

'Yesterday, When I Was Young...'

By: Judy Darnell

Danny O'Malley paced restlessly in his one-room basement apartment. This wasn't a night for sleeping. The demons were there, right outside his vision, waiting to pounce. He felt the dryness in his throat as he tried to swallow, but a quick search confirmed what he already knew. There was a half empty carton of orange juice and a bottle of coke, but nothing to mix them with. Nothing to send a fiery warmth to his belly and a cooling numbness to his mind. He didn't want to go out, but the demons had to be held off and they were getting so close.

//Maybe I should call Dr. Shulz. He said I should call when I got to feeling this way. No, dammit! What does he know? He wasn't there, he doesn't know what it was like. I just need a drink, that's all. I'm not gonna hurt anybody. Maybe later, after I've had a few, ... maybe then I'll call him. Yeah, that's all I need ... couple drinks to calm me down, take the edge off a little. Doc worries too much.//

He slipped on an old corduroy jacket to ward off the chilly night air as he left the apartment and ran quickly up the stairs that led out to the street. The Colt .45 was shoved deep into the jacket pocket as a matter of course. It was second nature to the former Army Ranger. Sgt. Danny O'Malley went nowhere unarmed.

Milton Hardcastle shook his head at the general disarray of the Gatehouse. Closing his eyes, he remembered the pristine neatness that had reigned in the past. That only made it worse when he peered out again at the present disorder.

"McCormick!"

"Yeah, Judge, almost ready." The curly haired ex-con ran quickly down the stairs, almost tripping over a discarded tennis shoe on the way. "Just let me finish up with my tie here, then we can go mix with the fancy-schmancy set."

"Would you stop calling 'em that. It's just a small party for Judge Melton's birthday, nothing 'fancy-schmancy'."

"Well, I still don't know why we're going. You don't even like Melton that much."

"Says who?"

"Says you, that's who. Every time I've ever heard you say anything about him, it's been 'that jackass Melton'."

Hardcastle didn't bother to suppress his frown. Funny how McCormick could

'forget' to clean the gutters or weed the rose garden, but he managed to remember every snatch of derogatory dialogue that he ever overheard. "It's like this, kiddo, going to Melton's is what is known as a courtesy, something you'd know nothing about."

"Boy, you're in a great mood, aren't you? Admit it, Judge, you hate this. You'd rather stay home and watch the Rams game. If being courteous takes this much effort, why don't we just skip it? Let's stay here where you can be your usual rude, discourteous self. You seen my shoes?"

Hardcastle sat down and watched as the younger man dropped to his knees and began a methodical search underneath the furniture. "If you'd clean this place up once in a while, you might be able to find something when you need it. I feel like I'm sitting in the middle of a pig-sty."

"What is this? Pick on Mark McCormick night? First I'm discourteous, then I live like a pig, and we're not even out the door yet."

Hardcastle merely grunted in reply and continued to shake his head.

McCormick watched him closely as he slipped on the finally located shoes. //Wonder what's going on with Hardcase. He's been like a wound up spring all day. The place isn't any messier than it usually is ... and this whole bit about going to Melton's ... I know he can't stand that ass-kisser and since when has he given a damn about being courteous?// "Judge, how come we're really going to Melton's?"

"Because we were asked!" Hardcastle snapped.

"And that's the only reason?"

"McCormick, I'm not here to play twenty questions. I'm going to Melton's. I don't want to stay home and watch the Rams game. I want to go out, be with people, ... now get your ass in gear and let's go." Hardcastle slapped his favorite cowboy hat on in a gesture that signified 'subject closed' as he stood.

"Okay, okay, I'm ready. Do I pass inspection?"

The look McCormick received at that question was icy cold, and he almost shivered in its intensity. "What'd I say? Judge?"

Hardcastle seemed to snap out of whatever spell had momentarily held him in its grasp and he smiled slightly, the smile never reaching his eyes. "You look okay, kid. Let's go, we don't want to be late."

McCormick's eyes followed the broad back as it went out the door. Something was definitely bothering the Judge, but whatever it was, he wasn't ready to talk about it yet. //Okay, Hardcase. Patience hasn't ever been one of my strong points, but I know something's on your mind. Sooner or later, you'll tell me.// He sighed as he turned off the lights and went outside to join the Judge. It was a cool, clear night with the promise of a dropping temperature in the air. McCormick paused for a moment as he saw Hardcastle's stern profile staring straight ahead in the car. //Can't get any colder out

here than it already is in there with you. Dammit, Milt, what's wrong?//

McCormick squirmed uncomfortably as he drove, his eyes cutting over to where Hardcastle sat in stony silence.

"Judge, I'm startin' to feel like I'm riding with a tree stump. Never thought I'd say this, but silence does not become you." Getting no response, he tried another approach. "Look, have I done something to make you mad? Other than the usual stuff, I mean, 'cause if I have I'm sorry ... whatever it was."

"Just shuttup and drive, McCormick." Looking over at the other man, Hardcastle continued in a less harsh tone, "You haven't done anything to make me mad ... Just don't bug me tonight, okay? I'm not in the mood."

"Okay, fine, I certainly wouldn't want to bug His Honor."

The Coyote squealed around a corner as McCormick took out his anger in the manner to which he was most accustomed.

"Slow it down, hotshot. I want you to stop at the next liquor store we come to."

"Will it bug His Honor if I ask why?"

"Yes, it'll bug His Honor, but I'll tell you anyway just to keep you from pouting like a two-year-old for the rest of the night. I want to pick up a bottle of Scotch to give Melton for his birthday."

"Ha! There's enough Scotch in your cellar for half of California to get a buzz on if they dropped in, but you're gonna buy a bottle for Judge Melton?"

"Damn right! You're crazy if you think I'm giving a bottle of my twenty-year-old Scotch to that jackass."

"Now there's the Milton Hardcastle I've come to know and love. Don't you feel better yelling and grumping than sitting there like a stump?"

"Stop calling me a stump, McCormick. I already told you, I'm in no mood."

"Alright already. Geez. This is gonna be some fun party." He continued to mumble under his breath, "A donkey buying Scotch for a jackass."

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

"There's a liquor store up there on the corner. Pull over."

"This is not a great section of town, Judge."

"I'm not looking for a 'great' bottle of Scotch, McCormick; now pull over."

"Whatever you say, Kemosabe. You mind if I come in with you. I bet they've got a great line of Ripple in there. Okay," he added, catching the Judge's fierce glare, "no more wise cracks, I promise ... Scout's honor."

"Huh! Anything less like a Boy Scout ..." Hardcastle grumbled as he got out of the car.

McCormick frowned as he followed Hardcastle into the liquor store. If it wasn't him the Judge was so mad at, then who was it? This was just getting too weird.

Danny O'Malley had tried to outrun the demons, but he hadn't made it. He had arrived at the liquor store thinking he was safe, but then the clerk had turned around to face him. The slanted, Oriental eyes were all O'Malley saw as he exploded with a roar, leaping over the counter and devastating his enemy with a vicious karate chop to the throat. Now he leaned over the unconscious man, trying to determine if he was still alive. Damn VC were everywhere, you couldn't get away from them. He froze, hidden behind the counter, as he heard the door open and voices calling out. //More VC. Has to be. Take 'em prisoner, hold 'em for the Captain. Yeah. That's the way the Captain always likes it. Take 'em prisoner and make 'em talk.// He pulled the .45 from his pocket, ignoring the injured man who no longer mattered. Leaping to his feet, he stood in the posture his training had shown to be most effective: feet squarely planted, gun held straight out, firmly gripped in both hands. "Freeze!"

Hardcastle had a funny feeling from the moment he entered the liquor store and spotted the empty counter. McCormick was right on his heels, calling out for the clerk, when Hardcastle turned and silenced him with a look and a hand on his shoulder. He began to reach in his jacket for the ever-present 'Millie', but stopped short when the large, red-haired man leapt up from behind the counter.

"Easy, fella," Hardcastle spoke in a low tone, "We don't want any trouble."

"Drop your weapons. Both of you. Slow and easy."

Hardcastle considered a bluff, but from the look in the gunman's eyes, decided he'd better not risk it. "Okay. I've got to reach in my jacket."

"Go slow. Don't you try nothing, or I'll blow you away. Put it on the floor, and slide it over here."

Hardcastle did as he was instructed, and slowly stood back up.

The gunman looked at McCormick. "Now you. Same thing."

"I'm not packin'."

"Who the hell do you think you're fooling with, boy? Now you put your weapon down!"

"He's telling the truth," Hardcastle said, "he's not armed."

The gunman looked at them both silently for a moment, then slid his long legs over the counter and squatted down to pick up Hardcastle's .45. He smirked as he pocketed the weapon. "Nice gun. You must have got it off of one of our boys."

Hardcastle exchanged a puzzled look with McCormick. What was this fruitcake talking about?

"You just turn around and march now. No funny stuff. We're going back and wait for the Captain. He'll be wantin' to talk to you two."

"Is this guy crazy, or what?" McCormick muttered to Hardcastle through clenched teeth.

"You say something, boy!?" Demanded the tall gunman, moving closer to McCormick.

"Me? No. Nothing."

"Then you turn around and move. Now. You, too, papa san."

Hardcastle motioned to McCormick to do as the strange assailant had instructed. As they walked outside and began moving down the street, he realized that the few people they passed weren't the type you could call on for help in a situation like this. Dammit, why hadn't he paid more attention when the kid had objected to stopping in this neighborhood. Looking over at the ex-con, he could see McCormick was as confused as to what was going on as he was. They had walked into the middle of something crazy. He could only hope, that when it was all over, they'd both be able to walk out again.

McCormick checked the layout carefully as they entered the run-down apartment building. Stone steps leading down to the basement; a one-room apartment with two inner doors, one standing open and showing a filth-encrusted bathroom, the other, presumably a closet; one window, heavily curtained. His inventory stopped when he felt the muzzle of the .45 press against his back.

"What you think you're looking at, boy? You're not gonna be taking any information back with you."

"Mister, I don't know what you're talking about; I swear I don't."

"Sure you don't, you little slant-eyed shit. Now both of you, turn around slow, real slow, that's right. God, you people are all alike, you got no pride. Women, little kids, old people. Makes no difference. You'd kill me so fast, if you had the chance. No mercy. There's no mercy in any of you."

"I think you're confused, soldier," Hardcastle said in a quiet tone.

McCormick looked at him quizzically, //Soldier?//

"You shuttup, papa san! I'm not confused about anything."

"What year is this?" asked the same quiet voice.

"Forget it, old man, I'm the one who asks the questions. You're my prisoners, and don't think the Captain's gonna go easy on you when he gets here just 'cause you're old. Captain don't give a shit, and neither do I."

"Whatever you say."

McCormick took in this exchange feeling like he'd walked in on the middle of a Hitchcock film.

"Move back, back over there and sit down," the gunman ordered.

McCormick glanced at Hardcastle, who nodded slightly as they both backed over to the chipped, white iron bed the man had indicated.

Their captor never took his eyes off them as he opened the closet door. He pulled out two pairs of handcuffs without looking behind him, obviously knowing exactly where everything in the closet was placed.

McCormick's eyes widened as he took in all the military paraphernalia the closet contained: Uniforms, camouflage jackets, knives, machetes and several M-16 rifles. Suddenly, it all clicked into place and he felt like a fool for not realizing it sooner. //Oh, man. Soldier. Papa san. Now I get it. Nam. This guy was in Nam, and he must think he's still there. What do they call it? Stress syndrome? Flashback? Shit, I wonder how long it lasts. You figured it early, Hardcase. How'd you know?// He looked over at the Judge, trying to show that he had caught on, but couldn't tell if Hardcastle understood the look or not.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Hardcastle, eyeing the handcuffs.

The man glared as he slowly spit out his answer through clenched teeth. "What I'm going to do is shoot your ~~damned~~ face off if you ask me one more question. I'm not the prisoner, old man. Get down there on your knees."

He pointed toward an old radiator by the wall, several feet away from the bed. "Now put these on," he said, flinging a pair of handcuffs to where Hardcastle knelt. "Loop 'em through there and snap 'em tight. You try anything, and I'll blow your friend's head off before you can get to me."

McCormick watched, hoping fruitlessly for a chance to jump the man, as Hardcastle snapped one of the cuffs to his left wrist, then threaded them around a bar on one end of the radiator.

"I can't get the other cuff fastened."

"The hell you can't!" The agitated man leaned down, his eyes darting from one to the other of his prisoners as he fastened the other cuff. "Now you," he said, rising and throwing the other pair of cuffs to the ex-con.

As McCormick fastened a cuff to his right wrist, he tried to watch Hardcastle without being obvious about it, waiting for the signal he felt

sure would come. As he moved towards the radiator, their captor backed away and Hardcastle nodded, silently mouthing, "Now."

The Judge's leg shot out in a sudden, straight thrust, catching the surprised gunman behind the knee and knocking him off balance. McCormick leapt at the same moment, tackling the startled man and knocking the gun across the room. He tried to pin his enraged opponent down, but was thrown off by an almost superhuman strength. A karate chop landed on the side of his throat before he had time to regain his balance and two hands grabbed his jacket, swinging him in a downward arc towards the floor. He never heard the awful sound his head made as it struck the iron radiator with tremendous force. He only felt a burst of pain and saw a sudden flash, like stars across a midnight sky.

"McCormick! Mark!" Hardcastle watched closely for some reaction from his unconscious friend. "Dammit, come on, kid!" He jerked at the cuffs in frustration as the younger man didn't move. //Don't do this to me, kiddo. Twitch a leg, or make some kind of sound, but do something. You shook the whole radiator when you hit your head.// Hardcastle stood up in a crouch, as tall as he was able, and leaned to the right, trying to see McCormick's face. The ex-con lay on his stomach, arms pulled forward. His face lay turned to the right, partially hidden under one arm. Hardcastle could see a faint trickle of blood at the hairline, but the rest of the face was hidden from his view. The Judge grimaced as he looked around the dingy room. He didn't know what he was looking for, just some way out of this damnable mess. "McCormick," he called again, hopefully. //Dammit, kid, the only way I can reach you is with my foot, and I don't want to shake you. You could have a fractured skull from the way you hit this thing. Come on, Mark. Move! Do something!// Hardcastle slid back down to his knees, trying to keep his thoughts under control. Shaking the kid probably wouldn't do that much good, and if he did have a skull fracture it could prove harmful. He realized the thought he was trying to hold off, but as he looked over at his unmoving friend, it rose, against his will, to the surface. //Oh God, kid. I can't even tell if you're breathing.//

Lieutenant Bill Giles walked into the liquor store wondering what was going on. "Which one of you guys is Petrie?"

"I am, Lieutenant." A young, uniformed policeman stepped over to where Giles waited in the doorway.

"What's the problem, Petrie? I got your message that there was something here you thought I should know about."

"Yes, sir. It's about those friends of yours, Judge Hardcastle and that ex-con that works for him. I've seen them going in and out of your office a lot."

"You, and everybody else. I think it's their second home. Anyway, I saw McCormick's car outside when I came in, so where are they and what's going on that concerns me?"

"That's just it, Lieutenant. We don't know what that car's doing here."

"I don't get you."

"Well, sir, the counter clerk was attacked here earlier tonight."

"What do you mean, attacked? No robbery?"

"No, sir. He said a guy came in, tall, red-headed man about forty years old, and when he went to ask if he could help him, the guy just jumped. Karate-chopped him in the throat, and just laid him out."

"So what's this got to do with Hardcastle and McCormick?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. When the clerk came to, he called the police. I recognized the car when we got here, I mean, who could miss it? But the guy said the car wasn't out there when he was attacked. It just didn't fit, Lieutenant. That's not the type of car you walk off and abandon in this kind of neighborhood. I just thought ... the Judge being a friend of yours and all ..."

Giles nodded as the young patrolman let his sentence drift off. If McCormick was hanging around this part of town and had gotten himself into some kind of jam, he couldn't blame the younger cop for not wanting to be the one to tell Hardcastle. The man's reputation ... and temper ... were legendary.

"Where's the clerk now?"

"The medics took him to the hospital. Just a precaution, they said, but it was really a nasty blow. Nguyen ... that's the clerk's name, Chau Ngog Nguyen, he's Vietnamese ... said he never even had a chance to duck, that's how fast the guy was. Poor fella, he'd only been working here a little over a week. Says he's never coming back, and I don't guess you can blame him."

Giles smiled slightly at the younger man's mispronunciation of the Vietnamese name, but he couldn't hide his puzzlement. How did McCormick fit into this? "Hang around, Petrie. I'm going to go ahead and call Hardcastle, see if he knows what this is about. If I live through the phone call I might need you to drive the Coyote out to the Judge's place."

"Me, sir? Drive that car?"

"Calm down, kid, we don't know anything yet."

"Yes, sir."

Giles shook his head at the young patrolman as he moved towards the phone. What was it with kids and cars? Especially one certain ex-con kid and that red firecracker he called a car. He did not relish the idea of making this call to Hardcastle. Frowning, he took a deep breath as he heard the phone pick up on the other end, then he cursed softly as he realized he had Hardcastle's answering machine. He hung up the receiver, standing silently for a moment, his hands on his hips. //Unh-unh, Milt. I'm not leaving this message on a machine. You'd die before you'd admit it, but I know how much this kid means to you. Maybe you know what's going on, but I'm sure not

gonna count on it.// He walked outside to where Petrie had gone to have a closer look at the Coyote.

"No answer at Hardcastle's."

"Lieutenant ... does this McCormick ever wear a cowboy hat like I've seen the Judge wearing?"

"Are you kidding? He wouldn't be caught dead." Giles looked inside the car to where Petrie was pointing. "Oh, great! That's Milt's hat, he never goes anywhere without one of the damn things. He must have been here with McCormick ... So where the hell are they now? None of this makes any sense."

"Sir ...What should we do about the car?"

"Have it impounded till we can figure out just what went down here. This Nguyen ... does he think he could recognize the man who jumped him?"

"He wasn't sure, just mainly remembered red hair and tall."

Giles turned around, his face expressionless as he looked down the now deserted streets. What were Hardcastle and McCormick doing in this neighborhood? No way would they have walked off and left this car of their own free will. If they had walked away at all.

McCormick moaned slightly as he tried to open his eyes and lift his head. Both actions were too much of an effort and he settled for taking a deep, shuddering breath.

"McCormick! Mark, can you hear me?"

Consciousness slowly returning, McCormick could feel something rubbing, nudging at his left side. //Hardcase?// "I don't wanna get up yet, Judge."

The nudge turned into a distinct poke, and the ex-con attempted to raise his head and object.

"You okay, kid? McCormick?"

The younger man blinked several times as he tried to get his bearings. //Why am I lying on the floor? Why's Hardcase poking me with his foot? ... and what's he doing on the floor?// "Hi, Judge."

"Hi yourself, kid."

"Why are we on the floor?"

"You don't remember?"

"No."

"You hit your head."

"Oh."

"McCormick ... wake up, kid."

"I'm awake. I think. Head hurts."

"Can you sit up?"

"Nooo ... I don't think so."

Worried, Hardcastle looked down at his injured friend. Both the slurred speech and the pallor of his complexion were symptoms easily recognized. "McCormick, listen to me. You've got to wake up. You hit your head real hard, and I'm pretty sure you've got a concussion. I know you probably shouldn't move, but if we're gonna keep you awake, you're gonna have to sit up, kid."

"Okay." He didn't move.

"McCormick!!"

"Okay ... ~~staring~~ I'm sitting, okay?" McCormick rose to his knees, seeming to notice the handcuffs for the first time, as he slumped in an upright position against the radiator. "What happened?"

"Never mind that now. Turn your head around a little bit so I can see where you're hurt."

"I'm okay."

"Dammit, McCormick, you're not even half awake and you still manage to argue with me. Will you just do what I ask you!"

"Yes, mother," the younger man sighed.

Hardcastle almost smiled, the kid had to be coming around to his old self if he could come out with a wise-crack. The hesitant smile disappeared quickly as McCormick turned his head. There wasn't much blood, but his face was darkly bruised from the temple down to the cheekbone, including the right eye which was almost swollen shut. //Damn!!! "Listen, kiddo, can you remember what happened?"

"I dunno. Gimme a minute. Feels like a couple of guys are playing one-on-one inside my head."

"Yeah, I'll bet it does," agreed Hardcastle, wincing at the sight of his friend's face. "Way you hit this thing, I half expected your head to split open like a melon."

"Thanks, Judge. That pretty picture really makes me feel better."

"I just meant you scared me, McCormick. We've gotta get out of here somehow and get you to a doctor ... before our friend comes back."

McCormick looked down at the handcuffs through his good eye. "Oh yeah, now I'm startin' to remember. Crazy guy. Red hair. You called him 'soldier'."

"Now you're cookin', kiddo. Gotta be some way to get out of these cuffs." Hardcastle yanked on the offending handcuffs several times, as though he could will them to snap open. "McCormick, never thought I'd ask this, but ... you got a lock pick on you?"

Not getting an answer, Hardcastle looked sharply at the other man. McCormick was breathing shallowly, his eyes closed and his head leaning against the radiator.

"Mark. MARK!"

"What?"

"Kid, you've got to stay awake." //Got a concussion at the very least, that's why he can't stay awake. Hope that's all he's got. Damn, he hit this thing hard. Got to get him to a doctor. If he's got a skull fracture ... // Hardcastle refused to dwell on the thought, and concentrated instead on keeping the younger man awake.

"Mark, have you got a lock pick on you?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Judge. We were going to a birthday party. Why would I take a lock pick?"

"Fine time you chose to be logical."

"Hardcase, it is not an American Express Card. I do leave home without it." McCormick lowered his head against the radiator again. "Can't keep my eyes open, Milt."

"You've got to! Look, kid, we'll get out of this somehow. I don't know how yet, but I'll think of something. You've got to stay awake, Mark."

"I'm trying. Talk to me, Hardcase. Say anything. Just keep me awake."

O'Malley shivered in the cold night air as he looked around in a state of confusion. Checking his watch, he realized it had been over two hours since he left the apartment to go get a bottle of whiskey. Vague images clicked through his mind, but they made no sense, and he leaned against the nearest building's brick wall in despair. His hand sought the comforting presence of the .45 in his pocket, but for the first time it brought no comfort.

//What the hell is going on? I shoulda called Doctor Shulz. I'm not going crazy, I won't let myself go crazy, but Jesus God, something's going on and I can't handle it. Thought I could, but I can't. Look at yourself, O'Malley! You're standing here on a city street and you're all broke out in a night sweat, just like you used to be in Nam. Back in the Iron Triangle taking prisoners. Wait a minute ... that's wrong. Never took prisoners in the Triangle, that was strictly search and destroy. It was at Cu Chi that we

took prisoners, Captain wanted it that way. The Captain ... damn, I must be going crazy. I remember now, I came out to look for the Captain, ... no, that's not right; I came out to go to the liquor store. Oh, you are really losing it, soldier, you don't know what the hell you're doing. Captain's been dead since '68. Remember ... going through those tall weeds in the Triangle ... Captain hit that trip wire. Wasn't enough of him left to ... //

"Oh, damn," he said, feeling the tears run down his face. "Why won't it all just go away?" O'Malley wrapped his arms around himself tightly, noticing, for the first time, a bulge in his other pocket.

"What the hell?" He stared at the strange gun, perplexed. "This isn't mine. Where'd it come from, and what am I doing with it? Oh Lord, what have I done?"

Hardcastle was becoming more worried as the minutes dragged by. He hated to admit defeat, his own stubborn pride refusing to admit the existence of the word most of the time, but sometimes facts had to be faced. There was no way for human hands to rip steel handcuffs from an iron radiator.

He tried yelling for help without really expecting any response. He wasn't disappointed.

"Judge. I can't claim that you're giving me a headache, but you're sure not helping."

"Sorry, kiddo. At least it's keeping you awake."

"So keep me awake at a lower decibel level."

"Ha! You're the one who thinks a stereo has to be played at 'Mach 2' to be heard."

McCormick gave the older man a hard look. "Why are we sitting here talking about stereos?"

"You said to talk about anything. I know you're hurting, kid, but it looks like we're just going to have to bluff our way out of this somehow."

"What if the guy doesn't come back?"

"He lives here. He'll be back."

"Wonderful. I can hardly wait." McCormick sighed and closed his unswollen eye.

"Stay awake, Mark."

"I am. It's just hard to keep one eye open all the time."

"Yeah, you look like a battered cyclops."

"Thanks, Judge, I love you, too."

"You should," Hardcastle agreed, knowing that would bring a derisive snort.

It did.

"You're too much, Hardcase. Tell me something."

"What's that, kiddo?"

"How'd you catch on so fast? I didn't get it till he opened that closet, but you already knew. Vietnam, right? That 'flashback' stuff that you hear about?"

"Yeah," Hardcastle said uncomfortably. "It wasn't too hard to figure. Calling me papa san, calling you slant-eyed, ... and he's about the right age to have been there."

"What else?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're staring off into space instead of looking at me. Judge ... you know under normal circumstances I'd never expect you to talk about Vietnam. I know how painful and off limits the subject is. But is there something going on that I don't know about? Something I can maybe help you bluff this guy with?"

Hardcastle turned and looked at the younger man for a long moment before he spoke. "No, boy. There's nothing going on. Nothing that could help us, anyway."

"Hardcastle, you're leavin' something out."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, just this feeling I've got. Please, can't you tell me?"

"You're so young, kiddo."

"I'm not that young."

"You're young. Be glad of it. Glad you weren't born a few years earlier. That you didn't have to go over there."

"Yeah, I know. I remember when they declared the cease fire in early '73. I was eighteen, almost nineteen. I remember thinkin' ... thank God, I won't have to go. I hope you don't think bad of me ... 'cause of my thinkin' that way."

"Since I lost my son ... that way, you mean."

"Yeah," McCormick replied, almost inaudibly.

"You were wondering," Hardcastle said slowly, "why I was in such a bad mood earlier tonight. This was the day ... thirteen years ago ... that my

son was reported killed."

"Oh! ~~Jesus~~ I'm sorry."

"Nothing for you to be sorry about. I probably should have told you instead of letting you wander around thinking I was mad at you about something."

"I don't know what to say, Judge."

"No need to say anything. You had no way of knowing."

"Man. Great timing this guy had."

"Yeah," Hardcastle grimaced, finally shrugging, "he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Tell that to my aching head."

"I know, Mark, but you've gotta keep talking. Gotta stay awake." Hardcastle knew the worry was becoming detectable in his voice, and he tried to keep it under control. McCormick was so damned good at picking up on stuff like that. Too damned good. //Mindreader. You knew something was bothering me, and you wouldn't let it go. Even half out of it like you are now, you knew I was 'leavin' something out.' It's just too hard to talk about. You can understand that, can't you, kid? It's kind of like the thing with your old man and how he skipped out on you ... twice. We don't talk about it cause it hurts ... but when your birthday rolls around again, I'll know you're thinking about it, so if you get kind of moody or down ... I'll know why, and I'll understand. That's the reason I should have told you about today, and what it meant to me. Just so you could have understood. Wasn't fair, letting you think I was mad at you.//

"Judge?"

"Yeah, kid."

"Thanks for telling me what was wrong."

"It's the least of our problems right now, McCormick."

"Yeah ... but thanks for telling me anyway."

"We've got to figure some way to distract this guy when he gets back," Hardcastle said abruptly, "get him to uncuff at least one of us for some reason."

The look on McCormick's face showed that he knew exactly what Hardcastle was doing; leaving the painful past and dragging them back to the present.

Hardcastle read the look and acknowledged it with a slight nod and the hint of a smile.

"Okay, Hardcase, but how to you figure we're gonna distract him?"

"I haven't figured that part yet."

McCormick eased his head back against the radiator. "I sure hope you think of something soon. I even wish he'd hurry up and come back. Milt ... I wanna close my eyes so bad."

Hardcastle turned and placed his feet firmly against one of McCormick's legs. He didn't want to have to shake the kid to keep him awake, but it was beginning to look like he might not have much choice.

O'Malley almost dropped the phone as he fidgeted in the booth. He took it for granted that Dr. Shulz would be at the clinic, the man seemed to have no other home. Finally the familiar voice came on the line and O'Malley swallowed nervously, realizing that he didn't know where to begin.

"Come on, Dan, talk to me," the voice coaxed.

Slowly, in halting, incomplete sentences, he tried.

"Don't know what's happening. I got confused. I think ... I don't know ... might have done something ... Doc ... I've got a gun, and it's not mine. I don't know where I got it ... or how. Scared ... I'm so damn scared."

"Where are you now, Dan?"

"Phone booth."

"Will you come to the clinic? I'll be waiting here for you. We'll figure it out."

"Doc? What if I've hurt somebody? What if ...?" His mind refused to complete the question.

"Don't try to figure it out now, not by yourself. Get over here, and I'll help you."

"Okay, Doc ... okay." He hung up the receiver and took a deep breath, leaning his head against the cool glass of the phone booth. "Shoulda listened to you earlier. Shoulda called when I first felt it coming on. Stupid. So stupid. Too proud to admit I needed help. Only hope it's not too late." Pushing open the door of the booth, he hesitated for a brief moment. Squaring his shoulders, the decision made, Sgt. Danny O'Malley turned sharply and headed off down the street.

"Judge, is it just me or is it getting awful cold in here?"

"It's pretty cold, kid. This radiator's not turned on and the temperature's dropping." //And you're looking clammy and probably starting to go into shock. Damn, damn, damn!// Hardcastle looked over at the bed, several feet away from McCormick's side of the radiator. There was an old Army blanket thrown loosely on the top, and the kid needed to be kept warm if he was going into shock. He knew, despairingly, there was no way he could reach the blanket.

"Mark. Listen up, kid."

"I'm listenin':"

"You need to stay warm till we can get you to a doctor. The bed's behind you and there's a blanket on top, but I can't stretch my foot over far enough to reach it."

"Told ya you were a stump."

"McCormick!"

"Okay. Lemme see." The ex-con' pushed slowly up to his knees and looked towards the bed. "I see it. Guess I've gota try to throw my foot up there and drag it down, huh?"

"It's the only way, kid. Hold onto the radiator so you don't lose your balance."

McCormick took a deep breath as he prepared for the effort. Hardcastle didn't realize that he was holding his breath until he released it when McCormick's foot came crashing down, bringing most of the blanket with it.

"Good boy. There you go. A little bit more."

McCormick collapsed against the radiator as he turned back around to face Hardcastle, the blanket tangled around his ankles.

"Okay, easy now," Hardcastle soothed, trying not to be alarmed at how much the exertion had drained his friend. McCormick was sweating even as he shivered, his breath now coming in shallow gasps.

"Just lie still, I'll get you covered up," //Somehow,// he added to himself, as he struggled to grasp an end of the blanket between his feet. Cursing under his breath, the Judge finally managed to get a good portion of McCormick's body covered by the recalcitrant blanket.

"Thanks, Hardcase."

"Sorry I can't get it up on your shoulders, kid."

"S'okay. Ya can't help being a stump."

"I swear, if we live through this, I'm gonna kill you."

"I know," McCormick replied, trying to smile.

Hardcastle clenched his lips at the badinage, as much to fight off the stinging wetness that threatened at his eyes as for any other reason. You didn't have to worry about 'mush' when you were dealing with McCormick, no matter what the circumstances. You just had to read between the lines. He frowned as he noticed McCormick shiver again, despite the blanket. Even if he could reach the radiator's on/off knob, he didn't dare try turning it on. The kid would be burned in no time the way he was leaning against the thing, and besides, the idea of heated handcuffs was not an appealing one.

He placed his foot on the younger man again, ready to shake or poke if he had to. The murmured "It's okay, I'm awake," that he got in response wasn't very reassuring. It wasn't very reassuring at all.

Bill Giles frowned as the Ford LTD pulled into the liquor store's small parking lot. He had just watched the Coyote being towed off, and he didn't like the feeling it left him with.

"Get rid of the customers," he muttered to Petrie, not bothering to watch as the young patrolman walked over to the Ford.

"Lieutenant," Petrie called out a moment later, "I think you should hear this."

As Giles turned around, it registered instantly that these were no ordinary customers. The man emerging from the passenger side was a tall redhead, it couldn't be a coincidence.

"Are you in charge?" asked the driver as he hurried around to join the redhead.

"I am," Giles replied, taking in the strange behavior of the silent passenger. The man seemed almost frozen with fear, unmoving except for his eyes, which darted frantically from the liquor store to the faces in front of him.

"I'm Dr. Max Shulz," the other man continued, "I help run the free clinic a few blocks from here."

"I'm familiar with it," said Giles, looking at the redhead and coming straight to the point. "You know anything about what happened here tonight?"

The man swallowed hard and looked at the Doctor.

"Lieutenant," said Shulz, "this is Daniel O'Malley. He's a patient of mine. Dan thinks he might have been here earlier, but he's not sure. Can you tell us what happened?"

"What do you mean, he's not sure?", Giles looked from one man to the other incredulously.

"I ... lose track sometimes," O'Malley said miserably.

"Drugs?"

"No, Lieutenant," Shulz said firmly. "Dan's a veteran, and he's been having some problems with post traumatic stress."

"Mr. O'Malley," said Giles, "if that's the problem, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you may have some real trouble here. The clerk in this store was attacked several hours ago. Attacked with karate by a tall, red-haired man. Do you know karate, Mr. O'Malley?"

The redhead nodded slowly.

"The clerk was Vietnamese. Does that jog your memory any?"

"I'm ... not sure. I'm sorry. Was he ... hurt bad?"

"He'll live," said Giles bluntly. "That's not all. Two friends of mine were evidently here, also. We found their car abandoned here in the lot, and they've both disappeared. One's a young guy around thirty, the other's in his sixties. You remember either one of them?"

O'Malley looked at the Doctor helplessly. "I don't know! I swear to God ... it's all so confused. I remember something about thinking I was back in Nam, but I don't know if any of it was real, or if it was all just going on in my head. You gotta believe me. I just ... can't remember!"

"Dan," the Doctor said softly, "We've got to get to the bottom of this and find out what happened. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Yeah, Doc, I understand. Go ahead and tell 'em."

"Tell them what?" asked Giles.

"Lieutenant," the Doctor reached into his pocket and brought out the .45. "Dan had this in his jacket. It's not his, and he doesn't know where he got it ... or how."

Giles sucked in his breath as he reached for the weapon. It was a standard blue metal .45 like millions of others, but he'd bet his life that he knew where this one came from. The frightening question was 'how'. "You have no memory, Mr. O'Malley, of how you obtained this weapon?"

"No, sir."

"Where do you live, Mr. O'Malley?"

"Just a few blocks from here. Down that way." He pointed out the direction with a hand that trembled as much as his voice.

Giles couldn't help but feel some sympathy for the obviously disturbed man, but it was heavily overlaid with concern for his two friends. What had this guy done that he was carrying Hardcastle's .45 around in his pocket? "I think we'd better go to your apartment, see if there's anything there that will help us fill in the blanks." Or anyone, he added to himself, dreading what might lay ahead.

"Am I under arrest?" O'Malley looked fearfully from the Doctor to the policeman.

"Let's worry about that later, after we have all the facts," said Giles. "My car's over here, you just point the way."

As O'Malley and Dr. Shulz crawled into the back of the car, Giles signaled to Petrie, who had been hovering at the edge of the conversation. "Follow us, and be ready for anything."

"You think he got the Judge and his friend, Lieutenant?"

Giles didn't bother to answer the question out loud. The look on his face said it all.

"You still with me, kid?" Hardcastle asked, nudging gently with his foot.

"Yeah, Judge, still here. Might be runnin' my mouth a little slower than usual, but ... still managing to run it."

"Well, just keep it up. Silence doesn't become you, either."

"Huh?"

"That's what you told me earlier tonight, that silence didn't become me."

"Oh, yeah. But that was before I knew ... I mean ... you know, the reason. I'da never been bugging you like that if I'd known."

"Yeah, but like I said, that was my fault. I shoulda told you."

"I guess ... that must be about the worst kind of hurt there is."

"Maybe. There's all kinds of hurts, you know that. But nobody ever really expects to outlive their child. When it happens, you just don't know how to deal with it. You keep expecting to see him walk into the room, to wake up from the nightmare. But it never happens ... and you finally have to face the fact that it isn't going to. You have to accept it, and go on with your life. Nancy never really accepted it, she couldn't ... Maybe if she had lived longer herself, maybe she would have learned to accept it. I don't know. I'll never know."

"She would have, Judge. From the things you've said about her, seems like she was a real strong lady. She just didn't have enough time."

"You're probably right, kiddo, probably right." Hardcastle smiled at his young friend. It was such a fond and gentle smile that he knew the kid would probably have been embarrassed had he been able to focus well enough to really see it. "When did you get to be such a good judge of human nature, kid?"

McCormick chuckled softly. "I'm hardly that, Judge. Remember Melinda? And there's been plenty of others, too. Hell, I'm just plain gullible when it comes to most people."

"We all make mistakes, Mark. The thing is to learn from 'em. I admit you sure learned the hard way with Melinda and that deal with the Porsche, but the thing is, you did learn."

"Oh, yeah, once I got out of prison, it was a full six months before I stole another car."

"Yeah, but that was different. Even I've got to grant you 'extenuating circumstances' in that case."

"You mean you're finally admitting I was right in what I did?"

"I never said it was right. I just said there were extenuating circumstances, and things like that have to be taken into consideration."

"I was right."

"McCormick! You are the most hard-headed, contrary individual I have ever had to deal with in my thirty years of jurisprudence!"

"Shit. You really thought that, you'd never have brought me home with you."

Hardcastle grinned. "Yes, I would. 'Cause along with being hard-headed and contrary, you were also the most wide-eyed and gullible. Oh, you tried to be Mister Tough Guy, but 'help me' was written all over ya like a flashing neon sign."

"Was not."

"Have it your own way."

McCormick moaned softly, almost apologetically. "Wish I really was more hard-headed. But at least I'm stayin' awake. That's good, isn't it, Hardcase?"

"Yeah, kid, that's good. I know your head hurts. I wish I could help you."

"You're helping, Judge. You're keeping me awake with your constant yappin'."

//For now, but how much longer?// Hardcastle thought as he saw McCormick begin to shiver again. The talking was obviously taking a lot out of the kid, using up his strength. But he couldn't let him fall asleep, it was too damned dangerous. Hardcastle had a brief, horrifying vision of a second tombstone with this date carved on it. "No!" he roared aloud, cursing whatever dark fate had brought him to this moment in time. //I'm not gonna lose this kid!//

"What're you yelling about?" McCormick's voice was almost a whisper. "You're makin' my head hurt."

"Sorry. I was sorta thinking out-loud."

"Well, don't think out-loud so loud ... if that makes any sense... ~~Hardcase~~ Hardcase... When's this guy ever coming back?"

"Soon, kid, he's gotta be coming back soon." //Please God,// he added silently, //get the guy back here and let me be able to talk some kind of sense to him. Else I'm gonna lose this kid, and I don't think I can handle that. Dammit, a man can only handle so many losses in his life, and I've already had my share. Don't make me go through this again, please ... don't make me!//

Hardcastle jerked around suddenly as he heard a sound at the door. Prepared for almost anything, his mouth still fell open at the sight of Bill

Giles standing in the doorway. Hardcastle didn't say a word. He just closed his eyes and silently finished what he had begun. //Thank you.//

"Milt, you can come grill the steaks at my house anyday. I won't be able to eat again for a week."

Hardcastle smiled at Bill Giles as they walked to the Lieutenant's car. It had been a week since the incident with O'Malley, but the memory, Hardcastle knew, wasn't going to fade soon. If it hadn't been for Giles, it might have been hours before the younger cops would have thought to look at O'Malley's apartment.

"I owe you one, Bill, you know that," he said as Giles got into the car.

"I'll be sure and remind you, next time you start bugging me about some case," Giles replied, laughing.

Hardcastle stood back and watched the car pull out, down the long Gulls-Way drive till it was out of sight.

"Hey, Hardcase? Where'd everybody go?" Came the voice from poolside.

"Everybody, all one of him, went home," Hardcastle answered as he walked back around to the pool where the portable grill was set up.

McCormick was sitting up in the lounge chair, yawning and rubbing at his eyes. "Must've fell asleep."

"Yep. Our conversation was so stimulating that you dozed off right in the middle of it."

"Come on, Hardcase, you know I always get sleepy after I eat. Hope Lieutenant Giles doesn't think I was being rude."

"What do you mean 'think'? He already knows you were rude," said Hardcastle, settling into his chair and enjoying the younger man's embarrassment at having fallen asleep in front of company. God, the kid looked better today. The bruising was still highly colorful, but the swelling was gone and the eye looked normal again. There had been some anxious moments at the hospital, waiting while the doctors took their X-rays. The concussion had been obvious to anyone who knew what to look for, but the fractured skull he had feared had thankfully not been there. The descriptive word 'hard-headed' fit the kid in more ways than one, he thought with a chuckle.

"Judge? You think that doctor's really going to be able to help O'Malley?"

Hardcastle shrugged, "Hard to say, kid, but I hope so. Shulz seems like a good man, and now that O'Malley's faced the fact that he can't handle things by himself ... yeah, I think Shulz will probably be able to help him."

"Kind of weird, the way things happen sometimes, isn't it?"

McCormick's voice was hesitant, and the Judge looked at him sharply, knowing the reason for the hesitation. "Yes," he replied, nodding his head. "I would certainly classify being attacked by a freaked out Vietnam vet ... on the anniversary of my son's death in Vietnam ... as weird. Mark," he added softly, "you don't have to be afraid to mention it."

"I know that, Judge. Just ... don't want to open up old wounds, you know?"

"Don't worry about it. If I'd opened up a little more, the whole thing never would have happened. Sure as hell wouldn't have been going to Melton's. I can't stand that jackass."

"You ever let him know what happened?"

"Nah."

"Couldn't be bothered? Other things on your mind?"

"You could say that."

"Hah! And you call me rude," McCormick grinned.

"I am not rude!" Hardcastle bellowed. "I've just got better things to do with my time than to waste it on a jackass like Melton. Now, make yourself useful and pass me that piece of leftover steak."

"You're closer to it than I am."

"Yeah, but I can't reach it unless I get up and walk over there. I did the grilling. That makes you the waiter."

"You could reach it, ..." McCormick began.

Hardcastle looked over and saw the gleam in McCormick's eyes topping the impish grin. He knew what was coming. "McCormick!"

"If you weren't such a ..."

"Don't -- say -- it," he warned.

McCormick whistled innocently as he walked over and speared the last piece of steak, dropping it onto a plate and presenting it to Hardcastle with a flourish.

Hardcastle watched with his best fake-fierce look as McCormick sat back down. The kid was looking at his lap, at the ground, anywhere except at the Judge. Hardcastle quickly bit into the steak, the only way to hide his grin as he sat back and listened to the inevitable.

"Stump."