

HARDCASTLE & McCORMICK

Part 2,
pages 36-65

You Get What You Pay For

By:

Melinda Reynolds

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The guy was only half right; he wasn't rich. McCormick's derisive grin was more insulting than any sarcastic comment could be, and the older man swung with far more anger than accuracy. McCormick ducked under a powerful left, blocked a vicious right, and managed two good punches of his own before the deck lurched. Both were thrown to the floor, and McCormick was struggling to his feet when strong hands gripped the front of his shirt, slammed him brutally against the metal bulkhead, followed by a short, savage jab under his ribs, driving the air from him. He doubled over, gasping, and a hard right connected solidly, then struck again on the return sweep. He had been careful to protect his right side, leading with his left; and even though he took the last punch on the chin, the force behind it staggered him. McCormick was rolling with the punches, and not from choice; it was impossible to maintain his balance on the swaying deck. He just managed to block a roundhouse blow then was belted soundly where the .38 had struck earlier. Pain flashed in his aching head, and the world blacked out for a few seconds; then he found himself on the deck, breath ragged and senses reeling. This old man was tougher than a two-dollar steak, and if he was going to survive this match, he would have to answer in kind.

His vision focused in time to see the square toe of the harness boot aimed for his head. He tried to avoid it, to get up, only to have the boot crash squarely into his chest. Nearly disabled, he pushed weakly to his knees, breath short and rasping. There was sure to be another one, and he knew he couldn't defend against it. He barely had strength, and presence of mind, left to raise protective arms, preferring broken ribs to a broken head.

Jayce paced back, braced for another kick that would end the fight for good, when the deck tilted sharply again, dropped with a bone-jolting lurch. He staggered back, grabbed the companionway railing for support. "What the hell—"

There was a receding engine roar from the starboard side; the yacht continued to rock violently in a cross-wake, as another engine crescendo screamed past. Waves struck the hull with audible, frightening force; these were followed by a third, equally rough wake that seemed determined to capsize the yacht.

Minutes passed as the yacht was brought expertly under control; by the time the deck had settled, McCormick was on his feet. He stumbled toward the closed cabin door, intending to retrieve the .38, only to find the door had automatically locked. He was spun around, a fist backhanding him; a jarring uppercut sent him across the deck, to the foot of the companionway. He didn't get up right away, watching covertly as the older man came at him again. At the last moment, McCormick charged upward, his shoulder plowing into the man's midsection, lifting him and slamming him into the metal bulkhead with every bit of strength he had left.

McCormick stepped back, and his would-be killer collapsed at his feet, barely conscious. He took a shaky breath, leaned wearily against the wall; he was wiped out. It had been awhile since he had taken that kind of punishment. He turned toward the curving companionway, planning to get topside and jump ship. Instead, he found himself facing the owner of the second .38, the calm brown eyes quietly amused. He supposed it would have been too much to hope for that the other one would have waited a few more minutes.

"W-Who's...driving?" McCormick nodded toward the bridge, then regretted the action as the deck tilted without moving.

"It's relatively calm for the moment; I've cut back to idle speed. There were three powerboats racing each other; they're not supposed to do that, this close to the harbor, but - " He gave a what-can-you-do shrug, "After the wake and cross-wakes hit us broadside, I yelled down to my partner, to see if everything was okay. When I didn't get an answer, it wasn't hard to figure out what he was up to." Even with the concealing ski-mask, McCormick detected the smile, "I'll give you credit, there aren't many who could get the better of him." Then the hardness returned to his voice and manner, "But now, we'll have to keep you cuffed; probably to the companionway railing. It won't be for long, an hour or so." There was a low groan, and the downed man got unsteadily to his feet, eyes unfocussed. The pilot directed his comments to his partner, never taking his eyes off McCormick as he spoke, "Go get your gun, and try to hang onto it this time. And will you listen to me from now on? I warned you he was tougher than he looked, and to watch him."

Hand against his dully aching jaw, McCormick braced on the railing, nearly exhausted; he was just becoming aware of various other aches and pains, "I...wish to hell...someone had...warned me."

XV

Hardcastle found the rental place without difficulty. He glanced around as he approached the open counter, but no one seemed to be watching him. In fact, none of the vacationers or locals spared him more than a brief, cursory look.

A languid voice brought him to the business at hand. "Yeah, Gramps, wha'cha need? Fishin' boat? Row boat?"

Hardcastle glared at the teen-aged kid behind the counter; he was sitting on a bar stool, leaning indolently against the far wall. If it should tip over and dump him, the Judge doubted that the kid would even be aware of it.

"You have a boat reserved for me? Name's Hardcastle."

With infinite slowness, the words filtered through and into whatever passed for his brain, and he picked up a clipboard. "Le'see...Ward, Strothers, annmddd Hardcastle..." It took about ten seconds to register, "...Yeah," then he looked up, grinning like a jackass, "Mil-ton?"

"That's right," he replied tightly; this kid was pushing it.

"Got some I.D., man? Cash or credit card?"

Hardcastle pulled out his wallet, took out his license and some twenties, "Look, I'm in a hurry, here. So do you think you could maybe move a little faster?" Lips pulled back from clenched teeth, he was giving off danger signals of the first magnitude. "Pretend your very existence depended on it."

The kid returned a loopy grin; he was either incredibly stupid or felt completely safe, and out of reach, behind the counter. He pushed some forms in front of his annoyed customer. "Fill these out, Gramps. Got you down

for a real fast babe. Think you can handle her?"

Hardcastle gritted his teeth, tempted, but having neither the time, nor the inclination, to do the job properly. He filled out the forms, scribbled his signature at the bottom. "How fast?"

"She'll top 65 - well..." He sized up the Judge's solidly muscular frame, "With you aboard, maybe 60. Oh, yeah, before I forget; guy who called said to be sure to tell you to fly these." He pulled out two signal flags from under the counter, "When you pass that small island..." He pointed out toward the ocean. The island was barely visible, to the south of two larger ones. "Also, that there's been a change in plans, and that you're to go southwest instead of northwest." He took a slip of paper from his pocket, "I marked it down for you." The insufferable grin widened, "Written proof ya got your bearings."

With considerable restraint, Hardcastle ignored the last comment. He hadn't expected the change in direction. Carlton had been right; they were being extraordinarily cautious about their location.

The kid held up one of the flags, a yellow cross against a red background. "This is 'R', it goes first," he continued, in tone and manner as if explaining to a simpleton. He picked up the remaining flag, half white, half red. "This is Mr. 'H', it goes under Mr. 'R'. Together, they mean 'message received'. They both go on the halyard on the flagstaff - you know what that is, don't cha?"

If this kept up much longer, there was going to be mayhem. "Where's the damn boat?!"

"Pier 32, Slip 27, the Cheetah; and, Gramps, no racing in the Marina."

Hardcastle snatched keys and flags off the counter, stalked off. Damned, smart-ass kids - and he had thought McCormick had an attitude problem...

The kid yelled an afterthought, "Hey, there's storm warnings out for tonight, so be back before dark. I'm responsible for these boats!"

It took a few minutes to find Pier 32, and the walk gave Hardcastle time to cool off. He had expected an ordinary speedboat, a few hundred years old, with a 150-or-so H.P. outboard precariously clinging on the back. He stood on the pier, checking the slip number twice, then looked the Cheetah over, surprised and impressed. The late afternoon sun slanted over a long, open bow; gold and silver flakes sparkled brilliantly. The inboard engine was jet-mounted, with a bench seat spanning the beam, faced by swivel seats. There was full instrumentation dash, the wheel wood and aluminum, teak trim and interior carpet and panelling. The Cheetah was 18 feet of long, sleek lines combining comfort with speed.

At any other time, Hardcastle would have enjoyed taking this baby out for a spin; but for the matter at hand, she was more than adequate. He placed the flags and case on the seat next to the pilot's chair, and cast off the lines. The engine started right off, idling with a thrumming power. He reversed out, turned, and directed the open bow toward the distant islands. The

sail boats swept lazily past him, and he kept the powerboat at low speed as he wound through the pleasure boaters. The wind was strong, raising whitecaps; most of the sailboats and smaller craft were heading in for safe harbor.

As he steered, half his mind was alert to anyone who might be watching, his eyes scanning the pleasure and fishing boats; but, as on the dock, no one followed, or gave any indication they had the slightest interest in him. Another part of his mind was on Carlton; the lieutenant was about thirty minutes behind him, with a tracer for the bugs, and no doubt would be quickly aware of the change in course. He had to give the local cops credit; he couldn't find them, and he knew they were positioned, not only in speedboats, but along the harbor and islands as well. He could just make out the lines of the Coast Guard cutter in it's usual berth further up the harbor; and another one a few miles out to sea, also to the north.

Finally clear of the smaller craft, he turned the wheel until the compass read S.W. Shoving the throttle forward, the Cheetah leapt over the waves. He had barely forty minutes to reach the smallest island, hoist the flags, and await contact. And ten of those minutes had been used to clear the harbor.

In a little over twenty minutes, he came within view of the island, approximately five miles off his starboard side. He throttled down, idled, the boat pitching on the rough water; there were several bouys, warning of strong currents around the island. As a potential danger, there were no other boats in the immediate area.

Opening the case, he removed the transceiver, placed it under the dash on the passenger's side, covered it with a lifejacket. With all the precautions the kidnappers were taking, they might disable the Cheetah to prevent pursuit; but he would at least know their direction while waiting for the police launch. Picking up the flags, he placed them as instructed. He gazed out at the cloud-laded horizon; two or three miles out were several 60-foot-plus cabin cruisers, fishing trawlers, and a dozen or so sail and motor yachts. One yacht, several miles distant, caught his eye; there was something familiar about it. It was too far away for details, and it was more of an impression than any actual knowledge, but it's construction was unique. There were only five or six of them in the world, built to the owners' specifications. Even as he watched, a small private helicopter descended from the gathering clouds, settled on the landing pad on the aft deck.

A low engine rumble intruded on his thoughts, and Hardcastle turned toward the sound. Shielding his eyes against the low sun, a motor yacht advanced before its orange-red backdrop. The yacht was small, 58' or so, and he examined it closely as it approached. There were staterooms, a salon, and an aft cabin below; a main salon, and flying bridge. The aft portholes had been painted over, and he had a pretty good idea why. About fifty yards away, the yacht veered to port, cut speed, and circled the idling powerboat. Hardcastle held firmly to the windshield as the wake reached the Cheetah from all sides, rocking it in seemingly four directions at once. Hardcastle could see only one person on the yacht, the pilot; the boat's name and registration number had been taped over. The second one was probably checking things out from the main salon; he didn't know if there were more than two, but it didn't seem likely.

Apparently satisfied, the pilot slowed, brought the yacht to a near stop about thirty feet away, and cut the engines. Then the second man appeared on the aft deck, alone; he motioned Hardcastle to approach.

The Judge guided the Cheetah over the rough water, until only a few feet separated the yacht and the powerboat. The man who had signalled him was tall, with a muscular frame, and wearing a pair of harness boots that looked remarkably out of place on a ship's deck. Both wore ski-masks and dark coveralls; the tall one was armed, and Hardcastle took for granted the pilot was, too.

A familiar, gravelly voice called out to him, "Cut your engine and drop anchor!"

The Judge lowered both fore and aft anchors; neither would touch bottom, but both would help steady the boat. A line was tossed to him, and he secured it to the metal tie-down on the bow.

"You got the money, Hardcastle?"

"You got my son?" He yelled back.

The pilot spoke from the bridge; he had a quiet voice, but it carried to the others, "I'll drop the anchor," he told his companion, "And go down and get him."

"No, I want to be able to leave fast, if we have to - I don't trust this old goat. Go on and get him; the boat's not goin' anywhere."

Hardcastle watched as the smaller man disappeared down a companionway. He released a held breath at this assurance that McCormick was still alive. He hadn't been sure, until now; and he hoped he could keep it that way.

XVI

Eric descended the narrow stairs quickly, smiled faintly at the questioning face that looked up at his approach. He took the keys from his pocket, and an extra set of cuffs.

"Nearly over. A few more minutes, we'll have the money, and you'll be with your dad." Eric went behind him; using the extra set, he would cuff both wrists before unlocking the pair that was wound through the railing.

"Yeah? What does your brother have to say about it?"

"He wants—" Eric stopped; he'd been caught. He snapped the cuffs down tight. "How'd you know?"

"It just figured, that's all."

Pulling the first set of handcuffs off, he placed them in a back pocket. "You're gonna talk yourself into your grave, you know that?"

"I've a...friend who would agree with you." He stretched painfully;

sitting on the lower steps for over an hour hadn't done much good for his bruised and aching muscles.

Eric came around to face him, eyes and voice serious, "Let me give you some advice, friend; my brother is already mad as hell at you. I'm doing my damnest to be certain he makes the exchange fairly. So if I were you, I wouldn't say, or do, anything. Don't chance setting him off - you could get your dad killed as well as yourself. Just do as you're told, and don't say anything."

There was a guarded look in the younger man's eyes that Eric couldn't read, then he nodded, "Yeah, okay."

Eric felt the first twinge of uncertainty as he took the prisoner's arm and led him topside.

XVII

The pilot reappeared, a hand gripping McCormick's shoulder. His hands were bound behind him, and there were some bruises that hadn't been in the photo, but other than that, he seemed all right. He was led to the stern of the yacht, where the other one stood. He caught McCormick's eye, and Mark shook his head slightly, then was still...and quiet.

"The money, Hardcastle." The voice held menace and impatience.

Hardcastle picked up the gray metal case, tossed it to the yacht. The bigger man caught it, balanced it on the railing; he hesitated, then turned the case toward McCormick. Snapping the latches, he pulled the case open, "You're smarter than I thought, Hardcastle; I expected the case to be rigged." He slammed the case shut, then gazed down at the powerboat, "The keys - Toss them up here."

The Judge removed the keys from the ignition, threw them well over the railing. They landed on the aft deck a few feet behind the three men. No one moved to retrieve them.

"Keep him here, until I check this," he ordered the pilot before going below, "It won't take long."

The seconds stretched to minutes, the minutes like hours, increasing Hardcastle's apprehension - what was he checking for? His nerves were pulled taut, the tension being unbearable; fearful the deception would be discovered, and no aid in sight. Surely he wasn't counting every note, he'd find the second bug, and, just possibly, if he were sharp enough, detect something else... He unsnapped the trigger guard on the .45, just in case.

Then the man burst onto the aft deck, boiling mad, and raging, "What the hell were you tryin' to pull?! What do you take me for?!" He held the case aloft, shaking it angrily.

The fear drained away, and Hardcastle, knowing he had failed, was coolly prepared to do whatever he had to to get McCormick off that yacht. His hand closed on the wood grip of the .45, and he was about to pull it, when the

case was flung to the Cheetah. Opening as it hit the carpeted deck, Hardcastle saw the empty interior, and relaxed somewhat, lowering his hand. The handle had been torn free at one end, and ripped apart; but the money had been taken out, and was still on the yacht. So they weren't aware of the duplicity...not yet, anyway.

"That case was bugged!!!" He turned his fury on McCormick, backhanding him savagely.

McCormick fell to the teak deck, rolled onto his back; he kicked out, and missed. Then he found himself looking up into the short barrel of the .38, saw the murderous intent in the dark eyes as the hammer was pulled back.

"Hold it! Or I'll fire!" Hardcastle's authoritative voice cut through the anger of the moment, and the older man paused, looked questioningly at his partner.

The pilot had his own .38 aimed at Hardcastle, eyes on the Judge as he spoke, "Hardcastle has a .45 trained on your back, and he looks ready to use it." Then, to both of them, "Listen, there's no need for this. Judge, put the .45 down; you might hit him, but you might miss. My partner won't miss; and neither will I."

The .45 didn't waver. "He puts his gun away, I'll do the same."

The pilot gave the tall man a hard look; and, despite his fuming resentment, grudgingly placed the .38 in a coverall pocket.

As Hardcastle lowered the .45, the pilot continued, "I can't leave you armed. Pull out the clip, and throw it overboard." The Judge did so. "Now, in the air, fire it."

Hardcastle pointed the .45 upward and pulled the trigger. He had an extra magazine in his jacket, and he hoped the other man wouldn't think of that.

The shorter man stepped back, lowering the .38 at McCormick, "Okay, Mark, get up." When McCormick got to his feet, he was motioned toward the railing.

"All right," Hardcastle called to them, "You outsmarted me. But you've got the money; give me my son."

"When I'm ready." The taller man gripped McCormick's upper arm, turned to his partner, "Get up there, and let's get the hell out of here! No tellin' where the cops are."

The pilot's manner was stubbornly insistant. "Not until you give me your word that you'll let him go."

"All right, all right, god-damn it, I'll let him go! Now get this boat cranked up!"

The pilot released the line on the Cheetah, then climbed up to the bridge. As he fired up the engines, he glanced back, to see if Hardcastle's son was

was aboard the powerboat. Jayce had pulled Mark to the stern, near the churning wake, and several feet from the powerboat. Cursing under his breath, he set the engines on idle, and jumped down from the ladder. He heard his brother's voice, taunting and abrasive, just as he reached the aft deck.

"You want him, Hardcastle? Well, go get him, damn you!"

With that, McCormick was shoved over the low railing, and Hardcastle caught the glint of handcuffs as he went over.

"My God, Jayce..." Eric stared in horror as McCormick disappeared beneath the choppy waves.

Jayce shouldered past him, climbed up to the bridge. He pulled the ski-mask off, no longer needing it; he eased the control forward as quickly as possible, turned the motor yacht sharply. The turbulent wake would make swimming difficult at best; even if the Hardcastle kid made it to the surface, he wouldn't stay there for long.

Eric saw Hardcastle dive into the water, striking out in strong, steady strokes; the rough water didn't deter him for an instant, even as the wake sent the powerboat further away. Seeing that his brother was occupied with getting the Gemini out into open sea, Eric picked up a life preserver, and tossed it as close as he could to where he had last seen the two men.

The yacht picked up speed, widening the distance considerably between them and the powerboat, and any other pursuers. Removing his own ski-mask, he went forward, and up to the bridge; he grabbed his brother's arm, yelling above the wind and engines. "Damn it, Jayce! You promised! You said you'd take the money and let him go."

"I did let him go," he grinned crookedly, and for the first time Eric saw the stranger his brother had become. "He slipped; too damn bad!"

"The hell he did; you pushed him! You lied to me, and now—"

Their argument was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a sixty-foot, high-performance boat; lean and trim, with speed and power in every aerodynamic line, it cut sharply across the Gemini's bow at a good seventy miles per hour. Emblazoned on the side in silver and electric blue was Jetstar II; and, aside from the pilot, there were two other men aboard, training Uzi's in their direction.

Jayce held the wheel with effort, trying to stay on course, not experienced enough to ride the wake. "What the hell! Who are these guys?!"

The Jetstar II was joined by two cabin cruisers, built for speed, both with half a dozen or so heavily armed men. The Blanckert's yacht was enclosed in an inverted V, escorted further out into the ocean, to an unknown destination.

Eric watched Jayce closely, noting the clenched jaw and the white-lipped anger; he wasn't sure what this was about, but he felt he had more to fear from his brother's unbalanced temperament than anything else.

XVIII

A majestic, 130-foot-plus motor yacht turned into the wind, the upswept bow slicing cleanly through four to five foot whitecaps. The name Atias was painted in black and gold on the gleaming white hull; and it had the unmistakable lines of Dutch-Italian craftsmanship. It came to a near stop, awaiting the arrival of the escort.

The Jetstar II veered off, ten yards from the Gemini's port side; and each cruiser took up positions starboard and aft. The Gemini, forced to slow her speed, crept around the stern of the Atias. The Blanckerts looked up nearly twenty feet to the railed afterdeck, as an elderly man descended to the teak swim deck that spanned nearly half the length of the Gemini. He was followed closely by a hulking bodyguard; and various crew personnel, in white jackets, caps, and gloves, observed from the after-deck. Now on a level with the Gemini's bridge, the elderly man stood with imposing dignity, his steely glare directed at the Gemini's occupants.

Eric swore softly, then, "I don't believe it! What's he doin' here?"

"Ahoy, Gemini!" The pilot of the starboard cruiser called, "Heave to, or be blown out of the water!"

The Gemini powered forward slowly, crossing the Atias' elegant after-deck, the other three boats staying alongside. Eric leaned over the side of the bridge, saw the tape had been washed away from the starboard side, revealing the yacht's name. The elderly man and his companion continued to watch the slow progress of the Gemini as it came alongside the swim-deck.

Jayce, ignoring the command of the cruiser, directed his inquiry to the Atias, "Just who the hell are you?"

"Jayce, that's Joe Cadillac!"

"Your buddy's right, Jayce; cut your engines." Cadillac's voice carried clearly to the Gemini.

Jayce pulled back completely on the throttle, switching off the engines.

"Now, drop anchor."

Jayce didn't move, ready to take off at a moment's notice. "I don't take orders from has-beens."

"Jayce!"

Cadillac gave Jayce Blanckert a hard, piercing glare. "You have something that belongs to me..."

"I don't have nuthin' of yours, you senile old bastard! Now get the hell outta my way, or I'll plow through that fancy tub of yours!"

"You're gonna get us killed, Jayce; give him what he wants, for God's sake!" Eric was pale, voice shaky, as he pleaded with his brother. Taking on a judge was one thing, but Joe Cadillac was something else entirely different.

For years, he had worked very hard to stay out of his way, and out of his notice.

Jayce looked around at the armed men surrounding them, then back at Cadillac, still defiant, "What? What do I have that's yours?"

"Two million dollars."

Jayce covered his astonishment with bravado. "Are you crazy? There isn't even a hundred dollars on this boat, much less two million."

"You're beginning to sound like a bigger fool than you are. I know you have two million in ransom, handed over to you by Judge Hardcastle. I want that money."

"You can't do this! It's...it's..."

"Illegal?" Cadillac finished with a wolfish grin.

"Why? This is peanuts to someone like you."

"Let's just say I owe the Judge; and I pay my debts. All of them."

"Hardcastle? You're helping Hardcastle? But, you hate the guy - Everybody knows that; and he'll burn you! You even threatened to kill him - twice!" This was too much for Jayce Blanckert to assimilate at once.

"And I may yet. But not today." Cadillac became ominously, coldly unrelenting. "Now, hand over the case; I'm not asking again."

Eric didn't wait to be told again; he went below, and returned with a leather briefcase. Jayce took it from him, threw it at Cadillac's feet.

Cadillac's black eyes drilled through him, "This isn't the case Hardcastle brought out here."

"I switched them; figured the one he had was bugged. I'm not stupid, Cadillac."

The ex-Mafia boss motioned to a crewman, who came down, picked up the case. Opening it, Cadillac glanced inside, then nodded; the crewman returned to the after-deck, then toward the main salon.

"Maybe not; but you're sure as hell not as smart as Hardcastle. And," he added with proud emphasis, "None of you are smarter than me. The case was bugged, but so was the money inside. How do you think we traced you? You made a lot of dumb mistakes. The biggest mistake you're not even aware of yet."

As he spoke, a small boat was lowered from the Atlas.

The older Blanckert looked at it suspiciously. "What's that for?"

"That's your transportation back to whatever harbor you can find. I'm

letting Hardcastle have you. Bastards like you, make me sick."

"No, you can't send us back. You know Hardcastle has every harbor, island, and inlet crawling with cops and FBI."

"My patience with you has worn thin, my friend. If it were up to me, I'd sink you with this boat; but, the person whose interest I'm acting for, he wouldn't approve. You have exactly ten seconds to get aboard the lifeboat." His gaze fixed both with deadly intent, "And I don't have to tell either of you not to implicate me in any way with this. The engine blew, and everything was lost - That's your story. Understand?"

Furious at having his victory taken so ignominiously from him, Jayce flared at Cadillac, regardless of the consequences, "Damn you, I won't let you take everything! You're nobody, Cadillac; you've got nothing! And you'll soon be spending what's left of your pathetic life behind bars, courtesy of Hardcastle! You son of a bitch, you're not blowing me into the cops! I'll kill you first!" Jayce pulled out his .38, and Eric lunged at him.

"Jayce, don't...!"

Before either could move, or Jayce could pull the trigger, Davey fired, straight and unerring. Jayce fell back in Eric's arms, dead almost instantly. Eric stared numbly at the red stain spreading rapidly through the front of the coveralls; the bullet had struck the lower left of his chest, right through the heart. He swallowed hard, not daring to go for his own gun.

Then, aware of the continued silence, he looked up; Cadillac was restraining his bodyguard from firing again.

Cadillac spoke quietly, "Who are you?"

"Eric Blanckert." He glanced down, "He's my brother. His name is, was, Julian Carroll Blanckert. He never liked it; we always called him Jayce..."

"Whose idea was this?"

"His."

"The guy you kidnapped; he still aboard?"

Eric glanced away, "No."

Cadillac took out his .44 Magnum, checked it. "You kill him?"

Eric shook his head, still stunned by the sudden, nightmarish turn of events. "I don't know; I hope not." He looked steadily at Cadillac, "Jayce pushed him overboard. When we took off, his dad went in after him. I threw a life preserver to them, that was the best I could do; we were too far away..."

"Get into the lifeboat. I'll let Hardcastle take care of you. And don't expect any mercy from him; in many ways, we're very much alike, the Judge and I."

Cadillac sent one of his crew down to the Gemini, and, together, he

and Eric got Jayce's body into the lifeboat. Unseen by the younger Blanckert, the crewman slipped a stack of \$1,000 bills into Jayce's pocket, frowning at the dark stains on his white gloves. He had found the stack with the concealed bug, and, under Cadillac's previous orders, removed the top bills from each stack on the top layer, placed them in the wrapper with the bug.

Boarding the Atias, the crewman nodded briefly to his boss, then went topside. Cadillac waited until Eric started up the 25 H.P. outboard; moved away from the Atias and the Gemini. The small boat was nearly swamped in the high waves, but the man knew what he was about. The lifeboat was kept on a steady heading toward the distant harbor.

Eric watched, desolate, as Cadillac gave the order. There was a burst of fire, that riddled the sides of the Gemini. The Atias moved slowly out of range of the impending explosion, along with the cruisers. The Jetstar II remained close, and a gennade launcher sent three gennades into the broken porthole amid-ships, then took off with an ear-shattering roar, barely ten seconds ahead of the explosion. The Gemini went up in yellow-red billows flame, then burst apart, scattering wreckage skyward, and several yards out to sea. Black smoke and flames engulfed the remainder of the hull, as it slipped beneath the water.

He avoided looking at the blanket-draped body; after the initial shock, Eric found he felt little or nothing at the loss. Only that a great weight of responsibility had been lifted; his brother had died long ago, and he could summon no remorse for the embittered, vengeful person he had become, willing to kill to gain his ends. Instead of rebuilding, he had chose to tear down.

He would not make the rendezvous with his family in Rio; but his wife had instructions what to do if he shouldn't show up. He had planned for even that contingency. What he hadn't planned on was Joe Cadillac. They would have made it safely to Mexico if Cadillac hadn't shown up; the cops wouldn't violate International Waters. Actually, he knew they would have been much better off taking the nearly six million dollars that had accumulated in the Swiss account over the years, and leaving the country. Their biggest mistake - Jayce's biggest mistake - had been to cross that old Judge.

Eric wasn't sure what he would be charged with, if the kidnapping charge would hold up. The money was as good as gone; the Gemini, and all evidence aboard her, was gone; Mark couldn't identify either of them, if he had survived. The burden of proof would be on the prosecuting attorney. But he didn't doubt that Hardcastle would find a way.

XIX

McCormick managed a quick, deep breath before the cold Pacific closed over him. He halted his downward tumble, kicking out and upward against the strong current; he reached the surface, heard the familiar roar of the motor yacht's twin engines. The turbulent wake broke over him, pushing him under. Even with his hands not cuffed behind him, he wouldn't have been able to cope with the three foot waves and the churning wake; as it was, he knew it would be impossible to stay afloat. He surfaced again, and a three foot wave crashed over him with the force of a ton of bricks, salty water

burning eyes and throat, searing his lungs. The powerful undertow dragged him deeper, the water darkening from clear aqua to ultramarine. He struggled back toward the surface, knowing Hardcastle would be nearby to pull him out - but only if the Judge could see him.

Pulling free of the current took most of his depleted strength, and he fought back panic as oxygen-starved lungs protested, afraid he wouldn't make it to the surface again. Then something brushed against his shoulder, and a strong hand clamped tightly over his mouth and nose. He was pulled rapidly to the surface, the hand leaving his mouth, forearm sliding under his chin. He gasped, waves crashing over them, and he heard Hardcastle's voice.

"Relax, kiddo; get you to the boat in no time."

But Hardcastle was tiring, fighting the waves and current, now burdened with McCormick's weight. The powerboat seemed miles away, instead of the fifty yards or so it had drifted. He saw something white out of the corner of his eye, floating on the choppy water, and struck out for it. Another large wave submerged them momentarily, and the Judge dragged both to the surface again. McCormick had taken a draught of salty water, and was coughing, making it difficult to hold on to him. Hardcastle clung tightly, his eyes on the life preserver only a few feet away. Two desperate, powerful strokes brought him within reach, and he slipped an aching arm gratefully through the ring. He rested, getting his breath back from his exertions. Then, taking a firmer grip on McCormick's sweatshirt, he kicked slowly toward the Cheetah.

Finally reaching the side, he gripped the gunwale with his free hand, and considered. There was a full swim platform bolted to the transom, but he would have to let McCormick go to get aboard the powerboat. He retrieved the life preserver, and guided them to the rear of the boat. He pulled down the single step, held firmly to the metal frame.

"Can you hear me, kid?"

McCormick nodded, "...yeah..."

"You think you can get your hands in front of you?"

"Dunno...I can try. You'll have to hold on to me, though, 'cause I'll sink like a rock if you don't."

Hardcastle slid his arm from under McCormick's chin, and wound his hand in the back of his pull-over. "Okay, gotcha."

After a few tries, McCormick managed to slip his legs through his arms, finding it easier than he had expected underwater. Coming up for air, his hands were now in front of him, and he reached for the life preserver. Hardcastle released him, and climbed aboard the powerboat. Leaning over, he grabbed the chain connecting the cuffs and pulled McCormick onto the swim platform.

"Pull the step up." Hardcastle instructed.

McCormick looked at him, but did as he was told.

"Come on, get in; or you'll fall overboard again."

"I didn't fall the first time," he corrected through clenched teeth. "Give me a hand, will ya?" Hardcastle caught his wrist, and pulled. Tumbling over the transom, McCormick landed on the bench seat. "Thanks, Judge; I think I'll just...lie here for a minute."

Hardcastle knelt next to the bench seat, one hand braced on the gunwale; his back was to the setting sun, face in shadows. McCormick couldn't see the Judge's features, unable to read what he was thinking or feeling.

"Here, let's take a look at that." Hardcastle tilted McCormick's head toward the waning light. The unhealthy pallor was stark beneath the darkening bruise down the right side of his face, swelling slightly around his eye. In comparison, the other bruises were minor.

At Hardcastle's silence, McCormick grew concerned. "Well, what's it look like?"

Hardcastle set back on his heels, "Like a Chevy spun out on your face."

"Gee, Judge, it's a real comfort to know I can always count on you for a note of jeer."

Hardcastle chuckled quietly, slapped McCormick's shoulder lightly, not seeing the wince. "We'll have you looked at back at the harbor."

As Hardcastle went forward to pull in the bow anchor, McCormick heard a soft bumping against the hull and lifted his head to see what it was. He smiled, reached over the side, and pulled the lifesaver into the boat. He settled back against the thick foam cushions, idly tracing the stenciled letters curving around the ring: GEMINI U.S.A. So that was the name of the motor yacht.

Crossing back, Hardcastle leaned over the gunwale next to McCormick, pulled in the aft anchor. Hardcastle watched covertly as McCormick settled wearily into a more comfortable position, the life preserver resting against the seat. If he'd had any doubts about pursuing the Gemini, McCormick's appearance settled them...he wasn't in any condition for any further exertions. The kidnappers suddenly took on a secondary importance...and he doubted that the yacht would get very far anyway. Even if they should manage to escape police and Coast Guard...well, another kind of justice was in store for them. The poetic kind.

Stowing the remaining anchor, Hardcastle turned the passenger seat to face McCormick, unable to completely conceal a very real concern. "You sure you're okay, kiddo?"

McCormick shivered in the cold, evening breeze, a hand pressed against his chest. "I'm freezing, and hungry, and, despite swallowing half the Pacific, thirsty. My chest hurts, I have a headache, and I feel like hell," his glare warned Hardcastle not to say that was how he looked as well, "Other than that, everything's great. Now, quit wasting time, and let's get after them!"

Hardcastle smiled slightly at McCormick's impatience. "Can't; unless you can hot-wire a powerboat. They still have the keys."

McCormick grinned broadly. "No, I got 'em." He held up his hands, his right hand tightly clenched since he had left the Gemini's deck; the keys fell into Hardcastle's open palm. "When I let that crazy old bastard knock me down, I grabbed them off the deck. They didn't even notice - or, if they did, they didn't care."

Hardcastle moved to the pilot's chair, but didn't start the engine right away. Instead, he lifted the transceiver from under the dash. Switching it on, he watched for a few minutes, under McCormick's curious gaze. Then he started up the engine, steered the boat toward the harbor.

As the boat turned, McCormick looked at Hardcastle questioningly, "Hardcase, you're goin' the wrong way." He pointed over his shoulder, "They went thataway, Kemosabe."

"I know that, McCormick; but according to the tracer, they've reached open sea by now. The range is six miles, and nothing's showing up. We'd never catch them. They're probably headed for Mexico. We'll let the FBI contact the Mexican authorities to pick 'em up down there."

"Sure. Thousands of miles of coastline, and the Spanish cops are gonna pick them right up. I don't believe that for a minute."

"Best we can do at the moment." Hardcastle remained evasive about his reasons for not giving chase. There was a long, uneasy silence, broken only by the muted engine roar, and the wind. When McCormick spoke, Hardcastle could only just hear him, his voice low and uncertain, and not far from accusatory.

"You're letting them go, Hardcase; I...wouldn't have believed it, if I weren't here to see it." He raised up on one elbow, "You can't let them do this... You can't let them get away with it. Don't you want to get the ransom back?"

"Just forget it, okay?"

"Forget two million dollars? Are you feelin' okay?" He leaned against the cushions, completely worn out and really not up to arguing. He was still shivering, as cold air swept around the Cheetah's long prow, cutting through the waves at fifty miles per hour.

"They're not getting away with it, McCormick; just take my word for it." He had only just placed the identity of the yacht he had seen earlier; realized he had a back-up he hadn't planned on. He saw a police launch, and the Coast Guard cutter, heading out to sea, and knew his assistance wasn't needed.

The trip to the harbor was completed in gathering darkness, and in silence; each with his own thoughts and neither willing to discuss it.

Tying up at the pier, they were met by the local harbor police, the L.A. officers assisting Hardcastle, and the FBI contingent. McCormick looked at the official and unofficial uniforms lining the brilliantly lit dock, and said quietly to Hardcastle, "What's all this, Judge? Looks like a cop convention."

"You should know by now, kiddo, that I never do anything without a backup."

McCormick grinned. "Took forty guys to replace me, huh?"

"You want those cuffs off, you'd better start showing a little respect, here."

"Very little, Judge," he agreed amiably.

"I oughtta throw you back in myself; you can be a real pain sometimes, McCormick."

Agent Mathews, tall and thin, blond and precise, approached them. Introducing himself, he spoke in a reserved, yet not unfriendly tone, "I'd like to question Mr. McCormick, now, Judge... I assume this is him?"

"Go ahead, but he hasn't any idea of who the guys were."

Only the pale gray eyes held suspicion, "I have a feeling, Judge Hardcastle, that you have some ideas about this..."

"Sure I do - lot's of ideas. Can't prove any of them, though."

Mathews indicated a bench on the opposite side of the dock. He took out a notebook, flipped through several pages. "Over here, Mr. McCormick, if you don't mind."

"Would it really matter if I did?"

"McCormick, I know this is asking a lot, but try not to irritate the man. Be polite, and no smart-ass remarks."

As McCormick started to follow the FBI agent, Lt. Carlton came from the far end of the dock; another man was with him, handcuffed, and wearing gray coveralls. McCormick halted, getting his first good look at one of the kidnapers. The man was ordinary in every way, one of a crowd; he was indistinguishable, and undistinguished - a Gallup Poll construct of Mr. Average America.

Carlton brought his prisoner over to them, and Eric Blanckert found himself face to face with the last person he expected to see. Mark's grey-blue eyes stared at him intently, but he made no comment; gave no sign of recognizing him.

"We homed in on the signal, Judge; the Coast Guard and harbor police picked this guy up about four miles from the harbor, in a lifeboat. Had another guy with him, but he's dead. There was a burning yacht sighted about eighteen miles out; he says it was his, that the gas tanks blew. We searched the lifeboat, and found this on the other guy." He held up a stack of \$1,000's,

"The bug was inside, under the wrapper. Searched this one, found an unlicensed .38, some I.D., handcuffs, and," he smiled at McCormick, "These." He tossed the small keys to Hardcastle. "According to his I.D., his name is Eric Blanckert. He doesn't have much to say; until he sees his lawyer, that is."

Hardcastle unlocked the handcuffs, and McCormick murmured, "This is gettin' to be a habit, Judge."

Eric didn't hear the comment, his mind working furiously. He had thought of just denying everything, with no one around to contradict him. But he knew Cadillac's influence reached far, so denial was out. But maybe, just maybe, he might get out from under a kidnap rap, and go for a lesser charge of extortion.

McCormick turned to the younger Blanckert. "You threw the life preserver out to us, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Jayce wanted to...just leave you out there, but me... Well, a deal's a deal, no matter how it turns out."

Agent Mathews picked up on the statement. "Deal? What deal?"

Eric gave McCormick a rueful smile, accepting defeat gracefully. "Might as well come clean; they've got us to rights."

McCormick stared at him, stunned. "...U-us...?"

"Look, it was a good idea, Mark, but it didn't work. The old man was too smart for you."

McCormick looked from Mathews, to Carlton, and the interested faces looking on. "I know how this is going to sound, but - I don't know this guy...really."

Eric shrugged, unruffled. "Okay, you don't know me. Try to get out as best you can."

"You don't believe him, do you?" McCormick was alarmed at the speculative look in the agent's eyes, and that Carlton was listening to the guy. He turned to Hardcastle, who was strangely quiet and reserved. "He's lying! I had nothing to do with this!" Hardcastle frowned, looked at him as if he wanted to believe him, but not quite able to. "Is that why you didn't go after them? You thought I... You couldn't have thought I'd do that." He lunged at Eric, grabbed the front of his coveralls, "Tell them!"

Hardcastle caught his arm, pulled him back; his eyes were hard, voice angry, "Just hold it a minute, okay?" When he turned back to Blanckert, his voice was weary, shoulders sagging. He looked the very picture of a loving father betrayed by a greedy son, and McCormick swallowed laughter, covering his amusement from the others. "Just what did my...son, here, tell you?"

The FBI man broke in, before Blanckert could answer, "How did you know for certain who he was? You didn't just take his word for it, did you? That

much money involved, you must have made certain you knew who you were dealing with."

"Yeah, sure. Said he was Mark Hardcastle, that the Judge, there, was his old man, and wealthy. Wealth that belonged to him. He had driver's license, credit cards, and stuff..." He watched the circle of faces, and when none of the expressions changed, aside from Mark looking less pale, he continued, addressing Hardcastle, "It was all Mark's idea. He was tired of waiting for his inheritance; tired of you bossing him around. He wanted money and freedom; and, short of knocking you off, he figured a fake kidnapping would be the best way."

Mathews interrupted, "How'd he get beat up like that?"

"He and Jayce had a...disagreement on the division of the money. Mark wanted 75%, instead of the 50-50 split we agreed on earlier. So, you see, he came with us willingly; there wasn't any real kidnapping at all."

"When did Mark approach you with this idea?" Everyone seemed content to let the agent ask the questions.

Eric considered; if he chose sometime recent, it might be easily checked. The more time involved, the less likely it could be proved wrong. "He was introduced to me by a mutual friend at a bar in Malibu. This was a few years ago, and he sorta jokingly referred to it then, to see how I'd react. It was back in '83; no, it was '82, 1982."

Hardcastle's expression was unreadable, but his eyes were sparkling as he looked to the others, "You heard all that?"

They nodded, some smiling; Carlton was near laughter.

Eric sensed the changed atmosphere. "What? You heard my side; it's all true. Mark will have to prove me wrong, if he can." For some reason, the Hardcastle kid was no longer apprehensive, and that worried him.

"He doesn't have to prove anything," Hardcastle informed him.

McCormick threw an arm around the Judge's broad shoulders, "Think we should tell him, 'Dad'?"

"Sure, go ahead. Be worth it, just to see the dumb look on his face."

"My father, Mr. Blanckert, is— Well, let's just say he's not anyone here. I work for Judge Hardcastle, and..." His arm tightened in a half embrace, then fell away a millisecond before the Judge shoved him away, "I'm no more related to him than Lt. Carlton is." He winked at the black officer, getting a grin in return. "The name's McCormick. And, just for the record, I was in San Quentin in 1982." He'd never thought he'd be glad of that.

Eric stared, uncomprehending, at Hardcastle, then McCormick; and realized this was 'the biggest mistake they had yet to discover'. He wanted to ask a dozen questions, and dared not; he wouldn't cross Cadillac in any way, although he wondered why the Mafia boss and the Judge were working together.

Carlton took his arm, "Come on, you've got a lot of explaining to do."

"Wait, I'd like to...explain something to the Judge."

"Make it quick."

Eric nodded, watching Hardcastle closely. "The other man was my brother, Judge; his name was Julian Carroll Blanckert. Does that sound familiar to you?"

Hardcastle thought for a moment, repeating the name, then nodded, "Of course, Jayce Blanckert; three counts of armed robbery, five years each count." Some pieces began falling into place. They had known about his son, but not that he'd been killed in Viet Nam. And, obviously, they had never seen him, because McCormick looked nothing like him. "Sent him up back in '70."

"Right. Well, I have something to tell you, Judge. My brother wasn't guilty on all counts, two were mine. But Jayce figured, since he was already gonna serve time, there was no sense in both of us goin' up, so he took the rap for me. I stayed out, and continued our, uh, business operations; I was to keep things going, and build up a bank account for when he got out. We were expecting six, seven years at the most; but you threw him a curve, fifteen years and no parole. He was furious - you cost him his freedom, his status, and, later, his family. Never forgot, or forgave you for it. It was his idea to kidnap your son, to make you pay. We both thought he was your son; he never told us different. But Jayce promised me he'd let Mark go after getting the two million, and he never meant to."

He paused, no one had interrupted and no one spoke now. Everything he had said up to this point had been the truth. Might as well try the lie, see how it went over, and hope for the best. Life imprisonment was not an appealing prospect. With any luck, perhaps his lawyer could convince the jury he'd been an unwilling accomplice, and had done all he could to aid the prisoner. He looked Hardcastle straight in the eye as he continued.

"When Jayce saw you go in after Mark, he...was going to shoot both of you. I grabbed the gun; I didn't want anyone killed. Some shots went wild, one must have hit the gas tank or something, 'cause it blew up. Then the gun went off again, and the bullet must have ricocheted and hit Jayce. The yacht was in flames, and I just managed to get us into the lifeboat before the Gemini was totally engulfed. Everything's gone - Jayce, the yacht, the two million, everything..." He let the rest trail off, not knowing how much of the story would hold up, but he was going to stick to it.

Carlton held up the money. "How about this? Just twenty grand of walking around money?"

"Jayce went below and switched cases. I guess he slipped a stack in his pocket. So what?" He cursed Cadillac again, knowing he was finished, even if Hardcastle did nothing - which was unlikely.

"We'll question him further; check with the bank, do some digging into that 'business' of his. At any rate, it looks like San Quentin is going to be his new address.

XX

"Can we leave now? They're not gonna keep me overnight, or anything." McCormick sat uncomfortably on a plastic chair, wrapped in a blanket; the waiting area of the local 24-hour medical service clinic was full and noisy.

"Inna minute. I want the doctor's version; your abridged 'I'm okay' doesn't cut it." He flagged down the young M.D. who'd seen McCormick earlier, held him in place with a firm grip on his forearm. "What's the verdict on my buddy, here, doc?"

Distracted by more serious concerns, the doctor looked up from a clipboard. "Nothing serious. Various abrasions, contusions, lacerations...nothing that would require hospitalization. The worst thing the x-rays revealed was a hairline fracture of the zygomatic arch..." He glanced back at the clipboard, reading off the last.

McCormick straightened in the chair, visibly concerned, "What do you do for that?"

"They put your head inna cast, McCormick - sorta like a helmet. Want a red one?"

The doctor looked at both, uncertain. "Uh, nothing, actually. It will heal on its own. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He continued down the hall without a backward look.

McCormick got up, tossed the blanket on the chair; his clothes were practically dry. Leading the way out through the glass doors, he glared at Hardcastle, "Why do I even listen to you...?"

Hardcastle pulled onto the main roadway, headed down the Pacific Coast Highway at a sedate rate of speed. He glanced over at McCormick, ostensibly asleep in the reclining passenger seat. Ever since Blanckert had said the two million had been lost, McCormick had been unusually pensive and withdrawn, except for his irritation at visiting the medical center. Hardcastle couldn't explain back at the harbor, with the police and FBI around; and the clinic wasn't the place, and had decided to postpone explanations - and possible recriminations - until they got back to Gulls-Way. He'd wait until McCormick had rested, had some late supper, and was in a more positive frame of mind. The only thing Hardcastle dreaded worse than McCormick's depressive introspection was his white-hot temper.

It was after eleven p.m. when he turned off the coastal highway, through the open gates; he pulled into the garage, parked next to the 'vette. He reached over, punched McCormick lightly on the arm. "Wake up, kiddo; we're home..."

He raised up, unlatching the car door. "Yeah, home..." But for how long?

Hardcastle went into the kitchen, rummaged through the refrigerator, and placed possible edibles on the counter. McCormick picked up two sandwiches

on his way through the kitchen, and Hardcastle spoke to his retreating back. "Where're you goin'?"

"I'm gonna fill that seven-foot tub of yours with steaming hot water and soak for an hour."

True to his word, McCormick reappeared an hour later, a large towel around his waist, hands on his hips. "Where's the bathrobe, Judge?"

"It's my robe, kid; it's in my room. It is not community property." Hardcastle glanced up from the newspaper he had just now gotten around to reading, and surveyed the pattern of darkening bruises on McCormick's torso, "Gave you a beating, did they?"

"Hell, no, Hardcase; I worked hard for these."

McCormick was defensive, and Hardcastle raised his brows, indulging in light railery. "There were two of them, right? I mean, you wouldn't let one guy do all that to you, would ya?"

"You're not gonna let me forget this, are you? He was an old guy, Judge; I made the mistake of not wanting to hurt him too bad. He had no such compunct-ions, though... And he was the insensitive type; you know, too mean and hard-headed to feel pain. I'm lucky to still be standing."

"Was the other guy still standing?"

"He isn't now."

Hardcastle folded the paper. "Look, I was gonna lay some heavy talking on you, but you look out on your feet. Go on to bed, sleep as late as you want; it can wait until tomorrow." McCormick nodded, turned to leave, then hesitated. Hardcastle could see that McCormick wanted to say something, but was unsure how to begin, and waved him off, "Tomorrow, kiddo; get some sleep."

As the door closed behind McCormick, Hardcastle leaned back in the armchair. He had come very close to telling McCormick everything, only to realize he should keep Cadillac's confidence. No one outside the ex-gangster's organization - and only a few in it - knew the complete truth; Cadillac hadn't even told his own son. McCormick was no less to the Judge, and Hardcastle could do no less by Cadillac.

XXI

McCormick pulled the heavy quilt over his head, burrowed deep into the pillows. He was exhausted, but his troubled thoughts wouldn't let him sleep. And he knew he couldn't rest until he had resolved, somehow, a desolate feeling of guilt. He knew he wasn't personally responsible for the loss of the ransom; but he still could not reconcile the fact that Hardcastle had risked, and lost, a fortune to ensure his safety. As long as there had been a chance, however remote, of recovering the money, McCormick hadn't worried about it - he'd had other things to worry about at the time. But now...

He pushed the covers aside, rolled onto his back, and gazed up at the

beamed ceiling. How had Hardcastle gotten the money so quickly? The time he had been allotted was, to say the least, marginal; the kidnapers couldn't reasonably have thought Hardcastle could get two million in cash in only eight hours. Actually, it had been less than eight hours, as 90 minutes or so was transportation time to the harbor and rendezvous; it had been delivery in eight hours. It was as if they had wanted the Judge to be unable to meet their deadline. - Then what? Carry out what they had intended all along, kill the man they believed to be Hardcastle's son, exacting a terrible and devastating revenge. How the hell had the Judge managed it - in the face of nearly overwhelming odds, Hardcastle had come through. He had done the unexpected and the impossible, with seemingly little effort—as usual...damn it.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, heralding cooler weather with the high winds. He got wearily to his feet, pulled the robe around him tightly; he still felt cold, and checked the thermostat. It read 54°, and he tapped it lightly. Eyes adjusting to the semi-darkness, he treaded carefully down the cluttered staircase, nearly stumbling over an errant tennis shoe. Turning the air-conditioner off and the heat on, he crossed to the stone hearth, cleared away more clutter. Aside from the light on the lower landing, he didn't bother with the lamps; if Hardcastle should glance out and see the Gatehouse lit up, he'd be over to see what was wrong. And he needed this time to himself, to make some decisions; decisions that wouldn't wait.

Removing the firescreen, he started the fire; flames caught the dry kindling and newspaper almost immediately. He added some of the smaller logs, not wanting a blazing bonfire; but just enough to take the chill out of the air. He watched as yellow-orange flames curled around the firewood, crackling and popping.

McCormick rested against the still cool stone, arms around pulled up knees. He tried to sort out his ambivalent feelings and work through the problem. The warm feeling of security and delight at Hardcastle's rather expensive example of his unswerving loyalty was tempered by the fact that he couldn't even acknowledge the gesture - not by kidding or by gratitude. For he didn't doubt for a second that Hardcastle wouldn't try to get as much of the two million back as he possibly could, even if the Judge had to deduct from his wages for the next three or four lifetimes. He would never be free of it; it would be a debt he would never be able to clear...

There was only one dim hope, one glimmer of a possible solution - and even that was chancy, at best. But it was a possible answer, the most difficult part being getting Hardcastle to agree. The Judge had to have put up something for collateral; he doubted that Hardcastle could have sold anything on the stock market so quickly, and he knew Hardcase would never tell him. If the two million was to be re-paid in installments, and not all at once, then so much the better. And if Hardcastle didn't agree, well, this time next year it wouldn't matter; he wouldn't need the Judge's permission to leave the state.

He would return to the racing circuit, try to talk the Judge into it. He knew he'd need a lot of good rides, and even more good luck, but he was certain he could accomplish it. They would have to put their investigations on indefinite hold for two or three years, or operate on a 'part-time' basis. Hardcastle wouldn't like that; he wouldn't like it one bit. -But then, he just

may not have that much choice, either.

McCormick scattered the dying embers, replaced the firescreen. It wasn't a sure-fire answer, a lot could go wrong; but at least it was something he could offer the Judge. Because he knew he couldn't, in good conscience, stand by and do nothing.

XXII

Hardcastle replaced the phone as McCormick joined him on the patio, skirting the puddles left by the early morning rain. It was nearly one in the afternoon, and McCormick didn't look any better for his twelve hours of sleep. He looked worse, if that were possible; it wasn't only the scrapes and bruises, but a disquieting, inner turmoil lying just below the surface.

"That was Carlton, kiddo; seems they turned over a rock, and found a nest of vipers."

McCormick settled into the nearest chair, elbows on the table, chin in his hands. Hardcastle was in an exceptionally good mood for someone who had just lost two million dollars. He gazed past the older man, not really interested in what the Judge was saying, yet dreading to bring up the subject he wanted to discuss. In fact, he was puzzled that Hardcastle hadn't mentioned it himself. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now, listen up; this is important. That Blanckert guy, seems he was involved in all sorts of illegal activities - mostly drug related. Had been for years...seems he was good at his job. His lawyer showed up this morning; well, not his, but someone sent by...an interested party. Blanckert didn't raise any objections, and pleaded guilty to accessory to kidnapping with extenuating circumstances. That means no trial, and no evidence or testimony." He waited for the usual response, and when none was forthcoming, "Are you listening to me; is any of this filtering through?"

"Yeah, Hardcase. He's gonna throw himself on the mercy of the judge. Real dumb move." If he took the defensive, Hardcastle would have the advantage. And if the best defense is a good offense, well, he could be as offensive as the next guy - that being Hardcastle. "He's gonna end up serving less time than I did, and all I took was my car."

The Judge wasn't to be taken in. McCormick's complaint didn't track with his attitude. "You want to tell me what the problem is?"

"Dammit, you know what the problem is." His glare lacked conviction, holding only an uncharacteristic despondency. "I'm feeling guilty as hell, and you're loving it."

"You wanna narrow it down to ten or so possibilities?"

"Why do you do this to me? Was it my fault those guys thought I was your son? I still haven't figured out where they got that idea." He switched to defiance, wanting to know if Hardcastle held him to blame. "I don't think I should be held accountable for someone else's mistake—"

Both voices overlapped. "I agree. You shouldn't--"

"--There's no way I can--" The words reached him, and he paused, surprised, "...what?"

"I said you shouldn't be held responsible. What did you think I was going to think?"

"Who knows what you think? I'm surprised you didn't tell them to go straight to hell right off..." There was a flicker of startlement in Hardcastle's eyes, breaking his reserve momentarily. McCormick sighed, rubbed a hand over his eyes. "But all that money, Hardcase. You...you didn't hock Gulls-Way, or something, did you? Even if you did, say you didn't."

"I didn't."

It was a flat statement that McCormick couldn't bring himself to believe. "Oh, God, you did..." He ran an unsteady hand through unruly hair, and straightened, resolved and determined. "Okay, Judge, I've been thinking about it, most of the night; and, well, I think I can get that money back for you." Hardcastle looked at him with unnerving calm, and he continued, tentative, hoping to delay the inevitable. "It won't be right away, and not all at once. But, if you'll agree, I can get the money back at..." Courage failed him at the last second. "...the track."

"You," Hardcastle said darkly, "Had better be talking about Santa Anita." Although outwardly disapproving, he was secretly pleased that McCormick was willing to help him pull out of a serious situation, even though it didn't exist.

"Judge, com'on; three, four years, I'll win it all back - even more." He smiled, spoke with a confidence he didn't feel. "Guarantee it."

"You guarantee you won't end up decorating the landscape - before you even win a cent?" At McCormick's despairing look, he tried a different tack. "I can't let you do that; I wouldn't want you to race under that kind of pressure. Wanting to win is one thing; having to win is...too dangerous."

"Judge, when I'm on that track, all I think about is winning - regardless of the reason."

McCormick wasn't giving ground, so he went for humor; the kid always responded favorably to a lighter approach. "Look, kiddo, the choices were mine: My decision, my money, my loss." He shrugged heavily and sighed, with comic exaggeration; however, McCormick took him at his word, not his attitude.

"That makes me feel a hell of a lot better." McCormick's voice was low, and there was no fire, just a terrible sense of guilt. And that was worse than his self-satisfied, over-bearing disposition could ever be.

Hardcastle considered, silent for the moment. He had never had to worry about dealing with heavy emotional scenes with McCormick, as Mark disliked them as much as he did - maybe more. And the ex-con rarely took anything

the Judge said or did to heart. But this was different, and he wasn't sure McCormick could deal with the whole truth. Maybe just part of it for now, and the rest later - as much later as possible, as soon as Cadillac gave the go ahead. Unfounded guilt was bad enough, but hurt feelings was something Hardcastle couldn't cope with.

The Judge reached over, slapped McCormick's shoulder. "Hey, I'm kidding, okay? You know, when you're serious like this, you're no fun at all." McCormick glanced up from the glass top, smiled faintly; but his eyes were guarded, waiting for the ax to fall. "Now, listen carefully: I didn't 'hock' Gulls-Way, I didn't risk my livelihood - or yours. I'm covered, nothing's lost. I assure you, if there was the slightest cause for alarm, you'd be the first to know."

"I believe that." But he was unconvinced; the money had to come from somewhere. "Where did it come from, Judge?"

"That's the same thing Carlton asked. The twenty thousand was the money the bank sent over; he couldn't find where I'd gotten the rest. I'm telling you what I told him: The balance was a payment on a long-standing debt, from an...acquaintance, who wants to remain anonymous. And since it's highly unlikely that there'll be a trial, I see no reason why that request shouldn't be honored."

McCormick desperately wanted to believe this, but he was a natural skeptic. "Who the hell would owe you two million dollars? And for what? Or should I ask?"

"It was never a specified amount. It was for something you can't put a price on - as I well know, now..." Even mentioning Cadillac's name would be enough for McCormick to put two and two together. He wouldn't guess the entire scheme, but he'd be close.

The release of inner tension caused McCormick to realize just how frazzled he was; he rose from the wrought-iron chair, needing to move around. He leaned back on the low wall, hands in his jeans pockets, and gazed out over the slate blue ocean and low clouds. "I did wonder how you had managed to get so much money, so quickly. It was...almost as if they wanted you to fail."

"They did - well, one of them did. If I couldn't pay up, that would be their excuse to kill you; and I would have had to live with that. However it turned out, whether I got the money or not, you were never meant to survive. Jayce Blanckert was keen on getting his revenge, he wanted to kill my son - never knowing that someone else had beat him to it..." His voice grew unsteady, and he trailed off, glancing away.

McCormick gave him a few minutes, then broke the uneasy silence. "Judge, can I...ask you something; and you promise not to yell or get mad?"

"If I can't yell or get mad, why bother?" That got a half-smile, and Hardcastle knew he was making progress; a change of subject, if nothing else.

"Did you...did you pay the ransom because of me, or...because of who I was mistaken to be?"

"What the hell kinda question is that?"

"The kind I want answered."

Hardcastle didn't know if he could give McCormick the answer he wanted, and needed. "I paid the ransom to save a life - yours, my son's, anyone's. The money itself never mattered to me; it's...not something I need to have around."

A wide, slow smile spread over McCormick's tired features, "Thanks, Judge; no one's ever done anything like that...not for me. I'm touched, really..."

"You'll get no argument from me on that point, kiddo." Hardcastle felt undeserving of such open, and genuine, gratitude.

McCormick laughed, eyes sparkling with all their former mischief, "You're one of a kind, Hardcase. Thank God."

XXIII

Nearly two weeks passed, and things settled down to near normalcy. The Judge had demanded, in no uncertain terms, that at least a pathway be cleared through the Gatehouse. And despite Hardcastle's continued disclaimers to the contrary, the nagging doubt still lurked in the corner of his mind, that the Judge hadn't told him the whole story behind the ransom. But Hardcastle refused to discuss it any further, and no one in three-piece suits arrived at the estate with a court order, or violin cases, to claim ownership of Gulls-Way, McCormick decided that his concern was unfounded. He should have known Hardcastle would never risk the estate; it meant too much to him. And McCormick wouldn't have wanted him to, anyway.

Bored with the constant, never-ending sameness of cleaning up the Gatehouse he paused in a quick run-through of the dining room. It had been a way too quiet lately, and, deciding he needed a break in the cleaning routine, crossed to the stereo and cranked up the volume. He grinned to himself, knowing that would get a quick, and resounding, response.

Rock'n'roll music fairly shook the walls of the Gatehouse, and Hardcastle stomped across the patio, hands over his ears. He burst through the French doors, shouted to be heard above the din.

"Do you have any idea what the decibel level is doing to your brain cells?! But then, I guess you've got nothing to worry about, but I have. There's plaster fallin' from the ceilin', here!"

McCormick was moving with the beat, while supposedly picking up the clutter around the living room. "What?! I can't hear a word you're sayin', Judge; I got the stereo on!" Then he grinned, dumping assorted junk into the wood steamer trunk.

Hardcastle stood near the stairs, out of McCormick's way, and looked

around the Gatehouse in disbelief. "I paid two million to have my eardrums shattered, my Gatehouse demolished, and my good nature sorely imposed upon." He glared at McCormick, as Mark leaped the coffee table to catch the upright vacuum as it trundled mindlessly across the carpet. The Judge decided they suited each other: Mechanically mindless, and a mindless mechanic. "I tell ya, kid; I don't need this."

McCormick swung the vacuum around, just short of the open patio doors, and sent it back over the carpet. He held on to the cord and pulled it back, never missing a beat of the music. Hardcastle crossed to the blasting turntable, and McCormick moved to block him. The Judge reached past him, attempting to separate the various cords running to the multi-plug outlet. Finally, he grabbed all five cords, wondering what had kept the fuses from blowing - not to mention the fire hazard.

"Waddaya doin'?!"

"Doing me, and the world, a favor, and performing a mercy killing." With that, he pulled the plug.

The music died in a mournful, undulating wail; as did the vacuum, the TV (which had been on, but the sound turned down), the light next to the stereo, and Lord knew what the fifth plug was for.

"Aw, com'on, Hardcase; I was really movin' and groovin'."

"Oh, is that what you call it? I thought you were havin' a seizure, a delayed reaction of Stress Syndrome, or something."

The sound of tires crunching gravel caught his attention, and Hardcastle looked out the side window to see an all too familiar black limo parked outside the Gatehouse. He motioned to McCormick, and they both went outside to meet Joe Cadillac.

Davey leaned against the glossy black fender, arms crossed, imposing and ominous behind dark glasses and stern features.

McCormick waved cheerily, with a low aside to Hardcastle, "What's he doin' here?" He returned Cadillac's smile, as the ex-Mafia boss approached, carrying a leather case.

With a significant look, Cadillac handed the case to Hardcastle, who took it without comment. The ex-gangster slid a friendly arm around McCormick's shoulders, guided him away from the Judge. "McCormick, if you should decide to quit this crazy old judge, and go out on your own... Well, I could use..."

They walked beyond Hardcastle's hearing, and the Judge placed the case on the three-foot high stone wall bordering the patio. He watched as McCormick nodded, laughed, shook his head, then nodded again. As if feeling Hardcastle's gaze on him, Cadillac turned, and both he and McCormick rejoined the Judge near the Gatehouse.

Cadillac's dark eyes were bright with good humor, and Hardcastle was instinctively on the defensive. "Well, Judge Hardcastle, tomorrow is my

Day of Judgment; I wanted to stop by here, first, to...uh, return your investment. And to let you know you can tell the kid, here, whatever you want; I'm covered now.'

Hardcastle nodded. "I will; but, if I find out how you managed this..." He left the sentence unfinished, bristling at Cadillac's increased amusement.

"I'll consider myself forewarned, Judge; but you can't prove a thing."

Hardcastle grinned, "We'll see."

Cadillac shook his head, started for his car. "Remember what I said, Mark; nobody should have to put up with him any longer than absolutely necessary."

Davey opened the rear door, and Cadillac paused before getting in. He looked straight at Hardcastle, the amusement fading, a steel edge in his voice and manner. "And, Judge, just so you don't get the wrong idea: The next time we meet, the slate will be clean."

Hardcastle shrugged. "Whatever you say, Joe."

Davey closed the door, slid into the driver's seat. The engine started with quiet power, and the limo moved smoothly down the long drive with the stately elegance of its owner.

McCormick had watched the exchange quizzically, and indicated the leather-bound case. "What's that, Hardcase? What investment was he talkin' about; what are you supposed to tell me?"

"What did he say?" Ignoring McCormick's questions, he insisted on one of his own.

McCormick reached for the case, started to open it. Hardcastle slammed it shut with some force. McCormick jerked his hands back, checked to see if all his fingers were intact.

"What did he say?" Hardcastle repeated, leaning both hands on the case and staring levelly at McCormick.

The ex-con gave the Judge a self-satisfied smirk. "He offered me a job."

"Why? Is his chauffeur taking early retirement?" Hardcastle spoke confidentially, "Ya know what 'early retirement' in the Mafia is, don't cha?" He placed his forefinger against his temple, pulled the trigger, and let his head fall forward.

McCormick shoved him, not too gently, and laughed. "Cut it out. No, it seems he needs a trustworthy pick-up and delivery man, if you get my meaning!"

"What'd you tell 'im?"

"Said I'd think about it."

"McCormick..." Hardcastle started for him.

"Hardcase, I have my future to think about, here - I don't want to be your gardener forever."

Hardcastle's hands stopped short of McCormick's neck, gripped the open collar of his jacket. "You're not gonna have a future..."

"Okay, okay..." He held his hands up to stave off an explosion. "I'm only kidding. I said thanks, but no thanks; I'm too soft-hearted for that kinda job."

"Soft-headed is more like it." He released McCormick, dismissed him with a wave.

McCormick sidled around Hardcastle, snatched up the case, jumped the wall, and was at the patio table before the Judge could react.

Going through the Gatehouse, Hardcastle came out onto the patio as McCormick stared into the open case. He looked up at the Judge's approach, puzzled. "Hardcase, I don't get it..." He held up a plastic sack, "Camouflage confetti?" There were two others packed inside, and he removed them as well. "We goin' to the Army-Navy Game?"

"Cadillac never takes chances, kiddo."

"It was Cadillac, wasn't it? You got the money from Joe Cadillac... But, why did he grind up two million dollars into green hamburger? I know billionaires are supposed to be eccentric, but this is crazy; it's beyond crazy, it's certifiable."

"That's Cadillac's way of tellin' me he's covered his tracks. I'm not sure how he got it back; I don't know if I want to know..."

McCormick sat down weakly, pale and shaken. "The Mafia? You owe the Mafia two million dollars?"

"Me? Few weeks ago, it was you going to pay it back."

"Siddown, Hardcase; I want it all. I somehow sense the adroit hand of the master cynic, here."

"Well, it was like this: I wasn't about to give in to those guys, even if I could have gotten the money in time, which I couldn't; but I wasn't going to jeopardize you, either. I needed to lull them into what is commonly referred to as a false sense of security—"

"Yeah, I know all about that."

"Something that wouldn't be immediately detected, if ever. Joe's presence gave me the idea, and the source; a way to get you back, and give them nothing... well, nearly nothing. So, I sorta borrowed Joe Cadillac's printing press..."

Total, complete astonishment, "You mean you — You really didn't—" For a few seconds, McCormick was speechless, and Hardcastle prepared himself for the inevitable worst: "~~was any of it real?~~" was any of it real?"

Hardcastle took the question to mean the money. "The twenty grand Carlton has, I told ya; the rest, well..." He added defensively, "If that bothers you, I don't wanna hear it."

McCormick got to his feet, leaned his hands on the tabletop, and stared down at Hardcastle. "You old donkey, you don't fool me. You knew it would have bothered me- if you had paid, didn't you? That we couldn't continue as before - that I couldn't continue..." There was a sense of awed amazement; it was ingenious. The Judge had paid off the kidnappers, and even if they had gotten away, they would have gotten nothing for their trouble. McCormick liked that; it appealed to his sense of the absurd. If Hardcastle had been given enough time, the Judge would have gotten the actual two million; of that he had no doubt. But this, this was better; more than that, it was classic. No wonder Hardcastle had been willing to let them go; trying to launder funny money was not conducive to continued good health. "I'm not at all upset, or angry about it; but," he added with barely suppressed laughter, "I can't believe you pulled it off - That you actually got me back with a counterfeit ransom."

Hardcastle shrugged with modest acceptance. "Why not, kiddo? It was only fair. After all, they had a counterfeit son."

- END -

SWEET JUSTICE 2
5/86