

HARDCASTLE & McCORMICK

Part 1,  
pages 1-35

You Get What You Pay For

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YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

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I

Judge Milton C. Hardcastle paused on the patio separating the Gatehouse from the main house, and inhaled the brisk, invigorating morning air. Sunlight was just beginning to tip the mountains in a dusky rose glow, somewhat hazy in the light fog, glinting on the dark windows of the Gatehouse. The Judge smiled to himself, in high spirits and anxious to get the day underway; he threw open the French doors and squinted into the dim interior of the living room. McCormick obviously wasn't up yet, if he had even remembered to set the alarm. Closing the doors quietly behind him, Hardcastle picked his way carefully through the general disarray of clothes, newspapers, magazines, and other paraphernalia he couldn't readily identify in the semi-darkness. He hesitated at the stairs, deciding not to even attempt negotiating that obstacle course.

Taking a deep breath, he bellowed gustily, "McCORMICK!"

McCormick's eyes snapped open with a start, then he groaned quietly and closed them again, burrowing under the pillows.

"McCormick, are you dead, deaf, or defiant? Get outta there!" He would accept only the first two excuses for non-compliance.

"Okay...okay..." McCormick mumbled, then louder, catching sight of the lighted clock dial, "Hardcase, are you crazy? It's barely 5:30 a.m. Nobody in his right mind is up at this hour..."

"Yeah, I know; I meant to get an earlier start, but I thought I'd give ya an extra hour's sleep, seein' as how you didn't get in until after midnight."

McCormick ignored the accusory tone, and stumbled sleepily to the railing. Switching on the desk lamp, he glared down at the older man, "The sun isn't even up yet, so what do you want?"

The Judge leaned against the bannister, pushing aside a denim jacket thrown over it, and continued in an overly-patient voice, "You've got a lotta work to do today, to make up for cuttin' out on me yesterday. You can start on the sea wall this morning, then, after that, you need to One," he counted off the points on his fingers, "Trim the hedges by the garage, I can't get out without scratching the side of the 'vette; Two, take out the garbage, Three, finish the lawn--"

"I mowed the lawn yesterday." McCormick interrupted.

"I said 'finish the lawn' - your little girlfriend showed up early, remember?"

McCormick smiled fondly, "Yeah, the only bright spot of the week."

"Get dressed and get busy. Breakfast is on the patio."

McCormick watched as Hardcastle left, shaking his head at the Judge's stubborn persistence. He yawned, looking around for the laundry he had brought in the day before. Remembering he had dumped the whole load on the sofa, he gathered his tennis shoes off the TV as he started downstairs.

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Hardcastle glanced up from his coffee as McCormick, still more asleep than awake, fell into the nearest chair. The Judge slid a steaming cup toward him. "Here, this'll start your engine."

"Thanks...I think." He grimaced after the first swallow, "What did you do, drain the truck's crankcase?"

"Here, I've written down everything you need to do today to catch up from yesterday." Hardcastle dropped a sheet of yellow legal paper on McCormick's empty plate; the ex-con just stared at him, head propped on one hand. "You better get your priorities straight, kiddo; work before pleasure."

McCormick tilted the plate, and the list fluttered to the tiled deck. Hardcastle watched without comment as it was picked up by the breeze and blown to the center of the pool. As McCormick helped himself to eggs, bacon, and hash browns, he spoke in his most beleaguered tone, "This place isn't gonna fall into the ocean if I take an evening off, Hardcastle."

"An evening, McCormick, consists of five hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.; you were gone twice that. I make the rules, and you follow them. End of conversation."

McCormick finished his breakfast in silence, knowing it was useless to reason with Hardcastle when the Judge was in his I'm-always-right,-and-you-never-are mood. Draining the last of the orange juice, he tossed the napkin on the table, "Okay, Judge, sea wall first. Got the stuff together?"

Hardcastle pointed toward a loaded wheelbarrow sitting to one side of the patio. "Been there since yesterday afternoon." He reminded McCormick, not looking up.

"You gonna keep this up forever? It was only one evening!"

"Ten hours is almost a day."

Giving up, McCormick crossed to the wheelbarrow and headed for the path leading to the beach. Hardcastle continued to concentrate on his breakfast, and McCormick stared resolutely ahead; neither noticed the flash of sunlight from the distant hills.

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Nearly three hours had passed, and the temperature had started its steady climb, when Hardcastle, an iced tea in each hand, ambled nonchalantly down the pathway to check on McCormick's progress. He was mildly surprised to find repairs well under way and near completion.

"Out for a leisurely stroll, Hardcase?" Replacing one of the flat stones,

McCormick didn't pause; sweat soaked his T-shirt, trickled down his face and neck.

Setting the glass on the wall, Hardcastle seated himself on a nearby boulder. After watching McCormick for a few minutes, he commented, "You know, it would go a lot quicker if you'd cut the stones first, then mixed the mortar, instead of the other way around."

McCormick tamped the stone in place with the handle of the trowel, using more force than necessary.

"That other flat stone over there will fit better. Try it."

Without further acknowledging Hardcastle's presence, McCormick emptied another sack into the wheelbarrow, added some water from the garden hose.

"Mixture's too dry, McCormick; it'll crumble in the next heavy rain we have." Hardcastle rose, added more water.

"Judge..." McCormick gritted through clenched teeth.

"Hey, I'm only tryin' to help."

"You wanna help? Then don't help!"

"You're not gonna get this done today, much less your other chores..."

"No, I won't; not if you keep 'helping'..." McCormick leaned back against the wall, downing the tea in one long draught; then rested his forehead against the icy cold glass. "Tell ya what, Hardcase; unless you have some other constructive reason for being down here, why don't you leave me with my ineptitude, and I will bet you four dinners next week, wherever you say, that I'll not only finish the sea wall today, but the other stuff as well; and," he added with a devilish gleam, "I'll also clean out the garage. I win, I pick the restaurant."

Total disbelief shone in Hardcastle's eyes, as he sensed an easy victory. "Well, kiddo, you've caught yourself this time. If you should, by some miracle, manage this, then we'll go to that pizza place you like so much; but better make plans for Barney's Beanery next week."

"Fine, anything; now get outta here and let me get some work done." McCormick retrieved the trowel, began spreading mortar over a cracked stone.

Biting back another 'helpful suggestion', Hardcastle started for the path. "Sure, okay, go ahead...don't bother listening to me; do it your usual way, learn by...by..." He turned suddenly, grinning broadly, "By trowel and error." He chuckled as a glob of concrete landed at his feet, and headed for the main house.

McCormick smiled to himself, determined to beat Hardcastle at his own game. After all, he had until midnight, and he'd win if it killed him.

And several yards down the beach, near the access road, binoculars lowered, and calm, thoughtful eyes studied the distant figures. A slight smile curved thin lips, as the slim figure rose from his observation point, returned to a carefully concealed black Seville.

II

"Is that the guy?" Jayce Blanckert peered through the darkly tinted glass as the Seville passed Angelo's.

"Yeah, I think so. They came to this pizza place three times so far this week," Eric-replied, pausing to allow a car into the backed up traffic lane, as his brother watched the two men enter the restaurant. It would have been unlikely that the two would be taken for brothers: Eric was short, slim, with common, unremarkable features; only his eyes held a measure of intelligence, with a cold glint of cunning. Jayce, tall and rangy, broad shoulders hinting at deceptive strength, had a rough, street-wise appearance and attitude; he rarely thought before acting.

"Don't think, be sure. You have any trouble locating him?"

"Oh, yeah, that was the really tough part; for awhile, there, I wasn't sure I'd manage it."

"What did you do? You were careful?"

"Had to look in the phone book."

Jayce did not appreciate the sarcasm, "You're a barrel of laughs today, aren't you?"

"Just tryin' to cheer you up a bit. Where's your sense of humor?"

"In prison. Along with fifteen years of my life."

"Yeah, well, I'm as sure as I can be without coming right out and asking somebody." He shrugged. "After all, the kid was just 13 or so when I saw him in the courthouse back in '64 — when you got the suspended sentence."

"Yeah, yeah, and you only saw him for a few seconds; but you're the one with the great memory."

"I wasn't payin' that much attention to some kid and his mom, okay?"

"You sure nobody's seen you?"

"Yeah. But I couldn't hear anything they said, most of the time — had to stay far enough away so's not to be noticed. That old guy sure does a lot of yelling; I wouldn't want to be his kid for nuthin'."

"Why not? He's richer than sin, and close to seventy. Just hang around long enough and inherit it all. You can put up with a lot for coupla million and a big estate like that."

"Yeah, but I've been watchin' them for over a week, don't forget. That old buzzard hardly ever lets the guy outta his sight; always tellin' him what to do, when to do it, how to do it." He steered around a gawking tourist, headed for the Pacific Coast Highway. "I have to say that the kid does stand up to him; but, like as not, he usually does as he's told."

"Good. That makes it easier for us. He's used to taking orders."

The traffic thinned somewhat as they left Malibu, and they begin reviewing Eric's carefully thought-out plan. Once Jayce had proposed the idea, Eric knew it would take considerable preparation and attention to detail, which Jayce found tiresome.

"You given notice yet?" Jayce asked.

Eric nodded. "Tomorrow's the last day. I take the van back in, after my last delivery to Lowell's Pharmacy." He looked at his older brother with a certain amount of pride. "All this time, all these years, no one even thought of suspecting a lowly, nearly forty-year-old deliveryman; my twenty-year record is spotless. Those other jerks were so obvious, they got picked up right away. I lasted longer than any of them, and it paid off big. I never took risks, and I paid well. That may change, though; one of the security men, a new guy, seems kinda suspicious. He hasn't said or done anything, but I've learned to be cautious. I've been clean the past three months, waiting for you to get out. But if anyone starts digging now, before we're ready, it'll be tricky."

"I saw a patrol car outside the pharmaceutical place where you pick up the stuff. Coupla cops nosing around, talkin' to people."

"Damn, sooner than I thought." But he smiled, confident, "I'll just do everything by rote. After all, tomorrow's my last day; what can happen? It'll be awhile before anyone notices the missing stuff; I re-packed and re-sealed everything, just a few items that we'll need. I'll run the van through the car wash, and clean it out; it's already scheduled for a new driver. We won't be traced through it." He chuckled suddenly, "You know, the shift boss-man, he wanted to give me a retirement dinner. Said I couldn't, had some family plans I couldn't change. He wanted to reward me for twenty years of selfless service, an example for the other employees."

They both laughed, and Jayce shook his head. "Hell, I hope not; we don't need the competition."

### III

Hardcastle crossed the patio to the poolside table, carrying a pot of coffee and a plate of eggs. He glanced toward the darkened Gatehouse, pushed the baseball cap back on his head; he smiled grimly as he devised a new and novel means of getting McCormick up before noon. However, the slamming of the Gatehouse door put an abrupt end to any idea he was considering; McCormick appeared soon after, yawning and stretching. The ocean breeze still held the chill of the night air, and McCormick wore his favorite navy blue jogging suit - which Hardcastle considered pointless, as the ex-con never jogged.

By-passing the table, the younger man went directly to the section of the patio that overlooked a wide expanse of distant sand and surf. With an obligatory 'Morning, Judge' and half-smile, he leaned on the low stone wall, scanning the beach with avid anticipation.

Hardcastle, with dawning suspicion, lowered his half-raised coffee cup. "The typhoon season is over, kid; and there'd better not be any cute little beach bunnies hoppin' around down there, 'cause my private beach is just that - private!"

McCormick was only half-listening, which was half more than he usually did. "Uh-uh. I'm waiting for her. I've been waiting for her all my life."

"Who?" Hardcastle tugged the wide brim of the Yankees cap down against the morning sun, followed McCormick's line of vision. "You don't know anyone around here. That is, no one you'd be interested in."

"I saw her, strictly by accident, week ago today. You know, last Friday morning, when you got me up at that ungodly hour to repair the sea wall? God, I thought my heart had stopped."

"That sounds dangerous, kid. How come you didn't mention her when I was there?"

"Since when are you interested in my ladies? I tell ya, Hardcase, she's The One; I can feel it. We were definitely made for each other."

"Uh-huh; what about Claire, Marlana, Lorrette, Doreen, and...what's her name—" Hardcastle held both hands out from his chest, "The short brunette whose assets always preceded her?"

"Bonita, yeah...No, Judge, all those were just mere females. This, this is a woman," McCormick wandered down to the stone post, leaned past it to see further down the beach.

"Aw, gee, kiddo, I didn't think you knew the difference. Most of the young ladies you bring home have bustlines greater than their IQ - collectively, he added. "Which, by the way, puts each of 'em a way ahead of you." He leaned back in the white, wrought iron chair, hands behind his head. "Let me guess: Blonde, blue eyes, fantastic figure too good to be true..."

"And legs, Hardcase; the longest, most perfect legs this side of Susan Anton. A golden goddess, running along the tide the way she does. My own personal Atalanta."

"Yeah, well, What'isname, he had three gold apples - you're gonna need a bushel just to get her attention. You think you can...keep up with her? I've never seen anyone within a mile of her." Seeing the instant curiosity, he knew he had McCormick's full attention now.

"You've already met her? Wasn't interested, was she—can't blame her... Is she local? I don't remember seeing her around here before. And believe me, everybody in a 100-mile radius knows Seagull Beach is off limits to anyone under thirty in a bathing suit."

"To most people, yeah. However, I do allow a few - a very select few, to cross my property on occasion. She vacations here for two weeks or so every year at Jason Connell's place. He spends half the year in Europe, and lends his house out to various friends. We were out of town when she was here last year. I really don't know all that much about her; just that it's kinda nice seeing her every morning." At the smugly knowing look, he added with exasperation, "The most we've ever exchanged was 'good morning' and a wave, McCormick; so just stop thinking what you're thinking. Besides, how do you know she's under thirty? Not to mention she's taller than you."

"She's not taller than me. She's taller than you. All six gorgeous feet of her."

"In three-inch heels, kid, she's taller than both of us."

"Who cares, Judge?" He checked his watch, the new one; he wanted to look his best, and the gold Seiko was classier than the other one. She had, for the past few days, excepting the weekend and Monday, ran along the tideline between six and six-thirty. It was a few minutes after six, and he decided to head down the beach trail, to intercept her. He had worked extra hard, and extra long, that week, to get Friday and the weekend off. He gave Hardcastle a wide grin as he started off. "If the lady is in a receptive mood, I may be home by this time Monday evening. See ya, Judge."

Hardcastle shook his head, wondering if he should have told McCormick everything about his 'Atalanta'. What the hell, let the kid learn the rest on his own; it would be an instructive - and humbling - experience for him.

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She was early today, just approaching the mid-point of Hardcastle's property as McCormick jogged slowly over the eight or ten yards to the crashing breakers. Her running shorts and tank top were rust and orange, enhancing the golden brown of her California tan; yesterday had been red and black, the day before, dark blue. She seemed unaffected by the coolness of the early morning air. A hot-blooded woman...McCormick liked that; she'd keep her man warm on those long, cold winter evenings - not to mention spring, summer, and fall evenings...and mornings and days, and nights... With that thought to spur him on, he picked up speed. Easily passing her steady gait, he turned, to face her, running backwards.

The eyes that looked at him were wide and friendly; a deep ocean blue, clear and intelligent. A cold gust of wind from the ocean blew red-blond hair back from high, sculptured cheekbones, straight nose, and wide, full lips. He had been wrong, this wasn't Atalanta; this was Helen of Troy, Venus, Diana...all of those, and more. She flashed him a white, perfect smile, giving him all the encouragement he needed.

"Hi, I'm Mark McCormick. I was just hired by the California Coastal Committee as lifeguard and beach security. And, as such, it's my job to see all joggers safely across lonely stretches of beachfront property." He was breathless, and not from the unaccustomed effort of running.

Her steady pacing wavered, then resumed, as she laughed. "You're the new maintenance man at Judge Hardcastle's estate, aren't you?"

McCormick retained his heart-melting smile - which had always worked before, and groaned inwardly. Sometimes he wondered if he had PROPERTY OF GULLS-WAY stamped on his forehead. "More than that, actually. I'm the Judge's right-hand man; he doesn't make a move without me."

She glanced past his shoulder, her gait slowing somewhat. When she looked back at him, there was a warm, loving glow in her eyes. McCormick hadn't been watching her eyes, when she glanced away, and so missed the real significance of the look he was longing to see there.



Both started to speak at the same time, but before either could say anything, McCormick came up against a brick wall that all but sent him sprawling headlong. As it was, the unexpected impact knocked him off balance, and he would have fallen if strong hands hadn't caught his upper arms, set him upright, and steadied him on his feet.

Startled, McCormick looked up at Atalanta's Adonis: 6' 8" of bronzed muscle and bone, blond, blue eyes; of indeterminate age, but definitely over forty. He stepped back, dismayed, staring wordlessly at this epitome of robust health and virile vitality.

"Uhhh..." Was the only intelligent thing he could think of to say at the moment; to himself, he swore.

There was a giggling, and for the first time, McCormick noticed three mini-Adonises grouped behind the original. Double damn. At least he hadn't made a total fool of himself - he hadn't asked her out. But the fact that he had meant for tonight to be the most romantic and memorable evening of their combined lives didn't make it easier. McCormick's heart thudded to his shoes, and his spirits descended to minus twenty, as this Adonis laid claim to his golden goddess.

"You okay there, little fella?" The voice was deep, resonant, and pleasantly Texan...it figured. "You shouldn't run backwards like that; never know what you'll step into."

McCormick almost preferred some jealousy to the open amusement and self-assurance. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine..." Which was as far from the truth as he had ever gotten; he was miserable, but rallied bravely, "Judge Hardcastle, he sent me down here to invite you - all of you - over to Gulls-Way for dinner one night next week." The lie was smooth, born of long practice, and he hoped fervently that this walking side of beef didn't suspect he had been about to hit on his wife, and mother of his children...damn, damn, damn. "Seems he missed you last year, and since you're neighbors, sort of..."

"Well, now, that's mighty nice of Judge Hardcastle, and we've been looking forward to meeting the people out this way..." He held out a long, muscular arm, and continued, with a grin that belonged to an office-seeking politician, "Glad to finally make an acquaintance, young fella. I'm Larimer Walter-Smythe, of the Houston Walter-Smythes. You can call me Larry."

"McCormick," he replied shortly, and shook the offered hand, "You can call me—" He glanced into the sparkling eyes of his lost love, 'anytime' he sent mentally to her; then returned Larry's brilliant smile with equal wattage, "Mark."

Walter-Smythe moved aside, indicated the younger boys, "These little monsters are Adam, Brian, and Carlyle; we're thinking of starting on the D's next year," he chuckled, drawing his wife to him in a fond, close embrace. "This lovely lady is Marshelia; we like to call her Marcy."

I'd like to call her mine, McCormick thought forlornly, as he took her warm, slim hand. "Then can I tell Judge Hardcastle to expect you?" He honestly hoped not.

"I'm afraid we'll have to take a rain check. The reason we're down

here to meet Marcy early, seems there's a cry-sis at the old Rolling W, and we have to leave this evening. But it was nice meeting you, and be sure to tell the Judge that we look forward to seeing him next year."

McCormick's gaze followed the group as they continued down the beach, sadly returning Marcy's parting wave. At least he wouldn't have to endure having the invitation accepted, not to mention Hardcastle's reaction at having five surprise dinner guests - that prayer had been answered.

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Hardcastle sauntered down the sandy trail, attempting to conceal his amusement, and not succeeding. McCormick trudged back toward the pathway, hands in the pockets of his hooded pull-over, his whole attitude one of total dejection. The Judge was not looking forward to the next few hours; McCormick's breakups always read like the death scene in Romeo and Juliet. But this time, he hadn't even gotten up to bat; no hits, no runs, no score. Hardcastle couldn't take it, not even the thought of it.

He continued down the curving path, waved to get McCormick's attention, "Hey, kid..." As McCormick kept walking, head down and unheeding, he raised his voice above the crash of the breakers, "Mark!!" Using his given name usually evoked a quick response from McCormick, as the ex-con automatically assumed either he was in big trouble, or something was wrong.

McCormick paused, turned to face Hardcastle at the foot of the trail. "You knew, didn't you? Dammit, you could have told me!"

"Aw, com'on, kid; don't take it so hard. Week ago, you never knew she existed; you know her for what, five, ten minutes, and she still hasn't the slightest idea that you exist."

"You're a real understanding guy, Judge."

"Sure I am. Now, before you even start with the my-whole-world-is-falling-apart routine," he added quickly, "Could you maybe run down to Dr. Barrows' place, and pick up my fly rod he borrowed last spring? I wanna take it with me on our fishing trip next month."

"Yeah, okay..." He started down the beach, in the opposite direction the Walter-Smythes had taken. "I haven't got anything else to do, right? Three whole days just to run your errands..."

"Look," Hardcastle called after him, "When you get the fly rod, leave it at the greenhouse, and take the rest of the morning off. I'll credit you another weekend. Meanwhile, go break something, or kick the walls; find a good game of basketball - but get it out of your system. I just don't wanna hear it, not again; three times in five months is a bit much, ya know." His smile took some of the sting out of his words, and he offered McCormick the best alternative he could think of, "We'll have an early lunch on the patio and take in a ball game; grilled hamburgers, and grilled Braves, how's that? Say around 10:30?"

"Sure, Judge; see ya."

Hardcastle watched him for a few moments, then started back toward the house. Maybe it was time to look in the files; find something to take McCormick's mind off his shattered love life.

IV

Jayce Blanckert followed the narrow, rutted road to the beach, then parked the van out of sight. Seagull Beach was a few hundred yards from the access road, with ample natural cover. Eric pointed out the peaks and slopes of the main house, the roof barely visible above the trees.

"There's a trail that goes from the back patio to the beach. Last week, he was down here working, the old guy ordering him around as usual. But the past few mornings, he's been down here alone, but a girl was running along the beach, so I left so she wouldn't see me. So far, she's come by every morning since Tuesday, and he's been in sight. Let's wait around, until after she goes by; maybe we'll get a chance then."

They knelt behind a large boulder, surrounded by salt bushes and sea grass. Eric surveyed the beach with binoculars, as Jayce grew increasingly impatient.

"We could be out here all day...Jeez, is that her? Hell, let's take 'em both; she can keep me company on the long trip to Mexico..."

"Shut up, will ya? We only have room for one, so decide which one you want."

The decision was made for them when the girl went off with an older man and three boys. Eric moved closer to the trail, staying out of sight. They were about to make their move when Hardcastle came down the path. Eric motioned Jayce to remain where he was, as he crouched behind a dune ridged with sea grass, and listened, catching only a few words above the noise of wind and surf. The old Judge kept the young man in sight until he was half-way down the beach, before finally leaving.

Eric rejoined his brother. "He shouldn't be too long. We'll get him when he comes back."

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His luck was running true to form. There was no one at the Barrows', except the help. And none of them knew anything about Hardcastle's fishing rod.

Not wanting to be with anyone, except for the one he had lost, McCormick walked back to Seagull Beach. He felt as one with the crashing surf - alone, desolate, and frustrated. He picked up a handful of rocks, spun them over the waves, venting his disgust at the unfairness of it all. He settled back on the smooth surface of a boulder nearly buried in the sand, and watched the grayish-white seagulls skim over the whitecaps.

"Well," he grumbled to himself, "One thing's for darned certain; this day couldn't get any worse..."

"That," came a rough, unfamiliar voice from behind him, "Depends on your point of view, buddy."

Before he could react, or even move, gloved hands gripped his upper arms, and a thick, folded cloth was pressed over the lower half of his face. Attempting to pull free, he struggled to his feet, only to have his knees buckle as the strong, penetrating fumes fogged his thoughts and dulled his reflexes. As the world faded away, the last thing he felt was anger at being taken out so easily.

McCormick slumped in their grip, the chloroform-soaked cloth still against his face. Jayce looked at his brother, "Can this stuff kill a guy?"

"Yes, it can; so cut it out, he's had enough." Jayce replaced the cloth in a plastic sack, placed it in a back pocket, as Eric counted McCormick's pulse. "Okay, let's get him in the van, and get outta here. Let's not push our luck."

No one saw as they carried McCormick to the hidden vehicle, dumped him among crates and boxes of pharmaceutical supplies, and placed a blanket over him.

As they drove toward the harbor, Eric studied Jayce's craggy profile, worn by time and the stress of confinement. "We're going to get the money, and take off for Mexico, right?"

"That's the plan."

"What about him?" Eric nodded toward the back of the van.

Jayce shrugged, unconcerned. "What about him?"

"I'll go along with getting anything we can out of that old Judge; I mean, it's not even his money, he married into it. But his kid - I don't know. Kidnapping is one thing...murder? That's something else."

The younger Blanckert grabbed the edge of the bucket seat, and the dash, as Jayce swerved sharply, braked to a skidding halt on the shoulder. The dark eyes that glared at him were nearly wild with hatred.

"He sentenced me to fifteen years in that hell-hole! And ten of those years should have been yours! So don't tell me what you're not gonna do. You're going to do whatever I say; you owe me that much! And that Judge - after I've taken every cent he has, I gonna let him watch his kid die! He'll have nothing, nothing; not even the knowledge of who broke him. If you can't take the rough stuff, then stay out of my way. That's all you damn well have to do!"

Not waiting for a reply, Jayce pulled back onto the highway, and the trip was resumed in uneasy silence.

As they came within view of the harbor, Jayce slowed to the local speed limit. He glanced at his brother, saw the tight-lipped anger, the set jaw. Eric always chose silence during their infrequent arguments, and would never resume the conversation afterward. After fifteen years, that was one of the few things that hadn't changed. "You have any trouble getting a space? And I hope you got something that doesn't stand out..."

Eric stared straight ahead. "Don't worry. She looks like a million other boats." He relented somewhat, "Anyway, with so many tourists and vacationers, one more boat's not gonna be noticed. But we were damned lucky to get a berth."

"The real trick will be getting him aboard, without anyone seein' us."

"I don't see any problem there. The harbor is teeming with tourists - mostly elderly people and kids. You think any of them are gonna notice, or even care, if two guys 'help' a buddy back on board who'd been partying too much?"

"The direct approach, huh? I, don't know; I'd prefer him not being seen at all. Hell, I'd rather none of us be seen."

"Believe me, no one will bother us; they're all too busy having fun."

V

The phone rang continuously, and Hardcastle, resting comfortably on the lounge, started to yell for McCormick to answer it. Then he remembered he had sent the ex-con to the Barrows, and hadn't returned yet. Probably spending his free time moping along the beach, if past experience was any indication. Never happy at being interrupted by the phone, he sat aside the file he was reading and went into the study; he took his time, with any luck the caller would get tired of waiting and hang up. They didn't.

He snatched up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Hardcastle?"

"Yeah, who's this?" The Judge frowned at the low, husky voice, not in the mood for one of those calls.

"We got him, Hardcastle; we have your son. You want—"

Hardcastle slammed the receiver down with disgusted anger; crank callers, he hated them. The call had brought back carefully buried memories of the dark terror of nearly fourteen years ago, when his son was MIA for long months of torment and uncertainty; then the final, heart-breaking notification that he had been killed in action. It had taken four months just to identify the body. And the calls - several had been sympathetic and supporting. But there were also the cruel, sick calls, that, thank God, he had managed to intercept; Nancy had never known about them. This was probably a random shot by some weirdo with nothing better to do...

The strident ring interrupted his thoughts. He answered, angry now. "Hardcastle."

"Listen to me, Hardcastle; your son is—"

"No, you listen: You call me again with your damned lies, and I'll have the cops on your ass. If this is some kind of sick joke, I'm not laughing - and when I find you, you won't be laughing, either!" With that, he slammed

the receiver down with even greater force than before. He yanked the jack from the wall, and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

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As Jayce boarded the Gemini, Eric looked expectantly at his brother's startled features, then watched as anger edged out amazement. "What?"

"That...that son of a bitch hung up on me - twice! Wouldn't even talk to me. I oughtta..."

"What did he say?"

"Said I was lyin'." Jayce, in spite of himself, was somewhat taken aback. This wasn't supposed to happen; although from his past association with the Judge, it wasn't entirely surprising. He indicated the Gemini's aft cabin. "He awake yet?"

"No. We could get him to talk to the old man, but he might not wake up for hours. You shouldn't have given him that second dose."

"Ten feet from the boat, he starts comin' out of it. What was I supposed to do?" Jayce ceased his restless pacing, headed for the rear of the boat, Eric on his heels. "We've got to convince Hardcastle that we've got his kid, and that we mean business." Reaching the cabin, he glanced through the one-way glass, and, satisfied, unlocked the door. McCormick was as they had left him, taking up most of the bunk space. The added storage cabinets left very little room to maneuver, and Eric remained near the doorway.

As Jayce bent over McCormick, Eric lunged forward, grabbed the older man's arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Relax, will you? He's got to have a wallet - credit cards, I.D., license, pictures...something we can use. We'll send it with a ransom note." However, a quick search turned up nothing; there were no pockets in the running pants, and the sweatshirt pockets were empty. Jayce straightened, baffled and irritated. "No I.D., no money, no nothing...I don't believe it! Rich guy like him, they don't go around with nothing on 'em."

"He was jogging on his own property. Nowadays, most joggers don't carry anything in their pockets, not even on public roads."

"Well, this is great. A picture isn't all that good, 'cause we'd have to show where he is to be convincing - and we don't want anyone to know where he is. Damn it! Okay, get the camera anyway, it's better than noth— Wait a minute..." He reached down, grabbed McCormick's left wrist, pushed the sleeve back. "No watch, either; or rings." He let McCormick's arm drop, looked at Eric with aggravation at being stymied again, and by an unconscious man, no less.

"Try the other arm," Eric suggested; at Jayce's questioning look, he explained, "Maybe he's left-handed, or something. 'Cause you're right this time, everyone has a watch. Even joggers, so they can pace themselves."

With a wide grin, the older man removed the gold Seiko, tossed it to Eric.

"It looks new, or not worn much. No scratches on the band or crystal."

"We'll send it with the photo, and," he picked up the L.A. paper, a large photo of a local politician with the police commissioner on the front page, "Put this next to him. That should do it."

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Jayce, wearing a pair of driving gloves, placed the developing Polaroid on the desk in the topside salon, then hunted for a box that would accommodate both watch and photo. Checking through the storage bins, he dumped an extra compass from a plain white box. He rummaged through the desk drawers, finding a spiral bound notebook, common and untraceable, and a pair of lightweight work gloves. Both were tossed to Eric, who watched from the sofa.

"Put those on, and write what I say." Eric complied, and Jayce continued, "This time we'll use the guy's name - more personal that way. What did the old man call him, out there on the beach? Mac? Mike?"

"Mark. I'm sure of it; I was a coupla yards closer than you. That, and a few other words, was all I heard clearly."

Jayce dictated the note, while preparing the box. Then box and note were placed in a manila envelope, and securely taped. "You said you had an idea how we can get this to Hardcastle?"

"Yeah, I know the paperboy's route. Some neighborhood kid on a bike. Give him a few bucks, he'll deliver it for us. In fact, after I take the van in today, I'll go on over to the parking garage, get the Caddy, and see to it myself. You stay here, in case he wakes up - I don't think he will, not for a while yet."

Jayce's dark mood had lightened considerably since returning from the phone booth on the walkway, due mainly to the fact that they had managed to work their way out of an unforeseen complication. The hardest part, getting the Hardcastle kid aboard the Gemini, had gone without a hitch. As he had thought, no one on the busy pier had given them a second look. Caps and sunglasses had concealed their features, and attitude was everything; to a casual observer, they were three friends preparing for a weekend jaunt on the motor yacht. Jayce had been right to put the kid under again, someone might have offered to help with their 'drunk' buddy. But now, there was something he had to clear up, and this was as good a time as any; maybe he'd listen to reason. "Jayce, we need to settle something before going any further with this..."

"What?"

"I did what you wanted, followed your instructions to the letter, all the time you were...gone. Continued the operation that we had started together, and kept your share safe from the cops. Now, we're both ready to start fresh; there's nearly six million in the Swiss account, my wife and kids are waiting in Rio..." He paused, hoping Jayce wouldn't react badly to the mention of his family. His brother's wife had divorced him barely a year after he was sent up, and moved to Canada. She had taken their two sons and remarried, to a high-powered Canadian lawyer. Eric figured they would be Jayce's next

'target, and he definitely wasn't going to be involved in that vendetta.

"What are you tryin' to say?"

"So far, we've been very lucky with this scheme of yours. But if the police are starting to get suspicious, well, I don't need any heat; neither of us do. So let's take the money, and let him go. A vengeful father is bad enough, but a vengeful judge is worse. If we kill his kid, he won't rest until he tracks us down; no matter how careful we've been, we may have overlooked something. And Hardcastle would have access to the authorities all over the world." He watched his brother carefully, saw the indecision, "I'll even split 60-40 with you; and," he added with quiet determination, "You'll need my full co-operation to pull this off. To handle the Gemini, if nothing else. The judge pays, the two million, he gets the kid back - alive. Okay?"

Jayce Blanckert considered carefully before answering, knowing he needed his brother's good will, and help, to get the revenge he so desperately wanted. The offer of over four million was a strong inducement, as Eric had known it would be. So, for now, he'd agree; but later... "On one condition: That guy below gives us any trouble, or Hardcastle tries something funny, then we do it my way."

Eric nodded, glad to have gotten even a provisional agreement. Once they reached Mexico, they would go their own way, his debt to Jayce paid. His obligation then would be to his own family and their safety.

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Hardcastle had the grill going full blast, hamburgers sizzling over the red briquettes. It was close to eleven, but he wasn't too concerned. McCormick hadn't bothered with breakfast, and since he didn't have any money with him - his usual state of affairs - he expected Mark any minute, nearly starving, his broken heart and bruised ego forgotten for the time being.

He glanced up as the paperboy sped down the drive on a 10-speed equipped with a newspaper carrier. Hardcastle waved him down, and the bike halted near the Gatehouse. Taking a paper from under his arm, it was thrown with unerring accuracy over hedges and wall, landing on the tiles between patio table and grill. Hardcastle looked in the paperboy's direction, impressed; ordinarily, a toss from that distance would have landed the paper square in the center of the pool. He touched the brim of the Yankees cap in a salute.

"Good shot, Freddy; you're gettin' better."

"Thanks; Judge; don't lose the package. The guy was anxious for you to get it."

Freddy turned the 10-speed around, preparing to leave; Hardcastle stopped him, "What guy? It wasn't McCormick?"

"Nah, somebody in a new, black Caddy. Said you left something at his place, he was in a hurry, and asked me to deliver it. He even gave me five bucks. See ya tomorrow, Judge."

"Wait, what did he look like? You ever see him before?"



"I didn't see him at all; the windows were tinted. The driver rolled the window down just enough to slip the package and money through."

"How'd he sound? --Rough kinda voice?"

"He sounded like everybody else, Judge. I gotta get goin'; got a ball game after my route, and I don't wanna be late."

Hardcastle picked up the rolled newspaper; a 7 x 10 brown envelope was secured under the wide rubberband. His name was printed in one corner, the flap taped. He turned the burgers over, then settled down on the lawn chair with the package and a steak knife. A square box took up half of the envelope; and he slit the flap. Unpeeling the envelope, a taped box fell into his lap; looking inside, he pulled out a folded sheet of lined notebook paper. Printed in all capital letters was the following:

THIS IS THE ONLY WARNING YOU'LL GET.  
WE'VE GOT MARK. YOU WANT TO SEE HIM  
ALIVE AGAIN, YOU'D BETTER FOLLOW ALL  
ORDERS. NO COPS OR FBI, OR HE'S DEAD.  
FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS WILL FOLLOW.

Hardcastle read it twice; then picked up the box, cut the tape. Inside was the watch he had given McCormick a few months ago, on his thirtieth birthday. Under that was a Polaroid snapshot. The photo was head and shoulders, and McCormick was either asleep or unconscious, no bruises that he could see. The newspaper photo was clear enough to make out as today's, the front page photos indistinguishable.

He looked the envelope over carefully. There were no markings of any kind; the printing on the envelope the same as on the note. And it was a good bet that the only fingerprints would be his and Freddy's. He leaned back in the chair, frowning; the earlier caller had said "son". Everyone whom Hardcastle knew, and who knew the Judge, was well aware that he and McCormick weren't related. So, either someone had made a bad mistake, or...

Or maybe it wasn't a mistake. He went into the study, flipped through his desk calendar. The phrase 'follow orders' nagged at him; why no mention of money? What orders was he expected to follow, and for whom and why? As the name he was searching for came up, he smiled grimly. Joe Cadillac was currently out on bail, his over-paid lawyer pulling all kinds of fancy legal maneuvers to avoid court proceedings against him. But he had run out of delaying tactics, and Cadillac was scheduled for court in a few weeks - more than a year after he and McCormick had wrapped up the case.

Hardcastle didn't want to believe that Cadillac would stoop to something this low, but he couldn't think of anyone else who'd not only want to put pressure on him, but also knew exactly how to do it. He had the resources and, although no longer head of the local neighborhood Mafia, he still wielded considerable power in the underworld. A simple 'Grab the kid' would have been sufficient; any number of thugs, Mafia related or not, would have jumped to it. There could have been a mix-up in communication, but Hardcastle suspected the kidnapers meant "son", quote, unquote - probably instructed to

do so. Cadillac knew how he felt about McCormick, the wily old gangster had picked up on that almost immediately.

Barely controlling his anger, he replaced the phone jack, and dialled Cadillac. Going through a butler, a 'business manager', and someone who wouldn't identify himself, he finally got the ex-gangster on the line.

"Judge, how've you been? How's the kid? Or has he finally told you to shove it, and taken off?" The warm laughter belied his words, and served only to worsen Hardcastle's volatile temper.

"You listen to me, Cadillac, and you listen good. You get the hell over here, now, alone; or I swear you'll be county lock-up before the day is over." Hardcastle didn't wait for a response; he broke the connection, started to dial LAPD...then hesitated. He'd talk to Cadillac first, then Carlton. He might not have to call the lieutenant at all, if Cadillac knew what was good for him.

## VI

Joseph Lorenzo Cadillac arrived at Gulls-Way in near record time, the black stretch limousine halting quietly outside the Judge's study. The hulking driver exited, as impressive and ominous as the vehicle he drove, and opened the side door. He stood protectively as Cadillac stepped carefully from the car, looking about cautiously; seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he tried with moderate success to conceal his unease. Hardcastle had never blown up at him like that, much less issued ultimatums...not without good cause. The tranquil surroundings could mask a possible disaster in the making; whatever was wrong, it was serious, deadly serious, and was unsure of what he was walking into. Yet he trusted the Judge enough to meet him on Hardcastle's own terms, a concession Cadillac allowed because of a debt that could not be repaid. With a final, appraising survey, he nodded curtly to his driver and bodyguard, and was escorted to the entryway. The unease was mingled with surprise as the Judge himself answered the door. Hardcastle spared the bodyguard one hard, cold glance, then stepped back to allow entry.

The Judge shoved the door shut with his foot, and they found themselves looking down the double barrels of Hardcastle's shotgun. The burly bodyguard automatically went for his shoulder holster, granite features expressionless. The shotgun moved warningly, and Cadillac placed a restraining hand on his driver's arm. "No, Davey, not yet." His dark eyes locked with Hardcastle's, meeting the cold anger with equal intensity. "The Judge isn't going to shoot us down in cold blood. Are you, Milt?" The calm tone held the barest hint of challenge.

"Up to you, Joe. Now, the two of you, slow and easy, unload the hardware. And be real careful not to try anything, 'cause I can get both of you with a single blast if I hafta."

Davey looked at Cadillac, silently requesting permission to blow this old fool away. Again, Cadillac indicated that Hardcastle's instructions were to be followed. He glanced around the den, through the open door leading to the hallway and main entry. "I suppose that McCormick kid is backing you? I shoulda known something was up when you answered the door instead of him. This is not a good idea, Judge, holding citizens at gunpoint. You

'could be in a lot of trouble, did you think about that?' At Hardcastle's tight-lipped silence, he placed his .44 on the side table. Continuing in a more conversational tone, he searched for a common ground. "You know, Milt, that young man is worth more than you give him credit for. My boy was telling me, just the other day--"

For one heart-chilling second, he thought Hardcastle was going to pull both triggers. Then his grip tightened, and he held control with effort, voice low and threatening, "Shut up. So help me, Cadillac, you say another word and it's all over."

Joe Cadillac, once the undisputed leader of the West Coast Mafia, straightened proudly. Appearing disdainful to his bodyguard, only the ex-jurist saw the covert concern behind the sternness. "What is this, Hardcastle? What's the idea of shaking me down like some common street punk?" Then, lower, just the two of them, "What's wrong, Milt?"

"Don't even try to pretend you don't know what's going on. I know you're behind this, and I don't care what you want, 'cause it isn't gonna work." He waved to the telephone on the side table next to Cadillac. "Now, you get on that phone, and tell your goons to get McCormick here - fast! 'Cause my patience is running out."

"Milt, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

The shotgun motioned to the note lying open on the desk. "Maybe that will refresh your failing memory."

Cadillac turned slightly, read the message where it lay. The short missive explained everything - well, almost everything; he didn't know why the Judge suspected him. But he understood why Hardcastle was so upset, and dangerously so. He recalled all too well his own reactions in a similar situation: Gut-wrenching fear, and absolute desperation. Desperate enough to beg an old 'enemy' for help. Not exactly Hardcastle's course of action, but the Judge rarely followed the conventional path. He looked up, "I know nothing about this." Seeing the disbelief on Hardcastle's face, he reaffirmed his statement, "I swear it on my son's life."

"Maybe. Okay, maybe you don't. But you have people in your organization who do this sort of thing on a regular basis - For a flat fee, satisfaction guaranteed."

Cadillac gave him a long, considered look; then he spread his hands, reasonable and sympathetic. "Why? Why would I, or anyone in my...circle of friends, want to kidnap your, uh, associate?"

"You're due in court next month. Maybe you decided you liked your freedom too much to stand by a commitment. With the proper 'persuasion', perhaps you thought I would get you off."

"We had a deal, Judge Hardcastle," the ex-Mafia boss responded with heated dignity. "I may be many things, but I am still a man of honor; I still keep my word. You and your friend helped get my son back from those killers. In return, I agreed to turn myself, and my records, over to the

'cops. Now, it's up to my lawyer to keep me out of prison - that's what I pay him for. Believe me, Milt, I would never do anything like this," he indicated the note, adding, "And if I did, it wouldn't be McCormick. He risked his life for my boy; I don't forget something like that."

Hardcastle was uncertain; he felt Cadillac was telling the truth, but then, who else...? The phone rang with tension-breaking suddenness, and the Judge answered on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

"Hardcastle?" It was the same voice that had called earlier.

"Yes."

"You hang up, we'll kill him now."

"No. No, I won't hang up." Hardcastle kept the other two in sight, but lowered the shotgun as the conversation continued. "What do you want?"

"Two million; unmarked and random numbers."

"Let me talk to him."

"No."

"I don't talk to him, no deal."

"I'll call again later. And remember, Hardcastle, no cops. You call the cops, you'll never find him - not in one piece."

There was a click; Hardcastle stared at the receiver, then absently replaced it. He walked slowly over to the desk, placed the shotgun on the dark oak surface. Slumped in the chair, he spun away from his guests, "Sorry, Joe, looks like I was wrong—this time..." He gazed blankly at the distant ocean, hand over his eyes as he evaluated the options open to him. There weren't many.

Cadillac picked up his .44 Magnum; Davey replaced his arsenal, holding on to the .38, awaiting only his superior's order. Cadillac waved him aside, "Put the gun away, Davey; wait for me in the car."

His bodyguard looked at him, hesitant. "You sure, Mr. Cadillac?"

"Very sure. Go on."

He waited until the door closed, then settled into the leather chair opposite the antique desk. "Is there anything I can do?"

The chair swivelled slowly to face him, and Cadillac saw the unyielding determination in Hardcastle's icy blue eyes. "Yeah, maybe you can..."

"Whatever you need. Name it."

"I need two million, Joe; and I don't think they're gonna give me much

'time." His smile was humorless, voice weary, "You still wanna help?"

"Two mil - that's steep. You know my funds are frozen, pending this court thing coming up..."

"That's not what I meant. I have an idea, but I need help in a certain area of...expertise. What I have in mind is sorta borderline legal. That's where you come in."

As Hardcastle outlined his plan, Cadillac smiled broadly, then broke into appreciative laughter. "Milt, I don't ever want to get on the wrong side of you. This is worthy of anything I ever devised."

"I'll consider that a compliment, Joe. How long will it take?"

"Four, five hours...maybe less. You might say we keep an inventory on hand." He smiled at Hardcastle's pained look, both aware that the Judge couldn't act on the near-admission. "I'll see to it personally, get extra help, if necessary. Since this is Friday, you should have no trouble at the bank. Try to get 1,000 dollar bills; 100's will take up too much room. And I don't think you want to use 10-grand notes, do you?"

Hardcastle shook his head, "No, I'm gonna be out enough as it is." If it didn't come off as planned, the loss wouldn't matter.

"Knowing you, I take it you plan on calling in the cops?" At Hardcastle's nod, he continued, "Then have the bank deliver the money here, in a large satchel - tell the bank manager what you're doing, he'll see that it goes through okay."

"Oh? Know him, do you?"

"No. I'm only saying that the amount you're asking for...well, there's a question of volume. Understand?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"My man will bring the case, along with a tracer, say, about five hours from now." He rose, preparing to leave. "And, Milt, be careful. One wrong move, and you both could be dead."

"Nothing we're not used to." He accompanied Cadillac to the door. "Thanks, Joe; it means a lot to me."

"I know he does."

The ex-mobster and ex-judge looked at each other with complete understanding, once again finding themselves conditional allies.

## VII

McCormick awoke to a thumping great headache, a queasy stomach, and a confused state of mind. Then memory flooded back, and he sat up abruptly, without being fully aware of his surroundings. His forehead cracked smartly on

the low ceiling, and he fell back, swearing softly. If nothing else, the jarring collision served to bring him fully awake; he looked about the small room, this time without rising. It was low-ceilinged, long and narrow; clearance above the bunk had been considerably lessened by the recent addition of overhead storage cabinets. Bare of furnishings, aside from built-in bunk and cabinets, it measured roughly 5' by 9' in the open space. Across from the bunk was a closet and bathroom with shower, both with doors removed. The bath and closet were separated by another built-in cabinet, with a center space for a chair, the counter-top doubling as a desk. Over this, drawn curtains, and the entire room was panelled in walnut. Another cabinet ran the narrow width of one end, between bunk and bath, with sink and bar-type faucet in bright, polished brass. All the drawers had been removed from the cabinets, even the storage ones under the bed; also, the clothes bar and shelves had been taken from the closet. Anything that could possibly be used for a weapon had been removed. From the gentle rocking motion, and the muffled slap of waves, he realized he was aboard a small, luxury-equipped, motor yacht.

He leaned back on the bare mattress, closed his eyes; he couldn't figure out why he had been brought here, and in such a secretive fashion. They weren't working on any case, having finished the last one a few weeks ago; and Hardcastle had wanted some repairs done around the estate before starting on another one. He rested a few more minutes, and when it became evident the headache wasn't going away, he thought it might be interesting to see just how much trouble someone had gone to simply to keep him where he was.

Thus committed, he forced himself to his feet. The floor lurched suddenly, and he stumbled forward, catching himself on the bar-cabinet. There was a distant engine roar, gradually diminishing, and the turbulent rocking subsided to a gentle sway. He moved carefully to the sink, splashed cool, fresh water over his face in an attempt to shake the grogginess; he drank from cupped hands to alleviate the cottony dryness. Whatever they had given him hadn't completely worn off, and the constant motion wasn't helping matters any - he was learning a whole new meaning for the term 'rock'n'roll'.

Leaning against the cabinet, and gripping the edge firmly, he resumed his visual inspection. He glanced inside the bath; crammed in the space of a linen closet was a stainless steel sink, toilet, and shower - with a little over six feet of headroom. He groaned at the unintentional pun, and filed it away for future use. The closet was only slightly larger. He reached across the desktop and pulled the curtains aside - no curtain rod, the material seemed part of the panelling. Behind the maroon burlap drapes was a blacked-out porthole, bolted and secured. He didn't even know if it was still daylight, and he checked his watch, to find it missing. Damn, he would lose it the first time he'd worn it since the Judge had given it to him. He hadn't wanted to risk damaging it on one of their assignments; he had been looking forward to an entirely different situation when he had slipped it on that morning.

He moved to the center of the room. The cabin was lit by a single, recessed light, with a frosted plastic cover. The tiny lights in the bathroom and closet had been taken out, metal plates fastened over the receptacles; since there were no doors, interior lights in those two small rooms were unnecessary. Even the electric outlets, spaced conveniently around the walls, had metal covers. The overhead light was covered by a newly added metal grate, fastened

with countersunk screws. Quite a bit of forethought had gone into preparing this room, so his being here was not a spur-of-the-moment decision, but a well-planned, and excuted, action.

He was getting dizzy, staring at the ceiling about ten inches from his nose, and decided to check the door. Although he knew it would be locked, he tried it anyhow, just to be consistent. It didn't budge, not even when he kicked it. A round, one-way glass, two inches in diameter, had been installed at eye level. He glared at the miniature reflection, positive he was being kept under surveillance. An almost inaudible motor clicked on, and he looked up at the small metal vent as cool, fresh air flowed in. All the conveniences of home, he thought disgustedly, and just about as much freedom.

He crossed back to the bunk, stretched out; he didn't think he'd have long to wait. The thought had barely been completed when there was a low click, and the latch moved downward. The door opened inward, and McCormick looked up as two men, both wearing ski masks and dark grey coveralls, entered. Two identical .38s were aimed at him, and he studied the dark brown eyes, trying to decide which, if either, would be the more reasonable.

The taller, and obviously older, one spoke. "Okay, buddy, over against the wall, hands on your head." His rough, gravelly voice grated on McCormick's nerves.

"Bulkhead." The other one corrected in a low voice.

"What?"

"It's a bulkhead, not a wall."

"Who the hell cares?" The .38 motioned McCormick up, "You, do what I said!"

McCormick slid off the bunk, slowly and carefully, unused to the swaying deck, and the anesthetic still lingering stubbornly. Hands behind his head, he stood against the wood-panelled bulkhead.

"Turn around; face the wall."

Not wanting to let either of them out of his sight, he hesitated. The shorter one moved to his side, raising the gun on a level with, and a few feet from, his left temple. "Better do as he says," the quiet voice was a startling contrast to his companion's. The eyes weren't as hard, but his manner clearly stated he would brook no arguments. "Believe me, you don't want to get him angry."

Knowing he couldn't jump one of them without the other one nailing him, McCormick reluctantly complied. The older man approached him, took his wrist in a tight grip, pulled his arm down and behind him. McCormick felt the familiar cold metal snap around his wrist; he didn't like the way this was shaping up, and berated himself for not plowing into them earlier. As his cuffed hand was held against his lower back, his other arm was twisted painfully McCormick clenched his teeth, suppressing his anger and resisting the impulse to shove the man's face through the deck.

More force was applied, a dangerous undertone in the rough voice, "You don't look much like your old man. You don't have the indifferent, unbending steel in your eyes, that mightier-than-thou arrogance... Maybe that's just as well. 'Cause if I looked at you, and saw him—" He was slammed roughly against the wall, a reinforcement to the unfinished threat.

The other one interrupted, anxious, "Take it easy; we do want him able to talk, you know."

The pressure was eased, and McCormick leaned weakly against the cool panelling. The oblique reference to his father shook him, and he was more confused than before - Just what the hell was going on? The remaining cuff was snapped around his other wrist, and he started to turn, ask for some kind of explanation. A large hand clamped on his shoulder, stopping him mid-turn.

"Not so fast, buddy; we're goin' upstairs. And since we don't want you seein' something you shouldn't..." The hand left his shoulder, and a dark cloth was tied over his eyes.

"Look, you guys wanna tell me what this is all about? What are you gonna do, make me walk the plank?"

He was pulled from the wall and shoved forward. "Don't tempt me. Now shut up, or I'll shut you up - for good!"

One took his arm, led him forward and up a narrow companionway; the other one followed close behind. The room they entered was more open, harbor sounds and smells carried on the breeze from open windows. Judging from the amount of activity going on outside, they were berthed in a teeming, busy harbor - either pleasure or commercial. He was pushed into a metal folding chair, while one stood behind him, to his left, the gun resting lightly against the base of his skull. The other settled into a chair across from him, and gave him his instructions.

"Okay, now, here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna make a phone call, and you're gonna tell your dad that you're here, you're okay, but if he doesn't do what we say, you're dead. You got all that?"

It was fortunate for all concerned that they couldn't see his eyes; as it was, he was just barely able to keep the amazement off his face. "Uh, just what is it that he's supposed to do?"

"He'd better hand over two million, or you're goin' for a swim."

"Two million?! Two million what - you're not talkin' dollars, are you? From my dad? Are you serious?"

"Damn right we're serious. You'd better convince him of that, if you want to live."

"But..."

The quiet voice spoke from behind him, a calm warning. "Don't argue, Mr. Hardcastle; your father can well afford it. Two million for his only



son and heir; that's very reasonable."

McCormick's head snapped up at the mistaken name; he bit his lower lip, hard, to keep from laughing outright. Somehow, he didn't think the other two would see the humor of the situation. Then a more sobering thought occurred, that if they did discover the error, it just may prove fatal for him. But despite everything, he would love to see the Judge's face when the ransom demand was made - Jeez, these guys had nerve!

His amusement was quickly curtailed by apprehension; if these guys told Hardcastle they had his son, the Judge would freak, the game would be up, and he'd be history. Unless...unless the Judge quickly put two and two together. The fact that he hadn't returned to Gulls-Way, and now was getting a phone call demanding ransom for a 'son'. He had to trust that Hardcastle would figure it out before anything regrettable happened.

They took his silence for agreement, and the older one went for the phone. Regardless of Hardcastle's reaction, McCormick realized he really wasn't too keen to hear the Judge's response—after all, two million! He had no idea what the Judge's financial position was, that was one of the multitude of subjects that Hardcastle never discussed with him — but Gulls-Way alone probably listed for around two, three million. He knew Hardcastle had various investments, stocks, bonds, T-Bills; the checks came periodically in the mail. There were savings accounts and checking accounts in various banks, and he never seemed short of funds, despite his frequent complaints about the increasingly high cost of living. McCormick couldn't even begin to imagine such a large amount; even the \$750,000 they had recovered last year had seemed unreal to him.

There was a soft chime as the telephone was slammed down next to him, and the other man remained standing this time. He heard the tones as Hardcastle's number was dialed, listened to a brief, one-sided conversation.

"Hardcastle?...Yeah, he's here...A few seconds, no longer..."

The receiver was held to his ear, and he heard Hardcastle's concerned voice, very worried, "That you, son; you okay?"

So the Judge had already been contacted, had figured it out, and wanted him to play along. It was an effort not to smile. "Yeah, I'm fine...Dad." A gun nudged his ribs, reminding him. "Uh, they want me to tell you to do what they say, or they'll...kill me. I think they mean it, Dad. They've got a lot sunk into this, and nothing to lose."

The receiver was taken away, and the gravelly voice spoke into it, "You've got eight hours, Hardcastle."

He barely heard Hardcastle's alarmed protest, "I can't get two million in eight hours; it's impossible—"

It was a rather obvious maneuver to keep the line open for a few minutes more, to get the kidnapers to talk. Then McCormick heard the Judge's voice clearly, still attempting reason, knew the receiver was close to him again. He hadn't been told to say anything, and he knew better than to volunteer.

He turned instinctively at a sudden movement on his right, from above. But unseeing, and totally unaware, he took the full brunt of the downward sweep of the .38, the impact sending him to the floor.

Hollowly, as if from a great distance, he heard the older man speaking again.

"Eight hours, Hardcastle; every minute you delay after that, he gets more of the same. How long do you think he'll last?"

## VIII

Hardcastle replaced the receiver, glanced over at the police officer at the wire-tap. The young man shook his head; the kidnapers were too smart to risk having the calls traced. But he had hoped to trace this one, as he felt sure that the phone was in the same location as McCormick; the other calls had probably been made from different public phone booths. He had chanced keeping the line open, and had heard the awful crack, and McCormick's sharp, gasping cry - and he hadn't even managed to get the trace completed. The tape was rewound, and played back; after this, he wasn't going to do anything to place McCormick in further jeopardy.

"'Sunk into this'," Hardcastle mused, leaning back in the desk chair. He didn't think about the last part of the tape, concentrated instead on the only message McCormick had managed to send him. "That could mean one of two things, or both. The colloquial meaning: They've gone to great expense. And the literal meaning: Sunk; immersed in water. So, at the very least, he's somewhere on the water, most likely the ocean, probably a boat - a rather large one, if there's great expense involved." He looked over at the two ranking officers, one a friend. The other, Lt. Williams, had prudently retreated behind Carlton after having suggested that McCormick had thought up the whole thing in an effort to get money out of Hardcastle, by appearing to be a mistaken 'son' and kidnapped. Hardcastle hadn't thought McCormick capable of that, and had argued that the ex-con could not have been all that certain he would pay. The Judge didn't bother to explain the real reason for believing McCormick innocent of the officer's ridiculous charge.

Two years ago at this point, Hardcastle may have considered McCormick's possible collusion; and, even then, perhaps would have given him the benefit of the doubt. But not now - for now there was no doubt. McCormick was, admittedly, an exceptional car thief, a passable second-story man, and a damn good safe cracker, but...he had never intentionally set out to harm anyone in his life. Deceit, fraud, and betrayal were not in his nature. And if there was one thing the Judge had a firm belief in, it was the unchangeability of basic human nature.

He directed his comments to Carlton, "Well, that narrows it down to 3,000 miles of California coastline. Down toward Mexico, I would think; two million would last forever down there."

Lt. Carlton was the only one in the room with courage enough to challenge Hardcastle, after witnessing the verbal barrage suffered by the other lieutenant. "Milt, you aren't thinking of paying, are you?"

"What else can I do? Whoever they are, they think McCormick's my son.

I want to get this over with as quickly as I can. I don't want to chance wasting time, and having them possibly discover their mistake. If they find out he's an ex-con, and no relation to me at all, it's very likely they'll kill him and take off."

"What's to stop them from killing him anyway? He'd be dead; you'd be out two million."

Hardcastle glared at him, anger sparking, "Are you saying I should let them kill McCormick, and be two million ahead?"

Carlton shifted uncomfortably. "No, of course not. But you could try negotiating for a lower ransom, something more reasonable. Say, \$200,000 or so. You never pay list price, Milt."

Hardcastle shook his head decisively. "No, there'll be no negotiating, no delays. I'm going to see to it that they get everything they ask for."

## IX

McCormick, though not completely out, was close enough to unconsciousness to offer no resistance as he was half-carried, half-dragged back to the cabin. The whole side of his face ached dully, and he wasn't sure something hadn't been broken. Dumped unceremoniously on the bunk, he was only vaguely aware of the hurried, low-voiced conversation between the other two.

The argumentative tone rose angrily, "...We don't need him anymore; why risk keeping him around?" McCormick silently agreed, just leave him at the nearest port... The door slammed behind heavy footsteps, but he wasn't alone. There was the sound of running water, and he started slightly as a cold, damp cloth was pressed against his right cheekbone.

"Be still, Mr. Hardcastle; you're bleeding a little. Not much, just scraped skin."

McCormick relaxed somewhat. At least the remaining kidnapper wasn't the crazy one, and wasn't going to work him over any more—that is, he hoped not.

"...Uh, look...Would you mind...not calling me 'Mr. Hardcastle'?" He spoke carefully, moving his jaw as little as possible. "Mr. Hardcastle is...my dad. My name is Mark."

"Yeah, I know."

McCormick was distantly interested; they knew his first name, but not his last. The rocking motion that had caused him such discomfort earlier, was now oddly soothing. The constant, gentle slap of waves was lulling; he fought it, trying to stay alert. And there was something he wanted to know. "Are you going to...let me go?"

"If I have anything to say about it, yes. Assuming, of course, the ransom is paid."

"How about the blindfold? I take it I'm back in the cabin—nothing to see

that I haven't...already seen."

"Afraid there is, Mist— Mark. As long as you're blindfolded, I don't have to wear that damned ski-mask. And you definitely don't want to see, or know, who we are, because then we'd have to kill you. So far, there's no reason to do that. Don't give us one."

"Can you tell me what time it is?"

"Around noon; we'll be casting off in an hour or so."

"Oh? Are we in a commerical harbor?"

Eric started to answer, then caught himself; this guy was a lot sharper than he looked. "Don't ask any more questions; you know all you need to." Removing the cloth, he saw that the bleeding had stopped, leaving a large, purplish-blue bruise down the side of his face, a slight swelling forming under his eye. Eric had known it was necessary to convince the Judge that they meant what they said, but still... The kid wasn't responsible for his old man putting Jayce away for all those years, didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of his brother's pent-up hatred. He had always been uncomfortable around violence, despite his line of business. When it had become necessary, and unavoidable, he had preferred to delegate such unpleasant tasks to others, and never having to see the end result. "How does it feel?"

"How...does it look?"

"Pretty damn awful," he replied honestly.

"That about covers it."

Eric smiled faintly; he could get to like this guy, which would not go down well with Jayce. "Listen to me. I'm gonna take off the cuffs, but you don't even touch the blindfold until you hear the door close. If you do, I'll have to shoot you."

"Okay, deal."

Eric unlocked the cuffs, pulled them off, and backed slowly out of the cabin, gun ready. He paused outside the door, checked to make sure the lock had caught. It occurred to him that Hardcastle's son hadn't behaved like he would have thought a rich, spoiled bastard would, whining and complaining, and, at the very least, demanding better accomodations. He was taking it all calmly in stride, almost as if this sort of thing happened to him every day. Also, he hadn't crumpled under Jayce's rough treatment; and he was certain Mark would take Jayce apart if given half a chance...no, he was by no means a soft, pampered rich kid. And Jayce, despite his 52 years, was tough; guys half his age would go out of their way to avoid a confrontation. He'd have to keep a very close watch on both of them; pushed too far, the Hardcastle kid would fight back. There was a core of steel underlying his easy-going nature that could mean trouble.

X

Lt. Carlton flipped through sheets of computer paper; he had contacted

the Coast Guard, had all ports and harbors south of Marina Del Rey checked for any recent information on either large cruisers or small motor yachts. The Judge reasoned that a trip to Mexico, with at least two people aboard, warranted a well-equipped cruiser or yacht. He was still going with his hunch that the kidnappers would leave the country as soon as possible. Harbors along the southern coast down to the Mexican border had reported in, and the result was overwhelming.

"Milt, there's no way we can check out all these boats; there must be thousands."

"Yeah, well, it was worth a try, anyway; I appreciate the effort. There's only a few hours left on the ransom deadline, they should be calling again soon. Keep the Coast Guard on the alert. If I were them, and hoped to get away, I'd head for International Waters, under cover of darkness and no lights. But they'll have to tell me where they are, in order to deliver the ransom; then, I'll have them."

Carlton picked up on the lingering doubt, "They've been very careful up to now; do you really think they're going to give away their location?"

Before he could reply, the doorbell at the main entry chimed. "I'll get that; wait here."

Hardcastle closed the study door, crossed to the entry foyer; this visitor he had been expecting. Opening the door, he stared with frank surprise at the young, darkly handsome Italian standing on the threshold. This wasn't the person he had been expecting.

He was greeted with a broad smile, the dark eyes cautious, "Hello, Judge Hardcastle; my dad sent me over."

"He did, huh?" Hardcastle didn't want to call the young man a liar, but he seriously doubted that this had been Joe Cadillac's idea.

"Well," his visitor conceded, as if reading his mind, "Maybe not at first." He stepped into the entryway, placed a restraining hand on the closing door. He started to speak when someone entered the foyer from the study.

Lt. Carlton came to check out the caller, and stopped; he sent Hardcastle a quick, questioning look.

Hardcastle motioned the officer to join them. "This is a friend of McCormick's. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Very."

The Judge made introductions. "Lt. Carlton is a friend of mine from Homicide, LAPD; so far, he's here in an unofficial capacity. Lieutenant, this is Father Atias."

Carlton acknowledged the introduction, then pulled Hardcastle aside. "Milt," he spoke in a low, worried tone, "I know who he is; exactly who he is. What's going on here?"

"Look, Lieutenant, the Father and I, we really need to talk - without having a half dozen assorted cops hangin' on every word."

"I don't know..." He thought for a moment, then agreed, from long experience. "Okay, I'll wait in the den. I sure hope you know what you're doing - whatever it is."

"Always do." The confident smile didn't reach his eyes.

Father Atias and Hardcastle watched as Carlton returned to the study, closed the door. The priest took Hardcastle's arm, as the Judge started toward the stairs. "Wait, Judge, there's something outside for you." Opening the door, Atias brought in an aluminum case, "Pop wouldn't tell me what's in here - and Davey insisted on waiting outside the gate for my return. Sorry about that, Judge. I told Pop I had all the protection I needed, but Davey wouldn't hear of it. 'I am my father's son', as he sees it."

"No, it's all right. Even if he's noticed by the local patrol, they have orders not to interfere." Hardcastle took the case, and they went upstairs to the privacy and quiet of the master bedroom suite.

Father Atias paused near the fireplace, watched as Hardcastle locked the door. Although the Judge was doing a remarkable job of concealing it, Atias could detect the strain. Perhaps because he was experienced in dealing with pain and suffering, he recognized the signs more readily than another might.

Hardcastle crossed the room, placed the case on a rarely used desk. "I don't understand why Joe got you involved. Why you, and not one of his hoods?"

"He didn't want me to. But I said, Look, Pop, the police, they'll be suspicious if one of your...employees shows up on Hardcastle's doorstep. But a priest? Friend of the family, in a time of need?" His disarming smile faded, the caution returning, "I didn't expect the lieutenant to know, though."

"Carlton's okay; he was the arresting officer on your father's case, and your kidnapping. He more or less figured it out, considering what Cadillac was willing to do to get you back. Only a father would be that desperate, willing to sacrifice everything - even his freedom."

"There are only a few people who know I'm Joe Cadillac's son: Some trusted friends of Dad's, you, and Mark. I know my father isn't perfect. For a long time, he would never tell me; but I knew...somehow, I always knew. He was never proud of what he did; he was afraid I would be ashamed, to have a gangster for a father. I never saw that side of him, Judge. And not until after I entered the priesthood, would he even confess to it. It doesn't matter, not to me; I love him as the man I knew when I was growing up. It is not for me to judge him - nor you."

"I can understand that, and I wouldn't expect you to feel any other way. But he has to pay for his crimes..."

"He will - we all do. He's accepted it. He told me once, that it was far too late for him. He would pay not only for his crimes against the law itself, but for his sins against God's law as well; and the best he could

"hope for was eternal Purgatory." He shook his head sadly, "I've tried—after all, no one is beyond redemption..." He paused, seeing the gentle sympathy in Hardcastle's eyes; and he wondered at what point their roles had become reversed. He began to understand why his father respected this crusty old judge, and trusted him. "Anyway, my reason for being here...I was at his place when he returned from his visit with you. I knew something was wrong first thing; I can always tell when he's upset. He wouldn't tell me right away, but when I finally got it out of him, I wanted to help. At first, he refused, saying it was too dangerous; that there wasn't anything I could do, anyway. I convinced him otherwise; I can do more than just pray, you know."

"I know. But I agree with your father. However," he added, crossing to the window overlooking the ocean, "I'm glad you're here, if only for a few minutes." Hardcastle leaned heavily against the window frame, voice low, speaking more to himself than to the young man whose presence alone was quietly supportive, "It seems...I don't know, incomprehensible to everyone else, why I care, why I'm going against my hard-held belief not to yield to extortion. And that conflict is the most difficult to deal with right now; because I'm the only one who's completely aware of what I'm risking. I guess I just need to know that there's someone who understands why I'm doing...what I'm doing. Not for approval, or forgiveness; but just for...moral support. I don't know if that makes any kind of sense; I'm not sure I understand it enough myself to be totally objective." The Judge turned to face him, the iron control once again reasserting itself, "Those...idiots downstairs, they don't understand. Not even Carlton, not entirely. The head cop, Williams, even believes that McCormick is in on it, trying for a quick score. That's just plain stupid, on all counts. They're more concerned about catching the guys, and retrieving the money, than they are about McCormick's safety." Then the iron melted away, leaving a very human anguish. "I don't want...I can't let him be hurt any more. Whoever is doing this, is after me; I just hope he's...all right." He faced the ocean again, seeking a source of solace within himself.

Father Atias approached him, placed a comforting hand on a bowed shoulder. "I'm sure he is. After all, he's valuable to them, and only if he's alive and well. I was treated with consideration, and released safely."

"Yeah, but you're a priest; even rock hard killers balk at harming a priest. McCormick, well, he's..." He hesitated, not really sure what the kid was, "McCormick's..."

"A good man, despite his past mistakes," Father Atias finished for him. Hardcastle shook his head, but the priest knew the Judge wasn't disagreeing with him. "I feel I should do something more, more than just—"

Hardcastle turned at that, interrupted quietly, "We didn't rescue you from those hired killers to have you feel any kind of obligation to either of us. I got what I wanted out of the deal, as you are well aware."

"Yes, I know; but the bottom line is that you came through for my Pop when no one else could, or would. And did you know he never expected you to? He told me what you did for me, the risk you took then, morally as well as physically. Or," he added with doubting disapproval, "Is there such a thing

as 'justifiable breaking and entering' and 'borrowing' evidence?"

Hardcastle grinned, then chuckled, his mood lightening. McCormick had wanted to keep quiet about their midnight raid on the police impound, and was appalled at Hardcastle's attempt to turn himself in to Carlton; and Father Atias knew what he had done was wrong, for whatever reason. It was a clear case of intent. Bent rules had a habit of snapping back in your face. "I sure wish McCormick would talk to you. I keep tellin' him, just 'cause there's no one around to see, that doesn't make it right. You always pay in the end."

"But we have talked..." His tone implied that Hardcastle should have known. "Oh, not as confessor to priest, I admit - more like friend to friend. In his own time, Judge, he'll know; he'll hear."

"Yeah, but will he listen?"

Father Atias smiled gently, "We all listen, at one time or another."

"Well, I'll leave it to your capable hands to redeem his immortal soul - and I don't envy you the task; while I try my best to keep his mortal hide in one piece."

"Challenge accepted, Judge." The handclasp was firm, "My prayers will be with you, my friend; good luck, and be careful."

"I will; and, thanks, for everything."

Father Atias paused at the door, "And Judge, you're not alone; neither in your decision, or your belief."

Hardcastle straightened, mentally squaring his shoulders; the conversation had helped ease the heaviness of mind and spirit. He was now determined to stay with his decision, see the plan through.

The case contained all that Cadillac had promised. He picked up a sheet of folded stationery, expensive but without imprint. Listed at the top was the frequency used by each of the two miniature transmitting devices, as well as instructions on the use of the enclosed transceiver. Copying down the frequencies on three separate sheets, he read the short missive at the bottom of the stationery. 'Judge,' it read, 'My boy's something, isn't he? Told you he was worth it. The bugs will transmit up to six miles, unobstructed. Just wanted you to know, I'm not finished yet; you saw it through, I'll see it through. I strongly suggest you burn this after you read it.' It was typed and unsigned. Joe Cadillac never took chances, not with anyone.

He wasn't sure what Cadillac had in mind, but he couldn't think about that now. He burned the note in the fireplace, then returned to the desk. The bank had delivered the money about an hour ago, and both Williams and Carlton had taken a quick look inside, assured by the bank official that each bill had been treated to show up under infra-red light. The notes nearly topped the over-sized satchel, and Hardcastle had been relieved that the bank manager had backed his request. Opening the satchel, he began preparing the ransom.



He counted out the stacks of \$1,000's carefully, with fifty bills already pre-counted in a stack, and packed them two deep, two down, and ten across. He had hidden one bug under the wrapper of the first stack he had placed in the case; the other bug had already been concealed in the handle.

Although they had a very general idea where to look, the bug would lead them directly to the kidnapers, wherever they went. Hardcastle looked at the small fortune taking up so little space in the silver-gray case. The two million lying in neat rows represented nearly all his liquid assets; he had thought about it carefully, and prayed he was doing the right thing. The decision had been difficult, for he was no longer dealing with abstract laws and statistics; when one unconsidered move on his part could result in disaster. It had to work; he hadn't followed the kidnapper's instructions to the letter. The police and Coast Guard were alerted, the ransom was bugged, the money treated...and those were minor infractions compared to the circumvention he was attempting. If the deception was discovered too soon, it could cost McCormick his life.

There was a knock on the door, and Carlton entered without invitation, "Saw the priest leave, and thought I'd come up and—"

"See what I was up to?" He snapped the case shut.

"To see that you don't do anything stupid. What's this?" He indicated the items on the desk; then realized what it was. "Milt, we could have supplied any kind of bugging equipment you needed. You didn't have to approach Cadillac."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Lieutenant; but I wanted something reliable."

Annoyed at the indirect answer, Carlton faced him squarely, "We haven't gotten much cooperation from you, Milt, since you more or less took over the operation. Williams is good, but he never had a chance; not with you using that gold detective's shield to it's fullest potential - and then some. Just what is it that's so special about this McCormick kid? What makes him so different from the others?" He seemed unaffected by Hardcastle's stoney stare, "Okay, the mistake was unfortunate, but that's no reason not to handle this kidnapping like any other. Have you called in the FBI yet?"

"No." He held up a hand at Carlton's protest, "But I will; I still have a few hours...I know the rules. I just want a fighting chance, that's all. I'll call them when I'm ready."

## XI

Twin Mercruiser engines turned over smoothly, and McCormick listened to the increasing noise level as the yacht prepared to get underway. He stared up at the off-white underside of the cabinets, wondering where the rendezvous would take place. Although the cabin was spacious, for a boat, and comfortable, he would be glad to leave it; he didn't like small, enclosed rooms - never had, never would.

McCormick knew it would be a cold day in hell before Hardcastle would allow the kidnapers to escape, unscathed. It wasn't only the money, or

the fact that they had erred in taking him - it would be the same no matter who had been taken; but because he knew, more than anyone else, how much the Judge hated to lose control of a situation, to be told what to do and made to feel powerless. He was aware it had nothing to do with him, that Hardcastle's unrelenting pursuit would be simply to see justice done; but...he couldn't deny that the Judge's 'fatherly' concern pleased him. For the ex-jurist who had sent him up, kept tabs on him, and rode his case had been more of a father to him than his real one.

His own father had made it very clear that he was no more interested in becoming a 'dad' now than he had been twenty-five years ago. Johnny Johnson had stepped in some years later, after the first desertion; and the second time, the Judge had been at hand—as always, it seemed. He smiled to himself; not even his best badgering tactics had forced Hardcastle to admit that he had broken a law or two on Mark's behalf.

As he had no desire to spend the rest of his life at Gulls-Way, it was not so much permanence as stability - for Hardcase was always there, whether McCormick wanted him to be or not. And it was a comforting, secure feeling; one that Flip Johnson had started, and the Judge had taken up, and continued. Hardcastle didn't have Flip's open, affectionate nature, preferring to show his concern by what he did, not by what he said. At that thought, he chuckled quietly, as the Judge's actions and words seemed at odds most of the time. McCormick didn't mind the rough and gruff exterior at all; somehow, it made it easier, for Hardcase would never let him forget this.

He frowned at that prospect. "Damned cantankerous old donkey," he grumbled, "You'd pay the two million just to hold it over my head for the rest of my life. Well, maybe I have some ideas about that. These guys are bound to slip up sometime, and I'll be ready..."

## XII

Hardcastle pushed the speed limit in the Coyote; the customized car was damned uncomfortable, but fast. He might need that edge; he had very few aces. He eased up on the accelerator, the needle dropping from 70 to 58; this was the third time he had consciously had to slow down. Although the Coyote would easily cruise at 90-plus, he couldn't chance being popped for speeding, even a ten-minute delay could prove fatal. He glared at the other vehicles streaking past him as if he were parked, heads turning at the sleek lines. He doubted that the kidnappers had allowed for error; he would reserve the Coyote's thundering power for the chase, if one should occur.

The last call had given time and location for the exchange; he had been directed to a well-known tourist harbor, to the Oceanview Boat Rental, where a powerboat had been reserved for him. The call had been brief and to the point, as usual; and he hadn't been allowed to talk to McCormick. The caller then ended the conversation with the caution of no police, and that if anyone but Hardcastle showed up, he would be responsible for the consequences.

Carlton had disapproved, certain that Hardcastle was making a big mistake by agreeing to all conditions and terms. Before leaving Gulls-Way, the Judge had contacted the FBI, spoke to an Agent Matthews. He had then left the situation in Carlton's capable hands, knowing the lieutenant would follow

his instructions despite personal feelings. The fact that he had pointedly ignored Williams' presence in the room had not gone unnoticed. Carlton had the frequency of the bug, and the cops would be alerted at the harbor. The FBI wouldn't like it, he knew; but with any luck, it would be over before Agent Matthews knew what had happened.

Heavy traffic forced him to slow down as he approached the harbor. The crowd was unbelievable; he'd never find a place to park. Instead, he drove directly to the pier and pulled off the road. If the Coyote was towed... well, it wouldn't be the first time.

Hardcastle checked the contents of the case one last time. Another condition had been added; the photo and ransom note were to be returned with the money, in the envelope they had been sent in, as well as the tapes of the phone calls. Hardcastle didn't attempt to argue about the existence of the recordings; he wasn't going to anger them in any way. Once the kidnapper's had that, only the money would be left as evidence; everything else would be hearsay. Hardcastle removed his .45 from under the passenger seat, loaded it, and slipped it in the shoulder holster under his lightweight jacket. He hoped he wouldn't need it, but he'd use it if he had to.

### XIII

"He go for it?" Eric yelled down from the flying bridge.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here." Jayce peered through the salon window, at the teeming dock area. Nothing out of the ordinary that he could see. He'd expected, hoped, for more of a fight from Hardcastle; instead, the old judge had agreed almost meekly to all their demands. They had moved further down the harbor, while Jayce, in cap and dark glasses, used a nearly deserted phone booth for the last call. He had called the Oceanview Boat Rental, and left careful instructions. The only person around during his calls had been a young man tending gas pumps; and he was totally involved with a young blonde and her brunette girlfriend, making sure they had everything they needed for their speedboat. Needless to say, none of them had been aware of his existence; he doubted if they had even noticed the streamlined Gemini, resting quietly against the pier. He shook his head; it was damned amazing what you could pull off under the eyes of a crowd...and if anything was noticed, no two would agree.

The wind had picked up, but the harbor was as crowded as ever despite the threat of the approaching storm. It was forecast about four or five hours away, but dark clouds were already lining the horizon. He hoped it would be bad enough to discourage pursuit, yet not too rough for the Gemini; the weekend weather forecast was one reason Eric had decided to implement the plan at this time.

He went topside, watched a few minutes as his brother piloted the Gemini toward open water, carefully avoiding smaller craft and sailboats. It was a few hours before dusk, and the sun was streaking the slate sky with mauve and gold. Eric seemed especially concerned with the clouds gathering on the horizon, constantly checking instruments, charts, and the radio weather reports. Assuring himself that his brother was occupied with the Gemini, Jayce pulled on the ski-mask and went below to check on their prisoner.

XIV

The motor yacht made considerable headway, as McCormick listened to the varying pitch of the engines. They hadn't left immediately after casting off, but powered slowly for several minutes, then stopping briefly. From the gentle bumping against the hull, he judged they were alongside a wharf; and it wasn't too difficult to guess the reason for the stop. One last call, and a dock phone was safer than using the one on the boat again.

For the past few hours, all he had done was try to believe what the shorter, friendlier guy had told him. But he knew from the malevolence in the older man's eyes and manner, that it wasn't very likely he would get off the boat alive. A body would be easily disposed of at sea, all they needed was an extra anchor. The younger man's assurances that he would be freed had been a ploy to keep him in line, quiet and tractable. It was only a question of when; he hadn't wanted to dwell on how.

And he couldn't just lie there and do nothing; just as he couldn't let Hardcastle give up so much, couldn't let them succeed, not without a fight...

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps on the metal stairs, and he remained still, eyes closed. It was the harness boots the older man wore, and he wasn't accompanied by the lighter tread of his partner. McCormick's mind shifted into high gear, this may be the chance he'd been waiting for. This one was tall, he had to lean down to see through the one-way glass; then, he would naturally straighten, unlock the door, open it... McCormick would have about five unobserved seconds to act; five seconds to get from a reclining position on the bunk and to the door before being seen. And not even begin to move until he heard the lock click.

It was riskier than he would have liked; the other one could join his partner at any moment. But the yacht was still travelling at a steady rate, and someone had to be piloting it.

McCormick heard the lock turn, and was off the bunk with surprising speed. The .38 preceded the kidnapper's entry, and McCormick threw his weight against the door, shutting it forcibly on the man's thick wrist. With a curse, he dropped the gun, and it slid over the tilting deck, well beyond McCormick's reach. With a howl of rage, the door was shoved inward, and instead of resisting, McCormick yanked it open.

Tumbling inside with the momentum, Jayce was off-balance and unprepared for the sudden pitch of the deck, as the yacht surged forward. But the kid was braced for it, and he swung hard. Jayce was unable to avoid the fist as it smashed across his face; a second blow to the stomach doubled him over, and the third sent him reeling backward through the open door. He hit the deck hard, and his fulminating fury overrode caution and restraint.

McCormick followed up, not about to lose the advantage. But the other man recovered quicker than he had expected, and came up from the deck with murder blazing in his eyes.

"God-damn you, you rich bastard; I'll kill you!"