

NIGHT THOUGHTS

Quiet reigned in A-wing of Fox River State Penitentiary. The hum of the air conditioning system seemed loud after its absence all day. The riot's rubble had been cleared from the floor and galleries, but a hint of smoke still hung in the air. Michael lay on his back on the bottom bunk bed, one tattooed arm behind his head, the other resting lightly on his stomach. His eyes were wide open, staring at the bottom of the top bed. It bulged beneath Sucre's weight. His cell mate's breathing was slow and deep; undoubtedly he was dreaming about his beloved Maricruz. The gentle noise served to underline the silence that ruled the sleeping cell block — as did the soft scuff of rubber-soled boots on the concrete when the CO made his round. Muted snores drifted from the cells; a few doors down someone murmured in their sleep. It was such stark contrast with the cacophony and mayhem of the day, it was almost painful.

Michael rolled over onto his side, focusing on the dull gray of the wall a few inches from his nose. At least Sucre and Abruzzi had broken into the main drainage pipe. The plan was still on schedule. But the price had been high: several people dead, numerous others injured; their secret revealed to T-Bag, one of the scariest, nastiest creatures Michael had ever met. He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut but couldn't banish the image of Bob Hudson, the rookie guard, falling over the railing. The sight of the blue-clad body twitching while blood poured from numerous stab wounds was etched on his mind. That blood was on his hands, and no matter what, it would never wash off. *One for the team.* He'd carry the burden with him the rest of his life, he knew.

He flung himself over onto his other side so forcefully the bed shook. Sucre snorted and moved before his breathing deepened again. Michael looked out through the bars. The opposite cells were dark, the inmates barely visible, shapeless bundles in the bunks. Somewhere over there, Abruzzi slept; another dangerous man but one that was needed for his plan to succeed. Michael's missing toes tingled with a phantom itch and he suppressed the urge to reach for them.

He shouldn't judge them, though. For the past three weeks, he had managed to keep himself separate, telling himself he was nothing like the cons in Fox River, that he was merely a man with a mission. It had been easy to believe. Until today. *I'm one of the bad guys, remember,* he had told the doc. He would do well to never forget it — though in reality, he stood a better chance to win the lottery than have today's events ever slip from his mind.

And Sara Tancredi, the one truly good person in this godforsaken place, had paid a terrible price for his desire to get Lincoln to freedom. Though he'd managed to get her out of harm's way unscathed, if barely, she had lost something too. Her innocence, naivety, mistaken belief in the good of man — whatever you wanted to call it — had

suffered severe damage when her collected, ordered world had collapsed and men she treated daily turned on her like wild animals as soon as the leash was gone.

The terror and shock in her eyes had been branded onto his soul, when, for a long moment, he had been afraid she would not take his hand, would not dare trust him. Then recognition had dawned on her face, followed by a relief that seared him as badly as the terror had done. Sara's fear, the dead, the injured, they were on him; *he* had sabotaged the AC system, *he* was the fool who had opened Pandora's Box and unleashed the fiends of hell onto Fox River. Still, he had had no choice. Time was running out; in seventeen days they would strap his brother to the chair and kill him for a murder he had not committed. Desperate times required desperate measures.

Mentally, Michael went over his plan again, step by step, like he had done countless times, to make sure he had not overlooked something. If he failed, if he was not prepared for every possible contingency, Linc would die; and he would be stuck here in this madhouse for the next five years, alone. He didn't believe he would survive with his sanity intact.

Far off, a metal door shut with a clang that reverberated through the prison. The fluorescents blinked on. Michael squinted in the sudden glare. All over A-wing the sounds of men waking could be heard: yawns, muttered curses; someone coughed. Michael swung his legs over the side of the bunk bed and stretched. Another day in the five-year sentence of prisoner 94941 had begun. And with it, the time for the next stage of the plan had come.

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