

**I DID A
NO—NO
A FEW YEARS
AGO**

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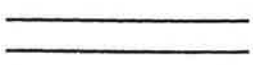
This is a long fic and will be loaded in 4 parts.

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.



CHAPTER TEN

Hardcastle regretted his outburst almost immediately but decided to let McCormick come to him with his apologies, and then he'd raise the subject of law school again. What the young man had done to a handicapped person was unforgivable, but Anita had suffered no harm, so Hardcastle remained silent and waited.

Three days passed, however, and McCormick still did not seek him out. Hardcastle said nothing when he noticed Mark moving his belongings back out to the trailer. Neither did he demand his presence at meals, but left sandwiches in the refrigerator or on the counter, frowning in concern when he later found them untouched.

He even held his temper when he found an evergreen bush whacked to pieces, his rosebushes uprooted and trampled, and putty clogging the water fountain.

Standing with his hands on his hips, Hardcastle glared at the latter, his face turning dark with anger. "Okay, kid, so you're mad," he muttered, "but if you keep this up, you're gonna have more trouble than you can handle."

McCormick already felt that trouble had become his twin brother. His impulsive actions had caused him to make a mess of things, and he was at a loss as to how to straighten it out. For the last three days, he had felt as if he were two people, each at total opposites with the other.

One half of him was filled with guilt and disgust at what he had done in the gatehouse. "God! What in the world made me do something like that?" he muttered to the hedges. "The Judge oughta send me back to the joint for that. Damn! How low can I sink just because of some petty jealousy?!" He couldn't get the look of righteous anger on Hardcastle's face out of his mind and groaned. He wouldn't blame the judge for any actions he might take in retaliation. He almost wished that Hardcastle had slammed him into the wall, for to go unpunished for such a heinous act made it even worse. Both the judge and Anita probably hated his guts now, and with good reason. It no longer made any difference, though.

As soon as he could find a job and a place to live, he was leaving Gull's Way, and Anita would then have her father all to herself.

It was that thought which caused McCormick's 'other side'



to enter into the argument. No matter how often he tried to tell himself Anita was a young handicapped woman wanting nothing more than to live in peace with her father, a part of him remained unconvinced.

His suspicions grew stronger with each passing day, as did the ache in his chest when he saw Anita and the judge by the pool or when they went out for a ride.

He had watched them laugh together, had watched Hardcastle wrap his arms around his daughter and hug her as gently as one would cradle a small kitten.

"He's never hugged me," McCormick mumbled to the hedge. "I mean, I know it's different between a father and a daughter, and anyway, it's not like I'm his son or anything, but still..."



The calm voice that was telling him everything was wonderful between the judge and his daughter suddenly fell silent the third day after the incident in the gatehouse, and McCormick knew he couldn't leave Gull's Way until he found out the truth about Anita.

He had gone to the supermarket the afternoon following her so-called suicide attempt and stocked up on junk food and other items that needed no cooking or refrigeration, but they continued to sit in a sack on the narrow counter in his trailer, relatively untouched. Filling up on hot sodas and beer, McCormick mechanically did his chores, keeping out of sight as much as possible and getting more done in three days than he normally accomplished in a week, all the while wondering how long he could continue living like a hermit.

His eyes had widened in surprise when he came across the dead evergreen and the withered rosebushes brought a frown to his face. He didn't find the clogged water fountain, but the other two incidents set his mind to racing. The judge surely would not have destroyed the plants, yet it was obvious they had been deliberately mangled and uprooted.

McCormick wandered thoughtfully across the grounds, determined to stay awake all night and keep a watch on things.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rising early as usual, Hardcastle began getting dressed, intending to go out and shoot a few baskets before breakfast. Remembering again that Anita was still asleep, he slumped down on the bed and shoved his foot dejectedly into a dirty tennis shoe.

"It's no fun shootin' baskets alone, anyway," he grumbled. "Damn it! When's McCormick gonna quit actin' like a spoiled kid?"

He had not seen Mark at all the day before, and his eyebrows came together in a worried frown as the thought struck him that something may have happened to the young man. There were many ways to get hurt on an estate that size, and McCormick had a habit of finding all of them. Deciding to slip down and take a peek in the trailer, Hardcastle laced up his shoes and started downstairs. On the last step, he froze, his eyes following a path of yellow paint sprayed on the carpet, leading from the kitchen into the den, then back out again, stopping at the front door.

Hardcastle's face contorted with rage, and filling his lungs, he roared, "McCormick!!!"

Flinging the door open, he ran outside and looked around quickly. Spotting his culprit entering the garage, Hardcastle started that way, mumbling angrily to himself, "The kid's done it now! I'm gonna string him up by his heels!"

Unaware that trouble was heading his way, McCormick pulled the garage door closed behind him, yawning. Despite his best intentions, he had fallen asleep by the front gate and now was cold, stiff, and on his way to feeling totally miserable.

Switching on the light so he could see better, McCormick started around the front of the truck, but came to a startled halt, eyes widening as he spotted a sledge hammer lying on the floor beside one wheel.

"Now, what the devil was Hardcase usin' that for?" he wondered. Leaning down to pick it up, he saw the smashed fender. "What the--"

The garage door flew up behind him and, straightening, McCormick whirled around, the sledgehammer falling to the floor. "Judge!"

Hardcastle stalked forward. "I don't know what the hell you think you're doing, kid, but if you think I'm gonna let you get away with spray painting my carpet--" His eyes went from

the sledgehammer to the dented fender. "McCormick!!"

His voice reverberated in the garage, and Mark cringed. "Now, wait a minute, Judge. I didn't do it. I just came in here and found it like that."

Hardcastle grabbed the front of his shirt, jerking McCormick forward so he could yell in his face. "And I suppose you didn't chop down that bush or dig up the roses or put putty in the water fountain or spray paint my carpet!"



McCormick stared at him wide-eyed. "No, I didn't! I saw the bush and the roses, but I didn't know about the water fountain or the paint." He glanced down at the fender. "Or this!"

"Like hell you don't!" Hardcastle shouted, and gave McCormick a violent shove backward, sending him reeling into the garden tools hanging on a rack behind them. Gasping, Mark slid down the wall, resisting the urge to grab his forearm as a stab of pain shot through it.

Picking up the sledgehammer with one hand, Hardcastle literally threw it to the other side of the garage and shouted, "I want this truck taken down to Benny's and I want it fixed... now! And don't think it's not gonna come out of your pay, either! Then I want you to get your butt back here and clean that carpet! I don't care if it takes you ten years--you're gonna get up every spot!"

McCormick rose slowly to his feet, keeping his arm turned away from the judge. "Go to hell, Hardcase!" he hissed angrily.

"Not before I send you there!" the judge roared. "Now, get moving!"

Whirling around, he stalked out of the garage, leaving

McCormick trembling with anger and pain. Unbuttoning his cuff carefully, he pulled back the ripped sleeve, wincing at the stream of blood coming from a four-inch gash on his forearm.

McCormick glanced at the culprit behind him, a scythe still hanging on the rack, part of its long, curved blade now stained with a thin line of blood.

Grabbing the cleanest rag he could find, he wrapped it tightly around his arm, and jumping into the truck, slammed it into reverse and roared out of the garage, not caring if he ran over every single evergreen and rosebush left on the place.

Dropping the truck off at Benny's, McCormick mumbled some hurried instructions, then caught a cab to Doctor Friedman's office where, by chance, he entered the elevator at the same time as the physician he had come to see.

Charles Friedman recognized the young man from the day several months earlier when McCormick had tried to persuade him to reveal Hardcastle's medical condition,* and grinning broadly, he held out a hand. "Mark, how're you doing? And how's Milt?"

McCormick offered his left hand. "The judge is as cantankerous as ever," he smiled.

"That's Milt, all right," Friedman laughed, then his face grew somber. "God, I'm glad the lab made a mistake on that death sentence I gave him."

"Yeah, me, too," McCormick replied frevently, somewhat surprised that despite all that had happened during the past few days, he truly meant it.

The doctor stepped from the elevator, and McCormick followed him.

"Well, what brings you around here, Mark? You haven't come to see me by any chance, have you?"

"Well,...yeah, as a matter of fact, I have." McCormick nodded and removed his jacket carefully, revealing the rag, now spotted with blood.

Friedman's eyes widened. "What happened to you?"

"I, uh, had a dumb accident and cut my arm," he returned vaguely. "I thought I'd better have you take a look at it; that is, if you're not too busy."

* "Do Not Go Gentle..."

"Actually, the office is closed up today," Friedman whispered conspiratorially. "I was just stopping by to pick up a file."

"Oh." McCormick hesitated. "I, uh, I guess it can wait, then." He started to turn but was grabbed by his uninjured arm.

"Nonsense, Mark. You're not going anywhere until I have a look at that. Milt would never forgive me." Guiding McCormick into his office, the doctor unwrapped the wound carefully and frowned. "Well, I've seen worse, but this is no little scratch, either. Looks a lot worse than it is, though, because you've bled a lot. What'd you cut it on?"

"A scythe."

"Rusty?"

McCormick shook his head.

Dropping the bloody rag into the wastebasket, Friedman grumbled, "Well, you sure as hell didn't use good judgment putting that thing around it. It's not the cleanest bandage I've ever seen. Why didn't Milt wrap this up for you and bring you in?"

"He, uh, he wasn't there at the time."

Friedman cleaned the wound, then studied it, nodding thoughtfully. "This is going to require stiches, you know."

McCormick cringed. "That's what I was afraid of."

Moving to the cabinet, the doctor began removing the swabs and other items he would need for his work. "When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Uh, never, that I know of," McCormick replied.

"Well, you're gonna get one now," Friedman grinned. "Painful son-of-a-gun, but that'll teach you not to wrap a dirty rag around a wound. Come on, son, bare the bottom."

McCormick groaned. "You've been hanging around the judge too long--you sound just like him."

Friedman laughed heartily and went to work. By the time he was finished, McCormick was pale and sweating, and also unable to sit down. Fastening his pants with one hand, he turned to Friedman, venturing hesitantly, "Doc, can I ask you a medical question?"

"Sure."

"Well, this is, uh, it's gonna sound a little crazy," McCormick began slowly, "but I thought I'd try my hand at writing

a story, you know, just to see if I could do it."

Friedman's brows arched. "That doesn't sound crazy, Mark; it sounds interesting."

He smiled. "Thanks. Well, anyway, in the story I've got this guy who's pretending he's paralyzed from the waist down. He's not, really, but he wants everyone to think he is, so he's taking this drug that causes a temporary paralysis. What I need to know is, does a drug like that really exist?"

Friedman rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, now, that's not exactly my field, Mark, but I think I can find out something for you."

"I don't want you to go to any trouble," he returned hastily.

"Oh, no trouble at all," Friedman assured him. "Tell you what--I'll call you as soon as I come up with something on it, okay?"

McCormick offered his hand. "Thanks, Doc."

"Anything for an aspiring writer," Friedman grinned. "Now, you go on home and take care of that arm. And tell Milt I said you're to take it easy for the next couple of days. I don't want you pulling those stitches loose."

"You wouldn't want to put that in writing, would you?" McCormick asked.

The doctor blinked. "Well...yes, if you want me to."

"No, Charlie, I was just kidding." He smiled. "Thanks again."

Getting a cab back to the service garage, he waited another hour until Benny finished up the truck, then climbed into the vehicle and drove slowly back to Gull's Way, favoring his right arm and wondering how long he could keep that and his particularly sore bottom a secret from the judge.

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

Hardcastle was saying good-bye to his attorney, Henry Dwayne, when he saw McCormick pull into the garage. Going back inside, he sat down behind his desk and waited, certain the young man would be putting in an appearance soon to clean the carpet.

Drumming his fingers on the wooden surface, he thought back over the last few days, somewhat surprised that after his burst of anger in the garage that morning, he had calmed down considerably, even to the point of feeling relieved when he saw McCormick return with the truck.

Things couldn't continue the way they had been going, though; sooner or later, McCormick had to face the fact that changes had to be made, and like it or not, the kid was going to have to accept them, he decided firmly.

Leaning back in his chair, Hardcastle gazed pensively at the certificates on his wall. Maybe that was the problem, he thought. Maybe he should start treating McCormick less like a kid and more like the adult his age and the young man himself kept saying he was. It was difficult, however, to look at the youthful features and not see the childhood there that he suspected Mark had never really had in those early years. It lurked just below the surface, sneaking out unexpectedly through laughing blue eyes that usually viewed the world with a child-like optimism. He was so easily pleased, and so easily hurt. Hardcastle missed the easy-going comraderie that had existed between them and wanted it back, selfishly for himself as much as for McCormick's sake. He felt young and vibrant in Mark's presence, not weighed down with responsibilities such as the ones he had felt since Anita's arrival.



That thought caused a wave of guilt to wash over him, and straightening in his chair, he frowned. Anita was his daughter, and at least to himself, he could admit that McCormick had become like a son, and he had responsibilities to both of them. Anita would be no problem, but if he couldn't make peace with his 'other kid,' he was determined to at least achieve a temporary truce.

A banging from the kitchen caught his attention, and rising quickly, Hardcastle circled his desk, stepping into the hallway just as McCormick set a bucket of water next to the yellow strip on the carpet.

"McCormick!" He pointed to the den. "Get in here! I wanna talk to you!"

Leaning against the wall, McCormick groaned. "Aw, not now, Judge--please. I'm in no mood to talk to you or anyone else."

"Good. Then you won't have any problem listening," he returned gruffly. "Now, get in here."

Resisting the sudden urge to kick the bucket of soapy water all over the hallway, McCormick sighed and followed the judge into the den, stopping in front of the desk.

Hardcastle getured to a chair. "Sit down."

"I, uh, I'd rather stand, if you don't mind," McCormick returned hastily.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself, kid." Opening the left drawer of his desk, he pulled out a document and laid it in front of him. "I guess you saw Henry leaving here a few minutes ago," he spoke in a casual tone.

McCormick nodded. "Yeah, so?"



Hardcastle leaned back in his chair, his eyes rising to meet McCormick's. "So, I had him draw up a new will. Half of my estate goes to you and half to my daughter. You and Henry are co-executors."

The blue eyes widened. "You put Anita in your will?" he exclaimed.

"'Course, I did," he returned. "She's my daughter, McCormick. I've gotta provide for her after I'm gone."

"Judge, you're an even bigger fool than I thought you were," McCormick retorted.

Hardcastle jumped to his feet, the temper he had promised himself he would keep under control flaring. "Look, McCormick, I've had it with you!" he yelled. "You've been acting like a jealous brat since Anita got here! Now, I want you to shape up, or I'm gonna do it for you! You hear me?!!"

McCormick's pent-up anger also boiled to the surface. "Listen, Hardcase, you're not sitting behind the bench, and I'm not facing you across the courtroom anymore! You can't tell me what to do!"

"Like hell I can't!" Hardcastle roared. "You go digging up any more rosebushes or smashing up my truck again, and I'll have you wishing you were back in prison!"

"The joint would be paradise right now compared to this place!" McCormick fired back. "I'm a prisoner here, anyway! All I get is 'McCormick, do the cleaning; McCormick, do the gardening' and what does Anita do? She sits around and pretends she's the all-perfect daughter! She's using you, Judge, and you're too damned blind to see it! And now you're gonna leave half your money to her!"

Hardcastle sat down slowly, his own anger suddenly gone. "I never thought I'd see this, Mark, not in you of all people," he sighed heavily. "I thought we had more between us than just your hopes of getting your hands on my property when I die."

McCormick stared at him in shock. "You think that I--" His voice choked on the next word, and he swallowed hard. "You're right, Milt. We did have more between us, but it's all over now. That petty little accusation you just made is the last straw. I didn't want your money when I thought you were dying, and I sure as hell don't want it now. You tell Henry to do that damned will over again, and this time, leave my name out!"

Hardcastle rose quickly to his feet, reaching a hand across the desk. "Look, kid, I didn't mean that. I know you're not--"

Pivoting on his heel, McCormick stalked from the room, Hardcastle's voice ringing in his ears.

"McCormick! McCormick! Come back here!"

The front door slammed shut, and Hardcastle sagged in his chair, suddenly feeling very old. Rubbing his hand across his eyes, he muttered angrily, "Damn! Why does life have to get so complicated?"



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Almost running to the trailer, McCormick threw his suitcase on the bed and began flinging his clothes into it. Tears of anger and hurt stung his eyes, and he swiped at them, wiping his hand on the cashmere sweater Hardcastle had given him for his birthday two years ago.



Throwing the garment at the suitcase, he hissed angrily, "You damned jackass! Go ahead and grow old and decrepit! See if I care! I'm not gonna stay around and watch! And I hope you have to buy a new carpet, too!" he added with grim enjoyment at the thought.

Forcing the bulging suitcase shut, he left the trailer, slamming the door closed.

"Going somewhere, Mark?"

He froze, then turned slowly and watched as Anita wheeled her chair closer. "Yeah, I'm leaving," he answered at last.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

He sneered at the smile curling her lips and retorted, "Yeah, I can see you are. I'm sure you won't lose any sleep over it, though." He started to walk away, but Anita stopped him with her voice.

"It's just as well you're leaving," she spoke in a casual tone. "You have no right being here, anyway. After all, he's not your father."

McCormick spun around. "No, but he's a damned good friend!" he snapped. "The judge and I built a very special relationship these past three years, and if you think something like that is going to develop between you and him, then you can just forget it!"

Anita tilted her head slightly, arching an eyebrow. "If this relationship is so special, why is he kicking you out?"

"He's not!" he retorted. "I made the decision to leave!"

Anita laughed, her tone mirthless. "Oh, because you love him so much?" When he offered no response, she shrugged. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I didn't come here to form an emotional relationship with your precious judge."

Sitting the suitcase down, McCormick leaned forward, gripping the arms of the wheelchair. "Just why the hell did you come?" he hissed.

Anita's eyes met his, and her smile grew wider. "He's my father," she answered sweetly. "I have the right to be here. Judge Hardcastle owes me. But you, you're nothing but an ex-con, a mongrel pup my father took in because he felt sorry for you. He feeds you, pats you on the head occasionally, and you think you're his best friend. I'm surprised you don't sit up and beg," she added derisively.

McCormick fought the urge to shove the wheelchair over. Startled by his sudden desire to commit such a violent act, he straightened and backed away slowly. "Well, I hope you enjoy your stay," he muttered angrily, "but just remember--the judge may be a sentimental jackass at times, but he's nobody's fool. Take it from a guy who knows."

Grabbing up his suitcase, he stalked off, feeling her eyes on him until he rounded the trailer. Jumping into the Coyote, he drove through the front gates, then turned sharply to the left, and pulled the car over into the grass. Climbing out, he turned and gazed back at the ornamental gulls 'flying' over the entrance to the estate. "I wish someone would tell me why I'm doing this," he mumbled and began a painful climb over the wall.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The telephone rang several times before its shrill sound finally penetrated Hardcastle's troubled thoughts. Reaching over, he picked up the receiver and barked, "Yeah, what do you want?"

"Milt? This is Charlie Friedman."

Hardcastle cleared his throat. "Oh, hi, Charlie. What can I do for you?"

"I told Mark when he was in this morning that I'd call him when I found the name of that paralysis drug he wanted to use in the story he's writing," his friend explained. "Is he around?"

"Uh, no, he's not here right now," Hardcastle returned hesitantly, then his mind clicked on what Friedman had said. "Charlie, what the hell's this about McCormick writing a story?"

"You didn't know?" Friedman asked. "Uh-oh, I think I may have spilled the beans. Listen, tell Mark I'm sorry. I guess he was going to surprise you with it, but since you know now, I might as well go ahead and give you the information. Got a pencil and paper?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle growled. "Go ahead."

"Okay, the brand name of the drug is Sorbecol--that's s-o-r-b-e-c-o-l. It's used sometimes to treat patients with muscular dystrophy and other types of debilitating diseases which cause muscle spasms. According to the dosage of the spinal block injection, it can result in lower paralysis for up to forty-eight hours."

Hardcastle was writing furiously. "Okay, Charlie, I got it."

"Great. Tell Mark I want to read this story when he gets it done."

"Yeah, me, too." He frowned. "Especially the ending."

"Well, Milt, I guess that's it. Oh, yeah, by the way, how's Mark's arm doing?"

"His arm?" Hardcastle echoed. "What's wrong with his arm?"

"Why, I put twelve stitches in it this morning," the doctor returned in a surprised voice. "He said he had a dumb accident and cut it on a scythe. I had to give him a tetanus shot, too, for safety's sake."

"So, that's why he wouldn't sit down," Hardcastle murmured.

"What was that, Milt?"

"Uh, nothing, Charlie," he replied hastily. "Listen, thanks for calling. McCormick hadn't gotten around to telling me about his accident yet."

Friedman laughed. "You'd better keep an eye on that young man, Milt. Sounds like he's keeping some secrets from you."

"Yeah," he growled, "the kid's full of surprises."

"Well, tell Mark I'm sorry if I blew any of them for him," Friedman apologized. "Take care of yourself, Milt."

"Yeah, you, too, Charlie," Hanging up the receiver, Hardcastle sat in thought a moment, then jumping to his feet, he went out to the garage, throwing the door open and moving to the wall where the garden tools were hanging. Running his eye over them, he got the scythe and held it up to the light, frowning at the thin line of brownish stain on its blade. Replacing the tool on the rack, he stepped back and squatted down, his fingers reaching out to touch a spot of the same dark color staining the concrete floor.

Leaning back on his heels against the truck, Hardcastle removed his cap and ran a trembling hand across his face. "Damn it, kid!" he mumbled hoarsely. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He remained in that position until darkness fell outside the garage, then straightening at last, tried to work the kinks out of stiff muscles as he made his way to the gatehouse. Anita wasn't there and returning to the house, he went to the basement and drew a chair up in front of the computer, glad now that he had let McCormick talk him into keeping it.

The clogged fountain and smashed fender simply weren't McCormick's style. He had denied all knowledge of the incidents, and Hardcastle had never known the young man to lie to him. But if he hadn't created the havoc, then someone else did, someone who was trying to blame it on McCormick.

Hardcastle's thoughts returned to Anita. Was she truly paralyzed or just pretending to be, hoping to gain his affections quicker that way? Did she truly want a father's love, or did she hate him so much, she wanted revenge for being abandoned? His fingers hovering over the keys, Hardcastle determined to find out.

An hour later, he returned to the den, his eyes narrowing when Anita exclaimed, "Father! I've been looking for you everywhere!"

"I've been looking for you, too," he replied gruffly and sat down behind his desk. "Anita, we have to talk."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It wasn't something he made a habit of doing, but if the need arose, McCormick could hold his own with the best of the cat burglars. The situation here was screaming for that type of inborn talent, and he unhesitatingly put his to use, crouching low as he made a swift, silent journey across the dark lawn, dropping to one knee beside the water fountain.

He had detected a whisper of sound to his right and when his eyes darted that way, he caught just the quickest glimpse of a shadow blending into the night. It was moving too fast to be the judge and Anita was much smaller.

Rising cautiously, he held his injured arm close to his chest, rubbing his backside with the other one. The damp night air coming in from the ocean was causing both to ache, and he found himself wishing he could curl up in his old bed and sleep around the clock.

The wind carried his low sigh into the night, and slipping forward, McCormick maintained a precariously low position as he ran towards the gatehouse. A light was on inside, but a quick inspection of the room through the window revealed that it was deserted.

Moving to the door, McCormick opened it silently and slipped inside, eyes sweeping the room. Running up the ramp to the bedroom, he began rumaging through the closet, the nightstand, and under the bed.

There was nothing specific he was in search of, but when he went into the bathroom and picked up the wastebasket, he knew he'd found what he'd been looking for. The empty vial was the type with a rubber top into which a syringe could be inserted, and turning it over in his hand, he read the drug's name aloud. "Sorbecol, hmmm?"

Replacing the wastebasket, he stuffed the vial in his jacket pocket and returned to the bedroom, glancing around to make certain he had left no signs of having been there. Going back downstairs, he slipped out of the gatehouse, his eyes searching the darkness for any more human shadows.

Crouching low, he quickly covered the distance to the main house and flattening against one wall, inched along it until his hand could reach out and touch the den window. Ducking under it, he straightened on the other side and peeked in.

Hardcastle was behind the desk, back to McCormick, and talking to Anita, who sat in her wheelchair facing him. The window was slightly ajar, and keeping his face hidden behind the

draperies, McCormick pressed his ear to the opening.

"Of course, Father," Anita replied quietly. "What would you like to talk about?"

"You know that McCormick's gone for good," Hardcastle stated rather than asked.

"Yes." She dropped her head. "I'm sorry, Father. I know you and Mark were...close, and that it hurts to find out he wasn't the kind of friend you thought he was."

"Yeah, well, that's all behind us now," Hardcastle promised gruffly. "What I wanted to talk to you about, honey, is your future." He held up the document that he had brought in with him. "I just had my will revised. I haven't had a chance to sign it yet because it requires two witnesses, but according to this new will, you're my sole beneficiary. I've got over a million and a half wrapped up in investments, not to mention this estate, so if anything happens to me, you'll be well provided for. I just wanted you to know that."

"I-I don't know what to say," Anita stammered.

"You can say you'll stay here," Hardcastle suggested softly. "With McCormick gone now, it'll get awfully lonesome around here if you don't."

Anita smiled. "If that's what you want, Father, then, of course, I'll stay."

"Good, good." Hardcastle jumped to his feet. "This calls for a celebration. I'll go fix us a snack. You just stay there, and I'll be right back."

"I'll be waiting," Anita promised.

McCormick moved away from the window, his eyebrows knitted together in a frown. Either the judge had lied to him when he said the revised will left everything to Anita and him equally, or something very fishy was going on in the den.

Glancing in the window again, he saw Anita look toward the hallway, then guide her wheelchair to the desk. Reaching out, she turned the will Hardcastle had conveniently left lying on the blotter, and leaning forward, began reading the top page.

McCormick was so intent upon watching Anita's movements that he failed to notice the shadowy figure creeping up behind him. A hand shot over his shoulder, clamping his mouth shut, and his heart lurched before beginning to pound furiously as he was jerked backward into a clump of bushes. There he was released and a hand turned him around roughly.

"Judge!" he exclaimed in a loud whisper. "Don't do that! God, you scared me to death!"

"Shhh!" Hardcastle gestured with his hand, and grabbing McCormick's arm, pulled him farther away from the house. "I thought you were gone," he accused. "What the hell're you doing skulking around like a peeping-tom?"

McCormick stared at the judge wide-eyed. "How'd you know I was out here? I didn't make a sound."

"The hell you didn't!" Hardcastle fired back. "You were standing there at the window breathing like a crank caller!"

"Oh." McCormick dropped his head. "I-I'm sorry, Judge, but I couldn't leave. I know I don't have any right being here-- Anita made that perfectly clear--but something's going on, and I just... Damn it, I just couldn't leave you here alone!"

Hardcastle gazed at the lowered head a moment, before reaching out to grasp McCormick's right arm, just above the wrist.

"Ow! Ow! Let go!" McCormick yelped, trying to pull away. "C'mon, Judge, turn loose!"

"Why?" Hardcastle demanded.

"Just let go!" he pleaded with a grimace.

Hardcastle released him. "Let me see it, kid."

McCormick held his arm behind him and tried to assume an innocent tone. "See what?"

"Charlie called," Hardcastle explained. "Now, let me see the arm."

"Aw, Judge, it's just a scratch," he tried to convince him. "It's nothing, really."

"I don't call twelve stitches a 'scratch,'" Hardcastle retorted. "Now, let me see it. If I have to roll that sleeve up, it's gonna hurt ya," he warned.

Sighing, McCormick pushed his jacket sleeve up carefully, then unbuttoning his cuff, rolled it back.

Even in the dark, Hardcastle could see the thin strip of blood staining the white bandage, and released his breath in a low groan. "Aw, kid, why didn't you tell me?"

McCormick smiled wryly. "You were a little busy being mad at me at the time."

Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder. "Mark, I'm sorry."

"Does this mean we're friends again?" McCormick asked hopefully.

Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "It means we got work to do. When Charlie called, he gave me the name of a drug--"

"Sorbecol," McCormick interrupted.

Hardcastle's eyes widened. "How the hell'd you know?"

Reaching into his pocket, McCormick pulled out the small vial and held it out to the judge. "I found this in the gatehouse a few minutes ago," he explained softly. "It causes temporary paralysis, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle sighed, turning the bottle over in his hand. "So you were right. She's been faking it all along."

"She has an accomplice, too," McCormick added.

The judge glanced up quickly, his eyes narrowing. "How do you know that?"

"I saw something a while ago," McCormick told him. "And besides," he smiled, "I really didn't turn your carpet into a skunk."

"Yeah, I finally figured that one out on my own," Hardcastle admitted. "Looks like somebody's trying to part us like the Red Sea, kiddo."

"What're you gonna do about Anita?" McCormick asked low. "I mean, she hasn't really committed any crimes, and she is your daughter."

Hardcastle glanced up sharply. "Are you sure about that, McCormick?"

"Yeah," he nodded grimly. "That's just about the only thing she didn't lie about. I checked with the hospital in San Francisco. Anita was born in Miami, December 29, 1964."

"December 29!" Hardcastle grabbed his shoulders, shaking McCormick slightly. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that before!" he demanded.

"Why? What difference does it make?" McCormick stared at him in surprise. "That's the same year you were there and did that little number with Suzie."

"Yeah, but I flew in on New Year's Day, 1964, and left two days later!" Hardcastle shot back. "If that woman in there is my daughter, then her mother had one hell of a pregnancy!"

"What! You mean she's not related to you?" he asked in shock.

"She sure as hell isn't!" Hardcastle retorted. "It doesn't take a woman almost twelve months to make a baby! Even you oughta know that!"

"She's not your daughter!" Breaking into a grin that threatened to reach from ear to ear, McCormick grabbed his shoulders. "Oh, Judge, that's great! That's wonderful! That's fantastic!"

Hardcastle pulled away from his grasp. "Kid, will ya pipe down!" he demanded in a loud whisper. "You want her to hear?"

McCormick calmed down immediately, his expression becoming serious. "Oh, Judge, I'm sorry! I know how much you wanted a daughter."

Hardcastle glared at him. "What the hell're you talking about? I never wanted a daughter."

"But when she first came here, you told her you did," he protested.

"Well, what was I supposed to say? That I didn't want her?" Hardcastle snapped, then breathed a sigh of relief. "Actually, I'm glad it turned out this way. Having you around here is bad enough!"

McCormick smiled, deciding not to pursue the subject.. "That's what I like about you--ol' soft-hearted Hardcastle."



"Yeah, and ol' Soft Heart better get back inside before that young woman gets suspicious," Hardcastle shot back. "Now, you stay right here by the window and be careful. If someone's skulking around out here, I don't want ya getting your damned head blown off. It'd make a helluva mess."

McCormick grabbed his arm as he started to leave. "Judge, I think we both know what's going on here. She obviously wants your money."

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "I suspected that before you did, kiddo. That's why I typed up that new will on the computer. I'd say she should be just about through reading it by now."

McCormick's eyes widened. "How'd you know she was reading it?"

Hardcastle snorted. "McCormick, how many times have I told you that I'm a damned good judge of character?" He paused, then added wryly, "It just takes me a while, sometimes."

McCormick flashed him a smile. "Don't feel bad, Judge. Like Nixon said--'You can fool all the people some of the time.'"

"That wasn't Nixon," Hardcastle retorted. "It was Will Rogers."

"Oh?" McCormick looked doubtful. "I though he said, 'A sucker is born every minute.'"

Hardcastle shook his head. "No, that was P.T. Barnum, probably an ancestor of yours with clairvoyance."

McCormick grinned and would've continued the rapid-fire exchange they both enjoyed, but Hardcastle nodded toward the house, his tone almost apologetic.

"I gotta get back in there."

"What're you going to do?" McCormick demanded.

The judge shrugged. "The next move's hers. We play this one by ear." He started around McCormick, his hand shooting out to whack the young man hard on the backside.

McCormick tried to muffle a yelp of pain and whirled around to see Hardcastle grinning.

"Charlie told me about your shot, too," he explained sweetly.

McCormick glared at him until the judge disappeared around the corner of the house, then rubbing his sore bottom, he turned to the window, waiting for Hardcastle to make his way back through the kitchen and into the den.

Suddenly, something hard was pressed to his back, and McCormick started to turn. "Judge, what're you--" His eyes widened, and he raised his hands slowly. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

The man waved his gun toward the house. "Get in there!" he demanded harshly.

"You got it. Whatever you say." As he started by the window, McCormick could see the judge just entering the den, but his warning cry was anticipated before it had the chance to leave his lips.

McCormick felt the muzzle of the gun pressed to the back of his head, just above the ear. "You make a sound, and I'll blow your brains all over this lawn," the man promised. "Now, move."

Swallowing hard, McCormick did as he was told, opening the front door carefully, and going into the house where a hand on his shoulder forced him to stop at the den entrance.

"Anita, the gig's up!" the man yelled over McCormick's shoulder.

She looked up quickly. "Jerry!"

Giving McCormick a slight shove into the room, Jerry moved from behind him. "Hardcastle and this guy were outside talking. They know our plans."

Anita looked up and hissed, "You just couldn't stay away, could you, Mark?"

McCormick shrugged. "I'm a homing pigeon. What can I say?"

"You're gonna be a dead bird when we get through with you," Jerry retorted, giving McCormick a hard shove across the room. "Get over there!"

Hardcastle caught him before he crashed into the desk, and both men stood eyeing their captors warily.

Pulling another gun from the pocket of his jacket, Jerry gave it a toss to Anita, who caught the weapon with one hand. "You'll excuse me for not rising," she smiled, "but the drug still hasn't worn off completely. There's nothing wrong with my hands, though. If either of you make a move, you'll be attending your own funerals."

Hardcastle leaned casually against the desk, folding his arms. "There's one thing I wanna know," he demanded. "How'd you know about Suzie and me?"

Anita laughed harshly. "That whore was really my mother. Right after she had her little one-night stand with you, she decided to settle down, so she moved in with some guy. He hung around until after I was born, then took off for places unknown. After that, dear ol' Mommy moved out here and took a job as a

waitress, and every time she saw your picture in the paper, she'd show it to me and say she wished I'd been your daughter instead of that other creep's." Her coarse laughter rang out again. "I guess she thought if I had your blood in my veins, I wouldn't be such a bad girl. She wanted me to be your daughter so bad, I thought what the hell. So when I met Jerry here a couple of months ago, I told him the story.

"He used to be a doctor, but did something stupid and lost his license. He knows how to give those spinal shots, though, so we worked out this scheme."

"Which is probably gonna end up being the dumbest mistake you've ever made," Hardcastle retorted mildly. "You'll never get away with this, ya know."

"Don't bet on it, Judge," Anita fired back. "All I have to do now is get you to sign that new will."

"Sure," Hardcastle agreed amicably, and reached for the document still lying on the desk. "Won't do you any good, though, because it needs two witnesses, and you can't be one of 'em because you're listed as the beneficiary. That's the law."

Anita waved her gun at McCormick. "He'll be the other witness."

McCormick gave a short laugh. "You're crazy if you think I'm gonna put my name on that piece of paper."

Jerry grabbed him by the arm, shoving the gun against his neck. "You'll do like she says, or you'll die right here, Junior."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" he sneered. "You're gonna kill me, anyway, but at least I'll die with the satisfaction of knowing that neither one of you can get your hands on a cent of the judge's money."

"Like hell, too!" Jerry hissed and rammed the gun into McCormick's stomach.

Doubling over, he went down on one knee, clinging to the edge of the desk as he gasped for breath.

"Mark!" Hardcastle started toward him but Jerry pointed the gun at McCormick's leg.

"Stay right there, old man, or I'll shatter his kneecap!"

Hardcastle froze, deep lines of fury cutting across his face. "Both of you are damned fools!" he shouted. "You may get by with killing me and making it look like an accident, but if McCormick and I both show up dead, the cops'll never fall for it. You won't get a damned cent of my money, and you'll probably end up in prison."

Jerry turned slowly, a look of doubt on his face. "He's right, Anita. Both of them dyin' is gonna look too suspicious, especially after he just cut Junior here outta his will and left it all to you!"

Anita chewed on her lower lip a moment. "Okay, here's what we'll do," she decided and pointed her gun at McCormick casually. "You witness Hardcastle's signature and you get to live. I'll also throw in a hundred thousand dollars to boot, just as soon as the estate is settled."

"Take the money, kid," Hardcastle demanded.

McCormick shook his head. "Forget it, Judge."

"Don't be a bigger jackass than you already are!" Hardcastle roared. "Take her up on the offer--that way you get to live."

"Unh-uh," McCormick remained stubborn. "I figure what she's wanting me to do is worth more'n a hundred thousand."

Anita's eyes narrowed. "How much do you want?"

"All of it."

She leaned back in surprise. "All of it? Are you crazy?"

"You'll have to take a poll on that," McCormick quipped.

"I can certify he's mentally incompetent," Hardcastle tossed in firmly. "He's been that way for at least six years. Now, sign that will!"

McCormick shook his head again. "No can do, Judge."

"McCormick!"

"Don't be a fool!" Anita yelled. "I'm offering you a hundred thousand dollars! That's more in one payment than you've ever gotten from him!"

McCormick smiled. "Anita, I know you're never gonna believe this in a hundred years, but take my word for it--there are more important things in life than a padded bank account."

"Don't push me, Mark," Anita warned. "I still owe you for that coffee you poured on my leg. That drug is wearing off, and it's starting to hurt like hell." Her eyes narrowed. "And I don't like to hurt alone. Now, if you sign that will, I'll forget that little incident." Her gun rose slightly. "If you don't sign, you're going to die, and I can promise you it won't be quick or pleasant."

McCormick grinned at her threat. "My, my. Who would've thought the sweet little girl in the wheelchair would turn out

to be the Wicked Witch of the West."

Anita fired, putting a bullet in the floor between McCormick's feet. He jumped backward, almost falling over the desk, and she warned in an ominous tone, "The next one will be about three feet higher, and right in the middle. You probably won't die from it, but you'll wish that you had. Now, sign that will!"

McCormick paled, but his voice was firm as he retorted, "Go to hell, Anita!"

"All right, if that's the way you want it." The gun rose about four inches, and Anita cocked the trigger with a slow, deliberate motion.

McCormick clamped his eyes shut, thereby missing the judge's movement as he stepped casually in front of him.

"Listen, you're not gonna get away with this," Hardcastle stated firmly. "Why don't you just chalk it up to a bad day, and get the hell outta here."

McCormick's eyes flew open to stare at the most beautiful sight he had ever seen--the judge's broad back blocking his view of Anita. His relief was short-lived, however, when Jerry cut in.

"He's right, Anita. This whole thing's fallin' apart around us. You said this was going to be easy, that all you had to do was sucker this old man into believing he had a handicapped daughter, and then when he changed his will leaving everything to you, he'd have an accident. You said--"

"I know what I said!" she interrupted angrily. "But McCormick wasn't supposed to be here! He's the one who messed up everything!"

Stepping up behind Hardcastle, McCormick looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Gee, I guess the judge is right. He's always telling me I'm more trouble than I'm worth."

Hardcastle turned his head slightly to glare in McCormick's face. "Will you shut up?!" he growled.

Jerry threw Anita an anxious look. "C'mon, let's just kill them and get outta here."

Hardcastle turned back to the two and shook his head sadly. "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry. You really are dumb, aren't ya? If you stop and think about it, the only real crimes you've committed so far are breaking and entering, vandalism--you did pull up my rosebushes and smash my truck, didn't you? And you're holding a gun on McCormick and me. Now, if you'll just put that thing away, and get the hell outta here right now, I'm willing to forget those other offenses."

Instead of getting angry at his condescending tone, Jerry glanced quickly at Anita, his gun lowering. "Well?"

"No!" she yelled. "I came here for that money, and I'm going to have it!"

"But they won't sign the will!" Jerry protested.

"Then I'll do it myself!" Anita retorted. "I used to be pretty good at forging dear ol' Mother's name; I can do theirs, too. With both of them dead, the courts won't have any choice but to give me the money eventually. I can wait for a cool two million or more." She jerked her head toward the door. "Find some rope and tie 'em up."

Jerry hurried from the room, and Anita settled back in her wheelchair, the gun leveled at a spot between the two men.

Eyeing her a moment, Hardcastle leaned toward McCormick and growled, "You've still got a chance, kid. Go ahead and take the money."

"Would you?" McCormick whispered.

"Yeah!"

"Like hell you would!" McCormick retorted. "Judge, if I die here, it's gonna be all your fault. If you hadn't taught me so many values--"

"Forget one of 'em!" Hardcastle yelled.

McCormick shook his head. "Can't break tradition. Tonto always follows the Lone Ranger."

Anita interrupted their conversation with a harsh laugh. "This relationship stuff is sickening," she sneered. "There's only two things in this world that are important--money and power."

McCormick threw her a grin. "You're just jealous because you don't have your own judge."

It was fortunate Jerry returned at that moment with the rope, because Anita's gun was again swinging McCormick's way. She held it steady a few seconds, then lowering the weapon slightly, ordered, "Tie them up tight, Jerry."

Hardcastle threw his companion a quick look, silently warning McCormick not to make any false moves. Overpowering Jerry would be no problem, but Hardcastle didn't try to kid himself that Anita wouldn't shoot both of them down with the slightest provocation.

They were obviously going to be taken some place where an accident would suddenly befall them, and that's where Hardcastle felt their only chance of escape would lie, for there was no accident that couldn't be made not to happen--he hoped.

Beside him, McCormick grimaced slightly as one of the ropes Jerry wrapped around his wrist rubbed against the bandage. Feeling the stitches pull, he tried to move his arm to relieve the pain, smothering a curse. Jerry shoved him, and McCormick stumbled forward, his mind racing. He was desperately hoping the judge was formulating a plan of escape because he was fresh out of ideas. He would rather have taken his chances in taking Jerry on and trying to get to Anita before she managed to get off a shot, but Hardcastle's warning glance had caused him to hold back and bide his time. Following the judge toward the door, McCormick only hoped there would be more of that precious commodity left in his all too short life.

Jerry urged them outside into the darkness, Anita following in her wheelchair a short distance behind, the gun lying in her lap within easy reach if either one of them decided to make any unexpected moves.

"What're we gonna do with 'em?" Jerry asked.

"I've got something nice and slow planned for their demise," Anita smiled. "That money is as good as in my hands."

Walking slowly, Hardcastle glanced back at the house, realizing with a sinking feeling that it could very well be the last time he would ever set eyes upon the beautiful structure.

McCormick was looking in that direction, too, and knowing that he was probably entertaining the same thought, Hardcastle leaned close and whispered, "Don't worry, kid. The Lone Ranger ain't outta silver bullets yet."

McCormick threw him a grateful look and smiled. "Right, Kemosabe."

"Don't bet on it," Jerry hissed and, stepping behind Hardcastle, brought his gun down hard against the back of the white head.

"Judge!" McCormick cried. Pain exploded in his own head, and Mark collapsed, the darkness around him closing in and engulfing him in a world of oblivion.