrent of stone and mud.

They paused just beyond the cave-in, drinking in the dank air. "You're crazy, you know that?" Harry said evenly. "These tunnels are old - probably older than you. You could've brought the whole thing down on us."

"That's a chance I had t'take." McCloud peered at the grey puffs that blew towards them. "How far down do they go?"

"Dunno. Nobody does, really.... You're not thinking 'bout going back in after her, are you?"

"Guess so - even if she doesn't deserve t'be found.... But first, let's get you back to the surface. You've had a busy night."

Harry shrugged. "Sure thing, I----"

His words ended in a yelp as an arm looped around his throat. Mad eyes glared at McCloud over Harry's shoulder. "This game is ended.... You will go, now. Toss the gun over here. Now!"

Torn and disheveled, the woman seemed taller, the killing fury giving her new strength. No bluff would move her. McCloud pulled free the gun slowly, carefully, never taking his eyes from her face. Setting the gun on the concrete at his feet, he stepped back and held up his empty hands.

"All right, you got what you want; now let the boy go."

A shark-like smile answered him. "Yes, I have what I want. I'll go now.... and take----"

Suddenly, her eyes flickered behind him. She shrieked as a loud roaring split the still air. Something smashed McCloud to the ground, leaping over him; he glimpsed Harry twisting in her hands - his cry of pain blended with hers as the shadow pounced on the woman who shrieked and fled into the darkness. Their footsteps echoed for long moments. McCloud raced after them, but the tunnels twisted, and he could only follow the sounds of their running.

Then he glimpsed them, shadowed against a subway tunnel. The bottom was hidden in shadow, and he thought he heard water slapping against stone. "Hold it there! You can't take the law into your own hands."

A low growl answered him as the shadow stalked the woman. She peered over her shoulder at her pursuer; McCloud sensed her studying the drop, deciding whether she could leap to safety. "Don't do it - come -"

There was a second roar, a shrill scream as the woman leaped, then silence. McCloud listened but there was no splash, nothing but darkness and his own rough breathing.

Suddenly, he remembered Harry and backtracked. The kid was bleeding. The scalpel had sliced across the back of his right hand. "Looks like you'll need some stitches," he said, as he tied his handkerchief into a pressure bandage. "Stay here, and I'll get some help."

Harry smiled weakly. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right behind you."

McCloud lost track of time and distance as they trudged onwards. Finally, he glimpsed a pale light, like an earthbound moon; one last burst of energy, and they stood blinking in the morning light.

Paramedics surrounded them. Before the Marshall could say a word, a harsh voice snarled.

"McCloud!"

He turned automatically. Chief Clifford glared at him as the knot of medics and patient moved around him. "What's going on here?"

"Well, sir, Joe and me were following up a lead, when things got a mite confused----"

"McCloud, everything involving you is confusing. What is it, Broadhurst?"

The black detective glanced at McCloud then turned his attention to his supervisor. "None of the checkpoints report seeing the suspect...."

"Looks like you didn't flush her out, McCloud. Any ideas where she went?"

McCloud glanced at the silent tunnel and considered the maze he'd traveled. "I think she's lost down there, chief. There was a cave-in; she's buried pretty deep...."

Clifford scanned his poker face, measuring his report; McCloud kept still, ready to lie before telling his superior what really had happened while he was underground. Street kids who wandered through underground tunnels as if they were a playground; a big man-shaped something that stalked a kill-

crazy woman.... and a kid who played at magic who somehow had connections to them all. The Chief already thought he was half-crazy; tales of shadows and mysterious guides would merely convince him that McCloud belonged in a psychiatric ward.

Besides, his guide was only protecting his territory; a man was entitled to that.

EPILOGUE---MARCH 7, 1991

Washington parties were more than friendly get-togethers; they were essential to building alliances in order to help one's constituents. At least, that was what Representative Christine Sullivan told herself as she surrendered her wrap at the door. Her escort tugged at the bowtie she had persuaded him to wear; to her relief, this one didn't light up, through the dark blue sequins matched the glitter of her gown.

"Harry, not here," she hissed, squashing whatever mischievous urge had flashed through his mind. The innocent look didn't fool her. "Wait for me here, and don't disappear on me. Promise?"

"Promise...." He scanned the crowd; dismissing them as a bunch of fuddy-duddies, he headed for the buffet.

While he nibbled on his midnight snack, Harry hummed along with the band. The tune took him back a couple of years, when he was young and hungry.

"Howdy there, Harry," boomed a voice beside him. "What're you doing at a boring shindig like this?"

The voice sounded familiar; the sun and time had added new lines to the speaker's face, but the man could probably still outrun and outshoot anyone in the room.

"Marshall McCloud, what're you doing here? Running down state secrets?"

"You could say that." He grinned at Harry then turned to watch Christine as she talked with another representative. "Nice lil lady.... She's working real hard for you folks.... Still working the streets, or you find some honest work?"

"Well, I've gone legit, if that's what you mean. But the streets're still a big part of my career."

"You can take a boy off the streets, but----" Whatever he was going to add about Harry's career ended with Christine's approach, as he switched subjects with amazing smoothness. "Well, Ms. Sullivan, looks like that education bill is headed for a showdown."

She beamed at him. "We'll be ready for them, Senator."

"Senator?" Harry glanced from one to the other, surely, she was kidding, but Christine looked intense and serious. "You mean people really voted for you?"

"Harry!"

McCloud grinned amiably. "Sure did."

"Harry - I apologize, Senator----"

"Call me Sam." She looked back and McCloud slipped his arm through hers. "Lovely ladies always do."

Flustered, she glanced towards Harry for support, but the ex-Marshall added smoothly. "Now you can't raise a fuss. I'm an excellent judge of----"

Harry couldn't stop himself; the man had him feeling like an awkward kid at his first prom. "Now being a judge is my job, Mar----"

"Sam.... So, you're a judge?" McCloud chuckled drily. "Now that must be a real change from pulling a rabbit out of yer hat."

"You should see him, Sen - Sam." Christine disengaged herself from the older man as she beamed at Harry. "He works real magic in the courtroom.... But I didn't know you knew each other."

"Oh, yeah - we go a long way back when we were working the streets of New York. Why I remember the time when we was trapped underground, and----"

"But it's a long story," Harry interrupted suddenly; as he continued McCloud sensed a growing desperation in his voice and realized that maybe he'd gone too far. "You don't wanna hear it. It's real boring."

"Oh, yes I do!" Christine slipped her arms into both men's and drew them towards the dining hall. "I want to hear all about your adventures."

"Lessee, now.... It was a long time ago, and I was just a poor cowboy on leave from New Mexico, when...." As he continued the story, the Senator gave Harry the high sign. His secrets were safe with them.

END