

# BREAK SHOT



DARREN MUSIAL

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Dedicated to Carol Musial.

Practically perfect in every way,  
You are missed, every day.





**IT WAS THE** warmest January in Chicago I can ever remember. No snow. Every couple of days it would tinkle a bit of rain. *Rain!* So the entire city is cold and damp. Which I suppose is better than icy and frostbitten.

I was working my usual shift on a Thursday night at Dougie's Pool Hall on the city's north side. Dougie's was the kind of place that I liked. It was an old-school poolroom with no frills. There was nothing fancy here, no bar, no big screen TV, no arcade games. The owner, Dougie, had recently tried to start changing the image of the place by installing a streaming jukebox that unfortunately played the likes of Ke\$ha and Katy Perry to attract a younger crowd. Lucky for me, Dougie was extremely lazy and the jukebox is about as far as his exertions went. Other than the occasional song out of the jukebox and the murmur of conversation, the only noise here, typically, was the crack of pool balls on the clean green felted tables. That was the way I liked things: Quiet.

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It was early in the evening, about 8 o'clock, so it was slow. It wouldn't get busy for another few hours. There were three tables running, two men each. The rest of the room was dim except for the three illuminated tables and my counter and sitting area. The counter was on a riser a few inches above the rest of the floor so I could look down on everyone else.

The front door opened and a short, wide figure came towards the counter. I could hear cars sloshing through puddles on busy Belmont Street outside before the door swung closed. The way the light was, you could only see someone's silhouette for a few seconds until they got closer to the light from the counter. I saw the bald head, and I knew it was Dougie.

"Whaddya know, Maxie?" Dougie asked.

I didn't answer. When it's not my name, I don't answer.

"How we doing tonight?" he asked.

I looked around at the three sparse tables running, "Boss, you're gonna need a rake for all the cash I'm bringing in tonight."

Dougie smirked while staring at something on his cell phone, then he looked up at me. Dougie was about five foot nine, two-seventy five. A squat, fat, thick man with a big shiny bald dome for a head. He had a lot of attitude, which he needed to be the owner of this joint, but he was generally a good guy. He gave me a job when I returned from Iraq to this shitty economy and couldn't find any work. He loved to break balls whenever he could. Dougie waddled behind the counter and poured himself a Coke with ice. He turned his back to me, which meant that he was pouring a little whiskey in also. He took a long sip and sighed.

Two of the men were placing the pool balls in their plastic tray to bring up to the counter. I cut the lights on their table and rang them up. Just a couple of old gray dudes, out shooting some stick.

I took the shaft and butt pieces of my pool cue out of its case.

Dougie did the same. We flipped a quarter for break. I won, heads. Dougie racked up the balls on the table closest to the counter for a game of eight ball. Table ten. *CRACK!* went my thundering break shot. I sank two balls off of the break. One striped and one solid. Still my shot.



**DOUGIE WAS A** much better pool player. When given an opportunity, he would run the table out. He might not have been world class, but I'd never seen anyone beat him, whom he didn't let do so. We shot a few games as the room got busier. I'd have to run behind the counter to give out a table or ring somebody up every now and then.

"You playing Tim tonight?" I asked.

"You know it. I'm gonna take that fucker's money, then let him win a little back to keep him on the line." It was his shot; he sank another ball with perfect position for the next. He waddled to his next position without looking at the table; I think he could've shot blind. Dougie was a bit of a hustler.

"What time are they coming?"

"About midnight, that'll gimme a coupla' hours to beat on him before we close up."

A table full of thug looking guys and thug looking girls played next to us. The guys were trying to look like big shots, showing the ladies how to shoot pool. Like the blind leading the blind.

Every time Dougie would shoot a successful bank shot, I could hear them whispering. Like he must be a pro.

“His crew coming with him?” I asked.

“God I hope not... buncha’ degenerates.”

Degenerates, shady people, hustlers, gamblers, and loose women were the kinds of people I met here on a daily basis. I loved it.

“Don’t worry boss, I got your back.”

“I know you do, Max.”

We played a few more games, then Dougie ran some racks by himself. Warming up for the competition.

Alyssa came bounding through the door and up towards the counter. Most men in the room made no attempt to hide that they were watching her ass in those tight jeans. I could hardly blame them. She was tall, but curvy where it counted. Proportionate with creamy pale skin and a nicely featured face. Thank God for tight jeans. Alyssa was a foxy brunette who had an enthusiasm for pool. She would come in after her cocktail waitressing job to hang out with us low-lives. She’d help out working the counter, getting drinks for people, and I’d throw her some free table time and the occasional lesson. Her shiny brown leather boots clacked on the wood floor as she came closer.

“What’s up bitches?” She asked with attitude, she fit right in here.

“Heya Lyss.” Dougie said. I nodded.

“You got action tonight, Dougie?” She asked while she took off her long wool winter coat.

“Tim Dougherty from the south side’s comin’ up.” Dougie said.

She looked at me, “Holy shit, Slim Tim? That’s some heavy weight. Mind if I hang?”

“It’s cool, you can be the distraction,” I said. She smiled and came to the counter right in front of me. She put her elbows

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down and leaned over showing a valley of cleavage between the V of her t-shirt. Her long wavy brown locks fell gently around her shoulders and arms.

“What do you mean by a distraction?” She said in a dumb-blonde voice and gave me a wink with one of her big brown eyes.

“You’re right, it’ll never work, you’re too subtle.” I met her eyes for a beat.

“If you kids are done with the foreplay, we’ve got some fucking to do.” Dougie interrupted with his gravely booming voice.