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Nowhere To Hide

Written by Alex Walters

Published by AVON

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ALEX WALTERS

Nowhere To Hide

A V O N

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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Prologue

They were some miles from the port terminal, out on the open road, before Hanlon felt able to relax slightly. ‘Shit,’ he said. ‘I really thought they were on to us back there.’ He was a short wiry man, muscular, with the air of having drunk one too many strong coffees during the journey over.

At first he thought that Mo was asleep. But the older man opened one eye, peering at him from under his trademark trilby hat. ‘You worry too much, man.’

‘Jesus, Mo. We’ve got plenty to worry about.’

Mo opened both eyes and shrugged. ‘I’d say not, wouldn’t you? All gone smooth as clockwork.’ He eased himself back in the passenger seat and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. ‘Not even any noise from back there.’

Hanlon glanced back over his shoulder. The two women were asleep. Partly exhaustion. Mainly the sedatives Mo had fed them as they were leaving the port. Christ, how had he allowed himself to get mixed up in this? Apart from anything else, it seemed so half-fucking-baked. ‘This worth the hassle, then, you reckon?’

Mo’s eyes were half-closed again, the hat slid low across his forehead. ‘What’s that, man?’

‘You think it’s worth it? All this?’

‘Not ours to judge, man. Being paid for it, aren’t you?’

‘Not enough,’ Hanlon said. ‘Like I say, I thought they were on to us back there.’

‘That was nothing. I been through far worse with those bastards. They didn’t suspect a fucking thing. Even with you shaking like a bare-assed Eskimo.’ Mo tried to sound like he was on the sidewalks of Harlem, but his North Wales intonation kept breaking through.

He was right, though, Hanlon thought. The passports had been convincing enough. The Immigration Officers had waved them through with no more than a couple of questions and a glance into the back of the car. He’d been worried that the two women might make a fuss, either on the ferry or when they reached the border. After all, it was their one chance to get free. But they’d played the game, just as Mo had said they would. Maybe because they were scared of Mo. They had plenty of reason to be scared. But Hanlon thought they’d just lost the will to resist. They’d been through too much. There was no future for them other than this.

‘Feels like there should be a better way of doing it,’ Hanlon went on. He just wanted to keep the conversation going to calm his nerve, keep focused for the long drive. Mo looked like he wanted to sleep. ‘Something less risky.’

‘What you suggest, man? Parcel post? Rolling ’em up in a fucking carpet?’ Mo slid the hat fully across his face, a gesture indicating that the conversation was at an end.

He was right about that as well. As long as the women played ball, this was low risk and cheap. Two couples returning from a long weekend in Dublin. Apparently

legitimate British passports. Even the ferry tickets had been bought at a discount.

Hanlon was new to this. He didn't even know how often they carried out these kinds of transactions. Not very, he guessed. They'd have other means of getting the women into the country in the first place. Most probably they arrived legitimately, lured by the prospect of jobs and money. Then, before they knew it, they'd vanished off the grid, exploited by thugs like Mo and the people he worked for.

Christ, he thought again, how the *hell* had he allowed himself to get mixed up in this?

Money. That was the short answer. A way to make the quick buck he needed. Low risk, they'd said, though he hadn't really believed that. Just help them move the merchandise about. That had been the word. Merchandise. One of the less unpleasant words.

Hanlon didn't know the background and he didn't want to. Some deal had been done across the Irish Sea, and now they were bringing these two women – hardly more than girls – to work in some brass-house in Manchester. For them, probably no different from doing the same thing in Dublin. Crap either way.

They'd had cheap tickets on the last ferry of the day, so it would be into the small hours before they reached Manchester. God, he felt tired. Mo was snoring gently now, hat flat across his face. The privilege of being the senior partner, Hanlon assumed. You got to snooze your way across North Wales, while the junior oppo kept his eyes on the road. As far as he knew, the car belonged to Mo, though Hanlon assumed the car was stolen or the plates pirated in some way. Presumably, like the faked passports, nothing

would be traceable. He didn't even know for certain who Mo worked for. He had his ideas, but better not to ask too many questions, as long as they paid what was owed.

It was the first and last time, though. They'd suckered him just like they'd suckered those poor cows in the back seat. The difference was that he had an exit route. If they paid him what they'd promised, he'd have enough to settle his debts and get things back on track. Maybe even make an attempt to patch things up with Cath, if it wasn't too late for that. At least stop her playing silly buggers about giving access to Josh. Not that he had any rights in that department, after everything he'd done.

'Shit.' He'd been driving on autopilot, his mind full of his unmissed past and half-imagined future. For a minute or two, he hadn't registered the flashing blue light in the rear view mirror. He glanced down at the speedometer. It would be fucking typical to be pulled over for speeding. But, no, that was okay.

He leaned over and nudged Mo. 'Fucking pigs,' he hissed. 'Behind us.'

Mo sat up with an alacrity that suggested he perhaps hadn't been sleeping after all. He looked over his shoulder and peered through the rear window. 'Christ's sake, man. Relax. They're not after us. Probably just the end of their fucking shift. Keen to get back to their loved ones. Or even their wives.' He snorted at his own wit and prepared to stretch himself back across the seat.

But the police car was already overtaking and slowing in front of them, in an unmistakable signal for them to pull over.

'Jesus, Mo,' Hanlon said. 'What the fuck do we do now?'

Mo was sitting bolt upright, looking less relaxed. 'Let me do the talking. Keep calm and keep it zipped.' He looked across at Hanlon, his gaze unwavering. 'Nothing to worry about, man. Long as you leave it to me.'

'But the car—'

Mo shook his head. 'We're not fucking amateurs, man. Vehicle's stolen, but it's a ringer. Licence plates match the type and colour. Name of registered owner's the same as the passport. It's all sorted. There's nothing to worry about.'

'So why the fuck are they stopping us?' Hanlon was already pulling into the hard shoulder, carefully following the police vehicle.

'Probably just routine. Not much opportunity to hassle a black guy out here in the sticks.' He frowned suddenly, leaning forward in his seat. 'That not right, man. Who is that guy?' He watched for a moment as a figure climbed slowly out of the car in front, then turned to Hanlon. 'Shit, man. Get started. Just fucking drive!'

Hanlon stared back at him, bewildered. He'd already cut the engine. Now, in the face of Mo's unexpected panic, he frantically twisted the ignition. He slammed his foot on to the accelerator, misjudging the movement, and the engine stalled.

'Fuck, man. Just get it started.'

Hanlon turned the ignition again, but he'd flooded the engine and the starter turned ineffectually. In the dark outside, the figure had reached the car. Hanlon made another attempt to start the car, trying to remember what to do about a flooded ignition. Then, suddenly, the engine burst into life. As he struggled to put the car into first gear, his mind and actions refusing to coordinate, the car door

beside him was pulled open. He jammed the gear stick into what he thought was first, banged his foot hard down on the accelerator and let out the clutch.

The engine coughed and died.

The figure outside said: 'Need a few more lessons, mate. Don't take off in third.'

Hanlon looked across at Mo, baffled now. Mo had his head in his hands, his body hunched as if anticipating a blow.

'Fucking cowboys,' the figure said. 'Shouldn't be let out on your own. Give us all a bad name.'

Hanlon raised his head and stared through the windscreen at the car parked ahead of their own. Not a police car. Not a police car after all. Just a plain dark saloon with one of those magnetic blue beacons that doctors and plainclothes cops use to get through the traffic.

He looked up at the figure standing next to him. Black suit. A baseball cap. Dark glasses. No one he'd be able to recognise in daylight. Beside him, Hanlon could hear Mo breathing rapidly, murmuring something, a voice on the edge of losing it.

'Nice of you two to do the heavy lifting, though,' the figure said. He leaned forward and peered into the back seat. There was a gun in his hand, Hanlon noticed, feeling oddly calm now. 'Bringing these two charming ladies over. I'm sure we'll use them wisely.'

He straightened up, juggling the gun gently in his hand. Then he looked back down at Hanlon. 'Sorry about this, son,' he said, gently. 'Nothing personal.'

Hanlon stared back, surprised by the softness of the man's tone. He suddenly had the sense that it was all going

to be all right. The man would simply take the women and leave. Okay, he and Mo would lose the payment because they'd fucked up. But he could live with that. He could fucking live.

But the man had already taken a step back and Hanlon knew that, really, nothing would be all right again. He watched as the man crouched slightly, then raised the gun and pointed it past Hanlon into the car.

Hanlon was screaming before the gun was fired. Before he felt the rush of air and heard the explosion. Before he sensed the impact and the sudden jerk from Mo's body beside him. Before the windows and seats and his own face were showered in Mo's blood and bone and grey matter.

He was still screaming as he tried ineffectually to free himself from his seat belt, throwing himself sideways in a vain attempt to drag himself from the nightmarish, blood-drenched interior of the car.

And he stopped screaming only when the man outside raised the gun and fired for a second time.

Ken had left his car in one of these back streets, but for the moment he couldn't quite remember where. Earlier, it had seemed the obvious place, just around the corner from the club, handy for when he came out. But now he'd walked round the block twice and he still couldn't work it out.

Maybe someone had stolen it. Always possible in an area like this. Not likely, though. Not the kind of car to attract thieves. Too new to be easy pickings, but not so modern or sexy that anyone would be particularly drawn to it. Not one for the boy-racers, or for the professionals who blagged

prestige cars to order. A nondescript runabout for the middle-aged. Just the way Kev liked it.

Story of his life, in fact. Keep your head down. Don't draw attention to yourself. Get to know the right people. Word of mouth. Enough people knew who he was, but not too many. If he wanted some gear, he knew who to go to. If he had some gear to shift, people came to him. Otherwise, he drifted out of sight, unnoticed. An inconspicuous link in the chain.

He didn't feel particularly inconspicuous tonight, though. He'd made a mistake, lost a bit of control. He wasn't a good drinker. A cheap drunk, Kev, they always said. A few pints and he's anybody's. That wasn't quite true. Kev was always his own man, no matter what he'd drunk. But on a night like this that just meant there was no one to look out for him.

Shit. He stumbled on a loose paving slab and clutched at a shop front to steady himself. He didn't really believe the car had been stolen. In any case he was in no state to drive. But he'd wanted to reassure himself that it was still safely there. Now all he could do was hope that his memory would improve once he'd sobered up.

He turned round, trying to get his bearings. Where was he, exactly? He didn't know Stockport well. He wasn't even sure why he'd come along this evening. A gentleman's club, Harvey had said. The audience hadn't seemed to contain many gentlemen, and the women on stage hadn't been Kev's idea of ladies. Expensive bloody drinks, as well, especially when the big man, whoever he was, had moved them on to rounds of shorts. Harvey had told him he'd meet some useful people there. Maybe he had,

but in the morning he'd have no bloody idea who they were.

He tottered his way towards the next street corner, looking for some recognisable landmark. There was a knot of street lights at the far end of the street. Probably the A6, the characterless trunk-road that sliced through the town on its way to Manchester. Once he reached that, he'd find a minicab office. This was going to cost him a bloody fortune. A taxi back home, and then another cab back in the morning. Why had he let Harvey talk him into this?

It never paid to stray outside your own territory. He should know that by now. Up in the city, he knew what was what. Who to talk to, who to avoid. Tonight, he'd talked to a few people, suggested a few deals, but he hadn't known what they thought. He hadn't even been able to work out who were the real players. Not the mouthy ones, for sure. There'd been a few of those, making the right noises, but that counted for nothing. It was the ones in the background who mattered, the ones who watched you, made their judgements, and said nothing. It was only later that you'd find out whether they were happy or not.

What the fuck had happened to Harvey anyway? He'd been there earlier, had done the introductions, settled Kev in with a crowd who looked mostly like chancers. Then at some point he'd bugged off. Probably found himself some woman. Someone not too choosy.

Shit. This was the last time. Harvey always made out he was doing you a bloody favour, and nine times out of ten you ended up out of pocket.

He stopped again. The lights he'd thought marked the A6 had turned out to be at the corner of some other

junction entirely. It was vaguely familiar, but only vaguely. Somewhere he'd driven through maybe. Certainly nowhere he'd ever been on foot. There was a closed down pub opposite, the back end of some industrial buildings. Not the kind of place you'd find a minicab.

He turned, peering through the pale darkness down each of the streets in turn. There wasn't even anyone around to ask, this time of night. The only sign of life was a car pulling slowly out of a side street further down the road. Judging from the speed, the driver was nearly as pissed as he was. Kev had been half-thinking about trying to flag the car down, ask for directions, even try to cadge a life to the nearest minicab office. But who would pull up for a drunk at this time of the night?

Well, maybe someone who was in the same condition. To Kev's mild surprise, the car drew up next to him, the electric window slowly descending. If you're after directions, pal, Kev thought, you've come to the wrong fucking bloke.

Kev was on the passenger side of the car and could see only the shape of the driver through the open window. Baseball cap, he noticed irrelevantly. Dark glasses. Who the fuck wears dark glasses to drive at night?

From inside, a flat voice, devoid of intonation, said: 'Kevin Sheerin.' It was a statement rather than a question.

Kev suddenly felt uneasy. He glanced both ways along the street, but there was no sign of anyone. Just the stationary car in front of him. A dark saloon. Cavalier or Mondeo or somesuch.

'Who's asking?' he said finally. The wrong response, he realised straight away. No one was asking, but he'd already

given all the answer that was needed. The car window was already closing. ‘What the fuck—?’

But that question needed no answer either. Kev, sensing what was coming, had already started to run, but his drunken feet betrayed him and he stumbled on the edge of the pavement, tumbling awkwardly into the road. He rolled over, head scraping against the rough tarmac, trying to drag himself out of the way. He could already taste blood in his mouth.

It was too late. The headlights, full beam, were blinding his eyes. The engine, unexpectedly loud, the only thing he could hear. The moment seemed to last forever, and he told himself that he’d been wrong, that it wasn’t going to happen after all. Then he was at the kerbside, trying to drag himself upright, and the car slammed hard into his crouching body.

For an instant, he felt nothing and he thought that, somehow, miraculously, he’d escaped unscathed. Then he tried to pull himself upright and immediately the pain hit him, agonising, unbearable, a shockwave through his legs and back. He fell forwards again, hitting his head on the curb, scarcely conscious now, thinking; *shit*, my back—

He had no time to think anything more. The car had reversed a few yards, and now jerked forwards again, the front wing smashing into his legs. He lay motionless as the car rode bumpily over his prone body and disappeared into the night, leaving his mangled, bloody corpse crumpled in the gutter.

Steve woke too early, like every night since they brought him here. It was the silence, he thought. The silence and the darkness. He’d never be comfortable in this place. He

was a city boy, used to the traffic-drone that never died away, the wasteful small hours glare of the street lights and office blocks.

He rolled over, pulling the cheap duvet around his body, burrowing in search of further sleep. But the moment had passed. He was awake, mind already racing through the same thoughts, the same anxieties. Feeling a sudden claustrophobia, he threw back the covers and sat up in the pitch black. The room faced east, across the open valley, and the curtains were as cheap and flimsy as the duvet. But there was no sign of dawn, no promise of the rising sun.

He fumbled around the unfamiliar bedside table until he found a switch for the lamp. The sudden glare was blinding but, after a moment, reassuring. The bedroom was as bland and anonymous as ever. Off-white walls, forgettable chain store pictures, inoffensive flat-pack furniture. There'd been a half-hearted attempt to make it homely, but that only highlighted its bleakness, confirmed beyond doubt that no one would ever stay in this place by choice.

It was cold too, he thought, as he reached for his dressing gown. The central heating hadn't yet come on, and he could taste the damp in the air. He crossed to the window and peered out. A clear night, the sky moonless but full of stars, less dark than he had imagined. In the faint light, he could make out the valley, the faint gleam of the Goyt in the distance. Miles from anywhere. The end of the line, past all civilisation.

He pulled the dressing gown more tightly around him, and stepped out on to the landing. This was his routine. Waking in the middle of the bloody night, making himself

a black coffee, sitting and waiting for the sun to rise on another empty day.

The unease struck him halfway down the stairs. Nothing he could put his finger on, just a sudden sense of something wrong. He hesitated momentarily, then forced himself to continue down. Of course something was wrong. Everything was fucking wrong. He didn't even know why he'd done it. It wasn't the money – he knew there would be little enough of that, now they didn't need him any more. It wasn't the supposed guarantees. He'd few illusions about what those would be worth when the excrement hit the extractor. It wasn't even that he was doing the right thing. He'd just managed to get himself wedged firmly up shit creek and then discovered that there never had been any paddle.

He pushed his way into the tiny kitchen and went wearily through the familiar ritual – filling the kettle, spooning coffee into the cup, adding two sugars. While the kettle boiled, he stared out of the kitchen window, across the postage stamp of an unkempt garden, towards the Peaks. The eastern sky was lighter now, a pale glow over the bleak moorland.

He stirred the coffee and paused for a moment longer, sipping the hot sweet liquid, gazing vacantly at the darkness. The sense of unease had remained, a thought lurking at the edge of his mind. Something more focused than the usual ever-present anxiety. Some idea that had struck him and receded before he could catch it.

He picked up the coffee and forced himself back into his routine. He would go into the living room, sit on the chilly plastic sofa, switch on the television and watch the silent

moving figures, with no interest in turning up the volume. Waiting for yet another bloody morning.

He pushed open the sitting room door, and his mind finally grasped the thought that had been troubling him. The door. He'd closed the sitting room door before going to bed. Another part of his routine, some unquestioned wisdom retained from childhood. Close the downstairs doors in case of fire. Waste of bloody time in a place like this, he'd reasoned. Whole place would be up like a tinderbox before you could draw a breath. But he still closed the doors.

Halfway down the stairs he'd registered, without even knowing what he'd seen, that the living room door was ajar.

He thought of stepping back, but knew it was already too late. In that moment another, more tangible sensation struck him. The acrid scent of cigarette smoke, instantly recognisable in this ascetic, smoke-free official house.

He thrust the door wide and stepped inside. The small table lamp was burning in the corner of the room, The man was sprawled across the tacky sofa, toying lazily with a revolver.

'Up early, Steve,' he commented. He was a large man in a black tracksuit, wearing dark glasses, with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. His face was neatly shaven and boyish, but there was nothing soft about him. 'Guilty conscience?'

'Not so's you'd notice,' Steve said. 'You?'

'Sleep of the just, mate,' the man said. 'Sleep of the fucking just.'

A moment before, Steve had been contemplating how to

get out of this. Whether to try to get back into the kitchen or upstairs. Out of the front door, or through the patio windows.

But there was no point. The man knew his name. Knew who he was. Why he was here. Someone had grassed. Why else had he come? Someone would always grass. He ought to know that better than anyone.

There was no way out. No future. There never had been any future, not to speak of, once he'd taken that step. He'd known it then and there was no escaping it now.

Steve felt oddly calm, detached, observing all this from a distance. He saw the man playing aimlessly with his gun. He saw it all, and he felt untroubled. He had no illusions about what the man would do. Perhaps no more than he deserved.

So he stood there, motionless, waiting for it to start. And in that moment – before the flare and the noise, before the impact, before his blood began to seep into the worn fibres of the cheap grey carpet – Steve felt almost relieved.

He'd almost missed it.

Something caught the corner of his eye, some movement. A twitch. He moved himself to the right to try to gain a better vantage through the spyhole.

It was well after midnight. The dead hours of routine patrols when nothing much ever happens. Maybe just some scrote with insomnia – and, Christ knew, all of this bunch ought to have trouble sleeping – shouting the odds, wanting to share his misery with the rest of the fucking world.

But usually nothing much. A fifteen minute stroll along

the dimly lit landing, glance into the cells, check that no one was up to no good. There was never any real trouble.

Sometimes Pete tried to kid people that this was a responsible job, stuck up here all night by himself on the landing. If anything happens, it's up to me to sort it out. Yeah, he thought, up to me to press the bell and summon backup. He was an OSG. Operational Support Grade. Bottom of the pile, with – at least in theory – minimal prisoner contact. Didn't always work out that way, of course. But nobody expected much of him. Especially not the Prison Officers.

Like that one earlier, who'd been coming up here just as he was ending his previous patrol. Pete had been running a bit late, had lingered a bit too long over his coffee and copy of *The Sun*. Nobody really cared at this time of the night, but he didn't like to let things slide, so he'd been a bit out of breath, dragging his overweight body hurriedly round the landings then down the stairs.

He hadn't recognised the officer who'd met him on the stairs. He thought he knew most of them, but they kept bugging the shifts about and this one was new to him. Christ knew what he was doing going up to the landings at this hour.

Pete had tried to offer a cheery greeting – they were both stuck on this arse end of a roster, after all – but the guy had just blanked him, hardly seeming to register that Pete was there. Well, fuck you as well, Pete had thought, puffing down the last few stairs. He'd heard the officer unlocking the landing doors above him.

Afterwards, he'd been worried that the officer might report him for being late. It was a stupid concern. The guy probably wouldn't even have known what time Pete

was supposed to carry out the patrol. But there was something about him, something about the way he'd ignored Pete on the stairs, that had seemed unnerving. Just the kind of officious bastard who'd grass you up for the sheer hell of it.

So, just in case the guy was still up there, Pete had kicked off his next patrol a little early so he could get it finished on time without busting a gut. But of course the landing had been deserted. Whatever the officer had been doing, he'd finished it and buggered off.

There was nothing else to do. Pete shuffled with effort round the landing, stopping to check on each cell in turn. Everyone sleeping like a baby.

He'd reached the last cell and was preparing to move on to the next landing, when he stopped and looked again.

Yeah, he'd almost missed it. The cell was in darkness and he'd assumed the occupant was securely in bed. Then he'd caught some movement in the periphery of his vision. He hadn't even been sure he'd seen it at first. He'd shifted his body to get a better view.

Jesus.

There was something – someone – there, jerking and struggling. Someone pressed against the wall behind the door, almost invisible. And now Pete could hear the sound of choking, the awful sound of a wordless, gasping scream . . .

He reacted better than he'd have expected, racing across the landing to sound the alarm. Then back to the cell, fumbling with his own set of keys. He was supposed to enter the cells only in the direst of emergencies, but surely this counted as one of those. As he pushed open the door,

it occurred to him that he might have been suckered. But the landing was sealed and backup would be there in minutes.

He knew straight away he'd done the right thing. The prisoner was hanging halfway up the wall – Christ knew how he'd managed it – some kind of cord tight around his neck. The man's head lolled to one side, his waxy face already blue in the dim light from the landing.

Pete threw his arms round the prisoner's body and tried to drag it down from whatever was holding the rope. He struggled at first, afraid that he was doing more harm than good, but knowing the prisoner would have no chance as long as his own weight continued to tighten the cord. Suddenly, as Pete strained to lift the prisoner's body, the rope gave way and the body toppled sideways, out of Pete's grip, on to the hard floor.

A nail. A fucking six inch nail hammered into the wall. Where the fuck had he got that from? And the rope, for that matter? Someone was for the high jump.

Pete crouched down by the body, fumbling to loosen the ligature from the prisoner's neck. The face was purple now, and the old guy looked like he might be a goner already. Pete fumbled around the plastic cord and finally found the knot. He could feel it beginning to give under his trembling fingers. At the same moment, he heard the sound of the landing gates behind unlocked.

By the time the two officers and the principal had reached the cell door, Pete had managed to loosen the rope. He looked up as the three men crowded the doorway: 'Trying to top himself.'

Pete moved back as the principal officer crouched over

the body and began to administer CPR, thrusting hard and rhythmically on the prisoner's chest. One of the officers was on his radio calling for an ambulance.

Pete dragged himself to his feet, only now beginning to take in what had happened. What he'd just dealt with. 'Jesus.' He glanced down at the supine figure, still bouncing under the pounding arms of the principal officer.

The officer with the radio nodded laconically towards Pete. 'Good work, son. Let's hope we're in time. We all get a bollocking if one of them tops himself.' He took a step back and glanced at the number of the cell. 'Mind you,' he added, 'won't be too many saying any prayers for this one.'

Pete looked up. 'That right?'

'Don't reckon so.' The officer moved to lean against the doorframe. 'This is Keith Welsby. Just another bent copper. There's one or two would be glad to help him on his fucking way.'