

# **SLEAFORD NOIR 1.**

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McTeague's once trusted friend and associate, Wheelan, has broken off part of the older mobster's crime empire around the east Midlands. Far worse, Wheelan has also taken McTeague's much younger second wife, Claire, away with him.

Knowing the rest of his empire will fall away or defect to Wheelan if he fails to act, McTeague sends his trusted and lethal enforcer, Hennessy, to Sleaford to show Wheelan who is chief and to take Claire back home. So Hennessy starts a campaign of violence until Wheelan has no choice but to return Claire. But that is only the start of both gang boss's problems...

\* **WARNING!** This book contains scenes of graphic violence. It is not intended for the easily offended. You have been warned, so if you read on, don't blame me.

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## **CHAPTER 1.**

I first heard Sleaford called Sleazeford in a mock Tudor gastropub out on the A15 highway. The woman had iron-grey hair and had come straight from the golf course. At first I thought the woman was joking me. Then I thought I'd misheard her. Although not drunk she and her friends had sipped on a few gins already that afternoon and had reached the stage of laughing too loudly. Much later I realised she'd hit the nail dead centre on the head.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. How could this sleepy little Lincolnshire town deserve to be called Sleazeford? The mean streets of Gunchester, Shottingham or even Londonistan it isn't. That's what I thought then.

Full from my dinner, I walked out of the gastropub and saw two youths right next to my white Audi A5 coupé. They straddled two BMX bikes; their low riser jeans showing the white band of their Calvins. I gripped my car key with the serrated teeth sticking out through my knuckles. But I kept my hand in my pocket.

"You Hennessy?" the taller youth asked with a grunt. His face was half masked by his hoodie but the roll-up dangling from his lower lip gave him the look of a much older man.

"Might be. Who wants to know?"

"Turn your car round and go home. We don't want you here." He pushed away from my Audi. As he did so, a pocket knife appeared in his hand. Before I could stop him, the yobbo ran the blade down the side of my car in a jagged line. The blade made a terrible screeching sound on the metalwork that set my teeth on edge. His skinhead mate followed and gobbled in my direction – the phlegm landing centimetres from my shoes.

I shouted and ran towards them but they were already out the car park and pedalling down the road. So much for arriving under the radar.

No way was I having that. I ran to my disfigured Audi. The scratch looked like a scar on a lover's face. I turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of the car park. The two youths were cycling down the A15 like they were coming down the Champs Elysée on the final sprint stage of the Tour de France with the Yellow Jersey still up for grabs. I gunned the engine and pressed the pedal to the metal. The two litre turbo howled and the rev counter needle swung over into the red. But the Audi's protesting engine hurled the car forward.

The rear yobbo looked back and shouted something to his mate. I had almost reached their bikes but they knew the local area better than me. They looped off the highway

and into a little public park. I turned to follow them but couldn't. A double-line of concrete bollards guarded the park from joyriders. Instantly, I slammed on the brakes and my Audi slewed round to a dead stop.

The two youths spun their BMXs round on the concrete under a rusting swing frame. The swings had gone, as had the rubber matting, and the bare frame looked like a gallows waiting for the execution party. The jobs saw I'd pulled up hard by the bollards. They both flipped me the finger. The taller one, the scumbag who'd scarred my Audi, grabbed his crotch and thrust his groin in my direction. I wondered if they'd have done that if they knew I had a Beretta 92 semi-automatic pistol hidden in a custom made secret compartment in my car. Somehow, I didn't think they would. So I didn't bother getting out my coupé but instead reversed into the traffic on the A15 and a minute later I'd left the park behind me and was heading into Sleaford. I thought about calling my boss, McTeague, on my BlackBerry to let him know that someone in his organisation had been talking to Wheelan's mob. But in the end, I didn't bother. McTeague trusted me to get the job done and I wasn't about to let him down. It just added an extra layer of complication. That's all.

If it was late at night, if there was no traffic on the A15 and if I put my foot down; I'd have blown through Sleaford in five minutes flat. It's a one horse town built just south-east of the crossroads of the north-south A15 highway and the east-west A17, where the two join at the Holdingham roundabout. It took me longer than that but not by much.

My SatNav directed me to an upmarket Close on the other side of Sleaford. Now Wheelan's mob knew I'd hit town, I had no reason to waste time. I turned into a sweeping brick paviour driveway laid in a herringbone pattern that drew the eye to a large 1930s mock Tudor mansion. They seemed to like their mock Tudor in Sleaford. The detached house had been extended since then with a wing over the double garage and dormer windows high in the roof following a loft conversion. I pulled up before a large entrance porch making sure the Audi's scratch was on the opposite side so it couldn't be seen from the house. I got out and rang the bell.

Nothing happened. So I pressed the bell again, longer this time; letting the tune ring through the house. Eventually a light came on in the hall and the door was opened by a schoolgirl. The girl was sensible enough to keep the door on the chain.

She was maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. She had dyed her hair red with pink streaks running through it and had long, cow-like fake eyelashes. We wouldn't have

got away with that at school in my day. Apart from that she was quite pretty despite having the prominent Wheelan ears. The crest of her private school took up her blazer pocket. The girl gazed impassively at me.

I searched my memory for Wheelan's daughter's name. Alice? No, it wasn't who the F is Alice. Alexandra? No that wasn't quite right. Alexa – that was it.

"Is Claire McTeague in?" I asked.

The girl shook her head. "No," she said around a mouthful of gum.

I waited for a moment. The girl leaned on the door frame. I heard music in the background – probably something from the current top ten. Not that I'd know.

"Do you know where she is, Alexa?"

"No."

I felt like kicking open the door and slapping her. That would knock the sullen expression off Alexa's face. But I don't agree with hitting girls or women so I kept my hands to myself. But what was Claire McTeague to this girl? Nobody. Except Claire McTeague was a woman who could bring down her father's petty empire crashing down around her Wheelan ears.

"Thanks for your help," I said. The girl didn't reply but started closing the heavy oak door. I stuck out my foot, blocking it. Alexa looked up, surprised. For a moment she stopped chewing.

"If you see Claire before I find her, tell her Hennessy's looking for her. Okay?"

The girl nodded and this time I let her shut the door.

I walked back to my Audi deep in thought. I knew Claire McTeague but I didn't know Sleaford that well. But as it was a town with only one timetable, I thought I'd find her fairly quickly. So I drove back along the brick driveway, made a right and within a few minutes was back in Sleaford's town centre.

Claire McTeague was a woman who always took a great deal of pride in her appearance. That was how she'd snared McTeague himself in the first place. I'd tried to warn my boss the woman was no good but at that point the man was thinking with his what he kept between his legs and I was wasting my breath. So I shut up before he became angry with me, knowing he'd find out the hard way.

Of course, it wouldn't be the first time he'd fallen for the wrong woman after the marriage to his first wife broke up. But he fell further for this Claire McTeague than he'd fallen for any of his other bimbos or floozies. He actually married her.

Unbelievable, I know.

The first salon I drove past was completely unsuitable. The exterior was scruffy, there was a tacky poster of a bikini-babe and there were signs in Polish in the window. However, even I knew that above the salon was a massage parlour that offered all the 'extras' a desperate man might need. Every town has a place like that if you know where to look. Claire might not be bothered about sharing with Polish farm workers but there was no way she'd enter a place also offering those sorts of services.

The next place seemed more up-market and also advertised itself as a Beauticians. I remembered it was also controlled by Wheelan making it a much better bet. Ignoring the parking restrictions outside I pulled up behind a buttercup yellow Porsche 911. I pressed the bell and a receptionist released the electronic door lock. As soon as the buzzing sound started, I was inside.

There was a smell of acetone from nail polish remover. A young manicurist was sitting at a nail table filing and polishing the nails of a woman in her mid-twenties who had elegant hands. Hands that had never done a day's hard work in their life. Ms. Elegant Hands was chatting about her holidays in the Seychelles. I thought soon she'd start on about the Porsche which I guessed was hers.

Ignoring them, I crossed to the reception desk and the girl greeted me with a professional smile. Those teeth had to be capped – they weren't a product of British National Health dentistry.

"Good afternoon. Do you want to book an appointment?" she asked.

"Is Claire McTeague here? Or she might be using the name Wheelan now?"

The girl closed the leather bound appointment book and looked up at me with a worried expression. That told me all I needed to know. I walked past the reception desk and along to a corridor running behind it. The receptionist laid a hand on my arm but I shook it off. The corridor was lined with numbered white painted doors behind which were the sunbeds or spray tan booths.

"Which one?" I said, turning back to the receptionist who was following me. Her worried look had been replaced by scared. Good. Showed she was brighter than she looked at first sight.

"I... I..."

I pushed her against the first door. The flimsy panels shook and it echoed with a hollow sound.

"Which one?" I repeated, my face only centimetres from hers.

Her pretty face screwed up. Scared now upgraded to terror. "S... s... six," she stammered.

I pushed the girl away. She staggered back and one of her flatties fell off her feet. I walked down to door six. For a moment, I thought of a game show on the TV that I used to enjoy when the winning contestant had to choose which door to open. The doors all hid different prizes; some worth having like a holiday to Majorca but behind others were just a cheap Biro or something. There was only one prize I wanted today. The jackpot.

I turned the handle and pulled open the door. Claire McTeague was standing there naked except for a pair of white paper panties and a paper hat covering her hair. Their whiteness stood out bright against her tanned skin. Her arms were spread out wide as if she was making a semaphore signal whilst the beautician coated her underarms. The sweet, biscuity smell of the spray tan filled the air.

Immediately Claire squealed and flung an arm across her boobs. The woman needn't have bothered – she had a trim, almost boyish figure. I knew Claire had wanted a boob job but McTeague wouldn't allow her that. He preferred his women natural. The girl operating the spray turned to look at me open mouthed with astonishment. I stepped back to avoid the spray until her finger released the trigger.

"Oh, it's you, Hennessy. Should've expected you'd show up," Claire McTeague said, dropping her arm to her side.

For a moment we all stood there at the points of a triangle – Claire McTeague, the beautician and myself. Until I snatched down a fluffy white bathrobe that was hanging up behind the door and tossed it over to Claire McTeague.

"Get dressed and come with me," I said.

"But I haven't finished here – the spray's not dry yet," she said, not really grasping the situation.

In response I stepped forwards and pulled her forwards. My hand felt sticky from the spray still covering her skin.

"Okay, don't bother getting dressed. I don't care, you can come as you are." That grabbed the woman's attention. She jerked her arm out of my grasp and shrugged on the robe, belting it around her waist.

The tanning lady stared at us as I half led, half dragged Claire McTeague back down the corridor. Back out in the reception area, the manicurist and her client stared at us as we passed. This afternoon's action would give Ms. Elegant Hands something to talk

about with her middle-class book club friends. However, the receptionist was speaking quietly on the phone. I crossed to her desk, took the receiver from her hand and set it down.

"Naughty, naughty, very naughty," I said. She flinched.

I pushed Claire McTeague out of the salon door and an instant later I'd unlocked my Audi.

"Who's keyed your car?" Claire McTeague asked with a little smile on her face. It's just as well I don't hold with hitting women or I'd have knocked that smirk right off her face.

"Get in," I contented myself with saying. As Claire swung into the passenger seat, being careful to keep her knees together, I ran round the front bonnet and dropped into the driver's seat. As I pulled away from the kerb I noticed the women in the Beauticians parlour all standing and peering out the window at us.

I hadn't arrived in Sleaford under the radar and I wasn't leaving under it neither.

## **CHAPTER 2.**

Turning into the flow of traffic, my aim was to hit the A15 southbound and keep going until I'd brought Claire McTeague back home to my boss; her husband. After that, what happened was out of my hands.

The traffic was heavier than I expected along the B1517, known as Grantham Road within Sleaford, but a glance at the dashboard clock told me it was rush hour – or what passes for rush hour in a place like Sleaford. I thought Claire McTeague would cry or argue with me but instead she sat quietly with her hands in her lap just looking out the side window. At least she'd taken off that ridiculous paper cap.

I tuned into the local radio station, BBC Lincolnshire 104.7 FM, just for something, anything, to break the silence between us. All was going well until a beat up builder's van pulled out of a suburban side road, Ancaster Drive, ahead of me. The side panel said 'Hansen and Sons: All Property Renovations' above a cell phone number and untraceable hotmail e-mail address. The van driver stamped on his brakes causing me to pull up suddenly in an abrupt stop that made my seatbelt catch across my chest.

Immediately, two men leaped out the back of the van.

At that point I recalled that Wheelan laundered some of his under the counter cash through property development. That and gambling, beauty parlours, restaurants. The usual stuff – any business where cash is king and you can start and close companies at a faster rate than the Inland Revenue or Customs and Excise can follow the paper trail.

Any fool could see what was going down and my mother raised no fools, I can tell you. Immediately I flung the gear stick into reverse. But one glance in the mirror showed there was no easy escape that way. I was blocked by a woman in a Slovakian registered Skoda Octavia. The woman beeped her horn at me. Trust me, madam, if I could get out this situation then I would.

Before I could engage central locking, both doors of the Audi were wrenched open at the same time letting in a chill draught. The two men were what you'd expect. They both had solid muscles built up by working on building sites. They wore paint splattered padded shirts, filthy jeans and rigger boots. One had on a hi-viz jacket, equally dirty. I smelled sweat, tobacco and clay earth.

The man by my door said, "out," as the second man leaned over Claire McTeague's body and unclipped my seat belt. The first then grabbed a fistful of my jacket and hauled me out of the Audi. He then pushed me out of his way towards the waiting van. I stumbled over the pavement unbalanced from the force of his shove. All this took less time to happen than for me to tell you about. They were that good. The man gave me a second push, harder than before, and I toppled into the van's cargo bay. I was out of my Audi and in the back of the van in under a few seconds flat.

The second man ran round the Audi's boot, between my car and the Slovakian Skoda, and dived into the driver's seat – still warm from my body. I saw this just as the first man stepped up to the back of the van and slammed the doors cutting off my view. A slick, almost professional job.

I wondered if the Slovakian woman would blow this incident in to the cops. It's not every day you see someone bundled out of their car and into the back of a van. I thought it depended on how good her English was.

As soon as the rear doors slammed shut the van driver dropped the handbrake and shot forwards. I sat up on the cargo area's floor. My suit was ruined now from the mud and cement dust on the floor of the van. But all the same, I brushed some of the worst off with my hands.

"Think about it. You're making a big mistake here, Riordan," I called forward through a small hatch into the driver's cabin. "You're going to seriously annoy McTeague. You sure that's what you want to do?"

"Shut up, Hennessy," Riordan said.

"That goes for you, too," I called up to the driver. I didn't know his name.

Riordan made a fist. So I shut up.

The van turned around in the next road we came to, and then headed back east to the centre of Sleaford. The traffic was even heavier now but as the van swung around I saw my Audi still following us. We carried on through the town centre past the still open shops. I knew where we were going. Wheelan's crib. No surprises there.

I felt the change beneath me as the van's tyres rumbled over Wheelan's brick driveway but the driver didn't pull up in front of the house. Instead, we drove past the side of the mock Tudor where there was a range of brick outbuildings. The van stopped.

Riordan told me to get out. It was good to jump down from that cluttered, stinking van but my immediate future didn't look much better at this point. No point my shouting as Wheelan's house was a fair way from any neighbours and surrounded by thick tree-lined hedges. I looked around at the businessman's extensive gardens. There were some children's toys out on the lawns.

"In there," Riordan said, pointing to a shed that looked like it had doubled as an old wartime air-raid shelter in its time.

I stepped into its dank, gloomy interior. The shed was empty of anything useful.

There were a couple of children's bicycles with pink tassels dangling from the handlebars leaning against the wall next to a skateboard. A deflated paddling pool, half filled with enough footballs to supply the Premier League. There was a broken basketball hoop and a folded up table tennis table. Like I say, nothing obviously useful like a baseball bat so unless I wanted to play some sports whilst I waited I was stuffed.

Riordan shut the door behind me and I heard the key turn as he padlocked it. The only light came from an arrow-slit window far too narrow for me to climb out of. I set up the skateboard and sat down on it and waited as the light outside faded to night.

I waited. I was good at waiting.

Later, when I was cold and hungry, I heard footsteps and then the key inserted in the padlock. By the time the door creaked open on rusted hinges I was standing on the balls of my feet and waiting for them.

Riordan stepped back from the door and Wheelan took his place. But he didn't enter the brick shed. Very wise.

Security lights on the side and rear of his house lit the scene with a harsh, brilliant glare that made the shadows even deeper and darker. I must have been standing in pitch blackness to Wheelan.

The so-called businessman wore a navy polo shirt with some logo on the breast pocket and khaki chinos. Wheelan was tall – six two, something like that – and his arms had gym honed muscles. Although only in his early to mid thirties, he was already balding so he'd taken to shaving all his head. In my opinion this was a mistake as it made his ears appear to stick out further from his head than they did.

Behind Wheelan was Riordan and the other man from the man. The one who'd driven my Audi. Wheelan glanced back to his two thugs.

"Let's send a message back to McTeague. But I want Hennessy's message to reach my old boss – not the hospital or the morgue. You with me?" he said to them.

Riordan cracked his knuckles. At that point I heard Claire McTeague call out from the big house. Wheelan turned away and crossed the patio area back to the kitchen.

Riordan cracked his knuckles again, waiting for his boss to leave.

"I don't like hittin'...", Riordan said, pushing forward. That was all he managed to say before I kicked him square in the balls. Hard and faster than a striking rattlesnake.

Riordan gasped and bent forward, the stuffing knocked out of him. Just the opening I was looking for. I karate chopped him straight in the throat, smashing his voice-box against his spine. His hands didn't know what to do – go for his crushed testicles or his neck. Ultimately, that was his problem to work out and deal with. Not mine.

Riordan collapsed on the floor making strange, strangulated sounds.

Only one man at a time could enter the shed. The other stepped over Riordan's twitching body, his fist drawn back ready to pulverise me. Some men never learn. I grabbed his arm, drawing him deeper into the darkened interior. He swung wildly but had no real idea where I was. Using his extended arm, I slammed him into the brick wall. I pounded a quick one-two into his kidneys before the man pushed away.

He started to turn as I knew he must. I hooked a leg around his calf, pushed my hip into his; twisted and turned and the man staggered and almost fell. I must admit I had a little luck at this point. But you use what fate hands out. As he stumbled forwards, he trod on the skateboard, lost his balance and fell forwards. I pushed him down, helping him on his way until gravity took over and he fell. I heard a crash as he hit the

concrete floor. I picked up the folded table tennis table and smashed it down on the man's head. I heard a sickening crunch. A second blow finished the job.

I couldn't see my watch in the dark but if the fight had lasted more than fifteen seconds I was losing my touch.

Feeling glad to leave the shed, I stepped out into the night air. The padlock was still dangling from its hasp so I locked them in and threw the key as far as I could into the bushes. I didn't see it fall.

Keeping to the pitch black shadows, I jogged around the side of the house. I heard Wheelan gobbling off to someone on the phone. My Audi was still out on the driveway, near the double garage. Its keys were still in the ignition. I suppose Wheelan's aim was to leave me just capable of driving back to McTeague's. With my face messed up, minus most of my teeth, a broken nose, cracked ribs and pissing blood from my kidneys for the next week or so.

That was the message Wheelan wanted to send – that nobody messes with him. Not wanting the hood to know I'd gone, I didn't switch on the Audi's lights until I had driven out of Wheelan's and was back on the road. What had just happened made me think. Wheelan must be feeling supremely confident if he thought he could take McTeague's woman for his own and give me a beating. Confidence racing over the dial towards arrogance.

Like I say, I was still hungry so I drove out of Sleaford until I saw the golden arches above a drive-thru shining bright in the Lincolnshire darkness. I say I gave my order to the Pole working the window but the guy might have been a Lithuanian for all I know. He spoke as much English as I speak Polish. Or Lithuanian.

Eventually, I collected my food, drove round the back of the restaurant out of sight of the road. Behind the parking lot, the flat empty Lincolnshire fields stretched all the way to the North Sea. The wind blew against the side of my car but inside I felt all warm and secure inside like I was snug in a cocoon. The burgers filled my Audi with savoury aromas increasing my hunger ten-fold. Hungry like a wolf, I tore the paper bags open and ate. The hot, greasy food hit the spot. As I was on my own I belched long and loud after I finished. I smiled to myself. You can't do that in polite company. After eating, I wadded the paper and polystyrene and tossed the bundle in the trash on my way over to the rest rooms. There I washed my face and brushed down my dirty suit under the driers and tried to make myself look presentable at least. Someone who followed me in with their toddler in tow looked at me strangely as I tidied myself up.

They were glad when I'd finished, I think. If it wasn't for the quality of my suit I must have looked like someone with mental health issues to them.

Next to the drive-thru was a 24 hour garage with a mini-mart attached. With what I was going to make happen later tonight; there was no way I wanted my face appearing on any CCTV cameras. So I slipped my oversize grey hooded chain store sweatshirt over my jacket before driving across to the garage and filling up my Audi's tank. It covered my face nicely. No way could anyone I.D. me now.

After replacing the black nozzle I walked into the mini-mart to pay. At this hour, there wasn't much happening but I sort of guessed I could walk in at any hour and there wouldn't be much happening. I strolled along the aisles and picked up a few things from off the shelves I'd need later tonight.

Like you, I think it's amazing that these places stock so much booze. Haven't people heard there's laws against drinking and driving? All the same I bought half a dozen bottles of cheap white wine – the sort of stuff only one step above the industrial cider the park bench alkie's drink – a box of super absorbent extra large Tampax tampons, mints and a lighter. The woman behind the glassed in counter gave me a funny, sympathetic look as she bagged them all up.

Reaching into my pocket, I paid using a credit card that had been cloned from one of Wheelan's, of course. It seemed appropriate in a way – making Wheelan pay for the devastation coming his way. After all, he should never have taken Claire McTeague. He must have known what would come his way.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. What about my vehicle numberplates? They'd be recorded by the CCTV cameras. Except they were cloned plates, of course. After the ordure hit the air conditioning unit, some poor Audi driving woman in Sutton Coldfield; a pillar of the community no doubt – have you noticed they always are? – was going to lose a few hours of her life being sweated in some basement police cell until the cops established her innocence. She'd probably look back on the experience as the high spot of her year. It would give her something to talk about at her no doubt mind numbing dinner parties. Makes a change from talking about house prices, stable fees or her kids' private schools.

I drove back to the diner's car park and stopped furthest away from the glassed-in building. One of the security lights was out and that part of the tarmac expanse was almost as dark as the field on the other side of the wire fence. Getting out, I noticed

the wind had got up and blew in a flat whine over the field and it cut through my clothes.

Crossing to the nearest drain, I poured away the cheap plonk. You didn't think I'd drink it, did you? I then unlocked the gas tank before pushing a length of plastic tubing into the tank. Grimacing with disgust at the foul taste and stink as I sucked petrol into my mouth, I then siphoned off enough gasoline to fill the six bottles. I then stuck the tampons into the bottles' necks. They make great wicks. It took most of the tube of mints to mask the petrochemical taste filling my mouth.

Then I carefully put my Molotovs in the passenger footwell and covered them from view. Not that anyone was likely to see them in the darkness in the middle of nowhere.

Once again, I used the rest rooms in the diner. One of the Polish or Lithuanian girls recognised me as I left and gave me a look as we passed but really, what interest is someone lucky to scrape by on the minimum wage and doesn't speak the language too well expected to take? Why should they care if someone uses their boss's nearly empty parking lot to crash out for a few hours during the night? I nodded to the girl as she entered the Ladies in turn.

Back in my Audi I set my cell phone's alarm, pushed the seat all the way down, wrapped myself up in my hoodie and fell into a thin doze for a few hours.

### **CHAPTER 3.**

You're never properly asleep and I was awake, although unmoving, at least ten minutes before my BlackBerry's alarm shrilled into life. I stretched and rubbed my chin. At least I didn't have to shave. I rolled out of the diner's parking lot at three a.m. precisely. About the quietest time of the night. I turned the Audi's front towards Sleaford and a few minutes later I was driving through its deserted streets.

I'm from the city myself and I can't take these sleepy little towns where nothing happens from one year to another. It would drive me crazy. What was going to happen tonight would make the headlines. Give them all something to talk about how the world was going to hell in a hand-cart.

Maybe that's true, maybe the world has sold its soul for money, but Wheelan was about to find out a little about hell.

The other side of Sleaford, on East Road, I pulled up opposite a complex of mid-sized industrial units. You've seen the sort of thing – they've sprung up all over the country like mushrooms over the last few decades. Several huge metal hangars clustered together all spray coated a sort of greyish green. Maybe whoever built it thinks that will help the estate blend into the countryside. Or maybe they just don't care and greyish green is the cheapest option. Nothing to me either way.

One of these sheds was Wheelan's. The units were fenced off from the road with a sliding electric gate at the front controlling the access road. Next to the gate stood a little fibreglass security hut. I closed my Audi's door as quietly as possible and crossed the road. Inside the hut, a radio tuned to BBC Radio 2 finished playing a song from the 1980s I hadn't heard since the 1980s and then the distinctive voice of Alex Lester himself came on.

The guard was tipped back in his chair, his feet up on the desk and with his arms folded over his chest. I tapped on the glass. The guard jerked awake, his feet dropping to the floor. He blinked and then peered at me, his eyes taking a moment to focus.

"Help you?" he muttered, thickly as I held up a large padded envelope.

The guard slid his glass window panel to one side and leaned out into the night air. He blinked again in the chill.

I took my Beretta 92 from out the envelope and showed him the gun. That grabbed his attention.

"Unless your hut's bullet proof; open up," I said.

The guard blinked and thought. Not easy when you've only just woken from sleep and someone's threatening your life.

"Hurry," I said, tightening my finger on the trigger.

The guard pressed a red button on his desk and the electronic gate slid along its grooves. I walked past and opened the security hut's door. The interior was cluttered with a bank of CCTV monitors attached to obsolete looking computer terminals. Next to them stood his Tupperware lunch-box, Thermos and radio. Alex Lester's voice was going on about his cross-dressing truckers.

"Doesn't anyone ever clean this place? It's filthy," I said to him. The guard backed away into a corner. Pointing to his swivel chair I told him to sit. He did so.

From my pocket I took a roll of duct tape and ripped off a length. This was the dangerous part, when I was up close and personal with the guard. He might take it into his head to fight back and catch me when I was more vulnerable. Admittedly, he

didn't look like he could put up much resistance being in his mid-fifties and overweight from a diet of late night comfort eating. His uniform was scruffy, ill-fitting and well washed with a frayed shirt collar. He smelled of cheap deodorant. No, I didn't think it likely he'd risk his life over a dead-end, minimum wage job.

I dragged the guard's arms behind his back and taped them to the chair back. Now I felt much safer, I taped his ankles to the chair base.

The guard glanced up at the clock. "The wagons start coming in at five thirty or so," he told me. "The drivers'll see me tied up when they can't get in."

"Thanks for the tip. But I'm not here to rob the place so I'll only be a few minutes." I thought for a moment. "Can you open unit number three from here?"

The guard shook his head. "No. The owners of the units all have their own keys and things."

"Can you silence the alarm?"

"No, that's independent as well."

I thanked the guard for his help and then taped his mouth closed. I gently pulled his chair over and laid him flat on the floor out of sight of the hut's window. If any early arriving truckers – cross-dressing or otherwise – showed up they might think the guard was in the attached toilet. I left the hut, returned to my Audi and collected what I needed.

Earlier, McTeague had told me unit three belonged to Wheelan. It wasn't in his name, of course, but held by an offshore shell company. That much, Wheelan had learned from McTeague; that it was wise to keep yourself several steps away from anything dodgy. The directors of the shell company were probably a couple of residents in an old folks home who'd sign anything that was placed in front of them in return for a litre bottle of Bristol cream sherry each.

A few minutes later I stood in front of unit three. It was identical to the other five units in this part of the industrial complex except for the shell company's sign above the door. There were two doors – a large one for vehicular access with a smaller one for pedestrians set into it. The pedestrian door's lock was nothing that couldn't be picked.

So I guessed Wheelan was relying on the fencing and guard to provide security. If that was the case, he was making a big mistake. I crouched on the damp tarmac before the door, pushed in my L shaped pry I'd brought with me and after thirty seconds or so I

heard a click as the door unlocked. I stood, brushed my suit pants down and then I was in.

As I expected, a row of light switches were on the wall by my right. Closing the door behind me, I snapped one row of lights on. The overhead hi-watts flickered on, dimmed and then came onto full brilliance. All the illumination I needed. Near the bank of light switches was the alarm panel's keypad. The number in the display scrolled down every second: 180, 179, 178... I took no notice after that.

Looking around, I saw the unit was far larger than Wheelan needed. Unless he was stupid enough to think that McTeague was a busted flush and was about to roll over and give up all his Lincolnshire and East Midlands operations. And it would take someone way stronger than Wheelan to grab them from McTeague's hands. 167, 166, 165...

The unit smelled like a distillery. Which wasn't surprising as that's exactly what it was. An illegal distillery producing hundreds of gallons of moonshine vodka to supply the needs of the thirsty ill-paid East Europeans in the towns all around the East Midlands. However, there was a nasty undertone of industrial alcohol, similar to the nail polish remover I'd smelled in the Beauticians earlier.

To one side I saw a wash still standing over an unlit furnace. An angled swan neck from the wash still led down to a condenser and that in turn led onto a spirit safe. The units were cold and dead at the moment. Looked like Wheelan didn't have enough custom yet to justify taking on a night shift.

Me, I wouldn't let a drop of it pass my lips but maybe the East Europeans' stomachs were much stronger than mine. I remembered reading about a teenage girl who was found dead in a Grantham park after drinking a bottle of this stuff. The papers were full of it for a couple of days until the next scandal came along. Then it was quietly dropped and the dead girl faded back to obscurity missed by no-one except her family.

The sweet smell of fermenting potatoes was mixed in with chemical undertones. Over by one wall were crates of empty bottles next to a bottle-capping machine. Wheelan might as well have sourced the bottles from the local recycling bottle banks rather than buying them in. That's all his rot-gut was fit for, I thought as I walked over to the bottle-capper.

Next to the capper was a box filled with printed labels – the labels marked up as Goo\$\$e Lake. There were plenty of differences between these labels and those of a

high end vodka of a very similar name. Maybe Wheelan thought he'd get around trading standards that way. I doubted it but you never know. But if you're a Pole or Lithuanian wanting to get blotto after a long day's graft on the minimum wage, then Wheelan's knock-off rot-gut did the job. Anything to dull the misery of working in this wretched rain-soaked country.

I put the labels back.

If it hadn't been for the click of its claws on the painted cement floor, it would have been on me before I could react. I spun round, fast as a spinning top as a Hell-hound trotted round the corner of the fermenting vat. It must have been attracted by the lights or my scent.

So Wheelan wasn't just relying on the contract security guard.

The dog was a huge tan and black rottweiler with huge bone crunching hyena-like jaws. It took one look at me and I'm sure it grinned. Me being here must have made its day. The guard dog tensed, coiled its back legs like a spring and then raced towards me. Slobber and foam dropped from its gaping jaws and I saw its evil red eyes like fire lamps. Its simple doggy brain had visions of blood on the floor. Mine.

Unfortunately for the hell-hound, it wasn't up against some teenage punk or crack-head junkie looking for something to rob to score their next fix. It was up against me. McTeague's top enforcer.

With one fluid motion I drew my Beretta 92 and shot it. The hollow point Parabellum nine millimetre bullet slammed into its chest. The gunshot echoed around the vast space of the unit, bouncing off the metal walls, multiplying its loudness making it sound as if an army of gunmen had pulled the trigger. For a moment, the tang of cordite killed the sweet smell of booze.

The hollow point ripped into the rottweiler's broad chest. The dog spun backwards, almost head over heels and crashed onto the cement floor. Its fore legs twitched beneath it as the dog tried to stand. It raised its great hyena like head and barked fiercely but after a moment gave it up and howled piteously.

Its legs were scrambling, no longer strong. Its eyes no longer evil and red looked up at me. The dog's brain couldn't understand what had happened except that it was in a lot of pain and couldn't move its body any more. Blood spread out to form a pool under its body. The hollow point must've ripped through its insides – the bullet expanding and mushrooming as it travelled through the dog's body, devastating everything in its path.

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