

THE ADVENTURES OF MARK & THE JUDGE



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Interior Art: pp. 67, 68, & 70	--	--	--	--	--	Anja Gruber

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"You Oughtta Be In Pictures..."

By
Melinda Reynolds

I

He needed the money...a lot of it and quick. Every day he'd read the ad in CLASSIFIEDS, for almost a week; it had sounded too good to be true...or legal. But...he needed the money. Each day that went by brought the same printed offer, and each day it had sounded more and more tempting.

He sat down on a well-worn sofa, propping his feet on a rickety plywood coffee table. He opened Saturday's paper to the Classified Section; if the ad was still there, he would answer it.

It was.

And Austin Dane needed the money...

II

Mark McCormick dumped the contents of the shoe box onto his bed, watching anxiously as several bills fluttered out, landing like rectangular leaves over the scattered change. Setting the box aside, he carefully separated the bills into very short stacks of One's, Five's, and Ten's. He counted up the amounts, and found the total to be disappointingly low. He'd tried to save as much as he could for the past three months, but with a monthly salary of \$200 - before taxes - there wasn't much to save. Of the necessary \$400, there was \$182.89 (and \$3.89 of that was in change). Slightly less than half, and he had six weeks to come up with the amount that had taken him three months to accumulate.

Only slightly daunted, McCormick settled back against the pillows, picking up the already-read morning paper from the nightstand. Maybe he could find something part-time...and temporary. Even at minimum wage, it shouldn't take that long to earn \$220. Either that, or win a few more basketball games--he actually preferred the work...

His eyes ran down the long, narrow columns, noting several possibilities, when the large bold print caught his attention:

WANTED: SWM -- for film work. Part-time wkdays and wkends. Good pay, no exp. necessary. Must be between 20-35, good health, athletic. Temporary acting roll for 6-8 days. Call 55-4433, Ext. 427; ask for Jeffery Taylor, Martinque Productions. NO COLLECT CALLS.'

Lowering the paper, he couldn't help the wide smile that broke across his face. He recalled reading somewhere that extras used in non-speaking crowd scenes earned around \$40 a day. It sounded perfect; exactly what he needed. It wouldn't hurt to call, check it out.

Taking the paper with him to the desk, he dialed the number. A woman's monotone answered on the second ring.

"Martinque Productions."

"Extension 427, please."

"One moment."

Another few rings, another feminine voice, "Mr. Taylor's office."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Jeffery Taylor, please."

"Mr. Taylor is in conference. May I help you?"

"I'm calling about the ad in today's paper; '...Single White Male for film work...'"

She interrupted before he finished. "Your name, please."

"Mark McCormick."

"Age?"

"Twenty-six..." It wasn't like they were going to ask for his birth certificate or something.

"Height?"

"Six-foot-one."

"Weight?"

"One-sixty-eight."

"Color of Hair?"

"Light brown."

"Color of eyes?"

"Blue."

"Do you have any previous acting experience?"

"Uhh, no, but the ad said--"

"We're required to ask. If you haven't acted before, you'll need to join the Guild -- we'll take care if that if you're hired. Now, your mailing address?"

"101 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu."

"You'll receive an appointment card in the mail in a few days, Mr. McCormick. It will give you the time and place of your interview. Be sure to bring the card with you. You'll also need to bring your past work experience and references. If you have no previous work experience or references, you'll need three forms of ID plus a Social Security Number and Driver's License. Do you have transportation?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Thank you for calling. Your appointment card will arrive in a few days."

"Well," he mused, replacing the receiver, "That was easy. Wonder what kind of movie they're making?"

And then it occurred to him, a bit belatedly, that perhaps the kind of movie they were making was the type that earned triple-X ratings. The Judge would not be at all happy to know (he wouldn't see it; but there were too many people who would see it and be real quick to inform Hardcastle of the fact) that McCormick was cavorting on the silver screen in his birthday suit...He sighed, seeing the dollars flying away, as he dialed the number again, and was put through to Taylor's secretary.

"Hi, this is Mark McCormick; I called a few minutes ago about the movie job..."

"Yes, Mr. McCormick; how can I help you?"

He felt a bit embarrassed asking a strange woman about porn movies, and tried to think of a way to ask without being too specific, "Umm, I was wondering if you could give me some information about what, uh, kind of movie Mr. Taylor is doing..."

"Mr. Taylor does several kinds of movies; he's known mostly for action-adventure and the avant-garde film."

Just his luck, his application was probably for the 'avant-garde' film. "The ad in the paper...was that for a movie where the actors get to walk and talk with their clothes on, and perform their scenes in an upright position...?"

There was the slightest of chuckles, as she obviously figured out what he was trying to ask. "Yes, Mr. McCormick, the actors are fully clothed and mobile at all times."

"Thank you, M'am. Sorry to have bothered you." He replaced the phone on the desk, and leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head. "Well, what do you know...A legitimate job that actually pays more than three-twenty-five an hour..."

Austin Dane fumbled hurriedly at the shiny brass deadbolt, the only thing related to his apartment that was less than thirty years old. He opened the door carefully, knowing the mail would be lying on the cracked linoleum floor a few inches from the door, and he didn't want any of the envelopes caught in a crack and torn. There were only three pieces of mail on the floor, and one was a postcard.

He picked it up, hardly daring to hope that he'd been called in for an interview. Closing the door, he locked it absently as he read,

'Mr. Dane: Please report to 3727 Elmhart Street, Suite 42,
March 30, at 1:45 PM for your interview with Mr.
Jeffery Taylor. You will need to supply the following:

1. Previous work record & 2 references
2. Social Security Number
3. Driver's License (not essential, but helpful)
4. Four recent photos -2 portraits, 1 B&W, 1 color
2 full length, 1 B&W, 1 color

If you are unable to provide the requirements of Item #1, you may substitute 3 forms of ID excluding Items #2 & #3 as those forms of ID. Wear dark clothing, as photos may be taken at interview. Bring this car with you for verification of appointment. If unable to keep this appointment, please call 555-4433, Ext. 427 to re-schedule. (Signed)

Jeffery Taylor
Martinque Production

It was, Dane thought, the easiest job interview, and requirements, he'd ever had. One thing was for certain, it sure beat punching in ten hours as a janitor any day of the week.

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McCormick leaned on the worn broom, his eyes scanning the entrance of the driveway for a mail truck. Every so often, he gave the walk a few haphazard sweeps, just in case the Judge looked out the window to see what was occupying his resident ex-con. He glanced impatiently at the mailbox, wanting to get the mail before Hardcastle. No need to bother the Judge with this yet--he might not even get the job, and if he didn't, he had no desire to listen to all the reasons why he wasn't qualified for any job that required an IQ over 80. It had been two days since he'd called, and he should be getting something today or tomorrow. He hoped he didn't have to endure a whole weekend, waiting for Monday's mail. The mail truck finally rolled into view, and McCormick intercepted it at the mailbox.

The mailman nodded, gathering First-, Third-, and Fourth-Class into one large bundle. "Must've been expectin' this stuff," he said, indicating some large catalogs, "It's too large to fit into the box. Here," he dropped the load into McCormick's arms, "and thanks for saving me a trip to the house."

The truck pulled back onto the highway, and McCormick shifted the unwieldy stack to one arm, trying to sort through it as he walked back to the Gatehouse. A few feet from the front door, he found the card--near the bottom, of course. "Yes!" He pulled it out eagerly, and the rest of the mail tumbled to the driveway, unheeded.

He stood, reading it through carefully, murmuring key phrases: "'...3727 Elmhart...Suite 42...work record...references...Social Security...License...photos...' No problem. Well," he reconsidered, "maybe one." The appointment was for the 30th, at 3:45; middle of the afternoon and Hardcastle's favorite time of day to find some meaningless, time-consuming, and altogether unnecessary chore for him to do. Stuffing the card into a back pocket, he knelt, gathered up the mail. It was all for Hardcastle, and McCormick went inside the main house and left it on the Judge's desk in the den.

The Judge was nowhere in evidence, and he returned to the Gatehouse. The old donkey was probably holed up in the basement, trying to find Dangerous Psychopath #1. He shook his head; he sometimes wondered what it would be like to have a normal, everyday, mundane, boring life.

He smiled.

He'd probably hate it.

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Judge Milton "Hardcase" Hardcastle, retired, frowned at his desk calendar. March 30th had a notation in large, red letters: '2PM to 6PM, Meeting RJoFA; DON'T, under any circumstances, bring McC.' The Judge cringed a bit inside as he recalled the last such meeting he had dragged McCormick to. The Retired Judges of America met twice a year, dinner, drinks, and a smoke at one of the local country clubs. God, what a fiasco that had been; afterwards, the Judge had been told by the current president that Hardcastle was to attend all future meetings alone, or not attend at all.

However, leaving McCormick unchaperoned for 4 hours didn't sit well either. He hated to ask Frank Harper to 'baby-sit', and couldn't think of a way to ask that wouldn't be real obvious. "I'm gonna be out with the boys for a coupla hours, Frank; mind watching the kid for me?" Yeah, right. Trust McCormick to stay home, and out of trouble? Yeah, ri-ght. Send him to the movies? Only if he wanted to hear a scene-by-scene replay afterwards, with special attention given to the goriest, most violent, parts...why couldn't the kid watch a nice, bloodless (more or less) John Wayne movie? Well, he had a few days yet; he'd think of something. Sighing, he wondered why he couldn't have a normal, everyday, mundane, boring life.

He smiled.

He'd probably hate it.

IV

"Alright, now, you know to pick me up at six, right? That's 6PM, sharp, tonight, got it?" Hardcastle awaited confirmation before exiting the Coyote.

"Yeah, Judge, I think I can remember single digits."

Hardcastle nodded, opened the door.

"Judge..." McCormick held his hand out, palm up, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, yeah..." Hardcastle dug into his jacket pocket, "Here's the ticket to the museum exhibit. It's a good three-hour tour, and I want you to see all of it, okay?"

"Why, is there gonna be a test?" McCormick frowned at the ticket, then stuck it in the sun visor, "It's pay-day, remember? Anyway, I'm gonna need something to last me through to supper."

"You sure this is enough for one your fast-food binges?" Stuffing his face would keep McCormick busy for at least thirty minutes. Counting out the money, he added an extra five dollars, "Here, have dessert."

"Fifteen dollars? Where's the rest of it?"

"The 'rest of it' is going on the bill you ran up at the auto parts store."

"I needed those parts!"

"Trust me, McCormick; dual carbs don't look that good on you." With that, Hardcastle got out of the car and slammed the door.

"Damned. Old. Donkey.!" Never one to take out his anger or frustrations on his vehicle, he nevertheless burned rubber as he shot away from the curb. How did the man sleep at night? Slave labor, garnisheed pay, constant surveillance...the old bastard obviously had no conscience whatsoever.

The twenty minute drive to Elmhart calmed him somewhat, and he pulled into a Burgerbomb for a quick burger and fries. He didn't want to appear too eager and show up too early; 3:40 would be just about right.

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Jeffery Taylor watched the videotape carefully, noting the presence and unassuming charm that came through clearly on the two-dimensional tape. The first applicant of the afternoon was being photographed by Diana--she could do amazing things with light and shadow. He glanced at the application, Austin Dane...kid probably changed his name as soon as he hit LA. But he had no family, few friends, and a degrading job. And he was also young, handsome, personable. As watched the last few minutes of the taped interview, Taylor mentally matched Dane with a possible script and a possible buyer. The photos would determine the sell. And Taylor had no doubt that this kid would sell.

There was a quiet buzz, and he turned off the VCR, and flipped on the intercom. "Yes, Margaret?"

"You have an appointment at 3:45; a Mr. Mark McCormick," she reminded him.

"Yes, let me know when he arrives." The digital clock read 3:28, and he buzzed Diana. "How much longer?" He asked when she answered, "We have another one at 3:45."

"We've just finished; he should be coming out now."

Taylor glanced up as the back door to his office opened, and Austin Dane stepped through. "Thanks, Diana; get ready for another shoot - although I may call it a day if this one works out the way I think he will."

"Let me know."

"Mr. Dane," Taylor stepped forward to meet the young man halfway across his office, "I'm very glad to tell you that you're among our top five candidates."

"Thanks, Mr. Taylor. Everything was okay, then?" Dane hadn't been too sure about some of the references. He didn't have many friends in LA.

"Just fine. Tell me, would you be able to take four or five days off from your current job?" At Dane's hesitation, he added, "Because if you can, I can practically guarantee you a minimum of \$250 a day -- maybe more."

"I...I don't know; I'd have to check. You see, the place where I work, they gave me a job when I really needed it. Kinda hate to leave 'em in a lurch."

"Loyalty - that's very commendable." Taylor kept the understanding smile in place as he placed this kid in the "Jerk" file. "But you know, with what you'd earn, you could hire someone to take your place - temporarily."

Dane nodded, "Yeah...Yeah, I could. I just might do that, Mr. Taylor."

"Good, good..." Taylor guided him toward the door to the reception room, "Call me Monday and let me know. I want to start filming Thursday, and there's the usual papers and forms to deal with."

"I'll do that Mr. Taylor, and thanks."

They shook hands as Taylor opened the door and ushered him out.

McCormick, sitting in one of the comfortable chairs, tried not to stare as a young man left Jeffery Taylor's office. He held the magazine before his face, eyes peering over the top edge. The other guy looked to be in his early twenties, close to his own height, and more slender in build; his sandy blond hair was wavy and worn long, past his shirt collar, his features were regular, but unremarkable, and though he couldn't tell from across the room, McCormick figured the guy probably had blue eyes to go with the fair skin and hair. Not much competition, as far as he could tell. But the guy also had a pleased expression about him. Had he been hired? If so, would they be seeing anyone else?

He glanced over at the receptionist, and she smiled. Since she didn't ask him to leave, he decided the interview was still on. He smiled back, returning his gaze to the magazine. She was a redhead, in her late fifties, still trim and attractive. He'd recognized her voice as the same one that had given him the earlier information on the phone. After the blond guy left, she announced his arrival to Mr. Taylor.

Margaret Jenkins tried to concentrate on her typing, but her eyes invariably skipped over the notepad to linger on the recent arrival. She knew she'd get nothing done until he was called in for his interview; but she'd pretend to work just the same, just to have an excuse to look in his direction.

The intercom buzzer startled her, and she picked up the phone. "Yes, Mr. Taylor?"

"I got kinda busy in here. It's almost four, is that next interview - McCormick - still out there?"

"Oh, yes, sir." She couldn't help the rather obvious emphasis she gave the words.

"I see..." Mr. Taylor had clearly picked up on it as well, yet he still hesitated. "I don't know if I'll need to see him; the last one more that fit the requirements. Still, I suppose I could talk to him for a few minutes..."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Margaret, send him in."

Ms. Jenkins replaced the receiver, "Mr. McCormick...?" There was something about those eyes that made her feel twenty again; this boy could be dangerous. "Mr. Taylor will see you now."

She watched him get gracefully to his feet, cross the few yards to the door; her hands hovered over the keyboard as her eyes tracked his every move. "Thank you, M'am." He gave her a very knowing smile, then went inside the office. She leaned back in her chair with a sigh; why couldn't she have met someone like that when she was twenty? If she had, she wouldn't be going home to two cats and a dog...

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Having experienced few interviews, McCormick wasn't sure what to expect--or what was expected of him. But he had decided on one thing, and that was he was going to do this on his own. He wouldn't use Hardcastle's name or influence - good or bad -- to wedge his way in. The less these people knew about his setup with Hardcase, the better.

Taking a indicated chair opposite the desk, McCormick waited while Taylor looked over the form that the receptionist had obviously filled out earlier.

The gray eyes looked up, gazed at him steadily. "How long have you lived in Malibu, Mr. McCormick?"

"Almost eight months."

"And before that?"

"The Casa DeVille apartments - for six months." He knew Taylor would recognize the name, and connect it to the dump that it was.

"I see." He placed the form aside, "Do you have a current driver's license?"

"Yes."

"May I see it?"

McCormick took it from his wallet and handed it to him. Taylor looked it over carefully. A faint smile crossed his lips, then his features were brought under control as he returned the license. "Where did you live before Casa DeVille?" At McCormick's hesitation, he added quietly, "I'd like to mention now, Mr. McCormick, that I value honesty. Everything will be thoroughly checked out, and I prefer not to discover any lies. I can understand the...slight exaggeration in age," again, the faint smile, there, then gone, "considering the youthful mind-set of this business, but please save us both a lot of trouble and effort in the future and be truthful now."

Realizing that his past was a matter of public record, McCormick gave him at the truth. "Before that, I was in San Quentin for two years, Grand Theft Auto." He left it at that, expecting to be dismissed.

"I see." Taylor made a few notations on the form. "Are you currently employed?"

"Yes. I'm a ...groundskeeper; I work for room, board and salary. My previous employment was at Carhart Garage, Assistant Mechanic." He handed over the requested references and other information, along with the appointment card. "I didn't put my current employer's name down; I prefer you wouldn't contact him...he might fire me if he finds out I'm looking for another job." He should be so lucky.

"I understand. No, this will be quite sufficient." Taylor made a convincing show of reading over the information, all the while calculating McCormick's possible worth to him. As usual, the camera would tell. He picked up the photos; the B&W portrait shot was 5"x7", and he was wearing the type of jumpsuit worn by race car drivers, and so was the B&W full length; the two color shots were the usual 35mm size, unprofessional and next to useless.

Taylor leaned back, hands crossed on his desk. "Would you object to my photographer taking a few candid shots? Wouldn't take more than 30-40 minutes. I need some idea of how the camera will see you."

"No, I don't mind at all." He hadn't been asked to leave, his record didn't seem to matter.

Taylor picked up the phone. "Diana?...I'm sending Mr. McCormick to you...Yes, make up the regular package...and anything else you think might be useful." He got to his feet and McCormick rose also. "Diana is very good; you'll like her. Through this door, then the second door on the right. She'll send you back here when you're finished."

Taylor closed the door before McCormick could respond, and went back to his desk. He looked over the information and photos once more. McCormick may have quite a bit of potential; and if he did, Diana would find it.

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"Come on in, hon. Be with you in a moment."

The pleasant voice come from across the large, open room, it's owner obscured by reflectors and various lighting equipment. He waited just inside the door until the photographer finished whatever she was doing and stepped around the reflectors and into view. The word "stunning" was suddenly given full, vibrant meaning; she should be in front of the camera, not behind it. She was what was once called "statuesque"; nearly his height, ebony hair that fell in thick waves past her shoulders, and dark, jade green eyes. High cheekbones gave her features an ageless quality, and she possessed an exotic beauty that was natural rather than artificial. In fact, as she approached, he could detect very little makeup.

"Hi, hon," she smiled, extending her hand, "I'm Diana Ashton."

His voice seemed to be the only part of him not working. He swallowed. "Uh,...McCormick, Mark McCormick."

Her dark gaze swept over him, quick, intimate, openly assessing, "Jeffery wants a portfolio done - ever had one before?"

He shook his head, "No, I haven't, Miss - Mrs. ...?"

"Just Diana, hon. Well, come on over here and we'll get started."

Diana Ashton was clearly a professional, utilizing minimum effort to achieve maximum results. The first series of photos were posed and candid, and took about twenty minutes. "Okay, hon," she said, tilting a reflector away from him, "I'd like to do a few more; do you mind wearing different clothes?"

He shrugged. "No."

"And how do you feel about no clothes?"

"Uh...you mean nude photos?" At her nod, he shook his head, "I'd rather not."

"That's okay, hon; it's not a requirement. I'll need to setup for the rest of the shots. There's a dressing room over there, with a rack of jogging suits in different sizes. Pick one out, and we'll finish up."

The dressing room also served as a storage room, for filing cabinets lined one wall. The rack held several jogging outfits, and he chose a turquoise blue in his size.

Diana glanced up as he came back into the room. She smiled to herself. Nylon jogging suits were designed for one purpose: To draw the eye. And it certainly did.

Jeffery Taylor rose from his desk as McCormick returned from the photo session. "Mr. McCormick," he said, offering his hand, "I'm very glad to say that you're among the top five candidates--your references and background information checked out fine. All I need now is to see how the photos come out; if they're as good as I think they'll be, you're in."

McCormick felt caught up in a whirlwind; he straightened, taking on a more savoir-faire attitude. "Thank you, Mr. Taylor. If there's anything else--"

"No, no..." Taylor guided him toward the door, "Check back with us, say, 5:30; I'll have the proofs by then. You may be signing a very lucrative contract." With an encouraging smile and a wave, he closed the door.

He rewound the videotape of McCormick's interview. Definitely promising. Just the right amount of charm and good looks; with McCormick and Dane, he'd need only one more. That shouldn't be too difficult--he had a couple hundred prospects to choose from.

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Diana smiled to herself as she flipped through the photos, waiting for the tape to run its course. At the tone, she spoke, "If you're there, Trace, pick up. I've got a hot one for you."

"Diana? Yes, I'm here...what's up?"

"Hon, I've got somebody here you've gotta see. One of Jeffery's prospects. I just got the photos done, and I think you really should find something for him."

"Can he act?"

"Believe me, Trace, with his looks, he doesn't need to act."

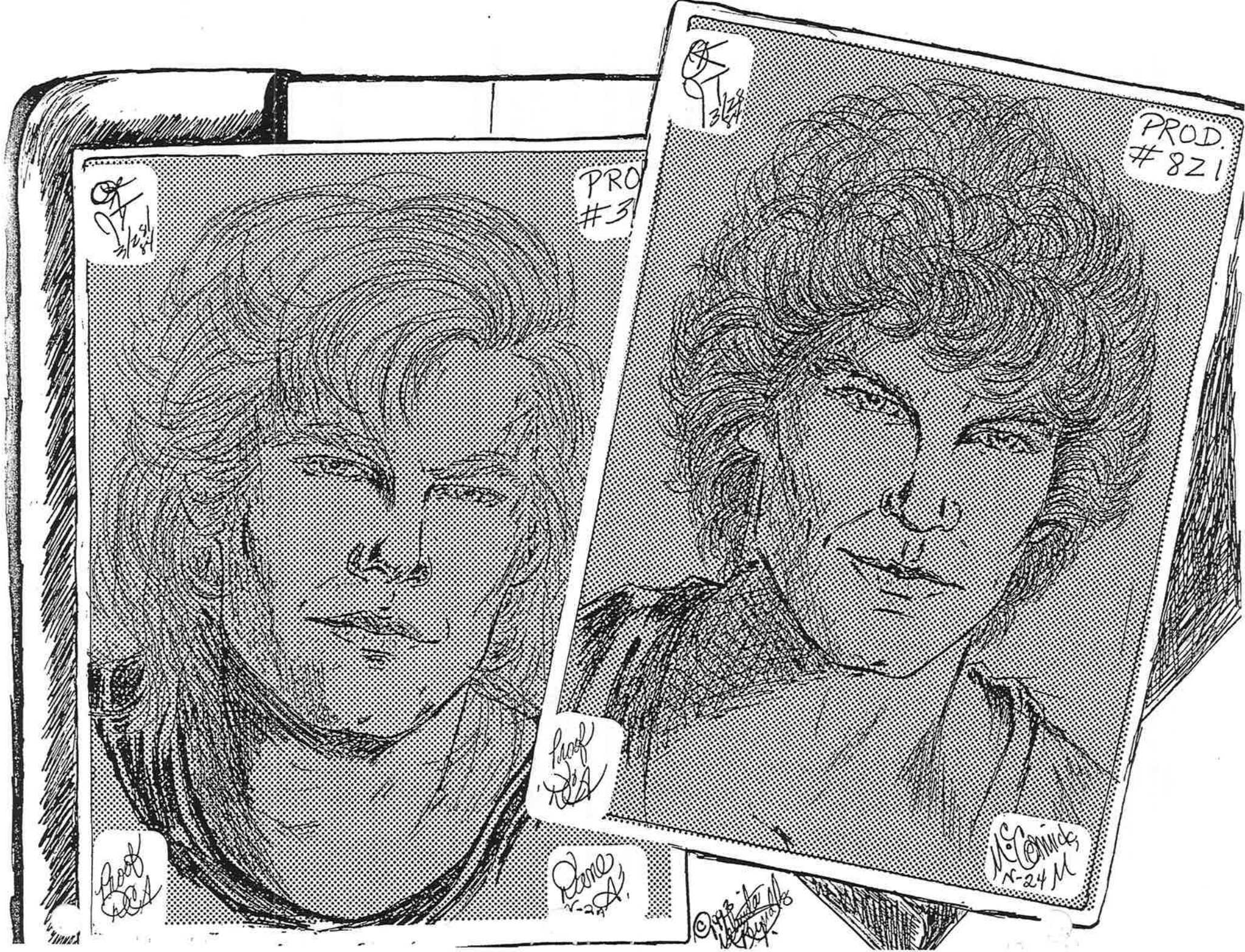
"Hmmm...Usual portfolio?"

"Yes. And extra sets for ourselves."

"Any nude shots?"

"'fraid not."

"Oh? Lack of courage, lack of poise, or just 'lack of...?'"



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"He's not lacking, that's for sure. Seriously, though, I'd really like for you to try and buy this contract from Taylor. Guy's sure to hire him, and considering what seems to happen to his "Unknown Stars"...Well, I'd hate to see anything happen to this one."

"Okay. I'll stop by tomorrow. I'll see you around ten or so. If he's as good as you say, then I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Traci; I owe you."

"No, he will..."

V

McCormick leaned against the Coyote's glossy red fender, rereading for the fourth time the contract with Martinque Productions. He could hardly believe it; so much had happened so quickly--and in his favor. He was till basking in a self-satisfied glow when Diana Ashton crossed the parking lot, caught sight of him, and came over.

"I see Jeffery wasted no time," she said, indicating the contract. "Can't say I'm surprised; in fact, I would have been surprised if he hadn't signed you."

He gave her a wide, genuine smile. "You must take awfully good pictures, Miss..., uh, Diana; Mr. Taylor said that he was very impressed with them. I got a feeling you got me hired."

"I only photograph what's there. Mr. McCormick..." she couldn't help the suddenly serious tone her voice took on, "it might be a good idea to have an attorney read over that contract before you sign it."

He glanced away guiltily, "Uh, well..."

She stopped the sigh from escaping. "You've already signed it."

"Well...yeah. Mr. Taylor said it was just a standard contract. Nothing complicated."

"When do you start?"

"Next week; he's mailing me a shooting schedule."

"I see." Diana turned her attention to the sleek lines of the customized car. "Is this yours?"

"Yeah. It's one of a kind, built for racing."

"Do you race?"

"No...Sorta got side tracked by life. But I have raced, mostly on the NASCAR circuit..." He trailed off; he'd have to be careful, or he'd be giving her way too much information.

"Well, I wish you luck, Mr. McCormick," she held out her hand.

"That sounds like a farewell," he said, moving closer as he held her hand lightly.

"I suppose it is. Tomorrow's my last day."

"You're not one of Mr. Taylor's employees?"

"No, I'm a freelance photographer. Jeffery hires me from time to time for temporary photo assignments."

"You mean," he said in mock distress, "that I'm never going to see you again?"

She laughed, enjoying his obvious interest in her. "I'm not a recluse; I do get out occasionally. Not often, but occasionally."

"Would you consider this Friday night one of those occasions?"

Direct and to the point; she liked that. She found that she liked everything about him. "Perhaps...I should be free late Friday evening."

This was definitely his day--a great job and a hot date, both in the same afternoon. "So, how about a movie, dinner,...whatever," he suggested, his fingers tightening briefly around hers.

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

She stepped closer, until their bodies were almost touching. "That we forego the movie, the dinner and go straight to...whatever." She spoke the last word in a near-whisper, her lips brushing softly against his.

She stepped away from him before he could register the fact that she'd actually come on to him. Her hand slipped from his suddenly numb fingers, and he watched her walk away. And then a thought hit him, and he ran after her. "Diana, wait!"

She paused next to a black Jaguar. "Yes?"

"Your address...where do you live?"

"Oh, my...I guess that would help, wouldn't it?" She took a card and pen from her purse, wrote hurriedly on the back. "Here's my home number, it's unlisted." Turning the card over, she circled an address, "This is my home address; it's actually an apartment over the studio. Will eight-thirty be all right?"

He nodded. "Eight-thirty. I'll be there." He pocketed the card.

Unlocking the car door, she slid behind the wheel, and rested one hand on the gearshift, the other on the door handle. "I do hope you like blueberry pancakes...they're my weekend specialty."

He smiled. "My favorite."

She closed the door, chuckling, "You probably would have said that if I told you curried kippers was my specialty."

He nodded. "Yep."

"'Bye hon; see you Friday night."

VI

Hardcastle paced ten steps, stopped, looked at the highway, then his watch, turned, and paced another ten steps. He had a strong desire to kick something—or, to be more specific, someone--but neither was available at the moment. So he paced, growing more irritated with each step, with each glance at his watch. For every five minutes he waited, he added to a mental list, which so far included laundry for two weeks, painting the fence, cleaning up the beachfront, resurfacing the drive, scrubbing and repainting the fountain, and, as soon as the minute hand reached 6:30, he'd add the gutters as well. Damn it all, anyway; McCormick knew he hated to be kept waiting.

He heard the Coyote before he saw it; he kept an eye on the second hand...it would be close. The red sports car squealed around the corner, and came to a whiplash stop at the curb. Five seconds to spare...damn...the gutters would have to wait.

He climbed laboriously into the passenger side, and fastened the seat belt. Settled in, he glared at McCormick as the ex-con pulled back onto the highway. "Ran into some heavy traffic...?"

"No...pretty much like it is now."

"Car trouble?"

"C'mon, Judge, she runs smooth as silk, and you know it."

"Then why," he thundered, "Are you 30 minutes late!?"

"Oh, that..." McCormick shrugged it off, much to Hardcastle's astonishment, "Well, you see, Judge, that museum tour...it was so neat that I went through it twice."

"That's interesting." The old man reached across, plucked the unused ticket from the sun visor, "Seeing as how you didn't even go the first time..."

The kid was a quick thinker, no doubt about that; he stared, wide-eyed, at the ticket. "So that's where it was. You know, I had to buy two tickets...Think I can get a refund on this one?"

"Do you think you can tell me where your really were?"

"I did."

"No, what you are going to do is learn some responsibility. You're going to the laundry for the next two weeks, paint the fence and the fountain, resurface the drive, and clean up that godawful mess on the beach." He settled back, arms crossed, waiting for the argument.

"Okay."

It took a minute..."What? What do you mean, 'okay'?"

"O. K. Want me to spell it for you?"

Something was definitely going on here. No moaning, no groaning, no protests? Lord, it must be more serious than he thought. "Pull over."

McCormick actually had the gall to grin at him. "Pull over? Why?"

"Just pull over."

The Coyote rolled to a halt on the shoulder. "Now, get out."

As if humoring a crazy person, McCormick sighed, climbed out.

Hardcastle circled the car, got in behind the wheel.

"Judge, what are you doin'?"

"You're grounded."

"I'm...what?"

"Grounded. Want me to spell it for you?"

"Judge, I'm twenty-nine years old. You can't ground me."

Hardcastle grinned, as McCormick was no longer smiling. "We'll see. Now get in, or do you want to walk home?"

VII

Traci Knight waited impatiently in Jeffery Taylor's office, long nails drumming on her mauve briefcase. Inside were the photos Diana had saved for her, and, as usual, her photographer's eye had not been wrong. He was one of those rare people who photographed younger than their actual years; a godsend in the film business. Added to the fact that Diana had also found out that he was once a race car driver--one of her drivers had been injured, and she needed a replacement, quick. A few days of shooting racing footage, and the budget would be saved. Now, if only Taylor would co-operate....

As if on cue, Taylor crossed through from the lobby, seating himself before acknowledging her presence. "Mrs. Knight, how nice to see you again. Since we were unable to come to a mutually agreeable understanding, do I dare hope that you have reconsidered?"

"Maybe." She faced him squarely, "You have something I want; I have something you want. Perhaps...a trade."

"And what am I to offer?"

"Mark McCormick's contract."

"How did you--" he shook his head, "never mind; the grapevine never ceases to amaze me. I need those cameras, but I need Mr. McCormick more--he's worth more to me, in the long run. Cameras I can rent, if I must; but talent, that's hard to find."

"Would you consider a loan, then?"

"Loan? For how long?"

"I'd only need him for two or three days."

"And I can have the cameras for as long as I need them?"

Traci sighed, knowing Taylor was getting the better end of the deal; she could get several thousand rental on those Arriflex's. But she also had a movie to bring in on time and on budget, not to mention her hard-won standing in the film industry. "Yes, all right. And the usual lab work is included."

"Then, Mrs. Knight, we have a deal. When and where, do you want Mr. McCormick to report?"

She handed him a manila envelope. "Everything's in there. Tell him not to be late; he should know where the race track is. And I'll have the truck deliver the cameras tomorrow afternoon."

Taylor rose as she prepared to leave. "I'll see to it. Any compensation due to Mr. McCormick will, of course, be paid by your company."

"Of course. Good day, Jeffery," She retraced her steps to Diana's temporary studio.

Opening the door, she leaned inside; Diana was setting up to shoot a rather nice-looking blond. "Got him for three days. That was the best I could do."

"Thanks for trying, Trace. Who knows, maybe he won't like it, and will quit before Jeffery gets hold of him again."

"Yeah, well, all I have to say is he'd better be worth what he's costing me."

VIII

Silence is Golden.

At least, that's what he'd heard. Of course, whoever had coined the asinine phrase obviously didn't have to live with Mark McCormick. After nearly two days of sulking, pouting, and moping - not to mention a lot of clanging, banging, and slamming --Hardcastle was beginning to prefer the ex-con's verbal displeasure to his 'silence'.

Deciding that enough was definitely enough, Hardcastle strode through the front door of the Gatehouse, just as McCormick was coming down the stairs from the loft bedroom. He was wearing his best suit, and adjusting his tie, coat over one arm. There were basically three reasons why McCormick ever wore a suit: 1) Church, 2) Funerals, and 3) Hot Date. As he could pretty much discount the first two, he was certain it was the

third possibility. The idea of grounding a grown man was pretty ridiculous, he had to admit to himself, if not to McCormick; and the kid had done most of the chores that he had meted out as punishment.

"Going somewhere?"

McCormick gave him a wary, defensive look. "Yeah. Out."

"Uh-huh...What's her name. This is all about a 'her', isn't it?"

"Her name's Diana...you know, like the Greek goddess?" Was she ever.

"Artemis."

"Huh...?" Most of McCormick's attention was on the mirror as he shrugged on his coat.

"Artemis was the Greek goddess of the moon and the hunt; Diana was the Roman version."

McCormick came over to the Judge, placed a hand on his shoulder and looked down at him, "Hardcase, you know some really weird stuff."

"Should I expect you back anytime tonight...or tomorrow ?"

McCormick's grin broke out in full force; he knew Hardcastle wasn't going to enforce the 'grounding' to the letter, but it was nice to hear it. "I'll be back sometime tomorrow morning."

He paused at the door, "Thanks, Judge."

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The address on the card turned out to be in a moderately affluent neighborhood. A two-room, glass fronted studio was at street level, sandwiched between a boutique and a deli. Parking in front of the studio, he went over to the grilled door; there was a intercom placed on the wall, and he reached between the bars and pressed the buzzer.

"Ashton Studios."

"Hi, it's me, Mark McCormick."

"Hi, Mark. Listen, the iron gate isn't locked; pull it open, I'll buzz the office door and unlock it. Open the office door, then pull the grate closed, hard; make sure it catches, it's self-locking. The office door will also lock when you close it. The stairs are off to the left. Come on up."

He followed her instructions, making sure both doors locked securely. The interior was dim and cool, a faint hint of jasmine in the air. A staircase curved to the second floor, ending at a wide landing and double doors. He pressed the doorbell, the chimes playing the first six notes of a show tune he couldn't name.

The doors opened inward, and she met him at the threshold. Taking the roses he held in one hand, and the wine in the other, she kissed him deeply and totally, backing him up against the closed doors. Diana Ashton was not a woman who believed in wasting time with nonessentials such as greetings.

His hands slid over her, her skin softer than the velvet of her backless dress. She moved against him as his arms drew her closer; she molded to him perfectly, their bodies fitting together like two pieces of an interlocking puzzle.

She broke the kiss with a deep sigh, tilting her head back as his lips moved over the arc of her throat, her shoulders. She finally stepped back, and he reluctantly released her.

"You're on time. I like a man who comes when he's expected."

"I aim to please."

She led the way into the living room, placing the wine on a coffee table, and picking up a vase from the bookshelf. McCormick looked around, admiring the modern black-and-white decor; the living room was accented with electric blue, the adjoining dining room complimented with gray and silver. The apartment reflected Diana's lifestyle both professional and personal: Professional in the clean, uncluttered lines of the furnishings; personal in the chosen decorations and scattered photographs. He felt comfortable and relaxed, and the cool air also carried the scent of jasmine.

She returned from the enclosed kitchen, the dozen roses arranged loosely in the onyx and ivory vase. She placed it in the center of the dining table, touching the dark red petals lightly.

"The roses are beautiful; thank you."

"I thought of you when I saw them."

She laughed quietly, came over to him, "Such a flatterer. I'm afraid I didn't finish my assignment today; one of the models didn't show up, so I'm going to have an early shoot tomorrow. I hope you don't mind skipping the preliminaries. The wine will be nice for...after."

He took off his jacket and loosened his tie. "I've already had dinner, and my evening's free. Did you have something - particular - in mind?"

Diana hooked a forefinger into the loosened knot, pulling him toward her, "I'm so glad you didn't say 'peculiar' --some guys think I'm a bit...agressive."

"I like a lady who knows what she wants..." As long as what she wants is me, he finished to himself.

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Her bedroom was ornately designed and decorated; a woman's room done in bright reds and golds. Rich, golden satin draperies covered one wall, the gold satin repeated on the tables, bed covers, and pillows. A red and gold, brass-plated dressing table stood before the curtained wall, and a red velvet fainting couch was against another wall. A single bedside lamp cast a rosy glow over the bed, a king-sized four poster of brass and black enamel; the headboard and footboard were intricately detailed with highly-wrought brasswork over the vertical rungs. He took in the room with one an all-emcompassing glance, and gave a one word comment, "Wow."

"My thoughts exactly," Diana murmured softly as her hand slid over him, pleased at the immediate response.

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McCormick let her take control at the start. She seemed to prefer it, and he didn't mind... and there were definite compensations. The role-reversal was a bit unusual, as he was usually the one 'on top of things', so to speak. She was also the silent type, which was something else different for him. As if she deemed it a personal challenge to endure her pleasure in silence, until it was too great to contain. And when she finally surrendered to him, he knew he'd done all the right things at all the right times. She settled over him, ebony hair enveloping in dark, fragrant waves. And still she held him, her touch revitalizing, her lips enticing. His hands slid down the long, smooth slope of her back, pressing down as he pushed up. They moved together as one, each seeming to know what the other desired.

He shifted slightly, intending to change their positions, but she halted him, hands pressed firmly against his chest. McCormick let himself be pushed back, down between the large, soft pillows. He lay quietly, shivering at Diana's light, expert touch--gently, yet tantalizing, fleeing yet lingering. His body responded thoroughly and completely, the blood heat surging through every pore. He wanted it to last forever, but couldn't endure another second. Her hands ran up his sides, over his arms. She held his wrists, easing them upwards, his hands brushing against the brass bars of the elaborate headboard.

"Hold tight, hon," she breathed in his ear, "I'll give you a ride you'll never forget."

He took a deep, shaky breath, fingers curling around the heavy railing. "...I want to touch you...feel you..."

"Later...you can feel me all you want..."

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McCormick lay back, stretching - he almost felt like purring. He was drained and exhausted, but it was a gratified kind of tired - for a change, He pulled the cool, satiny sheets around him as Diana rose from the bed. He watched as she brushed her hair back over her shoulders, and slipped into a silky green nightshirt, the filmy material clinging to well-developed curves. She'd been confident, and inventive--and he was strongly reminded of an expert, professional driver taking a perfectly tuned Formula One on a endurance drive...and he now knew how the car felt...

"Back in a minute, hon."

He nodded, giving in to a pleasant drowsiness.

She returned, a wineglass in each hand, to find him curled up on his side, sound asleep. Smiling, she downed one glass, placed the other on the nightstand. Leaning over, she brushed aside damp curls from his face,

kissed him lightly. She turned off the bedside light, and eased under the cover, snuggling close to his warm body. She like the way he fit, and rested against his shoulder, sliding an arm over his waist. Within minutes, she joined him in sleep.

IX

"So Milt, what time can we expect you?"

"Hmmm, well, I tell ya, I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Hardcastle grimaced as ex-Judge Sullivan Whitley interrupted his schedule for the third time that morning.

"What's to talk? Same as last year, and the year before--you're not going to lame out on us, are you?"

"It's not that, Sully...it's just, well, McCormick and all..."

"You're not bringin' that convict, are you?"

"He's not a convict."

"Yeah, well, twelve honest citizens disagree with you; and so do we," he added, obviously not realizing how that sounded. It was one of those unique phrases that McCormick was quick to pick up on, and invariably further endear himself to the remainder of the RJofA members.

"Okay. Look, I'll make some kind of arrangements with McCormick, and get back to you later today."

"That sounds like the old Milt; Vegas will never know what hit 'em." With a hearty laugh, Judge Whitley broke the connection.

Making decisions that went against his grain was not the way he like to spend pleasant Sunday afternoons. However, the annual Vegas trip was something of a tradition, and he hated to be the one to break tradition. He secretly believed that the other members took the week-long trip in order to escape the company of wives and family. He, too, had found it a nice distraction the first few years, but lately the charm seemed to have faded. Maybe that's why he'd found McCormick's comments and observations more amusing than his fellow jurists. But he'd already committed himself, and now had to deal with the seemingly recurring problem of what to do with McCormick.

He was still puzzling over it when he reached the Gatehouse, sliding open the glass patio door. He closed it silently behind him, and remained quietly by the door as McCormick's voice came clearly from the bedroom.

"...Yeah, yeah, I know; I can hardly believe it myself. And your place would be ideal...I don't know, I doubt if he'd go for it; he seems to think I'll go on some kind of wild crime spree if he let's me out of his sight for more than ten minutes...Hah, easy for you to say...Geez, it's like everything's happenin' at once, ya know? And, the thing is, I think it would be good for both of us to spend some time apart--I mean, I'm still on parole, where am I gonna go?...You don't know Hardcase; if he could figure out a way to do it, he'd chain me to this place...Yeah, right...It's like I don't have a life outside of Gull's-Way and Milton C. Hardcastle - if I have an interest in something, it's 'so what'; and if I don't have an interest in something, it's like 'who cares?'" And it's real obvious that I'm just not smart enough, quick enough, or strong enough...now, he doesn't actually come right out and say it; it's done by comparison: 'See that guy, kid; got a hell of an intellect; he'll be somebody someday'; 'That guy can take two bullets in each arm and not flinch'; 'Gotta watch that one, moves like lightning'. And that's not the best part, the kicker is, all those guys are in prison. I mean, what's his point; I don't understand it, I don't understand him...Oh, yeah, I'm real useful around here; Hardcase trusts me for two things; Drawing fire, and spreading fertilizer...Oh, funny; you're pretty good at it yourself, as I recall...And, speaking of trust, he'd said it'll be six months before he'd trust me, and it's been longer than that. And nothing's changed, it's the same as before--he's on my case all the time...Okay, okay, I'll ask him, just don't expect miracles; man, I tell ya, just once I'd like to do something I want to do, and not what he wants to do..."

Hardcastle snorted, hating to admit that the kid was right--in all respects: Maybe he should allow some slack in the leash; he hadn't meant to come across as a domineering Simon Legree. He opened the door, then shut it loud enough to be heard upstairs. "McCormick!" He called out in the expected manner.

"...Uh oh, speak of the devil. Gotta go, talk to you later." McCormick bounded down the stairs, his usual energy level at plus-20; he stuffed a folded paper into his shirt pocket and flopped down on the couch. "Hiya, Hardcase; hope you're not here with a new list of 'Things for McCormick to do today', 'cause I'm still on my 48-hour break."

Sometimes, all that positive energy could be downright infuriating. "No, no list. Not yet, anyway." He sat down in the armchair opposite the couch. "I'm going to Vegas next week--"

"Vegas! Next week!?!!" It amazed him how the kid could sound so surprised and upset at the same time.

"I'm going; and if I had any sense, you'd be going, too. But Judge Whitley--"

"Oh, yeah, Judge Witless; is he still callin' the shots for the rest of those spineless wonders? Why do you bother with 'em, Judge? They're startin' to give you a bad rep."

"Are you finished?"

McCormick grinned. "For the moment."

"Okay, here's the deal. Judge Whitley and the others are expecting me to join them in Las Vegas for a week and won't take no for an answer--nor you, either." He raised a hand to forestall any whoops of joy, "And no way am I leavin' you here by yourself. So you're either going to have to stay with Frank and Claudia, or--"

"No, wait, Judge, this is perfect." McCormick was on his feet, demonstrating how perfect it was, "I just got through talkin' to B.J. Manners; he's going out of town next week and wanted to know if I could keep an eye on his apartment for him. Now, I can call him and tell him I can stay there all week. You know where it is, and it's not that far from Frank's. How about it, you go to Vegas with the old fogey judges, and I'll stay at BJ's condo and live it up."

This sounded too much like a setup, and he would have suspected as much under different circumstances. "Okay, but I want a phone number. And I'm gonna call, every night, and you'd better be there. If you're not there, I'm gonna be there--got it?"

"Don't worry, Judge, I'll be there; and I'll even come by the estate every day, just to make sure everything's okay, and that nobody's stolen the fountain or anything. Man, this is great! Seven whole days of--" He stopped suddenly, looking a bit guilty.

"Seven whole days of what?"

"Nothin', honest..."

"Yeah, okay, Honest John, get over to the house; there's two suitcases in my bedroom, Bring 'em downstairs."

McCormick gave him a look. "You're already packed."

With a broad grin, McCormick reached behind the couch, and picked up a well-packed suitcase. Hardcastle kept his own grin firmly under wraps, "You're already packed."

"Hey, I learn from the best..."

X

McCormick stumbled through the front door, fumbling in the unfamiliar semi-darkness for the ringing telephone. He found it, finally, nearly knocking it off the table as he grabbed the receiver.

"Yeah, hello..."

"McCormick...?"

"Hi, Judge; hocked the farm yet?"

"I called an hour ago; nobody answered. Where were you?"

"Out. Late dinner. Just got back. How's Vegas? Is the city still solvent what with High-Roller Hardcastle in town?"

"Don't change the subject. I find out you're fooling around, you're in trouble. I'm callin' again tomorrow night at nine; you don't answer, I'm callin' Frank. And it won't be a social call, got it?"

"Yeah, Judge, I got it. I'll be here. Good luck, and good-bye." He was glad the couch was near the phone, as he simply collapsed onto it. How did something that looked so easy, take so much out of you? He closed his eyes, too tired to get up and fix the sandwich that he had planned for the that night's dinner. One day...Geez, it seemed like a week already.

When he'd gotten home last Saturday, he'd been surprised and delighted to find Taylor's letter in the mailbox with the instructions to report to White Knight Productions, six AM, the following Monday. Six pages of script had been included, along with a shooting schedule, directions to the track, a contract, and an ID badge. The rented racetrack was less than eight miles from B.J. Manners' apartment, and it was sheer luck that BJ had an out of state ride, and would be gone for at least a week. The temporary acting job turned out to be more stunt than acting; and he was listed as apprentice to the stuntman who had been injured in a car roll. He'd run that damn car up the ramp at least a hundred times, coming to a side-winding halt so the roll could be edited in later. The car was to land right side up, and another stuntman was to do the actual roll, scheduled for Tuesday. His job was to do all the driving before and after the stunt; his face hidden from the camera by the helmet. With the heat,

and the near-constant tossing in the small confines on the race car, he felt like he'd spent sixteen hours in a spin dryer. He ached in every joint was sore in every muscle. Just as he was about to drift off to sleep, the phone rang again.

With a groan, he answered, "Yeah...?"

"Mark, is that you?"

He perked up a bit, "Diana, hi. How'd you find me?"

"Traci's a friend of mine. She gave me your number and address."

"Oh, yeah...Dragon Lady. Oh, sorry; she's a real nice lady."

"No, you were right the first time. She hates to go over budget and over deadline. She pulled a lot of strings to get you on the set; you're going to have a lot of forms to sign and send in to--"

"Diana, please...I really don't want to talk about anything right now. Everything I have aches...My hair hurts, my head hurts, so does my neck, my back, legs, knees, feet...even my toes hurt," he lamented. "And, I'm starving."

"Poor baby..." she tried not to laugh at his litany of woes. "Tell you what, hon, how does pizza and a back rub sound?"

"Wonderful. Heavenly. How soon?"

"Be there in less than an hour."

"I'll be here."

"Bye, hon."

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The five o'clock alarm went off with a clamor, jarring him into consciousness. He literally rolled out of the bed, staggered to the bathroom, trailing blankets and sheet. God, the things he did for that old donkey - he wouldn't even be doing this...if he hadn't needed the money to buy back that damned championship basketball⁽¹⁾...Hardcastle harped on it constantly, casting accusing glares his way as if he had taken the thing and hocked it for twenty bucks. To more or less make things easier for himself, he'd made inquiries to every contact he had, until, finally, he'd located the person who'd purchased it from a pawn shop. McCormick hadn't known what the self-proclaimed collector had paid for it, but he wanted \$400, and was giving him until April 10th to come up with the money. Guy was a collector, all right--a collector of hundred-dollar bills...And to his surprise, he was being paid enough in one day working for Ms. Knight to buy two basketballs; but he didn't want to quit mid-job, or mid-scene. She'd told him that today would be the 'sniper scene', whatever-the-hell that was; he'd been too tired to go over the pages they'd given him to take home. He didn't have any dialog, anyway...The hot shower woke him up somewhat, and he pulled on jeans and shirt as he followed the tantalizing aroma of coffee brewing in the kitchen.

There was a note on the counter, and he read it as he poured a large mug of coffee. 'Good morning, hon,' it read, 'you're going to give me a complex if you don't quit falling asleep on me; at least last time you waited until after...But you're forgiven - this time. I've set the timer on the coffee-maker for 4:45, there's Danish in the fridge. You can thank me later...Diana.'

He smiled ruefully as he took the pastries from the refrigerator. The last thing he remembered, after the extra-large, everything-on-it pizza and iced tea, was the exquisite, consummate massage...her slender, expert hands ran mercilessly, marvelously over knotted muscles, aching joints, until he didn't know if his moans were from pain or pleasure. He could have died right then and there, and been a very happy man...and, unfortunately, he obviously had. He'd have to do something very special for her to make up for his inattentiveness.

Finishing up the coffee and Danish, he grabbed the still-unread script pages and headed out the door. He'd get to the track about fifteen minutes early, plenty of time to read over today's scene...

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McCormick looked uneasily at the paraphernalia strapped around his chest. The clipped, last-minute instructions ran through his mind as he adjusted the racing harness. He - or rather, the actor/character he was

doubling for - was suppose to be shot twice by a racetrack sniper, initiating the subsequent 'crash and burn'. The first time, one of the remote controlled 'wounds' hadn't worked properly; the second time, he had felt both jolts, which interfered with his timing, causing him to spin out on a curve at eighty-plus miles per hour. He'd apologized for the ruined scene, knowing every delay cost time and money. One of the first things he'd been told was never to blow a scene unless it was absolutely necessary. The director had been concerned, and had asked him if he wanted to continue. He wasn't afraid to do the scene, and had never really lost control of the car...he just missed his slide to the ramp, where he was to halt. Close-ups were to be taken after the end of that scene. The third setup had taken nearly another hour, and he hoped it would go well this time.

Getting the thumbs up from the assistant director, he started the engine; as he couldn't see the clapboard, he watched the AD for the signal, and took off, shifting quickly and smoothly through the gears. The orange striped barrels would be coming into range soon, the cue for the remote charges. He'd have to feel them go off, as he couldn't look down without running off the track; he almost missed them, it was so slight. A quick glance confirmed two red blotches spreading across his chest, and he swerved across the track, between two other cars, and slid toward the ramp and a halt.

Within seconds, the car was surrounded by various crewpeople. One helped with his harness, another leaned in the passenger side, checking the dash-mounted camera; others checked the car, and did whatever they were suppose to do. The AD came up to him as he pulled the helmet off, clapped him on the shoulder.

"That was great, Mark; perfect timing. We'll run through it a few more times, the sound was a bit off. Matt," he called to a crewman, "get the car back to the mark. Reload the camera; and Mark, get cleaned up, and report to FX for a new harness. Come on, people, let's move; this ain't Paramount. Time is money."

McCormick trudged back to the office building temporarily setup for make-up and special effects. Another hour for preparations, and then hurry-up and wait until everyone else was ready. Ordered chaos, it seemed; and he wasn't crazy about the prospect of three more days of more of the same. It was a good thing this was a temporary job; he didn't think he could take it on a permanent basis...

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Traci Knight wound through the cables and equipment, looking for her director. She finally caught sight of him near one of the trailers, caught his eye and waved him over.

"Well, Martin, the replacement...the new guy...how'd he do?" She was almost afraid to know, hoping she hadn't made a big mistake.

"Who...McCormick? Did pretty good for a first-timer." He chuckled, "I think the AD wants to marry him."

There were a few hours left before sundown, and she nodded toward the track. "How'd we do today?"

"Just finished the last gag. Daniel's rolled that car perfectly on the first take. We're finished here."

"Finished? Martin, that's wonderful, you're a miracle worker."

"That's what they pay me for. We're wrapping up the close-ups, and pan shots; then we're outta here. He was motioned by one of the cameramen, "Anything else?"

"No, go on, finish up." She couldn't believe it; they had finished early. She went through the crew, congratulating them...it never hurt to heap praise as well as complaints.

She looked around for McCormick. She'd talked to him only briefly early Monday morning, enough to ascertain that he was familiar with film work⁽²⁾ and also a capable driver. Then she had to attend to other business, leaving the responsibility of the shoot to the crew and actors. She found him seated on one of the folding chairs, a paper plate in his lap and a Styrofoam cup in one hand. He started to rise at her approach, and she shook her head.

"Mark, Martin tells me you did us proud today."

A look of relief crossed his tired features, "It was nice of him to say that, Ms. Knight; I, uh, messed up a few times..."

"So what? I got the footage I needed, with time and money left over." She smiled. "With results like that, you can mess up all you like."

"Will I be doing any more work for you?"

"Not on this film, no; but...if you're available in the future..."

"I don't know, Ms. Knight...I sorta have a full-time job--I'm just on vacation at the moment..."

"It's a shame to waste good talent," she tried not to stare at him. Even tired and dusty, he was gorgeous...more so than even hinted at in the photos. She gave him her personal card. "If you change your mind, be sure to look me up."

"I'll do that, Ms. Knight. Thank you."

His smile was devastating; Lord knew what he would be like if he wanted to seduce her. "I'll have your check ready before you leave; pick it up at the office on your way out."

"Yes, M'am."

She forced herself to walk away then, before she gave in to her baser instincts, and jumped him right then and there. It might have damaged her credibility, but not her ego--Lord, but Diana could pick 'em...

XI

McCormick parked two doors down from Diana's studio. He didn't know what her working hours were, but it was nearly six p.m., and he hoped she wouldn't be too busy. There were soft chimes as he pushed the door open; she was talking to an older gentleman, and glanced up as he entered. She sent him a brief smile, then turned her attention back to her customer.

He studied the black and white photos on the wall, until the older guy finally left. He sauntered over to her desk, "Hi, pretty lady. Think the boss will let you leave early?"

"Oh...probably. I hear she's a wonderful humanitarian."

"You'll be glad to know that we finished up early yesterday, and not only did I get paid, I also got a solid ten hour's sleep."

"Best news I've heard today."

"I thought we might...do something."

She raised an eyebrow, "...Oh?"

"No, really. I want to take you out, do whatever you want..."

"Give me thirty minutes."

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They finished their evening at one of the finer restaurants that specialized in choice cuts of steak. McCormick could not recall having spent a more relaxing, and entertaining day; and the evening promised to be even better. Diana had wanted to visit the beach, and just walk along the ocean. They spent a couple of hours strolling aimlessly and enjoying each other's company. The steak house was also her idea, a place she had patronized often, if the hostess' greeting was any indication.

They shared small talk through the main course, but McCormick sensed there was something on her mind. As the dishes were cleared away and the dessert orders taken, he reached across, touched her hand. "We've spent the past three hours talking, and not saying much. I got a feeling you're trying to lead up to something." He smiled, "Wanna get it over with?"

"I...I don't know if I should even say anything or not." It was the first time he'd ever seen her unsure of anything. "But the more I think about it, the more I feel I should...warn you."

"About what?"

The waiter arrived with their desserts, forestalling her answer. "I'm not sure, really; it's hard to put a feeling into words--or explain something that's not quite right...Oh, dear, I'm starting to sound like an airhead bimbo."

McCormick was halfway through his Black Forest cake, "This doesn't have anything to do with...us, does it?"

"No, of course not."

"Then it's not important. Don't worry about it."

"I wish I didn't worry about it. Even when you were doing all that driving for Traci, I was a bit concerned; and I know she's real strict about safety measures. But Jeffery Taylor...well, I've heard he's not so...conscientious..."

"It's just a couple of days of playing 'Let's Pretend' and getting paid big bucks for it."

"Just be careful...Please?"

"Tell ya what, if I see anything weird goin' on, you'll be the first to know."

"Mark, darling, how would you know if there was anything 'weird' on a movie set? No, I'm going to worry, no doubt about it. Promise you'll call me at least once a day, at home or at the office?"

She seemed genuinely concerned, for no reason that he could fathom; but then, it was nice to have a beautiful lady care about you. "Okay, deal. And, just to put your mind at rest, here's a guy you can call if I happen to fall off the face of the earth--but call him only as a last resort."

She took the dinner napkin with Hardcastle's name, hotel, and phone number on it and put it in her purse. "Well," he conceded, "I feel a little better; just don't go into this blind."

"You and my friend would get along fine; you both worry needlessly about the same thing." He smiled, glancing at his watch. "Ah, great; excuse me for a moment, I need to call said friend. Otherwise, we'll be having unexpected company later tonight."

Diana finished her strawberry cheesecake absently, wondering if she should be more insistent--even ask that he not accept anymore of Jeffery's assignments. She shook her head; she had no right to tell Mark what to do, regardless of any misgivings she might have. She had no proof, no concrete reasons...

And she wasn't going to let Jeffery Taylor, or anything else, ruin this evening - no way.

XII

"Excuse me," a voice from behind halted him in mid-step. "Could you tell me where Studio B is?"

McCormick turned, found himself eye-to-eye with the blond guy who'd been interviewed the same day McCormick had been there; and instead of the expected blue, calm green gazed back at him. "Yeah, turn left at the end of the hallway. You work for Jeffery Taylor?"

"Yeah. Just started; today's my first day." He held up some loose script pages. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do...And this is all the script they sent. I thought I'd get the whole script."

"Not always. Extras and walk-ons usually don't get scripts at all. Since we're only working a few days, we only need the script pages pertaining to us."

"You seem to know a lot about it, Mr. --"

"McCormick, Mark McCormick." He held out his hand.

"Austin Dane." Dane had a firm grip, and an open, engaging smile. "Uh, maybe you can explain something else..."

"Be glad to."

He indicated two pages, "What does 'AD LIB, DC', mean?"

"The 'DC' is Director's choice; the actors ad lib whatever dialog the director decides on."

"Easy when you know how, huh? Have you been working for Mr. Taylor for very long?"

"Oh...a while. I just finished some work on Knight Productions new film, "Speedway Sniper"; then Jeffery called in today to finish out the week."

Dane appeared suitably impressed. "Did you get to meet some big stars; did you work with them?"

"Oh, the usual in a racing movie...Paul Newman, Jim Garner..." He shrugged; it was easy to appear nonchalant when the closest he'd come to the 'stars' was sharing the same make-up chair. "I had a brief scene with Cheryl Ladd." He didn't explain that the 'scene' was caused by his accidentally stepping on her foot while they stood in the catering line.

"Man, imagine getting paid to be with her. Do you think we'll have someone like that on these movies?"

"You never know."

He headed down the hall in a more positive frame of mind, "I'll let ya know!"

McCormick smiled, then looked again at the written directions to Studio C. Down the hall, to the right; made sense. There were double metal doors with bar handles, and on one door was a cardboard sign, hand lettered, which read 'Studio C'. Classy.

He went inside, looked about for a familiar face. The room was large, crowded with equipment and various odds and ends. There was a cluster of lights at the far end, and the murmur of voices. He followed the sound to find Jeffery Taylor seated at a card table talking to three other men; three large men dressed identically in navy muscle shirts and jeans.

Taylor looked up at his approach, smile broadly. "Mark, you found us. Come on over, and meet the rest of the...cast."

The three stood up and McCormick got his first clear look at them. All were big, but one was blond with a crew cut; one had dark straight hair; and the other reddish, curly hair. Taylor indicated each in turn, "This is Lawrence...", the blond nodded, "this is Joseph," the dark-haired guy just looked at him, "and that's Burl," and the guy with the frizzy curls smiled faintly.

McCormick grinned broadly, thinking they were putting him on. "Oh, yeah, I get it. Larry, Joe, and Burly, the Steroid Stooges, right?"

Burl looked at his companions, "Stooges? He talkin' about us?"

"No, no, he's just kidding around." Taylor didn't want the mayhem to start too soon; the camera wasn't rolling. He spoke in a low voice to the three goons, "Save it for later." To McCormick, the phony grin was again in place, "That's their real names, and they're kinda touchy about the 'Three Stooges' remarks."

"Hey, sorry, guys; I think you look great. What's on line for today?"

"Rehearsals. I'm going to videotape the rehearsals, so we can watch 'em later and see what needs work. Have you read over the scene?"

"Yeah. It seems to be mostly direction."

"You learn fast; picked up quite a bit from the Knight people, didn't you?"

"Yeah, they were great to work with."

"Okay. The dressing room's over there; your wardrobe is on a hook by the door. Get changed and we'll start."

The change didn't take long, and actually wasn't much of a change. His Nikes were replaced by navy tennis shoes; his jeans were replaced by faded, worn Levi's with the knees ripped out; and he exchanged his tan pull over for a bluish-green shirt with long sleeves.

The others were already in place when he rejoined them. The 'set' was made up of packing crates, boxes, and a railed staircase along the back wall.

"Okay, Mark, we're going to pick up on Act 2, Scene 4. Ready?"

McCormick nodded.

"Action."

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"Cut! Okay, guys, take a break."

McCormick sat back on the lower step, watching the others from the corner of his eye. It had been a rather odd rehearsal; he was used to a lot of crew people being around, whether they were doing anything or not. And Taylor seemed to keep the camera aimed in his direction, ignoring for the most part, the other three--and the one thing that had stuck with him with his brief experience with movies and actors was that most actors insisted on equal time. These three actually seemed to prefer not to be on camera. Weird. He smiled slightly; maybe this was the 'weird' that Diana had mentioned to him.

Taylor came over to him, "I'm going to review the tape. Since it's close to lunch, we'll break for a couple of hours. Come back at 2."

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Once again, McCormick ran into Dane in the hallway leading to the front door. "Hey, Austin..."

Dane turned, and McCormick stared at him, "Geez, what happened?"

"They were supposed to miss," he said, fingering a darkening bruise around his eye, "Obviously, they didn't."

"Cuts down on make-up," he kidded, but Dane didn't find it at all funny, "Look, it wasn't intentional; they're pros. But sometimes, even pros misjudge things. Look at it this way, they'll probably be extra careful from now on."

"I don't know..."

"Want to join me for lunch...maybe talk a bit?"

Dane shook his head, "No...no, I'm not sure about any of this. That all seemed awfully real...I'm gonna have to think about it..." He held the door open, and closed it thoughtfully. "They said I'd make a lot of money, but I don't need money this badly..."

McCormick watched as Dane got into a 15-year-old Chevy and smoked off the lot.

XIII

When McCormick returned to the set a few minutes before two, he hadn't noticed Dane's car in the parking lot, and he wondered fleetingly if Austin was going to return. Some guys, he thought, took things way too seriously...and overreacted as well. He was met with the news that they were 'going on location'. He changed, locking his belongings in the Coyote's trunk, then followed a panel truck and a van with the Stooges to the outskirts of L.A.--almost a ninety-minute drive.

They followed a rutted-out lane past scattered oil wells, another mile or so into scrub foothills-type terrain. The Coyote bottomed out in a few places, and he hoped the road wouldn't get any worse; a racing car wasn't meant to be used as a four-wheel drive.

They finally halted in an area of dry, brown brush and thicket; scrubby trees bent by the wind, ochre grass giving sparse cover for the sun-baked ground. Altogether, a totally unprepossessing place.

"Okay," Taylor addressed all of them, but McCormick felt most of the comments were directed at him, "rest of this rehearsal will be mostly play as we go. The location I wanted is being used by another production company today; this was as close as I could get, and the best I could do on short notice. Let's try to get down with a minimum of fuss. Mark, the boys, here, pretty much know the routine. All you have to do is more or less be yourself. We'll pick up at the van."

Larry opened the sliding door revealing one bench seat across the rear door, and an open area between the rear seat and the two bucket seats in front.

"Mark, get in..." Taylor turned to the other two, "Where's the rope?"

Joe opened the passenger door, withdrew a coil of nylon rope.

"Good...Tie his hands like before, Joe, but be sure it's loose enough for him to work free at the right time."

McCormick held his arms out, wrists together; this was where they'd left off just before lunch. His bit-part character was to be kidnapped, taken off somewhere, worked over, then dumped somewhere--there was very little dialog to remember, mostly just keeping everything in order. Joe finished with the rope, and he tested the loops, finding them loose enough to slip free.

"Okay, Scene 42; Action."

Larry and Burl reached inside the van, grabbed his arms, and pulled him out. He hit the ground with an unexpected thud, and he rolled, getting his feet under him. He was supposed to pretend fear, but his frown wasn't in keeping with that role. Larry lumbered over to him, arm drawn back; McCormick instinctively pulled back from the backhand blow, uncomfortably aware that his action had kept him from being hit. "Hey, guys, what--" Larry's second try didn't miss, and knocked him flat on his back.

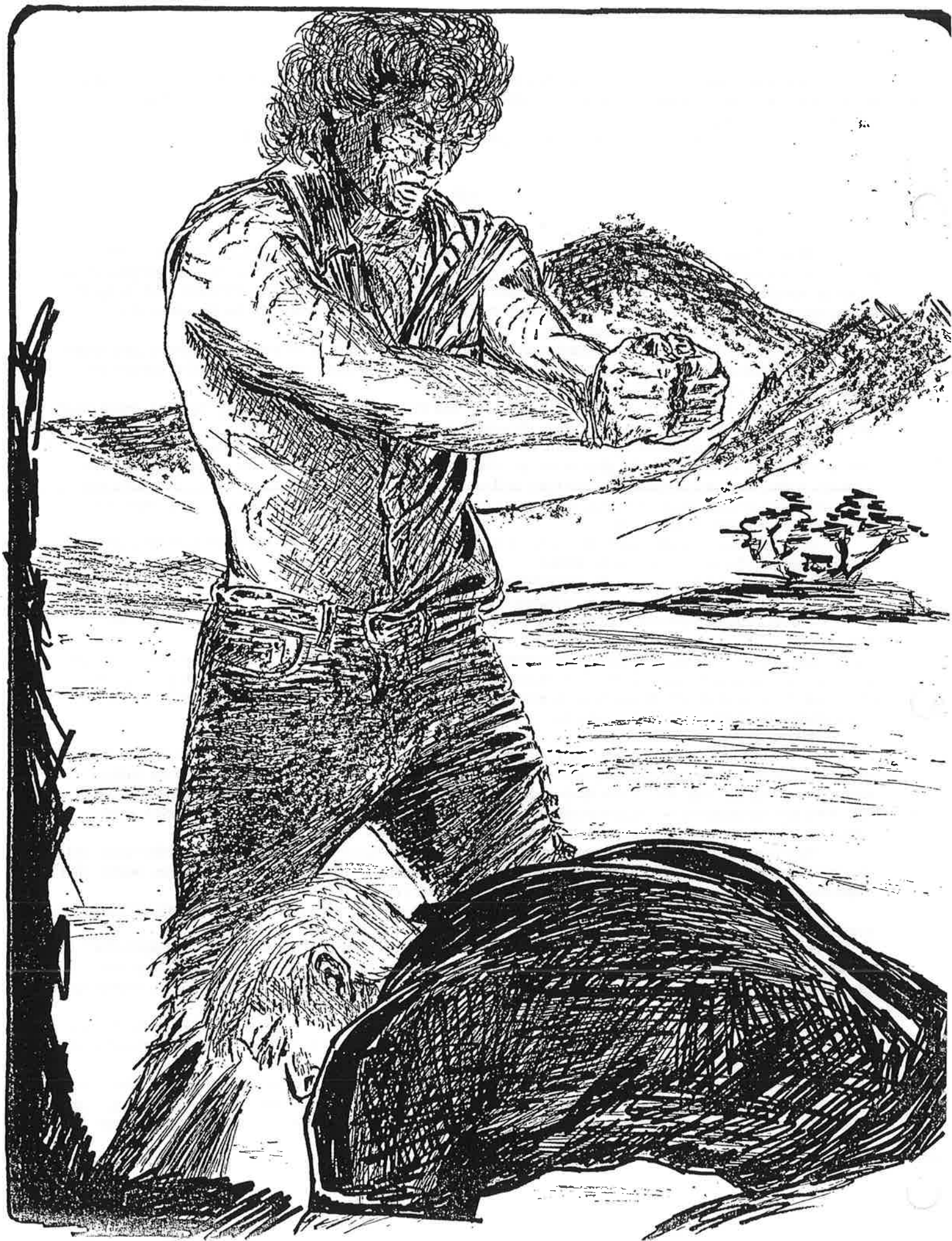
Burl reached down, grabbed the looped rope and pulled the slack tight. He was jerked to his knees, and, staying to one side, Burl's left fist landed solidly across his face, with no attempt to miss or to pull his punch. Burl pulled him close, "Sorry," he sneered, "Accident. They happen, ya know."

"...Y-yeah..." McCormick glared back, knowing he was in trouble, but not given much chance to think about it, "...you're...living proof of that, as--"

He didn't finish. Burl's foot slammed into his midsection, followed by another left that sent him to the ground, doubled up and gasping for breath. The other two men stepped back, and Taylor moved in with the camcorder. McCormick looked up, at first uncomprehending, into the indifferent camera lens; then a chilling wave swept through him, and he knew the kind of 'movie' they were making. Exactly what kind.

"You...won't get away with this," he pushed himself up, "None of you. You're crazy if you think you can -- hell, you're just plain crazy...!" Rough hands grabbed his shirt, hauled him to his feet; Joseph stood before him, holding a double leather strap.

As he came within reach, McCormick kicked out. Joseph sidestepped easily, grinning tightly. Joseph's arm lashed out, not once or twice, but several times; the strap crisscrossing in an unrelenting assault. The stings sharpened to burns, then dulled to an almost numbing pain as he was literally beaten to his knees. After an



eternity, the lashing stopped, and he was released, allowed to sink into the near-oblivion of searing pain. His shirt was ripped, shredded; and the skin beneath it in similiar condition. He felt blood soaking through the remnants, and tried, with failing determination, not to let them see how much it hurt. Not when that was what they wanted; wanted to see and hear...

One of them grabbed a handful of hair, jerked his head back, "This is only the beginning, tough guy," the voice spoke quietly, chillingly, from behind him, "Only the beginning..."

Then he was released, and his head fell back on the rocky ground as the camera whirred softly...

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Austin pushed the speedometer up to fifty, the worn engine straining in fourth gear. He had just missed the Martinque group as they pulled out of the lot back in L.A. Of course, he hadn't known that at the time; it had taken 5 or 10 minutes to find someone who could tell him where to find Jeffery Taylor. The check they had given him as advance had been returned by the bank, and he needed the money not only to pay the guy who'd filled in for him at work, but also for the down-payment on a newer, used car. He glanced at the hastily written directions, and at the gas gauge. Just over a quarter of a tank, and less than ten dollars in his wallet. He didn't know how long it would take to get to the location, and nearly forty-five minutes had passed. He was, as near as he could figure, about halfway there. He'd better get a couple of gallons, just in case.

He stopped at the next off-brand, self-serve and pumped in six dollars' worth, determined to get to where Taylor and Company was busily filming. He'd get the cash, or Taylor's skin, whichever the man preferred. He pulled out of the station, went less than five miles when the oil light flickered on. With a curse, He U-turned, headed back to the self-serve for a quart of oil. Setting out once more, Austin glanced at his watch, frowning; he didn't like the time he'd lost. Taylor could finish up and leave before he got there, and he didn't dare push his ailing vehicle too fast, or too far. But at this rate, it would be dark before he finally tracked them down--if he could find them at all.

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The respite they had allowed him was both welcome and dreaded. Welcome, generally, for the cessation of any further violence directed at him; dreaded, specifically, because it allowed the pain to penetrate and take hold.

Taylor and the other three had gone to the panel truck, and were rummaging about inside. McCormick waited a few more seconds, not wanting to move; a short, scrubby tree was within crawling distance, and he edged over to it. The slightest movement aggravated the welts on his chest and shoulders, and he bit down hard on his lower lip. He finally reached it, inched up into a sitting position, and leaned against the smooth, dry bark. He rested his bound wrists against an upraised knee, studying the knots. The nylon coils were tight, but not tight enough to cause any lasting damage; if he could get to his feet - and stay on them - he could make his way to the Coyote...Then he remembered; the keys were in his back pocket--and he couldn't reach his back pocket...

His thoughts were interrupted by returning voices, forestalling his future problem and bringing his attention back to the present one.

"...okay," Taylor was talking to the other three as they approached him, "I'm going to fade in, and we'll pick up with Joe and Burl...And, I think--" He paused, seeing that McCormick had managed to move a few feet from where they had left him, "I think we'd better keep a closer eye on this one."

McCormick worked his way upright, gripping the tree trunk tightly; he wasn't going to face them on his knee. "How much?" He asked, knowing they had to be doing this for money; it was all to elaborate, and expensive to be just for kicks. "What's the going rate for pain and suffering on today's black market?"

Taylor smiled as he checked the camcorder, "Actually, Mark, it depends on your endurance. The longer you last, the more I make. So far, I'd say I've got about ten grand." His gray eyes glittered, cold, without feeling, "Could go as high as 100 thousand - I plan on it, in fact. The last act will, indeed, be your last act..."

McCormick lashed out as Larry reached for him, hands clasped together into one first. He got two good punches in before Larry brought him down. Taylor stood over them, "Lots of fight left, I see. That's good; it

doesn't hurt for the boys, here, to earn their wages." He nodded at Larry, "Let him up, and bring him back where we left off." His smile was more disquieting than his threats, "After all, we do want the scenes to match..."

"You know," Larry commented as he half-dragged, half shoved McCormick to indicated area, "It might go easier on you if you'd just give him what he wants."

"Easier? What, you'll use knives instead of leather straps? Gee, thanks. Anyway, I don't think your boss would want to lose 10 or 15 minutes worth of your handiwork - it might cost him ten or fifteen thousand."

Larry looked over the barren ground, shrugged, "This looks about right." Without preamble, he struck, clean and hard.

It wasn't the hardest punch he'd ever taken, but it wasn't the easiest, either. He tasted blood from a split lip, and it took a few seconds to focus properly. He was on his back again, vaguely aware of movement to his right; he rolled to the side, just as something solid thumped the ground, raising bits of dry earth. He caught a glimpse of a light colored, wooden bat as it swung toward him again, and instinctively raised an arm to ward off the blow. The aim was changed in mid-swing and hit his shoulder with less force than intended; but it was jarring, and caused dried welts to reopen.

He tried to get to his feet, keeping his eyes on Joe and Burl and the softball bats that each held. Larry came into his line of vision, hefting a metallic colored bat. He staggered to his feet, trying to keep all three in sight as they formed a circle around him. Larry got behind him and swung; the bat hit squarely across his shoulder blades, lacking the bone-cracking impact of wood, but burning like hell. He stumbled forward, managing to regain his balance enough to avoid Joe's attempt; Burl stepped in, with an underhand sweep that caught him just below the ribs. Reeling to the side, he caught the full impact of Joe's bat as it arced toward him; this time, ribs cracked, and he fell, breath rasping, to his knees. Another blow shuddered through him, closely followed by a second and third. Barely conscious of his surroundings or his actions, he pulled his legs up and ducked his head into protective arms. The blows stopped, and a foot rested against his shoulder, pushing him on his back. He couldn't stop the trembling of bruised muscles, or the tears of pain that seeped through tightly closed eyelids...

And the camera continued its gentle humming....

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"...Jesus-H.-Christ-onna-cross..." Austin Dane sank down behind the cover of rocks and brush. On the third try, he'd found the twin tracks of ruts that allowed access to the oil wells; and although the Chevy had enough ground clearance, it had stalled out about a half mile back. Dane had continued on foot, looking for the group of pines that marked the filming location. He'd found them, all right and more.

Even now, after having witnessed everything with his own eyes, he found it difficult to believe what he'd just seen. He had heard of such movies, but he never thought he'd actually see one being made, much less nearly participate in one.

Well, he figured, this was a whole new ballgame.

Going up against four to one wasn't too intelligent, especially when they had weapons at hand and he didn't. And yet, conscience balked at turning tail and running off. It had taken nearly two hours to get here; he wasn't sure if the Chevy would even make it back to L.A. And if he did get there, managed to get somebody to listen to him and help--that in itself could take a couple of days--and then come back out here...who knows what could happen in the meantime?

He took another look, checking the plausibility of sneaking in and out. The low, hilly terrain had plenty of trees, rocks, and brush; the access road curved and wound through the hills. The van and panel truck were parked together, away from a bright red sports car that he suspected belonged to McCormick. That car, he knew, could get them both out...For if he actually carried out what he was thinking; and something went wrong and he was caught...Well, he had no doubt that McCormick would have a co-star...

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McCormick hadn't the strength to pull away as Jeffery Taylor held his chin firmly, surveying the pattern of bruises and welts, the tears that streaked through a thin layer of dust...It was better than he had hoped for.

"Good work, boys...Ten, twelve hours, and the bruises will be just right. Shouldn't take too much longer to finish up.

XIV

Diana Ashton tapped long nails nervously, impatiently, on the desktop. The ringing on the other end of the line went on, unanswered. It was nearly seven, and she had not heard from Mark since just before midnight, Wednesday night, when he had left her apartment, saying he had to report to Jeffery Taylor at the studio early Thursday morning. She had called the studio - or rather, the rented warehouse that Jeffery called a studio - at lunch and received no answer. She had called again at 4 pm, to be told by the warehouse manager that Martinque Productions not only wasn't there, but had packed up and lit out, owing him rent. And she hated to even admit to herself that she had spent nearly three hours calling Mark's apartment, and getting no answer.

She replaced the receiver, looked thoughtfully at the name and number that Mark had given her. 'Only as a last resort' he had insisted; and he might not consider that she had reached that point. Screw it, she thought, seventeen hours was close enough for her--worst that could happen was that she would make a fool of herself.

She took a deep breath when the hotel answered. "I'd like to speak to a Milton Hardcastle, please."

"One moment; I'll ring his room."

She toyed with the phone card, hoping this stranger wouldn't think she was odd or something. The voice that answered was rough, gravely, but not unpleasant. "Hardcastle here."

"Mr. Hardcastle, my name is Diana Ashton - I don't think you know me..."

"Are you the Diana that Mark McCormick had been carryin' on about?"

"Uh...yes; I guess you do know me, then; or, know of me..." She chided herself for delaying the purpose of her call; come on, get on with it, "It's Mark that I'm calling about."

"Well, that just figures, doesn't it?"

She wasn't sure if he was amused or angry, "Am I calling at a bad time?"

"No, no...Now, what is it about Mark?"

There she was, faced with it again; she couldn't convince Mark, face to face, how could she succeed with someone she'd never met, several hundred miles away? But she had to try..."It's not easy to explain, but please, bear with me. I'm afraid Mark may be...involved with a potentially dangerous person..."

"Dangerous in what way?"

"It's not anything I can prove; it's mostly just rumors, stories..." This wasn't going well at all..."It may be nothing at all; but...I'm worried."

"Why not start at the beginning, and tell me everything?"

His tone was gentle, understanding; and she found herself responding to it. "I don't know what the beginning is. I first heard of Jeffery Taylor--he's the one Mark is involved with - about five years ago. I'm a freelance photographer, and he's hired me, a couple of times, to do photo shoots for him. Personally, I don't much care for him...A friend of mine owns a production company, and most of my information is from her. Jeffery does make legitimate movies--Grade Z, but aboveboard; however, there are rumblings that he may also be...linked with another kind of movie--the kind that the 'stars' don't survive..." She trailed off, waiting for his reaction.

"And...?"

"And Mark is supposed to be working for him. I tried to contact them all day today, the studio has said that Jeffery has cleared out, Mark isn't at his apartment, he hasn't called me...And I'm sorry, but I have a terrible feeling that something is wrong."

"I'm not discounting that possibility, Miss Ashton; but...well, sometimes, McCormick can be forgetful - not intentionally, but he gets wrapped up in 'the moment' and everything else goes right outta his head."

"Is that a nice way of saying he's probably with another woman?"

"I'm saying that with McCormick, anything is possible. Tell you what, he knows I'm going to call him later...at nine. If he doesn't answer, I'll call a friend of mine to...check on him."

"I suppose I could wait a few more hours...I almost wish he is with someone else, anyone but Jeffery Taylor..."

"Tell me, Miss; do you know for a fact that Taylor is making these 'killer' movies?"

"Only that three of his young, male leads have turned up horribly beaten and mutilated--after having worked for Jeffery. He, of course, has insisted that all three had large amounts of cash on them, and they were beaten and robbed. The rest he attributed to the warped criminal mentality of LA."

There was a sigh, and a long pause. "I'm going to call a friend of mine at the LA police department, Lt. Frank Harper; he may call you. Are you going to be home the rest of the night?"

"Yes." She gave him her number. "Thank you, Mr. Hardcastle; I feel a little better, knowing the police will finally look into this."

"It's circumstantial, but worth checking out. Oh, and Miss Ashton--"

"Yes?"

"It's Judge Hardcastle."

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Frank Harper pushed back in his newly acquired recliner, fished the TV Guide from the magazine rack, and settled in for a restful, peaceful evening of whatever sport happened to be on TV. When the phone rang, he let Claudia answer it, praying it would be for her.

She, however, came into the den, the cordless phone in one hand. "It's Milton..."

"Tell him I died."

"Fra-ank."

"All right, give it here." He waited until she left the room. "Yeah, Milt, what is it?"

"I need you to check on McCormick."

"He's not with you?"

"No."

"He's always with you."

"If he was with me, Frank, I wouldn't be talking to you."

"My point, exactly."

"Look, it's way too complicated to go into over the phone. I just want you to check into a few things. First, go over to 4576-B Grover Avenue, see if McCormick's car is outside - if he's there, and not answering the phone, I'll wrap the cord around his neck and drop him from the roof; Second, see what you can find out about a Jeffery Taylor...."

Harper had just finished writing down the address when the last name struck a chord. An interoffice memo a few weeks ago, mentioning an undercover operation concerning a Jeffery Taylor and whatever film company he had for the month...the details escaped him, but it had to do with fraud, misrepresentation, assault, missing persons, and a possible homicide or two -- guy was a regular buffet or crime. "Hold it, Milt; I already have something on Taylor, none of it good. Look, you'd better get over here. The department has something going against this guy and I don't think they'd appreciate outside interference."

"Be kinda hard, Frank; I'm in Las Vegas."

"Las Vegas...? Why...? No, never mind. Just get back here as soon as you can. I'll look into it from this end."

"It could be serious, then?"

"Of course it could be serious; any police work can be serious, remember? You, at least, are supposed to have some kind of experience in police work; Mark doesn't. Why you continually put him at risk is beyond me."

"Neither one of us know all the particulars of this, Frank. I'll get the next flight out."

"Fine. You can call Claudia from the airport; she'll know where to find me." Harper broke the connection before Hardcastle could respond. What the hell had Milt stumbled into now? And what on earth was he thinking of, getting Mark involved in something way over his head, and then leaving town?? Well, those questions would have to wait. Right now, he had a feeling that things were going to get a lot worse before they got any better. A not uncommon state of affairs when Milton Hardcastle was involved...

McCormick shivered as a cool breeze gusted through the hills. He was feverish, his body's defense mechanisms kicking into high gear to combat the damage done to it. As the light faded, the others more or less left him alone. He watched them, off and on, as they set up a couple of tents for a temporary camp, opened a card table and folding chairs, dragged out a cooler and propane stove. They weren't going back to LA; at least, not tonight.

That meant he wouldn't be home when Hardcastle called; he wouldn't be home when anyone called. The Judge might wait another hour or two, and try again; and if he finally called Frank Harper and he checked out the apartment, then what? Where would they look next? Where could they look? Even if Diana somehow contacted them, she knew only the location of the office and the studio - not where they were now. Would the Judge figure he had skipped, and go in all the wrong directions looking for him? He knew the stubborn old donkey would look for him, regardless of the motivation; finding him would be the problem...

That meant he was on his own. He couldn't realistically expect rescue, not matter how desperately he prayed for it. So far, they'd given no indication of tying him up, or to, anything to prevent his escape; which meant that they must have thought he was injured far worse than he actually was. He was stiff, sore, bruised and aching, but he could run if the opportunity presented itself. Yeah, he could run, but how far? The ache in his side was bearable if he didn't move about too much, and his left arm, which had received the brunt of the blows from one of the softball bats, was already numb and unresponsive--a few cracked bones were possible there. His right arm seemed okay, and there was nothing wrong with his legs; the rest, though painful, was mainly inconvenience. He looked again at the ropes around his wrists; he'd tried working the knots loose with his teeth, and had so far failed. There was nothing around to cut them with, and pulling on them only caused the coils to tighten. He was still mulling it over when a shadow fell over him, and he looked up to see Taylor standing there, flanked by the other three.

"I know what you're thinking, Mark; you're thinking you can get away..." He shook his head, smiling, "but you can't. We're not novices; we've been doing this for a long time."

"They'll be looking for me..." his voice didn't sound as strong as he thought it would, and the words were an effort.

" 'They'? What 'they'?" Taylor's tone was almost kindly. "I told you; I checked you out carefully. No family to speak of, no friends, no wife or steady girl. Your prison background only made you a better prospect; you're on parole - it's not uncommon for parolees to 'disappear'. Who, Mr. McCormick, is going to care enough to even notice you're missing, much less going to the effort of looking for you?"

He really wanted to answer that, but wasn't sure if it would be wise to do so. If he mentioned that an ex-judge and a police lieutenant might make the effort, they might just kill him right then and there. And as long as he was alive, he had a chance; a small chance, but it was better than no chance at all. So he glared, and remained silent.

Taylor seemed satisfied. "I thought so. Now, I'm also sure that you are aware that I have to make certain you can't take off sometime during the night. You didn't, after all, think we were finished, did you?"

"I...entertained the possibility," he noticed, then, that Joseph was dragging something heavy, "You don't need to do anything; I mean, you have the Larry, Darryl and Darryl Tag Team at your beck and call..."

"The boys have had a rough day; they need their rest. Can't keep them up all night, watching you."

"You know, I do understand words of more than two syllables, so you can use them...if you know any."

"It's guys like you that make work like this such a joy," he nodded toward Larry. "Hold him." He lifted the camcorder, and pressed the 'on' button.

Larry was the biggest, and strongest, of the three, and, seemingly, the most obedient--he never questioned any order given him. McCormick wondered if the man ever questioned anything - probably not, or he wouldn't be working for a guy like Taylor. Larry knelt down next to him, grabbed his right arm and pulled him up to a sitting position. He started to pull free, but the unexpectedly sharp pangs in his side stopped him; the injured ribs forced him to keep his exertions to a minimum - whether he wanted to or not. Retaining his hold on his upper arm, Larry's other arm slide around his chest and shoulders. He was braced solidly, immobile, against Larry's rock-hard frame -braced for what?

McCormick watched in growing horror as Joseph lugged the heavy object into view near his foot. A large, old-fashioned iron vise, the kind he'd used in auto shop a hundred years ago. As Joseph spun the vise open, Burl gripped his ankle.

"No...no, wait...Just tie me to a tree or something. You don't have to break my leg..."

Burl looked at him, grinned. "You're gonna beg us to break it...but just don't beg too soon, huh?"

"You're crazy..." McCormick kicked hard, fought with all the strength he had left. It wasn't enough, and Burl gave his ankle a sharp twist and jammed it into the vise. "...crazy...sick bastards...!" He was forced to stop struggling, unable to ignore any longer the pain cutting through him with each breath.

The vise tightened centimeter by centimeter, until Burl released his hold, and his attempts to yank his ankle free only made it worse. At first, he managed to clench his teeth and hold on, uncertainty wearing away at his determination to endure all that he had to; his last defense was dignity under pressure...He almost laughed; pressure was going to break him, one way or another...It was unbelievable how pain could multiply into agony in such a short period of time; how, when he was certain it couldn't be any worse, it was... He didn't want to break down, to beg them to stop...but he hadn't known it would be like this, that his endurance couldn't equal his pride...And when the agony burned too hot for him to bear, when his best efforts to get free of it only increased the intensity of the pain, there was only one escape left for him... He wouldn't beg them, he wouldn't... He wasn't sure when he started screaming, only that he was, and that after the first one, the rest came easier, until he couldn't get enough air into his lungs for screams, just a torturous rasp for breath that did little but keep him conscious... For he was learning the hard way that people did not pass out from pain...

"No...no more..." He wondered if they would hear him, he could barely manage a hoarse whisper, "...please, God... break it..."

There didn't seem to be an immediate response, and he struggled for strength repeat the words, then there was a clink of metal against metal. The pressure eased, and his foot fell to the ground with a jolt. Taut muscles trembled with the release of tension, and spasms shuddered through him as he finally let go, no longer resisting anyone or anything.

His pounding heart gradually calmed, his breathing evened out and most of the pain dulled to a throbbing ache. Exhaustion seeped through, granting him the relief he'd prayed for earlier. Strong arms loosened their hold, easing him carefully to the ground. He heard the voice, distant, unrecognizable, "Every bone in your ankle shattered five minutes ago, Mark - but the son of a bitch wouldn't let you go, wouldn't let you beat him... But you did; you beat him..."

XVI

Shadows lengthened, in overlapping darkness, as the night brought cool, gentle winds. Dane chanced getting closer, using the natural cover and darkness to the best advantage.

All four had returned to the campsite, lit now by a small campfire, a couple of lanterns, and a large battery light placed in the center of the table. One of the big guys was fixing something on the camp stove, the others seated at the folding table with beer cans and playing cards. Sandwiches and chips were scattered over the tabletop, a radio blared C&W from one of the tents, and he edged closer to overhear their conversation.

"...can't hand him," Taylor was saying, laying down a card, "Doesn't take long enough. I need twenty, twenty-five minutes, at least; then I can push the price to 100 grand. Get those two Wops in Italy going against each other on the bidding, and there's no telling what we'll get. See you fifty, raise you another fifty...Nope, has to be something else."

One player had his back to him, all he could see were broad shoulders and frizzy hair. He spoke up, "We still got the bullwhip in the truck, and some chains--"

"No," Taylor interrupted, "Did that last time. Can't risk the same buyer gettin' two tapes of the same thing - they like variety. Hell, I fold." He tossed the cards on the table, helped himself to a sandwich and chips.

Cards hit the table, bets made and called. Frizzy Hair raked in his winnings, while the third player gathered the cards.

Taylor nodded toward the one shuffling the cards, "Give me some damn decent cards, Joe; at this rate, I'm gonna lose more than I'm payin' you. Might have to make a short, just to get my money back."

There was some nervous laughter, and the fourth guy joined them, passing around whatever he'd fixed on the stove. The dealer - Joe - looked up, "You in, Larry?"

"Yeah."

"You know," Joe said, arranging his hand, "There's one thing you might try. Might be a little messy...I'm in."

"Messy doesn't bother me - or my buyers. Will he live through most of it?"

"I've heard they do; they usually die toward the end, though. I guess it all depends on...," he gave Taylor a look, "technique."

"I see. What is it?"

"Skin him." At Taylor's speculative look, he went on, "Nice--slow--easy. Strip by strip; can go just as fast, or just as slow, as you want. He'll go through seven hells before you're finished."

"Good...good. I like it. It's close, it's personal, it's visual. We'll do it. Tomorrow, as soon as there's enough light."

Dane sat back, sickened, missing the rest of the conversation. He couldn't let anyone go through something like that - it would be inhuman. He glanced at the glowing dial of his watch, just after midnight. He doubted that they were going to stay up all night; and even if they did, they seemed completely absorbed in their game. He'd wait a few more hours, get to McCormick, grab the car, and take off. Maybe it would work, maybe they could get away...

He glanced up at the sharp exclamation from Larry. "Damn! Well, that's it for me. Deal me out."

"Aw, come on," Frizzy Hair laughed, "I'll spot ya a coupla hundred, seein' as how I'll probably end up with it anyway..."

Dane crept quietly into heavier cover, and settled down to wait.

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"...Mark...McCormick, can you hear me...?"

A voice...the same one? He wasn't sure--why couldn't they just leave him alone?

"Mark...It's me, Austin."

McCormick wasn't sure he had heard correctly; Dane, here? How in God's name--? "...Austin...?"

"Yeah. I'm over here." The voice, low and quiet, came from his right. He could distinguish little in the darkness, and he flinched as a hand touched his arm. "Can you...walk?"

There was an odd quality in Dane's voice, and McCormick shook his head, "Don't know...doubt it. My ankle's broken, and--"

"I know. I've been here for a while, up in the hills...hiding."

McCormick caught the self-reproach in the younger man's voice, "Austin, you did all right. You couldn't have done anything, except gotten yourself in the opening credits."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking. Doesn't make it any easier, though, sittin' up there, watching, doing nothing..."

"You can do something now."

"What?"

"You can get out of here."

"My car broke down, 'bout a half mile back. I might be able to get it started, but I don't know how long it will run. Is that car over there yours?"

"Yeah."

"She's a beaut."

"Take it, and get out of here."

"But...you're going with me; that's why I'm here--"

"No. No, I'd give us away. In this darkness, one stumble, a slip--I'm sorry, but they'd hear us. No," he emphasized more strongly, "you take the Coyote; she's fast - nothing in this state can catch her. Even if they hear you leave, you can outrun them. Get to a phone, call the police and ask for Lt. Frank Harper--Got that? Frank Harper. Tell him everything."

There was a long silence between them, then Dane spoke, uncertain, "I know what you're saying makes sense, but...What if something goes wrong? What if I can't reach this...Frank Harper? Worse yet, what if they don't believe me? There could be delays, they may not get here until...until it was too late. I think you should come with me. ~~Jessie~~ Mark, do you know what they're gonna do to you?"

McCormick nodded, not needing to be reminded, "Yeah, I heard them discussing it."

"Then, come on..." He took a firmer grip on McCormick's arm, started to help him up.

It took everything McCormick had not to cry out, and the sharp gasp of pain was enough for Austin to quickly release him. "~~Jesus~~, I'm sorry--"
He took a careful, steadying breath, "It's...okay. You see, I'd give us away. I can't...make it that far."
"Okay, I'll do it. And I'll get them here in time."
"The keys...back, right pocket..." He hardly felt Austin's touch, he was being very careful this time.
"Got them." Dane started to rise, hesitated, "You gonna be okay?"
"...yeah...go on."

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Austin made his way carefully, silently, toward the car. It was nearly 3 a.m.; Taylor and Frizzy Hair were still playing cards, and the other two, he supposed, had retired for the night. The radio was still playing Top Ten Country, so unless they had ultra-sensitive hearing and could see in the dark, he could probably walk right by them and not be noticed. But there was too much at stake for him not to be cautious, and he paused, every few yards, to be certain he hadn't been detected.

He leaned against a concealing tree trunk, looking about carefully. The car was parked about six yards away, out in the open. Worse, he'd have to back it up and turn around, during which time he knew they would hear him. Even the quietest motors would be heard in this desert stillness.

He couldn't wait any longer - three hours, four at the most, remained till sunup; if he was going to do it, it would have to be now.

He stepped out into the clearing, just as someone grabbed him. A large, strong hand clamped over his mouth, and arm encircling him in a crushing hold. His heart leapt to his throat, and he fought panic.

"Quiet!" A voice hissed in his ear. "Be still."

Since he didn't have much choice, he complied.

"Listen to me. I'm a cop. Officer David Myers. I'm here undercover, and if you don't do exactly as I say, we're all dead. Got it?"

Dane nodded, and the hand lowered. "What...what do you want me to do?"

"The others are still playing cards. I intentionally lost, and suggested to Taylor that I get rid of McCormick's car. Told him I'd ditch it and walk back - nice night for a walk, wouldn't you say? Figured I'd use the opportunity to call in, and get these scumbags hauled in. I was at the car when you were with McCormick--I couldn't find any keys. Since you now have them, we'll both go."

"How do I know you're really a cop?"

"You don't. But we're the only chance he has. Let's go."

XVII

"Lt. Harper..." The desk sergeant held up the phone, "It's Hardcase."

Frank Harper paused at the door, debating; then he sighed, went back, and took the receiver. "Make it quick, Milt."

"I'm at the airport; any news?"

"Too much. Everything's breaking, and I'm just on my way out. One of our guys called in on this Jeffery Taylor deal..." He glanced up as an uniformed officer came through the front door, the blue/red lights of a squad car flashing on the glass doors. "Look, Milt, it's all going down at the old Haycraft Oilfield. I have to go, they're waitin' for me."

"Frank, wait - is there anything on McCormick?"

"Yeah...the guy did mention him. Seems he's right in the middle of this mess. Now, why am I not surprised to hear that?"

"Is he okay? What did he say?"

"He suggested that we make arrangements for an ambulance. Good-bye, Milt."

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Hardcastle struck the truck's steering wheel impatiently. Why was there all this traffic at five-friggin'-o'clock in the morning? Nearly an hour had gone by, he'd covered less than ten miles, and was barely crawling along at 15 miles per hour. He eyed the shoulder, then decided it was too risky--too much broken glass, too many abandoned cars.

He inched another few feet, glaring at the sparse traffic on the opposite lanes. A flash of blue caught his eye, and he saw two CHIPS in the center lane, moving slowly and talking to the drivers. When one reached him, he nodded.

"Morning, sir. Sorry for the tie-up, tractor-trailer jack-knifed coupla miles up." He started to move on, but Hardcastle stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Officer -" He glanced at the nametag, "Baker; I'm Milton Hardcastle, Superior Court Judge," he gave the officer his ID, "It's urgent that I get to the Haycraft Oilfield."

"Well, sir, uh, Judge, unless you can fly..."

"You can take me, on your bike."

The other CHiP had joined them, in time to catch the last part. "Important, Huh?"

Hardcastle nodded. "Very."

"Go on, Jerry; I can take care of things here."

Officer Baker grinned widely, unclipping the extra helmet. "Just park your truck over there on the shoulder, Judge, and hop aboard."

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Four police cars pulled into the self-serve at exactly 5:33 am; Harper caught sight of the Coyote immediately. He went inside, searching for the driver; he didn't recognize anyone in the place. Two officers had followed him inside, and a young man jumped up from a far booth.

"Are you from LA? Are you the guys Officer Myers called?"

Harper went over to him, "We're the ones, I'm Lt. Harper. Who are you?" The young man looked tired and dusty, a dark bruise forming around his left eye.

"Harper! You're the guy Mark told me about..."

"Lt. Frank Harper, LAPD?" Another voice broke in, from an older, distinguished-looking gentleman. Harper nodded, and the man introduced himself, "I'm Lt. James Elmore; Officer Myers is one of my men. He called in a few hours ago to set up the bust. I understand you have a man involved also?"

There was no time for long, complicated explanations, and Harper opted for the quickest route. "Yes, his name's Mark McCormick; I think he may be badly hurt."

"This is my operation, Lieutenant--"

"and you're welcome to it, Lieutenant; the two officers and I are just here to get my man out safely."

"Okay, let's go; we're goin' in."

They went outside, Lt. Elmore conferring near his unmarked car with the other officers. Dane followed Harper to the squad car, "Can I go with you, Lieutenant?"

"What was your name again?"

"Austin Dane."

"Well, Mr. Dane, I really don't think that would be a good idea." He didn't need another civilian to worry about.

"I know where they are. I can take you right to them."

Harper considered, watching Elmore laying on the authority. "Wait till these guys pull out. Then get in the Coyote, and I'll follow you. When I flash my lights, you pull over and stop; you then remain where you are until I say you can leave - understand?"

"Yes, sir."

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Harper frowned slightly as the Coyote turned off onto an access road, Lt. Elmore and his entourage forging ahead, obviously going in a different way. They slowed considerably, bumping along until they came upon an abandoned old Chevy. Harper flashed the lights, and the Coyote swerved to the side, stopping in front of the car.

Harper got out, trotted up the Coyote. "How much farther?"

"Half mile; just past those hills. There's a group of five or six of those tall pines trees; they're right there."

"Any cover?"

"Not for cars; and they'll probably hear the engines--" He broke off at the sound of sporadic gunfire; they both looked toward the sound. Seconds passed without any further gunfire. They looked back at each other.

"Guess it don't matter now, if they hear you or not, huh?"

"Condition still stands. You stay here until I get back."

"Okay, Lieutenant. I'll wait for you."

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Harper and his officers arrived just as Elmore's men were wrapping things up. He was out the door before the car stopped completely, and stood, at something of a loss, looking about for some indication of McCormick's whereabouts. A very tall, and large, individual detached himself from a group of officers, having apparently noticed him.

"Lt. Frank Harper?" At Harper's nod, he continued, "I thought so; you were the only one here I didn't recognize. I'm Officer David Myers. I was getting the First Aid kit for Mark, but here," he offered the small metal box to Harper, "maybe you'd better do this..."

Myers took him to the small grouping of pine trees that Austin had mentioned, and Harper had no trouble locating McCormick - he was the only one there. Dawn was only a few minutes away, and the shadows weren't quite as dark or concealing. At Myer's suggestion, Harper approached McCormick first - "I'll only upset him" was all he'd said in way of explanation. But no one had told him what to expect; since Taylor wasn't one of his cases, he had no idea what the man was wanted for. He took one good look, stopped, and backed up a few steps, right into Myers.

"You okay?"

Harper glared at him. "No." He took a few deep breaths, to bank his anger, and went back to McCormick. He knelt, placing the First Aid kit on the ground nearby - although from what he could see, the small kit would be inadequate. McCormick looked gray in the morning light, most of his skin discolored by bruises and lacerations. Christ in heaven, what had they used on him? The injuries were diverse, varied, and extensive. He didn't know if McCormick was conscious or not; he half-hoped he wasn't. But he needed to know that someone was there to help him, and Harper gently touched the least bruised part of his shoulder. "Mark..."

Eyelids flickered open, and the eyes that looked up at him were dark and glassy from pain.

"We're getting you out of here; an ambulance is on its way..." And should be here by now, he thought irritably...Visual inspection was inconclusive; there could be serious internal injuries he knew nothing about.

Another voice interceded, calling his name. Harper looked over his shoulder, saw Adkins standing a few feet away.

"Lieutenant," he said, "Dispatch just called. The ambulance got delayed twice. They were stuck in gridlock for almost an hour; and the traffic hasn't gotten much better."

Harper caught himself before he said something unprofessional before his officers. "All right. I'll give 'em a few minutes; if they don't get here soon, I'll take him myself." It was a risky decision, he knew; if McCormick had internal injuries, moving him could be dangerous; but waiting another hour--or longer--for an ambulance could be just as dangerous.

McCormick's silent gaze shifted from Harper as Myers approached, and the remaining color drained from his face. He fumbled weakly for Harper's arm, hampered by the ropes. "...Frank..." his voice was hoarse, rasping, "He's...one of them..."

"Mark, it's all right," Harper reassured him as best he could, "He's an undercover policeman."

He looked from Harper to Myers, and back, unconvinced, his tone doubtful, "...Larry's...a cop? Are...are you...sure?"

"Yes; I can vouch for him. His name's David Myers."

McCormick looked at Myers, his expression unreadable. "I remember...everything you...did to me..."

"I know. I'm sorry. I really am sorry--"

"...yeah...so am I..." McCormick's breath came in harsh, shallow gasps, and he shuddered, moaning softly.

Harper's concern was rapidly becoming alarm, "Mark...I need Officer Myers' help to get you to the car. The ambulance won't get here in time, and he can carry you easier than any one else here..."

McCormick nodded, and as Myers knelt over him, Harper carefully lifted his shoulders so Myers could get his arm under them. "...Wait a minute..." McCormick's voice halted them, "aren't there...height restrictions for the...police force...?"

Myers answered calmly. "Yes, there are." He nodded toward Harper to straighten McCormick's left leg.

"Then what did you do...walk in on your knees...?"

There was still some doubt left, and Myers smiled, "No. I'm part of a special unit - I get the odd, strange assignments not suited for the average officer. I have to take special training for it." He slid his other arm under McCormick's knees, glanced at Harper, "Make sure his right foot doesn't bump against anything."

"And what kind of...training did you take...for this job...?" His voice trailed off, as if his strength was draining away.

Straightening from his kneeling position, he lifted McCormick's one-hundred-sixty-eight pounds as if they were ounces. "I wasn't trained for this. No one could be. They told me what I would have to do, what would be expected of me, and what I would see -- but they didn't tell me what I would feel..." He moved slowly, steadily over the rocky, uneven ground; Harper doubted that McCormick felt the slightest jar. "They had already gotten rid of the two other victims before I joined them. You were my first, and, I think, my last... I guess people think because I'm big, I'm insensitive; I wish I was, it would have been handy the past couple days... No, I don't think I'm cut out for this kind of work..."

They reached the car, and Harper moved to open the rear door.

"I think he's out of it, Lieutenant; not surprising, considering all that's happened."

Harper backed into the car, guiding McCormick inside. "Just what did happen to him?"

Myers explained as succinctly as possible without leaving out any important details.

Harper shook his head, biting back resurging anger. ~~Does Christ~~ McCormick was in the middle of something this...this reprehensible without a back-up? Judge Milton C. Hardcastle had a hell of a lot of explaining to do on this one. But that could wait...this couldn't.

"Frank...?"

Harper looked up, surprised. Well, speak of the devil--he'd been so involved in getting McCormick in the car, and listening to Myers' account of the horror he'd been through, he hadn't noticed Hardcastle's arrival. And from the question in his voice and eyes, he wondered how much the Judge may have overheard. At this point, though, he really didn't care.

McCormick's head was resting comfortably against Harper's shoulder while Myers used the camping blankets and pillows to brace and protect his injured leg. Harper didn't try to keep the disgust from his voice, "Well, Milt, you never cease to amaze me...You wanna give me one good reason why I shouldn't have you up on charges?"

Hardcastle ignored him, pulling the rear door open. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough."

Myers backed out, leaned in the open door, "Should be okay till you get him to the hospital. Your men can go with us; get goin'." With that, he shut the door.

"I oughtta haul you downtown, but I don't have time. We can't wait any longer for the ambulance; I'm taking McCormick to the hospital myself. I need someone to hold on to him, and you win by default."

Harper eased out, and Hardcastle took his place, apparently unnoticed by McCormick. The lieutenant slid behind the wheel and headed out, without further word to Hardcastle. He relented, however, when he saw the First Aid kit Myers had left on the front seat. Eyes on the road, he handed it back to the Judge, "Here, see what you can do...And get those damn ropes off him..."

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Harper drove slowly down the access road, hitting the ruts and gullies as easily as he could. He saw Dane sitting on the hood of the Coyote, and rolled the window down as he went by. "Follow us," he said, and watched in the rearview mirror as the red sports car pulled in behind them. Reaching the highway at last, he turned on lights and siren, tires squealing as the patrol car surged ahead at a rapidly increasing rate of speed.

XIX

Of necessity, Hardcastle waited until they were on the highway before attempting anything with the first aid kit--but even on the pavement, it wasn't easy with Harper floorboarding the gas and barreling down the highway at 70 or 80 miles an hour.

And he really wasn't sure where to start, or how...there was so much...damage. Dark bruises overlaid welts and cuts; cuts which had only recently healed, now broken open and bleeding. The worst of it curved over his chest and shoulders, the rivulets flowing together into larger streams coursing slowly down his chest and arms, staining the pillows and blankets beneath him. There were two boxes of the square type gauze pads in the kit, and he tore them open, unwrapped all of them. The 4" squares seemed so inadequate, but they helped; slowing the bleeding and soaking up most of the blood. "Frank, I don't think there's enough here to do much good -- there's just...too much."

"Do what you can; we'll be there in 15 or 20 minutes."

"What in God's name happened to him?"

The coldness returned in Harper's voice, "Ask Mark."

"Well, at the moment, he's not talking to me, either."

There was no response, and he turned back to McCormick. He couldn't ascertain if Mark was aware of anything or not; and he was hesitant to find out. It was difficult enough to look at the welts and swollen bruises marring his features without having those all-too-expressive eyes looking back at him. A thin line of blood trickled down the side of his face, running brightly over dried, darker red, streaks. His lower lip was cut, darkly swollen, the blood having long since dried in wide, broken streams down his chin and jaw. The inch-wide welts crisscrossed his face, forming a grisly grid against gray-white skin. Who would do something like this, why would they even want to do anything like this?

And for some reason, Harper seemed to think he knew all about it; worse, thought him to blame for most of it. He adjusted the bloodstained pillows under McCormick's head and shoulders; for the mile or so that the patrol car was moving slowly, he'd pulled his arm from under Mark's shoulders, figuring he'd need the use of both hands.

Having done what he could to staunch the flow of blood from all the various wounds, he reached carefully into his pants pocket, found his pocket knife. Opening the largest blade, he cautiously cut through the ropes wound tightly around McCormick's wrists. With gently care, he pulled the nylon rope, stained with blood and dirt, from deep indentations, raw bits of skin clinging to it - no doubt the coils had tightened whenever McCormick had tried to pull loose...and Mark had obviously tried desperately to pull free. Hardcastle swallowed the rising lump in his throat, trying to keep his hands steady; if anything he was doing was causing McCormick any additional pain, the kid gave no indication of it. He hadn't flinched or stirred at the Judge's touch, and his breathing, though a bit harsh, was even, almost controlled.

Hardcastle started to carefully place McCormick's left arm to one side when he noticed there was something wrong. Checking the shoulder, he found that the arm and shoulder alignment wasn't quite right. He hesitated to touch the area, the bruising there was dark and swollen - as if his shoulder had been struck repeatedly with something hard and heavy. He tried to straighten the left arm, only to have it draw back up when he released it. He tried again, and the arm was rigid and immobile, and a weak, but familiar, voice startled him, "...Cut it out, Hardcase...that hurts like hell..."

"Mar--McCormick...How long have you been awake?"

"Never...been asleep." His eyes were dark with pain and fatigue, and his attempt at a smile didn't quite succeed.

He touched McCormick's forehead lightly; it felt hot. "Other than the obvious, where else do you hurt?"

The long, dusty lashes lowered for a moment, and he took a careful breath. "Ribs, left side...probably busted. Shoulder feels real strange...left arm numb, but hurts...if I hold it a certain way, it doesn't hurt much..."

"Well, let's hope it's a pulled muscle or tendon, and not a dislocation." He unwound the roll of narrow gauze, carefully wrapped it around Mark's left forearm, and up over the opposite shoulder, behind his neck, and back to his arm, forming a makeshift sling.

When he finished, McCormick added as an afterthought, "Ankle's broken."

"Hmmm...that's all?"

Mark gave him a pained look. "Isn't that enough? ...Bad as those those other guys..."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It's just that you look so...well, so--"

"...Terrible? ...Ghastly? ...Wretched? ...Gross?"

"Well... actually, worse than that."

"I feel...worse than that..."

"Look, we'll be at the hospital soon. Why don't you try to rest; you also look exhausted."

"I think I can, now." He sighed, closing his eyes. His right hand found Hardcastle's forearm, held it tightly.

"God, but I'm glad...you're here, Hardcase..."

There were few, in any, areas in his professional life that Milton Hardcastle couldn't handle with confidence and aplomb; the same, unfortunately could not be said for his personal life. He had maintained friendships...at a distance; continued relationships...at a distance; and still cared about the general welfare of those around him...but also at a distance. And now, he was finding it nearly impossible to maintain that distance. He had made the attempt, several times, to keep McCormick at arm's length; to never let the professional cross over into personal. His reasoning for this, he had thought at the time, was sound. McCormick was a con artist, a street kid, someone who would no doubt take advantage of any situation if given a chance....kept in line, let him know his fast-talk and charm would get him nowhere, and he just might make a passable partner. At least, that was what he had thought...at the time.

And he couldn't get around the fact that he felt McCormick hated him - not that he didn't have good reason. He'd been twenty-six when the Judge had sentenced him to Quentin; there had been no outbursts, no threats - those he could deal with, was accustomed to--just a deep, soul-numbing shock. And the look, when he was led out of the courtroom...cold, distant, accusing. That had been the last he'd seen of McCormick, and it stayed with him for a long time. And two years later, after the parole went through, his attitude had hardened, and whenever Hardcastle saw him or spoke to him, the loathing was there, stronger then ever. Then later, with the theft of the Coyote in abeyance, with McCormick an unwilling member of the Hardcastle household, he had detected the changes -- within himself as well as Mark. The past seven months had brought about a gradual acceptance on McCormick's part, the resentment easing to a grudging respect, his anger and frustrations now given vent in an occasional game of one-on-one -- the one way he could take out any resentments without fear of retribution...and those games, Hardcastle noted with some satisfaction, were becoming fewer and farther between. McCormick's anger burned hot, and then was gone, forgotten; it was only when he had that cold, hard look in his eyes that he could seriously be contemplating a murder or two.

With himself...well, Hardcastle knew himself well enough to know that he'd be much slower to make the one-eighty in attitude adjustment. And he had had been more interested in reforming McCormick than he was in altering his own opinions...but somehow, somewhere along the way, the kid had gotten to him on some level that he had left unguarded. By the time they had embarked on their third case, he knew the hatred had been eroded to dislike; the acceptance of his situation to an almost willingness to be whatever help he could.

And now, with McCormick reaching out to him, holding onto him so tightly, he felt the dislike had been worn away as well...replaced by, what, he wasn't certain. And as the patrol car slowed for city traffic, only a mile or so from the hospital, Hardcastle slipped his arm under McCormick's shoulders, and held him close - much as he had done when his own son was young, and frightened of something in the night and needed warmth and assurances... For Milton Hardcastle knew that there was a child in everyone that needed the comfort, the care, and the assurance of another person's touch...

XX

Austin Dane turned into the first available parking place, about six rows over from the Emergency Entrance. He hadn't imagined the hospital parking lot would be so full at nearly 7 am. By the time he got to the Emergency Room, Mark had been taken in and Lt. Harper and the elderly man who'd been in the back of the patrol car also were sitting at opposite ends of a small sofa in the waiting room. The two men occasionally glared



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at each other, but said little; he figured the older guy was probably Mark's father. He could give him the keys to the red sports car, and then think about finding a way home. That wouldn't be easy, for he'd spent his last dollar-eighty at the self-serve on coffee and doughnuts. And he lived clear across town...quite a long walk.

The ER waiting room was nearly filled with people in various states of distress, and he threaded through them carefully. He paused a few feet away from the sofa. "Excuse me, Mr. McCormick...?" The older man looked up at him with a very odd expression on his face, and the police lieutenant gave a short, loud laugh. He tried to correct an obvious mistake, "I'm sorry, are you his step-father...or his grandfather?"

"Keep going, Dane," Harper said, "You'll probably hit it eventually."

That earned Harper another glare, then the cool gaze settled on him, "I'm Milton Hardcastle, Judge," he added, with another at the lieutenant, "Milton Hardcastle. Something I can do for you?"

"I thought you might want the keys to Mark's car. I was the one who was following you," he added helpfully.

"This in Austin Dane, Milt; he's a friend of Mark's."

Dane offered his hand, "Glad to meet you, Judge Hardcastle. Did they say how Mark is? Is he going to be okay?"

"They just took him in; they'll probably tell us so as they know something," Harper continued the conversation with Dane as if Hardcastle was not there.

"I'm getting pretty damn tired of you assuming I'm at fault, here, Frank." Hardcastle turned to Dane, "You said you were driving McCormick's car?" At Austin's nod, he went on, "Well, do you know what is going on; what happened to McCormick, and why?"

"I know some of it..."

With a look at Harper, Hardcastle got to his feet, placed a long arm around Dane's shoulders, and guided him to the other side of the room, "Then you and I, Mr. Dane, are going to have a nice, long talk..."

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"Franklin James Harper," Hardcastle spoke to the lieutenant in a low, angry tone, through clenched teeth, "I can't believe that you would even consider that I'd get McCormick involved in something like this..."

"What else was I to think? I don't think Mark went after them on his own, do you?"

"He didn't - according to Austin - he just answered an ad in the newspaper. Without," he emphasized, "consulting me about it. If he had, this never would have happened."

"Are you real sure about that, Milt? Once your suspicions were piqued, once you'd done some digging into Taylor's background, can you stand there and honestly tell me you wouldn't have sent Mark in there, and gotten the goods on Taylor yourself?"

"Yes, I can honestly stand here and tell you that I would not have done it."

Harper snorted. "In a pig's eye..."

"Listen, Frank, I've known you a long time; but I'm not having you, or anyone else, make accusations about something that you know nothing about."

"I know you, Milt; I know how single-minded you can be--to the exclusion of everything, and everyone, else. I may be wrong about this; if I am, then I'll apologize...But that doesn't mean you won't try something similar sometime in the future."

An uncomfortable silence followed, broken only by the arrival of a doctor. "Lt. Harper?" He asked, striding toward them. he held a clipboard, flipped through some pages, "The young man you brought in..."

"Mark McCormick," Harper supplied the name quickly.

"...Mr. McCormick is conscious. If you have any questions for him, you may want to talk to him now. He's been sedated, and if you wait any longer, he may not make much sense--"

"I'd like to see him," Hardcastle broke in.

"You can both see him. I'm going to look over his X-rays; I'll get back with you before you leave."

They found McCormick in a curtained-off cubicle, and Harper held back, letting the judge approach first. The wounds had been cleaned and bandaged, the ribs taped and bound; there was a cast on his left arm along with a sling. His ankle was splinted and bound, temporarily, awaiting, no doubt, the results of the X-rays. McCormick heard his footsteps, turned toward him, opened his eyes and smiled.

"Hiya, Hardcase..."

"Feeling better? You look a lot better."

"Ohhh, yeah; I feel great. Whatever they gave me, it's... wonderful..."

Hardcastle decided this was not the time to ask all the questions he wanted to ask; time enough for that later. "Feel up to talkin' to Frank?"

"Sure...Bring 'em on."

"Do me a favor, will you. Will you tell this hardheaded, stubborn know-it-all cop that I didn't have anything to do with this."

McCormick looked obligingly at Harper, "Hardcase didn't have anything to do with this." He gave them a loopy grin. "Did it all myself....didn't need any help at all..."

His voice trailed off, eyes closing. Hardcastle touched his arm lightly, "Go to sleep, we'll be outside." He turned to Harper, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Where's my apology?"

"Okay, I apologize."

"I'm sorry, too, Hardcase..."

Hardcastle looked at him, "Why?"

"For lousing up your trip to Vegas."

"Oh, that," the Judge shrugged, "Don't worry about it; that was loused up years ago..."

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Austin came into the waiting room just as Harper and Hardcastle came through the double doors; he met them with two cups of coffee. "Did you see Mark? How is he?"

"They're working on his ankle. Thanks," Hardcastle said, accepting the coffee. "Other than that, the kid was damn lucky--no serious injuries."

Harper took the other one, glanced at his watch. "Well, boys and girls, I'm on duty. Mr. Dane, you'll be needed as a witness; come by my office later today."

"I'll be there, Lieutenant." He pocketed Harper's card, then shook hands. "I guess I'll be going home now, Mr. Hardcastle. Thanks for the money, I'll pay you back--"

The Judge shook his head, "Forget it. I appreciate your help."

Hardcastle finished his coffee, then clapped a hand to his eyes, suddenly remembering, "Ms. Ashton! She's probably been waiting' by the phone all night..." He headed for the nearest pay phone, rationalizing that the call may be late, but at least the news was good...

And that, he decided, was worth waiting for...

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Lt. Harper's patrol car was still parked, a few yards away, from the ER entrance. Harper himself was seated inside, talking on the radio. Austin waited, then tapped lightly on the rear window when the lieutenant replaced the mike.

Harper rolled down the driver's window, "Forget something, Austin?"

"Sorta...I guess I oughtta tell about something else I did. When Mark told me to take the Coyote and get help, it occurred to me that if those guys heard me leave, they'd know somebody was around and had probably seen them. I was afraid they might take Mark and go somewhere else, someplace where we couldn't find them again...at least, not in time for Mark. So I...what I did wasn't legal; and those other cops have probably already found out about it, just don't know who did it..."

"Austin," Harper held up a hand to stem the flow of words, "What did you do?"

"It was the quickest, and easiest, thing I could think of. I let just about all the air out of the rear tires of the truck and van; and...uh, put sand, dirt, and stuff in the gas tanks...Figured if they couldn't go anywhere, they might keep Mark alive as a hostage...I didn't know about Officer Myers at the time, and later, I sorta...forgot about it."

Harper looked at him, then smiled. "Have you ever considered a career in the police force?"

"Not recently."

"Well, don't worry about the 'vandalism'. Both vehicles have already been towed in. And I just finished making arrangements for Mill's truck to be picked up. Just don't forget to see me this afternoon - around four okay?"

"Yeah. Thatta give me time to get some sleep. Man, I am really tired."

Harper watched as Austin went to the taxi stand, "Yeah, kid, so am I..." He started up the patrol car and pulled into the heavy, morning traffic.

XXI

It was less than a week since the hospital sent McCormick home, and Hardcastle found himself in the unfamiliar role of servant, cook, and housekeeper. But things had, to all outward appearances, settled down to normal at Gull's-Way...at least as far as the Judge was concerned.

Such was not the case, however, with McCormick; he still felt...out of sorts. He placed another small log on the fire, reaching across awkwardly with his arm. He watched the flames curl around the narrow girth of the dry wood, feeling the welcome heat and warmth that took the chill off the early morning air. Hardcastle, after placing a 'just right' throw pillow from the couch under his cast, was hovering about in the background. Supposedly, he was 'picking up and putting away', but McCormick sensed the old man was remaining on site to make sure some other mishap didn't occur--and what could happen to him in the Gatehouse, other than him falling over something, McCormick wasn't sure. But he was sure of one thing...he wanted some time alone. He glanced over at the Judge, found himself smiling. Hardcastle was wearing a mauve and blue apron, the Bar-B-Q type, that had the logo: "Hug the Housekeeper".

"Gift from one of your many admirers, Judge; or, perhaps, a satisfied customer of Hardcastle, the Janitorial Judge?"

"What...? This...?" He shrugged, picking up newspapers and magazines, "Nah, Sara gave it to me last New Year's, when she took her two-week vacation."

McCormick thought that should have been the other way around, but wisely refrained from commenting--no need to start an argument when he really wasn't up to it. "Wasn't she supposed to be back this week?"

Hardcastle seemed intent on folding the newspapers into perfect rectangles. "Called her and told her to stay with her sister a couple more weeks."

"Why?" He was genuinely puzzled; Hardcase intentionally making extra work for himself?

"Because," the other man replied with exaggerated patience, "she'd take one look at you, the mother instinct would take over, and she'd be over here 24-hours a day, fussing over you. I need a full-time housekeeper, not a nanny for you."

The ex-con thought about it. "Makes sense. But, you know, you don't have to hang around here 24-hours a day, either. I'm okay, really."

Hardcastle hesitated, stacking magazines on a side table. "I'm only here a few hours a day; maybe it just seems like 24 to you. Hey, you want me to leave, just say so..."

"Will you leave, Hardcase?"

Hardcastle looked up at McCormick, to find the wide, impertinent grin spread across his face. Damn, kid got him again. "Works for me; I have important things to tend to, you know. I'll check in on you around lunch."

"Okay. I still eat, you know."

"I didn't say anything about feeding you." Hardcastle slapped his shoulder lightly as he walked by, and McCormick watched as he closed the back door of the Gatehouse.

He leaned against the smooth stone of the fireplace, sighed deeply; he was still a bit unsteady, but at least the shakes had left him. And he could finally get a night's sleep without the aid of painkillers or sleeping pills. As the pain faded, so did the unpleasant memories; he had thought he would never be able to close his eyes and not remember, not feeling, the strap flaying in skin, the softball bats slamming into him, breaking skin and bone...he shivered only slightly at the thoughts, where before he'd been wracked by uncontrollable spasms of fear and pain. Reaction, the doctor in the Emergency Room had told him; and assured him it would fade, along with the shock, and the memory of what the agony had felt like. McCormick hadn't believed him then; as much as he wanted to forget, how could he? Every time he moved, or took a breath, he was painfully reminded.

But modern medicine worked its miracles, and the comforting sanctuary of Gull's-Way did the rest in aiding the human psyche in closeting away terrifying painful memories, until only the acts themselves could be recalled, without the attendant terror and pain. He didn't question this mysterious facet of human nature, but welcomed it. And an errant thought crossed his mind...A long ago conversation between his mother and a neighbor, a young mother-to-be. The young girl was having natural childbirth, and was fearful of the pain she'd heard so much about; his mother had spoken soothing words, and he remembered part of what she'd said about extreme pain, because he had found it difficult to believe. The human mind, she had said, has its own ways of protecting us. Yes, the pain will be unlike anything you've ever felt before, but you won't remember it two hours later. After all -- and he remembered her quiet laughter--if we could remember, and feel, that pain at will, there would be no further children born, ever... He wished she was here now, to offer the same kind of comfort and warmth...But the memories would do; just as they always had...

The flames crackled, dying down to red embers. He added more wood, fuel for thought as well as heat. His thoughts came back to his present surroundings: Gull's-Way. He had never noticed before how conducive it was to calming turbulent thoughts and fostering an inner healing--but then, he'd never needed it before. Or perhaps he was more receptive to it now; he just knew that there was something soothing and protective about the place...something else he needed at the moment. It enabled him to consider not only the past, but the future as well. The past he had pretty much accepted, the long-ago as well as the more recent; and he could understand, and maybe forgive...at least, he could forgive one person's role in the affair...It would have been easier on him mentally, if not physically, if he had known there was a police officer involved; and, in thinking back, he realized that Myers had, as much as he could under the circumstances, done a lot less to him than the others. He didn't envy the cop, and he knew he himself could never have pulled off an undercover operation like that. But he understood it, and that was why he had agreed to Officer Myers' request to see him next Friday. He figured he'd be called to testify; wasn't really looking forward to it, but willing to do just about anything to get those creeps locked up for a long, long time. Forever would be nice. Myers had mentioned a possible kidnap charge, but McCormick had told him honestly that he had followed Taylor willingly--they just wouldn't let him leave. Technicality, he was assured; and Myers was also working another angle, which he would detail when they met. The conversation had ended with feeling of relief on both sides, as well as a mutual respect.

The Taylor incident brought something else to mind; his future employment prospects. He tended to give little, or no thought to his future. For that, he was certain, was a hopeless quest in view of his prison record. To be able to continue on the NASCAR circuit meant having a sponsor-- and there were too many young, eager, hot-shot hopefuls out there willing to put it all on the line for any backer to consider an over-thirty, ex-con driver to be trusted with millions of dollars' worth of machinery and advertising...No, his career as a professional NASCAR driver had ended before it had a chance to begin...

And his immediate future...The next two years, at least, were pretty much decided for him. And after that...It was difficult for him to comprehend any major decision after his parole ended. But he would probably to right back at Square One, only two years older. Not a very comforting thought...

There had to be more to his life than that - a rocky, uneven series of ups and downs...with a lot more downs than ups. More than just a day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month existence. But what could he do? Where could he go? He knew cars and their maintenance; and, in spite of all that had happened, he liked living in California. Who would trust him with any kind of responsibility, or hire him in an honest-to-God career-type position? Without the experience, the education, he knew the answer to that; and he also knew something else. That, in spite of himself, he'd become accustomed to Gull's-Way and its cantankerous owner; had settled in just a little too securely into the open, pleasant surroundings. It was only when he reminded himself that the seven-acre estate was just another kind of prison could he even consider the possibility that it wouldn't last forever...

He found himself startled, then bemused, at that last thought. Stay here forever?

Sure... a dream and a nightmare combined into one...

And Hardcastle sure as hell would never stand for it; the old donkey was constantly on him about having 'some kind of plans for when your parole is over; I ain't livin' forever, ya know'. Nope, wouldn't work...unless...unless Hardcase thought it was his idea...

Countless possibilities whirled in his mind, but he shook his head. No, he couldn't do it; he couldn't con Hardcastle that way...

Of course, there was also the obvious fact that the Judge just might see through his manipulations, and he didn't care to think about the consequences of that at all...

Okay...So, he'd be out on his own again; big deal. He'd been on his own before. Preferred it, in fact; no one to answer to but himself. Always before, that had brought a certain amount of satisfaction to him; no

authorities, foster parents, or parole officers dictating his every move and actions. That satisfaction was absent now, replaced with the old, familiar feeling of acceptance. But this time, he'd have two years' notice before he'd be tossed back on the street...And, in that time, he would find the 'something more' that he needed in his life. And, somehow, he didn't think he'd have to look very far...

XXII

The next Friday arrived, more or less routinely; McCormick spent most of the time on the couch in the Gatehouse while Hardcastle tried to look after him without being real obvious about it. Mostly, though, the Judge found himself kept busy just trying to keep two residences in halfway decent order.

It was close to noon when McCormick was startled out of a sound, peaceful nap. "McCORMICK!!!!"

Mark grabbed a loose pillow and put it over his head. "What!?"

"Look at this place! Look at it!"

McCormick lowered the pillow and took in the general disarray in one sweeping glance. "What's wrong with it?"

"What's wrong with it? What's right with it?!" Hardcastle barreled through, picking up newspapers, magazines, clothing, shoes; as well as three day's worth of plates, cups, and glasses. "What if someone should come by, unannounced?"

"Oh, yeah, someone like Frank, or one of your buddies." A horrible thought struck him, "You didn't invite the Jazzmasters over here again, did you? I'm still half-deaf from their last visit."

"No, they're not coming over. In fact, they may never come back after you insisted on singing along..." He was straightening chair cushions when the doorbell rang, cutting him off in mid-sentence.

"You wanna get that, Hardcase? It is, after all, your house..." McCormick found a more comfortable position, "It's probably the mailman."

There were low voices, and Hardcastle came over to the couch, "Hey, Sleeping Beauty, there's a goddess here to see you." As McCormick's eyes snapped open, the Judge leaned close, and said in a low voice, "You were right."

Diana sat down in the chair opposite the couch, gave him a sympathetic smile, "Hi, hon; how do you feel?"

McCormick gave an exaggerated moan, "I feel terrible...my hair hurt, my head hurts, so does my neck, my back, legs, knees, feet...even my toes hurt; and," he added dramatically, "I'm starving."

Hardcastle looked to the ceiling, "Oh, brother..."

Diana laughed, "Poor baby..." Actually, Mark looked better than she had expected - but then, he always looked better than she expected. His right ankle was in a cast, and a single metal crutch rested along the back of the couch; the Judge had told her, when she called earlier, that the cast had been taken off his arm a few days ago, but he still wore the sling. His face bore only the faintest red marks, and the bruises had nearly faded away completely. And he was still, she thought, the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen...

Hardcastle headed for the door, "I'll bring some sandwiches over; are you staying for lunch, Ms. Ashton?"

"Oh, a few minutes, maybe."

McCormick waited until the Judge left, then raised himself up on his right elbow, "A few minutes? Now, you know it takes longer than a few minutes..." He winked, smiling wickedly.

"I'm very tempted, believe me; but, I really can't stay. I have an appointment in Santa Monica at 12:30." She settled back in the chair, crossing long, perfect legs. "I wanted to see you, before I left."

"Left? Where are you going?"

"I have a six-month assignment overseas; the meeting is to sign the contract. I'll be leaving Monday."

"But that's only two days from now."

"I know, and I'd like to have dinner, or," she smiled, "'whatever' before I have to leave."

"No problem. We'll order out and lock the doors."

The doorbell interrupted again, and Diana stood up, "I'll get it."

He heard Dane's voice as he came into the living room, "Hi, Miss Ashton; you know Mark?" He looked at McCormick, then back at Diana, "Uh, am I interrupting anything...? I can come back later--"

"No, of course not, Austin," Diana sat down as Austin took the matching chair next to hers. "Mark and I were just talking."

"Well, if it's okay..."

"It's okay," McCormick assured him. He glanced up as Hardcastle came through the patio doors, plate of sandwiches in one hand, a pitcher of iced tea in the other. "We're gonna need some more sandwiches, Hardcase."

Hardcastle sat the plate and pitcher down on the coffee table, smiled over at Dane. "So, how's the Academy, Arlett?"

"'Academy'? 'Arlett'?" McCormick gave them a puzzled look, "What Academy? And who's Arlett?"

"I am," Austin smiled sheepishly, "I'm from Austin, Texas; and I picked Dane out of the phone book. Well, I wasn't going to get far in Hollywood with a name like Arlett Dudds."

There was quiet laughter, and McCormick spoke in a confidential tone, "If I were you, I'd stick to Austin Dane; only thing that goes with Dudds is Milk."

Dane looked over at the Judge, "And I start the Academy in a few months."

"Good. And in the meantime, I got a great job lined up for you; you can work around your classes."

"Why don't you get a great job for me while you're at it?"

"You've got a job, McCormick."

"Yeah, but it ain't great."

"Neither are you."

The doorbell rang again, and Hardcastle smiled. "I'll get that."

The Judge opened the door, and the smile and good humor faded. He glanced back at the other three, then stepped back. "I'm not sure if you're welcome here."

McCormick waved the visitor inside. "Come on in, David." As Officer Myers crossed through, Hardcastle followed closely. "Hardcase thinks he's still a judge..."

Myers looked around, "High ceilings; I like this place." He smiled at McCormick, "For a guy who isn't supposed to have many friends, there are a lot of strangers here."

Introductions were made, and Hardcastle replaced the sandwiches and tea twice before Diana finally got to her feet. "I'm sorry, Mark, but I must be going. I'm late as it is." She kissed him briefly, "I'll call you tomorrow. Good-bye, Austin, it was nice seeing you again...or should I call you Arlett?"

"Austin. I'm having it changed legally."

She smiled at the police officer, offering her hand, "And it was nice meeting you, Officer Myers."

He stood up, reddening a bit, "My pleasure, Ma'am..."

They all watched her leave, Austin and David sitting down at the same time. "That," Myers observed, "is quite a woman."

The patio door slid open once more, and Hardcastle entered with two bowls of chips. "Officer Myers, there's a call of you; you can take it in the den. Come with me..." He hesitated at the door, "Oh, McCormick, Frank said to tell you that he's damned tired of being your social secretary."

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When Myers returned about 15 minutes later, Dane had left. He was glad; that made it easier to get to the real purpose of his visit. He sat down in the large chair next to the couch, "This isn't exactly a social call... I brought something for you." He reached inside his jacket, pulled out a small, rectangular-shaped packet. Placing it on the table, he continued, "They did some plea-bargaining with Taylor and Company. DA offered to drop the kidnap charges--and the life sentence that went with it--in exchange for Taylor and the other two pleading guilty to lesser charges, and supplying the names of his buyers..."

"What 'lesser charges'?"

"Assault and battery, assault with intent to kill, assault with a deadly weapon, fraud...and that's just for a start. The sentence will probably run concurrently, damn it. But I'm still working on tying him in with the deaths of those two other boys; I'll get him. Won't be any plea bargaining on Murder One."

"So, how much time do you think they'll get?"

"On this case? Hard to tell--probably 10 or 15 years, with parole possible after 3 years. That's why I'm going to get him on Murder One; he'll get a life sentence before I'm finished..."

Hardcastle watched out the front window as Myer's patrol car left; McCormick may have found it easy to forgive and forget, but the Judge found it difficult to be that generous. He returned to his desk, finishing his recommendation for Austin Dane's acceptance to the Police Academy.

It was late afternoon before Hardcastle finally braced up to returning to the Gatehouse, and facing the mess he'd know would be there. McCormick alone was bad enough; but McCormick with other people usually resulted in a disaster area.

As he crossed the patio, he saw an unfamiliar car pull out and head down the drive. Going inside the Gatehouse, he found McCormick up on the crutch, placing a good-sized cardboard box on a side table.

"What's that, and who just left?"

McCormick jumped a bit, "Will you stop sneaking up on me."

"You can't sneak in your own house. What's that?"

McCormick leaned against the wall, smiling slightly. "It's yours."

"Mine?"

"Yeah, and I worked damned hard for it, too; and it cost a friggin' fortune..."

"What work? You're not talkin' about--"

"No, no... Taylor never paid me; Traci Knight had already paid me nearly \$1500 for the work I did on her film."

"Uh-huh. And that would be with White Knight Productions?"

"Yeah."

"So... Where is it; the money, I mean."

"Well, uh..."

"Come on, McCormick, even with deductions, you had nearly one thousand dollars. What did you do with it?"

"Well, I got this," he patted the cardboard box, "And...I took Diana out..."

"Must've been a hell of a date."

"Ohhh, it was..."

"The rest of it, McCormick, the rest of it."

"I...sorta...gave it away." He finished quickly.

"You...what?"

"I gave it to a guy in need. I mean, that's what you're always sayin', ain't it? That we should help out others less fortunate than ourselves...Of course, in my case, a guy worse of than me would be damn hard to find, but...I found him. And he said to pay back the \$40 you loaned him." Taking the 20s, Hardcastle just looked at him, "Look, Judge, I got all I need: a job, a place to live, just barely enough to eat..."

The look was still in place, his expression clearly stating: Bull Shit.

"You have money, you have problems. I don't need any more problems. So, here," He opened the box, took out the contents, and tossed it at the Judge, "Catch."

Caught off guard, Hardcastle fumbled, then got a firm grip on the basketball that thumped against his chest. "What the-- My basketball! My Championship basketball...!"

"Yeah, and don't forget who got it back for ya." McCormick made his way back to the couch, frowning at the packet that Myers had left on the coffee table.

Hardcastle looked at him, "I...apreciate this, kid."

"Yeah, you're welcome." McCormick sat down carefully, stretching his right leg out on the couch, and leaning back against the stacked pillows.

Hardcastle settled back in the chair, examining the signatures on the basketball.

McCormick sighed. "It's the real thing, Judge."

"I know - just missed it, that's all..."

"Know why Taylor hired me?" McCormick spoke in a carefully neutral tone. There was no answer; he really didn't expect one. "More or less the same reason you did...A guy with no prospects; good-looking enough to get by; charming enough for any occasion; and dumb enough to let himself be used...and who would care if something happened to him?" He gave Hardcastle a look, "Right, Judge?"

"No, you're not right; but then, you rarely are. My reasons were different..."

"Were they now?"

"First of all, I care if something happens to you..."
"Oh, yeah, I forgot...might be a bit more difficult to find someone else to blackmail, huh?"
"Shut up. Here I am, making the effort - and you're grouching!"
"Sorry. Go ahead, make the effort."
"And, second, the job requirements aren't even in the same ballpark--"
"Right. I worked for Taylor for the promise of money; I work for you for the promise of freedom. I ended up with neither; and a lot of black and blue marks to show for my efforts."
"But not intentionally; never intentionally..."
"Yeah...I guess that makes the difference, huh?"
"That, and the third reason."
McCormick looked at him, "Which is?"
"The motivation behind what we do..."
"We're just so damn noble, aren't we?" He looked again at the packet lying undisturbed on the table. He reached across and picked it up.
"What's that?"
"Nothing...just something Myers left for me..." McCormick's voice and hands were unsteady as he pulled a black cassette from the wrappings.
"That's not...that's not Taylor's tape, is it?" Hardcastle asked quietly.
"Yep." He looked over at the Judge, holding the tape out. "Wanna watch it?"
"No!"
McCormick smiled at the emphatic, and immediate, response. "Why not? I have it on good authority that I gave an \$80,000 performance; of course, if it had been finished, it would have been worth a lot more--"
"It's not worth the tape it's printed on...It's not worth--" Hardcastle broke off suddenly, locking down on surfacing emotions. The same ones he'd felt in the back seat of Frank's patrol car; the same ones he'd managed to keep under control for the past two weeks. But he couldn't conceal the anguish in his eyes, or voice. McCormick was looking at him, waiting for him to finish; needing him to finish. "It's not worth," he continued, angry with himself, with Taylor, with the situation - why couldn't he finish; why couldn't he say it? "...a life." Damnitall, anyway.
But McCormick accepted it; just as he accepted all the emotional crumbs the Judge cared to toss his way. The forgiving nature that Hardcastle had questioned earlier was now responsible for that acceptance. But it was difficult for him to even consider overcoming a lifetime of training--the almost inbred belief of his generation that 'real men' don't display the 'gentler' emotions - certainly not to a young man not related to him. And McCormick continually proved that was a fallacy. Hardcastle had found it easy to display love, affection, and caring to his wife and son; perhaps not to the degree that they had expressed toward him, but at least the ability was there. Now, it was like he was having to learn all over again; and he wasn't sure he wanted to. He wasn't sure he could reach out in the easy and trusting way that McCormick could, as almost second nature--without reservations or restrictions. Wasn't sure he could face the possible loss - or worse, a future rejection when the kid's parole was up and he was free to go where he chose...And how could he explain all that without coming across as a cold-hearted bastard?
"You're right, Hardcase," McCormick broke into his train of thought, startling him for a moment, "it's not worth anything that I can think of." With that, he tossed it across the room, into the roaring flames of the fireplace. "And, as far as I'm concerned, it never happened..."

Epilogue

Hardcastle leaned back in his desk chair, sorting through the mail; a small, ivory envelope fell from the stack. He picked it up, glancing at the return address - Clarence, Arkansas. Inside was a printed invitation for the Clarence High School Reunion, Class of '35. He smiled; this just might be the ticket...McCormick had fully recovered from his injuries, and it would be good for the kid to see, and experience, life at a slower, more sedate pace. Get away for a week or so from the dirt, and grime, and pressures of Los Angeles, and relax in the tranquil, rural town of Clarence...

Yep, a change of scenery would definitely do them both good...

As he picked up the phone to make the arrangements, he was, at least, certain of one thing: It sure as heck wouldn't do any harm...

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- (1) "The Crystal Duck" - filmed episode
- (2) "Killer B's" - filmed episode



