

PROLOGUE

James Beck had about ten seconds before bones broke and blood hit the floor.

It was his fourth day at Clinton State Prison in Dannemora, New York, and Beck knew he was about to be robbed.

He'd been in lockdown while they finished his intake process. Now he walked in a line of inmates, slowly making his way up a stairwell leading to the cell assigned to him on the fourth-floor in A block. In his left hand, Beck carried a brown paper bag holding personal supplies: toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shaving cream, a pack of cigarette tobacco, and papers.

Clinton was Beck's third prison. He'd been incarcerated for sixteen months. First in Rikers, then in Sing Sing. Long enough to know a new fish, a white guy, unaffiliated, holding a bag of supplies would be a target.

Normally, there wouldn't have been so many prisoners on the stairwell, but guards on the third floor had decided to stop everyone and search them down for contraband. When they finally let the inmates back onto the stairwell, Beck found himself surrounded in a tight space where the guards on the landings could only watch the line of men above them, or below them, but not both.

The two inmates who had planned the rip-off didn't much care about what Beck carried in the paper bag. They wanted to know if the white-boy fish would give up his possessions without a fight. If so, they could feed off him forever.

Beck figured the man behind him would be the muscle. He had about fifty pounds on Beck. He'd do the grab. The one in front would do the snatch. Beck hoped he wouldn't try to shank him first. It would be impossible to defend against a blade in such a tight space.

But Beck wasn't going to wait to defend himself. He was going hit first.

The moment the guard above looked away, Beck rammed his right elbow at the face of the big man behind him. But his attacker was already moving, too, trying to get one arm around Beck's throat, the other around his chest.

Beck's elbow banged into the bigger man's right forearm, missing the face, preventing the chokehold, but not stopping his attacker from getting his other arm around Beck's torso, trapping Beck's left hand. As Beck kept ramming his right elbow at him, the big man lifted Beck off his feet as the inmate in front of Beck turned and fired a punch at Beck's face.

Beck leaned back from the punch and drove both feet into the man in front of him, pushing all of his weight into the attacker behind. Beck and the bigger man fell onto the next man in line, knocking him down and three others. Beck landed on his attacker whose head smacked into a stair with a wet cracking sound, but he still kept his grip on Beck.

The inmate above grabbed the handrail, jumped up, trying to land both feet on Beck's chest.

Beck kicked up at the man, catching him midair between the legs, doubling him over. Her fell onto Beck who shoved him off, broke the grip of the half-conscious attacker under him, and rolled away from the pile of fighting, flailing inmates. Beck grabbed the handrail and pulled himself onto his feet, shouldered and elbowed his way out of the scrum of fighting, stumbling, cursing prisoners.

Guards from above and below shouted and fought their way toward the melee, calling for help on their radios.

Beck joined the rush of men exiting to the tier below, running into more guards who grabbed and shoved the inmates against the wall, yelling for them to spread wide and get their hands up.

Beck felt a fist smack into his kidney, nearly sending him to his knees, but he managed to get into position, head down, hands against the wall, unmoving.

It took about an hour to sort everything out. Nine men were sent to keeplock cells, including Beck, where they were locked down for two days while the prison staff investigated what happened.

Nobody claimed they had been in the fight. Everybody professed ignorance, or said something vague about a guy who fell, or maybe got pushed by another guy.

The COs had little doubt about what had happened. Beck's supplies had been found on the steps. Clearly, the new fish had been attacked, but they couldn't prove that Beck had fought back.

Normally, the guard staff might have decided Beck was a victim and let him off, but word had already come to Clinton that James Beck was a cop killer. So even though Beck stuck to his claims that he had no idea what happened and had committed no violations, because he'd lost his supplies they found him guilty of violating Rule 106.10: "An inmate shall not lose, destroy, steal, misuse, damage or waste any type of State property". Worse, they claimed it involved an assault, and inflated the violation to a Tier III offense.

Beck received of sentence of sixty days solitary in the prison's Special Housing Unit (SHU).

They shackled his hands and ankles to a chain around his waist and shoved him into an isolation cell about the size of a parking space. There was an open shower in one corner, a toilet with no lid, a built-in bunk, desk, a shelf, and a door that opened to a cage outside tall enough for Beck to stand in, but only slightly bigger than what might be found in a dog kennel.

With a Tier III violation, Beck was allowed two showers a week instead of the usual

three, two books or magazines instead of the usual five, no television, no headphones for a radio, no personal possessions other than a small bar of soap and a roll of toilet paper. He received a change of clothes every ten days, one thin blanket that had never been laundered, one polyester sheet for his inch-thick foam mattress, no pillow. And no shampoo or comb. It took five days for him to receive a toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving cream, and disposable razor that had to be returned after one use.

On his shelf, he found a beat-up Bible and a February 1994 copy of *National Geographic*.

All meals were served through a slot in the heavy metal door.

Out of spite, the guards in the SHU made sure that for the first week Beck's meals consisted of water, a wedge of raw cabbage, and the infamous *brick* - - a hardened loaf made out of carrots, potatoes, and bread dough. No human could possibly digest three daily servings of the brick. Beck managed to eat one brick per day by soaking pieces of it in water. He became so horribly constipated he had to stop eating on the fifth day. By the time they began serving him the usual prison food, he'd lost six pounds. He continued to lose weight during the rest of his time in SHU eating food often delivered cold, sometimes with coffee grounds tossed on it, and three times consisting of nothing but an empty Styrofoam container.

From the moment he stepped into the small cell, Beck was determined to survive the Box. He immediately set out to clean his cell which reeked of dried feces, urine, and general grime. Luckily, he had nearly a full roll of toilet paper. He folded a length of it into a tight block and used it to clean his sink, the rim of his toilet, and the floor around it before the wad of tissue fell apart.

He washed his hands, trying to conserve the half-used bar of soap and spent the next hour

doing calisthenics. Next, he tried meditating, first sitting, then walking methodically. After all that, less than three hours had passed on his first day.

Within four days, his notion of time slipped his grasp. Minutes could feel like hours. Days interminable. His concentration began fading in and out. His diet drained his energy which made it harder to exercise.

He tried to find solace in reading, but found it increasingly difficult to absorb the archaic language in the battered bible. By the third week, he had read the *National Geographic* so many times, he loathed even touching it.

He had to force himself to step out into the kennel cage for his hour a day of recreation because it exposed him to the screaming abuse of other prisoners and manhandling by the guards, which caused nearly uncontrollable waves of rage to come over him. His only compensation was breathing fresh air, but one day he found himself dodging wet feces the guards had manipulated a prisoner into throwing at him. No one ever bothered to clean the shit off his cage.

He found his attempts at meditation turning into obsessing about revenge. Twice he fell into screaming outbursts he had to fight to control. As time passed, he had to exert more and more energy warding off panic attacks. His first hallucination came thirty-eight days into his sentence in the middle of the night.

On the forty-second day he ran out of soap, and yelled at the CO through the door slot to give him another bar, but instead found his water supply shut off for two days.

Beck knew about men who had come into the Box for minor infractions, and committed so many offenses while in the SHU they had months, even years, added to their sentences. The prospect terrified him. As did his fear that the SHU was permanently damaging him.

On the fifty-second day he was yelling, slapping his face to pull himself out of his paralysis. He felt as if his brain had frozen inside his head.

He avoided looking at the walls of his 105-square foot cell because it often made him feel as if they were closing in on him. He paced back and forth for hours, head down, burning away the tension, trying to force all thoughts of mayhem and retaliation from his mind, banishing any memories of the outside, any moments spent with family or friends.

On the day they released him from SHU, Beck dared not speak while they shackled him for transfer back to general population out of fear he would slide into an incoherent rage that would land him back in the Box.

Once showered, changed into clean clothes, and placed in a cell with a man he had never met, Beck raised an open hand at his cellmate, mumbled he was sorry, and laid down on his bunk, mostly to avoid any contact or conversation.

He fell into a sleep so deep, it felt like only moments had passed when the five-thirty A.M. standing count arrived. He drifted through breakfast in the mess hall, feeling half comatose.

When they released him to the yard, Beck felt more awake and connected, but much more nervous and uncomfortable about being around so many inmates. Even though the temperature hovered in the teens, he had been anxious to getting outdoors because he could still smell the stench of the SHU.

Beck barely held himself together until he reached the yard. He headed for the north end because the guards avoided that part of the yard. If prisoners wanted to go there and kill or maim each other, it was fine with them. They'd eventually arrive to clean up the mess.

Beck wanted to be as far away as possible from the COs. He didn't trust himself. He feared he might throw everything away and attack a guard to avenge what had been done to him, hoping they would shoot him, or beat him to death, and end the nightmare of his imprisonment.

The remaining sane part of James Beck forced him to do what he had done to survive the SHU – walk. Get away by himself.

There weren't many prisoners in the north yard. All were in small groups except for a solitary figure standing in a slice of sun, face raised to the warm light, his hands behind his back.

Beck decided he needed some of that sunlight. Absorb some of the cleansing warmth. He had to get into the light, and if it meant passing the lone figure to get to it, so be it.

Beck refused to walk with his head down, or with any hint of deference. He strode purposefully toward the man, but kept enough distance to indicate he had no intention of talking to him, or accosting him.

The sound of Beck's footsteps made the man open his eyes and turn toward Beck. Not surprising since it would have been foolish not to watch someone approaching you in the north yard at Dannemora. Beck held both hands open, away from his pockets, to show there was nothing in them.

The other prisoner watched carefully. As Beck came closer, the prisoner's expression changed. Was it concern? Preparation to attack? Whatever it was, Beck found himself stopping, almost against his will, and meeting the man's gaze.

"What?" said Beck. One word, with enough of an edge to communicate to the man he'd better not give him any trouble.

"How long?" said the man.

It took a moment for Beck to get it. His brain still working slowly.

“Sixty-days.”

“First time in the SHU?”

“Yes.”

The man nodded slowly.

“Did they win?”

Beck started to answer, then stopped. He thought about it. Really thought about it before he answered.

“No. Not yet.”

Paco Johnson nodded again, communicating a deep, profound sense of empathy and encouragement, even though he was a complete stranger.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

Beck nodded back and walked on, slowly, feeling the human connection the man had made with him. It had only taken a handful of words, but whoever he was, Beck knew the man had changed his course.

Over the next days, months, and years Packy Johnson and James Beck forged a friendship and an unbreakable bond. At first, Packy concentrated on slowly guiding Beck back from the brink, asking him careful, pointed questions that pushed Beck to think and examine everything about himself, each question asked with the intention of helping Beck figure out what kind of man he wanted to be.

Packy Johnson had been incarcerated most of his life, and had earned his status as a respected, righteous con long ago. Beck never asked Packy why he had decided to help him. Maybe it was part of Johnson’s contrarian nature to help a white man. Maybe it was Johnson’s

curiosity how a man with no criminal record had killed a cop. Whatever the reason, Beck didn't question it. Nor did he question the unspoken understanding that each of them would watch the other's back, share whatever they had, and suffer whatever the other suffered.

They might talk once a week, or every day. The conversations could be terse, or rambling. Beck learned how to do time, survive prison, but above all else, in the cauldron of hell that was Clinton maximum-security prison, James Beck learned the meaning and value of a true friend.