

CHAPTER ONE

Naperville, Illinois

11:58 a.m.

The blue velvet curtains drew back like it was movie night, allowing Johnny Sanders to stare through the bulletproof window.

Twelve sets of eyes stared back.

The eyes of the people who'd come to watch him die.

Sanders half-smiled in acknowledgement.

Some returned it. Others looked away. One skinny guy flinched, like Sanders had snaked through the glass and tickled him.

Sanders thought that hilarious. He was strapped to a quarter-ton chair, which was bolted to the floor, which was anchored to reinforced concrete.

He wasn't tickling anyone.

He was waiting. For the end.

Which would come in, oh, a minute and a half.

He tried to relax by taking deep breaths. No good—the air stank of quicklime and paste wax. The former from the fresh-cured concrete that formed the execution center's floors, ceilings, walls, and corridors. The latter from the chair

itself.

He traced his fingers along its wide oak arms.

Slippery as drool.

The paste wax, he figured. The humidity. The restless fingers of the condemned, rubbing the wood like a rosary . . .

Sanders shivered, suddenly chilled. He wondered why. The execution center's furnace was pumping heat like the devil opened a hole in the earth.

Maybe I'm getting sick, he thought. Hope I don't catch my death of a cold.

The little joke made him smile.

He glanced at the official clock over the curtains.

The smile faded.

He wasn't sick, he knew.

He was scared.

He shouldn't be. But he was.

Go figure.

"Think it'll work this time?" the official executioner asked the electrician.

"Damn well better," the electrician said.

"I hear ya. Did you replace the power cable?"

The electrician slapped the control panel. "New, just like this. I triple-checked every connection. Polished the electrodes. Replaced the switches. Rebuilt the buzzer box." He shook his head. "This time she sings like the fat lady."

"She doesn't," the executioner warned, "Covington sticks us both in the thing."

Sanders worked his teeth into the heavy mouth guard. Like the doctor said, it'd be stupid to crack his molars if clemency came through during the burn.

He chomped till rubber suckled his gums.

Praying the phone would ring.

“Fifteen seconds,” the executioner said. “Get on those push-buttons.”

Black silk touched red plastic.

It was part of the dress code, the silk. Like the rest of the staff, the executioner and his two assistants dressed business casual—tan Dockers and navy sport coats. But in addition they wore black silk hoods and gloves, to shield their identities from the condemned.

A couple months ago, he’d asked his California counterpart why that mattered. “Dead men tell no tales,” he’d quipped over single-malts at a corrections conference. He received only a shrug and a muttered, “Who the hell knows why we do anything?”

Sanders’ mouth was so dry he couldn’t swallow. Yet sweat poured like broken hydrant.

Weird.

The chaplain walked in. Told him to stay strong, he was going to a better place, Jesus forgave, and he wanted to pray now, yes?

Sanders didn’t answer.

The chaplain asked more insistently. Sanders kept mum. Let Reverend Michaels sweat a little himself, wondering if he’d done something wrong.

“Five seconds,” the executioner said, eyes on the stuttering clock. “Four. Three . . .”

When the red hand joined the blacks at twelve, the executioners would take a

deep breath and push. One of the buttons—and only one, so each could secretly believe he wasn't the real executioner—would send several thousand volts of Illinois electricity into the condemned prisoner. Killing him.

Or so everyone hoped.

Last time, the multimillion-dollar death system didn't kill anything but the lights. Prompting an apoplectic Illinois Governor Wayne Covington to boot the Justice Center's director. If it didn't work exactly as promised from here on, the governor warned, "I'll fire every single damn last one of you."

Nobody wanted that.

"Two. One. Now," the executioner said, breathing fast and shallow as the second hand completed its march to the sea.

Their thumbs kicked so symmetrically they could have been Rockettes.

Sanders cringed at a warmth he hadn't felt since third grade. "Oh, man," he whispered, flushing with shame.

The Justice Center director swaggered in, grinning so hard his eyes vanished. "You're one hell of an actor, Johnny!" he boomed. "You looked so scared when that buzzer went off I thought you'd wet your pants."

Yeah, well, Sanders thought.

He decided not to mention that.

"I'll tell you what's really scary," he said, slurring a little from the mouth guard. "Those twelve official witnesses."

"Them?" the director said, pointing to the state employees milling about the other side of the viewing window. In the back, arms folded, was the man playing Martin Benedetti, the detective commander who'd arrested the scum and would view the burn for real. "Why?"

“They just sat there, staring. At me. Like they were vultures and I was roadkill.”

“They were supposed to, Johnny. That’s their job.”

“I know,” Sanders sighed, wriggling against the slats to murder an itch. “I get that they were play-acting. But right at the end, when the buzzer went off? I swear they wanted me dead.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. Creeped the bejeezus out of me.”

“That’s great!” the director barked, clapping his hands in glee. “Means they did a hell of an acting job too. Covington will be pleased.”

“Good,” Sanders said. “That’s good.”

“You got that right, brother,” the director said.

Today was the third in a series of dress rehearsals for the execution of Corrigan “Corey” Trent, whose monstrous crimes rivaled those of John Wayne Gacy and Richard Speck. Covington built the electric chair especially for Trent, and ordered these endless rehearsals to “make sure the bastard roasts to perfection.”

Which is why Sanders found himself in a six-by-twelve cell at Stateville Prison, the maximum-security fortress near Joliet that housed Death Row. Sanders, a state historian, was organizing more than two centuries of official execution documents. He’d volunteered to play Trent in the dress rehearsals to get a better feel for the people he was reading about. “Wow, a Method historian,” his boss kidded when Covington gave his blessing.

He was tossed in the one-man cage at noon yesterday, to the jeers, threats, and hurled feces of the real condemned, led by Corey Trent. Correctional Officers restored order. Sanders sat in his bunk the rest of the day, heart thumping, chin in hands, wondering what exactly he’d gotten himself into.

At sundown, a flying squad of COs shoved him in an armored car and sped north. A half hour later he was flung into the condemned cell at the State of Illinois Justice Center in Naperville. The staff let him call his “lawyer” for updates on his “clemency petition,” then served his last meal—Coke, cheddar fries, and a

rare T-bone. Prompting the center's director to joke as he swallowed the last bite, "Don't worry, Johnny, we'll make sure you're well-done."

The doctor arrived at nine to make sure Sanders was healthy. "If you weren't, we'd postpone. We don't execute sick people," he'd said. Without sarcasm.

Then it was lights out. Sanders lay wide awake in the heavy concrete gloom, wondering how even monsters like Trent survived the Row without biting out their wrist veins. Best not to think about it, he supposed. He fell asleep.

At sunrise, the chaplain asked if he wanted to pray. Sanders said no, not now, but he'd sure appreciate a visit just before the sentence was carried out.

"That's when I'll really need your help, Reverend," he explained. "You know, in getting square with the Lord."

The young chaplain agreed eagerly, and Sanders grinned to himself. Messing with the clergy was fun. They were so earnest.

Then he was shaved, diapered, dressed, manacled, marched down the hall, strapped into the electric chair, ministered, witnessed, and "executed."

To ensure Sanders wasn't accidentally injured, the live power cables weren't attached to the chair. They plugged instead into a test box in the rear of the chamber, which unlike the remainder of the cement complex, was tiled for easy cleanup. The box was chockablock with resistors and capacitors that mimicked the human body. If the power spurted out of the generator and ran the circuits properly, the box would buzz, signaling death.

Which it did.

Which is why everyone was smiling.

"What happens now?" Sanders asked as the guards unbuckled the last of the leather straps that pinned him to the oak.

"You take a break," the director said. "Have a smoke, hit the john if you need. Then we run through it again." He pinched his chin divot, thinking. "This time, fight the guards all the way to the chair. Hard as you can. Give us a good show."

"Cool," Sanders said.

“Yeah, everyone likes that part,” a guard said.

As Sanders headed to the bathroom, the director dictated notes. Then he strode to the telephone—“safety yellow,” per OSHA regulations—bolted to the wall.

The hotline to the governor’s office in Springfield.

It was there if Covington changed his mind. Or some court somewhere changed it for him.

The latter was always possible, the director knew. The former wasn’t. Covington wouldn’t cancel an execution if his life depended on it. That kind of thinking hadn’t been in the man’s makeup since 1966. But having a hotline was part of the execution protocol, and as such, it needed to connect loud and clear.

He put receiver to ear and waited through the clicks.

“It went perfectly, Mr. Governor,” he said when Covington picked up downstate. “No more circuit problems. The Justice Center is up and running.” He listened a few more seconds, then grinned. “That’s right, sir. We’re ready to burn the trash.”

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