

# ByAll

*Written by Ori A*

Nick pulls out an old Glock and gives it the once-over. Ejecting the magazine, then quick-loading it back into the well and chambering a round with a gaudy flourish. I roll my eyes. He's trying to be cool but I know he learned that from YouTube. Next he double-checks that the car charger is still juicing up his iPhone and that the reception is still good.

"Maybe we should head over to K-town. I don't think shit goes down here on the weekdays," he says as he refreshes the app for the hundredth time.

I look up from my comp-sci book and check the dashboard clock: 1:06 a.m. "They won't pay for K-town. Let's go to the Hills."

He frowns; "Nothing ever goes down in those rich places. People still got that mentality. It doesn't make sense now but people still think that. Somethin' will be going down in K-town."

Tossing the greasy Jack N' The Box bag that had been sitting on his lap in the back seat, he cranks up the engine. Reversing his shitty Camry and pulling out onto Sunset.

"C'mon, I got a test tomorrow morning. I need at least a couple hours of sleep. Let's just hope we bag a good one in Beverly Hills and go home," I complain.

"And if we don't? You're the one always whining about the five-hundred-dollar text books and shit."

"I also need to pass these classes otherwise all the money is just a fuckin' waste."

He frowns deeper. Annoyed. See, unlike me, Nick isn't here for the money. It's not that he doesn't need it. Everyone in this city needs money. Hell, even the city's broke. That was one of the reasons it agreed to beta test the system two years ago. But if the ByAll app didn't pay out, I wouldn't be here. Nick would. Simple as that. I like to think it was just because he had nothing else going on but I also know that's not the whole truth. That thought scares me a bit so I decide to compromise.

"Look, how about we go *through* K-town. We can hop on the 10 and then take that over to the Hills. If we get a hit in K-town we'll stop."

"Fine." He yanks the wheel to the left, cutting in front of a van to turn down Western, drowning out the angry honks by turning up the music.

I try to go back to studying but I can feel him getting pissed. He hates talking about school. Or, more specifically, being reminded that I'm in college and he isn't. If brains were the only thing that were required to go to college, he could have gone. But he has two little sisters to feed and a mom that smells like piss and vodka all the time. I don't.

I shove the textbook in my book bag and pull my hoodie up. It's fifty degrees tonight. SoCal winter. But when you're born and raised in Inglewood that's cold and Nick's heater didn't work. Outside, the city streams by in a sodium vapor blur punctuated every now and then by large, sun-bleached ByAll billboards. Each one depicts some version of a smiling cop handing over his badge to a racially ambiguous citizen above one or two lines of that inane catchphrase of theirs. I look back at the Glock that Nick's stashed in the cup-holder.

"Where'd you get that anyway?" I ask.

Without taking his eyes off the road; "One of the old stations. They've still got stockpiles from before."

"They just give you one?"

He shrugs, "If you got the app. You just show 'em and they sign one over. They even take you through a little seminar thing to show you how to use it but I didn't stick around for that."

"All those years of *Call of Duty* in my basement finally paying off, huh?"

That gets a smirk out of him; "You don't get a 2.5 KDR without knowing your shit... Those were fun nights."

"Yeah. We should do that again. Just chill and play video games till the morning."

"Well you know where I'm at," he replies dryly, causing me to wince at the implied rest of that sentence: *same place you left me*.

I didn't, of course. Leave him, I mean. We still see each other all the time. But it isn't really the same as when we were kids. And I know when I graduate in a year it'll be worse. I'll have a real job, maybe even move to a new city, but Nick will just be here. Working temps. Trying to keep his mom's hands off his two little sisters. Cruising around at night refreshing the ByAll app over and over and over again to scratch an itch that never used to be there when we were joking around in my basement.

I look for sanctuary out the window again. We're passing the car park near the 101 where they've stashed all the old black-and-whites. Several football fields worth of retired LAPD patrol cars, just gathering rust out there by the freeway. A lot with hubcaps missing or smashed windshields or 'ByAll' graffiti tagged across their hoods.

It's always weird seeing them. Growing up they were everywhere in my part of town. Something that would make you tense up when they rolled through. Hike up your pants and play it cool even if you weren't doing anything bad. And now they were just... here. Out to pasture.

That's what you get I guess. There's only so many unarmed kids you can shoot before even the white folks start chiming in. Start demanding a better system. You can try to beef up what

you've got. Body cams and oversight committees and pump-action shotguns. But eventually the costs get too high. People get even angrier when more of the little money they earn has to go to an organization they despise. Soon enough the whole thing breaks down. People become willing to try something new. And that's how you end up with a carpark full of dusty police cars by the side of the freeway.

I watch them blur by. It's oddly mesmerizing. There's something different about them tonight. Something I'd never really seen but I think I'd always felt. Arrogance. A challenge. Like they're saying, "all right you fuckers, you think you can do it better? Go ahead." I don't like that. But I can't look away. Tonight, it seems like that carpark is as big as the city. And every single one of those black-and-whites is staring at me.

*DA-DOOP!*

Nick nearly crashes the car checking the app. An alert. I look out the window again but the carpark is already in the rear-view.

"Fuck," Nick says, taking his eyes off the app and back to the road. "It's just an observe and report."

"Well how much?"

"Forget it. We're not going to an observe and report. We can't even do anything."

I grab the phone off its holder and cycle to the most recent alert:

Alert: #3492OR

Type: domestic violence dispute

Action Requested: observe and report for future legal action

Location: 611 S. Hobart St. Apt #302, Los Angeles, CA 90010.

Location Addendum: building door-code: 4112

Reward: \$25

Local Responders: 3

"It's twenty-five bucks," I say. "C'mon, it's easy."

"It's boring. We'll keep going. There's always something going down in K-Town."

"It's right here. Easy money," I argue again.

"There's probably a dozen people on it by now. The money'll be shit," he fires back.

He's right. I look at the app again. The number next to the 'Local Responders' tab has jumped from three to sixteen and the reward has inversely plummeted to four-dollars and sixty-eight

cents. I sigh and put the phone back, my hand brushing the Glock as I do so. I stare at the gun. Nick saying, “*it’s boring,*” ringing over and over in my head.

We’d been out a couple times together but he’d never brought a gun. I had an old bat in the back seat and Nick usually brought a tire-iron but we’d never really had to use them. Usually enough people showed up that the perps either dropped whatever shit they were doing and ran or the whole thing devolved into a weird tackle game. You’d pile onto some dude that had had too much to drink or was trying to boost a car. Get in a few kicks to prove you did something. And once all the surveillance was cross-checked and your level of involvement confirmed, your phone would ding and your bank account would grow by a couple dollars. Easy.

There were more violent altercations, of course. Overall the level of crime had decreased – something the ByAll contractors never failed to mention in their advertisements – but there was still crime. And some of it still ended badly. A lot of it did. People beat to a pulp or filled with hollow-points. We’d just never been a part of it. I didn’t want to be a part of it.

Nick did though. I could tell. I knew he went out without me. In fact, I knew he went out most nights. As soon as he made sure Maya and Ariceli were in bed and his mom was blacked-out on the Lay-Z-Boy. As the months wore on I noticed that the bruises on his knuckles stopped fading away. Even now I could see the cuts and scrapes on his fists as he clenched the steering wheel.

But he’d never brought a gun.

I want to ask him why tonight but I’m afraid of the answer. So instead, I toss him a softball.

“Have you fired it yet?” He looks at me and I nod to the cup-holder. er

“Yeah. Down in the LA river. Just pop shots to get used to it. Fuck, they’re a lot louder than in the movies. I tagged a cat that was like fifty feet away, though.”

“Jesus, you shot a cat?!” I say, incredulous.

“It was a stray, calm down. It didn’t belong to nobody. Probably had rabies.” It probably did, I tell myself. “We can get you one next time,” he continues. “Better to be safe.”

“Yeah...” I say still thinking about the cat.

He refreshes the app again. We’re deep in K-town now but it must be a quiet night for which I was secretly thankful. To my right, an old suburban pulls up to the same stoplight we’re idling at. I look over and notice a small face staring at me. It’s a little girl. Three, maybe four. All bundled up. Cute kid. I grin back at her and make a funny face. The rest of her family is in the car. Mom and dad in the front seat, two teenage boys in the back. My smile fades when I notice the chain across one of the teenager’s laps. The brass knuckles reflecting the street light on the hand of the other. Up in the driver’s seat, the mom checks her phone, refreshing the familiar ByAll interface.

“Crazy to think that girl won’t even know what cops are.” I look back and notice Nick staring at the family, his eyes momentarily losing their normal anger, becoming thoughtful. “Probably doesn’t even know what a siren sounds like. Or ghetto birds. She won’t have to grow up being scared of that shit.”

I turn back to the girl who was now busying herself drawing smiley-faces on the window in the fog. Nick’s right. ByAll had done that. Had given this girl a future that wouldn’t be peppered with ‘police shooting’ lower-thirds. It was worth it for that, I think.

“You saw the latest update?”

“Nah,” I respond, not really wanting to know.

“They added a judiciary component to it.”

“What?”

“Like if enough people respond to an event, enough for a ‘quorum’ or whatever, they can act as jurors right there. The app sets it up. First no cops, pretty soon no lawyers. One-stop shop.”

Something about that bothers me. I’m trying to process it when the light turns green. I look back at the suburban just in time to catch it before it speeds off. For a fraction of a moment, the family inside is distorted by the green light pouring through the windshield. Twisting and sharpening the shadows around them, turning them into something monstrous. Turning that little girl into something monstrous. The whole car morphed into a grotesque cabal of night crawlers.

And then they’re gone.

Nick refreshes the app. I try to shake that horrific afterimage from my brain. I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to be in my tiny dorm. I want to be studying. I don’t want to keep being reminded of the Glock every time we hit a bump and it rattles in the cup holder. I don’t want to keep looking at the scabs on Nick’s knuckles. I don’t want to keep holding my breath every time he refreshes that damn app. I decide to say something, make up some excuse to pack it in.

“Yo, Nick I gotta--”

*DA-DOOP!*

An alert. Nick’s eyes fly to the phone as he reads the message.

“Good enough.” He hits the ‘ACCEPT’ option and twists the wheel violently, sending the little Camry screeching over the lane’s double yellow lines. I bang against the window and swear.

“What is it?!”

“Robbery at a Seven-Eleven. Only non-lethal force, but still.” He punches the gas pedal.

I grab for the phone to try to read it myself, Nick's words '*Only* non-lethal force' echoing through my head. The 'TEMPORARY DEPUTATION' page is pulled up and I desperately try to scroll through the legalese to find the details of the alert but we hit a bump and the phone flies under the seat. "Fuck!"

"It's fine I know where it is," he says, making another hairpin turn. The alerts usually only have a one-mile radius so I know I've only got a minute or two before we're there. I make up my mind.

"Nick, I'm not feeling this."

"What?"

"I'm not feeling this tonight. Let's leave it."

"Fuck no! It's eighty bucks! And someone's getting robbed!"

"That's not why you're doing this!" I yell, surprising myself with the anger in my voice. I think I surprised Nick too because he doesn't have an immediate retort. For a second the only sound is the roaring Camry. Then I speak up.

"... Nick, look..."

"Not everyone gets to be you," he says, bitterness undercutting his tone. Then he white-knuckles the steering wheel and guns it. I have to grab the dash as he zooms around cars. "Not everyone gets to go to fucking college. Not everyone gets to have parents that don't beat your ass. Not everyone gets to have zero mouths to feed. Gets to do whatever the fuck they want!"

"That's not what I'm saying! I'm saying--"

"Shut up! Stop being a fucking pussy!" The car hops a curb and I look up to see a Seven-Eleven glowing in the gloom. Other cars are swerving into the parking lot, too. Nick slams the brakes, causing me to hit my head on the dash. "If you don't want to go, stay here." Grabbing the tire-iron from the back, he hops out, making sure to get the Glock and jam it into his waistband before running off toward the distant convenience store.

I check my head. It's bleeding a bit. Then I look up as shadows race over me. A dozen or more people are running for the store. Hopping out of cars or sprinting down the street. Phones in one hand. Improvised weapons in the other.

I look for Nick but he's already too far away. "Fuck!" I say under my breath. Then I reach for my bat, scoop the phone from under the seat, and jump out to join the throng racing for the store.

For a second I'm reminded of those zombie movies. Something like *28 Days Later* where a whole gang of undead ghouls rush some poor soul. Only in this case we were the ghouls.

In the commercials, it's always two or three nice-looking people that stand up. Sometimes it's a mom who puts down her baby to take out a gun. Or a wholesome-looking teenager with well-coiffed hair that trips up a perp. It's never a mob of angry, desperate people in sweatpants and beanies sprinting over cracked sidewalks so they can pay their electric bill on time. But that was the reality. The real promise of ByAll. Irresistible force delivered to your door not by some fascists with ray-bans and a crew-cut but by your own neighbors. People you see every day. People that look and act like you because they are you. If it manifested uglier than it did on the billboards at least it worked.

I'm late to the party. By the time I reach the convenience store there's already ten people inside trashing the aisles as they try to grope and beat the two dumbasses who thought they could hold up the place and get away. One of them has a machete and is swinging it wildly to keep everyone at bay, but some genius throws a soup can at his head and knocks him to the floor. Seeing their opening, everyone pounces like sharks to a feeding frenzy, making sure to get their kicks and jabs in.

The other perp takes advantage of the momentary distraction to hop out of the store through a broken window. He trips, cutting himself on the jagged glass, but gets up and starts booking it right toward me. I plant my feet and wind up, conscious of the security camera under the building awning. When he gets close, I swing my bat across his back. It connects with a loud *WHACK!* Hard enough to make him stumble a bit but he stays upright and keeps going. I don't chase him. That swing was enough to get me paid.

But then a figure shoots by me. It takes me a second to recognize him: Nick. A half second later, a dozen others follow. These were the junkies. The people that did this for more than the money. A shiver of fear crackles through me and I start sprinting after my friend.

We run across the street, dodging cars. The motherfucker was fast. But so was Nick. He was always fast. I could never catch him growing up. Whether it was tag or football he could always get away. Watching him separate from the pack now, his back growing smaller and smaller, I flash back to those summer days when we used to spend all afternoon in the park and crash in my basement at night to play videogames.

People start to fall off as the chase keeps going. They've either lost interest or are too winded. But not Nick. And therefore not me. Eventually, he closes enough distance. Heaves his tire-iron. It spins through the air and connects with the back of the perp's head with a sickening thud. The guy crashes to the ground, scraping up his face on the gravel.

Nick's there in a split second. Sweeping up his tire-iron and whaling on the downed man. Again and again. Other people finally make it and start following suit. Kicks and punches and swings from whatever weapon they're carrying. The perp tries to cover up but it's no use. Soon enough he's not moving much.

I get there just as most of the junkies have started to step back, having gotten their fill. Not Nick though. He keeps going. Keeps swinging. Screaming obscenities now. Everyone stands back.

Awed or scared or fascinated. Standing there on the sidewalk, watching this grotesque performance piece.

I keel over and vomit. Whether it's because of the sprinting or the blood I don't know. I just know when I wipe my mouth and look up again, Nick's reaching into his waistband...

I try to yell out; "No! Wait--"

But he doesn't hear me. Or maybe he doesn't want to hear me.

They really are louder than they are in the movies. The gunshot cracks the night only to be swiftly swallowed up by the city. A bullet-hole in the perp's chest the only proof it ever existed.

I stare dumbfounded at Nick hovering above the man's now-dead body. The Glock extended in his hand. He still looks like Nick. That's the funny thing. You'd think someone would be unrecognizable after something like that but no. It's still him. Still the kid I grew up with.

His shoulders relax and he takes several deep breaths. Everyone around us is standing dead still. The only noise, the ever-present buzz of Los Angeles. Then...

*DA-DOOP!*

It sounds so cheerful I don't even register it at first. But it comes again.

*DA-DOOP!*

And again.

*DA-DOOP!*

And then from everywhere at once.

*DA-DOOP! DA-DOOP! DA-DOOP!*

The people around me tear their eyes away from Nick and the dead man to check their cells. I do the same, slowly bringing up Nick's phone. It's a ByAll alert. Mechanically I open it and read the simple message:

*A quorum has been reached.*

*Answer the below question in regards to Alert #3501NL:*

*Did Local Responder #14 use excessive force in apprehending the suspect?*

A picture of Nick's profile picture hovers above a simple 'YES' or 'NO' touch button. You could even click on 'excessive force' to get a legal definition. A chill runs down my spine and I

can hear my heartbeat thrum in my ears. I look up at Nick. He hasn't noticed anything. He's still standing there, looking down at the body rapidly cooling beneath him.

Then movement to my right. I look over and see the woman there staring at her phone, face under-lit by its blue LED screen, inverting the shadows. She swipes her thumb across the screen. I glance around. Everyone is staring at their phones. Moving their thumbs. Faces made inhuman by the light.

The world closes around me. I jam the 'NO' button. Over and over and over. Jabbing my thumb at the screen. A message finally pops up:

*Thank you for doing your part.*

And then it disappears. And for a second I believe that's it. It's over. I can go home. We both can...

*DA DOOP! DA DOOP! DA DOOP! DA DOOP!*

The alert ripples around me. Every phone lighting up. Every face tilting down to read the message glowing there. I do the same. All the information blurring except for two lines:

*Action Requested: execute #3501NL Local Responder #14, Nicholas  
Cardennas Gutierrez*

*Reward: \$850*

And beneath the message, Nick's profile picture grinning at all the hangmen.

I don't hear myself scream but I know I yell out because Nick turns to look at me. We lock eyes for a split second before the first bullet rips through his torso. A micro-second later, a half-dozen more follow the first, cutting through him in an instant.

He falls. Dead before he hits the ground but still shots ring out. Everyone knows they'll check the bullets against the gun registries to determine participation so they want to make sure some of their rounds are found in him. Eight-hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money and no one wants to take any chances.

When the gunshots finally die down, the few people that don't have firearms crawl forward to stab him or crack him across the skull with something. He's already dead but their blows will still command a percentage of the reward, especially if they would have been lethal were Nick still alive. Effort counts for something.

Eventually everyone's satisfied and people pack it up. Start ambling away. The ones that came with a friend leave discussing where to grab a late-night bite or what they're going to do with the money. The ones that came by themselves refresh the app, looking for another hit, or shuffle off into the darkness alone.

I stay.

I don't cry. I don't scream. I just stand there. Feeling nothing.

Eventually I grip my bat and walk over to the body. That's all it is now. Whatever made it Nick is seeping into the cracks of the sidewalk. A bullet must have caught him in the head because his face is just a pulpy mass now. I'm glad of that. It makes it easier.

Eight-hundred and fifty dollars will help a lot with those textbooks.

Winding up, I bring that bat down hard on the body's skull. Hard enough to hear a crack even on the security cameras that I'm sure are watching.

Then I turn and go, hiking my hoodie up and leaving the bat to bounce on the concrete. I've still got to study for that test tomorrow and I'll have to take the bus home. Nick's car is stick and I can't drive stick.

Above me, one of those sun-bleached ByAll billboards shines like a beacon in the night. A smiling cop and a smiling citizen.

And beneath them, that inane catchphrase:

*Justice For All. Justice By All.*