

READY TO BEGIN AGAIN

WINTER, 1980-81

By: Judy Darnell

Judge Milton Hardcastle flipped open the file that lay on his desk and stared at the mugshot. It didn't help. If that face, with its cold-looking eyes and hard expression had been in his courtroom today, he wouldn't be having these second thoughts. But it hadn't been that face, and Hardcastle had caught himself looking twice to be sure they had brought in the right prisoner.

McCORMICK, MARK J., had been anything but cold and hard in his courtroom appearance, and the Judge almost smiled as he remembered the scene. Jesus, what a mouth that kid had on him. Vehemently insisting that he hadn't stolen the Porsche, that it was his to begin with. Interrupting his own court-appointed lawyer, not to mention trying to interrupt the prosecutor, until Hardcastle had finally threatened to remove him from the courtroom if he didn't shut up.

That had done it, and the tongue had stopped wagging; but the pout that took its place had been one for the books. Hardcastle had finally realized it was supposed to be a glare. Kid needed to work on that if it was going to have the desired effect. As it was, the Judge had been hard-pressed not to grin. He was used to putting accused criminals in their place, showing them that they did not run the courtroom. He wasn't used to the accused looking back at him with the expression of a ten year old who thinks he's been unjustly told to go stand in a corner.

That look wasn't the disturbing one, though, the one that had him still sitting in his office and looking through a file long after he should have gone home. The pout had faded as the prosecutor had pressed on, till finally the kid had just seemed to deflate like a ten-cent balloon, obviously sensing that he didn't stand a chance in hell of beating the rap.

'Now,' Hardcastle had thought, 'He'll drop the "Poor little me" act, and I'll see the guy in the mugshot.' It hadn't happened. It was like the kid had somehow clicked himself off; all the vibrant energy that he had brought into the courtroom draining away, leaving an empty shell for the Judge to pass sentence on.

Hardcastle didn't like it, not one bit. He'd spent enough years on the bench that he'd seen it all. Every type of criminal trying to pull every type of scam. Anything for a 'Not guilty', or even a lighter sentence. This one though, this McCormick, wasn't pulling a scam. Hardcastle was as sure of that as he was his own name. McCormick was in the wrong, but he honestly couldn't see it. He'd got it through his head that it was his Porsche, regardless of whose name was on the ownership papers.

Shaking his head, Hardcastle closed the folder. He hadn't had any choice when he passed sentence. With McCormick's previous record of GTA, backed up by a juvie file, two years was the minimum. So why the hell did he feel like he'd just sent a lamb to the slaughterhouse? Maybe the kid was just a good actor. Maybe. Damn. Something just didn't feel right.

He opened the file again and picked up the mugshot. Cameras weren't supposed to lie. This one had. The kid didn't look like that. Not yet, anyway. 'Yet' could be a damn big word, though; and two years could be a very long time when you were only twenty-six. Like McCormick.

Shit. He sentenced people to prison every day and hardly ever let it get to him. You couldn't do that, and be a good Judge. Had to keep your distance; your sense of detachment. So why the hell was this kid any different? Why was he sitting here staring at a damn file when he should be home in his comfortable bed getting some well-earned sleep?

He couldn't understand it, except... there was something about the kid, something beneath the loud-mouthed exterior, that had been so damned likable! He'd been so earnest in professing his innocence. All flailing arms and wide blue eyes and a voice that cracked whenever he got excited. Which was often. He was so damned alive! And he shouldn't have to lose that. The mugshot seemed like a very uncomfortable preview. What the kid would look like if somebody didn't help him out. But there was no way to help. The law was the law. Minimum sentence: Two years.

Sighing heavily, Hardcastle red-tagged the folder. He was going to keep a close eye on this one. Only thing he could do. Keep tabs, and hope it was enough. Damn. Of all the Judges in the district, why did he have to get McCormick? "Somebody up there," he muttered as he put the file away, "Does not like me."

Leaving the office, he turned off the light and headed for his pickup, ready for the long trek out to Malibu. He hoped he'd be able to sleep... but he had a feeling he wouldn't.

He was right.

FALL, 1983

Hardcastle smiled as he looked up at the Gatehouse window. The kid played a damn good game of B-Ball. He'd figured that he would. Help get him over the first night jitters. And despite Sara's protests, and McCormick's smart mouth, he wasn't gonna stick him in the gardener's trailer. Couldn't really say why. Just didn't seem right.

Funny how things worked out. If you believed in Fate, which, of course, he didn't, you could almost think that had something to do with it. He smiled as the light in the Gatehouse clicked off. Better go get some sleep himself, since God only knew what the morning would bring. Somehow, and it was just a feeling, he knew that life with Mark McCormick wouldn't be dull.

It wasn't.

