

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - O N E

Hardcastle blinked and raising his head slowly, winced at the pain that shot through his skull. He tried to move and discovered he was tied to a chair, his hands bound tightly behind him.

Blinking rapidly to clear his blurred vision, his heart missed a beat when he saw McCormick sitting opposite him. The young man was also tied to a chair, his chin slumped on his chest. He didn't appear to be seriously wounded, but Hardcastle didn't like the blood on his chest, or the angry bruise already forming close to his eye. Trying to keep his voice calm, he whispered, "McCormick. McCormick!"

The curly head remained motionless, and Hardcastle struggled to free his hands, his worry growing. The bonds were tight, but given some time, he felt certain he could free himself.

That precious commodity was taken away from him, however, when the door swung open and Dejohn stepped into the room, a smile spreading across his face when he saw that Hardcastle was conscious. "Well, Judge, it's about time," he complained in a light tone.

"What the hell's the meaning of this?" Hardcastle demanded.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," Dejohn promised, and moving to McCormick's side, began slapping the ex-con's face. "C'mon, wake up."

"Leave the kid alone!" Hardcastle hissed.

Ignoring him, Dejohn kept slapping the young man's face until McCormick jerked his head away, and groaned.

"Kid, you okay?" Hardcastle asked anxiously.

McCormick had to blink several times in order to bring the judge into focus. "Yeah, I'm all right," he muttered, not daring to move his head again. Looking down at the ropes which secured his arms to the wooden ones of the chair, his eyes widened in surprise. "What's goin' on here, anyway?"

"It's simple," Dejohn returned sharply and perched on the edge of his desk. "I want those books back. Without them, you don't have a shred of evidence to convict me."

"Forget it," Hardcastle shot back. "You've starved these people, forced 'em to live in squalid, unsanitary conditions, and have allowed them to be abused by Mason. McCormick and I are gonna use those books to put you in prison for a long time."

Dejohn merely smiled at the threat. "Now, somehow I knew, Judge, that you weren't going to hand those books over to me simply because I asked. Looks like you're gonna have to be persuaded." Standing, he reached across the desk and picked up a blood pressure device, the type commonly used in doctors' offices to measure an individual's blood pressure. Taking a pair of scissors, he cut the left sleeve of McCormick's jacket up to the shoulder, then pushed the material back out of the way.

"Hey, what're you doin'?" McCormick protested. "That's my good jacket!"

"In a few minutes you won't need this sleeve any longer," Dejohn returned in an ominous tone, "that is, of course, unless the judge decides to cooperate."

"What the hell're you talkin' about?" Hardcastle demanded, trying to keep a growing sense of fear out of his voice.

Securing the black cuff around McCormick's upper arm, Dejohn explained, "Remember your first-aid, gentlemen? If a person has a serious wound, you apply a tourniquet to stop the flow of blood. You have to remember, however, to loosen it every three to five minutes, or that person will end up losing his arm or leg." He looked up, his eyes meeting Hardcastle's as he added threateningly, "In this case, that loss would be all your fault. Now, are you gonna tell me where those books are?"

"Forget it, Judge," McCormick put in quickly. "He's tryin' to pull a con. He can't use this gizmo for something like that."

"You don't think so?" Dejohn said smugly. Picking up the small bubble laying on the desk, he began pumping air through the tube into the arm band. It started to swell and the pressure around McCormick's arm increased, causing him to wince slightly.

"How about it, Hardcastle?" Dejohn held the bubble in his hand, no longer squeezing it, and glanced at the judge. "In minutes, he'll lose all feeling in that arm. If it continues very long, the arm will have to be amputated. So why don't you just tell me right now where the books are, and save all of us a lot of time and pain."

Seeing the worried look on Hardcastle's face, McCormick shook his head. "Don't do it, Judge. This creep belongs in prison and you know it."

"You shut up!" Dejohn yelled and pumped more air into the arm band, this time causing McCormick to gasp.

"Judge, we can't let him kill any more people," he pleaded. "Don't give him the books!" Dejohn squeezed the bubble faster, and McCormick sucked in his breath sharply against the pain of his arm being slowly crushed.

"Look at 'im, Hardcastle!" Dejohn demanded cruelly. "He's too young to be a cripple. If he loses that arm, he's gonna blame you for the rest of his life. Is putting me behind bars worth that?"

"He's wrong!" McCormick hissed between clenched teeth. "I won't hate you, Judge. If I lose my arm, I'm comin' after you, Dejohn, and I can fire a gun with my right hand better than I can with my left!"

Dejohn's response was to pump more air into the black cuff, causing McCormick's head to jerk back sharply, a half-muffled cry escaping his lips.

Hardcastle strained at his bonds, his face dark with rage and fear. "I gotta tell him, kid!"

"No!" he gasped.

McCormick's arm, below the band, now had a deathly pallor, and mentally counting off the seconds, Hardcastle shot back gruffly, "It isn't worth it, Mark. I'm telling him now before it's too late."

"Judge, he killed Harry, and no telling how many others! You want that to happen again?" McCormick flung back. "You can't tell him!"

Picking up a short-bladed scalpel, Dejohn snarled, "Maybe this'll persuade you."

McCormick stared in horror as the scalpel bit into his arm just above the wrist. He felt no pain, however, and when the knife was pulled from the wound, only a trickle of blood escaped.

Slapping the medical instrument down on the table, Dejohn turned to the judge. "I give him three, maybe four more minutes. Then no doctor in the world can save that arm."

"All right!" Hardcastle roared. "You got the books!"

"Judge--"

"Shut up, kid!" Hardcastle ordered. "The books are at Gulls-Way. McCormick put 'em in the safe last night. It's in the

den behind the big landscape oil painting."

"What's the combination?" Dejohn demanded.

"Thirty-four - left, twelve - right, seventeen - left. Now, get that damned thing off him!"

"Forget it!" Dejohn started for the door, calling back over his shoulder. "If those books aren't there, I'm coming back, and next time he'll lose a leg."

"DEJOHN!!" Hardcastle's roar reverberated in the room. "I'm comin' after you, and I'm gonna kill ya with my bare hands!"

The door slammed shut on his fury and he began struggling desperately with his bonds.

"Forget it, Judge," McCormick whispered, no longer feeling any pain in his arm. "It's too late."

"It's not too late!" Hardcastle fired back. "Hang in there, kid, and I'll be with you in just a minute, less if I can manage it."

McCormick leaned his head back against the wall and gazed down at the black wrapping on his arm, seeing it now as one of those arm bands that mourners sometimes wear. "You can do a lotta things, Judge, but you can't perform miracles," he spoke quietly. "I didn't feel a thing when he stuck that scalpel in me. My arm's gone."

"It's not gone! Damn it, will you quit talkin' like that!" Hardcastle yelled and getting one hand free, frantically tore at the ropes around his other hand and legs. Jumping to his feet, he moved quickly to McCormick's side, and ripping the arm band off, flung it across the room in fury. Freeing McCormick's wrists and legs, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the scalpel wound. "We get the blood circulating again, you're gonna start bleedin' like a stuck pig," he explained gruffly. "Now, c'mon," he hooked an arm under McCormick's good one, "get on your feet and keep that arm hangin' down. We gotta get you movin'."

McCormick was suddenly too tired to care. "It's no use," he mumbled, tears swelling in his eyes. "My arm's like a dead weight. They're going to have to... Oh God, Judge, they're gonna have to cut it off!"

"Over my dead body!" Hardcastle shouted. "Now, will you do like I tell ya! Move it!" Forcing McCormick to walk across the room with him, he leaned his young friend carefully against the wall, and begun rubbing his arm briskly, trying to get the blood circulating. "Feel anything?"

McCormick shook his head. "I can't even feel your hands," he whispered hoarsely. Straightening slightly, his voice grew stronger. "This is a waste of time, Judge. Go get Dejohn. If he gets away you'll never catch up with him again."

"Forget Dejohn!" Hardcastle roared, and poured all his anger into rubbing McCormick's arm. Grabbing Mark's wrist, he started bending the elbow, talking roughly as he worked. "You gotta have faith, kid. You always give up too easily on things. Ya oughtta know by now that if ya want something bad enough, you gotta work for it. Now c'mon, put a little effort into it. Let me see you move your fingers."

McCormick tried to obey, the tears spilling over onto his cheeks. "I can't."

"Try harder!"

"I am!" He released his breath in a sob. "I can't move 'em."

"Like hell you can't!" Grabbing Mark's hand, Hardcastle forced the fingers into a fist. "Now, open your hand."

McCormick tried and seconds later elation lit his face. "Judge, I-I feel something!" His fingers moved slightly, then his fist slowly opened. "I did it! Oh God, I did it!"

"Okay, now try bending your arm," Hardcastle ordered.

Putting all his remaining strength into the effort, McCormick managed to bend his arm mere inches, but enough to show that his muscles were still in working order. The tingling sensation was turning into actual pain as the blood began racing through his veins again. Sucking in his breath sharply, he gasped, "Damn! It's starting to hurt!" A spot of red appeared on the handkerchief Hardcastle had wrapped around his arm. "Look! I'm bleeding!" he yelled excitedly, his voice catching on a sob.

Hardcastle broke into a wide grin. "Told ya so," he spoke hoarsely, his own eyes filling with tears of relief.

McCormick's gaze rose to meet his. "Judge, you-you're crying," he whispered softly.

"So what if I am?" Hardcastle shot back. "Can't a man shed a few tears without you making a big deal outta it? Now, bend that arm," he ordered.

McCormick started to, but swaying slightly, his hand went slowly to his head. "I-uh-I think I'd better sit down for a few minutes."

"You and me, too," Hardcastle agreed. Hooking an arm under McCormick's shoulder, he helped him back to the chair, then dropped on the edge of the desk beside him. "What happened, anyway?" he questioned, frowning at the bruises already forming on the young man's neck. "You look like you tangled with an army."

"Same thing," McCormick explained wryly, continuing to work his fingers. "Alex and Christine decided to stop by and make an anti-social call." His face hardened. "Alex is the one who blew the whistle on you."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that," Hardcastle nodded. "When Dejohn found the books missing, he probably thought Alex and Christy stole 'em and were gonna blackmail him."

"And when Alex blew our cover, Dejohn sent him and Christy after me, and Mason after you." Reaching up, McCormick gently touched the lump on Hardcastle's right temple. "You got a helluva knot there, Judge," he spoke softly.



"That's nothing compared to what Mason's gonna have when I get through with him," Hardcastle promised in a voice cold as steel. Sliding off the desk, he grabbed McCormick's good arm and

started to pull him to his feet. "You up to going after Dejohn? He's got a headstart but with a little luck we can find him on the road somewhere."

McCormick remained seated, a sly grin spreading across his face. "I've got a better idea, Judge. Why don't we just wait here and nab Dejohn when he comes back?"

"And what the hell makes you think he's gonna do that?" Hardcastle snapped. "Dejohn gets his hands on those books, he's gonna disappear faster'n you can blink an eye."

McCormick's grin grew wider. "That's only if he gets his hands on the books, which he won't."

"How can you be so sure?" Hardcastle demanded suspiciously.

"Because the books aren't in the safe," McCormick smirked. "Matter of fact, I hid 'em so well, Dejohn could take Gulls-Way apart piece by piece, and he'd never find 'em."

Hardcastle's eyes narrowed. "Just where did you put 'em?"

"Unh-uh," McCormick shook his head. "You already told once; I'm not putting you in a position where you'd have to spill the beans again."

"You know damned well why I spilled 'em."

"I know," McCormick's voice was soft and he reached up to squeeze Hardcastle's shoulder. "Thanks, Judge. I know how much you want Dejohn in prison, yet you told him where you thought the books were just to rescue me. I'm really touched."

"Now, don't go gettin' sappy on me," Hardcastle growled, and immediately changed the subject. "Did ya find out anything from those fingerprints?"

"Yeah," McCormick nodded grimly. "I also found some juicy little tidbits about those supply companies Dejohn supposedly bought that medical equipment from." He began relating what he and Harper had discovered, winding up the narrative with Frank's plans to move in with the search warrant as soon as he gave the word.

Hardcastle shook his head stubbornly. "I want the cops kept outta sight till Dejohn gets back, and we make sure Mason's somewhere around here. I wanna nab both of 'em at the same time, then we'll go after Alex and Christy."

McCormick rubbed the bruises on his throat and frowned. "I never thought I'd wish prison life on anyone, but it's gonna be

a real pleasure waving at those two through the bars."

Slapping him on the back, Hardcastle grinned. "C'mon, kid, let's call Frank and give him the news. In about another fifteen minutes DeJohn's gonna come chargin' back in here madder'n a wet hen."

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Harper hadn't liked the judge's plan from the beginning, but long years of association with Hardcastle told him it was useless to argue. "All right," he reluctantly agreed, his sigh plainly audible. "We'll hold back until we hear from you. I'll have my men out of sight about a mile down the road. Dispatch'll put your call through immediately, and we can be there in minutes."

"Now yer cookin'!" Hardcastle grinned and slammed the receiver down, ready for action.

Seeing the look on his face, McCormick sighed. "Hi-O Silver," he muttered and dropped dejectedly in a chair. "You know, I was really looking forward to semester break," he recalled sadly. "It was my chance to get away from torts and habeas corpuses, and I thought you and I would have the time to do something together."

Hardcastle threw him a surprised look. "We are doin' something together."

"This isn't what I had in mind," McCormick shot back. "I was hoping we could go camping, or fishing, or maybe visit Aunt Mae and Aunt Zora. But waiting around for a scumball and a sadistic creep is not my idea of a fun vacation."

"Aw, what's the matter?" Hardcastle teased. "You upset because you got beat up, scratched, nearly choked to death, and almost lost your arm?"

McCormick slumped in the chair and groaned. "Aw man, now I really feel terrible."

"You look it," Hardcastle returned generously. "Better keep workin' that arm, kiddo. How's it doin', anyway?" Reaching out, Hardcastle pulled back what was left of the jacket sleeve.

"It hurts like the devil," Mark complained.

The judge made a sympathetic sound with his tongue. "You're gonna have a helluva bruise there tomorrow." He glanced up, a mischevious grin on his face. "Want me to kiss it and make it well?"

"And get your slobbers all over it?" McCormick protested. "Wouldn't work, anyway, because you're not a mother. It's a well-known fact that all mothers are born with some kinda way of secreting antiseptic through their lips. Every time they kiss a boo-boo, the kid automatically gets first-aid treatment."

"And men don't have this, huh?" Hardcastle asked, trying to hide a grin.

McCormick shook his head solemnly. "Nope, only mothers and certain single women with long, blonde hair and voluptuous bodies."

"Well, I'll file that under 'who gives a damn'," Hardcastle said feigning annoyance. "Now, c'mon, sit in that chair over there and wrap these ropes back around your arms."

McCormick threw him a look of surprise. "Why? What're we gonna do?"

"We're gonna pretend like we're still helpless." Reaching down, Hardcastle picked up the blood pressure device and held it out to McCormick. "You'll-uh-have to put this around your arm again, real loose, of course."

McCormick stared at the instrument a moment, a look of fear in his eyes, then snatched it from Hardcastle's hand. "I just hope you know what you're doin', Kemosabe," he grumbled.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine."

"Yeah, that's probably what Davy Crockett said at the Alamo."

The judge shook his head. "No, he said, 'Let's give 'em hell, boys'."

"You'd know, wouldn't you?" McCormick grinned. "You were probably there."

"Get in the chair," Hardcastle snapped. Waiting until McCormick had replaced the blood pressure cuff and wrapped the rope convincingly around his left arm, the judge then loosely bound the other arm to the chair. Returning to his own chair, he looped the ropes around his legs and held his hands behind him, not bothering with the pretense of securing them since his back was to the wall.

McCormick eyed him nervously. "How long do you think we're gonna have to wait?"

"Not long," Hardcastle promised.

He was right. Within a few short minutes, the door was slammed open with a bang, and Dejohn stalked into the room, reminding McCormick of an angry mound of jello. His body quivering with fury, he grabbed Hardcastle by the front of his shirt and hissed, "You lied to me! The books weren't there!"

"That's where McCormick said they were," Hardcastle protested.

Whirling around, Dejohn glared at the young man who was slumped in the other chair, apparently unconscious. Moving in front of McCormick, he grabbed his shoulder and yelled, "Wake up, damn it!" McCormick didn't move, and Dejohn drew his arm back, ready to backhand him viciously across the face.

Flinging himself out of his chair, Hardcastle dove for Dejohn, sending him crashing to the floor in a flying tackle.

McCormick opened one eye, then shaking the ropes off, carefully removed the blood pressure cuff and rose to his feet, grinning. "You missed your calling, Judge. You shoulda been a linebacker for the Rams."

Rolling off Dejohn, Hardcastle grabbed him by one arm and the back of his jacket, and jerked him to his feet. Holding the administrator's arms tightly behind him, he pulled the man around to face McCormick.

Mark eyed the fat man in disgust, "May I, Judge?"

Hardcastle leaned close to Dejohn, his blue eyes twinkling. "Never could say no to that kid."

McCormick drew his fist back and Dejohn tried to pull away, the pudgy face creased with fear. "You wouldn't!"

McCormick's lips curled into a smile. "Watch me."

A well-placed blow to the jaw, and Dejohn was out cold. Hardcastle released the limp body and let it drop to the floor, then stepped over the bulk with great difficulty. "Damn, you knocked him right outta my hands," he grumbled.

"Couldn't hold onto him, huh?" McCormick grinned and leaned against the desk. "Well, one down and one to go."

Picking up Dejohn's gun, Hardcastle straightened, his face suddenly hard as granite. "Mason's mine, kid."

McCormick nodded. "You sure you can handle him?"

He shoved the gun in his pocket. "No, but I'm sure as hell gonna try!"

McCormick followed him into the empty hallway, and reaching out, gripped Hardcastle's shoulder. "Milt, I really think we oughtta call in Frank now," he suggested softly.

Hardcastle turned, and seeing the concerned look on McCormick's face, smiled. "Listen, I'm not gonna kill the guy, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm more worried about him killing you," McCormick admitted.

"Not a chance," Hardcastle retorted. The expression on McCormick's face remained unchanged, and the judge relented. "All right, kid, I'll make a promise. We find out if Mason's on the premises, then we call in the cops. I won't even go near him. Probably better that way, anyway," he added with a growl, "because if I come face to face with that scumball again, I'm liable to wring his damned neck."

"Okay," McCormick agreed. "Let's check outside and see if his car's here."

The reception area was deserted as was typical when no visitors were expected. Not relying on habit, however, both men maintained a sharp lookout until they reached the front door. Swinging it open, McCormick motioned the judge to precede him, then stepping into the open, peered over Hardcastle's shoulder. "There it is," he pointed. "That's Mason's car." Not giving the judge a chance to go back on his word, McCormick grabbed his arm and started pulling him backward. "C'mon, let's go call Frank."

Hardcastle turned, and with a sudden, violent move, shoved McCormick aside, sending him crashing over the low bushes lining the sidewalk.

"What the hell!" McCormick looked up in time to see Hardcastle staggering backwards from the blow which had obviously been intended for him. Leaning heavily against the building, the judge shook his head, as if to clear it, then straightened with a slow, deliberate motion.

"C'mon, ol' man," Mason goaded, his hands urging Hardcastle forward. "I've been wanting to take you apart since I set eyes on ya. You're just like the others in here--gutless chunks of rotting meat. You're so old, you stink of decay."

McCormick inhaled deeply, "Aw oh," he murmured, his eyes on the judge. This was definitely not a time to interfere. Mason had at least fifty pounds on Hardcastle, but the judge had something even stronger--a cold rage that McCormick could almost see sweeping over his entire body, turning it rock-hard. The eyes became glacier-cold, pinpoints of steel-blue that should've been a warning to any man that an eruption was about to occur.

Mason, however, was either too egotistical or too stupid to realize he was in trouble. "What's the matter, ol' man?" he taunted. "You so scared ya can't move?" He took a step towards Hardcastle. "That's good, because maybe you're scared enough to tell me where those books are. Or am I gonna have to use a cigarette on ya again?"

Suddenly the humiliation and degradation he had suffered at the hands of this sadist, churned in Hardcastle like bile, threatening to choke him. With the roar of an enraged bull, he charged, taking Mason completely by surprise, and sending both of them crashing over a stone water fountain.

Mason was by far the larger man, but Hardcastle was a hundred and eighty-five pounds of solid fury, shaking off the one blow Mason managed to deliver, and straddling the attendant, connected with his own again and again. When his hands closed around Mason's throat, McCormick sprang into action, grabbing Hardcastle beneath the armpits and frantically trying to break his hold on the semi-conscious man.

"Judge! Let go!" he screamed.

Hardcastle's hands tightened. "I'm gonna kill 'im!!!"

"Judge, turn him loose! He's not worth it!" Mason went limp, and giving up trying to pull Hardcastle off the prone man, McCormick began pounding on the muscular forearms, trying to break his hold. "Milt, for God's sake! Let 'im go!"

Still consumed with rage, Hardcastle released his grip and jerked upward, drawing back a fist aimed for McCormick's face.

Mark froze, meeting the look of fury with horrified eyes.

The color drained from Hardcastle's face, and his fist slowly opened, the hand lowering until it was resting on McCormick's shoulder. He sucked in a ragged breath.

"You okay?" McCormick whispered hoarsely.

Hardcastle nodded. "Give me a hand up, will ya?" he spoke in a strangely soft voice.

Helping the judge to his feet, McCormick checked Mason and finding he was still breathing, picked up the attendant's gun and shoved it into his waistband. "Can we call Frank now?" he asked in a pleading tone.

Inhaling deeply, Hardcastle slapped his young friend lightly on the back. "Yeah, kid, we can call Frank now."

"You do it," McCormick instructed. "I've gotta get something."

"What?"

He flashed a grin. "You'll see."

Frowning, Hardcastle turned his back and started towards the building. He had taken only a few steps, however, when a cry of alarm caused him to whirl around, whipping out his gun. His finger eased off the trigger when he saw McCormick face down on the ground, Mason still clutching his ankle. The gun Mark had picked up was in Mason's possession again, the barrel of it jabbed in the young man's back.

"Make a move and I'll blow 'im in half!" he warned.

Hardcastle froze, his gun still aimed at the duo.

"Get on your feet!" Mason ordered. "No sudden moves!" Transferring his grip to McCormick's shoulder, he rose with him, a burly arm snaking across McCormick's chest, forcing him into the position of a human shield.

Hardcastle's gun, now pointing at McCormick's head, never wavered. "Mason, if you know what's good for you, you'll let him go - NOW!"

The attendant laughed harshly, his weapon coming up until it was touching McCormick's neck just below his right ear. "I'm the one callin' the shots now, Hardcastle."

The touch of the cold steel sent an unearthly chill down McCormick's spine, and he stood motionless, barely breathing, only his eyes moving as he watched Hardcastle step closer, his weapon held steady.

"Drop it!" Mason warned. "Or I swear I'll blow his head off!"

"Do that, and I'll empty this gun in you before you can take another breath," Hardcastle promised in a voice as cold as the metal against McCormick's throat.

Mason began backing away, pulling McCormick with him. "If you think I'm goin' to prison, then you got another think comin', Judge." He eased the hammer back on the Magnum, the click sounding like an explosion in McCormick's ear. "Throw the gun away, and back off!" he ordered. "McCormick's my ticket outta here. Soon as I feel safe, I'll let 'im go."

"Like hell you will!" Hardcastle fired back. "You'll shoot him down like an animal!"

Mason's lips curled in a cruel grin. "Well now, you ain't got a helluva lotta choice, do ya, Hardcastle? You know

what kinda damage a .44 Magnum can do, especially at this range. Wouldn't it be better to dump his body on a road somewhere than to have me blow his brains all over ya?"

It was the end of the line. McCormick accepted that, and with the realization came a calmness he had rarely experienced in his life. He was going to be killed, either here with his head being blown off, or on some lonely road where his body might never be found. But there was a third alternative, another way to die, and that was the one he chose.

The blue eyes locked with Hardcastle's and he spoke one word in a quiet, unhesitating voice. "Shoot."

Hardcastle gazed at his young friend, seeing what he could only describe as a look of beauty on the youthful features. McCormick was prepared to die, and Hardcastle knew he was asking him to commit the act. It would be the last favor he could do for Mark, and yet he faltered, unable to pull the trigger.

Mason sensed his wavering, but misinterpreting the thoughts behind the ashen face, he snarled, "Forget it, Hardcastle! You ain't got a snowball's chance in hell of getting me without hittin' him, too. And even if you did I'd waste 'im before I hit the ground." He backed away a step. "We're leavin' now, and if you're smart, you won't try to follow. I see any cars on my tail, the kid's dead meat."

Hardcastle gripped his weapon with both hands, sweat breaking out on his forehead. "I'm warning you, Mason--don't move!"

"Try and stop me," the attendant sneered, and his gun rose to McCormick's temple, pressing painfully against the bone. "I pull this trigger and you're gonna have a helluva mess to clean up. Now, drop the gun!" he yelled.

McCormick looked deep in the judge's eyes and knew what he was going to do, the only thing he could do. The weapon lowered slowly, an inch, six inches, then was almost at Hardcastle's side. No longer feeling Mason's gun against his temple, McCormick inhaled sharply and clamped his eyes shut.

"Hardcastle, you're a damned fool!" Mason laughed, the Magnum swinging slowly towards the judge. "You didn't really think I was gonna leave --"

Two shots rang out, followed by another that deafened McCormick. He felt Mason's arm drop away, and dove to his left, shocked that he was able to do so. Rolling over, he rose slowly to his knees and stared at the body sprawled on the ground beside him, unable to look away even though his stomach churned threateningly. There were two bullet holes in Mason, one over his

right eye, another through his neck just above the collarbone, the only two parts of his body that had been visible behind his human shield. The lifeless eyes seemed to be fixed on McCormick, and Mark shuddered, still feeling cold steel against his throat.

He jumped when someone touched his shoulder, then a hand cupped his chin, gently turning his head.

"I said, are you okay?" Hardcastle asked in a worried tone.

McCormick cleared his throat noisily. "I-uh-I can't hear in my right ear. There-there's a roaring sound."



"The gunshot," Hardcastle explained. "It'll clear up." He stared at the body, and McCormick felt the hand on his shoulder start to tremble. "I had to take the chance, kid," the judge whispered hoarsely. "I had to hope Mason hated me as much as I hated him, and if I lowered the gun, he'd try to waste me. That's the only way I could get that damned thing away from your head." Still staring at the body, he shook his head. "Funny, he looked a lot bigger when he was punchin' me out than he did when he was holdin' you in front of him. For a few seconds there I thought I'd hit both of ya." His eyes rose to meet McCormick's. "I'm sorry, kid."

"Don't be," McCormick answered softly. "If you'd done what I wanted you to, I'd be lying there beside him right now."

Hardcastle bowed his head. "I don't think I've ever hated anyone as much as I hated that man. He degraded me, tried to make me feel like the scum of the earth. I would've killed him if you hadn't stopped me, and now...."

"Now, you didn't have any choice," McCormick finished quietly.

Hardcastle looked up, his piercing blue eyes meeting McCormick's. "You realize what you were asking me to do there, don't cha?"

McCormick nodded. "I also realized you're the only person I know who would've had the courage to do it." Reaching out, he squeezed Hardcastle's shoulder and smiled. "After all, that's what friends are for. Right?"

The lines on Hardcastle's face softened. "C'mon, kid, let's call Frank."

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T W O

Harper read the Miranda to a sullen Dejohn, then handed him over to two officers who had some difficulty squeezing the rotund figure into the back of their black and white. Turning, the lieutenant gazed across the lawn at another form in a body bag, "I hope you two have a good explanation for this," he remarked quietly.

"Mason tried to kidnap McCormick. I had to shoot 'im," Hardcastle replied in an expressionless tone.

Harper studied the judge a moment, knowing that the drama which had been enacted here involved much more than Hardcastle's brief summary. "Okay," he nodded at last, "but I expect a little more detail in your and Mark's statements." He glanced around the area. "By the way, where is Mark, anyway?"

As if on cue, a slightly breathless McCormick tapped him on the shoulder. "Right here, Frank. Have your guys turned up anything in their search yet?"

Harper pivoted, his eyes flashing anger. "If by 'anything', you mean Dejohn's books, no, they haven't been found because they weren't in the place they were supposed to be."

"Have you checked the trunk of Dejohn's car?" McCormick asked innocently.

"And how do you suppose the books got in there?" Harper questioned suspiciously. "You think they picked the lock, and just jumped in all by themselves?"

"Must have," McCormick grinned. "Smart little buggers, if you asked me."

"Unh-huh, sure," Harper motioned to an uniformed officer crossing the yard. "Come with me."

Hardcastle waited until the lieutenant was out of earshot, then grabbing McCormick's arm, growled, "Where the hell'd you have those books? I told you to lock 'em up in the safe."

"And aren't you glad I didn't," McCormick replied in a smug tone, "because if I had, Dejohn would've gotten his fat little hands on 'em and be long gone down the highway by now."

"Okay," Hardcastle conceded, "but where the hell'd you

put 'em?"

"Behind the front seat of the Coyote," McCormick explained with relish.

Hardcastle's eyes widened. "You mean Alex and Christy stole your car, brought you here in it, Dejohn goes to Gulls-Way lookin' for the books, and all the time the damned things were right here in the parking lot?"

McCormick propped his arm on Hardcastle's shoulder, and grinned. "Irony, Judge. Don't cha just love it?"

Hardcastle jerked away from him, his temper flaring. "Damn it, kid! You could've lost an arm! Why didn't you tell Dejohn where those books were?"

"He didn't ask me," McCormick replied simply.

Whatever angry rejoinder Hardcastle might have made was interrupted by Harper's reappearance. "Well, it looks like it's all over but the shouting," he sighed in contentment. "Dandridge is sending over some counselors and a couple of doctors to check the patients. Mason's dead, and Dejohn and Hanson are in custody, so that just about wraps everything up." McCormick started to speak, but Harper held up a hand, "Except for one small matter." He patted his pocket. "I was just delivered the arrest warrants for Alex and Christine Caldwell. You guys care to be there when I give 'em the good news?"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away," McCormick replied, and started for the car.

"Ah, the eagerness of youth," Harper smiled after him.

"More like the old adage of revenge," Hardcastle retorted, and remembering the bruises on McCormick's throat, added softly, "The kid deserves this one."

The Coyote was mere inches behind the black and white when it came to a stop in front of the mansion. Jumping out of the sports car, McCormick followed the group to the front door, crouching low behind the two uniformed officers when the massive oak barrier swung open. A butler stepped forward, his professional demeanor shattered when he spotted the policemen.

Not giving him time to recover, Harper inquired in a cold voice, "Are Alex or Christine Caldwell here?"

Nodding wordlessly, the butler stepped back, motioning them towards the study. Stopping in the hallway, McCormick grabbed Harper's arm. "Frank, let me go in first," he whispered.

"He could have a gun," Harper protested.

McCormick shook his head. "That's not Alex's style. 'Mash 'em and smash 'em' is his motto."

Harper glanced at the judge who shrugged. "It's up to you, Frank."

"All right," Harper sighed. "But we're comin' in right after you."

Stepping quietly into the room, McCormick saw brother and sister with their backs to him, both with drinks in their hands as if preparing a toast. "Kinda early to be celebrating, isn't it?" he asked cheerfully.

Caldwell whirled around. "McCormick! Damn you! You're supposed to be dead!" He charged, but the group in the hallway moved in quickly, Harper and the two uniformed officers exerting all their efforts to hold Caldwell back as he struggled to reach McCormick. "I'll kill you!" he screamed. "I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

"He could, too," Hardcastle muttered in McCormick's ear.

"Don't I know it," he replied fervently, and backed away as Caldwell was literally dragged across the room.

Christine was inching her way towards the French doors, but Hardcastle took her arm in a none-too-gentle grip. "Sorry, young lady, but you're into this up to your eyeballs."

Having finally gotten the handcuffs on Caldwell, Harper grabbed Christine's other arm and slapped a metal bracelet on it. "You're both under arrest," he began, "on charges of kidnapping, attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and conspiracy to commit fraud. You have the right to remain silent..." His voice faded away as he and the other two officers ushered the Caldwells from the room.

Dropping on the sofa, McCormick released his breath in a long sigh. "Is it over now, Judge?"

Hardcastle sat down next to him, propping his feet up on the ornate coffee table. "Yeah, it's over, kid." He studied the various bruises on McCormick's face and neck, and suddenly noticed the way the young man's left arm laid limp across his stomach. "You look like hell, you know that, don't cha?" he grumbled softly.

McCormick favored him with a scrutinizing look, taking in the old and new bruises Mason had administered over the past few days, and the cigarette burn which looked as if it was becoming infected. "You don't look so hot yourself," he replied in a low

voice.

"Well, I guess we'll live," Hardcastle sighed, then added in a low voice. "That's more than I can say for Harry." Rising slowly, he moved to the portable bar and filling two glasses with Scotch, returned to the sofa and handed one to McCormick. Holding his own in the air, he spoke quietly, "To Harry. Maybe now he can rest in peace."

"To Harry," McCormick repeated and drained his glass.

He immediately began coughing, and slapping him sharply on the back, Hardcastle grinned, "C'mon, kid, let's go home."



C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T H R E E

Cindy had a party a few days after the nursing home fiasco, an informal gathering of her grandfather's friends who had come to reminisce about Harry and the old day.

The newspapers had had a field day with the story of Dejohn's activities, and the arrest of two of Malibu's most prominent citizens, making a certain judge and young law student unwilling celebrities among their peers.

"If I'd known this was gonna happen, I would've stayed home and watched that John Wayne movie," Hardcastle grumbled in McCormick's ear as they watched yet another well-wisher heading their way, obviously wanting to offer his congratulations.

"Grin and bear it," McCormick suggested between clenched teeth and forced a smile as Judge Reinholdt greeted them cheerfully.

"Well, I hear you two found a real nest of hornets," the rotund judge grinned and shoved out his hand. "Congratulations! You did a helluva job."

Gripping his hand, Hardcastle turned red for not the first time that day. "Thanks, Chester. We just did what had to be done."

"Yeah, sure," Reinholdt teased, and offering his hand to McCormick, stared at him closely. "You know, I can see it now," he remarked thoughtfully. "The eyes, that's what it is."

McCormick blinked in puzzlement. "I beg your pardon?"

Reinholdt slapped him on the shoulder and wandered across the lawn in search of another drink.

"Now what the hell do you suppose that was all about?" Hardcastle demanded.

"Search me," McCormick winced, "but if another person slaps me on my sore arm, I swear I'm gonna slug 'im."

Hardcastle touched his shoulder gently. "Cool it, kid. Here comes Cindy."

Genuine smiles broke out on their faces as each hugged the young woman, then sat down next to her on one of the benches

lining the garden.

Cindy relaxed in her chair and smiled. "I've always loved this place. It's so soothing."

"Yeah," Hardcastle agreed. "Harry spent a lot of time here. He did a helluva job with this garden."

Reaching out, Cindy laid a hand on each of their arms. "Things have been so hectic the last few days, I haven't had the chance to thank both of you for what you did," she spoke softly. "You took a horrible risk for my grandfather and those other patients at the nursing home, and I'm so glad you're both all right."

Hardcastle patted her hand. "It was our pleasure, honey, but I am sorry about how things turned out with your dad and Christy."

Cindy's face hardened. "Yes, I guess I am too, in a way. I have the thought of Father and Aunt Christy going to prison, but as far as I'm concerned, they're the ones who killed Granddad." She dropped her head and sighed. "If they just hadn't been so greedy."

"Well, at least you have your proper inheritance now," McCormick pointed out. "I know you didn't care anything about that, but it's what Harry wanted and what you deserve."

Cindy broke into a smile. "I guess I should be grateful that Dejohn was such a crook. If he had thrown away that letter Granddad had written, instead of keeping it to blackmail my father and Aunt Christy, all this would still be theirs even though they're going to prison."

"And now it's yours and Michael's," Hardcastle grinned. "You made any plans?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have," Cindy nodded. "I've talked to Michael, and we've decided to put some money into the Westwood Nursing Home. It really is a beautiful place, and we want the remaining patients to be happy there." Meeting Hardcastle's soft gaze, she smiled, "It was a wonderful thing you did recommending Beth Tyler and Steve Mitchum as co-administrators of the home until someone can be found to hold the position permanently."

"Yeah, it was wonderful," McCormick agreed. "I gotta go by there sometime soon, and talk to Mitchum. From one ex-con to another, I owe that guy an apology."

"Misjudged the boy simply because he'd been in prison, huh?" Hardcastle teased.

McCormick turned scarlet. "Yeah, something like that," he mumbled.

"Considering the circumstances, I'd say it was understandable," Hardcastle returned generously. Looking across the lawn, he groaned, "Here comes Judge Braden with a Cheshire cat smile spread all over her face." Leaning across Cindy, he muttered, "Kid, is it my imagination, or have we been getting some strange looks around here today?"



"You noticed it, too, huh?" McCormick whispered, his eye on the approaching judge. "These people act like they know something we don't."

They rose simultaneously as the member of Hardcastle's regular Thursday night poker game held out her hands to them. "Well, and how are our knights in shining armor?" Kissing McCormick's cheek, she teased, "When do I get my night on the town, Handsome?"

"You name the day and the time, and I'll be there an hour early," McCormick returned with a grin.

Stepping back, Braden looked at each of them and shook her head. "I still can't believe it. The evidence was all there, and yet none of us ever guessed." Gripping McCormick's wrist, she motioned with her head towards Hardcastle. "You have any idea how long I've been after that man? And now I find out someone else beat me to it a long time ago." She flashed Hardcastle a mischievous smile. "You wouldn't want to tell me

who the lucky lady was, would you? Was she anyone I know?"

Hardcastle stared at her in confusion. "Maddie, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Of course, you do, sweetie. I didn't know you had it in you." She glanced at McCormick and added meaningfully. "But it's quite obvious you did."

"Maddie--"

"Sssh, that's okay," Braden interrupted. "I won't tell a living soul." She started to walk away, throwing back over her shoulder, "I don't have to. Everyone already knows."

Hardcastle stared at the departing judge, then whirling around, put his hands against McCormick's back and gave him a shove. "That's it, kid, we're goin' home. I stay here any longer, I'll go nuts."

"I'm with you," McCormick agreed fervently. Turning to Cindy, he offered his apologies. "Hate to eat and run, but I've gotta get back to my school work, and the judge has gotta get back to his John Wayne and popcorn."

Cindy smiled. "I understand. I wouldn't have put you through this if I had known it was going to be so embarrassing for you. I can't imagine how everyone found out."

Hardcastle threw up his hands. "Damn! Now she's doin' it!" He was suddenly slapped hard on the back and wheeled around, coming face to chest with Myron Cohen, an ex-cop and old friend who towered over everyone at the party.

Offering an enormous hand, Cohen flashed a grin. "Congratulations, Milt, you sly ol' dog." Grabbing a startled McCormick, he pulled him into a bearhug. "Shoulda guessed the first time I laid eyes on ya, kid."

"My arm! My arm!" McCormick's muffled protests were lost against the broad expanse of chest.

Releasing him at last, Cohen stepped back. "Yep, yep, should've known. Same eyes, same stubborn as a jackass approach to everything. What's the old sayin'? 'Two peas in a pod'? 'Like father, like son'?"

Hardcastle's eyes widened. "Like father, like ..." he repeated slowly. "Myron, what the hell're you talkin' about?"

"Sorry, Milt, but it's not a secret anymore," Cohen replied. "Everybody here knows."

"Knows what?" Hardcastle bellowed, finally losing patience.

"Why, that McCormick's your son."

"What!!"

Cohen punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Love that story you handed out, Milt--the old 'rehabilitate the ex-con' tale. No wonder it's taken over four years." He shrugged. "Know what they always say, though--the truth comes out in the end."

Hearing chuckling behind him, Hardcastle wheeled around angrily. "McCormick!"

Mark backed away, holding up his hands. "I never said a word, Judge--honest."

His chuckling turned into laughter, and Hardcastle roared. "This isn't funny! My reputation is at stake here!"

McCormick tried to get his breath. "You're right, Judge. It's not funny--it's hysterical!"

"McCormick!" Noticing the small group of people gathering around them, Hardcastle turned scarlet. "Look, people, the kid is not my son."

Cohen grinned. "Yeah, that's what Michael Jackson said."

That comment sent McCormick into fresh peals of laughter, and with an unintelligible roar, Hardcastle grabbed his arm, "You just wait till I get you home!"

Still laughing, McCormick draped an arm around Hardcastle's shoulder, and winked at their audience. "What can I say? He's hard to live with, but I love 'im, anyway. Right...Dad?"