Care-based interventions in situations of injustice attract significant suspicion in the social sciences. Scholars caution that caring responses to social issues often ignore the structural causes of suffering, obscuring systemic problems by focusing on meeting the needs of individuals. Concerns about power discrepancies are also prominent. Seemingly altruistic ‘caregivers’ are charged with reinforcing social hierarchies, adopting privileged roles as heroes and saviours while ‘care recipients’ are locked into disempowered positions as helpless victims. The volunteer is characterized as deriving emotional gratification from their privileged role. Such critiques are particularly prominent in research about efforts to assist racial minorities, where colonial patterns of power and domination can endure and thrive under a veil of altruism and good intentions.

But do clear lines always exist between the personal and the political, between care and activism? And what happens to interpersonal power dynamics in institutional spaces characterized by violence and control? I began this research in 2015, intending to analyse the social, political and emotional contours of asylum seeker support work at the level of personal relationships. My interviews with participants in a range of refugee and asylum seeker support programmes drew my attention to the work of people who visit refugees and asylum seekers in immigration detention facilities. As I listened to their stories, it became apparent that issues of power, privilege and emotion were of critical importance to these people. I also began to understand that these ideas held different meanings and carried different resonances in the carceral spaces of Australia’s detention centres.

As I continued my research in different parts of Australia, I saw with growing clarity that detention centre environments distort and to some extent collapse conventional distinctions between empowered caregivers and disempowered care recipients. Within detention environments, visitors are positioned not as privileged benefactors but as quasi-prisoners. The inaccuracy of emotional gratification claims was stark. Interviewees were often reluctant to focus on their own emotional experiences, but when asked acknowledged sleepless nights; feelings of shame, complicity and powerlessness; and even clinical diagnoses of depression and Post-Traumatic
Stress Disorder. Equally, while many visitors did not identify as activists or use the language of resistance, most nonetheless conceptualized the work of being a friend to the stranger as a political act.

The echoes of my original research focus can still be found within this book. My research still engages with fundamental questions of power, privilege and emotion. But this is not the book I initially planned to write. Concerns about power discrepancies at the interpersonal level remain present but have been eclipsed by larger questions regarding state power, institutional affect and policy intent. Concerns about volunteers deriving emotional gratification from their work have at once been challenged and become secondary to questions about how and why detention regimes inflict harm – not only on detainees, but also on their loved ones and supporters. The allegations of apoliticism that have been so central to critiques of care-based volunteer work have been called into question as a more complex picture has emerged regarding the intimate relationship between personal care and political activism.

Drawing on more than 70 in-depth interviews with regular visitors to Australian immigration detention facilities, as well as other corroborating sources, this book paints a unique and vivid picture of these carceral spaces. It tells the story of Australia’s onshore immigration detention network as witnessed and experienced by the people who enter these spaces to offer friendship and support. Ultimately, it offers a richer understanding of how detainee isolation and despair is produced and weaponized through the details of institutional life; a deeper recognition of what deterrence looks and feels like in Australia’s onshore immigration detention system; and an expanded appreciation of the human costs – both direct and collateral – that this system imposes.