

THE GAME ISN'T OVER 'TIL IT'S OVER
By Hillary Tenzing

Not with a bang, but with a whimper, that's the way the world ends.

It seemed to be the small moments in a man's life, the ordinary ways extraordinary things came to him, that in the end brought him down. He knew those moments well. The boring familiarity of an annual check-up that, in less than a year, would end a wife's life. A phone call in the middle of a perfect Sunday afternoon that told you your son was gone.

How many times did one man have to see his world slip away?

Milton Hardcastle thought, that to be fair, he had seen his share of such anguished moments. Enough whimpers, for God's sake, let the whole thing end with a bang, and maybe the pain would be less.

But somebody had once said that life wasn't fair. Maybe he had said that himself; it sounded like the kind of thing he would say.

So no bang.

Just another quiet moment. Another killing moment.

With the way they had lived over the past several years, it was almost funny, if you stopped to think about it. How many bullets had they dodged? How many close calls had they had? He had lost count. But in the final analysis, he supposed, none of that mattered.

Dead was dead.

A bullet or a car crash could do the job, sure.

But sometimes it was a lot less dramatic than that.

Hardcastle decided to live it up just a little and have breakfast in the hotel room. He didn't indulge himself often in perks like that, the kind of thing that a man with his money might. But once in a while couldn't hurt.

It was a beautiful day, and breakfast on the small balcony that overlooked the seemingly perfect blue of the San Francisco Bay sounded like a nice idea.

And it was nice. The orange juice was freshly squeezed, not the frozen kind that McCormick usually served up. Frozen juice wasn't bad, but he liked to have all the lumps of ice gone, at least. Once he'd mentioned that, so the next morning the kid put it in the microwave. Hot orange juice got the day off to a real crummy start.

The rest of the meal lived up to the promise of the chilled fresh juice: eggs scrambled just so, crisp bacon that had been drained of all grease, toast that wasn't black around the edges.

Home cooking, unless he did it himself, wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

He would be glad to be getting home anyway.

The parole hearing for a crazy killer who had no business at all being out on the streets had been scheduled to last only one day. But various legal maneuvers by the creep's lawyer had kept things dragging on for three long days. But it was over now, and he had a noontime flight for home.

After breakfast he would pack, and then call McCormick to remind him about the time to be at the airport. Kid had a memory like a sieve sometimes.

Hardcastle was just swallowing the last of the coffee when somebody knocked at the door of the hotel room. He wiped his mouth with the linen napkin and went to answer.

When he saw who was standing in the hallway, he grimaced. "I'm done with Leroy Holt," he said threateningly. "No more talking to that damned parole board."

Callahan, who had spent the same three days trying to convince the system that Holt was a bomb just waiting to explode, shook his head. "It's not Holt I'm here about, Milt," he said.

Hardcastle stepped aside to let the tall detective into the room. They had been fleeting acquaintances over the years, who had come to know one another a little better over the hours spent sitting in the Federal Building. "Well, I'm afraid that the cleaning up of this city is your job," he said. "I've got my hands full with Southern California."

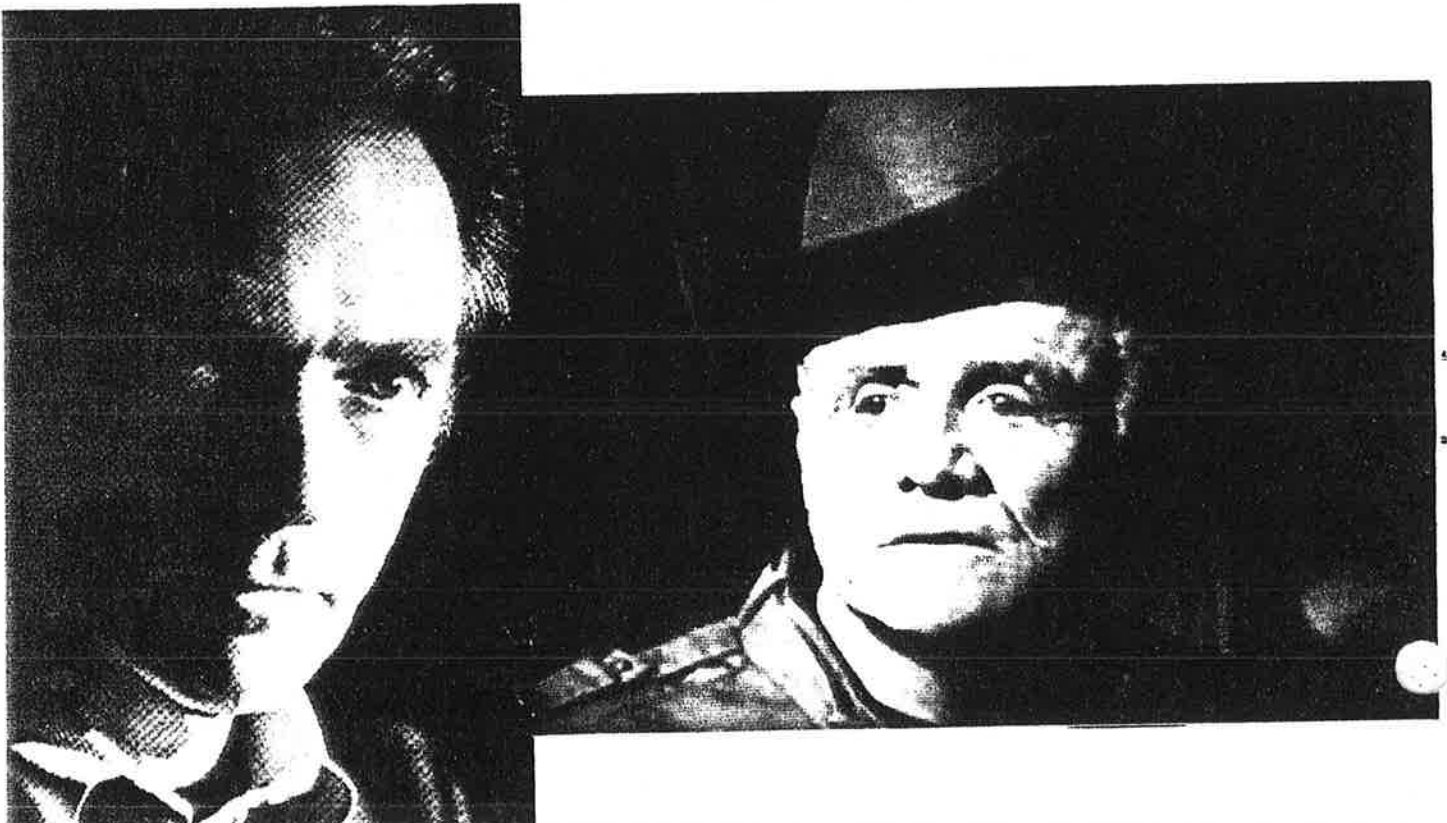
Callahan didn't smile at the small joke. He sat on the sofa and waited until Hardcastle was sitting as well. "I just got a call from Frank Harper," he said slowly. "He wanted me to come by and speak to you in person."

There was something in the lanky cop's demeanor that made the little hairs on the back of Hardcastle's neck begin to tingle. He tried to cover his sudden worry and settled back in the chair. "What's going on, Callahan?"

"Some bad news, I'm afraid. Harper said that your friend McCormick apparently had some kind of accident."

"Apparently had some kind of accident?" Hardcastle repeated. He gave Callahan a disgusted look. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Quit waltzing around and tell me what happened. Is McCormick hurt?"

Callahan had been a cop for a long time and bad news was his stock in trade. He looked right at Hardcastle, green gaze locking with blue. "McCormick is dead, Milt."



Hardcastle didn't blink. "Mark wasn't doing anything more dangerous than cleaning the rugs while I'm up here," he said with quiet logic. "How the hell does anybody get killed scrubbing carpets?"

Callahan looked relieved; probably he was glad that there wasn't going to be a big emotional scene for him to deal with. "Harper said that apparently McCormick -- Mark -- had gone in swimming with a girl, Melody Kramer."

Hardcastle shook his head. "Well, you see, there's some kind of mixup, then. We had to empty the pool, one of those damned fungus things, and we're not filling it till next week."

Callahan might have heard the hope in the words. He spoke with kindness. "They weren't using the pool, Milt. They were in the surf off your place. According to the Kramer girl, Mark swam out pretty far and then just disappeared. She finally called the local cops, but they couldn't find him. There was a real stiff undertow, Harper said. Unless McCormick was a damned good swimmer, he probably just got into trouble and couldn't get out."

Hardcastle stood and walked over to the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. He stared out at the remains of his breakfast. "Mark isn't that good in the water," he said. "Although he likes to think so." He turned around and looked at Callahan again. "I don't know this, what's the name, Melody Kramer."

"McCormick did, apparently." Callahan stood. "I'm damned sorry about this, Milt. From the way you've talked, I guess he was pretty close to you."

"Mark?" Hardcastle shrugged.

"You going to be okay? Anything I can do?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. I have a plane to catch. Gotta pack and then..." His voice dwindled off.

"How about a ride to the airport?"

Again he shook his head. "No, thanks, Callahan. You have work to do. I'll get a cab."

After another somewhat awkward moment, Callahan left.

The room was very quiet with him gone. Hardcastle hauled his over-nighter out of the closet and began to pack. He folded everything with great care.

The flight landed right on time. Hardcastle was the first person off. He held his small bag in one hand and shoved his way through the crowd waiting to meet the plane.

Frank Harper pushed himself away from the wall he'd been leaning against and came toward him. "Thought you'd be on this flight," he said.

"You should be a cop," Hardcastle muttered.

"Come on, I'm parked out here."

Neither man spoke again until they were in the car and pulling away from the curb. Hardcastle watched the traffic swirl around them. "What happened, Frank?" he asked quietly.

"Pretty much like I told Callahan. He gave you the story, right?"

"Nothing more to it than that?"

Frank blew the horn at a small yellow sports car trying to push into the traffic flow. "According to the Kramer girl, they had a couple of drinks before they decided to take their moonlight swim. Maybe the booze played a part in it. Maybe he got a cramp. We'll never know."

Hardcastle grunted. "Did they find the...did they find him?" Harper shook his head. "Not yet. Coroner said he'll...the body will probably wash up down the coast in about three days. With luck." Harper hesitated, then plowed ahead flatly. "Whatever's left."

"Who's the girl? I never heard of her."

"She's just a nomad. Met Mark earlier yesterday on the beach. He invited her up to the house for lunch...and things took off from there, I guess. Until late last night, when they decided to do a little skinny-dipping in the surf."

"Damn," Hardcastle said.

Harper glanced at him. "You okay, Milt?"

"Feels like somebody ran me over with a goddamned truck," he said in a low voice. Then he straightened. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

They stayed quiet the rest of the way to the house. Once there, Frank started to get out of the car, but Hardcastle stopped him. "Never mind," he said. "I don't need anyone here to hold my hand."

"I just thought--"

"Go away, Frank," Hardcastle said firmly.

"Well, I'll call later."

"Fine, fine, you do that."

Hardcastle stood on the sidewalk until the car was out of sight, then he turned and walked heavily into the house.

Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

The house was a mess, of course. Give McCormick a couple of days on his own and he could turn a relatively neat place into a shambles.

Moving slowly, Hardcastle began to tidy the den. The remains of a meal were scattered over the top of the coffee table. He gathered and crumpled used napkins, and pitched rock-hard pizza slices.

Pick up some girl on the beach and bring her here for frozen pizza that he'd burned in the oven. McCormick had a way with women, that was for sure.

Hardcastle shoved everything into the wastebasket and carried it into the kitchen. That room was a living memory of everything McCormick had eaten and drunk over the last three days.

Hardcastle felt dizzy all of a sudden. He braced himself against the counter until it passed. To hell with the kitchen. The mess would still be here later.

He walked out of the kitchen and across to the gatehouse.

Stepping through the door, Hardcastle felt the truth hit him like a solid blow to the gut.

McCormick was gone.

Mark was dead.

Yet again, death had unfairly ripped from him someone he cared for. After the first time, when his son died, he held on, because there was no choice. His wife needed him, needed his supposed strength. And then when she was gone, he still held on, using the job. The work was important; it gave him a reason to keep going.

But now he had no wife. No job. Nothing.

Just a roomful of dirty clothes, week-old newspapers, and a hoard of snack food, apparently intended to ward off some kind of national disaster.

Hardcastle stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by the mess, and tried to think of one good reason why he ~~could~~ go on living.



It was that evening when he heard Frank Harper's voice calling him, but Hardcastle didn't answer. He just kept on with what he was doing.

After another minute, Frank appeared in the gatehouse, making his way through the jungle of cardboard boxes that were stacked everywhere. "Milt," he said hesitantly.

"Frank."

"You've been busy."

"Just clearing out the junk."

"Mark's things?"

"What else?"

Harper picked up a battered tennis shoe and dropped it into a box. "This could have waited."

"No time like the present."

Harper slid one hip onto a taped box and crossed his arms. "So what're you going to do with it all?"

"Call the Salvation Army, maybe." Hardcastle folded a denim vest and shoved it away. "It did occur to me that maybe I should just dump the whole load into the empty pool and set fire to it. Like that old Gary Cooper movie. Beau Geste and the Viking funeral."

Frank was quiet, gnawing on his lower lip for a moment. Then he said, "You're not going funny on me, are you, Milt? You're not gonna let this whole damned thing flip you out?"

"Judge Milton C. Hardcastle? Mr. Rock of Gibraltar?" Hardcastle shook his head. "I'm still sane, far as I know, Frank."

"Good."

He picked up a framed photograph of McCormick in his racing suit, standing next to some car, grinning broadly as he held up a small trophy.

The size of the smile seemed out of proportion to that of the prize. Hardcastle looked at the picture in silence.

"Mark was okay," Frank said finally. "You really got him turned around."

"Yes, I did that, didn't I?" Hardcastle said mildly. He set the picture aside, not packing it away with the other things. "Frank, where can I find the girl? Kramer?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to know."

"She can't tell you anything we already haven't, Milt. Leave it be, why don't you."

"Leave it be? Frank, I need to understand what happened here last night."

"You know what happened," Frank said, his voice harsh. "Mark picked up some broad, they drank beer, then they were stupid enough to go swimming. He drowned." The cop stood and walked over until he was close enough to touch Hardcastle. But they didn't touch. "It was a stupid accident, Milt. A damned stupid way for anybody to die."

"That's not good enough!" Hardcastle shouted at him. Then he took a deep breath. "Maybe I just want to hear directly from her what happened. She was the last person to see Mark alive; she knows what he was like just before. Maybe I need to hear that."

"It's only going to hurt more, damnit."

Hardcastle smiled at him. "Frank, the pain is all I can feel right now. I have to keep hurting awhile. He deserves that much. Besides, the pain lets me know I'm still alive."

Although he was obviously still reluctant, Frank nevertheless gave him the address of a boarding house in Venice where the Kramer woman was staying. The cop lingered a little longer, but when it became clear that there was nothing more he could do for Hardcastle -- nothing more that Hardcastle would allow to be done for him -- he left.

The moon was high in the sky and the light it cast so bright that it was almost like daytime on the beach. The scene was so beautiful that it made Hardcastle pause for a time to admire it.

This must have been what it was like the night before. A place like this, bathed in the silvery moonglow, could tempt anyone to a little foolishness. A beer or two or three and then a swim with a pretty girl. He could understand that.

What he couldn't understand was how that could get a young man killed. It made no more sense than a random bullet in a dirty jungle war, or a random growth that invaded a woman's body.

Hardcastle sank to his knees in the sand. This was the place they had come to mourn the loss of a son and where he had come to grieve over a wife. He waited for the same exorcism now: let the grief wash away the pain.

He stayed there a very long time, but there were no tears, there was no rush of grief to wash away the pain. It stayed, a hard cold lump in the center of his being.

"Mark," he said aloud at last. "Why the hell did you have to do this? Why did you have to die?" He was stunned at the sudden anger that filled him. Who was the anger directed at? Mark?

There was no sound except for the crash of the waves on the beach. Finally he stood and walked slowly back up the hill. It was hard for an old man to keep his footing in the sand.

He slept that night in the gatehouse, surrounded by the cardboard boxes that held the sum total of Mark McCormick's life. That was all he had left behind. Except for the damned Coyote, of course.

And one friend.



The shabby boarding house sat very near the water, the peeling paint of its facade clearly announcing its station in the life of the community. Hardcastle parked the truck in front of the house and got out. A wino on the curb watched him warily.

He stepped into the hallway, where a woman was haphazardly dusting the bannister. "Melody Kramer," Hardcastle said without any preliminary pleasantries.

"She's in 203," was the equally curt reply.

He nodded and started climbing the steps. Funny, he'd always had a lot of energy. But it all seemed to have deserted him now. Everything was such an effort.

He had to knock twice before the door of 203 was opened. The girl standing there looked about Mark's age, what Mark's age had been, and he supposed she was pretty enough, in a hard, brassy sort of way. Did anybody say that about women anymore? Brassy. It made him think of the Forties and cheap bars.

If Mark had been given a choice, Hardcastle didn't think that he would have chosen to spend his last hours with the hard-eyed Melody Kramer.

"Yeah?" Kramer said. "You one of those religious nuts? I keep telling you guys I'm not into that God shit. Go peddle your message someplace else."

He put his hand out in time to stop the door from closing in his face. "I'm Milton Hardcastle," he said. "And I'm not here to talk about God. I want to talk about Mark McCormick."

She leaned against the wall. "Christ, the cops kept me talking about him all night. It's a real shame what happened. I mean, we just wanted to have a little fun, you know?"

"Could I come in?"

She hesitated, glancing around the hall, then stepped aside to let him enter. "I don't know what else I can tell you, mister. He just went out too far and drowned."

Hardcastle tried to find a place to sit, but the room was cluttered with clothes and magazines. He finally perched on the arm of the sofa. "Is that all?"

"What else could there be?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked."

She ignited a cigarette, staring at him through the smoke. "You the old guy he lived with?"

"Yes, I'm the old guy."

"Uh-huh." She swept some magazines to the floor and sat on the chair.

Hardcastle tried to figure out the best way to phrase the question. "Was he okay? Before it happened, I mean," he finally said lamely.

"He was fine, mister. Fine. Whaddaya think?"

Hardcastle realized bleakly that Frank had been right. This wasn't helping at all. The stupid woman would obviously have been of no aid at all to a drowning man. He stood. "Okay, I won't bother you anymore."

As he turned to go, the door of the room opened again and a man came in. Startled, apparently, by the sight of Hardcastle, he stopped short.

Kramer nudged Hardcastle toward the door. "Sorry I can't tell you any more about your friend. He seemed like a real nice guy."

"He was," Hardcastle said, then he was in the hallway and the door was closed.

Something about the man who'd come in struck a nerve in Hardcastle's memory. But so what? He was probably just another two-bit creep in a world full of them, and it wasn't his concern anymore. Not anymore.

Mark was dead and Hardcastle was getting out of the hero business. The fun was gone out of the game now.

Hardcastle was polishing the Coyote later when Frank showed up again. He kept rubbing the already shiny red surface as the cop approached, holding a manila envelope in one hand.

Hardcastle spoke first. "Frank, you think there should be some kind of service or something?" He stepped back to study his handiwork on the car. "Or should I wait until...until the body turns up?"

"Have a service, Milt. The water sometimes doesn't give back the dead."

"For a cop, that sounds pretty poetic, Frank."

Harper snorted. "Reason I came by, Milt, was that just out of curiosity I ran a make on that broad, Melody Kramer."

"Why?"

"Curious, like I said. Aren't you?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you'll get interested when you hear what I turned up." Hardcastle moved around to the other side of the Coyote and began to polish again. He didn't say anything.

Frank sighed and opened the envelope anyway. "Seems as if she isn't as lily pure as she seemed night before last. Miss Kramer did time."

"Lots of people do time. Mark did time. So what?"

"Okay, true. But there's more."

"Which you are probably going to tell me, right?"

Harper gazed at him. "You look like hell, Milt. You eating? Did you sleep at all?"

"I slept. For a while. And when I get hungry, I promise to eat." He didn't tell Frank about the dream that kept waking him up. It was too stupid and trite. Any high-priced shrink would have been able to tell him why he kept dreaming that Mark was trapped in some dark place, calling for him. That was the kind of thing grief did to a man. Grief and guilt, although Hardcastle couldn't figure out what the hell he had to feel guilty about.

Frank glanced at the paper in his hand. "Turns out she's married."

"Married women fool around these days."

"Her husband is interesting," Frank said, obviously determined to plow ahead no matter how uninterested his audience. "Remember George Poole?"

The name clicked into place with the face of the man he'd seen earlier. "Yeah. Poole. He showed up at the boarding house today when I was there."

"Yeah, well, he's gone now. So is the broad. I just came from there. We've got two outstanding warrants on Poole. One for killing a cop in Texas."

Hardcastle rubbed the car. "All this is supposed to mean something to me, I guess?"



"I thought it might. I thought maybe you'd like to get in on the hunt for Poole."

"You thought wrong," Hardcastle said.

"You're just giving up, is that it? All of a sudden, law and order don't matter anymore?"

"They matter, Frank, they matter. But I've done my bit. I'm tired."

"Maybe in a while you'll care again."

"I don't think so. We tried to do something, Frank, Mark and I."

"You did a lot."

"Okay. But let somebody else handle it now." He tossed the polishing rag away. "I'll let you know what I decide to do about a service, Frank."

"Okay, Milt."

He left Frank standing there as he walked into the house and closed the door.

The rented rug cleaning machine was still standing in the middle of the living room where Mark had left it. The rugs hadn't been cleaned. Typical. He'd probably planned on doing it just before rushing to the airport.

Hardcastle decided he might as well return the damned thing. That would be doing something, after all, it would constitute taking action of a sort. I act, therefore I am.

He loaded the machine into the back of the truck and drove out onto the PCH.

The store from which Mark had rented the damned thing was on Santa Monica Boulevard. Hardcastle parked at the side of the building and went inside. There was a late fee due on the rental, which he paid without complaint.

Afterwards, he sat in the truck, trying to decide what to do next. Nothing came to mind. Might as well go home. He shoved the key into the ignition, then paused. Across the street there was a biker bar and going into the place was one George Poole. Hardcastle thought for a moment, then got out of the truck and went back into the store.

The girl behind the counter didn't want to let him use the phone at first, but after he flashed the damned honorary shield at her, she changed her mind. He dialed police headquarters and asked for Frank. This really didn't signify getting involved, he told himself. He was only doing what anybody would have. A regular citizen would do this much; it certainly didn't take some damned Lone Ranger.

The Lone Ranger didn't exist anymore.

Without Tonto, he just couldn't do it.

When Hardcastle had given Frank the particulars, he hung up and left the store. He didn't bother to stay around long enough to watch the action, but headed for home.

So maybe Frank would get off his back now. He would think that good old Hardcase was back in action. The cop would decide that Milton Hardcastle was going to be all right after all.

Cops, even a good one like Frank Harper, didn't know everything.

As Hardcastle hit the PCH again, something occurred to him. Kind of a coincidence, wasn't it? Poole showing up at that particular bar? Right across the street from where Mark had rented the rug-scrubber?

But life was full of coincidences and Hardcastle was too tired to pursue the thought any farther.

A lot of old cops took the easy way out and ate their service revolvers. But he knew that wouldn't work for him.

Not if there was a chance of an afterlife where he would have to answer up to Mark for doing something that stupid.



The phone woke him out of his restless sleep before the dream had a chance to. Hardcastle fumbled for the receiver. "What?" he said.

"This Hardcastle?" a soft voice said.

"Yeah."

"This is Melody Kramer."

He sat up. "What the hell do you want?"

"I'm scared. The cops took George away."

"He's wanted for murder."

"I know that. But now they're looking for me, too, and I don't want to go back to jail. I can't stand it in there no more."

Hardcastle wished she would just go away and leave him alone. He was starting to like the dream better than real life, because in the dream, at least, Mark was alive. "I don't care about your problems, lady."

"He's trying to blame everything on me."

"So?"

She was quiet for a long moment, and Hardcastle started to hang up. "He didn't drown."

The words were faint, but clear. Hardcastle jerked the receiver back to his ear. "What did you say?"

"That guy McCormick didn't drown."

"But you said before--"

"I lied."

Hardcastle leaned back against the pillows. "What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

"I need you to promise to help me out with the cops. I won't get sent up for what George did."

He was gripping the phone so hard that his fingers cramped. "Tell me, damnit."

"Not over the phone. Meet me at Lucky's. You know it?"

He searched his memory, coming up with an all-night coffeeshop about twenty minutes away. "I'll be right there," he said.

Hardcastle dressed quickly and left the house. He didn't know, couldn't imagine, what was going on here, but he intended to find out. And if he discovered that Mark's death was something more than just a stupid accident, somebody would be made to pay.

That was the way it was done, in the hero game.

She was sitting in a back booth, nervously swallowing coffee. She barely looked up as Hardcastle slid in opposite her. "What happened to McCormick?" he said tightly.

Kramer pushed the coffee cup away and took a deep breath. "It all started that afternoon. George and I were coming out of the Snakepit -- the bar where they busted him today, you know?"

Hardcastle nodded, but didn't say anything.

"This guy George used to know in Texas comes walking up to us and they start to fight. George pulled his knife and the guy was all of a sudden dead. Just like that. Shit, we didn't know what to do. At first, we thought maybe nobody had seen us, because we were like back in the alley a little. But then George saw this one guy -- McCormick -- looking right at us. He was putting something in the back of his truck and he was just in the right place to see the whole thing." She stopped to light a cigarette.

Hardcastle was scarcely breathing.

Finally she went on. "George took off across the street before I could say anything. McCormick tried to get into the truck, but George caught him and put the knife to his neck. We all got into the truck and I drove us out to that fancy house."

Hardcastle was trying to understand the story she was telling him. God, only Mark would have the bad luck to stumble across something like that. The kid was born under an unlucky star, that was for damned sure.

Kramer inhaled deeply, then sent the smoke out in a stream. "George tied McCormick up and we spent the rest of the day there, trying to figure out what to do next. He was gonna just off the guy, you know, but we thought that maybe, 'cause of that big house, there might be some money to be made. Ransom or something, you know?" She shook her head slightly. "McCormick laughed at that. He said nobody would pay to get him back."

Name the price, Hardcastle thought. Aloud, he said, "What happened to Mark?"

She shrugged. "He was stupid and tried to get away. George cut him. Bad." She touched one hand to her side. "Right here." Her eyes flickered toward him. "I felt bad about that. He seemed okay, you know? But what could I do?"

Hardcastle felt tempted to slap her stupid face, to try and jar her into some awareness of what they had done. "And then? After Poole cut Mark?"



"We figured we better split. Nobody was gonna care about the guy in the alley, he was just a scumbag. But somebody might care about McCormick." She crushed out the cigarette. "And I guess you're the one, huh?"

"I'm the one."

"We cleaned up the blood. George wrapped McCormick up in a fancy rug from upstairs."

"He was dead?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. The bleeding had sort of stopped, but he sure wasn't moving or nothing."

Hardcastle hesitated before he spoke, not wanting his voice to reveal the sea of emotions inside. "What did you do with him?" he said at last.

"George took him in the truck and dumped him. Then he was supposed to come back for me. But the bastard didn't. It was a long time and he didn't come back. I got scared, so I decided to make up the story about McCormick drowning. It seemed like a good thing to do. So I did. I figured nobody could blame me. By the time George really did get back, it was too late, the beach was crawling with cops. He snuck the truck back where it belonged and split." She shuddered a little. "He was mad, when he found out what I'd done, but I don't care. Hell, if a girl doesn't look out for herself, who will? So we decided that the best thing to do was stick with the drowning story. Till now. I just know that bastard is giving me up to the cops."

Hardcastle spoke very quietly. "Where did he dump McCormick?"

She licked her lips. "Now, see, this is where we have to deal a little. If I tell you that, do you promise to help me out with the cops?"

He reached across the table and encircled her wrist with one hand. "If you don't tell me," he said, still in a soft voice, "I promise to hurt you a lot."

So, when push came to shove, this was the way the Honorable Milton C. Hardcastle upheld his precious law? By threatening scared, stupid women?

He didn't care.

She stared at him and evidently saw something in his face that frightened her. "There's an empty baitshop down on the beach."

"Where?"

She grabbed for a paper napkin and took a pencil from her purse. "Here," she said, drawing a crude map. "This is the place. So what about me and the cops?"

He stood, looking down at her. "You can go straight to hell for all I care," he said.

Hardcastle ran from the coffeeshop.

He should have called the cops, Hardcastle knew that, but that would have taken time. There was no time. Mark was in a dark place and there was no time to waste.

He didn't allow himself to think that maybe all the time had run out already.

After a drive that seemed endless, the truck squealed to a stop on the highway above where the baitshop should have been. And, when he got out to stand on the shoulder, he could see the shack below. There was no one in sight on the beach this early; dawn was just starting to touch the sky.

Hardcastle slipped and slid down the incline, then he walked with studied care up to the shack itself. He used one hand to push open the door, turning on the flashlight from the glove compartment. Its glare pierced the black interior of the building. The smell of old fish hit him, making him gag a little, but he stepped inside. "Mark?" he said softly.

The light finally found the rolled-up rug in one corner. He played the glow along the length of the bundle. At one end he could see a tousled head of hair. So Mark had managed to crawl out part way; that meant he was alive when Poole dumped him here.

Hardcastle moved over to the corner and dropped to his knees. "Mark?" he said again in the same whisper. "Please?"

He touched one cheek lightly. The skin beneath his fingertips was damp and hot. That wasn't the way dead flesh would feel.

With fingers that shook, he untied the rope holding the rug in place and pulled it away. Then he sat again, cradling Mark on his lap. As he saw the slow but steady up and down movement of the younger man's chest, some of the pain inside him began to slowly dissolve.

Mark's eyes twitched under the direct glare of the flashlight and then opened. Hardcastle shifted the light a little. "You... made it," McCormick said.

"Sure. Don't I always make it, kiddo?" Hardcastle used one hand to push damp curls out of McCormick's face, leaning nearer.

Mark grimaced. "You...cut it close, though," he said, his voice just a soft breeze against Hardcastle's ear.

"Makes the game more fun," Hardcastle said.

Mark managed a faint smile.

Hardcastle didn't try to stop the tears that sprang up suddenly. He had lived long enough to know that there was no shame in crying. He held onto Mark for another moment, then rested him back against the rug. "I'm going to call for some help," he said.

Mark didn't hear him; he had lost consciousness again. Hardcastle pressed one hand against McCormick's face, gently.

Not with a bang, but with a whimper the world is reborn.

Hardcastle looked across the patio to where Mark was stretched out in the sun. It would take some time yet before he lost the hospital pallor and regained the lost pounds. Hardcastle could wait. There was time for everything now.

He hefted the file folder in one hand and started toward McCormick. "You about done goofing off, Tonto?" he said. "The world is full of bad guys."

McCormick groaned. "Gimme a break, Hardcase, I'm still recuperating."

"So the world is supposed to stop and wait for you?"

Mark grinned up at him. "Sure. I waited for you, didn't I? Believe me, it would have been a lot easier to die."

Hardcastle sat in the other chair. "Damned good thing you didn't," he said.

"Missed me, didja'?"

Hardcastle opened his mouth to respond in kind, but then he shrugged instead. "Yeah, I missed you. But don't let that fact go to your head."

Mark laughed out loud, apparently delighted at the rare admission. Hardcastle just sat back and enjoyed it.

The small moments that made life good. The sunshine, the water in all its perfect blueness, the sound of Mark's laughter ringing across the patio. Such small things. They all only added up to a whimper in the overall scheme of things.

Only a whimper, but he held onto it, caressing it, knowing how easily it could all be lost.

But not yet. Not yet.

