

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

One steak disappeared into McCormick's mouth and a raw one went on his eye which was swiftly becoming the same color as its neighbor. Slumped in the chair, he kept his eyes closed, trying to put up with the throbbing headache until the aspirins the Judge had given him started to take effect.

Taking the glass of water from him, Hardcastle sat it on the desk and sinking into his chair, grumbled, "That's a helluva knot you got on your forehead, kid. I should've ignored your protests and went on and took you to the hospital. Hell, you're beginning to look like a punching bag."

"I'm beginning to feel like one," McCormick groaned and instantly regretted the remark. Opening one eye, he glanced quickly at the Judge, then rising, went over to sit on the edge of the desk. "C'mon, Judge, there's no reason for you to feel guilty anymore," he spoke softly. "It wasn't your fault I got in trouble, and it wasn't your fault in thinking that Tatum guy was me. God, after seeing him and hearing him talk, it's unbelievable that you could have so much faith in me." He dropped his gaze, his voice no more than a whisper. "I feel humbled, Judge, and very, very grateful."

Hardcastle looked up, his eyes twinkling. "It wasn't that hard to believe in you, kid. You know, you oughtta go into politics--you got a helluva persuasive way about you." McCormick broke into a grin, and leaning back, Hardcastle changed the subject. "Been meaning to ask you something, McCormick. How'd you guess that Burgess guy wasn't me?"

McCormick's face grew serious. "Let's put it this way, Kemosabe--there's only one Milton C. Hardcastle. Judge, you're definitely an original."

"Is that a compliment or an insult?" Hardcastle asked suspiciously.

McCormick's grin flashed again. "You figure it out, Hardcase."

Standing, Hardcastle slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "For a smart-aleck, know-it-all, wise-guy, you're all right, kid. Now, what do you say we hit the hay? You oughtta be able to sleep tonight now that you don't have a murder rap hanging over your head."

"Hey, I'm not in the clear yet," McCormick reminded him.

"No, but it's just a matter of time," Hardcastle returned confidently. "Now that they got my double in jail and are ready to put the cuffs on Hagers, that's enough to make the DA stop and

think. At least they decided not to revoke your bail."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," McCormick sighed.

Hardcastle glanced at him sharply. "So what's your problem now?"

McCormick whirled around, his features darkened with anger. "Judge, I don't like havin' a guy running around loose with my face, especially not a creep like Tatum!"

"Don't worry, the police'll get him," Hardcastle promised. "He can't keep hiding out forever." He paused and frowned. "I just wish the newspeople had kept quiet on Burgess' arrest, though. It would've been a lot easier if we had gotten him to tell us where he and Tatum were supposed to meet tomorrow. Wouldn't do any good now because you can bet Tatum heard the newscast and he won't go anywhere near that meeting place."

McCormick nodded in agreement. "One other thing, Judge." His eyes rose to meet Hardcastle's squarely. "When're you going to explain your sudden interest in Louie Drapier?"

Hardcastle shrugged slightly. "Just curious, that's all." The telephone rang and he reached over his desk to answer it. "Hello. Yeah, Frank. Uh-huh, uh-huh." He was silent more than a minute, then agreed, "Yeah, you bet I'll keep an eye on him. And if you turn up anything, let me know immediately. Yeah, right. Thanks for calling, Frank."

McCormick waited as he slowly hung up the receiver, but when Hardcastle rendered no explanation for the call, he grew impatient. "Well, what did Frank say? Who're you supposed to keep an eye on?"

"You," Hardcastle replied roughly.

"Me? Why?"

Drawing a deep breath, Hardcastle suggested, "Look, kid, I think you'd better sit down."

McCormick stared at him. "Oh no, is this gonna be one of those 'Lone Ranger shoots the horse out from under Tonto' stories?"

"Just sit down and shut up, wise guy," Hardcastle growled. McCormick slowly did as he was told, and Hardcastle leaned against the desk facing him. "As the old saying goes, I got some good news and I got some bad," he began. "The good news is, you've been cleared of all charges."

"Fantastic!" McCormick yelled excitedly and jumped to his feet. "That's great, Judge! Let's celebrate!"

"Sit down," Hardcastle demanded patiently. "I hate to burst your bubble, McCormick, but the celebration's gonna have to wait."

McCormick returned to his chair. "Okay, Judge, what-what's the bad news?"

"Police arrested Hagers," Hardcastle began to explain gruffly, "and after doing a little plea bargaining, Frank said that weasel lawyer sang like a nightingale. More like a vulture, if you ask me. Anyway, what Burgess said is true--someone did want you back in prison. Louie Drapier."

McCormick's eyes widened in horror. "Oh my God! But-But why?"

Hardcastle shrugged. "Hagers swears Drapier never told him. He just got some money to him, a lot of it, told him to get in touch with Burgess and Tatum, and explained what he wanted done--you framed so you'd be sent back to prison. Hagers said Drapier obviously wants to get his hands on you for some reason, but for the money he was getting paid, it wasn't any of his business why."

"Good God!" McCormick breathed hoarsely. "Is he doing all this because I broke his nose?"

Hardcastle smiled grimly. "I think there's more to it than that, kid."

"But-But what?" McCormick shook his head in disbelief. "I always managed to stay out of his way except for that one time." Leaning back in his chair, McCormick relaxed a bit. "Well, unless Drapier confesses, I guess we'll never know what he wanted since he's still in prison, and you said I was cleared."

Hardcastle sucked in his breath. "McCormick, what I just told you wasn't really the bad news."

McCormick stiffened. "Well, what the hell is?"

"Drapier's not in prison anymore," Hardcastle returned softly. "He's out, kid. Escaped night before last. A policeman spotted him here in town this morning, but lost him in a junkyard. I guess he got tired of waiting for Burgess and Tatum to do their job."

"Oh Lord!" Leaning forward, McCormick dropped his head in his hands. "I'm dead, Judge. If Drapier wants me that bad he'll get me. That guy wrote the book on how to be mean. He was serving life in prison because he robbed a bank and shot down four innocent by-standers. Then he-he went home, found his wife and another man and killed both of 'em with his bare hands. That's what they got him for first, and then someone identified him as the robber. He got away with over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and they never did find the money."

Hardcastle nodded thoughtfully. "That must've been what he used to pay Hagers and the other two. He must have someone on the

outside who he trusts and who knows where the money is. I bet if we find that person, we can find Drapier. C'mon, kid, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we're gonna go rat-hunting."

"Sleep!" McCormick exclaimed. "Forget it, Judge! I'm gonna sit here all night with a shotgun across my lap!"

"No, you're not," Hardcastle contradicted and grabbing McCormick's arm, pulled him to his feet. "You're gonna go to bed in one of the guest rooms and you're gonna get some sleep, and tomorrow you're gonna be all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and we can get some work done. Now, move it!"

McCormick gave in reluctantly. "All right, Judge, but if I get blown away in my sleep, I'm going to come back and haunt you." He started toward the door. "I'm gonna go get my pajamas and don't you dare turn out these lights till I get back."

"Well, hurry it up," Hardcastle growled. "I'm not staying awake all night."

He was halfway up the stairs when McCormick swung the front door open and froze. "Uh-Judge. Yo, Judge. We-uh-we got a problem here."

"Hello, twin." Tatum waved McCormick back with his gun and stepped through the door. "Get down here, Hardcastle!" he demanded.

Turning slowly, Hardcastle stared at him a moment, then started back down the steps. On the last one, he launched himself at Tatum, roaring, "You're the one!"

Tatum staggered backwards under the impact, and brought the butt of his gun down hard on the back of Hardcastle's head.

Catching him as he fell, McCormick lowered the unconscious judge gently to the floor, cradling his head in his lap. Looking up, he hissed between clenched teeth, "You filthy bastard! You're gonna pay for everything you've done to him!"

"No, twin, you got that wrong," Tatum sneered. "It's Hardcastle who's gonna pay if he cares anything about you. Now, get him on his feet before I blow a hole in him!" he demanded.

The look McCormick threw Tatum was one of cold fury. Slapping Hardcastle's face gently, he whispered, "C'mon, Judge, wake up."

Hardcastle's head moved slightly and his eyes fluttered, then opened. "Damn," he groaned and held his head as McCormick helped him sit up.

"Hardcase, what the hell did you think you were doing?" Mark demanded low. "You idiot, you tryin' to get yourself killed?"

Hooking his arm under Hardcastle's shoulder, he helped him to his feet. "Now, behave yourself," he pleaded.

"Do as he says, Hardcase, and you'll save yourself a lot of grief," Tatum promised. Waving his gun, he ordered, "Get in the living room."

With Hardcastle still leaning heavily on him, McCormick led the way into the room and lowered himself and the Judge to the sofa.

Looking up, Hardcastle's craggy face hardened. "What the hell you want, Tatum?"

"Your money!" the double shot back. "Tomorrow morning, Judge, you and me are going to the bank and we're gonna make a hefty withdrawal--fifty thousand dollars. My twin's gonna stay here as insurance for you doing exactly like I tell you to."

"And what's to stop me from calling the police while you're gone?" McCormick retorted.

Reaching into the pocket of his jacket, Tatum pulled out a cylindrical object and held it up. "This little baby'll do the job," he grinned.

McCormick's eyes widened as they fell on a stick of dynamite strapped to a small digital device.

"Sorry, buddy-boy, but you're gonna be tied up in the morning," Tatum sneered. "With this bomb taped to your chest and set for an hour detonation, the Judge had better make no mistakes at that bank."

"You know you'll never get away with this," Hardcastle growled.

"Oh yeah, I will," Tatum shot back, "because I'm smart, Judge. I got this whole thing under control."

"If you're so smart, have you ever figured out who hired you to do this job?" McCormick asked sarcastically. "Who paid for your plastic surgery and that red Coyote?"

Tatum shrugged. "What difference does it make? As soon as I got involved in this, I knew it was too good an opportunity to pass up. Burgess didn't know it yet, but I had plans for him. With Hardcastle dead and you in prison, Burgess could've become the judge and nobody would've been the wiser. Then he could've sold off everything, and we would've split the money." Standing behind the sofa, Tatum pressed the gun to McCormick's head just behind his ear, the cold barrel sending a chill up Mark's spine. "But you messed all that up, didn't you, twin?" Tatum snarled. "You got Burgess arrested, so I had to change my plans and hit Hardcase up for fifty grand. It's not as much as I wanted, but that plus what I got from those robberies oughtta do me just fine on some nice little island in the Caribbean."

With the gun against his head, McCormick could not afford to make any wrong moves, and a glance at Hardcastle out of the corner of his eye showed the Judge sitting stiffly beside him, also obviously unwilling to take any chances as long as the weapon was in that position.

Tatum nudged McCormick's head slightly with the gun barrel. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" he laughed.

"No, I was just thinking about the guy you double-crossed," McCormick returned casually. "If I were you, Tatum, I don't think I'd go to a little island in the Caribbean. I think I'd try to get lost in the Antarctic, or maybe book passage on the shuttle because that's how far you're gonna have to go to keep Louie Drapier from finding you."

"Louie Drapier!"

McCormick no longer felt the gun against his head, and he and Hardcastle turned slowly to see Tatum standing with the weapon held loosely in his grasp, an expression of undisguised fear on his face.

"Oh, you know the guy?" McCormick asked innocently.

"Uh-yeah, yeah. I-uh-I-I served some time with him up in Attica," Tatum stuttered.

"McCormick didn't tell you the worst of it," Hardcastle smiled grimly. "Drapier broke out of prison two days ago and was spotted here in town this morning. If he's got the connections to be able to hire you and Burgess from behind a prison wall, then you can bet he's also heard about your double-cross. Looks like he's decided to do something about it."

Tatum stepped back, his gun slowly falling to his side. "I gotta-I gotta think," he mumbled.

"I lay you odds Drapier is one very angry man right now," McCormick surmised.

"Shut up!" Tatum screamed. "Just shut up! I-I gotta figure something out." He was either a stupid man or just not thinking clearly at the moment, for he turned his back on his prisoners and began mumbling softly to himself.

Not one to waste time questioning his good fortune, McCormick took advantage of the situation immediately. Standing up on the sofa, he launched himself over the back of it, he and Tatum going down in a wild confusion of arms and legs.

Hardcastle stood on his knees on the sofa, becoming a one-man cheering section. "C'mon, kid, hit him! Get his gun!" Ducking his head, he groaned, "Ow! C'mon, McCormick, at least act like you know how to fight!"

They were the strangest pair of combatants Hardcastle had ever seen. Physically identical, the only way he could tell them apart was by their shirts--his McCormick had on a pale-yellow one but the imposter was wearing a blue T-shirt.

Hardcastle kept rooting his side on. "Yeah, kid, that's it! You got him! Now, grab the gun! Grab the gun!!" He started to move backward off the sofa, but froze as he felt something small and hard suddenly pressing into his back.

McCormick grabbed the weapon and leveled it at Tatum. "Get up!" he demanded breathlessly.

Staggering to his feet, Tatum stared past him, his eyes widening in shock. At first McCormick thought the double was trying to pull one of the oldest tricks in the book, but suddenly noting the silence behind him, he yelled over his shoulder, "Judge!"

"Kid, I think you better turn around," Hardcastle answered quietly.

Moving so he could keep an eye on Tatum, McCormick turned, inhaling sharply as his eyes met those of the man holding a gun to Hardcastle's head.

"Drapier!"

"Hello, Skid." A grin spread across Drapier's face. "With all the crime on the streets these days, you'd think a judge would know better'n to leave his door unlocked."

McCormick raised his gun slowly. "Let him go," he demanded. "I don't know what you want with me, but the Judge doesn't have anything to do with it. Turn him loose!"

"And have you blow a hole in me?" Drapier shot back. "Forget it, Skid. Now, drop your gun!"

"No, McCormick!" Hardcastle tried to pull away from the massive arm hooked around his neck. "This is no time to be squeamish, kid! Shoot him!"

Drapier shook his head. "I wouldn't try that. Even if you managed to hit me instead of your judge here, I'd still be able to get off one shot and with a Magnum at this close range, it'd blow his brains all over this room."

The gun in Mark's hand began to tremble, but his voice was firm and cold as ice. "Drapier, you hurt the Judge and I'll empty this gun in you before you can hit the floor."

"Yeah, Skid, I believe you would," Drapier replied casually, "but you see, you got a problem here. Me, I'm not afraid to die, so your threats aren't any good. Now, you may not believe that, but I'm willin' to bet you won't risk Hardcastle's life just to find out if I'm lyin'."

McCormick shook his head. "No bet," he whispered and slowly lowered the gun.

"Now, drop it on the floor and step back."

McCormick did so, and releasing his hold, Drapier pushed Hardcastle aside.

Tatum started to make a move for the gun, promising, "I'll take care of him for you. Me and my twin here have a score to settle."

"Forget it!" Drapier fired, putting a bullet hole in the floor between Tatum and the weapon. "Touch that gun and you'll be needing another face because I'll blow that'un off!"

Tatum froze, his eyes growing wide with terror.

"Kick that gun over here!" Drapier demanded.

Tatum did so, then began stammering, "L-Look, you got no cause to be angry at me, Louie. You hired-You hired me to put McCormick back in prison, and that-that's what I was workin' on."

"Like hell you were!" Drapier yelled. "You were working on linin' your pockets! I know all about the double-cross, Tatum! Why the hell do you think I broke outta prison? McCormick wasn't my only reason. I don't like people who take my money, then betray me!"

"I-I didn't--honest," Tatum pleaded, swiftly turning into a sniveling piece of humanity. "I wouldn't-I wouldn't double-cross you, Louie--I swear!"

McCormick turned his back on his double, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's. "This is disgusting," he muttered.

Hardcastle nodded. "He may look like you, kid, but he sure as hell don't act like ya."

Drapier had obviously had enough, too. "Tatum, sit down and shut up before I waste you right here!"

The double did as he was told, becoming a cringing lump on the sofa cushion.

Drapier's gun moved to cover McCormick. "Okay, Skid, I want that information and I want it now."

McCormick's eyes widened. "Don't you think it'd make it easier if you told me what the hell you're talking about?"

"Don't play games with me," Drapier shot back. "I still owe you for that broken nose. Believe me, I can fix it so a wheelchair'll be your personal companion for life."

McCormick swallowed hard, knowing Drapier was quite capable of backing up his threat. "Look, man, I have no idea what you're talking about. If you think I've got some kind of information, why didn't you come after it sooner than this?"

"Because I didn't know you had it until three months ago," Drapier retorted. "That's when ol' man Hidalgo had a heart attack. Just before he died, he whispered to me, 'Tell Skid the money's his. He knows where it's at'."

McCormick stared at him in horror. "Pedro Hidalgo said that?"

"Word for word, and don't try to act so damned innocent because that was a deathbed statement."

McCormick shook his head in disbelief. "You must've misunderstood him, Drapier. Ol' Pedro never told me anything like that. All he ever talked about was his wife--'dear Maria, bless her soul' was what he was always saying."

Drapier stepped forward, raising his Magnum so it was pressing into McCormick's throat just below his Adam's Apple. "Tell me where that gold is, Skid, or I'm gonna blow your head off."

"Excuse me for interrupting your fun here," Hardcastle snapped, "but would somebody mind tellin' me what the hell's goin' on here? Who's this Hidalgo character and what's this bit about gold?"

Drapier lowered his weapon and nodded to McCormick. "Go ahead, Skid, tell him and while you're at it, tell me where the gold is."

McCormick tried to clear his parched throat. "Uh, Pedro robbed a-uh-an armored car back in '67, killed both guards, and got away with over fifty thousand in gold. The-The police finally caught up with him and he was sentenced to life in prison, but the gold was never found. That's why he was always talking about his wife's death. He felt guilty about it because when Maria heard what he had done, she had a heart attack and died."

"Tell him the rest," Drapier demanded. "Tell him what the gold's worth now on the open market."

McCormick shrugged. "I haven't any idea."

"I do," Drapier snarled. "It's worth over six hundred thousand dollars." He grabbed McCormick by the shirt and pulled him close, the Magnum at his temple. "And that, Skid, is why you're gonna tell me where I can find that gold."

"Like hell, too!" McCormick retorted, his anger getting the better of his common sense. "Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you! And if you think you can come barging in here and terrorize us, then you better think again, Mister!"

Draper made a quick move, the Magnum burying itself in McCormick's stomach.

He doubled over in pain, the Judge catching him before his knees collapsed beneath him. Still supporting him, Hardcastle yelled over his head, "Drapier, you're just like every other crook--you're a damned jackass!"

Still doubled over, McCormick tried to grab his arm. "J-Judge, don't!" he gasped.

Ignoring him, Hardcastle growled, "If the kid knew where that gold was, he would've turned it in to the cops a long time ago!"

Drapier laughed harshly. "Skid's just like the rest of us. He wouldn't have given up that kind of money."

"Okay, if that's true, why's he livin' with me?" Hardcastle demanded. "If he knew where that gold was, why doesn't he have a place of his own, or why isn't he at the Riveria or off in the Bahamas?"

"Because Skid's a fool!" Reaching out, Drapier grabbed McCormick's arm, jerking him away from the Judge's grasp. Hardcastle started to lunge forward and Drapier leveled the gun at his chest. "Breathe, old man, and I blow a hole in you!"

"Judge, don't do it!" McCormick begged.

Hardcastle relaxed and Drapier nodded in satisfaction. "Wise decision, Hardcase. You get to live a while longer." Jerking McCormick around, he twisted his arm behind his back. "All right, I'm tired of playing around. I want that information--now!"

"I can't tell you what I don't know!" Mark hissed between clenched teeth.

"You're lyin'!" McCormick barely stifled a scream of pain as Drapier twisted his arm higher. "I'm gonna break every bone in your body, punk, one at a time, until you tell me what I wanna know." His eyes fell on an object on the floor which had fallen from Tatum's pocket when he and McCormick were scuffling, and releasing Mark, Drapier shoved him forward into Hardcastle's arms. "No, I got a better idea," he grinned and waved his gun at Tatum who was still sitting wide-eyed on the sofa. "Nice of you to bring along a bomb, Tatum. Now, pick it up!"

Moving quickly, Tatum retrieved the device and Drapier

motioned at McCormick with his gun. "Move away from Hardcase."

"Kid--"

McCormick squeezed his arm. "It's okay," he whispered softly. Stepping away from Hardcastle, he sighed, "Okay, what now?"

"Sit down in that straight chair," Drapier demanded. "Tatum, get the cords off those lamps and tie his hands and feet."

Tatum did so quickly and Drapier ordered, "Now, tape the bomb to his chest."

McCormick's eyes widened as Tatum ripped open his shirt and began securing the device to his bare chest. Sucking in his breath, Mark looked up, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's. The look of fear in them did nothing to alleviate his own mounting terror.

The bomb securely taped, Tatum started to straighten. "What detonation time you want me to set it for?"

"I'll take care of that little matter myself," Draper decided and brought the gun down hard on the back of Tatum's head. He collapsed to the floor in a crumpled heap, and Drapier snarled, "You should've known better than to try to double-cross me. Nobody gets that chance more than once."

Keeping one eye on Hardcastle, Drapier leaned over and punched in two numbers on the digital readout, then pushed another button to begin countdown. He straightened, his eyes narrowing ominously. "You got ten minutes to live, Skid. If you don't give me that info, you and this half of the room'll be blown to hell. But don't worry, you'll see your Judge again soon because if you die, I'm blowin' his head off."

Grabbing Hardcastle's arm, Drapier forced him backward to the door of the room, and glanced at his watch. "Nine minutes and twenty-one seconds," he called out.

McCormick didn't need to be told the time. Looking down, he could see the bright red numbers on his chest ticking off the last few minutes of his life.

"Talk to me, Skid!" Drapier demanded.

"Damn it, I can't!" McCormick yelled back. "I don't know anything, Drapier! When're you gonna believe that?"

"When I see pieces of your body all over the room! Then it'll be too late, won't it?" Drapier looked down. "You've got eight minutes, thirty-seven seconds!"

"Go to hell!" McCormick retorted.

Jerking Hardcastle in front of him, Drapier placed the gun at his temple. "Two seconds after you die, so does Hardcastle. Word is you're like a son to the Judge here. Is that what you want, Skid? You wanna kill your 'father'?"

McCormick struggled with his bonds. "Let him go!"

"Tell me where the gold is!" Drapier snarled. "I got nothing to lose, Skid. I spent every cent of that hundred and fifty thousand I stole hiring Hagers and those other two fools, and paying someone to break me outta prison. I need money and I need it now!"

McCormick glanced down at the readout. Seven minutes, fifty-two seconds. Grasping at straws, he yelled, "Okay, Drapier! Take this bomb off me and I'll show you where the gold is!"

"Forget it!" Drapier growled. "You tell me!"

"You'll never find it."

"I'll take my chances."

McCormick sucked in his breath. "All right, it's at the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco." He began talking fast. "At the back of the park is an old oak tree. The gold is buried twenty paces east of its trunk. Now, get this damned bomb off me!"

Drapier laughed harshly. "No way. You and the Judge are still gonna die. All I gotta do is wait another..." he glanced at his watch, "...six and a half minutes."

McCormick looked down at his own readout and cringed. A sound from across the room caused his head to jerk up quickly and he gasped, "Judge! What's wrong?"

Hardcastle was holding his chest with both hands, his breathing shallow and labored. He made a wheezing sound and his knees started to buckle beneath him.

"Oh God! Help him, Drapier!" McCormick pleaded. "He's having a heart attack!"

Releasing Hardcastle, Drapier stepped back and watched the Judge collapse in a motionless heap on the floor. "Well, well," he shrugged, "the ol' goat saved me a bullet."

McCormick started struggling with his bonds. "I'll kill you!" he screamed.

"I don't think so," Drapier grinned and started to step over Hardcastle's prone body. "You got five minutes, twenty-four seconds, Skid."

A hand shot up to close around Drapier's ankle, and with a yank, Hardcastle jerked him off his feet. Both men sprawled on

the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, and grabbing for the hand holding the gun, Hardcastle slammed Drapier's knuckles hard against the door facing. Drapier roared in pain, the gun skidding across the hardwood floor and coming to a stop under the desk in the living room.

It was McCormick's turn to become the rooting section and he did so in an hysterical voice. "Hit him, Judge! Hurry up! I got four minutes and forty-nine seconds left here!"

They were on their feet, Drapier side-stepping a blow, and simultaneously delivering one to Hardcastle's midriff. He started to follow it with an uppercut, but the Judge ducked, his fist hitting Drapier with a powerful blow to the shoulder. Drapier staggered backward and they began trading punches.

Both seemed pretty evenly matched. Hardcastle had a good twenty years on the escaped con, but he had kept himself in top physical condition, while Drapier, although muscular, had not used his muscles in prison except against those who were much smaller than him.

McCormick watched the fight anxiously, quickly working himself into a frenzy. "Hit him! Harder! That's it, hit him again! For God's sake, hurry up!!"

"McCormick, will you shut up!" Hardcastle roared.

"I can't! I'm dying over here! Three minutes and fifty-one seconds!"

Hardcastle took a vicious blow that caused him to sprawl backwards on the staircase. Drapier started to pounce on him, but the Judge drove a fist upward, smashing it into the convict's chin. He fell back dazed, and jumping to his feet, Hardcastle headed for the door. "Hold on, kid! I'm coming!"

"Behind you!" McCormick screamed.

Drapier brought him to the floor hard with a flying tackle. Having no compunction about fighting dirty if the other guy was doing the same, Hardcastle rolled over quickly, bringing his knee up and slamming it into a vital area.

Drapier screamed and before he could recover, Hardcastle smashed a fist into his nose, feeling the bones crack under his knuckles, then giving the convict a shove backward, he started crawling on his hands and knees across the room.

Catching movement from the corner of his eye, McCormick looked down beside him and saw Tatum beginning to stir. "Judge, Tatum's waking up!" he yelled and glanced down at the readout, "and I've got only two minutes and thirty-nine seconds! Hurry!"

Drapier grabbed his ankle and Hardcastle kicked at the broad shoulder with his other leg, trying to break his hold. Drapier

released him and staggered to his feet, delivering a vicious kick to Hardcastle's side. Rolling into the desk, Hardcastle pulled himself up and charged Drapier. The convict grabbed him in a bearhug and Hardcastle struggled a moment, then with a roar, slammed the palms of his hands against Drapier's ears. The convict screamed and releasing his hold, stumbled sideways, knocking over a table. Hardcastle moved in, delivering a one-two punch, then a third that sent Drapier flying over the back of the sofa.

Tatum had been watching the fight closely and now that he saw Drapier was down for the count, he scrambled to his feet.

"Judge, watch out!" McCormick yelled.

Hardcastle whirled around, but Tatum had no interest in him. He had seen his chance for escape and was taking advantage of it.

Hardcastle made a move as if to chase him, and McCormick screamed frantically, "No, Judge! The bomb! The bomb!"

Running to his side, Hardcastle frowned at the two colored wires leading from the dynamite to the detonation device, and grabbing both, he gave a swift jerk.

McCormick clamped his eyes shut, but when he didn't feel himself being blown into a million little pieces, he opened them slowly. "Damn, Judge! That's not the way to defuse a bomb!" he complained in a high-pitched voice.

"Hey, kid, did you really want me to take the time to figure it out?" Hardcastle growled and stared pointedly at the readout.

McCormick looked down and closing his eyes again, groaned, "Oh God, four seconds. I'm gonna be sick."

"No, you aren't," Hardcastle retorted and ripped the tape from his chest, causing McCormick to yelp in pain. Untying him quickly, Hardcastle reminded him. "Tonto's still got a bad man to catch. You gonna let Tatum get away?"

McCormick was galvanized to action. Jumping to his feet, he flung off what was left of his torn shirt, and ran out the door. The other Coyote was disappearing down the drive and diving into his own car, McCormick roared from the front of the house, squealing his tires and leaving a trail of curved rubber in his wake.

Hardcastle remained behind long enough to grab a pair of handcuffs from his desk and fasten Drapier's wrist to the claw leg of the heavy piece of furniture, then running out to the truck, he took off after the Coyotes.

When he finally spotted the cars several hundred yards down the road, one was gaining on the other, while the driver in front was weaving back and forth, trying to prevent his pursuer from passing.

Both drivers were good and the cars looked identical, but it soon became obvious that under the hood, there was still only one Coyote. Smiling grimly, Hardcastle muttered, "C'mon, kid, you can do it. The guy's got nothing, so quit foolin' around."

Both cars disappeared around a sharp curve, and when Hardcastle had them in sight again, they were side by side on the narrow road, first one, then the other bumping his neighbor.

"Damn!" Hardcastle growled softly. "Which one's McCormick?"

In only minutes, he had the opportunity to find out. With his heart in his throat, Hardcastle watched the two cars try to maneuver "neck-to-neck" around a particularly vicious curve.

The Judge held his breath. The one on the left wasn't going to make it!

The driver weaved slightly, then obviously lost control of the car altogether. The Coyote careened to the outside of the road, then became a bright red airplane, sailing through the air as if in slow-motion. Dipping below the edge of the cliff, it was gone.

The other Coyote came to a screeching halt several yards down the road, then backing slowly to the edge of the cliff, it stopped, the driver remaining inside.

Hardcastle slammed on his brakes and swerved, coming to a gravel-spitting stop. Jumping from the truck, he ran to the edge of the cliff, frowning down at what was once a beautiful car, now engulfed in flames.

He turned slowly, the lump in his throat making it difficult to utter the name, "M-Mark?"

The young man climbed from the vehicle. "Judge, I don't wanna look."

Hardcastle sucked in his breath sharply. This McCormick had on no shirt, yet it would've been easy for Tatum to have removed his T-shirt before he backed up. Desperately wanting to believe, but remembering how he had been fooled before, Hardcastle walked towards him and stopping, scrutinized the youthful features, trying to discover some clue. "McCormick?" he asked hesitantly. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me, Judge."

Hardcastle continued to stare. "How can I know for sure?"

McCormick's eyes widened a moment, then he sighed, "Yeah, I guess after all this..." He frowned in thought, then asked, "Remember our little cave up in Oregon, Judge?"*

*"She's Not Deep, But She Sure Runs Fast"

Hardcastle nodded slowly.

"Well," McCormick slung an arm around his shoulders and started walking, "I've been curious about something ever since that trip. Just what the hell are your two regrets?"

Hardcastle stopped and stared at him a moment, then his eyes crinkled at the corners, a sure sign that a grin was there that he was determined to keep hidden. "You're one of 'em, kid," he shot back. "I regret not having handcuffed you to the staircase the first day you walked into the house. If I had, then you couldn't get into so damned much trouble!"

"Trouble! Me?" McCormick exclaimed. "Hey look, Judge, it wasn't my fault--"

"And who the hell taught you to drive?" Hardcastle roared. "You could've killed yourself!"

"And who taught you how to fight?" McCormick retorted. "Talking about almost getting me killed!"

"I'd like to have seen you do any better!" Hardcastle yelled. "I thought I did pretty damned good for an old man!"

McCormick smiled. "I don't know about that, Judge. I wasn't watching an old man fight." His eyes met Hardcastle's. "Thanks, Judge, not only for saving my life, but for believing in me."

Hardcastle snorted. "Kid, you thank your barber or the teller down at the bank. You don't thank me. I always have an ulterior motive for what I do."

"Like wanting to keep cheap labor?" McCormick grinned.

"You got it, Tonto." Slung an arm around McCormick's bare shoulders, Hardcastle ordered softly, "C'mon, let's go home and get that trash outta the living room."

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

Sinking into the chair by the pool, McCormick stretched his legs out before him and released a sign of satisfaction. "Ohhh, this feels great, Judge. No doubles, no Drapier, just doughnuts and coffee and lots of relaxation. Man, it feels good to have this case wrapped up."

Lowering his paper, Hardcastle reached for his cup of coffee while commenting in a casual tone, "It's not wrapped up yet, McCormick."

The young man threw him a startled look. "What do you mean?"

Folding the paper, Hardcastle laid it on the table between them. "We still got a piece missing," he explained, "the piece that started all this mess. We still don't know where the gold is."

"Oh that." McCormick relaxed. "Well, I guess we'll never know the answer to that. The secret died with ol' Pedro."

Hardcastle shook his head. "I don't believe so. I think Drapier was right--Pedro Hidalgo did tell you where the gold is hidden."

McCormick turned a look of hurt and shock on him. "Good God, Judge! You believed me with those robberies and all, and now you're calling me a liar?"

Hardcastle smiled. "No, kid, I'm not callin' you a liar. I think this Hidalgo guy told you where the gold is hidden, and you just didn't know it, still don't, obviously."

"But he didn't tell me, Judge," McCormick insisted. "All he ever talked about was Maria."

Hardcastle's eyes met his. "Did Pedro by any chance mention where his wife is buried?"

"Uh--yeah." McCormick frowned in thought. "It was the name of a flower. Rose. Uh--Rosebud? No. Rosewood?"

"Rosemont?" Hardcastle offered.

"Yeah, yeah, that's it! A little cemetery just outside of the city." McCormick threw him a puzzled look. "What's that got to do with the gold?"

Hardcastle broke into a grin. "Remember your friend, Bill Bauer, and that sixteen million?"*

*"The Yankee Clipper"

McCormick's eyes widened. "You mean the grave? Pedro buried the gold in the grave?"

"Now yer cookin'," Hardcastle grinned.

"Aw man!" Leaning over, McCormick dropped his head in his hands. "Over half a million in gold," he groaned. "I knew where it was and I didn't know it. Damn! You have any idea what I would've done with that gold?"

Hardcastle leaned over and patted him on the back. "Yeah, kiddo. You would've turned it over to the police."

McCormick raised his head enough to throw Hardcastle a look of disgust. "Judge, I hate it when you're right."

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

It took three days for the exhumation order to go through, but as it turned out, the body didn't need to be exhumed at all. When the workers dug into the grave and cleared away the dirt, there on top of the coffin in a neat stack, were the gold bars, six of them in all, the dull yellow showing through the mud caked to their sides.

The small group of people closed in around the grave, staring at the first bar handed up to Lieutenant Harper. Wiping it off with a rag, he looked up and grinned, "Well, there you are, Mark. You just helped us find a mini Fort Knox."

"Can I hold it?" McCormick asked eagerly.

Harper handed the gold bar to him and McCormick's hands dropped six inches. "Damn!" he exclaimed. "It's heavy!"

"No wonder," Harper smiled. "You're holding a little over a hundred thousand dollars there."

"Doesn't look it." McCormick stared at the bar, its surface dulled by the years it had spent underground. "I didn't know a hundred thousand dollars could look so ugly."

The Brink's, Inc. security official stepped up beside him and hastily took the bar from his grasp. "Young man, gold is never ugly," he admonished.

"Naw, I guess not, Mr. Appleton," McCormick grinned.

Smiling his forgiveness, Appleton reached into his pocket and pulled out an official-looking document. "I have good news for you, Mr. McCormick. I'm sure you're unaware of the fact that there is a ten percent finder's fee on this gold."

McCormick stared at him, wide-eyed. "T-Ten percent," he stammered. "That's-That's..." Suddenly he began jumping up and down, yelling at the top of his lungs. "I'm rich! I'm rich!" He grabbed Hardcastle in a bearhug. "That's over sixty thousand dollars! I'm rich, Judge!"

Hardcastle patted him on the back, beaming proudly. "Congratulations, kid. See, I told you if you do the right thing, you'll get rewarded for it."

McCormick drew back and began pumping Hardcastle's hand. "Thanks, Judge! The one time I listened to your advice, and now I'm rich!"

Appleton touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Uh, excuse-excuse me, Mr. McCormick. I think-I think you're slightly confused. You see, in-in this particular case, the ten percent finder's fee is based on the value of the gold at the time it was stolen."

"The-The time it was stolen?" McCormick repeated slowly. "But that's-that's only..." Awww, Judge." Releasing Hardcastle's hand, McCormick fell against his shoulder, groaning.

"Now, now, c'mon kid, don't take it so hard," Hardcastle coaxed. "You still get somewhere in the neighborhood of five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand two hundred eighty-four dollars and thirty-six cents to be precise," Appleton recited.

McCormick drew back and sighed, "Well, that's five thousand two hundred eighty-four dollars and thirty-six cents I didn't have ten minutes ago." He broke into a grin. "Hey, I'll get some of those fancy seat covers for the Coyote, and I'll buy me a waterbed, and-and maybe a home computer, and a new stereo, the loudest one they've got on the market, and one of those big-screen TVs, and... Hey, Hardcase, what do you think?"

"I think you oughtta put that money in the bank," Hardcastle suggested firmly.

"Aw, Judge."

"Look, how do you think I got rich?" Hardcastle admonished.

"You didn't; your wife did--remember?" McCormick shot back. "And besides, it's my money, Judge, and I don't wanna keep it; I wanna spend it."

"Fine, fine." Hardcastle held up his hands. "Go ahead and do as you please," he growled and headed towards the truck.

"Aw, c'mon, Judge." McCormick chased after him. "Okay, okay, how about spending just half of it? Huh? How about that?"

Hardcastle kept walking. "Like you said, kid, it's your money."

"All right, how about-how about a fourth of it?" McCormick persisted. "I'll put the rest in the bank, I promise."

"Do what you want with it," Hardcastle shot over his shoulder.

"C'mon, Judge, don't do this to me," McCormick groaned. "A hundred dollars. Just let me have a hundred, okay? Please, Judge, please, please, please..."