

## CHAPTER ONE

Bobby “Squeak” Charles walked through the double doors of the courthouse a free man. The sight of Squeak caused blood to flush Mark Baker’s jaw, the internal heat of frustration and anger flowing through his system to the clenched fist he would never swing. Mark’s service pistol was on the dresser at home, and he found himself torn between relief and disappointment.

*Injustice is not an inanimate thing, Mark thought as he watched six months of work waltz into the open air without cuffs. It’s a persona. A personality. And occasionally, a person. It’s every defense attorney who’s ever won a case they shouldn’t have. It’s every judge who ever let the guilty go. It’s loopholes and assholes.*

*And my fucking life.*

The wrinkles in Squeak’s borrowed suit were obvious in the natural light of the afternoon sun, extra fabric hanging off his skeletal frame like cheesecloth over a mason jar. Mark wondered who in Squeak’s circle even had a suit for him to borrow, but decided it was more likely provided by his defense attorney. Lauren Patterson was a first-class bitch when it came to defending her clients and shredding both witnesses and evidence, but she had a heart outside the battle of the courtroom, and he wouldn’t put it past her to have fed Squeak as well as dressed him to make him appear healthier and more respectable than the druggie street thug he was in reality. Damn her. She was good at her job.

But so was Mark. Squeak would fuck up again and Mark would be right there when he did. He watched as Squeak bounced down the steps, a free man, and felt the anger rolling through him anew.

“Fucking loopholes...” he cursed under his breath, but loud enough for Squeak to hear him. The junkie turned his head to the pillar Mark was leaning against and grinned. A big stained grin. His missing tooth created a black hole in a pugnacious smile, which chilled the blood of younger thugs and civilians wandering the wrong part of town. It didn’t affect Mark the same way. He wasn’t inclined to cross

the street to avoid the dirt bag, or avert his eyes from making contact. Instead, Mark's eyes narrowed and he nodded to Squeak, silently daring him to fuck up again, or better yet, start something right there on the courthouse steps.

Squeak curled one corner of his lip up in a mock grimace, "Better luck next time, Baker." He turned and continued bouncing down the steps without seeing Mark's reaction.

Mark shoved his hands into his pockets, wishing he had his gun. Wishing he had the authority to just do what the courts didn't. Wishing there was some loophole to save him if he went ahead and just took the dealer off the streets, off the planet, permanently. He growled in frustration. There wasn't. He knew that.

He turned and walked toward the side parking lot. His day was done. No way was he heading back to the station now. He'd had enough of crime without punishment for one day. As if to urge him in the right direction, his stomach growled and he remembered Gina was making her enchiladas tonight. A plate full of spicy happiness filled his mind and pushed the thoughts of Squeak back to the darker corners where they belonged.



Mark heard music emanating from his duplex apartment as he reached for the door and paused, grinning. He stood outside the door for a moment and listened to Gina warble out the last chords of the latest pop song she'd fallen in love with, something by someone who used to be in a band and was now solo and better according to her, but whom Mark could never remember the name of—solo or band.

He gently opened the door as the next song kicked in and he recognized Guns N' Roses immediately. He slipped inside the apartment, careful not to let the sunshine give away his presence and leaned against the door watching his girlfriend gyrate around the kitchen to "Welcome to the Jungle." Gina alternated whistling, humming and singing, as she spun from a frying pan full of spiced hamburger to the cutting board on which she massacred various herbs and scallions. Occasionally she would stop all action and swoop like

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a snake toward the floor and back up, popping a hip with the beat as she impersonated Axl's famous move.

He grinned while he watched, feeling the day wash off him like dead skin and felt his heart lighten and his love of life rejuvenate. Watching Gina unawares was always good for the soul. It reminded him to stop and enjoy life. To dance while cooking and sing while cleaning. He absently began to whistle in tune with the song and Gina spun in a panicked move, knife held up to defend herself. They met eyes, both wide from surprise, and laughed.

"Bastard! How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough."

"I hate it when you do that." She put the knife on the counter and sashayed toward him. "You know that?" Her cupid lips askew as she smirked.

"Yeah, but I love watching you and I'm going to keep doing it as long as you keep putting on a show, so learn to live with it or give up the stage." He wrapped a hand behind her, planted it flat on the small of her back, and pulled her the last few inches to him. He leaned down toward her face and locked her eyes as his lips brushed across hers. Half a foot shorter than him, she felt tiny in his arms, but he noticed the baby bulge beginning to make a bigger gap between the two of them when he pulled her close like this.

He felt her grin beneath his lips a moment before she bit his lower lip and pushed him away as if she could ever overtake him. Gina spun and returned to the cutting board. "Enchi-mee-ladas in forty-five."

"Excellent." He sat on a kitchen chair and began untying his shoes.

"So? How'd it go in court today?" Gina began assembling the enchiladas and asked the question without turning toward him. She didn't see his grimace but his pause in answering let her know it was there. "That good, eh?"

"Fucking bullshit, that's what it was." He flipped his foot and let the shoe fly toward the corner by the door. "Yet another case of too much of this, not enough of that, tiny protocol slip here, forgotten warrant there. I had a fucking warrant. It said residence. It should have covered the fucking shed out back, Goddamn it."

“Breathe, baby. That rage is not good for you...” She cooed as she flipped a wrapped enchilada into the pan. “Or me. Remember, I have to live with you. Not to mention Junior here...” She patted her tummy with the side of the spatula.

“It’s bullshit, Gina. There are dead kids because of this piece of human shit. I work my ass off to get these fucking thugs lined up just right, to take them down like filthy dominos. And the system is on their side. The system hasn’t seen firsthand the cast-off children left in the wake of these drug dealers. The system has never had a deal or a bust on its lawn. The system lives at the edges of civilization with large yards and locked gates. They don’t truly understand the underbelly found in royalty around here. Fuck, what was the first warning I gave you?”

“If the street has a royal name, don’t be on it.” Gina’s tone was a mockery of a parental warning spoken so often it had lost its intimidation.

“I’m serious. I was then and I am now...”

“Oh I know you are, honey. I avoid the parts of town you want me to avoid. I understand what these punks leave in their wake. And I understand your frustration.” She grabbed a handful of chopped greens and tossed them into the bowl of shredded cheese. “But you have to understand right now, right at this instant, the thugs are winning, because they’ve got you so riled up you can’t think straight. You can’t function properly. You don’t sleep, you don’t eat like you used to, and you hang on every squawk that comes from that damn scanner. It’s not healthy. You need to do your job and rely on others to do theirs.”

“I hate you.”

“I love you, too.” She poured the last of the sauce across the pan of rolled enchiladas and turned to face him, leaning back against the counter. “You know I’m right. You’re very good at what you do. That’s the best you can do...your best. If the next animal in the food chain fucks up the kill you offer them, that’s not your fault. You do your job, let them do theirs. And if they fail, the universe will pick up the slack.” She grabbed her coffee mug and walked toward him. “After all, how many street-level dealers do you know of who die peacefully of old age

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outside of jail with a family who still loves them?”

Mark opened his mouth to speak. It was the same battle they had whenever court went poorly and he was going to win this one, but she kept right on going.

“None. That’s how many. They get what’s coming to them. Sometimes it’s your doing, sometimes it’s their own. But they get it in the end and that’s all that really matters.” Gina kissed his head, and headed to the living room. “Now go take a shower before dinner, you smell like alligator spit.”

He laughed. He’d never understood the reference but always found it amusing when she proclaimed his similarity to zoo animals. Mark was certain she’d never actually smelled alligator spit, and even more certain he didn’t smell like it, but it made him smile, which is what she was after. Damn her. Spunky little girl won again.

Mark flicked his remaining shoe to the corner and headed to the bathroom without another word to her. To himself, he had plenty. *I am not above the law. I am the law. Unfortunately, I’m not the top of the totem pole or the highest wrung on the ladder, and as Monday morning courtroom antics have reminded me: sometimes, even when I do my job, it’s not enough.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Where are you going?” Gina’s groggy voice startled Mark and he looked toward the bed. In the wash of light escaping the bathroom, he saw her squinting in his direction, an arm outstretched and hand splayed flat on the spot where he should be. Instead, he was leaned against the wall quietly pulling a sock onto his foot.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah...but where are you going?”

“Nowhere special, hon. Just go back to sleep.”

She leaned up on an elbow and opened her eyes more fully. “Bullshit. Remember why this works? We communicate. Now what the...”

“You’re right. Sorry.” He stepped toward the bed. “I was flipping channels downstairs when the scanner went off. They grabbed Bobby Charles in the yards.”

“Oh Christ, really? Really?”

He couldn’t tell if the annoyance was at him, the scanner, the thug or the fact he’d woken her because of the job—again. “Baby, I have to make sure they don’t fuck it up.” He leaned in to kiss her and she backed away. “If I can put him back behind bars, even for a few days, it negates his victory earlier today.”

“No, it just makes you obsessed.” She pouted and he could see the thoughts churning in her soft brown eyes.

“You know the uniforms won’t do what they should. Especially the damn night crew.”

“I know you’re frustrated, but Jesus, give it a rest. Just for a day. Twenty-four whole hours without the fucking dealers and street dirt breaking into my life and tearing you out of it, out of our bed, in the middle of the night.”

“Gina, it’s Bobby Charles though. It’s still fresh. It’s...”

“Fine. Go. You’re not going to sleep if you don’t and if you think I’m mad you’ll just act all weird tomorrow. Go. I’ll sleep all by myself on your side and pretend the smell is really you...”

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“Gina...”

She smirked and rolled over. “Sheesh. I’m just giving ya shit you big lug. Go catch your bad guys. Make the streets safer for me and Junior.”

He put a knee on the bed and leaned in to smell her hair before brushing it out of the way and kissing her shoulder. “I love you, Gina Beana.”

“And I’m IN love with you.”

“Lunch tomorrow before your shift?”

“Mmmhmmm...” She murmured and began drifting off again immediately. Mark slipped out of the bedroom, flicking the bathroom light off as he did so.

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“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mark pulled up to the scene in a rage. The radio chatter had been a mess and he expected Bobby Charles to be gone already by the time he got there. He pulled his unmarked in behind a squad car in the factory parking lot and slammed it into park, his driver’s door open before the keys were out of the ignition.

“Where’s Ray?” Mark barked at the nearest uniform. A young cadet stuck on night shift and ill prepared for the foulness of late-night city shenanigans pointed behind him at a cluster of bodies.

Mark pushed past the boy fiddling with scene markers and shouted over his shoulder at the officer squatted on the ground to the left of him, “Make sure you shoot evidence from several angles and put tape there so we can size it correctly later. And for fuck’s sake, don’t move anything until someone higher than you on the food chain says you can fucking move it!”

He heard mumbling behind him but could neither make out the words nor find it in his heart to care what they’d been. Bobby Charles was here somewhere, in cuffs he hoped, and he needed to make sure fucking Patterson wouldn’t have any loopholes to jump through this time.

“Baker, what the fuck are you doing here?” The captain spotted him before he got to the circle of men.

“Why didn’t you call me, Ray? You know Squeak’s mine.” Mark’s stride increased and he closed the gap between them. “For fuck’s sake...”

“Captain, Baker. I’m your Captain.” The balding man plucked his cigar from his mouth and waved it between pinched fingers at Mark. “Don’t you fucking start with me. I know you had a bad day, but this isn’t tied into your drug case. We got a dead girl and your boy Squeak here called it in.”

“He called... He what?!” Mark bellowed. “No he did not. He wouldn’t. It’s not his style.” Mark looked around him, noticing the sprawling body of a poorly dressed girl and a shaken Squeak sitting on a curb talking to a uniform as the officer quickly jotted down a statement. “I call bullshit.” Mark turned and headed toward Bobby Charles.

“Baker, I am not fucking kidding. You fuck with this scene, or your boy, and your ass is going on vacation.”

Mark froze. *Fuck*. And turned back to his commanding officer. “Just let me talk to him. I know him. I know how he works. I can tell you if he’s lying.”

“He always lies, that’s the beauty with his kind. Just take what he says and flip it to find the truth.”

“Ray...”

“Baker...” The captain mimicked him and he put the cigar back in his mouth and resumed chewing on the end rather than smoking the stub. “When we’re done you can have a word. Until then you can sit your pretty ass in your car, take a walk, or find some way to be helpful...without harassing my crew.”

“Fine.” Mark scanned the parking lot. “Where the fuck did he call from? It’s not like there’s a phone booth handy, and he sure as shit didn’t use his throwaway and hand over his number to us.”

“Good question. Write that down for later and get the fuck out of my way.” The captain pushed past Mark and headed toward the body on the ground near the corner of the building.

Mark squinted toward the girl, trying to see if he recognized her, but couldn’t make out her features in the shadows. “Can I take a look at the vic?”



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“Sure, whatever. Just don’t touch anything or talk to anyone until we’re done.” The captain’s words were garbled around the chewed end of his cigar but years of practice helped Mark understand them perfectly. “And stay the fuck away from Squeak.”

Mark offered a cursory glance to the boys in blue, the lot itself, and made eye contact with Squeak—letting him know he was there—as he made his way to the girl on the pavement and glanced over the shoulders of the bus crew.

Young. Early twenties, tops. Probably attractive once, though not recently. The girl was far too skinny for the leggings and baggy sweater she wore. Her shoes didn’t match her outfit and seemed an ill-fit for her feet, making Mark wonder if she’d found them or stolen them. The sleeves of her thinned sweater were pushed up to show track lines and Mark turned to glare at Squeak at the sight of them. Her hair was most likely blond but filth and dim lighting made it appear darker. Her face was without makeup and a jagged scar ran along the bridge of her nose.

“Rosie?” He stared at the scar and thought of every description he’d ever gotten of Bobby Charles’ twin. “Squeak, is this Rosie?” He yelled at the small-time dealer and watched him drop his gaunt face into his hands. It was Rosie.

And it explained why Squeak called it in.

On the street, family was rare. Close family was unheard of. But the legend of Squeak and the twin he shielded from everyone’s eyes had been around as long as he’d been on the nitwit’s tail. Even Mark had never seen her. But he’d gotten enough reports to know she used and had a scar along her nose from the night she fought back with a broken beer bottle, the last night her daddy touched her.

This was not his crime scene. This wasn’t Squeak’s drugs. But he could use it to break Squeak. He could use it to make him squeak.

Mark walked over to the captain and interrupted instructions to the young night cop taking pictures, “I’ll wait at the station for him. Bring him in for me.”

Rosie was dead. Squeak could very well be next. And if the idiot was going to get his clock punched, Mark wanted as much info out of him as he could get first. “The body is his sister. Keep an eye on him.”

Commotion behind him spun Mark on his heel. Squeak had stood from the curb and either pushed or attacked the cop taking his statement. “Sit the fuck down!” was met with “Fucking make me!” and the two went into a tight locked close-combat struggle. Before Mark could react, before the captain could intervene, Squeak pulled back from the officer, brandishing the officer’s service pistol in front of him.

Guns were drawn universally in the lot and several shouts drowned each other out, as multiple voices demanded Bobby Charles put the gun down. Squeak’s eyes were wide and wet as he scanned the uniforms around him pointing their weapons at him. He turned to Mark and locked eyes, stolen pistol at his side. Mark had his drawn and a bead on the thug’s kneecap.

“It ain’t right, Baker.” Bobby Charles’ voice broke and he started to lift the gun. Mark realized it was more of a gesture than a threat, as the dealer often talked with his hands, but moved his sights from the man’s knee to his weapon-wielding elbow.

“Put it down, Bobby.” Mark took a cautious step forward. “You don’t want to do this. Hell, you beat me, remember. You’re a free man. You wanna fuck that up?”

“He already has.” One of the other officers commented and Mark turned to glare at them. Squeak took the chance and raised the gun up fully.

“Bobby!” Mark yelled too late and a shot rang through the buildings like a ricochet. Squeak crumpled as his knee went out beneath him, another officer having taken initiative, but held tight to the weapon in his hand. The cop in front of Squeak saw the dealer lose concentration for a moment and kicked him hard in the gut, knocking him backward onto his shattered knee and the unbalanced foot of the other leg.

“It ain’t right.” Squeak lifted the gun, tears in his eyes and pulled the trigger. The loud pop reverberated between the buildings for longer than it took Squeak’s limp body to hit the pavement. The spray of pink and speckles of bone bits blew to the side and covered the officer standing next to him.

“NO!” Mark sprinted forward and pushed the young officer

out of the way. “No, no, no...” He looked down at the dealer and watched the blood pool under his head. Anger seethed behind his eyes as he calculated the months of work lost in a moment. The lost opportunity this tragedy could have helped him procure. And he spun on the officer.

“You stupid, stupid son of a bitch!” Someone grabbed his arm and pulled him back as the officer’s eyes widened in fear.

“Down, boy.” The captain’s voice was a creepy calm, which usually meant he was somewhere three miles north of pissed. “We got a mess to clean up and you’re not officially here. Just go home. Stay off the paperwork.”

“That fucking rookie...”

“I know. And it’s my problem, not yours.” The captain tightened his grip on Mark’s arm until Mark focused on his face and his eyes cleared. “You got enough bullshit going on. Now get the fuck out of here.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Mark jerked his arm free from Ray and walked toward his car. “Fucking waste. Just a fucking waste...” He slammed the door shut and sat there for a moment. The reality of his best drug dog being dead was just sinking in. He hit the steering wheel in frustration and wished he hadn’t given up drinking. A shot of tequila never sounded so good and he debated hitting the bar rather than going home.

Mark turned the key in the ignition. The car came to life with the radio still on and the dying refrains of “Welcome to the Jungle” bled from the speakers.

“Fuck.” He dropped his head to the steering wheel. “She’s right.” He thought of Gina, lying in their bed alone, and the words she tried to drill into his head. He needed to be there for her emotionally as well as physically when he wasn’t on shift. He needed to let go of this bullshit after hours. It got him nowhere except out of his bed. He sighed and pulled out of the lot.