

[NOTE: Some content was moved from this chapter to others.]

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FRIDAY, 16 APRIL

McGinley squatted just outside the maimed fence and ran his thumb over one of the severed wires. A smooth, clean cut; wire or bolt cutters, nothing with teeth. Whatever dirtbag did this was smart enough to leave the flap of chain link attached, so once they got through they could close the door behind them (so to speak) and if the guards weren't paying attention (which they apparently weren't), it would look like nothing was wrong.

Well, nobody said they were stupid. Untrustworthy foreign terrorist-loving assholes, maybe, but not stupid.

He twisted to look past the railroad tracks outside the second fenceline behind him, hardly a hundred feet away. Across the brown valley lay brown hills in front of brown mountains with hardly a tree in sight. Did this desert remind the rags of their home? Could the ones who escaped use some kind of tribal memory to move through this wasteland?

"Rankin," he drawled, "how often do all y'all count noses here?"

Rankin—the bullet-headed contractor the camp commandant had handed McGinley, juiced muscles and shaved head standing arms-crossed in his tan utilities—spat some chaw into the gravel before answering. "Twice a day, or whenever we damn well feel like it."

Which meant twice a day; contractors never worked harder than they had to. "How often do you sweep the fence at night?"

Rankin chewed some more. "Once, around midnight."

"Regular like?"

"We got schedules."

No wonder they'd had four escapes so far this year. McGinley grunted upright and brushed off his hands. Inside the wire, knots of prisoners eddied around the bases of the big slab-

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sided warehouses that were now their homes. He could tell how long they'd been off the boat by whether the men stood around with each other or with the women, and whether the women covered just their heads or their whole bodies.

The Marines used to keep equipment and supplies here before all that moved to Twentynine Palms, a place McGinley had thought sounded a bit more interesting than Barstow until he looked it up and saw it was as brown and ugly as here. Now these warehouses held a mess of CORMEXes stacked two high, metal boxes with a door and a vent that could hold two GIs or four rags, more if there were bitty ones. Well, he'd lived in one of those in Kuwait about a hundred years ago and he'd survived, and so would these fuckers.

Several of the closest ones gave him hard stares and tight lips. He gave it right back. He'd never tolerated attitude from these people back home and even if it led to a few busted heads or bloody mouths, he and his boys kept them in line.

"Rankin, maybe you can explain something to me." McGinley crossed his arms without breaking the staring contest he had going with the rags. "How is it these people keep getting wire cutters when all y'all are supposed to be checking everything that comes in from outside?"

Out of the corner of his eye, McGinley saw Rankin shift his gaze to the prisoners. His mouth tightened. He tapped the phone pod on his left ear and mumbled. After another spit, he said, "Best guess is people coming down the tracks, chucking them over the fence."

"And your guards don't see that."

Pause. "Nope. You guys don't want to pay for more guards, so—"

"I didn't ask you about your manning problems, now did I, son?"

"Ask or not, you get what you pay for."

The nearest prisoner—a wiry guy crowding forty with cheap Western clothes just hanging on him—stabbed a middle finger in the air in McGinley's direction. McGinley smiled, made the "OK" sign with his left hand and shook it at the man, a double insult. The pack sneered at him. A rock pinged off the wire.

A trio of guards in riot gear jogged around the corner of the nearest warehouse. The clots of rags melted away fast; the ones

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who didn't move got a swat from the guards' four-foot black batons or a backhand with a full-length plexi shield. The half-dozen wiseguys facing off with McGinley broke and ran. Rather than go through the hard work of chasing them, the guards turned on a nearby couple of teenaged boys and beat them bloody, just because. Well, at least there was a little discipline here.

McGinley faced Rankin, shook his head, blew out a long, exasperated breath. "You wouldn't have any idea who these good citizens are, chucking in escape tools, now, would you?"

"Nope." His look said, *I don't care, either.*

"Well, that don't surprise me none." Prison contractors hired guards for big, brutal and stupid. Still, he had to wonder if this was just natural stupidity or the kind that came from bagfuls of money left in car trunks. "So you wouldn't have any opinions about whether our friends south of the border are mixed up in this, would you?"

Either this hadn't occurred to Rankin until now, or he was a fine actor. "The Mexicans? What the fuck for?"

"It's a damn business, son, don't you read?" McGinley stuffed the cut fence back into place with his boot toe. "The quitters and the runners, they pay to go south, good money, too. More'n a few sign on with the cartels to pay their fare or because they're broke or pissed off or both. A lot of the older ones got military experience one way or another. Some of the rags ran businesses or had education, doctors and engineers and such, they can set up down there. Taking these sumbitches south makes good business sense."

McGinley stalked toward the Humvee hulking a few yards away between the fencelines, leaving Rankin to catch up. "These runners gotta go somewhere. I reckon it's time we find out where, and who's helping them. Then maybe we can bring back your lost sheep, son. Or maybe just make us some lamb chops."