

FROM “NIGHT AS WE KNOW IT”

WHILE NICK HADN'T SPOKEN with Johns Mayweather in many years, there was someone from their school that he had kept in contact with, who had also stayed in Philadelphia.

“Rod, it’s me Nick Fullwood.”

There was a beat before Rod Tomes spoke. “What’s up?”

“You got my text message last night that I’m in L.A.?”

“Yeah,” Rod answered quickly, but then he was quiet again.

“You got somebody around and can’t talk,” Nick asked as he was walking around Johns’s living room, full of morning sun glared by Los Angeles fog. His voice was low, despite the fact that he could hear Johns in the bathroom showering.

Nick was already dressed and sipping coffee. During the night, while Johns was snoring off a deep sleep fueled by too much alcohol, Nick had been up and snooping around the apartment. He had found nothing of note.

“Yeah, just getting my kids ready for soccer,” Rod said loudly into the phone. Then he said more softly, his voice in the distance. “Baby...can you put Shemar and Tori in the car? I’ll meet you outside in a sec. Thanks.”

“Look, I’m sorry to bother you so early in the morning, but I don’t know when I’m going to get a chance to talk to you again,” Nick eyed the bathroom door. “Did you find what I needed?”

Rod sighed heavily. “Yeah, I found it. I’ll send it to your email address. But let me tell you...this needs to stop right now.”

Nick frowned. “What are you talking about? We’re close.”

“*You’re* close,” Rod said, his voice lowered. “*I* am out.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Nick said. “You can’t back out on me now. I need you. You’re hooked up. You do security. You have access to police records, databases—”

“I also have a family now.”

“So...”

“*So?* What do you mean, *So?* I can’t get them involved in this shit.”

“You already did when you agreed to help me.”

“I did not agree to help you. I was *forced* to help you.”

“I didn’t force you to do anything. This was all your idea.”

“Nick,” Rod said. “You and I have very different recollections of our conversations together.”

“Let me tell you what I remember,” Nick hissed into the phone. “I came to you seeking an interview for my newspaper, because I found out the *friend* I went to high school with now owns a firm that provides security for the African-American family whose unarmed teenaged son was recently killed by police. He’s providing security for this family because they’re secretly afraid that the officer who shot their son is somehow linked to a White nationalist group, and if they testify at this officer’s trial they’ll wind up with a bullet in the back of their skulls. Am I stuttering?”

Rod was silent.

“It was you who asked me to find out if it was true. And guess what? I did.”

“And you should’ve stopped there!” Rod yelled.

“But the trail led to something bigger. Not just in the suburbs of Philadelphia, but all across America. It led to cops linked to White nationalist organizations. Possibly hooked up with politicians connected to White nationalist organizations. This doesn’t affect just Blacks. This could affect Jews. Gays. Muslims. Everybody! And God knows how high it goes. Local politics? Congress? The White House? Can you imagine what’s

under all these rocks that I could turn over? Redistricting scandals. Politicians on their payroll. Rigged courts. Crooked legislation.”

“I don’t want any part of this anymore. What part of what I’m saying don’t you understand?”

“You want to kick me to the curb after I helped you.”

“I asked you to look into something, and you did and that was that.”

“I’m not talking about that, Rod. I’m talking about high school.”

“*High school?*” Nick could almost see Rod frowning.

“You wouldn’t have what you have now without me!”

“Bullshit! Go sell that shit somewhere else!”

“You’d never have gotten into college without me, Rod. You wouldn’t have this cushy security business you have now, the big house, the expensive cars, the beautiful family, the money, any of it!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Who got you into college, Rod?” Nick growled. And when Rod didn’t answer, Nick continued. “Who wrote all those papers you turned in for scholarship money? Who wrote your college application essays? Who did everything but piss in a cup for you to get your athletic scholarship? I still remember the tears in your mother’s eyes at graduation, she was *so* happy!”

“I’m hanging up!”

“Don’t even think about it!” Nick spat. There was quiet a moment, and Nick could hear in the background a car horn honking. “I don’t mean to be like this, Rod. I really, really don’t. I like you.”

“You don’t have a family!” Rod yelled, his voice shaky. He sounded near tears. “You don’t have anything. You don’t have a girlfriend, wife, kids, nothing. You have *nothing*! And you want me to put everything I have on the line? For what? For *you*? Because you did me a few favors years ago when we were kids?”

There was silence, and Nick noticed suddenly that the shower was off. He moved further into the living room, away from the bathroom.

Nick whispered. “I’m not asking for much. Not nearly what you asked of me. Just some info when I need it. And this should be over by the end of this week anyway. Your name doesn’t get mentioned. Everybody gets what they want. Everybody walks away clean.”

Rod swallowed, breathed shallowly.

“I’m going to email what you asked for. Don’t call me again, hear? Don’t email me. And keep my name outta your mouth. I’m hanging up.”

“Are you really that scared?” Nick asked before Tomes could disconnect.

“Yeah,” he answered. “And you should be, too.”