

Brought To You By The Color Drab



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All of the characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

A note from the author:

I love to hear from my readers. You may contact me here:

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Dedication

To Jeremy Donovan, the only one I know personally who could relate to Race's life. Like Race, Jeremy found the freedom he so desperately sought. Victory by God's grace.

Jeremiah was a bullfrog. He was a good friend of mine...

[Today, Jeremy Donovan is a committed, dedicated youth pastor, husband to beautiful Annie, and dad to three incredible children.]

Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude to the Carmichael family, James (Jamie), and Kathy, and their two daughters, Christy Acheampong, and Melissa, who so graciously took me under their wing for my Cincinnati visit all those years ago. Who knew it would take so long for this novel to finally be completed and published?

It was totally a *God-incident* that in 2004, I called Cincinnati Christian College (now University), to find a student to escort me around the inner city for my research. What I got instead was an entire family (because it was Christy— then Carmichael—who answered the phone that day). Plus, I learned from Christy that I could procure lodging at the campus rather than go to a hotel. Only God can pull off a miracle like that. And these are only the surface details.

Thank you, James Carmichael family, for your warm hospitality, dinner at your table, rich conversation, and many drives around the city. What a blessing!

Cincinnati, OH in 2001

If you think that riots in the streets in this country are a recent phenomenon, you would be sadly mistaken. In my *Tulsa Series* novels, the setting is 1921, the year of the infamous Tulsa Race Riots. (Titles listed below.)

A quick Google search shows that riots have plagued our nation for decades.

In *Brought To You By The Color Drab*, set in 2001, a riot takes place in Cincinnati, and I use that incident as a part of the story. I've taken license to rearrange so that details fit with the plot. If you were there, and you remember it differently, I apologize in advance.

This 4-title series is available in the Kindle Store:

Tulsa Tempest

Tulsa Turning

Tulsa Trespass

Return to Tulsa

Chapter 1

The moment Race heard the gunshots explode, he knew it was Vince. Somehow he just knew.

Throwing the remote across the room, he leaped over the back of the ratty couch and flew down the dimly lit stairs out into the hot August night.

He screamed his brother's name as he ran through the trash-littered streets toward the playground. For three blocks his feet barely touched the ground.

Then he saw it. Beneath the streetlight, Vince's six-foot frame sprawled face-forward across the broken sidewalk, lying ghostly still, the blood pooling in bizarre patterns, trickling worm-like toward the curb. His basketball had rolled into the weeds along the chain link fence.

"Filthy scum! You filthy dirty scum!" Race screamed. The screams were drowned out by the wail of approaching sirens.

As Race lunged toward his brother's body, strong black arms from behind grasped him in a vice grip that knocked his wind out.

Race writhed and jerked to free himself. "No! No! Let me go! Oh God, please no! Answer me, Vince. Vince!"

"Hold it, Race. Just hold it."

Through the pounding in his head, Race heard Wynn's voice like a distant whisper. Race twisted violently, but the rock-hard arms held him fast. "Gotta touch him, Wynn," he pleaded.

"Please. I gotta touch him. Just one time. Please."

“Can’t touch him, bro. You can’t. The police...” Wynn’s voice cracked in a deep sob.

Suddenly Race’s knees buckled and he started to fall. Wynn spun Race around and they clung to each other sobbing until the police cars splashed eerie red light into the deserted street.

No crowd gathered. No witnesses would come forward. Killings in Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine district were too common. Police officers, with barely concealed boredom, asked a few questions and ordered Race and Wynn to report to the station. Race watched as they loaded Vince’s lifeless body into an ambulance. It was over.

Race’s brother and Wynn’s tightest bud—the glue that had held them together—was gone.

That night was the last time Race cried.

Chapter 2

The warm, clammy air of the September night hung on Race like wet laundry. He and his four buddies walked along Cincinnati's Liberty Street as though they had purpose and a mission, but of course they had neither. Chains looped on their baggy pants jangled as they walked.

Wynn strode on one side of Race. Toon was on the other, jiving as he walked, his black dreadlocks bouncing. Toon always had a rap running through his head. His long, loose, skinny frame seemed to be in perpetual motion. If Vince had been there, Toon would have had to walk behind them with the younger punks, Pinky and Hawk.

"So where we headed?" Wynn threw out the question.

"How about finding a set of wheels in Clifton Heights?" Toon offered.

"Clifton," Wynn echoed Toon's idea. "Sound good to you, Race?" Wynn Jamison moved like a sleek panther—no wasted motion. Total opposite of Toon. Muscles bulged under his black t-shirt. People on the streets of Over-the-Rhine both feared and respected Wynn's power and his presence.

Race didn't answer right away. He hated Clifton Heights with its fancy houses and clean streets. Even though Clifton was a straight shot up Vine Street from Over-the-Rhine, the exclusive neighborhood was like another planet compared to their home turf. So when the suggestion came up to steal cars in Clifton, Race just shrugged his shoulders and kept his eyes ahead. "Whatever."

Race was sure Wynn expected a better answer. Like all of a sudden Race was supposed to be calling the shots now that Vince was gone. He swallowed hard around the word *gone* and kept walking.

Over his shoulder, Wynn motioned to Pinky and Hawk. “Hey punks, you be keeping up or you outta this action.”

It wasn't as though Wynn's two younger cousins were falling behind. They clung to Wynn like double shadows. But at his command, Race heard them double step to close the gap.

“We gonna walk up to Clifton?” Toon wanted to know.

“Nah,” Race smarted back. “Taking the ferry.”

Toon laughed. He laughed at most everything. Race had never heard a hyena's laugh, but it was a cinch it was real close to Toon's.

Toon's full name was Alan Toomey but his street name was Looney Toon because he enjoyed frying his brains now and then sniffing glue, and had since grade school. There was nothing about Toon that Race liked. Why Vince and Wynn ever let him start running with their pack was a mystery.

Vince and Wynn had always agreed on most everything and that included Toon's entrance into their group. Toon just seemed to materialize out of a dark Cincinnati night. He had moved into a small rented room down the street from Vince and Race's building. His long skinny frame was perched on the stoop every time they passed by and he took to saying, “Yo bro,” to them real friendly-like. And he wore no gang colors. The next thing Race knew, Toon was tagging them on one of their shoplifting sprees. That was last spring and he'd stuck like a leech ever since.

When Race had asked Vince about Toon's hanging with them, his brother was cool. "Notice we haven't had to fake IDs to get the beer since Toon came on board," he said, flashing his famous grin that the girls went ape for. Race wanted to say that he'd never remembered them having a shortage of beer—ever.

Vince, as though reading his thoughts, waved his hand to silence any protest. "He's got connections, Race. He knows choice buyers. He's been in juvie and knows tricks we never heard of."

The *tricks* Vince referred to meant getting stolen cars to the chop shops where they were quickly stripped and the ones who did the stealing got a cut of the take. Any guy who came back from juvenile detention usually knew more and better ways to beat the system.

"And," Vince had added, his dark eyes growing serious like they did when he thought hard on something, "we don't gotta hook up with no set gangs, like the Deuce Dragons, to do it."

Sets were a big deal with Vince and Wynn. Sets were all these little gang wannabes coming around, putting pressure on them to take their colors. Neither Vince nor Wynn wanted anything to do with them. Their own little pack hung tight, but they had nothing in common with gang bangers.

"Don't need you," Wynn'd tell the Dragon leaders when they came around to get them to join.

"Got our own," Vince would add.

"We watch each other's backs." That was Race's little piece to put in.

The Deuce Dragons weren't the Crips. Not the Nations. Not the Folks. They appeared to have no connection whatever to any *real* gang anywhere. They were snot-nosed little wannabes trying to act cool. While street people called them *sets*, Vince had other choice names for them.

They'd rumbled the Dragons a couple times. And messed them over real good, too. But they never seemed to get the message. The three of them—Vince, Wynn and Race—were tough when it came to fighting. They'd learned young. Toon was okay, but Race could tell right away he was too loopy to hold his own.

They turned off Liberty to head up Race Street toward Clifton. As they passed by a darkened alley, Race glanced that direction and shivered. He'd had his first real fight in that alley when he was in fourth grade. The other kid was bigger. A loudmouth bully was all he was. Race remembered the stench from the overflowing garbage bins, smelling like every other alley in Over-the-Rhine. He remembered the gritty pavement scraping against his face and tearing at his bare arms as he was knocked down again and again. He remembered hard, solid punches pummeling pain into his small body, jarring his head and making his teeth slam together. But Vince was there yelling, "Punch him out, bro. You can do it. Punch him out."

Vince's voice in Race's head pumped the adrenaline that forced him to get back up again and again till he finally pinned the bully, yelling, "Don't never call me Cracker ever again. Cause if you do, I'm gonna smash your ugly face in."

Graham Kyle—what a stupid name his mother had saddled him with. It caused him no end of grief in his early grade school days when kids called him first *Graham Cracker*, then simply *Cracker*. Even his mother had dropped the Graham, preferring to call him Kyle. He'd probably been named for one of her here-today-gone-tomorrow boyfriends. There'd been dozens of them. But no one ever called him Graham Cracker after that. His rep stood solid at age ten.

After that victory, Vince started calling him Race. Perfect name. "You creamed him on Race Street," Vince crowed as he helped Race home, then nursed the scrapes, cuts, and bruises in

their small kitchen. “Way to go bro. Don’t ever forget,” Vince said in all his fifth-grade wisdom, “you and me, we don’t take nothin’ off nobody. Ever!”

Race never forgot. He didn’t take nothin’ off nobody. Ever.

Race Street, like many in OTR, had its fair share of vacant buildings where the winos, bums, and crack addicts could get in out of the weather. Broken glass crunched under their feet as they passed where someone had smashed out a few windows. One brick wall sported fresh graffiti, obviously a work of the Deuce Dragons. The dual meaning of deuce—*devil* and *two*—was clearly portrayed by a dragon carrying a numeral two in one hand and a pitchfork in the other. Race glanced over at Wynn to see if he’d seen it as well. He had. Evidence of the Dragons’ tagging activities kept popping up in the streets and alleys around Over-the-Rhine.

As he walked, Race felt the bounce of his knife in his pocket against his leg. He liked the feel of it there. He’d sunk it into a few dimwitted characters who should have known better than to tangle with him. “Just show ‘em a little of their own red blood,” Vince used to tell him. “That’ll strengthen your rep and scare ‘em off.” It usually did. Race was good with a knife and he knew it. Vince and Wynn had taught him well.

Toon was probably toting a piece. But Wynn, Vince and Race had always shied away from packing guns. First of all, guns cost plenty, and the three of them were always short on cash. And like Vince always said, “It’s easier to trace a gun than a knife. I’m not looking to get sent away.”

Now how crazy is that? Vince never being too cool about packing and he’s the one who gets shot. Made no sense at all. Race thought about those bullets that slammed into Vince’s back and wondered if his brother had felt them. A new wave of bile-tasting anger bubbled up in his

throat. He shivered in the heat and forced his head to shut up. *Don't think about nothing. Don't think; don't feel.*

The trek to Clifton was uphill all the way. By the time they reached Ludlow Street, they were all sweat-soaked and doing some heavy huffing and puffing. How could September be so blasted hot?

"I don't sweat this much for PE class," Pinky's voice sounded from behind. "This hill goes straight up."

"Quit bellyaching," Hawk answered him.

"See if you're big enough to make me," Pinky popped back, followed by sounds of the cousins scuffling behind them.

The cousins had been the same size for years until the past few months when Hawk had shot up a couple of inches. Now he enjoyed throwing around his new-found power.

"You whining about sweating," Wynn said over his shoulder, "we'll pick you some wheels with AC that sings, and cool, soft upholstery."

"Mmm mmm. Now you talking my language," Pinky said. Then, "Now Hawk cut it out 'fore I make pudding outta you."

"You and who else, twerp?" came Hawk's retort.

More scuffling sounds came from behind as the larger tormented the smaller. Race glanced around to see Hawk with his cousin's head in a hammerlock and Pinky's fists flailing the air whamming Hawk's back. Just like he and Vince used to do. *Used to do?* Barely three weeks ago. Before...

"Hey, Punks! Cut it out!" Wynn said. "You gonna get us in trouble before we ever get what we going after."

The rebuke stopped the scuffling for the time being. The tight little group walked on a block or two with no one talking.

Sometimes they cased a busy parking lot for a set of wheels to jack. Sometimes a quiet neighborhood. Mostly the latter. Vince, their undisputed leader, had always determined which one at which time. Some dummy might leave the keys in. Sweet times those were. They scoped those out first. If they found no keys, Vince was cool about knowing the slickest ones to open. Vince knew everything. Except how to cover his own back.

“What’ll it be?” Wynn threw out, his dark face glistening with sweat beads. His ball cap was twisted slightly so the bill set cock-eyed. He always wore it that way. Sort of like his trademark.

Race quickly said, “Hoods.” At the same instant Toon said, “Parking lots.”

Wynn slowed his pace. Pinky and Hawk nearly slammed into him.

“Hoods are quieter. Fewer eyes,” Race retorted, miffed that Toon would even dream that he had any say in the matter.

“Parking lots give better cover,” Toon said. “If an alarm screams, people got no idea where it’s coming from.”

Race glanced over at Wynn and in a split second saw the twitch in his jaw. “Toon’s got it, Race. Remember the alarm there in Fairview last month? That was a close one. Close as I wanna get.”

Race bit his lip. Actually, stealing cars wasn’t their big thing anyway. Shoplifting was. The three of them got darn slick at it. Oh sure, they’d grabbed a car once in a while when they wanted a thrill. But then they ditched it. Usually with only a few new scratches on it. That was

before Toon. It was all because of Toon they were doing all this stuff. Did that mean Toon had become their shot-caller? It looked that way.

Race shrugged and started walking again. “Whatever.” What did he care anyway?

Toon seemed to take on a new air. “Now then,” he said with a twinge of authority in his voice, “they’s a ritzy club a few blocks up ahead. Lotsa nifty wheels in that lot. Especially on a Friday night.”

“That cool with you, Race?” Wynn asked catching up with him.

“Whatever,” Race said again. “How do we split? Who goes with who?”

Before this—when Vince was still with them—Race and Vince always took Hawk, and Wynn and Toon took Pinky. Pinky was a little more jumpy and edgy than Hawk, so Wynn thought the kid needed close watching. Since the shooting, Wynn hovered over both his cousins like an old hen. So Race wasn’t surprised when he said he’d take both Pinky and Hawk. That left Racel with Looney Toon. His gut tightened at the thought.

Clifton Heights seemed to beam with pride, showing off all its shiny cars and stately, castle-like houses. No slummy bars or panhandlers on these clean street corners. The pack hung to the dark back streets. Wynn wasn’t saying much. Race kept waiting for Wynn to give the plan, but nothing came forth. Ever since Vince got shot, Wynn acted like he expected Race to Vince-think and Vince-act. What a crock that was. Race pressed his lips together tight and kept walking, wondering how close they’d get before Wynn said anything. But it was Toon who finally said, “Race and me’ll come in from this side.” He pointed to the west side of the filled parking lot.

The place was lit up brighter than day. Race looked at it and shook his head. So dumb.

“Wynn, you and your punks come in from the other side. First one to find keys give the whistle and we’ll all come running.”

“And if no keys?” It was Hawk, his voice all quivery with fear and excitement.

At thirteen, he was four years Race’s junior. Only four years, and he seemed like such a baby. Pinky was twelve. Is that what he and Vince were like at that age? *At that age. Vince and me led the pack. We never followed. I never remember us ever following nobody. Not ever.*

“Only five full minutes of looking,” Toon answered Hawk’s question. “Then Wynn jacks one. We all jump in and ride.”

“Any trouble,” Wynn added, “you knows how to split, where to go and where to meet.”

At that, Wynn and his boys headed toward the far end of the parking lot, Race and Toon entered the other end. Race squinted against the dazzling brightness. *Give me a dark neighborhood street any day.* Sweat trickled down his ribs under his thin t-shirt.

They scrunched down low, tripping car to car. They knew how to look quick and move quick. After only a few minutes, Race heard the whistle. Hawk had found the winner. Toon motioned that direction — as if Race didn’t have sense enough to follow the sound of a whistle.

When they got there, Wynn had already slipped behind the wheel of a gun-metal blue Acura. Sweet. Toon took the shotgun seat and Race slid in back with Hawk who was beaming. His find — he had a right.

“Check it out, man,” Hawk said to Race. “Cool, huh?”

“Cool,” Race agreed. He looked out the back window and saw Pinky scurrying.

“Hurry up, kid,” Toon said cursing under his breath. In his panic, Pinky slipped against another car and set off an alarm. Someone across the parking lot yelled something they couldn’t understand.

Wynn revved up the car, and as Pinky dove in beside Hawk, slamming the door, they laid down a layer of rubber out of the lot.

“Better do some fancy driving, man,” Toon said. Then over his shoulder, he said to Pinky, “Clumsy punk.”

“Hey, I slipped. Coulda happened to anybody.”

“Forget it,” Wynn said, keeping his eyes on the road. Deftly, he started going down back streets with the headlights out till they could get out of the Clifton neighborhood. But they hadn’t gone half a dozen blocks when sirens screamed behind them.

“Man,” Wynn said, “them cops musta been having coffee right across the street or something.”

“Just a siren,” Hawk stated, his voice still trembly, “don’t mean they’s after us. Lotsa sirens late at night.”

Toon laughed at the remark. “Stupid kid. Course it’s us.”

“Ditch?” Wynn threw the question back at Race.

“Ditch, jump, and split,” Toon said. “Too hot to maintain.”

Once again, Toon calling the shots. Race didn’t like it.

Wynn swung into a dark alley, barely missing a tall wooden privacy fence. All four doors opened and they piled out. Toon was laughing his hyena laugh as he sped off through a nearby back yard.

Race could almost smell the fear coming off Pinky and Hawk. “Follow the plan,” Wynn told them, giving the nearest one a shove as he said it.

Race was already sprinting down the alley. “See you back at OTR,” he called back softly to Wynn.

“OTR,” Wynn echoed.

It had become their code, long ago. When it was just the three of them — Wynn, Vince and Race. Before splitting, it was always, “Over-the-Rhine.” Only now it wrenched Race’s guts to say it.

**FOR THE REST OF
RACE’S STORY
[CLICK HERE](#)**