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The Stealers

Written by Charles Hall

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THE
STEALERS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Megaton Mornings
Bad Faces
Sea Fort

THE STEALERS

CHARLES HALL



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Dedicated to Jack & William Birch

In remembrance of my friend, John Hackling

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'*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is when good men do nothing.*'

Edmund Burke

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Dusk began to cast its heavy mantle over the Thames Estuary. A frantic voice, carried on the rain-flecked wind, drifted across the open tarmac space as Jack Crane walked briskly across the deserted public car park, adjacent to the promenade at Southend-on-Sea. The sound did not connect, as he strode hurriedly towards his cherished iconic 1966 Ford Mustang convertible. His eyes were focused on the ground, guiding strong, nimble legs around huge puddles that had been formed by a recent heavy downpour. The desperate voice called out again, but now it was much closer and was accompanied by the patter of footsteps slapping hurriedly on the wet surface. This time it caught his attention; it was a desperate plea for help.

Crane tossed the shopping bags that he had been carrying into the boot of his car and turned swiftly towards the urgent sound. A young woman, who looked to be in her twenties, was scurrying towards him in a distressed state; her feet carelessly splashing noisily through the puddles. In the half-light, she appeared bedraggled; her long blonde hair splayed limply across her shoulders, her face contorted with anguish and her eyes wide with fear. As she got nearer, her husky breathless voice called out once more. 'Excuse me… excuse me… I'm sorry to bother you, but please, *please* can you help me?'

Crane immediately looked around for signs of trouble; there was nothing that he could see and all was quiet until, suddenly he heard the raucous drone of an engine as a car headed towards the exit at speed; its tyres slithering wildly on the wet tarmac.

He turned to face the woman again as she tried to regain her composure, 'My car… my car.' She raised her arm wavering frantically towards the exit. 'Look, look over there; they're taking my car. *Please* help me. Can you follow them?'

Crane looked towards the exit as the small Ford Ka left the car park. 'Do you have a mobile phone? I've, erm, left mine at home.'

'It's in the car, so is my little boy; he's in the back seat. *Please* follow them.'

Crane hesitated briefly. He looked towards the disappearing Ford and immediately threw the passenger door open saying, 'Okay, you'd better get in.'

The dim courtesy light briefly revealed the woman's wide nervous eyes as she slid into his car. Crane brought the powerful V8 engine to life, slammed the car into gear and headed for the exit. Her voice quivered as she said, 'Do you think you'll be able to keep up with them?'

Crane was about to say, *"Are you kidding?"* but instead he said reassuringly, 'They are not going to get too far ahead in this kind of traffic. Have you seen these men before?'

'Erm… no. I don't think so.'

Crane drove at a steady pace and trailed the woman's car from the busy main road through to the back streets of Southend. The driver of the stolen car appeared to be in no particular hurry; it seemed as though the thief considered it was now safe and had decided to take his time. After a while

the stolen Ford Ka turned into a small empty car park and within a minute, Crane followed suit and stopped at the entrance; blocking the only way in and out.

Leaving the woman seated in the Mustang with its engine running, Crane got out and walked cautiously towards the Ford Ka but as he drew near to the Ka, the sound of his Mustang revving up made him turn. At the same time the Ford Ka's lights came on, flooding the grey duskiness of the car park around it. Realising this was a set up, Crane spun round and started to move speedily towards the red shape of his retreating Mustang. At the same time his right hand delved into his jacket and he thumbed a small button on a tiny hand-held unit that he located in his pocket; the Mustang's engine cut out and the car stopped dead. The Ford Ka's driver reacted and leapt out of the stolen car holding a baseball bat high above his head. He growled deeply as he moved menacingly towards Crane, his scrawny silhouetted frame contrasting sharply with Crane's six-foot well-built body.

'Immobiliser!' he snarled. 'Hand it over, dude.' Then, swinging the bat he added, 'You'd better be quick, dude, unless you wanna get hurt.'

Crane put a hand in his pocket and as he pulled it out said, 'Here; come and get it.'

'No, toss it over.'

'If I do, and it falls on the ground, the remote will get damaged, and then it'll never start.'

The guy from the Ford walked confidently towards Crane; the baseball bat firmly clenched in his right hand. 'You'd better not try anything,' he warned, 'I'm pretty good with this.'

With his free hand, the would-be thief reached out for the immobiliser. In the blink of an eye, Crane grabbed his wrist and spun him round twisting the man's arm up between his shoulder blades. The would-be assailant dropped the bat and let out a painful howl as Crane dislocated his shoulder and threw him to the ground.

An accomplice, seated behind the wheel of the stalled Mustang, immediately leapt out of the car. In the poor light, his features were indistinct, but he was bigger and heavier than his unfortunate cohort. Unlike the man from the Ford, instead of a baseball bat he held a semi-automatic hand-gun. A shot rang out as he waved the gun in the air. Crane remained stock still and the new assailant moved menacingly towards him but he stopped a few metres from Crane and with outstretched arm, pointed the gun at Crane's head.

'I can use this,' he growled in a heavy London accent, and looking down at his accomplice said to Crane, 'What have you done to him?'

Crane shrugged, 'His shoulder is out of joint.'

The injured man, his face twisted with pain, sat on the ground looking up at Crane in disbelief. The man with the gun called out to the woman in the Mustang and she came running over to where the injured man lay. She glanced swiftly at Crane before bending down to examine the injured man. Without taking his eyes off Crane, the gunman said to the woman, 'His shoulder's out of joint; can you fix it?'

'I've only been trained in first aid; I can try.'

She ran her hands gently over the man's back, and then gripping his arm, at the same time pushing on his shoulder, she jerked the joint back into place. There was a yelp of pain,

and the gunman snarled at the woman, 'Help him up and take him over to the Ka – and make sure he can drive it.'

Still gesturing with the gun, he said to Crane, '*You*, put the remote on the ground carefully, and back away. Do it now!'

Crane did as he was told. The gunman's eyes were still on Crane as the woman returned, 'He's okay, he can drive,' she mumbled. The gunman nodded and pointed to the remote control lying on the ground.

'Pick it up and go to the Mustang.'

She glanced furtively at Crane as she picked up the remote and then hurried towards the Mustang. The gunman backed off saying, 'I wouldn't move if I were you.'

The Ford Ka followed the Mustang as it left the car park and they both sped off down the road. Crane dashed out of the car park and focused his eyes through the misty drizzle. He watched as his car disappeared at the end of the road with its bright tail lights indicating a left-hand turn into the main road. Within half a minute, a man on an old motorbike rounded the corner and Crane stepped out in front; waving and thrusting his hands skywards. The biker slid to a halt on the wet tarmac. After briefly telling him what had just happened, the biker said, 'I ain't got a spare crash helmet, but if you like, hop on the back and we'll see if we can follow them.'

The traffic on the main road had not eased up. A continuous stream was snaking its way out of town, but before long, Crane spotted the familiar rear tail lights of his car. It was steady going for the old motorbike to keep up in the stream of heavy traffic. After two miles the traffic thinned out and they followed the car as it passed through

Rochford and turned off towards the sparsely populated rural area of Stambridge. The road had cleared and the Mustang, true to its namesake, leapt ahead, but the distinctive rear lamps continued to be like a homing beacon. By the time the bike had caught up and turned into Denisons Lane, Crane was just in time to catch a final glimpse of those tail lamps disappearing behind a rapidly closing automatic garage door. The Ford Ka was nowhere to be seen. Crane noted it was the first property – number one.

Crane tapped the biker on the shoulder and suggested that he should pull up further down the road.

'Whad ya gonna do now?' he said.

'Look for a phone box and call the police.'

'Ain't yuh got a mobile?'

'You wouldn't believe how many I've lost or damaged.'

The man stuffed a hand in his pocket and offered, 'Use my mobile if you like.'

Crane took the handset, dialled the emergency number and explained the situation to the officer in charge. After handing the phone back the man said, 'Look mate, I'd like to stay, but I must get back now, or my other half will wonder what I've been up to.'

Crane thanked him profusely and from a distance, kept his eyes on the garage.

Fifteen minutes later a police armed-response unit turned into the road, met Crane and he filled them in on the details. The officer in charge of the armed unit, Chief Inspector Harris, had met Crane before; he said, 'The Ford Ka was reported stolen from a supermarket car park in Westcliff late this afternoon.'

As they approached the front door, the area was

suddenly lit up with bright security lights. A policeman pressed the doorbell. A child raced eagerly towards the door and as he pressed his face against the glass side-panel a woman came scurrying after him. As the door swung open the looming figures of the police startled the child and he shrank back towards the woman, clutching and tugging anxiously at her skirts. She looked startled and fondly stroked the boy's hair as the officer began, 'We have reason to believe that you have a stolen car in your garage; a car that was taken by an armed person. Would that be yourself, madam?'

The woman looked horrified. 'What? Me? Stolen car? You must be joking. There's nothing in the garage. I'll open it and you can see for yourself.'

She pressed a button near the entrance in the hall and the huge double garage door began to roll up. Crane stared in disbelief; it was empty. He walked into the garage and looked around. It was immaculately kept. The wall-to-wall coarse floor covering was bone dry; no sign of a wet car ever having been there. He looked past the policeman and at the slim dark-haired woman standing before them. Although he had only seen her in the half light, and her accent had sounded different, there was no doubt in his mind – he knew it was the same person. She was the right size, five foot three-ish; her hair was now a different colour, it was cut short and it was dark.

'I followed the car here.' Crane said calmly.

The woman's deep-blue eyes flitted from Crane to the policeman, and she said confidently, 'How embarrassing. I've never seen this man before in my life; he's obviously mistaken me for somebody else. You can see that his car is not in my garage. The only car that you will ever find in there

belongs to my husband – and he has not yet arrived home from work.'

Chief Inspector Harris took Crane to one side and said quietly, 'Mr Crane, are you… ' he began.

But before he could continue, Crane, realising the futility of the situation, interrupted him and said, 'Look, I'm sorry to have put you to so much trouble, it would appear that a mistake has been made. I was on the back of someone's motorbike and, well he could have followed the wrong car.'

Police apologies were made to the woman and Harris said to Crane, 'I'll give you a lift back to the police station at Southend where you can give details of your car and they'll give you an incident number for your insurance company.'

With some resignation, Crane accepted the offer; given the circumstances, there was little else he could do. Invariably, he would now have to do things his own way.