

Sample Chapter

Matt awakened to pain. A massive hammer slammed just behind his closed eyes in time with his pounding heart. He lay on his stomach with his right cheek against a cold hard surface. Remembering the attack, he didn't move or make a sound, kept his eyes shut, hoping he hadn't groaned as he gained consciousness. He listened, heard nothing. He flexed different parts of his body – nothing seemed broken – and cautiously opened his eyes. The cold hard surface was a concrete floor. He turned over on his back, slowly, stifling a cry of pain. Looked up through wavery red to rafters above. In view of the cooler temperature, probably the ceiling of a basement. A small window in one wall admitted pallid light, maybe signaling dusk, surely not dawn. He wondered how long he'd been out.

He remembered the guard attacking him while at least two others held his arms. If the guard had sought revenge Matt wondered why he hadn't killed him. Trees had hidden them from the market so no one could have identified him. Then he remembered the small man standing in the trees behind the guard. He seemed familiar somehow, though Matt couldn't see him clearly for the vegetation. As far as Matt knew, the onlooker had not joined in the beating. How did he fit in?

He turned his head to examine the room. Directly across from the window he saw a solid looking door, closed, and no doubt locked. The stuff filling the large room identified it as a storeroom. Stacks of chests and boxes filled one end. A bound bundle of thick sticks in the corner smelled of pitch: pine boughs intended for use as torches. Scroungers' supplies filled the other end: a stack of folded waterproof hides and tarpaulins to cover truck in wet weather; coils of cord to use for pitching tents and securing truck to pack animals, among other uses. Floor to ceiling shelves on both sides of the door, and one over the door, held jars filled with something.

Gingerly, he sat up. The movement made his head ache and the room spin. He remained sitting until the room stabilized, the hammer behind his eyes grew less intense and his vision cleared, then crawled over to the shelves. The jars held preserved food. He used the shelves to pull himself upright and just for the hell of it tried the door. And of course it didn't budge. Then he went to the window and tried to open it. Its rusty hinges wouldn't let it open far, though he couldn't have fit through it even if they had. Its hinges squealed.

"Pringle! Matt Pringle! Is that you?" The harsh whisper from outside made Matt flinch. He flattened against the wall beside the window. "I know you're in the basement somewhere. I saw 'em lug your sorry ass down there." He must be in Chadwick's basement. "Chadwick and his boys know you're part of Johnson's gang and I want you to know who told 'em. Me, Geraldo Grimes." He gave a kind of snuffling chuckle.

Grimes had been the little guy hiding in the trees. The itinerant trader from Columbia. That's why he sounded familiar. Matt remembered the last of Grimes' many humiliations at Johnson's hands. It had happened in the Rat's Nest in Nellie's Fair. Frank had brought tears to Grimes' eyes by squeezing his thigh with his powerful legs. Grimes had had to crawl out of the tavern. He had cursed Johnson, Matt and Dodd and swore revenge on them.

"Let me tell you what's gonna happen. I was there when they planned it." Snort, snuffle. "After supper Chadwick's comin down there to *person*'ly beat your gang's whereabouts outta you. Tell him fast, Pringle, and maybe he'll kill you quick." Again, that nasty chuckle. Then, "Well, don't know if you heard me or not. I'll move on to the next winder. Remember, give in

quick if you wanta git it over with.” He moved away snorting and chuckling.

Matt’s heart pounded. He had no way out. He worried that he would indeed give the gang’s location away, but he would hold out as long as possible. He began to pace the small floor area, ignoring his headache. As often happened in stressful times his anger began to override his panic. He looked around the room in the waning light, searching for defensive weapons.

Then looking up he saw a way – if not to escape, at least make his captors’ torment of him more costly than they bargained for.

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Except for the window’s square of dim light, full dark shrouded the basement when Matt heard the door’s bolt slide open. He willed calmness to subdue his wrath. With surprise on his side he knew he could handle two men but maybe not three.

The door slowly opened. Faint yellow light spilled through it from a candle in the adjoining room, illuminating a wider patch of floor as the door edged further open. Matt looked down on Chadwick’s wedge-shaped body and balding head. He entered first. A second, taller man followed, carrying (ominously) a pair of hedge trimmers. He stopped abruptly, stumbled into Chadwick who had stopped and was looking around the room for Matt.

“Where the fuck is...?” said Chadwick. A third man carrying a long thick wooden dowel blundered into the second.

Damn, three of them!

Matt had decided to ambush his enemies from the shelf above the door. They wouldn’t look up, at least not at first. He had climbed the shelving next to the door far enough to remove the jars of preserved vegetables, then went down to grab a tarp from the pile of tarpaulins and blankets. Once perched on the empty shelf, he unfolded the tarp. His thin frame and it crowded the space between shelf and ceiling but not enough to keep him from moving freely.

Upon first seeing Chadwick he had recognized the man’s superior strength. He needed to disable him first so he could deal with whoever accompanied him. He would cast the tarpaulin over as many of the group as possible and try to land on Chadwick with both feet.

He had waited.

Now his enemies stumbled around below him.

It’s show time, thought Matt.

Just then, everything went to hell. The shelf, deciding Matt weighed too much, gave way. Three startled faces looked up at its parting screech. A few seconds later the tarp covered Chadwick’s companions – mostly. But Chadwick had dodged it.

The shelf’s collapse disrupted Matt’s trajectory. He landed on one of the men writhing under the tarp, lost his footing and pitched forward. Chadwick, immobilized by seeing his captive attacking from the ceiling, quickly recovered. He caught Matt by the throat with one hand and yanked him to his feet.

“Clever motherfucker aincha?” snarled Chadwick. As they stumbled back and forth over the two under the tarp, Matt tried to wrench free of the viselike grip. Then frantically pushed upward on Chadwick’s chin with the heel of his hand. Neither tactic worked. Chadwick shoved him backward and tried to hook a foot behind his ankle to trip him. Matt backed quickly, knowing he couldn’t let Chadwick wrest him to the floor, slammed against the shelves by the door. He could no longer breathe. Spots danced before his eyes. Feeling consciousness wane, his arms flailed randomly, helplessly.

His left hand struck and reflexively grasped a jar on the shelf. With the last of his strength and the last shred of rational thought, he swung the jar, felt it connect with the side of

Chadwick's head.

Chadwick uttered a surprised, "Unnh!" His grip loosened on Matt's throat just a little. Just enough. Matt knocked Chadwick's arm aside, raised the jar with both hands and brought it down on Chadwick's head with all his failing strength. The jar broke. Fragments of glass and juice struck Matt in the face. He tasted raspberries. He had broken free, at least temporarily.

Chadwick came for him, raspberry juice mixed with blood streaking his face. Holding the broken jar by its cap end, Matt thrust the broken shards at Chadwick's throat. Chadwick backed away. Matt forced his retreat by swinging and jabbing with the makeshift weapon.

When Matt fell for a Chadwick feint to the left, Chadwick struck his wrist and sent the broken jar sailing across the room, then launched himself head first toward Matt.

Matt could no longer think through the fog of pain and fear. Fortunately, Johnson's training kicked in.

Chadwick, sure of victory, had committed himself too far to change his course. Matt dodged to the side, grabbed Chadwick's neck with both hands and increased his headlong flight. Chadwick slammed headfirst into the shelves. He landed in a mass of splintered shelving, shattered jars and coated in semi-liquid goop.

Matt tried to say, "Yes, I am a clever motherfucker at that," but he could only gasp and cough and try to see through a red fog.

He heard one of Chadwick's men crawling from under the tarp – the other wasn't moving – while trying to free the long thick dowel. Matt kicked him in the side of the head and finished untangling the dowel. The guy rolled on the floor groaning. Matt smacked him on the head with the dowel. He didn't move again. Seeing Chadwick move a little, Matt brought the dowel down on his head with all his strength. Twice. The man was too powerful to fight again. Then Matt stood over his unconscious adversaries, catching his breath, regaining his composure.

He considered killing them with the dowel if he hadn't already. But no. He would have if his escape depended on it but it didn't. And he had killed enough people.

But he had to leave quickly. People upstairs must have heard the commotion. Then he realized they would believe it resulted from the interrogation. Peering cautiously out of the storeroom, he saw a large elaborately furnished office, apparently Chadwick's, lighted by a single candle on the desk. He saw no one around.

He stumbled out of the room using the dowel for support, still gasping for breath. He closed the door, slipped the bolt through its holds, crossed the office and looked through an open doorway. It led down a corridor with closed doors on each side to a stairway that led upstairs. No way out in that direction. Turning to find a closed door in the opposite wall, he crossed to it and opened it a crack. It led outdoors onto a concrete patio bathed in cold dim moonlight. He stood in a walkout basement, probably with a guard posted outside. He went to the desk and blew out the candle, then, holding the dowel ready, returned to the door and opened it wider.

"Izzat you, Boss?" Someone outside had noticed the door open.

"Yeah. C'mere." His hoarse whisper, sounded surprisingly like Chadwick's growl.

"Boss?" A tough-looking middle-aged woman, her face barely visible in the moonlight, stepped in front of the door, holding a rifle across her chest. "Why's it so dark in there?" Despite Chadwick's dislike of recruiting women, he apparently employed a few. She stood a little too far outside. Anyone standing in the yard would see him strike her.

He stood half-concealed behind the open door. "Come in." As she stepped across the threshold he brought the dowel down over her head as hard as he could. She crumpled without a sound. He pulled her out of sight behind the doorway and took her rifle. Edging into the

moonlight he recognized it as an assault rifle of some kind; Mitch could tell him the type if he ever saw the gang leader again. Rifling through her clothes he found an additional magazine for it.

He heard steps outside on the patio. A young male voice said, “Marcie?” *Shit!* A second guard, maybe posted because of the prisoner in the basement.

Matt quietly stepped back into the darkness behind the door. A shadow filled the doorway. He swung the dowel.

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