

BETWEEN THE SCENES...

"Man In A Glass House"

TESTING THE GROUND

By: Teri White

The trouble came just one day after they had wrapped up the Joe Cadillac business. Hardcastle certainly wasn't expecting any problems to appear to mar the sunny morning. He ate breakfast by the pool, then stayed where he was, browsing through the file of one Harvey Kane. Kane, a successful drug dealer who had slipped through the law's clutches more than once, looked like a good possible target for them to tackle next.

As he read, however, one corner of his mind was wondering why his reluctant Tonto hadn't yet shown up for breakfast. Even in the short time they had been living together, he had discovered that whatever his faults - and they were many - Mark McCormick could be counted on to be on time for meals. Boy ate like a lumberjack.

But on this particular morning, even though Hardcastle had taken his time cooking the meal (since it was Sarah's day off, kitchen duty fell to him), then dawdled over the eggs and toast, McCormick never put in an appearance.

And now, when he was supposed to be cleaning the pool, there was still no sign of life over at the Gatehouse. Hardcastle flipped over another page of the file, sighing in exasperation. Ex-cons. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered. And what the devil had ever made him think that Mark McCormick, he of the smart mouth and wise-ass grin, would be any different than all the others?

Then he looked up and thought: Speak of the Devil.

McCormick was walking across the patio toward him. Only three hours later than he should have been in getting up. And he looked to be in great shape, too. Clothes he must have slept in, and the tangled curls were more tangled than ever. The bastard didn't even have shoes on.

Hardcastle didn't say a word as the younger man sat at the table and sipped from the glass of now-warm orange juice. He made a face at the taste. "Yuk."

"It was cold at eight o'clock." Hardcastle's tone was unsympathetic.

"Isn't there more?" McCormick said in a tone that almost whined.

"There is. But you can't have it. This is breakfast for today."

"Jeez," McCormick muttered under his breath. "Might as well be back inside, if this is the kind of slop I have to eat."

"That could be arranged," Hardcastle said cheerfully.

McCormick only looked at him. Then he started to pile cold scrambled eggs onto cold toast. He took a big bite and spoke through it. "Welcome to Alcatraz South."

"If that's how you want to think of it." Hardcastle's good mood was relentless.

They didn't talk anymore as McCormick finished every bite of his meal. Then he stood and stretched. "Think I'll work on my tan today."

Hardcastle tossed the file down. "To hell with that. What you'll do is, clean the pool. And then you'll spread fertilizer around the rose bushes. Which should be a job well-suited to your talents. And then the 'Vette needs washing. Got all that? Or shall I write it down for you?"

Two blue eyes glared at him, looking for all the world like they belonged to a

petulant little boy. A strange thought. Hardcastle wondered where the hell it had come from. He pushed to his feet, reminding himself as he did that the man standing in front of him was just another ex-con. A wise-guy like all the others. And what Hardcastle recognized as his sneaking fondness for McCormick shouldn't obscure that fact. "I'm going into L.A. and check some things with the cops. Have those chores done by the time I get back, understand?"

McCormick snapped into a Nazi salute. "Ja, Herr Commandant," he said in a very bad German accent.

Hardcastle started to say something else, then he decided to save himself the effort. Instead, he just started for the truck. "Clear the table before you do anything else," he ordered without looking back.

Behind him, McCormick said a dirty word.

It was late afternoon before Hardcastle finished all his business and drove back through the gates of the estate. The first thing he noticed was that the rose bushes were still unfertilized. Then he spotted the dirty Corvette.

Hardcastle felt his temper rising as he stalked around to the patio and found, as he had almost expected he would, that the breakfast dishes were still on the table. The pool skimmer was half-in and half-out of a half-cleaned pool. To complete the scene, loud music, or what passed for music these days, emanated from the Gatehouse.

As the Judge headed that way, he tried to keep his boiling anger from exploding. No use just erupting all over the place. This was a situation that called for some judicial temperament.

He opened the door of the Gatehouse, and all his good intentions evaporated instantly at the sight of the room, cluttered with clothes, newspapers, and the apparent remains of several late-night snacks. And, stretched out in the middle of the mess, his eyes closed as he listened to the music, was Himself. Mark McCormick.

Hardcastle crossed the room in about three steps and yanked the plug of the cheap stereo. The room was abruptly silent. McCormick sat up. "Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself. What the hell is going on here?"

McCormick actually grinned. "Not much. What's going on there?"

Hardcastle sputtered for several seconds, unable to get his words out. He took a deep breath. "You didn't do any of the things I told you to do," he finally said.

"I didn't feel good. Maybe it was the breakfast you made me eat. Cold eggs can't be good for a person. Probably I got like food poisoning from it."

Hardcastle snorted. "The only thing you're suffering from is a bad case of chronic worthlessness. Now you put your jailhouse ass in gear and get busy. Start with the dirty dishes and work your way down the list."

"Now? But it's almost dinner time."

"Not for you. Not until every one of those things is done."

"Hell, man, you don't have to make a Federal case out of it. You've got all the money in the goddamned world. Why don't you have somebody to do that shit?"

"I do have somebody. I have you. So get moving."

The jaw was stuck out so far that it was a wonder McCormick wasn't dislocating

something. "And if I don't?"

"You don't want to find out what happens then."

McCormick stared at him for a moment, then whipped around and left the Gatehouse.

Hardcastle followed him. He watched as Mark loaded all of the dirty dishes onto the tray. You just had to get tough with these guys sometimes, that was all. Show them plainly who was the boss.

McCormick picked up the tray and started across the patio. But instead of going on into the house, he stopped at the side of the pool. With his eyes on Hardcastle, he slowly straightened his arms and then, deliberately, released the tray. It and the dishes splashed into the water. "You wanted the dishes clean, Hardcase? So now they're clean. Happy, are you?"

Hardcastle felt his rage boil over again, and this time he made absolutely no effort to stop it. "That's it!" he yelled across the pool. "That's it. You're going to be one very sorry car thief before I'm finished."

"Yeah?"

"Pack your bag, hotshot. You're on your way back to the slammer."

"Surprise, surprise," McCormick said with startling softness. He walked past Hardcastle, toward the Gatehouse.

The Judge watched him go.

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," Mark said, now sounding strangely hollow. "I'm an old hand at packing fast." He shut the door very quietly.

Hardcastle went into the house and drank some water to wash down three aspirin. Damn, what was going on here, anyway? They had been getting along fine. Some rough spots along the way, sure, but all in all, he'd thought the kid was settling in better than he could have hoped for. And now this. Everything was falling apart.

It was exactly ten minutes later that he heard an impatient blast from the truck's horn. He walked out to the driveway. McCormick was sitting in the truck, a battered dufflebag stuffed between his feet. "Let's hit the road, huh?" he said.

Hardcastle climbed in behind the wheel. He looked at Mark for a long moment. "You seem mighty eager to get back inside."

"No sense delaying the inevitable."

Hardcastle shrugged and started the engine.

For a long time, they rode in silence.

Hardcastle spoke first. "Guess I was wrong about you."

"Yeah, well, it wouldn't be the first time," McCormick mumbled.

"Maybe."

Hardcastle didn't know what else to say. Instead, he hunched over the wheel and started to mentally review McCormick's file. He had the damned thing practically memorized by now. But this time, he skipped over the most recent stuff, and went all the way back to Mark's juvie file. And that made for some dismal reading. It was practically a case study in how society worked to take one basically decent kid and turn him into an almost guaranteed loser.

According to the various social agency notes in the file, after the death of his mother, Mark McCormick was shifted from one foster home to the other. The placements just never worked out. People kept sending the boy back. Uncontrollable,

they called him. A bad influence. His easy grin and sweet manner seemed to get him placed in a lot of homes; but pretty soon, he'd start acting up and get dumped right back into the lap of the state.

The Judge almost slammed on the brakes as he realized what was happening here. He thought back, suddenly, back years, to when his son was about five. The boy had misbehaved, how, Hardcastle could no longer remember. Just punishment had been meted out, but the boy didn't go to his room immediately. Instead, with tears still rolling down his face, he looked up at his father and asked, "Don't you love me when I'm bad?"

It was pretty easy to reassure a tearful five-year-old who was your own son that, good or bad, he was still loved, still wanted.

But no one had ever told the young Mark McCormick that. When he was bad, they just tossed him away like a piece of garbage.

And what was this but just more of the same old thing?

Before Hardcastle could decide what to do with his newly discovered wisdom, McCormick spoke. "Your son was probably perfect, right?" he said in a soft voice. He was looking out the window, not at Hardcastle. "Never did anything wrong."

"That's not true," Hardcastle said. "And, anyway, what my son was or wasn't has nothing to do with this."

"No, I guess it doesn't."

"You're not a substitute for him; I told you that already."

McCormick grunted.

Hardcastle pulled the truck over to the side of the road and stopped.

"What's wrong?" McCormick asked, finally looking at him.

"Nothing." Hardcastle settled back in the seat. "You tried real hard, didn't you?"

"Tried what?"

"To find my breaking point. To drive me crazy, to the point where I'd say, 'Okay, McCormick, you're history around here.'"

"Didn't take long, did it?" Surprisingly, Mark gave him a small smile. "You were almost too easy."

"That's what you think, hotshot." Hardcastle whipped the truck into a U-turn, and started back towards Gulls-Way.

"What're you doing?"

"We're going home."

"We're...going...home?" McCormick repeated in a bewildered whisper. "What the hell does that mean?"

Hardcastle glanced at him. "It means, McCormick, that you don't get away from me that easy. The Lone Ranger needs a Tonto, and you're it."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Maybe I just think you're the best man for the job." Hardcastle thought that more was called for, although it irritated him. "Maybe I even like you some."

There was a pause. "But what about everything back at the house?"

"What about it?"

"I acted like a real jerk today."

"That's the truth."

"So?"

"So what?"

Again there was only silence from the passenger seat. Finally McCormick gave a deep sigh. "So nothing, I guess." He shifted a little. "This mean you're not putting me back inside?"

"Hell, no, I'm not putting you back in. For better or for worse, Mark, we're stuck with each other. Even when you act like a jerk."

"Or when you do?"

"Never happen, kiddo." He thought he heard a soft chuckle from McCormick. Hardcastle pressed the gas pedal a little harder, suddenly eager to get home.

He ate his dinner on the patio, watching as McCormick worked to clean the mess out of the pool. The job was done with a minimum of effort and a maximum of bitching, but it was done.

Hardcastle just let him rave on, nodding and grinning occasionally.

