


# BACK-TO-BACK

\* *Special* \*

\* *Issue* \*



Christmas at

**GULL'S -  
WAY**



DJP

# Christmas At Gull's-Way

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# A Family Christmas

Lizabeth S. Tucker

"McCormick!" Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, retired, bellowed, standing at the door to the basement.

A radio was blaring psychedelic oldies, the washer and dryer chugging to the beat while Mark McCormick swayed back and forth as he folded a large assortment of T-shirts belonging to both him and Hardcastle. Looking up, McCormick's faint smile of welcome faded at the annoyed grimace clouding Hardcastle's features. "What's wrong?"

"Gotta go to -- will you shut that racket off!" Once it was peaceful except for the clump-chunk of the machines, Hardcastle continued. "Aunt Mae and Aunt Zora are having a family reunion this Christmas and I can't get out of it. Somehow they got me to agree to go to Clarence."

"Oh." McCormick blinked. Family reunion? That meant another lonely Christmas for him. It seemed something always messed up their Christmas together. Two years ago, the Judge was in jail; last year it was a bad case of flu that had both of them in bed, hacking and wheezing. "That's -- nice."

"Nice? I thought you'd be thrilled, kid," Hardcastle commented.

McCormick made an effort to appear normal, hiding his face by bending over the next pile of dirty clothes. "A vacation from you is pretty ... exciting. I just need time to take it in."

"Vacation from me? What the hell are you babbling about? I'm not sending you there alone, they'd spoil you rotten. 'Course, you're already spoiled."

"Huh?" McCormick stared at Hardcastle, his mouth hanging open. "But ... you said it was a 'family reunion.' I'm not family."

"Don't you remember? You said it yourself once, you're here by adoption. My aunts specifically told me to bring you along. In fact, I don't think I'd be too welcome if I left you home." Hardcastle jumped when McCormick whooped, grinning ear to ear. "Is the bleach warping what's left of that brain? What is wrong with you?"

"Not a thing, Judge, not one little thing." McCormick replied, his jaws aching with the width of his grin. He was going to a Hardcastle family get-together. He knew that Hardcastle's various friends and relatives apparently accepted him, but they didn't have much of a choice. To be considered a member of the family was a warm feeling.

"Are you listening to me?"

"What?" McCormick realized that Hardcastle had continued talking to him, giving him orders and he hadn't heard a single one.

"I'm gonna get your hearing checked. I said, be sure and pack warm clothes for us. It's cold in Arkansas at this time of year. And I thought we'd drive, do some sightseeing on the way. You've got the Christmas holidays off at law school, we have the time for it, what do you think?"

"That'd be great! We haven't had a real vacation in ages. Are we taking the pickup or the Coyote?"

"I think the pickup would be better, the traction might be needed if we run into any snow. The heater works pretty good, so we shouldn't freeze or anything. Maybe I'll borrow some snow tires."

McCormick looked up. "How long have you known about this? You seem to have it all planned out. I know you, it takes you ages to organize a vacation. Or do you have some case planed on the way to Clarence?" His suspicions rose; he wouldn't put anything past Hardcastle. And due to his schooling, the Judge was forced to behave himself. McCormick would accept nothing less than total abstinence from criminal chasing, afraid his friend would wind up hurt or dead. Surprisingly enough, Hardcastle had agreed. Now he wondered if this was why he was being taken along.

"No case. But I have known about this for a while," Hardcastle admitted. "I was trying to think of a way out of going there."

The dryer shut off and McCormick busied himself emptying it before he said what was on his mind. "Is it because of what happened there, the last time?"

"Nah, kid, I've put that away. It's the past, no sense in dwelling on it. I just don't like having to put up with Gerald and the aunts fussing about and all the various cousins that show up at one of these things. It's one big pain."

A bit wistfully, McCormick sighed. "Sounds nice to me." He picked up the basketful of clean clothes and edged past Hardcastle, heading for the bedrooms on the second floor.

Hardcastle trailed after him, stopping outside the den. "You won't say that after you get caught in that mass of people, all jabbering about what horrible things you did as a kid, filling you up with different homemade foods, full of good cheer, but only for the holidays. The rest of the year, they're all grouches who don't want anything to do with you."

Halfway up the stairs, McCormick tried to imagine it. Christmas for him was being alone in the dingy one-room apartment that his mother rented for an unreasonable sum of money while she worked a special shift at the local diner. It was more money, something they had little enough of. It meant a warmed-over turkey dinner after his mom got home at three a.m., too tired to do more than watch her bastard son open a tiny present or two. It was usually something simple, like candy or a toy car, but once, it had been a Mickey Mouse watch. It didn't even matter to him that it was from a pawn shop and didn't keep good time, it was the most beautiful thing he had seen in his seven years. And even that family feeling had ended when his mother died six years later. Most of the foster homes he had been put into did it for the money or the community good will or, in a few cases, they could get children to torment or worse. A real family, to fawn over you, that was something very special to McCormick and he wouldn't miss the get-together in Clarence for the world. And getting to hear more 'Hardcastle as a kid' stories would only put the icing on the cake.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is fun, Judge. I've never panned for gold before." McCormick leaned over the wire-bottomed pie plate, his eyes glowing. He was concentrating so hard that his tongue was sticking out between his lips.

Hardcastle watched with a tolerant, fond smile on his face. They must've stopped at every two-bit roadside operation before arriving in Denver, Colorado. An overgrown kid, that's what Hardcastle sometimes treated McCormick like, but it was true on this trip. Every place they went, McCormick viewed with wide-eyed wonder, no sign of the ex-con/hustler/cynic who acted so tough.

"I've got one! Judge, I've got a chunk of gold!"

Amused, Hardcastle leaned closer, peering at the tiny bit of yellow rock nestled in the mud at the bottom of the pie plate. "Yeah, looks like you've struck it rich, kiddo. Wanna magnifying glass?"

McCormick frowned, 'stalking off to find the mine's guide and instructor in

the fine art of panning for gold. He passed the only other occupants of the mine, a young Oriental family of three, intently staring into the muddy water from the nearby sluice.

Hardcastle followed along behind the younger man. McCormick was head to head with the pretty blonde woman who supervised the mining/tourist operation. She was picking the nugget out of the pan with a tweezer and putting it in a glass vial filled with clear water, handing it to McCormick. He held it up to the skimpy yellow light, gazing at the dull rock resting on the bottom of the glass tube. He seemed entranced, and Hardcastle's smile softened.

"You ready to go? We can get quite a few miles in before we have to stop for the night."

McCormick looked up, his eyes distant. "Huh?"

Hardcastle jingled the GMC's keys in front of his nose. "Drive. Truck. Now?"

"Oh, right. Sure, let's go. Got my souvenir, don't I? Sure you don't want anything? A T-shirt, maybe?"

Hardcastle pushed the grinning McCormick up the tunnel, laughing at the self-satisfied smirk on his face. "You're driving, but try to keep that noise you call music to a dull roar, okay?"

The agreement had been that the driver got to choose the radio station, to each man's sorrow when the station was on something the other didn't particularly care for. McCormick would catnap during some of the more sedate pieces of music. Hardcastle would attempt to do the same while McCormick drove, but "I Can't Drive 55" and "I Didn't Mean to Turn You On" at the loudest decibel was not conducive to sleep.

"Haven't you ever gone sightseeing before? I mean, considering all the places you've visited during your days on the racing circuit, I'd think you'd have been to so many tourist traps that you'd be tired of them," Hardcastle said as McCormick guided the pickup down the highway.

"Never had the time -- or the money, most of the time. That's why walking on the boardwalk in Atlantic City when I was a kid was such a big event. Goin' to these places alone is kinda strange, everybody looked at you. So I never did."

The explanation was simple, no hearts and flowers sympathy bid, but Hardcastle read more into it than McCormick meant to reveal. A lonely childhood, few friends during his early years and an attitude that didn't allow him the "weakness" of childlike pleasures, all of which made Hardcastle glad he had agreed to make all the various stops they had.

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"I'm beat. Are we heading straight through to Clarence or can we stop for the night?" McCormick yawned, hunched over the steering wheel. He had been driving all day and was exhausted. It was almost dinner time and they hadn't seen any signs of civilization in hours. The roadmap showed a small town a few miles down the way and McCormick was ready to call it a day.

Hardcastle studied the map, estimating distances. "I think we'll see if this Silver Hills has a motel. That way, we'll be rested when we drive into Clarence. If I know Aunt Mae and Aunt Zora, they'll want to talk for hours when we arrive."

"Sounds good to me."

They drove on, the heater working full-blast and barely making a dent in the freezing cold outside. While it wasn't snowing now, there had been over three feet of white stuff in the last two days, making driving hazardous. McCormick sighed. He was a Floridian, that's what he considered himself after living for so long in the south. Snow was something you heard about, not drove in. And

his years in California hadn't trained him any better. He had told Hardcastle that when it snowed in New Jersey when he was a kid, he had taken public transportation. Of course, what he hadn't mentioned was that they didn't allow him to use the family car in the last foster home he had stayed in when he got his learner's permit.

McCormick cut his speed down as they entered Silver Hills' town limits. The first thing they passed was a large house, set back off the road and surrounded by a spiked metal fence. The yard was covered with debris sticking up out of the snow. There was a bridge to the grounds over a deep ravine that had a river rushing through it. The water was deep enough and fast enough to keep from freezing.

"There's a motel," McCormick called out, pulling into the motel parking lot and stopping outside the neon-lit registration office.

"Good. I'll sign us up. I could use some food, maybe they can recommend a restaurant."

Hardcastle got out of the pickup, stopping to look back at McCormick who was staring at the motel, frowning. "What's wrong?"

Visibly shaking himself, McCormick replied slowly. "I...don't know. I don't like this place. Maybe there's a Holiday Inn nearby?"

"I doubt it. You're just tired. A hot shower, some food, and you'll feel okay again. I'll be back in a minute." Hardcastle walked into the office, his breath fogging in the cold.

McCormick got out of the truck after shutting off the engine. He looked at the motel and shivered again, but not from the winter chill. The place gave him the creeps. It reminded him of something horrific, but he couldn't quite pin it down.

Whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant. And there was the house, situated on a gentle hill overlooking the motel. McCormick would've bet his last dime that the owner of the motel lived in that house. The house was old, decrepid. It almost looked like... "the Bates' house." McCormick swore. If that was the Bates' house, then this would be the Bates' Motel.

Hardcastle came out of the office carrying a key to their room. "Come this way, bring the truck and park it at this spot. Mr. Anderson gave us the first room next to the office. The others don't have hot water." The Judge stood outside the door to Room 1, waiting. "McCormick, are you listening?"

"Judge, can't we go on? I don't like this place. It's like something out of PSYCHO."

"You're out of PSYCHO, kid. Get the truck over here and bring our bags inside. Now." Hardcastle's order was tinged with exhaustion.

"Yessir," McCormick replied, climbing back in the GMC and sliding into the parking space, stopping abruptly, just short of Hardcastle.

"I'm gonna take a shower, then you'll do the same. Then we'll find the local diner, and relax over a good meal." Hardcastle unpacked his bag, leaving it opened on the bed near the wall.

"A shower? After what I told you this place reminds me of? You're a cruel man, Judge." McCormick looked around the small room uneasily. He knew he'd check for peepholes before he got under the water.

McCormick laid back on the other bed, staring at the ceiling. He could hear Hardcastle's rendition of "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" in the shower and laughed. Somehow he had never thought of the Judge as singing in the bathroom, although most everyone did it. Well, he admonished himself, he should be thinking of the fun he would be having in Clarence with Hardcastle's aunts and brother, Jerry, not some stupid fantasy about killers that only exist in books and movies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hardcastle came out of the bathroom already dressed in soft blue jeans and a warm flannel hunting shirt. He gazed fondly down at the bed where McCormick had fallen into a half-sleep. He nudged the younger man roughly.

"Wha?" McCormick jumped upright, his blue eyes wide open.

"I'm done in there. Hurry and get cleaned up, we'll get some food. Mr. Atwood said there's a diner within walking distance."

"Who's Atwood?"

"The manager of this motel. Owner, too, from what I understand. He's an old man, in his late eighties and strong as a bull."

"Walk, huh?"

"Yeah, good for you, get out in that fresh air."

"Hmmm," McCormick grumbled from force of habit. "Good for me? Yeah, I love getting pneumonia."

"Clear your lungs out of the L.A. pollution." Hardcastle continued teasing him as McCormick dragged some clean towels off the dressing table.

McCormick strolled into the bathroom, steam from the Judge's shower blowing out in a tiny puff as the door closed.

Restless, Hardcastle decided to go ahead to the diner. He scribbled a quick note to McCormick, leaving it on the other man's suitcase. He shrugged into the thick sheepskin coat and slipped out the door.

The walk to the diner was invigorating, the air crisp and clean. Hardcastle knew that McCormick wouldn't appreciate his disappearing, but after hours in the pickup, the Judge needed the walk to stretch his legs. And Hardcastle knew from long experience that his friend might be in the shower for an hour. McCormick loved water.

There was hardly anyone in the diner when Hardcastle went inside. A young woman about McCormick's age was standing behind the counter, talking to an older man dressed in a brown police uniform. A typical truck-stop style cook was scraping the crud off the grill with a spatula. A teenager and his girl sat in a back booth munching on large hamburgers, giggling at the ketchup dripping on the formica table top.

"Hi, help you, sir?" The waitress ambled over to the booth where Hardcastle sat, next to a window facing the motel. He wanted to see McCormick when the man was on his way.

"No, I'm waiting for a friend. A cup of coffee would be nice, thank you." He glanced at the nametag pinned to the woman's pink blouse. "Pat?"

"Yessir, it's really Patricia, but that wouldn't fit on the tag. Coffee, cream and sugar?"

"No, thanks." Hardcastle took the menu that Patricia offered, scanning it in fond remembrance of diners from his past. Simple food like chicken fried steak, fried chicken and white gravy were the staples of a roadside diner. All heavy with grease and oil, considered bad food by nutritionists, but filling to people on the road. People like truck drivers and motorcycle cops forced to eat at all hours of the day and night.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Judge, I was thinking. You're right, much though I hate to admit that. My imagination did get away from me. Crazy, thinking this place looked like the Bates' Motel. That's just a movie. And a book, of course."

McCormick's complaining died away when he realized that he was alone in the room. He had a towel around his head, drying his hair vigorously.

Grimacing, he found the note and strained to decipher the scribble. "Damn, Judge, gotta get you a portable typewriter if you're gonna write like a doctor."

He got into warmer clothes from his luggage and put his sheepskin coat, a present from Hardcastle, over a heavy sweater. He was feeling the cold more

than the Judge, to Hardcastle's delight. Lectures about his eating, living and sleeping habits filled a lot of the monotonous hours spent driving through the middle of nowhere.

McCormick opened the door after making sure he had the room key. Pulling the door till he heard a click, he started to walk towards the 50ish diner down the road across the street from the gas station.

"Excuse me?"

The voice was loud and forceful and McCormick turned to see a man who had to be Atwood, the owner/manager of the motel from Hardcastle's description which was right on target. "Yes sir?"

"Are you staying with Mr. Hardcastle?" Atwood was eyeing McCormick suspiciously.

"Yeah. The Ju-Hardcastle's at the diner waiting for me. Something I can do for you, sir?" McCormick was patient, understanding that Atwood hadn't seen him when the Judge checked in and men Hardcastle's age didn't usually have guys his age traveling with them.

"Oh."

"If there is nothing else, I've got to get going. He's waiting for me." McCormick turned away and was startled to feel a dull poke in the small of his back.

"This is a gun, a very small but efficient gun. If you try to move, I'll kill you." Atwood's voice was menacingly low.

"You'll never get away with it." The old guy was crazy, he had to be.

"I wouldn't bet on that, boy, if I were you. Move."

Walking slowly back to where the path led to the old house, McCormick tried to figure it out. In desperation, he grabbed at a straw. "It's a joke. Hardcastle put you up to this, didn't he? That sly dog. I've got to think of something really terrible to get him back." He looked back at Atwood. "What were we supposed to do?"

Atwood frowned, the gun lowering slightly. "What?"

"Okay, you pull a gun on me -- lucky I didn't try and take it from you, I could've hurt you by accident -- and we walk towards the house. Then what?"

"We...we go inside. You think this is a joke, a trick by your friend?"

"I can see his fine hand in this, without a doubt. Alright, to the house it is." McCormick walked peacefully alongside Atwood, grinning as various schemes came to him. He ignored the questions about why Hardcastle would play such a trick; it made more sense as a joke than his premonition being correct.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I wonder what's keeping him." Hardcastle was standing at the counter, talking with the cook about the chances of the Rams making it to the Super Bowl after their disappointing start.

"Water pressure is a little low here, Judge. Maybe he decided to take a bath instead." Mac, the cook, slung another order of fries on the counter. The teens were still in the diner, making their way through the fourth order of french fries they had ordered since the Judge had come in.

"Yeah, he probably is. Craziest thing, the kid was spouting about the motel reminding him of the Bates' place, in PSYCHO. Considering how Janet Leigh bought it in the film, I imagine he's not too thrilled with the idea of a shower. Maybe I shouldn't have left him alone. But the Bates' Motel?" He chuckled as he shook his head.

"Don't laugh, Judge. He wasn't that far wrong."

Hardcastle moved aside for Patricia to sit next to him. "What are you talking about?"



"Well, my mother remembers seeing that writer guy, what was his name? Oh, Bloch, Robert Bloch. Anyway, he came to town when she worked here, doing the same thing I'm doing now. See, that book and that movie were based on a case that happened here, a long time ago."

"I remember that. I was a deputy then," the cop chimed in. "I'm a sheriff now, Judge. Seems that Homer's wife ran off with a traveling salesman and took the only son with them. Homer is Atwood's first name. He took it hard, 'specially when the boy died in a car accident. He blamed the salesman."

"And?" Hardcastle asked.

"He blamed him so much, he had a nervous breakdown. And when he was released a few years later from the sanatorium, he started killing men who looked like that salesman. He got put back in the hospital, for the criminally insane. Yep, all the victims were about thirty to forty years old, slim, charming, with brown curly hair. . ."

"My God, Mark!" Hardcastle jumped up, stiff-arming through the diner door at a run.

The sheriff ran after him. "What?"

"That description. It fits McCormick."

With a moment's hesitation, the sheriff ran after Hardcastle. They got to the motel and found everything quiet. Hardcastle's hand shook as he unlocked the motel room door, stopping inside, unable to walk into the bathroom.

Understanding, the sheriff slipped past the Judge and went into the small room, his gun in his hand. He came back out smiling. "No sign of him here."

Hardcastle sagged against the wall. "Then where is he? The truck's still out there and he didn't pass us. There's no other place to go."

"Let's see if we can find Homer," the sheriff said, keeping his gun out of its holster.

They went to the office and found it locked tight. A quick glance in the window showed it to be empty. Hardcastle headed for the house, the sheriff trying to slow him down.

"Procedures, Judge. You should know them by heart. I can't go busting into a man's home. We don't know if Homer even saw your friend. Maybe McCormick went exploring or is trying to give you a scare."

"No. You don't know him like I do. You might not be able to go in his house, but I can -- and will. That madman could be doing almost anything to McCormick. I have to stop him, find them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Once inside the house, uncomfortably warm, McCormick pulled his coat off. The old man was still holding the gun, apparently confused by the turn of events. "Look, Mr. Atwood, what's gonna happen next? I mean, was the Judge supposed to find us here or what? God, do you know your heater's about to have a nervous breakdown?"

The first slash caught him unaware, slicing neatly down his right shoulder to his nipple. McCormick stared at the blood seeping from the sweater, shocked. "What are you..?"

"You killed my son!" Atwood shouted, as he came at McCormick again with the knife he had been hiding in his other hand.

"Your son? I don't even know you." McCormick backpedaled, feeling the paper thin cut slice across his upheld palm as the knife slashed down at him. He knew he had to get out of the house, get as far away from Homer Atwood as possible, but the front door was behind his assailant and the knife. It was all true. The old man was a psycho, else why use a knife when you have a gun? He spun on his heels and raced down the hall, praying for a back door and escape.

He scrambled through a dusty kitchen, yanking uselessly on the only other door. It was bolted shut, the large picture window criss-crossed with wood planks. He could hear Atwood shuffling nearer and frantically dug through the drawers, looking for a weapon of his own. It was a hopeless search. The kitchen had been stripped clean of pots, pans and utensils. Three inches of dust and a couple of dead cockroaches didn't make much of a weapon.

Before McCormick could run back out of the room, Atwood arrived, his eyes shining in the dim light. They stared at each other, neither moving. The man's insane strength made the chances of getting past him almost non-existent. Then McCormick spotted an old dumbwaiter, diving into it and working the ropes that ran through the middle. The blood pouring from his hand made it slippery-going, but he managed. He was below the kitchen level when he heard an evil cackle.

Atwood was sawing through the rope from above, making the dumbwaiter shake and shiver. It wouldn't take too long, McCormick knew, before the precision sharp instrument completed its job. He gave up the race to the bottom and tried to brace himself in the cramped box. His knees were already against his chest, the rope between them. Debating the relative merits of cushioning his head on his knees, McCormick wrapped his arms tightly around his legs, praying that he wouldn't fall far. Both wounds were beginning to smart, the soft anesthetizing shock wearing off.

The drop, though expected, was still sudden. McCormick felt his stomach lurch, the queasiness similar to his one and only ride on the Cyclone, Coney Island's wooden roller coaster. He didn't like having no control; though after all the years with Hardcastle, lack of control should've been something he was used to.

The dumbwaiter smacked into the dirt floor of the basement and tipped over, tossing McCormick painfully out onto his side. He lay there, panting, wondering if he had boxed himself in. The faint echoes of Atwood's footsteps came from above him. There was very little time left. He had to get moving and fast.

Pushing himself off the floor, McCormick cradled his slashed hand against his stomach. His eyes darted about the basement, desperate for a sign of light. Atwood had arrived. But the door to the upper levels of the house must've been barricaded, considering the racket he could hear.

A light, a chink from across the room spurred McCormick on. He walked slowly, afraid of what he might trip over in the darkness. He made it safely and pried at the wood. It wouldn't budge. McCormick felt the outline of the door. It came to him what it was.

"A root cellar, like in the WIZARD OF OZ."

He needed to push, not pull, and so he did, leaning his unwounded shoulder into it.

"I've got you!" Atwood screamed, breaking through just as the large cellar doors popped open.

McCormick chinned himself up and out, grimacing as the cuts both widened painfully. The cool snow felt soothing and he grabbed a handful, packing it under his sweater and into the throbbing wound which was still bleeding, though at a slower pace.

He climbed to his feet and began running. McCormick was lightheaded, disoriented. He couldn't place the motel and diner's location in relationship with the house, so he contented himself with flat-out running for his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hardcastle pounded on the Atwood door, afraid he might be too late. There was a feeling deep in his gut -- an ex-cop's hunch -- that his friend was in terrible trouble and there was no time to lose.

Sheriff Mike Summers, sensing that fear, didn't attempt to stop the Judge when he busted the door in. He followed Hardcastle in, ostentatiously to make sure nothing was stolen.

It was in the kitchen that Summers became a serious cop once again. "Judge Hardcastle, over here!"

Hardcastle rushed to where Summers was kneeling. There was a small splatter of blood on the floor, drops leading to an open shaft. The hacked apart rope was smeared with more blood.

"He's hurt," Hardcastle growled.

"Somebody sure is. Come on, let's get down there." Summers led the way outside, circling the old mansion, his caution more pronounced.

They headed for the cellar door, but the bloody clumps of snow and the set of footprints partially obliterated by a second set told their own story.

"They're on the move," the sheriff observed.

"And the kid isn't wearing his coat." Hardcastle had found it thrown over a chair in the hallway.

"Storm's brewing, not to mention nightfall. We'd better find them fast. Here, you take my flashlight. We might need it."

Hardcastle nodded, his haggard face set in stone. He pulled his own coat, a duplicate of McCormick's, tight around him, the collar up behind his neck. It was snowing again, light flakes landing gently on the already fallen snow. Accustomed to walking in deep snow, Hardcastle wondered how his sun-loving friend was faring.

The two men set out, trudging through the piles of dirty snow, their eyes alternating between the ragged trail and the trees up ahead.

McCormick was wandering in a loose, zig-zag fashion, large holes in the snow where he'd fall, then climb up to his feet again. Each fall left traces of blood in the snow, and Hardcastle wondered just how badly McCormick was injured.

It was bitterly cold, the slate grey skies turning to almost black as the snow began to fall in earnest.

"If we get a blizzard, we'll never find them." Summers' breath came out in soft puffs of white.

"I'll find McCormick, don't worry about that. I have to find him. We've got a family dinner to attend." It seemed a silly thing to say, Hardcastle knew, but all he could see were his whole family staring accusingly if he arrived in Clarence alone.

"Shh," Summers ordered, dropping to the ground. "There's someone up ahead."

Hardcastle clenched his fists as he crouched over. He was a man of action, waiting was difficult for him. "Can you see anything?"

"No...yeah, two shadows. Damn it." Summers jumped to his feet, the pistol tightly gripped in his hand. "Drop it, Homer. Now!"

Hardcastle blinked rapidly, the tiny flakes dropping off his eyelashes. It was hazy, but he soon made out Atwood standing over a dark shape, his arm raised, the knife glinting in the beam of the sheriff's flashlight Hardcastle was carrying.

Atwood turned and stared at them, cackling as the knife began its downward thrust. The shot echoed through the woods. The blood that sprayed the white snow seemed Crayola red, it was so startlingly bright.

Atwood's body crumpled to the ground, a wadded up piece of garbage that was no longer of use. As one, Summers and Hardcastle moved closer, only their intended destinations different.

Summers bent next to Atwood, flipping the knife away from the dead man. There was a bullet hole in the thorax, a bit higher than where he had aimed, but sufficient to kill Atwood.

Hardcastle took in the dead body at a glance, then knelt next to McCormick's too still form. There was frozen blood all over his ripped sweater and frost on his skin. If it wasn't for the tiny clouds of condensation, Hardcastle would've thought he was looking at an ice statue.

"I'll get the 4-wheel. An ambulance'll take too long," Summers said, running off into the darkness.

Hardcastle nodded distractedly as he shrugged his coat off. He gently pulled McCormick up into his arms, resting the white-flecked head against his shoulder. Then the coat was draped snugly over the unconscious man's chest and the Judge, sitting on the snow, huddled around his friend, trying to pass his own body warmth into the frighteningly cold McCormick.

"So cold," the murmur was almost too low for Hardcastle to hear.

"Hey, kid, you just hang on. Help's on the way."

"I wanna..." Two overly bright eyes stared up at Hardcastle in confusion.

"What?"

McCormick sighed, shrugging. He snuggled closer, turning his face against the Judge's shirt.

"McCormick? Mark, don't go to sleep." He gripped the man's chin and shook it gently, afraid to touch anywhere else.

"Tired." Single word answers slipped past the blue-tinged lips as if the effort was too much for McCormick.

"Talk to me. Tell me what happened," Hardcastle encouraged. "Why did you go with him?"

McCormick frowned, raising his face from the warmth and security. He didn't seem to know who he was with, the gaze focused far away. "Go with ... who?"

"Atwood. Kid, do you know who I am?"

There was a sweet smile on McCormick's face as he reached up with a bloody hand and touched Hardcastle's chin. "Santa Claus...but you don't gotta beard."

Hardcastle was startled. Now that McCormick said more than one word, he could hear the strains of a little boy, not a thirty-three year old man. And he thought he was Santa Claus? "Do you hurt, son?"

"Nope..uh, no, sir."

"Sure?"

McCormick looked down at the sweater, his frown returning. "Mom's gonna kill me. I'm not supposed to play with the cat."

Tears appeared in the trusting blue eyes and Hardcastle hugged him closer. "She won't hurt you. Nobody's gonna hurt you, Mark."

"Promise?"

"I'm Santa, son, have you ever known me to break my word?"

"You didn't bring my daddy home last year."

"He...he as doing things for me, special things, Mark. Didn't your Mom explain things to you?"

"She said I was bad. That I'm always bad. Momma said that she and daddy didn't want me." The childish voice quavered, muffled against Hardcastle's shirt. "Nobody loves me."

Hardcastle could hear the echo of the young boy, sitting on the fire escape waiting for a father that never returned, a young man standing in court accused of stealing his own car, the man who was fighting to get his only friend's murderer, all rolled into one painfilled person.

"I love you, Mark. I love you very much." Hardcastle rested his chin on the top of McCormick's head, hearing the roar of the 4-wheel approaching.

"Santa?" McCormick pulled away, gasping. "I...no, Judge? What...oh, I think..."

Hardcastle caught him as McCormick sagged forward. The brown 4-wheeler slid

to a halt, Summers jumping out of the vehicle to help the Judge lift the wounded man.

"I've got him." Hardcastle shied away from the assistance, unable to let anyone else touch and, possibly, hurt McCormick more than he'd already been. It would be a long ride back to the town. Longer to the nearest hospital. Hardcastle wanted to comfort and protect the younger man for just a little longer, till he was aware of his surroundings and the game was begun again. A game in which Hardcastle couldn't openly reveal his feelings, content to know that the kid knew, in his heart, how much he was wanted and needed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hum of conversation brought McCormick slowly back to awareness. At first, he couldn't make out the words, only the tone. And the tone was angry, frightened. The fuzziness receded a bit more and the tones fine-tuned into that of three people. One was a man's voice, not Hardcastle's, joking but concerned. The angry voices belonged to two women. All three were familiar, but he couldn't place them.

"You put that boy in danger continually and expect him to get out without a scratch. Don't you care, Milton?"

"Now, ladies..." the man tried to interrupt.

"Hush up, Gerald," one of the women ordered.

The babble faded in and out as McCormick struggled towards consciousness. He wished they would all shut up. He tried to tell them that, but all that came out was a croak. Yet another voice, one who hadn't been speaking earlier, shouted at the others to quiet down. Then, McCormick felt a hand rest on his wrist.

"How you feeling?"

A smile was the best McCormick could dredge up, but the pressure on his wrist made it clear that it was enough. He kept smiling until he faded off again.

The next time he awoke, he felt stronger. Looking around the room, he saw Hardcastle, propped up in a chair, sleeping peacefully. There was a two-day old growth of beard on him and he had shadows under his eyes, but there was a relaxed look to him.

"Judge?" McCormick called, wincing at the harshness of his voice.

"McCormick?" Hardcastle was at the side of the bed instantly.

"Why don't you go home? You look terrible."

"You don't look so great yourself, hotshot. Besides, we're not in California, if you remember. We're in Arkansas, right outside Thomson."

"What happened to Atwood?"

"Dead," Hardcastle replied shortly. "You came out of things pretty good. The cuts weren't deep, just painful. You're lucky it was an old man after you. The worst part was a combination of shock and hypothermia."

"I'm okay? I feel lousy." McCormick pulled the hospital blanket up around his shoulders, glancing at the white bandage. "And tired."

"Yeah, I know. The doctors said you would be for a while. Get some sleep, kiddo." Hardcastle tucked the covers under the mattress.

"Christmas dinner. I missed it?"

"'Fraid so. If you hurry and get well, you can shoot for New Year's. Now, go to sleep. I've caught enough grief from Aunt Mae and Zora to last a lifetime." Hardcastle's face softened as he stared down at McCormick. "And if you behave yourself, I'll even let you have your presents."

McCormick turned his hand over, touching Hardcastle's arm. "I said it once before and I still mean it. You're present enough for me. As long as you're safe, I'm happy."

"You're the damnedest sentimentalist at Christmas, kid." Hardcastle started out of the room. "But, if it means anything to ya, the feeling's the same."

His eyes heavy, McCormick felt himself grinning foolishly. He could remember arms around him, keeping him safe. And, the most important present of all, Hardcastle's voice telling him that he loved him. It was a family Christmas after all. Hardcastle was his family and always would be. He was sure of that now.

\* \* \* \* \*

McCormick sat on the bed, the blankets tangled around his feet and his finger pressed tightly on the remote control for the hospital television set. He was half-dressed, his shirt draped over his shoulders. He had foolishly refused help in dressing and now was too embarrassed to buzz for the nurse. It was ten a.m., over an hour later than Hardcastle was supposed to pick him up. Mild annoyance at the delay in leaving the antiseptic prison was fast becoming anger and a little worry.

He stopped tormenting the control box and let it rest on a local station showing happy weather forecasts. He leaned back in the bed, wincing at the tugging of the bandages on his chest and shoulder. McCormick fumed and fretted and drifted into a half-doze where his imagination could run wild.

He could see Judge Hardcastle on the news, being carried to a waiting ambulance. The pick-up was torn in two, the cab wrapped into a curlicue over the hood. The reporter on the scene discussed the cause of the five car pile-up, but McCormick's eyes were riveted to the edge of the minicam's view and a stretcher that was being covered over.

"No!" McCormick jumped upright, his heart racing.

"McCormick!" Hardcastle ran into the hospital room, McCormick's doctor one step behind him.

The patient stared at Hardcastle, his fear sliding away as he realized it had been a dream. "Where the hell have you been?" McCormick asked sharply.

Ignoring the question, the Judge stared back at him, concern evident in his blue eyes. "What happened? What made you scream like that?"

McCormick waved his hand at the news program. "Bad dream. Got it all mixed up with that accident they were talking about." He smiled sheepishly at the doctor. "Sorry."

"No problem. I've signed your release papers, given Judge Hardcastle instructions on your recovery program and a few prescriptions, so you're free."

"Great." There was little enthusiasm in his voice.

As Hardcastle and McCormick walked down the corridor, slower than normal in deference to the younger man's stiffness for his wounds and the stitches in his shoulder, Hardcastle waited for him to speak. McCormick could feel his eyes on him but didn't want to talk about the attack or the dream or anything.

"McCormick?"

The younger man stopped short, turning to look at the Judge. "I'd rather just go home, Judge. It's over with and we have a New Year's dinner to go to, right?"

Laying his arm on McCormick's shoulder, Hardcastle nodded. "Yep, let's go join the family."

When they reached the GMC, and Hardcastle had helped McCormick into the truck, Hardcastle continued. "At least you'll miss the majority of the Hardcastle clan by having a New Year's dinner instead of Christmas."

"Who'll be there?"

"Aunt Mae and Aunt Zora, cousin Finch and his wife Effie, and a couple of nephews, along with my brother."

"I thought you said the family was mostly gone. That sounds like a lot of people to me."

"There were around twenty more last week, kiddo. Pure pandemonium."

"Oh." McCormick sighed. "Sounds like you had fun."

Hardcastle slowed the vehicle down, pulling to the side of the road. "Son, I wouldn't know about that. I was otherwise occupied while they were here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh. What's eating you?"

"Nuthin'." The mutter was low, but understandable.

"McCormick, when I left you last night, you were all smiles and enthusiasm about getting out of the hospital. What's changed things?"

"I'm scared," came the whispered reply.

"Of what?" Hardcastle frowned.

"Meeting your family. I figured only your aunts would be there. Maybe I should take a plane back to Malibu."

"And have you party while I'm away? Not a chance, hotshot. 'Sides, there's nothing to be scared of in my family, other than being bored to death."

"What are they gonna think of me? I mean, I don't belong there with your blood relatives. I'm an outsider."

"Look at me."

McCormick reluctantly raised his eyes to the Judge's surprisingly gentle ones.

"I'm only gonna say this once, kid, so listen carefully. You're more family than most of the Hardcastles who were at the reunion. I don't have to like you because you're blood. I do like you because I chose to. Got it?"

"Yessir."

Hardcastle continued driving to the Aunts' house, letting the silence grow in the truck. It was a fairly long drive from the hospital to Clarence, time enough for McCormick to take in the almost effusive, for Hardcastle, speech and the emotions behind it.

When they pulled up into the driveway of the modest woodframe house, McCormick put his hand on the Judge's arm. "Thanks."

Harrumphing in embarrassment, Hardcastle pretended not to know what McCormick was referring to.

"Let's eat. If I know your aunts, they'll have enough baked goods to feed an army."

McCormick was engulfed in the anxious arms of Hardcastle's two favorite aunts before he could step on the front porch. Fussed over, he found himself ushered to a comfortable easy chair, plates of cookies, cakes and other sweet edibles piled onto his lap and a large pitcher of lemonade on the side table. He found himself more than comfortable as the man who had married the Judge's favorite cousin, Effie Lamont, now Fitch, regaled him with tales of the Judge's younger days. Soon the aunts chimed in and Gerald added a few tall tales of his own over Hardcastle's loud blustery protests.

McCormick laughed till he grimaced in pain and the Judge called an end to the bull session. It was an evening like McCormick had heard of. There was a jigsaw puzzle on a card table in one corner of the small living room, the five nieces and nephews played Monopoly on the kitchen table until the aunts needed it for dinner, Hardcastle and Gerald were playing poker with Fitch and McCormick. It was a happy evening for the younger man, and he couldn't seem to stop smiling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hardcastle stood and stretched. The poker game had broken up when the fourth

player fell asleep on his cards, head buried in the unwounded arm. Working the kinks out of his back, the Judge had Gerald pull the table away while he picked McCormick up and carried him into the bedroom they would be sharing.

"Need help, Milt?" Gerald asked as Hardcastle struggled with the sleeping body.

"Nope, I'll take care of him."

Aunt Mae nodded vigorously. "See that you do, Milton. Just see that you do."

Carefully walking to the bed, Hardcastle laid the still sleeping man down, pulling the quilt up and over him. The change caused McCormick to murmur and move restlessly, but Hardcastle quieted him down with a gentle hand and a soft admonishment to settle down. "You could use the sleep more than food, kiddo. I'll have my aunts save you a plate. You just sleep."

He sat on the edge of the bed, watching McCormick's boyish face. The signs of strain were beginning to fade, the pain that was etched in his face lessening as time passed.

"Milt?" Gerald, the Judge's brother, came into the bedroom. "How is he?"

"Okay."

"But?"

Hardcastle looked up, shrugging. "Nothing. Let's see what the others are doing, let him have some quiet."

"You were worried about him, weren't you? Why can't you just admit you care for him? It's not a crime, Milt." Gerald leaned over and tucked the quilt under McCormick's feet.

"That's between the two of us."

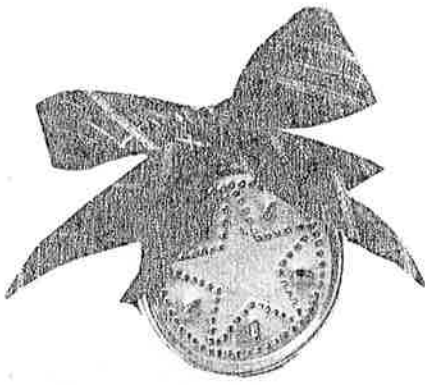
"Milt, you mean it's between you. I doubt that you've ever said it to him." Gerald left Hardcastle musing over what he had said.

"I guess he's right, hotshot. I never felt I had to say the words. Don't know if I could, tell ya the truth." Moving back to the bed, Hardcastle let his hand rest for a moment on McCormick's forehead. "But you do know, of that I'm sure."

He walked back into the living room, unaware of two bright blue eyes watching him and a happy smile barely hidden by the bright, handmade quilt.

# Season's Greetings





## A Not-So-

## Silent Night

By: Darlene Fisher

"That's great, Sonny. I'm sorry you can't make it, either. Yeah, everyone's here. I will. I'm counting on you to bring the house down, you hear? Okay. Merry Christmas to you, too, Dad."

Mark McCormick gently hung up the receiver of the kitchen telephone. As he leaned back against the counter, he was torn between happiness for his father's landing the Christmas dinner show at one of Atlantic City's larger casinos and disappointment that he wouldn't be able to make the large family gathering at Gulls-Way for the holiday.

"What's the matter, dear? Is something wrong?"

Mark started slightly, not having heard "Aunt" May come into the room. He smiled at her concern.

"No, Aunt May, everything's fine. Sonny just called to tell me he can't make it here for our Christmas. He has to work."

"Oh, what a shame, dear. And Zora and I were so counting on getting to meet your father. Milton has told us so much about him."

"He's sorry he can't make it, either. He wanted me to give everyone his love, though. Maybe next year . . ."

May set about refilling a large tray of crystal cups with Hardcastle's famous eggnog. After returning the icy pitcher to the refrigerator, she turned to the heavily laden tray and started to pick it up, but Mark intercepted it.

"Here, Aunt May, let me get that for you."

"Thank you, dear. You're such a gentleman."

She smiled at the slight reddish tinge to Mark's cheeks as he turned toward the living room with the refreshments.

After slowly making his way through the crowded room, Mark set the tray down on a table decorated with all the traditional Hardcastle Christmas delicacies, most of which had been made by May and Zora during the past week. The rich aromas of holiday breads and candies filled the room, making Mark sniff in appreciation. Picking up a piece of rocky road candy and popping it into his mouth, Mark turned and surveyed the crowd. The turnout had exceeded even the Judge's expectations.

Scanning the festively decorated room, Mark tried to focus on the guests he knew best: he saw Frank and Claudia Harper, his old "roomie" Teddy, Barbara Johnson and her fiance, Jerry Hardcastle, police Lieutenants Delaney and Giles and their wives, Aunts May and Zora, and E. J. Corlette and his newest girlfriend, all mingled in among what seemed like half the Los Angeles Police Department and all of the L. A. County judicial system, as well as many of Mark's new friends from the university.

"Who was on the phone, kiddo?"

"Oh, sorry, Judge, I didn't hear you come up. It was Sonny. He's not coming out for Christmas after all, He got a gig for a Christmas dinner show at one of the casinos."

"Yeah, well, that figures . . ." Hardcastle saw the spark in McCormick's eyes and bit his tongue. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I'm sure he would've made it if it was at all possible."

"Yeah, sure, Judge."

"Aw, come on, McCormick, don't go gettin' all depressed on me. It's Christmas Eve, and we got a house full of guests that you insisted we invite over for an "intimate" little get together..."

"Me? Judge, I don't even know half these people. This little shebang was your idea!"

"Nonsense! Don't go blaming me because your family reunion backfired."

"Milton! Is that any way to talk on Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, uh, no, Aunt Zora, I guess it isn't."

Hardcastle caught a glimpse of McCormick standing behind the elderly lady with a big, shiteating grin on his face. He gave Mark his best scowl, but it didn't deter his friend's obvious enjoyment of his being "put in his place" by Zora.

"Now, Milton," Zora continued, "Mark is very upset because his father can't join us, so you should be extra nice to him, instead of causing a scene."

Mark nodded solemnly, the stupid smile still plastered on his face.

The Judge put on his best shiteating grin, and responded, "Yes, I do. In fact, 'Markie', why don't you come with me into the kitchen, and we can discuss this whole matter?"

Mark's grin faded. "Uh, that's okay, Judge. I accept your apology. No hard feelings, really." He took a quick step backwards and bumped solidly into Frank Harper. "Oh, sorry, Frank. Did I spill your drink? Here, let me get you a fresh one..."

Before the shaken, and slightly baffled police lieutenant could respond, Mark had jerked the full glass from his hand and was beating a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

Hardcastle watched the young man disappear through the swinging door, then turned to Frank. "Did you get it all set?"

"Yeah. He'll be here at midnight. You sure Mark doesn't suspect anything?"

"I know he doesn't. He'll really be surprised. Now, if Sonny doesn't screw it all up..."

"He won't, Milt. He's really looking forward to this. He's been doing nothing but pacing my house for the last three days. He's as excited as a... Well, as a kid on Christmas."

Mark reappeared from the kitchen with Frank's glass. "Here ya go, Frank." He quickly glanced from the policeman to the Judge, then back again. "Okay, what'd I miss?"

Frank shrugged as Hardcastle replied, "Frank was telling me about this great little diner that makes a great bowl of chili. Maybe we'll go there for dinner tomorrow."

"Chili? A diner? For Christmas?!"

"Yeah, you're right, I did already make the reservations at Barney's. We'll save this place for New Year's."

"Judge..."

"Don't whine in front of the guests, McCormick. We'll talk about it later."

Suddenly the air was filled with soft strands of carols coming from the front porch. Everyone became quiet as Hardcastle and McCormick pulled open the double front doors. There, clad in elves costumes and singing "Jingle Bells", was the entire membership of the Malibu chapter of the Welcome Wagon.

Mark softly whistled his appreciation of the bevy of scantily clad beauties before him, and quickly scanned the nametags emblazoned upon their ample chests: Judy, Liz, Melinda, Ann, Robbie, Teri, Darlene, Shirley, Vejae, Cindy, Ruth, Rowena, Sandra, Mysti, and Sue-Anne. They returned Mark's look of appreciation.

After several more carols, the girls turned and started down the walkway, amid the applause of the houseful of partiers.

As Hardcastle moved to close the doors, Mark quickly stepped outside. "I'm gonna make sure they make it down the drive all right," he offered sheepishly at Hardcastle's glare.

"Okay, but don't go wanderin' off with 'em, McCormick. We still got a lot of party left."

"Right, Judge. I'll be right back."

|| § || § ||

"Where the hell is McCormick?" Hardcastle growled at Delaney.

"Oh, relax, Milt, he's only been gone a half hour. We still have plenty of time."

"I swear he just does things like this to drive me crazy..."

The sound of the front door closing caught Hardcastle's attention. McCormick slipped nonchalantly in among the rest of the crowd. The Judge looked at his watch, saw that it was 11:25, and sighed in relief. That was too close. With only thirty-five minutes to go, Hardcastle was going to make sure McCormick stayed in sight.

|| § || § ||

As the clock approached midnight, a sound of sleigh bells filled the air. Suddenly, the front door burst open and "Santa Claus" rushed in, 'Ho, ho, ho'-ing in a most familiar voice.

"Sonny!" Mark gasped.

Sonny held open his arms and Mark stepped into them.

"What...when...I thought you couldn't make it!" Mark finally managed to sputter.

"Hey, kid, what's Christmas without Santa, huh?"

Mark turned to the Judge, "You did this, didn't you?"

Hardcastle looked at Sonny. "No, kiddo, we did this."

Mark looked from the Judge to Sonny, and back again. He shook his head. "You guys are somethin' else, you know that?"

"Now yer cookin'!"

Sonny merely tightened his hug, then held Mark at arm's length. "Okay, now tell Santa, have you been a good boy this year?"

Hardcastle replied, "He's been a very good boy this year."

Mark blushed slightly, then smiled.

"Okay, then, Santa has a special present for very good boys. Here ya go, kid."

Mark reached up and caught the set of keys tossed to him. He held them up, then looked at Hardcastle questioningly.

"It's out in the driveway, kiddo," he said quietly.

"You're kidding! Wow!" Mark turned and raced from the room, quickly followed by Hardcastle, Sonny, and the rest of the large group.

There, gleaming in the light of the full moon, sat a sleek, new, silver Fiero. Mark stood still, admiring it.

"Aren't ya gonna get in and give it a test drive?"

Mark turned to the Judge. "This is incredible. You didn't need to do this."

"I know I didn't need to. I wanted to. Now, go on, get out of here!" Hardcastle gently nudged him toward the driver's door.

Mark quickly embraced the Judge, ignoring his protesting growl. Then he hugged Sonny again. "Thanks, you guys. I don't know what to say..."

"You don't have to say anything, kiddo."

Mark smiled again before disappearing into the sleek interior of the sports car. The engine turned over and the car rolled toward the front gates, quickly gaining speed.

Sonny smiled at the Judge, then slung his arm over Hardcastle's shoulders as they headed back into the house with the rest of the revelers.

And to all it was a Merry Christmas, and to all a good night...

Except for the fifteen members of the Malibu Welcome Wagon who waited ever-so-patiently for Mark's return to the Gatehouse--they had a great night!!

The End?

Don't you believe it!





YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS...

AND HIS NAME IS HARDCASTLE



By: Mike Christopher

The day was a P.R.'s dream: Bright blue sky and deep blue ocean; white fluffy clouds drifting lazily on a gentle breeze; the sun glinting on distant whitecaps, warming the day to a pleasant 82°. The trees and shrubs were green, flowers bloomed profusely, and birds chirped and twittered. It was a perfect day in almost any context you cared to choose. Unfortunately, Hardcastle considered as he approached the Gatehouse, you weren't always able to choose; and perhaps this was not everyone's ideal weather when Christmas was only four days away.

Opening the French doors, he found, as expected, the sole occupant curled up disconsolately in an armchair, staring out the window at the glorious summertime beauty outside.

He didn't acknowledge Hardcastle's presence, except to complain, "Lookit that. Disgusting."

"What's your problem?"

"If ya didn't have a calendar, it might as well be July out there."

"Nah, it tops 90 in July."

"Snow. There should be snow on Christmas. Lots of snow, and icicles, and --"

"You want snow and ice, go back East."

"I said 'snow,' not a two-month blizzard."

Both McCormick's tone and attitude hinted at melancholy, which was unlike Mark -- especially during Christmas holidays. He was usually so up, overflowing with Christmas cheer.

"You want to go get the tree today? Only a few days to go, ya know."

"Yeah," the response was low and lacking in enthusiasm, "I guess so."

Hardcastle stepped over to him, placed a hand against his forehead, "You OK, kid?"

Seeing the concern in Hardcastle's eyes, McCormick managed a smile, "Sure, Hardcase; I'm fine. It's just that it's been a long time since I had a White Christmas. I kinda miss it -- usually at the rate of once a year."

"Com'on, then; let's get over to the tree lot before all the good ones are gone."

McCormick jumped to his feet, eyes lighting up. "Let's get a big tree this time. The one we got last year didn't even reach the ceiling. Okay?" He added hopefully.

Hardcastle grinned; this was more like the McCormick he knew. "Yep. The biggest one you can carry."

\* || \* || \*

Three hours later, the truck halted in the drive, and the Judge and McCormick carefully unloaded a ten foot Scotch pine.

Half-carrying, half-dragging the pine into the den, Hardcastle laughed, "Kid, you're not gonna get done trimmin' this monster until after Christmas. And if the tree isn't finished, Santa won't leave any presents." He leaned it against the wall as McCormick unboxed the tree stand. "It's a good thing we didn't get that Blue Spruce you liked -- it would've been two feet too tall. Told ya we needed a ten-footer -- I have done this before, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You just didn't want to shell out the \$120 bucks. It was a living tree, Judge. We coulda planted it later." Clearing a large space by the fireplace, he positioned the tree in the stand, and began securing the clamps.

"Don't need any more trees," Hardcastle grunted as he shifted the weight, tilting

the tree slightly until it was upright. "OK, tighten 'em up."

"Cheap," McCormick continued, "you'd rather throw away \$40 bucks in five days, than spend a little more on one that would last forever."

"I didn't hear you offerin' to kick in half; \$20 looked a lot better to you than \$60."

"Yeah, well, I sorta had other plans for that extra \$40."

"Uh huh. What's her name?"

McCormick grinned, not answering.

"Well, it's all yours, kid. Have fun." Hardcastle started for the door.

"Where're you goin'?"

"Got a coupla things I need to do. Need to pick up something for Sara and the Harpers. Want to come?"

"Nah. Got all my shopping done." McCormick tightened the last clamp, stood up, holding the tree at arm's length. He released it gingerly, caught it as it started to tip.

Hardcastle paused at the door, grinning. "Well, if I come home, and find you crushed under the tree, remember -- you asked for it."

\* [] \* [] \*

Putting the finishing touches on the tree, McCormick glanced at his watch. "He's been gone four hours ... wonder what's taking so long?" When another two hours went by, curiosity became worry. "What kinda present takes six hours to buy?" The thought was barely completed when the truck's engine roared past the den's window. He frowned as the Judge came in. "Where have you been? The North Pole? You've been gone six hours."

"What? I'm supposed to punch a time clock? I was busy, okay?"

McCormick shrugged. "I was worried, okay? So sue me for caring."

Hardcastle's voice softened. "Well, let's get some dinner, and hit the hay early. I want to get an early start." He started for the kitchen.

"Start? Start where? Judge, we're not goin' on a case, are we?" McCormick followed on the Judge's heels, "Aw, man ... that's what you were doing all that time. A quick visit with Frank, your usual conversation, and you suddenly have a list of crooks that only you can catch. Well, I tell ya, Judge, I ain't stupid, I ain't expendable, and I ain't goin'!"

Hardcastle had dinner on the stove by the time McCormick finished, and he didn't turn as he ordered firmly, "Shut up and set the table."

His tone clearly stated 'Case closed.'

\* [] \* [] \*

Despite the insulation of blanket, quilt, and pillows, the roaring bellow came through loud and clear.

"McCORMICK!"

He tossed the pillow off and yelled back. "WHAT?!"

The sound of a blaring horn came through the open loft window.

McCormick shook his head, and the blankets joined the pillow on the floor. "What now?" Grumbling, he went to the window. Hardcastle was standing next to the truck, hand on the horn; he eased up long enough to shout, "Come on, already!"

McCormick glanced at the clock. "Fivé A.M.? Are you nuts? I don't know where you're planning on going at this hour, but I told you I'm not--" He broke off, wincing as Hardcastle's roar interrupted.

"You've got two minutes to get your rear down here, boy!"

McCormick slammed the window down. "Okay, okay. Geez...and I don't even get Holiday pay..."

\* [] \* [] \*

Arms crossed in a posture-defiant attitude, McCormick nodded at the rear of the truck. "What's under the tarp in the back, Hardcase? Assault weapons?"

"You'll find out when it's time, and not before."

McCormick leaned back in the seat, spoke with resigned anger. "This is just great. Everyone gets Christmas off, Judge."

"Even wise-ass ex-cons?"

Closing his eyes, McCormick didn't give the Judge the satisfaction of an answer. "Just wake me when we get there," he yawned. "Wherever the hell that is."

\* [ \* ] \*

"Okay, we're here." Hardcastle emphasized the statement with a solid shoulder punch.

McCormick sat up, looked around. They were in a mountain wilderness, the roadway barely a path, and a rustic cabin giving the only evidence of human habitation. "What are we doing up here? Nobody's been around this place for ages." The cab rocked gently in a sudden blast of wind. "And it's friggin' cold."

Hardcastle opened the door. "Come on, kiddo."

"I ain't gettin' out of this truck, so you can just turn around and head back for civilization."

"Why do you have to make everything so difficult?! Now get out of there, unless you want help."

Giving up, McCormick slid out of the truck, mumbling something the Judge couldn't hear -- luckily for him.

Hands shoved into his pockets, he followed Hardcastle into the cabin.

"Well?"

At the expectant note in Hardcastle's voice, McCormick looked up, his indifferent gaze falling on the beautiful Blue Spruce resting in the far corner next to a stone fireplace.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo."

McCormick smiled with amazed wonder, "There isn't a case, is there?"

"Never said there was."

"You never said there wasn't."

Hardcastle shoved him into the large, open room, and shut the door. "Never satisfied."

"But how? When?"

"I did it yesterday; that's why I was gone so long. Came straight up here with the tree and some supplies, fired up the generator, and dumped the other stuff." He indicated the 'other stuff,' several boxes next to the tree. "Those boxes have ornaments in 'em; feel up to trimmin' another tree?" He crossed to the fireplace, tossed in kindling and logs.

"But why? I mean, why go to all the bother?"

Hardcastle was silent as the flames roared up, then crackled around the smaller branches. "You said you missed seeing snow. Should be plenty of it pretty soon." He straightened, headed for the door again. "Let's get the stuff outta the truck."

\*

They made several trips to get all the bags inside the cabin. About half-way through, McCormick paused, "What the hell did you bring, Judge, all of Gull's-Way?"

"Didn't want to hear your complaints about 'roughing it,' so most of the work involves getting your essential luxuries from one place to the other. Come on, get busy!"

\*

Hardcastle started lunch while McCormick sorted out decorations and lights. "You

know," Mark commented idly, "It's awful quiet up here. Want me to sing some Christmas carols?"

Opening one of the sacks, the Judge tossed him a box, "Here, open this first." He watched with amusement as the wrapping was quickly ripped off; McCormick was like a little kid whenever he got a present.

"Hey, a new radio. Thanks, Judge." Then he realized it also had a built-in mini-TV and cassette player-recorder. He gave the Judge one of his soft smiles. "Thanks." He turned on some Christmas music.

"You start to sing," Hardcastle warned, "I'm takin' it back."

McCormick made a face at him, and started to sing along with the music -- loudly and deliberately off-key. He was well into decorating when Hardcastle called, "Chow's on; come and get it."

When McCormick sat down, there was more tinsel on him than the tree. "Can we stay up here a couple of days, Judge?"

"Long as you want, kiddo; it's your Christmas wish."

|| \* || \* ||

McCormick gathered up the dishes. "I'll wash 'em."

Hardcastle went into the living room, sank down into a large armchair. He closed his eyes, savoring the momentary peace and quiet. Then he smiled to himself at the racket coming from the kitchen, accompanied by McCormick's own brand of monologue. "Probably spoiling him rotten," he muttered to himself, "but he's a damn good kid -- when he wants to be."

McCormick joined him a few minutes later. "Tree looks pretty good, huh, Judge."

Hardcastle nodded. "You can open the black bags now."

Dumping the contents of the black plastic bags on the floor, McCormick read the name tags on the wrapped gifts. He looked up at Hardcastle, frowning. "They're all for me."

"Now what's wrong?"

"I didn't know we were coming up here. All your presents are at home."

"Open the green bags."

McCormick registered surprise as he pulled out the presents he had wrapped for the Judge. "Okay. How'd you find 'em?"

"There weren't all that many places to look -- I figured I'd better bring 'em along with the rest of the stuff."

Hardcastle watched as McCormick placed all the presents under the tree. Tossing another log on the fire, he sat cross-legged in front of it. He was quiet for several minutes -- an eternity for McCormick, and Hardcastle broke the silence. "You goin' to sleep already, kiddo?"

Receiving only a headshake for an answer, Hardcastle leaned forward, "You okay?"

He stopped in mid-nod. "...Yeah. Just...thinkin'."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what about."

There was a low chuckle. "No, it's just...well, no one -- after my Mom, that is -- no one ever bothered themselves about how I felt, or what I wanted..." He paused, then looked at Hardcastle, his eyes wistful, "It's nice having someone around who cares, but, well, kinda hard to get used to."

"You seem to be adapting pretty well -- and it hasn't snowed yet, though the weather report says it's only a matter of time."

"I don't care. This is nice, and I appreciate it. Just wanted you to know, that's all."

"You're not gonna get mushy, are you? You get mushy, I'm leavin'."

"Nope. All through."

"Good. Go get some more firewood."

"Okay," McCormick jumped up.

"Don't forget your jacket. It's a lot colder up here."

McCormick opened the door a bit to check the outside temperature, then stepped back, throwing the door open, "Hey, Judge, look!"

"Close the damn door, McCormick, it's--"

"Snowing." McCormick finished for him.

\* || \* || \*

Christmas Eve dawned fresh, clear, and cold; sunlight glittered on the white carpet of snow, reflected brilliantly off the frozen lake.

McCormick stood before the large picture window, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand as he gazed at the classic wintry wonderland.

"Hey," Hardcastle's voice came from the kitchen, "You want breakfast or what?"

"Be right there."

Hardcastle was already seated by the time McCormick joined him. "Took ya long enough. Is it still snowing?" He glanced up just as a snowball smacked his shoulder.

McCormick grinned. "What do you think?"

"I think you're gonna be dead in about five seconds. There'd better not be another one."

"Uhhh..."

Hardcastle gave a tight grin. "Shove it."

\*

Leaving the breakfast dishes, McCormick followed Hardcastle into the living room. "So, what's on the agenda for today?"

Hardcastle held up a box, shook it. "Ice skates. Thought we'd try them out on the lake."

McCormick held up the lightweight jacket, shook it. "Windbreaker. It's 28° out there. I'll freeze in this."

Hardcastle tossed a large box at him; McCormick opened it, finding a well-insulated parka inside. "I don't suppose Santa remembered a pair of boots?"

Another box landed at his feet.

\* || \* || \*

A mid-morning walk in light snowfall proved the lake not quite ready for skating.

"This time tomorrow, kiddo, it'll be perfect. Com'on, I'll show you some of the countryside," he grinned in the frosty air, "Nature in the raw."

"You're crazy, you know that? Traipsing around this wilderness in the middle of a blizzard--"

"Blizzard? This little snow flurry? Brace up, kiddo; give ya a chance to break in those new boots and coat."

McCormick's mind was back at the cozy fire and unopened gifts, "Okay, but just around the lake. I wanna survive to open the rest of my gifts."

\* || \* || \*

As the sun lowered, so did the temperature; the snowfall slacked off, then ceased, frigid winds bowing the snow-laden evergreens.

Hardcastle settled back in the easy chair, facing the fireplace, eggnog in hand. McCormick sat on the floor between the easy chair and the fireplace, eggnog on the floor next to his knee. He hadn't felt this contented in a long time. Both were comfortably tired from their day-long treks, and McCormick sighed deeply, leaning back against Hardcastle's chair. "Judge, this has got to be the best Christmas Eve I've had in a long time. Thanks." He pulled his long legs up and wrapped his arms around them.



Hardcastle looked at the top of the curly head and smiled. "Yeah. 1984 Christmas Eve I was in jail. Remember?" He decided not to mention Christmas Eve, '85.

"I've been trying to forget. But I think I was more miserable than you were." He looked up at Hardcastle with a mischievous grin. "Hadda sell my car to get you out."

"Got it back for you, didn't I? Guy robbed me."

"That you did. And you only paid 20% more than he paid me."

"Highway robbery," Hardcastle grunted. The Judge had known what it had cost the kid to part with the Coyote, and he felt very lucky to have a friend like McCormick. It had been very hard for the Judge to even admit his feelings about McCormick, much less mention them. McCormick had been the same way at first, but now he was so open and sincere that Hardcastle was finding it easier as well. Maybe, deep down, he'd known the first time McCormick appeared in his courtroom - he knew he'd never get his son back, but this wise-ass ex-con was the next best thing.

McCormick jumped up suddenly, interrupting his thoughts. "Hey, I think there's a game on. Wanna watch it?" At Hardcastle's nod, he brought the radio-TV-cassette combo from the kitchen. Fiddling with the tuner and the antenna, he commented, "You know, I just happened to think..." He ignored the Judge's smirk, "We each just wasted 40 bucks on the tree back at Gull's-Way. Be ready to throw out, by the time we get back!"

"Nope. Called Frank before we left. Told him to come over, take the decorations off and donate the thing somewhere."

"You think of everything, don'tcha?"

"Yep."

\* || \* || \*

Hardcastle awoke to loud music, and his immediate response was volume in kind. "McCormick! Turn that thing down!!!"

He groaned, feeling stiff, and found he was still in the chair, a blanket thrown over him. He sat up, stretching. "Damn, gettin' too old to sleep like this." He also noticed there was no appreciable decrease in the decibel level. "McCormick, are you deaf?! Turn that down - or better yet, off!"

Getting to his feet, he went to the window to check the night's snowfall. He really wasn't too surprised to find McCormick outside, putting the finishing touches on a well-endowed snowwoman. The radio was resting on a nearby box, blasting out "Jingle-Bell Rock". Hardcastle went outside and turned the volume down to a bearable level.

"What - as if I have to ask - are you doing?"

"Morning, Judge. Look at all this new snow; isn't it great?" At Hardcastle's look, he continued, a bit sheepish, "Oh...uh, well this is Crystal. Kinda neat, ain't she?"

Hardcastle tried to keep a stern expression, "Looks a lot like Vonna What'shername!" McCormick grinned. "Want me to make one for you?"

"No. I want you to make breakfast."

"Can we open the presents first?"

"After breakfast...maybe."

\*

McCormick stuffed the last of the toast in his mouth and drained the coffee cup. "Now?"

"You've already opened half of them. Let's go out to the lake; that way, we'll have something to look forward to later on in the day."

"You're doing this to make me crazy, aren't you?"

"Just adding the finishing touches."

\* || \* || \*

Hardcastle guffawed loudly each time McCormick cracked the ice--which was often. "No no, no." He called in an overly-patient tone, "You're doin' it all wrong. Keep your ankles straight and your head up. Stop lookin' at your feet."

McCormick hit the ice again, amid some colorful language. "Are you sure this is supposed to be fun, Judge."

"It is from where I'm standin'."

With a not-too-convincing glare, McCormick got slowly and carefully to his feet. "Maybe I should tie a pillow around me."

In ten minutes or so, he was doing better; managing a short distance before falling. He sat on the ice, watching the Judge skate circles around him. "How you do that?"

"Talent. Skill. Know-how."

"Has something to do with weight distribution, doesn't it? Low center of gravity, and all that?"

"Get up. You need more practice, that's all."

"What I need is to have my head examined for letting you con me out here." But he got to his feet again, bound and determined that the Judge wouldn't have one up on him.

\* || \* || \*

Shortly after 11 a.m., Hardcastle called it quits. McCormick had finally gotten the hang of it, and was leaving inch-deep skidmarks in the ice. It was like hitting speed bumps. Hardcastle led the way back to the cabin, McCormick lagging behind. Suspicious, the Judge turned to check on him and was smacked with a soft, slushy snowball. "What did I tell you about that?"

There was a second, then a third, and as McCormick bent down for more ammo, he was surprised at how fast the Judge got to him. Caught off guard by a flying tackle, he and the Judge both plowed into a five-foot snow drift. "You wanted snow, wise-guy," he heard Hardcastle's muffled voice, "You got it."

Hardcastle got up, and shoved McCormick back down each time he attempted to rise. "Okay, okay. Cease fire on the snowball war," Mark finally conceded defeat.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart."

"Hope to die?"

"JUDGE." The two-syllable complaint indicated total and complete surrender.

\* || \* || \*

McCormick followed Hardcastle into the kitchen, looking like a bedraggled puppy. "Can't we open the presents now, Hardcase?"

"After lunch," he glanced back at McCormick, "Go change into some dry clothes." Busying himself in the kitchen, he grumbled, "Catch pneumonia...have to listen to all that wheezing and coughing... Stubborn kids."

When McCormick came into the living room, wearing dry jeans and shirt, Hardcastle was waiting with two beers and a plate of sandwiches. He settled into the large arm chair, "Go on, go ahead. Don't want you to get indigestion from swallowing everything whole." He watched with amusement as McCormick plowed into the gifts.

Separating his from the Judge's, he placed Hardcastle's gifts next to his chair, carefully placing one to the side. Then he set about opening the remaining boxes, each expectant discovery followed by a "Thanks, Judge."

He opened the smallest package last, as Hardcastle had known he would. Mark's absent-minded humming ceased abruptly as he opened the small box; there was several seconds of silence, then a pair of very surprised blue eyes looked up at him. He started to speak, failed, and tried again.

Hardcastle interrupted before could get started again, "Well," he said reasonably, "You can't expect a big-time lawyer to run around town in a red firecracker, now, can ya? Wasn't your fault that drunk totaled your Fiero last New Year's," he added.

"God, Judge..." McCormick's voice was low with awe, "A Ford would've been just fine. But...but this..." He held up the key chain bearing two sets of car keys and

the Jaguar emblem.

Hardcastle shrugged, grinning. "Okay by me. It's still at the dealership, waiting for you to pick it up. We can always exchange it."

"The hell 'we' will! I love it!!" McCormick jumped up, waving the keys around, his natural enthusiasm coming to the fore, "I love you! I love everybody!"

"Get away from me, McCormick!" The tone was gruff, but he endured the enthusiastic hug. McCormick sat back down on the floor, looking at the keys as if he still couldn't believe it. "Guess you're anxious to get back, now, huh?"

"What? No," McCormick shook his head, "No, I'm really not; waited this long, few more days won't matter." He replaced the keys in the box, put it next to the radio on the coffee table. "Okay, Judge, your turn." He tossed a package at him, and Hardcastle caught it automatically.

The first box held a Lone Ranger jigsaw puzzle; the second, bookends with brass gavels attached; followed by a rack of beautifully hand-crafted pipes, and a red and black Nike jogging suit with matching tennis shoes. Hardcastle looked at him knowingly, "Now I know what you spent that extra \$40 on, not to mention the extra \$250 advance on your salary."

McCormick grinned, picking up the last box, the one he had set aside. "No, you don't." He paused dramatically, holding the box close, "Now, before I give you this, you gotta promise me two things. One: Don't ask how I got it. Two: Don't use it while we're here."

"What the hell is it?!" Hardcastle lunged at the brightly wrapped gift.

"Ah, ah, ah," McCormick admonished, holding the box beyond the Judge's reach. "Promise?"

"All right, dammit, I promise."

"Cross your heart?"

"McCormick, do you want to see the New Year?"

Smiling, McCormick placed the last gift on Hardcastle's lap. "Merry Christmas, Milt."

Hardcastle lifted it, hefted it, shook it, then finally opened it. His surprise surpassed McCormick's as he gazed wordlessly at the contents. Then he rose from the chair, taking the gift over to the light where he could examine it more closely. McCormick looked over his shoulder, "It's the real thing, Judge, honest. I felt real bad about what happened to it, and--" He broke off, found himself nearly crushed in a bear hug; then he was released just as quickly, as Hardcastle held his shoulder with one hand and the gift in the other.

"This is great, kid; you must have spent--" he stopped himself, "No, I promised. No questions. Then he grinned widely, "You got it back for me; that's all that matters. You don't know what this means to me, kiddo... My Championship Basketball..." He sat on the overstuffed hassock near the fireplace, reading the names, "I got this back when the Lakers won the Championship..."

\* || \* || \*

Hardcastle sat for a long time looking at the fire. A smile played at his lips. He had had a good time today, this Christmas Day; that kid, that smart-mouth, push-him-to-the-limit kid, had brought something back into his life that he never wanted to lose: Happiness. He felt a hand on his shoulder and he started, looking up.

"Judge? Judge, you okay?"

"What?"

McCormick sounded worried. "You were just sittin' here, staring at the fire...for a long time. Something wrong?"

"Just thinkin'. What time is it?"

"After midnight. You ran out of stories about the 'Good Ol' Days' about thirty minutes ago. Then you sorta went into a coma, and I got worried."

Hardcastle let McCormick pull him to his feet. "Com'on, Judge; you're not sleepin'"

in this chair again."

Hardcastle paused at his bedroom door, spoke quietly to McCormick as Mark opened the door to the other bedroom. "I tell ya, kiddo, this has got to be the most uneventful Christmas holiday I've ever spent." At McCormick's questioning look, he smiled, "And I've enjoyed every uneventful minute of it."

"You know, Judge, I was in a lot of foster homes when I was growing up; I either tried to run away, or the families couldn't handle me. I never really felt that anyone wanted me around for any length of time, unless I could do something for them. And until you dragged me to Gull's-Way, I was alone a long time...I spent a lot of Christmases and other holidays alone; and that can get a little scary.

"When I first came to live with you, I thought: 'This Judge owns me; I haven't any rights at all.' All I wanted to do was to get out of your custody, back on my own - which didn't make much sense, because I didn't want to be alone.

"But that's all changed now, 'cause I know that whenever you yell at me, or make me do something I'm not crazy about doing, you do it because you care. And even though it gets hectic at times, or we have our 'misunderstandings', I wouldn't want my old life back for nothing.

"So, I figured, if I can put<sup>up</sup> with you, you shouldn't have any trouble putting up with me. Turned out to be right, huh?"

"Smart-ass."

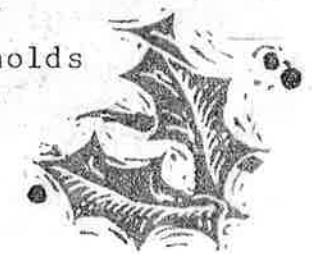
"Well, enjoy the peace and quiet of this Christmas season, Judge..." McCormick opened the door, went inside the bedroom, then leaned out with a broad grin, "'Cause next Christmas, I got plans..."



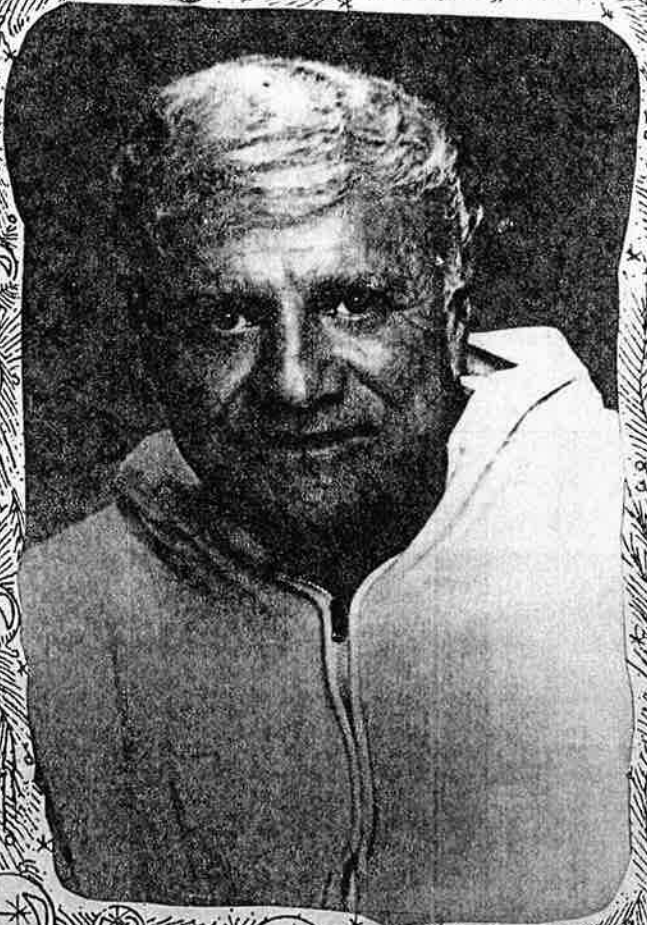
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The story you've just read is a "Christmas Bonus". I added it to make the zine longer, as I wanted a minimum of 100 pages. It was sent to me last February ('87), so wasn't in the original Christmas Exchange. I had also typed up and xeroxed the CONTENTS page, so was unable to list this last story with the others. Hope you enjoy the zine, and have a happy holiday season.



Warmest Regards, Melinda Reynolds



Noel



Merry

Christmas

