



# THE LOST CAUSE

by

Wilkie

"Aww, c'mon, Judge. It's Saturday night. Date night, U.S.A." Mark McCormick, showered, shaved, wearing a clean shirt, and rather too much spicy cologne, stood in the den, his hand extended, palm up, across the desk. "Please, Dad," he grinned winsomely, "let me have the keys to the car."

Milton C. Hardcastle, momentarily caught off-guard by the request for a night away from Gulls Way, repeated the negative shake of his head. "What do you want to go out for, McCormick? There's a great John Wayne movie on the tube tonight, and Sarah's making popcorn." He rubbed his hands together in delighted anticipation, then began gathering up the file folders that had absorbed his attention since supper. Engrossed in the task of selecting an appropriate case with which to celebrate his recent retirement from the Superior Court of Los Angeles, the judge had failed to note the disappearance of his new sidekick until the slam of the front door had heralded the young man's reappearance. "Good thing you came in when you did," Hardcastle said, consulting his watch. "We almost missed the beginning of the movie. Pull up a chair. Skip the commercials, we can talk about our next case."

"No offense, Judge, but I don't want to spend this evening with you and the Duke. I've seen enough of you, your files, your hedges, and your pool this week." He gestured insistently with his open palm. "Keys?"

The older man slapped the file folders on the desk and rose to his feet. "You had last weekend off, McCormick, after we got back from Las Vegas. That should be enough excitement for you for awhile."

"I spent most of last weekend moving my stuff into the Gatehouse. And the trip to Vegas wasn't exactly what I'd call fulfilled. Hey, Kemosabe, even the Lone Ranger let Tonto off occasionally."

"Tonto didn't ride into town, drink too much firewater, and hang out with known felons," Hardcastle answered.

Mark gritted his teeth, but managed a smile as he riposted, "I'm not going out to hold up liquor stores and rob banks. I worked hard this week; I deserve a night off."

Hardcastle dismissed the objection with a wave, settled into his favorite leather chair, and began hunting around for the TV listings. "You complained as much--or more-- than you worked. Besides, I let you sit in on last night's poker game," he stated magnanimously.

"Talk about hanging out with known felons!"

"Listen, McCormick, those were some of the finest legal minds in the state of California! It should have been a novel experience for you, facing judges outside a courtroom for a change," Hardcastle said sternly. "What have you done with the TV schedule?"

Mark trailed the judge across the room. "Fine legal minds but lousy card players. Next time I'm in court, I'll just bet my sentence against a hand of draw poker." He crouched to pull the listings out from under the judge's chair, then planted himself squarely between the older man and the television as Hardcastle scanned the booklet for the right channel. "I believe there's something in the law about a forty-hour week?"

"At the rate you work, it will take you a month to put in forty hours." Upon the younger man's look of annoyance, the judge eased off slightly. "Look, kid, I'm not Simon Legree; I don't make you work twenty-four hours a day. You have your evenings free."

"After I help Sarah with the dishes and before I play basketball with you," he sulked.

"No one forced you to do either of those things, McCormick."

It was true. Although Mark had agreed to prepare his own meals in the Gatehouse, Sarah had soon realized that his highest achievement in the culinary arts was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Fearing that he might starve and would, therefore, be too weak to work, she had begun feeding him his evening meal in the kitchen. Hardcastle,

rationalizing that the dinner hour could be utilized to discuss cases and assign chores (not to mention debating current events and sharing the latest news from the world of sports), had moved McCormick into the dining room. From the first night, Mark had helped Sarah clear the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher while indulging in light banter, a routine which both appeared to enjoy. Hardcastle suspected, although Sarah certainly would have denied it, that Mark was slowly finding a way into her heart.

"He isn't a bad kid," the judge reflected. "Maybe I should just hand over the keys and wish him a pleasant evening." Then the retired jurist frowned slightly. "I thought you liked playing basketball."

"I do," Mark said quickly, "and betting on the outcome lets me supplement the puny wages you pay me."

"What do you need money for? You have a roof over your head, and you're certainly not going hungry. I even paid the insurance on that hot rod of yours."

The younger man laughed lightly. "With a real salary, I could pay for my own car insurance. I'm a race car driver, Judge, not a gardener. On the circuit, I could be pulling down twenty or thirty grand in an afternoon."

"You could also be back in prison." "I may as well be in prison!" Mark snapped. "You won't let me drive the Coyote; it isn't even registered in my name. You won't let me off the estate except to accompany you to the police station or to visit my parole officer."

"The insurance premiums on that car are high enough. I can't afford you running it into things or collecting more traffic violations. Besides, you have been off the estate: you took Sarah grocery shopping on Thursday," Hardcastle pointed out as he fished around in the chair's cushions for the television's remote control unit.

"In the pickup truck," McCormick grumped. "We went to the supermarket and came straight back here."

"You expected to stop for ice cream or something?" The judge was becoming irritated by the argument and the fact that the remote control was still eluding him. "Where is that gizmo?" he muttered to himself. "Why can't people leave things where I put them?"

"No, I didn't expect to stop for ice cream," Mark mimicked petulantly. He sighed. "Please. Just let me take the Coyote out for a drive. I promise I'll be home by midnight."

The kid sounded sincere, and Hardcastle was again tempted to relent. But McCormick had to learn to respect authority, to understand that when he said "no", he meant it. "You're home now, McCormick," he said gruffly. "And you're staying home. Listen, you've only been here a week. Maybe later, when you've been around longer, and we've gotten to know each other better; maybe then we can discuss privileges. But, for right now, you'll do as I say. So," the retired jurist smiled to soften the force of his words, "sit down and watch the movie. You'll enjoy it. After it's over, we can

have a little one-on-one. Work off some of that restlessness. What do you say, kid?" "I'm not a kid, Judge." The voice was low and just a bit desperate. "I'm old enough to cross the street by myself without you holding my hand. I can make my own decisions even if, in your opinion, they're the wrong ones. I said please, Hardcase. What do you want--a note from my mother?"

"I want my TV whatchamacallit!" Hardcastle barked, giving up the search and approaching the set to adjust it manually. "And I want you to quit pestering me. May I remind you, McCormick, that you are still on parole and that the court has placed you in my custody?" Hardcastle turned away from the set to face his young charge.

Mark's eyes were hard, and there was a defiant thrust to his jaw. "You never stop reminding me, Hardcase," he said bitterly.

The judge was surprised by the abrupt change in tone. He was becoming accustomed to the kid's sudden mood shifts, many of them simple tactical changes when an initial approach failed to produce the desired result. He could recognize and deal with Mark's anger, hostility, even arrogance, but those attitudes were usually tempered by the kid's natural good humor. This bitterness was new, and the Hardcastle wondered what had prompted it and why. A night away from Gulls Way couldn't be that important, could it? Then his thoughts were interrupted by the theme music of John Wayne Theater and an announcer's voice extolling the virtues of the evening's presentation. "The movie's coming on, and we don't want to miss any of it," he ventured, hoping to de-escalate the confrontation. "Let's put this discussion off until another time, okay?"

But Mark was not about to allow himself to be so easily deflected. "Look, Judge, San Quentin was no picnic. I won't do anything to give you reason to put me back inside. But you don't need a reason, do you? Big, important judge like you, you just give the word, and it's back to the big house for Mark McCormick. If I have to live like this--behind gates, with bed checks and lockdowns--I may as well be back in prison." He turned and headed for the door. "Call the cops; I'll get my stuff together."

When had he lost control of this situation? "McCormick!" Mark froze in position, and Hardcastle was strongly tempted to throw the keys after him, to let him go out and the Devil take the consequences. But backing down now would mean giving the kid the upper hand; and, damn it, he had to learn that trust had to be earned, not bullied.

"I've never run a bed check. And whether or not you lock the Gatehouse is up to you," he said softly, keeping the irritation out of his voice only with tremendous effort.

The stiffness slowly melted from the younger man's shoulders, and he nearly smiled as he wheeled to face the judge. "If I phone out for pizza, will you let the delivery man through the front gates?"

He was pushing again, testing the limits. Hardcastle sighed; the Kid was sharp. He was going to have to move quickly to stay ahead of this one. "You know how the security system operates, McCormick. You let him in."  
"You're something else, Hardcase." There was a note of near admiration in the tone. "By the way, Sarah put the remote control in the drawer," he threw back over his shoulder as he left.

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Sarah, entering from the kitchen with the popcorn, winced at the slam of the screen door that punctuated the young man's departure. "Problems, your Honor?"  
"What?" Hardcastle was still staring at the spot where McCormick had last stood as if by mere force of will he could make him reappear. "No. At least, I hope not." He shrugged and turned his attention to the movie's opening credits. "We just had a bit of a difference of opinion, that's all." He dipped his hand into the bowl, which the housekeeper had placed on the small, round lamp table next to him, and asked, "Is there any beer in the refrigerator, or has McCormick drunk it all?"  
"Your friends finished it last night. You know the boy never touches anything in your kitchen without your permission, your Honor," she said reproachfully.  
"You don't approve of the way I handled the Kid, do you, Sarah?"  
"If you thought you were right, you wouldn't be asking for my approval," she stated bluntly, relying on their long association to take the sting from her words. She had overheard most of the argument, and she suspected that the judge, at least, was dissatisfied with its outcome.

"Well," Hardcastle went on, not really hearing her reply, "I think I may have dropped the ball on this play." He had located the remote control exactly where Mark had said it would be and used it now to adjust the sound on the movie he was finding it hard to concentrate on.

"The boy can be difficult at times," Sarah observed loyally. "You're doing your best to keep him out of trouble and out of prison. He should be grateful."  
"Why do you insist on putting this gizmo in the drawer?" the judge complained, changing the subject. He was somewhat reluctant to discuss McCormick until he had rooted out the source of their conflict. Somehow, he felt as though he were to blame, and he didn't care for the idea. He didn't like it at all.

"Because someone has to pick up after you," Sarah answered calmly. "The way you leave things lying around, it's a wonder you ever find anything."

He smiled in fond remembrance. "You sound just like my wife."  
"Mrs. Hardcastle, God bless her, worked very hard to keep you organized. I'm only following her example, as she would have wished," Sarah explained patiently. She glanced around the room and sighed. Mark was nearly as bad as the judge, although he confined most of his disorder to the Gatehouse. Still, the book she had seen him reading earlier was face-down in a chair, and the deck shoes in the corner were undoubtedly his.

"I know," Hardcastle harrumphed, "but I like things where I can see them. So they won't get lost."

"Like ex-cons?"  
He looked up at her sharply, but her demeanor remained completely guileless. Humor wasn't Sarah's style. "McCormick is already lost. Isn't that how you think of him? As another one of my lost causes?"

It was Sarah's turn to shrug. "I'm not sure, your Honor. Young Mark is different somehow."

"Don't tell me you've fallen for his line of baloney," Hardcastle scoffed.  
"No," the housekeeper demurred. "Not yet, anyway. He can be charming, but he's also lazy and much too forward at times. I'll reserve my judgement until I've decided whether the politeness he shows on occasion is real or just an act--his company manners, so to speak."

"He's okay," the retired jurist conceded. "He's just scared. He has a smart mouth, and he likes to believe we misuse and abuse him, but I think he'll come around. I hope so. I'd really hate to see this one back inside."

He focused his attention on the television screen as Sarah moved to the desk and began straightening the file folders into a neat stack. The judge was planning his next campaign in the war on crime, and Sarah offered up a short prayer that this latest project, whatever it was, would not involve guns and high-speed car chases. Such antics might keep the judge young, but they would make her old before her time.

From the chair closest to the desk, she scooped up Mark's book and was pleasantly surprised to discover it was a work of non-fiction from one of the book shelves in the Gatehouse and not the trashy novel she had expected to find. Maybe this ex-con was different. He was certainly determined to keep them off-balance.

As if reading her thoughts, Hardcastle said, almost to himself, "He doesn't need my permission to leave the estate. He may be in my custody, but he isn't a prisoner." His voice rose slightly. "I don't even want him around all the time--bothering me, getting under foot. I need my privacy, too, you know."

"Have you told Mark?"  
"Damn it! He shouldn't have to be told. I wouldn't have brought him here if I didn't think I could trust him--if I didn't care what happened to him." He used the remote to turn the set off. "I think I'll go up to bed; I have a book I've been wanting to read."

"Aren't you going to watch your movie?" The housekeeper was stunned. "You've



Leen looking forward to it all day."

"Nah, I've seen it." He remained slumped in his seat, contemplating the darkened television screen. "I thought the Kid might enjoy it, but I guess he doesn't like John Wayne--too young to appreciate a classic movie like this one."

Picking up the deck shoes to put them with Mark's book, Sarah made a mental note to speak to him about keeping his possessions in the Gatehouse--and about John Wayne movies. It wouldn't hurt him to indulge the judge occasionally. He should feel used that Judge Hardcastle had taken such an interest in him.

The judge pulled himself to his feet and said decisively, "McCormick should drive that car of his. It isn't good for it, leaving it just sitting in the garage, and if he waxes it once more, it's going to glow in the dark. Yes," he turned in the doorway to smile back at Sarah, relieved that the matter had been settled, "he should take the car out tomorrow. Open her up and see what she'll do." With an absent-minded wave, he headed for the stairs. "Good night, Sarah."

She finished her tidying up, putting the TV listings and the remote back in their drawer. //Well, at least, it wouldn't be dull having Mark McCormick around.//

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"McCormick!" the judge's raucous bellow resounded across the estate, shattering the early morning tranquility. "McCormick! Damn it, where the hell are you? McCormick!"

"Judge," Sarah admonished, "it's Sunday!" She was standing on the front steps as Hardcastle crossed the lawn from the direction of the Gatehouse, her white-gloved hands primly clutching her prayerbook and rosary while she waited for her taxi. "Mark can't hear you. He's gone."

"Gone! Gone where?" the retired jurist thundered, his good mood rapidly evaporating. A restful night's sleep and a dawn game of basketball had restored his spirits, and he was actually looking forward to sharing breakfast with McCormick. Replete with eggs, toast, and bacon, the Kid could admit contritely that his attitude the night before had been totally unjustified. Then Hardcastle could magnanimously accept the apology and hand over the keys to the Coyote. Perhaps, the Kid would ask him to go along to test out the machine. The stage was set: breakfast was waiting next to the pool. All that was missing was his co-star. "Why isn't he ever where he's supposed to be?"

Sarah seemed disconcerted. "He took the car out of the garage about half an hour ago, while you were in the shower."

"What? Why didn't you stop him?"

"When I heard him leave, I assumed the two of you had settled your differences. You said you were going to let him have the car today. I thought that Mark had gotten up early to talk to you while you were out shooting baskets."

"Early isn't in McCormick's vocabulary," Hardcastle growled. "He isn't aware the world exists before noon. He took the Coyote?"

She nodded. "That's why I thought you knew he was leaving, because you had to have given him the keys."

"McCormick doesn't need keys. He's a car thief." Sarah trailed him around the house to the garage, where he stood staring at the vacant spot the car had occupied. "This isn't even the first time he's stolen it. Driving it out of Martin Cody's warehouse and outrunning half the Los Angeles police force is what landed him here in my judicial stay." The Judge shook his head sadly. "Damn it, McCormick. You've really put your foot in it this time."

"He didn't mean to steal it. It's his car."

"He took it without proper authorization, and that's the legal definition of stealing." As Sarah looked unimpressed with this interpretation of the law, he went on, "And it isn't his car. Because of his record, we had to register it in my name to keep the insurance premiums reasonable."

There was a brief toot and the sound of a car approaching along the curving driveway. The two glanced up expectantly and moved quickly to the front of the house, but the car was driving much too slowly and the engine was far too quiet for it to be their truant ex-con returning. At the sight of the yellow cab, both sighed with a disappointment each then sheepishly tried to cover.

"Please, your Honor," Sarah pleaded as the taxi halted, and the driver waited insolently for Hardcastle to open the door for her to climb inside, "don't do anything rash. He'll come home. I'm sure he had a good reason for taking the car."

"He took it to prove he could," Hardcastle said tightly. "He's getting back at me for keeping him in last night. The only place he would go without permission is somewhere he knew I wouldn't allow him to go." He closed the door with enough force to draw a protest from the cabbie. "He stole the car, Sarah; I'm going to have to report it."

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Most cab drivers are potential demolition derby participants, but this one wasn't likely to wind up in the winner's circle. As the taxi slid to a stop, Sarah offered a prayer of thanksgiving that she had arrived at her destination alive. Then she blinked in astonishment. All remembrance of the harrowing ride slipped away as she handed over the fare and a far too generous tip, her mind focused on the incredible vision confronting her. She couldn't be mistaken! Only one Cody Coyote had ever been

manufactured. This had to be Mark's car--except that it was parked--rather too close to the corner and next to a fire hydrant--in the last place she had ever expected to see it, by the front steps of St. Casimir's Catholic Church. She hoped the judge would wait another hour before issuing his APB.

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"Sarah!" the smile Mark gave her as she waited beside the car after Mass equaled the California sunshine in brilliance. Except for the greeting and the cheeky grin, she might not have recognized the young man she had grown accustomed to seeing in T-shirts and cut-offs. Today, he was nattily dressed in a charcoal-colored three-piece suit, white shirt, and deep-blue tie and looked more like a successful banker or stock broker than an ex-con. "What are you doing here? The judge send you to track me down?" he teased.

"No, Mark. I've been coming here to St. Casimir's every Sunday for almost forty years. Why are you here? I wasn't aware that you were Catholic."

"You should have asked old Hardcastle. It's probably in my file. Then again, maybe not. I went to all kinds of services while I was in prison--Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and all those far-out, hymn-singing, Bible-thumping religious sects as well. It looked good on my record. Couldn't get into those Eastern religions, though. They wanted me to shave my head."

"Mark," Sarah reprimanded him sternly, reminding him that she took her faith seriously. She relaxed her features into soft amusement at the thought of a bald McCormick as he hung his head in response to her rebuke.

"I was born Catholic," he said soberly. "With a name like mine, I couldn't be anything else. I go to Mass off and on--more off than on, I guess. Sometimes, when I'm confused, it helps me to think straight, you know?"

She was impressed by his sincerity and the slight note of wistfulness she detected in his words. "Yes, Mark, I do."

He studied her silently for a moment, then grinned. "I'm sure you do. You've been putting up with him for years." He dropped his eyes again, and the grin melted slowly. "I just wanted to go out," he said plaintively. "No place special. Just out." He rubbed absently at a spot on the car's mirrorlike finish. Suddenly, his head snapped up. The smile was back, bright as ever. "Hey, you need a ride back to Gulls Way?"

Sarah stared at the low-slung sports car dubiously, but Mark gallantly lifted the gull-wing door on the passenger's side and, with a totally unnecessary flourish, helped settle her into the bucket seat. He adjusted the seatbelt, then rounded the car and folded himself neatly through the driver's window. The housekeeper found herself admiring his lithe gracefulness as he stretched out on the leather seat, placing his feet on the pedals and running his hands lightly over the controls. He was an attractive young man and, in his present humor, very appealing. If this was an act, it was a good one.

"Everything okay?" McCormick asked, noting the odd look she had given him.

"Just remember, we don't have to set any speed records on the way home."

He laughed. "I imagine the judge holds most of those. I've ridden with him in the Corvette."

The engine purred to life, and Sarah waited for him to pull from the curb and insert the Coyote into the heavy traffic before inquiring, "Why didn't you tell the judge where you were going this morning?"

Mark shrugged. "I wasn't sure he'd understand. He's a good man, but not religious--not a church-goer," he amended. "And if I'd asked and he'd refused--said it was all hokum or something--well, I don't know how I would have handled that."

Touched by his ingenuousness, she felt obliged to warn him of his possible reception at Gulls Way. "Instead, you stole the car and risked getting arrested again."

"Stole!" He stared at her in total disbelief, then clenched his teeth angrily. "Yes, he would see it that way--once a car thief, always a car thief. Do you and old Hardcase have a pool going on how long I stay out this time? I'll wager that gang of executioners he plays poker with couldn't wait to get their bets down. It took six months to get me back inside last time. This time, with him breathing down my neck, it only took a week."

"You shouldn't joke about it, Mark. The judge was very upset when he couldn't find you this morning."

"I'm not joking!" I just wish I could figure out what his game is. When I'm out, he wants me in; when I'm in, he wants me out. Mark McCormick, yo-yo. Has he got something against me personally, or is he trying to drive the wardens and the parole board crazy as well?"

His brittle, mocking tone only partially masked what Sarah believed to be genuine confusion. She also sensed an undercurrent of real fear. As Judge Hardcastle had pointed out to her only the night before, this one was scared. "You don't understand him. He's worked very hard on your behalf, getting you paroled in his custody. He was justifiably angry when he learned you had taken the car and left the estate without an explanation."

"So he puts out an All Points Bulletin. Well, the Coyote shouldn't be that hard to spot. It's probably still in the police files from the last time I stole it. You'll be home before lunch, and I'll be back behind bars--another desperado brought justice by the amazing Milton C. Hardcastle."



In the distance, a traffic light glowed amber. Mark powered down, braking to a smooth stop as the light turned to red. One hand resting easily on the gearshift, the other running lightly over the steering wheel, he displayed the facile confidence of the professional driver--totally in control of himself and his machine. Then he slumped forward dejectedly. "You're right, Sarah; I don't understand him. But, I thought I could trust him. I even thought he kind of liked me. Yet, all week he's been threatening me, holding prison over my head like some Sword of Damocles. Well, if he's going to send me back, let him do it now before...." He let the sentence trail off, covering his inability to finish by devoting his attention to the traffic in the intersection where the light had switched to green.

"Before it hurts too much when he rejects you?" Sarah finished for him. "That's why you tease him so unmercifully, isn't it? You think if he doesn't care about you, you won't have to care about him."

"I don't want to go back to prison." McCormick ignored the amateur psychology and plunged on, his desperation building. "Hardcastle has the idea that it's like some boy's club where everyone thinks it's fun to dress alike. He calls it 'camp' and other cute names. Well, let me tell you about prison. It's rough, Sarah, really terrifying. I didn't think I was going to come out of there alive. Or sane." He clutched the steering wheel, his jaw set in grim determination. "I won't go back. And if the price I have to pay to stay out is to come when Hardcastle calls, then I'll do it. I'll clean his pool, I'll trim his hedges, I'll get shot at and run over, and I'll chase every black hat that he sends in my direction. Hell, I'll even subscribe to Lone Ranger Comics and join the Duke's fan club if I have to."

"Why don't you tell the judge that? I'm sure he doesn't realize how much his threats bother you."

"Because if old Hardcase knew I was that scared of going back inside, it would give him a hold over me," the ex-con said tightly.

"Just as his fear of losing you gives you a hold over him."

"What?!" The Coyote narrowly missed a parked car, and a cacophony of horns reminded Mark that he was still a part of the city traffic. He aligned his car with the other vehicles in his lane and repeated, a decibel or two lower, "What?"

"You're not the only one who had ever felt betrayed or alone. Judge Hardcastle has also had his spirit tested. His wife was a lovely woman, and he adored her. Mrs. Hardcastle was also Catholic; the judge went to Mass with her every Sunday. Since she died, he's only been inside a church for weddings and funerals. That's when he started his rehabilitation program. By indulging himself in lost causes, he reaffirms his faith in humanity."

"Is that the way he thinks of me?" Mark demanded defensively. "As a lost cause?"

"No," Sarah smiled. "That's the way I think of you. The judge considers you a prospective friend."

"A friend? Me!?" McCormick was incredulous. "You've got to be kidding! Hardcastle has plenty of friends--judges, cops, guerrilla basketball players. He doesn't need ex-cons hanging around. I'm just here to do the yard work."

"Then you'd be living in the gardener's trailer, not in the Gatehouse. You wouldn't be eating in the dining room, and you wouldn't be driving this car. If you'd had to wait until you could afford the insurance...."

"I'd be too old to drive it," he sighed resignedly. Then he glanced at her, still skeptical. "Are you sure about this?"

"He was hurt that you didn't stay for the movie last night."

"Yeah, I figured something was eating at him when he missed basketball practice. Course, he made up for it this morning. That was probably my head he was pounding against the backboard." He smiled ruefully.

Sarah shook her head. "He's forgiven you. He asked me to fix you a special breakfast so he could tell you."

"Forgiven me!" Mark exploded. "For what? Asking for basic human rights guaranteed me in the Constitution?! I don't show up for his crow-and-humble-pie breakfast, and he accuses me of stealing my car!" Then he grinned, dispelling the illusion of outrage. "That old donkey is really something else," he said wonderingly.

"Don't call him a donkey; it's disrespectful, and I know you don't mean it."

"He is a donkey," Mark insisted, "but he's a nice donkey. Don't tell him I said so, though." He winked conspiratorily. "Okay, Sarah, I guess I can survive a few John Wayne movies. But no more popcorn," he bargained. "This week I want roast beef sandwiches."

"Don't push it," she warned, trying hard not to smile. With his fears temporarily allayed, the ex-con now looked like an overgrown child playing dress up rather than the competent professional man she had envisioned on the church steps. "And if the wedding isn't finished by the end of the week, young man, I'll send you back to prison myself."

"You know, Sarah," Mark's eyes twinkled, "you're as big a fraud as old Hardcastle."

"Now you're cooking."

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The judge wasn't sure if he was more furious or relieved when the Coyote drove sedately up the long driveway and parked by the fountain. The kid would be on the receiving end of all the vituperation Hardcastle could muster; but, at least, he and the car appeared to be undamaged. So far.

McCormick, more smartly dressed than he had been even during his last court

appearance, confidently stepped from the car and waved. "You can call off the dogs, Hardcase. I'm back."

"I can see that," the retired jurist growled. He had spent the morning taking out his frustration on the hedges, and neither the pruning shears nor the bushes across the front of the house would ever be the same. He snapped the shears shut. "What made you think I'd bother to send anyone after you? Waste of valuable police time. The first traffic cop you passed at warp speed would clip your wings fast enough."

"Now, Judge," Mark continued in his same infuriating manner, although he did seem to breathe a bit easier at the news that he wasn't yet a fugitive, "you know I wouldn't break any speed laws. Sarah has invited me to Sunday dinner, and I wouldn't want to disappoint her." Hardcastle watched in open-mouthed amazement as McCormick strode around the rear of the Coyote to open the door on the passenger's side and helped Sarah alight.

"Mark is a very good driver," she said, beaming up at the young man. "He stayed within the limits all the way home from church." She placed a white-gloved hand on the arm he offered her, and they approached the house together, like a knight with his lady.

"McCormick," the judge snarled, "what are you trying to pull this time?"

The two blithely ignored him and continued up the steps. At front door, Sarah turned to Mark and said loudly enough to be certain she was overheard, "Dinner will be served at one o'clock. And if his Honor expects to join us, he'll have to get cleaned up and put on a coat and tie."

Mark held the door for her and waited until she had disappeared into house before adding, "Yeah, Miltie, and don't forget to wash behind your ears." His giggle was cut off by the slamming of the door.

Hardcastle snapped the shears again, wishing he had not dulled the blades so badly. He knew a smart-mouth kid who needed pruning. Still, it was good to have him home.

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Dinner was a somewhat subdued affair. Hardcastle attempted a couple of verbal provocations, but Mark, under the influence of several significant glances from Sarah, wisely kept his mouth shut. Sarah resolutely confined the conversation to acceptable topics, which resulted in some not-too-original observations on the weather and very little else. There were three barely suppressed sighs of relief when dessert was finally served.

Having helped the Sarah carry the gold-rimmed china dinner plates into the kitchen, Mark returned with the coffeepot. He poured a cup for the judge, then one for himself before reseating himself at the table. The housekeeper had prudently absented herself, allowing the two men some time alone together.

Each stared into his coffee cup uncomfortably, waiting for the other to speak, until Mark noticed the object lying next to his dessert saucer. "What's this?" he questioned, fingering what he presumed to be an apology.

"The keys to the Coyote, wise guy," Hardcastle rumbled. "Since you're going to be driving it, you should have your own set of keys. You can't keep hot-wiring it."

"I don't know, Judge," Mark grinned wickedly, "it keeps me in practice."  
"Stealing cars is one habit you don't have to practice. It would be healthier for everyone if you forgot you had that particular talent." He realized his voice had risen, and he reduced it to a reasonable level. "Anyway, I know the car means a lot to you. Your friend Flip designed it for you, and then he got killed...well, just try to be careful, okay?"

"Why, Judge, I'd almost think you cared, except that I know you're only thinking of your insurance rates," Mark teased.

"No, McCormick, I'm thinking that that road monster with an ex-racing champ behind the wheel might be pretty effective in a high-speed chase. Keep the bad guys from getting away."

Mark wondered if that was a compliment to his driving skills or merely Hardcastle's hard-headed practicality as he examined the other item on the key ring. It was a flat silver disk with a bas-relief figure on the front of it and appeared to be a religious medal of some kind. "Judge?"

"Oh, that," Hardcastle coughed, slightly embarrassed. "That's so you won't lose them. I thought you were supposed to be Catholic?"

"I am, sort of." The young man turned it over to read the inscription on the back. "Saint Anthony?"

"He finds things that are lost. I could never find my car keys, so my wife put that on my keychain. The idea is, you say a short prayer, and St. Anthony inspires you where to look for them." He gestured pejoratively. "Lot of foolishness."

But Mark knew the value the judge placed on anything belonging to his late wife. He was genuinely touched. "Thanks, Judge."

"Go on," the older man said gruffly. "Get out of here. Take that fancy suit off and go drown yourself in the ocean or something."

McCormick smiled to himself as he left the room, the keys jingling in his pocket. He wondered if there was a patron saint of donkeys. One day he would have to look it up.

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"McCormick!" Hardcastle gazed down sadistically as Mark came abruptly awake in the pool-side recliner. Sunday dinner, a long swim, and the afternoon sun had made the kid pleasantly drowsy, but if he didn't move soon, he would spend the rest of the week in bed with sunstroke. The judge had other plans for him.

"Go away, Hardcase. Whatever it is, it can wait 'til tomorrow. Sunday's my day off."

"Who says?" Hardcastle glared at him.

"Judge!" Mark protested with a short laugh. "Even God rested on Sunday."

"Well, you're not God. Sit up," the retired jurist said, swiping at Mark's feet with one of the manila folders he'd been studying. "I want to talk to you about this file. And you might want to listen because after that we're going to discuss days off and leaving the estate."

"And pool privileges? If I've got to clean it, I ought to get to use it."

The judge sighed, wondering if he would ever learn to resist that impish grin. "You've been using the pool all afternoon. The filter is probably full of curly brown hair. For that, I could have gotten a cocker spaniel. They eat less and don't talk."

"Yeah, they don't clean pools, either. Relax, Hardcase, I'll take a look at the filter tomorrow. Or maybe Tuesday. Sarah wants all the weeding done this week, and you've got a lot of weeds here at Gull's Way. Sometimes, I think you planted them just for me 'cause you knew I was coming."

"If I'd planted them for you, they would have poisonous thorns, wise guy," Hardcastle snapped. "Now, are you going to look at this file, or do I have to send you to your room without supper?"

Mark appeared startled, then amused, at the new threat, but he swung his feet to the deck and reached for the file. "Who are we going after this time, Butch and Sundance?" As he moved, there was a glint of something metallic on his chest.

"What's that around your neck?"

His grin widened as Mark fingered the medallion on its silver chain. "St. Anthony. Patron saint of the lost. I figured he might work for lost causes, too."

The judge grunted, but both he and McCormick knew he was touched by the kid's gesture. "McCormick...."

"Listen, Judge," Mark broke in, "Miami's playing the Raiders tomorrow night. Why don't you use your influence to get us a couple of tickets?"

"Wouldn't you rather go with some of your friends?"

"Nah. What do I need friends for? I've got you, Hardcase. Besides, I don't have to send the bone-crushers after you to make you pay up your sports bets."

"Making book is illegal, McCormick."

"Judge!" Mark cried in mock outrage. "This is just a small, friendly wager. Now, the way I see it, you'll probably want the Raiders--they always do well on Monday night. But the Dolphins are starting that new kid from Louisiana State University, Dudley, and so far they're 2 and 0 this season. If you spot me ten points...."

"Ten points!" Hardcastle grinned. Sarah was right; this one was definitely a lost

