

S T O L E N T H U N D E R*

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Milton C. Hardcastle, retired L.A. Superior Court Judge, drove in an unusually cheerful frame of mind down the long, sand-dusted drive, slowing only slightly as he approached the main gate. There, precisely in the center of the drive, was the thirty-foot step-ladder; about four steps from the top, one hand gripping the yet-to-be painted iron bracing, the other slapping white paint onto the "W", was the Judge's resident ex-con-cum-handiman, Mark McCormick.

Hardcastle swerved around the ladder, missing it by scant inches, and braked to a stop. By some miracle of unknown achievement, the ex-con had somehow managed not to splatter a single drop of paint on neither the blacktop drive nor the ladder; however, the same could not be said for the painter himself. Dressed in fairly new tennis shoes, faded, worn-through cut-offs, and a navy mesh shirt, McCormick seemed to have gotten more paint on himself than on the previous five letters of GULL'S-WAY.

Squinting against the brilliant sun, Hardcastle yelled above the sounds of the highway and crashing surf, "Hey, kid, why aren't you wearing the white coveralls I got for ya? Whatta people gonna think, drivin' by and seeing you dressed like that? They'll think I'm hirin' bums, or something. Better change that shirt, anyway; with this sun, when you take it off, you'll look like a waffle."

McCormick's answering grin lacked a certain amount of respect as he eyed the Judge's well-worn jogging suit. "Hardcase, you're looking unusally dapper today. What is that, last decade's jogging suit?"

Conceding the point, Hardcastle waved him down. Placing the paintbrush atop the paint can, McCormick climbed down, leaning against the truck. "How much paint ya got left?"

"Enough for the "a", but I haven't done the other side yet; and I haven't done the rear gate."

"Okay, finish up what you have, then clean up and come over to the main house. There's a paint sale at Wardell's, we'll run over and get enough to finish up."

"Okay."

Hardcastle started the GMC, "And don't forget to unload the truck; stack the lumber and bricks inside the greenhouse, then unload the fertilizer out by the rose garden." He slipped the truck into gear, "And try to remember not to stack the Redi-Mix near the sprinkler's--like you did last time." With a nod of dismissal, he added, "And for christsakes, put on some decent clothes." With that, the GMC turned into the service drive leading to the greenhouse.

"Why--, you old donkey," McCormick's fist waved at the disappearing truck's taillights. "It ain't enough I bust my ass painting five million feet of iron railing, I'm supposed to do your work, too?! You were too cheap to pay the contractor for the supplies; you bought the damn stuff, you unload it!" He kicked agrily at the ladder.

Less than a half second after his toe impacted with the wooden ladder leg, did he remember the half-empty paint bucket. He ducked his head, arms upraised and the bucket struck his shoulder, fell to the pavement with a clang, bounced twice and rolled to the edge of the drive.

Swearing fluently, McCormick grabbed the ladder, dragging it toward the Gatehouse. "Damn...Now I'll have to change clothes..."

The Coyote roared through the partially-painted gate, fast enough, McCormick hoped, that the Judge wouldn't notice the paint splotches on his driveway. Luckily, Hardcastle seemed to be in no mood for idle conversation, miffed that McCormick hadn't unloaded the truck, forcing them to scrunch into the Coyote's small cockpit. As McCormick saw it, there was damned little the Judge could buy and expect to load it into the sports car. A couple of gallons of paint, at most; he'd finish both gates, as promised; the limited trunk space precluded any additional purchases - i.e. more work. McCormick smiled contentedly to himself. Maybe the day wouldn't be so bad after all.

Pulling up in front of Wardall's Paint and Hardware, Hardcastle climbed out laboriously. "Go park this damned street monster and meet me inside."

Choosing a corner parking space, several yards from the nearest parked car, McCormick jumped out, pausing to admire the Coyote's sleek, wind-swept lines. Thunder on wheels, and he loved every inch of her.

Glancing carefully inside the door, the ex-con spotted the Judge at the back of the store, looking at hedge clippers. McCormick, in turn, wasted no time in sauntering over to the counter in the paint department. The lovely blonde salesgirl smiled a welcome.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yeah, are you busy tonight?"

The smiled widened, "My husband and I are celebrating our fifth wedding anniversary. Can you babysit a two-year-old?"

Some of the spark went out of McCormick's smile. "I'm better with twenty-two-year-olds."

Hardcastle came up behind him, pushed him aside. "Don't mind him, Miss; they only let him out on weekends. I'd like about fifteen gallons of rust-proof paint, black latex."

"Awww, Judge, black is so...ordinary. Get something that reflects your personality--which sure isn't ordinary. You know, some-

thing that says 'Milton C. Hardcastle'," he leaned on the counter, glancing at the salesgirl, "What have you got in Pearly White?"

"All we have in rust-proof is gloss white and flat white," she answered with a quiet laugh, "I'm afraid you'll have to find the pearls elsewhere."

"If you two are finished... I'll take five gallons of gloss white, also, Miss."

"In one-gallon or five-gallon containers?" She began punching in the order.

"Five-gallon."

"Hardcase, that's four five-gallon buckets. No way is all that gonna fit into the Coyote's trunk."

"Not my problem, kiddo; if you'd done like I told ya, there'd be plenty of room."

Automatic doors opened with a soft swish as Hardcastle and McCormick exited the hardware store, each carrying two five-gallon containers of paint.

"Figured out how to get this into your lean, mean, racing machine?"

"Yeah, you can take a taxi home--" McCormick stopped abruptly, paint cans falling to the sidewalk. The corner where he'd left the Coyote was empty - nothing was left to even suggest that the bright red racing car had ever been there. "Gone..." he stammered out, "She's gone...!"

Hardcastle, resting the paint containers next to McCormick's, walked over and stood in the empty parking space. He glanced around the sparsely filled parking lot, studied both lanes of traffic as far as he could see. There was no sign of the Coyote.

The Judge slowly rejoined his devastated friend, "Looks like we're both gonna be taking a taxi home," he muttered. Hardcastle placed and awkward, comforting hand on McCormick's shoulder, "Well, kid, how does it feel to have your thunder stolen?"

McCormick clambered into the taxi, glaring at the Judge as he slammed the door. "Why don't you just admit it, Hardcase; you're glad she's gone. You never could beat her time, no matter how much you tried, and you know it."

"Ah, c'mon, kid." Hardcastle clapped a hand on McCormick's knee in a conciliatory fashion, not arguing that his Corvette had never been in the same league with the Coyote when it came to speed. "Don't be that way. You know there never really was a competition. It was just fun and games."

"Yeah, well, the fun and games are over now," McCormick moaned, "She's gone, and I'll never see her in one piece again."

"Yes, you will," Hardcastle repeated in an irritated tone, "Trust me, McCormick. The police are used to handling cases like this."

McCormick turned a woebegone face to the stunned-appearing taxi driver. "He doesn't understand. They took her, right off the street, in broad daylight. She's used to kindness, consideration, a light touch... God knows what they'll do to her. She'll be stripped down, torn apart..."

The driver nodded in agreement, frowning at the older man. It was difficult for him to understand how the old guy could be so hard-hearted to the poor girl, even if she was competition.

Hardcastle sighed. McCormick would be impossible to live with until the Coyote was found. "Well, kiddo, if it happens, it happens. But you will get her back, and if necessary, I'll even help you fix her back up."

"But she won't be the same, Judge."

"Sure she will. If there's been any damage to her, it can be fixed up -- there's only a \$250 deductible, ya know. Get her re-fitted, slap on some paint...she'll be back on the street in no time."

McCormick shook his head stubbornly. "Won't be the same, I tell you; it never is, not after they've gutted her." He slumped down into the seat, sighing wistfully, "She was the smoothest ride I ever had."

"I don't see how... I hafta bend myself double just to get into her, damn thing's so small--" Hardcastle broke off, noticing the driver's frowning disapproval, "What!?"

"You sure I shouldn't maybe drive you guys down to the police station? Your friend here seems pretty upset over what happened to his--"

"Nah, I already called it in; cops have pulled her ass in so many times, they know her description by heart. Besides," he added, punching the ex-con lightly on the arm, "The kid, here, gets upset if she doesn't purr the second he turns her over. He'll be okay, just take us on home. And tell ya what, kid," he offered generously, "When we get her back and get her all fixed up, I'll even help you take her around the track a couple of times, okay?"

"Yeah, sure..." McCormick slid deeper into depression, his face a picture of gloom. "She was one of a kind, Hardcase; I'll never be able to replace her..."

It was a long, long ride out to Gull's-Way...

And for the remainder of the trip, Hardcastle wondered why the taxi driver kept muttering under his breath. Hadn't the guy ever heard about a car being stolen before?

The teen-age boy stroked the Coyote's steering wheel lovingly as he grinned over at his friend. "What'd I tell ya, man; is this the hottest thing on four wheels, or what?"

"Yeeaaahhh..." Chico Gonzalez dragged the word out in admiration. hating to see the hour-long joy-ride come to an end. "This is one

mean machine, Richie." He thumped the driver lightly on the arm. "You sure Skid won't mind that we took his wheels without asking? I mean, what if he's come out, lookin' for 'em?"

Richie Mendoza shook his head as he carefully parked the bright red car back in it's original spot at Wardell's Hardware. "No sweat, Chico; you worry too much, man. You heard Skid say we could borrow his wheels anytime we wanted to."

"Yeah, but maybe he was just saying that to look good in front of ol' Hardcase. Ya know, gettin' in brownie points. I mean, helpin' us out in that mechanics course wasn't his idea, no way."

"Maybe not," Richie allowed, getting out of the car and gazing at it longingly as only a 16-year-old boy could, "but he did say we could drive it."

"Yeah, he did; and we did help him put in that new, push-button ignition system. Just get in, push a button, and you're off; and no keys to mess with." He glanced toward the entrance of the hardware store as they started to walk off. "Ya think he noticed it was gone? Maybe we should go inside and tell him."

"Nah, man; I told ya earlier -- I've seen the totally rad blonde that works in there. Last thing Skid wants is a coupla kids messing up his moves. Don't worry about things so much, Chico. Place doesn't close for another thirty minutes, and you can bet the ol' Skidder is making use of every minute of it."

Richie looked back at the gleaming Coyote and gave a final admiring sigh, pausing as he realized that McCormick just might be the type to keep track of his gas and mileage. Nah. Not 'ol Skid. Especially if he had just scored with the blonde...

No sweat, he decided, and walked off with all the inper-turbability of youth. Skid didn't even have to know that she was ever gone...

McCormick stumbled over magazine rack and footstool in an effort to reach the ringing telephone in the shortest possible time. He knocked over the table lamp as he grabbed wildly for the receiver.

"Yeah, McCormick here. Who's this?"

"Officer Batson. McCormick, huh?" There was a distinct snort, the gravelly voice edged with aggravation. "I shoulda guessed. You wise-ass cons never change, do ya?"

"Uh, well..." Great. "Batty" Batson; the cop held the record for pulling the Coyote over on speeding violations. Needless to say, Batson wouldn't bust his balls on this case. "The Coyote...have you seen her?"

"I've seen her, smart guy."

"What...?!" As much as he had hoped, he really hadn't expected such quick results.

"I'm lookin' right at it."

"Where?!"

"Look, buddy, this car hasn't budged. It's right where you left it!"

"How...?"

"Oh, yeah, like you didn't know. You know what happens to guys who call in false reports?"

"Huh?"

"Aww, that's great, McCormick. My partner just told me Hardcase called it in. How'd you get the Judge in on it--did you con him, too?"

"But--"

"Left yourself in the clear to laugh at all of us, is that right?"

"B-but--"

"What's the matter, was it a dull week for you, you needed some kicks... Dream up a car theft and make the cops look like fools, is that it?"

"But...but--"

"Yeah, well, you get your sorry butt down here before I impound the damn thing myself - with you in it!"

McCormick guided the Coyote with loving care into its accustomed place in the garage. He'd been so glad to see the car returned intact that he'd endured Ofc. Batson's sarcastic comments and observations. It had been made very clear by the officer that the only reason McCormick was being let off with a lecture and a warning was due solely to the high regard and respect Batson held for Judge Hardcastle.

He hadn't even bothered to argue that the Coyote had been taken. He'd noticed the triple zeroes on the odometer just after he had parked, rolling over to 8,000 miles. When he and Hardcastle pulled up in the GMC, the first thing he'd done, after the initial visual once-over, was to check the odometer; it had read 8,062.3. And the full gas tank had dropped to three-quarters of a tank. Enough evidence, he felt, to refute Officer Batson's charge of "false reports".

Hardcastle had backed his story; though McCormick doubted that the Judge had noticed either the gas gauge or the mileage.

"Look," Hardcastle had said, "If McCormick says there are sixty-two extra miles, then there's sixty-two extra miles. Even the Coyote doesn't idle that fast."

"Don't forget the gas, Judge," McCormick had reminded him, "almost a quarter of a tank burned up. That's nearly seven gallons."

Batson had looked unconvinced, but Hardcastle swayed both officers to their side. There had been one other bit of evidence to support the 'theft'; on the floorboard, near the driver's bucket seat, was a white rabbit's foot, the chain replaced by a purple ribbon. The last time McCormick had seen that was when Richie Mendoza had retrieved it from the concrete floor of the shop building. It had fallen from the worn pocket of his jacket, and the teen-ager had embarrassedly explained that his long-time girlfriend had given it to him. McCormick decided to return the good-luck charm at a later date - give the kid time to notice its absence and wonder where it had been lost; and if Hardcastle didn't ask, he wouldn't say anything about it.

He grinned over at the GMC as Hardcastle pulled into the garage next to the Coyote.

"Well, Judge," he smiled as they got out of their respective vehicles, "looks like you were wrong after all; she wasn't 'stolen' thunder, just 'borrowed' thunder."

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