

PROLOGUE TRAGEDY STRIKES

It began on one of July's hottest days during the summer of 1998 in North Philadelphia. Jamal, who was 15 at the time, and his 13 year old brother Shawn, were with their best friend Raheem, waiting for the fourth member of their battling crew on the corner of their usual hang out, 26th and Bailey Streets. Maurice was always late, and even though it was agreed amongst the four of them to meet, that day was no exception because he was late again.

"Damn, where is this nigga?" Jamal asked as he looked up the street to see if Maurice was coming.

"I know, man. He talked all of that trash about how he was gonna drop some crazy bars on me and he ain't even here," Shawn added as he leaned into the wall.

"He's probably with Ashley getting it in," Raheem laughed as he popped some cheese curls into his mouth. "I heard that she gives crazy brain to Mar." He and his friends burst out laughing.

"Here he comes now," Shawn said after spotting Maurice coming across the street.

Maurice greeted his friends with handshakes and pounds. "What's up, y'all?"

"You're late little nigga," Jamal scolded him.

"I know, Mar. Where were you?" Raheem asked with a slight grin on his face. He was the jokester of the group; a medium height kid with

thick and curly hair, golden brown skin and dark eyes. No matter what was going on, he always had a joke and kept the people surrounding him laughing.

Maurice returned the same look. “None of your business, youngin.” He then turned to Shawn. “You ready for me to bust your ass again?”

Shawn sucked his teeth and frowned at Maurice. “You stay talking shit. It’s cool though. I have something for your ass.”

Their friends became hype and gathered around as they knew it was about to go down. It was known throughout the neighborhood that this was their corner to battle on. Most days, it was like being in Bed Stuy when Biggie Smalls free-styled. When Jamal and company came through the spot, the excitement was soon to follow.

“Okay, let me see what you got,” Maurice replied.

“Do the beat from Busta Rhymes’ *Dangerous*,” Shawn told Raheem.

Raheem balled up his bag of cheese curls and took a drink from his bottle of Hawaiian Punch to rinse his mouth out. He started the beat as they huddled around with Shawn and Maurice bobbing their heads. The battle started and immediately everyone became hype over Shawn’s hot lyrics. Lyrically, Shawn was the bomb and everyone knew it. The metaphors he used and the way his rhymes flowed together, everyone just knew that it would only be a matter of time before somebody signed him. If basketball wasn’t his

heart and soul, he might have taken his skill more seriously.

Though he was the younger brother of Jamal, he stood slightly taller and was light-skinned. His hair was extremely dark and wavy, almost appearing jet black when the sun hit it. His eyes were small and made him appear sleepy at times but the neighborhood girls adored him despite the slight gap between his front two teeth. Shawn had an athletic build and was slightly muscular. He was the quiet one of the bunch. He and his older brother Jamal were like night and day.

At the end of his rap, everyone gave Shawn handshakes and pounds. Before Maurice had a chance to get his freestyle in, an unknown bystander stepped over to Shawn.

“Yo, that shit was hot. I’m trying to battle you, so what’s up?” the guy asked. He appeared rough and rugged; a tall and skinny individual with a rusty brown skin complexion which resembled an old penny in need of some shining. His attire consisted of worn down, dirty Timberland boots, faded black Guess jean shorts that almost appeared gray, and a knock off Polo shirt. He was also over-due for a hair-cut.

Shawn and his friends looked at each other and then looked at this clown as if he had lost his mind.

“Who are you?” Jamal retorted as he stared at the individual in disgust after peeping the way he looked.

“I’m Khalil, who the fuck is you?” Khalil replied back in the same tone once he detected Jamal’s hostility.

Jamal made a move towards Khalil as if he was going to break his neck. “Nigga, I will put you on your fucking back...!”

Shawn and his friends grabbed Jamal before anything could jump off. He then cut his eyes at Khalil. “It’s cool. It’s kinda like a private thing anyway.”

Khalil looked him over as if he were trash. “What the fuck are you talking about? This ain’t your corner. Don’t let that mediocre shit you spit get your head big. I just wanted to battle you right quick.”

Maurice and Raheem looked at each other and then looked at Shawn. They wanted to see how he was going to react. He had definitely been challenged.

“Yo, you’re not going to talk to my baby brother like that. If you wanna battle, then that’s what’s up. But don’t let your mouth get you fucked up out here, for real.” Jamal had a hot temper and was ready to throw hands whenever and with whomever. He was the total opposite of Shawn personality wise; loud, rowdy and fearless. Jamal was a little darker than Shawn with a honey brown complexion and also had a medium build. He had a scar on his left cheek from an accident as a child when he fell from a tree. His eyes held the same sleepy appearance as Shawn’s did, and he kept his hair close cut and wavy also. He was slightly bow legged and always walked with a lean, which gave him the look of a miniature pimp. No matter what was going on, Jamal stayed with a straight face not wanting to give anyone the impression that they could ever catch him

“slipping”. To this day, he had yet to lose a fight and was waiting for Khalil to give him a reason to run up in his mouth.

“Whatever,” Khalil replied slightly rattled by Jamal’s demeanor. “Are you battling or what? What’s up?”

“Alright, you can go first,” Shawn replied.

Raheem started another beat and everyone began bobbing their heads again. Khalil started off pretty good, but then towards the middle of his free-style and all the way through to the end, it turned into a complete joke. When it was finally over, Shawn gave him his props anyway. He then told Raheem to do the beat to DMX’s *Ruff Ryder’s Anthem*. Already having the most of his free-style in order from the moment that Khalil opened his mouth, Shawn began to drop bombs on him from start to finish. He embarrassed the hell out of him; clowning him from his needs of a haircut, all the way down to his “butt naked” Timberland boots.

The crowd was ecstatic once again. Jamal was laughing extra hard in Khalil’s face making him look even more stupid.

“That was hot,” Khalil painfully admitted. “You wanna go again?” he asked hoping to redeem himself.

“Naw, it’s cool. I’ll catch you another time,” Shawn replied not really in the mood to embarrass him again. He turned back to his brother and friends.

Khalil felt slighted. “Oh, so now you’re bitching up on me? Oh you’re corny as shit, nigga. That shit was lame anyway.”

Jamal stepped to Khalil and got all the way in his face. “Yo dawg, what the fuck did I just tell you? You’re about to get your ass whipped out this camp.”

“You better get the fuck out my face with that tough Tony shit, nigga you don’t know me like that.” Khalil made the biggest mistake of pushing Jamal. Jamal reacted on instinct and punched Khalil square in his mouth, busting his lip. Khalil touched the blood that poured from his lip and then threw his hands up. Jamal was ready. He hadn’t given out a good ass whipping in a while. They began fighting with Jamal whipping Khalil’s ass like he stole something causing an even bigger crowd to come around. The owner of the store heard the commotion and came outside waving his .40 caliber pistol in the air.

“Get your little asses from in front of my damn store making all of this ruckus. I told y’all before about the dumb shit!!” Old man Bob hollered. The bystanders, including Shawn and Jamal and their friends, scattered like roaches.

Once they were safely around the corner, Jamal and his friends stopped to catch their breath. They began to cut through the Johnson Homes Projects.

Maurice burst out laughing. “Yo, you played the shit outta that nigga, Shawn.”

His friends laughed with him. “I know, right? That shit was comical,” Raheem chimed in.

“That’s what his little bitch-ass gets for coming to our corner talking shit,” Jamal replied as he rubbed his knuckles which were sore from punching so hard. Just as they were getting ready

to cut through the heart of the projects, they heard a young girl screaming that somebody had a gun. They all turned to see what the fuss was about and saw Khalil coming towards them holding a 9mm with murder in his eyes. Basic instinct told them to run like hell, and they all did.

“Split up!” Jamal yelled as he pushed his brother in one direction and ran in another. Maurice ran with Shawn, and Raheem ran with Jamal. Coming to what seemed like a dead end, Jamal and Raheem began to scale a fence to get out, not wanting to back track.

Jamal jumped over first, landing on his feet before falling to the ground. Raheem was getting ready to jump over when his pants leg got caught on the fence.

“Come on!” Jamal yelled, not wanting to leave his friend behind.

“I’m stuck!” Raheem yelled back. “My fucking leg is stuck.” Raheem panicked as he tried to free himself. Jamal was about to climb back onto the fence to help Raheem when Khalil appeared from around the corner. He aimed his gun at Raheem.

“NO!!!” Jamal screamed as the gun went off. The bullet hit Raheem in his chest and knocked him from the fence and onto Jamal. Scared, Khalil fled the scene. Jamal tried to sit up from under the weight of Raheem and saw blood on his hands. “Raheem! Raheem!” he yelled.

He pulled his friend into his lap and held him. Raheem looked up at him with wide eyes. Jamal rocked him, telling him to hold on before screaming for help. Tears poured out of his eyes

with the taste of salt from them getting into his mouth as he talked to Raheem telling him to hold on because help was on the way. Even if the ambulance had made it in time, Raheem didn't have a chance. He was losing blood too fast. He frowned in pain as he touched the gold chain around his neck that displayed his name. Jamal heard him mumble something and leaned closer. He faintly heard Raheem murmur Deisha's name, his girlfriend at the time whom he cared about more than anything in the world.

"I got you homie. I got you. Don't worry it's gonna be alright." He looked up in the sky and screamed for help again as loud as he could as he rocked Raheem in his arms. But when he looked back down at Raheem, he knew he was looking into his best friend's dead eyes.

Shawn and Maurice along with others ran around the corner and stopped on the other side of the fence. They both looked down at Raheem and Jamal not wanting to believe what their eyes were seeing. A crowd had gathered by the time the ambulance finally arrived and they had to push through to get to Jamal and Raheem. Jamal laid Raheem on the ground and pulled the chain from around his friend's neck and clenched his fist around it. A sheet was placed over Raheem just as his girlfriend Deisha ran around the corner. She also pushed through the crowd.

"Where is he? Where's Raheem?" she shrieked, not wanting to believe the story that had spread so quickly. Shawn and Maurice tried to grab her to calm her down. Jamal put his fist to his face praying that this was a bad dream. He

leaned over with his hands on his knees trying to get in air as it felt as though all of the oxygen in the world had been taken away. Deisha came over to him and he stood up. His shirt and his jeans had Raheem's blood on them and she looked horrified. How could he tell her that her boyfriend was killed because of him?

"Jamal, where is Raheem?" Deisha asked again. "What happened?!"

Jamal grabbed her hand and put Raheem's chain in it. The blood from it got onto her hands. Deisha looked down at it and shook her head. "No Jamal. No!" she whined and sobbed. He put his arm around her and briefly told her what happened through his own sobs.

"He was stuck to the gate and I was trying to get him off and the dude came out of nowhere and shot him. It happened so fast."

Deisha snatched away from him and looked at Jamal with fire in her eyes. "Are you kidding me? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?? He was looking for you! He was coming after you and now my boyfriend is dead because of you! Because you can't walk away from a fucking fight!" Deisha started swinging on Jamal, hitting him in his chest, screaming and yelling before Maurice was able to get her off of him and pull her away. Jamal closed his eyes still hearing her screams and still seeing Raheem falling from the fence and into him after being shot, and then seeing his lifeless eyes looking up at him. Those images flooded his vision all at once. Jamal swore the shit wasn't over. There was going to be hell to pay. He promised that no later than a week after

they buried Raheem, Khalil's family would be burying him too.

Jamal went to his cousin and told him everything that happened. Samir was one of the biggest drug dealers in Philadelphia and had connections with Italians in South Philly, drug territories in North Philly, Germantown, Nicetown, Olney, West Oak Lane and even parts of West Philly. He stood a little over six feet tall with skin color matching a smooth, Hershey candy bar. His eye brows were thick and bushy with eye lashes that accentuated his pearly, dark eyes. He wore his hair in dreads pulled back into a pony-tail that hung just above his shoulders. Samir had a striking presence and was feared by every other nickel and dime dealer in the city. Either you worked for Samir or your ass got worked and with the police connections that he had, he was damn near untouchable. Nobody dared to fuck with him. Fucking with Samir was bad for your health.

Jamal told Samir what his intentions were and was adamant in his need for revenge for his friend Raheem. He was willing to do whatever he had to do to make sure Khalil didn't live to see another day, even if it meant losing his own life. Raheem wasn't just his best friend, but like another brother to him as well and every night that passed after his death, Jamal was haunted by the events that transpired that day.

Samir was happy to oblige Jamal. He always knew Jamal was a rider and had the perfect mentality to run the city beside him with just a little grooming and schooling about the drug game. Samir knew having a soldier like Jamal by

his side they would be unstoppable once Jamal was old enough. There was no need to bargain or reason with him. He had already decided on a sentence for Khalil. Death: Street Justice Style. So Samir agreed to help Jamal carry out his revenge knowing that would be a way to initiate Jamal into the drug game. He had enough police connections to make sure that Jamal didn't get caught.

The date was set for the night before Raheem's funeral. During the day, Samir's cronies threw bricks and rocks at the street lights to cause a black out once the sun set. Not realizing what was going on, the neighborhood kids began to join in thinking it was all fun and games.

Once the sun set, everything was in order. Samir had two .44 caliber Smiths and Wesson guns, a .44 Magnum, a sawed off shot gun, two Glock 9s and a Desert Eagle. If Khalil wasn't alone, whoever was with him was about to catch a bad one.

They had already staked out Khalil's hangout. They weren't surprised that he was sitting outside with some of his homies, smoking blunts, getting high out of their minds, and talking about getting money.

"They're going to have a closed casket for all of those pussies," one of the guys said as he loaded a clip into his gun.

"Mark-ass niggas think this shit is a game. Getting money? Oh you niggas won't be getting shit after tonight. Believe that," another guy replied as he tossed a gun and a clip to Jamal. Jamal had been silent the entire night. He put a pair of black gloves on and held the gun in one

hand and the clip in the other. He looked at them both feeling unsure about what he was getting ready to do.

Samir noticed the look on his face. “Jamal, are you cool?” he asked his little cousin. Jamal nodded his head slowly. “Are you sure? Because if you’re having second thoughts about this, just say the word and we’ll take you home and do this without you.”

Jamal thought for a second. The images of Raheem falling from the gate and dying in his arms sealed Khalil’s fate. He slammed the clip into the gun and cocked it. “No. I want this muthafucka.”

“Let’s do this shit,” the driver of the car said. He started the engine and they slowly crept down the street towards Khalil and his crew. They were still smoking, talking and laughing, unaware of the untimely demise they were about to meet.

One of the guys noticed the black squatter creeping up on them. “Yo Lil, who’s that?” he asked, letting his eyes do the pointing to the car.

Khalil squinted, his vision impaired by his high. When he noticed the Black Death Mobile, he dropped his blunt and yelled for his friends to run. They darted up the street as the car screeched and then sped after them. Jamal shot at Khalil a few times but missed. After hitting Khalil’s two friends and seeing them down but not moving, Samir aimed at Khalil and shot him in his back, putting him down.

“Stop the car!” Jamal said, wanting to finish it.

“What?” the driver of the car asked. He was ready to get the hell out of dodge before someone called the cops.

“Stop the fucking car!” Jamal yelled, almost in tears.

“Stop the car,” Samir instructed.

The driver stopped the car and Jamal jumped out, cocking his gun. He walked back to Khalil and kicked him in his ribs, causing him to yelp like a puppy. He then used his foot to turn him over on his back.

“Turn the fuck over, pussy!” Jamal seethed through clenched teeth, shaking tremendously from adrenaline and anger.

“This shit ain’t even cool! I don’t even know you, nigga! What the fuck are you doing?” Khalil piped after he turned over, not recognizing Jamal.

“You killed my fucking homie and now you’re acting like you don’t know me, bitch!” Jamal growled. He aimed the gun at Khalil’s face. Khalil looked at Jamal wide eyed, finally recognizing him. Before getting the chance to plead his case, Jamal silenced him forever with four shots to his face and neck. He looked at his dismembered victim and then up at the sky, silently telling Raheem that he could rest now.

Samir and company sped up to Jamal. “Jamal, come on nigga. Come the fuck on! Get in the fucking car nigga, let’s go!!” His cousin yelled at him.

Jamal jumped inside of the car and they sped off into the darkness. He had his revenge and now it was over, or so he thought. Little did Jamal know, this was just the beginning and would be

A THUG'S REDEMPTION PREVIEW

one mistake that would come back to bite him in his ass, costing him more than he was willing to spend.