

Excerpt from *Mato-sa* (1st novel in *Wave and Whirlwind*, a novel duo)

October 15, 1955, Williston, North Dakota

All but one person in the Plainsman Saloon knows what the blaring sirens mean, and all save one look at one another trying not to appear alarmed. Karl Myers, who has been asleep at the end of the bar farthest from the front door, lifts his head from where it has been resting on his forearm and asks the barkeep if it is normal for a siren to go on for so long.

“It ain’t no fire and it ain’t no drill,” the barkeep says as he stares toward the entrance.

Myers pushes a shot glass toward the man, and the man fills it with bourbon. Myers downs the shot, looks around the smoke-filled room and notes that everyone, including the barkeep, has their eyes on the front door as if certain someone will appear.

It has been a long day for Myers, who has driven from Bemidji in Minnesota to Williston. He looks at his reflection in a round mirror on the wall behind the bar looking for someone he knows, but the hair of the man looking back is more silver and longer than he remembers, too silver for a man of forty-two, he thinks. A heavy stubble covers his face, something he has not seen since he was a warrior in Korea.

Myers recognizes the worn, brown leather jacket he is wearing over a white T-shirt as *his* jacket, but he does not recognize the eyes that are staring back at him. They should be blue, ice blue, he thinks, but they seem something much less than that: tired, bloodshot eyes searching for something. He rubs those eyes, asks for the bottle of bourbon, pours out a portion, and knocks it back.

“If it’s not a fire, what is it?” Myers asks.

“You not from around here?” asks the barkeep.

“Just passing through. Never been this far west by car, just by train.”

“During the War?”

“Just so, my friend,” Myers replies. “Fermamount is somewhere near here, right?”

“Two miles north of town. Everybody around here knows what those sirens mean.”

“Prison break.”

“It’s either that or a riot or both. They have a drill from time to time, but they don’t blow ‘em this long. Ain’t heard a siren like that but once before, and that

was before the war. Most of these men are going to be on their way to the ‘Mount soon. Surprised no one’s left yet.”

The barkeep’s words are still hanging in the air when several men begin to hurry out the front door.

“They work there?”

“They do,” says the barkeep.

The barkeep walks toward the front of the saloon and peers out at the street through one of the large windows that bracket the front door. He is joined by two silent men and two women who whisper to one another as the wail of the siren continues.

Time seems suspended until a door in the back wall of the saloon flies open and slams against the back legs of Myers’ barstool. Three men rush through the door, one of whom is holding a revolver that he waves back and forth as he yells for everyone to “freeze.”

The gray prison garb each of the invaders is wearing confirms for the people now standing with their backs to the windows that they are hostages. The youngest of the women and one of the men begin to whimper. The older woman puts her arms around the younger woman who clings to the older woman as though both their lives depend upon it; the whimpering man bolts for the entrance. A shot rings out; the slug drops the runner but not before the momentum of his body strikes the door and knocks it open. The man slumps into the doorway, and his lifeless body prevents the door from closing.

Distant sirens, higher pitched than the wailing alarm from Fermamound, sound as though they are approaching the town center where the Plainsman is located. The three escapees look at one another as if expecting direction from one or the other. It is seconds before the man with the gun, a stocky Native American with graying hair, yells for the hostages to face the windows with their arms up and their hands against the glass. The man lying in the doorway is sufficient confirmation for the request. The hostages comply.

A second escapee, a dark-skinned man of average height with a handsome face and the physique of an athlete, addresses the man with the gun as “Cetan” and points a shank toward the back of the room where Myers is slumped onto the bar.

Cetan yells, “*Hey, motherfucker!*” in Myers’ direction, but Myers does not move. Cetan grabs a beer glass from a table and throws it toward Myers. It shatters against the back wall as Cetan again yells, “*Hey!*” but again, Myers does not respond.

“Mato-sa,” Cetan snaps, “wake him up, and if he don’t wake up, slash his fucking throat.”

Mato-sa looks with uncertain eyes toward Cetan and protests, “He ain’t giving us no trouble.”

“*DO IT!*” Cetan screams.

As Mato-sa moves toward Myers, the third escapee, a pale, fragile looking man leans back against the bar. There is fear in his eyes and his voice breaks as he begins, “Cetan, I’m thinking ...”

“Don’t *think!*” yells Cetan. “And keep your pie hole shut, you goddamned pansy.”

Mato-sa approaches Myers and hollers for him to get up. When Myers still does not stir, Mato-sa grabs Myers’ arm. Myers’ hand whips out of his right jacket pocket as he bolts up, and the .45 semi-automatic pistol in that hand slams into the face of Mato-sa, who falls backward over the adjacent barstool. The pistol does not stop until it is leveled at Cetan, who has paused a fatal split-second too long.

A shot rings out. Cetan’s chest is driven back, his arms snap toward Myers, His eyes convey momentary disbelief and then nothing as Cetan and his gun drop to the floor. Myers points the pistol at the fragile man, who pushes his palms forward, cries out for Myers not to shoot, and pisses his pants.

Mato-sa is crabbing backward with the shank still in hand, but Myers aims the gun between Mato-sa’s eyes, fires a cold, blue-eyed glare into those eyes, and shakes his head in a slow motion that confirms for Mato-sa the high probability that Myers will not hesitate to pull the trigger again. Myers gestures with the gun, and Mato-sa interprets the gesture correctly: he slides the shank several feet across the floor.

The hostages have turned away from the window and stare at Myers, who kicks Cetan’s revolver across the floor toward them and says, “One of you, pick it up ... with a handkerchief ... no fingerprints ... and cover these two. You ...” Myers looks and nods at the older of the two women “... pick up the knife ...”

“With a hankie?” the woman asks.

“Right,” Myers replies, notes that his requests are complied with, turns toward the barkeep, and says, “You need to ...”

“Call the Sheriff,” the barkeep says as he steps toward a large phone mounted on the wall behind the bar, places the receiver to his ear, and spins the dial.

“You ...” Myers says to Mato-sa and then to the fragile man “... and you, both of you, on the floor, face down, arms spread.”

Mato-sa rolls over, and the fragile man drops to the floor, spread eagle. A few seconds more, and the assembled players realize the high-pitched whine of patrol cars is closing on the Plainsman Saloon. The now former hostages begin to chatter with each other, except for one, a very bald, stocky man nearer sixty than fifty who has picked up Cetan's revolver. Myers watches the bald man approach the two men on the floor and notes the man's face is a stony mask of anger.

The man kneels close to Mato-sa's head and whispers, "I know who you are, you bastard. These others aren't here, I'd put a bullet through your skull."

Myers is about to say something, but sirens and flashing lights arrive outside the saloon. The bald man stands and stares at Myers for a beat before he turns toward the entrance, as do the others, with the need to confirm with their own eyes that their momentary nightmare is at an end.

The Sheriff and three deputies with guns drawn clamber over the body in the entrance to the saloon. They deduce in an instant that the situation is in hand. The Sheriff looks at the bald man holding a revolver with the handle and trigger wrapped in a handkerchief, nods at the body lying in a pool of blood and asks, "You do that?"

"It was him," the bald man says as he jerks his thumb toward the rear of the saloon.

"Who?" the Sheriff asks.

The bald man turns around, sees two deputies who have entered by way of the back door to the saloon, and discovers that Myers has disappeared.