

Excerpt 6 of 6 – “Blackened by Fire” II

The small man with locked hair, who had carried the stumbling stripper off stage, now led Rick, Peter and Paul down a long, dim stairway. Perfume and the humidity of the women’s showers filled the air and seemed to narrow the passage of sweating brick. Paul lit a joint and passed it up front. After hitting it once, Rick tried to pass it to Reagan who refused it, narrowed his eyes contemptuously and said “Every dread not a Rasta.”

The man opened a door to a brightly lit room full of over plush furniture that looked about twenty years old. Rick sat down right away to appear at ease. The couch sank so low, he found himself looking at the underside of one of the end tables in the room. Something metallic there caught his eye, but he looked away.

Paul’s initial contact on the deal sat in a tight white dress that managed to appear both gaudy and expensive against the wine red couch. One wall was mirrored and another hung with oil on velvet paintings of nude women.

“Where’s Elvis?” Peter asked looking around.

The woman on the couch gave a hoarse laugh and moved her eyelids as slowly as any human could.

“He’s dead honey,” she almost slurred. “And, yes, I know, I’m not looking too good either. I’ll save you the trouble and be my own straight-man. I’m good at that, ain’t I pookey?” she said to the man with locks.

“Shut the fuck up,” Reagan spat at her without looking and sat down in an oval shaped swivel chair. “I got something worth five K. You can move it tonight or somebody else will.”

“My man,” Rick spoke up, nervous to even be in the presence of so much cocaine, “this was just supposed to be a bit of after-the-game recreation. We weren’t looking to buy in on the Medallin Cartel.”

“You work for NBC, right? That’s the national network out of New York, if I’m not mis--”

“Sometimes,” Peter interrupted, “we get rented out to NBC to shoot a game and sometimes we shoot minor league hockey in fucking Toledo.”

“Be calmer,” Paul admonished through tight lips.

“We get rented out,” Peter continued, “to whoever meets the price, an arrangement I am sure you’re familiar with from another angle.”

“Jesus,” Paul lamented and hung his head.

"Listen to this stupid, stupid white boy come to insult me with no idea of the weapons at my disposal," Reagan sat back and smiled but showed no teeth.

"Yes," he said reaching into a drawer, "I sell what you and your daddy howl at the moon for."

Reagan pulled out a Polaroid photo. It was the guard from the ballpark Rick had dropped off in Windsor weeks ago. She had on too much make-up, but nothing else.

"Lost track of her for a while. She just was about to start turning tricks for rocks when I found her, shaking like a leaf. She eats a meal a day now whether she wants to or not."

Paul thought surely this would be the end of the deal, that Rick would back off and leave him and Peter without enough money to do anything significant, something to get them through a few games. Peter also looked to Rick, hoping he'd be ready to leave.

Rick couldn't take his eyes from the photo or think of anything but the woman in it and the view of Detroit across the river. If this were all taking place a few weeks earlier or if he'd been assigned to a different camera, he and the woman in the photo would have never shared a room. He would not have known her voice, the voice now in his head talking about her minimum wage job and all that she had witnessed and crammed into the reams notebooks she'd asked him to read. Weeks earlier, the photo would have elicited only a brief shudder of pity and that twinge of emotion would have done no more for the woman in the photo than what he was feeling now.

"She's light to the black men and exotic to the whites. Big money. I cut a deal with the owner. He didn't think she would get back up to weight. So we're going to split her dancing tips and she'll still have time for private action in the evenings."

"How long will she be able to hold that schedule?" Rick asked looking up briefly.

"She's a first degree fiend," Reagan assured him. "Sleep is just a word for her."

"Can I see her?" Rick asked. Paul put his head in his hands.

The small man smiled again and extended his hand palm up.

"I just want to talk her, that's all, just talk."

"Pay me or talk to yourself and pretend it's her. Your lips just about the same size."

The woman on the couch snickered. Rick produced \$50 from his wallet.

“You get fifteen minutes, one second more and I’ll tell her to bite it off.”

She was only slightly heavier than in the photo. She had on what struck Rick as a child’s version of the white dress the woman on the couch wore. Though it had been some time since she’d seen him, she, of course, recognized him instantly especially since he had the same puzzled, pitying look on his face he’d had when she’d invited him up to the motel room, the look that said he was above what is most real in most people, something no one had any business denying. It was so clear to her now or maybe it was the drugs.

She tried to tilt her head and role her eyes as she had done when she had her hand on his knee in the car. But her eyes were dim and one of her teeth was missing.

“So all that college shit and all that stuff about the notebooks comes down to this, huh?”

“I just came to talk.”

“They all want to talk. The owner, Mr. Milhous, he can only get off over the phone.”

“Why don’t you come with---”

She put a finger to his lips to silence him, leaned over the table next to the bed and began writing a note. It was almost illegible. He could make out the words “stupid” and “rescue.” She tried to write slower. She turned to look at him and realized she was of two minds.

One the one hand, he was the first man to actually read her notebooks and he reminded her of everything she’d written. His love making had been good and slow. But then, she remembered how his hands shook at the border, his anger even though they had gotten through customs without being stopped, how he had avoided details of why she felt the need to cross over from Detroit to Windsor. When she thought of the notebooks again, she remembered his failure to follow up. She decided not try to explain anything else to him. Addled as she was, when the door opened again she would lunge for the gun she knew to be taped to the underside of one of the tables. She stopped writing.