

BETWEEN THE SCENES...

"The Birthday Present"

"IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS"

By: Teri White

Five minutes, the nurse said.

You can stay with him for five minutes. He's not conscious yet, you know, so there's nothing you can do.

I can stand by him, was what I told her.

She smiled at me. Job like hers, she's probably used to crazy relatives pleading for just a glimpse of the patient.

So she let me into the room. Even though I'm not a relative. Word must have come down from someplace, because she didn't question my right to be there. Her glance, though, seemed to say, who is this guy?

I'm just a friend.

Mygod. He looks...frail. Not the way he usually looks. Not the way he's supposed to look. The man is strong. Tough. Tough as old rawhide. That's the way he is, and that's the way I want him to be now.

But he looks old.

That scares me. Old people die.

Not gonna up and die on me, are you, Hardcase? That would be a really rotten thing to do. You can't die. 'Cause you owe me. You owe me.

That would sound funny to some people, probably. Your friends. He owes you? Smarten up, McCormick. The Judge already gave you a place to live, food, clothes. So what the hell could he owe you?

They don't understand.

What do you owe me, Milt?

A life, that's all.

See, before you dragged me, kicking and screaming into this whole scene, I didn't expect much. Oh, there were dreams, sure, plenty of those. Winning the Indy 500. Getting rich and famous. Let's-Pretend stuff like that. But as for real life, forget it. Mark McCormick was going nowhere, even if he was going at hyper-speed.

But then, wow, here comes the Lone Ranger and all of a sudden, ol' Skid has expectations.

How's that for a word? Not bad, coming from an autoshop class scholar, right?

Expectations. Do you understand the...the significance of that, Milt? I mean, we're talking here about a guy who gave up expecting much when he was five years old. Don't expect things, and you won't be disappointed.

Jesus, Hardcase, you took that guy and made a believer out of him. I think, maybe, I can amount to something. With you backing me up.

After all, isn't that what a friend is for? You back me up, and I back you up. Even when it's not easy.

It scares me to see you like this. Can you feel me holding your hand? Nah, guess not, 'cause if you could, you'd open your eyes and chew me out.

Come on, Milt, open your eyes and give me hell, why don't you?

You have reason to be mad, I know. And I'm real sorry. A friend should back you up, and where was I when you needed me? That guy never should've got the shot off. Wouldn't have, if I'da been paying attention to him. But I wasn't, and you want to know why? It's because I was watching you. Hardcastle the Jurist. You're fun to watch on the bench. At least you are when it's not me you're sending away.

Hardcase Hardcastle. A tough piece of work, all right.

They don't make them like you any more.

So I was watching Judge Roy Bean in action. And he shot you. That's my excuse, and you're right to be pissed at me. I knew what a crazy guy he was.

If you die what happens to me?

God, there's nothing like being a selfish bastard. But I can't help thinking about it. It's like...well, like my life used to be a void. A black hole, you know? Getting to be your friend changed that. But now I can see it waiting for me again, that damned emptiness.

Ahh, Milt.

Yeah, those are tears you feel on my face. Sorry about that.

Don't die.

Just...don't die.

I need to talk to you. See, I killed the guy. Yeah, I killed him and that makes me feel so bad. I didn't want to shoot, but he forced me. Like he was appointing me his executioner. He used me, Milt, and I don't like that.

The worse part about it is, I'm not sure if I killed him to save Sandy or because of what he did to you. Maybe it was a little of both.

I need to talk to you about it.

That nurse, she's waiting for me to go now. And I promised Frank I'd come back to headquarters and lay the whole story on him. But I needed to see you first. So I gotta split.

But I'll be back. And you be here, understand? You be here. I need you, and so you just better not die. You open up those eyes and look at me when I come back.

Okay, lady, okay, I'm going.

Maybe I should tell her...let her know how special you are, and that they should take extra good care of Judge Milton C. Hardcastle.

But she'd only look at me weird again. She wouldn't understand.

You do, though, right, Hardcase? You understand what I'm trying to say.

I love you.