

## The Chair

The massive steel door opened and the first thing I saw was the chair. There it was, right in the middle of the courtyard. The chair was made of wood, with leather straps for the body and hands, and bronze electrodes for the legs. A metal helmet was attached to the back of the chair, hanging above the seat like a hair dryer at a beauty salon.

The executioner and I passed through the door into the courtyard, my parents close behind. The door was the only way in or out. The door slammed shut after we'd all entered. I heard the turn of the deadbolt as we started walking toward the chair.

The four walls of the courtyard were about three stories high and made of cut stone. On each of the corners was a turret, with windows looking out over the courtyard. The turrets were unoccupied. Except for the chair, the courtyard was completely empty. Above the courtyard was a patch of gray sky.

The executioner was a short, aging man. He walked with a limp and was extremely ugly, but he had a very pleasant demeanor.

"Right this way, sir," he said gently. He took my arm and guided me to the chair. Our footsteps echoed eerily in the otherwise silent courtyard.

My father walked all the way to the chair with me, but about halfway there my mother turned away and went to the wall on the left. She slumped against the stones, head in her hands, crying.

When I finally reached the chair, the executioner said with a sweep of his hand, "Please, have a seat."

I sat down. My father stood to the right of me, looking straight ahead. The executioner strapped me into the chair. The leather straps on my wrists and waist were tight. The electrodes on my ankles felt cold.

"Would you like a hood?" the executioner asked me.

"No thanks," I said. I took what I thought would be one last look at the gray sky overhead.

The executioner adjusted the helmet on my head.

"Any last words?" he asked me.

I tried to shake my head no, but the helmet was too tight. The executioner looked at me with kind eyes.

"How old are you, son?"

"Thirty-three," I said.

"I don't want to do this, you know. But it's my job."

"I understand. Everyone does what they have to do."

"Trust me, though. It won't hurt a bit."

The executioner hobbled away to the switch on the wall behind me. Out of the corner of my right eye I could see my father standing beside me, still looking straight ahead. I shifted my eyes to the left and could see my mother sobbing by the wall, her face turned away from me.

Suddenly I felt a tingle in my head. The electricity began vibrating down my body to my chest and legs. But it was just a trickle, not a gush, and I felt no pain. Then the vibrations stopped.

The executioner appeared again, stooping in front of me.

"Sorry about that," he said. "The current isn't strong enough. I'll need to fix it."

"Does this sort of thing happen often?" my father asked.

"No, it's a rare case." The executioner looked at my father and then back at me. "Would you like to walk around while you're waiting?"

"Sure," I said.

"I mean, the door is locked and the walls are too high to climb, so it's not like you're going to escape or anything," he chuckled.

The executioner took off my helmet and loosened the straps, then hurried back to the switch box. I stood up and looked at my father. He didn't return my gaze. There was nothing I needed to say to him and maybe nothing he needed to say to me. I turned and walked over to my mother. She hadn't

stopped weeping.

“Mom,” I said. “Don’t cry. If I can accept it, so can you.”

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

“You are only getting what you deserve,” she said. “You’re guilty.”

“You’re wrong, mother. I am innocent.”

“But you did it.”

“Yes, I did it.”

“So that makes you guilty.”

“No it doesn’t, mom. I’m still innocent.”

“You broke the law.”

“Yes, I broke the law. But sometimes it’s the law that’s wrong, not the person who breaks it.”

“The law is the law. There are no exceptions. Not even for you.”

I didn’t reply.

She continued, “Everyone knows they have to obey the law. You should know that, too.”

“Well, maybe everyone is wrong.”

My mother looked up at me. She had stopped crying. Her eyes were filled with anger now.

“Why do you think you’re so different from other people? How is it that you, and you alone, think you can break the law? It isn’t you who makes the laws, you know.”

“We each have our own laws,” I said.

“Ha!” she laughed. “And do you think your own ideas about what is right and wrong are better than everyone else’s? Who do you think you are—God?”

I knew I wouldn’t be able to persuade her, so I started walking back to the chair. On the way I could see the executioner tinkering with the switch box. My father didn’t look up when I reached the chair. He was still staring stone cold ahead.

The executioner returned from the switch box.

“Once again, my apologies,” he said, bowing repeatedly. “But I’ve adjusted the current and it should be working properly now.”

I sat down in the chair again. The executioner strapped me back in and put the helmet on my head.

“I’m sure everything will be fine this time,” he said, smiling reassuringly. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

I settled back in the chair. So this is it, I thought. Maybe my mother was right. Maybe it was me who had gotten it wrong. Maybe I was only getting what I deserved. How could I be sure if I’d done the right thing?

But there was no more time for reflection.

As the executioner was walking back to the switch box, I glanced over at my mother. She was still facing the wall. She couldn’t look at me. Then I felt my father’s hand touch my arm. It was warm.

“You did what you had to do,” he said.

My father withdrew his hand. I looked up at the cold gray sky. Then I heard the pull of the switch. I instantly felt a surge of electricity pulsing through my body. After that, there was no longer anyone to accuse me.