



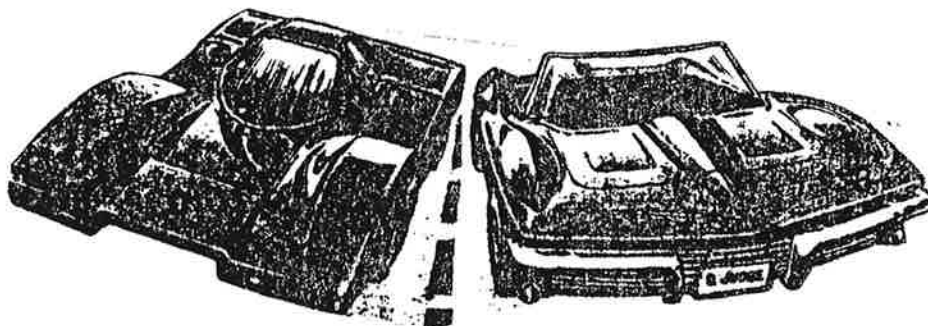
Back-To-Back

SUPPLEMENT 3

december, '86

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SUPPLEMENT

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MISSING SCENE:

"The Black Widow"

TOO LATE FOR REGRETS

By: Linda Wood

Filipiano hung up the phone and slammed a fist on the desk top. Damn! What a hell of a time for the chauffeur to get nailed. Now, the Widow needed a new fall guy -- fast.

His gaze wandered to the window facing the office. Hardcastle was still out there, still snooping. And his shadow was hovering right next to him. The curly-haired kid with the face of a street punk.

Filipiano looked again at the young man, harder this time. He felt old resentments surge to the surface. He hated self-righteous, arrogant judges; and he hated smart-mouthed punks. They screwed up jobs that were hard enough already.

Light dawned. Maybe there was a way to deal with all of his problems at once.

When Hardcastle and his companion finally left, Filipiano strolled out onto the floor. He snagged an officer he'd seen visiting with the Judge, offering his most casual smile.

"Hey, Barker, how's it goin'?"

"Not bad, Captian Filipiano." When Filipiano continued to stare at the officer, Barker fidgeted nervously. "Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

"No, no. I was just wonderin'... Who's the kid with Hardcastle?"

Barker frowned, glancing toward the door. Then he seemed to make the connection, and smiled. "Oh, you mean McCormick! Aw, he's just another of Hardcastle's rehabilitation projects. Ex-con, GTA. I heard he used to be a race car driver. I sure like the wheels he drives now."

"That's it? Just a project?"

Filipiano tried to make the question seem casual. Barker bought the act, shrugging and laughing. He leaned forward and spoke confidentially.

"I think this one's gotten under ol Hardcase's skin. I think he actually likes this kid."

Filipiano laughed, raising his eyebrows in his best imitation of surprise. "Old Hardcase?! I don't believe it."

Filipiano couldn't believe his luck.

*** *** ***

It was good to be done with the case, and even better to have finally cleaned up old business that had haunted him. Filipiano was finished. That was the best news he'd had in years.

Still, something was rattling his cage bars. A vague uneasiness he couldn't quite pin down. His gaze travelled across the pool to where McCormick was good-naturedly going about his chores.

McCormick. There'd been a couple moments during this case he wouldn't want to repeat. Twice he'd faced the possibility the kid might be dead, and didn't

care for his own reactions. He'd been honestly scared to face that event. That was too damned...personal. He hadn't counted on anything like this.

Filipiano's grin haunted him. The man had staked his career on the fact that McCormick would die. He'd almost been right. And he'd done it all for revenge. Because he knew it would hurt him to be the cause of McCormick's death. It seemed he'd been right.

Hardcastle shifted uneasily in the lawn chair, trying to get comfortable. He sipped his beer.

Was it that obvious? Hell, he'd tried to keep his distance. But the kid had something. A goodness wrapped in a mouth as smart as any he'd ever heard. A vulnerability and child-like charm, uncharacteristic of a 'hardened' ex-con.

He could hardly believe he had let those words slip out. 'That kid means somethin' to me.' Even he wasn't sure what that meant. But Filipiano's triumphant smirk had chilled Hardcastle. 'I was told he did,' he'd said. He'd been delighted to find a chink in Hardcastle's armor, especially one the Judge himself had been unaware of.

It was only the beginning. McCormick had been with him only for three months. How many others would want to use his feelings for the kid for revenge? Hardcastle shivered, despite the warmth of the afternoon sun.

God, if the kid had died because of him... he had to pull back, and fast. People with as many enemies as he had had no business being close to anyone. Friends made too damn accurate targets.

The clear pool water caught McCormick's reflection and tossed it at him. McCormick, the enigma. Tough guy, smart ass, con man. And under it all, a mystery. One minute hard as nails, the next a terrified child. But always ready to laugh and deny it all.

Milton Hardcastle smiled and shook his head. There was no point in denying the almost fatherly pride that sometimes warmed him, especially when McCormick was on his best behavior. Like it or not, the kid was under his skin.

With a sigh he released the tension that had been building in him. It took a controlled effort to loosen his grip on the beer can. Together, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, they could cope with whatever the bad guys threw at them.

He let a grin spread across his face, replacing the frown he'd been wearing. Everything would work out fine as long as McCormick never found out about the sweat he'd worked himself into. If the kid ever knew the panic he'd been in that he could be dead, or worse, dyin' somewhere...there'd be hell to pay.

McCormick, seeming to sense Hardcastle's stare, looked up and grinned. He rested his lean body against the pool skimmer. "What's wrong with you, Hardcase?"

"I just can't believe you're actually doin' your chores without belly-achin'."

"I told you a hot shower would do wonders for my morale. Now, if we can just do something about the cockroaches and that hard mattress."

"Give it time, kid; and the roaches will probably carry it out for ya."

McCormick chuckled, Hardcastle joining in. Yep, as long as he kept control, everything would be fine.

