

## Chapter 1

The near silence was broken as a metal key scraped in the door lock. Steven Cunningham was on his feet before he heard the rasp of the deadbolt being drawn back. His look of sheer terror was matched by the uncontrollable shaking of his hands. He knew who it was. The moment he feared the most had finally arrived.

He stepped back until he felt the chill of stone that was the cell wall; there was nowhere to run. The door was pushed open by a uniformed prison officer, who then stood back. Behind him, he saw the round-faced man he had briefly seen the day before. He knew precisely who he was. He was the hangman.

There was no visible look of any emotion as the grey-haired man entered the cell, followed by his equally glacial assistant. Both were dressed in dark suits, white shirts and black ties. Cunningham tried to push himself further back against the unforgiving wall. Nothing was said as the hangman grasped one of Cunningham's arms and pulled him forward.

The condemned man whispered.

“No! Please! I'm innocent! Please!”

His pleadings were ignored as the hangman's assistant stepped behind the prisoner. Cunningham cried out as he felt his arms being drawn together behind him, a leather restraint was tightened against one wrist and then the other.

He looked beyond the steel-faced hangman. In the doorway was the Chaplain, the man who had mentored him for the previous months. He was not looking at him; he was reading aloud from the bible. Cunningham could hardly hear the words

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he spoke; they were almost inaudible against the pounding of his heart.

“Dear God! No! Please! I did not kill that girl.” The last words petered away into a whisper as tears began to descend his cheeks. “As God is my witness, I did not kill that girl. Someone, please help me.”

The Chaplain continued to read; his voice slightly louder. No one else took any notice.

The hangman turned and walked towards the door. His assistant took Cunningham’s right arm and compelled him to follow.

Outside the cell, he saw the grim-faced Prison Governor, the Chief Prison Officer and another man. Two prison officers fell into step on either side of him. His legs weakened; the officers took his arms, leading him the short distance up the wide corridor. At its end, he saw the green double doors, which, two days before, had been closed, hiding what lay beyond. They were now open. The hangman entered the room. Cunningham, being guided by the assistant and prison officers, followed.

The room was large. The walls were painted an impersonal shade of light green. Two windows on the far side offered some daylight; the incandescence, though, was provided by three bright, naked bulbs that hung from the ceiling. To the left, a thick beam of wood straddled the room. Beneath its centre was a wooden square. From the beam hung three ropes; the middle one was a noose.

Cunningham tried to stop. The prison officers urged him on and helped the assistant to manoeuvre their charge onto the wooden square. The hangman’s assistant then eased the condemned man forward, so that his toes lined up with a white

painted ‘T’.

“NO! PLEASE!” cried out Cunningham, as he felt the assistant strap his legs together. The two prison officers, who still held onto his arms, now stood on two planks, one on either side of the wooden square.

“Oh, please God! Help me! Please, help me!”

The hangman walked over to Cunningham and slipped a white, linen hood over the condemned man’s head.

“Dear God! NO!” came a muffled cry from within. A small pool of liquid appeared on the wooden square; a dark stain appeared on the quivering man’s trousers.

The hangman took no notice of the pitiful cries as he deftly placed the rope noose over Cunningham’s head and around his neck. He adjusted it so that it sat neatly against the cloth hood that hid the man’s head. A slight further adjustment, and it sat in exactly the right place.

“Dear God! Where for art thou in the hour of my need! Why, my Lord, are you forsaking me?” came the plea from beneath the hood.

The hangman moved away and stood by a wooden lever. He looked at his assistant, who gave a nod. The prison officers released hold of their charge. The hangman bent down, removed a metal pin then reached up and pulled the lever towards him.

A loud mechanical crack was heard, and the square parted in the middle. Cunningham dropped. The rope became taught with a snap. It moved slightly as the weight beneath it fractionally swayed.

The hangman walked over to the hole and looked down. There was no movement from the body that dangled at the end of the rope. He turned and looked at the man who was standing

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beside the Prison Governor. He gave him a nod. The deed was done.

The three witnesses began to file out of the room. The Governor paused as he passed the Chaplain. It was impossible to ignore the look of abhorrence on the cleric's face; the bible the man held was clasped tightly to his chest.

“As I told you before, Chaplain, he was found guilty by a jury,” the Governor said evenly. “He had two appeals, which affirmed his conviction. The Home Secretary confirmed his sentence.”

“That is as may be,” the Chaplain replied, speaking between clenched teeth, still staring at the hole in the floor that hid the hanged man.

“There are over eight hundred prisoners within these walls,” the Governor continued. “Each and every one of them claims they are innocent. That man's claim, like all the others, was purely made to try to save himself. But the law is the law, and the guilty must pay their dues.”

The Chaplain remained silent for a moment, then looked at the Governor.

“There may well be eight hundred men in this prison, but there are not eight hundred men who are devout Christians in this prison. I should know. But there was one.” He released a hand from his bible and pointed to the rope. “And you have just hanged him.”

“I am not the person who hanged that man; he did that for himself. He killed a young girl and, as the law requires, his conviction determined that he should hang for his crime.” The Governor moved towards the door.

“Remember, Chaplain, he was hanged because he was

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found guilty.” He then turned to leave.

“But what if you have just hanged an innocent man? Will God forgive you because someone else found him guilty?”

The Governor walked out, ignoring the Chaplain.