


That's What Friends Are For  
by Mehola Reynolds 

C H A P T E R O N E

"Please don't hit me again," the old man pleaded. "I won't cause any more trouble, I promise." He cowered in the corner of the room, his plaintive cries doing nothing to soften the heart of the attendant towering over him.

"Caldwell, I've had it with you," Mason complained roughly. "You won't take your medicine like you're supposed to, you won't go to bed when I tell you to, and you keep bellyachin' about the food. Here we are tryin' to give you a decent place to live and you don't appreciate it." Grabbing the elderly man by the front of his shirt, Mason jerked him from the corner. "You're just a decrepit old man who gripes about everything. Well, I'm sick and tired of your senile babblings, and I want it stopped--right now!" Drawing back his hand, he slapped Caldwell across the mouth, a vicious blow that caused the older man's head to jerk and brought a trickle of blood to the corner of his lips.

But instead of shying away from the blow, Caldwell straightened to his full height and jerked away from the attendant, the spark in his eyes revealing the hard-nosed judge who had sat on the bench for over thirty years and handed down rulings on men a lot tougher than Mason could ever be. "I don't have to take this!" he shouted angrily. "If you touch me again, I'll report you!"

"To who?" Mason sneered. "Your kids?" He laughed. "You're just a nuisance to 'em. All they want is your money, old man. Nobody gives a damn about you."

"That's not true," Caldwell fired back. "When I contact Milt, he'll do something about this."

"Oh yeah, good ol' Milt," Mason shot back sarcastically. "Your dear old 'friend' who's visited you so many times since you've been in here. Sure, the man cares a lot about ya."

"He'll come," Caldwell promised confidently, but the light disappeared from his eyes. "Milt's a-a busy man, but he'll come."

"Yeah, just like your son and daughter," Mason retorted, "but until they do, you're gonna behave and do like I tell ya to." Grabbing up the small container of pills sitting on the table, he shoved them in Caldwell's face. "Now, take these and hurry up! I can't spend all day with you!"

"No!" Caldwell shouted and threw the pills against the wall. "I don't want to be drugged anymore! I wanna go outside and

get some fresh air, and eat some decent food instead of that pabulum you keep feeding us! I don't want to spend the rest of my life sleeping!"

"I don't care what you want or don't want!" Mason yelled back. "You're gonna pick up those pills!"

"No!"

Mason hit him again, this time with a fist to the jaw, causing Caldwell to careen backwards, crashing into the bed. His head hit the railing with a loud crack, and he collapsed in a crumpled heap.

Reaching down, Mason grabbed the front of Caldwell's shirt and lifted him from the floor. "Well, old man. I don't have to worry with you anymore," he sneered, and releasing his hold, let the motionless form drop to the bare floor with a thud.

## C H A P T E R   T W O

"Judge, can I bug ya a minute?"

Hardcastle lowered his newspaper to look across the den at the young man sitting behind the desk surrounded by stacks of law books. "Sure, kid. What do you need?"

"What's a subpoena duces tecum?"

"It's a writ served on a person that requires him to appear in court and bring with him any books or other evidence that pertain to the proceedings."

McCormick scribbled furiously, then looked up, his pen poised over the paper. "And what's the difference between that and a regular subpoena?"

He began writing again as Hardcastle explained, "When someone gets a regular subpoena, he just brings himself to court; records aren't required."

McCormick nodded and made a note. "Okay, what's the Latin term 'et sic ulterius' mean?"

"'And so on'," Hardcastle replied innocently.

McCormick glanced up sharply. "Huh?"

"'Etc.'."



McCormick threw his pen down in frustration. "Well, why the hell didn't they just say that?" he complained. "Studying law is hard enough without throwing in all that Latin garbage."

Sitting his coffee cup on the table next to him, Hardcastle grinned. "You quote that 'Latin garbage' to your clients, throw in a couple phrases like 'aforementioned documents' and 'hereditaments and appurtenances', and it sounds like you're earning the hundred bucks an hour lawyers charge nowadays."

"A hundred dollars an hour," McCormick repeated dreamily. "Just think how much money I could make in only one week."

"Forget the money," Hardcastle growled. "You let that go to your head, and you'll turn into one of those two-bit shyster lawyers I can't stomach. That happens and I'll kick your butt out of here."

McCormick smiled. "Don't worry, Judge. You know why I'm doing this."

Folding the newspaper, Hardcastle laid it on the table next to his coffee, and looked up. "Yeah, I know why, kid, and it's a helluva compliment," he returned quietly, "but I hope you're doin' it, too, because you wanna help people."

"I do," McCormick assured him, his expression growing serious. "I really get a warm feeling inside when we're able to help somebody out or put one of the bad guys away." As if embarrassed by that admission, he cleared his throat and abruptly changed the subject. "Could you-uh-could you give me a little help on how to obtain a writ of habeas corpus?"

"You sure you're supposed to be getting outside help like this?" Hardcastle questioned dubiously. "Looks like having a law library and your own judge at your disposal gives you an unfair edge over the other students."

Shutting one of the books, McCormick looked up with a smile. "Judge, I'm not in competition here. I'm just trying to learn everything I can so I'll be the best attorney possible."

Hardcastle jumped to his feet and started across the room. "And you're gonna make a damned good one, kid," he promised, "but don't try doin' it all in one day." Reaching over the desk, he began slamming the books shut. "You're on semester break right now, and you're gonna climb out from behind that desk." To enforce his order, he pulled McCormick to his feet. "Just look at you," he complained. "You're white as a sheet. Forget the 'therefores' and the 'whereases' for awhile. Go trim a hedge or two and get some fresh air."

"Judge, we've got a gardener coming in now once a week,"

McCormick reminded him.

"He can do your old chores, but he can't get fresh air and sunshine for you," Hardcastle retorted. "Now, I don't wanna see a law book in your hands for the next two weeks."

"Two weeks?" McCormick groaned.

"You heard me, kid."

Knowing that tone of voice brooked no argument, McCormick gave in gracefully. "All right, Judge, but if I forget everything I've learned, don't blame me."

"You won't," Hardcastle grinned. "You got a mind like a steel trap. Takes awhile for anything to get in there, but once it does, you don't let it go."

McCormick eyed him doubtfully. "Thanks--I think." Picking up an armload of books, he began returning them to the shelves. "Okay, if you won't let me study, what can I do?"

"Go to the supermarket," Hardcastle decided. "Another thing you haven't been doing lately is eating right. You can't survive on peanut butter, mayonnaise, and lettuce sandwiches. Ugh! Pick up a coupla thick steaks and we'll grill 'em out by the pool."

McCormick grinned slyly. "How about four steaks and a bottle of wine, and while I'm gone, you call Mary Beth and Judge Cotton?"

Hardcastle slapped him lightly on the stomach. "Now yer cookin'." The telephone rang and with a grin still spread across his face, he answered it.

Sitting on the edge of the desk, McCormick watched the judge, his own smile changing into a worried frown as he saw the craggy face grow sad. From the few remarks Hardcastle was making, McCormick couldn't tell what had happened, but with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he knew it wasn't good.

The conversation ended and, slowly returning the receiver to its cradle, Hardcastle sat with his head bowed.

McCormick waited, but when the judge offered no explanation of the call, he slid off the desk and moved beside his friend. "What happened?" he asked softly.

"Harry died last night."

"Judge Caldwell?"

Hardcastle nodded and McCormick reached out to squeeze

his shoulder. "Aw, Judge, I'm real sorry. He was a good man."

"If I could've just seen him again," Hardcastle mumbled, rising to his feet with a jerky motion. "Every damned time I went to that nursing home, they said he was asleep and couldn't be disturbed. Four times I went there and they never would let me in."

"How'd he die?" McCormick asked low.

Hardcastle shrugged. "That was his granddaughter, Cindy. She said the staff doctor figured he got dizzy and fell in his room, hitting his head on the bed railing." Staring out the window a moment, he suddenly slapped his hand against the wall, "Damn, it, McCormick!" he exploded. "He should never have been in there! Harry was only seven months older'n me! If that son and daughter of his hadn't been so damned greedy and anxious to stuff him away some place so they wouldn't have to worry with him, this would never've happened!"

McCormick gripped his shoulder. "Judge, you sure you're not just looking for someone to blame?" he asked softly.

Hardcastle turned, his eyes flashing with anger. "Believe me, McCormick, I don't have to look far! You don't know those two like I do. After Harry's wife died, Alex and Christine ran wild. I kept telling him they needed a little discipline, but good ol' Harry couldn't do it. Then he had that stroke a little over a month ago, not even a bad one, and they talked him into giving 'em a power of attorney and then locked him away in that nursing home."

"I'm sure they were taking good care of him," McCormick tried to sound confident.

"Like hell!" Hardcastle roared. "They let him fall down and die, didn't they?" He turned to stare out the window again. "Harry should never've been in there," he stated in a lower, but still angry voice. "You should've seen him that day before he left, McCormick. Something inside him was already dead. Harry knew what his kids were up to and the old man just gave up."

McCormick watched him with sad eyes, remaining silent, knowing nothing he could say would ease the judge's pain.

Whirling around abruptly, Hardcastle started across the room. "I'm goin' upstairs for awhile," he flung over his shoulder.

McCormick waited until he left, then sitting down again behind the desk, he opened a law book and tried to lose himself in search and seizure warrants. Only a few minute passed before he gave up and slamming the book shut, rose and wandered outside.

### C H A P T E R   T H R E E

Hardcastle stopped at the door of the large room and glanced around, seeing first the closed casket, then the abundance of flowers surrounding it, and lastly, the friends and relatives gathered to pay their respects.

Moving beside him, McCormick leaned close to whisper, "Take it easy, Judge. If you see Alex and Christine here, don't create a scene. Just remember this is a funeral home."

"I know that," Hardcastle growled low. "What do you think I am, anyway?"

"A man who tends to forget his manners when he thinks an injustice has been done," McCormick retorted. "I love ya for it, Judge, but don't do it here."

"You don't go wandering off some place," Hardcastle shot back, knowing that his friend had an even greater distaste for funeral homes than the average person did. Glancing at McCormick, he turned and reached for the younger man's collar. "And for Pete's sake, straighten your tie!" he complained gruffly. "If you're gonna become a lawyer, you gotta learn to do that right."

"Why?" McCormick smiled. "You never did."

Hardcastle grabbed his arm. "C'mon, wise-guy. Let's get this over with."

Many of the people in attendance were friends and acquaintances of Hardcastle's; judges, attorneys, and police officers who had come to know and respect Caldwell during the thirty years he had been on the bench.

Hardcastle was standing beside the casket, talking to one such friend, when McCormick leaned over to whisper something in his ear. His eyes darting to his left, the judge saw a young woman standing as if waiting to speak to him, a tumultuous smile curling her lips when she saw his eyes on her.

Excusing himself from his present company, Hardcastle walked her way and held out a hand. "How's it goin', Cindy?" he asked softly.

"Oh, Judge." Moving into his arms she began to weep silently.

"Hey, it's okay, honey." Hardcastle rubbed her back, his large hands gentle. "It's gonna be all right."

She drew back and turned to McCormick, who leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "Hi, Cindy."

"Hi, Mark." Stepping back, she drew a deep breath. "I'm so glad you're both here. I need to talk to you."

"I thought you might," Hardcastle nodded, "and before you start, I've got a question. If Harry was killed by a blow to the back of the head, what the hell's his coffin doin' closed?"

"That's one of the things I need to talk to you about," Cindy replied. Her eyes swept the room, and she added in a whisper, "But not now. Here comes 'dear' Father and his sister." Her face contorted with anger. "God, I hate them for what they did to Granddad."

Alex Caldwell, a tall, broad-shouldered, and wildly-handsome individual stepped beside his daughter and put an arm around her shoulders. "Well, Cindy, are you hogging our guests?"

The young woman looked up, her eyes blazing with fury. "I'd hardly call two dear friends who've come to pay their respects to the dead, guests," she retorted, and jerking away from her father, left the group to take up a silent vigil by the casket.

Watching her go, Christine shook her head sadly. "Poor child, she did love her grandfather dearly...as we all did," she added quickly, and dabbed at her dry eyes with a handkerchief.

Hardcastle's response to the performance was a loud snort. "You can cut the play-acting, Christy. McCormick and I already know the truth."

"And just what is the truth?" Alex shot back. "Has Cindy been tellin' you a lot of garbage?"

"Like what?" Hardcastle asked innocently.

"She's got it in her head that Harry was murdered," Christine explained coldly. "We've tried to tell her he was a sick old man, and in his condition, accidents happen."

"Harry was only seven months older'n me," Hardcastle pointed out, "and he wasn't so sick that he didn't know what the two of you were up to."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Alex demanded.

"Harry wasn't sick or old," Hardcastle shot back. "He was just tired. He gave the two of you power of attorney and let you



put him in that nursing home because he was just too tired to fight you anymore."

"Harry was an old fool!" Christine snapped. "He wanted to give all his money away to charities, or tie it up in those long-term trusts for the grandchildren. Thank God we talked him out of it."

"Thank God?" McCormick echoed, his eyes widening with disbelief. "Your father is lying there dead, and all you two can talk about is his money? Damn! Talk about cold-hearted!"

"Aw, come off it, McCormick. Don't pull that 'holier than thou' attitude with me," Alex sneered. "You'd do the same damned thing to the judge here if you got the chance."

"Why, you --!" Lunging forward, McCormick grabbed Caldwell by the lapel and drew back his fist.

Moving quickly, Hardcastle grabbed his young friend's arms from behind and pulled him back, breaking McCormick's hold.

Caldwell stepped forward, his very stance a silent threat. Jerking McCormick to the side, Hardcastle warned, "Hit the kid, and you'll be picking yourself up off the floor in a lotta little pieces."

Caldwell froze, and noticing the small crowd gathering around them, suddenly took a great interest in brushing non-existent lint from his lapel. "Judge, I suggest you get him out of here," he muttered angrily, keeping his head down. "And while you're at it, teach him to show a little respect for the dead."

"Respect for the dead?" McCormick yelled as Hardcastle started pulling him towards the door. "I've got a lot of respect for the dead, Caldwell! It's the living creeps like you that I can't stand!"

"C'mon, kid, button it and get outta here," Hardcastle hissed low and still holding one arm, almost dragged the young man out the door and into the rear parking lot.

Jerking away from his grasp, McCormick whirled around, the streetlight illuminating his angry face. "You should've let me beat the hell outta him!"

"That wasn't the time or the place," Hardcastle replied calmly. "You told me to mind my manners, and look at you."

McCormick relaxed and dropped his head. "I'm sorry, Judge," he apologized in a contrite tone. "I didn't mean for that to happen, but when he said what he did..." His head rose quickly, the blue eyes locking with Hardcastle's. "What Caldwell said--

that's not true, Judge", he denied hotly. "If-if you had a stroke or something, Heaven forbid, I wouldn't put you away like Caldwell did Harry."

"I know that," Hardcastle interrupted softly.

"I'd keep you at home," McCormick continued in earnest. "Quit school and hire a private nurse if I had to, but there's no way I'd try to get your money and then just lock you away and forget about you."

Hardcastle reached out to squeeze his shoulder, "Mark, I know that," he repeated.

McCormick blinked. "Then why didn't you get mad when Caldwell said what he did?"

"Because you were doing a pretty damned good job of it for both of us," Hardcastle grinned.

"Aw, Judge, I don't believe I tried to take a swing at a guy in a funeral home," McCormick groaned as he realized what he had almost done. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you like that."

"You didn't embarrass me," Hardcastle contradicted and slapped him on the back, "As a matter of fact, I was damned proud of ya." Grabbing McCormick's sleeve, he started pulling him towards the truck. "Now, c'mon, let's get home. The funeral's at ten tomorrow." McCormick started to protest, but the judge cut him short. "And you're gonna attend it, kiddo. You put on that black courtroom suit, and Caldwell'll be so mad, he'll be spitting nails, not to mention Christine, who'll probably scratch your eyes out first chance she gets."

"Gee, sounds like a fun day," McCormick returned sarcastically.

Hardcastle grinned. "Now yer cookin'." He started to climb into the truck when a voice from the back of the funeral home caused him to pause.

"Judge! Mark!"

When the young woman reached their side, McCormick took her hand. "Cindy, I'm really sorry about what happened in there," he apologized.

"Don't be," she almost snarled. "They asked for it." Dropping her gaze, she admitted, "I know you're supposed to have respect for your father, but Granddad never got any, and I just can't forgive my father and Aunt Christy for what they did to him."

Hardcastle leaned against the truck and folding his arms,

watched Cindy intently as he asked, "Your aunt said you believe Harry was murdered. What makes you think that?"

"By the way they were treating him at that place."

McCormick's eyes widened, "The Westwood Nursing Home?"

Cindy nodded. "I went there two or three times a week, but they only let me in to see him once. Granddad was strapped to the bed, and there were bruises on his arm. I-I asked him what happened and he just shook his head and said it didn't matter." Her eyes filling with tears, she stepped into Hardcastle's arms, and buried her head against his broad chest.

Hardcastle patted her back gently, "Did you talk to any of the staff about the bruises?"

Cindy nodded against his shirt. "They said he fell out of bed and that's why they were using restraints." She drew back, her tear-filled eyes suddenly flashing with anger. "Those bruises weren't caused by that, Judge. They were the marks of someone's fingers, as if they had gripped his arm too tightly. He also had a bruise on his jaw and an older one on his neck."

"Let me get this straight," Hardcastle spoke carefully. "Are you sayin' you believe Harry was being abused?"

Cindy nodded. "Not only in that way," she continued firmly. "They brought in his lunch while I was there and it looked like pabulum. When I questioned them about it, they claimed he was having trouble with his digestion." Her voice grew cold. "You've known Granddad for almost twenty years, Judge, and you know he never had a problem like that a single day of his life."

Hardcastle's forehead creased with lines of anger. "And you think someone on the staff murdered him?"

"I don't know if it was deliberate," Cindy replied, "but I don't think Granddad's fall was totally an accident."

A thought suddenly occurred to McCormick and his eyes widened in shock. "Is that why the casket's closed?"

"That's what I think," Cindy nodded. "I believe Father and Aunt Christy are trying to cover up."

"You think they knew what was going on?" McCormick asked in surprise.

"I think they just didn't give a damn," Cindy returned angrily. "When they found out what happened, they just swept it under the rug. After all, they got what they wanted - Granddad's money."

"That's why they didn't want an investigation," Hardcastle surmised. "The estate would be tied up in probate for no telling how long."

"Now, wait a minute," McCormick put in, obviously confused. "If Harry had been abused, surely the coroner would've noticed it and filed a report."

"You haven't gotten to that part of the law yet, have ya, kid?" When McCormick shook his head, Hardcastle went on to explain. "In a licensed facility like that, the attending physician rules on cause of death. If the family doesn't protest the ruling, the coroner's not called in."

McCormick's face hardened. "So it's all cut and dry, huh? Those creeps may be abusing and killing elderly people at that nursing home, and they're getting away with it because no one gives a damn."

Hardcastle pointed a finger at the young man. "Now there's where you're wrong, McCormick. Somebody does give a damn-- me. I'm gonna get to the bottom of this and if Cindy's suspicions are right, a helluva lotta heads are gonna roll."

"What're you going to do?" Cindy asked in a low voice.

"Well, first we're gonna see you home."

She shook her head. "My car's right over there. I'll be fine." Reaching out, she grasped Hardcastle's arm. "Judge, be careful. You, too, Mark. My father carries a lot of weight and he likes to throw it around."

McCormick broke into a grin. "Don't worry, Cindy. Nobody carries more weight than the judge," he shot Hardcastle a sly glance and added, "literally and figuratively."



"Keep it up, wise-guy, and you'll be feeling some of that weight," Hardcastle retorted. Turning to Cindy, his voice softened, "Listen, if something's goin' on at Westwood, I'm gonna blow it wide-open. That means your dad and Aunt Christy could be pulled into a scandal, and if they really are covering up something, there's a good possibility they could be brought up on charges. Can you handle that?"

Cindy nodded. "When my mother died six years ago, I cut all familial ties except with my brother, Michael. He didn't like what was happening with Granddad, either, but being in the Navy, he couldn't take any action personally. He couldn't make it to the funeral because he's stationed on a carrier in the Mediterranean. I know Michael will back me a hundred percent. As for the rest of the family, I just don't give a damn."

"Okay then, you go on home, write a long letter to Michael, then go to bed," Hardcastle ordered and kissed her forehead. "McCormick and I'll take care of this."

Cindy smiled and gave him a hug, then kissed McCormick on the cheek. "Thanks, both of you. I feel a lot better now."

"Good", Hardcastle grinned. "Now, go home and get some rest; we'll see you tomorrow."

They watched her climb into her car and pull from the parking lot, McCormick's eyes still on the vehicle as he complained, "Judge, I didn't like the sound of that 'McCormick and I'll take care of this'."

"Now, don't go gettin' your dander up, kid," Hardcastle grumbled. "You're not gonna get shot or beat up this time, and there's not a train around here for miles." He climbed into the truck, and McCormick followed suit, waiting for Hardcastle to start the engine. When the judge didn't do so, he asked in a suspicious tone, "Well? Would you mind telling me what we are going to do?"

"We're gonna get some proof of Cindy's accusations," Hardcastle decided, "and then we're gonna go to the State Cabinet for Health, Education and Human Resources. Their Social Services Department oversees nursing homes."

"That's all well and good, Judge, but where are we gonna find proof?" McCormick questioned.

Hardcastle flashed him a grin, "Kid, how good are you at breaking into funeral homes?"

The whites of McCormick's eyes gleamed in the darkness. "What! You gotta be kiddin'!" he exclaimed. "Judge, stealing a dead body is a Federal offense! I have gotten that far in the law. I mean, we're talking grave robbers, cadaver nappers, Frankenstein

time. It'll ruin my career! I'll be a has been before I ever even get the chance to be!"

"McCormick, will ya shut up and listen," Hardcastle demanded patiently. "I'm not talkin' about stealing Harry's body. We don't have a place to put it, anyway--the freezer's not big enough."

"Aw, Judge, get a little gross, will ya?" McCormick groaned.

"Now listen, kid, all I wanna do is get a look at Harry and see what Alex and Christy are tryin' to cover up. I wanna see in that casket."

"Isn't there some other way?" McCormick complained.

"No, there's not."

"How about an exhumation order?"

"McCormick, you can't dig up a body until you bury it," Hardcastle retorted. "Besides, we'd need some kind of evidence to warrant an exhumation order. Same goes for tryin' to go through legal channels in getting the casket opened. And even though Cindy's a member of the family, she can't request an order because she's not considered an adult yet." Leaning back comfortably, he continued, "This is our only chance. We sit here and wait till everyone leaves and they close up shop, then you get to do your stuff."

McCormick slid down in the seat, folding his arms across his chest. "Why couldn't I have been born a female ballet dancer?" he grumbled.

"'Cause your tush is too big," Hardcastle grinned.

## C H A P T E R   F O U R

McCormick discovered that a lock on the back door of the funeral home was definitely not one of the most difficult in the world to pick, probably because no one expects a thief to turn his talents towards breaking into that type of establishment.

Swinging the door open in a matter of seconds, he made a sweeping gesture with his arm and grinned. "There ya are, Judge. You just go on in and do your thing, and I'll stay right here and keep an eye out."

"Forget it." Hardcastle grabbed his arm. "I need you as a witness."

"Judge, staring at a dead body is not my idea of a fun night."

"All right, stay here," Hardcastle agreed, and released him. "But if what Cindy says is true about that nursing home and someone else dies in there, it'll be on your conscience, not mine."

McCormick glared at the older man in the darkness. "That's not fair, Hardcase."

"So, sue me," Hardcastle retorted and switching on the flashlight, started down the hallway, McCormick reluctantly bringing up the rear.

"I still wouldn't put you in a nursing home," he grumbled, at the judge's back, "but the first chance I get, I'm gonna call the men in the little white coats and have 'em put you away. You're nuts, you know that?"

"Yeah, I found that out four years ago when I took you in," Hardcastle shot back.

"Cute, Judge, real cute," McCormick retorted. "I bet you stayed up all night thinking that one up."

"McCormick, will ya keep your voice down!" Hardcastle hissed.

"Why? You afraid I'll wake the dead?"

Hardcastle gave him a shove into the room they had visited earlier. "Just shut up and take this crowbar," he ordered.

"How come I gotta pry the casket open?" McCormick protested.

"Because I told ya to, that's why." Reaching up, Hardcastle switched on a light positioned next to the head of the casket, then flicked off his flashlight. "Now, get to work."

Fitting the crowbar in place, McCormick grunted as he pushed the steel rod upward. There was a dull crack and the seal broke.

Hardcastle reached for the lid, but paused before opening it, glancing quickly at McCormick.

"Judge, I really don't wanna do this," McCormick whispered.

"You think I do?"

"No," he replied softly and sighed, "Okay, let's get it over with."

Hardcastle still hesitated. "Kid, I don't know how true this is," he muttered, "but I've heard that when a mortician knows the casket's gonna be closed, he doesn't do a helluva lot to fix up the body, you know, the face and all."

"Oh, swell," McCormick frowned. "That's just what I needed to hear right now." Setting his shoulders firmly, he nodded, "All right, open it."

Hardcastle did so slowly, lifting the lid all the way so it would remain open on its own.

"Oh my...God!" McCormick stared in horror at the face of the man he had come to know well through Hardcastle, and the crowbar fell from suddenly nerveless fingers. "Judge, I--I'm gonna be sick," he whispered hoarsely and pivoting on his heels, fled the room.

Hardcastle closed the casket quickly, but he could do nothing to erase from his mind the picture of the horribly swollen and bruised face, a grotesque caricature of his old friend. Only a surge of white-hot anger kept him from reacting as McCormick had done.

Remembering his young friend now, he grabbed up the crowbar and ran to the men's washroom, finding McCormick slumped against the side of one of the stalls, his face as white as the shiny tiles behind him. Snatching a couple of paper towels from the dispenser Hardcastle soaked them in cold water, then gripping McCormick's shoulder with one hand, held the dripping pieces of toweling against his pale forehead. "You okay?" he asked gruffly.



McCormick nodded against his hand.



"Kid, I'm sorry--"

"Wasn't your fault," McCormick interrupted in a choked voice, and leaned his head back against the wall, some of the color slowly returning to his cheeks. "I've seen my share of dead people, Judge, but never any who looked like that," he whispered, an involuntary shudder running through his body.

"Me, neither," Hardcastle scowled.

Reaching up, McCormick grasped the judge's wrist and pulled his hand away from his forehead, his horrified eyes meeting Hardcastle's. "How?" he demanded hoarsely. "How could someone stand there and beat up a sick, defenseless old man who he's supposed to be taking care of? What kind of human being could commit that kind of atrocity?"

"The same kind that I've been puttin' behind bars for most of my life, kid, and the same kind that one of these days you'll be facing across the bench."

"I wish I was facing him now," McCormick snarled, his hand reflexively clenching in a fist.

Hardcastle shook his head grimly. "No, you don't, because the next thing you'd see is me being arrested for murder," he

responded in a curiously flat tone.

McCormick glanced up quickly, his eyes widening at the look on Hardcastle's face. The judge usually hid the softer emotions he felt, but rarely did he make an effort to control his anger. The few times McCormick had seen him do so were the times when Hardcastle changed from a stubborn, cantankerous judge into a very dangerous man. The anger was so well under control that his voice was almost gentle as he ordered, "C'mon, kid, we're goin' home. You've been through enough for one night."

McCormick tried to take a cue from the judge, but never one to suppress any type of emotion, he could be satisfied with nothing less than slamming his hand against the wall. "Damn! You should've let me beat the hell outta Alex!" he hissed. "For God's sake, Harry was their father! How could they just take his money and keep quiet about this? If something like this happened to you, I'd tear the guy apart with my bare hands!"

"That's because you're different from Alex and Christy," Hardcastle replied quietly. With a hand on McCormick's shoulder, he started guiding him towards the back door. "Don't worry about those two," he continued, his voice growing hard. "They'd better spend that money fast because they sure as hell can't do it from behind bars."

When they reached the parking lot, McCormick turned, his eyes narrowing. "You are gonna close down that nursing home, aren't you, Judge?"

"You bet I am," Hardcastle fired back, "even if I have to go in there with an axe and tear up the place myself. Nobody should have to die like Harry did."

McCormick gripped his shoulder. "I'm with you on this one, all the way. Whatever it takes, we do it."

## C H A P T E R   F I V E

Each of them spent the remainder of the night tossing and turning in their respective beds, neither able to get more than an hour or two of sleep not haunted by vague nightmares. As if by unspoken agreement, both showed up on the basketball court the next morning at six-thirty, Hardcastle getting there first and slowly dribbling the ball as he watched McCormick approach.

"You look like hell," he stated bluntly.

"You don't look so hot yourself," McCormick retorted.

"Yeah, well, I was kinda restless last night," Hardcastle admitted.

The young man smiled grimly. "I know what ya mean."

Hardcastle started dribbling the ball in earnest, and assuming his stance, McCormick tried to block the judge's shot. Unsuccessful, he caught the ball after it swished through the hoop and feinted to his left. "Did you keep seein' him every time you closed your eyes?" he asked in a low voice.

Hardcastle nodded, staying in front of McCormick as Mark moved to his right. "I couldn't get his face outta my mind," he confessed with a scowl. "Last night was like one of those damned horror movies you watch every once in a while."

"Only this one's real," McCormick replied tersely and making his shot, backed up slightly as Hardcastle retrieved the ball. "What do we do first?"

"We go see Frank and find out what our options are," Hardcastle replied and dribbled to his left, McCormick following. "I'm not counting on him being able to get an exhumation order, or a writ to stop the burial altogether, but it won't hurt to try." He made a quick move, bumped McCormick hard, and launched the ball in a hook shot.

Ignoring the obvious foul, McCormick caught the ball before it hit the ground. "And what if Frank's hands are tied?" He dribbled backwards to shoot.

"Then we go to the State Cabinet for Human Resources, and lay the facts on the table," Hardcastle decided and slapped McCormick's shot down. "One way or the other we're gonna close that place."

Grabbing the loose ball, McCormick made another shot, this one successful.

They continued the game in that manner, no complaints from either side, neither bothering to keep score. It was not a contest of skill or for recreation; instead a release valve for pent-up emotions. There was no anger over the elbows in the ribs or the kicked shins, each man giving as good as he received, and each realizing the importance of the hard-played game.

The basketball swished through the hoop one last time and they backed off simultaneously, Hardcastle bent over with his hands grasping his knees as he tried to get his breathing under control; McCormick leaning against the wall, his eyes closed as he filled his lungs with air.

"You...want some breakfast?" the judge puffed.

McCormick nodded and slapping him on the shoulder, Hardcastle grinned. "That was a helluva game, kid. Let's hope we don't haveta do it again."

"Now yer cookin'," McCormick wheezed.

## C H A P T E R   S I X

Harper leaned forward and slammed his hand down angrily on the desk. "Why do you do this to me? Mark, why do you let him come in here with something like this when you know damned well I can't lift a finger to help?" Not giving McCormick time to reply, he turned back to Hardcastle and yelled, "I hate it when you do this to me!"

"Well, who the hell else am I gonna do it to?" Hardcastle demanded. "You're the law, Frank, and I thought the law's supposed to protect the innocent, or has that changed since I stepped down from the bench?"

"Milt, you're not being fair," Harper replied in a hurt tone.

"Yeah, I know," Hardcastle sighed and leaned back, his eyes meeting Harper's. "Look, I'm sorry, Frank," he apologized gruffly. "It's just that seeing Harry last night got to McCormick and me both."

"That's another thing," Harper complained. "What the hell's the idea of coming in here and confessing a crime? Granted, Mark's parole is up, but damn it, Milt, he's got a career ahead of him! You tryin' to ruin it all by forcin' him to do a B and E?"

"I didn't force him--I asked," Hardcastle corrected.

"You asking is the same thing as someone else putting a gun to his head," Harper pointed out. "You know damned well he's not gonna turn you down."

"Well, it wasn't an entire B and E," Hardcastle argued. "The kid just picked the lock; he didn't break a thing. All we did was enter."

"Don't pick bones with me, Milt. You talked Mark into committing a crime, and there's no two ways about it," Harper replied emphatically.

"Forget about that," McCormick shot in. "Frank, there's a helluva lot bigger crime here than what I did."

"Agreed," Harper sighed, "but my hands are tied on this one, guys. I can institute an investigation, but I can tell you right now it's not gonna get far because I don't have any proof to warrant it."

"You got McCormick and me," Hardcastle gestured to the young man and himself. "We're your witnesses."

"Did you see a crime committed?" Harper demanded and answered before Hardcastle could. "No, you didn't see one."

"We saw Harry's face!" Hardcastle shouted.

"Milt, I'm not doubting you!" Harper yelled back. "But there's no way we can stop that burial, and they just don't hand out exhumation orders on vague suspicions, not even yours. Now, if Alex and Christy wanted it, that'd be another matter, but you know damned well those two want Harry in the ground as soon as possible. If we tried to get an exhumation order without their consent, they'd fight it in court, and the damned thing would drag on for no telling how long."

"All right, so what do we do?" Hardcastle asked tightly, obviously trying to get his temper in rein.

"Go to the Cabinet for Human Resources and tell them what you told me," Harper directed. "They can start an investigation with no more proof than what you've got, then when they get enough evidence for indictments, they'll turn it over to us, and I'll personally close that place down so fast, they won't know what hit 'em."

"Okay, that's how we handle it," Hardcastle decided, and rose to his feet, McCormick following suit. "We'll let you know how it goes."

"You do that," Harper urged, and walking the two of them to the door, he turned, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's. "Harry was my friend, too, you know," he spoke quietly, "and I want these people behind bars just as much as you do."

"And we're gonna do it, too," Hardcastle replied firmly. He glanced at his watch, "You goin' to the funeral?"

Harper nodded.

"I guess we might as well go, too," Hardcastle decided, "because there's no way we can get an injunction in time to stop it. C'mon, kid, let's go home and change."

"You want us to come by and pick you up?" McCormick asked.

"Yeah, do that," Harper agreed. "I'll see you in about an hour."

## C H A P T E R   S E V E N

The funeral was held at the gravesite, those who had come to pay their last respects gathered under a large canopy waiting for the service to begin.

The last three arrivals chose chairs at the back, Hardcastle's eyes automatically searching the small congregation before he took his seat. Alex and Christine were turned their way, but he noticed it was McCormick, not him, they were glaring at. Sitting down next to the young man, he leaned close to whisper, "Looks like you made a coupla enemies last night, kid. Alex and Christy've got their eyes on you, and if looks could kill, you'd be in that coffin with Harry right now."

"There's no love lost on this side, either," McCormick muttered. "But don't worry. I'm not going to make a scene or anything. The very least Harry deserves is a dignified funeral."

Hardcastle glanced at McCormick's determined face and smiled. "You know, it's a damned shame Harry didn't have a son like you instead of Alex."

McCormick looked up quickly, his eyes widening in surprise, then a slow grin began to spread across his face. "Hey, Hardcase, you finally realizing how lucky you are having me around?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"You're not bad," Hardcastle conceded, "but don't let it go to your head, kid. You've given me some headaches over the past four years."

"The feeling's mutual," McCormick retorted lightly.

The minister stepped in front of the coffin and all conversation between them ceased.

"We have gathered here today on this sad occasion to pay our last respects to Russell Harrison Caldwell, a wonderful husband and father, and a fine, upstanding citizen in our community..."

The white-collared man continued to extol Caldwell's virtues, but McCormick knew it was not those fine qualities Hardcastle was thinking about as he sat with his head bowed. The judge was remembering their poker games, and the talks they'd had about their past cases, discussions which had often turned into friendly arguments lasting most of the night. McCormick felt certain Hardcastle was also remembering that Caldwell was only

seven months his senior.

Although it had never been a topic of discussion between them, McCormick knew that the death of each old friend increased Hardcastle's awareness of his own mortality. He would drive himself at a frenzied pace for days afterwards, as if to prove there was still time left on his own clock. Glancing at him from the corner of his eye, McCormick reached out, casually laying his hand on Hardcastle's forearm just below his elbow, and squeezed gently.

The white head remained bowed but McCormick could feel him relax, and left his hand where it was, offering a silent assurance that he was there.

The funeral service came to an end, and people began filing by the coffin to say their last good-byes. Stepping to its head, Hardcastle touched the shiny steel surface, then patted it gently. "You were a helluva friend, Harry," he growled softly. "Life wasn't always good to you and death wasn't a lot better, but you've got my promise that somebody's gonna pay."

McCormick laid his hand on the coffin next to Hardcastle's. "I'm with him, Harry; you know that," he whispered.

Hardcastle slapped his shoulder. "C'mon, kid, let's get the ball rolling."

Moving away from the coffin they joined two of Hardcastle's old cronies who had come to pay their respects to their mutual friend.

McCormick listened to them talk for a few minutes, then quietly excusing himself from the group, wandered over to a shade tree, keeping an eye on the judge and on Harper who was deep in conversation with two uniformed officers.

Lost in thought, he started slightly when a voice behind him demanded, "McCormick, I wanna talk to you."

Turning slowly, he found Alex directly behind him, his features contorted with anger. Stepping closer, Caldwell's eyes blazed with fury as he came right to the point. "The funeral director told me this morning that the seal had been broken on Harry's coffin."

"Gee, that's strange." McCormick's eyebrows arched innocently. "I wonder how that could've happened."

"You know damned well how it happened!" Caldwell retorted. "What were you and Hardcastle up to last night?"

"What makes you think we had anything to do with it?"



McCormick asked politely. "Maybe Harry got restless." His voice hardened. "Maybe he can't rest in peace because of what his children did to him."

Grabbing McCormick by the front of his suit jacket, Caldwell slammed him hard against the tree. "I'll tell you who's gonna be resting in peace if he doesn't keep his nose outta my business!"

"No way!" McCormick shot back.

"Then you're asking for it!" Caldwell hissed and in a swift move, buried his fist in McCormick's stomach.

Doubling over in pain, McCormick went down on one knee, gasping for air. He heard a shout, "What the hell do you think you're doin'?" and felt strong arms encircle his shoulders.

"Mark, you okay?" Hardcastle demanded anxiously.

He managed to nod.

Helping him to his feet, Hardcastle continued to lend support, one arm across his chest to keep him from falling, as McCormick remained bent over, still fighting the stabbing pain in his abdomen.

Hardcastle glared at Caldwell over McCormick's back, his eyes narrowing with barely-controlled fury. "Damn it, I warned you about this last night!" he snarled. "You just made the second biggest mistake in your life!"

Caldwell took a step backward, his Adam's Apple moving convulsively. He no doubt would have turned and ran if Harper had not stepped up beside him, reaching out to casually grip his arm.

"Mark, I heard Caldwell's threat and saw what happened," the lieutenant spoke in a no-nonsense tone. "You wanna press charges?"

"Press charges?" Caldwell echoed angrily. "Lieutenant, I'm the one who wants to press charges! McCormick broke into my father's casket last night!"

Harper turned a look of surprise on him. "Now, why would Mark want to do something like that?" he questioned calmly.

"Because he's a sicko!" Caldwell shouted. "He's been in prison! There's no telling what kind of perverted ideas he has!"

McCormick straightened quickly, ignoring the pain caused by the sudden move. He tried to take a step towards Caldwell, but the muscular arm still across his chest prevented him from doing

so. "Judge--" he warned, but Hardcastle interrupted.

"Alex, did you actually see McCormick break into Harry's casket?"

Caldwell glared at him, but made no response.

Glancing at Harper, Hardcastle shrugged. "Well, it looks like what we've got here is an accusation with no proof."

Harper nodded in agreement. "But we do have proof of first-degree assault. Mark, you gonna file a complaint?" he asked again.

McCormick shook his head. "Not right now, Frank. I've got more important things to do."

Harper released Caldwell's arm. "Get out of here then, and for once, try to show a little respect for the situation."

There was anger in Caldwell's stride as he stalked to his car, and Harper, wearing a worried frown, watched him leave. "You made a dangerous enemy there, Mark."

"So did he," McCormick promised in a cold voice, and still holding his stomach, pulled away from Hardcastle and stomped towards the truck.

Exchanging worried looks with Harper, Hardcastle went after the young man, catching up with him with a rough order-- "Would you mind tellin' me what the hell happened back there?"

"It wasn't my fault," McCormick protested. "Caldwell said the funeral director told him the seal on the casket had been broken. When I told him that maybe Harry couldn't rest in peace because of what his children had done to him, Caldwell slammed me up against that tree, and tried to use me for a punching bag."

"Well, didn't you see the blow comin'?" Hardcastle demanded.

"Of course I did," McCormick shot back, "but I also saw you and Frank coming towards us."

"And you weren't going to be the one accused of starting a fight," Harper guessed correctly.

"He would've had me arrested just like that," he snapped his fingers. "Well, good 'ol Mark here wasn't gonna give him a reason." He climbed in the truck, trying to stifle a groan, and moving to the middle of the seat, waited until the other two men had settled on each side of him before adding weakly, "It wasn't that bad, anyway. The guy's got a lousy right."

"Sure he does," Hardcastle snorted. "From the look on your face, I'd say he only damned near ruptured your spleen."

"All right, so I thought all that muscle was just hype," McCormick admitted with a wry grin. "I didn't know he could throw such a mean punch."

"Guys who've won the Golden Glove award usually do," Hardcastle shot back.

McCormick's eyes widened. "You never told me he was an amateur boxer."

"There was never any need before," Hardcastle returned, the warning obvious in his voice. He pulled from the cemetery onto the main street and glanced at Harper. "We'll drop you by the office, Frank, then I'd better take Muhammad Ali here by the emergency room and have him checked out."

"Judge, I'm fine," McCormick protested. "Let's go home and get something to eat, then get moving on closing down that nursing home."

Harper threw Hardcastle a grin. "If he's hungry, he must be okay."

The judge snorted. "You can't go by that. He'd have one foot in the grave and still be demanding a peanut butter sandwich and pizza." Coming to a stop at a red light, he turned to McCormick. "All right, we'll go on home, but I want you to stay away from Caldwell. If he gets the chance, he'll use you to mop up the floor."

McCormick held up his hands in surrender. "You know me, Judge. I never pick a fight."

"Yeah, and ducks hate water with a damned passion," Hardcastle retorted.