

THE ADVENTURES OF MARK & THE JUDGE

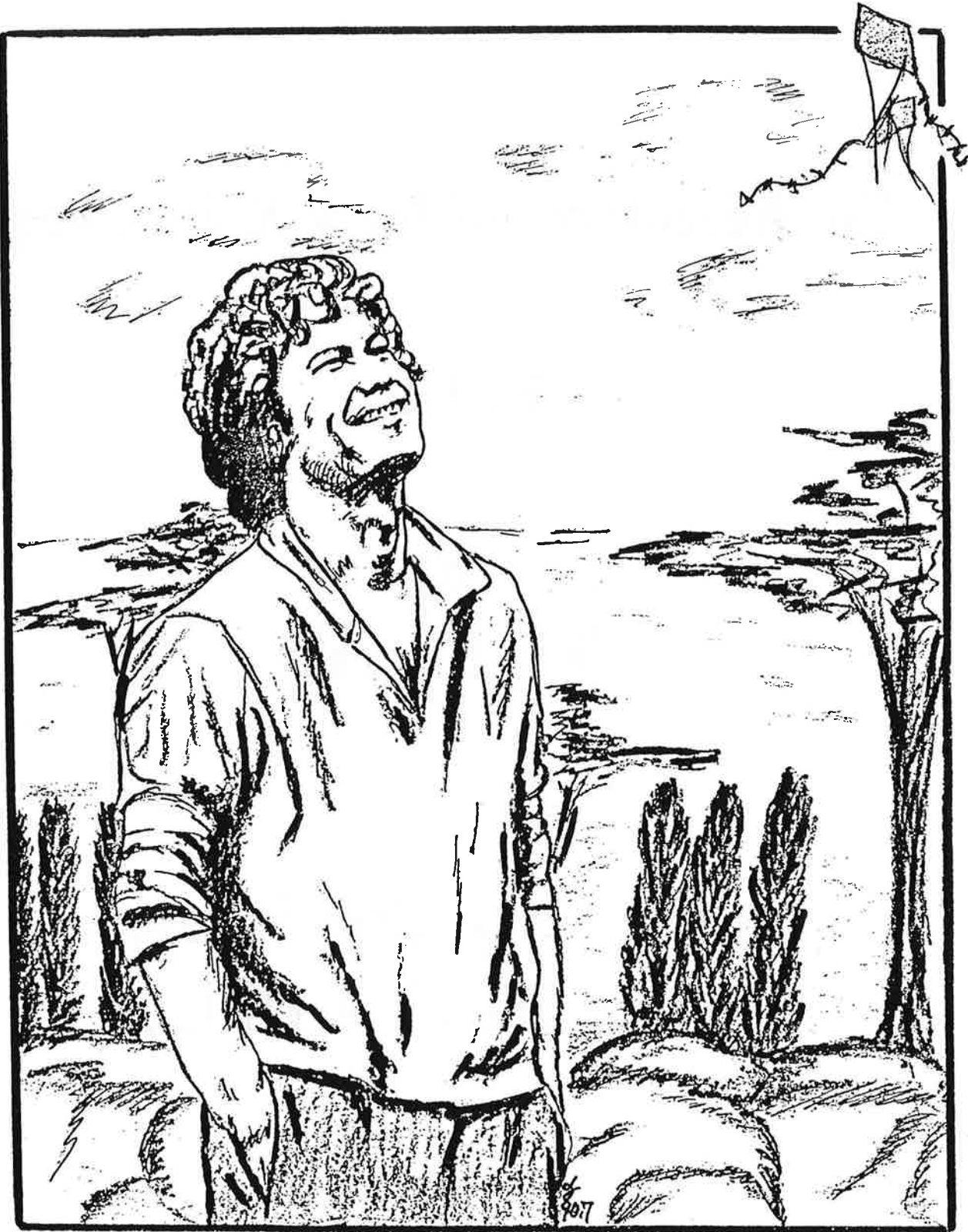


The Adventures of Mark & the Judge

Part Two

By
D D Brischke

Chili Today...Hot Tamale
Where There's A Will...



WHERE THERE'S A WILL...

By
D.D. BRISCHKE

"McCormick!" The usually quiet atmosphere around Gullsway was broken by the familiar roar of the retired superior court justice Milton C. Hardcastle. The beautiful grounds of the Malibu estate had been a recluse for the jurist since the legal custody of one Mark McCormick, ex-con and parolee. Since his arrival the grounds and the judge had come alive.

"McCormick!" the judge roared again as he came barreling up the driveway on his way to the gatehouse where Mark resided.

"Hi Milt!" Frank Harper waved from his compact car as he pulled up to the front of the house. Hardcastle stood, hand on his hips, looking around panning the grounds for any movement.

"I'll kill that kid and bury him under the ferns...No one will ever find his mangy carcass there! Then when his body decays my roses will grow from the human fertilizer, God knows he slings enough of it verbally! What he didn't do in life, his dead body will do in the hereafter!" He spouted angrily through gritted teeth.

"Milt!" Lt. Harper called again snapping Hardcastle out of his grump. When he waved back, Harper stepped out of his car as Hardcastle came up to him. "You looking for Mark again?"

"Yes...with blood in my eyes! Take a look at this!" He took off his Chicago ball cap and held it up. "Damn seagulls! They shit all over my new cap; it's ruined! I told McCormick to stop feeding those feathered moochers but you know Dr. Do-Nothing, he's got pet names for all of them!" Harper laughed. "This place is a refuge for every feathered, furry, flying, digging and crawling hoo-ha around!"

"I just dropped by to return your fishing gear." Harper withdrew a long pole from the back-seat of his car. Hardcastle accepted it. "How'd you do? Catch anything?" He looked over the rod and reel.

"Well Claudia caught a cold and I caught hell. So, we're going to drive to San Diego to visit her mother. I've still got a week of my vacation left."

"Did you see McCormick on your way up here?" He looked around again.

"Yeah, I saw his car next door." Harper answered getting back in his car. "Are you renting his services out now?"

"IN a way. Lydia needed someone to do her grounds cause she fired the guy she had for almost fifteen years." He shook his head. "That woman is something else. Nothing pleases her."

"I thought you were good friends?"

"We are but not when she monopolizes McCormick's time so he's behind in his chores around here," he said angrily.

"I hear she's one of the richest women in California, that true?" He slammed the door of the car.

"Not one of the richest...the richest, in the country. Her husband owned Fairchild Foundries, now Fairchild Inc.; one of the biggest steel manufacturers in the country and abroad. She's worth billions if not more. Carl was the best. Money never went to his head. They were both down to earth. He really pampered her and his kids. We use to go to the country club with them. They're good people. Lydia still is but she knows McCormick works here!" His voice was vehement. "She's deliberately keeping him there to aggravate me!" He shot a cold glare at the estate just over the high fences.

<> <> <> <> <>

"Have another sandwich Mark," Lydia Fairchild offered as she sat across from Mark at the patio table. Lydia was an elegant elderly matron in her early eighties. But her zest for living kept her spirit as well as her physical appearance youthful.

"No thank you Ms. Fairchild, three's my limit. I'd better get back to work. The judge will have the mounties out looking for me." He washed the bread down with a glass of milk.

"Oh poop, Milton has you all the time. I only get to have you twice a week and then it's my Dahlias and Begonias who see you." She turned her head and shouted. "Olivia!" The walls of the glass room echoed from her yell as a black maid appeared in the doorway.

"You gotta bell Mrs., can't you ring? Do you gotta yell like that?" Olivia was a large, chocolate skinned woman with a short cropped hairdo and a starched-white uniform.

"Oh hush, I'll yell if I want to...Bring Mark some of the cheesecake and I'll have some tea; strong and dilute it with a little Jack." She looked back at Mark and smiled.

Mark looked up at Olivia, who had become a good friend. He questioned. "Jack?"

"Daniels...You try to tell her it ain't on her doctor's orders. She don't listen to me, I only works here!" She picked up the soiled plates and huffed off towards the kitchen.

Mark looked over at the smiling lady. "You put Jack Daniels in your tea to cut it?"

She popped a cherry tomato in her mouth. "No, I usually put Cutter's but that witch keeps hiding it from me."

Mark snickered and cover his mouth. "Maybe it's not good for you."

"Not good for me, this advice is coming from the boy who I saw chug-a-lug a pitcher of green beer last St. Patrick's Day on a dare and never missed a beat?" Her eyes widened as she watched Mark squirm.

"Yeah but I learned a valuable lesson. I spent all night hugging the porcelain princess while doing the Technicolor yawn...And Hardcase didn't help my headache the next day. All he did was lecture me and pump me full of Bromo Seltzers.

Lydia giggled as Olivia came back into the room. "Here's the cheesecake, Mark...And here's your tea, ma'am!" She placed both down on the table and walked out.

Lydia sipped her brew and immediately put it down. "~~God~~ damn it, Ollie, I gave you an order!" She roared as she pushed the tea cup away. Olivia waltzed back in the room.

"Dr. Cooper said no alcohol!" She stood her ground.

"I pay him because my son and daughter insist...Charley Friedman is my doctor and he says a nip now and then won't hurt. I don't do what their quack says, now get the bottle!"

"Mr. Thornton and Miss Lilla say no!"

"You're fired, ~~God~~ damn it!" She shouted.

"You can't fire me no how!" Olivia spat back, hands on his hips. Mark watched them bantering back and forth.

"Why not?"

"Cause you fired me yesterday, that's why, you old crow!" She stuck out her tongue, winked at Mark and walked out.

Lydia looked at the giggling parolee. "I have all the money in the world and I still I can't do what I want." She put her tiny hand on her chin and leaned on the table.

Mark laughed out loud. "I know the feeling. I don't have any money in this world and I can't do anything I want." He wiped his mouth and stood up. "Well I've got one more section of lawn to cut and then I'd better get back home. I'm supposed to be trimming the hedges. Hardcastle wants the place ship-shape and if I don't shape it up, he'll ship me out!"

"Oh you're not afraid of Milton, are you?"

Mark wiped his sunglasses on his shirt and looked down at her. "Do ducks shit loose?"

Lydia began laughing and put her napkin over her mouth. "Oh Mark...you're such a joy to have around. You've made this mausoleum come alive. You make me feel forty years younger." Her face blushed.

He walked toward the door and slipped his sunglasses on. "Good... then you can bag the grass!" He winked and left the patio, gently closing the glass door behind him.

Olivia walked back into the room carrying a tray. "Mr.Thorton called, he's coming over today."

Lydia kept watching Mark gearing up the lawnmower. "What...what did you say?"

Olivia stood over her. "I said Mr. Thornton is coming over. Want me to hide the silverware and booze?"

"Do you know what I like about that boy?" She watched adoringly as Mark started cutting the grass as Beau, her Golden Retriever chased the mower.

"Yes, he ain't like that son of yours? I like Mark, he's got the smarts. And he's got your number honey!" She laughed.

"He couldn't hold a candle to Thorton, even if he is younger. I like Mark because he's honest and he doesn't treat me like an old lady with one foot in the grave. He knows what I've got and it doesn't make a difference to him. I'm gonna remember that." She looked up at Olivia. "And don't tell anyone either!" Olivia smile. Lydia watched as Mark hopped off the mower and began throwing sticks for Beau to run after. "This place is alive again and that young man did it!" She watched as Beau brought the stick back to her young friend and he wrestled with him on the lawn. "Yes, I won't forget!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark turned in the driveway of the estate and drove up to the garage; Hardcastle stood waiting for him. As he got out of the car he was greeted by the angry jurist.

"Well the prodigal returns," Hardcastle scoffed as Mark climbed out of the Coyote. "And I suppose you had Lobster Thermador for lunch again." He said sarcastically, hands on his hips, squinting into the sun.

"Grilled cheese...but it was imported cheese," Mark giggled as he came up to him. "Jealous Judge?" He walked past him with his cocky Jersey strut.

"Jealous, me? Listen wiseguy," he huffed after him. "you know I don't mind you helping out Lydia but you've got chores around here too ya know...Have you seen the pool lately?"

Mark turned around as he walked toward the garage. "Sure, if you take a hard left right though that gate you can't miss it!" He turned back around and was quickly followed by the frustrated, hard-heeling judge.

"That's not what I mean and you know it! You didn't get the new filter did you? I told you to get it two weeks ago...where is it?"

"I forgot...I'll get it tomorrow, I promise!"

"Yeah, well maybe I'll just forget to pay you this month, how's that?"

"I said I'll get it tomorrow...Why are you so up tight? It was your idea for me to help Mrs. Fairchild, not mine." Mark picked up a piece of hose and carried it over to the side of the house.

Hardcastle wiped his face and adjusted his ballcap, "I know...what is she paying you anyway?" He watched as Mark hooked up the hose and began sprinkling the flowerbeds along the side of the garage.

"Nothing!" Mark said nonchalantly, as he bent and flicked a dead leaf off a plant.

"What...you mean to tell me for the past five months that woman hasn't paid you one red cent?" His voice rose.

"I didn't ask for any. She offered but I told her I didn't want her money." He put the hose down and pulled some weeds from around a rose bush.

Hardcastle walked over, bent down and felt his head. "You feel all right?"

Mark brushed his hand aside. "She's a nice old lady judge. I enjoy her company. She's together, ya know? Money isn't everything." He stood up and continued to spray the flowers.

Hardcastle slowly, stretching his aching legs out, stood up. "This philosophy is coming from the same person who threw a hissy fit because one of his pen pals welched on a bet?"

Mark shrugged and made a face. "Circumstances!"

"Priorities kid, she's taking advantage of you McCormick!" He pointed a scolding finger but Mark shook his head. As he walked away Hardcastle looked at his watch. "I've got a date tonight. I've got to get ready."

Mark looked up at him. "You have a date...with a woman?"

"What's so surprising about that? I'm still breathing. There may be snow on my roof but my furnace--" he tilted his head comically.

Mark impishly leaned against the garage and stared at the older man. "Hey judge, what does it take to stoke a furnace like yours anyway?" He tried to hold his laughter.

"Never mind smart-mouth. Eleanor is a nice lady, a probate judge. We've got something in common."

"Uh-huh, like the same robe size? Is your gavel big enough to accommodate her?" He covered his mouth and laughed.

Hardcastle walked over to face him. "Listen smart-ass, you just water my flowers, my personal life is my business! My ladies have class, they aren't your typical beach bimboes." He turned to leave.

"All champagne huh, not beers and chips?" Mark said as he turned off the water. "What's for dinner?"

"For you...whatever Taco Bell has a special. Eleanor and I are going out, so dinner is your guess not mine." His grin was evil.

Mark picked up a hoe and began weeding the rose bed. "Well I have a dinner date anyway." He called after him.

"Good, make sure you turn the alarm on when you go. And be home early tonight, huh?"

"Me, what about you?"

Hardcastle turned a condescending glance at him. "McCormick, I'm a mature adult male, I cant stay out as long as I want."

"What about me? I suppose I'm an immature adult male?" He pouted up at him.

"You're an immature male who needs to get up early for a change to get the damn pool filter, it looks like and Irish pub down there!" He resumed his march up the path but turned suddenly and shouted. "And stop feeding those ~~g~~damn gulls! They're shitting all over the place. My hedges look like the White Cliffs of Dover!" He turned and huffed up to the house.

Mark glanced over at the three gulls roosting on the roof of the garage. "What'd I tell you guys about that?" The birds twisted their heads as if understanding what the young con was saying.

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark's dinner companion was the elegant Lady Fairchild from next door. The dining room was dimly lit with the crystal chandelier and the table was set with the finest of imported china.

After several minutes of food picking, Mark spoke up. "Why am I sitting way down here? I might as well be in the next county." Mark stretched his neck to see Lydia over the large flowered centerpiece placed in the middle of the table. "I can't see you through those flowers...got a machete?"

"It's proper!" Lydia responded.

"It's stupid!" Mark picked up his plate and utensils and carried them down to her side of the table. He carefully placed them on the linen table cloth. "There," he sat down. "now I can see and hear you. You don't mind do you. I mean I did shower." His eyes twinkled.

She laughed. "I don't mind anything you do Mark. And I might say you look very handsome tonight, very distinguished. But you didn't have to get all dressed up for me."

"I had to...this is the only shirt that was clean." He began his salad. "I've been so busy helping you over here, I didn't get to the laundry this week." His face turned red as he began to eat.

"Was Milton very angry with you when you got home?"

"Not anymore than usual."

"I suppose he thinks I'm keeping you over here just to make him angry." She also picked at her salad.

"Something like that...And the fact that there isn't a price on my head or wages in my pockets." He wiped his mouth.

"I knew it!" She tossed her napkin down. "I told you, you had to get paid! Why are you so stubborn. A man should get paid for his work. You've done more work around this old place than Carlos did in fifteen years. You should get paid!"

Mark looked up at her, fork in hand. "I told you I don't want anything from you. I like doing things around here."

"But Milton pays you."

Mark almost spit out his wine as he took a sip. "Pay! Is that what you call it?..Listen Ms. Fairchild--"

"Lydia, remember, I told you."

"Yeah...Lydia, listen if it wasn't for me being paroled in that slavedriver's custody, that place would be like Sherwood Forest and he knows it! You wouldn't be able to get near it. I've ruined three hedge cutters, two lawnmowers and five shovels keeping that palace in Better Homes and Gardens for him and you call it pay!" He laughed and started eating again.

"Well a young man like you needs money. Milton is a penny pincher from way back and I'm sure he doesn't give you a decent allowance. A boy like you needs extra things." She rang a small silver bell next to her plate.

"Like what?" Mark wiped him mouth again.

"Oh flowers for young ladies, things for that fancy hot rod of yours, clothes, things like that."

"I'm comfortable with what I have. I get enough to put some away." He leaned back just as Olivia entered the room.

"Surely there must be something special you've had your eyes on."

He looked at Olivia who placed the main course on the table. He looked around suspiciously as if someone might be eavesdropping. "There is a dealer downtown who had this '57' Chevy convertible, black and silver trim, a beauty. I had one when I first started driving. My mom hated it, but I loved it. I've been giving this joke fifty bucks a month to hold it for me. I've almost got it paid for. Just about six more months and it's mine...all mine!" His eyes rolled with ecstasy.

"Why don't you just take the money from me and go buy it." She looked at Olivia.

"Hell no!" Mark's voice rose. "It's my car not yours. I pay my own way lady! I learned the hard way to work for what I get. Things that come fast don't last." He put his napkin down as he saw Olivia snicker.

"Ollie, after dinner, we'll have coffee and brandy in the living room."

"He'll have the brandy...you can have all the coffee you want!" She snapped and walked out.

"I suppose I can't have a cigar you old crow!" Lydia yelled after her as Mark continued eating, smiling in-between bites.

"Money doesn't mean a lot to you, does it Mark?" She asked.

Mark looked up, innocence in his eyes as he answered. "Should it?"

Lydia pondered his response as the dinner proceeded through the dessert.

When the last piece of peach cobbler was finished, Mark rose, picked up Lydia's cane and helped her out of her chair.

As he escorted her into the living room, she leaned close to him. "Did you like the dinner?"

"Beats the hell out of Taco Bell."

She laughed as he helped her over to the velvet divan.

"Now about this money matter--"

He sat next to her. "I've never had a lot so I don't miss it. As long as I pay my own way I'm happy."

Olivia entered carrying a silver tray with two china cups and saucers and a coffee pot on it.

"Mark, go over there and on the lower shelf is a photo album, bring it here!"

Olivia began pouring the coffee. "Oh no, a trip down memory lane!" She said sarcastically.

"Oh hush!" Lydia scolded her as Mark came back carrying the large leather album. "Sit here, dear."

Mark obeyed and sat down, putting the album on her lap. Lydia opened the album. "Guess who this is?" She pointed to a photo, yellowed with age.

"Mary Pickford!" Olivia said as she poured Mark a glass of brandy to go with his coffee.

Lydia scowling up to her. "Don't you have something to do in the kitchen?"

"It can wait." She leaned on the back of the divan and looked over Mark's shoulder.

Lydia cupped her hand to her ear and looked up. "I think I hear a line." She said seriously.

Olivia looked around. "What line, I don't hear no line!"

"The unemployment line!" Lydia snapped and pointed out the door.

Olivia straightened up and walked over to retrieve the brandy bottle. "My big brother used to give me a quarter to git lost!" She mumbled.

"What about a c-note?" Lydia said to Mark's snickering.

"I'm gone!" With that she left them alone.

"Good...that woman drives me crazy...Now, where were we, oh yes, that's me when I was eighteen...I did sort of bear a striking resemblance to Mary." She breathed a heavy sigh. "I was in the movies you know." She said proudly.

"You're kidding!" Mark turned and looked at her.

"No...I even had a small part in the "Sheik"." she turned the page. "There I am in that pith helmet. That's Rudolph Valentino, my first love...what a hunk!"

Mark looked closely at the faded photo. "Did you have any lines?"

"Oh no child, these were silent movies. It took real acting. I made five dollars a week, big bucks in those days...And I got to see Rudolph everyday. He was so handsome. You know women actually killed themselves when he died." Mark shook his head and smiled. "I played an heiress in that picture. He carried me off on his white horse to his desert tent." She turned the page. "Here is one where I played a vamp."

"A what?"

"A vamp...you know a bimbo. That bare shoulder gives me away. That wasn't done in those days. Too risqué. My parents had a fit when they saw it."

"Did you make any more movies?" He turned the page.

"A few, then I met Carl and he swept me off my feet. He didn't want me showing my shoulders on film. You know back then a bare shoulder meant one thing." She winked at him. "He didn't want to share me with anyone...Sometimes I miss him so much. He made me laugh. We had good times together, and he was such a good dancer. We'd go to the country club several times a week and dance all night. We never sat down once. I wish you could have met him Mark. He'd have liked you. You are just like him; self-made. I like that too." She tapped his hand gently.

"Are these your children?" Mark pointed to a photo of two children standing by a pony.

"Yes, that's them!" Her tone was full of disgust. "Spoiled little brats...Carl pampered them too much. Whenever they asked for something he'd fork over and give it to them. When they asked for it I wanted to give them a thick hairbrush where they need it most!" Mark laughed.

"Who's this?" He pointed to another photo of four people standing by an old car.

"Oh for heaven's sake, I forgot that was in there." She looked closely at the photo. "Why that's Milton and his wife and me and Carl. It was an anniversary I think. We were at the country club...Look," she laughed. "Milton still has hair!" She giggled and covered her mouth. "He was a handsome man, such wide shoulders That must be thirty years old. We were such good friends. Nancy, his wife, and I were good friends. We served on many committees together. She was such a dear."

"The judge doesn't keep photos around the house. I never really saw what she looked like. She was beautiful wasn't she?" He looked closely at the photo.

"Both inside and out. It almost killed him when she passed away. She suffered so. And Milton felt every pain with her. She deserved better for what she did for others. But Milton stayed right by her side through it all. Then when Tommy was killed I thought it would finish him. I did what I could to help but he just shut himself up in that big house and threw himself into his work and he also began drinking, very unlike him, but pain will do that. It almost killed him...then you came along." She looked adoringly at him. "You're a special part of his life, you know."

"Sometimes I wonder." Mark closed the album.

"Milton just has a hard time expressing his feelings, but they're there, I know. I can read him like a book." She leaned down and picked up her coffee and began stirring it slowly.

"So can I, like a speed reading course. He has a way of giving orders first, second and third...Things have to be done right then and now, no excuses. Man sometimes I feel like a Stepford parolee." He picked up his brandy and sipped it.

"He used to do that same thing to Tommy. He had that boy jumping all the time. Sometimes I could hear him yelling all the way over here and Tommy would yell back just as loud, but things got done." She noticed Mark's head lowering. "Don't you know the louder that man yells, the more he cares?"

"Can we change the subject?" He took another sip of warm brandy.

"You don't have to be embarrassed with me child, I know how you feel about him even though you're as pigheaded as he is...Okay, the subject is changed. Tomorrow is my birthday, I'll be eighty-two."

Mark looked up in surprise and said with dramatic sarcasm. "No!"

"Oh hush you scamp! Yes, my dear children are kissing up by throwing me a party at the Country Club...I guess I'll have to go so I want Milton to grab a date and I want you to be my escort." She sipped her coffee slowly again waiting for his response.

"Well happy birthday and many happy returns, I'm broke so don't expect a gift and no thanks but I have to wash my hair tomorrow!" He stood up, downing his snifter of brandy and took the album back to the glass shelves.

"And what's that supposed to mean; 'no thanks I have my hair to wash?'" She turned and watched him lean on the mantel.

"Look Lydia, those people are caviar and prime rib, I'm beans and franks. I just don't fit in with the tilt-noses." He walked back and sat down. "I never have. Some of the judge's friends look down at me cause I did time. I'm not in the blue book, I'm in the police files. If your friends ever found out, you'd have to move!" He poured another snifter of brandy, took a sip and coughed.

"Don't you think that occurred to me?" He shrugged. "I don't care that you were in prison. When Milton suggested I have you help me around the place, did you think I worried if you'd stab me in my sleep, no! I didn't go around counting my silverware either because Milton said you were a good kid and those were his exact words." She put her hand under his lowered chin and lifted it. "I love you like a grandson...no a son, what other

people think doesn't mean a hill of beans to me. And it's none of their business anyway! I want you at my party tomorrow and I won't take no for an answer...Do you have a monkey-suit?"

Mark looked at her and whined. "You mean I have to wear a tux?"

"They don't allow jeans at the Club...And we'll take my limo. I'll pick you up at seven thirty...I like to make an entrance...How about it? Is it a date?"

"Have I ever let you down?" He smiled a deep-dimpled smile.

"No and you never will." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Excuse me Mrs., but Mr. Thornton is here to see you," Olivia said 'Thornton' like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Maybe I'd better go!" Mark said, standing up.

"Sit!" Lydia ordered and instantly Mark obeyed.

Into the room strode a fiftiesh, graying man wearing an expensive suit. "I'm sorry I'm so late mother, but I had a board of directors meeting and then some potential stockholders took me to a late lunch and dinner. They want to open a factory in Brussels." He leaned down and brushed her forehead with a kiss.

"I didn't expect you Thornton, but now that you're here, sit!" Thornton walked over and sat across from Mark, eyeing him suspiciously. "Oh, you remember Mark McCormick, don't you?" Lydia motioned toward him.

"Yes, of course; the gardener." He glared at Mark. "Isn't it a little late for pruning Mr. McCormick?" His tone was vindictive as he merely sneered at Mark.

"Mark was invited to dinner Thornton, be nice." She said, pouring Mark a cup of coffee. "Now what was so important that you traveled all the way from Beverly Hills to see me? You never come out this way."

"It's business mother...our business! I must talk with you. I'm going to make some changes in the company."

"What kind of changes?" She asked.

"Oh that's not important mother, I'll take care of it for you." He poured himself a snifter of the expensive brandy.

Mark leaned back on the couch. "Lydia if it's your company, you should have the last say in what goes on there."

"I handle the business for my mother Mr. McCormick. She doesn't have time for it."

"Doesn't have time, hell she rambles around this castle all day counting the flowers on the wall paper, what does she have to do?" He looked at Lydia grinning. "It's your business isn't it?"

"Yes it is."

"Well, why don't you run it...You're the chairman of the board and president...you'd be great!"

"Well I never gave it much thought but now that you mention it--"

"Hey if you ain't the lead dog, the scenery never changes!" Mark said sipping his brandy and grinning at her.

"Mother you never had a head for such matters, father always took care of it...It's very nice of you to suggest it Mr. McCormick but this is a family business!" Thornton's tone was getting increasingly hostile.

"I think I'll call it a night." Mark said sensing the tension between them. He put his glass down and rose.

"It's early...you don't have to leave yet." Lydia said sadly.

Mark glared in the direction of the pompous Thornton. "I think it would be better...I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"And don't forget your promise...tell Milton too. I'm expecting both of you. Don't let me down!" She took his hand.

"I'd never let you down." he kissed her hand tenderly. "Thank you for dinner. Next time I pick the place." He watched her face blush like a school girls. He turned to Thornton. "I'd like to say it was a pleasure, but my mother taught me never to lie...goodnight!" He started out.

"Excuse me mother, I think I'd better speak to Mr. McCormick." Thornton rose to leave.

"Yes, apologize Thornton you were never rude. That's a nice young man."

"Of course mother. I think I'll do just that." Thornton followed Mark to the vestibule. "Oh McCormick, I'd like a few words with you!"

Mark turned around ready for action. "Look Thornton, I don't know you that well and I don't plan on becoming chums. Your mother is a great lady. And she has a good head on her shoulders, I think she'd give your business a fresh shot in the arm. And it'd get her away from this house. She needs to get out and become involved in things so she doesn't stagnate."

"I think that decision would be made by her family, not the handyman! And I feel your services are no longer needed here. I've taken the opportunity to engage a real landscaping professional." He withdrew his bill fold and began leafing through hundred dollar bills. "I think four hundred should cover your pay." He held the money out to Mark.

"You're mother hired me!"

"Well then I can fire you...here!" He pushed the money towards him. "I'm sure you can put this to good use."

Mark saw Olivia standing in the doorway of the hall making faces in Thornton's direction. He looked back at the snobbish bastard and then at the money in his hand. "I'd tell you where you could put it to good use but you're too ~~fo~~damn pious to take your eight hundred dollars pants down to do it!" Olivia covered her mouth as she held back a giggle.

Mark strutted out the door as Thornton stood, mouth agape staring at the vacated door and it closed slowly. Suddenly turning he saw Olivia standing with her hand over her smiling face.

"That will be all Olivia!" He snapped with embarrassment. She made a face and retreated back to the kitchen. He returned to the living room. "Of all the unmitigated gall!" He blared as he paced the floor.

"Thornton, what are you babbling about now?"

"That young upstart you hired! He's crude and vulgar!"

"Mark is nice boy...and a hard worker!" She put her cup down.

Thornton came over and sat down next to her. "Mother, it isn't right and it doesn't look proper for you to be alone with him. And for him even to be working here."

"We're not alone here Thornton, Olivia and Charles are here and I did need someone to help out around here. You know yourself, Carlos was a drinker."

"Mother...I fear that young man's intentions are not honorable. They have a name for someone like him." Thornton glanced out the window as he heard Mark pulling away.

"They have?" Lydia's rose.

"Yes...gigolo!" He spat at her and stood up to continue pacing. "I know his type."

"Do you Thornton...and just what makes you think Mark is a gigolo? I'll have you know that young man hasn't asked for a penny of my money. And I invited him to work for me, he didn't just pick me up. Believe it or not, he's not impressed with my fortune. Mark isn't like that. He has values." She took her cane and rose.

Thornton ran to her side. "Mother, I'm just trying to save you from embarrassment. It doesn't look right. What will people say?"

She pulled her arm away from him. "I don't give a damn what people think or say." She started out but turned. "And if they did think, they'd probably say 'Lydia Fairchild can really pick'em. That kid is a knockout!' And he's right...starting tomorrow I'm going to take a deep interest in my business...Goodnight Thornton, see yourself out, suddenly I'm quite tired." Lydia walked out and was greeted by a snickering Olivia holding some freshly laundered towels. Lydia came up to her. "Did Mark get off a good one?" She whispered.

Olivia took Lydia's arm. "He sure did Mrs....You should have seen Mr. Thornton's puss. That boy did real good!" They both laughed all the way up the stairs.

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark slammed the kitchen door as he entered the main house. "The ~~fo~~damn son of a bitch!" Mark yelled as he opened the refrigerator and extracted a can of beer.

"What in heaven's name was that?" Eleanor Danfield asked as she suddenly sat up.

Hardcastle's face fell down on the couch as he lost his balance. "Sounds like hurricane McCormick! Don't mind him, he probably got stood up...Now where were we?" He tried to nestle close to her.

Mark pulled the tab on the beer can and sprayed all over the kitchen like old Faithful. "Ah shit!" He shouted again.

"Milt...I think Mark needs help." Eleanor said, looking deeply in the judge's blue eyes.

"He needs therapy!" He said angrily. "Forget him, he's a big boy!"

"Milt...please, go see if you can help." She touched his cheek and smiled. "You always know the right thing to say."

Hardcastle blushed, breathed a labored sigh and lifted himself from the couch. As he threw open the door to the kitchen he found Mark on the floor wiping up the brew. "All right McCormick, what the hell is wrong with you?" He yelled.

"I thought Eleanor said you always said the right thing?" He looked up as he dipped the paper towel in the foam.

Hardcastle pointed a finger at him. "You were eavesdropping again!"

"No I wasn't, you just talk loud that's all...Go back before she cools down."

"Don't talk like that about Elly, she's a nice lady...What got you so heated up?" He leaned against the door, looking down at Mark.

"I had dinner with Lydia...everything was going real nice till Thornton came...I tell ya that guy could empty a room in five seconds with his subtleness!" Mark rose and threw the toweling in the waste basket.

"I know, he's got no personality to speak of...I never did like him." He went over and sat at the counter as Mark extracted another beer from the frig. "So...is he the reason you're so--" he looked at the floor, "--clumsy?"

"I told Lydia that she should take more of an interest in her husband's business, not leave everything up to Thorny."

"Oh I bet that went over great with him."

"Like a lead biscuit...From that moment on it went all down hill. You know that prick actually tried to buy me off? Wanted to pay me for my services rendered." Mark imitated Thornton's prudish face and voice. "I've enlisted the services of a professional landscaping company!" Mark shook his head. "The prick!" He pulled the tab on another can of beer and again it sprayed all over. "What the hell did they do at the store, shake all these friggin' cans up before they bagged them?" He shouted with frustration.

"Look, don't go taking your hostility out on the bagboys." Hardcastle said calmly. Mark shook his head and pulled the paper towels from the wall holder. "Why don't you take a glass of milk. It'll calm you inside...forget Thornton!"

"Believe me I'd like to...I ain't quittin' just cause he hates me judge...And I'm going to that party tomorrow, in a tux...in a limo!" He said confidently.

"What party?"

"Oh Thornton and Lilla are throwing Lydia a bash for her eighty second birthday at the Country Club. She wants you to come with a date and she wants me to escort her!" He threw the second wad of soaked paper towels in the trash. "And I'm going!"

"Good for you...you have just as much class as those ya-hoos...I'll go ask Eleanor right now...Get some sleep!" He patted Mark on the back and walked out.

"Yeah...I got just as much class as those yahoos!" Mark sat down, chin in his palm. "I just don't got as much money!" He looked at the empty can of beer and rolled his eyes.

<> <> <> <> <>

The evening was clear and sweet-smelling as the Rolls-limo pulled up to Gullsway. Mark and the judge stepped out to meet it.

"Man what a car!" Mark said opening the door.

"Well, don't just stand there, let's get going! I don't like to be late!" Lydia ordered from the back seat.

Mark slid in, followed by Hardcastle. "This isn't a car, it's a house on wheels!" He said as he seated himself next to Lydia.

"Well don't you look snazzy! You should wear a tux more often. We're gonna turn some eyes tonight sweetheart!" She said straightening Mark's tie. She glanced to her right. "Oh, you look okay too Milton." He made a face as she pushed a button in front of her. "Okay Charles, peel out! We have pick up Milton's date, you do have one, don't you?"

Hardcastle's face showed disgust. "You've been hanging around this clown too long...of course I've got a date, I'm not dead yet ya know!" He shouted angrily, looking out the window. Lydia winked at Mark.

The car started up and left the estate heading down the PCH slowly. "Mark, Ollie told me what Thornton did to you yesterday and I just want you to know, he's horseshit! Don't pay him any attention. I'm the boss in that family as of now! I'm taking your advice and getting back in the business. I think Carl would want me to."

"I've met his kind before Lydia, it didn't bother me!" He watched as the judge turned his head and scoffed at him. He caught the sneer. "Well it didn't!"

"Did I say anything?" Hardcastle asked slyly.

"No, but you were thinking it...Look let's sit in a corner table somewhere when we get there, maybe no one will notice us."

"We'll do nothing of the kind. I'll pick the table and you will sit right next to me! And that's final! It's my birthday and you're my date and I want everyone to know it!"

Mark's face turned crimson as he watched the scenery pass by the window. This was going to be a night to remember, or one he'd want to forget.

<> <> <> <> <>

The entrance to the Country Club was decorated with flowers and shrubs of all colors and shapes. The valet service was busy parking all the classic and vintage automobiles as well as the limousines. Mark stepped out of the limo and held his hand out for Lydia.

"Well here it goes kid...let's make a show!" She smiled holding onto his arm.

Mark looked at Hardcastle as he helped Eleanor out of the car. "Class, you got class kiddo, go get'em!" He winked and took Eleanor's arm to follow.

Mark swallowed hard. "Class, right." He closed his eyes before holding his arm out for Lydia and she graciously smiled, placed her arm on his and they walked in the marble building.

Once inside, they could hear the music coming from the ballroom. "Sounds like a good band." Lydia looked around. "Let's see who's here." She led Mark over to the doorway and peeked in. "My it's crowded tonight, just like the old days Milton...Oh there's Lilla and Thornton...come on!" She led the way as Mark and the others followed.

They made their way toward the round table near the dance floor. "Well Lydia Fairchild!" A resonant, husky but soft voice cleared the air. Mark looked up to see a tall, very debonair man walking toward them, his arms outstretched. "I haven't seen you in years! You're as lovely as ever!" He embraced her gently.

"Oh Gregory, you could always flatter me." She saw Mark back off. "Oh Gregory, I want you to meet Mark McCormick, he's the influence behind me coming out again...Mark this is--" she held her hand out.

Mark held his hand out. "Gregory Peck...I know," he shook the man's hand. "It's a great pleasure to meet you sir."

"Well, you must be a special young man if you could talk this lady into coming out of seclusion...I take my hat off to you." He smiled at Mark. "And Lydia, I hope you save me a dance." He kissed her hand.

"Well, my dance card may be filled but I'll leave at least one space open." She shyly smiled.

"Nice to have met you Mark, take care!" He patted Mark on his back, nodded to the judge and left."

"Gregory Peck...you know Gregory Peck!" Mark was in a daze.

Lydia hit Mark's chest softly. "Don't be so taken in, he's just a man. He puts his pants on just like you," she started away.

Mark looked at Hardcastle. "Yeah but his pants cost more than my whole closet."

<> <> <> <> <>

"I don't believe it!" Thornton said in surprise as his mother and her entourage walked up.

"Oh, no need to rise," she place her beaded purse down, "Lilla I don't believe you've met Mark, Mark this is my daughter Lilla, oh I see Harvey didn't come as usual," she looked at Mark. "Lilla is married to the invisible man, he never shows up for anything. Lilla this is Mark...he's my, oh how should I say this...gentleman friend." Her voice held a devilish tone to it as Mark blushed. He saw a stern looking woman pull back.

He held out his hand. "Nice to meet you Mrs.--"

"Well answer him Lilla," she watched as her daughter refused to extend her hand. "You can call her Lilla, Mark...I think we caught her by surprise. You know Thornton and that's his wife Vernice, she doesn't talk much. Everyone, this is Milton Hardcastle, you all know him, and this is Eleanor Danfield, she's a judge too...Now Mark you sit next to me and Milton you and Elly can sit next to Mark." She said sitting down. "This is going to be a nice party. I feel like I was forty." She said smiling at Mark.

"I've taken the opportunity to order champagne mother." Thornton snapped his fingers and the wine captain walked over carrying a tray with a bottle on it. "Captain, the champagne please."

The steward began pouring the clear liquid into the tall crystal stemware. "Perhaps Mr. McCormick would like to sample it...And tell us if it's suitable to our palates." Mark watched the smug look on Thornton's face as the steward handed the first glass to him.

Mark swallowed hard as he took the glass from the steward who stood over him like a vulture. He looked over at Hardcastle and received a wink. He put the glass to his lips and took a sip. He could feel all eyes on him as he then lowered the glass to look inside. He held it up to his nose and sniffed it. Then he held it up to the light only to lower it and sip again. He looked up at the wine steward. "This is a little flat don't you think, maybe it wasn't turned on time and the color is a little cloudy."

The steward, to everyone's surprise poured a small amount of the champagne in his serving cup and sipped it. "I'm quite sorry sir, this is most unusual. Mr. Fairchild ordered this especially for this occasion. My deepest apologies sir."

Mark looked up at him. "Don't let it ruin you day, anyone can make a mistake picking wines."

Mark watched Thornton's face flush with embarrassment and anger.

"Would you care to order something else sir?" The steward asked Mark.

Mark looked around the table and then at the Judge. Hardcastle looked up at the lighting and then down at the table. "What about something that won't got to our heads quite so fast. How about a nice Rothchild?" He suggested looking up at the man.

"Very good sir...might I suggest a '68? It was a very good year."

"Yeah it was for the Detroit Tigers but not for wine. What about a--" Mark stopped and pretended to think. His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar tapping of fingers on the table. He looked down and saw the judge tapping his digits on the table. When he was certain that he had Mark's attention he fingered a four and then a three with his fingers and the resumed tapping. "--'43! I think you'll find that was a better year for wine."

"Oh a very good choice sir." The steward left.

"I didn't know you knew so much about wine Mark. I'm impressed," Lydia said smiling.

"Doesn't everyone?" He said confidently as he picked up his water glass and cooled off his embarrassment. He caught the judge's snicker and wink and began to relax.

Dinner was eaten with simple conversation. Mark kept his eyes glued on Hardcastle whenever a course was served. He secretly aided Mark in selecting the correct fork. His assistance went unnoticed by practically everyone at the table except Lydia. When coffee was finally served, she broke the silence.

"Well Thornton that was a delicious dinner. All my favorite things."

"Nothing is too good for you Mother...And now I think it's time for the birthday girl to open her presents." He pushed the array of glittery boxes towards his mother. Mark fidgeted in his seat. "Open the one on top first mother, it's from me."

Lydia put her napkin down on the table and took the silver-wrapped box from her son. She anxiously opened the wrapping and revealed a velvet box which she slowly opened. "Oh, Thornton it's lovely!" She took out a diamond and gold brooch. "It's so beautiful!" She held it up as all the eyes ood in silence.

"Here Mother, let me put it on you," Lilla said as she rose and came over to Lydia. "It'll go so well with your dress." She began to put it on. "Here, you don't need this old scarf!" Lilla began to remove a silk scarf from around Lydia's neck.

"Don't you touch that scarf, it was a gift. A very special birthday gift," Lydia looked at Mark, "Mark gave it to me...you can just put the brooch on the scarf." She smiled at him and patted his hand. "It's the loveliest gift I own...thank you Mark." Mark just nodded.

The orchestra began playing. "Now Mother this is from Vernice and Lilla, they had it handmade for you." He lifted up a large box and placed it in front of her on the table. "Maybe I should help you." He lifted the lid and pulled the tissue paper back, exposing a mink cape.

"Oh my goodness!" Lydia expelled. "Isn't it a bit warm for mink?"

"It's never too warm for mink mother! Lilla said as she sat back down. "Happy birthday mother and many more."

"Yes, happy birthday Mother Fairchild and many more!" Vernice's drunken tone was dull as she lifted her glass in a toast and downed the contents in one gulp.

"Well I don't know what to say. This is a very special day for me. And I know it won't be the last. As the young people say, 'this is the first day of the rest of my life'. And I plan on really living it up now...Mark, let's dance!" She stood up.

"Mother do you think it's wise, the doctors said you should use a cane, where's your cane?" Thornton asked standing to her aid.

"My doctor is Charley Friedman and he's right over there, do you see him with a cane." Only a few snickered at the table. "I've been feeling very steady lately, especially when I have Mark to lean on...Come on Sport, I feel like a foxtrot." She looked up as Mark took her arm. "Can you dip?"

Mark laughed and threw his head back. "Can I dip? Do winos love Muscatel?" Lilla cringed and Thornton's face turned white as Lydia grabbed Mark's arm and they walked to the dance floor.

"Well I never!" Lilla announced snobbishly.

Hardcastle cleared his throat. "I haven't dipped in a long time, shall we Elly?" He rose and held the chair for her.

"I'd love to Milt." They followed them onto the dance floor.

"You were right Thornton, I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life! How could mother do this to us?"

"I tried to let him know in a subtle way that we didn't approve of him but he's a very hard young man to convince. Maybe some of our good friends will do the job for us. Mother will see it our way."

On the dance floor, Lydia and Mark were dancing, surrounded by all her long-ago-friends. "I think we're the center of attraction. I kinda like it," she looked at Mark's feet. "I didn't know you could dance so well. You have hidden talents."

"When I was ten my mother gave me a choice. I could either take ballroom dancing in school or eat spinach for the next month...Guess what I chose?" Mark made a face and swung her around.

"I guess you were a prize student." She smiled and hung onto him.

"You're more fun to dance with than Sister Evangelica. Every time I dipped her, her cross banged me in the balls." Lydia slapped him gently on the back and giggled.

Several matronly women walked over to the table. "Lilla, where did your mother ever find such a handsome young man?" They cooed.

"Yes...I've never seen your mother looking so vivacious before. That young man seems to have brought out the best in her again," another said as they turned to watch Mark lead Lydia around the floor.

Lilla looked over at Thornton and coldly glared him down. "He certainly knows how to handle himself...I envy her." An elderly woman said with a heavy sigh.

When the song had ended Hardcastle had waltzed Eleanor over to Lydia and Mark. "I think two dances is it for me...I need a drink. What about you Elly?" He asked, wiping his forehead.

"Oh I guess I could stand some more wine. Are you two joining us?" Elly asked.

"No..I made a promise to someone earlier this evening, I'm going to dance every dance," she looked at Mark. "Aren't we?"

"It's your birthday!" He answered.

As Hardcastle and Eleanor walked off the dance floor, Lydia went over to the bandstand and whispered something to the bandleader.

"Ladies and gentleman, I have just been asked for a request. It's a ladies choice and it's dedicated to a special person." The bandleader announced in the microphone. Lydia smiled in Mark's direction as she walked toward him, hands held out to greet him. The music began as she reached him.

"Don't blush...everyone is watching!"

"Why did you have to do that?" He put his arm around her.

"It's my birthday and I'm eighty-two, I can do whatever I want!"

The bandleader took the microphone and began singing to the music. "Heaven, I'm in Heaven and my heart beat so that I can hardly speak. And I seem to find the happiness I seek. When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek."

"Smile and have fun!" Lydia said as she pulled Mark closer to her. "Let's let them know we know what we're doing kiddo!"

"You got it!" Mark led her all around the floor.

"Oh I'd love to climb a mountain, and to reach the highest peak. But it doesn't thrill me half as much as dancing cheek to cheek." The song continued. Everyone stopped dancing and watched the fancy footwork Mark and Lydia were displaying.

"That's just terrible!" Lilla said as she turned her head.

"Yeah you're right Lilla." Hardcastle said.

"Well I'm glad someone agrees with me Judge."

"You're right, that singer is a little flat!" He watched as Lilla's face whitened with astonished anger. Eleanor gently hit him in the ribs and they both smiled as they watched Mark and Lydia dancing, alone on the dance floor enjoying themselves.

"Oh, I love to go out fishing in a river or a creek. But I don't enjoy it half as much as dancing cheek to cheek." Mark held Lydia in a tango grip and danced her down a lone. "Dance with me I want my arms about you, the charms about you will carry me through to Heaven--"

"Mother Fairchild is certainly the lucky one...at least her partner gets up and moves," Vernice said looking over the rim of her cocktail glass. "And he has all the right moves, in the right places, if you ask me." Her eyes drooled at the sight of Mark's handsome physique.

"We didn't ask you Vernice so shut up!" Thornton snapped at his drunken wife and then returned his glare to the dance floor. "Milton, don't you think you should have a talk with that young man?"

"Why...is he dancing wrong?"

"You know what I mean! Surely you don't condone what he's doing."

"Thornton your mother invited him here. Mark is not stepping over any bounds. And I might add that your mother's grounds have never looked better and he's not taking any payment for his work. So I don't think I need to speak to him at all. And after tonight, that kid can go where ever he wants and fit in as far as I'm concerned."

Thornton didn't answer, he merely refilled his glass with wine and downed it.

"I wonder if Lydia would let me cut in?" Eleanor said.

"Well let's see, shall we?" Hardcastle held the chair for her as Eleanor stood up. "You'll excuse us." He said turning to Eleanor. "I think they will." She smiled at them as they headed out to the dance floor.

"Thornton, you have to do something! Everyone is talking and staring. Mother and that young man are making us the laughing stock of the club. They must all think Mother is keeping him. Just look at the way they look at each other. It's disgraceful. And Milton Hardcastle thinks it's cute. Of all the nerve...Do something, don't just sit there!" Lilla whispered sternly.

"That's what he does best dear, sit." Vernice lisped in her drunken stupor. She looked out at the dance floor. "I think he's cute...I wonder what he's like under the silk sheets...Your mother has silk sheets doesn't she darling?"

"Shut up Vernice, this isn't your concern!" Lilla snapped angrily. "And while you're at it Thornton, why don't you send her away again to get dried out?"

"I wouldn't be so dry if he'd spend a little more time putting it where it belongs...Maybe I should engage a stud like his mother did...Maybe I wouldn't get my climaxes from a vermouth bottle!" She snapped back and tried to stand up.

"Sit down you slut...and keep your mouth shut, you want everyone to hear you?" Thornton said through gritted teeth.

"I don't care if the whole damn place hears me!"

Thornton stood up and grabbed his wife by the arm, "Let's go dear, you need your rest!" He growled, dragging her to her feet. "You take over from here Lilla...I'll talk to you in the morning. Something has to be done about this situation and right now before it gets out of hand."

"Maybe I can talk some sense into mother...just get her out of here before people start talking about her." She nodded toward Vernice.

Thornton pulled Vernice out to the stares and whispers of the crowd. Lydia was now dancing with Hardcastle. "I have to tell you Milton, Mark is a joy. I've never has such a good time since Carl was living and we use to come here...I with I had a boy like him."

"He was so nervous about coming here tonight. You know this is out of his element. But I thought he handled Thornton pretty damn well." He grinned

"Well I noticed he kept his eyes glued on you throughout dinner...giving him a little fatherly advice via hand gestures?" She asked, looking him in the eye.

"He's not quite up on table etiquette...he didn't want to embarrass you. I just helped a little," he smiled.

"You know Thornton and Lilla don't approve of him. Thornton called him a gigolo last night, Olivia told me, but Mark put him in his place. Milton, you don't think Mark thinks I think he's--"

"McCormick, hell no! I told you, he doesn't value money like some people. He's had to work and fight to get what he has, He's got integrity and that's one thing money didn't buy him. When he does have money, you can bet he's either giving it to a friend because they're tapped out or he's putting it on that car he wants...No, Lydia you don't have to worry about McCormick, he says what he means and means what he says." He turned

her around to watch Mark and Eleanor doing tango across the floor. "I think he's having just as much fun as you are...you're good for each other."

"I need to speak to you later this week about something very important, but Mark mustn't know."

"Okay...he's going to a pal's apartment on Friday, we can have lunch and talk, how's that?"

"Good...now tango me over to him, you dance like a plow horse!" Hardcastle made a face and they danced her over to Mark and Eleanor.

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark and the judge walked in the house and headed toward the kitchen. Hardcastle immediately went over to the cupboard and pulled out a box and a glass. "Now I remember why I hated dances at the club," he burped. "Drinking and the tango don't mix."

Mark giggled, "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, huh?" He laughed again as he took a bag of cookies from the same cupboard and put them on the table. Then he went to the refrigerator and took out the milk. "Well I had a great time tonight. You know some people with money didn't show it."

"Oh you're just beginning to figure that out huh?" He burped again as the little bubbles began to dissipate in the glass and he drank it down.

Mark poured himself a glass of milk and sat down at the table then began unscrewing the Oreos and licking out the centers. "Well almost everyone...Thornton did everything he could to make me look bad tonight...good thing he doesn't know I'm an ex-con. He would have had me arrested on some trumped up charge."

Hardcastle put the glass down and let out a big burp. "That's better! Thornton always stuck his nose up on anyone who didn't bleed blue when cut. He forgets his father came from a coal mining town in Tennessee, dirt poor like me. He just happened to have a great idea that turned him into a millionaire. Thornton never had to work for his money like normal people. He never took the silver spoon out of his mouth. His sister and him always look down their noses at people. They're no better than anyone else at that club. But they're forgetting one important thing--"

"What's that?"

"It's momma's money, not theirs, yet!" He tilted his head slightly to the side.

"I told Lydia that it was her business, she's chairman of the board and president of the company. She should be running it, not Thorny." Mark dunked the chocolate cookie in the milk and bit it.

"Well Carl did all the business from as far back as I can remember. Lydia just ran the household and raised the children."

"Yeah, maybe if her husband would have let her raise them the way she wanted they would have grown up with some values."

"Oh she was a good mother McCormick, she tried from the very beginning to give him love but even at an early age they rejected that...too bad, they had too much to fast. I mean, we weren't poor, we were affluent and we didn't pamper our son, and he wasn't stuck up either...if he needed a good seat warming, I obliged and he grew up with values, he never wanted for anything and he treated people like human beings." He nodded proudly.

"I guess some people don't know when they have a good thing going," Mark took another cookie and unscrewed it. "You know...I never had a real grandmother to speak of...but being around Lydia I feel like...well I can't explain it. I know she's old but when I'm with her I see so much inside of her and she's taught me a lot too." He licked the center out. "Oh...by the way, thanks for the help tonight Judge...you kept me from looking like a horse's ass."

"You'd never be a horse's ass kid, and you did a lot of it yourself...you looked good out there tonight. Believe me eyes were turning...I didn't know you could dance like that."

"Must have been all those Glenn Miller albums you play." Hardcastle chuckled as he watched Mark raise his eyebrows up and down. "You know, when I first walked in, I kinda felt sick in my gut. I mean I was really out of my league there. But Lydia made me feel like, well like I really fit in. She's something else."

"She sure is," Hardcastle loosened his bow tie and opened his collar. "There was a time when I almost gave up on everything; things just didn't matter to me anymore. I just worked and worked and when I had free time I drank and worked some more," Mark sat back and eyed the serious jurist before him. "Lydia would call or

come over, bring soup, cakes and Olivia would make me dinner when Sarah was off. Those two kept me going," he leaned on the table, "in fact, Lydia got so mad at me one day, she threw a coffee cup at me and told me to get off my souring ass, pick myself up by my boot straps and get back to the living world!" He said, voice rising with excited anger but his eyes twinkled. Mark smiled. "After we yelled at each other for about an hour, I realized she was right. I was feeling sorry for myself. I couldn't bring back what I lost. From that day on I started living again or tried. And I haven't looked back once. She's a great lady...even is she is the richest dame in the country."

"I thought you two didn't get along."

"Oh...you wouldn't know it. She doesn't show her true feelings. She's not demonstrative. Know what I mean?"

Mark smiled. "I think I do. I know the type well."

"Anyway, I'd do anything for her. She was always there when I needed a friend," he sighed. "Well..I'm bushed and my feet hurt." He said as he rose and put his hand on his left knee. "Oooo," he moaned. "I think I over-dipped tonight."

"You're a good dancer too Hardcase!"

"Hey, I could have made it a career." he said as he straightened up and shook the kinks from his legs.

"Why didn't you?"

"Hell, one Fred Astaire was enough...night kid. Lock up huh?" He slowly walked out.

"Good night Judge."

<> <> <> <> <>

"Are you gonna be long boy?" Olivia asked impatiently, peeking her head down the drain pipe of the kitchen sink.

Mark caught a glimpse of her through the pipe. "Do you want it fixed fast or fixed right?" He asked, clanking the wrench on the pipes as he laid on the floor under the sink.

"Right...I want it fast! I gotta make lunch!" She went over to the cupboard and began taking dishes out.

Mark looked over at her. "If you wanted it fast yo shoulda called a plumber!"

"Uh-huh honey, we ain't payin' no crook \$32.00 an hour to look down his nose and tell us we gotta plugged up drain...You doin' fine!" Her toothy white smiled brighten the room.

"You sound like Hardcastle, if I had a nickel for every penny I save him by doing all the fix-up jobs around his palace, I could buy this house."

"Uh-huh...dream on boy, dream on...just keep unpluggin'!" Olivia went about her work.

"Olivia, have you seen--" Lydia walked in the kitchen and looked down. "--good lord, child you're all wet!" She said staring at the puddles of water coming from the sink and Mark's wet jean cuffs.

"That's what happens when you call someone to unplug a drain. I shoulda brought a raincoat." Mark huffed and puffed as he turned the wrench and popped off the collar on the pipe.

Lydia held onto her cane and peeked under the sink. "What's plugging it?"

Mark pulled on the obstruction, "Well...it's either a dirty old sweat sock, of which I'm very familiar, or it's--" he pulled out a gray, wet cloth. "--dust cloth!" He held it up on his wrench.

Lydia straightened up, "Olivia!" she shouted.

Olivia took the cloth from Mark's wrench. "How did that git down there?" She held it up as Mark replaced the collar and began screwing it back on the pipe.

"Well, I won't tell if you don't!" He said with a giggle. "I use mine to start the fireplace," he laughed. When he had finished screwing the pipe back, he pulled himself to his feet. "That's it! Anymore water problems before I get the judge's pool filter?"

"Aren't you staying for lunch?" Lydia asked as bit disappointed.

"I would but I promised Simon Lagree I'd get the pool filter. The water is a lovely shade of lime green today on it's way to Kelly." He began washing his dirty hands in the sink.

"I guess we'll have to eat that three-layered chocolate, marshmallow cake by ourselves," Olivia said as she put the dishes on the tray.

Mark snuck a look over his ball capped head which was turned with the bill in the back. "Dutch chocolate?"

"Uh-huh...with little baby marshmallows on top," Olivia answered as she placed the utensils on the tray. Mark grabbed a towel and shrugged. "What's an hour or so...I can get it later."

"Good...and while you're waiting, you can come upstairs and work on the bathroom drain in the master bedroom...it seems to be plugged also." Lydia turned and with the aide of her cane led the way out.

Mark put the towel down and stared at Olivia. "Don't you ever dust?"

"Oh hush!" She scolded with a tease and flicked the wet towel at his seat. Mark jumped to the side and left a smiling Olivia to return to her kitchen chores.

<> <> <> <> <>

Days later, Mark sat in a posh Beverly Hills restaurant, picture perfect in his tuxedo, eyeing the menu. "Did you see these prices?" His whispered voice rose.

Lydia leaned over, "You're not supposed to read the prices...just order!" She picked up her opera glasses and viewed the large laminated menu with discretion.

"What...no cheeseburger?" Mark exploded quietly.

"Not at La Belle Maison dear...why don't you let me order," she answered as the waiter approached. "We're ready to order now Maurice. We'll begin with the soup de jour, a Caesar salad, light on the dressing. We'll have escargot and then the specialty a la maison."

"Very good madam and the wine?"

"Your best Chardonnay ce vous plait." Mark perked up at Lydia's command of the French language.

The waiter clicked his heels and retreated to the kitchen. "Where did you learn French?" Mark asked, sipping his water.

"Berlitz...and a year in Paris. It comes in handy sometimes." She folded her hands on the table. "Now tell me, how did you like the opera?" Her eyes twinkled in the candlelight as she stared at Mark's handsome face.

"Doesn't anyone ever write operas in English?"

"Not very often. Did you like it?"

"It was different. Do they know what they're singing about cause man, I sure didn't, except when that guy stabbed the woman and then sang for twenty minutes. I take it she done him wrong."

"Exactly...see you did understand it. I'm glad. And you look very handsome in your tuxedo." She said, eyeing him proudly.

Mark looked down at his rented ruffled tuxedo shirt. "What...this old thing?" He teased with a wink.

Lydia touched his arm and giggled. "You rascal!"

<> <> <> <> <>

"I don't believe it!" Lilla said from the other side of the restaurant.

"What?" Her husband said, starting to turn around to look.

She grabbed his arm. "Don't turn...they may see us!" She whispered.

"Who?" Her husband became frustrated.

"Mother...she's here with that...gardener McCormick, the one I told you about." She looked around at the other patrons. "I've never been so embarrassed in my whole life. I bet she's paying...Thornton was right, he's a gigolo...Come on before our friends see them and start asking questions." She quietly and indiscreetly rose and they slinked out of the crowded bistro, unnoticed. "I've got to phone Thornton, maybe now he'll do something!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Thornton Fairchild sat at his antique oak desk, listening in his French phone. "I've had reports too, dear sister."

"Thornton, they've been to the opera, the symphony and several plays. All my friends are talking. I can't walk down Rodeo Drive with someone snickering under their breath or asking how mother is...I thought you paid him off!" Her voice was cold and accusing.

"I tried! I've had a little research done on Mr. McCormick. He's an ex-convict paroled in Judge Hardcastle's custody--"

"Oh Lord!"

"And there only one way to deal with the likes of his kind!"

"How?"

"Now don't you worry your little head about it, sister dear. Big brother will take care of everything. We have to protect our mother's reputation and her money which will someday be our money."

"Well do something quickly. I have a charity function coming up and I'm not about to answer questions about mother's fling!" She snapped the receiver down.

Thornton began dialing. "The fling has flung dear sister. The fling has flung!"

<> <> <> <> <>

"This was a delightful evening!" Lydia said as she watched Mark around the front of the Rolls Royce to open her door. "Wasn't it a delightful evening Mark?"

"Yeah...I've never driven a Rolls before...idles too strong, I'll tune her up one of these days." He held his hand out and grasped hers to help her out of the car.

"Milton's so lucky. You're so helpful. Is there anything you can't do?" She slipped her arm through his as they began to walk toward the house.

"Yeah...remember to pick up the judge's pool filter!" She laughed as they proceeded up the walk.

Suddenly from out of nowhere, two men in camouflage suits and ski masks grabbed Mark and threw him back against the hedges. Lydia screamed as the men began pounding Mark relentlessly with their fists. He tried to fight back but one man secured him from behind while the other punched Mark's face and stomach. Lydia's feistiness made her hold her cane firmly and began swinging in their direction.

"Okay, that's enough he's got the message!" One man yelled. The other let Mark go and he collapsed to the ground, holding his stomach and rolling in pain. Lydia screamed until Olivia and Charles came running out of the house.

"Hurry up, it's Mark, two men...hurry he's hurt!" She screamed. Olivia and Charles came running down the front walk to where they were. Charles and Olivia bent down and helped Mark to his feet. "I'll phone Milton. Bring Mark into the living room!" She staggered back to the house as they lifted Mark and almost dragged him along.

"I'll get the brandy, you get a warm cloth and some ice!" Olivia ordered as she and Charles carefully set Mark down on the couch. He groaned as blood poured from his mouth and nose. "Easy honey, just lie still. I'll fix ya'all up...lie easy!" she opened his tie and collar as Lydia entered.

"Milton is on his way. My Lord, who'd do such a thing?" She sat down on the chair next to Mark.

"Lydia?" Mark's eyes suddenly shot open in panic and he tried to sit up.

"Lie still child...she's right here. No need to fret none. She's a dandy. You's the basket case!" Charles returned with a tray of first aid. Olivia lifted the brandy glass to Mark's lips. Here...sip this!" She held his head as he sipped a little, almost choking. He coughed up blood as well as expensive Courvoisier. "Okay...too much...here!" She commanded as she put a warm cloth on his face and began washing the blood way.

The sound of screeching tires brought Charles to attention. Lydia looked towards the window. "That's Milton...Charles let him in!" Charles nodded and quickly went to let the judge in.

Within moments they heard, "Where is he? What happened?" from an anxious, gruff voice. Charles showed Hardcastle to the living room where he found Lydia patting Mark's hand while Olivia washed his face. He stood over them, "What happened?" he asked eyeing Mark's swollen face.

"They must have been thieves. I knew I shouldn't have worn these emeralds. The little bastards probably followed us from the restaurant. They were merciless to Mark."

Mark tried to sit up, aided by Charles and Olivia. "How're ya doin' kid?" Hardcastle asked.

"I'll live!" Mark touched his face. "Course, I won't be able to pick up girls for a while." Hardcastle snickered. "This is somewhat reminiscent of Bubba Kawalski in the joint. I flatly refused to give him my chocolate pudding."

Charles sat down in the chair across from Mark, intrigued by the soliloquy. "I say Master Mark," his staunch British manner and accent pronounced. "what happened?"

Mark looked over at him. "I wore my pudding to the infirmary when he flattened me." Grimacing painfully Mark turned towards the judge. "Can we go home? I feel sick and these rugs are too expensive to clean." He put the icebag on his face and tried to stand up.

Hardcastle grabbed one arm and lifted Mark up. "Sure sport...come on!" He put his arm around the younger man.

"Are you sure Mark? We can turn down a bed upstairs for you...I just feel awful about this," Lydia's eyes began to tear as she rose to help also.

Mark looked at her and put his hand on her cheek. "It wasn't your fault...It looks worse than it really is. I'll be fine," He leaned over and kissed her cheek, cringing with the pain in his swollen lip. Then he whispered, "Besides, this ought get me outta work for at least three days, if I milk it for all it's worth." He raised his eyebrows and tried to wink his almost shut eye.

"You're incorrigible!" She patted his good cheek carefully. "Milton, you put him straight to bed you hear?" She moved out of their way as they limped to the front door.

Hardcastle braced Mark up under his strong arm. "He's in good hands, but look at that rented tux!"

"So the guy'll take twenty bucks off for the blood, big deal!" Mark looked at Olivia. "Thanks for the ice Ollie. Owe ya!"

"Next time, lead with our right!" She made a fake punch in the air and smiled.

"I'll remember that," he tried to smile back as they left.

Lydia leaned out the door. "Now you take care of yourself...Milton call me in the morning." Lydia ordered as she watched the judge help Mark into the truck.

"Thanks for a...good time Lydia," Mark closed the door and leaned out the cab's window.

Hardcastle started the truck and call out, "Put on your alarms just in case is was attempted robbery. I'll call in the report!"

"All right...just take care of Mark!" Lydia called back as she watched them both wave as the truck slowly pulled out of the driveway.

Hardcastle turned to Mark. "Okay, wanna tell me your side of the story? If it was an attempted robbery, they would have ripped those emeralds off her neck and all!" He glanced at Mark, who had slid down in the seat and was covering his face with the ice bag.

"They didn't want her jewels, Judge...they wanted me!" He growled rubbing his aching ribs.

"What make you think so?"

"Because after they tapped danced over my intestines, one joker said 'I think he's got the message'."

"You owe anybody money."

Mark looked at him with a sneer. "Judge...I owe everybody money, including you! Besides, these weren't repo men. They were paid hit men and I do mean 'hit'!" He touched his face and cringed.

"Who'd want to have you beat up?"

"Maybe someone who's afraid I'll become his step-daddy!"

"Thornton! Come on McCormick!"

"Judge, the guy tried to buy me off. He tried to ridicule me in public and I saw lovely Lilla at the restaurant tonight. She did everything but crawl under the table when she saw us. She probably ran to the nearest gold-plated princess phone and called her brother...uh-uh, they weren't hungry for jewels, they were hungry for blood...mine!"

"Well, that's speculation. You can't prove it so we'll forget it. You take it easy for a few days."

Mark felt his stomach. "I feel sick judge."

"That's natural...Hey, how was dinner? Did Lydia order you escargot? They serve it in a great garlic-wine sauce don't they?"

"Ohhhhhhhh!" Mark groaned and covered his mouth as he leaned way out the window.

Hardcastle watched as Mark's sides heaved as he wretched. "Ah McCormick, I just washed the truck!" He made a face.

"Good morning ma'am, may I help you? Do you have an appointment?" The young secretary asked as she eyed Lydia.

"Young lady, I own this company and this building. Now, please tell me where Mr. Fairchild is!" Lydia ordered.

"He's in the board room ma'am, There's a meeting going on. It's right in there!" She nervously pointed to the double door just in front of them.

"Don't bother announcing me!" Lydia strode to the doors, which the girl quickly ran ahead and opened for her.

"I thought I told you no interruption!" Thornton yelled from the other side of the long conference table. All the men looked up. "Mother?" He said in surprise as Lydia stood panning the long table. "What are you doing here?"

"It is my company Thornton and I am still the president and chief board member and I hold the most stocks...step aside!" She pushed him away. "Good morning gentleman!" She nodded as all the startled men rose to their feet.

Thornton followed her to the head of the table. "Mother this is just old business. You'd be bored. Why don't you wait in my office and we'll go to lunch."

"I can't, I have a luncheon date. I'm going to the track with Mark, Milton and Eleanor...Now, if you'll please have Miss what's-her-name take notes, I want a copy tonight and I want our accountant to bring over the books. I want to check them myself." She started out. "Oh, I'm having all my jewelry put in a safety deposit box. Mark was badly beaten a few nights ago. Someone tried to rob me. I don't want that to happen again. Come to dinner, if you want. It'll be a first...ta ta!" Lydia waved and walked out.

The room was abuzz with whispers, "Thornton, is she really taking control?"

Thornton tried to laugh as he nervously drummed on the table. "Mother...no, she's--"

"Having a fling?" One board member suggested with a smirk.

Thornton shot the accuser a stern, cold glare just as another spoke up. "I heard she's seeing a very young man." He raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, they've been seen all over the city, in the best of places...What gives Thornton?"

"He's a ward of Judge Milton Hardcastle. He's been doing some odd jobs around the estate. It's nothing serious. Mother is a mature woman and he's--"

"An ex-convict as I recall. Milton Hardcastle has custody of his parole. It seems to me you'd better have a serious talk with our mother."

"I'll handle my mother and the business! The McCormick situation will be taken care of!" He sat down and began leafing through files.

"Shall I take notes Mr. Fairchild?" The young secretary asked.

He looked up and glared angrily at her. "No...get out! If I want you I'll buzz!" The teary-eyed young girl retreated out. "Now gentlemen, about Brussels..."

"The lunch was delicious. I'd forgotten what good food there is here. I'm glad we came." Lydia saw Mark looking intently at his plate, tell-tale bruises still visible on his face. "You didn't eat your escargot Mark. Weren't they sautéed correctly?"

Mark wiped his mouth on the napkin. "I couldn't eat the little buggers. I think some of their relatives live in the judge's flower beds."

She looked at a snickering twosome; Hardcastle and Eleanor. "This is just delightful. I'm so glad we came." she repeated with excitement. "I haven't been to the track since Carl was alive. And Thornton opposes horse racing...the stick-in-mud! It's only money for heaven's sake!"

"Easy for you to say," Mark injected as he perused the scratch-sheet.

"Who looks good to you Mark?" Lydia said as she held up her opera glasses to check the field below.

Mark glanced over the paper. "Check out the brunette ten rows down!" He raised his eyebrows.

"She meant the horses McCormick!" Hardcastle retorted as he also checked the paper.

"I've never bet on horses before, you'll have to help me Milt." Eleanor said as they both shared the same paper.

"Seriously, Don Juan, who looks good to you?" Lydia tried again.

"I don't know...I like the 2-4 combination!"

"2-4 combination, what kind of betting is that...using just numbers?" She took the paper from his hands and looked closely at it. "Here's one Handy Dandy, 20 to 1."

Mark let out a giggle. "At 20 to 1 on a dry track he better be handy."

"What's wrong with that? When you're a long shot you try harder, don't you?" She searched his cheerful face.

"Don't ask him, that long shot still hasn't gotten my pool filter!" Hardcastle snarled.

"I've been busy, okay?" Mark snapped back and looked up at a pouting matron. "Okay...go ahead, blow your dough on a stupid name, it's your money. But I'm sticking with the 2-4 combo!"

"You sound confident Mark...Milt, are you going with Mark's selection?" Eleanor asked.

"Me, are you kidding? McCormick would have bet on Custer. Nope, I think I'll go with Dumb-Bell!"

"I resent that!" Mark piped up angrily.

"Number eight, McCormick, Dumb-Bell, 3-1." He made a face.

"Oh...What about you Judge Danfield?" Mark asked.

"I think I like the name Philly's Filly...I like to see the ladies get a fair chance in sports," she said smiling.

Mark stood up. "Female chauvinist...Okay folks put your money where your mouths are. Judge, you popping for the usual buck bet?"

"No wiseguy, here's a hundred! Put it on number eight to win!" He handed Mark the money.

"Judge?" Mark turned to Eleanor. "You a sport?"

"I'm new at this game...just put ten on her powdered nose for me Mark." She carefully took the money from her wallet and handed it to him.

As Mark put the money in his pocket, he stood staring down at Lydia, who was still looking in the paper.

"Well moneybags...you still going with your long shot?"

"Yep, I'll go with my first hunch...Here's a 1000!" She handed him a single bill.

Mark gasped as he took the fresh bill and fingered it. "You're putting a c-note on a name?" His voice rose.

"Handy Dandy...I like the name. He's like you; young, strong; he's handy and a dandy...He'll win cause he had to try harder."

Mark began laughing and flipping the bill up and down. "You might as well kiss this money goodbye. You can't pick horses by names. The odds are inconceivable, take my word for it."

"Milt," Lydia turned to him. "Do you believe in putting your money on a long shot?"

Hardcastle poured himself and Eleanor a glass of wine. "He's still around, isn't he?" Mark pocketed the money after making a face at the judge. Hardcastle ignored him. "Go place the bets so we can talk about you while you're gone...make my day!"

Mark put his hand on the judge's broad shoulder. "Be kind when you speak of me." He patted the shoulder and left.

"Now that Mark is gone...Milton did you think about what I asked you the other day over the phone?" Lydia pushed her chair closer to the two of them.

"I talked it over with Eleanor because she's more versed in matters like this. You know it is a felony."

"Well, you're both judges, surely you can make exceptions in a case like this...This is so important to me Milton, you know that. I have to find out. There's something very wrong in the company that Thornton isn't letting me know about. Carl worked too hard for it to go under, and I'm afraid maybe it is or will."

"Oh, I don't think it's that bad." He watched her usually bright expression disappear. "Well, I think under the circumstance we can warrant some legal maneuvers, don't you Elly?"

"Under the circumstances, an exception could be made but there could be other legal ramifications if it's not handled properly." She said sipping her wine.

"We'll take care of that," Hardcastle handed Eleanor the binoculars. "You just stand by in case we need you. You can cover all the paperwork...Okay, Lydia we have a deal. When we find out anything I'll call and keep you updated."

"Thank you Milton. This is deceitful I know, but I think it's the only way to learn the truth no matter who it hurts." She put her finger up to her lips as she saw Mark coming up the steps.

"Okay folks, here's your tickets!" he said as he handed them out.

"Well it's about time! What did you do, stop off to get the brunette's phone number?" Lydia teased.
"No...it took ten minutes for the guy to stop laughing when I placed your bet...Here's your ticket! Those are tear stains when I told the guy how you picked the horse."
She grabbed the ticket from his hands. "You're incorrigible!" Mark giggled, shook his head and sat down just as the bugle blew for the start of the race.

<> <> <> <> <>

"My mother should have been home an hour ago! Where is she?" Thornton said as he paced in the living room. "The race track, of all places to go!"

"She's in good hands Mr. Thornton. She's with Mark and Judge Hardcastle."

"Olivia, servants don't give opinions. You'd be better off if you remained in your place if you wish to remain in this service!" He snapped.

She looked smugly at him. "Pardon me sah...I forgot! It won't happen no more sah!" She walked through to the vestibule towards the kitchen. "Horse's ass!" She mumbled as the door opened and Mark and Lydia walked in.

"I don't believe it!...I just don't friggin' believe it!" He stammered as he helped Lydia off with her shawl.

"Believe it Curly!" Lydia answered with a sly smile.

"How was the track?" Olivia asked with excitement as Mark came to stand next to her.

"She picked a horse with a stupid name for stupid reasons and I picked a favorite 2-4 combo." His voice was absent of enthusiasm.

"So?"

"So...I'm out twenty-five bucks and Mrs. Rockafella cashes in her ticket for twenty grand!" He raised his eyes upward. "There's no justice in this world! The rich get richer." He pointed a finger at Lydia. "Next time you walk all the way down those steps and get your own stupid ticket!"

"Don't feel so bad sweetheart, you can stay for dinner." Lydia patted his cheek and walked toward the living room.

"Ah...Mrs, 'you know who' is here and chewing real-live nails!" Olivia warned, tilting her head toward the open door.

Mark retreated. "Maybe I'd better--"

"Mother...I've been worried sick about you!" Thornton said, scurrying out to greet them. Suddenly he saw Mark and turned on him. "McCormick I warned you! Of all the nerve, taking my mother to a place like that! I should have you arrested, you--"

Mark flared and took a step forward. "Listen you son of a bit--"

"Stop it both of you!" Lydia ordered and stood between them. "Thornton, Mark didn't take me to the track, I took him!"

"That's even worse mother! How can you do this? Don't you know what people are saying about you?"

Lydia smiled smugly. "They're probably saying I have good taste."

"Mother, this isn't a laughing matter!" He scowled at Mark. "Do you know how it looks for her to be paying your way?"

"Listen Jack, I pay my own way!" Mark shouted being insulted at Thornton's tone.

Thornton leaned back and viciously smiled at him. "You mean you go dutch?"

"When I have money...yeah!"

"And all the other times mother pays. There's a name for young men like you McCormick!"

"And there's a name for older men like you Fairchild and I bet my name is cleaner than yours!" Mark spat angrily.

"I'd like to take you down a few pegs!" Thornton said as his face grew redder.

"No you won't, you'd dirty your hands. Men like you hire their muscle...saves on silk towels!"

"See mother...now he shows his true colors...the street comes out. He's nothing but an ill-mannered, impudent hoodlum!"

Mark stepped closer to him and came nose to nose, "I don't like you Thorny, I never did and I don't think I plan to in the near future. I can tell you alot about a man by the way he moves. And mister, you don't move, you

slither. The air around you stinks! You make a living by pushing people around. You do Olivia and Charles; you do your mother and I bet everyone who works for you has sole marks on their asses." Olivia watched as Lydia grin behind her hand.

"So I'll tell you just once, don't ever push me cause believe me I'll push back!" Thornton puffed his chest out and quickly withdrew to the living room. Mark leaned down and kissed Lydia's cheek. "I'd better take a raincheck on dinner. If you need me, you know where I am. I'll be over on Wednesday to finish the lawn." He kissed her again and watched as she carefully, using her cane, followed Thornton into the living room.

"His daddy shoulda taught him some manners with one of his fancy steps!" Olivia said with disgust.

"Watch him Ollie...I don't trust him. He's a son of a bitch! If he tries anything with Lydia, call me. She's too good to take his shit!"

"I know child...I don't trust him neither. The Mrs.'ll be all right, she's tough."

Mark heard loud voices in the other room. "If I ever find he's cheated her or hurt her in any way--"

"Now don't go gettin' yourself in any trouble on his account. He's not worth it."

"He'll get his some day...I hope!"

"You best be gettin' home...I'll watch her for you." Her smile was refreshing and warm. There were times when Olivia was so sophisticated and there were times when she was downright country. Mark loved her either way. He surprised her by kissing her cheek. "You didn't need to do that!" Her embarrassment showed through her dark complexion.

"Yes I did!"

"Git for I throw you out!" She teased as Mark made a exit.

As she walked toward the kitchen she heard, "I'm going to put my foot down mother. The business is of no concern to you. Daddy ran it, now I run it. It's a man's company, there's no place for a woman in it...trust me I know what I'm doing. I'll handle everything for you."

Olivia shook her head sadly "Horse's ass!" She whispered and went to serve dinner.

<> <> <> <> <>

Several days had passed before Mark was scheduled to return to finish his work at Lydia's estate. He sat quietly as Hardcastle drove to her home. "You gonna sit and pout all the way over there?"

"I coulda driven myself! What the hell do you have to come along for? I can cut the grass myself. I don't need a back-seat driver!"

"I'm going to visit with Lydia while you trim the lawn. Then I'm going to make sure you get the filter for the pool. Cause I'm personally going to drive you to Paul's Pool Paradise...If that pool isn't cleaned now, anyone who dives in is going to come out looking like Kermit the Frog."

Mark mumbled. "There goes my french crepes for lunch!"

"What'd you say?"

Mark snapped to attention. "Nothing...I didn't say nothing!" He turned away and looked out the window, breathing a relieved sigh.

<> <> <> <> <>

As they pulled up in front of the main house, Hardcastle slowed the truck. "What's going on?" Mark asked as he surveyed the ambulance and many vehicles in the circular drive.

"Maybe someone broke in last night and someone got hurt." Hardcastle offered before Mark darted out of the truck and ran up to the front door. He rang the chimes and was immediately greeted sadly by Charles.

"What happened?" Mark asked anxiously as Hardcastle came up behind him. Charles mournfully stepped aside to allow them to enter.

They were immediately greeted by the hauntingly mournful wail of a woman coming from upstairs. Hardcastle and Mark looked up to see Thornton escorting his sister, who was sobbing uncontrollably, down the stairs, followed by Olivia and Dr. Charley Friedman.

"Oh why...why..." She wailed and dabbed her dry eyes. "Mother!" She dramatically reached behind her. Mark watched, eyes wide and face expressionless as they reached the bottom steps. Thornton looked up at the judge. "Mother passed away last night. It was sudden, Dr. Friedman says it was her heart." Lilla sobbed even more as he led her to the door. Thornton turned back, "Dr. Friedman, our attorney will make the final arrangements; it was what mother wanted. I'm glad you were here with her at the end."

"Yes...the attack was sudden. I only wish I could have made it sooner." Charley Friedman answered.

"It was meant to be! Come Lilla, I'll take you home." Thornton held her tightly and walked her to the door.

"Thornton, if there's anything I can do, please call." Hardcastle offered, patting him on the back.

"As soon as the arrangements are final, I'll have you informed. You were a good friend to her. She requested everything to be simple."

Lilla swooned as she looked around. "I don't want this house Thornton!...I simply can't bear to live here...not now!" She sobbed. "Mother! Dear mother!" Thornton led her out.

Olivia stood at the foot of the stairs holding some towels as Mark walked up to her. "How...why?" His voice shook as he fought back his emotions. She choked up as she saw Mark's colorless complexion. She searched Hardcastle's eyes for a response for she was now without words to console her young friend.

"McCormick, Charley said she did have a bad heart...It was just her time." The words seemed to come so naturally for him, that Olivia covered her face and scurried out of the room.

Mark looked up toward the master bedroom. "I didn't even get to--" his words trailed off.

"Everything had been taken care of Milt," Charley said.

"Was it hard...I mean, you know." Hardcastle asked as he faced the doctor and long time friend.

"It was as expected. I'll stick around and help out."

"Okay...I guess we should leave, McCormick!" The judge turned around to find an empty vestibule. He looked around as Charles entered. "Where's McCormick?"

"Master Mark? I just saw him walking across the front lawn toward your estate sir. Beau was following him."

Hardcastle looked at Charley. "Damn!" He expelled with remorse and guilt.

<> <> <> <> <>

Milton Hardcastle hadn't expected this strong of a reaction from McCormick but as he drove back toward Gullsway, he suddenly realized that is was the only reaction Mark could have. An explanation of the circumstances was not unheard of. He had pleaded his case to a higher justice but the decision was not to be reversed. How could he explain an unexpected death of a good friend, a deliberate death of a close friend? He couldn't, not now. Not that he didn't want to; he just couldn't.

As he pulled in the driveway he knew exactly where to find Mark. Whenever the kid was angry, depressed, hurt or confused, he'd head down to the beach. As the judge parked his car and walked toward the rocks he tried to muster the right words to say.

Suddenly he found himself looking down toward the beach. There was Mark, sitting on the sand, legs pulled way to his chest with his chin resting on the top of them. Beau was sitting by his side, nudging him for attention. Hardcastle slowly began the trudge down the slope to where Mark was sitting, just staring at the rolling incoming waves.

As he approached, Beau began wagging a friendly tail. Hardcastle hoped that he would say the right words as he drew a deep breath.

Mark didn't acknowledge his presence, he merely kept his eyes affixed on a distant spot on the horizon. The judge squatted down and began patting Beau's head. "I thought I'd find you here. Brought a friend along I see." Beau panted as if smiling at the friendly judge.

"He followed me so you can tell Thornton I didn't steal him!" Mark's tone was full of resentment.

"I don't think he even knows his mother had a dog. And besides, where's a better place to be for him than with you!" He tried to ease a tense situation, one he never considered would come into play. He cleared his throat and began anew. "You wanna talk about it?" He too began to stare at the horizon.

"What for, won't help!"

"Feel like...maybe crying? It's okay ya know!"

Again Mark didn't look around at him. "Won't do any good!"

"Well how about hitting something?"

"Thornton volunteering?" Mark's tone was angry.

A heavy, exasperated sigh came from Hardcastle's muscular body and Mark pulled himself to his feet. "Look Judge, you do me a favor...just back off on this one, okay, cause nothing you say is gonna help. Just leave me alone!" He started to walk away.

Hardcastle stood up slowly. "What're you going to do?"

Mark looked up and scanned the area ahead of himself. "I'm gonna walk till I either run into a sea lion or run outta beach!"

"And then?"

"And then, I'm gonna do what I've done when I've lost someone I've cared about, I'm gonna buy the best Irish Whiskey I can afford and drink till I drop!"

He started his long sandy trek down the beach followed obediently by Beau. Hardcastle watched as Mark quickly wiped away moisture that had begun to come to his eyes again. He put his hands in his back pockets. "Damn!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Hardcastle was in his den, drumming his fingers on the blotter, as he spoke on the phone. "He's been in the gatehouse for three days. I've just left him alone, I can't bring myself to say anything to him. I shoulda expected this Elly," he listened. "I tried but you know the answer...No, it is better this way but I wish there had been some other way. Okay, if you need anything let me know...bye!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Hardcastle entered the gatehouse and stood in sudden shock when he saw vases smashed, pillows featherless and magazines ripped to shreds all strewn on the floor. He followed a trail of whiskey and tequila bottles and at least a dozen cans of beer all strategically thrown on the carpeting. Beau looked up from his position in front of the fireplace.

"Had a rough time, huh fella?" Beau wagged an affirmative tail. The judge turned around to the sound of the toilet being flushed and then running water. Within minutes the junior member of 'Hardcastle and McCormick', crime-fighters LTD came out and leaned on the door jam. He looked at Mark with compassion in his eyes. "You all right?"

Mark dragged himself over to the couch and flopped down. "I feel like I've been licking a cat all night." Hardcastle smiled. HE knew the feeling all too well. "I know the inner workings of your toilets perfectly. Believe me, booze looks better in the bottle!" He rubbed his aching temples.

"Speaking of booze," he glanced at the floor and picked up an empty bottle, "What happened to the expensive Irish whiskey?"

Mark looked at the bottle he holding. "You know how much good Irish whiskey costs? I'm a low budget drinker. Jack Daniels and Tequila, the cheaper the better. And I kinda fell back on my younger days. I think there's a bottle of Mogen David around here somewhere, just to let you know I'm not anti-Semitic!"

Hardcastle put the bottle on the table. "Well kiddo, I can tell you from experience, this kind of action only numbs the hurt and pain. It doesn't take it away."

Mark sat up and braced his arms on his knees. His face had three days beard growth on it and his eyes were red and lacked their usual sparkle. "I know...I didn't know what else to do. When Flip died I swore I'd never feel that pain again...never!" his anger came to the surface again.

"I know how--"

"I feel...sure you do," Mark's voice was defensively sarcastic. "Don't patronize me judge. No one was there when I had the first hurt at 12 and then at 28...Don't start now, okay? I'm running a lousy pattern here!"

Hardcastle glanced at the messy room, "Of what, self-destruction?"

"Don't lecture me either! I don't wanna hear 'things happen for a reason kiddo; life has some tricky turns McCormick; life goes on McCormick; pick yourself up by your boot straps and keep your chin up McCormick..." he looked up at Hardcastle, eyes suddenly tearing. "I can't judge...those hurts are still fresh...now this." He

wiped his eyes. "I just can't!" He took a deep breath, shivered and tried to suck in all the hurt and emotions. "I'm sorry damn it!" Hardcastle didn't say anything. He knew Mark's embarrassment at the display of emotions. "I only knew her for a short time," Mark rose and walked over to where Beau was laying, he squatted down and began petting the dog. "but she was the second special lady in my life and I never got to tell her how much I--"he put his arms around the dog's neck and hugged the warm animal, tears freely flowing down his cheeks now.

Hardcastle pulled back his own emotions. This much he hadn't counted on. He fidgeted as he watched Mark try to gather strength from the dog. Suddenly, scratched the back of his head and looked down at Mark. "McCormick...there's something I have to tell you."

Mark wiped his face and stood up to face his friend. "You don't have to judge. I know what you wanna say."

"No you don't! You see--"

"Life is like a race track, right? It goes round and round seemingly endless until your time comes and you crack up, right?"

"No! You see--"

"You can't ask why things happen, they just do and I have to learn to accept them, right?"

"NO! No we--" he tried again.

"I know Judge, but will you please promise me something?" Mark looked deeply into the judge's eyes.

"What?"

Mark lowered his head and stared at the carpeting, his voice was low and sad, "Don't die!"

Hardcastle could see a little boy, lonely and confused, in Mark's manner and hurt eyes. He'd never be able to make things up to him for this. He swallowed a guilty lump and put his hands on Mark's shoulders. "I'll do my damndest kiddo." Then he took his big rough hand and wiped Mark's face of the tears. "Okay, sport, now I want you to go back in the can and clean up, you look like hell. Shower, shave and freshen up. I'm going back to the house and make you a Hardcastle Arkansas hangover cure; works everytime. It's my mother's invention." He winked and started out.

"Didn't your father have one?"

"Yeah, well-" he fidgeted again and got a smirk on his face. "You wouldn't want it anyway. It had to do with long lectures on the evils of spirits, cleansing the soul and sneaking moonshine and it usually ended up with some over a barrel in the woodshed." He snickered at the memory.

"Did it work?" Mark smiled.

"Well, it made you forget how bad your head felt! And every time you sat down you couldn't help but remember...worked every time!" He laughed and left. Mark mustered a half smile and entered the bathroom to try to return to the land of the living.

<> <> <> <> <>

"I think we're doing all right now...but if you coulda seen him yesterday Elly," Hardcastle said into the receiver. "I know...like I told her, we should have told him but you know her, it was her wish...I'll keep in touch with you, uh-huh, bye!" Hardcastle hung up as Mark walked in, all dressed up.

"Why do I have to go along? I'll fell like an udder on a bull sitting there. Why don't I just drop you off and wait outside?" Mark messed with his tie and collar.

"You're coming too! You were a friend of Lydia's and Cameron Thomas, her attorney, requested all her friends to be there for the reading of her will. Besides, you don't wanna leave Olivia and Charles alone in the same room with Thornton and Lilla, do you? They're still friends ya know."

"Yeah, once they get the house and stuff, Ollie and Chuck will be out!"

"Lydia wanted you there so you can't fight me on this one. You're going, case closed!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Before Mark set up for an appeal, they were walking in the plush office of Cameron Thomas, a prominent, seasoned attorney.

As they entered they were greeted by Olivia and Charles, who sat solemnly in a corner of the spacious office. As Mark walked over, Olivia rose, arms outstretched and embraced him as they met, "How're ya doin' Ollie?"

She put her large black hands on his face. "I'm fine child...just fine." He kissed her cheek. Olivia reminded Mark of the typical semi- stereotyped black woman. She was large framed but tender of heart. She was educated in life but she could revert back to her southern upbringing, accent, temperament and all when she wanted to express a point.

Mark turned to Charles, "How is Beau Master Mark?" Charles asked in his low, retreating voice.

"He's okay. Not eating very much but he's okay." Mark shook Charles's hand and patted his shoulder.

All eyes turned as Thornton and Lilla walked in. "Thomas, let's get on with this," he looked at his Rolex. "I have a meeting at 11." Lilla seated herself on a leather couch and commenced removing her white gloves, finger by finger showing no emotion.

Cameron Thomas panned the room, "Very well...if you will all be seated we can begin." Hardcastle and Mark sat over to the side of the desk as the attorney opened a cabinet to display a large television screen. Hardcastle looked over at an impatient Thornton Fairchild and then Lilla who carefully scrutinized her fresh manicure. "This is a very unusual reading. Several weeks ago Mrs. Fairchild requested that her last will and testament be video." He raised a video cassette.

"I've never hear of such a thing!" Thornton protested. "My mother had her will written down! I saw it!"

"That will was invalidated! This is her new will and I assure you, Thornton, it is all legal and it was rightfully witnessed by myself and a probate judge...Now, if I may continue," he went over and slipped the cassette into the video player. The picture came on, clear and on track as the attorney went and settled back at his desk.

"Hello there," Lydia's voice and body appeared on the screen. "If you're watching this I must be dead. Oh, I didn't expect to go so soon mind you, so now that it has arrived, let's get down to why we're all here. I assume you're all here because I told Cameron who I wanted and I'm paying him good money to do what I tell him," Mark watched Cameron smile. "now, I'm not nuts so you can all forget that 'not of sound mind' crap because Charley Friedman is sitting right over there," she pointed somewhere off-screen. "take his picture Cameron so no one thinks I did this tape alone." The camera panned over to a chair where Dr. Friedman sat, blushing. "Wave Charley so they know it's you!" Charley tried to hide but finally gave a finger wave to the camera.

"Okay, Cameron back on me, I'm the star here!" As the picture changed, Hardcastle looked over at Olivia and shook his head in a smile.

"Now that we've established I have my cards in the deck, let's get down to why we're all here." She put on her reading glasses and picked up some papers. She glanced over them and then just put them down. "Hell, I'm not going to real all this legal mumbo-jumbo, someone once told me that unnecessary bullshit only makes your sneakers dirty," Hardcastle watched as Mark covered his grin as Lydia continued. "So...to Olivia and Charles, my two faithful servants and friends, they put up with my family and money can't buy that kind of loyalty...but with the prices nowadays, what the hell...I bequeath, is that right?" she looked off to the side and then nodded. "Good...I'm leaving you both \$200,000 and the promise that your jobs are still there if you want them. The house would go to hell without you two anyway."

Mark looked over at the two of them, grinning and teary eyed. Their smiles ended with the disgruntled whispers emanating from the corner.

"Now to my good friend Milton Hardcastle, I know you're there because you've never let me down, no matter what I've asked you to do, you were there for me and Carl. Remember the great trips you had with Carl up at our lodge in the Sierras; hunting and fishing? Well, we never forgot, so I'm giving you Carl's antique gun collection and his fishing gear. Now I know you have a gun collection of your own, but Carl had some real treasures that I know you admired...now they're yours!" Mark saw Hardcastle's face beam and his eyes twinkle. "They're priceless Milt but Carl would have wanted it this way too, thank you."

"Now my dearest children, and I use the term loosely, Thornton my oldest and Lilla my...well Lilla, since you two have managed to spend most of the inheritance from your father and your trust funds, I figured you must already have everything you want. You must not like the manor since it gags you to come visit me and I bet you didn't even know I had a dog." Mark looked over at Hardcastle and they shared the same grin. "So...no hard feelings dear children, I'm not a cold mother, I'm a just one so I'm splitting your inheritance to make it fair." Thornton sat up in his chair and grinned. "You'll both receive \$500,000!"

"What!" Lilla shouted, dropping her gloves on the floor.

"Sit down Lilla!" Thornton ordered, eyes glued on the screen.

"If anyone fainted I can wait!" Lydia said, staring at the audience. Mark covered his eyes and shook his head in disbelief. Even in death she had tenacity. "Okay...now that the initial shock is over, I assure you this is all legal and binding."

"That's not all my mother had!" Thornton said angrily.

"That's not all I had," Lydia continued. "Now for the real kicker. I haven't had so much fun in years. In the past six months I started to really enjoy life again. Even my health got better. I laughed, I danced, I even swam in my pool and I won six bucks on the Raiders game and enjoyed every minute of basketball." she looked off to the side. "Oh, football...what difference does it make I ain't leaving them any money!" She looked back at the camera. "Mark, you did all that for me and you never asked for anything. I know you're there, because I told Milton to bring you and Cameron knows too," Hardcastle saw a tear come to Mark's blue eyes. "So...you're the one young man who's honest, intelligent and you shoot straight from the hip," Mark snuck a look at the judge. That was a term he had heard everyone use describing him. "Mark I trust you completely, you know that. And I came to love you. You'll do what's right. I want you to have Beau!"

"HA!" Thornton grumbled a laugh and tapped his sister's arm. "The old lady left him her dog...how fitting."

"Please Thornton!" Cameron Thomas hushed him from the sidelines.

"But Mark, you know that Beau likes to run a lot and he would miss the old house and grounds and also Olivia and Charles so I guess I have no alternative but to leave you my estate and ground!" Mark's eyes popped and his mouth dropped. "Of course on the silly little salary Milton pays you, you never could keep it up, so I'm leaving you the remainder of my estate, which includes Fairchild Enterprises, you run the company, you're the lead dog now son and also I'll throw in my bank accounts, American and Foreign, safety deposit boxes, the cars, the yacht, the lodge in mountains, a couple of villas somewhere and a chalet, you'll have to learn to ski." She picked up the paper again. "Oh, we didn't figure in the stocks and bonds, T-bills and other investments...I think it comes to a little over 58 million give or take a few mil." She put the papers down. "I want you to take occupancy right away Mark, I'd feel so much better knowing you're living there. How could I feel better, I'm dead." She thought for a moment and grinned. "Oh well, Olivia and Charles will be glad to stay on and give you a hand."

Everyone looked at Mark, who was sitting in a state of shock. Thornton fumed at the sight. "Oh, and just to make sure no one has any ideas about contesting this will, I've put in a little item here--" she held the paper close to her eyes. "If this inheritance will is contested, the contesters will forfeit all inheritance moneys and it shall be distributed to my many charities and also to protect Mark from joining me in the hereafter from an unnatural demise, all remaining properties and moneys left to him will revert to my charities...there that ought to do it. He's a very capable young man and trustworthy too and he'll do the business proud." She removed her glasses and leaned back in the tall chair. "Well, that about does it. And since this is taped while I'm still living, have fun my children and do what you have to do...Okay Cameron, turn that damn thing off, I've got a hairdressers appointment," she sat up. "Go on...cut it off I've said everything I came to say!" Instantly the screen faded out.

"Cameron this is a joke! Surely it was just theatrics!" Thornton protested.

"I assure you it was all legal. If you'd like to look at the papers--" He held them up.

"But to leave millions, maybe billions to a...a--"

Hardcastle stood up in Mark's defense, "I'd be careful with your choice of words Thornton."

"This is preposterous! I'll see another attorney!" He grabbed his trenchcoat and ran for the door.

"Ah, I wouldn't if I were you Thornton. You see I was also a witness to her will. Believe me, it's all legal and binding." Hardcastle said as he turned back to a dazed young parolee, who was still staring at the blank screen.

Thornton's blood vessels were ready to burst as he ran out of the office. Lilla stood up and put her gloves in her purse, "How could mother do this to us, after all we gave her?" She pretended to dab her dry eyes and walked out.

Cameron Thomas shook his head and walked over to where Mark still sat, "Mr. McCormick, here are the keys you'll need." He approached Mark and Hardcastle pulled him to his feet and gently patted his stunned face.

When he came around he was staring at Thomas. "Mr. Thomas, there's gotta be some kinda mistake. I'm nobody, I did time, I'm a gardener, I'm on parol...Hey, I've got the only Irish/Catholic family in Jersey who are Republicans and I once cheated on a math test...I mean Lydia's chocolate chips were in her cookies but the lady did have a sense of humor." He laughed slightly to ease his tension.

"I know...did you ever have Jell-O in your briefcase?" He laughed at the memory. "But assure you Mr.McCormick, it is no joke...Now, this envelope contains keys for you. There are the keys to the house,

gatehouse, servants quarters, the yacht, which is moored just off of Marina Del Rey, the garages, security system, the Rolls Royce, Bentley, Mercedes and the others are all labeled. The smallest key in there is for the safety deposit box at the bank in Beverly Hills. It contains \$150,000 for you to use until the will passed through probate, which won't be long...it was stipulated a 'rush job'." Hardcastle snickered. "But the important thing is that you must take immediate occupancy, it was her dying wish that you be living in the house and you take full control of the company starting Monday morning. You are the head of Fairchild Enterprises and the president of the board of directors..." He grasped Mark's hand. "Good luck, Mark...I'm sure you'll do fine!"

When Thomas went back to his desk, Mark looked at the envelope and then the judge, who was smiling and winking at Olivia and Charles.

Mark turned a surprised eye to the judge. "Yesterday I couldn't scrape together enough dough to buy a chili dog," he glanced down at the envelope of keys. "Today...I can buy you!" Mark didn't see the winks and smiles coming from the corner as the meeting concluded. What was to follow would be pure fantasyland! He had finally grabbed the brass ring and he was going to hang on.

<> <> <> <> <>

"Just look at this will! There has to be some way to break it! McCormick is a lowlife! He's an ex-convict with no scruples or intelligence! He'll go through my money in no time; buying race cars, boats, wasting it on fast women, booze, and drugs. Once he's out of Hardcastle's grasp he'll turn back to his fast ways. And to think of a common street hoodlum like him sitting on the board of directors of Fairchild Enterprises and running the company, makes me ill...You've got to find a loophole!" Thornton ranted in another Beverly Hills office.

"As far as I can see Mr. Fairchild, there is no way to contest this will. It clearly stipulates--"

"I know damn well what it stipulates! I'm saying that fortune rightfully belongs to my sister and me!" Lilla watched attentively as her brother paced back and forth.

"Of course, you could try to prove this McCormick is incapable of fulfilling your mother's wishes. You did say he was an ex-convict. You could try to get him on a parole violation. Then we could go to court and try to invalidate the will. It would not be considered contesting."

Thornton snapped his fingers repeatedly. "Yes...yes, parole violation, of course. Hardcastle had him on a tight leash. Now that he was to stay at the house, he'll throw wild parties, probably invite some of his ex-prison pals, maybe have some illegal drugs on hand, I know his kind. Ex-cons aren't suppose to associate with known felons, that's a parole violation. And he's the type of guy that once he's out of the old judge's reach, he'll run amuck, especially since that much money never crossed his palm before." He walked over to lovely Lilla. "Don't your fret sister dear, we'll get back what's ours. I won't give up anything to an ex-convict!"

<> <> <> <> <>

"One duffel bag of clothes? That's all that boy had?" Olivia asked as she walked the judge to the patio.

"Well he's got mixed emotions about all this," he sniffed and looked around at the beautiful grounds before him. "Ambivalence is running pretty deep right about now."

"He'll do fine. Me and Charles will be here. And if anyone can do this Mark can. He's a smart boy."

"Well if anyone can get to the bottom of things, McCormick can, especially when he has a cause...And if he needs anything, I'm just a hop over the hedges, which are trimmed finally." She laughed. "And I noticed he didn't take his racing trophies with him. I think he'd keeping one foot in the gatehouse just in case." Olivia smiled as they walked out onto the patio for lunch.

<> <> <> <> <>

Several days later, the poker game had been moved to Mark's new abode.

"The kid's been a millionaire almost a week and he hasn't spent one nickel," Hardcastle said as the members of the Friday night poker club milled around the large game room.

"Money won't change Mark, he's too down to earth," Maggie, the pretty lady judge said as she looked around. Her pretty eyes centered on a painting and she walked over to it. "Is that a Van Gogh?" She peered at the stroke marks on the painting that decorated the flossed wall.

"Look at this spread; caviar, lobster, five kinds of crepes...We never at this good at your place Milt!" Charley, the retired bailiff said taking a croissant and filling it with crabmeat.

Hardcastle yelled over his shoulder. "You guys were happy with chili and cold cuts! Since when did you get taste buds?"

Maggie walked over and sat down, balancing a plate of gourmet goodies in one hand and licking her fingers on the other. "I still can't imagine Mark a millionaire." She laughed and sat down.

"What'd he buy first Milt, a candy store or a race track?" Lieutenant Frank Harper asked opening a can of imported beer.

"I told you he didn't spend any money. All the kid did was pay off everybody he owed money to, including me!" He grabbed a crab claw and began cracking it open with a small utensil. "He hasn't bought anything for himself!"

"Do you think money will change him Milt?" Charley asked as he too came over and sat down.

Suddenly from the hallway, a loud yell was heard and everyone jumped. Charles and Olivia, who had been serving, turned toward the cry. Hardcastle cupped his ear towards the door. "Hark...our host cometh!"

Mark appeared at the door, hands on his robed hips and glaring at Charles. He was clad in only his tee-shirt sneakers and robe. "Okay, Chuck," Mark said walking slowly to the timid little butler. "Where's my jeans?"

"Master Mark, I laid out your blue dress slacks sir," Charles was always a posh valet as he stood straight and peered at Mark.

Mark looked at him. "Chuck, this is a poker game, not an arraignment. I haven't worn blue dress slacks since I was in fourth grade at St. Matthew's asylum for the hopelessly catholic...Where's my Levi's?"

"I put them in the box for the Salvation Arm sir."

"Salvation Army?" Mark's voice rose in panic. "Those jeans are practically new. The knees were just beginning to break through!" He ran out of the door in fluster.

Poor Charles turned toward the poker players looking helpless. "I was only trying to uplift his wardrobe."

"Don't take it so hard Charles, an 80 mile an hour wind couldn't uplift his wardrobe!" Hardcastle said. "Clothes make the con!" With that, he began dealing out the cards. "Olivia, are you in?"

"If ya'all don't mind. What's the prerequisite?" She asked walking over.

Maggie looked up at her. "You got money?"

"Fifty bucks!" she answered.

"You just passed...sit!" Harper gestured to the vacant chair next to him.

Mark came strutting back in wearing his faded old jeans.

"Brother, imagine giving these jeans to the tambourine bangers." He stood in the doorway.

"Hey, Mark, where's the ashtray?" Charley said as he held up his ashing cigar.

Mark went to the wet bar and picked up an small bowl. "Here, use this Charley!" He walked over and held it out.

"Mark...that's a Steuben!" Maggie exclaimed in shock.

Mark looked at it. "No it's not...it's just a funny looking bowl!" He turned it over in his hands.

"McCormick, what Maggie means is that bowl is worth \$5000!" Hardcastle explained.

Mark looked closely at it. "You're kidding!" Then he slowly put it on the mantel and looked back at Charley, whose cigar was dangling in his fingers. "Use your hand Charley!" Hardcastle shook his head with a laugh.

Mark walked over to the bar. "Come here Doll, I've never sat by a real millionaire before!" Maggie said patting the chair next to her.

"Careful Mag...if he had a ring you'd have to kiss it." Harper teased as he picked up his cards.

"I would not...she might have to curtsy," Mark looked down at the food. "What's this shit? Where's the tacos, chili and beer nuts?" He sounded like a disappointed youngster as he surveyed the spread before him.

Charles walked up to him. "You requested a buffet sir. I took the liberty of selecting some simple tidbits for your friends."

Mark looked up and saw the almost frightened look on the little man's face. He put a friendly hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Chuck," Mark tilted his forgiving head. "These are my friends, I don't have to impress them. They're used to chips, cold cuts and cheap beer. Lobster, croissants and pate are pretentious!"

"I like pretentious Mark," Harper said as he dipped a cracker in the pate. "It'll be the first poker game that I won't have to have a double Alka-Seltzer when I get home."

"I'll remember that Harper!" Hardcastle yelled. "Come on McCormick, play cards!" He began redealing them out.

Mark popped a chip in his mouth and walked over to the beautiful hand-carved game table. He stopped in his tracks. "What're you doing here?" He stood over Olivea who was wearing a green visor and a sweatshirt that read; 'Dull woman keep immaculate houses.'

She threw her cards in the middle, "Not as good as I thought." She walked over to the bar and picked up a fresh fruit.

Mark put his hands on his hips. "Did you dust today?" He asked watching her make a plate for herself.

Olivia picked up a cocktail napkin and ran it over the bar, "Now I did!" Then she put the dirty napkin in the trash. "Don't be so picky child, git over there and play cards!...It's my night off anyway, so hush!"

As she walked back to the table, Mark stood with his mouth open.

"Lydia was right, when you got a lot of money, you still can't do what you want!"

<> <> <> <> <>

The game was progressing well. The stereo was playing a forties station and the green felt table was buzzing with quips and jibes about everyone's poker playing abilities.

"I say, you can't come barging in!" Charles voice was heard from the vestibule as the front door slammed open. Everyone looked up as two large, uniformed officers made their way past Charles and into the game room. Charles entered all in a fluster. "I'm sorry sir, they insisted on intruding...forcefully!" His starch manner was a bit ruffled as he stood to the side of the men.

Mark rose. "That's okay Chuck, I'll handle this!" He walked over to the policemen. "May I help you officers?"

The eldest man looked around and then stared at Mark. "Do you own this place?" His hand was duly poised on his revolver as he panned Mark from head to foot.

"Yes...is there a problem with that?"

The younger man circled the room as the eldest did the talking. "We had a complaint about the wild, loud music coming from up here."

Mark looked at the stereo, "Well I admit it's not exactly my kind of music but trust me, no matter how loud you turn the volume up on Glen Miller, you'll never get his clarinet to be wild!"

The younger man stepped over to Mark. "We also had a report that something funny was going on up here." With that he went back to looking over the room.

Mark watched him intently. "Funny like in ha-ha or funny like in call out the S.W.A.T. team?"

The older officer pointed a finger at Mark. "We were warned about you!"

Mark crossed his arms on his chest and leaned back on the table. "Really? I wasn't warned about you."

The poker players all searched Hardcastle's face for a sign, but he silently gestured to let Mark run with the ball.

Realizing Hardcastle knew the situation was in good hands, they all relaxed and settled back in their seats to watch the show.

"All right wiseguy, where's the pot?"

The younger officer began opening drawers and cabinets. Mark cleared his throat and gestured toward the somewhat nosy rookie, "Ah...I hope he has a search warrant Admiral. And it's just been polished so try not to leave fingerprints, huh?"

The rookie slammed the cabinet door and came to stand face to face with Mark. "We don't need a search warrant fella, we've got probable cause!" His voice was young and had a slight squeak to it as he looked confidently at his superior for a nod of support.

Mark pushed his way past the young man and stood over by the veteran officer, "Oh, so you have probable cause."

"We had a tip that there's illegal drugs here and some disreputable characters hanging around." Mark was getting tired of these innuendoes from this insulting excuse for a police officer. "Okay hotshot, where's the pot?"

Mark turned his cocky glare towards Hardcastle, and with a sly tilt to his head received a 'sting' nose swipe from his partner giving him the 'go' for it signal. Mark turned back to the officer and with a swift movement pointed at the judge.

"You caught me...he won't admit it but the pot is right below his western belt buckle!" At that, the poker table broke up in hysterical laughter.

"Listen buddy, these are serious charges here!" The officer bellowed. "You know damn well what kind of pot I mean!"

Mark put his hands on his head, "Oh, pot like in Mary Jane, joints, grass, silly smokes, Mexican whoopee weeds--"

The young officer walked over. "Hey Sarge--maybe if this guy is as rich as all this, he's into the heavy stuff like Coke," he raised his eyebrows.

Mark shook his head, "boy, you must have been number one at the academy. You're truly one of LA's finest." Everyone looked at Frank Harper who shook his head at the remark and watched the two officers doing their so-called duty very closely.

"I thought so...You look like the type for the rich man's high...hiding a little nose candy? Okay pal, hand it over...now!" The sergeant ordered, hand palm up, as Mark made his way over to the bar.

"Okay fellas, I know when I'm licked...You can have all the Coke!" He reached behind the bar and came up holding two cans, "Diet or Classic?"

The players couldn't contain their laughter any longer and they burst out with loud guffaws. The sergeant turned fast and angrily yelled. "Shut up!"

Surprised at the rude and uncalled for treatment, the members of the poker club sat up in their chairs, glaring, red-eyed, at the overzealous police officer. With a flash, the officer spun Mark around and pushed him spread-eagle on the bar. "Okay smart-ass spread!" As he began frisking Mark, he reached over and took two bowls from the counter.

"Okay, guacamole or French onion?" He held up the bowls towards the officer. Again, the table began laughing.

The officer pulled out his handcuffs and spun Mark around, "That's it punk...you're under arrest!"

As he grabbed Mark's wrists, Mark withdrew them and held them up. "On what charges, they'd better be good ones, cause you clowns haven't found shit!"

"Associating with criminal elements."

"What?" Maggie shouted rising and starting over to confront the officer.

Mark walked over and put his arm around her shoulders, "Now, now Maggie, he's got us dead to rights here. After all, these are oh-ficial men of the law." He patted her back down in her seat, then turned back to the cops. "Officers allow me to introduce you to your known criminals elements so you can get their names right for your reports...This is the lovely but terribly lethal lady element better known as Margaret "Maggie" Sullivan and she deals with criminals that are very appealing!" He emphasized the word. "Maybe you know her better as Judge Margaret Sullivan, like in Appellate court, Margaret Sullivan. We criminal elements affectionately call her Killer." Mark looked at her and wrinkled his nose. "She's so cute!" She patted his cheek, then turned and growled at the officers.

Mark then moved on to the next chair. "Oh, look at the puss on this character! The Bronx Bomber, alias Charles LaFata. This guy had friends." Mark pushed his nose to the side with his finger and winked at the officers. "Be careful, I know for a fact that he sometimes carries a gun and cuffs. He uses them too. You see, he sometimes moonlights as a court baliff...That's b-a-l-i-f-f like in 'all stand for the honorable what's-his-name!" Mark bent down and whispered so everyone could hear. "Down boy, don't get your blood pressure up. Chew your cigar!" Mark patted Charlie's head and he too growled in the direction of the two men.

Mark moved on to the next chair's occupant. He glanced down and then withdrew in fear, "Oooooo, look at this bad boy...watch it fellas, I know for another fact that this dude is carrying a heater right now, I saw him come in with it. He may be vertically challenged but what he lacks in height he makes up for in paperwork." He put his hand under Harper's chin and lifted his head up. "Take a good look at this little flat nose cause you're gonna see a lot of him when you get back to the precinct...May I present, Lt., like in 'your asses are grasses', Mr. Homicide himself...heeeeeerrree's Harper!" Mark looked over at the stunned officers. "You guys have

something in common...the LAPD." They watched as Harper turned around and flipped badge towards them with a evil smile.

Mark then moved on. "And here we have one of the most intriguing and infamous of all those criminal characters. Why this woman alone can dust off anything and anyone you want for a price. And she's cleaned up a number of places in town." Olivia sneered up at the officers as she shuffled the cards.

Mark cockily walked over and put his arm around the eldest officer who's face had paled quickly. "I've saved the best for last. I can see you're a veteran cop...I bet you're so professional you recite the Miranda, don't you?" He winked at him. The officer nodded confidently. "Oh is this big guy gonna love you! This guy is so unlawful, I saw him rip the little tag right off of a mattress once! Shame, shame, Milt!" Mark cleared his throat and strutted over to Hardcastle. "This man needs no introduction, his scowl and nasty disposition says it all! It cost the city thousands just to keep him in gavels he's brought down so many decisions, and I bet he's making one right now!" He looked back at the two officers. "Does the name Hard-case, ring a bell?"

The older officer tried to look under the judge's L.A. ball cap. When he saw Hardcastle's grin he swallowed hard, "Sorry judge...I didn't recognize you!"

"See judge, I told you robes make the man!" Now Mark stepped off to the side. His temper had finally run out as well as his ad-libs and sense of humor. "Now that you clowns have met my felonious friends of whom I'm suppose to be associating with...you'd better have warrant to be here!"

The younger officer stepped forward in Mark's way. "The Sarge says we don't need a warrant. We've got probable cause!"

"You know I'm getting tired of having your blue uniformed breath in my face! And your Sarge has shit and he knows it!" Mark turned back to the other officer. "I know my legal rights, being a private citizen. Now if you've got a legal search warrant, my house is yours. You can bring in the dogs, the NARCS and the S.W.A.T. team, the National Guard and the June Taylor dancers for all I care! But you'd better have it in writing cause if you don't I've got enough charges against you and Boy Wonder here to get you walking a beat so far down in East L.A. you'll need a Spanish dictionary just to take a crap!" He went over and closed the cabinet the young officer was searching. "We'll start with illegal entry, illegal search and seizure, harassment, police brutality, assault, defamation of character--"

"Okay...we get the message!" The sergeant yelled back.

Hardcastle leaned back in his chair and smiled proudly in Mark's direction. "Good, now if you don't mind," Mark continued. "I've got a good hand, finally, and my honored guests are waiting...patiently. The door is that way!" He pointed as he returned to the table. "Oh, you might get word back to that source of yours, that next time he gives you a tip, I'll press charges and I won't be such a gracious host...And Sarge old buddy...I'd brush up on false arrests if I were you!" Mark made his way back and sat down. "And get a Miranda card!"

The officers stood like scolded schoolboys as Charles walked up to them. "This way gentlemen," he motioned toward the open door. "And might I say, next time, which I doubt there will be, when you enter Mr. McCormick's home...wipe your friggin' boots!" He snapped with dignity. Mark threw a surprised look in his direction only to receive a thumbs up from Charles which he returned with a broad smile.

When they had exited, Mark quickly went over to the bar, poured himself a tall glass of whiskey and downed it with one gulp, coming up coughing. Maggie went over and pounded him on the back.

"You rascal! You deserve a medal...no an Oscar!" She smiled as did the others.

Mark wiped his mouth and stared at the empty glass, "When that guy said 'spread 'em' I almost wet my pants...I could feel the cell door slamming!" He took the bottle and filled the glass again.

"No way kiddo, you had them dead to rights!" Hardcastle said with a nodded wink.

Harper turned around, "Mark, how do you know so much about the law?" He asked. "You spouted those legal terms like Clarence Darrel."

Mark straightened up and walked back to sit at the table. "Hey, I've been dusting his law books for two years."

"Have any ideas who sent them over, Mark? Those were really trumped up allocations," Charley added.

"Who would have everything to gain if I was arrested on a parole violation?" Mark asked looking around to everyone.

"Thornton Fairchild?" Harper said.

"I get sent to the can and he gets a smart mouthpiece to prove I'm a hood and can't be capable of fulfilling Lydia's last wishes."

"Could he do that?" Olivia asked.

"'Fraid so," Hardcastle added on. "It would take a lot of solid proof on his part. But I think McCormick would have some pretty upstanding character witnesses. Thornton probably thinks because he's out of my sight the kid's gonna run wild. McCormick knows I'd kill him myself if he ever jumped parole."

"Oh Mark would win a case like that anyway Milt," Maggie said supportively.

"Don't be so sure, judgette. Van Hammerstein vs. Claude the Climber, 1944." Mark said with a tilt of his head.

Hardcastle carefully placed his cards on the table and glanced up at the ex-con a doubtful expression on his face. "Van Hammerstein vs. Claude the Climber?"

Mark looked at him surprised at his response. "Don't you ever read your own lawbooks?...Claude the Climber was a second story man from Chicago. One night he climbed over the fence of this mansion owned by Simon Van Hammerstein, thinking he was going to rob the place, right? But when he got on the inside, he found old man Van Hammerstein choking on a piece of steak. So old Claude pulled the Himmelich maneuver and saved the old guy's life. In gratitude, the old gieser left him his fortune. But the guy's grandson tried to get it back by proving old Claude was unworthy of the bucks because he did time." Hardcastle was leaning with his hand on his chin, just staring at Mark as he relayed the story. "Anyway, they found out that Claude had sold some of his old furniture to this buddy who turned out to be an ex-fence so--"

Hardcastle slammed his fist down on the table and sat up, "Parole violation, bye bye buckos, right?"

"Right...you did read that book!" Hardcastle shook his head. "Anyway," Mark turned back to the other interested parties, "he should have known better but who'd think someone would pull that on him. He was only getting rid of his old crap but it cost him the entire fortune."

"When it comes to money Mark, no hold barred," Harper said.

"You'd better watch yourself McCormick...Big Brother's gonna keep an eye on you!" Hardcastle added, fixing his cards in his hand.

"He won't have to Judge...cause startin' tomorrow, I'm gonna be in his face!" Mark said confidently as he sat back down and picked up the cards and began shuffling them slowly.

<> <> <> <> <>

The Fairchild Building on Wilshire Boulevard towered into the smog as Mark pulled up in the front of it.

"Take a look at this car!" One of the secretaries exclaimed as she watched Mark hand the attendant a bill. "Wow and look what just stepped out!" At that, several more secretaries ran to the windows and peered down as Mark looked up and panned the mirrored building.

"Anybody know him?" One asked.

"Never seen him!" Answered another.

"With that car, he's got money!" A black girl said.

"Come here Sharon, take a look at Mr. Gorgeous!"

Sharon Whitney, Thornton Fairchild's executive secretary slowly moved over to the window. She had been a secretary at Fairchild Enterprises for five years. She was young, very attractive. She had taken every kind of abuse known to clerical work. She was overworked and underpaid for her position.

"Where, I don't see this Adonis!" She looked down at the Coyote being driven to the underground garage.

"He just entered the building...That curly hair, did you see it?...He's a dream! Let's hope he's looking for a job here." One giggled.

"Hell, think big...let's hope he's looking for a job here and single!" They all began to laugh.

"What's going on here?" It's only 10:00!" Everyone snapped to terror-stricken attention as Thornton came out of his office. "While you still have jobs I'd advise you to do them!" Obediently they scurried back to their desks and began looking busy. Thornton turned to Sharon. "We're having a meeting in the conference room and we don't want to be disturbed by anyone...clear?" He shouted viciously at her.

"Do you want me to take notes Mr. Fairchild?"

"If I wanted you to take notes I would have asked!...Just do as you're told!" He abruptly turned and headed toward the large office at the end of the hallway where several elderly men were now congregating. Sharon tried not to look at the other girls as she made her way back to the desk at the entrance to the hallway. Her embarrassment could be seen in her pink complexion as she silently wiped a tear away.

As the bell to the elevator rang, all eyes turned as the door opened and Mark peeked out. He was dressed in a three-piece navy blue suit as he stepped off. He headed toward the reception area, black shoes shining and a broad smile on his face.

Several secretaries were experiencing warm sensations as they stared at him walking past. He stopped at Sharon's desk. "May I help you sir?" Her voice still cracked from embarrassment but Mark's warm smile seemed to seep into her troubled heart.

"Yes you may...If this is Fairchild Enterprises?" She nodded. "I'm Mark McCromick...I'm your new boss!" Mark heard muffled sounds of surprise and a buzzing of whispers coming from the rows of desks. He looked up at the secretaries as they hurriedly retreated to their typewriters. "Did I say something wrong?"

"I'm afraid this is new to us Mr. McCormick. You see Mr. Fairchild is the head of Fairchild Enterprises."

"Not anymore...I just inherited the company from his mother...Surprising as it seems but I have the papers right here." He tapped his side pocket. "Are you the receptionist?" he smiled.

"No sir...I'm Mr. Fairchild's secretary." Her eyes were filled with fright as she stared up at him.

"No you're not...you're mine, as of now!" Mark looked around. "Where's his office?"

"Down the hall sir, he isn't there. There is a board meeting going on and he gave me strict orders not to disturb him for any reason...Please don't disturb him!"

Mark could sense the fright in her voice. He came around to the side of her desk and put his hand on her shoulder. He looked down at her name plate, "May I call you Sharon?" she nodded. "Sharon, he has nothing to say about it. What do you usually do at these meetings?" He stood up.

"I usually get the coffee and donuts and run errands."

Mark straightened his vest, "That stops right now! Those clowns can get their own coffee and donuts, we're not running a deli here!" Her eyes widened and a small smile began to protrude her pretty face. "Bring your note pad...there's gonna be other changes!" She reached down and snatched her steno pad and stood up. Mark turned to the other secretaries, "That goes for you too. As of now, anyone who doesn't take an hour for lunch and at least two coffee breaks answers to me!" He winked as he escorted Sharon to the conference room.

The girls looked around at each other, "I won't mind doing work now!" one said. "We've been freed...Yes Lord!" Affirmative nods and silent cheers went up in the work area as Sharon walked in the large board room first.

"I thought I told you no interruptions...you're fired!" Thornton yell abusively as Sharon backed up only to be pushed forward by Mark, who was standing behind her.

"Have a seat Sharon...this won't take long," Mark walked toward the podium where Thornton had taken his post. "You can't fire her Thorny...she's my secretary now, remember?"

One executive looked up, "Thornton, who is this person?"

Mark glared down at the elderly man, "This person happens to be your new boss," he looked back at Thornton. "Right Thornton?"

"Look McCormick--"

"No you look, I've got legal papers in my pocket stating I am the head of this company as stated in your mother's will and I plan on starting in the basement and working my way up! Maybe you could talk Lydia out of not coming here and taking a part of her business but I'm in control now sonny, the gavel is mine and this meeting is adjourned." he grabbed the gavel and banged it on the table. Then he looked at it. "I've always wanted to do that." Sharon snickered. Thornton sneered in her direction and she immediately stopped.

"Gentlemen, since Mr. Fairchild is at a loss of words, I'll introduce myself. I'm Mark McCormick, your boss like it or not. I'll be taking up residence in the executive office down the hall...Thornton you'll have to find another one maybe three floors down. Gentlemen, I'd like to take a look at your files and records...by noon, all of them!" He backed halfway out of the room. "Oh, by the way, no one talks to my secretary like that and gets away with it...you're fired!" As Mark walked out Sharon was right at his side, "Did you get all that?"

"Yes sir!" she cheerfully said.

"Good, now I want you to get the company's accountant on the phone." They began walking down the hallway back to the reception area. "I want his ass over here in fifteen minutes with his books..all of them!" Sharon was writing quickly as they walked back. "I want any correspondence with the overseas companies on my desk and any invoices, files or whatever there too. Anyone who's anyone, I want a file from them, that includes reports from every executive, in the place, plus janitors, gophers, and flunkies!" The entire steno pool looked up in amazement at Mark's rapid-fire instructions. Mark turned and saw their surprised faces. "Not enough work to do?" he snapped unexpectedly at them. He saw them cringe and withdraw. He looked at his watch, "Well, I guess it must be time for your first coffee break. And my name is Mark...Don't call me Mr.

McCormick, I'm not any better than anyone here. Don't think I'm soft. I know what hard work is. I did time. I know how people should be treated."

Just then all the executives walked out of the conference room. Mark walked over to one of the secretaries as he saw her snap to attention the minute one man entered the area. She began typing furiously. Mark looked at the man and then down at what she was typing. He snatched it out of the typewriter and began reading it.

He stoned-glared at the man in question. "If I find any secretary typing personal business for anyone in this company other than for the business itself, they'll be fired along with the executive who issued the order!"

Mark ripped it up and tossed it on the girl's desk. She jumped and Mark put his hand on her shoulder. "This won't be pushed on you again, I promise." His soft grip on her shoulder made her relax and a relieved smile came to her face. "I think you ladies have been taken advantage of long enough. You have my permission to tell those asshole bosses of yours to go to hell! And they'll be no sexual harassment or bedroom, motel, or dark closet dictation in my company!" Mark glared angrily at the men standing there. "If you want...buy it on the street, you can afford the good stuff. These are ladies and I expect them to be treated like human beings. They aren't errand boys and they aren't your personal maids...drop off and pick up your own cleaning! You only get respect if you give it...got it?" The men swallowed hard, frozen in their Gucci shoes.

Mark walked over to where Sharon stood, pencil poised in her fingers, scratching shorthand notes. Mark glanced at his watch, "Guys, I believe I said noon. I'd put your rears in gear if I were you. Oh--" he snapped his fingers. "--and if I hear anyone of you highbrows verbally abuse these lovely ladies, I'll personally slam you so far down you'll have to open your fly just to sneeze!"

The secretaries looked at each other, expressions of joy as well as relief as they saw Mark strut past the men, headed toward his new office.

Thornton Fairchild was nowhere in sight. His hasty and abrupt retreat only meant he was on his way to see Cameron Thomas.

Mark opened the oak door and slowly pushed it to the side. His eyes widened at the expensively furnished decorations accenting the glassed-in room. He walked over to the panoramic view. From the eighteenth floor, he could see the ocean as well as every building in L.A. "Beautiful sight!"

Sharon stood just inside the doorway, "Yes it is."

Mark turned. "Sharon, when the big hoo-has bring in their ledgers and files I'll need your help going through them. If this was the inside of a car engine I'd have it made. But this corporate shit is Greek to me!"

"I'd be happy to...Mark," She blushed.

"Good...first take an early lunch. When you come back we'll get started. Get that accountant on the horn. I want all his books, then call the florist downstairs. That area out there reminds me of my old cell block. Have each lady write down their favorite plants and then order them for their desks and around the room. Then some for the entire hallway and reception area, a couple of ferns, maybe a Ficus and a big Philodendron. This isn't a sweatshop anymore and it won't be run like one?"

"You know about plants?"

"Might say it's a hobby." He grinned impishly. "I know those plastic things just won't do it!"

"Yes sir!" She wrote quickly.

"Then call Milton Hardcastle and tell him I'd like to have lunch with him at one at Demonte's and call Cicero's and make reservations for two for dinner."

"Yes sir!"

"And stop callin me 'sir', I might have been crowned a few times in my life but never knighted," he smiled.

"Okay, I'll get on this right now," she turned to leave. "Mark?" He looked around at her. "Thank you...from all of us." He grinned at her as she blushed and left.

<> <> <> <> <>

"Yeah...I just had lunch with him...Demonte's...yeah three piece suit and everything. Well from what I told you before, he's spent about 400, that includes paying his IOU's, the spread for the poker game and today's lunch." Hardcastle listened to the speaker in the receiver. "I told you he'd get it done...Oh, hold your hat...he fired Thornton!" He laughed. "I wish I could have seen his face...Yeah, McCormick just walked in cool and calm. He'd make one hell of an actor, made them all think he knew what he was doing." He listened. "No, don't

underestimate the kid. He's like the caped crusader, he's for the underdog. He'll recruit anyone he needs to find out what's wrong. I just dropped a few hints about the suspicions and he took it from there...Yeah, he did take it real hard. I told you so. That's what bothers me, the kid is so deep! Don't worry, it'll all work out...trust me...bye!" Hardcastle hung up the receiver just in time to release a loud belch. He tapped his chest, "Damn cucumbers!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark slumped back on the black suede sofa, hands over his face. "Mark, it's seven you have reservations at eight." Sharon announced, holding his suit jacket toward him.

He looked at her, "I guess I overdid the first day huh?" He looked at his watch. "And I kept you over-time...I'm sorry.

"I didn't mind." she held the coat as he slipped into it, "I just wish I knew what we were doing."

"I'll tell you over dinner...That is, if you'll join me." He fixed the sleeves on his jacket.

"Cicero's" She looked at her modest dress.

"You look fine...I don't want to take advantage of you Sharon, but you've been in this company longer than I have. If anyone can decipher these books it's you. You want an extra hour for lunch, you got it. You want your own parking space, you got it. You want a raise, you got it. You can have whatever you want."

"I'll do all I can to help but I'd really like..." Mark picked up the folder and put them under his arm.

"...something to eat. I'm starving!"

He held the door open for her. "Now you're cookin'!" They left.

<> <> <> <> <>

"Would you care for more wine, sir?" the waiter asked as he stood by the secluded table in Cicero's.

Mark looked at Sharon. She was lovely in the candlelight. Her eyes were beginning to sparkle as he suspected they had once before. "Would you like some more?"

"Just a little please." Mark nodded and the waiter filled the crystal half way. "thank you."

When the waiter left, Mark took a sip from his own glass and then asked. "Would you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

She wiped her mouth on the napkin and leaned back, "I'm 29...single, I live with my mother and three cats, my sign is Virgo and I hate Sushi!" Her answer was curt and robotic as she put her glass down.

"Whoa Annie Oakley, pull back them reins!" He watched her begin to blush. "I take it you've been through something similar before?" She lowered her head. "That's not what I was going to ask you, believe me." He leaned over and took her hand. "Sharon I'm not priming you for sexual favors...I mean what I said this afternoon and that meant you too. Though you are attractive I'd never do that to you. I need a friend in the company and I have a feeling you could use one too." He lifted her chin and saw the tears beginning to form in her blue eyes. "If it was so tough why did you stay?"

She took her napkin and dabbed her eyes, trying not to smudge her mascara. "I'm a good secretary I really am. I was first in my class. I type 120 words a minute and I can take 75 words a minute in shorthand. I have a degree in computer and word processing and business administrations. Fairchild Enterprise is the biggest corporation in the country. To be the executive secretary to the head of it means everything."

"But the way you were treated--"

"The money was good and my mother had medical bills. I make just enough to make ends meet. Mr. Fairchild was not so generous when it came to salaries. My mother had a stroke three years ago so I had to stay. No one quits Thornton Fairchild, the word goes out." She played with the rim of her glass. "One girl quit because of some sexual advances her boss made. She never got another job, Mr. Fairchild saw to that. He's powerful."

"Was! His mother never knew how he ran the business. He always kept her at arms length. I think something dirty is going on and I'm gonna find out...with your help, I hope." He sipped his wine again.

"Like what? It's a very lucrative business."

"Hey, even the best companies have stains. I don't know what it could be; fraud, embezzlement, stock scams--"

"Were you really in prison? You sound more like an attorney."

"I've been thinking about it lately...but my legal knowledge comes from years of associating with a certain judicial jackass. I kinda had no choice. And yes, I was in prison for being stupid. I came out able to read people from the ground up. And Thornton Fairchild is a very short story." Sharon laughed. "I'm gonna find out what's going on in this company."

"How are you going to do that?"

"We'll start with the accountant's books." He summoned the waiter.

"I called Mr. Ciamataro. His secretary said he started his vacation today."

"How convenient." The waiter came up. "Coffee please." The waiter left and returned with the silver pot. "I'm going to drop you off at my place. I'll get the books."

"It's after ten, his office is closed, so is his safe. How're you gonna get in and I'm not sure I can decipher those books anyway. I'm not an accountant."

"The less you know the better...And I have a good friend who will just die to help." The waiter wheeled the dessert cart beside the table. "See anything you like?" Mark perused the display of tortes, cheesecakes, cream puffs and mousses."

Sharon beamed at Mark, "I sure do, boss." She blushed when Mark caught her warm smile.

<> <> <> <> <>

"When you said you wanted to take me out and I should wear black, my skin tingled and I felt my prayers had been answered...This wasn't what I had in mind Mark!"

"Shut up Corky!" Mark whispered firmly.

Cortland Felman, AKA Corky to close friends and clients, was a likable man, an expert CPA, snappy dresser and an out of the legal closet homosexual. In fact, he was Judge Hardcastle's personal accountant and financial advisor, despite his flamboyant lifestyle.

Mark carefully turned the dial on the safe, which he had located behind a photo on the wall. Corky stood, leaning against the wall holding the light on the tumblers. He scanned the room. "I know Joseph Ciamataro. He's a good accountant." There wasn't no sign of a lispy tone to his voice.

Much of Corky's innuendoes were overly projected just to irritate his closest friends, most of whom he had deepest respect.

"Then why did he take a sudden vacation when he heard I took over the business and wanted to see his books?" Mark continued to listen for the tumblers, ear pressed against the safe door.

"Maybe he's in the mileage plus club...How should I know...coincidence!" Corky spat sharply.

"Bullshit...hold the damn light still...Stop shaking for Christ's sake!"

"I love it when you talk tough...And I can't help it, damn it, I've never broken into a building before!" Corky's voice was shaking.

"There's a lot of things you've never done before!"

Corky looked snidely at him. "Don't get personal Markus," Corky said resting his head on the wall as he watched Mark work.

"If Milt knew we broke in here...Oh you have such talented hands...too bad they're wasted on that safe. Oh were I the tumblers what bliss I'd know!" He rolled his eyes.

"Shhhh!" Mark snapped.

Corky lowered his voice. "He'd kill you. Milt would kill you dead right in your tennis shoes. And I couldn't think of seeing you all pale and cold." He looked adoringly at Mark. "I'd love to see you still though." Corky looked down at Mark's legs.

"Don't you ever give up?"

Corky laughed. "Lifestyles change, my man. I haven't been shall we say bosom buddies with anyone for ten years...We get hurt too ya know."

"Shhhh!" Mark hushed as the tumblers clicked.

Corky spoke again. "I had a girlfriend a few months back but that didn't work. She got too possessive. That's one thing my gentlemen friends weren't...possessive I mean."

"Will you shut up, I can't hear the tumblers click!"

Corky released a bored sigh. "Joseph never had taste. Look at that tacky divan, imitation leather probably. He's such a penny-pincher. And that lamp...no one has brass lamps in their offices anymore, it's too gauche!"

"That's two, I think...shut up!" Mark said hearing a faint click.

"I mean I love secluded dark rendezvous, but this is ridiculous!" He looked back at Mark. "How do you know we didn't set off an alarm, huh, smarty-pants, which are by the way very fashionably tight, I love them!" Corky said. "Does Milt know how adorable you really are?"

Mark listened attentively to the tumblers clicking. "He tells me all the time, shut up I've almost got it!"

"It's about time...this is no James Bondish...I'm starved. I expected a tour of your new casa and an expensive repast for all this help."

Mark open the safe door. "You'll get just what I promised."

As Mark opened the heavy safe door, lights sirens and flashing light beams decorated the room. "Shit!" He began grabbing everything from inside the safe quickly.

Corky panicked. "Oh great, now I'll go to the big house and eat bread and water thanks to you!" He ran to the window.

Mark's arms were full as he bent down to retrieve the flashlight Corky had dropped. "Come on!" He shouted making his way in the dark toward the door. "And don't touch anything!" He opened the door with his gloved hand, peeked out. Corky was right on his heels. Suddenly Mark looked over his shoulder, feeling Corky's body very close to his. "I said anything!" He scoffed.

Corky withdrew his hand. "Sorry...force of habit."

Mark looked out again, "Let's go, stay close behind."

Corky eyed Mark's tight pants. "Don't worry about me...I'll cover the rear." He closed his eyes.

"Temptation get behind me!"

As they made their way down the flights of stairs to the garage below, the police cars stormed the entrance. Mark looked around the corner as the exit door to the garage opened.

"That's Beverly Hills cops for ya...Okay, get in your car and drive north! I'll go south! We'll meet at my place." Mark started off only to be grabbed by the arm.

"Why can't I go with you, I don't drive too well under stress?"

"Didn't you ever see Butch Cassidy?...Get going and try not to look conspicuous. Drive out slowly like you belong here."

"I'll look ugly in prison gray, ugly do you hear me? And the food in jail is horrid, I've heard stories...from you no less. I have a very delicate stomach you know." He walked at a quick pace to keep up with Mark. "And my clients...what will they say if I get arrested?"

Mark slid into the Coyote. "They'll probably say I knew that gay act was just a front...Get going Corky and don't look back!" Mark started the engine.

"If I get caught I'm going to tell Milt it was all your idea!" Corky said making his way to his car.

Mark leaned out the window. "You won't have to. The man has psychic abilities and a police scanner in his bedroom!" He slowly pulled out.

Corky watched as the Coyote disappeared. "What a hell of a time to change my life style...he's gorgeous. Life is so cruel!" He sighed longingly as he slid into his silver Jaguar.

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark came hurrying into the mansion and Olivia bustled up to him. "It's about time!" She said sternly.

"Is Corky back?" He asked, heading toward the den.

"Yes and eating goose liver and fish eggs!" She said disgustedly, pointing to the den.

Mark entered the den carrying the large ledgers, which he dropped on the huge mahogany desk. Corky jumped, his mouth full of pate. "We were waiting for your one phone call!" He said picking up his wine glass.

"You should have been here an hour ago, what happened?" Sharon rose and anxiously went to Mark's side. Her sudden concern touched his heart and he smiled.

"I picked up a black and white coming out of the garage. They followed me so I made nice. They finally left me alone when I pulled into an all night market, ran in and came out carrying a bag full of Pampers!" Sharon

covered her mouth and laughed. Mark looked over at Corky. "Now that you've fed your face, let's get down to business...Here Corky, you start looking over this one and Sharon and I will take these." He handed the large volume to Corky. Corky pulled Mark close. "Why don't you and I look over this book...What's she have that I haven't?"

Mark looked at Corky and then over at Sharon. "You have got to be kidding...I thought you changed?"

"I get relapses sometimes!" He chagrined and looked down at the book on the desk. "I can't scrutinize someone else's books. It's immoral, it's unethical, it's unprofessional. It's a shame, shame." Corky protested as he put some caviar on a cracker.

"Corky must I remind you, you just broke into a man's office and stole these books? You call that ethical?" Mark smiled slyly at him.

"You stole these books?" Sharon's voice rose in surprise. "You said you were just going to his office."

"Well," Mark took the books and went over to the couch where she sat. "he was gone so I just borrowed them...Anyway, I do own the company now as these books are rightfully mine, wouldn't you say?"

Corky looked at Mark and then at Sharon, "How can you argue with such a face?" She smiled and looked at Mark.

"What are we looking for?" She picked up a large book and opened it.

"Your guess is as good as mine. There has to be some reason why Thornton kept Lydia from getting active in the corporation and looking at these books. She was a shrewd lady and smart. I figure he was afraid she'd find something." Mark began leafing through the pages.

"What?" Sharon asked following his lead.

"I don't know...that's why Corky is here."

Corky stepped over to them. "That's his crude way of saying I'm the best accountant in California, right blue eyes?"

"Well Hardcase says 'he doesn't care what floats his boat', he's a damn good CPA. And he doesn't throw compliments unless they're warranted. I don't think he meant certified pain in the ass either...Now get your new re-sculptured nose in those books! I'm paying you by the hour!"

Corky walked back to the desk and began his work as Olivia walked in carrying a tray with coffee on it. "Are you done eatin'?" She asked Corky.

"My dear lady, ones does not just eat caviar and pate, one savors it!" Corky took the small crackers and palliated the rich gourmet spread on them.

"Well here's coffee," she place it down on the coffee table.

"Keep it comin' Ollie! This might be a long night." Mark said to her.

"That's okay, me and Charles have a marathon gin rummy game going. Just holler if you need anything." She watched as all three went back to delving into the thick leather-bound books.

<> <> <> <> <>

"He'll never find anything. It's all locked up safe. Besides, if he did find the book, he wouldn't be able to decipher them. He's a piston-head ex-con. He's just acting the big shot...He's bound to trip up, show his true colors and then we'll have grounds to take him to court and get back what's ours!" Thornton said, taking a swig of his brandy.

"You're just pissed off because he fired you!" Vernice snapped in a drunken voice. "That curly-haired car jockey took your blow," she raised her glass. "here, here!" Thornton responded viciously by knocking the glass from her hand, sending it crashing to the carpeting.

"Let me remind you of one thing darling, if I don't get my mother's legacy, you'll end up in a drunk tank because there'll be no expensive bottles of your special medicine to help you through the day." He smiled evilly.

"We have money!" She shouted.

"What money? You drank most of it and I had some bad investments...The corporation is all the money left and no one will take that away!" He banged his fist on the table.

"What did Thomas say?"

"The probate passed, everything was witnessed by some judge."

"Hardcastle?"

"No, a probate judge. Mother wanted that way. McCormick could take full power immediately and he did...I've got to get him out!" He poured himself another snifter of brandy and downed it quickly.

"I think that young man is smarter than you think Thornton." She leaned back on the velvet divan. "I think he'd going to burn your aristocratic ass darling!" Suddenly she saw the enraged expression on his face and she rose, staggering to the hallway. "I didn't need money that badly..I only wanted you. But after twenty years of nothing, I found companionship and love in the bottle and you know something funny?" She laughed slightly. "it keeps me satisfied longer!" She held onto the door as she left the room.

Thornton grabbed the bottle and poured another snifter. He stared at the portrait of Lydia over the mantel. "Damn you mother!" He threw the glass, striking the painting and sending brandy streaming down the expensive canvas.

<> <> <> <> <>

The three hundred year old grandfather's clock began to chiming three o'clock. Mark had fallen asleep on the couch and Sharon had cuddled up next to him, head on his lap. Corky was seated at the desk, reading glasses positioned on his nose, deep in concentration.

"I found it!" He shouted.

Mark stirred just a little and Sharon held onto his leg. "Huh?"

"Wake up you sleepy people! I've found it!" He shouted again.

Mark opened his drowsy eyes, rubbed them and saw Sharon asleep in his lap. "What?" He mumbled.

"I found it...I am a genius, haza, haza!" He kissed the back of his hand.

"You did?" Mark carefully got up, making sure he didn't wake up Sharon. He went over to the desk.

"What?"

"I didn't quite know what I was looking for. These records are peculiar but I think I've found something," he put two ledgers next to each other. "Look!" He pointed.

Mark leaned over the desk and stared at the two books laying side by side. "Corky I flunked math twice, don't tell me to just look."

"So did I but, look anyway." He smiled. "See this column, it's accounts receivable in this book. And over in this book it's accounts receivable. And tin this book it's accounts dispersed and in this book it's accounts dispersed...viola!" He put his hand up.

"Viola...what the hell does viola mean, these books are identical."

"No my fine-haired dimpled person...this person shows moneys going out to the various factories in Europe and the accounts that said moneys are in. Million dollar companies right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, my perfect specimen of masculinity, this book shows no profits..no monies coming in from said companies...where's the money?" He raised his eyebrows.

Mark grabbed the books and looked deeper at them. "You're right. Those factories aren't showing any profits...What, no one needs steel anymore?" Mark questioned.

"Here's the account numbers, separate ones for each factory." Corky pointed.

"What are you saying Cork?"

"I'm saying that these books are for your company and these books are for the IRS. Someone, my friend, is misusing money. Cause there isn't any sign of profits from those factories in either book...only losses...still more factories are being planned, I read about it in the financial page."

"That's impossible. I know for a fact that Lydia had factories in Europe and she didn't mention any new ones." Mark said sitting on the desk.

"I don't care if she had one in every country of the world. The bottom line right here says no money is coming in from those companies, denada, zilcho!" Corky took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Joseph must be an expert cause I almost missed that...he really juggled the numbers."

"You mean these accounts are phony?" Mark questioned.

"Oh the accounts are probably real, I've seen it done before especially during tax time."

"Then money was put into accounts and just left there...Than what about the factories?" Mark leaned down on the desk.

"My guess is they never existed...but that's just a guess of mind you. If you were looking for dirt Mark...wash your hand when you put that book down."

"Then I bet Thornton's name is on each of these accounts. If we could prove there are no factories that would be fraud because--"

"He sold stocks for these factories!" Corky finished Mark's sentence.

Mark slammed the book shut. "You up to a little jet-setting?" His grin was devilish.

Corky stretched. "Give me time to splash some water on my face and pick up my water pick."

"No time...get your coat!" Mark ran to Sharon and gently shook her awake. "Powder your nose, you're going to Paris!"

<> <> <> <> <>

"Great scott, the shit hit the fan!" Hardcastle yelled into the phone. "I just spoke to Olivia, McCormick just left for the airport! He's going to Paris!" He listened. "I know, you don't have to tell me I'm a judge remember? If he leaves the country--stay by the phone, I'm going to try to stop him. He can't blow it now!" He slammed down the receiver, grabbed his hat and ran out of the house.

<> <> <> <> <>

Hardcastle ran as fast as his aching leg would carry him, into the almost empty airport terminal. He made his way breathlessly up to a security booth.

"Where do you keep the private jets?" The man pointed and Hardcastle was off. As he arrived, he ran up to a man just coming in from the outside. "Where's the Fairchild jet?" He shouted in a panic.

The man pointed. "Right up there sir!"

Hardcastle watched as the silver learjet climbed through the clouds. "Damn...he did it!...I'll kill him!" He wiped the perspiration from his red face and stared down at the boarding area. He squinted his eyes. The sun was just beginning to peek through the morning sky when a small ray fell on the silver Bentley. He looked a few feet away and saw Mark waking toward him.

"I'll be damned!" He turned back to the man, "I'm a judge, this is police business. How do I get down there?"

"Right through here and down the steps!" Hardcastle rushed out and arrived just as Mark was climbing in the car. He stood smiling at the parolee just as Mark glanced toward the terminal and saw the judge standing there.

"What're you doing here?" He began, getting back out.

Hardcastle positioned his cap and zipped up his jacket, "Well I could say I have a thing for planes but the truth is Olivia called me. She was concerned that you were gonna jump parole." He smiled with embarrassment.

Mark looked pensively at him. "Did you?"

Hardcastle was shaken. He fidgeted like a child with his hand in the cookie jar. "Well I knew--" he squirmed.

"Uh-huh?" Mark stood, arms crossed on his chest.

"I just felt--"

"Yeah?"

"I don't owe you an explanation McCormick! If you're not on that plane, who the hell is?" The area around the terminal echoed with his booming voice.

"Corky Felman and my secretary Sharon Whitney. Anymore questions Great Kahuna?" Mark giggled to himself.

"Don't get smart. You said you'd keep me informed." They began walking.

"I'll tell you over breakfast...my treat!" Mark got in the Bentley.

Hardcastle thought to himself. I'm going to take advantage of this cause I'll never hear him utter those words again!

<> <> <> <> <>

"I want him out and I want him out now, do you hear?" Thornton's adult tantrum could be heard throughout his new attorney's office.

"I've had a private investigator following him. I think I've found what you want but I'm not quite sure it'll pass in court, not with Judge Hardcastle holding McCormick's parole papers. In any case Mr. Fairchild, I can't guarantee you'll get your mother's estate. There are stipulations in fine print."

"I don't give a damn about the stipulations and fine print. I need that company!" Thornton yelled angrily.
"Mr. Fairchild I--"

"Just do it, you'll get paid! And I know it was McCormick who broke into my accountants office and stole my books...That's a parole violation right there isn't it? Get a warrant and have him arrested!"

"But Mr. Fairchild--"

"No...I want his smart-ass in prison and I want what's coming to me!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Mark was dressed in a light blue suit as he and Hardcastle stepped off the elevator. The office area was abuzz with whispers. Mark smiled at the secretaries who each picked up their special plant and mouthed the words, "thank you" to him. Mark mouthed back, "you're welcome"

He and Hardcastle made their to the board room; Sharon stood outside the double doors.

"Everyone is present and accounted for." Mark asked.

"Yes...here are the reports and the list of all major stock holders. The board member are there also. Oh I think you should know Mr. Fairchild is here with his attorney." Sharon said.

"Fairchild...I fired him!" Mark said surprised.

"You fired him as head of the company, he's still a major stockholder, so am I. And this is a stockholders meeting," Hardcastle reminded him.

"What's with the new ambulance chaser?" Mark questioned.

"Ah, never underestimate the power of an asshole. My guess is he's got some dirt on you."

"I didn't do nothing...I'm clean!" Mark said in his own defense.

"Settle down, your public awaits!" Hardcastle motioned toward the open door and Mark entered. All eyes were on him as he walked in the room.

"Good morning gentlemen and ladies. I'm glad you could all come today," he made his way to the podium and placed the folders down. "I believe we have some new business to discuss."

"I think we have some newer business McCormick!" Thornton stood up and approached him.

"You're out of order, Fairchild!...Robert's rules of order you know!" Mark spat at him. Hardcastle snickered and leaned against the wall.

"You're going to be sorry McCormick. You'll be finished in this company for good!" Thornton said disgruntled as he sat back down.

"Gentlemen and ladies, I have here the financial reports of the various holdings you have in Fairchild Enterprises. Holdings which I suspect you paid through the nose for."

Thornton stood up to the side of Mark, anxious eyes peering over his shoulders. "What are you trying to do?"

"Run a meeting...do you mind, you're still out of order." Hardcastle nudged a lady sitting below him. "For the past five years you good stock holders have been paying for stocks that don't exist." A loud hum went up throughout the room.

"That's absurd!" Thornton protested.

"Is it?" Mark removed several 8x10 photos from the folder. He held them up. "These are photos of the so-called Fairchild factories in Europe that you good people invested in, and to which stock certificates were issued." Mark singlely held up the photos. "Here's the factory in Paris!" The photo showed a vacant lot. The people whispered among themselves as he held up more photos. "And this is Amsterdam and Munich and Barcelona and Bristol." As the photos were passed around the long conference table, many pairs of angry, outrages eyes veered at Thornton.

Thornton became nervously agitated and grabbed one of the photos. "What is this, some sort of joke? How do we know these are even the supposed sights?"

"I thought you'd say that." Mark pulled out papers. "These are notarized property papers, bill of sale papers for those parcels of land. See, recognize your signature? You bought the land but you didn't put a factory on it."

"What about all our money? Some of us sunk thousands in those factories?" An elderly man shouted.

"Thornton, there must be millions of dollars in stock certificates for those factories. Where's our money?" Another man shouted. "Is this young man right?"

"I sold stocks to all of you in good faith. My father founded this company. Who's going to believe the word of an ex-convict over me?" His voice rose with anxiety.

"I am!" A husky feminine voice sounded from the back of the room.

All eyes turned as Hardcastle helped a veiled lady to her feet. She slowly lifted her veil on her way up the aisle.

"Mother!" Thornton yelled in shock as Lydia Fairchild walked up the aisle. Mark stood speechless as she made her way to the podium. "Who...how...why?" Thornton stammered.

"Don't stammer Thornton, it's ill-becoming and it makes you look more like a fool!" She turned to Mark. "I want to hear more!"

Mark couldn't gather his words. There was a large emotional clump in his throat.

"Mother surely he--"

"Shut up Thornton! Go ahead Mark...finish your report," she smiled.

Mark looked at her, eyes beginning to tear but too proud to let them drop. His inner strength repelled them back and he gathered his wits.

"The monies from the stock certificates and various share holdings were deposited in Swiss bank accounts under you-know-who's name." He glared over at Thornton. "There are European stock holders who were pulled into this scam."

"Scam..." Thornton yelled. "this trusted thief broke into my accountants office and stole those account books!"

"You got a witness?" Mark asked sarcastically at him. "And besides, he was working for this company and that made anything he held property of the company of which I took over."

"That's hearsay, you broke into a locked office. We know all about your prison record!"

"Speaking of records," Mark began. "if he's a smart fella he'll turn state's evidence. He's just as guilty as you are. And as it stands now, you and your pals are guilty of stock fraud, misappropriation of funds, embezzlement and income tax evasion. That's the one that's gonna burn your ass!"

Thornton looked at the officers he had ordered to the meeting. His mother spoke up. "Officers...take him away!"

"Mother!" Thornton pleaded.

"Thornton, you've had just about everything in your life. After your father died I relied on you to carry the Fairchild name proudly. Not only did you cheat your sister but you cheated me and these good people. And it'll take a long time for me to forget and forgive that."

"I suppose you think your precious ex-con here is above the law," he sneered. "not if I can help it. These officers already have a warrant for his arrest on a parole violation."

Hardcastle stepped forward. "What parole violation?" He demanded.

"It seems Mr. Perfect was seen in the company of a certain character of felonious type, one Jack Delaney, alias Jack the pen. I believe he served time for forgery the same time Mr. Grand Theft Auto did." Thornton's tone was like a tattling child.

"Come off it Thornton, McCormick was just paying off a debt!" Hardcastle butted in.

"He was in the company of an ex-con for three hours!"

Mark shifted his weight, "I was having dinner with him and his wife. Jack owns a diner now."

"He's still an ex-convict and you're not suppose to associate with him. That's a violation of your parole...officers I demand he be arrested, the law is the law!" Thornton bellowed.

The officers looked at Mark and then Hardcastle who was standing between Mark and two uniformed men. He eyes caught Mark's.

Lydia came and stood next to the judge. Mark looked at her and then back at Hardcastle. Again, the officers looked at Hardcastle. "Don't look at him, I'm the one in violation...and you won't need the cuffs, I'll gladly go with you!"

"McCormick!" Hardcastle started forward. "You don't--"

Mark stared him down, "You lied to me!" Then he looked at Lydia. "Both of you!"

"McCormick listen to me--"

"You let me wrench my gut on a three day drunk...for what? This was all a pre-planned farce. And I, like a damn fool, fell for it...man!" He shook his head. "How could I be so stupid? I should have known it wasn't what I hoped it would be." He eyes lowered sadly.

"You don't have to go back to jail. This is just a technicality. I'll fix it." Hardcastle said confidently and put his hand on Mark's shoulder.

Mark shrugged it off. "Don't do me any favors Hardcastle! In the past two years I've never once lied to you. I thought we trusted on another. I thought that 'I don't wanna be buddy' routine was just a front. I thought," he turned away. "Shit...parole yourself another sucker judge...I'll relish the joint now! At least I know who my friends are there!"

Mark brushed past him, followed by an officer. "Mark!" Lydia called after him. "Milton, do something. You can't let him go back to jail! Tell him it was all my idea!"

Hardcastle was in a state of shock. His face was ashen white, "It wouldn't help Lydia. He feels betrayed. McCormick's a proud kid. We'll have to give him time."

Hardcastle was also hurting inside. His every instinct had wanted him to tell Mark the plan but he knew it couldn't be done. Now, he had to pay the supreme price. And maybe the price meant losing the best thing that ever walked into this life.

<> <> <> <> <>

The clock ticked slowly, as the minutes passes like centuries. Olivia brought in a tray and began serving tea. Lydia looked up at her and she motioned over at the judge who was sitting, staring at the fire.

"Have some tea Milton, you'll feel better." She said.

He looked up as if in pain. "Got any good Irish coffee."

"That won't do you any good. It only prolongs the pain." Lydia said, motioning for Olivia to pour him a cup of coffee.

"Where have I heard that before?" He whispered to himself. Then he suddenly, verbally jumped to his feet. "Who the hell says I'm in pain?"

"You are! I know you went to bail Mark out. What did he say?"

Hardcastle began pacing. "Nothing! The damn kid wouldn't even see me. And he refused to take my bail money! He's so damn hard headed! Let'im sit in the can a few days. What do I care?" He shouted as he wandered aimlessly around the room.

"If I had known Mark would react this way I--"

"It's not you, it's him! You can take the kid outta the streets but--"

"That's not true and you know it! It was my fault! It was my idea to fake my death. We both agreed on it. You and Eleanor helped with all the legal details."

"Don't you think I know that?" He turned to face her. "I was there remember? We set out to get some hard evidence. McCormick was the only way. I trusted his judgments. I gave him a chance to come out. He threw it right back at me," he ranted pacing again. "I give up, who needs this aggravation? He was hurt, okay; he felt betrayed, okay. I was willing to discuss it, explain things but no...Mr. Independence would rather go back on the inside and finish his sentence. Okay, fine, who needs a kid like that, huh?"

Lydia just watched him pace back and forth like a caged bear, trying to be convincing. She glanced at Olivia who had been standing by the doorway, watching the scene also. Lydia winked at her and she left.

"I was doing just fine before Mr. Hotshoe came along! I didn't have to get him paroled in my custody ya know. I thought he could use some straightening out. See, I was being a nice guy. And what did it get me, huh what?" Lydia shook her head, hiding her chuckles. "I'll tell you what I got, nothing!...Not even a 'thank you judge'. I can get along just dandy without that kid. He's been a big pain in my ass for two long years! That's enough for anyone to take. He's right, I'll get someone else. There was nothing there between us anyway!" He stopped sadly by the window and began fingering the pleats in the drapes.

"Milton Hardcastle...you're a big bullshitter!" Lydia said nonchalantly as she sipped her tea.

Hardcastle released a labored sigh. "No, Lydia...I'm the biggest!"

Mark stared at the ceiling as he lay on a cot in the county jail. Deja vu he thought to himself. How ironic to end up the way he started. He heard the jail door open.

"Hey McCormick you have a visitor!" The guard announced as he opened the door wider.

"It it has a stupid New York ball cap, thinning gray hair and a crabby disposition, I'll pass!"

"What a pitiful sight!" The voice said.

Mark looked up and stared at the visitor standing outside the cell. Olivia looked at him with a grin. "Don't tell me you baked a cake with a file in it," he said cockily.

"Being in jail one day made you cocky." She said standing outside the cell.

Mark sat up, "Honey, I was born cocky! I suppose he and she sent you here!"

"Would it matter if they did? You don't wanna stay in here." She looked at the mangy cot and the one commode in the holding cell. "And you look tacky in that orange suit, like a reject from the Temptations."

"Says who? I got all the comforts of home right in one room." He motions around the small area.

"Says me...is you comin' out child?" She slipped back to her down home ways, hand on her hips and glaring like a stern mother in Mark's direction.

"Hardcastle put up the bail. I don't want anything from him and that includes your boss too!" Mark crossed his legs on the cot and leaned back against the wall.

"Hey lady, you can bail me out!" The man in the next cell yelled.

"Shut up Hooker and count the flies!" Mark spat at him.

"Well if you ain't comin' out, I'm comin in!" She motioned for the officer to open the door.

"Suit yourself! But I warn you, I like the dust right where it is."

When the door was opened, Olivia slowly walked in and stood staring down at Mark. "The judge was only trying to help the Mrs."

"And just how was lying to me gonna help her?" He stood up and began pacing in the small cell. "Didn't he think I'd go along with their so-called plan. Didn't he think I'd do what I could to help her too?...He completely and deliberately deceived me...both of them! They let me believe she was dead! He knew how I--" Mark quickly dropped the subject. "I'm better off here, believe me. It was doomed from the beginning. He can use his bleeding heart philosophy on another con; Lord knows he's good at it!"

"You givin' up that easy?"

"I wasn't the first one to give up and I ain't crawling back to him. Who needs that aggravation? He needed help, okay, he turned to me, okay. He coulda told me the truth but no, Mr. Law and Order decided to run the plan his way!" Who needs a guy like that?" Mark turned to confront her. "I was doing just fine before the Lone Ranger came along. He didn't give me a choice ya know! You can do it my way or you can do it my way...big choice!" Mark was irate as he spoke. "What did I get, huh?" Olivia sat down on the cot and watched as Mark paced back and forth trying to be convincing; a rerun of a just played scene back at the mansion.

"He probably thought I needed a father figure, some guidance to straighten out my fragmented life. I was a nice guy. I did what he asked and what did I get...not even a 'thank you McCormick'. He just lied to me!" Mark shook his head and turned back to the cell bars. "I can get along just dandy without that gravel-banger! He's been a pain in my ass for two long years, that's enough for anybody! I'll stick out my sentence here. I already know what to expect. There was nothing between us anyway!" He put his head on his hands and leaned on the bars.

Olivia stood up, arms crossed on her chest. "Child, you is a stubborn white boy!"

Mark didn't look up. "No Ollie," he released a labored sigh. "I'm the stubbornness!"

"I thought you invited me to dinner." Hardcastle said, sitting at the far end of the dining table.

"Shortly, shortly have patience Milton," Lydia said timidly. "It will be ready shortly."

After several long minutes, Charles entered the room. "Dinner can be served now Madam!" He announced with a wink.

"See, what did I tell you?" Lydia shrugged an innocent shoulder at him.

As Charles returned pushing a serving cart, argument could be heard from the hallway. "You told me you bailed me out and you were taking me to a friends!" Mark shouted in a whisper, disguised through gritted teeth.

"I did bail you out with my poker winnings and you are at a friends so hush and git in there!" She pushed him toward the dining room.

"Forget it! I'd rather walk barefoot on hot coals!" He started back out the door.

She grabbed his collar. "Boy, you'd better git your skinny carcass in there while you can walk!" She gave Mark a shove and he was in the dining room.

As he regained his balance, he stood angrily embarrassed as Lydia and Hardcastle stared at him. "Here he is...now ya'll can git things settled and I'll git dinner!" She looked toward Mark, who stood pouting. She pushed him toward the table. "Sit!" Mark gave her a dirty look and reluctantly sat down at the far end.

"Well I see you accepted her bail!" Hardcastle said sarcastically while he buttered a roll.

"She left me no choice. She threatened to dust the whole cell block! And besides, her bail didn't come with strings," he looked around and made a face. "At least I didn't think it did!"

"Good now we're talking to each other!" Lydia said cheerfully.

In unison Hardcastle and Mark responded, "We are?"

The judge threw down his napkin. "This is ridiculous! I've got better things to do!" He stood up and huffed to the door.

"Me too!" Mark also stood and went toward the door. As both men reached the door frame, they tried to exit at the same time. They ended up stuck in the door, each struggling to get out first. "Suck in your gut Hardcase!"

"Let out some of that hot air McCormick!" Each continued to push his way to freedom.

"Look who's talking; the original Pillsbury doughboy!" Mark struggled.

"You'd think with all that STP in your veins you'd slide through the door!" Hardcastle sniped back.

As both of their faces began to redden, Lydia threw down her napkin and stood up. "That's it!" She shouted angrily and stormed over to them. She reached them, she grabbed each man by their ear and dragged them, yelping, into the living room.

She deposited one man on each end of the sofa. "Now you sit here...and you sit here!" Then she stood in the middle and stared angrily at each one. "Now, I'm old enough to be your mother and your grandmother so you both keep quiet and hear me out!" Her voice rose with a crack. She watched as each man turned away from the other, arms crossed on their chests and one leg crossed on the other, just staring ahead.

"Now you two are acting like spoiled children!"

Again in unison they responded, "Am not!" And turned away.

"Well I won't have it!" She began, prancing back and forth in front of them. "Now Mark, you're angry at Milton because he didn't tell you our plan. You feel he lied to you and betrayed a trust. Now during the entire episode I was in constant contact with him. And he repeatedly pleaded with me, 'let me tell McCormick, let me tell him. He'll take it hard if I don't. I don't wanna put him through that, let me tell him.'" She stopped in front of him. "Well young man, you're angry at the wrong person. I told him not to tell you. And I only did that because he told me how hard you worked to bring the man who killed your friend Flip to justice."

"It was my mistake. I wanted to find out why I wasn't allowed in my own company so bad, I thought you'd rally that hard if you thought I died." She hung her head. "I was right but I was more wrong." She looked down at him. "It wasn't worth destroying what you had." She then walked in front of Hardcastle. "And Milton, you're angry with Mark because he refused to accept your help again and wouldn't let you explain things...Both of you had a right to feel the way you do and you have no one to blame but me. I told you Milton that day at the track, I wanted some answers no matter who was hurt in the process," she began to slowly move again but turned and stood between them. "I thought that. I can bare the hurt that I've lost my son for the next twenty years, with possible time off in five...but I'll never get over the hurt that I broke up you two...I'm finished now, so you can leave if you want. I'm going to eat dinner..." She started off toward the dining room but turned slightly with a morose look on her face, but a twinkle in her eyes, "...alone!"

After she had vacated the room, only the ticking of the clock could be heard. Mark spoke, still looking ahead, "You were gonna tell me that day in the gatehouse, weren't you?"

Hardcastle cleared his throat and wiped his chin, "Well I...that is after I saw...you didn't give me..."

"Can't you just say yes?" Mark finally glanced over at him.

Hardcastle threw a sullen look his way. "I shoulda known you would take her death hard, even if it was a fake."

Mark sat with his leg on the couch and one arm resting on it, "How'd you pull that one off? It's a felony to fake your own death."

"Charley Freidman never signed a legal death certificate and there was no habeas corpus. Cameron Thomas knew about it too."

"How did the will pass probate so fast? It usually takes a year." Mark was now drawing closer to the judge.

"Eleanor...she's a probate judge remember...Anyway, there really wasn't a will on video so no laws were broken. We just made it seem like that in hopes that Thornton or someone would panic and do something stupid. To Thornton and Lilla it was real. That's all we wanted. I knew if Thornton was dirty he'd tip his hand with a will like that...And he did, unfortunately."

"Yeah," Mark said sadly. "It's gotta be rough to lose your son."

"I know the feeling." Hardcastle answered, Mark looked over the sullen-faced jurist.

"Look Judge. you did what you thought was best to help a friend. You wouldn't be you if you didn't. I admire and respect you for that." He lowered his embarrassed head.

"Well kiddo, you pulled all the stops out for a friend, too. You didn't know anything about the corporate workings but you jumped right in and did your best for a friend...I guess we could sorta call it a draw, huh?" He looked over and gave Mark his half smile and a wink.

Olivia walked in, "The Mrs. wants to know if you two coming to dinner?" She stood with her hands on her hips as both men stood up.

Mark looked at her. "Seeing Lydia alive must have been a real shocker for you huh Ollie?" He asked.

"Me...no child, I knew all along. Why she was only up to the lodge." She patted his cheek and walked out.

Mark turned angrily towards the judge who wiped his face and came to the door. "I think I'll get some dinner, I'm starving!" He hustled out.

Mark shouted angrily after him. "You told the maid and not me!" He ran after him. "I'm not through with you Hardcase...get back here!"

<> <> <> <> <>

Hardcastle leaned back in the chaise lounge as the morning sun gave his face a pink flush. Mark walked out from the gate house and headed toward the pool.

"Mail come yet?" Hardcastle called as he heard footsteps approaching.

"No...it's only 10:00. You know it takes Harvey till noon just to get his mail truck in high gear to get up the driveway." Mark said disgruntled as he slumped in the other chair.

Hardcastle shook the morning paper to turn the pages. "Get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, did we?"

"I woke up poor again! Yesterday I was a millionaire; today I'm back to a two digit figure in my bank account and nothing in my Christmas club. And I don't in hell know where I'm gonna get the money to pay Lydia back for what I spent. And I'm gonna ya know!" Mark leaned back but then turned angrily and leaned on the arm of the chair, glaring at the judge. "And your pal Corky personally handed me his bill...Talk about extortion!"

"Oh, he's miffed because his traveling companion to Europe was a female and not you!" He laughed. "I'll take care of him. I'll tell him I heard his name mentioned on my police scanner the night you two broke into that office. That'll scare the silk undies off a him!" He giggled with a wink and pulled the bill of his cap over his eyes.

"He really did a good job though. He may have a different lifestyle but he's not overt about it." Mark laughed. "He looks and talks like you and me but when he really puts it on and I know he does just to rile people, he make La Cage a Faux look like a Disney Movie." Hardcastle laughed.

"And I'm gonna pay Lydia back. You know having that much money felt kinda unnatural for me; made me feel sort creepy inside."

"You weren't eating junkfood, those creepy feelings were probably withdrawal symptoms."

"Speaking of withdrawal, if I take out money in my account to pay Lydia, I'll have to close out my account and if I do that they'll take back my clock radio!"

Hardcastle sat up at the nudge of Beau's cold nose, "Are you still here?" He wiped the damp moisture from his hand and then looked over at the sulking ex-con. "Lydia told you last night she doesn't want the money

back. And since she never paid you for doing all that work over there, you were to think of it as wages, which was cheap if you ask me."

Mark looked smugly at him. "Are you saying my work is worth more?" Beau trotted over to sit next to Mark.

"I'm saying, things shouldn't be done for nothing!"

Mark began scratching Beau's ears, "Not even for friends?"

"McCormick, you have to draw the line somewhere. You were doing hard labor, you shoulda been paid!"

"Hey, I did hard labor in the joint and I didn't get paid!"

"You were paying a debt to society wiseguy, there's a big difference," he sat up. "So forget about the money you think you owe. It's all over, finished, done with, kaput!"

Beau began wagging his tail and barking. At the sound of his commotion, they turned to see Lydia and Sharon coming up the path towards them.

"Good morning!" Lydia called out with a wave.

"Good morning!" Hardcastle called back and rose to greet them.

Mark smiled at Sharon as she came up to him. "We came to pick up Beau. It's kind of lonely around the house without him." Lydia smiled; she watched Sharon and Mark exchange stares and smiled. "Oh, you've met Sharon." Neither one answered. "She's my personal secretary now. I imagine you two will be seeing a lot of each other." She winked at the judge. "Oh, we brought something for you Mark. You might call it a bonus from the company. It's out front." Mark looked from face to face confused. "Go on...take a look!" She urged him with a wave of her cane. Mark shrugged and ran off. Lydia went to the umbrella table and Sharon helped her to a chair. "Well now Milton, is everything all right between you and Mark?"

Hardcastle came and sat in the chair across from her. "After what happened it won't be the same around here. There'll be some changes, naturally. There has to be now," he said strongly.

"Oh Milton, I hate to hear that," her voice was morose as she saw Mark running back all excited.

"I don't believe it!" He yelled as he stopped before her. "But I can't accept that from you. I told you yesterday--"

Sharon stepped in. "It's not from her Mark. It's from the stockholders." He looked puzzled. "They were so grateful to you for bringing out the truth and saving them money that--"

"But they lost their investments," he said.

"No they didn't Mark," Lydia broke in. "Those factories are going to be built. It seems Thornton had my name on the accounts. I must have signed the card authorizing it but there were times when I wasn't feeling well, he must have taken advantage of that. Anyway, I never gave it any thought till the attorney told me. Thornton thought I'd die and he'd get the money anyway. I never thought he'd bilk out good trusting friends...So, I advised my engineers and contractors to begin construction on each of those factories, using the money Thornton stole. The stockholders asked what they could do to show their gratitude to you and I told them. You were right, she is a honey of a car!"

"Car...what car?" Hardcastle snapped.

"That '57 Chevy I've been paying Bennie fifty bucks a month for. She's mine, all mine!" He giggled like a happy child. "All shiney black, silver chrome, convertible, tail fins, white walls--"

"Terrific another car...couldn't they have just sent him a plague or a thank you note?" Hardcastle said with disgust.

"Milton, don't be such a sour puss...After all, Mark saved you money too!"

"Don't tell him that! He's hard enough to live with now!" He snapped. Lydia slapped his arm. "Get me something cold to drink!"

Hardcastle began to rise. Mark looked at Sharon, her pretty face glowing with new found joy. "I'm not a millionaire anymore but I think I have just enough money to take you for a drive and pop for some White Castles."

She looked up into his warm blue eyes. "My wardrobe is more suited for White Castles than Duck ala Orange."

Mark took her arm. "I hate pretentious food, don't you?"

Hardcastle suddenly looked up having listened to their conversation. "Hold it right there wiseguy!" He strutted over to them.

"What's the matter now?" Mark asked.

"What's the matter, I'll tell you what's the matter. The last two weeks I considered you on hiatus from this place." He motioned to the grounds. "Take a look around McCormick. The hedges are so high I'd need a pole vault over them. I don't need privacy that bad." Mark made a face. "And look at my lawn. If I had a herd of

sheep they'd have to go to Weight Watchers after they chowed down." Lydia sat amazed at the conversation. "And every time I walk past my flowerbeds, they need water so bad they hold little tin cups in their petals and beg!"

"Milton!" Lydia scolded.

"This is between McCormick and me, Lydia. I told you things weren't the same, changes had to be made," he turned back to Mark. "And I've left you little notes around the house. You can't miss them, they're written in three inch thick dust! The Vette makes a funny noise when I accelerate, the kitchen sink spits water at me and the vacuum eats everything. Oh, and if the laundry pile gets any higher, you'll need a Tibetan guide to get to the top!" Mark fidgeted, kicking the cement and cringing at the judge's bellowed orders. "And if you think you're gonna go off in your new toy all day and gallivant around town...forget it kiddo!...First thing you're gonna do before you have your fun is--" he dug into his pocket and pulled out a fifty dollar bill and threw it at him. "--get my damn pool filter!" Mark smiled as the judge's tone mellowed. "Then...bring me back a chocolate malt and six White Castles, easy on the ketchup!" Hardcastle pulled his ball cup over his eyes and huffed off towards the kitchen, mumbling all the way. "Well I guess I told him who's boss!"

Lydia looked at a smiling Mark McCormick, "I guess there was a change," her voice was sad.

Mark put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, kissing her cheek, "Nope...we're still cookin'!"

