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The Hangman's Song

Written by James Oswald

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The Hangman's Song

JAMES OSWALD

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I

'The important thing is to get the drop right. Nothing else matters, really.'

He stands on tippy-toes, balanced on the precarious chair, hands behind his back like a good boy. His fingers are trembling slightly, as if in anticipation, but he's not struggling. I knew he wouldn't. Not now. He wants this, after all.

'Of course, to work that out I need to know your height, your weight, your build.'

I tug at the rope. Good, stout hemp; none of that nylon rubbish for a job like this. Getting it over the beam was a struggle, but now it's secure, ready. His eyelids flutter as I slip the noose over his head, gently snug it around his neck past his ear, let the excess loop over his bare shoulder.

'Height? No, height is easy, as long as you're not wearing platform shoes. Clothes can be deceptive though, make a thin man seem fat. And then there's build.'

He doesn't respond, but then why would he? He's not here any more. I can see the movement of his eyes under closed lids, the flick, flick, flick as he watches something far off in his mind. I reach out, run the backs of my fingers down his cheek, his arm, the muscles of his taut stomach. He is young, so young. Barely a man yet and the world has already dragged him down. Young skin is so

soft and pure, not corrupted by the cankers and blemishes of age. A pity the same cannot be said of young minds. They are so fragile, so hopeless.

'Muscle is so much denser than fat. A well-muscled physique will weigh more than a lazy body. It is essential to take that into account.'

The spirit shivers in me, drinking deep from the well of despair that fills this room. There is nothing here worth saving, only the joy of release from a life not worth living.

'A handshake is usually enough. You can tell so much from a person's hand, their grip. I knew as soon as I met you how long a piece of rope we would need.'

I let my hand drop lightly down, stroking him with my nails. He rises to the occasion, ever so slightly, a soft moan escaping from his lips as I reach in, cup his barely dropped testicles, tickle them with my fingertips. The touch is both exhilarating and revolting, as if some tawdry sex act could ever be as intimate as what we have, this man child and me.

He shivers, whether from cold or excitement I will never know. I withdraw my hand, take a step back. One second, two, the pressure builds as the spirit rises within me. I see the rope, the knot, the chair, the table. Clothes neatly folded and placed on the bed a few feet away.

There is a moment when I push the chair away. Anything is possible. He floats in the air like a hoverfly, trapped in that instant. And then he is falling, falling, falling, the loops of rope untwining in lazy, slow-motion rolls until nothing is left.

And then.

Snap.

2

'You sure about this, Tony?'

Detective Chief Inspector Jo Dexter sat in the passenger seat of the Transit van, staring out through a grubby windscreen at the industrial wasteland around Leith Docks. Street lights glowed in orange strings; roads to nowhere. The first tinge of dawn painted the undersides of the clouds, marching north and east across the Forth to Fife. The high-rises that had sprung up along the northern shoreline were dark silhouettes pocked by the occasional light of a shift-worker coming home. This early in the morning there wasn't much activity, least of all from the dark bulk of the freighter they were watching. It had docked two days ago, a routine trip from Rotterdam bringing in aggregates for the new road bridge. As if they didn't have enough rock and sand in Scotland already. A team had been watching around the clock ever since, acting on information thought to be reliable. Beyond the unloading of a large quantity of gravel, nothing interesting had happened at all.

'According to Forth Ports, she sails on the tide. In about two hours' time.' Detective Inspector Anthony McLean checked his watch, even though the clock on the dashboard told him it was almost five in the morning. 'If nothing happens before then, we've been played for fools. I dare say it won't be the first time.'

'Easy for you to say. You're not the one having to justify the overtime.'

McLean looked across at his companion. He'd known Jo Dexter of old. She'd joined up at the same time as him, but had hit the promotion ladder early. McLean was happy for her, though he preferred his own niche; a career of chasing prostitutes and pornographers had hardened Jo Dexter's once pretty features so that she looked far older than her thirty-nine years. Vice did that to a person, he'd been told. And now he was finding out first hand thanks to bloody Dagwood.

'Well, you're the one reckoned the tip-off was good.' The temperature dropped by several degrees. Even in the darkness, McLean could see that this was the wrong thing to say, no matter how true it was. The letter had appeared in his in-tray on the first day of his secondment to Jo Dexter's team in the Sexual Crimes Unit. It didn't have a stamp on it, and no one knew how it had got there. Nevertheless, the information in it showed that whoever had written it knew a great deal about the sleazy underbelly of Edinburgh's sex industry, and the final nugget had concerned a highly organized people-smuggling operation and this very ship.

'It's just that normally these things happen in container ports. How the hell do you smuggle people off a boat like that without being seen?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.' McLean switched his focus away from his temporary boss, across the empty yard to where a large box van had appeared at the security gate. After a short pause, the guard let it through. It continued its slow journey around the seemingly random

piles of rocks, sand and other unidentified materials that were the port's stock-in-trade, headed in the general direction of the ship.

McLean picked up his radio set, called the guardhouse. 'Who was that?'

'Catering firm. Provisions for the ship's galley. Guess they've got to eat, aye?' The guard sounded bored. Hardly surprising given his shift.

'They check out OK?' McLean asked.

'On the roster, aye.'

'OK then. Keep your eyes peeled for anything unusual.' He put the radio back on the dashboard as the box van arrived at the ship's side. In the semi-darkness, with nothing to compare it to other than the distant buildings, the ship had seemed small. Now with the van alongside, McLean could see just how big it was, high in the water without its ballast of rock.

'You think they might try something here?' Jo Dexter stretched as best she could in the confined space. She'd have been better off in the back, were it not for the half-dozen officers already in there, snoring gently.

McLean picked up the binoculars he'd appropriated from stores earlier that day, focused on the box van as the driver got out. A single lamp lit the steps leading up from the dockside to the deck, casting more shadow than anything else.

'Even if we weren't here watching, nothing gets out of this bit of the port without the excise boys checking it. There's no way they'd be able to smuggle anyone out unless they'd paid somebody off.'

'Stranger things have happened, Tony. What can you see?'

The driver opened up the back of the van and clambered into the darkness. After a moment he jumped back out again, grabbed a box and carried it up the steps. At least that's what McLean assumed he'd done. The way the van was parked, it obscured the foot of the steps, and the top was in shadow. Only a small part in the middle was visible, and by the time he'd adjusted the focus, the driver was gone.

'A man unloading groceries, by the look of it. Yup. There he goes again.' Movement at the back of the van, and the driver once more grabbed a box, heading for the steps. McLean flicked the binoculars up a fraction, and caught a fleeting glimpse of someone before the darkness swallowed them. It wasn't much, but there was something wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it; the way the driver moved, perhaps?

A moment later and the figure passed across his view again, heading up the steps with a baker's tray in its hands. But that couldn't be right, could it? How had he missed the driver coming back down the steps? Unless there were two people in the van. That would make more sense anyway.

Another figure cut across the narrow pool of light, this time carrying a large cardboard box, struggling under its weight and bulk. McLean squinted through the binoculars, wishing the magnification was better. This figure seemed different from the first and second. There couldn't be three people working the van, could there? And how much in the way of provisions did a cargo ship need to make the crossing from Leith to Rotterdam?

Dropping the binoculars back onto the seat, McLean

started the engine, slammed the Transit into gear and shot forwards. Beside him, Jo Dexter grabbed for the handle above the door, too stunned to say anything.

'Not smuggling them in. Taking them out. Wake up you lot. It's time to go to work.' McLean shouted to the team in the back. A couple of muffled grunts and a high-pitched yelp were all the answer he got as he accelerated as hard as he could, covering the distance to the ship in less than a minute. The back of the box van was open, and as he swept round behind it, the Transit's headlights threw aside the shadows, revealing what was inside.

'Go! Go! Go!' The team burst out of the back of the Transit, fanning out and securing the van. A commotion up on deck was followed by a shout of 'Armed police. Drop your weapons.' McLean and Dexter watched from the Transit as a large cardboard box fell from above, twisting once, twice, before smashing against the concrete of the dock in an explosion of oranges.

It was over in seconds. The sergeant in charge of the armed-response team came over to the Transit and signalled the all clear. McLean didn't need to hear it; he could see with his own eyes. Out of the back of the box van they began to clamber into the light. Pale, almost cadaverous some of them, scantily clad despite the cold and all bearing that same terrified expression. A dozen or more young women, no more than girls, really, though their faces showed they'd seen more than any girl their age should ever see.

'Well, that's not quite what I was expecting.'

McLean leaned back against the cool concrete wall

outside the back of the station, watching as the last of the young women was escorted into the station. Dawn had already painted the overcast sky in oranges and purples, promising rain for later on. A quick glance at his watch showed that it was almost shift-change time. Not that he worked shifts any more.

'Not what I was expecting, either.' Jo Dexter pulled deeply on the cigarette, held the smoke for just long enough for it to do its worst, then let it spill upwards as she let her head clunk lightly against the wall. 'Remind me about that tip-off again?'

The letter. McLean reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the photocopy the forensics team had given him. He knew that they'd not managed to lift anything from the original, but he still wasn't allowed to have it back. It didn't matter, the words were still the same. Date, time, place, ship name, it was all there. He even had a suspicion he knew who had sent it, but it wasn't a suspicion he cared to share. He tapped the edge of the folded-up paper against his hand.

'It all checked out. You know that as well as I do, otherwise we'd never have got this lot authorized.' He nodded at the Transit van as the last of the armed-response team jangled back into the station, Kevlar body armour unstrapped and dangling.

'You're right. I thought it was legit. But this? Trafficking prostitutes away from the city? Taking them to Rotterdam and then God only knows where.' Dexter shook her head, sucked once more on the cigarette as if the answer might be in there somewhere. The smoke billowing out into the lightening air gave up no answers.

'I . . .' McLean began, but was interrupted by his phone buzzing in his pocket. It had been on silent all through the stake-out and arrests. A quick scan of the screen showed an instantly recognized number. Dexter must have read something from the expression on his face, said nothing as he took the call. It wasn't a long one, not even time enough for her to finish her cigarette.

'Bad news?' she asked through a haze of smoke.

'Not sure. I have to go.' He saw the scowl forming on Dexter's face. 'Won't be long. It's just . . . I have to go.' And he scurried off before she could stop him.

3

McLean didn't even wait for Doctor Wheeler to greet him, just started off down the corridor and expected her to keep up. He'd known her what . . . almost six months? Quiet, competent and impossibly young for someone with such a detailed knowledge of the human brain, she had given him hope that Emma would recover eventually, promised to let him know as soon as anything happened.

And now something had.

The guilt had been there ever since her abduction, when poor, mad Sergeant Needham had smashed her over the head, and all because he'd let Emma get close to him. He'd visited her every day, even if it was sometimes only for five minutes. He'd watched her, as he'd watched his grandmother before, wasting away bit by bit, her mind somewhere else, her body kept alive by machines. Day after day, the hope being ground away like a mountain succumbing to the onslaught of weather. Slow, but inexorable. He'd been steeling himself, rebuilding the walls that she'd been the first in a decade to breach. Hardening himself for the time when he'd have to bury another.

But something had happened.

'You said on the phone there'd been a change?'

'Indeed there has, Inspector. But you mustn't get your hopes up. She's still unconscious.'

The route to the ward was imprinted on McLean's

memory, but he still had to run the gamut of patients out and about, trailing drips on wheeled stands or revealing more flesh than it was comfortable to see through skimpy backless gowns. Even though it felt like he'd spent half of his life in them, he still couldn't get used to hospitals; their smell of disinfectant, bodily fluids and despair. The institutional beige walls didn't help, and neither did the bizarre collection of artworks hung along the corridors. No doubt chosen by some psychotherapist with a view to creating the optimum healing environment. Either that or a six-year-old child.

'Unconscious is not the same as in a coma though. She's going to come round soon.' Was that a desperate hope in his voice, or just weary resignation?

'I believe so. Yes. And yes, you're right, unconscious isn't the same as coma. The brainwave patterns are different for a start. There's more happening. She's shifting to something more akin to sleep.'

They had reached the door to the ward, but before McLean could push on through, the doctor reached out and stopped him.

'Inspector . . . Tony. You need to face up to the fact that there could be permanent damage. There almost certainly will be permanent damage.'

'I know. But this happened because of me. I'm not going to abandon her now.' McLean was about to open the door when it pulled away from him of its own accord. A startled nurse stood on the other side.

'Oh, Doctor. I was just coming to look for you. The patient's started talking. I think she might be about to wake up.'

Just like McLean's grandmother had been for the eighteen months it had taken her body to die, Emma was surrounded by the machinery that kept her alive. She had been propped upright, her shrunken form pale even against the white pillows of the hospital bed, her unruly mop of black, spiky hair tamed by some well-meaning nurse, far longer than she would ever have worn it. As he approached, McLean could see the change in her in an instant. Her eyes fluttered under eyelids, twitches in her face almost reminding him of her mischievous smile, then creasing into a frown. And all the while she muttered, quiet whimpers of terror. He was about to take her hand as he had done every day since she'd been brought here, but before he could, Doctor Wheeler once more stopped him.

'Best to wait just now. A touch could bring her out too quickly. Let her come at her own pace.'

'What's happening to her? She looks scared.'

'Difficult to be sure, but she's probably reliving the last few moments before she was knocked out.' Doctor Wheeler consulted the clipboard at the end of the bed, then pulled a pager out of her pocket. McLean hadn't even heard it ping. 'Gotta go. I'll check back as soon as I can.'

It was a special kind of hell, sitting there, watching the emotions skim across Emma's face, wondering what it was that Needy had done to her. Just the bash to the skull, or had there been something more? McLean found it hard to recall the events clearly himself. Too much smoke inhalation and blows to his own head. Too much dealing with the past he thought he'd finished with but which didn't want to let him go.

'Oh my god. No.'

The voice was barely more than a whisper, but it was hers. McLean looked around to see if any of the nurses in the ward had noticed. They were busy with the other patients and their machines. He reached out, about to take Emma's hand where it lay on the covers, fingers flexing minutely. Before he could, she drew her hand away.

'No, no, no, no. No!' Louder now, and Emma started to shake. Her heart rate monitor pinged a warning, but still the nurses were oblivious. McLean went to stand, meaning to get some help, but a tiny hand whipped out and grabbed him by the wrist, surprisingly tight. He snapped his head around as Emma sat bolt upright, eyes wide open.

'It took their souls. Trapped them all. They were lost. I was lost.'

And then the grip was gone. Her eyes flipped up into her head and she dropped back into the pillows. McLean could only watch as the nurses gathered around, alerted by the motion. He couldn't move, could only stare at Emma's face as they bustled around her, checking monitors, adjusting drips, whispering urgent messages to each other. Did this happen whenever a patient woke from coma? Was there some procedure they followed?

Slowly, the commotion died down. Everything that could be checked had been checked. The patient was asleep, heart rate steady. It was going to be OK. Everything was going to be fine. Still he sat and watched, oblivious to the passing of time. Minutes, hours, he didn't really care. This was his fault, after all. He wasn't going to shirk that responsibility. Not now. Not ever.

She woke more slowly the second time; colour coming back to her cheeks as her breathing changed from deep and regular to shallow and swift. Her eyes opened slowly, a hand reaching up to her head as if feeling for the damage that had been inflicted. Then she noticed the tube taped to her arm, the needle.

'It's OK,' McLean said, hoping to fend off the panic with a familiar face and voice. 'You're in hospital. You've been unconscious.'

Emma slowly rolled over, her head too heavy for the wasted muscles in her neck to control. She squinted against the light, even though it was muted in the ward, and it took her a while to focus on him. Even longer for her to speak. He'd hoped for a smile, but was rewarded only with a frown. Her voice, when it finally came, was cracked and dry. The words as terrible as they were inevitable.

'Who are you?'