

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

Connie Daniels

"Aw, come on, Hardcase. How often do I ask you for a favor, huh? Well?"

"Shuttup, will ya; I'm counting."

"Wiseass," McCormick muttered under his breath. It hadn't been spoken quite softly enough, however, judging by the sudden, fierce glare thrown his way. Deciding to change tactics, McCormick gave Hardcastle his best lop-sided grin. "Yeah, okay, so I've asked for a few," he conceded generously.

"A few?! You know the meaning of the word, kiddo?"

"All right," McCormick shrugged. "A lot, then. But if you'll just do this one teensy little favor for me, I won't ask you for another thing. Not ever. And that's a promise. Cross my heart and everything."

Hardcastle snorted at the younger man's solemn, sincere features. "You've heard the one about pigs flying, I trust."

"Cute, Judge. Very cute."

Hardcastle smirked. "It's what I'm always tellin' ya, kid."

McCormick rolled his eyes. "Look, Hardcase, you owe me," the ex-con charged, changing course again, opting for a dose of the guilts as he glanced down at his tightly-strapped right ankle.

"Why?? Because you're clumsy as a horse with five legs?"

"Clumsy?!" McCormick's voice rose in indignation. "It's not my fault a certain Arkansas mule I know went and shoved me down a flight of stairs. Hard, concrete stairs."

"I did not shove you!" Hardcastle shouted back at him. "That creep pushed me!"

"And you just used the most convenient nearby object to break your fall. Namely, me. But, hey, that's OK, Judge. I'm not complaining."

"Like hell you're not!"

"No, really. That's what I'm here for, right? To trim the hedges, take out the trash, and, in my spare time, take a tumble for the Great White Chief."

"You're gonna take another one in a minute if you don't shuddup!" Hardcastle warned, waving a threatening fist in McCormick's direction.

"You'd hit an injured, defenseless man?" Mark's blue eyes rounded in shocked horror.

"With pleasure," agreed Hardcastle, rising quickly to his feet.

"You're a hard man, Judge," McCormick pronounced, shaking his head as he, too, stood up, albeit much more slowly.

"And where the hell do you think you're going?" Hardcastle demanded as the slim figure hobbled dramatically towards the door.

"To get my pizza."

"Don't be an idiot. You can't drive with that foot."

"Yes, I can. I'm not crippled, ya know."

"You will be if you don't get back here."

"But Judge—"

"Now!" Hardcastle yelled, halting the young man in his tracks.

Looking both stubborn and sheepish in equal proportion, McCormick turned around and limped back to his chair. "Yeah, maybe you're right. It does still hurt a bit. It's just that I haven't had a pizza in ages!"

"Well, the phone's still right over there on the desk. Have one delivered!"

"Stefano's doesn't deliver - not way out here," McCormick reminded him plaintively.

Hardcastle sighed heavily. They'd been over this already. Several times. "So call someone who does!" he retorted.

"But it wouldn't be the same. All that time I lay in that hospital bed, recovering from my concussion, I dreamt of having a Stefano's special. It's gotta be Stefano's, or nothing."

"Oh for chrissake. . . All right! I'll get you your damn pizza. But it's gonna cost ya."

"What?" Mark asked warily.

"I'll let ya know when I get back." 'There, let the kid sweat a little', Hardcastle thought with relish. Smirking in a most self-satisfied manner, he began to search for his keys.

After ten long minutes, filled with the judge's colorful curses and meaningful scowls, McCormick threw up his hands in sheer exasperation. "Look, Hardcase, why don't I just hotwire it for you, huh?" He realized it was the wrong thing to say the moment the words left his mouth.

Glares at him suspiciously, Hardcastle stood in the doorway to the den with hands on hips. "You trying to get rid of me or something?" he demanded accusingly.

"What? Me? No! Why would I wanna do that, Judge? I'm just hungry, is all."

'The kid doth protest too much, methinks,' Hardcastle pronounced silently. Vowing to himself to find out what McCormick was up to, he continued his search in silence.

Five more minutes passed. Just when McCormick was despairing of ever getting rid of

the other man, Hardcastle gave a shout of triumph from upstairs. "Found them," he announced unnecessarily as he descended the steps, to find McCormick standing in the foyer.

"Great! Er, while you're out, could you get some beer too? We're almost out."

"What, again? You're gonna get a belly there if you don't watch out!" Hardcastle warned, poking McCormick in the stomach, none-too-gently.

"Cut it out," Mark complained, pushing Hardcastle's hand away. "And I am not!"

"Yes, you are. But don't worry. Soon as that bandage comes off, I'll get you out on the court again. Double our normal time. Whip you back into shape in no time." Grinning evilly, Hardcastle proceeded to leave, McCormick's groan echoing in his ear.

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"The old donkey. I thought he'd never leave," McCormick muttered to himself as he limped back into the den and headed for the desk. "If he'd sat in that chair another ten minutes, he'd 've started taking root there! He's been hovering over me like a hen with one chick. Making me sleep here, not letting me outta his sight. I'm a grown man; I don't haveta put up with this!"

Easing himself into the comfortable leather chair, McCormick rummaged in a drawer till he found what he needed, then moved the phone within reach and propped his aching leg up on the desktop. Eying his injured ankle balefully, he began dialling hurriedly, while continuing to grumble.

"Clumsy, yet. He's got a nerve!" McCormick rolled his eyes at the ceiling as he listened to the phone ringing. "The old jackass. . . Oh, hello. No, not you! Who's this? It's Mark. Mark McCormick. . ."

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"So that's it," Hardcastle nodded to himself, peering in at the closed window. "Only outta the hospital three days, and already he's itchin' in his britches."

He was tempted to head back into the house and watch the kid squirm, but changed his mind. It would be much more fun to wait and catch McCormick in the act, as it were. Teach him not to go inviting some girl over when he was supposed to be recuperating. Yeah.

As quietly as he'd snuck up to the house, Hardcastle left, and headed back down the driveway towards where he'd left his truck.

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"That's great. Yeah, OK. See you Saturday."

Mark replaced the handset in its cradle, then leaned back in the chair, stretching the kinks out of his back and neck. He hadn't been sleeping too well since his 'accident', and it was starting to tell on him. Maybe he was a tiny bit out of shape. . . Nah, he was perfectly fit. The Judge was just tryin' to rattle him.

Lifting his sweatshirt, McCormick peered down at his abdomen and patted it gently. 'Beer belly, huh? No way. Can't even pinch an inch here,' he thought smugly.

With a muffled oath, he eased his leg off the desk and got gingerly to his feet. His back still ached, and he wished he could take a long, hot shower. Bathing with one leg hanging over the side of the tub was definitely not his idea of a relaxing experience. But the doctor had been firm. The bandages came off on Thursday morning, and not before. Three more days of being hobbled. Swell.

Restless from so many days of enforced inactivity, McCormick paced slowly round the room, until the throbbing beneath the "cast" became too painful. He felt hot as well, and figured he must still be running a low temperature, the result of the chill and subsequent cold he'd contracted while lying immobile in that damp cellar. It was only by sheer luck that Lt. Delaney's appearance on the scene had been in time to prevent double pneumonia, or even pleurisy!

Pulling the sweatshirt up over his head, McCormick tossed it on the back of the chair and almost immediately began to shiver. Deciding a bath wouldn't be so bad after all, he glanced at his watch and figured he'd have time for a quick soak. And at least he couldn't hurt himself that way. Life with old Milton these last six months hadn't exactly been a joyride. Maybe he'd 've been better off going back to prison after all. This custody thing was likely to finish him off before a year had passed. And he so wanted to see his thirtieth birthday. . . Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place!

Not quite sure which one Hardcastle was, McCormick limped awkwardly up to the guest bathroom, and was soon blissfully ensconced up to his neck in deliciously hot water.

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Hardcastle quietly let himself into the house by the back way, depositing the beer and pizza on the countertop before making his stealthy way towards the den. Listening for any tell-tale sounds of giggling or smooching, he paused beside the open doorway and eased an eye round the corner. To his surprise, the room was empty.

Humph. Spying McCormick's grey sweatshirt, Hardcastle picked it up, frowning in annoyance. Why the hell did the kids always leave his dirty clothes everywhere except the hamper? Not that he had to wonder, really, in this case. McCormick had been in too much of a damn hurry to start having fun, obviously.

Heading unerringly for the guest-room, Hardcastle was surprised to find the door standing wide open. 'Shameless, that's what these kids were today. They didn't care what they did, or who might see them doing it.'

Marching into the room in an outraged huff, Hardcastle stopped in his tracks, noticing the perfectly made-up bed. 'Quick little bugger', he thought, half-admiringly, and half in stern disapproval. 'No finesse, no slow, careful loving: just slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am, caveman tactics. . .' He clucked his tongue in disgust, then called out: "McCormick! Where the hell are you?"

There was a crash, a shout of pain, then a string of very loud and inventive curses. Rushing towards their source - the bathroom - Hardcastle flung the door open, only to be greeted by another grunt of pain as the door connected with the naked body lying on the floor behind it.

"McCormick! What the hell are you doing down there?"

"Grouting the tiles, what do you think?" McCormick shot back, then groaned as he tried to sit up.

"Always gotta be a smart-mouth, don't you," Hardcastle snapped, kneeling down and grabbing McCormick's shoulders, pushing him back down.

"What the hell are you doing?" McCormick squawked, trying to sit up again.

"You don't move till I make sure you're OK."

"But it's cold down here!"

"Shut up! You hit your head?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Course I'm sure!"

"Cos you're just getting over one concussion, and—"

"I didn't hit my head!" McCormick shouted.

"Twist your ankle?"

"No."

"What'd'ya hit then?"

McCormick mumbled something the Judge couldn't quite catch. "What'd'ya say?" he prompted, leaning closer.

"My ass, you deaf donkey!" the younger man yelled, his cheeks suddenly flushing.

"Oh." The corners of Hardcastle's mouth twitched - very noticeably.

"Yeah; 'oh'. And if you laugh I'll clock ya one."

"You and what army?" the Judge said, casting a disdainful eye along the wet, shivering, skinny form sprawled before him.

His blush deepening, McCormick pointedly ignored the smug look on the craggy features as he began yet again to get up from the floor. Over his protests, Hardcastle grabbed him under each arm and carefully helped him to stand.

"There. Now rub yourself down before you get pneumonia!" Hardcastle thrust a towel at him.

"If I do, it'll be all your fault!" McCormick stressed, glaring at the older man.

"My fault?! Just 'cos you're terminally clumsy—"

"I AM NOT CLUMSY!! You sneak in here, then go bellowing out just as I'm getting out of the tub—"

"—Where you shouldn't 've been! I told you not to take a bath unless I was around!

You could've cracked your damn-fool skull open!"

Mouth open to make a further retort, McCormick simply stood there, towel forgotten as he caught the hidden note of worry behind the blustering anger. Chestened, he glanced away from the blazing eyes and began drying himself again. Hardcastle turned abruptly and left the room, returning a minute later. "Here. Put that on," he ordered, handing McCormick a thick, terry-cloth robe.

McCormick did as he was told, feeling like a kid playing dress-up in his dad's clothes as he enfolded himself in the large garment.

"Now get into that bed. And no arguments!" he added as McCormick opened his mouth again to protest.

"Yes, your honor," he yielded quietly, letting Hardcastle support him as he made his way to the bed. 'But the old goat better not try to tuck me in', he thought as Hardcastle drew back the covers.

"In," Hardcastle said, pointing a stern finger.

McCormick climbed into the bed and drew up the sheet.

"The blanket fool!"

McCormick grimaced, but obeyed in meek silence.

"All comfy now?" Hardcastle asked sweetly when he'd settled.

"Yeah."

"Good. I'll bring up your cold pizza and warm beer, then."

"Judge!"

But the older man was already gone, his self-satisfied chuckle hanging in the air.

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"How's it look, Doc?"

"Everything seems to be coming along as it should, Mark, but I want you to take it easy yet. Don't put too much pressure on it for a few more days."

The curly head nodded. "Can I drive?" the young man asked, a hopeful note creeping into his voice despite his attempt to sound nonchalant.

The doctor frowned. "You could, but I wouldn't recommend it, not for another day or so. MIT here can take you around if you have to go out. My best advice is to stay at home - at least until Saturday. See how it feels without the strapping."

McCormick's mouth thinned in displeasure. Seeing the look of stubborn defiance, Hardcastle spoke up. "Don't worry, Dr. Springer. I'll see to it the kid doesn't go gallivanting about."

Mark glared at the Judge in annoyance. 'There he goes again, calling me a kid in front of other people. Jeez, it's embarrassing. I'm not a kid! Just look at him. Why'd he have to insist on coming in here like that, anyway? You'd think I was three years old or something. . .'

"McCormick!" The Judge's gruff voice broke into Mark's thoughts.

"What?"

"Put on your sock and shoe. It's raining outside."

'See what I mean?' Mark silently asked of the ceiling as he accepted the items the Judge had remembered to bring along. 'If I don't watch out, he'll be tryin' to wipe my nose for me next.'

"You ready?" Hardcastle asked impatiently.

"Yes, Judge."

"Good. Then wait outside a minute; I want to talk to the doc here."

"Why can't I—"

"Out!"

'One of these days, Hardcase. . .'

"And go wash your face. You've got a smudge on it. Just there." Hardcastle's finger touched Mark beside the corner of his mouth.

"Judge! Don't do that!"

But Hardcastle had already dismissed him, turning his broad back to McCormick as he waited for the young man to leave. Sputtering under his breath, McCormick resisted the urge to slam the door shut behind him as he headed towards the men's room.

"This isn't gonna work. It's just not gonna work," he told his mirror image a minute later as he washed away the missed spot of jelly.

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"McCormick. McCormick! Where the hell are you?" Hardcastle bellowed as he searched through the early Friday evening gloom.

"Grrr. . ."

"McCormick!"

"Out here!"

"Where?!"

"The gatehouse."

Hardcastle stormed through the door just as McCormick was hanging up the phone. There was a guilty look about the blue eyes, and Hardcastle's own narrowed in response. The kid was

definitely up to something, but as furtive as the Judge had been the last few days, he hadn't been able to catch Mark out. But he was determined nonetheless to get to the bottom of - well, whatever was going on. Maybe if he got the kid off-guard. . .

"You been keeping the weight offa that?" he began, pointing to McCormick's bare foot.

"Is that all you wanted?"

"You didn't answer me."

"Yes, Judge."

"Good. And no."

"Huh? No, what?" "Jeez, but the old guy could drive a person to distraction."

"No, that's not all I wanted," Hardcastle clarified, as if to a very simple child.

McCormick held up his hands. "Wait. Don't tell me, lemme guess. You want something fixed."

"No."

"The laundry, then, right? You're outta socks."

"No."

"Well, it can't be the silver. I polished that right before our last little adventure."

"Listen, wiseguy, if you'll just button your lip a minute, I'll tell ya."

"Yes, your judgeship. Consider it buttoned." McCormick saluted, then made a motion across his lips.

"Anyone ever tell you you're an insolent young pup?"

McCormick laughed in spite of himself. "No, Judge, I can honestly say no one has."

"Probably because they couldn't get a word in edgewise."

"Look, if all you're going to do is insult me, I'm leaving."

"No you're not. You're gonna sit back down and listen. I got something for you."

"You do? Oh boy, I love surprises. What is it?"

"Sit down first."

"You sure you wouldn't rather have a dog around here, Judge?"

"McCormick!! Sit!!"

Mark sat down.



"That's more like it. Why you have to fight me on every little thing I'll never understand. Anyway," he continued before McCormick could make a retort, "like I said, I've got something here." Reaching into his pocket, Hardcastle pulled out an envelope and tossed it onto McCormick's lap.

"What do you think of that, eh?"

Long fingers reached into the envelope and withdrew two tickets. Then McCormick's eyebrows rose as he whistled in amazement. "The Sunrise Fiesta? But that's a - a cruise ship!"

"Yep. At least you can read," Hardcastle said approvingly.

Ignoring the sarcastic tone, McCormick took the brochure the other man was now handing to him. "Five days and four nights - enjoy fine dining and festive dancing, with all the authentic flavor of Mexico'," he read aloud.

"Well, maybe not the festive dancing - at least not for you," Hardcastle chuckled.

"This is great! But why? When? I--"

"The why is 'cos we're celebrating an anniversary."

"We are? Whose?"

"Ours."

"Huh?"

"Thick as a two by four, that's what you are." The white head shook gravely.

"Judge. . ."

Hardcastle sighed. "McCormick, when did you first come here?"

"Er, about six months ago."

"Right. And you're still here. I figured you'd be back in the can by now, if you wanna know the truth. The fact you're not rates a celebration. And, well, we've been rather busy since you got here. We deserve a break."

"When did you get these?"

Hardcastle shrugged. "Couple months ago. Wasn't sure we'd be able to make it, the last week or so, but the doc said it would be OK and--hey, where're you going?"

"To check through my stuff. I may hafta do some shopping. Wanna be able to impress all those señoritas, know what I mean?" McCormick winked outrageously, while grinning from ear to ear.

"Forget it, McCormick. You're not gonna have time to shop."

"Why not?"

"Maybe you can't read after all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, kiddo, that we leave tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" McCormick's voice rose a full octave.

"I'm not deaf, McCormick. There's no need to shout."

"But - I - that is - tomorrow is--"

"Saturday."

"Right. And, er, I--"

"McCormick, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"It's just that - I - uh - had plans for tomorrow."

"So change them."

"I can't!"

"Yes you can. She'll keep for five days, you know."

"She?"

"Your date!"

"My what?"

Hardcastle threw him a disgusted look. "You know, kid, I think that concussion affected that pea brain of yours more than Dr. Springer realized. You'd better sit back down."

"I don't wanna sit! And I don't have a date for tomorrow."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I just have. . . other plans."

"What plans?" Hardcastle exploded.

"I can't tell you."

"You don't have to. It's a poker game, isn't it? You've got a poker game lined up with some of your ex-con buddies. That's why you wanted more beer," Hardcastle accused.

"No - it's not that."

"Then what? And that's the last time I'm gonna ask!"

"I'm sorry, Judge, but I can't tell you. It's a - a secret. Can't we just exchange the tickets for a later time?"

"No, we cannot!" Hardcastle shouted angrily. "I shoulda known better than to try and

do something nice for you. I figured you'd enjoy getting away for a few days. But if you've got better things to do, then fine. You don't wanna go, don't go! But I'm going. And you - you can do as you damn well please!" With that, Hardcastle grabbed the tickets from McCormick's hand, stuffed them back into his pocket, and stormed out of the gatehouse, leaving a thoroughly shaken McCormick staring miserably after him.

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"Judge."

"Go away, McCormick. I don't want to talk to you right now."

"But Judge. . ."

"You need a hearing aid?" Hardcastle's voice boomed from behind his bedroom door. "I'm packin' here, and then I'm going to bed."

"You want me to help ya?"

"No."

"How about something to eat? You didn't have any supper."

"There's a reason for that. I'm not hungry."

"But I - I fixed you something."

"McCormick, go away. Now!"

McCormick looked down at the tray of food he'd carried upstairs, then back up at the closed door. He opened his mouth to try again, but thought better of it. Hardcastle was stubborn enough for ten mules, and nothing was going to change his mind tonight. Besides, the judge's feelings had been hurt, and since McCormick couldn't explain why he'd behaved the way he had, it was stalemate time. Maybe in the morning, Hardcastle would be a little less angry. . .

Swallowing past the tightness in his throat, McCormick turned away and began to make his careful way back down the stairs.

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"I told you you didn't have to drive me!" Hardcastle snapped peevishly.

"And I told you I wanted to," McCormick returned quietly.

"It wasn't necessary. I could've driven myself."

"Yeah. But then you'd 've had to pay the parking fee."

"Since when do you care how I spend my money?" Hardcastle said ungraciously.

Mark clamped down on the retort he'd been about to make. Nothing he could say or do was going to appease Hardcastle's anger. He'd made enough of a mess of things without adding fuel to the fire.

They drove on in glaring silence for another twenty minutes until, needing a distraction, Mark reached out to press home the cassette resting in the tape deck.

"Oh no you don't. I'm not gonna listen to that godawful racket you call music."

"But Judge—"

"No!"

"Fine. Have it your way!" McCormick yanked the cassette out of the machine and threw it on the floor at Hardcastle's feet. Glaring down at it, the older man caught sight of the label. It was a recording by one of the Judge's favorite dixieland bands.

"McCormick?—" he began, but faltered at the sight of the young man's taut jawline. Waving his hand in a 'what's-the-use' gesture, he turned to stare out the side window instead. Neither man spoke again until the Coyote pulled to a stop at their destination.

"McCormick, wait," Hardcastle finally said as that young man opened the hatch-door on his side.

"I'm going to get your bag. You got your ticket?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then you're all set. We're early; you have plenty of time to get on board." With that, the ex-con swung his legs out onto the pavement.

"Mark, will you just wait a goddam minute!!"

McCormick froze at the use of his given name. "What do you want?" he asked in a quieter tone.

"Haul your ass back in here and I'll tell ya!"

McCormick took a deep, steadying breath before climbing back in behind the wheel. "Well? What's so important?"

"I don't know if it is important - probably won't be to you, anyway. But it's my birthday today, do you know that?"

"Yes." It came out in the barest of whispers.

"Not that you should know - there's no reason for you to," Hardcastle went on, apparently not having heard him. "It's just that - well, it's not something I usually make a fuss about, not since, well, since I've been on my own. But things are. . .different now, and I thought - well, a little treat, for both of us—"

"Judge, I said I know—"

"Will you shut up and let me finish! Jeez, why can't you just for once let me say something without interrupting?! Anyway," lowering his voice again, "what I'm tryin' to say here is, I know we don't have much in common; you've got your own friends, your own plans - but, well, I just thought it would've been fun to do this thing together. I should've checked with you first, is all. Next time I'll!—"

"JUDGE! WILL YOU SHUT UP FOR ONE SECOND! I SAID I KNOW IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY, YOU ARKANSAS DONKEY!!!"

"Huh??"

"Close your mouth, Hardcase. You're gonna catch flies that way." McCormick's mouth twitched at the nonplussed expression on the craggy face.

"There aren't any files in February!"

"It's a figure of speech, Judge."

"Never mind that! You said you knew?"

Mark clucked his tongue sympathetically. "The hearing's one of the first things to go, so they tell me."

"McCormick!"

"Yes, Judge?" he replied in a sweetly innocent tone.

"How the hell didya know?"

"Well, uh, I just, that is. . ."

"I'm waiting, McCormick."

"I noticed. You do that real well, Judge."

Emitting a low growl, Hardcastle reached out and grabbed hold of the younger man's jacket, pulling him round on the seat to face him. "How?" was the only thing he said.

"Judge, what does it matter?"

"It matters; that's all you have to know."

"OK, OK. I, er, found something."

"What?" The light blue eyes narrowed accusingly.

"Now don't look like that. I wasn't snoopin' or anything. I was cleaning out the attic, like you told me to. Right after I polished the silver, remember? And I, I found something. A card. It was dated."

"I see." Hardcastle let McCormick go, and rubbed a finger over his upper lip. "From Nancy? She always did date everything."

"Yes."

They sat in silence for a long moment, Hardcastle apparently lost in memories, and McCormick respecting that fact. When the older man suddenly snapped his fingers, McCormick literally jumped in his seat.

"What is it, Judge?"

"I just realized something," Hardcastle announced, poking McCormick's arm sharply. "You said you knew. You also said something about having plans for today. What plans?"

McCormick shifted uncomfortably, and made a great show of studying his watch. "No time, Judge. We gotta get you on board before they sail without you."

"You said we were early."

"That was before. C'mon, Hardcase, get a move on."

"McCormick--"

But the young man had already climbed out of the car. He grabbed Hardcastle's suitcase from the back and took off as briskly as he could towards the gangplank.

"What room you in?" he called back over his shoulder at the white-haired man rushing after him. Noticing the way Hardcastle was grumbling and muttering under his breath, McCormick grinned and quickened his pace, trying not to wince at his still-tender ankle.

"Never mind. I'll ask the porter."

Hardcastle caught up with McCormick just outside his stateroom. "What's the matter with you?" he said harshly, grabbing the young man's arm to prevent him from entering. "Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?"

"Judge, you wound me!" McCormick's eyes rounded in that little boy way he had, but Hardcastle wasn't buying it.

"I know you, you mean! You've got something up your sleeve, and I wanna know what. And I'm not leaving until I do. I wanna know I'm gonna have a house to come back to, for one thing."

"Judge, believe me, there's nothing up my sleeve. See?" And setting down the case, McCormick bared both his forearms.

Hardcastle cuffed the side of his head. "You know, you're gonna wise-off once too often, kiddo," he warned in a deceptively calm voice.

"I wasn't wise-off; I was teasing," McCormick complained. "And stop doin' that, will ya?"

"Doing what?"

"Hitting me!" McCormick rubbed his ear meaningfully. "I'm not a kid!"

"Can't prove it by me! Now, you gonna tell me what's going on, or do I have to arrange for a little keelhauling here?"

"Jeez. OK, OK, I'll tell ya. But let's go in first. People are staring at us."

"Yeah, all right." Hardcastle reached for the doorknob with one hand, the other twisting in Mark's shirtfront, preparatory to hauling the kid in after him before he could bolt.

"SURPRISE!!" several voices chorused loudly as the door swung open.

Startled, Hardcastle took a step backwards, colliding into an already off-balance McCormick. Mark's injured foot came down on the forgotten suitcase, twisting awkwardly in the process. The next thing he knew, he was sprawled in the corridor, supporting a 225 pound weight on his stomach.

"Ooff! Shift it, Hardcase, will ya? You're squashing me here!" he gasped, pushing ineffectually at the solid bulk.

"McCormick, what's going on here?"

"A party, what else?" Mike Delaney's delighted voice announced. Reaching down a hand, the Lieutenant helped Hardcastle to his feet.

"Hey, what about me?" came a plaintive cry from the floor.

"Nah, leave him, Mike," Hardcastle advised as his friend leaned over again. "The kid's so clumsy, he'll just end up back down there anyway."

"Clumsy?!" McCormick spluttered, highly outraged. "You pushed me!"

"Sorry, kiddo, it won't wash. You've already used that one."

"Grr," was Mark's only response to Hardcastle's beamed face as Delaney helped him to stand up.

"Happy birthday, Milt," one of Hardcastle's fellow jurists greeted, appearing in the doorway.

"Uh, thanks, Pete."

"Milt, let me kiss the birthday boy," another friend said, rushing up.

"Ooff!" Hardcastle panted, arms going round the lady clinging to him. "Uh, it's nice to see you, Helen," he said when she finally broke the kiss.

"Umm," she replied, winking at Mark. "Very nice."

McCormick winked back over Hardcastle's shoulder, smirking as the older man shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He loved it when Hardcase got embarrassed or ruffled; it made him seem more human, not so infallible.

"Hey, Milt," another Judge, George Willoughby, called. "We don't have much time; come in here and make a wish."

"Yeah, go and blow out the candles, Judge. You're good at that," McCormick chuckled, steering Hardcastle over to the table.

Flashing the young man an 'I'll get you for that later' look, Hardcastle bent over the cake and blew out the candles. A round of cheers went up, and someone handed the Judge a knife. "Nice big slices, Milt." "Who's hogging the champagne?" "What did you wish for?" Everyone spoke at once.

When the cake had been cut and handed around, Hardcastle reached down for his own piece. A long-fingered hand darted out and snatched the paper plate away, lightning-quick.

"McCormick!" roared Hardcastle, drawing everyone's attention.

"Gee, Judge, I'm just doin' you a favor," McCormick said, sweetly solicitous. "You need to go on a diet. Believe me, I know!" He issued a heartfelt sigh, rubbing his tender stomach.

Hardcastle gazed balefully amid a chorus of giggles. Then he cuffed McCormick on the head and took back his cake. The laughter doubled in intensity as the two men stared each other down, eyes scant inches apart.

"Come on, you two. Kiss and make up," Delaney encouraged, slapping both men on the back simultaneously. He used a bit more force than he'd intended, and twin 'ouches' rang out as McCormick and Hardcastle's noses banged together.

"This is great!" Bill Giles gasped between guffaws. "Best party I've been to in a long time! Don't even mind your late night call, Mark."

"Eh? What call?" Hardcastle asked somewhat thickly, holding his nose gingerly.

"The one explaining the change in venue."

"Change in venue?"

"Yes, Hilt. We were supposed to have this little shindig at your place. Until you got bitten by the travel bug, that is."

"You mean--"

"Yep. Mark had it all planned days ago. I dare say he got half of us up out of a sound sleep last night, calling to change things."

"McCormick!" Hardcastle whirled to face the ex-con. "Why didn't you say anything?" he demanded, sounding more accusatory than curious.

Mark pulled a long-suffering face. "Dumb and stubborn. . . it was supposed to be a surprise party, Judge. How was it gonna be a surprise if I told ya, huh?"

This remark elicited another round of raucous laughter, helped along by the rapid consumption of beer and champagne, and the general air of good cheer. When the steward came by a few minutes later, he was hard-pressed to get the small crowd's attention.

"Everybody who's going ashore!" he called again in a louder voice. "Five minutes, ladies and gentlemen."

More hoots as someone shouted: "Where? I don't see any gentlemen here!"

'Like a bunch of kids', Mark thought to himself in bemusement, watching as the judge's friends and former colleagues began to file out.

"Now you behave yourself," Helen Wallingford warned, planting a kiss on Hardcastle's cheek. "Don't go wearing yourself out. Remember, I'll be waiting for you."

McCormick smothered a giggle.



"Happy birthday, you old goat," another well-wisher said, slapping Hardcastle on the shoulder.

"And many more," added Lt. Delaney, making his own way out.

"Enjoy your presents!" Bill Giles said, pointing towards the pile of gifts there had been no time to open.

At last the room emptied out, leaving just Hardcastle and his young 'protege'.

"Well, Hardcase, I'd better be going too. That was the last whistle."

"But you'll miss the trip if ya do that."

"Eh?"

"Eloquent as ever, McCormick."

"Judge, what are you talking about?"

"This," the former jurist said, reaching in his pocket to produce a ticket.

"What's this?" Mark asked, taking the slip of paper.

"I'm beginning to think you need glasses, kid. That is your ticket. For this cruise. Remember now? You saw it only yesterday."

"But I thought—"

"I doubt it," Hardcastle cut in. "Not with that pea brain of yours." The judge's grin robbed his words of any possible sting.

"You mean - but I figured you'd 've torn this up."

"Now why'd I want to do that? Can't use it if it's torn up."

A knowing look suddenly appeared in the ex-con's eyes. "So that's why you so 'graciously' allowed me to drive you."

The broad shoulders shrugged.

"And what if I hadn't offered, huh? Would you have shanghaied me?"

"Nah. I'd 've just turned it in, and gotten my money back."

"Of course. Why did I even ask?"

"Dunno," Hardcastle said, fighting back a grin.

A long moment went by. Then McCormick said, very quietly, "You really wanted me along? After . . . well, after yesterday?"

"Sure. Where the Lone Ranger goes, Tonto goes. Thought you knew that by now."

McCormick shifted uncomfortably, staring down at his sneakered feet. "But this isn't one of your cases. You don't. . . need me."

Hardcastle took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Listen, kiddo. I told you once that you're important to me. I don't say things like that easily, or often, or unless I mean it. Understand?"

Dark blue eyes rose hesitantly to meet the older man's. "Yeah," McCormick said softly. "Thanks for, uh, setting me straight."

"That's what I'm here for," Hardcastle punched McCormick in the arm, then reached down for a paper plate. "Here, kid. Have another piece of cake."

Brown curls bounced as McCormick shook his head. "Nah, that's OK."

"You don't want any more? You feelin' OK?"

McCormick pulled a face. "Of course I'm feeling OK. I just don't want any more cake."

"Then you can't be feeling all right," Hardcastle persisted.

"Oh, for— Look, Judge, I, er, had some last night."

"Some what?"

"Cake."

"Cake? Where'd you get cake?"

"I baked it."

"You baked a cake?!"

"Yeah. And it was delicious."

"Was? You mean you ate the whole thing?"

McCormick had the grace to look sheepish. "Well, most of it. But you were going away. I didn't want it to go to waste."

"Waste, or waist?" Hardcastle admonished, pinching McCormick's midriff with both hands.

"Judge!" McCormick squeaked, being very ticklish just there.

"You keep this up, you'll never find any clothes to fit."

"Eh?"

"Clothes. At our port of call tomorrow. Or are you plannin' on wearing the same rags the whole trip?"

"Rags!" McCormick was indignant. Then he said: "But I don't have any money!"

"That's OK. I do."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Sure. You can work it off when we get home."

McCornick moaned, and sat down heavily. "You're a prince, Judge, you know that?"

Hardcastle winked at him. "Now yer cookin'," he pronounced, then began to open his presents.

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