

*Back-to-Back
Supplement 1*



THERES NO
PLEA BARGAIN
IN HEAVEN

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Learning to Live with Losing

Written by: Liz Tucker

// "Scared?" Judge Milton C. Hardcastle tucked the blankets tightly around Mark McCormick's shoulders, a futile attempt to make the dying man more comfortable.

With a weak smile, McCormick nodded. "A little. It's not so bad. Doesn't hurt that much..." He clutched Hardcastle's hand when a spasm of pain belied his words of reassurance.

"Ride it out, kid; I'm here." Hardcastle laid his free arm over McCormick's convulsing body, desperately trying to give some of his strength to the weakening ex-con. The gunshot wound had torn his insides into mush, and the loss of blood was slowly taking him away from Hardcastle.

After a long wave of pain, McCormick fell back against the pillows, his face paler than ever. His breathing was becoming more and more labored, the blue eyes beginning to fog over. "Hey..." McCormick interlaced his fingers with Hardcastle's stronger ones. "...sorry... 'bout this..."

"What do you have to be sorry about? I'm the one-- I should've listened to Millie. If I had, you wouldn't be here...d-dying." Hardcastle protested, eyes burning with unshed tears. "Don't leave me, kid."

"No...choice...l-love..." McCormick's grip began to loosen until the lifeless fingers slipped from Hardcastle's hand.

Swallowing, the Judge felt for a pulse in McCormick's neck. He wasn't surprised at not finding one, but the chill that rode up his spine and the knot in his stomach wasn't any less cold, or any less painful. "Mark? Mark!" The cry became a scream of anger: At himself for getting McCormick into the no-win situation despite the younger man's fears; at McCormick for leaving him alone again, like his son so many years earlier; and most of all, at the two people most responsible for McCormick's death, Wendell Price and Dex Falcon... //

"Judge? Hey, wake up!"

Hardcastle opened his eyes to sunlight streaming into the master bedroom, Mark McCormick leaning over him with concern in the deep blue eyes. "McCormick... you-you're... alive!" Hardcastle, still enthralled in his nightmare, gripped his friend's shoulders, fingers digging in painfully.

"Hardcase, what's wrong?"

Shaking himself fully awake, the Judge lowered his arms, looking around the room and taking in the sunlight filtering through the half-drawn curtains. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine. That's why I'm here. You're always up earlier than me. I got a little worried." McCormick laid the back of his hand on Hardcastle's forehead. "No fever. Must be the doldrums - or a guilty conscience," he added, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

Hardcastle flinched at the touch, pushing the hand away from him. "I'm all right, McCormick. I just had a dream. No big deal, okay?"

"Sounded like one. You were yelling for me when I came up the stairs." McCormick sat on the edge of the bed, his puzzled gaze on the Judge's face. "What did ya dream about?"

"It wasn't anything. Don't you have something to do, besides bugging me?" Hardcastle threw the covers off, ignoring the fact that the sheet and pillowcase were drenched in sweat. The dream was a regular visitor, starting shortly after McCormick was pronounced fit, and well on his way to a full recovery. Hardcastle had put it down to relief, and the letdown after so much stress and worry. That had only worked for the first week or so, then the Judge assumed that he was dreading the nightmare's return so much that he was almost programming its recurrence. Another week went by and still the dream continued. Hardcastle was becoming annoyed, and taking it out on McCormick.

"Nothing urgent," McCormick replied, backing away as Hardcastle went into the bathroom. "Come on, Judge, what's going on? What were you dreaming about? It musta been something pretty bad, for you to yell like that. And you sounded...I don't know, really strange..."

Hardcastle turned the water on in the shower, then went to get a change of clothes. McCormick was standing in the door, blocking the way. "Move it."

"Nope, not til you tell me what's going on." McCormick shook his head stubbornly, planting his feet in the carpet. "You don't ever sleep past nine. Not even when you're sick or hungover. So something's wrong, and I want to know what." His voice softened, "You were dreaming about the night on the cliff, weren't you?"

Hardcastle pushed McCormick roughly out of the way, brushing by him without answering. He kept his back to the ex-con until, after a sigh, the door to the hall shut with a quiet thump. After a few moments of silence, Hardcastle sat on the bed, rubbing his eyes wearily. That night in the hospital, waiting for word on McCormick's condition, went through his mind once more. He remembered the seemingly endless white corridors, the clock that didn't move on the same time schedule as the rest of the world.

He could also recall the giddy wave of relief when the doctor finally told him that McCormick had made it through surgery; then the great let-down at the physician's carefully guarded prognosis at full recovery of the badly wounded ex-con. Hardcastle had begged, threatened, and finally convinced the doctor to allow him to stay with the patient in Intensive Care. It had been the longest night for Hardcastle since his wife had died eleven years ago. It had seemed to the Judge that the sun had come out when the doctor pronounced McCormick well on his way to health after the ex-con's eyes opened and he had smiled blearily at Hardcastle, falling asleep with the Judge's hand resting on his. That was what made the nightmare so unsettling, as it was so close to what actually happened, that the Judge could feel the emotions over and over again, only, this time, McCormick didn't make it.

McCormick didn't have an inkling that he had ever awakened, but when he woke again with his wits somewhat about him, he had a smile on his lips and a warm, safe feeling inside, but couldn't figure out why. Hardcastle had left after

hearing the good news and wasn't present when McCormick decided to join the real world again. Millie had, after McCormick's return home, let the younger know just how upset Hardcastle had been and how very worried. She had told the snickering, though touched, patient that Hardcastle loved him. It should have been situation normal, Hardcastle thought, but instead he had been drawing farther and farther away from McCormick, and he knew his friend was hurt by it. Their usual repartee, the games they dealt in that showed the real affection that was between them after three years together had waned, then disappeared altogether. Now the two men barely exchanged civil greetings in the morning.

The older man wondered if it was too late to keep McCormick from digging into his heart, and knew it had been too late the moment the scared, but defiant car thief had faced him across the courtroom. The fear had been offset by the smart-ass attitude that McCormick couldn't, or wouldn't, surpress...even when looking at fifteen years in prison for Grand Theft Auto. It wasn't that the kid from New Jersey reminded him of his son so much as of himself. And McCormick's second appearance in court, for the theft of the Coyote, had been even more antagonistic than the first; the kid going for broke, too upset over the death of his best friend and surrogate father to consider taking the safe way out and keeping his mouth shut. This time there wasn't fear in the eyes glaring at him, there was anger and hatred and desperation. And something more...determination. It didn't take Judge Hardcastle long to find out what was behind this appearance for car theft, McCormick's third Federal beef for the same offense.

In the slightly more than three years that he and McCormick had worked together, lived together, and even fought together, Hardcastle had found a new energy, a reneance of his zest for life. It had never seriously ocured to the Judge that McCormick might be killed. It was only a vague danger, one that seemed remote, at best. Despite the dangers of their cases, Hardcastle had rarely worried about McCormick's safety. He knew the ex-con was an accomplished hustler and con-man, cool under pressure - except when it came to dealing with Hardcastle himself, then the temper flared. He could only recall fearing for McCormick's safety a few times: Once when McCormick had gone undercover as a rogue cop and Hardcastle couldn't be with him, having to stay so far back, that if anything did go wrong, McCormick would be dead long before Hardcastle could help; another time when McCormick played dead, killed at Hardcastle's own instigation. He had played it so well that when the kid didn't return until late, Hardcastle had worked himself up into a fine anger. And the night on the cliffside. That had been the worst occasion of all, because this time Hardcastle knew without a doubt that McCormick had been shot. It had seemed a gift from God when he and Millie had found the man alive below Kelly's Curve.

But that fear for McCormick's well-being had shook Hardcastle more than he would ever had imagined. He could still remember telling McCormick that he didn't want to be buddies with the kid; he had wanted a working relationship only. That had lasted only a few days, but the almost-friendly working relationship, at that time, was still controllable. Hardcastle couldn't actually pinpoint when it had become more personal, but he trusted McCormick more than most of the men he had worked with over the years, and knew the feeling was mutual. That trust, and the respect that accompanied it, had slowly become entwined with a deep affection that was rapidly becoming love. And Hardcastle didn't want that. Losing someone cost too much. A partner, his son, his wife, and numerous friends over the years had taught Hardcastle to be sparing with his deepest emotions. And now, a curly mop that sometimes hid a quick mind, two

blue eyes that showed every emotion, and a mouth that didn't know when to stop could tie Hardcastle up in knots and get him angrier, faster than anyone; anyone, that is, since his son had died in Southeast Asia.

A roar from the driveway caught Hardcastle's attention, pulling his mind from his musings and to the sound of a car racing out of the driveway. Hardcastle went to the window and saw the rear brakelights of the pickup as it disappeared down the drive to the Pacific Coast Highway. The Judge's Corvette was on loan to a car show, the Coyote was still in the shop being rebuilt after an accident blew it pieces. "Now how the hell can I go anywhere? Damn it, McCormick," Hardcastle frowned; getting upset wouldn't get the GMC back any sooner, so he decided to finish his shower and hope McCormick would have returned by then.

Mark McCormick swung the pick-up out onto the highway, needing to talk to someone about Hardcastle. And the only person he could think of who would understand was Lieutenant Frank Harper. So McCormick was on his way to the police station where Harper had his office.

Wandering through the back streets of Los Angeles gave McCormick some semblance of calm and he felt better, almost to the extent to skip seeing Frank. Almost.

"Hiya, Frank." McCormick pushed the door to Harper's office open, smiling at the lieutenant who was on the phone. Waved to a chair, Mark plopped down, putting his feet on Harper's desk and earning a close approximation of the Hardcastle glare.

When Harper's phone conversation was finished, he leaned forward and pushed McCormick's feet down. "This is not Gulls-Way, Mark. So don't get comfortable."

"Glad to see you, too."

"What's up? Hardcase on your back again?"

McCormick sighed. "I wish."

Harper's smile slipped at the sound of McCormick's voice. "You sound down. What's wrong?"

"I think the Judge is getting tired of me hanging around."

"You're kidding, aren't you? I mean, is this a set-up for one of your dumb jokes?" Harper laughed, but the sound died on his lips when he realized that McCormick was serious. "What gave you that idea? Something he said, or how he said it? You know Milt, most of the time, the louder and angrier he gets, the more he likes you."

"He's not talking to me at all, Frank. It's like I'm a stranger he doesn't really want to bother with. McCormick's gaze lowered to the floor. "I feel... in the way."

"There's only two of you, and seven acres - how can you be in the way?" At McCormick's silence, he continued, "Mark, you can't just pack up and leave."

"Cause of my parole? I can go back to reporting to an officer." He shrugged with apparent unconcern. "It's almost up now anyway."

"No, not because of your parole. The last time you walked out--"

McCormick interrupted sharply, "He told me to leave."

"Whatever. The point is, when you left, Hardcase didn't hold you with the parole. You can't leave, because... well, you know why." He leaned on the desktop, "What brought it on this time?"

"He's been pushing me away, Frank, avoiding me. I can't understand it. Millie was wrong about one thing: He doesn't love me. I was just a convenience whose usefulness is over. I can't stay where I'm not wanted, understand? And I don't want Hardcastle to feel that he has to keep me on just 'cause he feels obligated. I can move out, get a job; it might be better for everyone concerned."

"Mark, I swear, you're as muleheaded as Milt! He does love you, that's why he's pushing you away. You didn't see him when he discovered the blood on the poolhouse floor. And to Milt's way of thinking, he cares too much..."

"Huh? That doesn't make sense, Frank. If he cares all that much, why do I feel like he hates me? That he doesn't want me around?"

"Milt thought he had his life all planned out, a retirement job, a trusty sidekick who could handle all the tough stuff; his life all neatly pigeon-holed, no surprises, no upsets. Only he wound up liking his choice for Tonto, more than liking him. And that scared Hardcastle. But he probably figured that wouldn't be a big hassle, all very manageable. That is, until that incident at the party." Harper got up and moved by McCormick, laying a hand on the confused man's shoulder. "He was beside himself, Mark, terrified at the thought of losing you. I think it shook him to the core, and now... Well, he's trying to overcompensate by pushing you out of his sight. Milt thinks that keeping you at a distance will allow him to build his defenses up again. Give him time to think it through, Mark, he'll drop the act soon."

"You really think that's what it is?" McCormick asked, doubtful, yet a weight dropping from his shoulders.

"Yes, I do. You've seen his concern over your safety before, right?"

"Well, yeah... Sure, lots of times. Guess I haven't thought much about that."

"Okay, then. Would he suddenly do a complete about-face and dump you?"

Mark jumped up, walking to the window. "It wouldn't be the first time," he muttered.

"Ah, shit." Harper could have kicked himself. Hardcastle had mentioned McCormick's penchant for feeling abandoned, and now he opened the subject in regards to Hardcastle. "Mark, come on, be reasonable. Milt wouldn't do it this way..." The phone rang, cutting off whatever he had been about to say. "Yeah?" He growled into the phone, then glanced up at McCormick. "Oh, Milt. We were just talking about you. Hey, hang on a minute."

"Don't tell him I'm here!"

"Why not?"

"I don't want Hardcastle to know I was talking to you about this. Frank, please, do me this favor."

Harper didn't answer, gauging McCormick carefully. "Uh, Milt, sorry about the wait... Who? No, not recently, why? Yeah, we were talking about you... No, not Mark, just one of the guys. He was wondering whether you were enjoying your retirement. And he was asking about McCormick, how he was working out..." Harper motioned Mark to the extra phone, mouthing 'pick it up'.

A moment's hesitation, a flash of an impish grin, and McCormick complied. Nodding to Frank to go on, Mark pressed his hand over the mouthpiece so that the Judge wouldn't be able to pick up the sound of his breathing.

"What'd ya do, Milt, throw the kid out... again?" He added with a wink at McCormick.

"No. He took off. Damn it, Frank, I don't know what's the matter with that boy." Hardcastle's voice sounded strained.

"You must've done something. I got the impression that you've been a little cool toward him lately."

"Are you sure you haven't seen him today?" Hardcastle snapped.

"Don't change the subject. I was over there a couple of days ago, remember? A deaf-mute could've picked up on it. Milt, what's the problem? I know you don't want him to leave, but you're driving him away."

"I don't want to, Frank, but I can't help it. Damn it, I wish I knew how to deal with this... He took the pick-up; think you could put out an APB on him, get him back here?"

"Again? The last time I did that you two cowboys were competing against each other over that case of yours that was overturned. Sometimes I think you consider me your private police department. Not this time, Milt. You want him, you find him."

"I can file charges of GIA against him," Hardcastle countered, not liking Harper backing up on him.

McCormick's jaw clenched, and he broke in. "That's all you think of, isn't it? 'Send the law after the kid and save me the hassle.' Not this time, Judge Hardcastle. Your damn truck is at the police station. You want it? Take a cab and pick it up yourself, 'cause no one's gonna bring it, or me, back to you. Good bye!" He slammed the receiver down onto the cradle, storming out of the room in a furious rush.

"McCormick?!" Surprised, then angry, "Harper, you lied to me..."

"Mark, wait!" Dropping the phone, the lieutenant went after McCormick, who was standing with his back to the cop, shoulders shaking. "Uh... Mark, I didn't

think... That is... I'm really sorry—"

"What for? Do you think that taught him a lesson?" When McCormick turned around, Harper discovered that he hadn't been crying, he had been laughing.

"That was a set-up? A scam?" Awkward sympathy turned to laughter, as Harper replayed the scene in his mind. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

"Yeah, but he asked for it. He really does care, doesn't he?" McCormick said in an awed tone.

"Yeah, Mark, he really does - in his own unique way. So, what are you going to do when Milt gets down here?"

"Make him work for it, what else?" McCormick grinned devilishly. "He put me through hell, thinking he was gonna dump me. Why shouldn't I reciprocate? Huh?"

"You two deserve each other. I used to wonder how you put up with Hardcase, now I'm begining to wonder how he puts up with you. Two of a damn kind." Harper walked back into his office, noticing the phone lying on the desk. "Oh, no, Milt..."

He picked up the receiver gingerly, frowning at the snickering ex-con who was seating himself across from Harper's desk again. "He hung up."

"Not surprised. I figure he's calling a cab right now. Should be here in about fifty minutes, an hour at the most. Unless he harasses the guy driving and gets tossed out on his judicial butt." That mental image sent him into another bout of giggles, and soon he was holding his side. "Owww, that hurts..."

"You're not completely healed yet?" Frank asked in concern.

"I'm okay, just cramps up sometimes. No big deal." McCormick replied reassuringly.

"Does Milt know that?"

"Nah, what for? Doesn't happen that often - haven't been laughing that much lately." McCormick smiled, and Harper saw that the younger man was not as light-hearted, or resilient, as he sounded; but he seemed to know what he was doing, so held off. McCormick looked at him steadily, "And I don't want you to mention it."

"Hell, I can't wait to see how Milt plays this. This should be loads of fun." He leaned back in his chair, feet propped on his desk. "Maybe I should get a few uniforms to back us up."

Milton Hardcastle burst into Lt. Frank Harper's office without either knocking or invitation. He didn't see McCormick sitting in the corner of the small room, an affectionate smile playing about his lips.

"Where is he? You didn't let him just walk out, did you?"

"What, I was supposed to handcuff him to the water cooler?" Harper tossed

the truck keys to Hardcastle, who caught them automatically.

"Dammit... I didn't mean it, none of it..."

"Yeah? You were sure doing a pretty good imitation of sincerity, Hardcase." McCormick observed, steeling his face to a somber mask before Hardcastle could see through the deception.

Hardcastle spun about, the open joy on his features startling McCormick. Somehow, he hadn't expected it, and certainly not so obvious.

"You're here." Hardcastle regrouped, coughing. "Well, glad to know you broke tradition and didn't steal my truck. And that you had enough backbone to stay and face me."

"I don't rely on a second party, Hardcase. You want to wrap it up? Fine, any time you say."

"I never said that," Hardcastle protested.

"You never say anything, that's just it... Aw, Judge," McCormick's voice broke suddenly, the hardness falling off. "You don't talk to me, you talk at me. Do you know how that hurts? I thought that you wanted me to leave, but couldn't come right out and say it."

Hardcastle stared at McCormick, shocked, "Where do you get these stupid ideas, anyway? I'm just going through..." His voice faded, unsure how to explain.

"Yeah, I know. You're going through your mid-life crisis." In an aside to Harper, who was listening shamelessly to the put-up job, McCormick added, "About twenty years too late, if you ask me."

"Watch your mouth, kid. So, are you coming home or not?"

"Not."

"What?" Hardcastle leaned back against the desk. "Why not?"

McCormick pushed up from the chair, crossed to stand before the Judge, his eyes misty. "I can't take it. I need things the way they were before. We used to talk and argue, fuss and fight; it was all in fun, never intentional. Now I talk, and you don't even listen - you don't even yell at me anymore. It's like I don't exist, and I won't take that. So tell me now, what the problem is, what's really bothering you, or I'm out of here for good." The assertive tone was backed by apprehension, a deep-rooted fear that this would backfire on him, and he'd gain nothing.

Long, silent seconds dragged by, then Hardcastle sighed, sounding remarkably like McCormick had earlier. He turned to Frank Harper. "Could you leave us alone for a moment? Mark and I are way overdue for a talk."

Harper nodded, patting McCormick on the arm as he passed him. "Yeah, I'd say so."

Frank Harper paced outside his office, casting an occasional glance at the glass walls that cut off all sound from his curious ears. He managed to mask the pacing with looks at paperwork that his men were in the process of completing, but soon even those overworked officers caught on that something was wrong. The conversation wasn't going well between Hardcastle and McCormick, that much was obvious. Hardcastle's face was florid and McCormick was waving his arms about, the way he did when in a heated argument. The tone was loud enough to filter out, but not the actual words. Harper watched closely, ready to jump in if it seemed to be getting out of hand. He saw McCormick start to leave with a semi-violent push past Hardcastle, but the Judge grabbed his arm and swung him around. McCormick threw off the hand, snapping at the Judge, and whatever he said shook Hardcastle to his roots, the pain and surprise on his face. He reached out again, without anger this time, but the ex-con shrugged him off. He turned sharply on his heel and opened the door, the rest of the argument loud and clear.

"I thought I was wrong, that there might actually be a heart in there somewhere, but you're like all the rest. Use me as long as it's convenient, then it's 'So long, Buster, nice to have known you'. Well, I'm just saving you the trouble!"

"Dammit, don't you walk out on me, son!"

McCormick froze in the doorway, rooted to the spot.

"Don't." Hardcastle entreated, reaching out with words instead of gestures.

McCormick turned to look Hardcastle in the face, searching desperately for something that Hardcastle didn't know if he could give.

He smiled faintly. "Look at us, each of us trying so hard to do what he thinks the other wants. Sometimes, I'm not sure what I want, but I know what I need—that hasn't changed."

"Then why haven't you said something...anything?"

"I was afraid to; I came too close to..." He paused, still unable to verbalize deeply buried emotions. "If, and when, you decide to leave, I want it to be for your good, because it's what you want and need; not because—" He broke off, suddenly aware of all the eyes on them, and frowned. He nodded toward the office, "Back inside; I don't think the whole police station needs to hear the rest of this."

Hardcastle walked back inside, McCormick following him like a well-trained puppy, flashing a thumbs-up sign at Harper. Shaking his head, Frank smiled at both; no matter how it turned out, he couldn't help but marvel at their persistence. He stood outside the windows as Hardcastle finished his statement, seeing the first genuinely warm smile spread over McCormick's features, then grinned as Hardcastle stoically endured McCormick's impulsive embrace.

Frank Harper looked around at the mixture of expressions on his men's faces. "Don't you people have anything better to do with your time besides eavesdropping?"

A flurry of activity, some of it feigned, answered Harper's stern question. He decided the two stubborn donkeys had had enough time alone and went in. At the sound of the door opening, Hardcastle shoved McCormick away with gentle roughness, the ex-con's usual grin firmly in place.

"Well, children, have we made up? I do have work to do in here, you know... that is, if I'm not inconveniencing you two lovebirds."

Hardcastle glared at Harper, counter-pointed by McCormick's amusement. "We don't have to stay here and take this, you know," the Judge growled.

"Yeah, we can go home and take it." McCormick offered helpfully, and the glare switched to him.

"Good. So why don't you go home, and leave me in peace. I don't think I care to handle too many of these temper tantrums, Mark. I'd appreciate it a whole lot if you could stay out of the ICU next time." Harper reached out and ruffled McCormick's hair, taking enormous satisfaction from the act as he knew that it annoyed the younger man, making him feel like a kid.

A faint smile replaced the smug grin, revealing again, momentarily, the well-concealed weariness. "Tell Hardcase, not me. He's the problem. Always getting me into these stupid cases..."

"Now just a second, hotshot. You fought with them, instead of waiting til I got there; that's why you were shot." Hardcastle began to argue, Harper pushing them out the door.

"Yeah, 'cause they were gonna shoot you as soon as you walked in. What did you want me to do, Hardcase, hold the door open for them? I had to do something!"

"Almost getting yourself killed is not a big help, McCormick."

"And I suppose you could have done better, given the lack of time?"

"Well, yeah. I would've..."

Harper shut the door firmly, missing his chance to find out what Hardcastle would, or would not, have done in the same situation. McCormick was still looking frayed around the edges, and Harper knew he would soon be talking to Hardcastle about giving the young man a vacation soon. All the activity and stress had been too much after the recent rush of personal events in McCormick's life. He had been living on the edge since Hardcastle had been shot, and it didn't seem that there had been a decent, relaxing interval since. No matter what Hardcastle's best intentions were, the Judge's little vacations turned into races against time, and usually with an element of danger, if only stumbled into. Mark McCormick was wearing down fast, and Hardcastle didn't seem to be aware of what extent the toll was taking on McCormick's depleted reserves. That was going to have to be remedied; McCormick could use some time away from everyone and everything. Well, Harper thought, pulling out a case report form, he'd be seeing them on the weekend, he'd mention it to the Judge then. It'd be the perfect opportunity, especially since Hardcastle was in such a good mood now. Yep, that's what he'd do.