

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

McCormick watched the approaching vehicle a few seconds longer, then went inside to set a pot of coffee on the stones in the fireplace. He didn't care what kind of mood the Judge was in; he was just glad he was safe. His mind had been playing tricks on him the entire day, imagining all kinds of horrible things that might've happened to Hardcastle while he was shut up here alone and helpless.

The truck came to a screeching halt outside the cabin, and breaking into a grin, McCormick grabbed up an auto racing magazine the Judge had thoughtfully packed, and plopping down in a chair, he became totally engrossed in one of the articles. He'd play it cool, he decided, and not let Hardcastle know he'd been on pins and needles for the past two days.

He heard footsteps on the wooden porch, then jumped as the door was suddenly kicked open, hitting the wall with a resounding bang that caused it to sag askew, its upper hinge snapping.

McCormick rose slowly to his feet. "Judge! What's wrong? And where the hell you been? I've been worried sick about you!"

Growling in reply, Hardcastle stalked across the room, his last step in front of McCormick followed by a blow that sent the young man flying backward over the chair.

McCormick laid there a moment, staring up at Hardcastle in shock.

Except for the red welt along one jaw, the craggy face was white as a sheet, the blue eyes burning as if caught in a fever. "Get up!" he roared. "Damn it, get on your feet!"

McCormick's eyes widened at the tone of fury. "W-What is it, Judge? Did I do something wrong? For God's sake, tell me, and I'll-and I'll apologize or-or whatever you want."

"I said, get up!!" Hardcastle yelled. "Let's see how much guts you got when my hands aren't tied! Where the hell's your gun? Maybe you'd like to 'waste' a bullet on a decrepit old man now!"

Using the overturned chair as a support, McCormick staggered slowly to his feet. "Judge, have you gone off your rocker?" he asked in a shocked tone. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Like hell you don't!" Hardcastle roared, and kicking at

the chair between them, he grabbed McCormick's collar with one hand and drove a fist into his stomach with the other. McCormick doubled over in pain and Hardcastle followed the blow with an uppercut which sent him reeling into the wall.

Hugging the rough wood, McCormick gasped for breath. "Judge, damn it, what're you doing? What's gotten into you?"

"C'mon, fight like a man, if there's any manhood left in you, you sniveling coward!" Hardcastle growled. "I told you I'd find you! No one calls me a bastard, especially a punk like you!"

He started towards McCormick, and Mark backed away quickly, still using the wall as a support. "Don't you hit me again," he warned, pointing a trembling finger at Hardcastle. "Now, I didn't do anything to cause you to come storming in here like Gunga Din. I don't know what the hell happened, but--"

"You know damned well what happened!" Hardcastle shouted. "I gave you everything, McCormick--a chance at a new life, a roof over your head and food in your belly, and something I hadn't given anyone in a long time--my love! And what'd you do? You threw it back in my face! Made a mockery of it! You walked into my house and robbed me, slugged me with a gun, and showed me what an old fool I'd been! When you said you hadn't committed those robberies, I believed you. No, I thought, not the kid I'd grown to love like my own son. But you've been lying to me from the day you walked into my house!" Grabbing McCormick by the collar with both hands, Hardcastle slammed him hard against the wall. "C'mon, damn you! Fight me like a man!"

McCormick was staring at him in horror, his head moving back and forth slowly. "Judge, I didn't do it!" he denied, panic replacing the anger in his voice. "I swear I didn't do any of that! I haven't left this cabin. I wanted to because I was scared to death something had happened to you, but I didn't. I stayed here just like you told me to--I swear to God!"

With a roar, Hardcastle flung him across the room and into the back of the sofa. "It won't work this time, McCormick!" he snarled. "That innocent kid routine went sour! Now, get on your feet and fight me!"

"No!" McCormick used the back of the sofa to pull himself up, his eyes never leaving Hardcastle's angry face. "I won't-I won't fight you, Judge."

"Then I'll beat the hell outta ya!"

"Go ahead!" McCormick screamed back hoarsely, tears beginning to swell up in his eyes as he watched his whole world falling apart in front of him. "I don't give a damn what you do to me! Judge! Somebody's already tryin' to put me back in prison! It doesn't make any difference anymore! I'd rather you kill me with your bare hands than have to go back to that hellhole!"

Hardcastle delivered another blow that sent him flying into the side of the fireplace. This time it took McCormick longer to stagger to his feet, a cut over one eye causing blood to mingle with his tears. "Judge! Please! I didn't do it!" he pleaded in a choked voice. "What can I say to make you believe me?"

"Nothing!" Hardcastle yelled. "I may be a damned ol' fool, but I'm not blind, McCormick! You robbed me this morning and slugged me with a gun! What the hell, you think I don't know you when I see you! You were the one who laughed in my face and called me a stupid old man!"

"No! Oh God, Judge! I'd never call you that!" McCormick groaned. "It wasn't me, I swear!" The tears were flowing freely now and he swiped at them with the sleeve of his shirt. "Judge, you're all I've got," he whispered hoarsely. "You met my real father; you know how he is. But since I--since I came to live w-with you, I've been really happy. I was beginning to think, with your help, I could make some-something of myself. The last two years I've had everything I've ever-I've ever wanted all my life, and I wouldn't screw that up. I'd never steal from you, Judge, and I wouldn't steal from anyone else--I swear to God!"

Hardcastle glared at him, his fury gradually being replaced by a cold anger. "I believed you before, McCormick. When someone saw your damned car at the site of that robbery, and when I saw the pickup leave that night, you told me it had to be somebody else, and I believed you. I even lied for you to the police! I was doing everything to protect you because I thought, 'Naw, the kid wouldn't do something like that. He has too much affection for me!'"

"I-I do," McCormick stammered. "Judge, you've changed my whole life. You gave me an authority figure, someone I could look up to, someone I could respect and-and love. God, I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world!"

It was obvious Hardcastle was hurting now, his face twisted with pain as he roared, "Damn you, you're doing it again!" Grabbing McCormick, he slammed him against the wall, one hand closing around his throat. "You're lying to me, McCormick! It was your face I saw this morning and it was your voice that called me a bastard!"

McCormick tried to shake his head. "If you're-if you're gonna kill me, get it over with," he gasped. "I won't fight you, Judge. I can't-I can't hurt you, not even to save my own life."

Hardcastle's hand tightened around his throat and McCormick clamped his eyes shut, the tears forcing their way between his eyelids.

Suddenly Hardcastle's grip loosened, then fell away altogether and jerking McCormick away from the wall, he flung him across the room, causing him to go crashing over a low table.

Staggering to his feet, McCormick went down on one knee, then pulling himself up, he stumbled towards the open door. "God, I gotta get outta here!" he cried out in anguish.

"Get back here, you damned punk!" Hardcastle started after him, certain he was heading for the Coyote, but McCormick ran wildly around the side of the cabin and into the woods, forming an erratic path in the virgin snow.

Hardcastle chased after him, his thoughts racing chaotically. Something was very wrong here--McCormick wasn't that good an actor. He was not at all like he had been that morning. Where were the lines of cruelty that had twisted his mouth when he spoke those damning words? Where was that hard, cynical look that was in his eyes when he had obviously taken so much pleasure in showing an old man what a fool he had been? McCormick had a smart attitude sometimes, but Hardcastle had figured out long ago that he used it as a shield in an effort to keep anyone from seeing his true feelings. The McCormick who had robbed him that morning was so different from the McCormick he had known for the past two years and the one who he had just wanted to kill in the cabin.

He hadn't committed those crimes--Hardcastle was suddenly as sure of that as he was of his own innocence. But, God forgive him, he had driven McCormick to the edge, and now the kid thought he was alone. Unfortunately, Hardcastle knew the feeling all too well, and cursed himself for having caused it in another.

Glancing down at the blood on his knuckles, he groaned. What had he done? Nancy had always warned him to keep his temper under control, but this time he had ignored her advice. He had given his fury full rein, taking out his anger and hurt on McCormick while turning a deaf ear to his pleas of innocence. And now the kid was the one out of control, trying to escape to God knows where. He had disappeared almost immediately in the evergreens, but Hardcastle continued to follow the erratic stumbling path he left behind, glancing fearfully at the sun touching a distant mountain peak.

He had to find him before darkness set in. With no coat on and no way to build a fire, McCormick wouldn't last the night. Inhaling sharply, Hardcastle stepped up his pace. If anything happened to the kid because of him...

That was the last thing on McCormick's mind right then as he stumbled and fell, then pushing himself up, began running again. There was only one thought screaming in his brain--Hardcastle thought he was guilty! No matter who was trying to frame him, as long as the Judge believed in him, he had had faith that it would all work out. The Lone Ranger would never have let Tonto go to jail, and Hardcastle wouldn't let him. He'd slap him on the shoulder and growl, "Don't worry, kid. I'll take care of it."

McCormick fell again and lay there a moment, his hands closing around fistfuls of snow as hot tears stung his eyes. The illusion of safety had been ripped away and he was alone again, more so than he had ever been in his life because he had now had a taste of what it was like to be part of a family; that it was

a family of only two had made the ties even stronger. It had taken him awhile, but he had finally accepted the fact that he was loved for himself and not for what someone could get from him. He had known some time ago that the employer-employee bit was no longer applicable, if it had ever been, but he had not realized just how strong each of their feelings had grown until that day the Judge had told him he was going to die. McCormick remembered the fear that had seized his heart, much like the fear which claimed him now. There was more than one kind of death, and death of Hardcastle's love and trust hurt just as much as the death of his body.

Using an evergreen to help pull himself to his feet, McCormick leaned against the tree, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "What's the use?" he mumbled hoarsely. "There's nowhere to go."

"McCormick!!"

Whirling around, he saw Hardcastle charging towards him through the snow. "No, stay away from me!" he screamed, stumbling backward. "You're not taking me back, Judge! I'm not going back to prison for something I didn't do!"

"McCormick, don't run!" Hardcastle yelled.

"Keep away from me!" McCormick started backing away, quickly working himself into an hysterical frenzy. "I'm not going with you! I don't-I don't care if I die out here! I wanna die! Just go away! Go away and leave me alone!"

"Mark! Watch the log behind--"

Losing his footing, McCormick fell backward over an old tree laying across the path behind him.

Hardcastle ran towards him and, doubling up in a fetal position, McCormick covered his head with his arms. "Don't hit me," he pleaded in a pitiful tone. "Please don't hit me anymore."

"Aw God, kid, what've I done to you?" Hardcastle groaned. Kneeling beside McCormick, he gently pulled his arms down. "I'm not going to hit you again, I promise." With an arm around his shoulders, he helped him sit up. "C'mon, just take it easy, kid."

McCormick's body began to shake with ragged sobs. "Don't make me go back, Judge! Oh please, don't make me!"

Removing his coat quickly, Hardcastle wrapped it around the lean shoulders, then pressed the curly head against his chest. "It's okay, Mark. You're gonna be all right," he mumbled.

"I-I didn't do it," McCormick sobbed, a hand coming up and clutching the pocket of Hardcastle's shirt. "I ain't no robber, Judge."

"I know, kid, I know." Hardcastle rubbed his back vigorously. "And I'm damned sorry this whole thing ever happened." Deciding further apologies could wait, he coaxed McCormick to his feet. "C'mon, we've gotta get back to the cabin before it gets dark. Now here, take a deep breath." McCormick did so, and he urged again, "Okay, another one. Now, can you walk?"

His sobs ceasing, McCormick nodded slowly.

"Here, let's get this coat on ya."

"But you haven't--"

Hardcastle cut short his protest. "Don't argue with me, kid. Stick your arm in there." McCormick did as he was told, and Hardcastle zipped the coat up to his neck.

"It's a little big," McCormick commented shakily.

"You'll grow into it," Hardcastle smiled, and hooking an arm under McCormick's shoulder, he ordered, "Let's get back to the cabin before we freeze our tails off."

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

Putting another log on the fire, Hardcastle returned to the chair facing McCormick's and began dabbing at the cut over his eye with a wet cloth. "You warmed up yet?" he asked gruffly, pulling the blanket tighter around McCormick. "You want some more cover?"

"No, I'm fine." McCormick had ceased his shivering several minutes ago.

"Then how about--"

Reaching from under the blanket, McCormick grasped his wrist. "Judge, stop it," he ordered softly. "Don't do this to yourself. None of this was your fault."

"Then who the hell's was it?" Hardcastle demanded. "I didn't see anyone else here when I was beating the hell outta you." He frowned. "You sure your nose isn't broken?"

McCormick wrinkled it and smiled despite the pain in his jaw. "It's okay, Judge, really."

"What about your ribs?"

"They're fine, too," McCormick assured him.

"Your teeth! Damn it, I bet I broke some of your teeth! Open your mouth and let me see," Hardcastle ordered.

"Judge!" McCormick pulled away gently from his grasp. "I'm okay. Nothing's broken, I promise you."

"Well, maybe not, but you're a helluva mess. And I can't even take a chance on takin' you to the doctor; somebody might recognize you." Hardcastle's eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. "God, kid, I'm sorry I did this to you."

McCormick leaned forward quickly, gripping his shoulder. "You don't need to apologize, Judge. It wasn't your fault," he repeated earnestly.

"McCormick, don't try to pacify me!" Hardcastle shot back, angry at himself. "I came chargin' in here like a raging bull. I wouldn't listen when you were trying to tell me you were innocent; instead, I started knockin' you all over the room. God, kid, I might've killed you!" Turning abruptly in his chair, Hardcastle stared into the fire, the flames causing his eyes to gleam brightly. "How do I apologize for something like that?" he demanded in a choked voice.

McCormick had never seen the Judge hurting as much as he was now, and desperate to help him, he dropped the blanket from his shoulders and sliding off the sofa to his knees beside Hardcastle's chair, he laid a hand on his arm. "Judge, don't crucify yourself like this," he pleaded in a hoarse whisper. "If anyone ever had a reason for doing something like this, you did. I would've acted the same way if I had thought that guy was you. God, from what you told me, I don't see how you can believe me even now. You said he looked and sounded exactly like me, and I can believe every word of that because it's hard to fool you. Damn, Judge, he drives a red Coyote with my license plate and even knew about the wall safe and he had the combi--nation..." His voice faded away and he inhaled sharply. "Judge, you know what I'm doin'? I'm putting my head in a noose here. Nobody else could've known that combination. You and me are the only two who had it, and I didn't tell anyone, and you sure as hell didn't."

Hardcastle sniffed loudly. "There's another way someone could've gotten it, kid."

"How?" McCormick demanded. "You don't even have it written down anywhere, and I couldn't have told anyone if I wanted to, because I never can remember the damned thing."

"Yeah, I know." Hardcastle looked down at McCormick, still on his knees, and reaching over, he picked up the blanket and draped it around his shoulders again. "Remember last week when I told you to get some money outta there to buy those begonias, and you were complaining because you forgot the combination again?"

McCormick nodded slowly. "I said, why couldn't you use your birthdate or part of our telephone number as the combination, but no, you had to come up with that stupid formula--the number of years you were a judge-left; the number of years you were a cop subtracted from the number of years you were married to Nancy-right; and Christmas Day less April divided by the number of years I was on the Can-Am circuit-left. That last one's the only one I can remember," McCormick complained.

Hardcastle sighed. "Kid, I keep tellin' you to forget the formula--just memorize the numbers."

"Well, why'd you tell me the damned formula then!" McCormick yelled. "You just confused me!"

Hardcastle held up a hand. "Forget it. The point is I had to tell you that combination again last week."

"So?" McCormick frowned in puzzlement.

"Kid, you're not too swift in the brains department sometimes, are ya?" McCormick stared at him with a blank look, and Hardcastle feigned anger. "Haven't I been tellin' ya to spray around the house for insects?"

McCormick rose slowly to his feet, the blanket falling from his shoulders. "A bug?" he whispered. "You mean somebody bugged the place?"

Hardcastle grinned. "Now yer cookin'."

"Aw c'mon, Kemosabe, you're grasping at some pretty short straws," McCormick argued.

Hardcastle shook his head stubbornly. "It makes sense. Somebody hired a guy who probably already looked a lot like you, and then he had some cosmetic surgery done to complete the job. A damned good one, too, let me tell ya. That part was pretty easy, but the trick was to sound and act like you, and to learn as much as he could about both of us. So he bugged the place, probably the living room and the kitchen and maybe even the gatehouse and out by the pool. A little present for him was when he overheard me give you that combination. That really put the finishing touches on convincing me."

McCormick stared at him, the doubt obvious on his face. "Judge, that's gotta be the craziest idea I've ever heard. You just visited Wacko Land on the highway goin' through the Twilight Zone."

Hardcastle jumped to his feet. "What the hell's wrong with you, McCormick? You tryin' to make me believe you're guilty?"

"No way, José," McCormick returned immediately, "but all that stuff you just handed me is never gonna stand up in a court of law."

"Don't try to tell me the law!" Hardcastle shot back angrily. "I know the damned law! What we need is proof!"

"The bugging devices!" McCormick exclaimed. "If we really can find those, at least we'll have a leg to stand on." He grabbed Hardcastle's arm. "C'mon, let's get back to the house!"

"Forget it, kid." Hardcastle pushed him gently into the chair. "I'm not about to drive that mountain road tonight. And besides, you're not going anywhere."

"Like hell I'm not!" McCormick fired back. "You hid me away and what happened? The Lone Ranger got robbed by a Tonto look-alike. So unh-uh, Kemosabe, you don't take Silver anywhere unless me and Scout go, too."

Hardcastle sighed. "McCormick, I told you it's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous!" McCormick yelled back, his voice rising in pitch as it always did when he got excited. "Judge, we got a guy out there with my face who likes to start little wars and

doesn't take prisoners! The only reason he didn't shoot you was because he wanted you to turn on me. Now, I don't know about you, but Tonto here is gonna pack up his bow and arrows and go after that creep."

"Tonto didn't use bow and arrows," Hardcastle corrected automatically, "and you're in no shape to go anywhere. That cut's bleedin' again." McCormick started to make a swipe at it, but Hardcastle grabbed his hand and used the piece of cloth instead. "Just look at you," he grumbled, his voice growing hoarse. "You let an old man beat you up. What makes you think you'd have a chance against someone your own age?"

"Judge, you know damned well why I didn't hit you back," McCormick retorted. "And besides, I can think of a lotta things to call you, but none of them would be 'old man'. I haven't met an old man yet who's got a punch like you've got. Hell, I haven't met a young man who has a punch like that." The look on Hardcastle's face caused him to inhale sharply. "God, Judge, I didn't mean to say that."

"Why not? It's true," Hardcastle shot back. "I've always kept myself in shape, and for what? So I could knock your lights out? If you had hit your head on that fireplace, it could've killed you, or I could've blinded you in that eye."

"Then you would've looked only half as ugly," McCormick quipped.

"Stop it, damn it!" Hardcastle growled.

"No, you stop it, Judge!" McCormick fired back. "You got angry because you love me and you thought I had betrayed you!" He smiled softly. "Believe me, Judge, the beating was worth it, because as angry as you were, there must be a lot of love there." He dropped his head. "A lot more than I ever did anything to deserve."

Reaching down, Hardcastle picked up the blanket and draped it around the lean shoulders again. "Shut up, you're talking nonsense. Now, come on, let's get you to bed."

"Unh-uh," McCormick shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not movin', Judge, till you promise me you won't try to sneak outta here in the morning. Your word of honor, Your Honor."

Although McCormick looked as if he was prepared to stand there all night, Hardcastle doubted he would last more than an hour. The beating, exposure to the elements, and the emotional upheavals had all taken their toll on the young man.

"Look, kid, you're tired. Let's go to bed," he coaxed.

McCormick swayed slightly. "I'm not goin', Judge, not until you give me your word."

Slinging an arm around his shoulders, Hardcastle urged, "C'mon, we'll sit down and talk about this, and I'll explain it so even you can understand."

"You mean, you'll try to pull a con on me," McCormick retorted, but having little choice, he let Hardcastle lead him to the sofa, and dropped on the cushions with a sigh.

"Now," Hardcastle sat down next to him, "I told you before that you can't be seen in public. The police'll pick you up before you can bat an eye. I didn't report that robbery against me, but there's two others that we know of and..." He rambled on, watching McCormick closely.

His eyes gradually closed and his chin soon fell to his chest as he began to snore softly.

Rising carefully, Hardcastle turned him around so McCormick was stretched out on the sofa, and leaving the blanket wrapped around his shoulders, he got another one and spread it over him up to his chin.

McCormick groaned softly and Hardcastle gazed down at him, wincing at the cut over his eye which was already causing it to become discolored. There would also be a bruise on his jaw and one close to his lip, too, by morning.

"Damn, I'm sorry, kid," Hardcastle apologized in a hoarse voice. "I don't know why you'd want me for a father. I can sure as hell make a mess outta things. I know I've yelled at you and made life miserable for ya a few times, like that time when I dragged you off to Oregon, but what I did today was the worst. If I had killed you..." He raised his head, once again "seeing" McCormick's body by the fireplace, only this time it lay in a crumpled, motionless heap. Tears filled his eyes. "God, I don't think I could've lived with that," he whispered.

C H A P T E R N I N E

McCormick stirred and with a groan, opened an eye. The other one was supposed to be in that position, too, but he could see only a mere slit of sunlight through it, and raising his hand, he touched the bruise gingerly and winced.

The effort to sit up was almost too great, but ignoring the stiffness and various aches, he managed to swing his legs to the floor, then pausing only a moment, stumbled to his feet.

The mirror on the back wall cast a reflection which caused another groan. "Hardcastle's gonna flip out when he sees me." Something clicked in his mind, and whirling around, he yelled, "Judge! Judge!!" Moving to the window as quickly as his stiff body would allow, he glanced out and slapped the wall angrily. The Coyote was still parked out front, but the pickup was nowhere in sight.

"Damn! He did it to me again. He went off and left me!" Furious, McCormick began stoking the fire, then grabbing his last pair of clean jeans, he changed clothes, his hands shaking when he noticed the spots of blood on his shirt. Throwing it on the floor, he slipped on a new one, muttering softly, "The Judge is gonna get himself killed; that's exactly what he's gonna do. The kind of mood he's in right now, he's gonna go after that creep impersonating me, and this time that piece of scum will decide the Judge is expendable." Dropping to the sofa, McCormick shoved his feet into a pair of combat boots and laced them up angrily. "Hardcase, if you think I'm just gonna sit here while you get yourself blown away, then you'd better think again. I've got a car and--" He stopped and jumped to his feet. "Damn! I bet he did something to my car so I can't follow him! Probably stole the distributor cap! That's the only thing on the Coyote that he knows!"

He ran for the door, vaguely noticing that the upper hinge had been repaired. Flinging the door open, he froze, then a big smile spread across his face. "Judge!"

Hardcastle raised his head and winced as his eyes took in the bruises. "Well, kid, you're finally up," he spoke gruffly.

McCormick enveloped him in a bear hug that caused Hardcastle to stagger backwards. "Boy, am I glad to see you, Judge! I thought you had gone off and left me, and I was so worried because I was afraid you'd get yourself killed!"

"Hey, hey, kid, settle down." Hardcastle tried to rid himself of the ache in his throat which threatened to be too much for him. God, it feels good to have someone love me this much, he

thought. Remembering that he had tried his best to kill that love the night before, instead of pushing McCormick away, his own arms rose slowly, and he returned the hug.

His response surprised McCormick, and sniffing loudly, he wiped his tears on Hardcastle's shoulder.

"Hey, c'mon, kid, don't get the shirt all wet," Hardcastle grumbled. "And when're you gonna let me in? We gonna just stand out here all day and freeze?"

McCormick drew back with a shaky laugh. "Sorry, Judge."

His eyes rising reluctantly to meet McCormick's gaze, Hardcastle swallowed hard. "No, Mark, I'm the one who's sorry," he spoke low. "Damned sorry."

"Aw now, c'mon, Judge, let's not go through that again," McCormick protested softly. Slinging an arm around Hardcastle's shoulders, he walked with him into the cabin. "Listen, yesterday was yesterday and today's a whole new day."

"McCormick philosophy, huh?" Hardcastle snorted. "Well, let me tell you something, kid. You ever heard of people carrying their past with 'em? That's what you're doin' right now." He winced again at the bruises covering McCormick's face. "And the past sure as hell isn't pretty."

"Aw, don't worry about it, Judge," McCormick grinned. "In a few days, I'll be back to my handsome, macho, debonair self again, and you won't be able to stand me."

"Probably not," Hardcastle growled, finally exhibiting some of his old spirit. "Sit down and I'll fix breakfast," he ordered.

"Hey no, Judge, let me do it," McCormick offered.

"Kid, I said, sit down," Hardcastle commanded quietly. "Now, I'm doing this, and that's that. The way you cook, you probably haven't had a decent meal in the last four days, anyway."

Unable to argue with that, McCormick sat down at the small table and watched in silence as Hardcastle set a skillet full of bacon slices on a stone close to the fire, then broke several eggs in another skillet and began scrambling them. A pot of coffee McCormick had failed to notice before was already sitting on another stone, and opening a square, cast iron container, Hardcastle began removing golden brown biscuits and stacked them on a plate.

"What's that?" McCormick asked curiously.

Hardcastle glanced up. "It's an oven. Didn't you know that?"

McCormick shook his head. "Boy, Judge, you really got the knack for this kind of stuff."

Hardcastle threw him a grin. "I've had a little bit of experience, kid. When Nancy was alive, we used to come up here a coupla times a year, just to get away from things. A great place to think."

"Yeah, and a great place to worry yourself to death, too," McCormick added fervently. Leaning back in his chair, he watched Hardcastle bent over his work. "Judge?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you leave this morning without me?"

Hardcastle straightened slowly. "I couldn't," he finally answered in a low voice. "You asked me not to, and I...well, I felt like I owed you that much. Besides, I..." He cleared his throat noisily. "I had to wait until you woke up to make sure you were all right."

"You're gonna take me home with you now, aren't you?" McCormick asked in a pleading tone.

Hardcastle stiffened. "McCormick..." His shoulders relaxed and he sighed, "Yeah, kid, I'm gonna take you home."

"Good." McCormick grinned and rubbed his hands together. "But not on an empty stomach. When's breakfast? I'm starving!"

"Coming right up," Hardcastle promised and filling a plate with half the scrambled eggs, several slices of bacon, and two biscuits, he carried it and a cup of coffee to the table and set them in front of McCormick. "Listen, you can go home with me on one condition," he announced, the tone of his voice allowing no argument.

"What?" McCormick asked suspiciously.

"You gotta leave the Coyote here," Hardcastle decided. "If you're at Gulls Way and your car's up here, they can't blame any more robberies on you."

McCormick started to protest, but knowing the Judge was right, he sighed, "Okay, the car stays here. By the way," he added, "what'd you do with the truck?"

"I moved it behind the cabin so the wind couldn't hit it," Hardcastle explained. "I've been having some trouble with that battery lately, and I was afraid it'd freeze up. Then neither one of us could get outta here." He pointed to McCormick's plate. "Now, eat up before your food gets cold."

"Yes, Kemosabe," McCormick grinned, but his enthusiasm vanished almost immediately. Biting into a biscuit, he failed to control a grunt of pain, and even chewing the scrambled eggs caused his jaws to ache. It was also difficult to swallow, his throat still swollen from the pressure of Hardcastle's hand when

he had come close to choking him to death. His stomach was empty, though, and ignoring the pain, he continued to eat, albeit slowly.

Hardcastle couldn't ignore the expression of pain on McCormick's face, however, and his own food almost untouched, he jumped to his feet at last and ordered, "Stand up, McCormick!"

He glanced up. "Why?"

"Just stand up."

McCormick did so hesitantly. "And?"

"Hit me."

The blue eyes widened. "What!"

"I said, hit me," Hardcastle repeated. "You owe me one."

McCormick shook his head. "Judge, I didn't hit you yesterday, and I'm not going to do it now."

"Hit me, damn it!" Hardcastle yelled.

McCormick studied him a moment. "Will it make you feel better?"

"Yeah! A helluva lot better!"

McCormick doubled up his fist. "Okay," he agreed and hit the Judge.

It must've stung slightly, but the blow was not even one that would cause a red mark on the craggy jaw, let alone a bruise.

"What the hell you call that?" Hardcastle demanded. "You couldn't even down a wimp with that punch."

McCormick smiled. "You said hit you, but you didn't say how hard I had to do it." He sat down again and resumed eating. "Lone Ranger's code of honor is now satisfied," he mumbled with a mouthful of food. "That's it, Judge. I got my 'revenge' that you seemed to think I wanted. Now, sit down and eat. Children in Africa are starving."

Hardcastle sat down slowly and glaring across the table, he growled, "You're determined not to make this easy for me, are you, wise guy?"

Lowering his fork, McCormick sighed, "Judge, I'm not trying to make it easy or hard. I'm trying to make you forget the whole thing. You had your reasons for doing what you did, and I don't blame you for it. Now c'mon, Judge, let go of the guilt," he begged. "You're only making things miserable for both of us. Let's finish eating and get the hell outta here. I wanna go home."

In less than an hour they had finished breakfast, packed their belongings, and were ready to leave the cabin. Climbing into the truck, McCormick waited patiently as Hardcastle made one last trip into the cabin.

Returning with a blanket, he tucked it around McCormick. "You comfortable?"

"Yeah, Judge. I'm comfortable."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Trotting around the front of the truck, Hardcastle climbed in behind the wheel and switching on the ignition, he let the engine run a few minutes, then nodded toward the radio. "Pick your music, kid."

McCormick stared at him in disbelief. "Do my ears deceive me? Is the great Judge Milton C. Hardcastle giving me the choice of Benny Goodman or Tears for Fears?"

"Quit being a smart-aleck and pick the damn station," Hardcastle retorted.

The radio remained silent as McCormick leaned back with a frown. "Hardcase, am I going to have to put up with this all the way home?"

"Put up with what?" Hardcastle asked innocently.

McCormick sighed. "Forget it, Judge."

CHAPTER TEN

The trip was much too long as far as McCormick was concerned. Hardcastle was driving him nuts with his solicitous inquiries, his insistence upon him remaining bundled up even when they were down from the mountains, and the Judge's constant worrying about the state of his health. McCormick had made the mistake of sneezing twice and now Hardcastle was convinced he was coming down with pneumonia.

"Judge, I'm fine," he protested, pushing Hardcastle's hand away from his forehead for the fourth time.

"You feel like you're getting a fever," Hardcastle insisted and pulling between the pillars of Gulls Way, he announced, "Well, at least we're home now, kid. We'll get you in bed and fix up some chicken soup, and you'll be right as rain in no time."

"Judge, I'm not going to bed because there's nothing wrong with me."

"There is, too!" Hardcastle yelled back. "You're catching a cold!"

"I am not!"

"You are, too!"

The truck came to a stop and McCormick jumped out. "I hate to disappoint you, Hardcase, but I'm feeling great!"

"Well, you look like hell!" Hardcastle fired back.

"Judge, stop it! Just stop it!"

Hardcastle followed him up to the door. "Stop what?" he shouted. "All I'm tryin' to do is take care of you!"

"No, you're not! You're trying to smother me with kindness!" McCormick retorted.

"Well, what the hell you want from me?" Hardcastle roared.

"I want that!" McCormick pointed at him. "I want you to get mad and yell at me like you always do! I want my Judge back!" he pleaded.

"Okay, kiddo, you got him," Hardcastle decided. "Now, get the hell in the house, get your butt upstairs and in my bed, and stay there till I bring up some lunch!"

McCormick sighed. "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"You wanted me to yell--I'm yelling! Now, move it!!"
Hardcastle roared.

Deciding obedience was the better part of valor, McCormick started up the stairs. Despite his protests, he had to admit Hardcastle's solicitous attitude was rather enjoyable, even if most of it was caused by a guilty conscience.

There was a third reason for obeying the Judge. He hadn't wanted to admit it to Hardcastle, but the drive back from the cabin had drained him of energy. Placing his hand against his forehead, McCormick grinned wryly. "Hardcase is giving me a complex. There's nothing wrong with me that a coupla hours' sleep won't cure." He stretched out on Hardcastle's bed, enjoying the feel of a real mattress against his back for the first time in several days. "After I eat, maybe I'll just catch forty winks," he mumbled with a yawn. "If it'll make the Judge happy..."

It didn't quite work out as McCormick had planned. When Hardcastle entered the bedroom a few minutes later with a tray of food, he found the young man curled up in a fetal position, snoring peacefully.

Grinning broadly, Hardcastle sat the tray on the nightstand, and getting a blanket from the closet, he spread it over McCormick, then tiptoeing from the room, pulled the door closed quietly behind him.

It was late afternoon when McCormick finally awakened. Stretching, he pulled the cover up to his neck and decided to roll over and go back to sleep, but his growling stomach reminded him he had already missed lunch.

Sitting up, he swung his feet to the floor and groaned, "Aw man, the Judge'll kill me if he finds out I was in his bed with my boots on." Noticing the tray of food still sitting on the nightstand and the blanket wadded up on top of the bedspread, he broke into a grin. "Guess he already knows."

Picking up the tray, he started down the stairs. "Hey, Judge!"

"In the kitchen!"

He reached the foot of the stairs just as the doorbell rang. Holding the tray in one hand, he yelled, "I'll get it!" and reached for the door.

"McCormick! No!" Hardcastle's panicked cry came too late.

McCormick stared at the plainclothed police lieutenant standing on the porch and swallowed hard. "Uh-hi, Frank."

Lieutenant Harper nodded slightly. "Hello, Mark. May I come in?"

McCormick stepped back slowly, throwing a frightened look at Hardcastle who came charging in from the kitchen.

"McCormick, I told you not to open that door!" he yelled. "Where the hell's your brains?"

"I-I just didn't think," McCormick stammered.

"That's obvious," Hardcastle returned sarcastically. Glaring at Harper, he demanded, "What're you doing here?"

There was a look of pain on the lieutenant's face as he answered softly, "I think you know, Milt."

Hardcastle didn't bother trying to skirt the issue. "The kid didn't commit those two robberies," he stated firmly.

"Three," Harper corrected in a low voice. "Another jewelry store was hit yesterday and the guard shot."

"Well, that proves it," Hardcastle retorted smugly. "McCormick and I were up at Judge Renfro's cabin yesterday; we just got back a coupla hours ago. As a matter of fact, his car's still up there."

Harper eyed him suspiciously. "Milt, can you swear in a court of law that you were up there all day yesterday?"

Lying didn't come easy to Hardcastle and his slight hesitation in answering the question caused Harper to hold up a hand. "Don't bother, Milt. I can't believe what you say, anyway. If you're convinced Mark's innocent, you'll do anything to protect him, but I'm afraid it won't work this time." He turned to McCormick. "Damn it, I hate to do this, but I've got no choice. Mark, you're under arrest for robbery and attempted murder. You have the right to remain silent..." He rambled on, McCormick staring at him with a look of fear in his eyes.

Hardcastle waited until the lieutenant had finished, then exploded, "Frank, you know damned well the kid's innocent!"

Harper sighed heavily. "Milt, I really want to believe that, but a clerk at the jewelry store made a positive ID from the mugbooks. It was Mark."

"It wasn't him, damn it! It was some creep who's been made up to look like him!" Hardcastle shouted. "Somebody's tryin' to get back at me by framing McCormick!"

Harper stared at him. "What makes you think there are two Mark McCormicks?"

"Because the other one was here yesterday!" Hardcastle roared. "He robbed me!" No sooner were the words out of his mouth, he regretted having uttered them.

Frank's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "If there was a robbery here yesterday, why didn't you report it?" He whirled around to McCormick. "And who beat the hell outta you?"

"I was mugged," McCormick returned quickly.

"Yeah, sure," Harper agreed, but it was obvious he didn't believe McCormick's lame excuse.

"Frank, listen, we got this all figured out," Hardcastle tried to explain. "Some ex-con is tryin' to get back at me by framing McCormick and sending him back to prison. He hires a guy about McCormick's size, pays to have cosmetic surgery done, has a car made that looks like Mark's, then the imposter commits all these robberies."

Frank turned a doubtful look on him. "And what about the guy who robbed you?" he asked. "Did you know he wasn't Mark?"

It was obvious Hardcastle was going to lie, but McCormick interrupted with a shake of his head. "No, he didn't. This guy not only looks like me, but also talks like me, and he knows some things that only the Judge and me could know."

Harper's eyes widened. "How do you explain that?"

"I can't," McCormick answered softly.

"Well, I sure as hell can." Reaching in his pocket, Hardcastle pulled out a handful of small devices with short wires attached to them.

"You found the bugs!" McCormick exclaimed.

"Yeah, while you were asleep," Hardcastle nodded. "One was in the kitchen, one here in the living room, and even one in the gatehouse." He handed them to Harper. "Now, what do you think of that, Frank?"

"It's all the evidence I need," Harper agreed, "but I can tell you right now what the DA is going to say. You have no proof these bugs were installed in the last few days. They could've been here for weeks or even months. And you've got no suspects in this case, and no motive, either."

"I told you the motive!" Hardcastle yelled. "Somebody's out to get me through the kid here!"

"Milt, cosmetic surgery and a car made up to look like the Coyote doesn't come cheap," Harper argued. "There's got to be more to it than that. And until you find it out..." He turned to McCormick. "Mark, I'm sorry, but I've got to take you in," he spoke softly. "There an APB out on you and sooner or later a black and white's gonna spot you. This isn't easy on any of us, but I thought you might feel better about me doing it instead of some stranger."

McCormick nodded silently.

Putting a hand on his back, Harper gently urged McCormick towards the door. "If you'll give me your word you won't try to escape, I can dispense with the handcuffs."

McCormick glanced quickly at Hardcastle who nodded once. "Yeah, yeah, give him your word."

McCormick sighed. "You got it, Frank."

Hardcastle followed them outside, his heart beating painfully against his ribs when McCormick turned to him.

"Judge."

It was only one word, but Hardcastle had never heard it spoken in such a pleading tone. Reaching out quickly, he squeezed McCormick's shoulder. "Listen, don't worry, kid. They'll set bail in the morning and as soon as they do, I'll have you outta there faster'n you can bat an eye."

McCormick gazed at him a moment, fear clouding his eyes. "They're gonna keep me there, Judge," he whispered hoarsely. "Once they get me back in jail, I'm never gonna get out. They're- They're going to send me back to prison."

Harper moved away from them quickly, taking a sudden interest in the water fountain.

Putting an arm around McCormick's shoulders, Hardcastle cleared his throat. "Look, kid, it's been you and me for over two years now, and it's going to continue to be that way. I'll bail you out of jail in the morning and we'll find out what's going on." His voice became rough. "But I swear on Nancy's grave, I won't let you go back to prison. You hear me?"

McCormick nodded and his eyes rose to meet Hardcastle's. "I wish your son had lived," he whispered.

Hardcastle stared at him in shock. "Why?" he demanded gruffly.

"So he would've really gotten the chance to know what a hell of a father he had," McCormick replied softly.

For once Hardcastle was at a loss for words. Swallowing hard, he pulled McCormick into a quick hug and patted his back once. "Take care of yourself tonight, Mark."

McCormick stepped back and smiled slightly. "I will, Judge." He glanced at Harper who still had his back turned, and called out, "I-I'm ready, Frank."

Turning quickly, Harper started to climb into the car, but paused, looking over the roof at the two men. "I really am sorry

about this," he apologized.

"It's okay, Frank," McCormick assured him. "You're just doing your job."

"Yeah, but this is one of those times when I wish I had followed in my dad's footsteps and become an engineer," Harper complained.

McCormick eyed him curiously. "Frank, how come you're so sure I'm innocent?" he asked quietly.

"Two reasons," Harper answered with a smile. "I like you, Mark, and I don't think you'd do anything like this. Second, Milt is more than just a judge in a court of law--he's a damned good judge of character, and I've never known him to be wrong yet." He threw Hardcastle a quick smile. "Don't worry, Milt. Mark'll be fine until you bail him out tomorrow."

Hardcastle nodded. "Then get the hell outta here before I kidnap you and make you stay for supper," he demanded gruffly.

Harper threw him a look of understanding and climbed into the car. McCormick followed suit, and glancing up, he mumbled softly, "Bye, Judge."

Reaching through the window, Hardcastle slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Just till tomorrow, kid. Now, you behave yourself and don't do anything to embarrass me."

McCormick broke into the first genuine grin he had shown since Harper had arrived. "At least I won't have to get up in the morning and trim the hedges, cut the lawn, and plant those damned petunias," he teased.

"Just wait till you get back," Hardcastle retorted. "When I get through with you, jail'll seem like heaven." He stepped back and Harper started the engine. As they started down the driveway, Hardcastle could see Mark turning around in his seat. He waved to the young man, then waved again, watching the car until it disappeared.

Returning to the house, he vented his frustrations on the hapless door, and the tray of food still sitting on the table in the hall. Then he really got angry.