

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

It was a bright and beautiful morning, but Judge Milton C. Hardcastle had not the time nor the inclination to notice it. He had charged out of the courtroom after the arraignment, angry at the world in general and furious at Judge Watkins in particular, who he felt had found Mark guilty before he had even been tried.

"Where the hell am I gonna come up with a hundred thousand cash on such short notice?" he muttered to the pickup. He could still see McCormick's face when Watkins announced bail. It had contained a look of quiet desperation which Hardcastle tried to dispel by nodding his head vigorously, attempting to let McCormick know that the bail was no problem.

They wouldn't let him talk to Mark then, but Hardcastle knew what the young man was thinking. He was well aware that the Judge had amassed a sizeable fortune, but McCormick also knew that most of it was tied up in the estate and in securities that could not be turned into immediate cash.

Hardcastle stared through the windshield, lost in thought, then reaching over, he switched on the ignition. "Tough times call for tough measures," he growled. "Time to go pull a coupla strings."

It was late afternoon before he was able to get the necessary cash, but still a lot sooner than he had feared. Handing the suitcase over to a young sergeant, he grumbled, "Take care of that. It's a helluva lot of money."

He waited impatiently for the sergeant to count it, a receipt to be made out, and the necessary papers signed for McCormick's release. At last the young man was brought in, and Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "How's it goin', kid?"

"All right," McCormick answered low. He didn't speak again until they were in the truck, then turning in his seat, he demanded, "Okay, Judge, where'd you get a hundred thousand dollars?"

Hardcastle started the engine and pulled into the traffic before throwing McCormick a grin. "Pulled a coupla strings. I haven't been a judge all these years not to have some connections."

"A hundred thousand dollars is a hell of a connection," McCormick shot back. "You mortgaged Gulls Way, didn't you?" When Hardcastle didn't answer, he groaned, "Aw, Judge, how could you? That place means everything to you. You could lose it!"

"No, we couldn't," Hardcastle retorted. "The only way I could lose that bail money is if you skip out on me, and you're not planning to do that, are you?"

"Never," McCormick answered immediately.

"Then the money's the least of our worries," Hardcastle assured him and deftly changed the subject. "I had Nat bring your car down from the cabin this morning. Figured you might want it. Since you've already been arrested for those robberies, there's no reason to hide it out anymore."

McCormick's eyes grew wide with horror. "Judge, tell me you didn't have him tow it all that way! The Coyote's a delicate machine. He could've torn out the rear end!"

"McCormick, I'm not stupid!" Hardcastle fired back. "I had Nat load it on a platform."

Sinking into his seat, McCormick sighed, "Thank God!"

"You and that damned car!" Hardcastle complained. "If you owned something decent like this pickup, you wouldn't be in so much trouble right now."

"Decent?" McCormick echoed. "You call this decent? I wouldn't be caught dead driving this-this thing!"

"Oh yeah?" Hardcastle yelled back. "Well, it's a helluva lot better than that squashed bug on four wheels that you call a car, kiddo!"

"Squashed bug?!"

The argument continued the rest of the way home, putting both of them in a better mood than they had been in for days. The mood gradually faded into frustration, however, as they spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening making phone calls and searching through stacks and stacks of files.

Leaning back in his chair at last, McCormick massaged his aching neck and groaned, "It's useless, Judge. We're never gonna find anything."

"Yeah, we are," Hardcastle promised. "Your trial's not until next month, so we've got plenty of time to turn up something."

McCormick threw a file on the floor and jumped to his feet. "Judge, you've already made those same phone calls and went through these same files while I was up at the cabin. You didn't find anything then and we're not going to now because there's nothing here to find."

"Like hell there isn't!" Hardcastle roared. "The answer's in those files! We just have to look harder. Now, sit down and get busy!"

McCormick stood silent a moment, then dropping into his chair, he reached down and picked up another file.

Hardcastle threw him a worried look, his own fears mounting with each passing hour. The telephone rang and he reached for it quickly, a surge of hope racing through him.

The news was obviously bad, however, as McCormick could tell by the look on the Judge's face, and standing slowly, he moved beside the desk, his heart pounding as Hardcastle ended the conversation.

"Thanks a lot, Frank. I know what it cost you to do this. We both owe you a big one."

McCormick waited as the Judge returned the receiver to its cradle, but when Hardcastle remained sitting there with his head bowed, he asked impatiently, "Well? Why do we owe Frank a big one?"

Looking up, Hardcastle inhaled deeply. "Because he just broke all the rules by telling me something we aren't supposed to know yet." Rising slowly to his feet, he circled the desk and stopping in front of McCormick, he reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Kid, the guard who was shot in that last hold-up...he died a few minutes ago."

McCormick eyes widened in horror. "Aw no...aw no, Judge. That-That's a murder charge."

Hardcastle nodded. "As soon as they can get hold of the judge in the morning to sign the necessary papers, they're revoking your bail," he related gruffly.

"Oh God." Mark's eyes darted around the room as if he were suddenly lost, then stumbling to a chair, he fell in it with a groan. "That's it, Judge. It's all over."

"No, it's not over," Hardcastle contradicted and moving quickly to McCormick's side, he grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. "C'mon, we got work to do."

"Like what?" McCormick demanded hoarsely.

"Damn it, Mark, why do you think Frank called?" Hardcastle retorted. "He was giving us a warning. Now, we've got time enough to get the hell outta here."

"And go where?" McCormick asked in a choked voice.

"How should I know?" Hardcastle shrugged. "Planes fly everywhere. We just get the hell out of here and get lost until we can figure out a way to work things out. Now, c'mon," he pulled on McCormick's arm, "let's get some things packed."

McCormick stood his ground. "No."

"What?"

"I said no, Judge." McCormick gently pulled away from his

grasp. "I can't let you do it. I can't let you give up your life here and go on the run with me. It would destroy everything you've worked so hard for all these years."

"Stop talking nonsense," Hardcastle demanded.

"It's not nonsense!" McCormick shot back. "You've done a lot for me the past two years, and I really appreciate it, and that's why I can't let you do this." The tone of his voice grew intense. "Judge, it would ruin you--your career, your reputation, even your life. I usually can't stop you from doing something stupid, but this time I can. If you go anywhere, you're going without me."

Hardcastle studied him a moment, the stubborn look on the young man's face making it quite obvious that he meant every word he had said. "Okay," Hardcastle finally agreed, "then I'll have to make another kind of sacrifice." Sucking in his breath, he ordered, "Pack your bags, take that Coyote, and get the hell outta here!"

"I can't do that, either," McCormick returned softly. "If I disappear now, no one's gonna believe that you didn't help me. You'll be arrested for aiding and abetting a murderer, and believe me, Judge, with the kind of enemies you've got in prison, you wouldn't last a week in there."

"Look, kid, I don't give a damn about that right now!" Hardcastle shot back.

"Well, I do!" McCormick yelled. "If you won't worry about yourself, then somebody's got to!" He sat down again and crossed his arms. "I'm not running away, Judge, and that's final."

Hardcastle glared down at him, barely hiding his mounting fear with a look of exasperation. "What if I knock you out and stuff you in the truck?"

"I'll jump out at the first police station we pass," McCormick threatened.

Hardcastle released a sigh. "Okay, kiddo, you win, but you picked a helluva time to get stubborn on me."

Looking up, McCormick smiled. "I guess a little of you has rubbed off on me after all. That's what I get for hanging around hard-headed judges."

"Wise-guy," Hardcastle snorted. "Well, if you're not gonna leave, then I'm going down to that courthouse first thing tomorrow and talk to Judge Watkins. I'm gonna remind Randolph of a few things I've done for him such as the time I went easy on his kid when he got in trouble because I didn't feel like he was having a decent home life." He turned and started for the door. "I'm going to bed. You coming?"

"In a little bit," McCormick promised and walked him to the door. "I'd like to just stay here and...think for awhile."

Reaching out, Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

"You want me to stay up with you?" Hardcastle offered.

McCormick forced a smile. "No, you get your rest, so you can go down to that courthouse tomorrow and whip that ol' judge, Judge."

"You got it," Hardcastle grinned. "Meanwhile, you hang in there, all right?"

"You bet," McCormick assured him.

Hardcastle slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Good night, Mark."

"'Night, Judge."

He waited until Hardcastle had gone upstairs, then returning to the living room, he sat down in the chair behind the Judge's desk and stared at the far wall. "It's over, Milt," he murmured softly. "That judge is gonna sign those papers and there's nothing you can do to stop him. Not even you can argue against a murder rap."

Leaning over, he crossed his arms on the desk and dropped his head on them. It wasn't fair, he thought. Since coming to live with Hardcastle, he had tried to be a model citizen, not because it was something he had to do, but rather something he suddenly discovered he wanted to do. Despite that, he was going back to prison because some creep wanted to get back at the Judge by framing him.

It had never occurred to McCormick to lay the blame for his present troubles on Hardcastle and he didn't do so now. Instead, he indulged in a bout of self-pity for the young ex-con whose world he felt was crumbling around him.

Opening the bottom drawer of the desk, he took from its interior a bottle of brandy that Hardcastle kept there to entertain some of his friends. Reaching for one of the glasses, McCormick filled it to the brim with the alcoholic beverage, then sat there staring at it a moment. At last taking a deep breath, he gulped down the entire glass of fiery liquid and immediately went into a coughing spasm, tears stinging his eyes so he could barely see to fill the glass again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hardcastle found it impossible to get to sleep. After tossing and turning for almost an hour, he threw the covers back, deciding to go downstairs and warm up a glass of milk.

Padding past the door of the living room, he backed up, his eyes caught by the faint light glowing from the lamp on his desk. "Funny, I don't remember leaving that on," he muttered and started into the room. The sight of a familiar curly head lying on his desk caused Hardcastle to draw up short, his heart suddenly pounding furiously against his ribs. "Oh good Lord!" he whispered hoarsely.

Reluctant steps carried him to McCormick's side, and without touching him, he looked the young man over quickly, trying to spot any blood in the dim light. "Aw God, kid, tell me you didn't do something stupid," he pleaded in a choked voice.

His hand reached out slowly, but as it touched McCormick's neck to feel for a pulse, Hardcastle's eyes fell on the glass and almost empty bottle of brandy laying on the floor next to the desk. Leaning down to pick up the bottle, he straightened with a grin of relief. "I'll be damned. The kid got himself drunk." Grasping McCormick's shoulder, he shook him, gently at first, then harder.

The curly head rose slowly, and McCormick blinked several time before mumbling thickly, "H'llo, Judge." He staggered to his feet, grabbing Hardcastle's arm for support. "I guess it's time to go to bed, isn't it? Boy, am I sleepy."

"No wonder," Hardcastle growled and held up the bottle. "Just what the hell was this all about? You're not a drinker. And what the devil's the idea of scaring me to death like that? When I walked in here and saw you slumped over my desk, I thought--well, I thought you had done something stupid."

McCormick turned scarlet, and grabbing the bottle, hid it behind his back. "I-I'm sorry, Judge," he stammered. "I didn't mean to scare you. Besides, I only had a-a coupla glasses."

"I know. That's all that was in the bottle," Hardcastle retorted. "You're not used to that kind of poison, though, and now you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk," McCormick denied. "I'm just feelin' good." He slumped in the chair and corrected with a groan, "No, I'm not. I'm feelin' bad, Judge, real bad. It's like the whole bottom's dropped out of my stomach. I'm so-so scared my insides are shaking." He raised his head slightly, staring into the darkness outside the

small circle of light. "J-Judge, they've got a murder rap on me now. That means I'm not just goin' back to prison--I-I'm gonna get the gas chamber." Dropping his head on his arms, he only partially muffled a groan. "Oh God, I don't wanna die, Judge! I wanna grow old, and be like you--make something of my life and-and maybe change other people's lives for the better."

Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder gently. "You still wanting to leave your footprints in the sand, huh, kid?"

McCormick moved his head up and down on his arms. "But damn it," he choked on a sob, "I ain't even gonna m-make it to the beach."

"Yeah, you are. I give you my word on that," Hardcastle promised in a soft voice and began massaging McCormick's shoulders vigorously. "You're gonna make it because there's too much good in you not to. Hell, kid, you've already changed a lot of people's lives for the better."

McCormick made a choked sound. "Tell me one," he demanded in a muffled tone.

"Well, there's me, for instance," Hardcastle answered gruffly. "Before you came along, I was just a grouchy ol' judge."

McCormick raised his head, laughing shakily. "Hardcase, you're still a grouchy ol' judge."

"Yeah, but I meant it then," Hardcastle shot back. His smile faded and he sat on the edge of the desk, looking down at McCormick. "What I'm tryin' to say here, if you'd mind your manners and quit interrupting, is that you're a damned good person. You got a love for people that not enough of us have anymore. And that's why I'm so damned sorry about all this. You don't deserve to have something like this happen to you, and it's all my fault."

McCormick's hand shot out and grabbed his arm. "No, it's not," he denied immediately. "Judge, I've never blamed you for any of this."

Hardcastle patted his arm. "I know you haven't, Mark, and that makes you a damned fool because you oughtta be madder'n hell at me."

"Judge, I'm not going to blame you and you can't blame yourself for some psycho you put in prison, and who's now trying to get back at you," McCormick argued. "If you hadn't put him away in the first place, there's no telling what the nut case might've done."

"Yeah, yeah, I guess," Hardcastle replied shortly and looking away from McCormick, he sighed. At last straightening his shoulders, he slapped Mark lightly on the back. "Well, kid, what do you say we hit the beds?"

"You got it, Judge." McCormick started to stand, but Hardcastle grabbed him as he stumbled, almost falling over the desk.

"I think you'd better sleep in one of the guest rooms tonight," Hardcastle growled. "If I let you go out to the gatehouse in your condition, you'll probably tramp all over the begonias."

"Yeah, and then you'd make me replant 'em." McCormick held his head and groaned, "Judge, will you do me a favor."

"Sure, kid." Hardcastle hooked an arm under his shoulders. "What is it?"

"Next time...lock your desk."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

McCormick opened his eyes a crack, moaned in agony, and clamped them shut again. Rolling over to the edge of the bed, he ventured another look, this time at the floor, and groaned, "Oh God, it's so far away. I'll never make it."

At last summoning up the courage to make the attempt, he sat up slowly and careful not to make any sudden moves, swung his legs to the floor and stood, swaying slightly. "So far, so good," he muttered, "but I wonder how sympathetic Hardcase is gonna be. If he starts yelling, I swear I'll-I'll scream. No, on second thought, I don't think I'll do that. I'll go running outta the house. Naw, don't think my legs could handle that. Maybe I'll just clamp my hands over my ears and drown myself in my bowl of Fruity Pebbles."

Stumbling around the room, he managed to get himself dressed, then started down the stairs, grasping the bannister with both hands. "Judge?" he called out softly. "Hey, Hardcase, where are you?"

Reaching the foot of the stairs, his eyes fell on a piece of paper laying on the hallway table and picking it up, he read aloud, "'Gone to talk to Judge Watkins. Stay put until I get back. Coffee's on, but you'd better just eat fruit for breakfast. If you're in the kind of shape I think you're in, nothing else'll stay down. That's what you get for acting like a damned fool'."

McCormick dropped the note and sighed, "I don't believe it. He's not even here, and he still manages to yell at me." He headed for the kitchen, still mumbling, "Bet Hardcase stayed up all night writing and re-writing that note, just to think of something onery to say."

Despite his complaints, he followed Hardcastle's advice, deciding a cup of coffee and an orange would do until his stomach stopped doing workouts with Jane Fonda videotapes.

Finishing his orange, he took his coffee and wandered out front, squinting painfully as the morning sunlight bombarded him. Shading his eyes, he glanced at his watch, then stared down the long drive, an uneasy feeling sweeping over him. "Almost nine-thirty," he mumbled. "The Judge should be getting back pretty soon."

As if in answer to his prediction, a white sedan appeared around the curve in the drive, moving at breakneck speed until it whipped in front of the house where the driver brought it to a screeching halt, leaving a path of rubber behind him.

"Hardcase, what the hell--" McCormick began.

"Get in!"

"What?"

"I said, get in!" Hardcastle roared.

Jerking the door open, McCormick jumped in beside him. "Where the hell did you get this car?"

"The truck broke down," Hardcastle growled, "so I had to borrow this."

McCormick's eyes widened. "You stole a car?"

"Borrowed," Hardcastle insisted firmly. "The cops are on their way, kid, so I'm getting you outta here."

McCormick shook his head. "Judge, I told you last night--"

"Forget last night," Hardcastle interrupted. "I'm taking you to a place I know where I can keep you under wraps."

"Aw no," McCormick groaned. "Not the cabin again."

"No, it's not the cabin," Hardcastle shot back. "It's a house not far from here, but as long as you stay outta sight, no one will ever find you."

McCormick leaned back in his seat with a sigh. "No luck with Judge Watkins, huh?"

Hardcastle threw him a sharp glance. "No, no luck at all."

"Judge, you know we can't keep this up," McCormick pointed out softly. "Sooner or later, the police are gonna find me, and if you're mixed up in this, they're gonna have to arrest you, too. I don't want that happening."

Hardcastle kept one hand on the steering wheel while he reached over with the other and patted McCormick's knee. "Don't worry about it, son. I told you I'd take care of you and I will."

McCormick stared at him. "Uh, yeah...great," he stammered.

A few minutes later, Hardcastle pulled into the driveway of a small, one-story house that looked as if it should've been condemned several years ago.

Jumping from the car, he motioned McCormick to follow him. "Here it is, Mark. Not much to look at, but it'll keep you safe."

"Judge, I-I don't think we oughtta do this," McCormick protested hesitantly.

"Now listen, Mark, I'm not letting them take you back to the joint and that's that." Hardcastle slapped him on the back. "C'mon, the place isn't as bad as it looks. There's a telephone, running water, and even a TV."

McCormick reluctantly followed him inside the house, a feeling of uneasiness causing his stomach to churn. Deciding it was due to the lack of breakfast and his stupidity the night before, he made the effort to look upon the entire situation with an optimistic point of view, but try as he might, he could find nothing good about the thought of going to the gas chamber on a trumped-up murder rap, and the Judge probably going to prison for trying to help him.

Hardcastle eyed him with a worried expression. "Kid, you don't look so well. Why don't you go in the bedroom there and take a nap for awhile, and when you wake up, I'll fix us some lunch."

"Uh-yeah, I think I will," McCormick nodded slowly, and threw Hardcastle a smile. "Thanks, Judge."

"Sure thing," Hardcastle returned softly. "Just get some rest, son."

McCormick's smile faded. "Yeah, yeah, I'll do that."

He was determined to stay awake and try to figure out the reason for that odd sinking sensation in his stomach, but the bed was more comfortable than it looked and before McCormick knew it, he had dozed off.

A voice from the other room awakened him and raising his arm, he glanced at his watch. "Damn! It's after noon." The voice still filtered through the door and recognizing it as that of a local news commentator he got up quickly and joined Hardcastle in the living room, dropping to the sofa beside him.

The newscaster finished his report and leaning forward, McCormick groaned, "God, Judge, he did it again, this time a bank. And it's not a curly-headed guy in a red Coyote anymore-- they've got an APB out on me."

"Don't worry about it." Hardcastle leaned over and switched off the television. "I told you you were safe. Now trust me."

"Safe!" McCormick jumped to his feet. "I don't believe this!" he yelled. "I'm already smelling gas here, and you're telling me not to worry! Judge, you're suddenly awfully calm about all this!"

Hardcastle shrugged. "Getting upset'll just cause ulcers, Mark. I promised you I'd handle this, and I will. You're not smelling gas, either. That's the liver and onions I got on cooking. You'll feel better after you get something in your stomach, you just wait and see."

McCormick swallowed hard. "Uh-yeah, I guess you're right. I-uh-I just gotta go, you know, to the john, and then I'll be in there."

Hardcastle nodded. "Hurry up before the stuff burns."

"I-I will." Hurrying into the bathroom, McCormick closed the door softly behind him and slumped against it, trying to control his trembling legs. "What the hell is going on here?" he muttered to his reflection in the mirror. "That guy looks and sounds like Hardcase, but he sure as hell ain't him!" Moving quickly to the small window, he stood on the commode, and slid open the pane of glass. "Man, I gotta get out of here and find the Judge," he mumbled. "This whole thing's getting spookier by the minute."

Squirming through the small opening, he dropped to the ground and started to straighten, but a voice behind him caused McCormick to freeze.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

McCormick whirled around, his eyes falling first on the gun, then rising slowly to the face of the man holding it. "I-I don't believe it," he whispered.

"Like what you see?"

"You're-you're me," McCormick stammered, feeling as if he was still looking in the bathroom mirror. The clothing was different, but the face... McCormick blinked rapidly, convinced that he was dreaming. "Man, this boggles the ol' brains. No wonder Hardcase thought--" He stopped, suddenly realizing who was standing in front of him. "You!" he yelled angrily. "You're the one who's been trying to frame me!" Ignoring the gun, he leaped forward, but the pseudo-Mark raised his weapon, bringing it down hard against McCormick's temple.

He dropped like a sack of grain, and the imposter straddled him, reaching down to lift the limp body slightly by the front of his shirt. "You're in luck, twin. You're not gonna die because we still need you. I'm going to leave your death up to the State of California." Raising his voice, he yelled toward the house, "Hey, Burgess, get your butt out here! I just captured your prisoner!"

C H A P T E R F O U R T E E N

"Milt, I gave you plenty of warning. Why the hell didn't you get Mark away from here?"

"Because he wouldn't go!" Harcastle roared. Dropping into the chair behind his desk, he looked up at the lieutenant and tried to control the fear that was causing his chest to ache. "The damned kid thought I'd get in trouble with the law if he suddenly disappeared," he explained with slightly less volume.

"So, why'd he change his mind?" Harper demanded.

"He didn't," Hardcastle shot back. "Frank, you saw those treadmarks out there in the drive. Somebody either came in or left this place pretty damned fast. And it wasn't McCormick because the Coyote's still in the garage."

Harper sat on the edge of the desk, watching Hardcastle closely as he asked, "Okay, Milt, what do you think happened?"

Hardcastle drew a deep breath. "I think McCormick's been kidnapped."

"By who?"

"How the hell should I know!" Hardcastle jumped to his feet. "If I knew that, I'd be out there getting him back!"

"Milt, there is an answer to all this," Harper pointed out softly, "even if neither one of us wants to believe it."

"No." It wasn't a frantic denial, but a firm negative. "McCormick didn't commit those robberies," Hardcastle growled. "Somebody's trying to frame him because of me."

"Then why'd you beat him up?" Harper asked in a low voice.

"Because I'm a damned fool, Frank," Hardcastle sighed and dropped in his chair again. "When that guy walked in here, looking exactly like McCormick and saying what he did, it... well, damn it, it hurt. So like an idiot, I didn't stop to think, but went up to the cabin and beat the hell outta Mark. And you know what he did?"

Frank shook his head.

"He just stood there and took it," Hardcastle recalled gruffly. "I kept yelling at him to hit me back, but he wouldn't do it. The kid would've let me kill him before he'd fight back. Now, does that sound like he's guilty?"

"No, it doesn't," Harper admitted with relief.

"And I'll tell you something else," Hardcastle continued. "You know McCormick--he's got brains when he wants to use 'em. If he wanted to pull off these robberies, he sure as hell wouldn't go about it like this."

Frank nodded thoughtfully. "That's what has been bothering me since this whole thing began. It just isn't Mark's style. I don't see him robbing a place in broad open daylight, and I don't see him ever using a gun. If my sources are correct, he prefers the nighttime."

Hardcastle's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And just what do you mean by that?"

Harper broke into a grin. "Let's just say, between you and me, I know that not all the information you get on your cases is always acquired through legal channels." Hardcastle started to protest, but Frank held up a hand. "Forget it, Milt. Like I said, it's between you and me. I know Mark's technically broken the law a couple of times since he was put in your custody, but I also know it was always for a good reason and no one has ever been hurt, that is, no one except the crooks the two of you have put in prison."

Hardcastle's answering grin faded quickly. "So, what're we gonna do about finding McCormick?" he demanded.

Harper released his breath in a long sigh. "Frankly, Milt, I don't know. We haven't got a clue as to who kidnapped him, so how can we even begin to guess where they may have gone?" Rubbing his thumb thoughtfully against his jaw, Harper glanced up and asked, "Milt, did you have anything to do with putting away a guy by the name of Louie Drapier?"

Hardcastle searched his memory. "Name doesn't ring any bells," he replied. "Why?"

"He escaped from San Quentin night before last," Harper explained. "This morning one of the guys on a beat was sure he spotted him close to a junkyard at Fifth and Main. Lost him, though. I just thought there might be some connection."

Hardcastle shook his head. "It was a good thought, Frank, but I've never heard of the guy."

"Well," Harper rose to his feet, "I've got to be going, Milt. If you hear from Mark, tell him to either let you turn him in, or get the hell outta this town for awhile."

Hardcastle studied him suspiciously. "Frank, I don't like that look on your face."

"Believe me, I don't like what's causing it." At the door,

Frank turned, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's squarely. "Milt, you know that all the guys on the force respect you, but that guard who was killed was an ex-cop, had been one for over twenty years, and he was well-liked, too. You know how cops are when someone kills one of their own. And I really hate to admit this, Milt, but there are some police officers who even after two years, still don't think much of your idea of reforming an ex-con. They don't know Mark like you and I do, and to them 'once a crook, always a crook'."

Hardcastle snorted. "McCormick was never really a criminal. He was just a kid who got mixed up there for awhile."

Harper held up his hands. "Milt, I've been convinced all along, especially where Mark's concerned, but some of the guys on the force will argue that an ex-con is simply someone who hasn't had the opportunity to get in trouble again."

"So, what are you saying?" Hardcastle demanded.

"You've got to find Mark before we do," Harper replied bluntly, "otherwise, some 'dedicated' cop is liable to shoot first and dispense with the questions altogether."

Hardcastle's features hardened in lines of cold fury. "If that happens, there'll be hell to pay," he promised.

Harper nodded once. "I'll spread the word. It just might stay someone's trigger finger."

C H A P T E R F I F T E E N

McCormick opened his eyes slowly and groaning at the sharp pain that shot through his temples, he started to reach up, but discovered that simple move was impossible to make. He was in a straight chair, his hands tied behind his back in such a way that made even breathing slightly painful.

Looking up, he inhaled sharply at the sight of the two men sitting at the table across the room. "Oh my God," he breathed hoarsely. Seeing both of them together was almost more than McCormick could handle. It was a feeling of having suddenly had his identity ripped away from him. He had become a non-existent being, on the outside looking in on a scene taking place between the Judge and this guy who used to be him.

Mark wet his lips and tried to swallow. Hey, McCormick, thoughts like that could land ya in the funny farm, he warned silently.

His imposter glanced up and seeing that he had regained consciousness, rose to his feet with a grin. "Hey, Burgess, my twin finally decided to rejoin us." Moving in front of Mark, the pseudo-McCormick leaned over and grabbed the front of his shirt. "Well, twin, how's it feel to be lookin' in a mirror when there ain't even one around?"

The illusion had been broken for McCormick. Although the imposter still looked like him, he was no longer trying to mimic his speech, and this caused McCormick to retort grimly. "You're on a dead-end road, mister. You can't keep fooling people very long with this charade because there's one thing you didn't take into account--the Judge and his belief in me. You've made one hell of a mistake here, buddy, and when Hardcastle gets through with you, you're gonna wish you looked like Sylvester Stallone."

The bogus McCormick backhanded him across the face, not a particularly vicious blow, but still one that caused Mark's head to spin. He reacted by kicking out, one leg going between the imposter's, and with a twist of his own, he sent the other McCormick to the floor with a bone-jarring crash.

Hardcastle's twin stood by, an anxious look on his face as the fake McCormick scrambled to his feet, and grabbing Mark again by the front of his shirt, he drew back his fist. "You bastard! I'm gonna fix your face so nobody'll think I look like you!"

Mark cringed involuntarily, and tried to brace himself for the anticipated blow. It never came.

Stepping forward quickly, Burgess grabbed the pseudo-McCormick's arm, and jerking him around, broke his hold on Mark's shirt. "Leave the kid alone, Tatum," he demanded. "We're already ruining his life. Isn't that enough?"

"Let me go!" Tatum pulled away from his grasp. "I'll beat the hell outta him if I want to!"

"Hit the kid again and I'll knock your lights out," Burgess threatened grimly. "You know I can do it, too."

Tatum glared at him a moment, then whirling around, stormed back to the table.

Burgess patted McCormick on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, son. We've gotta do what we're doing here, but at least I can stop him from hurting you anymore."

McCormick's only response was a look of astonishment as he watched Burgess return to the table and pick up his hand of poker.

Wow, this is getting too weird, McCormick thought-- Hardcastle's double protecting me from my double. Trying to find a comfortable position, he leaned back and breathed softly, "Judge, if you don't find me soon, I'm gonna be tap dancing to Twilight Zone music."

He watched as the poker game continued on into the late afternoon, his stomach constantly reminding him that all he'd had to eat all day was a cup of coffee and an orange. His arms and shoulders were also beginning to protest their unnatural position, and he wriggled around, trying to get rid of a sharp pain in the small of his back.

Finally the poker game came to an end, Tatum having obviously lost the last hand. Throwing his cards on the table in disgust, he glanced at his watch and rose. "It's time, Burgess. Meet me at the regular place tomorrow around noon and bring my twin over there with you."

Hardcastle's double stood with a frown. "Listen, I think we oughtta call it quits after this one."

"What're you talking about?" Tatum shot back. "I've already got two other places picked out to hit."

"Your luck is gonna run out sooner or later," Burgess warned.

"Hell, my luck's gettin' better," Tatum laughed harshly. "Now that we got McCormick under wraps instead of the cops havin' him in jail, I can knock off more places than we had planned on. Remember, we get to keep all this money."

"I still don't think--"

"That's a good idea," Tatum interrupted. "You let me do what thinking needs to be done, and you just be sure you do your part when the time comes."

"I'll do it," Burgess assured him grimly. "I've gone too far now to back out."

Tatum slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it. We got a sweet deal goin' here. We've already got over sixty thousand to split, and I expect to get at least another five on this job. Two more, then I get Hardcastle, we let my twin loose, and you do your job. McCormick goes back to prison, and we're free and clear."

"Yeah, yeah, I guess," Burgess sighed.

Tatum crossed the room, stopping beside McCormick's chair. "Well, you're off to hit another bank," he grinned. "How's it feel to be sitting here helpless while I tighten the noose around your neck?"

"Untie me," McCormick demanded, "and we'll see who's helpless after I get through beating the hell outta you, you lousy--"

Grabbing a fistful of hair, the double jerked McCormick's head back at an unnatural angle, causing Mark to inhale sharply. "You're gonna die!" Tatum hissed. "They're gonna strap you to that big chair and turn on the gas, and you're gonna be trying to get loose and screaming, and every breath you take--"

"Tatum!" Burgess' voice reverberated through the room. "Get the hell outta here--now!"

Releasing his hold, Tatum snarled, "Just remember what I said." Turning to Burgess, he warned, "You just be sure you're at the meeting place tomorrow with my twin."

"We'll be there," Burgess promised. "You just be sure you don't screw up."

McCormick waited only until Tatum was out the door before demanding, "What's all this about? What'd he mean he'd 'get Hardcastle'?"

"He's gonna blow him away," Burgess returned flatly.

"Like hell he is!" McCormick struggled with his bonds.

"Just take it easy, son," Burgess advised. "It's gonna happen and there's not a damned thing you can do about it."

"It's not going to happen!" McCormick yelled. "And stop calling me 'son'! There's only one man who has the right to do that!"

"Your father?"

"No!" McCormick shot back. "He gave up that right a long time ago!"

Burgess dropped to the sofa, his eyes meeting McCormick's. "This Judge Hardcastle, he means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

"He's my best friend," McCormick replied angrily.

"Well, I'm sorry, s--Mark, but we're getting paid to do a job here, and we've gone too far in this thing for me to back out now."

"Who's paying you?" McCormick demanded.

Burgess shrugged slightly. "I guess it doesn't make any difference now if you know. He's a lawyer by the name of Malcolm Hagers. He's just the middle-man, though, not the guy who wants you back in the joint."

McCormick's eyes widened. "What're you talking about? Somebody hired you and that look-alike creep of mine to frame me in order to get back at the Judge."

Burgess shook his head. "Hardcastle doesn't have anything to do with this. Somebody you and I both know wants you back in prison so he can get his hands on you."

"Who?" McCormick asked in shock.

"No idea," Burgess replied, "and I'm not one to ask questions. We was hired by Hagers to do a job and he made it plain the less Tatum and I know, the healthier we'll be."

McCormick tried to make some sense out of this new and disturbing information. "Wha-What do you mean this guy's somebody we both know?"

Burgess smiled slightly. "You don't know who I really am, do you, Skid?"

McCormick shook his head slowly.

"Does the name Hank Burgess mean anything to you?" he asked.

McCormick frowned in thought. "Yeah, he was transferred to San Quentin from another prison about three months before I got out."

Burgess leaned back on the sofa, his smile growing wider. "I'm him."

"You're kidding!" McCormick exclaimed.

"Plastic surgeon did a hell of a job, didn't he?"

McCormick stared at him, trying to see some resemblance. "You were in for-for robbing an auto store and beating a guard almost to death."

"Yeah, well, that was a mistake," Burgess sighed. "I didn't mean to hurt that guard, but he attacked me, and I guess I lost my temper. Served my time, though, and got out just a coupla months ago."

"And what about this Tatum character?" McCormick asked.

"Rance Tatum," Burgess filled in the name. "Apparently whoever told Hagers to hire me had him hired, too."

"How did Hagers know to contact you?"

Burgess leaned forward. "Like I told you, Skid, somebody we both knew in prison wants this job done. He obviously knew me and knew I was the same size and all as your Judge, so he had Hagers contact me. I guess he served time with Tatum in some other prison, probably."

"Who do you think this guy is?" McCormick pressed.

Burgess shook his head firmly. "Haven't thought about it and I don't want to, because I can tell you one thing. The guy's got money, and to be able to do what he's doing from inside the joint, he's got a lot more power than I ever want to experience."

McCormick dropped his head, trying desperately to recall all the men he had known in prison. "It doesn't make any sense," he mumbled. "Why would anyone want me back in there?"

"I'd say for information," Burgess suggested.

McCormick looked up quickly. "I don't have any information anybody would want."

"Somebody seems to think you do."

A frown marred McCormick's features. "You said this didn't have anything to do with the Judge. If that's so, then why is Tatum going to kill him?"

"That's where I come in," Burgess explained. "Tatum is insisting upon pulling off two more jobs. When that's done, we give the police an anonymous tip on where to find you. Once

you're in jail, Tatum blows Hardcastle away, and I take his place, then when your trial comes up, I testify against you, telling how you robbed me and told me about the other robberies you committed. The kind of reputation Hardcastle has, if he says you're a crook, the jury's gonna believe him. His testimony alone'll convict you, and we will have done what we got paid for."

McCormick stared at him in horror. The thought of going back to prison or even dying didn't upset him as much as the idea of Hardcastle getting blown away. Burgess obviously hadn't even thought about it yet, but with the Judge out of the way and him taking his place, he could easily move into the house and acquire all of Hardcastle's assets, in reality, become Hardcastle permanently and no one would ever know the difference. They certainly wouldn't believe him, a con who the Judge had just sent back to prison. Burgess hadn't thought that far ahead, but McCormick felt sure that Tatum would hit upon the idea sooner or later, if he hadn't already.

Burgess studied him a moment, then asked, "I've been wondering something, Skid--how did you know I wasn't Hardcastle? You obviously thought so at first or you wouldn't have gotten in the car with me."

McCormick made a face. "I hate liver and onions, and the Judge knows that."

Burgess laughed heartily. "So that was my mistake. I knew it had to be something." He rose to his feet. "Well, tell me what you do like, and I'll fix us something for supper."

Closing his eyes, McCormick groaned. "Nothing. I'm in too much pain to eat."

Burgess' eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, you're in pain? Tatum didn't hit you that hard."

"In case you didn't notice, I've been beat up before," McCormick shot back. "When Tatum robbed Hardcastle, at first he thought it was me, and he came up to that cabin and beat the hell outta me. Ended up breaking four of my ribs," he lied, "and being tied up like this sure doesn't help any."

Burgess frowned. "I'm sorry, Skid, but I can't untie you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." McCormick tried to find a more comfortable position. "Go ahead and fix some food, I don't care what. I haven't had anything to eat all day, so I guess I'd better try to down something."

Burgess nodded and headed for the kitchen. Several minutes later, he returned, carrying a couple of sandwiches in his hand. "How about--" He stopped, his eyes widening. McCormick was sagged forward, his chin resting on his chest. "Skid, wake up,"

Burgess demanded, and bending down, he looked at McCormick closely. Laying the sandwiches on a table, he shook his shoulder, but there was no response, and grabbing a handful of hair, he pulled McCormick's head back, but when he let go, it fell limply to his chest.

"Damn! He's passed out on me." Burgess studied the motionless form a moment, then nodding his head once, he reached behind McCormick and began untying the ropes. "I'll just take you in the other room and tie you to the bed," he talked softly. "It's gotta be better on you than this."

The ropes fell to the floor, and returning to the front of the chair, Burgess grabbed McCormick's arms and bending down, ducked his head in order to lift the limp body over his shoulder.

McCormick sent up a quick prayer that he could get his stiff muscles to respond to his commands, for his and the Judge's future depended on his success. Kicking out hard, his feet slammed into Burgess' kneecaps. Crying out in pain, Burgess released his hold, his legs giving way beneath him.

Unable to indulge in the gentlemanly code of not hitting a downed man, McCormick grabbed for Burgess' gun and brought it down hard on the back of his head. The double collapsed in a motionless heap, and grabbing up the ropes, McCormick bound his hand and foot, then straightened and released a long, drawn out sigh. Staring down at the unconscious form, he shook his head in wonder. "Boy, Judge, wait until you get a load of this." Grinning in anticipation, he headed for the phone.

C H A P T E R S I X T E E N

Hardcastle answered McCormick's greeting with a list of angry questions. "Are you all right, kid? Where the hell've you been? What's the idea of calling and making me come over here? Why didn't you come on home?" He paused and reaching up, grasped McCormick's chin, turning his head slightly so he could see the angry bruise on his temple. "And who the hell beat you up this time?" he demanded gruffly.

"I did," McCormick grinned and grabbed his arm. "Forget about that, Judge. C'mon, you gotta see this! You're never gonna believe it! C'mon, c'mon!" he urged excitedly.

"See what? McCormick, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"This is one of those 'seeing is believing' things, Judge," McCormick insisted, and pulled Hardcastle towards the kitchen where he had propped the double in a chair. Burgess had regained consciousness by now, and he raised his head as Mark and the Judge entered.

Hardcastle stared, his mouth falling open in surprise.

"Aw wow! This makes the last few days worth it!" McCormick was almost dancing with glee. "Judge, you oughtta see your face! I mean, your other one! Damn, I wish I had a camera!"

Hardcastle glared at him. "All right, wise guy, now that you've had your little fun, would you mind tellin' me what the hell's going on here?"

McCormick's grin grew wider. "Sure. Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, meet Judge Milton C. Hardcastle."

"Will you stop that!" Hardcastle roared. "If you don't tell me what the hell this is all about, I'm gonna stuff you in the tailpipe of my truck!"

"Gee, Judge," McCormick complained, "I think I like this Hardcastle better."

Despite the trouble he was in, Burgess broke into a grin. "No wonder you knew I wasn't him, Skid. I wasn't mean enough."

"You shut up!" Hardcastle yelled. "And you," he grabbed McCormick's arm, "get your ass in that other room, and start talking to me--fast!"

"Yes, Judge," McCormick returned meekly and following Hardcastle into the living room, he began filling him in on what he had learned.

The most important piece of the puzzle was still missing, and leaning back on the sofa, Hardcastle rubbed his chin, frowning thoughtfully. "Kid, you know a guy by the name of Louie Drapier?"

McCormick's eyes widened. "Yeah, in prison. He-uh-he's one of those guys I told you about who's the sadistic type--the original Mr. Hyde. He was in there for burglary and four counts of first degree murder. Spent half his time in solitary because he kept beating up on the other prisoners."

Hardcastle nodded. "You ever get on the guy's bad side?" McCormick looked away and he urged, "C'mon, talk to me."

"Yeah, I-uh-I got in a fight with him once," McCormick admitted, inhaling deeply. "The creep was always provoking everyone; got his jollies punching in faces. He started on me one day and I guess it was just a time when I had let things pile up inside and they needed to get out."

He paused and Hardcastle asked softly, "What'd you do?"

"I-I went a little crazy and before I knew it, I was all over Drapier, a good thing, I guess, because if I hadn't gone wild with anger and surprised him, he probably would've killed me. The guards broke it up pretty quick, but I did have the satisfaction of busting his nose."

"Did you get punished for starting a fight?"

McCormick shook his head. "The guards knew Drapier was a trouble-maker, thank God, because I only had eight days left on my sentence. They put him in solitary and I never saw him again." McCormick stopped, his eyes widening as he stared at the Judge. "Why the hell're you asking about Drapier, anyway?"

Hardcastle slapped him on the back and stood. "C'mon, kid, let's call the police and get that weasal attorney, Hagers, picked up. That guy always has been a pain in the butt and I've been trying to get something on him for years."

McCormick stared after him as Hardcastle started for the phone. "Judge, you didn't answer my question," he protested.

"No time," Hardcastle shot back. "When the police see another Hardcastle, you can bet there's a good chance they'll believe our story about another McCormick, too. At least it should create enough doubt to keep you outta jail. Now, c'mon, move it! You wanna have a cloud of guilt hangin' over your head forever?"

Past experience had taught McCormick that Hardcastle wasn't going to talk about what was on his mind until he was good and ready. Sighing, he rose to his feet and retorted, "Okay, get the cops over here and make it fast. I wanna go home. I'm tired, and I hurt, and I'm starving. I haven't had anything to

eat all day except an orange because some stupid judge wouldn't let me eat breakfast."

Hardcastle threw up his hands. "How was I to know you'd be a damned fool and go wandering off with some stranger! Hell, McCormick, I took one look at the guy and knew he wasn't me!"