

# A Little Rain Must Fall

Mark ran an admiring eye over the sleek contours of the machine in front of him and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. This was it -- the big day.

It had been almost a week since Santa Claus, a/k/a Hardcastle, had retrieved the stolen piece of property, and in his endearingly rough manner, presented the motorcycle to McCormick as a late Christmas gift.

The bike was accompanied by rules laid down and strictly enforced by the judge, and although secretly appreciating the older man's concern, McCormick openly complained of the constant trips up and down the driveway, learning the feel of the machine and being forced to memorize the manual on its operation. His patience paid off, however; today he was going to streak past the stone pillars which had been his barrier all week and take the red beauty out on the highway beyond.

Climbing onto the motorcycle, he reached for his helmet and called out, "I'm ready, Judge."

"So am I."

Turning quickly, McCormick watched as his friend headed towards the truck. "Where do you think you're goin'?" he demanded.

"With you," Hardcastle replied casually. "It's a beautiful day; I thought I'd get some fresh air."

Not fooled for a minute by the lame excuse, Mark sighed, "Judge, I don't need you tagging along, playin' mursemaid. You'll ruin my macho image."

"Don't worry, kid, no one'll know I'm here," Hardcastle promised. "If any ladies approach you, I'll take a big interest in the rearview mirror."

Too excited to argue what he knew would be a losing cause, McCormick slipped on his helmet and nodded, "Okay, but be careful and don't run over me."

"You be careful," Hardcastle shot back, "and don't try to do any of those damned wheelies."

Throwing the judge a grin, Mark started the engine. The motorcycle roared to life, and with heart pounding wildly, he guided the machine down the drive to freedom.

Hardcastle had instructed him to keep away from high traffic areas this first time on the road, and the order suited McCormick perfectly. There was not a car in sight on the straight

stretch of road before him and he bent low over the handlebars, carefully nudging the machine past the double nickel.

Behind him, Hardcastle pressed down on the accelerator and grinned. He didn't need to ask his young friend what he was feeling right now; it was the same heady exhilaration he himself had experienced the first time he had climbed onto his own black monster.

He continued to follow along behind, unconcerned until McCormick suddenly whipped the motorcycle onto a side road, man and machine almost scraping the asphalt as they made the turn.

Pulling the bike over to the side, Mark waited until the judge caught up with him, his eyes flashing mischievously. "How'd you like that little maneuver?"

Hardcastle threw him an angry scowl. "Do that again and the bike goes back to the dealership and you get locked in the gatehouse."

"Aw, c'mon, Judge," McCormick teased. "How many times did you used to take a corner lyin' down?"

"We're not talkin' about me!" Hardcastle snapped. "You just give that machine all the respect it deserves and you'll be okay."

"Yes, Your Honor," McCormick replied meekly and with a squeal of tires, took off, leaving a single strip of black in his wake.

Hardcastle slammed his foot on the accelerator, laying down his own dual trail of rubber on each side of McCormick's.

Forgetting the judge's earlier instructions, Mark edged towards the more populated area of Malibu, but quickly learned that traffic lights and speeding motorcycles don't mix. Stopping at the third red light in a row, he flicked on his turn signal, anxious to get back to the open stretch of highway.

Pulling up behind him, Hardcastle saw the tiny blinking light and sighed in relief. He knew he was being overly cautious with McCormick and the motorcycle, but worrying about the young man had become a habit he made no effort to break.

The light flashed green and Mark swung the bike in an arc to his left, failing to see the silver gray Olds bearing down on him from the other direction.

Hardcastle spotted the vehicle in his peripheral vision and with a sickening wrench in his gut knew it wasn't going to stop. Before his horrified eyes, the car plowed into McCormick, sending man and machine flying into the air. Hardcastle was out of the truck before Mark hit the pavement and, running across the intersection, roared at the group of people already gathering at the curb, "Somebody call an ambulance!"

Dropping to his knees beside McCormick, he unsnapped the helmet to allow McCormick to breathe, but cautious of a back or neck injury, left the protective gear on the young man's head. Trying to visually determine the extent of his injuries, the judge's stomach lurched threateningly as he stared at his young friend's legs. The left was twisted at an impossible angle, a certain indication it was broken in at least one place. The right leg was a bloody mess, the thigh bone snapped and jutting angrily through the ripped jeans.

Tearing his eyes away from the jagged wound, Hardcastle's gaze went to the white face below him and leaning close, he spoke softly, "McCormick? Mark, can you hear me?"

The eyelids fluttered and slowly opened. "Judge? What-what happened?" He tried to sit up. "Oh G--od!"

The cry of agony was torn from his lips, and leaning forward, Hardcastle pressed him gently to the asphalt. "Just lie still, son. The ambulance'll be here any second," he promised hoarsely.

McCormick gazed up at the judge, one hand rising slowly to grasp his jacket. "How-how bad is it?" he asked in a breathless, but surprisingly calm voice.

Hardcastle cleared his throat before answering bluntly, "Both your legs are broken, kid. The right one's a compound fracture; the...thigh bone's stickin' out." Digging in his pocket for his handkerchief, he gently wiped away the blood trickling from a scrape on McCormick's cheek. "You hurt anywhere else?" he asked gruffly.

"It-it's hard to tell." McCormick jerked his head with a groan as another stab of pain shot through his body.

Hardcastle clasped the young man's hand tightly. "Hang in there, kiddo. Don't you go into shock on me."

"I won't...will I?"

"No, you won't," Hardcastle returned firmly. "For once in your life, you're gonna do like I tell ya." The sound of sirens brought his head up quickly and forcing a smile, he promised, "You're gonna get help in a minute. Just try to relax."

Only then did Hardcastle notice the man kneeling beside him, his business suit slightly wrinkled and a look of horror twisting the middle-aged features. "I'm sorry," he kept repeating in a choked tone. "I didn't see him."

Hardcastle glared at the man angrily. "You didn't need to see him! The damned light was red!"

"I-I didn't see it in time."

Recognizing the faint odor tickling his nostrils,

Hardcastle exploded, "Get outta here! Get the hell away from us before I kill you with my bare hands!"

Stumbling to his feet, the man backed away, mumbling incoherently.

"Judge, don't be too hard on 'im," McCormick whispered.

"I wasn't hard enough," Hardcastle shot back angrily. "Kid, you were just struck down by a son-of-a-bitchin' drunk!"

The ambulance arrived and he started to straighten, but McCormick refused to release his hand. "No! Stay with me?" he asked piteously.

The pleading look was almost more than Hardcastle could bear, but knowing both of them would be better off if he got out of the way and let the paramedics do their work, he patted McCormick's hand and reassured, "Don't worry, I'll be right over there talking to the cops. You want me, you just yell. Okay?"

McCormick nodded, then gasped as another stabbing pain ripped away his breath.

Squeezing his hand before releasing it, Hardcastle touched the curly head. "Hang in there, Mark. You're gonna be all right."

A faint smile teased McCormick's lips. "I have to be," he murmured. "Otherwise, you'd probably kill me."

"Now yer cookin'," Hardcastle growled and standing slowly, backed away to give the paramedics room. An officer stepped beside him and with notebook in hand, began asking questions which the judge answered in a clipped voice, his eyes never leaving the young man stretched out on the pavement. He saw McCormick stiffen again in agony and started to move towards him, but a hand on his shoulder and a soft voice stopped him.

"Let them do their job, Milt. They'll take good care of him."

Hardcastle turned slowly, his eyes meeting the gentle brown ones of Lieutenant Harper.

"Johnson called me as soon as he saw you two," Harper explained his presence. "How's Mark?"

Only with Frank did Hardcastle allow the concern to show through. "It looks bad," he admitted in a rough voice. "The kid's got two broken legs, one of 'em a compound fracture. The damned thigh bone tore right through his jeans. He's in so much pain from that, he can't tell if he's hurtin' anywhere else."

Harper squeezed his shoulder. "Don't worry, he'll be all right."

"Yeah, that's the same line I used to use when I was a cop," Hardcastle retorted, suddenly angry. "You say that to the family of the victim, and ya pray to God you're not made out a liar." He whirled around to Harper. "I don't need platitudes right now! I need to get my hands around the throat of that damned drunk who ran McCormick down!"

"Milt, blowing up like this isn't going to help Mark," Harper censored in a soft tone. "You've gotta keep it together for his sake. The boy needs you."

As if to support his statement, a paramedic joined them, motioning with his head towards the ambulance. "We're ready to transport. He's asking for you, Judge. If you want, you can ride in the back to the hospital."

Hardcastle didn't bother to answer; instead, heading for the vehicle. On the way he was stopped by a uniformed officer who quickly asked, "Judge, what do you want us to do with the motorcycle?"

Hardcastle glared at the twisted piece of machinery, the once sleek red bike that he had been so excited about presenting to his young friend. It lay now by the curb, a mockery of that almost child-like happiness and, tearing his eyes away, he replied hoarsely, "I don't care what you do with the thing. Just keep it the hell outta my sight!" With that, he whirled around and climbed into the ambulance, immediately reaching for McCormick's hand.

"You're here," Mark sighed and his eyes slowly closed.

"He'll sleep now," the paramedic assured and Hardcastle relaxed, still holding the white hand gently in his own.

At the hospital he was forced to release his hold and stepping back, watched as a procession of doctors and nurses wheeled McCormick into an emergency room. The door swung shut behind them and he was left alone in the hall, suddenly a very tired old man.

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Harper found him in one of those cheerfully-colored plastic chairs found in every hospital waiting room, his broad shoulders slumped and the large hands clasped loosely between his knees.

Sinking into the chair next to him, Frank asked softly, "Any word?"

The judge shook his head. "Not since they said they were going to have to operate. That was over three hours ago," he complained in a tired voice. "You'd think they'd at least let me know how it's going."

"You know what they say -- 'no news is good news'," Harper

quoted and eyeing his friend, he leaned over to squeeze the clasped hands. "Let me get you a cup of coffee or something."

Hardcastle shook his head and with a sudden jerky move, jumped to his feet. Going to the window, he stared out, seeing not the early evening sun, but the events of the day being played out before his eyes -- the look of excitement on McCormick's face as he climbed onto the motorcycle, the way he handled the machine as he sped between the pillars and onto the highway, knowing how to coax the last ounce of maneuverability from the bike, yet still treating it with respect.

Then there was the crash. Hardcastle's stomach twisted again in a knot as he "saw" the car plow into McCormick, and relived the horror of watching his young friend being flung into the air, slamming into the asphalt several yards away. He recalled the deformed piece of metal close by, and slapping his hand angrily against the wall, growled, "I should never've bought the kid that bike. I was just tryin' to show off by gettin' him this big, fine present."

Harper was at his side, arguing softly, "You bought it because you knew Mark would be thrilled to death. You love the boy, Milt, and you'd do anything to see that look on his face."

"So I go out and buy him a death machine," Hardcastle shot back with contempt. "I used to ride bikes, Frank. I know how dangerous they can be, but like a damned fool, I go and put McCormick on one."

"This accident wasn't the motorcycle's fault any more than it was yours or Mark's," Harper pointed out. "It was one of those horrible things that happens when someone's had a little too much alcohol, then climbs in behind the wheel of a car."

The judge whirled around, blue eyes flashing with anger. "What about that drunken piece of scum?"

"His name's Philip Meyers, an accountant with one of the big CPA firms," Harper replied. "The man has a clean sheet, no priors for drunken driving or anything else. He said he's had a bad day at work, stopped off at a bar and had two martinis, then started for home. The tests indicate 0.19 percent alcohol in his bloodstream, .09 percent above the level considered safe to drive."

"But he didn't feel tipsy or anything so he thought he was okay, right?" Hardcastle guessed in a harsh voice.

The lieutenant nodded.

"That's the way they all do," the judge complained angrily. "At least in Myer's case, he's in jail where he can't hurt anyone else." Harper remained silent and he threw the lieutenant a sharp glance. "He is still in jail, isn't he?"

"I think you know the answer to that," Harper returned low. "Myers' attorney bailed him out right before I left."

"What!" Hardcastle exploded and pointed a trembling finger at the door. "There's a kid lyin' in there with his legs smashed and no tellin' what else, and that son-of-a-bitch just walked out of the police station?!"

"That's the way the system works," Harper reminded him.

"Then the system's wrong!" Hardcastle roared.

"Don't tell me! You don't like the law, then do something to change it!" Harper shot back.

The angry exchange was interrupted by a man in surgical greens who stepped into the waiting room. "Gentlemen, please. This is a hospital," he reminded quietly.

Hardcastle pivoted, hope leaping into the blue eyes as he recognized the doctor who had followed McCormick into emergency. "The kid! How is he?" he demanded in a suddenly hoarse voice.

"Barring complication, Mark is going to be fine," Doctor Lansing smiled. "From what I heard about the accident, I can only say it's a miracle. He has two cracked ribs, a sprained wrist, and multiple lacerations and contusions. As you know, both legs were broken, and it's the left one that gave us some trouble in resetting the bone and repairing torn muscle. He'll be off his feet for quite awhile, but he's young and should heal nicely, quite probably without even a permanent limp."

"When can I see him?" Hardcastle asked.

"He's in recovery. We'll be moving him to a private room in about an hour. You can see him then." Lansing reached out to squeeze the judge's shoulder. "Your son is a very lucky man."

The lieutenant stepped beside Hardcastle, watching as the doctor departed. "Why didn't you tell him Mark's not your son?"

Hardcastle shrugged. "It was an honest mistake. I didn't wanna embarrass the guy." He didn't bother to explain that in signing the forms permitting surgery, he had indicated his relationship as "father", reasoning that was easier than chasing all over the country by telephone trying to locate Sonny Daye, McCormick's biological parent.

Something told him, though, the lieutenant had already guessed that fact. Harper made no comment, however, asking instead, "You want that cup of coffee now?"

Hardcastle nodded and cleared his throat noisily, "Look, Frank, if you're stayin' here for McCormick's safe, that's fine. But if you're hangin' around to keep me company, you don't need to. I'm okay now."

"I know," Harper smiled, "but I think I'll stay just a little while longer."

"Good," Hardcastle suddenly grinned. "Let's go have that coffee, the stronger, the better."

They were back in the waiting room when the nurse entered to inform Hardcastle--"Mr. McCormick is in a private room now, Judge. If you'd like to come with me?"

He hesitated a moment, glancing at the lieutenant.

"Go on," Harper urged. "I'll wait till you come out. Tell Mark I said 'hi' and to take it easy."

Hardcastle nodded and followed the nurse into the hall. Leading him to a door at the far end of the corridor, she turned with a smile. "He's been asking for you. He seems to be pretty concerned about how you're taking this."

Hardcastle inclined his head silently and waiting until the nurse had departed, he edged the door open slowly, stepping into the softly-lit room. Nearing the bed, he expected to find McCormick asleep, but as if sensing his presence, the blue eyes flew open.

"Judge!" Reaching up a hand, McCormick asked in a worried tone, "You okay?"

"That's supposed to be my line," Hardcastle grumbled, his big hands closing around Mark's. "How ya feelin', kid?"

"Pretty good, considering," McCormick replied with a smile. "My ribs ache, but I don't even feel any pain in my legs at all. They must have me doped up good."

The strong voice and clear blue eyes didn't appear to fit a heavily-sedated man, but Hardcastle dismissed the thought. Pulling a chair close to the bed, he sank into it, complaining softly, "This is just like you, McCormick. You'll pull any kinda trick in the book to keep from havin' to do your chores."

Mark broke into a weak grin. "The doc says I'll be on crutches for at least six weeks. You gonna be as grouchy a nursemaid as you are a judge?"

"You're enough to make the Man Upstairs grouchy," Hardcastle shot back out of habit. His eyes swept over McCormick, lingering on the legs which were engulfed in snow-white casts, the left one suspended above the bed by a network of thin, silvery wires attached to railings overhead. "Uh, look, Mark..." he began in a strangely hoarse voice.

"Judge, don't do it," McCormick interrupted quickly.

"Don't do what?"

"Apologize for buying me the motorcycle." When Hardcastle started to shake his head in denial, McCormick's lips



curled slightly. "I know you, Hardcase. You probably told 'em to take that bike out and shoot it."

"Didn't have to," he grumbled. "It was already dead."

"The point is, you didn't make a mistake," McCormick argued in an earnest tone. "Judge, that motorcycle was the best present I've ever gotten in my entire life."

"Yeah, and look what it did to ya," Hardcastle flung back.

McCormick moved his head back and forth on the pillow. "The bike didn't do it; that idiot driver did. Just how drunk was he, anyway?"

"The worst kind," Hardcastle replied angrily. "The kind where the guy has only two drinks and thinks he can go right ahead and operate a vehicle without any impairment of reflexes. The damned fool said he didn't see you or the red light in time to stop. Meanwhile, you're lyin' here trussed up like a mummy, and he's outta jail a free man."

"He'll have to go to trial," McCormick pointed out.

"Yeah, and end up getting a three-year suspended sentence or maybe just a fine and a slap on the wrist."

"Looks like you shoulda stayed on the bench," McCormick teased and reaching up, squeezed the muscular arm. "Don't worry about it anymore, okay?" he pleaded softly.

"Yeah, you're right," Hardcastle mumbled. "You're gonna be fine and that's what really counts." He turned his eyes away, staring at the far wall. "When I-when I saw that car slam into you, and then you and that bike..."

His voice faded away and McCormick could feel a shudder run through the judge's body. His own stiffened with horror as he realized that what was only a blur to him was stark reality to Hardcastle, every detail of the accident no doubt burned into his memory. "Milt, it's over," he whispered. "Try to forget it."

Hardcastle's head jerked slightly. "It's not that easy, kid. Some memories never go away, no matter how much you wanna 'em to." Straightening in his chair, his voice became stronger. "Look, don't worry about me. You just concentrate on gettin' better. By the time you're outta those casts, the place is gonna look like a sanctuary for weeds."

McCormick laughed and immediately clutched his arm to his side. "Oh, don't make me do that, Judge," he complained lightly.

Hardcastle frowned and patting the young man's arm, promised, "I'll be back in a coupla minutes. I-uh-I gotta go talk to Frank."

It wasn't the lieutenant he was in search of, but Doctor

Lansing, who glanced up at his approach and smiled. "Have you seen your son?"

Hardcastle nodded once, demanding in a blunt tone, "How come his ribs are hurting and his legs aren't?"

Lines of concern creased the surgeon's forehead. "What do you mean?"

"He says he doesn't feel any pain at all in his legs," Hardcastle explained in a clipped tone. "And I've been around doped-up people enough to know this kid isn't."

"You're right," Lansing agreed in a worried tone. "The sedative should have worn off by now and Mark should be feeling aches and pains all over his body, particularly in his legs."

He started down the halls towards McCormick's room at a brisk pace, the judge close behind. "What're you tryin' to say?"

"Nothing at the moment," the doctor replied quietly. "Let's just wait and see, all right?"

McCormick's right leg was in a cast from above his knee down to the foot, his toes peeking out from the white plaster, and it was this leg Lansing began to examine as he asked softly, "How're you feeling, Mark?"

"Not bad," McCormick replied in a cautious tone.

"Are your legs giving you much pain?"

The curly head moved back and forth. "None at all, Doc. What'd you do? Give me some kinda spinal shot?" Lansing offered no answer and the blue eyes darted to the judge, something in the older man's face causing McCormick to inhale sharply. "I haven't been given any kind of painkiller, have I?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "There-there's something else wrong with my legs."

Hardcastle moved quickly to the side of the bed, laying a firm hand on McCormick's shoulder. "Now, don't go jumpin' to any conclusions, kid. The doc'll tell ya there could be a hundred explanations."

"He's right," Lansing confirmed. "Just take it easy, Mark. Relax, and let me see you move your toes."

Taking a deep breath, McCormick tried to follow the surgeon's instructions, but one look at the judge's face told him he was unsuccessful in doing so.

A small needle appeared in Lansing's hand and he ordered, "Tell me if you feel this." He pricked the top of McCormick's foot and glanced up, an eyebrow arched in inquiry.

Mark shook his head slowly and Lansing tried again, this time sticking the needle in McCormick's thigh just above the cast.

Again he was forced to give a negative response and Lansing straightened. "I want to schedule some tests," he decided and left the room quickly.

McCormick's eyes followed the doctor's departure and remained on the door in a fixed stare, his face almost as white as the pillow beneath his head. "Oh God! Oh God!" he gasped. "I'm paralyzed!"

His breathing became harsh and seeing that he was about to hyperventilate, Hardcastle grasped the lean shoulders gently. "Take it easy, kid," he ordered softly. "Don't go gettin' yourself worked up till we find out what's going on here. This-this thing is probably caused by trauma resulting from the accident. I've seen it a coupla times in the war and as a cop. It could last two or three days and then again it could be gone in an hour or so. You just gotta be patient and hang in there. I remember a doc tellin' me one time..."

The gravelly voice droned on and on, calming McCormick as no sedative could've done. Somewhere along the way he had reached up to grip Hardcastle's hand tightly, but his own gradually relaxed as the blue eyes met those of the judge, silently begging him to continue.

Hardcastle kept up a steady soliloquy, one subject slipping into another. He talked of some of the friends he had lost while a cop, the practical jokes those same officers had pulled on him, his own ways of getting revenge, and anything else that came to mind. He rambled on for over an hour in the same quiet tone, McCormick clinging to every word as if his life depended upon it.

In the middle of recounting an incident that had occurred in law school, the door swung open and Doctor Lansing approached the bed, accompanied by two interns and a stretcher. "We need to take you down for the tests now," he explained and McCormick nodded silently.

Still gripping Hardcastle's hand, Mark squeezed it and forced a smile. "I'll see ya in a little while, Judge. I wanna hear the rest of that story."

"You got it," Hardcastle grinned and releasing his hold, he turned away from the bed, only then allowing his expression of cheerfulness to be replaced by one of concern.

Stepping beside him, Lansing touched his arm. "It'll take about an hour or so. I'll let you know as soon as he's back in the room." Hardcastle remained silent and the doctor added in a whisper, "Don't worry, Judge. We're going to do everything we can to get your son back on his feet again."

Unable to speak due to the sudden lump in his throat, Hardcastle nodded and left the room, his dragging footsteps carrying him back to the waiting area.

Harper had apparently returned to the station, and alone with his thoughts, Hardcastle sank slowly into a tangerine-colored chair, resting his head against the wall. He had been through times like this before, days that had begun without a care in the world but had turned into a nightmare before they were over. One had been the day he had been forced to kill for the first time; another that horrible afternoon two Marines had appeared at his door, gently trying to ease the heartache of a lost son. These long-ago memories of horror mingled with the newest one of a young man and a bike, and with a strangled sound escaping his lips, Hardcastle slumped forward, burying his face in his hands.

He was still in that position when Harper returned and, believing him to be asleep, the lieutenant moved carefully across the room, pausing to gaze out the window.

Hardcastle jerked, then his head rose slowly, the blue eyes fixing on the far wall. "The kid's paralyzed," he mumbled in a voice totally void of emotion.

Without turning, Harper nodded. "I know. Doctor Lansing just told me. He thought I would need the information for my report. He-uh-he didn't know I had a personal interest in this, too." Leaving the window, he dropped in a chair beside the judge. "I'm not gonna tell you everything will be all right because we don't know yet," he spoke quietly, "but don't go imagining the worst, either. Lansing said it could be any one of a number of things. We'll just have to wait and see what the tests show."

"In the meantime McCormick's lyin' there scared to death," Hardcastle returned roughly. "You should've seen the kid's face. He's already bought himself a wheelchair for life."

"What-what happens if that turns out to be...true?" Harper asked in a hesitant tone. "What'll happen to Mark?"

Hardcastle threw the lieutenant a sharp look. "What the hell do you mean 'what'll happen to him'? He'll stay at Gulls-Way. I got enough money to buy 'im anything he'll need."

"We both know how Mark is," Harper shook his head slowly. "He's not going to want to be dependent upon you or anyone else."

"Who's askin' him?" Hardcastle snapped and rose to his feet. "This discussion's moot, anyway, Frank, because McCormick's not gonna remain paralyzed. If I have to, I'll get the best doctors money can buy, but that kid's gonna walk again."

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Some of the longest hours since the history of timekeeping began are those spent waiting for the results of medical tests.

Harper had dropped in for a few minutes after McCormick

was returned to the room, carefully controlling his shock at Mark's appearance. Now, however, Hardcastle was alone with the young man, and having dropped the forced conversation sometime ago, was alternating between staring out the window and pacing back and forth to peer into the corridor.

Glancing at McCormick during one such trip across the room, he pulled up short at the foot of the bed, gripping the railing tightly. "Sorry, kid. I don't mean to make ya nervous."

"It's okay," McCormick assured him quietly. "If I could do it, I'd be pacing, too."

"If you could, we wouldn't need to pace," Hardcastle growled.

Mark smiled. "Good point, Judge."

Two pair of blue eyes darted quickly to the door as it swung open and Lansing stepped into the room, a heavy metal chart tucked under one arm. He said nothing as Hardcastle moved to the head of the bed, one hand resting casually on the pillow next to McCormick's suddenly pale face.

With both now in the doctor's line of sight, he began to speak in a gentle voice, "I have the results of the tests and it's not good news nor is it bad. I don't mean to be vague or try to hide anything from you, so let me explain." His eyes met McCormick's. "According to your father, when the vehicle hit you, you were thrown several feet into the air. When you struck the pavement, you did so either on your feet or your knees, hence both legs being broken. The sudden force of the impact also jarred your lower spine, causing swelling in that area and resulting in pressure on the nerves leading to your legs. That is what's causing the paralysis."

"So after the swelling goes down, he can walk again," Hardcastle tried to sound optimistic, "or at least he can after the casts come off."

"I wish I could say you're right, but that's not necessarily so," Lansing replied in a regretful tone. "I have had cases where the swelling has disappeared, yet the patient is still paralyzed. In some instances we believe it to be psychosomatic, but in others it apparently has something to do with interruption of the neural impulses from the brain. There's no cure and really no viable treatment for the problem."

"So what's you're sayin' is we have to play a wait-and-see game," Hardcastle spoke roughly.

"I'm afraid so," Lansing nodded. "If past experience is any guide, the swelling should start going down almost immediately and be completely dissipated in about three days. After that occurs, if you still have no feeling in your legs, we can run more tests and determine where we go from there." He paused, then added softly, "Do either of you have any questions?"

McCormick had remained silent throughout the discussion and, glancing at him sharply, Hardcastle shook his head. "I don't think so for now. Thanks for everything, Doctor."

Lansing bowed his head slightly and departed, leaving behind a room almost pulsating with silence. Going to the window, Hardcastle stared out into the darkest part of the night, the blackness mirroring his troubled thoughts.

Behind him, McCormick asked in a voice surprisingly calm, "What're you thinking, Judge?"

He turned slowly, desperately searching for a response. It wouldn't do to let the kid know he was envisioning a very bleak future. "I-uh-I was wondering if you wanted me to see if I could find your dad," he answered at last.

The curly head moved back and forth on the pillow. "I don't think so." A ghost of a smile touched McCormick's lips. "Besides, the doc somehow got the impression that my dad's already here, so why bother to correct that?"

Hardcastle cleared his throat. "Now look, kid, don't go gettin' any weird ideas. Somebody had to give permission for the surgery, and it was supposed to be the next of kin. Since you didn't have anyone here, I just figured...well, you know."

There was no look of hurt on Mark's features as he replied solemnly, "I understand, Judge."

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The hours and days crept by slowly, McCormick lapsing into longer and longer stretches of silence. The pressure on vital nerves was by now almost entirely relieved, yet he still could not feel the prick of the doctor's needle. Even his mind was slowly slipping into a form of paralysis as he tried desperately to ignore questions which insisted upon being asked. Would he ever walk again? If not, what would he do? Hardcastle would insist upon taking care of him, of course, grumbling about this and that, yet never complaining about him being a burden.

The judge would consider him his responsibility, but for Hardcastle to throw away his active life out of love and guilt was something McCormick could not allow him to do. There was no alternative, though. He had some money, but not enough to support him for a lifetime in a wheelchair. One thought reared its ugly head and he jerked away from it as if suddenly confronted by a hideous monster. He didn't want to die--he had discovered that when he woke up in the hospital, and yet...did he want to continue to live as only half a man? McCormick hid his doubts from both the judge and Doctor Lansing, but unable to mask them with cheerfulness, he slipped into a silence only broken when he was directly spoken to.

This continued through seven long, weary days, a now

perpetual frown carved on Hardcastle's face, as he at last sought out the surgeon and asked bluntly, "You got a minute?"

Nodding, Lansing led him into a vacant waiting room and turned, waiting for the judge to speak.

"I don't like the way McCormick's acting," Hardcastle came straight to the point. "It's like he's got a little switch in his brain and he keeps turnin' it off."

"Yes, I've noticed," Lansing sighed. "I'd rather see a patient become angry or hysterical instead of crawling into a cocoon like Mark is doing." He paused a moment, eyeing the judge. "You're not really his father, are you?" he questioned suddenly.

Hardcastle shook his head reluctantly. "It's a long story."

"Well, it doesn't really matter,," Lansing replied in a solemn tone. "The relationship is there as well as one of very close friendship, and that's going to be an important factor in the days ahead."

"What're you sayin'?" Hardcastle demanded.

"Mark will need extensive therapy, of course, but I told him this morning I was planning to release him from the hospital today," Lansing explained. "He asked me not to."

The judge's eyes widened in shock. "Why the hell would he do that?"

"I think you probably already know the answer." Lansing wandered to the window and gazed out as Hardcastle slumped in one of the plastic chairs.

"Yeah, I guess I do," the white head moved up and down slowly. "The kid's got this stupid idea in his brain that he's gonna be a burden on me. I know him; he's too damned independent for his own good. If he comes down with a cold or gets just a little injury, he loves playin' on my sympathies, but for something like this, I'm gonna have to fight him every inch of the way."

Lansing turned from the window. "I have a possible suggestion. Mark needs to feel, and I'm not talking about just his legs. Try to make him angry, force him to release what he's bottling up inside. Don't let him accept his paralysis, at least not for awhile yet, because once he does, it'll be a fact--the boy will never walk again."

Hardcastle bowed his head, unaware of the doctor's departure and deaf to the ubiquitous intercom calling for assistance. He was still in that position when Lieutenant Harper joined him, asking what was by now an all too familiar question, "Any change, Milt?"

"Yeah, but it's not good," Hardcastle replied gruffly, and leaning back in the chair, related the conversation with Lansing. "The kid doesn't wanna come home," he added in a voice that had grown increasingly hoarse.

Frank reached out to squeeze his shoulder. "It's nothing against you, Milt; you know that."

"Yeah, yeah." Hardcastle rubbed a tired hand across his face. "The question is, do I force him to do it? This isn't the same as makin' him take out the garbage or something. If I get tough and throw my weight around, is that gonna be better for the kid or will it just make things worse?"

Harper shook his head slowly. "I can't answer that question, Milt. But we both know Mark well enough to guess what he's going through right now. He's convinced himself he's going to be a burden on you."

"That's a lotta crap if I ever heard it!" Hardcastle fired back. "The kid's my responsibility and...hell, Frank, you know damned well why I wouldn't consider him a burden."

"I know," Harper smiled softly. "But just to give you an alternative to consider, Mark is welcome to move in with us for awhile. You know how Claudia feels about him. She would love to have the opportunity to fuss over him like a mother hen."

The harsh lines cutting across the judge's forehead relaxed somewhat as he reached out to squeeze Harper's shoulder. "Thanks. I appreciate the offer, Frank, and I may take you up on it if things don't work out." His hand fell to his side as he mumbled, "I want the kid at home, though, where he belongs."

"Then start throwing your weight around," Harper suggested. "You haven't yelled at Mark since the accident, so maybe it's about time you did so. Like the doctor said, make him angry. You might hear some unpleasant things, but just ignore them."

Hardcastle nodded silently in agreement, having reason to recall those words a few minutes later as he stood at the foot of McCormick's bed and ordered, "You're gonna go home whether you like it or not. Case closed, no appeal."

"I'm not going," McCormick replied flatly. "I'm staying right here in the hospital."

"You can't," he argued. "The doc's already told me he wanted to release you today and you refused. Now, you can't keep takin' up room they need for sick people."

"And you don't think I'm sick?" McCormick demanded.

"In the head!" Hardcastle fired back. "You've gotten all these stupid notions in that thing you call a brain, but you just



might as well forget 'em. You're in my custody, you're my responsibility and that's that."

Both knew Hardcastle used that argument as a facade for his true feelings, but the dam within McCormick suddenly broke and he lashed out, "Your responsibility! Like hell! You think if you take care of me, it'll ease your guilty conscience! Well, go find absolution some place else because I'm not gonna give it to you!"

Hardcastle turned white, but his voice was firm, trembling only slightly as he retorted, "It would take more'n you to get rid of my guilt, anyway, kiddo, so you can forget about that. You're comin' home because that's where you're supposed to be."

"No!!" McCormick shouted, his voice growing louder with hysteria. "I'm not gonna be trapped in that masoleum! I've had it with prisons, Judge! I'm not going!!"

"The only place you're trapped is in your own mind!" Hardcastle roared. "I thought you had more guts than this, but you're nothing but a coward who's just layin' around feelin' sorry for himself!"

"Damn you to hell!" McCormick screamed. "You put me in prison for three years and now you've crippled me for life! You son-of-a-bitch, I hate you! Get outta here! Just get the hell away from me!"

The words hit him like tremendous blows, and his face now ashen, Hardcastle pivoted on one heel and stalked from the room, barely making it into the corridor before being forced to slump against the wall. Frank and the doctor had said to make McCormick angry, but in that fury, the truth had been revealed. He was not the only one who blamed himself for the accident, and that knowledge left him cold, strangely contradictory to the hot tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

In the room behind him McCormick was going through his own personal hell. His anger gone so quickly it left him drained, Mark stared at the door through which Hardcastle had abruptly disappeared. "Oh God, what've I done?" he gasped, a trembling hand reaching out to claw at empty air. "Judge, come back. I didn't-I didn't mean it."

His choked voice failed to carry beyond the door, and flinging the covers back, he eyed the dual casts in frustration. The look of pain on Hardcastle's face came back to haunt him, however, and pressing his palms flat against the bed, with effort he worked his body sideways until his legs were sticking out over the edge, only one thought consuming his mind. "Judge, I'm sorry!" he cried out, his voice stronger with panic. "I didn't mean what I said, I swear it! Please, I wanna-I wanna go home!"

In the hallway, Hardcastle heard the broken words and turned, pausing with his hand on the door. Was this the time?

Could they make peace with so much guilt still between them? Or would it be best for both of them if he turned away now and walked out of the kid's life?

"Judge! Please!"

Grasping the small table next to the bed, McCormick struggled frantically to pull himself up. The casts made that almost impossible, but impossible acts are often born out of desperation. His bare feet touched the floor and he clung to the metal structure, using it as an anchor, his voice harsh with emotion, "Judge, don't leave me! I need--"

The weight of his body came down suddenly on both legs and Mark gasped as knives of pain sliced through the casts, turning his left leg to fire. Staring down at them wide-eyed, the panic swept into uncontrolled joy. "Judge!! My-my legs hurt!"

Hardcastle hesitated no longer. Slamming the door open with such force, the handle banged against the wall, he charged into the room, pulling up short when he saw McCormick on his feet, swaying dizzily. "Mark!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

McCormick reached out a trembling hand, tears streaming down his face. "Judge! I can-I can feel my legs!"

Hardcastle quickly closed the distance between them, and McCormick collapsed in his arms, sobs wracking the slender body. "I'm-I'm sorry, Judge. I never blamed you for the accident. I just-I just wanted to make you mad so you-you'd go away. I couldn't be a burden on you. I couldn't!"

Hardcastle's muscular arms held the young man gently, one hand massaging his back. "It's okay, kid, everything gonna be all right now. I've heard people say a little rain must fall, but we've just weathered a downpour. It's all over now, so what do you say we go home?"

McCormick drew back slightly, Hardcastle maintaining a firm grip on his shoulders to keep him from falling. Swiping the back of his hand across his eyes, he smiled weakly. "When we get there, can I have-can I have something decent to eat?"

"Anything you want, kiddo," Hardcastle grinned.

"How about a peanut butter, salad dressing and lettuce sandwich and a dozen double stuff Oreos?"

The judge sighed. "Yeah, life's back to normal." Tilting his head back, he added in a whisper, "Thank God."