

Father's Day



written by Rowena Warner

Hardcastle stretched and yawned, his nose wrinkling appreciatively as the faint smell of bacon tickled his nostrils. The clock on his nightstand revealed that it was only 6:20 a. m., and his eyes widened in surprise. "Either McCormick's got another screw loose, or some stranger's cookin' up breakfast in my kitchen," he growled, throwing back the covers.

Within minutes he entered the kitchen, his slippers slapping softly against the tile floor.

McCormick whirled around, an egg in each hand and a guilty look spreading across his youthful features. "Judge!" he exclaimed. "What're you doing up?"

"I might ask you the same question," Hardcastle barked suspiciously. Tying his robe around him, he checked the meat sizzling on the stove. "Bacon's getting too done," he pointed out. "And what the hell're you doing up cookin' this time of morning, especially on a Sunday? I thought you were up late last night studying."

"I was, but I, uh, I just wanted to get up and fix breakfast," McCormick answered evasively.

"For both of us, I assume?" Hardcastle questioned, noting how many eggs McCormick was breaking into a bowl.

"Of course, for both of us," McCormick retorted, whipping the eggs with more energy than the judge had seen him display in some time.

Studying the young man a moment, Hardcastle dropped into a chair and sighed. "Whatever it is, the answer is no."

Still devoting his energies to the eggs, McCormick glanced up. "What do you mean, the answer's no? I haven't even asked you anything."

"No, but you're going to," Hardcastle grumbled, "and if you've gotta get up at six o'clock on a Sunday morning and fix me breakfast, then it's bound to be something I'm not gonna like, so before you ask, the answer's no," he repeated firmly. "And I think those eggs are already dead, McCormick," he added with a grin. "You don't have to commit first degree homicide on 'em."

Looking sheepish, McCormick poured the yellow mixture into a skillet, then without raising his head, spoke softly, "You're wrong, ya know."

"About what?"

"About me wanting somethin'." He reached over to turn the bacon.

"I just wanted to fix breakfast for us this morning, that's all."

Hardcastle was still doubtful. "Why?" he demanded.

"Why not?" McCormick turned to the refrigerator. "You want some orange juice?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle growled and leaned back looking as if a lightbulb had just come on in his brain. "I know what you're doing," he accused. "You're trying to make me feel guilty because I yelled at you yesterday."

McCormick snorted. "Judge, you yell at me every day. Yesterday wasn't any different."

Hardcastle remained silent, and glancing his way, McCormick saw a strange look on the craggy features. "Hey, Judge, I didn't mean anything by that," he assured hastily. "You yell at me, I yell at you. That's the way it is with us. It's when you *don't* yell at me that I get worried," he added with a grin.

"They why're you fixing breakfast?" Hardcastle persisted.

Laying the bacon on a piece of paper towel to drain, McCormick sighed. "Judge, anybody ever tell ya you got a one-track mind?"

"Yeah, lots of people," Hardcastle shot back, "but that doesn't answer my question."

"I fixed you breakfast because I *wanted* to fix you breakfast," McCormick answered, his tone one of patience, and set a plate filled with food in front of the judge. "Satisfied?"

"Not until I taste the eggs," Hardcastle grinned. Taking a bite, he chewed slowly and nodded. "Not bad, kid. I may make a cook outta you yet."

"Forget it," McCormick retorted and tried a sample from his own plate. He took two more bites, then jumped to his feet, a nervous energy seeming to emanate from him. "Be right back," he promised and headed for the den.

"Where ya goin'?" Hardcastle called after him. "Get back here and eat your breakfast!"

"Just a minute!"

McCormick returned in less time than that, carrying a large box decorated with masculine wrapping paper, ribbon, and bow. Offering it to Hardcastle, he stammered, "I, uh, I bought you something."

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, Hardcastle accepted the present with a grin. "Well, well, what's this?"

Returning to his chair, McCormick demanded excitedly, "Open it and find out."

Turning the package in his hands, Hardcastle studied the semi-neatly folded corners and the ribbon which had been cut just a fraction of an inch too short. "You wrap this yourself?"

"Yeah." McCormick nodded. "Last night in the gatehouse."

Hardcastle looked at him in surprise. "Thought you always had the stores do this kinda stuff."

"I do, but...this was...different," McCormick answered, then confessed wryly, "Took me over half an hour and three sheets of wrapping paper."

He shook the box. "I don't hear anything."

"That's 'cause it doesn't rattle. C'mon, open it," McCormick urged, reaching across the table. "Here, let me help."

Hardcastle jerked the box back out of his reach. "Get your hands off my present," he growled. "What the hell's wrong with you? Think I'm gettin' too old and weak to unwrap a package by myself?" With a snort, he

ripped the paper off with a flourish, the ribbon and bow departing with it, revealing a non-descript box which gave no hint as to what lurked inside. A thought suddenly occurred to Hardcastle, and he glanced up sharply. "This isn't some kind of joke, is it? When I open this box, is a bunch of snakes gonna jump out at me?"

McCormick shook his head, blue eyes twinkling. "I promise you, Judge, it's not a joke."

Hardcastle eyed him doubtfully, but proceeded to remove the lid and fold back the tissue paper. "Aw, now, that's nice," he smiled. "A blue wind-breaker. That'll really come in handy in the mornings."

"Hold it up," McCormick urged.

He did so and nodded. "Yep, looks like it's the right size."

"Turn it around."

Throwing McCormick a puzzled look, the judge did as instructed, his eyes widening in surprise. A large, snow-white horse, mane flowing as it reared, front hooves seeming to reach for the inscription *Hi-O Silver!* emblazoned overhead, had been embroidered on the back in meticulous detail.

"Hey, this is great!" he exclaimed, grinning broadly. "This is really great, McCormick!"

"I'm glad you like it." McCormick smiled shyly.

Hardcastle lowered the windbreaker so he could see the young man's face. "This must've cost you a bundle, kid."

"Well...no, it wasn't that bad," McCormick hedged. "I found a little old lady downtown who loves to do that kind of stuff." He rose quickly to his feet. "C'mon, Judge, stand up and try it on."

Hardcastle did so and looked over his shoulder with a grin. "Well?"

"Go look in the hall mirror," McCormick replied and followed him, smiling as the judge preened, flexing his broad shoulder muscles so it appeared the horse was moving.

"This is really great, kid," Hardcastle repeated, still looking at his back in the mirror. "But why'd you do it? This isn't my birthday, and it sure as hell isn't Christmas."

When there was no answer, he glanced at his young friend's reflection in the mirror, then turned to face him. "Well?" he asked in a curiously soft tone.

"There, uh, there's somethin' else that goes with it," McCormick mumbled and held out an envelope.

Taking it slowly, Hardcastle hooked a finger beneath the seal and tore it open, then removed the card inside. "'Happy Father's Day to Someone Special,'" he read aloud, his eyebrows arching. "Well, I'll be damned," he breathed softly, and opening the card, continued to read, almost to himself:

"I know I don't say 'thank you' nearly as often
as I should,
And I know I don't do my chores the best that
I really could.
And just because I mouth off a lot and sometimes
cause a hassle,
Doesn't mean I don't like living here,
just me and Judge Hardcastle."

Raising his head, he eyed McCormick intently for a moment, then asked,

"You wrote this yourself?"

"Yeah." McCormick averted his gaze. "It, uh, it took me over an hour at one of those computers they have in the card stores. I-I know it doesn't sound too good, but..."

"No, no, I like it," Hardcastle assured him. "It's just that I, uh, well, I don't know what to say, kid."

"You're not angry, are you?" McCormick asked anxiously.

"Angry? Why the hell would I be angry?" he demanded.

McCormick didn't answer, and looking down at the card again Hardcastle ventured, "Mark, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

He lifted his gaze to lock with McCormick's. "Did you send your dad a card?"

"I, uh, I don't know where he's at right now." McCormick looked away quickly.

"If you did, would you've sent 'im one?" Hardcastle pressed.

"I'm not sure," McCormick replied flatly, then amended, "No, I don't think so. Maybe later, but not now." His gaze returned to Hardcastle's.

"Does that mean I'm a terrible person, Judge?"

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "You won't hear *me* saying that, not to the kid who just gave me a one-of-a-kind Father's Day card and a windbreaker with 'Hi-O Silver' on it." He slapped McCormick on the back, then slung an arm around his shoulders. "C'mon, let's go to a ballgame. I'll buy ya a hot-dog and one of those big banners you can hang in your room."

H&Mc



Day after Daye



an essay written by Judge
Milton C. Hardcastle, Retired
uncovered & submitted by
Rowena Warner

Thanks to the kid, I've gotten into this habit of writing stupid little essays whenever I've got something on my mind. This time, though, I'm beating him to the punch. Instead of answering one of *his* "walks through the woods", I'm blazing the trail myself. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not the type to sit around talking to a pen and paper. I prefer people, but in this case, the "people" I'd really like to talk this over with is the one person I *can't* talk to right now.

We just got back from Atlantic City early this morning, and the kid's out in the gatehouse, claiming he's tired and needs some rest. But I'm not buying it. I think he's got a few tears inside he wants to get rid of in private.

That's okay. He needs some time alone, and so do I, because I tell you, right now I've got a lot of mixed emotions about this whole East Coast deal. For one thing, I'm madder than hell at Sonny. I've never wanted to deliberately hurt anyone in my entire life, but when he sat there in that hotel room, with Mark in the hands of those goons who'd just as soon kill the kid as look at him, and said, "If I'd wanted to see him, I would've put an ad in the newspaper", I could've punched his lights out. Almost did.

I don't believe that jackass! He's got a perfectly good son, a decent kid who, sure, got into a little trouble, but he got his life straightened out, no thanks to his dad, and what does Sonny say? "Some people just should never have kids."

The *damned* fool!! I went through hell when I lost my own son, and this man just gives *his* up, turns his back and walks out on the boy like he did 25 years ago! Didn't even have the decency to tell him face to face that he was leaving. The creep didn't give a damn how Mark felt. The kid's not stupid; you don't have to hit him over the head for him to understand his dad's not real thrilled about having an offspring. How's he supposed to feel, knowing that his own father would've been happy if he'd never been born?

Usually, I'm satisfied with life, but there are times when it seems

pretty damned unfair. Why couldn't *my* son have lived, or why didn't Sonny have a kid who didn't give a damn how his father felt about him? It would've saved Mark and me both a lot of pain. To quote Sonny's favorite saying, though--"That's life." Damn it, I never did like that song.

I'm not bragging and I'm not saying that I make a good substitute, but I was glad I was there last night when Mark read that note from his 'dear old dad'. I just wish Sonny'd been there, too, because that look on the kid's face would've melted a snowball in the Arctic. It sure as hell did something to me. Guess that's why I've been feeling so guilty.

When McCormick stood gazing up at that marquee and was giving his dad all the credit for breaking into that Federal building, I admit, I was pretty damned hurt. I almost told him the truth, but then I thought, what right have I got to burst the kid's balloon?

But then, when he read that note, God forgive me, I started grinning. The boy is standing there, all his illusions about his father suddenly flushed down the toilet, and I'm heaving a sigh of relief. I couldn't help it. He thought his dad had done this great thing just to save him, and if I didn't set him straight on it, Sonny sure as hell wouldn't have. I could already feel a gap widening between Mark and me. Like he said, "We're talking about blood", and right then I was certain he was gonna move back to Jersey to be with his father. Oh sure, he probably would've stayed in contact with me for awhile, but there's a helluva lot of miles between LA and Atlantic City, and a young man like McCormick is bound to find new friends, new interests. So that's why I broke into a grin when I found out Sonny had left. Right then I was feeling really good, but I realized on the flight back that I would've done anything, and I mean *anything*, to have kept that kid from being hurt.

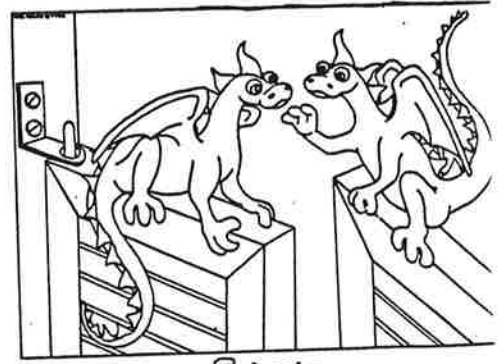
I think Mark must've realized a few things, too. He wanted to get out of Atlantic City as soon as possible, so we caught the red-eye home. He sat there beside me all night, looking like a lost Bassett hound, never uttering a word until the plane landed and was taxiing across the runway. Then he turned to me and said, "You know, Judge, you're one in a million." I think he finally figured out the break-in wasn't exactly his dad's idea.

Well, I've gotten all this out of my system now, so I think I'm going to go to the gatehouse and drag McCormick out of bed and make him play a game of basketball. Do him good. I'm going to show him that, if I have anything to say about it, there's at least *one* person in this world who's not going to trade him in for a free meal and a bigger sign out front.

Mark's a good kid, a *damned* good kid.

H&Mc

This Just Doesn't
Seem To Be
My Daye



Swireme

an essay written by
Mark "Skid" McCormick
uncovered & submitted by
Lizabeth S. Tucker

Well, well, well. I must've had a good idea if the judge is doing this stuff now. I only started writing these things 'cause it was a form of therapy recommended when I was in prison. Channel your hate and aggression and pain to paper rather than letting it out to other prisoners and guards. It's a lot safer, for both sides. I *know* Hardcase didn't want me to find this one, it was well hidden in his desk. And I probably never would've if he hadn't gone away for the weekend and called me for some information. It was stashed in the same place. Guess he forgot. Or maybe the ol' marshmallow wanted me to find it, but wouldn't come right out and tell me about it. He puts up this steel, John Wayne exterior, but I've learned better; it's all a big sham. He cares, sometimes too deeply. But that's another subject. We're talking about my "father" now.

Yeah, I put quotes around it. That man may be my biological father, but he's never done any of the things that a real father does. He wasn't there when I needed him, but it was by his choice. Okay, fine. I looked him up, gave him a chance to explain. What did I get? Rejection. Something I'm getting used to.

I still don't understand why the judge let me drag him clear to Atlantic City without an explanation. There aren't lots of people who would do that, not even friends. Three thousand miles on a whim? That's a bit much for anyone to swallow. Especially when Hardcase was footing the bill, as usual. I needed him there, and I think--I hope, he realized that.

My feelings for Hardcastle never waned, despite the search for my dad. I didn't mean to hurt him when I said "blood is blood", but somehow I thought it was important to find Sonny.

It took seeing the loser I had for a dad to make me appreciate just how special Hardcastle was to me, how much *he* filled that void in my life that wanted a father figure. Flip didn't make it, he was too close to my own age in attitude. I had just about given up with my "father fixation" when Hardcastle roared into my life. I didn't want it, but now I'm glad we met.

A two-year jail term and Flip's death was a rough way to get introduced, but meeting Hardcastle was the best thing that ever happened in my stupid, stinking life.

Yeah, I cried that night. Bitter tears for the loss of a dream that I had sheltered in my heart since I was five years old--that I would find my dad, discover his leaving was a mistake, and that he'd welcome me with open arms. A kid's fantasy dies hard when it's been nurtured for all those years. It hurt. Bad. So did the truth of my rescue.

Yeah, I knew, even while I was outside that club spouting off about my "dad's" name being up in lights. I was trying to get at the truth, but Hardcastle was closemouthed about it, the cops wouldn't tell me squat, and I knew Sonny, if I talked to him, would play the hero for his adoring son. Ha, some adoration!

Hardcastle once said I was a good judge of character, and so I am. I knew the minute I met Sonny he was no good, but what your instincts tell you and what you want to believe are two different things.

Oh, Hardcase, you're so tough. Didn't you know that my dad, even if he *had* been the kind of man I was hunting for, wouldn't have broken us up? Even if you ignore the parole thing, my dad and I hadn't seen each other for 25 years. We might've become friendly, still might, but it would never be the same as what *we've* built up over the months.

Yeah, I hurt when that letter was handed to me. It was the final act. There were no more illusions left to me, no more hopes about a fairytale ending. I wish...hell, I don't know what I wish, but I was hurt by the judge's obvious sigh of relief at Sonny's leaving. I understand it, but it doesn't mean that the jealousy, the pettiness that I thought I saw in his face didn't disappoint me.

Then I thought about how I'd feel if the judge's son was suddenly back to life, back in Hardcastle's life, living in the gatehouse...and I understood.

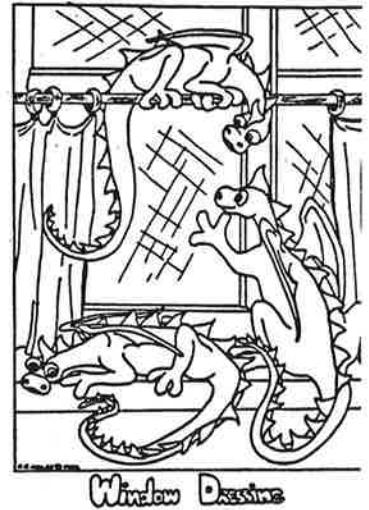
It took a lot of work, a bit of charm, and a hell of a lot of my own money to get the truth of what happened after I was snatched, part of the story coming from a secretary in the Federal building and some from dear ol' dad, when he hit me up for a loan (something the judge doesn't know about), but it thawed the last frozen part of my heart. I *did* find my dad that weekend. I've been living with him all along. I'm really home. Just a shame it took this to wake me up. I never wanted Hardcastle hurt, not since the first night I found him watching me like a mother hen just before I went undercover. I never thought the feeling was mutual.

Still and all, though, Hardcastle was wrong about two things. One, I'm not that good a kid, though I'm getting there. And second, the late night basketball game didn't do me any good. I think I broke some ribs on that last jumpshot.

Home. It sure sounds great. Even if Hardcase throws me out someday, I'll have a few good memories to take with me. That's more than I've had most of my life. Yeah, home. Has a nice ring to it.

H&Mc

Come Back
to the
Five and Dimes
of Vonna Westerlake



written by Rowena Warner

"Do you remember my girlfriend, Vonna Westerlake?"

"Who could forget Vonna Westerlake? Naked all the time, skinny-dipping in the pool. I don't think she had any clothes, did she?"

"Well, she was part of my adolescent dating experience--she was what you called a 'free spirit'."

"Dumb. Dumb as a box of rocks."

"Yeah, but she had a certified A-plus centerfold body. And you kept telling her to put her clothes on; something I will never forgive you for..."*

"Put your clothes on!" Hardcastle yelled for the fifth time. "For Pete's sake, young lady, didn't your mother ever tell you you're not supposed to run around like that except in a bathroom behind a locked door!"

"Oh, Judge, you're so funny," Vonna replied, supporting her statement with a high-pitched laugh that grated like sandpaper on Hardcastle's nerves.

"McCormick!" he roared, then gestured to Vonna. "Excuse me a minute. Go jump in the pool and stay under for about thirty minutes." At the blank look on her face, he changed his order immediately, fearful that the young woman would suddenly decide to obey him. "No, don't do that," he amended. "Just, uh, just sit down somewhere and quit jiggling around. McCormick!"

"I heard you the first time," McCormick answered over the judge's shoulder. "You don't hafta bust my eardrums."

Hardcastle turned on him angrily. "If you heard me the first time, why the hell didn't you answer?"

"Because I was busy admiring the scenery." McCormick grinned and leaned around Hardcastle, his eyes caressing the body posed provocatively in front of him. "Boy, Judge, just look at those mountains."

"McCormick!" Grabbing his arm, Hardcastle started dragging him

"The Career Breaker" - aired episode

toward the gatehouse, yelling over his shoulder. "Get your clothes on! You're gonna wind up causing the kid to have a heart attack!"

"Yeah, but what a way to go." McCormick sighed dreamily and, clutching his heart in faked pain, allowed his legs to buckle.

Still gripping McCormick's arm, Hardcastle reached out with his other hand to support the younger man. Maintaining his hold, he gave his friend a shake. "Stand up there before I have you committed to an asylum for the sexually insane!"

"Hey, I'm just a red-blooded American boy," McCormick protested. "Hardcase, if there's a deviate around here, it's you. Don't you appreciate beauty?"

"Sure I do," he shot back, "but part of beauty is leaving something to the imagination. *That* girl certainly doesn't. Now, I want you to make her put some clothes on," he ordered. "The guy's supposed to come to clean the pool today, and I'm expecting a special delivery from the postman. If they see her like that, they'll be telling the whole neighborhood that I've got some kind of orgy goin' on here."

McCormick broke into a grin, his blue eyes twinkling devilishly. "The Honorable Judge Milton C. Hardcastle keeping time with Lady Godiva." He punched Hardcastle lightly on the arm. "I *knew* you had it in ya, Judge."

"What I've *got* is a helluva lot of irritation directed at a certain kid who's being a wise-guy, and whose butt is gonna be mud if he doesn't do what I tell him to--*NOW!*" Hardcastle roared.

McCormick jumped. "You got it, Judge. Whatever you say. Consider it done."

"Now, I'm gonna go take a shower and get ready for my date with Judge Wellis tonight," Hardcastle continued in a fairly calm voice, "and when I get through, I'd better not see any bare skin around here. If I do, I'll end up being arrested for aggravated assault, and guess whose ass that assault'll be on?"

McCormick's eyes widened. "Uh, don't worry, Judge, I'll take care of it," he promised and took off after Vonna, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Hardcastle wasn't following.

Finding the young lady sitting on the edge of the pool, her bare legs dangling in the water, he moved up behind her and cleared his throat. "Uh, Vonna, we gotta talk."

Rising gracefully, she pressed her body to his. "Sure, Markie-poo. What would you like to talk about?"

"That, uh, that name, for one thing," he stammered, finding it difficult to breathe. "Could you...could you not call me that in front of Hardcastle?"

"Why not?" she asked sweetly. "I call *him* Judgee-poo."

Horror stricken, McCormick gaped at her. "You don't? You do? You *do!* Oh, Lord!"

"Aw, what's the matter, Markie-poo?" Slender fingers caressed his temples, then slipped into his curls. "Ooh, I just love your hair," she cooed. "It's like spun gold." Her fingers combed through it gently, and McCormick closed his eyes.

Having brushed his hair back, Vonna's fingers went to his mouth. "I love your lips, too," she whispered, and her hands moved downward, "and your shoulders, and your chest, and--"

McCormick's eyes flew open, and he grabbed her wrists. "--Uh,

Vonna--no! D-don't do that!"

"Why not?" she pouted.

"B-because we...we're out in the open and all," he finally managed and pulled back. "I, uh, I need to talk to you about putting somethin' on."

Her face brightened. "Sure. What song do you want to hear?"

He blinked in puzzlement, then smiled. "No, no, I don't mean put a record on the stereo. You, uh, you gotta put some clothes on your...body."

"Aw, don't make me, Markie-poo." Curling an arm around his neck, she pulled him close, her lips just inches from his. "I don't like clothes," she complained softly. "One should be able to express one's emotions and inner feelings, not only with the face, but with all parts of the body."

"Oh, you're expressing, all right," McCormick grinned, then caught himself. "Uh, no, you gotta put your clothes on. You see, Hardcase owns this place, and...and he tells me what to do, and he told me to tell *you* to put your clothes on, and if you don't do what I told you that he told me to tell you to do, then *he's* gonna tell *me* something else that I'm not gonna wanna hear, so--" He sucked in his breath. "--please, please, please, put your clothes on."

"Oh, all right," she agreed reluctantly. "I'll have to go get them."

Nodding in relief, McCormick watched as she headed for the main house. His eyes widened suddenly and chasing after the buxom blonde, he started to grab her arm, but let his own drop to his side. "Vonna, the, uh, the gatehouse is over there." He pointed.

"I know," she smiled.

"Then why are you heading this way?"

"To put my clothes on," she replied in an exasperated tone. "I can't very well put them on until I get them, now can I?"

McCormick swallowed hard. "Vonna, just where...where did you leave your clothes when you took 'em off?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Judge Hardcastle's bedroom, of course."

"Of course? *Of course?!*" McCormick was on the verge of panic. "Vonna, see that house? It's a big house, a *very* big house. It has lots of rooms in it. Then there's the gatehouse, smaller, but still a nice size. We even have the gardener's trailer." A note of hysteria crept into his voice. "With that much room, why, Vonna? *Why* did you have to undress in the judge's bedroom?"

She slapped him on the shoulder lightly. "Because that was the most private place, silly."

"Private!" McCormick gaped at her. "Vonna, you--look at you! I mean...all afternoon, everywhere, without your...without *anything*...and you're...you're talking about *privacy?!*"

Vonna straightened with a frown. "Mark McCormick, I refuse to undress in public! What kind of girl do you think I am, anyway?"

"I...I..." He had no answer, and Vonna whirled around, flouncing into the house.

Staring at the closed door, McCormick tried to figure out just where he'd gotten lost in the conversation. Suddenly, as if some giant hand had pushed him from behind, he lunged for the door in wide-eyed terror. "The judge! He's taking a shower!"

Vonna was nowhere to be seen, and bounding up the stairs two at a time, McCormick came to a grinding halt outside Hardcastle's bedroom, his heart sinking when he heard--

"Judge! Oh, my, what wonderful muscles!"

"McCormick!!!"

Turning, he started back down the stairs dejectedly. "That's it, I'm dead," he mumbled. "Might as well call it quits. Look up a florist in the phone book and order a spray of flowers. Carnations would be nice. I wonder what they call those long things on stems? Get one of those banners across it--R.I.P. McCormick. Lord, I can see it on my tombstone now-- 'From this spot Mark McCormick will never budge; Done in by a woman and a crazy ol' judge!'"

He was sitting on the bottom step, his chin in his hands, a perfect picture of hopelessness; when Vonna came bouncing down the stairs with a smile. "Okay, I'm dressed. What do we do now?"

He jumped to his feet. "You gotta go home!" Grabbing her arm, he led Vonna to her car. "The judge is gonna kill me when he comes downstairs. If you're not here, maybe he'll be satisfied with just mutilating me for life."

Vonna caressed his cheek with a slender finger. "Markie-poo, don't worry about the judge. Oooh, he has the most delicious muscles." She shivered in delight. "I promise you, I can take care of him. I can take care of *both* of you."

McCormick stepped back in shock. "Uh, whoa, wait a minute! If you wanna choose the judge over me, I can handle it. I'll probably kill myself, but I can handle it. But you, me, *and* Hardcase? Unh-uh, no how, no way. You gotta go, Vonna. You gotta go *now*!"

Her lower lip protruded in a pout. "Well, if that's what you want."

"I want! I want!" He helped her into the car, then slammed the door. "Go, good-bye, *adios, sayonara, vamoose!*"

Her car was clearing the gates when Hardcastle opened the front door. "McCormick!"

"She's gone, Judge," McCormick shot in quickly. "I sent her on her way."

Hardcastle turned a look of surprise on him. "Well, you didn't have to chase her off, kid. I just wanted her to put her clothes on."

McCormick stared at him. "But you and her... Upstairs..." His face turned fiery red. "She, uh, she said she could...take care of both of us."

Hardcastle frowned. "What do you mean 'take care of'?"

McCormick leaned close to whisper, "Judge, I'm talking about *take care of*, you know, as in 'fulfill our needs'."

Hardcastle drew back. "You're kidding!" He gazed down the long drive, then started toward the garage. "Wonder if we can catch up with her in the truck, or should we take the Coyote?"

"Juuudge!!!"

H&Mc