

**I DID A
NO—NO
A FEW YEARS
AGO**

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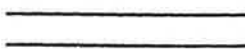
This is a long fic and will be loaded in 4 parts.

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

Finding a heavy plank of wood, McCormick built a ramp leading up to the front door of his former residence, then moving Anita's bags inside, stood in the middle of the room, waiting for her to enter.

She halted her wheelchair just inside the door and looked up at him with a worried frown. "I really feel bad about this, Mark. I know this house technically belongs to the judge, but you have been living here for almost three years, and I didn't mean for him to throw you out."

"He didn't throw me out," McCormick protested somewhat sharply. "I left of my own accord."

"Oh, I-I'm sorry," Anita apologized softly. "It's just that--well, I must've misunderstood Father."

McCormick's spirits sank at her use of the paternal name. "And just what did dear ol' Dad say, anyway?" he asked sarcastically, feeling that he should've eavesdropped a little while longer the night before.

"Nothing important, really." She dimpled merrily. "I'm already beginning to learn that your judge doesn't always say what he means."

"That's for damned sure," McCormick agreed fervently.

Hardcastle appeared in the doorway behind Anita. "Hey, no cursing around my daughter, McCormick!" he ordered in a hard voice, pushing her wheelchair on into the room.

McCormick turned crimson at the censure. "Sorry, Judge," he mumbled.

Anita looked up as Hardcastle walked in front of her. "It's okay, Father. Believe me, I've heard a lot worse than that."

"Not around here, you won't," Hardcastle promised grimly. "What're you dawdling for?" he yelled. "When're you gonna take the bed apart and bring it downstairs?"

"As soon as I get my tools," McCormick muttered and started for the door. Outside, he stopped and backed up to listen in again. Eavesdropping was rapidly becoming a habit, and although he wasn't proud of it, Anita's insinuation that the judge had said something the night before that she didn't want to repeat made McCormick feel justified in his actions.

Putting his ear close to the door, he heard--"Father, do you...do you always yell at Mark like that?"

"'Course I do," Hardcastle shot back. "The kid likes it. He'd get bored to death if I wasn't always on his case."

"Maybe you should...you should be a little nicer to him right now," McCormick heard Anita suggest in a hesitant voice. "I think he's a little upset because he had to move."

"Yeah, I know, but he'll get over it," Hardcastle returned gruffly. "Mark's a good kid, got a heart of gold. You're really gonna like him once you get to know him. Just take it slow; he's kinda gun-shy about relationships. McCormick's come a long way, though, since I took him in. Some of it, of course, I can take the credit for, but all he really needed was a good kick in the butt to get him goin' in the right direction."

McCormick stood outside the door, blushing furiously and grinning from ear to ear. "I'll be damned," he mumbled. Coming from Hardcastle, that was high praise, indeed, more than he had ever heard face to face. Remembering his chores, he took off quickly for the garage, thereby missing the rest of the conversation in the gatehouse.

Anita chewed on her lower lip a moment before responding to Hardcastle's remarks about the young man in his custody. "I don't doubt your word about Mark," she spoke at last. "I guess I, uh, I just have to get to know him better and not take everything he says to heart."

"What do you mean?" Hardcastle demanded, his eyes narrowing. "McCormick hasn't insulted you, has he?"

"Oh, no, no," she answered a little too quickly, then deftly changed the subject. "I, uh, I'm curious, Father. Why do you have Mark living here with you? I mean, the two of you seem so different."

Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "I'm not so sure about that, honey. Sometimes I think McCormick and I are cut from the same cloth."

"What do you mean?" Anita asked in a curious tone.

"You ever seen two rams go at it head on?"

She smiled. "Which one wins?"

"The older one, every damned time," Hardcastle assured her. "The reason, though, that McCormick lives here is because he's in my custody."

"Your custody?" Anita's eyes grew round. "You mean, you've adopted him?"

Hardcastle laughed. "No, well, at least not officially. You see, the kid got in a little trouble about six years ago--I had to sentence him to prison for grand theft auto."

Anita's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God! And you let him stay here?"

"Now, just wait a minute, young lady. Don't go condemning someone till you have all the facts," Hardcastle censored softly. "I said I sentenced McCormick to prison for grand theft auto; I didn't say he stole the car."

Anita was obviously confused. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"'Course you don't," Hardcastle smiled. "That's because the kid got caught up in technicalities and ended up getting the shaft. He didn't really do anything wrong--he just had an attack of gross stupidity. The damned fool put his Porsche in the name of his girlfriend he was living with so he could save money on his insurance. The girl broke it off, but wouldn't give the car back, so he took it."

"And she brought charges against him," Anita guessed.

"You got it."

"But the car was hers," Anita protested.

Hardcastle shook his head. "In name only. Not even McCormick is dumb enough to give away a Porsche. No, I believe his story."

"But you sent him to prison," Anita pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he sighed. "But the law's the law, Anita, and I couldn't bend it for Mark or anyone else. He made a stupid mistake trying to save some money and ended up having to pay dearly for it."

"Does he resent you for that?"

"Nah," Hardcastle replied firmly. "McCormick's not like that."

Anita leaned forward slightly. "Are you very sure of that, Father?"

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Anita watched as McCormick moved the furniture to one side of the room, then began setting up the bed against the opposite wall. Studying his profile a moment longer, she guided her wheelchair around the furniture separating them and reached out to touch his arm.

"Mark, may I say something?"

He looked up from his work and smiled. "Yeah, sure, go ahead."

She dropped her eyes, her hands toying with the frayed ends of her string belt. "Father told me about your being in prison," she began softly, "and I-I just wanted you to know that I don't hold it against you. I mean, a lot of people make mistakes."

Smile fading, McCormick straightened slowly. "That's very generous of you," he snapped. "I don't know if a bad ex-con like me deserves your kindness."

She stared up at him wide-eyed. "Oh, dear, I've said the wrong thing, haven't I? I should've known it would be a touchy subject for you."

McCormick glared down at her. "Just what the hell did the judge say?" he demanded. "Did he tell you the truth or his version of it?"

"He-he said you went to prison for grand theft auto," Anita stammered.

McCormick threw down his hammer and stalked across the room, yelling back over his shoulder, "There's your damned bed!"

Storming into the house, he slammed the door behind him and, stepping into the middle of the hallway, yelled at the top of his lungs, "Hardcase!"

"In the den!"

When McCormick stomped into the room, Hardcastle looked up from his work and growled, "Well, what the hell's wrong with you?"

McCormick brought his fist down hard on the desk. "Judge, you had no right, no right, maligning me like that!"

Leaning back in his chair, Hardcastle frowned. "Kid, would you mind telling me what the hell you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about you telling Anita I stole a car!" he yelled.

"Aw, now, I didn't say that," Hardcastle protested. "I told her you were a damned fool and had to pay for your stupidity."

"Why were you even talking about me in the first place?" McCormick demanded.

"She asked why you were living here, and I told her," the judge answered quietly.

"And did you also tell her what I do around here?" McCormick yelled. "Did you tell her I'm gardener, housekeeper, chief cook and bottle washer, not to mention part-time Tonto? Huh, Judge? Did you tell her that?"

Hardcastle shrugged. "She didn't ask."

"No, but she sure made a point of inquiring into my checkered past, didn't she?" McCormick shot back. Placing his hands flat in the desk, he leaned over to face Hardcastle, his voice becoming intense. "Judge, that girl's up to something. She's trying to put a wedge between you and me. Nobody can be as angelic and perfect as she's pretending to be. I don't know what's going on here, but I know people, and there's something very wrong about her."

Hardcastle rose slowly, his face darkening with anger. "I know people, too, McCormick, or at least I thought I knew you."

Mark straightened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you got a lot of flaws, kid, but I never thought I'd see a cruel streak in ya!" Hardcastle flung back.

McCormick flinched as if slapped in the face. "I'm not being cruel," he denied in a low voice. "I'm just telling you Anita is up to something, and it's not good."

"That girl out there in that gatehouse is handicapped, and she's my daughter!" Hardcastle roared. "There's only two people on this earth who knew what happened in Miami! I sure as hell didn't tell anyone, and there's only one person Suzie would've told--the daughter of the man who got her pregnant!"

McCormick backed away slowly, holding up his hands. "All right, Judge, you do what you feel like you gotta do, but I've gotta follow my own feelings."

As he whirled around and started towards the door, Hardcastle yelled after him, "And just where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I don't know!" McCormick threw back over his shoulder, "but don't bother holding up dinner for me! I wouldn't want you and your precious daughter to be inconvenienced!"

"McCormick!" The only response was the slamming of the front door and, dropping back into his chair, Hardcastle released his breath in a sigh. "Damn!" he muttered. "I never thought the kid would let his jealousy get out of control like that."

Trying to shake off the disturbing thought, he pulled a legal document from his desk drawer and reached for the phone.

McCormick drove into town and, after hunting up a pay phone, began calling the major hospitals in the San Francisco area, identifying himself as Dr. McCormick of Malibu and requesting information on one Anita Bushmeyer. It was a long shot at best, but on the fourth call, he hit paydirt.

After the usual wait for a computer check, the hospital official came back on the line. "Yes, Dr. McCormick, we have the medical records of Anita Bushmeyer; however, I cannot discuss them with you without a signed release from the patient."

"Look, the patient is in no condition to sign a release right now," McCormick argued. "I need information on her paralysis, and I need it now. It could be a matter of life and death."

There was silence on the other end of the line a moment, then the woman returned hesitantly, "I have no record of a paralysis, Doctor. Are you certain we're talking about the same person? This young woman came to us two years ago for an abortion. If she was paralyzed at the time, I assure you it would have been on her records."

McCormick swallowed hard. "Do you, uh, have any information on where and when she was born?"

"Yes--Miami, Florida, December 29, 1964."

Aw, man, McCormick thought to himself. It was the same year the judge had been at the convention in Miami. That meant Anita really was Hardcastle's daughter. "Did she list any relatives?" he asked aloud.

"None living," the woman replied. "Her mother, Suzanne Bushmeyer, died of a heart attack four years ago...in this hospital, as a matter of fact. I have her records, too, if you need them; that is, if this Anita Bushmeyer is the same young woman who's now your patient."

"Uh, no, she doesn't sound like the same one," McCormick lied. "But thanks, anyway."

McCormick returned the receiver to its hook, his mind a mass of confused thoughts. He could understand Anita not wanting to offer the information that she had had an abortion, but she had lied on two counts--she was not paralyzed at the age of seven or even at the age of twenty, and her mother had died four years ago, not three months ago like she had claimed.

His eyebrows came together in a troubled frown as he tried to decide what to do next. Going to Hardcastle with what he had discovered was out of the question; the judge would raise the roof if he found out he had been investigating his daughter.



Anita had obviously told the truth about Hardcastle being her father, so there could be a good reason for the other lies, he reluctantly decided. Maybe she was afraid the judge wouldn't accept her as his daughter, but if she was handicapped to boot, he wouldn't be able to turn her away. Maybe she had no money and no other place to go, so she was desperate, McCormick thought. And maybe he was an even bigger fool than the judge said he was if he believed any of that.

Arriving back at Gull's Way, McCormick started towards the trailer, jumping slightly when a shadowy figure stepped out of the darkness to confront him.

"It's about time you got back!" Hardcastle roared. "Where the hell've you been?"

"Out," McCormick returned in a clipped voice.

"That's no answer!"

"Well, it's all you're gonna get," he snapped. "I don't have to give you every little detail of where I go and what I do."

"Like hell you don't!" Hardcastle yelled back at him. "You're in my custody, McCormick, and I don't want you wandering all over the place without me having some idea where you're at. What if you got hurt like you did that time when Millie and I had to find you. If you think I'm gonna go through that again, you're crazy!"

McCormick smiled slightly, Hardcastle's words, as well as the unspoken ones, lifting his spirits. "Judge, I'm thirty-two years old," he retorted mildly. "I think I can take care of myself."

"And I'm supposed to believe that coming from the screwball who believes in leprechauns?" the judge fired back.

"Okay, okay." McCormick held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I promise I won't leave this place again without giving you a minute-by-minute itinerary."

"Good," Hardcastle returned gruffly. "Now, you'd better get some sleep. You've got a lotta chores to do tomorrow because you goofed off all afternoon. I wanna talk to you in the morning, too, so be sure you don't miss breakfast."

McCormick saluted smartly. "Yes, sir, Your Honor."

"And quit being a smart ass!" Hardcastle shot back.

McCormick grinned, and climbing into the trailer, turned to call back, "Night, Judge."

He couldn't see the craggy face in the darkness, but Hardcastle's voice was curiously soft as he responded, "G'night, kiddo."

McCormick closed the door quietly and dropped onto the narrow bed, his spirits sinking again. Anita had been there only two days, but he had a feeling she was going to be staying a lot longer. She had every right to do so, he argued with himself. She hadn't asked to be born, but like him, she'd been forced to grow up without a father; and now that she had found him, it was her right to lay claim to his affections, and to expect to be accepted into his familial circle.

McCormick could understand that yearning to belong to someone, that need to have a solid foundation, and he knew it was unfair to condemn Hardcastle's daughter for wanting no more than he did. Maybe her so-called paralysis was a ruse, but it made no difference. She only wanted to be loved, and he knew that feeling well.

Making a resolution to accept the situation and help the

young woman in any way he could, McCormick stretched out on the narrow bed. After lying there for several minutes, he released a sigh--despite all his grand decisions, sleep still refused to come.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There was someone else at Gull's Way who couldn't sleep that night. Not even bothering to go through the motions of retiring, Hardcastle sat, instead, behind his desk all night, worry carving new lines in the craggy face.

For the first time in his life, the judge was unsure of himself. Life had suddenly become very complicated, and at his age, complications didn't fit into his lifestyle. There were decisions to be made, ones that he wanted to avoid because they would change a way of life that he had been satisfied with for years. There was that ever-present sense of guilt, however, the undeniable fact that he had done something stupid years ago and now had to try to make amends for it.

Finding out he had a daughter had been a shocking and somewhat exciting revelation, but taking on the responsibility for her care meant changing many things. He had talked with her at length that day about his 'extracurricular activities' that he had been involved in since his retirement, and she had made a pleading request that would not only affect him, but McCormick as well.

Hardcastle frowned. There was his main worry. Although she apparently made an effort to hide her feelings, it was obvious to him that Anita didn't care for the young man in his custody, and for the life of him, Hardcastle couldn't understand why. Everyone who met McCormick liked him almost immediately; therefore Hardcastle could think of only one reason for Anita's reaction--jealousy.

He was already beginning to feel trapped in the middle, forced into the position of mediator, and having to make decisions he wasn't crazy about. No matter which way he leaned, feelings were going to be hurt. He had a responsibility to both of them, one that he had gladly taken on almost three years before, the other thrust upon him now and which he was forced to assume in an effort to ease a guilty conscience.



Because McCormick had been with him the longest, Hardcastle was hoping that he would be the more understanding. But even Mark would sacrifice only so much, especially for a young woman he considered an intruder and a fake.

Leaning back in his chair, he began to formulate plans, but a part of him knew with a sinking feeling that they would probably never be carried through.

The eastern sky was glowing with the light of a new day when Hardcastle finally stood, stretching his legs in an effort to get the blood pumping.

Going outside, he got his basketball from the garage and started to make a shot, but remembered all the times he had awakened McCormick with his early-morning exercise. Anita was sleeping in the gatehouse now; and gazing longingly at the basketball a moment, Hardcastle tossed it back into the garage, then shoving his hands into his pockets, walked down to the beach.

Almost an hour later, he retraced his steps, stopping at the gardener's trailer to wake McCormick. There was no answer to his knock nor any sound from within, and opening the door slowly, he stepped into the dimly-lit room, inhaling sharply as he did so.

The trailer hadn't been used in years, and he had forgotten just how small it was. McCormick's clothes were stacked in neat piles on the bed and narrow counters because there was no other place to put them. Hardcastle barely had room to turn around, and his nostrils twitched at the musty odor permeating the tight quarters.

Backing out of the trailer slowly, he resolved to do something as soon as possible about McCormick's accommodations. It was almost as if McCormick had been demoted from a member of the family to a part-time employee, and he scowled, easily imagining how Mark probably felt about the move.

Remembering his earlier words about it making no difference which 'room' of the home McCormick lived in, Hardcastle entered the trailer, grabbed a stack of shirts and jeans and started for the house. What he had said still held true to a certain extent, but it didn't include trying to live in one of the 'closets.'

Going into the kitchen, he found Anita already at the table waiting as McCormick whipped up a batch of scrambled eggs to accompany the bacon he had frying on the griddle. Slapping the pile of clothes on the counter next to the young man, Hardcastle growled, "Here."

McCormick glanced at the clothing, blue eyes widening. "What's that?" he asked slowly.

"Some of your stuff," Hardcastle shot back.

"I can see that." McCormick's eyes rose to meet his. "What'd you bring 'em in here for?"

"Because they're goin' upstairs along with the rest of your junk," Hardcastle returned gruffly. "I just came from that trailer, and it's too damned small. You don't even have a bathroom!"

McCormick turned back to his cooking. "It's okay," he assured in a low voice.

"No, it's not okay, damn it, and don't go pullin' that 'I can take it' routine," Hardcastle shot back. "You're moving upstairs into the bedroom next to mine."

McCormick's head came up quickly. "Hey, wait a minute, Hardcase. I'm not living under the same roof with you!"

Grabbing the clothes, Hardcastle started toward the hallway, yelling over his shoulder, "We can do this two ways, kid-- your way, you'll wind up in bed for three days!"

Frowning at the retreating judge, McCormick turned to set the plates of food on the table, his eyes meeting Anita's, and he inhaled sharply at the expression of pure hatred twisting the delicate features.

She glared at him defiantly, her lips curling in a snarl. "You think you have Father wrapped around your little finger," she hissed, "but it won't last, I can promise you."

Caught offguard by her open display of animosity, he could think of no response to the vague threat; and by the time he did, Hardcastle had returned, sniffing the air and rubbing his hands together. "Smells good, McCormick. I'm starving."

Sitting down beside him, McCormick watched as Hardcastle stuffed a piece of bacon in his mouth. "Judge, I really don't think--"

"Good," Hardcastle growled. "Keeps ya outta trouble." He nodded at McCormick's plate. "Now, eat up before your food gets cold." Glancing at Anita, he added, "You, too, young lady. Those eggs were over a dollar a dozen. Damn! I remember back when I was a kid, we used to get 'em at the general store for two cents a piece."

"Oh, no," McCormick groaned, "not another one of those Noah's Ark stories!"

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "Wise guy, eat your breakfast before I stuff it down ya."

CHAPTER NINE

Having wheeled Anita out to the pool area, Hardcastle was waiting at the foot of the stairs when McCormick staggered in, arms loaded with clothing. Halting his young friend, Hardcastle pushed down the pile until he could see a pair of blue eyes and grinned. "You under there, kid?"



"Somewhere," McCormick complained. "You could help me with these, you know."

"You shouldn't have tried to carry everything at once," he retorted.

"Well, at least point me to the stairs."

Hooking his hand under McCormick's elbow, Hardcastle pulled him forward, commanding, "Step up." At the top of the stairs, he guided the young man into the bedroom.

Dropping the load of clothes onto the bed, McCormick turned with a sigh. "Judge, this isn't gonna work."

"Sure it is," Hardcastle contradicted. "There's plenty of room in the dresser and in the closet over there."

McCormick shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I'm

talking about you and me, side by side, under the same roof. It won't work. What if I wanna have a girl in?"

"You can," Hardcastle assured him. "Right down there in the den."

"Oh, sure. In the parlor, you mean," McCormick returned sarcastically, "with 'Pop' and 'little sister' sitting there gawking at us. Maybe we can all eat watermelon and gather 'round the pi-any and sing 'By the Light of the Silvery Moon.'"

"Well, what the hell you wanna do?" Hardcastle snapped. "You wanna go back out there in that trailer? You sure as hell couldn't get a girl in there. Besides, you haven't slept in that cubbyhole for the last two nights!"

McCormick stiffened. "How do you know I haven't slept?"

"It's written all over your face," Hardcastle returned. "You're too young to have bags under your eyes."

McCormick threw him a sharp glance. "You don't look so hot yourself this morning."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I didn't sleep much last night, either." Dropping onto the bed, Hardcastle pushed the clothes aside and slapped the spread. "Sit down, kid."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to!" Hardcastle retorted. "Damn it, McCormick, you've got more questions than a bar exam! Sit your butt down!"

McCormick did so slowly, turning to face him. "Okay, Judge, lay the bad news on me. The only time you tell me to sit down is when you're about to get me involved in something you know I'm not gonna like. So what's the case this time?"

"There isn't one." Leaning forward, Hardcastle clasped his hands in front of him and dropping his head slightly, turned it so he could see McCormick out of the corner of his eye. "There won't be any more cases, Mark," he spoke quietly.

McCormick stared at him. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"I'm going to destroy my files," Hardcastle answered low.

"Destroy them?!" McCormick stared at him in shock. "Judge, have you lost your marbles?!"

Hardcastle shook his head firmly. "No more playing Lone Ranger and Tonto, kid. I thought you'd be happy to hear that since you're always complainin' about getting beat up, shot, and thrown off trains. Well, you don't have to do that anymore."

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"Nothing." McCormick's eyes narrowed. "It's Anita, isn't it?" he accused. "You told her what we do, and she wants you to stop, doesn't she?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle sighed and glanced up to meet McCormick's hard gaze. "Look, you can't blame her," he protested. "She just found her father, and she doesn't wanna take a chance on losing him again. You of all people oughta be able to understand that."

"Oh, yeah, I understand, Judge." Rising to his feet, McCormick grabbed up a handful of shirts and shook them at the judge. "I understand that for the last three years I've watched you act like a jackass and almost get yourself killed a dozen times!" he exploded. "I've been through Clarence, Arkansas and Weed Randall, but did you ever listen to me when I wanted you to quit playing John Wayne? No! Anita comes along, though, and bam! It's good-bye files!"

A frown marred Hardcastle's features. "Look, McCormick, you don't understand. Anita needs me. If anything happens to me, you'll be taken care of. You know what's in my will. But Anita needs more than that."

"Oh, and I don't?" McCormick shot back. "Gee, thanks a lot for the character reference, Judge. You make me sound like a money-grubber who's just hanging around here waiting for you to kick the bucket so I can get my hands on your dough."

"You know I didn't mean that!" Hardcastle yelled back and jumped to his feet, angry not at McCormick but at himself for having stuck his foot in his mouth and royally chewed on it. Trying to figure out a way to get things back on the track for both of them, he laid a hand on McCormick's shoulder. "Listen, none of this changes anything between you and me."

Pulling away, McCormick reached beside the dresser and, picking up the suitcase he had sat there only minutes before, laid it on the bed. "You're wrong, Judge. It changes everything," he returned sadly.

Hardcastle's eyes widened. "What're you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" Picking up a shirt, he folded it carefully and placed it in the suitcase, then followed it with a pair of jeans. "I've suddenly become a third thumb around here."

"What the hell kind of nonsense're you talking?" Hardcastle demanded.

Halting his packing, McCormick looked up, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's. "Think back, Judge. You took me into your custody

so we could go after those guys in your files. You throw away those files, and you throw away my purpose for being here. I become as much excess baggage as this suitcase."

"Will you stop that!" Hardcastle yelled angrily, grabbing a handful of clothes from the suitcase and throwing them across the room.

Retrieving the articles of clothing, McCormick stuffed them back into the suitcase, yelling, "Will you get outta here, Judge! Just get out and leave me alone!"

"No! I won't! You're still in my custody, kid, and you don't go anywhere unless I tell you to!"

McCormick's nostrils flared. "Forget it, Judge! If you think I'm gonna stick around here and become your full-time gardener and housekeeper, then you're crazier'n you look!"

"That's not what I had in mind!" Hardcastle roared. "You're going to law school, damn it!"

McCormick stepped back, giving a high, mirthless laugh. "I'm gonna do what?"

"You're gonna go to law school," Hardcastle repeated in a calmer, but no less firm tone. "Now, I was thinking about it last night, and I've got it all planned out. You'll go to UCLA; that's where I went. You're a smart kid, so you won't have any trouble passing, if you just knuckle down and put your mind to it. You'll go full time and that way you can finish up in two years, and then we'll look around for a good law firm."

McCormick stared at him in shock. "Judge, have you flipped your gourd?" he exclaimed. "I can't go to law school! Good God, I'm thirty-two years old!"

"And I was almost forty!" Hardcastle retorted. "I made it, and so can you! Sure, it'll be tough, but it'll be worth it once you get to be a lawyer."

"And then go on to become a judge?" McCormick asked sarcastically. "Hardcase the Second, huh?"

He grinned. "Now yer cookin'."

"And just who would pay for all this?" McCormick questioned in a hard voice.

Hardcastle looked at him in surprise. "Why, me, of course."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Judge. I don't accept charity." McCormick backed across the room, holding up his hands. "I'm not going to law school and that's that. End of discussion."

"It's not a discussion!" Hardcastle bellowed. "It's a fact! You're as much my responsibility as Anita is, and you're gonna do what I tell you to do!"

"And you just wanna dump your responsibility someplace else!" McCormick accused. "No way, Judge! If you want me outta your hair, you don't have to pay to do it! Just say so, but don't go trying to pack me off to...to some college campus!"

"All right! All right!" Hardcastle shook his head, his voice lower but still gruff with anger. "I can see I'm not getting anywhere with this, so we'll drop the subject for now. You're too damned stubborn to listen to reason."

"Stubborn? Me stubborn?" McCormick exclaimed. "Judge, you're the biggest hay-bearin' jackass to be born in Arkansas in the last hundred years! And you're blind, too! You're so wrapped up in the thrill of having a daughter that you can't see what she's up to!"

"McCormick, what the hell're you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Anita's off-Broadway performance." A pleading tone crept into McCormick's voice. "She's only been here three days, and she's already dominating you. She hates me and wants me outta here because I stand between her and you. She's jealous of me, Judge."

Hardcastle frowned. "Isn't that like the pot calling the kettle black, kid?" he asked grimly.

McCormick stared at him a moment, then reluctantly agreed, "Yeah, okay, I'll admit I was jealous of her at first, but now I'm worried." He stepped toward Hardcastle, a look of concern in his eyes. "Judge, I've never pretended to you to be anything I wasn't."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Hardcastle snapped.

"It means I don't think Anita's paralyzed," McCormick replied. "I wasn't going to tell you this, but I did some checking yesterday, and--"

"You did what?!" Hardcastle roared.

"Now, wait a minute, don't go blowing your top," McCormick cajoled. "I knew you'd get angry and--"

"You investigated my daughter!" Hardcastle yelled. "She's my business, McCormick, and you just keep that damned nose of yours outta it!"

"If she's trying to con you or something, then I've got the right to interfere!" McCormick shouted back and hurried on before Hardcastle could object. "Milt, just listen...just listen to me for a minute--please. Let me tell you what I found out,

and then I won't stick my nose in any more, I promise. You can decide for yourself what you wanna do about it."

Hardcastle eyed him warily. "Okay, but this better be good."

"No, it's all bad," McCormick replied in a quiet tone. "According to a hospital in San Francisco, Anita had an abortion two years ago, and--"

"An abortion?" Hardcastle interrupted angrily.

"Yeah, and she wasn't paralyzed at the time," McCormick went on hastily. "That means she lied when she said she'd been paralyzed since she was seven, and she also lied about her mother, Judge. Suzanne Bushmeyer died of a heart attack four years ago."

Hardcastle paced the floor a moment, then whirled around to face him. "Did it ever occur to you, kid, that Anita may've been paralyzed just a short time ago, and lied about that and about when her mother died because she wants me to think she's more independent than she really is? Hell, I knew she hadn't been paralyzed very long as soon as I saw her walking with those crutches. She'd be more adept with 'em if she'd been like that since she was seven."

McCormick dropped his head. "I, uh, hadn't noticed," he admitted.

"That's because you've been too busy investigating her," Hardcastle growled. "And while you were at it, did you manage to find out anything on the big question here--whether or not she's my daughter?"

McCormick's eyes rose to meet his. "She was born in Miami in 1964," he replied softly.

Hardcastle slammed his hand down on the table. "Then that settles it," he growled. "The time and place is right, and no one else would've known what happened there but Suzanne and me."

"And she could've told Anita about the two of you," McCormick pointed out. "That doesn't necessarily make you her father."

"You heard what she said," Hardcastle retorted. "Suzanne hadn't been with a man in almost two months."

"Yeah, but Anita didn't have any proof other than that arrest record," McCormick reminded him. Seeing the stubborn look still on Hardcastle's face, his eyes narrowed. "You know what I think, Judge? I think you like the idea of Anita being your daughter. You like it because the whole thing sounds so romantic. Here's this hooker who's probably been in bed with fifty guys or more, and suddenly her white knight comes along and gets her pregnant. But she doesn't want to get her hero in trouble, so she has the baby and refuses to give the father's name, then raises the

child all on her own. It must be a helluva feeling, Judge, to have slept with this woman only one night, yet still make such an impression on her. Sure puffs up the ol' male ego, doesn't it?"



Ignoring the question, Hardcastle faced him squarely, his features twisted with anger. "All right, McCormick, you wanna play 'Let's Face The Truth,' then suppose you tell me why you're fighting me on this. When I told ya what happened in Miami, you were madder'n hell, accused me of abandoning Anita. Now, damn it, you're wanting me to kick her out of the house."

"That's not true," McCormick denied in a low voice.

"Then what the hell's wrong with you?" Hardcastle growled.

McCormick stared out the window, offering no reply.

Gazing at the curly head a moment, Hardcastle cleared his throat. "Uh, look, kid, forget I asked that question." McCormick remained silent, causing the judge to snap irritably, "Listen, do I ask many favors of you? Do I?"

McCormick turned slowly, his gaze meeting Hardcastle's. "No," he admitted reluctantly.

"Well, I'm gonna ask you for one now."

McCormick eyed him suspiciously. "What?"

"I'm gonna ask you to be patient," Hardcastle replied in a softer tone. "I know Anita showin' up here has thrown a cog in our wheels, but it'll work out. As soon as I can get an elevator installed on the stairs, then I'm gonna move Anita up here and you get the gatehouse back."

"Judge, I don't have to have the gatehouse," McCormick protested softly.

"Yeah, you do, kid. That's where you like to cuddle with your lady birds, and you got a right to your privacy, so you're gonna get it back. All I'm asking is that you have a little patience. I know we haven't been playin' basketball and stuff like that, but it's only been three days. Just give me a little time to get to know my daughter and things'll be back to normal before ya know it."

"And we'll be one big happy family, huh?"

Hardcastle slapped him on the shoulder. "Now yer cookin'."

"Judge, she hates me."

"Aw, she doesn't hate you," Hardcastle contradicted. "She just resents you. She comes here thinking I live alone, and she finds you in residence. All right, sure, we have our arguments, but we get along okay, and I guess that's pretty plain to her, so she resents you bein' here. But don't worry, she'll come around. Just turn on the ol' charm, and you'll be friends before you know it." He pinched McCormick's cheek and grinned. "Right, kiddo?"



"Judge, stop it." McCormick pushed his hand down, but smiled in spite of himself. "All right," he sighed, "if that's what you want, then I'll give it a try."

"It's important to me," Hardcastle admitted quietly. "If Anita's gonna live here, then I want you two to get along." He started for the door. "And as far as her lying is concerned, she probably has her reasons, and I'm sure she'll confess sooner or later when she feels she can trust me."

"Ask her now," McCormick urged, following him downstairs

and out the front door. "Confront her with what you know. Judge, if you're gonna have any kind of relationship with your daughter, you can't let it start out on a foundation of lies."

Pausing, Hardcastle studied the young man thoughtfully and nodded. "You're right, kiddo. I've gotta teach her to be honest with me just like I taught you."

McCormick smiled wryly. "The way you taught me was by threatening to break my neck if I ever lied to you."

"Aw, I did not," he retorted and started walking again. "I just instilled in you the virtues of being honest."

"Yeah," McCormick agreed, mimicking Hardcastle's voice. "'Tell the truth, kid, or you'll be two feet shorter.'"

"You got that on tape? Because if you don't, it won't stand up in a--" Hardcastle stopped, his eyes widening in horror. "Good God!"

McCormick followed his gaze and took off running, shoving the empty wheelchair aside as he dove into the pool. Swimming quickly to the motionless form floating face down in the water, he turned her over carefully, and hooking an arm under Anita's shoulders, began swimming back to the edge of the pool.

Hardcastle lifted her gently from the water and stretched her out on the tiled surface. McCormick was at his side in seconds, swiping at the water running down his face as he gasped, "Judge, is she--"

Anita started coughing, and Hardcastle released his breath in a heavy sigh. "She's okay, McCormick. It must've just happened." Lifting her carefully in his arms, he started towards the gatehouse, yelling over his shoulder. "Get some extra blankets and a pot of coffee!"

McCormick was back in minutes, and, sitting the tray of coffee on the table, he helped Hardcastle spread another blanket over Anita. Groaning, she opened her eyes and met Hardcastle's worried gaze.

"Oh, Father, why didn't you let me die?" she whispered.

Hardcastle straightened slowly, his horrified gaze meeting McCormick's across the bed. "Damn! She tried to kill herself!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

McCormick knelt beside the bed. "Why, Anita? Why'd you do it?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I-I went up to the house a little while ago," she explained in a choked voice, "and-and I heard you and Father arguing. You're angry because he wants you to move out." Her hands came up to cover her face as she began

sobbing hysterically. "It's all...it's all my fault! I never meant to be a burden! I should never have-come here!"

Hardcastle sat on the edge of the bed, and pulling Anita's hands down, held them gently in his. "Now, that argument you heard wasn't your fault. McCormick was just acting stubborn, and I was trying to straighten him out. Happens all the time." He threw a warning look at McCormick. "Isn't that right, kid?"

His voice was soft, but McCormick had no problem understanding the look of warning on his face. "Yeah, whatever you say," he mumbled, understanding what the judge was doing, but feeling that he was being unfairly used.

Anita broke into a watery smile. "Oh, I'm so glad, Father. I wouldn't want you to hate me."

Hardcastle patted her hand. "Never, honey," he assured her. "And don't you ever do anything like that again. You scared the hell outta me."

"I won't," she promised.

McCormick was sickened. He could almost have believed her story if not for the look and words she had flung at him at breakfast that morning. She was trying to worm her way into the judge's affections, and he was soaking up her lies like a sympathetic sponge. McCormick remained silent, knowing if he spoke up now, he'd only get in trouble. His promise of patience to Hardcastle was forgotten, however, as he resolved to get proof of Anita's lies that not even the judge could refute. She had obviously not heard the entire conversation between them, and McCormick decided to bide his time until he could come up with concrete evidence that Anita was at least lying about her paralysis.

That moment was not long in coming. Pushing herself up in bed, Anita threw back the covers and laughed in a shaky voice. "I think I'd better get into some dry clothes. I'm starting to shiver, and the last thing I want to do is catch a cold and cause you more trouble."

Hardcastle helped her to swing her legs over the edge of the bed; and seeing his chance, McCormick grabbed up the pot of coffee and a mug, and moved to her side. "Here, you better have some of this," he offered. "It'll help warm you up."

"Thank you," she smiled as he handed her the mug and began to fill it while Hardcastle turned to get her crutches.

McCormick's hand suddenly began to shake, and a portion of the hot liquid spilled onto Anita's wet slacks. His eyes were on her face, however, and he saw her start slightly, then look up with a smile. "Thank you, Mark, but pouring the coffee on my leg won't warm me up. I can't feel it there, you know."

Hardcastle whirled around. "McCormick, what the--" Seeing

the stain down the front of Anita's slacks, he glanced up sharply. "Did you do that on purpose?"

McCormick backed away slowly, the pot of coffee still in his hand, and a look of shock on his face. "I-I..."



"Are you crazy?!" Taking a step toward him, Hardcastle knocked the container from his grasp, sending it flying across the room where it smashed into the wall, hot liquid staining the paint as it trickled down and mixed with the shattered glass below.

"Get outta here!" Hardcastle roared. "Get the hell out before I do something I'll regret!"

McCormick turned and fled.