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Opening Extract from...

The Hanging Club

Written by Tony Parsons

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PROLOGUE

After PrayErs

After Friday prayers Mahmud Irani walked back to where he had parked his taxi and within a few minutes he had picked up the man who was going to kill him.

The man was standing opposite the entrance to London Zoo, dressed in a suit and tie, the jacket buttoned up despite the steaming midday heat. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses and he had one arm already raised in the air to hail a cab, as if he was fully expecting Mahmud to be driving round Regent's Park's Outer Circle immediately after prayers, as if he knew he was coming.

As if he had been waiting.

Mahmud pulled up beside him, smelling the animal stink of the zoo in summer.

'Cash only, boss,' Mahmud said.

The man nodded, glancing at his phone before showing it to Mahmud. On the iPhone's screen there was a map of the City with a red marker pinpointing their destination.

Newgate Street, EC1.

Less than four miles away but it meant crossing the middle of the city in the stagnant traffic of lunch hour. Mahmud grunted his reluctant assent and watched the man slide into the back seat.

In silence they drove east through the sweltering city.

Mahmud was turning his taxi onto Newgate Street when he glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw the man removing a small leather credit-card holder. Mahmud sighed. How many times did you have to tell these stupid people?

'*It's cash only,*' he repeated, harder this time, tugging at his polo shirt, the sweat sticking.

But the man was not getting out a credit card.

He leaned forward between the gap in the front seats and placed an old-fashioned razor blade firmly against Mahmud Irani's left eyelid.

Mahmud drew in his breath and did not let it go.

He felt the thin cold steel of the blade's cutting edge settle into the folds of soft flesh beneath his eyebrow. The fine layer of skin covering his eye fluttered wildly against the razor blade. Pure naked terror rose up inside him.

'Please,' Mahmud said. 'Please. Just take the money. It's under my seat.'

The man laughed.

'I don't want your money. Keep driving. Nice and easy now.'

Mahmud drove as if in a dream, driving with one eye squeezed closed, trying to concentrate on the road ahead with a razor blade pressed against his eyelid.

Following the man's directions, he drove to the end of the street and then turned left onto a huge building site. It was deserted, one of those little pockets of total silence and emptiness that suddenly surprise you in the city. Another tower of glass and steel was being erected here, but there was nobody working this afternoon. They were all alone. Ahead of them was a yawning hole in the uneven ground.

'Down there,' the man said.

'I have a wife and children.'

'Too late for all that now, pal.'

The razor blade pressed more firmly into Mahmud's flesh and he felt his eyeball move, a sick rolling feeling as the eye recoiled from the cutting edge. Mahmud drove into the hole and down, bumping over a speed bump and then over some random rubble before entering a vast basement twilight.

What was this place?

Mahmud could not tell if it had once been an underground car park or if that's what it would be in the future. Right now it was simply a massive expanse of empty space with a very low ceiling; a subterranean basement with no lights apart from the shafts of summer sun coming in from somewhere.

'Where are we going?' Mahmud said, unable to stop himself talking, and this time the man slid the razor blade very gently across his eyelid, just one inch, but enough to cut into flesh and make Mahmud cry out from the shock of sudden pain.

A warm trickle of blood oozed slowly around the curve of Mahmud's left eyelid.

And he did not speak after that.

They got out of the car and that was a moment when Mahmud thought he could run away if he was not so stricken with terror, so paralysed with disbelief that this was happening, so appalled by the warm blood that ran now on either side of his left eye, so scared witless that he did not fully register the chance to escape until the moment had passed.

Then the man stood behind Mahmud, the razor blade returned to the soft fold of flesh above the left eye and the man's other hand gently taking the taxi driver's wrist.

They walked across the wide-open space to a door.

They went down some steps.

The air got colder.

They descended into total darkness and walked along a narrow passage until suddenly a thin shaft of natural light was coming from somewhere high above their heads. Mahmud could see ancient white brickwork that

was stained green by time and weather. It was very cold now. The summer was on another planet. The air was fetid with what smelled like stagnant water. It was like stepping into another world.

And then there were the others.

Three of them.

Their faces hidden by black masks that revealed only their eyes.

One of them had a red light shining in their hands.

It was some kind of camera, and it was pointing at Mahmud Irani.

There was a stool. A kitchen step stool. Mahmud could not understand what was happening as hands helped him onto the stool and something was placed around his neck. The blood was in his eyes as he watched the man from the car consulting with the one who held the camera. Mahmud wiped away the blood with the palm of his hands and he tried to balance himself, afraid he would fall from the stool.

His fingers nervously felt his neck.

It was a rope.

They had put a rope around his neck.

He looked up and saw that it was attached to a rusted tangle of ancient pipes in the ceiling.

Hands were touching his arms. He heard a metallic click. He found that his arms were secured behind his back.

And now the words came in a torrent. Now he had no difficulty at all in speaking. Now even the razor blade pressed against his eyeball could not have shut his mouth.

'I have a wife and children!' he screamed, and his voice echoed back at him in this secret basement.

Wife and children!

Wife and children!

'I'm just a taxi driver! Please! You have the wrong person!'

The man from the car was covering his face with a black mask. Like an executioner. He turned to Mahmud Irani.

'*Do you know why you have been brought to this place of execution?*' he asked.

Mahmud stuttered, 'What? This – what? I don't understand. What? I'm a taxi driver—'

But then the words choked in his throat because, beyond the red light of the camera, one of them was sticking A4 sheets of paper to the worn white bricks of this underground place.

The A4 sheets of paper were portraits that had been downloaded from the Internet.

They were all the faces of girls. Young girls. Smiling girls.

And, yes, they were all smiling, every one of them – although some of them had smiles that were stiff and

shy, and some had smiles that were natural and full of confidence.

They all smiled in their own way. The school photographers had insisted upon a smile, encouraged them to smile, tried to make them laugh.

They were formal portraits, the kind that a school takes every year to record and honour a student's growth, and they caught the girls at the fleeting moment in their lives when they were poised between the children they had so recently been and the women they would one day become.

The smiling faces watched Mahmud Irani.

And he knew these faces. All of them.

He had known them in rooms full of laughing men. He had heard the girls scream for help when no help was coming. He had seen them blurry and on the edge of unconsciousness, foggy with cheap booze and strong drugs as their clothes were removed.

He had laughed at those girls with all the other men.

And now his words were edged with bitterness and contempt and anger.

'Whores,' he said. 'Cheap whores who like drink and drugs. Sluts who show themselves. Girls who like men. Many men. Typical girls of this country. Oh, listen to me! These are not decent girls! Will you listen to me?'

Someone was kicking the stool he stood on.

'Whores,' spat Mahmud Irani, and then he said no more, not another word, because the stool was gone and all at once the rope around his neck cut deep, deep, *deep* into his throat and his feet were kicking wildly at nothing but the air.

He soiled himself immediately.

The red light watched him squirm and writhe and twist, wild with panic and pain, so much pain, his body thrashing desperately at the rope that cut into his flesh, deeper and deeper every second.

The rope first compressed his jugular vein and then the much deeper carotid arteries, stopping the flow of blood to his brain, abruptly turning it off, his brain instantly swelling, making Mahmud's eyes roll back into his head and his tongue loll out of his flapping mouth and a choked gurgling sound come from somewhere deep inside his throttled neck.

The red light watched Mahmud as he was strangled by the rope around his neck.

And the pain!

Mahmud did not know that there was so much pain in the world. The minutes passed as slowly as centuries. But after what seemed to him a thousand years but was less than five minutes he finally stopped kicking and his arms went limp by his side.

Mahmud Irani choked out his very last strangled breath in that secret white-brick basement that hides deep below the city.

The red light went out.

And on the wall, the faces of the girls were still smiling.

PART ONE

The BlAck stAge

1

We sat in Court One at the Old Bailey and we waited for justice.

'All rise,' the bailiff said.

I stood up, never letting go of the hand of the woman next to me. It had been a long day. But finally it was coming to the end.

We were there for the man she had been married to for nearly twenty years, a man I had never known in life, although I had watched him die perhaps a hundred times.

I had watched him come out of their modest house in his pyjamas on a soft spring evening, a middle-aged man wearing carpet slippers, wanting to do only what was right, wanting to do nothing more than what was decent and good, wanting – above all – to protect his family, and I had watched the three young men who now stood in the dock knock him to the ground and kick him to death.

I had watched him die a hundred times because one of the young men in the dock had filmed it on his phone,

the small screen shaking with mirth, rocking with laughter, the picture sharp in the clear light of a March evening. I had watched him die again and again and again, until my head was full of a silent scream that stayed with me in my dreams.

'He was a good man,' his widow, Alice, whispered, gripping my hand tight, shaking it for emphasis, and I nodded, feeling her fingers dig deep into my palm. On her far side were her two teenage children, a girl of around sixteen and a boy a year younger, and beyond them a young woman in her late twenties, the FLO – Family Liaison Officer.

I believed the Central Criminal Court – the proper name of the Old Bailey – was no place for children, especially children who had watched their father being murdered from the window of their home.

The FLO – a decent, caring, university-educated young woman who still believed that this world is essentially a benign place – said that they were here for *closure*. But closure was the wrong word for what they wanted in court number one.

They wanted justice.

And they needed it if their world would ever again make any kind of sense.

When I had first gone to their home with my colleagues DCI Pat Whitestone and DC Edie Wren on that March evening, the last chill of winter had still been clinging

on. Now it was July and the city was wilting in the hottest summer since records began. Only a few months had gone by but the woman and her children were all visibly older, and it was more than just passing time. The three of them had been worn down by the brain-numbing shock of violent crime.

For our Murder Investigation Team at Homicide and Serious Crime Command, West End Central, 27 Savile Row, the case had been straightforward. You could not call it routine, because a man having his life brutally taken can never be considered routine. But there was incriminating evidence all over the smartphones of these three blank-faced morons in the dock, and the blood of the dead man was all over their hands and their clothes. It was an easy day at the office for our CSIs.

We were not hunting criminal masterminds. When we arrested them, they still had fresh blood on their trainers. They were just three thick yobs who took it all much too far.

But the case felt personal for me.

Because I knew him. The dead man. That lost husband, that stolen father. Steve Goddard. Forty years old.

I had never met him in life but I knew what made him leave his house when the three yobs were urinating on his wife's car. I understood him. I got it. He could have let it go – ignored the noise, the laughter, the

obscene insult to his family and the street where he lived, the mocking of all that he loved.

And I could even understand that it made no rational sense at all to go out there in his carpet slippers to confront them. I could see why it was not worth it, why he should have turned up the television and drawn the curtains, and watched his children grow up and get married and have their own children, and why he should have stayed indoors so that he could grow old with his wife. I got all that.

But above all I understood why this decent man did not have it in him to do nothing.

'Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?' said the judge.

The jury spokesman cleared his throat. I felt Alice's fingernails digging into my palm once more, deeper now. The faces of the three defendants – immobile with a kind of surly stupidity through most of the trial – now registered the first stirrings of fear.

'Yes, Your Honour, we have,' said the jury spokesman.

Juries don't give reasons. Juries don't have to give reasons. Juries just give verdicts.

'*Guilty*.'

'*Guilty*.'

'*Guilty*.'

And juries have no say in sentencing. We all looked at the judge, a papery-faced old man who peered at us

from under his wig and over his reading glasses as if he knew the secrets of our souls.

'Involuntary manslaughter is a serious offence,' intoned the judge, glowering at the court, his voice like thunder. 'It carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.'

A cry of, '*No!*' from the public gallery. It was a woman with a barbed-wire tattoo on her bare arms. She must be one of the boy's mothers, I thought, because none of their fathers had been spotted for nearly twenty years.

The judge rapped his gavel and demanded order or he would clear the court.

'Public concern and the need for deterrence must be reflected in the sentence passed by the court,' he continued. 'But the Criminal Justice Act requires a court addressing seriousness to consider the offender's *culpability* in committing the offence. And I accept the probability that the deceased was dead before he hit the ground due to a subarachnoid haemorrhage, making this a *single punch* manslaughter case.'

'But what does that *mean*?' the youngest child, the boy – called Steve, like his dad – murmured to his mother, and she shushed him, clinging on to good manners even in this place, even now.

It meant they would be home by Christmas, I thought, my stomach falling away.

It meant the bastards would get away with it.