

# THE TIES THAT BIND...

Sequel to "Not Lookin' To Be Buddies", B-t-B 2

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Milton Hardcastle breathed a sigh of relief, glancing over at his young companion as Mark McCormick brought the car to a halt in front of the main house. After the strange events in San Francisco, it felt damned good to be back home. Especially in one piece. An earthquake; the oldest cliché around, yet it had really happened. It was still hard to believe.

"Look alive, kiddo," he said to the yawning McCormick as he left the car, "We're back where we started from, all safe and sound."

"Is that sound in body, or sound in mind? Because we just might have a difference of opinion there."

"Get outta the car, McCormick. You've gotta learn how to talk and move at the same time. Comes in real handy. On second thought, why don't you just forget how to talk?"

"C'mon, Hardcastle." McCormick popped up out of the car and joined the Judge. "You're just mad 'cause I wouldn't let you drive the Coyote."

"I do know how to drive, kiddo. I've been doin' it for fifty years."

"Maybe, but never with a piece of machinery like this." McCormick grinned, "Takes a special kind of talent."

"It's a car, McCormick," Hardcastle said patiently, "Not your personal winged chariot."

"No kiddin'? Way you were holding on to your seat a couple times, I thought you were getting ready for a take-off."

"The way you drive," Hardcastle snapped, "That's what I felt like! The PCH is not a raceway, and you better learn that real fast."

"Gimme a break, Hardcase," McCormick muttered, becoming disgruntled, "The past few days have been weird enough without this."

"Well, I'm sure not gonna deny that. Seems like nothing's been normal since the night I brought you home."

"Oh, and I suppose that's my fault."

"Who said anything about 'fault'? And why are you so grumpy? These moods of yours have got to go. Lighten up, kid."

McCormick sighed, looking off in the distance. "I am not grumpy. I am not moody. What I am, is tired."

"Understandable." Hardcastle mellowed a bit as he took in the ex-con's exhausted stance. McCormick had insisted on doing all the driving, despite the fact that neither man had gotten much sleep the night before. Not to mention the nasty blow to the head he had taken during the earthquake. "You feelin' okay?" He asked abruptly. "Other than being tired, I mean."

"Yeah. Sure. Why'd ya ask?"

"You didn't see a doctor after that brick hit ya. Maybe you should have."

"Nah, it's fine. Judge...are we gonna stand out here and talk all night?"

"Not planning on it. Why?" Hardcastle asked suspiciously.

"Because I am starving."

"Again?!" Hardcastle scowled in disbelief.

"Still," McCormick replied.

"C'mon." The Judge pushed the younger man towards the house, mumbling under his breath, "Gonna have you checked for tapeworm..."

"What?"

"I said we'd better let Sarah know we're still alive and kicking."

"Didn't you call her last night? You know that stuff had to be on all the news-casts."

"Of course I called her, McCormick. Give me a break. But I know Sarah; she won't relax until she sees us come walking through the door."

They were barely inside the house before the elderly housekeeper swooped down upon them. "Oh, Your Honor. Thank goodness you're all right. You, too, Mark," she added, evidently as an afterthought.

"Told you we were, Sarah," Hardcastle said reassuringly. "Too ornery to let a little something like an earthquake do me in."

"Amen to that," McCormick mumbled, slouching against a door jamb.

"I heard that, McCormick." Hardcastle didn't bother to turn around, but instead gave Sarah a quick wink, signalling her to disregard the grouchy young ex-con.

"I've kept your dinner warm in the oven," Sarah smiled at the Judge, ignoring McCormick.

"Great." Hardcastle rubbed his hands together, "I'm starving."

"Again?" McCormick asked sarcastically.

This time Hardcastle did turn around, eyes cold. "That's enough of your lip for one night, boy. Now, you can come on and eat, or you can stand there and hold up the wall all night. What'll it be?"

McCormick straightened, looking slightly abashed as the two older people continued to stare at him, unsmiling, waiting for his reply. "Okay. Yeah, let's eat."

Sarah led the way, hastening into the kitchen as the two men sat down at the dining room table. She reappeared almost immediately, beaming at the Judge as she sat their plates in front of them. "One of your favorites, Your Honor. Liver and onions."

"Sarah, you are a jewel." Hardcastle inhaled deeply, enjoying the aroma. He looked over at McCormick, but then dropped his eyes quickly, clearing his throat to keep from laughing. The younger man hadn't said a word, but the expression on his face was so transparent that the Judge chuckled slightly, despite his best efforts. "Whasamatter, kiddo? Don't like your dinner?"

"No." McCormick didn't elaborate.

"Can't live on junk food all the time;" Hardcastle commented affably.

"Liver is very good for you," Sarah added.

"I know it is," McCormick said, carefully folding his napkin and placing it on the table. "But I hate it. Always have."

"It's all right, Mark. You don't have to eat it." Sarah scooped up the plate. "Wait right here, and I'll go fix you a sandwich."

Hardcastle watched in amazement as the housekeeper made a quick exit. Sarah had never gone out of her way to please ex-cons at the dinner table, maintaining a 'take it or leave it' attitude with them. Looking back over at McCormick, he understood her change in attitude. Sarah had firm standards, and she had never approved of his rehab project, or been at all fond of the ex-convicts he had brought home over the years. On the other hand, she was blessed with an extremely maternal nature. McCormick, without trying, had obviously struck that chord when he had looked at his dinner. Lord, but the kid could look pitiful when he was tired and hungry. Sort of like a Cocker Spaniel waiting hopefully for table scraps.

Hardcastle shifted slightly in his chair, uncomfortable with the silly, sentimental thoughts. Dammit, this was a business partnership...and that was all it was. No more, no less. Oh, sure, the kid had a somewhat likeable nature, but how was he going to work out as an assistant? Thanks to the fiasco in San Francisco, he hadn't even been tested yet. Except for Martin Cody, and that couldn't be counted because of the personal nature of McCormick's involvement. He'd done just fine when it came to tracking down the man who had killed his best friend, Flip Johnson, but how would he do when it was strictly business? That part Hardcastle had yet to find out.

"Lose your taste for liver, Judge?" A sleepy voice asked, breaking into Hardcastle's train of thought.

"Nah. Just thinkin', kid."

"What about?"

Hardcastle smiled as Sarah came back through the door, glad that he wouldn't have to manufacture some type of answer. Wouldn't do to let this kid know there were moments when he got through to the Judge on a personal level. For some reason. Whatever it was. Not that it mattered.

"Were there any important messages while we were gone?" The Judge's question was addressed to Sarah, though his gaze never left McCormick's face, his eyes widening slightly as he saw the amount of sandwich the kid managed to consume in one bite. He glanced away, shaking his head.

"I put them all on your desk," Sarah replied. "Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow. Perhaps I should go ahead and mention though, that one of the messages concerns that awful Mr. Cody."

"What about him?" McCormick put the sandwich down, staring intently at the housekeeper.

She looked at the Judge, who nodded for her to go ahead and answer. "Just that he's to be arraigned next week. Next Tuesday."

"That was fast," Hardcastle said approvingly.

"Judge..." McCormick turned his stare to Hardcastle. "He won't get out on bail, will he? I don't think I could stand it, knowin' he was walking around free."

"If he's indicted--and I don't know of any reason why he wouldn't be--it'll be first degree murder. Premeditated all the way. There's always a chance of bail, a chance of getting a real liberal judge, but I doubt it in this case. I can't make you any promises, kid, but I don't expect to see Martin Cody out on the streets any time soon."

"Good." McCormick pushed back the plate holding the remainder of his sandwich and stood up from the table. "Sorry, Sarah, but I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought I was. I'm gonna go on over to the Gatehouse and hit the sack. That okay with you, Judge?"

"Yeah. Sure. Go ahead, kid; I'll see ya tomorrow."

Hardcastle watched the retreating figure until it was out of sight, unable to pre-

vent his sudden surge of sympathy. He understood the kid's loss of appetite. It was rough when you lost a friend, someone you really cared about. Someone you loved. Hardcastle understood only too well.

§§§

McCormick popped the tab on a cold beer and collapsed onto the Gatehouse sofa. After yet another, seemingly interminable, day of working around the estate, his muscles were sore in places that he hadn't even realized he had muscles, and he slowly stretched, trying to work out some of the kinks. Hardcastle should write a book, he thought gloomily, 'How to Get Maximum Work For Minimum Pay' or, 'You, Too, Can Own a Slave'.

"Damn gutters," he groaned, laying his head back and closing his eyes. How could he be so tired, and yet so bored, all at the same time? Easy, he answered his own question; just come live at Gull's-Way, home of Robed Justice. Not that he'd seen very much of the Judge in the five days since they returned from San Francisco. Hardcastle was once again spending all his time in the basement, setting up his numerous files so they could begin work on their cases. Declining help, he'd given McCormick 'chores' to keep him busy; and, McCormick suspected, from under foot.

"Shit," he mumbled, giving up the battle to remain upright, stretching out full length on the sofa. "I just can't figure ya, Hardcase."

The Judge had him truly baffled, and no matter how much he tried to figure out his situation, he couldn't begin to understand the man who controlled it. He went over the facts once more in his mind. First, the Judge sent him to prison, then bugged the hell out of him while he was on parole. Second, Hardcastle almost sent him back to prison, then instead brought him to Gull's-Way. Third, Hardcastle believed his accusations about Martin Cody, and they got him. And fourth, the Judge holed up in the basement for a couple of days, then announced they were going to San Francisco.

He finished the beer, and smiled slightly, remembering the strange excursion. Hell, Hardcastle was almost like a different person while they were up there; even to the point of going out of his way to let McCormick do some of the things he wanted to do. And then the earthquake. God, but he'd been scared. And the Judge was like some kind of indestructible rock; and McCormick had known if he could get back to where Hardcastle was, he'd be safe. It sounded crazy now, but that was how he felt at the time. And despite Hardcastle's later denials, the Judge had been a real mother hen that night, a hell of a lot more worried about McCormick's injury than the ex-con had been.

But now they were back...and it was just like it was before they had left. "Clean the gutters, McCormick", "Trim the hedges, McCormick"...Hardcastle might as well say what he meant, because it sure wasn't difficult to figure out: "Stay the hell outta my way until I need ya, McCormick."

With an effort, McCormick pushed himself upright and started for the shower, his aching muscles protesting with every step. Once there, he leaned over the bathroom sink, staring at his tired reflection in the mirror. "Hey," he told it, "I'm gettin' tired of spending so much time with nobody to talk to except you."

Sighing, he stripped off and stepped into the shower, unable to shake the depression that had been settling in for days. At least in prison you didn't have the illusion of freedom. Still lost in thought, he moved forward into the hot, needle-sharp spray. "It's not gonna work, Hardcastle," he said finally. "It's just not gonna work."

§§§

Hardcastle glanced at his watch, almost doing a doubletake when he realized how late it had become. "Damn," he grumbled, closing the file he had been so engrossed in, "Never meant to stay down here this long."

That wasn't altogether true, and he knew it. He was avoiding McCormick, just as he had been for the past few days, and he didn't like himself too much when forced to admit that fact. It wasn't the kid's fault that he was having second thoughts about their arrangement.

Frowning, he left the basement and wandered upstairs into the den, clicking on the television and lowering himself into his favorite chair. It was several minutes before he realized he hadn't even noticed what was on. He turned the TV off, scowling at the blank screen. Trying to avoid thinking about things wasn't the answer; it never was. But then, he'd never had this kind of problem before. A Judge had to remain detached, he had spent a lifetime learning that simple fact. But...goddamn it...for some reason that he could not fathom, it just didn't work where McCormick was concerned. All the rules seemed to go flying out the window when he tried to apply them to that obnoxious, smart-mouthed kid. He had had ex-cons working for him before, plenty of them. And he'd never had any problems dealing with them. Either they shaped up, or it was back to the slammer. So...why did it seem so different this time?

Hardcastle leaned forward, squaring his shoulders and firming his resolve. It wasn't different. He wouldn't let it be different. The trip to San Francisco had shown him that, if nothing else. The gut-wrenching fear he had felt for the short time that the kid had been missing in the earthquake was all too damned familiar. He hadn't felt such a panic in over ten years, and he wasn't about to make himself vulnerable to that kind of pain again. Not ever.

He might not be able to understand why he cared about what happened to that curly-haired delinquent, but that didn't matter. What did matter was to nip it in the bud. Keep things on a business level at all times. None of that personal hoo-hah. Just work on the cases, get the kid straightened out in a year or so, and then send him on his way. He was nothing but an employee, even if it was forced employment. Just a paid assistant. And that was how it was going to stay.

§§§

McCormick ran a hand lovingly over the Coyote. After Hardcastle had brought him news of Cody's indictment, he had spent the rest of the afternoon washing and waxing the exotic automobile. Somehow, it had seemed like the right thing to do, a way of honoring Flip's life instead of forever mourning his death. The loss still hurt, though, and would, McCormick knew, for a long, long time.

"Mark?"

He jumped, not having noticed Sarah's approach.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said, reaching out, but then pulling her hand back suddenly, as though she had just remembered who she was talking to. "Judge Hardcastle wants to see you in the den."

"Okay, thanks, Sarah. Did he say what for?"

"That's none of my business, Mark. I don't pry into the Judge's affairs."

Feeling properly chastened, McCormick nodded at the housekeeper's retreating back. What was it about that woman that always made him feel like he should go wash behind his ears?

Hardcastle was sitting at his desk when McCormick entered the room. Noticing the gavel that lay to one side of the desk blotter, he almost grinned at the familiar sight. "Guess ya can take the bench away from the man, but ya can't take the man away from the bench, huh, Judge?"

"What are you talkin' about, McCormick?" Hardcastle grumbled.

"You, Hardcase. Sittin' there behind ten square yards of solid oak, handy-dandy gavel at your side. Sarah's a little out of character for a bailiff, but at least ya

got a familiar prisoner to send for, right?"

"Are you through?" Hardcastle asked.

"Does it matter?"

"No."

"Then I guess I'm through." He sat down, giving the Judge an insolent grin.

Hardcastle grunted, steeping his fingers and staring over them at McCormick. "We've got a real problem with that mouth of yours, and I'm tellin' ya right now, it's one of the first things we're gonna be workin' on."

"Glad we're gonna be workin' on something," McCormick muttered.

"Oh, gettin' bored already, are ya?"

"Aww, what gives you that idea, Judge? Don't you know it's been my life's ambition to be an underpaid handyman?"

"I wasn't aware that you had ambitions of any kind. Now," he went on, ignoring the ex-con's glare, "do you want to hear about these cases I've decided to start with, or not?"

"I dunno. I guess."

"Whattya mean, you 'guess'?" Hardcastle snapped impatiently. "First, you're bitchin' 'cause you're bored; then, you're not interested when I come up with something. Just what the hell is your problem, McCormick?"

The ex-con sighed, looking down at the floor instead of the cranky judge. How could he even begin to explain? Why did he want to make the effort? "It's just been a lousy day, Judge, okay? I thought I'd feel better once Cody was indicted...but I don't. It's not gonna bring Flip back, and... God...he didn't deserve to die like that. He was a good person, Hardcastle; he was kind, and...generous...and he really tried to help, to give a guy a break, ya know? Without makin' ya feel like ya ain't worth the bother..." He paused, taking a deep, steadying breath. "He was the best person I ever knew, and when I stop and think about how I'll never see him again...I dunno...it just leaves me feelin' all empty inside. Like...like nuthin' anyone does is ever gonna change that; whether Cody goes to jail or walks, Flip isn't ever coming back."

"You two were friends for a long time, weren't you?" Hardcastle asked quietly.

"Oh, yeah. A real long time."

"Listen, kiddo..."

Responding instinctively to the serious tone, McCormick lifted his eyes to Hardcastle's face.

"I don't know much about what kind of life you've had up to now. Whether you've lost somebody that was close to you before or not. What I do know...is that life goes on...much as it hurts sometimes. Your friend wouldn't want you draggin' around and not gettin' on with your life, just because his got cut off too soon."

McCormick's head snapped up at the last remark. Hardcastle had never known Flip; had never even met him. So where did he get off telling him what Flip would 'want'? "If I'm draggin' around, Hardcastle, it's because I haven't had any choice in the matter. And what the hell do you know about anything, anyway? Maybe it's just my nature to 'drag around'."

"Now you're being ridiculous," Hardcastle snorted.

"I'm being ridiculous?! You drag me out here by the scruff of the neck to...to..." McCormick gestured wildly, "...'Prison-By-The-Sea', or whatever the hell you want to call it. You've got this cock-n-bull idea that you're gonna play Lone Ranger while

you live out your golden years...and I'm being ridiculous!?"

"That's enough out of you, boy," Hardcastle said dangerously.

McCormick leaned back in his chair, folding his arms and returning the Judge's glare. His vague depression of the past few days had turned into anger, and he couldn't stop the words from pouring out. "I shouldn't have to stay here, anyway. I've been thinking about it. You've got no right to keep me here."

"Oh, I don't? Well, you'd better go check your law books again, Mr. San Quentin lawyer, 'cause the last time I looked, car theft was still a felony."

"Unh-uh. Think about it, Hardcastle. I'm here, in your judicial stay, because I stole a car, right?" At the Judge's curt nod, McCormick grinned broadly, spreading his hands, "Only, it turns out that I didn't steal a car. Barbara was the rightful owner, not Cody. And Barbara was the one who asked me to get the car. I was just returning property to its legal owner. There-was-no-stolen-car!"

Hardcastle stood, leaning across his massive desk as he stared down at the younger man. "The law does not bend and twist to suit your individual requirements, McCormick. If you had half a brain, you woulda learned that by now. Even if we could forget about the car, which we can't, there's still the small matters of breaking and entering, flight to avoid arrest, and God only knows how many traffic violations. Any one of which more than qualifies as a parole violation. You are damned lucky not to be behind bars right now, boy; but evidently, you don't have enough sense to appreciate that."

McCormick leapt to his feet, leaning into the Judge's face. "Oh, I'm behind bars, Hardcastle. They may not be made outta steel, but they're sure as hell there!"

Hardcastle only grinned back...tight, cold. "If that's the way you see it, fine. But you are here, and you're gonna stay here until I, or the law, say otherwise."

The staredown lasted a few seconds, then McCormick tuned away sharply; wanting to strike, to lash out, yet not daring to. There was no outlet for his frustration, no way to re-channel the destructive energies threatening to overwhelm him. His current situation was becoming untenable, with the definite potential of getting a lot worse before it got any better. And if he wasn't careful, he'd be back inside. Slaving for Hardcastle was better than being inside. Maybe. Hard Castle. The name fit him; rock hard, everything about him set in concrete. Immovable, and unmoved. How could this be the same person he'd almost come to like in San Francisco?

He had retreated a few steps from the desk, wandering toward the window. Mark fingered the blinds absently as he spoke, trying to find some measure of understanding. "There's got to be something in the law that says when circumstances are so harsh, and the violations are so minimal in comparison, that reasonable people can agree that it's acceptable. When the law gets in the way of what's right. A stand-up magistrate would consider the mitigation, and let the guy off. I'm sure of it. But me, I draw the infamous hanging judge again. Is it really the law, or is there something about me, personally, that you don't like?"

"Being sure isn't the same as being right. And your sense of 'right' may not be someone else's sense of 'right'. You're basing your arguments on personal opinion, and not on what's valid, or legitimate. You seem to have a real problem sorting it all out--in your favor, of course."

"If I don't, who will? There's never been anyone to argue my case. I need to know what's going on. I'm not one of those statues out in the yard; not a still life, not some generator you get to keep around the place on standby."

"You're no still life; I can bear witness to that."

Driven by a hunger he didn't understand, reaching out to something he recognized but couldn't define, McCormick went further, pushed harder. Hot and angry words

poured from him, burning himself and anyone close. "You told me I was coming here to ride shotgun with you on your cases. Okay. But all you say to me is 'clean this', 'fix that', 'load that barge, lift that barge', 'gimme any lip, and you'll go to jail."

"You're gonna clock your fair share, hotshot. I'm gonna see to that."

"Who totes up the score? You? Got your scales rigged? Patting yourself on the back all the time 'cause you do your cheating behind black robes, making it seem fair and reasonable that way?"

The icy blue eyes were colder than ever, the tone low and even. "McCormick, you are proving to be lazier than hell, and opinionated as the devil. You are also disrespectful, discourteous, and dissentious."

"Yeah? Well, you can add dissatisfied, discontented, and displeased onto your list." And maybe, he added to himself, disappointed. He strode back to the desk, re-establishing eye-contact. "I didn't agree to be one of your labor-saving devices, Hardcase. How 'cum you never mentioned that while you were layin' out the deal, huh?"

"Okay, that's enough." Hardcastle clenched his teeth as he sat back down. "If this goes on, we're both gonna say things that you'll probably regret later. So get outta here and get on over to the Gatehouse. Now."

"I am not ten years old, Hardcastle! You can't just send me to my room 'cause things are gettin' too heavy for ya."

Hardcastle's look was chillingly cold, and his voice matched it perfectly. "Oh, yes I can, boy. Whether the room is in a house on this estate, or a cell in prison; and that choice is yours."

Furious, McCormick glared at the Judge before turning and storming from the den. The slamming of the door was the only sound that disturbed the descending silence.

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McCormick's temper was not improved by tripping over the low hedge as he stomped angrily toward the Gatehouse. He kicked it into submission, swearing lustily, and not caring if he was seen or not.

The vitriolic monolog didn't stop once he was indoors, but continued in ever-increasing volume as he paced back and forth in the small living room.

"Ya damned old donkey! You're outta your mind if you think you can treat me this way! Ya hear that, Hardcastle?!" He frowned, mouth tightening into a thin, pouting line as he threw himself down on the sofa. 'Damn the man,' he thought, viciously punching the throw pillow at his side. 'This is crazy. He's crazy! Thinkin' he can treat me like some little kid; telling me what I can do, and what I can't do.'

Snorting loudly, he plopped his sneakers heavily on the coffee table, taking a perverse pleasure in the knowledge that it 'wasn't allowed'. "Might be ol' Hardcastle's coffee table," he muttered, "but if I've gotta stay here, then it's gonna have ol' McCormick's scuff marks!" The satisfaction lasted only for a few seconds, however, as a feeling of shame quickly took its place. He sat up, wetting his finger and trying to rub the marks from the beautifully crafted table. "Way to go, McCormick; show 'em you really got class."

He hugged the throw pillow to his chest, propping his chin on it as he looked around the small Gatehouse. He loved the comfortable, elegant living quarters. He'd never had such a nice place before, would probably never have such a nice place again...and he would have died before admitting it to Hardcastle.

"Aw, hell, Judge," he sighed into the pillow, "Why do you have to be so ornery? I can't go back to prison, and you must know it; it'd just about kill me." It wasn't just being locked up again--he shied away, trying to keep from finishing the thought



--it was the feeling of belonging that he'd gotten a taste of a couple of times. "I could really enjoy living here--if only you'd let me enjoy it."

He squirmed uncomfortably, remembering the Judge's angry face. Maybe he shouldn't have said some of the things he did, but...dammit...the man just made him so mad. Seemed like sticking him in a room with Hardcastle was just like sticking an unlit match into a roaring fire. It couldn't help but blaze up. "And I gotta stay with you indefinitely...now that can't be legal," he murmured, shaking his head. "How in the hell are we gonna keep from murdering each other?"

Curling around the large pillow, he closed his eyes and settled in, trying to pin down a thought that kept running through his mind. They had almost gotten along while they were in San Francisco. They hadn't even fought...well, not very much. So why were things so different, now that they were back at Gull's-Way?

He was acting the same, he was pretty sure of that. So the difference had to be with Hardcastle. Yeah. In fact...that was it. The coldness. Hardcastle had been mad at him before, that was no big deal. But there was always a sense of humor underlying the anger. He had never seen anything funny, but the Judge had always acted as if he was trying to swallow a laugh--at his expense. And that wasn't there this evening. When he had been ordered from the house, the Judge's gaze had been cold and humorless, as if he couldn't stand the sight of the ex-con. And yet it was Hardcastle's authority that held him at Gull's-Way.

"Hell, Hardcase, it's beyond me. I don't know what's goin' through your mind. Probably wouldn't understand it if I did. I wonder if you do."

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McCormick hesitated outside the kitchen door, balancing the empty dinner dishes on one hand while holding the basketball under one arm. He didn't usually enter the main house without a direct invitation or order, but the dishes were a good excuse. He kicked at the door lightly, and Sarah waved him inside, taking the dishes before they fell.

"Where's Batman?" He glanced quickly into the empty dining room. "Is he still at his bat-desk, goin' through his bat-files? Isn't he batty enough as it is?"

"Judge Hardcastle," Sarah spoke from the sink, keeping her back to him, "is down in the basement, reorganizing his criminal records. He left strict orders that he wasn't to be disturbed."

"Too late..." At Sarah's sharp, warning look, he continued, "He's been disturbed for years." He bounced the ball on the tiled floor. "I think the old guy's been workin' too hard. Nuthin' like a real good game of guerilla basketball to give ya a whole new outlook." McCormick smiled to himself. He'd use Hardcastle's tactics against him and pray that the results were half as good.

"I don't know, Mark; he wasn't in a very good mood."

"When is he ever? Look, I sorta need to apologize, and this is the best way I know of to go about it." He watched as Sarah finished up the dishes, took off her apron, and picked up her coat.

"All right," she said, digging in her purse for the keys, "I've given you fair warning. And I fully expect to be preparing breakfast for one tomorrow morning."

McCormick held the door open, closing it softly behind her. "I expect that you're probably right."

§§§

Hardcastle looked up from his filing, trying to identify, then locate, the 'thump, thump, thump' that had intruded on his thoughts with irritating suddenness. Shoving the file drawer shut, he turned just as a basketball thudded on the last step and bounced across the floor. It rebounded on the wall, rolling back toward the stairs.

He ran a hand over his face, not really wanting to go another round with Kid McCormick; lately, their verbal sparring hadn't been too enjoyable. "What," he asked in a carefully neutral tone, as the ex-con bounded down the steps three at a time, "are you doing down here?"

McCormick scooped up the basketball, tossed it against the wall; catching it on the rebound, he sat on the lower step, "Oh, nothing much; just following the bouncing ball." He began rapid-bouncing the ball on the cement floor in what Hardcastle found to be a very annoying manner. "How 'bout a little late-night one-on-one? I'll even spot ya ten points, and still beat ya by twenty. Whattaya say? Ten bucks, three-to-one you lose."

"You may be doing 'nothing much', which is about par for the course for you, but some of us--" He broke off, lunged and grabbed the ball in mid-bounce, "Gimme that thing." Opening a top filing drawer, he shoved it inside and slammed the drawer shut. "Some of us," he continued, "find it necessary to work from time to time. Now, no more interruptions, and no more gambling."

"Gambling?" McCormick stared up at him with wide-eyed innocence. "Hell, Hardcase, winning a game of B-ball against you is no gamble, it's a sure thing."

"If you're gonna insist on staying down here just to aggravate me, then you can help with the filing." Hardcastle dumped a load of file folders in McCormick's lap. "You do know what comes after 'C', don'tcha?"

"'C' Spot run?" McCormick gathered up the folders, reading the names of several big-time criminals; the very cream of the underworld. He shook his head, more or less resigned to the enforced role of Tonto. "Tell me something, Judge; just so I can get it straight in my own mind... Why are you so hellbent to get these guys? I mean, if they are, as you say, out there committing new crimes, won't the cops eventually get 'em? They've been doing that sort of thing for a long time, now; even while you were on the bench. In fact, you were the one that let a lot of them walk. Whatsamatter? Getting a conscience attack? Rationalizing that since you let them go, you have to be the one who gets them?"

"I didn't 'let' them go, McCormick. I followed the law, and ruled accordingly."

"Okay, then, how about this: Can you give me a good reason for going along with this inane scheme to clean up L.A.? Give me a half-way plausible reason for chasing down crooks on a whim, and feeling--and looking--like the world's biggest fool?"

"Inane? Foolish? Is that what you think this is?" Hardcastle grabbed the folders, "Or is that what you think I am?"

"C'mon, Judge, you know that's not what I said. But ya gotta admit, this isn't the sorta thing your normal, average Joe is going to set himself up to do; at least, not willingly."

Hardcastle placed the folders on a workbench, then went around and sat down at the table. He pulled three folders from a wobbly stack, and put them aside. Scribbling quickly on a notepad, he didn't look up from his writing as he spoke. "Tell ya what. Just forget it. Forget the filing, the next target, everything. Starting tomorrow, you won't have to worry about which murderer you'll be chasing--I'll take care of it. I'll do the choosing, and make the decisions. Now, get out of here and let me work in peace."

McCormick got slowly to his feet, seemingly hesitant to leave. "Does that mean you've decided on our next case?"

Hardcastle shrugged, deliberately evasive. "Maybe."

"Well...G'night, Hardcase. See ya tomorrow."

Hardcastle waited until he heard the door click shut, then leaned back in the

swivel chair. He had wondered how McCormick would react when a case was strictly business, no personal involvement; well, now he had a pretty good idea. The ex-con's cavalier attitude could be dismissed, but the Judge could not overlook the apathy. If McCormick didn't feel that what they were doing was worthwhile, then the project was doomed from the start. Disinterest and indifference could be a deadly combination in a police situation, and the Judge needed someone he could trust to cover his back, to respond without hesitation or doubt when plans went awry, and involved enough to be able to cope with any surprises that might crop up. Maybe it was better that he had learned now, when everything was under his control.

It had to end now. Hardcastle nodded his head absently, pleased that he could make the decision. He'd found himself saying things to McCormick that he shouldn't, knowing that the ex-con would fire back. A loss of control he wouldn't permit; there could be only one authority, and it was absolute. Anything else only fueled escalation, and that was bad for both of them. His own earlier, personal involvement with McCormick had been the first warning, triggered in his subconscious mind, and almost ignored. The control had slipped, and was shared, something that hadn't happened before with any of the other parolees placed in his custody. It wouldn't happen again. He had to send McCormick away while he still could.

He derived no satisfaction from acknowledging the failure of the experiment. Being forced to it, in such a decisive manner, released a deeply buried emotion that he wasn't prepared for: the regret of loss.

§§§

McCormick stared uncomprehendingly at the second surprise of the morning; the first had been the insistent knocking on the front door of the Gatehouse--Hardcastle never knocked, so it had to be somebody else. The 'somebody else' turned out to be two uniformed police officers. Recovering, he leaned against the door jamb. "If you guys are looking for Judge Hardcastle, he's over in the Big House." He pointed helpfully.

Before either officer could reply, Hardcastle stepped into McCormick's line of vision. "They know who they're looking for, Ace." He nodded to the officers, "Take him in."

The officers' instructions were a hollow echo in his mind as McCormick stared at the Judge with shocked disbelief. Then the defense mode took over, and he raised a hand to restrain the officers, giving Hardcastle a cocky grin. "Wait a minute, guys. C'mon, Hardcase, you can't cart me off to jail. I haven't had my morning coffee yet!"

Hardcastle grinned tightly. "Cuff him." As McCormick's arms were pulled behind him, the Judge continued in a flat, even tone, "When you drive so hard to get an edge, you can go right over it, McCormick. Always a smart answer. Everything's an argument. You never do anything I tell you without a fight. It just isn't worth bothering any more. Too damn much trouble. I need an assistant, not a rebel." Even now, the doubts were creeping in, taking a firmer hold. What was it about this one ex-con that caused him such doubts and misgivings? That made him so angry, so quickly? He was looking at a two-time loser, a criminal, and all he could see was a wayward youngster, anxious to please and clumsy at it.

"Yeah, 'Rebel Without A Cause', that's me. Always was, I guess." One officer took his arm, leading him to the patrol car, while the other slid into the driver's seat. As the policeman opened the rear door, McCormick glanced back at Hardcastle. "Wanta hear something funny, Hardcase? I knew right from Day One that this would never work, and it took you almost four weeks to realize it. Sometimes, it just doesn't pay to be right."

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Milton Hardcastle was sitting in Frank Harper's office when the Lieutenant showed up for work. "You're twelve minutes late," the Judge observed idly.

Harper ignored the remark, hanging up his hat and jacket. Settling into his chair, he smiled benignly at Hardcastle. "What's got you in town this early, Milt? Or are you on your first, big, post-retirement case?"

"Nah, just decided I'd come on down here and do that damnfool interview for the Judicial Quarterly Review."

"Yeah, right. You've been avoiding that for the past two months; now, all of a sudden, you're eager to co-operate? Sure. What's the real story?"

Hardcastle pulled a waxed bag out from under his chair and plopped it down on the desk. "How about having breakfast with me? I brought Danish." He dug into the bag, "And coffee."

"Where's the rest of the army?" He looked around as if expecting at least a platoon. "All that's for the two of us?"

Hardcastle smiled at his old friend. He liked Frank Harper; the man was sharp, honest, and out-spoken. He'd been doing a lot of soul-searching during the drive to L.A., and he needed a sounding board. "You like to give advice, Frank."

"Since when?"

"Since I decided I might need some. Or maybe I just need an impartial opinion. Let me start at the beginning..."

Harper broke into the flow just long enough to phone down and have his calls held, then hooked a danish and settled back with his coffee. This was obviously going to take a while.

The coffee was cold and the danish reduced to crumbs by the time Hardcastle finished and made a final, accusing plea. "You're the one who came looking for me that last day, to make sure I knew that McCormick had risked his skin to save your cop's life. I figure you've got a stake in this, too."

"If you're holding me responsible for any of it, I'd like to point out, in my own defense, that at least this one has stuck around a lot longer than Beale did." He smiled slyly.

"Touché." Hardcastle looked into his cup, saw nothing to hold his interest. "Went right down the check list with ol' JJ, and he came through on top all the way."

"Well, there you are. The intellectual exercise led you straight to the wrong man. Milt, you've had forty years of experience working with people on both sides of the law. Forget the cold intellect of reason, and go with your instincts."

"Instinct's what got me into this McCormick mess in the first place." He didn't bother hiding the bitter heart of it from his old friend; even if he tried, Harper would see right through it. "If I can't keep it strictly a business relationship, I'm not gonna risk having him around. Anyway, he's shown no interest at all in helping me with my retirement project; in fact, he's ridiculed it every chance he's gotten since I told him about it. I can't have a partner working against me."

"You really can't blame him for being less than enthusiastic about running down the worst elements of criminal society. I'd be worried if he was gung-ho about it. Nope, sorry, Milt, but that sounds like more the symptom than the cause. Seems to me you're just playing out the hand you were dealt, never letting yourself care about anyone else."

"Exactly." The note of desperation in Hardcastle's voice made it difficult for Harper to keep from wincing. "If you don't care one way or another about someone, you can't get hurt when you're left behind. I've given up enough hostages to fate. More than enough. No more."

"Sounds like another way of dying."

Hardcastle nailed him with a glare. "Bull.Shit."

"You're welcome." The Lieutenant held up two fingers, ticking off his observations "One: You don't want to let McCormick out of your sphere of influence. Two: You don't want to keep him around, for whatever reason." He leaned back in his chair. "Have I got the picture?"

"And to think I invited you to butt in. Kid may be right at that. Could be I'm brain dead and just haven't caught on yet."

"Maybe you ought to let it go. After all, this a street kid; it's hard to predict how he'll jump. Self-preservation is deeply ingrained. He seems like a fairly decent sort, considering where you got him, but how much of it is an act for your benefit?"

"Devil's advocate doesn't suit you, Frank. All right, McCormick's stubborn, aggravating, volatile, infuriating...you name it. But he sure isn't acting. He doesn't hide a thing. When he isn't careful, his eyes give it all away...everything he's feeling."

"Milt, you're talking about a guy who seems to have come out of two years in San Quentin pretty much unscathed. You know that doesn't happen. The scars are there, someplace, whether or not they show. Two years in prison is a long time, even if you try saying it real fast." He glanced away, adding quietly, "Could be he's an outlaw!"

"I don't read it that way. The kid's a maverick. Bent a little, but not broken. I hate to see him go bad, and it can happen. He's on the edge. If he's going to straighten himself up, it's going to have to be done now."

"Let me see if I've got this straight. You'll work with the kind that you don't give a shit about, but when one comes along who you might come to care about, you'll turn your back and wait for some kind of catastrophe to take him." It was very obvious that Hardcastle has having difficulty holding his temper in check. "I dunno, Milt; sounds lame to me."

"The catastrophe's already happened, to hear him tell it. Loud and often. Judge Milton C. Hardcastle. Aww, hell, Frank, that's not even the half of it. Even if we were both willing to start again, he simply will not acknowledge that I have any authority over him. He won't--"

"Knuckle under?" Harper interrupted with a grin, "Would you really want him to?" Hardcastle shifted uncomfortably, not answering. But Harper had known the answer before he asked the question. "You know what this reminds me of?"

"What?"

"Remember that story you told me about Lucifer, the meanest mule in Clarence? How no one could tame him, or control him, or work him? About how you, at fifteen, were determined to prove everyone wrong, and break him to the plow yourself?"

"Is there a point to this, Frank?"

Harper continued, undeterred, "You talked your dad into trading three goats for him, then put the first saddle on him that he'd ever had. You remember what happened the first time you jumped on his back?"

"Yeah. The SOB threw me."

"And the second time? And the third?"

"Ran me into the fence; then knocked me off on a low-hanging tree limb."

"The point is, you didn't give up when he rebelled. How did you get him to take a saddle, and, later, to pull the plow?"

Hardcastle gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Those other farmers, they tried to whip and beat him into submission. All I used was a little kindness and patience; along

with a well-placed kick every now and then. Took awhile, but it paid off. He came around just fine."

Harper smiled broadly. "So, what's the difference now?"

"The difference," Hardcastle said levelly, "is a matter of intelligence. I'm dealing with a whole different level of intellect." He got to his feet, placing the empty coffee cup on Harper's desk. "Lucifer was a lot smarter than McCormick."

"Give him that chance. Set a limit on how far, and stick to it. And keep your cool. Knowing you, that's gonna be the hardest part. You do have a few other options. You can drop the idea of your retirement project, or start lining up another candidate. Either of those sound appealing?"

"Appalling." The Judge shook his head ruefully. "You give lousy comfort. Hope your advice is better. Heads, I win; Tails, he loses...that's the 'how' it's gonna be. Gull's-Way, or go away." He started for the office door.

"Jesse James. Sundance. Cool Hand Luke..." Harper called the names to Hardcastle as the Judge slammed the door behind him.

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McCormick's usual method of dealing with anything he couldn't handle was simple: he didn't think about it. But the grim reality of the holding cell refused to be ignored, and as his discomfort mounted, so did his resentment against Hardcastle. It was the same kind of resentment and hatred that had kept him going the two years he'd spent in San Quentin. The same feelings he had clung to so desperately when he made parole, unwilling to give up the carefully structured defense.

And yet, after only a few weeks in Hardcastle's custody, the hatred had faded, and the resentment was grudgingly becoming respect. He couldn't quite pinpoint when it had started, and was unable to prevent it from going any further. But to all intents and purposes, the turnaround had been completely one-sided. Hardcastle seemed to have it in for him right from the start. Even when he'd made parole, Hardcase was there, walking on his heels, watching for any mistake. All the time looking for an excuse. It was stupid of him to hope that there was anything more to it. Hardcastle was determined to drop him back in stir; the catalog of charges he'd recited, reminding McCormick of the sword he held, made it obvious. Even taking the Coyote hadn't been as big a mistake as trusting to the Judge's sense of what was fair.

Yet...Hardcastle really hadn't appeared vindictive while propelling him into a sort of indentured servitude. Just full of enthusiasm for hunting the ones that slid through on technicalities, oozed through the cracks in the system; and he'd steamrollered right over McCormick in forcing agreement to his Lone Ranger and Tonto plans. But there had been one other deciding factor, something that made him trust Hardcastle enough to go along with his plans to trap Cody. He could have charged Barbara as an accessory, when she spilled it all to him. But he had let it go; just given that look to show he hadn't missed it. And the time spent up in San Francisco, there was something there...something so close...

They'd had some differences, but it hadn't stopped them from being able to work together. And for a few days, it looked like they might make a team after all, regardless of how impossible it had appeared when Hardcastle first made the proposal. No sense in trying to kid himself about it; the Judge wasn't half bad up in San Francisco. He could have gotten to like that guy. Not as a friend, not like Flip, but enough to stand with him on the jobs...strictly business...

It dawned on him then; maybe, just maybe, that was it. Hardcastle had made it clear that he only wanted a working relationship. Had said straight out that he wasn't looking for a buddy. The Judge had obviously mistaken his natural friendliness as a scam, an effort on McCormick's part to con him into being a pal instead of a jailer, so that Hardcastle would go easy on the custody stuff...That might be

making the Judge think twice about keeping him on as a sidekick...

If that was it, maybe he could still fix it. Back off to an arm's-length arrangement. Depression swelled another degree with the realization. If he had had time to get to know Hardcastle well enough, to know which buttons to push, he could have pulled it off. But, as with everything else in his life, it was too little, too late.

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"...And don't forget, Judge Hardcastle, as soon as we finish our interview with Judge Melton, we'll want you all back for a group picture. So please, keep your robe on so there won't be any delays. We should be ready for the photo session in thirty minutes." The insipid female interviewer dragged her equally insipid photographer down the hallway, searching for Melton's office.

Relieved to have an half hour to himself, Hardcastle decided that McCormick had sweated enough, having spent the entire morning in the holding cell. Confinement was a strong persuader.

As he strode down the hallway to the elevator, he turned over various approaches in his mind. Admitting to McCormick that he was actually having second thoughts about sending him up was definitely out of the question; no way would he ever let the ex-con know he'd consider going back on a decision. So he needed a good, plausible reason for relenting, one that depended on McCormick's future 'good behavior'. That would work out better for both of them; let the hothead know there were limits, and with those limits came consequences for exceeding them...

It certainly sounded good on paper, but in practice?

Well, they would soon find out.

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McCormick started at the sharp click of the cell door, the sound breaking into his dismal thoughts. Glancing up, he wasn't really surprised to see the object of his thoughts standing just inside the doorway, black robes and all; his courtroom nemesis, and courtyard guardian. The fact that the Judge had appeared at all gave him a faint glimmer of hope; after all, by now everything had been arranged, all that was left was the I-told-you-so's. Hardcastle didn't need a personal appearance for that. No, Hardcastle was here for a reason, a purpose. And since admitting to defeat was one thing the Judge refused to do, that might be his one, last chance to turn things around. He knew he'd have to be the one to give in; not a surrender, but a compromise - if compromise was still possible.

Hardcastle studied him for a few seconds, brows raised. "Nothing to say, sport? That's a first. Amazing how a coupla hours in a locked room can help a guy see where he's gone wrong. Helps him concentrate, and all that."

It wasn't quite the opening he was hoping for, and he pulled himself together, holding tight against showing any of the anguish he felt. He answered carefully, trying to be neither sarcastic nor condescending, "I can guarantee that you're having a lot more fun out there looking in than I am being inside me, looking out. This is it then, huh?"

The Judge gave no response, no indication which way he might be leaning. There was an awful sense of deja vu, of that first trial, and the fear that the outcome just might be the same. The not knowing was more torturous than the certainty, and he finally accepted the inevitable. "How much longer do I have to wait here? I mean, if it's going to take a few more hours, I'd like a chance to...take care of some things. Find a place for the Coyote and...stuff. Or is that too much to ask?"

Slowly, as if the reply wasn't what he had planned to give, "I was in a pretty bad mood last night..."

"Tell me about it; I was there, remember?"

Hardcastle rubbed a hand over his eyes. This wasn't going to escalate to total warfare; that wasn't the solution, not what he had decided on. "Don't you ever know when to leave bad enough alone?" McCormick shrugged, shoulders slumping. Whatever life had been in him seemed to have drained away in the past few seconds. When he had entered the cell, McCormick hadn't bothered to stand, had remained sitting on the built-in bunk, legs drawn up, back resting against the wall. He was strongly reminded of their first meeting, the fright showing at the start, and the light of battle. Then the terrible emptiness, the shell he'd left behind as he prepared himself for what he'd have to endure. "It was your fault, you know."

"I know."

Kid wasn't going to make it easy, damn him. Limits. How could he set a limit on understanding and honesty? How could a person's basic nature be measured and restricted, without losing the qualities that had drawn him in the first place? And, on top of all that, what was a worse consequence than several years in prison? His carefully constructed scenario was falling apart at the seams; and if he couldn't get an agreement in black and white, then he'd settle for gray. And never let McCormick know it.

"So, why'd you do it? Had to have had some reason."

There were long seconds of silence, before McCormick finally answered, "I dunno. After you got me into your custody, I guess...I started thinking that, maybe, I might have been as wrong about you as you were about me. And I wanted you to see that you were wrong; my mistake was expecting you to admit it." And... Hardcastle's acceptance of him, had, for some reason, been important to him; McCormick couldn't deny that, not to himself. Not that it mattered now.

"You'll have plenty of time to...arrange things," Hardcastle said quietly, finally answering McCormick's earlier question. "You're gonna be serving your time at Gull's Way. I oughtta have my head examined, but...you're gettin' a reprieve."

It took all of five seconds for the words to sink in and register, then the response was immediate. McCormick was on his feet, face and voice animated, "Look, Judge, I'm willing to try; I really am. I just sorta...forget, sometimes, ya know? But from now on, it's whatever you say, Jack; just tell me what to do and I'll do it. No more arguing. Whatever. Rules is rules, and all that shit. Okay, deal?"

"HAH!" The Judge half-laughed, recognizing the quick 'transformation' for what it was; he gave the kid an appraising look, watching him squirm under it. "You know, McCormick, you're about one more dumb move away from finishing up your time the hard way."

"Too much, huh?" He couldn't keep the impish grin under wraps. It was back again, the warmth and the humor. Question was, what had he done to drive it away? And more important, what had he done to bring it back??

Hardcastle held his thumb and forefinger about a half-inch apart. "Just a little, yeah." What the hell, why fight it? Go with the flow and see how things work out. It wasn't something he would have chosen, or planned to do; and maybe that was the attraction...the challenge, and the unexpected rewards. Having seen McCormick with his defenses laying in rubble, he'd seen the boy that lived in the man. And he couldn't penalize him for what he couldn't help being. If the kid could handle the job, then he would handle his fears. This was the jumping-off point, and he could keep trying for as long as McCormick did.

"Can we go now?"

"Okay, listen up, kiddo. Same rules, new game. But first of all, I gotta finish up here." He motioned for McCormick to approach. "C'mhere."



McCormick eyed him suspiciously. "What for?"

Holding up the handcuffs, Hardcastle explained in a patient tone, "Rules, remember? Technically, you're still under arrest. Can't leave the room without 'em."

Sighing, McCormick held his hands out before him. The Judge snapped on the cuffs, quickly and expertly, and with a broad smile. McCormick grinned back, not about to be out done.

While Hardcastle took care of paperwork, McCormick retrieved his personal effects. Holding onto a handful of change, he sighted several vending machines set in an alcove; soft drinks, coffee, candy, chips, and cigarettes. Everything one would need to get through an average day, and he had just been through several un-average days in the past few hours. Keeping Hardcastle in sight, he stuffed candy bars and cigarettes into his pockets, and quickly drained a 12-ounce Coke just as the Judge began looking around for him.

Catching sight of McCormick near the vending machines, Hardcastle waved him over, "All taken care of. Now," he continued as McCormick fell in step next to him, "I still gotta get back to Melton's chambers for that damn group photo." At the ex-con's questioning look, he added, "Don't ask; take forever to explain. And I feel like I've done more talking in the past twelve hours than I have in the past twelve years."

"I wasn't gonna ask. I just figured that black robes were de rigueur whenever you got within sight of any legal-type building." McCormick chuckled as they stepped outside into the bright sunlight. He dug into his shirt pocket for a cigarette, and had it between his lips before realizing, a bit belatedly, that he didn't have a lighter.

That proved not to be a problem, however, as Hardcastle took the unlit cigarette and tossed it to the ground. "What's the matter with you," he growled, "You know there's no smoking while you're in my custody."

"Reflex action. You know, like when you go for your gun?"

Searching his pockets for the keys, Hardcastle grumbled, "Those things'll kill ya!"

"And bullets won't?"

Locating the keys, the Judge smiled tightly, "Well, this is it, kiddo; last chance to renege."

McCormick summoned up his most annoyingly cocky grin, "You wish."

Removing the cuffs, Hardcastle gave him a hearty slap on the arm, grinning widely, "Okay, just remember, these are your terms; you blow it, that's it."

Certain that he was once again on top of the situation, McCormick smirked, swaggering down the court steps. That was one thing, Hardcastle admitted to himself, that the ex-con did better than anyone else he knew. The Judge called out to him before he reached the sidewalk, "The GMC is in the side lot. I expect to find you in it, and it still in the parking lot, when I get through here."

"Okay, but don't take too long. I've missed my morning tanning session; got some catching up to do." With a wave, McCormick took off at a jog for the parking lot.

Hardcastle shook his head, watching him, "'Tanning session'," he snorted. "I'll give him a 'tanning session'."

Then he gave a light-hearted chuckle, and entered the courthouse in a much more cheerful frame of mind than he had been in five hours earlier.

§§§

Hardcastle frowned at his scrambled eggs. They were light and fluffy, just the way

he liked them; the bacon was crisp, the coffee was hot. Yet the breakfast table wasn't the perfect picture it presented, mainly because McCormick was determined to be the focal point of perfection. His 'new beginning', as the kid had solemnly stated during the ride back to Gull's-Way the previous evening. And if it kept up, it was going to be a 'new ending'. McCormick was being excruciatingly courteous; and the Judge quickly discovered, to his chagrin, that he didn't like it.

"Okay, McCormick," he said finally, after the ex-con had very politely asked for the jelly to be passed his way, eyes firmly fixed on the toast as he made his request, "You can stop the 'orphan of the storm' routine right now. I'm not gonna send you back to prison just because you've got a smart mouth, no matter what the provocation or justification. Got it?"

McCormick glanced at the Judge, "That's got nothing to do with it, Hardcastle. You mentioned earlier that you didn't care for my smart mouth. I'm just tryin' to work on it, that's all."

"Un-huh. We'll see how long that lasts." Although prison was no longer an immediate threat, it was pretty obvious that McCormick had somehow sensed that the Judge was having second thoughts about his choice for a partner. Damn kid. Too intuitive for comfort sometimes. He sipped at his coffee, resisting the impulse to tell the kid to wipe the jelly from his upper lip. "So...you ready to start earnin' your keep, kiddo?"

"On a case, you mean? You got one picked out?"

"Yep. Finally get to see if you've got what it takes to be a 'Tonto'."

McCormick grinned for the first time that morning. "You're gonna be the brains, and I'm gonna be the muscle? That how you figure it?"

Hardcastle chuckled at the figure of speech, unable to help comparing the slender ex-con's build to his own. "You're gonna do the legwork, McCormick. 'Muscle' I already got."

"Yeah, well, ya know what they say," McCormick begin, "Strong body, weak--" He stopped in mid-sentence, mouth clamping shut like a puppet whose string had just been yanked.

"You were sayin' something, McCormick?" Hardcastle appreciated the attempt, but he couldn't quite hide his amusement at the amount of effort it took for this kid not to wise off.

"Uh...no, not me, Judge. Not a word."

The poolside phone began to ring and Hardcastle reached for it, not missing McCormick's relieved sigh at the interruption.

"Hello." He frowned after the first words, not liking what he was hearing, and tried to recognize the voice. Hanging up the receiver, he stared out at nothing in particular.

"Judge? Is something wrong?"

Hardcastle focused on the ex-con, having momentarily forgotten his presence. "I don't know." He shrugged, "Probably not, but ya never can be sure with these things. We'd better check it out."

McCormick was looking at him strangely. "Hardcase, I hope you know what you're talking about, 'cause I sure as hell don't. Can't be sure about what? And better check what out?"

Hardcastle nodded toward the phone. "Death threat."

"What!?" McCormick's voice cracked and he stared at the phone, his eyes growing wide.

"Don't go tyin' yourself into a knot, kiddo, 'cause it probably doesn't mean a thing."

"Wait a minute, lemme get this straight. Somebody just called you and threatened your life? And you're just sittin' here?!"

"McCormick," Hardcastle sighed, "I said I'm gonna check it out. Are you plannin' on having a nervous breakdown every time something happens?"

"But...but...Judge? A death threat?"

"It's not the first one I've ever had. Far from it."

"It's not?" McCormick was amazed at how calm the Judge was about it.

"Stop and think, kiddo. How many hundreds...make that thousands...have I sent up during my lifetime? You think you don't like me? You're just the tail end of a long line, kiddo."

"And you're Number One on the Convicted Felons Hit Parade."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Do you hear me laughing?" McCormick snapped, more sharply than he had intended.

"No, I guess not," Hardcastle replied, his interest drawn by the kid's intent look. Maybe McCormick was going to shape up and be useful.

"Hell, Hardcase! You're a walking target, and I'm the guy sitting next to you!"

Hardcastle froze. He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he'd been hoping for, but this sure wasn't it. "Don't worry about it, McCormick," he growled, standing and shoving his chair back, "If I'm a 'target', as you so quaintly put it, I'm a nice, damn big one. You're not gonna get blown away just 'cause of being in the same general vicinity."

"That didn't come out the way I meant it, Judge," McCormick protested.

"Yeah, sure, kid."

"No...I mean..." McCormick stumbled for the right words, finally shaking his head in defeat. "You're so calm. Someone calls you up, at your own home, threatens your life, and you don't even break into a sweat."

Hardcastle looked at the younger man for a long moment, disappointment settling over him like a cloud. Well, that's what he got for following his heart instead of his head. "I'll see ya later, kid."

"See me later?" McCormick jumped up. "Whattaya mean? Where are you going?"

"To take care of this business," Hardcastle said, walking off. He quickened his steps, shutting out whatever it was that McCormick was yelling after him. At this point, he wasn't interested in anything the kid had to say.

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Finishing his coffee, McCormick wandered around the patio, feeling at loose ends. He had planned to spend the day fine-tuning the Judge's Corvette, but it had roared out of the drive ten minutes earlier with a silent and fierce-looking Hardcastle at its wheel.

He must be setting a record for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. He wasn't all that scared, and hadn't meant for it to sound that way. He just hadn't stopped to think about how many guys didn't like ol' Hardcase. And, okay, the Judge was cool about it, doesn't get upset. But, dammit, he was used to it, said so himself. Bet he was scared shitless the first time it happened, though; that kind of thing took some getting used to if you weren't expecting it...and McCormick hadn't been expecting it. If only Hardcastle had let him explain; but no, not Hardcase. He had

to go barreling off on his own, leaving him to sit there like some snotnose kid.

"Mark? Did Judge Hardcastle say how long he would be gone?"

McCormick spun around, surprised to see Sarah standing by the table, gathering up the remains of their abandoned breakfast. "I didn't know you were out here, Sarah. Uh, no, the Judge didn't say how long he'd be." He hesitated, uncertain whether to say anything more. Did Hardcastle usually keep his housekeeper informed on this kind of stuff? Hell, maybe she was used to it, too.

"What's wrong, Mark?"

"Nuthin'," he muttered, trying to ignore the concerned look in the lined face. "The Judge had to go take care of some business. It'll be okay, I guess. He seems to think so, anyway."

"You're as bad as the Judge when it comes to talking in riddles," she said with asperity.

"I don't mean to be," he told her honestly. "I just don't know how much I'm supposed to say about things, ya know? This is a whole new ballgame for me, Sarah, and I don't even know the rules yet."

"You'll learn them soon enough, Mark. The Judge will see to that."

"Will he?" McCormick asked, more to himself than to the woman standing in front of him. After hitting bottom yesterday morning, followed by a breakfast this morning that resulted in Hardcastle's stalking off by himself, he had serious doubts that the Judge would ever say anything to him again. "I dunno, Sarah," he said finally, "Every time I think there might be a chance that things will work out, I end up getting my walking papers. I don't really expect this to be any different."

"You're wrong."

"Sarah..."

"No. Now, you listen to me," she said firmly. "I don't know what kind of disagreement you and Judge Hardcastle have had, but I'm not blind. I could tell that something was wrong when neither of you appeared for breakfast or lunch yesterday. And this morning, the two of you were sitting there like two statues, the Judge staring at you, and you staring at the table."

"I was not."

"You were. Mark," she sighed, running a hand through her gray hair, "I know that living here is a difficult adjustment for you. And you're right, you don't know the rules that the Judge lives his life by, and expects you to conform to. But you're young, you can adjust, and learn those rules in time. It would--"

"Why?" McCormick interrupted quietly.

"What?"

"Why-is-it-always-me?! I can learn. I can adjust. Okay, maybe that's true. God knows, I've managed to adjust to some strange situations in my life so far. But why does it always have to be me? Just once, I'd like to see somebody make some changes in their life to adjust to me, instead of always expecting me to make all the changes."

"Would you really expect the Judge to change?"

"No," McCormick admitted, "But it would be damned nice to know that he at least made the effort. To know that he cared enough to try."

"Mark, I told you your first night here, the Judge cares. Oh, not about groups and popular causes; but about people, individual people. And if he didn't care about you, you wouldn't be here. I think you know that."

McCormick shook his head, confused as ever about the course his life seemed to be following. He had promised to make an effort, to follow Hardcastle's rules and regulations without complaint. But that was becoming increasingly difficult to do for the Hardcastle who froze him out, who glared at him as if he was something less than human. Yet he had seen another side of Hardcastle, generous, indulgent, and most of all, just being there--that Hardcastle was worth making an effort for. Christ, it was like living with Jekyll and Hyde.

"What can I say, Sarah? I'm stuck here, for better or worse. And I'm gonna do my best to make it for 'better'."

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Lieutenant Frank Harper divided his lunch carefully in half, sliding a roast beef sandwich and three homemade cookies across his desk. "And you're sure you didn't recognize the voice, Milt?"

"No, I already told you that," Hardcastle said grouchily, picking up a sandwich and glaring at it. "What are you making me repeat myself for?"

"You say you got a call from a guy who says he's gonna kill ya because he owes ya. You don't pick up on the voice, or anything in the background that might give us some kind of clue as to where to look...and then you act like I can run out and arrest this guy while you sit here and wait."

"Is that how I'm acting?" Hardcastle smiled, acknowledging his behavior as he bit into the sandwich. "Sorry, Frank."

"Nah," Harper brushed aside the apology, "You're not the only one in the city that thinks that way. C'mon, let's go down to Records. Maybe we can dig up something."

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McCormick threw the pool skimmer down and checked his watch. It had been almost three hours since the Judge had huffed off, giving no indication of where he was going or when he would return.

"Not that I'm worried about the ol' donkey," McCormick assured himself. "Still ... he should have taken me with him to ride shotgun. Hi-ho, and all that shit. What if that nut tries to jump him while he's out by himself? Guess he thought about that, though. Damn, why did I have to open my big mouth? The old bastard runs me crazy, but it wouldn't be right if something happened to him because of my not being there. That's what our deal was supposed to be - me being his fast gun. Not him going out there alone, being a target; while I'm behind the lines, cleaning his pool!"

Picking up the skimmer, he tried to concentrate on the job at hand, without much success. It wasn't a comfortable feeling, worrying about Hardcastle, and he wasn't sure how to deal with it.

His slow approach to the poolhouse stopped suddenly. Either his eyes were playing tricks, or there had been some type of movement in the shadows. Easing forward quietly, he hoped like hell that it wasn't a snake, because those he was definitely terrified of. Sure wouldn't improve his bravery quotient for Hardcastle to come home and find his erstwhile Tonto standing on a deck chair and frantically yelling "Shoo!".

Hearing the screen door slam, he turned and saw Sarah approaching with a glass of tea. "Sarah," he called out, intending to ask if she had ever seen snakes around the pool. He never had time to ask, and later would be hard-pressed to describe exactly what happened; it was all so fast.

Sarah stood, horror on her face, as the large, middle-aged man jumped out and clutched her around the shoulders, a .38 pressed against her temple. The glass fell unnoticed to the ground, shattering on the concrete.

"What the hell..." McCormick began.

"Don't move," the man ordered, emphasizing his point with the gun. "Where's Hardcastle?"

"Don't tell him, Mark."

"You shuttup!" The gunbarrel glanced lightly against her temple, a warning gesture, "Are you Hardcastle's wife?"

"Hey, you leave her alone!" McCormick yelled.

"I am not Judge Hardcastle's wife," Sarah said, speaking at the same time as McCormick. "I'm his housekeeper."

"Okay, housekeeper, so where's the Judge?"

"I don't know," Sarah replied.

"That's the truth," McCormick jumped in before Sarah could be harmed. "We don't know where he went, but I'm sure he'll be back soon."

The gunman looked at him skeptically. "If you don't know where he went, then how do you know when he'll get back?"

"Uhhh...because this is Wednesday," McCormick said, stalling for time. "He always runs errands on Wednesdays. You know, pays bills, gets a haircut, has his gavel polished, stuff like that..."

"Are you tryin' to be cute, buddy?"

"No, not really. Just answering your questions." McCormick replied, trying to find some angle at which he could jump this guy.

"I know what you're thinking, sonny; and I'm tellin' you right now, don't try it or this will be one very dead old lady."

McCormick swallowed. "Let her go," he said quietly.

"No way in hell. I want Hardcastle, and she's gonna be my insurance that I get him!"

"You're the guy that called this morning..." McCormick cursed himself for being so slow to realize what was happening. "Hey, man, let her go. She's just the housekeeper. She's got nothing to do with whatever it is going down between you and the Judge."

"Aww, you're breaking my heart, kid. Who the hell are you, anyway?" He took in McCormick's faded-out jeans and T-shirt, "If she's the housekeeper, what're you, the pool boy?" He snickered.

"No." McCormick tried to make eye contact with Sarah, hoping desperately that she could read his expression, would understand what he was doing. "I'm the Judge's son!"

"Is that right?" The gunman said, interest in his voice.

"Yeah, that's right; so let her go. I'll be your insurance."

"No, Mark," Sarah blurted out, "Don't do it."

"C'mon," McCormick went on a persuasive tone, before the guy had a chance to turn his attention to Sarah, "Let her go. You want the...my father...right? Well, who do you think he's gonna care more about? His son, or an old housekeeper that's probably gonna drop dead of a heart attack any minute?"

"I'll keep both of you," the gunman grinned.

"Nope, won't work. Think about it."

"What the hell are you talking about? Get over here and quit wasting my time!"

McCormick approached, his eyebrows arching a 'you all right?' gesture to Sarah; relieved when she nodded back to him. "What I'm talking about is...you say you want

us as insurance that you get Hardcastle. Only, you're going to have to take us inside, 'cause you're a sittin' duck out here, right?"

"I know that, man. What do you think I am, some kind of fool?"

'Absolutely', McCormick thought, trying not to let it show on his face. "Hey, you take us inside, and what happens? The old man could come in with half a dozen friends, and then what are you gonna do? But if you let her go...she stays outside and tells him whats going on, so he comes in alone."

The gunman narrowed his eyes, considering the proposition. He didn't see the old woman that he was holding from behind wink at the young man that stood in front of them.

"Oh, Mark," Sarah said, fluttering her eyes and reaching toward her heart, "I don't feel well..." She sagged slightly.

"See? See!?" McCormick said quickly, capitalizing on Sarah's contribution. "I'm telling you, man...she's got a history of heart trouble, and you're gonna give her a heart attack if you don't let her go. She can't be any use to you, dead."

"Okay, okay." He turned the housekeeper loose, keeping his gun carefully trained on the young man as he solicitously helped her settle into one of the poolside chairs.

"You'll be okay, Sarah," McCormick was saying, patting her hand. His back to the gunman, he stared meaningfully at the half-hidden phone. "We'll both be okay if we just do what the man says. You know what to tell... 'Dad' when he gets here?"

"Yes, Mark, I understand."

"No, you don't, old lady; you don't understand anything. But that don't matter." The gunman grabbed McCormick by the neck of the T-shirt, pulling him back. He pushed the barrel of the gun against McCormick's skull, issuing instructions to Sarah. "You tell the Judge...if he wants to see his kid again...alive...he better come on inside. He better be alone, and he better be unarmed. He tries anything, and his kid is dead meat. I'll blow his goddamned head off, and I won't think twice while I'm doing it. You got that?"

"Yes," Sarah answered, tight-lipped.

"Oh, and I wouldn't want you to even think about sneaking away and calling the cops. God knows what I might do to the Judge's kid, here, if I thought you'd done something like that. Isn't that right, sonny-boy?" The man moved suddenly, jerking his captive around and slamming a knee into his stomach, following it with a fist to the jaw that threw McCormick to the ground.

"Stop it!" Sarah gasped.

"Just showing you what happens if I get mad," he said, grabbing McCormick and pulling him upright. "And calling the cops would make me real mad, so you don't want to do that."

"Please," Sarah said anxiously, watching McCormick wipe at the blood that was trickling from his mouth, "Don't hurt Mark. I'll do whatever you say, just leave the boy alone."

"You got it, old lady. Won't nothing happen to junior, here, as long as everybody does like they're supposed to. Now, me and the kid are going inside. When his old man gets home, you tell him how it is, and send him on in. Anything, anything different happens, junior will need a closed casket because he won't look very pretty time I get through with him. And you tell Hardcastle I said that. You make sure he understands."

"I will," Sarah said quietly, nodding her head at McCormick.

Already tired of being hauled around, McCormick didn't hesitate when the gunman indicated for him to start walking. Casting a quick glance back at Sara, he hoped that he was reading her right. The nod had been reassuring, implying that she did understand. God help him if she didn't.

They were barely inside the door when Sarah picked up the phone, moved to the cover of the poolhouse, and began to ~~call~~  
dial.

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"...A yellow streak? McCormick? Are you sure?" Harper continued their conversation as the elevator doors slid open and he and Hardcastle walked back to his office. "You must have seen something in this kid to make you pick him in the first place, and it doesn't figure that a race car driver would be a coward."

"That's true. But you didn't see him when I got that call this morning. I did."

"Well, I suppose people can change." Harper eyed the Judge shrewdly. "Why do I get the feeling that you're leaving something out?" He closed his office door behind them, and went to his desk.

Hardcastle cleared his throat, uncomfortable at the question. When the police lieutenant's phone began to ring, he couldn't help but give a sigh of relief at the diversion, smiling slightly as he remembered McCormick sighing for the very same reason earlier that day.

"Yeah, he's still here," Harper said, his gaze fixing on Hardcastle. "Does she want to speak to me or to him?"

"What's going on?" Hardcastle mouthed silently.

"Sarah? Yeah...slow down...he's right here. Yeah, sitting right here in front of my desk. Is something wrong? Do you want to talk to him?"

"Gimme that," Hardcastle growled, reaching out and grabbing the receiver from Harper's hand. "If that damn kid has taken off, I'll...Sarah? What's happened?"

Hardcastle could feel the blood draining from his face as Sarah related the events that had taken place in his absence. Assuring her that they were on the way, he slammed down the phone and filled Harper in.

Quickly alerting his men, Harper turned a cool stare on the Judge. "Don't even think it, Milt."

"It's my house, Frank. And it's me he wants."

"And it's you he'll kill as soon as you walk in."

"Not if your men are covering me right."

"Milt..."

"I'm not gonna let him kill that kid." The words were spoken quietly, unemotionally, but they left no doubt as to Hardcastle's intentions.

Harper's mouth tightened imperceptibly, but he finally nodded in agreement. "You're one hard-headed sonofabitch, Milt, you know that?"

"Probably so, but I know what I'm doin'."

"I hope so. You thought you knew what you were doing with McCormick, but turns out you were wrong."

"How's that?"

"Well, for one thing, his 'yellow streak', remember? Uh-huh, only now, Sarah says that he traded himself as hostage to save her. That doesn't sound like any kind of yellow streak I ever heard of. Not to mention pulling my cop outta the black-and-



white before it blew."

Hardcastle nodded slowly, suddenly remembering a conversation he and McCormick had had while in San Francisco. Remembering, in particular, one statement the kid had come out with: 'Just took me by surprise; and I don't like surprises. I have to think things through, but then I handle 'em just fine. So don't be worryin' about my end of it.'

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, as another part of the multi-faceted personality that was Mark McCormick slid into clear focus. The kid hadn't been scared when the phone call came; he'd been surprised. And, being McCormick, he had blurted out the first thing that popped to mind without stopping to think about how it would sound. And, Hardcastle admitted to himself reluctantly, he himself had wasted no time in passing judgement. Didn't even give him two seconds to explain, but just stomped off.

"Milt? You ready?" Harper asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Yeah." Hardcastle headed for the door with a determined look on his face. "Let's go."

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McCormick leaned back in his chair, trying to find a comfortable position; impossible with his hands tied so tightly behind him. Leave it to Hardcastle to have a ball of heavy-duty twine in his desk drawer - the man was a pack rat. Of course, the Judge had never planned for a gun toting lunatic to drop into his den and need to tie someone up; but hey, McCormick thought ruefully, let's be prepared for anything, right?

Ol' Hardcase was gonna shit a brick when Sarah told him what he had done. McCormick almost smiled, thinking of the Judge's reaction. An ex-con car thief having the gall to pass himself off as a Hardcastle. The Judge's son, yet. The man was going to turn purple when he heard that part, probably have apoplexy, and this would all be for nothing.

"Sit still, kid," the man spoke up suddenly, "You're makin' me jumpy."

McCormick frowned, hating the sight of this creep sitting in the Judge's chair, his feet propped up on the Judge's desk. "Why do you want to kill my father?" He asked, continuing the ruse.

"None of your business, so just shut up."

"Bet I can guess," McCormick went on, in what he hoped sounded like the bored, superior tone of a spoiled 'I-get-everything-I-want' rich kid. "You're a convict. Or you were a convict. Dear old dad sent you up and ruined your life forever. So now you're gonna kill the mean old judge, and that will make everything all right again!"

"You got a big mouth, kid."

"So I've been told," McCormick said sarcastically, "Never could see it myself. Bet I'm right, though. You're a convict, and you probably think you're the first one that's ever tried this. Man, you're a fool."

"I told you to shut up!" The gunman jumped to his feet, grip tightening on the .38 as he leaned over the desk. "Your old man shoulda taught you better manners."

"Yeah, well, he never had time. He was too busy sending scum like you to prison." McCormick held his breath, wondering if he was pushing too far. He wanted the man to be angry, furious, by the time the Judge arrived. If he had time to become cool and collected, he might be able to pull off his crazy plan, and the Judge would wind up dead. If he was furious, though, he wouldn't be thinking straight; he'd be careless, maybe making a mistake. And surely he wouldn't shoot the Judge's 'son' before the Judge got there. He hoped.

"Who are you calling 'scum'?" The man asked dangerously, coming around the desk to stand directly in front of McCormick.

McCormick widened his eyes and looked around the den as though searching. "Well, golly gee, Ace," he drawled, looking up, "There don't seem to be anybody here in the old cell block but you and me, does there? And we all know it can't be me."

He'd gone too far, and though he tried to pull to one side, he couldn't avoid the blow that caught him right under the eye, nor the backhand that followed it, leaving him momentarily dazed.

"You want more, kid? Just keep it up, and your old man won't even recognize you, time he gets here."

McCormick shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. Yeah, the guy was definitely pissed off. The problem was to keep the man angry without getting himself pulverized in the bargain.

McCormick sighed, assuming his best sulky expression. He squirmed in the chair once more, watching his captor's frown deepen. The Judge had said it was time for Tonto to start earning his keep, but this was one hell of a way to do it.

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Hardcastle parked in front of the main house, as though he had no idea of the events taking place. Adjusting the bullet-proof vest beneath his shirt, he climbed out of the 'Vette and bellowed loudly for Sarah.

She appeared almost instantly, coming from the pool area. The Judge quickly maneuvered her to stand beside the car, placing himself between her and the gunman inside.

"Thank goodness, you're here, Your Honor," she said nervously, her eyes darting toward the house.

"Just stay calm, Sarah, and act like this is the first you're telling me about what's going on."

"There's not much more to tell. This horrible man just appeared out of nowhere with a gun, saying that he 'wanted Hardcastle'. He would have kept us both as hostages except that Mark lied to him. Made him think that I had a heart condition, and would probably die of fright at any moment."

"The kid's a quick thinker," Hardcastle admitted, acknowledging one of the reasons he had chosen McCormick in the first place. "You're sure you didn't recognize the guy, Sarah?"

"No, I've never seen him before in my life." She hesitated, then touched the Judge's arm lightly, "There is one more thing, though; I didn't have time to mention it on the phone."

"What's that?" Hardcastle resisted the temptation to sweep the area with his eyes. Harper's men should all be moving into place, but he didn't want to take a chance on the gunman wondering what he was looking around for.

"The main reason that awful man was willing to let me go... Mark told him that he was your son."

"He did what!?" Hardcastle was too stunned to be angry or upset. Where did the kid come up with that one? He couldn't know. He couldn't...unless Sarah...

"Oh, no, Your Honor," Sarah said, obviously reading his thoughts. "I've never said a word to him about your son. Mark just said that to make himself sound like a more valuable hostage than a housekeeper."

"Worked pretty good, too." Hardcastle muttered, looking toward the house. Sarah followed his look, and he turned his attention back to her. "What is it, Sarah?"

Something more?"

"Your Honor, you can't go inside. He'll kill you. Surely there's some way the police can get Mark out of there?"

"We'll get him out, Sarah." Hardcastle reassured her. "But you know I've gotta go in. I can't take a chance on him killin' McCormick while I hide in the bushes."

"He said...he said that if you try anything, your... 'son'...would need a closed casket by the time he was through. He said for me to tell you that," she finished in a rush.

"Oh, he did, did he?" Hardcastle's voice was steely, masking his concern.

"Yes, and...I think he meant it because he was already hitting Mark before they went inside. I'm sorry," Sarah fought at the tears welling up in her eyes, "but I wish that Mark had been off with you this morning--I only stayed because you said never to leave him at the estate alone. Today is market day, you know." Hardcastle nodded, and she continued, "I know that he just wanted to save me, but he could get killed. He's so young, Your Honor."

Hardcastle patted Sarah's shoulder absently, feeling her words hit home. She was right, the kid should have been with him. Would have been, if he hadn't flown off the handle. His temper had always been a fault that he had paid a high price for, but the price this time might be more than he could bear to think about. The fact that the gunman would have come upon an empty house and could possibly have lain in wait for whoever showed up first gave little comfort.

"It'll be okay, Sarah. Now, you get out of sight." He started for the house, wondering who the hell the gunman was? But he'd find out soon enough; he'd also get Mark out of there in one piece. He had to rescue...for all intents and purposes...his 'son'.

The thought stung in a way that McCormick had had no way of knowing that it would. A chance to rescue his son. To save him from a certain death. It was vinegar poured into an open wound. But there was something else, too, though he couldn't readily identify it, would be loathe to admit it if he could. Bittersweet, yes, but with it a soothing comfort and a lightening of a burden that he had carried for many years.

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McCormick tensed as he heard the front door open; heard the Judge call out his name...his given name. That was a first! The vagrant thought brought a small shock of pleasure. Then he realized that it meant Sarah had gotten her message across, and the Judge was playing out the role.

"Answer him, junior," the gunman said, yanking McCormick's head back.

"In here. In the den," he yelled, trying to ease his hair from the man's grip.

"Are you okay?" Hardcastle shouted, his voice sounding no closer.

"He's still in one piece," the gunman taunted, "But I'm not guaranteeing how long he's gonna stay that way. You better get on in here while I'm still willing to be reasonable."

"Not until I know who you are, and what this is all about."

"You're in no position to bargain. Either get in here, or I'll start on him. Slow."

McCormick looked up nervously, his gut feeling telling him that this man meant exactly what he said. He was out for revenge, and he wasn't going to care what happened to him after he got it.

"You listen to me," came Hardcastle's voice, "You touch one hair on his head, and I walk out this door. If I have nothing to lose, then I'll call the cops. Now, do you want to see me or not?"

The gunman looked at McCormick for a long moment, then slowly nodded. McCormick was pulled to his feet, the gun jammed against his temple. "We're coming out the door, Hardcastle. Me and your kid. When I open it, you better be standing where I can see you."

"I'm waitin'."

McCormick tried to stay calm as he was pushed toward the doorway. 'Please, God,' he thought, feeling his T-shirt cling to him clammily, 'Let ol' Hardcase be up to something. I've tried so hard to keep this guy off-center. Don't let the Judge just be standing out there with no back-up.'

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Hardcastle felt his heart sink the moment the door opened. Joe DeCosta. The man had been paroled nearly three years earlier, over Hardcastle's fierce objections.

"It's been a long time, Joe," he said coolly, trying to assess what kind of shape McCormick was in.

"Only seems that way to you, Judge. To me, it seems like yesterday."

"Whatever." Hardcastle shrugged. "I'm here, now, though, so let go of my kid."

"Maybe, maybe not. I've gotta think about it."

Hardcastle knew the anger was visible on his face. Knew, and didn't care. He'd been prepared for this particular double-cross even before he'd seen who the gunman was. There was no doubt that Harper's men were trying to cover DeCosta, to get someone in a position to take the man out with one clear shot, but what about McCormick? He was the unknown factor, and the Judge looked at him hard, trying to let him know, somehow, that they weren't in this thing alone.

"Are you okay, Mark? Looks like he's been using you for a punching bag."

"I'm okay," McCormick replied, his eyes fixed on Hardcastle with a quizzical expression.

'Easy does it, kiddo', Hardcastle thought, as he nodded his head ever so slightly hoping that McCormick would understand what he meant.

Evidently he did, the corner of his mouth turning up in what seemed to be acknowledgement.

"You're not gonna be 'okay' for long, kid," DeCosta said, missing the silent exchange that had occurred between the other two men. "It's gonna be a kick seeing your face when I blow your old man away. I gotta admit, though, I'm tempted to do you first. Whattaya think, Hardcastle? You want that extra minute of life you'll have if I stand junior against the wall here and blow his brains out while you watch?"

Hardcastle took a step forward, ignoring the gun pointing his way, his jaw clenched with determination. He had to get DeCosta out of the doorway. No way could Harper's men get a line on him as long as he stood there. "I-said-let-him-go!"

"Hey, junior," DeCosta grinned wildly, leaning into McCormick's ear, "your old man's gettin' upset. I better go ahead and put you both out of your misery, huh?"

Hardcastle's breath caught in his throat as he saw DeCosta cock the .38 and point it at McCormick's head. McCormick lost all color in that instant, turning a desperate face toward the Judge. He kicked back clumsily with one foot, which DeCosta easily avoided, still grinning maniacally. There was no time left to think.

"DeCOSTA!" Hardcastle roared, charging forward.

The slug caught him in mid-chest, and he fell backwards, hearing McCormick's anguished cry, overlaid by the sound of another gun.

Hardcastle raised up on his elbows and looked to where DeCosta lay sprawled in a lifeless appearing heap. Nearby, McCormick was picking himself up off the floor, somewhat awkwardly due to his hands being tied. "You okay, kid?"

McCormick looked at him. He blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and sat down hard. "You-- You're alive!?"

"Of course I'm alive. You don't think I'd walk into something like this without wearing a bullet-proof vest, do you?"

"Bullet-proof...you're wearin'...you mean...?"

"It's called planning ahead, kiddo." Hardcastle pushed himself up, and went over to try and untie McCormick's hands. The police had scurried into the house, but Harper hadn't arrived yet, and the Judge felt strangely like he and McCormick were having a private conversation. "Sarah called as soon as DeCosta took you into the house. I wasn't tryin' to play hero, but since I did have on the vest, I wasn't gonna stand there and watch him blow your head off. Would've made a hell of a mess," he added, grinning.

The twine finally loosened, and McCormick threw it off, rubbing his stinging hands, trying to let the blood circulate in them once more. He looked at Hardcastle balefully. "I knew you were up to something: I could tell by that look you gave me. But that was too close, Hardcase."

"I'm not arguing. It never shoulda happened. If I'd filled ya in, like I should have, told ya what to watch out for and how to be on guard, it wouldn't have."

McCormick gave him a suspicious look. "Are you sayin' you were wrong?"

Hardcastle returned the look. "Don't push your luck, McCormick."

"Okay." McCormick grinned suddenly. "It's gonna be fun, Hardcase, watchin' you fight the changes."

Hardcastle stood, somewhat taken aback by the sudden change in attitude. "What the hell are you talkin' about, McCormick?"

"Nuthin' important." McCormick got to his feet, the grin still firmly in place. "Just a little talk I had with Sarah before all of this started up."

Hardcastle shook his head, having no idea what the kid was talking about. Didn't matter, though. He'd figure it out eventually. They had all the time in the world.

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McCormick surveyed the hedge he was clipping with a not-too-critical eye. It looked...clipped.

"McCormick," came an exasperated voice, "You're supposed to trim, not mutilate. What did that bush ever do to you?"

"I'm getting it, before it gets me. Anyway, I'm new to this." McCormick threw the clippers down and caught the beer Hardcastle tossed his way. "Ya gotta remember, I come from the wonderful world of concrete yards and cement overshoes."

"Oh, and I guess I'm supposed to ignore the way you're mangling my shrubbery. Just chalk it up as a new learning experience."

McCormick grinned smugly. "You're never too old to learn."

"Was that crack directed at me?" Hardcastle asked, knowing that it was. "And, if so, don't you think you'd better change the subject before I think of a dozen more new 'learning experiences' for you?"

"Uh...right. Judge..can I ask you something?"

"Maybe."

"Why did DeCosta want you so bad? He never planned on getting away with it; he knew he'd be caught, but that didn't seem to matter. All he cared about was taking you down first."

Hardcastle paused, considering how to answer. It had been two days since the DeCosta incident, and he had been expecting the question - and maybe another one, which he wasn't going to answer. He still wasn't sure how to answer this one, though.

"I can't really tell ya, McCormick. I sent DeCosta up, same as any other criminal that came in front of my bench. Seems like the DeCostas in this world, though, they never want to accept the blame for what they did. It's always somebody else's fault. And if life still goes bad for them, once they get out, then, hey, blame the judge...he's the obvious target. It's the old story, kid. People losing all perspective 'cause it's so much easier to blame somebody else for their failures."

"That shot aimed at me?"

"Only if you want it to be."

"I guess not," McCormick said, after considering it. "But, it's still kinda sad, isn't it?"

"It's a part of life. Ya gotta take the bad with the good, kiddo. No gettin' around it."

"What about you, Hardcastle? You gonna be up to handling the bad with the good? Indefinitely?"

Hardcastle grinned, not missing the emphasis on the last word. "No problem, kid. Time comes I can't handle it, you'll know."

"Fair enough." McCormick smiled back over his shoulder as he picked up the clippers and resumed his task. "Just so long as you know what you're lettin' yourself in for."

Hardcastle chuckled to himself as he turned and began walking back to the main house. "And next time, McCormick," he called back, "Tell 'em you're adopted."

