

CHAPTER 1

It was the beginning of summer and grammar school graduation day for Tony Blakus, Oliver "Ollie" Banks, Carliss Washington, Crador Johnson, Malin "Mal" Jones, James (Jimmie) "Dead-Eye" Jenkins and me, Theron "Thee" Kenes. The question on all of our minds was what we were going to do with ourselves now that school was officially out.

"So what are we going to do tonight fellas. Tomorrow morning I will be on the highway going away for the whole summer. What are we going to get into to celebrate the beginning of summer and our graduation."

"Who are you bullshitting Thee," Tony Blakus barked back at me. "As soon as it gets dark, your little ass will have to go home. And I don't see your momma letting you stay out late just because you graduated from grade school."

"I'm hanging with my peeps tonight."

"Yeah yeah nigga, we will see, this is TB you talkin to. So don't try to bullshit the bull shitter," he said, laughing, sticking a pound out to get dap from everyone in the group.

"Fuck all that, I wanna see the rubber hit the pavement. My question still remains, what are we going to do tonight to celebrate the beginning of summer break?"

"Let's go down to the corner and see what's poppin' at Caleco's," TB suggested.

"Man you know our parents would kill us if they found us anywhere near that place." I responded. "Besides it is too early."

"When are you going to stop being such a punk, you

say one thing and then you punk out. Besides your cousin owns the place. What the hell else is there to do?" TB snapped.

"Let's go up to Cabanne Park. With school being out everybody will be there," I responded.

"Fuck that. I am too old to be sitting around a muthafuckin' park. I want to see some bitches. Not play with some damn kids," Malin shouted, adding his two cents to the conversation.

"That's right Thee," Crador chorused in, "I'm tryin' to be pimpin' tonight. Besides the Labancamy Crew s'posed to be at the Caleco's tonight."

"Yeah, that's right, and since yo' cousin own the club, we can hang out at your house," Oliver said.

"He ain't gone be there at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Why don't we go up to Cabanne park first then when we think the action is about to start at Caleco's we can stop there on the way back?" I offered.

"OK," TB said reluctantly, "but if you bitch out on us when we get ready to leave the park, you had better make sure you take yo' ass to Atlanta tomorrow morning, because I am going to talk about you and how you punked out all muthafuckin' summer long."

Cabanne Park was the hang out in the summer time for everybody who lived in the Benton-Wilson district of St. Louis' southside. It was a city owned Municipal Park on the corner of Compton and Cherokee. The park covered two square blocks. It was named after Onasis Cabanne, a famed Civil Rights leader before the movement became prominent nationally. The land had been the site of a WWII military base, but none of the old heads in the neighborhood could tell you with confidence what military mission was conducted there. In 1952, the

military donated the land to the city of St. Louis. The city tore the base down and replaced it with a park for blacks only. The city built the park to placate the protests that black leaders had lodged concerning the segregation of the city's parks and recreational facilities. In 1951, a race riot almost erupted at the city owned white only swimming pool in Scottsdale Park. Scottsdale Park was located on the edge of the southside and although Scottsdale Park was a municipal park, paid for by the tax bearers and inhabitants of the city as a whole, blacks were not allowed to use the swimming pool or tennis courts. Fearing that the friction between blacks and whites would continue and possibly worsen the white city officials decided to build a park with a swimming pool for blacks. That's where Cabanne Park fits in.

When we got there it looked like a neighborhood celebration was going on. There were several pick-up basketball games going on, a softball game on the baseball diamond and a real noisy crap game on the pavilion. Speakers from over-customized car stereo systems wher blasting, the potent smell of marijuana was sifting through the air, and more than a few park goers were having a drink or two, if you know what I mean.

"Why don't we get the winners for the next basketball game," I suggested.

"Fuck that," TB muttered, "y'all can do that if you want, I feel lucky. I'm bout to throw them thangs."

"That's stupid," I said, knowing immediately that I had just fucked up".

TB was my friend but the one thing you could not do was call him stupid. Ollie, Malin, Carliss, Crador, Dead-Eye Jimmie, and I were all going to high school and would be in a regular high school program. However, TB had been classified and enrolled in a program called

Rehabilitational Education. I forgot that TB was in the program. He did not come to the graduation luncheon because he was ashamed of being in the program.

The designation of “Re-Ed” was the most awful thing that you could be called in school. State law required that a person could attend elementary school until age 17. If the student had not met the requirements to graduate from the eighth grade they were sent to high school and assigned to this program. Students in the program were only allowed to attend high school for two years. An exception could be made if you were re-tested and could make a minimum score on the Missouri Basic Skills Standardized Test. TB, like a lot black kids, was smart and had a lot of street sense, but did not do well on standardized tests.

The St. Louis Public Schools at that time were using a tracking system to classify students entering high school. There were three tracks: A,B, and C. What made what I said doubly bad was the fact that I had tested into A track

TB turned to me pointing his finger in my face and shouting, “You think you are the shit because you a A track mutherfucka! Bet that A track can’t keep me from kicking your ass for calling me stupid!”

Ollie saw that TB was pretty pissed. He grabbed him and joked with him, “Come on TB, you know Thee is fucked up, he’s’ book smart, but you and I both know he would not last five seconds in the streets because he ain’t got one ounce of street sense. His momma think that education will make him and his brothers and sisters better than everybody else. But what they don’t know is that them white folks gone see them as just a bunch of highly educated niggas. No different than you or me, or any other nigga.”

TB pulled away from Ollie and grabbed me in my collar, "Yeah but I think this nigga needs to be taught a lesson that all that book shit don't mean a muthafucking thing in the streets. I been pissed off all day and been looking for somebody's ass to kick."

TB was known to carry a .22 and a knife and was not shy about using either one of them. Sensing that I was about to get fucked up, I threw up my hands and tried to cop a plea. "My fault man. You probably won't believe this but I have a lot of love for you. I see you as an older brother and I appreciate all the times you have kept niggas from fucking with me."

Hesitating for a minute, TB suddenly slapped me on the side of my face with the back of his hand.

"The next time you say something like that to me I am gonna fuck you up." Breathing a sigh of relief I slowly backed away sideways and walked over to the basketball courts.

Following behind me Ollie whispered, "You a lucky nigga Thee, TB is fucked up when he gets angry, and nothing makes him more angry than somebody calling him stupid."

"Yeah, I know man. Thanks for helping."

Although TB hung out with us, he was really a young gangster. He had spent time at the Pacific State reformatory for assault and truancy. He and his two brothers were linked to all kinds of criminal activities. Even his mother was suspected of fencing stolen goods from boosters. He was not a nigga to be fucked with. If he had put half as much time into school as he did his criminal activities he would be quite the scholar.

While all this was going on Mal had already secured the winners at the basketball court. A game was just ending when Mal yelled to us, "Come on y'all! You

niggas want to play or do I have to choose some other guys to play with me!"

"Chill out nigga, you ain't got no where to go and their ain't nobody better than us for you to choose!" Carliss yelled back. At the same time TB was walking toward the pavilion to join the crap game.

After about 20 minutes of playing basketball, we heard loud shouting noises coming from the vicinity of the crap game. We saw TB standing up yelling at someone. Then James Washington, a brother from our street, came running over to Oliver and shouted, "Your boy TB is in real deep shit now. C-Note accused him of cheating at craps and hit him with his pistol." Simultaneously we all stopped playing and rushed over to the pavilion. When we got there TB was bleeding from a gash in his head and was screaming at C-Note.

"I wasn't cheating and you know it C, you just can't take losing!"

"You ought to just shut up and consider yourself lucky, you little bitch ass nigga," C-Note laughed. "I normally don't allow mutherfuckas who cheat me to leave and talk about it".

Unimpressed, TB continued talking, "That's how you win all the time. When you start losing, you just fake some kind of bullshit like this and take all the money. You ain't finna punk me outta my money."

"Who does this little muthafucka think he is," C-Note laughed again. "I heard you was a little retarded. That's the only reason I didn't pop you with this 38. I don't have a reputation of going around shooting crazy mutherfuckas."

Everybody except us laughed loudly at what C-Note said. They felt comfortable enough to laugh at TB because on the outside C-Note was the "shit".

Undaunted, TB kept on talking, "I want my money man, I won it and you know I didn't cheat. They was yo dice." The gash on TB's head was bleeding like a gusher. Ollie, fearing that TB was going to further aggravate C-Note, walked over to TB and whispered into his ear, "You can't win this fight man, he's got the ups on you. I know you probably got your knife or a gun, but come on lets go." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around TB's head in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

Heeding Oliver's warning, TB started walking away, yelling as he left, "This ain't the end mutherfucka, you ain't got shit to look forward to. Nobody steals from me."

"Go on little young punk ass nigga, I'm scared to death. You better take the advice of your little basketball-playing friends. If I didn't know your momma, I wouldn't let you talk to me like that and walk away. I would have popped a cap in your ass. I must be getting soft in my old age."

"Fuck you!" TB yelled back, "don't do me no favors mutherfucka. It ain't over." TB's head was still bleeding as we followed him trying to get him to stop so we could help. Oliver was the only person TB would let near him.

"TB you got to let go of this man. C-Note is not the kind of nigga you want to be fucking with."

"Fuck you too, Ollie. This nigga is not going to get away with pistol whipping me, calling me a thief and taking my money. I was winning big time. I can't let nobody get away with doing that to me!"

"But what are you gonna do man? C-Note is a full-grown mean motherfucker. He has killed at least twelve niggas. You have got to let this shit go."

"I gotta go man, I'm going to go home, but I will be back."

We had never seen TB like this before. Ollie had

known TB longer than anybody else. His momma, (Mrs. Banks) and TB's momma (Mrs. Blakus) were from the same small town in Tennessee and had worked together at the Old Arms Plant on Goodfellow in St. Louis during the war. Ollie's mother went back to school and became a teacher. TB's mother continued working at the Old Arms Plant. All of his brothers and sisters were just like him: they will fuck you up at the drop of a dime. The neighborhood gossip use to say that Mrs. Blakus had flipped out after TB's daddy left her.

C-Note had no idea what he had done. TB was not going to let things end like this. We all knew it.