

*Back-to-Back
Supplement 1*



THERES NO
PLEA BARGAIN
IN HEAVEN

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"Rolling Thunder"

"Today Is The First Day

Of The Rest Of Your Life..."

Written By: Teri White

7 A.M.

Jail food never changed.

He moved the length of the steam table, making what generally proved to be safe choices, no matter which correctional facility he happened to be a guest of. Unfortunately, local jails like this fell toward the low end of the scale, food quality-wise.

So breakfast: Toast that looked only a little soggy, some scrambled eggs, and a mug of coffee. It all seemed so familiar that he sighed a little as he picked up the tray and looked for a place to sit in the small cafeteria.

He ended up at a corner table with Jack the Ripper and Al Capone.

Or maybe his dining companions weren't actually those two celebrities, but they could have been. Mark shoveled eggs onto the limp toast and grinned inanely at no one in particular. People tended to shy away from guys who grinned at nothing. Everytime he was locked up, Mark spent a lot of time smiling.

"You that axe murderer they brung in last night?" The Ripper asked conversationally.

"Uh, no," Mark said. "Sorry."

The Ripper nodded.

Capone didn't say anything.

Well, life was just great, wasn't it? Six months on the street and here he was again. Damn that car. Damn the cop, who might have been just a little grateful for having his life saved. Where was gratitude in the world today? Damn doing favors for friends.

From now on, Mark thought to himself, he was going to look out for Numero Uno and to hell with the rest of the world.

Something in Capone's face alerted Mark, and he flashed the grin again. Keep smiling, fool. Being careful not to scowl again, Mark quickly finished his breakfast.

As he was swallowing the last of the coffee, a guard came over to tell him that his Legal Aid attorney had appeared and was waiting to talk to him about his case.

His case. That was a joke.

Please, he thought, please. Let it be anybody but Hardcastle on the bench. Anybody but him.

8 A.M.

The elderly housekeeper glared at the table. "Is that what you call eating your breakfast?"

Hardcastle glanced up from the file he was reading and noted with mild surprise the almost untouched plate of fluffy yellow eggs, crisp bacon, and warm buns. "Sorry," he said. "Guess I'm sort of distracted."

"That file," she said. "Kept you up most of the night, too, and don't try to deny it."

He shrugged. "Just trying to see if maybe I've missed something in here. I thought the boy was going to make it this time."

"I don't know why you think you should care. He's just another one of those young punks. You've seen enough of them over the years. Should think you'd have better things on your mind now." She gathered up the breakfast dishes and went back inside the house.

Hardcastle sat still, although it was almost time to be leaving for court. About the last time he would be doing that. He opened the file again and stared at the mug shot.

"Dammit," he said aloud. "I'm not wrong. McCormick has something special." He glanced around quickly, hoping Sarah hadn't heard him talking with no one there to hear. She'd think he was getting senile.

Milton Hardcastle could not have explained, had anyone asked, why he felt this special interest in the young auto thief. The boy obviously had a real problem leaving his hands off cars that didn't belong to him. But there was something else, something that the Judge had spotted first two years ago at McCormick's trial. Over the months McCormick spent locked up, the Judge maintained a sort of long-distance watch over him.

Every few weeks he would call the warden and see how his prisoner was getting along. The reports he got were all good. Model prisoner. There were times when he worried - like when McCormick was apparently beaten by another prisoner and ended up in the infirmary. Hardcastle almost drove up to San Quentin then, but the warden assured him that the boy was okay.

So here he was: On the streets for only six months and now he was right back inside again, for the same old thing.

Hardcastle shook his head. He felt angry, but whether it was at Mark McCormick, or himself for caring, wasn't entirely clear. He took one more look at the photograph and then slapped the file closed.

Time for Judge Milton C. Hardcastle and the infamous "Skid" McCormick to

dance around again. Damn, he couldn't let this screw up his plans.

The Lone Ranger couldn't ride without a Tonto. And if Tonto couldn't keep himself in line, damnit, then somebody else would have to do it for him.

And there was nobody better for the job than Hardcase Hardcastle.

9 A. M.

Mark shook his head, almost wanting to laugh. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You have graduated from law school? Passed the bar and all that shit?"

The baby-faced lawyer drew himself up to his full height, which wasn't much. "I assure you, Mr. McCormick, that I am a fully accredited attorney."

"I'm sure you are." McCormick almost found himself hoping he would get to see this pipsqueak go up against Hardcase. That would be fun to watch.

Fun to watch?

Good Lord, was he losing his mind? After he stopped laughing at the confrontation, he'd be on his way back to Quentin on the next bus. The old goat would send him up forever this time. He only wished he could figure out why the hell Hardcastle had it in for him.

I never did anything to him, Mark thought righteously. Never stole his Cadillac. If that's what he drove. Sure, old judge like him. What else?

The lawyer gestured toward the garment bag hung over the back of the chair. "Brought your suit."

"Thanks. I'm sure Hardcastle will be very impressed." Mark picked up the suit and started for the door. "See you in court."

"Don't worry," the lawyer called after him.

This time, Mark did laugh a little.

He couldn't help it.

12 P. M.

Hardcastle had spent the morning disposing of some last minute caseload details. It was boring, but he wanted to leave everything just right. Because the McCormick case was scheduled for one o'clock, he just went down to the coffeeshop for lunch.

He was reading the damn file one more time, still trying to find the secret that seemed to be eluding him.

"Working right down to the last second, right, Milt?"

He glanced up. "I'm still drawing my salary, Frank," he said as Harper sat down. "Figure I should be earning it."

"Heard about your big case this afternoon. Billy the Kid strikes again."

Hardcastle grimaced, regretting that over a couple of late-night beers, he had told the cop about his interest in McCormick. "Well, I don't know the whole story yet," he said lamely.

"Do you know that he saved a cop's life? Pulled him out of the car just before it blew. That was the cop that put the finger on him."

Hardcastle shook his head. "Damn. That's what I mean. How many punks would do that?"

"None of the smart ones. Let's face it, Milt, your favorite boy doesn't show a whole lot of brains, the way he keeps getting caught."

"We'll see," Hardcastle said stubbornly. Then he glanced at his watch. "I better get back upstairs. You're not coming to court, are you?"

"Wish I could. I remember how much fun it was watching the two of you last time. But I've got work to do. Good luck."

Hardcastle felt as if he was going to need it.

5 P. M.

Mark sat in a corner of the lounge, watching his old friend Ripper play ping-pong with a tall, skinny black man. The dinner he'd just had - God, he hated the strange hours you had to eat your meals in jail - the meal was settled like a block of concrete in his stomach. But he knew that it wasn't the tough roast beef or lumpy potatoes that was giving him indigestion. That kind of food he was used to.

No, what was causing the pain in his gut was the conversation he'd had earlier with old Hardcase. God, what a space cadet that old man was. They were getting him off the bench just in time.

How the hell did he think, how could he imagine, that Mark McCormick would sign up in his crazy war on crime? The Lone Ranger and Tonto. It was insane.

Mark shook his head. Hardcastle made him laugh.

But it wasn't funny that the bastard was going to send him away again. And it wasn't fair. How could he get the ones responsible for killing Flip if he was locked up?

And even beyond that, Mark just didn't want to go inside for a long time. It would make him crazy.

He grinned.

Well, if he went over the edge, maybe then he'd be ready to sign up with Hardcastle and bring in the bad guys.

Hi ho, Silver.

10 P. M.

Hardcastle lowered the phone back into the cradle. Well, it had taken all evening, but now he was pretty sure that there was something to what the kid had been saying about the death of his friend, Johnson. It looked very fishy.

Despite himself, Hardcastle felt the beginnings of a smile tug at his mouth. Not that he was pleased to realize that a murder had been committed. But if it had, he might be able to turn that fact to his advantage.

Blackmail was a dirty word, yes.

But he didn't think it really applied here. After all, he wasn't trying to do something that would be bad for Mark McCormick. He was trying to help the kid out of jail, and also help him straighten out his life. Damn it, that was good. And if maybe a little gentle blackmail could help him toward that end, it would be for the best.

"Mark McCormick," he said aloud to the empty office, "I'm going to save you in spite of yourself."

Damn, he thought, I've got to stop talking to myself.

12 A. M.

The sleepy guard opened the door to Hardcastle's chambers. "Here he is, Judge, just like you asked."

Hardcastle thanked the guard and told him he could go. Then he looked at McCormick, who had already dropped into the chair, his feet swinging over the arm. "So," he said.

McCormick picked up one of the comic books and rolled it into a tube. He put the rolled magazine up to his eye and peered at Hardcastle. "You know this is crazy, don't you?"

"Thought you wanted to find the man who killed your friend."

"Oh, I do. That's the only reason I'm here."

"Well, I'm glad you decided to sign on."

"You didn't give me a whole lot of choice."

Hardcastle grinned at him. "That makes it easier to choose."

McCormick slapped the comic book against his knee. "You really serious about this? This chasing down the ones that got away?"

"Very serious, kiddo. You and me, we can do it."

"Why me?"

There was a long silence in the office, then Hardcastle shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Tell you the truth, I've been trying to figure that out for about

two days. You looked like a good prospect until you blew it by getting busted again. But I still think you'll do. Once I pound you into shape."

"That may be harder than you think," McCormick said with a smile.

"I got lots of time," Hardcastle replied. He stood. "Come on, let's go home."

"Home?" McCormick said doubtfully.

But Hardcastle just grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

After a moment, McCormick followed him. He brought the Lone Ranger comic book along.

4 A. M.

Hardcastle stood at the window and watched until the light in the Gatehouse went out again. He massaged his arm thoughtfully. The kid was tough. Played a decent game of basketball. But, God, that smart mouth.

There was a lot to be done here.

He smiled.

4:10 A. M.

Mark rolled up in the blanket.

Basketball in the middle of the frigging night. God. That old man, he was one crazy piece of work. But tough, for a man his age. So Mark decided he could hang in there for a while, anyway. See if Hardcastle meant it about getting the ones who killed Flip.

After that... well, after that he could see.

He couldn't help chuckling a little. Hardcastle was a funny one, all right.

Then Mark fell asleep.



"Something's Going On On This Train..."

Dialog Between Scorpion and Scorpio

Written By: Melinda Reynolds

Snuggling down in the cool darkness of the covers, the Black Scorpion waited patiently, claws crossed, for Intended Victim. There was a certain amount of anticipation, as the Black Scorpion had been kept bottled up for days, and was looking forward to some feisty competition. The Scorpion lifted its head, alert, as the door opened and voices reached him.

"Inna minute, kid; wanna get something outta the room."

Sensing a kindred soul, the Black Scorpion scuttled eagerly from under blanket and sheet. Looking up with bright, black eyes, he introduced himself, "Hi, there. I'm Blackheart Scorpion; you can call me Blackie. My owner told me you were a Judge, but I know a fellow Scorpio when I see one." Blackie curled his tail comfortably over his back. "So, how's it been?"

Expertly covering his surprise at the unexpected visitor, the human Scorpio leaned against the bunk-frame, arms crossed. "Oh, about the same as always. Could be worse, could be better."

"Yeah, know what you mean. Victims are gettin' few and far between." Brightening suddenly, he suggested hopefully, "Hey, want me to make things better for ya?"

"What do you mean?"

"How about I mosey on up to the upper bunk and get Alternate Victim? After all, Leos are such a pain in the ass, who'd miss 'im?"

"How do you know he's a Leo? He told me he was Cancer...with Virgo rising."

The Scorpion stared at him for a moment, then rolled onto his back, cackling with laughter, claws clicking and legs waving in the air. After a few seconds of hilarity, the Scorpion rolled back on his feet, tore a piece of sheet off, and dabbed at watering eyes. "Oh, shit, that's funny! Just like 'em not to want anyone to know what overbearing bastards they are—"

"He's not that bad - not usually..."

"Don't interrupt."

"Oh, sorry." The human Scorpio pulled back in mock deference.

"Cancer! Hah! They can fake the traits of all previous signs, but what they crave, desire, and would kill for is the power, the certainty, and the self-confidence we Scorpios have as second-nature — and which they can only guess at. Virgo rising! What a scream! Only thing funnier than that, would be if he claimed to be Pisces..."

The Scorpio wisely remained silent.

"Leos! Such accomplished liars; it's their best trait." There was a disdainful

snort, which, coming from a Black Scorpion, was a trip in itself. "Yeah he's all right. Check out the brilliant radiance, that disgustingly sunny position disguising a royal tyrant, the smell of burning rubber from constant spinning in their tracks... They know - think they know - so much. Pain in the s."

"Well, you know, we all have our faults."

The Scorpion tilted its head suspiciously. "You're sure you're Scorpion?" The tail lifted ominously, "You haven't got a lot of those sickening 'favorable influences', have you?"

"Don't worry about it," the Scorpio smiled reassuringly, "I've got all sorts of things planned for him. Make his life miserable - a living hell, even, sometimes, when I'm bored and need some amusement."

"Now yer cookin'."

The imperious voice of Alternate Victim cut through the metal door, "come on, already. I ain't waitin' out here all day!"

The Black Scorpion sighed with exaggerated tolerance, flexed his tail significantly, "I could really use the exercise, Scorpio. You would, too, if you'd been cooped up in a pickle jar for days on end."

"Yeah, I see your point..." There was a pained look from the Scorpion as he continued, "Still, like I said, he does have his uses - minimal, I admit, but..." He shrugged, and Blackie settled back, dejected at being deprived of his Alternate Victim.

"Can I go with you, then? I don't want to be put back in the pickle jar-pickled Scorpion, yuk! Tried to nail the guy myself a few times, but no dice. Love to see him get his; I was doin' just fine out in the desert before he came along." The Black Scorpion rested its chin on a claw, "You know who it is, don't cha?"

"Hmm, got a pretty good idea. No, proof, though; that is," he grinned at the thought, "Short of puttin' you on the stand."

Blackie straightened proudly, raised his right claw. "I solemnly swear to tell something approximating the truth, as I see it." There was an evil chuckle, "Blow their collective minds."

"You sound like Mr. Radiance out there." The Scorpio indicated the hallway.

The Black Scorpion gritted both claws, replied huffily, "Don't push it, Jack." He considered, concentrating on Alternate Victim, "Hell, we do have something in common after all: A Leo with a Scorpio Moon. How deadly; guess he can't be all good. So, how about it? You'll never know I'm around."

"Sure, why not?" Holding a hand down on the pillow, a very happy Scorpion crawled carefully aboard. Slipping Blackie into a shirt pocket, the Scorpio glanced down. "You okay in there?"

The Scorpion curled up snugly in a corner, "'S'al'right."

A strident voice interrupted again. "Judge! Waddaya doin' in there?! We're not gettin' any younger, here. And I tell ya, you're goin' about this all wrong... now, if you'll listen to me, I'll tell ya just how to run this scam..."

The human Scorpio retrieved the notebook that had been his original objective, and reached for the doorknob. He chuckled silently at the Black Scorpion's dark mutterings.

"Leos! Impatient, egotistical, know-it-alls. Always knowin' the score, the line-up, the kick-off... and it's baseball!"



BETWEEN THE SCENES...

"McCormick's Bar and Grill"

Lip Service

Written By: Elizabeth Tucker

"How long have you been sitting there?" Judge Milton C. Hardcastle hit the lightswitch, flooding the den with a blinding glare and revealing Mark McCormick sitting on the floor, his back against the desk.

"Not too long. I didn't know it was so dark. What time is it?" McCormick asked, shielding his eyes.

"After nine. Something wrong?"

"Nah, just lost track of time." The ex-con leaned his head back, looking up at Hardcastle. "Did you want something?"

"No. I didn't think you had mentioned going out, so I was a bit surprised when you didn't show up for dinner." Hardcastle pulled a chair up near McCormick and settled down into it. "Something's bothering you. Tell me."

"I guess it's Sonny, as usual."

"What about him?" Sonny Daye was a touchy subject where McCormick was concerned and Hardcastle knew enough to tread carefully. He still hadn't come to grips with his father's need to be free, without ties on his life. Sonny had deserted McCormick's mother on the day of the boy's fifth birthday, and hadn't been seen again till he was tracked down by McCormick on his thirtieth birthday. That had been a moment of confusion for both Hardcastle and McCormick, and had almost signalled the younger man's death when hoods had grabbed him to force Sonny to steal some incriminating tapes from the cops. Hardcastle had managed to preserve some of the kid's ideas of his father till they had returned from Atlantic City, until a night of drunken soul-bearing spilled the beans.

Thinking back on that night filled with storms, no electricity, and plenty of tequila, Hardcastle realized that McCormick hadn't been surprised when he found out that his father was ready to leave him in the hoods' hands, and certain death, rather than take a chance on going back to jail. Sonny Daye had rarely been mentioned after that, until a little more than a week ago, when the nightclub singer had shown up in the Gatehouse with a deed for his son. A deed to a bar that had seen better days, and was the private cemetery for the mob's most successful hitman.

"Nothing," McCormick said, sighing.

"Stop that! I hate it when you clam up on me like that. Don't shut me out, kid."

McCormick smiled. "Sorry. Force of habit."

"So, what is it this time about your dad?" The usual twinge of jealousy hit Hardcastle despite the fact that he knew McCormick would never share the same closeness with Sonny as he did with the Judge. Yes, blood ties were strong and Sonny would always have that, while he and his reluctant Tonto survived

with friendship, trust and respect, begun with a threat of jail and the murder of McCormick's closest friend.

"Why? What made him come out here, and give me the bar? It's like he was trying to buy me."

"He meant well, kid."

"Yeah, sure. He always 'means well', but I wind up shafted every time."

"Sonny doesn't know how to handle a son. Particularly one who's full grown and independent as hell. Give him a chance, at least he's trying." Hardcastle leaned forward, trying to see McCormick's shadowed face. "He didn't ask for you to show up in his life, McCormick, but he's doing the best he can in a difficult situation."

"Maybe I was wrong, looking for him. All I really wanted to know was why he deserted me and my mom. I still don't know why."

"Did you ask him?"

McCormick shook his head, replying with a catch in his voice. "No. I guess... I'm afraid of what he might say."

Hardcastle thought about that, and realized what was at the root of this soul-searching. "You think it was your fault, don't you?"

McCormick's eyes darted to Hardcastle's face, dark with uncertainty. "I was...a handful. It might've been too much."

"You were five years old, kid. All five-year-olds are rambunctious. If you were the reason, he wouldn't have waited five years; believe me, surviving the first three is the roughest." The usual response was absent, and he looked at McCormick intently. "You have a bad habit of thinking you're always at fault, don't you? Son, people have lots of reasons for leaving others; sometimes, it has nothing to do with family or friends - it just happens. Not even you can be that faulty."

"Thanks; was that an upside-down insult? Do you think Sonny will be back again?"

"Probably. He wants to see you; I think he honestly likes you, but doesn't know how to get past your disapproval, and resentment. Give him a chance."

"A chance to hurt me again? I've been giving him chances since he left; ...even after I found him, I gave him two more chances. How many is he supposed to get?"

"As many as it takes."

"I don't know... I think I'll stick with you. At least I know what I'm getting into." With a wry grin, McCormick got up and walked by Hardcastle's chair, trailing his hand on the back of the chair. "But I still wish my dad had been..." His voice trailed away as he headed for the kitchen, but Hardcastle caught the words, "...someone like you."

