

*Back-to-Back  
Supplement 1*



THERES NO  
PLEA BARGAIN  
IN HEAVEN

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Photos facing Pg. 10 taken by Ann Leonhart  
Photos courtesy of SJC publicity office.

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BACK-TO-BACK SUPPLEMENT 1      APRIL '86

DELTA TRIAD PRODUCTS; 3362 Thruston-Dermont; Owensboro, KY 42301

FIRST PRINTING, May 10, 1986

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Editor's Note: There is no page 29

# DOUBLE OR NOTHING

Written By: Melinda Reynolds

The roar of thundering power barely held in control shattered the late afternoon quiet of the ocean highway. A red streak screamed through the curves, scorched down the straightaway, oblivious to any road hazards, and seemingly determined to become a part of the landscape. It was closely pursued by two similarly inclined vehicles, dark and long, thrumming engines hinting at as yet untapped speed. One edged ahead, swerved sharply into the lead car; both spun out of control, tires squealing and smoking on tarmac. The dull, hollow-sounding impact of metal against metal overlaid everything as the two vehicles slammed into each other, then plowed through the guardrail. The larger, heavier car preceded the smaller one by scant inches, flipping once down the rocky embankment before careening sideways into a rock outcropping. The lighter car was prevented from overturning by Providence alone, as the tires found a sandy purchase among the rocks, and dug in, slowing the downward momentum. The embankment fell away several feet, and the low-slung undercarriage caught on the jagged outcroppings, halting movement altogether. The second pursuing vehicle screeched onto the shoulder, backed up, stopped at the mangled guardrail. The lone occupant got out, gazed down at the ominously silent wreckage scattered over rocks and boulders.

\*\*\*

Lorin Dant settled into the deep luxury of velour and leather, relaxing in the air-conditioned comfort of the Mark V. The stately automobile was advancing in years, but still serviceable; Lorin smiled, somewhat like himself in that respect. It would be good to be back at the estate, with a very promising weekend ahead of him. His wandering attention was caught by a dark blue, late model Mercedes parked at a broken guardrail, preceded by several black skidmarks. Dant slowed, glancing down the embankment, then abruptly pulled over. One of the cars wedged precariously between boulders half-way down the incline was very familiar — a lot more familiar than its beguiling owner, unfortunately.

Running to the torn railing, Dant sighted three men at the ocean's edge, and it was not a friendly confrontation. Going back to the Mark V, he took a .357 Magnum from the glove compartment; loading it, and checking the safety, he returned to the accident scene. He made his way carefully down the rock-strewn slope, unheard and unseen. Reaching the beach, he moved quickly and quietly among sparse cover until he was scant yards away; still, none of the three were aware of his presence as he knelt behind a half-buried boulder, leveled the .357 in both hands, and shouted authoritatively above the crash of breakers.

"All right, guys, let him go, or the family jewels will be a thing of the past!" The order was punctuated by two shots fired at their feet.

The two gorillas froze, one in mid-swing, their startled faces turned in his direction. A few seconds of immobility was broken by unspoken agreement, and they released their captive, taking off for the parked Mercedes at a speed remarkable for their size, and intervening terrain.

Not bothering with them any further, Dant advanced quickly toward the crumpled figure lying on the hard-packed sand. Kneeling, he turned the younger man over,

wincing slightly at the scrapes and bruises. There was a groan, and cloudy blue eyes stared up at him blankly.

"Mark? It is Mark McCormick, isn't it? Are you all right? What the hell was that all about?"

McCormick struggled weakly to a sitting position, glanced around, still dazed. "It's...a long story." He looked closely at his rescuer, "Mr. Dant? Yeah...I remember; you were at the Judge's a coupla months ago..." His tone became reproachful at the memory, "That wasn't nice, what you did. Or, rather, tried to do..."

Dant smiled in agreement. "I know. Although it was the Judge's idea, I instigated it, and then did nothing to discourage him. I'm really sorry about that. I was going to tell you my real purpose right off, but Judge Hardcastle had other ideas."

McCormick nodded, accepting the apology. "Yeah, he usually does."

The smile became a crooked grin. "You weren't...too hard him, were you?"

"Retribution is still pending." McCormick got unsteadily to his feet, a hand pressed against his side.

Dant restrained from helping, not wanting his actions to be misconstrued. But he stayed close, just in case McCormick wasn't able to manage on his own. They gazed up the steep embankment, McCormick frowning at the hopelessly entrapped Coyote, Dant searching for the easiest route back to the road.

"Do you think you can make it back to the highway?"

"Hmm...?" McCormick's mind was still on his car, mentally assessing possible damage; and aware that towing it over the rocks would probably rip out what was left of the undercarriage.

Dant noted the concern. "Friend of mine runs a garage that specializes in foreign and custom cars. I'll call him; he'll take extra special care of your car. He won't do more damage to it getting it out than was caused by the accident!"

"Wasn't an accident..."

Dant barely caught the low comment, and, although curious, decided not to press. "How about it? It's only 300 feet or so."

"What? Oh, yeah, I guess so. And thanks, I think I'll take you up on that offer."

Dant had another in mind, but knew it would not be accepted so readily. He followed McCormick up the incline, a few feet away and to one side; if the younger man should lose his footing, he'd be there to lend a hand, if not, well, the view was rather nice.

Their progress was slow, and McCormick paused briefly when they reached the Coyote. The front end was suspended in space, but the rear-mounted engine kept it anchored in place; it wouldn't go tumbling down to the beach before the tow truck arrived. Finally reaching the top, McCormick grabbed the twisted metal



guardrail and rested, getting his breath back. Dant continued past him, waited on the shoulder, then offered a hand up. McCormick accepted without hesitation, leaning on him slightly as they covered the short distance to the Mark V. Dant opened the passenger door and McCormick nearly collapsed in the bucket seat; after a moment, he went around, slid behind the wheel. Not starting the engine, he looked at McCormick and suggested carefully, "Are you sure you're all right? You look pale, and you'll be black and blue tomorrow..."

McCormick brushed aside the concern. "I'm fine; a bit shook up, that's all." He let his head fall back against the headrest, eyes closing.

Dant leaned across, pressed a toggle switch. The passenger seat moved back to provide extra leg room, another switch tilting the seat back. McCormick stretched, then curled up in the seat. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Dant smiled, started the engine; pulling onto the highway, he glanced again at his passenger. "Maybe you should see a doctor, or something—"

McCormick shook his head. "There's no need, really; I got used to this sorta thing a long time ago."

"I'll have Dani look you over. Now there's someone who'll take real good care of you..."

"Danny? Who's that? No, I'm okay; just...take me home..." His voice trailed away, as he dozed off. It had been a hell of a long day, especially after working stakeout the previous night.

Dant's smile widened. "The three words I've been waiting to hear..."

\*\*\*

Danielle Dant crossed the wide drive from the stables to the garage, looked up as her brother's metallic mauve Lincoln entered the front gate. She couldn't understand why he held on so stubbornly to the nearly 15-year-old clunking dinosaur especially with the brand-new, burnished bronze Lamborghini Contach parked in the garage. Perhaps it had made him uneasy that she had purchased it, birthday or no birthday.

Danielle had been unable to change the conditions of their parents' will, which had left all property, money, and corporate holdings to her, as they had disapproved of their son. Aside from the small trust provided to Lorin by the will, she had also given him the Guesthouse, and three companies separated from the main corporation. All were now thriving under Lorin's capable management. She may not care for her brother's lifestyle, but she couldn't pretend he didn't exist.

As the Lincoln halted at the entrance to the main house, she frowned slightly. Lorin rarely stopped at the main house first, always parking at the Guesthouse.

Lorin came around the long hood, motioned to her as he opened the passenger door. She glanced inside, then groaned, shaking her head. "Not another one! You know how Maurice gets whenever you show up with someone else - sulking around

the place for weeks on end..."

"Not this time. Give me a hand."

Danielle took a closer look, then straightened, smiling. "You're losing your touch, Lorin; you didn't used to have to knock them senseless to get 'em to come home with you."

"Oh, funny. I'll have you know I never touched him - well, hardly never."

"Hmm, sure. Another victim of one of those barroom brawls? I must say though, that this one's not like the other wimpy blonds you insist on fawning over. I take it you didn't take him to your place because you wanted to avoid an unpleasant scene?"

"That's right. Maury is always jumping to conclusions without waiting for explanations. Figured this way would be easier on everyone."

"Easier for you, you mean. All right, wake him up and bring him inside. You can put him in one of the guest rooms; but none of your shenanigans, understand? And make sure he understands."

"Oh, he understands. No need to worry about that."

\*\*\*

Lorin Dant overrode McCormick's protests, practically dragging him into the house. "Sit down here for a minute." Dant waited until his reluctant visitor was seated in the wing chair just inside the entryway. "Now, Dani said it was okay for you to use one of the extra rooms. I think it would be a good idea for you to wait here, and I'll see about your car. It will take a few hours, and you can use the rest. You slept the entire hour and fifteen minutes it took to get here."

"Where's 'here'?"

"Dant Manor. Established sometime around the Fifth Century, if you believe old Gramps. Now, no more arguments; get in there before I carry you in."

\*\*\*

"Just make yourself at home," Lorin opened the double doors to the combination dressing room and bath, "There's a whirlpool in there if you want to soak for awhile. There's some robes and stuff in the closet; you can leave your clothes outside the door and the maid will have them cleaned and returned in an hour or so. Anything else you want, just call down to the maid's quarters; it's marked on the phone. I'll let you know when your car's been taken to the shop." He paused at the door to the hallway, adding with a wide grin, "The door has a deadbolt, which should make you feel better." Closing the door, his quiet chuckle turned to outright laughter as he heard the lock turn.

\*\*\*

McCormick was pondering over the robes in the closet, a white terry, white velour, and white fake fur, when there was a light knock on the door. Taking

the terry robe, he pulled the bolt, and an elderly maid entered with a dinner cart. A hanger held his jeans and shirt, cleaned and pressed; even the tear in the left sleeve had been mended.

"Mr. Lorin ordered dinner, and said to inform you that your car was at Jacques Custom Car Care; it will be ready by the end of the week. If there's nothing else you require, I'll return later for the cart."

"Uh, no, thanks..." This place had better service than the security floor at the Centre Plaza. The maid left, and McCormick, feeling much better after the steaming whirlpool, settled down to the three course dinner. He could get used to this real easy; it was the fringe benefits that worried him.

The early dusk was just beginning to darken the evening sky when there was another knock at the door. He had left it unlocked, and, thinking it was the maid to pick up the thoughtfully provided dinner tray, he called out from the window, "Come in."

"Hello, I'm Danielle Dant; I hope you're feeling better. Lorin told me about the accident, and asked me to look in on you."

He turned sharply at the feminine voice, eyes lighting up. "Mark McCormick. Lorin mentioned you, in passing..."

Danielle felt his intent gaze, probably admiring the sweep and flow of the jade green silk; she would have to keep a close watch on her wardrobe. Lorin's last 'visitor' had made off with her favorite pair of gold stilettos. Sighing inwardly, she wondered why all the really good-looking ones were either married or gay - just her luck. She returned his smile with cool courtesy, more from habit than any attempt at friendliness.

McCormick was a bit puzzled by her seeming indifference; he'd never had trouble making contact with gorgeous women before. They usually gave some indication that they were interested, or unavailable. Of course, they had only just met, but still... He wasn't accustomed to being totally ignored. "Are you Lorin's sister?"

"Yes."

She didn't elaborate any further, and McCormick figured, with his luck, this would be a case of 'like-brother-like-sister'; hell, why him? However, he continued with the charm; he could be wrong. She moved with a style and grace that spoke of a professional career as a dancer or model; and the long slit in the silk skirt revealed longer, tanned legs. Then something clicked in his memory, and he stared at her outright, "Wait a minute..."

Her cool reserve never wavered as he approached closer, taking in every detail of face and body. "I know you..."

At that moment, Danielle realized that Mark McCormick fit in neither category that she had chosen for him; he was genuinely interested in her. Concealing her pleasure at this discovery, she warmed considerably. "That's what they all say. What they mean is that they'd like to know me."

"Nooo... I do know you..." The smile widened, "A tiger-print bikini, with black

stripes in all the right places — 'The Tawny Tiger', right?"

Danielle grimaced at the reminder; she hadn't been referred to as that for nearly ten years. She had just started modelling, and her first semi-nude layout had been with a tiger skin; with her sleek figure, golden tan, and wildly styled coppery blonde hair, she'd been nicknamed 'The Tawny Tiger'. She had thought at the time that 'Tigress' would have been more appropriate, but who was she to argue with her experienced PR agent?

"All right, but that was ages ago; most people have forgotten it. I know I have." She'd also like to forget her current nickname; 'Double D' referred to more than just her initials.

He gave no sign of knowing it, however; instead, he stepped back, leaning against the window frame, arms crossed. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Thinking for a moment, she shook her head. "Not really. Do I get a hint?"

"Do the races at Valkerie, Florida, sound familiar? 1974, the old, abandoned airport between Cocoa Beach and Fort Lauderdale?"

"Lord, how could I forget? My first public appearance after that awful tiger layout. I was all of eighteen, and—" She broke off, eyes widening, "Omigod, you're not..." She looked closer at his amused features, imagining him twelve years younger. "You are... You won that race! I gave you your first trophy — and you, you gave me my first kiss."

"Yeah, I knew it was."

"Still as impertinent as ever, I see." She laughed at nearly forgotten memories "I'm much better at it now."

"So am I."

"Do you...have the evening free?"

"I do now."

\*\*\*

Excusing herself for a few minutes, Danielle encountered Lorin in the hallway, where she had expected him to be. He gave her a raised brow, "Well, I see you didn't waste any time."

"Why didn't you tell me when you got here that he wasn't one of yours?"

"Hope springs eternal. I keep thinking, maybe, one day..."

"Not ever, Lorin. And if you so much as look at him the wrong way, I'll tell the Mad Mauler who you really spent last weekend with."

"You're an evil woman, Dani; evil."

"Tell me about him. Where's he from?"

"I'm not sure; East Coast, I'd say. You remember Judge Milton Hardcastle?"



"Isn't he that crazy judge who keeps ex-convicts on his estate?"

"That's him."

"You're not saying..."

"Yes, I am... And, yes, he is."

They had been walking toward the curving staircase, which led to the Master Suite, when Danielle paused, uncertain. "What...did he do?"

"Car theft. Served two years of a five-year sentence, and is now on parole and in Hardcastle's custody."

"That's all? Nothing else? No assault and battery; no murder or rape?"

"Nope, none of that. Nothing serious or violent. Although I do have it on good authority that he's an expert at breaking and entering."

"Oh?" She smiled over her shoulder as she started up the stairway, "That sounds promising."

"Sometimes, Dani, you're worse than I am."

\*\*\*

McCormick, realizing that Hardcastle had no idea where he was, and that he should have been at Gulls-Way over an hour ago, knew he would have to call the Judge. If nothing else, just to keep Hardcase from issuing an APB on him; Mark definitely didn't want Hardcastle, or the cops, locating him at an inopportune moment.

He slid a hand over a smooth, bare shoulder, as he pulled Danielle down next to him. "I really don't want to delay this any longer than absolutely necessary, but, do you mind if I use the phone? I need to call someone. Believe me, it will be to both our advantage."

"Judge Hardcastle?"

"Uh, yeah." He considered for a moment. "Dani, are you listed in the phonebook?"

"Yes, but under my married name."

McCormick pulled back, "Married?"

"I'm divorced, darling; just never bothered to change the listing."

"Are there any other Dants listed?"

"Lorin's number is unlisted. That leaves my grandmother, Lynette, under L. Dant." Her light green eyes sparkled. "All the Dant women have the same problem."

"What's that?"

"None of us can ever say no to a handsome man." At McCormick's wide grin, she looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

Not answering, he reached for the bedside phone, dialled Hardcastle's number. "Judge? It's me. I'm gonna be a little late... Yes, Judge, I took the files straight to Judge Carson, and gave them to him personally. I think I can follow simple instructions... No, I'm not at his place. There was an accident, and I wrecked the car, and before you ask, I'm fine... Thanks, Judge... A couple of Bookman's thugs caught up with me on the PCH and ran the Coyote off the road..."

Danielle snuggled closer, nibbling his ear, fingertips brushing lightly down his back; his free hand slid through long, copper hair and brought her lips down to his. Hardcastle's loud voice went, for the moment, unnoticed.

"McCormick, where the hell are you? What's going on? And what are you up to? I'm tellin' you right now, kid..."

Danielle's hand turned the receiver, pressed it against the comforter. "Is he always that bad?"

"Nah, sometimes he's worse. I'll get rid of him." He waited for one of Hardcastle's rare pauses, and broke in. "Don't you want to know who rescued me? He's a real good friend of yours; you introduced us. Lorin Dant, remember? He brought me to his place, and, Judge, you were right that time..."

Danielle laughed quietly, whispered in his ear, "You're a bad boy..." She was going to say 'bad little boy', but there was nothing little about him.

"...There's definite possibilities, here; possibilities I never dreamed of... New and exciting experiences; and I wouldn't think of taking payment for it... Sec ya later, Judge, real late." Replacing the phone on the nightstand, he turned his full attention to Danielle. "Serves him right. Bot the old donkey is searching through the phone book right now; and he'll find L. Dant all right, and he'll <sup>As</sup>straight for that address. Where is it, by the way?"

"Out in Santa Monica."

"Great. That'll give us plenty of time. I almost wish I could see that encounter...sure hope I'm not disappointed."

"You won't be; not in either case..."

\*\*\*

Danielle sighed deeply, stretched with languid contentment in his close embrace. "Hmmm, that was...different."

"It...wasn't what you wanted?" He bit her neck lightly, "Or expected?"

"Oh, I got everything I wanted; and a lot more than I expected."

\*\*\*

McCormick, recognizing the blaring horn of the GMC, got unwillingly to his feet. "Geez, I'm in for it now. But it was worth it."

"Will I see you again?"

"I should be back on my feet in about a week."

"I don't want you on your feet..." Her Leasing smile wavered, "He won't be too angry with you, will he?"

"Don't worry; Hardcase's disciplinary actions rarely take on physical form. He'll just work my ass off."

"Oh, is that what happened to it?" She leaned back against the pillows as he dressed. "How soon, then?"

"How about tomorrow night? Lorin has my address."

"Yeah, but I have your number."

\*\*\*

At the foot of the curving staircase, McCormick gave Danielle a parting kiss. "Since I'm gonna do this, I might as well do it right. Would you mind staying out of sight? Let Lorin see me out?"

"You must love living dangerously."

"Is there any other way? Gotta admit, it keeps things from getting boring."

\*\*\*

Lorin Dant opened the front door just as Hardcastle charged through it. Without preamble, he grabbed McCormick's arm and nearly dragged him out the door.

"Thanks, Mr. Dant; I had a great time."

"Mark," Dant said disparagingly, "After all we've been through, don't you think you should call me Lorin?" He turned a broad grin to Hardcastle. "Hello, Milt; you're looking well."

"You I'll deal with later," Hardcastle growled; shoving McCormick toward the truck, he muttered darkly, "As for you, you..." He opened the door and all but threw McCormick inside the cab. "See if you can sit there and behave yourself."

"It's not what you're thinking, Hardcase."

"McCormick, you have no idea what I'm thinking." Slamming the door, he went around and got into the driver's seat.

"I know you. I knew what you'd do. You went to Santa Monica, didn't you? Tell me, how was the vivacious Ms. Dant? Still as spry as ever?"

Whether it was the impertinence of his attitude, or the impudent smirk, Hardcastle wasn't sure; but something snapped deep down, and he lunged across the seat grabbed McCormick's shirt collar in a tight grip. "Do you realize," he said in a quiet, deadly tone, "That I was nearly assaulted by an 80-year-old crone

on a suburban doorstep - in front of God, the neighbors, and everybody! They were cheering her on McCormick! I've got bruises in places I won't talk about." His hold tightened, "And you planned it!"

McCormick tugged slightly at the locked grip, "Hey, Judge, com'on; be fair. It wasn't... all that much different than what you had planned for me."

"Not even close, kid; not even close. And believe me, you will live long enough to regret it. I'll give you fair: Give me one good reason, any reason, why I shouldn't wring your neck."

"...Uhh, it's illegal?"

"Not good enough, kiddo; undue provocation - no jury would convict me. Try again."

"You'd miss me?"

"At the moment, never."

"Who would you yell at?" Seeing Hardcastle considering that, he smiled faintly, "Besides, you'd...have to actually pay someone to take care of that...mausoleum of yours..."

With grudging agreement, Hardcastle released him. "Yeah, ya got a point there... But I swear, if you ever pull something like this again, I'll cut off your—"

Straightening his collar, McCormick looked at him with raised brows.

"...Salary."

