

THE LEGACY

By: Melinda Reynolds

I

Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, retired, settled back in the comfortable desk chair, smiling faintly at his younger colleague. Mark McCormick, in suit and tie, shoes sitting next to the side table, sat crossways on the leather chair opposite the desk, the L. A. Yellow Pages propped against his knees. Even at thirty-five, it was hard to imagine McCormick as a graduate law student; he'd always be the brash young kid who had openly defied him in court ten years ago. Ten years... it seemed a hundred years ago, and it seemed just yesterday. The gamble he'd taken with McCormick had paid off, far in excess of what he'd reasonably expected. In less than a month, McCormick would be a full-fledged attorney-- or so he claimed, certain he had passed the Bar exam.

"'Eblehare, Donhewitt, Lanstein, & McCormick'," he read off, giving cheerful emphasis on the last name, "'Elhart, Elhart, & McCormick'; say, here's a promising one: 'McCain, McCann, & McCormick' -- Whaddaya think? The Big Macs."

"I think it sounds like an Irish rock group. Are you really serious about all this? The best way to start out would be a legal clinic - get your feet wet in the morass of legal technicalities and client confidentialities!"

McCormick grinned, tossing the book aside. "A storefront clinic, huh?" He held his hands about a yard apart, visualizing a sign, "'Mark McCormick, Attorney-At-Law: An uncommon man for the common man'." Hardcastle shook his head, and McCormick shrugged with apparent unconcern. "Let's face it, Hardcase; law firms would jump at the chance to hire a guy like me, right? I mean, how many lawyers are so well-versed on both sides of the law?"

"Mostly on the wrong side, kiddo."

Conceding the point, McCormick continued, "I sent out resumés to just about every law firm in L.A. Right now, I'd settle for the ACME Law Firm with Anybody and McCormick!"

Hardcastle shuffled some papers, placed them in a well-worn file folder as he spoke in an off-hand manner, half-serious. "How about 'Hardcastle & McCormick'?"

McCormick laughed, obviously thinking Hardcastle was kidding around. "Nah, never work." At the Judge's

questioning look, he explained, "Nobody'd come to us-- not a single Jewish name to be found."

"You think not? Yeah, you're probably right. Clients prefer experience - on this side of the bars - and I doubt if I could handle the caseload."

"Clients also like a lawyer to have a modern outlook, and who can see gray between black and white."

"Hmmm..." Hardcastle hesitated, unsure whether or not to continue, then decided to charge ahead. "An, uh, old friend of mine has an office in L.A. Seems his partner decided to open his own office across town, and now he's on the lookout for a 'capable and dependable' junior partner to take over the firm when he retires in a few years. Against my better judgement, I told him I might be able to help him out."

McCormick sat up, suddenly interested. "Yeah? Did you tell him about me?"

"No, McCormick, I told him about the Cocker Spaniel down the street. Yes, I mentioned you. If you're interested he'll see you next Saturday at two o'clock."

II

"Com'on, Hardcase, which one? The solid or the stripes?" McCormick held two neckties against his light blue shirt. "I want just the right look, here."

"I'd go with the solid; indicates solid character. Think you'd've had enough of stripes."

McCormick looked at him for long seconds, then, with great deliberation, put the solid tie aside. "How much time have we got?"

"A little over two hours, if you want to get lunch in town. You about ready?"

McCormick finished the knot in the gray-silver-blue striped tie. He glanced around, looked under the bed pillows, pulled out the drawers in the night stand. "Now where are those black dress shoes? I had 'em here a minute ago..."

With a weary sigh of long-suffering tolerance, the Judge lifted the newspaper off the desk, revealing the sought-after shoes. "How the hell do you manage to get dressed by yourself?"

"I don't have any problems when I'm not rushed."

"Rushed? You've had all morning."

"I've had barely an hour - I spent the morning doing 'catch up before getting behind', as you put it. Remember, the extra chores you added to make up for the time we'd be gone." He picked up his suit coat from the bed. "Let's go." He started down the stairs without waiting for Hardcastle, "And it's your turn to buy lunch -- and my turn to pick the restaurant."

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"Look, kid," Hardcastle interrupted McCormick's fourth run-through, practicing various routines for the interview as the GMC headed down the Pacific Coast Highway. "Forget the nonsense about 'selling yourself'; it's your ability and knowledge that counts. Just state the basic facts, your potential based on past performance--" He broke off, glancing at McCormick. "On second thought, maybe you'd better use that so-called 'charm' and fast talk...and con the hell outta him."

"Thanks, Hardcase."

"Hey, whatever works -- maybe even exaggerate a little..." he mused.

McCormick gave him a surprised look. "Exaggerate a little?"

Hardcastle shrugged. "Okay, a lot."

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They left the pick-up in the underground garage of an ultra-modern, glass and steel high-rise. McCormick nervously paced the twelve-foot square area of the the walnut panelled elevator, his doubts surfacing. "You think I really got a shot at this, Judge?"

"Sure you do. Just like a thousand other guys gunning for the same job." He punched McCormick's upper arm lightly, led the way as the doors slid silently open. "Tell ya what. Wait in the reception area, and I'll go talk to him first. Sorta pave the way for ya."

"Thanks... I think."

The law firm had a suite of offices fronted by a smoked glass reception area. A steel-gray sign with black raised letters announced "Jones & Bernstein, Attorneys at Law". McCormick glanced at Hardcastle, said in a low aside, "See? Told ya."

"Go sit down, and pretend you belong here."

Hardcastle motioned McCormick to one of the velour couches, then approached the middle-aged receptionist. The nameplate on her desk introduced her as Ms. Jawalski, and McCormick mentally nick-named her "Jaws", as she was built like a Rams linebacker.

As she escorted Hardcastle to the senior partner's office, McCormick got to his feet, walked restlessly around the lobby. Muted blues and grays lent a stylish elegance to the warm wood tones of the furnishings, combining effectively to signify quiet efficiency and confidence. He liked it, and found himself wanting to be a part of it. The receptionist returned, smiling at McCormick as she resumed her typing.

Nearly ten minutes passed, and the phone intercom buzzed. Ms. Jawalski spoke quietly, then rose from her desk. "Mr. McCormick, Mr. Jones is ready to see you now. Will you follow me, please?"

He followed her down a short hallway, gave her a not-too-confident smile as she opened the door to the office. She stood near the doorway as McCormick entered. "Mr. Jones, Mr. McCormick." With a last encouraging look, she departed.

McCormick was only vaguely aware of the low click as the door closed behind him. He took in the rich, dark panelling and classic art prints, the thick carpet, the heavy wood and leather furniture. The term "lavish" was upper-most in his mind, as his gaze turned to the opposite wall, consisting of floor-to-ceiling, bronze tinted windows overlooking the city. A massive teak desk was placed before the glass wall, a high-backed chair turned toward the view, away from McCormick. Smoke curled lazily above the chair back, its occupant having taken no apparent notice of McCormick's presence.

Uncertain, McCormick cleared his throat. "Uh, Mr. Jones," he began, "I'm Mark McCormick; I have a 2 o'clock appointment." The only response was a slight forward tilt of the chair, and another puff of smoke. "Judge Hardcastle told you about me?"

The voice was deep, rough, and familiar. "Yes. I understand you want to be a lawyer." The chair swivelled to face him, and Hardcastle, with a self-satisfied grin, placed the pipe on the desktop.

McCormick stared at him in stunned silence for a few seconds, then realized he'd been smoothly and expertly manipulated - again. "You... you son of a--"

"Watch it, kid; you're talkin' to your past, present, and future employer...and partner." Pulling open the

center drawer, the Judge held up a polished brass sign. It read "Hardcastle & McCormick, Attorneys-At-Law". "You didn't think I was going to turn you loose on the unsuspecting public, did you?"

McCormick bit back a smile, shook his head. "So, where's my office? And my desk? And my secretary? And my--"

"One thing at a time, kiddo." Hardcastle indicated double doors set between wall-to-ceiling bookcases. "Your office is in there, where I can keep an eye - and ear - on you. And I know I'm going to regret this, but I'm going to let you hire your own secretary. At least make sure she can type, okay?"

"I'll keep it in mind." McCormick crossed to the double doors, opened them into an office equal to the one he was standing in. Looking around, he commented, "Not bad... Could be a little larger; but on the whole, not bad at all." He opened the doors all the way, smiled warmly at Hardcastle. "Thanks, Hardcase; you won't regret it."

"I never have."

III

Judge Milton Hardcastle, retired, stepped back, gazed with proud approval at the black and gold sign on the plate glass door. He had gotten to the office early, wanting to be there before McCormick arrived, before the secretaries and "Jaws" Jawalski arrived; before anyone arrived. Hardcastle grimaced, yet chuckled in spite of himself. Margaret Jawalski was crazy about the kid, and allowed that outrageous nickname, which she had taken as a sign of affection. McCormick always did have that effect on older women, and the clientele that fell into that category invariably went to him.

But for now, Hardcastle had wanted to enjoy this moment alone, to bask in the inner warmth, and just let the feelings take over, without an audience. Although at first his name had brought in the clients, McCormick's flair and persuasive persistence combined with his knowledge and common sense approach to the law, had earned him equal status in a few all-too-short years. It was time to step down, to hand over the reins... Oh, he'd still be available for consultation, but no longer actively practicing.

He had discussed the change with McCormick last week, and overrode his protests. Hardcastle had never intended for the firm to be permanently linked to him; only to give it a good start. It was up to McCormick to continue the momentum.

He'd met the maintenance man early that Monday morning, and made the change. He held the old sign fondly under one arm; the bright gold letters on the new one now read:

"McCORMICK & ASSOCIATES, Attorneys-At-Law"

"You earned it, kiddo. You gave me back the legacy I thought I had lost..."

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