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**TRUST IS A TWO-WAY STREET**

*by Arianna*

*Sequel to: A Man I Can Trust*

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Embers of burning pain flared into searing agony with every breath he took, inescapable and unbearable fire that dragged him from the respite of sleep back toward restless wakefulness. Not yet quite conscious, he moaned in futile resistance, craving the darkness that was fast receding, drifting away out of his grasp with the inexorable indifference of the tide abandoning the beach.

“Easy, kid, easy.”

Hardcastle’s voice jerked him all the way to consciousness. “Wha …?” Mark muttered, blinking in confusion as he stared at the Judge, who was leaning over him, concern etched on his face. He was hot, so hot, and yet pitiless shivers wracked his body, adding to his misery. “Hurts,” he grated with raw honesty through clenched jaws, despising his weakness but helpless to hold it all inside. “B-bad.”

“I know, kid,” Milt soothed as he awkwardly stroked Mark’s fevered brow. “The nurse’ll be here soon with something to ease the pain.” Shifting, Hardcastle lifted Mark’s head just a little, while he held a cup to Mark’s lips. “Try to drink,” he urged.

Mark’s stomach rebelled, but he sipped as bid, and nearly wept at the relief the cool water brought to his throat. Though he would have gulped more, Hardcase kept the flow of the elixir maddeningly slow. But, at least, that made it last. By the time the cup was empty, he was exhausted by the effort and sagged heavily against the bed. Very gently, Milt eased his head back onto the pillow. Sucking in shallow puffs of air, afraid to breathe deeply and stir the embers inside into a conflagration, Mark’s gaze drifted blearily around the room as he tried to remember where he was and why.

Hospital. Right. Shot. His hand fumbled over the dressing that covered his chest before Hardcase caught his questing fingers and held them still. Too weak to resist, Mark tried to focus on him but, God, the pain and the hellacious heat were distracting. He’d been better, hadn’t he? Better than this?

“Fever started last night,” Hardcastle told him, the words coming low and slow, and he could see the Judge wasn’t sure if he understood or not.

“F-fever?” he rasped.

“Yeah,” Milt gusted. “Infection in your chest. They’ve got you on heavy-duty antibiotics. You should feel better soon. Day or two.”

“Day or …” Mark whispered in abject despair, not knowing if he could endure such raging agony for so long. Afraid the tears that blurred and burned in his eyes might fall, he closed his eyes to hold them inside. Dying couldn’t be worse than this. Or, maybe, he was dying, and this is what it felt like.

“Where the hell is that nurse?” Hardcase growled.

Mark felt the absence of the Judge’s hands, and had to clench his jaw to keep from crying out the desolate wail in his mind. *Don’t leave me! Don’t wanna die alone….*

If he’d had the strength, he would have laughed with the bitter knowledge that alone was as it should be. Alone was what he was. What he’d been for most of his life. But lacking the strength, he could only whimper nearly soundlessly and, even then, humiliation forced the sound to strangle in his throat. He heard the bustle of sounds, cloth swishing, footsteps … felt cool fingers on his wrist and a thermometer was slipped into his mouth. He tried to open his eyes but was too weak and tired, so he contented himself with an inarticulate mumble around the hard, glass stick. Hardcastle’s palm covered his brow, solid, reassuring, and he felt pathetically grateful for the touch. An ache, deep inside, below the fiery torment, eased.

Gradually, he felt the pain in his chest recede into a low burn, and he could breathe again without feeling as if his lungs were ripping apart. Chilled, he shivered uncontrollably, and felt a blanket layered over him, bringing comfort and warmth. Not quite conscious, too uncomfortable to sleep, he drifted aimlessly in the vague world between, hearing voices in the distance and feeling the touch that told him Hardcase was nearby, anchoring him, holding onto him to make sure he didn’t drift so far he’d never find his way back. Funny to feel someone there, with him. Different.

Nice.

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“How’s our boy doing?” Charlie asked as he came into the room, his expression somber as he studied McCormick.

“Aren’t you supposed to be telling me that?” Milt groused with worried irritability. “So far as I can see, he’s gettin’ worse not better.”

Charlie nodded as he moved further into the small, glass-walled cubicle, to stand on the far side of the bed. Thin, elegant fingers pressed against the pulse point in Mark’s wrist, and then Charlie settled the ear-pieces of his stethoscope, and leaned forward to listen to Mark’s chest. After shifting the metal disk to one spot after another, he straightened and reached out to feel his patient’s neck, under his jaw. Cocking his head, he chewed his lip as he appeared to listen to Mark’s labored breathing.

Milt watched his old friend’s face, scarcely daring to breathe. He didn’t much like the preoccupied, distant expression, and the frown that grew on Charlie’s brow thrilled him even less. “He’s not doing too good, is he?”

“No, no, he’s not,” Charlie agreed, though his tone was mild and thoughtful. He grimaced and sighed. “I’m going to have him placed back on life support.”

Milt felt the wash of cold shock as he gaped at the doctor. “You don’t mean … he’s not….”

“Mark’s very sick, Milt,” Charlie murmured, his gaze narrowing as he continued to study Mark and listen to his labored respirations. “The pain is such that he’s breathing too shallowly, not filling his lungs – and that’s not good. Will only worsen the pneumonia.” Glancing at Hardcastle, he straightened and compassion flooded his face as he hastily reassured, “Relax, Milt. I’m not saying that we’re losing him here. Just that we need to take steps to ensure we don’t.”

Not entirely sure how much relief he could wring from such guarded reassurance, Milt swallowed hard and nodded. “But you think he’ll be okay, right? Just a matter of time?” he asked, too weary and scared to worry about how forlorn and frightened he sounded.

Charlie’s hesitation didn’t do much to ease the tight band of fear around his chest. “We’re doing all we can,” he finally replied. “And Mark’s strong. Despite the severity of his wounds, he was doing well until this hit him. Let’s give it another day or two, give the antibiotics time to work – and let his system rest a bit by not having to fight the pain to breathe on his own.”

With no other choice, his lips pressed tight against useless protests that this shouldn’t have happened, that it wasn’t fair, Hardcastle could only grudgingly nod.

“You need to go home and get some rest,” Charlie went on, his tone gently chiding. “You’re beginning to look almost as bad as he does.”

Scowling heavily, Milt rubbed his stubbled chin. Flicking a look up at Charlie, not really hoping the physician would understand what he didn’t fully understand himself, he shook his head. “I think I need to stay here,” he rumbled. “Can’t explain it but … I think the kid knows I’m here. I think he needs to know someone cares about him right now.”

“You think you’re somehow holding him here,” Charlie murmured, his gaze once again assessing Mark.

Feeling like a fool, Milt nonetheless admitted softly, “Yeah. I guess I do. He, uh, he seems less agitated when I touch him or talk to him. Like he knows I’m keepin’ watch an’ he can relax and rest.”

“Given that he’s probably not used to feeling safe or sheltered, you could well be right,” Charlie allowed. “And given how much he needs to rest to heal, I’m not about to argue against whatever might help.” But his tone grew sharp with firmness as he directed, “But you make damned sure to eat, and to get some rest, whether in that chair, or preferably stretched out on the couch in the lounge. I don’t have time to worry about you collapsing, too.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll behave,” Hardcastle growled, but a smile of weary gratitude twitched on his mouth. Jerking his head toward the door, he went on, “You’ll get Nurse Ratchet off my back? Tell her I can be in here as much an’ as long as I want? She’s been threatening to have Security toss me out on my keister.”

Charlie snorted as he moved around the end of the bed, and patted Milt on the shoulder. “I’ll call her off,” he promised. “She’s just doing her job but … I’m prepared to accept you’re doing Mark as much good as all our fancy medicines and machines. From what you’ve shared with me about him, I agree that it’s important that he not feel like he’s fighting this battle all on his own.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Milt mumbled, his friend’s words easing his discomfort that he was maybe being a bit too superstitious, and giving too much weight to an instinctive certainty he couldn’t quite put into words.

After Charlie had gone, he leaned forward to again cover Mark’s hand with his own. “I’m here, kiddo. And I’m not going anywhere. You can make book on that.”

Whether Mark understood him or not, he couldn’t be sure. But Milt felt a slight twitch in the hand under his, and it was enough to let him believe that Mark knew he was there.

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Mark passionately hated the perpetual gagging sensation of the tube that snaked down his throat. But that was nothing compared to the relentless, excruciating agony of the air being rhythmically forced deep into his lungs and sucked back out again without his volition. He would have ripped the damned thing out if he could have lifted his arms. Would have screamed in rage and hurt, if he’d had the energy. But he felt trapped in some kind of hell, where he could only endure, not understanding, wishing it would all end, praying with inarticulate desperation for relief. Tears leaked from his eyes and, sometimes, he heard a distant mewling, like a dog caught in a trap, too hurt and weak to howl. He was afraid the sound was coming from him. Every time he heard it, someone came in to fiddle with the tube in his mouth, and it thickened in his throat in a way that terrified him. Though he vaguely knew in his rational moments that the machine was ensuring he got oxygen, not being able to draw in air on his own or make any sound of distress left him desperately afraid of suffocating to death.

And he was still so hot, like he was staked out somewhere in the Mojave under the cruel sun, and yet, maybe at night when the sun had set, he was wracked by violent shivers that only made all the rest of the agony worse. He couldn’t escape. There was no comfort, no refuge. It just went on and on and on, until he thought he might lose his mind and slip away into eternal madness.

All that kept him sane, all that sometimes seemed to make some sense, was the reassuring strength of the hand he felt holding his, or occasionally stroking his brow, that let him know he wasn’t lost and abandoned; that as bad as it was, someone was there, with him, enduring the torment by his side. And … and the rumble of the voice, words that flowed together most of the time so that he couldn’t quite make them out. The sound of that voice was reassuring, encouraging, holding some kind of promise he didn’t understand but that he clung to, desperate to believe that this hellish existence would not be interminable. There were times when the pain dimmed enough that he could recognize the tones, make out the reassurances. In those ebbing moments, he vaguely understood that Hardcastle was watching over him, assuring him this torment would end, if only he’d hold on a little longer, fight a little harder.

Those moments, and the strong grip that held him like a lifeline, were all that kept him from drifting into the beckoning light that seemed to grow brighter and then wane, even as the pain and the words surged around and within him and receded for a bit, allowing him to sink into the dark arms of tenuous and all-too-brief interludes of sleep.

*Hold on a little longer,* he urged himself, with little more than pigheaded stubbornness, when the light grew so bright it was blinding, so close he could almost touch it. *Fight a little harder,* he told himself, though he didn’t truly think he had anything left to fight with, and it was hard, so hard, to even try. But deep within the core of him there was a spark of anger that fueled his flagging determination to not simply give up. He wasn’t done with life yet; wasn’t ready to call the curtain down, however pathetic the show had been so far. He wanted … more. Wanted a chance. Just a chance. If he’d been alone, known he had to do it all himself, he might have lost hope, given up, let go the anger and the aching sorrow, and let slip his stubborn but ever-weakening grip on life.

But in the hardest moments, when he was sure he didn’t have anything more to give and wasn’t sure he even wanted to try any more, when it was just too damned hard to endure, he felt someone holding on, someone who cared enough not to let go, someone’s voice calling to him … and … and it was enough, enough to try. Enough to hope that maybe, just maybe, if he got through this nameless hell, there was someone out there beyond the borders of heat and pain, who thought he mattered, who cared a damn about him … someone … someone he didn’t want to let down.

*He could endure a little longer … hold on just a little harder … for a while, just a little while more….*

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Despite eyes scratchy with the need for sleep and muscles and bones aching with weariness, Milt stubbornly remained by McCormick’s side. The few times he’d nearly drifted off, his grip loosening on the kid’s hand, the machines had gone nuts, sending out warning whistles and beeps, and jerking him back into dazed awareness. His grip tightening, he’d call urgently to Mark to not quit on him, to not give up, not after making it so damned far … and the machines would settle down, and his own heart would start beating again.

Two days and nights had passed since they’d again intubated the kid, and now another dawn was lightening the eastern sky, just visible from the window by the bed, sending pale streaks of light to wash McCormick’s haggard visage. His stubbled, hollowed cheeks were unnaturally splotched with fever, the unhealthy ruddiness making the bluish-gray pallor underneath even more pronounced. The fever had burned the flesh from his body, leaving the kid looking wasted, bones sharp under his hot, dry skin. Tears leaked intermittently from Mark’s eyes, sliding down into his hair, until Milt wiped them away.

From time to time, when the pain medication was wearing thin, there was a raw, guttural keening low in his throat that lifted the hairs on the back of Hardcastle’s neck. Each time the nurse hurried in to do something to fix the tube and stop that piteous sound, the Judge winced and wondered if there was something wrong with the damned equipment. When whatever was wrong was fixed, he couldn’t decide if the abrupt and unnatural silence that followed was better or worse than the piteous sounds of suffering.

Nor could Milt take comfort in believing the kid was unconscious and blessedly unaware. A good part of the time, Mark was awake, or what passed for being awake, his eyes open but so shadowed with misery and relentless agony that he was lost, seemingly unaware of his surroundings. He twitched weakly, his whole body so tight he trembled with his inability to escape the pain or find any comfort, except when the medication was first pumped into his intravenous line. Then, his eyes would glaze and close as he drifted into a death-like slumber that was … terrifying, because Milt was never sure he’d wake again.

The Judge had never seen a man suffer more than this, not even during the war. His helplessness to do anything about it gnawed at him, and wore him down, too. The fact that the kid was suffering so terribly for having shielded him left Milt feeling utterly sick.

He wasn’t sure how much more McCormick could take. Hell, he wasn’t sure how much more *he* could take. But there was no way he was going to quit. Mark was in that bed, suffering God knew how much, because he’d had the guts to stand as a shield for Milt; had been ready to sacrifice his life to save Hardcastle’s, and that demanded loyalty … and this vigil, however long it might last.



One way or another, Milt didn’t think it could go on much longer.

“No change, huh?” Frank asked quietly from the doorway.

“Huh? No, not so’s you’d notice,” Hardcastle agreed wearily. “Kid’s a fighter, though. He’s not quitting. Not yet, anyway.”

Frank nodded slowly as he came into the room, hands stuffed into his pockets, his expression carefully guarded and his gaze averted.

“You look like you got bad news you wish you didn’t have to spill,” Milt observed, his chin lifting to take whatever blow might be coming.

“Mickey Di Angelo made bail a couple hours ago,” Frank told him morosely. “No priors. No reason to hold onto him, not without Mark’s statement, anyway.”

Milt felt his expression harden with futile anger. The law was the law, whether the charged was as innocent as a week-old lamb, or as rotten as year-old garbage. Turning away to hide the resentment he felt, that that animal was strutting around free while McCormick was still fighting for his life, he grunted in acknowledgement, and let it go at that.

“I’ve ordered protection,” Harper went on as he gazed at Mark. “Nobody gets into this room from now on without the proper ID.”

“Good,” Hardcastle approved with blunt appreciation.

“You think he’s gonna make it?” Frank asked guardedly.

“Of course he’s gonna make it, dammit! This kid doesn’t give up, y’hear?” Hardcastle shouted, giving vent to emotions he’d kept bottled up too long, and unable to countenance any other outcome.

“Yeah,” Harper replied with a small smile, his tone wry. “I hear you. I bet the guys on the next block heard you, too. Take it easy, Milt, before you blow a gasket.”

Chagrined, Milt rolled his eyes and grimaced. “I know he’s in bad shape, Frank,” he allowed. “I’m not blind, y’know, an’ I’ve been here watchin’ him for more’n two days now. It’s been close a coupl’a times, but he’d hangin’ in. He’s hangin’ in.”

His smile widening to a grin, Frank teased, “He probably doesn’t dare give up, what with you breathin’ down his neck like that. Probably figures you’d chase him all the way to hell, just to drag him back an’ give ‘im a piece of your mind. Easier to just stay.”

“Yeah,” Milt agreed, a ghost of a smile playing over his lips, grateful for the teasing, the easing of the mood. “Yeah.”

Frank hesitated, and then offered, “You want to take a break? Get some food? Maybe take a shower? I’ll stay with him. Even hold his hand, so he won’t know you’re gone.”

Hardcastle scowled at him and searched for any sign of mockery in Frank’s face or eyes over the hand-holding but, when he only saw sincerity, he relaxed … and felt every ache of exhaustion. “Okay,” he agreed. “Might be a good idea. Might wake me up a bit.” Standing, he stretched and ceded his place by the bed to Harper. “I’m gettin’ a little too old for this kind of thing.”

“Not sure it’d be any easier if you were any younger,” Frank observed dryly. “Not easy to be on tenterhooks this long.”

Milt let his expression say what he’d never have the words to express as he turned to walk slowly and stiffly out to the hall. “Be back in half an hour or so,” he called.

“Take your time,” Frank told him, as he reached out to clasp Mark’s hand. When he was sure the Judge was out of earshot, he leaned in close. “You don’t know me from Adam,” he murmured, low and steady. “But I gotta say, I’m some impressed with you. Not sure how you did it but … that man’s alive again. Cares more’n just about what’s legal, and gettin’ the bad asses behind bars. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him give much of a damn about anything or anyone else. You’ve … you’ve gotten to him, McCormick. You’ve hit him where he lives. So, I gotta ask ya to hang in for the long haul. I know … I know. He’s not the easiest man to be around. Downright obstinate, and he’s got a mean mouth, when he wants to use it that way. But … he’s a good man. And I think he needs you, kid – I get the feelin’ that you’re more’n stubborn enough to be his match. An’ something tells me that maybe you need him, too, ya know? Worth givin’ it a shot, huh? Worth stickin’ around to see how things work out?”

Frank studied the unresponsive man, compassion shadowing his eyes. “I hope you start gettin’ better soon, Mark. For your own sake as much as for his. I hate to say it, kid, but you look like shit.”

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“Judge! Hey, Judge Hardcastle! You in there? Would you tell this officer that I’m allowed to visit, huh? Judge?”

Milt turned and nodded consent to the cop on the door to let Teddy pass. He had to hand it to the kid – he might be a space cadet, but he was loyal. Came by to check on Mark just like clockwork, every three days, rain or shine. “Teddy,” he grunted with a nod. “How’re ya doin’?”

“Me? Oh, hey, you know, I’m doin’ great. I think I maybe got somebody interested in my icy coffee idea,” Teddy Hollins told him with a wide, eager smile. But the cheerful bright expression faded into abject sorrow when Teddy looked at his friend and former cellmate. “Skid’s still not doin’ too good, huh?” he observed, sounding like he might cry.

*Kid sure wears his heart on his sleeve,* Milt thought. *Wonder how he ever survived in prison? Was probably everybody’s mascot, or some damned thing. Be like kickin’ a pup to pick on him.* Aloud, he replied, “McCormick’s doin’ okay. He’s holdin’ his own, and that’s somethin’.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right,” Teddy agreed, rallying, ready to grab any bone that would allow him to believe that fairytales might still come true. Without any sign of being intimidated by the former jurist, Teddy laid a hand on Milt’s shoulder. “You’re looking pretty done in, Judge. Anything I can do for you? Maybe go get you a cup of coffee or something?”

“I’d appreciate that, Teddy, if you wouldn’t mind,” Hardcastle agreed, reaching into his pocket for the change, but Hollins waved him off. Milt felt guilty at the relief he felt when Teddy bounced out of the room, but he just didn’t have the energy left to cope with that much enthusiasm.

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Edgy with exhaustion, twitchy, needing to lie down on his own bed so bad he ached, Hardcastle stared at McCormick’s face with grim determination, refusing to quit … but afraid he was going to have to. There was no way he was going to last another night in that chair. He was so fixated on not giving up, on riding it out that he didn’t at first register the beads of sweat that formed on Mark’s brow … and then his jaw dropped and his breath caught in hope.

Rising, he cupped Mark’s cheek and leaned closer, squinting to be sure he wasn’t seeing things. But the beads were proliferating, and Mark’s still too-warm skin soon grew slick under Milt’s hand. The antibiotics were finally working. Tears glazed Hardcastle’s eyes and, for a moment, he couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, for the relief that surged through him, filling his chest and clogging his throat.

“That’s it, kid,” he rasped, his voice hoarse with emotion, as he squeezed Mark’s shoulder. “You’re gonna be okay now, aren’t ya? You made it through the valley.”

He punched the call button pinned to the pillow. By the time a nurse responded, the sweat was pouring from Mark’s body, drenching the sheets and his bandages. The dangerous fever had broken.

Milt stayed long enough to see that they cleaned Mark up, and put fresh, dry sheets on his bed. Long enough to be sure the kid was really sleeping, and not just lost in a fretful nightmare. He patted Mark’s shoulder approvingly. “I’ll see ya in the mornin’, McCormick,” he murmured. “An’ we’ll see about maybe gettin’ that infernal tube outta your throat. Bet that’d make you more comfortable, huh? Anyway, kiddo, you sleep good tonight, y’hear? God knows, I expect I will.” Yawning, he added, “I think I could sleep through the Second Coming, or at least an earthquake.”

And then, tired but feeling pretty good, a half-smile on his lips and whistling under his breath, he headed out into the hall, intent upon getting home to his own bed. The kid was a long, long way from being well, but he was a hell of a lot better than he’d been. And, for now, that was enough. But the young patrol officer standing sentry duty lightly caught his arm.

“Excuse me, Judge, but it looked like something was going on in there. How’s Mr. McCormick?”

“Better, son,” Milt replied. He rolled his shoulders to loosen them. “I’m going home for a few hours. Be back in the morning.”

“Fine, sir. I’ll have a patrol car pick you up at the main entrance. They’ll maintain surveillance while you’re at home, and bring you back here when you’re ready.”

Hardcastle was a little surprised, but then realized that he shouldn’t be. He was a witness, too, and Frank wouldn’t be taking any chances with either of them. Too tired to be responsible for his own security, he was grateful.

“Good, I’ll meet them downstairs,” he agreed. Tipping the officer a salute, he continued on his way to the elevator. He hadn’t spared much thought to Mickey D in the last few days but now, as the elevator carried him downstairs, his brow creased in a frown as he recalled the hood’s threat to kill McCormick himself. Words spoken in the heat of anger were often reconsidered in the cool light of the day. But the Judge was pretty convinced that the young hoodlum had stayed out of jail in the past by ensuring he either terrorized possible witnesses – or simply killed them – to ensure their silence. And, as many as the gang members as had been rounded up the night of the bust, there were that many again still roaming around; and who knew how many of those arrested had made bail?

Yawning as he ambled to the entrance to wait for his ride, Hardcastle shrugged; looked like they might not be out of the woods on this one, not yet, anyway. He pulled on his ear as he thought about McCormick. The kid was safe, for now. Nobody would get to him up in that locked ward. Deciding there was nothing to worry about that night, the Judge dozed in the patrol car and, when he got home, he climbed straight upstairs to his bed. When he crawled in under the sheets, he stretched out, savoring the feel of being horizontal, and was asleep in seconds.

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Hardcastle grimaced when he heard some poor bastard gagging and choking as he ambled down the corridor the next morning, but he didn’t twig to where the sounds were coming from until he noticed the cop standing watch was looking both tense and queasy. Breaking into a jog, he slammed into the tiny room, and was appalled to see McCormick thrashing and heaving, grunting and choking in desperate panic, while two orderlies held him down and a nurse was doing something around his head.

“What the hell is going on in here?” he demanded.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” the nurse countered sharply, but her attention was on holding Mark’s jerking head steady while she fiddled with the tube that disappeared into Mark’s mouth and filled his throat. Milt could hear a rasping suction sound, like at the dentist’s office, but didn’t understand what was going on. “Wait outside.”

“McCORMICK! SETTLE DOWN!” he bellowed, ignoring her curt instruction that he leave. “Let them help you!”

Immediately, Mark stopped fighting, but his gagging, grunting distress didn’t lessen, and his whole body was tight with panic.

“What’s wrong?” Milt demanded again, his tone a low roar. “Why’s he sound like he’s choking to death?”

“Because he is,” the nurse retorted. “The endotrachial tube is blocked, and he can’t get any air. I’m trying to suction it clear.”

“For God’s sake,” Hardcase growled, his gut clenching in fear. “How long’s he been like this?”

“Not long.”

But Milt could see Mark’s lips were blue and his face was fast turning the same color. Wild fear shone from the kid’s eyes, and his fists clenched as he fought to hold himself still.

“Why’s he fighting you?”

“He was trying to pull out the tube,” she explained, doing her best to remain calm but her tone was brittle.

“Dammit, that sounds like the most sensible thing to do,” Milt observed, scowling ferociously. “He’s turning BLUE!”

Mark suddenly sagged, scaring the hell out of him. “That’s it. That’s it! He’s losing consciousness!” Milt yelled. “Get that damned tube out of him – NOW!”

Evidently agreeing, the nurse gave up the futile attempt to suction the obstruction out of the way and, in a heartbeat, was smoothly pulling the gunk-covered tube out. Nauseated, Milt glanced away, but moved closer, wanting to help but not sure what to do. As soon as the tube was clear of his throat, Mark began choking and heaving, gasping for air. His whole body spasmed as deep, tearing coughs wracked him. The nurse suctioned his mouth, and then slapped an oxygen mask on his face, while the orderlies braced his body, giving what support they could to his injured chest.

Finally, the terrible coughing subsided, and Mark sagged bonelessly on the bed, shallowly panting for air. “God,” he rasped, his voice low and guttural with agony.

The nurse waved the orderlies back as she checked his pulse and blood pressure. “I’ll get you something for the pain,” she told him. “And I’ll call your doctor; see if we can leave that tube out. You seem to be breathing alright without it.” Staring at the ceiling, still evidently concentrating only on breathing, Mark gave her an infinitesimal nod of agreement. “We’ll leave that oxygen mask on you for now,” she told him. “Hang on. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” All he did was blink and then, tears leaking down the sides of his face, closed his eyes, as if any kind of answer was beyond him.

When she bustled out, waving the orderlies out ahead of her, Hardcastle approached the bed and gripped Mark’s wrist. “Hell of thing,” he muttered, as he studied Mark’s wan visage. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Mark puffed a weak laugh but, stiffening defensively, jerked his arm away to hug his chest when another coughing jag threatened.

“Easy, kid,” Milt soothed, laying a palm on his damp brow. “You got the right idea. You just breathe, and let me an’ everyone else take care of the rest.”

Silence fell as Hardcastle kept anxious watch. Mark’s breathing gradually slowed, but it sounded funny to Milt’s ears – sodden and labored. His gaze narrowing in thought, Milt figured that the antibiotics had done more than break the fever; the infection was loosening its grip, too, but McCormick now sounded like he had the world’s worst chest cold. *Pneumonia,* Milt thought. *That’s what it’s called. Pneumonia.*

The nurse finally returned with an injection of pain medication. “Dr. Friedman will be in to see you soon. In the meantime, he said we could just continue with the oxygen.”

Mark didn’t respond but the strain showing on his face seemed to ease marginally. A few minutes later, he appeared to have fallen asleep.

Hardcastle heaved a deep sigh and slumped onto the chair beside the bed. Leaning over, he scrubbed his face with his hands, and then shook his head. Here, he’d thought last night the kid would be just fine now. Sure, he had to heal but he’d thought the worst was over. He hadn’t thought about the congestion in Mark’s chest and the danger that could pose. Walking in to find him like that, fighting to breathe, nearly passing out from lack of oxygen, had shaken Milt badly and he was still trembling.

Straightening, he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. They still had a hard battle ahead of them, but they were going to make it.

*They?*

He frowned as he wondered when it had become ‘they’, but it didn’t matter. Whether it was the moment he’d turned back and had seen Mark standing between him and death, being gunned down to save his life, or sometime in the hours and days since, sitting here, holding onto the kid, willing him to stay alive, in Milt’s head they’d become a ‘they’. In it together. More than the separate individuals they’d been.

Biting his lip, he studied Mark’s face, the sickly pallor, the wasted appearance, listened to his strained breathing, and wondered if the kid felt anything like the same thing. Regret clouded Milt’s eyes; sorrow for the kid’s suffering. McCormick was sure paying a hell of a price for the partnership they were still hammering out between them. It seemed almost obscene to see the weakened, utterly vulnerable wreck he was now, compared to the vitally alive, strong and energetic, smart-assed man he’d been just over a week ago. But they were gonna get past this. Mark was going to get strong again, and be as cantankerous, independent, and brimming with mischievousness as he’d ever been, laughing, teasing, whining and bitching.

And … being there. Being whole.

Sitting back, Milt began to think about what would be needed to get McCormick strong and healthy again. For one thing, he wouldn’t be able to manage in the gatehouse on his own, not for a while. Glancing at Mark’s injured leg, Hardcastle pursed his lips. Might not even be able to manage stairs for a bit. Sniffing, he rubbed his nose with his thumb and, mentally, began to rearrange the geography of the house.

When Charlie showed up about an hour later, Hardcastle was ready with a list of questions about the treatment Mark would be getting for his current pneumonia, and about what would be needed during his convalescence.

“It’ll be a while yet before he’s ready to go home,” Charlie observed dryly.

“I know that,” Hardcastle retorted impatiently. “I just want to get everything ready. He’s gonna need physiotherapy, right? For his leg? And we’re gonna have to get some meat back on those bones, so I need to know what to feed him. I’m just sayin’ –”

“I think I know what you’re saying,” Charlie intervened with a thin smile. Crossing his arms, he gave Milt a pointed look of scrutiny. “Scared you this morning, didn’t it – when you walked in here and thought he was choking to death? Deep down, you’re thinking you can take better care of him at home than we’re doing here.”

Hardcastle flushed and his gaze dipped. He rubbed his mouth, and then pinned Charlie with a hard glare. “He *was* choking, and fighting to try to help himself,” he snapped, coming to his feet to pace in agitation. “*An’ they were holding him down*. He was *terrified*, Charlie, an’ he had good reason. He damned near *passed out* before that fool of a nurse pulled that blocked tube outta him so he could breathe. You’re damned right I was scared. And, yeah, maybe I do think I could take better care of him at home. Maybe get private nurses, ‘round the clock care – whatever he needs.”

“Calm down, Milt, before you have a stroke,” his physician soothed. “However it looked this morning, Mark is getting the best care possible right here – the care he needs. We have to get this pneumonia cleared up before I’ll even consider releasing him. After that, I’ve been considering referring him to a rehabilitation center for a few weeks, so that he can work on getting his damaged leg muscle going again, and get his strength back.”

“No.”

“Milt, it’s a lot of work caring for an invalid,” Charlie coaxed. “It’ll be some time before Mark has his full strength and mobility back.”

“I said ‘no’, and I meant, ‘no’,” Hardcastle growled. “When he’s ready to leave the hospital, he’s coming home. That’s it; that’s all. I’m not shuffling him off to some rehab place, no disrespect to them. But he’d only be one patient there, right? I can make sure he gets individual care.” Looking around the cell-like room, the glass wall, the lack of privacy, he shook his head. “This man has spent ‘way too much time in institutions already. He needs to be *home*. He’ll get better faster *at home*.”

Charlie sighed. “All right,” he agreed. “I hear what you’re saying, and don’t entirely disagree. But, Milt, it’s ultimately up to Mark. Once he’s stronger and it’s time to discuss next steps, we can give him the choice. He’s only been with you, what? At most, a couple of months? That might not make the place feel like ‘home’ to him.”

Hardcastle reared back at the thought, and turned to look at McCormick. Would the kid consider Gulls’ Way home? Frowning, he thought the question might more properly be whether Mark would rather be confined in another impersonal institution, surrounded by people in uniform, constrained to eat whatever they deigned to feed him, locked into a schedule that someone else dictated? “Nah,” Milt murmured with bittersweet certainty. “No, no, he’ll want to come home. Whether he feels like that’s what Gulls’ Way is, or not, it’s better than the alternative.” He paused and then added somberly, “Besides, it’ll also be safer for him out on the estate. The gang that put him in here is gunning for him. You know that. Be easier for the cops to protect him if he’s out there.”

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Floating on the edge of sleep, feeling dazed, afraid to attempt much more than to just keep breathing shallowly and evenly to stave off another fit of pain-filled coughing, and lacking the motivation to even open his eyes, Mark was nevertheless awake and listening to the discussion going on over his head. The medication he’d been given some time before had taken the edge off the burning pain deep in his chest, allowing him to relax and rest, and he thought he might have dropped off to sleep for a little while. But the pain wasn’t that muted and, coupled with his terror at being unable to breathe that morning, he hadn’t relaxed enough to remain asleep for long.

God, those had been some of the worst moments in his life. When Hardcastle had bellowed at him, he’d frozen in reflex more than anything else, but it had been so damned hard not to fight when he still couldn’t breathe. All that had kept him still was his hope that he had an advocate on his side, someone who was paying attention and making sure the nurse did something – *anything* – to help him. Afterward, in a vague way, he’d known Hardcase was still there with him; he’d heard low, muttered phrases as Hardcastle carried on some conversation with himself, and had been content to leave the Judge to it.

Playing possum gave him a chance to think, to try to figure out what was going on. He needed the subterfuge, the … privacy. Especially when his mind tended to drift and he knew he wasn’t firing on all cylinders. God, he felt like shit, and in no condition to have any kind of meaningful conversation.

Before his doctor had come in, he’d been puzzling over why Hardcase was there. Why he always seemed to be there. Mark knew he’d been out of it for a while, too sick to respond to much of anything, but every time he’d awakened for about as much as he could remember since he’d gotten shot, Hardcastle had been right there, beside him, as often as not holding onto his hand or wrist, or cupping his brow. Touching him. Anchoring him. When things had been pretty bad – hell, *really* bad – he’d been pitifully glad to have someone there, someone who seemed to be determined to hold onto him, to not let him float away. But the experience of not being alone and completely on his own to fight his personal battles was unusual and downright strange enough to be arresting. He appreciated it, sure. But he didn’t understand it. Couldn’t figure out why Hardcase was always there. Why he seemed to care.

Bits and pieces of the time before he’d gotten so sick began to surface as he pondered the mystery. While it would be nice to think that maybe Hardcase just liked him enough to want to be sure he was okay, Mark was pretty sure that wasn’t the case. As he remembered listening to the Judge telling him what had gone down the night he’d gotten shot – he still couldn’t remember those moments – he told himself it was just some kind of mixed up sense of guilt and responsibility that tethered Hardcastle to his side. And that left him feeling kinda sad, because he didn’t want the old donkey to … to get all bent out of shape because of guilt. And the man sure in hell wasn’t responsible for the decisions Mark made, or the actions he took. For the Judge to act like he was responsible, was … well, emasculating. Mark was no child, and he sure in hell didn’t need anyone to take care of him or, worse, take responsibility for him, as if he was incompetent or some damned thing. Being in Hardcase’s judicial stay didn’t make him any less of a man.

Feeling surly and out of sorts, he’d just decided that, when he was up to it, whenever the hell that would be, he and Hardcase were going to have to have a serious talk, when he heard Dr. Freedman come in. Expecting the doctor to want to know how alert and responsive he was, he was just gathering his energy for the awesome task of opening his eyes and maybe even talking a little, when Hardcastle began peppering Charlie with all sorts of questions. Startled, but agreeable to the distraction, Mark had settled back to simply listen, and see what information he could gather about his condition and how soon he might expect to feel better than … well, like death warmed over. Sure a lot easier to let Hardcase interrogate the doctor than to try to ask of all those questions himself, let alone find the energy to even think them up.

*Pneumonia, huh?* *Just what I needed on top of a gunshot wound to the chest*, he thought morosely. He wasn’t surprised to hear Charlie say it would be a while before he’d be well enough to go home, though the thought discouraged him more than a little. Hospitals were okay; the staff was great. But he was so tired of being … helpless. Tired of being as good as locked up again, even if it was for his own good.

But when Hardcase began talking about taking him home, and ‘round the clock care, he was astonished. *What the hell would make the Judge want to take all that on?* As he listened, he was … touched, deeply, to hear Hardcastle going on with such ire about how scared he’d been that morning. God, it really did sound like he cared, at least a little, and it was … well, nice, to have someone in his corner, fighting like that for him. Weird, maybe, that it was the guy who had sent him up who was doing it, but still. Nice. And he was surprised to catch something like understanding in Hardcase’s words, as if the Judge somehow understood that being home was infinitely better than being in some institution, however fine it was. Mark hadn’t expected that degree of empathy. Hell, he hadn’t expected *any* empathy, not from Hardcase.

Home? Was Gulls’ Way home? No, no it wasn’t. He didn’t have a place that was ‘home’. But the estate was a refuge, of sorts. The clean air from the sea, the wide open reaches without walls hemming him in, the lushness of the place, the privacy of the gatehouse … yeah, it was all good. Better than a rehab center. He was feeling a surge of gratitude to the Judge for understanding that and being willing to give him that, when he caught the remarks about the gang. What? They were gunning for him? Oh, well, now wasn’t that just terrific news.

And, with a sinking feeling, Mark figured that explained everything. It wasn’t understanding or empathy, or even misplaced guilt or an inappropriate sense of responsibility that had Hardcase so solicitous, so … present. Nah. He should have known better, dammit. Really didn’t have anything to do with him at all, did it? Was just the old donkey making damned sure the *witness* he needed didn’t croak or get himself killed; that was all. Wouldn’t want the bad guys to get away with it, now would we? And, yeah, it sure made a pile of sense to make things easier for the cops on protection detail, by keeping him secure behind the electrified walls of the estate and not in some open, easily accessible bed in a public rehab center. No wonder Hardcase seemed so damned concerned for his welfare. It wasn’t personal at all, just … just necessity and … and convenience.

Mark was surprised at how bitter that realization made him feel.

Bitter and … diminished. Like he wasn’t a person, just a thing.

Swallowing the resentment and the hurt, he told himself to stopped being such a damned fool. What else would it have been, huh? Wasn’t like he was anyone the Judge would actually care about. Wasn’t like the Judge had used ‘home’ in the sense of it being Mark’s home.

Like he’d just finished telling himself, he didn’t have a home.

Sometimes, he wondered if he ever would.

Deciding he’d heard more than enough, he let the voices drift away until they were just a distant droning and he let himself slip into the respite of sleep.

When Dr. Friedman woke him to test his lucidity and to get him to take deep breaths – which immediately triggered an exhausting and excruciatingly painful bout of coughing – he did his best to respond with something approximately courtesy.

He couldn’t bring himself to look at Hardcastle.

As soon as the doctor was finished with him, he closed his eyes again and pretended to sleep … and wished Hardcase would stop hovering, and just go home. Apparently, there was a cop on the door, standing guard. The Judge didn’t have to bother giving the matter of witness protection such personalized attention. Surely, the man had better things to do.

Wasn’t like he was in any condition to pull a stupid stunt like try to slip out from under Hardcase’s judicial stay. Wasn’t like he’d be dumb enough to try that, even if he could take a hike, which he couldn’t. Hell, he doubted he could even manage to sit up on his own, let alone stand or make a run for it. It was all he could do to breathe without coughing his lungs out.

Irritably, as silent minutes stretched into what felt like hours, trying not to flinch when Hardcastle touched him while adjusting his blanket, Mark wondered again and again why the *hell* the old donkey was hanging around; why didn’t he just go home?

And why, oh why, did he care so much? Why did it hurt so damned much, to know Hardcase only valued him as a protected witness, huh? Mark knew damned well he didn’t deserve anything more. Oh, sure, he’d apparently done his best to cover Hardcastle’s escape from that gang, but that was what he was there for, right? Besides, what other choice had there been? The Judge didn’t owe him anything for that, except, maybe, a little respect for the fact that he wasn’t an abject coward who only cared about his own worthless hide.

Lying there, feeling bereft, missing something he’d never had – the Judge’s honest concern about him as a … what? Acquaintance? Surely not friend. Employee, maybe? Whatever. Mark felt like a fool for having even briefly and only fleetingly hoped, or wished, that Hardcastle had maybe cared about him, really cared about *him*, and not just about a witness, or Tonto, or whatever he was in the Judge’s life. Huh, imagine that, wanting the guy who’d sent him to prison for stealing his own car to care about him. Like that was ever going to happen. Like he should even care what the Judge thought about him.

Distantly, almost grudgingly, Mark supposed he should be grateful. Back when death had been such a temptation, it had mattered to think – to *believe* – that someone cared enough about him to hold onto him, to not let him slip away, and he’d fought hard to keep living. So, yeah, he should be grateful that Hardcase had hung around so much. At least … at least he was still alive, still had a chance to maybe make something of his life, someday.

But, wearily, unable to fully relax with the Judge sitting there, no longer finding any comfort in his presence, Mark really, really wished the man would go away.

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Hardcastle could tell that McCormick wasn’t sleeping. The deeply etched lines of strain on his face and the slight flinch when Milt pulled up his blanket to keep him warm were dead giveaways that he was faking it, but the Judge wrote it off to the kid being too exhausted to do more than lie there. Still, he wished McCormick *would* sleep because that would be the best thing for him, and he worried that maybe the pain was still so bad Mark just couldn’t let go enough to rest. When the kid had been unconscious, Milt had talked about this and that, mostly with the hope that Mark might hear him and that the sound of his voice might help somehow. Now, sitting in silence, the time weighed heavy, but he didn’t want to disturb what little rest McCormick was trying to get.

Still, the silence, when he knew damned well the kid was awake, was unnatural. McCormick just wasn’t this quiet. It was even kinda eerie. At first, Milt was content to let him rest, sure that the kid would soon start whining, or at least ask how long he’d been out of it. But, when the silence stretched, he started making bets with himself about how long Mark could go without talking. After nearly an hour of losing his bets, he was growing uncomfortable. Why the hell was the kid being so stubborn? Was he hurting that bad? McCormick didn’t strike him as the type to suffer in silence for the hell of it. Or … Milt frowned, thinking about how he’d bellowed at the man when he’d been fighting to breathe, and he wondered if Mark had misunderstood, was maybe resenting being ordered like a child to be still. Who knew what went through that guy’s head?

Willing himself to patience, he leafed through some magazines he’d brought for Mark, back when the kid had been feeling better, before the infection had damned near done him in. But, try as he might, he just couldn’t get interested in the world of car racing. It just seemed so self-indulgent to him, a bunch of grown-up hot-rodders tearing around a track as fast as they could go, risking life and limb – for what? Glory? What kind of glory was that? What did it matter? Sighing, he told himself that it mattered as much as any other sport in terms of skill, discipline, training and, well, guts. Looking at McCormick, he had no doubt that the man had the guts; whether he’d ever been any good at the sport in terms of skill, discipline and training, Hardcastle didn’t know. Frowning, he thought that was something he might be best to avoid as a conversational gambit. Racing was just one more thing the kid had lost when he’d pulled that stupid stunt to dodge high insurance payments and ended up paying a whole lot more than a few lousy bucks. His gaze dropping to the floor, he sighed heavily.

“Go home,” Mark rasped.

“Huh? What?” he asked, straightening, irritated with himself for being so lost in thought he hadn’t heard what Mark had said. “You want something? Need anything?”

“Go home, Judge,” Mark repeated, his voice weak and drawn with effort, and sounding breathless. “You’re tired. An’ I don’t need a baby-sitter.”

“Ah, I’m okay,” Milt protested. “You sure you don’t need anything. You look like you’re in pain.”

Mark grimaced and, when he opened his eyes, Milt could see the shadows of exhaustion and … and something else, but he wasn’t sure what. He had the distinct feeling McCormick was stonewalling him, hiding something from him. There was no sparkle in those eyes, no vestige of humor or warmth, just dull endurance.

“Look, McCormick, earlier, you know? When I shouted at you? I didn’t mean nothin’ by it. I, uh, I just wanted to get your attention, so you’d let them help you. Not that they seemed to be helpin’ much at the time. You had every right to be fighting them. You needed that tube outta your throat and they weren’t taking it out.”

Mark just stared at him for a second or two, and then looked away. His breathing was still labored and congested, and he seemed to be concentrating on taking very shallow breaths. That wasn’t good. They’d put him on the respirator in the first place to fill his lungs fully. Milt didn’t pretend to understand it but, apparently, the shallow breathing was part of what had caused the pneumonia in the first place.

“You’re gonna hafta breathe deeper, ya know,” he ventured. “Or the infection’ll just get worse again.”

Mark’s gaze wandered around the room before coming back to him. The dullness had hardened into resentment that Hardcastle didn’t understand, except to assume that the kid didn’t need someone raggin’ on him when he already felt like hell. Before he could say anything more, Mark whispered bitterly, “Don’t worry. I won’t croak on you and wreck the case.”

“What the … that’s not what I meant!” Milt exclaimed hotly, stung by the antipathy he didn’t understand, especially when he’d been doing all in his power to lend support. “I just meant –”

“I know, I know,” Mark cut in, again closing his eyes, the effort to engage obviously taxing his energy to the limit. “I’m too tired to talk. Please, go home, Judge. Just go home.”

Hardcastle scowled in confusion, certain that he was missing something – something crucial – but had no clue as to what it was. He didn’t want to leave, not when the kid was still so fragile, so damned sick. But he could also see his presence wasn’t doing any good; was, apparently, only causing distress. He rubbed his mouth as he struggled to figure out what was going on but, with a sigh, he had to accept that he was missing too many pieces of this particular puzzle. And, hell, maybe McCormick just needed some space to rest without feeling like he was being stared at or some damned thing. Nodding to himself, he figured that made some sense.

Standing, he awkwardly patted Mark’s shoulder and tried not to take it personally when McCormick flinched at his touch. “Okay,” he rumbled, “okay, I’ll leave you be for a while. Let you rest. An’ I’ll see if they can give ya somethin’ for the pain, to make it easier for you to breathe. But I’ll be back later, to see how you’re doin’. I’m not gonna just abandon ya here, kiddo. You’re not alone. Ya hear? You’re not alone.”

Mark’s mouth tightened and he swallowed convulsively. Other than that, only a tight, sharp nod indicated that he’d heard and understood.

Feeling a helpless ache inside that he didn’t fully understand, Milt patted him once more before trudging out of the room.

Behind him, Mark opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling and, cursing the weakness that left his emotional control in tatters, swiped impatiently at the stinging tears before they could slide down his face.

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Mark had thought he’d feel better when Hardcase left, more able to relax and rest … only to become irritated with himself when, instead, he felt abandoned and bereft. And scared.

He told himself he was being ridiculous, that it was just the drugs, and being so sick and weak, that left him feeling more vulnerable and alone than he’d been since prison. He was used to fending for himself. Hell, it had been a way of life since ….

His mind shied away, his emotions not in any shape to think about how alone he’d been since he’d been orphaned. He kept thinking he should be used to being alone and should stop feeling so damned lonely, but the hollow, cold feeling hadn’t diminished or gotten any better over the years, just more familiar. He was a man, dammit, not a lost little kid; he should be able to handle it better. Being alone shouldn’t matter so damned much any more.

Telling himself to suck it up, he closed his eyes and tried to relax. But he felt broken. His chest was on fire and his throat was raw. His head throbbed and so did his leg. He felt trapped in a miasma of pain, with nowhere to go and no way to escape it. His fists bunched in the sheets as he fought off the urge to moan. God, could he be any more pathetic?

A nurse came in and he stiffened at the intrusion. She was young, and pretty, but he couldn’t find enough enthusiasm or strength to even try to smile, and how pitiful was that?

“Mr. Hardcastle said you needed something for the pain,” she explained, as she swabbed his upper arm and then jabbed him with a needle. He felt a burning sting and winced. She fussed with his sheets and pillow, offered him a sip of water. “You’ll feel better soon,” she assured him on her way out.

*Better? What was better?* he wondered. The pain gradually distanced and he wilted against the support of the bed. *Okay, yeah, this was ‘better’*, he supposed. No less lost or afraid, but … better.

Mark had just begun to relax and doze a little when another white-garbed woman came in. Frowning, feeling bleary, he watched her approach and wondered what she wanted. She wasn’t a nurse – wasn’t wearing a cap – and she wasn’t carrying a tray of stoppered glass tubes and needles like the lab techs did.

“I’m Mrs. Rankin, your respiratory technologist,” she told him. “We need to get you breathing more deeply, and coughing up the gunk in your lungs, or you won’t get better.”

“Cough?” he echoed, appalled, knowing how much that was going to hurt.

With a hearty cheerfulness that he found incredibly annoying, she smiled and nodded, and proceeded to roll him onto his side. The next thing he knew, she was beating on his back, her cupped hands making a drumming sound that thrummed through his body. “Breathe,” she encouraged with robust vigor. “Deep. In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

Was she kidding? When she repeated the instructions, he grimaced with resigned trepidation but did as he was bid – and erupted into a frenzy of deep, hacking coughs that felt as though his lungs were exploding. She braced his body, murmuring encouragement, reminding him to breathe. Gasping in agony, choking, he wondered if he was trapped in a nightmare that was never going to end. Finally, finally, she stopped tormenting him and he lay exhausted, panting shallowly, the room spinning around him and darkness edging close.

“We’ll need to get you deep breathing every two hours,” she advised him matter-of-factly. “I know it’s hard, but if you can’t sustain deeper breathing on your own and clear out those lungs, we’ll have to put you back on the machine.”

Mark gazed at her bleakly and gave a slight, weak nod of understanding. “I’ll breathe,” he whispered, his voice rough and raw. As bad as he felt, it was better than having that damned tube down his throat, choking him like it had that morning. When he was again alone, weak as a day-old kitten, limp as a rag doll, he rolled his eyes and thought how much easier it would have been to be dead.

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Time blurred, broken only by the regular percussion and deep breathing exercises that left him panting through the pain. Regular doses of medication left him floating, hazy, the pain more distant, less strident, but still there. Hours passed, becoming days and nights of misery, debilitating, discouraging, drifting anguish, and dull acceptance. Sometimes, maybe even often – Mark was no longer sure – Hardcase was there, looking and sounding concerned and irritable in equal measure. In his turn, Mark managed little more than sullen indifference when he was capable of feeling anything at all. But, lacking the energy to pretend to be sociable when Teddy came to visit, Mark felt like a heel when he closed his eyes and feigned sleep. Nurses bathed him, turned him, changed the sheets and intravenous bottles, plumped the pillows, and urged him to drink tepid water and juices that held no appeal. Charlie Friedman appeared from time to time, to press the cold stethoscope to his chest and listen, nodding soberly and then patting his arm gently, murmuring he was getting better, telling him to keep up the good work.

Getting better? Good work? So far as he could tell, Mark was enduring, and that was all. He felt utterly wasted and seriously wondered if he’d ever be any better, ever be able to breathe again without wrenching, shattering pain. Ever feel strong again. Hell, ever be more than a lump of miserable flesh too weak to sit on his own, let alone walk even the short distance to the bathroom. He came to loathe everything about what was happening to him – his weakness and lack of dignity, his engrossing self-pity, the pain – but he couldn’t seem to get past it. He didn’t have the energy; was just too damned tired. Breathing, simple breathing, something he’d always taken so much for granted, took everything he had.

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“Dammit, Charlie, you keep sayin’ the kid’s getting better, but I’ve seen corpses with more life in ‘em!” Milt griped anxiously four days after Mark’s fever broke. McCormick had been moved out of Intensive Care into a private room that Milt was paying for, and he was worried that the kid wouldn’t be getting the care he needed, especially if he suffered a relapse of the pneumonia. He ran a trembling hand over his mouth, and his gaze darted up and down the hallway, resting for a moment on the uniformed sentry who was studiously pretending he wasn’t listening.

“He *is* getting better,” Charlie soothed.

“As opposed to what?” Hardcastle demanded, making an effort to lower his voice but not succeeding. “He lays there like a wet dishrag, floating in and out of consciousness, hardly able to breathe. An’ it’s plain as the nose on your face that he’s suffering bad pain. How long’s this gonna go on, huh? ‘Cause I really don’t know how much more he can take.”

“As opposed to being dead,” Friedman replied with thin, caustic irony. “Two weeks ago, we weren’t sure he’d make it this far, and the pneumonia was only one more complication. A serious complication. A week ago, well, he was on the edge, but he pulled through. His lungs *are* clearing; slowly, yes, but clearing. There’s no fever now; the antibiotics have beaten back the infection. Right now, he’s exhausted and, you’re right, he’s still experiencing considerable pain. You can see why I was unwilling to allow you to take him home when he came off the respirator. He has a long way to go, Milt. A long way. But he’s getting there.”

“He is, huh? You’re sure about that?”

“I’m very sure,” his physician assured him. Laying a hand on his shoulder, Charlie went on, “In another day or two, you’ll see remarkable improvement; I guarantee it. Tomorrow, we’ll start getting him out of bed, to sit for an hour or so twice a day. Once he’s able to tolerate solid food, he’ll get stronger. Be patient, Milt.”

“Patient,” he huffed, then pressed his lips tight against further comment. If Charlie said the kid was doing okay, was getting better, then it had to be true. But, God, it sure wasn’t obvious, not yet, anyway. Scowling, he looked away, conscious that he was taking out his fear and the anger that came with being so damned helpless on the guy who’d been keeping McCormick alive. “Okay,” he agreed, however morosely. Taking a breath, he asked, “When I do get him home, what will he need? You know, what kind of help? Round the clock nurses? Physical therapy?”

“Well,” Charlie stalled, scratching his cheek as he ruminated. “I’m not sure full time nursing will be required, but someone once a day, to help him bathe and get dressed would be a good idea. And he’ll need regular physical training sessions to both help the recovery of his injured leg and to aid in building back strength and stamina. Muscle atrophies quickly and he’s been in bed for weeks now, already. Spending time in that pool of yours will be good exercise for him. He’s going to be unsteady on his feet for the first while, need support getting to the bathroom, moving from one room to another. And … Milt? He may need some counseling.”

“What? You mean a shrink?” Hardcastle clarified.

“Maybe not a psychiatrist, but a good therapist. Mark has suffered severe trauma and may have some deep-seated emotions, fears, to work through. And you might need to rethink this arrangement you have with him. After going through this, I’m not sure how ready he’ll be to confront more bad guys with guns,” Charlie warned, though his tone was gentle, non-judgmental. “Frankly, I wasn’t keen on the whole business in the first place. I don’t particularly want you going after dangerous criminals, either.”

Avoiding eye contact, the observation hitting too close to his sense of responsibility for everything McCormick was suffering, Milt harrumphed and sniffed. “Cops get shot and go back to work all the time. Soldiers, too.”

“Mark isn’t a cop or a soldier,” Charlie observed.

“No, no, he isn’t,” Milt agreed with a frown as he studied the floor. Looking up to meet his old friend’s steady gaze, he added, “But he’s got what it takes, Charlie. That kid’s no coward.”

Friedman’s mouth twisted and he shook his head. “All I’m saying is, I think you should ask him if he wants to carry on playing cops and robbers. Not just assume he’s as stubborn and cantankerous as you are.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll ask ‘im,” Hardcastle agreed, but he quirked a small smile. “Care to lay a wager on what his answer’ll be?”

Charlie snorted and then grinned, clearly amused. “No, thank you,” he refused the bet, his tone wry. “I’d prefer not to know that neither of you has a lick of common sense.”

Hardcastle chuckled as he turned away, to go back into McCormick’s room. The laughter died and he sighed. “Patient,” he reminded himself and squared his shoulders. He had the easy part, after all. He just needed to be present and encouraging. Mark had to do all the work.

But it was hard, damned hard, to see how gaunt the young man had become, his bones straining against the pallid skin of his face and body, his stubbled cheeks hollow. Hard to see the dull suffering in sunken eyes that had sparkled with humor, or glinted with determination or anger, and lips turned down with sullen discontent and pain, when McCormick was more given to smart-ass teasing and easy, sometimes taunting, laughter. Very hard to see how weak and listless, how vulnerable Mark had become, when his presence had been so vital, so vigorous.

“Charlie says you’re getting better,” Milt said, determined to be positive despite the lack of much in the way of encouraging physical evidence to support the doctor’s assessment. Still, now that he thought about it, Milt had to admit the kid was breathing easier. The regular pummeling he’d endured for the past several days appeared to have cleared his dangerously clogged lungs. “Says they’ll start getting you outta bed tomorrow, to sit up for a while. Bet you’re glad to hear that.”

Obviously astonished and evidently dismayed by the news, Mark gaped at him and then closed his mouth with an audible click. His gaze wandering the ceiling, he seemed to be searching for words or some more positive reaction. Finally, he rasped without enthusiasm, “Sure, why not? Can’t lie around here forever, that’s for sure.”

“That’s the spirit,” Milt replied, but winced at the false heartiness in his voice. Who was he trying to kid? “Look, McCormick,” he went on soberly, “I know you’ve been through hell, an’ you’re probably wondering if you’ll ever feel any better than you do now. But you will. I guarantee it.”

Mark studied him, his expression flat, giving nothing away. “You do, huh?”

“Absolutely,” Hardcastle affirmed, his tone solemn and solid. “We just gotta be patient here. You took a bad hit, but you … you’re through the worst of it. Before you know it, you’ll be on your way home.”

A question flickered in Mark’s eyes, but his gaze dropped away.

“What? I can see you want to ask me somethin’, so out with it,” Milt urged, leaning forward.

“Why’re you here, Judge?” Mark asked after a long hesitation, his eyes still hidden by the long lashes. “Why’re you always here?”

Taken aback by the question, Milt wasn’t sure what to say. “Where else would I be?” he countered, mystified that McCormick had to ask. “Someone’s gotta make sure they’re treatin’ you right. And, well, you’re my responsibility.”

Mark’s expression hardened and he turned his face away. “We’re each individually responsible for ourselves, Hardcase,” he said distantly. “You didn’t put me in this bed. You don’t have to beat yourself up about it.”

Settling back in his chair, Hardcastle nodded. “You’re right, sort of. I mighta sent you out there, but it was your boneheaded idea about being some kind of shield that got you shot.” A humorless smile touched his lips when he Mark cut him a surprised look before his gaze darted away. “You still don’t remember, do you?”

Mark just shook his head.

“Well,” Milt sighed. “I kinda hope you don’t. Wasn’t a lot of fun. But …”

When his words fell off, Mark muttered, “If you’re here because of guilt, stop it.”

“Guilt?” Hardcastle echoed. “Maybe, some, but not much. You made the decision to face them down all on your own, an’ we still gotta talk about that when you’re stronger, ‘cause that sorta thing just isn’t on. But mostly … mostly I don’t think you should be suffering through all this alone. And I am responsible for you – you’re still in my judicial stay, ya know.”

“Pity’s worse’n guilt,” Mark groused in a surly mumble. “And you sure don’t need to worry about me making a run for it, Judge. I can’t even stand up on my own right now.”

“Oh, get over yourself, McCormick,” Milt snapped in frustration. “Self pity isn’t your style. And, for the record, I’m not here ‘cause I pity you. Feel sorry, sure, that you’re having such a hard time of it. But that’s not the same thing. What? You think the Lone Ranger would leave Tonto alone by the campfire after he took a few hits from the bad guys? You know better than that.”

A ghost of a smile flitted over Mark’s mouth. Not much, but the first trace of humor Milt had seen for weeks and the sight of it loosened something inside. “Tonto, huh?” McCormick murmured.

“Damn straight, kid,” Hardcastle confirmed.

Mark didn’t say anything more, but the tension around his eyes and mouth eased a little, and he drifted into sleep.

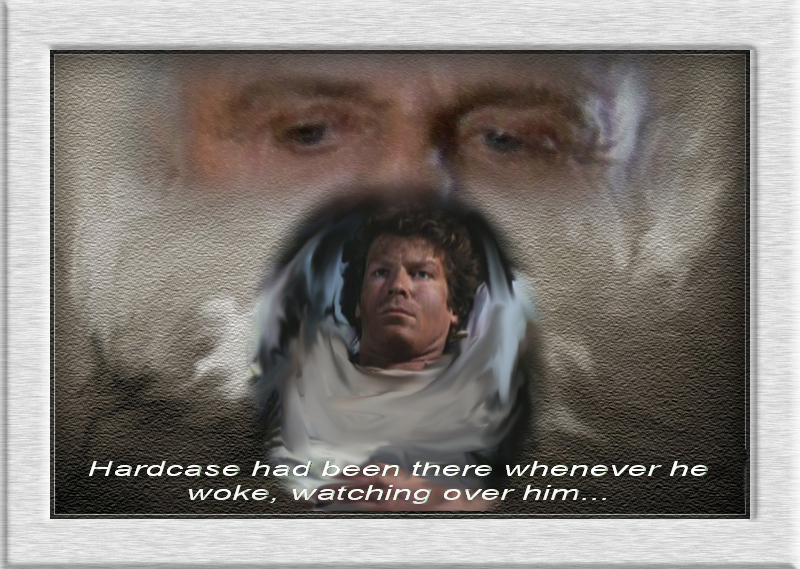
Milt studied him for a long time, compassion softening his features. “What’s going on inside that muddled head of yours, McCormick?” he asked softly with bemused concern. “I can understand the pain, and it’s no wonder you’re weaker than a newborn lamb. But I don’t know where the edgy bitterness is coming from. An’ I sure don’t understand why it’s such a mystery for you that I’m here.”

He frowned, thinking of how readily Mark had been willing to sacrifice himself, and how the kid had thought his crazy decision had made sense. Was there any connection? He didn’t know, didn’t have enough information yet. With a determined glint in his eye, he rumbled, “But you can make book on the fact that I’m gonna figure it out.”

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*Tonto,* Mark reflected when he woke late in the night, feeling better than he had in quite a while. The fire in his chest had diminished to embers that flared with each breath but that didn’t erupt into an all-consuming conflagration of agony. He no longer feared each respiration, resistant and hesitant, reluctant to feed the fire, and the simple relief was profound. Though there was still an ache in his leg, it was muted and distant, far from troublesome, and his head felt clearer, too, as if a haze was lifting, allowing him to see and think more clearly. His gaze slanted to the side, half expecting to see the Lone Ranger still hunkered at his post in the chair by the bed, but it was empty.

Mark wasn’t sure if he was relieved or regretful that the irascible cowboy had apparently abandoned his post, leaving the job of sentry to the cop stationed by the door in the hall. The old donkey had been looking haggard, the long days and nights without sleep wearing him down. A man his age needed his rest, even if he stubbornly chose to ignore the facts. Staring at the ceiling, Mark wasn’t entirely sure how many days and nights it had been now since he’d been shot, but it felt like half a lifetime. And for most of that time, Hardcase had been there whenever he woke, watching over him, making sure his star witness and so-called sidekick was hanging on.



He supposed he should be grateful that he mattered at all to Hardcastle, for what, if not who, he was; for what he could do as a witness or as a kind of hired muscle – more like indentured servant – if not because Hardcase gave a damn about him as a human being.

*Oh, grow up,* he told himself disparagingly, disgusted with the whining self-pity. He could be cooling his heels again in prison, down for the long count – well, okay, maybe he wouldn’t’ve been shot then, but if what Hardcase had told him was the truth, he’d made the decision to take those bullets. Down deep, instead of telling himself he’d been a fool for doing such a thing, he felt a spark of pride in himself, that he’d had the courage and decency to make a stand, that he hadn’t been a coward when the chips were down. Yeah, sure, it hurt like hell, but Mark had long ago learned that nothing was free, and he’d won a measure of self-respect he hadn’t felt in … well, ever.

So why was he so pissed off with the Judge? Because he *was* angry and had been for days, bitter and resentful, barely able to speak or look at the man, and intolerant of his touch. Sure, it was Hardcase who had sent him up for three years for stealing his own car … but Mark had to accept some responsibility for being so bone-headed as to put the Porsche in Melinda’s name to avoid crippling insurance payments. God, how could he have trusted her so much? With a grimace, he shook his head. Man, he’d learned a long, long time ago that he couldn’t ever trust anyone. So what if they’d been living together? So what if he thought he loved her and that she loved him? Obviously, he was a terrible judge of character. Nobody could be trusted completely. Nobody.

Grimly, he thought about that lesson that life had taught him early, starting with when his father had taken a hike on his fifth birthday. The lesson was reinforced in spades by the way his mother’s family had treated the two of them, and then underscored with brutal violence when his mother, the best, most decent and gentle person he’d ever known, had been tortured and beaten to death, and her murderer never caught. After that – as if being orphaned by the age of ten wasn’t enough – there had been more lessons just in case he hadn’t yet learned he was entirely on his own, from his mean-spirited and abusive aunt and uncle, to the more subtle cruelty of the foster homes and the callous indifference of Juvie. Melinda had only been one more person on a very long chain of people who should have cared, should have been trustworthy, should have … but had only, ever, let him down, turned on him, *used* him.

Hell, Hardcase had only been doing his job, albeit with narrow-minded arrogance and efficiency, when he’d sent Mark up the river. Wasn’t really the Judge’s fault that the system had sent him on a ride from a minimum security institution to the hell-hole of San Quentin. That was just more of his bad luck. Nor was it the Judge’s fault that not one, *not a single one*, of his so-called friends from the track had ever once come to visit him. Oh, sure, Flip had written from time to time, and yeah, Flip had finally looked him up six months after he’d again hit the streets, offering the deal of a lifetime. Flip had believed in him, had been certain of his talent and skill, and had been the best – hell, the *only* – friend he’d still had. But, when it came right down to it, Flip had only gotten in touch because he, too, could use what Mark had to offer, not because, or not only because, they’d once been friends. And, hey, that was okay. More than okay. Poor Flip would have been a fool to offer a ride in the Coyote just for old times’ sake. And Barbara? Well, he could understand her wanting to use him to get the Coyote back and to avenge her father’s murder. Who else had she known with experience in repossessing cars? She’d needed help, and he was glad she’d trusted him enough to know he wouldn’t turn his back on her.

Even if what she’d asked of him had nearly got him tossed back into prison for a long, long time. Funny how not even saving that cop’s life had bought him a break. Mark would have thought that hauling the guy out of that wreck might have earned a bit of goodwill and a fuzzy memory. But no, the cop had done his job, and Mark couldn’t really fault him for it.

And life had brought him back full circle, face to face with Hardcastle. Guess it shouldn’t’ve been such a surprise that even ‘by the book’ Hardcase would have a use for him, and would be willing to exercise a little emotional blackmail to get what he wanted. Man, what kind of deal was that? Prison for up to twenty years versus an unspecified term of indentured labor as … what? A bodyguard? A yard man? General, all-purpose slave? At least Hardcase had helped him nail Flip’s murderer. That was something, right? Looked like Hardcastle could at least be trusted to live up to his end of a deal, so long as there was something in it for him.

Then there was Teddy, his last cellmate. Mark huffed with helpless, fond amusement. Teddy had come running to him, trusting Mark to keep him safe from his scumbag parole officer, without the least concern about the risk he was asking Mark to take in hiding him out; the risk of being tossed back into prison. Yep, Teddy had also been very quick to use him. Was that all friendship meant to everyone else? Friends were someone to use when you needed them? Regardless of the possible cost to said friend?

At least Hardcase was honest enough not to suggest they were, in any respect, friends. Or, at least, he hadn’t until Mark had ended up in the hospital. But things had gotten confusing since then; especially in those dark, hazy days of misery, when the Judge seemed always to be there, literally holding onto him, willing him to live. Mark didn’t know what to make of that. Since his mother’s death, there’d been no one in his life who had seemed to care so much whether he lived or died, but all the effort seemed a little much to be expended on a guy who was little more than a servant of sorts. In his weakness and vulnerability, he knew he had let Hardcastle’s presence and concern come to mean too much, far too much. Hell, it had been like having family again and though he’d not understood it, hadn’t had the strength to even try to figure it out, he’d treasured that sense of being valued and wanted with desperate need; it had fueled his will to live.

Only to realize that, of course, he’d been foolish in his assessments and assumptions. All Hardcase wanted was what he’d always wanted: help in putting bad guys behind bars. Mark knew it was stupid, but it had hurt; had felt like a kind of betrayal and had painfully put him back in his place. The trust he’d begun to feel was sorely misplaced.

And he supposed that’s why he’d been so angry, so bitter.

He worked hard at not hoping for too much, at never expecting more than what life and luck dealt him, and he resented being blindsided in a weak moment. But it wasn’t Hardcase’s fault that he was such a fool, that he was so easily suckered. No, that was a weakness in himself; a child-like hope that someday his life would really matter to someone. That *he’d* really matter to someone, for who he was and not just what he could do for them. Wearily staring at the ceiling, he regretted his misplaced anger. So long as he remembered that nobody ever offered anything beyond their own self-interest, so long as he stopped wishing for more, he and Hardcase would get along fine. He just had to keep reminding himself to not trust too much, to not care too much, and to never expect more than what he already had.

Meanwhile, he’d made a commitment to Hardcastle. Right now, his task was to get better, so that he could get on with his job of taking care of the lawns and gardens, and tracking down bad guys. Okay, so it was a weird job. But he’d given his word. That might not mean much to a lot of folks – the word of an ex-con – but his word was really all he had that was his, and he held it dearly.

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“Hey, Judge,” Mark greeted him when Milt ambled into the room the next day.

“McCormick,” Hardcastle acknowledged with a nod, his gaze narrowing as he studied Mark. “You look like you’re feeling better today.”

“Yeah. I think I’m finally on the downhill stretch,” Mark agreed. He shrugged diffidently, and his gaze wandered the room. “I, uh, I’m sorry I haven’t been the best company. You’ve, um, you’ve been really good about keeping tabs on me, and I appreciate it.” He paused and then pressed on, “I should be able to be up and around soon … get back to mowin’ the back forty.”

“Don’t worry about the lawn, McCormick,” Milt replied guardedly. There was something not right here, but he wasn’t exactly sure what. All he knew was that the contrite, almost bashful tone rang alarm bells. Where was the anger and bitterness that had at least seemed honest, if inexplicable? Wasn’t like McCormick to seem so … what? Nervous? And what was with the shifty eyes? “The grass isn’t going anywhere. I’ve been talkin’ to Charlie, an’ he says you’re goin’ to need some rehab. You know, physical training to get your leg back in shape. And you’re just getting over pneumonia, not to mention bein’ shot. Gonna be a while before you’re up to pushin’ the lawn mower.”

“Rehab. Right,” Mark murmured with a frown. “Not exactly the deal we had, huh?”

Milt grimaced and crossed his arms. Was that it? Was the kid worried about going after the bad guys now? Couldn’t really blame him but … Oh, hell, maybe Charlie was right about the need for counseling. He scratched his cheek and said, “Well, about that. Charlie also said he wondered if you might want to talk to somebody about what happened.”

Mark looked at him, confusion written on his face. “Talk to who? Oh, you mean the cops? Right. I guess they need my statement, huh?” His lips thinned and he shook his head. “Wish I could remember it all more clearly. Not sure how good a witness I’ll be for the part after Mickey gave me his gun. I’m sorry about that, Judge. But maybe the memories’ll come back. Hey, maybe we should try hypnosis or something?”

“Hypnosis?” Milt echoed in disbelief, and then waved off the idea with impatience. “You don’t need to remember that part; I’ve got it covered.”

“Oh, well, okay,” Mark allowed, his gaze again slipping away.

Milt watched him rub his chest, as if it was still hurting, which created a pang in his heart. McCormick was still paying one hell of a price for keeping him as safe as the kid could that night. “Charlie wondered if you might want to talk to a counselor,” he said, to bring the conversation back on topic. “You know, about getting hurt so bad an’ all.”

“Really?” McCormick exclaimed in surprise. “No, no, I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m okay with what I did and what happened. Hey, I’m alive so I figure I’m ahead of the game, right?”

Heaving a sigh, Milt sat back in the chair. Something was definitely off. The kid’s tone was forced, stilted, and definitely nervous. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked. “What’s got you all skittish all of a sudden?”

Mark blinked at him and then, again dammit, looked away. “Nothin’s wrong, Judge,” he protested. “I just, well, I know I’ve been surly and I’m sorry, that’s all. You didn’t have to be here so much, I know that. I’m grateful.”

“Well, you don’t have to be grateful or anything dumb like that,” Milt muttered. “I’m the one who’s supposed to be grateful, here. Look, we need to talk about what happens next, when you’re well enough to get out of here. Charlie has some cock-eyed idea that you might prefer to go into a rehab place, but I told him you’d want to go home.”

Mark swallowed and bowed his head. “Because it would make protective custody easier, right?” he queried quietly with a sidelong glance at the door and the cop standing guard. “And probably cheaper in the long run, too. I guess those rehab places are pretty expensive and I know I don’t have the money for that.”

“This isn’t about money or convenience, McCormick,” Milt interjected with a flash of irritation. “I just figured you’d had enough of institutions – that you’d rather be back home, that’s all.”

“But which is easier for you, Judge?” Mark asked uncertainly. “I don’t want to be any kind of burden, you know? How long before I’ll be back on my feet? Has Charlie given you any idea?”

Apologies. Worried about being a burden. Milt pursed his lips as he pondered the evidence and put it together with the guy who thought his own life didn’t matter much. “Look,” he said, leaning forward and speaking low and even, “you’re not a burden, so stop thinking like that. If you seriously want to know what I’d prefer, well, then, fine, I’ll tell you. I want you to come home as soon as possible. But this isn’t about what I want, McCormick. This is about what would make you feel more comfortable. Can you honestly tell me you’d rather be in some anonymous hospital room, stuck with whatever schedule works for the institution in terms of your care and recovery, than come home and recover there? You do know that Gulls’ Way is your home now, right? You do know that?”

Mark flushed and seemed at a loss for words as he picked at the sheet. Taking a breath, he nodded. “Okay, then,” he said, his tone careful, “when you put it like that, yeah, I’d rather go back to the estate.”

Estate. Not home. Well, at least it was the right answer. “Good,” Milt replied as heartily as he could manage given the warning flags he could see all over the damned place that signaled McCormick’s uncertainty about where he stood. “I’ll talk to Charlie and make the arrangements to get you *home* as soon as possible.”

“And maybe tell the cops I’m ready to make my statement?” Mark suggested. “Be good to get that nailed down. You know, in case anything happens.”

“What do you think is going to happen?”

“Well, I was out of it most of the time, but I thought I heard someone say Mickey D was out and you said when all this started that he’s careful about not leaving witnesses around, and I figure that’s why Joe Friday is camped out in the hall, right?”

“Nothin’s goin’ to happen to you, McCormick,” Milt insisted. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Still, be a good idea to give my statement,” Mark returned doggedly. “Get it out of the way.” Looking worried, he asked, “You think the Parole Board will have a problem with me shooting back?”

“Nah, I’ve got that covered,” Milt replied, wondering if they were finally getting to the bottom of McCormick’s oddly stilted behavior. “Was self-defense, pure an’ simple. They weren’t too happy with me putting you in the situation but ….” He shrugged.

“Ah, yes, all that paperwork,” Mark teased gently, referring to their conversation before he’d gone undercover.

Relieved by the spark of humor, Hardcastle gave him a crooked grin. “You don’t want to know,” he retorted with a mock growl. “Next time, I’ll make you fill it all out.”

“Next time?” Mark chuckled, and then groaned as he braced his chest with an arm. “Don’t hold your breath, Hardcase.”

“Now yer cookin’,” Milt approved with a wink and a sharp nod, though he hated knowing the kid was still hurting so bad. Pulling a pack of cards from his shirt pocket, he held them up. “You up for a game or two to pass the time?”

“Yeah, sure, why not?” Mark agreed with alacrity and seemed relieved, as if he’d just successfully traversed a minefield and was again on safe ground.

As he shifted the portable table across the bed and then shuffled the deck, Milt wished he knew what the hell had gotten the kid all tied up in knots. Setting the small mystery aside for the moment, he dealt the cards.

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Mark tried to concentrate on the card game, and was glad it wasn’t too demanding, because he still felt about as lively as a sloth. Didn’t help that a headache from hell was building behind his eyes, and his skin was itching, a combination of dryness and, he suspected, the effects of having cut back on the heavy-duty pain meds. The evening before, a nurse had warned him that he might feel some mild withdrawal effects like headache, nausea, and the restless twitchiness. And irritability, definitely irritability. Mark was determined to remain pleasant, even respectful … but as the minutes wore on and became hours, he ached to be left alone.

He was also distracted by his efforts to figure out why Hardcase had made such a big deal about him going ‘home’ rather than to a rehab unit for recuperation. Oh, he got that the protective surveillance would be easier but … but Hardcastle had really emphasized the fact that the estate was his ‘home’, and that was a bit weird. Because it wasn’t. Sure, he lived there, for now and the foreseeable future, but that was at the Judge’s sufferance. When the day came when Hardcastle decided that either their partnership wasn’t working out or they’d caught all the bad guys who’d gotten away, well, then he’d get his marching papers, right? Surely Hardcastle didn’t really want him to start thinking he belonged at Gulls’ Way. Nah, no way. Hardcase couldn’t be suggesting that – to the contrary, Mark was very sure the old donkey would be quick to disabuse him of any such notion. No, it was just a figure of speech.

At least he’d managed to get through his apologies for his unsociable manners without Hardcastle belaboring his recent rudeness. Since Hardcase wouldn’t usually put up with that much attitude, Mark figured he was being given leeway because of the circumstances. But he had the uncomfortable feeling that Hardcastle was watching him, trying to figure something out. With a mental shrug, Mark gave up wondering what the Judge was thinking. He was too tired and he still hurt too much to care.

When the Respiratory Tech arrived to put him through his afternoon deep breathing exercises, Mark was glad of the excuse to shoo Hardcastle out of the room. As he went through his paces of taking a deep breath, holding it, and blowing out, he pondered the Judge and the man’s odd behavior. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why Hardcase was hanging around so much. Okay, sure, it maybe made some sense when he’d been lingering between life and death, if only to show due concern for a parolee under his authority – though Mark couldn’t imagine Dalem, his official parole officer, even bothering to come to the hospital to check on him. He didn’t even want to think about what it was costing to keep him in this private room. Nah, it had to be an exaggerated sense of responsibility on the Judge’s part, and probably also some guilt. They’d have to clear the air about all that, once and for all.

*Later*, he thought, when a coughing jag caught him, leaving him breathless. Once he felt a little stronger. And once he’d gotten past the sick, antsy and very irritable need for pain medication that his body had learned to crave for all the wrong reasons. For now, it was hard enough to just be pleasant and polite, suitably grateful for the time and interest Hardcase was taking in him, even if it was all exhausting. Maybe he would be better going into a rehab institute? He couldn’t imagine having to cope with Hardcastle hovering over him all damned day and night at Gulls’ Way, free of all ‘visiting hour’ restrictions.

Sighing, bracing his chest, with the tech’s support Mark eased out of the bed and settled into the chair by the bed for his mandated afternoon spell of sitting up for an hour. Panting a little, he leaned back and closed his eyes. God, he was still so damned weak! The respiratory and physical therapists had both commented more than once that they wished he could be up and walking the hallway, to build strength and stamina again, but his leg injury still hadn’t healed well enough to put much weight on it, and with his chest injuries, he couldn’t manage crutches. In a little while, the physical therapist would arrive for the second session of the day, to work his legs and arms, to keep the muscle from atrophying completely, but it wasn’t nearly as good as walking would be.

Tired to his bones of being so weak and vulnerable, so incapable of looking after himself, Mark lifted his head and eyed the short distance between the chair and the door to the bathroom. Chewing his lip, he figured there was no reason he couldn’t hop that far, especially since he could lean on the wall most of the way. With grim determination, he levered himself up but had to reach quickly for the support of the wall when his head began to spin. He closed his eyes and took several deep, steadying breaths, and then, tentatively, settled some weight on his bad leg. When it nearly gave out under him, he cursed in frustration. Leaning heavily on the wall, feeling the pull in his chest, he clenched his jaw and began his shuffling hop.

Barely halfway to his goal, he had to stop to pant for breath as he rubbed the deep ache in his chest, and he felt desperation build. How the hell long was he going to be so incapable? And a small voice in the back of his mind asked the question he’d been actively avoiding: how long would Hardcase put up with a defective ex-con before he got fed up and traded Mark in for a better model? He thought about the wide lawns and the clean, clear view over the Pacific, and his eyes began to burn even as his gut clenched at the thought of losing all that and having to go back to a noisome, dismal cell. Driven now by fear, gasping and fighting pain and dizziness Mark forced himself to cover the rest of the distance, no more than five feet away though it felt like ten miles.

“What the hell!” Hardcastle barked, startling him, and he started to shake. A strong arm came around him, supporting him, and he had to fight the urge to weep both with relief and humiliation.

“B-bathroom,” he stammered, ashamed to be so inarticulate as well as utterly helpless.

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” the Judge muttered. “Just lean on me and we’ll get there.”

It was so much easier with support and, in what seemed only seconds, Mark found himself in the little cubicle. “I can manage in here,” he said, his gaze downcast and his voice embarrassingly unsteady.

“I’ll be right outside. Holler if you need help,” Hardcastle ordered, sounding gruff, but he retreated, affording Mark the dignity of a little privacy. Outside the door, however, he carried on irritably, “You should’ve called for help, ya know. Stupid to try that on your own. Might’ve fallen and hurt yourself! I swear, you’re the most stubborn, pig-headed, independent cuss ….”

Mark couldn’t help the crooked smile as the Judge went on and on with his complaints and observations. He finished his business and washed his hands. Leaning on the counter around the sink, he called, “Okay, you can come in.”

With one arm around Hardcastle’s shoulders and Hardcase holding him with staunch strength, they made short work of getting him back to the chair. Milt wanted him to get back into bed, but he insisted he was supposed to sit up for at least another thirty minutes.

“Yeah, well, I’ll bet you were supposed to *stay* in the chair,” Hardcastle growled as he loomed over Mark and crossed his arms.

“You’d win that bet,” Mark panted, leaning back. But, with a wave toward the bathroom, he complained in virtuous self-defense, “I’m just sick of it all, you know? Sick of … of the damned urinal and bedpan. Sick of being unable to take care of myself. Tired of lying around, doing nothing, being so useless.”

“Useless? Where do you get these dumb ideas?” Hardcase exclaimed. “You’re hurt, bad hurt, and sick to boot. There’s no shame in needing help, McCormick.”

“No? How would you like to be tied to a damned bed for weeks on end, huh? I’m sick of it,” he argued, his voice rising.

Hardcastle’s lips thinned and then he shook his head. “Guess I wouldn’t care for it much, either,” he admitted, taking the steam out Mark’s ire. “But, kid, ya nearly died – twice,” Milt went on, his tone cajoling. “You need to give yourself a break here. Takes time to come back from all that.”

Looking away, Mark swallowed the urge to either scream or cry. His head pounded mercilessly; he felt queasy and was trembling with weakness. “Maybe I should go to the rehab unit,” he rasped. “When I can’t even get to the bathroom by myself – it’s too much, Judge. Too much for you to be worrying about or … or helping me with, for God only knows how long.”

He heard Hardcastle sigh, and the soft rustle as the Judge moved away to lean against the bed. “Now, you listen to me, McCormick,” he said, low and firm. “I’ll decide what’s too much for me. An’ I already told you that I want you home as soon as we can spring you outta here.”

“Why?” Mark appealed, lifting his eyes to meet Hardcastle’s steady gaze. “Why would you want to bother?” When Milt hesitated, he went on, unable to stop himself, the words coming fast and sharp, “You’re doing too much, Judge, too much. This room,” he waved again, helplessly, “being here all the time. You don’t *owe* me anything, Hardcase. Not a thing. I got into this with my eyes wide open. And it’s your home, not mine. I *cannot* understand why you’d want to take on the hassle of helping me recover. And I don’t know why you’re always here. If it’s guilt or, or a misplaced sense of responsibility, just stop it. And if it’s pity or some damned thing, I don’t want it. God, I don’t know why you don’t just throw me back and get a model that works, you know? You didn’t sign me on with the idea of having to nursemaid me.”

“Toss you back? What to prison?” Hardcastle snorted; then he continued, his voice rising with ire. “Get a model that works? Kid, you must have a pretty low opinion of me to even suggest any such thing. You’re a human being, McCormick, not a car. An’ it is, too, your home,” he insisted heatedly, “for now and for the foreseeable future. I don’t know why you’d think otherwise.” He paused and shook his head, visibly regaining control of his temper. “Look, you’re tired, alright, and discouraged. I can understand that, but I don’t think you’re in any shape right now for the conversation we obviously need to have. Let me help you back into bed, okay? You need to rest now. We can talk about the rest of it later, or when you’re home.”

Mark wanted to fight, but didn’t have the energy for it. Defeated, he nodded and accepted Hardcastle’s help. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled as the Judge drew up the sheet and blanket to cover him. “I’m just … I ….”

“Shh, it’s okay, kid,” Hardcastle said when his voice faded. “Just relax and go with the flow for now. We’ll sort it all out.” He laid a palm on Mark’s shoulder. “But, for the record, it’s not pity, an’ it’s not because I feel I owe you, though I do. You saved my life, McCormick. Pure and simple.”

When Mark shook his head and started to object, Milt’s hand tightened on his shoulder. “Enough, Mark. Rest now. We’ll talk more later. You need anything for pain?”

“God, no,” he blurted. “I’m too attached to the drugs already. Need to get off them.”

Milt frowned. “I’ll talk to Charlie about that,” he mused. “Doesn’t make sense to me for you to be cuttin’ yourself off if you still need ‘em. In fact, I’ve heard that when you need the stuff for real pain, you don’t get hooked. So you shouldn’t be worryin’ about that.”

“I’m fine,” Mark insisted wearily. “Really. I can manage without it, and I’d really rather not test the theory of whether they’re addictive or not – God knows, I’ve been irritable without them today.”

“Because you’re hurting, and you still need –”

“I said I’m fine,” Mark cut in, at the end of his rope. He didn’t want to argue about it. He just … he just wanted to be left alone.



Nodding, Hardcastle stepped away. “It’s your call,” he agreed, if grudgingly. “Go to sleep, kid.”

Though he felt pathetic to be so exhausted after so little effort, Mark needed no further encouragement to simply close his eyes and let the world drift away. But his dreams were filled with dark shadows and the flickers of firelight, by the metallic taste of fear in his mouth and the terrible knowledge that he was going to die.

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Gradually, Mark grew stronger and the pain in his chest diminished from an ever-constant awareness to an ache that flared only when he twisted a certain way or pulled his chest muscles when he was taking too much weight on his arms. With help, getting to and from the bathroom became a simpler task, and he began to feel more human, less vulnerable. Hardcastle still spent long hours at the hospital, but they kept their conversation light, impersonal, and focused on playing cards or talking about the weather or news of the day. Neither of them said anything about the police officer who stood sentry in the hall.

One afternoon, Frank Harper ambled in, Mark recognizing the detective from his earlier, short visits to check on his progress. This time, though, he was carrying a tape recorder and his demeanor was more professional than reassuringly congenial.

“You feel up to giving me a formal statement today, and answering a few questions?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Mark agreed. “I’m surprised you’ve waited this long.”

“Well, I wanted to be sure you didn’t fall asleep on me halfway through,” Frank returned with a small, sardonic grin. Turning to Milt, he jerked his thumb toward the door. “’Fraid I have to ask you to leave, Milt. Don’t want to compromise your status as an independent witness by you hearing Mark’s formal report of what happened.”

Hardcastle harrumphed as he stood to go. “If we were going to collude on our testimony, we’ve had plenty of time to make sure our stories match,” he grumbled.

Frank’s smile widened. “I know,” he agreed. “But this is about the rules, not what makes any sense. Give us an hour or so, would you? Maybe bring back some coffee?”

“Sure, fine,” Milt agreed as he left the room.

Frank set up the equipment on the bedside table, and then got comfortable in the chair the Judge had just vacated. “You know the drill, Mark. I’ll state the formal specifics of the case, and then ask you to tell me what happened in your own words. If I’ve got any questions for clarification as you go along, I’ll let you know. You ready to get started?” When Mark nodded, he punched on the recorder and stated the case number, Mark’s name, the location and date, and his name. And then he said, “Tell me what happened that night, Mr. McCormick, but maybe start with what you were doing there in the first place.”

Mark gave him a bemused look, tempted to go all the way back to what he was doing working with Hardcase ‘in the first place’, but he sobered and simply began with the Judge’s suspicions that the murders in old Hollywood and the rumors about a new designer drug about to hit the street were related. And he went on from there. But, as he got closer to the eruption of violence that night, he slowed.

“I remember them shoving Hardcastle into the back alley. And I remember thinking I had to get him out of there before they killed both of us,” he said, frowning with concentration. He related how he’d conned Mickey into giving him a weapon, and he squinted into the middle distance, as if to see more clearly, but then shrugged. “All I remember after that is telling Hardcastle to walk toward the dumpsters, and the alley beyond them. Mickey and the others thought I was going to make the Judge climb into one of them, I guess. Like I was saying he was only so much garbage. I could feel them watching us and I knew the longer I took before starting to shoot, the more suspicious they’d become. I remember thinking we’d run out of time and telling the Judge to run for it, and I remember turning back to face them all. But … but that’s all I remember until I woke up in the hospital. I’m sorry. I … I’ve got some flashes of stuff, like dream memories, but I don’t know for sure what happened after that.”

Frank nodded. “That’s not unusual, given how badly you were hurt. Can you tell me what you were thinking as you turned around to face them? What you’d intended. Did you intend to kill as many of them as you could?”

Mark blinked, feeling cold and queasy at the disconcerting question; more, at the memories of the fear that he might kill someone and how terrible that feeling had been. “Uh, no. I … I really didn’t want to kill anyone. I just knew I had to buy some time for Hardcastle to get clear.” He shook his head helplessly. “I don’t ever want to have to kill anyone. But I guess, maybe … I guess I must’ve known I might. I mean, I was ready to shoot at them.”

“Sounds like you didn’t have much choice,” Frank murmured as he shut off the machine. “You didn’t kill anyone, Mark, so don’t worry about that, okay? But from the Judge’s statement, I know you showed a lot of courage that night. I want to thank you for that. For saving Milt’s life.”

Embarrassed, Mark shrugged and his gaze fell away. “I was just doing what made sense to me, that’s all. I figured only one of us had any chance of getting out of there in one piece.” Looking back at Frank, he asked, “What’s with the guard outside the door? Is it just because Mickey is out on bail? Or do you really think he might come after me?”

Frank hesitated. “You don’t know about the threat he made, do you?” he finally asked.

“What threat?”

“That night, he said he hoped you’d live, so he could kill you himself.”

“Oh,” Mark exclaimed softly, surprised.

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” Frank agreed. “He’s never left witnesses behind, Mark. We’re not taking any chances with either you or the Judge.”

“An’ that’s why you guys want me to go to Gulls’ Way to recuperate, right? Instead of a rehab unit? Because it would make it easier, and cheaper, to keep an eye on both of us?” Mark probed.

Frank scratched his cheek. “Well, there’s no doubt it makes it a little easier having the two of you in the same place. But, mostly, I thought you were going home because that’s the way both you and Milt want it. Isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Mark agreed and forced a laugh. “Hard to beat being in a place like that; nice digs, wide open spaces, the ocean. Who wouldn’t want to recover there?”

His gaze narrowing, Frank gave him a searching look. He seemed about to say something, but Hardcastle bustled in just then, and handed him a disposable cup of coffee. “You guys all done with the important stuff?” Milt asked, looking from one to the other.

“Yeah, your timing’s perfect,” Frank replied with a glance at the door, as if he wondered if Hardcastle had been listening out in the hallway. “I’d like to stay and visit for a while, but I’d better be getting back downtown. Thanks for the coffee, Milt. See ya, Mark.”

An hour later, Charlie Friedman came in during his rounds and listened to Mark’s chest, asked him to cough and listened again, nodding to himself all the while. When he settled the earpieces of the stethoscope around his neck, he smiled and said, “Congratulations, Mark. Tomorrow morning, you can go home.”

Mark turned to Hardcastle, and was startled by the light of pure joy that suffused the man’s face. Milt’s eyes were sparkling with a happiness could not be feigned and a wide smile wreathed his rugged face. Mark’s breath caught and a lump thickened in his throat at the simple, blissful delight radiating from the Judge. God, the man was happy – genuinely *happy* – to be taking him home! Hardcase looked like a man who’d damned near lost someone important to him, someone like family or a best friend, and was now filled with relief and unfettered jubilation to know that someone was really going to be fine, was coming back home again, at long, long last.

Filled with confusion, Mark smiled back uncertainly, and his gaze fell away. In a million years, he would never have expected the Judge to look at him like that, as if Milt truly cared about him; like he was someone who not only mattered, but mattered profoundly, not someone impersonal like a witness. It didn’t make any sense; didn’t fit with any of the notions Mark had about their relationship. No, he must’ve been mistaken. But when he glanced again at Hardcastle, the man was still grinning like a loon, and was on his feet, heartily pounding Charlie on the back and thanking him profusely for having done a great job, a *great* job. And now the Judge was rubbing his hands together, bubbling away about having to take care of some last minute details. Bubbling? Hardcase was *not* a guy who ‘bubbled’. But that’s what he was doing. Like effervescent champagne bursting free and overflowing in celebration.

Mark’s eyes stung and he swallowed hard. He didn’t understand it and sure hadn’t expected anything like this. He felt as if his whole world had turned on its axis and nothing was what he’d thought it was. Belatedly, he realized he was smiling in response, but he felt dazed and couldn’t make sense of any of it.

“You’ve got a ways to go, yet, Mark,” Charlie was saying, and he wagged an admonishing finger at Hardcastle. “Don’t be pushing him too hard, too fast.” Milt held up his hands in a ‘who me?’ gesture of absolute innocence, and Friedman turned back to Mark. “I’ve arranged a physiotherapist for two hours every day, to exercise your muscles – your injured leg in particular – and to build back your strength and stamina. Your wounds have healed sufficiently for you to spend time each day in the pool. But don’t be wearing yourself out. I don’t want to see you back in here – ever. And the next time bullets start flying toward you? *Duck*.”

“This is terrific news, ain’t it, kid!” Hardcastle enthused as he squeezed Mark’s shoulder. “Look, I’m just gonna go an’ make sure the home care’ll start the day after tomorrow, and get in some groceries. An’ I’ll call Teddy, so he won’t come in here and think somethin’ bad happened when he can’t find you. I’ll be back later with your clothes, so’s you can get dressed first thing in the morning. You’re comin’ home, McCormick! Finally, you’re really comin’ home!”

And then he wheeled away to walk out with Charlie, his arm around the physician’s shoulders, still talking and making plans.

Mark blinked and, realizing his mouth was hanging open, closed it. What was that all about? He leaned back against the pillows and shifted his gaze to look out the window at the cloudless sky. He couldn’t have seen what he thought he saw, could he? A kernel of hope flared in his chest and started to grow, filling him with warmth. But he frowned and shook his head. No. No, he was imagining things, seeing more than was there. Hardcase was just glad that he wouldn’t have to keep spending all his time at the hospital. It wasn’t personal; couldn’t be personal. That’s not the way things were between them.

But … damn, the man had looked like he’d just gotten the best news in the world, as if he really was the Lone Ranger and had been worried sick that his best friend – his only real friend – was going to die but was, instead, well on the road to recovery.

“Tonto,” Mark breathed and, despite himself, smiled in muddled but pleased bemusement.

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With the help of an orderly, Mark showered, shaved and got dressed before breakfast the next morning. By the time the stuff masquerading as eggs beside cardboard cut-outs representing toast arrived, he was sitting in the chair beside the bed, already worn out from the exertion. His hand shook as he reached for the cup of dishwater coffee, spilling some on the tray.

“Damn,” he muttered, and then huffed in mingled exasperation and fear. If he couldn’t even dress himself, and was *still* exhausted by the ordeal, how the hell was he going to manage back in the gatehouse? He looked at the bed he’d come to hate and knew he was going to miss it. The couch was going to have to do until his leg was strong enough to make it up the stairs, and he knew by then his back was going to be killing him. That couch just wasn’t all that comfortable, and it was too short by about four inches to fit his legs.

Taking a breath, he told himself to calm down and get with the program. So he’d be a little uncomfortable for a while, so what? As difficult as it had been to get his socks and pants on – make that impossible without help – he was relieved to be fully dressed again. Having his butt hang out and the perpetual draft in the back when he was wearing the hospital gown had gotten old real fast. But his clothes hung so loosely on him, he felt like a scarecrow. He’d had to tighten his belt several extra notches just to make sure his pants didn’t slide right off his hips. Until then, he hadn’t realized quite how much weight he’d lost. Grimacing at the congealing mess on the plate, he didn’t doubt that everyone lost weight while incarcerated in hospital, this one, anyway. But, just thinking about the distance between the gatehouse and the backdoor of the kitchen wore him out.

God. Maybe he should have insisted on going to the rehab center. He really, really didn’t know if he was up for ‘home’, yet.

He’d meant to share some of his misgivings about the arrangement with the Judge the evening before, when Hardcase had brought in a carry-all with his clothing and shoes. But Hardcastle had still been so evidently delighted to be springing him out of the hospital that Mark hadn’t had the heart to rain on his parade. Giving up on breakfast as a bad bet, Mark leaned back in the chair and thought about Hardcastle and his really strange reaction to the news of his imminent release.

Though Mark had pretty much convinced himself that he’d more or less imagined how glad Hardcase had seemed that afternoon, there was no denying that the man was still practically incandescent when he’d returned last evening. The Judge had been eager to relay that the homecare people would send someone along every morning to help Mark get bathed and dressed, and that the physical training guy, Jessie Havers, would put Mark through his paces every afternoon from one until three. The only hitch was that homecare wouldn’t start for a couple days, but Hardcastle waved that off, saying he’d be able to help out, no sweat. Before Mark could quite visualize that, the Judge had swept on to the rest of his news. Apparently, Teddy was overjoyed to hear Mark was getting out of the hospital and would visit the next day. The larder was all stocked and the Judge must’ve stated his intention fifty times, if he’d stated it once, that he was ‘determined to put some meat back on those bones’. And all the while, Hardcastle had been grinning from ear to ear and if his eyes had twinkled any brighter, they could have powered the city.

There could be no doubt about it. Hardcase really was *very* glad to be taking him home.

And Mark didn’t know what to make of that. He really didn’t. He wanted to believe that the Judge actually cared about him, and he *could* believe that Hardcastle *thought* he cared. But it couldn’t last. It was just a reaction to everything that had happened, that’s all. Maybe a kind of Stockholm syndrome, the effect of being holed up in hospital rooms for so many hours and days and weeks, an effect that would swiftly wear off once Mark was back at Gulls’ Way. Mark couldn’t allow himself to take it for granted or, worse, come to rely upon it. Sooner or later, things would get back to normal and Hardcase would remember he was nothing more but an indentured servant of sorts.

Still … it was kinda nice. Not since his mother had anyone given him such an unmitigated feeling of being *wanted* or that his presence was the cause of any kind of joy. Real nice. Left him feeling a little sad to know it couldn’t last. He let out a long, slow breath, and told himself to just enjoy it while it lasted. Glancing at the bed, he decided that if the price of it was a sore back and broken sleep for a while, it would be worth it.

Hardcastle showed up fifteen minutes early, all smiles and rubbing his hands together as he supervised the nurse helping Mark into a wheelchair. “Everything’s all set,” he assured Mark. “Jessie will be over this afternoon and, if ya want, he’ll even get you into the pool for your workout.”

Mark thought that might be a bit ambitious for the first day, but didn’t say so. Just nodded and smiled, and hid all sense of foreboding about how he was going to manage in the gatehouse on his own. Hell, wondering which vehicle the Judge had brought, he wasn’t even sure how he was going to get into the truck without a hoist to lift him inside … or out of the Coyote, without a lot of help to lever him out of it once they got home.

“You okay, kid?” Milt asked, as they waited for the elevator. “You seem, I don’t know, kinda quiet.”

“I’m fine,” Mark chirped and widened his smile. “Everything’s just fine.”

There was a flash of worry in Hardcastle’s eyes, quickly banished as he patted Mark’s shoulder. “Well, maybe everything isn’t all fine, not yet. But it will be.”

*How does he do that?* Mark wondered with familiar disquiet. *How does he seem to look right through me? Right past the con to what’s inside?* Disconcerted, he just nodded and looked away.

When they got outside, Mark was surprised to see the patrol car waiting for them, and he looked askance at Hardcastle.

“All part of the protection,” the Judge assured him, gripping his arm to help him to his feet and steady him.

Mark grinned wryly as he slid slowly into the back seat, and thought about the last time he’d ridden at the city’s expense, right back to jail. At least, this time, he didn’t have his wrists cuffed behind his back.

When they got to the estate, he was surprised when they pulled up right in front of the door to the main house and didn’t carry on down the drive to the gatehouse. Stifling a sigh, he figured that Hardcastle was determined not to baby him, and to make sure he got his exercise.

But when he started down the drive, Hardcastle caught his arm. “Where’re you going?” he asked, as he steered Mark toward the house.

“Well …” Mark began, waving toward his residence.

“No, no, you can’t manage down there, not yet,” Hardcastle blustered, shaking his head. “I know you probably want your privacy and everything, but that’s gonna have to wait for a bit. Here, put your arm around my shoulder and lean on me. It’ll go easier.”

Perplexed, Mark draped an arm around the Judge’s shoulders and leaned more heavily than he wished was necessary as he limped into the house. Hardcastle guided him past the den and through the kitchen to Sarah’s old quarters, a private suite overlooking the yard and the ocean. After getting him settled in a chair by the window, Milt sounded almost nervous as he said, “I think you’ll be comfortable in here. There’s a private bath just past that door over there. The bedroom’s through that other door over there. It’s all on one level, and there’re no stairs between here and the kitchen. An’ I’ve installed an intercom on the table there by your hand, in the bathroom, and another one by the bed that links to the kitchen, den and my bedroom upstairs, so you can call me if you need any help. I was going to set you up with a bed in the living room, or maybe even the den, but I thought you might find that a bit too open, ya know? A bit strange. No privacy an’ all. This’ll be okay, won’t it?”

“This … this is fine, Judge,” Mark said, more than a little breathless with surprise … and gratitude. “You didn’t need to go to all this trouble. I mean it; this is really great.” He looked around in amazement and then smiled widely at Hardcastle. “It’s perfect.”

Milt smiled, very obviously pleased and clapped his hands together. “Good, good,” he replied, nodding vigorously. “Well, okay, then. Did you eat breakfast or just push the glop around on your tray?”

Snickering, Mark admitted, “Mostly just pushed the glop around.”

“Thought so. Stuff never looked very appetizing,” Hardcastle agreed. “How do bacon and eggs sound? With some thick slabs of toast and good, strong coffee?”

“Sounds like heaven, Hardcase,” Mark replied, laughing. He began to push himself back up to his feet, but Milt intervened. “No, you just sit back and relax; enjoy the view. I’ll come getcha when the food’s ready.”

And then he was gone, whistling a jaunty tune as he hastened off to begin his self-appointed mission to put some meat back on Mark’s bones. Astonished, Mark again looked around the comfortable, even cozy, quarters, and then he gazed through the open window at the glittering sea beyond the garden and sweeping lawn. A slight breeze touched his face, bringing scents of flowers and grass and salt, and his chest tightened as he blinked back tears. It really was heaven. Or, at least, it was as close as he was ever likely to get to paradise.

All of a sudden, he was very, *very* glad to be *home*.

And, just as quickly, he sternly warned himself not to get too used to the place or the special treatment. *Just enjoy it while it lasts ….*

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Beaming benevolently, Hardcastle watched him down every last bite and drain the last dregs of coffee from his cup. “Still hungry?” he asked. “I can make more.”

Leaning back, Mark gently rubbed his stomach and shook his head. “Nah, I’m stuffed,” he said with a smile of cheerful repletion. “Sure beats hospital food. Thanks, Judge.”

“Ya want to sit out by the pool, maybe read the paper for a while?” Hardcase asked. “Ya need to get some sun to get rid of that peaked, hospital ‘death warmed over’ look.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed with a grimace at the imagery, bracing his weight on the table as he levered himself to his feet, and trying not to wince at the pull in his chest.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down there, hotshot,” Milt ordered as he hustled to Mark’s side, to give him a hand up and support him with an arm around his back. “Charlie said to make sure you don’t put too much weight on that leg before it’s ready. You take a header, an’ I’m the one he’ll skin alive.”

“Thanks, Judge. I appreciate –”

“An’ would ya stop thanking me for every little thing?” Hardcase cut in irritably. “For Pete’s sake, just relax, McCormick. Relax.”

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Jessie Havers, the physiotherapist, showed up as scheduled and, after getting Mark to do some gentle stretching to limber up his muscles, he decided working out in the pool would provide the right kind of low impact workout that Mark needed. About halfway through the session, Mark thought he heard the doorbell ring, but promptly forgot about it as he concentrated on his breathing as he followed Jessie through some aerobic exercises and then walked for twenty minutes in the water. He felt frail and pathetically skinny, particularly in contrast to Jessie’s well-developed musculature and, apparently, boundless energy. After having barely moved at all for weeks, he found the workout, as gentle as it was, exhausting, but he refused to quit and assured Jessie he was doing just fine. Finally, though, a half-hour before their two hours was up, he had to cry ‘uncle’, and he was glad of the other guy’s strength when it came time to get out of the pool. He was so exhausted and his muscles were trembling so badly, that Jessie practically had to heave him up onto the patio.

Panting, he dropped onto a lounge, too tired to towel off his hair or body. The sun was pleasantly warm, so he didn’t worry about it. Jessie handed him a tube of sunblock, and then gently worked his legs and arms until the trembling eased, all the while coaching him on keeping his breathing deep and slow. By the time the therapist was finished, he was already more than half-asleep, and barely heard the man say he’d see him again the next day.

A delectable scent teased him awake, and he became aware of someone moving quietly nearby. Blinking against the bright sunlight, he shaded his eyes as he looked up, expecting to see Hardcastle. “Sarah!” he exclaimed, a smile bursting forth as he pushed himself up. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello to you, too,” she replied with her usual asperity, but then relented as she gazed at him with warm compassion shadowing her eyes. “The Judge thought you’d earned some of your favorite cookies. So I said I’d come and bake you a batch.” She set the plate of freshly-made oatmeal, cinnamon, and raisin cookies and the glass of milk she was carrying onto the low table beside him. Giving him an assessing look, she said darkly, “I can see why he thought he’d need some help fattening you up. Are you alright, Mark?”

“Well, I’ve been better, but I’m doin’ okay,” he returned. Reaching for a cookie, he added with an impish grin, “In fact, I’m doing a whole lot better now. But, oh! I’m in your suite. I can move out,” he went on, shifting to stand, but she placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Nonsense,” she retorted briskly. “I’ll be perfectly comfortable in one of the guestrooms upstairs. Be careful, now. That cookie might still be too hot to eat.”

He took a delicate bite and, closing his eyes, moaned with sheer bliss. “Id’s wunnerful,” he mumbled around the crumbs. Swallowing, he gazed at her fondly. “Thanks for coming, Sarah. We both missed you.”

She sniffed and gave him a sharp nod. Looking out at the gardens, she murmured, “It’s good to be with my sister, but I’ve missed the two of you, too.” Turning back to him, she went on, “The Judge told me what happened, Mark. I’m sorry you were so badly hurt. But … but thank you. Thank you for keeping him safe. Or, at least as safe as he’d let you.”

Flushing in embarrassment at her earnest gratitude, he hastily took another bite and reached for the glass of milk to cover his confusion. “You going to stay for a while?” he asked hopefully.

“Long enough to keep the two of you out of trouble until you heal,” she replied, the dry irony of her tone belied by her maternal pat on his shoulder.

“Great!” Mark enthused, meaning it. He genuinely liked her, maybe even loved her, like the grandmother he’d never had, and her presence had helped him and Hardcase deal with one another. After she’d left, they’d always seemed to rub each other the wrong way, well, up until he’d been shot. Now, Mark didn’t know what to think about how Hardcastle was treating him. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

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In the kitchen, watching and listening through the open window, close enough to hear but remain unseen, Milt chewed on a cookie and pondered Mark’s behavior. There was no question he was glad to see Sarah, and Milt congratulated himself, pleased he’d thought to get in touch with her and ask her to return for a while. But, there was something else, something more in Mark’s face and voice. An easy delight, a relaxing around the edges, that Hardcastle didn’t see when Mark was talking to him, or anyone else for that matter. He frowned and scratched his cheek, thinking about that, wondering if it was another clue to the puzzle of what was going on with McCormick.

A burst of hard-edged laughter captured his attention – the first time he’d heard Mark laugh at all since before he was shot. Milt was sorry he’d missed whatever it was that Sarah had said to spark the bitter amusement because, from the pained look on Sarah’s face, she hadn’t meant to be funny. Mark must’ve noticed her expression, too, because he was immediately contrite, his words too low for Milt to hear anything but the apologetic tone. Sarah murmured something and again patted his shoulder, as if McCormick was the one who needed reassurance. The kid looked uncertain, a little lost, and he shivered in the slight breeze. With a grimace, Milt decided that whatever they’d been talking about, it was time for McCormick to come back inside and maybe have a nap. That Jessie had worked him pretty hard for his first day out of the hospital. The last thing they needed was for McCormick to catch a cold and maybe end up with another case of pneumonia.

Marching out of the kitchen, Milt strode across the patio, and picked up the robe Mark had discarded on a chair by the table. “It’s getting cool,” he said, sounding rougher and more abrupt than he’d intended. “I’ll help you back to your room. You got time for a nap before dinner.”

“Oh, okay, thanks,” Mark replied, easing himself up to sit on the side of the lounge. He shivered again as he reached for the robe Milt held out. “Thanks again for the cookies, Sarah,” he said with a soft smile. “I really am glad you’re here.”

Milt helped him up and put an arm around his waist to balance him as, leaning stiffly into his support, Mark limped into the house. Behind them, Sarah carried in the empty plate and glass.

“You okay?” Hardcastle asked, once he got Mark back in his room. “Do ya need help getting the trucks off?”

“Nah, I think I can manage, thanks,” Mark replied, his tone subdued and his eyes downcast. “And thanks for asking Sarah to come back for a while. It’s really great to see her again.”

Frowning, Milt shook his head. So polite. So stilted. So unlike McCormick. “I told you to stop that. You don’t need to be thanking me for every damned thing. Ya hear?”

Mark nodded but, when he didn’t say anything more, Milt sighed and turned away. “I’ll come back later to help you get dressed for dinner. Try to get some rest.”

Back in the kitchen, he found Sarah making a pot of tea. “There’s something wrong with that kid,” he muttered as he sat down at the table. “I just can’t figure out what.”

“The boy’s hurting, Judge,” she replied with a sigh. She poured two cups and carried them to the table.

“Well, I know that,” he groused. “He nearly died.”

“I don’t mean just his injuries,” Sarah mused, sounding preoccupied. “Why aren’t any of his family here?”

Milt blew across the steaming liquid. “I don’t think he has any. None close, anyway.” He took a small sip and, wincing at the burn, set the cup down. “What made him laugh out there?”

Her face was pinched with worry when she met his curious gaze. “I said it was a good thing he was out of that hospital and finally home, where people cared about him.” Her lips tightened, and then she added, “He said he was sorry for laughing at me. Said he just wasn’t used to thinking he had a home or that anyone cared about him, and then he seemed embarrassed, as if he was sorry to have said so much.”

“Huh,” Milt grunted. “Guess maybe that explains a few things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he muttered, still thinking it through. “Except when he was hurting too bad to be anything but honest, he’s been on good behavior, all polite and everything, pretty much since he got shot. A couple times, he’s said stuff like maybe I’ll send him back for a new model, one that works and doesn’t have to be nursed. Like he thinks he’s disposable or something.” He paused and frowned. “Like when he just stood there and let ‘em shoot him. He doesn’t remember it all, but he as much as told me that he figures it didn’t matter if he got out alive, just so long as I did.”

“How much do you know about him? His background?”

“Not a whole lot,” Milt admitted with a shrug. “There’s no mention of any father in his file, an’ his name’s the same as his mother’s. She died when he was ten. After that, he spent some time with an aunt and uncle, but kept running away, so he was put in foster homes. Ran from them, too. Did a stint in Juvie and some time for joy-riding, before he was eighteen. Cleaned up his act after that. Got work repossessing cars and hit the racing circuit as a driver. He was working in a garage for about six months after he got out of prison before he came up in front of me again for, uh, ‘repossessing’ the Coyote for the legitimate owner.”

“He told me once that you sent him to prison for stealing his own car,” she said, sounding as if she hoped he’d deny it.

“Yeah, well, he was dumb enough to put his Porsche in his girlfriend’s name – you know, to avoid higher insurance payments – and when they broke up, she accused him of stealing the car,” he replied, trying not to be defensive.

“Oh, Judge,” she sighed. “Two years in prison – for taking his own car?”

“Now don’t you start,” he growled. “If I’d tried him for insurance fraud, he could’ve gone up for a lot longer.”

She snorted. “Sounds like he’s had a lot of bad luck in his life, poor boy.”

“He’s not a boy, Sarah. He’s a man; a man who made some dumb mistakes.”

She sighed and looked out the window. “I know he’s a man. Obviously, a very brave man,” she murmured. “But when I think about how he was when you first brought him here … like a stubborn little boy trying to pretend he didn’t care about anything, smart-mouthed and tough as nails, but no meanness in him.” Looking back at Milt, she went on, “You know, like an orphan who knows he’s going to be rejected and is pretending he doesn’t care, so it won’t hurt when he’s sent back? And now, when he’s hurt and can’t take care of himself, do you think maybe he’s being very, very good, so he won’t be sent away?”

Milt gaped at her as at least some of the puzzle pieces snapped into place. “An orphan who doesn’t think anyone cares about him. A kid who doesn’t think he’s worth much.” He thought about that, matched it against Mark’s behaviours and nodded. “I think you might have something there, Sarah,” he admitted. “Don’t know what we do with it, though. I’m sure not gonna adopt him.”

“He doesn’t trust us. Doesn’t trust that this will last, so maybe the first thing we need to do is convince him that he’s safe here.”

“He trusts you,” Milt insisted.

“Maybe, a little, because I’m no threat to him; I don’t have any power over him,” Sarah replied dryly. “The one he needs to learn how to trust is you, the man who sent him to prison for stealing his own car.”

“I don’t know what else I can do, Sarah,” he complained, feeling as if she was judging him and finding him wanting. “I’m straight with him. I watched over him at the hospital. An’ I’ve done my best to tell ‘im this is his home now, at least for …”

“At least until you get tired of him, or he messes up, or you just don’t need him anymore?” she supplied, sounding unimpressed.

“Damn.”

“Mmm,” she agreed with a narrow look. When Milt sagged back in discouragement, she added, “But there’s hope.”

“You think so, do you?” he grumbled.

“Of course,” she snapped, as if impatient that he had to be told. “You’re important to him, Judge. He was willing to die for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, he was,” Milt agreed, once again feeling the sick fear of how close it had been. “I just don’t know why.”

“Maybe you should ask him.”

“I did. He’s says he doesn’t remember. But, well, he said that if he figured only one of us could make it out alive, it made sense that it should be me. An’ I never asked for that. I don’t want him thinkin’ that way. It’s too dangerous.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Men,” she sighed and sipped at her tea.

“Oh, don’t give me that,” he grumped, caught between anger and frustration. “Why do you think he’d say something like that? Think something like that, huh?”

Carefully setting her cup on the saucer, avoiding his gaze, she looked around the kitchen. “Maybe he thinks that’s why you brought him here,” she offered quietly. “It is, isn’t it? To be a bodyguard? To help you bring criminals, dangerous ones, to justice? Maybe he thinks that’s what you expect of him. And what happens if he fails? If you decide he’s not doing his job well enough? Does he go back to prison? And if, God forbid, something like this happens again and he lives and you don’t, what then? Does he go back to prison then? Maybe he’d rather be dead than go back. Or, maybe, he just respects you more than he respects himself. Thinks your life is worth more than his.” She shrugged and sighed. When she straightened and turned her head to look at him, her gaze was dark, direct and uncompromising as she went on, her tone abrupt and impatient, “I’m not a mind-reader. I’d don’t know what he’s thinking, anymore than you do. I think you need to talk to him. Clear a few things up. Or is he right, Judge? Is he right that you’d send him back to prison if he doesn’t measure up?”

His jaw clamped tight, Milt looked away. What could he say? That was the deal, wasn’t it? It had seemed fair at the time, more than fair. But, now? Put as bluntly as Sarah had just done? Now, it didn’t seem all that fair. Made him feel like a bully, and he despised bullies.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “I need to talk to him. Sort a few things out.”

“Good,” she approved and stood up, her manner brisk. “Now go on, scoot. I need to get started on dinner.”

Feeling unaccountably like a chastised child who’d just been dismissed from class, and not liking it much, Milt pushed himself away from the table and tromped heavily down the hall to his den, where he slumped in his chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. He’d known since McCormick had awakened in the hospital that the two of them had to talk, but he’d been putting it off with the excuse of waiting until Mark was stronger. But now he wondered if he’d been delaying the inevitable because he really wasn’t sure what he wanted to say beyond, “When the bad guys start shooting, duck.”

He stared out the window at the drive, at the Coyote, and rubbed his mouth as he thought about McCormick’s life, and everything the kid had lost all the way down the line. Surely McCormick didn’t really think he’d wind up back in prison? That was nuts. But … was it? He was on parole and there were a thousand and one rules to be obeyed – and the kid had already broken a good number of them. Their deal had made some sense when McCormick was facing a third fall for stealing the Coyote, but that was before all the facts were in. No way would he go to prison for helping to bring Flip Johnson’s killer to justice; all he’d done was get the car back from Cody, the killer, for the rightful owner, Barbara Johnson. Milt thought Mark understood that, but maybe he didn’t. Or maybe he just didn’t trust the system – or Milt himself – to see it that way.

“I can’t just order him to trust me,” he muttered. Trust had to be earned. *But, dammit! I’ve given him a home. Got there as fast I could when he called to say he was in trouble. Stayed with him in the hospital. Brought him home instead of sending him to rehab,* he thought with no little exasperation. *What else am I supposed to do here? Besides, he’s the ex-con! He’s supposed to be earning my trust!*

*“He would have died for you,”* a stern voice in his head reminded him. *“Can’t get much more trustworthy than that.”*

“No. No, you can’t,” he agreed somberly. “But he’s not perfect.” *And you are?* “He makes dumb mistakes. Acts without thinking.” *You sent him to prison for stealing his own car. He’s paid for that dumb mistake.*

“Right,” Milt sighed.

He knew they needed to talk, but he had no idea where to begin or what to say. The gulf between them – not just age but the differences between them and their life experiences, their respective perspectives on the world – was very nearly overwhelming. For a moment, Milt wondered if they’d ever really find any common ground. But he shoved that thought aside. He had to make the effort. McCormick had earned that much, deserved that much. Besides … he liked the kid. He really did. Even though Mark had only been around a couple months, the place would seem too quiet without him. He belonged at Gulls’ Way.

Milt huffed a laugh and shook his head. “I’m still not gonna adopt him,” he grumbled, but his grin widened.

They might never be family, but there was no good reason they couldn’t be friends.

The phone rang beside him, interrupting his musings. “Hardcastle.”

“*Milt, it’s Frank. I wanted to let you know that Mickey Di Angelo has dropped off the radar screen. He might’ve skipped town or …*”

“He might be getting’ ready to make his move.”

“*Yeah, and it couldn’t be worse timing. I’m getting some heat about the surveillance at your place, especially since nothin’ much has happened in nearly a month.*”

“I’m surprised it’s lasted this long, to tell ya the truth. Don’t worry about it. If ya have to pull the patrol car, just let me know. I can lock this place down an’ the security system is tied into the local precinct. If anyone breaks in, they’ll know to send out reinforcements.” He paused, and then mused, “Ya know, might not be a bad thing to lure him in ….”

*“Don’t even think about it,”* Frank ordered.

“I’m just sayin’ –”

*“I know what you’re saying and the answer is ‘no’. Capisce?”*

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Probably best not to take too many chances, anyway. At least until McCormick is back on his feet.”

*“How’s the kid doin’?”*

“Good, all things considered. Still pretty weak, but okay.”

*“Good. Well, I’ll keep you posted. If Mickey D turns up, I’ll let you know. Don’t take any dumb chances.”*

After hanging up the phone, Milt went out into the hall to the security board, to remotely close the gate at the highway and switch on the alarm. The row of glowing red lights indicated the separate alarms on the fence that surrounded the property were all functioning, but there was no alarm on the cliff path from the beach. He wondered if Mickey, a city kid used to working the streets, would think about coming in that way. It was a long walk around the point from the nearest parking lot, and most crooks liked to know their rides were a good deal closer than that, in order to make a fast getaway. But, he couldn’t count on Mickey being like most crooks. For one thing, the guy was smarter than most of them. It was doubtful that he’d try anything, though, before dark, so the house alarms and motion detectors out on the lawn didn’t need to be set until nightfall.

Back in the den, he loaded his shotguns, to be ready, just in case.

Would be nice to think Mickey had just blown town – that he hadn’t simply been waiting until McCormick was out of the hospital so he could take them both out at the same time – but he didn’t think Mickey was *that* smart. Besides, the timing was off. If the scumbag was going to take off, he wouldn’t have hung around for the past month. Nope, he’d be coming for them.

The only question was when.

Wouldn’t be the first time some hoods had come after him … or even McCormick, come to think of it … on the estate. And he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be the last. He’d deal with it when it happened. Grimly determined not to let the threat of attack spook him, Milt turned his attention to the mail he’d brought in earlier that afternoon. However, when he came to a slightly grubby envelope addressed to McCormick – that didn’t have a stamp which meant it had to have been put into the box by hand – he paused and tapped it thoughtfully on the desk. Then, setting it aside, he reached down to the lowest drawer and drew out his spare semi-automatic. After checking to ensure it was clean, he slammed in a fresh magazine of ammunition, and then stuck it in the back of his belt, under his shirt.

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Sarah had pulled out all the stops in making a dinner guaranteed to fatten up McCormick. The scent of succulent, savory roast chicken had filled the house for the last hour, and Mark was starving by the time Hardcastle helped him to his seat at the dining room table. There was rich gravy, stuffing, a mountain of mashed potatoes, buttered carrots, creamed peas with tiny pearl onions, coleslaw and fresh baked rolls. “Wow,” he breathed, then gave her a bright smile. “This looks terrific!”

“Good, see that you eat it all,” she sniffed, and then placed a tall orange milkshake in front of him, instead of the milk she knew he favored with his meals.

He laughed as he began to dish up his plate. “I’ll do my best, Sarah, but I think we’d need the whole Eighth Army to eat all of this.”

Milt pushed an envelope along the table toward Mark before he filled his own plate. “That came for you in the mail today. Maybe it’s a ‘get well’ card from one of your friends.”

Mark looked at it doubtfully, noting the absence of a stamp. “Maybe,” he allowed, but didn’t sound convinced. Curious, he tore open the envelope and slid the card out, which did, indeed, convey a ‘get well quick’ message. “Huh,” he grunted softly, as he opened it, but then he went still. “Oh, this can’t be good,” he muttered, and looked up at Hardcastle. “It’s from Mickey D. And I quote, ‘Glad to hear you lived. See you soon.’”

“Who’s Mickey D?” Sarah asked as she forked chicken onto her plate.

“The guy in charge of the goons who shot me,” Mark told her.

“An’ the guy who said he hoped Mark would live, so’s he could kill McCormick himself,” Milt added.

“Oh, dear,” Sarah murmured.

Milt heaved a breath. “I wasn’t gonna say anything until after we ate, but I think he might come after us here. Frank called this afternoon and said the cops’ve lost track of him.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be here,” Mark said, losing all interest in dinner. “Maybe it’d be safer for you if I left.”

Hardcastle snorted. “There’re two things wrong with that idea, hotshot. First, he’s after *both* of us, not just you. And second, if you think I’d hang you out to dry on your own, you really are an idiot.”

“Judge!” Sarah scolded.

“What?” Milt objected. “I’m not gonna sit here and let him get away with that kind of talk. We’re in this *together*, an’ we’re gonna *stick* together, come hell or high water. *I* value his life, even if he doesn’t. No way is he gonna sneak off and do something stupid like be some kind of target. He’s done that once already, and it was one time too many. That’s it, that’s all.”

Sarah’s brows arched, but a small smile played around her mouth as she subsided. “Eat your dinner, Mark,” she directed mildly. Milt blinked, surprised by her lack of comeback. Frowning, he thought about what he’d just said, and belatedly realized that, without even thinking about it, maybe he’d told McCormick some of what the kid really needed to hear. Now, if only McCormick would *believe* it.

“Wait a minute!” Mark exclaimed, looking from him to Sarah. “Okay, so maybe Wyatt Earp, here,” he went on, jerking his thumb toward Milt, “and I make hafta our stand at the OK Corral, but you shouldn’t be here! It’s too dangerous. Judge, tell her it’s too dangerous for her to stay here!”

Milt chuckled and shook his head. “You wanna tell him, or you want me to give him the facts of life?”

Sarah delicately dabbed her lips with her napkin before saying very firmly, “Mark, if you think I’m going to be driven from my own home by a bunch of young punks, you don’t know me very well. Of course I’m staying.”

Mark gaped at her and then, tossing his hands in the air, gasped, “You’re as crazy as he is!”

“When the going gets tough, friends – *real* friends – don’t cut and run,” she lectured. “You’ve already proven that. It’s high time you realized that you’re not alone anymore. Now eat your dinner before it gets cold.”

“But …” he blustered, looking from one to the other.

“You heard the woman, McCormick,” Milt interjected, waving his fork at Mark. “I’m tired of you looking like I starve you to death. Eat.”

Mark blinked and, slumping back in his chair, watched them both calmly eat their dinner. Then, though he was no longer hungry, with a shrug, he picked up his fork and started to eat his own.

“Save some room for the pie I made for dessert,” Sarah advised him, primly. “It’s your favorite, raspberry-rhubarb.”

Mark couldn’t help laughing at the absurdity of it all. A dangerous murderer who had a whole gang of vipers at his beck and call was planning to kill them, maybe even that night, but were they worried? Oh, no, not these two senior citizens. There they were, himself included, calming eating dinner as if it were any other evening. He’d never known anyone like either of them. They were both fearless, and more than just a little eccentric. “Ah, I love you, Sarah,” he gasped, when he finally got his breath.

“Thank you, Mark,” she returned with a small, sweet smile. “I’m very fond of you, too.” Looking across the table, she added, “The Judge is also very fond of you. Aren’t you, Judge Hardcastle?”

Milt nearly choked, but he nodded gamely. “Yeah, sure I am,” he agreed gruffly. “Fond. Maybe not *very* fond. But … fond.”

Mark managed to swallow his incredulous laughter, but he quaked with it – and he jumped when they both turned to him and bellowed, “Eat!”

“Alright, alright!” he agreed, trying not to snicker and holding up his hands in surrender. Surprised to find his appetite had returned, he dug into his dinner with gusto. “Mmm,” he moaned as he savored a mouthful and swallowed with a feeling very close to bliss. “Sarah, you are *such* a great cook.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Milt give her a smug grin and a wink. Smiling to himself, feeling warmth fill his chest, he kept on eating. *Friends. She said we’re all friends. Maybe … maybe we are.*

But later, when Hardcastle helped him back to his room, he protested, “Seriously, Judge. Don’t you think Sarah should be somewhere else? I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Nobody’s gonna get hurt, McCormick,” Milt assured him. “Even if they come after us, they don’t know she’s here, an’ she knows enough to stay upstairs, out of the way of bullets. Her job is to call in the cavalry, and she’s good at it. And … well, she’ll take a shotgun upstairs when she goes to bed.”

Mark stared at him in disbelief as he sagged down on the side of the bed. “A shotgun? What? She thinks she’s Annie Oakley? Come on, Judge. This isn’t funny. That gang is bad news.”

“I know that, and so does she. Look, this isn’t the first time some hoodlum has threatened me in my own home. You know that. They came after you the first night you were here. We learned a long time ago to roll with it.”

“Roll with it,” Mark echoed.

“You want a handgun or a shotgun?” Hardcastle offered.

“I don’t know … I guess … maybe … if you think I should … I mean, just in case,” Mark stammered, uncertainly. He *really* hated the idea of shooting at people. But, then, he didn’t much like the idea of being shot at, either. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

Hardcastle pulled the semi-automatic from the back of his belt. “I think you should have this close by, just in case,” he said, and laid it on the bedside table. “Look, this place is alarmed six ways to Sunday. If they try to get near the house, we’ll know it. Sarah will call the cops, even though the alarm also rings at the local station. I’ll come down here to get you, an’ make sure you’re okay. After that, we’ll just have to see how it plays out.” He hesitated, then stooped to slip McCormick’s shoes off his feet. “You need help getting undressed?”

Mark scratched his neck, and then shook his head, deciding he’d sleep in his clothes just in case there *was* some action during the night. “Nah. You really think they’ll come after us – here?”

“I think there’s a good chance of it, yeah, but maybe not tonight. We still got a patrol car keeping watch up on PCH. But if it gets pulled, and it might … an’ even if it doesn’t, I think Mickey’ll try to silence us.” Milt grinned at him. “I kinda hope he does. It’s one sure way to get him thrown back in jail, where he belongs.”

“You really are a certifiable lunatic, you know that, right?”

Milt just slapped him on the shoulder, and then surprised him by reaching out to ruffle his hair. “Takes one to know one, bucko.”

Mark snickered as he waved Hardcastle away. “Yeah, yeah, so I’m crazy, too.”

“G’night, kiddo,” Hardcastle said, chuckling as he turned to go.

“Hey, Hardcase,” Mark called, and Milt turned back. For a heartbeat, Mark hesitated, and then – *needing* to know – his tone brash, he asked, “What you said at dinner … did you mean it? Or were you just keeping Sarah happy?”

Hardcastle met his gaze unflinchingly, but didn’t immediately respond, just looked at him. And then, sounding irritable and a little disappointed, he said with gruff candor, “I don’t say stuff I don’t mean, McCormick. I’m surprised you don’t know that by now.” His gaze skittered away and it seemed like he might say something more, but his lips thinned and he gave a small shrug. “Try to get some sleep, kid,” he muttered as he turned to leave the room. “See you in the morning.” At the door, he paused before closing it and growled, “If anyone starts shooting, make damned sure you duck, y’hear me, Tonto?”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you, Kemosabe. Night, Judge,” Mark replied softly, embarrassed and awkward and feeling like a fool for pushing the issue. Crossing his arms, he bowed his head. What was the point of asking, if he wasn’t going to accept the answer? But it was hard, so hard, to trust anyone that much, to let down his walls and believe it was safe to surrender his heart.

Hardcastle’s words that night battered at those walls, words said in the heat of the moment. Words that were meant, that had import. Words that weren’t broken fragments of dreams that couldn’t be trusted, but were spoken openly, even fiercely.

*In this together … gonna stick together.*

*I value his life, even if he doesn’t.*

*Fond ….*

*Don’t say stuff I don’t mean.*

*Make damned sure you duck, y’hear me, Tonto?*

Mark wanted to believe the words, he really did. They resonated with something visceral deep in the core of him, with his bone and sinew, and with a need for inclusion and to be valued – *wanted* – that had haunted him for twenty years. God, he was so sick of being alone, on his own, unable to count on anyone but himself, not needed by anyone. He ached for the validation of counting for something with another human being … a human being who mattered to him, whom he respected, despite himself.

What the hell was he looking for? A father to replace the one he couldn’t even remember anymore, except as a sense of abandonment? For God’s sake, he was thirty years old and it was beyond time that he grew up and stopped searching for something he was never going to have.

Hardcase was the man who had sent him to prison; the man who had virtually blackmailed him into servitude. Hell, the man who had been treating him with open contempt before he’d been sent out to sniff out evidence and culpability in the back streets of Hollywood. The man Mark had been so sure would never respect him; had no reason to respect him.

Had so much changed? Could he trust that the change was real and would last, or was it still only so much gratitude and guilt, emotions that would, at best, fade … and, even worse, might twist into the rot of resentment when the Judge stood back and took a hard look at the ex-con and wondered just what the hell he should feel grateful for or respect?

Better to play it safe. Keep an emotional distance. Not care too much. Not want that respect so much … *way* too much.

Bone-tired, his whole body aching from the exertions of the day, Mark drew up the blanket, eased down on the bed, and curled tightly on his side facing the window. God, he was going to be stiff and sore in the morning. He was certain that he was too anxious to sleep, and would spend the night squinting into the shadows and waiting for the alarms to sound the attack.

But sleep crept up on him and carried him away into darkness and fire, fear and the certainty of death, regrets, so many regrets and sorrows, unnamed but felt deeply, broken memories and shattered images, pain. Spinning, crying out … falling, falling through the void, shouting in protest and despair.

Then … a strong grip on his arm, and a voice in the void. “Easy, Mark, easy.”

Mark jerked awake. Startled, confused, shaking, he looked around wildly to get his bearings and saw Hardcastle, felt the solid grip. “Judge?”

“Yeah. Relax, kid. Just a bad dream.”

“What? But … I …”

“Shh, kiddo, it’s okay. You’re okay. Go back to sleep.”

The words, the tone, calmed and soothed him and he closed his eyes. He felt the blanket drawn close over his shoulders, and the warmth of the broad palm on his brow, grounding him, comforting him … and he slipped into simple sleep.

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Milt had been in the den, watching television and had gone into the kitchen for a glass of milk, when he heard the sharp cry, a disturbing shout of denial and need. Worried that their defenses had been breached, he’d drawn his pistol from his belt and hurried into the small suite and, in the silver glint of moonlight, he found Mark thrashing weakly. Instinctively, Milt had reached out to calm him.

Now, he stood quietly, watching to ensure the kid didn’t slip back into the nightmare. He wondered what the dream had been about, and whether some part of Mark was remembering more about that night. This wasn’t the first time he’d witnessed Mark’s disturbed sleep. The kid had been caught in many unpleasant dreams in the hospital. Sometimes, from garbled, mumbled comments, Milt had understood they were dreams of a long ago childhood; sometimes they seemed to be fearsome prison moments. Once, he was pretty sure Mark was reliving being shot. McCormick was beginning to remember, his mind gathering up the disjointed fragments buried deep and piecing them together. Sighing, Milt regretted that. Bad enough to have lived through it once, without having to suffer those terrifying moments again and again in the vulnerable realm of dreams.

He was such a complex kid, by turns almost naïve in his innocence, or brash and cocky to hide his vulnerabilities, or world-weary and toughly independent, or wary and watching, like a wild animal, easily spooked. And yet … and yet, he was resilient, and there was a kindness in him, in the way he treated Sarah – and Teddy. There was strength, too. The strength to face his fears. And despite all the hurts of his life, the kid still knew how to laugh, could appreciate the ridiculous, and get a kick out of the moment. This kid had all the right stuff.

Smiling wryly, Milt patted his shoulder and turned away. Life with McCormick would be far from boring.



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Morning was streaming in the window when Mark woke, and he lay for a moment in his tangled blanket, savoring the fact that the night had passed without murder and mayhem. Maybe Mickey D was intimidated by the estate’s security – and the fact that cops were stationed in a patrol car at the gate. Not that he thought the killer would give up, but even a temporary respite from trouble was worth enjoying.

Yawning, Mark scrubbed at his face and then froze at the memory that intruded, of Hardcastle being there in the darkness and calming his fears, even tucking the blanket in around his shoulders. Humiliation washed through him but, bemused by the Judge’s gentleness, he grinned crookedly. Crazy old donkey liked to pretend he was such a tough guy, but the memory, and others that were similar from his time in the hospital, were giving him a different and deeper understanding of Hardcastle. Beneath the gruff stubbornness and irascibility, there was a core of kindness and decency that was rock-solid. And an odd thought intruded, leaving him pensive. *What if Hardcase is as lonely as I am? What if he’s tired of being alone, too? Maybe … maybe I’m not the only guy here who needs a friend he can count on.* And he remembered again the Judge’s assertion from the night before: that they were in it together and were going to stick together, ‘come hell or high water’.

Lingering on the bed, in no hurry to get up and test lazy muscles that were sore and achy from being worked the afternoon before after more than a month doing nothing, he thought about where he was and what he was committed to doing for the foreseeable future. For the first time since he’d been shot, his head felt clear and he could breathe easily, without fear of a hitching cough or the nagging pain. Maybe all that food Sarah had shoved into him – *Yeah,* he grinned, *like she had to force me to eat* – and the exercise in the pool had already begun to help. Or maybe it was just the healing nature of time. Whatever had caused the difference, he felt more like himself than he had in weeks. Okay, sure, he was still weak, still off his game, but he no longer felt so abysmally vulnerable and helpless.

His smile widened when he caught a whiff of coffee and heard the muted sounds of Sarah puttering in the kitchen. It was really sweet of her to return for awhile, to help out when she’d heard he’d been hurt. And … and it was nice of Hardcastle to invite her back, knowing Mark would enjoy her presence and her cooking. Hell, it was great to be at Gulls’ Way rather than in a rehab facility, and he had the Judge to thank for that, too. Truthfully, between them, he was feeling more than a bit coddled, something he hadn’t felt since long ago childhood.

The memories of Hardcase being so concerned and attentive again intruded into his thoughts, and the yearning he felt to belong, to trust, intensified. At no time had he sensed any resentment on Hardcastle’s part for the time and care he needed, nor was the man treating him like some worthless ex-con – to the contrary, if anything, the Judge had been treating him almost like family. He began to wonder if his hesitancy, his tendency to hold back, was entirely warranted, or simply a reflex borne of bitter experience. He wouldn’t appreciate them judging him based only on J.J. Beal’s behaviors, so why was he so determined to distrust their motivations based only on his past? Sighing, he had to admit that, sure, this whole setup was a time-limited thing and someday it would be over. But did that mean he couldn’t appreciate and enjoy it, and what they offered in the form of tentative friendship, while he had it? Life was lonely enough without rejecting the warmth honestly offered along the way.

When he smelled bacon, he knew it was time to get up and face the day before Hardcase came looking for him to help him out of bed, like some arthritic old man. Despite the Judge’s stated willingness to help him – and Hardcastle had helped him to dress for dinner the evening before – he just could not imagine the man helping him bathe. With a bitten-off moan at the protest of his muscles, he pushed himself up and off the bed to peel off his clothes before limping with slow deliberation into the small bathroom for a shower.

God, it felt good to be able to do something as simple as shower and shave on his own. By the time he finished dressing again, though, he was very nearly exhausted, his thin reserve of energy all but depleted. Between his chest and his leg, bending was still a challenge; getting his jeans on hadn’t been easy, and he couldn’t manage the socks. Working hard at not becoming discouraged, he decided that didn’t matter; half the time, he didn’t wear them, anyway.

He’d just finished stuffing his feet into his loafers when Hardcastle knocked at the door and came into the room, calling, “Rise and shine, McCormick! Oh, hey, you’re already dressed!”

“Morning to you, too, Your Honor,” he replied, his tone admittedly a bit cocky as he stood and accepted the arm of support the Judge offered. Despite how weak he still felt, Mark felt a spark of pride at the grin of knowing approval Hardcase bestowed upon him for having managed to get himself up and dressed for the first time since he’d been shot. A small thing, sure, but even these small, every day achievements gave him the sense that he was finally on the road to recovery. And that felt good. Real good.

Hardcastle helped him down the short hallway and into the kitchen, and settled him into a chair by the window. Sarah turned from the stove to give him an appraising look as she wished him a good morning. A frown puckered her brow and her eyes narrowed as she asked, “You sleep alright, Mark?”

Remembering the Judge’s nocturnal visit, Mark glanced at Hardcastle who blandly met his gaze and passed him a cup of coffee. *He’s not going to say anything,* Mark realized, more than a little surprised that Hardcase was passing up the chance to get a dig in about having to soothe his fears and tuck him in. “Uh,” he hesitated, returning his attention to Sarah. “Not bad,” he finally replied. “Had some nightmares but after the Judge helped me settle down, I slept the rest of the night okay.”

Hardcastle flicked him a startled look, and Mark wondered if the Judge had thought he wouldn’t remember.

“Nightmares?” Sarah echoed as she dished up heaping plates of scrambled eggs and bacon. Setting them down in front of the two of them, she probed, “About what?”

Mark shrugged and took refuge in his glass of orange juice.

“Seemed like you might’ve been dreaming about the night of the shooting,” Hardcastle muttered and then looked up, his gaze piercing. “You are, aren’t you?”

Mark nodded slowly as he set the glass down. “Yeah, I think so. Still mostly just disjointed images and feelings but … yeah.”

Hardcase grimaced. “Well, I guess it’s natural, especially when we’re more’n half expecting Di Angelo will be coming after us. Bound to joggle the memories. Can’t say as I’m glad, though. Kinda hoped you might get away with never … well … it wasn’t fun, that’s for sure.”

Sarah placed a plate of blueberry pancakes between them, along with a bottle of pure maple syrup. Her hand dropped onto Mark’s shoulder for a moment. “Might not’ve been fun,” she observed, her tone stern and yet kind, “but it’s probably better to remember and put it behind you, than to be haunted by never knowing quite what happened.” She gave him a little pat before going to the counter to make a fresh pot of coffee.

Mark looked at both of them, and at the bountiful breakfast, and could feel their concern for him. His throat tightened at the unexpectedness of it all – but more, because they acted as if their kindness was commonplace, nothing to be remarked upon, something only to be expected. He could almost feel all his old defenses crumbling in the face of their steady care and … and evident friendship. “Uh, well, I guess everyone has bad dreams once in a while,” he said uncertainly, struggling with his reflexive doubts, and then carried on to change the subject and distance the emotion. “This is a terrific breakfast, Sarah. Keep feeding me this way and I’ll be soon be able to get back to work. You know, mowin’ the back forty, clippin’ hedges, pullin’ weeds, chasing after America’s Most Wanted.”

“Aw, I told you ya don’t have t’worry about all that right now, McCormick,” Hardcastle grumbled and waved a fork at Mark’s plate. “Go on, eat before it all gets cold.”

Picking up his fork, Mark grinned and shook his head.

“What?” Hardcase demanded.

“Oh, I’m just thinking it’s really good to be home,” he replied, and was gratified by the twitch of a smile on the Judge’s mouth and the sparkle that lightened the concern in the older man’s eyes.

“Now yer cookin’!” Milt approved.

They were working their way through the stack of pancakes when Hardcastle said, “I was talking to Frank earlier an’ he says they really won’t be able to keep up the protective surveillance much longer. Today might be the end of it.”

“Oh,” Mark murmured, and put down his fork, his appetite gone. “Well, I guess that’s not surprising. It’s been quite a while already.”

“Yeah,” Hardcastle agreed with a sniff. “But I gotta figure that Mickey D is watching – he’s gonna try to take us out.”

“You don’t seem unduly worried about that, Judge,” Mark observed, and glanced at Sarah who rolled her eyes before turning back to the sink to finish washing the frying pan.

His appetite apparently unabated, Milt helped himself to another pancake. “I’m not,” he replied, with a shrug. “In fact, might be the best thing that could happen. The Angel’s been a slippery one, hard to catch in the act – was even able to make bail because he claimed you had his gun and he had nothing to do with the shooting. Just an innocent bystander. But,” the Judge gave him a leering smile, “if he comes after us, well, then, he digs himself into a very deep hole.”

“Only if we survive,” Mark pointed out. “If he kills us, then he gets away with everything.”

“Oh, he’s not gonna kill us, McCormick,” Hardcastle groused. “You know, you worry too much. An’ you’re not eating enough,” he went on irritably, jutting his chin at Mark’s plate. “Gotta put some meat back on those bones. Eat!”

“I worry too much?” Mark whined half-heartedly as he slid another pancake onto his plate, amused by the Judge’s constant imprecations to stuff food into his mouth. “Could be because I’ve had some bad luck lately … like for about the past three years.”

“Yeah, well, y’see, that’s when you were on your own, before you hooked up with me,” Milt told him with an engaging and confident grin, his eyes twinkling with devilment.

“Since teaming up with you, I’ve been shot!” Mark protested, but he was hard-pressed to hold back his own grin at the banter.

“Now, you know that wasn’t my fault,” Hardcastle objected huffily. “Getting shot was your own idea. Next time, you’ll know better, an’ you’ll run like a sensible person. You’re tough, kid. But you’re not indestructible. So don’t go pulling any more heroics when Mickey comes after us, an’ nobody needs to get hurt.”

When Mark just snorted, Sarah chimed in, “You’d better do as he says and finish your breakfast, Mark. Sounds like you’ll need your strength before all this is over.”

Giving up in the face of their phlegmatic acceptance of probable attack, Mark chuckled weakly and returned his attention to devouring the pancakes. Be a shame to waste them, when they were so damned good and Sarah had gone to all the trouble of making them.

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Teddy Hollins gazed idly upon the passing storefronts and mini-malls along PCH as the bus trundled through Malibu. He’d talked to Mark on the phone the evening before, and knew he would be arriving around the time that the physical therapist would be there, but he had to work the evening shift at the bowling alley, and he figured it wouldn’t matter if he visited during Mark’s workout. Besides, Skid had told him that Sarah was back and Teddy remembered her great cooking. Smiling to himself, he hoped he’d get lucky and they’d offer him some lunch. Man, he was glad Skid was finally out of that hospital. The place had creeped him out, especially during those awful visits when he really wasn’t sure his best friend was going to make it – and he could tell the Judge hadn’t been sure, either. And that had been really scary. He shivered and then shook off the dismal memories. Skid was doing okay. He was home, finally, and was going to be fine.

The business district gave way to the elegant walls and wrought-iron privacy fences that backed estates which overlooked the ocean. Not for the first time, Teddy reflected with a cheerful grin, Skid was sure lucky to be able to live out here, and not in a small, thread-bare and, okay, sleazy apartment with a view of the dumpster in the back alley. But a frown again puckered his brow when he thought about how dangerous Mark’s work with the Judge really was. Teddy knew there was no way he’d be brave enough to get into situations where he could be shot … or killed. He shuddered at the very idea.

But Skid was different from him; Skid, well, he was easy-going and all that, but he also had steel inside. You could only push him so far and no farther. He was kinda like the big brother Teddy had always wished he’d had; a brother who would look out for him and stand up for him. A brother who would care about him, no matter what. Like Skid had looked out for him when they were cell-mates and had helped him out, given him a place to hide, when Teddy had had the hard luck to be assigned a crooked parole officer. Nobody in his life had ever stood by him like Mark had. Teddy figured nobody else ever would. So, he didn’t begrudge Mark’s nice gatehouse, not one bit; he was just really happy for him. His smile widening, he had to admit he wouldn’t want all the work of mowing the lawns and pruning the shrubs that Skid had to do instead of paying rent, let alone dodge bullets when Hardcastle went after some bad guy. Gulls’ Way might be paradise, but it wasn’t a free ride.

When he got off the bus, he sauntered along the grassy verge toward the estate, enjoying the cool breeze that blew in off the Pacific, and the sweet floral scents that drifted across the highway from the gardens behind the walls. About a block ahead, he could see the patrol car guarding the entrance to the drive down to Hardcastle’s place – and he was glad to know that Skid and the Judge were still being protected from that really scary Mickey D. He was lifting his face to bask in the sun’s warmth when hideous screeching of tires and wrenching crashes of metal exploded not far behind him, making him jump and twist around, ready to leap out of harm’s way. Three motorcycles with leather-jacketed riders roared past him, heading north and, behind them, several vehicles had collided, blocking both directions on the narrow highway.

Teddy shuddered and panted in shock at the sudden violence of the multiple accidents, and wondered if he should go back to see if anyone needed any help. But though it looked like a lot of cars and a truck or two were crunched together, he thought it was mostly a case of fender-benders, rather than anything really serious. While he was still debating, the patrol car that had been parked in front of Gulls’ Way sped past – siren blaring – to sort out the situation and, no doubt, call for any help that might be needed. Taking a breath, he hunched his shoulders, still not really certain what he should do, but he finally turned to continue toward Hardcastle’s place.

He’d nearly reached the drive when a green van came toward him from around the far curve, and turned into Gulls’ Way. Looking at his watch, he figured it must be Mark’s physical therapist, arriving for their one o’clock workout session. But he frowned, wondering where the van had been coming from. The hospital where Skid said the guy usually worked was back the other way.

Picking up his pace, he jogged under the Gulls’ Way arch and through the open metal gates.

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When he heard the sound of a vehicle coming down the drive, Mark looked up from the book he was reading – a Dick Francis that Sarah told him he’d enjoy, when she’d handed it to him that morning. He hadn’t been sure that a character involved in British steeple-chasing would appeal to him, but he’d quickly found that the excitement and adrenaline rush that the jockey described, of being in control of all that power, of the speed and seduction of danger, had resonated with him. And, he’d found he also understood and even identified with the hero’s ethics about what was right and what was wrong, and that it wasn’t right to ignore the wrongs.

Reluctantly setting the book aside, he waved when the van pulled up behind the house. Not particularly looking forward to the pain he knew Jessie would be inflicting upon him, but determined to be cheerful about it, he managed a lopsided grin as he pushed himself to his feet. But his cheerfulness faltered and the fine hairs stiffened on the back of his neck when he observed his trainer’s stiff movements, hunched shoulders, and pallor as he got out of the vehicle. Something was obviously wrong, but he couldn’t imagine what … and then the side door of the van slid open.

“Oh, God,” Mark gasped, and his stomach plummeted when Mickey D and several of his henchmen jumped out, their weapons trained on him. He wanted to run – to warn Sarah and Hardcase – but knew he was still too weak, too damned slow and awkward, no match for these husky and armed men. All he could do was lean a hand on the table for support, to keep his knees from buckling. And he was scared of what they’d do to Jessie if he yelled a warning. Mickey was holding a revolver to the therapist’s head, and Jessie was wild-eyed with fear.

Di Angelo shoved Jessie toward him. “Check the house. Bring Hardcase out here,” the gang leader ordered, gesturing toward the building. One thug with a sawed-off shotgun took off around the front, and another with a revolver ran across the patio to the back door.

“I’m sorry, Mark,” Jessie said, sounding sick and stumbling a little when Mickey roughly pushed him toward McCormick. “They jumped me when I left the hospital.”

“It’s okay,” he replied, hoping his fear didn’t show, cautiously motioning Jessie to the side. “I’m just sorry you got dragged into this. It’s, uh, not good.” Jessie nodded miserably and rubbed his arms, as if he were cold.

“So, McCormick, we meet again,” Mickey drawled, swaggering closer.

Mark nodded tightly. “Wish I could say it’s a pleasure.”

Mickey laughed with low, harsh menace that promised nothing good. “Ah, don’t worry about it. I’d say the pleasure’s all mine.”

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When he saw a guy with a shotgun coming around the corner of the house, Teddy gaped in shock, his steps fumbling to a stop. Astonished, he watched the man hasten stealthily to the front door, and then slip inside. His heart pounding in his chest, instinctively scared stiff, Teddy had taken an unconscious step back toward the highway when he froze, not sure what to do. Where could he run for help? The cops weren’t at the end of the drive but more than two blocks away. By the time he got to them and made them understand what was happening, it could all be over.

Over? He shivered. Those guys probably meant to kill Mark and the Judge. Who was he trying to kid? There was no time to get any help. His gut twisted with fear, and he wanted to take off, he really did. Violence terrified him. But he couldn’t just walk away. He had to at least *try* to help Skid. Sure couldn’t just abandon him.

“Oh, this is really crazy,” he mumbled, torn between running for his life and doing something that was bound to get him killed. “Ah, geez,” he agonized, “I really have to do this. I have *got* to do this.”

Teddy swallowed hard, took a deep breath and, letting it out slow, he eased off the drive to move in an awkward but fast, crouching lope along the edge of the trees and shrubs, hoping their modest shadows would cover his approach. His gaze kept flicking between the door and the edge of the house, afraid of seeing more guys with guns. More afraid of hearing shooting erupt. Desperate, he crept toward the door, wishing with all his heart for a weapon – anything – but there wasn’t even a good-sized stone on the immaculate drive or path.

Carefully, he eased the door open, wincing at the slight creak of the hinges, and then peered around the edge. The creep he’d seen enter the house was standing in the entry of the den, pointing his shotgun at someone and ordering, “C’mon, move it, old man. Mickey wants ya outside.”

Teddy slipped into the hallway and, with a fast look upward and a fervent, if silent, prayer, he moved up behind the big guy who must’ve been twice his size. Jabbing his finger firmly into the man’s back and holding it there, he growled, “Police. Drop your weapon. NOW!”

And nearly fainted with relief when the gorilla stiffened and then did exactly what he was told. His shotgun clattered to the floor, setting off an explosive shot that made the breath catch in Teddy’s chest.

“Don’t shoot me!” the erstwhile enforcer cried, his hands coming up to clasp the back of his neck.

“Judge! You alright?” Teddy managed to squeak in alarm.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hardcase growled. “You, get down here. Sit over there and keep your mouth shut.”

Blowing a grateful breath to have someone else in charge, Teddy slumped against the doorjamb and watched the goon ease across the den and over to the chair in front of the desk. Hardcastle scooped up the shotgun and, keeping one eye and his weapon on the gang member, he gave Teddy a wry look. “Police, huh? Whaddya use for a gun? ‘Cause if you’re carrying, you know I’ll have to report ya.”

Laughing softly with rueful acceptance that the Judge would likely do just that, even if he had just probably saved the man’s life, Teddy cocked his finger and thumb at Hardcastle, mimicking a pistol. “No worries, Judge,” he replied. “I’m clean.” But he sobered and added with urgent vehemence, “You know, I don’t think he came alone. An’ the cops aren’t parked up at the highway.”

Nodding soberly, Hardcastle motioned him into the room. “Here,” he said with heavy authority as he handed Teddy the shotgun, “I’m deputizing you to watch this clown. Keep an eye on him, and if he so much as twitches, shoot him. And call 911. Tell ‘em we’re under attack here, an’ tell ‘em to advise Frank Harper.”

They heard a guttural groan and muffled thump. Hardcastle stiffened. “Sarah!” he breathed. Grabbing another shotgun from his gun-rack, he rushed from the room.

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Mark jumped at the sound of the shotgun blast. The wave of shocked denial and a sense of the ground shifting between him nearly dropped him to his knees. But before he could draw breath, the unexpectedly wretched grief was supplanted by cold, implacable rage. Glaring at Mickey D, he tried to think through the icy, blinding emotion, tried to figure out how to take the bastard out before he was cut down by the other punks standing around, grinning like hyenas at the thought of Hardcase being killed.

“Sounds like the old man put up some resistance,” Mickey drawled. “Too bad. I was looking forward to killing him myself. Ah, well,” he shrugged. “Gives me more time to have a little fun with you.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Mark promised with deadly calm and, for a moment, a flash of something in Mickey’s eyes told him he’d frightened the other man.

But then Mickey shrugged and laughed. “Who’s gonna stop me? The cops? They had to go take care of an accident down the road that’ll take hours to sort out. Three bikers snarled up the traffic real good. Funny how that happens.”

“Oh, yeah, real funny,” Mark echoed flatly. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Jessie was pale and tense, his muscles bunched, as if ready to act but not sure what to do.

“So, that means we’ve got a couple hours, at least, before anyone checks back here,” Mickey went on. He shoved his revolver under his belt and drew out a switchblade. Flicking it open and advancing slowly on Mark, he drawled, “And I plan to enjoy every minute of them.”

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Milt rushed into the kitchen, and found Sarah holding a heavy frying pan and standing over another big man, who was sprawled unconscious on the floor. From the little Milt could see of the man’s face, he looked badly scalded and there was a puddle of brown liquid underneath him.

Sarah looked up and said matter-of-factly, “The blast distracted him and I tossed a pot of boiling beef broth in his face. When he doubled over, trying to get it out of his eyes, I lambasted him with this.” She lifted the cast-iron pan and then slid it back onto the stove. Jutting her chin toward the windows that looked out over the pool, she told him, “There’re at least four more of them out there.”

“So I see,” Milt rumbled, scowling heavily. He handed Sarah his handgun. “Take this. I want ya to go to the den and stay with Teddy Hollins, who’s calling the cops – and he’s guarding one of these bozos. You should be safe in there.”

“Safe?” Sarah sniffed as she took the weapon, her lips thin and tight, and her piercing eyes stormy. “Don’t patronize me, Judge.”

“Sarah, I don’t have time to –” he began, but when her chin lifted defiantly and her stance became mutinous, he subsided and couldn’t resist a wan grin of defeat. “You sure you’re up to this? It could get messy.”

“Milton Hardcastle, as you well know, I survived occupation by the Japanese – these young punks who’re no better than they ought to be, don’t scare me,” she lectured, already directing him with a firm hand back toward the hall. “Now, go on. Sneak up behind them.” A bleak smile tilted the corners of her austere mouth. “I’ll be another surprise for them; throw them more off balance after you distract them. Between us, we’ll get our boy out of this, won’t we, Judge?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he agreed with a harried wave as he jogged down the hall to the front door, raw urgency building in his gut. He’d seen the blade that Di Angelo was waving in McCormick’s face.

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Tensing, preparing to attack, Mark eyed his adversary warily. Though he was taller than Mickey, the other man carried more weight – certainly more muscle – than Mark did in his debilitated state. Nor was he sure how well his leg would hold up; but that would only matter so long as they were standing.

Mickey gestured for his two of henchmen to move in closer, to hold McCormick’s arms, while the last stayed close to Jessie, keeping watch on him.

Mark stiffened at their approach, bitterly knowing he was in no shape to take on three armed men. His fists bunched and he swallowed hard as he glanced from one to the other, waiting for one to come within range.

The explosive blast of a shotgun threw them all off-balance. Milt was shouting, “All of you! Just back off and drop those weapons!” – Mickey was half-turning, disbelief written on his face, his two goons hesitating, their steps toward Mark faltering to a stop as they looked to Mickey for orders. Mark felt a surge of what felt an awful lot like joy at the sound of Hardcastle’s rough voice, and to see the Judge so obviously whole, but he still didn’t like the odds much. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, he launched himself at Mickey, driving him to the ground and, Jessie, following his lead, tackled the man watching him, plunging them both into the pool with a humongous splash.

Mark barreled into Mickey with one shoulder, driving him to the ground, and reached out to grab the knife-wielding arm to hold it away from his body. But the other man fought like a tiger, squirming and heaving under him, jabbing a sharp elbow into his still-tender chest and driving the breath from his lungs. He heard another shot ring out, and was vaguely aware of Sarah telling someone to stay put, and the Judge was bellowing, but he was too occupied to pay attention to what was being said.

Mickey heaved and rolled, driving him over onto his back, and he was hard-pressed to keep the knife from angling inward toward his body. Hell, he was losing the battle and he knew it, though he panted for breath and dug deep for the strength to keep fighting back. Mickey slugged him in the face, dazing him. Still, he fought, doing his best to push the man away, thrusting up with one hand under Mickey’s jaw, his other fist locked on the wrist forcing the blade toward his body, closer and ever closer.

He felt a stinging burn along his side and then, poised above him, Mickey went absolutely still. Looking past his adversary, he saw Hardcastle looming over them – the shotgun pressed against the gang leader’s head, but angled in such a way that the blast – if it came – would blow past McCormick’s shoulder – *maybe*. Mark grimaced at the gruesome image but, certain that Hardcase was just trying to psych Mickey out, and wouldn’t *really* pull the trigger, he blinked it away.

“You hear me now?” Hardcase bellowed again. “I said get the hell off him or, I swear, I’ll blow your head clean off.”

Sirens were screaming down the driveway, their raucous wail filling the air when Mickey’s grip on Mark loosened and the hoodlum cautiously drew away from him.

“Drop the damned knife,” Hardcastle growled, and the blade fell to the grass beside Mark.

Dragging in air, Mark became aware of splashing from the pool, and turned his head to see Jessie hauling his catch out of the shallow end. Panting, exhausted now that the surge of adrenaline that had carried him was spent, Mark tilted his head the other way, and saw Sarah holding a gun on yet another young hood. Tickled by the incongruous image, he chuckled weakly as he shook his head. Belatedly realizing he was still sprawled on the ground, he started to push himself up, intending to stand, but the best he could manage was to sit until he could get his breath back. Cops were rushing like a dark blue tide around the house, swiftly taking charge of their attackers.

“What the hell is so funny, McCormick?” Hardcase demanded, giving him a narrow look.

“Oh, nothing,” Mark replied, waving one hand airily. “Just impressed by our very own pistol-packin’ Mama,” he explained with a fond grin toward Sarah, who only quirked a sardonic brow in response. Amused, Mark thought he really should stand up, but his chest was aching and he wasn’t sure he could trust his leg. Nevertheless, he levered his weight onto a hand pressed to the ground and then gratefully accepted the hand-up Hardcastle offered. But he was barely standing when the Judge grabbed his arm and pushed him down on the closest chair.

“Damn it, McCormick,” the Judge cursed. “You’re bleeding! How bad he get ya?”

Startled, Mark twisted and saw the growing splotch of red staining his side, and he gingerly drew up the edge of his t-shirt. Bending close, Hardcastle surveyed the wound while, wincing, Mark looked away. The thought of going back to the hospital held no appeal and, grimacing at the sight of his own blood, he risked a curious glance to assess the damage. “Am I gonna live?” he asked facetiously, certain he wasn’t badly injured; it didn’t even really hurt.

Hardcase snorted. “Yeah, you’ll do. Just a scratch. Probably won’t even need stitches. Not many, anyway.”

“Gee, thanks, Judge,” Mark replied, wryly. “I think.”

“What did you think you were doing, huh? I told ya to duck! An’ what do you do? You tackle the guy, when you’re in no fit shape to fight a gnat!”

“You said to duck bullets, Hardcase,” Mark argued mutinously in his own defense. “And, technically, by hitting the ground when the shotgun went off, I *was* ducking.”

Rolling his eyes, Hardcastle grated, “You’re a real piece of work, kid,” but his tone held no heat and his grip on Mark’s shoulder was firm. Feeling light-headed, Mark was grateful for the support, though he’d bite off his tongue before he’d admit it.

“Milt!” Frank yelled as he loped around the corner of the house. “You okay? Anybody hurt?”

“Only the bad guys,” the Judge replied, sounding, in Mark’s view, entirely too self-satisfied given how close it had been.

“How’d you get the drop on the guys who went into the house?” Mark asked, curious, and then hissed when Sarah appeared beside him to press a clean towel against his side. He gave her a grateful look, but redirected his attention back to Hardcastle.

“I didn’t,” Milt admitted. “Teddy did.”

“Teddy?” Mark squeaked, his gaze darting around the yard. “When did he get here? And where is he?”

“Probably still hyperventilating in the den,” Hardcastle replied with a small grin. “Gotta hand it to him, though. The kid came through in the pinch. Snuck up behind the guy who got a drop on me, an’ faked ‘im out with a finger in his back, growling that he was the police.” Milt chuckled at the memory, enjoying it now that there was time and the crisis was over. “And Sarah here took out the other one with a pot of soup and a frying pan.”

*A finger, a pot of soup and a frying pan against assault weapons wielded by killers?* Mark could only hope they’d always be so lucky. Shaking his head, he leaned back against the chair. “You think Teddy walked into it without knowing what was going down?” he asked, trying to put the pieces together in his head.

“Nah. He saw the guy sneak into the house. Said the cops that were supposed to be watchin’ the place had taken off. Guess he thought there was no time to go for help. An’, he was right,” Milt admitted.

“Huh,” Mark grunted, trying to reconcile his image of Teddy, the guy who quavered and ran at the first threat of violence, with someone who – unarmed – walked right smack into danger. “Why’d he do something like that?” he murmured, more to himself than expecting any answer.

“Guess you’ll have to ask him that,” Milt returned, glancing over to see Teddy walking toward them. With a wave, he called, “Hey, Teddy, you did good today.”

The young man blushed scarlet and bobbed his head, but his smile was radiant. “Hey, glad to help out, Judge,” he replied with a swagger and studied nonchalance that clearly telegraphed his attempt to make light of it all, while at the same time revealing he was pretty pleased with himself.

“Why didn’t you go for help, Ted?” Mark asked, unable to mute the edge of scolding in his tone. “Don’t you know you could have been killed?”

Stuffing his hands in his jean pockets, Hollins nodded. “Yeah,” he admitted, the smile faltering. Mark thought he looked impossibly young when he scuffed his toe in the grass and went on with heart-stopping sincerity, “But I couldn’t run out on you, Skid. You’re my best friend and … well, I know you’d never run out on me.” He sneaked a look at the Judge, and then added diffidently, “And the Judge here, he’s been pretty good to me, you know?”

“Yeah, Teddy, I know,” Mark replied softly, fighting the lump in his throat. “Hardcase is right. You did real good today. Probably saved our lives.”

“You think so?” Teddy exclaimed at the unhesitant praise, the blinding smile back in place, and he straightened his shoulders proudly.

“Uh huh. I really do,” Mark affirmed. Glancing at Jessie, he went on, “And you did pretty good, too.” Waving toward the gatehouse, he added, “I’ve got some dry clothes over there. Why don’t you go change?”

“Thanks. I think I’ll take you up on that,” Jessie agreed gratefully. “Guess we’ll have to postpone our session today. You’ve had enough action, and you need to get that wound looked at.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine,” Milt interjected with hearty confidence. “Maybe you can make up the lost time tomorrow, huh?”

“Judge!” Mark protested, more out of habit than because he disagreed.

“What? We need to get you back in fightin’ form, McCormick, the sooner, the better. Especially if you’re gonna keep jumping headfirst into trouble!” Hardcastle retorted, sounding fierce – but his eyes were twinkling and a grin twitched on his lips.

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That night, comfortable in the pajamas Hardcastle insisted upon helping him don, lying in bed and gazing out the window up at the starlight sky, Mark was doing some hard thinking. He just couldn’t keep ignoring or discounting the evidence around him; couldn’t keep scaring himself with old lessons that quite evidently had no relevance to his current situation. Teddy, God, sweet, feckless Teddy, had overcome his fear and took the chance of getting killed … for him. Because he couldn’t turn around and walk away knowing Mark was in trouble. If that wasn’t unconditional friendship, Mark didn’t know what was. Finally, too restless to lie there, he pushed himself up and limped to sit in the chair by the window, to look out at the ocean and the clear night.

As for Hardcase and Sarah? What more could they do than they were already doing? What more proof did he need than what he was seeing and hearing … and *feeling* … from them. They cared about him. Honestly and unselfconsciously cared. And they didn’t seem to expect anything back except, maybe, that he relax and accept the normalcy of it. Trust it. And them. To be the friends they claimed to be; that they showed in every way they were.

Like that afternoon, when the Judge insisted Charlie Friedman come to the house to stitch up the wound in his side, so he wouldn’t have to be subjected to the exhaustion of going to the hospital. And Sarah … Sarah had told Frank Harper in a no-nonsense tone that brooked no disagreement that he’d just have to take Mark’s statement right there, because there was no way she was going to allow him to be dragged down to the police station to sit around and be questioned at the detective’s leisure. And she’d stood watch, monitoring them the whole time to ensure Frank didn’t overtire him. And Frank? Man, he hadn’t even tried to debate the issue, seeming to know when he was beaten. Sarah and the Judge had taken care of him, made sure his needs had come first; so far as they were concerned, everything and everyone else could damned well wait. It had been a novel experience; no one had put him first for nearly twenty years.

Mark’s lips thinned as he contemplated the tangible goodwill that surrounded him, and he knew he couldn’t continue to let his doubts and his past get in the way of the here and now. If he couldn’t trust them, he’d never be able to trust anyone, ever. What a dismal, empty excuse for life that would be; because, without trust, there could never be real friendship.

What had Sarah said that morning? *Better to remember and put it all behind you.* Heaving a heavy sigh, Mark contemplated that for a while. And he had to admit that while he’d been good at remembering – especially the bad stuff – he hadn’t been so good at putting it behind him and moving on. For the first time, Mark realized that he, as much as the people in his life, had put limits on the possibility of friendship because of his own inability to trust.

But he *could* trust them. He couldn’t help *but* trust them. And, God, he sorely wanted their friendship. And he very much wanted them to see him as a friend they could count on, which meant that the trust between them had to be a two-way street. In that moment, he vowed to make damned sure they never had reason to doubt that *they* could trust *him*. Somehow without him really being aware of it, they’d become the closest thing he had to family, the only family he’d had since his mother had died. There was no way on this earth that he could imagine *ever* hurting either of them, or causing them to regret their faith in him.



God, he thought, you just never knew what life was going to spring on you. He’d been sure, when he went to prison, that his life was over; that he’d never be the champion he’d long dreamed of being. And he’d thought the same thing when, for those few bright, brief hours, he’d thought he’d get another chance at those dreams, only to have them crash and burn when Flip was killed. He’d been resigned when he came up in front of Hardcase again that he’d be going down for the long count. Hell, he’d been so convinced of that, so angry about the unfairness of life, he hadn’t even listened when the Judge first offered the deal. But the Judge had dug in, and given him reason to grab for something better than four cement walls and bars. But he still hadn’t hoped for anything. Hadn’t believed anything good would ever come of this period of servitude. Was that why he’d been so ready to die that night in the alley? Because he couldn’t see any real point to living, and he was just so tired of being a loser?

In some ways, maybe he had died. That old, hopeless Mark, the one with no friends and no future, sure didn’t seem to exist anymore. He didn’t have a clue where his life was going now but at least … at least he thought he was engaged in something worthwhile in helping the Judge get really bad guys off the street. He didn’t feel like that loser anymore. And … and for the first time in a long, long, *very* long time, he wasn’t alone – or *lonely* – anymore. Wasn’t alone, and he could really, honestly trust in the truth of that.

The fierce emotion that surged shook him, literally, as the last of his defenses crumbled, and he shuddered as he crossed his arms and swallowed hard, to keep it all inside.

His vision blurred, but he blinked to clear his eyes, needing to see the stars. A smile trembled on his lips and he sniffed. “I think, maybe, I’m home, Ma,” he whispered hoarsely. “I think I’ve finally found my way home.”

Then, feeling a peace that was as welcome as it was unfamiliar, he crawled back into bed and swiftly surrendered to healing sleep.

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The next morning, Sarah greeted them with another massive breakfast that was guaranteed to help put more meat back on Mark’s bones. When they finished eating, and Sarah was assured that Mark couldn’t manage even one more bite, she poured them each another cup of coffee and hustled them out to the patio to enjoy the glorious weather. Outside, they settled at the table and shared the newspaper, reading quietly for several minutes.

Mark’s attention soon drifted from the news and, simply content to enjoy the moment, he looked out across the sweeping lawn to the sun-dappled water and the long curl of waves rolling toward the land. Not long after, the Judge sighed and sat back. Comfortable with the silence between them, Mark didn’t say anything, just kept looking out over the ocean, mesmerized by the beauty of the view. But his attention was drawn back when Hardcastle cleared his throat and, sounding uncharacteristically tentative, asked, “You sorry you agreed to this deal? I’d understand if you want to call it quits.”

Startled, Mark met the Judge’s gaze. “Sorry? No!” he exclaimed, and felt surprise at how quick his answer had been and how sure he was of it. The guy who’d harbored so many resentments and doubts seemed to have vanished overnight, and Mark was heartily glad he was gone. When Hardcastle simple regarded him patiently, seeming to expect more, he went on, “I mean, getting shot isn’t a whole lot of fun but … but you kept your end of the deal and helped me put Martin Cody away. And since then, well, hey, it hasn’t been boring, that’s for sure. I’m good, Hardcase. I gave you my word and I’ll keep my end of the bargain. You can trust me, Judge.”

“Oh, I *know* that,” Milt replied, as if such trust between them had never been in question; though that was far from the truth, Mark deeply appreciated that it was the truth *now*. “It’s just that, yesterday, after he stitched you up, Charlie thought maybe you’d have second thoughts after everything that’s happened,” he persisted. “You might not’ve counted on being targeted by killers.”

“Well, that’s true,” Mark agreed judiciously, and then teased, “I figured they’d be targeting you, not me. But I guess it goes with the territory. An’ the fringe benefits are pretty good,” he allowed, with an expansive wave at the pool and the grounds.

Hardcastle snorted. “Just so you know, I won’t leave you hangin’ out to dry. If I get you into something, I’ll get you out of it again.”

Sobering, Mark nodded. “I know that. You came pretty fast when I called that night, and you rustled up the cavalry to get us out of there. And you sure had my butt covered yesterday afternoon when the situation was getting out of hand. But … but I know things can get a little hairy an’, well,” he hesitated, and then, taking a deep breath, went on, “I understand the risks, Judge. I don’t expect you to work miracles, or anything.”

“Well, I’ll try not to get you killed,” Hardcastle retorted defensively, then muttered aggrievedly, “You wouldn’t be all that easy to replace.”

“No? Didn’t take you long to replace J.J. with me,” Mark challenged, knowing he was pushing it and not sure why he persisted in taking it to the line. Maybe all those doubts and insecurities weren’t *entirely* gone after all. “You told me I’m not as bright as he is, so who knows? Maybe you could get yourself a better bet next time around. Third time lucky and all that?”

Hardcastle snorted. “Beal might be a bright guy … but he doesn’t use that head of his for anything good. Look where he ended up.” He sniffed in disparagement as he reached for his mug and took a sip. “Besides, you’re not exactly stupid,” he added, with a shrug, “and you got something J.J.’ll never have. Something a lot more important than brains.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Mark taunted. “Good looks? Charm?”

“Heart, McCormick,” Milt retorted gruffly and, avoiding his eyes, he set the mug down and reached for the paper. “You got heart.”

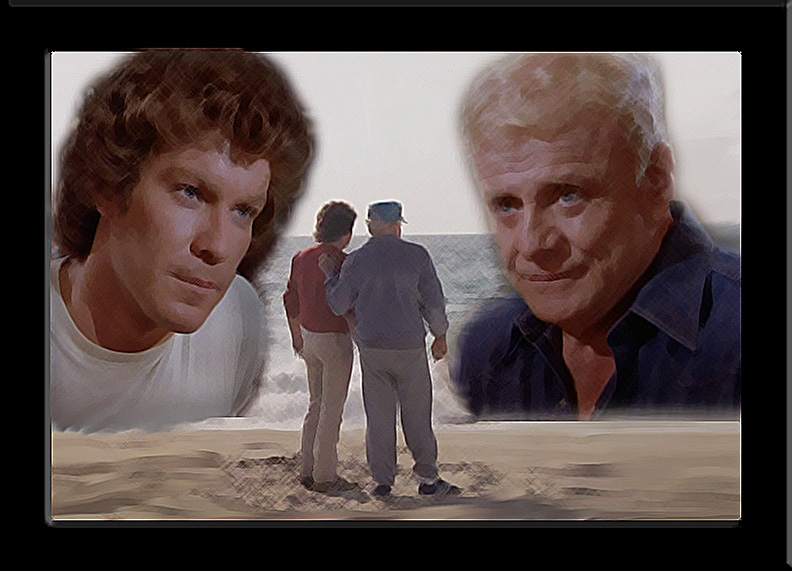
For a moment, Mark was speechless, utterly dumbfounded by what sounded an awful lot like a grudging but very meaningful and utterly sincere compliment. And then joyful laughter bubbled up from his chest. “Please, Judge, try not to get too sentimental,” he teased in delight. “It’s embarrassing and, besides, you might give me a big head.”

“Big enough already, with all that hair,” Milt grumbled, making a show of picking up the paper and rattling the pages as he pulled it open to read. “Just wanted to make sure we’re clear about things, that’s all.”

“Oh, I think we’re clear,” Mark chuckled, lifting his own mug and taking a sip. “We’re in this *together*. Me, Tonto; you, the Lone Ranger. And when the bad guys start shooting, I’m supposed to duck.”

“You got it, kiddo,” Hardcastle affirmed with a puckish grin and wink, before disappearing behind the morning news. “See that you don’t forget it.”

Mark snickered and, slouching in the chair, he tilted his face up to catch the rays of the sun and bask in the warmth of being home and safe … among friends. Life just didn’t get better than this.



*Finis*