

THE ADVENTURES OF MARK & THE JUDGE



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"Now We're Cookin'"

Welcome! Here it is two days before MediaWest*Con 13 and we're just putting the finishing touches on this zine. I hope you enjoy it. We already have submissions for the next installment which will be entitled "The Further Adventures of Mark & the Judge".

I would like to thank our contributor's: D D Brischke, who seems to have a never-ending file of stories for us. Thanks DD, ya know we love 'em. And to our Cover artist Anja Gruber from Germany. Was I ever surprised to get this wonderful packet of art in the mail. And lastly to Melinda Reynolds, who started out sending us one story and was able to work up a trilogy, along with her own accompanying art.

Ladies, I thank you very much. And thank to DD for the filler photos. Personally I own one photo of Hardcastle & McCormick and that doesn't stretch too far.

As with all my all my ideas, in order for them to become finished projects I require the help from my two partners, Char Wray & Laura Keeler. They typed, scanned photos, and provided lots of caffeine in the last few hours.

Thank you to you, our readers. Please let us know what you think.

We are open for submissions. Deadline February 1, 1994 for written submissions, March 31, 1994 for submissions on disk. We can take 3.5" & 5.25" in either DD or HD in the following formats: AmiPro; Word Star; Word Perfect 5.0 & 5.1; Microsoft Word; Paradox; Windows Write; Word for Windows; and ASCII. With ASCII we need a hard copy. Your disks will be returned. Publication will be in time for MediaWest*Con 14, Memorial Day 1994.

See ya next time,

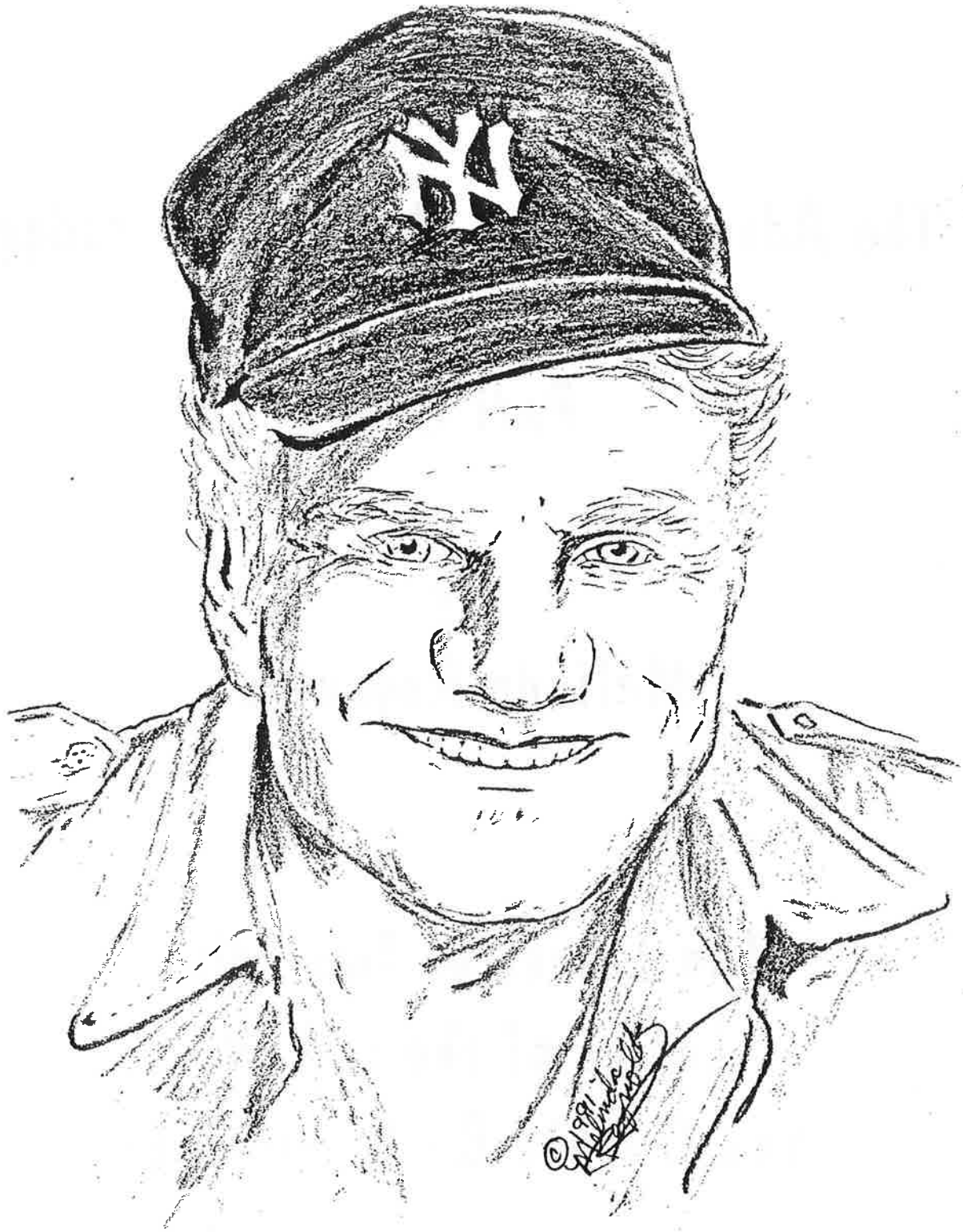
Jan Keeler

The Adventures of Mark & the Judge

Part One

By
Melinda Reynolds

The Lesser of Two Evils
Letter of the L.A.W.
You Oughta Be In Pictures



Letter Of The L.A.W.

By:
Melinda Reynolds

"McCormick!" Milton C. Hardcastle, ex-Judge, ex-lawyer, and ex-asperated, pounded repeatedly on the bathroom door. "Get outta there already!"

"Inna minute!" Came a muffled voice from within.

"It's been minute -- you've been in there for half an hour. How long does it take to take a shower?!"

The door finally opened, emitting billows of steam. "Twenty minutes, Hardcase; I hadda shave, you know." Mark McCormick, ex-con, ex-racecar driver, and exasperating, strode past Hardcastle, vigorously toweling his hair. "Jeez, it's only 7:45; what's the big hurry?"

The Judge gathered up scattered clothes from the sofa -- McCormick's usual dumping place for clean clothes -- and shoved them in the ex-con's arm's. "Here, get upstairs and get dressed. You make me miss this appointment, and you'll be taking group showers -- with you r clothes on."

"Guy must be really important -- or a right mean dude. Do I get breakfast?" Clothes under one arm, he headed up the stairs.

Hardcastle frowned, shook his head as a damp towel and bathrobe sailed over the upstairs railing. "After the meeting. Next time, you'll get up when I tell you to, not when you want to."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..." McCormick bounded down the stairs, pulling on a denim jacket. "Like it really matters if we get there at eight, or eight-fifteen. Offices don't even open until nine o'clock."

"This one will be open." He herded McCormick out of the Gatehouse. "Maybe not to the public, but it will be open."

"Why the rush, then?" McCormick caught the keys that Hardcastle tossed to him as they headed for the garage.

"Because," the Judge explained with a patience usually reserved for politicians and the intellectually deprived, "the guy I'm after is gonna be there for thirty minutes...tops. So put that NASCAR driving of yours to good use."

"You'll have minutes to spare."

Hardcastle's response was lost in the roar of the GMC as it sped down the drive and onto the PCH.

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Twenty minutes later found the GMC parked across from a seemingly deserted warehouse in a rather run-down section of town.

"I missed breakfast for this?"

"You're gonna miss lunch if you don't shut up and watch."

Nearly five minutes later, a silver Mercedes pulled up to the boarded-over door. The driver got out, and, without a glance in either direction, opened the door and went inside.

"Okay, that's him; let's go."

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Hardcastle, standing to one side, eased the door open carefully. Despite its apparent age and disuse, the door opened smoothly and silently. With a nod, McCormick followed the Judge inside, closing the door softly behind them. Eyes adjusting to the dimness, they found themselves in a long corridor. The warehouse had been subdivided into several rooms, sturdy padlocks on all the doors. A faint light glowed beneath the door at the end of the corridor. Hardcastle slipped his .45 from his shoulder holster.

"Kinda obvious, don't cha think, Hardcase?" McCormick whispered, "I mean, why not just put a sign of the door: 'Here we are, come and get us.'?"

"That's exactly what he's doin'. Be careful, and stay sharp."

As the Judge started forward, McCormick caught his arm, halting him. "Just a minute, here; who is this guy, anyway? What are we walkin' into?"

"We're walkin' into this guy's lair. And this time, this time I'm gonna get him."

"Who?!"

"His name's Warner, Dr. Leslie Warner. The 'Doctor' is PhD, not MD. He's the slipperiest fish ever to jump out of the judicial net -- several times. He's hard, cold, and calculating."

"Sounds familiar." The ex-con leaned against the corridor wall, arms crossed. "Is this another one of your 'I'll-get-this-guy-if-it's-the-last-thing-I-ever-do'- type deals? 'Cause if it is, it just might be the last thing you do -- the last thing both of us does...Do we have a back-up on this?"

"Don't need one."

~~Shit~~ McCormick groaned, shook his head, "We're in it for sure."

"Look, I have it on good authority that he's here with one, maybe two, other guys -- day I can't take out a coupla goons is the day I retire..."

"From what? Life? You're already retired, remember? Or is that what you keep me around for, to remind you of trifling details like that?"

"Hey, you don't wanna do this, fine." Hardcastle shrugged, started down the hallway, "You can wait in the truck-- this won't take long."

"Yeah, it'll take 'em about two seconds to blow you away. Maybe having two targets will confuse them long enough for us to take a few of 'em with us." McCormick caught up with the other man's long strides. "I wanna wake with my funeral; and I'm not sharing a casket with you."

"Quiet, he'll hear us."

"Yeah, like he doesn't already know we're here."

Hardcastle passed over the extra handgun, the .38, and the ex-con checked it carefully. "So, what's he wanted for? Other than violating your sense of humor, that is."

"You name it, he's done it; just having trouble proving it."

"Oh, stuff like evidence, witnesses, that sort of thing?"

"Yeah, that sort of thing. We're going in now 'cause he has a habit of getting rid of competition before they become competition, if you get my drift. Now, be quiet and come on."

"Whattaya gonna do when you get there? Kick it open, knock, what?"

Before Hardcastle could answer, the door opened and a deep, resonant voice greeted them. "Come in, gentlemen, come in."

"It's open, satisfied?" Hardcastle stepped warily inside the room, the interior light coming from a double overhead florescent fixture.

The door closed silently behind them, two gunmen standing before it, weapons drawn. The man who had spoken was seated at a large metal desk, flanked by armed men. In all, there were six guns to their two.

"Odds big enough for you, Judge?"

Hardcastle gave him a look as the two hoods at the door came forward and took their guns.

"Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, Superior Court, Los Angeles. You don't seem so superior now, Judge. I knew you wouldn't be able to resist my little 'invitation'."

Hardcastle nodded slightly, his smile not at all friendly. "Dr. Leslie A. Warner, West Coast crime czar-- you look as crooked as ever."

"Davis, Martin," Warner motioned to the two men at the door, "take the Judge to the 'holding room'. I want to talk to his assistant -- Mark McCormick, I believe the name is..."

"How'd you--?"

Warner interrupted McCormick's question, directing his answer toward Hardcastle. "I make it a point to know everything about my enemies...and allies."

"Just play it cool, McCormick," Hardcastle gave Warner a hard look, "he ain't gonna do anything stupid...at least, not while he's still in the building. You're never around for the rough stuff, are ya, Leslie?"

As the Judge was ushered out, Warner indicated one of the leather chairs to McCormick. "No, Mr. McCormick, I know you're on parole; that you're serving two-to-five for grand theft auto. Also, that you're currently employed by -- and in the custody of -- the esteemed Judge Hardcastle. And, I might add, the situation is not a mutually agreed upon one. My informant spared no details...you had very little say in the matter."

McCormick's gaze was level, features expressionless. "So?"

"So, Mr. McCormick, I don't care if you love him or hate him. I only care about one thing: Getting him out of my way. And you're going to help me do that."

"Me? How can I--?"

Warner interrupted him again. "The easiest way to evade Hardcastle is to simply be beyond his reach. More specifically, you will be the means to enable my escape from the country."

"How am I supposed to do that? Like you said, I'm just an ex-con, still on parole. I haven't any money, no contacts, no influence. How can I possibly be of any use to you?"

"You have talent. A special talent that you will use on my behalf. The police have impounded one of my vehicles, a 1983 Cadillac limousine. Hidden in the car is my means of escape and my continued livelihood. You will break into the impound area and bring the limo back to me."

"Oh, that's simple, right?" McCormick smirked, shaking his head. "I don't think so -- I'd rather face you and your goons than be sent back to the pen for God knows how many years."

"This is not a request, Mr. McCormick. If you refuse, then the Judge is forfeit -- and I will see to it that you will be arrested and convicted for his murder. As you see, it is that simple."

McCormick leaned back in the chair, arms crossed, seeing no immediate way out of the situation. For his own, and the Judge's, sake, maybe he should play along-- or at least give that impression. "And if I agree to this plan of yours, what's in it for me?"

Warner's smile was thin, cold, "Your continued existence."

"And Hardcastle?"

Warner shrugged. "His as well."

"All right; but I'll need more information...and some help."

"You'll get everything you need. Oh, and one more thing: Judge Hardcastle is to know nothing of our little 'deal', understand? Not even a hint."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons. You're to do what you're told, when you're told. You're to follow all instructions to the letter." He smiled, eyes glittering, "The letter of the L.A.W."

McCormick looked at him, not understanding his amusement. Then he shrugged, "Just when is all of this suppose to go down?"

"Tonight. You'll have very little time, or opportunity, to change your mind."

"I won't change my mind. I'll do the job...but I'll need some guarantee from you -- your word that Hardcastle will be okay."

"Why should it matter to you? Or are you genuinely concerned with his welfare?"

McCormick hardened his voice and features. "As long as he's in good health, so am I; anything happens to the Judge, I go back inside. And I'll do anything to prevent that."

"I see. I believe we understand each other, Mr. McCormick; we share the same goal in life: To remain out of prison. And I, too, will do anything to prevent serving a prison term."

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Nearly three hours had passed since Hardcastle was left in the 'holding room', which was nothing more than a small storeroom. He paced the ten feet of the width, glancing occasionally at the locked door, trying to pick up the sound of any approaching footsteps. But there was nothing, only the sound of his own steps as he crossed the room. He couldn't imagine why Warner would want to talk to McCormick alone. The kid didn't even know who the man was, much less be of any use to him. After the first hour had gone by, he was apprehensive, after the second hour, concerned; and now after three hours, the concern was beginning to give way to worry and fear. What was going on...?

The small room held two cots, and he sat down on the one nearest the door. His head jerked up as the latched clicked, and the door was pulled open. Getting slowly to his feet, he braced for anything....

His clenched fist tightened as Warner walked in, followed by the two gunmen. Warner nodded toward the still open door, "Martin, wait outside; Davis, stay with me."

Warner held a white paper sack, which he offered to Hardcastle, "Here, sandwiches and coffee; not much of a lunch, but better than nothing -- wouldn't you say?"

The Judge ignored it. "Where's McCormick?"

"Why?" He gave the old man a cold, appraising look, "What is he to you?"

Hardcastle hesitated, knowing he'd have to chose his words carefully. It wouldn't be a good idea to let this man know too much. "I'm responsible for him, is all. I put a lot of time, money, and effort into...reforming him; and it would be a lot of trouble to replace him."

"But you would...Replace him, that is; if it was necessary?" The cool gray eyes never wavered, watching his every reaction.

"Yes...If necessary." Hardcastle met, and matched, the level gaze.

Warner placed the sack on the floor, and crossed to the door. Opening it, his eyes never left the Judge as he spoke, "You can bring Mr. McCormick in now, Martin."

The other gunman shoved Mark inside the room, and Hardcastle was relieved to see that he appeared to be unharmed. Relief that he was careful not to let show.

"I have...other business interests to attend to, gentlemen; please, make yourselves comfortable until I return." With that, Warner and the two gunmen left the room the door locking automatically.

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"What's this?" McCormick picked up the sack, looked inside. "Great. Lunch -- or is it brunch?" He pulled out the two sandwiches and two small Styrofoam cups with lids. He sat on the floor, legs crossed, as he investigated the sack's contents. Placing the cups on the floor, he unwrapped the sandwiches. "Okay, we got roast beef with Swiss, and ham with cheddar. Which one do you want?"

Hardcastle looked down at him. "What happened out there?"

McCormick shrugged, "Nothing."

"'Nothing' doesn't take three hours, McCormick. What were you doing?"

"Talking."

"About what?"

"Oh, the usual stuff...the weather, the Rams, the Meaning of Life..." He flipped the lid off one of the cups, took a tentative taste. "Yuck...too strong; must be a coupla days old..."

"Answer me, McCormick; what were you talking about?"

"Okay, okay...But at least sit down; I'm getting a crick in my neck."

Hardcastle sat down across from him, picking up the other cup.

"He did most of the talking. He seems to know all about us; even knows you blackmailed me into working for you--"

"I didn't blackmail you."

McCormick went on, as if the Judge hadn't spoken, "I'm not really sure what he wanted, or if he wanted anything..." He was careful to maintain eye contact, hoping Hardcastle wouldn't detect his lies, "He seems mainly concerned about you, though; doesn't know quite what to do about you. We shared a certain...affinity on that subject."

"Well, you aren't gonna be sharing anything else." He reached across picking up the roast beef and Swiss.

"We aren't?" McCormick made quick work of the remaining sandwich.

"Nope. We're busting outta here."

"We are? Great. Can I finish my coffee first?"

The Judge smiled. "Sure, kid; you're gonna need it."

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"I hear 'em..." McCormick pressed his ear against the door, "You ready?"

Hardcastle nodded, hefting the long, wooden pole that was once part of one of the cots. Since the door opened outward, into the hallway, they would be able to charge straight through, without having the door itself blocking them.

The latch clicked, and as the door began to open, McCormick, shoulder down and keeping low, plowed into the first two men. Right behind him, Hardcastle sidestepped flailing arms and legs, and swung the end of the pole into the third man. The solid wood thudded into the gunman's midsection, and he doubled over with a gasp of pain, the gun falling to the floor. McCormick, meantime, had knocked out one of the fallen men, and was grappling with the second one for the gun. Swinging around, Hardcastle slammed the pole against the gunman's head, and he collapsed without a sound.

Getting to his feet, McCormick picked up both guns, handing one to the Judge. Tossing the pole aside, Hardcastle started down the hallway, McCormick on his heels.

A door opened ahead of them, another a few feet behind them. The Judge stopped, gun raised, as two more armed men came through the first door. Turning, he saw Warner and another armed man behind them.

"Very good, Judge Hardcastle; very good. But, I'm afraid, not quite good enough. Now, your guns...or do you want to shoot it out?"

Tightlipped, Hardcastle tossed his gun toward Warner, and indicated for McCormick to do the same.

Warner shook his head as he approached McCormick, "I see I have misplaced my trust..." The backhand caught the younger man off-guard and he staggered against Hardcastle. "I could kill you right now, but I still have need of you. However," he stepped back as two of the gunmen grabbed Hardcastle, pulling him away from McCormick, "I don't need him..." Pulling a 9mm from his jacket, he aimed it at the Judge.

"No...!" Being closer to Warner than Hardcastle, McCormick lunged forward, grabbing the man's arm; Warner was slammed against the wall, 9mm slugs ripping into the floor. Then strong hands were pulling him from Warner, dragging him to his feet.

Warner got shakily to his feet, somewhat surprised at McCormick's reaction. And the expression of the young man's face...one of alarm, fear...but not for himself...He looked over at Hardcastle, saw something very similar on his features, before the Judge felt his gaze and belatedly masked his emotions.

"I see I have misjudged both of you. However, Mr. McCormick, our deal still stands."

"Whatever it is you're wanting him to do, he isn't going to do it, Warner."

"No? I think he will. Unless, of course, he wants to...suffer the consequences..."

"Judge..."

"I said 'no', McCormick."

"And what do you say?" Warner turned his attention back to the ex-con, watching him closely. "Do you both live, or do you both die?"

Seeing Mark's indecision, and knowing he was weakening, Hardcastle tried again, "McCormick, listen to me; no matter what you do, do really think he'll let us go?"

Warner crossed over to Hardcastle, bringing the revolver down against the Judge's forehead. The return sweep cracked against his cheekbone, breaking skin and sending him to his knees.

"No! Stop it!" McCormick struggled to pull free of the men holding him, "I'll do what you want! Anything...but leave him alone!" Warner stepped back, glancing at McCormick. The ex-con subsided, knowing he couldn't fight all of them. He glared at Warner, "I'll do what you want, but only if you let Hardcastle go. If you kill him, you'll have to kill me, too."

"You are in no position to dictate terms. However, I'm not an unreasonable man. Do as you're told, and he'll come to no further harm. And once you've fulfilled your part of our agreement, and once I am safely out of the country, you'll both be released." He turned back to Hardcastle, and the two men holding him upright. "Let him go."

McCormick winced as the Judge fell heavily to the floor; then the arms restraining him fell away. Without a word or glance at Warner, he went to Hardcastle's side, placed a gentle hand on the broad shoulder.

"Judge...?"

There was a low groan, and the pale blue eyes gazed up at him. "I'm...all right...You do as I said, McCormick...You hear me?"

"I hear you."

"I mean it. No matter...what they do to me..." He gripped McCormick's forearm in a tight, painful hold, "You're...not breaking the law..." His eyes closed briefly, shutting out the pain; he took a deep, steadying breath. "I want...your word, kid..."

"I can't give it to you, Judge."

"Dammit, McCormick...if you throw away...everything I've done for you--" He tried to pull himself upright, to stay conscious long enough to make the kid understand. But he couldn't focus properly, Mark's features blurring into an encroaching darkness. He felt strong arms supporting him, even as he sagged against them. "Don't do it, Mark; I won't...be able to help you..."

"I'm sorry, Judge; I'm sorry to have to disappoint you. But I can't watch them...do anything to you. I can't. Maybe you can endure it; maybe you have the strength. But I don't. I don't think I ever will..." He felt Hardcastle shake his head, and he smiled to himself. The Judge's concern was unexpected, but not welcome...maybe he did care, in his own way. "Don't worry about it, Hardcase; with any luck, no one will ever know that I broke any laws..."

Hardcastle's voice was low, trailing off as consciousness faded, "I'll know, Mc...Cormick...I'll...know..."

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Hardcastle winced, flinched back at the light touch on his forehead. He was laying down, on the remaining cot, back once more in the store room. Vision clearing, he looked up to see McCormick bending over him, tentatively providing limited first aid. He was a bit surprised to see the concern in the kid's eyes; but, then, McCormick's welfare more or less depended on his own. "Whaddaya doin'...?"

"I don't know; I'm not used to this--"

"I see you're...still here."

McCormick shrugged, avoiding his eyes. There was a shallow bowl of water resting precariously on his lap, and he rinsed out a cloth before replacing it on the Judge's forehead. "Nothing happening 'til after dark."

"I told you--" He tried to sit up, but a sudden, sharp pain stopped him. Mark gently, but firmly, pushed him back down. "I told you...No black bag jobs."

"Will you be still?" McCormick retrieved the fallen cloth, tossing it into the bowl. "I finally got the bleeding stopped. Now calm down and be still, dammit."

"You're gonna do it, aren't you?"

"Do what?"

"Forget the innocent routine, kid; it's never worked before, and it sure isn't gonna work now." He grimaced, touching the cut on his cheek. McCormick leaned over him again, pressing the cool cloth against the cut in an effort to keep the swelling down.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Judge. Does that feel better?"

Hardcastle gave a noncommittal grunt, and McCormick smiled faintly. Dammit, why wouldn't the kid listen to him? "Yes, you do. And you'd better think about it real careful, kid..."

"I have, Judge--"

" 'Cause if I have to, I'll turn you in myself."

The smile faded, his expression hardening. "You would...wouldn't you?"

Hardcastle didn't answer. He adjusted the folded-up jacket under his head--the faded denim jacket that McCormick had been wearing--and closed his eyes. He'd hoped this threat would serve to bring McCormick back to his senses, but the reaction wasn't what he'd expected. A cold, distant silence; then the sound of his footsteps as he rose and walked off.

McCormick crossed the room, then sat down on the floor, his back against the wall. In more ways than one, it seemed. This was one hell of a situation; either way he turned, he lost. If he didn't do the job, Warner would kill Hardcase, frame him, and he'd up in jail for the rest of his life. If he did do as Warner wanted, then the Judge would see to it that he'd serve the maximum in prison - just to teach him a lesson. Damn. And he didn't doubt that Hardcastle would carry out his threat; ~~less~~ less than two months ago the man was going to turn himself in for doing the very same crime he was planning: Breaking into police impound and stealing evidence.⁽¹⁾ He could, of course, just take the car and keep driving...

He sighed, leaned his forehead against upraised knees. "That's okay, Judge," he said quietly, not sure if Hardcastle could hear him or not, "you do what you have to do...and I'll do what I have to do..."

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McCormick looked at the back of Davis' head, then over at Martin (Joe and Mike, respectively, as he had learned earlier). He tried to appear more or less at ease - as if breaking into police impound was everyday business for him. The .38 pointed in his direction did little to alleviate the tension.

"So," he began in a conversational tone, "how long have you guys been doin' step'n'fetch for good ol' Leslie?"

Martin's gun jammed roughly into his side. "Shut up."

McCormick shrugged. He turned his attention to the items they'd spent most of the day acquiring for him. In the waning light, he found the lockpicks to be more than adequate, and placed them in an easily accessible pocket. Knowing the limo was fairly new, and having no extra keys, Warner had questioned McCormick's ability to hot-wire a car with a locked steering column. Mark had rather smugly told him that 'one didn't'; and described in detail what he would need. Those items were in a small valise, and he had to trust that Warner had gotten the right ignition for a Cadillac limo; the slidehammer was okay - all in all, he should be able to yank out the old ignition and replace it in less than three minutes. The insert the new keys and get the hell outta there...Warner at least been able to supply him with the remote to turn off the car alarm; and unlocking the door itself was no problem.

He didn't want to think about Hardcastle's reaction - the mere fact he was in possession of the lockpicks and slidehammer was a violation of his parole...But he couldn't afford to think about any of that; he would need all his concentration to pull this job off...

The sun was a dusky red streak in the darkening sky as the Chevy rolled to a stop two blocks from the police impound. There would be one guard until midnight, then dogs would be let into the area. That gave them four hours to get the lay of the land, and for McCormick to familiarize himself with all the various alleys and sidestreets. Most of them he already knew, but this quick check enabled him to find open alleys- barreling down a narrow, dark lane without knowing what ahead him wasn't his idea of fun... If the impound was wired for silent burglar alarm, the cops would arrive in ten to fifteen minutes after setting it off. He didn't have time to search for it, and disconnect it; and disconnecting it would probably set off another alarm. He decided to trust to his own speed and expertise, and to be long gone by the time the boys in blue made an appearance.

One hour after midnight the Chevy once again came to a silent halt a few blocks from the impound gate.

"Looks clear," Davis glanced over his shoulder, "You guys ready?"

"Yeah." Martin picked up a small case. "Don't wait. I've no idea where the damn car is parked, or if we'll have to move any other cars to get it out. I've got enough to take care of the dogs for several hours. You sure the alarm's been taken care of?"

"Got the okay right before we left."

"Good. Shouldn't be any hitches, then; that is, if smart guy here really knows all he says he does..."

"Don't worry about me, Jack; I'll get us in and out in record time. You're not dealing with some jerk who has to bash in a window just to get into a car..."

"Yeah, well, time will tell, won't it?" He motioned for McCormick to get out. "We'll call in on the car phone when we're clear. You don't hear from us - in say, hour and a half, then that means wonder boy here screwed up. You know what to do after that..."

McCormick got out, not liking the sound of the implied threat.

But at least he didn't have to worry about the alarm.

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Mike Martin followed closely on McCormick's heels, watched over his shoulder as he took out the lockpicks. Selecting one, he went to work on the gate.

Holding the gun in one hand, and a small penlight in the other, Martin glanced around nervously. "This gonna take long?"

The chain fell away with a faint rattle as McCormick removed the padlock. "You were saying?"

"We ain't out yet, wise guy. How many dogs do they usually have in these places?"

"Hard to say. Whatever the city budget allows. Anywhere from two to four - maybe more. I wouldn't recommend sticking around for a head count." He opened the gate carefully, closed it behind them. "Doesn't matter if there's one or ten, they're all big, mean, vicious, ugly dogs..."

"I can take care of the dogs." Martin opened the case, took out an oddly shaped gun. "Tranquilizer gun. Stuff's potent enough to drop a 90-lb dog in it's tracks; and it lasts for several hours." He put the .38 in his shoulder holster, adding, "And one shot will drop a man for a half hour; so don't get cute."

"I hope your aim's real good; 'cause they're all gonna be comin' at once."

"You let me worry about that. Let's just find the car, and get out of here."

They were undisturbed for several minutes, quickly going down rows of parked vehicles of every type and description. McCormick stopped suddenly, a hand on Martin's arm, "Wait a minute..."

Martin looked at him, annoyed, "What?"

"Don't you hear it? Great big doggy feet." He moved toward a Ford Bronco. The pit-pit-pit of unclipped claws was easily heard; then two dark shapes bounded around the end of the row they were investigating. "Here they come...!" McCormick jumped on the hood of the Bronco, not about to get in the line of fire - or teeth. Martin, his back against the Bronco's fender, took steady aim and fired at the lead dog. The Doberman dropped in mid-bound, about three yards from them. The other dog jumped over the twitching body, followed by a third. Martin, to his credit, was cool under pressure; he fired twice, bringing down both dogs - one in mid-leap. McCormick was impressed. "Not bad -- Look Out!"

Another Doberman charged between two cars, and was nearly on Martin before he could react. His reflexes weren't quite as fast as the dog's and the tranquilizer dart hit as the Doberman attacked, teeth flashing. Martin slammed the case between the gaping jaws, and McCormick heard the unnerving crunch as the reinforced plastic was bit in two. But the drug quickly took effect, and the dog's momentum carried his dead weight down on top of Martin. McCormick heard the gun fire again - maybe twice, he wasn't sure. Then there was quiet - and no movement from either man or dog. McCormick waited, and listened; he neither saw, nor heard, evidence of any other guard dogs. He eased down from the Ford's hood, hardly daring to hope - but closer examination showed that Martin had hit himself at least once. That meant he had about 30 minutes to think of a way out of this mess...

On impulse, he checked to see if Martin had fired six times; and found the last dart imbedded in the molding of the car next to the Bronco. He pocketed it, and went looking for the limo, an idea forming...Sighing, he realized that the breaking in and the theft part wasn't all that difficult. In fact, he rather enjoyed it, and had a certain proficiency for it...He shook his head. Why was it so easy for him to do all the 'wrong' things, and so damned difficult to do the 'right' ones...?

Martin stirred, moaning softly; he located a sharp stinging near his right knee. Reaching down, he pulled out the dart -- ~~he'd~~ he'd tranqed himself...A bit groggy, he realized he'd been out for at least 30 minutes...if that kid had taken off, it'd be his ass. He shoved the Doberman's dead weight off his chest, and got unsteadily to his feet. Rubbing his eyes, he moved carefully, leaning on the Bronco; his head began to clear, and he noticed the other body lying on the Bronco's hood and windshield: McCormick, out cold as well. A wild shot must have got him, too; retrieving the penlight, he ran the narrow beam over McCormick. Reaching across, he pulled the dart from the denim jacket, just below the collar.

He shook McCormick's shoulder; if they were hit about the same time, they should come out of it the same time as well. "...c'mon, Mac -- wake up..."

McCormick groaned, gradually becoming aware of things, "...What happened? Why'd you...shoot me for?"

"Accident - got myself, too. ~~he'd~~ I'll never live this down..."

"Well, no one's gonna know about it from me."

"Look, can you finish up here?"

"Yeah...Give me a minute."

Martin gauged McCormick's recovery by his own, and after five or ten minutes, he felt more or less normal. "C'mon, we've wasted enough time. We gotta find that damned car..."

The Cadillac was parked four rows from them, facing the lane and easily accessible. McCormick turned off the alarm, unlocked the door in less than a minute, and had the ignition out in less than five minutes. Martin had the new one waiting, and it slid in, smooth and easy.

McCormick hit the button for the darkened window. "Okay, she's ready. Let's go."

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Bringing the limo to a smooth, noiseless stop, McCormick waited while Martin got out, opened the gate, and jumped back into the car. Like a luxury liner on wheels, the Cadillac swept through the gate, turned with slow deliberation into the deserted street. McCormick shook his head; he'd never driven a limo before...and he wasn't sure he liked it. The engine was quiet; the automatic gears shifted silently, without fanfare; the suspension, even over the roughest part of the street, ensured a jolt-free, almost numbing, ride. He found it to be boring in the extreme.

He'd been following Martin's directions, and keeping within the speed limit, when the first blue/red flashes appeared in the side mirror.

"We've got company," he said to Martin.

Martin glanced at the passenger side mirror, and swore; all the while he kept the .38 level with McCormick's jawline.

The Cadillac picked up speed, and the ex-con spared a quick look at Martin. "You wanna get outta this?"

"What do you think, asshole?"

"Then get that ~~gun~~ gun outta my face." He swung wide at an intersection. "Hey, man; ain't no skin off my ass. I'm already lookin' at 10 to 15, whether they catch us or not..."

Martin hesitated, then lowered the gun. "Kick it," he ordered.

Maneuvering the limo was like cornering a tank - and just about as responsive. Unless specially ordered, the Caddy probably had a 302, with 180 or so horsepower...Nothing. Nothing at all compared to the hot engines he was used to; engines that split the air with thundering power...But he knew the area; and, thanks to the earlier reconnaissance, he had several exits available through backstreets and alleys.

McCormick pressed the gas pedal to the floor, demanding more speed. Only the digital readout for the speedometer indicated that the car had picked up any speed; the green numbers wavered between 60 and 63. The lights were getting closer, joined by sirens. He could just make out two squad cars on his tail, and he swung wildly into a narrow street, the right rear tire brushing against the far curb.

"Hold on, this isn't gonna be easy," McCormick warned through clenched teeth, "I'd be better off in a Volkswagen," he added with irritation, "A bicycle, even..."

He pushed the car toward 80. Martin stared at him, silent, wide-eyed, a death grip on the well-padded dashboard. The limo fish-tailed again, tires squealing dangerously as it slid sideways toward an alley barely eight feet wide. The car straightened with inches to spare, then sped like a white fireball down the narrow lane. One squad car flashed past, overshooting the alley, swerving to avoid oncoming traffic on the one-way street. The second black and white braked in a screeching skid, then wailed down the alley after them.

McCormick never slowed, pushing the engine to its limits, and beyond. The speedometer was flashing a red 85-90 when the limo, like white lightning, flashed through the intersecting street, ignoring four lanes of traffic. He shot across, and the police car followed. Even as the Caddy and the police car was separated by an ever-widening gap, they heard the squeal of tires, the blare of horns, and the hollow crunch of metal-on-metal as the squad car was neatly bookended.

After five minutes, and no signs of any further pursuit, McCormick smiled slightly at Martin, "Guess we lost them. Sorry it took so long."

Martin just stared at him. "...damn...~~damn~~damn..."

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They arrived back at the warehouse without further incident. As soon as the limo rolled to a halt, Martin got out. He went straight to Warner, having already spoken to him on the car phone. "I'm never...never...getting into another vehicle with him behind the wheel..."

McCormick turned off the ignition, opened the door; he remained, however, behind the steel and leather barrier as Warner approached him. He halted a few feet away.

"The keys, Mr. McCormick."

"The Judge, Dr. Warner."

"That's not the game plan; when I'm safely out of the country you and the Judge will be--"

He broke off as a late-model, dark colored sedan rolled into the area, closely followed by several black and whites. As if on signal, the lights swept red/blue flashes around the area, followed by a few warning whoops

from the siren. Warner started for the limo, and, when he was close enough, McCormick pushed the door open, striking Warner and knocking him on his butt.

Several police officers quickly and efficiently rounded up Warner's men without a shot being fired. Warner got to his feet as Carlton joined them. McCormick held out his hand.

"The key, Dr. Warner; or I'll break both your arms."

"Are you going to stand there and let him threaten me like that, officer?"

Carlton gave him a hard look. "What threat?"

Warner dug out a ring of keys, tossed them to McCormick.

The ex-con caught them; there were at least fifty keys on the ring. "Which one unlocks the Judge's door?"

"You're so smart, wise guy; you figure it out."

"I'll see to things here, Mark. You go and take care of the Judge."

McCormick nodded, thinking that it was probably going to be the other way around...

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McCormick pounded on the solid wood door. "Judge! Judge, can you hear me?! You okay in there?!"

"I can hear you, McCormick; the entire block can hear you. I'm not deaf..."

"I've got the key; I'm gonna get you out..." That could be premature he realized, as he tried the first five keys without result.

"Well, come on, kid; I'm damned tired of this room..."

"Yeah, Judge; just a minute..." The next five didn't open it either.

"McCormick, what are you doing out there?"

"I'm tryin' to get you out; what do you think I'm doin'?"

"I thought you said you had the key."

"More like keys..."

"What?"

"Keys, Hardcase; I got about fifty keys here. All I gotta do is find the right one."

"Look, kid, just use the lockpick and get me the hell outta here."

"Now, Judge, you know that having lockpicks on my person is a parole violation..." Damn, with his luck, it would be the very last one.

"Dammit, McCormick, you've got the key and you still can't get the door open --" He broke off as he heard a distinct 'chink' on the floor. "What was that?" He asked quickly.

"Nuthin', Judge..."

"McCormick, did you drop those keys...?" His tone dared the ex-con to answer in the affirmative. There was, however, no response. "Kid, if you don't get me outta here in the next five minutes--"

"It's okay, Judge; I got 'em." Great. He'd been about halfway through the ring, and he had no idea where to begin. The keys all looked the same. But they were numbered, and the last number he remembered seeing was 916...or was it 619? ~~619~~

He chose a key at random in the middle and tried it. Nothing. He tried the next one, and there was a quiet click. Just then, a police officer came up behind him, leading two EMTs.

"Are you Mark McCormick?" The officer asked.

"Yeah, glad to see you guys," he smiled at the EMTs, "I think the Judge may be a bit hysterical."

"McCormick, I'm gonna rip your lungs out through your as--!"

"See what I mean," McCormick interrupted Hardcastle's angry voice, "I'm gonna open the door; get ready."

Hardcastle shoved the door open as soon as it was unlocked, "Okay, kid, fun's over. You and I are gonna--"

Each EMT took an arm, the older one speaking in a calming tone, "Just come with us, sir; you'll be fine..."

"McCormick..." He tried to twist around in the firm, unyielding grip; he was guided toward the door,

"McCormick, who are these people...?!"

"It's okay, Judge; I thought it might be a good idea to have an ambulance handy--wasn't quite sure what I'd run into--"

"This isn't finished, McCormick..." Hardcastle glared at each in turn as he was half-dragged through the door and toward the ambulance, his gaze settling on the ex-con, "You're not off the hook, McCormick; you've got charges to face, and you are gonna face 'em..."

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McCormick wound through cars, crooks, and cops, finally catching sight of Lt. Carlton. The black officer smiled at his approach.

"Well, I'm pretty sure we got 'em all. We're doing another check, though, just to be certain. You wouldn't happen to know how many were there, do you?"

"All I saw was Warner, Martin, Davis, and four other goons. There could be more."

"Yeah, well, we'll find them if there are."

"Uh, Lieutenant...Can I be arrested for any of this?"

"Not unless someone presses charges..." He glanced around, "And I don't know of anyone around here who would do that--"

"Wish I could say the same..." McCormick looked at the ambulance, the EMTs still checking over a very uncooperative patient.

Carlton followed his gaze, "Hardcastle? Come on, Mark, I don't think he'd--"

McCormick's laugh was short and bitter. "He told me before I started that he would turn me in if I-- Well, you know."

Carlton caught his arm, "Wait a minute. You mean to tell me that you knew you were heading for a fall, and you did it anyway?"

"Yeah..." He kicked at the loose gravel on the blacktop, "dumb move, huh?"

"Wellll, not really..."

"Yeah, really. Really dumb. A smart guy would've kept running...Awww, Jeez...he's not gonna let this ride. He'll have me locked up for 15 years..."

"Mark, under the circumstances, the worst that would probably happen is that your parole would be revoked. Not even that if you get a friendly judge..."

"'Friendly judge'? What's that?" McCormick smiled faintly, "There's no such creature, Lieutenant; not when I'm concerned." He sighed, hand in his pockets as he leaned against a black and white. "Great...Save a judge's life and serve two years in San Q. Thanks, Lieutenant, you've just brightened up my whole entire outlook here..."

They were interrupted by the arrival of one of Carlton's men. "Lt. Carlton, Judge Hardcastle wants to talk to you."

"How is he?"

"Oh, the EMTs said he's gonna be okay; he can even drive if he wants to. I think he's just yelling for effect...uh, sir..."

"Yeah, that sounds like Hardcase. Lt., I don't think it would be a real good idea for me to, uh, drive the Judge anywhere...Might be a good idea to let him cool off, you know. If you want, I can take the limo back to the impound - I know just where it goes."

"I bet you do. Sure, go ahead and take it back. If Milt needs someone to drive, I'll get one of my men." As McCormick turned to leave, Carlton added, "Don't worry too much, Mark; Hardcase ain't all that bad..."

"Yeah...He might change his mind - send me up for 20 instead of 15. But, I've heard miracles still happen...yeah, sure..."

He slid behind the wheel once more, closing the door with a solid, heavy 'whump'. He leaned back, closing his eyes for a few moments. Who was he kidding? It seemed like every time he tried to do something to help someone, he got it in the neck. Maybe he should try to help himself for a change...He started the engine, headed for the street. There was really only one choice he could make...

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Hardcastle shoved past the EMTs, smiled grimly at the officers handcuffing Warner's men and reading them their rights, and met Carlton half-way. He spoke before the Lieutenant had a chance to.

"How'd you know about...all this?"

"McCormick--"

"How...? When?"

"He called from the police impound -- from the limo's car phone, yet," Carlton chuckled as he recalled his own surprise. "He's a pretty smart kid, Milt."

"Clever, not smart," Hardcastle gritted, "There's a difference."

"Why don't you cut the kid some slack, Hardcase? You've been ridin' him kinda hard, haven't you?"

"I'm tryin' to keep him outta jail."

"And you're gonna do that by threatening to send him there?"

"That's just what they are: Threats...so far..."

"Anyway, you and Mark didn't know this, but we've had an eye on the good 'doctor' ever since we arrested his chauffeur on possession and impounded the limo. We didn't touch or change anything in the car. We knew there was something hidden in the car that Warner wanted badly enough to risk stealing it. We figure a key to a locker full of drugs, his usual MO. Probably worth millions...So, rather than tear the car apart, we decided to let Warner try for it. We found his inside man, and used him to give Warner information we wanted him to have. That's why I'm working tonight. When his agent turned off the alarm at the impound, we arrested him and waited for Warner. Imagine our surprise when Mark showed up - figured you couldn't be too far behind. My men had orders not to apprehend until the car was on the street."

"But then McCormick contacted me, told me the setup--"

"Yeah, I bet he couldn't wait to tell you how I screwed up..."

"Actually, all he said was that Warner had kidnapped you, and was forcing him to steal the limo. Seems the guy he was with had accidentally hit himself with the tranquilizer gun he'd used on the dogs. I took him at his word, and--"

The Judge broke in again, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you believe him?"

"Because," Carlton said in a 'I-shouldn't-have-to-explain-this-to-you' tone, "he didn't run out on you. Mark can boost anything on four wheels. There's over three-hundred cars in that impound, from Jeeps to Jaguars. He had his pick of any of 'em. But he chose to stay...That, and the fact that, for some reason, he was concerned about you. He told me to get an ambulance, that you'd been injured..."

"What, this?" After a couple hours of rest, and worry, and anger, Hardcastle had given the bruises little thought. "This is nothing. Kid exaggerates something fierce..."

"Well, he was worried. And since my men were already there, I figured I had little to lose. So we worked out a plan. He would pretend to have been hit as well, get the car, and lead us to Warner's hideout. We even had a phony car chase to convince his 'partner'. Mark was a little too good - one of my black and whites got nailed in traffic. The unmarked car stayed with him, though, and radioed the location. Then we showed up - just like the freakin' calvary." He looked at Hardcastle, "In time to save your ass, anyway."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Why do you think ^{he} did this job?"

"Because it's one of the few things he's really good at, and he wanted to...And because I told him not to, which is usually reason enough for him."

"You mean...You didn't know that Warner threatened your life? He told McCormick he'd kill you if he didn't get the car -- that's the real reason he did it."

"No...He never said anything about that. I just thought..." He paused, considering, "He let me think...damn...damn that kid..."

"Milt, how did you and Mark get involved in this, anyway?"

Hardcastle shrugged, considering the question unimportant and beside the point. "Got a tip. Probably from the same guy in your department working for Warner. Guaranteed he'd be there, and be an easy bust." At Carlton's despairing look, he continued, "Well, hell, Kelly, I'd been after this guy for years..."

"And so you just blundered in, didn't you? Alone. Without a backup...~~alone~~, Milt--"

"I wasn't alone."

"Yeah...You had a guardian angel. I hear they look after drunks and fools."

"Okay, maybe it was a dumb idea..."

"Well, no..." The Lieutenant said, feeling a strong sense of deja vu, "Not really..."

"No, it was a dumb move. A smart guy would've known when to cut and run."

"You know, McCormick said pretty much the same thing."

"Speaking of McCormick, where is he?"

"He took the limo back to the impound. C'mon, you can follow me back to the station. Can you drive?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

Carlton parked his sedan in the side lot, went inside while Hardcastle looked for a place to park the GMC.

He found McCormick in his office, pacing nervously.

"Hardcase will be here in a few minutes. C'mon, you can wait in one of the lawyer-client conference rooms."

McCormick followed Carlton down the hall, voice anxious, "He's still pissed, ain't he?"

"Yeah...Guess you could say that."

"Awww, man, it's just like last time; only this time, it's my hide he's gonna burn." He paused just inside the door that Carlton held open, his voice and manner angry, irritated, and despairing. "I may be clear with your department, Lieutenant; but what about Hardcase? What...am I gonna do?"

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Hardcastle found Carlton in his office, and the Lieutenant rose before the Judge could close the door.

"He's in Conference Room B. You know where it is?"

"Yeah...I tell ya, that kid's gonna put me in an early grave, Kel--" The thoughts that had accompanied him to the police station were of the soul-searching variety. He was uncertain, and his uncertainty only added fuel to his anger - at himself as well as McCormick. The kid had only been trying to keep them alive, trusting Warner to keep his word. But he didn't trust Warner, and he still wasn't sure if he could trust McCormick...Warner, though, had no reason to let two witnesses live, to possibly testify against him later. Still, he'd have to find some way to apologize, without actually apologizing, or assuming fault. "Okay, I admit, I could have been a bit more careful; called for a black and white...But it was a simple arrest on an outstanding warrant. Now...now it's complicated..."

"If I let it slide, McCormick will think I'll overlook any future transgression. If I take some kind of disciplinary action, it'll be like I don't appreciate the sacrifice he was willing to make..." Willing to trust Warner to let them go; knowing that the Judge would send him back to prison if there were freed...He looked at Carlton. "What...am I going to do?"

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McCormick tipped the chair until the back was resting against the wall, and propped his feet up on the conference table. Before Carlton had left, McCormick had bummed a few cigarettes from the Lieutenant, who professed to be 'trying to quit', and gave him what he had left. He shook the last two cigarettes from the Marlboro pack; placing one in his shirt pocket, he slid the half-full matchbook from under the cellophane and lit the other one, inhaling deeply. Closing his eyes, he savored the smoke, as Hardcastle had confiscated his supply shortly after he had taken up 'residence' at Gull's-Way. It was, in fact, his first cigarette in over three months. He wished he'd thought to grab a pack from the machine; his borrowed smokes weren't going to last long enough. But at least it would help to calm and soothe jangled nerves, and get him through his talk with Hardcastle. He was a damned fool for not running when he had the chance...

As if echoing his thoughts, Hardcastle's voice broke in on his reverie. "Why didn't you run?" He opened his eyes - he hadn't even heard the Judge come in. He inhaled deeply, blowing a trail of smoke before answering. He knew it would irritate Hardcastle more than he already was...might as well get something out of it. "Wasn't my car. Told ya...I only take cars that belong to me."

"You just don't know when to quit, do you?"

"Guess not."

"You're not making this easy."

"Yeah, well, life just generally sucks, doesn't it?" Another stream of smoke followed the words.



Hardcastle glared through it. "What did I tell you about smoking while in my custody?"

"Oh, yeah, another one of your rules..." He flicked the ashes onto the floor. "Let's see, is each one gonna add another month onto my sentence?"

"Is that what you want? 'Cause I can sure as hell arrange it."

"Doesn't matter what I want, Judge; it never did." He crushed out the cigarette, gazed steadily at Hardcastle. "Either get me out of here, or just...get out."

There it was--the gauntlet had been thrown down, and neither one wanted to pick it up.

Hardcastle crossed to the door, then paused. He turned sharply, walked back to McCormick.

"Get up. Give me that." He took the newly lit cigarette from the ex-con's raised hand. "Yeah, you almost did it, didn't you? Well, you're not getting rid of me that easily. You broke the law. Bottom line -- no ifs, and, or buts about it."

"Hey!" McCormick grabbed for the cigarette. He watched as Hardcastle crushed it, letting the brown grains sift down onto the table top. "Look, Hardcastle, I'm either in your custody or not. Which is it?"

"You're going to serve time for B&E, GTA, and showing contempt for an officer of the court."

"What officer of the court!?"

"Me, wise guy."

"Well, in that case, I'll have to serve three life terms!"

"Oh, you'll serve time, kiddo; no trial, no jury - just parole violations. Enough to last a century!"

The chair fell to the floor as McCormick lunged to his feet. "Damn you, Hardcastle...Just when I start to think you might...might...be human -- that there might be a heart in there, somewhere," he paced angrily, running a hand through his hair, "you prove just how wrong I am! I don't expect you to like me, man, but I didn't think you hated me." He stopped, hands spread, "What the hell did I ever do to you, Your Honor, to earn your special brand of frontier justice?" Not expecting an answer, and not getting one, he walked over to the barred window, leaned against the sill. The weariness settled over him as he stared at the bars; he'd probably be look at them for quite a while...His back to Hardcastle, he continued in a quiet voice, "All right, let me have it. What am I lookin' at here? Two years, three, five, what?"

"Two years."

"Awww, Jeez..." He wanted to ask 'two years more'?, but was afraid of the possible answer.

"To run concurrent with your parole."

He turned slowly, looked at Hardcastle with apprehension, "Can...can you do that? I mean, parole violations usually mean going back to prison." It wasn't the miracle he'd prayed for, but it would do for now. Hardcastle shrugged. "Hey, you can spend the time in jail if you want." He tried to stop the smile, but didn't quite succeed.

McCormick, more uncertain than before, shook his head, "Nahhh, I'm kinda used to the one I'm in now..."

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They walked in silence down the sidewalk toward the truck; the Judge paused a few feet away, digging out the keys.

"Want me to drive, Judge?"

"No, McCormick, I don't want you to drive; you've done enough driving for one night. Get in."

Tightlipped, McCormick got in the truck, almost but not quite slamming the door. Hardcastle started the engine, and pulled out into sparse traffic. He spared neither a glance or word in McCormick's direction.

Okay, McCormick figured, he didn't really want to talk anyway. He was tired, worn out by the long hours of stress and worry. Right now he wanted to just get back to the estate without having to defend his every action and word. The radio was on, the volume low, but loud enough for him to recognize the agonizing squawks of jazz horns - how did Hardcase stand that racket? It was enough to set anyone's teeth on edge. He reached over in an automatic response to change the station when Hardcastle's steel-cold glare stopped him in mid-reach. Sighing loudly, he slouched back in the seat, staring out the window. Can't even listen to decent music; and at least 50 minutes to the estate--torture, that's what it was...cruel and unusual punishment...

Hardcastle kept his eyes on the road, and the radio on the station that McCormick hated most. He figured it wouldn't be too many miles before the kid started up, and he wasn't in much of mood to listen to it. 'Cause deep down, he knew McCormick was justified in his resentment. He debated on whether or not to tell

Mark the truth, that there were no parole violations against his record -- but, that would be like admitting that he'd been wrong and the kid had been right...No, better not...Kid would find out about it eventually anyway; would hurt to let him sweat it for a while...He smiled to himself; McCormick hadn't been the only one blowing smoke in that conference room...

As the miles slipped by, Hardcastle began to wonder at McCormick's continued silence. He chanced a glance to see if the kid was still awake. He was. Chin cupped in one hand, staring out the window, a long-suffering expression on his face. Pitiful, just pitiful...C'mon, kid, say something; get it out in the open, and get it over with...

The moonlit scenery whipped by as McCormick did his best to shut out the godawful wailing coming from the truck's stereo speakers. Hardcase, he decided, must have been a member of the Spanish Inquisition in a former life...Jeez, not even a 'Thanks, kiddo'; or a grunt of approval...surely, the Judge knew -- well, if he didn't, he sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to tell him....

Just get the trip over with; the night, the day, the week over with. and don't let the Judge say anything; just let them get to Gull's-Way without another 'explanation', another argument, and another let-down...Don't let him say anything...

Why wasn't the kid saying anything? Was he that angry? Or that relieved? Or maybe just tired? It was, after all, nearly 3 AM. Well, they'd be home soon, and McCormick was always out of the truck before it stopped rolling...he'd be certain to have some suitable comment to make by then...

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The GMC's brilliant headlights swept in an arc as it swung around the curved drive, the beams flashing across Sarah's bedroom windows. He brought the truck to a smooth stop, turned off the ignition. Silence settled over the cab like a heavy blanket; neither spoke. Neither moved. McCormick continued staring out the passenger window, while Hardcastle gazed at the darkness beyond the hood. Each waited for the other to be the first to break the silence, with the result that the only sounds were the crickets, the surf, and the gulls.

Hardcastle jumped a bit as someone tapped on his side window. He turned, to see Sarah standing there, a shawl over her long robe. He rolled the window down. Her curious gaze went from him to McCormick, and back again.

"Is everything all right, Your Honor?"

"Yeah...yeah, Sarah, everything's just fine."

She leaned past Hardcastle, looked again at McCormick. "Are you all right, Mark?"

"I'm fine, Sarah."

She spared them another look, waiting for them to say something further...to explain why they were sitting in the truck at 3 o'clock in the morning. But the two men looked everywhere but at each other, and said nothing. She mentally shrugged her shoulders...she wasn't going to stand out here in the cold moonlight and try to figure it out. "I left your supper in the refrigerator...along with lunch. You can heat it up, if you like." She gave them another look, "Goodnight, Your Honor."

"Goodnight, Sarah."

"Goodnight, Mark."

" 'Nite, Sarah."

Turning, she drew the shawl around her shoulders, went back inside, and quietly closed the door behind her.

A few more minutes passed before McCormick finally gave in. "Judge," he said, irritated at the man's stubbornness, "This is dumb. I'm sorry, okay? I'll never, ever disobey you again; next time, I'll letcha die."

"Okay." Hardcastle opened the door, got out and started for the house.

McCormick slammed the truck's door, came around the hood to face Hardcastle. "'Okay'?? Juddge..."

The whine was starting, a sure sign that the kid didn't know which way to turn. Which meant that things were back to normal. "Go to bed, McCormick. You've got a lot of work to do tomorrow, and we're starting early."

"You're crazy, Hardcase; absolutely, completely, totally crazy," he walked away, toward the Gatehouse, waving his arms and looking heavenward for help, "I'm living with a crazy man, and nobody cares..."

Hardcastle watched until McCormick disappeared into the Gatehouse, lights flooding the lower floor. He let the chuckle escape, amused in spite of himself. "Thanks, kiddo; thanks for disobeying me..." He went up the

brick walkway to the front door, and paused again, glancing back at the Gatehouse just as the lights went off.
"And I know damn well you're going to do it again..."
And he knew that McCormick knew it, too...

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(1) "Man in a Glass House", aired episode.

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