



Excerpts from *Hard Return* by Rosie Claverton

Except #1 – Behind Bars

The two men shoved Alby down on the ground in front of the officer. He didn't move, didn't speak, didn't even look at Alby.

One of the new uniforms broke the silence. "He's a thief."

The other nodded, the movement of his dreadlocked head casting strange shadows on the ground. "Second offence, sir."

The officer nodded.

They dragged Alby to his feet again and gave him a push. "Round the block with you then!"

His breath was misting in front of him and Alby was covered in goosepimples, like a turkey ready for the oven. He stood stock still, as if holding his body rigidly might somehow protect him from the wind stinging his dripping, naked body.

Alby looked up then, eyes searching for someone to help him. Lewis resisted the urge to duck his head, waiting for Alby to meet his eye. He wouldn't play the coward and deny his friend. Yet a small part of him didn't want to fuck this up after only a couple of minutes, especially not for Alby Bloody Collins.

Alby probably had nicked something. Lewis was the one who had trained him to thief after all, and he was bloody good at it. What he wasn't good at was discretion. If he'd stolen something of value, he wouldn't have been able to keep himself from flaunting it. He deserved whatever punishment was coming to him.

Even death?



It was hard to judge the temperature when Lewis was just out of a metal box, cocooned in sensible layers against the chill. It wasn't freezing, but it wasn't a balmy summer's evening either. Would Alby get hypothermia from jogging round the block? Was Lewis leaving him to die out here?

Were these men prepared to take that chance? What rules were there in this place anyway? What happened if a man died out here? Would anyone care?

Alby saw him. "Lewis! Lewis, you wouldn't let them do this, would you?"

All eyes were suddenly on him. He felt the officer watching him particularly, as Alby took one staggering step towards him. The man who'd shoved Alby hauled him back and tried again to propel him away from them, away from the bright light and into the darkness.

"Wait!"

He hadn't meant to speak. Yet the focus was back on him, as Lewis stumbled forward and unzipped his fleece jacket. He chucked it at Alby's chest, furious with his friend, and at himself for losing front so quickly. But his fucking conscience wouldn't let them send Alby out into the night like that.

"Run fucking fast," he said, voice harsh even to his ears.

Years of instinctive obedience kicked in and Alby ran, not even stopping to put on the jacket, swiftly disappearing into the inky blackness beyond the floodlights.

Someone grabbed at his T-shirt, but Lewis stuck his palm flat against the man's chest, holding him away. The dreadlocked man held him fast.

"You ain't been here five minutes and you're already interfering. It won't go well for you."

Lewis didn't move, didn't speak, just stared down the bloke until he released his shirt.



“I don’t make the rules here.” The officer spoke with an accent from deep within the heart of England. “You make them, you play by them.”

He fixed Lewis with his dark eyes, the rest of his face completely in shadow.

“You live by them. You die by them.”

Excerpt #2 – Know Thy Enemy

Amy traipsed through the woods, Cerys a few steps in front of her, flanked on either side by silent armed men. They had taken her backpack but neither of them had been searched. Amy was almost afraid of what Jason’s sister might be carrying.#

Cerys had tried to introduce herself, to show her badge, but she was silenced with a gun against her chest. These men weren’t interested in explanations. Amy had watched Cerys barely control her temper, her panic. It made her deeply afraid to see that Cerys was as helpless as she was.

The sliver of moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and the woods were eerily quiet. Had the wildlife all fled before them or had there never been any? Had this bizarre experiment wiped them out somehow? Was Amy growing more hysterical with every step deeper into darkness?

A mist was rising, coiling around her body like a sinister snake. With mounting horror, Amy watched the fog swallow Cerys whole, the guards’ torches useless within this shroud.

It could’ve been ten minutes or it could’ve been a decade before Amy ran into the back of Cerys, almost sending them both to the ground.

“Sorry!”

Her voice was too loud, almost a shout. Idiot.



“Don’t panic on me,” Cerys hissed.

A heavy hand fell on Amy’s shoulder, pushing her forward, until her foot nudged at a raised edge. Something whistled past her face, before landing with a soft thud—somewhere below her.

“Climb down.”

Trembling, Amy lowered her body into a crouch and reached out. The metal was burning with cold as she leaned forward, noticing the presence of dim lights like cats’ eyes on a midnight motorway. Leading her down a bare metal ladder into a hole in the ground.

She couldn’t back down now. Jason was committed, probably already inside, and he needed her to be present. This hadn’t been what they’d planned for, but if she could somehow get this team to accept her, she could keep him safe.

If she just climbed down into the bowels of the earth with a gun at her back.

She climbed in. The light gave everything a red-tinted glow, like the mouth to Hell, and she wanted to close her eyes against it. She counted thirty-nine steps before her foot hit solid ground, then the second.

Two men were waiting for her, in the same black uniforms, but the low lighting continued down the tunnel so she couldn’t see their faces. A co-incidence, or a deliberate strategy?

They were silent as they preceded her down the tunnel, their footsteps echoing in the close space. She suddenly looked behind her, but there was no one else there. No guards, no Cerys.

“Where is—”

“Your driver made her delivery, didn’t she?”



The guards didn't stop walking and Amy trotted to keep up. She noticed that one of them seemed to be holding her backpack in his hand. Was that the object that had been dropped past her face before she'd entered the manhole? Is that what he thought Cerys' delivery was?

Had they mistaken Amy for someone else? If they had, how long could she maintain the charade? With preparation and the separation of a computer screen, she could lie like a pro, but here, like this? She wasn't sure she even knew how.

The familiar sick feeling was rolling in her stomach and her lungs felt compressed, unable to coexist with her frantically-beating heart. She wanted to run, to get out. She had to get out.