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CHAPTER I

SAVING ANTONIO



They entered the narrow corridor, father and son, on this morning in late February 1996, and made their way to the tiny cell on Death Row where Antonio James had lived for fourteen years. Sixteen-year-old Marshall Cain was used to the cell blocks, locks, and multiple doors of a maximum-security prison. He'd grown up in that world, grown up making prison rounds with his dad and riding horses with the cowboy inmates working the cattle at the Louisiana State Penitentiary—familiarily known as Angola.

Now he wanted to visit Antonio.

He didn't have much time. In just a few days, James, sentenced to death for killing a man in a New Orleans robbery, would leave his "home" for a final journey. Guards would transport him to a holding cell in Camp F, some distance from the Death Row complex and on the other side of the broad expanse that is Angola.

Shortly before sundown on March 1, guards would escort James from the holding cell into an area where visitors normally congregated

with other prisoners on visiting days at the prison. Then they would take the condemned man through a heavily secured metal door, down a short hallway, and at last into a brightly lit but sterile room where he would be strapped to a gurney and put to death by lethal injection.

The teenager, Marshall Cain, had asked his dad, Burl, the warden of Angola who would preside over James's execution, if he could take a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies to the condemned inmate, now less than a week from his appointment with death. The father, who had come to deeply appreciate how James made the most of his days on Death Row, readily agreed. "I had no idea what kind of interchange might occur between a sixteen-year-old and a man counting off the last days of his life," Burl Cain said later.

Antonio James seemed delighted to see the two visitors. He quickly got up from the cot that he used both for sleeping and as a chair of sorts in which to sit, study, write, and watch the communal television anchored high on a wall across from his cell. He extended his right hand through the bars, and both the warden and his son shook it. They marveled at the upbeat countenance of someone who, it seemed, had so little to look forward to, locked up as he had been in this tiny cell for so many years and now preparing himself, as best he could, to die.

Marshall Cain's eyes momentarily turned away from the man whom society had sentenced to death for what he had done. The teenager began taking mental snapshots of the scene, snapshots he would never forget, absorbing details of Antonio's meager existence. It was such a tiny cell where James lived, about the size of a cage housing wild animals at the zoo, without windows, pictures, or any signs of warmth. There was barely enough room for a thin cot, a small wooden chest in which the inmate stored his belongings, a weathered stainless steel toilet, and small sink with a faded mirror above it. Marshall stifled a shudder.

Then something else caught the teenager's attention. There, on top of the chest, was a worn and much-underlined Bible, Antonio James's most precious possession. The inmate kept it open so he could immediately turn to one of his favorite passages. James would say that it was the

Bible, and its message to him, that not only prepared him to accept his ultimate fate but also served as an encouragement to other Death Row inmates struggling to keep from losing their sanity and flat out giving up. Burl Cain had told his son how this condemned man had come to use his time over the years teaching other Death Row inmates to read so that they, too, might find a measure of hope in a hopeless situation.

Antonio James had dodged death once before when in March 1995, only hours from having his life ended, his attorneys had successfully negotiated a stay of execution. He had tried to make the most of the subsequent time he had left, tried to leave behind something good. But now his additional time was rapidly running out, falling away like the grains of sand slipping through the narrow hole of an hourglass. There was virtually no likelihood James would avoid dying on schedule this time.

Yet here he was, still reaching out to others and now taking a moment to savor the sweet aroma of the cookies he would soon devour. His smiling face offered no hint that the inmate dreaded, or would struggle against when the hour arrived, what the state of Louisiana planned to do to him as final punishment for a killing he helped to commit as a teenager.

“Here,” Marshall Cain said as he inserted the paper plate filled with cookies through the narrow slit between the cell bars. James took the plate, sniffed the cookies approvingly, and sampled one. In a moment he turned his attention to the youth.

“Thanks,” the inmate said, “that was kind of you. They’re my favorites.”

Marshall nodded, somewhat self-consciously, then asked a question that clearly reflected both his disbelief and dismay. “Antonio, I have to ask you something. You are a Christian. You care about others; you teach the other inmates to read and you do Bible studies. Why are you here on Death Row? Now my dad has to execute you—why?”

James did not answer for a moment. Then he began to talk about his abusive upbringing, about a father who liked to hurt and belittle him, about escaping by sleeping under the house with his dog keeping him

warm. He talked about running away to New Orleans when he was twelve. He and his friends formed a small gang that would rob tourists at gunpoint in the French Quarter. Most of the time, the victims did not resist. Except one. Antonio shot him, and he died. "That's why I'm here," the condemned man said.

"I have some real good advice to you and I hope and pray you will listen and tell your friends. When you get to be fourteen or fifteen years old, your parents will let you start going places with your friends. They will trust you to do the right thing, but it's a jungle out there for young people. There are all kinds of trails, paths, and crossroads. There are lots of bad things that can hurt you in the jungle—bears, tigers, lions. Drugs and alcohol will hurt or destroy you.

"As you go through the jungle with your peers, they will tell you to go here and turn there, but at every crossroad in the jungle, Marshall, if you will just pause, stop, and look for your mom or dad's face—or Jesus' face—it will be there to guide you on the safe path." Antonio told Marshall that all his friends ran away. They testified against him to save themselves and they never visited him. He told Marshall, "Nobody loves you like your mama, daddy, or God. They will always be with you no matter what. They will always keep you safe if you listen and seek their guidance."

ABC television's *Prime Time Live* crew was on-site at Angola producing a documentary on James's execution, entitled "Judgment at Midnight"—so-called because when Cain announces the time of death of an executed man to the media, he makes the statement, "We sent (name's) soul to God for final judgment at (time of death)." ABC's Cynthia McFadden interviewed Marshall after James's execution, saying, "He seemed to be remorseful, a changed man." Marshall responded, "Ms. McFadden, those are the consequences of Antonio's behavior. It's bad, but he can't take back what he did."

James's lawyers had made one final attempt to save his life. Two days before his scheduled execution, the three-person Louisiana pardon board convened at Angola to hear an appeal from the condemned man's attor-

neys seeking clemency for their client. James was in the room and testified before the board, which listened politely as he apologized for his role in the death of the robbery victim.

“I didn’t mean to kill that man,” James insisted, as he had throughout his years on Death Row. “But it happened, and I take responsibility for that.”

The day before the hearing, James met with the son of the slain man and offered a heartfelt apology for what had happened. The condemned man asked for forgiveness, all the while admitting he could understand if the slain man’s son would not grant it. Unsaid, yet implicit, was the hope that the son, now middle-aged, would not only forgive the inmate but would agree that his life should be spared. He accepted James’s explanation and apology and declared he had forgiven the inmate. But it seemed clear he would not endorse any effort to stop the execution.

“I’m glad he feels the way he does now, that he’s remorseful,” the son told a television crew who filmed the meeting. “But he’s still got to pay the price.”

After a brief closed-door meeting, the pardon board weighing Antonio James’s fate emerged into open session and made its findings known to the condemned man, his attorneys, and reporters present to cover the unusual event.

“We find no reason to recommend clemency,” the board’s chair announced abruptly without further explanation. James stared straight ahead without flinching. His lawyers vowed to continue fighting to stop his execution. Their faces betrayed a bitter disappointment; only hours later, when it became apparent that nothing could save their client, did the attorneys break down and weep.

The pardon board’s decision all but guaranteed the execution would proceed on schedule. Only the Louisiana governor’s direct intervention, a stay issued by the state’s highest court, or some action by the U.S. Supreme Court would stop the execution now. It seemed unlikely that any miracle might yet occur to keep Antonio James from dying.

As the date of his death drew near, Antonio asked the warden lots of

questions. "How is it when you die? What happens to your soul, and how does it really work?" Cain listened, taking the man's questions seriously. He quoted Jesus' words to the thief hanging next to Him on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

He also told Antonio what Billy Graham, in his book *Angels*, says about those celestial beings and how they escort the redeemed soul to heaven. Antonio asked Cain if he would hold his hand when the time came, so he would be connected to this earth while he reached into heaven with the other hand. Cain promised he would.



On the afternoon of March 1, 1996, the condemned man and his family gathered in the visitors' room in the death house for their final farewell. They sat around a long table, laughing and reminiscing. Eventually the warden walked in, and the family's attention shifted to him.

He spoke briefly. "Thank you for coming so Antonio can say goodbye. I know how much he appreciates it." He did not add, nor did it need to be said, that he applauded Antonio's mother, siblings, nieces, and nephews for being brave enough to offer unconditional love to him at the time he needed it most.

As he left, Cain stared at James, who acknowledged his glance. "I'll be seeing you shortly," the warden said quietly. It was time for Antonio to prepare for his last meal.

Burl Cain had done his best to prepare Antonio James for death. The two men had spoken often about the events soon to unfold, most recently just that day. The warden had explained what would happen when he would arrive to escort the inmate from his holding cell to the death chamber. He spared no detail, believing James would be helped by knowing exactly how things would play out.

The warden described the concrete block death chamber and the gurney, positioned diagonally inside the room. He told James how a guard team, specially trained and rehearsed, would buckle him securely to the gurney and how an EMT would insert a needle into each of his arms. Cain

explained that only one needle would be needed to administer the lethal combination of drugs, but the second one would be in place in case the first failed. Cain made it clear that he would try as hard as he could to ease James's departure from this world.

The inmate listened intently, taking everything in without interrupting, almost as though the procedure were meant to help, not put him to death. The calm expression on Antonio's face did not change as Cain explained what was going to happen.

"Any more questions?" the warden asked. Antonio shook his head. "Let's pray together, then," said Cain.

"I'd appreciate that very much," Antonio said.

The warden reached out and grasped the inmate's hand as he whispered: "Dear God, You're about to welcome Antonio into Your kingdom. Help him to keep his focus entirely on You during the coming hours. Help him to realize that he is about to come into the presence of Jesus. And Father, we just pray for the victim's family, that You'll be with them and comfort them . . ."



The ABC television crew filmed Antonio's last walk. He needed no assistance as he was led from the holding cell and through the area where he had had dinner with Cain, Assistant Warden Darrel Vannoy, his spiritual advisor, and several others. When James entered the death chamber he paused at the microphone and addressed the witnesses. He told the victim's family he was sorry and asked their forgiveness. He turned, looked at the execution gurney, walked over to it, sat on the side and lay down.

The efficient strap-down team did their work in ninety seconds, securing leather straps around the prisoner's ankles, thighs, abdomen, chest, and shoulders. Then the executioner began searching for a vein in his right arm into which he could insert the needle.

"Antonio was so calm, his pulse so low, that we couldn't locate a suitable vein even when he made a fist," Cain said later. "He apologized for

making things difficult. The EMT slapped his arm to see if he could raise a vein. That didn't work, so finally we inserted the needle into his leg."

Now, with every step of the procedure accomplished, the warden signaled for the curtain to open so the witnesses could observe the actual execution. Cain took hold of Antonio's hand and stared into his eyes. Then he said, "Antonio, the chariot is here; get ready for the ride. Here we go; you are about to see Jesus."

In a gesture that the warden took to mean that he fully understood and expected to see his Lord, James squeezed Cain's hand. Then the warden turned toward a one-way glass. He could not see the executioner who would administer the drugs, but he could give the signal.

Cain nodded.

The process, irrevocable, began. In a moment, the first drug began to enter Antonio James. The inmate breathed two deep breaths, relaxed his grip on Burl Cain's hand, and closed his eyes for the last time. The lawyers had tears in their eyes.

Later that night, in front of TV cameras, the warden would announce that "we have sent Antonio James to his final judgment." He purposely avoided using the words "execution" and "death."

The warden's compassion in directing executions does not mean that he opposes capital punishment. He makes no public statements about the death penalty. As warden, he is committed to carrying out the sentences that Louisiana juries and judges hand out, whether to send inmates to Angola for a period of years, for life without parole, or to their deaths.

Some victims' family members—but not all—have criticized Cain for the way he conducts executions. They say he should dispense justice without becoming involved in the slightest in the lives of the men he is putting to death.

"They say that I seem more interested in their loved one's killer than I do in the victim," the warden remarked. "I say that you have to do *what* you can *where* you are. I wish I could have been there to hold the *victim's* hand: just because I couldn't be there when your daughter died, for example, doesn't mean I shouldn't be there when her killer is put to death."

Cain, in fact, often expresses great sympathy for the victim's families. "I regret there *had* to be a victim," he says.

James was the second of six men whom the warden has executed. James's death showed him how important it is to give every inmate, even those condemned to die and waiting for years on Death Row before their executions, an opportunity to find meaning to their existence in prison even in the direst circumstances. For the warden, that existence is found in believing in Jesus Christ as Savior. Not every inmate who has died in the execution chamber during Cain's tenure at Angola has made that commitment. One inmate, a Buddhist, whispered to Cain as the execution began, "Tell my lawyer he's fired."

The executions he has conducted have served, along with other events, to motivate Cain to continue making sweeping changes to a prison culture at Angola that for years had been among the most violent in the nation. It would encourage him to take risks—although he refuses to call them that. He would offer inmates, most of them serving sentences from which they will never be set free, the chance to join a "community" where they could begin to experience what Cain would come to call "moral rehabilitation."