

## C H A P T E R   E I G H T

After a wait of more than thirty minutes, the two men were shown into the office of Perry Dandridge, assistant director of the Department for Human Resources for the County of Los Angeles, an impressive title that seemed too heavy for the lean shoulders of the young man rising from behind his cluttered desk to greet them.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I'm Perry Dandridge."

Hardcastle shook the offered hand and nodded, "Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, and this is my associate, Mark McCormick."

"Mr. McCormick."

Shaking hands with him, Dandridge gestured to two seats in front of the desk and returned to his own. "Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

"We're here to report abuse of the patients at the Westwood Nursing Home," Hardcastle began, and in a cold, concise voice, related the facts, including their break-in the night before, and a full description of Harry's condition.

Dandridge said nothing during the narrative, only the frown on his face proof that he was even listening. When Hardcastle wrapped it up with a detailed account of Caldwell's attack on McCormick at the funeral service, Dandridge leaned over, slapping a button on his telephone. "Dorothy, call up the Westwood Nursing Home file on the computer."

Turning in his chair to the computer on the console behind him, Dandridge keyed in a command, then waited. In seconds tiny green letters began chasing each other across the screen, and he leaned forward, his eyes following the readout, and his frown deepening.

McCormick threw Hardcastle a questioning look, and the judge shrugged. They continued to wait patiently as Dandridge scanned three pages of statistics, then leaving the display on the screen, turned back to them with a sigh. "Something is definitely wrong here, gentlemen, but I'm afraid it's going to take a full-scale investigation to find out exactly what's going on."

Hardcastle leaned forward. "Just what did you find in that computer?"

Dandridge hesitated. "Well, we usually don't discuss matters like this outside the department, that is, except with the police, of course."

Hardcastle flashed an engaging smile. "I can understand that, Perry, but you see, in this particular case, you'll turn over this information to the police, then a certain lieutenant will fill me in on what you found, so why don't we just eliminate the middle man, and you tell me directly."

Hardcastle could be persuasive when he wanted to be. McCormick had found that out a long time ago, and now Dandridge had discovered it as well. Meeting the judge's smile with one of his own, he nodded, "Since you are a retired judge," he looked uncertain a second then finished, "I suppose it would be all right." He swung his chair around again to the computer. "We have no record of any complaints filed against Westwood, but I couldn't help but notice their mortality rate is abnormally high. They've lost seventeen patients in the last six months, and the suspicious thing is, only eleven of them died from natural causes."

"What'd the other six die of?" McCormick asked.

Dandridge turned to face them. "Accidents." He let the word hang in the air a moment, then continued, "One fell in the bathroom, another choked to death, and so on, including your friend who supposedly hit his head on the bed railing."

Hardcastle slapped the desk. "Well, there you have it. That's enough suspicion to warrant an investigation, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Dandridge replied flatly.

"You don't look too happy about it," McCormick remarked in puzzlement.

Rising, Dandridge circled the desk, and sitting on the edge of it, leaned forward to speak in an earnest voice, "You both know all the complaints about government agencies - under-budgeted, miles and miles of red tape, employees not doing their jobs. Well, only part of that's true. We are under-budgeted and also understaffed, and there's a googleplex of rules and regulations that need to be followed."

"So what're you tryin' to tell us?" McCormick asked suspiciously.

"I'm saying that an investigation of this nature will require more than just a visit to the nursing home by one of our field agents," Dandridge explained. "It will also necessitate background checks on all the personnel to see if any of them have a record of abuse, and a background check on the patients and their families in an effort to determine if the abuse is actually

occurring in the nursing home, or if the patient was abused before being admitted."

"In other words, you're telling us this investigation will probably take awhile," McCormick remarked in a hard voice.

Dandridge looked away from him. "A month," he returned quietly, "maybe longer."

"What!" McCormick jumped to his feet. "Damn it! People may be dying in there right now! Or don't you care about that?"

Dandridge jerked his head up, brown eyes blazing. "Don't you dare accuse me of not caring! I get paid a lot of money for this job, but no amount of money in the world could make me stick with it if I didn't care about these people! We do a lot more than keep watch on nursing homes, and in the past five years, I've seen things that would make you go in the corner and retch!"

"I did last night!" McCormick shot back in a cold voice.

The two young men locked gazes, and Dandridge nodded, "Then you should understand, Mr. McCormick," he spoke softly. "We both care, and I can promise you I'll get to the bottom of this, but it's going to take time."

Hardcastle rose to his feet. "Then I'd say the best thing we can do right now is get outta your hair so you can get started." He gripped McCormick's arm. "C'mon, kid, let's go."

McCormick arched a puzzled eyebrow at the judge's complacency, then turned back to Dandridge. "Look, about what I said... I-uh-I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Dandridge smiled. "Believe me, I understand what you're feeling. I wouldn't have blown up at you like that if I wasn't feeling the same way."

Hardcastle pulled on McCormick's arm. "C'mon, c'mon."

"Judge," Dandridge stepped in front of them, "we have a lot of statistics and data in our computers, but there's one thing we're not allowed to enter."

"What's that?"

"Rumors."

Hardcastle's eyes narrowed. "Like what, for instance?"

"That the majority of Westwood's patients are placed there by a family member, and then abandoned," Dandridge related tersely. "The payment for their care and maintenance continues,

but rarely is the patient visited by family or friends. From what you've told me, that is apparently what Judge Caldwell's children did. If that's also true in the other cases, it explains why we've never received any complaints. Abandonment of that kind is not against the law, but it is a crime against humanity."

"You definitely got my vote there," Hardcastle scowled and opened the door. "We'll keep in touch," he promised. "You know where to find us if you need us for any statements."



McCormick waited until they were in the truck, then reaching over grabbed Hardcastle by the wrist, preventing him from inserting the key in the ignition. "Okay, Judge, out with it."

Hardcastle's eyes widened in surprise. "Out with what?"

"Don't hand me that 'I'm innocent as a newborn babe' routine," McCormick challenged. "I haven't lived with you for four years not to know when you got some harebrained scheme cookin' in that Arkansas skull of yours."

"It's not a harebrained scheme," Hardcastle protested calmly, "and we'll talk about it when we get home."

"We'll talk about it here."

Hardcastle jerked his wrist from the young man's grasp. "When you ever gonna learn to do what I tell you to?" he yelled.

"When you tell me to do something that won't get us both killed!" McCormick shouted back.

"Have I ever gotten us killed? Have I? Huh?" Starting the engine, Hardcastle slammed the truck into drive. "You're just over-reacting, McCormick. You always do that."

"I don't call self-preservation 'over-reacting'," McCormick hissed. "And the only reason you wanna go home to talk about this stupid plan of yours is because when I start complaining about it, you can just walk off and ignore me."

"Aw, do I ever ignore you?" Hardcastle sympathized.

"Yes, you do!" McCormick complained in a high voice.

"Well, you act like you're an old spinster and I'm one of your cats!" Hardcastle fired back, suddenly angry. "I don't have one foot in the grave, McCormick, and I'm not getting senile, so stop trying to handle me with kid gloves! Do that and I'll rip 'em off and wrap 'em around your damned neck!"

McCormick fell silent, leaning back in his seat and staring out the window at the road. He didn't blame the judge for his outburst--it was Hardcastle's way of covering his fear of his own mortality--but he was worried about the so-called plan that would no doubt cause both of them to end up in trouble as usual.

Hardcastle glanced at the young man out of the corner of his eye, opened his mouth to say something, then clamped it shut again. Several minutes later, he pulled into the drive, brought the truck to a grinding halt in front of the house, and climbed out, waiting for McCormick to join him. "All right, I'm sorry!" he yelled. "Are ya satisfied? Now quit givin' me that silent treatment. You know I hate it when you do that."

"I'm not giving you the silent treatment," McCormick denied quietly, "and I'm not angry at you."

"Well, I sure as hell am!" Hardcastle shot back, his voice softening as he apologized again, "Look, kid, I'm sorry. I shouldn't've blown up at you like that."

"Judge, it's okay," McCormick assured him, and leading the way into the house, he stopped in the den and announced, "Well, we're home."

"So?"

"So, tell me your plan," McCormick pressed.

Hardcastle turned away from him. "You're probably not gonna like it."

"Judge, I never like your plans but that doesn't keep you from trying to carry 'em out," he replied. "Now, c'mon," he coaxed,

"let's get this over with so we can get back to a normal life, if there is such a thing around you."

Hardcastle threw him a quick look, then settled behind his desk. "All right, here's the plan. You're my son, and--"

"I'm your what?" McCormick interrupted.

"My son," he repeated. "That part shouldn't be too hard for ya since you're always treating me like a kid does his old man. Now shut up and let me finish."

McCormick remained silent, not certain if Hardcastle's remark was a compliment or an insult. Deciding it was a mixture of both, he listened warily as the judge laid out the plan.

"Okay, you're my son, but you're tired of putting up with me because I've gotten senile, may even be getting Alzheimer's, so you put me in the Westwood Nursing Home," he explained. "Now, I won't be able to call you from there and you can't call me, because they might have the phones tapped, so you wait for three full days, then you come back with the excuse that you just wanna make sure everything's okay. If they follow their normal pattern, they'll tell you I'm asleep and can't be disturbed. So then you come back in another three days and insist that you gotta see me because you need the ol' man to sign some important papers. By that time I oughtta have all the evidence I need to get that damned place shut down. See? All very simple." Rising, he circled the desk. "Now, c'mon, let's get movin', McCormick. I've gotta get some things packed and you go put that business suit back on."

"Forget it," McCormick dropped to the sofa and folded his arms. "It's a simple plan, all right, thought up by a simple-minded judge, and if you think I'm gonna go along with it, then you're an even bigger jackass than I thought."

"I'm not gonna take any flack off you on this," Hardcastle warned. "You're gonna do like I tell ya."

McCormick rose to his feet, but shook his head stubbornly. "No way, Judge. I told you I'd never put you in a nursing home, and I'm not going to."

Reaching out, Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder. "I know you wouldn't, kid, but this is just pretend."

"No, it isn't!" McCormick shot back in a pleading tone. "Judge, you could get killed doing this, and that's about as real as it gets. I check you into that nursing home and they'll do the same thing to you that they did to Harry."

Hardcastle jerked his hand back in anger. "Damn it, McCormick! How many times have I gotta tell you I'm not an old

man! They start anything in there with me, they'll get it right back!"

"And then you'll blow your cover," McCormick pointed out, "and they'll kill you for sure. Besides, I don't like you playing a senile old man, and I sure as hell don't like me being the creepy son. Forget the plan. It's stupid, it stinks, and I'm not gonna do it. We'll just wait and let Dandridge finish his investigation and he can close down the place."

"More people can die before that happens!" Hardcastle yelled.

"Well, at least they won't be you!" McCormick shouted back. "Judge, have you forgotten they know you at that nursing home? You went there to visit Harry, remember?"

"So what?" Hardcastle shrugged. "I'm going in under my real name, anyway. That way if they do a background check, it'll all look legal. And in your case, you were with me twice when I tried to visit Harry, so they know your face too. That makes it even better."

"Yeah, but what if they do run a background check on you, and find out you don't have a living son," McCormick demanded.

Hardcastle frowned a moment, then his face brightened. "You're illegitimate."

"I know that!" McCormick returned angrily. "You don't need to remind me!"

"Look, kid, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that," Hardcastle apologized quickly, trying to smooth McCormick's ruffled feathers. "What I meant was you're my illegitimate son. I didn't find out about you till about seven years ago and you and I are the only two who know about it, so that's why you aren't in any of my records."

McCormick stared at the judge in amazement. "Talk about a facile liar!" he exclaimed, stepping back and studying Hardcastle with narrowed eyes. "Maybe that private investigator I hired that time steered me wrong about Sonny. Are you sure you weren't in Jersey in '53?"

"If I was, I wouldn't tell you," Hardcastle snapped. "Now when we get in there, don't forget to call me 'Dad', or you'll blow the whole thing!"

McCormick shook his head firmly. "No way, Judge. I'm not callin' you 'Dad'."

Hardcastle blinked, then a strange look crossed his

face. "Look, I know I'm not your real dad. You just call me that for this little undercover job."

"No!" McCormick protested louder. "I'm not callin' you 'Dad'!"

"I don't care what the hell you call me then!" Hardcastle fired back in a hurt tone. He started to whirl around, but McCormick grabbed his arm.

"Judge! Wait! You don't understand." His eyes rose to meet Hardcastle's. "You-uh-you know that Sonny and I have a-uh-an uneasy truce, but we're doin' okay. It's just-it's just that with the kind of relationship you and I have, if I called you Dad, it would be like-like I was belittling that relationship. I mean, the word just doesn't hold a good meaning for me. I don't know if it ever will."

A slow smile spread across Hardcastle's features. "It's okay, kid. I understand." Clearing his throat, he asked, "Now, are you gonna help me out on this, or not?"

"No!" McCormick replied determinedly. "And you're not gonna talk me into it, either!"

"Than I'll check myself into the place!" Hardcastle retorted and started for the door.

"You do that!" McCormick shouted after him. "If you wanna be the biggest jackass this side of the Mississippi, you go right ahead, but I'm not gonna help!"

"Good, because I don't need your help, anyway!" Hardcastle shouted.

"Fine!" McCormick yelled at the judge's departing form. "Because you're not gonna get it, you damned Arkansas mule! I wouldn't be your illegitimate son for all the money in the world, because then I'd have to admit to everyone that my father belongs in an insane asylum! You want a kid, you go out and rent one, because I'm not going to be your son!"



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"I'm his son," McCormick answered the nurse's question and when she resumed her typing, he threw Hardcastle a quick look of anger. The judge flashed a grin, then his face went dull again, causing McCormick to blink in startlement.

Hardcastle was playing his role to the hilt. Slumped in the wheelchair they had rented on their way to the nursing home, he raised his hand shakily and pleaded in a choked voice, "Don't leave me here all alone, son. Take me home - please. I promise I'll be good."

Caught offguard, McCormick had to cover his shock quickly by releasing his anger at Hardcastle for getting him into the present situation. "Shut up, old man. I told you this is for your own good," he hissed. "You know I can't take care of you at home. You embarrass me in front of company."

"I'll stay in my room, I swear," Hardcastle begged.

McCormick leaned forward and slapped the desk. "I've been answering questions for over an hour!" he yelled at the nurse. "Can't we get this over with? I've got things to do!"

"Of course," she smiled and rose to her feet. "Mr. Dejohn would like to talk to you again for just a few minutes, then that should be it."

"It's about time," McCormick stood and grasping the handles of the wheelchair, maneuvered it successfully through the door, then bumped into a chair.

"Not used to pushing that, are you?" Dejohn commented with a smile.

"No, and I don't plan to, either," McCormick snapped. "Now, what else do you need to know? I told your nurse I'm in a hurry. I didn't know this was going to take so long."

"This shouldn't take but a minute or so, Mr. McCormick." Dejohn waved him to a chair, then settled his enormous bulk in his own.

McCormick had taken an instant dislike to the administrator of the nursing home the moment he had been introduced, fighting a wave of disgust when he felt the fat fingers curl around his in a handshake. Dejohn was obviously trying to be ingratiating, but

McCormick could easily imagine him as the perpetrator of all sorts of crimes, including child molestation and abuse of the elderly. With those thoughts running through his head, it wasn't hard to be uncivil as he demanded, "Well, is there a problem?"

"Not at all," Dejohn assured him, and leafed through some papers on his desk. "There's just one or two things I need to clear up. We did a little background work on the judge here first to make certain that his finances were adequate for a prolonged stay in our facilities."

"I told you the old man was loaded," McCormick retorted.

"Yes, well, I think you can understand our need to ascertain that for ourselves," Dejohn smiled apologetically. "We also ran a check on Judge Hardcastle's personal background, family, friends, and the like, and we discovered something rather strange. Mr. McCormick, you did say you're the judge's son, did you not?"

McCormick nodded grimly.

"Well, that's rather odd," Dejohn continued, "because according to our records, Judge Hardcastle's only son was killed in Vietnam. We did, however, come across your name as an ex-convict whom the judge took into his home some four years ago."

McCormick leaned forward, a slight smile curling his lips. "And why do you suppose he did that?"

"I really couldn't say," Dejohn replied, then his eyes widened, "unless you're his --"

"Illegitimate son," McCormick finished. "I've been putting up with the old man for all those years, but he's become impossible since he had that light stroke a couple of weeks ago. He's just gotten embarrassing to have around. Always whining and complaining."

Dejohn made some notes on the chart in front of him. "Well, that clears up that part of it, Mr. McCormick, but since you hold no power of attorney, I can't help but wonder who will actually be paying the bills for the judge's stay here."

"He will," McCormick jerked his head towards the wheelchair. "He'll do anything I tell him to."

Dejohn rose slightly and leaned over the desk. "Is that true, Judge Hardcastle? Judge!"

Hardcastle jerked his head up, blinking rapidly. "Huh? What?"

McCormick tapped his head with his finger. "Losing it,"

he explained. "Don't worry. If I put a check in front of him, he'll sign it, believe me."

"Well, with that kind of assurance, Mr. McCormick, I'd say we just removed all obstacles to the judge's staying with us." Pushing a button on his phone, Dejohn spoke into it, "Nurse, will you show our new patient to his room?" Rising to his feet, he reached out a hand. "You're doing the right thing here, Mr. McCormick. Let me assure you, your father will get the best of care."

McCormick nodded slightly. "Good, because with my various interests, I won't be able to come by to see him much."

"That's quite all right," Dejohn assured him as they followed the nurse and the wheelchair into the corridor. "That's what we're here for--to make elderly people like the judge less of a burden on their families."

McCormick glanced at Hardcastle's bowed head, suddenly wanting nothing more right then than to grab the wheelchair and escape the nursing home at breakneck speed. Fighting the urge, he took a quick look at his watch. "Well, I've got to go. I'm running late," he managed in a fairly calm voice, and pivoting on his heel, started down the corridor.

He had taken less than five steps when a voice behind him called out in a pitiful tone, "I love you, son."

Forcing himself to continue walking, McCormick muttered angrily, "Act, hell! He did that on purpose! When I get him back home, I'm gonna kill him, I swear I am!"

By the time he reached the truck, his anger at Hardcastle was gone, replaced by a feeling of disgust as he recalled some of the things he had said to Dejohn. The judge knew it was only a performance, but that did nothing to alleviate McCormick's guilt, and slapping the steering wheel, he hissed, "Damn! Why'd I let him talk me into this?"

Sticking the key in the ignition, he paused and gazed out the side window at the nursing home, tears suddenly stinging his eyes, "Damn it, Judge! If anything happens to you, I'm never gonna forgive you...or me either," he added in a whisper.

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Hardcastle lay face-up on the bed in the small room, and pretended to be asleep but instead, peeked through one partially-closed eye as he listened intently to the conversation at the foot of the bed.

"You're not going to have Dr. Hanson check him?" the nurse asked in a concerned voice.

"There's no need, Miss Tyler," Dejohn snapped. "Physically, he's in good health except for his weight problem. You just follow that diet like I told you to."

"But I really don't think cornflakes and soda crackers are very nutritional," the nurse protested.

"Miss Tyler, how long have you been here?" Dejohn demanded.

"Uh--almost three weeks, sir."

"And you're already questioning my instructions?"

Hardcastle opened one eye and saw the young woman shaking her head vigorously. "No, sir, I'm not. It's just that --"

Dejohn put an arm around her shoulders. "Miss Tyler, let me assure you that I know what is best for our patients here," he almost purred. "Judge Hardcastle had stomach surgery about a month ago, and he still has trouble digesting food. So cornflakes or soda crackers in milk is just the prescription for him, I promise."

"I'm sure it is," she smiled. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dejohn, I didn't understand the situation."

"That's quite all right, my dear," Dejohn patted her arm and headed for the door. "You just stay here with Judge Hardcastle until he wakes up. Being in a new place, he may be a little disoriented."

Hardcastle laid motionless, patiently counting off seconds. When he reached a hundred and twenty, he stirred, moaning slightly. Opening his eyes, he looked around the room fearfully, and whimpered, "Where am I? What am I doing here?"

"It's all right, Judge. Everything's fine." The nurse pressed him back to the pillow gently, and smiled. "I'm your

nurse, Elizabeth Tyler. You can call me Beth."

Hardcastle saw her open gaze, and offered his hand. "Hi, Beth. I guess you already know me."

She nodded, a surprised look on her face as she felt his firm grip. "Uh, Mr.-Mr. DeJohn said you'll be with us for awhile," she stammered.

Hardcastle's face took on a look of anguish. "My son... I was too much of a bother to him," he mumbled hoarsely. "I found out about six years ago that I had an illegitimate son. I had to put him in prison for auto theft, then I used my connections to get him paroled two years later, and took him into my custody. I've given that boy everything, even paying for his law school, and this..." His voice cracked, "this is how he repays me."

Beth reached out to squeeze his arm. "I'm sorry, Judge. I'm sure your son really loves you, though."

"He's got a helluva way of showin' it," Hardcastle complained.

"Would you-would you like to go outside and get some fresh air?" she asked hesitantly, obviously trying to change the subject. "I can get a wheelchair."

Sitting up, Hardcastle slapped his legs. "Hell, girl, why do I need a wheelchair? These still work perfectly."

"I bet they do," Beth laughed softly, and handed him his slippers. "You know, you're not at all like I thought you would be," she added with a smile.

Hardcastle glanced up sharply. "And how's that?"

"Most of our patients sleep all the time," she explained. "They're very lethargic and have no life about them. You, Sir, have a spark."

Standing, Hardcastle took her arm under his elbow, and patted it, smiling, "That, my dear girl, is because I'm not as crazy as my son thinks. Oh, it comes and goes," he threw in quickly, "but I'm not in as bad a shape as he likes to pretend. He just wants me outta the house so he can have his wild parties and all."

"He doesn't sound like a very nice person," Beth commented in a hard voice.

"Oh, he's not," Hardcastle readily agreed. "The kid's good-looking and he knows it. Vain, greedy, hard-hearted..." He was enjoying himself at McCormick's expense. "Women seem to go for

that kind of stuff though, and they just fall all over him."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't," Beth returned emphatically. "I hate men like that."

"I bet you do, honey," Hardcastle grinned. Leaving the building, he led her to some wrought-iron chairs clustered under a shade tree, and dropped into one of them with a sigh. "The truth is, Beth, my son got on my nerves as much as I did his. I love 'im, but I don't like 'im, so I figure my coming here is best for both of us." He bowed his head, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I just couldn't stay where I'm not wanted."

Beth reached out quickly, squeezing his arm, "Judge, let's try to forget about that, all right? Let's talk about something else."

Hardcastle cleared his throat. "Yeah, you're right." Leaning back in his chair, he studied the building sprawled before them. "Tell me about this place, Beth. How many patients you got here?"

"Twenty-three at the moment," she replied, "and five staff members, including Mr. Dejohn. We're understaffed, but because of budget cuts, we can't afford to hire anyone else."

"Dejohn tell you that?"

She nodded. "It's not really that bad, though, because as I said, most of the patients sleep all the time. Once they're put in here, it's like they give up on life," she continued sadly. "Their family and friends rarely come to visit and it's as if they've been abandoned by the whole world. I try to talk to them, but they don't need a stranger; they need their loved ones. Of course, they're not loved ones or they would never have put them here in the first place," she added in a bitter tone.

"Some people don't have any choice," Hardcastle censored softly. "Some young folks have to put their mother or father in a nursing home only because they can't take care of 'em themselves. They don't wanna do it; they have to."

"I know that," Beth returned somewhat sharply, "and I wouldn't presume to pass judgment on those people."

Hardcastle studied her a moment and nodded. "I see. You're not talking about just any nursing home, are you? If I'm not mistaken, you've got a particular one in mind." Beth turned away from him, and the judge smiled, deciding not to press her any further at present. Instead, he reached out and squeezed her arm. "You really care about these people, don't you?"

"Maybe a little too much," she returned softly. "It

really hurts sometimes."

Hardcastle watched her face and smiled. He considered himself a good judge of people, and was convinced that this young woman beside him was exactly what she appeared to be. He decided to proceed slowly, however, and feel her out to see if she knew or had any suspicion of what was going on at the nursing home. Dejohn could well be handing her lies such as the one about his stomach surgery and the "special diet". He knew there could be only one explanation for that. As an accredited nursing home, Westwood was receiving funds from the state and federal government, as well as fees from the families, for the care and maintenance of their patients. He knew the fees alone were enough to feed the patients properly, so that meant only one thing--Dejohn had his hand in the till. He was no doubt getting rich while the people put in his charge suffered from lack of care and malnutrition.

His face hardened with lines of anger, and Beth reached out to touch his arm. "Judge, are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay," he grumbled, and scrutinized her face, debating on revealing his cover. It was still early, however, and with five more days yet to go, he decided to keep his eyes and ears open a while longer before giving away his plan.

## C H A P T E R   E L E V E N

Less than twenty-four hours had passed since Hardcastle had entered the nursing home, and McCormick was already going nuts. "We're a team--The Lone Ranger and Tonto," he muttered to the law books spread out on the desk in front of him. "But how the hell am I gonna give him any backup when he goes ridin' off alone?"

Turning back to his studies in an effort to distract his thoughts, he managed to get involved in pornography laws, until coming across one of Hardcastle's landmark decisions. The judge's name jumped out at him from the pages, and McCormick slammed the book shut, rising quickly to his feet. "Damn it! He's got no right putting me through this!" he complained. "What if I get killed or something going to the store? Nobody else knows he's in there!" He knew Hardcastle was quite capable of getting himself out of the nursing home, but the question was whether he would still be in the physical condition to do so.

McCormick tried eating lunch, but the memory of Caldwell's bruised face kept flashing in his mind like a harsh neon sign.





"God, I gotta talk to someone!" he muttered in desperation, and grabbing up the phone, he punched in a number and waited. "Frank! Hi, this is Mark. When you get off duty, can you come over? I need to talk to you. Oh yeah, you can bet something's wrong. The judge is making an ass of himself again."

In less than an hour, Harper walked into the den, his eyes widening when he saw McCormick's face. "You look like hell warmed over," he greeted. "Where's Milt?"

"In the Westwood Nursing Home." McCormick waved the lieutenant to a chair, and proceeded to fill him in on Hardcastle's scheme.

"And you went along with it?" Harper asked angrily. "Mark, where's your brains? You should've talked him outta it!"

"You ever known me to be able to talk the judge outta anything?" McCormick demanded. "I argued till I was blue in the face, told him it was a stupid plan that could get him killed, and I wasn't gonna be a part of it. He said if I didn't help, he'd just do it alone!" He threw up his hands in helplessness. "Other than hogtying the jackass and locking him in the garage, what else could I do?"

"Yeah, I know, Mark," Harper agreed softly, "and I'm sorry I yelled at you."

McCormick laughed mirthlessly. "You didn't say anything compared to what I've been saying to myself the past twenty-four hours. I tell you, Frank, if I'm not a loony tune by the time I'm forty, it's not because Hardcase didn't try. I'm tempted to go there right now and get him outta that place, but he'll kill me if I do. Worse'n that, he'll never forgive me. You know how Milt is when he gets on one of these Lone Ranger kicks. He takes the last three words of the Pledge of Allegiance dead serious--'justice for all'--and that Arkansas mule'll get himself killed tryin' to make it true."

Harper sighed. "Well, all we can do is just wait and let him play out his hand."

"But what if they do something to him?" Unable to sit still any longer, McCormick jumped to his feet. "Damn it! I can't get Harry Caldwell outta my mind, the way his face looked. When I saw it, I got sick; I mean 'make a dash for the john and lose your dinner' sick." Running his hand through his hair, he groaned. "God, if something like that happens to the judge, I-I don't know what I'll do."

Harper rose slowly to his feet and squeezed McCormick's shoulder. "I know it's hard, Mark, but this was his decision. Milt knew what he was getting into, so all we can do is wait and

see how it turns out."

"Well, I can tell you one thing," McCormick shook an angry finger at Harper. "I'm not waiting no six days to get the judge outta there. I'll hold off the three days like he told me to, then I'm going in and if they refuse to let me see him, I'm gonna take the place apart and no one's gonna stop me, including Hardcase! I don't care if he's got any evidence against 'em or not--he's coming home if I haveta drag him!"

## C H A P T E R   T W E L V E

More than forty-eight hours had passed and nothing was cookin'! The only two people who had come into his room were Beth and a huge, muscular guy by the name of Mason. Apparently one of his jobs was to deliver the meals, and he did so with obvious disregard for the patients, in Hardcastle's case, leaving the tray on the table at the foot of his bed, then returning to get it only fifteen minutes later.

Two days of cornflakes, soggy crackers and a morning's addition of brown mush had Hardcastle wishing for McCormick... toting a jumbo pizza with sausage, double-cheese and all the other junk he liked on top. His stomach growled and he decided now was the time to make a move, while he was still strong enough to do so. A wheel that didn't squeak was never greased, or in this case, a docile patient was apparently not abused.

Making plans to remedy that situation, he was sitting on the foot of the bed that evening when Mason made an appearance. The orderly slammed the tray of food down in front of him and without a word, headed for the door.

"Cornflakes again?" Hardcastle complained loudly, and deliberately shoved the tray off the table. It hit the floor with a crash, cereal flying in all directions.

Mason whirled around, glanced angrily at the mess, then grabbed Hardcastle by the front of his pajama shirt. "What the hell you think you're doin'?"

"I want some decent food!" Hardcastle demanded. "I'm getting sick of this stuff!"

"Oh, you are, are ya?" Mason sneered. "Well, old man, you're gonna clean that up--the hard way!" Gripping Hardcastle behind the neck, he pushed his head down. "Get down there and lick it up!" he yelled harshly.

"Like hell I will!" Hardcastle shouted.

Mason backhanded him, the blow causing Hardcastle's eyes to water. Tasting blood in his mouth, he remained erect on the bed, glaring at the orderly with eyes of steel.

"Oh, so you're one of those tough ol' birds, huh?" Mason snarled. "Well, it's gonna be a pleasure gettin' you in line." He grabbed Hardcastle by the arm. "Now, get down there and lick

that up!"

Jerking away from him, Hardcastle jumped to his feet. "No, I won't do it!" he yelled, determined to stay in character. Every instinct screamed 'fight back', but he couldn't risk it. He needed more evidence than just the tyrannical actions of one man to close down the place. Dejohn could easily deny knowledge of Mason's abuse and the attendant would go to prison, leaving the head of the nursing home free to continue his corrupt activities.

Backing away from the orderly, he forced a hint of fear into his voice. "I want some decent food. This stuff isn't fit for hogs."

"Oh yeah! Well, you're gonna eat it, old man!" Mason shouted and hit him again, this time with a fist to the jaw that sent Hardcastle reeling into the wall. He slid down it, collapsing to his knees in the corner. His mind, blurred by pain, was still alert, and pretending to be more injured than he was, he huddled in the corner, arms raised to protect his head as he begged piteously, "Don't hit me anymore. I'll do whatever you want."

Grabbing the judge by the back of his collar, Mason dragged him across the floor to the spilled cornflakes. "Lick it up!" he demanded. Hardcastle hesitated and Mason shoved his head down within inches of the floor. "I said, lick it up!"

A fury like Hardcastle had rarely known consumed his body, but he clamped down hard on it, pushing thoughts of Harry and the other twenty-three patients in the home to the front of his mind.

He began licking up the mess, thankful the bowl had been plastic, leaving no shards of glass among the soggy flakes.

At last Mason grabbed his arm and jerked him to his feet. "Now, get in bed," he snarled, "and I don't wanna hear a peep outta you!"

Hardcastle did as he was told, waiting until the orderly left the room before sitting. Angry, he swung his legs to the floor, rubbing his injured jaw. The last time he'd felt this consuming fury was when he had almost killed a crazed mountain man in the wilds of Oregon. McCormick had stopped him then, but the kid wasn't here now, and Hardcastle knew he had to control his anger, so he could plan his next move.

The shame was not so easily pushed aside. He had been treated like a dog, and the degrading act he had been forced to do, despite his reasons for submission, had put a dent in his pride. His hands clenched at his side as he relished the thought of them closing around Mason's neck.

Having now seen the man in action, he was certain the big

man was the cause of Harry's death, and the deaths of the other five patients Dandridge had told them about as well. He probably had not set out to deliberately kill any of them, but Mason was sadistic, obviously taking pleasure in humiliating and abusing people weaker than himself. He literally did not pull his punches, and Hardcastle knew that anyone in poorer physical condition than himself could have easily been killed by that first blow.

But the physical abuse was only a part of the problem. His bed and bathroom linens had not been changed since his arrival, and the clothing Beth had picked up two days before to be laundered, had yet to be returned. That, added to the quality of the food being served and the fact Hanson had not bothered to give him an examination, a requirement for all nursing homes, convinced Hardcastle that putting Dejohn out of business was going to be a pleasure.

To do that, he had to have evidence to present in court, proof of Dejohn's guilt that could not be argued by any fast-talking lawyer. What he needed was to get his hands on the books of the nursing home.

He chewed on his lower lip and frowned. McCormick could get those books, but he would be damned if he'd ask him to do it. He should never have had McCormick break into the funeral home, and would not have done so if he hadn't been desperate. Once was enough though. He couldn't let his young friend lay his law career on the line for this. Even more important, if McCormick were caught in the process of stealing the books, he might never see the inside of a police station, particularly if Dejohn was working hand in hand with Mason.

That meant breaking into Dejohn's office himself, and while Hardcastle knew he was capable, he also knew he was an amateur when compared to Mark's skill as a black bag artist. But he'd watched his young friend work, and had picked up some useful information. Stolen books wouldn't be admissible in court, but if they contained any incriminating evidence, he'd quietly return them, then get a subpoena for their legal confiscation.

Sliding off the bed, he padded into the bathroom, and flicking on the light, studied his face in the mirror. Touching his swollen jaw gingerly, he winced. "Damn! It's a good thing McCormick's not gonna see me tomorrow. He'd blow everything just to get me out of here."

Beth had mentioned earlier that Dejohn frequently put in long hours at the home, and was in fact staying late that night to finish up inventory schedules. With that in mind, Hardcastle decided to forgo "borrowing" the books until the following night. "Might as well make good use of the time," he muttered to himself.

Wrapping a robe around him, he walked boldly into the

dimly-lit corridor. There was no one to question his presence in the hall that late at night, and Hardcastle continued towards the main area of the nursing home, keen eyes taking in every detail along the way. Dirty dishes sat on racks outside some of the rooms, the floor was cluttered with dirt, cigarette butts and other debris.

Moans came from behind several closed doors, and trying to turn deaf ears to the sounds, Hardcastle set his jaw in determination and continued on to the reception area which, in contrast to the rooms and hallway, was spotlessly clean.

Checking names on the doors, Hardcastle found the one he was interested in--Dr. Philip Hanson. Trying the door and finding it unlocked, he glanced around the corridor quickly, then slipped into the room. Feeling for the light switch, he flicked it on and scowled. He was in an "examination room". A low, padded table with a glass-doored bookcase behind it stood at one end, a scarred wooden desk at the other. The rest of the room was empty.

Checking out the desk first, he found a scratch pad and a bottle of whiskey with a chipped glass. A search of the other drawers proved fruitless, and moving to the bookcase, Hardcastle quickly examined the contents, his anger deepening. "How the hell're they gonna treat sick people with only antacids and tranquilizers?" he muttered.

Hearing the door click behind him, he fought the urge to whirl around. Reaching, instead, for a bottle of antacid, he pretended to read the label as a nasal voice demanded, "Who're you, and what the hell're you doin' in here?"

He turned, his eyes widening in carefully controlled surprise. "You Doc Hanson?"

The tall, emaciated man nodded once. "I'm only gonna ask you one more time--who are you and what're you doin' messin' around in here?"

"Name's Milt Hardcastle." The judge answered readily. Rubbing his stomach he held up the antacid. "I've got a touch of indigestion and thought maybe you had something I could take for it." He tensed as Hanson moved closer, eyeing the bruises on his face.

"Looks like more'n indigestion to me."

Turning away from the heavy stench of whiskey on the doctor's breath, Hardcastle smiled weakly. "I-uh-I ran into a wall."

"That's what they all say," Hanson sighed and nodded. "Go on. Take that stuff and get outta here."

Hardcastle beat a hasty retreat from the office, thanking his lucky stars that Hanson was either too drunk or too apathetic to question his story.

The building was quiet as he made his way back through the corridors, but only one room away from his own, he froze when the door opposite him swung open. Caught with no place to hide, he immediately assumed a shuffling, slump-shouldered gait, one hand against the wall as if to support himself as he walked. He felt fingers bite into his arm and was jerked around roughly, coming face to face with Mason.

"What the hell're you doin' outta your room?" the attendant demanded.

"I, uh, had a stomach ache," Hardcastle 'explained' haltingly. "Thought the doctor might have somethin' for it."

"I don't care what the hell you wanted!" Mason shouted. "You're not supposed to leave your room after lights-out! Now, get in there!" Gripping the judge's arm, he shoved him into the room.

"You're hurting me," Hardcastle whined, forcing a note of pleading into his voice. "I'll do what you say. Just-just don't hit me again."

Mason threw him against the bed and laughed harshly. "You're all alike. Gutless, spineless jellyfish. That's all ya are. You expect everyone to wait on ya, wipe your mouth when you drool and clean up after ya when you wet your pants. Well, not me, old man. You become a pain in the ass with me and I just put ya out!" Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a container of pills and popping the cap, shook four of them out in his hand. "Get a glass of water!" he demanded.

"But I-I don't want any pills," Hardcastle protested weakly.

"Now, just who the hell asked what you want?" Mason sneered, and backhanded the judge, a particularly painful blow because it landed on one the attendant had delivered earlier.

Knowing his eye would probably be swollen shut by morning, Hardcastle quickly decided to capitulate before his anger caused him to blow his cover. Pouring a glass of water with a hand trembling just enough for Mason to notice, he took the pills, then drained the glass.

"Now, get in bed!" Mason ordered.

Hardcastle did as he was told, jerking sharply when he felt something slap across his legs.

Mason looked up, a harsh grin curling his lips.  
"Restraints, old man. Just in case you wake up before I'm ready."

Hardcastle forced himself to remain passive as his lower limbs were secured to the bed. Every muscle in his body was crying out in protest, but Harry's bruised, bloated face was an ever-present shadow in his mind. He had enough evidence to put Mason and the doctor away, but Dejohn would still be running the home, starving the patients and treating them like the sub-human beings. He had to wait. With every ounce of willpower he possessed, Hardcastle fought against striking out when Mason tightened the strap around his left arm. The right one was then secured in place, and he resisted a sigh of relief.

"There. Now, let's see ya try to cause any trouble," Mason sneered.

Hardcastle carefully kept all emotion from his face until the attendant left the room, then turned his head in the darkness, a floodlight shining through the window hitting his eyes and causing them to gleam like a polished gun barrel. "You and me, Mason," he muttered softly. "That's a promise."



C H A P T E R   T H I R T E E N

"H'ello."

The sleepy voice caused a pang of regret in McCormick, and he hurried to apologize, "Uh-Frank, this is Mark. I'm really sorry about wakin' ya up."

"Yeah, well, I always get up and answer the phone at one-thirty in the morning," Harper sighed. "You need something, Mark, or are ya just lonely?"

"Both," McCormick admitted. "Listen, can you call down to the station and have someone help me get some information from the police computers?"

Harper's voice was suddenly alert. "What kind of information?"

"I finally talked Dandridge into giving me a list of the employees at the nursing home," McCormick explained. "I wanna run a check and see if any of 'em have a record."

"Right now?" Harper questioned in surprise.

"Yeah," McCormick returned grimly. "I'm goin' to see the judge in a few hours, and if anyone working at that home has a sheet on 'im, I wanna know about it before then."

"All right, you got it," Harper sighed. "I'll clear it with Brewster. Now, go away and let me get some sleep."

McCormick smiled at the receiver. "Thanks, Frank... I owe you one."

"Huh!" came the sleepy retort. "I'll put it on Milt's tab, along with the other fifty thousand favors you two owe me."

Hanging up the phone, McCormick smiled, grabbed his jacket, and headed out the door. Reaching the Coyote, he jumped in, and squealing the tires on takeoff, left a dual trail of rubber in his wake.

At the police station, he hung over Brewster's shoulder, much to the officer's discomfort, watching as name after name flashed onto the computer's CRT.

"There! That's the one!" McCormick suddenly exclaimed,

his finger stabbing the screen. "Arrested at the age of eighteen for mugging an old man and woman," he read aloud. "Convicted, spent four years in prison, paroled seven months ago. That's the guy who must be beatin' up on the patients."

"What about that Hanson?" Brewster questioned and called up the doctor's record again. "Sued for malpractice three years ago. Not enough evidence to convict him, but it looks like his private practice fell apart after that."

McCormick frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think he's a likely candidate for elderly abuse. The man's only two years younger'n Hardcastle. If Dejohn's padding his pockets like I suspect, though, I'll bet ya twenty Hanson's an accomplice."

Brewster shook his head. "No bet."

McCormick began pacing the floor, chewing absentmindedly on his thumbnail. "And you haven't got anything on Dejohn?" he asked again.

Brewster entered the name a second time. "Slick as a whistle, Mark. No priors, no outstanding warrants, no aliases."

"That we know of," McCormick interrupted.

Glancing up, Brewster nodded grimly.

"Well, just because he doesn't have a record doesn't mean he wears a white hat," McCormick decided. "I can smell a crook a mile away, and that pale face, tub of lard stinks to high heaven."

Brewster smiled. "You sound just like the judge."

"Thanks," McCormick returned immediately, then broke into a grin. "But don't tell Hardcase I took that as a compliment." Glancing at his watch, he started for the door. "Listen, thanks for the help, but I gotta run. I gotta get home, shave, and get into my 'creepy son' clothes. I wanna be over at that nursing home when visiting hours start."

## C H A P T E R   F O U R T E E N

"What do you mean, I can't see him?" McCormick demanded.

"I didn't say you couldn't," Dejohn corrected quickly. "I just don't think it would be wise, not today, anyway. You see, your father had a-uh-a slight accident."

McCormick stiffened, forcing himself to remain calm. "What-what kind of accident?"

"Oh, nothing serious," Dejohn assured him. "He merely fell out of bed last night. No broken bones, but he does have a few bruises. The fall upset him quite a bit, so the doctor ordered a sedative. Your father's resting peacefully, and we're keeping an eye on him, I can promise you."

McCormick released his breath slowly, relief causing his legs to feel weak. Leaning casually against the wall, he nodded. "That's good, but I've got to see the ol' man. I have some papers that have to be signed by him this morning. I need them for a meeting in less than an hour, so I'm just going to have to wake him."

"I really don't think that would be wise," Dejohn hedged.

McCormick grabbed Dejohn's lapel, jerking the larger man to within inches of his nose. "You either let me go in and get these papers signed, or I check the ol' man outta this joint right now! You got that?"

"As you wish," Dejohn capitulated. "Perhaps you can arouse your father enough to guide his hand on the paper." McCormick released him and the administrator stepped back quickly, straightening his tie. "Uh, Miss Tyler, would you show Mr. McCormick to his father's room."

McCormick was vaguely aware the nurse who stepped beside him was pretty, but he had more important things on his mind. He was startled, however, when he turned to her and saw a look of undisguised contempt twisting the feminine features.

"This way, please," she indicated coldly, and started down the hall.

Catching up with her, he asked in a light tone, "Are you this friendly with all your visitors?"

"Only those I don't like," she snapped, "and I don't like you." Stopping, she whirled around to face him, her dark eyes narrowing with hatred. "You're nothing but a parasite living off your father's hard-earned money! You've made his life miserable for years, and only visit when you want something from him! Well, other women may go for your good looks, mister, but I think you're a cold-hearted bastard! I may lose my job for saying that, but I don't care anymore." She paused to catch her breath, then her voice lowered ominously. "I'll tell you something else, Mr. McCormick. If there's any love at all for your father in that black heart of yours, you'll get him out of here as soon as you can. Otherwise, he's going to die."

McCormick was struck speechless by her unexpected outburst, the warning twisting his insides into knots. He stared at her as she pointed out Hardcastle's room, then pivoted, stalking down the hall like an angry tigress.



"Judge!" he called out suspiciously, and swinging open the door, stepped into the dimly-lit room. "Judge?" This time the word was spoken in a fearful question as he moved closer to the motionless form on the bed. His eyes suddenly fell on the restraints. "What the hell!" A surge of anger caused his hands to shake as he fumbled for the fastener on the straps. "He's gonna pay for this!" he muttered. "I swear to God, Dejohn's gonna pay!" Glancing at Hardcastle's face, he froze, then reaching down, gently turned the judge's head towards him. "Oh my God!"

The bruises were obvious, even in the darkened room, and sucking in his breath sharply, McCormick groaned. "Oh God, why'd I let you talk me into this? They could've killed you and I-I..." His voice caught on a sob, and turning his attention back to the restraints, quickly unfastened the strap around Hardcastle's right arm, and reached over his body for the other one.

A hand shot up, grabbing McCormick's shirt. "Take it easy, kid," Hardcastle muttered softly in his ear. "I'm fine."

Limp with relief, McCormick almost collapsed on the judge, then drawing back slowly, his eyes glistened with tears as he demanded in a choked voice, "Are you sure you're all right? No bones broken? No concussion?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Hardcastle grumbled.

McCormick straightened. "Then why the hell'd you scare me to death like that?" he yelled angrily.

"I had to make sure no one else followed you into the room," Hardcastle retorted. "'Course if they had, you'd a blown the whole thing."

"Look, I don't give a damn about this little charade anymore!" McCormick shot back. Unfastening the other arm restraint, he freed the judge's legs. "I'm getting you outta here!"

"Whoa, now, hold on a minute." When McCormick started to help him up, Hardcastle grabbed the young man's shoulders, forcing him down on the edge of the bed. "Now, slow down, kid. Take a coupla deep breaths and just relax."

"No." McCormick shook his head vigorously. "You're not gonna change my mind, Judge. I'm getting you outta this place, and that's that. Good God, just look at you! Your eye's swollen almost shut, your jaw's swollen and bruised, and you were in restraints. No, I'm not leaving you here, not after this."

Hardcastle's grip on his shoulders tightened. "If you think I look bad, what about the other people in here?" he asked quietly.

"I don't care about them," McCormick returned forcefully.

"Oh yeah, you do," Hardcastle smiled. "If you didn't care about other people, I would've kicked you outta the house a long time ago."

"Judge, don't do this to me," McCormick pleaded. "I want you back home. I knew something like this was gonna happen. I haven't been able to sleep, and I've been driving Frank up the

walls. I'm going nuts worrying about you."

"I know you are, kid," Hardcastle spoke softly, "but you know damned well that I'm in better shape than most guys my age, and there's men and women in here older'n me. If this can happen to me, what do you think those poor people are goin' through?"

"Judge, that's not fair," McCormick groaned.

Hardcastle patted his arm. "I know, son, but I need you to let me do this one my way."

"When do I ever have a choice?" McCormick sighed and nodded reluctantly. "All right, I'm still Hardcastle's bad boy."

"Good!" the judge slapped the young man's shoulder and grinned. "Okay, let's get down to business. You can't stay long or they'll get suspicious."

McCormick shook his head in wonder. "You're awfully spry for a man who's been drugged. I came in here, expecting you to be out like a light. DeJohn handed me this crap about you falling outta bed, and said the doctor had to sedate you."

"Hanson?" Hardcastle shot back with contempt. "Ha! The guy's a drunk. I checked out his office last night, and all he's got in there are antacids and tranquilizers. Doesn't even keep any records on the patients." His face hardened with anger. "It was Mason, not Hanson, who gave me those damned sleeping pills."

McCormick blinked in puzzlement. "Then how come you aren't asleep?"

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," Hardcastle grinned.

The young man still looked confused.

"I didn't take the pills, stupid," Hardcastle added gruffly.

"Oh." McCormick shifted on the bed. "You say a guy named Mason gave 'em to you? You sure it wasn't Mitchum?"

"McCormick, I'm not getting senile," Hardcastle fired back. "I know names when I hear 'em. Mason's one of the attendants here. He's the son-of-a-bitch who beat me up. Man takes real pleasure in his work."

McCormick drew back in surprise. "Dandridge gave me a list of the fifteen employees here. There wasn't any Mason on it. A guy named Mitchum, though--"

"Wait a minute," Hardcastle interrupted. "Beth said there's only five people working here and that includes Dejohn."

"Dandridge says fifteen," McCormick insisted. "All of 'em checked out except for one named Stephen Mitchum, who was convicted for assaulting two elderly people. He was eighteen at the time and served four years in the joint. Got paroled seven months ago."



"Can't be the same guy," Hardcastle shook his head. "Mason's between thirty-five and forty."

McCormick frowned. "Do you know anyone named Mitchum?"

"Haven't met him," Hardcastle replied. "Maybe I can find out something from Beth."

"Who's she?"

"Only good thing about this place," Hardcastle grinned. "Pretty little thing, only been working here about three weeks. She really cares about people."

"Yeah, I think I met her," McCormick winced, and cleared his throat. "Uh-Judge, just what exactly did you tell this Beth about me?"

"Oh, you know, the usual hype," Hardcastle shrugged innocently. "You can't stand your ol' man, you just want him outta the way so you can spend his money, stuff like that."

"Thanks a lot," McCormick groaned. "Now I'll be afraid to step outta this room. That woman hates me so much, she may be lurking out there in the hall, waiting to stick a knife in my back."

"Look who's complainin'," Hardcastle retorted. "What I wanna know is what you're doin' here today, anyway. You weren't supposed to insist upon seeing me for another three days."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," McCormick nodded. "But I got worried, so I changed the schedule."

"Well, you could've blown the whole thing," Hardcastle barked, then his voice softened. "But I'm glad you came, kid. Never thought I'd say this, but I've missed your ugly mug."

"I've missed yours, too," McCormick admitted wryly. "That house is like a mausoleum without you around yellin' at me."

"Just remember that the next time I want ya to do something," Hardcastle shot back, then fell silent, his face darkening.

Reaching out to touch his arm, McCormick asked in concern, "Judge? You all right?"

Hardcastle met the piercing blue eyes of his young friend, and scowled. "No, I'm not all right--I'm angry. Make that madder'n hell!" he amended. "Kid, you wouldn't believe what's going on in this place. Mason's abuse is only the tip of the iceberg. Here, look at my bed. The sheets haven't been changed since I got here. And you oughtta see the slop they try to pass off as food--soggy cornflakes and soda crackers in watery milk!"

McCormick's eyes widened in shock. "Good God! That's all you've had to eat?"

Hardcastle nodded. "And I've only been here three days. What about the other patients? If Mason doesn't kill 'em, they'll probably die of malnutrition. Damn!" he exploded. "No one deserves to be treated like that! Just because these people don't have many more sunsets doesn't mean they've checked out as human beings! You don't treat 'em like a piece of garbage that you just shove out in the alley, and wait for the Man upstairs to come pick up! It's not fair, McCormick, not for Harry or any of the others. They were probably decent, hard-working people who cared all their lives, and now when they need someone, the whole damned human race turns their back on 'em!"

"Not all of us," McCormick spoke quietly. "You haven't and neither have I. We'll give these people back their sunsets."



The anger left Hardcastle's face and his features softened. "Did I ever tell you you're one helluva kid?"

"Now, don't go sappy on me," McCormick retorted, his voice strangely hoarse. "I'll start thinking you're getting senile."

"Yeah, you're right," Hardcastle grinned and slapped the bed. "You'd better be gettin' the hell outta here, McCormick, but before you go, let me have your gadget."

The blue eyes widened. "My what?"

"Gadget, dohickey, whatever you wanna call it. That lock-pick tool you always carry with you." He held out his hand. "C'mon, give it to me."

"Why do you want it?" McCormick asked suspiciously.

"I'm gonna break into Dejohn's office tonight," Hardcastle replied. "We need proof that Dejohn's padding his pockets. To do that, I need to get my hands on his books."

"Steal 'em?" McCormick questioned in surprise. "Judge, you can't use evidence that's been illegally obtained."

Hardcastle snorted. "I don't need you quoting the law, McCormick. Besides, I didn't say I was gonna steal the books."

"All right," McCormick agreed, "but when it comes to a B and E, I'm the breaker, and you're the enterer."

"No way," Hardcastle shook his head firmly. "Frank was right. If you'd been caught breaking into that funeral home, your future as a lawyer would've been down the tubes. This job's even more dangerous'n that one. So don't argue with me; just hand over that lock-pick."

"Judge--"

"C'mon, c'mon," Hardcastle coaxed impatiently with his hand. "Don't make me get outta bed and take it from ya, kid."

Reaching into his pocket, McCormick withdrew the slender metal tool and handed it over with a sigh.

"Great," Hardcastle grinned. "Now, get outta here. Go home and get some sleep. Ya look like hell."