

Chapter 27

“I Got You”

Living in concrete you get used to noise. Sound bounces off the floors and walls and echoes. When someone on the tier cracked you'd hear him cry or scream. Some guys would moan for hours or days. Televisions were always on and the volume was high. You heard every voice yelling up and down the tier. Sixteen times a day someone's door would be opened, then, an hour later, closed. When guys argued you'd hear it. When someone's cell was shaken down you'd hear it. When prisoners stood in front of each other's cells and talked they had to yell to be heard; you'd hear every conversation. Every time a prisoner was taken off the tier you'd hear the restraints rattle as they were carried to the prisoner's cell by the guard. Then you'd hear the chain between the prisoner's feet as he walked out and when he returned. Prisoners on different tiers could talk to each other through the pipe chase and everybody heard those conversations all day. Security had listening devices in the pipe chase. I never held conversations in the pipe chase, for that reason; everybody could hear what you were saying.

Solitary confinement is used as a punishment for the specific purpose of breaking a prisoner. Nothing relieved the pressure of being locked in a cell 23 hours a day. In 1982, after 10 years, I still had to fight an unconscious urge to get up, open the door, and walk out. All of us in CCR were dealing with strong, powerful emotions all the time, maybe the strongest that exist: the fear of losing control over yourself, the fear of losing your mind. Every day is the same. The only thing that changes is whatever change you can construct on your own. The only

way you can survive in these cells is by adapting to the painfulness. The pressure of the cell changed most men. Some got depressed and went into themselves, isolated themselves, never speaking, never leaving their cells. Others talked constantly, were confused, irrational. When I saw that a man was about to break I'd talk to him, try to help him through it. I could feel what he was going through, even though I wasn't going through it at that moment, because I'd experienced it myself. I made a strong effort to distract him. I occupied the headspace he was in so he wasn't alone. It didn't always work. I'd see men who'd lived for years with high moral principles and values suddenly become destructive, chaotic.