

**I DID A
NO—NO
A FEW YEARS
AGO**

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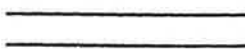
This is a long fic and will be loaded in 4 parts.

Well, here it is, folks--my second Hardcastle & McCormick zine. This one contains "The Shoe and The Other Foot", a continuation of the episode, "When I Look Back On All Those Things"; a missing scene entitled "Strike One, You're Out" from "In The Eye of The Beholder"; a short scene concocted in the middle of the night called "Nightmares Ain't What They Used To Be"; "S. Claus & Associates", a continuation of the Christmas episode, "Hate The Picture, Love the Frame"; a poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas--McCormick Style", which is another version of what happened on a certain night; and the main story, "I Did A No-No A Few Yars Ago", an original idea from my own befuddled brain.

I want to thank Ann Leonhart and Reg Marracino for editing the story, "No-No". They very daringly disagreed with me on character interpretation in certain scenes, which takes a lot of guts since I can be a royal pain in the butt when it comes to criticizing my stories. I went along with them on some of their suggestions, and on others, I had to stick with my own feelings, so if you don't agree, please feel free to let me know. I'm not promising I won't send Milt to your gatehouse with a shotgun, but I'll definitely listen.

I owe a very big thanks to Mysti Frank for typing this for me. I've published fourteen other zines and the worst thing about them is the typing. You would think I'd get better as time goes on, but I don't. So I really am grateful to Mysti for taking that God-awful rough draft and making some sense out of it. You'll probably notice that the type is different on some of the stories. That's because I ended up writing and typing some new stories while Mysti was doing the ones I had given her.

Well, I'll shut up now, throw in a few ads, then let you get on with the stories. I hope you like them.



I DID A NO-NO A FEW YEARS AGO

P R O L O G U E

Pulling off the highway onto the grass, the young woman shut off the engine and sat staring at the portion of the estate visible through the open gates.

"Gull's Way," she whispered softly, continuing to gaze at the huge house in the gathering twilight, drifting, wavering shadows giving an air of unreality to the dwelling.

There was an expression of longing, almost passion on her face as her eyes flitted from the sun setting behind the edge of one wall to the metal crutches lying in the seat next to her. Inhaling slowly, she started the engine and, giving the ornamental gulls above the gates one last look, pulled onto the empty highway.

CHAPTER ONE

"Judge, what do you wanna be when you grow up?"

Catching the basketball after it swished through the net, Hardcastle turned and stared at the half-awake young man. "What the hell kinda question's that?" he demanded.

"Well, you're obviously still going through puberty," McCormick yawned, "because no grown man would come out here at six-thirty every morning and shoot baskets."

Hardcastle made a slam dunk and growled, "If I'm still in my puberty, that must make you a baby, which is exactly what you sound like when you start whining like you're doing now."

"Judge, I'm an adult, and I am not whining," McCormick retorted with a lack of his usual enthusiasm on the subject. "I'm the only one who's got any sense around here."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Hardcastle shot back sarcastically. "You mean the kid who was running around here a few days ago, waving a great big book in my face, and yelling about leprechauns in the backyard has some sense?" He put his hands on his hips. "You coulda fooled me."

McCormick groaned low. "Oh, shut up, Hardcase. I had a late night last night with Gretchen, and--"

"--Oh, and I'm to blame for that, too?" Hardcastle interrupted. "Look, McCormick, I'll tell you what your problem is."

"I'm dying to hear," McCormick sighed.



"You're getting too old for your age." He grinned, lobbing the basketball to the young man. "Now, c'mon, let's do a little one-on-one before breakfast. That'll get the ol' blood pumpin'."

McCormick let the ball bounce off his chest as he yawned again. "Judge, my ol' blood doesn't wanna pump; it just wants to lie there quietly, peacefully, like I was doing a few minutes ago when you started pounding the boards with that damned ball."

"Aw, is the kid in a bad mood today?" Hardcastle sympathized in a mocking tone.

"No, the 'kid's' not in a bad mood," McCormick shot back. "The kid's sore, and he's tired because some ol' donkey's been usin' him as slave labor for the past few days."

"Are you still bellyachin' about that?" Hardcastle sighed. "I didn't make you work for a whole week while you were recovering from that concussion you got from one of your own stupid traps. By that time, the grass needed mowing and the hedges trimmed."

"I could've lived with it," McCormick shot in.

"Yeah, I bet you could've," Hardcastle retorted. "Look, I don't ask you to do anything around here that I wouldn't do myself--"

"--But that you don't have to do because you've got a Roman slave to do it for you," McCormick finished. "I'm surprised you don't ask me to run your bath water, too."

"Now yer cookin'," Hardcastle grinned, and dropping the ball, he slapped McCormick on the stomach and started towards the house. "Well, guess what you're gonna be doing today, kid?"

McCormick brought up the rear with a groan. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Nothing."

"Huh?"

"You're not gonna do anything today."

McCormick stepped away from him and stopped, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Judge, don't joke like that. It's cruel and inhuman."

Hardcastle chuckled. "Hey, I'm serious."

"Are you really serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious."

"Nah, you're not serious."

"Damn it! I'm serious!" Grabbing McCormick's arm, Hardcastle began pulling him towards the house.

"Are you honestly and truly serious?" McCormick pressed.

"I said you're not going to work today, and damn it, you're gonna do like I tell ya!" Hardcastle yelled.

"Well, if you're gonna put it that way..." McCormick's eyebrows came together in thought, but it wasn't until they reached the kitchen that a possible explanation came to mind. "I know what it is." He plopped down in a kitchen chair and propped his elbows on the table. "You're still feeling guilty about giving me a black eye and for not believing me about the leprechauns."

Hardcastle whirled around, pointing a skillet in McCormick's direction. "You deserved that black eye!" he shouted. "That's what you get for rigging up those contraptions and almost killing me! And for the last time, there are no such things as leprechauns!"

McCormick grinned. "I wouldn't tell that to the wee folk."

"That's another problem you've got," Hardcastle snorted. "An idea gets in that pea brain of yours, and it just stays there because it can't find a way out."

"At least my brain doesn't have concrete in it," McCormick retorted. "That's your problem, Hardcase. Everything to you is black and white with definite borders. You're so narrow-minded, you won't even consider the only possible explanation for how my car showed up, literally at the end of the rainbow."

Hardcastle flipped the sausages over and turned to glare at McCormick. "And I suppose you think the leprechauns picked the car up and carried it here."

McCormick shook his head. "No, they wrinkled their noses or something, and poof! there it was."

"Aw, come off it, McCormick." Lines of concern creased Hardcastle's craggy features. "You know, kid, you keep this up and I'm gonna have to take you to a shrink. You're beginning to worry me."

McCormick smiled. "Save your money, Judge. Until you can tell me how the yard got cleaned up and my car got out there, in perfect condition, I'm gonna believe the truth, and one of these days, I'm gonna make you believe it."

"When hell freezes over," Hardcastle snorted.

"Have it your way," McCormick shot back. "You always do." He slapped the table. "Hey, move it with the grub, Judge. I'm starving."

Hardcastle fought the urge to dump the skillet of food on

a curly head. "Keep it up, kid, and I'll change my mind about letting you goof off," he warned.

"Yeah, that's it, go back on your word," McCormick complained.

"I didn't give you my word," he growled. "I just said you don't have to work today."

"How come?"

Dumping the breakfast cuisine on two plates, Hardcastle sat one in front of McCormick. "How come what?"

"How come I don't have to do anything today?" McCormick reached up to put a hand on Hardcastle's forehead. "You feeling okay, Judge?"

"Cut that out!" He slapped the hand away. "Can't I give you a day off without you thinking I've gone senile?"

His young friend grinned. "You're right. I shouldn't look a gift jackass in the mouth." Stuffing his own with food, he mumbled, "What're you gonna do today?"

"As soon as we get through here, while you're doing the dishes, I'm gonna go to the supermarket and stock the refrigerator that you keep emptying like a vacuum cleaner," Hardcastle grumbled. "Then I'm gonna come home and do nothing right next to you. We've both been working our butts off the last three days, so I figure it's time to relax a little."

McCormick smiled. "Thanks, Judge. And listen, I'm sorry you didn't win that magazine contest. I know it meant a lot to you."

"Yeah, well, there's always next year," Hardcastle sighed, then began chuckling. "It was more fun the way it turned out, anyway. We gave those old biddies a real shock, didn't we? I bet their hearts haven't beat like that in years. It was worth losing the contest just to see their faces." The memory of it put Hardcastle in an even better mood, and leaning over, he slapped McCormick on the arm. "Hey, kid, whatta you say we take the Coyote out this afternoon for a test drive up the coast? You haven't had a chance to try it out yet and see if your little friends got all the parts in the right places."

"Ah ha! Ah ha!" Grinning from ear to ear, McCormick pointed a finger at the judge. "You believe in 'em! You believe the leprechauns fixed the Coyote!"

"Aw, now, don't start that again, and quit pointing that finger at me before I break it," Hardcastle shot back, his face becoming slightly red. "I'm just going along with you here because the shrinks say you should try to humor a crazy person."

"Yeah, I know," McCormick laughed. "What do you think I've

been doing for the last three years?"

Knowing he hadn't convinced the young man (or himself), Hardcastle snapped, "You wanna go up the coast or not?"

"Can we take a picnic lunch?" McCormick asked hopefully.

"Sure, why not?" Hardcastle agreed heartily. "I'll tell you what--we'll make a day of it." Wiping his mouth with his napkin, he stood. "I'll get some extra stuff at the supermarket, and as soon as I get back, we'll take off towards Ventura."

"Are you serious?" McCormick asked in wide-eyed wonder.

"Sure I'm serious."

"Really and truly serious?"

"McCormick! Don't start that again!" Hardcastle released his breath in a familiar sigh. "Damn, kid, you got a one-track mind. If you ever had a collision with a rational thought, you'd be dangerous."

McCormick flashed him a grin. "Sticks and stones may break my bones--"

"--And so can a certain judge we both know," Hardcastle interrupted. "Now, get those dishes done. If they're not spotless when I get back, we're not going."

"Yes, sir," McCormick saluted smartly. "Right away, Your Honor. Anything you say, Your Judgeship."

"Aw, shut up," Hardcastle growled.

"Immediately, sir," McCormick promised, determined to get the last word.

CHAPTER TWO

The doorbell rang, but by the time McCormick had finished rinsing the plate and drying his hands, it had sounded throughout the house a second, then a third time.

"Keep your pants on!" he yelled, but not too loudly. He had said that once when he first started living there, and the visitor had turned out to be one of Hardcastle's old cronies who took offense at his "order." He in turn had caught hell from the judge for being irreverent to an officer of the law. Of course, he knew all of Hardcastle's friends now, and decided smugly that they enjoyed having someone around who didn't constantly put them on the bench.

The doorbell rang again and he muttered, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, so you got a finger. Just get it off the button." Swinging the door open, he started to make a caustic remark, but the words died in his throat. Stepping back in surprise, he could utter no more than, "Uh-uh-hi."

The young woman facing him looked up, obviously surprised and spoke in a hesitant voice, "H-hello. Is this...is this where Judge Milton C. Hardcastle lives?"

McCormick nodded, trying to find his voice. "The-uh-the judge isn't here right now," he finally managed, staring down into the large, pale blue eyes of the most fragile-looking woman he had ever seen.

She stood just over five feet, and he doubted that she would tip the scales at a hundred pounds, that is, without the metal crutches which were hooked around each arm.

She seemed to sag slightly on them and sighed, "Oh, dear, I suppose I should have called first, but it-it would've been rather awkward..." She stood there as if uncertain what to do next.

Pulling himself together at last, McCormick smiled wryly. "God, I'm sorry, I must've left my manners in the other room. Listen, the judge should be back in about a half an hour. You're welcome to come in and wait if you want to."

The young woman hesitated. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"No, of course not." He stepped back, giving her room to enter, and asked, "Can I-uh-can I help you?"

"No, thank you." She smiled up at him. "I'm pretty good with these things, even if I do say so myself."

He closed the door behind her, and pointing to the den, he brought up the rear, tears unexpectedly stinging his eyes as he watched her move with agonizing slowness across the room. It was heartrending to watch her rely solely on the crutches, her legs apparently useless appendages that she was forced to drag along with her.

Stopping in front of the sofa, she literally dropped onto it, and slipping her arms from the cuffs, propped the crutches against the cushion beside her.

McCormick took a seat on the other end of the sofa, and watched as she inhaled deeply, then spoke in a somewhat breathless voice. "I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Anita Bushmeyer."

"Mark McCormick." He nodded, then grinned. "Mark, for short."

"Anita," she smiled and glanced around the room. "Are-are you visiting, too?"

"No, I live here--well, out in the gatehouse, actually," McCormick amended, "but this is my home, too."

She sighed. "You're lucky."

"Yeah, I know," he agreed softly, suddenly realizing he was fortunate in more ways than one.

Her eyes met his, and she asked in a low voice, "Have you known Judge Hardcastle long?"

"About six years," McCormick replied. "I've been living here with him for almost three."

"Is-is he nice?" Anita asked hesitantly. "The judge, I mean."

McCormick broke into a grin. "It's according to whose opinion you get."

"I'd be very interested in yours," she urged softly.

Leaning back against the cushions, McCormick's grin faded. "The judge is a stubborn, cantankerous, onery jackass," he answered in a serious tone, then the grin flashed again. "And I love the guy to death. But don't tell him I said that," he added quickly.

"He doesn't know?" Anita asked in surprise.

"Well-uh-yeah, I guess so," he stammered, blushing slightly, "but it's just not something you'd say to him outloud."

"I think I understand," Anita smiled.

Both fell silent, McCormick beginning to grow uncomfortable under Anita's constant scrutiny. She appeared to be contemplating a grave matter, and apparently arriving at a decision, spoke at last. "Mark, do you and Judge Hardcastle share things? I mean, things that happen in your daily lives and-and your past? Do you talk about them?"

McCormick started to make some kind of smart remark that the judge was always coming to him for advice, but the young woman looked so serious, he decided to answer in the same manner. "Yeah, for the most part. There's not much Milt and I don't talk about at some time or another."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Then-then I suppose it would be all right to go ahead and tell you why I'm here. I would like to-to sort of practice what I'm going to say to him."

Leaning over, McCormick patted her arm sympathetically. "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad, Anita. Believe me, the judge is a very understanding guy, and he'll help you in any way he can. If you're in some kind of trouble--"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," she interrupted. Inhaling deeply, her eyes rose to meet his. "Mark, I...I'm Judge Hardcastle's daughter."

McCormick stared at her in shock. "Good Lord! You're kidding! The judge has told me a lot of things, but he never mentioned having a daughter!"

She threw him a weak smile. "That's because he doesn't know it yet."

"Oh, I see," he said, not seeing at all. Trying to collect his confused thoughts, he said the first thing that came to mind. "Do you-uh-do you want some coffee or-or something?"

Anita laughed shakily. "Coffee would be nice, Mark. Thank you."

McCormick rose slowly to his feet. "There's a pot on in the kitchen. It...won't take but a minute."

She nodded, and Mark departed the room fast, mumbling under his breath, "His daughter! Boy, Hardcase, are you in for a shocker! Man, I can't wait to see your face!" Pouring two cups of coffee, he sat them on a tray and adding cream and sugar, began thinking aloud again. "Of course, she can't be telling the truth. She must be in her early twenties, and the judge was married to Nancy then. Nah, he would never have done something like that." His eyebrows came together in a frown. "I wonder what she's up to. If she thinks she's gonna blackmail Hardcase, then she'd better think again."

Picking up the tray, he carried it into the den, and sitting it on the table in front of her, his face was a mask as he asked

politely, "Cream and sugar?"

"Cream, please."

Handing her the cup, he reached for his own when the sound of an engine drew him to the window. "It's Hardcastle," he announced with a quiet sigh of relief, and meeting the judge at the front door, he took the bag of groceries from his arms.

"Whose car's that out front?" Hardcastle asked immediately.

"You, uh, you got a visitor, Judge."

"Ah, okay. There's a couple more bags in the truck," he motioned with his head. "I'll get rid of this person quick, and in the meantime, you can start packing the picnic lunch."

"That'll have to wait a little bit, Judge." McCormick sat the bag on the table in the hallway, and putting a hand against Hardcastle's back, he pushed him towards the den. "There's a young lady in there that I can guarantee you is going to blow your mind." He broke into a grin. "Really, Judge, I never knew you had it in ya. How many mistakes you got strung all over the country?"

Hardcastle threw him a puzzled look. "What the hell're you talking about?"

"Just kidding, Judge. Listen, be gentle with her. She's probably got some kind of mental problem." He followed Hardcastle into the den, watching Anita's face carefully as she looked up, her eyes sweeping over the judge.

"Milton C. Hardcastle?" she asked softly.

He nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

She smiled. "Please forgive me for not rising."

Hardcastle took in the crutches beside her with a glance, and he nodded again. "Of course. Well, what can I do for you, young lady?"

She glanced at McCormick, then drew a deep breath. "My-my name is Anita Bushmeyer. My mother was Suzanne Bushmeyer." She paused, then continued in a low voice, "I'm your daughter, Judge."

Hardcastle turned white and for a moment, McCormick was afraid he was going to faint right there on the spot. Staring at the judge's pale features, he gasped, "Good God, it's not true...is it?"

Hardcastle apparently didn't hear him. "My daughter?" he managed hoarsely. "I-I didn't know."

Anita nodded. "Mother didn't want you to. She knew you

had another life, and she didn't want to cause any trouble for you."

"She should've told me," Hardcastle returned in a choked voice.

McCormick's shocked gaze went from Anita back to Hardcastle. "Judge, you mean she-she's telling the truth?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle replied slowly. "I'm afraid so, kid."

"But...how?" McCormick asked. "How could she be your daughter?"

Hardcastle threw him a sharp look. "Haven't you learned about the birds and the bees yet?" he snapped.

"Of course, I have," McCormick retorted. "That's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

Anita's eyes met Hardcastle's. "Should I tell him, or would you rather he didn't know?" she asked low.

"Nah," Hardcastle motioned with his head. "Go ahead and tell him; otherwise, he'll pester me to death."

McCormick was suddenly not so sure he wanted to know the details. "Uh-listen, Judge, if-if this is private...I mean, you don't owe me an explanation."

"Yeah, kid, you're entitled to one," Hardcastle decided and gestured towards a chair. "Sit down." McCormick did so slowly, and looking as if he needed something for support, Hardcastle leaned heavily against the desk, and nodded at Anita. "Go ahead."

"This isn't easy for me," she began, then cleared her throat. "My-my mother was a-a prostitute. I'm not proud of that, but she was a good mother, and I loved her very much."

"Was?" Hardcastle questioned softly.

"She died three months ago," Anita explained in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Her gaze fell, and the slender hands began twisting the ends of her string belt as she continued. "My mother used to...work at some of the largest hotels in Miami. One time, in 1964, there was a conventions of lawyers in town..." Her eyes rose to meet McCormick's. "That's where my mother met the judge."

The blue eyes widened. "You mean she and he...they..."

Anita nodded.

"Oh, my God!" he breathed softly.

Hardcastle threw him a sharp look, then turned back to Anita. "Look, forgive me for saying this, but your-uh-your mother'd profession was prostitution. How could she be sure that I-uh-I'm the one--"

"Who fathered me?" Anita asked frankly. "She knew, Judge, because during that time she hadn't been with a man for almost two months. If you want proof, I'm sorry, but I don't have it, at least not all of it. The police had started a campaign to wipe out prostitution in Miami, so my mother left for a month to visit her sister in Georgia. She didn't meet any men there because, believe me, Aunt Maeve would've had a heart attack. She thought Mother was a saleslady in a clothing store in Miami. I can't prove that part," she reached into her purse, "but I can prove what happened to Mother the day after she met you." Leaning forward, she handed Hardcastle a sheet of paper. "That's her arrest record. The police arrested her within an hour after she left you the next morning, and she spent three weeks in jail because the pimp she worked for wouldn't pay her bail," she explained in a bitter tone.

"Why not?" Hardcastle asked in surprise.

"Because she told him she wanted to quit," Anita answered softly. "After she got out of jail and discovered she was pregnant, she got a job as a waitress, and never...did it any more." Straightening her shoulders, her voice became stronger. "I have a birth certificate in my luggage that I can show you if you like, but the only thing it will prove is that Suzanne Bushmeyer is my mother. The father's name is blank. Mother refused to give your name because she didn't want to cause any trouble."

Hardcastle frowned and threw McCormick a quick glance to see how he was taking the news. The young man was sitting ramrod straight, his eyes glinting like cold steel, and his frown deepening, Hardcastle sighed and mumbled, "Damn! The fat's in the fire now."

"I beg your pardon?" Anita asked.

Rubbing his hand across his face, he shook his head slightly, as if to clear it. "I-uh... Look, you're gonna have to forgive me. It's not everyday that I find out I apparently have a daughter." He laughed shakily. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do next."

Anita smiled. "You don't do anything, Judge. It doesn't even matter whether you believe me or not. I just had this overwhelming desire to meet you, that's all." McCormick was still sitting quietly, and she looked his way. "I think I may have made a mistake by coming here, though. I knew your wife was deceased, but I didn't know anyone else was living with you."

Slipping her arms into the cuffs of her crutches, she started to stand, and Hardcastle made a move towards her, obviously intending to help. "No, I can make it, thank you." She nodded, smiling. "I think it would be better if I left now. It was...it was nice meeting you, Judge, and-and you, too, Mark."

"Now, wait a minute," Hardcastle demanded. "You can't just come in here, tell me I'm your father, and walk out."

"Why not?"

"Damn it, just because! McCormick!"

Mark raised his head. "Don't look at me, Hardcase. She's your problem, not mine."

"And just what the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm no one's problem!" Anita shot back angrily. "I just wanted to meet my father! I have no intentions of becoming a burden to anyone!"

McCormick dropped his head, but not before Hardcastle saw his face turn crimson. "Listen, ignore him. He didn't mean anything by that," he assured Anita. "And you're crazy, young lady, if you think I'm going to let you just walk outta here like this. Now, where are you living?"

"Well, no-no place at the moment," she admitted. "Mother and I moved out here to San Francisco when I was thirteen, and when she died, I sold the house. I haven't-I haven't really decided what I want to do now."

"I have." Hardcastle reached out and squeezed her shoulder gently. "You're gonna live here with us."

McCormick's head shot up, and Anita threw him a concerned look. "No, Judge," she protested. "I know you mean well, but I didn't come here for a handout or a place to stay. I was in a car accident when I was seven, and my legs have been paralyzed ever since; but believe me, I can manage quite well on my own."

"I don't doubt that for a minute," Hardcastle smiled. "But you're my daughter, and now that I know that, I think I should have a little say-so over what you do. If you don't like that, you shouldn't have come here."

Instead of getting angry at his words, Anita matched his smile. "So this is what Mark meant when he said you were stubborn."

He glared at the young man who returned his look with an angry one of his own. "He doesn't know what stubborn is yet," Hardcastle warned. "I think the two of us are gonna have to have a serious talk." Turning back to Anita, his voice softened. "Look, I can't force you to live here if you don't want to, but

you can stay for a while, at least till you decide what you want to do. I've got a nice guest room upstairs. I can carry you up, and I'll get one of those elevator things installed and you can go up and down the stairs on your own. Have you got your bags with you?"

Anita nodded and laughed shakily. "You do like to take command of a situation, don't you?"

"That's the way I am," Hardcastle replied gruffly. "Take me or leave me."

She studied him a moment and her lips curled. "I think I'll take you--but only for a while," she added hastily. "I don't want to be a burden, and I'm afraid I also like my independence."

"Great." In one quick move, Hardcastle swung her off her feet and into his arms, then ordered McCormick, "Grab those crutches and go out and get her luggage."

McCormick silently complied, and watching him leave the room, Anita sighed. "I'm sorry, Judge. I think I'm an unwelcome guest in your family."

"Aw, don't worry about the kid," Hardcastle shrugged and started up the stairs with her. "I'll straighten him out. He just got a big shock, that's all. To be honest, we both did." He looked down into her face and grinned. "Damn, a daughter! I always did want one."

Anita smiled, and hooking her arm around a broad shoulder, she leaned her head against his chest. "Mother was right," she whispered. "She said you were a good man, and now I believe it."

CHAPTER THREE

McCormick brought in two suitcases and a folded wheelchair and, leaving them at the foot of the stairs, went outside again.

Hardcastle stood on the landing and frowned as he watched McCormick pull the door closed hard behind him, then retrieving his daughter's possessions, he carried them upstairs and, advising Anita to get some rest before unpacking, went in search of his young friend.

Spotting McCormick standing on a pile of rocks at the edge of the beach, Hardcastle moved up behind him, watching as he flung several flat stones into the water.



Instead of jumping across the small waves, they were sinking immediately, and looking up, Hardcastle shook his head with a sigh. "That's not the way I taught you to do that, kid."

"Well, I guess I'm just a real disappointment, ain't I, Judge?" McCormick snapped without turning.

"All right, all right, you got my attention," Hardcastle shot back. "Now, you wanna talk about it?"

"No, I don't," McCormick retorted and climbing down off the rocks, he started down the beach away from the judge.

He had only taken two steps, however, when Hardcastle grabbed his shoulder, pulling him around. "C'mon, McCormick, I know when something's bothering you. What's stuck in your craw?"



McCormick's face suddenly went rigid with anger. "You! That's what!" he yelled. "How could you, Judge? How could you have done something like that? My God, you were married! You're always saying that Nancy was such a wonderful wife, but her husband... Damn! He goes off to a convention and beds a hooker!"

"Hey, who do you think you are?" Hardcastle threw back at him. "You sure as hell haven't lived a pristine life!"

"No, I haven't!" McCormick flung back angrily. "But I never paid to have a daughter, either!"

Hardcastle's face turned white with fury, and he caught himself just in time, opening his raised clenched fist and satisfying himself with grabbing McCormick's shoulders and shaking him roughly. "Damn it! Don't you ever say anything like that again!" he roared.

"Don't you ever preach to me again!" McCormick shouted and, pulling away from the judge's grasp, threw caution to the winds. "The Great and Honorable Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, dispenser of justice," he announced sarcastically. "Boy, that's a crock! Doesn't the law pertain to morals, Judge? Or did you figure you were above that kind of old-fashioned stuff?"

"No, I didn't!" Hardcastle yelled back. "It was just one of those things that happened! I'm not proud of it, but I can't change it, either!"

"That's sure as hell true!" McCormick retorted hotly. "God, I don't believe this! You had the gall to put me in prison for stealing my own car, and you go and get a hooker pregnant! Damn you, Hardcase, you're nothing but a sanctimonious charlatan!"

Hardcastle inhaled sharply at the accusation; but instead of becoming angry, he reached out as if to lay a hand on McCormick's shoulder. "Look, Mark--"

"Don't!" McCormick backed away. "And don't give me any excuses, either! I've listened to you preach at me for almost

three years now, and all that time, you were living a lie!"

"Are you finished?" Hardcastle roared.

"No, I haven't even gotten started yet!" McCormick yelled back in an equally loud voice. "I've looked up to you, Judge. I even wanted to be like you. Well, it looks like I've left out a coupla things. First, I've gotta marry a wonderful woman, then I've gotta go off and bed a hooker, then leave her with my kid to raise all on her own!"

"I didn't know she was pregnant!" Hardcastle yelled.

"That's no excuse!" McCormick fired back. "You abandoned your own daughter! Left her with a single mother trying to do the right thing, and probably working herself to death to make ends meet! You're-you're--"

"Just like your dad?" Hardcastle shot in.

"Yes!"

Grabbing McCormick's arm, Hardcastle's voice quaked with fury. "Listen, kid, I'm sure as hell not perfect, but I'm no Sonny Daye, either! If you had been my son, I wouldn't have abandoned you, and if I'd known about Anita, I wouldn't have done it to her! I would've done the right thing, even if it meant maybe losing my wife!" There was no lessening of the anger in McCormick's face, and releasing his arm, Hardcastle stepped back, his eyes locking with Mark's.

"I'm sorry, kid," he apologized softly. "I did a no-no a few years ago, and if you feel you've gotta condemn me for that, I can't stop you. I can't even blame you. Believe it or not, I can see me through your eyes right now, and I sure as hell don't like what I see." He sat down on the rocks behind them, his eyes staring out over the ocean. "I may have gained a daughter," he continued low, "but it looks like I've sure made a mess outta things with you."

Gazing down at the bowed head and slumped shoulders, McCormick's own anger faded. "Aw, hell," he mumbled and knelt in the sand beside Hardcastle. "Why, Judge?" he asked softly. "Why'd you do it?"

Hardcastle shrugged and released his breath in a drawn-out sigh. "I don't know. I was forty-five at the time. Maybe I was going through some kind of mid-life crisis. I'd been an attorney for about three years, and was working my butt off, tryin' to learn everything I felt like I needed to know in order to compete with guys half my age. Hell, you know how I am--ol' Hardcase Hardcastle always goes after what he wants and tough luck to anyone who might get in his way."

"Judge, you're not like that," McCormick protested in a

low voice.

Hardcastle looked down and squeezed his shoulder. "Yeah, I am, kid, and you know it better'n most people." His hand remained on McCormick's shoulder, apparently forgotten, as he looked back to the ocean and continued. "Anyway, I was at that convention, trying to learn everything I could and hitting the books at night after the seminars instead of goin' out on the town like most of the other guys were doin'. The last night I was there, I was tired, couldn't sleep, though, so I went down to this little all-night coffee shop in the lobby. That's where I met Suzanne. She was a good woman, McCormick; she didn't look or act like a hooker, not like the ones I used to arrest while I was on the beat. We sat there, talked awhile, then went to my room and talked some more. One thing sort of led to another and damn it, it just...happened." His eyes lowered to meet McCormick's and he sighed again. "Well, that's it, kid. Ol' Hardcase really made an ass of himself that time."

"Did your wife ever know?" McCormick asked.

Hardcastle smiled wryly. "She never said anything, but I'm pretty sure she guessed something was wrong because I was acting guilty as hell; couldn't stop myself. And believe me, that was the first, last, and only time I ever let something like that happen." Dropping his hand from McCormick's shoulder, he pushed against his thighs and rose slowly, suddenly looking very tired. "You know, kid, it's funny, but you never really leave your past behind. It has this habit of showing up when you least expect it."

"Yeah, I know." Climbing to his feet, McCormick brushed the sand from his jeans, keeping his head down as he spoke, "Judge, I-uh-I'm sorry. I had no right saying what I did."

"Yeah, you did," Hardcastle contradicted softly.

McCormick shook his head, still keeping it lowered. "No, I didn't. I shouldn't have gotten angry like that."

"McCormick, look at me," Hardcastle demanded. The curly head rose slowly, his eyes meeting the piercing blue gaze. "You had every right to get mad at me," Hardcastle insisted. "If you ever do something like that, I'll...I'll kick your butt all over Malibu."

McCormick smiled. "Yeah, I bet you would." His expression grew serious. "You really think Anita's your daughter, Judge?"

Hardcastle nodded slowly. "She must be. She knows all about Suzanne and me, and I don't need to see her birth certificate to know she's Suzanne's daughter--she looks just like her."

"What're you going to do about Anita?" McCormick asked cautiously.

Hardcastle shrugged. "That's up to her. She sure as hell has got a home here as long as she wants to stay--permanently, if that's what she decides. I owe it to her."

"Oh," was McCormick's only response, and he turned slowly, starting up the beach towards the house.

Hardcastle stared at his back a moment, then went after him. "Okay, kiddo, what's buggin' you now?"

"Nothing, Judge--really," McCormick assured him.

"I know what it is," Hardcastle grinned. "You're jealous."

"I'm not, either," McCormick denied.

"Yeah, you are." Hardcastle stepped in front of him, forcing McCormick to stop. "Look, kid, this doesn't change anything between you and me, that is, not unless you want it to," he added slowly.

McCormick shook his head. "I don't, Judge."

"Well, then, you've got nothing to worry about," Hardcastle grinned broadly.

McCormick was privately doubtful, but he kept his thoughts to himself as he followed Hardcastle back to the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bringing Anita downstairs, Hardcastle had her join them for lunch, then spent the afternoon with her by the pool, and beamed proudly when she insisted upon helping him prepare a somewhat elaborate dinner.

By the time McCormick had cleared away the dishes and finished washing them, he was having a difficult time fighting his growing resentment of the new addition to the family, all the while hating himself for feeling the way he was. "Damn it, she's handicapped and alone," he muttered to the serving platter. "What else could she do but hunt up her father?" His argument didn't help, and he shoved the platter in the rack with the rest of the dishes.



Hardcastle had not spoken to him all afternoon and had barely thrown more than a few words his way over dinner. The judge was totally engrossed with his new-found daughter, plying her with questions about her past, making plans for her future. Ignoring her mild protests, he had called and made arrangements for an elevator chair to be installed on the stairs, and had ordered her a motorized wheelchair so she could move about with greater ease.

McCormick didn't mind the money the judge was already lavishly spending on his daughter, but he did resent the motivation behind it. Guilt was riding heavily on his shoulders, though, because Anita was the most independent, undemanding and lighthearted young woman he had ever met. She insisted upon doing as much as possible for herself and did so in such a way that Hardcastle literally beamed with pride.

Hearing Anita and the judge now in the den, laughing over something he had apparently said, McCormick stood in the hallway and listened.

"Look, I can understand your wanting to be independent," Hardcastle was saying, "and I think I've got the solution for you. If you don't want to live upstairs, you can move into the gatehouse. Probably be easier for you, anyway. We can set up the bed downstairs, and it should work out just fine."

"What about Mark?" McCormick heard Anita ask. "Shouldn't you talk to him about this first?"

"Nah, he won't mind," Hardcastle replied. "He can move into the gardener's trailer till we get something else worked out. It's only temporary. I'd have him move in here--he could have the bedroom next to mine--but he'd raise hell if I tried to get him to do that."

McCormick moved slowly to the back door, his expression one of anger and hurt. "He could've at least asked," he mumbled and pulled the door closed quietly behind him, feeling certain Hardcastle wouldn't even notice his absence.

He spent several hours gathering up his personal belongings and carrying them to the tiny trailer perched some distance from the house, then passed the rest of the night sitting on the edge of the narrow bed, chin cupped in his hands as he stared into the darkness.

The day that had started out so promising had turned into a real bummer. Hardcastle had forgotten about their one-day vacation and the plans for the picnic, leaving McCormick feeling like a kid who had been promised Disneyland, but instead was being punished for something he hadn't done.

He tried to convince himself that he was being childish, but the ache remained. Before coming to live with Hardcastle, there had been precious few times in his life when someone had done something for the sole purpose of making him happy, and he still cherished those moments with Hardcastle, even though they had become more frequent with each passing year he was there.

He knew he resented Anita's intrusion, but it was more than just a case of jealousy. A feeling of sadness and loneliness crept over McCormick as he failed to conquer the growing suspicions that the best three years of his life were rapidly coming to an end.

C H A P T E R F I V E

"McCormick! Where the hell are you?"

"Over here, Judge." McCormick was on his hands and knees, busily trimming the grass along one edge of the drive. He kept his head down, glancing at the dirty pair of tennis shoes now in front of him, and continued trimming.

"McCormick, what the devil're you doing up so early and working before breakfast?" Hardcastle demanded.

"I thought I'd get a jump on the chores before it got so hot," he returned casually, keeping his eyes on his work.

"Where the hell'd you go last night? I went looking for you right before I went to bed and couldn't find ya anywhere."

"I was in the gardener's trailer," McCormick answered quietly, closing his shears hard on a particularly stubborn tuft of grass. "I moved my stuff in there last night."

There was silence a moment, then Hardcastle bent down to jerk the shears from his grasp. "Will you stop that and look at me when I'm trying to talk to you!" he yelled.

Straightening, McCormick kept his eyes down as he slipped off his work gloves. "There's nothing to talk about, Judge," he replied calmly. "I overheard you telling Anita about the gatehouse, so I cleared my junk outta there. You can move her in this morning if you want to."

Hardcastle cleared his throat. "I was gonna ask you about it first, you know."

McCormick looked up sharply. "Sure you were," he agreed, unable to keep a hint of sarcasm from creeping into his voice.

"Look, if you object to this--" Hardcastle began.

"No, no, it's okay." He sighed. "You're right, Judge. It'll be easier on Anita in the gatehouse. She'll have more room to maneuver around with her wheelchair."

"The trailer's only temporary, ya know," Hardcastle promised. "Besides, it's not like I'm evicting you from your home. You know damned well this whole place is your home, so what difference does it make what 'room' you sleep in?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," McCormick agreed reluctantly.

Hardcastle studied the young man a moment, a worried

frown marring his craggy face. "What's wrong with you, McCormick? You look like you didn't sleep a wink last night."

"I told you I was moving," he answered evasively. "I, uh, I've collected quite a bit of junk in the last three years, and it took me a while to get it all out."

He reached for the shears, but Hardcastle held them behind his back, out of McCormick's reach. "It took you the entire night?" he asked suspiciously. "You'll be pushin' ninety before I fall for a line like that, kiddo." He broke into a grin. "I know what's really wrong with you. I still say you're jealous of Anita."

"I am not!" McCormick fired back, then corrected almost immediately, "Okay, maybe I am." He smiled wryly. "But I'm also carrying a heavy load of guilt on my shoulders, so let's forget it, huh, Judge? I guess I was just a little upset yesterday, that's all."

"Yesterday?" Hardcastle suddenly remembered. "Awww, McCormick. Hey, look, I'm sorry. Anita showing up and all--I completely forgot about our plans. Listen, I'll make it up to you. We'll do it in...a coupla days, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, whenever you can fit me in," McCormick mumbled. "Look, Hardcase, don't do me any favors," he returned sharply. "You never have before, so why start now?"

"Aren't you being a little unfair?" Hardcastle asked in a hurt tone. "I've done a lot of things for you, kid, but you're right--they weren't favors. I'm selfish. If it makes you happy, then it makes me happy. Is that what you want me to admit? Okay, I admit it," he snapped.

"I don't want you to admit anything," McCormick retorted. Turning his back on Hardcastle, he ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, "Aw, damn, Judge, I'm sorry. You're right, I'm being unfair." Turning, he managed a smile. "Look, just forget about yesterday. I'm an adult; I don't need around-the-clock attention."

"Well, why the hell didn't you tell me that before?" Hardcastle growled in mock anger. "Look at all the time I've wasted on ya."

McCormick broke into his first genuine grin of the morning and made a grab for the shears again. "Get your butt back in the house, Hardcase, and let me get some work done."

Hardcastle gave the garden tool a toss into the grass. "Not until you come eat some breakfast."

"You're fixing it," McCormick demanded.

Grinning, Hardcastle slapped him lightly on the stomach.

"Now yer cookin'."

"No, I'm not."