

**I DID A  
NO—NO  
A FEW YEARS  
AGO**

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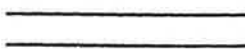
This is a long fic and will be loaded in 4 parts.

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.



## C H A P T E R   S I X T E E N

As consciousness filtered back, Hardcastle rolled over with a groan and, opening his eyes, began to blink rapidly. There was pitch blackness all around him, and his pulse racing, he wondered if the blow on the head had caused blindness.

Shoving that disturbing thought to the back of his mind, he called out, "McCormick!" There was no answer, and he worked his way to his knees, a hint of fear in his voice. "Kid, where the hell are you?"

Nothing. Just the sound of his own rapid heartbeat. Hardcastle struggled desperately against the ropes binding his hands. "Mark, answer me!" he demanded. The silence, as well as the blackness, was total and complete, and breathing rapidly, trying in vain to make out a shadowy form, Hardcastle began crawling across the rough floor on his knees.

His leg brushed against something, and moving to his right, he leaned over, poking around with his head until he felt soft hair brushing his cheek.

The young man was apparently lying on his side, and moving down until he could feel McCormick's shoulder against his head, Hardcastle pushed, rolling him over onto his back. Placing an ear against McCormick's chest, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God, he's alive."

Feeling for Mark's chin with the top of his head, he nudged it slightly and commanded, "C'mon, kid, snap out of it!"

McCormick groaned softly and rolling over against Hardcastle's thighs, he mumbled, "Judge, are we home yet?"

"No, we're not home," Hardcastle snapped. "Now, c'mon, McCormick, wake up!"

Groaning again, McCormick opened his eyes and blinked rapidly. "Oh, God, Judge, I'm blind!" he yelled in panic. "I can't see!"

"No, you're not blind," Hardcastle growled, inwardly heaving a sigh of relief. "I can't see anything, either." He sat down and worked his way toward McCormick. "Okay, sit up." He felt the young man doing so, and ordered, "I want you to turn around with your back to me and see if you can get these ropes untied."

McCormick sat motionless. "Judge, I just found out something."

"What?"

"I'm afraid of the dark."

"You're gonna be in it 'permanent' if we don't get out of here!" he snapped.

"But I've never been in this kind of dark before," McCormick wailed. "Damn, I can't even see my hand in front of my face."

"That's because they're tied behind you," he retorted. "Now, c'mon, turn around and see if you can get these ropes undone."

McCormick used his legs to push himself until he was back to back with Hardcastle. "Where do you think we're at?" he asked low.

The broad shoulders shrugged against his. "I figure we're in some kind of small room," he guessed. "There's probably no windows in here."

"You really think so?" McCormick asked hopefully.

"Yeah," Hardcastle assured him. "You can feel the concrete floor, can't ya?"

"That doesn't mean anything," McCormick hissed low.

"McCormick, why the hell're you whispering?" he demanded.

"Sssh. Because I don't want anybody to hear us," McCormick breathed softly.

"There's no one here!"

"How do you know?" McCormick fired back in an even lower voice. "They may be standing over us right now with a gun pointing at our heads."

"If they are, they would've already shot your pea brain!" he roared. "Now, get to work on those ropes!"

Doing as he was told, McCormick tried for several minutes to loosen the knots, then leaning forward, he released a low moan. "I-I can't, Judge."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"It's my head," McCormick mumbled. "God, it hurts. I think-I think I'm gonna be sick."

"You're not gonna be sick," Hardcastle commanded.

"I wish I had your confidence," McCormick groaned as



another wave of pain caused his stomach to churn.

Turning slightly, Hardcastle tried to see his young friend in the darkness. "Listen, kid, lean back against me and just rest. You'll feel better in a few minutes," he promised, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. If Mark had a concussion, they were both in trouble.

Doing as he was told, McCormick let his head rest against the back of Hardcastle's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Judge," he mumbled. "I guess...I guess I'm not very good in death situations."

"Hey, it's not your fault," he protested. "You got whacked on the head. That'd scramble anyone's brains."

"Then why didn't it scramble yours?" McCormick asked low.

"You oughta know the answer to that one," Hardcastle snorted. "You're always tellin' me I've got a hard head." He waited for one of McCormick's smart remarks, but when none were forthcoming, he sighed, "I'm sorry, kiddo. I really got ya into a mess this time."

"No, you didn't" McCormick contradicted.

"Yeah, I did," he argued. "If I had listened to you about Anita--"

"It wouldn't have made any difference," McCormick interrupted softly. "We both thought she was your daughter, so you couldn't turn your back on her." He straightened, lifting his head from Hardcastle's shoulder. "Besides, I didn't know she was up to something like this," he admitted, wriggling around slightly. "I thought she was just planning on sponging off of you for the rest of your life."

"What're you doin'?" Hardcastle demanded.

"I'm trying to get you untied."

Hardcastle glanced over his shoulder. "How you feeling?"

"Mad!" McCormick shot back. "If Anita thinks we're gonna sit here and die just because she wants us to, then she's crazy!"

The judge grinned into the darkness. "Now yer cookin', kiddo."

McCormick struggled with the knots, grunting as his fingers plucked at the stiff ropes.

"How's it comin'?" Hardcastle asked.

"You tell me." McCormick leaned away from him. "See if they're loose enough yet."

He gave a tentative tug, then with muscles bulging, uttered an unintelligible roar. The ropes flew off, slapping McCormick in the back. "I got it!" he yelled and scrambled to his feet.

"Thank God for the Hulk's grandfather," McCormick sighed in relief. "Hurry up and untie me."

"Wait a minute."

"Wait a minute? What do you mean, wait a minute?"

"Just what I said, McCormick. Keep your britches on."

"I couldn't take 'em off if I wanted to!" McCormick yelled, "because some Arkansas mule won't untie me!"

"First, I'm the Hulk's granddaddy, and now I'm a mule, huh?" Hardcastle retorted. "Keep it up, sport, and I'll let you sit there and rot."

"Judge!" When Hardcastle didn't answer, McCormick yelled again. "C'mon, Judge, I was just kidding. Judge? What're you doing?"

"I'm looking for a light switch."

"No, don't!" McCormick shouted in panic. "Don't move around!"

"Why the hell not?"

"Just...just because. You might fall in a hole or...or something."

Hardcastle snorted. "In a room?"

"You can't be sure we're in a room!" McCormick returned anxiously. "C'mon, Judge, don't do that," he pleaded. "If you get killed and leave me tied up all alone, I'll never get out of here."

"Well, it's nice to know you care about me," Hardcastle snapped. "Just hold your horses, McCormick; I'll be with you in a second."

Suddenly there was light.

Clamping his eyes shut a moment against the artificial brilliance, McCormick opened them slowly and looked around the small, concrete room, then groaned. "Turn it back off, Judge. I liked it better in the dark."

Hardcastle sighed. "Yeah, I know what you mean." Leaving the light on, however, he crossed the empty room and knelt down to untie McCormick's bonds, then helped him to his feet. "How's the head?" he asked in concern.

McCormick swayed slightly. "I feel like a brick wall fell on me."

Separating the curls at the back of his head, Hardcastle touched the lump gently and frowned. "No wonder. You got a knot there the size of a goose egg. That's what you get for making Jerry mad. The guy tried to knock your lights out permanently."

"Yeah, if I had white hair, he probably wouldn't have whacked me so hard," McCormick complained.

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "There's advantages to being old." He glanced around the room. "But it's not gonna help here."

"Where the hell are we, anyway?" McCormick asked. "I've never seen a room like this before."

"I have."

"Where?"

Hardcastle avoided his gaze. "You're not gonna like it, kiddo."

"Judge, I've been cut, hit in the stomach, whacked on the head, tied up, and thrown outta my own home, not to mention a certain other thing that Anita threatened to do to me. What could be worse than all that?"

"A home-made bomb shelter," Hardcastle answered.

McCormick's eyes widened in disbelief. "A what!?"

"People were building 'em all over the place in the early sixties," he explained. "That was during the time of the Cold War and everybody was running paranoid in the streets, thinking the Russians were gonna attack any minute. So they built bomb shelters like this all over the country for protection. I'd say this one has just sat here unused for more'n twenty years." He gazed up at the naked light. "It's a damned miracle that still works. I guess somebody forgot to disconnect the electrical cable."

"Thank you, Professor Hardcastle," McCormick retorted sarcastically. "All I ever wanted to know about bomb shelters in one easy lesson." He stared upward at the only exit from the room. "Judge, the one thing you didn't tell me is why the door is in the ceiling."

"Because we're underground," Hardcastle informed him reluctantly.

"Under--" McCormick threw him a startled look. "You're kidding!"



"'Fraid not. Building these things underground offered more shielding against a bomb blast," Hardcastle explained.

McCormick looked up again, studying the door. "We've gotta try to get that thing open."

"Won't do any good." He shook his head. "That door's made of eight-inch-thick concrete, and Anita probably has something heavy sitting on top of it."

"Judge, we gotta try," McCormick pleaded.

Hardcastle studied his young friend's anxious face a moment and sighed. "All right, kid, we'll give it a shot."

The trapdoor was in one corner of the small room, and moving beneath it, Hardcastle braced himself against the wall and cupped his hands. "Okay, kick off your shoes and climb up here."

McCormick looked at him doubtfully. "I don't know, Judge. Are you sure you can hold me?"

"Can I hold--" Hardcastle sputtered. "McCormick, get your butt up there!"

Grinning, McCormick untied his tennis shoes, and slipping them off, put a foot in Hardcastle's hand. "Okay, up." The judge pushed, and McCormick stepped onto his shoulders, leaning against the wall in order to maintain the precarious position as his arms inched upward.

Hardcastle had a firm grip on his ankles. "Can you reach the door?"

"Yeah, easily," McCormick yelled down. He was able to place his hands flat on the ceiling without fully extending his arms, and pressing them against the trapdoor, he called down, "I'm ready. You ready?"

"Do it."

Taking a deep breath, McCormick pushed, trying desperately to straighten his arms. He put all his energy into one tremendous shove, but the concrete refused to budge an inch, and he sagged against the wall, panting. "You-you're right, Judge. We're not...we're not gonna get out that...way."

Hardcastle reached up for his hands. "Get down from there, kid. We've got more important things to worry about."

McCormick climbed down slowly, and jumping off the judge's knee, he fell against the wall, still breathing hard. "What could...what could be more important than-getting...outa here?"

"Your breathing," he growled.

McCormick blinked at him in surprise. "I was pushing on that-on that door. How do you think I'd be-be breathing?"

"McCormick, I know you're out of shape, but even you wouldn't be breathing that hard under normal conditions," Hardcastle retorted grimly. "Didn't you notice the air up there's getting thin?"

McCormick's eyes widened. "Judge, what're you trying to say?"

Hardcastle pointed to the corner of the room where the wall joined the ceiling. "You know what that up there is? It's the ventilation system for this place. If there's a bomb blast, a filter system would filter the incoming air. Otherwise, it's just a long duct with a grid over the other end."

McCormick looked where he was pointing. "But somebody put a metal plate over this end," he protested.

"Give the kid a Dewey button," Hardcastle growled, then raised his voice in a roar. "McCormick, why the hell do you think they put us in here?! Except for that ventilation system, which they closed up, this place is airtight!"

McCormick's face contorted with horror. "Oh, my God, Judge! We're gonna suffocate!"

"Not if we can get that plate off!" Hardcastle pointed out. Grabbing McCormick's arm, he dragged him toward the corner of the room. "C'mon, get on my shoulders again and see if you can get that thing pried off."

"But the air's so thin up there," McCormick protested.

"It's gonna be a helluva lot thinner down here if you don't get that opened up!" he retorted.

"Point made," McCormick sighed. Climbing onto the judge's shoulders again, he tried to work his fingers between the plate and the wall. "Boy, what I wouldn't give for a crowbar right now," he puffed.

"Why don't you wish for a tank?!" Hardcastle snapped irritably. "You're just as likely to get one as you are the other."

"My, my, touchy, aren't we?" McCormick grinned.

"That's because my back is breaking!" Hardcastle yelled. "McCormick, when we get outa here, I'm putting you on a diet! No more soda pop, Double-Stuf Oreos, or Ha-Has!"

"That's Ho-Hos, Judge, and did you have to mention Oreos

right now?" McCormick groaned. "I'm starving!"

He was also starting to breathe rapidly again, and hearing his efforts to suck air into his lungs, Hardcastle asked worriedly, "Kid? You okay?"

"Yeah," he gasped. "I think..I think...wait a minute... I-I've got...I got my fingers behind the plate, Judge. I'm... gonna have to give it one big yank, be-because if I stay up here ten seconds longer, I'm gonna p-pass out."

His breathing was coming now in loud wheezes; and grasping his ankles tightly, Hardcastle took a firm stance. "Give it all you got, kid!"

"Here goes! It's coming, Judge! It's--"

The metal plate separated from the ventilation system with a loud crack.

"Mark!"

"Juuuudge!!!"

They toppled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Hardcastle rolled away, pulling his left knee up to his chest, and clutched it, grimacing in pain. At last, favoring the leg, he crawled to McCormick, who was also on his knees, bent over so low his head almost touched the floor. Putting a hand on his young friend's heaving back, he asked in concern, "You okay, kid?"

Desperately gasping for air, McCormick could manage only a nod.

Hardcastle slapped him on the back and grinned. "That's it, suck it in. We've got plenty of air now."

Gradually bringing his breathing under control, McCormick raised his head. "You-you okay, Judge?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just wrenched my knee a little." He tried to straighten his leg and winced at the sharp pain shooting up to his hip.

McCormick straightened quickly, throwing Hardcastle an agonized look. "Oh, God, Judge, I'm sorry. I tried to keep my balance."

Hardcastle grasped his shoulder. "Yeah, I know you did." He started to stand, and McCormick came up with him, an arm hooked under his shoulder. Gingerly putting weight on the leg, Hardcastle made a face. "Believe me, I'll take a sore knee anytime over the whole damned body not working. You did a good job, McCormick."

"Yeah, sure," McCormick mumbled and stared up at the now

open ventilation duct. "I fixed it so we can die of starvation instead," he retorted bitterly. "In about three days, you're gonna start looking like a bucket of Colonel Sanders'--extra crispy, of course. We're gonna starve to death in here, Judge. Our stomachs'll become big and bloated, and we'll get weak, and finally die a horrible death. Then, in about twenty years or so, somebody might accidentally find our bodies, and then maybe our bones'll get a decent burial."

Hardcastle threw the young man a look of disgust. "Do you mind if I interrupt your nightmare?" he growled. "That thin air must've affected your brain, because you're not usually this dumb."

"Why? What're you talking about?" McCormick demanded.

Limping to a wall, Hardcastle leaned against it so he could face his young companion. "McCormick, why the hell do you think they put us in here?" he asked.

"So we'd go to that big Courtroom in the sky and face a real Judge," McCormick shot back.

"And how did they expect us to die?" he persisted.

"Well, if they're the ones who put that plate over the ventilation system duct--"

"They are."

"Then they wanted us to suffocate," McCormick decided.

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "Good, good. Maybe you haven't suffered permanent brain damage."

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

"It means, kid, that in order for Anita to carry out her little plan, she's gonna have to produce two bodies who look like they died in some kind of accident," the judge explained patiently. "If we just disappear, my estate'll be tied up for years, and she won't get a penny."

McCormick stared at him in puzzlement. "But how's she going to explain us dying in a bomb shelter in the middle of nowhere?"

He sighed, exasperated. "McCormick, have you ever had two coherent thoughts in a row? After we die in here, without a mark on our bodies, then they can plan any kind of accident they want."

McCormick's eyes widened as he began to understand the direction Hardcastle's thoughts were going. "So that means Anita and Jerry are gonna have to come back down here and get our

bodies. And...and since they think we're gonna suffocate, they're not going to wait several days to do it."

"You got it," Hardcastle grinned.

McCormick pondered the idea a moment. "Judge, how long you think we've been down here?"

"As thin as the air was getting down here, I'd say about three or four hours," Hardcastle decided. "If you hadn't gotten that plate off, we would've had another coupla hours at the most."

"So you figure Anita and Jerry'll be back in what? About three hours?"

Hardcastle nodded.

"And when they do, they're gonna find us 'dead.'"

Hardcastle matched McCormick's grin. "Now yer cookin'."

C H A P T E R   S E V E N T E E N

"How much longer, you think?"

Hardcastle didn't even bother looking at his watch. "Two minutes less than when you asked last time," he growled.

Dropping his head on his knees, McCormick groaned low. "I'm sorry, Judge. I just wanna get outa here. It reminds me too much of prison."

"Yeah, I know," Hardcastle returned gruffly and reached out to casually massage McCormick's shoulder. "Just hang in there, kiddo. It shouldn't be much longer now." His hand dropped to his sore leg, and raising his head, McCormick watched a moment as the judge absentmindedly rubbed it.

"How's it doing?" the young man asked softly.

"The knee? Oh, the knee--well, it's doing fine," he returned cheerfully and slapped his leg. "See, it's gettin' better already."

McCormick smiled. "Yeah, sure, ol' Never-Show-Any-Pain, Call-Me-John-Wayne Hardcastle." He glanced up at the trapdoor with a worried expression. "Listen, Judge, when Jerry comes down here, maybe you'd better let me take care of him."

Hardcastle turned a derisive look on him. "What?! And let you get yourself beaten to a pulp?! You saw the muscles on that guy. Besides, you got a sore arm."

"My arm's okay, and you've got a bum leg," McCormick pointed out.

"I don't fight with my legs," Hardcastle argued, "and your arm's not okay, either. I'm gonna have to take ya back to see Charlie when we get outa here. I bet you've pulled some of those stitches out."

"But, Judge--"

"--No buts about it," Hardcastle shot back. "Look, McCormick, you got brains--sometimes--and one or two other pretty good qualities, but you know damned well that even with a good arm, I could beat your ass five days a week and twice on Saturday."

"Four days a week," McCormick argued. "I'm not in that bad a shape."

"Five, and you are, too," Hardcastle retorted. "I keep tellin' ya to work out with me, but no, you'd rather sit by the



pool and soak up the sun."

"Hey, I do work out with you," McCormick protested, "every time we play basketball. Instead of pumping iron, you pump me-- my head, my stomach, my back... After a game of one on one, I feel like a semi backed over me."

Hardcastle sighed. "Yeah, I've missed that the last few days."

McCormick blinked, thrown offguard by the unexpected remark, then broke into a smile. "Me, too, Judge." He glanced at Hardcastle from the corner of his eye and spoke hesitantly. "Judge, there-uh-there's still no guarentee that we're gonna get outa this alive. I mean, Anita and Jerry have guns."

Hardcastle shrugged. "That's life, kid. It doesn't come with guarantees."

McCormick nodded slowly in agreement. "In that case, I just...I just want you to know that I'm sorry about the way things worked out with Anita."

Hardcastle threw him a sharp look. "What's the matter? You think you're gonna die, so you're tryin' to confess your Seven Deadly Sins?"

McCormick looked up, startled. "No, I-uh-I just wanted you to know what I was thinking. I know you loved Anita and..."

Hardcastle shook his head and sighed. "Love involves more than just biology, kiddo. I would've grown to love Anita as my daughter in time, but not yet. What I was doing was trying to make up for the years I thought we had lost, make her feel welcome." His eyes rose to meet McCormick's and he cleared his throat. "Listen, since we're into this confessing our sins bit, there's no time like the present for me to apologize for all this."

"You don't owe me an apology," McCormick protested softly.

"Yeah, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do!" Hardcastle roared. "And damn it, you're gonna shut up and listen to it!"

"Yes, Your Honor," McCormick answered meekly, trying unsuccessfully to hide a smile.

Hardcastle snorted. "Now, I've made a jackass outa myself since Anita's been here, and I'm...well, I'm sorry I acted like that. You were right about me likin' the idea of having a daughter because it puffed up the ol' male ego. But she was pulling a con all along, and I fell for it like a damned fool."

"Judge, you're not a fool," McCormick argues gently. "You are one of the good guys, and good guys always fall for cons like that. They can't help it; it's in the 'Lone Ranger Book of Rules.'" He leaned his head back against the wall. "Besides, if anyone should apologize for the way he was acting, it's me."

"You?" Hardcastle threw him a surprised look. "You were the one who was right about Anita."

"Yeah, but for all the wrong reasons," McCormick admitted reluctantly. "All you were really asking from me was a little patience, and I couldn't even give that to you. I was...I was jealous of all the attention you were giving to Anita."

The judge smiled. "Yeah, I know, kid. And I understand how you felt."

Drawing his knees up, McCormick wrapped his arms around them and mumbled, "Well, I wish you'd explain it to me then, because I'd never felt that way before. Oh, maybe a little bit with Sandy--but not like this."\*

"I have," Hardcastle admitted gruffly. "When you found your dad."

McCormick raised his head to stare at him. "Really?"

Hardcastle nodded and glared at the opposite wall. It was like pulling a tooth, but McCormick had confessed, and he felt he owed it to the young man to match it with a confession of his own. "This is probably gonna sound terrible," he began, "but when I talked Sonny into breaking into that Federal building, I was halfway hoping he'd get arrested and put back in jail, because I was...well, I was afraid he was gonna start hangin' around all the time."

McCormick's head jerked up, his eyes round with shock. "You?" He pointed an accusing finger at Hardcastle. "You lied to me, Judge! You said Sonny was the one who talked you into stealing those tapes!"

"Now, I did not. You assumed it was your dad, and I didn't see any reason to tell you any different," Hardcastle snapped. He was angry at himself for having let the truth slip out now, but part of him wondered if he had subconsciously done it on purpose. It had hurt him when McCormick stood in front of the marquee bearing his father's stage name, and had given the multi-time loser all the credit for something which he had been forced to do. Hardcastle finally understood those feelings he had experienced then--he had been jealous, as jealous of Sonny Daye as Mark had been of Anita.

Feeling McCormick's eyes upon him, he glanced up sharply

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\* The Birthday Present

and demanded, "Well, what're you lookin' at?"

McCormick was grinning from ear to ear. "I don't believe it! You broke the law! Judge Milton C. 'Do-Everything-By-The-Book' Hardcastle willingly and voluntarily committed a crime for me!"

"Aw, I didn't break the law, McCormick," Hardcastle argued. "There's a whole string of Latin phrases that explains what I did, but I won't quote 'em because you wouldn't understand 'em, anyway."

"Oh, yeah, I do. I even understand 'em in English." The broad grin faded to a soft smile. "I told you in Atlantic City that blood was thicker than water, and it is, but I need more than just Sonny's blood in my veins to make him really my father. And, anyway, what's wrong with having two of 'em?" Grabbing Hardcastle around the shoulders, McCormick squeezed him tightly and grinned. "Right, Dad?"

"Cut it out!" Hardcastle pulled away from him, complaining gruffly, "What the hell you doin', McCormick? Get off me!" The word 'dad' was still ringing in his ears, though, a not unpleasant sound, and one that he hadn't heard in a long time. Hardcastle admitted to himself that he had never wanted to be a 'father,' but 'Dad' was something that was right down his alley.

The name brought with it thoughts of basketball and football games, wiping mustard off a youthful face, poker nights, sharing chores, and walks on the beach talking about girlfriends, the future, and life in general.

It also brought back memories of another voice calling him 'Dad,' a voice that hadn't echoed in his mind for a long time now. He wondered, not for the first time, how his real son and what now seemed like his adopted one would have gotten along. Tommy had been different from Mark in many ways, but he had had that same zest for life that seemed to spread to everyone around him.

Throwing a sharp glance at the young man next to him, Hardcastle wondered if McCormick was able to read his thoughts. He probably could, because Mark was still sitting there watching him, and grinning from ear to ear.

## C H A P T E R   E I G H T E E N

Hardcastle had been mentally formulating plans for nearly an hour, and McCormick, slumped next to him with his head against the judge's arm, had almost drifted off to sleep, when a sound above their heads caused both to jerk to immediate attention.

Ignoring the pain in his leg, Hardcastle jumped up and grabbing the ropes which had bound them earlier, tossed one to McCormick. "Loop this around your hands, and curl up on the floor on your side. And even if you've gotta lay there for ten minutes, don't breathe!"

They assumed what both hoped would appear to be positions of death. "McCormick, the light!" Hardcastle hissed low.

Jumping up quickly, Mark slammed his hand against the switch and fell to the floor again with his back to the judge.

Hardcastle could feel the young man's hands touching his own, and whispered, "When I give the word."

"Gotcha," McCormick breathed softly.

There was the rasping sound of concrete moving against concrete, then Anita's voice. "We've gotta wait a coupla minutes till some air flows in there. Use your flashlight and see if you can see anything."

Behind his eyelids, Hardcastle could make out the brilliance of the beam shining in his face. It disappeared, presumably to illuminate McCormick, and he heard Jerry announce, "They're dead, Anita."

"Good," she replied. "Get the ladder and go down and get the bodies."

"Not alone," Jerry retorted.

"What's the matter? You afraid?" Anita sneered.

"Yeah! I'm afraid if I go down there alone, you'll close this door again. I don't trust you, Anita."

Hardcastle smiled inwardly. Jerry wasn't as dumb as he looked, but by demanding that Anita climb down into the bomb shelter with him, he had unwittingly played right into their hands.

"Jerry, this is ridiculous," Anita insisted. "Why should I go down there? I can't carry either one of those bodies."

"No, but you can keep me company," Jerry retorted. "Your paralysis has worn off, Anita, so either you go down with me, or I don't go."

"All right, all right!" she yelled angrily. "Just get the damned ladder in place!"

There was the clanging sound of the ladder being lowered into the room, then footsteps coming down the aluminum rungs.

Apparently neither captor knew the light overhead was still operational, for no anticipated burst of brilliance flooded the room.

Better and better, Hardcastle thought and held his breath as he again saw the small circle of brightness behind his eyelids.

"This one's dead." Jerry's voice sounded less than three feet away. "How about Junior over there?"

"Wait a minute, let me check." There was a pause, then Anita agreed, "Yeah, he's dead, too."

Hardcastle 'saw' the light turn away from him, and touching McCormick's hands, he roared, "Now!!"

There was a sudden confusion of arms and legs, followed by several dull thuds and the ear-splitting crack of a single shot. Two flashlights went bouncing across the room, one obviously breaking on impact while the other landed in a corner, throwing a band of fading radiance across the floor, adding no illumination to the fight going on above it.

There was a muffled cry, followed by another dull thud, and Hardcastle called out, "McCormick! You okay?"

"The light, Judge! Hit the light!"

Grabbing up the flashlight, Hardcastle threw its beam around the room until he found the switch, then banged it with his fist.

Jerry was lying in an unconscious heap on the floor, but McCormick was standing with his back to the wall, holding Anita by one wrist and trying desperately to grab her other arm which was flailing the air. He managed to only partially duck as she lashed out at him, a fingernail ripping the skin down the side of his cheek.

"I'll kill you!" she screamed.

McCormick yelped in pain. "Judge, she clawed me!"

"Well...hit her or something!" Hardcastle suggested.

"I can't hit a woman!" McCormick protested, still trying to grab the loose arm. "What comes under the heading 'Or Something?'"

Hardcastle snorted. "McCormick, can't you do anything?" Grabbing Anita's shoulders from behind, he pulled her away from the young man. "Leave him alone--the kid breaks easily."

Throwing him a hard look, McCormick rubbed his cheek and muttered, "Told you I wanted Jerry."

Anita was still struggling in Hardcastle's grasp, and when he released his hold, she made a lunge for McCormick. He jumped back, and Hardcastle grabbed her arm, whirling her around.

Glaring over her shoulder, she screamed, "I'll kill you, McCormick! You messed this up! I swear, I'll kill you!"

Hardcastle shook her roughly. "Look here, young lady, I like to give a woman all the respect that's due her, but you've just about used yours up! Now, if you don't behave, I can fix it so you'll need that wheelchair again!"

Anita stopped struggling and stared at him, obviously still angry, but a note of doubt crept into her voice as she retorted, "You wouldn't dare!"

McCormick walked behind them, tossing over Hardcastle's shoulder, "Don't bet on it, Anita. You've only known the judge five days; I've been here almost three years. I've got scars all over my body as proof that he means what he says."

Hardcastle glared at him. "Shut up, McCormick!"

"Yes, sir," McCormick grinned.

Pushing Anita into a corner, Hardcastle ordered, "Sit."

She did so, the look of anger replaced by one of fear.

Turning his back on her, Hardcastle yelled, "Get up that ladder, McCormick, and make it fast!"

"Yes, Your Honor," McCormick grinned, bowing subserviently.

"Scars," Hardcastle growled. "You don't know the meaning of the word--yet."

McCormick started up the ladder, ignoring Hardcastle's grumblings. "Look, Judge," he pointed upward, "it's daylight. Boy, I hope they have a car or something up there because I'm too tired to walk all the way home."

Hardcastle followed him up the ladder, suddenly silent.

Reaching the top, McCormick climbed out and slowly



straightened, staring at his surroundings in speechless amazement.

Pulling the ladder up, Hardcastle let the trapdoor slam shut behind them, the tiles effectively concealing the exit. Turning to the astonished young man, he demanded, "Well, kid, you got a problem?"

"I-I don't believe it!" McCormick turned, his eyes wide with shock. "This is your bomb shelter, Judge, right in your backyard, next to your pool, and you didn't tell me?!"

Hardcastle shrugged. "The pool wasn't there then. As a matter of fact, part of the shelter was used for it."

"Don't change the subject, Judge! You knew where we were all along!" McCormick accused.

"Of course, I did!" he snapped. "Don't you think I know my own bomb shelter?"

"Well, why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

"Yes, I did," McCormick threw back. "I specifically remember asking you where we were."

"And I told you we were in a bomb shelter," Hardcastle reminded him. "You didn't ask where the damned thing was at."

"Judge! I don't believe it!" A grin began spreading across McCormick's face. "Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute! I can see it all." He held a hand out as if pointing out the headlines in a newspaper. "L.A. Times, one day in the early 1960's-- 'Cold War Is Upon Us,'" he 'read.' "'Russia could attack any minute. And Milton C. Hardcastle, dispenser of justice, the Lone Ranger and John Wayne rolled into one, runs paranoid in the streets and builds himself a bomb shelter.'"

"Are you through, wise-guy?" Hardcastle demanded.

"No, there's more. I see a question in the headlines now," McCormick continued. "It says 'How Is It That Anita Bushmeyer Knew About This Bomb Shelter On Judge Hardcastle's Property When Mark McCormick, Who Has Lived With That Same Donkey Judge For Three Years Had No Idea It Even Existed?'"

"I suppose your headlines want an answer to that," Hardcastle growled.

"Can't write the story without it," McCormick grinned.



"Well, forget it! I gotta call Frank," he grumbled. Whirling around, he started towards the house, managing to stomp, even with a limp.

McCormick chased after him. "C'mon, Judge, how'd she know? You always told me your wife used that little ring to tie her rubber raft to so she wouldn't float into the middle of the pool."

"She did." Hardcastle nodded.

"Yeah, but you didn't tell me that ring was also attached to the door of a bomb shelter," McCormick protested. "C'mon, Judge, how did Anita know that?"

Throwing open the front door, he whirled around and roared, "Because I told her mother!!"

"You what?!" Falling against the door, McCormick started laughing. "Judge, you're one in a million! You're the only person I know who has a one-night-stand with a hooker, and you-- and you tell her about your bomb shelter! God, you're so romantic!"

His laughter had grown to hysterical proportions, and trying in vain to hide a grin, Hardcastle shook a finger at him. "Just keep it up, wise guy, and you're gonna be working the rest of the day and all night getting that spray paint off my carpet!"

McCormick sobered quickly. "Hey, I didn't do that, Judge!"

"No, but you're gonna clean it up!" Hardcastle ordered. "This whole damned mess was your fault, anyway!"

McCormick's eyes widened. "How the hell was it my fault? I didn't do nookie with a hookie."

"No, but you're the one who let Anita in!" Hardcastle countered. "How many times have I told you never to open the door to strangers? Huh? Huh? How many times?"

McCormick grinned. "Okay, I'll clean your stupid rug, but right now, can we get something to eat?" he pleaded. "I haven't had any decent food for the past five days and I am starving!"

Hardcastle smiled. "Sure, kid. You go make some sandwiches and I'll go call the cops." Instead of heading for the telephone, however, he remained standing in front of McCormick, an expression on his face that Mark didn't understand. "Listen, uh, there's something I gotta say, McCormick, and I wanna get it over with. I know the last few days weren't easy on ya, and... well, I'm damned sorry this all happened. I imagine Anita told you some pretty vicious lies in an effort to get rid of you, and I accused you of some pretty lousy things, but you stuck by me, and I really appreciate that, kiddo." The smile returned as he added, "You'd make any father proud," and stepping forward, he pulled the young man into an awkward bear hug.

"Hey, hey, Judge, cut it out!" McCormick, caught offguard, laughed shakily, unsure where to put his arms. "C'mon, you're embarrassing me."

Hardcastle drew back, his face somber. "Yeah, well, I'm embarrassing me, too," he returned gruffly, "but sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"I don't believe it!" McCormick grinned. "You really hugged me!"

"Well, don't let it go to your head, kiddo," Hardcastle grumbled. "'Cause you just got your quota for the next twenty years."

## E P I L O G U E

It was one of those cool, quiet nights that made going to bed a sheer pleasure, especially to a man who had had very little sleep for the past few days.

Hardcastle was dead to the world seconds after his head hit the pillow, but it seemed he had been asleep only a few minutes when a sound downstairs jerked him to wide-eyed alertness.

Throwing the covers back quickly, he grabbed his pistol from the drawer of his nightstand and tiptoed down the steps in the darkness. The light was on in the den, and padding across the hallway in his bare feet, Hardcastle held the gun poised and ready to blow a hole in any would-be burglar.

The soft sound of feminine laughter suddenly tickled his ears, followed by the hushed tones of a voice he knew well, and lowering the gun, Hardcastle stalked into the den, stopping in front of the wingbacked chair, roared, "McCormick! What the hell're you doing?"

The young lady jumped to her feet, McCormick following so fast that he bumped into her back. "Judge!" he exclaimed. "Did we-did we wake you?"

Hardcastle stared at the young woman in front of McCormick, his piercing blue gaze starting at her bleached hair, then travelling downward, past the painted face and skimpy, low-cut dress, and ending at the strapless spiked heels. Shoving the gun in his robe pocket, he yelled, "McCormick, who the hell's she, and what are you doing down here this time of night?"

"Oh, uh, this is--this is Mitze, Judge," McCormick stammered, stepping from behind the young woman. "I, uh, I saw her on a street corner downtown a little while ago, and she said she was all alone and needed a ride and so I, uh, I sort of...brought her here."

Hardcastle nodded slightly to the young woman. "Excuse us, miss, but the kid and I need to have a little talk." Grabbing McCormick by the back of the neck, he marched him into the hallway, and releasing his hold, shoved him against the wall.

"Judge! What're you doing?" McCormick protested. "You're embarrassing me!"

"McCormick, are you crazy?!" Hardcastle shouted and pointed a finger at the den. "Do you know what she is?"

McCormick broke into a grin. "Yeah, she's a woman, Judge. Surely you're not too old to remember them."

"Knock off the smart-ass remarks!" Hardcastle hissed. "That young woman in there's a hooker! A prostitute!"

"A hooker? Judge, how do you know?" McCormick asked in wide-eyed innocence. "I mean, does she--does she look like the hookers you used to arrest when you were on the beat?"

Remembering what he had told McCormick several days ago about Anita's mother, Hardcastle's eyes narrowed. "Okay, sport, you got your revenge," he growled. "And for your information, Suzie didn't look like that--her hair was red," he added guiltily, then his voice took on an angry tone again. "Now, get that young lady--and I use that word loosely--outa here and take her back to where she picked you up, and you get back here fast, or I'm gonna have a bareskin McCormick rug lying in front of my fireplace. You get my drift, kid?"

"Gotcha," McCormick grinned. "Quick as a flash, Judge. You just go up to bed, and I'll be back before you know it." He pushed Hardcastle toward the stairs. "Night, Judge. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Waiting until Hardcastle was at the top of the stairs, McCormick returned to the den, and kissed the young woman on the forehead. "Thanks, Jenny," he grinned. "Hardcase fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

Picking up her sweater, Jenny censored, "You really shouldn't have done that to the Judge, Mark. He's a very sweet man."

"Yeah, but it was worth it," McCormick chuckled, reaching up to pull her wig off and ruffle her short, dark hair. "Did you see his face when he saw you? Aw, man, I wish I'd had a camera. It was priceless!" He guided her to the door. "C'mon, the cab's waiting outside. Here's the money for it, and I'll see you tomorrow night. Oh, and you'd better wash that makeup off as soon as you get home. I've heard that stuff's terrible for your skin, and you have such beautiful skin," he added, gathering her in his arms.

They exchanged a long, lingering kiss, and Jenny waved good-bye.

Closing the door behind her, McCormick leaned against it, rubbing his hands together and laughing softly. "God, I love it when I get Hardcase."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

Glancing up quickly, McCormick gulped, "Uh-oh."

Hardcastle started down the stairs, one deliberate step at a time. "You're dead meat, kiddo. You know that, don't you?"