

*Back-to-Back
Supplement 1*



THERES NO
PLEA BARGAIN
IN HEAVEN

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Art Credits:

Ruth Kurz: ii; 6

Melinda Reynolds: 43; 48;
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WINNER TAKES ALL...

Written By: Melinda Reynolds

Lorin Dant reclined in decadent comfort on the lounge, stretching luxuriously. He always enjoyed visiting Gulls-Way, even if only on business. The serenity and beauty of the estate was felt as well as seen. He opened a folder as Milt Hardcastle handed over a check for his contribution to the Annual Charity Drive. Lorin smiled warmly; the Judge, despite his faults, was, without exception, generous — and invariably a gracious host, regardless of his personal beliefs.

"Thank you, Judge. I have you as follows: 35% to the American Cancer Society, 30% to the Heart Foundation, 20% to the United Way, and," he completed in a rush, "15% to the Gay Liberation—"

Hardcastle cleared his throat audibly and shook his head.

"Okay, okay, just a suggestion. All right, how about 15% to St. Mary Theresa's Home for Girls?"

"That's fine."

"Now," Dant glanced around the meticulously kept grounds, a final look before leaving, "if you should decide to change any of the charities, just let me; or someone at my office, know, and..." His voice trailed off, eyes halting in mid-scan, then widening in appreciation. "My God, Milt, who is that?"

"Who is who?" Hardcastle followed Lorin's rapt gaze, about 45 over his left shoulder. He turned in his chair, half-way expecting to see a long-legged beauty trespassing on his property, although he knew better; whatever blond vision had caught Lorin Dant's attention would not interest him in the slightest. As the saying went: 'One man's dream is another man's nightmare'. Anyway, whoever it was must have left quickly, because all he could see was McCormick, busily (for once!) waxing the Coyote out by the garage. He was wearing the usual cut-offs, risking a bad sunburn over 90% of his body. The Judge turned back around, smiling inwardly at Dant's riveted stare, realizing he hadn't been too far wrong on his paraphrased quote. "Oh, that's only McCormick."

"Only? Are you blind? He's gorgeous!"

Hardcastle frowned, took a second look. "Take my word for it, Lorin, you really should wear those glasses the doctor prescribed for you." He grimaced. "You should see him at six o'clock in the morning—talk about stomach-churning..."

"For heaven's sake, Milt, look at him. Just... look at him." There was a note of longing in his sigh; then, an afterthought, "I'm wearing contacts, so I can see just fine."

Hardcastle shrugged, reaching for the newspaper lying next to the chair. "I look at him all the time. What's the big deal?"

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"Where have you been keeping this one, Milt?" Dant asked with piqued reproach. "I seemed to have missed him last year."

"Last year, I knew when you were com-- That is, I knew when you were arriving. That's why I insisted on an appointment this year, which you conveniently 'forgot'."

"You're awfully defensive; is he yours?"

Lowering the paper, the Judge gave Dant his best judicial expression and said levelly, "I keep tellin' ya: I'm not in the same catagory as you."

Dant ignored the comment, shook his head. "It's not fair, Milt; you get to hand-pick them..."

"Don't you have somewhere you need to be -- far, far away?"

His guest wasn't to be put off so easily. "So, just what does he do around here, then?"

"He's my maintenance man..." Hardcastle regretted his choice of words the instant he spoke them. He had to continually remind himself to watch what he said around Lorin Dant, as the man always heard what he wanted to hear, and not necessarily what was intended.

Lorin grinned broadly, but spared the Judge the benefit of his sharp wit. "Oh, like the others? Well, he's much cuter than that last one. You know, the one that stole your darlin' little car, then had the temerity to total it."

Hardcastle bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile. He owned nothing that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be termed as "darlin'".

"Is he very bright? The intelligent ones, they have a tendency to get on one's nerves after a while."

"He's a Rhodes Scholar, and a nuclear physicist; never uses words under four syllables." Hardcastle crossed his fingers, hoping lightning wouldn't strike.

Dant laughed. "And then again, I get tired of the same old grunts and groans." He frowned slightly as McCormick moved around to the far side of the sports car, his view blocked. "Tell me, what are you paying him? Whatever it is, it's not nearly enough."

"That's probably the only subject you two would agree on." Mentally following the drift of the conversation to it's logical conclusion, he bit back laughter, keeping his face expressionless. "You really think you can take him away from all of this?" He waved his arm over the estate.

"I'd sure like to try. Think he'd be interested?"

Hardcastle nearly burst out laughing, but managed to contain his amusement. "Not," he chuckled, "For love or money."

"Mind if I find out for myself?" Dant gave his host a sideways look, "That is, if you have no interest in him..."

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"Sure, why not? But I'm tellin' ya, the kid does have a temper, so don't say I didn't warn you; or, maybe, I should warn him. Anyway, he's not your preference; aren't you one of those sadly misinformed souls who believes 'Blonds are more fun'?"

"Honestly, Milt, no one can turn a phrase like you. I have been known to, shall we say, make exceptions to the rule." He gave a fair Groucho Marx imitation, ducking the thrown newspaper.

Hardcastle settled back in the lawn chair, considering. "I have to admit, though, that I am curious to see if you can get the kid to go with you...without telling him why. You game?"

Dant's response was uncertain. "Let me see if I have this right: I don't tell him my real reason, and try to hire him away from you?" At Hardcastle's nod, he continued, "That's sneaky, Milt. What are you after?"

The Judge's smile was genuine this time. "Maybe just to see if the kid's learned anything, and to show you that money doesn't buy everything."

"I don't want everything, just one or two things." Dant craned his head as McCormick finished and stepped back to survey his handiwork. "And you know that everyone has his price..." McCormick leaned over a sloping fender, catching a spot he missed. "And he would be such a nice...asset." He placed emphasis on the first syllable of the last word, glancing warily in the Judge's direction.

"We'll see." Hardcastle made a quick, visual check of the patio, assuring himself there were no weapons at hand. The worst McCormick could do would be to dump Lorin Dant in the pool. He turned, yelled at the top of his voice, "McCORMICK! Get over here, kid!"

McCormick crossed the patio with long, easy strides. He was a bit surprised at seeing the visitor; Hardcastle hadn't mentioned that anyone was expected, and random guests at Gulls-Way were few and far between. The other man was tall and distinguished, in his late 40's or early 50's, with wavy, iron-grey hair and pale grey eyes. His suit was well-tailored, and his gold watch, cuff-links, and chains managed to be tasteful without being tacky. McCormick had him pegged as either a lawyer, or a Hollywood agent. The man didn't match the profile of Hardcastle's long-time acquaintances and friends, or anyone he would choose to associate with.

The lean features smiled pleasantly as he approached, paused opposite Hardcastle's chair. "Yeah, Judge, what's up?" As his back was to the Judge, he missed the older man's wince.

"Uh, McCormick, this is Lorin Dant; Lorin, Mark McCormick."

"Mr. Dant." McCormick smiled at their guest, giving Hardcastle a questioning look; the Judge hadn't said who the man was, or why he was here.

"Mark." Dant inclined his head, waited for Hardcastle to get the ball rolling. The young man looked even better close up; most of them didn't, and distance was flattering.

Hardcastle shifted under McCormick's intent, but unsuspecting, stare. . "Mr. Dant, here, would like to, uh, hire you for the summer..."

"Yeah? Well, even considering that you'd trust me out of your sight for three months, is he payin' the same as you? 'Cause if he is, you can both forget it. Why should I trade one slave labor camp for another?"

"I was thinking along the lines of, say, \$1,000 a week?"

McCormick stared at him, disbelieving; that sounded like a line, and a rather familiar one. "A thousand? Are you kiddin'?"

"Okay, then, \$1,500."

McCormick realized his mouth was open, and he shut it. "What kind of work gets \$1,500 a week?" It had to be something legal, or else Hardcase wouldn't even allow the conversation to take place.

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to work..."

"What, no manual labor?" There was a choked sound from Hardcastle's direction, and McCormick shot him a suspicious look.

"My...employees really don't consider what they do as work. I'm interested in your natural skills.":

McCormick said the first thing that came to mind, that would pay that kind of money on a regular basis, and required his own special talent. "You own a race car? You need a driver?" That would be too good to be true.

Dant knew he could lie, after all, all's fair in love and war; but decided to play it straight - in a manner of speaking. "No, nothing like that. It is recreational, but more of an...indoor sport." He saw the light fade from McCormick's deep blue eyes, his disappointment evident, and wanted to make up for it. "However, if a race car is what you want, you got it. I want my employees to be happy."

McCormick looked to Hardcastle, but the Judge shook his head and shrugged with elaborate bewilderment. Then the two older men exchanged knowing glances, and McCormick felt like he had just walked in in the middle of a movie. He had missed something somewhere.

"You see, Milt, everyone has a price." It was a smug statement.

"He hasn't agreed yet, Lorin. Well, kid?"

McCormick wasn't sure about this at all, and he addressed the Judge, cautious, "I don't know...it sounds, well, sorta strange. Mr. Dant, just what, exactly..." He turned to face the other man, catching him in an unguarded moment. The invitation in the pale eyes was so open and obvious that that, along with the rest, made it very clear what Dant was hiring him for. No room was left for doubt.

"Uhhh, wait a minute, here..." He stepped back, toward Hardcastle; he shook his head. "Uh-uh, no way; sorry, but..." At the man's defeated, yet amused,

chuckle, and Hardcastle's victorious grin, he directed a searing gaze at the Judge and growled through clenched teeth, "I'll kill ya."

Lorin's appraising gaze went over McCormick one last time, yearning wistful. "I don't blame you for wanting to keep him, Milt; he's precious."

McCormick was boiling, not looking at Dant, but turning the full impact of his outrage on Hardcastle. "I'm definitely gonna kill you. It's only a question of how, something appropriate. I'll let you worry about when."

Both watched as McCormick left with dignified haste, and Hardcastle was not too happy. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to the Judge that McCormick would be angry at him. "Well, this worked out just great. He's not gonna speak to me for at least a week." Then he smiled, "Which, come to think of it isn't so bad after all..."

