



Sometimes The Dreamer...

Written By:

Linda Wood

&

William Kounter

A Fantasy/'What if...?' story based on the aired H & Mc episode:

"In The Eye of The Beholder"

Hardcastle cradled the barely conscious form in a one-armed embrace, desperately trying to ease the younger man's discomfort. With his free hand he tucked his jacket tighter around McCormick's blood-stained chest, and gently rested his hand on the trembling shoulder.

"Damn this case... Sorry, kid. I shoulda made you pull out." He swallowed against the aching tightness in his throat. "Hang in there, kiddo. Help's comin'."

He tried to keep his words light and encouraging, but it wasn't easy. Mark's life was draining away like hourglass sand--and he was helpless to prevent it. Hardcastle strained to hear the sound of approaching sirens, and searched the empty landscape for any signs of emergency vehicles - but there was nothing.

"Judge...?" The voice was weak, yet it broke the silence like a gunshot.

"Yeah, kid?" He said, gaze returning to McCormick. The younger man's eyes were open, glazed with pain, but intensely watching him.

"...thanks..." The effort it took for McCormick to speak made the Judge's insides ache in sympathy. He pulled his friend closer.

"For what? Almost gettin' ya killed?" He let the self-condemnation creep into his voice; then continued, more softly, "Don't talk; just rest."

"For...believin' in me..." McCormick returned. He paused against a wave of pain that shook his body, then went on. "For bein' my friend. It's...it's meant...a lot to me. I-just... wanted you to know."

"Well, you're pretty special yourself, kiddo." Hardcastle forced a smile and a cheery voice. "That's why you gotta hang on. I can't ride alone, ya know."

Mark managed a weak laugh, then paid for it with a wave of agony. He shifted against the pain, a shadow passing across his pale face.

"P-plenty o' Tontos, Hardcase; but--" Mark trembled, stifling a sob. Hardcastle offered his hand and let his friend squeeze it. Bones crackled against the strength of Mark's grip. After a moment the wave passed and McCormick continued, more weakly, "...but only one...Lone Ranger..."

Darkness crossed his form again, obscuring it. Hardcastle knew instinctively whose shadow it was, and pulled Mark closer to shield him from Death. It couldn't have him -- not yet.

McCormick's hold on his hand abruptly slackened; Hardcastle felt the tension in the body melt away into his embrace. The curly-haired head dropped gently against his chest and the ragged breathing ceased. A terrible silence filled the air.

"McCormick? Hey, come on, McCormick, that's not funny..!" But he knew it wasn't a joke, even as he groped for a pulse, and found none. Wrapping his free arm around the limp body, he hugged it close to him and buried his face in the soft mass of curls. "No. Don't, kid; don't leave me..."

Grief poured out in a flood he couldn't contain any longer. He choked off the words, and - for the first time in twenty years - allowed the tears to flow.

In the distance, siren wails echoed hollowly off the canyon walls.

It was all over but the pain. He wasn't really sure how he'd endured the funeral, the sympathy, the accusing stares. But it was over now, and he was facing the toughest critic of all - himself.

Many of his fellow jurists hadn't approved of his using an ex-con as an assistant. Grandstanding, they called it. Behind his back, of course. A foolish attempt to recapture his youth at McCormick's expense. Now it looked as if he'd made the young man pay the ultimate penalty for his crimes.

They had always believed he had held McCormick with threats. To hell with them! They'd never understood that threats couldn't hold McCormick against his will.

5400

He couldn't explain to them the special bond they'd formed. Their friendship had been as deep as that of a father and son. In fact, McCormick had been his son in his own mind. He wished now he hadn't been so embarrassed to let Mark know that.

No one would ever fill the gaping hole left by the young man's death. He sighed, the shuddering release of breath echoing in the emptiness of the Gatehouse, and turned back to his task - packing away McCormick's belongings.

Hardcastle found himself caressing items that brought back floods of memory. It was hard to concentrate on his work when visions kept interfering.

On the floor under the bed he found a small photograph of Mark in his racing gear. He had to squeeze his eyes tight against the burning tears that assaulted him. He clutched the photo to his chest until the weakness receded, then slipped it into his wallet.

"My son's in my memory, Mark," the Judge said to the air, "And now you are, too. At least I'll always have that."

It was hard packing away the life of his younger companion, almost worse than it had been watching the coffin settled underground. It made it all so final.

"I wish I'd never heard of that damned case. I'm sorry, kiddo; I never meant to hurt ya."

Everything he touched contained a moving picture, a memory. It was difficult to believe someone could live so intensely that they lit up the entire life of another. But Mark "Skid" McCormick had. His quick mind, sharp tongue, and easy laughter had penetrated every molecule of Gull's-Way in just under three years. How could he ever be comfortable on the estate again without the kid?

He lifted a pile of clothing and spotted a huge brown book underneath. Time shifted, and he was taken back to a moment in the past when McCormick had been wonderfully alive. Trembling, he dropped the clothes and picked up the book, holding it to the light.

It was an elegant, old edition with dark leather on light brown corduroy. McCormick had claimed to have found it while 'cleaning up' the Judge's library - and had been doing more looking than cleaning, apparently. The embossed gold legend authoritatively declared: CELTIC LEGEND AND MYTHOLOGY.

Hardcastle almost laughed out loud as he was assaulted by cherished memories. He'd never seen the gullible kid in McCormick as clearly as the stormy night he found this book.

He smiled, despite his pain. There was never a doubt in McCormick's mind that magic existed, or leprechauns. For a minute, he regretted that he'd never allowed himself to believe in dreams.

Exhaustion spread over him suddenly. Giving in to the weakness, he abandoned the packing and started out of the Gatehouse. At the door he paused, gaze falling on the book he'd just set aside. He retrieved the volume, tucking it securely under his arm, then pulled the door shut.

"What's wrong with dreams?" That was what Mark often asked. It had seemed a dumb question at the time. But now...

Hardcastle listened to the awful silence, and acknowledged a longing for escape inside himself. Dreams might be a relief right now, an alternative to the agony of reality. Maybe there was hope in dreams, because hope in life had died with Mark.

He settled into the plush leather easy chair, hefting the book into his lap. Switching on the table lamp, he parted the covers and began to slowly turn the heavy linen pages.

The book fell open to the section on leprechauns. He studied the vivid line drawings of little people cavorting across rolling landscapes. Mark's high-pitched voice outlined every picture.

"They look like leprechauns!" The picture of the leprechaun king, Cluracan, did resemble the little gypsy remarkably, he admitted to himself. At the time, the whole leprechaun business had been an annoying intrusion. Now, he'd happily welcome the voice cracked with excitement and bubbling over with energy and laughter.

Scanning the text, he stopped at the mention of wishes. "What would you have wished for, kid?" He questioned the painful stillness. "A racing career? A new home? More money? Life?"

The last word came out a terrible accusation that made his weary body flinch as if stuck a physical blow. "Know what I'd wish for if I caught a leprechaun, kiddo?" He continued aloud, willing McCormick to hear. "I'd wish you were alive again; alive and well..." He surrendered to the wave of cold that shook him. "I miss you, you smart-assed con."

A swell of affection coursed through him and he rode it out, hoping somehow that Mark could share it. Hardcastle smiled at his foolish flight into fancy. If life were only a

dream, wishes would come true.

Weary, he closed the book and laid it aside. It was time for bed, he knew. There was plenty of time for rest now. Somehow, playing Lone Ranger had lost its importance.

He dropped heavily on the bed and stretched out on the soft mattress. The full weight of his grief settled on him in the quiet. He closed his eyes to search for sleep, hoping for escape. Maybe Mark would share his dreams again. If they could circumvent death to spend the sleeping hours together, he thought, he just might make it through the days ahead.

"Judge. Hey, Judge. Come on, Hardcase, wake up."

The voice, so familiar, so welcome, haunted Hardcastle; but he knew his mind was merely pulling off a cruel hoax. McCormick was dead. He pulled the covers over his head, willing himself to ignore the manifestation of his grief. But the hand on his shoulder, shaking him roughly, could not be ignored.

Slowly he pulled the covers back and opened his eyes. The image was fuzzy, but blinking, he cleared it and saw a curly-headed miracle hovering over him, grinning.

"McCormick?" He shuddered. He'd snapped. Too much guilt. Too much grief. Hardcastle rubbed his eyes and looked again, but McCormick's form stayed as solid as the grip on his shoulder.

"Hey, Judge, what's wrong with you? You look like you've seen a ghost. You were the one that told me we had to get an early start to get to the lake." Mark paused, grin running over in sarcastic laughter. He continued, voice grating with good-humored teasing, "Now, here you are, sleepin' in."

A dream! It had just been a bad dream. Hardcastle wanted to hug the young man in relief, but caught himself in time. An out-burst of sentimentality would just frighten the kid. He found his voice at last. "That's 'cause you don't usually listen to me. I'm not used to you followin' orders."

"Oh, yeah?" McCormick leaned against the wall, folding his arms across his chest in challenge. He grinned widely. "Tell me more, Hardcase."

Hardcastle returned the grin, too glad to see him to go on. It seemed so real. So damned real. Pushing aside the eeriness he jumped up, clapping his hands. "Well, let's get

goin'. Or do you think those fish are gonna wait all day for you?"

"Sure, make it look like your idea," McCormick teased, falling in step beside him as they left the room. At the door Mark paused. "By the way, was that some kind of subtle hint to clean up the Gatehouse?"

"What?"

"Packin' half my stuff and labeling it 'Salvation Army'. Next time, just ask. Okay, Judge? It'll take me ages to put that junk back where I had it."

As the Judge started to close the bedroom door, he heard a chorus of pixie laughter. He glanced over at McCormick and realized with relief that that the voices were only for him.

"Ye know, Mr. McCormick never used his wish," a voice said in a brogue so thick it was almost an alien tongue. "But we always pay our debts, Judge Hardcastle. Good day to ye, sir."

Hardcastle smiled to himself as he put an arm around Mark's shoulders. "Ya know, kiddo, sometimes it pays to be a dreamer."

"What?!"

Hardcastle laughed into Mark's surprise, pulling the door closed.

