

SLEAFORD NOIR **1**



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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 yobs 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 it's 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.

I would have liked to put the rottweiler out of its misery but I didn't want to risk a second bullet on the animal. Once I'd finished here, I didn't think the police forensics unit would notice one tiny lump of molten lead under the dog's body but two?

Looking around I spotted the brass shell casing lying bright in the open so I stooped to pick it up.

And then the alarm sounded – its shrill bray adding to the dog's howls of pain and fury. The noise was deafening. I'd wasted too much time already but I thought I still had enough. We were on the edge of town. And after all, Wheelan wouldn't have linked this factory's alarm system to the local cop shop. Not with what he was producing here.

Nearby were two stacks of pallets all loaded with cases of vodka awaiting distribution. The pallets had all been mummified in layer after layer of shrink-wrap. A forklift was connected up to its charging unit just next to the stack. I smiled to myself. This was getting better and better.

So I jerked out the electrical lead, dropping it onto the floor and then engaged reverse, raising the forks to waist height. I backed away from the stacks, then threw the gear into forwards. The forklift crashed into the first stack of pallets. It swayed and then toppled over. The stack crashed to the concrete floor, the bottles smashing into a million pieces, the shrink-wrap holding its shape for a moment before deflating and collapsing in on itself. For a moment, the crash drowned out the alarm's bray.

After the noise of the crash the place sounded quiet for a moment until my ears picked up the alarm again. A lake of booze spilled out from the shrink-wrap flooding out from the impact, spreading out over the floor towards the injured rottweiler. It opened its jaws and howled. A trickle of blood leaked from its mouth, mixing in with the moonshine vodka staining it pink.

Again I reversed and knocked over the second stack. This crash seemed even louder than the first. There's something deeply satisfying about making a lot of noise destroying crates and crates of bottles. The floor was an inch deep in moonshine washing around the furnace's base, the poor rottweiler trying to back away, the fumes of cheap moonshine vodka filling my nose and making me gag.

I stepped down from the forklift and walked through the lake of vodka. The rottweiler didn't even bother snapping at me as I passed. As if it knew what was coming its way. I walked to the entrance and looked around at the scene of devastation before me. At the door I lit the tampon wick of my first petrol bomb. I paused for a second, enjoying the feeling of power, of destruction in my hand. I felt like some malevolent god.

Then I lobbed the Molotov straight into the lake of booze. It caught with a dull whoompf. Blue flames licked up from the vodka as the alcohol started to burn. The rottweiler howled and desperately tried to scrabble away as it felt the heat and flames spread towards it. I watched the fire take hold until the heat became too much. Only then did I step outside of the unit and closed the door behind me.

Jogging past the security hut, I crossed the road and a moment later was back inside the safety of my Audi. No rest for the wicked, I thought, as I dropped the handbrake, engaged first and drove out of the industrial estate. Shortly after, I was back in Sleaford's town centre.

CHAPTER 4.

Driving slowly past Wheelan's betting shop, rather imaginatively called 'Wheel an' Deal', I saw that particular target was out of my reach. An armoured metal shutter closed off its front and although I knew I could have picked the lock, it would have taken too long and I didn't fancy crouching on the pavement fiddling about with the lock with several Molotovs in the car behind me. It wouldn't take even the dimmest cop to work out what was going on – or to connect me to the recent fire-bombing on the industrial estate.

So, I carried on through the town centre and past some large buildings that belonged to some private schools and then followed a Polish registered articulated lorry as it thundered down Southgate before I made a left along Eastgate. In front of me was the Beauticians I'd snatched Claire McTeague from earlier. Maybe Wheelan thought that

as this place was on a main road, it would be safe. It wasn't. A large plate glass window took up most of the front. Peering inside the Beauticians I saw a stack of towels piled up on the receptionist's desk and all the magazines neatly stacked up on a side table all ready for tomorrow. Except there wouldn't be a tomorrow. Not for this one of McTeague's businesses.

I fetched the tyre iron from out of the Audi's trunk, took a swing and smashed the iron into the plate glass. The window exploded inwards, shards of crystal shattering and scattering into the shop and onto the pavement around my feet. Immediately, the alarm added its whooping, rising and falling high pitched din drowning out the late night / early morning street sounds. A moment later, I'd lit the next fire-bomb and threw it through the jagged hole in the window.

Now the flames scattered over the tiled floor and licked up the receptionist's desk. I chucked another gasoline bomb over the seating area just for fun. Now the fire splashed up the walls, raced along the ceiling and took hold on the settees. I wondered if McTeague was insured against this carnage. I could have stood hypnotised and watched the fire do its work of destruction but already there were lights coming on in the flats above the shops. So I sprinted back to my Audi and drove away.

Only one more job to do before I'd finished tonight. This was the job I didn't want to do. I'd argued against it but McTeague himself insisted so I had no choice. At first I was surprised that McTeague wanted it doing. He was one of the last of the so-called 'old-style' villains and like me he'd always left people's houses and families alone. Sure, he'd wreck businesses, break every bone in your body if needed and I knew for a fact there was more than one body feeding the fishes under the North Sea waves that was down to him.

But until now, families had been off-limits, even sacrosanct with McTeague. But I suppose that in taking McTeague's second wife – even if McTeague was in the process of getting a divorce – the boss thought that Wheelan had crossed the line. As I drove, I thought about McTeague's first wife, Melissa. She knew the score all right and since her divorce, she knew men were strictly off limits for the rest of her life. Or McTeague's – whichever came sooner. Although McTeague had finished with Melissa, he didn't want any other man enjoying what he'd had.

Has to be said, McTeague had been very generous with the divorce and bought Melissa a nice house up in the Dukeries area of north Nottinghamshire. Like a Roman emperor of old, McTeague had banished Melissa to the far-flung edge of his empire.

Somewhere he could control her but far enough away that he would never have to see her. When he last asked me to check up on his ex, she was keeping herself to herself. She'd found a part time job in a gift shop and kept herself busy with charity work. But I bet she still missed having a man in her life. Melissa hadn't let herself go and she kept herself trim, working out several times a week at a gym in the nearby larger town of Worksop.

But Claire was of a younger generation, more free-spirited, and had broken McTeague's rules. She'd left the older man and taken up with Wheelan. There was no way McTeague could tolerate that show of disrespect. McTeague had visions of everyone laughing behind his back even while they did business together.

I tried to tell McTeague that it didn't matter so much these days – although their divorce hadn't come through, as long as Claire was discreet she should be allowed to do what she liked. But McTeague said from men laughing it was only a short slide before they thought he was weak and decided to help themselves to his empire.

Perhaps he had a point.

So McTeague felt he had no choice except to take her back and slap down Wheelan. Show him who was top dog in the East Midlands. But it was me carrying out the old gangster's instructions and so it was up to me as to how they were executed. The plans – not the family, I sincerely hoped.

I drove along Boston Road before turning off into an upmarket cul-de-sac called Old Place. Maybe this was part of an older Sleaford but I wouldn't know. The large houses were all in darkness although some had carriage lamps mounted onto their gate posts or porches. I wondered if Wheelan would have one of his men on guard but fifteen minutes of quietly watching convinced me there was no-one about. Sure, the alarm box was flashing its blue light at regular intervals and I saw CCTV cameras mounted over the porch and gates. But apart from having locked the electronic gates there seemed to be no extra security precautions. Wheelan's confidence was about to be shaken.

Except I wasn't going to do exactly what McTeague wanted. Leaving the engine on, I stepped out of the Audi's warm interior and crossed over. As well as an eight foot high metal fence topped with spear points, McTeague had also taken a leaf out of the police's crime prevention booklets which sometimes come through the door and planted a barrier of prickly shrubs behind the fence. I don't know what they were as I

don't watch Gardener's World but even in the dark I could see their sharp, vicious thorns.

Peering through the railings, the house looked asleep. Wakey-wakey, I thought as I returned to my Audi and fetched the next two of my Molotovs. I lit the tampon wicks and lobbed them high over the fence towards the front door. The bottles shattered on impact, the noise surprisingly loud in the quiet suburban night. The fire spread out over the brick paviours, the orange flames reaching out towards the garage doors. A light came on in the neighbouring house so I ran back to my Audi and was half way down the road before the nosy parker had time to draw the curtains. Turning the corner back onto Boston Road, I pulled up at the kerb and then slowly walked back in time to watch the fun. By this time, some of the closer neighbours were stepping out of their driveways and onto the pavement.

They all wore nightwear, the women had mussed up hair, and one or two were still pulling on dressing gowns. Others, more prepared, were already recording the scene on their smart phones. I figured footage of the blaze would all be uploaded onto Youtube within the next half hour. Check it out if you want. As they filmed, I slunk back into the deepest shadows out of sight of any viewfinders.

The flames soared higher into the night sky. One elderly man said to his wife that they should have brought out a Thermos of tea. Coming round the side of the house, I spotted Wheelan clutching a fire extinguisher closely followed by his moody fourteen year old daughter, Alexa, with another girl I didn't know – presumably a friend on a sleepover – and Claire herself. By the light of the fire and Wheelan's security halogen lamps I saw the girls looked scared.

By now, as they had no extra fuel, the flames were starting to die down. All the same, Wheelan aimed the extinguisher's nozzle at the base of the blaze and smothered it with foam. Some of his neighbours cheered and one man asked if everything was all right. Wheelan gave the man a thumbs up sign but didn't say anything. Wheelan and Claire inspected the damage – which was confined to a charred garage door, burned bricks and shrubs – whilst the two girls stood together.

Alexa's friend was crying. She probably never expected to be fire-bombed during a sleepover. I guessed it would come as a shock. Next time, she might choose her friends more carefully. Eventually, Wheelan said something to Claire and she led the two girls back down the side passage. In the distance, I heard sirens. Time to go.

One or two of the neighbours looked at me as I walked back down the road to my Audi. Nobody knew me and I was the only one fully dressed. Both things made me an object of suspicion. Back in the car, I yawned widely. I could have done with a slug of caffeine or one of those high energy drinks but I'd forgotten to buy one. I shook my head, pressed the button to lower my window and drove away.

In my rear view mirror I saw blue flashes from an emergency services vehicle. However, I still had a lot to do tonight. Glancing at the dashboard clock, I saw I was cutting it fine if I was to complete tonight's last job.

Driving along Boston Road, now the B1517, heading out of Sleaford I was soon out in open countryside. I continued east until the B1517 joined the main A17 highway towards Boston and the coast. I had no time now to deal with my next job in Boston itself but could only hope to intercept them somewhere along the A17. That would have to do.

As the lights of Sleaford dwindled away in my rear mirrors I just hoped I'd recognise the truck when I saw it. Even at this time of night, or very early morning if you prefer, there was traffic in both directions along the A17. Like me, some heading towards Boston or Spalding others back to Sleaford and then onto Newark-on-Trent.

Keeping my window down, the cold slipstream freshening me up I drove into the dawn. Except it still wouldn't be dawn for another couple of hours or more. By now Alex Lester had finished his show so I tuned into Lincs 96.7 FM for something a bit livelier. Something that would help keep me awake. I turned up the volume.

The A17 is a road with few curves or bends as it stretches across the flat Lincolnshire countryside. No wonder they call this area Holland Fen. It really is as flat and featureless as the Low Countries. In the distance on either side of the road, I saw a few lights coming from early rising farmhouses but not much else. I gained on the next set of tail lights and followed a Volvo estate as we carried on.

Oncoming headlights filled my windscreen. I looked to my left; not only a car. Not what I was looking for. As I drove I wondered about the person in the car ahead. A sales rep most likely, I thought, hurrying to a power-breakfast with his client. No, her client as my headlights showed the driver had long hair and a slim build. Also she drove carefully. To keep my mind occupied, I wondered what she was selling – maybe pharmaceuticals, maybe greeting cards, maybe a new type of software program? Or maybe she was the area manager for a chain of gastropubs?

A blare of an air horn, a glare of hi-beam headlights. My Audi filled with white light from an oncoming heavy goods vehicle. I'd crossed the centre line and had strayed into the path of oncoming traffic. Desperately, I hauled on the wheel and dragged my coupé hard over back to the left. The H.G.V. blasted past, its wheels huge in my sight. The driver leaned on his horn, the sound also filling my car.

I wiped perspiration from my forehead. That was close – far too close. I must have dozed off behind the wheel – one of those micro sleeps lasting only a few seconds but that's the sort of inattention that can get you killed. I wound the window down some more, sucking cold air deep into my lungs and turned up the radio's volume.

Taking a renewed grip on the wheel I stared ahead through the windscreen concentrating on the road ahead. Within a minute I was back behind the Volvo. As I drove I also kept an eye on the oncoming traffic – the vehicles driving in the direction of Sleaford. All the cars I could ignore but I had to check out the licence plates of every truck. Fortunately, there weren't too many. The first few were all British, then a Dutch one. No interest to me. Then a.. a... yes a Polish H.G.V.

My interest picked up as I scoped its plate. No, no good. I drove on into the night. I yawned again and shifted in my seat. This wouldn't do. We came to a fork in the road. The Volvo carried on along the A17 towards King's Lynn and Norfolk but I turned off along the slightly narrower A1121 to Boston.

I thought I'd have seen the Polish truck I was looking for by now. Maybe the driver had been delayed at customs. Maybe he'd had a breakdown. My mind was filled with all sorts of possibilities. Then I thought I saw it coming. A smile came to my lips. Only to vanish again. Right model – a Ford Luton box truck – right colour, but wrong nationality. Another few miles clicked up on my odometer. I was past the village of Hubbert's Bridge.

Much further and I'd be in Boston itself and then the North Sea.

CHAPTER 5.

Yet another Luton truck approached and I scanned its licence plate. Yes! Yes! Yes! The plate started with LRA 7. All my fatigue, all my exhaustion washed away and I sat up straighter. By now the truck had passed by and I saw its red tail lights receding

in my mirror. A lay-by came up ahead. So I swung in, avoiding a length of black shredded tyre, and turned around, following the Luton box truck.

Accelerating, I was soon up behind it. I flashed my lights but the driver took no notice. If anything, he sped up and the lumbering van slowly gained speed. My foot pressed the accelerator down. Sixty, sixty-five. I flashed my lights again and again. No response. The van was now up to seventy. I thought these things were all fitted with speed governors nowadays but this van didn't seem to be.

There was nothing coming so I pulled out and sped up alongside the van. I pointed at the driver, making gestures for him to pull over. I saw the man had a huge handlebar moustache like it was 1974 all over again. He ignored me. So I made more gestures but then had to drop back behind the Luton as a Ford Mondeo was bombing down the road towards us. As soon as the Mondeo passed I pulled out and resumed position alongside the Luton.

One last chance. More gestures; frantically, urgently waving to the driver. The man glanced my way but then turned his head and looked away, his eyes staring steadily at the road ahead. Well, if that's the way he wanted it. I looked both ahead and behind. There was no-one near us, only a few headlights far off around the slight curve in the road. Almost perfect.

I leaned to one side and pulled out my Beretta 92 semi-automatic. I then wound down the passenger window to its fullest extent before taking aim. Fortunately the A17 was smooth and wide at this point. I matched speeds with the Luton box truck and fired. Two things happened. The bang in the enclosed space deafened me, the after effects ringing in my ears, and I smelled cordite smoke before the wind rushing in blew it away.

The other thing was that the Luton's front driver's tyre shredded as the nine millimetre Parabellum hit, shedding its rubber along the highway. That grabbed the driver's attention like nothing else could. The man gripped his wheel wrestling with it to keep control. By now, my Audi coupé had shot ahead. I decelerated, dropping back but keeping my distance as the van's driver controlled his swerves. Let's make things more difficult.

I took aim a second time and shot out one of the rear tyres. No way could the driver control his vehicle now. Giving in to the inevitable, the driver steered over to the hard shoulder by the side of the highway. He switched off the engine but didn't get out.

Pulling up in front of the Luton, it was me who got out. I walked over to the Luton in what I hoped was a slow and menacing way and the driver watched me approach. He clicked down the door lock and sat there, slab-like. I saw him pick up his cell phone so I shook my head at him. I jerked up my Beretta's barrel in an unmistakable sign for him to unlock. He mistook my signal and looked at me wide eyed with fear. So I aimed the pistol at him through the glass and tightened my finger on the trigger still shaking my head. No mistaking my intentions.

The driver dropped his cell and lifted the lock. I opened the van's door. "Out," I snapped. The driver gabbled something in Polish or Lithuanian. However, I was too tired to care. I knew the man must speak some, even if only a little, English and I didn't have the time to mess about. I stretched up, took a fistful of his jacket and hauled him out of his cab. He stumbled and almost fell at my feet. I showed him the Beretta 92 again, making sure he got a really good look at its deadly shape.

Pushing the driver away from the Luton, I leaned in and took the keys out the ignition. Then I tossed the keys to the driver and pointed with my semi-automatic to the cargo area of the van. He got the idea and walked back with me. A car sped past, its headlights washing us in colour before vanishing. If the car driver saw the Luton's shredded tyres, he must have thought I'd stopped to help.

In the darkness at the back of the van, the driver fumbled with the keys. "Hurry up," I said. The back had been padlocked and the driver snapped open the lock and lifted it from the hasp. He then slid up the back. Even in the near dark, I saw the back was quarter filled with plain cardboard boxes.

Several people sat amongst the boxes. They looked at me as the Luton's tailgate rolled up. Some stood and picked up rucksacks, suitcases and several plastic carrier bags.

"Out. Now," I told the people.

The driver opened his mouth to speak. Until I planted my Beretta 92 in his ribs. Then he got the message loud and clear and closed his mouth again. We stepped to one side to let the people get off. They were a mixed bag – a petite Chinese woman, a very tall African youth, three young men from the middle east, maybe Iraqis or Syrians or Kurds or something and lastly an older Indian or Pakistani gent.

So Wheelan was muscling in on the human trafficking front as well. McTeague wouldn't like that. The people shuffled out of the back of the Luton box truck. The Indian helped down the Chinese girl. The group stood looking about them, dazed, confused by the side of the road. This wasn't what they expected at all. They must

have been told they would be dropped off in a city, not dumped in the middle of nowhere in the bleak, windswept Lincolnshire countryside.

Another few cars sped by. One of the drivers slowed down slightly to take in the little scene. The people, the immigrants started talking in their own languages. I didn't need to speak them to know that they were protesting that this wasn't what they had paid for.

One of them, the Indian gent, pushed his way to the front. "Excuse me. We were told we would be taken onto London," he said in perfect if heavily accented English. "And I cannot see Big Ben." I turned to the man. He stepped back, catching sight of my pistol, and a look of alarm crossed his face.

"Your bus has broken down. London's that way. If I were you, I'd start walking before the cops round you all up and deport you."

He turned to his comrades and tried to explain. With angry scowls from the middle easterners and tears on the face of the Chinese girl they shouldered their bags and started walking. Not a good deal but at least they'd arrived somewhere in the promised land so they couldn't complain too much.

I turned back to the Polish driver. He backed away. "Get your bag and passport and you can start walking as well." He nodded, returned to the cab and pulled out a blue holdall. Maybe thinking he'd be blamed by his immigrant passengers who were now walking along the highway towards Sleaford in a group, the driver turned the other way and started walking back to Boston. He cast a glance back at me.

I jogged to my Audi, took out my last Molotov, lit its tampon wick and tossed the bottle into the Luton's cab. Orange flames lit up the inside of the windscreen. I raced back to my car, engaged first gear and pulled away just before the van exploded.

Another yawn hit me and I felt my jaws crack. I wanted, no I needed sleep; but no chance of that tonight. Instead it was eastwards along the A1121 towards Boston for me. After a few hundred yards I passed the Polish van driver. He shook his fist as my Audi sped past but didn't break his stride.

I hit Boston just as the earliest risers were out on the streets. There were a few deliveries to newsagents and a group of men climbing into the back of a muddy Transit van, probably for a back breaking day labouring on one of the local farms. The men looked exhausted and that was even before they'd started work. I drove down to the harbour and walked out along the quayside.

For a port, Boston is a long way inland. Maybe the coast has shifted since it was founded? Don't ask me as I'm not from around here. Now the harbour is sited along the banks of the river Witham. The muddy river flows sluggishly between concrete quaysides and wharfs. A rusting crane stood nearby overlooking a number of barges and narrow-boats that were moored to the quayside. A couple of men wrapped in thick pea jackets leaned against the crane and muttered in Russian or something. Heading away from Boston towards the open sea was a small trawler or fishing boat towing a dinghy, its sailing lights rocking slightly as its diesel engine moved it downstream. That must have been the boat that brought in the immigrants, I thought, as I made a note of the number painted on its side. Or should I say bulwark? Don't ask me. Opposite me, on the far bank, stood a group of grey warehouses, their outlines sharp under the glare of industrial lighting.

As the fishing boat moved further downstream along the river I saw the eastern horizon shade from black to dark grey and then a still lighter grey. The start of another day. No rest for me. I took in several deep breaths of the oil and fish smelling salty air before realising I was starving.

Hands in my pockets, I turned away from the river Witham and walked over to a dockside greasy spoon diner. Even at that time of the morning the café was packed with men – truck drivers, dockers, fishermen, cabbies as well as the usual handful of runaways, odd-bods, the down at heel all nursing a mug of tea for an hour's warmth and those for whom life dealt a bad hand. Donkey jackets, fluorescent hi-viz coats and cast off military gear seemed to be the dress code here.

The men looked at me as I opened the door and walked into the steamy heat inside. I heard voices talking in several different languages. No wonder the place is also known as 'Bostongrad'. There were one or two wolf whistles. I put it down to my suit as I don't suppose many people in suits ate here. I walked up to the counter.

"Full English – no black pudding – extra toast and tea," I ordered. The short-order cook stared at me. Maybe because I keep fit and work out and don't look the sort who would normally go for this sort of grub. However, you can get away with it now and again and I really needed the calorie infusion. I'd work it off later.

I picked up a copy of the Daily Star from the end of the counter. Again, not a newspaper I normally read – I prefer the Financial Times or Telegraph as they report the Test cricket in far more detail than just the briefest highlights. However, not much

chance of coming across those two quality broadsheets in a dive like this. I took the paper over to a nearby table.

All the tables were occupied. I nodded to a man sitting by himself at one of the Formica topped tables. "May I?" I asked, drawing out a chair. The man nodded and cleared away some of the clutter littering the Formica. There were a few more whistles and cat-calls from some of the truckers but I took no notice. Instead, I shook out the Star and looked through the full colour pictures of celebs, most of whom I'd never heard of, as well as adverts for cell phones, legalised loan sharks and lotteries. The small amount of actual text took less than five minutes to read.

I flicked back through the paper on the off chance I'd missed anything, ending up on page three. The large-breasted page three babe, a girl working under the name of Nikkii, gazed out at me. "Nice baps on that, eh," one of the truckers said, leaning back in his chair and looking at me. He wore a black fleece hat against the cold. "Wouldn't say no."

There was some more laughter from the other men. Even the cook was grinning as he brought out some more breakfasts. I turned to Mr. Fleece Hat. "You ever get an urge for a feel of some tits, why don't you just play with your own man boobs?" The others all laughed at him. The man at my table called out, "that told you, mate." The laughter was directed at Mr. Fleece Hat instead of me now. The trucker turned as red as the tinned tomatoes on his plate.

A few minutes later my own full English arrived. Two Lincolnshire sausages, bacon, fried eggs, fried tomatoes, beans, mushrooms, couple of hash browns and hot toast, the butter melting into it. All washed down with a mug of hot tea. Who says you can't get good cuisine in England? I squirted brown sauce onto my breakfast, arranged my napkin and tucked in.

One or two of the truckers watched me for a few minutes, amazed that with my slim build I was going to eat it all but by then my novelty had worn off and the men got back to their own conversations or newspapers. More working men came and left as I ate but I took no notice of their stares or comments.

After I wiped up the last of my sauce with my toast, I stood and left a pound as a tip on the Formica top. Then I used the diner's toilets to freshen up. They were surprisingly clean, if cold and old fashioned with chipped tiles. Nobody followed me in and I had them to myself.

Back outside, I walked over to my Audi. I leaned against its bodywork. To be honest, after that huge breakfast I felt full with a bloated feeling in my stomach but the energy kick would keep me going for a while yet. Covering my mouth with my hand I gently belched.

Glancing at my watch it wasn't too early now so I called McTeague himself to keep him updated on progress. He was on his way for his early morning workout. He took the call on one of his disposable cells and I explained what I'd done so far. "Up the ante. Make him hurt. And most important, get Claire back," McTeague told me. No room for doubt there.

"No problems, boss," I said before dropping my cell back in my pocket. Glad to get confirmation from him. I thought I'd be hearing from Wheelan any time soon.

Another look at my watch. It was coming up to seven in the morning so I lowered myself into my Audi and switched on the radio tuning into BBC Lincolnshire 104.7 FM, for the local news.

Unsurprisingly, the news was filled with a series of arson attacks around Sleaford.

There wasn't much more than that at the moment. Probably the station's reporters hadn't yet had time to do their digging and make the connections. I thought there'd be more info at eight. Then I fired up the Audi's two litre turbo engine, pulled away from the kerb and accelerated away down the A1121 back towards Sleaford.

However, I had to slow down as I approached the burned out Luton. A cop in a hi-viz was directing traffic and a tailback had built up. The woodentop directed us onto the other side of the road whilst one of his colleagues held up the oncoming traffic. As I passed the blackened shell of the box van, I saw a full forensics team giving the area a fingertip search whilst a low loader stood by waiting to take the van away.

I gawped like any rubber-necker as I passed the scene. Then I rejoined the A17 and was in Sleaford an hour later. As I expected, the news at eight was more informative. The burned industrial unit and Beauticians were identified as belonging to a 'local businessman' whose home was also targeted but no names were given out. It also said police suspected arson attacks. I figured that those good people of Lincolnshire listening in would mutter to themselves 'gangster' as that's what most people think an unnamed 'local businessman' who gets fire-bombed must be.

And in Wheelan's case they wouldn't be wrong.

CHAPTER 6.

My BlackBerry rang as I approached the outer suburbs of Sleaford. I pulled the phone from my pocket but I didn't recognise the number so I let the phone ring and ring until the caller gave up. I was on the Holdingham roundabout when my phone rang again. This time I took the call. I recognised the voice of Wheelan's friend and, in police terms, 'associate'.

A man called Mulhearn. I think he was some distant relation of Wheelan – a second cousin or something like that. Whatever, the two men had grown up together on the same estate; been friends since primary school, and whilst Wheelan had worked for McTeague, the old boss had never taken on Mulhearn.

Not that Mulhearn wasn't capable enough. Okay, through Wheelan, McTeague had thrown Mulhearn a few bones from time to time, a few scraps from his table, made use of his talents, but the man was – well, flaky. He didn't use violence strictly as a means to achieve an end but used it for its own sake. He got off on violence way too much. Mulhearn was trouble with a great big capital T; a man who got you noticed – and not in a good way.

"Mulhearn. Good to hear from you," I said. For a second, I wondered if Wheelan had authorised this call, but on reflection I realised he must have. Although I wondered why Wheelan hadn't called me direct. Probably he was showing me he was far too important these days. Above my level. If that was the case Wheelan would soon find out he wasn't. I'd bring him down to earth in a hurry.

"You've been a bit lively, Hennessy," Mulhearn said.

"Me?" acting the innocent. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't hand me that, Hennessy. We know you've been making things rather 'hot' in Sleaford."

I didn't need to say anything. I let the silence spin out between us. It was Mulhearn paying for the call after all. Eventually, Mulhearn spoke.

"We need to meet, Hennessy. Get this SNAFU sorted. The King's Arms Hotel, twelve hundred hours. Okay with you?" Mulhearn said. I remembered Mulhearn had been the army and still liked to salt his talk with military slang.

You'd think a man with his record would have tried to put his army past behind him. He drew a dishonourable discharge after some business when he and some others in

his unit went too far interrogating a bunch of Afghan prisoners of war. I heard that at the time, the army simply wanted to brush their misdeeds under the carpet before news hungry journos found out. The way the war was going, it would have been too politically embarrassing if that story ever leaked out when we were supposed to be winning the Afghans' 'hearts and minds'.

Which was an impossible task anyway.

So the court martial concentrated on his 'misappropriation of medical supplies' instead. Basically Mulhearn, and others, were stealing as many medicines and drugs and selling them on via a camp orderly to the Afghans. It's not like Mulhearn and his squad were the only ones at it.

Way I heard it, the biggest quartermaster for the insurgency in the area was the British army. Body armour, night scopes, boots, rations, you name it; equipment flowed out of the camp gates. Some of it in the same boxes it had been delivered in earlier that day. If our squaddies could've sold the Afghans a Challenger 2 tank, then they would have. But Mulhearn was caught out, drew a year at the Colchester glasshouse and then made his way back north to team up with his old mate, Wheelan. Inevitably, a harder and more dangerous man after leaving the army than he'd been when he'd signed up as a rookie.

However, as far as I was concerned it was a 'Situation Normal, All Fouled Up' scenario. After my quick snatch from the Beauticians had failed, I knew I'd have to up the ante.

"Only thing to talk about is Claire McTeague. Make sure you bring her along with you," I said.

"That's not going to happen, Hennessy. But we need to rendezvous – maybe come to some alternative arrangements."

I agreed even though I knew that the only way this was going to finish was with Claire McTeague back where she belonged – at McTeague's side for as long as he wanted her.

Checking my watch, I had a few hours to kill before the meet so I drove to the massive Tesco Extra supermarket over on Northgate. I went along Boston Road, looped around Old Place and slowly drove past McTeague's house. The gates were shut tight closed so I saw no sign of my fire-bombing.

So I turned around, picked up speed and a few minutes later I was parking outside the Tesco Extra. The car park was a wide windswept expanse of grey asphalt stretching

out to the horizon under the grey sky. I parked as far as possible from the store – and the gang of Poles offering to wash your car for a fiver or valet it for fifteen.

Inside the store the smell of fresh baked bread filled my nose. After what I'd eaten in Bostongrad, the smell made my stomach roll slowly inside. Breathing shallowly, I picked up some toiletries, underwear and looked along the racks until I found another grey suit that fitted. It wasn't designer or anything but it still looked way better than the crumpled, soiled outfit I was still wearing. Once again, I paid using Wheelan's cloned credit card.

"Clubcard?" the smiling blonde girl behind the till asked with an accent that came from way east of the Oder river.

I shook my head. McTeague hadn't bothered cloning Wheelan's Tesco clubcard.

"Where's the toilets?" I asked the girl. Still with a smile on her face, she pointed me in the right direction. The store was so big I only got lost once before I found them.

Another woman from some village on the Baltic Sea was mopping the tiled floor. A yellow cart surrounded by yellow 'wet floor' signs filled the space.

"Later," I told her, holding open the door.

"No – is my schedule. I clean now," she said, gripping the mop a little tighter.

I took a fiver from my pocket and held it out to the woman. She looked at the note like it might bite her. Until I showed her a couple of its sisters as well. She looked up at me and then snatched the notes from my hand.

"I clean other toilets first," she said.

"Take your time – twenty minutes," I told her as she left. I took an 'out of order' sign from her trolley and propped it outside the toilet door. Hopefully, I'd be left alone as I didn't want to be disturbed. The cubicles were all immaculate and smelled of pine disinfectant. They didn't really need cleaning but I approved of the woman's attention to detail.

After I'd finished in the cubicle, I had a strip wash, sprayed on deodorant and then changed into my new underwear and suit, hopping on one leg as I did so before bundling the old clothes into the carrier bag. I brushed my hair. Yes, I looked the part now. More businesslike. I opened the toilet door to see the cleaner mopping the corridor. I nodded to the woman as I passed.

"Was a queue but I send away," she said to me.

"Thanks," I said.

It had started to rain as I left the supermarket. One of those fine drizzles that gets into your clothes and soaks you before you know it. I didn't want to take my Audi to the meet with Mulhearn at The King's Arms so I strolled along the covered walkway outside the superstore and took the first cab on the stand.

The driver, an overweight man wearing grey sweat pants and purple fleece; a man who looked beaten down by life, switched on his meter, flicked on his wipers and drove out of the expanse of parking lot and made a right onto Northgate.

Immediately, he launched into a diatribe about all the eastern Europeans coming over here, taking all the jobs, their private hires keeping all the fares down, how you can't make a living any more before moving on to how much they drink, that decent local women can't walk about in safety no more... I grunted in the right places and was glad it was only a short journey into the centre of Sleaford. At least the cabbie hadn't got time to tell me how he would 'pull the lever myself' or how he would deal with all nonces except all the politicians are...

Stepping out in front of The King's Arms Hotel, I told the cabbie to keep the change. I thought about suggesting he use it to buy a copy of The Guardian newspaper to get a different slant on life but somehow I didn't think he'd appreciate my suggestion.

Looking up, I saw the King's Arms was, perhaps inevitably, a mock Jacobean building with exposed black painted beams. The upper floors were larger than the lower giving the whole a top heavy appearance. An ornate, if faded, heraldic royal coat of arms hung from the inn sign. The hotel's windows were all leaded with small diamond panes surrounding stained glass coats of arms. Warm light shone out, breaking up from the myriad tiny panes.

I ran in out of the rain, pushing through the heavily studded oak doors. My footsteps died away on the dark red, deep pile carpets inside the lobby. Bypassing a rack of tourist leaflets I walked over to the lounge on the left past the reception desk. A quick glance at my watch showed I was still early. I found a corner seat but made sure it was near to a side door.

The lounge was done up with heavy, baronial furnishings to match the Jacobean exterior. As soon as I sat down, a skinny, pale blonde girl wearing a white blouse and burgundy skirt came over. Her gilt coloured name badge told me she was called Morela. With barely a trace of an accent, Morela asked me if I wanted something to eat or drink.

Although I was still full from my breakfast in Bostongrad, I ordered a plate of sandwiches and coffee. The lounge was mostly empty except for a few couples having a break from shopping. They were well dressed, elderly, the men wearing tweed jackets and cavalry twill trousers, the women favouring knitted navy twin sets. Relics from a bygone age. I wondered if I'd see my friend from the gastropub yesterday. My coffee and sandwiches arrived and I settled back to wait for Mulhearn. I yawned once...

Mulhearn stood in front of my table. My coffee had gone cold with a milky skin on its surface. I sat up straighter and blinked the sleep from my eyes.

"Very lax. Could have killed you there, Hennessy. Should have done," Mulhearn said. I looked up at Mulhearn. The man was of only average height – five eight or thereabouts, but powerfully built. He had a broad, ugly face deeply tanned as if he'd only just come back from a tour of some middle eastern hell-hole. However, the tan must have come from the electric beach as Mulhearn had been out of the army for a few years now. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off regimental and other tattoos.

"Trying to kill me would be the worst and last mistake of your life," I said, pushing a chair away from the table with my foot. Mulhearn sat and I called Morela back over and ordered two more filter coffees. I felt fresher, more alert after my cat-nap.

"Wheelan's angry with you," Mulhearn said as soon as Morela was out of earshot.

"Hurt him, have I?"

"No," said Mulhearn but his eyes told a different story. I doubted if the actual fire-bombings had damaged his empire much but when news of what I'd done inevitably reached back up the food chain it would make Wheelan look weak to the big-shots of Nottingham and Birmingham. The real big-shots would sit back and wait to see whether this upstart Wheelan could stick or fold.

"Then I'll have to do something that will hurt. Twist the knife a little. Maybe I'll take a trip to Rotterdam and go after Wheelan's Dutch contacts. He's still dealing with that ex-Provo, Finnigan, isn't he? Let them know they're only hurting because Wheelan won't give up McTeague's woman."

Mulhearn lifted his coffee cup. "That might be too hard an ask even of you, Hennessy. Finnigan's protected by the Romanian now."

I nodded. The Romanian was one bad man and I didn't think even McTeague would want me to go up against him merely for the sake of getting his runaway second wife back.

I looked Mulhearn straight in the eye. They were muddy as if his tan had leaked into the whites of his eyes.

"Then I have no choice. I'll have to bring down Wheelan – and anyone working with him will be so much collateral damage. I can do it, too. Remember what happened to the Kirkham brothers of Hull?"

Mulhearn did. Everyone in our line of work knew what happened to the late Kirkham brothers. The extremely late brothers. One died slowly. The other lingered for days.

Apart from a missing persons report in the local rag, the story never made the papers.

"It doesn't have to be like that, Hennessy," Mulhearn said. "Wheelan's prepared to cut a deal, you know."

"Go ahead."

"He's built his business up more than McTeague ever did. And Wheelan's opened up some new lines of work. Lines." Mulhearn leaned forward over the table, pressed one nostril closed with his finger and mimed snorting up a couple of lines of coke. That was one of the Romanian's specialities after all. Looking up, I saw Morela and another waitress glance our way. I smiled at them to show there was nothing silly going on.

"Cut it out. What's Wheelan offering?"

Mulhearn's answer was too quick. "Fifteen per cent. Of everything. Even the new business. Even the lines."

I laughed. This wasn't an insult. It was a joke. Wheelan must have a sense of humour after all.

Even Mulhearn looked ashamed. "Twenty per cent, then."

Now we were edging into the realm of insult.

"And what about Claire McTeague herself?"

"She stays. Wheelan's not giving her up. And she doesn't want to go back to your boss anyway. They're getting divorced."

As if Claire McTeague's wants had anything to do with the situation.

I shook my head. "No. Claire McTeague's non-negotiable. She's going home..."

"Whether she likes it or not?"

"That's right. She's going home. If McTeague chooses later to give her up – maybe even let her shack up with Wheelan – then that's his decision. Certainly not Claire's or Wheelan's."

"I'm surprised at you saying that, Hennessy. I thought you of all people would have more sympathy with Claire," Mulhearn said.

I shook my head. "No. Claire knew full well what she was getting into when she married McTeague. She can't change the rules of the game now." I looked Mulhearn full in the face again, getting the full attention of Wheelan's lieutenant. Making sure the man fully understood what I was saying. "And neither can Wheelan."

"And neither can you or me, Hennessy."

"True. We're just pawns, Mulhearn. Pawns with teeth and claws but that's all we are at the end of the day."

"So there's no way you'll go without taking Claire with you?"

I thought I'd already made that crystal clear but I shook my head. "No."

Mulhearn thought for a moment and took out his Nokia. "I need to touch base with Wheelan. Give me a moment?"

I nodded and stood to give him privacy.

CHAPTER 7.

I left the lounge with its heavy dark furnishings and crossed the corridor to the toilets. The lavatories were old fashioned but clean. Someone had left little vases of fresh flowers by the wash basins next to bottles of scented hand lotion – a nice touch, that. Which is what you'd expect in an upmarket place like the King's Arms.

Pulling the chain, I stepped out of the cubicle and a moment later was washing my hands. A movement, a sudden reflection in the mirror caught my eye. I looked up, amazed that Mulhearn had followed me into the toilets. His phone was back in his pocket but now he carried a yellow cloth in his hand.

Mulhearn leaped forwards, annoyed that he hadn't been able to catch me unawares. The pungent sickly, sweetish scent of chloroform came from the cloth as he clutched it. I raised my eyes away from the cloth. Wheelan must have told Mulhearn to bring me in alive. Maybe as revenge for the fire-bombings or to use me as a bargaining chip with McTeague.

Mulhearn pulled up hard seeing that his surprise attack had failed. I paused, waiting for Mulhearn to take the next move. A grin crossed his broad face. It would be a mistake to underestimate Mulhearn's combat skills. The man had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan and I knew he'd fought several straighteners with other soldiers out there.

Particularly against the jocks. For some reason, Mulhearn hated Scots. I never found out the reason why, perhaps it was simply their accents that grated on his nerves. But a lot of Scots are very tough people and together with their hatred of everything English the jock squaddies almost held their own against Mulhearn's ferocity. Almost – but the way I heard it Mulhearn always won his bouts in the end.

So I didn't dare downplay Mulhearn's skills in one-on-one combat. All the same, Mulhearn should have waited until I left the toilets and grabbed me from behind in the corridor. The man must have wanted the honour, the glory of taking down the infamous Hennessy face to face.

Now Mulhearn leaped forward, hoping to use his heavier build and weight to overpower me. The fumes from the chloroform rag hit the back of my nose, making me gag. I sidestepped his attack and Mulhearn's body slammed into the rack of washbasins. He pivoted away, surprisingly light on his feet and launched himself at me, the rag clutched tight in his hand. I spun away and caught Mulhearn's jaw with my fist. Once again, he crashed against the washbasins.

Mulhearn bellowed with rage and frustration. He pushed away from the washbasins and attacked. I gave him a swift one-two to his face but I might as well have punched the tiled wall as his face. He didn't even recoil. For a moment, I felt a shudder of fear before pushing that feeling back down.

Grinning, Mulhearn approached. He was now between me and the door so I couldn't just cut and run. Not that I wanted to. How long would I last out on the streets if, no, when word got around that I'd run from Mulhearn? Less than a week. Not an option. Anyway I wanted to beat Mulhearn. He'd broken our truce and tried to attack me from behind. The man had it coming.

Mulhearn jabbed at me. A swift right straight to my face. I bobbed out of the way with a fraction of an inch to spare and felt the airflow as his fist sailed past my ear. Then I brought my knee up. Hard. Right up between his legs. My kneecap connected squarely with Mulhearn's crotch.

"Oooph," Mulhearn gasped. He leaned forward, gasping for air. His left, the hand holding the yellow cloth, dived between his legs. That was too good an opportunity to waste. I thought Mulhearn was better than that. I planted one deep in his solar plexus under his breastbone. He doubled over in pain.

"Uummph," Mulhearn said this time.

"What's that?" I asked.

Mulhearn's hair was cut short in a military buzz-cut. Too short for me to grab and pull the man upright. Instead I gave him an uppercut to his nose. He rocked back, straightening up. Shock and rage in his eyes.

With an effort of will, an effort I could appreciate, Mulhearn pulled himself upright again. He looked far more dangerous now. Blood leaked from his wide nose, staining his chin and white shirt collar. His chloroform soaked rag now forgotten, Mulhearn charged forward like a prize Lincolnshire bull.

His shoulder caught me and using his heavier build he slammed me up against the tiled wall. My ribs squashed in, further than they were meant to contract. Now it was my turn to feel what it was like to have all the breath knocked out of my body. I gasped, drawing oxygen deep into my hurting lungs.

Mulhearn punched me in the gut. I gasped again choking and felt my gorge rise, my coffee and sandwiches coming back up. I forced the partially digested food back down. I saw Mulhearn grin and now he remembered his chloroform rag. He pressed the rag over my mouth and nose.

I needed oxygen, I needed life. Mulhearn punched my stomach again, pushing more air out of my lungs, forcing me to inhale another deep breath. The sickly stench of chloroform filled my throat and lungs instead. Almost instantly, I felt strength leave my muscles. The cream tiled walls of the lavatories greyed. I felt woozy, dazed, unsteady on my feet. I swayed.

In my fading, greying vision, I saw Mulhearn's face looming above me like a tanned fall moon. I struggled but his hand was clamped vice-like over my airways and there was nothing I could do as my strength waned. Black blotches swam into view and already the far side of the lavatories was no more than a grey blur.

Mulhearn said something but I couldn't really tell what he was saying. His words sounded muffled, indistinct, vague. Still keeping his hand pressed over my mouth and nose, Mulhearn supported my limp body as I slid down the wall. The blackness was

taking over my vision and I felt light headed and out-of-it. My head slumped to one side and the tiled floor filled my remaining view.

Maybe Mulhearn relaxed the pressure just a fraction. Whatever, I had one last unexpected chance and I took it between my teeth. Literally. Twisting my head, I bit down as hard as I could through the yellow cloth. My teeth connected on the base of Mulhearn's thumb. The man cried out but the yell sounded dull on my drugged ears. His left hand jerked away automatically, the pressure on the rag blocking my breathing falling away.

So I twisted my head further away and drew in a lungful of sweet clean air. I sucked in another breath and my vision started to clear and my thoughts came through quicker and with more clarity. There were blood spots on the tiles. Mine or his, I didn't know.

I drew myself up onto my hands and knees and retched. A string of bile dangled from my lip. I spat. Mulhearn stood and kicked me in the side. More pain flared from my already bruised ribs. But the agony purged more of the effects of the chloroform from my system. I felt sharper, a bit more in control of my own body now. Mulhearn raised his leg to kick me again. Unbalanced, he was easier to topple over. I grabbed Mulhearn's ankle lifted and twisted and threw him over on his back. He slammed down onto the floor. I heard his skull crack on the tiles.

The adrenaline surge through my system blasted even more of the chloroform from my bloodstream. Using the shelf with the basins as support I pulled myself to my feet. Mulhearn turned over, leaning on his elbow. He'd dropped the yellow cloth and it lay next to his body.

I was on the man before he had chance to get to his feet again. I dived onto his back, crushing him down onto the tiles. Snatching up the chloroform rag, it was my turn to press it over his airways instead. Mulhearn bucked and writhed beneath me until I pressed my knees and thighs against his side, holding him in position.

Leaning forward, I kept the damp rag tight against Mulhearn's ugly face. He shook his head from side to side trying to free his airways. I clung on for grim death. Mulhearn's struggles were fierce at first but gradually the strength ebbed from his body and his attempts to free himself became slower, sluggish losing their urgency.

He lay still. I felt his energy leave his body.

I wasn't fooled by his stillness but held the rag tight against his face until I was completely sure Mulhearn wasn't faking it. Carefully I stood and watched Mulhearn's

body for a moment, half expecting him to rise to his feet and resume the attack, like every villain in the last reel of every movie I've ever seen.

However, Mulhearn didn't move but lay still on the tiled floor. I must be losing my touch, I thought as I was out of breath. Leaning on the washbasin shelf for support, I checked my appearance in the mirror and quickly washed my face and brushed my hair until I looked half way presentable again. And not like someone whose just come from a life or death struggle rolling about on a toilet floor. For good measure I threw a double handful of water onto the tiled floor near Mulhearn's feet.

Stooping, I checked on Mulhearn. For a moment I thought I'd killed the man. Not that I was bothered – it wasn't like Mulhearn's would be the first corpse I'd left behind me. Of course, it would be inconvenient having to deal with Mulhearn's body as I wouldn't be able to call in the services of McTeague's professional 'cleaner' to tidy up the scene for me. Not here at a busy place like the King's Arms. The big danger was that someone would walk in whilst I was dealing with Mulhearn.

Glancing up at the door, I half expected someone to walk in there and then. Mulhearn drew in breath – a ragged, shuddering inhalation. He muttered something thickly. I rolled Mulhearn over onto his side in the recovery position.

Another glance at the door. Deciding to push my luck I checked Mulhearn's pockets. I took his car keys and found a tightly sealed brown bottle labelled 'Halothane'. That was the chloroform. I knew enough to know that repeated doses of Halothane can cause something called hepatotoxicity. No, I'm not too sure what hepatotoxicity is either but one of McTeague's associates, Dr. Nabi-Khan told me it is a serious blood disorder – it can give you things like jaundice.

I listened to Dr. Nabi-Khan MB, ChB, FRCA, DICM whenever he talked to me. That string of letters after his name? Means: Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery – they are the degrees all doctors take at university – and then Fellow of the Royal College of Anaesthetists finishing off with a Diploma of Intensive Care Medicine. Even other doctors regard the training to become an anaesthetist as the most difficult. It takes a minimum of fourteen years to become an Consultant Anaesthetist.

Over the years I've found it's always worth listening to people who are experts. You can pick up a lot of tips from people who really know what they are talking about. However, although he's very knowledgeable, Dr. Nabi-Khan was a man who gave me a severe case of the creeps. He used to be an anaesthetist at Nottingham's main City Hospital. But he got caught out once too often touching up the women on the

operating table. Not only the young pretty girls but older women, too. In his way, Dr. Nabi-Khan was an equal opportunity pervert.

Now he'd been struck off, Dr. Nabi-Khan made almost as lucrative a living working for people like McTeague and a number of other *capos* around the Midlands. He was the go-to guy if you needed bullet wounds treating without troubling the authorities. Or if you needed someone keeping alive for a while longer whilst you find out what they know. Like the Kirkham brothers from Hull.

But I still didn't like being alone in a room with Dr. Nabi-Khan with his eyes crawling all over my body.

I unscrewed the cap off the bottle. Again, the fumes hit the back of my throat and I felt my earlier wooziness come on as I poured out a few drops of Halothane onto the yellow cloth and pressed it tight over Mulhearn's face until the man subsided again. If Mulhearn got this hepatotoxicity thing later then that was his problem. Not mine. I tried to lift Mulhearn's body. Although I'm strong for my size and work out at the gym, Mulhearn's dead weight was too much for me to lug about. So I dropped him back onto the floor. His head hit the floor with a dull thud. Ouch.

Stepping out of the lavatories, I had another stroke of luck. Morela was walking down the corridor holding a dustpan and brush. She glanced round at me.

"Quick, help me!" I called to her in distress. "My partner's had a fit and he's collapsed on the floor."

Morela dropped the dustpan and brush and ran with me back into the lavatories. She saw Mulhearn's body on the floor.

"What was he doing in...", the stress making her Polish accent stronger. She saw the cubicle's open door and put two and two together to make a number that was nowhere near four. Her pale complexion flushed red, making the young woman even more beautiful.

"I call ambulance," Morela said, her accent very thick now.

"No, never mind that; give me a hand to get him up. He's had these attacks before. I only need to get him home where he can rest quietly," I said.

Morela looked at me. Unsure. Unhappy with the situation. "Should get ambulance," she said again. Mulhearn stirred slightly and his tongue lolled from his mouth. A string of drool leaked out onto the tiles.

"Don't worry, he'll be okay," I reassured her. "Even though he's banged his head. I just want to get him to my car." Looking Morela full in the face, I said those magic words.

"Look at this wet floor. No wonder he slipped. Maybe I should sue the hotel for negligence?"

That decided her. No way did she want even the hint of a stain on her work records here. There were lots of eastern Europeans out there eager and waiting to take her job. Far better to get us out of the King's Arms as soon as possible.

"Stay here. I get Arkadiusz from kitchens. He help you take him to car," Morela said. She dashed out of the lavatories and I heard her calling to Arkadiusz before the door closed behind her. Instantly, I gave Mulhearn another sniff of the chloroform.

A minute later Morela burst into the lavatories closely followed by Arkadiusz. He was a stocky, darker man wearing kitchen whites. They spoke together in Polish.

Arkadiusz crouched and hoisted Mulhearn's body up in one fluid motion. Morela and Arkadiusz spoke some more in Polish. The only word I could make out was 'ambulance' but Morela shook her head.

With Morela leading the way, we exited the lavatories, walked down the corridor until she pushed open a fire exit and we were out in the car park. Taking out Mulhearn's keys, I pressed the central locking button and the lights flashed on and off a Jeep Cherokee. I ran forward and opened the Jeep.

I suppose Mulhearn thought it looked macho to keep his Jeep 4x4 as muddy as possible. I knew Mulhearn enjoyed off-road rallying of a weekend but he could still have swung by a car wash on his way home. Maybe he thought mud and dirt went with his military hard-man image as if he'd come straight from manoeuvres. Opening the door, I expected the Cherokee's interior to be as filthy as its bodywork but the 4x4 was show room fresh inside with that new car smell.

Carefully, with Morela's assistance, Arkadiusz slid and pushed Mulhearn's body into the passenger seat and then leaned over him to clunk-click the seatbelt. I thanked the two Poles for their help, slipped them a tenner, and then got behind the wheel. In my mirrors I saw them watch me drive out and turn onto Northgate.

CHAPTER 8.

My first stop was the tarmac expanse of the Tesco Extra car park. I took Mulhearn's SatNav out from its wallet in the glove locker and switched it on. I checked its list of pre-programmed locations. Mulhearn's home address in Grantham came up and I

stored that information away for future use. Wheelan's house next and then what I was looking for. The location of Alexa, Wheelan's daughter's private school. As I expected, it wasn't far. Nowhere is in Sleaford.

The fresh air from the car park must have revived Mulhearn because he shifted position in his seat.

"Wha'...", he said thickly and tried to raise his arm to wipe the slobber from his chin. That bought him yet another deep sniff of the Halothane and he went under again. If anyone was a candidate for hepatotoxicity that day, it was Mulhearn.

Checking my watch, I saw I had plenty of time. I'd tried to play it nice but Wheelan and Mulhearn hadn't left me much choice so I had to play it nasty now. It wouldn't be the first time I'd been put in that position. I carried on through the town centre and then out along East Road following a bus marked as 'Town Service 1'. Surprised as I wouldn't have thought a one horse town like Sleaford would have needed more than one town service bus.

I pulled up outside Wheelan's daughter's private school. A large green and gold sign told me this was 'Sydenham Private Girl's School' founded in 1952 together with the name of the headmistress. The school looked like how you would imagine a private school to look like. It was a large red-brick building set well back from the road with tall, twisted chimneys on either side like an Elizabethan manor house.

What is it with Sleaford and mock Tudor architecture? Is that the only style permitted here? Ivy covered most of one wall and above the traffic noise along East Road I heard rooks cawing amongst a line of chestnuts. If the girls' parents were paying extra for Sydenham's appearance then they were getting value for money.

Leaning over, I pulled Mulhearn's mobile phone from his pocket. I scrolled down through his list of contacts until I came to the name I wanted. It was near the top. Alexa. Wheelan's moody fourteen year old daughter. Checking through Mulhearn's texts in the 'sent items' folder in his cell, I saw that he was a man of few words. Good. I sent Alexa a text. 'Pickng u up 2day. M', it read. A moment later Mulhearn's mobile beeped at me. Alexa was also a girl of few words; at least to Mulhearn. 'OK.' No xxx's, LOLs or anything else on either side. I settled down in the seat to wait for school to finish.

Tuning the radio to BBC Radio 4 I listened to the presenters of Moneybox Live explain complex financial problems to pensioners. Me, I don't have their difficulties as I keep my money in a series of numbered offshore accounts. I don't know why

everyone doesn't do the same. It's the best way to bank as long as you don't forget your account numbers and pass words.

Fortunately, I didn't have long to wait before a security guard wearing a yellow and blue contrast hi-viz jacket came out and lounged against the stone gate post. The man cast a glance up and down the street but then seemed lost in his own world until an elderly teacher came out and rang an old fashioned hand-bell in the yard.

Shortly after, one or two schoolgirls came out, followed by a few more and then a torrent, a Niagara of girls. Even from the other side of the road, I heard them laughing and chatting. Sydenham's uniform was an unflattering bottle green with yellow trim. Several of the girls had rolled up their skirts to way higher than any regulation length. That happened in my day, too. The security guard stood straighter, took his hands from his pockets and admired their legs as they passed. Pervert. He'd make a good friend for Dr. Nabi-Khan.

I thought Alexa would stand out with her dyed red hair but she wasn't the only schoolgirl sporting exotic hair colours. At one point I thought I'd made Alexa in the crowd but it wasn't her. I slumped down in my seat as much out of sight from the road as possible leaving Mulhearn breathing heavily, still comatose, in the Cherokee's passenger seat.

A gaggle of girls clustered around the bus stop. A few peered at one of their friends' smart phones. There was a little pushing and shoving but all good natured and restrained. They weren't boys after all. Their giggles came loud over the traffic along East Road.

Looking in the mirrors, I spotted Alexa in the crowd. Alexa stood by herself on the edge of the pavement, looking both ways until she spotted Mulhearn's Jeep Cherokee. She held a large bag. Then I lost sight of the girl as a Town Service 1 bus pulled up outside the school. I swore under my breath. No, she wouldn't get on the bus, I told myself, not when Mulhearn was taking her home.

But schoolgirls are erratic at the best of times. Moody and hormonal. Maybe Alexa had changed her mind at the last minute and had gone off with one of her friends instead. Perhaps she was going round to her friend's house to do her homework, listen to music and talk about celebs and boys.

I was telling myself to relax and take it easy when the bus pulled away from the kerb. There were far fewer schoolgirls by the bus stop now. Then I saw Alexa's vivid red hair. She looked both ways and then crossed East Road.

Alexa Wheelan was reaching out to the Cherokee's passenger door handle when she noticed Mulhearn's slumped body. The man was only held in place by his seatbelt and his face was loose and slack. More drool trickled down his chin and onto his shirt collar. The man looked seriously unwell at the moment. Shock and confusion flashed across her face. She even stopped chewing gum.

But by then it was too late. I was already out of my seat, around the Cherokee's bonnet and standing next to Alexa. I opened the rear passenger door. She turned her brown cow-like eyes up to mine. Her false eyelashes helped with that bovine look she was cultivating. But Alexa didn't look scared, only bemused.

"Mulhearn's taken sick," I explained as I held open the rear door. "Your Dad's asked me to take you home instead – and then I'll take this useless lump onto the Grantham and District Hospital."

Alexa thought for a moment. I could almost hear the cogs turning in the girl's brain. She might have inherited her Dad's ears but not his brains.

"You're Hennessy, aren't you?" Alexa said, her voice rising. "You burned..." Perhaps I'd misjudged Wheelan's daughter. But that was all she had time to say. Swiftly, I pushed Alexa onto the back seat of the Cherokee. Mulhearn himself might have been too strong but there was no way Alexa could resist. From my jacket pocket, I whipped out the yellow cloth and pressed it hard over the girl's face. From my other pocket I took out the bottle of Halothane, unscrewed the top and poured some drops onto the cloth.

As soon as the sickly smell hit Alexa's nose, the poor girl struggled even harder. Her feet flailed and drummed on the Cherokee's floor and one shoe fell off. She made muffled cries for help but only succeeded in drawing more chloroform deeper and deeper into her lungs. Carefully, I dripped out a little more Halothane. I turned my head slightly, keeping my face clear of the fumes filling the car.

Alexa was only a fourteen year old schoolgirl. She wasn't some psycho hard man like Mulhearn. There was only one way this was ending. Her struggles rapidly weakened and her arms and legs became still. I removed the rag and watched for a moment but the girl wasn't faking. She had toppled over onto the rear seat so, like any concerned parent would, I straightened her up and strapped her in. The whole struggle had taken less than a minute.

I looked back over the road at the group of schoolgirls gathering around the bus stop. If they'd noticed what had happened I'd be in big trouble but the girls all seemed

wrapped up in their own little worlds. All the same, I was glad when I pulled away from the kerb and joined the traffic flow heading out of Sleaford.

It wasn't too long before I was well out of Sleaford and heading north east along the A153. During the drive both Mulhearn's and Alexa's mobile phones rang out several times. The highway crossed a railway line and I drove past the village of Anwick before I turned off along a minor country lane. Nobody followed me and the flat, waterlogged fields under the vast grey sky let me see in all directions. Apart from the constant flow of traffic along the A153, I had the place to myself. There wasn't even a tractor in the fields today. The air smelled damp and cool. Eventually, I pulled up in a little lay-by and then took a roll of grey duct tape from my bag.

Mulhearn was starting to come round again so I dealt with him first. I wrapped tape around his wrists and ankles and then slapped a length over his mouth. I didn't think he'd choke as I was staying with him. I also cut two smaller pieces and taped his eyelids closed. Being vulnerable, in the dark, not being able to see what's going on is very disorientating. I should know. It happened to me once.

When I was sure that Mulhearn was secure, I did the same to Alexa. I felt a little sorry for Alexa Wheelan as the only thing she'd done wrong was having a wannabe *capo* hood like Wheelan for a father. She'd lose her cow-like false eyelashes when she peeled off the tape closing her eyelids. That would hurt but I reckoned she'd soon get over it.

I straightened my back after I'd finished with my prisoners and looked around. The light was starting to fail and the sky was a deeper, gunmetal grey. The cars heading along the A153 were the only sign of life apart from a ragged W shaped skein of geese flying high overhead. Their honks to each other sounded ghostly in the half light.

Behind me I heard a choking sound coming from Mulhearn. The man was gagging and heaving. I turned to him and ripped off the duct tape covering his mouth. He leaned forward, out of the Cherokee, and retched and then vomited his lunch onto the muddy lay-by. I stepped back until he'd finished.

"Feel better?" I asked.

Mulhearn swore violently. I took that to mean he was.

"You want some water?"

Mulhearn swore again but nodded his head. I took a litre bottle of mineral water I found in the door footwell, uncapped it and held the bottle to his lips. Mulhearn swallowed greedily.

"Only sip it," I advised. "You don't want to get stomach cramps or anything."

Mulhearn spat. The gob of spit landed near my feet. I cut off another piece of tape and pressed it over the man's mouth. Turning to Alexa, I was a little worried. The girl seemed as if she was in a coma. I watched her chest and then placed my fingers gently over her carotid artery. I felt her pulse, fast and light, throb just beneath her skin. Then her breasts rose and fell as the girl took a shallow breath.

I guess being smaller Alexa was more susceptible to the effects of the Halothane than Mulhearn. Or maybe I'd just given her a bigger dose. After all, I hadn't measured it out with scientific accuracy taking into account body mass like they do before an operation in hospital. But I thought she'd live and that was all I was interested in. By Alexa's feet was her school bag. I rummaged through her bag. As well as the usual dog-eared folders and text books and a small toilet bag containing make-up and emergency sanitary protection I found her smart phone. She'd treated it to a pink case covered with pink crystals. But all the same a crack ran across the screen. The case sparkled in the fading light. Flicking through her a little diary, in the notes section, I spotted a four digit number surrounded by doodles of hearts and flowers. I guessed that was her phone's PIN number.

Switching it on, I entered the PIN number and then scrolled down through her contacts. And scrolled and scrolled. How many friends did this girl have? Was she on speaking terms with every girl at Sydenham? And half the boys at the nearby Carres Grammar School? It seemed like it. Eventually I found the only number I wanted.

Wheelan himself. I pressed the number and heard it rang out.

Wheelan answered on the third ring.

"Look, Sugar-apple, I'm busy so...", Wheelan started. Sugar-apple? Alexa didn't look much like a sugar-apple now. More like the usual moody, hormonal teenage girl.

Maybe she was sweeter when she was a little girl.

"This isn't your little Sugar-apple," I cut in.

"Who's this? Is that you...?"

"Yeah, it's Hennessy. I'm taking Alexa and Mulhearn for a little drive out in the country. Don't worry they're both safe although I don't think they're enjoying the ride very much."

Wheelan exploded with rage, threatening me with terrible revenge. I took no notice but let him purge his anger from out of his system. He finished with how he should have started – by getting confirmation, by asking to speak to his daughter and Mulhearn. Amateur.

I turned back to the Jeep Cherokee. The engine was ticking as it cooled in the never ending east wind blowing over the Fens. Mulhearn was sitting more upright now and had been trying to untwist and free his hands. I tore off the tape over his mouth again, ripping more skin from his lips. He swore.

I held the cell phone to Mulhearn's ear. "Friend asking how you are," I told Mulhearn. "Let him know you're safe and well."

Wheelan spoke. I heard him ask about Alexa.

"I don't know," Mulhearn replied. "I'm tied up and blindfolded."

Glancing back, poor Alexa was still out of it. I took the phone away from Mulhearn and crossed to the back seat. It was only the seatbelt keeping her upright but she had slumped forward against the strap. I pushed her back and slapped the girl's face. No response. I slapped her again, harder, leaving palm prints on her cheeks.

"What's going on?" Wheelan shouted through the phone, his voice distorted.

I returned to Mulhearn in the front passenger seat and ripped off the tape covering his eyes. He cried out with shock and blinked several times.

"Confirm to your boss I've got Alexa," I commanded. Mulhearn twisted in his seat and looked behind him. He sounded defeated when he told Wheelan that Alexa was also in the Cherokee with him. I snatched the phone away before Mulhearn could tell Wheelan that his beloved daughter didn't look in the pink.

"You should never have gone against my family. You'll pay for that," Wheelan shouted to me.

"You started it – you shouldn't have taken Claire. You must have known that would bring the roof down."

"It was Claire who came to me in the first place. She wanted me, wanted what her old fella couldn't give her no more – not without a load of blue diamonds rattling around inside him."

"Whatever, Wheelan. Frankly, I couldn't care less. I'm only here to bring Claire home. You've got to decide what's more important to you right now – Alexa or Claire."

Wheelan swore some more. "You of all people wouldn't hurt Alexa, Hennessy. She's only a girl. She's done no-one any harm."

The second and third parts of his statement were true. She was only a girl and she had not hurt anyone.

"Remember what happened to the Kirkham brothers from Hull?" I reminded him. "I enjoyed that job."

CHAPTER 9.

Wheelan fell quiet so I took advantage of his silence. "I'll give you time to decide. We meet in two hours," I said.

"Where?"

"Tell you nearer the time," I said, killing the connection. This was Wheelan's turf and I didn't want to give him time to prepare an ambush.

Wheelan hadn't argued though. I didn't know if that was a good or bad sign.

"You'll never get away with this, Hennessy," Mulhearn said.

"Have done so far," I said before pressing more duct tape over his mouth and eyes and tightening his wrists. He wriggled but there was nothing he could do.

Once again, I checked on Alexa and was pleased to see that the girl was breathing deeper now. I slapped her face, not so hard, and this time she stirred a little. I was glad about that as I didn't want to present Wheelan with a corpse. It would have made my night's work a whole lot more difficult. Not impossible, you understand, but more difficult than it needed to be.

The light bled out of the sky. If it wasn't for the cloud cover, I'd have had a great view of the constellations. The cars and lorries never stopped along the A153 making a stream of light. And the wind never stopped its flat dirge over the Fens.

It was getting colder but I didn't fancy sitting in the Cherokee with my two captives. So I wrapped my jacket tighter around my body and stood with my arms crossed but the searching fingers of the wind found every chink in my clothing making me shiver. Actually, I was glad to be disturbed from my thoughts by a knocking on the glass behind me. Alexa was tapping the side of her head against the window. I opened the door. The girl wriggled away from me. I leaned in and carefully unpeeled the tape from her mouth. She still winced as the fine downy hairs on her upper lip were torn away. Alexa licked her lips but her tongue was dry and coated with white. I held the bottle to her mouth and the girl drank greedily, thirstily until I removed it.

"You all right, Alexa?" I asked, trying to put some compassion in my voice. Sure, I wanted Wheelan's daughter scared but not so terrified that she stopped being compliant. On the front seat, Mulhearn shifted position to face us. I don't know why as the man was still gagged and blindfolded.

Then I noticed tears leaking out from under her taped down eyelashes. I put my hand on her shoulder in a friendly manner. She recoiled from my touch.

"P.. p... please don't kill me, Hennessy. I'm s... so scared," Alexa cried.

That was a given.

"Listen, I'm not going to whack you, Alexa; nor you neither Mulhearn. Not if your Dad decides to be sensible and plays along. You think he'll do that?"

Alexa nodded furiously, trying to convince herself. Mulhearn grunted something but I ignored the man for the time being.

"If that's all," I said, about to tape the girl's mouth closed.

"Wait... no," Alexa blushed furiously, her cheeks almost matching her hair dye. I paused. "I really need a wee. Please, I can't last out." Her surly indifference all gone now.

I looked down at the girl sitting in the back seat so forlorn. She was no threat to me, especially not tied up.

"Okay, but be quick," I told her. Alexa swung her legs out of the Cherokee and I helped her stand. I looked both ways up and down the country lane but nothing was coming.

"If you're not going to untie me, you'll have to help me," Alexa murmured, her voice little more than a whisper lost in the unending whine of the wind. I was about to tell her to pee where she stood, pee in her pants and let it trickle down her legs but that wasn't fair on the girl. All the same, I felt like her nurse maid. Very carefully, not looking, I reached up under her skirt and pulled down her panties by the sides before holding her skirt away from her body as Alexa squatted by the Cherokee and did what she had to. Finished, Alexa stood to let me tug up her panties again.

"Thanks," she whispered before I closed off her mouth again. As I helped Alexa back into the Cherokee, Mulhearn made more muffled demands.

"I'm not doing the same for you, Mulhearn. Tie a knot in it," I told him. "Oh, you can't, can you? Never mind, we'll be finished soon."

Mulhearn groaned. Tough. Glancing at my watch, I reckoned I'd given Wheelan enough time. I made the call.

"Wheelan," he answered.

"Back of the Bass Maltings. Just you and Claire. No-one else. Got that?"

"Sure. Bass Maltings. Alexa had better be fine," Wheelan said.

"What do you think I'd do to your girl?"

Wheelan didn't reply to that. But I'd heard the eagerness in his voice as he confirmed the Bass Maltings venue. Which would be a big disappointment to Wheelan as the last place I wanted to meet him in the dark was Sleazeford's Bass Maltings.

For sheer scale, dwarfing the little town of Sleaford, you can't beat the Bass Maltings. It's like a modern day builder placing a Manhattan sky-scraper in the middle of Sleaford's town centre. Totally out of scale – and totally unsustainable. Which is why the Bass Maltings have been closed and left empty since the 1960s. I heard there's recently been talk of restoring the Maltings and converting them.

If you're not familiar with Sleazeford, the Bass Maltings are huge brewing malthouses that replaced all the other small breweries in the area. Sometime before the First World War, this was. There is a line of eight huge detached brick buildings together with a tower and chimney in the middle of them all. The total frontage is over three hundred yards. A really impressive slab of industrial architecture out in the middle of the pancake flat Lincolnshire countryside.

But, like I say, the place went bust in the 1960s and is filled with rusting, abandoned machinery, deeply recessed doorways and windows and there are too many places where a marksman with a sniper rifle and night scope could hide and take me down. So no way was I meeting Wheelan anywhere within rifle shot of the Bass Maltings. I walked round to the driver's seat, did a three point turn and turned the Cherokee around. Back through Sleazeford. I saw some young man stagger across the road clutching a vodka bottle. He lobbed the empty at the Jeep Cherokee but it sailed past and shattered in the opposite gutter. The man then turned away and disappeared down a dark alley between two shops.

"Nice place you have here," I said to my passengers. "Friendly."

Once we had driven over the bridge past Sleaford's train station, I relaxed a little. Although I hadn't expected any trouble from Wheelan but I might have been eye-balled and followed as I drove through town. On the other side, I turned off London Road and onto Grantham Road, the B1517. The traffic was lighter now at this time of night.

"Almost there," I told my passengers to keep up their spirits. A few minutes later, we turned right up Castle Causeway and onto my intended destination all along. Where I could keep control of the handover and not Wheelan.

Sleaford Castle.

You might be wondering why I rejected the Bass Maltings but chose Sleaford Castle instead. If you're thinking Sleaford Castle is like one of those huge medieval castles built to keep the Welsh under control such as Caernarfon or Conwy or Harlech then you'd be making a mistake. Maybe Sleaford Castle was like that once but no longer. All that's left now is some earthworks in a field together with a moat and a section of rubble wall. At one end of the field is a copse of trees and bushes. And that's that. Over the centuries, the locals probably had it away with the castle's masonry to improve their cottages. It's funny to think that what was once so important is now barely a third rate tourist attraction.

I pulled up opposite the site's entrance. As I expected, the metal barrier was padlocked, but a moment later I'd picked the lock with my L pry and swung the gate open. Turning the Jeep Cherokee onto the castle fields, I drove along the rough track and parked near the ruined wall. Perfect. Only one way in and out. No way could Wheelan sneak in some of his hoods to blindside me. My captives stirred themselves and sat up straighter. They knew they were nearly through. Stepping out of the Cherokee, I called Wheelan a second time.

"Changed my mind, Wheelan, it's Sleaford Castle."

Wheelan made some crack about how it was my privilege to change my mind at short notice but underneath I could tell the man wasn't happy about the change. But I was, which was what mattered.

Keeping an eye on the only entrance, I stood and waited. A train thundered by to the south of the castle fields – a long tube of light and sound fracturing the night's darkness. It took longer than I expected for Wheelan to show. So I guessed he had set up a little 'meet and greet' party at the Bass Maltings. It's what I would have done in his place after all. Then a large off-road 4x4 turned up the dirt track leading to Sleaford Castle. The car flashed its lights the once. I got behind the Cherokee's wheel and flashed my lights in reply.

"You two. Time to go. Out now," I told them. I opened their doors and helped them both out. Mulhearn slightly hunched over, groaning to himself. The man must be

absolutely desperate by now. The chill air wouldn't help his bladder any. Taking a Swiss army knife, I knelt and cut the duct tape binding their ankles.

"Walk," I told them, giving the pair a gentle shove in the right direction. They took slow hesitant steps, little more than a cautious shuffle as their hands were still bound behind them and their eyes taped shut. Strangely, it was the schoolgirl Alexa who seemed bolder than Mulhearn. Alexa stumbled over a tussock of rough grass and I caught her arm, steadying her. When we were about fifty yards from Wheelan's Mercedes M-class 4x4, I commanded that they stop. My captives did so and stood trembling slightly in the ever present wind. Alexa's skirt rustling around her knees. Taking out Alexa's mobile, I called Wheelan again. No-one had yet got out of the Mercedes-Benz and I couldn't see inside the vehicle.

"We're here, Wheelan. Let's get this over with." As I spoke to Wheelan I heard Claire McTeague's voice carrying on in the background. Pleading and begging. It sounded like the woman wasn't happy about going home.

"Come on Wheelan. I haven't got all night," I reminded him.

The Mercedes door opened. I saw Wheelan's six foot two bulk as he crossed his headlight's beams and opened the passenger door. Despite the cold, Wheelan wore only a skinny rib tee shirt, the better to show off his muscles. He leaned in and gently helped Claire McTeague out. The woman was warmly dressed in a velour tracksuit, hoodie and wore white trainers. He spoke to her and then both started forwards towards my group.

Immediately, I called Wheelan again. Even at that distance I heard his ringtone. Wheelan answered.

"Only Claire McTeague, Wheelan. You know the drill – they meet half way and then keep walking. Remember, I hold all the aces here. Do you need me to spell it out? I'm armed and whacking your daughter, your lover and your second is less than nothing to me. Got that?"

Wheelan got that loud and clear. To be honest, I didn't need to remind him but I just wanted it crystal to everyone. Poor Alexa shuddered and sunk her head into her shoulders as if she could feel the 9mm Parabellum blasting through her body, punching through her insides and sending her into eternity. Mulhearn groaned. Stepping forward, I pulled off the tape covering Alexa's eyes so she could guide Mulhearn. Her false lashes came with it and she cried out. She blinked, her eyes

adjusting to the dim light and she focussed on her father's M-class. Wheelan waved to her.

"You two can go now," I said giving them another push. "Good luck."

As soon as they started walking, Wheelan nudged Claire McTeague. With a backward look at her lover, the woman started forward.

So far, so good. Nice and easy. No dramas.

My phone rang. Wheelan. I took the call. "Please, Hennessy," he started. I hated hearing the man beg. "Please, it doesn't have to be like this. Claire doesn't love McTeague no more – its me she wants. You must understand how she feels. Listen, one last chance, throw your hand in with me and I'll make you my second instead..." I laughed at this point. It was pathetic. "... my partner then. Equal shares. You and me, Hennessy, together. We're both younger than McTeague. He's yesterday's man, always going on about the club scene of the Eighties and Nineties. Battling the old Scouser gangs. What does he know about the future? Outsourcing..."

I wasn't even tempted. McTeague had seen challengers like Wheelan come and go. Like an old oak, he'd stayed the course.

"Listen Wheelan. I'll give you one tip. Wait for McTeague to calm down and then make him an offer." I finished the call. That was good advice. It wasn't my business but I reckoned once McTeague had lived with a woman who no longer loved him for a few months, he'd be open to a trade for her.

By now, the three had met in the middle of the castle field. Claire McTeague spoke to Mulhearn, who nodded a couple of times before they crossed paths and then Claire was coming towards me. She walked slowly, carefully over the uneven ground. I looked over the field. When she was only a few yards away from her father's M-class, Alexa forgot caution and ran forwards into her father's arms and he enfolded her in a bear hug. A touching sight.

Claire McTeague was almost up to me by now. I nodded politely and opened up the Cherokee's passenger door for her like any good chauffeur should.

"Are you carrying?" I asked her before she got in.

I didn't think she was as Claire was out of the life except for the good things men like McTeague and Wheelan were prepared to lavish on her in order that they could have her draped over their arm. I couldn't see the attraction myself.

Claire shook her head and sniffed. Her eyes were red and watery. Whether from the cold or crying I neither knew nor cared. I patted her down anyway but the woman was clean.

"In," I said. Before she sat down I showed her Mulhearn's bottle of Halothane and told her I'd have no problem with using it on her if that's what she wanted.

Again, Claire shook her head, her carefully coiffured hair remaining in place.

"You win Hennessy; you and McTeague. But it's wrong what you're doing."

One sentence in and already I couldn't take any more of this drivel so I tuned into Lincs FM for something loud from the charts and drove over the bumpy field and then along the track. We passed Wheelan, who was still cuddling Alexa; and Mulhearn who was pissing like a horse, before rejoining Castle Fields road and then onto the B1517.

We were leaving Sleaford on the A15 before I allowed myself to relax. Claire was going home. She sat quietly, apart from the occasional snuffle. Her hands rested in her lap. I'm not telling you which direction we headed nor how far I drove as the Serious Organised Crime Agency might find that information of use.

CHAPTER 10.

Of course, it all kicked off big time.

Although McTeague still had the far bigger empire, Wheelan wasn't without resources and a couple of other *capos* sided with him, especially the Norfolk Farm Boys, hoping to pick over the remnants of McTeague's empire after the older man went down. And maybe they also genuinely knew what it was like to lose a woman they loved and had some sympathy for Wheelan.

Although in the case of the Norfolk boys, that woman would have been one of their close relations. A very close relation. You know what I mean by that. However, the general consensus was that although Wheelan was out of order for taking Claire without asking; McTeague was bang out of order for taking her back by force. Strange how men's minds work.

Unless you're a hermit on the Outer Hebrides or Scilly Isles or somewhere you'll have seen on the News or read in the papers about what happened next. The gang war made headline news; police Chief Constables were dragged blinking before the TV cameras

and there were even questions asked in the House of Commons about the crime wave sweeping eastern England. The topic dominated one Question Time on Radio 4 with solutions ranging from the usual 'bring back the rope' from the right wing Tory rent-a-quote member of parliament to the even more predictable hand-wringing 'they are all victims of poor upbringing' liberalism of some pinko quangocrat.

With my skill set I was much in demand. You remember that tourist from Ottawa who was stabbed to death by a mugger in a hoodie thirty seconds after leaving East Midlands Airport's arrivals hall as he waited for a taxi? There was a lot of fuss made at the time about how dangerous Britain was becoming? Visitors not even making it out of a provincial airport before being killed in our increasingly violent country? That was no mugger. And that was no ordinary tourist but a top dollar hit-man flown in to whack McTeague.

The owner of a string of lap-dancing clubs throughout South Yorkshire – that's right. The man who went down in a hail of bullets from a converted Mac-10 'spray-'n'-pray' machine-pistol as he crossed the pavement from his club to his waiting limo one rainy night? There were two people in black leathers on a stolen Yamaha R6 superbike. The pillion rider shredding the club owner like a Swiss cheese before the bike zoomed off into the night. The bike was later found burned out a mile away. But the driver and the shooter still haven't been found. Nor will they ever be.

That club owner shouldn't have thought he could get away with joining forces with Wheelan by bringing some Canadian hit-man in on his new friend's behalf. He'd probably still be alive and enjoying the nightly strip shows to this day.

Then there's the two Kosovan so-called asylum seekers deep underground in Sherwood Forest. Two hard-man chancers in leather jackets who thought they could muscle in and take over whilst the East Midlands went up in smoke. No, wait. They haven't been found yet. And I hope they never will be. You mess with one Kosovan Albanian and you mess with them all. No way do I want their brothers, cousins, uncles, nephews, in-laws and out-laws all after me in one of their unending vendettas. Of course, this couldn't spin on out of control for ever. The top brass at Lincolnshire Police must have been leaned on by some of the high mandarins at the Home Office to get this sorted before the red top press started another moral panic about Britain's crime rate which would cost the government the 'law and order' votes at the next election.

Superintendent Donelan of the Lincolnshire Police asked to see me. He was respectful but made it crystal that not meeting wasn't on the cards. We met in that same mock Tudor gastropub on the A15 that I'd been in at the start of all this. Where I got my Audi keyed. The previous chef had since moved on and the new chef seemed to be having some trouble as several of the dishes were off the menu.

Donelan came in out of the rain wearing a civvie jacket over his uniform but he still looked like a plug-ugly copper. He ordered a freshly squeezed orange juice and brought it over to my table as I folded up my copy of the Telegraph. He held out his hand and after a moment's hesitation I shook. Although Donelan was okay for a copper, I still don't like shaking their hands. Makes me feel dirty, somehow. He sat down and glanced at the back page headlines.

"India's doing well. Reckon we'll draw the series?" he asked. "On the radio just now it said we're currently two hundred and eight in reply."

I nodded. "I think so. The forecast's for rain but we made a mistake by not asking them to follow on in the First Test. We should have won that easily and then we'd have the upper hand," I said.

We discussed the summer's cricket some more as the drizzle hit the windows. Outside some families dodged the rain under the parasols and a few hardy kids made the best of the small play area. A woman called out for Oliver, darling, to be careful.

Small talk over, Donelan got to the point. It was short and sweet. "Hennessy. Tell McTeague to calm it down. As for you: get out of the country for a while. Otherwise you're going down for a long stretch. And don't cry if it's a fit-up job. You've ruffled too many feathers of people who don't like having their feathers ruffled."

Donelan stood up to leave. "If you go down, forget any appeals even if you can afford to hire the best barristers out of your offshore accounts. The bigwigs in Whitehall will have a quiet word with the judges to laugh any appeals out of court." Donelan made a strange gesture with his hand which I took to be something from the Freemasons' rituals. Not that I'd ever be allowed to join! He couldn't have been any clearer. The Home Office mandarins and top judges all drink in the same Lodges.

Donelan looked down at my newspaper. "Three down. Forbidding Albert and Diana to join royal family? The answer's Grimaldi."

I looked down at my crossword. That was one of my few blank answers but I should have got that. I was annoyed that Donelan had come by before I'd had chance to complete the crossword.

"Finished with this?" Donelan said as he took my Telegraph with him as he left. Coppers. They're as light fingered as everyone thinks they are.

* * *

However, McTeague took advantage of my enforced absence by sending me to have a word with Finnigan. I tracked the old ex-Provo bomber to his lair in Antwerp after spending too long looking for him in his old stamping grounds around Rotterdam's Europoort area. That is a story in itself; but one for another time.

I found him with his Thai mail order bride – well, who else would look at a man with Finnigan's face? – in a coffee shop overlooking the medieval cathedral. I explained that it would be far better for him to cut ties with Wheelan and resume business with McTeague. Of course, Finnigan protested that he was protected by the Romanian. Taking my time, I looked around the coffee shop and told him that I couldn't see any Romanians in here but I was sitting opposite with a razor sharp Gerber combat knife strapped to my thigh and a Honda Fireblade superbike capable of hitting one hundred and fifty miles per hour within quarter of a mile's distance parked outside for my getaway.

"Not in these streets it's not doing one hundred and fifty," Finnigan said with a smile. But that was bravado and nothing else. Both of us knew I'd found him once and I could find him again. Did he still feel so protected now? Finnigan got the message loud and clear and said he'd cut off Wheelan's supply routes.

I later found out that the old fox played off both ends against each other and supplied both men. I can't say I blame him.

* * *

However, McTeague didn't have it all his own way and whilst I was out of the way hunting Finnigan throughout Belgium and the Netherlands, things went wrong for my boss. He would have liked to keep me by his side but we both knew that was impossible for the time being.

McTeague called me one evening as I was resting in a quirky hotel on Keizersgracht canal in Amsterdam's bohemian Jordaan district. Not the sort of place I normally use – not a high enough star rating – so that's why I chose it. The sound of tourists jostling

with cyclists came from below my bedroom window. McTeague told me that there had been a conference in London about the situation. Most of the big gangland firms were represented.

To cut to the chase, McTeague told me that the big firms had let him know that his activities were bang out of order and he was affecting all their businesses. Basically, he had to leave Wheelan alone for the time being – and push through his divorce before letting Claire have her own life back. McTeague wasn't happy but what could he do? These *capos* were the real heavy hitters of organised crime.

If the Serious Organised Crime Agency could have charged the men in that room with everything they had committed, these *capos* would be looking at sentences of about a thousand years each. Basically, their great grandchildren would die inside. However, and because of that, what they said went. Unless you were really stupid and had a death wish. A wish to die a particularly nasty death.

Strangely, McTeague didn't sound too upset by the ultimatum. I think even he had become fed up with the chaos and uncertainty but he couldn't let Claire go voluntarily now without losing too much face. Not after having started a big gang war just to get his woman back.

Also, McTeague had by now come to the conclusion that he could never make Claire love him again. He bought her presents: a Rolex with diamonds inset on the rim, a mink coat, filled his home with hot-house flowers specially brought in from Holland. Finnigan organised that for him – a change from his usual commodities. Pampering sessions at plush spas. You get the idea.

She lived with him in his farm outside of... if I told you, I'd have to kill you. Only joking but you really don't want to know. But within weeks they were back to sniping at one another and the atmosphere at home became tense and unpleasant very quickly. I heard that they had separate rooms with separate en-suites – well their farmhouse was more than big enough.

McTeague should have listened to me in the first place. I could have told him that and saved all the trouble. What do they say? Something like be careful what you wish for. You might get it. Now that things had calmed down, McTeague put out some feelers to Donelan (and maybe made a cash donation to the police widow's fund) and I was allowed to come home. I can't say I was sorry as I was fed up with eating fries with mayo – it was playing havoc with my waistline.

McTeague himself met me outside East Midlands Airport. This time he was driving an anonymous Ford Mondeo 1.6L. It had tinted windows but otherwise was plain vanilla. Just like you see countless sales reps belting up and down the motorways in. Things must be bad for McTeague to be driving those wheels because he was a man who loved his motors.

We shook hands and on the way back to his farmhouse, I filled my boss in on how I'd got on with Finnigan. He seemed pleased at the result. However, on the way back, I realised that was the only good news.

McTeague's hands gripped the wheel, his knuckles white and he changed gears with sharp, choppy motions. He lowered his window, lit up and blew smoke into the slipstream.

"I need you to meet with Wheelan. Thrash out a few details out with him. I can't face seeing that jumped up fool," McTeague said. He slammed his palm onto the wheel, hard. Smoke drifted into the Mondeo and I coughed.

"Sorry. I forgot you don't smoke, Hennessy. No respect – I taught that fool everything he knows. If it wasn't for me he'd still be joyriding around the estates with his tearaway mates; a baseball cap on back to front and thinking half a kilo of blow and a dozen tabs of E is some big deal."

McTeague slammed the wheel again. It was rare to see my boss in such a foul mood. I kept my silence and waited to hear what he wanted me to do. Somehow I didn't think I'd be sitting with my feet up on the sofa watching the cookery or property renovation shows on daytime TV any time soon. McTeague sounded off about Wheelan some more. His main theme was Wheelan's lack of respect.

"I want you to meet with Wheelan. I've decided he can keep that bitch Claire. I'm giving her a no-contest divorce and a decent pay-off, but only from what my legit businesses can afford, you know what I mean?"

I knew what McTeague meant. As a front, he owned lots of legitimate businesses, through most of which he laundered his less kosher sources of income. You know the kind of things – taxi firms, an amusement arcade, a chain of pizza takeaways. Pubs and clubs. As always anything where cash was king. He'd even been invited to join the Rotary Club of the nearby city. However, his illicit income dwarfed that and there was no way he wanted the Inland Revenue or the VAT people getting a sniff of that. I was surprised. Despite what the London *capos* had told him, I had thought McTeague would try and hang onto Claire if only to stop Wheelan gloating over her.

However, on second thoughts, it looks a little medieval to keep two ex-wives in seclusion. And, unlike Melissa, there was no way a young woman like Claire would keep herself out of the way. Maybe he was doing the right thing by letting the woman go. If McTeague presented it right, he could make it look like a gesture from a position of strength, rather than weakness. I told him this and he smiled.

"Trust you to see it in the right light, Hennessy," McTeague said with a smile.

CHAPTER 11.

Back at McTeague's farm, I found my Audi which had been collected from Sleaford after I drove away from the little town in Mulhearn's Jeep Cherokee. It had been resprayed, valeted and looked good as new. I collected my keys from McTeague. Claire McTeague came out of the farmhouse. She wore comfortable jeggings and a cerise cashmere sweater that clung tight to her slender frame making the woman look like she was smuggling out a couple of peanuts under her top. One of McTeague's men followed carrying several suitcases and bags which he loaded into the Audi A5's trunk.

I glanced over at McTeague.

"Take her away," he said. He looked sad. Defeated. I didn't think his low mood would last for ever as, of course, McTeague could have his pick of almost any woman in the life and, being a man with both needs and money, he wouldn't sleep alone for long.

All the same, I know Claire had been someone special to him, at least at first.

I slid behind the wheel and Claire got in beside me. She didn't look at me. I don't think she was happy about the way I snatched her away from Wheelan several months ago. Or about the way that, ultimately, Wheelan showed he valued his daughter more than her. But what did Claire expect? Not that I'd know personally but I guess a man's love for his daughter is something very special.

I drove away from McTeague's farmhouse. The last I saw was McTeague standing all forlorn outside, his hand raised in a half wave. Claire didn't respond but stared ahead through the windscreen. She didn't speak to me, which was fine as far as I was concerned, so I switched on Radio 4 and listened to Eddie Mair on the PM show before the News at Six.

A couple of hours later I was pulling into Wheelan's mock Tudor mansion on Old Place. Even before I'd stopped, Wheelan's men were piling out of the house.

Mulhearn, Riordan and couple of others. Standing tall behind them was Wheelan himself.

Mulhearn wrenched open the driver's door and looked like he was going to haul me out and give me a pasting. Riordan looked like he would join in. I felt a little like that chap in the Bible – the one who got thrown into a lion's den or something. Except these lions didn't look like they wanted to make friends.

Wheelan pushed his way through his men and held out his hand. We shook and his men stepped back but, like a pack of wild beasts, they circled around us until Wheelan ordered Riordan to fetch Claire's bags from out of the trunk. Wheelan escorted Claire and we all walked into his house.

"I'm gonna mess you up," Riordan whispered as he passed me with the bags. Riordan hadn't before so I took no notice. That annoyed him more than anything else I could have said or done. There was no music blaring out from upstairs so I guessed Alexa was either not at home or hiding in her room. Another one who wasn't so keen to meet me. I can't say I was surprised.

Wheelan showed us into his front living room and crossed to his drinks cabinet.

"I'm driving. Coke for me, please," I said.

Wheelan pretended to misunderstand. "Pepsi or china white?"

I wasn't in the mood to play along. "Diet Pepsi if you've got it." Everyone knows I don't do drugs. Never have and never will. I keep my body clean – why pollute it?

Wheelan uncapped the bottle and handed it to me together with a tumbler filled with ice. The atmosphere was heavy and the conversation limped along until it died. I'd hurt Wheelan's men and both McTeague and Wheelan had damaged each other's empires. Not long after, Wheelan stood and showed his men the door, leaving me alone with the gang boss.

I put to Wheelan what McTeague had authorised. Claire he already knew about as the woman was under his roof. I explained the division of territories that the London *capos* had agreed. It was more than McTeague wanted to lose and Wheelan couldn't hide the pleasure on his face. He grinned like the Cheshire cat. Ultimately, it was a climb-down, a humiliation for McTeague. However I dressed up the deal. And Wheelan knew it.

"I'll need to confirm that with your boss, Hennessy," Wheelan said. "Make sure he's cool with that, Make sure there's no comebacks."

I nodded and keyed in McTeague's latest number into my BlackBerry. I handed the phone over. Wheelan spoke and walked into his conservatory out of earshot. I sat back and sipped my drink, watching Wheelan pace to and fro as he spoke with my boss. Eventually, Wheelan pressed the end call button on my phone and came back into the lounge. A big grin covered his face.

"Looks like I've won, Hennessy. McTeague says he's given up. He can't – won't keep Claire. He even says he's no objections to us getting married."

"That's good, Wheelan. I'm pleased for you. Best news I've heard all year," I said.

"Don't be like that, Hennessy. You should be pleased. All the fighting's over. And I've won – I've got all Lincolnshire, the Fens, even part of east Nottinghamshire..."

"As well as Claire, of course."

Wheelan smiled again. Surprisingly gentle. "Yes, and Claire."

A thought came to me. "Until McTeague takes it all back again."

But nothing I could say dented Wheelan's good humour. He'd won and he knew it.

He laughed. "No way, Hennessy. McTeague's yesterday's man. He's losing it – whilst you were running around Holland, I've taken control of the supply routes from Bostongrad and Kings Lynn now. You know, maybe I'll move into the West Midlands at some point. That's more than McTeague ever managed. Hey, like I said, you should think about throwing in your lot with me. I could use someone like you, Hennessy, in spite of what you've done."

"Thanks for the offer, Wheelan, but I'll pass. I'll stick with McTeague's outfit."

Wheelan stood and offered me his hand. We shook. I wasn't to see him again until the wedding.

* * *

The wedding was the social event of the year in Sleazeford as I'd come to think of the place now. Wheelan had booked St. Denys parish church in the centre of the town. The ancient twelfth century church was filled with blooms which turned out to be supplied by Finnigan. The ex-Provo was making a nicely legit sideline exporting flowers now. Wheelan had spared no expense. Yellow and white garlands wrapped around the pillars, covered the altar and filled big vases in full view of the congregation. The bridesmaids looked gorgeous in mauve dresses.

And as for Claire McTeague herself? Sorry, Claire Wheelan as I should call her now. Well, she was simply beautiful. She looked stunning as she walked down the aisle on McTeague's arm. Yes, even in these days I suppose it's unusual for the ex-husband to give away the bride. But if that's what McTeague wanted to do, who was going to argue?

There were men there from Birmingham, Leicester; hell from all over the country and as far away as Scotland. One face even took a chance and had slipped back into the country from the Spanish Costas. Men who wouldn't normally be seen sitting together in the same room shared the same pew. Their wives and girlfriends all dolled up like birds of paradise. I don't suppose the symbolism was lost on the assorted faces in the congregation. The handing over of the prize by the older gang head to the leaner, meaner younger boss.

I can't say I paid much attention to the service or the vicar's sermon and forty minutes later we were all outside. That flat unending east wind blew off the fens making the smokers huddle together against the sheltered side of the old, white stone church. After the photos had been taken – as you would expect there were a number of faces there who declined the opportunity to appear – McTeague drew Wheelan and myself to one side.

"I might not get chance to catch you during the reception, Wheelan, so let me congratulate you now and wish you every happiness and success in the future."

"Thanks, McTeague," Wheelan said, shaking the older man's hand. "That's really good of you."

"I've arranged for your wedding present to be delivered Monday the twenty-third. After you two get back from your honeymoon. A truck load of Chinese cigarettes, at least fifty thousand cartons worth. Top quality packaging. No-one will spot the difference."

Wheelan did the sums in his head. He smiled and threw his arms around McTeague's body in a bear hug.

I'd had enough so I didn't stay on for the wedding reception. Speeches and toasts followed by drunken dancing never appealed to me. Instead I walked alone down the churchyard path past the mossy graves, climbed into my Audi and drove home.

CHAPTER 12.

Today was the morning of Monday, the twenty-third.

I was parked further down East Road from Wheelan's industrial unit. I wasn't in my Audi A5 as that was too well known round here by now. Instead I was in a DAF tractor cab-over, the obligatory hi-viz coat covering my suit, pulled up by the side of the road as if waiting for my tachograph to give me permission to start driving again. Where's the best place to hide? In plain sight. Although my cab-over was huge; on an industrial estate it was totally inconspicuous. The cab's heater was on and a paper beaker of Starbuck's skinny latte steamed in the cup holder next to a half eaten low-cal muffin.

A red truck drove down the road leading to the complex of industrial units. I stirred in my seat. The truck was marked up with the logo of a furniture hire company. Must be a regular as the driver bantered with the security guard leaning out of his hut before the guard raised the barrier. It was a different guard than the man I'd tied up months before. I guess that first guard had got the sack.

Eventually the truck swung into the forecourt shared by the units. I watched as the truck turned into the sixth unit. This truck wasn't for Wheelan.

I settled back in my seat and carried on waiting. Another truck turned into the complex but this time I didn't even bother stirring in my seat. It was just a flat-bed come to collect for recycling a load of blue plastic drums filled with dirty kitchen oils. There was a long gap before the next lorry arrived during which I listened to John Humphrys on Radio 4's Today show tell me all about failed breast implants. As if he knew anything about them. My eyelids drooped so I wound the cab's window down a few inches allowing fingers of cold air to keep me awake.

Another goods vehicle turned in, also pausing at the barrier. This seemed more likely. It was a battered white Luton box truck with no markings on the side. The old van looked like it had been round the world and back. The security guard raised the barrier and I watched the Luton turn left and pull up in front of Wheelan's depot. The driver beeped his horn once, twice before the pedestrian door inset in the main gate opened. Two men stepped out. I recognised Riordan and his friend. The man I'd once slammed into a brick wall. The second man's face looked like he had recently lost a bout in a bare knuckle prize-fight so he wasn't having much luck recently.

The two men asked the driver to step down from his cab. The driver did so, walked to the back of the truck and then unlocked the doors. Riordan climbed up into the back and disappeared from my sight. Battered-Face kept his eye on the driver. Eventually Riordan re-emerged from the back. He nodded to the driver and they shook hands. Up in my cab-over, I felt a little like the guy the Greeks left behind with their Trojan Horse. But that guy had much the harder job as he'd had to persuade the suspicious Trojans to unlock the gates and let the hollow wooden horse filled with Greek soldiers into their city. Me, all I'd had to do was watch and wait. Which was just as well as my presence would've made Riordan and his mate more suspicious rather than less. I smiled to myself. McTeague's plan had worked perfectly. Finally, the large vehicular gate slid up. Even from my high up position in the road outside, I couldn't see the inside of the unit. I wondered how Wheelan's men had got on with the clear-up after my fire-bombing.

After all, although the industrial unit would have had a modern sprinkler system I must have done a lot of damage to the distillery equipment. In spite of the breeze blowing in, I thought I could smell the black stench of old smoke but really I knew it was only my imagination running away with me. All the same, my nostrils twitched at the well remembered smell of burning.

As soon as the Luton was inside the metal unit, the vehicular gate rattled down. The industrial estate once again became a haven of peace, broken only by a group of smokers so desperate to satisfy their needs that they were prepared to stand outside in the wind tunnel between two of the metal units. Their laughter floated over to me as they looked at something in the fluttering pages of the Daily Star. A brown UPS courier van made a delivery but other than that, the place was as quiet as it had been at three in the morning.

I watched and waited. Maybe twenty, certainly no more than twenty five minutes later, the Luton box truck emerged from the unit and the gate slid down in its tracks immediately after. The Luton drove out past my parked cab-over and the driver gave me a little nod but without slowing down. Excellent. I took Mulhearn's mobile phone from my pocket.

How come I had Mulhearn's new phone? Too easy. For relaxation, the ex-squaddie liked to visit that massage parlour above the scruffy salon with the tacky poster of a bikini-babe and Polish signs in the window. Regular as clockwork, he was. Did he take advantage of the 'extras' on offer? What do you think? So, the other day I slipped

back into Sleazeford and had a word with the Ukrainian masseuse who provided much of these services.

Even I could see what Mulhearn and her other clients saw in her. She had long blonde hair and legs up to her chin, her ass barely covered by the shortest tunic I'd ever seen. I handed her a foil wrapped pack of strong sleeping tablets and told her to spike Mulhearn's drink on Sunday night and to let me know when the man was asleep. I had to explain it a few times as her English wasn't that good but she soon grasped what I wanted. The small wedge of twenties I also gave her helped her English improve. "Call me," I said miming a phone call. Then all I had to do was wait for Mulhearn to visit.

* * *

First I made a call to the massage parlour. A tired voice with a strong east European accent told me that yes, Mulhearn was still fast asleep. No surprises there. The amount of ketamine in his veins would've knocked out the entire field at Market Rasen races. With some left over for Doncaster the next day. Wheelan's man was going to sleep until Tuesday week.

Using Mulhearn's phone, I sent a text to Wheelan. Like I said earlier, Wheelan had learned enough from McTeague to keep himself a couple of steps removed from anything incriminating. Let the small fry and middlemen take all the risks whilst you make the big bucks. Never get caught in the same building with anything that could get you in any trouble.

If the cops do come for you, look wide eyed and innocent and deny everything – make the Crown Prosecution Service put in the night shifts proving you knew anything about it. Even if they know you're involved, they still have to prove it before a jury. And if it comes to trial, there you stand in the dock in a good suit – but not too expensive as you don't want to get the jurors' backs up – whilst your brief paints a picture of an innocent businessman who was so time-pressed he had no idea what his associates were up to behind his back.

And if even that doesn't work, you send someone like me to have a quiet word with some of the jurors in their own time. Like late at night on their doorstep or outside their kid's school. But sometimes there are emergencies when you have to break that cardinal, *numero uno* rule. And the text I sent from Mulhearn's phone would have

Wheelan flying down here. The cigarettes had been partly paid for on Wheelan's cloned credit card and a transaction slip had been left for the men to find. Wheelan was linked to the hooky cigs now. That's what my text said, anyway.

A moment later, Mulhearn's phone beeped. I looked at the answering text. Wheelan had risen to the bait. As he had to. He was on his way over. I smiled, but it lasted only for a fleeting second. I didn't like what McTeague had asked me to do. It went against the grain, against every fibre of my being. But the way McTeague explained it, I had to agree this was the best way forward. Then I made my next call. To Superintendent Donelan of the Lincolnshire Police.

"It's all ready for you. Wheelan's on his way. I'll call when he actually lands, okay?" Donelan said something but I closed the call before he started talking cricket. I hate talking to the cops – they make me feel dirty. I knew that, if the circs were different, if Wheelan had played his cards more cleverly, Donelan would have no hesitation in dragging myself and McTeague down the fun factory for a couple of days solid interrogation.

Sleaford's only a small place after all and not long after my first call, Wheelan came bombing down the road. He was driving Claire McTeague's – sorry, I keep forgetting her name's Wheelan now – yellow Porsche 911. On the dull blackish-grey road, in the dull greenish-grey industrial estate, under the dull whitish-grey sky the sports car stood out like the sun. No way could Superintendent Donelan and his boys in blue miss that.

The Porsche made a hard left, Wheelan jammed on the brakes which blazed red hot and the security guard raised the barrier. As soon as the barrier was high enough, Wheelan shot forward and jerked to a stop just outside his own unit. He threw open the Porsche's door and an instant later, he was inside.

I made that second call.

"Wheelan's on-site. You want him; he's yours," I said before ending the connection. That's it. My job done.

I don't know where the cops had been hiding, although I guessed it was probably behind the abandoned paper mill on the other side of the estate, because only a few minutes later, they arrived in force. Their black and yellow chopper swooped down and then clattered in the air above the unit. A fleet of pale grey Operational Support Unit carriers with mesh window shields swung past my parked DAF cab-over and into the industrial complex.

From my cab's high up vantage point I saw their identifying rooftop numbers and letters. They were closely followed by some cop cruisers and even one or two on powerful motorbikes. Their blue lights bounced off the metal sidings of the industrial units. The group of smokers stood open mouthed, their nicotine addiction forgotten for the moment. The security guard leaned out the hut's window and stared at the fast approaching carriers.

Even from my distance, I heard the driver of the lead carrier as he bellowed at the guard to, "open up, now! now!" The security guard must have leaned on the open button as I'm sure the barrier lifted quicker than usual and the police armada was barely delayed. Most of them sped to the front of the unit but a couple of OSU carriers raced around to the rear as well. Wheelan and his crew were caught like rats in a trap. No way out.

The OSU could have knocked politely on the door of Wheelan's unit but that's never been their style. Instead a heavily armoured lead pair holding a two-man enforcer battering ram leaped out of the first carrier. They took aim and swung the ram at the inset pedestrian door. No way could it withstand that blow. With a metallic crash, the stoved in door smashed open. The two with the ram stepped to one side and instantly more heavily armoured OSU cops stepped over the threshold and into the unit. These carried vicious looking Heckler & Koch sub-machine guns.

I almost felt sorry for Wheelan. Almost but not quite. I would have heard shouting coming from inside the unit as the OSU cops raided the place but the chopper had descended to a few hundred feet and its rotors drowned out everything else.

Superintendent Donelan himself stepped out from the back of one of the cruisers. He rubbed his hands in the cool air and he looked pleased with the result. He too walked into the chaos inside the unit.

Some time later, Wheelan and his men emerged into the daylight each with an armoured cop by their side. The prisoners' hands were bound behind their backs with lengths of cable ties, the plastic ends sticking out into the cold air. None of them were smiling. Other cops followed clutching evidence bags. One, grinning like a Cheshire cat, held a bin bag. They'd found McTeague's little extra gift. I knew they would. The cops bundled the prisoners into the back of the OSU carriers, pulled out of the yard and accelerated out of the industrial estate. Maybe they thought their prisoners' mobster mates would make a rescue attempt; maybe they'd just watched way too

many of those 'Police, Camera, Action' type shows that litter the high numbered satellite channels. Or both.

The chopper hung about a bit longer until it too was summoned back to base and in the sudden silence I could hear myself think. A few cops were left on guard and told to wait for the forensics teams to show. As they waited, they unspooled blue and white crime scene tape over everything they could see.

Superintendent Donelan was one of the last to leave. He spoke to those cops remaining and clapped them on the back. A job well done. He had his driver stop near my cab. I pulled off my hi-viz jacket and then swung down from the warm interior. Donelan lowered his window.

"Hennessy," he said. "I know civic duty isn't your or McTeague's strong suit but thanks for the tip-off. No way is Wheelan walking free from that lot."

"Always a pleasure to help," I said.

"We also found two thousand yellow tablets in with those hooky cigarettes," he told me.

My eyebrows lifted as I remembered to look surprised.

"I don't know what they are but one of my sergeants, who between you and me likes to go clubbing in Ibiza, she tells me they're most likely mandies – ecstasy in other words. And of a particularly high quality. They're knocked out by some Romanian outfit in Constanta, I believe. I don't suppose you know anything about the E?"

Donelan shot me a look from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Me? I wouldn't know; I don't deal in drugs. You know that, Donelan," I lied. He let my lack of respect to his rank slide.

"We've got Wheelan's prints all over the bags," Donelan said his finger hovering over the button to raise his electric window.

"How's that?" I blurted out before shutting up.

Donelan shot me a look. "Yes, got some nice prints on the drugs. His brief will claim in court we pressed the bags into his hands but what chance has a man like Wheelan got of a jury believing such palpable nonsense?" Donelan smiled like a fox.

"Not much – sounds thin to me," I said, returning his grin.

"Oh. Before I go, Hennessy. Do yourself a favour and leave Claire Wheelan alone," he said just before raising his window. "Just go home to McTeague and leave it at that."

We discussed our prospects in the forthcoming Test match for a few minutes and then I touched my fingers to my forehead in a brief salute as Donelan's cruiser pulled away. Now Wheelan was off the scene, I still had to deal with Claire. I locked the cab and walked out of the estate to pick up Mulhearn's Jeep Cherokee. It's not like he would be using it in the near future.

CHAPTER 13.

In the end it was all too easy. Using Mulhearn's phone I sent a text to Claire telling her that her husband had been picked up by the law. She would have found out shortly anyway – as soon as Wheelan's solicitor had been briefed. Almost immediately she sent a return text. A brief smile crossed my lips.

It's easier now than it used to be in the old days. I don't have to speak to people unless I want as most people on a mobile phone contract get given five thousand free texts. Unless you're a teenage girl, like Alexa with a wide circle of friends, most people never use them. However, nobody likes to think that they are wasting their free texts so they use them whenever possible.

I checked Claire's text. She would be waiting for me at home. I engaged first and drove the long way round, over the Holdingham roundabout and then down through the congested centre of Sleaford onto Boston Road and then looped up Old Place. As soon as my Cherokee pulled into the driveway, Claire came running out of the door, clutching her handbag. She wrenched open the passenger side door and only then pulled up in confusion.

"Hennessy? What are you doing here?" Claire asked.

"Mulhearn's busy dealing with the arrests. As I'm sure you can appreciate. As I was in the area he asked me to take you down the cop shop instead." I smiled and tried to look friendly.

This was the tricky part. If Claire Wheelan smelled a rat, then I would have to use force. I didn't want that. But soft living and worry for her new husband had weakened her sense of danger and Claire got in beside me, her handbag on her lap.

"I didn't know you were working for my husband now," said Claire. "He never told me."

I edged out into the traffic. "I didn't want it spread all over, but McTeague's yesterday's man. So I switched sides," I lied.

Claire nodded. People in my line of business usually have as much loyalty to their boss as an overpaid Premier League club footballer has to their team. That is: zero. As soon as a better deal comes along they're off even if the ink is barely dry on their old contract. She should have known better. Because I'm like one of those old fashioned one-club players you sometimes still get.

"Mulhearn said Wheelan needs something picking up from his tanning studio. We'll swing by there on our way to the cop shop. Okay?"

I parked outside the Beauticians. It had been renovated since my fire-bombing raid and everything was brand new with a luxurious purple and black interior. The place was closed and the towels were piled up in neat fluffy heaps. Not surprising the place wasn't open. Earlier, using Mulhearn's phone I had sent texts to all the staff telling them not to come in today. Unlocking the salon, I showed Claire inside.

"It's a USB memory stick hidden in the sun-bed room. It holds some documents Wheelan will need for his defence. Give us a hand to look for it, please," I said. Claire was way too trusting. She followed me into one of the sun-bed rooms. Claire peered around with a puzzled look on her face. There weren't many places you could hide even something as small as a memory stick. She turned to me just as I took a fresh bottle of chloroform out of my jacket pocket that I'd sourced from Dr. Nabi-Khan. "Hennessy? What are...?" was all Claire said before I clamped a hand towel over her face and poured out a dose of the Halothane. The fumes filled the air, masking the smell of tanning lotion. Claire struggled frantically and her manicured nail scratched my hand drawing blood. Slowly, slowly, her struggles diminished and her limbs stilled.

However, before Claire went under completely, I took away the rag. She looked up at me. It's funny but I'd never before noticed how pretty Claire's eyes were – a sort of turquoise blue. I half led, half dragged her over to a chair and sat her down.

"McTeague sent me to give you a warning," I told her. "Remember, he can reach out and take you whenever he wants."

Claire nodded but I'm not sure if she was capable of taking it in. "Let me fetch you a glass of water." Leaving the sun bed room I crossed to the small back kitchen for the staff's use and fetched a bottle of water from the fridge before returning to Claire. She

still looked groggy and ill. From my jacket pocket I took out a couple of pills that my friend, Dr. Pervert, had also given me.

"These will help you recover faster," I lied, holding them out. Claire shook her head weakly but I put them in her mouth and then held the bottle of water to her lips giving her no chance to spit them out or refuse. She jerked her head around but I tapped her throat, forcing her to swallow.

"Feel better?" I asked.

Terror filled Claire's eyes and they opened wide. She knew I wasn't there to help her, especially when I placed the stinking rag back over her face. I dripped a few more drops of Halothane onto the cloth. Claire could no longer struggle as much as earlier and within minutes she was as limp as a rag doll. I gently let her slide down onto the tiled floor.

I looked down at Claire for a minute as she breathed. I felt no sympathy for her. If she hadn't taken up with Wheelan none of this gang war would have taken place.

McTeague would have kept on quietly running the East Midlands with Wheelan as one of his lieutenants. But Wheelan had wanted it all and now he was going to lose it all.

Kneeling by Claire, I stripped her naked and then lifted her up and placed her on the sun-bed. She looked like she was sleeping. I lowered the coffin-like lid, put in the tokens and turned the dial to the max – a full hour's worth of high tan. As I waited, I folded her clothes neatly, wiped down all the surfaces I'd touched and then brought in a couple of magazines from reception. I wondered about popping out to Mulhearn's Jeep for my Telegraph but that would have been an unnecessary risk.

Claire stirred and muttered thickly until I gave her another dose of chloroform. At this point, hepatotoxicity was the least of her worries. The rest of the hour passed slowly. And so did the second after I turned Claire over onto her back, fed the slot with more tokens and then gave her front an hour's full tan.

Finally, at long last, the sun-bed's dial turned full circle until it reached the off position. I stood. Big fluid filled blisters were already forming on her breasts, stomach, thighs and upper arms. There would be many more later. I dreaded to think what her back and buttocks were like.

Claire was a dead woman. Not now but within a few days we would be attending her funeral. The pills I'd forced down her were psoralen, which greatly enhances the effects of light therapy. In medicine, they are mostly used for the treatment of skin

conditions such as psoriasis before a patient goes under the lamp. However, in Claire's case they would give her phototoxicity. Together with the overdose of UV rays from the sun-bed, she was well on the way to getting massive third degree burns leading to sepsis – blood poisoning. This is what Dr. Nabi-Khan explained to me when I'd visited him a few days before.

And the great thing was that no-one would suspect a thing. Everyone knew that Claire was a high-maintenance kind of girl addicted to the sun beds and beauty parlours.

What could be more natural that she would take a short cut by using black market psoralen sourced from some dodgy website and then fall asleep on the sun-bed?

Because it was such a rare cause of death, I already knew the coroner's verdict:

Accidental Death. That would do me and McTeague fine.

Collecting my gear and making sure I didn't touch anything else, I let myself out of the Beauticians salon. The sun had broken through the clouds and it promised to be a beautiful day. On a bench over the road three youths sat passing a bottle of White Lightning cider between them whilst a girl tried to cadge a smoke from them. Their BMX bikes were propped up against an abandoned retail unit. Welcome to Sleazeford, I thought, recognising two of the yobs as the lads who had keyed my Audi coupé months before.

As I crossed the road towards them, my BlackBerry rang. Wondering who was calling me, I looked at the display. It was my husband. Smiling, I took the call.

"I've been trying to reach you all morning, honey. How was the conference?" he asked.

"Great. My presentation went well and the chairman's only just finished wrapping the whole thing up. Listen, I'll pick up a nice bottle of Aussie Shiraz on the way home and prepare a beef casserole for dinner," I told him. He knows nothing of what I really do. He thanked me. My husband's a good man. Unlike me – I'm a bad woman to know. As those youths were about to find out.

THE END.

If you enjoyed reading my book why not send me a quick message via the Feedback link on my obooko.com download page? I will be delighted to hear from you.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR: -

* **Sleaford Noir 2:** - One sleepy Fenland town. Two Polish chancers eager to make a fast buck with no questions asked. A group of businessmen with funny handshakes wanting to rake off big bucks from town planning contracts. A neo-Nazi bigot who'll jump at the chance of becoming Mayor as his first stepping stone to total power. His bunch of thuggish skinhead hangers-on. Add a huge, abandoned industrial complex on the edge of town ripe for redevelopment. Put them all together and what could possibly go wrong? Except that matters soon escalate way beyond anything any of these groups expected.

Welcome to Sleazeford...

If you enjoyed this story, you might enjoy my longer books featuring Romanian criminal Nicolae Caramarin:

* **200 Steps Down:** - When his crime boss in Odessa, Ukraine, decides to up his game by getting involved in people trafficking, Nicolae Caramarin must make a choice. Should he turn a blind eye to the horrors he witnesses and carry on being a good soldier for the gang; or take his stand and bring them all down in the only way he knows how?

* **Lookin' For Trouble:** - With little choice but to flee his home city of Odessa, Nicu Caramarin must recover a gang boss's missing valuable painting if he ever hopes to return. He follows the trail to the windy and rainy city of Manchester. There, he soon falls into his bad old ways with the local underworld. But things soon escalate out of control. Who can he turn to for help? Who can he trust? Soon Caramarin finds himself relying on his strength and wits in a battle for survival where just staying free is a bonus.

* **Two Ways Out:** - Having fallen on tough times, hardbitten ex-con Nicolae Caramarin is lying low. However, he's thinking of going back to the only life he knows – crime. When an old flame shows up asking for a simple favour, he has no idea of the trouble he'll soon be in. Hours later he's standing in front of a murdered

Prosecutor's body – and dead centre in the sight of cops from Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta.

Only question is: how will Nicu Caramarin get out from under and clear his name?

You can connect with the author, Morris Kenyon, on Facebook and follow on Twitter where you will find regular updates. Thank you.

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