

# DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY

*by Pamela Rose*

Hardcastle was hurting. He was tired and pissed off and for once felt every minute of his age. But he shooed off the police sargeant who urged, for the umpteenth time, that he check into a hospital. Hospital, hell. What did those quacks know? He'd been worked over by experts in his day--these creeps had been strictly amateur. No bones broken. A couple of days and he'd be playing gorilla basketball with McCormick again.

Wincing as he went up the steps, he amended that to a week. Wasn't as tough as he'd been a few years ago. Hated like hell to admit it, but McCormick was his muscle now. It went against the grain but, except for flukes like this, he'd be glad to keep it that way. Mark could take it. That pretty-boy face hid a real bone-head disposition and a hell of a lot of grit. Whined a lot, did ol' McCormick, but all these young kids that these days...

He paused inside the door. The house was dark and too quiet. It felt empty; emptier than could be explained by just no one being here at the moment. It felt--abandoned.

"McCormick!" he bellowed.

Silence.

Turning around, he headed for the gatehouse, noting grumpily that the hedges needed trimming and the grass hadn't been cut for a couple of weeks. "That lazy goof-off," he grumbled to himself, "I'm not around to chew his behind and he lets the place go to rack and ruin."

There was a single light burning in the gatehouse and he nearly stumbled over a ratty gym bag inside the door. Kicking it to one side with a curse, it took a second for it to register as the one McCormick had brought with him when he moved in.

McCormick himself was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, the stereo playing some rock and roll in-a-godda-de-vida 1960's crap, as usual, but for once the decibel level was almost timid.

"McCormick!" he bellowed again, expecting a happy rush toward him. The boy was so damned enthusiastic; he'd never been able to teach him to tone it down--

But there was no reaction at all; the other man didn't even bother to look up. Instead, he grabbed a glass from the table and gulped down the contents. "Fuck off, I've got enough ghosts already."

Spotting the nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the end table, Hardcastle realized McCormick was drunk. More than that, stone, falling-down-and-ready-to-puke soused. He blinked in surprise. The kid had never been much of a drinker; didn't have either the head or the stomach for it.

"Mark?" he said tentatively. "It's me, Milt."

McCormick closed his eyes, letting his head fall back against the sofa. "Yeah, sure. Who else?"

Puzzled and more than a little worried, Hardcastle moved closer, sitting down on the couch. "Hey, kid, what is all this, anyway?"

"Go away," Mark said dully.

"Go away?" Hardcastle blustered. "Well, that's real nice! What the hell is going on here, damn it!"

McCormick lifted his head and observed the other man with bleary eyes. "Marvelous. Now I'm hallucinating. Can't wait for the pink elephants."

"Hey! It's me, you dummy! How much have you had to drink, anyway?" He glanced at the bottle, recognizing it as one that had set on his sideboard for years. "Wait a minute, who said you could drink my liquor?"

Incongruously, Mark started giggling. "Why not? You can't drink it; you're dead, rem'ber?"

Feeling as if he had missed something important, Hardcastle stared at the young man, tempted to respond furiously, but suddenly unsure. He recalled something the cop had said; something he'd been too weary and too put out to listen to at the time. *Thought you were dead, sir...coroner...car burned...body identified...*

He'd ignored it, eager to get home and to bed after a long, hot bath and seeing McCormick. Two weeks handcuffed to a pipe in an empty warehouse, sleeping on a concrete floor and eating cold pork and beans kind of narrowed his focus to essentials. It had never occurred to him that anyone would believe he was dead. Self-

centered, perhaps, but since he knew he wasn't, he hadn't even bothered considering the impact. Actually, he hadn't even imagined anyone would have reason to believe, although he'd been present when they'd pushed Artie into the truck and watched it blow sky-high against those gas tanks. True, Artie and he were of much the same size and age, and there couldn't be much to examine after that explosion, but still--two lousy weeks and they declare you worm food? What a crock.

But they did believe it. The fact was beginning to sink in, remembering the way that rookie had turned white as a sheet when the Judge had stumbled up to the squad car and identified himself. He'd been so numb at the time, he'd only half listened to the exclamations, too anxious to get home and ache in peace.

And now he came home to this? Bad enough total strangers jump at any little evidence that he'd bought it--but Mark? Laying around here, drinking up his aged whiskey, letting the place go to pot? The crummy little ex-con, he'd have his hide for this.

Grabbing the young man's shoulder, he shook him hard. "Wake up! Tell me what's going on here!"

The blue eyes regarded him calmly and Hardcastle felt a twinge of real concern. McCormick was more than that drunk, he was five minutes on the edge of passing out from it. Glancing at the bottle again, the Judge asked, "How much have you guzzled down tonight? Surely not all of this?"

It was Mark's patented Beaver-Cleverish smile; rueful, sweet, heavy on the dimples, hold the freckles. "Yep. Not to mention the scotch an' tha--"

"My twenty year old scotch!" Hardcastle broke in, outraged. "I've had that bottle for ten years!"

"You n'ever drink it," Mark pointed out reasonably.

"That's why it's so old, damn it!" Hardcastle felt like belting him, wiping off that smug smile--except the smile didn't reach the desolate eyes, and there was something in the limp figure that held him back. "Wait a minute. You drank all of that and all of this?"

Mark grinned beatifically. "Yep, almost finished. One more bottle to go. Napoleon brandy--"

"What?! Jesus Christ, haven't you ever heard of alcohol poisoning, not to mention grand larceny? Look, I can't figure out why you haven't passed out already, but--"

"That's what I'm hopin' for," McCormick broke in. "Hasn't worked yet."

Disgusted, Hardcastle leaned back, shaking his head woefully. "Leave you for two weeks and you--"

"What'd you expect for a wake," McCormick snapped, "kool aid?" He lifted his glass again. "Here's to the best damn judge ever to gi' a guy hard time...Milton C. Hardcase--"

Hardcastle caught his arm. "What the hell are you talking about, McCormick? Wake? I'm right here."

Mark stared at him. "So you are. Don' tell me you're gonna pop up ev'ry time I've had a few too many. Ev'n you couldn't be so mean. Give a guy a break, Judge. You had your shot at me. Parole's over. Finished my time wit' you six mon's ago. 'M a free agent. Stuck 'round 'cuz I felt sorry f'r you."

"Oh you did, did you?"

McCormick straightened on the couch. "Sure. Now you're dead an' I can go. Stop playin' Prince Perfect an' be m'self again."

"Playing what? Now hold on there, McCormick. First of all, I'm not dead and I don't want to have to hit you to prove it, and second--"

"Believed it all, too, d'n't you, Judge? Fell for it like a true donkey. Sucker born ev'ry minute, right?"

Feeling more confused than ever and wondering why Mark was so angry, the Judge decided he didn't have the strength to deal with it at the moment. "Okay, kid, whatever's bugging you'll have to wait. I'm too bushed to--"

"Had to go and get killed on me, didn't you?" Mark cut in suddenly. "I goddamn told you not t' go without me, but you always think y' ken handle anythin'! Wrong fer once, weren't you, Judge? No one there to pull your ass outta the fire this time. So you got burned...burn'd..." The words caught, choking in his throat, and he buried his face in his hands, muffling a whimper of despair. "Damn you...damn you..."

Stunned, Hardcastle just stared at him. "McCormick? Mark?" He put a tentative hand on the trembling shoulder. "Now you know I'm okay, right? I'm sorry if you were hurt, but it's all over, kid."

McCormick looked up, his blue eyes flooded with tears. "Leave me alone, damn you. I've done my bit, played your game. Clipped y'r dam'd hedges, mowed y'r lawn, danced y'r tune. 'M done now. I can live without you! Stop hauntin' me!"

"McCormick, I'm not-- Oh, for God's sake, wake up! I'm sitting right here beside you. It was all some stupid mistake. You can't be that drunk!"

McCormick swayed on the couch, and Hardcastle thought he would fall over, but Mark clung to the sofa arm and stayed upright, eyes wild and glazed. "Mistake...yeah, mistake. All of it. I

was a fool to go 'long with it. Should've known it'd never work... comin' here. Figured I could con you, make you think I wuz Mister Clean. 'Cept it wuz you conned me, right? What a joke."

Hardcastle suddenly felt shaky himself. He was so damned tired and his ribs hurt like the devil from the pounding they received. He just couldn't handle all this wildness right now. Unemotional by both training and nature, he'd still expected to come home and field off hugs of joy from someone he'd considered the best friend he'd ever had, and was oddly disappointed at its absence. But he wasn't prepared for this. It was sinking in, very slowly, that Mark believed he was some kind of hallucination or ghost. Too damn exhausted to feel anything but impatient with the whole mess, he certainly didn't feel up to snapping the kid back to reality.

"Listen, McCormick. I'm tired, I wanna go to bed. You got beefs, tell me tomorrow, okay? I'm not in the mood to play games right now."

Mark caught his arm as he started to rise. "No...don't leave me!"

Irritated, Hardcastle glared at him. "Thought you told me to shove off?"

"Yes, but... Hell, why are you doin' this to me, Judge?" Mark hunched up and began crying. It was a very soft weeping, as if he'd cried himself out so much there wasn't much left.

"Aw, kid..." The Judge put his arm around him awkwardly and Mark immediately clutched at him, snuffling against his shirt.

"Hey, there...hey...it's okay. McCormick, I'm alive, dammit!" He glanced around the room, feeling helpless, never good at handling this kind of emotional outburst. Coming from McCormick, it was even more unsettling. Sure, the boy had always been a bit puppyish and over affectionate at times, but deep down he was a hard cookie. Seeing the cookie crumble so decisively was more than he felt qualified to manage. Why couldn't the kid wait until he'd had a few hours decent sleep and a solid meal? Jeez.

"Come on, kid, what's wrong with you?" he said gruffly, still holding the boy closely and patting his shoulder gingerly--as if comforting a dangerous Great Dane. "You can see I'm just fine. I'm not dead--" He broke off abruptly. Or maybe he couldn't. Did Mark still think he was a ghost? Certainly he was drunk as a coot, but drunk enough to dream up a ghost solid enough to slobber on? Self-consciously, he pugged Mark away. "Come on, McCormick. Get hold of yourself, kid. I'm not dead, for Chrissake. You can see that."

Mark pulled himself upright with a drunk's particularly stiff

brand of dignity. "Go 'n fade away then. Don't need you. You've paid me off."

"Paid you-- What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"You know. Your stinkin' will," Mark snarled, reaching for his glass and missing. The liquid soaked into the carpet unnoticed by either. Mark simply grabbed up the bottle and took it down another half inch before the Judge could jerk it away.

"Stop that! God knows you've had enough already! Your eyes are crossing, you fool. What's all this about my will? How do you know about that?"

McCormick fell back limply. "Read it yesterday...lawyer wanted it all cleared up... Two days after the coroner's verdict... decent interval, right?" He turned to the other man, finding a surge of energy to sit up on his own. "Damn you, Judge. Why'd you do it? Why!!"

Still trying to take in the jarring fact that he'd actually been declared dead, Hardcastle stared at him blankly. "Why'd I what?"

"Leave it to me, dammit!"

Hardcastle looked at the furious, hurting face and didn't know how to answer, wasn't quite sure of the question. "What?"

"Oh, you left a decent amount to relatives, a few things to your aunts...enough to keep the courts off my back, but the rest-- the house, your stocks...even the damn truck you burned up in... you left it all to me. How could you do such a rotten thing?"

Hardcastle blinked, feeling much as he had when he'd been punched by one of Ricco's bullyboys a few hours ago. "Let me get this straight: you're upset because I left you everything? Isn't it supposed to be just the opposite: mad because I didn't leave you anything?"

"Don't give me that shit!" McCormick tried to make a dramatic rise to his feet and failed miserably; only the Judge's restraining grip on his arm kept him from falling flat on his face. "You think I'm some cheap golddigger you can buy off?"

Bemused, Hardcastle smiled. "Is that what everyone thought? Funny, I never even considered that. Should've, I suppose. You mean it hurt your pride having everyone think you were my autumn fling? Saw me as senile and queer, huh?" He began to chuckle, tickled at the whole idea. "Sorry, but you're not my idea of a hot date, McCormick. You may be cute, but I prefer a larger bra size."

"Yeah, they all thought that," McCormick came back sharply. "What else were they t' think? Even judges are warped, ya know."

Hardcastle thought about it. Yeah, it might seem strange to an outsider; taking in an ex-con, especially a kid as pretty as McCormick, giving him a home and money and, finally, leaving practically everything to him. Did look odd. In spite of himself, Hardcastle couldn't help grinning; thinking of himself as a sugar daddy was hilarious. And thinking of McCormick as a submissive little hustler was even funnier. "Poor Skid Mark. Must be tough living down being a kept man, huh?"

"You're laughing?"

"Well, you've gotta admit, it is funny, kid. Never figured you to worry about appearances."

"You son'va bitch. You know I don't give a damn what people think. But you're not buyin' me off this easy."

"Buying you off?" Now Hardcastle was definitely confused.

"Yeah. Well, I'm not takin' it, hear me? An' you can just go back to heaven or hell or wherever you came from and take that with you!"

Hardcastle paused, understanding finally and certainly that Mark was in too deep of an alcoholic haze to ever realize he wasn't imagining the Judge's presence. It was hard to believe, but obviously true. Mark was convinced he was talking to a dead man. In a bizarre way, it even made sense. After the coroner's report and the reading of the will, Mark would be forced to accept his death. And once he had, as drunk as he was, it would be even harder to relinquish the idea. Safer not to, maybe. Building up hope was dangerous and for someone who had been disillusioned as many times as Mark McCormick...

"Oh, kiddo, I'm sorry," he said softly. "Didn't want you to feel like this. It'll be better in the morning. You'll be straight enough to understand then. Let's get you to bed."

"No!" Mark fended off the helping hand.

"What are you gonna do, sleep on the sofa?"

"I'm gettin' out, that's what," Mark said harshly. "All packed and ready." He gestured toward the gym bag in the entrance. "See? Movin' on."

Hardcastle felt a pang in the pit of his stomach. "Leaving?"

"Sure. Should've done it two years 'go. Screw the old buzzard anyway. Hangin' 'round here growin' moss, cleanin' the stinkin' swimmin' pool, geez, what a laugh."

"McCormick--" He stopped, unable to say what he wanted to. "Is that all you're taking?" he finished finally.

"All I came with, isn't it?" Mark pointed out coldly.

"Except for the whiskey you've been guzzling."

Even drunk as he was, McCormick flushed guiltily, like a little boy caught munching a windowsill pie. "Owes me that," he said defiantly. "A good drunk, owes me that much." Then he grinned; a drunken, lopsided Tom Sawyer grin. "He'd kill me if he knew I snitched it--" He blinked, then turned to the Judge. "You'd kill me if you knew I was messin' up like this. Good ol' Hardcase. Tow the line or he'll string you up...Judge Roy Beanoo.."

"That bad, am I?" the Judge asked softly.

Mark's face contorted, he bit his bottom lip to stave off the tears. "No...it was good...too good. Knew it couldn't last."

"So why are you leavin'?"

The blue eyes stared at him, bloodshot, lids heavy. "You bastard. You can't pay me off. Pay me to forget you. Accept your death. Forgive you for dyin' on me like that. No way! 'S what you thought, isn't it? Grab the money, have a big party... oh God..." The pain in the voice brought a lump to the Judge's throat. "I don't want it, you hear me? None of it. You made me love you, you son'va bitch, and you don't got enough stinkin' money to make me forget that!"

Hardcastle's breath caught. It was a couple seconds before he could let it out again, and his bruised ribs protested the effort. He needed very badly to lie down--knew now that he probably should've gone to the hospital after all. But he was very glad he hadn't. McCormick would've been gone when he got back, and right now he thought he could stand anything but that. He felt a strange surge of happiness and sadness all at once.

"Mark, that's not why I left it to you. Not to make you feel guilty."

"Oh yeah?" McCormick sneered. "Why else?" He grabbed up the bottle again and his fingers were so uncoordinated that it dropped, rolling across the carpet, spilling amber liquid. He reached out for it and tumbled down, striking his head on the table. Hardcastle knelt down beside him, pushing the table out of the way.

"You okay?"

Laying flat on his back, McCormick's face twisted painfully. "Leave me the hell alone! Won't you ever leave me alone? Two weeks...an' ev'ry day you're here...lookin' over my shoulder--" he broke off, choking, tears coming again in hurtful gasps.

The Judge gathered him up in his arms and held him tightly, for once forgetting his aversion to sentimentality, unembarrassed by the emotional catharsis. "It's okay, kid, cry. We all do some-times..." He realized that his own voice was breaking and his eyes burned. He was too tired, he rationalized, he couldn't help it.

"Why'd you leave me...I hate you...for that..." The words were muffled against his shoulder, but harsh, angry and hurting. "I...believed in you..."

"I'm still here, kid. I'm not going anywhere."

"No...you're dead. Left me...told ya not to go...never hurt this bad before...hate you...for dyin'...I've got nuthin'...no one..."

"It was a mistake, Mark. They screwed up; I'm alive. Please don't do this. Never wanted to hurt you this much." He rocked the young man tenderly, feeling things he hadn't felt for years. It scared him in a way. Knowing he'd come to love this crazy kid, he'd never noticed how deep it ran until now--certainly hadn't realized how strongly it had affected Mark. Habit made him accept the responsibility, and selfishness made him glad of it. But he'd never pictured this much pain; never thought about it. Mark was in a deep emotional nightmare and he couldn't drag him back. His supposed death had triggered a lot of nasty shadows from Mark's past, and although the Judge refused to be any half-baked psychiatrist, he was aware this might be the only chance to air a lot of concealed problems. McCormick's happy-go-lucky, placid exterior hid a hell of a lot of pain.

"What's hurting you?" he asked gently. "Tell me."

"You're dead, damn you--"

"No, Mark, that's not all of it. Why are you so mad at me?"

Mark sniffed and the Judge winced, realizing Mark had just wiped his rather runny nose on his shirt front.

"I didn't want to believe...it was true. Whate'r they said... couldn't be dead. Then...they came to...read the... Had to believe then. You'd never let me know any of...that...unless...you weren't comin' back...ever!" He stirred then, muscles rippling angrily as he pushed himself up. "You bastard! You must've known I'd hate it...least I thought you would. Okay, maybe at first I was conning you...but I figured you knew that...but later..."

Hardcastle touched his cheek. "Maybe I just wanted you to have it."

"No! It was the payoff. Always thought of me as a con... figured it was the money I was after...that I would forget you. I don't want it! Won't touch it! I won't stay here without you-- don't need it--don't need you!"

"It wasn't intended as an insult, son," Hardcastle said softly.

"Don't call me that!" McCormick twisted around in his arms. "You tol' me once I wasn't a substitute for your son. Wasn't good enough, I suppose..."

"No!" Hardcastle pulled him back roughly. "That's not what I meant at all."

Mark laughed bitterly. "Well, here's a joke for you: you've been my father. Never had one. Oh yeah, I know I found him finally, but he wasn't...Christ, what a laugh...he wasn't right. He wasn't what I wan-- what I needed. Wasn't as good as you. You were my friggin' dream dad, ain't that a hoot? I loved you...more than I could've ever loved him."

Hardcastle tightened his grip on the broad shoulders, throat too tight to respond even if he'd known what to say.

McCormick wasn't finished, though. "But I was never good 'nuff for you, know that. I tried...God help me, I did try. At first it was just to con you, get loose of y'r strings. Always good at that; you swallowed it whole. Trusted me a long time before you oughto've. Maybe that was it. Why it stopped bein' a con. Woke up one day, you barked at me and...an' I liked it. Felt good. Belonged to someone. Y'didn't cut me much slack...but I knew it wasn't because I...I didn't need it. For once in my screwed up life I needed an anchor, not a green light. Couldn't treat life like a friggin' race track. 'Ad to slow down an' take the curves with some sense." He was shaking again, wound up so tight, the tension was like a live wire through his body in spite of the alcohol. "I loved you, damn it! Then you had to go and get yourself blown up!"

Hardcase Hardcastle was melting, and wondered if he wasn't as drunk from exhaustion as Mark was from booze. He pressed his cheek tightly against the curly hair. "Then I had the nerve to go and leave you everything. Obviously still trying to prove you were a rat." He smiled ruefully. "What a jerk I am."

"Yeah," McCormick agreed readily, upset and offended, totally unconscious of the gentle sarcasm. "That was rotten, Judge. As if it was what I wanted or expected. Shit...made me feel worse... not better. Can't you see that? I'm not goin' to forgive you for dyin' on me just 'cuz you left me some bread. Not enough. Won't let y' go that easy."

"Maybe I left it to you because I knew you weren't expecting it," Hardcastle suggested quietly. "Or maybe it was just because... I love you, too, kid."

McCormick stiffened uneasily. "Hardcase? Nah, no way. Likes me some maybe...but..." He shook his head.

Hardcastle just grunted, realizing it was a lost cause at the moment. Not too much was getting through the whiskey-haze in Mark's brain. Mostly just what he wanted to accept, and right now that was all bad. Understandable maybe. The poor kid couldn't afford to let go. Had to hang onto the anger as a lifeline. It was always like that with Mark: slide by the real feelings with

jokes or anger or sarcasm. Push them away until he could deal with them.

"Okay, kid, enough. Time to get you to bed, and me, too. Come on." He straightened up, trying to lift Mark's almost dead weight.

"Nope. I'm leavin',: Mark said stubbornly. "All packed an' ev'ything..."

Breathlessly, in the process of getting the lax form to his very unsteady feet, Hardcastle said, "If your knees won't even lock...you won't be able to even get in the blasted Coyote, let alone...drive...the damn thing..." He grunted again with the effort. "Come on, McCormick, give me a little help here."

Mark smiled sweetly. "Okay." And promptly slipped further down in the Judge's arms. "You're v'ry strong f' a ghost," he observed, then passed out completely.

"I've been workin' out," the Judge panted dryly, struggled to balance the unwieldy figure. It took some doing, but he finally managed to lift the limp form into his arms. Taking one look at the flight of stairs to Mark's bedroom, he turned resignedly towards the sofa and lowered McCormick onto it, stretching him out on his back. He eyed the soft easy chair nearby and lowered himself into it with a weary sigh. He didn't want to leave Mark alone in the condition he was in, and in a deeper, unacknowledged, sense, the Judge wasn't quite ready to be alone either.

He glanced over at the full clothed, totally comatose McCormick, refusing to expend any more effort in that direction. Sleeping in his clothes wouldn't kill him. "I may be your pop, kid, but I sure as hell ain't ready to be your mother." But looking at the young, softly snoring face, he felt a curling warmth of content in his stomach.

"You're okay, kid," he said gruffly, and promptly fell asleep.

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Dawn light was coming in through the window when Hardcastle was awakened by the struggle nearby.

McCormick was lying on his stomach, face buried in his arms, moaning and twisting as if trying to escape some private horror.

Hardcastle prodded him ruthlessly in the side with his foot. "Would you settle down, please? I'm trying to get some sleep, for God's sake!"

Suddenly awake, the curly head lifted. "Huh?" He stared at Hardcastle blankly. "What?" A minute went by, then another. "Judge?"

"Yeah, now will you go back to sleep?"

"Judge!"

"For Chrissake, McCormick, will you stop saying that? I know who I am."

"I...oh my God...it's you! You're here...alive..." He reached out tentatively to touch the solid leg, unable to believe it.

"I know; you thought I was dead and I'm not. So that's settled. Now will you shut up and go back to sleep?"

There was another long silence so intense curiosity drove Hardcastle to open his eyes. McCormick was staring at him, not even breathing. A fat, almost perfect tear slipped ~~down~~ his cheek to plop on the sofa. He was biting his lower lip to contain any noise.

The Judge got up and sat down next to Mark on the couch. "Oh, come here," he said grumpily.

McCormick went into his arms, holding the older man so tightly his bruised ribs protested the pressure.

"Lighten up, kid."

McCormick jerked back self-consciously. "Sorry, it's just..."

Hardcastle tugged him back. "I know. It's okay. I'm fine, boy. I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

He could feel the body shaking and knew Mark was crying again, but it was very different from the tears last night.

"I thought...they told me..."

"It was a mistake. Ricco set it up to look like I'd bought it. That way nobody would be looking for me. Gave him time to clear up his operations before the Feds moved in. Didn't know about you. You did give the evidence to the police, didn't you?" he added as an afterthought.

The curly head lifted. "Of course, I did. Just like you said. Caught most of 'em, too. But Ricco made it out of the country."

"No, he didn't." At the startled look, he elaborated. "He was laying low with a couple of his boys in a warehouse on 10th. Kept me alive as insurance. They finally got careless." Then, more honestly, he added, "I got lucky. Anyway, Ricco's behind bars now, and if I have anything to say about it, he'll stay there." He noticed the expression on McCormick's face. "What's wrong?"

"I...thought you were dead. I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

"Now don't start that crap, kid. If they fooled the coroner, they could sure as hell fool you. What else do you think? It's okay."

"No. No, it's not. I should've kept looking. Should've helped you out somehow--"

"Hold on there. You did what I told you to do, you stayed put and went for help at the right time. They got the rest of the gang, didn't they? We were after the whole lot of them, and between us, we did it. That's what counts."

"Is it?"

Hardcastle took a deep breath. "Listen, I'm sorry you--"

"Are you okay?" Mark cut in. "Did they hurt you?"

"I told you I'm all right, kid. A little sore is all. I'll live." Immediately, he regretted that particular form of expression.

Mark's face blanched. "Yeah, well..." He turned away. "About last night...don't remember too much, but I must've been a mess. Sorry you had to come home to that. I guess I lost my head. Hope it wasn't too bad." He started to get up, but Hardcastle caught him.

"Sit still," he ordered gruffly. "You must have one hell of a hangover."

"No, not really. Mostly just a headache."

"Must be nice to be young," Hardcastle mused wryly.

"Judge, I...didn't mean to make a scene. Last night, I...I couldn't believe it was you. Whatever I said..."

"Shut up," the Judge said firmly. "I want to tell you something." He couldn't see Mark's face, as it was pressed against his shoulder, and he was glad. Wasn't sure how to say what he wanted to say, but he knew it was important for Mark to hear it. Maybe even important for him to express it. Those days chained up, certain he wasn't going to make it out, Mark was strong in his thoughts. He'd practiced a dozen conversations like this, all of them very logical and so easy to say in his mind. Mark needed to know how he felt, had always needed to hear it. The time had just never seemed right, and he was too awkward with this kind of thing. Nothing had changed on that score. Every comforting phrase he had planned deserted him. Instead, he tried for straight truth: "It's about my son."

McCormick looked up, surprised. "Judge--"

"Hear me out. What I once said about you not being a substitute for my son, I meant it."

"I know that," Mark said bleakly. "It's okay. I never expected to... Listen, if I said something last night--"

"Will you shut up?" Hardcastle snapped. "You're not a substit-

tute for my son 'cause my son was a bum."

There was a second of startled silence, then, "What?"

Even though he couldn't see it, he chuckled at the expression on McCormick's face. "It's no big deal, you know. I guess most kids are bums at one time or another. I know that now--just had a hell of a time accepting it then. He was like the rest of the punks running around: long hair, patched jeans, wouldn't get a job, refused to go to school. Messed around with drugs."

Mark's eyes widened. He'd imagined something very different from any son of Milton C. Hardcastle.

"As you can imagine, it was quite a trial for me. I couldn't understand what was in his mind and I don't think I even tried very much. We had some fights that made anything me and you have seem like a picnic. He was a bull-headed, independent little devil. Don't know where he got it. His mother probably."

McCormick rubbed his cheek against the comfortingly stocky shoulder, suppressing a grin. "Had to've," he agreed pleasantly.

"Don't get smart," Hardcastle growled, but he pulled the young man a little closer. "Anyway, he was a good kid, deep down. Bright as hell, good looking, a breeze at most anything he tackled...but he didn't have any direction. Just floated. It was such a blasted waste, I couldn't stand it. I bullied him, I guess. He just needed time to grow up and I guess I didn't have the patience to see that."

"Judge," Mark said softly, "you don't have to tell me this."

"Yeah, maybe I do." He was silent for a moment. "The last fight we had was the worst. He'd gotten his draft notice and was heading for Canada. I was so damn mad, I thought I would kill him. A son of mine, a coward. I couldn't stand it. I wouldn't listen to his reasons; sounded more like excuses at the time. Anyway, the next morning he was gone. I tracked him down, of course. Wasn't hard. He wasn't really trying to hide. Found him in a commune north of San Francisco. Dragged him out by that greasy mop of hair he had. Yeah, I straightened him out, all right. Hardcase Hardcastle laid down the law. And he bought it. For once, he agreed with me. Poor kid, he was so confused. Didn't want to run at all, just wanted to understand why. I told him, God help me." Hardcastle paused, took a slow breath. "He was hardly in Viet Nam a month before he was killed."

Mark closed his eyes, almost wishing the Judge had never told him.

Hardcastle sighed. "If you're wondering, I don't regret what I told him. I still think he was right to go. It's just...but...I can't change what I am, McCormick. I play by the rules 'cause

it's the only guideline we've got if we want any kind of decent world. Sometimes I seem a little too gung-ho for you, but it's the way I feel. My regret is that I'm not so sure he knew."

"I'm sorry," Mark said hoarsely. "God, I'm sorry."

The Judge patted his shoulder absently. "It was a long time ago. I've learned to live with it."

Mark lifted his head to look at him. "Why did you tell me this?"

The Judge shrugged, but he met the other's eyes squarely. "Thought it was time you knew you didn't have to live up to anyone. I loved my son, Mark, but he wasn't perfect. God knows, neither am I. Maybe I shouldn't have made him do something that went against his conscience. I thought I was right. But I wonder if I would have the guts to say the same thing again. I just wanted you to know why you aren't some kind of half-assed replacement for him. And you don't always have to be living up to some imaginary ideal. He was hardly that. And I thought you ought to know that I would've been quite happy if he'd turned out just like you have. With time and luck, I think he might've."

Mark swallowed painfully. "Thanks, Judge." He slipped his hand shyly around the older man and hugged him gently. "Thanks."

Hardcastle savored the warmth for a long moment, realizing this was probably what he'd been searching for. As far as he was concerned, the con man in Mark McCormick was gone, leaving a sincere, sweet reality.

After a bit, he growled, "Now will you, for God's sake, go back to sleep? You've got a hell of a lot of work to catch up on today. Did you see what a mess that lawn is in? And the pool's full of guck again. I told you about that filter--"

McCormick smiled contentedly. "Yes, Judge, I'll take care of it."

"Damn right, you will!"

McCormick hugged him tighter. "I'm glad you're back," he whispered.

Hardcastle grinned. "Yeah, me too, kid."

THE END