Praise for The Executioner’s Redemption

*The Executioner’s Redemption: My Story of Violence, Death, and Saving Grace* is the most exciting book about a Christian’s experience I have read. The story of his life and the powerful message he is delivering is so compelling it was difficult to take a break, even for sleep.

This book is about how God desires all of us to walk with Him and to grow in our understanding of His plan for our life on earth. Tim has shown through this book exactly how we can apply God’s Word to our everyday activities. While Pastor Tim uses his criminal justice experience to give us understanding of Satan’s unceasing attack, he provides practical methods for us to use the power of the Holy Spirit to blunt Satan’s best efforts.

Every sentence, every paragraph, and every page lays forth the pure theology of God’s Word. This story speaks to the prison guard, the police officer, all criminal justice practitioners, every judge and jury member, and to every Christian. I truly regret I didn’t have the benefit of this book to help keep me grounded during my thirty-seven-year career as a police officer and manager of police service in the fourth largest city in the United States. I highly recommend this book to everyone.

—Jerry W. DeFoor
Assistant Chief of Police (Retired)
Houston Police Department
Houston, Texas

This book, in part, reflects the transformational journey from a nonpracticing Christian to a self-righteous and judgmental one, and then to a man willing to die-to-self, allowing others to see Christ live through him. In the past six years, Rev. Carter has helped me personally go beyond the carnal, judgmental attitude of dealing with criminals. I believe I have learned from him to look through the lens of grace, inwardly knowing that we all are fallen and are in need of God’s redemption and help. Rev. Carter serves as an example of the power of Christ, who can take someone from an empty path of self-fulfillment to a path of trusting in God and being fulfilled completely so that it is evident to all that meet you.

—Sergeant James D. Rhoads
Houston Police Department
A riveting must-read that I could not put down! From hard-hearted executioner to God’s gentle servant, Tim Carter’s incredible journey of self-discovery and perseverance powerfully illustrates that no one is beyond God’s life-changing transformation. Tim’s experience on the Texas death squad vividly proves that God’s peace and love shine brightest in the darkest places. This book will inspire you, make you gasp, cry, and laugh. It beautifully morphs hope into fact that with God ALL things are possible.

— Donna Pyle
Speaker, Bible Teacher,
and Author of Quenched: Christ’s Living Water for a Thirsty Soul (CPH 2014)

_The Executioner’s Redemption_ shows how our God can mold and shape someone’s life through His Word even in the hardest of circumstances. I was blessed to know Captain Carter during some of the hardest years of my life. In my teen years I began to let the enemy take control and lusted for every evil thing imaginable. I ended up in prison at age 27, and the Holy Spirit used Tim Carter’s witness to impact my life. Now, as a Christian, I have continued to keep in touch with Rev. Carter, and he has continued to inspire and shape my life each and every time I talk to him.

— Donald Tapley

While a friend of Tim Carter for years, I never really knew him until reading _The Executioner’s Redemption_. This is an intriguing story of Tim’s journey from prison guard to prison death squad to ordained Lutheran pastor.

In addition to gripping stories of prisoners he encountered, Tim addresses the perennial question of capital punishment, sharing his own personal struggle in a compelling biblical exegesis of the balance between God’s mercy and God’s justice. His dual role as penitentiary administrator and ordained pastor catapults Tim Carter into the rarified company of another friend, the sainted Dr. George J. Beto, and makes this book a fascinating read!

— Rev. Dr. Gerald B. (Jerry) Kieschnick
President Emeritus | The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
The Executioner’s Redemption
My Story of Violence, Death, and Saving Grace

Rev. Timothy R. Carter
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Shaped by the Sword of the State</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shaped by a Turbulent Transition</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shaped by the Serpent/Dove Principle</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Shaped by the Appointment to the Death Squad</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shaped by a Condemned Inmate</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Shaped by Prison Ministry Workers</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Shaped by Families of the Victims</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Shaped by Families of the Condemned</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Shaped by Fighting the Good Fight</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Shaped by Deterrent Controversies</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Shaped by Justice/Injustice Controversies</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Shaped by Both Law and Gospel</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Shaped by Serving in Two Kingdoms</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Shaped by the Sword of the Spirit</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

Faith in Extremis

About that strange title, “in extremis,”—who uses Latin anymore anyway?—I’ll explain later. For now, let me welcome you to this book. As you get into Tim Carter’s life and jaw-dropping stories, please keep asking yourself, “What do all his experiences mean for my personal faith?”

I was born a year-and-a-half after the end of World War II. America had come through terrible times—the Great Depression and the War—and had come through in triumph. It was a time of great optimism and hope that we youngsters took in with almost every breath. “With work and determination, there’s nothing you can’t do,” the adults taught us. “Why, you could even go to the moon,” and we did. But then life came along, and more than a few times those feelings of youthful idealism were knocked out of us, something like a three-hundred-pound tackle taking down a smaller running back. That’s aging, and in some ways in contributed to weakening my personal faith.

My brother, sister, and I were raised in a wonderful Christian home—I couldn’t have asked God for better. We were taught to attend church every Sunday, went to Sunday School and Christian day school, and knew that this was very important to our parents. Family, church, and school modeled the truth, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Yes, we learned about sin, but we were kids and America was overtly Christian, at least in appearance if not always in the hearts of all its citizens. But then suffering came along: relationship struggles,
family members contending with illnesses not always curable, and of course, visitations at the funeral home for relatives and for our father when he was only in his sixties. Beyond our family, we saw that other people didn’t have it as good as we did, like the people “on the other side of the tracks.” Where’s this God of love? And that, too, impacted my feelings about God and contributed to the weakening of my personal faith.

One more category, though I could add more and you probably could too, having had your own less-than-ideal moments in your relationship with God. We were taught the Ten Commandments, even memorized them. Our parents were interested in all the grades on our report card, but heaven help us if we came home with anything less than A’s in religion, memory work, effort, and conduct. Again, we had idealism instilled, spiritual idealism, but as we grew older we saw go-to-church Christians doing things they ought not to do. My father had a saying: “You dasn’t do that.” It was a kind of German-American expression, I guess. But our feelings about God and faith took a hit when we saw fellow Christians doing things that the heavenly Father had said, “You dasn’t do that.” “Thou shalt not.” Their less-than-A+ conduct was another significant contributor to the weakening of my personal faith.

So what was going on, and in fact still is going on, with my faith? *Every Mother’s Nightmare* by Charles Bosworth Jr. describes a horrific crime. Teenager Stacy was babysitting three-year-old Tyler when an intruder forced his way in and brutally murdered both children. I met Stacy’s mom, Jude Govreau, when she appeared on a TV program I was hosting, *On Main Street*. The program explored the dimensions and benefits of faith in life. When I asked Jude what that terrible experience did to her faith—I still shudder, years later, as I recall the horror of the crime—she answered, “It took it away.” Her answer invites reflection: what exactly is faith? Jude’s feeling that faith in God had been taken from her, my experiences over the decades, and Tim Carter’s changing relationship to God during his
twenty-one years working for the Texas Department of Corrections all turn on an understanding of what faith really is. How your own experiences impact your faith relationship with God is something you’ll have to ponder for yourself, but if you do that personal reflection as you read this book, you’ll be blessed. So then, what is “faith”?

We naturally equate “faith” with our feelings. So the murder of Stacy took away any positive feelings that Jude had for God, and we certainly can understand her reaction, her loss of “faith.” As I described my own reaction to experiences such as aging, suffering, and the conduct of others, things I said “contributed to the weakening of my personal faith,” I was careful to write that those experiences impacted my feelings about God. You, too, have had experiences that weakened your warm and fuzzy feelings about God. And on almost every page Tim talks about the wide range of feelings he had as he dealt with “human wolves.” Feelings about God—that’s a part of faith that you’ll explore in this book, but only a part.

In the Bible the word faith has two aspects. One is our feelings toward God. There’s nothing wrong with this. How many of us get teary when we worship on Christmas or Easter? That’s our emotions, our feelings, subjective. But in the Bible there is another aspect to faith, and in fact it’s even more important than how we’re feeling about God. This aspect is objective, not subjective. It is outside of us (external), not within us (internal). This other aspect of faith wasn’t born in us, as our feelings are, but this other aspect of faith comes to us from outside, totally from outside of us. This fundamental aspect of faith is the promises of God to us in Jesus Christ. When our feelings toward God are weakened, God’s promises to us in Jesus Christ cannot be weakened because they’re from God, who never changes and is true to His word.

You can understand the whole Bible as a book of promises. The promises are not all sugar and spice and everything nice. For example, in Ezekiel 18:4 God promises, “The soul who sins shall die.” That includes all of us, good religious people and death row
inmates. God kept that promise not by sending you to the eternal prison but by sending His Son, Jesus, to suffer the punishment for sin in your place. Jesus said that He came “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Again, Jesus promises, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25–26). That promise of eternal life in heaven is a promise He will keep to you and to everyone who believes Jesus is their Savior, and that includes inmates on death row who turn to the only Savior. There are hundreds more promises in the Bible to instruct, admonish, and encourage us. The Bible tells us that all the promises are centered on Jesus Christ. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him” (2 Corinthians 1:20). Tim Carter became a Bible student because he yearned deep in his being to know and hang on to the promises. Indeed, that’s the heart of faith, hanging on to the promises, especially when everything is pummeling our good feelings about God. God doesn’t change, God doesn’t lie, and God doesn’t renege on His promises. In His own time, God keeps His word. “If we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

That’s faith. Sometimes our feelings about God are upbeat, warm, and sunny, but other times we feel down on God, cloudy and cold days. Either way, faith is hanging on to God’s promises in Jesus Christ. As you turn each page and hear Tim share his own feelings about God in light of Scripture, this dual aspect of the word faith will be evident. However, one thing is different about Tim’s journey from our own, and the difference is caught in those strange words in the title, “Faith in Extremis.” Those Latin words mean “in a difficult situation,” often “at the point of death.” The words are so succinct that you’ll see them every now and then in your English reading. Tim’s growth in faith came facing death, the death of others. The ultimate questions of good and evil, punishment and forgiveness, love and hate, life and death, God and us ... All those questions
were put inescapably before Tim every day for those twenty-one years. His feelings and trust in the promises of God were forged in extremis, in facing the death of others. God led Tim to internalize death, to see that true faith meant his own personal dying, dying to himself and his feelings, to trust instead in the God who wants to save all people. Jesus says, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35).

In these pages you’ll be invited to faith in extremis, to dying to yourself so that the promises of Christ can fill your life. I have found that to be true, that faith is less about my feelings and more about trusting the promises with all my heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). I hope that Jude has found it, that she has come to know peace from the promises. And I pray that insight for you as you walk through these pages with Tim. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Dale A. Meyer
President, Concordia Seminary
INTRODUCTION

What you are about to read will take you behind the scenes of the physical and emotional world of death row. During my time as a member of the execution squad in the state of Texas, my experiences became “classrooms” through which God taught me what matters most in life. These learning experiences may cause you to be shaken by observations of the most oppressive darkness. Although the circumstances in dealing with death row inmates and the capital punishment process are extreme, I believe that you will relate to many of the dilemmas and find fresh hope and inspiration from my story.

The life lessons I have learned stem from my interactions with death row inmates and other execution participants, all with varying points of view. Many condemned inmates, their families, and anti-capital punishment activists think of the death squad members as merciless, bloodthirsty wolves. Judges and juries of the state of Texas, however, consider virtually everyone they sentenced to death to be the merciless and bloodthirsty ones. These contrasting opinions tugged my heart in different directions and taught me life lessons I couldn’t have learned anywhere else.

In the Bible, God often calls His people “sheep” and refers to those who try to physically or spiritually kill them as wolves. The apostle Paul (Saul of Tarsus), before his conversion, was a ravenous wolf who preyed upon God’s flock. Penitentiaries are filled with every kind of human wolf imaginable and, like Saul of Tarsus, I was one of them for a season. I became a product of my environment, zealous to do what I mistakenly thought was right, following the wrong mentors into a deep ditch.
As one empowered to wield the “sword of the state,” I went through a turbulent pilgrimage of experiences that shaped my heart and soul. Therefore the following story is not simply a gratuitous look inside death row; it is the story of the progression of my faith in Christ—a relationship that triggered a long and serious struggle to know His will concerning my authority and responsibility in wielding that sword. This is also not a treatise for or against capital punishment. It recognizes that the “sword of the state,” if misused, can result in grievous harm and at the same time be a God-given restraint of evil.

The lessons revealed in the following pages are unique, yet affect everyone. While only thousands are commissioned to wield the “sword of the state,” everyone must support and yield to that authority—be they police, military, or others.

This journey includes a parallel consideration of the sword of the Spirit as it describes my initial exposure to reading and hearing God’s Word, followed by a growing appreciation for and eventual dependence on that Word. Some of the life lessons reveal that the sword of the Spirit can be abused in much the same way as the sword of the state. The Word of God can be twisted out of context by people with twisted hearts and minds.

The majority of life lessons stem from my reluctant transformation and failure to align my spirit with the Word of God. This is about my journey to discovering the truth among conflicting influences in a hostile environment. It’s about learning that when it comes to dealing with people who choose to live by the sword of violence, there are definite Christian responsibilities for all crime fighters and private citizens.

The human wolves who prey upon others not only diminish their victims, but they also weaken the very fabric of society. We are compelled to carefully consider all of the affected lives so dear to God. Having spent most of my life working for the Texas prison system, particularly with death row inmates, their families, and the families of their victims, I had a unique opportunity to examine all sides of the
situation. I saw the deepest darkness of pain and suffering caused by sin and evil in the world. I was also blessed, however, to see the bright light of God’s hand at work in the lives of every person affected by the sword of violence and the sword of the Spirit.

Although I studied for many years at Sam Houston State University, earning a degree in criminal justice, I learned far more by praying my way through the heart-rending atrocities of prison life and diligently searching God’s Word for wisdom and direction.

This humble volume is about startling life lessons learned while dealing with death row inmates on the last day of their lives. It’s about love lessons from those deemed unlovable. It’s about heart lessons from God. But mostly it’s about God’s will for and activity in the lives of wounded sheep and deranged wolves. It is my hope that these pages will inspire those who are empowered to wield the sword of the state, and will bless those whom they serve as well.

Some of the very blunt and stark realities of life deep inside a prison and the capital punishment process may be unnerving and uncomfortable; nevertheless, I encourage you to continue taking this very emotional ride with me. I trust that you will be moved by its destination. I pray that the Lord will hold you tightly if any aspects of this journey might open a personal wound in a victimized heart. My greatest reward for writing this book would be that God would use my experiences, along with the life lessons I learned through them, to help you look to Him for direction through life’s most painful and troubling times. To you, to the victims of predatory criminal actions, and to those who dedicate their lives to fighting crime and keeping the peace, you are in my prayers and in God’s heart. May the Lord draw you closer to Him through this journey.
“He really is a good boy,” the mother said. I was caught off guard. I had to pause and silently stare at her for a moment, digesting her words. It was the day of her son’s execution. I had just finished explaining in detail the rules she was expected to follow when she entered the prison to witness the event. Her thoughts and focus were understandably somewhere else, and it was obvious that she had not heard a single word I had just said.

The lady stood a little over five feet tall. She was dressed respectably sharp, yet casual, had shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair, and was probably in her late forties. Her demeanor was calm and very polite as her eyes shifted down at the floor, then back up at me, then quickly down to the floor again. She took a deep breath, quietly stared into my eyes for a moment, and with a slight southern drawl, she said, “He’s one of God’s little lambs. He’s a special sheep in God’s flock.”

My heart was smitten with sympathy as my mind began to ponder her words. Only a few minutes before, I had counseled the family of the victim of her son’s crime. Their thoughts about her son burned with intense, spiteful anger, and their words were a lot different from this mother’s description of one of God’s special sheep.

Staring back at this heartbroken woman, I gave thanks to God that I was no longer the same man I used to be in the early years of my criminal justice career. The old me was mean, unsympathetic, and would have told her: “Lady, you need to face reality. Your son is not a good boy and is certainly not one of God’s special sheep. He is only a
wolf in sheep’s clothing, pulling the wool over your eyes. Your son is a cold-blooded murderer. He is a despicable, dangerous criminal who is about to get exactly what he deserves!"

Instead, the new me gently and sincerely replied: “Yes, ma’am, I know that your son is a good boy and one of God’s special sheep. I am so sorry that you both have to go through this. I am so sorry.” I continued to ponder her statement and thought about how my heart had been enabled to answer her as I did.

The transformation of my character was a process that took place gradually over many difficult years of learning critically important life lessons in a setting that had been the most brutally violent and emotionally ruthless classroom on earth. Breaking old, insensitive habits and changing warped thinking had been a long, daily struggle. After more than two decades in that developmental battle, I ended my prison career; but I had a lot more growing and maturing to do. I have come a long way from the confused, angry young man I used to be. As I share the stories of the journey into the depths I sank, you might come to despise the old me. You should. I do too.

Shattered Safety

I grew up on the south side of Houston—a scrappy, redneck, but easygoing *Happy Days* Richie Cunningham sort of guy. Our neighborhood, like many others in the seventies, was quiet and, for the most part, peaceful. Neighbors knew their neighbors and crime took place “somewhere else—not here.”

And then one night during my last year of high school, everything changed. It was all over the news:

“**Bodies of 27 young boys found in shallow graves!**
Abducted—abused—murdered”
Even more startling was that it took place only a few blocks from our home.

Our family was shaken; our neighborhood was horrified; the city was in disbelief; the nation was stunned. What kind of monster(s) could do such a thing? Their names: Elmer Wayne Henley, Dean Corll, and David Brooks. Doors that were never locked before were now shut tight. Parents who once allowed their children to roam free were extra protective. The secure feeling of a safe place to live was gone forever.

I was seventeen at the time. Some of those victims were about my age. I could have been one of them. The story was on everyone’s lips for months. Why? Why here? I had questions too, but not a lot of answers. I do recall that one of our neighbors, known for his “religious” background, had much to say regarding what the “Word of the Lord” tells us about how to handle dangerous criminals.

I considered myself a Christian. Although I was raised Catholic, I was an uncommitted Catholic; I paid no attention to what went on at church and attended only when my parents insisted—but that had stopped early in my teen years. It had been a long time since I darkened a church doorway.

A year later, I had all but dismissed the neighbor’s “Word of the Lord.” But then, as a young student at Sam Houston State in Huntsville, Texas, I found myself in the middle of a class discussion of morality issues. The topic turned to the death penalty.

“Carter! What’s your opinion?” the professor asked.

(Gulp.) How can I be inoffensive and as neutral as possible? Make no enemies here. It’s a long time to the end of the semester. Pause . . . pause . . . pause.

“I suppose that it’s all right, but personally I could never be a part of it,” I hesitatingly replied. That comment only resulted in sharp opinions and objections from both sides of the debate. Rather than meet my goal of not making enemies, I succeeded in making more
than anticipated. So much for fence-straddling. At the end of the ses-
sion, I walked out, my head spinning in confusion and uncertainty.

Late that Friday night, as most nights, Huntsville was desolate and
fog was rolling in. As I stood on my dorm balcony, looking out on the
lifeless, dormant town, the slow, bellowing moan of a steam whistle
inside the state penitentiary less than a mile away announced through
the darkness that all was well at the prison.

As much as the local residents tried to ignore its existence, the
dismal wailing of that whistle would not let the citizens rest with-
out sounding its grim reminder that Huntsville’s “bastille” was still
there—lurking and real. Subconsciously, everyone in town would lis-
ten for silence after the first long whistle blast—one blast said “all is
well”; three blasts meant trouble, danger, or an inmate had escaped.

Through the thick fog, I could barely see the outline of the dark,
foreboding 150-year-old fortress, completely surrounded by a huge
brick wall that guardedly obscured anything inside and was true to its
name: the Walls. Deep inside was the extension of death row—the
execution chamber. I could not imagine how anyone could possibly
work there. Only two months earlier, several members of the prison
staff were taken hostage, and two were killed by inmates. There could
not be a worse place of employment on earth.

I would never have anticipated that less than a year later, in des-
peration to meet college expenses, I, Tim Carter, would become a
prison guard—but, I assumed, only temporarily, until I finished col-
lege. And, as unthinkable as it was at the time, I would eventually
make a career in an institution of violence and mayhem, culminating
as a member of the “death squad,” the exclusive group responsible for
the execution of the condemned. By the time my penal career ended,
I had personally assisted in the legal deaths of over 150 human beings.
The world of the penitentiary is filled with pits of pain and darkness. As a new recruit, I would step into each and every one of them. What a bizarre and amazing path my life was about to take. I saw nothing but complete darkness in the beginning of the journey.

I vividly recall my first trip to the Walls. I swallowed hard as the first crash gate slammed securely behind me. I was locked inside! When the second gate slammed shut, my knees grew weak. Suspended high overhead, in a large cage out of anyone’s reach, was a guard who controlled all of the crash gates that allowed entrance into or exit out of the prison. If the guards needed to stay in cages for protection, I was in trouble!

As one crash gate after another slammed shut behind my back, the sinister atmosphere of the institution tore away what courage I may have thought I had. Realizing my complete loss of control and freedom, I felt like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

The deeper I walked into the unit, the stronger the indescribable odor of the musty old structure and its grim world. I stayed so close to the sergeant leading me that had he stopped abruptly, I would have bumped awkwardly into his heels. He displayed no fear of the hundreds of inmates standing in the crowded recreation yard through which he led me, but a cold chill came over me. Every inmate was staring directly at me—one smiling—just checking me out. I passed within inches of many of them. Some smirked and made degrading and suggestive remarks. These scar-faced convicts were big and mean. I had always considered myself to be a self-confident, high-energy guy and thought I was reasonably tough—but not nearly this tough. I couldn’t believe they were all allowed to be out in the open like that and not locked up.

I thought to myself, “If I can get out of here alive, I’ll never come back!”
Yet for whatever reason, I did go back the next day, and the next, and the next. For the first several months, it was a daily decision to continue the job or quit. But I survived the training and was first assigned to the Wynne Unit on the north side of Huntsville. A gruesome scene awaited as I entered the gate on my first day. An inmate lay dead on the ground, his body charred and smoking. He had fallen onto a live transformer and had been electrocuted. The word went out, but was never proven, that his working partner responsible for holding the ladder had purposefully made him fall. What a first impression!

Orientation included assignments to most of the various tasks performed by all the regular guards. My first duty was the guard tower, one of the only places where guns are allowed and, in fact, required. Having spent hours in the East Texas woods, I was no stranger to firearms. But the thought of looking down the barrel of a high-powered rifle aimed at a living human being was far different from setting the crosshairs on a ten-point buck. In training we had to promise that, no matter what, we would shoot to kill—never thinking of our target as a human, but as a dangerous wolf who himself would kill if he were not stopped. Fortunately, I never had to keep that promise.

Kindness Is Weakness

In cellblock duty, my mentor was an experienced officer named Wayne. He was twice my age, tough as nails, and afraid of nothing. His was the ubiquitous movie image of a prison guard. Although he was only about forty years old, his skin was hard and leathery, his hands were heavily calloused, his voice was deep and coarse, and his gray hair belied his age.

He didn’t say much at first. When we did bed check, he would just hand me a pencil and tablet and motion for me to follow. Separated from each other, we walked the sixteen “runs” (each run containing twenty-six cells) and took inventory of our “stock.” If our individual
counts didn’t match, we did it all again, then compared our count to the captain’s log, which all had better agree, or else. . . .

Wayne’s constant piece of advice for me was to forget everything I was told in the training academy. It became very clear that he considered the academic side of training to be garbage—very different from his practical view of guard duty. In the middle of the graveyard shift, after midnight when all was quiet and the lights were dim, we’d have time for my personal schooling. He’d pull a chair up right in front of mine—face-to-face. He’d speak slowly and deliberately. One of the first things he said was, “You seem to be a nice guy, but that can be a problem. . . . You see, in here, nice guys don’t finish last—they just don’t finish. . . . Know what I mean?”

Sometimes he would just sit and stare at me until he was sure that he had my undivided attention. One nugget of Wayne’s wisdom still echoes in my mind: “Son, I like you, and I want to see you survive. But in prison, kindness is weakness, and if you’re one of those ‘religious nuts’ you’ll get eaten alive.” I assured him that he had nothing to worry about, especially the religious part. At that point in my life, the only thing I had faith in was myself and the fellow officers I knew I could trust. I hadn’t been to Catholic Mass in a long time, and my only opinion of church was that it was mostly a meaningless ritual. I was a self-centered kid, consumed with sports and a girlfriend.

Wayne stressed how manipulative and dangerous inmates could be. It was critical that we stick together. He made it clear that inside these walls, I would have to prove my manliness. I hung on his every word, daring myself to not show any sign of weakness—which meant having to walk (and sometimes cross) a critical ethical line, a line I willingly violated without blinking an eye.

It did not take long for me to learn personally that all the dangers Wayne warned me of were very real. When prisoners were not manipulating and scheming against the officers, they were preying upon, assaulting, and raping each other. I learned how to out-hate, out-cuss, and out-con the hardest of convicts or guards. Recruits who appeared
weak, gentle, or compassionate had short careers in the penal system. I vowed that I would fit in and become a valuable asset to the team. I wanted to become as tough as Wayne.

Looking at me now, in my fifties and several times a grandfather, few would believe that I could once bench press twice my weight. I was quick, agile, muscular, and had little difficulty standing my ground and proving I was one not to be reckoned with. I enjoyed fighting prisoners. Compassion and lenience were left behind, replaced by a keen attentiveness to winning the war against inmates. Mentally and emotionally I became as hard as a rock, and my heart became equally calloused and insensitive.

The penitentiary was a classroom that made an impressionable student out of me. Like a stern schoolmaster, it demanded my full attention as its student. Like a hot branding iron, it was determined to leave permanent reminders of every lesson it taught. Within the first year at the prison, all of my naïveté and innocence was completely annihilated. The discomforts I used to feel in the Sam Houston State University classrooms were like preschool playtime compared to the prison. This prison curriculum was shaping every aspect and direction in my life, but it was about to be interrupted by an unexpected detour.