

# #FreeMeekMill

**Brutally beaten by rogue cops, the jailed rapper has become a cause and, in an exclusive interview from prison, he speaks out and looks ahead**

By PAUL SOLOTAROFF

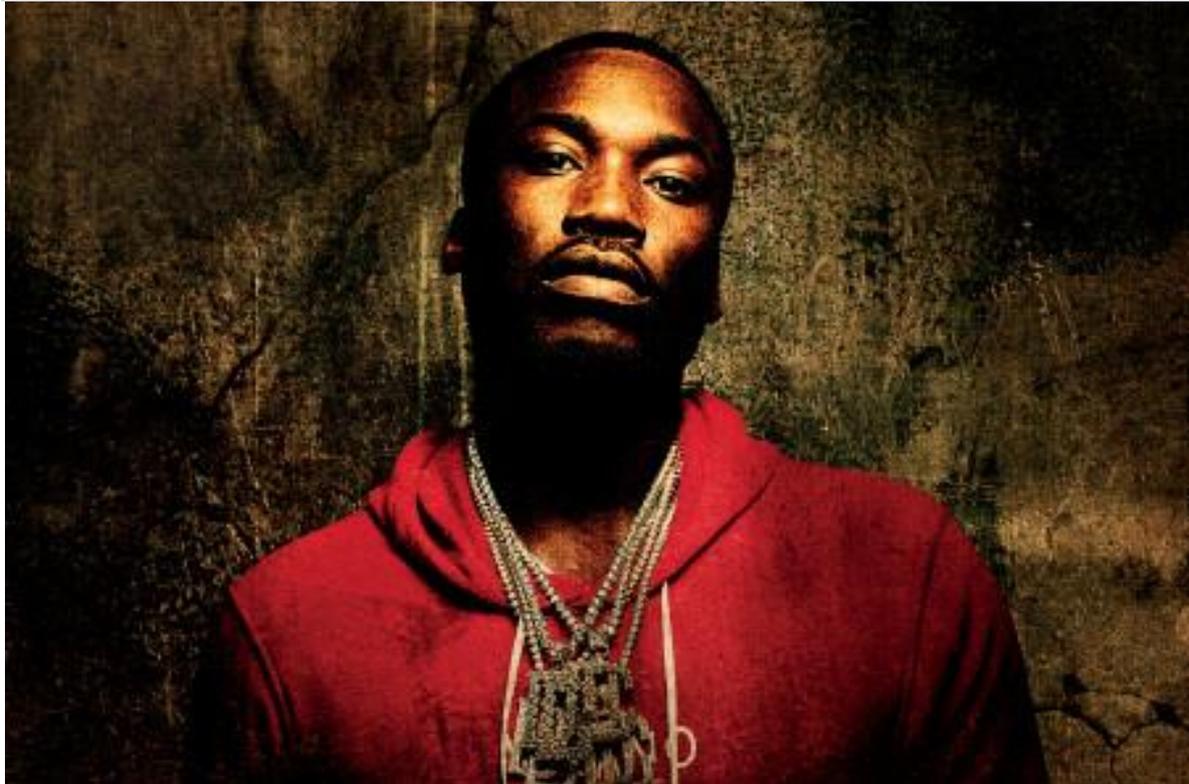


Illustration: Sean McCabe for Rolling Stone; Photo: Karl Ferguson Jr.

**Meek Mill** loves dirt bikes the way Mick Fanning loves big waves and Jimmy Chin loves hanging off four-mile-high towers. It's an inconvenient passion that may one day maim or kill him – but if you'd seen as much death as he did by 18, you wouldn't be particular about your poison. "It's the only time I ever feel peace," he says, "kicking wheelies on the freeway, doing 60. You're out there 20 deep, just a brotherhood of dudes. No gang shit. There's like this . . . freedom you can't get from nothing else."

**Meek**, the fiercest and most prolific rapper to come out of Philadelphia in two decades – millions of albums sold, multiple high-end beefs provoked, and one very public breakup with Nicki Minaj – picks at a bulbous clump of vending-machine pasta in the visitors' room of the Chester state **prison**. It's a place of emasculated, tube-lit sadness: men in orange jumpsuits sitting with their loved ones, barred from leaning close enough to touch them. Meek, by his own design, spurns all visits from anyone besides his lawyers and a few friends. "I won't let them come," he says of his family, a huge and intensely close tribe in Philadelphia, about 15 miles east of these

walls. “If they see me like this – fucked-up beard, hair all ganked – then it’s like I’m really in here. Which I’m not.”

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Since the day last November when he was sent to prison on parole violations, he’s packed off his spirit to roost somewhere else, a disappearing act from the neck up. To rage or steep in sadness would be “letting [that woman] win,” meaning the judge, Genece Brinkley, who convicted him 10 years ago on drug and gun counts brought by a disgraced cop. Since then, she’s sent him back to prison twice; tacked on 14 years of stifling parole; and repeatedly torched his rap career each time he was poised for mega-stardom. Her latest decree, jailing him two to four years for a sheaf of minor infractions, triggered broad outrage and a suite of investigations, including one by this reporter. For 15 years, per the evidence I’ve obtained, she’s committed acts unbecoming her office; a full accounting can be found below. Perhaps worse, though, say lawyers who have sat before her in court, is her treatment of defendants. “She’s a sadist,” says a Philadelphia attorney who asked that I not name him for his clients’ sake. “She puts long-tail probations on young black men, then jerks them back to jail for small infractions.”

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But we were talking about dirt bikes, and for just a moment, the light banked on Meek’s eyes. From the age of 11, a bike was all he dreamed of, the only thing he’d let himself want. You could buy a Kawi 80 for a thousand bucks, used, and that sum seemed feasible in Philly. The things his neighbors coveted while raised in public housing – rap royalty and Lamborghinis – those you had to live till at least 20 to get, and Meek never thought he’d last that long. “I had 10 friends die when I lived in North Philly, and probably another six or seven on the South side,” he says. “I would literally open the door and smell the air outside. Yup, smells like murder today.”

His father, Rob Parker, was killed during a stickup when Meek was five years old. (Meek's real name is Robert Williams. His nom de rap derives from his middle name, Rihmeek.) Rob was one of 14 kids born to Beulah Parker; almost all of them went on to live working-class lives. The exception was Rob, "the real-life Omar – he robbed drug dealers for a living," says Ron Parker, his brother. "That's how he died, trying to take off a gangster. But the guy caught him slipping and shot him down." Rob was 31 when he passed away; his killer was never identified by cops. Meek was a quiet child who tunneled inside himself after his father died. "For 10 years, I barely got a word out that boy. He'd stay in his room drawing cartoons," says Kathy Williams, his mother. "Then he turned 15 and those hormones hit him hard. He was out there on the corner, spitting fire."

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Actually, Meek was 14 when he started carving kids up on the corner of 24th and Berks: That was the spot where come-up rappers cut their teeth in North Philly. "I lost my first battle and walked away crying, saying, 'I'll be back strong, motherfuckers,'" Meek remembers. If he ever lost again, you won't see it on YouTube – in clip after clip, he hands older kids their heads with a coldness that's frankly reptilian. By the time he was 17, he was fronting a crew known as the Bloodhoundz. They played a local spot called Blue Horizon, packing the house full on Friday nights. "Dudes would walk up on me and shake my hand: 'Yo, your shit is flamin' in the streets,'" he says. The boy who, at nine, compiled a rap thesaurus – "He'd fill up all these notebooks with words that rhymed: cat/hat, moon/tune," says his sister, Nasheema Williams – dropped out of high school in his junior year to spend his waking hours crafting songs. "We knew he'd break it big – he was our LeBron," says his cousin Rasson Parker.

Philly is no springboard for aspiring MCs. You can count on five fingers the rappers who've made it big – and one of them was named Will Smith. But Meek's skill set would have launched him from the wrong side of Pluto. He had, besides maniacal breath control and an insult comic's ear for brutal burns, the kind of want-to you can't teach to lesser artists. "He had so many setbacks that it made you think," says Conah Howard, who's helped manage Meek since 2008. "Drops his mixtape – goes to jail. Almost signs with T.I. – T.I. goes in. It was almost like, 'Shit ain't meant to be.'" Around 2010, Meek was spotted by Rick Ross while doing a college show. "Rick's like, 'Who is this kid making the crowd crazy?'" says Howard. Ross added a verse to Meek's single "Rosé Red," then signed him to his label, Maybach Music. Within a year, Meek put out four gold singles. He was a trap rapper toasting the usual tropes – big cars, body counts, Saturnian sex – but he used them as shiny paper to gift-wrap his story, folding in truth between the brags:

*When my dreams started to crumble, niggas deserted/Empty courtroom when the judge read my verdict*

In an age when **hip-hop** was hugging the shore, Meek was a kid who'd wade in deep, splashing his pain on the page. No one confused him for Kendrick, but he was working it out,

finding his subject as he grew. He dropped three hit albums in less than five years and probably would have been a fixture on Top Five lists – if his path hadn't crossed with Brinkley's.

Last August, Meek went to New York to tape a spot on *The Tonight Show*. He was riding in a Rolls uptown when a crowd of kids on dirt bikes pulled up at a red light beside him. “Meek asked one of the dudes, ‘Yo, could I get a ride?’ and of course the kid lent him his bike,” says Howard, who was driving. Meek rode with the pack, tossing wheelies; his cameraman filmed it all and posted a clip to Instagram Live. The next day, leaving a basketball tourney, he was stopped by the NYPD. “It was the most bogus bust I’ve ever seen,” says Joe Tacopina, one of Meek’s team of powerhouse lawyers. “I talked to a squad commander who said, ‘This isn’t my bag of shit. It came from way above me, that’s all I know.’”

The felony count – reckless endangerment – was dropped to a misdemeanor and later dismissed, but Meek was ordered back to Philly and charged with breaking probation. Not by the district attorney or the probation department, but by Brinkley. Both the Philly DA and Meek’s probation officer opposed jail time; Brinkley ignored them and gave her ruling. “I have been trying to help you since 2009,” said the judge who, per Meek’s management, has cost the rapper an estimated \$30 million, but “you have no respect for this court.” She ordered him back to prison for two to four years, adding, “I don’t have to deal with you ever again.”



**Rapper Meek Mill attends MMG Weekend's The #BIGGEST Pool Party on July 3, 2016 in Fayetteville, Georgia. Photo credit: Prince Williams/Getty Images**  
Eleven years ago, a drug cop named Reggie Graham claimed he saw Meek Mill, then 19 years old, sell crack to a confidential informant. Graham was attached to a squad called the Narcotics Field Unit, a purportedly elite group of plainclothes cops who target major dealers of crack and heroin. Or so they've been tasked: What they've often done, instead, is embroil themselves in epic – if unpunished – misconduct. “You can practically- set your watch to it – every five years, there's a major NFU scandal,” says Brad Bridge, a senior public defender

who's locally famous for reversing wrongful convictions. Bridge ballpark the number at about 1,300 reversals; many of those were NFU-related.

In 2009, a squad of NFU cops was busted for brazenly robbing bodegas in North Philly. Though they were caught in the act on a security camera, the detectives involved walked away clean; the one narc who got fired was reinstated. Philly taxpayers picked up the tab for them: Almost \$2 million in claims was paid to the victims. Five years later, a different NFU squad was charged and tried for robbing drug dealers. "We stole millions of dollars" from them, says Jeffrey Walker, the only officer convicted of those crimes. (The other six were acquitted in 2015.) "From 2002 on, we were basically stickup guys," says Walker. "We'd lie about probable cause, get an ADA to write it, and knock down the door of a known supplier." Walker served three years in prison, then got out and gave testimony – for the plaintiffs. A class of civil lawsuits had been brought against the department on behalf of people locked up by his squad. The city fought those suits till Walker testified last year. The account Walker gave of his squad's alleged tactics – writing false warrants to search a suspect's house, beating up suspects to extract information, and planting drugs on them to make arrests – seemed to sap the city's resolve. Its solicitor settled hundreds of cases, paying millions in damages (and more cases continue to pour in). "In my mind, Jeff's a hero. He put his life in danger going against other cops," says Michael Pileggi, a lawyer with multiple plaintiffs in the case.

NFU cops work in teams, and Walker partnered on and off with Reggie Graham for almost a decade. Graham requested a warrant to search the house Meek was living in part-time, which was owned by Meek's cousin Rasson Parker, who'd bought it with an inheritance his father left him. That house in South Philly, on a well-kept block of strivers, was the hang spot for Meek and his older cousins. "I was 18 and not paying my share, so they made me the errand boy," Meek recalls. "Whatever they needed – toilet paper, blunts – I would run out and get." They smoked and dealt weed there and played their music loud, but all say they were no menace to the public. "Yeah, I did weed, sold some too," says Meek. "But sell crack? Fuck, no. I had an aunt on that shit – she wound up dying behind it."

*Meek Mill's cousins discuss what happened on that night in 2008.*

Graham claimed he watched Meek sell crack to an informant at 4:45 the afternoon of January 23rd, 2007. According to Meek and three of his cousins, however, he was nowhere near the corner of 22nd and Jackson, where Graham said the deal went down. They say he was three miles away, in a Center City courtroom, from 10 a.m. till 5 p.m. that day. "Our cousin Thelonious was on trial and at least 20 of us were there" to support him from the gallery, says Ikeem Parker, another of Meek's cousins and then-housemates. "With rush hour, Meek couldn't have got home till 6 p.m." There's no forensic proof that Meek was in court that day, but at least he has witnesses. That's more than can be said for Reggie Graham, who either didn't lab-test the crack "seized," or the lab test never made its way to court. All he had was his word that the alleged substance was coke; Graham claimed he'd done a "field test" at the scene. According to multiple legal experts, that missing evidence should have been grounds for an instant mistrial; it was the basis for the warrant and Meek's arrest. Which raises a second flag: Graham's truthfulness. Though he left the force last year, his name rang out on a blacklist compiled by the DA's office. That list, which was unsealed to the public in March, is a rogues' gallery of cops too dishonest or corrupt to be called upon to testify at trial. (Graham, who has moved to central

Florida, declined all requests for comment.) “Reggie was involved in a suit I brought back in ’07,” says Pileggi, the civil-rights attorney. Graham and his squad implicated a whole family after claiming they saw their son selling dope on a corner. Pileggi proved at trial that the cops had lied: The kid was locked up in juvy at the time of the alleged sale.



**Processing photo of Meek Mill from his 2008 arrest. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Police Dept.**

Nevertheless, Graham got his warrant to search Meek’s house and returned the following night with his squad. Meek says he was on the stoop of his cousin’s house when he saw a Dodge Charger round the corner. NFU cops poured out of the car. Meek, who carried a gun for protection – “First day I ever felt safe outside was when I got me that Sig Sauer” – heard them yell “Police!” and tossed the gun, he says. Two cops grabbed Meek by either foot, another by the arms, and cuffed him. According to Meek, they charged up the steps and bashed the inner door in, using Meek’s head as a truncheon. Once inside the house, they swung him around and his skull smacked the base of a coffee table. Meek was going in and out of consciousness, bleeding from the mouth and eyes. “He yelled, ‘I ain’t done nothin’! Why y’all beatin’ on me?’ ” says Rasson. “They started beating us, kicking us, yelling, ‘Eyes to the ground,

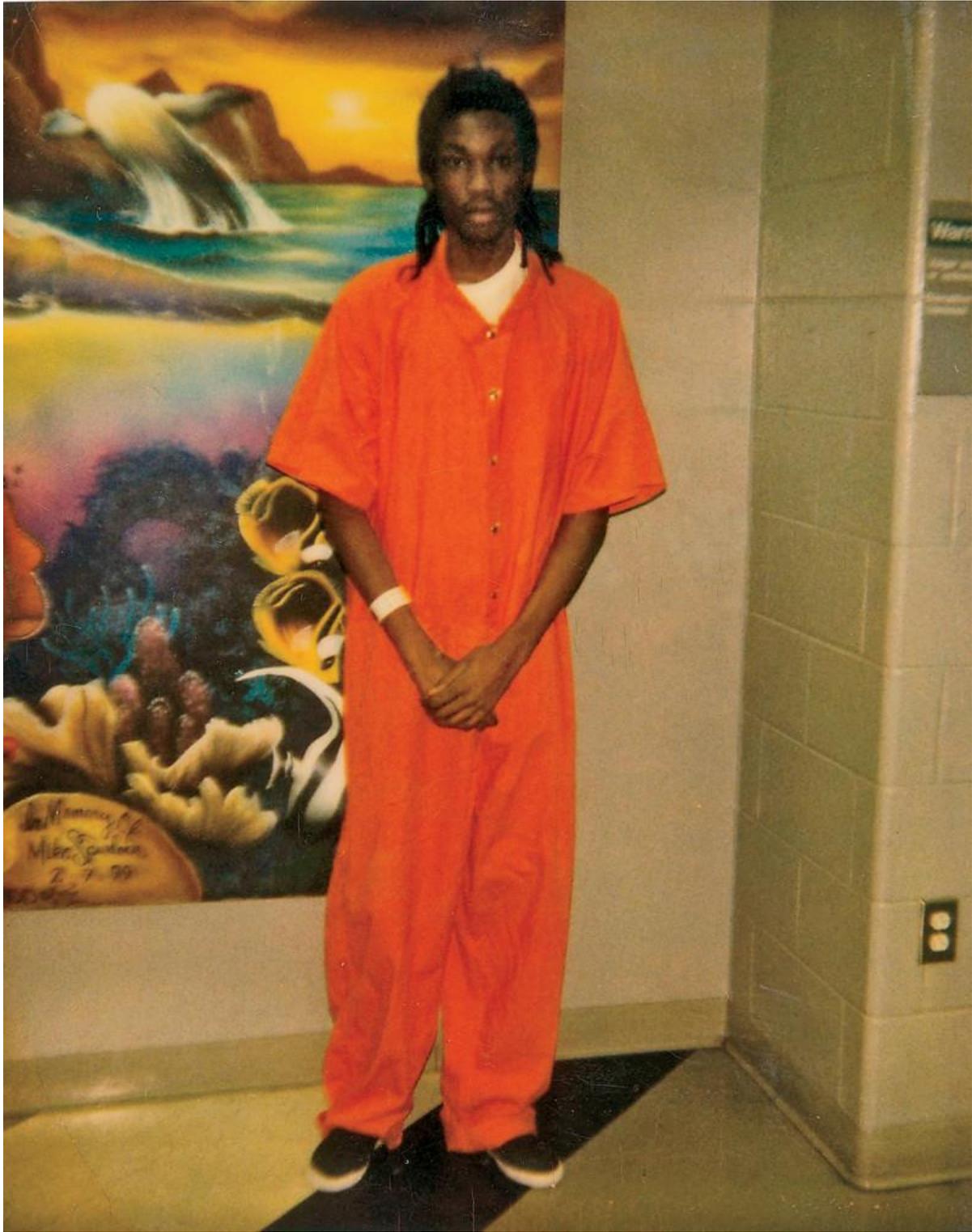
motherfuckers!’ ” says Meek’s cousin William Bailey. “Then a few of ’em went upstairs to search our rooms.” They came back holding a bag of money. “It was my money,” says Ikeem, who was the house’s weed supplier. “He took \$30,000 from my closet. Graham yelled ‘Jackpot!’ as he came down the stairs.”

**Kathy Williams is 55**, but her physiognomy isn’t: Often, she feels like 80. She’s had surgery “on my spine, wrists, hands and elbows,” and lives in constant agony with sciatica. If it’s any comfort to her, she comes by her pain honestly: She worked backbreaking jobs, sometimes several at once, to support her two kids alone. “Meek’s songs make it sound like we were broke-broke, but the real is, we had more than other kids,” says Nasheema. “She always gave us money for a hoagie, not free lunch,” and bought them the latest Jordans every fall.

As hard as she toiled, though, Kathy couldn’t raise Meek’s bail bond till he’d served several months in County. She certainly had no money for top-drawer counsel. Meek says he barely saw his attorney before trial. (That lawyer, now retired, didn’t return calls for comment.) On August 19th, 2008, Meek faced 19 counts in the Court of Common Pleas in downtown Philly. Roughly a third involved carrying an unlicensed gun; others were for drugs and assault – Graham claimed Meek aimed the gun at him.

Meek says his lawyer had no defense prepared and had no idea that there were 20 witnesses who could place him in court the day of the alleged drug sale. Then there was the matter of Meek pointing the gun. There were witnesses in the house who could debunk Graham’s story; Meek says his lawyer neither knew that nor called them. He apparently didn’t canvas the cops at the scene either – but Meek’s current lawyers have. They dug up Jerold Gibson, an ex-NFU detective who helped detain Meek outside the house. Recently, Gibson signed a sworn affidavit to investigators hired by Meek’s team. It says, in part, “I never saw Mr. Williams lift his gun and point it at Officers Graham and Johnson. I observed Mr. Williams lift the gun out of his waistband in a motion that suggested he was trying to discard [it].” Graham was the only state’s witness called: “Myself and Officer Johnson took cover. Mr. Williams . . . crouched down behind the car, looking like he was trying to give off a shot. . . . We yelled ‘police’ and ‘drop the gun.’ . . . Mr. Williams . . . took off running.” Gibson says none of that happened: “Graham and Johnson did not take cover [and Meek] did not take off running.”

Meek waived a jury trial – it costs thousands more in legal fees – so Brinkley decided the case. She acquitted Meek’s co-defendants, then found Meek guilty of seven charges – four involving the gun. There’s no arguing that Meek had a gun on him; he took the stand and admitted so himself. But in Philly, illegal carry is a misdemeanor, typically punished with a fine and house arrest. Instead, he got two years in a county prison and eight years of strict probation – all because Graham swore he’d seen him sell drugs and aim a weapon at cops. The whole case swung on Graham’s testimony, which doesn’t pass the laugh test of his former partner. “That boy [Graham] lied like it was second nature!” Walker says. “If you had your weapon drawn, [Meek’s] never pulling a gun. The second he raised that weapon, he would’ve had one breath to live. Straight up and down, they’d have aired him out. We’re talking closed casket, not open.”



**Meek Mill in prison in 2008. Courtesy of Kathy Williams**

**Several months after his trial that summer**, Meek got a visit from Charles Alston. Alston, who's known in the streets as Charlie Mack, is said to have been once affiliated with the dominant drug gang in West Philly. A slab of a man, he's a former bodyguard of Will Smith. The Fresh Prince rapped an ode to him called "Charlie Mack – First Out the Limo," which is actually more hummable than you'd guess. Later, Mack branded himself a talent manager; he was struck by Meek's work-drive and his debut mixtape, which was picking up spins on local radio.

According to Howard, Meek's manager, Mack paid a call on Meek after he was released to house arrest. "He said, 'Sign this management contract and I'll get you off this shit,'" says Howard. It was the fall of 2009 and Meek had done almost two years between jail and home detention. Sure enough, Mack appeared in court and produced the two-page contract; Meek was released from detention. What sounded like a break would prove anything but: Meek had merely moved from a small box to a big one. He still had the eight years of strict probation, which meant that at any time – and for any infraction – Brinkley could send him back to jail. Here is the trap of our post-conviction system: Defendants, even famous ones, live at the mercy of their judge and probation officer. It's one thing to toe the line while holding a nine-to-five. But to live a spotless life while chasing the prize in hip-hop? Now, there's a manual someone needs to write.

Still, Meek got out and cut three mixtapes in a year. His single "Rosé Red" gained traction in Philly, and he was in high demand on the DMV circuit, doing club shows in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. He'd bought that Kawi 80 and a used van to tour in, and had rented himself a loft in a new building. For the very first time, he could see a path forward. It pointed out of Philly, to places unknown.

But that aside, says Meek, he wasn't seeing much cash: Most of the money funneled through Mack. "*Flamers 2* moved 100,000 units – and Charlie handed me a check for three grand," he says. (After expenses, mixtapes cost only pennies to burn and sell for \$10 a copy on the street.) Even his show money, he says, was coming up short: "Charlie took 20 percent off the top" and charged Meek "for every bag of chips," says Phil Smith, Meek's day-to-day manager since 2010. "Meek was grateful to Charlie, but this shit's a business." (Reached via e-mail, Mack replied with "Peace&Blessing," but offered no response to Meek's claims.) Meek signed with a major label and resolved his contract with Mack by paying him \$25,000; Mack agreed and walked off, grumbling. "Last thing he said was, 'Too many chiefs, not enough Indians,'" says Smith. "I'm like, 'Yeah, whatever, motherfucker.'"

A couple of months later, Rick Ross came to Philly and dropped in on a drive-time DJ, Cosmic Kev. He asked Kev's listeners, "Whose track should I jump on here?" The overwhelming response: Meek Mill's. Meek gathered his small savings, roughly \$5,000, and flew to Fort Lauderdale to record with Ross. At the airport, he went for broke, renting a Rolls-Royce. "I'm like, '\$1,500 a day?! That's the last cash we got!'" says Smith. "He said, 'Don't matter, we gotta step to him right.'" They got to Ross' villa in a Bentley, however; the Rolls broke down en route. Ross came out to greet them with a grin on his face. "I see y'all young bulls pulled up large."

Before signing with Ross, Meek made \$3,000 a show. Six months later, he was earning \$50,000 per, and dropping a hit single every quarter. "We had so much money hit us, we didn't know where to put it," says Smith. "We're running around the country with a half-mil, cash." Meek hired RocNation to manage his business, which "got too big too fast for us to handle," says Smith. Suddenly, he was everywhere – MTV, BET – and headlining his own shows. No less than Nas declared Meek "the next one to take this over" – and that was before his debut album, *Dreams and Nightmares*. Released on October 30th, 2012, it launched four singles and was the Number Two album in America. It might have gone platinum and well beyond – but Meek never got the chance to make that happen.



**Rick Ross and Meek Mill perform during Tidal X: 1020 at Barclays Center in Brooklyn on October 20, 2015. Photo credit: Taylor Hill/FilmMagic**

The week the album dropped, Hurricane Sandy hit New York, shutting down the city. Meek, in town for a promotional blitz, had to get to Atlanta for a show. The airports were closed, but Philadelphia's were open. He drove down to Philly to charter a jet. Minutes from the airport, Meek was stopped by the cops. "He said my windows were tinted and said he smelled weed in the car," says Meek. The cops arrested him and impounded his car: An hours-long search of the vehicle turned up nothing. Detained overnight, Meek was released with no charges. He thought the worst of it was missing his flight. He was mistaken. The worst hadn't even begun. Incensed about the change in Meek's travel plans, Brinkley hauled him in for a drug test. At a violation-of-parole hearing three weeks later, she ordered a second drug test. (Both screens came up clean.) Nevertheless, she barred Meek from touring, which cost him "\$7 or \$8 million," says Clint Saunders, Meek's booking agent. Next,

she replaced his probation officer. Meek's dealings with his PO's had always been cordial, but his new one, Treas Underwood, was a "dragon." "Straight out the gate, she hated me, talking to me like I'm some kind of rapist," says Meek. "She would follow me around and pop up at my house, looking for some way to do me dirty." "Before her, we would fax Meek's schedule once a week," says Smith. "Now, we had to tell her every hour of our day: 'Meek's check-in is at so-and-so; we leave Miami at midnight.' Man, that ain't the way the rap game works. Half the time, you don't know when you'll go onstage." (Underwood, reached by phone, declined to comment.) An odd theme emerged in the hearings that followed: Brinkley bashed Roc-Nation, Meek's management firm, and raved about Charlie Mack. "I don't know how or when you all got involved," said Brinkley, but "he didn't have no problems with the other manager." Underwood, the probation officer, joined the chorus: "Working with Charlie Mack, hands down, he is phenomenal. [Your management people] are a problem for you." Meek was perplexed. He'd made pennies with Mack, and more money than he could spend under Roc. Counting royalties, concerts and sponsor deals with Puma, Ciroc and Monster, he was earning \$5 million a year. He'd release three albums that would chart Top Three, and would surely have fared better but for Brinkley's rulings.

It became a grim ritual: Each time he dropped a record, she'd jail him for some violation or restrict his travel. Before *Dreams Worth More Than Money* hit stores in 2015, she sent him back to prison for six months – he'd tested positive for Percocet. (Meek says he'd had wisdom teeth pulled in 2013 and developed an opiate habit the way most people do: A doctor prescribed them to him. He wrestled with the addiction for several years, then sought treatment in Atlanta and recovered.)

Though *Dreams* went platinum, it might have doubled its sales if she'd allowed him to tour more than four cities. Ditto the performance of his last LP, *Wins & Losses*. Just after its release last summer, she benched him again, after he popped wheelies in New York. "Meek lost \$5 million in shows last fall," says Saunders, his booker. The hits to his bottom line just kept on coming. Meek's sponsors dropped him in 2016, after Brinkley gave him 12 months' house arrest. (Her reasons: He'd moved a video shoot from one site to another in Philly, tried to pass off water as urine for a drug test, had shown up late to a probation meeting, and hung up on Underwood during a call.) "The sponsors loved him, but they don't need you if you can't be there," says James Lindsay, Meek's manager for branding.

Meek was essentially on detention in city limits. Bored, he spent his time at sporting events. "He was at all our games, so I asked him, 'Why are you here?'" says Michael Rubin, the co-owner of the 76ers, who developed a fast friendship with Meek. "He told me, 'You don't get it: That bitch shut me down. She's gonna bleed me till I'm broke or back in jail.'"

Rubin, a multibillionaire tech savant, was infuriated to learn of Meek's predicament. He made a donation to the nonprofit Justice League, which hired a firm that specializes in investigating wrongful convictions. That firm, Quest Research and Investigations, analyzed troves of documents, including Charlie Mack's phone records, obtained by Meek's legal team by subpoena. "We found dozens of long phone calls between [Underwood] and Charlie Mack," says Luke Brindle-Khym, the co-founder of QRI. Meek's attorney Joe Tacopina also obtained phone recordings of Underwood candidly discussing Meek's case with her boyfriend. The info gave Meek's reps the leverage to move Underwood off his case.

Then QRI's detectives dove in deeper. They searched state databases for Brinkley's name on cases overturned by higher courts. Instead, the shocker find was dozens of *civil* lawsuits, the great bulk of them brought by Brinkley. A 61-year-old Tennessean who'd won her Philly

court seat in 1993, Brinkley has owned and rented a number of properties in North Philly, and has sued, or been sued by, many tenants. Brindle-Khym and his staffers spoke to some of those tenants; they heard horror stories about Brinkley, the landlord. (Brinkley declined to comment: The judicial code bars her from speaking about cases – but not about her conduct outside court.)



**Judge Genece E. Brinkley in November 2015. Photo credit: CCPTV**

Anna Torres was the mother of an infant son when she rented a flat from Brinkley in 2006. Torres had been living there about a year when her son showed delays in speech development. Doctors diagnosed a severe case of lead poisoning. Building inspectors were summoned; they found dangerous levels of lead in the peeling paint. Brinkley was ordered by the city to fix the problem. According to Torres, who was seven-months pregnant at the time, Brinkley stormed in and started screaming at her. Brinkley sued to evict Torres in 2007; Torres sued for damages. Soon after Torres filed, she told QRI, she and her husband got threatening calls from a Brinkley courtroom staffer: “Don’t show up in court. You are going to lose, because she knows people in the system.” Torres was terrified. Still, she went to trial and got a judgement in her favor.

Other ex-tenants told comparable stories. Matthew Edinger, a single father of three young children, moved into 5010 Penn Street in 2002. On Christmas Eve that year, he checked in on his infant son and found him dead of SIDS in his crib. A month later, he told QRI, he was sitting around, despondent, when Brinkley let herself into his place. She was with several people, presumably contractors. She marched them around the flat, pointing to features she wanted changed. Edinger said he ordered her out; she ignored him and continued the tour. Months later, she bought the house and sharply raised his rent. Edinger’s mother says she called Brinkley, asking her to have compassion for a broken man who’d lost his little boy. Brinkley responded with a chain of threatening letters, demanding that Edinger vacate by month’s end if he didn’t pay the new rent. He moved out before the end of his lease. And then there’s Brinkley’s treatment of Richie Pacell. Pacell, a detective with the Northwest Detectives Division, is a second-generation Philly cop; his father walked a beat for 22 years. Like lots of other cops, Pacell works on the side: He does construction work. In the fall of 2010, Brinkley hired him to build an addition onto

her house. According to Pacell, Brinkley regularly dropped by, demanding extensive changes. Those discussions led to arguments, which led to name-calling. She fired him on Valentine's Day 2011. That night, she hired Bill Nicholson, Pacell's friend and the plumber on the job, to do the finish work. Nicholson says he arrived to find Brinkley calling the cops. She accused Pacell, a 10-time Officer of the Month, of burglarizing her house to take back his tools. Squad cars roared up and cops investigated, but found no evidence of a break-in and didn't arrest Pacell. That night, in her kitchen, Brinkley seethed. "I'm gonna get him, you watch," Nicholson claims she told him. "I'm gonna take his badge and pension."

Soon afterward, Brinkley filed a second report, this time with Internal Affairs. The department dismissed the matter. Brinkley pressed on, suing Pacell in Small Claims Court. A day before the trial, Nicholson says she e-mailed him. Her note read, "Attached please find the questions for tomorrow's hearing. I will call you later to go over them." When Nicholson clicked the attachment, his jaw dropped open. She hadn't just scripted the questions her lawyer would ask him, she'd also supplied the answers. Reading down the list, he ticks off falsehood after falsehood. "She says I got there first and realized she'd been robbed – bullshit. No break-in; I saw nothing. She said I saw a window had been jimmed open – bullshit. Never saw that and never said it. She has me saying how Rich did shitty work. Bullshit. She was a *nightmare*." Rolling Stone obtained a copy of the e-mailed script and shared parts of it with Lawrence Fox, a judicial-ethics expert at the Yale School of Law, who says if the note is indeed from Brinkley and the answers she fed him were false, it's "subornation of perjury. It's a felony-level offense in any state."

Even without Nicholson, Brinkley pushed ahead in court and won a judgment for \$11,500 against Pacell. That outcome, says Brindle-Khym, fits another pattern of facts: "Brinkley files suspect suits and wins." In 2014, she sued the Hotel Hershey, claiming she was "traumatized, unable to sleep and experienced flashbacks." Why? She said she rolled over in her hotel bed and found the name tag of an employee between the sheets. The hotel settled for an undisclosed sum. In 2003, according to QRI, she threatened a tenant, Alan Oswald, after he refused to pay a mid-lease rent hike. " 'I'm a judge, you know. I can sue you,' " Oswald recalled Brinkley saying, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Brinkley did, in fact, sue him, claiming damages. She was awarded \$900 – his security deposit. "When I saw the early cases, I thought, 'Wow, the poor woman. She must have money troubles,'" says Brindle-Khym. "But then you add them up, and it's dozens of lawsuits! Who does that, let alone a sitting judge?"



**Meek Mill and Nicki Minaj at the 2015 American Music Awards at Microsoft Theater on November 22, 2015 in Los Angeles, California. Photo credit: Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic**

**Judges in Pennsylvania have broad discretion** over the length and terms of jail bids. “It’s not uncommon, with harsher judges, to see 10-year probations for lesser offenses,” say one veteran criminal lawyer who represents the poor in Philadelphia. “Brinkley’s the judge you’d least want to be supervised by. Any failure to live by her rules will be punished.” She isn’t the only judge to hang long leashes, but is, according to every lawyer I spoke to, the most needlessly severe. “She had a parolee before her who was nine months pregnant – and sent her off to prison to deliver,” says another attorney who asked that I not name him.

When Meek got out of jail in the summer of 2009, he appeared before Brinkley for status hearings. The theme of those sessions is best summed up by a recurring phrase of hers: *You’re thumbing your nose at me*. She uses it over and over again to describe small mix-ups – a scheduling snafu here, a missed phone call there. Meek would explain himself and apologize profusely, but nothing seemed to salve her sense of outrage. “All the opportunities I’ve given you,” she said in a typical broadside.

“Each and every time, you’ve done something to indicate that you have no respect for this court.” Two years ago, he got the chance to talk to her in chambers, and hoped, out of earshot of the lawyers and reporters, to make her see how hard he was really trying. In February 2016, he came to court with his then-girlfriend, Nicki Minaj. The meeting in Brinkley’s chambers was not recorded by a court transcriber, and Minaj has declined offers to confirm Meek’s account; she and Meek broke up badly some months later. But there were several of Meek’s people in court that day (lawyers, executives from RocNation), and some of them spoke about what he and Minaj told them moments after the meeting.

“They were both in shock, saying, ‘We can’t believe what just went down,’” says Desiree Perez, the COO of RocNation. “The judge said, ‘I’m not really the monster

you think I am. In fact, a lot of people look up to me.’” Then she asked them to do a song for her, a remix of the Boys II Men hit “On Bended Knee.” “Fucking Nicki busts out laughing, but I grabbed her leg, going, ‘Yo, this is my life here,’” Meek recalls. “I tried to tell the judge, ‘All respect, but that ain’t me. I’m a Philly street rapper, not a bubblegum dude.’ She says, ‘Fine, then,’ in a real sarcastic way. ‘Suit yourself.’” Tacopina, Meek’s lawyer, rang his contacts at the FBI. Two agents came to Philly to talk to Meek. They asked him to wear a wire in front of Brinkley – just get her to out herself on tape and his long legal nightmare would be over. Meek declined. “In my world, that’s called snitching,” he says flatly. Instead, he served the year of house arrest, and got an additional six years of probation. In all, that comes to 14 years under Brinkley’s thumb. His original sentence called for 23 months. Between jail and house arrest, he’s done almost four years, and may spend that much again in state prison.

And for what, one asks? How is the public interest served? Since 2008, Meek hasn’t been convicted of so much as a misdemeanor. He made some unwise choices involving dirt bikes and drugs, but if those are disqualifying offenses these days, then which rap star would escape hanging? Meanwhile, absent rulings from a higher court, he’ll sit in his cell until someone in power – the governor, attorney general or Philly DA – musters the will to say “enough.” Here’s a man who supports dozens of loved ones, pays a fortune each year in taxes and serves as a voice of his aggrieved people. “There’s brothers locked down that did nothing to be here but piss off people like Brinkley,” Meek says of the men in plastic seats, huddled with their broods in this somber room. To keep from going mad, he’s made an inventory of wrongs he means to address when free. “I want to speak on this system and what it does to black people – on both fucking sides of the fence.” It’s not lost on Meek that the people who harmed him were black – the judge, the cops, his probation officer. “Straight self-hate, man, it makes these people crazy.” For a kid from North Philly to come all the way up, then be pulled back down by his own? “Trust me, I’m gonna say something about that. And then, I’m gonna move to Atlanta.”