

Sierra



written by Cathy Bryson

Mark McCormick cruised through the grocery store parking lot, alternately muttering and cursing to himself about the lack of available spaces. He also roundly cursed one Judge Milton C. Hardcastle for sending him here in the first place. A beautifully sun-drenched day, save for a slight chill in the air that forced him to wear a light windbreaker; and here he was trapped in the judge's pickup, battling old ladies for parking spaces. After 15 minutes, he was about to turn around and go home, judge or no judge, when he spied a car pulling out a few aisles away. Flooring the accelerator, McCormick tried to ace out a station wagon driver who had also spotted the empty space. Just as he thought he'd made it, he was startled by a runaway shopping cart and a young lady chasing it when both suddenly shot out in front of his vehicle. He wrenched the wheel around in a tight turn, stomping the brakes at the same time. The truck bounced over several cement dividers, causing him to lose control.

When McCormick saw he was headed directly for the storefront, he abandoned ship, throwing himself from the pickup. He landed heavily, rolling a couple of times before ending in an untidy heap on the blacktop. Raising himself up on an elbow and shaking his head, he looked up in time to see the truck roll majestically through the grocery's sliding glass doors. People scattered every which way, shouting and screaming. The truck ended its short run to freedom by becoming entangled in two of the three cashier counters situated by the now defunct doors. The vehicle gave one last burp and died; a cashier reached in to snatch the keys from the ignition.

McCormick watched all of this in horrified fascination, the thought of Hardcastle's reaction overshadowing his physical pain. Deciding to try and forego these terrible thoughts, he fell back to the tarmac, closing his eyes.

"Are you all right?" a distinctly feminine voice inquired.

McCormick cocked one eye open. A small and delicate face, framed by long auburn hair, hovered over his. The woman was of average height, slim, and stood quite confidently. But what caused McCormick to open his other eye was the woman's eyes. They were almost translucent and the palest blue he had ever remembered seeing. "What?" he asked dumbly, transfixed by their beauty, forgetting, for the moment, all about Hardcastle's impending wrath.

"I said, are you all right?" she repeated, kneeling down to his level.

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

"Well, I think you have a broken arm here. Why don't we zip up your windbreaker about halfway and lay your arm inside for more support?"

McCormick glanced down at the limb, only noticing pain at that moment. Gritting his teeth, he looked back at the woman and nodded.

"Okay, I'll be real careful, I promise. I wasn't a candy striper for nothin', you know." She chattered on, her voice a pleasant sing-song, keeping him preoccupied while she carefully laid his injured arm on his chest, then zipped his windbreaker up halfway. "How does that feel?"

McCormick grinned a little. "Feels better. Thanks."

She smiled back. "Some mess we made, huh?"

"We?"

She laughed, plopping down beside him. "Allow me to introduce myself. Sierra Dalton. Secretary and shopping-cart-chaser extraordinaire."

"You?" McCormick exclaimed. "It was you I almost ran over?"

"None other. Damn shopping cart! When it got away from me, I was worried about it hitting another car. I never thought about anybody hitting *me*."

"Well, don't sweat it," he advised with a smile. "I was having a very boring morning. Nothing like nearly running over a pretty lady to spice things up a bit."

She bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment of the praise. They were silent for a moment, perking up slightly at the sound of sirens approaching.

"Care to tell me who you are?" Sierra asked finally.

"Oh, sorry. Mark McCormick's the name. Aspiring race-car driver and current all-around-handyman to one Judge Hardcastle."

"Pleased to meet you, Mark," she replied, shaking his good hand.

"Looks like it's time to face the music," she added as two police cars pulled into the lot.

"For you, maybe," McCormick answered glumly as she helped him stand up. "My *real* trouble begins when Hardcastle finds out about this."

"Will he really be that angry?"

"Let me put it this way, Sierra Dalton," McCormick said. "That trashed and smashed truck in there is owned by Judge Milton C. Hardcastle."

"Oops." She suddenly started giggling, and he soon joined in. They barely stopped laughing long enough to give the police their stories.

Hardcastle snapped a file folder shut with an irritated flick of his wrist and swung his chair around to peer through the shutters covering the study windows. Drumming his fingers on the armrest, he muttered, "Come on, McCormick, what's takin' you so long? It's been nearly four hours since I sent you out to do the weekly shopping." He scowled. *Kid wasn't too happy about it, either, and I'll just bet this's his way of getting revenge.*

Tracking the still empty drive to Gull's-Way with his eyes, he shook his head, finally turning back to his paper-littered desk. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing and at last decided to go outdoors, where at least he could worry in the fresh air. He'd just stepped out of the front door when a compact car came squealing up to the house. Startled, the judge barely had time to notice that McCormick occupied the passenger seat before the vehicle came to a halt before him.

"How's that for Formula One racing?" a young woman called out as she hopped from the driver's seat.

"Number one all the way," McCormick replied happily, exiting his side of the car.

Hardcastle watched all this with some bemusement, then frowned, fear surging through him when he noticed the bandaged forehead, the scraped nose and cheek, the casted arm. Seeing that the younger man's energy level was about normal, however, the fear faded, and his face hardened. He was privately amused to see McCormick's smile falter as he turned and caught sight of him and slowly descended the few steps leading to the driveway, drawing the moment out for as long as he could. "Didn't you forget to bring something home with you, McCormick?" he asked gruffly. "Like my truck?"

"Uh, Judge, I..."

"McCormick, where's my truck?!"

"Judge, I'd like you to meet a real nice lady. Sierra Dalton, this is Judge Milton C. Hardcastle. Judge, Sierra Dalton. We sorta met at the grocery store."

Sierra shook Hardcastle's hand firmly. "Pleased to meet you, sir. Mark's told me quite a bit about you."

Hardcastle snorted, but his mouth started to turn up at the corners. "I'll bet he has. Pleased to meet you, young lady." He swung around on a just relaxing McCormick. "Okay, kiddo, where's my truck? The lake? Did you drive it over a cliff? Run down a policeman? Where is it?"

"You'll only yell if I tell you," McCormick said sullenly.

"I will not yell!" Hardcastle yelled. Forcing himself to some semblance of calmness, mainly because of the visiting Sierra, he added quietly, "Now, tell me where my truck is."

Before McCormick could answer, Sierra stepped between them. "Well, I sense World War Three brewing here, so I think I'll make my getaway while the getting's good. It was real nice meeting you, Judge. You have a beautiful home." She turned to McCormick. "Tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay," McCormick grinned, helping her back into the car and shutting the door. "Pick you up at seven."

"I'll be waiting," she promised, then drove back down the road at a considerably more sedate pace than she'd used driving in.

Hardcastle watched McCormick turn in a half-circle, following Sierra's departure with a silly grin plastered on his face, and sighed. He knew love-sickness when he saw it. He shook his head. "Hey, kid?"

"Yeah, Judge, what is it?" McCormick replied dreamily.

"WHERE THE HELL IS MY TRUCK?!"

McCormick jumped, sobered, but not by much. He threw his good arm around Hardcastle's shoulders, leading him back into the house. "It's a long story, Judge, and one best told over a nice, cold beer."

"There is no beer," he growled. "That's one of the things you were supposed to pick up at the grocery."

"Oops," McCormick returned, and to the judge's bewilderment, broke into hysterical laughter.

"Did you get enough to eat?" McCormick asked.

"More than enough, thanks," Sierra replied, patting her stomach.

"Now, I'd like to do some talking."

"Sure, what do you want to talk about?" he asked, eyes roaming

around the busy sit-down restaurant where they'd chosen to eat. After a bit, he returned his gaze to the woman across from him, his eyes met by bewitching, pale blue ones. He blushed slightly. "Well?"

Sierra smiled mischievously. "Let's talk up close and personal."

"And just how personal is personal?"

"Oh, come on, Mark," she scolded gently. "You must be as curious about me as I am about you." Sierra paused, a tiny frown replacing her smile. "Or am I moving too fast here?"

He leaned forward, placing one hand over her clasped ones. "Hey, no. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shoot down your idea. It's just that..."

Sierra searched his face with those disconcerting eyes. In the end, she squeezed his hand, saying, "If there's something you want to tell me, Mark, I'll listen without prejudice. If you don't want to tell me, we'll move on. But, I gotta warn you, one part of my mind will always question."

Suddenly, McCormick needed to tell this woman everything about himself and his checkered past. He started slowly, careful to leave nothing out. He couldn't keep the bitterness surrounding his arrest and subsequent imprisonment from seeping into his words, but it virtually disappeared when he explained how he and the judge had come together. He became animated, his body moving with his words, as he related some of their more memorable escapades. He finally paused, out of breath, a little embarrassed at his exuberance, yet also pleased with Sierra's apparent delight.

Sierra shook her head, her laughter still bubbling. "Oh, Mark, why didn't you want to tell me about your life? It's fascinating!"

He sobered, picking up his wine glass and staring into it. "I've met a few ladies who beat a hasty retreat to the nearest exit when they found out I'm an ex-con. Made me a little sensitive, I guess."

"What happened in your past happened in your past, and should stay there, as far as I'm concerned," she said firmly. "The judge has given you a new future, Mark. Take it and run."

Smiling, McCormick nodded. "I plan to," he replied, settling back in his chair. "Now, it's your turn to confess all."

"Well, I can guarantee you that my life hasn't been anywhere as adventurous as yours," she laughed.

"That's okay. I'll hang around with you, anyway."

"That's mighty big of you, thanks. Okay, here goes. Age: twenty-eight. Never married. I live alone with my obesely rotund feline companion whose name is Alfie. I'm frugal, but will go wild at the slightest whiff of a used book sale. I enjoy long walks. I have a wild sense of humor and sometimes I can be a real pain in the rear." She stopped, her turn to blush.

"That's about it for now. How'd I do?"

McCormick raised his wineglass in a toast. "Perfect."

As Mark walked Sierra to her apartment, she sighed happily. "It's a beautiful evening." She laughed. "God, that sounds corny!"

"Maybe," McCormick agreed, "but I share the sentiment."

"Oh, I almost forgot to ask. How did the judge take the death of his truck?"

McCormick grinned. "About like I thought he would. After he found out I was okay, he launched into his patented 'McCormick, -where-are-your-brains?' speech, closely followed by a list of chores I'm gonna have to do to pay him back for repairs, not to mention the raise in insurance premiums."

"He really said all that?"

"The judge is big on talking. Especially when it comes to me screwing up."

Sierra reached out, taking his hand in her own. "How about me explaining to him that it was really my fault?"

"How do you know I didn't?"

"I know."

In a short time, they reached the entrance to Sierra's small, neat apartment building. Turning toward McCormick, she smiled. "I had a wonderful time tonight, Mark. I hope we can do it again, real soon."

McCormick's face lit up. "I think that can be arranged," he replied enthusiastically bending to give her a brief, gentle kiss. When they pulled apart, she caressed his cheek before stepping inside the building's foyer.

"Hey!" McCormick yelled.

Sierra swung around, arching an eyebrow. "You called?"

"Don't I get invited in for a nightcap?"

"When I'm ready."

"And when will that be?"

"Say goodnight, Mark," she ordered playfully.

Executing a short bow, McCormick mimicked, "Goodnight, Mark."

Laughing, Sierra left him. When she reached her apartment, she immediately headed for the window overlooking the street. Peeking out through a tiny slit in the closed curtains, she saw that McCormick still stood staring at the door. He did so for quite some time before turning to walk back to the Coyote. She continued to watch until the red sports car disappeared from sight.

The next few months were ones of discovery for McCormick and Sierra. They enjoyed finding out one another's likes and dislikes; hopes and dreams. They found many things in common, including a taste for messy chili dogs and corny horror flicks. But mostly, they liked being with each other, and the feeling only grew as time went by.

About six months into the relationship, McCormick met Hardcastle late one evening after both men had returned home: McCormick from Sierra's apartment, where the two had played a rollicking game of Monopoly; the judge from a gig with his jazz band.

"Hi ya, Judge, long time no see," McCormick greeted cheerfully, pocketing the Coyote's car keys.

"You got that right, kid. Does seem we miss each other quite a bit these days," Hardcastle returned in a less cheerful tone, but his smile seemed genuine. He turned to go into the house.

"Uh, Hardcastle, you got a minute?"

"Sure, McCormick, come on in."

The two men made their way to the judge's study and got comfortable: Hardcastle behind his desk, McCormick in an easy chair opposite him.

"So, what'cha got on your mind?" Hardcastle asked.

McCormick shifted uneasily in his chair. "Judge, when did you know that you were in love with Mrs. H?"

Hardcastle's eyebrows shot up, a smile tugging at his lips. "Why don't you tell me how you feel, and we'll compare notes."

"Well, I think about Sierra all the time, whether I'm with her or not. I'm sorta happy and sad and confused and nauseous, all at the same time."

When I'm with her, I'm high as a kite; when I'm not, I mope around a lot. I know it sounds ridiculous--"

--Not to someone who's been down that road, kiddo. Sounds perfectly logical to me. Felt all the same things myself a time or two. Like I was on a damn rollercoaster." Hardcastle chuckled. "Yep, I'd say you've got it bad."

"Whew!" McCormick sighed. "Thought I was goin' nutso there for a while."

"Nah, that happened long before you met Sierra," the judge returned smugly.

"Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome. By the way, how does Sierra feel about all this?"

"Same as me," he stated firmly, then wilted a little. "At least, I think she does."

"Haven't you talked to her yet?" When he shook his head, the judge sighed. "Well, get off your butt and talk to her, McCormick! No dragging your feet on this one. That's a great gal you got there. Don't let her get away, or I'll kick your keister all over this estate."

McCormick leaped up, saluting smartly. "Yessir, Judge Hardcastle, sir! I'll talk to Sierra tomorrow. I plan on asking her to marry me."

A shadow passed briefly over Hardcastle's face as he turned his chair around to face the window. "I know you are, kid."

Seeing the look and not knowing what to make of it, McCormick frowned. "Hardcastle, you okay?"

"Fine, just fine," his friend answered gruffly, swinging around. He rose and headed for the stairs leading up to his bedroom. "Now, you be sure to bring Sierra by here for dinner after you talk to her. We've got plans to make."

"She just might say no, Judge."

Hardcastle paused, then turned to squeeze McCormick's shoulder.

"She won't," he said softly. "Now, get outta here, and let me get some sleep. Lock up when you leave."

"Sure, Hardcase," he murmured under his breath, watching the older man climb the stairs.

Shutting off the study lights and locking up the house kept his mind occupied for a few minutes, but when McCormick reached the quiet of the gatehouse, he found himself unable to sleep. He sat in the dark until nearly dawn, haunted by the look on his friend's face.

It was Saturday. McCormick and Sierra spent the day at a local park, munching on chili dogs and sipping beer. Comfortable in silence as well as conversation now, a good deal of the afternoon was spent just being together; they sat cross-legged beside each other, their shoulders touching. But McCormick was preoccupied, for several reasons.

Suddenly Sierra pulled his head down into her lap and locked her eyes onto his. "Okay, McCormick, talk to me," she demanded.

For a moment, he was confused, then burst out laughing.

"What?" she asked, frowning.

"You know, sometimes you sound just like Hardcastle," he replied breathlessly.

"I'll decide later whether to take that as a compliment or not. In the

meantime, I want you to tell me what's bothering you. And don't tell me it's nothing. I know you too well for that now."

He sighed. "It's the judge, Hon. Something's wrong with him, but I can't figure out what."

"He's not sick, is he?" she asked anxiously.

"No, nothing like that," he assured hastily, one hand reaching up to caress her cheek. "It's like he's real happy for us, and he says all the right things, but his eyes, Sierra. His eyes tell me a different story. They're sad and empty, even when he laughs. It scares me, you know?"

She bent forward to gently kiss his forehead. "I know," she said, trying to smooth away his frown with her fingers. "Mark, when does he get this look?"

"Well, it seems to come on when I'm telling him something about us. I mean, just last night, I was saying I was gonna ask you to marry me, and he--"

"--Hold it!" Sierra ordered. "Back up a minute. Could you repeat what you just said, please?"

McCormick was at once shy and nervous, and he blushed fiercely. Swallowing convulsively, he said, "I told Hardcastle I was going to ask you to marry me." The words came out in a rush.

Sierra smiled at him, her expression expectant. When he remained silent, the smile disappeared. "So?" she asked impatiently.

"So, what?"

"So ask me, you dope!"

"Didn't I just do that?" he asked innocently, eyes twinkling.

"You *told* me what you were planning to do, but you haven't done it yet. There *is* a difference, you know, Mark McCormick."

"I know," McCormick chuckled, scrambling to a kneeling position before her, taking her hands in his. "Sierra, I love you," he said solemnly. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she replied in the same somber tone.

"I don't have a lot to offer," he continued as if he hadn't heard her, "except me, of course. And we may have to live in the gatehouse, if the judge's willing. And I may actually have to consider getting a real job--"

Sierra reached up to sandwich his face between her hands, puckering his cheeks until he shut up. "I said yes, my darling. Unconditionally, yes. A hundred times, yes. YES!"

McCormick let out a whoop that sent several birds and squirrels scurrying for home. Then he leaned forward to capture Sierra's lips with his own, and by the time the kiss ended, they were both breathless. Lying down side by side, arms entwined around each other, they stared up at the sky.

"Wow!" McCormick said softly.

"Ditto," Sierra echoed fervently. After a moment of silence, she added, "Mark, I think I know what's wrong with the judge."

"Yeah? What?"

"Two things, really. You know, love, in a way, you and I have been terribly selfish these past few months. We forgot to include Hardcastle in our plans. The man has been so good to you and has counted on you for companionship. Suddenly, here I come to take you away from him. Not on purpose, mind you, but the result's the same. I'm thinking the judge has been feeling pretty lonely and a little betrayed lately. That's the way I felt when my best friend got married. Lonely and betrayed. I got over it, but it wasn't easy. Anyway, I think the being lonely has set the judge to

thinking about the second thing. Can you figure out who that is?"

McCormick gasped, then replied, "Mrs. H! All this time, when I've been rattling on about the two of us, Hardcastle's been thinking about his wife. What a dope I've been not to have seen it before."

"Not a dope, just a human being," Sierra comforted, giving him a quick hug. "Being in love makes a person tend to shut out the rest of the world. That's just what we did. Unfortunately, we also shut out the judge in the process."

McCormick sat up abruptly, rubbing his face with one hand. "God! I feel terrible! I wouldn't hurt that man for anything, and here I've been doing just that for weeks now and not even knowing it. Hardcastle must really hate me!"

Sierra rose to sit beside him, wrapping him securely in her arms. "Of course, he doesn't hate you. You didn't set out to hurt him, he knows that. He also understands what it's like to be in love. He understands, Mark."

"That doesn't change anything, you know," he replied glumly, resting his head against hers. "Question is, how do I fix it?"

"We'll fix it, sweetheart," she insisted. "I've got an idea how, if we can find some way to get together with the judge."

"That's easy enough. He told me to bring you by for dinner tonight."

"Great! Now, here's what I have in mind..."

McCormick watched Hardcastle carefully during the evening. But the judge was chipper, for him, and seemed to be enjoying having a woman in the house again. He wouldn't allow Sierra to help with dinner or its presentation. McCormick, however, was entirely another matter.

"McCormick, run get the good dishes, will ya? And don't drop any, or it's your butt." A giggle from Sierra at this.

A few minutes later: "You got the wrong silverware here! This is our everyday stuff!"

"Well, excuse me!" he huffed. "I only grabbed the 'stuff' we always use."

"We got a lady here, kiddo, or hadn't you noticed? Everything's the best tonight, okay? Now, get the good silverware and no backtalk!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Dinner itself was delicious, the conversation pleasant. When the dishes had been cleared, mostly by a protesting McCormick, they settled down in the judge's study, wine glasses in hand.

"Well, McCormick," Hardcastle finally said gruffly, "you two squared away?"

McCormick glanced quickly at Sierra, who squeezed his hand reassuringly. "Well, Judge, I asked Sierra to marry me, if that's what you mean."

"And?"

"I said yes," Sierra smiled.

"You did? Think you can take this guy on, do you? He can be a handful--"

"--Hardcastle!!"

"Just kiddin', McCormick," Hardcastle grinned. "Congratulations! The best to both of you."

"Thanks, Judge," he replied, his voice low, for he'd seen that 'look' spring back into his friend's eyes. Helplessly, he looked to Sierra.

She moved from her seat to kneel beside the older man's chair.

"Judge, I'm not taking Mark away from you. I'd *never* do that. In fact, if it's all right with you, we'd like to live in the gatehouse for awhile." When Hardcastle only nodded, Sierra sat down and, in an almost childlike gesture, rested her chin on his knee. "We don't want to lose you, Judge Hardcastle," she said softly. "We want you to always be involved in our lives. Don't run from us, or give us space, unless we ask you to. Don't feel that you're intruding. Let us keep you with us. Please?"

Hardcastle touched one broad hand gently to the top of Sierra's head. "I promise," he replied, a small smile coming to his face. "Thank you."

"There's something else we'd like you to do, Judge," McCormick put in over the sudden lump in his throat. "Two things, actually."

"What's that, kid?"

"Well, I'd like you to be best man at our wedding." He reached out to hold Sierra's free hand.

Hardcastle's smile became a shy one. "I'd like that, Mark."

"Don't forget me," Sierra teased. "I want the second thing."

"Oh, and what would that be?"

"As you know, Judge, my father died some time ago. I'd like you to give me away."

Hardcastle stared at her for a moment before finally managing hoarsely, "Can I be best man and surrogate father of the bride at the same time?"

McCormick laughed. "I don't know if Emily Post would approve, Judge, but it's our wedding and we want you to be both."

"Will you?" Sierra asked hopefully.

Hardcastle leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "I'd be honored," he said solemnly, and when he sat back again, the 'look' was gone.

"I'd say we did good tonight," McCormick said as he walked Sierra to her apartment building.

"I'd say so, too," she agreed, snuggling close to him. "The judge looked so happy when we left."

"Yeah, it was great. Well, here we are. Home, sweet home," he hailed, swinging them both to a halt before the building's foyer door. "See you tomorrow?"

"You certainly will. Especially," Sierra added slyly, with a casual wink, "if you stay the night." Skipping free of his hold, she headed for the door.

"You mean...?" He stared at her, hope rising.

"I'm ready, Mark McCormick, whenever you are," she said and disappeared into the building.

McCormick smiled broadly and quickly followed.

Plans for a Christmas Eve wedding were soon in the making, and they filled the following days and weeks. McCormick and Sierra were careful to include the judge in on virtually every aspect of the planning, often asking his advice and then taking it. For the three of them, the weeks passed quickly into months.

After one particularly long day and night of figuring out arrangements for the church and reception area, Sierra let out a heartfelt sigh and stretched her tired body. "I'm sorry, fellas, but I'm just too tired to think about this any more. How about we pick up where we left off tomorrow?"

"You're right, we've been at this long enough," McCormick agreed with a yawn. "You do look beat, Honey."

"If you ask me, we've been goin' over this too much lately," Hardcastle growled. "You guys should take a rest from this 'who's gonna walk with who' and 'who should get the debatable honor of passing out cake'. I mean, kid-dos, we got two months left till the 'I do's', so relax a little, will ya?"

"Good idea, Hardcase. Let's take tomorrow off, go see a movie or something. How about it, darling?"

"Fine by me," Sierra replied, rising to put on the light jacket she'd worn over. "You wanna come, Judge?"

"No, you two need some time together without me buttin' in. Have yourselves a good time. I'll be sittin' in front of the TV, shoveling in popcorn and tuning in Japanese baseball."

Sierra frowned. "Japanese baseball?"

"Don't ask," McCormick advised quickly.

"Okay. I'd better get on home then. I could use a good night's sleep." She turned to leave.

"Sure you don't wanna spend the night?" Hardcastle offered. "Guest room's empty and waiting."

"Thanks, Judge, I really appreciate it, but my mom's due to call. She's thinking of flying in early, and frankly, I hope she does. You two guys are great, but a girl does need her mother at a time like this."

"Us guys understand," McCormick said, rising to escort her to her car.

"Good for you," she praised. "See you later, okay, Judge?"

"You got it, Sierra," Hardcastle replied cheerfully. "Drive safe, hear?"

Sierra nodded, waving as McCormick steered her out the front door. When they reached the car, she gave him a smothering bearhug.

"Not that I didn't like it, but what was that for?" he asked when she released him.

"That was an 'I-love-you-very-much' hug. You'll get a lot of them if you hang around me long enough."

McCormick grinned. "Then I guess I'll just have to hang around you forever."

Sierra laughed. "I just might let you do that, Mr. McCormick." She kissed him soundly before bending down to get into her little car. "Call me tomorrow when you're ready for the movie," she added when she was settled.

"Will do," he promised, giving her one last kiss. "See you then, wife-to-be."

"Okay, husband-to-be." Sierra started the car, stepped on the gas, and was gone.

McCormick watched until she was out of sight before turning back to the house. Bidding Hardcastle goodnight, he headed back to the gatehouse for his own night of well-deserved rest.

Awakened by the persistent ringing of the telephone, Hardcastle rolled over and glanced at the clock's luminous dial. *One o'clock?! Who the hell'd be calling this late?* Snatching up the receiver, he barked, "Yeah?"

"Judge Milton Hardcastle?"

"You got him. What is it?"

"Judge Hardcastle, my name is Dr. Jonas Morgan. I'm calling from the emergency room of Memorial Hospital. Do you know a young woman by the name of Sierra Dalton?"

"I do," he answered shortly, sitting up to switch on a light. "Why?"

What's happened to her?"

"She was involved in a car accident. Hit by a drunk driver. I'm afraid she's suffered massive internal damage. We have to operate immediately."

Stunned, Hardcastle sucked in a deep breath, trying to get his mind in some semblance of order. "Did Sierra ask you to call me?"

"She did, after we called her mother. She told me you could prepare her fiance for this better than we could."

"She's right, although just how, I don't know," he answered glumly.

"You'll both be coming in then, sir?"

"We will, Doctor. Thanks for calling." Hardcastle hung up, in the same motion leaping from his bed to dress in the nearest clothing handy. He spent a frantic few minutes searching for his truck keys, then dashed from his home, heading for the gatehouse on the run. The sliding glass door was unlocked, as usual; Hardcastle jerked it open, yelling hoarsely, "McCormick! Get up!" When his only reply was an incoherent mumble from above, he turned on a light and barreled up the stairs to McCormick's bedroom. "Come on, Mark, wake up, will ya? We gotta go somewhere."

McCormick rolled over onto his back, blinking sleepily up at him in the half-light. Opening his mouth to protest, he shut it just as suddenly when he caught sight of Hardcastle's face. Sitting up, he demanded, "What's wrong?"

"McCormick, I'm not sure how to say this..."

"Just say it, okay, Judge? You're scarin' me to death here!"

Taking a deep breath, Hardcastle said, "It's Sierra, Mark. She's been in an accident."

McCormick's eyes widened. "How bad?"

"Bad."

"Oh, God!"

McCormick shrugged off Hardcastle's restraining hands as he burst through the hospital's emergency room doors. Having learned what facts Hardcastle knew on the drive over, he arrived at Memorial frightened and nearly hysterical, refusing to listen to any words of comfort from the judge, too certain in his own heart that comfort was not what awaited him.

Striding down the hall at a near run, Hardcastle in his wake, McCormick frantically searched for a Dr. Morgan. Finally corralling a nurse, he discovered that the doctor was operating. Further questioning netted him the information that Sierra was in surgery; then the nurse directed the two men to a waiting area off the operating rooms' exit doors.

The wait was a long one--almost two hours. During that time, McCormick paced, started conversations he never finished, bugged the nurses, and drank endless cups of strong, black coffee, which started him pacing all over again. Finally, Hardcastle dragged him to a chair, installed him in it, and ordered him to stay put. Reluctantly, McCormick obeyed, glaring at the judge.

"How long are they gonna take, Judge?"

"As long as they take. All that pacin' won't make 'em move any faster."

"This waiting game is killin' me!" McCormick protested in anguish. "The longer they're in there, the crazier I get. I start thinking, what if she doesn't make it? What if she's already dead and they're in there trying to come up with a nice way of tellin' me? What if--"

"--*That's enough, McCormick!*" Hardcastle snapped, then said in a gentler tone, "I know it isn't easy, but we've got to remain calm, okay? The doctors are doing everything they can for Sierra, count on it." He watched as McCormick struggled to relax, then added, "Besides, kiddo, what would Sierra say if she could see you like you are now?"

"She'd most likely tell me what an ass I'm being," McCormick admitted, a thin smile crossing his face.

"Damn right."

"It's just so hard, this waiting," the younger man said forlornly. "So hard."

Hardcastle reached over to pat McCormick's shoulder. "I know what you're feelin', Mark, believe me. But there's nothing else we can do now but wait."

And they did. An agonizing half-hour later, a man in surgical greens exited the operating room. McCormick leapt from his chair, nearly colliding with the other man in an effort to prevent him from getting away. "Are you Doctor Morgan?" he asked breathlessly.

"I am." The man was in his mid-thirties, lean of body, quick of step. His face was dominated by the most expressive pair of eyes McCormick had ever seen. "How may I help you?" Morgan asked when McCormick didn't continue.

"I'm...Mark McCormick. Sierra's fiance. How is she, Doctor?"

Morgan took his arm, guiding him to an office across from the operating room, taking note of Hardcastle's silent presence with a nod at the judge. The office was small, cramped, filled with file boxes. Two hardwood chairs stood before an old desk, behind which Morgan settled himself in an ancient swivel rocker. Motioning Hardcastle and McCormick to the other chairs, he began to speak in a soothing, gentle voice. "I'm sorry to break this to you, Mr. McCormick, but Miss Dalton's condition is critical. She suffered extensive internal damage, in addition to several fractures. We operated, repaired some of the damage, but had to stop when her vital signs began to fall. She *is* stabilized for the moment, and we have the highest hopes that if she can gather up her strength within the next twenty-four hours, we can try surgery again."

"And if she doesn't?" McCormick asked numbly. "Gather up her strength, I mean?"

Morgan leaned forward on his desktop, folding his hands. "I won't lie to you, Mr. McCormick. There's a very real possibility that your fiancee will die. But we--you and I, the staff of this hospital--are going to do everything in our power to keep that from happening. And that's where you come in."

"How?"

"When she wakes up, she'll be groggy and disoriented. Hopefully not in too much pain as we'll have her hooked up to painkillers by I.V. What you can do is talk to her, touch her, make her want to stay with us. She needs not only her own strength to carry her, but yours as well."

"I can do that," McCormick promised, straightening with renewed purpose. "Sierra already knows how much I want her with me."

"Good," Morgan smiled. Then his depthless eyes held onto McCormick's for a moment, as if judging the ex-con. Finally, Morgan nodded fractionally; his smile disappeared. "This isn't easy for me to say to you, but there is one more thing. Something you should know, and something

you'll very probably have to tell your fiancée."

"What's that?" McCormick asked, tensing up all over again.

"Miss Dalton will want to know about the baby. I'm afraid we're going to have to tell her she lost it."

"The...the b-baby?" McCormick felt like he'd been socked in the gut for the second time that night. "I...didn't..."

Hardcastle reached out a hand to wrap it securely around McCormick's wrist. "I think what McCormick's tryin' to say here, Doctor, is that he didn't know about the baby."

"Oh. I'm sorry to spring it on you so baldly. I thought you knew. She was about three months along. Unfortunately, there was little chance of the fetus surviving with the severity of her injuries. The shock to her system..." He paused, staring at McCormick's pale face. "Can I get you a glass of water, Mr. McCormick? Or a mild sedative?"

"No! No, I'm okay," he answered quickly, rising. "Look, can I go see her now?"

"Of course," Morgan said, standing up, also. "Your friend may come if he wishes. Miss Dalton needs all the support she can get." The doctor shook hands with Hardcastle as McCormick absently apologized for not introducing them sooner. "Quite all right. I'm sure we understand your mind's elsewhere. Now, come along. I'm sure Miss Dalton should be settled into ICU before long. There's a special waiting room just off it; you can wait there till she's settled in. I'll leave instructions to let you know as soon as she is. Your face is the first thing she should see when she comes around."

McCormick halted in front of the door leading into Sierra's ICU cubicle and turned to look nervously at Hardcastle.

The judge placed a comforting hand on his back. "It'll be all right, son. Go on. She needs you. I'll wait here, see her later."

He nodded, then swallowing convulsively, pushed the door open and entered, allowing it to close silently behind him. For a moment, he stood frozen, the sight of his beloved a shock: Sierra lay, pale and bruised, one leg in a cast, hooked to I.V., oxygen, and heart monitor.

McCormick gulped, his nerve nearly deserting him, and tried to pull himself together. Moving slowly to the bedside, he bent, lightly kissed her forehead, then touched her cheek with a gentle caress. He broke contact reluctantly, turned, and hooking one foot under a chair, dragged it forward. Perching on its very edge, he gathered her small, slender hand in his, rubbing it absently as he waited. And waited. At last, frustrated, he scooted closer to the bed, laid his head down beside her, and reached out an unsteady hand to stroke her stomach. Soon his eyes drew heavy, and he fell asleep.

Jerking awake, he raised his head, disappointed to find Sierra's eyes still closed, and resumed his former position. His fingers circled her stomach in soft, gentle strokes. "A baby," he whispered in wonder. "We made a baby."

Fingers touched his head softly, lovingly twisting his hair, and raising his head, he met Sierra's smiling face.

"Was...coming to...tell you. Just...found...out," she managed in a low, shaky voice. The smile disappeared to be replaced by quiet tears. "Baby's dead, isn't it? I-I killed--"

"--Don't you *ever* say that again, Sierra!" McCormick exploded, catching her eyes with his. "You didn't kill our child! It was out of your hands, you hear me? Promise me you won't think that, Sierra! *Promise* me!"

Sniffing, reaching out to capture his hands in hers, Sierra nodded reluctantly. The tears started all over again. "I wanted...your baby."

McCormick rose, and very carefully stretched himself out on the bed, snuggling close, holding her as tightly as he dared. "It's all right, honey," he crooned, nestling his face in the hollow of her shoulder. "We'll have lots of children once you get outta here. And we'll take them all over to Hardcastle's so they can drive him nuts." Brushing back the hair from her eyes, he gently removed her tears at the same time.

She smiled. "Just...just like their dad."

"You better believe it!"

For a time, they were silent, content to be in each other's arms.

Then Sierra's sleepy voice asked, "Promise me something?"

"Sure, whatever you want," McCormick replied, almost asleep himself.

"If I die--"

"--Sierra, you--"

"--No, please...listen."

Silence answered her pleading request, and she caressed his cheek.

"Promise you'll...go on with your...life. Don't...die with me, darling."

McCormick looked up, tears tracking down his cheeks. "I promise," he whispered.

"I love you," she murmured, her eyes already sliding shut.

"I love you, too, Sierra," he returned, laying his head back down to listen to her breathing.

"Stay with me?"

"Always."

An hour later, Sierra went into cardiac arrest. McCormick was shoved unceremoniously out the door as the doctors and nurses began to frantically work on her. Hardcastle, who'd been waiting, laid one broad hand on the hysterical McCormick's shoulder, the touch the only thing that kept him from bolting back into the ICU area.

Time seemed to pass eternally before Dr. Morgan walked from the room, wiping sweat from his brow. McCormick planted himself squarely in the doctor's path, forcing him to stop. "Well?" he asked hoarsely.

Slowly, Morgan's gaze lifted to meet his, and the doctor shook his head. "I'm sorry. We did everything we could. The damage she suffered was just too great."

"She...she's dead?" he asked miserably, his voice quavering slightly.

"Yes. I'm very sorry." Morgan glanced at Hardcastle before making his way down the corridor, his shoulders slumped.

Hardcastle moved forward. "Let's go home, Mark," he said softly.

McCormick didn't respond, his eyes focused on the closed ICU door, leaving only when the judge pulled him away, turning them both toward home.

Later the next morning, Hardcastle went looking for McCormick but couldn't find him in the main house or the gatehouse. He finally went down to the pool, where, looking over the small wall that surrounded the area, he spied McCormick down on the beach. Worried, he made his way to the

spot as quickly as he could.

McCormick sat, legs crossed, arms wrapped around them, staring dry-eyed out to sea. He barely acknowledged Hardcastle's arrival, even when the older man sat in front of him, a little off to one side. The silence between them stretched until Hardcastle thought he'd go crazy; and he'd finally decided to speak when McCormick seemed to break himself out of his reverie, his pain-filled eyes coming down to focus on Hardcastle.

"I had a lady who loved me, Judge," he said, his face melting into a mask of total grief.

"Me, too, kid."

"And I had a child. A kid of my own."

"Me, too."

"Then...how is it, Judge, that we're both so alone?"

Hardcastle patted McCormick's knee, and the other man's eyes lifted to meet his. "Mark, you're forgetting something. We're not alone any more. We have each other."

McCormick gazed steadily at him for a moment, then nodded. "Thanks for bein' here, Judge."

"So, where else would I be?"

"Yeah, where else?" McCormick attempted to smile but failed, returning his gaze to the ocean.

Hardcastle settled down to wait, and for awhile, both men were silent. Then, suddenly, McCormick began to cry, softly at first, then in great hiccoughing sobs that wracked his body. The judge felt his own tears threaten over a lump in his throat. Reaching across the small space that separated them, he gathered McCormick into his arms, cradling the curly head against his chest.

H&Mc

