

*Back-to-Back
Supplement 1*



THERES NO
PLEA BARGAIN
IN HEAVEN

«Contents»

BETWEEN THE SCENES:

1. Today Is The First Day Of The Rest Of Your Life (T. White)....	1
2. Dialog Between Scorpion and Scorpio (M. Reynolds).....	7
3. Lip Service (L. Tucker)	10

GENERAL FICTION:

4. Learning To Live With Losing (L. Tucker).....	12
5. Tequila Sunrise (J. Darnell).....	22
6. Wimmer Takes All (M. Reynolds)	44
7. Double or Nothing (M. Reynolds)	49

MISCELLANEOUS:

Shooting Schedule - "In The Eye Of The Beholder".....	59
-------------------------------------------------------	----



Art Credits:

Ruth Kurz: ii; 6

Melinda Reynolds: 43; 48;
58

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TEQUILA SUNRISE

Written By: Judy Darnell

Judge Milton Hardcastle wandered into his kitchen, looking for a quick snack. Noticing a hastily scribbled note from his housekeeper taped on the refrigerator, he glanced at it briefly, then stuck it in his jacket pocket to be read later. It was mainly a grocery list with some extra reminders added at the bottom, but he didn't figure he or McCormick would be doing much cooking.

Hearing the front door slam, he frowned. At 55 miles per hour, there was no way his resident ex-con should have gotten back from the airport this fast.

"Hi, Hardcase. Fixing lunch?" Mark McCormick breezed into the room, bypassing Hardcastle and heading straight for the refrigerator.

"What'd you do, McCormick? Take the Concorde from LAX to Malibu?"

"Nah. Just took a shortcut. Where's the mayonnaise?"

"There is no shortcut, the mayonnaise is where it's always been, and get your head out of my refrigerator. You're gonna get hair in the food."

McCormick straightened, clasping the finally located jar in his hand, and giving the Judge a disgusted look. "That's gross, Hardcastle."

"Nope, just blunt." He grabbed the mayonnaise and headed for the breadbox. "You've been here for over three months, you oughtta be gettin' used to it by now."

"You mean like had breath? After a while you just stop noticing it?"

"That's enough out of you, kiddo." Hardcastle turned quickly to hide his smile, and began slapping mayonnaise across the bread. He'd be damned if he was gonna let this kid know how often his smart aleck remarks cracked him up. "So, you got Sara to the airport okay?"

"Yeah. God, she was so excited. You'd think nobody ever had a baby before."

"Well, Sara Ellen is her namesake, her favorite niece. We knew she'd be going to stay with her for a couple of weeks when the baby was born, we just weren't expecting it quite so soon. But," he added, throwing the sandwich knife into the sink, "babies seem to have a habit of coming when they want to, regardless of what other people have planned."

"I guess so," McCormick shrugged. "I wouldn't know much about it." He frowned at Hardcastle who stood leaning against the counter. "Is that supposed to be our lunch? Mayonnaise sandwiches?"

"Do I look like a chef, McCormick? You're waitin' on me to make you a sandwich?"

"You just told me to stay out of your refrigerator."

"Well, now I'm tellin' ya to get back in the refrigerator. Stay away from that fried chicken, though; it's for the band."

"For the what?"

"Didn't I tell ya? The Jazzmasters are comin' over here tonight. You're gonna love it."

McCormick looked at the Judge skeptically as he began laying sliced ham across the bread. "Jazz? I don't think so, Judge. It's just... not me, ya know?"

"Don't knock it til ya tried it, kiddo." Hardcastle grabbed his sandwich and headed for the table. "Believe me, you're in for a whole new listening experience."

McCormick slammed down the garage door, at the same time muttering unintelligible words through clenched teeth. It was ridiculous to be changing the plugs in the Judge's 'vette at 2 o'clock in the morning, but no more ridiculous than trying to sleep. Hardcastle's Jazzmasters were in residence.

McCormick had never really listened to jazz before, and so hadn't formed any firm opinion of it. That attitude had changed rapidly a few hours earlier. The assault on his eardrums was mentally filed under 'cruel and unusual punishment' as he had frowned at Hardcastle's trombone and decided that he hated jazz.

The Judge hadn't looked too surprised when he had excused himself from the gathering, feigning sleepiness. In fact, come to think of it, he reflected, the whole roomful of older men had almost looked amused. 'Almost' hell, he thought, snapping the toolbox shut. Hardcastle's innocently asked "Tired so early, McCormick?" had definitely held a snickering undertone.

He sighed as he sat down on the toolbox and pondered the enigma that was Milton C. Hardcastle. He'd been set up again; Hardcase knew he'd hate it - the old buzzard!

McCormick looked hopefully toward the door. No Saints had come marching in for several minutes now, and he hoped almost desperately that they were through for the night... what was left of it. He smiled, hearing the muffled sounds of men's voices, and car doors slamming out in the drive. He sent a silent prayer of thanks, then shifted his weight and leaned back against the car, waiting for all the band members to leave. He grimaced as he heard Hardcastle's bellowing laughter. Christ! The 'good nights' would probably take an hour; didn't this man ever need to sleep? He shook his head as he heard Hardcastle laugh again. A jazz band. Every time he thought he had this guy pegged, he popped up with something new. It had been a hell of lot easier sitting in prison hating his guts; there were no confused feelings then. He had seemed so one-dimensional; a typical, rock-hard, law-and-order conservative. Everything was either black or white, right or wrong, nothing in between. He'd pictured him going home at night to a sterilely clean apartment, probably presided over by a prune-faced wife. No kids - or maybe a couple of old maid daughters tucked away in the corners, studying their law books and trying to be like Daddy. Yuck.

Oh, well, just went to show how wrong he could be. In the three months he'd

been at Gulls-Way, the Judge had broken just about every stereotype he had ever imagined. A basketball playing widower who drove a classic corvette and an ancient pick-up, rode a dirt bike and played a trombone, all the time operating out of a seaside Malibu mansion -- it just didn't fit any of the images he had conceived.

It hadn't taken long, either, to sense the basic decency hidden beneath the gruff exterior. The man had kept him off balance ever since that first night when he had installed him in the elegantly furnished Gatehouse. He remembered Sara's horrified chagrin at the thought of an ex-con in the Gatehouse, instead of the gardener's trailer. It was stuff like that that made him like the guy, and, dammit, he hadn't wanted to like him. He had wanted to resent him, and still did, somewhat... but he liked him, too.

"Damn!" He mumbled in exasperation as he checked out his watch. Surely all of Hardcastle's buddies would be gone by now. He hated trying to get analytical about things, it always made him depressed. Sometimes more than others, and this was one of those times. Besides, Hardcastle was like one of those damned Chinese puzzles, anyway. Just when you thought you had it figured out, you discovered you had it all backwards and you had to start over.

Standing finally and slipping out of the garage, he saw the Judge still talking to someone, but he couldn't make out who it was in the darkness. Who cares, he thought wearily as he entered the Gatehouse and made his way upstairs to the bedroom. Stripping to his shorts, he slid gratefully under the down comforter, sleep coming quickly in the now quiet night at Gulls-Way.

Hardcastle and his long time friend Tyler Peebles stifled their laughter as they saw McCormick leaving the garage and heading for the Gatehouse.

"You were right, Milt," the gray-haired sax player said, "He really hated it."

"Yeah, kinda thought he would." Hardcastle agreed, his laughter barely concealed.

"How did things work out on his street monster?" Peebles asked, his eyes drifting admiringly over the Coyote's sleek lines in the moonlight. "Ever manage to find insurance that cost less than your weight in gold?"

"Barely," Hardcastle admitted, "But we managed. You know how it is, Tyler. Sports cars. Kids and their expensive toys."

"Oh, yes, I know. Kids of all ages. How is the corvette, Milt?" He nodded sagely at the half-embarrassed look Hardcastle gave him. "Still playing cops and robbers, aren't you, Milt?"

"Come on, now, Tyler, it's not that. I explained it to you."

"I know, I know. Two hundred cases that slipped through. I've heard it Milt, but I know you too well. You won't retire til they plant you six feet under, especially now you've got that crazy kid around to show off for."

"Show off? Tyler, you've been watching too much TV. You know I do everything by the book."

"Sure, Milt. You don't think there might be just a little bit of a Magnum, P.I. syndrome in your lifestyle?"

Hardcastle laughed, knowing how Peebles had always turned up his nose at the loud Hawaiian shirts the Judge was so fond of wearing. "Tyler," he said, fingering the green shirt emblazoned with red and yellow parrots, "I've had this shirt since Thomas Magnum was running around in diapers, and if I've got any 'cops-n-robbers' syndrome, it probably dates back to Dragnet."

"Just the facts'?"

"Just the facts."

"Okay, Milt, whatever you say. Just watch your step and be careful. I wouldn't want to see an old friend get hurt."

Hardcastle gave Peebles a puzzled look as he noticed the other man glancing at the Gatehouse as he made his last statement. "Why," he said hesitantly, "Do I get the feeling there was a double meaning behind that?"

"We've known each other a long time, Milt."

"Yes, we have."

"I've watched you try this 'rehabilitate an ex-con' thing before, and I know how you got burned by the Beal case. I thought that would probably be the end of it."

"You live and learn, Tyler; that doesn't mean you stop trying."

"I guess. This one's different, though. This McCormick kid, I mean. I don't know, Milt, your whole attitude seems different."

"Don't know what you're talkin' about, Tyler."

"I think you do, but if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. Just... try to keep things in perspective, alright? He seems like a nice kid, but..."

"Okay, Tyler, okay. I'll tell you just like I've told everybody else that's come beating around this same bush. I know what I'm doin'. This is not Adopt-A-Con; and I'm not lookin' to replace my son. I'm just tryin' to help out a kid who could use a break."

"Point made, Milt. I'll shut up, but, hey, be careful anyway."

"Will you get outta here before Claudia comes over and drags you out my front gate?"

"That'll be the day," Peeble laughed. "Never get married four times, Milt. It starts catching up with you."

"This from a man who's been giving me advice?"

"You're the one who lives and learns, Milt; some of us haven't mastered that yet."

"Take care, Tyler." Hardcastle smiled.

"Yeah, you, too."

The smile faded as Hardcastle watched Peebles' car pull out the drive. Damn. Why did everyone have to speculate on his relationship with McCormick? No one had ever said anything about the other ex-cons he had had at Gulls-Way. He wasn't trying to replace his son. McCormick was just... McCormick. A kid that needed a break. What was so hard to understand about that?

McCormick stared glumly at what seemed to be two runny yellow eyes looking up at him from his breakfast plate. He guessed that they were supposed to be eggs, but with Hardcastle cooking breakfast, you couldn't be too sure.

Wrinkling his nose, he covered each of the two offending objects with pieces of toast and tried to wish it all away. It didn't work.

"Wake up, McCormick! Drink your coffee and stop playin' with your food."

The loud voice from the other side of the table forced his half-asleep eyes open and he glared. "Four hour's sleep," he mumbled.

"What?"

"FOUR ... hour's sleep. Thanks to you."

"Why, McCormick, you mean our music kept you awake?"

"No, I mean your noise kept me awake. I never did hear anything resembling music."

"What can I say, kiddo? You've got no taste. Must be a case of arrested development."

McCormick sighed and rolled his eyes skyward. Give this round to Hardcastle, he wasn't awake enough yet for a sparring match.

"You win, Hardcase," he said, reaching for the black coffee, "Anything about me that's been arrested, I'm sure you know all about. Now, will you just let me drink my coffee in peace so my brain can wake up?" He glanced quickly at Hardcastle. "And no remarks about my mental state; not til after coffee."

"Fair enough." Hardcastle poured himself another cup.

"Just remember," McCormick added, "I owe you a sleepless night, and I'm gonna getcha!"

"Yeah, sure. When Hell freezes over maybe, not before then. Hey, what were you doing in the garage so late last night?"

"Changed the plugs in your 'vette. Since I couldn't sleep."

The Judge grunted a vague response which McCormick had learned to interpret as the Hardcastle version of 'thanks', and he nodded his head at the older man as he mumbled 'uh-huh' in return.

"You better get to those hedges right after breakfast, kiddo. Weather looks like it's gonna be acting up afterwhile."

"You want me to trim all those hedges today?"

"No, McCormick. I want you to walk around and talk to each one of 'em individually. Of course I want you to trim 'em. Wake up!"

McCormick looked up at the overcast sky that matched his mood exactly. "I'm awake, Judge." He pushed the coffee away suddenly and began to walk to the edge of the patio. "I'll go ahead and get started."

"Hey!"

Taking a deep breath, he turned and looked back at Hardcastle, who was watching him with a puzzled expression.

"Whasamatter? How come you're in such a big rush all of a sudden?"

"Gotta beat the weather, Judge." McCormick found himself studying a small crack in the concrete, rather than meeting those piercing blue eyes.

"Are you okay, kiddo? You're not sick or something?"

The concern in the Judge's voice was evident, and McCormick attempted to smile. "I'm not sick."

"How 'bout the 'or something'?"

McCormick shrugged, raising his eyes to meet those of Hardcastle's. "Can't always be in a good mood, ya know?"

"Anything you wanna talk about?"

"Nah. I'd better get started, Judge."

"Yeah. Okay."

McCormick moved off toward the hedges, knowing that Hardcastle was still watching him curiously. Irritated at himself, he cursed inwardly at his inability to hide his moods. Never had been any good at it, and, damn, old Hardcase could read him like a book sometimes. Oh well. Nothing to do about it now. Just get through the day. Get it over with.

Hardcastle tried to concentrate on the files spread out across his desk as the lightning crashed and thundered outside. The storm that had been threatening all day had finally arrived just after sunset, the wind whipping and howling at the windows.

Restless, he stood and looked out the window towards the Gatehouse. Ordinarily, McCormick would have found some reason to entrench himself in the den by now — the kid really hated storms. The lights were on in the Gatehouse though, so it looked like he was going to sit this out on his own.

The Judge frowned, wondering what was bothering the younger man. He'd seemed distracted and out of sorts ever since breakfast. It had to be more than just missing a few hours sleep.

He jumped suddenly, as a thundering crash sounded, almost seeming to come from within the room. In the same instant the lights surged, flickered, and died, leaving him standing in the fluttering glow of the fireplace.

"Well, shit," he announced to the vacant room, "There goes the power."

Peering back out the window, he saw only a vague outline of the now-darkened Gatehouse visible through the pouring rain. "It won't be long now," he muttered. "No way you're gonna sit over there in the dark by yourself while it's stormin', hotshot."

Hardcastle settled back comfortably in his favorite leather chair to wait out the power failure. The slamming of the front door and the loud holler of "Judge?!" wasn't long in coming.

"In the den!" He yelled back.

The sound of McCormick's squeaking wet sneakers precoded him and the Judge scowled at the sight that greeted his eyes. "Well, you look like a drowned rat," he grumbled.

McCormick took off his soaked windbreaker and dropped it to the floor. "That's too clichéd, Hardcastle. You've never seen a drowned rat in your life. I'd expect something a little more original from you."

The statement being true, despite its smart-ass delivery, Hardcastle let it go unchallenged. As he watched the dripping ex-con remove his soggy shoes and socks, then kneel in front of the fireplace and begin shaking the water from his hair, Hardcastle said solemnly, "Francis X."

McCormick stopped in mid-shake. "What?"

"Francis X. When I was a kid, we had a water spaniel. Whenever he got wet, he looked just like you do now. Yep. Francis X."

"Hardcastle, nobody but a kid named Milton would ever call his dog Francis X." McCormick's faded jeans and T-shirt were drenched through, and he sat down in front of the fire, rubbing his arms and shivering slightly despite the proximity of the flames.

"My mother named him for her favorite movie star, Francis X. Bushman."

"Let me guess. The Silent Screen's version of John Wayne, right?"

"Wrong. That was Tom Mix or William S. Hart. You can't sit the in those wet clothes, kiddo; you'll catch pneumonia."

"Nah, I never get sick, remember?"

"Get outta those clothes, McCormick!"

"Hardcastle! There are many people that I will gladly strip in front of a fireplace for. You are not one of them - you're not even on the list."

"Will you cut that out? Christ! Sometimes I think you were born with an X-rated mind. Now, get the flashlight out of my desk and go change into the robe that's hangin' in my bathroom. I think there's some sweats in there, too."

"Okay. Talked me into it, Masked Man."

Hardcastle just shook his head as he watched McCormick make his waterlogged way across the room. Closing his eyes as he leaned back to enjoy the warmth of the roaring fire, he mumbled under his breath, "Kids!"

The laughter burst from Hardcastle's throat before he could stop it as McCormick re-entered the room. He forced himself to bring it under control as he saw that the ex-con was looking at him with what was evidently supposed to be a fierce glare. Under the circumstances, it wasn't coming across as very convincing.

"Alright, Hardcastle. You're the one who insisted that I go change."

"Yeah, but I forgot to prepare myself for the result," Hardcastle replied as the frowning younger man flopped down in front of the fireplace once more.

He kept quiet as McCormick tried to arrange the voluminous folds of the blue robe more tightly around his slender body. Finally, the kid seemed to admit to himself the comical picture he was making, as he shrugged his shoulders and smiled up at the Judge.

"Okay, so I look like a kid playing dress up. Or dress down, as the case may be." He fingered the baggy gray sweat pants that stopped several inches before reaching his ankles. "Not all of us wear an Extra-large, Short, Judge."

"Sorry, kid, I didn't think about that part of it. At least you're dry. Except your hair."

"It's gettin' there."

McCormick leaned closer to the fire, running his fingers through the still damp curls. The sight amused Hardcastle until he saw the other man shiver once again. 'Chilled to the bone' was more than just an old saying, and he didn't want the kid becoming ill, despite his protestations that he never did.

"Tell you what, kiddo," he said, rising and walking over to the sideboard

that stood in a far corner of the room; "There's not much to chose from heres and I'm not about to go down into the wine cellar, but I think we might can come up with a little somethin' to warm you up quicker." He squinted as he tried to make out the labels in the semi-darkness. Giving up, he picked one of medium size and grabbed two glasses.

McCormick laughed as the Judge settled back into his chair, setting the glasses on the small table next to it. "Tequila, Hardcase? Never pictured you as the tequila type."

"I'm not," Hardcastle said, scowling at the bottle. "All that stuff over there—" he indicated the sideboard, "was given to me. Ya know, Christmas presents, things like that."

"None of it worthy of the Hardcastle wine cellar, huh?"

"Don't be a smart-ass. You wanna sit there and freeze while you make your dumb remarks, or you want me to pour you a shot?"

"Tonto never turn down free firewater. Even if it is third rate," McCormick smirked.

Hardcastle ignored the smirk as he poured the glasses half full, passing one down to McCormick. He still couldn't figure why it had taken a power failure to make the kid decide to be sociable.

McCormick kept looking toward the window as the lightning flashed outside, and Hardcastle wondered why he seemed to have such a hangup about storms. He didn't seem particularly frightened, he just plain didn't like 'em. Wouldn't do any good to come right out and ask him, though. He'd be answered just like he had been earlier today when he had asked the kid what was bothering him. A shrug. A non-committal non-answer. McCormick was totally straight forward and bluntly truthful when he wanted to be. It was only getting him to the 'wanting to be' stage that was so damned hard.

Hardcastle let his own gaze drift out the window for a moment. "Now this," he said, "really reminds me of when I was a kid."

"The storm?" McCormick asked, "Or are you comparin' me to your water spaniel again? Francis X..." He added, giving Hardcastle a look that plainly stated he could never understand someone allowing their dog to have such a name.

"Don't you go knockin' old Francis X, he was a good old dog. Nah, I was talkin' about the storm. Sittin' around with just the fireplace for light. You grow up living in sharecropper's shacks, you don't even know what it means to have electricity. We had kerosene lamps - you've seen those, haven't you? Wind used to blow in through the windows, hell, through the boards, and the lamps would flicker, make weird shadows on the wall. We used to sit around and tell ghost stories; scare the shit out of each other, ya know?"

"Doesn't sound too bad," McCormick said as he passed his glass for a refill. "At least you had somebody to share spook stories with. Were there lots of little Hardcastles sitting around, scaring the crap outta each other? God, don't tell me there's more like you running around loose?"

Hardcastle refilled the glass, keeping his head turned as he fielded the question. No point in getting into that, he reasoned. The kid would never be meeting little brother 'Gerald', so just leave him out of the pleasant reminiscences.

"Nah," he said as he returned the glass, "But I had a couple of aunts that were around a lot of the time. You'd like May and Zora. You talk about two women who can cook, makes my mouth water to remember some of the stuff they used to come up with. Aunt May always figured that homemade cookies were a cure-all for anything. A bad cold, a broken romance,... a kid that's scared during a thunderstorm..." Hardcastle let his words trail off as he watched the younger man closely.

"Wish I'd had an Aunt May." McCormick's voice was soft as he gazed into the fire, and Hardcastle realized that the ex-con was already feeling the effects of the fiery tequila.

"You didn't have much family around?" He asked off-handedly, keeping his tone casual.

"Unh-unh. Oh, there was some family. People I'm related to, I mean. But, ...well, you know how it is. Some families are close, some aren't. Mine wasn't."

"No other 'little McCormicks' running around?"

"Nope. Guess one was more than enough." He added wistfully, "I always used to wish I had a brother."

"You were probably better off, kid. A brother would more than likely have broken half your toys, and hocked the other half."

"There weren't that many toys to break, Judge. Besides, it would have been somebody to share those ghost stories with. Do you have any idea..." His voice broke off, and he leaned back against the couch, stretching long legs in front of him.

Hardcastle looked at the pensive young man staring into the fire, his thoughts obviously of another time and another place. "Do I have any idea about what, kid?" He asked softly.

"It's not important."

Hardcastle waited patiently, his eyes never leaving McCormick's face.

"Do you have any idea," the voice was almost a whisper, and Hardcastle strained to hear the words, "What it's like for a little kid to wake up in the middle of the night during a thunderstorm? To know he's all by himself in the apartment, 'cause his mother's working night shift as a waitress. To turn on the lights and nothing happens, and the lightning crashing like it's gonna come in the window any second?"

"I'd guess," Hardcastle said quietly, "That would be one pretty frightened little kid."

"Oh, yeah. I remember how I'd jump back into bed and pull all the covers up over my head, like that was gonna somehow make it all go away. Never worked. A brother... Woulda been a nice thing to have around."

McCormick passed his glass suddenly, and Hardcastle refilled it, ignoring his own. The kid was going to have one hell of a hangover tomorrow, but time and a couple of aspirins would deal with that temporary pain. Not like the pain of childhood memories that could hang on for years, with a stinging sharpness that could make a long-ago incident hurt as though it had happened only yesterday. The boy had mentioned his mother, but not a word about his father. Hardcastle knew better than to ask; he'd talk about him when he was ready. One problem at a time.

"You had to be alone at night a lot?"

"Yeah. I dunno, really, maybe it just seemed like a lot to me. It seemed like she was never around, 'cause she worked days, too. I knew she had to, so I couldn't really get mad at her for leavin' me... but I did."

"Only natural. A kid can know a lot of things and still not really understand them."

"Tell me about it. There's still a lot of things I'll never understand."

"Such as?"

McCormick shrugged, hesitating, his eyes never leaving the crackling fire. "Just... things."

Hardcastle saw the sad smile and decided that his curiosity would have to wait for another time. "Well, I guess we all have things in our childhood that we'd rather forget about, kiddo."

"Yeah, but how do you ever do it?"

"You don't, not completely. You just learn to live with 'em."

McCormick turned to face the Judge, circling drawn-up knees with his arms and leaning his head against the couch. He grinned suddenly, unexpectedly. "What kinda things would you want to forget about, Hardcase?"

After his momentary surprise at the sudden mood change, Hardcastle smiled; the tequila had hit, the kid was looped. He searched his mind quickly for an answer that wouldn't bring the mood back down.

"Le'me see... Well, for starters, there's goin' to the outhouse on a cold winter morning..."

McCormick laughed. "Yeah. That is kinda hard for me to picture though, Judge."

"Maybe so. But it sure isn't hard for me to remember. You ever sit your bottom down on what feels like a chunk of ice with a hole cut in the middle, you don't forget it."

"Yeah, but," McCormick giggled, covering his mouth apologetically with one hand, "Sorry. I just have this mental image of a white-haired little kid wearing a black judge's robe and pounding his gavel while he sits there."

"I was not born a Judge, McCormick. I worked damn hard for the right to pound that gavel."

"I know. It's just....just that I can't picture you doin' anything else, ya know?"

"I did a lot of other things."

"Yeah, I know. You've been a soldier, a lawyer, a cop — 'Baker, banker, candle-stick maker'... And wound up a Judge. But...that's all 'good guy' stuff. Didn't you ever do anything bad?"

"I've done things I've regretted later, yes."

"That's not what I mean. Didn't you ever do something, and you knew, even while you were doin' it, that it was wrong, but there was just something in you that made you do it anyway?"

"Nope. Oh, there's been things I wasn't sure about. Times when I've wondered if what I was doin' was right, or wrong. But purposely, intentionally, doin' something that I knew was wrong? No. You'd probably call it my John Wayne Complex, and maybe you're right. I always wanted to be the 'good guy'." Hardcastle frowned, knowing how sanctimonious that last statement had sounded. He didn't mean for it to come across that way, but it was true; he had always wanted to be the good guy.

McCormick sighed heavily as he turned back to face the fire. "I don't guess I ever wanted to be the good guy... I just wanted to be somebody; and, at the time, it didn't matter how."

"You are somebody, kid."

"No, I mean I wanted to be somebody..instead of just another nobody. I used to sit out on the fire escape and watch people down in the street. All those anonymous faces passing by. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. I hated it. I just wanted to get out, to get away. Hell... I just wanted to be. Just wanted somebody to notice I was there."

Hardcastle rubbed his jaw, aware of the lump in his throat that hadn't been there a moment before. He wasn't sure how to respond to McCormick's drunken ramblings. No one came through childhood unscathed, there were always some unpleasant memories, but this kid seemed to have drawn way more than his share. His self-image hadn't been just bad, it had almost been non-existent.

"Is that why you stole a car when you were seventeen? So somebody'd know you were there?"

"Maybe. I dunno. You don't stop to think at seventeen, you just...do. Plenty of time for thinkin' later. After it's too late."

"It started you on a bad path, kid."

"Not really, Judge, it was just another step. I'd been on the path since the day I was born."

"You know something, McCormick?"

"What?"

"You really make a maudlin drunk."

McCormick considered for a moment, then turned to face the Judge. Hardcastle smiled as he saw the hoped-for twinkle beginning to appear in the slightly glazed blue eyes.

"Yeah, I guess I do, don't I?" McCormick smacked the couch with his hand and broke into a grin. "Tell ya what, Hardcase." He held up his empty glass and waved it at the Judge. "Gimme a little refill here, and I shall change the subject entirely. Tell ya all about the glorious years after I hit puberty."

Hardcastle chuckled as he poured a very minute amount of tequila into the glass, figuring the kid probably wouldn't notice anyway. He didn't.

"Kid, do you have any idea how drunk you are?"

"No. How drunk am I?"

"Very. But I'm not drunk enough to sit here and listen to the highly exaggerated tales of your adolescent escapades, amorous or otherwise."

McCormick downed the drink in one swallow, then grinned at the Judge idiotically "You mean you don't wanna hear about the first time I got laid?"

"No!" Hardcastle tried to look stern and serious.

"Her name was—"

"McCormick!!" The Judge was finding it hard to maintain his 'stern and serious' in the face of that lopsided grin.

"It's a great story, Judge; you don't know what you're missin'."

"It may be a 'great story' to you, McCormick, but somehow I'll manage to get through the rest of my days without hearing it, okay?"

Both men blinked suddenly, covering their eyes as the electricity came back on, flooding the room in brightness.

"About time." Hardcastle went to the window, looked out. "That's better. Looks like the rain's just about stopped, too."

"Looks like you got a reprieve, Judge." McCormick stumbled to his feet. "I'll save the stories of my brilliant career with the opposite sex til another time."

"You do that, kid," Harcastle laughed. "Some other time. Way off in the future. Way off."

"You betcha." McCormick began weaving toward the door.

"Where do ya think you're goin'?"

"Home." He pointed vaguely to the outdoors. "Gatehouse. Bed," he specified.

"You'll never make it." Harcastle couldn't help but grin at the incongruous figure. Wobbling across the room in the oversize sweats and bathrobe, the kid looked like a very drunk six-year-old.

"Sure I will. Know the way by heart; get there with my eyes closed..."

"Got a bulletin for ya, kid; they are." As McCormick continued on, unheeding, "Okay, hardhead. Have it your way." Harcastle followed, standing in the doorway, so he could watch and be certain that the over-confident ex-con didn't fall flat on his face half-way to the Gatehouse. "At least you're finally in a good mood. Even if it did take a half a bottle of tequila to do it."

McCormick turned and looked at the Judge for a long moment, the maniacal grin fading to a soft smile. "I'm just glad to have the day over with, Harcase... real glad. G'night."

Harcastle stared after the retreating figure, watching him weaving a steadily haphazard course to the Gatehouse; even clearing the low hedges without mishap. What the hell had he meant by that last remark? He'd been smiling, but...somehow, the smile hadn't reached his eyes. They'd looked...regretful.

Harcastle shook his head as the inebriated young man reached his destination safely and went inside. "You're turnin' out to be a half-way decent kid, Mark McCormick," he said to himself as he stood in the doorway, "But, damn it, boy, you're turnin' out to be a complicated one, too."

Harcastle changed into his pajamas, frowning as he remembered that his favorite bathrobe had staggered off to the Gatehouse a short while earlier. The frown relaxed into a vague smile as his memory replayed the scene. God, what a hangover the kid was going to have. Probably wouldn't remember half the things he'd said tonight, and that was just as well. He wouldn't be bored having to listen to stumbling explanations and apologies for half-remembered comments.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the Judge threw his clothes into the growing pile in the corner as he thought back over the evening. Complicated kid, definitely. All tough-guy and smart-mouth on the surface. Start scratching that surface, though, and the tough guy bled. A lot. No wonder the kid had built such a defensive wall around himself. What the hell kind of childhood did he have anyway? What was it he'd said: "I just wanted to be!" What could make a kid think like that? As if he had to prove his very existence; as if he didn't have the right. And if not...why not? Damn. Complicated kid.

Harcastle stood and headed for the bathroom, stopping to pick up the pile of dirty clothes that had already accumulated since Sara had left. No point

in turning into a slob just because his housekeeper was going to be away for a few weeks. If he wasn't careful, the main house would start to look like the Catchhouse; and that place, he thought, oughtta be posted with warning signs. The kid didn't have many possessions, true, but those he did have were scattered everywhere. You couldn't walk three feet without stepping on something. Or sitting on something, he recalled with a grimace, wondering if Sara had been able to get the pizza stain out of his favorite slacks. Nobody in their right mind left a half-eaten slice of pizza laying on a chair. "Course, we're not talkin' about somebody in their right mind," he muttered to himself as he stuffed the clothes into a hamper, "We're talkin' about McCormick."

A jingling sound caught his attention and he remembered that he hadn't gone through any of the pockets. "Oh, hell." He pulled the clothes back out of the hamper, and began collecting various items. He stared blankly at the piece of paper that he pulled out of a jacket pocket until he recalled Sara's note that he had pulled off the refrigerator. He read it over absently, smiling: A grocery list; when the pool man was coming; the date of his upcoming dental appointment; a reminder not to forget Mark's 29th birthday... "Oh, shit!"

He sat down heavily on the hamper, checking the date on his watch. Damn and double damn! He wouldn't expect McCormick to say anything about it. That would have been setting himself up for a possible let-down, and no way would this kid risk something like that. His first birthday in three years that hadn't been spent in prison, and it just slipped by. That explained his unusual behavior, and the remark when he left, about just being glad to have the day over with. Damn.

He stood and walked over to the window, staring out into the darkness. Drumming his fingers on the window sill, he slowly began to smile. Maybe it wasn't too late. Let the kid sleep in tomorrow; he'd need it anyway, thanks to the tequila. There were belated birthday cards, so why not a belated present? Yeah. In fact, he knew just exactly what to get.

Crossing the room, he set the alarm clock to get up early. He'd need some time to pull this off. As he crawled into bed, his mind flashed back to Tyler Peebles and his 'be careful' warning. Tyler just didn't understand; none of his friends did. But damn, he thought as his eyes began to close, after ten years, I've just about faced the fact that I'm not gonna be getting married again. And who wants to got through the rest of their life alone? That's not living, that's just existing. Everybody needs somebody. Hell, I know I do, it's just human nature. And that kid out there sure as hell seems to. So, if we can help each other out a little bit... That's all that matters in the long run, isn't it?

McCormick moaned as he opened his eyes to the bright sunlight, then quickly closed them again. He would have covered his head with the pillow, but that would require movement and his body wasn't up to that yet.

"Ohhh... God..." He finally managed to mumble as a vague recollection of the previous evening began to surface. How much of that stuff did he drink? He'd heard of a tequila sunrise, but had always thought it was the name of a drink. Hell, that's what they should call the morning after...

Not wanting to move, but realizing that his bladder was soon going to insist otherwise, he carefully sat up in bed. Squinting in the brightness, his eyes

fell on the bedside clock. 12:15. It took a moment to register. 12:15? Afternoon? What was going on? The Judge took a sadistic pleasure in making him get up early. On more than one occasion Hardcastle had actually crept up the stairs and jerked the covers off after he had slept through the alarm. And enjoyed doing it. The man was definitely perverse. So how come he had let him sleep in today? Unless Hardcastle had a hangover, too; a real whopper. McCormick smiled at the thought, trying to remember how much tequila the Judge had tossed down. He couldn't remember. They'd been talking about a dog, Francis X, ... and Aunt Zora May - or something like that - and homemade cookies. He frowned, trying to recall what he'd talked about. The thunderstorm; and something about sitting on the fire escape. Shit, he hoped he hadn't said anything about— No, he'd never mention anything about that part of his life, no matter how drunk he'd been.

At least he'd gotten the birthday over with, and that was a relief. It always was. 'Happy Birthday'. What a joke. He closed his eyes trying to shut out the memory. His fifth birthday. The cake and melting ice cream. His mother's strained face as they tried to wait for his father to get home. A wait that had never ended. A father who had never come back home.

He shook his head slowly, ignoring the painful hangover. Someday, he'd find that sonofabitch if he was still alive. Not yet, he wasn't ready to face him yet. But someday. Just to ask him, "Why?" There had been so many whys. Some he knew he'd never ask, like "Why didn't you marry my mother?" "Why did you make me grow up a bastard?" No. Those he couldn't, and wouldn't, ask. Even after all this time the answers might hurt too much. Some things, maybe, you were better off not knowing. But, by God, to walk out on his birthday... that was something else. The man must have known how that would hurt; he just hadn't cared.

Okay, McCormick, he thought, as he pushed off the bed covers and stood, that's enough of your annual whine and snivel session. Pack it away until next year.

Giving in to his body's no longer deniable urge, he picked his way carefully down the stairway to the bathroom. He wondered again why Hardcastle had let him sleep so late. Old goat. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, his eyes fixed on the large object that stood against the wall. What the hell??

He started forward, but then, clenching his teeth, detoured quickly to the bathroom. He was in and out in record time, checking to be sure that he hadn't been seeing things. He hadn't. The stereo, with its large Bose speakers, was a state-of-the-art thing of beauty.

McCormick sat down cross-legged on the floor, looking over the AM/FM tuner with stereo cassette deck and turntable. He'd been drunk the night before, but he hadn't been blind. The lights had been on when he had staggered in, and this thing had not been here.

Hardcastle. It hadda be. The Judge had known all along, because he knew he hadn't said anything about it. He ran a hand over wood-grained speakers that would blow the walls out; fiddled with some of the knobs and buttons.

After a moment he sat back, folding his arms and staring at his crossed feet. Hardcastle. The man had done it again; he just wouldn't be pigeon-holed into any category. First, the Judge had sent him to prison for two years; then brought

him to Gulls-Way to live. Sent him chasing after bad guys as if it didn't matter if he lived or died; but if he skipped a meal, or got into one of his down moods, then Hardcastle would start worrying that he might be sick. Paid him two hundred lousy bucks a month - and then had the gall to take taxes out; then slipped in a stereo that had to set the Judge back a least a thousand. Goddamn. The man was crazy!

McCormick grinned widely at the thought of the Laciturn older man setting the stereo up while he was still asleep; after so much tequila, it would have been a safe bet that McCormick would've slept through an earthquake. The grin softened as he forced his thoughts to slow down, finally allowing the warmth that had been spreading in his chest for the last ten minutes to take over. It wasn't the expense of the gift, that wasn't it at all. Cliché or not, "It's the thought that counts" was a damned truthful statement.

He closed his eyes, smiling at the image that swam before them. Milton C. Hardcastle. Man of a thousand faces. And one of 'em, carefully tucked away, where no one could ever see, was a soft-hearted marshmallow. He chuckled to himself, "Hardcase Hardcastle. Who'd have ever thunk it?"

Hardcastle sat at the poolside table filling out warranty cards, keeping an eye out for McCormick, and wondering if he'd done the right thing. It had seemed like a good idea, but the more he thought about it, the less certain he was. Maybe the kid had a reason for not saying anything. He had assumed that the remark about 'glad to have the day over with' was just disappointment that the Judge hadn't known what day it was. But what if it was something else, something more. The kid was bad about keeping a lot of things buried, not wanting to talk about them.

But then, Hardcastle considered, who didn't have stuff that they didn't want to talk about. Didn't even want to think about if they could help it. He had plenty of deeply buried memories. Maybe he should have just left it alone; let McCormick deal with it on his own, if that's what he wanted.

He frowned as he stacked the completed warranty cards. Maybe Tyler was right; maybe he was letting himself get too involved with this kid. He hadn't intended to, it was all supposed to be strictly business. And it still pretty much was, he reasoned. It had only been three months, and he had even told the ex-con that it would be at least six months before he would begin to trust him. But, dammit, something about this kid... some unexplainable, undefinable something... had gotten to him from the beginning. It hadn't made sense then, and it didn't make any more sense now. Everybody needed somebody. Sure. It was a nice, pat little speech, and he'd said it to himself more than once. It still didn't answer the basic question. There were plenty of 'somebodies' out there. Plenty of 'kids that needed a break'. So why had it had to be McCormick? He was hard-headed and smart-mouthed; and he had no respect for authority. He was an uneducated motorhead, a street punk. He took advantage by getting out of his chores whenever possible, and his idea of 'cleaning up' was to sweep everything under the bed.

Hardcastle smiled as he added up the negatives. Every balance sheet had two sides, even McCormick's. The kid didn't have a mean bone in his body. Every time he got into trouble, it was because he was trying to help somebody else. And he was smart as a whip, even if he wasn't very educated. Yeah. Positives and negatives, everybody had 'em. And it still added up to the same

unanswerable question. Why McCormick? Whatever that...undefinable something was...it had been there all along. Had made him put the kid in the Gatehouse that first night, instead of the delapidated gardeners' trailer. And now it had made him buy a possibly unwanted birthday present.

Raising his head, he saw a jean-clad figure approaching the table, and he hurried to cover the warranty cards with some of his file folders.

"Mornin', Judge," McCormick said as he sat down.

"Afternoon, McCormick." Hardcastle corrected, keeping his eyes on his papers.

"You didn't wake me up."

"Nope."

"Considerate of you."

"Yeah, I know. Don't get used to it."

Hardcastle glanced up, saw the impish grin on the younger man's face. He smiled inwardly, relieved, as he looked back at his papers, striving to retain his poker-faced outward appearance.

"Somebody must have broke in while I was asleep."

"Did they now? I didn't hear anything."

"Yep. Must've been a very confused burglar."

"Why's that?"

"Left somethin' instead of stealing somethin'."

"Sounds backwards to me, kiddo. Maybe you just had a tequila nightmare."

"Maybe. Or maybe it wasn't a burglar."

"Beats me." Hardcastle shrugged, noncommittal.

McCormick leaned across the table, trying to force Hardcastle to look at him. "Maybe it was the Stereo Fairy. You've about him, haven't you?"

"Can't say as I have." Hardcastle cleared his throat to keep from laughing.

"Sure you have. Short, squatty guy. Gets people drunk and then waves his magic gavel. Makes stereos appear while they're sleepin' it off."

"Most guys see pink elephants, you, you see pink stereos. If you ask me, I think you should still be sleepin' it off."

"Juudge!!!"

Hardcastle looked up, unable to maintain his serious demeanor any longer in front of that grinning face. "What?"

"I'm tryin'... tryin' to say thanks, here."

"Okay." Hardcastle nodded, watched him with a faint smile.

"I...guess I should've explained..." McCormick squirmed uncomfortably. "But..., well, Judge, I can't ask you try to understand 'cause it's just too complicated. I usually just try to get through my birthday without payin' too much attention to it."

"Complicated, huh? Well, that figures."

"I don't get ya."

"Nothin', kid. Just some stuff I've been thinking about lately."

McCormick stared at the Judge with a puzzled look. "Hardcastle, I will never understand you."

"Of course not."

"What do you mean, of course not? Why do you do this stuff that runs me crazy?"

Hardcastle grinned broadly, wondering if McCormick realized that his voice rose an octave or so whenever he got excited. "I can't run you to a place you're already at, McCormick."

"Aaaaggghh! I give up!" McCormick shook his head violently, then stopped, frowning as he rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Headache?" Hardcastle asked wickedly.

McCormick glared as the Judge poured a cup of coffee and shoved it in his direction. "You, I suppose, have no headache."

"Yeah, I do," Hardcastle replied with a pointed look at McCormick, "A constant one. However, I didn't drink half a bottle of tequila."

"So how come you let me?"

Hardcastle paused, knowing he was being evasive. "You were cold and wet; I wasn't."

"Oh. Okay. I guess."

Hardcastle watched the young ex-con sip at the scalding coffee. He obviously didn't remember most of the previous night's conversation, and while that was probably good, at the same time it was unfortunate. So many things this kid needed to talk about, to get out of his system. Maybe in time...

"So. You gonna remind me next year? When you turn the Big 3-0? Or would you rather I just forgot it? Just let you 'get through the day'?"

"I dunno. Hard to say."

"Just kinda play it by ear, huh?"

"I guess."

"Okay, kiddo, but don't come up poutin' if I forget."

McCormick grinned. "I never pout."

"Shit."

"I've...never planned anything a year ahead, Judge. That's just not my way."

"Probably best. Never can tell what kinda changes a year will bring."

"No kidding?!"

"No kidding. Tell ya what, kiddo, if I remember, since you probably won't remind me, I'll fire up the grill. Do us some 'Burgers Milton'."

McCormick gave him a baleful look. "Yum."

"Maybe have the Jazzmasters over. Play you a Dixieland version of 'Happy Birthday', how's that?"

"Hardcase, were you born a sadist, or did you have to work at it?"

Hardcastle grinned, acknowledging the teasing tone of the question. "Some things just come natural, kid. Yep. They just come natural."

It was almost midnight as Hardcastle took off his bathrobe and prepared to get into bed. The robe was freshly laundered, McCormick having unexpectedly run all their dirty clothes through the washer and dryer earlier in the day. This being an event so rare that Hardcastle had halfway expected the heavens to open up, he had finally decided that the kid was just reciprocating, in his own way, for the present.

They hadn't talked about it any more, so the Judge still had no idea of what the problem was concerning the kid's birthday; why it made him so depressed. He wasn't going to worry about it, though. McCormick seemed to have a way of knowing when he was ready to deal with things; and this problem, whatever it was, he just wasn't ready to deal with yet. He'd come to grips with it eventually, when the time was right. Until then, no point in pushing him.

The stereo had been a good idea, and he could tell the kid appreciated it. Why anyone would want to destroy their nervous system by listening to the screeching racket that passed for music these days - played at sonic boom level - was beyond the Judge's comprehension. But the kid had had all those albums laying around, and only an old, beat-up portable to play them on. Yeah, it had been a good idea.

Hardcastle turned off the light as he crawled into bed. They were going to start digging into the Delgado case tomorrow, and he wanted a good night's sleep before beginning this one.

He had just begun to doze when suddenly his eyes popped open. Throwing back the

covers, he stomped over to the window and jerked open the curtains.

An ear-splitting voice, wailing 'Nutbush City Limits', was blaring at full volume from the Gatehouse.

Hardcastle grabbed his robe, clumping down the stairway, out the door, and across to the Gatehouse, wearing his most bulldoggish you-are-dead-meat expression. Approaching the Gatehouse entrance, he gritted his teeth, as he was engulfed by the noise coming from inside.

He stopped suddenly as he noticed a large cardboard sign taped to the door. Hardcastle stared at the sign for a long moment, pressing his lips tightly together before he finally gave up and allowed himself to break into a face-cracking grin.

"Hoisted by own petard," he chuckled quietly, looking up at the second-story window. "You lucked out this time, kid."

He looked again at the cardboard sign, vibrating in a merry dance with every bass boom that came from inside.

Remember your jazz band?
Remember my sleepless night?

GOTCHA!!!

Hardcastle shook his head. Kids. Kids and thier toys. Everybody needed somebody. Yeah.

Still smiling, he turned and headed back to the main house.

