

Chapter 1

Tuesday morning started out damn near perfect. Right up until Demarco Jones told James Beck, “Manny wants to kill somebody.”

Demarco hadn't told Beck right away. He'd been waiting for the right moment, as if there were right moments for that sort of news.

Beck was at his usual spot: sitting just past the turn of an old oak bar in a hundred-year-old saloon that occupied the first floor of a ramshackle building Beck owned in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The bar ran nearly the entire length of the room, curving to meet a solid plaster wall coated in a century of paint, currently a pale green that Beck didn't particularly like, but felt he should leave unchanged. It was a bright, cold February morning, the sun streaming in through the bar's plate glass window, warming Beck's broad back, as he made his way through the front section of the *New York Times* and his second cup of coffee.

Demarco stood in his usual spot behind the bar, leaning against the back cabinets. Relaxed. Watching Beck. Waiting.

Demarco Jones could watch someone without them hardly noticing, which was surprising, because when people saw Demarco, they looked twice. He was six four, wide shouldered, muscular, around ten percent body fat, skin about the color of Beck's strong coffee. He was handsome, but tough looking, especially with his head shaved. He wore a dark blue Nike tracksuit over a black T-shirt.

But Beck noticed. He could feel Demarco waiting for him to look up from his morning paper, even though Demarco didn't give Beck any indication of anything. He just stood there, his long muscular arms crossed, waiting for Beck to put his perfectly fine Tuesday morning on hold

Beck lifted his eyes from his paper, stared straight ahead for about four seconds, turned to Demarco and said, “What?”

Demarco turned and gazed calmly at Beck, no expression.

Beck waited.

Demarco said, “Manny wants to talk to you.”

“Manny.”

“Yeah.”

“About what?”

“Manny wants to kill somebody. Figures he should talk to you first.”

Beck knew that if Manny Guzman had said the word *kill*, it was not metaphorical.

And if Emmanuel “Manny” Guzman, former lord of a Dominican street gang, former shot-caller of several prison gangs including the most feared Latin gang in Dannemora wanted somebody dead, that person’s last breath on earth wasn’t far away.

Beck took another sip of his coffee. Now it tasted sour.

He slid off the bar stool, standing there in a pair of worn gray jeans, sturdy black tie shoes, a maroon plaid flannel shirt. Winter clothes. He folded the paper. He stared at the front section of the *Times* and thought about the juxtaposition of a newspaper not even a day old resting on top of a bar over a hundred years old.

Although property records showed that the old brick building which housed Beck’s bar was owned by a limited-liability real estate partnership, it would take a great deal of work to uncover James Beck as the managing partner and owner of 24.75% of the general shares, and a 1% manager share.

A dense thicket of legal filings designed by Beck’s bulldog lawyer Phineas P. Dunleavy

stood between Beck and public knowledge of his ownership. Dunleavy was a thorough man, the same man who had taken up Beck's cause while Beck was serving ten to twenty-five years for first-degree manslaughter. Dunleavy had pursued justice for Beck, had burned through Beck's last dollar, but had restored that dollar many times over by winning a settlement for wrongful conviction that netted James Beck \$2.1 million, a large part of which Beck used to buy the old bar and the three-story building that housed it, and a small part of which he used to make sure nobody knew about it.

The other partners were a very select group of three men: Manny Guzman, Demarco Jones, and Ciro Baldassare.

The only patrons Beck allowed into his waterfront hangout were members of his network, and a few misfits from the neighborhood he tolerated because they either interested him, or because they needed something he felt like giving them.

Like the twenty-pound sealed bags of ground meat scraps and bones he gave to a wild-haired Greek woman who collected the free mash of protein for the wild neighborhood dogs she fed. Beck liked her spirit, and every once in a while he needed a good way to get rid of ground meat and bones.

Or the shots of Jameson Demarco doled out to Arnold, an aging alcoholic who checked into Beck's bar much like he would to a hospital emergency room. Beck allowed him to sit and sip his Jameson if he remained quiet and didn't smell too bad.

There were others who stepped into Beck's bar, but not many. If they were people Beck didn't like or know, they were quickly told they had entered a private bar, not open to the public.

When told this by Demarco Jones, very, very few did anything other than apologize and leave.

But this morning, something else had entered Beck's enclave. Something that had set Manny Guzman on a dangerous path.

Emmanuel Manny Guzman kept the old Red Hook place clean to the core. No grime. No stink of beer. Barely a hint of dust anywhere. And windows polished to a gleam every other week. Even the glass and frames holding faded photos of ship hands and dock scenes were shined to a gleam. Even the insides of drawers were clean all the way to the back.

And everything in working order: the plumbing, the light fixtures, everything.

There was no slippage with Manny Guzman. If Manny wanted something done, it was done.

Shit, thought Beck. He turned and headed back to the bar kitchen where he knew Guzman would be sitting, waiting for him.

But before he had gone three steps, something hard cracked into the plate glass window that fronted Conover Street. It was a brutal, disturbing sound that made Beck turn back and curse.

"Christ, now what?"

He strode quickly to the front of the bar and saw a crack that ran diagonally from the left lower corner of the window to almost the middle.

Demarco joined Beck at the window. The bottom third was painted black so passersby couldn't see in, but they were both tall enough to see a beat-up van parked outside across the street. Four black gangbangers in various sizes stood around one huge, heavily muscled thug. The thug yelled, "James Beck, come out here before I come in after you."

Beck grabbed a leather shearling jacket from the coat peg near the front door. He looked at Demarco and nodded. Demarco moved fast in the opposite direction, toward the back of the

barroom.

Beck, seething, walked out his front door and stood on the sidewalk across from the rock thrower, breathing deeply, giving himself time to burn off the flight or fight hormones coursing through him, forcing the rational part of his brain to start working.

Four of them flanked the big man, two on each side. He dwarfed all of them, standing a few steps out near the middle of the street, wearing a black leather hoodie, unzipped to reveal a torso bulging with muscle under a tight white T-shirt. He had on thick, dark denim pants and heavy Timberland boots.

Beck figured the muscles had been built in a prison iron pile. The clothes seemed to be just-out-of-the-joint new. What the fuck is this, he wondered. He remained on his side of the street. He didn't see any guns or other weapons brandished, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

The big man's hands were balled into fearsomely large fists. He wore no rings, no jewelry, no watch. It reminded Beck of being called out for a prison yard fight. It seemed absurd. Absurd, but dangerous.

Beck took a couple of steps forward and stopped at the curb, watching and waiting.

"I'm here to tell you what's what, Beck."

Beck had never seen this guy before. Maybe he recognized one or two of the others from the neighborhood. But not Mr. Muscles. He said nothing.

"Them little punks you pay over in the projects to give you a heads up? They don't do that anymore. I'm back. This is my hood. Now you pay me and my people. And the price has gone up, motherfucker."

Beck waited a beat, "When are you going to fix my window, asshole?"

The big man reared back. “You know who the fuck I am?”

“No.”

“I’m Willie Reese. You want to live here, you pay me.”

“Willie Reese.” Beck shook his head. “The name doesn’t ring any bells. Does your mother know you’re out here breaking windows?”

That ignited the spark. Just about the way Beck had wanted it to. Willie Reese puffed up and ready to enforce his demands, let his anger take over.

Beck had reached an alert state of calm. The trick now was to survive the first seconds.

Reese rushed at Beck in long steps, arms coming up into a fighting position, fists balled into clubs, coming at him fast.

Beck turned to his right and ran. Faster. Faster than he looked like he could.

Beck’s sudden move confused Reese. He lunged at Beck, took a wild swing and missed, his Timberlands slipping on the cold, slick cobblestone street. Within three seconds, Beck was ten yards away from Reese and running easily. Reese got his footing and took off after him.

The others hooted and jeered and stepped out into the street yelling at Beck about being a punk-ass coward, cursing him, shouting about how bad he was going to get his ass kicked. Beck ignored them, but Willie Reese listened to his crew and believed them. Beck just kept running, but not as fast now. He slowed down so Reese wouldn’t give up. Or do something really stupid like pull out a gun and shoot at him.

But Reese surprised him and closed the gap more quickly than Beck expected.

Shit, Beck thought. He sprinted toward a beat-up Volvo station wagon parked to his right, managed to get a foot on the front bumper and vaulted up onto the hood, just as Reese came close enough to lunge at him, grabbing for his foot. Beck pulled his foot away and kept

right on going, jumping onto the roof of the Volvo.

Reese splayed across the hood, having just missed catching the bottom of Beck's jeans. Beck kept going, jumped off of the car, landed on the street, slipping a bit on the slick cobble stones.

By the time Reese picked himself off the hood, Beck had circled wide around him and was running back toward the bar, about five yards out in front of Reese, but this time at half-speed, conserving his wind, staying just far enough in front to taunt Reese into catching up to him.

Beck also slowed down because Reese's gang had come into the street to block his path. They figured they'd keep him trapped, so their man could get to him.

Reese saw it, too. Beck had nowhere to go. He slowed down, slipping a little on the uneven street, trying to get his footing and catch his breath. He'd been raging, burning energy, but now he had this guy. Time to get it together.

Behind Beck, Reese's gang hooted and yelled for blood. In front of him, the big man closed on him slowly.

And then, before any of them realized how it happened, everything changed.

Just as Reese was about to reach Beck, Beck stopped backpedalling and lunged forward, slapping aside Reese's huge outstretched arm with his left hand, and stabbing two stiff fingers into Reese's left eye. The pain and force of the hit stopped Reese so suddenly that his feet nearly went out from under him.

Back near the bar, Demarco Jones appeared out of nowhere. He stood behind the four gangbangers who were watching their man closing in on Beck. Demarco held a Benelli M3 shotgun firmly pressed into his shoulder, aimed right at the group of four standing near the beat-

up van.

At the same time, Emmanuel Guzman dressed in his usual dark blue work clothes and stained apron, emerged from between two buildings north of the van aiming a second shotgun at the group. It was a beautiful old Winchester 12 gauge, its dark grain walnut gleaming in the bright winter sun.

At first, neither Demarco nor Manny said a word. The chilling chu-chunks of the shotguns being pumped stopped all the bravado and yelling. The shotguns were one thing. The men holding them were the main thing.

Demarco said, "Hands."

All four of them, heads swiveling back and forth at the men in front and behind them, raised their hands.

Manny continued to advance until he had the long barrel of his Winchester pressed into the forehead of the nearest gangbanger.

Manny Guzman was shorter, stockier than the young black man, but implacable. He just kept walking forward, pressing the muzzle of the Winchester into the soft skin of the young man's forehead, pushing him toward the van.

"Leave. Now. Or I kill you."

All four of them tumbled and pushed their way into the battered van, three of them falling through the sliding side door and one jumping into the driver's seat. He started the engine and accelerated down the street, swerving and sliding on the cobblestones.

Now that the four behind him were taken care of, Beck circled to Reese's left, his blind side. Reese had his left hand clamped over his suddenly throbbing blind left eye, giving Beck an opening to slide forward and twist a fast, hard right into the left side of Reese's nose. The

septum broke with a sharp crack.

One moment Reese was thinking about taking apart James Beck. The next he was half blind with a screamingly painful broken nose.

Beck stepped back, figuring that should do it. But he was wrong. Taking out an eye and breaking a nose weren't disabling blows, just horribly painful. And pain wasn't going to stop Willie Reese.

He lashed a roundhouse left at Beck, more to knock him away than to knock him out. Beck leaned back from the fist, but not far enough. The fist only grazed the right side of his head, but the jolt and speed behind the wild punch still were enough to make everything go black for a moment.

Beck didn't hesitate. He leaned right back in toward Reese and fired a fast right fist around the hand protecting Reese's left eye, landing a solid blow to Reese's left temple. Hitting Reese's big head with such force nearly broke two of Beck's knuckles. It was a knockout punch, but it only staggered Reese. Beck followed it with a left elbow to the face, a right to the side of the neck, and a left aimed at Reese's throat.

Reese somehow slap-blocked the last punch and lunged forward quickly enough to grab Beck's coat, rear back, and snap a vicious head butt at Beck's face.

Beck barely jerked out of the way in time. Reese's huge forehead banged into Beck's left collar bone. It felt like being hit with a bowling ball.

Reese tried to throw Beck to the ground, but Beck grabbed Reese's massive forearms, widened his stance, twisted back against Reese and levered his own head butt directly into Reese's already broken nose.

This time the pain was too intense even for Willie Reese.

Beck heard him gasp and growl in agony. Reese couldn't move, but he held onto Beck's coat, so Beck pounded six hard fast lefts and rights into Reese's liver, floating ribs, and sternum, twisting, aiming, grunting with exertion as he landed each blow. Reese could do nothing but hang onto Beck who couldn't believe that Reese was still standing.

Finally, Reese hurled Beck away from him. Beck's feet left the ground and he went down hard onto his back. Reese tried to step toward Beck so he could kick him or stomp him, but his legs wobbled under him as he staggered forward.

Beck rolled sideways and scrambled to his feet, quickly backing away from Reese, who managed to stay on his feet, blood streaming from his nose, left eye swelling grotesquely, huffing and puffing for air, two cracked ribs splinting pain with every breath.

They both knew it wasn't over. Beck would have to step in to finish Reese off. And if Reese managed to get his hands on Beck, he might find a way to grab Beck's throat so he could crush his windpipe. Or smash Beck's head into the ground. Or manage one hard blow that would knock Beck out.

Beck shook out his arms, staying back, breathing deeply. Getting ready.

He said to Reese, "You that hard up for my business?"

Reese spat out a mouthful of blood and turned his head sideways to look at Beck out of his good eye.

"Ain't about that anymore."

"What's it about?" asked Beck.

"You and me," said Reese.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to have anything to do with you, man. You're a fucking handful."

Reese looked over at Demarco and Manny, watching, cradling the shotguns.

“Maybe you should have your boys shoot me. You don’t want me comin’ back for you.”

“Maybe. But there is an alternative.”

“What’s that?”

“You working for me like you said.”

“What?”

As soon as he heard that answer from Reese, Beck knew he wasn’t a complete maniac. And that meant there might be a way out of this without one of them dying.

Beck continued to keep his distance and said, “Hey, like you said, I hired Shorty and his little gang to give me the heads up on anything coming this way through the projects, but he didn’t do it, did he? He didn’t have the balls to tell me you were coming.”

“Nah, he didn’t.”

“So what do you want more? A job or a chance to keep beating on me? Which I guarantee you isn’t going to work anyway, ‘cuz they will shoot you down if it gets out of hand.”

Reese looked at Demarco and Manny cradling their shotguns. He spit out more blood.

Beck said, “Fuck it. Your guys are gone. Tell them you beat a job out of me. I don’t give a shit. Think it over. It’s too damn cold to stand out here discussing it.”

Beck turned his back on Willie Reese and headed toward his bar. He told Demarco and Manny, “Don’t shoot him if he wants to come in.”