

TOP HARD

September 1998

Nottinghamshire, England

1.

This lorry I'd been watching was a brand new Iveco with French registration plates. All torted up with flags and air horns and rows of headlights, it was like a space shuttle had just landed in a layby on the A1.

I'd got myself a position no more than thirty yards away, slumped in the driver's seat of a clapped-out six-year-old Escort that had last been driven by a clapped-out brewery rep. Or that was the way it looked, anyway. It was one o'clock on an ordinary Friday afternoon. And all I had to do was wait.

The trouble was, this lorry hadn't been doing very much. I had nothing to look at except a red and white sticker on the Escort's dashboard thanking me for not smoking, and a little dangling plastic ball that told me what direction I was heading in. I might have been facing the soft south, but at least I was nicotine free.

I already knew a few things about this truck by now, of course. I'd counted its sixteen wheels and admired the size of its tail pipes. I'd seen the sleeping compartment behind the cab, with its ten-inch colour telly, a fridge, and even a microwave oven for warming up the driver's morning croissant. I knew that its forty-foot trailer was packed full of leather jackets, jeans and denim shirts - all good stuff that's really easy to shift. I also knew that somebody was going to be really pissed off about that trailer very soon.

Well, it definitely looked like a solid job so far - good information, and a plan that might actually come together for once. That's saying something in this part of the world. So all I needed to do was sit tight and wait for the action. But it's funny how things can start out really good and solid in the morning, and then turn totally brown and runny by tea time. It's one of my own little theories, this. I call it the Stones McClure Vindaloo Lunch Rule. It's as if the bloke up there with the beard likes a bit of a joke now and then. And today was going to be one of his joke days. Well, I might just die laughing.

Meanwhile, sitting in a tatty motor was in danger of ruining my image. The Escort just wasn't worth looking at. Well, that's the point, I suppose. But you can take low-profile a bit too far. There were an incredible eighty-five thousand miles on the clock of this thing, which proved it hadn't been handled by a used car dealer recently. The floor was covered in empty sweet wrappers, the mouldy debris of a cheese sandwich, and dozens of screwed-up bits of pink tissue. The inside panels looked as though they'd been trampled by a gang of miners in pit boots. The cover had fallen off the fuse box, and a tangle of wires and coloured plastic hung out of it, for all the world as if I'd just botched a hot-wire job. The car smelled of stale beer, too. Maybe a pack of free samples had split open some time. Or maybe a brewery rep just goes around smelling like that.

In a word, it just wasn't the sort of motor that folk round here are used to seeing Stones McClure in. My style is more poke than parcel shelf, if you know what I mean. More turbo charge than towbar. Not to mention a spot of F and F across the fake fur covers. That would be me, definitely.

So for the last few minutes, I'd been dozing a bit, clutching my plastic bottle of Highland Spring in one hand and a half-eaten Snickers bar in the other. Don't believe that means I had no idea what was going on. I've got this trick of keeping one eye half open at all times, like an old tom cat. It's saved me a lot of grief on jobs like this.

One-fifteen. I sat up to take a quick look round. Along the road was a roundabout where traffic was heading into the service area or grinding its way west on the A57 into Lincolnshire. Apart from a roadside cafe, there was nothing around me in the layby - just empty fields on one side, and a bit of Sherwood Forest on the other. I mean there was nothing

apart from four lanes of traffic thundering by on the A1, obviously. But the drivers weren't taking notice of much. They were busy fiddling with their carphones, or counting the miles ticking off as they hurtled towards their next meeting or their latest delivery of widgets. This is what vehicle thieves rely on. Nobody sees anything happening around them when they're on the road.

Well, people never learn, do they? That's my second rule. And thank God for it, because this is what keeps blokes like me in beer and Meatloaf CDs for life.

I glanced at the clock again. Shouldn't be long now. Half an hour ago, I'd watched the driver who brought the lorry disappear into the cafe, shrugging his shoulders at the smell of hot fat drifting from the window of Sally's Snap Box. He was a short, thickset bloke wearing blue overalls and a five o'clock shadow. You could practically hear him singing the *Marseillaise*. This bloke's load might be headed for Leeds or Glasgow, or anywhere. But it wouldn't make it to its destination. Not today.

It's the load that's important, see. Thieves don't target brand new trucks for their own sake. If you're planning to cut a vehicle up for spares, you go for an ancient Bedford or something. There's a big export market for old lorry spares. But if you're nicking the load, it's a different matter. That's where the real business is - at least £1.6 billion worth a year, they say. And people will do anything to tap into dosh like that.

For the sake of authenticity, I was tuned in to a local radio station on the Escort's battered old Motorola. The presenter had just stumbled off into one of those endless phone-in segments they seem to like so much. Grannies from all over the county were passing on tips for getting cocoa stains out of acrylic armchair covers, or offering to swap back copies of *People's Friend* for a second-hand budgie cage. It was dire enough to kill my remaining brain cells - I mean, the few that last night's booze had left intact.

And then - bingo! An unmarked white Transit van left the inside lane of the A1 and pulled slowly into the layby in front of the French truck. Action at last.

I have a really good memory for registration numbers, but the plate on the Transit was a new one to me. That was no surprise, though. It would have been nicked from a car park in Worksop or Mansfield during the past hour, and that was someone else's worry.

From my position, I could just see a bloke jump down from the passenger side of the van. He had the collar of a red ski jacket turned right up and a woollen hat pulled low over his face, making it impossible to get an ID on him. As soon as he'd slammed the door shut, the Transit pulled out into the traffic again and disappeared south.

I stayed low in my seat and ate a bit of my Snickers. The chocolate was starting to melt and my fingers were sticky. I rubbed them on a windscreen wipe from a little packet I found in the door well. I would have stuffed the used wipe into the ashtray, but it was already jammed with crumpled tissues, all yellow and crusty. Anonymity is fine, but I draw the line at catching some disgusting disease for the sake of camouflage.

The bloke in the cap was fiddling with something I couldn't see, right up close to the near side of the Iveco's cab. No one took any notice of him, except me. Then he looked round once, took a step upwards, and was gone from sight.

I speed dialled a number on my mobile, then waited a minute or two more until I heard the rumble of a diesel engine and the release of air brakes. As I started the Escort's motor, I glanced in my rearview mirror and saw a large figure emerge from the cafe. It was a bloke so big that he had to duck and walk out of the door sideways to avoid bringing the side of the portakabin with him. He lumbered up to the side of the car, hefting something like a lump of breeze block in his left hand. And suddenly it was as if the sun had gone in. Oh yeah, meet my sidekick, Doncaster Dave. He's my personal back-up, my one-man riot squad. A good bloke to have watching your arse.

Dave had been stuffing himself with sandwiches and cakes in Sally's at my expense. Well, it's better than having him sit in the car with me. He gets twitchy when there's food nearby, and he'd probably enjoy the phone-in programme and laugh at the DJ's jokes. And then I'd have to kill him.

"Come on, Donc. Come on."

Dave was starting to go into the monkey squat necessary for him to manoeuvre his way into the passenger seat, when the door of the cafe flew open and a second figure came out. This one was dressed in blue overalls, and he was gesticulating and shouting. The sight of the lorry pulling onto the A1 seemed to infuriate him, and he ran a few yards down the layby, yelling. Then he turned and ran back again, still yelling. This was far too much noise for my liking. And definitely too much arm waving. Even on the A1, he might attract attention.

I put my foot on the brake. The bloke came eagerly towards me, and I sighed as I wound down the window.

"*Mon camion,*" he said. "My truck. It is being stolen."

"Let him in, Donc, why not?" I said.

So Dave opened the back door of the Escort without a word. The Frenchman climbed in, and Dave squeezed into the front. The breeze block in his hand turned out to be the biggest sausage and egg butty you've ever seen, dripping with tomato sauce. The car filled with a greasy aroma that would linger for days. It didn't go too well with the stale beer either.

The Iveco was already a few hundred yards away by now, and the Frenchman began bouncing angrily.

"What's up, monsieur?" I said, as I indicated carefully before pulling out. I was waiting until I spotted some slow-moving caravans to sneak in front of. Getting onto the A1 from a layby is a bit dicey sometimes - you can end up with a snap-on tools salesman right up your backside, doing ninety miles an hour in his company Cavalier.

"We must follow the thieves. They steal my truck."

"Dear, oh dear. It happens all the time, you know. You can't leave anything unattended round here."

"Hurry, hurry! You are too slow."

I shook my head sadly. Well, there you go. You give somebody a lift, do them a favour, and the first thing out of their mouths is criticism of your driving ability. The world is so unfair.

"It's always been like this," I said helpfully. "This bit of the A1 was the Great North Road. You know, where Dick Turpin used to hang out? You've heard of Dick Turpin, have you, monsieur?"

"*Comment? What?*"

"Highwayman, you know. Thief."

This is straight up, too. Well, the original Great North Road is a bit to the east, but it's well and truly bypassed now. Some of it has deteriorated to a track, fit only for horses and trail bikes. But make no mistake. This whole area is still bandit country.