


BACK-TO-BACK

* *Special* *

* *Issue* *



Christmas at

**GULL'S -
WAY**



DJP

Christmas At Gull's-Way

CONTENTS



CONTENTS 1

CHRISTMAS PAST:

- 1. Remembering - Part 1 (S. Hartwick) 2
- 2. Remembering - Part 2 (S. Hartwick) 3
- 3. It Was The Night Before Xmas At Gull's-Way;
 Meanwhile, All Through The Big House. . . (J.
 Darnell) 4
- 4. 'Tis The Season (M. Reynolds) 11
- 5. The Descent of Xmas Past (C. Shannon) . . . 16
- 6. The 12 Trials of Xmas (M. Reynolds) . . . 20

CHRISTMAS PRESENT:

- 7. Yesterday's Snowflakes (R. Warner) 22
- 8. Early One Xmas Morning (S. Sipe) 27
- 9. T'Was The Night Before Xmas (M. Frank) . . . 37
- 10. A Dickens of a Christmas (A. Leonhart) . . . 43

CHRISTMAS YET-TO-COME:

- 11. Let Nothing You Dismay (S. Hanson) 52
- 12. I'll Be Home For Christmas (T. White) 59
- 13. A Boy & His Dog (VJ Wynder) 71
- 14. A Family Christmas (L. Tucker) 75
- 15. A Not-So-Silent Night (D. Fisher) 89

REPRINTED 12/2001 with Permission
of Editor Melinda Reynolds
by Intertwined Press
PO Box 49
Savoy, IL 61874

© Copyright 1987. All rights revert back to authors. "Hardcastle & McCormick" is a Stephen J. Cannell Production.

Special thanks to Sue Hayden for typing pgs. 4, 11, 16, 22, 27, 37, 43, 52, "I'll Be Home For Xmas", 71, "A Family Christmas", and 89 .

First Printing: 8/29/87 # 75 of 100

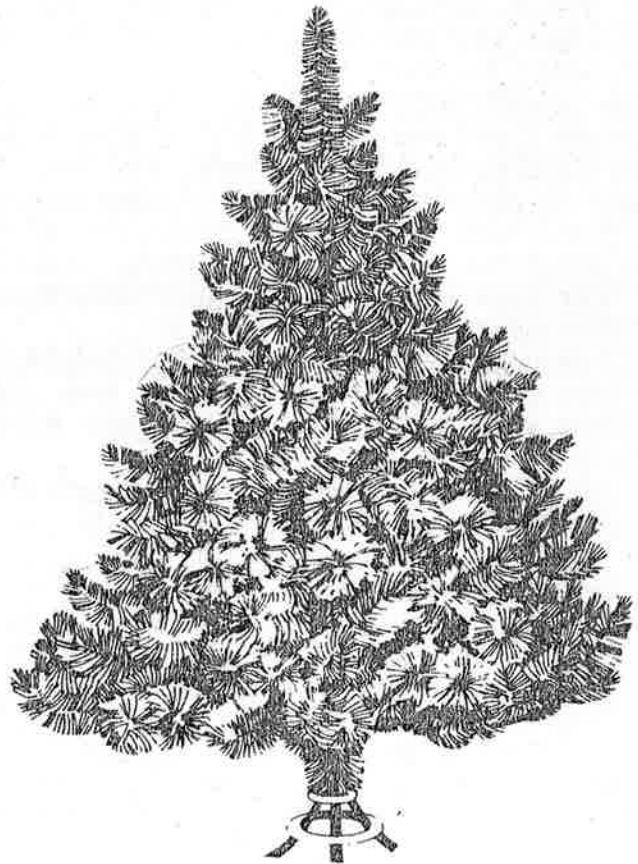


Christmas

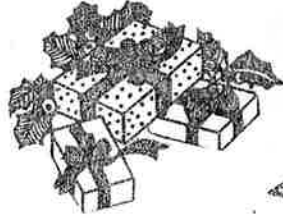
Yet

To

Come...



Let Nothing



You Dismay



By: Sandra Hanson

The Little Rock airport was a crush of humanity. It was one week before Christmas, and less than jolly holiday travellers were making their way through ticket lines, terminals and baggage claims. Here and there small islands of laughter could be found as long lost family members met in airline waiting rooms. The general air, however, was one of rush and impatience.

One contradiction to the crush, however, came in the form of two men. Milton Hardcastle, retired judge and expert troublemaker, marched along at an aggressive gait that challenged the Concorde itself not to get out of his way. What mere passenger wouldn't also move aside? The longer legs of his companion, Mark McCormick, easily kept up. The two were carrying on an amiable, if animated, argument, totally oblivious to the crowds around them.

The two men were on the last leg of a journey that had started in Los Angeles, California. To be precise, it had started three months before with the death of Molly Jones. At the age of 106 no one had been surprised by her death, but many grieved, especially Hardcastle. Even when he had been a child she had been "old" Aunt Molly. A tough battle-ax -- loving and unflappable; she had been a guiding force in his youth. The funeral was long over now and the time had come to settle her estate. Having no direct descendants, her will stated that it was to be divided equally among all her living relatives. "Dividing the spoils," Mark had quipped, but an angry look from the Judge had warned him away from such jokes.

It was May Hardcastle who had the brainstorm of combining the task with a Christmas reunion.

The Judge hadn't planned on attending. He could only take so much of his relatives, and the idea of all of them together was a little frightening.

McCormick, on the other hand, had been delighted. He went to work on Hardcastle, extolling the virtues of family memories, sentiment and Christmas.

"Just think of it, your whole family together at one time . . ." (It was at this point the Judge started turning white.)

"Aunt Zora will be there, Aunt May, Miss Arkansas, and maybe even Gerald . . ."

"Oh wonderful."

"I thought you'd be glad to see Gerald."

"That was before I got the bill from that store."

"That wasn't his fault. He just followed you in, and he did keep you from getting shot."

"The bullet hit a water pipe instead and flooded the basement."

"You could show me all the places you used to go skinny dipping . . . I hear your aunts have been baking for weeks . . ." And so on until the Judge had finally let himself get caught up in the spirit of the event.

Mark was looking forward to this meeting of the Hardcastle Clan. He liked Gerald, and had grown genuinely fond of his "adopted" aunts during their eventful visit the year before. One thing he had learned about the Hardcastle family; they were all originals, none alike, and none like anyone else he had ever met.

But he had a second reason for the trip as well. As soon as they were notified of the will, he had begun scheming. Molly Jones' house was the same one Milton Hardcastle had grown up in. A few months earlier Gerald had let drop a hint of

treasure in the attic of that old house, and McCormick meant to be the first to get his hands on it. At the same time he was using friendly persuasion on the Judge, he was using a combination of bribery and blackmail on Gerald to learn the whereabouts of a lost and forgotten box.

Hardcastle's cousin Wilbur had arranged a rental car for them at the airport. Wilbur was the Judge's age, and the two had been inseparable as children. The years had fallen away over the telephone, bringing the two close again. Hardcastle had taken the wheel of the bright red Bronco as McCormick stowed the suitcases and bags of presents in the back. It was a two-hour ride to Clarence, most of it spent in silence. The two men were tired, and content in each other's company.

The Bronco pulled up to a curb and stopped. McCormick opened his eyes, then sat up in surprise. They were outside an office building instead of a farmhouse. He turned curiously to Hardcastle as the man climbed out.

"Thought you were asleep. I told Aunt Zora I'd pick her up. She's having lunch with an old flame."

According to the sign outside the door, 'Arthur Wharton, Esq.', had his office on the second floor.

On the way into the building McCormick stepped aside and bowed in exaggerated deference as Santa Claus passed through the opened door. He was typically dressed in red suit, black boots, white beard and wig, and round, wire-frame spectacles. Brushing past, apparently lost in his own thoughts, he didn't appear to notice the two men he'd almost ran over. McCormick shrugged it off and followed Hardcastle to a staircase leading to the second floor.

Zora Hardcastle and Arthur Wharton were both in his office. Zora wasn't much changed from when they saw her last. She was still slightly chubby and white-haired. At the moment, she was staring at them in surprise and dismay. Arthur Wharton had been a distinguished, elderly gentleman, but he wasn't looking very healthy now. In fact, he was dead, slumped over his desk with a puddle of blood marring its surface. The gun which had obviously killed him was in Zora's hand.

"Oh, my, this does look bad, doesn't it?"

|| § ||

While the coroner took Arthur Wharton's body out the door, Zora sat on a small couch, talking to the homicide detective, and wringing a handkerchief between her hands. Hardcastle sat next to her with a hand on her shoulder while McCormick held up the wall beside them.

"I finished my business with Arthur early and since he was busy and couldn't take me to lunch, I went Christmas shopping until Milton came to pick me up." She nodded to the shopping bag left forgotten by the desk. "I had just returned, and came up to say goodbye to Arthur when I found him like that. The gun was on the floor... there," she said, gesturing toward a spot just inside the doorway. She turned toward the Judge. "Oh, I know I shouldn't have picked it up, it's the classic move in all those mystery stories, but I just wasn't thinking..."

The officer, Stevenson, had a very disbelieving look on his face and Zora was trembling violently. McCormick knelt beside her, interposing his body between her and the detective. He clasped her shoulders, gently urging her to look at him instead of her hands. At the same time, he turned a pleading look on Hardcastle, who caught the cue and led the officer a few feet away where they spoke in low tones.

"Get a hold of yourself, now." McCormick kept his voice as gentle as possible. "The Judge and I know you didn't kill him. As soon as the police check into his background, they'll find someone with a whole lot more motive, then they'll know you didn't do it, too. We'll still have to go down to the station and all, but we'll have you bailed out in no time."

"Bailed out?!"

McCormick realized that might have been the wrong thing to say. He tried to cover

it up with a smile. "Just think what a celebrity you're going to be. Aunt May will be green with envy. In fact, she'll probably never forgive you for getting booked without her."

That brought a tentative smile to her lips. Mark changed the subject, "Did you find that box I asked about?"

It took her a minute to remember what he was talking about. "I'm sorry, Mark, there are just so many boxes like that up there it will take weeks to go through them all."

Before McCormick could answer, Hardcastle called him over in a low, serious tone of voice. Mark gave Zora a wink before rising to answer.

The Judge's face was very serious. "We have a problem. It seems May and Zora are well known at the station. They recently accused a farmer of growing pot. Vice set up a drug raid, and came up with a greenhouse full of geraniums. The farmer, Ashe, is suing for invasion of privacy and demanding competency hearings. Wharton was their defense lawyer."

"They aren't gonna commit her, are they?!"

"She was found standing over the body with a gun!" Hardcastle caught himself. "I'll speak with the Captain and see if they'll release her in my custody."

Both the Captain and Hardcastle had fierce headaches before the Judge got his way, but when they made their entrance at the ancient farmhouse it was with Zora in company. The staunchly loyal Hardcastle clan, alerted earlier by McCormick, set up a shield of forgotten phone calls and rerouted visitors that would done the FBI proud.

McCormick was surprised and pleased by his easy acceptance into the group. Everyone seemed to know him, apparently Zora and May had done a lot of talking. A wave of small children surrounded them momentarily, grabbing presents and suitcases, then disappeared again before McCormick could even count them all. They belonged to Stephen and Eunice Hardcastle, who had a penchant for adopting as well as having their own. Their private branch of the United Nations seemed to get bigger every time he tried to count. Warren and her mother were there, quietly making introductions since the Judge had gotten sidetracked. Six families, including themselves, had responded, with more due after Christmas.

Wilbur's younger of two sons was playing host. At the rebellious age of sixteen, he had been sent to help Aunt Mollie with the farm. She, at the tender age of ninety six, had begun slowing down and needed a helping hand; Gregory had needed purpose and a firm hand. The arrangement had worked well. Mark still couldn't get over his first sight of the farm. The same grit that had taken Hardcastle from sharecropper's shack to the Superior Court had turned that same sharecropper's shack into a large, beautiful farm house surrounded by stable, silo, and barn.

The rest of Wilbur's family was made up of his wife, Naomi, an older son spending Christmas with his wife's family, and two twin daughters. Mark couldn't stop himself from staring and had earned a shin kick from Hardcastle, to the girls' delight. They were two identical, tall burnettes in obviously very good health. They were paying their way through medical school by mud wrestling. A little dirty, according to their philosophical father, but not exactly immoral. And it paid real well. McCormick had to be kicked again. Their names were Stephanie and Eunice. Eunice had smiled at McCormick and explained, "Call me Nisa. It's all Aunt Eunice's fault for being a midwife. Steffi lucked out; she was named after Uncle Stephen." Despite having the riot act read to him by the Judge, McCormick and the twins hit it off immediately.

Gerald Hardcastle and Agnes Shaker, May and Zora's sister, made up the rest of the tribe.

A council of war was called around the dinner table. Zora and May had three days before they must face the competency hearings. In that time the clan had to find out who really killed Arthur Wharton, and what happened to the pot in the greenhouse. The evidence May produced for her exasperated nephew abruptly ended his lecture on

playing detective. It was no wonder the vice squad had moved on it. The evidence was a point in their favor, but competency hearings were traditionally biased against the defendant. Gerald reasonably pointed out that both aunts were as sane as any body else at the table, then after looking around thought twice and asked McCormick to pass the photographs.

A four-prong attack was formed with McCormick and the twins "taking a walk" near the Ashe nursery (no one minded a little trespassing in Clarence as long as no vandalism occurred), Warren would dig through court records looking for possible enemies that Wharton may have had, the Judge would backtrack the attorney's steps for the past few days and check on Ashe's past and current activities, and the rest of the clan would work on public opinion, turning the sympathy of the town in Zora's favor. Despite legal idealism, public opinion could go a long way in affecting a Judge's decision.

McCormick, Nisa, and Steffi set out, braving the mid-morning chill for their bit of exercise. Mark only then found out, to his dismay, that the Ashe Nursery was five miles away. Once out of sight, however, he forgot about his discomforts as the two identical twins slipped their arms around his waist. They had had the riot act read to them as well, but their father had apparently forgotten how attractive the forbidden can be - especially when the forbidden came with very long legs and curls. He didn't even complain when the soft snow began to fall.

The Judge began his investigation at the State Police barracks with the Lieutenant in charge of Vice.

The local high school had, within the last month, quite literally gone to pot. The Lieutenant wanted to end the problem before they graduated to anything else.

When May and Zora had come to him with their pictures of Ashe talking to a recognized crime figure outside a Cadillac, and other pictures, taken through a window, that showed tall, shadowy green plants, he had acted on the information. None of the pictures were incriminating by themselves, but they did add up to reasonable suspicion. Lieutenant Schaeffer couldn't say how the man had known they were coming, but he had cleaned out the greenhouse long before they arrived. Then he'd had the temerity to slap them with a suit for invasion of privacy and false arrest. They wanted this man, and if Hardcastle could come up with more evidence Judge Horn would issue another warrant immediately.

He left, satisfied, without noticing the gangly teenager in the Deputy's uniform who had listened to their entire conversation between pulling files and delivering coffee.

His second stop was at Wharton's office. The police barrier proved little hindrance (a technique picked up from McCormick), conscience rarely getting in the way of a good cause. There, a quick and efficient search of the desk yielded an appointment book and professional journal that made for very interesting reading. Wharton had been a meticulous man, and that was paying off in their favor now. Hardcastle left quickly, taking both books with him.

Outside he passed the same Santa Claus in round spectacles he had seen before. He noticed, but didn't acknowledge, that a conversation between him and a young deputy had broken off the moment he appeared. It was the same deputy that had been bustling around the Lieutenant's office. It might be mere gossip, but Hardcastle suspected something more sinister.

McCormick and company were having a difficult time remaining inconspicuous in the bare, winter fields. You could meander through a field only so slowly. Suddenly, Steffi scooped something out of the grass and began giggling. Seeing the beer can in her hand, Mark smiled and picked up another. A few moments later, three giggling, weaving people were leaning against a greenhouse, as if unable to stand otherwise. A moment's fumbling with the lock, and the three stumbled out of winter cold into almost summer-like heat. Now McCormick knew why they were called hothouses. He un-

did his coat, letting it hang open, and stuffed his gloves in his pockets.

The plants were grown in large table boxes about three feet off the floor, the area underneath used to store supplies and tools. The boxes contained geraniums, ferns, baby's breath, and carnations. Not a five-pointed leaf in sight. The three spread out, checking further. McCormick, near the far wall leading into the nursery, got too close to a stack of flower pots. The edge of his coat, weighted by the gloves, caught the edge of a stack and brought them over with an unholy crash. All three people dived for cover under the flower beds, holding their breath.

The door, unseen until now because it blended into the wall, opened, not three feet from where McCormick knelt. A man dressed in a police officer's uniform emerged holding a gun. Behind him, Mark could see a clear view of potted plants jammed into a small space that must have served as a utility closet.

Another man entered from the nursery's more conventional door. The first sight of him sent a chill down McCormick's spine. Despite the lack of beard and wig, he recognized him. The build and wire-frame spectacles were a dead giveaway of the "Santa Claus" he had seen leaving the building the day Wharton was shot.

The two men conversed with each other, establishing that neither had made the noise. Then they spread out, one with a gun and the other holding a wicked-looking garden trowel. They searched methodically, looking under seedling tables and behind some larger plants near the walls. Knowing he couldn't remain hidden without discovery, McCormick crawled out and quietly made his way to the nursery door. He had just about reached it when the florist flushed Steffi from the rows of tables the twins had been using for cover as they headed for the door that they had entered by. Nisa struck him from behind with one of the larger flower pots, and the two bolted for the entrance. Seeing the officer taking aim at them McCormick changed direction, bringing him down with a flying tackle over the flower beds. The man's shot went wild. Mark yelled for the girls to keep running as he wrestled with the other man. Mark was struck from behind and before he blacked out he saw the officer following the twins out the door, and prayed he'd given them enough of a head start.

|| § ||

Hardcastle took the journals to the Lieutenant's office. The snow, which had started a few hours earlier, was getting heavier and traffic was slowing. The Judge had become used to California winters, and found he'd lost the knack for driving in snow. As a result he was forced, despite his impatience, to drive at little more than a crawl. By the time he reached the police station, frustration had turned him into a real bear. He shoved the appointment book under Schaeffer's nose and pointed to the entry that showed a 2:30 meeting between Arthur Wharton and Edward Ashe--only ten minutes before Zora found his body. The professional journal had entries showing Ashe's rising debts, then sudden increases to his bank account. Wharton intimated in the journal that he suspected the whereabouts of the missing plants, but apparently had never had the chance to prove his suspicions.

The Lieutenant wasted no time, and immediately called Judge Horn to set up another search warrant; he then made arrangements to go out to the nursery and arrest Ashe. While he was in jail on suspicion of murder he couldn't object to the searchers tearing his greenhouse apart, if necessary.

While Schaeffer was making arrangements, Hardcastle asked a few questions about the deputy. A quick check determined that Calvin Thomas had volunteered to search Wharton's office; conveniently not seeing the incriminating books. Further inquiry proved that he was, in fact, Ashe's nephew. The police detail left for Ashe's nursery with two arrest warrants.

The two police jeeps were just approaching the nursery when they heard shots being fired. Schaeffer floored the accelerator and the chained tires bit into the snow, sending them forward at much too great a pace for safety. Two girls appeared from nowhere, running as if their lives depended on it. The Jeep slid sideways trying to

miss them. The girls, trying to avoid the Jeep, lost their balance and fell, thereby saving themselves from the next bullet that hit the Jeep instead. Hardcastle didn't even notice the bullet that passed two inches from his head. He had recognized his nieces, and leapt from the Jeep with gun in hand. He pulled Nisa to her feet, but she shook him off. "Mark..." She warned, looking back toward the greenhouse. With a cold feeling in his stomach, Hardcastle ran for the building.

Inside, Mark lay forgotten on the floor as Ashe threw kerosene over the plants. He turned as Thomas came running back in. He saw him stop and aim his gun at McCormick, his face white with fury. "Leave him!" He yelled, fumbling with a pack of matches.

"Like hell!" Thomas growled, looking back at his uncle then to McCormick. Before he could squeeze the trigger, though, another shot sounded instead. Deputy Thomas spun and fell to the floor.

Ashe turned in shock, the lit pack of matches falling from his hand into the kerosene. Sheets of flame roared up, catching not only the marijuana, but the dry flower boxes where the kerosene had splashed. By the time Hardcastle had grabbed up McCormick, and Schaeffer had taken Ashe in hand, the whole back of the greenhouse was in flames. One of the other officers grabbed Thomas' lifeless body as the men stumbled from the building, choking on the pungent fumes of burning marijuana.

While Schaeffer called for an ambulance and fire detail, and the Judge set about reviving McCormick, the handcuffed Ashe stood and watched his nursery go up in flames.

|| § ||

Christmas Eve dinner was also a victory celebration. Ashe had confessed to the killing, and all charges against Zora were dropped. Having been proven right in their suspicions, the court gave in to their appeal - and public outcry - and dropped the competency hearing.

An agreement had been reached to leave the running of the farm to Gregory Hardcastle. The house had been in the Hardcastle family for three generations and would not be sold. He had taken over the farm from Aunt Molly during this year, and his children would run it after him.

Just as well that things turned out right. The snowfall had turned into a blizzard. Four feet of snow, and rising every minute, had trapped the entire clan inside with each other until further notice. May, Zora, and Agnes had eased their nerves with two days of baking, the house was filled with cookies, cakes, and pies of every breed. Even McCormick had gotten his fill.

Best of all, Mark, with Wilbur's children, had been able to slip away and search the attic. Finally, a very old, very dusty box was brought to light. Triumphant, they snuck down to the twins' room. What they found inside was worn and somewhat brittle, but still readable. Mark set to work carefully with water, paper towels, stapler, and tape; then later with wrapping paper and ribbon, until one more package joined the others beneath the tree.

Many hands had to be slapped, and some smaller children removed bodily from the room, but not a single present was opened before everyone had sat down to a large brunch.

Finally everyone crammed themselves into the large living room. Packages were passed around to the accompaniment of laughter and surprise. One package was held until nearly last before Mark set it in front of the Judge. There was nothing to say who the gift was from, just his name on a tag.

Seeing the mischief lurking in McCormick's eyes, the Judge opened the package very carefully. When he saw the contents, however, his jaw dropped. From the top of three stacks, he reverently lifted an ancient Lone Ranger comic book. It had been carefully taped and the corners reinforced. Slowly, he turned the pages, seeing his childhood hero come to life once again.

"Where did you get them?" He helplessly refused to let the tears come to his eyes.

"From the attic. They're yours, your original collection."

Hardcastle spun toward his brother who stepped behind Wilbur. "You told me you sold them!"

"I lied. I just got so tired of you reading them to me every night that I boxed them up and hid them in the attic."

Gerald probably would have died right there if it weren't for McCormick's hand on his arm, and the laughing family surrounding his brother.

Zora decided this would be a good time to change the subject. She picked up an envelope almost lost in the discarded wrapping paper. "Here, Mark, this one is for you."

McCormick took it, surprised. He had, of course, received gifts - a hat and scarf from Zora, a wallet from May, a chisel with a note saying 'In case you want to get away for a visit' from Wilbur's family, and a racing form from Gerald. He wasn't expecting anything else. Seeing the name on the envelope, he turned an accusing look on Hardcastle, "I thought you forgot, and left this at home."

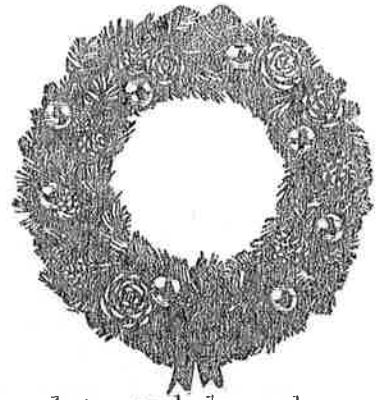
"I lied." He quoted with a smug grin.

McCormick opened it eagerly, read the papers inside, then groaned, "Two weeks at a ski resort?"

The blizzard howled and billowed outside as Hardcastle answered innocently, "I thought you liked snow."



I'll Be Home For Christmas...



By: Teri White

Mark curled his fingers around the cup of steaming hot chocolate and leaned forward to watch the ice skaters again. "This is great," he said enthusiastically. It wasn't the first time he'd uttered those same words in the last two days.

Hardcastle nodded absently. He didn't seem real interested in the graceful -- and some not-so-graceful -- figures that glided around the rink at Rockefeller Center. A Judge was a Judge was a Judge. Apparently even Christmas time in Manhattan took second place to a nagging bit of unfinished legal business.

Mark shook his head helplessly. Whoever it was that said you couldn't teach an old dog new tricks must have had Milton C. Hardcastle in mind. "Bah, humbug," Mark said under his breath.

The old goat had ears like a ... well, the right simile eluded Mark at the moment. Anyway, Hardcastle heard his uttered words. At least he had the decency to look a little sheepish. "I'll be able to finish this" ---- 'this' being the file contained in the thick manila envelope on the table --- "today," he said.

"And then?" Mark wouldn't be surprised to hear that there were one or two other bad guys that the Judge wanted to track down as long as they were in the city anyway.

But Hardcase surprised him. "And then we're free until our flight tomorrow night. Plenty of time to paint the town red."

"Paint the town red?" Mark repeated skeptically.

"Have some fun," Hardcastle said. "Kick up our heels." He must have seen the faint glint appearing in his companion's eyes, because he added hastily, "Within limits, of course."

"Okay. We haven't seen F.A.O. Schwarz yet."

"F.A.O. Schwarz? That's a toy store," Hardcastle said.

"That's the toy store," Mark corrected. "And I wanna see it."

"Whatever," Hardcastle replied. He glanced at his watch. "You coming with me to the District Attorney's office?"

Mark made a face. "Two days of that cloak and dagger stuff is enough. I'm on vacation from law school, you know."

A smile played around the corners of Hardcastle's mouth before he caught himself. "All right, Mr. Law Student. You go play."

"Maybe I'll do my Christmas shopping."

"Fine. I don't want any Statue of Liberty salt and pepper shakers."

Mark waited until Hardcastle had gathered his papers and was standing before he said, in a voice loud enough to be heard several tables away, "How about the Ellis Island undershorts?"

Hardcastle picked up the envelope and glared at him. "Very funny, McCormick," he said in his deepest, volcano-rumble voice. That voice had caused felons before the bench to quake. It didn't seem to faze this young man at all. Never had, in fact, even when McCormick had been one of the felons in question. Hardcastle sighed. "Meet me back here at four. Can you remember that?"

Mark put one hand over his heart and raised the other one. "Skating rink, four o'clock. I'll be here."

"You better be," were Hardcastle's parting words.

Mark chuckled and hurriedly drained the dregs of his hot chocolate.

He had about six hours to find the perfect Christmas present. What the devil did you give the curmudgeon who had everything?

* * * * *

It took just about five and one-half hours for Mark to decide that he had enjoyed just about all of Christmas in the Big Apple that he could stand. Every store he went into was jammed with shoppers whose moods seemed to range from frantic to surly to homicidal. The incessant playing of carols---mostly out of tune---had given him a raging headache and the sound of too many crying children had irritated his nerve endings to the edge of snapping.

The worst part about it was, he still hadn't found a gift for Hardcastle.

When he saw the empty bench, he hurried to it and collapsed to catch his breath. It was starting to get dark already, even so early in the afternoon, and when Mark glanced around, he realized that he had absolutely no idea where he was. Wherever he had ended up, it was not one of the hot spots for shoppers; he was surprised to see that the crowds had vanished and that he was alone in the gloomy cul de sac.

It felt good. For a moment, he just sat there and enjoyed the quiet solitude.

Then he snapped to and reached into his pocket for the folded map of Manhattan. If his quick calculations were correct, he wasn't so lost after all. In fact, he was actually only a few blocks from the office where Hardcase was having his meeting. He glanced at his watch. But that was probably over by now, so his best bet was to head back to Rockefeller Center as fast as he could. He might be a few minutes late, but no more than that.

Of course, there was still the problem of what the heck to get the Judge for Christmas.

He decided to take a shortcut through the alley, still thinking about the absence of a gift. Mark was thinking so hard on that problem that it took him several moments to realize that he wasn't alone in the alley. Three shadowy figures were gathered just ahead of him in the approaching gloom. Mostly out of surprise, Mark stopped. They didn't seem to notice him.

When the gunshot sounded, Mark jumped involuntarily and made a small gasp.

Soft as the sound was, the two men still standing heard him and turned sharply. One still had the gun in his hand. Even in the faint light, Mark recognized him. He took one bewildered step toward them. "What the hell--?"

He felt a sharp pain in the back of his head and then everything turned black.

* * * * *

Hardcastle glanced at his watch. Again.

Damn that McCormick anyway. Wouldn't you think that a law student would have some sense of responsibility? But obviously not. Apparently Mark was Mark and not even an approaching degree would change him.

And, really, Hardcastle was glad of that.

Or he would be glad later, but right now he was mad. It was almost five-thirty, making McCormick an hour and a half late. Hardcastle finished his lukewarm coffee and stood. To hell with this. He was cold and tired. Let McCormick make his own way back to the hotel.

He was lucky to get a cab at that hour, so in only twenty minutes of midtown traffic, Hardcastle arrived back at the Blackstone. The desk clerk was occupied with a large group of Japanese tourists and didn't notice him. He rode the elevator alone to the fourth floor. Maybe, it occurred to him during the ride, Mark was already here. That would be like him, to be sound asleep in his bed while keeping someone else waiting out in the cold.

But the room was empty when he opened the door.

The maid had done a great job of cleaning the place; the disarray that McCormick could create in only two days was gone and both beds were freshly made. Hardcastle took off his coat and dropped it onto the chair. Teach the kid a lesson. He'd be the one taking a nap.

He stretched out on his bed and was asleep almost immediately.

* * * * *

Pain.

That was all he knew.

Pain. The whole universe could be summed up in that one simple word. That one feeling. Blackness enveloped him and he reached out into it, trying to grab the hurting and do something with it. Defeat it, maybe.

But the agony was just beyond his reach.

Someone was crying and it took him long moments to realize that it was he himself making the sounds.

Thankfully, the darkness pressed down upon him again, ending the hurt for a time.

* * * * *

There was no light left in the room when Hardcastle woke up. He fumbled for the lamp and then peered blearily at his watch. Eight o'clock? Where the hell was McCormick?

Hardcastle's earlier anger was turning to worry. Even Mark wouldn't be four hours late without some kind of phone call explaining himself.

After chewing on his lower lip for a moment, Hardcastle picked up the phone and waited until the front desk answered. "This is Judge Hardcastle in 405. Have there been any messages for me?"

There was a pause, and then the clerk returned. "No, sir. No messages."

"Thank you."

He hung up slowly. New York was a big city, a place where lots of things could happen, even to the most streetwise of people. And face it: The kid had an almost perfect knack of falling into trouble.

But where could he even begin to look for his missing friend?

Hardcastle got up from the bed and grabbed his coat. For starters, he would go where you went when there was trouble: To the cops.

* * * * *

The next time he woke, there were voices.

He tried to hear the words, but the sounds were muffled, as if they came from behind a closed door. He tried to figure out where he was, but it was so dark. There was a smell, and after a few moments, he managed to identify it. Fish. The heavy, oily odor of raw fish cut through the blackness and reached him.

His gut surged and heaved.

He squeezed his eyes tightly closed until the nausea had passed. When his stomach had settled back where it belonged, he opened his eyes and tried to think.

It seemed important that he try to remember what had happened. Maybe then he would know where he was.

Who he was.

* * * * *

Hardcastle took a deep breath.

The detective, whose name was Stanskoski, looked impatient. "Sir--"
"Judge. Judge Milton C. Hardcastle."

"Yes, Judge."

"Did you call the District Attorney's office like I told you to?"

"I called, I called. But Mr. Delray wasn't there. Nobody's seen him since about three this afternoon."

"That's when I left his office."

"Yes, so you've said."

Hardcastle gritted his teeth and tried to stay reasonable. After the past hour, however, reason was becoming very difficult to hold onto. But he gave it one more shot. This idiot was a cop, for God's sake. He should be able to grasp the situation. "Okay, Sergeant. I'll run this by you one more time. McCormick and I came to the city two days ago. I've been working with Delray on a special investigation. A drug case. McCormick went sightseeing this afternoon and we were supposed to meet at four o'clock at Rockefeller Center."

Stanskoski looked bored. He tapped his front teeth with the eraser on his pencil. "You've told me all that. Several times, sir. Judge."

"Then why are you having such a hard time understanding it?"

"This McCormick you claim to be travelling with -- he's an adult, right?"

"What do you mean 'claim'?" Hardcastle said loudly. To hell with reason. A fool was a fool, cop or not.

Stanskoski smiled. It was a particularly insincere expression. "That's just cop talk," he said. "Judges have their way of saying things. And so do cops."

Hardcastle's return smile was the echo of the detective's. "Before I was a judge," he said, "I was a cop. So spare me that crap, okay?"

Two bland brown eyes surveyed him. "Okay. Cutting the crap." He swiveled and picked up a paper from the desk. "I ran McCormick's name through the computer. He's an ex-con, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"You make a habit of running around with criminals, do you, Judge? If you do, things must be a lot different out West. Land of fruits and nuts, like they say."

"McCormick is an ex-con. He's rehabilitated. Now he's a law student."

"Uh-huh. I guess that's a step up." Stanskoski was quiet briefly, rolling the computer read-out and peering through it at the ceiling. "Judge, answer me something, please. How come I haven't heard anything about this special investigation you're supposed to be working on with Delray?"

"Because it was a secret probe."

"A secret? Just you and Delray, right?"

Hardcastle stared at him. "Mostly. One or two others. And what the hell does any of this have to do with Mark McCormick disappearing, anyway?"

Stanskoski dropped the makeshift telescope. "Hey, look at this from my point of view, willya?"

"Which is?"

"Which is this: I got some old Judge from a whole different state coming in here. Says he's been working on some hotshot top secret drug thing with a lawyer in the D.A.'s office. Except nobody I can find seems to know anything about it. Or about the Judge. Or this missing ex-con." He leaned back. "Maybe you begin to see my problem here, Judge Hardcastle?"

Hardcastle rested both hands on the edge of the desk. "Stanskoski, when I find McCormick, I'm coming back here just so I can deal with you and your attitude. I hope you understand that."

Stanskoski blinked at him.

Hardcastle got to his feet and left the office.

* * * * *

Mark decided that he had to get out of this place. Wherever "this place" was

and whyever he was here.

He rocked back and forth on the cold damp concrete floor, trying to loosen the ropes that held his ankles and wrists. The movement caused his stiff and aching bones to cry out in protest, but he kept up the effort.

At least, he told himself, I have a name now. Mark. Maybe it was wrong, but it rang the right bells in his mind. Mark. Yeah.

So maybe he still didn't know where he was or even who this Mark might be, but it still seemed like a step forward to recognize the name.

He angled himself and squirmed upwards until he was resting against the edge of the bottom step. He managed to stretch his fingers and touch the narrow strip of metal that ran along the edge of the step. Perfect. He started rubbing the rope against the sharp metal.

The first order of business was getting out of this place.

* * * * *

Hardcastle had a headache. A dull, throbbing kind of pain that was located just behind his eyes. Another cup of black coffee was not what he needed, with his nerves already stretched to the breaking point, but nevertheless he accepted the cup offered by the mustachioed lawyer. "Thanks," he said hoarsely.

It was nearly three a.m.

Malloy nodded absently and sat down again with his own cup. "We're getting nowhere here," he said, his voice also harsh with weariness and despair. "Nothing on McCormick, and nothing on Delray."

Hardcastle sipped the vending machine sludge, almost used to the terrible taste by now. "Both of them missing. It can't be just a coincidence."

"But how could the two be connected?"

"Damned if I know." Hardcastle was quiet, suddenly back at the skating rink, back to a time that seemed to have been very long ago now. Life was so . . . careless. Moments slipped by, and he never even noticed how important they were. How precious, though that was not a word he could ever use outside his own thoughts.

Malloy spoke, bringing Hardcastle out of his reverie. "I'm going to ask you something, but don't get pissed about it, okay?"

"What?"

"You're one hundred percent sure that McCormick wouldn't just take off?"

Hardcastle didn't answer quickly. Instead, he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "I am one hundred percent sure that he didn't just take off," he said finally, quietly. "Mark and I are friends. We..." he broke off, not wanting to say more, and opened his eyes. "Something has happened to him. Something that must be bad." He set the cup down. "You think there's a leak in this office?"

Malloy obviously didn't like to hear that. But his eyes admitted the truth, even before he said, "It's possible. And if there is, that means big trouble for Delray."

"Yeah." Hardcastle took a deep breath. "You think maybe it's bent cops?"

The lawyer shrugged. "That's the inevitable conclusion, isn't it? If word got to the department that you and Delray were investigating drug dealing within the police force. Bent cops? Yeah, I'd say that's our best guess."

"Which would explain why Delray is missing. But Mark?" Hardcastle shook his head. "What does Captain Riply think?"

"I don't know. He hasn't returned my calls. Riply never approved of the investigation anyway."

"I got that impression. He was only there because the D.A. insisted."

"I know," Malloy said. "Let's hope that wasn't a mistake."

Hardcastle stood. "Let's hope."

"Where are you going?"
"I don't know. Back to the hotel, I guess."
"Good idea. Get some sleep."
"Right."

*

But he couldn't sleep.

Instead, with the radio playing softly, he stood at the window and stared down at the street below. A light snow was falling. The Christmas decorations, which before had seemed only tacky and somehow annoying, now made him feel intensely melancholy.

The song on the radio was something about having a blue Christmas. His gaze moved up and down the nearly deserted street, hoping in a vague yet desperate way to see a familiar figure heading his way. But only a shabby old man pushing a shopping cart came into view.

"Mark, where the hell are you?" The whispered question steamed up the surface of the window. But there was no answer to be found in the uncaring night. Hardcastle pulled the drapes closed and went to bed.

He left the radio on.

* * * * *

Time lost all meaning for him.

Maybe it was hours before the rope around his wrists finally frayed and snapped. Or maybe it was days. It didn't matter, because he was free. His arms ached, but he gave them only a few moments of rest before bending to undo the rope around his ankles.

He was so cold. It seemed as if he should have been wearing a coat, but all he had on was a sweater that did little to ward off the chill. He rubbed his arms and legs vigorously.

There had been no more voices or sounds in all this time and Mark knew, without having to check, that he was alone in the building. When he tried to stand, his legs felt as if they belonged to somebody else, Gumby maybe, so he crawled up the stairs and pushed open the door. No lock. Apparently they had not expected him to get this far.

He chuckled a little.

Well, they had under-estimated Mark.

A sudden thought struck him and he reached for his wallet. A wallet meant ID, didn't it? But the pocket of his jeans was empty.

Even by the dim light that came from outside, he could tell that this building had once housed a fish market. But it didn't look like it had seen much business lately. He realized that the smell of fish that had sickened him earlier was an old smell. This building was deserted.

What it looked like was, somebody---for reasons he could not figure---dumped him in the cellar of this place and took off. Probably figuring that he'd just lay down and die.

Dumb bastards.

The outside door was held by only a flimsy lock that snapped with two good tugs. Mark slipped out and, ignoring the blast of icy air and snow that hit him, ran.

* * * * *

A person could simply drop out of sight in New York City and never be seen again. Hardcastle couldn't stop that thought from echoing in his mind as he wandered aimlessly through the streets the next day. As a cop and a judge, God

knew, he'd seen plenty of cases like that.

Sometimes people disappeared. Just vanished. And sometimes those people were never seen again.

This was the painful truth that must be faced: He might never see Mark again. Might not even ever know why. It was almost like when his son was reported missing, presumed dead. Would Mark now fall into that same black void?

Could he stand to have it happen again?

Death, at least, was a reality that a man could hold on to. But not knowing ... that could drive even the sanest of persons a little crazy.

Hardcastle stopped to buy a hot dog from a sidewalk vendor, then carried it into Grand Central Station to a telephone.

Malloy answered on the first ring. "Glad you called," he said after Hardcastle's grunted hello. "I left a message for you at the hotel."

Something in his tone made Hardcastle set the half-eaten hot dog down carefully. "What?"

"There's a John Doe at the morgue. You better go over and have a look. I'll meet you there."

"A John Doe?"

Malloy sighed across the wire. "White male, 25-35 years of age. Brown hair. Apparently shot by a mugger sometime yesterday. No ID."

"All right," Hardcastle said quietly. "See you there."

*

It wasn't the first time Hardcastle had been in a morgue, of course. And whether it was in California or New York made very little difference. The atmosphere remained the same---the smell, the look of the people, the sights and sounds of death.

Hardcastle waited in the small lobby until Malloy appeared, out of breath. "Sorry," the lawyer apologized. "Traffic."

Hardcastle shrugged.

A moment later a white-jacketed woman appeared in the doorway and they followed her down the hall. The room they went into held four tables and on each table there was sheet-covered form.

The woman stopped beside the first table and flipped the sheet down. "John Doe," she said.

Hardcastle willed his eyes to look at the face. After about thirty seconds, he shook his head. "No," he said. "That's not Mark." He shook his head again, turned away, and walked quickly back to the lobby.

Malloy appeared a few moments later. "Well," he said. "That's good."

"Yeah," Hardcastle said. "Except for John Doe. And whoever is waiting for him to come home."

Both men began to button up their coats, but before they were finished, the receptionist summoned Malloy. "Telephone," she said.

Hardcastle watched as the other man took the call. From the look that appeared on Malloy's face, he could tell it wasn't good news he was hearing.

After another minute, Malloy hung up and walked back to where Hardcastle waited. "They just found Delray," he said. "Somebody executed him."

Hardcastle sighed and followed Malloy out of the building.

* * * * *

Mark huddled in the doorway of the closed jewelry store and watched the people hurrying by in the fading late afternoon light. He blew on his fingers again.

A cop appeared down the block and Mark watched him nervously. Cops were

supposed to help people in trouble, right? But something kept him from walking over and asking for help. He was afraid of the police officer, without knowing why.

Mostly, though, he was cold. The whole day had been spent ducking in and out of stores and buildings, trying to warm up even briefly.

And he was also hungry.

The worse thing, though, was that he still didn't know who he was or why he was in this mess.

The cop seemed to look his way and Mark moved further back into the doorway.

*

Mark stopped and read the sign again. A free meal? Somebody was giving away free food? He watched as several shabbily dressed men went into the church. It would be warm in there. And he could eat.

He paused in the doorway long enough to survey the room and make sure there was nobody dangerous inside. But it was mostly old men, a few women, and even a couple of kids sitting at a long table and eating. They were watched over by a priest and two women in nice clothes.

One of the women saw him standing there and came over. "Would you like some food?"

He nodded.

She led him to a counter and filled a bowl of soup. On a tray she put the bowl, some bread, and a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," Mark said.

He sat at the farthest end of the table, apart from the others. As he spooned the thick rich broth into his mouth, his eyes darted constantly around the room.

When the meal was over, the priest said a short prayer and told the gathered about a shelter ten blocks away that might have room for some of them. Then the group was ushered back out into the night.

Mark thought about trying to find the shelter, but it sounded dangerous. He might be trapped there, and those who had hurt him might come back and find him.

So he walked off alone into the darkness, already as chilled as if he'd never been warm.

*

This doorway belonged to a library. Mark squeezed back into the corner, drawing both knees to his chest and resting his head on them. He closed his eyes and tried to remember.

He must have had some kind of life before waking up in that cellar. But what was it? Images flashed so quickly through his mind that he could not grab them. Vague things: a blue sky, water, and the sound of distant laughter. It all seemed happy.

He knew that tears were welling up in his eyes. He rubbed them away with the back of one hand.

"You got anything to drink?"

The voice was so unexpected, that terror raced through Mark. He lifted his head and tried to see who was standing there.

It was a young man wearing tattered army clothes.

Mark shook his head.

"You sure? I really need a drink."

"I don't have anything," Mark whispered.

"Nice sweater."

"Leave me alone."

"Go to hell," the young man said. He walked away.

Mark waited until the sound of his footsteps was gone, then he lowered his head and closed his eyes again.

"I wanna go home," he said softly.
He had a home somewhere, didn't he?

* * * * *

The knock at the door was so soft that Hardcastle wasn't even sure he'd heard anything. But then it came again. He got up from the bed, where he hadn't been sleeping, and went to answer it.

A young uniformed cop stood there. He looked scared. "Sir? You're Judge Hardcastle, right?"

"Yes? Why?"

"Can I come in? I need to talk to you. About some guy named McCormick."

Hardcastle stepped aside and let the cop enter. Then he closed the door and turned to face him. "You know something about Mark?"

"Yes." His nametag said Whitlock. He gestured toward the chair. "Can I sit?"

"Yes."

When Whitlock was settled, he looked up at Hardcastle. "You gotta understand. It was like I was following orders."

Hardcastle stayed where he was. "Just tell me about Mark."

"It's complicated, is all."

It was a test of his self-control that Hardcastle didn't shout, or cross the room and grab the young man. "Just tell me about Mark," he repeated quietly.

"He just showed up. We weren't expecting anybody. Especially anybody who knew about the drug investigation."

"Who is this 'we'?"

"Captain Riply and me."

"Riply?" Hardcastle finally crossed the room and sat on the end of the bed.

"Yes." Whitlock took a deep breath. "He shot Mr. Delray. Killed him." His face was anguished. "But it was for the good of the Department. The Captain explained it all to me."

"It was for the good of Riply," Hardcastle muttered. But then he dismissed that. "Mark?"

"After the Captain shot Delray, we just turned around and there he was. McCormick. It was freaky. Like, why him?"

Yeah, Hardcastle agreed silently. Why him? Although the Judge did not put any stock in a thing like astrology, sometimes he had to think that Mark McCormick had been born under a damned unlucky star. Why else would he have ended up right at that spot at the precisely wrong moment?

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Did Riply shoot McCormick, too?"

Whitlock shook his head. "He said that would be too dangerous. He didn't want you tying McCormick in with the case. Just figured he should disappear. You'd look a while, then leave town."

"So?"

"The Captain's driver hit McCormick on the skull. He dropped like a rock. We tied him up and dumped him in a basement down in Chinatown."

Hardcastle was already moving for the phone. "Where? Where?"

"I don't know the address. But I can show you."

"You will. And you better hope he's okay."

They got to the abandoned store just before dawn. Hardcastle led the way down into the cellar, guided by the powerful police flashlights.

He knelt beside the steps and fingered the ropes there. Malloy directed one

beam of light to the edge of the bottom step. Traces of blood were clearly visible. "He got out," Malloy said.

"Then where the hell is he?" Hardcastle replied. "Where the hell is he?"

* * * * *

The too-skinny Santa Claus kept ringing the damned bell and exhorting people to drop money in the bucket. Some did, most just hurried by.

Mark had found a grate that gave off a steady flow of warm air and there he stayed. His fingers and toes stopped tingling.

The flashes in his mind were coming more frequently now, and he almost thought he could see a face. The features were shadowy, but familiar, and it comforted him.

At least, this face didn't scare him.

But he was hungry. Maybe if he walked some more he could find another church that was giving out free food. He hated to leave the warm air from the grate, but the thought of food drove him away.

Just across the street the department store window caught his eye. He paused to watch the Muppet figures glide around the mirror-like ice rink. Miss Piggy kept falling down. Mark stared at it for a long time.

There was something . . . there was something dammit.

He turned around and saw a woman standing nearby. "Excuse me," he said. "Can you tell me what time it is?"

Even as she glanced at her watch, she moved away. "Almost three."

Mark tried to think, but his mind was a muddle. "That's getting close to four, right?"

She eyed him, then nodded.

Four o'clock. There was something important about both that time and the ice skaters. The familiar face flashed into his mind again and this time he almost was able to grab onto it. But not quite.

"Excuse me again," he said to the woman. "But where do they do that?"

"What?"

"Skate like that. Where do people skate like that?"

She saw her bus coming and headed for it. "Rockefeller Center," she called over her shoulder.

Mark knew that was right. Rockefeller Center. Four o'clock.

He didn't know why, but he had to get there.

* * * * *

Hours later, Hardcastle still had no answer to his question. Where was McCormick?

A lot of other things had happened. Whitlock, Riply and Riply's driver were all in custody. The drug ring, which Riply and his driver had headed up, was broken, and the District Attorney had submitted his resignation. It was a muddle, but that was for the city of New York to worry about. All Hardcastle wanted to do was find Mark.

He stood outside the window of the new F.A.O. Schwartz and watched the train go around the track. It was a great train set. Should be for the price, which was nearly two thousand dollars.

Hardcastle finally walked away.

Then he turned around and went back. He went into the store and bought the train set, telling them to send it immediately to Mark McCormick, Gull's Way. They promised to have it there by Christmas Eve.

When he was back on the street, Hardcastle glanced at his watch. Nearly four. A voice echoed in his head.

Skating rink, four o'clock, I'll be here.

Without really knowing why, he turned and headed for Rockefeller Center.

* * * * *

Somebody had left a half-finished cup of hot chocolate on a table and Mark picked it up to finish. It was cold by now, but he didn't care. He walked over to the railing and leaned there, watching the skaters.

He had been waiting a while now, scanning the faces in the crowd, still not knowing who or what he was expecting to find here. But something within was telling him to be patient.

He sipped the chocolate slowly, so it looked like he belonged. The music playing sounded familiar and he hummed along.

It was about being home for Christmas.

* * * * *

When Hardcastle first saw the dirty, unshaven figure bent over the rail, he didn't recognize him. But the sweater was familiar and then he saw the tangled mass of brown curls. He stopped and watched Mark for a moment, fighting back the flood of emotion that threatened to destroy his control.

Finally, he made his way through the crowd and squeezed next to the rail. "Hello, kiddo," he said quietly.

After a moment, two vague blue eyes were turned to him. The gaze studied him. Suddenly a smile broke across the filthy face. "I know you," Mark whispered.

"You damned well better know me," Hardcastle said with false gruffness.

"I do. I know you." Suddenly Mark leaned against him, as if he could not support the weight of his own body one more moment. "Can I go home?"

Hardcastle put an arm around him, supporting him. "We're both going home, kiddo."

Mark didn't say anything and after a moment, Hardcastle led him away.

* * * * *

The strange noise woke Hardcastle sometime after midnight. He stared at the ceiling of his bedroom and listened for a few moments, then crawled out of the bed and reached for his robe.

The only lights in the den came from the Christmas tree, but in the pale colored glow, he could see Mark, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor, watching the train make its journey around the room.

Hardcastle walked over and sat beside him.

Neither man spoke for a long time, then Mark glanced at him. "This is a great train," he said.

"Should be," Hardcastle muttered. "Considering what it cost me."

"Bah, humbug," Mark said. Then he grinned.

Hardcastle shook his head. "Merry Christmas, Mark," he said.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Same to you."

Hardcastle patted the younger man on the knee. After a moment, he got up and went into the kitchen. He poured two glasses of eggnog and took them back into the den.

Mark turned the train on again.

They sat there watching the damned thing until almost dawn.



A Boy & His Dog



By: Vejae Wynder

The whining got louder the closer Mark McCormick got to the front gate. He had heard the sound off and on while he was out stringing Christmas lights on the hedges. At first he dismissed it as traffic noise being this close to the PCH, but the whining became louder and more insistent. Giving up, he dropped the tangled mess and went to investigate.

The little noisemaker was a small female collie-type dog, grey with a white neck, chest and legs. The white muzzle had little brown freckles, giving the dog a puppyish appearance. She was lying on her side holding her mangled right paw in the air.

Mark approached very cautiously, not wanting to scare her. He got down on his hands and knees and carefully looked over the injured leg, keeping his movements slow and gentle, so she wouldn't rip off his face because she was in pain and didn't realize he was trying to help. She began to lick his hand.

The leg was ripped open down the inside from the top all the way to the paw and was bleeding profusely. Without hesitation, he wrapped her up in his jacket and carried her to the Coyote. He laid her in the passenger seat, jumped in and dashed off to the nearest veterinarian.

*** *** ***

"She's going to be just fine, some stitches and some TLC is all she needs." The vet gave her a quick pat as he continued. "Keep the leg covered so she won't chew her stitches and keep her off of it as much as possible. Bring her back next week to remove the stitches. That's a cute little dog you have there."

Mark nodded in agreement and gathered her up in his arms. She looked up into his eyes with trust and had not stopped licking his hands. It gave him a real warm fuzzy feeling inside. His problem now was to get Hardcase to agree to let him keep her.

*** *** ***

"Please, Judge," Mark whined. "I never had a dog before and I promise she won't be any trouble."

"You're damn right she won't be any trouble." Then Judge Milton Hardcastle put on his most reasonable tone. "Look, McCormick, I wouldn't mind having a dog, but she obviously belongs to somebody. She's well-fed and she's got a collar."

Mark looked down at the dog. He had never considered that possibility. He ran a free hand over the head on his knee, her feather duster tail doing a gentle thump-thump against the couch. He brightened.

"Maybe she was tossed out. People are always dumping dogs off on the highway hoping that someone will adopt them. Yeah, and she got hurt and crawled up our driveway. Nobody wants her, Judge, I'm sure of it."

The Judge wavered in front of the pleading, hopeful face. McCormick could look like a 12-year-old. "You could be right, McCormick, and if that's the case: sure, consider her an early Christmas present, but you owe it to yourself and to her to see if anyone is looking for her before you become too attached."

Mark considered it briefly and agreed. That seemed fair, besides he was sure

she was a toss-out.

The Judge set up some ground rules for basic dog care, then asked, "What are you gonna call her?"

Mark looked into the warm brown eyes that made his heart melt. "Well," he began thoughtfully, "She looks kinda like a collie, so we could call her 'Lassie'."

"Kinda short for Lassie, and not very original. She looks more like a wolf cub, don'tcha think?"

"Hey," Mark snapped his fingers, "That's it! I'll call her Cubby. Okay, Cubby?" The tail wagged faster.

Hardcastle laughed. "Now she sounds like one of the Mouseketeers." Ducking a flying couch cushion, he shouted, "Okay! Okay! Cubby it is. Now, go give her a bath or something."

¶¶¶

Cubby's leg healed without incident, and she became the central figure at Gull's-Way. The Judge donated a couple of quilts for a bed which Cubby discarded, choosing instead to sleep on the bed with Mark, much to his delight.

The Judge's patience was then stretched to the limit when he went with Mark on a shopping expedition to make sure Cubby had the latest in high-tech doggie dishes, the very best, most nutritious and expensive pet food that TV ads recommended, plus every little squeak toy ever invented.

Mark, to Hardcastle's surprise, kept all his promises and became a model of responsibility, at least, where Cubby was concerned. Her leg healed without incident, and Mark made sure she was fed, groomed, and exercised. She, in turn, was his constant companion, following him everywhere. When he talked she gave him her full attention, head cocked, as if she understood every word he said.

¶¶¶

McCormick, to satisfy Hardcastle, made a token search for anyone looking for Cubby in a few local papers and animal shelters. No one came forward, and it began to look like Cubby had found a home at Gull's-Way. That is, until Christmas Eve morning.

The ad jumped out at the Judge as he was trying to leisurely read the paper:

LOST: Female Collie-mix,
answers to Trista. Child's
pet. Reward. 555-6754.

Hardcastle knew Cubby was Trista. He sat and thought a bit. Sighing, he got up; McCormick might as well know now.

He found the two curled up together, sound asleep on the bed. "Trista." He whispered. She was instantly awake and, with tail wagging, she jumped down off the bed. As the Judge knelt down to pet her, he couldn't help but feel saddened. This was a lesson you learn when you're a kid, not a grown man.

"Hey! McCormick!"

"It's Christmas, Judge. Have a heart and go away." The reply came from somewhere under the mountain of covers.

The Judge threw the newspaper with the ad circled in red down next to McCormick, turned on his heel, and made for the door.

Mark yelled from upstairs, "Cubby's my dog."

Hardcastle yelled back, "She's not your dog, and her name is Trista."

Upon hearing her name, Trista bounded down the steps to the Judge, barking and jumping up and down around him. He looked up into McCormick's almost defiant face. "I rest my case."

"No, Judge!"

"Listen, kiddo, this is gonna hafta be your decision. If you can live with the fact that she belongs to a child and keep her, knowing how you would feel if the situation was reversed: fine! I won't say another word." He watched as some of the defiance

melted from McCormick's face and his tone softened. "The longer you wait, kiddo, the tougher it's gonna be." With that, he left McCormick alone to think.

¶¶¶

The sky was beginning to grow dark when the car pulled up to the house. A man got out of the car and knocked on the front door.

"Mr. McCormick?"

"No, Milton Hardcastle. Are you the folks who lost a dog?"

"Yes. We had just about given up hope of finding Trista. I'm Tom Warrick; my wife, Susan, and our daughter, Josie." He waved in the direction of the car.

"Let me get this straight. McCormick called you?"

"Mr. McCormick called us and said he might have Trista. We jumped in the car and came right over."

Hardcastle stepped back. "Why don't you folks come in and make yourselves at home. I'll go see if I can rustle up McCormick."

"I'm here, Judge." McCormick had slipped in the back door when he saw the car drive up. He waited until the Warrick's were all in the den before he opened the dining room door. Cubby raced past McCormick, throwing herself on little Josie, knocking the girl over in her enthusiasm and deafening everyone with her joyous barking.

Mark closed his eyes on the happy reunion. He had spent most of the day trying to convince himself that Cubby was his dog, and not to make that call. But the Judge was right, he wouldn't be able to keep her until he knew for sure.

When he opened his eyes, Mr. Warrick was trying to force the reward on him, but he declined. "Thanks, but I don't want your money." Mark swallowed hard. "I just want to see her happy and where she belongs."

As the family trooped out, Josie stopped, looked up at Mark then handed him the leash. "You wanna say goodbye?" She smiled and followed her family and Hardcastle out to the car.

Mark knelt down. "Hey, girl. You be good." He stroked her soft head. "I'll miss you. You won't forget me, will ya?" He choked. "I love you."

McCormick took her out to her waiting family. Giving her one last pat, Cubby/Trista ended their friendship as it began, with a lick on the hand.

¶¶¶

Two hours later, McCormick, all showered and changed, walked into the den. Even though his eyes were a little puffy, he had a smile on his face as he joked with Hardcastle about when he got to open the bounty under the tree.

The good-natured fun and games continued all through dinner and the gift unwrapping, neither one bringing up the subject of the doy. Instead of crawling off somewhere to feel sorry for himself (Mark didn't have any better luck with dogs than he had with women), McCormick was doing his best to be happy and not dampen the holiday. Hardcastle could not have been more pleased and proud.

Maybe McCormick was growing up after all.

¶¶¶

The holidays came and went, decorations removed and packed away, and life at Gull's Way settled into as routine as it gets. So when the mail brought a letter for McCormick, the Judge knew just where to find him. Mark spent every morning at the front gate looking out at the PCH.

He walked up to McCormick and handed him the letter. He gave Mark a quick pat on the back and received a small smile. Mark let the Judge know, without words, that he wanted to work this out for himself, and Hardcastle left him mostly alone to do so. But he stayed close by for when Mark was ready to talk.

McCormick watched Hardcastle head back toward the house, then looked at the letter. His name was printed sloppily in crayon all along the front. He opened the letter, mildly surprised at its contents.

Dear Mark,

Josie is doing this for me cause I dont write good with my paws. Thank you for taking care of me.

Josie, mommy and daddy says you can visit me when you want. Please.

I Love you.

Mark put the letter in his back pocket, and went looking for Hardcastle. He was ready to talk.