

McCormick, Take Two
by Regina Warner

C H A P T E R O N E

"McCor--mick!!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. Prune the hedges, mow the lawn, wash the truck, take the garbage out, work my fingers to the bone," McCormick grumbled, clipping away at the hedge in a haphazard manner. "I wish Lincoln was still alive. He'd have you up before the Supreme Court on charges of keeping a slave."

"Aw, you poor kid," Hardcastle sympathized. "Here I am, the wicked stepfather making you sit on your ashes and do all this work while I just laze around and watch."

"Yeah, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Not at all," the Judge grinned.

"Well, you oughtta be," McCormick shot back. "What I need is a fairy godmother."

"You already got a fairy godfather," Hardcastle retorted. "What the hell else you want?"

McCormick threw him a mischievous smile. "Somehow, you don't look like a fairy, Judge."

"Considering what that word means nowadays, thank God!" Hardcastle replied fervently.

McCormick continued pruning the hedge with a definite lack of enthusiasm. "If you were really my fairy godfather, you wouldn't be starving me to death," he complained.

"Starving you? McCormick, you just ate two hours ago," Hardcastle reminded him. "Kid, you got a bottomless stomach."

"What can I say? I'm a growing boy." Suddenly dropping the shears, McCormick staggered backwards, grabbing his head. "Judge, my eyes! Something's wrong with my eyes!"

Jumping up, Hardcastle grabbed him, trying to pull his hands down. "What is it, kid?" he demanded in concern. "What's wrong?"

"I'm seeing double!"

"What!"

"Double pizzas, sausage and pepperoni, heavy on the cheese, and two glasses of beer, overflowing all over the table." McCormick opened his eyes and grinned. "How 'bout it, Judge?"

"McCormick! You pull something like that again, and I'll chain you to this railing at two in the morning and make you prune these hedges till your fingers fall off!" Hardcastle threatened in a rough voice.

"Hey, Judge, I-I'm sorry," McCormick apologized, realizing his innocent little joke had really frightened Hardcastle. "Does that mean I don't get my pizza, O generous and kind fairy godfather?"

"Now, don't go pulling that cocker spaniel look on me," Hardcastle growled.

Turning back to the hedge, McCormick picked up his shears and began pruning again, his head lowered so the Judge couldn't see his face.

"All right, all right," Hardcastle agreed gruffly and pulling a couple of bills from his pocket, he handed them over. "There. Go get the damned pizzas." He had planned to give in from the very start, but wasn't about to inform McCormick of that. It's not good to give the kid everything he wants the minute he wants it, Hardcastle reasoned. It'll spoil him.

McCormick grabbed the money and started towards the Coyote, yelling over his shoulder, "Thanks, Judge. I'll be back in a jif."

"You make sure they don't put any of those damned little fish on mine!" Hardcastle yelled after him. "And when I say extra cheese, I mean extra cheese!"

"Gotcha!"

Hardcastle waited until the Coyote was out of sight, then picking up the shears, he began trimming the hedge. An hour later, he was still at it, nervously clipping away while his eyes kept flicking to his watch. "Damn it, McCormick should've been back here almost a half an hour ago," he muttered. "I bet the kid's gotten himself into some kind of trouble. Let him out of my sight for five minutes, and he gets his tail caught in a wringer every time." He clipped away in a worried manner for another ten minutes, keeping one eye on the long drive. The Coyote failed to make an appearance and finally losing his patience and his battle with a gnawing fear that had been increasing for the past thirty minutes, Hardcastle dropped the shears and started towards the truck.

The sound of squealing tires caught his attention, and stopping in the drive, he allowed himself a sigh of relief as McCormick slammed to a stop in front of the house, leaving a dual path of rubber in his wake.

"Where the hell you been?" Hardcastle demanded immediately. "You've been gone long enough to get a dozen pizzas."

The angry look on McCormick's face faded somewhat. "Hey, Judge, you weren't worried about me, were you?"

"'Course not," Hardcastle denied gruffly. "I wanted my pizza."

McCormick hid a smile. "It would make me feel better if you'd admit you were worried," he complained.

"Why? What happened?"

McCormick's face hardened. "While I was in Dominic's some creep opened the hood of my car and clipped two of my spark plug wires."

"What the hell'd they do that for?" Hardcastle asked, following him into the kitchen.

McCormick shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Well, why the hell didn't you call?" Hardcastle demanded. "A lousy quarter, my quarter. You could've called at a pay phone and told me what happened."

McCormick threw him a grin. "Why? You said you weren't worried." He popped the pizzas in the microwave and turned. "Look, Judge, I'm sorry; yeah, I should've called. But I had to splice and tape those wires so I could drive the car home, and all the time I was doing that, I was getting madder'n hell. Some bum out there probably won't work for his money, but he gets jealous of anyone else who owns something nice. I tell you, Judge, if I could get my hands on the guy, I'd wring his neck."

"Okay, just cool it, kid," Hardcastle advised. "You're wasting your energy. A creep like that's not gonna hang around so you can beat him up."

"But that made me so damned mad!" McCormick objected, and brought his fist down hard on the counter.

Taking the pizzas from the microwave, Hardcastle set them on the table. "Feel better now?"

"No," McCormick groaned. "I think I broke my hand."

Picking up a slice of pizza with one hand, Hardcastle gripped Mark's wrist with the other. "Move your fingers."

He did.

"Nah." Hardcastle dropped his hand. "You didn't break it."

"Aw gee, thanks. I love all the sympathy I get outta you," McCormick complained. "Damn it, Judge! Somebody hurt my Coyote!"

Stuffing his mouth with the Italian cuisine, Hardcastle chewed thoughtfully. "Look, I'm sorry about that, but you know, you've developed an unnatural affection for that car."

"Unnatural?" McCormick jumped to his feet. "I love that car the same way anyone would love a sleek, beautiful, finely-tuned machine!" he protested. "And-And besides, it's the only thing I can call mine."

"What about this house?" Hardcastle pointed out.

"That's yours, Judge."

"You should know by now that it's both of ours, kid," Hardcastle spoke softly. "Remember, I wanted to give it to you and you wouldn't take it."

"That's when you thought you were dying and God, I don't wanna talk about that right now," McCormick added fervently.*

Hardcastle leaned back in his chair and sighed. His "impending death" had frightened McCormick and the Judge understood why. The young man had thought he was going to be left alone again, and Hardcastle had learned by experience that a million and a half dollars was no substitute for loneliness.

"Hey look, I take back what I said about your stupid car," he apologized. "Now, sit down and eat your pizza before it gets cold--again. It already tastes like cardboard."

McCormick started to drop into his chair, but the sound of the doorbell caused him to straighten.

Hardcastle waved him down. "I'll get it. Kids in Africa are starving, so don't waste that stuff."

McCormick grinned at his back and reaching over, proceeded to grab a slice of pizza with each hand. He had polished off his share and slightly more by the time Hardcastle returned to the kitchen, a grim look on his face.

Glancing up, McCormick quipped, "What happened, Judge? Someone stomp on your roses?"

Hardcastle shook his head. "Worse." Leaning against the refrigerator, he released a sigh. "That was the cops. Somebody just robbed that computer store over on Clayton at gunpoint. Got away with about two thousand dollars in cash."

McCormick stuffed another slice of pizza in his mouth. "So, what's the deal?" he mumbled. "Why'd the cops come tell you?"

"The owner of the store said the man had on a ski mask," Hardcastle explained gruffly, "but he got a glimpse of the getaway car-- the Coyote."

McCormick froze, then his hand slowly lowered, the slice of pizza falling from his grasp and hitting the table with a dull thud. "Judge, what're you saying?" he demanded.

*"Do Not Go Gently..."

"I'm saying someone driving the Coyote robbed that computer store about forty-five minutes ago," Hardcastle replied calmly.

McCormick's eyes widened. "And the cops came here because..."

Hardcastle nodded. "It was Harry and Dan. They know you own that car and when they pulled up, they saw it out front and wanted to know if you had been out in the last hour or so. I had to tell 'em you went for a coupla pizzas."

"And we all know that computer store is just a block from Dominic's," McCormick added in a grim tone, rising slowly to his feet. "Good God, Judge! You think I robbed that place! Once a con, always a con--is that it?"

"Now, don't go jumping to conclusions," Hardcastle threw back quickly. "But you gotta admit, there's not too many red Coyotes around here."

"There's not any around anywhere, and you know it!" McCormick yelled. "So that's makes me automatically guilty, huh?"

Hardcastle started towards him. "Now look, kid, take it easy."

"No!" McCormick backed away, glancing towards the door leading into the hallway. "Are the cops still in there, Judge? Are they waiting for you to bring me out so they can handcuff me?"

"No, the cops aren't there," Hardcastle retorted.

McCormick's voice dropped to a choked whisper. "I didn't rob that place, Judge--I swear! I can show you where I had to tape those wires. Someone really did cut 'em." He reached for Hardcastle's arm. "C'mon, I'll show you!"

Hardcastle shook his head. "No need. That alibi wouldn't stand up in court, anyway."

McCormick's hand fell to his side and he stared at Hardcastle in horror. "You-You really do think I robbed that store!"

"Aw, come off it, kid! Will ya quit being so damned defensive," Hardcastle snapped. "If I thought you were guilty, I wouldn't have told the police that I was with you when you went to get those pizzas."

For once McCormick was struck speechless, stammering at last, "You-You did that for me?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle returned gruffly. "They got a word for that, kid--it's called 'perjury'. And believe me, I don't go around perjuring myself for just anyone." He sat down and reached for the last slice of pizza. "Now, here's what I think happened. While you were in Dominic's, someone stole the Coyote, committed that robbery and brought the car back, then cut those wires. That's what I told the police and that's what they're going to check into."

"I-I don't know what to say, Judge." McCormick's face suddenly beamed. "Gee," he repeated, "you really-you really did that for me, huh?"

"No, I did it for me," Hardcastle changed his mind. "The hedges still have to be finished, the lawn's getting so high you're gonna have to use a machete to cut it, and I won't even mention the--"

"You don't have to. I'll have it all done by tonight," McCormick promised excitedly, trying to show his gratitude. "You just watch! The hedges, the lawn, the pool, the truck, and anything else I can think of, all done before it gets dark."

"Hey now, don't go overdoing it, kid," Hardcastle protested. "I'll help ya."

"No, no!" Grabbing his arm, McCormick steered him towards the living room. "Now, you just relax in your favorite chair, Judge, prop your feet up, and lose yourself in a good book. And be sure you stay outta my way because Hurricane Mark is goin' through!"

Hardcastle settled in the chair as ordered, and watched the young man dash out of the house. "Good kid," he mumbled with a grin. "A little hyperactive, though. Maybe I oughtta change his vitamins." His thoughts returned to the robbery and the craggy features twisted in a troubled frown. There were three disturbing facts here that he couldn't ignore--the Coyote was placed at the site of a crime, Mark was getting a pizza a block away right at the time the robbery was being committed, and he had been more than a half an hour late in returning, having a lame story about his car being tampered with.

Hardcastle's frown deepened. If the DA got his hands on that "evidence", McCormick would be back in prison in no time. "Exactly where he doesn't belong," Hardcastle growled softly. He didn't believe for a minute that his young friend had committed the robbery, but the coincidences here would've been too much for the police to overlook, if they had gained knowledge of those coincidences. As it was, Hardcastle knew his own reputation was the only thing that had prevented McCormick's arrest, and he planned to continue using that reputation to the fullest until the real culprit was apprehended.

Picking up the book Mark had left laying on the table next to him, he settled back in his chair. McCormick was always complaining about him sticking his nose into trouble, and this time Hardcastle decided he was right. The farther away they stayed from this particular crime, the better off they'd both be.

C H A P T E R T W O

McCormick finished up the jobs as promised, even skipping dinner so he could get the lawn mowed before darkness set in.

At last deciding McCormick was carrying the gratitude bit too far, Hardcastle went in search of him, finding Mark in the garage where he was putting the finishing touches on a polish job on the truck.

Running a hand along the hood of the vehicle, Hardcastle grinned. "She looks good, McCormick. Ol' Betsy hasn't had a spit and shine like that in years."

"Hey, don't touch the merchandise!" McCormick yelled and applied his chamois vigorously to the shiny surface, rubbing away Hardcastle's invisible fingerprints.

"Look, kid, aren't you overdoing this just a little?" Hardcastle asked. "The pruning, mowing, and pool cleaning were enough, but then you painted the ornamental iron, weeded the roses, and polished the truck. Don't you think it's time to call it a day? I'm getting tired just watchin' you."

McCormick straightened slowly, holding his back. "I think you're right, Judge," he groaned. "I bet I'm gonna have to crawl outta bed in the morning."

Hardcastle motioned with his head towards the house. "I got some soup on. Come on and eat a bowl of it, and then you're going to bed."

"What time is it?"

"Almost eight."

McCormick broke into a grin. "Judge, the last time I went to bed that early was before I could walk."

"You haven't worked this hard since before you could walk," Hardcastle retorted.

McCormick needed no further persuasion. His eyelids were drooping before he was halfway through his soup, and finally giving up, he stumbled to his feet, mumbling, "'Night, Judge."

Hardcastle smiled sympathetically. "'Night, kid. And don't forget to take a shower before you fall in bed. You're filthy."

"Uh-yeah, right," McCormick nodded and stumbled out the door.

Hardcastle stayed up to watch the late news, frowning again at the report of the robbery. Remaining up awhile longer to catch Carson's monologue, he switched off the television and went to bed.

His sleep was disturbed sometime during the night by a noise from outside and lying there a moment, Hardcastle tried to place the sound in his memory. It finally clicked in his consciousness and jumping out of bed, he reached the window in time to see the truck disappearing down the drive.

Glancing at his watch, he growled, "Almost two-fifty. Now, where the hell's McCormick goin' this time of night?" Pulling a chair close to the window, he sat down to wait, knowing he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep until McCormick returned. He had never required Mark to report before leaving the house, but he had always done so just to let him know where he was going. The fact that he hadn't done so this time worried Hardcastle. Gnawing at his insides was the old fear he had had when McCormick first came to live there--that one morning he'd wake up and find the gatehouse empty.

He paced the floor, stretched out on the bed and tried to go back to sleep, got up and paced some more, and had resumed his position by the window when he heard a familiar sound. Its headlights off, Hardcastle could barely make out the silhouette of the truck in the darkness. There was the sound of the garage door opening and closing, then silence.

Glancing at his watch, Hardcastle muttered, "After three-thirty. The kid was gone almost forty-five minutes. I wonder where the hell he went?"

He started towards the bedroom door, then decided grilling McCormick could wait until morning. The important thing was, he had returned.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

McCormick was awakened as usual by the sound of a basketball being dribbled outside his window. Unwrapping the pillow from around his head, he listened carefully for a few minutes and groaned. Hardcastle was making his shots hard, hitting the backboard with a jarring force that meant one of two things-- either the Judge was in a really good mood or he was madder than hell.

McCormick didn't think he could handle either Hardcastle that morning as he started to rise, then fell back with a moan. Every bone in his body felt as if someone had stomped on it. "I'm so young," he groaned to the ceiling. "How could I be so out of shape?" Forcing himself to a sitting position, he rose slowly, clutching his back as a pain shot through it.

"McCor--mick!!"

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, waving his hand behind him at no one in particular. "I'm coming, Judge!" he yelled back, then mumbled, "Soon as I figured out how I'm going to make it to the bathroom."

Fifteen minutes later, he was lowering himself carefully into a chair beside the pool. "Morning, Judge," he muttered, and reached for several of the pastries on the small table between them.

Hardcastle grunted a reply and continued reading his newspaper.

Glancing at him, McCormick hid a grin. A hot shower had taken away much of his stiffness, but he figured if he played on Hardcastle's sympathies, he might get the day off. Of course, part of it would have to be spent in replacing those clipped spark plug wires on the Coyote.

Planning his strategy, he stretched his legs out before him and halfway suppressed a low groan.

Hardcastle remained buried in his newspaper.

Twisting around to pour himself a cup of coffee, McCormick's reaction was real this time as he inhaled sharply at the sudden stab of pain in his back.

Hardcastle dropped the newspaper and glared at him. "Is that all you're gonna do today is bellyache?"

McCormick threw him a startled look, surprised at the harshness in his voice. "Sorry, Judge," he mumbled low.

"Yeah, well, I told you you were overdoing it yesterday," Hardcastle grumbled, "and if you'd gotten your sleep last night like you were supposed to, you'd feel a helluva lot better this morning."

"Believe me, I did sleep last night, Judge," McCormick assured him. "I conked out like a light, and didn't hear a thing till you started shooting that damned basketball."

Hardcastle threw him a strange look. "Where'd you go last night?" he asked quietly.

"Go?" McCormick echoed. "I just told you--I went to bed."

Hardcastle folded the paper with deliberate slowness and laid it on the table between them. "I never say anything when you go out at night on a date, do I?" he asked in a gruff voice. "I never set a curfew, and I never yell when you don't return until the wee hours. But when you go out at almost three o'clock in the morning in my truck and don't come back for forty-five minutes, then I think I should have an explanation."

McCormick nodded slowly. "I agree, Judge. So when're you going to give me one?"

Hardcastle's hand came down hard on the table, causing Mark to jump. "I'm asking you, damn it!" he roared.

"And I don't know what the hell you're talking about!" McCormick fired back.

"I'm talking about you goin' out of here early this morning in the pickup."

McCormick stared at him. "You're crazy, Hardcase! I told you a long time ago those peanuts were gonna do that to you! I never went anywhere last night. At three o'clock this morning, I was dead to the world."

"Then who the hell was driving my truck?" Hardcastle demanded.

"How should I know?" McCormick yelled. "But it wasn't me!"

Hardcastle studied him a moment, then spoke in a strangely calm voice. "There was a robbery early this morning. I just heard about it on the radio. A jewelry store on Jefferson was burglarized and the guard knocked unconscious. The guy got away with about twenty thousand dollars worth of diamonds, but the guard managed to get a glimpse of his transportation--a black and silver GMC pickup."

McCormick's eyes widened at this news, then with his face set in determined lines, he jumped to his feet and started towards the garage.

Hardcastle chased after him. "And just where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to prove that you're wrong in what you're thinking right now!" McCormick shot back over his shoulder.

"You don't know what I'm thinking!" Hardcastle protested.

"The hell I don't!" McCormick retorted angrily. "And I'm going to show you that you're about as far off base as you're ever gonna get!" Lifting the garage door, he started around the side of the truck. "When I was polishing this thing yesterday, I noticed the odometer reading and I remember thinking that this has been a good truck considering all the miles you've put on it--87,248.3 to be exact."

"Now look, kid--" Hardcastle began.

McCormick whirled around. "No, you look, Hardcase! You're laying an unfair accusation on my shoulders, and I don't like it! I'm gonna prove to you that I didn't take this damned truck anywhere last night, and then I'm gonna pack up my things, and me and the Coyote are making tracks out of here. First, that robbery yesterday, and now this. I don't know what the hell's going on, but I'm not going to hang around and let you hand me over to the cops for something I didn't do!"

Hardcastle froze. "Mark, I never accused you of committing those robberies," he denied softly.

"You didn't have to! I can see it in your face!" McCormick yelled back. Climbing into the driver's seat, he hissed angrily, "It's easy to trust me as long as things are going smoothly, isn't it? But as soon as something weird happens, bam! Ol' Judge Milton C. Hardcastle is right there with the gavel ready to--" He stopped and leaning close to the dashboard, stared at the odometer reading. "I don't believe it," he breathed low. "The-The odometer reading is different."

"How much?"

"Six point one miles."

"That jewelry store is just about three miles from here," Hardcastle pointed out.

McCormick's head rose slowly, his eyes locking with the Judge's. "I didn't do it," he whispered hoarsely. "I swear I never left my bed all night--at-at least, I don't think I did."

Hardcastle patted his arm. "Your word's good enough for me, kid. Besides, I didn't actually see you last night, anyway. I saw the truck leave and come back, and I just assumed you were driving it."

"Maybe-maybe I was." McCormick climbed slowly from the truck. "Judge, you-you ever come across a case where a guy was s-stealing things and didn't know he was doing it?"

Hardcastle chuckled. "What's the matter? You think you've gone off the deep end?"

McCormick frowned. "I'm serious, Judge. I go out yesterday and someone in a red Coyote robs a place. You saw the truck go out last night, and someone robs another place in a pickup just like this one." His eyes widened in horror. "Could it be me, Judge? Could I have robbed those places and don't remember it?"

"No, you couldn't have done it," Hardcastle assured him, "and I'll tell you why. One, if you need any money, you know all you gotta do is ask. Two, I don't see you slipping up on anyone and knocking him unconscious. That's just not something you'd do. And three, you don't have a damned gun."

McCormick was still doubtful. "Then what the hell's going on? Who did commit those robberies and why would anyone steal your truck and then turn around and bring it back?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out," Hardcastle promised firmly. "And you're not going anywhere until I do. You're gonna stay right here on this place until we can get this thing straightened out."

"But I've got to go get new spark plug wires for the Coyote," McCormick objected. "That jury-rigging I did won't last very long."

"McCormick, what's more important to you?" Hardcastle shot back. "Getting that damned car fixed, or staying out of prison?"

McCormick threw him a wry look. "I get your point, Judge. Okay, I promise, I won't stir from this spot."

"That's what you think," Hardcastle broke into a grin. "Since you're gonna have a lot of time on your hands, you might as well put it to good use. Those evergreen bushes need to be shaped, the house could use a good cleaning, and you've been promising me for two months that you'd finish up painting the trim around the windows."

"Aw Judge, didn't I do enough yesterday?" McCormick groaned. "I was kinda hoping you'd let me have the day off today."

"Sure," Hardcastle agreed amicably. "But you'll have double the chores to do tomorrow."

"Okay, okay, Hardcase, you get your damned windows painted," McCormick retorted, then smiled. "Thanks, Judge."

"For what?" Hardcastle growled.

"For believing in me."

"Forget it, kid," Hardcastle growled. "I'm doin' it for me as much as for you. Labor, even your kind, doesn't come cheap anymore, so I guess I gotta keep you around."

CHAPTER FOUR

Even a place as beautiful as Gulls Way can turn into a prison if one is forced to remain there very long. It took McCormick only three days to become stir-crazy, yet all his demands, threats, and pleas to rejoin the real world continued to fall on deaf ears.

"You're whining again," Hardcastle growled over lunch.

"I can't help it! Judge, I gotta get out of here!" McCormick pleaded. "Let me go to the supermarket with you. Oh please, Judge, let me go--please, please, please."

"Stop begging," Hardcastle demanded. "Every time you do that, your voice gets high like a little kid's."

"And you can't say no to a kid, right?" McCormick threw back hopefully.

Hardcastle leaned across the table. "No."

"Aw, come on, Judge. Have a heart."

"If I have a heart, you're liable to end up in prison," Hardcastle retorted.

McCormick leaned back in his chair, his appetite gone. "Damn it, Judge, I can't stay here forever," he complained. "When're the police gonna get that creep? Can't you find out something?"

Hardcastle shook his head. "I've got to be careful on this one. If I ask any questions about those robberies, the police'll get suspicious. Right now, they don't have any reason to connect the pickup to that second robbery and I want it kept that way. So we just lay low and let them work this one out."

"Okay, okay," McCormick agreed reluctantly. "But that doesn't mean I can't go to the supermarket with you. C'mon, Judge," he pleaded, "I promise I'll do everything you say and I won't leave your sight for a second. You can even put a leash on me."

Hardcastle sighed. "That is tempting, kid, but I don't want you seen in a public place." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood. "I'll tell you what, though. If you behave yourself and nothing else happens, then we'll go for a drive up the coast tomorrow. How's that sound."

McCormick's face lit up. "You promise?"

"I promise."

McCormick grinned. "You got it, Kemosabe. I'll be quiet as a mouse the rest of the day."

Hardcastle slapped his arm. "Good. Now, write out the information on those spark plugs wires you need and give me a list of things you want at the supermarket."

"Okay, the food first. We need some vanilla ice cream and Double-Stuf Oreos," McCormick began thoughtfully, "a coupla six-packs of beer, and...oh yeah, we're down to our last jar of peanut butter, and pick up a dozen or so doughnuts, too."

Hardcastle started for the door, yelling back over his shoulder, "It's a good thing I don't let you do all the shopping; we'd both weigh three hundred pounds."

McCormick watched the pickup disappear down the drive, then trying to fight his restlessness, he began cleaning the leaves out of the fountain. His eyes, however, kept straying to the Coyote sitting in the open garage, and finally giving in to the urge to feel himself behind the wheel again, he wiped his hands on his jeans and climbing into the car, he started the engine.

The automobile hadn't been driven since that ill-fated trip to Dominic's, and he planned to just let it run a few minutes to warm up. His hand, however, went to the gearshift and he grinned. The Judge had said he couldn't leave the grounds, but that didn't mean he couldn't run up and down the driveway.

Maneuvering the car out of the garage, he took off with a squeal of tires. At the entrance to the drive, he slammed on the brakes, swinging into a U-turn that laid down a trail of rubber. Twice more he approached the entrance in the same manner, but the third time he pulled between the stone pillars and stopped, gazing longingly at the highway beyond. If he went up the road just a short distance... What Hardcase didn't know, wouldn't hurt him.

McCormick sat there a moment longer, then sighing, he slipped the car into reverse. The Judge had set up that rule in an effort to protect him, and McCormick knew he was trusting him to obey it. If he didn't, he would know in his own mind that he had betrayed that trust, and McCormick decided he could live without that kind of guilt.

Making a slow turn at the entrance, he started back towards the house, flicking on the radio and pretending that he was cruising the highway.

The song came to an end and the local news blared across the airwaves, the lead story concerning a robbery which had occurred

just minutes before. McCormick slammed on his brakes and listened in growing horror to the description of the young man who had walked into a savings and loan, unmasked, and in broad open daylight, shot and critically wounded a guard, then walked out again, jumping into his red sports car--license number "COYOTE X".

"Oh Lord," McCormick breathed low. "The Judge is never gonna believe me this time, and I can't blame him if he doesn't."

His instincts told him to run, to get the hell out of there and lose himself up the coast somewhere or maybe even in another state. It was no longer just a simple case of robbery--somebody was trying to frame him, and with no one on his team, he wouldn't stand a chance of proving his innocence.

Every nerve in his body was screaming at him to get out of there, but McCormick's heart was telling him something entirely different. He couldn't do that to Hardcastle. He couldn't put the Judge in a position of trying to explain to reporters how the young man he had taken into his custody and treated like a son, had committed those robberies almost under his nose. And McCormick knew he couldn't run away and let the Judge believe he was guilty. He had to stay and try to convince Hardcastle that taking in an ex-con hadn't been the biggest mistake the Judge had ever made.

His decision made, McCormick slammed his foot down hard on the accelerator and swung the car around the back of the house. It was debatable who would get here first--Hardcastle or the police--but until he found out, he and the Coyote were staying out of sight. Sending up a prayer of thanks to the the gods of procrastination, McCormick pulled the car in among the evergreen bushes which he had never quite gotten around to trimming.

Jumping out, he made a dash for the house and, running up the stairs to Hardcastle's bedroom, he moved alongside the window where he could get a good view of the drive. It was almost a tie. In a matter of minutes, a black and white pulled through the gate. Before it reached the house, a familiar pickup appeared and McCormick watched as it came to a stop some distance down the drive. He was certain the Judge was staring at the open garage, now empty, and he ached at the thought of what must be going through Hardcastle's mind right now.

Glancing around the room quickly, McCormick tried to think of some way to let Hardcastle know he hadn't taken off, but there was no way he could give him a sign with the black and white sitting right below the window.

The pickup started moving again and McCormick left the bedroom, flattening himself against the wall at the top of the stairs. The front door opened in the middle of a conversation and McCormick leaned forward not quite believing what he was hearing.

"--won't be back for another four days," Hardcastle was saying. "He wanted to go up in the mountains with Christy, that

cute little brunette he's been dating. You know how McCormick can plead, and he's been doing a lot of chores around here lately, so I thought, what the hell--give the kid a vacation."

"And you swear he's not around here anywhere?" Lieutenant Harper pressed.

"Look, Frank, you can search the place if you want to," Hardcastle suggested. "I won't even make you get a warrant."

Harper shook his head. "I'll take your word for it, Milt, but if he calls in, you'd better talk him into giving himself up. I've always thought Mark is a good kid, and I don't want to believe he's committing these robberies any more than you do, but the evidence is sure stacked against him."

"Yeah, I know," Hardcastle nodded, "which is why I'm sure someone's tryin' to frame him."

"Who? Why?" Harper demanded.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be standing here talkin' to you now, would I?" Hardcastle snapped.

"All right, all right," Harper held up his hands. "I'll see if I can get any other leads, but I can tell you this, Milt--the DA knows that Coyote is one of a kind."

"It was one of a kind," Hardcastle corrected. "Hell, Frank, anyone with money could have a car built that looks like the Coyote. A coupla years ago, pictures of it were plastered all over those auto racing magazines."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Harper nodded, "but the DA's not going to go for that unless you can prove there's another Coyote out there somewhere." He started for the door. "Until then, if Mark calls, talk to him, Milt. He's in real trouble."

"Yeah, you can bet I'll do that," Hardcastle assured him. Moving to the window, he watched until the police car was out of sight, then turning, slammed his hand down on the desktop. "Damn! Where'd McCormick go?" he growled.

"He didn't go anywhere." McCormick stepped through the doorway, into the living room. "Judge, I never left here while you were gone--I swear."

Hardcastle whirled around and moving quickly to McCormick's side, he grabbed his shoulders. "Kid, are you a sight for sore eyes!" he beamed. "I thought you had taken off for places unknown."

"I almost did," McCormick admitted low. "I heard about the robbery on the radio, and when I heard that description, the first thought that came to my mind was to just get the hell outta here." He hesitated and dropped his head. "I couldn't do that to you, Judge," he whispered.

Hardcastle watched him closely as he asked, "Kid, I got one question for you, and if you've never lied to me before, believe me, now's not the time to start. Did you commit that robbery?"

McCormick raised his head, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's squarely. "No. I swear to God I never went past that gate while you were gone."

Hardcastle broke into a grin and slapped his shoulder. "Well, that's good enough for me."

McCormick stared at him in disbelief. "How can you be so sure, Judge? That was my car with my license plate, and the description of the robber fits me perfectly. How can you believe me over that kind of evidence? You've put guys in prison for a helluva lot less than that."

"True, but I didn't know those guys," Hardcastle smiled and perched on the edge of his desk, looking up at McCormick. "That bank official was shot and critically wounded. Now, I'm a pretty damned good judge of character and the way I see it, that kid who sat beside my bed that time in the hospital and shook like a leaf because he'd been forced to shoot and kill a creep like Weed Randall,* isn't capable of shooting down one of the good guys. McCormick, you're a lot of things, but one of 'em is not an actor. Besides, like I told Frank, anyone with money could have a car built that looks like the Coyote. And that description--a curly-headed, young man. Hell, kid, that description fits a hundred guys right around here."

McCormick dropped into a chair with a long sigh of relief. "After this last robbery, I was sure you wouldn't believe me, and I couldn't really blame you." He paused and his eyes rose to meet Hardcastle's. "Judge, why is someone doing this to me?" he whispered. "What have I done to anyone to make them wanna frame me like this? God, who hates me that much?"

Hardcastle dropped his head. "It's probably not you. I think someone's out to get back at me."

McCormick straightened. "What do you mean?"

"Somebody's probably trying to discredit me," Hardcastle decided. "You know damned well how it'd look if the police arrested an ex-con in my charge for committing robberies and shooting down innocent people. We've both made some enemies, and I already had more'n my share before you even came along."

"So-So what do we do now?" McCormick stammered.

"We get you outta here." Reaching down, Hardcastle grasped McCormick's arm and pulled him to his feet. "Judge Renfro, an old friend of mine, has a cabin up in the mountains not far from here. We used to go hunting there a lot. I've got a key to the place, and Clyde's in Hawaii right now, so the police or no one else will know you're up there."

*"The Birthday Present"

"How long do I have to stay?" McCormick asked.

"Till I get this whole damned mess cleared up," Hardcastle shot back.

McCormick's eyes rose to meet his. "Judge, I'm scared. I'm real scared."

"Yeah, I know, kid," Hardcastle patted his arm, "but don't worry. I'll get it straightened out."

Turning away from him, McCormick wandered to the window and stared out with unseeing eyes. "Judge, I-I want to tell you something that I've never told a living soul."

Hardcastle's eyes narrowed. "Kid, if you confess to those robberies now, I'll stuff you through that basketball hoop out there."

McCormick laughed shakily. "No, it's not that," he assured without turning. "Judge, I-I know you want to believe I'm innocent, but deep down inside, you're still not sure."

"Hey now, that's not--" Hardcastle began.

"Yeah, it is true," McCormick interrupted softly, "and it's okay. But there's another reason why I wouldn't have committed those robberies, a reason that I was too cocky, I guess, to let you know about back when I stole the Coyote.* I'd never betray your trust in me, Judge, but this reason is even stronger than that."

Hardcastle stepped close behind him. "What is it, kid?"

McCormick turned slowly to meet his gaze. "I can't go back to prison, Judge. Just the thought of it terrifies the hell outta me."

Hardcastle could tell McCormick was telling the truth by the look of fear in his eyes, but he tried to shrug it off. "Yeah, well, nobody likes prison. You're not supposed to."

McCormick shook his head. "You don't understand, Judge. Those two years were like a hell on earth for me. I-uh-I-I tried to be the prison comedian, you know, laughing and joking around and all, but half the time I was scared to death I-I'd get raped, and the other half I was terrified of being-of being killed. You've never been in there, Judge; you can't in your worst nightmares imagine what it's like to have your freedom ripped away, to be locked up with perverted, sadistic killers, to-to have to listen to 'em brag about who they wasted before they got in there, and who they were going to hit when they got out. You know I haven't lived a pure life, but to be forced to sit there for two years and listen to those-those dregs of humanity talk, and-and watch them get in fights and cut each other up..." He turned back

*"Rolling Thunder"

to the window. "That's why I got-I got so upset when I had to kill Weed Randall. I felt like it...lowered me to the same level with them. I was no better than those guys who sat around and bragged about blowing somebody away." A shudder ran through him, causing his body to visibly tremble. "I can't go back, Judge. If they try to put me in prison again, I-I swear I'll do something drastic. I won't go back in there! I won't!"

His voice had acquired a slightly hysterical tone, and Hardcastle laid a hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him. "Mark, you're not going back, you got my word on that. I'll find out what's goin' on here and I'll get you cleared."

"What if you can't?" McCormick whispered.

Hardcastle drew back. "If--and that's a big if--I can't get this worked out, then you and me, kid, are gonna go on an extended vacation. I've always wanted to tour Europe, and I haven't been back to the Bahamas since Nancy died."

McCormick's eyes were round with wonder. "You-You'd do that for me, Judge?"

"I'm not making a sacrifice here," Hardcastle shot back gruffly. "You're up to your ears in trouble because of me, and I'm not letting you take a dive because some creep out there wants my ass." Starting around McCormick, he slapped him lightly on the chest. "Now c'mon, move it, kid. Pack your PJs and a toothbrush. I'll load up some food and we can get the hell outta here and up to that cabin."

McCormick broke into a grin. "Right, Kemosabe."

He started towards the door and Hardcastle yelled after him. "By the way, McCormick, would you mind tellin' me where the hell you put the Coyote?"

C H A P T E R F I V E

The trip to the cabin was made in both vehicles, Hardcastle deciding he wanted to hide out not only McCormick, but the Coyote as well, just in case the police showed up on his doorstep with a search warrant. If they found the sportscar on the premises, it would blow a hole in his tale about Mark going on a vacation with his girlfriend.

The cabin was empty as Hardcastle had promised and glancing around the sparse two-room structure and the thick forest beyond, McCormick asked hesitantly, "Uh-Judge, how far away is the rest of humanity?"

"Far enough," Hardcastle assured him. "There's a fire station about six miles down the mountain. That's your closest neighbor."

"Aw man, I can see how much fun this is gonna be," McCormick groaned. "No telephone, no electricity, nobody to talk to..." He hugged himself and shivered. "Judge, it's freezing up here. What am I gonna do for heat?"

Hardcastle pointed to the far wall. "That, McCormick, is what is commonly known as a fireplace. And outside if you look real hard, you'll find some big, tall things called trees which, with a little effort, can be magically transformed into firewood."

McCormick groaned again. "I'm a city kid, Judge. I don't know anything about building fires."

"Well, you better learn fast," Hardcastle suggested. "The nights up here get pretty damned frigid."

"Oh great." McCormick dropped into an old leather chair and hung his head dejectedly. "I got two choices--I can freeze to death or die of loneliness."

"Aw now, c'mon, kid, it's not that bad," Hardcastle grinned, trying to cheer him up. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

McCormick raised his head slowly, a troubled frown marring the youthful face. "I don't like it, Judge. Whoever's committing these crimes, he's already slugged one guy and shot another. That puts him in the top ten on the list of baddies, and now you're hiding me away up here and you're going back after him. I don't like it; I should be with you."

"It's too dangerous," Hardcastle explained patiently.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Judge!" McCormick jumped

to his feet. "No, I've decided--I'm going back with you and we're gonna find this guy."

"You're gonna play hell!" Hardcastle retorted, pushing McCormick back into the chair. "You're gonna stay here and do like I tell you, or you can pretend like you're Santa Claus when I stuff you up that chimney!"

"But, Judge--"

"It's gonna be your butt if I catch you following me back," Hardcastle warned. "Now, I want your word that you won't leave this place until I come get you."

Mark stared at the far wall, a stubborn look on his face.

"McCormick!"

"Yeah, yeah," he finally gave in. "You got my word." He looked up, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's. "Milt, be careful, will ya? For my sake?"

Hardcastle slapped his shoulder. "Don't worry, kiddo. I'm just gonna find out who he is and why he's doing this. As soon as I find that out, I'll come back up here and get you, and we'll nail him together--I promise."

That assurance made McCormick feel a little better. "Okay," he agreed still somewhat reluctantly. "When you come back, if I'm laying here frozen stiff, just take me home and pop me in the microwave."

Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "For you, kid--anything."

McCormick recalled those words four days later and they did nothing to ease his state of mind. The afternoon after Hardcastle had left, he had chopped enough firewood to get him through the night, then dined on a supper of burnt beans, learning the hard way that cooking over an open fire was a far cry from an electric stove.

The next two days were spent in replacing the spark plug wires with the new ones the Judge had picked up for him, and chopping enough firewood to last someone a month or more. That unaccustomed exercise left him groaning in pain and unwilling to leave his bed the next morning. Getting up just long enough to replenish the fire, he crawled under the covers again and gazed out the window at the several inches of snow which had fallen during the night.

McCormick's heart swelled at the somber beauty of the late morning, and he realized with some surprise that if there hadn't been a cloud hanging over his head, he would have enjoyed

this return to his pioneer ancestors. The sight of the Coyote covered with snow, however, brought him rudely back to reality, and throwing the covers back, he sat on the edge of the bed, dropping his head in his hands.

"Judge, where are you?" he muttered low. "If there was only a telephone in this damned place." He was tempted to drive down the mountain to the fire station and use the phone there, but with his kind of luck, Hardcastle would come before he got back, and then there'd be hell to pay.

Foregoing a bath of any sort, since he had to go outside and pump water, McCormick dressed quickly by the fire, and began pacing the cabin. The lack of chores and recreation was leaving him with too much time on his hands, and with nothing to keep his mind and body active, he was beginning to imagine all kinds of terrible things which could've happened to the judge.

"If anyone hurts him..." McCormick growled, half in anger and half in fear. What if Hardcase broke his promise and went after the guy alone? What if there was more than one of them? What if they really did want the Judge and tried to frame him so Hardcastle would hide him away, thereby leaving the field open for them to do anything they wanted to the Judge?

McCormick slammed his hand down on the back of the chair. "That's gotta be it!" he muttered. "And Hardcase just played right into their hands!" He knew it was honest to admit that he couldn't really offer that much protection, but he and the Judge together had to be better than Hardcastle alone, especially since the Judge had the habit of not stopping to worry about anything, but just charged into a situation and damn the consequences.

"That's what's gonna happen," Mark addressed the hunter in the picture above the fireplace. "He's gonna get himself killed and they'll have a funeral and all his friends'll be there except me, because no one'll know where I'm at. I'll be like that little toy soldier in that poem where the little kid stood him on a chair or something and told him not to move until he came back for him, and then the kid died during the night. I'll be just like that--I'll stay here in this stupid cabin till I'm old and gray, doin' exactly what I was told to do, and the Judge is never gonna come back and get me!"

He had managed to work himself into a frenzy and an unoffending hassock got the brunt of his anxiety. Giving it a hard kick across the room, he grabbed his coat. "God, I gotta get outta here! I'm going nuts!" Grabbing up the ax, his hand closed tightly around it and he muttered, "You got till this time tomorrow, Judge. If I don't see your ugly mug by then, Kemosabe, I'm jumping on Scout and coming to the rescue!"

It was early afternoon before McCormick paused in his chopping and stared at the fresh stack of firewood before him.

"You'd better hurry up, Judge, or I'm gonna end up turning this whole forest into kindling," he threatened. As if in answer to his plea, the low roar of an engine reached his ears, and glancing up, he grinned in relief at the sight of a familiar pickup charging up the mountain road at a speed which would have been dangerous even in the summertime.

The grin faded and McCormick sucked in his breath sharply. "Oh Lord! Either Hardcase has got some good news, or there's gonna be hell to pay for somebody."

CHAPTER SIX

Hardcastle was starting to get worried. For three days he had been trying to get a lead on the robberies, but his sources couldn't tell him a word; either they were too scared to talk, or they simply didn't know anything. Incredible as it seemed, he suspected the latter was true. Someone, no doubt from out of town, obviously wanted revenge against him for some reason, but had put a silencer on the whole operation. No one was talking because no one had any information.

He finished getting dressed and went down to the kitchen, fixing a strong pot of coffee. His breakfast usually consisted of considerably more than that, but the thought of food this morning turned his stomach.

Someone was trying to get to him by putting McCormick back in prison. Hardcastle was so sure of that, he had gone through his files the day before, pulling those of men who had a father or even an older brother, operating on the possibility that some young man he had sent away had died or was killed in prison, and a relative was determined to make him pay by taking McCormick away from him.

He knew it had become a well-known fact that McCormick had grown to be more than just an ex-con in his custody, so any type of attack on the young man would also be an attack on him. Following that lead, he had searched his files thoroughly but nothing had panned out. No young man he had sent up had died in recent months, and there was simply nothing that could be tied into what was going on now.

Growling low in his throat, Hardcastle started toward the living room with his cup of coffee. He had awakened that morning with an almost overwhelming urge to go see McCormick. It still wasn't safe to let him return home, but Hardcastle found himself sorely missing the young man's company. The moment McCormick had walked into the house over two years ago, it was as if someone had opened the blinds and let the outside world in. Hardcastle knew that since Nancy had died, he had been merely existing, going through the motions and pretending he was living a normal life when in reality it had suddenly lost all its meaning.

Then McCormick came along, a brash ex-con who was so young for his age, so incredibly full of life, stubborn, smart-mouthed, and uncomplimentary, yet so sensitive to the needs of others and always anxious to please. And now someone was trying to take McCormick from him, trying to lock the kid away in that hellhole again, and attempting to force him back to those years of loneliness.

"Like hell he will!" Hardcastle growled, slamming his fist down on the desk. Picking up a picture of McCormick he had found

the day before at the gatehouse, he promised gruffly, "Don't worry, kid, I won't let 'em send you back to prison--you got my word on that. I'll find out what's going on, but just in case I don't have enough time..." Pulling open a drawer, he checked the two small notebooks lying within. One was his passport, and the other was McCormick's which he had finally found the day before in a search of the gatehouse, positive that the young man would've had a passport when he was traveling on the Can-Am circuit.

Deciding to check the airlines, Hardcastle reached for the telephone, but a familiar sound outside claimed his attention. Jumping up, he shoved the chair back and turned quickly to the window.

"What the hell's he doing here?" he muttered and ran towards the door, flinging it open and glaring at the young, curly-headed man standing on the small porch. "McCormick, what the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled.

With a hand against his chest, McCormick pushed him aside. "Get out of my way," he demanded.

"What!"

"I said, get out of my way!" He stalked into the study and Hardcastle charged after him.

"McCormick, have you gone crazy?" he shouted. "I told you to stay up at that cabin."

"I got tired of waiting," McCormick shot back without turning.

"Well, that's tough, kid, but stayin' up there is a helluva lot better than comin' down here and letting the police or someone else see that stupid car of yours!" Hardcastle retorted angrily. "I'm knocking myself out tryin' to clear you and here you are running' around in that damned car that sticks out like a sore thumb. Kid, I oughtta--"

"Shut up!" McCormick whirled around. "Nobody asked for your lousy help and I'm getting sick and tired of you always pushing me around and complaining."

Hardcastle stared in shock at the Magnum now pointing at his chest. "Good God, McCormick! What the hell's happened to you?"

McCormick's lips curled in a sneer. "I've had it with you, Hardcase. Being the good kid on the block was handy for awhile, but it's outlived its usefulness. I've found a quick and easy way to make money, and no two-bit judge like you is gonna stop me."

Hardcastle's eyes widened. "You didn't commit those robberies," he argued firmly.

"That's what you want to believe, Hardcase." McCormick broke into a sly grin. "You didn't really think you had converted me, did you?"

Hardcastle couldn't believe his ears nor his eyes. There had to be some explanation for all this, and he searched his mind, trying to find one. McCormick must've found out something and was attempting to turn him against him. He was probably planning to go out on his own and capture the real crook.

Hardcastle held out his hand. "I'm not falling for it, kid. Now, hand over the gun and we'll sit down and talk about this. I know you probably want me off this case for some reason, and I can appreciate your concern, but I'm not letting you go out there on your own."

"My concern?" McCormick echoed with a harsh laugh. "Hardcase, the day I'm concerned about you is the day I become a solid citizen. Trying to pretend you're my father..." He laughed again. "You're just a stupid old man who has nothing to offer me, nothing that is except the money you keep in your safe."

Hardcastle flinched, but was determined not to believe what was apparently happening. "All right, McCormick, you've had your say." He took a step forward, his hand extended. "Now, hand over that gun. You're not gonna shoot me and we both know it."

"You're right," McCormick agreed. "I wouldn't bother wasting a bullet on a decrepit old man. I don't need to." Stepping towards Hardcastle, he backhanded him, the barrel of the gun connecting with his jaw.

Hardcastle hit the floor hard, dazed by the vicious blow. Blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear his vision, he stared up at McCormick, at last forced to believe his words. With that realization came a sudden rush of emotions--anger mixed with hurt, and an overwhelming sense of loneliness. He had unconsciously molded what was left of his future around McCormick, but now those hopes lay shattered, as broken as his spirit. Dropping his head, Hardcastle appeared more hurt than he actually was, in order to hide the tears stinging his eyes. McCormick had called him an old man, and he had never felt it more so than now.

"C'mon, get up!" McCormick yelled, and hooking a hand under his shoulder, he jerked Hardcastle to his feet then pushed him roughly into a chair. Grabbing a length of rope from his jacket pocket, he tied the Judge's hands behind his back, then straightened. "There. You're not goin' anywhere soon. Now to get that money."

"I won't tell you the combination!" Hardcastle yelled after him.

McCormick turned with a grin. "You forget, Judge--I already know it."

Hardcastle felt a wave of anger consume him. "You're gonna

pay for this, McCormick! You could've had it all. Everything I've got would've one day been yours. Right now you could've had anything you wanted. All you had to do was ask, and I would've given it to you."

"You mean, crawl!" McCormick sneered. "Not for the likes of you, you judicial bastard!" he yelled in Hardcastle's face. "I'm sick of you and your pathetic attempts to buy affection!"

Hardcastle struggled against his bonds, his face pale with hurt and anger. "Get out of my house!!" he roared. "And you better get off this planet, because I'm coming after you, and by God, I'm not bringing the cops with me!!"

McCormick laughed. "Oh, I'll get out of your house, Hardcase." He moved to the wall safe and began spinning the dial. "And don't waste your time looking for me, especially at that cabin. It was a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't wanna live there." Stuffing his pockets with the money Hardcastle kept on hand for household expenses, McCormick slammed the safe shut. "It's not much, but it'll tie me over till my next job." He touched his fingers to his head in a sarcastic salute. "Bye, sucker. It's been fun but I can't say I'm sorry to leave."

Hardcastle heard the door slam, then the familiar roar of an engine faded into the distance. He sat like a statue, tears filling his eyes and flowing freely down the craggy cheeks. "Why?" he whispered hoarsely. "Why did he do this to me? Did I treat him that badly?"

Something had to take the place of that terrible ache within him, and as he began struggling to free his hands, a white-hot fury started to grow in Hardcastle. "All this time you were playing me for a sucker," he muttered angrily. "Handing me that kid act, trying to win my affections. Well, kid, you just made the biggest mistake in your life, because no one makes a fool outta Judge Milton C. Hardcastle. No one!"

Freeing his hands at last, he jumped to his feet and ran for the door, stopping only long enough to grab his coat. He was headed for the cabin. Experience had taught him if someone said not to waste your time doing something, the odds were you'd be wasting your time if you didn't.

The drive up to the mountains usually took an hour and a half, but Hardcastle made it in just under an hour. In the distance, he could see the bright red Coyote, and smiled grimly. Mark McCormick was going to rue the day he walked into Judge Hardcastle's courtroom.