

## WHERE LIFE ENDS AND DEATH BEGINS

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Handcuffed, shackled, and unable to move for hours, I felt numbness taking over my body and mind. I was incapable of grasping the severity of the dreadful reality to which I was being subjected. I was a kid who knew almost nothing about life, and certainly nothing about prison life. Yet spending the rest of my life in prison is what awaited me.

“I sentence you to life without the possibility of parole.” I can barely recall the judge saying on that dreadful October day in 1996, when life as I knew it was over. Several months had passed since I had heard that life-ending statement. It would take me over two decades to fully comprehend what those ten words really meant. Life without the possibility of ever learning how to drive, going to the prom, getting married and having kids, voting, fighting for my country, or just being able to grow old with my family.

Staring out the window in complete dismay, I saw that my living nightmare was about to get worse. I was less than a mile from the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester, Oklahoma. This ominous revelation sent a bone-shattering shiver through my body that even the coldest of cold could not do. Built in 1909, Big Mac, as it is known, was the first prison in the state. Lockdown almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This was and still is Oklahoma’s most notorious maximum-security prison, housing what society believed was the worst of the worst.

The months of waiting and knowing I would be sent here could not have prepared me for the onslaught of emotions that were bombarding me as we approached the prison. On the verge of hyperventilating, I tried to get my breathing under control. The last thing I wanted to do was pass out. Yet I struggled for what felt like an eternity before breathing normal again.

The van came to a stop, and I was ordered to get out and start walking with the other five prisoners who were under the same dreadful fate. As if in slow motion, I started walking towards a twenty-foot wide sliding chain link gate that opened with a loud shriek. Walking through the gate, my gaze went upward to the top of the thirty-three foot high, white-washed concrete walls topped with rolls of razor wire that surrounded the prison. For almost 114 years its medieval guard towers have stood silently like sentinels waiting to spring into action. The only thing missing are gargoyles perched atop the towers.

As I walked beneath one of the towers and through the monolithic archway, I saw two guards standing nonchalantly at either side of the tower with shotguns cradled

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in the crooks of their arms pointing down at us. Clearly this was a message for all prisoners who arrived, “Your soul better belong to God, because your life belongs to us.”

“Name and number,” yelled one of the guards. Just mere hours out of the reception center where my prison number was issued, I froze and could not recall it. Finally I remembered.

“Elliott 250104,” I said without looking up.

Never before in my short life had I felt the immense presence of evil as did that night walking into that place, stepping into the very definition of hell on earth. I was oblivious to the absolute horrors I was about to face in this man-made hell.

Being led through the rotunda, we were ushered into the foyer of the west cell house. It was like stepping through a portal into the past, when prisons were built for a single purpose, to crush the very life from you and remove all hope of ever being free again.

The building was so old and deteriorated that I actually expected to see ghosts rising from its five tiers. Peering into the first cell was jaw-dropping. The walls were so claustrophobically close that, even small as I was, I could touch both sides with flat palms. I could not believe people had been subjected to living in a place this small. Yet thousands of men were forced to live in such barbarically inhumane conditions for decades.

One hour after arriving, I was ordered to grab my property and head off to my bunk somewhere in this fortress of horrors. I was confused as to why I was still fully restrained. Little did I know then that out of the 1,574 bunks, the only empty bunk left was on H-Block, the supermax unit, and no one went to H-Block without restraints. Built partially underground, it was kept at 45 degrees year-round. It housed people for disciplinary reasons, administrative segregation, some general population, and of course, death row. It was boasted about as the most secure unit in the entire Oklahoma prison system. It was a prison within a prison, and the worst place in the state to do time.

Heading to H-Block, we spiraled our way down several flights of stairs, passed through two massive chain-link gates, and entered the long corridor of this modern-day dungeon. I was surprised not to see prisoners chained to the walls and ceiling. Once again, a massive shiver coursed through my body. The guards escorting me saw this and told me I would get used to it. They did not know that the shiver had nothing to do with the cold. It was impossible to fathom how anyone could get used to a place that was designed to remove all hopes, dreams, and aspirations of ever being free again.

Down the long corridor we walked until I was ordered to turn right, directly to Northwest One, the disciplinary pod. The captain standing at a barred steel door gave me an excuse about there being no empty bunks anywhere else, so I would be housed here until one became available. He told me I might as well get comfortable, because it could be a while. As I stepped toward the door, everyone in their cells started screaming and beating on their cell doors. I instantly broke out into a sweat. My breathing became shorter and shallower. I was positive at that moment that my life was over; I would never make it out of that unit alive. I just did not know how long I would survive before I was killed. So I did the only thing I knew I had control over. I clenched my jaw and started walking up the stairs to my cell, trying not to think of what nightmares lay in store for me.

So began my sentence: life without the possibility of parole. This living death sentence has oppressed me now for over twenty-nine years with no end in sight.