

Stuck in the Middle

by L C Wells

(This story was initially published in a mixed-media zine called CrosSignals in 1990s that concentrated on crossovers (now called mash-ups.) It is actually part of four related stories: Friends in Low Places, Enemies in High Places, Heart of Dixie, Stuck in the Middle).

Chapter 1

The bearded young man who leaned against the wall of the Kennedy airport observation deck had dark auburn hair that hung below his collar. His dark eyes watched the crowds flow back and forth, ignoring him.

"What do you see, Elliot?" asked the curly-haired young man beside him. His coat was unstylishly wrinkled, and a sharp contrast to the tailored, if patched, black cashmere overcoat worn by the man next to him.

Elliot Burch, former architect and millionaire, shrugged. "I see many people who don't see me any longer. The ones that recognize me are uncomfortable."

"You did what was right." Joe Maxwell, the District Attorney for Manhattan said bluntly. "Without you we'd have no case against the estate of Julian Gabriel."

"I know." The other man turned to him. "Roughly a year ago, Cathy Chandler came to me for information on a notebook. Then she died, I crossed Gabriel and nearly got killed. I just spent three weeks in front of the Securities and Exchange Commission telling them what happened, but I lost Burch Industries to bankruptcy. Sometimes it doesn't seem worth it to know that we brought down the empire of a dead megalomaniac."

"Justice is sometimes uneven, but in the end it all balances out," said a third man who had just passed through the security check point. He had the bearing of an English military officer and a mild-mannered expression on his face.

"Thank you, Robert," Burch said with a touch of sarcasm. "I sometimes wish it was the way it was before."

Robert McCall, former spy and now private investigator, could understand the slight trace of bitterness in Burch's voice. There were things that he wished had never happened in the course of his long life. Sometimes you had to let it work its way out of your system. Sometimes that took years.

"Where are you headed, Burch?"

"South," the young man replied. "Miami and the South Florida area. It's going to be hot as hell in April, but I'll stand it."

"If you need my help," Maxwell said with emphasis, "give me a call. You've got my number."

"I know your number," the former industrialist said with a grin. "I know your car phone number. I know your beeper number too. I memorized them last spring."

"Think you're gonna be safe?" Joe asked with sincerity.

"I don't have any more to tell anyone," Burch said with a wry smile. "I'm not a threat to anyone."

"Then I'll take off. I have..."

"Cathy's will's being read today, isn't it?" Elliot eyed him. He saw the job was giving the young lawyer lines and grey hairs among the mass of brushed-back brown curls. In fact, he would wager that the D.A. was working on an incipient ulcer. "Thanks for seeing me off, Joe."

"Take care of yourself."

* * * *

Robert McCall looked outside at the sleeting skies and shivered. It had been a strange year for weather. Ever since Thanksgiving the weather had been ugly, and McCall hoped it wasn't going to be this way for the rest of the winter. With Christmas a week away, he hoped the weather would improve enough that his son, Scott, would be able to get to the city.

He settled down on the couch next to the fire. Behind him the music system pumped Bach into the air.

Spread out across the coffee table was the latest issue of Wall Street Business. The economy and the world was going to hell as usual. There was a full page spread on the decay of the city's hospitals. The byline caught his attention. Frank Hayes. McCall had met the reporter last spring when he had been covering the destruction of Burch Industries and the subsequent reappearance of Elliot Burch. The investigator was one of the few who knew that Hayes had had a hand in finding the missing millionaire. He wondered why Hayes had taken on hospitals? It was well off his usual beat of insider trading and currency transgressions.

A knock on his door caught him unawares. He wished that the other members of his building wouldn't let people in when they entered. He cautiously looked out the peephole before opening the door.

"Good Lord! Elliot!" McCall opened the door, and took the man's dripping coat and hat. "What are you doing back in the wilds of New York?"

"And wild it is, too. I'm up here to clarify some things with my lawyers." Elliot Burch grimaced. "Never let your company go into bankruptcy, Robert. It's hell to clean up."

"You didn't have much choice as I recall," McCall remarked. He hung the coat and hat in the front bathroom to drip on a towel.

"I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd drop by," Elliot said, wandering around the front room.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" McCall asked. "Coffee would be fine."

The silver-haired man filled the coffee maker and flicked it on.

Burch stepped into the dining alcove. On the walls hung prints and paintings, African and modernistic on one side, old masters on the others, set off by the off-white walls. The polished oak table gleamed in the overhead light. In the center was a candle in a polished holder.

"What's this?"

McCall glanced in. "That's from our friends downstairs," he said casually. The candle was long and tapering, multicolored and obviously hand-dipped.

"A candle?" Burch said curiously, picking up the candle and holder. He sniffed. Beeswax?

McCall brought out a steaming mug and handed it to the young man. "Yes, an invitation to a party."

"Really? What kind of a party is it?"

"Winterfest. Their personal celebration of the winter season. I've gone for a couple of years."

"Sounds interesting." Burch put the candle down and took the cup from McCall's hands. "What do you hear from them?"

McCall waved a hand to the candle. "That's it since we last talked. First time I got one, it was wrapped in a hand-calligraphed invitation and left on the doorstep." The former agent grinned. "I didn't know what it was so I put it in a bucket of sand for a couple of days, till I could get a specialist in to deactivate it."

"Mickey?" Burch remembered the young man's talents with explosives.

"No, someone else." McCall led the way into the living room, and flicked on the light beside the couch.

It was getting dark outside. "Mickey's out of town for a couple of months."

Burch put down his cup and took up a log. He arranged it on the burning embers, careful not to catch fire himself, then settled back, dusting his hands.

"So how is Florida?" McCall asked.

The young man glanced back at him. He picked up the mug and went over to the other sofa kitty-corner to where McCall was sitting.

"It's starting to cool off finally. The summer's been blistering."

"Your tan says you were out in it."

"For the most part. I went from Miami to Galveston, and back on some of my projects." "Building?"

Burch shrugged. "I'm still an architect." "True. But..."

"Would you like to go to dinner, Robert?"

McCall sensed a need to talk in the young man. "I know an excellent place that does carry-out. We can eat here."

Dr. Peter Alcott massaged the back of his neck with his long fingers. He then stretched, unkinking his shoulders, stood and walked around the crowded office. The room was only lit by a small desk lamp. To one side was a battered file cabinet with a dying coleus drooping over the top drawer.

He made a mental note to get his secretary, Jennie Blackmun, to water it. Next to the plant sat a picture of Catherine Chandler, the authoress of his current back and shoulder ache. He looked at it fondly, but with a wry twist on his lips. He had brought Catherine into the world, held her when she was sick, been the family's general practitioner, but their bonds had strengthened when they shared the secret of the Tunnels. Even dead, she was affecting the world around her. And his life had taken on increased stress.

In mid-April her will had finally been read. Aside from some personal behests, the entire estate had been split three ways. A quarter had gone to Alcott free and clear. The next fourth went to the hospital where the doctor was now pacing back and forth - St. Vincent's. The remainder, the money, stocks, real estate inherited from her father, et al, had come to Alcott to, in the words of the Will, to be part of the "Chandler Trust, under the control of Dr. Peter Alcott, to be used by him for helping those who are needy." The total had come to over a million dollars after taxes. Only he knew the final request was aimed directly at the Tunnels.

"Cathy, did you ever have any idea of how much work goes into administering a trust?" he said aloud.

"Sir? Doctor?" The girl tapped on the dingy door, then opened it a crack. Behind him, rain lashed at the window panes. "Yes?"

"Two men are here. From the JCOH?"

Alcott raised an eyebrow. The JCOH? What was the Joint Commission on Hospitals, which

accredited and licensed hospitals, doing here? St. Vincent's wasn't up for review for a year.

"Please send them in, Jennie."

He stood when the men entered. "I'm Dr. Alcott. Can I help you?"

"Are you the man who submitted the request for the new addition to the hospital?" one man asked politely.

"Yes, I am. Please have a seat." Alcott waited till they were seated to continue. "Is there a problem?"

The man nodded. "I'm afraid we must reject your application, Dr. Alcott."

"What? Why? This hospital needs the addition!" Alcott waved towards the streaming glass. "We received permission to raze the building that was on the site. Why are we being rejected at this point?"

One man shot his companion an uncomfortable look. "I understand that you are on the building committee at this hospital--"

"Yes?"

"And, sir, I'm afraid we must report that this hospital isn't fulfilling its accreditation."

Alcott felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. It took a second for him to find his voice. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's not the quality of care or the people," the other man cut in hastily. "The building hasn't been kept up to the standard expected."

"We've been too busy staying open!"

The man pounced. "Then, you admit that there is a problem?"

"What? NO! I do not. What problems do you see?"

The men stood. "We will be sending a report in the next few days."

Alcott took several deep breaths. "I look forward to seeing it. Good day, gentlemen."

"Good bye, Dr. Alcott."

When the door shut behind them, Alcott turned to the window and hit the frame once, hard. The glass shuddered. Outside, the rubble that had been turn-of-the-century tenements, was piled, a crater in the heart of New York. In his mind's eye he could see the new addition, gleaming with paint and the most up-to-date equipment, financed mostly by the Chandler Trust. Now that dream was fading in the face of the reality which was that the hospital needed to be renovated.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Jennie?" Alcott didn't turn from the window. On the sill was an old-fashioned candlestick holder and a rainbow-hued candle. He ran a finger up it to the wick. Winterfest. A chance to get away from it all. He had a sudden urge to run away altogether.

"Sir, Dr. Wachtell would like to speak with you."

Alcott sighed. Wachtell was against the addition and he was one of the more important administrators. "Please send him in, Jennie."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter 2

In the study, white candles set in massive candelabras, burned and flickered in the random Tunnel

winds. Dr. Jacob Wells, "Father" to those in Tunnels, turned a page of his atlas. He was reading a history of the Silk Road and was tracing the silk traders' paths. He looked up as a tall man entered.

"Vincent, you must read this book."

The cat-faced, imposingly large, young man looked over his shoulder at the open pages. "Is that the book that Diana left you?"

"Yes, and it's excellent." "Father, we have a visitor."

Father looked beyond him up to the entrance. "Peter! How wonderful! What brings you down here?"

The doctor looked around the room wistfully. "It would be nice to just come down here to relax sometime, Jacob." He met his friend's gaze. "I'm running away from home."

Father laughed. "Then you've come to the right place." He limped around the desk using his massive wooden cane to help him.

"Did you hurt yourself again?" Alcott settled into the chair opposite Father.

"No. It's just the weather. We may be miles below New York, but sometimes the damp even gets down here." Father sat down, propping the cane. "What are you running from?"

Vincent glided to the desk chair behind the desk.

Alcott ran his hands over his face. "Well, you know about Catherine's Trust?" They nodded. Both Father and Vincent remembered Alcott's explanation. It had been painful to all involved. They missed the young woman tremendously and the money would never replace her.

"Well, I told you about the addition the hospital was planning. It would have served as an outpatient facility for the entire neighborhood."

"Was?" Vincent said softly.

"Was. The JCOH turned us down a couple of days ago."

"Why?" Father inquired.

"Because of St. Vincent's." Alcott took a pile of papers out of his pocket. "This is the report. The building is worn out and we have radon problems. St. Vincent's needs a drastic make-over or they'll shut us down. Permanently."

Father stared at him. "Shut down a hospital? In that neighborhood? That's ridiculous. That's where they need it the most."

"There are few doctors for those people," Vincent commented. "If the hospital shuts down, they will be helpless."

Alcott slapped the papers on his knee. "I know that! You know that. They admit it. But the law says that that's the way it is if nothing is done about the radon, in particular."

"Well, the Chandler Trust can divert monies to rebuilding the hospital, correct?" Father asked.

"Yes, and it will. The Trust can help pay for it. We may be able to get financial backing. But what about you folks?" Alcott stared from Father to Vincent then back. "Remember something. The way we had planned the addition, it would in no way conflict with the Tunnels in that area. They wouldn't even have had to do more digging."

"The fabric of the ground is weak there," Vincent said thoughtfully. Father stirred restlessly. "What has to be done to St. Vincent's?"

"Work. Lots of work. We have an administrator named Clarence Wachtell, who used to be a doctor at St. Vincent's. He owns a lot of real estate around town, and has an architect on tap who he say can do the work. I don't trust Wachtell. He's has wanted to erase the addition from the start. No one cares about this addition but me!"

After a few minutes of silence, Father asked hopefully, "Is there a way, Peter, that the construction can avoid the thin ground?"

The doctor put his head back and closed his eyes. "It would be illogical for them not to use the empty site for materials while they refurbish St. Vincent's and that's dangerous for the tunnels. What we really need is someone who can take the old layout and bring it up-to-date."

"What you need," Vincent paused for effect. The other men looked at him. "What you need is Elliot Burch."

"Burch?" Alcott said blankly.

"Burch!" Father exploded. "Burch..." He put his fingertips together. "That's not a bad idea."

"Burch? Oh, yes, the man you sent to me."

Most of Alcott's reading was done in medical journals. He had not followed the Burch scandal and barely recognized the haggard wounded man who appeared on his doorstep at one morning, with a note from Father explaining what had happened. "The man with the gunshot wound. How is he?"

Vincent dropped his gaze to the atlas. "I don't know. Mouse brought down a newspaper which said he'd been at the opening of the Chandler Theater in October. But where he is now..."

"He could do what you want," Father said emphatically. "And he could work around the Tunnels."

"He was a very fine builder before everything happened," Vincent seconded. "But the question is would he help us? Would he help you?"

Father stared at Vincent with a blank expression. "Why not? We helped him!"

Vincent shifted his gaze to the chessboard. "We helped him because he had helped me to find Gabriel and because he needed help. I don't feel that this means he's in debt to us, Father. If anything, the debt is finally in balance."

Father thought silently that Vincent was being unfair to himself. True, Burch had helped them with Gabriel. But he had also almost gotten Vincent killed, twice. Vincent had saved Elliot from death last spring, but Burch had then reciprocated by making sure that the Tunnels were never threatened by building a theater on the site of the never-built Burch Towers. Father felt that anything that threatened the Tunnels justified calling on all the help that was possible. Besides, hadn't Burch said that if they needed him - if VINCENT needed him - to call?

He said the last thought aloud, and was surprised to hear himself.

"That's true, Father, but if we can't find out where Elliot is, we can't ask him to save the hospital," Vincent said softly. "Peter, do you know any way to find Elliot?"

The doctor shook his head. "I can barely find my keys, Vincent."

"Then we'll just have to ask Diana if she can find him," Vincent said. "I'll ask her--"

"Diana is in Virginia on that training course," Father reminded him. "But I can ask Joe Maxwell."

"That means you have to go Above," Vincent stated warningly.

"Maxwell worked with Burch on the Gabriel matter. If anyone would know where he was, Maxwell would," Father said confidently.

A burly man dressed in a heavy wool coat and muffler was unwrapping his bulk by the office door. An umbrella leaned against the secretary's desk, dripping icicles. His blue eyes smiled at the doctor who opened his door at the knock. It was during Jennie's lunch hour.

"Dr. Alcott? I'm Frank Hayes of Wall Street Business." "Yes?"

"Dr. Wachtell called me. He said you'd be the man to talk with about St. Vincent's."

Alcott felt a sudden irrational urge to strangle Wachtell. Discussing with administration problems with the hospital's renovations was one thing but calling in a reporter was another altogether.

"Frank Hayes... you're the man whose been writing the hospital series? It's very good."

"Thank you."

The reporter followed him into the dim office. The light on the desk gave a puddle of light on the papers Alcott had abandoned.

Alcott pushed the only chair out for him to sit in. "Have a seat. What would Wall Street Business be interested in with St. Vincent's, Mr. Hayes? It's only another hospital with cash flow problems."

Hayes sat down and flicked open his notebook. "I was informed by my sources that St. Vincent's is in danger of closure, Dr. Alcott. Since it is also the home of the Chandler Trust, and I covered the Chandler/Gabriel murders last spring, and you are the trustee of the Chandler Trust, Dr. Wachtell felt I would be interested."

Alcott flicked on the wall lamp next to the window. The radiator below the sill was giving desultory heat out, enough to give a halo of steam on the icy windows. Outside he could hear sleet.

"I'm the trustee. We were trying to get permission to build an addition. It turns out the money will be diverted to refurbishing St. Vincent's. That's the end of the story."

Hayes looked at him with placid calm. "Will there be enough to completely restore the hospital, Dr. Alcott?"

"With other donations, I hope so." Alcott settled back into his chair. "I'm sorry I can't offer you anything to drink. We're cutting back already."

The reporter smiled. "You are the fourth hospital at this end of town to be threatened with closure in the last few months, Dr. Alcott. Do you feel the city has abandoned you?"

"The city is in an economic morass. It hasn't abandoned us as much as it is frantically trying to stay afloat. We get three gunshot victims a night on the average. We have people stealing drugs from the dispensary, we're chronically understaffed, and we still have to serve the people. I can't blame the city for anything but being New York. The hospital needs the support of the community."

"And you feel that you aren't getting it?"

"You tell me." Alcott was tired of being diplomatic and fencing. "I am trying to prevent our closing. And your article isn't going to do us any good."

Hayes blinked. "It isn't written yet. When Dr. Wachtell--"

"Wachtell is trying to ruin us!" The doctor snapped and instantly regretted it. "Strike that. It's off the record."

"What are you planning to do about the hospital?" Hayes changed the topic.

"I have a lead on an architect who can help us. But I haven't found him yet. I should have more news by next week."

"And this will keep St. Vincent's open?" the reporter pursued. "Can I ask the name of this architect?"

Alcott hesitated. "I can't divulge that until I get his acquiescence. I'm sorry, Mr. Hayes."

The burly man stood, flicking closed the notebook. "I understand, Dr. Alcott. Here is my card. If you should want to get in touch with me, please call me."

The doctor followed Hayes to the door. "I hope that you don't have a long trip home, Mr. Hayes. It's a wretched night to be out."

"I have to file my story, then back to Brooklyn. I should be home by oh, one or two." The reporter grinned infectiously.

Despite his exhaustion and frustration, Alcott grinned back. The man was reasonable for a newsman. It was a pity they had met under such circumstances. Making contact with Joe Maxwell was more difficult now that he had become the leading District Attorney. Father finally reached the correct office by trial and error. Maxwell was just inside the open door, looking through some papers, when he heard the tones of a familiar voice talking with his secretary.

"Let him in," the young man interrupted. "Come on in, Mr. Wells."

Father limped in. His overcoat was a faded London Fog which covered his one good suit, and snowflakes had melted on his brown hat, splotching it wetly.

Joe held out a cup. "I'm having coffee. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you." Father settled into the other chair, feeling the pain made the in his hip ease. The cold had made the walk much more difficult that he had expected.

"Well, what can I do for you?" Maxwell settled back behind his desk. "Mr. Maxwell, I am looking for Elliot Burch. Can you help me find him?"

The D.A. cocked his head and took a sip of coffee. "Burch? Why do you want Elliot Burch?" Father stared at him. "I have a job for him."

"For him? Why? And exactly who are you, Mr. Wells?" Joe eyed his visitor.

"I am exactly who I told you I was. I have a renovation job which I hope he'll take on."

"What is your connection with Burch?" Joe said suspiciously.

Father stood up. "It appears this is going nowhere. I will have to search for Mr. Burch elsewhere."

"Hold it, hold it." Joe stood up. "I owe you, I admit it. If it wasn't for you we wouldn't have put down Gabriel and you gave us the tip on the *Compass Rose*. I do know where Burch is. If he wants to meet you, give me a place where he can do that."

Father hesitated a second. Where was a safe place? Where else but the hospital. "St. Vincent's. Dr. Peter Alcott's office."

"Alcott!" Joe's voice changed abruptly.

"Yes. Do you know him?" Father inquired.

"Yes. I met him at the reading of Cathy's will." Maxwell leaned on his desktop. "Is there a problem with the Trust?"

"The hospital needs renovation," Father answered. "I think Elliot Burch would do a wonderful job."

Maxwell stared at him in disbelief. "Burch? He built high-rises and malls! A hospital?"

"A new challenge. You will tell him, then, that I will be at St. Vincent's at nine pm., if he is interested in the job."

"We'll be there." Joe replied.

"Oh, that's not necessary," Father said hastily realizing he had attracted Maxwell's attention.

"No problem," the young man replied cheerfully. "I didn't have anything planned for tonight."

Chapter 3

In McCall's apartment it was cozy. The fire had warmed the living room, and the two men were full with a good dinner. McCall remembered Burch as a good conversationalist and he had proved to be

even more interesting than McCall remembered. The conversation had roamed over the world, and Southern Florida, from banking, to architecture, to women, to life in general. Burch had also proven to be expert at guiding the conversation away from topics he did not want to discuss.

Burch had been frank with McCall about what had brought him to New York.

"Bankruptcy never ends, even when you liquidate most of the company. The pension plan for Burch Industries was taken over by another company which has turned out to be misusing it. The final papers on a couple of my notes, and the sale of the Park Avenue building, came due this weekend. I hope everyone can get into town. I want to get this over with."

"You still miss New York, don't you?" McCall commented watching him poke the fire.

Burch watched the fire burn for a couple of seconds before answering. "Yes. Down in Florida, the situation is different. The people are different."

"Why did you go down there?"

"Why not? I took what loose cash I had and went down to the little vacation home I had." He smiled and turned around. "I wasn't in town a week before an old friend commissioned me to build a vacation home for her. I needed that so much that I gave her the plans for free by the end. But it was only the start. My little business is thriving, Robert."

McCall laughed. "And what about your reputation?"

"Oh, a little bit of soot doesn't bother the people I deal with. They enjoy meeting a person who has gone through so much." There was a trace of mockery in that statement. "And the ones who really care for me, don't care about it at all."

"So you wouldn't come back to the City permanently?"

"Not unless it's in Spring. New York in Spring is beautiful." The young man ran his hands through his long hair. "I can't imagine living permanently where I couldn't see the seasons turn. How do they live underground, Robert?"

"It's a safe haven. They don't need the seasons. They're happy with what they have."

"How did YOU meet them?"

McCall prevaricated. He avoided mentioning that the first time he had met Father, he had nearly shot him.

"I'd rather hear how you met up with them. There are a lot of gaps in the story of you, Vincent and Gabriel."

"All right. It's a long story."

"More coffee?" McCall poured another cup, and listened. The story was different from what he had heard before, filling in what Father had told him, what he had picked up from the New York papers, and what he had investigated.

"So, basically, if Catherine Chandler hadn't asked you to check the notebook, you wouldn't have gotten involved."

"I was a specialist in not getting involved with dangerous people," Elliot said with a slight edge.

"Except in the building industry. There I knew the rules."

"And no one knows about the Tunnels... still," McCall mused as he sipped on his tea. He looked at the candle. He wondered if the Tunnel dwellers would have invited the man staring into the fire to Winterfest, if they knew he was in town. Vincent probably would have. "I think they are masterful at manipulating you, Burch."

"But I would still like to see the Tunnels," Burch replied with a trace of wistfulness. "All I saw down there was a hospital cave, but I heard so much about the rest that it felt like I was there. It's like

looking through a Christmas window, Robert. I sometimes feel like a homeless child in a Dickens' novel, with my nose against the glass. Inside it is warm and safe. But I'm out in the elements."

"Would you want to be down there?" McCall asked. "Just to see it for a while. I'm curious."

Outside they could hear sleet battering the window. Though it was just past six-thirty, it was pitch black. Street lights struggled against the falling ice.

"It's a bad night to be caught outdoors," McCall commented. "More coffee? I'll make a new pot."
"Thanks. I think I'll pay a visit to your facilities."

McCall started the coffee maker, and poured the rest of the tea into his mug. The phone rang as he was setting it down, and the tea slopped over the side. He muttered a curse.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming! Hello?" "I'm looking for Elliot Burch?"

"Who? I'm sorry, you must have a wrong number," McCall said his senses suddenly alive with suspicion.

"No, I don't. I got this from him, McCall. This is Joe Maxwell."

"Joe, why didn't you introduce yourself first?" McCall said with a sharp edge. He now recognized the familiar tones. "Wait a minute. Burch!"

Elliot came back into the living room. McCall held out the receiver. "This is for you."

"For me? Hello?"

"Burch, this is Maxwell. Listen, did you tell anyone you were going to be up here?"

"No, of course not. Only the lawyers and the police know I'm in town."

"What do you know about a man called Jacob Wells?"

"Jacob Wells? Who is he?"

McCall lifted his head sharply. He recognized the name. It had been on the bookplates in the old books Father had lent him. Jacob Wells was Father and Burch did not know it. Why was Joe Maxwell going on about Jacob Wells?

"A JOB offer?" Burch said, then noticed McCall's waving hands. "Hold on, Joe." He put his hand over the receiver. "What?"

"Jacob Wells is Father," McCall breathed at him.

Enlightenment spread over the young man's face. "Wait a minute, Joe. That name does sound familiar. You say he has a job? Where did I meet him? That's not important but-- well, why not? I'm curious. When does he want to meet me?" Elliot checked his battered Rolex watch. "Nine? That's barely under an hour from now! I wonder if I can get a cab..."

"Are you serious about this?" McCall could hear Joe's incredulous voice. "Then I'll pick you up."

"Be careful out there. It's snowing."

"Merry Christmas."

St. Vincent's hospital had only night lighting. The nurses soft-footed their ways around. The administrators' area was on their own floor.

Alcott had lit the lamp on his secretary's desk and the one in his office. Outside, sleet had turned to snow and was falling heavily.

Father sat in the desk chair, a steaming cup of tea in one hand. He finished reading the report on St. Vincent's.

"I can't see what all the fuss is about, Peter. Even this says it is possible to save the building."

"Read it again, Jacob. We can't fix the radon problem without rebuilding parts of the basement."

"Elliot Burch is supposed to be a genius," Father commented. "He should be able to figure out a way of fixing this without having to shut the hospital."

He slid the report back on Alcott's desk. The doctor was standing like a sentinel by the window staring out over the barren lot.

"It's becoming an obsession, Jacob," Alcott said softly. He turned his head. "I wanted the addition so badly to help the neighborhood. Now we may lose it all."

"I hope not," Father replied. "You have the contract?"

"It's there." Alcott waved to another pile. "Next to the roll of blueprints for St. Vincent's. I borrowed them as soon as I knew we had to rebuild."

Father perused the handwritten contract. It seemed airtight and was, to his mind, maybe slightly overgenerous to Burch. But the time constraints on the work made the price realistic.

"Where is he? He's late. It's almost nine thirty."

Outside came the sound of footsteps, men's shoes clicking on linoleum, then the outer door opened. Maxwell scanned the room.

Burch stepped around the other man. "Dr. Alcott - Fath- ah, Dr. Wells. How nice to see you."

Joe shut the door behind him. "Doctor Wells?"

"Yes. It's very good to see you again, Elliot." Father stood and held out his hand.

Burch shook his hand. His face had a touch of reserve. Maybe it was Alcott's position by the window or Father's stiffness, but he reacted with suspicion of his own.

"I hear you have a job offer for me?" he inquired politely.

"Yes." Father handed him the report. "St. Vincent's needs help."

Elliot scanned the sheets, his brows bent in a frown. Maxwell read over his shoulder.

"There's not much more that can be said," Burch said handing back the sheets. "You have a real problem here."

"Can you do anything to help?"

"Me?" Burch stared at him.

"You. This hospital must stay open."

"I'm out of the New York real estate market," the former builder said harshly.

"But can you help us plan the renovations?" Father asked desperately. "You will help us, won't you?"

Burch's blue eyes scanned the man who had saved his life. The last thing Elliot wanted was to get involved with the people down below. Through them, he had lost Catherine, lost his company, lost his work in New York, the buildings that were his children, and now they were coming to him for more help. It was too much to ask. He could not go home again.

"I can't help you," he said quietly. "I'm only in town for a couple of days and then I go back to Florida."

Father sank back into his chair with a defeated expression. Behind him Alcott was motionless, looking out into the night.

"Can I speak to you alone?" Father said with intensity. "Please, Elliot?" The other man nodded.

"Peter? Mr. Maxwell?" The two men filed out silently. "We need you to do this, Elliot. The hospital is important ...

"I can't!" Burch's voice plead for understanding.

"Can the hospital be saved?" Father asked quietly. "You are the experienced builder. Can it be saved?"

"Yes, probably. But it means a lot of work."

"They were planning on adding an addition," Father said softly. "For the poor."

Burch flinched. Father had hit on his conscience, that conscience which was so easily guilt-tripped. That was how Catherine had talked him into getting involved with Gabriel. And how he'd ended up shot. And how he had lost everything.

Burch steeled himself. "I can't help you. I'm sorry. It's too much to ask of me." He stood abruptly and walked out. "Joe. Let's go."

Alcott watched them leave, shutting the outer office door behind them. He sighed as he came back in and picked up the contract.

"Well, that's that. I guess we'll go with Wachtell's architect." He stuffed the folded contract in the shuddering window frame. "At least I found a use for that."

"Don't," Father said softly. "Don't give up yet. I'll ask Vincent if he can find a way to talk to Elliot."

"It won't work."

Across the hallway, a man picked up a telephone and pressed the buttons. He kept his voice down as when the phone was answered.

"Mr. Hayes? This is Clarence Wachtell. I thought I might pass along that the architect that Dr. Alcott has got for the renovations is Elliot Burch. What? Of course, I'm sure. I recognized him from the newspaper articles. Elliot Burch. Thank you, Mr. Hayes." He hung up silently.

Burch struggled up out of heavy sleep. Though deep, it hadn't been undisturbed. Dreams of Father mixed with St. Vincent's hospital, and he was pursued by Catherine and Vincent both with oversized reproachful eyes. It took several seconds to realize it was morning.

His budget no longer ran to penthouses in expensive hotels. His room was moderately priced and not four blocks from his lawyers.

He grabbed the television remote and turned on the set catching the local news. Crawling out of the cocoon of blankets, he stared out the window, seeing even more snow falling.

"Room service? I'd like two eggs, bacon and toast sent up to room 523, please."

"At once, sir," the woman replied.

Elliot hung up and ran his hands through his hair, brushing it back into long waves. His beard needed trimming. He took a shower and was drying it when he saw a familiar building on the television screen. It was St. Vincent's hospital. He turned up the sound.

"Despite rumors of closure, St. Vincent's hospital has received a reprieve. Today's Wall Street Business says that former multimillionaire architect, Elliot Burch, in New York in relation to the bankruptcy of his company, has been asked to redesign the century-old building and plan its new addition."

"What! Goddam it!" Burch cursed. Where the hell had the press gotten this? He had not forgotten

what had been printed about him after the false murder arrest and his disappearance. The only reporter who had behaved responsibly, to his biased view, was Frank Hayes of Wall Street Business. And who was spreading the rumors this time? So what if they were true! He didn't need the press! He called the desk and had the New York papers sent up along with his breakfast.

Spreading the Times and the Post, he found no mention of his connection with St. Vincent's. However, there was a small blurb in Wall Street Business.

His gaze went to the byline. Frank Hayes. Damn The man knew that he was not interested in coming back to New York! He had talked with him at the Chandler theater opening in October about his life in Florida.

The phone rang. "Burch!"

"What's going on, Elliot?" Maxwell's voice came through loudly. "Have you seen the television?"

"Yeah, and Wall Street Business as well! You were there, Joe. I turned DOWN the job!"

"Well, I've had three people point it out to me this morning, so perhaps you'd better talk with Frank Hayes!"

"First thing after breakfast," Elliot said tensely. "See you later, Joe."

He read over his messages while eating breakfast. The lawyers had put off till the afternoon the meeting on the building notes, and even that was tentative. The snow had wrecked a number of plans. There were several messages from last night that he must have missed when he came in. They were all from Frank Hayes. How the reporter had tracked Elliot to the hotel was beyond the builder's imagination, but Hayes had tried desperately to reach him. Probably about an interview. Burch felt any interview was likely to end up with the reporter being carried out on his shield. He tried calling Hayes, but the phone went unanswered.

He had to make another call. Burch dialed and let it ring till a woman picked up. "St. Vincent's Hospital."

"Dr. Alcott please."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Alcott is in a meeting at the moment. Can I take a message?" "Yes, please tell him that Elliot Burch called--"

"Oh, Mr. Burch! I'll tell him as soon as he comes out! We're so glad--"

"And my answer is unchanged from last night. Please pass that!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Thank you." Burch hung up.

He picked up his heavy top coat, wrapped his scarf on and went out for a walk.

The snow had become flurries. The powder on the streets was thick and scuffed, but only the underlying sleet had hardened into a layer of ice. There were only a few people enjoying the air. The storm must have forced most of New York to stay home.

Burch headed for Central Park. He walked past the statue of Alice in Wonderland, and the snow-covered ice rink. At the carousel, he paused. That was where he had first seen Vincent face-to face. That was where he had nearly been killed for the first time. He had not been able to see a carousel again without remembering that night. He shivered, half at the memories, and turned away.

By the rink, he bought some hot cider and sat down on a bench that he swept clean of snow. The wind was blowing gusts of powder around, but the sky was lightening from leaden grey to silver. It was cold and crisp - and the New York he still loved desperately.

He remembered his first skyscraper. It had been modest by later standards but the satisfaction he had felt when it was completed had seldom been met. Walking inside the day it was completed,

standing alone in the foyer, he knew he had made something special. Among his memories, he walked the streets of New York, from building to building, deal by deal, up to the moment he met Catherine Chandler.

He leaned back, slitting his eyes against the growing wind. His long hair blew around his face. He did not want to think of Cathy and what happened after that. From the pinnacle he hit the depths, like a roller coaster, and now he was rising again. He had been exonerated of the crimes he was accused of. But he belonged down South now, not here in New York. Here was nothing but pain and desperate longing. Involving himself in New York would be like tearing a bandage off a barely-scabbed wound. It was over with here. Over.

"Burch? Elliot?"

Elliot realized he had let his defenses down. The bulky man chewing on a pretzel could have been an enemy. But the voice was familiar.

"Frank?"

"May I have a seat?" Hayes sat down on the other end of the bench. "Cold morning."

"At least the snow has stopped."

"They'll still be picking frozen bodies off the streets," the reporter predicted callously. Hayes shifted so he looked at Burch. "Did you get my messages?"

"How'd you find me?"

The man smiled. "You're still recognized in this city, Burch."

"Where did you hear that I was 'renovating' St. Vincent's, Frank?"

"Is it true? I spent a lot of time last night trying to reach you!"

Burch met his gaze. "I'm not doing anything with St. Vincent's. They asked me if I would and I turned them down."

Hayes stared at him for a second. "Then why did they say you were?"

"Where'd you hear it from?"

"I never give away my sources. But he was incorrect?"

"That's right. I'm going back where I came from, Frank."

"Oh." The reporter looked over the snowy rink. "Hmm. That's too bad, Elliot."

Burch felt trapped. The world was conspiring to keep him in New York. "I don't know where they got the idea that I was going to do it. I noticed it only appeared in your paper."

"The tip came from a highly-placed source. I tried to confirm it with you. You can't say it was malicious slander or done with malice aforethought." Hayes stood up. "How about some lunch?"

"Only if you're buying."

"It's a soft news market out there, but I can still afford a greasy spoon," Hayes laughed.

They walked to Tavern on the Green. The head waiter looked doubtful at Burch's long wet hair, but then recognized the man. He led them to good seats near the windows after they had hung up their winter coats.

"I love eating out with you, Burch. We always get the best seats in town."

The builder grinned. "It's one of the few perks they still allow me. Have you been here before?"

"Been here? They wouldn't even let a reporter through the door without a copy of a bank statement! What looks good?"

Both men perused the menus. "Mr. Burch!"

Burch looked up. The man was pear-shaped with pendulous jaws and a balding scalp. His suit was new judging from the sheen and the scarf around his neck was an expensive wool plaid, green like the man's eyes. Behind him was a slender young man in his thirties, with a thin closed face and narrow lips which he kept wetting. His hair was a butternut color. Around his thin neck was a vivid scarlet scarf which matched his overcoat.

"I'm afraid I don't know you," Burch said politely.

"My name is Clarence Wachtell. I just heard that you aren't taking on St. Vincent's."

"Mm," Burch made an indeterminate noise, eyeing the man with barely-concealed disdain.

Hayes flicked his gaze from Burch to Wachtell, then back.

"I was sure Dr. Alcott had it wrong when he said you were taking over. But I'm glad to have met you after all I've heard. Good afternoon." Wachtell nodded and waddled off, followed by the other man.

"Who was that?" the builder hissed at his companion.

"You don't know? Wachtell's one of St. Vincent's administrators." "And... the other man?"

"The scarlet fop? Kevin Fetters. He's the architect that Wachtell got to do the renovations on his last building." The reporter crinkled his nose as if he smelled something unsavory.

"How does he know that I'm not taking St. Vincent's?" Elliot hissed across the table.

"I suppose someone told him." Hayes folded his menu. "Why won't you take it, Elliot?"

"Off the record or on?"

"Whatever you chose."

"Off then. I have plans going on down south which I need to get back to and because I... can't," Elliot finished lamely. "Let's start with some coffee."

Hayes looked up at the waitress. "Coffee, please. Give us a moment to order." He waited till she was out of earshot. "Down in Miami?"

"Miami? You damn journalists know everything, don't you?" "Not everything."

"You expect me to give up Miami at Christmas, for New York in a blizzard?"

"You don't feel you owe the city something?"

Burch glared at him. "I gave this city a lot. I don't owe them a cent!"

The bulky man stared out the window for a second then back to the man opposite him.

Burch, and this is strictly off the record, it would do your reputation no end of good to do that hospital. People remember your arrest for Marino's death, and the SEC hearings, and don't remember what you have done for the city. The impression is that you're an arrogant S.O.B. who doesn't give a damn about the little people. This would change their minds!"

"Why do I care what you think? What do I care what they think?" Burch replied heatedly. "I don't live in New York any more!"

"Really?" the reporter said pointedly. "I think New York will be with you for a long, long time, man. Even down in Miami."

Burch was silent. Hayes had a point. He still loved the city. He did not want people here to think he didn't care. But he was damned if he would let anyone guilt-trip him into doing that hospital.

Hayes shrugged. "I suppose Wachtell and Fetters win out. Pity."

"Wachtell?"

"Oh, he's the one who tipped me off last night," the reporter said casually.

"Why are you telling me this? Why do you want me to take on St. Vincent's? I thought reporters were impartial," Burch commented sarcastically.

"I am being impartial. I am just pointing out facts you might not have known about, so you can make an informed judgment," Hayes intoned, as the waitress put the food down. "Besides I don't like Dr. Wachtell. I've been watching him work for years. He leaves a trail of slime. Now what's for lunch?"

"Escargot?" Burch asked dryly.

Hayes flicked him a glance. "Why don't you tell me about Florida?"

"You want an interview?"

"Yeah. On the record."

The builder laughed. "Fair enough. Florida has lots of birds..."

Chapter 4

Robert McCall read the blurb in Wall Street Business and raised an eyebrow. Burch had not been planning on staying in New York City when he left last night. Curiosity drove him to call Elliot's hotel, but the man was out.

He eyed the half-decorated pine tree in one corner of the room. Burch had helped string the lights, which led to a discussion of Christmas plans. The young man's plans included finishing a deck for a girlfriend. McCall's skepticism was met with the bland assurance that it was a paying job and his designs were only on the wood flooring.

The clock said it was around noon. The snow must be damping even the desperate because the phone was quiet. He restlessly walked to the window, then back to the tree. His own Christmas plans were unformed. He turned on the television to the morning talk shows and flicked from channel to channel. Mindless babble! He left it on one channel as he put together some lunch.

Coming back, there was a picture of St. Vincent's hospital on the screen. McCall turned up the sound.

"Despite information that former builder Elliot Burch was going to rebuild the hospital, the administration has now announced that Kevin Feters will be doing the renovations. Mr. Feters is part of Parton and Dumbrell Architects," a woman correspondent standing in a snowdrift announced cheerily. "I have here Mr. Clarence Wachtell, one of the administrators. Dr. Wachtell, why has Mr. Burch refused this job?"

The man shrugged. "Well, you'll have to ask Dr. Alcott about that. He was the one who was negotiating with Mr. Burch. Besides we can't afford to hire anyone like that. The hospital is in desperate need of money."

"Dr. Alcott? The trustee of the Chandler trust?" McCall gave points to the correspondent. It appeared that the woman had done her homework before going on the air. "Isn't the Trust helping with the expenses? Was Mr. Burch going to charge the hospital for his work?"

Wachtell looked sincere as he gazed into the camera. "You must direct those question to Dr. Alcott. Now, I have to go."

"Thank you for your time," the woman said respectfully. "Back to the studio, June."

"Thank you. On Wall Street..." McCall narrowed his eyes. Wachtell was too slick, too expansive. His first thought was what was the administrator going to get out of the deal. He pressed the mute button. Amazing how much could be done with so few statements. Wachtell had insinuated that Alcott had concluded the deal with Burch for a great deal of money without consulting the administration, and that he, as an administrator, had acted with full support. He had also given the impression that Burch

was in it for the money. And the newswoman had let him get away with it. Of course, it was clear her only interest in the story was Burch's connection. Despite everything that had gone down, Elliot Burch was still news in New York.

He dialed Burch's number again. No answer. McCall looked out at the snow, shivered, then went over to the closet for his overcoat. Who was this Clarence Wachtell anyway?

Alcott caught the tail end of the interview as he came out of his office, heading for his rounds. His secretary had a small television on a corner of the desk, and was watching the news.

"What the--?" he said with a puzzled expression.

Jennie looked up at him, dark eyes peering under her frizzled black hair. "Dr. Wachtell. He gave an interview."

"What? Why?"

"Didn't you see the papers this morning?" She pulled out a copy of Wall Street Business. "Look."

Alcott felt ice run down his spine when he read the small blurb. "But that's not the way it is!" he said sharply.

"That's what Wachtell says. Oh, yeah, Mr. Burch called this morning too. He says his answer's the same as the one he gave last night."

The doctor grimaced. "I'm sure he's pleased by this."

Jennie said in a lower but intense tone, "He's undercutting you, Dr. Alcott!"

The tall man felt like control was slipping from around him. He was a doctor, not a politician, and the mechanics of office power annoyed him. But this was an attack on him personally, an attack with absolutely no validity, since Burch had rejected the offer.

"Is Dr. Wachtell in his office, Jennie?"

"Nope. He's out."

The phone rang. The secretary picked it up, "Dr. Alcott's office." She listened, then put her hand over the receiver. "It's one of the T.V. stations, sir. They want to talk to you."

Alcott waved her away. "I'll call them back. Take a message."

He had the ominous premonition that they were not going to go away, and that he should have stayed in the Tunnels when he had the chance.

Burch and Hayes walked slowly downtown, talking about New York City. The reporter loved the excitement and the people, the builder the city's structures and the liveliness.

Hayes finally turned away when they reached Fifth Ave and 52nd street. "I have an interview to do. Nice talkin' with you, Burch."

"I'll be seeing you around, no doubt," Burch said dryly.

The reporter held out his card. On the back were three times. "Those are my deadlines tonight. If you change your mind or have anything to add, call me." He turned before Burch could come up with an answer and trudged away through the snow.

Elliot put the card in his pocket. He looked around, found a phone and called his lawyers. As he expected, most of the people could not make that afternoon's meeting and it had been postponed.

He deflected several inquiries about the hospital and finished the call politely.

Walking, he found his footsteps leading towards the hospital. He pulled up his scarf around his ears, and huddled in the coat, and, from across the street, surveyed the structure.

It clearly dated from the middle of the last century. The main entrance was already swept clear of snow and salted, and people bustled in and out. Not the rich. He could tell from the clothing that most of the current patrons were middle-class or lower, some from the depths, but the building exuded a feeling of tradition and hopefulness. A black orderly and two young nurses carrying a very large pine wreath came out and began hanging it on one side of the door. The procedure was accompanied by a lot of laughter.

Burch walked slowly around the block. He found the emergency entrance, a more modern addition to the archaic building, and directly behind, an empty lot. The lot for the addition. Several cars were parked next to the piles of concrete. They had hospital stickers and someone must have given them permission to park here till the building was built. Looking up, he saw the dark windows where probably Alcott was standing right now. His trained eyes estimated the amount of work needed to be done before the addition could be built and he shook his head.

Temptation tugged at him. It would be fairly easy to rebuild this building. It would be expensive, yes, but it could come out better than new. The best of the past and the future. He thought ruefully of the days when St. Vincent's could have become a tax exemption for Burch Industries, a charitable donation. There was no way he help them monetarily.

His conscience nagged at him. Father had asked a favor and he had saved Burch from dying of the bullet wound. Vincent was probably named after the building, he abruptly realized. Mentally, he saw the drawn tired face of Dr. Alcott, a man who looked like he was at the end of his string. Dedication, Elliot understood. Alcott had looked crushed last night. He felt guilty at rejecting the doctor's request.

Coming around to the front, he spotted a television store with several sets in the window. One was giving the noon news. He stopped to listen and watch when he saw Wachtell's face.

They repeated the interview. Burch's spine stiffened. He was well aware of the complete ramifications. This would smear him in the minds of New Yorkers, even more than before! And all over a story that Hayes was going to deny in tomorrow's paper.

Turning he saw the front of the hospital, now adorned with the wreath. He walked across, keeping a sharp lookout for anyone who would recognize him.

The lobby was stuffy and warm. Nurses bustled back and forth, orderlies and interns laughed, and three young women shared brochures and giggles, in one corner. He saw the plaster was cracking in spots and the linoleum was worn. The floor was uneven from the weight of years and footsteps. The plastic chairs had taken abuse.

"Can I help you, sir?" a young woman's voice asked.

Burch's mind had been automatically assessing what the room needed. He was brought back to earth by her question. "Uh, no. Thank you."

"Oh. All right." The dark frizzy-haired girl stared at him, as he walked off out to the snowy street. Burch knew he had been recognized.

"Mr. Burch? Could I talk to you?" The young woman had followed him.

He turned reluctantly. She was hopping from one foot to the other, her hands tucked under armpits.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"Why won't you help us?" she asked bluntly. "I..."

"Dr. Alcott looks like an idiot. He asked you and now Wachtell's making him look bad, and he doesn't deserve it!"

"I never said I'd do it," Elliot said lamely.

She cocked her head. Her breath came out in a plume. "But it was in the paper. And on the T.V." "I don't know how. I turned him down when he asked."

"Oh. Why?"

Burch had forgotten this about New Yorkers. They were inquisitive and forthright. Right now he would have preferred some equivocation. "I'm only in town for the weekend. I have business in Miami."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's your reason?"

"You'd better get inside," he said awkwardly. "You'll catch pneumonia. I had that once. It was hell."

"I never get sick. But the others do. Dr. Alcott looks after them." She turned and went he could reply.

That was the second person who had walked away from him today. Burch felt uncomfortable. He turned his back on the building and walked away.

The Public Library had resources McCall had barely tapped. He had the Who's Who entry on Clarence Wachtell, and some financial information, enough to make him go into the library's newspaper section. After a few minutes discussion, the librarian went to the computer and found several articles on Wachtell that went into the man's background.

McCall trudged back to his apartment. The day was warming fast. The snow was clumping in dirty heaps, turning to slush.

He found Elliot on his doorstep waiting for him. The man leaned against the metal banisters, gently rocking back and forth to keep warm.

"Well met," McCall said curiously.

"Ill met, you mean. I have to talk to you." "Come inside."

The young man followed him in. After hanging their coats, they went into the living room.

"I heard about your new job. And that you weren't going to do it."

Burch grimaced. "I had lunch with Hayes. He says he got the information from a man named Wachtell."

"Wachtell? I saw the interview on the news. Looks like he's set up to move into power at St. Vincent's."

"Yeah." Burch sat down on the couch, hands hanging between his knees. "I went over to the hospital. The fabric's sound, Robert. I don't understand how the JCOH ever got the idea that they needed to close it."

McCall dropped the pages next to him. "From Wachtell maybe? If he's talking to Hayes and the media, then why can't he talk to the Joint Commission?"

"What are these?" Burch scanned the sheets. "You've been doing some research on him?"

"He looked smug. I wondered why."

"And you found...?"

"I found that he owns real estate all over the city. He's a rich man."

"Did you run across a Kevin Fetters affiliated with him?"

McCall raised an eyebrow. "Fetters? The charity case?"

"Hm?"

"Kevin Fetters is Wachtell's protégé. Apparently he was into drugs for a while. Wachtell sponsored his recovery and architecture degree. He uses Fetters on all his renovations."

Burch tossed the sheets on the table. "Damn it all. I can't do this. I can't." He walked over to the windows and looked out.

The ex-spy watched the young man. He showed every emotion on his face, and now it was emotionally torn.

"Give it up, Burch. Give in or go back south in three days."

"This is one of the most stupid things..." Burch muttered. "I'll do the plans. It won't take long."

"You'll be in Miami for Christmas," McCall reassured him.

"Right. Among the flamingos."

Chapter 5

Alcott had finished his rounds and returned to his office to find Jennie, sniffing as she poured of coffee.

"I hope you haven't caught what's going around, he chaffed gently. "I'm all right," she said morosely.

"What is it, Jen?"

"Well," she shifted from one foot. "Fetters is back."

"Ah-hem," Alcott said warningly. He saw a shadow on the glass of the door behind her. It opened. Wachtell walked in. "Peter? May I have a word with you?"

"Certainly."

Behind Wachtell came Fetters who smiled at Jennie. The secretary settled down with a pile of papers pointedly ignoring him.

Wachtell settled into a chair while his companion leaned against the battered black file cabinet.

"Have you seen the news?"

"What news?" Alcott prevaricated, shuffling his papers together.

"About the hospital renovations."

"I've been on my rounds."

Wachtell smiled, a half-moon of pink skin and overly-large teeth. Three strands of carefully arranged hair covered his bald spot from normal view, but Alcott could see it across the desk. He had a sudden irrational urge to throw the papers in his hands at the smiling face.

"Burch turned the job down."

"I have not yet heard from Mr. Burch," Alcott lied smoothly. Buy time. Anything could be happening.

"When did he call you?"

Wachtell hesitated for barely a second. "Just before lunch. So, Kevin gets the job."

"I thought we were going to discuss it at the meeting this evening," Alcott said with a trace of anger.

Keep your temper, Peter! he thought.

"You made your choice without it--"

"I asked Elliot Burch if he was interested in taking the job. I was going to discuss it with all the administrators if he showed some interest. He turned it down." In his anger, Alcott was unguarded.

Fetters straightened up. Wachtell's eyes glittered.

Alcott knew his mistake right away. "He said he couldn't do it --"

"Sir!" Jennie opened the door with an excited outburst. "Mr. Burch on line one!"

The three men froze. Then Alcott picked up the receiver. "Hello? Peter Alcott here."

"Dr. Alcott?" Burch's voice was audible to everyone in the room. "I wondered why you had broken our contract on the hospital renovation?"

Alcott wondered for a second if he was going insane. What was Burch doing? Was he going to commit to doing the hospital? The doctor eyed the men across the room as he replied, "As I understood it, you had a prior commitment."

"I... ah, have cleared myself for at least a month. Maybe more," Burch assured him. He must have picked up that the timing was bad because he cut it short. "I will come by this evening to get your input on what needs to be done,"

Wachtell ripped the phone out of Alcott's hand before the doctor could answer. "Mr. Burch, this is Clarence Wachtell. We already have a contract with Kevin Fetters to do the renovations so you can just go back to your earlier commitments."

Burch's reply was cool but polite. "I have a verbal contract with the trustee of the Chandler Trust, who I believe is the major contributor to the renovation, Dr. Wachtell. I will fight to keep the project."

"We have a written contract!" Wachtell said in a tight tone.

"I believe mine is valid," Burch replied. "And if it is broached, I will see you in court."

Wachtell licked his lips, pursing them in and out. His eyes watched Alcott with deep anger burning in their depths. "This has to be discussed with the administration, Mr. Burch. The meeting is tonight."

"Then I will expect to hear from Dr. Alcott," Burch said with a trace of amusement. "Please return the phone to him."

Wachtell held out the receiver. "Here!"

Alcott took it from his sweaty hand. "Burch?"

"My timing seems to have been bad. When can I talk to you?"

"I'll call you after the meeting."

"When is it?"

"Eightish."

"Right. I'll be at the hospital around nine?"

"Right. Thanks, Elliot."

"We're not out of the woods yet. Be careful."

On that note, Alcott hung up the receiver. He looked up, meeting the heat of Wachtell's anger and in contrast, the icy speculative stare of Fetters.

"You're not going to win on this," Wachtell said ominously. "You've ruled this hospital ever since you got that money, Alcott. But I've been an administrator for over ten years and you're not going to win this time." He left before Alcott could come up with a reply.

Fetter smiled, briefly, showing slightly yellow teeth and walked out.

Jennie waited till both men left the outer office before coming in. "Brrh! Did you see that? Kevin hasn't improved from when he worked here!"

"That call was a lifesaver!" Alcott smiled at her, feeling almost light-headed. "Burch is going to do the job!"

She stared at him, then cocked her head and smiled mischievously. "So it worked, huh?"

"What?"

"I saw him outside. I saw him come in, look around, as if he was trying to make a decision. So I went out and talked to him."

Alcott came to earth with a thud. "Burch was here? You talked with him?"

"And now he's doin, the hospital, right? I guess it worked."

"Who would have guessed...", Alcott muttered. Who would have guessed that Burch had a soft streak? "Well, Jennie, if you have a moment, can you type up my notes on the Aldres case?"

He smiled as she left, a spring in her step that had been missing a half-hour earlier. Alcott knew that this was just the start. He had to get Burch accepted by the others, then he had to get the hospital rebuilt.

Burch had made a couple of calls after he hung up on Alcott. McCall admired his technique. He was applying pressure to the precise points that would get him where he wanted to be: in charge of the hospital renovations. One call to Frank Hayes was short and sweet. The ex-spy didn't understand the reference to snails, but from the sound of the reporter's voice he knew that tomorrow's paper was going to be full of Burch's agreement. Then Burch called his lawyers, filling them in, and finally, he called a Jack Alcaris.

Alcaris apparently had never expected to hear the man's voice again. "Hello?"

"Hey, Alcaris, long time."

"Christ, Burch! Heard you been down south, hiding from your creditors." The man's voice boomed from the receiver.

"How long you been dry, Alcaris?" Burch's tone was slightly wary.

"Nearly nine months. That's when they let me out of the detox ward."

McCall raised an eyebrow. Sounds like Alcaris was a refugee from a Jim Beam whiskey bottle. How did Burch know him?

"And what you been up to since?" Burch asked.

"I made up with my wife."

"That's good. Know what I'm doing?"

"Running away?"

Burch blinked, then narrowed his eyes. "You're running a sugar line tonight, aren't you? I'm back in town, and I'm doing St. Vincent's. I need a construction boss that I can trust."

"When do we get paid?" Jack's voice was full of sarcasm and doubt.

"First, the deal. Then the terms. I'm doing the plans in three weeks. A Christmas gift to the city. It'll make you; it'll make me. You might even get back what you lost to booze, Jack. Your reputation."

"It can't do yours harm either," the man retorted. The phone was silent for a second, then he said, "All right, Burch. Let's talk. Where do you want to meet me?"

"St. Vincent's. Around 8. Under the main wreath in front." Burch hung up.

McCall settled back into the chair. "So it's that simple?"

"Nothing's simple till we have a signed contract with Alcott, and the plans are under way." Elliot walked over to the desk, then back to the window, restlessly pacing. Outside the winter night was

falling and gusts of wind were blowing snow up into the street lights. "I have to have a place to work on the plans. And some equipment."

"Get it shipped up from Florida."

Burch winced. "And I have to clear up some stuff there too. It's going to be a cold Christmas after all."

"Dickens wouldn't agree."

"Oh, please. Nothing about the 'milk of human kindness'." The former builder looked pained. "Now, I think I'm going to call some television people I know. They'd love confirmation that I'm doing the hospital, and it will be ammunition against Wachtell."

"Wachtell isn't going to give up easily," McCall I warned. "Shall I come along tonight? You might need a hand."

* * * * *

Alcott swiveled his chair from his desk, towards the window. Black night hid the construction site. He looked down at the papers still strewn on his desk. Old Mrs. Penneris' records really needed updating and then there was the pile of Chandler Trust papers to go over. He made a mental note to ask Burch to do something about the window, which was shuddering again, despite the paper wedge. Surely, if he was rebuilding the hospital, he could fix a window.

He settled in his chair, leaned back, and steepled his fingers. He had an hour before the meeting, and he needed to mentally prepare for that. Wachtell could still ruin the deal, and would if he could. Most of the administrators supported Alcott. They would support whoever had the money. But Alcott felt threatened. Wachtell was not backing down. And speaking of down.... He pulled out a sheet of paper, and wrote a note, then folded and sealed it with tape.

"Jennie?" He used the intercom.

The secretary instead of replying, opened the door. "Dr. Alcott?" Her black hair curled out from under the heavy woolen cap. She was dressed for the weather in a thick down coat and huge boots. He had to smile. She was a pixie in that garb.

"Could you drop this off at the barber's for me? The one--"

Unexpectedly she blushed. "Harvey's, right? Okay." She slid it into the coat's pocket. "Have a good night, Dr. Alcott. Don't stay here too long."

"I've got a meeting with Burch in a couple of hours."

Her eyes flashed with excitement. "Yeah, and he's gonna be around here for a while, isn't he? He's gonna get this place on its toes!"

"I'm not sure Harvey would approve of your tone," Alcott said with slight amusement. "I'll tell Burch you approve."

She tossed her head back saucily. "I helped on this, Doc! Have a good night, right?"

"You too. Good night." He let his smile emerge after she shut the door. Jennie was a minx with a good heart. If Harvey could win it, good for him. Meanwhile his note to Father would go down tonight, when Harvey passed it on.

His watch ticked away a half-hour as he wrote on the Penneris file, making careful notations. He finished, put it on the out stack and took up the Chandler Trust files. His appointment with the secondary Trustee was early tomorrow morning.

The outer door opened before he could lift his head and acknowledge the knocks.

Alcott eyed the man entering with bewilderment. "Can I help you?"

"I would like you to come with me," Fetters announced without preamble. "Why?"

"I have something to show you. Downstairs. I need your help."

Alcott could not refuse him, despite his suspicions. "What kind of help?"

Fetters sighed, drooped his head, and ran a hand over his face. "A friend of mine. He's in trouble. I can't bring him to the hospital."

"Why me?"

"You're the only doctor I know who might be free right now." The young man looked up with a piteous smile. "Yeah, I know it sounds ridiculous, but Dr. Alcott, you're the only doctor I know who might come."

"What kind of trouble is it?" Alcott stood and reached for his overcoat. He pulled out a small medical case. The roll of blueprints fell over, and he propped them against the wall, under the window.

"Heroin," Fetters said tiredly. "Street crap gone bad."

"You ought to call the emergency squad."

Kevin stood up. "Let me take you there. Then if you think it's bad enough, we'll call them. Walt just can't stay off the smack."

Alcott scribbled a note on his desk for Burch and followed the man out. He switched off the lamp on his way.

Burch, standing beneath the wreath, was recognized by several nurses as they left the hospital. It had been a good place to meet Alcaris. He tipped the hat he had borrowed from McCall (his winter clothes being in Florida) then smiled as they carefully went down the steps. The slush had hardened into ice.

Alcaris came up the stairs, with a slight smile on his creased features. He was portly and had a healthy flush. He looked good for a former alcoholic in his late forties.

They clasped hands in greeting. Alcaris tilted back his head to squint up at the building. "Three weeks, Elliot?"

"Think we can do it?"

"You can do the plans, but putting a team in durin' Christmas? You gotta be crazy, guy."

"I'm not crazy." Burch felt exhilaration flow through his veins. This was the kind of job he'd always loved. All the odds stacked against him, and doomsayers in the corners. Not fighting shadows like Gabriel, but a good clean street fight in an arena he knew. "It's a historical site, and I know the ropes. We've got a real chance here. Let's go inside."

"Lead on."

Inside it was cold. The foyer was darker than it had been, and was unoccupied. The small gift shop was closed and the main desk was unattended. Both men eyed the walls and structure, coming to similar conclusions. They exchanged glances.

"Okay. We might do it," Alcaris said with a shrug. "What do you need from me right away?"

"I have to see Alcott. Let's go." Burch led the way. He remembered it from the night before.

The outer office was dark. He stepped in, calling Alcott's name, and flicked on a light. It was empty.

They went to the inner office. Empty.

"Looks like he's not here," Alcaris said conversationally.

"I'm early. He must still be at the Board meeting." Burch wandered around the desk. He flicked on the table lamp.

"We got company," the rotund man said looking back. "Who?"

McCall blocked the light from the outer office. "Well, you did invite me, Burch."

"Robert! Let me introduce you to Jack Alcaris, my crew boss."

The two men eyed each other then shook hands. "You work fast, Elliot," McCall commented.

"I want to know how much we're getting," Alcaris said directly. He sat in Alcott's chair. "It's a thin season for getting help."

"Where's the doctor?" McCall interrupted.

"He's late," said Burch.

"A Mike Pauley called. He says come on over and use the equipment."

"Fine," Burch said absently. He stood by the window looking into the black night. The site was invisible. The wind rattled the window. He ran his fingers down the frame, finding the paper stuffing. It had writing on it. "What's this?"

"A wedge," McCall observed.

Elliot shot him a disgusted look and pried it free. He unfolded it. "Jesus!"

"What?" Alcaris asked from the chair which was now leaning back precariously on two legs. "It's Alcott's contract... for the hospital..."

McCall, then the others, suddenly heard footsteps in the hallway. The outer door opened, and a familiar voice, Wachtell's, floated in. "Since I am in charge and have a written contract, we don't have a problem."

Burch's gaze flickered out into the office, then down at the piece of paper in his hand. He picked up the pen on the desk, and quickly wrote his name. He looked at the other men.

Alcaris had his eyes closed, and McCall was looking the other way. Somehow he had a feeling that both men would back him up. And now he really was stuck with the job. Where was Alcott?

"Good evening," McCall greeted the men.

"Who are you?" Wachtell said bluntly.

"We're waiting for Dr. Alcott," Burch called. "Good evening, Dr. Wachtell."

"Mr. Burch." The man looked at him. "I'm afraid that Dr. Alcott didn't come to the board meeting tonight. The board backed my choice for architect. So your services--"

"The written contact, signed last night, is in my hands," Burch said baldly. "Dr. Alcott wrote it up. He is the trustee of the Trust."

"You say Dr. Alcott wasn't there?" McCall said harshly.

"Where was he?" Wachtell shrugged. "I have no idea. He didn't leave a note."

Burch came around the desk and perched on the end. "I will have preliminary plans by the end of the weekend, and we can start some of the work on Monday."

"That isn't possible," Wachtell said. "Without Dr. Alcott's assistance--"

"Who takes over the Chandler Trust if Dr. Alcott is incapacitated?" McCall asked.

"I--I don't know," Wachtell stuttered. "It has never been a problem."

"Tell you what. Let's find out who it is, and get their permission," Burch suggested. His gaze met McCall's with a flicker of worry.

McCall pulled on his gloves deliberately. "I suppose you have reported Dr. Alcott's absence to the police?"

"Why? He just didn't come to a meeting!" Wachtell said belligerently. "Mr. Burch, I will be in touch with you. I assume Dr. Alcott has your number."

"He'll be with me," McCall said unexpectedly. He held out one of his cards. "This is the number."

Wachtell put on his bifocals and squinted. "The Equalizer? For when odds are against you..

Burch looked down at the contract in his hands, then put it down on the desk top. "We'll be back tomorrow morning to see Dr. Alcott, Dr. Wachtell. Meanwhile, have a good evening."

He picked up the contract and the pile beneath, and slid it in his pocket. Then he picked up the roll of plans.

Wachtell stood back as they walked by, his gaze disapproving. Burch thought he looked murderous.

"Well, what about that?" McCall said as they walked out on the snowy stairs in front of the building.

"We need Alcott. No one knows where he is. He's disappeared. He wouldn't do it this evening. This means too much to him," Burch put together.

Alcaris shivered. "Then, what're you gonna do, Burch?" "I...m going to find..."

"I'll find him. You do the hospital," McCall said abruptly. He met the other man's gaze. "It is my kind of business after all."

"Ah, you'll probably find him boozing champagne nightcaps with some woman," Alcaris said morosely. "I'll be at home if you need me, Burch." He disappeared into the dark night.

The streets were almost empty, and the few working street lights barely made a dent. There were a couple of homeless on some grates a block away.

McCall led the way to the Jaguar. It was miraculously untouched. They drove back to Burch's hotel, picked up his baggage, then returned to McCall's brownstone.

"This is nice of you, Robert," Burch said as he put his suitcase in the extra bedroom.

"I'm beginning to feel proprietary towards that hospital," McCall said with a slightly amused tone. "It must be the Christmas spirit."

"Ho-ho-ho," Burch replied. "You've got a call. I saw your answering machine light on." McCall came back a minute later. "It's off."

"What?"

"My son. He's going to spend Christmas with his mother."

Burch looked up. He could read bitter disappointment in the man's carefully controlled tone. "Then I guess you can join the paint and spackle crew."

"What?"

"You don't think we're going to be done in three weeks if we don't do a day-and-night shift?" the young man said bracingly. "I hope you have some old clothes."

"Where did you get the IDEA that I was going to 'paint-and-spackle'?" McCall asked. His lips twitched. "Besides I have to find the missing doctor."

"Then maybe this'll help." Burch held out the note pad. McCall looked at it. "Interesting."

"Yeah. What happened to the message that was on top? The one with my name on it?" Burch said quietly.

"That's where to start, Robert."

"You paint - I'll investigate."

Chapter 6

After Burch left the next morning, McCall went to the hospital. In daylight it was much more cheerful than he had ever seen it.

Alcott's office though was as unprepossessing as it had been at night. McCall let his gaze roam over the files and stacked cabinets. The coleus was dropping leaves on the hardwood floor. McCall moved it to the window ledge.

"And whaddya think you doin'?" a voice as cold as the wind outside said behind him.

Turning he saw a young woman, wiry black hair protruding from under her cap, and wrapped in a bulky coat. Her cheeks were flushed and her black eyes glared at him.

"I'm looking for Dr. Alcott," he improvised smoothly. "My name's Robert McCall."

"You don't have an appointment," she said accusingly. "You'll have to wait outside till he arrives."

McCall realized that any chance for doing more surveying in the office was dropping precipitously. In fact, the temperature in the room had dropped. Beside the coleus, the window frame rattled now that the wedge was missing.

"You don't want him to come in to a freezing room," he said coolly. She eyed him suspiciously.

McCall picked up a sheet of paper, and folded it quickly into a wedge. Running his gaze over the desk, he saw the folders on the Chandler Trust. Why hadn't Burch picked up those last night?

"Do you have any idea of when Dr. Alcott will be in, young lady?"

"Nope." She retreated into the outer office, letting him pass. "You plannin, to wait?" "Well--"

He was cut off by a young man who bustled in through the door. "McCall?"

"Joe?"

Joe Maxwell brushed a cap off his bushy dark hair, and crammed it into the pocket of his overcoat.

"What're you doing here?"

"Just a minute!" the girl said imperiously. "Who're you?"

He looked from McCall to her. "My name's Joe Maxwell. I have an appointment with Dr. Alcott."

McCall's right eyebrow went up. "And just when did he make this appointment?"

Maxwell looked back at him. "Last night. Around seven. Said he needed to see me about the Trust."

"The Trust? The Chandler Trust."

"Yeah, Cathy's Trust. I'm the secondary Trustee." McCall stared at him. "The.. let's get some coffee, Joe."

"But my appointment..."

"That's what we need to talk about," McCall said with a trace of urgency in his voice.

Maxwell picked it up. He looked from the former spy to the girl who was a picture of irritation, then back.

"A cup of coffee? Fine."

"And what do I tell Dr. Alcott?" she said imperiously.

"Tell him I'll be right back," the young man said. "After you, McCall."

It took some time in the maze of corridors but they finally found the cafeteria. After gathering donuts and hot drinks, McCall led to the most secluded corner he could find.

"What's up, McCall?"

"Have you heard what's going on?"

Joe bit into a chocolate donut and swallowed before answering. "I heard Burch turn down the job. Now he's doing it. What'd Alcott offer him?"

"He had a change of heart," McCall said dryly. He sipped his tea and cringed. It was generic. "We were both supposed to meet with Peter Alcott last night. He didn't show up."

"So?"

"So, he left a note for Burch, a note that was missing when we arrived-

"Then how--" Joe stopped speaking when McCall fished a grimy sheet out of his pocket. "The note pad. The impression of his handwriting on the second sheet."

"Yes. It said he had an emergency and that he'd be back. But he didn't come back last night."

Joe eyed the half donut in his hand, then dunked it in his coffee. "How do you know he didn't come back?"

"The night guard. I asked," McCall said succinctly. "Alcott was going to go over the plans with Burch. Now, that he's gone--"

"Whoa! You can't get someone declared missing till they've been gone more than 48 hours," Joe protested.

He carefully maneuvered the remainder of his donut so he could dunk it without burning his fingers, and waited poised for just the right moment.

McCall viewed him with moderate exasperation. "Oh, come now, Maxwell. We both know that Alcott-- watch out!"

"Ahhgh!" Maxwell's grip on the donut slipped. It disappeared into the coffee.

"Have a spoon." McCall handed him the implement. "Now, I need to get into Alcott's office to see if there is anything there that would explain what happened to him."

Joe fished the crumbling remains out, and put them on the wax paper that had wrapped the donut. "I think you've made a mountain out of a molehill, McCall. When we get back to the office, we'll probably find that Alcott got caught in a traffic jam."

"Then finish your coffee," McCall said acidly. "And let's go. And by the way, why did he ask you to come by today?"

The young man sipped at the coffee and grimaced. "This is worse than before. He wanted to tap into some funds. The way things are set up, he had to have me sign off on them."

"Then the Trust isn't totally controlled by him?"

"It's complicated. I have some say. I think he wanted to sell some funds to help out with the repairs."

"Would that be really necessary?"

"Maybe. I think it was a cash in hand proposal verses cash down the line." Maxwell licked the last of the chocolate from his fingers. "McCall, by the way, do you KNOW how much Burch is asking for the renovations?"

The older man stared at him for a second. "I don't -- they haven't discussed it, I think. Alcott's not around to talk to."

"Then how's Burch going ahead with his work?"

McCall's face creased into pious lines, and he folded his hands in a praying motion. "I believe that most of the help he's got is doing it for the Christmas spirit?"

Maxwell choked on his last sip of coffee. After recovering, he shook his head. "Great till the bills come in. Do you think he's tapping his own funds, McCall?"

"We'll probably meet him before the day is over," McCall said coolly. "You ask him."

"I will."

* * * * *

Burch spent the morning with Mike Pauley. The young architect was happy to loan Burch his equipment since he was about to go on vacation. They had discussed the real estate and building market while packing and loading. The television murmured behind him. They'd watched the noon news, Burch for word of Alcott, Pauley for word of Burch. The hospital did make the news, especially for the return of Elliot Burch, but of greater interest to New York was that the man who'd mugged five Santas had finally been apprehended. It got almost five minutes while St. Vincent's rated a one-liner.

"I'm gonna be back in two weeks." Pauley said sealing the last box. "Take care of my stuff. I'll be thinking about you when I'm on Maui."

"I'm not sure your wife will allow you to get to the beach." Burch grinned. "You'll broil like a lobster."

The fair-skinned redhead grinned. "Seafood's good for you. Let's move this stuff."

They carried it to Pauley's van. Locking the building, they drove to St. Vincent's. Burch mused that while it would take Alcott's signature to get the work actually done, he could still get a lot done, in the planning stages, so when the doctor did appear, the plans would be prepared. He had an uneasy feeling that finding that signature was going to be difficult.

He and Pauley moved the computer and printers up to Alcott's office. Jennie was out for lunch, so they were uninterrupted. Pauley plugged everything in, ran some tests, then shut it down.

"I'm off. Have a good time, Elliot." He pulled on his overcoat.

Burch held out his hand. "Get a good break from it all, Mike. See you in a couple of weeks." He had already made up his mind to recommend the young man to Alcott when he returned. Pauley could carry out any plans that Burch laid out, and it might save his struggling firm.

After locking up the office, Burch headed downstairs. Alcaris had promised him a surprise. Alcaris sat with his eyes shut and his feet resting on the table's edge.

"What's up?"

"The radon man you wanted. I got Willie Massen for you."

"Willie?" Burch's tone was incredulous. "Since when does he work during Christmas?"

"His wife thought it would do his soul some good."

"His soul?"

"Yeah. Apparently he needs the upgrade."

Burch realized Willie's wife must have her own reasons for getting him out of the house. Still, he couldn't get a better man.

"It's going to take most of the next two weeks if we go by what the JCOH says."

"That report says most of this building needs work."

"Upgrading. I've got a night crew for the plastering end of it."

Burch hoped that Vincent and the underground were going to back him up on that. In fact, how could he let them know what was going on? Maybe McCall knew a way.

Alcaris raised an eyebrow. "Union?"

"Over Christmas?"

"I get off at five. If you hire gremlins, I don't know them," Alcaris warned. "Speaking of gremlins, the hospital administrators want to talk to you, and so does everyone else, all the way down to the people who do the laundry, who are the most curious."

Burch grinned. "They're the first to tell me if anything goes wrong. Let's go."

Alcaris heaved himself out of the chair. "I gotta be crazy to let you drag me into this."

"We've been working together since Atlantic City, Jack. Don't you trust me?"

They exchanged grins and went out.

* * * * *

With Maxwell leading the way, McCall entered, legally, into Alcott's office. Someone had been there. A new computer and printer took up most of the desk space. The used coffee cup on the desk was clean and the wastebasket was now empty. The plant had been watered, and the files straightened. Burch must be moving in.

Maxwell sat down and picked up the Trust file. "Hmm...," he murmured as he perused the files. "What?"

"Has he been pilfering from the pot?" McCall said from the cabinet drawer he was looking at.

"No. Quite the opposite. Peter did some very prudent investing, got rid of his junk bonds before the market crashed and has a nice, substantial lot invested in treasury bonds," the D.A. concluded.

"Then why threaten him?"

"Why would he have these on the desk? He doesn't need me to sign off on these."

McCall slid the drawer shut. "Did it ever occur to you, Joe, that he may have been using that as a cover? That what he really wanted was your professional advice?"

The young man looked up. "Why?"

"He was being threatened. Not physically, but his position with the administration. The hospital was being threatened with closure."

"I couldn't help him with the JCOH," Joe replied.

"It seems too convenient that the JCOH comes down on him just when he is ready to get the addition permits and when one of the hospital administrators has another candidate for the job."

Joe shrugged. "Conjecture, McCall."

There was a knock on the door. The secretary, who had introduced herself as Jennie when they came back up, poked her head around the jam.

"Mr. Maxwell, there's a man here to see Dr. Alcott, and when I said he wasn't here and you were, he said he'd like to see you--"

"Who is he, Jennie?" McCall broke in. This could be from Alcott's kidnappers.

She wrinkled her nose. "A reporter. Says his name is Frank Hayes."

Maxwell groaned. "Oh, lord, not Hayes again. Jennie--"

"Maxwell, talk to me," came a clear male voice.

"I can have him removed," the secretary said uncertainly.

"Let him in," McCall urged. "Why is he HERE, Joe?"

The young man sighed. "Let him in, Jennie."

She sniffed and withdrew. A second later, Hayes breezed in, shutting the door behind him. "McCall? What're you doing here?"

"That's not important," Maxwell broke in. "Why are you here?"

Hayes looked from one to the other for a second, then shrugged. "This." He held out a watch.

It was an old Timex, worn and scratched. Taking it, McCall flipped it till he saw the inscription. "Alcott's watch?"

Maxwell held out his hand, and McCall handed it over. "What's up, Hayes?"

The reporter sat in the chair, his gaze shifting between the two men. "I was out Christmas shopping this morning. A drug addict I know, Crazy Walt, was trying to hawk a bunch of junk in my neighborhood. When I saw the Timex, I decided I needed a new watch. Seeing the name, I asked him about it. He's a heroin addict, a smacker."

"You bought stolen property?"

"Walt swore up and down it wasn't stolen, that it had been given to him--"

"Alcott could have given it to him," McCall cut in. Maxwell shot him a look of disbelief. "You don't think he's missing anyway."

"When I saw Alcott's name, I thought I'd better come and find out why it's on the street," Hayes concluded.

"Right," Joe said unconvinced.

"Walt's a familiar face," Hayes added. "He's always trying to buy and sell in my neighborhood. I figured that someone must've given the Timex to Crazy Walt to pay him off for something. And..

"And..." McCall prodded.

"Talk to me," Hayes replied. "Why are you two in Alcott's office? Is he missing?"

The silence filled the room. Maxwell looked down at the Timex, then out at the empty lot, at the plant, then at McCall. McCall's gaze was resting on the reporter, who was watching Maxwell. "It's not for publication," Maxwell said warningly. "Alcott didn't show up for a meeting last night."

The reporter blinked. "So?"

"It was a meeting on the hospital," McCall said. "He wouldn't have missed it."

"Mr. McCall, over there, thinks he's been kidnapped," Joe said with slight mockery.

"And Mr. Maxwell thinks he's in a traffic jam," McCall replied in a similar fashion

Hayes shook his head. "The bridges are clear and traffic's better than it's been for a week. Something else must've kept him. So he's a missing person?"

"Not yet," Joe replied hastily. "But I'm interested in finding out why he missed my meeting."

"And I'm interested in finding out why his Timex is being hawked by a.. a... Crazy Walt," McCall put in.

"Crazy Walt used to have high connections in the pushing market." Hayes shrugged meeting their skeptical looks. "We had some druggies at work. Management did a private search to find out where

they'd gotten the stuff. Walt had hospital connections and scored a better grade of dope. Morphine. Methadone. That kind of thing."

"Hospitals?" "St. Vincent's?" McCall and Maxwell spoke at the same moment.

"No proof, no proof, guys! Walt's hospital source dried up months ago and he's gone downhill ever since. The druggies who want morphine have to go elsewhere for their supplies." The reporter spread his hands.

"Talking to Walt I got the idea to do the hospital series. It's Burch's involvement here that makes St. Vincent's interesting. And by the way, where IS Burch right now?"

"You want a comment on the hospital?" Maxwell said challengingly.

"From the D.A.? Always interested even if I'm not covering your latest crusade."

The two moneyed each other with hostility. Maxwell shrugged. "Don't try dunking a donut in the coffee downstairs."

Hayes snorted in disgust. "Here I bring you the suspicion of a crime and all I get is donut comments. Good luck, McCall. I leave the problem of tracking the good doctor to the minions of the law, who, if we can convince them there's been a crime, they might do an adequate job."

He walked out before Joe could come up with a reply. "He just insulted me!"

"And very professionally too," McCall said with amusement. "I'm going to talk with Crazy Walt.

Would you like to accompany me?"

"Not really. But since I've lost the morning anyway... And how do you plan to find Crazy Walt, Robert?"

The former spy shrugged. "You are not the only man with street contacts, Joe. And I happen to know where Hayes lives. I went to dinner there once."

"What did you have? Raw meat?" Maxwell buttoned his coat up and pulled his hat over his curly hair.

"Beef Bourguignon and Beaujolais Nouveau."

It was just after lunch when Burch and Alcaris got free of the administrators. They were headed down to the basement to survey the building.

"I'm not going down there," Alcaris balked when they reached a dark corridor.

"The lights are burned out," Burch said absently. "What's down here?" he asked Paul Merhouse their guide.

The orderly shrugged. "Storage boxes for equipment and that stuff probably. Not much."

"It faced the building they demolished, didn't it?" Burch speculated. "Was there a passageway?"

"Dunno."

"Why, Burch?" Alcaris questioned.

"We're going to have to support stuff down here. We can bring in the equipment and not disturb the hospital upstairs if there is a doorway." Burch went on into the darkness.

"Hey!" Alcaris protested. "At least take the flash!"

The young man caught the tossed light. Underfoot he could hear crackling, and looking down, he saw a tangle of dirt-encrusted cellophane wrappers, leaves, sticks, and anonymous rubble that must have

shifted in from somewhere. There had to be a doorway to somewhere.

"Elliot?"

He dropped the flashlight, catching it before it hit the dirty floor. Flicking it around, the light caught two eyes staring from a cracked door.

"Jesus! Vincent?" The name was a soft breath. Burch looked around, seeing no one behind him. "Get out of here! I've got friends."

"I have to speak with you, Elliot," Vincent said intensely. "We know what you're doing for the hospital, but you don't know all the ramifications."

"Get out of here, Vincent!" Burch said desperately. "I'll be back down here around 10." The tall man's departure was so silent that Burch could barely tell when he was gone.

"Burch!" Alcaris' voice came from behind him.

"Here! I've found a door." By shining the flashlight down the hall, Burch found a locked door. He couldn't force it open.

Alcaris and Paul came up behind him. "Do you know where this goes?"

The orderly shook his head. "This is the first time I've been down here in years. Usually I don't go beyond the dispensary. It's around the bend back there."

"Then this could go anywhere." Burch shined the light on the lock. "It looks like it's been closed for years."

"Yeah?" Alcaris grunted. "Then why's this here?" He delicately picked up a wrapper. Printed on it was the expiration date of November 15th.

"It could be from last year," Burch pointed out. He tried the lock. It didn't move. "I'll bet this opens on that lot. Was there an alley before they took down the building?"

Merhouse spread his hands. "I started here a year ago! I don't know about the outside of the building, just inside. And it's a mess. The boilers are pre-Civil War!"

Burch stepped back from the door. "Show me."

It took till late afternoon to get a lead on Crazy Walt. Drug addicts were elusive, as slippery as raw eggs, and many people ignored them as they ignored the homeless. Unless crime impinged on their lives, they looked past the people lining the street. It was in a little grocery store down from Hayes' building that they finally got a tip.

The pop-bellied proprietor grimaced when they asked. "I seen him roaming far and wide. You got a problem with the little creep?"

"Why do you let him hang around here?" McCall asked.

"LET him? Little bastard slides in and out. He never bothers people, just sorta slides up and offers stuff. He's not a beggar. Always has somethin' in trade."

"The sidewalks are still free for everyone to walk," Joe commented after they left.

"I know. It's getting hard to walk them sometimes. Check the jewelry store on that side. I'll go into the stores on this side."

They walked the street for an hour. The area had rundown factories with boarded-up windows. Many of the stores had thick wire screening over them, and both men saw the butts of shotguns behind the

counters. The proprietors denied knowledge of the heroin addict.

"You know," Joe said as they came to a break in the store fronts. "I could just call a precinct house and get them to run a check on this Crazy Walt. They might even know where he--"

"Well, why don't we just ask these policemen," McCall interrupted.

A patrol car had been pacing them. When Maxwell looked at it, it came abreast of the two men. Maxwell suddenly realized how much he and McCall stood out on this street... and how dangerous that could be.

"Can we help you, gentlemen?" one uniformed policeman asked leaning out.

"Yes, you can," Joe said, stepping forward. He cautiously opened his jacket and pulled out his identification. "I'm Maxwell, the District Attorney. I'm trying to find a man called,... ah, 'Crazy Walt,'"

"The D.A.'s office?" the officer's voice was incredulous. "What do you-- never mind. Around this time he's usually at the soup kitchen. It's in a church, St. Michael's, about two blocks south, four west. Has he done somethin'?"

Joe shrugged. "I need info on a missing person."

"Be careful with him," warned the other man in the car. "You know smackers aren't very stable, buddy."

"I know," Joe acknowledged. "See ya, guys."

"Good luck." The policeman rolled up his window and they drove on.

"They're going to be watching us," McCall commented.

"Good. We may need them," Joe said uneasily. "It's getting dark, McCall." "What's your office going to think?"

"I took the day off. Planned on running errands after I saw Alcott." McCall shrugged. "I can do this alone, Joe."

Maxwell hitched up his pants and rebuttoned his coat. "Let's go."

The church was as rundown as the neighborhood surrounding it. There was a line of hungry people, men, women, and children huddled against the stone walls. The soup kitchen had a side entrance.

They were watched as they headed for the door. A middle-aged man wearing a clerical collar, standing at the door, noticed them. He said something to a person inside, then stepped out.

"May I help you?" The man was heavily-built, with black hair brushed back. He sounded tired. "You don't look like you need a meal."

"Father?" Maxwell said deferentially.

"This is my church. Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"We're looking for a man, Father," Joe said hesitantly. "A man called Crazy Walt."

The priest looked from one to the other. "What do you want with Walt?"

"We think he might lead us to a man we're trying to find," McCall said briskly. "Someone told us that he often comes to this church."

"Are you with the police?" The priest's lips curled slightly. "Your informant was incorrect. I have no idea of where he lives, gentlemen. Now, we're almost ready to serve so..."

McCall was slightly puzzled at the man's hostility. Was he protecting this Crazy Walt? "Father, if you should see or hear from him, could you have him call this number?" He held out one of his cards.

The priest took it, read the inscription, then pushed it in the side pocket of his worn trousers.

"Good night, Father," Joe said. He shivered in the rising wind.

They left, acutely aware of the stares of the hungry. Both men walked briskly, without words, grateful for their warm clothing and places to live.

"Well, what now, McCall?" Maxwell said as they reached one of the main thoroughfares. "Dinner?"

"I've got to clean my apartment. My mother's coming to town. Right now it's decorated in early Chinese take-out," Joe said glumly. "Thanks for the offer."

"What about Alcott?"

"In another 24 hours we can call him a missing person and go looking. Till then, we can't do anything," Joe said defensively. "Call me, McCall, if you get a tip."

"I certainly will," McCall said with heavy irony. "Are you always this by the book, Maxwell?"

"Only since I made D.A., McCall. See you later." Joe slouched off.

McCall waved down a taxi and told the driver to go to St. Vincent's. He had to pick up his car, and Burch, if the builder was up to going out for dinner. Then maybe down to a precinct house to see if one of his contacts could pull the file on Crazy Walt.

Burch ate the last of the hamburger he had ordered hours ago. McCall dropped by but saw that the young man was engrossed with his work, and left. Alcaris had left hours before for an AA meeting, and Willie, grunting his replies, had promised to return on the next day. Whatever his wife had on Willie had made him a better worker. Burch hoped that he'd keep up with it.

He checked his battered Rolex. Nine fifty-five. Time to see Vincent. He took up the flashlight, and went downstairs towards that grubby corridor. Walking through the dark, silent corridors, he restrained shivering. They must have turned off the heat down here because the air was perceptively colder. He let his long hair out of the ponytail in a vain effort to warm up his ears.

Turning the corner, he was hit by a blast of cold air. What the hell was going on? He walked cautiously, sending the beam of light off the walls.

Something creaked. He spun, seeing nothing. The creak came again out of the darkness. Then some leaves brushed past his leg.

"The door's open?" he said aloud in disbelief.

Walking down the dark corridor, he turned the flashlight's beam on the doorway.

It was open. A fresh wrapper from a fast-food restaurant littered the floor, and there was a crumpled bag. A wind howled down the corridor.

Looking up, he could see starlight. The night air could cause frostbite. Walking very slowly up the cluttered stairs, he found himself in the abandoned lot next door. Around him were mounds of dirt and concrete.

He saw, as a dark line to one side, several cars, grey and white, parked on the lot near the edge.

Burch was acutely aware that he could become another criminal statistic at any moment. The runner could be in any of the dark piles. He went down the stairs faster than he had gone up.

Shivering, he pulled the door shut, and flipped the lock down. That might take care of any intruders for the moment. How had this door been used in the past? Where had it connected with the house on the other side? Who had used it?

He walked back down to the doorway where he had seen Vincent's eyes. The door opened unexpectedly. The cloaked man stood on the other side.

"Welcome to the Tunnels, Elliot."

"Welcome back, you mean," the young man said. He stepped into the dark gap. Vincent handed him a flaming torch then moved the secret door back.

From this side, Burch could see that the door didn't fit snugly. That was why he'd seen Vincent's eyes.

They were in a small storage room, long abandoned from the layers of dust they disturbed. He took the torch and led the way down into the Tunnel world.

Burch looked around him with fascination. The last time he'd been Below he'd been badly wounded and hadn't any idea what it looked like. He noted the rough hewed stone walls, the sandy floor, the mysterious light that lit some passages, and wondered how they kept the walls from falling. Pipes ran along some of the paths that Vincent walked down.

Finally they turned a corner and found two men waiting.

Father had a bundle of maps while Mouse hovered directly behind him. The sandy-haired boy eyed the builder suspiciously. Burch knew that Mouse didn't approve of him.

"What's going on?" he asked baldly of Father and Vincent.

"Has Peter talked to you about St. Vincent's?" Father replied puzzled.

"Alcott's gone somewhere," Burch said slowly. "I haven't seen him since we met a couple of nights ago."

Father looked stricken for a second. "But he said that you had agreed to do the hospital. He didn't talk to you about the problems--"

"What problems?"

Father looked at Vincent in puzzlement, then back to Burch. "The Tunnels run close to the surface near St. Vincent's. Any major work on the site next door may break through. He didn't mention this?"

Burch shook his head. "Nothing about it. When did you hear I was doing the hospital, Father?"

"One of our helpers dropped us a note from Peter. He said you had agreed and that he was going to explain everything when you dropped by that night."

"Which helper?" Burch said urgently.

"Why does that matter?" Vincent asked. "Just one of our helpers."

"Dammit, something may have happened to Alcott and we're trying to pinpoint when he vanished," Burch said sharply. "McCall and I found a note pad with the impression of a note to me, and another note. It must have been to you!"

"He's been kidnapped?" Father's tone was horrified and shaken.

Burch realized he could have been more tactful. Obviously, Alcott and Father were close, old friends.

"We don't know that. He could have been called away on an emergency. Don't worry. McCall's on the job. But you'd better tell me if you have a problem with that empty lot."

Father pulled himself back into control. "Let me show you on the maps."

Chapter 7

McCall paced back and forth in his apartment. It had been two days since he had gone looking for Crazy Walt. The man had not called, and when McCall went back to the church, the priest had said he had handed over the card, but not seen him since. Calling Maxwell had gotten him roundly

cursed. Apparently the D.A.'s office was undergoing end-of-year roundups and Maxwell was preparing reports. McCall commiserated and hung up. Burch had told him about the meeting with Vincent and Father, then moved into Alcott's office, working on the hospital. Despite the disapproval of the administration, things there were going quite smoothly. He had promised to bring dinner to McCall's that night.

So it was only the investigation for Alcott that was ruffling smooth waters. Maxwell had finally listed him as missing when the 48 hours were up, and the police were alerted, but McCall kept feeling there was something missing. Talking with the security guards at the hospital led nowhere. The man on the front door had sworn Alcott hadn't left by that exit, and the man at emergency had agreed. McCall, frustrated, searched the hospital but no trace turned up.

Finally, he picked up the phone. There was one person who might have something, and while he didn't want to encourage the reporter, Hayes had brought them the watch and given the tip on Crazy Walt.

It must have been Christmas party time at the paper. When the phone was picked up, McCall could hear laughter, and phones ringing in the background. A woman picked up.

"Frank Hayes' line."

"This is Robert McCall. Is Mr. Hayes in?"

"Hayes? HAYES! What? Oh. Sorry. What? Yeah, oh, yeah. Mr. McCall?"

"Yes?" McCall's ear was ringing from the yelling.

"I'm sorry but Frank's out on assignment. Shall I tell him you called?"

"Please."

"Your number-"

"He has my number."

"Righto. Have a good Christmas."

McCall wondered what really went on in a newsroom. His former profession had effectively banned him from getting involved with newspapers. "And now, I can't even get to Hayes," he muttered disgusted.

Walking over to the window, he saw the afternoon sky was ominously dark. Another snowstorm was predicted for the night going through to the next day, Christmas Eve.

The phone rang. McCall waited for the answering machine to pick up.

The voice was hesitant and shaky. It was male with a thick Queens accent. "Eq--eq--Equalizer? Hey.. anyone home there? Hello..."

"Can I help you?" McCall picked up the phone. Silence greeted him.

"Hello, are you there?"

"Equa..lizer? This 'ere's Wa-wa-walt..."

McCall softened his voice instantly. "Walt? From St. Michael's church?"

"Yeah..." the tones were long and drawn out. McCall realized the man either had to be coming down or on drugs.

"I want to talk to you, Walt."

"Bout what?"

"A business proposition," McCall said smoothly. "Information..."

"How much?" Walt put baldly.

"Well..., depends on the information, doesn't it?" McCall replied. "Depends what you give me."

"Hppff!" the man made a rude sound. "You wanna talk to me, you bring the cash."

"Where?"

"St. Michael's."

"It's closed."

"Round the back, man. Round the back." Crazy Walt hung up.

McCall slowly replaced the receiver. No time like the present. He quickly scribbled a note to Burch, saying where he was going, and took off.

* * * * *

Burch finally got open the front door of McCall's apartment. It would have been easier if he'd put down the bag of Chinese food, but he was so tired, the mechanics and logic eluded him. A quick shower, some food and some talk, then back to the hospital. This was the night when Vincent and crew were going to show up for their first night of plastering. Burch wasn't sure this was as good an idea as when he first thought of it.

The apartment was dark except for the night light which McCall always kept lit.

"McCall?" The young man dumped the food in the dark kitchen, and flicked on a light.

The answering machine light flickered. Burch hit the button, and began unloading his bags.

"Hi, this is Joe Maxwell. Sorry, McCall, you called at a bad time. Call me back. Don't have a thing on Alcott. If you don't call me, then have a good Christmas. I'm going to Long Island."

"Hi, Robbie, mon amour. Call me." Elliot raised an eyebrow. That was a sultry female voice with a Mediterranean accent.

"Mr. McCall, this is Frank Hayes. You called? Call me back. I'll be here till 9."

Burch wondered why McCall had called the reporter. Alcott's disappearance? The Timex? Hayes would probably have passed any information he got onto Maxwell.

He folded up the last bag and stuffed it in the garbage. A flicker of white caught his eye, and he reached over to the pad that sat on the far side of the machine. McCall had been in a rush he could tell from the hasty scribble. Reading, he wondered if McCall had bothered to tell Maxwell he was going to meet Crazy Walt. And speaking of meeting, this had a time of 3:30 P.M. on it. It was now close to 7.

Burch picked up the receiver and tapped in a number. "Joe Maxwell's office," the woman sounded weary.

"Can you tell Mr. Maxwell that Elliot Burch would like to speak to him?" Burch asked politely.

"He's in a--oh, hold on." From the sounds, she'd covered the phone with her hand. Muffled sounds came over the line. "Mr. Burch, please hold while I transfer you."

The phone clicked, and Maxwell's voice came on the line. "Burch?" "Joe, I'm worried about McCall."

"Worried about McCall?" the D.A.'s voice was incredulous. "He can whip a bear two out of three."

"I've got a note here. He was going to meet a guy called 'Crazy Walt'--" "What!"

"Around 3:30 and he's not back."

"3:30! That idiot! Why didn't he-- never mind." Maxwell's voice was angry. "Crazy Walt's not someone you should meet alone! Where're they meeting, Burch?"

"St. Michael's--"

"Burch, don't get any crazy ideas in your head about going down there!" Joe snarled. "I'm gonna get a couple of uniforms and go down myself! You just stay in the apartment!"

"But--"

"Dammit, you're not trained in this stuff! I am!"

Burch reluctantly admitted that maybe Maxwell was right. "I'll be at St. Vincent's. Call me when you know what's happened." He hung up.

Looking around at the food, he quickly stuffed the most perishable into a bag, and put the rest in McCall's refrigerator. He reset the answering machine, scribbled a note beside McCall's just in case the man came back, grabbed the bag and Left.

McCall lifted his silver head and listened. The air was full of the flat warmth that came before heavy snow, and the sky was orange grey as the city's light reflected off it. Looking around, he wondered if Crazy Walt was ever going to show up. He had walked around the church several times then retreated to the Jaguar, parked a block and a half away, between strolls. It was cold tonight.

Finally, he saw a man sliding from shadow to shadow towards the church.

McCall stepped out of his car, and followed the shadowy form. The man finally slipped up to the front door, and inside.

The investigator followed slowly. Earlier he'd seen the priest come out the doors, and shut them. If the form was Crazy Walt, he must know how to pick locks. What did he want in a church?

Coming up, he found the doors cracked. McCall pulled out his gun, and stepped cautiously in.

It was almost pitch-black. Two small lights burned on the altar at the front of the church. Most of the light came from an alcove to the right, where four votive lamps burned.

McCall saw the hands first, hovering over the flames, warming themselves. They belonged to a painfully thin man, who shied when he heard the door shut. The light showed that the man, if it was Crazy Walt, was dressed in ragged blankets and had open-toed sneakers on. Torn cloth was wrapped around them.

He looked like one of the homeless.

"Walt?" he made his voice as soft as possible.

The man shivered and waved his hands over the candles, trying to warm them. "Equal. .equal..

"My name's McCall," he said quietly.

"What about the leaf, man?"

"What?"

"The green, the bread, the money, man!"

"What can you tell me about this?" McCall held up his own Timex. Alcott's had been kept by Maxwell.

He moved closer, holding the gun out of sight.

The addict cringed. "What? What about that, man? What do ya want from me?"

"I want to know how you got a Timex to sell," McCall asked.

Standing closer to him, he could smell the rankness that came with infrequent bathing. The man's arms, showing through the torn cloth, were scarred with needle marks, a tracery against the dirt.

Walt's eyes didn't meet his gaze. He looked around at the church, the high altar, then back to McCall.

"I dunno what youze talkin' about."

"Well, then." McCall tucked the gun into his pants, making sure the other man saw it, then flipped the watch over his wrist and fastened it securely.

The man fell on his knees. "Jeeze, man, don't shoot me, don't shoot ME!"

McCall hated doing it. He leaned forward ominously, one hand on the gun butt. "I want to know about the Timex you sold."

"It was lawful, man. I earned it!"

"Earned? You pathetic example of a man, you couldn't earn a dime begging! How did you earn a watch?!"

The man wrapped his arms around his body, shivering. "Give me some cash. I gotta score somethin' soon."

"The information?" McCall demanded icily.

"Dude wanted help with this old guy. I helped him." Walt's gaze shifted erratically from the candles to McCall then back. "What guy? An old guy?"

"Yeah, Dude. He needed some help getting him upstairs, and he called me and... hell, I helped him! Dude gave me the watch and told me to forget him."

McCall absorbed the information. The older man must have been Alcott but who was the Dude?

"Where did this happen? Tell me!"

The man shook his head. "I don't remember."

"Oh, come on!" McCall said harshly. "You must remember!"

"Man, oh, man, that was days ago, and every day's a new day. Walt goes all over everywhere, and no one knows where he's been. Even Walt don't know." The man wiped his hand across his running nose. "Now the green?"

McCall gave him a icily speculative look that made the man at his feet cringe. Walt knew more than he was telling, McCall was certain of it. Then he felt a wave of pity. It was almost Christmas after all. "Here. Get some help." He dropped a fifty at the man's feet. Walt scabbled for it. "And if you find out anything new, then call me!"

"Sure, sure." The pathetic caricature of a man hugged his arms around him again. McCall backed out of the church being careful not to let Walt out of his sight.

Stepping outside he felt like he'd just walked into a police television show. Two police cars, lights blinking were skidding around the corner, while a third car was parked in front of the church, its red light blinking.

"McCALL!" Maxwell ran up the stairs, followed by the priest who looked angry. "Are you okay?"

"What the devil?" McCall asked.

"Burch finally got your note and called me. What the hell are you up to McCall! Did you find Crazy Walt?"

"Kill the lights, Joe, you're waking the dead! I got the information." McCall looked at the priest. "I think he's still inside if you want him."

"The church is sanctuary," the man said smoothly. "Especially on cold winter nights."

"He's still in there?"

McCall held Maxwell's arm. "He's probably gone by now, but check all the entrances. He doesn't

know anymore than what he told me."

"But he was passing stolen merchandise--," Maxwell protested, waving his companions to check the church.

"He was given the watch by the man who kidnapped Alcott," McCall explained. "Now we have to find that man."

"Talk to me, McCall."

After explaining, they drove, in separate cars, to St. Vincent's. The snow was falling heavily. They parked in the back lot, next to a mostly snow-coated grey sedan and went inside.

They found Elliot, wearing used, plaster-stained overalls, in a small lounge surrounded by a litter of Chinese food containers and cookies. A Hispanic doctor and an orderly were munching away. From Burch's expression what they were saying was fascinating.

"Anything left?" McCall asked eyeing the litter. Maxwell closed the door behind them. Light came in through the glass square that made up the upper half.

"Have a crumpet," Burch said absently. "So you say that the building next door was--"

"That damn tenement cost Alcott a fortune to buy," the woman doctor said. She took a bite of a chocolate cookie and talked around the mouthful. "Some slumlord was running stuff out of it, but the cops couldn't bust it. Covered his tracks real well."

Maxwell got some coffee. "Any idea of this slumlord's name?"

"Mm... no. Frankly it's mostly hearsay," she admitted reluctantly. "But I remember we did have drug problems till the building went down. Remember, Paul?" She turned to the orderly, who was combing powdered sugar out of his beard.

"I remember, Carmen. We padlocked all on the doors, but still someone would get into the morphine and peddle it on the street. Then it went on to other drugs. We got enough problems in this neighborhood without the hospital adding to it!"

"Yeah, that was when Alcott got the idea for taking the lot and putting in a drug rehab place, for all the street people. Wachtell didn't want him to. Doctor Wachtell," Paul's voice was mocking, "wanted them all to just go away, and die. He wants to upgrade the neighborhood. As if the homeless just fade away when a rich man wants them to."

Burch imperceptibly winced. He could remember passing homeless men and women and not handing them a dollar.

"And Kevin Fetters! Can you believe that Wachtell had the nerve to pull him in?" Carmen said indignantly.

"What do you mean?" Burch asked.

"Cripes, Fetters always had a smack problem! Wachtell took him under his arm, got him a job in the dispensary when he was finished with the rehab program, and helped send him to college! I'm sure Fetters is still doing white lady," Paul replied. "I seen him go up and down the times he came here. Remember all the hypos they missed when he was around?"

"Better keep your mouth shut," Carmen advised uneasily. "He's got run of the building and he's got good hearing."

"Got any proof of the drugs?" Joe said casually. His fingers mangled the donut he had selected.

Paul gave a Bronx cheer. "Nothing for court, man."

"We'd better be getting back to work," Carmen said. "Thanks for the cookies, Elliot. First time they've been fresh in months."

After they left, Burch smiled wryly. "Turns out the hospital lost the cookie delivery contract a year ago.

Can't pay the bill."

"I'm surprised Alcott didn't re-up it."

"Probably didn't know. What about Crazy Walt?" McCall explained what had happened.

"So, Alcott is somewhere being held by a Dude?" Burch raised an eyebrow. "What have we learned?"

"Well, he's not just missing now, he's kidnapped," Maxwell said crisply. "That means I can call in the Feds."

"What are you going to tell them?" McCall asked dryly. "That a heroin addict said he helped a man carry another man out of a car and got a Timex in return? I'm not even sure you'll ever find Crazy Walt again."

"Oh, hold it." Burch suddenly realized he'd forgotten to pass on the messages. "Frank Hayes called you back."

"Hayes? Oh, yes." McCall remembered calling that morning. He looked around for a phone. He finally saw one sitting on a pile of old newspapers. "Let me call him."

"We can pick up Walt and get his statement. Maybe we'll even improve his memory," Joe muttered. "And Hayes will have to tell us, again, how he bought the Timex."

"You sound like you'll enjoy making him talk," Burch said with a trace of amusement. "Have you ever questioned a newsman? They ask more questions than they answer!"

"Burch?" McCall turned towards the table, hand over the phone receiver. "The office says Hayes is on his way here. Have you seen him?"

"No."

"Oh, boy. A visit from the press. Aren't you lucky, Burch?" Maxwell said with a twist of his lips.

"Rather have print than video, Joe." Burch frowned. "What is he coming here for, I wonder? I talked with him this morning about the progress on St. Vincent's. He's keeping tabs for that series he's running."

"Think he's been looking for Alcott?" Maxwell asked.

"He told me he's so swamped with the Christmas Wall Street rush that he barely had time to get gifts! But he hasn't given up, I know."

McCall hung up and returned to the table. "Well, he's on his way here. The woman who took the call said he had something 'special' for us."

Joe stretched, joints cracking. "I'm off to report what we've got on Alcott." He looked at the door thinking he had seen a shadow on the glass but there was no one on the other side of the door.

"You must have a date for Christmas," Burch joked.

"My mother comes into town before church. Then we go out to her house for the rest of the day," Joe replied wryly. "And she fills the house with eligible young ladies, and I find I have absolutely NOTHING to talk to them about. I'm lousy with small talk."

"You suffer terribly," Burch said with false sympathy. "My lady sent me a Christmas present. I picked it up at the lawyers. A shirt with a hung flamingo."

"A flamingo?" McCall asked.

"Yes. And she air-brushed a bull's eye on it."

"Sure you want to go back south?" the investigator laughed.

Burch shivered. "It's warmer down there. I'll walk you out if you want."

They were almost to the door when the builder stopped. "You might add this piece of information to

the mix."

"What?" McCall asked.

"One of the JHOC's complaints was a radon buildup in the building. I got my own inspector in here this morning."

"And?" Joe opened the glass doors to the outer world, and a gust of cold air swept in. "There's more radon in City Hall than St. Vincent's."

The street was empty except for a man coming around the corner, his head down, hat covered with snow and collar up.

"Speak of a devil and he will appear. The missing Mr. Hayes, no less," McCall said amused. "And a far call from Wall Street."

"What'd he want with the lot? That's where he's coming from. Hey! Hayes!" Joe cupped his hands around his mouth and called.

The man lifted his head and waved.

No one heard the car come around the corner, till it screeched and slid. Hayes saw its rear end slid his way and flung himself back, desperately trying to keep his footing in the snow.

The fender caught him on the side, flinging his body against the brick wall of the building. Then the car roared off with a screech of tires.

McCall and Burch tore across the street to the fallen man. Maxwell peered after the car, trying to make out the plates. They must have been muddied because they were indistinguishable and the car was an anonymous light-colored Plymouth with a coating of snow.

"Get someone from Emergency!" McCall yelled at him. "Hurry up!" Joe took off, skidding in the slippery snow.

"How is he?" Burch asked urgently. "Hayes!"

The reporter was motionless. His notebook had fallen beside his crumpled form.

"The car hit his side," McCall surmised from the position. "And hitting that wall didn't help either. He's still breathing at least."

Blood ran down the scrapes on Hayes' face staining the snow. It looked like he had hit the wall at an angle. Soft breath wheezed in and out of barely-parted lips.

Burch pulled off his worn black cashmere coat and laid it over the body. "What do you think he wanted to talk about, McCall?"

McCall felt something under his foot, and saw a ring of keys which must have fallen out of Hayes' pocket. He picked them up and slid them into his own overcoat, then picked up the reporter's notebook.

"Don't know. He might be able to talk to us later if the damn med-team comes soon!"

Three figures, in hospital garb came running around the corner, two carrying a stretcher. Carmen, the doctor, dropped to one knee surveying the prostrate form.

"Let us in there," she ordered.

McCall and Burch stepped back, joining up with the panting Maxwell who followed the medical team.

"Did he talk, McCall?"

"Nothing I could understand," McCall said shaking his head.

The D.A. sighed. "Let's go report it to the station. I wasn't able to see the license."

"Maxwell!" McCall reproved.

"It was covered with something. This was too convenient, this accident. Someone must have known he was here." Joe remembered thinking he'd seen a shadow outside the door.

Someone had heard that Hayes was coming all right, and set out to stop him from talking to them. Why? What had the reporter got for them? They watched silently, as the orderlies carefully moved the man to the stretcher. Carmen handed Burch his coat, and led the small procession back to the emergency room.

McCall flipped open the notebook. "Do you think he left a hint?" "Can you read his writing?" Maxwell asked dryly.

"Just fragments of quotes. Nothing substantial," McCall muttered flipping pages. "Dammit!"

"Let's go take care of the paperwork," Maxwell said shivering in his coat. "I hope this doesn't mean calling the next of kin."

"Tidings of comfort and joy, to you too, Maxwell," Burch retorted. "And a dollop of Merry Christmas as well!"

"Let's go inside," McCall said reasonably.

* * * * *

McCall took the set of keys from his pocket. They were still wet with snow. He parked the Jaguar under a street lamp. The snow was now falling heavily. The roads had emptied out. Looking up at Hayes' apartment building and counting, he could tell the reporter's apartment was dark. In contrast most of the apartments around his were decorated with Christmas lights.

He felt a trace of guilt about illegally entering the apartment. Whatever the reporter had wanted to tell him would probably wait till he could talk again, but McCall wasn't sure that Alcott could survive that long. His instincts were making him edgy about waiting in this case.

He unlocked the foyer door, using with one of the keys, and rode up to the ninth floor. 915 was a sandwich apartment with two bedrooms and a bath. On either side were two corner apartments. From the one on the right, McCall heard Christmas carols being sung and a party going on, while the other had a wreath.

Hayes' door was unadorned. McCall wondered if the journalist had the proper Christmas spirit. Opening it cautiously, he felt around and found the light switch.

It was much the same as when he had been there for dinner. For the party the place had been cleaned up. Now piles of newspapers sat beside the screened fireplace, and a computer set up, discreetly out of line of sight of the front door, sat against the far wall. The dining table had four or five manila folders on it, some stuffed, some flat, and next to the computer set-up was a wall of file cabinets. Piles of phone books, local and out-of-state, sat on top, and there was a multiple phone hook up next to the computer. Three boxes of computer disks sat next to a used tumbler.

McCall switched on several lights, and turned off the overhead. He spotted, in a corner, Hayes' contribution to the season, a small plastic tree with red and green balls and unlit lights. It was slightly crooked, and had a crumpled star on top. Several paper bags sat next to it with wrapping paper sticking out of the top. The reporter must have been planning to come home and wrap gifts, McCall realized.

He walked through the apartment, familiarizing himself with the layout, then walked to the dining room table. Not touching the piles, he could tell that most of the paper was devoted to the current economic condition. Two envelopes had notes and pictures from the hospital series Hayes was working on. He saw that Burch's comments and accompanying notes took up a small stack.

Everything had carefully tacked together.

McCall, wearing his gloves, ran his finger over the hospital papers. There was nothing here on Alcott.

If he was correct, and someone had tried to run Hayes down tonight, then there had to be a reason. The reason wasn't in the reporter's notebook, now sitting in Maxwell's pocket, and McCall hadn't found an unobtrusive way to go through Hayes' clothing at the hospital. It had to have been something the reporter knew and he wouldn't have left it undocumented. So where was it? In the computer? McCall looked at the imposing set up. He could switch it on and get it to work, in time, but who was to say that he could find what he was looking for, or would recognize it if he did?

Going into the kitchen he discovered a closed bag of potato chips and a used glass on the counter. Something scurried away from it, and McCall shook his head in mild disgust. Cockroaches. He picked up the bag and crammed it into the covered trash can next to the refrigerator, wrinkling his nose. The journalist hadn't taken the trash out, and something was beginning to stink. Dropping the lid, he froze. No, Hayes hadn't taken out the trash in the kitchen, and probably hadn't done it in the main room. And, if McCall's experience was anything to go by, the first time you tried to print anything out of a computer, it always came out misprinted. If he had used the computer that is...

The trash was still there.

He went into the living room, to the computer. The trash can, set unobtrusively next to the printer, was almost filled. He rooted in it.

Towards the bottom he mentally reminded himself to suggest that Hayes leave off the Hostess Cupcakes. Besides the wrappers, most of the crumpled papers were copies of the stuff on the table.

Unwrapping a small ball he found a notation written in china marker. "Alcott?" was scribbled next to a number.

Hayes must have search the telephone directory via computer. He had searched for housing on a street, Nathan Avenue, then narrowed in on a number, 507. It was an apartment building. Most of the phones were unlisted but the name of the realty company who managed it was listed and familiar. Wachtell Realty ran 507 Nathan Avenue.

"What were you up to, Hayes?" McCall muttered. "Why did you throw this away? Did you check on this and find out it wasn't any good? Hayes..." He cursed reporters and their proprietary silences.

Putting the sheet in his jacket pocket, he dug deeper into the can. Some of the of the papers seemed odd. After studying them McCall realized that they must have come via modem from a very different computer system than had produced the address. Page after page were names, addresses and license plates (with some). Finally the man shrugged and placed the most complete set in his pocket, for further study, then replaced the garbage in the trash, then turned off the lights. On the way out he went to the Christmas tree and plugged the lights into the timer that sat behind it. No need to let anyone else know the owner of the apartment was incapacitated. Then he locked the apartment and went outside.

507 Nathan Avenue had been built just before World War II, from the architectural style. Only a few of the apartments were lit up with any holiday ornaments. A man glowered from a desk in the foyer. McCall found a parking space, left the Jaguar and went inside.

The man had disappeared when the investigator entered. There was a list of numbers on one wall and an intercom system.

"Do ya wanna talk to someone?" the harsh voice said from behind him. McCall turned. "Yes. Yes, I would but I've forgotten his number."

The man shrugged. "Can't help ya. No number, no calls."

"Maybe you know him. Clarence Wachtell?" McCall picked the first name he could think of. "Wachtell Realty's open in the mornin'. Come back."

"Oh. Thank you. Thank you very much. I take it that Clarence Wachtell doesn't live here then?" The man glowered. "No number, no calls, no names. People cherish their privacy here, buddy. And if you don't know anyone...", the sentence trailed off suggestively.

McCall decided that it had been enough for the night. He'd come back in daylight. "Good night," he said.

The man snorted and wiped his nose with the back of his hand in reply.

Burch finished giving his statement to the policemen who came for Maxwell's urgent call, and slid away into the darkened hospital. Maxwell was so engrossed in the paperwork, including dealing with the night time press, and calling the F.B.I, that Burch escaped unnoticed. He had been happy to hear that it looked like Hayes had broken bones but would survive.

He walked down into the basement area. He had brought a larger flashlight. It was perceptively warmer.

Apparently no one had opened the door this time.

"Vincent?"

"Elliot?" the man's breathy voice greeted him.

Burch put the flash down on the floor. "Who've you got with you?"

Mouse appeared, followed by a young blond woman introduced as Jamie and a matronly woman that Burch vaguely remembered from his recovery period down below. Her name was Mary.

"The volunteers?"

"Just tell us what you need us to do," Mary said calmly. "We all want to help."

Burch looked around, nodding. More than this and they would arouse suspicion. "I need to do some measurements upstairs and some painting upstairs. But there's a project down here for you Vincent and Mouse. Come on."

They followed him. The boiler room needed replastering and Burch detailed that Vincent, Mary and Jamie work on that. He had already had plaster board and plaster readied for them, and after leaving concise instructions, he left, taking Mouse with him. Hopefully, it would only take two hours to plug the holes which had let vermin into the hospital.

Mouse followed him suspiciously. He had left his outer clothes with Jamie and the others, and looked fairly normal which was why Burch had selected him.

He went up to the main entrance. It was quiet and dark except for the light over the guard station. The guard acknowledged his presence.

"Harry, I'm gonna be working in here tonight. You might want to take a break till about... oh, 2 or 2:30," Burch suggested.

"Really? All right then. Be careful. There's no one at this end of the building at this time of night?" the man replied. He stood up stretching.

"I'll keep an eye on the door."

After the man's footsteps faded in the distance, Mouse came out of the corridor where he had been waiting. Burch pulled out a tape measure and directed him to hold one end.

"What?" Mouse finally asked, after five minutes of his measurements and scribbling in a notebook.

"The walls and floors are sagging," he replied. "I'm checking on what I have got to work with." Mouse looked up curiously at the ceiling. "Sagging?"

Elliot chuckled. "Most old buildings sag with time. They need reinforcement."

"Oh."

"Don't you ever do any reinforcement downstairs?" he asked, smiling at him. "Hold that end down there."

Mouse bend over with the tape in one hand. "Carve caves."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"Hard work," he said defensively. "Good work!"

"I don't doubt it," Burch said absently. "We're going to have to replace the floor tiles here too. And the plaster's coming down over here." He pointed his flashlight up at one corner of the room.

The paint had flaked unattractively showing pitted concrete. "Mouse, run down and get Jamie or Mary, and some of the plaster."

"Redo corner?" Mouse sounded almost chipper. "And the floor if I can find the tiles. Go on!"

Burch turned on the main lights and pushed all the furniture into one corner. The floor was dusty, and had gum wrappers, but only a quarter of the tiles needed immediate replacement. The ones near the plastering would be the last, but no one would keep tripping over the ones near the door, if he had his way. He took a spatula out of his back pocket and dug under one.

It came up easily.

He put it to one side, and stood. The replacement tiles had been unearthed down in the basement, not far from where Vincent and the others were working, and if he could intercept Jamie and Mouse, they could bring up enough for the night.

The hospital lighting was dim and he heard people but no one crossed his path. Most of the doors to the wards were closed, and light came from underneath the doors, but the building was mostly quiet.

Burch felt uneasy in the quiet. It was unnatural. Even when he had worked late into the night he had had sound surrounding him. The air conditioning. His stereo. Now he only had his footsteps to accompany him.

He went down a corridor and recognized it as being incorrect. Turning, he walked back to the crossroads.

He passed several doors. It took a second to register that the second one was slightly ajar. He cautiously walked back, holding the flashlight as a club.

It opened silently when he pushed. The light showed shelves of small bottles, glass cabinets and boxes. The counter running under the shelves to one side had scales and measures.

Flashing the light on the door, he read, "Dispensary". So this was where the main stores of drugs for the hospital were kept. Merhouse had said it was on this level. He flicked the light around the room.

There were several boxes stacked untidily at the end of the counter. He walked over and saw that one was open. The label said 'Morphine Sulfate'. Morphine? The box below it had written on it,

"Methadone, Oral Solution". His brain made the connection finally. Methadone. The Heroin substitute. A drug used to help wean addicts from the illegal narcotic.

He used the flash to pry back the cover. The box was half empty.

"Who has got the drugs? Who needs the drugs? Who left the door open?" he muttered. I think I'll give McCall a call. He'll love hearing about this at this time of night.

Chapter 8

It was mid-morning when McCall made it to the hospital. Burch's call had ruined his sleep and he'd

spent the rest of the night talking to a friend trying to discover more about Hayes' list. Now with Burch's discovery, if it had relevance, and the knowledge that Fetters had the run of the hospital, McCall was even more uneasy about leaving Burch alone.

Then again, he's probably not alone. If it isn't a nurse, he probably spends most of the night with Vincent and that crowd, the investigator mused as he bent his head into the strong wind. It was still snowing, delighting children who for the first time in many years were having a white Christmas Eve. For the few commuters, it was hell incarnate. McCall had taken the subway and walked to St. Vincent's. The wreath outside was encrusted with snow. The stairs were swept and salted, but still people slipped.

Inside it was crowded. The main hallway already looked better, McCall noticed. Someone, in the night, must have gotten in here and repaired the floor. Shiny blocks of new linoleum showed where the old squares had been replaced. McCall spotted Maxwell moving down the hallway purposefully.

"Maxwell!" McCall called crisply.

Joe turned. "Hey, Robert. You're late."

"Had a late night," McCall retorted. "Are you going to see Hayes?" "The doctor said we can talk but he's is still woozy. That a new coat?"

"The other one's got blood on it! Did you call the F.B.I.?" McCall asked.

"Yeah. They said call again when we had some more info. I got the impression that they're understaffed with the season and all."

"Oh, come on! You're the District Attorney, Maxwell!"

"I call them after we talk to Hayes," Joe said sourly.

The door was open and they heard laughter. Just before they reached the door, three people came out. They called farewells and brushed past the two men.

McCall and Maxwell exchanged glances, then went inside. McCall snickered as he shut the door.

The reporter had his eyes shut, but they flickered open when he heard the sound. His face was swollen and red where it wasn't covered with gauze. One leg was hung in a sling, immobilizing him, while his shoulder was in a cast.

Maxwell knew why McCall had snickered. One of Hayes' earlier visitors had left him a wreath, made of colorful newsprint, decorated with red, white and green lights. It hung on the leg sling, looking like it was encircling the foot, and the lights must have been hooked up to a small battery since they blinked. Constantly.

"Hayes?" McCall moved up beside the head of the bed.

The journalist slowly turned his head, and smiled fractionally. It had to hurt, but from the languid fashion in which he moved, Hayes had to be filled to the gills with painkillers.

"Hayes, what did you have to tell me?" McCall said emphatically. "Can you remember?"

The man blinked. "'MthcCal'" he mumbled. "Righ'. Alth..ctt'..."

"Alcott? You found out something about Alcott?" Maxwell asked. "Is it in your notebook?" Hayes' head moved fractionally negatively.

McCall knew it was time to show him the sheet from the trash. "I went to your apartment last night--"

"What?" Maxwell yelped.

The wounded man winced. The D.A. lowered his voice. "You broke in his apartment? That's illegal, McCall!"

McCall ignored him. "And I found your papers but I didn't find anything on Alcott. Except in your trash can, I found this." He pulled out the wrinkled sheet.

Hayes' blue eyes opened slightly wider. "Thath's it...sorth' of."

"507 Nathan, eh?" Joe plucked it out of McCall's hands. "Owned by Wachtell. It can't be that easy. Do you think that Alcott's there?"

"Why not?" McCall said dryly. "How many people would expect that a Timex would fall into the hands of someone who'd recognize the name? What is it?"

"Walt. the is... wasth one of...t heth outpatienths hereth..." Hayes moved his free hand, a motion that caused him intense pain from his expression. He obviously wanted to go on, but the pain and the drugs didn't let him.

McCall could hear the orderly's voice replaying in his head. 'Fetters was one of Wachtell's charity cases! He had a smack problem! Wachtell took him under his arm...'

"The architect...", he said slowly, "was a patient here..."

"Fetters?" Joe asked.

"Fetters had a heroin problem, remember? Walt had a heroin problem. They both intersect at St. Vincent's. Walt helped a young man take an older man from a car."

Maxwell shrugged. "But, McCall, why would Fetters kidnap Alcott?"

"The hospital was to be Fetters' job," McCall speculated. "If Alcott vanished for a long enough period, then the Hospital committee would have to take drastic action. They'd have to chose Fetters. He was the only one with sanctioning at that point. And Wachtell loses a rival with Alcott gone."

"Then they don't expect to let Alcott go," Joe said sharply. "He could have come back and told us what happened. Do you think Fetters could kill a man, McCall? Or that Wachtell could?"

McCall thought back to the portly man he'd seen on television and met in Alcott's office. Wachtell didn't appear to have the backbone to murder in cold blood.

"I've never meet Kevin Fetters," he said slowly, "have you?"

Maxwell shook his head.

Hayes also moved his head fractionally, up and down.

"You've met him? What's your opinion-- oh. Well, do you think he's capable of this?" Joe said realizing Hayes really couldn't talk.

Hayes shrugged and winced. His free hand turned upwardly indicating he was uncertain if Fetters could or not. "Garth..."

"Car? Oh, the one that hit you? Its plates were covered..."

"Hayes," McCall said urgently. He saw that the man was starting to pale and knew he wouldn't be conscious much longer. "Have you been looking into Fetters at all?"

The reporter flicked his gaze to the piece of paper still in Maxwell's hands. "Is he living at 507 Nathan?" McCall asked. "Which one?"

Hayes shut his eyes in exhaustion.

Both men realized that their visit was now over. Hayes might have more to tell, but wasn't capable of saying it. McCall's hand went out, found the battery on the wreath and disconnected it. "Get some sleep, Frank."

"So if Fetters lives at 507 Nathan Avenue, Alcott could be there," McCall mused after they were outside.

Maxwell shrugged. "Give me proof, any proof, McCall and I'll move on it. We can't just go busting in on Fetters without probable cause. The fact that we don't like the color of his tie isn't good enough."

"He was a heroin addict along with Crazy Walt," McCall remarked. "He was affiliated with the hospital Long before he tried to become the architect."

"We got that from hospital gossip," Maxwell replied. "We can't get into the files because they're protected by confidentiality. We can't prove he was a heroin addict either."

"The police might have records. You might check."

"The day before Christmas? The city's shut down by now."

McCall stopped in front of Alcott's office. "Don't be so defeatist, Maxwell! You never were before you became D.A.! By the way, did Burch tell you that he found the dispensary open last night? It looked like someone had been at the methadone boxes. And methadone is used to wean people off heroin."

"Give me a connection from the hospital to Fetters or Crazy Walt, give me a reason to bust someone and I can move. This is all supposition!"

They went up to Alcott's office. Jennie was seated behind her desk, typing some papers.

McCall smiled at her. "Is he in?"

"Mr. Burch left word not to be disturbed," she said primly.

"Maybe not by Wachtell, but by us..." Joe said with slight malice and before she could stop him, he rapped on the door frame.

"Mr. Maxwell!" Jennie cried, springing up.

"That wasn't a good idea, Joe," McCall said warningly.

There was movement inside, the sound of somebody getting up, then the door opened.

An unholy wail came from one corner, behind the column which McCall had moved out into Jennie's office.

Joe could see where the thin strand of the alarm had been disturbed.

Burch was wearing a crumpled shirt, and some loose pants. His hair was hanging over his face and it was obvious that he had been awakened from a sound sleep. "Damn," he muttered. He retreated into the office and came back with a remote. Touching a switch he turned off the alarm. "Sorry about that. I was up... ah, good morning, Jennie."

"Good morning, sir," she said with a blush.

McCall's lip quivered. Another conquest, Elliot? "I know all about women's liberation, but could we ask you to get some coffee, my dear?" he asked charmingly.

She nodded, and retreated.

"I thought you drank tea, Robert?" Burch asked, with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"I drink what I get. How are you, Elliot?"

The man let them inside the office. Behind Pauley's computer set up was an army cot with a pile of blankets. An open suitcase sat next to the desk. The desk was covered with maps and new design layouts. "I was up till the morning shift came in," Burch said sleepily.

"When'd you get the alarm?" Maxwell asked.

Burch flourished the remote. "McCall set it up. Did you tell Joe, Robert, about the drugs?"

"Yes."

Joe shrugged. "No proof, guys. If the drugs have been stolen, then you need a suspect. They were probably signed out by a doctor. What's morphine sulfate used for anyway?"

"It's an analgesic. It's used to calm people down," Jennie said unexpectedly from the doorway.

She had three steaming cups of coffee on a tray and some cookies.

The men looked at her startled. Burch, realizing his disarray, smoothed back his hair and tucked in his shirt tail.

"Go on," McCall urged.

She shrugged. "It's a painkiller."

"Is it used in cases of heroin addiction?"

"More likely someone would use methadone."

"How do you know this, Jen?" Elliot asked.

"I wanted to be a nurse, but I decided to work here instead," Jennie replied simply. "I like Dr. Alcott."

Silence greeted her statement. All three hoped that she'd see the doctor again.

"We must be off," Maxwell said abruptly. "Sorry, Elliot, I didn't know you were going to be sleeping here."

"Take your coffee," Burch said with a yawn. "I'll give you a call this evening, McCall."

"You are going to find him? Dr. Alcott?" Jennie asked. Her gaze pinpointed Maxwell who she knew was part of the legal system.

The man squirmed.

"We're trying," McCall said. "Jennie, do you know who owns a grey sedan? A Plymouth?"

"Grey sedan? Hmm. No..."

"If you can find out, it would help. Go back to sleep, Elliot. Remember to put on the alarm."

They left Burch to return to his pile of blankets. McCall quietly shut the door.

"Jennie, can you make sure that he's not disturbed?" Joe said with an embarrassed grin.

She blushed. "He won't be now."

"Maybe it's time to visit Wachtell," Joe suggested when he and McCall were in the hallway. "Visiting hours are still on."

"And what do you plan on telling him?" McCall asked. "That we suspect him of kidnapping his major rival in the hospital?"

"Oh, I think a discussion of what might happen if Alcott turns up dead might be in order," Joe said lightly. "The legal consequences and all of having ME as the Trustee of Cathy's Trust."

McCall grinned in appreciation of the mental image this produced. "I'm going to see if I can find out some more about Nathan Avenue."

Maxwell gave him a dirty look. "I don't want to know about that. Hayes could sue you, you know."

"Not if we find Alcott," McCall predicted. "It would be a capper for his hospital series."

They separated, Joe headed to Wachtell's office, and McCall, outdoors.

Wachtell's office was a far cry from Alcott's. A modernistic computer sat on the gleaming oak desk, and the glass on the door to the inner office was shiny.

Maxwell knocked on the door to the inner office. Wachtell's secretary was absent, probably on Christmas leave from the mail that was piled in a box on the desk. He glanced over the top layer, noticing a predominance of catalogues and solicitations.

"Come in!"

Maxwell opened the door. "Dr. Wachtell?"

The pudgy man looked over the top edge of a newspaper. His eyes widened when they saw the young man, and he refolded the paper. "Yes?"

"I'm Joe Maxwell."

Wachtell's mouth gaped for a second, then he found his voice. "Please come in, Mr. Maxwell. You're the District Attorney, aren't you?"

Maxwell smiled. "Yeah, I am. I'm glad to meet you finally. I'm in charge of the Chandler Trust since Dr. Alcott has disappeared."

"Disappeared? How?" Wachtell said acidly. "I haven't seen him in for the last three or four days, but I assumed he would be back soon..."

"He vanished several days ago, and we have a lead that it was involuntary. The F.B.I is looking into it now, it's no longer the interest of the District Attorney's office. But, since I am now the Trustee, I thought I'd see how work was going here at the hospital."

Wachtell's eyes shifted betraying his reaction. Maxwell had faced too many criminals to not notice his sudden distress. What's sparked you, Doctor? The F.B.I.? The knowledge that Alcott's disappearance has been noticed?

"I do hope you find Dr. Alcott soon, because Mr. Burch is totally uncooperative. He will not show me what he has planned for the hospital. He has been doing work downstairs that has not been permitted by the administration!" Dr. Wachtell protested.

"But the hospital is profiting by it, correct?" Joe said coolly.

"He has no authorization!" Wachtell said angrily. "It is being handled without consultation!" Joe realized he had reached a wall. "I'm rather interested in your stand on the new addition."

"I never supported Alcott on the addition. He was planning on a drug rehabilitation clinic and a section exclusively for AIDS patients! The hospital needs new quarters for other medical practices. We could do more for heart patients, for example."

And they are more likely to pay their bills, than drug addicts and dying people, Joe thought. Yes heart patients were important. But with the addicts on the streets growing, and the help for them stretched to the limit, Alcott's idea was not only idealistic, but practical. Eyeing the man opposite, he concluded that Dr. Wachtell did not want to help the poor.

"But I heard that you helped out with the addicts. Didn't you take Kevin Fetters off the streets?"

Wachtell's eyes widened. What had startled him, Joe wondered.

"I knew Kevin when he was in school learning how to be an architect. When he became a heroin addict, I tried to help him out. He was employed by the hospital part-time till he was finished with his addiction program, then I put him to work on some of my buildings. He's excellent, you know," Wachtell finished aggressively.

"I'm sure he is. Did he do work on 507 Nathan Avenue?" Joe said unexpectedly.

Wachtell froze momentarily. "507 Nathan Avenue? What-- oh, yes, I own 507 but Fetters didn't work on it."

"Does he live there?"

"I suggest you ask him that question. And now if you're done..." Wachtell stood up expectantly.

Maxwell had no choice but to stand. "I'm glad to have talked with you, Dr. Wachtell. It was a pleasure to meet some of the administrators."

"I hope you find Dr. Alcott," Wachtell said unconvincingly. "Good afternoon."

McCall grudgingly admitted that Maxwell had been right. The city government was shut down for Christmas Eve and Christmas. He had finally been chased out of the New York Public Library.

By tracking through old phone books, he had managed to trace several people to 507 Nathan, but none of the names were familiar.

He saw that there was a message on the answering machine.

"Robert? I just remembered where I saw a grey car around here lately. It was parked behind in the addition lot. Apparently they've been using the lot for overflow traffic." Burch's voice still sounded loaded with sleep. "It had to have a hospital sticker on it to be in there."

"So..." McCall said aloud.

Elliot's voice echoed his. "So someone could be parking the car in the lot and using the old door to get into the hospital, and get to the dispensary without being seen, Robert. Someone who knows this hospital very well. Anyway, stop by tonight. They're having a pot luck Christmas dinner and caroling. If you prefer to stay alone in the apartment though..."

McCall occasionally wondered if saving Burch had been a good idea. Still the man was being only slightly provocative. He wondered what he should bring with him to the dinner. And he'd better find out what was still open on Christmas Eve.

Arriving an hour and a half later, he parked the Jaguar on the back lot. Walking in the dim sunlight, he found footprints in the thick snow leading to the abandoned doorway. Trying the door, he found it locked.

Going back to the car, he saw tire tracks that looked familiar. Of course, they belonged to the car that had hit Hayes. He stepped on the tracks when he ran to the man's help.

"I wonder if I go to 507 Nathan Avenue, if they'd have these tracks?" he said aloud.

He made it to the apartment building in record time in the light Christmas Eve traffic. Going around to the parking lot, he saw a line of cars, but none was a grey sedan. Walking around to the front, he saw the same surly man now watching a portable television, and a few inhabitants who were picking up mail. Going around the other side of the building, he saw a loading dock, and a rolling metal door. There were marks of cars going into the building.

"Interior parking," he murmured. "Let's see."

He fiddled with the door, trying to find the electronic eye to open the door. Nothing. He went over to the doors of the loading dock and examined the lock.

McCall heard a rattle. The metal roll-door opened letting out a dark car which sped away. He slid in under the falling door. The parking lot was silent.

The cars were neatly slotted. McCall walked around the one floor garage looking for a grey car, but there wasn't one. Most of the cars were clean of salt, showing that they hadn't been outside since before the last snow.

Snow. His eyes were caught by some lumps of snow. They didn't match the maroon Ford in the slot. Whatever had been there had wider and been driven since last night.

He bent over the encrusted snow lump that was slowly melting. It must have been run over by the leaving car.

The tire track was the same one. The car that hit Hayes had been in this space and left. Standing, he looked at the wall. It was a reserved spot for Wachtell Realty.

"Here's your link, Maxwell," McCall said slowly. "It's melting, I admit..." He carefully took up the snow clod and went over to the door, activating the electronic link. The door rolled up.

Wachtell was pacing the floor of the Realty office at 507 Nathan Ave. He was waiting for Fetters to come down from upstairs. The younger man had flatly refused to let him in the apartment.

When Fetters finally entered, he had a file folder under one arm. He shut the door firmly behind him.

"What's up, boss?"

Wachtell wheeled to face him. "Alcott's been kidnapped!"

Fetters blinked. "Kidnapped?"

"Yes, I had Maxwell, the D.A., in my office today saying that he's been kidnapped, and that the F.B.I. is looking for him. He has to have been gone since the night we were supposed to meet about Burch!"

"So?" Fetters said. "So what?"

"I told you to persuade him to give up, to leave town, not to kidnap him!" Wachtell said furiously.

The young man slapped the folder down on the desk. "What did you think I was gonna do, Doctor? He wasn't going to cooperate with us!"

"You kidnapped him? You.. .you didn't KILL him, did you?" Wachtell falteringly.

Fetters shrugged. "No, he's away in dreamland, Wachtell. He's so high on morphine right now, he's feeling NO pain at all."

"Morphine! Are you SURE he's all right? Morphine can cause respiratory failure--"

"He's not alone," Fetters cut him off. "Walt's sitting with him. He'll notice if the doc dies!"

"What did you plan to do with him?"

"Look at these." The man spread out the sheets on the table. "I got him to sign so I could copy it, but it's not quite right yet."

Wachtell looked over the sheets. "Forgery? Forge his signature turning the Trust over to me?"

"I want him to sign it over himself, but he's being uncooperative," Fetters said harshly. "We'll do the best we can."

"You'd better do something!" Wachtell almost screamed. "The F.B.I.'s on the case according to Maxwell! And he's the new Chandler Trustee!"

Fetters' head went up sharply. "The D.A.'s the Trustee?"

"And he won't be satisfied with just these signatures!"

"Calm down! Alcott won't tell anyone anything. I've kept him so tranked, he couldn't even recognize his best friend!"

"When do you plan for him to reappear?"

"Soon. Very soon."

"You'd better make it soon! Maxwell was asking about this apartment building!"

"How'd they track us here?" Fetters' face was being red with anger.

"I don't know! He asked if you lived here. I told him to ask you."

Fetters made an obscene gesture. "I'll have to move the doc when he's movable. Dammit! Did you bring your car?"

"My.. .my car? What happened to the Plymouth?" Wachtell demanded. "I leased it to you--"

"I used it on that nosy reporter!" Fetters replied harshly. "Oh, you didn't know that, did you? Walt sold the doc's watch and some damn reporter bought it. Started questioning him and Walt got scared. He told me about it, and I knew that it could lead to me, so I used the car. Turns out I didn't kill that snoop, though."

Wachtell's face showed utter horror. He did not want to believe that the young man facing him was capable of killing to get his way. It made him feel threatened.

Fetters knew this. He stepped closer, making the older man lean back. "I will kill you if you turn me in, Clarence! You're in this as deeply as I am, or even more. You were the one who wanted control of the hospital, who wanted Alcott gone so he wouldn't interfere. You chose me. I'm the weapon in your hand."

Wachtell swallowed hard, backing up a step. "I won't tell anyone, Kevin. Believe me."

"Remember that. Now, about the Ford-

"What DID you do with the Plymouth?"

"Sold it to a junk dealer down in Jersey."

"It's still registered to Wachtell Realty!"

"It's scattered to junkyards all over the States now. Forget it." Fetters put the papers back into the folder. "I need your car if I have to move Alcott."

"What am I supposed to do? Where are you taking him?" "Do you really want to know?"

Wachtell said nothing.

"I'll return it when I'm done. Just stall, Doctor. Alcott will be back soon. And you'll have control of the Chandler Trust." Fetters walked out with the folder under his arm.

The man standing by the desk was shaken. And scared. It was too much take in. After a minute, he walked out to the subway.

Chapter 9

Burch had saved some of the pot luck dinner for 'night shift', leaving it in Alcott's office to bring down later. Maxwell had dropped by, unexpectedly bringing three cakes, and partaken of the food, but McCall hadn't shown up. The D.A., in fact, was still eating dessert. Alcaris had brought his wife and gone over very well with the administration. They had taken off a half-hour before.

He used the remote on the door alarm, and went inside. The room almost looked homey by now. Burch had personalized it with the computer and the open suitcase. Alcott's trash basket served as a laundry bin, and Jennie had given him a mug that said St. Vincent's. The bull's-eyed flamingo hung by the door.

He looked outside at the lot. Who was the mysterious person who came and went without being seen? Tonight he planned on putting a new lock on the door.

He picked up the food locker and went down to the basement. Vincent and crew weren't expected for several hours.

The icy wind sweeping through the corridor chilled more than the walls. Burch put the locker carefully down, and proceeded cautiously. He had replaced the burned out bulbs at least and the empty corridor was illuminated brightly.

The door gaped open. Burch hesitated, then retreated. Time to get reinforcements. He remembered all too vividly what happened when he didn't get help. Unlike many people he had no real wish to be a hero. He gave that up a year ago when he was shot.

Passing the dispensary, he had no warning before someone hit him.

He fell to the ground and rolled, head ringing. Whoever had hit him hadn't been strong, but the fall had knocked him against the wall.

The attacker swung a box at him. Burch sheltered his face and hit back. He missed, grabbing at the box. The lid ripped. Small boxes scattered over him. The man kicked him in the ribs. Burch rolled away with a gasp of pain.

A roar filled the corridor. The attacker screamed, and took off, carrying the opened box. He was gone by the time the bruised man rolled to his knees.

"Elliot?"

Burch reached defensively, then relaxed. "Vincent?" "Who was that?"

"Didn't you see him? He got out the door!"

Vincent looked out the gaping doorway. "What did he want?"

"He was stealing something from the dispensary. Let's lock this and take a look."

They shut the door. Burch pulled from his pocket the new chain and lock, and fastened it. They went back to the dispensary. Burch clicked on the light. The room was as barren as last night, except for the morphine boxes which were scattered over the counter. "Morphine. Someone stealing morphine. I was right."

"About what, Elliot?"

Burch filled him in on what Maxwell had told him over dinner.

Vincent saw the glint of the silver medallion lying on the ground just inside the door. "What is it?" Elliot asked moving closer to the big man.

"A medal," Vincent said. "Of St. Michael."

"St. Michael. St. Michael's church! That was where McCall met with Crazy Walt!" Burch said taking it from his fingers. "Do you think that the man who attacked you could be Crazy Walt?"

"From McCall's description, it could be. That means Crazy Walt is the thief." He dropped it in his picket and looked up at Vincent. "What are you doing here, Vincent? It's early yet."

"I have something for you." Vincent held out a multicolored candle.

Elliot remembered seeing one of these in McCall's apartment and another in Alcott's office. It was an invitation to Winterfest.

"Winterfest... Ah...."

"Do you know about Winterfest?"

"Only what McCall told me. Thank you, Vincent."

The man smiled. "You don't have to accept, Elliot. But if you would, we would enjoy your company."

"When is it?"

"Epiphany."

"Epiphany? Early January? I'll have to see how it goes, Vincent." Elliot took the candle and ran one hand up and down it. It smelled of beeswax and lavender. "I might be gone by then. But, thank you. Thanks to all of you. It means a lot to be asked."

"I heard that there would be caroling tonight, Elliot," Vincent said with curiosity in his voice.

"They're making the rounds now," Burch said, carefully putting the candle in his coat pocket. "Come on. We'll have to be careful to avoid Maxwell, but I think I can get you a good seat."

"I would like to meet Joe someday," Vincent said quietly.

"He's still looking for Cathy's Vincent," Burch said warningly. "It wouldn't be a good idea."

By the time they reached the main level they could hear voices, singing and laughter. Vincent slid into the dark ward, one of the ones emptied for Burch's renovations, and waited. Burch stood outside providing cover.

The carolers were hospital employees, volunteers and people from the local church. Jack Alcaris, respondent in a red vest that made him look like Santa Claus, led the way carrying a lit candle set in a glass bowl. Jennie and a tall, slender man walked arm-in-arm, singing loudly. Bringing up the rear was Hayes' wreath, blinking, in the hands of Carmen. She smiled at Elliot, and sang the carol in Spanish. She held out one hand, beckoning to him.

Burch shook his head. He joined in the carol, singing in Polish, but didn't move. At the end, he blew her a kiss, that she smiled at and returned.

They walked on leaving one straggler. Joe Maxwell looked at the man leaning against the door with a quizzical expression.

"Have an accident, Burch?"

Elliot was aware that he still showed signs of the fight. "I found out what's being stolen from St. Vincent's."

"What?"

"Come with me. I'll show you." He led the man towards the basement, leaving Vincent safely hidden in the darkness.

* * * * *

Christmas day arrived in a fog bank. A warm front moved in and the slush melted to hang in the air.

For Robert McCall, the weather matched the case. He missed reaching Maxwell, both at the hospital and at his apartment. Burch was planning on working on plans for most of the day though they'd have Christmas dinner together at Le Cirque. He had talked with his son and ex-wife, extending season's greetings, but the rest of the day was as empty as his icebox.

The blue and white lights on the tree twinkled at McCall as he sat on the couch. He twirled the medallion that Burch had given him. Its serrated edge reflected the lights. St. Michael's Church. St. Vincent's hospital. Peter Alcott. Crazy Walt. Kevin Fetters. Where was the strand? Fetters had worked in the hospital when recovering from drug abuse. His friend Walt had been there but was still an addict. Fetters had been 'adopted' by Wachtell, probably as a charitable public relations measure and been sent to school by him. Now, Wachtell wanted the hospital and Fetters was his chosen architect. Only Alcott stood in the way...

Swing, swing. The medallion wound tightly around his fingers.

So Peter vanishes. Dead? McCall couldn't believe that of Wachtell. He hadn't the backbone.

Wachtell owned the building at Nathan Avenue. How had they found that? Through Hayes. How had Hayes known that? Because, as he told Burch, he had been watching Wachtell for a number of years. Hayes had been working also on Alcott's 'disappearance' — Why had the reporter 'chosen' Nathan Avenue of all Wachtell's properties? McCall sat upright. There was the link that he was missing or had overlooked. They had all assumed that Hayes had chosen to pursue Nathan Avenue because of his suspicions on Wachtell.

Why? Had someone pinpointed Nathan Avenue for Hayes? Had the journalist, then, tried to prove that Alcott was there? But his investigation had tipped off the kidnapers and they'd panicked and tried to kill him. So who could have pinpointed the apartment house? Crazy Walt, maybe? Hayes

knew Peter Alcott, both from his hospital series, and from his ongoing watching of the Chandler Trust. He bought the watch from Crazy Walt because of Alcott's name inscribed on it. He had gone to the hospital to talk to Alcott and ended up talking to McCall and Maxwell, finding out that Alcott was missing. What had Walt told him? Had it differed from what he told McCall? It must have. Hayes went back to his apartment and sometime in the time before he went to see McCall, gotten that list of Wachtell's apartments out of the computers.

The medallion swung in a loop. A loop from Crazy Walt to Hayes back to Walt. So what could Walt have told Hayes? McCall knew that Walt said he helped a unload a man and get him upstairs. Who did he unload him for? For a friend named Kevin Fetters perhaps, a friend that he knew from years back, going back to when they were in the same drug abuse program? Was Walt in the lot trying to get in the back door to the drugs, and seen Fetters load Alcott in the car? So Fetters pays for Walt's silence with Alcott's watch, figuring that of all the myriad places in New York City that Walt can pawn it, the watch will be totally lost. But unfortunately for Fetters, it falls into the hands of someone who knows Alcott.

"So..." McCall mused, "Fetters returns to the hospital in the same car as he used to kidnap Alcott and parks it in the lot behind." The snow lump found in the parking garage of Nathan Avenue matched the now-rapidly evaporating banks behind St. Vincent. "Why that car? Why did he bring it back?" Why? Two reasons, maybe. It couldn't be traced to Alcott's disappearance and because it didn't belong to him! It belonged to Clarence Wachtell. So Fetters had to keep it.

Hayes had been told by Crazy Walt that he had loaded a man into a grey car driven by Kevin Fetters. But he was trying to track it Wachtell, not Fetters. But the list of Wachtell's properties didn't have Wachtell's car ownership on it. So he way to prove to Maxwell that Alcott might be held in Nathan Avenue. However he might have been curious enough to go and check out the cars at Nathan Avenue, to see if there was a grey car that matched Walt's statements. McCall remembered the angry guard saying people wanted their privacy. Had that privacy been invaded by a reporter trying to find out about a grey car? And that would have tipped Fetters off that Hayes was checking him out.

The grey car.... McCall realized that he had seen the car as well, the same night that Hayes had been hit. He and Maxwell had parked next to it in the back lot! Carmen, the Hispanic doctor, seated at the table with the Christmas cookies, looked around uneasily at the mention of Kevin Fetters. 'Better keep your mouth shut. He's got run of the building and he's got good hearing.' She must have known that Fetters was in the building at the time. So he hears that Hayes is coming over to talk with Maxwell, and realizes that the reporter might have enough to 'pique' the D.A.'s curiosity. So he hits Hayes with the car.

McCall sat bolt upright. The car! Had Hayes recognized the car? He remembered the hit-and-run. It had been over so quickly that he barely noticed what happened before. Mentally replaying it, he remembered Hayes trying to escape the fender. It could have been just desperation at any car coming at him. Or could it have been he knew the car, known Fetters was after him.

The silver-haired man paced into the kitchen and got a glass of eggnog. Sipping on it, he returned to the living room. Opening his folder on Wachtell, he glanced over the sheets that came from the Public Library, then the crumpled sheet from Hayes' apartment. What was missing? It was as if his memory was trying to tell him that he had... He had! McCall stood and walked swiftly to the closet. He fumbled in his dark overcoat. He was wearing this when Hayes' had been hit, and gotten blood on it. With the events of the past several days, he hadn't taken it to the cleaners, just stowed it away until he had time. And while he had carefully kept the Nathan Avenue sheet out, the other sheets he'd left stuffed in his deep pockets.

Pulling them out he returned to coffee table. The lists of names and addresses were still a mystery.

Sifting through all the sheets on Wachtell, he found a clue. Wachtell had once owned an apartment building on the East Side, which he sold during the boom years of the '80's. The address was on Hayes' list. McCall found a car leased to the building, probably a company car. A grey Plymouth in fact.

So Wachtell leases company cars to certain buildings. Maybe he gave Fetters free rein with the grey car. And Fetters uses it in a hit-and-run AND a kidnapping. Maybe. McCall thought it sounded a trifle speculative but if he could prove that Fetters lived in Nathan Ave, he might be able to get Maxwell to move.

McCall called Alcott's office, rousing a sleepy Burch. "Burch, can you find out where Wachtell is?" "Ummph."

"Burch, wake up!"

"Shut up, Sherlock. The game's asleep here," Elliot replied muffled. It sounded like he had a pillow over his mouth.

McCall grinned. "I think Wachtell's car was parked in the space at Nathan Avenue and that Kevin Fetters is the one that hit Hayes. I need to know what apartment that car is affiliated with, Elliot, or who it is leased to."

"Wachtell's not here. The light's out under his door," Burch said with a little more energy. "Saw it the last time I down the hall."

"Get into his office--" "That's illegal."

"Alcott's in danger, Elliot! We know they'll not stop at hit-and-run. Check the office--"

"McCall..." the man's voice was exasperated. "I'll see if it's open but if it isn't, you'll have to get inside yourself."

"Fair enough. Call me back." Burch grunted as he hung up.

It didn't take over a quarter of an hour. Burch sounded much livelier.

"You know, McCall, you could have made that alarm a little bit softer. They're complaining about it downstairs."

"Put some more padding under the carpet, Burch. It gets you up in the morning, doesn't it?"

McCall's suspicion that the young man hadn't shut it off before leaving the office on the way to Wachtell's was borne out by his disgusted grunt.

"Well, I found something. No one locked the outer door to Wachtell's office, but the inner was padlocked. So I checked through the mail on his secretary's desk."

"And...?"

"And there's an architectural magazine there, the yearly directory. It's addressed to Kevin Fetters. I looked in the directory."

"And you found..."

"Kevin Fetters, 507 Nathan Avenue, Apt. 642, New York, New York, etc. That and the Dumbrill and Parton address."

"Right!" McCall said fiercely. "That's it, the connection."

"Huh?"

"Hayes found it out. He talked to Crazy Walt and got a description of the car. He traced it to Wachtell, to Nathan Avenue, and to Fetters. That's what he was going to tell us when Fetters--"

"Morphine," Burch interrupted. "What?"

"Morphine, Robert. If Fetters has Alcott, he needs something to keep him under control.

Morphine's used to control pain but can be dangerous. If they're using it on Alcott, then they may have run out. That's why Walt came back last night."

"And now they have a box. I'm going up there."

"HOLD IT!" Burch yelled. "ROBERT!"

"What?"

"At least tell someone, Robert! Call Maxwell!"

"He's with his mother, remember?"

"I know his beeper number! McCall!"

McCall hung up. He pulled his coat around him tighter, made sure his gun was accessible and went down to the Jaguar.

* * * * *

Elliot took a deep breath and picked up the phone. He dialed in a number which would connect him with Maxwell's beeper, if the D.A. was carrying it at that moment. He prayed that he could reach the lawyer.

It rang and rang. After the tenth ring, Burch hung up, and began dressing warmly. He planned on going over to 507 Nathan Avenue and helping McCall. He wasn't a spy or a hero... but he wasn't letting the other man go willfully into danger while he twiddled his fingers back in the office.

The phone rang.

"What?" He picked it up.

"Alcott?" the voice said doubtfully. "Burch?"

"MAXWELL! Where are you? How'd you know to call here!" Burch almost shouted. "The number shows up on my beeper," Joe said crisply. "What's up?"

"McCall says that Fetters is holding Alcott over in apartment 642 on Nathan Avenue," Elliot replied concisely. "He's going over there now."

Silence. Then Joe stuttered, "What? How does he--DAMMIT, McCall, don't do this again! This was how I ended up getting involved last time!"

"He doesn't give you much warning, does he?" Burch commented. "I'm going over there, Joe."

"YOU STAY THERE!" Maxwell ordered. "STAY THERE, Elliot! I'll go over with a couple of cops."

"What about your Mom?"

"I'll leave her a note on my door! She'll have to forgive me this time! I don't want to see you there, Burch--" Elliot hung up on him.

The alarm went off with the wail of a air raid signal. Swiveling towards the door, he cursed under his breath.

"Mr. Burch?" The man on the doorstep, looking bewildered, was Clarence Wachtell.

McCall had little doubt that Burch would be showing up sometime in the near future. By that time, McCall hoped that it would be over. He stopped the car outside the building in time to see the garage open and a dark maroon sedan drive out. It was familiar. It was the car that had been in the Wachtell Realty spot.

McCall trailed the sedan, which was going slowly through the dense fog. Any apartment above the seventh floor was hidden in grey clouds.

The investigator trailed him carefully. With the thin traffic, his car would stand out like a beacon.

The sedan drove to a familiar section of town. McCall had walked these mean streets with Maxwell looking for an addict called Crazy Walt. He passed St. Michael's church, and noticed that someone had smashed some of the wire mesh over the windows. Vandalism. Merry Christmas.

The sedan turned down a dark alley beyond the church. It drove over metal plates and past several garbage cans.

McCall drove past, and parked next to the church's garbage bin. He got out cautiously, and pulled out his gun. Retracing his path, he found the parked sedan empty.

The man scanned the car carefully. There was no sign that it had been used for anything illicit. Looking around the alley, he saw a boarded-up doorway. There were several windows that must lead to the basement of the buildings, but the mesh over them showed years of rust. The walls towered around him unbroken by other windows.

McCall cautiously tried the front car door. It was locked. Thinking for a second, he tried the door on passenger's side, in the back.

It was open as he thought it might be. If he'd had his arms filled with a body, he wouldn't be able to lock the door. Looking at the snow, he saw signs of feet, two sets of prints and one smashed section as if someone had fallen.

He once again checked for anyone in the alley, then leaned into the car.

The back was uninteresting, except for a crumpled grocery bag. McCall pulled it out, smoothed it, and found it intact. Looking inside he saw nothing. He reached in and checked the corners.

Nothing.

His fingers caught on the rough edge of a sheet of paper. Paper? A receipt? No, it was too thick. He pulled it out. The stationary was St. Vincent's and the thick looping handwriting was familiar. Elliot, I'll be back by 10. Wait for me. Peter Alcott.

Alcott's note! How had it gotten here? Someone must have dropped it, or planned on destroying it. There was red fluff adhered to the top where the adhesive was. Red wool. Fetters' scarf perhaps? "Maybe we can't bring him in on the color of his tie but what about his scarf, Joe?" McCall murmured. Bending over the seat, McCall saw strands of light grey hair caught in the door release on the other side. Alcott's hair caught in the move?

"But what happened to the grey car? And what happened to-

The screech of metal and something crashing took him totally by surprise. He dived into the back seat reflexively.

The silence that filled the air made him tense. Then something metallic crashed again.

McCall shifted position so that he was looking out of the open door. He pulled it closed till only a crack showed.

A man appeared from around the corner of the alley. He was dragging something. McCall held the gun ready.

Fetters dropped the body in the snow by the trunk, and pulled out his keys. He opened the trunk.

The investigator shoved the door open and leaned out. "Freeze!"

The killer, startled, froze for a second, then slammed the trunk. It jarred McCall's hold on the door, and the silver-haired man grabbed for the door to stay upright. It gave Fetters the necessary seconds to run past the other side of the car and head for the mouth of the alley.

McCall cursed, and detangled himself from the sedan. He was gaining on Fetters when the young man rounded the corner and screamed.

* * * * *

Burch settled in the chair behind Alcott's desk and eyed the man who sat in Jennie's chair.

"I thought you were out of town. Please excuse the mess," Burch said calmly. "I hadn't planned on visitors."

Wachtell seemed to miss the blankets and cot. "I have to talk to you. You know Maxwell, don't you?"

"Joe Maxwell? Yes." "Well?"

"Yes. We worked together on my case," Burch replied. "What do you want?"

Wachtell worried his lower lip, then licked his lips. "I need you to talk to Maxwell. I have some information on Dr. Alcott, but I don't want to go to jail."

Burch froze. "Jail? What have you done to him?"

"I DIDN'T do anything!" Wachtell wailed. He paced around the room, then returned to the chair. "I need your assurance that you'll help me with Maxwell!"

"If you tell me honestly what you know, I'll tell Maxwell you were honest. That doesn't commit him to helping you, Doctor."

Wachtell sighed. "It's all a mistake. I wanted to control the building of the addition. I told Fetters that Alcott was against this. I didn't know what he was going to do."

"Where is Peter Alcott?" Burch said intensely.

"I don't know. Fetters said he was going to move him to a safe place. He said that keeping him at Nathan Avenue was dangerous."

Burch wondered if the man had any idea of the consequences he was confessing to. He was an accessory to a felony, to a kidnapping, which might be murder, if Alcott was dead. He doubted that Wachtell knew what trouble he was in.

"You were keeping him at your apartments?"

"You'll talk to Maxwell?"

"I'll talk to Maxwell. Nathan Avenue?"

"Fetters has an apartment there. I rent it to him. I didn't know what he'd done with Peter until he told me that he'd kidnapped him and had him upstairs. But Maxwell was closing in and he said he was going to move Alcott."

"Was there anyone else involved?"

Wachtell shrugged. "Fetters had a man named Walt watching Alcott--"

"WALT! Hold it!" Burch tapped in Maxwell's car phone number. "Maxwell, where are you-- oh, McCall's gone? Try Crazy Walt's. What? Tell you later. Just get there. Where is it? How about over near St. Michael's--"

Click! The phone went silent.

Burch replaced the receiver. "Now go on."

"Fetters worked in the dispensary when he was in school here. When I found out he was selling drugs illicitly, through the building behind us, I tried to get rid of him. But he had forged my signature for the drugs and I couldn't. He was blackmailing me!"

Burch's face held little sympathy.

"When he wanted the job building the addition, I knew he was planning some way to sell the drugs

again. But I couldn't do anything!"

"Did he tell you about Hayes?"

"Hayes?"

"The reporter! The one who got hit by a car because he was trying to find Alcott!"

Wachtell shook his head. "Fetters said he tried to stop a reporter but he didn't give me a name. He used a car I leased him. That was why I decided to come to you. He's out of control!"

"Where is the car?"

"He said he'd sold it for scrap."

Burch grimaced. So much for the hit-and-run vehicle. "Fetters almost killed Hayes. What about the hospital commission? Why did they say there was radon when there wasn't?"

The older man stared at his hands, not meeting Elliot's glare. "That was part of my plan. I'll tell Maxwell whatever he needs. Whatever he wants."

"You bet you will," Burch said softly. "You bet you will."

Skidding to a stop, McCall found Fetters crumpled face-down in the slush. Joe Maxwell was stepping out of his car, his face pale.

"I didn't see him in the fog!" Maxwell protested. "He came out of nowhere, right on my hood!"

Two men got out of the following police car. One bent over Fetters, while the other radioed for an ambulance.

McCall, panting, leaned on the car. "Don't get too upset, Joe. He just killed someone."

"What? Where?"

"Down there. Beyond the sedan." McCall waved a hand, and one of the policemen went down the alley. "How'd you find me?"

Maxwell shook his head. "Burch called me. Told me to get to St. Michael's. Then I saw the Jaguar. Who's dead?"

"Walt. I saw him when he hit the snow."

"So where's Alcott?"

Fetters glared at them malevolently.

"He's not going to tell us anything," McCall concluded. "I heard something, though... come on." They walked together, down the alley, past Walt's body, then beyond the car. McCall stopped abruptly.

"I heard metal crashing. Something opened and closed."

"Metal... the plates maybe?"

Set in the street were a set of steel plates. One of them was clear of snow. McCall pulled on the metal ring, and it swung open, showing a set of stairs. "Probably leads to the basement of these abandoned buildings. The basement entrance."

The hole gaped blackly. McCall and Maxwell shared uneasy looks, then McCall stepped down gingerly.

Once at the bottom, their eyes adjusted to the low lighting. It smelled of too much humanity crammed in a small space. Many of the metal doors along the corridor were shut, but they could hear rustling. Rats or humans, Joe wondered. It was warmer than above, but the air was heavy with the smell of garbage. Water dripped with evaporation.

"Here," one of the officers called unexpectedly. He held out a flashlight. McCall took it. "We might need another ambulance. Get it here."

"You think he's down here?" Joe said uneasily. "Give me the flash. Got your gun?" "Ready."

They walked carefully down the hallway.

Halfway down, they found a woolen blanket that covered a doorway. Joe flashed the light inside and saw it lead to another doorway.

"The floor!"

Pointing the light down, he saw McCall bend over and pick up something. A morphine box, fresh and unstained by exposure to the floor.

"Alcott? Peter?" Maxwell called. They brushed past the hanging blanket and Maxwell bent over and entered the other room. The low ceiling would have made it cozy if it hadn't stunk of rotted food, and unwashed clothing.

The light flashed off the grey hair of the man who lay on the bed. "Peter!"

McCall pushed past him, and checked on the prone man.

Alcott was breathing irregularly, slight puffs that hung in the air. There was a bottle of Scotch and several boxes of morphine next to the bed. A used needle sat on crumpled cellophane on top of a pile of papers.

"He needs a doctor," McCall said feeling for a pulse. "He'll get it. Help me, Robert."

Carefully lifting him, the two men struggled into the outer corridor. Maxwell put down Alcott's legs, and went to the ladder. "Is the ambulance here yet?"

"We were gonna use this one for the body," the policeman replied. "Got a living one down here! Get the medics."

McCall waited till he returned, then took the flashlight. "I want to check on something. Take his head."

Maxwell sat, legs crossed, Alcott propped against him. McCall went back into the dark room. He left the bottle and the morphine, hoping they'd have fingerprints on them implicating Fetters, but he pulled on his own gloves and checked the papers.

Peter Alcott. Dr. Peter Alcott. Peter J. Alcott. The signatures covered several pages. The last one was on contract, written in a hand approximating Alcott's closely. It was a document signing over control of the Chandler Trust to Clarence Wachtell. It was signed by the same hand that had done the other signatures. A script that was close to the one in McCall's pocket... but not the same.

McCall took the file with him to rejoin Maxwell.

Chapter 10

It was Epiphany, January Sixth, Winterfest. Father led a long tail of people down the steep, windy stairs to the Great Hall, thinking that this year he had a great deal to be grateful for. Not the least was the return of one of his dearest friends.

Near the end of the line was a pale and shaken Peter Alcott. It had been only a few days since he had been let out of the hospital. Alcott had little memory of what had happened. He did remember being told to sign something, but most of it was fuzzy.

Robert McCall, descending in front of Alcott ready to lend a hand if the doctor needed it, had given the file to Joe telling him to examine carefully. The D.A. had a waterproof case against Fetters for the murder of Crazy Walt, and the kidnapping of Alcott. Wachtell's confession about the car also laid the charge of hit-and-run against the young man. It turned out that the syringe they'd found beside the cot had the remains of pure morphine and Crazy Walt had overdosed from it. The only fingerprints were Fetters'. The prosecutors were queuing for a chance to get him, Maxwell in front.

Elliot Burch followed Alcott, a roll of architect's drawings tucked under one arm. He wondered how the staircase had been built, and by whom. Then he thought back on the long two weeks preceding Winterfest.

Wachtell had been arrested. His protestations were useless in the face of felony charges and he was confessing all his sins in the hope that it would keep him out of maximum security prison. This left an opening in administration that Burch hoped Alcott would be able to fill with a supporter.

Burch had met Father sitting by the doctor several times when he made midnight visits to Alcott. The rebuilding of the lower part of the building was completed as of last night, and the upper and outer renovations were planned and signed off on by an abashed and compliant administration.

Father's input on the planning of the new addition had led to revisions in the drawings. He hoped that the plans would be acceptable.

After Father said the ritual greeting, and the Great Hall lit by the light of the multicolored candles, the party started.

Vincent walked out of the mass of dancers. There was an air of sadness about him, a reserve that set him apart from the revelers.

"How is it, Elliot?"

Burch smiled wryly. Ever the thoughtful host. "It reminds me of..."

"Dickens?" McCall said unexpectedly. He was clearing the top of the table behind him. "No. Go back further."

"The beginning of recorded time?" Father asked softly appearing out of the crowd to stand beside Vincent.

"I was thinking more of the Middle Ages," Elliot replied. "Are you ready for a surprise?"

Vincent and Father came to stand by the now emptied table. "What is it?"

"Where's Peter? Ah!" Burch waved, and the doctor, raising an eyebrow, came over. "This is the new addition to St. Vincent's Hospital."

"You finished them!" Alcott said seeing the sheets Burch and McCall were unrolling.

Next to him Father watched carefully. No matter that Alcott might protest he felt fine, they were still treating him like fine porcelain.

The paper's edges were held down by mugs and various wooden figurines.

"This is what it will look like," Burch said tapping one sheet. "From the street. These are the elevations and other plans."

The addition didn't differ too much in architectural detail from the main hospital. But the lines were clean and airy, and Alcott felt a huge burden slide from his shoulders when he looked at it. Burch had answered his every dream and more.

"Well?"

"It'll work, Elliot. It'll work."

The young man smiled crookedly. "Then I'll be off." "What?"

"I'm going home, McCall. Back to Florida."

"Back to the woman who sends you flamingo shirts with bull's-eyes on them?"

"Back to where I don't make the news when I sneeze," Burch said with an edge.

"And speaking of news, what about Hayes?" Alcott asked unexpectedly.

"Hayes? He's annoyed that he was still out of it when we found you, but I gave him a scoop on Wachtell. That's helped a bit."

"Made a hell of an ending for his hospital series, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but he didn't get to write it! You owe him your life, Peter," Burch said seriously. "If he hadn't found the watch, and linked it with Crazy Walt, we might not have found you at all."

"I'll give him first crack at the plans," Alcott said sounding slightly tired. "How much has this all cost, Burch?"

The man smiled. "Less than you might think. I asked some friends to kick in and their contributions covered at least half the work. The last three weeks and these are my contribution, Peter! Merry Christmas!"

Alcott chuckled. This was Burch's response to everyone who had thought he was in it only for the money. Joe Maxwell, eat crow! Or flamingo as may be...

"I'll ask Hayes to point this fact out, don't worry."

"Another bit of good news. Alcaris has agreed to stay on."

Alcott raised an eyebrow. "I thought he was going to leave when you did?"

"I introduced him to Pauley, who is taking over as I planned. They hit it off." Burch saw they didn't understand the significance of this. "It gives you continuity, Peter. Pauley knows the plans back and forth, and the administrators like him. Alcaris has become a favorite with the staff. You shouldn't have any problems with the crew."

"So we don't have to worry about breaking through?" Vincent asked eyeing the plans.

"Not the way these are built. I wouldn't put any of your caves directly underneath though," Elliot recommended. "Oh, and Peter? I fixed the frame in your office. It doesn't rattle anymore."

"Good. Now, no more work. It's time to relax," Father commanded. "Put those plans away."

Burch and Vincent carefully rolled the plans and put them to one side. The talk in the room became general, and music started.

McCall leaned on the table, next to Burch. "What do you think, Elliot?"

"The door is open to the Dickens' store and I'm inside."

"And..."

"It's warm and cozy, protective and safe. A cocoon."

"If you had a choice, would you stay?"

Burch shook his head. "No. I have wings to fly with."

McCall felt a rapport with the other man. "A nice place to visit but not to stay."

"For better or for worse, McCall, we belong Above."

END