

Choices

By: Judy Darnell

Judge Milton Hardcastle clicked off the television and tried, without much success, to find a comfortable position in his hospital bed. He didn't feel like watching John Wayne; that had just been an excuse to send McCormick home. What he really felt like doing was getting up and going home with him.

Damn. It was such a lousy time for the kid to have to be alone. Worse though, Hardcastle thought, for him to be hanging around a hospital for hours on end. Too many reminders of death and dying. Not that McCormick needed any reminders.

"Why did it have to be you, kiddo?" Hardcastle sighed, remembering the look on McCormick's face, the trembling in his voice as he sat at the bedside and returned the Judge's gun. 'I killed him. I killed a man.' Just listening to him had made Hardcastle feel like someone was ripping him apart inside. He'd sounded so lost and confused, like he still couldn't believe what he had done.

Looking over at the empty chair where McCormick had been sitting, Hardcastle wondered if there was anything more he could have said. He had tried to offer comfort as best he could. Pointed out that Sandy would be dead if Mark hadn't pulled that trigger. There hadn't been any need to mention that Weed Randall wouldn't be mourned, that the man was a homicidal killer who had gotten exactly what he deserved. It made no difference. He was a human being, and however justifiably, McCormick had killed him. It was a fact that he was going to have to learn to live with.

Hardcastle frowned, thinking over the past week; all the precipitating events that had led to the shattering climax of McCormick gunning Randall down in the parking lot of a sleazy motel. Mark had fired the fatal shot, but it wasn't right that he assume all the blame. So many 'ifs' in this situation: If Sandy hadn't lost his head and gone gunning after the man who shot Hardcastle; If Randall hadn't been able to sneak the gun into the courtroom to shoot the judge that he hated; and, even before that, If Hardcastle hadn't been so hellbent on trying to make Mark and Sandy be friends in the first place. If, if, if! Hell, they were all to blame, in a way. But how to get McCormick to accept that line of thinking. It wouldn't be easy. It might not even be possible.

He rubbed a hand over his aching chest; the scar would probably be bad, but that didn't matter. He was alive, and for that he could only thank God and an excellent surgeon. He'd never forget this birthday. So many good intentions, and they'd all gone so bad. It wasn't McCormick's fault, none of it. Going after Randall hadn't even been his idea - not to go after him with the intention of killing him - it had been Sandy's. But, as usual, McCormick was the one who wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Tired of thinking in circles, Hardcastle turned the television back on, but the images flickering across the screen couldn't dispel the one that still lingered in his mind. The puffy-eyed face hovering at his bedside. The brave attempt at a smile when he left.

He'd never seen anything look so helpless.

Damn.

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Grinning cheerfully, McCormick brought the car to a careful halt in front of the main house. It had been a long four weeks, but the hospital had finally said the Judge was ready to be discharged. And it hadn't been a moment too soon, McCormick considered, looking over at his taciturn companion. A few more days, and Hardcastle's nurses would have been ready to check into the psych ward; the Judge had probably been the most impatient patient they'd ever had.

"Home, sweet home, Hardcase." Starting to open the car door, he was halted by an iron grip on his forearm.

"McCormick," came the warning voice, "I don't know what they told you, but I coulda got home faster by walking. You were driving like you had 200 pounds of cracked eggs in the next seat; so I'm warnin' you right now, if you come runnin' over here and opening my door for me... I'm not gonna be responsible for the consequences."

"Whatsamatter, Judge? Didn't they let you have your strained oatmeal before they unlocked your cage this morning?"

"Aagggghh." Hardcastle grumbled as he climbed stiffly out of the car. "Don't mention that gray sludge. I don't ever want to see another breakfast that you hafta eat out of a bowl."

McCormick chuckled quietly, enjoying the feeling.

"It's not that funny." Hardcastle gave his friend a puzzled look as they walked toward the house. "What's with you today, anyhow? Every time I look at ya, you're grinnin' like a trained monkey waitin' to have his teeth checked."

McCormick felt the grin slip a little as he answered. "Believe it or not, Judge, I'm just glad to have you home."

"You worry too much," Hardcastle said, looking embarrassed.

"So sue me," McCormick shrugged. "Guy takes a slug in the chest, I tend to worry!"

"Yeah, okay. But it's over, and I'm gonna be fine. No reason to go on thinking about it. And no more worrying or fussing over me. That's an order."

"You're the boss, Boss."

"Damn right. And all I want now is my favorite chair and an ice cold beer, so move it."

"Are you allowed to have alcohol?" McCormick asked, his brow furrowing.

The look he received was a more than adequate answer.

"Uh...right. One cold beer. Comin' right up."

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Hardcastle pretended to watch the Johnny Carson Show as he carefully studied McCormick. He knew he should be going to bed, and he was tired, but he'd spent enough time in bed lately to last a lifetime. Besides, right now, it seemed more important to figure out what to do about the kid. McCormick hadn't mentioned Randall's death since their one talk in the hospital, but it was obviously still bothering him. Hardcastle knew a good front when he saw one, and McCormick's cheer was just that. A mock. A put-on. Well...not totally. Today's 'monkey grin' had been completely genuine. The kid really was glad to have him home. It wasn't that he was surprised; he knew McCormick cared about him. He just hadn't been expecting to see that affection so openly expressed on his face. It had caught him off guard.

He smiled slightly as McCormick slumped down further on the couch. Evidently the 'stimulating' talk show dialogue had bored him to sleep.

"Probably haven't done a lot of sleeping lately, have you, kiddo?" he muttered to himself. "Not much eating, either, from the looks of ya."

Hardcastle sighed as he looked around the semi-darkened room. The house was immaculate, exactly the opposite of what he had been prepared for. There weren't any dirty dishes laying around. No scattered newspapers. Hell, there wasn't even any

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dust. And the floor had been waxed. Either McCormick had gone on a cleaning binge, or else he was romancing someone at Dial-A-Maid. The Judge sensed uncomfortably that the only dial-a-maid at Gull's-Way was the one now snoring softly a few feet away.

It was obvious now, too, just how much weight the kid had lost. He hadn't noticed while he was in the hospital, but McCormick had always been bundled up in layers of sweaters and vests, so he couldn't have been expected to. He could certainly see it now, though, as he gazed at the somnolent figure. Despite the tucked-in shirt, the jeans fit loosely over the almost concave stomach; and if there was anything McCormick had never owned, it was a pair of loose jeans. He had often wondered how the younger man walked without tying himself into a knot. Sure wouldn't have that problem now; he'd lost at least ten pounds. Hadn't had a haircut, either. The unruly curls covered his forehead completely, drifting down into his shirt collar in the back. "I've got a sneaky feelin', kiddo, that you haven't been leaving this house very much except to come see me."

"Say wha'?" Came a sleepy mumble.

"Just sayin' that it's time to go to bed," Hardcastle said quickly, embarrassed to realize he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

"Sounds good to me," McCormick yawned, standing and stretching until Hardcastle thought he would surely dislocate a vertebrae. "Ya need any help?"

Hardcastle shook his head, irritated at the thought of being coddled, but at the same time, surprisingly touched by the concern. "I've been puttin' myself to bed since I was three, McCormick. I think I can still manage."

"Okay." McCormick turned and headed for the stairs.

"Where d'ya think you're going? The Gatehouse is thataway."

McCormick turned back and looked at the Judge's pointing finger. "Unh-unh. I'm staying in the bedroom across from yours."

Hardcastle smiled, taking in the firmly planted feet, the crossed arms and the determined expression. With his over-long hair, the kid resembled a very belligerent poodle. "I keep tellin' ya, McCormick, I'm okay. They wouldn't have let me come home if I needed round-the-clock lookin' after."

"I know that," McCormick said calmly, "So just humor me...okay? Let's just say I'll sleep better knowin' that I'm within hollerin' distance if you do need anything."

"McCormick!"

"Judge!"

"Alright, alright, but it's just because I'm too tired to argue about it. I'm not gonna need anything."

"Fine," McCormick said brightly.

"Fine." Hardcastle scowled.

"Night, Judge."

"Good night, McCormick!"

Hardcastle counted to ten as the younger man started up the staircase, mentally daring him to stop and ask if the Judge wasn't coming.

McCormick hesitated at the top of the stairs, looked back over his shoulder, but then went on without speaking.

Hardcastle snorted. Kid must've read his mind. The Judge shook his head as he began his own slow ascension to the bedroom, wondering what it would take to get McCormick back to normal. It appeared that Hardcastle wasn't the only one with a wound that still hurt; but he had a funny feeling that McCormick's was going to be a lot harder to heal.

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The Judge rubbed his eyes in amazement as he entered the kitchen. Not only was McCormick up and about without having to be blasted out of bed, he was dressed, shaved, and in the process of cooking breakfast.

Moving silently, he snuck up behind McCormick, and spoke in his ear, "Who are you, really?"

McCormick jumped, grabbing at the bowl of eggs he had nearly dropped. "Jee-sus, Judge; what're you doin'? Sneakin' up like that..."

"Who are you?" Hardcastle repeated, trying not to smile, "You're not Mark McCormick, not the one who's lived here for over two years. Oh, you look like him, and you talk like him, but you sure as hell don't act like him--"

"Cut it out, Hardcase." McCormick evidently wasn't amused.

"Unless," the Judge continued, as he laid the back of his hand against McCormick's forehead, "You're runnin' a fever; except that I can't find your forehead under all that hair."

"It's not that long," McCormick mumbled defensively, blowing upward at the vision-threatening curls. "And what makes you think I have a fever?"

"Because if you don't, I must have," Hardcastle said. "The Mark McCormick I know has to be dragged out of bed, pointed towards his morning coffee, and he couldn't scramble a proper egg if his life depended on it."

"Very funny. Ha-ha." McCormick waved a platter of crisply fried bacon under Hardcastle's nose. "Now tell me I can't cook."

"Passable," the Judge admitted, pleased but confused. "So, if you've all of a sudden developed this great talent for cooking, how come you've lost so much weight?"

"I haven't," McCormick shrugged, "Couple of pounds, maybe. No big deal."

"Yeah...whatever." Hardcastle was more confused than ever.

McCormick turned away, pouring the eggs into a pan. "Coffee's ready. I'll have the eggs done in just a minute."

"Fine." He peered over McCormick's shoulder.

"Judge! Why don't you go sit down? I can do this, really."

"You tryin' to get rid of me, McCormick?"

"No!" McCormick whipped around, fixing the Judge with a steely look. "Why would you ask me something like that?"

Hardcastle stared back, stunned at the over-reaction to his teasing question. "Hey, I was just kidding. What's the matter with you this morning? You're wound up tighter than a two-dollar watch."

McCormick slumped against the counter, hands on his hips as he looked down at his feet. "There's nothin' the matter," he said finally, looking back up at the Judge. "I was just fixing breakfast, that's all; something that doesn't come in a bowl."

Hardcastle nodded slowly, realizing that this was as much of an answer as he was going to get. Whatever it was making this crazy kid so uptight, he wasn't going to

find out by slamming questions at him.

The awkward silence was broken by the ringing of a doorbell. "What the hell?" Hardcastle grumbled, looking at his watch. "Who'd be showing up here at nine A.M.?"

"Beats me, but I'll find out." McCormick turned the burner down, "Here, you can finish these."

Hardcastle picked up the wooden spoon, frowning as he watched his friend leave the kitchen. Even his back looked tense. He couldn't still be this upset over Randall's death... could he? Even 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' had its extenuating circumstances. The kid knew that. But then, what in the hell was bothering him so?

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McCormick opened the front door, groaning inwardly as he saw who stood on the doorstep. "Sandy."

"Mark."

"So much for the amenities." McCormick leaned against the doorjamb, effectively barring entrance. "What do you want?"

"I heard that Milt was discharged yesterday."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, I came here to see him, Mark. Not to play door tag with you."

"Oh, did you really?" McCormick asked sarcastically. "Well, gee, that's just so nice of you, Sandy, to take time out from your busy schedule like this." His eyes and tone grew cold. "The guy was only in the hospital for four weeks, and you never came by to see him once. But, hey, nine o'clock in the morning, his first full day home - wouldn't be complete without a visit from you, right? Just come on in. We'll have a real family reunion."

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm, Mark."

"Listen, man, I'll tell you where you can shove your 'appreciation'..."

"McCormick! Who's at the door!?" Came the booming voice from the kitchen.

McCormick gritted his teeth and stood back, jerking his head in indication for Sandy Knight to come inside.

"Appreciate the hospitality," Knight said coldly. "I guess it would be asking too much to speak to Milt alone."

"I wouldn't dream of buttin' in." Ice would have been warm compared to McCormick's manner. "I'll tell you one thing, though. You say anything to upset that man, and I'll take it out of your hide."

Approaching footsteps silenced the two men as Hardcastle came into the room. "Who was at...Oh...Sandy."

"I'll leave you two to talk," McCormick said, turning abruptly.

"Hey, that's not necessary," Hardcastle said. "C'mon, breakfast is ready."

"That's okay, Judge." McCormick locked his eyes with Knight's once more before he left. "I seem to have lost my appetite."

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Hardcastle drank his coffee in silence as he looked at the young blond policeman sitting stiffly at the table, his own coffee growing cold. It had been more than twenty years since a dying police sergeant had asked his then partner to '...help look after Sandy'. He had honored the request and never regretted it, being pleased

to see Knight follow in his father's footsteps. The kid was handsome, polite, and likable...but that was as far as it went. Whatever spark was needed to bind people together in a close, caring relationship had never been there between the two of them. Although, Hardcastle realized a bit belatedly, he had sometimes tried to force it. But, they were friends, and if Sandy had ever needed more than that, a father-figure to turn to, he had given no indication. Self-sufficient, level-headed, and unflappable, nearly the perfect cop - until he went berserk in reaction to Hardcastle's being shot.

The Judge cleared his throat, wanting to hear what Knight had to say. The mutual inquiries as to health had been asked and answered. Now he waited.

"I couldn't face you," Knight blurted out. "What with all that was going on... The investigation... I know that's no excuse and I'm not proud of it...but there it is." He finished lamely, glancing away.

Seeing the tight face, and the white fingers gripping the coffee mug, Hardcastle tried to ease the tension. "Relax, Sandy. I'm not gonna start yellin', if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that, Milt. I almost wish you would."

"Some things," Hardcastle spoke slowly, considering his words carefully before saying them aloud, "You feel better about when you yell. Gets it outta your system. This isn't one of 'em. You did wrong, Sandy. You went against everything I ever tried to teach you."

"I couldn't think straight." Knight shook his head, obviously caught up in the memory. "I snapped, Milt. Pure and simple."

"Yeah, you snapped. But there was nothing pure or simple about it. You nearly got yourself killed. You coulda got McCormick killed. And how was any of that supposed to help me?"

"I don't know! I told you, I couldn't think; I just acted. I had to do something! Why can't anyone try to understand that?"

"Because it was irrational, Sandy. Can't you see that yet? You're a police officer, trained not to be irrational; the law is the law! I can understand your anger when I got shot, but don't ask me to condone what you did."

"I thought he'd killed you!"

"And what if he had? Was shooting him down in cold blood gonna bring me back!? Are you saying police officers are justified in personal vendettas? No one has that right." Hardcastle took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. "No eye for an eye, Sandy. No vigilante justice. I never taught you that."

"No," Knight sighed heavily. "No, you never did. Guess I just didn't measure up in the long run, did I? That's why you sent your gun out to McCormick...and not to me."

"I had my reasons for that," Hardcastle said quietly, "I can't expect you to understand 'em."

"I'd like to. I'd like to know why you thought he was better for the job than me!"

"I thought... I felt sure you'd know what to do, to follow the rules, even under personal stress. But McCormick... I wasn't sure about, wasn't sure if what I'd drummed into his thick skull had taken root, if he'd chose the right path. And if he chose wrong, then I figured you'd be there to stop him. It never occurred to me that it would be the other way around."

There was a short silence, then Knight looked up with a bitter smile, "No. I guess not." He started to add something else, but then shook his head, seeming to

realize that some things were better left unsaid.

"What?" Hardcastle asked curiously.

"Doesn't matter, Milt; it's too late to change anything." He looked around the warm, comfortable kitchen, eyes falling on McCormick's untouched breakfast. "Mark really hates me, doesn't he?"

"I don't know." Hardcastle replied honestly. "Whatever he feels, that's between you and him."

"He hates me. First, because of what I did, what I forced him to do. Then, because I didn't come to see you in the hospital."

"Does that bother you? If he hates you?"

"Not really."

"I didn't think so." Hardcastle reluctantly faced the reality he had suspected for a long while. "You've never liked McCormick, have you?"

"I don't like him or dislike him. We just never had anything in common."

"Except me."

"Except you." Knight stared levelly at the Judge. "None of that matters anymore, though; so you can tell Mark to pull in his fangs. I had to come by today, Milt. I couldn't leave without telling you good-bye."

"Good-bye? What are you talking about?"

"It's better to resign than be fired... so that's what I've done. I'm moving to San Diego. Got a job on a local TV station. Some people just shouldn't be cops, Milt. Guess I'm one of them."

"I'm sorry, Sandy. Sorry things turned out this way."

"Yeah, me too."

Sandy Knight stood, the strain of the meeting evident on his face. "I need to be going. Don't get up. I'd...rather you didn't follow me out."

"Take care, Sandy." Hardcastle wished that he could say more, knowing that he couldn't.

"I will. You do the same. Good-bye, Milt."

Hardcastle sat, listening to the departing footsteps, and, finally, the sound of the front door closing. He knew, deep inside, that he would never see Sandy Knight again.

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McCormick clipped the hedge viciously, pretending that it was Sandy Knight's perfectly groomed hair. He straightened, lips tightening as he saw Sandy coming out of the house alone, and heading towards his car.

"Leaving so soon?" He hadn't been able to resist, but he regretted the words before they were even out of his mouth. He cursed himself, as Knight paused, then headed in his direction. Why couldn't he have kept his mouth shut for ten seconds? He didn't want to talk with Knight; not now, not ever.

"Okay, Mark; let's hear it. I know you're just dying to tear into me, so go ahead. I can take anything you have to say."

"Drop the martyr act, Sandy. It doesn't suit you. Besides, I got nothin' to say to you. I never did."

"Fine." Knight said dismissively, beginning to walk off.

McCormick frowned, throwing down the hedge clippers. "Why, Sandy? Why did you wait until now?"

"To see Milt, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"I already explained that to him, and I don't feel the need to explain it to you. You wouldn't understand, anyway."

"You got that right, Ace. No way I'll ever understand people like you."

"Oh, and I'm supposed to really care about that, right?"

"No, not a bit. No reason you should give a happy damn what I think of you."

"Well, at least we agree on something."

"Yeah. Ironic, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

McCormick let his gaze travel from Knight's head to his feet, taking in the carefully styled hair, the well-tailored suit, and the soft leather slip-ons. "What I mean is you and me, Sandy. We tried to play it polite for the Judge's sake, but that's over, and we both know it. I've always known what you thought of me. And I think you always knew what I thought of you."

"Yeah, alright. You want it out in the open, fine. Look, you said it yourself, back before Milt got shot, you and me, we're from different planets. But you can goddamn lay off the Saint Mark bit, making me out as the villain that forced you to commit this 'terrible' crime."

"Watch it, Sandy," McCormick warned.

"Oh, come off it, Mark. You don't know what you would have done if the circumstances had been different. Maybe you wouldn't have shot Randall. Then again, maybe you would. The point is..." He jabbed McCormick in the chest with his finger, "You came out of this being the 'good guy'. You did what I was gonna do... and yet to everyone else, you're the hero. You want to talk irony, my friend, that's irony."

"You're a self-centered bastard, Sandy. Man!" McCormick stared at the other man in disbelief. "You still can't see any difference in what I had to do, and what you wanted to do."

"Sure. What you had to do; you killed a man to save the life of someone you can't stand. Sure you did."

"What are you sayin'?"

"You know exactly what I'm saying. You wouldn't have shot Randall to save me; you did it to avenge Hardcastle. And now, you're basking in the glory, while I play the goat."

"Glory?" McCormick asked incredulously. "You're crazy, you know that? You're a goddamn looney tune."

"Okay, hero. Whatever you say." Knight chuckled mirthlessly. "Can't argue with everybody's favorite Robin Hood, now can I?"

"I think you'd better be going, Sandy."

"Oh, I'm going, all right. Milt can tell you all about it. But you don't fool me, Mark. I just want you to know that. You're just as glad as I am that Weed Randall is dead."

McCormick stared at the retreating back, unclenching the fist that he had been

so tempted to use. Sandy was wrong. He was. He had to be.

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Hardcastle grimaced as he pushed himself up and out of bed. Getting thirsty in the middle of the night was a pain in the butt for a man still recovering from major surgery. Especially when he didn't want water, but orange juice. And the nearest juice was all the way downstairs.

He considered yelling for McCormick, but quickly decided against it. Kid would probably think something was wrong, and break his neck running across the hall. "Three o'clock," he muttered, looking at the clock in disgust. "Take dynamite under his mattress to wake McCormick at this hour. Damn kid oughtta be out in the Gatehouse anyway. Told him I didn't need lookin' after."

Pulling on his robe, Hardcastle walked out into the hallway, his eyes drawn to the closed door of the guestroom that McCormick had claimed as his own while the judge recuperated. Dammit, but the kid was acting strange, and Hardcastle didn't know what to make of his behavior. There had evidently been some sort of scene between him and Sandy, but McCormick wasn't talking. What he was doing was working. . and hard. Without even being told. Hardcastle didn't like it.

He went down the stairs slowly, his thoughts still on McCormick's odd behavior, till a soft noise brought him to a stop. Peering through the darkness, he saw a dim crack of light beneath the door of the den and realized what he was hearing was the television. He slipped into the room quietly, frowning at the sight that greeted him. "McCormick?"

"Judge? Hey, I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Nah." Hardcastle eased himself into his favorite chair. "Just got up for some juice and heard the TV going. Figured you'd fallen asleep on the couch."

"Uh-unh. Wasn't sleepy. Just watchin' an old movie."

Hardcastle looked long and hard at the younger man, curled up in a corner of the long couch, his sock clad feet tucked underneath him, yoga style. The kid was so tired and sleepy that his eyes looked bruised...yet, he wasn't sleeping. Noticing the can nestled in McCormick's lap, he frowned again.

"Drinkin' at three in the morning...all by yourself...that's not a good habit to get into, ya know?"

"I know," McCormick said with a small smile. "Don't worry, Hardcase. I'm not gonna make a habit of it. Just had some stuff to think about."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just...stuff. I don't really want to talk about it, Judge."

"Mark."

McCormick sighed loudly, leaning forward and setting the beer can on the floor. "It's nothin' important," he mumbled.

"C'mon, Mark, out with it." Hardcastle almost smiled, despite the seriousness of the moment. He knew it drove the kid crazy when he called him by his given name. It always meant that he was either going to kill him with kindness...or else just kill him, period.

Picking up the television's remote control, the Judge turned the sound off, leaving the picture so they wouldn't be sitting in total darkness. He didn't want to turn on the lights, sensing that the brightness and clarity would kill off any chance of getting McCormick to open up about what was bothering him. There was something safe and cozy about sitting in an almost dark room. Sort of like being in a

protective cocoon before going out and facing the world.

"Something Sandy said," McCormick finally answered in a low tone of voice.

"What did he say? Tell me."

"That I'm just fooling myself. That...I killed Randall to get revenge for you."

"Sandy's wrong."

"Is he?" McCormick asked bitterly. "I thought so...but now I'm not so sure."

"Well, I am. You're no killer, McCormick."

"The man is dead, Judge."

"I know what I mean, Mark." Hardcastle leaned forward, forcing McCormick to look at him. "We can't always control the circumstances we find ourselves in. You, of all people, should know that. You were put in a bad position, and you had to make a split-second decision. Weed Randall, in a way, killed himself. He knew what would happen when he pointed that gun at Sandy and started to pull the trigger. He knew you had my .44 aimed right at him. He killed himself. You were just the instrument he used to do it with."

"I never meant to kill him."

"I know you didn't. That's the difference between you and Sandy. And that's why Sandy's wrong in what he said. Let it go, Mark. You'll never be able to forget it, not completely, but you've got to put it behind you. There's nothing to be gained by dwelling on it."

McCormick sat very still, seemingly focussed inward as he absorbed Hardcastle's words. Finally he nodded, a quick, jerky movement that seemed to signal agreement.

"I'm glad Sandy's goin' away," he said quietly.

"Coulda fooled me. When I told you earlier today - about Sandy moving to San Diego, I mean - you just nodded and went about your business. But...guess you were just upset about what he'd said, right?"

"Yeah." Again the small smile.

"So, let's hear the rest of it." Hardcastle wasn't ordering, but asking, the smile causing something to tighten painfully in his chest. It was too familiar. Too reminiscent of the one he had seen in his hospital room. He wasn't, had never been, a sentimental man, but there was something about that smile that could break his heart.

"What do you mean? What 'rest of it'?"

"Hey, kiddo... this is me, remember? I'd have had to be blind not to notice that you haven't been yourself since I've come home. You've been little Mr. Perfect. Cleaning, cooking, the whole schmeil. It's just not you, ya know? So what's the problem?"

"Where do you get that it's a problem, Hardcase? I'm just doin' the stuff that you've always yelled at me to do...without you havin' to yell at me to do it - no middle man."

"I don't yell, McCormick. I instruct."

"Oh, is that what you call it?"

"Yes, and don't change the subject. We were talking about you, and the way you've been acting."

"Judge, you really oughtta be in bed. Not stayin' awake all hours worrin' about me!"

Hardcastle leaned back in the chair wearily. Damn, but he was tired. "I'm not."

worried, McCormick. I'm curious. There's a difference. I'm not up to playin' twenty questions, though, you're right about that. I'm sleepy, I'm still thirsty, and my incision itches like a sonofabitch. I wanna know what's goin' on with you...but I'm not going to waste my energy trying to force you to tell me."

"Aww, Christ..."

The words were spoken so quietly, that Hardcastle just barely made them out. "Whatsamatter, kid?"

"I've screwed it up again. Everytime I try to-- It backfires. Every time!"

"What the hell are you talkin about? What 'backfires'?"

McCormick suddenly jumped to his feet, "I'll go get that juice you came down for!"

Hardcastle grabbed the fleeing figure by the wrist, his words slow and deliberate, "I-can-get-my-own-juice-McCormick. Sit down. Talk to me."

"Yeah. Okay." McCormick ducked his head, chewing on his lower lip as he seemed to consider how much he wanted to say. "Give me a minute. Lemme go get the juice, then we'll talk."

"Hurry up." Hardcastle released his grip. He listened carefully as McCormick left the room, was reassured by the familiar slamming and banging sounds in the kitchen. The kid had an inborn talent for making a mess. Who else could turn getting a glass of OJ into a major project?

"McCORMICK! Dyin' of thirst in my own den is not how I want to go!"

"One cold orange juice, here ya go." McCormick slid into the room, barely avoiding losing his balance on the highly polished wood floor.

"Watch it..." Hardcastle rescued his glass in the nick of time. "You're gonna bust your butt tryin' to walk around in socks. Floor's got so much wax on it, you need suction cups on the bottom of your feet just to get around."

"Yeah. Guess I got a little carried away when I was cleaning up."

He stepped carefully to the couch and resumed his former posture, propping his elbows on his knees, cupping his chin in both hands.

"Okay, Buddha, you ready to tell me what's been goin' on in that warped little mind of yours?"

"I don't know how to put it into words, exactly." McCormick looked at the Judge with a pleading expression. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"I promise." Hardcastle sipped at his juice, curious, but knowing not to push. The kid would explain as the words came to him.

"You know...how my father walked out on us when I was only five. And...like any little kid...I kept wondering if it was somehow my fault. If maybe I'd done something bad...ya know...that caused him to leave..."

Hardcastle nodded, encouraging his friend to go on.

"And then years later...I met Flip Johnson. He helped me out, a lot. He was such a good friend. I really cared about him... But I messed up, got myself in trouble. Then when it was over, and everything was startin' to go right again...Flip got killed. I...thought I was gonna be alone again."

"But I stepped into the picture," Hardcastle said, remembering that never to be forgotten day in his courtroom.

"Did you ever!" McCormick chuckled at the same memory.

"Go on," Hardcastle said, seeing, even in the dim light, that McCormick's face

^{was} becoming flushed, that the next words were going to be the hard ones.

"So...without meaning to...I started letting myself care again, about you. You weren't my father...not biologically, but...you know." He shrugged, staring fixedly at the floor.

"Yeah, kid, I know." Hardcastle smiled slightly. He didn't need to hear the words; he could read the the thoughts loud and clear.

"But then," McCormick went on, "You got shot, and I...killed Weed Randall. I was so damned scared you were gonna die. And...this is gonna sound crazy, but...it was like I could see a pattern to it all. I care about somebody, but then I do something bad...and I get punished...by losin' the somebody I care about. They either leave, or they die." He sighed, shaking his head. "I know this probably isn't making a lot of sense."

"I didn't die, kid," Hardcastle said gently, "And I'm sure as hell not gonna leave."

"I know. But while it was all happening - while you were in the hospital - sometimes I'd just get so scared. And I kept thinkin', just like I did for the longest time after my father left... Maybe if I'm good...if I'm real good...he'll come home. He won't leave me. He won't...die."

"I'm not gonna die," Hardcastle spoke in a soothing tone. "Not anytime soon, anyway. And your bein' 'good' has nothing to do with keepin' me around."

"I know." McCormick raised his eyes to Hardcastle's. "But it's like I know it up here in my head, but I can't feel it in here." He placed one hand on his chest, pausing before going on. "It's like...this part of me is where that five year old kid still lives. And he just can't face this stuff." He looked down at the floor again, adding softly, "Sounds silly, but...it makes my heart hurt."

"Doesn't sound silly," Hardcastle said gruffly, clearing his throat. "Just sounds like a lot of stuff that you needed to say out loud so you can start gettin' it straightened out in your mind. Not good to keep stuff all bottled up." He looked at McCormick, for once not bothering to disguise his fond expression. "You feel better, don't cha? Gettin' all that out in the open?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"And you'll be able to get a grip on them now? Go back to bein' the Mark McCormick I've come to know so well?"

McCormick broke into a genuine smile. "Ya missed him, huh?"

"Maybe," Hardcastle shrugged. "Don't forget, kiddo," he added, speaking with a rare candor, "I might not act like it a lot of the time, but you don't have a monopoly on feelings. I care about you, too."

"Yeah. Thanks, Hardcase."

Hardcastle stood, tightening the belt of his robe. He felt, he realized, better than he had in weeks. Giving in to a sudden impulse, he reached over and ran a hand briskly through McCormick's riotous curls.

McCormick looked up at him curiously.

Hardcastle smiled. The kid looked like a five year old sometimes. And right now, what he looked like was a five year old girl!

"Ya know that Mark McCormick I was talkin' about? The one I know so well?"

"Yeah?"

"See that he gets a haircut tomorrow. Or I'll cut it myself with the hedge clippers!"

McCormick's laughter followed him as he turned and left the room.

§§§

The following morning found Hardcastle checking on McCormick before he went downstairs. The door had been left open and, Hardcastle wasn't too surprised to discover, McCormick had reverted to form and was still sound asleep. His eyes travelled across the room, taking in the sight. An open jar of peanut butter sitting on the nightstand. A trail of clothes, making a path that ended at the bed. The quilt-covered lump sprawled obliviously in its center. The place was a mess, the kid had overslept, and it all seemed so blessedly normal after a month of sheer hell that the Judge couldn't keep from grinning.

Leaving the lump undisturbed for the moment, Hardcastle went down to the kitchen, giving a tremendous yawn as he entered. Playing 'true confessions' in the middle of the night might be good for the soul, but it sure as hell made it rough getting up the next morning. "So what am I gonna do with you, kid?" he mumbled as he pattered around the kitchen, pouring coffee and making toast. "From perfect slob...to Mister Perfect...back to perfect slob. Somebody oughtta explain to you about finding the middle ground; I don't even think you know what it means."

"Don't know what what means?" Came the sleepy voice, "You talkin' to yourself these days, Hardcase, or am I interruptin' a meaningful conversation between you and your toast?"

Hardcastle managed, with some difficulty, to scowl at the dishevelled figure that stood grinning in the doorway. "Don't sneak up on me like that, McCormick! You overslept, as usual. And what are you doin' walkin' around barefoot? You're gonna catch pneumonia."

McCormick yawned, rubbing a bare foot against his pajama-clad knee as he tried to stretch himself awake. "Kitchen floor's slippery, too, Judge. Wouldn't want me bustin' my butt by walking around in my socks, now would we?"

"No, McCormick, we wouldn't want that. Which is why God, in His infinite wisdom, invented shoes!"

"Oh."

Hardcastle chuckled, enjoying a McCormick that was as yet too sleepy to come back with a smart-aleck remark.

"Look alive, kiddo," he said, turning McCormick by the shoulders, and pointing him in the direction of the coffee pot. "Go-into-kitchen. Drink-coffee. Wake-up. I'll see ya in the dining room."

Hardcastle pushed his way through the door, carefully balancing his own coffee and a plate piled with toast. He stopped suddenly, his gaze falling on the table and the object that sat, obviously on display, in its center.

"What the hell?" He asked incredulously, "Where did this--? How did--? McCORMICK!" He sat down, picking the model car up gently to have a closer look. Carved from wood, and almost a foot long, it was a nearly perfect copy of the classic and beloved corvette that sat in his garage.

"Ya like it?" McCormick asked as he slipped into a chair.

"It's beautiful." He turned the model to admire it from another angle. "Where on earth did you find something like this?"

"Didn't find it... I made it."

"You what?"

McCormick shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "It's no big deal. I went to vocational school, remember? Hell of a lot of woodshop in vocational school. So...before Sandy came in with his great idea about what to get you for your birthday... I had already started on this. After... I mean, while you were in the hospital...I figured I'd go

ahead and finish it. I know it's late, but...Happy Birthday, Judge."

Hardcastle didn't know what to say. The replica was handsome, and finely detailed; the hours of loving labor were very evident. 'Thank you' was such a damned inadequate phrase sometimes. He said it anyway, determined that the threatening moisture behind his eyelids not go any further.

"You're welcome," McCormick answered softly, his expression mirroring the Judge's. "And now," he said, pushing back his chair and smiling mischievously, "I'm gonna really make your day. I'm gonna call and make an appointment for a haircut."

"Appointment?" Hardcastle growled, regaining his composure, "What kind of barber are you going to? Just walk in and tell him to cut it."

"That's your barber, Hardcase; I don't wanna look like the victim of an Indian attack. I go to a stylist, and he's usually well booked up."

"Stylist!?" Hardcastle snorted. "Let me guess. His name is Mister Bruce, and thinks all those curls of yours are just 'devine'."

"Close," McCormick admitted, preparing for a swift departure. "He does think my hair is - how did he put it? 'Perfectly heavenly'."

"Nauseating."

"But his name isn't Mister Bruce."

"Bet it's close."

"Could be." McCormick backed through the door, grinning like an idiot. "It's 'Mister Milton'."

Hardcastle bellowed his protests, but to no avail; the kid had timed his exit perfectly. He shook his head, laughing quietly, as he ran a hand over the satiny smooth surface of his belated birthday present. The kid was totally happy this morning; just as he'd been totally miserable the night before. Nope, finding the middle ground just wasn't where it was at as far as McCormick was concerned. Never had been, and probably never would be in the future. It was a dangerous way to live, but God, it sure did keep things from ever getting dull. Try to guide him? Sure. But try to change him? Not for all the money in the world.

Hardcastle stood and stretched, looking out the window as sunlight finally broke through the overcast morning sky. Happy birthday? Definitely. It was gonna be a great year.



IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WAY
I DRIVE, STAY OFF THE SIDEWALK

I CAN CURE TAILGATING

choices