

FROM THE ALEX HOLLICK F.B.I. SERIES

ALEX HOLLICK ***ORIGINS***

FIRST 1/2 OF THE BLOODBATH RITUAL



Part saga, part suspense thriller, part love story...

...all original.

AN AMERICAN THRILLER BY
ANDREW DOWNS

THE ALEX HOLLICK F.B.I. SERIES

ALEX HOLLICK: ORIGINS

FIRST 1/2 OF THE BLOODBATH RITUAL

WRITTEN BY ANDREW DOWNS

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[THE ALEX HOLLICK F.B.I. SERIES](#)

Chapter 1: Where Angels Fear To Tread

Escondido, CA

Friday May 24th, 1985 11:32 a.m.

Seventy-five degrees had never felt so hot to Hollick. Crouching in a sun-baked van with three FBI agents certainly didn't help. Hollick wiped a continuous stream of perspiration from his forehead. He was trying to conceal his obvious anxiety from the rest of his robbery division team, Agents Joseph Velasquez, Travis Carnahan and Jennifer Fletcher. They were already on to him. Velasquez had been staring at him for nearly three minutes.

Hollick looked at Fletcher, his communications specialist. He had fallen in love with her and Carnahan already knew. Golden brown hair, tan skin and green eyes had served her well, but Hollick had hired her to help the team so that was that. He glanced at Carnahan, the alpha male Aryan, blue eyes, blonde hair and muscles. He and Hollick were once best friends and now they barely talked to each other.

He looked back at Velasquez. While the staring had initially irritated an already irritable Hollick, it was the best place to look given the choices. His team had been falling apart for half a year. Whether it was the unspoken attraction between Hollick and Fletcher, Carnahan's dive into alcoholism or Joe's frantic concern about the direction of the team, the end was coming. Someone was on their way out. Change was imminent.

There had already been many days that had changed Hollick's life in the last two years; the day he recruited Fletcher, the day he had been shot, the day his division became number one in the entire bureau and the day they fell back to second best. His team had never reclaimed their glory. They fell from second to third and then third to fourth, before resting in the fifth slot behind St. Louis. Hollick had an opportunity to change that today.

Today would be the final chance to close an investigation, a case that Carnahan had wanted off for months. He had requested the day off. He was growing weary of an investigation plagued with problems. Conversely, Hollick had become obsessed with the case, further straining their friendship. Carnahan watched the street from the back window. He set down his binoculars, looked at his watch and said, "Fuck! I have to be back in L.A. in three hours!"

"Is Cathy shortening your leash again?" asked Velasquez.

"She's got a showing in Glendale. She's a wannabe real estate agent."

Fletcher took her headphones off and chimed in, "What's the matter, Carnie, you scared of a little competition?"

"Har har har, you're her best friend, why don't you talk some sense into her?"

"Why don't you try supporting your wife?" asked Fletcher.

"Why don't you blow me, Fletch?"

"You know, I'll think about it, Carnie, but you're gonna have to give me those binoculars so I can find it first."

"Children, this is an FBI sting operation," said Hollick, intervening with a tone of irritation.

"Yeah and when San Diego finds out we're down here, it's gonna be your ass, Al. Why don't we just go home? These guys aren't gonna show," said Carnahan.

"You're a real fucking optimist, aren't you? We had a deal. If you want the lead on Pomona, we do this first. Now watch the fucking street, Agent Carnahan," replied Hollick.

Fletcher and Carnahan stared at Hollick. Fletcher's jaw had dropped, "What's with the attitude, Hollick? Don't talk to him like that," she said.

"I apologize, Carnie, but you're my eyes and she's my ears," said Hollick, "Now get back to work, pretty please with sugar on top," he added.

Fletcher nodded and put her headphones back on. Carnahan faced the window and put his binoculars back to his eyes. He started humming and singing, “867-5309/Jenny,” by Tommy Tutone. He was teasing Fletcher, just as he had done six months ago at the FBI L.A. Christmas Party. Fletcher looked up at Carnahan, removed her headphones and took a deep breath, “Carnie, could you please stop? You’re distracting me, Honey,” she said.

“Sorry, Fletch,” said Carnahan, as he continued to stare out the window.

“It’s okay,” she replied smiling. She put her headphones back on and continued to listen to the scanner. Then Carnie began to hum and sing the same song again. Fletcher looked at Hollick and then at Carnahan, “Carnie, please, I’m trying to focus,” she said in a polite but assertive voice. He ignored her, but Hollick had had enough.

“Damn it, Carnie. You’re fucking up our operation. If you want to act like an asshole, do it on your own time, not ours!”

“Whatever you say, Al,” said Carnahan, without turning around. Fletcher looked down. She could sense the divide for months and it bothered her. She put her headphones back on and listened intently to the scanner. Velasquez turned to Hollick.

“What’s the matter, you don’t seem like yourself?”

“It’s nothing, I’m fine,” replied Hollick.

“This is our last chance, isn’t it?” he asked, without taking his eyes off Hollick. He nodded as Fletcher looked to him for confirmation.

“I’m sorry. I lied to you guys yesterday,” said Hollick looking down.

“Wait, Novak doesn’t even know we’re down here?” asked Velasquez.

“No, he knows we’re down here, but San Diego doesn’t have a clue and we don’t have official authorization. Technically, we’re breaking the rules.”

“You told us that yesterday, but you didn’t tell us we only had one day,” said Fletcher.

“Well now you know. Everything’s riding on today. If we don’t catch these guys here and now, John hands the ball to San Diego FBI and the locals and on Monday, we’re going to be put on this new thing developing in Pomona.”

“That’s bullshit. This is all we’ve done for the last six months and we’re just going to give it away?” asked Fletcher.

“Yeah, Fletch, because that’s what you do according to John. You just hand all of your hard work over to the locals when your case crawls a few miles out of jurisdiction, it’s a real strategy for success,” said Hollick with sarcasm and bitterness in his voice.

“Speaking of locals, there’s a black and white outside. Are they here to pick up the case files, Al?” asked Carnahan. He was smirking, still sporting his pair of binoculars. Hollick quickly jumped up, grabbing the binoculars from Carnahan’s neck and almost choking him in the process. A black and white had rolled up in front of the target, the target that Hollick believed would be the next in a string of armored car robberies.

“They do know we’re down here, right?” asked Fletcher.

“Yeah, they do and I don’t see a fucking Krispy Kreme around,” replied Hollick.

“Al, just clear the streets. Give our boys some breathing room,” said Carnahan.

“Are you high? Do you want these guys to walk?” Hollick asked. Their eyes were intense and inches apart. Carnahan looked at Fletcher, “Fletch, give the order, please, before we lose these guys,” Fletcher looked at Hollick, who was visibly irritated with Carnahan’s overreaction.

“Don’t you dare give that order, Fletcher, I call the shots here, not him.”

Fletcher took off her headphones. She took a deep breath, looked at her watch and then up at Carnahan, “Carnie, Hollick’s my boss and he’s right, there’s no way I’m giving that order. I know these guys are listening too, that’s how they got this far, but I suggest someone ask the boys outside to take a hike in the

next oh, four minutes, or we will lose our one last chance to catch them.”

“Joe, get rid of them,” said Hollick. Velasquez, who was always eager to please, jumped up and hopped out of the back of the van. Hollick watched as Velasquez walked over to the cruiser, to inform them of the FBI’s presence and persuade them to leave. Fletcher put her headphones back on and Carnahan smiled at Hollick.

This was the last thing Hollick needed in the closing minutes of the operation. The suspects the team had been pursuing were careful. They would not attempt a takedown without a proper sweep of the perimeter. Worse than that, they were deadly in their efforts, killing seven armored guards in the last six months.

The case was so far unsolved by the team, who could only pinpoint one pattern, the target. The suspects targeted the same armored car company without mercy. When Hollick took the case, he was convinced it was some sort of inside job. He interviewed guards, drivers and managers, looking for weak spots within the company’s infrastructure.

Surveillance tapes had broken the case open for Hollick. While he cursed those wretched tapes, they served as the puzzle piece that made the case solvable. After hours and hours of watching surveillance of the L.A. branch of SOCAL Armored, he finally found a clue. Hollick had spotted a figure in black stealing garbage from the company dumpster.

Hollick asked the company for a week’s worth of trash, through which his team scoured. The disgusting chore brought forth the magic bullet in the case. The suspects had stolen discarded drop off schedules from the trash bin. They were using these schedules as a blueprint for targeting specific high value pickups in Southern California.

Hollick continued to watch the dumpster at SOCAL, but the suspects had never returned. He surmised that the suspects were using an algorithm based on the schedules. The robberies always took place on the last or second to last Friday of the month. The targets seemed to follow a southerly direction. This is what had put Hollick and his team in a steamy stakeout van, one-hundred miles away from L.A.

Carnahan and Hollick stared at each other while Fletcher continued to listen to the scanner. Velasquez jumped back into the van. “What’s up, Joe? Did you send them packing?” asked Hollick.

“They want to talk to you,” replied Velasquez.

“They want to talk to me, about what?”

“They said they wanted to clear the streets, but I told them not to do it. I told them we have federal preemption.”

“Federal preemption, Joe, you know we’re breaking jurisdictional prudence here, why the hell would you bring that up?” he asked.

“You told me to get rid of them.”

Hollick put his hand on Velasquez’s shoulder and looked him in the eye, “You’re right. Okay, everybody sit tight. I’ll be right back. Fletch, stay on the radio.”

Hollick jumped out of the back of the van and walked over to the police cruiser, parked on the adjacent street and occupied by two young local cops. Hollick smiled and approached the driver’s side of the cruiser.

“Officers, I’m Agent Hollick, division leader, how are you doing today?”

“We’re a little confused, Agent Hollick. We thought you wanted our help here, but your man told us we aren’t welcome,” said the driver.

Hollick smiled, “No, he misspoke. I apologize for the confusion. We want your help, but we want you guys making your usual rounds, because we don’t want anything to look out of the ordinary. The problem is that this bank over here is the target and if our guys see you, they won’t try to rob the truck, the truck that’s going to show up here in about five minutes. They’ll walk and we may never catch them. You guys can’t clear the streets. If you do, they’ll know we’re here.”

“Understandable, I’m just wondering why the San Diego FBI isn’t part of this operation. Your man brought up federal preemption, but this isn’t even your jurisdiction, is it?”

“No, he’s right. Federal trumps local last time I checked, but I’m running out of time here, fellas. Could you please move along and if we need you, we’ll call you, okay?”

“Sure thing, we’ll be on our way,” said the driver.

“Thanks, boys,” said Hollick tapping on the top of the cruiser as they pulled away.

Hollick looked down Grand Avenue, pondering what else could go wrong. He looked at his watch, which indicated that he had five, maybe ten minutes left if the truck was late. The lunch rush was beginning to pick up, which would make the robbery attempt even less likely. With local interference, Hollick was sure that this final effort would be a futile one.

Despite his resentment today, Hollick had grown extremely close to his team, often calling them by first name or their nicknames. While they had a near perfect record on previous investigations, the SOCAL robberies had become an impossible obsession for his team. They never seemed to be in the right place at the right time and this time, Hollick had prayed things would be different. He returned to the van and sat next to Carnahan, “Anything?” he asked.

“Nothing, Al. These guys are gone. Remember our talk this morning. I love you, buddy, but it’s time to be realistic here. There are other cases within our jurisdiction,” said Carnahan, Hollick nodded. He was transitioning from denial to acceptance. He had already spent plenty of time wavering between sadness and anger.

“Where the hell is this truck?” muttered Hollick, looking at his watch again.

“Hang on a second,” said Fletcher. Everyone looked up.

“What is it?” asked Hollick with anticipation.

“I’m getting something,” said Fletcher, motioning for everyone to remain silent. Fletcher pulled off her headphones, “Shots fired outside First National Bank, Ninth Avenue, Escondido,” she said.

Hollick’s face turned white with panic as he grabbed his copy of the truck schedule and looked up at his team, “It’s them,” he said. “Joe, take the wheel, Ninth Avenue, move!” Velasquez jumped into the driver’s seat, started the engine and peeled away from the bank. He drove furiously down Grand Avenue, running lights, avoiding pedestrians and other drivers. After making a right on to South Juniper, he floored the gas pedal, dodging traffic.

“We’re not gonna make it. You should have taken North City Centre. Turn around, Joe,” said Carnahan.

“Shut up, Carnie. Joe, you’re doing great, just speed up,” said Hollick. He looked through binoculars at the speeding roadway fast approaching.

“Right or left, right or left!” shouted Velasquez, as they approached Ninth Street. Suddenly, a red late model station wagon whisked by, heading West on Ninth Avenue. The driver had just run a red light. He was driving well above the posted speed limit.

“Right, go right!” shouted Hollick. Velasquez complied, peeling around the corner. He began following the station wagon. A police cruiser had joined the chase and quickly advanced past the stakeout van. As the cruiser caught up to the station wagon, the driver began firing shots into the cruiser, one of which fatally struck the driver.

“Holy shit!” said Velasquez.

“Keep driving,” responded Hollick. The lifeless cruiser veered in front of the van. Velasquez dodged the car and kept on pursuit.

“Where are they going, Hollick?” asked Velasquez.

“The 15 Freeway, we can’t let them take that on-ramp, we’ll lose them,” replied Hollick.

“What should we do?” asked Velasquez now panicking and sweating. Hollick looked down at his map of Escondido, quickly studying the surface streets, “Hollick?” asked Velasquez with urgency and anxiety.

“They’re going to have to slow down at South City Centre Parkway and when they do, perform a pit maneuver,” said Hollick in a firm tone.

“A pit maneuver?” asked Velasquez.

“Pursuit Immobilization Technique, Joe, just sideswipe the car, make them fishtail out of control. We’ll get the jump on them before they can react. This is what the LAPD is doing with high-speed chases. It’s been proven to work.”

“Al, this isn’t a cop car. It’s a shit box van from city works. We don’t even have seat belts back here. It’s going to be a fucking coffin if he does what you’re suggesting,” shouted Carnahan. Hollick looked back at him. He was nodding. Fletcher looked scared for the first time on an operation. She was shaking her head. Hollick looked back at Velasquez.

“It’s not about the car, Joe. It’s the physics, velocity, angle and trajectory. If you do it carefully and time it right, we’ll be fine. We just want to turn the car, aim for the rear fender,” said Hollick. Velasquez was shaking his head, thinking frantically.

“I don’t know,” said Velasquez nervously.

“Well I do. Fletch, Carnie, stabilize yourselves with those bars,” said Hollick, pointing to two metal bars in the back of the van. Velasquez nodded as if he understood, but was clearly concerned with the plan. The suspect in the passenger seat began firing back at the van, but he could not land a single shot. “Get down!” Hollick shouted at Fletcher and Carnahan. Fletcher and Carnahan complied with the order and Velasquez weaved the van to avoid bullets. He began straightening the van out as they approached the intersection of Ninth Avenue and South City Centre Parkway. He pressed down on the accelerator.

“Okay guys. Hang on tight,” said Velasquez.

The Parkway was a zoo as Hollick had predicted. Riddled with traffic, the suspects were forced to slow down to maneuver. Velasquez sped up and slammed into the station wagon. The car slid across the pavement, slamming into a guardrail in the middle of the intersection, just as Hollick had hoped for, but the impact was much more severe than he had expected.

The van sat mangled and twisted, with smoke billowing from the engine. Hollick checked on the team, “Is everyone okay?” he asked. Carnahan had a few bruises from the impact. Velasquez had suffered some cuts from the glass of the windshield. Hollick himself was a bit banged up.

“Jesus, Al,” said Carnahan coughing. “Are you okay, Carnie?” asked Hollick. “Yeah, I’m fine. What about you, Fletch?”

“Fuck!” yelled Fletcher, who was writhing in pain.

“You okay, Fletch?” shouted Hollick to Fletcher. She had slid to the back of the van.

“She’s bleeding, Al and I’m pretty sure it’s not that time of the month,” said Carnahan.

“Fletcher, I’m gonna call you an ambulance,” said Hollick.

“No, I think I just have surface cuts. Just get me the hell out of this van,” replied Fletcher.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Hollick. Fletcher nodded, but Hollick could see she had lost some blood in the abdominal area. Fletcher was strong and not the type to admit weakness. Hollick would have argued if time were not of the essence. Hollick looked at his team, “Okay, these guys are obviously lunatics. We do a two by two formation. Joe and I lead, Carnie and Fletcher cover us.”

The team exited the van through the back door, facing away from the suspects to avoid gunfire. Hollick peeked around the van to get a look at their condition. Their car was totaled and beginning to catch on fire. Hollick looked inside their car and saw that it was empty. The suspects had already exited their getaway car and were nowhere in sight.

He quickly rushed to the other side of the van, where he saw the suspects. They were limping along the Parkway, covered in blood, carrying two of the bags from the robbery. They were looking for a second getaway car. They pointed their guns at civilians after firing a few warning shots in the air. Drivers began fleeing for their safety. The beautiful roadway lined with palm trees had turned into a battleground. Hollick

turned to his team, "Okay, guys--,"

Fletcher fell to the ground. Her wounds from the accident had been more severe than even Hollick had initially thought. Hollick and Carnahan grabbed Fletcher and sat her up against the bumper of the van. Then Carnahan walked around to the side of the van to scope the perimeter for the suspects. Hollick crouched down and looked at Fletcher.

"Fletcher, look at me, you're going to be okay, just sit tight," Fletcher nodded, unable to speak at this point. Hollick feared the worst. His plan had gone to shit and he knew he had very little time. He ripped some cloth from his shirt and wrapped a makeshift tourniquet around Fletcher's abdomen in an attempt to slow down the bleeding. Deafening shots began to ring out. Carnahan had begun shooting at the suspects and they happily returned fire. "Cease fire, Carnahan, cease fire!" exclaimed Hollick.

Carnahan looked back at Hollick, "What the fuck are we supposed to do, Al?" he asked angrily. Hollick stood up to address Carnahan and Velasquez.

"Okay, Joe, you come with me. Carnie, cover us till we get close, but do not leave Fletcher," said Hollick, pointing his finger at Carnahan.

"Fuck you, Al," said Carnahan with intense blue eyes.

"Excuse me?" asked Hollick, staring back at Carnahan with equal intensity.

"You heard me," said Carnahan nodding. Hollick nodded and motioned for Velasquez to prepare for foot pursuit. Hollick and Velasquez carefully approached the suspects using cars, trees and concrete to remain hidden. Eventually the firing resumed between Carnahan and the suspects. Hollick had found a concrete wall close enough to the suspects to get a clear shot. With their weapons drawn, Hollick and Velasquez scanned the perimeter and found the suspects.

"Let's waste these assholes," said Velasquez.

"You know the protocol, Joe. We have to try to take them alive," said Hollick.

"Well, are you ready?"

"I don't know. I'm thinking maybe we should wait for the locals to back us up, they'll be here any second," said Hollick. He looked around, hearing faint sirens. A moment later, an explosion sounded out. The van had exploded with violent force, the same van the team had just stood behind, the same van Carnie was using for cover, the same van Fletcher was leaning against after the crash.

"Fuck protocol!" said Velasquez, staring into Hollick's eyes. He peered over the concrete slab and aimed at the suspects, "FBI! Drop your weapons now!" One of the suspects turned and began firing. Velasquez dropped to the ground from a single head wound. His lifeless eyes were indelibly marked into Hollick's memory.

Hollick's team lay around him in pieces, leaving only him to fight, with the help of the incoming police. Peeking over the wall, he saw the two suspects. They had killed a driver and were now entering his vehicle. Hollick carefully made the approach. At this point, he had nothing to lose. His team members and best friends were gone. He began to creep behind the cars lined up along the parkway. The .38 Revolver shook in his trembling hands. He steadied himself before peeking over an abandoned car.

Hollick watched the suspects. They were having a hard time getting the car out of the traffic jam, backing up and pulling forward, slamming the car into abandoned vehicles in an attempt to clear a path for escape. The sirens grew louder in volume. The locals had arrived. Hollick rose above a nearby car and fired at the suspect in the driver's seat. It was a clean shot. Suspect one dropped dead. The car rolled to a stop, resting against a bumper.

The accomplice jumped out of the passenger's seat, falling over himself and onto the roadway. He too had suffered injuries in the crash. Hollick stood over him and aimed the .38 at his face. This certainly wasn't an easy decision, vengeance or justice. "Don't shoot, I'm unarmed!" pleaded the man. Hollick pointed his gun at the man's shoulder and shot him anyway, "Aw motherfucker!" he screamed in pain.

A local cop approached Hollick from the side. Hollick looked over at the young officer, who had his weapon drawn on the suspect as well. Hollick lowered his weapon. "Can you take it from here?" asked Hollick, the young officer nodded.

The young cop arrested the living suspect, throwing in some of the savage brutality that cops in Southern California were famous for at the time. As Hollick rested against the wall, Escondido emergency services arrived, trying to put right what had gone terribly wrong. Fires were extinguished, the wounded were cared for and the dead were wheeled away.

Hollick spotted a local cop smoking a cigarette. The cop was generous enough to give him a smoke and even lit it for him. Then he walked towards one of the many abandoned cars nestled along South City Centre Parkway. He sat on the hood of a late model sedan, avoiding verbal interaction and savoring the sweet nicotine.

Hollick had only recently picked smoking back up, a habit he had quit after a prank that Carnahan had played on him five years earlier. The cop's cigarettes were of the cheap variety. It was gross, cough inducing class C garbage. Still, it was a coping mechanism. Hollick wasn't even sure he would have a job after leading three agents to their deaths, but none of that mattered to him now that they were gone.

Hollick stared at the smoky remains of the undercover van that his team had called home for the last six months. From the smoke, a man began to walk towards Hollick. He was dressed in standard FBI apparel, complete with designer sunglasses. He couldn't have been more than thirty or about Hollick's age. He stopped in front of Hollick and took off his glasses, revealing light blue eyes, which clashed with his bright red hair, "Agent Hollick?" the man asked. Hollick's head began nodding, his mind still reeling over his agents.

"Unfortunately, yes," he answered politely.

"I'm sorry. Mike Hansen, I'm from the San Diego field office, Internal Affairs," Hansen put his hand out. Hollick politely shook Hansen's hand before taking another drag.

"What's up, Mike, did I do something wrong?"

"Maybe, I'm just here to help you through the standard procedure," without a word, Hollick drew his weapon and handed it to Hansen, "Thanks for making this easy," said Hansen. Hollick nodded looking down. The second round of guilt had just hit him, creeping upward this time, widows, children and explanations, flags and funerals.

"So what the hell happened here, Agent Hollick? The last time I checked, Escondido was in San Diego County. We're a bit upset we weren't invited to the barbecue or even notified that you were coming. The local cops seem to know more about this than we do."

"We were just down here on a hunch from a case in L.A."

"Does this look like L.A. to you, Agent Hollick?"

"I'll level with you, Mike. I would have followed this case to the South Pole if I had to, at the time, it seemed like the right thing to do, but now my agents are dead and things have changed. I apologize for the inconvenience I've caused to you and your colleagues. Did I go against jurisdictional prudence? Yes. Did I dodge bureau protocol? Yes."

"You have a very strange demeanor, but I'm going to chalk that up to what you've just been through. I'm not here to suspend you or interrogate you. I just want the facts."

"Just the facts?" he asked, "Who the fuck are you, Joe Friday? I just watched my entire fucking team die," said Hollick defensively. Hansen's clinical demeanor had rubbed him the wrong way.

"I'm sorry about your team, Agent Hollick, but your communications specialist is in fact alive and being flown by helicopter to Cedar Sinai. She's in critical condition."

"She's alive?" asked Hollick in disbelief.

"A local officer found Agent Fletcher behind that guardrail over there," said Hansen, while pointing to the

opposite side of the parkway. “She’s pretty banged up, your career on the other hand, is on life support from what I’m hearing,” Hollick nodded and Hansen resumed, “Now I need you to tell me what happened here, Agent Hollick, just a brief summary and then you can go home.” Hollick nodded and took another drag.

He explained the incident in vivid detail while Hansen wrote feverishly in his notepad. He told the truth, that he knew he was breaking the rules, but he did it anyway, with John Novak’s blessing. Novak would surely be pissed, but this is what bureau chiefs are paid for, to deal with these kinds of headaches. San Diego FBI was pissed, but empathetic to Hollick’s situation. They offered medical services, but Hollick declined, opting for a ride home.

Hansen was a sweetheart as Internal Affairs agents go. He escorted Hollick to an unmarked cruiser, where he would be shipped home to Pasadena. Hansen was kind and compassionate in his closing words. He promised Hollick that he would fax his report directly to Novak. He once again offered his condolences. After a handshake and a pat on the back, Hollick stepped into the backseat of the cruiser.

The car whisked away, taking Hollick through the jungle of L.A. to his one bedroom apartment in Pasadena. The smells of Southern California were extremely potent on this late afternoon drive. The smog and bottleneck traffic were raising tensions among the commuters of the I-5 Freeway. Hollick lay down in the back of the car, avoiding all conversation, but the two agents up front barely talked to each other the whole way up.

Hollick was dropped off in Pasadena, his home for the last two years. He walked into his apartment and closed the door. Leaning back against the door, he took a deep breath. There was silence, what had been elusive all morning, was now invasive. Silence always gave way to thought, reflection, the last thing Hollick needed right now. Carnahan and Velasquez were dead; Fletcher may well be her on way to joining them. It was too much.

He walked across the living room and plopped on the couch. He reached for a pack of cigarettes he had left behind that morning. The smell of sweet tobacco leaves entered his nasal passage as he ran one under his nose. Then he looked around the apartment, where he and Carnahan had spent the early morning, drinking coffee.

Hollick’s apartment was bare bones, consisting of some nice furniture, a television, a stereo and an oak desk. The walls had a few prints of famous paintings by artists whom he admired, like Picasso and Dali, but his favorite was Vincent Van Gogh’s, “Starry Starry Night,” which was a painting that portrayed the view from the window of his room at Saint-Remy-de-Provence Sanatorium in Southern France in 1889.

Van Gogh, whose life was also marred by tragic events, had ended by suicide the year after he painted “Starry Starry Night.” Hollick looked at the painting for a moment before picking up the local phone book and looking for a suicide hotline number. He found the number, dialed it and lit up a cigarette, waiting for someone to pick up. The phone rang a few times. He hung up the phone before anyone could answer.

Hollick wasn’t sure if he was suicidal or just afraid, but he was certainly glad that Hansen had taken his gun away. Suicide would be a lot easier to contemplate with a .38 Revolver in his hands. Something was wrong, something other than this catastrophe, something other than Fletcher lying in a hospital bed. Tears began leaking from his eyes. He took the phone off the hook, sat back and unplugged from the world.

Chapter 2: To Walk in the Shadows

F.B.I. Los Angeles Field Office
Monday May 27th, 1985 9:47 a.m.

Memorial Day 1985 was especially somber for Hollick and the FBI L.A. field office. While today was a holiday that Hollick was scheduled to take off, the circumstances of the previous Friday had changed his plans. An explanation was expected as to the shots Hollick called in a botched sting operation with deadly consequences. Hollick was not looking forward to this meeting, but was thankful that the painfully slow weekend had come to an end. While he knew not what he faced, he was grateful to face it one day sooner. Better to face the music now than to spend one more day wondering, wondering about his future and wondering about Agent Fletcher.

Hollick was impressed with himself. He kept it together enough to get to this meeting on time with a shower, a shave and in his FBI uniform. His head still wrestled with his decisions on the SOCAL operation. Hollick wondered if Fletcher was dead or alive. He couldn't bear to visit the hospital over the weekend to find out. He was still on the border of rationalizing suicide. Her death would be the tipping point.

Hollick slung open the door to the FBI L.A. field office. He walked towards the security desk, as he had every day for the last five years. Becky, the attractive blonde haired blue-eyed secretary smiled and greeted him as usual, but with a different look in her eye than every day before. There was a sick fascination, like staring at a car wreck, "Happy Memorial Day, Agent Hollick. How are you feeling?"

"Like Vincent Van Gogh, about three hours after he shot himself," he replied.

"I'm sorry," she replied with empathetic eyes.

"Thank you, Becky. Is John in yet?"

"Yeah, he's expecting you."

"What kind of mood is he in?"

"Typical John more or less," replied Becky.

"Huh, okay, thanks," said Hollick as he began walking towards the stairs. He walked up to the second floor, where both his and Novak's offices were located. As he climbed the stairs, Hollick tried to ignore the uneasiness. He couldn't shake the mix of emotions he had felt since Friday and the only thing worse than his feelings, was this meeting. He figured he'd start by apologizing. He would be doing a lot of that soon enough.

John Novak was Hollick's mentor and Hollick was his protégé. That's how it had started back in Boston in October of 1979. After being shot during an operation, Novak was promoted to head of the L.A. branch. He needed a successor, a protégé, someone he could pay next to nothing to run the robbery division. As a graduate student at Harvard, Hollick met all the criteria. From there, it was Quantico and from Quantico, it was Los Angeles.

Novak was in his early fifties, but looked about sixty. He had taken on about as much stress as any human being could. Novak was born during the Depression. He worked his way from immense poverty to becoming a college graduate. He served in both Korea and Vietnam before joining the FBI. He had seen death, a lot more than Hollick had. Empathy was the only card Hollick had to play.

The field office was a ghost town. Most of Hollick's co-workers had the day off. They were celebrating Memorial Day. Hollick was thankful there would be no more stares like the one Becky had given him at the front desk. He reached Novak's door and knocked, "Come in," answered Novak from behind the door. Hollick waited a moment, delaying this meeting for every possible second that he could. He rested his head against the door. "I said come in," repeated Novak, Hollick took a deep breath and pulled the door open.

"Sorry, John, I didn't hear you," said Hollick. Three seconds into this meeting and Hollick was already

lying. He recollected himself and walked into the office. Novak was talking on the phone to somebody, presumably in the bureau. He called the man Steve and told him to move forward with the paperwork. He set down the phone and looked up.

“Have a seat, Alex,” said Novak in his usual inviting tone. They both stared at each other uncomfortably, each expecting the other to initiate the conversation. Novak had grayish hair that was balding, sharp blue eyes and a gut. He spoke with a friendly and slightly southern drawl, which was rather charming. Despite being an L.A. resident for thirty years, Novak still had a touch of his South Carolina accent.

“Hell of a Memorial Day, huh?” asked Novak. Hollick nodded in agreement, “It’s a sad day,” said Novak in a second attempt to break the ice, Hollick nodded again.

“I’m sorry, John. I take full responsibility for my actions. I should have called San Diego. I should have passed the ball,” said Hollick in an apologetic tone, Novak nodded.

“Agent Hansen faxed the report over with your account of the operation.”

“Yes, Agent Hansen was very helpful,” replied Hollick.

Novak sat back in his seat holding the report and looking out his window at the parking lot. The tension wasn’t particularly high, but time felt like it had stopped, “John, if there’s anything I can fill you in on, please--,”

Novak interrupted, “Alex, this seems like a pretty straight forward report and I don’t question your ability to carry out this operation, which did result in the apprehension of two dangerous men and sadly, the death of two beloved agents. I think it goes without saying that you and I both feel a great amount of sadness about what happened down there.”

“It’s immeasurable, John. I mean, words can’t describe how I feel.”

“I know, Alex. This was your team,” replied Novak nodding. He looked at the report before resuming, “I just have one question for you, Alex, about the operation and maybe it’s nothing, but this collision?” asked Novak.

“What about it?”

“Well how did this accident occur?”

“We were in pursuit. What difference does it make?”

“Well it’s not for insurance reasons,” replied Novak smiling. Hollick tried to humor Novak with a fake smile, but was getting concerned with this line of questioning. Novak continued, “Agent Fletcher’s wounds resulted from a high speed collision, so I guess what I’m asking is, was the accident caused by Agent Velasquez or the suspects?”

Hollick tried to find the magic words that would alleviate responsibility without dishonesty, but could not bring himself to lie again to Novak. Hollick took a deep breath, “In pursuit of the suspects, I instructed Agent Velasquez to strike their getaway car, to perform a pit maneuver. I believed at the time that this was the best option for apprehending the suspects and protecting the public.”

“I see,” said Novak, reclining once again in his chair and studying Hollick’s mannerisms. “In hindsight, do you still feel this was the best option?” he asked. Hollick replayed the incident in his mind yet another time before answering. He remembered Fletcher shaking her head in fear, just before the collision.

“John, I believe had we not used this option, the suspects would still be at large, but if you’re asking me if I would make the same choice today, the answer would be no.”

“So you’ve learned something then?”

“Yes. The preservation of Agent Fletcher’s life is far more important than the apprehension of the suspects.”

“Are you saying that because it’s the right thing to say or because you’re still in love with her?” asked Novak.

“Please, this is hard enough. I just lost Travis and Joe.”

“They didn’t die in vain, Alex,” said Novak.

“John, I take the lives of my team members with the same seriousness I take my own life, if not more and if I may say, these circumstances were unforeseeable.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” asked Novak with a look of friendly concern, Hollick nodded.

“I think I will be in time,” he replied. He was lying through his teeth. He was supposed to say he was okay, so he did, but Novak didn’t buy it for a minute.

“A lot of men in your position might feel a little guilt, maybe even shame after surviving such an ordeal,” said Novak. Hollick nodded in an attempt to remain neutral, ignoring the tremendous weight of guilt he felt. “Alex, during my second tour in Vietnam, my platoon was given a mission to secure and protect an ally village in the South. The Intel we got was from what we believed to be a trustworthy ally.”

Hollick nodded and kept his eyes focused, almost locked with Novak’s, “The Intel was actually from an NVA enemy posing as an ally. We were led into an ambush about three clicks before that village,” Hollick sat up as he became more interested in Novak’s story. “That ambush took out my entire platoon and I barely escaped. Good men were dying all around me because of a mistake, a mistake I made. I led that platoon, Alex. I led them to their graves and for some reason, I survived, nobody else,” Novak paused for a moment, “I never told anyone that story, not even my wife,” he added.

Hollick tried to think of something to say, to comfort Novak, but nothing came to mind. “The point is that you can’t control every factor of every situation and you can’t blame yourself for surviving this operation. Two of your agents were killed protecting this country and for the safety and security of this great nation, I would gladly volunteer my own life.”

“Thanks, John,” replied Hollick, who felt a little better when comparing his own experience with Novak’s time in Vietnam, still, the guilt remained.

“You’re lucky to have survived at all considering what you were up against.”

“I’m sorry?” queried Hollick with a look of confusion.

“Well your profile was right to some extent, two white males, mid-thirties, but they weren’t ex-army looking for smash and grabs, they were two former marines, Alex.”

“Marines?” he asked.

“Yeah, the guy whose head you blew off was Douglas Lind. He served in Nam from ‘69 to ‘73. Lind served in a black unit that specialized in the assassinations of high-ranking government and army officials in Southeast Asia. He was honorably discharged in August of ‘73, relocated from St. Paul to L.A. in ‘74. He worked for one of SOCAL’s competitors as an armed guard from ‘75 until ‘82. He was fired for suspected drug use. After that, he went off the grid completely.” Hollick kept replaying the Escondido incident in his mind.

“What about his accomplice?” Hollick asked.

“Paul Sterner, 36, he served in the same unit as Lind. He was discharged in December ‘73. Sterner returned to L.A. after his discharge and presumably hooked up with Lind. There are no employment or tax records for Sterner after ‘76. We searched a home that they shared in Barstow. We found guns, drugs and over four-million in cash buried under the house. We also found shorthand truck schedules they were using to plan the robberies.” Novak gave Hollick a serious look and continued, “Alex, you were right. These robberies were executed with inside information and I’m sorry I threatened to shut you down,” Hollick nodded and leaned back in the chair trying to relax.

“It’s okay, John. You weren’t the only one who had doubts about my theory.”

“I had my doubts, sure, but it was mostly these assholes in Washington, micromanaging me and my field office from three-thousand miles away,” said Novak.

“It’s like you said. You can’t control every factor of every situation,” replied Hollick. Novak nodded in agreement and reclined once again in his chair. “How’s Agent Fletcher?” asked Hollick, almost afraid to

know the answer.

"She's stable, Alex and she's conscious, no paralysis, not a single broken bone. It's a miracle," replied Novak.

"Does anybody know who removed her from the scene?"

"We believe that Agent Carnahan removed Fletcher from the scene before the van ignited, for her safety during the shootout."

"I guess that makes him a hero, huh?" asked Hollick, Novak shrugged his shoulders. "Where are they keeping Paul Sterner, John?"

"He was checked out of Cedar Sinai. L.A. County is babysitting him for us at the moment. He'll get a trial in federal court and then the gas chamber," replied Novak in a matter of fact sort of way, "It's over, Alex. He's a dead man walking," he added. He reached in his desk for what Hollick believed would be paperwork. Instead, Novak produced a bottle of whiskey and two glasses, "You want ice, Alex?" he asked.

"Please," said Hollick nodding.

"Well, I don't have any," he said laughing. Hollick could genuinely laugh at Novak's odd sense of humor, "I'll have to put that into next year's budget," he added. They continued to laugh, but Hollick was still confused by the situation. He wondered why Novak would want to drink after their discussion. He pushed a glass over to Hollick.

"What are we drinking to?" asked Hollick. Novak took a swig of his scotch before responding. He paused and motioned for Hollick to begin drinking. Hollick took his swig and looked for him to continue. Novak took another swig.

"We're drinking to the end of an era," said Novak, "Cause you're going to Quantico."

"To put together a new team?" he asked, thinking that would be the best news.

"No, Alex. Your time here in L.A. is over."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Well they didn't tell me much, but they want to see you. Intuition tells me it's a transfer, a promotion of sorts."

"Why the fuck would they promote me after what happened, John and why Quantico?"

"I don't know, Alex. The FBI isn't exactly an open book, you know that, but you're not under suspension, you still hold your rank as a field agent, what's the problem?"

"The problem is that this story smells like shit. I get two agents killed and they want to promote me, to what, Bureau Chief of American Samoa?"

"I'm not sure. I think it might be Rory Roscoe and that job offer you turned down back in December, you recall, robbery division instructor."

"The job you begged me not to take? Yeah, I recall."

"Well I think that's what it is, I mean, what else could it be?"

"But that wasn't the deal, John. You told me to run the robbery division until 1993 and then I would take your job when you retired and I would run this field office. You promised me eight months ago. I didn't even ask for it, you offered, that was the deal. You're doing to me exactly what you did to Carnie."

"That's not true at all, Alex. You're going to be making almost as much money as I am at this new job and you're half my age. It's the opportunity of a lifetime."

"I don't want it. I want to run my robbery division, just like I was promised."

"You don't have a division anymore, Alex. Travis and Joe are gone and if you think I'm putting Fletcher back in the field after this, you've got another thing coming. She's going on permanent desk duty."

"Just like that, huh? I make one mistake and I lose my division entirely. You get shot and they give you a field office. I got shot too. Do you remember that, almost two years ago, saved by a double lined bullet proof vest you didn't want any of us to have, because it would have cost you two percent out of your annual

budget?”

“Are you saying that I don’t care about my agents? I care about all of my agents, especially you. I got you off the hook with San Diego. You broke jurisdictional prudence and you could have been suspended for that.”

“But last Thursday you gave me the okay. You said I had one more day and that we could go down there and you didn’t seem to care much about jurisdictional prudence.”

“With all due respect, Alex, I was sure it wouldn’t lead to anything and certainly not the death of two highly decorated agents.” There was an uncomfortable pause as the two men stared at each other.

“Okay, John. I’ll go to Quantico. If that’s really what you want, I’ll go.”

“It’s not what I want, Alex, it’s just the way it is. I love you like a son and to think after losing Travis and Joe to death, I have to lose you to bureaucracy, well that breaks my heart. I’m gonna miss the hell out of you, Alex.”

“I’m going to miss you too, John,” said Hollick.

Novak leaned forward, “You know, down the road, when this all blows over, maybe I could work out a transfer for Fletcher. Maybe you two could reconnect outside of the field.”

“I just lost the two best agents I ever served with, beloved friends. I have funerals to attend. The last thing I should be thinking about is myself,” said Hollick.

“Well, to Quantico then?” said Novak raising his glass.

Hollick shook his head, “No, to Velasquez, Fletcher and Carnahan,” said Hollick correctively. Novak smiled as Hollick made his toast, but the smile withered by the time they had finished their drinks.

“Listen, Alex, there is something I want to tell you. I feel you deserve to know that this whole thing, it may not have been entirely your fault.”

Hollick looked up with intrigue, “What is it, John? Were the tires not properly inflated on our stakeout van?” he asked.

Novak took a deep breath, “Look, Agent Carnahan had a loose relation to Sterner.”

“A relation, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“They were cousins, second or third, twice removed or something,” replied Novak. Hollick trusted Carnahan and was sure this relationship was an odd coincidence.

“No way, he was my best friend, he was a good agent, he had some problems over the last six months, but he wasn’t a thief. He’s dead. He’s not even here to defend himself and you’re alleging he was a conspirator in the SOCAL robberies, without a shred of evidence?”

“I’m not saying one way or the other. We’re not even sure they were aware of their relationship, but we do have to look into it.”

Hollick looked deeply into Novak’s eyes, “John, you and Carnie worked this division way before I came along. Do you really think he was part of this?” Novak looked out the window before looking back at Hollick.

“Well I think it’s really strange that these guys evaded your unit for so long. I find it particularly odd that Lind and Sterner magically picked every high value bank pickup your unit wasn’t staking out, but like you, I don’t know shit and I can’t slander a dead agent’s name on half a hunch.”

Novak took another swig of whiskey and continued, “Carnahan was a good agent. His wife Cathy, she’s like a daughter to me. They have a beautiful family with two great kids. They own a nice home in Eagle Rock. They’re practically my neighbors. I would hate to think that Travis would have blown all that for something so trivial. I just hope my instincts are wrong this time, Alex.”

“Your instincts, John, the same instincts that told you to hire prostitutes to attend our Christmas party last year, you can call them party favors, but we both know what they were. I saw one of them doing coke. I had to tell Fletcher they were federal employees. I had to lie to my best friend to cover for you, because I love

you, you're like a father to me and I know you were going through a mid-life crisis, and I think you still are."

"Don't fucking patronize me, Alex!"

"I'm not patronizing you, John, but if your intuition is as finely tuned as your instincts are, my career is over, five years of my life flushed down the toilet."

"Alex--,"

"I'm not finished. Look, before you ruin a man's legacy, tarnish his reputation and throw his family to the wolves, you had better have some proof and much more than a crooked branch on the family tree. Have you even questioned Paul Sterner?"

"Not yet, but this guy's going down for capital murder no matter what. He isn't motivated to tell us anything. We'll be talking to Carnahan's family after the funeral. We're going to see if there's a stronger link between him and Sterner. We'll handle this, Alex."

"Okay, well, when should I leave for Virginia?"

"I have your tickets. You leave at six o'clock tonight from LAX," replied Novak.

"Tonight, isn't that a little sudden? You don't even have a robbery division."

"Well you're going to go change that. Send me the best, Alex," said Novak nodding. Hollick looked around the room with his mind filtering through the news of the morning. "Alex, leave Sterner to us, okay? You have to be on a plane in six hours. If I were you, I would go home and pack."

"That's a good idea," said Hollick nodding.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked Novak.

"Agent Hansen said my service weapon would be returned. Is it here?"

"No, they're going to keep it for more testing. They want to make sure there wasn't any friendly fire during the exchange," Hollick looked at Novak with disdain for the comment, "Alex, I know you didn't do anything wrong. It's just a standard procedure, when agents get killed in the line of duty," he added, Hollick nodded, utilizing the greatest of self-control, "Anyway, they're going to hang onto it for a while, so just wait for it at Quantico."

"I need the car. I want to see Fletcher before I leave. It'll be at LAX," said Hollick.

"No problem. Just, promise me that you won't tell her anything about this Carnahan/Sterner issue. I need discretion here. I have a reputation," said Novak.

"Don't worry, John. I won't tell her. I think it's bullshit anyway."

Hollick looked at the clock. He had less than six hours before his flight, less than six hours to detach from L.A. and latch onto the unknown. He stood up and extended his hand to Novak, "Thanks for having me, John. It's been a lot of ups, downs and in between's, but we walked in the sun for two months, didn't we?" queried Hollick. Novak nodded his head and gave Hollick a farewell hug.

"We sure did, Alex, the number one robbery team in America, it'll probably never happen again in my time," said Novak, still latching to Hollick.

Novak released Hollick, as Hollick said, "To walk in the shadows is not a curse and to walk in the sun is not a blessing. They are simply relative points of harmony, by which we can appreciate what we have, what we once had and what we hope to have. The sun means nothing without the shadows, nor would shadows without the sun."

"That's beautiful, Alex. Who wrote that?"

"I did, last night, it's about Carnie," said Hollick without expression.

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Me too, Goodbye, John, good luck with your investigation," replied Hollick in a flat tone. Turning around, he walked out of Novak's office, past his own office. He stopped and looked inside. He looked at the four empty chairs his robbery team sat in a week ago. He felt a great deal of sadness. His best friend lay in the hospital, his former best friend lay in the morgue, the posthumous subject of an internal investigation and he

had just lost everything he had built for the last five years.

Los Angeles County Jail
Monday May 27th, 1985 2:19 p.m.

Hollick pulled into the parking lot of the L.A. County Jail. The field office was nice enough to allow Hollick continued use of the car, a benefit he received as a division leader. The Crown Vic was nice, but did nothing to relieve the anxiety Hollick felt over his past, present and future. His world seemed to be coming apart rather quickly and the hush-hush nature of Novak had put Hollick much more on edge.

Hollick did however take solace in the little things. He was way ahead of schedule, having packed everything he needed and making the trek from Pasadena to L.A. Proper in just twenty minutes. Hollick brought nothing more than the essentials. He packed a suitcase with his clothes, a shaving kit and a Dictaphone.

The Dictaphone would come in handy, because he had no intention of leaving Paul Sterner to the L.A. field office. He had questions and he deserved answers much more than Novak did. Cathy Carnahan deserved answers, Maria Velasquez deserved answers and Jennifer Fletcher deserved answers. If Novak was right, if Carnahan was corrupt, everything else made sense, the team never stood a chance.

Hollick walked quickly up to the front doors of the jail. The LAPD and the LA FBI had a contemptuous relationship, always needing each other and hating every minute of it. Hollick certainly had his fair share of enemies, but Chief Rayburn had put this aside today, maybe because of Escondido, maybe because his coffee tasted good. Either way, he allowed Hollick to visit with Sterner, in private, off the record.

After unlocking the door, Rayburn allowed Hollick to enter the room. Paul Sterner lay in a makeshift hospital bed. He didn't present much of a threat. He was still suffering from the injuries he had sustained from the car crash and Hollick's gunshot. Sterner looked up from a copy of the L.A. Times he was reading. He was tall and blonde, but not too good to look at. He had the look of a hardened criminal who had lived a harder life. A smile came across his face, exposing his yellow teeth. He set the paper down on his lap and sat up.

"I remember you," said Sterner, smiling in a taunting manner. Hollick approached Sterner's bed. He was still bruised from the accident and in addition to that, there were some other well placed bruises, all of which could be chalked up to a slip and fall in a cell.

"You should remember me. I blew a hole through your shoulder last week," said Hollick smiling. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and retrieved one.

"Hey, buddy, can I have one of those?" asked Sterner, still bearing a smug grin on his face. Hollick knew he had to stay on Sterner's good side if he wanted to get answers. He handed Sterner a cigarette and lit it up for him, "Thank you, friend," he said.

"I'm not your friend, Paul. You killed my team, not exactly the act of a friend," replied Hollick. He was looking at the wall to avoid eye contact. Sterner laughed.

"You know, your team did a bang up job down there. I bet they're going to give you the key to the city, huh?" asked Sterner, laughing even harder.

"Maybe I should have killed you, Paul. They might have thrown me a parade."

"Why didn't you kill me?" asked Sterner.

"I spared your life because you were unarmed, nothing more, but now I'm glad I didn't kill you, that I resisted my urges."

"Why is that?"

"Because I want to know the truth and the truth lies within you. Nobody can tell me what you can. I guess

that makes you special.”

“Special, huh?” asked Sterner smiling.

“Yeah, would you be willing to talk to me about the SOCAL robberies?”

“You killed my partner and I’m going down for capital murder. I’m on the express lane to the gas chamber. What the fuck can you do for me?” Hollick took another drag and thought about what to say.

“Well, I can’t get you off death row, Paul and I can’t get you bail, so what else can I do for you? Would you like some plants in here, maybe some decorative tapestry?”

“Fuck you!” said Sterner with anger etched upon his face.

“I’m sorry. I’m not a mind reader. Why don’t you tell me what you want?”

“How about conjugal visits for starters, could you work that out, G-man?”

“Do you have a wife, Paul?” asked Hollick inquisitively.

“No, a girlfriend, she lives in Baker.”

“Does she know you take down armored trucks?”

“Now she does, but before all this she thought I was a contractor.”

“And you think she’s going to stand by her man?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Sterner smiling, Hollick nodded.

“Female companionship, I can understand that, but conjugal visits were enacted to help preserve family bonds, not to fulfill the sexual desires of incarcerated criminals and the privilege is usually denied to death row inmates. But, since you’re awaiting trial and not technically on death row yet, I think I could work something out for you, Paul, provided you give me the information I need. I know people in high places.”

“Really?” he asked, “Cool, can we get a contract or something?” Hollick dropped his cigarette on the floor and stamped it out. He walked closer to Sterner and took a seat next to him. Sterner had lain back down.

“You’re going to have to take my word for it, Paul. You see, this is our first and last visit. Once I walk out that door, I’m not coming back,” said Hollick. Sterner put out his cigarette and sat back up.

“Can I get another one of those?” asked Sterner, motioning to Hollick’s pocket. Hollick pulled out his pack of cigarettes and passed another one to Sterner, “Can I get a light?”

“It depends. Are we talking?”

“Yeah, we’re talking,” replied Sterner nodding.

“Good,” replied Hollick. He lit Sterner’s cigarette. Hollick produced the Dictaphone, “Paul, this is a tape recorder. I’ll be recording our conversation, okay?” asked Hollick. Sterner shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head. Hollick pushed the record button, “May 27th, 1985 2:47 p.m. This is Agent Alex Hollick of the FBI Los Angeles Robbery Division. The following is an interview with Paul Sterner, a suspect under indictment for the SOCAL robberies and corresponding murders committed between 1984 and 1985,” he set the recorder on a small table next to the bed.

“Now, Paul, I think you and your partner had some help with the SOCAL robberies. I think that help came from one of my agents, Travis Carnahan,” Sterner’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m right, aren’t I?” said Hollick, smiling with satisfaction at the thought of resolution. “Travis is your long lost cousin, who just happened to be working the robbery division, right?” Sterner exhaled, laughing once again.

“You are good, Agent Hollick, nice detective work!”

“How did Travis help you?” asked Hollick. Sterner took another drag from his cigarette.

He laid out his account of the SOCAL robbery spree, a tale of deception, betrayal and greed. Travis Carnahan had been helping them from the beginning. The run sheets hadn’t come from the dumpster and there was never an algorithm. The sheets had come directly from Hollick’s case file, delivered to the robbers by his second-in-command. Lind and Sterner knew about the stakeout locations only a few hours after Hollick had picked them.

Sterner cited a looming financial crisis as Carnahan’s motive. If this was true, Carnahan had never shared

his problems with the team, but it certainly equaled motive. Carnahan had regrets according to Sterner. He wanted out soon after he had gotten in, but he stayed on board for most of the ride. It was only the day before Escondido that Carnahan had turned on Lind and Sterner, threatening to kill them if they showed up at the sting.

Sterner expressed sadness over what had become of Carnahan. He had never meant to hurt him. The explosion was the result of a small fuel leak, which ignited from a ricocheted bullet. Sterner believed that Carnahan's last minute decision to save Fletcher had cost him his life, that he would have seen the fire had he not rescued her. He also hinted that Carnahan and Fletcher were sexually involved, at least according to Carnahan.

The commentary rubbed Hollick the wrong way and he figured it was a lie. Carnahan had lied to everyone, including Lind and Sterner. He had never told them about Hollick. Instead, he claimed he was the boss, the division leader. They bought it at first, but Sterner made it clear that they had some doubts towards the end. They continued to talk for over an hour. A beep rang out from Hollick's wristwatch. It was four o'clock. He had run out of time.

"I've got to go, Paul. Thank you for your cooperation," he said. He stood up, grabbed the Dictaphone and walked for the door.

"What about my girlfriend? Conjugal visits. We had a deal!" yelled Sterner. Hollick turned around and paused for a moment.

"I'll be in touch," said Hollick, pointing his finger at Sterner.

"Fuck you!" yelled Sterner. Hollick walked away, closing the door behind him. Hollick was deeply disturbed by Sterner's revelation, but happy to have the information on tape. FBI interrogators had not been able to break Paul, but Hollick had and for the price of two Marlboro Lights and a promise that he had never intended to keep.

Cedar Sinai Hospital Los Angeles
Monday May 27th, 1985 4:32 p.m.

Hollick was running out of time. Even though he had gotten the answers he wanted from Sterner, probably even more than he wanted, he had departed from the county jail straight into rush hour traffic. Cedar Sinai was close, but the bumper-to-bumper traffic was eating away at his timetable. Memorial Day had done little to alleviate traffic congestion. He used the time wisely, to ponder what he should do with the information he had just collected.

Hollick had initially planned to appeal the transfer decision. After all, his operation had been compromised from the very beginning. The tape could prove that much, but he also worried that the same audio would incriminate Agent Fletcher. She couldn't have been involved with Carnahan and certainly not with the robberies. Hollick knew he couldn't take Sterner's words without a grain of salt.

Hollick needed to see Fletcher before he left Los Angeles. He made up for lost time by leaving the Crown Vic in a no parking zone. The car had government plates, there was little chance he'd get a ticket. Once inside, he sidestepped the patient line. A few people bitched, until they saw his badge. After that, everyone became accommodating. Patients stepped out of the way, allowing Hollick a straight line to the front desk.

A lead nurse escorted Hollick up to the fourth floor of Cedar Sinai. The recovery unit was probably the calmest part of the building. There were no crying babies or whining patients, just people recovering from surgery, enjoying morphine, other high-grade sedatives and painkillers. The nurse cracked open the door to Fletcher's room, "Jennifer, you have a visitor, Honey," she said in a sweet, nurturing tone.

"Come in, Dad," said Fletcher. The nurse opened the door all the way and motioned for Hollick to enter.

“Hollick!” exclaimed Fletcher. She sat up, but was clearly still in pain. Hollick put his hands up.

“Don’t get up, Fletch. I’ll come to you,” he said.

He was still undecided as to whom he should share the new information with. He didn’t want his last visit with Fletcher to be an interrogation prompted by the words of Paul Sterner. Carnahan’s connection to Sterner made sense, not Fletcher’s. He wanted this visit to be as pleasant as every minute that Fletcher and Hollick had spent together. He sat in a chair next to the bed, “So, how are you?” he asked.

“I’m alive. Carnie saved my life. He died protecting me.”

“Yeah, I know. John told me,” said Hollick, clasping her hand.

“How are you holding up?”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said the past few days have been anything short of hell.”

“I know,” she replied with empathy in her eyes.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you were mad at me. I’m pretty mad at myself.”

“I’m just grateful that you’re alive.”

“I made a big mistake. I’m glad you’re not mad at me. I hope Maria and Cathy are as forgiving as you are,” he said, Fletcher nodded. “How is Cathy? I want to see her, but I’m afraid.”

“You shouldn’t see her, Hollick. She’s very upset. I talked to her on the phone. She thinks this is your fault, but I told her it wasn’t, that these things happen to cops every day and sometimes FBI agents. I know you feel terrible about both of them.”

“You know, if I had just listened to John, this would have never happened. The bad guys would have gotten away, but Travis and Joe would be alive. If I could go back--,”

“You can’t go back, you can only go forward and I know that, yet I don’t know where to begin doing that myself.”

“You never get over it, but I think over time you get through it. My dad once told me that long after a life-scarring event, the years start to solidify this barrier between you and the past, a protective layer. You still feel the pain, but it dulls and you become adapted to it. Eventually, pain becomes strength. You know, whatever doesn’t kill you...,”

“Yeah,” she said nodding, “So where do we go from here?”

“Well our division is finished. I’m through in L.A. per John’s request. I’ll be moving to Virginia in the next few weeks and you’ll be riding a desk indefinitely according to John.”

“Wait, he fired you?”

“No, it’s a transfer, some mystery promotion. I guess I should be grateful to even have a job at this point.”

“Is this that job you said you turned down, the one you told me about last week?”

“I don’t know what it is, Fletch, but I don’t want it. I want to stay in L.A., but I’m supposed to report to Quantico tomorrow morning. I actually have to get to the airport as soon as I’m done here.”

“You’re leaving tonight?”

“Yeah, I don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“But you’re coming back, right?”

“Of course,” he replied, Fletcher nodded.

“Listen, Fletcher, I know I made a lot of promises when I recruited you. I told you that this job was going to take you wherever you wanted to go, that the sky was the limit and I’m afraid I won’t be able to fulfill those promises. It’s not because I don’t want to or because it’s convenient to shirk obligations, but because my job has been taken from me, along with the power. I know that I owe you and I’m going to make it up to you, somehow.”

“It’s okay. You don’t owe me anything. I’m alive, aren’t I? In a few weeks, I’m going to walk out of this hospital on my own two legs, without crutches, no wheelchair. I mean, I could have been paralyzed or killed. What the hell do I have to bitch about?”

“You have incredible resolve, Fletcher,” he said proudly.

“That’s what my soccer coach used to say, ‘you have incredible resolve, Fletcher,’” she said, pretending to be a male soccer coach. She smiled and Hollick returned the smile. He looked down at his watch and looked back up at Fletcher.

“I have to go. I have to catch this flight, but I’ll be back for the funerals and to visit.”

“I know this sounds selfish, but I don’t want you to leave. There are things I want talk to you about, things that...,” said Fletcher hesitating.

Hollick clasped her hand again, “It’s okay, go ahead,” he said nodding, Fletcher looked down.

“No. These aren’t things you tell someone right before you put them on a plane.”

“So this isn’t like a Casablanca sort of goodbye?”

“Not exactly,” she replied shaking her head.

“Okay. You think about it. I’ll be back and if you still want to tell me, you can.”

“Thanks, be safe and have a good flight,” she said smiling. Hollick smiled and stood up from the chair. He leaned over and kissed Fletcher on the forehead. As he began walking out of the room, he thought about his feelings. The feelings shared between him and Fletcher were undeniable. The bond between Hollick and Fletcher had been growing in intensity right up until Escondido. Hollick had done a great job denying himself the forbidden fruit that Fletcher represented. She had planted a fateful kiss on him in a moment of drunken indiscretion. The Christmas party had changed everything.

He wanted to have her and it was more than just sex. Fletcher was tough, smart, funny, caring and possessed just about every other attribute desirable in a woman, but Fletcher was a colleague and making a move on her would have ended both of their careers. Because of this, Hollick had abstained and focused on the work as much as any man could.

Now, Hollick was perplexed, thinking about corruption on the part of his trusted comrade Travis Carnahan or some bizarre love triangle between himself, Carnahan and Fletcher. There were too many angles to know where to start, but his best defense was clearly the cassette tape from his interview with Paul Sterner. Hollick knew that if he could set things right with his conscience, he might be able to find some redemption.

Los Angeles International Airport
Monday May 27th, 1985 5:29 p.m.

Hollick’s mind reeled the all the way to LAX. After leaving the closest thing to love he had ever known, he had to come to grips with the betrayal of a trusted agent. To top it off, he had no idea what truly awaited him at Quantico. Being a pragmatist by heart, he tried to theorize what his fate might be in Virginia. A promotion after an incident of this magnitude seemed like a fairytale.

He sat waiting for his plane. Fifteen minutes came over the boarding call. Hollick suddenly remembered his unsanctioned interview with Paul Sterner. He began to worry. Chief Rayburn would talk to Novak. They were golfing friends. It would probably come up in conversation. It would be better if Novak heard it from Hollick first.

He walked over to a nearby pay phone and picked up the receiver. He slid in a pair of dimes from his pocket. As he went to push the first number, a slight resistance came over him. Instead, he dialed his home phone number. With Dictaphone in hand, he began rewinding the interview tape. After four rings, his machine picked up. At the sound of the beep, he pushed play, pressing the Dictaphone against the receiver.

This would serve as an insurance policy should the worst happen in Quantico. Someone would find the tape, his landlord Mr. Castillo most likely. When the interview ended, he hung up the phone and picked it back up. Now it was time to call Novak. Hollick thought it best not to mention the tape. It was the only tool

he had to save his reputation, his career, perhaps his life. For now, it would be a secret.

Catching Novak at the field office was wishful thinking. It was Memorial Day and nearly dinnertime, but Novak liked to work. He wasn't much of a homebody. Hollick dialed the field office, calling Novak's direct extension, a line few people knew. Most others would have to go through Becky, but not Hollick. He was special. The phone picked up after two rings, "Federal Bureau of Investigation Los Angeles. This is John Novak."

"Hello, Mr. Novak. Are you happy with your long distance service?"

"Alex, I hope you're at the airport," replied Novak in a disappointed tone."

"Yeah, I'm at the airport, John. I've got about five minutes before I board."

"Well, what is it?" he asked. He seemed impatient and hurried. Hollick looked around before resuming the conversation. His paranoia had gotten the best of him.

"Listen, John, don't be mad, but I visited Sterner."

"Sterner?" he asked, "Alex, you're transferred. This isn't your case anymore!"

"I know, but I had to ask him about Carnahan before I left town. I had to know."

The conversation went silent for a moment, "Well what did he say about Agent Carnahan?" asked Novak. Hollick thought for a moment before answering the question.

"Carnahan was in on the SOCAL robberies. He was providing them with information, truck numbers, stops, even our stakeout locations," Hollick had confirmed what Novak had feared all day, an agent, one of his agents that had become corrupt, "John?" Hollick asked.

"Alex, please be honest with me. Have you told anybody else about this?" he asked. Confusion began to cloud Hollick's mind. Novak was supposed to apologize, offer to help appeal the transfer and fight to keep Hollick in L.A. His eyes swept across the airport again. This conversation was making Hollick nervous. It was time to withdraw.

"Nobody, John, but Carnahan's dead. What difference does it make now?"

"You let me worry about that," said Novak in a stern voice. "What else did he tell you, Alex?" he asked. Sweat began to drip down the receiver.

"I think I should go, John. I don't want to miss my flight. I'll call you from Quantico."

"Alex, wait," said Novak as Hollick hung up the phone. Hollick grabbed his bags and got in line to board. Once on the plane, he quickly found his window seat. The jet engine began to roar at the runway. Wheels began to turn. Hollick looked out the window at Los Angeles. He was avoiding eye contact with a woman who had just taken her seat, a beautiful blonde woman. He closed his eyes, wanting nothing more to do with today.

[Chapter 3: Initiation Rites](#)

Washington-Dulles Airport Dulles, VA

Tuesday May 28th, 1985 3:28 a.m.

Hollick awoke to the crash of wheels slamming into the runway at Washington-Dulles. The flight had been anything but smooth. Hollick had hardly slept. The six-hour flight had been plagued with turbulence and thunderstorms. Thoughts of Carnahan, Fletcher and Novak circled Hollick's mind in a sickening tilt-a-whirl nightmare.

Even the beautiful blonde seated next to Hollick did nothing to raise his spirits. The young college student had bored him with stories about her ambitions to go to medical school. Hollick was either non-responsive or politely quiet. He nodded and smiled, but never fostered the conversation. Even if he wasn't a wreck, he wasn't interested.

When asked about his job, Hollick simply told her that he sold men's shoes. He figured the more boring the lie, the less open-ended any follow-up questions would be. God forbid he told her he was an FBI agent. He would have to answer the same stupid questions that always came up in conversations. What could anyone ask a shoe salesman?

Rain was pounding the D.C. area. Hollick had become used to the occasional L.A. drizzle, but this was angry rain, machine gunfire rain. Rolling off the runway, the welcome announcement broke through boring conversations about the weather. All of the passengers seemed quite happy to be alive. Hollick was grateful too. However, with life comes consequence and the plane had just brought him to the next one.

He thought that Escondido may come back to haunt him, fearing his last minute phone call to Novak may have done more harm than good. If Novak understood that Carnahan had caused Escondido, then maybe he could smooth things over with the bigwigs at Quantico. On the other hand, Hollick worried that the new information would place his own judgment under scrutiny. After all, Carnahan was his second-in-command.

The wheels stopped. Bags were being removed from overhead compartments and doors were opening. An impatient line of passengers formed in the aisle of the cabin. Hollick bid his med student traveling companion a fond farewell. She smiled and returned the kind words. They had merged in the aisle, but quickly separated at the gate, her feet quickly moving away from Hollick and towards a set of payphones.

His eyes followed her. They stared at each other for a brief moment. A nervous smile and a break of eye contact gave Hollick a clue. A jealous boyfriend, a protective father or brother was probably in the picture.

He didn't want to make any trouble for her. He had his own troubles. Brushing it off, he walked past the baggage claim, looking for his ride to Quantico. He spotted a man holding a sign that read, "HOLICK."

The man was dressed in the same FBI attire as Hollick. His nerves still on edge, Hollick ignored him and continued his pace through the airport. "Agent Hollick," the man said, he stopped. The man grabbed his bag without asking and said, "Follow me please, Agent Hollick." He was polite, respectful and helpful, acting more like Hollick's chauffeur than a fellow agent.

He had failed to introduce himself, but Hollick was sure this was an oversight. The agent was a younger black fellow who was short and stocky, but not fat by any means, more muscular. His hair was high and tight. He was vigilant, glaring in all directions, yet focused on the task at hand. He acted more like a Secret Service Agent than a Fed. His mannerisms and body language seemed out of place.

Hollick followed the agent outside, where the machine gunfire rain had subsided to a drizzle. A Crown Vic sat in the drop off zone along with two more agents. One agent stood guard over the car, a tall fellow with short dark hair and darker eyes. The other agent sat in the front passenger seat, talking on a car phone.

When he saw Hollick, he set down the phone and got out of the car. This agent seemed to be in charge. With a strut in his step and a winning smile, he said, "Agent Hollick, thank you for coming. I'm Agent Dunn and this is Agent Massingale," as he pointed to the tall fellow, still guarding the Crown Vic. "I can see that you've already met Agent Treadwell."

Agent Dunn was about Hollick's size, but a bit more muscular. He had stylized dirty blonde hair, blue eyes and wore non-standard issue threads, which were clearly inspired by Miami Vice. Dunn stood out from his agents, as a leader who had clearly established the pecking order. In contrast, Massingale and Treadwell seemed loyal, subservient and obedient.

None of them had offered to shake Hollick's hand, which made him a bit nervous. After placing Hollick's bags in the trunk, Treadwell climbed into the driver's seat and started the Crown Vic. Massingale opened the back door and said, "Agent Hollick," motioning for Hollick to step in. Hollick reluctantly climbed into the

car. Massingale sat next to him, while Agent Dunn rode shotgun next to Treadwell.

They sped away from the airport. Treadwell took a few turns that led them to the 28 South, a straight shot to Quantico. The FBI headquarters was actually in D.C., while Quantico was home of the academy. This worried Hollick. This request went outside the lines of standard procedure.

The car ride was quiet. Nerves had kept Hollick from asking about the meeting. The agents themselves were tight-lipped. After about ten minutes, Agent Dunn broke the silence, "Are you hungry, Agent Hollick?" he asked. "We can pull off in Manassas. I'm sure we can find a Denny's or something," he said, eyeing Hollick through the rearview mirror.

Hollick wasn't hungry. Although he hadn't eaten all day, the anxiety over this trip had worked wonders to suppress his appetite. He shook his head, "No, thank you, Agent Dunn, I ate on the plane," he replied.

"Bullshit," replied Agent Dunn without ever taking his eyes off Hollick. "What's the matter, Agent Hollick? You don't like chicken or fish, or do you just like the sauce?" he asked. Laughter erupted in the car, but Hollick wasn't laughing at all.

Hollick didn't eat airline food because he had gotten food poisoning while traveling to a convention in New York. On the plane, he'd had three glasses of wine to try to calm his nerves. He now felt uneasy in the care of these agents. He had no idea how much they knew or how they knew it.

Agent Dunn's stare continued to haunt Hollick, "How's the shoe selling business anyway, Alex?" he asked. Again, laughter erupted throughout the car. Dunn told inside jokes, but Hollick had already figured it out. The girl, his flight companion, she was planted to watch Hollick, to make sure he got on that plane at LAX.

"The girl," Hollick muttered under the laughter.

Dunn had heard him, "Cindy? Yeah, she's just great. Don't you think so, guys?" Dunn asked, looking around at his agents, who naturally agreed.

"Great ass," Massingale added nonchalantly.

"You know, I told her to quit the bureau and go work out in Hollywood. What do you think, Alex?" asked Dunn, Hollick nodded his head in a subdued fashion.

Hollick was genuinely afraid. He knew the bureau had gone to a lot of effort to make sure that he left L.A. and came to Virginia. At first, he thought he was going to be fired, but now things looked far more sinister. Hollick had to do something, despite being in the custody of Dunn and his comrades, in a car going who knows where.

He reached for the door handle in a futile attempt to leap out of the car, but the door was locked on the inside. The other agents laughed at Hollick.

"You have to be on the outside to do that, Agent Hollick. Besides, you wouldn't want to scar up that pretty face of yours," said Dunn. His goons went into stitches.

Agent Treadwell took the exit to Manassas without any objection from Dunn, "No, I told you I'm not hungry," said Hollick with a shrill of anxiety in his voice.

"Who said anything about food?" asked Dunn, smirking at Hollick in the mirror.

Hollick sat back as the car headed towards the city. The Crown Vic came to a rest at a beat up motel a few miles from Manassas. He looked at a flickering sign that read, "Clearview Inn," only a few of the letters didn't light up. The parking lot was empty, with only one other car parked on the side next to the office.

"What are we doing here?" asked Hollick. Dunn stepped out of the car and walked around to the other side. He opened the door and joined Hollick and Massingale. A nod and a smile came from Dunn, but still no answer as to the detour. A syringe emerged from Dunn's pocket. A brownish fluid flowed inside. A few drops came out of the needle as Dunn pushed down on the plunger, "What's that?" he asked.

"It's horse tranquilizer," answered Dunn.

"What's it for?"

"It's for horses, Agent Hollick and this particular tranquilizer is called acepromazine. It's typically used to

bring down problem horses. The guy I get mine from uses it to fix horse races. It has all kinds of applications. In fact, a well measured dose could bring down an eight-hundred pound mustang,” the two men stared at each other for a brief moment, “How much you weigh, Agent Hollick?” he asked.

Hollick glanced over at Massingale, who wore a smug smile. He looked back at Dunn, who raised his eyebrows for a quick moment. This was the end of the line. Hollick had no options, but he had no intention of making this easy either. It started with a violent elbow to Massingale’s chin and ended with a click from Treadwell’s service weapon. Hollick put his hands up, while Dunn just sat there laughing. Massingale held his chin in shame.

“So, how much, Alex, one-sixty, one-seventy?” asked Dunn, Hollick nodded. “That’s what I thought,” he said. Massingale’s arms came around Hollick, bracing him for the shot. “You’ll have to forgive me, Alex. I forgot to bring iodine, but don’t worry, I didn’t just pull this out of some junkie’s arm, or did I?” he said. The needle pierced Hollick’s flesh. The fluid traveled from the syringe into Hollick’s veins. After that, things got fuzzy. A daze came over Hollick for fifteen minutes. The car was moving again, but he had no idea where they were going. Dunn and Massingale took turns taunting Hollick, even pointing guns at his face. Under the sedation of horse tranquilizer, Hollick was rather indifferent to the melee, then incoherent and finally unconscious.

Undisclosed Location
Tuesday May 28th, 1985 1:09 p.m.

Hollick awoke in a daze. His vision was blurry and his muscles were weak. He tried to move his arms and legs, but to no avail. Cuffs restrained his limbs to a steel chair. Heavy-duty bolts held the chair firmly in place. Ice-cold water soaked through Hollick’s clothing, but he was still too numb to shiver. Darkness painted the walls, but a small amount of daylight bled in from some cracks.

Hollick tapped his foot and listened. The clack of concrete rang out, but with unusually high reverberation. This was a warehouse. A dim light slowly turned on above Hollick accompanied by a quiet electrical buzz. Footsteps sounded out in the distance, coming closer with an almost deafening reverb. A large figure appeared in the doorway. Hollick’s eyes strained to make out the finer details.

“Alex Hollick, FBI Agent, a real American hero,” the stranger spoke in a sarcastic tone. Hollick said nothing, trying like hell to figure out where he was. “You’re a real stand-up guy, Hollick, a real role model for dead agents,” the man added.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Shut the fuck up!” yelled the man. He lunged at Hollick, throwing a fist in his face. The force of the punch nearly broke Hollick’s nose. The daze had returned. Hollick spit a small amount of blood onto the floor.

The man grabbed Hollick’s chin and pulled his head up. Hollick’s soft hazel eyes met with angry yellow. This man was not Agent Dunn, Massingale or Treadwell. He was a large man, perhaps an ex-football player or the head coach of some crappy high school team. He pulled out a .38 Revolver and pressed it against Hollick’s lips, “Come on, bitch, open up, open wide,” he said.

The barrel entered Hollick’s mouth. He pulled back the hammer, “Hmm, how does that taste, Hollick? You like that?” he asked, sliding the barrel in and out of Hollick’s mouth in some homoerotic gesture. The barrel came out, allowing Hollick to speak.

“If you’re going to kill me, just kill me,” said Hollick.

“You’re going to die, Hollick, but I have one question first,” said the man. Hollick began losing consciousness again, but a slap in the face woke him back up, “Hey, asshole, I’m talking to you,” he said, Hollick nodded. The gun lowered, level with Hollick’s eyes, “Why did you and Carnahan sell out the team?”

he asked in a lower voice. "Tell me, motherfucker!" he shouted, widening his eyes and caressing the trigger. The barrel of the gun nearly touched Hollick's eyeball.

Hollick carefully took a breath, "Carnahan was the traitor, not me," he replied.

"Bullshit!" he yelled. He paced around the room before approaching Hollick again. Pointing the .38 at Hollick's face, he said, "Admit it asshole or I'll pull this trigger. I'll kill you right here, right now."

Hollick shook his head, "No," he replied in a soft but rebellious tone.

"I've got hollow points in this gun. You know what a hollow point would do?" he asked, Hollick didn't respond, "It would shatter your skull, shred your brain and sever your spine. Now I want answers you little faggot!"

"Fuck you!" shouted Hollick. A bullet flew over his head. His eardrums shook as the shot rang out with a painful reverberation. A faint whiny noise soon took its place.

Another man rushed into the room, this one was in a lab coat and unarmed, "What's going on? Did you kill him, Copeland?" asked the man. Hollick was unsure if these names were fake or real but he tried to memorize them. Coach Copeland.

"No, Alden, it was just a warning shot, but the next one will be the last, Hollick. You hear me, bitch?" asked Copeland. Hollick coughed up a little more blood. Alden rushed over, "Check him out, Doc. We could be here for a while," said Copeland. The coach lit up a cigarette while Dr. Alden took Hollick's vitals, "How is he?"

"He's dehydrated, he needs some fluids, but otherwise he's okay," replied Dr. Alden. He walked over to a dark blue camping cooler and retrieved something. Ice-cold water came pouring into Hollick's throat, quenching his thirst.

"Thank you," said Hollick. Dr. Alden ignored him as though this was just another job. The good doctor produced a syringe and filled it up with a mysterious brown fluid, "What's that for?" he asked.

"The pain," said Alden, plunging the fluid into Hollick's veins.

"What pain?"

The barrel of Copeland's .38 slammed against Hollick's skull, which all but knocked him unconscious. "I'm going to leave you to think about things," he said. Copeland walked away and Alden followed. Hollick passed out once again.

Eight or nine hours had passed by the time Hollick awoke. The room was dark again, only this time, pitch black. Hollick felt a bit stronger than before he had passed out, but he also felt sore. The restraints had become increasingly uncomfortable. His arms and legs wanted to move. His headache had subsided, but his brain felt like putty. Sedatives had caused Hollick's mind to play tricks on him.

A sequence of mental images came to Hollick. He had dreamed of a raunchy sexual encounter with Fletcher, which had played out several times before in his head. In his dream however, Fletcher was kinkier than Hollick had ever imagined. She was doing things even he hadn't fantasized about doing. Fletcher was not a good girl in Hollick's dream, but rather a harlot eager to please. While that part was all well and good with Hollick, his dreams had odd gaps, filled with nightmare visions of Velasquez and Carnahan dead.

Worse were the transitions between dirty sex with Fletcher and morbid visions of his dead agents. In one instance, Fletcher was pleasuring Carnahan in a pool of blood and a pile of money. They were both laughing at Hollick.

The light above Hollick came on again. Soon followed the footsteps of what seemed to be a few people. Dr. Alden was back to look at Hollick. If nothing else, Alden was thorough, once again checking vitals and hydrating Hollick with cool water. Copeland was in the distance, he was holding a plastic bag. The bag swung back and forth. An irritating whistle grew louder as Copeland came closer.

The scent of Chinese food permeated the room. Salivating at the sweet smell of Chicken Teriyaki, his mouth began to water. Hollick hadn't eaten in almost two days. He was becoming malnourished, "Hey,

Hollick,” said Copeland smirking, “I think we got off on the wrong foot, buddy. Are you hungry?”

“Very,” replied Hollick, avoiding direct eye contact. Crouching down on his knees, Copeland opened the bag, before shoving it in Hollick’s face.

“That smells good huh, Hollick?” he asked, Hollick nodded. He placed the bag on the floor beside him, “You want that food, don’t you? You don’t want to starve to death in this shithole,” Hollick looked at Copeland, “If I was in your position, I’d do just about anything to survive, so why punish yourself?” he asked. Hollick stared at Copeland, listening to his sales pitch, “I’ll give it to you, if you just tell me why you sold out the team.”

“Fuck you!” said Hollick through gritted teeth. The bag of food went flying, hitting Hollick in the face. Copeland stood up and began to remove his belt. Hollick flinched, expecting a whipping, but there were other plans.

“We’ll take it from here, Agent Copeland,” said a familiar voice. Copeland quickly turned around. Agent Dunn walked in with Massingale and Treadwell.

“Sir,” replied Copeland as he put his belt back on.

Agent Dunn smiled at Copeland, “Nothing yet I take it?”

“No, sir, no admission of guilt,” he replied. Dunn looked down at his watch.

“Okay, look, it’s almost midnight. Go home and see your wife. I’ll call you in the morning. We may need you back here,” he said while glancing at Hollick.

Copeland nodded and looked back at Hollick, “I’ll see you tomorrow, sweetheart,” he said, giving him a kiss on the forehead. As Copeland left the room, Hollick felt a little sympathetic for Mrs. Copeland. Agent Dunn approached Hollick. He was sipping on a cup of coffee. He looked well rested, showered and shaved from the night before. Dunn looked down at Hollick for a moment. Then he watched Copeland leave the room.

“Not very nice, is he, Alex?” he asked.

“Fuck you! You tie me up, kidnap me and beat me like an animal! What is this?” shouted Hollick. Dunn crouched down on his knees, just as Copeland had. He picked up the bag of Chinese food and began munching on an eggroll. He was savoring every bite while Hollick watched. Then Dunn answered him, with food still in his mouth.

“You know, Alex, the sooner you talk, the sooner we’ll listen,” he said.

“But I didn’t do anything. It was all Carnahan. I can prove it,” said Hollick. Dunn nodded and smiled. Then he stood up and began to walk away.

“Night shift, boys,” he said to Massingale and Treadwell, “You too, Doc,” he added as he walked past Alden, handing him his coffee.

Massingale and Treadwell left the room, leaving only Dr. Alden and Hollick. Alden seemed to be comparing notes and checking off papers like a high school science teacher. He appeared to be in his early forties with long grayish black hair and glasses. He was a small man, maybe five-foot-nine and one-hundred and twenty pounds.

“Hey, hey, Doc,” Hollick called out to the doctor. Dr. Alden looked up without saying a word, “Can I have some water please, sir?” he asked. Alden walked towards the door, looking both ways before pouring a glass of ice water. He approached Hollick carefully and began pouring the water into his mouth. Hollick almost choked gulping down the water. He looked Dr. Alden in the eyes, “Doc, are they going to kill me?” he asked. Alden began walking away without an answer, “Doc, didn’t you take the oath, the Hippocratic Oath?” Alden turned around and began walking back towards Hollick.

"I swear to fulfill to the best of my ability and judgment this covenant. I will respect the hard won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow. I will apply for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism," said Alden while approaching Hollick.

"So you know the oath," he said, interrupting the doctor, Alden nodded. "Doc, you have to help me. I didn't sell out my team, I didn't betray my country, please, help me."

Hollick hoped Alden would take mercy and use any ability he had to help him escape. Dr. Alden put his hand on Hollick's shoulder and smiled, "Son, I know nothing of your previous matters. I am a doctor. I am here to help you. This is not, therapeutic nihilism, nor is it apathy. My job is to provide you with health care, period. I can't help you escape your fate, whatever that may be. I can only make it easier and less painful," said Alden in a sincere tone.

"What's going on?" asked Massingale. Caught off guard, Alden quickly began checking Hollick's vitals, even though he had just done so.

"Just checking vitals," replied Alden. Treadwell began wheeling in a large speaker, then another and another. Massingale started to bring in what looked like stage lights.

"Doctor," said Massingale to Alden. He looked up from Hollick, "Prepare Agent Hollick for phase two," ordered Massingale. Alden nodded and pulled a tray on wheels over to Hollick. He began rifling through his medical kit.

"What's phase two, Doc?" asked Hollick anxiously.

Alden kept his eyes on his work, "I don't know," he replied. The good doctor pulled out a bottle dropper, "Stick out your tongue," he said. Hollick complied and the doctor placed two drops of liquid on Hollick's tongue. A tingling sensation soon followed.

"What was that, Doc?" asked Hollick.

The doctor began preparing a syringe, "Lysergic acid diethylamide," he replied. Hollick gave him a look of confusion, "It's LSD, Hollick," he said, clarifying his medical jargon.

"What's going to happen to me?" asked Hollick. He had studied drugs in his psychology classes at Harvard, but Hollick had no experience, not even pot.

"You're going to feel a change in sensory perception, such as time and space. Your emotions, memories and awareness will be altered. Your auditory and visual senses will change and you may experience hallucinations. One side effect is an after image or tracers of moving objects," Alden told Hollick as he injected a syringe into him.

"What's that there?" he asked looking down at the needle.

"Vitamin C," replied Alden.

"What's that for?" he asked in an anxious voice.

"Better absorption, of the LSD," replied Alden.

"Doctor," yelled Massingale from the other side of the room. Alden looked up from Hollick, "Let's get this show on the road." He and Treadwell had hooked up a lighting and sound system. The warehouse looked more like a nightclub.

Alden walked over to Massingale, Agent Dunn's de facto second-in-command, "He's ready. Is there anything else I can do?" asked Alden.

Massingale looked at Hollick, "No, Doctor. You've done a great job. There's a couch out in the lobby. Why don't you go rest for a bit? We'll call you if we need anything."

"Are you sure?" he asked, Massingale put his arm around Alden and began guiding him out of the room.

"Doc, you don't want to see this, trust me. If we need your assistance, we'll come get you," he said as he showed Alden to the door. Massingale turned around and walked towards Hollick with a smile, "Agent Hollick, are you comfortable?" he asked in a patronizing tone.

“Fuck you, asshole!” said Hollick as he clenched his fists in rage. Massingale laughed at him. Then he punched him in the jaw, surely this was retribution for the elbow to the chin. He walked to the other side of the room and plugged in a movie projector, “I think we’re set, Sean,” he said. He flipped on a projector and the show began.

The effects of the LSD were already taking shape. It had come on mildly, but fast. He tried to fight the effects, first, by closing his eyes, but that only made things worse. Music began to blast from the speakers. Lights started to flicker and flash. Then the projector fired up, spraying images across a screen, which was affixed to the wall.

The music was Donna Summer’s 1977 discothèque hit, “I Feel Love,” the extended play version, just over eight minutes, playing repeatedly. The lights flickered like some horror movie rock show, blinding Hollick with bright neon colors over one big red light. The out of sync lighting, paired with the repetitive dance track was wearing thin on Hollick.

The film is what broke him, a slide show of crime scene photos taken from the SOCAL sting operation. Pictures of Velasquez and Carnahan dead and Fletcher covered in her own blood were cut with images of the American flag waving. Hollick began screaming. Treadwell and Massingale laughed hysterically.

Hollick wanted to vomit, but had nothing in his stomach. He began dry heaving until he finally closed his eyes. The room felt like it was spinning, but anything was better than watching the slide show. Massingale walked over to Hollick and began slapping him, “Wake up, Hollick, wake up!” screamed Massingale. Hollick’s eyes opened, they were glassy and his pupils were dilated, “You’ve earned this, Alex. I don’t want you to miss anything,” he said with a cruel smile.

Massingale walked back to Treadwell and the pair left. Hollick had no idea where they were going, but they left the lights and music on for him. He looked at anything in the room to avoid watching the images of his team. Two hours passed. Hollick had endured the audio/visual assault on his senses. He began to wonder if he was asleep or awake. Massingale and Treadwell eventually returned to the room, this time with a woman.

She walked towards Hollick, a tall thin brunette with light eyes, both scantily clad and gorgeous. Jennifer Fletcher’s stunt double had just walked into the room. As she approached Hollick, the clothes came off. He could see that her body was athletic, with curves in all the right places. She had the face of an angel, a sensual smile and the scent of a womanly perfume. Her naked body sat atop his lap.

She began rubbing herself all over him, grinding herself fiercely against him. She looked at him, running her tongue over her lips in a sultry way. She began nibbling on his neck. Hollick’s senses intensified as his sense of reality blurred. He wondered if this was a hallucination. The woman lifted her head and looked Hollick in the eye, “Fletcher, is that you?” he asked. The woman smiled and started laughing.

“Do you like what you see, Hollick?” asked the woman. She continued to laugh. Hollick began to laugh with her, but the laughing soon turned into a fit of crying. She grabbed Hollick’s face, “Hollick Look at me!” she said, “Tell them what they want to know or they’ll kill me,” she said. She nodded, reaffirming her statement.

She embraced Hollick for a brief moment, stood up and retrieved her clothes. When she left, everything stopped. Even the light above Hollick went out. The bedfellows of silence and darkness had returned. Hollick was left alone with his thoughts. It seemed deliberate, like the next phase of the plan, now that the second part was over.

Hollick drifted in and out of sleep for four more hours. He had the same odd dreams from the night before, only more intense. Fletcher, Carnahan and Velasquez were there along with Copeland, who was now part of the blood lust orgy nightmare, using Fletcher as a pawn to get the best of Hollick, to access his emotions.

The spray of a garden hose woke Hollick from his nightmares. Hollick almost choked on the freezing cold water. The water stopped. He opened his eyes to see Agent Dunn holding a cup of coffee. Massingale was

holding the hose and Treadwell had just turned off the main valve. This was a terrible sight to wake up to, but still far better than what he had gone through the night before.

“Quite a night, huh, Alex?” asked Dunn, smiling while his goons snickered. Dunn approached Hollick and looked down at him, “Starting to get the picture yet?” he asked, Hollick shook his head.

“I know one thing, Agent Dunn,” he said.

Dunn was intrigued. He crouched down and looked into Hollick’s eyes, “Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“You and your goons aren’t with the FBI. You’re CIA agents,” he said. Dunn began laughing and his goons joined in following his lead, as they always did.

“Wow, drugs really do destroy your brain!” exclaimed Dunn. His agents once again joined in the fun. Dunn took a few steps back and focused on Hollick, “Alex, who my associates and I represent, is irrelevant. It’s a simple equation, friend. Admit to your involvement in the SOCAL robberies and we can all go home,” Hollick shook his head, “No, you’re sure? Fine, Alex, have it your way,” he said in a disappointed tone.

Dunn and his goons left the room. Hollick contemplated how much more he could take. He knew if he admitted to something he didn’t do, he would probably be killed, even before Sterner. If he kept telling the truth, he might die anyway in this concrete hell. A few minutes later, Copeland charged through the door.

“Hey, Hollick, I heard you like to smoke!” he shouted. As he neared Hollick, he lit up a cigarette. He began blowing smoke in Hollick’s face, “I heard you had a good time last night, tiger, oh I’m sorry. Do you want a puff?” Hollick continued to remain silent.

Copeland put the cigarette next to Hollick’s lips for what seemed like an eternity. The sweet nicotine was especially tempting in his state of pain and hunger. Hollick finally opened his mouth to take a drag, but Copeland pulled it away. He burned Hollick’s arm with the cherry of the cigarette. Burning tobacco singed his flesh. Screams of pain echoed throughout the room.

“That’s how it’s gonna be, bitch, slow and painful! We are gonna have some fun today!” shouted Copeland.

“Stop!” said a voice from the doorway. Dr. Alden walked into the torture room.

“What is it, Doc?” asked Copeland. He was clearly irritated with the interruption.

“I haven’t checked his vitals in eight hours. This is my patient, do not start without me,” said Alden.

Copeland stood aside and let Alden go to work. Agent Dunn stormed into the room only a few moments after Alden.

“What’s going on, Dr. Alden?” Alden stood up and looked at Agent Dunn.

“We need to talk,” said Alden. Dunn nodded and motioned for Alden to follow him. Outside the torture room, Alden laid down the news for Dunn, “Agent Hollick is suffering from starvation, dehydration and muscle atrophy. If he doesn’t get real medical attention in a hospital, he could die within a few hours,” he said.

“Fuck,” muttered Dunn pacing around, “Are you sure about this, Doctor?” he asked.

“He needs care, care that I can’t give him here,” he replied, Agent Dunn nodded. He opened the door and motioned for Massingale and Treadwell to return to Hollick.

“Wait here, Dr. Alden,” he said as he closed the door behind him. Agent Dunn joined his goons, including Coach Copeland. They all stood in front of Hollick, “Agent Massingale, secure Agent Hollick,” ordered Dunn. Massingale drew his weapon and pointed it at Hollick, who was now shaking. “Alex, this is your last chance to confess. If you do not, my agent will kill you where you sit,” said Dunn. Hollick looked at Massingale, who himself was visibly nervous. “What do you say, Alex?” he asked.

Hollick hoped that this was a bluff, but he couldn’t be sure. He had to take the risk. He thought about what they might do to Fletcher if he were to admit to the corruption. In the last twenty-four hours, death had become increasingly acceptable, one bullet and then eternal sleep. Hollick looked over at Massingale and then back over at Dunn, “I say fuck you, Agent Dunn, sir.” The agents all laughed at the reply, including

Dunn.

Massingale looked over for the order, “You know what, put the gun away. I don’t want to clean up the mess,” Dunn said.

Dunn walked over to Dr. Alden’s portable medical center and wheeled it over to Hollick. He took off his coat and folded it neatly on the tray before rolling up his sleeves. Dunn turned his back to Hollick and began putting on some medical gloves. He drew a syringe from the bag, filled it with fluid and cleared the air from it. Then he looked back at Hollick, “Alex, this is liquid cyanide, about fifteen times the amount needed to kill a human. I’m going to give you one last opportunity to confess or I’m going to inject this into your veins. You will die an extremely painful death in a matter of minutes. Do you understand, Alex?” he asked. Hollick stared at the needle and thought again about Fletcher, this time about never seeing her again.

“That’s not the way I’d wanna go,” chimed in Copeland with a pained look on his face. Dunn moved towards Hollick and put the needle to his skin.

Hollick’s eyes widened, “Wait, you’re making a huge mistake, I’m innocent!” screamed Hollick. It was a last ditch effort to save his life. Dunn stabbed him with the needle and pushed down the plunger as Hollick screamed. He fought it for about a minute, squirming around and struggling violently. Even the chair began to give way, but did not detach from the floor to which it was bolted. Hollick could hear Dunn and all his goons laughing at him. His vision blurred as he shook, until he saw nothing but black and his body slumped over in the chair.

Chapter 4: Changing of the Guard

F.B.I. Academy Medical Infirmary Quantico, VA
Monday June 3rd, 1985 7:57 a.m.

Nurse Rachel Finn sat behind her desk. Her day had just started at the infirmary of the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. She was scrambling to finish paperwork from the prior week. Her glasses hung off the edge of her nose. She squinted trying to decipher handwriting from the doctors. Most of her job involved paperwork pertaining to new recruits physicals and treating minor injuries that resulted from the rigorous training of new “would be” agents.

Finn was an attractive brunette in her early thirties who had a mousy nature about her. At first glance, one would assume she was a librarian or teacher. She was in fact the lead nurse of this unit and responsible for the care of future field agents. Handpicked by the bureau from thousands of applicants, Finn was considered one of the best.

She and her assistant, Nurse Susan Moyer handled all primary care responsibilities at Quantico’s training facility. Moyer was a younger blonde who worked at the direction of Nurse Finn. Today, Moyer was bandaging a sprained ankle that a new recruit sustained during a morning jog. The new recruit, Sheppard was anxious about his injury so he kept asking the same questions of Nurse Moyer, “Is it broken? Are you sure it’s not broken?” he asked nervously.

“It’s just a sprain,” said Nurse Moyer in a reassuring tone. Sheppard had good reason to worry. A broken ankle for a new recruit could be a career ending injury. With far more applicants than positions, the FBI had the luxury of picking winners and losers.

Dr. Walter Abernathy walked through the door into the infirmary. Abernathy was the only doctor who worked full time at the academy. As a man in his sixties, Abernathy had served as a medic in every war since and including World War II. At the end of Vietnam, Abernathy was offered the position of head physician at Walter Reed Medical Center, caring for wounded veterans. He opted for Quantico instead.

Despite all the blood and violence he had seen, Abernathy was a pleasant man who enjoyed his job. While the nurses did the majority of his work, Abernathy treated his small staff well. As he walked past Nurse Moyer, the young recruit, Sheppard tugged on his lab coat. Dr. Abernathy stopped and looked down at him, "Doc, could you please look at my ankle? I think it's broken," asked Sheppard. Nurse Moyer rolled her eyes at Abernathy. The doctor crouched down and began examining Sheppard's ankle, moving it in various directions. He looked up at Sheppard, who was still in a state of panic.

"It's just a sprain, son," replied Abernathy. Sheppard seemed relieved, despite Moyer's clear look of annoyance. Abernathy resumed his walk towards the desk of Nurse Finn. "Good morning, how's it going today?" he asked with a bright smile. Finn looked up. She gave him a brief smile and looked back down at her paper work, trying to concentrate.

"Good morning, Dr. Abernathy. Things are busy, as usual."

"Are last week's physicals ready to be faxed?" asked Abernathy.

"They will be. I'm almost done," she said in an assuring tone.

"Good. How's Patient Hollick?" he asked. Finn looked up and took off her glasses, revealing her almond colored eyes.

"Hollick regained consciousness on Saturday afternoon. His vitals are stable, quite normal I would say. His infections have cleared up and his wounds are healing. It's Hollick's mental state that I'm concerned with, he's been catatonic since he woke up. He hasn't spoken a word. Nurse Moyer has observed Hollick at night and he seems to sleep adequately."

Abernathy nodded and looked down the hall, where Hollick was placed in a make shift hospital room. The bureau had spared no expense for Hollick. His room had top of the line medical equipment and a rather comfortable hospital bed. Quantico was not the ideal place for Hollick's condition, but it worked well for private treatment. "I'm going to have a look," said Abernathy, Finn nodded and continued with her paperwork. Nurse Moyer was sending Sheppard on his way with his badge of courage.

Abernathy walked down the corridor of the infirmary. He poked his head into Hollick's room to see if he was awake. Hollick's eyes were open, fixed on the fluorescent light above his bed. Abernathy walked in and stood at the foot of the bed, "Alex," said Abernathy, Hollick didn't respond. His eyes remained on the light. Abernathy walked to the side of Hollick's bed and sat down. He looked up at the medical equipment that was measuring Hollick's pulse and the IV that dripped morphine into his veins. "Alex, I'm Dr. Walter Abernathy. You were involved in a car accident. You lost some blood and sustained a fractured nose. You're at Quantico Academy's medical infirmary. My staff and I are caring for you at the order of your employer, The Federal Bureau of Investigation," Hollick remained silent, his eyes glued to the light.

Abernathy retrieved a medical flashlight. He brushed Hollick's dark brown hair aside and opened his eyelids for a closer inspection. Abernathy shone the light in Hollick's hazel eyes, which were lifeless. He pushed on Hollick's chest, but could cause no physical reaction. He set down the flashlight, walked out of the room and headed back to Nurse Finn's desk.

Hollick slowly sat up. He was not catatonic, but rather acting. Hollick had been lucid since he awoke, but was faking his symptoms until he knew where he was. What troubled Hollick was the talk of his mental status. A compromised mental state in the FBI would mean termination at its best and extermination at its worst.

He was also concerned with Abernathy's car crash story. He didn't know if this was said to trick Hollick, or if the staff themselves didn't know what had truly happened to him. Hollick had remembered everything,

from the torture to the hallucinogenic drugs to the photos of dead agents he was forced to watch.

Hollick had rested well at Quantico. The switch from sedatives to pain killers seemed to help keep his nightmares at bay. He heard Dr. Abernathy talking to Nurse Finn, but couldn't make out the conversation. It sounded like whispering. Hollick carefully stood up. He walked as close to the door as possible, pulling his IV with him. He heard something about a "psych evaluation" by a "specialist" in the bureau. He peeked around the corner.

"Sue, could you change Patient Hollick's linens?" asked Finn.

"Yeah, just a minute, okay?" replied Nurse Moyer.

Hollick ducked his head back into his room. He pulled out his IV's gently as not to make any noise. With seconds to formulate a plan, he began to scope around for anything he could use to escape. He opened a medical drawer, amply supplied with syringes. He grabbed one and began pulling back the plunger, filling it with air. "You mind if I get some coffee after this, Rachel?" Moyer asked, Hollick stopped and listened intently.

"Sure," Hollick heard Nurse Finn reply. Moyer's voice was getting closer. Hollick crept across the room and hid behind the door. He wasn't exactly ready for a confrontation. He was still dressed in his hospital gown and a bit woozy from the morphine, but he figured the only chance for escape was a surprise attack, using Moyer as a hostage to get out. If he could get to the parking garage with Moyer, he could drive away, even if he had to crash the front gate.

It was a risky plan, but seemingly better than the alternative at the time. He had no idea what Quantico had in store for him, but he wasn't going to wait around to find out. Moyer's footsteps got closer. Hollick saw her approach the room through the window of the door. He didn't want to hurt her, but was prepared to do anything it took to escape.

Hollick pushed with all his strength and slammed the door into Nurse Moyer, knocking her on to the tile floor. Her head was gushing blood, but she was still conscious. Hollick leaped out from the door and reached for Moyer. Dr. Abernathy and Nurse Finn jumped out of their chairs.

Hollick pulled up Nurse Moyer. He put her in front of him, placing the syringe next to her throat. One shot of oxygen would cause a fatal embolism, killing the young nurse, which was of course a last resort for Hollick. Abernathy walked to the exit doors while Nurse Finn reached for the phone.

"Put that down, get over there," said Hollick motioning for Finn to move to the other side of the infirmary, away from the phone lines. Hollick pressed on, pushing Nurse Moyer towards the exit. She was crying rather loudly, begging Hollick to stop, but it was too late. Abernathy stood in front of the doors in a futile attempt to block the exit.

"Alex, let her go," he said, visibly nervous and desperately trying to pacify the situation.

"Back off!" screamed Hollick, beginning to press the syringe against Moyer's flesh.

She cried louder and began to beg for her life, "Please, I have children. Don't do this. You don't have to do this!"

"Shut up!" yelled Hollick, she was beginning to break his concentration.

"This isn't the way to get out of here, Alex. Even if you get past this door, there's no way you'll make it out of this building. Let her go, Alex," said Abernathy in a calm cool tone.

Hollick knew he was right. While the infirmary had almost no security, it would be difficult if not impossible to walk out the front doors of the FBI Academy with a hostage and a syringe. He hadn't thought this through. He looked around the infirmary, still clutching Nurse Moyer. He looked to his left, where Nurse Finn was standing. She had disappeared, "Hey, where did she go?" he shouted.

A stabbing pain pierced his shoulder. Nurse Finn had snuck up behind Hollick and injected him with a sedative. The syringe fell from his hand. He began to fall backward. Nurse Finn caught him mid fall and gently lowered him to the floor. Nurse Moyer collapsed and then burst into tears, nearly convulsing. She was

terrified of Hollick. Abernathy comforted her as best he could. Finn rose to her feet and walked to her desk to call for help.

F.B.I. Academy Medical Infirmary Quantico, VA
Monday June 3rd, 1985 4:24 p.m.

Hollick awoke in his hospital bed. He was in the same room he had tried to escape from hours earlier. His hands were cuffed to the sides of the bed. The light was off. The infirmary was much louder than before. Hollick heard the sounds of a camera shutter and an unpleasant conversation in the background. As his senses returned, he could make out the voice. It was Dr. Abernathy.

He was on the phone with someone, presumably from FBI headquarters. Abernathy was pissed. He demanded to know what was really going on with Hollick. This confirmed Hollick's suspicion that the Quantico medical staff believed he was the victim of a car accident. If this was the bureau's story, Hollick was sticking to it for now.

Hollick could tell the bureau wasn't giving Abernathy any information. He requested that Hollick be transferred to a different hospital, suggesting Walter Reed. The bureau had denied this request. He then told the bureau that Nurse Moyer planned to press charges against Hollick and file a lawsuit against the FBI, neither of which she could legally do. The U.S. government and its agencies, including the FBI were immune from lawsuits.

As an agent of the FBI, Hollick enjoyed the same protection. He could not be indicted by anyone outside of the federal government. All Nurse Moyer could do was take her one-week leave with pay and return to work. That didn't make Hollick feel any better about what he had put her through and now he was regretting his half-baked plan.

The most the bureau was willing to do was send an Agent to Quantico to babysit Hollick and ensure the safety of the staff. Keith Donovan was the agent the bureau placed at Quantico. Donovan was more of a representative for the bureau, but had all the same training as a field agent. His field was protective custody. His job was at one time to protect witnesses and informants who were helping with federal prosecutions against the mob.

Donovan was eventually promoted to Bureau Representative, which translated to public relations. Donovan would help quarterback the details of public information before it became public. He was a master at his craft and able to spin a story any way he needed to keep the public in the dark. Here, Donovan's job was to minimize contact between the Quantico medical staff and Hollick.

Hollick could hear Abernathy hang up the phone. He was talking to Nurse Finn about how the infirmary would run in Nurse Moyer's absence. It was decided that Nurse Finn would pick up the slack with Hollick's medical needs and Agent Donovan would serve as security. A nurse from Walter Reed would handle all other medical needs at Quantico. Hollick could hear footsteps nearing his room. Abernathy walked into the room, staying at arm's length from Hollick, despite the restraints. Hollick looked up at Abernathy, "Hello, Alex. Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Much better, thank you," replied Hollick.

"You know, you gave us quite a scare there," said Abernathy, Hollick nodded, looking down in regret.

"I know. Please give my apologies to the nurse."

Abernathy nodded and motioned for Donovan to enter the room, "Alex, this is Agent Donovan. He'll be keeping you company while you recover," he said.

Hollick extended his hand as much as the restraints would allow, "Nice to meet you, Agent Donovan," Donovan nodded and accepted Hollick's hand.

"I'm sorry to hear about your accident, Agent Hollick," said Donovan. Hollick nodded but was unsure what Donovan meant by the statement. Was Donovan being sold the same story as Abernathy?

"His vitals are normal and he seems stable, so I'm going to leave for the evening. If Alex needs anything, Nurse Finn will be at the front desk," Abernathy told Donovan.

"Thank you, Doctor. Have a good evening," he said.

Abernathy left the room. Agent Donovan turned on a small television, which Hollick hadn't noticed before. He sat down, pulled out a notepad and began writing. He wondered if Donovan was there to protect Nurse Finn or to interrogate him. He looked down at his hands, which were still cuffed to the sides of the bed. He looked back up at Agent Donovan, "Agent Donovan, could you take these off please? They're starting to hurt my wrists."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Donovan said with a smile, still looking at his note pad.

Hollick focused his attention on the television. The program was a faux news report, which featured stories about celebrities, both famous and infamous. Tonight's main feature was a piece on the Night Stalker, a serial killer who was terrorizing California. Hollick remembered hearing about the first few murders earlier in the year. He was so preoccupied with the SOCAL case that he hadn't watched much TV. This program was by far the most interesting to Hollick.

Agent Donovan had an odd taste in television for an FBI agent and well, a man. He mostly watched game shows, soap operas and daytime talk shows. His tastes were more in line with a housewife than a field agent. Hollick began to detest the shows that Donovan watched. Donovan didn't so much watch them as he did listen, while scribbling away in his notepad.

What was he writing? Hollick would try to look over without arousing Donovan's attention, but he never got a good look. Instead, he had to grow accustomed to Donovan's television choices. Hollick wondered if this was done to keep him from asking questions, which he was afraid to ask in the first place.

While the television shows were terrible, they provided some distraction. As Hollick sat in silence, he began reflecting upon the nightmares that had returned after Nurse Finn had pumped him with sedatives for attacking Nurse Moyer.

This time Hollick played the voyeur. He watched as Fletcher gave Agent Carnahan a lap dance in much the same way that the mysterious woman had done to Hollick just a few days ago in the torture room. That same room served as the setting. The same music, lights and slide show set the background. Carnahan was stuffing blood soaked money into Fletcher's panties as she straddled him. He was laughing and Fletcher was smiling. In this dream, Carnahan was covered in blood with bits of glass and metal protruding from his head, just as he had looked in the crime scene photos.

Then the music began to speed up, along with the flickering of the stage lights. Fletcher was moaning in ecstasy and grinding against Carnahan. She was becoming covered in his blood and screaming with pleasure. As the music and lights moved at an increasingly frantic pace, Carnahan climaxed. That's when Hollick woke up. He prayed that Nurse Finn would put him back on the morphine drip.

She came around later that night to check on Hollick. Finn walked cautiously into the room despite Agent Donovan's presence. She was still a bit shaken by the events surrounding Hollick's escape attempt. Finn checked his vitals, which were good considering what he had been through the past few days, "Alex, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"I feel better, but I'm still experiencing some pain. Nurse, I want to apologize for my actions earlier today. I wasn't myself," said Hollick.

"I'm sorry too. I hope we can move on from that and back to your treatment. Now you're experiencing some pain?" she asked, Hollick nodded. She walked over to the IV and fiddled with the fluids, "I'm going to put you back on a lower dose of morphine. This should help with the pain. In my experience, it's best not to overuse painkillers. Some patients become chemically dependent. I don't want you to experience further

pain, but we should be thinking about taking you off of morphine in the next few days.”

“I understand, Nurse, thank you,” said Hollick. Donovan continued to stare down at his notepad, scribbling away.

Nurse Finn walked back to the foot of the bed and faced Hollick, “From a physical standpoint, you’re doing great. The injuries you sustained are superficial. Your nose has a small fracture, you broke no bones and your vitals have improved dramatically since you were admitted. You’re very lucky, Alex. Most people would not survive an accident like the one you were involved in,” she said.

Finn turned around and exited the room. Hollick had wanted to ask her when he could leave, but not in front of Donovan. Hollick was unsure if she would know the answer, considering she was convinced this was a car accident. The morphine drip brought relief to the physical pain. It also blocked out the nightmares.

Hollick missed Fletcher terribly. He wondered if she was safe or if she had been dealt with in the same manner. He was optimistic that Fletcher knew nothing of Carnahan’s corruption, but his dreams told a different story. He was not yet ready to accept the possibility of Fletcher’s involvement.

He heard Finn outside talking on the phone. He was sure she was talking to Dr. Abernathy. Finn talked about how much Hollick had improved. Abernathy asked some question relating to the restraints. She said something about how they weren’t coming off anytime soon, which didn’t sit well with Hollick. Finn had also talked about something that would be happening tomorrow. Hollick was unsure if this pertained to his situation, but it was important enough for Nurse Finn to ask Abernathy to repeat himself.

The infirmary was quiet for the rest of the evening. Donovan scribbled and listened to bad television while Hollick pondered what lied ahead. He wanted to ask Donovan, but he had to remain committed to the car crash story until he knew more and that moment was seemingly imminent.

F.B.I. Academy Medical Infirmary Quantico, VA

Tuesday June 4th, 1985 9:11 a.m.

Hollick awoke the next day. He was still cuffed to his bed and Donovan was still guarding him. Donovan was drinking coffee and reading the same notepad he had been writing in all night. Hollick had slept well. There were no dreams or nightmares, just unconsciousness. His pain was beginning to fade along with his superficial wounds from the “car accident.”

Hollick had begun the morning with some toast and eggs from the Quantico cafeteria, which tasted rather good after a near week of starvation. Aside from the cuffs and the bedpan changes in front of Agent Donovan, things were looking up. He knew this “treatment” would only last for so long. He hadn’t been beaten within an inch of his life for no reason. Hollick tried to make conversation with Donovan for the first time, “Agent Donovan, what are you reading, just out of curiosity?” he asked.

“It’s classified,” said Donovan, without looking up. This was the standard FBI answer to sensitive information. He decided to try a different topic.

“So, Agent Donovan, what field are you in?” asked Hollick undeterred.

Donovan looked up, “Protective custody,” he replied.

He began to tell Hollick stories from his days as a field agent. Hollick had learned this trick long before he was recruited into the FBI. As a college student, Hollick learned that people loved talking about themselves in a flattering light, particularly the women he dated. He made a habit out of asking people these questions when he wanted or needed to get on someone’s good side.

Donovan didn’t really give up anything pertaining to Hollick’s situation, but his stories were entertaining and lowered the tension between them. Donovan told stories of the old days, when he was catching mobsters and pressuring them to break Omerta, the code of silence and persuading them to testify against their

associates. Hollick and Donovan began to sound more like old friends than captor and prisoner.

Then the door opened. A beautiful woman stood before them. She had black hair, blue eyes and olive skin. She couldn't have been a day over thirty. Her glasses hung off the edge of her nose, but in a completely different manner than Nurse Finn. It was more sexy than cute. A lab coat over a skirt, a low cut blouse and black high heels topped her off. She looked at Hollick with a smile before glancing over at Donovan, "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" asked the woman. She had dazzled them. They had no response. "I'm Dr. Patricia Jones. I'm here on behalf of the bureau," she said. Donovan and Hollick remained silent. Jones looked at Hollick, "You're Agent Hollick I take it?" she asked, trying to move things along.

"I am," replied Hollick.

"And you are?" she asked, now looking at Donovan.

"Agent Donovan, Ma'am, bureau representative," he said.

"I see," said Jones with her eyes still on him. "Well I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Agent Donovan."

"No, Ma'am, I have specific orders to watch him. Agent Hollick presents a threat. He attacked a member of the medical staff just yesterday," said Donovan. Jones looked at Hollick and then looked down at the handcuffs.

"Agent Donovan, you can stop referring to me as ma'am. I am a doctor, a psychiatric specialist. As a doctor, I have to safeguard my patient's right to confidentiality. Please leave the room. Agent Hollick seems properly restrained."

Donovan rose and exited the room, but it was apparent that he didn't like the idea of it. He had painted Hollick to be some kind of monster, to remain relevant to the situation. Hollick already liked Dr. Jones. She was beautiful, smart, mature and defied authority, the very foundation of the FBI. She possessed many of the same qualities as Fletcher, though without the endearing naivety.

Jones closed the door behind Donovan. She walked over to Hollick and sat in the chair that Donovan had just vacated. She opened her handbag and produced a manila folder, which read, "Agent Alexander Hollick." She began thumbing through the folder when Hollick broke her train of thought, "Dr. Jones, do you work for the FBI?" he asked.

"I do, Agent Hollick. I'm here today to ask you some questions," she replied.

"It's a psych evaluation and you can call me Alex," replied Hollick. Jones looked up at Hollick with a smile, nearly catching him staring at her breasts.

"I'm just here to make sure you're feeling better, Alex. You are feeling better?" she asked.

"Yes, much better," replied Hollick, trying to keep his eyes from wandering.

"I'm going to start with some basic questions, okay, Alex? May I begin?" Hollick nodded. Jones produced a paper and pen from her handbag and began.

"Please state your full name."

"Alexander James Hollick Jr."

"What is your date of birth, Alex?" asked Jones.

"November 13th, 1957," replied Hollick.

"Place of birth?"

"Boston," replied Hollick.

"Where do you currently live, Alex?"

"Los Angeles, well Pasadena."

"State your occupation."

"I'm an FBI Agent."

"What is your field?"

"Armed robbery," he replied.

“Who do you work under, Alex?”

“John Novak,” replied Hollick.

“Where did you attend college?”

“Harvard,” replied Hollick.

“Great,” replied Jones checking off a piece of paper. “Now, Alex, do you know why you’re here at the Quantico Medical Infirmary?”

“I was in a car accident.”

“That’s right. Do you remember the accident or the events that led up to it?”

“No, I don’t remember any of it.”

Jones took off her glasses, placing them inside of her lab coat pocket, “Alex, you flew into Washington-Dulles airport a week ago for a meeting. Your boss, John Novak sent you to scout new recruits for the robbery division. You got off the plane and left the airport in a rental car, this rental car,” Jones produced a photo of a white 1984 Ford Tempo on the back of a tow truck. The car slightly resembled a crushed aluminum can. Jones continued, “You were driving south on Route 28 in heavy rain. Somehow, your car ended up at the bottom of this ravine, just north of Manassas,” Jones produced a picture of the same car nestled against two trees. “Highway Patrol spotted the car on Tuesday morning. They found you unconscious. They alerted the FBI. You were rushed here to Quantico, due to the sensitive nature of your work. You remained in a comatose state until Saturday morning and in an unresponsive state until yesterday.”

“I don’t remember renting a car,” he said.

Jones produced a copy of a receipt, “This is a receipt documenting the rental car. It has your signature on it, Alex and its dated May 28th and stamped at 3:41 a.m., thirteen minutes after you got off the plane at Washington Dulles. A search of the car turned up your wallet, badge and the luggage you checked on the plane at LAX,” Hollick studied the photo. He became increasingly confused. Jones continued to explain, “When you were brought here to Quantico, they took blood samples. There were no traces of drugs or alcohol in your system. The highway patrol believes your rental car hydroplaned and skidded off the road. The bureau sent out a collision expert, who found this to be consistent with the position of the car.”

Hollick remained silent. He didn’t how to react. The story everyone else was buying seemed to be developing authenticity. If Hollick had been in a coma, all of the torture he experienced could be explained. Maybe he had only dreamt the kidnapping, drugging and torture. Maybe his dreams of Fletcher were only dreams within dreams.

“Alex, I know there’s some concern over the incident here yesterday, when you attacked Nurse Moyer. I don’t believe that you intended to hurt anyone. I believe that you are suffering from short-term amnesia. I think you were unaware of the events of May 28th and simply scared. I also think that in time, your memories of the last few days will return. Am I right?” she asked, Hollick nodded without looking at her.

“I didn’t want to hurt anybody. I just woke up here and I didn’t really understand what was going on, but I feel better now, much better.”

“Do you remember the last case you were working on, the SOCAL investigation?”

“Yes, Dr. Jones.”

“Would you mind describing the events of Friday May 24th?” she asked.

Hollick nodded and began recounting the events that led to the deaths of Joseph Velasquez and Travis Carnahan. He gave her the clean version, the one he had given to Agent Hansen. He omitted specific details. Carnahan’s corruption, Novak’s cautionary words and the Paul Sterner interview were left on the cutting room floor. He focused mostly on the high-speed chase and resulting accident.

Jones listened and nodded with understanding. She inquired about Fletcher and her condition at Cedar Sinai. Her face conveyed a sense of sympathy and understanding. She seemed to feel Hollick’s pain, even

though he hadn't talked about his feelings. His account of the Escondido incident read like a file, just as Novak wanted. When he was finished, Jones nodded and smiled, "Not much luck with cars, huh, Alex?" she joked, Hollick smiled and shook his head.

"Well, it is my opinion that you have suffered no long term mental effects or injuries from your accident. I will share my findings with Dr. Abernathy for review and then they will be submitted to the bureau." Dr. Jones stood up and extended her hand to Hollick, "It was nice speaking with you, Alex."

"Likewise," replied Hollick shaking her hand.

"Hang in there," she said, Hollick nodded.

Jones opened the door and walked out of the room. Hollick scanned her from head to toe as she left. He listened to the click-clack of her heels as she walked down the hall. Then he heard Abernathy's voice. He was talking to Jones about the evaluation. She gave Hollick a glowing evaluation as far as he could hear. When Jones left the infirmary, Donovan attempted to greet her, but she ignored him.

Hollick overheard Donovan talking to Abernathy, "I'll take that," said Donovan.

"But I haven't reviewed it yet. There's a protocol for these reports," he replied.

"I'll make sure this gets to the right people, okay?" said Donovan in a friendly voice.

The two men argued the issue for a bit, but Hollick had a hard time hearing the conversation. Their voices seemed to be further away than before. Hollick began to worry. He had done his part and complied. Dr. Jones seemed satisfied. Even Hollick was sure that a car crash was the only plausible explanation for the events of the last week. Still, Agent Donovan seemed intent on withholding her findings.

He returned to the room shortly after his skirmish with Abernathy. He must have thought Hollick hadn't heard the argument because he acted as though things were normal. He simply turned on the television, pulled out his notebook and returned to his scribbling. He had reverted to his typical attitude.

Hollick tried to resume a dialogue with Donovan, but he wasn't biting. He would either ignore Hollick or give close-ended answers. Hollick soon gave up trying to make chit chat. He spent the rest of the day watching soap operas and talk shows with Donovan. He tried to mull over what his future might be while reflecting on the last week of his life.

Hollick had enjoyed his short time with Dr. Jones. He had missed spending time with a beautiful woman. Jones had reminded Hollick of what he missed most about Fletcher, a woman he found both attractive and interesting. Hollick wondered what had become of Fletcher in the last week. He hoped that she was recovering as she said she would be.

Nurse Finn came by to check on Hollick around dinnertime. She checked Hollick's vitals and changed his linens. She had somehow moved past the incident and become more comfortable around him. She looked at him, "Your vitals are great, Alex. I think you're well on your way to a full recovery."

"Thank you," he replied. Finn turned her attention to Donovan, who was reading his notes and what Hollick suspected was the psych evaluation.

"Agent Donovan, these restraints are not good for his recovery. He needs to circulate his blood and use his muscles."

"Okay, thank you," said Donovan without looking up. Nurse Finn rolled her eyes and walked out of the room.

Hollick looked over at Donovan, "You know you should listen to her, Agent Donovan. She's a smart lady," said Hollick, Donovan laughed at the remark.

They began to watch television again. The one show Hollick actually liked came on the TV. It was the faux news show. Tonight's feature was a follow up piece from the day before about the Night Stalker. Hollick watched the intro stories with anticipation of learning more about the dark and mysterious California serial killer.

The phone at Nurse Finn's desk began to ring. She picked up and asked the caller to hold, "Agent

Donovan, you have a phone call,” she called out.

Agent Donovan looked up, set his notepad down and left to answer the call. He spoke very softly. Hollick couldn’t make out any of the words. The phone call was short. He returned to Hollick’s room and packed up his belongings. Turning off the television and the light, he left the room, “Hey! I was watching that!” yelled Hollick as Donovan walked down the hall.

Donovan set his bags down. At least that’s what Hollick thought he had heard. He listened closer. Without the television, it was far easier to hear background noises. “Take five, Rachel,” said Donovan to Nurse Finn.

She looked down the hall at Hollick’s room, “I’m not going anywhere. Alex is my patient and this is my infirmary.”

“It’s the people’s infirmary,” he said, “You’ve got a good thing here, Rachel, it’d be a shame to fuck that up,” he said in a lower voice.

They argued for a moment, but Donovan pushed her out of the infirmary, instructing her to leave for the evening. He assured her that Hollick’s needs would be met. Hollick sat up to listen as much as his restraints allowed. Ten minutes passed, but nothing. He knew that a heavy dose of resolution was on its way and not the kind he had hoped for earlier.

The front doors to the infirmary swung open and all but a few of the lights were shut off. Hollick sat back up. Heavy footsteps pounded the tile floor in perfect rhythm, getting louder and closer. Hollick feared these were the final fleeting seconds of his life. He started to blush, feeling a warm sensation come over his body.

A cold sweat began to shiver his bones. Clanging restraints were shaking the bed. Visions began to play through his head of Carnahan, Fletcher, Novak, Dunn and his goons, the Quantico staff and Jones. Hollick wondered why Novak had sent him to Quantico, to be tortured, interrogated and ultimately executed.

The footsteps stopped. Sweat had blanketed Hollick. His body had seized up, flexing every muscle. His breath, locked inside in his lungs. Hollick prepared to die. He waited, but still nothing. A shadowy figure appeared, lit only by a dim light outside in the parking lot. The figure appeared closer.

It was John Novak. Hollick began to calm down, but the shock hadn’t worn off. A sad look came over his face. A look that evoked the same regret Judas Iscariot must have felt after kissing Christ on the cheek. He knew he had sent one of his boys into the fire. He was struggling to find the words he needed to say. Hollick stared at Novak without a word, “I’m sorry, Alex, but we had to know too.”

[Chapter 5: The Black Room](#)

Hollick looked at Novak in disbelief. Novak pulled out some keys and unlocked Hollick from his restraints. Hollick stretched his sore wrists, massaging the ligaments with his hands. He sat up and looked back at Novak, who was now sitting in the chair that Donovan had called home for the last twenty-four hours.

It all sunk in. Everything that happened to Hollick was real, the kidnapping, the agents, the drugging and the torture. Agent Dunn and his goons were not figments of Hollick’s dreams, but real people ordered to put him through a sick and twisted game, challenging his loyalty to the bureau. Cindy, Dr. Alden and the mysterious Fletcheresque woman were all carefully planted to ensure Hollick would make it this far.

“How could you think I had anything to do with that, John?” asked Hollick.

Novak slumped back in the chair and then leaned forward, “I didn’t think, but I didn’t know,” he replied.

Hollick thought, carefully choosing his words, “When did you know about this, John?” he asked with a tone of suspicion.

“Alex, I can appreciate your desire to be let out of the dark, but now is not the time for questions, now is the time for a decision.”

“What decision?”

“Alex, you have come to a crossroads, not just in your career, but in your life. The last few days have been the most important days in your life so far. The chain of circumstances that have planted choice after choice has put you at the center of two options.” Hollick looked puzzled, trying to figure out what Novak meant.

“One path will lead to a career doing the most important work you will ever do, to protect the safety and security of your country, a career that most agents can only dream of, but will never know and an opportunity to reach your full potential, doing work of the most sensitive nature and utmost discretion.”

“And the other path?” he asked.

“You will be released from Quantico and honorably discharged from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You’ll draw a full retirement pension. You will be ineligible to work for any sector of the federal government for the rest of your life. The bureau will cut all ties and you will be free to do whatever you want, but I need your answer and I need it now, your final answer,” Hollick paused for a moment.

“This other path, it leads to the graveyard,” said Hollick rhetorically, Novak nodded. “Well this is a tough decision, but I think I’m going to have to go with door number one.”

“Good. I want you to shower, shave and change into your uniform. Donovan will help you clean up. We’re leaving for D.C. in one hour, okay, Agent Hollick?” Novak smiled and Hollick nodded his head, still adjusting to reality. Novak stood up and walked to the door. He turned to face Hollick, “Alex, I’m glad you chose the first path.”

The lights came back on. Donovan walked back into Hollick’s room. He approached Hollick and began removing the wires and IV. He helped Hollick up and brought him out to the main corridor of the infirmary. They waited at an elevator, “We have an hour, Agent Hollick, one hour, please use your time wisely,” he said.

Hollick nodded without a word. The elevator brought them to the academy shower room. Hollick entered the shower, which was empty, quiet and clean. This was the same shower that Hollick had used just over five years ago while training at Quantico. Donovan handed him an empty plastic bag, “Put your gown in there.”

Hollick disrobed, put the gown into the bag and handed it back to Donovan. He turned the knob in the shower and stepped in. The shower felt like a warm healing ray. The hot water helped soothe Hollick’s muscles and loosen his joints. He washed off the grime and adhesives from his various bandages and he reminded himself to be cautious.

There was nobody left to trust. He wasn’t sure if this was another ploy, but it was his only option. If he had chosen the other path, the bureau would have killed him. Hollick knew far too much and presented a risk should he be cut loose, as Novak had put it. Hollick was along for the ride whether he liked it or not.

After his shower, he shaved. Donovan watched the whole time. Hollick hadn’t grown much facial hair in the last week despite his half-Italian heritage, but he needed to look sharp. Novak had said so. He had to be presentable to the big shots, whoever they were.

Donovan placed Hollick’s bag next to him. When he was finished, Hollick placed the bag on the counter of the sink. He cautiously looked through his belongings. The Dictaphone was gone. He reached for one of his FBI uniforms and began dressing. He combed his hair and brushed his teeth. Then he looked in the mirror. Aside from some bruising and a few cuts, he looked like Agent Hollick always did, handsome, sharp and collected.

Novak entered the shower room for inspection, “Good, Good, you look good, Alex. Let me just fix this,” he said, unclipping his FBI photo ID and taking his badge away, “You won’t need those tonight,” he added. He threw them back in Hollick’s luggage. The bag was thrown into an empty locker, a padlock for peace of mind.

Hollick felt no better. He now had no way to identify that he was an FBI agent or even a U.S. citizen, but he was on board with this plan. Novak looked back at Hollick, “No fear in your heart and no doubt in your mind, Alex,” Hollick nodded hesitantly.

A Crown Vic waited outside. The 302 engine hummed. Donovan opened the rear door for Novak and motioned for Hollick to follow. He remembered Novak’s words about fear and doubt and reluctantly followed suit. Donovan would be driving. He looked in the rearview mirror at Novak, who nodded in approval. He put the car in drive and sped away from Quantico Training Academy.

This trip would be a forty-five minute drive north, zigzagging along the Potomac River. The drive was mostly quiet with no radio and little in the way of conversation. Novak leaned toward Hollick and talked softly into his ear, “Alex, these people we’re going to see tonight are not to be trifled with. Do you understand me? Follow direction, don’t ask too many questions and do not speak unless spoken too, okay?”

Hollick nodded and looked out the window. He didn’t want to say too much in front of Donovan. He had no gun, no identification and no badge. He had less security than a civilian did. Novak lit up a cigarette, which was a first. Novak was obviously stressed. He offered one to Hollick, who graciously accepted. Hollick was happy to have a cigarette. It was his first in a week. The nicotine did wonders to calm his already fragile nerves.

Capital Center Hotel Washington D.C.
Wednesday June 5th, 1985 12:01 a.m.

Hollick, Novak and Donovan entered through the front doors of the Capital Center Hotel. Hollick could tell Novak’s nerves had gotten a bit worse since a DUI checkpoint had slowed them down. They were running a few minutes late. When they had arrived at the hotel, both Novak and Donovan removed their FBI identification and their service weapons, opting to leave them in the car. This made Hollick feel a bit safer.

The choice of location is what confused Hollick. He thought that if the meeting were legitimate, it would have taken place at the J. Edgar Hoover building on the other side of the district. That was the FBI headquarters. Hollick didn’t understand the plan, but was in no position to argue.

There was nothing wrong with the hotel. The Capital Center was among the finest luxury hotels in the district, often frequented by diplomats, ambassadors and other important figures in the political world. Hollick had once stayed here while attending a seminar for the bureau back in ‘83. The nightly rate for a standard room was about what Hollick made in a week, but the room they were visiting tonight, was not the standard.

A penthouse suite located on the top floor was the destination, but first, Donovan had to go through some type of procedure. He checked into the hotel under a reservation, Bergeron and he was given the key to a room on the fifth floor. They rode up in the elevator and when they reached the fifth floor, Hollick tried to exit, but Novak pulled him back. They went back down to the lobby and waited for a few minutes.

They entered the elevator again, this time behind a pair of Japanese exchange students. They were riffing to each other in Japanese as the elevator rose. They got off on the third floor. That’s when Donovan pushed the button to the tenth floor. The elevator continued to rise through the hotel. The tenth floor was the top of the hotel, the penthouse floor.

The doors opened. Donovan exited with Novak and Hollick following. Donovan walked to the middle of the hall. There were two doors facing each other, Room “A” was on the left and Room “B” was on the right. Donovan turned to Room “A” and knocked on the door in some secret rhythm, obviously designated beforehand. After a few moments, the door opened. A wiry agent in his early thirties stepped out. He had long hair tied in a ponytail.

“Donovan, Novak, Hollick,” he said, acknowledging their presence. He then motioned for them to turn around and put their hands against the wall. Novak and Donovan did so instinctively and Hollick soon followed their lead. The agent frisked all three men for weapons. He was very thorough. “Good. Agent Donovan, Novak, please make yourselves comfortable in the other room. There are food and refreshments waiting for you. Agent Hollick, please come with me.”

Hollick gave Novak a concerned look as he and Donovan walked towards the other room. Was this just another segue to an interrogation session? Novak and Donovan entered Room “B” and closed the door. The young agent looked at Hollick, who had not moved an inch. “Ahem,” he said. Hollick nodded and followed him to the other door. As the door opened, Hollick felt a sense of relief.

The room was huge and luxurious with couches, a table lined with gourmet food and a gigantic desk. There were two more agents inspecting the room for bugs, checking every nook and cranny. There was a man behind the desk. He was smoking a cigar. Two more agents were seated next to him. To his right, were three empty chairs, which Hollick assumed were for the wiry agent and the two bug sweepers.

The man behind the desk was reading the Wall Street Journal. He had an old desk lamp with a plastic green shade, like the kind one might find in a motel. This served as the only light in the room. The man set down his paper and looked at Agent Hollick. He began to smile, “Agent Hollick, you are aware that you’re past the point of no return?” he asked, Hollick nodded. “There’s no getting out now,” reiterated the man behind the desk.

“I understand, sir,” replied Hollick.

The bug sweepers distracted him, “Don’t mind them. Boys, did you find anything?” he asked.

“No, sir,” replied one of the agents.

“How about in Room B?” he asked.

“Nothing, sir,” replied the other agent.

“Great, then come over here and sit down, you too, Hollick, Johnny!” he said, tapping on the chair next to his.

There was no doubt this man was in charge. He was seemingly friendly. He definitely enjoyed sitting behind the desk. He had an Italian/American look to him, but spoke perfect English with only a slight New York accent. He had short dark hair and brown eyes. He looked to be about forty years old. Wearing a semi-casual white dress shirt, he stood out among everyone else.

Hollick took the remaining seat on the other side of the desk, facing the man. The man in charge studied Hollick for a moment. He took another drag from his cigar. The agents were all donning sunglasses with the exception of the wiry man and the man in charge. Everyone had a serious look, except the man in charge and he had never taken his eyes off Hollick. He nodded and smiled, “Do you like the digs, Alex?” he asked.

“Very much, sir,” replied Hollick.

“This is the Black Room. I keep this entire floor on permanent reserve year round.”

“That must be expensive.”

“Twenty times your annual salary, Alex, but what’s money, right? I mean being in the FBI is all about the perks. Immunity from criminal prosecution, I mean, how much is that worth? What do you think, Alex, how much?”

“It’s priceless, sir,” answered Hollick.

The man nodded. The other agents sat still, without reaction. “That’s right, Alex. You’re a smart boy, I’m sorry, a smart man, who truly understands that money isn’t everything,” Hollick nodded, not really knowing how to respond. “You know, I’ve been scouting field agents for the last six months, kept searching until I was blue in the face and the same name keeps popping up. Alex Hollick.”

“Why is that, sir?” asked Hollick.

“I’m sorry, Alex. Let me start from the beginning. My name is Jordan Clay and I’m the director of the

Secrets Division, for the bureau.”

Hollick wore a puzzled face, “Secrets Division, sir?”

“Oh you haven’t heard of us?”

“No, sir,” he replied.

“Good. That means there’s at least one leak free division left in the bureau,” said Clay smiling. The other agents laughed, but not Hollick.

“Alex, the reason that you haven’t heard of us, is because technically, we don’t exist. We are a small, but powerful arm of the bureau that acts with a cloak of invisibility. We are a collection of the best agents in the country. We conduct investigations and carry out operations with the full resources of the federal government. The operations themselves require the highest level of confidence and discretion possible,” he said.

“So you’re like Secret Agents?” asked Hollick.

“No, Alex. My guys are FBI Special Agents on paper, but our division is unknown to the public, unacknowledged by the bureau and known only by a select few in government. This division handles threats that would terrify the public and that is why we exist. I craft official reports, which are submitted for bureau record, but our records aren’t subject to review.”

“I think I understand, sir,” replied Hollick nodding.

“I’d be surprised if you did, Alex, truly, you’d be the first to figure it out in five minutes,” Hollick nodded, accepting his limitations.

“The power this division has is immeasurable. We enjoy more resources than any other agency, but without the scrutiny of the Justice Department. Nobody ever breathes down our necks, but they all cooperate, Alex, no jurisdictional bullshit.” Clay took a drag from his cigar and looked back at Hollick, “As director of the Secrets Division, I have unlimited use of any branch of the military, access to government slush funds and the ability to grant full pardons to inmates in state and federal prisons. Alex, I have the authority to kill U.S. Senators and members of Congress,” he said. He nodded at Hollick with serious intention. Hollick’s face froze as Clay started laughing, “Not that I would ever do such a thing. That would be an abuse of power,” he added. “Okay, enough about me. Let me introduce you to my team. Now I have ten agents, only four of which were in the D.C. area this week. The other six are in the field.”

Clay looked at his agents, “Boys, drop the CIA bit, lose the shades. Be cordial to our new comrade,” The agents complied taking off their sunglasses. Clay smiled at Hollick, “You’ll have to excuse them, Alex, too much time in the field.” Clay pointed to the man on his far left. The man was tall, with dark hair and pale blue eyes.

“This is Special Agent Kirk Hayes. Now we’ve always had a rocky relationship with the CIA, you know that, Alex,” Hollick nodded, “Agent Hayes serves as our resident spy, because the CIA likes to hold onto their Intel like a hot piece of tail. Kirk here makes sure that we get all the details the CIA leaves out of their shared intelligence reports. The thing is, sometimes he gets information that they miss, but don’t be confused, Alex. Hayes is an FBI agent.”

Clay pointed to the next man, who was sitting beside Agent Hayes. To Hollick, the agent looked like Dunn’s slightly younger brother. He had the same build and facial features. His demeanor however, was much different. He seemed modest and humble.

“This is Special Agent Trevor Wolf. Agent Wolf serves as our Framer. When we need to discredit a public figure or neutralize a perceived threat, we use Wolf. Now Agent Wolf has the best job here in my opinion. He gets paid to commit crimes in the name of other citizens. Arson, blackmail and planting drugs are just a few of Wolf’s specialties.”

Hollick was beginning to wonder what he had gotten himself into, or more to the point, what Novak had gotten him into. Clay moved on to the next agent. He was a black man, appearing to be in his mid-thirties

with a crew cut. He was well built, muscular, but not overly muscular. His eyes stood out. They were a shade of green eerily similar to Fletcher's.

"This is Special Agent Chambers, Chris Chambers. Now Agent Chambers is technically a DEA Agent, at least that's his job on paper. Chambers is our newest recruit. See, Alex, we figured out a few years ago that the DEA would jump in on any FBI case if there was so much as a dimebag at the crime scene. Chambers works for the DEA, so he can provide us with details about the cases they're planning to step in on. We like Chambers."

Clay moved on to the man to his far right. He was an older man with a shaved head and gray facial hair, "This man over here is the Grim Reaper, Special Agent Levi Wells. He handles problem agents within the bureau. Say we have an agent that goes rogue, Alex, like a robbery division agent on the take. Agent Wells does damage control. Now, Alex, you should know that while it has never happened on my watch, Wells handles problem agents in all divisions, including this one, you get my drift?" he asked, Hollick nodded. He looked at Agent Wells, who shot him a cold look in return.

"These agents have specific tasks within the context of operations. The six agents who couldn't be here tonight work in broader fields like anti-terrorism, espionage, treason and arms distribution. These agents carry out investigations and the men you've just met help these operations come to fruition."

"Who is he?" Hollick asked, pointing to the wiry man who had frisked him. Clay smiled and looked at the man sitting to his right.

"This is Jonathan Silva and Silva is not an agent. He is the Secrets Division Liaison. On paper, he is just an FBI Liaison, but Silva is my right hand man, that's why I keep him right here next to me. Now he doesn't look like much, but you will have more interaction with him than you will with anyone else in this room. Silva flies around the country, facilitating the transfer of information. He also serves as our bagman for whatever that's worth. He's shy, Alex, be easy on him," Hollick grinned as Silva blushed at Clay's comment. "That brings us full circle back to you, Alex," said Clay.

"Yes, sir," replied Hollick.

"Now, Alex, we didn't just pick you for your good looks. We looked at your background and credentials. Twenty-seven is an incredibly young age to get as far as you have. You've got a near spotless record, a high intelligence level and a great educational background."

"Thank you, sir."

"Those are great things, Alex, but none of them matter without discretion. This last week you went through a hell that would kill most agents. You passed rigorous tests of your stamina, endurance and loyalty. You learned how to adapt to a lie. You were beaten within an inch of your life and you didn't hold it against Chief Novak. Well, Alex, that pain was not for my amusement. I now know that I can trust you with the task you are about to receive."

"What task would that be, sir?"

"Well I know your field is robbery, but that part of your career is over. You will never work robbery again or for that matter as a field agent. Your position is going to be unique to this division and to the bureau at large. You won't be a spy and you won't be running counter intelligence, which I know was an interest for you when you became an agent. This job is far more important." Hollick hung on to Clay's words, anticipating this seemingly elusive answer, "Alex, you will serve as our Archangel."

"Archangel?" he asked.

"You're aware of Satanism Paganism and the Occult?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Your job in the Secrets Division will be to investigate crimes related to these matters, satanic ritual abuse, or SRA's as we call them."

"Seriously?" replied Hollick with skepticism.

“Seriously, you see, Alex, the FBI supports the inalienable right to practice whatever religion American citizens wish. In fact, we cherish this right, but when laws are broken in the name of religion we must act swiftly. When arson, murder, rape and other violent crimes occur, where obvious signs of religious or anti-religious sentiment also occur, we must intervene.

“Now it’s 1985 and organizations tied to Satanism are spreading like wildfire. You see it everywhere, in the media, music, even the clothes on kid’s backs. Now it seems like harmless fun, but the fact is, there are over one-thousand underground groups that we know of, practicing some form of Satanism in the United States. Now we suspect that seventy percent of these groups are harmless, but that still leaves room for trouble.

“The real problem, Alex, is that this phenomenon of what we call the Left Hand Path Movement is growing fast and affecting the youth of America, the kids who will be running our beloved country in a few decades. Right now, we believe that one in ten teenagers practice or have engaged in satanic activity. We have projected that at the current rate, by the year 1995, just ten years from now, that this number will grow to one in three.

“Your background is a perfect match for this job, Alex, a psych major with a minor in theology. You’re physically fit, you can be trusted while going along with lies and you don’t have an annoying accent despite hailing from crab country.” Hollick laughed along with everyone in the room. It was the first time he’d genuinely laughed in a week.

“And you really think this is the best way I can serve my country?” he asked.

“I know it is. We need you, Alex. America needs you,” he said. Clay extended his hand, which Hollick accepted, “Welcome to the team, Special Agent Hollick. You’re one of us now. Come on, stand up,” Hollick stood up and began shaking the hands of all of the agents in the room. Hollick knew he was truly part of something bigger than himself, for which he was grateful. The problem was that Hollick knew he was in a new, dangerous and vulnerable position. He and the other agents sat back down.

“Alex, you currently earn twenty-nine-thousand dollars per year as a field agent, a robbery division leader. I’m going to bump that up to fifty-four-thousand. You will be issued a major credit card with a one-hundred-thousand dollar credit limit for use in your investigations. You will be able to use resources at any FBI field office in the United States, including use of vehicles, access to files and field agents as needed. The sky is the limit. You can go anywhere with this job.”

“It sounds like an incredible opportunity.”

“Well that’s the understatement of the year. The most important thing is that this division is a covert division. We do not exist. Aside from the men in this room, you can tell no one of the existence of this organization. In the light, you are an FBI Field Agent based in D.C. and your field is homicide. That’s how it will look on paper. That’s what’s best for you, this division and the country.”

“Understood, sir,” he replied.

“Now do you have any questions for me, Alex?”

“Well what do Novak and Donovan, know about this division?” he asked.

“A short list of people including Novak and Donovan are aware of this division. We never would have found you if they didn’t know about us. They don’t know specifics and that’s why they can’t be in the room with us right now. Look, Alex, if you were to tell anyone about this division, you would be putting them and yourself in great danger.”

“I understand, sir. When do I start?”

“Good question. First, you will spend the summer in Quantico, training. We’re going to break all of those bad habits you learned working robberies. You will receive the best training in the world. You will have a dedicated team, training you in a variety of areas to prepare you for your role here in the division. When your training is complete, you will begin fieldwork and then you will be on your own, Alex.

“You will work primarily alone. You will only see me during special meetings and only here in the Black

Room. The other members of this team will assist you whenever you need them. Silva is the go between. You will tell him what you need and he will get it for you. Do you understand, Alex?" Hollick nodded and Clay returned the nod.

"Okay, Silva, bring Donovan and Novak in here," Silva nodded, stood up and left the room. Clay put out his cigar, reached behind the desk and produced a folder. He placed the folder next to small portable cassette player. The cassette player reminded Hollick of the Dictaphone he had lost along with the Paul Sterner interview.

Silva reentered the room with Novak and Donovan. He produced two more chairs, placing them on each side of Hollick. Novak sat to his right while Donovan took the chair on his left. Clay began thumbing through the large file, occasionally stopping to look at something. He set the folder down. Donovan reached into a handbag, producing the notepad he had been scribbling on at Quantico.

"Gentlemen, our last piece of business would be the SOCAL robbery case. This Escondido incident is something we need to resolve. The papers, particularly in Southern California are eating this up. The public wants answers. It is in the best interests of everyone that this investigation is closed."

Clay held up yesterday's copy of the L.A. Times. The front story featured a picture of the Escondido crime scene. The headline read, "Questions Loom over Botched FBI Op." Novak and Donovan nodded their heads in agreement. Clay continued, "Novak is a good friend of ours and he provided us with three of our current agents, including Agent Hollick here. Friends help each other and Novak needs some assistance to close the SOCAL investigation. Now, Alex, you're obviously aware of the corruption of your former colleague, Agent Travis Carnahan."

"Yes, sir, it was very disappointing to hear. John informed me of Carnahan's possible link to our suspect, Paul Sterner."

"Yes, Alex. We know that you interviewed Sterner before you left Los Angeles."

"So you have the audio I acquired?"

"Yes. It's a wonderful piece, but Sterner is not a credible source. He's a thief and a murderer. We can't hang Carnahan's reputation on hearsay."

"I don't understand, sir. Are you saying Carnahan wasn't involved?" he asked, Clay looked over at Novak.

"John, please bring Agent Hollick up to speed on the events of the last week," Novak nodded with the same look of regret he had given Hollick at Quantico earlier.

"Alex, Paul Sterner is dead. He hung himself while in custody of the LAPD. They found him last weekend," he said. Hollick looked at Novak with confusion, "I went through all of the evidence collected from the house in Barstow while you were indisposed. Carnahan was involved and his involvement was far deeper than I initially thought. Director Clay, please play the tape for Alex."

Clay pushed the play button. The audio was of Carnahan. He was talking to Lind and Sterner about stakeout locations. Carnahan was revealing all of the details of the investigation. He gave them the strategies Hollick had used to zero in on robbery suspects and then took credit for them. This is how they were able to dodge Hollick for so long.

Hollick was especially irritated by the way that Carnahan had described the operation, referring to himself as "team leader" and calling them "my team." He described Fletcher and Velasquez in derogatory terms, but made no mention of Hollick. This is why Sterner had never heard of him. Clay stopped the tape and motioned for Novak to continue.

"Alex, this is one of four tapes that implicate Carnahan as a conspirator. The reason why we suspected you is that you weren't mentioned in any of these conversations. We thought you might have acted as Carnahan's silent partner. When you visited Sterner, we thought this may have been an attempt to throw us off, but now we know the truth.

"We believe that Lind secretly recorded Agent Carnahan without Sterner's knowledge, that these tapes

were made and used to intimidate Carnahan. Lind likely used the tapes to prevent Travis from turning against them. They pinned him into a corner, where he had no choice but to keep helping them,” Hollick nodded again, but didn’t respond immediately. He was trying to choose his words carefully.

“With all due respect, where is this all going?” he asked politely.

Clay took over, “Alex, you have to appreciate the gravity of this situation. A rogue agent, corrupted by money, to betray the bureau, well, it’d be a disaster of biblical proportions. This Intel would shatter all the trust that’s placed in the FBI. The Justice Department would shake down the bureau and question how we screen, train and direct field agents. In other words, the good old days would be over.”

“So what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying, is that the SOCAL case will be closed without documentation of this unpleasant fiasco. Agent Carnahan along with Velasquez will be given a burial with full honors and a medal of valor for their display of courage, heroism and selflessness. The sealed reports of the investigation will omit any details of Carnahan’s involvement and the relation to Sterner will be chalked up to mere coincidence,” he said. Hollick gave Novak a quick glance. Novak tried to maintain eye contact with Clay, who looked at Donovan.

“Now Agent Donovan is a public relations expert, he can spin shit into silver. He has graced us with his presence to help us deal with the press. Agent Donovan, have you come to a conclusion on the best way to handle the media?”

Donovan nodded and opened his notebook, studying his notes for a moment, “Agent Hollick gave two statements about the events of Escondido. One was given to an Agent Hansen of the San Diego field office, some IA peon. The other was given to a bureau shrink, a Dr. Patricia Jones. Luckily, for us, these two statements line up pretty closely. Now it is my professional opinion that the safest play is to go with what’s already out there. Agent Hansen’s report will serve as the template for Escondido. Jones’ report will substantiate Agent Hollick’s whereabouts while he was with our friends from the CIA. I believe these are the best and most plausible explanations available,” Donovan concluded.

Clay nodded and looked over at Novak, “John, I know that you have some concerns over this widow of Carnahan’s. Would you care to enlighten us?” he asked, Novak nodded.

“We recovered about half of the robbery money from the house out in Barstow. Based on the contents of the house, I believe that Lind and Sterner weren’t exactly living the high life. I also believe that Carnahan was paid at least some of his cut. Agent Carnahan’s thirty percent cut is part of the missing money.”

“How much is that, John?” asked Clay.

“Just over two million in cash and this money is still out there. I believe that Cathy, Agent Carnahan’s widow was complicit in these crimes. While we can’t prove it yet, we believe that Agent Carnahan confided in his wife. She may have helped him stash the money in a safe place.”

“Have you questioned her, John?” interrupted Hollick.

“No, that would interfere with our primary goal, which is to bury Escondido. We can’t arrest Mrs. Carnahan. That would be counterproductive. I want to track her independently with help from this division. We believe that she can lead us to the money and more importantly, any co-conspirators.”

“Then what?” asked Hollick.

Clay took over once again, “If we find Carnahan’s share of the SOCAL money, it will be destroyed to protect the integrity of public record. If we do find any co-conspirators, including Cathy Carnahan, they will be handled internally without arrest, trial or conviction. Our surveillance specialist is closing a case. When he’s finished, he will be assigned to handle this matter. Does that work for you, John?”

“Thank you, Director Clay,” said Novak nodding.

Clay returned the nod, “Any questions, gentlemen?” he asked, Hollick put his hand up. Novak motioned for him to put it back down.

“Yes, Alex?” asked Clay smiling.

“What about Agent Fletcher? What’s going to happen to her?” he asked.

Clay thumbed through his folder and produced a file photo of Fletcher, “Ah yes, the lovely Miss Jennifer Fletcher. She’s very pretty, Alex, don’t you think?” Hollick didn’t respond. Clay continued, “At this time, we believe Agent Fletcher had no knowledge of, or part in the SOCAL robberies. We have also cleared the late Agent Velasquez. Fletcher will remain at the L.A. bureau with a raise and a promotion. She will also be taken off the robbery division. Don’t worry, Alex, we’re gonna take really good care of her,” Clay smiled and winked at Hollick, as if he knew about his true feelings for Fletcher. “What’s really important here is discretion, Alex. Nobody outside of this room knows about this and we must keep it that way.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Any other questions?” asked Clay, there was no response.

“Okay, Alex, while you have been indisposed, Novak has been scouting recruits to replace your team in Los Angeles. You will return to Quantico and spend the next two days helping him pick finalists. On Friday, you will accompany Novak back to California. You will spend the evening gathering all evidence linking Carnahan to the suspects. You and Novak will then destroy this evidence.

“On Saturday, you will attend the funeral of Agents Carnahan and Velasquez. Novak will deliver the eulogy. You will show grief. You will offer your condolences to the Carnahan family. You will spend the rest of the weekend cleaning out your apartment in Pasadena. On Sunday night, you will fly back to Quantico. You start training on Monday.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Okay, gentlemen, that concludes our business for this evening. Thank you all for coming. This meeting is adjourned.”

“Thank you, Director Clay, sir,” said Hollick extending his hand to Clay.

“Thank you, Agent Hollick,” replied Clay, smiling and gripping Hollick’s hand very firmly.

Silva stood up and approached Hollick, Novak and Donovan. He guided them out of the room ahead of the other agents, thanking them once again and bidding them farewell. They took the elevator straight down to the ground floor and left the hotel.

Donovan drove to the J. Edgar Hoover building. He stopped out front, got out of the car and walked into the building with his bag. Presumably, Donovan was crafting the final statement for Escondido. Novak motioned for Hollick to get into the front passenger seat as he got into the driver’s seat. He put the car in drive and headed back to Quantico.

“John?” asked Hollick.

Novak put his finger over his mouth and looked cautiously at Hollick. He pointed at a flashing light under the car radio. Hollick hunched down for a closer look. There was a small plastic box attached to the underside of the dash. Novak produced his pack of cigarettes, once again offering one to Hollick. Hollick puffed on the sweet nicotine while looking out the window at the dark Virginia sky. He was thankful to be alive, if only for one more day.

Chapter 6: Death and Disposal

Los Angeles International Airport
Friday June 7th, 1985 6:17 p.m.

When the wheels touched down at LAX, Hollick felt somewhat conflicted to be back in his element. While he was happy to be home, he was reminded of what shambles he had left it. Hollick knew he had let down Novak, Velasquez, Fletcher, the LAPD and the unlucky few in Escondido who had become casualties of his botched operation.

Hollick had still not had the conversation with Novak, who was nice enough to give him the window seat. A chance to clear the air was all that Hollick wanted. He suspected this conversation might never happen. He had tried to break the ice with Novak during takeoff. He asked if Fletcher would be at the funeral on Saturday. Novak answered by suggesting Hollick get some sleep, noting that the two had a long day ahead of them.

It was easy for him to say. Without even going into the last week of mind fucking, what Hollick was facing was the prospect of destroying government evidence, acting at a funeral and of course his bright yet uncertain future with the Secrets Division. Hollick would be lucky to make it back to Quantico without first dying of a heart attack.

Still, the flight provided a break from his thoughts. The last two days at Quantico had been all business. Hollick and Novak scanned through files, conducted interviews and administered tests to the applicants who were vying for coveted positions in the L.A. Robbery Division. Hollick hated the task of replacing himself and his team members. He hated the green nature of those rookie bastards.

The only thing Hollick was grateful for was that he didn't have to train them. Novak had called in a favor. He was able to secure the team leader of the Seattle FBI Robbery Division to handle on the job training. For Hollick, it would be a vacation from the cloudy skies of D.C. to the paradise they call Los Angeles. He would enjoy his time in L.A. he told himself. He was ignoring the fact that Novak seemed to think that he was doing him a favor.

Nobody was doing him any favors, aside from Dr. Abernathy, who had written a prescription for Hollick. Abernathy was still scared of Hollick and promptly gave him what he wanted. Hollick had to approach him on his way to the infirmary. Nurse Finn would have protested. He also had to hide the script from Novak long enough to get it filled.

Hollick had not gotten the morphine he had wanted. Instead, Abernathy wrote a script for Percocet. Perc's were different from morphine. While both were painkillers and repelled Hollick's nightmares, the Percocet seemed weaker in comparison. Hollick was fine with it and grateful to have anything.

Eventually, Hollick began to reflect. Rather than pontificating on his future, he instead filtered through the past and present. He wondered about Carnahan, Fletcher, Sterner, Agent Dunn and his boys and the evidence which he was about to destroy. Hollick contemplated what he knew and what he didn't know, trying to string together any plausible answer.

Maybe this secrets division didn't exist on any level. Maybe Novak would slap the cuffs on Hollick as soon as he lit the match above the evidence pile. All of these questionable thoughts came rushing into Hollick's mind like a tornado. He could only go along with the lies. It was the "safest play" as Donovan had put it in the Black Room. He had said to just go with what's already out there.

Hollick woke up Novak to exit the plane. He wondered how Novak could sleep. Maybe the Secrets Division protected Novak and Hollick was being setup to take the fall. Maybe this job investigating Satanism and the Occult and the training in Quantico were all ploys to put Hollick at ease. At this point, he couldn't put anything past anyone.

They left LAX in the same car that Hollick had left behind, the Ford Crown Victoria. Novak once again took the wheel and drove them to Riverside. There was no conversation. Hollick looked for a flashing box, a bug, something, but the car appeared to be clean, at least by the time they found it.

Hollick wondered why they weren't heading straight to the field office to scour through evidence. Novak had instead driven them to a crappy strip mall on the other side of town, away from the nice mall. This mall was what locals referred to as the "dirt" mall, because it catered to lower income residents. The dirt mall was quiet, discreet and unwatched.

Hollick and Novak walked into a Salvation Army outlet. The task was to buy civilian clothes. Novak explained it in the car while removing his FBI insignia. He had come up with his outfit, a 1981 Oakland Raiders Super Bowl Championship shirt coupled with a faded pair of Levis and topped off with some used tennis shoes. Hollick also opted for Levis and tennis shoes, but went with a Led Zeppelin T-shirt.

They looked ridiculous, but believable as civilians. They departed Riverside for L.A. Proper. Novak made another detour, stopping at a moving truck rental agency. This was not a company most people were familiar with, but an amateur business renting crappy moving trucks from the seventies. Novak chose this company because the owner didn't require identification, if a customer put down a "large" deposit.

Theirs would be truck number nine, a smelly old diesel truck. It had at one time been a produce truck and still had the logos to prove it. Judging by the smell, Hollick assumed it was probably used for carrying garlic, onions or something else pungent enough to overpower the smell of diesel fumes.

Novak had a hard time getting the truck to start. He asked the owner for another one. The owner popped the hood and fiddled with the engine for a bit. Soon the truck was up and running. The owner assured Novak that the truck would be fine and just needed to be driven a few miles.

With reservations, Novak and Hollick transferred their luggage into the cab of the truck. The truck was slow, barely nudging above sixty on the freeway, but fast enough to avoid suspicion. Hollick had remained silent long enough. He wanted to know what they were doing and why they were doing it, "John, what are we doing?"

"We're driving to the field office to gather evidence."

"I know that, but why these clothes, why this truck?"

"Tonight, we are not FBI agents. We are civilians. Once we leave the field office, we are on our own. We can't bring our identification, we can't drive a government vehicle and we cannot tell anyone who we are. I told you that the people we met a few nights ago are not to be trifled with, Alex. If we get caught, if we are identified as FBI agents, they'll kill us," he said. Hollick remained silent after that. The less he knew the better. He would simply follow Novak's lead and do as he was told. It was the best way, the only way to survive this ordeal and live long enough to learn his uncertain future.

F.B.I. Los Angeles Field Office
Friday June 7th, 1985 9:36 p.m.

Novak and Hollick arrived at the field office. It was a ghost town, which was uncharacteristic for any FBI field office. The lights were off and nobody appeared to be in the building. The parking lot was empty, aside from a few standby Crown Vic's, like the one they had left at the rental company, the one they needed to pick up before daylight.

"Where is everyone, John?"

"I closed the office for the night. The whole building is being fumigated," said Novak pointing to two Pest Control trucks that Hollick had missed in his view. "But that's just a cover. There's nobody in the building and the pest control company, let's just say they are well, fictional," Hollick nodded, it was brilliant enough. "All business is being handled by San Diego this weekend. This is our one and only chance to get this right.

We have one hour to get everything we need, Alex. The cameras are down for the evening thanks to Clay's people, but in the morning they'll be back on and these trucks out here will be gone too. Let's do what we have to do," he said, Hollick nodded.

They entered the building and took the stairs to the second floor. The evidence was in a locker that only Novak had access to as the head of the L.A. field office. Novak pulled out three boxes of files marked "SOCAL" and slid a box over to Hollick. They began sifting through every paper, photo and evidence bag. The job was to isolate evidence that could incriminate Carnahan.

Novak was worried about time. He wanted speed and accuracy. He kept telling Hollick to move faster and then not to rush. They placed the dirty evidence in the duffle bag they had acquired from the Salvation Army in order to keep it distinguished from clean evidence. When they finished, Novak looked at Hollick, "Are we good to go?"

"Yeah," replied Hollick.

"Are you sure, Alex?"

"Honestly? No."

Hollick pointed at the clock. They had been in the field office for fifty-five minutes. Novak looked at the clock, "Shit! Let's go, come on!" Novak taped up the clean evidence box while Hollick zipped the duffle bag.

"Wait, why are we taking that?" asked Hollick, pointing to the box of clean evidence.

"I'm stopping by the post office. I'm mailing this to Agent Donovan," Hollick nodded and picked up the duffle bag. They began walking toward the door when the phone in Novak's office rang. Hollick and Novak froze. Hollick began to reach for the phone, "Don't touch that!" shouted Novak.

"It might be--,"

"Shhh," said Novak.

The phone rang four times before Novak's answering machine picked up. The message was not Novak's usual greeting, but was replaced with a new one stating that the office was closed this weekend and that all calls should be directed to the San Diego FBI field office. Novak's normal greeting followed this. Soon after a beep, a message began recording from an all too familiar voice.

"Hello, John. This is Bureau Representative Donovan. I just wanted to say how nice it was to have lunch with you on Tuesday. Please give me a call next time you're in town and we'll do it again. This time, my treat," came Donovan's voice through the answering machine.

It was a test. It was a test to see if Novak or Hollick would pick up the phone while they were stealing federal evidence. If one of them had picked up the phone, they would both be dead before Hollick's return flight to Virginia. Novak started walking and Hollick followed. They threw the evidence bags into the back of the truck and slammed the door shut. They began driving steadily away from the L.A. field office.

Sterner-Lind House Barstow, CA
Saturday June 8th, 1985 2:19 a.m.

Novak and Hollick pulled into the driveway of a beat up ranch in the desert. The SOCAL robberies were planned in this house. Lind and Sterner had lived in this house and Carnahan had visited, probably more than one time. Lind and Sterner had lived on the outskirts of Barstow, with their closest neighbor over five miles away. The dirt road that led to the house had taken a toll on the moving truck, which was overheating.

The ride had been frantic. Novak was worried and complained of time restraints. The moving truck had made what should have been a two-hour burn through Mojave a nearly three-hour tour. They made only one stop at a gas station in Victorville. Novak bought two flashlights, a pack of smokes and some lighter fluid,

like the kind used for barbecues. Of course, he paid in cash as both of their wallets were in the Crown Vic.

Novak instructed Hollick to unlock the back and get the duffle bag. They entered the house through a sliding glass door that Novak broke with a rock. After clearing the glass away, they climbed through it. Hollick began spreading the evidence around the carpeted floor while Novak poured lighter fluid around the house. He left a few drops for the evidence pile, discarding the empty can on top.

The ranch smelled like a fire pit ready to ignite. Novak had gotten everything with a rather small amount of lighter fluid. Lind's crappy furniture, ugly shag carpeting and dirty laundry were perfect materials for starting a fire. Novak's trail of lighter fluid led to all the rooms of the house with the biggest trail leading to the natural gas main.

Hollick wasn't surprised at Novak's abilities. While Novak worked the robbery division before Hollick, he was equally trained in arson investigations. Novak could make a house burn down in a few minutes with minimal materials. He lit a match and they were gone.

Novak pulled out the cigarettes. Standing by the truck, they watched the progress of the fire, which had spread much quicker than Hollick had thought it would. The flames had engulfed every room of the house within a minute. Smoke billowed from the windows, "We've got maybe three minutes. Let's go," said Novak handing the truck keys to Hollick.

They jumped into the truck. Hollick backed up before pulling out of the dirt driveway. Novak was right. Just under three minutes later, Hollick heard the faint sound of an explosion. The gas line had ignited, finishing the job and destroying all of the evidence. Hollick continued driving toward Interstate 15, the road back to civilization.

The plan had worked as far as Hollick could tell. He drove through the Mojave Desert with realistic expectations of reaching L.A. just before six o'clock. The heater in the truck was broken. Cold desert air trickled in through the vents. Hollick began to shiver. He silently cursed Novak, who had checked everything but the heater.

Novak had been paranoid and tested every light along with the windshield wipers, but failed to test the heater, which would have come in handy on this cold desert night. The truck was silent. Novak was scribbling in a notepad that looked like the same one Agent Donovan had. Hollick wondered if Novak was writing a report for Donovan, a rundown of their evidence disposal operation. Novak broke the silence, "Alex, can you think of a synonym for heroism?"

Hollick snickered. He couldn't believe that Novak was writing Carnahan's eulogy after burning down a house that Carnahan had once visited to help plan the SOCAL robberies. Hollick felt it was rather shrewd that not only did they have to clean up Carnahan's mess, but also that they would be honoring him in less than seven hours at his memorial service.

Carnahan may have been a competent robbery division agent, but he was a horrible criminal. He had left his fingerprints all over the investigation, from the tapes to notes in his own handwriting. Carnahan would have gone down the day after Escondido if he hadn't been killed first. Although not ungrateful, Hollick had wondered why Carnahan had saved Fletcher's life after putting the entire team in danger. Novak responded to the snickering, "Alex, don't fall apart on me now," he said.

"Valiance, John, the word you're looking for is valiance."

"Thanks, Alex," he replied.

Novak continued working on Carnahan's eulogy. A moment later, smoke began to billow from the truck. Hollick looked down at the dash. The truck was overheating again, but even more this time than it had before at the house in Barstow. The truck began to pull and slow along the highway, "Shit! Shit! What should I do?"

"Pull over! Pull over before you blow the fucking engine!" demanded Novak.

Hollick pulled to the side of the 15 as smoke continued to billow out of the truck. They were ten minutes

from the outskirts of Victorville and over an hour and a half from L.A. Proper. They got out. Novak walked to the front of the truck to look under the hood. As he opened it, a huge cloud of smoke billowed out and along with it came a popping sound. Hollick walked over with a frantic stare, "We're finished, John."

"No, no, it's the radiator, there's no fluid."

"No fluid?" asked Hollick.

"Antifreeze, there's no antifreeze in the fucking radiator!"

"Do we have antifreeze?"

"No! Shit! We have water in the truck. It'll have to do. Get the jug out of the cab."

Hollick ran to the cab. He was trying to be useful in a situation where he felt rather useless. He had little car knowledge and was completely reliant upon Novak to fix the truck. He grabbed the jug of water. Novak produced a rag and put it over the fluid cap. He twisted the stubborn cap open and even more smoke billowed out. He grabbed the water from Hollick and started pouring it down into the radiator.

When he was finished, he handed the nearly empty bottle back to Hollick, who was shivering from the desert cold. Novak replaced the cap and wiped the water off his hands with the rag, "Can I start the truck now?" asked Hollick.

"Shhh," said Novak with his finger over his mouth.

The sound of a car was approaching. It was maybe a mile away. Whoever it was would pass the truck in less than sixty seconds. Novak slowly walked to the edge of the truck. Headlights began to illuminate the road. He squinted as the car began to slow down. It was the California Highway Patrol. The lone patrol officer parked his cruiser behind the truck. "Let me do the talking, Alex," Novak said in a whispered voice. The officer came around the corner with a flashlight. First, he shone the light on Novak and Hollick, then on the engine. He was a young man, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three. He seemed green, like those robbery division rookies back at Quantico. He had no idea what he had just walked into. Novak was a good talker. Maybe he could talk his way out of this mess.

"Hey, guys, car problems, huh? Do you need some assistance?" he asked politely.

"No, thank you, officer, I think we have it under control," Novak responded casually.

"Are you sure?" he asked, "I can call a tow truck if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary. We just had a radiator leak, but I think we can get to where we're going from here."

"And where would that be?" he asked, shining his light around the cab.

"L.A. sir," interrupted Hollick. Novak shot daggers at Hollick to ensure that he would not speak again.

The officer looked back at them, "What are you guys doing out here at this time of night?" he asked.

Novak smiled, "I was just helping my son here on his move to Los Angeles for school. Yep, my boy here is going to UCLA. We thought we'd get a jumpstart on the day and get him into his new place, thought maybe that we'd try to catch the Dodgers game afterwards. Thing is, this piece of junk truck has been giving us problems ever since we left."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Barstow," replied Hollick.

"Baker, Baker is what my son meant to say. We stopped in Barstow for breakfast, but we're actually from Baker," said Novak, quickly correcting Hollick.

"What's with the bruises on his face?" asked the patrol officer of Novak, while pointing the flashlight at Hollick, whose injuries were still visible.

"Uh, he caught the tail end of a dresser we were moving down a flight a stairs. One second I thought I had it, the next it just slipped out of my hands. I felt terrible about the whole thing," said Novak, shaking his head with sincerity.

"I see. Do you mind if I see your license, sir and I want to just take a quick look at the contents of your

truck.”

“What’s the problem, officer?” Hollick asked.

“There’s no problem, son. I just want to take a quick look. As your father probably knows, it is a crime to transport certain fruits, vegetables and plants into the state of California.”

“Sure, no problem, officer,” said Novak, “Son, could you open the back of the truck while I get my license out of the cab?” he asked.

“Sure thing, Dad,” replied Hollick sarcastically.

This plan was going horribly wrong. Hollick walked with the patrol officer towards the back of the vehicle. He was unsure what to make of Novak’s calm demeanor. They were seconds away from being caught in a lie. The only thing in the back of the truck was a box of stolen federal evidence. Neither of them had any identification. They’d be arrested and lucky to live long enough to be thrown into federal prison.

Hollick grabbed the back lock of the door and slung it aside. Then a melee of gunfire broke out and the officer fell to the ground. It was Novak. He walked up to the patrolman, who was clinging to life. He shot another time, giving the patrol officer a fatal head wound. He never saw it coming. He was covered in blood. Hollick threw up on the side of the road.

“Holy Shit!” exclaimed Hollick.

Novak quickly put his gun in the small of his back, “Grab his legs,” he said. Hollick continued to stare at the body, seemingly in a trance. “Grab his fucking legs!” shouted Novak. He was losing his patience. Hollick grabbed the officer’s legs. They carried him to his cruiser and placed him in the driver’s seat. Novak turned off the cruiser and put the gear into neutral. Hollick could still hear the police radio. “Alex, push the car. I’ll steer,” he said with his hand on the wheel.

Hollick walked behind the cruiser and pushed. While the cruiser was heavy, it moved without too much effort. Novak steered to the right and the car dropped down a shallow incline, rolling about twenty feet before coming to a rest. They wiped away their fingerprints and walked back towards the truck. Novak walked over to the front of the truck, closed the hood and got into the cab. Hollick prayed that the water would help get the truck back on the road. Novak turned the key and the engine started.

“C’mon, we gotta go!” shouted Novak, Hollick was staring at the cruiser, “Alex!” shouted Novak. Hollick walked over and got into the truck. Novak peeled out. They continued heading west. Neither one spoke to each other. Hollick wanted to talk, but didn’t know what to say. Instead, he stared at Novak, who avoided making eye contact with him, choosing to keep his eyes on the road. The sun continued to rise over the desert.

By the time Hollick and Novak had reached L.A., it was raining. They hoped that the rain would wash off any dirt that had accumulated on the rental truck. The ride back to L.A. from Victorville had been pain free. Hollick was relieved not to see a single cop before entering L.A. County.

They had reached the rental agency early enough to drop off the truck without anyone in the office yet. Hollick retrieved the files and put them in the Crown Vic. Novak left the keys in the glove compartment. He scanned the truck for blood or any other incriminating evidence, but there was nothing. The rain had done its job and the truck was cleaner than when they had found it.

They left in the Crown Vic. First, they went to the post office to drop off the clean evidence. Then to Hollick’s apartment so they could shower, shave and change back into their FBI uniforms. They each had about thirty minutes. From there, they would pick up Mrs. Novak and head to Altadena for the funeral. Novak cleaned up first so that he could finish preparing the eulogy for the funeral.

Then they headed to Glendale, where Novak owned a two story bungalow he shared with his wife. Novak and Hollick arrived and entered the house to pick up Sally Novak, his wife of thirty years and a woman who Hollick both admired and respected. The house was a spacious open concept with lots of room. The kids had all moved out and it was just John and Sally, with an occasional visit from one of their five grandchildren.

"Honey, we're here, Alex and I," shouted Novak. Mrs. Novak was sitting on the couch and drinking tea as they walked inside. She was an attractive enough woman in her early fifties. She had shoulder length blonde hair and glasses.

"Cutting it close, aren't we dear?" she replied.

"You know the bureau, Honey. We just got back from Virginia. You remember Alex?"

"Hello, Alex. It's nice to see you again. I'm sorry it has to be under such sad circumstances," said Sally.

Hollick shook her hand, "It's a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Novak."

"You look very handsome, dear," she said, turning to her husband.

"Well that's how I got to where I am," said Novak laughing, Hollick smiled. He began to understand what had kept this marriage together for thirty years. Novak lied to his wife thirty seconds after he walked through the door and Sally lied to him thirty seconds later. Novak wasn't handsome. He was pudgy, bald and had a face like a burlap sack. He played to his strengths, sparkling blue eyes and southern charm.

It was what it was. Everybody loved Novak. He was a great guy, a guy you could count on, put your faith in and trust. Those three tours in Vietnam had changed him. He had a dark side few people knew about and they probably wouldn't care to know. Hollick had suspected a mid-life crisis for some time, a houseboat in '83, a new Porsche last year and prostitutes at the FBI Christmas party, but he never thought he had it in him to kill a cop.

Novak and his wife seemed to have an unspoken understanding. As long as he came home, she would be happy to know nothing of what he did. After he was shot and promoted, she took comfort in his new position, which would take him completely out of the line of fire. Hollick likened the lies to the ones he was seeing develop all around him. He saw the parallels between Novak's marriage and his own relationship with the bureau. Hollick didn't much care for it but he knew he had to adapt.

Mountain View Cemetery Altadena, CA

Saturday June 8th, 1985 9:43 a.m.

Hollick had arrived with Mr. and Mrs. Novak fifteen minutes early to the service. They traveled past Eagle Rock where Carnahan and his family lived and through Pasadena where Hollick's apartment was located. Novak, Carnahan and Hollick all lived very close to each other, whereas Velasquez lived in Culver City and Fletcher in Venice. The drive brought back memories of the not so old days when he called Carnahan his best friend.

Although they were early, the cemetery was packed. The rain had let off to a partly cloudy day in Altadena just below the San Gabriel Mountains. Hollick saw agents from many field offices out of Northern and Southern California. They were all there to pay homage to the two fallen heroes, Carnahan and Velasquez. Only Hollick and Novak would know the truth, that only one hero would be buried today.

Hollick looked around. He saw very few people that he recognized. He had expected a crowd, but nothing like this herd of G-men and women. He wore his sunglasses to help conceal the almost faded bruises on his face, the bruises from his "accident" in Virginia. He was to serve as a pallbearer, helping carry Carnahan's casket from the hearse to the funeral. It was getting very hard to keep up the act.

The service would be Catholic per a request from the Velasquez family. The priest delivered a homily, an over the top piece preaching the value of honor, courage and conviction in the face of certain death. Carnahan and Velasquez were martyrs for Christ, sacrificing their lives to protect the innocent. The crowd nodded and mourned.

Novak gave a touching eulogy that was carefully crafted in all of thirty minutes. It went surprisingly well considering how little effort was put forth, but Novak had always been a good talker. His eulogy was very positive and focused on the good qualities of Carnahan. He touched many times on Carnahan's courage,

bravery and valiance.

Then the brother of Agent Velasquez, a Torrance cop delivered his eulogy. Hollick had always liked Velasquez and felt bad that he had not taken the opportunity to know him better. Hollick enjoyed the stories about Velasquez, growing up and helping raise his brothers in Torrance.

The painkillers that Abernathy had prescribed were beginning to kick in. They were helping him to ignore this intensely emotional event. When it was over, the federal traditions began with the twenty-one gun salute and the folding of the flags. People began to cry more intensely, knowing that this could have been any one of them. After the traditions were complete, the caskets were lowered into the ground. Then the families stood to accept condolences from a long line of agents.

Hollick had to face the families of his dead agents, a moment he had dreaded all morning. He first approached Maria Velasquez, the widow of the late Agent Joseph Velasquez. While in line, he heard a few agents joking about wanting to flour her tortilla, to which Hollick shot daggers.

She was visibly sad. She held her crisply folded flag with her young son by her side. The boy was too young to understand that his father was never coming home, but old enough to know better than to make a scene at a funeral.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Velasquez. I didn't know him very well, but your husband was a great man and a valuable member of my team. He helped to make a country we both love a safer, better place," said Hollick. Mrs. Velasquez nodded with tears running down her face. She was clearly staying strong for the boy, who followed her example. Hollick crouched down to meet her son at eye level, "Son, your father was a very brave man," the boy nodded at Hollick and looked back down.

Mrs. Carnahan, the wife of the late Agent Carnahan could have taken some cues from the boy. She was crying profusely and making terrible sounds. Hollick wanted to give her a painkiller. The blonde haired blue-eyed beauty was an emotional wreck. Hollick peered through the line to get a look at her. There she stood with her two children. Her sister Carrie and her best friend Fletcher tried to comfort her. It was the first time Hollick had seen Fletcher since he had left L.A.

Hollick entered the line, not just to see Fletcher, but also to offer his condolences to Cathy Carnahan. The line moved steadily. As Hollick got closer, he could see Fletcher, who looked even more beautiful than he had remembered. She was wearing a black funeral dress with a coat, her hair was down and a bit wet from the rain earlier that morning. Hollick wanted to smile, but that would have been tacky. He knew a sad expression was the protocol for today.

Cathy had calmed down a bit in the ten minutes that Hollick had waited in line, but when he approached her, all of that changed. She gave him a dirty look that made others around her visibly uncomfortable, "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here, Alex. You get Travis killed and they give you a promotion. Now all I have is this flag, this stupid fucking flag!" She threw the flag on the ground, which was a no-no at any FBI function. An agent close by quickly grabbed it off the ground. Hollick embraced Cathy, who was going into hysterics once again, "A fucking flag, Alex," she said once again. Even her sad children seemed unnerved by their mother's unstable behavior.

Fletcher was crying too, but she held it in well, like Mrs. Velasquez. Tears ran down her pretty face as she was crouched down, trying to console Carnahan's small children. The Carnahan's had a boy and a girl, both of whom looked a lot like their father, without much resemblance to Cathy. "I'm sorry, Cathy. I'm so sorry," said Hollick, taking off his shades.

Hollick was no longer acting. He felt true sorrow for Cathy and her kids. As the funeral began winding down, agents littered the cemetery, talking about either Carnahan and Velasquez or the bureau. This part of the funeral was the reception. At this point, Hollick had felt enough emotion.

He stood alone under a tree and lit up a cigarette while most other agents were trying to move towards happier conversations and less morbid topics. Hollick wasn't ready to face Fletcher, but she was walking in

his direction. He had no choice. The time had come for him to lie. He had to adapt once again and play the part, “Hollick, you started smoking again?”

“Only in times of grief,” he replied, she gave him a strange look.

“What happened to your face? Those bruises look kind of fresh,” she commented.

“I was in a car accident last week.”

“Another one?” she asked.

“Yeah,” replied Hollick.

“But you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“That’s good. Listen, I was wondering if we could go get something to eat, you know, maybe catch up.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Let me talk to John and see if I’m okay to leave.”

“Okay. I’m going to say goodbye to Cathy and the kids.”

Fletcher walked back towards Cathy, who was calm again. Hollick walked towards Novak, who was talking to Kenneth Kopeck, San Diego Bureau Chief. In a hurry, Hollick interrupted, “Sir, do you need me to stay for anything?” he asked.

“No, Agent Hollick, I understand you have business in Washington to attend to. Thank you for your help,” Novak replied. Hollick shook hands with him and Chief Kopeck.

Novak had his public face on, which is why he wouldn’t call Hollick by his first name. Hollick was okay with it. He was leaving with Fletcher, which seemed like the greatest thing in the world right now. He walked back towards Fletcher, who was smiling and talking to Carnahan’s kids. They seemed to adore her. Hollick noticed a familiar face, Agent Michael Hansen from San Diego Internal Affairs. He was talking to a few agents from the Bay Area.

“Hi, Agent Hansen,” muttered Hollick while passing by on his way to Fletcher.

“Agent Hollick, it’s good to see you,” said Hansen, who broke from his discussion and began walking with Hollick. “Someone told me that you’re a bigwig in D.C., now is that true?” he asked smiling, insinuating that he was teasing.

“Well...,” replied Hollick with a smile.

“Ah see, I knew it. Congratulations, that’s great.”

“Thank you,” said Hollick, trying to exude some humility.

“Listen, Hollick, I’m glad we ran into each other. I’ve been looking at this SOCAL robbery case and I wanted to ask you some questions, you know, pick your brain a little bit.”

“Are you thinking about transferring to Robbery?” he asked smirking.

Hansen laughed, “No, it’s nothing like that. I just had some questions about the investigation.”

“Well it’s over. The investigation is closed.”

“I know. It’s just that, I think I’m seeing something the L.A. field office might have missed,” Hollick nodded and stopped walking. He turned around to face Hansen.

“What’s there to see? The suspects are dead as are my two best agents. It’s open and shut,” he replied firmly.

“Look, I get it, Hollick. You’re busy with Washington business. Just take my card. Call me next time you’re in L.A., we can go out for dinner, my treat,” Hollick took the card, but only to humor him and to leave the conversation.

“Okay. I’ll be in touch.”

“And, Agent Hollick, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Agent Hansen,” Hollick shook his hand. He began walking, nearly bumping into Agent Fletcher.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“Oh, him, he’s nobody, just an agent looking for some career advice, that’s all.”

“Okay, well do you want to go?”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

Bellanti’s Italian Ristorante San Marino, CA

Saturday June 8th, 1985 2:43 p.m.

Bellanti’s Italian Ristorante was Hollick’s favorite place to eat in L.A. He often daydreamed of taking Agent Fletcher here, but under different terms, where they weren’t colleagues. Hollick navigated Fletcher from Altadena to San Marino. She drove her 1976 Pontiac Bonneville through the busy 210 freeway. The car was old, junky and burned oil, leaving a blue cloud of smoke everywhere, but Hollick didn’t mind. He was happy in the company of Fletcher. After she parked, Hollick quickly darted to the other side to open the door for her.

“How chivalrous, thank you, Agent Hollick,” she said with a flirtatious grin, Hollick smiled. They walked in and Hollick asked for his favorite table, which he got. The table was seated next to a television. Hollick liked to watch TV when he ate alone, which was often. Hollick didn’t need the television now that he had a dining partner in Fletcher, but he liked the familiarity of an old table he had sat at many times before.

Hollick pulled out a chair for Fletcher and then excused himself to use the rest room. It was actually an excuse to down some more Percocet. The dose he’d taken earlier that day had already worn off. He returned to the table. Fletcher sat smiling and looking very interested in Hollick. The waiter brought over a bottle of wine that Fletcher had ordered in Hollick’s absence, “I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink after that.”

“Yeah, that was pretty...intense,” replied Hollick. He began to pour the wine.

“It was awful to see Cathy like that, Maria too,” she said, Hollick nodded. There was a brief pause in the conversation. Fletcher studied Hollick and smiled, “You seem...different.”

“In what way?” he asked with a smile.

“I don’t know, just different,” said Fletcher playfully, Hollick shrugged. “You know, I like this place, Hollick. It’s nice.”

“I love it. The furniture’s ugly, the food takes forever and the family that runs this place fights in Italian in front of the customers, but the food is genuine,” he said, Fletcher laughed.

Then the waiter approached. He was an older Italian-American man, “Are you ready to order, sir?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll have the Chicken Parmesan.”

“Very good, sir and for the lady?” he asked, never taking his eyes off Hollick.

“Why don’t you ask her?” Hollick asked sternly.

“Of course, Miss, what will you be having this evening?” turning to pose the question to Fletcher instead of Hollick.

“You know, I haven’t even looked at the menu. I’ll just have the same,” replied Fletcher.

“Very good, thank you,” said the waiter, who promptly walked back to the kitchen. Hollick watched him walk away and then looked back at Fletcher.

“I’m sorry about that. They’re very old school here.”

“It’s okay, Hollick, it’s fine. It’s just good to be here with you,” she replied, Hollick nodded, already pouring himself another glass of wine.

“So...,”

“Hang on a sec. I want to see this,” said Fletcher pointing at the television. The six o’clock news was coming on and Fletcher loved to see the leading story. The anchor was a pretty woman with a serious look on

her face to match the grim details of the lead story. They had found the patrol officer in the desert. His name was Lucas Shaw. He had been shot four times and placed back into his cruiser, found only a few hours later.

The story had been cut with images of the crime scene. Various angles of an empty cruiser surrounded by investigators flashed across the screen. Then there was a press conference. An enraged assemblyman from Victorville had made a statement. He held the Governor personally responsible, not for the murder, but for the absence of a dash cam in the cruiser, citing recent budget cuts to the dash cam program. Fletcher shook her head, "That is just awful."

"Tragic," replied Hollick, she nodded with sympathy.

"You know, Hollick, I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, Fletcher, very much," they smiled at each other.

"So, Mr. Washington, tell me about your big important new job."

"I don't know much about it myself. What about you, where's John going to put you when you come back?"

"I have no idea, hopefully something with a little less excitement. I mean I loved the work we were doing, but after what happened to Joe and Travis, I think I'm ready for something more, well, administrative," Fletcher smiled at Hollick, who had never stopped smiling. He took another drink, "I felt so fucking guilty today at the funeral, guilty that they were dead and," choked Fletcher.

"...And that you're alive," Hollick finished for her.

"Yeah, I mean if it weren't for Travis, I'd be dead. I'd be in that cemetery right now with them," Hollick stared intently at Fletcher. He took another gulp of wine, "Maybe you better slow down, Hollick. How many glasses is that?"

"Were you sleeping with Carnahan?" he asked abruptly.

"What, what did you just say to me?" Fletcher's tone rose.

"I just mean were you two involved, sexually?" he asked, trying to rephrase the question. Fletcher picked up her full wine glass and doused Hollick in Merlot.

"Fuck you, Hollick!" she shouted. She stood up and looked at Hollick, "Asshole," she added before storming out of the restaurant.

Hollick watched her leave, wishing he could get up and go after her, but he had no idea how to make up for that. Hollick heard her peel out, a blue cloud of smoke billowed after the car. He looked around the restaurant. Everyone was staring at him, from the customers to the wait staff. The waiter approached the table, "Would you like a doggy bag, sir?"

"That'd be great, thank you," replied Hollick.

Hollick Residence Pasadena, CA

Sunday June 9th, 1985 1:13 p.m.

It was packing and cleaning day for Hollick. He began the day on painkillers, recovering from the night before and the incident with Fletcher at Bellanti's. He thought that he should have died from the combination of wine and pills as many Hollywood celebrities had. Then he wished he had when he thought about what he had said to Fletcher the night before at dinner.

Hollick paced around the apartment, wondering where to begin. Then his eyes caught a flashing red light. The light was coming from Hollick's answering machine. He had a new message. He wondered who it could be. Hollick hit the play button. The message contained the Paul Sterner interview he had dubbed from LAX. Through all the madness and melee, Hollick had completely forgotten that he had made a backup.

The tape came through beautifully in almost crystal clear audio. The faint sounds of airport announcements

in the background didn't interfere much with the interview. Hollick quickly unplugged the answering machine and set it aside. He began packing and pondering what to do with the tape. Sterner was dead. Escondido was closed. Nobody outside of that meeting at The Black Room knew about Carnahan's corruption.

Hollick had made arrangements with his landlord to ship his belongings to Quantico. They were mostly books and heirlooms from his family. A small pile of boxes lay on the tile floor of the kitchen. The solid red light on the answering machine haunted the corner of Hollick's eye. A single cassette tape, capable of propelling a federal apocalypse sat in a one-bedroom apartment in Pasadena.

He listened again to the audio while contemplating his next move. Making a quick decision, he grabbed a shoebox and put the answering machine inside. He grabbed a pen, some paper and an envelope. Hollick began writing a letter to Fletcher. In the letter, he apologized for his behavior. He gave her instructions to listen to the tape in a safe location. Then he warned her about the Secrets Division and their plans to bury Escondido.

Hollick placed the letter inside the box with the answering machine. He wrote Fletcher's home address on the envelope and his own return address in L.A. He taped up the box excessively to prevent it from being opened easily. A horn honked outside. A taxicab sat there, waiting to take Hollick to LAX. Hollick dashed outside and asked the driver for a few more minutes.

He walked up to his landlord's unit and knocked. Javier Castillo opened the door. Castillo was a Mexican who immigrated to the U.S. as a young man in the fifties. He worked three menial jobs at once and eventually bought this apartment complex. He had spent three years working those jobs while fixing up the building. Now Castillo owned one of the nicest apartment complexes in North Pasadena.

Hollick spent some time with Castillo when he wasn't working the robbery division. They would drink beer and talk about conspiracy theories involving the government. Castillo loved talking about everything from the Kennedy Assassination to the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa. He and Hollick would debate all the angles. Once Castillo knew that Hollick was an FBI agent, he insisted upon these debates, "Alex, come in, have a beer. I just read something about John F. Kennedy you should know," he said in his thick Mexican accent.

"I wish I could, Mr. Castillo, but I have to leave, my taxi's waiting," said Hollick. Castillo looked at the cab and nodded.

"You've packed your things?" he asked, Hollick nodded.

"Yeah, there wasn't much to pack, but everything's set, all you have to do is drop off the boxes. I really appreciate it."

"Sure, Alex, it's not a problem."

"Thanks. The bureau is going to pay out the rest of my lease through October and I have some expensive furniture I can't take with me. Maybe you know someone who can use it more than I can," he said, Castillo nodded.

"Alex, you've been a good tenant and a good friend. I hope there are good things waiting for you in Washington."

"Thank you, Mr. Castillo. There's one other thing. I need a favor, another favor."

"Anything, Alex," he said. Hollick showed Castillo the shoebox.

"I want you to hold on to this for me, it's nothing illegal, I just can't take it with me," Castillo took the box and briefly inspected it. "Mr. Castillo, this next part is really important," Castillo stared intently at Hollick, "If you don't hear anything from me in three months, I need you to mail this package to my friend. Her address is on the box."

"A girlfriend?" he asked.

"Something like that," said Hollick nodding, "I should give you money for postage."

“Alex, please, I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, but only if you don’t hear from me in three months, that’s September 9th.”

“Okay, Alex, three months.”

“Thank you, Mr. Castillo,” he nodded and watched Hollick walk to his taxicab. Hollick hoped he had made the right choice. He was sure he could trust Castillo. He was a good man. Castillo would probably think it was some joke Hollick was playing on him.

Hollick got into his taxi and headed to LAX. He wondered once again what awaited him at Quantico. He hoped it would be different this time. He was worried that the people who he had to place his trust in were the same people Novak warned him not to trifle with. All he could do was get on a plane and hope for the best. He had done his part so far and he hoped that they would do theirs.

Chapter 7: The Blue Badge of Courage

Washington-Dulles Airport Dulles,
VA Monday June 10th, 1985 4:01
a.m.

Hollick arrived at Washington-Dulles Airport via Flight 76 early Monday morning. It had been a nice quiet flight. Hollick’s mind had relaxed and enabled him to remove all thoughts of Barstow, Officer Shaw, the funeral and Fletcher long enough to get some rest. The Percocet was apparently doing its job.

The first hour of the flight, he had thought about the events of the weekend. The guilt he had felt over having to take part in the murder of a young man, confronting the widows of his deceased agents and of course, Fletcher. After that, he simply dozed off. He had only been awake for about five minutes before the wheels touched down in Virginia. He used that time to recollect his thoughts and prepare for the inevitable.

The airport was even less busy than last Tuesday. Clay had not been specific as to how he would get from here to Quantico. He feared that Agent Dunn and his goons would be there, once again posing as FBI Agents. Hollick thought he saw them, but it was actually a few businessmen waiting to fly out. Hollick felt somewhat relieved, but remained vigilant.

He spotted Liaison Silva, Clay’s right hand man. He had a hard time seeing him at first as he was out of his uniform. Silva was wearing jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and some kind of hat, the type that beatnik’s would have worn at Woodstock. Once he made eye contact with Hollick, he stood up and began walking out of the airport. Hollick followed, struggling to keep up with Silva while dragging his carryon bag.

A Crown Vic sat parked at the front entrance. The car had no markings whatsoever, not even a fed license plate. Hollick noticed the Virginia plate when he threw his bag in the trunk. Once inside, Silva sped away from Washington Dulles with Hollick riding shotgun. They were both silent until they exited the airport parking lot.

“Welcome back, Agent Hollick.”

“Thank you,” replied Hollick cautiously.

“I trust everything went well in L.A.?”

“Yes, the objective is complete.”

“But not without incident,” said Silva, tossing a copy of the L.A. Times in Hollick’s lap. Hollick looked down at the front page. The headline read, “No Suspects in Mojave Cop Killing.” The accompanying photo

captured what he and Novak had left there two days earlier, beautiful desert landscape with Officer Shaw's cruiser parked in the sand. It was just as Hollick had remembered, reprehensible.

"We had car trouble. We were spotted by C.H.P. We did what we had to do to maintain cover," he replied.

"You did the right thing. This isn't ideal, but it's better than the alternative."

"Does Clay know?"

"Yes," replied Silva.

"Is he pissed?"

"No. A source in the Highway patrol assured us that there are no suspects and zero evidence. A heavy rainstorm washed away what little they did find. They have nothing to work with, but the bullets they pulled out of the body." A short-lived sense of relief washed over Hollick, knowing that there was no evidence to implicate Novak or himself. Then Silva said, "I have to ask, Agent Hollick, was it you or Novak who shot this guy?"

"It was John. My gun is in San Diego going through ballistics."

"Okay, that's good. Where is Novak's gun?"

"I have no idea. We went straight to the funeral after it happened."

Silva pulled onto the 28 South before resuming the conversation, "Okay, I'm going to try to explain some things to you, Agent Hollick. Don't feel discouraged if you don't understand right away. By the time you close your first investigation, you'll understand the modus operandi of our division."

"Okay," replied Hollick.

"Our division has existed since the late forties, but we've only just begun our golden age. This is due in part to the passage of an important piece of legislation, The Elevated Access Bill of 1980. Are you familiar with that bill?" asked Silva.

"Yeah, it's that bill that uh, elevates access," said Hollick.

"As the name implies, yes, it elevates access, but it's the golden goose for our division. Only twenty agents in the bureau have this clearance, ten of whom are in our division. You will be number eleven. Now with this clearance, you can ask for anything you need to conduct an investigation without the hassles of paperwork, without going through the channels and without the typical gridlock field agents sometimes face." Silva handed Hollick his new FBI I.D., which had a longer code and a prefix.

"Anything I need, huh?" he asked.

"Well, within reason. You can't request an aircraft carrier or a nuclear bomb, but yeah, anything you deem necessary to close an investigation. I'll give you a few examples. Let's say you had a murder suspect, but the only witness was already in prison. You could request a pardon through Clay and get your witness out of prison in exchange for cooperation. A more practical example might be a situation where you need leverage on a suspect or a witness. You can borrow drugs from the DEA and plant them on suspects to get them to open up to you."

"Isn't that illegal?" asked Hollick.

"It's in the interest of national security, Agent Hollick. It's part of the bill. Besides, those who would give up essential liberty to purchase temporary safety deserve neither. Do you know who said that?" asked Silva.

"Yeah, it was Benjamin Franklin."

"Correct. You obviously paid attention in history class. He said that in 1755. Here we are, two-hundred and thirty years later and most Americans still want both."

"Is that really so much to ask?" he asked, Silva smiled.

"You can't have one without the other in this country. People want safety and if we have to violate some inalienable rights along the way to provide that safety, well that's just the cost of doing business. You can't have your cake and eat it too, not even in America," said Silva. Hollick nodded, understanding on the outside while disagreeing on the inside.

Silva then went on to explain the division. First, he described the inner workings. The chain of command was rather simple. Clay called the shots while Silva orchestrated the operations. The protocol was just as basic. Agents were only to report to Clay and Silva, but more often than not, it would be Silva handling the exchange of information. He warned Hollick not to share Intel with anyone else, even close friends like Novak and Donovan.

Finally, he told Hollick how they kept it all a secret. Every member of the division had a paper job, even Clay, who was an intelligence specialist. These were cloak jobs, only to explain the money, because the division itself was off the books. Silva likened the division to a collective of field agents with both public and private funding. When Hollick asked about the private funding, he got the classified answer.

Hollick's cloak would be homicide, but in actuality, he would be given his own subdivision, SRA/CRM, Satanic Ritual Abuse/Crimes of Religious Misinterpretation. His chief area of focus would be the escalation of Satanism in North America, but his job extended to other areas like the Occult and Paganism. It all sounded rather crazy to Hollick, but Silva seemed both sincere and serious, especially at the drop off in Quantico.

"Agent Hollick, today you will begin your training. A three-man team will meet you inside. These people are the best and brightest and I suggest you learn from them. They know about our division, but they don't know specifics and they don't know about Escondido. You have access to anything here at Quantico to help you prepare. To everyone but your training team, you are training for Homicide Investigations," Silva told Hollick, "And it must stay that way," he added. Hollick nodded.

"Thanks for the lift," he said, exiting the Crown Vic.

After grabbing his bag and checking in at the front desk, Hollick was led to a conference room. It was mid-sized room outfitted with a few tables and chairs, a coffeemaker and a television. Fluorescent light shot down from above, just as it had in the infirmary. Hollick's escort, a Quantico peon said, "Your training team will be here shortly, Agent Hollick, feel free to make yourself some coffee," after which he promptly left the room.

The team did not arrive shortly. Hollick bided his time drinking coffee and watching television. He actually preferred reading and looked around for magazines, but there were none in the room. The television programs were reruns of episodes he and Donovan had watched together in the infirmary. He thought about his time there. He wondered if it was better to know or not know all that he had learned in the last five days.

Two hours later, three men walked through the door. They weren't dressed as agents, but were all dressed rather casually. They sat down at the table across from Hollick. One of them placed a folder on the table and then another man slid a small cardboard box across the table to Hollick, "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a welcoming gift, go ahead, open it," said the man on the left. Hollick examined the package and opened it up. The box contained his service weapon, a .38 Special Revolver, the same gun he had shot Paul Sterner with nearly three weeks ago. The gun was clean, shiny and unloaded. It had been over two weeks since Hollick had touched a gun. The cold steel felt unusually heavy for an empty gun or maybe it was just him.

"Thank you," replied Hollick.

He began to look at the box closely. His name was scribbled with Quantico's address in the center and the return address of the San Diego Bureau on the upper left corner. There was a stamp of an airplane on the box. This stamp meant that the package was flown in, probably express shipped on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. It was postmarked in Los Angeles, which Hollick found odd.

"Agent Hollick," said the man on the left.

Hollick looked up. The man had probably been handsome at some point in his life. Now he was in his late forties. He had a shaved head. His belly stuck out in his FBI T-shirt. Hollick also noticed that he had blue eyes, lighter than Novak's eyes were. At first glance, he looked like a hardnosed police interrogator, "Yes,"

said Hollick.

“We’re your training team. We’re here to help you prepare for your new job with the bureau. We’re going to go around the table and introduce ourselves. I am Philip Sheldon and I will be training you in investigations. I am a ten-year veteran of the NYPD and a sixteen-year veteran of the bureau. The cases I have worked on carry a ninety-seven percent conviction rate. I am proud to say that I am one of the very best in the country.”

Hollick nodded and Sheldon turned to the man in the center, motioning for him to speak. This man looked like a drill instructor for the Marines. He was in his late fifties, but built like a tank. He had some tattoos on his arms, visible under his POW MIA T-shirt. He wore army fatigues and a black hat with “ARMY” embroidered on the front. He spoke with a drawl, “I am retired Lieutenant Colonel Jack Bagley. My career with the Marines spans thirty-five years. I served as a Private First Class in Korea, a Drill Instructor in Vietnam and for the last ten years, I have trained both Green Berets and Navy Seals for operations around the world. I will be training you in hand-to-hand combat and physical fitness. Since this is a non-military platform, you may refer to me as Bagley.”

Hollick nodded looking Bagley in his tired brown eyes. Bagley looked at the man to his left. He was thumbing through folders. He was unlike the other two. He was skinny and dressed semi-formally with brown hair and glasses. He looked like a Harvard egghead to Hollick. He was no more than five years older than Hollick. Finally noticing it was his turn to speak, he looked up at Hollick with a nervous smile.

“Agent Hollick, my name is Shawn Stallard. I am a theology professor from Yale University. Now I understand you’re a Harvard man, so I hope you won’t hold that against me,” he said with a grin. Nobody laughed at Stallard’s attempt to lighten the mood. “Agent Hollick, I know you minored in theology. I am here to train you on the theology specific to your new career path. There won’t be any lectures or exams. Our time together will be spent discussing theology in an open dialogue,” Hollick nodded at Stallard. Sheldon knocked on the table.

“Agent Hollick, Bagley and I too believe in an open dialogue, is this something you can accept?” he asked.

“Sure,” replied Hollick nodding.

“Well, you’re a fine agent, a cut above the rest really.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We reviewed your file and you have a lot of strengths. You also have some weaknesses.”

“Weaknesses?” asked Hollick.

“You have a good investigative record overall, but your last case resulted in the death of two agents. We only lost one agent in the entire 1984 calendar year, excluding missing agents presumed to be dead. For my part, I’m going to teach you how to solve crimes more efficiently and expediently.”

“Okay,” replied Hollick nodding.

“You’ve also had little in the way of hand to hand combat training. Bagley here will assist you in that department. There are many situations where you can’t rely on that,” Sheldon pointed at the .38 Special sitting on the table next to Hollick, “Speaking of which, I want you to improve your target accuracy on the shooting range. You once carried a ninety-six percent average target accuracy, but our most recent report shows that your accuracy is about eighty-two percent overall. That’s a great number for a virgin robbery division agent, but for you I expect that number to improve by fifteen points in the next ninety days.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hollick.

“Now, Agent Hollick, the next three months are going to be the hardest in your life. You will be held to standards far beyond the norms for field agents. You will train hard and long to achieve the goals this team has set out for you. Failure is not an option as Bagley here likes to put it.” Everybody laughed, but Hollick. Stallard tried to join in, but it was awkward. “This morning you will be with me, learning investigative practices. After lunch, you’ll spend some time with Bagley. After dinner, you’ll finish up with Stallard. This

schedule will alternate randomly to keep you on your toes. Are you ready to begin your training?"

"Yes, sir," replied Hollick. He wasn't ready, but how could he say no. Bagley and Stallard looked like the odd couple walking out of the room together, one a Yale scholar, the other, one of the best military trainers in the world. Hollick was sure that Stallard was scared shitless just having to sit next to Bagley. After all, Bagley had taught Green Berets to kill with their bare hands.

Hollick drank more coffee while Sheldon thumbed through his folder. He looked at his gun and wondered why now, why all of a sudden had it appeared at Quantico? Novak had made it sound like the gun may take months to get back from San Diego. He remembered that Novak had told him to wait for his gun the first time he left Los Angeles. He also found the mismatched address and postmark peculiar.

Hollick filtered through the possibilities. The best-case scenario would be that this was a move by Agent Hansen, trying to get on his good side in hopes of a meeting. The worst case would be that this was Novak, insulating himself from Mojave, by using Hollick's gun in the shooting of Officer Shaw and then putting it back into Hollick's hands.

He concluded the most likely possibility was that this was the Secrets Division, once again toying with his mind. Silva asked specific questions about the incident in the Mojave Desert. If the gun on the table was the same gun Novak had used, this was the only evidence linking anyone to the crime and now it was in Hollick's possession. Hollick put it out of his mind as much as he could.

Sheldon reached under the table and produced, "Clue," a popular board game for ages eight and up. The object of the game is to move around the game board, a mansion, in the guise of one of the game's six characters, collecting clues from which to deduce which suspect murdered the game's perpetual victim, Mr. Boddy. Hollick played this game many times as a kid. He thought this must be a first day practical joke, "What's that for?"

"For your training," replied Sheldon.

"We're gonna play Clue? Are you fucking kidding me? I'm an FBI agent," he said, laughing at Sheldon, who began unpacking the game.

"You were a robbery division agent. You're going to be a homicide agent. It's not the easiest transition. We have to start somewhere, Agent Hollick. Master 'Clue' and we can move on to mock cases I've prepared based on my own investigations, real investigations."

"Sure," said Hollick smiling and nodding. Hollick and Sheldon began their first game. Hollick had barely tried, assuming through his own arrogance that he would easily win. As the game progressed, he began trying harder. He was actually enjoying himself. When the game concluded, Sheldon stared at Hollick, who was deep in thought.

"So, Agent Hollick, who killed Mr. Boddy?"

"It was Professor Plum, in the library, with the lead pipe," said Hollick before nodding.

"Right room, right weapon, wrong suspect," said Sheldon. Hollick shook his head and looked down at the floor. "It was Colonel Mustard," added Sheldon.

"Fuck," muttered Hollick.

"It's okay. I'm sure Professor Plum won't mind spending the rest of his life in prison for a crime he didn't commit," said Sheldon, Hollick looked up at him, "Let's play another round," said Sheldon nodding. They played a second game of "Clue" and this time Hollick put forth all his effort to bring Mr. Boddy's killer to justice. As the second game drew to a close, Sheldon once again stared intently at Hollick, who now refused to accept failure, "So who's the killer?" he asked.

Hollick took a deep breath, "Miss Scarlet, in the study, with the dagger," he said slowly and carefully.

"Right, right and right, she's the killer, she's pretty cute though," said Sheldon smiling and holding up the picture on the box, Hollick laughed. "Good job. I'll let you go for lunch. Tomorrow, if you win three consecutive games, we move on to some real cases, with real suspects and real victims. Does that sound

good?” asked Sheldon, Hollick nodded and shook Sheldon’s hand before leaving for lunch.

In the cafeteria, Hollick reflected on his first day, which was difficult. Hollick never liked training. He was always eager to be in the field. He had realized that he had let himself go and that smoking had affected his cardiovascular system. He could not jog as fast or for as long. Bagley worked Hollick hard that first day or maybe it seemed harder because it was the first day.

Bagley wasn’t like the hardcore drill instructors depicted in movies about Vietnam. He avoided psychological tactics, instead using only a few words to reflect his approval or disappointment. He trained Hollick hard, but only spoke in phrases like, “that’s not good enough” and “you have to do better.”

Bagley taught Hollick hand-to-hand combat and brought in martial arts experts to teach him basic skills in karate, jujitsu and tae kwon do. Occasionally, Bagley would bring in young marines as sparring partners, who continually kicked Hollick’s ass. As Hollick improved, he could match most of the marines Bagley put him up against. Bagley even shared some knife skills reserved for Green Berets.

Sheldon and Hollick had the strangest relationship of his three trainers. After graduating from “Clue” Sheldon liked to layout hypothetical cases based on his own investigations and compel Hollick to solve them. He would put out variables like an algebraic equation and look at Hollick to solve the equation. He would lay traps for Hollick that led him away from the answer and then use tips to bring him back.

If Hollick failed, Sheldon would give him looks of disappointment, like a father to a son when his kid struck out at a little league game. Then he would flip the switch and scold Hollick for missing an important piece of evidence that pointed to the right conclusion. If Hollick gave up, Sheldon would psychologically goad him into trying harder. Although the physical training was harder, it felt like a break from the brainteasers.

Hollick enjoyed his time with Stallard the most. They would drink tea, sit on a comfortable couch and discuss theology. These discussions often turned into debates. Although Stallard was a non-biased teacher, he believed that Islam was the most balanced and godly religion. Hollick was a lapsed Catholic. He subscribed to a patchwork of Christianity and Buddhism, although he did not regularly practice either.

Hollick first thought Stallard to be a bit pretentious, but he quickly grew on Hollick as an intellectual sparring partner of sorts. Stallard challenged Hollick to defend his own beliefs, which he tried to and often failed. They eventually arrived at Satanism, which was a big part of Hollick’s job. Hollick learned about the dark religions, the occult and the black arts.

When he wasn’t training with his team, Hollick would jog around Quantico and practice his target accuracy at the range. He ate well and slept better thanks to Dr. Abernathy. Hollick had an agreement with Abernathy to keep prescribing him Percocet as long as Hollick agreed to stay away from the entire floor of the infirmary. No more nightmares of dead agents, CIA torture teams or the naughty version of Jennifer Fletcher.

Hollick hadn’t left the Quantico facility at all, but it didn’t feel like he was in jail, like the first time. Instead, Hollick felt like a kid at summer camp. While he had no contact with the outside world, he was enjoying himself. His mind and body seemed to be getting stronger. The pain from his torture was almost non-existent and he felt more enlightened than ever before in his life.

He hadn’t received a single letter or phone call since he left Los Angeles three months ago. Hollick was sure the calls and the mail were being preemptively screened so that he wouldn’t receive them. All Hollick knew was what he saw on television, which he rarely watched and the inner workings of Quantico Academy. He also knew that the isolation was intentional. Quantico was his home and the FBI training team was his family for now.

Hollick missed Fletcher. He hadn’t seen or heard from her or Novak for that matter. He was okay with it. He was more afraid of the next interaction he would have with either of them than he was the solitude he felt. However, the solitude had Hollick beginning to question Novak’s character and how much trust he could place in him. He was also beginning to worry about Fletcher’s safety and what may happen when and if they

ever saw each other again. Hollick knew he had problems to face, but for the time being, they were all quarantined in the big bad world outside of Quantico.

As the summer dragged on, Hollick began worrying less and less. He still had not heard from anyone, not even Secrets Division Liaison Silva. His world was becoming Quantico. He had it made he thought. Nobody interrogated, tortured or threatened him. He was able to train with men whom he respected and returned respect. This is how it should be, he thought to himself.

Hollick had won over Sheldon, now cracking any mock investigation he threw at him with the greatest of ease. Sheldon even took him to New York City for a weekend as a field trip to the homicide division of the NYPD. Sheldon was now the proud father figure, watching Hollick hit home runs. They were becoming close friends.

Bagley was impressed with Hollick's improvement. He now met all of the goals that Bagley had set out for him and was lapping the newest FBI recruits on their morning jogs. His sparring had gotten much better. He stood toe-to-toe with much bigger opponents. Hollick's physical appearance had changed as well. Any fat that he had brought with him had now become muscle.

His shooting had improved over the summer as well. Hollick's averages were beginning to hit the low nineties and edging towards Sheldon's goal of ninety-seven percent. Hollick was becoming the very mold the team wanted to make out of him if not breaking the mold altogether. Hollick was happier than he could remember being in the last year.

Stallard was now beginning to submit to Hollick in their theology debates. Hollick would lie in bed, planning strategies to overcome Stallard and his Doctorate from Yale. Stallard began to look at Hollick as a peer rather than a student. The debates became far deeper and Hollick could hold his own against Stallard.

He hoped that the summer would never end. He knew however, as with all things, that the training would end. He tried not to count the days, pretending he had more time, but in reality, his time there was nearly over.

F.B.I. Training Academy Quantico, VA
Monday September 2nd, 1985 9:22 a.m.

Hollick sat in the conference room waiting for Sheldon and their investigative training regimen. Sheldon was late, which was rare. Hollick looked at the clock. Sheldon was nearly an hour and a half late for their morning meeting. Hollick wondered if he had gotten the schedule wrong and should be looking for Bagley or Stallard. He was sure he hadn't.

Then Sheldon walked through the door. He was talking to someone who he had clearly been walking with. He said, "Thanks again, buddy," and closed the door. He walked into the room with his folder and a big smile on his face. He pulled out his chair and sat down across from Hollick, "Hey, buddy, big news across the wire today."

"Really?" replied Hollick. He didn't know if he meant news about him or from the FBI wire system. Sheldon pulled out a faded low-resolution mug shot of a handsome young Hispanic man. He looked thin and a bit disheveled.

"You see this piece of shit? It's the Night Stalker, the guy who's been killing all those people in California, some spic named Ramirez. They have him in custody right now," Sheldon handed the mug shot to Hollick, who examined it closer.

"Who got him, us?"

"No, LAPD," replied Sheldon with an annoyed look on his face.

"Wow," said Hollick.

“Yeah, you know how they did it? A fucking fingerprint, one fucking fingerprint that asshole left on a car at a crime scene. A mob tried to kill him in East L.A., the cops had to break it up to make the arrest.”

“Wow,” he said again.

“There’s something to learn from this guy, Alex.”

“What’s that?”

“Sometimes it’s the simplest things that solve crimes. You got that?”

“Yeah,” said Hollick returning Sheldon’s nod.

The door opened again. It was Stallard and Bagley. They walked into the room and took their seats. Hollick had remembered the Night Stalker case and was thinking about how he watched it on television with Agent Donovan. He began to wonder what today would entail. This was the first time all three trainers were in the room with him since he arrived at Quantico. Hollick passed the mug shot back to Sheldon, who put it away.

“So, Alex, I’m sorry, Agent Hollick, you’ve got one more week with us. Next Monday will be our final assessment and then you’re going out into the field,” said Sheldon.

“Three months already?” asked Hollick.

“Yeah, it went by quick and we’ve all grown to like you very much,” Hollick smiled and nodded. “Today is going to be a review of where you’re at in terms of progress.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Now you came to me as a slightly above average investigator with far too much time working robberies and quite frankly, I think you were bored. Today, I feel that you will make a magnificent field agent and that you’ll do great working homicide cases.”

“Thank you, sir,” he replied.

“I’m not finished. You also came to me with an average of eighty-two percent on target accuracy. Today you’re shooting at ninety-six percent. You’re almost where I want you.”

“I’ll get there, sir.”

“I know you will. Bagley, how’s Agent Hollick doing in your view?”

“Agent Hollick initially started off like many of my recruits. His spirit was strong, but his flesh was weak. Now, I believe Hollick could do anything he puts his mind to, even join the Green Berets,” said Bagley.

“Well let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Sheldon, everyone giggled. Hollick smiled. He enjoyed being touted as an exemplary soldier.

“Stallard, what do you think?” asked Sheldon.

“He could teach my classes at Yale, really, Hollick, anytime you’re in New Haven,” said Stallard. Everyone laughed. Stallard had finally made the group laugh.

“Good, it sounds like we’re ready to release you back into the wild. We’ll go for another week, do some testing and then say our sad goodbyes. Good work, son,” said Sheldon. Hollick nodded, still smiling and in good spirits. “Do you have any questions for us?”

“Just one, who am I training with first today?”

“It’s Labor Day, take the day off, we’ll pick it up tomorrow,” said Sheldon.

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Last time I checked we’re all federal employees, well, except for Stallard, you Ivy League prick,” said Sheldon jokingly, “Federal employees don’t work holidays. We’ll see you tomorrow, Alex.”

“Tomorrow,” he said in agreement.

Sheldon, Bagley and Stallard got up and headed for the door. When the door closed, Hollick was alone with his thoughts again. He hadn’t had a true day off in over three months. He had no idea what to do with himself. He had enjoyed the distractions so much that he hoped they would never end. Then Sheldon opened the door and looked at Hollick, “There’s a phone call out here for you, Alex.”

Hollick looked up. He cautiously rose from his chair and walked towards the door. He hadn’t had a phone

call in months. He hoped it was Agent Fletcher, but he soon realized that Fletcher thought he was in D.C., not Virginia. He feared it was Secrets Division, but they probably wouldn't call Hollick at Quantico, they would just send Silva.

He walked to the receptionist's office window, where the call had been placed on hold. The red light flashed. Hollick's anticipation grew. He slowly reached for the phone and picked up the receiver. He carefully placed it next to his ear as if it were a land mine waiting to explode with the slightest touch, "Alex Hollick speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Hollick. Are you happy with your long distance service?"

"John?"

"Happy Labor Day, Alex, how are you doing?"

"Good, things are going great actually."

"That's good, Alex, glad to hear it."

"So, what's going on, John? Is there something I can do for you?"

"As a matter of fact there is. I was hoping you could come out to L.A. this Friday."

"Why?"

"Well I'm having an orientation for some new recruits, the new robbery division and some other agents. I was hoping you could come by and give a speech, you know, motivate the troops."

"Uh...I don't know, John. I'm pretty busy here. I don't think I can get away, I'm sorry."

"Wait a minute, Alex. I've cleared this with your boss and he's fine with it. Won't you come out? We'll put you up in any hotel you want. Just give me a twenty minute speech."

"This has been cleared, John?"

"Yeah, look at it as a weekend getaway to the golden state."

Hollick paused for a moment before answering, "Okay, John, I'll do it."

"I appreciate it, Alex."

"Sure, John," replied Hollick, "How's Agent Fletcher?" he asked.

"I got a call on hold and I've gotta take it. I'll see you on Friday. You go on at eleven."

"Okay, John."

"Thanks again, Alex."

He hung up the phone, standing there and thinking for a moment. He wondered if this was what Novak said it was. He'd never been asked to make a speech in his entire life. After three months, it seemed odd that Novak would call him out of the blue and ask for a speech. The request could be legitimate. After all, he did lead the robbery team for five years and made many arrests in those years. He even led the team to first place.

Hollick walked away, heading for the Quantico cafeteria. He had some Chicken Parmesan, which was his favorite dish. Quantico couldn't touch Bellanti's in terms of Chicken Parmesan, but the food reminded him of Fletcher and their one sort of date that went so badly. He wondered if he should look her up in L.A., maybe his absence had made her heart grow fonder.

Afterwards, Hollick took a jog around Quantico, which was a ghost town. He had already taken a jog, but he was becoming accustomed to regular exercise. He was starting to enjoy the routine. Quantico lay under a pale grey sky. The air was humid with an electrical aftertaste. A thunderstorm was all but imminent.

Hollick noticed his shoelace was untied, so he stopped at some nearby bleachers and sat down to tie the lace. When he looked up, he noticed that Bagley was jogging about fifty feet behind him. Bagley stopped and sat on the bleachers next to him. They looked around at the sky, expecting a downpour any minute, "Hi, Bagley," said Hollick.

"Hey, Hollick, you know, I'm surprised you're out here jogging. We gave you the day off. When I give my men time off, they usually head to the bar or look for a whorehouse," Hollick grinned at the remark.

"I guess I just like the exercise."

"That's great, don't break from the routine, it gives good marines bad habits."

"But I'm an FBI agent."

"Well, whatever. Anyway, I've noticed something about you, Alex. You don't mind if I call you Alex?"

"My friends call me Alex. Are you my friend?"

"I'm your trainer, but I'd like to think after the time we've spent, that we are friends."

"I'd like to think that too."

"Well what I'm trying to say is that when you got here, you had some dark clouds over you, just like the ones up there," he said, as they both glanced quickly at the sky. "In these three months I think the clouds have parted some, but I still sense there's something wrong, something that's bothering you. Now I don't know where you're going or what you'll be doing when you get there, but if you want to talk, my ears are open."

Hollick nodded his head, but his first thought was Secrets Division. Maybe this was another test to see if he would break down and spill secrets. Maybe Clay thought he ought to test him one more time just to be sure, before he sent him into the field. This was a test. Clay had to be completely sure he didn't need to kill him. He wouldn't take the bait, not from this drill instructor turned therapist, "I'm fine," said Hollick in a flat voice. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.

"Is it a woman?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You haven't left this place in almost three months. I'm sure there must be some special lady in your life. There are for most men in our line of work. Is there for you?"

"There is," he replied.

"And you miss her?"

"Very much so," he replied.

"Is she beautiful?"

"She's terrifying, beautiful, smart, ambitious, funny and caring. People say, 'I'll give you the benefit of the doubt,' but she actually does and she calls me on my shit, which I need occasionally. Anyway, yeah, she's amazing."

"She sounds great. What's the problem?"

"I lied to her."

"And you got caught?"

"No. She doesn't know. I can't even tell her."

"Cause you know you'll lose her?" he asked, Hollick nodded.

"I thought it was for her own good, that I lied to protect her. I still think that," Bagley nodded. "What about you? There must be someone special in your life. Have you ever had to lie to the woman you love?"

"Alex, I've been married for twenty-six years and have four kids. In that time, I've beaten recruits, killed civilians and banged more Asian hookers than I care to remember. Hell, I even lied under oath to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Bagley and Hollick laughed for a moment. "The point is that everyone lies. From the shit shoveling Private First Class right on up to the President of these United States, we all have our lies, Alex. The fabric of our country was built on lies. That same country has survived over two-hundred years because of lies. America is the greatest country in the world and you love her, don't you, Alex?"

"Very much," replied Hollick.

"And you love this woman?"

"Very much," replied Hollick again.

"I know you do, Alex. While you lied to her, you did it out of love, to protect her from something far worse than a lie," Hollick nodded. "The lies that hold this country together are necessary. Most people need to be

left in the dark. The truth can be as deadly as a bullet in the wrong hands. With this woman, you lied to her not to deceive her, but because you wanted to protect her. That's a blue badge of courage in my book."

"Don't you mean a red badge of courage?"

"No," replied Bagley shaking his head, Hollick nodded.

"Can I ask you a question, Bagley?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"You were in Vietnam, right?"

"Well I trained Marines to go to Vietnam down in South Carolina, Parris Island, but I spent some time over there. I made the trip nine or ten times in seven years. Why?"

"I was just wondering. Was it a common occurrence for platoon's to get bad Intel? You know, like Intel to go protect a village or something, but it was actually a ruse to lead them into an ambush."

"Oh yeah, mostly in the beginning, but we caught on pretty early. It was the responsibility of the platoon leader to take Intel from legitimate sources, but we did have a few incompetent guys over there who would take Intel from anybody who said they were an ally. To tell you the truth, our biggest problem with ambushes was the resolve of the NVA."

"What do you mean?"

"Those motherfuckers could sit in a foxhole for three days with no food or water, just waiting for our guys to show up. You put one of our guys down there for five minutes and he needs a cigarette. I truly believe that's why we withdrew from the war. In '75 when we got out of there, the NVA was ready to fight up until this very day," he said, Hollick nodded. Without warning, lightning struck down. Rain began to pour, "We should get out of this storm," said Bagley. Hollick nodded and they jogged back to the main building together.

Chapter 8: A New Friend in Old L.A.

American Airlines Flight 263 En Route to Los Angeles

Friday September 6th, 1985 6:36 a.m.

Hollick sat in the window seat of a plane on its way to Los Angeles. He was staring out the window at the cornfields and cow pastures of America. He was a bit tired because his flight had departed early in the morning and he had almost missed the plane. Quantico let Hollick borrow a Crown Vic to get to Washington-Dulles, but he had a problem registering the car into long-term parking. He had gotten to the gate just in time to board.

The rest of the week had gone by too fast. He spent the last three days training, mostly with Sheldon. He had given Hollick tips to improve his target accuracy, which had fallen back down to ninety-three percent. Hollick lied and said he was just having a bad day, but it was more than that. He knew that the last three months were just a sabbatical from the hell ride he was about to jump back onto.

Now he was just two short hours from Los Angeles, where he would be giving a speech to recruits at Novak's behest. Hollick had ignored the Barstow problem for three months. He wondered if it would resolve itself and prayed that it already had. He worried that the .38 Special in his holster was the weapon that took a patrolman's life three months ago.

If the gun Novak used was Hollick's, he knew he would be either dead or in jail by the end of the weekend.

That's how the plan would work, if it were in fact the plan. If it wasn't the same gun, then what became of the murder weapon? Was Novak stupid enough to kill a cop with his own service weapon? Hollick doubted the conjecture, but given the last four months, anything was possible.

Hollick gulped down some Percocet, which still blocked his nightmarish visions. He was able to secure one more refill from Dr. Abernathy. He told Hollick that he could not keep refilling the prescription, because Hollick had fully recovered from the "accident" in Virginia back in May. He gave Hollick a sixty-day supply, but at the rate Hollick took Percocet, he would be lucky if it lasted three weeks.

Hollick realized that he had not even prepared the speech he was about to give. While it was only a small group of recruits, he wasn't sure he could just wing it. He called over a flight attendant and asked for a pen and paper. She had the pen, but all she could find were a pile of cocktail napkins. Hollick also ordered a drink to help him relax before the speech.

Hollick feverishly wrote down some good FBI jargon. He would put together a template on the taxi ride over. He briefly looked out his window at the Mojave Desert, the same place where he watched Novak kill Officer Shaw, possibly with the same gun that was in his holster. In just a few minutes, the wheels would touch down at LAX and all would be revealed to Hollick.

After landing, he scrambled off the plane and towards the gate. The plane had to fly in circles over LAX because of some problem on the runway. The pilot said that he was waiting for room to land, but that everything was okay and they should be landing in ten minutes. An hour later, the plane touched down and taxied the runway for twenty more minutes. Now Hollick had to find a taxi and get to the field office in one hour.

He stormed through the gate to find a taxi, but once he entered the lobby, he froze in his tracks. There were cops everywhere. LAPD was at the airport looking through luggage. They seemed to be looking for something specific like a weapon or drugs. Maybe the speech Novak really meant for Hollick to give was a confession to murder in the Mojave Desert. He walked through the airport trying to remain inconspicuous.

A beat cop approached Hollick, who was walking fast with sunglasses covering his eyes. Hollick walked faster and tried to blend in with other travelers. The beat cop walked faster, hot on Hollick's heels, "Sir, sir," he shouted, Hollick stopped and turned around.

"What?" Hollick said in a stern tone laced with annoyance.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm going to have to search that bag."

"I'm an FBI agent. I'm running late for a very important meeting. Is this really necessary?"

"You're with the FBI? Where are your credentials, sir?"

Hollick noticed his ID wasn't clipped to his shirt. He unzipped the bag and began looking for his ID and badge when the cop noticed Hollick's holster and .38 Special. The cop radioed his partner, "I've got a gun over here." The cop pulled out his gun, a standard issue .38 and drew down on Hollick, "Sir, please back slowly away from the bag and put your hands on your head."

"No, look I've got my credentials in here."

"Sir, I'm not going to ask you again," he said. Hollick did as he said. He posed embarrassingly as a criminal in the middle of LAX. A minute later, the cop's partner came by and looked through Hollick's bag while the cop held Hollick at bay. The cop pulled out the badge and then the I.D., which had shifted to the bottom of the bag in flight. They let him go and apologized profusely for the misunderstanding.

Hollick resumed walking without saying a word. His fast walk was developing into a jog, like the many he had taken at Quantico. Once outside, he took the first cab he saw. He offered the driver double his fare, if he could get him to the field office by 10:55. The cabbie zoomed away from LAX. He was taking a patchwork of freeways that Hollick never would have used if he were driving.

Hollick let him drive. He looked at his notes and tried to read them as the cabbie hit every bump in the road he could find. He drove fast, weaving in and out of late morning traffic recklessly. The cabbie took an exit to

take surface streets. Whatever the cabbie's reasoning for taking this exit eluded Hollick, "This isn't my exit, get back on the freeway!"

"Trust me. I've been driving in L.A. for fifteen years. I know it like the back of my hand."

Hollick didn't think that this cabbie spent much time looking at his hands. He looked out at Los Angeles. The city was baking hot from the sun. L.A. seemed to be having a long summer and was stricken with some sort of heat wave. Slamming on the brakes, the cabbie pulled up to the field office. Hollick was just happy to be there, both on time and alive.

He rushed through the front doors. Becky was behind the desk and waved him through, telling him that Novak was waiting. He spotted a sign that said, "F.B.I. L.A. Orientation," with an arrow. He followed the arrow and began speed walking. When he turned a corner, he saw Novak in the hall. He was pacing around and looking at his watch. When Novak saw Hollick, his worried eyes had yielded to relief, "Alex, you made it. Thank God."

"Sorry, John, there was a problem with the runway at LAX."

"Well you're here. Are you ready to go on?" he asked, Hollick nodded.

Novak opened the door to the conference room, which was more like a small auditorium. Only larger field offices like New York, Chicago and L.A. were outfitted in this manner. The crowd was not the twenty or so Novak had promised, but instead contained almost one hundred people in the audience, including recruits, colleagues and fellow agents. Novak went ahead of Hollick to introduce him.

"Ladies and gentleman of the bureau, our speaker has arrived. A man I've had the pleasure of working with for the last five years. A man that exudes what an FBI agent should be. He is a man who not only led our robbery division with courage, humility and integrity, but also developed a template for others to follow. I present to you a man who I am proud to call not only a colleague, but a dear friend...Special Agent Alex Hollick."

The crowd roared as Hollick took the stage. He scanned the crowded room for Fletcher, but she was nowhere in sight. Hollick did recognize a few faces however, from the funeral some three months ago. The crowd began to quiet down in anticipation of the speech. Hollick took a drink of water before he stepped to the microphone. He put on the best smile he could muster.

"Well thank you for the flattering introduction, John and thanks to the wonderful staff here at the Los Angeles field office. It's good to be home. As Chief Novak said, my name is Alex Hollick and I am a special agent in the homicide division in Washington. Now I know a few of you out there are new to L.A. and let me tell you, this is a wonderful city that I had the pleasure of protecting for five years."

Fletcher walked into the room and stood next to the door. Hollick paused for a second to look at her. She was wearing a green dress that made her already luminous green eyes sparkle in the dimly lit room. She looked as beautiful as ever. Hollick quickly refocused on the audience and continued.

"I worked robberies actually and soon led a successful team of the best agents I have ever had the privilege of serving with, two of which died bravely, protecting civilian life."

Hollick glanced back at Fletcher, who was smiling. "As agents, we are given the privilege of protecting a country like no other. This is a country where people enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of religion. Freedoms we all hold sacred. These inalienable rights are the cornerstone of this special land. This freedom however, is not free. The threat of tyranny is always upon us.

"Our founding fathers developed, "The Constitution," to protect us from tyranny and it is our job not only as agents, but as Americans to uphold the integrity of this sacred document. The fabric of this country was woven from the blood of patriots, fighting to secure something greater than themselves.

"The new recruits sitting here today are now part of something greater than themselves. They too will face the same threats of tyranny, which our founding fathers faced two-hundred years ago. They too will exude integrity, humility and valiance," Hollick took a quick glance at Novak, who was staring at him.

“As federal agents, you will be entrusted with the safety and security of America, facing threats both foreign and domestic,” Hollick looked over at Fletcher for a brief moment and then back at the crowd, “Guard her, protect her and watch over her. Let your resolve be strong and your vigilance be focused. Reach beyond your grasp to defend this great land. Have no doubt in your mind and no fear in your heart. Together, we will overcome the threats of communism, terrorism and mob rule.

“As our great President Ronald Reagan once said, ‘Above all, we must realize that no arsenal or no weapon in the arsenals of the world is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries do not have.’

“My fellow agents, you are about to embark on the most important path you will ever take. The path is not always easy, there are many twists and turns and the light at the end is not always easy to see. However, this path leads to the preservation of freedom, the preservation of liberty and the preservation of a free republic. Today, your journey starts here at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Thank you and good luck to all of you.”

The crowd roared even louder than before. A few shutters in the audience flashed. Hollick was smiling even though he felt like a politician trying to bullshit his constituents into reelecting him. He looked over at Fletcher, who had her beautiful smile on and was clapping with the crowd. Hollick smiled back and began to exit the stage. Novak grabbed his arm and whispered into his ear, “I told you I wanted twenty minutes.”

Hollick ignored him and kept walking. Fletcher was on his mind. There was a group of recruits, who desperately wanted to meet him and shake his hand. They stopped Hollick on his way. He spent about ten minutes shaking hands and doing photo ops before the crowd around him began to disperse into their own conversations. Fletcher began to approach Hollick. He was sending off the last two recruits.

She walked towards him in a flirtatious manner. Her hips swung to the left and to the right. Cleavage pushed through a revealing blouse. High heels clicked and clacked on the floor, in a rhythm that in itself was sexual. Their eyes never lost contact. Hollick broke the ice, “Hello, Fletcher.”

“Hollick,” she replied.

“So, how’d I do up there on stage?”

“It was a great speech, very patriotic,” she said with a flirtatious smile, “How have you been, Hollick?”

“Honestly, I’m doing better than ever. What about you?” he asked. Fletcher pointed to her nametag, which read, “Jennifer Fletcher F.B.I. Los Angeles Spokesperson.”

“Wow, that’s great!” exclaimed Hollick.

“Well I think John just made the job up for me, but I was a communications major so when the press knocks, I’ll be ready for them. Actually, I’m going to be the secretary here for a while. Becky’s expecting. She’s going on maternity leave soon. Can you believe that though, me a secretary?” They both laughed together. “So what are you doing tonight, Special Agent Hollick? Maybe I’d be willing to let you try to take me out again.”

“That would be wonderful,” he replied.

“Okay, but we tried the best Italian restaurant in San Marino. Now you have to come to my turf in Venice.”

“Well, technically we didn’t eat, Spokesperson Fletcher,” he said jokingly. Fletcher pushed his shoulder playfully.

Then Novak walked up and interrupted, “Excuse me, Fletcher. I need to borrow Agent Hollick for a few minutes.”

“Stay right here, Fletcher. I’ll be right back,” Hollick told her. Fletcher nodded as Hollick walked away with Novak. They took the elevator to the second floor. Novak walked to Hollick’s old office, which was cleaned out except for a desk, a phone and a lamp. Hollick expected Novak to start tearing into him over his short speech. Novak shut the door and looked at Hollick who was leaning against the desk, “We have a problem, Alex.”

Novak walked over to his phone and turned it around to face Hollick. The message light was blinking, indicating there was a new message. Novak put the phone on speaker and pushed play. There was a message from Hansen followed by many more and they were all the same. Hansen had left six messages over the summer asking Hollick to call him back about dinner, to discuss the SOCAL robbery spree. Novak looked at Hollick for a response.

"That is a problem," he said nodding.

"I called you throughout the summer, but I couldn't get you on the phone. I had to put a request in for you to speak here as a guest in order to get through. This Hansen guy is with San Diego. He works as some agent errand boy with Internal Affairs for West Coast Operations. He's a peon. He's poking around this old case. He's a wannabe Eliot Ness."

"Well what do you want me to do about it?"

"I want you to take him out to dinner."

"Really, John?" asked Hollick.

"I want you to have dinner with him. Find out what he knows, what he's shared with Kopeck and the San Diego field office and what action we should take."

"Action?" he asked.

"Yeah, if he doesn't know that much, you might be able to convince him to drop it."

"Okay. I can come back in a few weeks for that."

"A few weeks?" he asked, "This is a pressing matter, Alex."

"Well what did you have in mind?"

"It's got to be tonight, the sooner the better. I don't like taking chances."

"I'm going to Venice with Fletcher in five minutes. We're going out for dinner tonight."

"It's got to be tonight, Alex. Just tell her something came up. Go tell her right now. I'll be down in a few minutes to take you to your hotel."

Hollick nodded, but he didn't want to cancel plans with Fletcher. At the same time, he didn't want to leave Novak a nervous wreck. Novak might have something on him, best not to take chances. Hollick took the stairs back down and saw Fletcher waiting. How could he leave her to have dinner with Hansen? He sighed and walked up to her. Fletcher looked at him funny, "Why'd you take the stairs?" she asked.

"It's good exercise. Listen, Fletcher, I would love to go to Venice with you, but I forgot about a prior obligation I have while I'm in town."

"A prior obligation, how prior?" she asked with a look of suspicion.

"It's bureau business, how about tomorrow night instead?"

"Okay, that works. Tell you what, you bring a bottle of that wine you like so much from Bellanti's and I'll cook you homemade Chicken Parmesan. How about it?" she asked.

"Can you cook?"

"Can I cook?" said Fletcher, put off by the comment. "Come by at four, okay," she said. She leaned in and gave Hollick a hug and a peck on the lips. She walked away, frequently looking back at Hollick and smiling. He was in a euphoric state. This state was soon broken by Novak's hand slapping across his back.

"Come on, Alex, let's go," he said. Hollick picked up his travel bag and they headed for the parking garage. Novak had procured a Crown Vic for Hollick. He took the wheel while Hollick rode shotgun. They were headed for downtown L.A. Hollick wanted to know more about Novak's intentions for his meeting with Hansen.

"John, what if Hansen knows more than he's letting on?"

"If the worst case scenario presents itself, he's gotta go."

"I'm not an assassin, that's not really what I do."

Novak pulled into the parking lot of the Caliente Motel. He parked the car and turned it off in front of room number six, "Alex, I'm not asking you to blow his head off."

"Well then what exactly is it that you're asking?"

Novak produced a small vial of liquid from his coat, "This is a poison I got from a friend here in L.A., a buddy from Vietnam. It's odorless, tasteless and untraceable. It mimics the effect of a heart attack. If Hansen does in fact present a threat, put this in his food or his drink at dinner. He'll have a heart attack a few hours later. You'll be back here at this motel before it even goes down."

"I thought I got to pick the hotel! I thought that was part of the deal!"

"Alex, I had to say anything to get you out here to help me deal with this situation. Just meet with Hansen and use your instincts."

"I don't know, John. Does Clay know about this?"

"No, that's why we have to deal with it now. If Escondido comes back to haunt us because we left one thing to chance, we'll both be dead by Christmas. This concerns both of us."

"So what are you going to be doing, what part do you play in all this?"

"Look, I got you this car, a motel room and this vial. I've done plenty."

"Yeah, plenty to insulate yourself," he muttered.

"You had better change your attitude, Alex. I am a colleague and a friend," Hollick nodded. "Now I'm going to be on my houseboat this weekend. It's docked at Marina Del Ray. Meet me there on Sunday afternoon and wear these," Novak passed him a Hawaiian shirt and khakis. This must have been part of Novak's genius plan. "Do what you have to do, Alex. Meet me on Sunday and we'll talk then," he said as he got out of the car.

"Don't you want a ride back to the field office?"

"No, thanks, I'll get a taxi."

Novak walked away. Hollick took the keys out of the ignition and walked into his room at the Caliente. The Caliente was about two rungs below the Clearview back in Virginia. The building was old stucco, a one-story ranch that looked like many houses in Southern California. What it lacked in quality it made up for in location and discretion. The Caliente was close to everything. Hollick walked back out and down to a store for cigarettes.

When he returned, he lit one up and recollected his thoughts. He thought about Fletcher and what his trainer Jack Bagley had said about lies protecting the women and the country that he loved. Hollick wondered if it was a metaphor or if Bagley knew about Escondido, Carnahan's corruption and Agent Fletcher. Was it a warning from the Secrets Division or was it simply a deep conversation between two friends?

Hollick wanted badly to come at least partially clean to Fletcher. He wanted her to know that Carnahan was not her knight in shining armor and that he had put her in the very same danger he helped her escape from in Escondido. He wanted her to know that Velasquez would be alive if it were not for Carnahan. He wanted to tell her the very truth that would put her in danger.

Then there was the matter of Hansen. How much did he know? Was he just trying to meet Hollick to hypothesize the inconsequential or did he have hard evidence on Carnahan, who lay at rest in Mountain View Cemetery. He had avoided his consequences completely. Carnahan had the easy part, he just lay there and rot. Then guilt hit Hollick like a lead weight for what he had just thought about Carnahan.

Hollick took Hansen's business card out of his wallet. He took a deep breath and picked up the phone. This conversation had to be a short one, quick and to the point. He could not leave any room for Hansen to say, "SOCAL," "Escondido" or "robbery." Hollick dialed Hansen's office number, the only number on the card. The phone rang a few times before he answered, "This is Mike Hansen."

“Agent Hansen, this is Agent Hollick.”

“Agent Hollick, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you. I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a busy summer. There’s a lot going on in Washington.”

“I’m sure there is. I just thought Chief Novak would have forwarded my messages to you.”

“Oh, he did, it’s not his fault, its mine. Like I said, I’ve been busy.”

“Understandable, I just have some questions about--,”

“Look, Agent Hansen, I don’t have much time to talk, but I’m in L.A. Did you still want to get together? I’ve got some free time tonight, maybe we could have dinner?”

“You know, tonight is no good. I’ve got dinner plans with my wife, how about tomorrow?”

“Nah, that’s not good for me. I head back to D.C. in the morning, but I’d really like to see you,” he responded quickly.

There was a brief pause, “Okay, I think I can get out of it. Where would you like to meet?”

“Romero’s, it’s in Old L.A., on Olivera Street, say eight o’clock?”

“I think I can find that.”

“Great, I’ll see you there, bring your appetite!” Hollick hung up the phone before Hansen could say anything incriminating or try to alter their plans. He took a deep breath. Now Hansen would know that this was his only opportunity to see Hollick. If he were serious about looking into the SOCAL robberies, he would be there.

Romero’s Restaurant Los Angeles, CA
Friday September 6th, 1985 7:49 p.m.

Hollick was seated at Romero’s. He had arrived an hour early in order to pick the booth in which he and Hansen would meet. It was a private booth with facing benches. It allowed Hollick to have the advantage, where he could observe both the entrance of the restaurant and the movements of the wait staff. This would allow him to remain vigilant if it became time for plan B.

Hollick picked Romero’s not for its fine cuisine of Mexican food, he hated Mexican food, but every non-Mexican who ate the black bean quesadilla at Romero’s had instant diarrhea the first time when trying it, especially whites. Hollick learned this when Novak took him there and insisted that he order the dish. Novak went into hysterics when Hollick walked painfully to the rest room.

Hansen was Irish with thinning red hair, which he styled with a comb over. He had pale skin and weighed about one-hundred and seventy pounds, approximately ten pounds above Hollick. He hoped that Romero’s spicy food and Hansen’s ethnic heritage would work against him. If Hansen had to excuse himself, Hollick would have time to poison his drink, which he prayed, he wouldn’t need to do.

Hansen walked in about five minutes early. He quickly spotted Hollick and waved. Hollick waved back and motioned for Hansen to come and sit down, “Agent Hansen thanks for making time in your schedule to dine with me,” Hansen nodded and sat down.

“Boy, the traffic in this town. You must love D.C., everyone walks,” Hollick shrugged and smiled. Hansen looked around. Mexican families speaking Spanish surrounded them, “Interesting choice of restaurant, do you come here often?”

“All the time, best Mexican food in all of L.A., there’s nothing like this in D.C.”

“Well I look forward to the entrée then.”

“Are you taking good care of San Diego for us?”

“Well better care of it than you were,” said Hansen laughing. He was talking about Escondido, which was just north of San Diego. This was a tacky jab at Hollick. He laughed with him. It was now Hollick’s job to

put Hansen at ease and get him to drop his guard. Hollick had to take whatever Hansen threw at him. It was in his best interest, “What about you, Agent Hollick, how do you like your new job in Washington?”

“Well the hours are long and the work is boring, but the secretaries are to die for,” they both laughed. Hollick was playing to Hansen’s favor. He was playing the Washington weasel he knew Hansen aspired to become.

“You know, I’d very much like for us to be friends.”

“Really?” asked Hollick excitedly.

“Yes, good friends.”

“I’d like that too, Agent Hansen.”

“Please, call me Mike.”

“Okay, Mike. Please, call me Alex,” Hansen smiled at Hollick and then pulled out a folder. A waiter approached their table, “Yes, two cervezas for me and my friend here,” said Hollick. The waiter nodded and left the table.

“The thing is, Agent Hollick, I mean Alex, is that friends help each other.”

“They do, don’t they?” replied Hollick nodding. The waiter brought back two Coronas with limes and placed them on the table. “Thank you,” said Hollick to the waiter. He continued, “I’m sorry, Mike, you were saying?”

“It’s fine. I was saying that friends help each other, Alex and I think I’ve found something in this SOCAL case that can help us both out.”

“Okay, I’m listening,” he said. Hansen went to speak, but the waiter had already returned.

“Hello, gentlemen, welcome to Romero’s. My name is Armando and I will be serving you tonight,” he said, Hollick smiled at Armando.

“Hello, Armando. How are you doing this evening?” asked Hollick politely.

“I’m doing wonderful, sir and you?”

“Fantastic,” replied Hollick nodding.

“Very good, sir,” he replied.

“Armando, are you originally from Los Angeles?”

“No, sir, I was born in Ensenada, Mexico. I came to America almost fifteen years ago. I lived in San Diego for ten years and now I live in L.A.”

“Wow, my friend Mike here lives in San Diego. It’s a small world huh, Mike?” Hansen nodded nervously.

“Do you like America, Armando?” Hollick asked.

“Very much, sir,” replied Armando.

“An immigrant coming to the land of opportunity to pursue a better life and taste the American dream, that’s beautiful. Don’t you think so, Mike?”

“Yes,” said Hansen looking nervously at the waiter.

“Okay, let’s see, I think that I will be having the Black Bean Quesadilla with a side of beans and rice,” said Hollick.

“Very good and for you, sir?” asked Armando, now facing Hansen, who was frantically thumbing through the menu.

“I will take...”

“You know what, Armando. Just bring my friend here the same thing. I know he’ll love it just as much as I do,” said Hollick, interrupting Hansen’s order and smiling at him.

“Very good, we’ll get that right out here for you gentlemen,” Armando said with a nod.

“Thanks, Armando. Glad to have you in the United States,” he said. Hollick’s behavior and the waiter’s interruptions seemed to make Hansen a bit uneasy, but Hollick figured breaking Hansen’s train of thought as

much as possible was a good thing. Hansen stared at Hollick with wide eyes and a nervous smile, "Please, Mike, go on."

"Yes, Alex, the day of what the papers have dubbed the Escondido incident, the day you apprehended the SOCAL robbers, I helped you through standard procedure. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I do. You were very helpful and I appreciate the gesture."

"No problem, Alex. I was just doing my job. Anyway, that same day I found a piece of evidence by the suspect's getaway car, a scrap of paper," Hansen handed a torn piece of paper inked with truck numbers to Hollick, who immediately recognized the handwriting.

"Did you check this into evidence?"

"No, I've been meaning to, but this paper started to make me think."

"Think what, Mike?"

"Well the numbers on this paper correlate with SOCAL's truck schedule for the same day of the Escondido incident. I think Lind and Sterner may have had inside help."

"From someone at SOCAL?" he asked.

"No, I thought that was the case at first, but I thought it was best to start with agents."

"You think that one of my agents would conspire with the SOCAL robbers?"

"No, I didn't think that until I looked at some requisition forms at our field office."

"What were the results of your research?"

"Well, look at this requisition form from July of '84," Hansen handed Hollick a requisition form filled out by Carnahan, "Hollick, I mean, Alex, sorry about that."

"It's fine, please continue."

"If you compare the handwriting on the notes to this requisition form, I think you'll see a similarity. I think Agent Carnahan may have been helping the SOCAL robbers."

"Okay. I think I see it, excellent work, Mike. Have you told San Diego about this?"

"No, I've been working on this independently, on my own time. I wanted to meet with you first, but there's more."

"A lot more?" asked Hollick.

"Yes," said Hansen.

"Please continue, Mike."

"Well I've been tracking Cathy, Agent Carnahan's widow. Do you know her?"

"Not very well," replied Hollick shaking his head.

"Well I believe Mrs. Carnahan may have acted in complicity and could possibly be benefiting from SOCAL money that may not have been recovered. I don't know for sure because I don't have access to your files."

"What makes you think Mrs. Carnahan has any involvement?"

"I've seen records, Alex, financial records. The Carnahan's were three months behind on their mortgage in the months leading up to Escondido. A few weeks ago, I drove by their house in Eagle Rock. There's a new Mercedes in the driveway and the latest records show that the house has been paid for, free and clear by Mrs. Carnahan. Widows payments don't explain this drastic change," Hollick nodded and looked back at the torn piece of paper before responding to Hansen.

"I think you're on to something here, Mike."

"Well it's not just me, Alex. There is someone else monitoring Cathy Carnahan."

"What do you mean?"

Hansen produced a picture of a natural gas truck parked across from the Carnahan residence, "This gas truck has been parked across from Cathy's house for the past few days. I think whoever is in this truck is

looking for the same thing I am.”

“Which is?”

The waiter returned with the entrees and placed them on the table, “Enjoy your meals.”

“Hey, Armando?” asked Hollick, recalling the waiter.

“Yes, sir?” he asked.

“Could you tell me and my friend Mike here, how authentic is the food we’re about to eat? I mean based on your own experiences growing up in Ensenada?”

“It’s very authentic, sir. I would say as authentic as any dish I have had in Mexico. The recipe we use is very old and very reliable.”

“But the beans, the vegetables, are they locally grown? Are they shipped in?”

“We buy our ingredients from a farm in Fresno. They are shipped in every three days to ensure freshness and taste.”

“Good, I feel a whole lot better knowing that before I eat this wonderful meal, how about you, Mike?”

Hansen was silent, just staring at Hollick with a blank face, “Thank you, Armando,” he said. Hollick began digging into his meal as Armando walked away.

“Look, Alex, if you’re not interested in this, I’m not going to waste my time or yours.”

“What do you mean, Mike? Corrupt agents in my division, missing robbery money, how could I not be interested? Please, tell me more.”

Hollick kept eating and Hansen took a few bites before resuming, “Okay, sorry, Alex. I think I misread you. Anyway, the last thing is what ties this all together,” Hollick put his interested face on, not really knowing what to expect. “The weekend of June 8th, the same weekend as Carnahan’s funeral, the house that the suspects lived in burned down. Did you know that?”

“No, but I’ve been away. I’m out of the loop on the happenings out here.”

“Well that same weekend, the weekend of June 8th, a highway patrol officer was found murdered about twenty minutes from Barstow, where the house was burning.”

“And you think these two events are somehow related?”

“I do, Alex. I think this young officer may have seen something he wasn’t supposed to see. I think he was murdered to cover up the arson of the house in Barstow,” Hollick nodded. Hansen continued, “Additionally, the bullets pulled from the patrolman Lucas Shaw match the same caliber used in a .38 Special Revolver. As you know, this is the standard issue weapon for FBI field agents.”

“Like this one here?” Hollick asked, pulling aside his coat to reveal his holster.

“Yes, Alex,” said Hansen, “The last thing is that the FBI field offices in L.A. were closed on the weekend of June 8th, the same weekend of Carnahan’s funeral, the fire and the death of Officer Shaw. It’s hard to ignore all of these events happening simultaneously. Now I think there were one or more conspirators engaging in a cover up and that they’re still serving at the bureau right here in L.A.”

“Anyone in particular?” asked Hollick.

“There’s your surviving agent, Jennifer Fletcher. Novak is also a person of interest to me.”

“Am I a suspect?”

“No, Alex, I don’t believe you were involved. I know you’re a good man and a good agent,” Hansen took another bite of food.

“I have to tell you, Mike, this is a lot to take in.”

“I know and I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you.”

“No, I’m glad you told me.”

“Well, this is where I think we can help each other,” Hollick nodded, motioning for Hansen to continue,

“What I propose is a joint internal investigation. With your new job, you can give me the files I need to build

a case against any surviving accomplices. You can still work in Washington and I can build the case here in L.A. Novak won't let me near the L.A. files, but you can get them for me and I'll do the rest. This is an opportunity to clean up the L.A. office and file an accurate report of what went down. Your strategies on this case will no longer be called into question."

"That's a very generous offer, Mike."

Hansen's face was getting red. The spice was kicking in. He was starting to feel uncomfortable, but trying to conceal it, though it was obvious that something was wrong. He smiled through the pain, "Well there is one more thing I need from you, Alex."

"I knew there was a catch," said Hollick laughing, Hansen smiled and nodded.

"There always is. I'm going to be spending a lot of hours putting this case together. In exchange for that, Alex, I would like you to recommend me to your boss for a position in the Washington field office. I want to climb the ladder and all the work I've done for San Diego in the past five years has gotten me nowhere, but a case like this..."

Hansen bent over. His stomach was on fire. He could no longer hold his bowels, "Excuse me, Alex. I have to use the rest room. I'll be right back."

"Sure, Mike, take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere," Hansen ran to the rest room. Armando the waiter came rushing over to the table.

"Is your friend okay, sir?"

"He's just a little under the weather, but he'll be fine. Thank you for your concern."

Armando nodded and walked to another table. Hollick looked around. He was practically invisible. He pulled out the vial and slowly twisted it open under the table. He looked again. The coast was still clear. He put the vial over the beer bottle and dropped in the poison, waiting until every last drop was gone. He placed the empty vial back into his pocket. Hansen came out about three minutes later and sat back down.

"Sorry, Alex, the food is a bit spicy."

"Are you sure you're okay, Mike? I have some antacids with me if you'd like one," said Hollick in a sincere tone.

"No, I'm fine."

"Okay, so where were we?"

"Well I think if we can find the murder weapon in Officer Shaw's shooting on one of your colleagues here in L.A. that will be our silver bullet to solving this case."

"It all just sounds great, where should I begin?"

"Well get me the records and I'll start researching. Now if you can get me Jennifer Fletcher's service weapon that would be even better."

"You think that Agent Fletcher killed a police officer?" asked Hollick skeptically.

"No, I think John Novak killed Lucas Shaw with Fletcher's service weapon."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because John had access to that gun while Fletcher was recovering at Cedar Sinai. For all I know the gun could still be in his possession. If I had that service weapon, I could have it run through ballistics. That would at least give us a starting point."

"I will make that happen, Mike. I want to see the proper closure of this case." Hollick raised his beer bottle, motioning for Hansen to join him, "To truth, to justice and to a bureau that the public can trust," said Hollick with conviction.

Hansen raised his glass and clinked it against Hollick's. They both took a swig. Hansen took a much larger swig, trying to cool his throat from the black bean quesadilla. Hollick thought it ironic that the practice of clinking glasses was implemented in roman times to prevent poisoning and now he was using that same

practice to poison Hansen.

“So, Alex, can you get me the files before you leave L.A.?”

“Yes, Mike, I will go to the bureau tomorrow and I will ask, no, I will demand that Novak turns over all of the files.”

“That’s great, Alex. I gotta tell you it’s good to have a friend in Washington.”

“It’s good to have a friend in San Diego, Mike, it truly is,” said Hollick nodding. Then suddenly, Hansen clutched his heart and started squirming. Nobody in the restaurant had noticed except for Hollick, “Is something wrong, Mike?” he asked in a patronizing tone.

Hansen’s face turned red again. The poison was taking effect much faster than Hollick had anticipated. Hansen started flopping around in his seat. Hollick leaned over and whispered into Hansen’s ear, “You would have done well in Washington, Agent Hansen. You’d sell your sister for a quarter. Did you really think I’d sell Fletcher and Novak out to you?” he asked. Hansen flopped a bit more and then his head lunged into the table, smashing his dinner plate into pieces. The waiter looked over. Hollick waved at him, “Call 911! I think my friend is having a heart attack!” he shouted.

The waiter rushed to the phone and called emergency services. Hollick reached for Hansen’s file, placing it into his own bag. He then walked over to Hansen and performed CPR on his corpse. He was acting as if there was a chance he could revive him. The Mexican families started speaking frantically in Spanish. The wait staff tried to calm them down, but to no avail.

They closed down the restaurant, not that it mattered, because most of the customers were gone. The ambulance came and they pronounced Hansen dead on the scene. Hollick stayed with the body, riding in the ambulance to Cedar Sinai. He knew he had to make it look good. They were simply going through the motions and transporting his corpse to the morgue of Cedar Sinai.

They wheeled the body into the cold dark concrete morgue. Hollick asked if he could wait for the San Diego Bureau Chief, Kenneth Kopeck to arrive. An hour later, Kopeck walked into the morgue. Kopeck was in his mid forties. He was tall and skinny with grayish hair and eyes. He looked at Hansen’s body and then at Hollick, “Hello, Agent Hollick.”

“Hello, Chief Kopeck.”

“What the hell happened here?”

“Mike and I were having dinner and he just collapsed. I think he may have had a heart attack. Did Mike have some sort of heart condition?” he asked, Kopeck ignored the question. He looked back at Hansen’s body.

“Why were you having dinner with Agent Hansen?”

“We were discussing career opportunities in Washington.”

“Uh huh,” was Kopeck’s reply. Kopeck looked down and away from Hansen, “He was thirty-three years old.”

“It’s tragic, sir. Chief Kopeck, did Hansen have a family of his own?”

“He had a wife, she’s six months pregnant.”

“I’m sorry for her loss and for your loss, sir. Hansen was a fine agent and an upstanding man from what little I knew of him,” Kopeck nodded his head.

“I’ll take it from here. Thank you for staying with him.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” said Hollick, patting Kopeck on the shoulder. Hollick walked away as tears began to run down Kopeck’s face. He walked out of Cedar Sinai and used his FBI status to convince a beat cop to give him a ride back to Romero’s, so that he could pick up the Crown Vic. The young officer was named Cody Fray. While the last thing Hollick wanted to do was talk, he amused the young cop who had FBI ambitions.

“So you work for the bureau here in L.A.?” asked Fray.

“No, I used to work here, but now I work in D.C. Have you heard of the SOCAL robbers?”

“Yeah,” replied Fray.

“I led the team that apprehended both suspects.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Well we lost two agents that day. There’s nothing amazing about that.”

“We lost five beat cops last month,” Hollick didn’t know how to respond, “So if you were me, would you join the FBI?” asked Fray.

“Well all things considered I’d rather be a beat cop.”

“Why is that?”

“Cops belong to a community. They know the people they protect and interact with them. I protect nameless faceless souls on a map with predefined borders. I protect an agenda, nothing more,” he said in an unforeseen moment of truth.

“Agent Hollick, you protect America,” said Fray passionately.

“You think so? You think people jump for joy when the FBI comes knocking?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, that’s my car over there, thanks for the ride.”

“You’re welcome, Agent Hollick. Enjoy the rest of your stay in Los Angeles.”

“Thanks, officer, stay safe out there.”

He exited the cruiser. He thought about how the young man was no different from the patrol officer that Novak had iced in the desert. For all he knew, they could have gone to high school together. Then there was Agent Hansen. Hollick had thoroughly enjoyed toying with him at Romero’s, but that fun seemed like cruelty now and the price paid was high. A young widow left to grieve and an unborn child who will never know their father

[Chapter 9: The Lovely Miss Jennifer Fletcher](#)

Castillo Residence Pasadena, CA
Saturday September 7th, 1985 9:51 a.m.

Hollick still couldn’t believe last night was real. Everything had gone so perfectly. He had abandoned Novak’s initial suggestion to be persuasive. He simply lied to Hansen long enough for him to drop his guard. There were still concerns. He wondered how Hansen had gotten so much information, how he had put it all together so quickly and who else would make the same connections between the fire and the murder.

Fletcher’s service weapon was a new twist to the cover up, one that Hollick was eager to look into. He looked at his own service weapon to make sure that Novak hadn’t played musical chairs with their guns. The serial number etched into the gun was a match. This was indeed Hollick’s gun, but was it the murder weapon?

Hollick spent the early morning reading all of the investigative work that Hansen had done on his own. All of his notes were very well written and he had connected the dots that led straight to the L.A. field office. He even saw Fletcher’s home address in Venice scribbled down. Hollick took the folder and placed it in the

sink. Once again, fire took the evidence, turning it to ash.

An early morning news report reminded Hollick of the date, September 7 and an old friend, Javier Castillo. In two days, Javier would mail a package to Jennifer Fletcher. The contents of the package, a cassette tape even more incriminating than Hansen's case file. Hollick couldn't let her get that tape or the letter he left inside the box.

She would talk to Novak, she would be killed and it would be on Hollick. He packed his bag, grabbed his keys and marched out to the Crown Vic. He had to get the tape back from Castillo. He didn't know what he would do with it, but as the last existing piece of hard evidence, it was both a tool and a weapon.

Hollick pulled into the driveway at his old apartment complex. It looked the same as usual, a large white multiplex with a lush green lawn. He walked up to Castillo's unit. With his ear against the door, he listened for movement. Dead silence. It was rather unusual for a man who was up at five o'clock on most days.

Castillo's cherry red El Camino sat parked as it had been every other day. One of the tires stood out, it had been slashed with some kind of blade. Sweat began to pour. Had he listened to the tape? Had he brought it to the authorities? Hollick moved away from the door and peered through some windows. There was no sign of Castillo.

Then a pickup truck pulled into the driveway and parked next to Hollick's Crown Vic. It was an older truck from the early seventies. Mariachi music blared out. Mr. Castillo stepped out of the passenger seat and grabbed a tire out of the back. He muttered something in Spanish to the driver before he left. Castillo turned around to see Hollick, "Alex, what a pleasant surprise!"

"Hello, Mr. Castillo, it's good to see you," he replied. Castillo put his hand out and Hollick accepted. After briefly shaking hands, Mr. Castillo rolled the tire over to the El Camino, leaning it against the fender, "What happened to your car, Mr. Castillo?"

"You know there are some bad kids in this neighborhood, Alex," he said, Hollick nodded. "So, were good things waiting for you in Washington?"

"Yeah, things are going really well."

"That's good, Alex. I was worried about you. It's almost the ninth and you had not yet come for your box."

"I know and I'm sorry. I meant to contact you sooner. You still have the box, Mr. Castillo?"

"Of course, it's inside."

"Listen, do you remember all that stereo equipment you showed me a while back?"

"Yes, Alex."

"I need another favor. I need access to a dual cassette recorder and a blank cassette. Do you have either of those things, Mr. Castillo?"

"I have both of those things."

"May I use your stereo for five minutes?"

"I'll tell you what, Alex, you help me change this tire, have a beer with me and then you can do whatever you need to do."

"Sounds great, Mr. Castillo, thanks," he said smiling.

Castillo grabbed two beers while Hollick jacked up the El Camino. Castillo took over loosening the lugs. He seemed to want Hollick's company more than his help, "You know, Alex, when I came to this country in 1951, I worked three jobs. I was a window washer, a dish washer and I worked at a car wash."

"You must have loved water, Mr. Castillo," he joked.

"At the end of every day, the tips of my fingers would look like dried raisins," Hollick nodded, "But after eight years, I bought this dump, at least it was when I got it and three years later, I owned one of the nicest apartment houses in North Pasadena," Castillo said proudly.

"You must be very proud."

"I am, Alex."

"So you still think it was the mob that took out JFK?"

"I don't know. Your argument for the CIA has resonated with me. You may have changed my position," they both laughed and finished their beer, "Let's go get your package, Alex."

Hollick followed Castillo into his simple but elegant apartment, which was adorned with pictures of his family in Mexico. He led Hollick into his master bedroom, where a top of the line stereo stood. Castillo pulled the box out from the closet and handed it to Hollick, "Do you have a box cutter, Mr. Castillo?"

He nodded and went into the kitchen. He had retrieved a box cutter. Hollick sliced through the layers of tape that he had wrapped around the package so many times. He pulled out the answering machine and popped out the cassette tape. Castillo handed him a blank tape and Hollick loaded up the stereo. He rewound the tape and looked at Castillo, "Mr. Castillo, I mean no disrespect, but I think I should do this alone. You don't want to hear this tape. It would be better if you didn't."

"I understand," he said. Castillo left the room, closing the door behind him.

Hollick engaged the cassette player. He began recording a copy of the original Sterner tape. When the audio started, he remembered what had gotten him into this whole mess. Maybe the tape had aroused suspicion like Novak said. He knew this tape was the only leverage he had against Novak, who had become increasingly sketchy, killing cops, setting fires and ordering hits on fellow agents.

The tape went silent. The audio had copied over, but Hollick double-checked. He only had one chance to get this right. He put the original tape back into the answering machine and the answering machine back into the shoebox. He called out to Castillo, "Are you all set, Alex? Do you now have what you need?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Castillo, I need to ask one more favor and it's a big one," Castillo waited for Hollick to continue, "I'm heading back to Washington tomorrow night and I need you to hold onto this copy I just made."

"No problem, Alex."

"Wait till I'm finished," he nodded, "With this tape you could end my career or maybe even get me killed. The audio is highly sensitive and it could get a lot of people in trouble. It could also change the history of how the FBI is run forever. I trust you, Mr. Castillo and I don't trust many people. I need you to hold onto this tape. It needs to be in a place where it's protected from thievery and degradation from the heat.

"Do not listen to this tape or make a copy of it under any circumstances. This is the only remaining piece of evidence in an extremely important case. This is my insurance policy, Mr. Castillo. If you read about my death in a newspaper or hear about it on television, I want you to send it to Philip Sheldon at the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington. Can you do that?"

"The tape will be safe and secure. I give you my word."

"Thank you. It means the world to me," said Hollick, "I hope I'm wrong, but this may be the last time we see each other, Mr. Castillo."

"I also hope you are wrong, Alex," Castillo put his hand out and Hollick shook it. They gave each other a look of understanding, briefly acknowledging the situation.

"I've got to go, Mr. Castillo."

"Okay, be careful, Alex," Hollick nodded and left with shoebox in hand. He headed south towards Venice. He still had about four hours before his dinner date with Fletcher and he wasn't going to waste any time. Hollick burned down the freeway back through Los Angeles Proper and Culver City before maneuvering south again.

Hollick wanted to know what Novak was really doing this weekend and since Marina Del Ray was a ten-minute drive from Fletcher's house, it seemed like a good idea to check up on him. Novak had told him to come by on Sunday to reconvene on the Hansen situation. He said it would be best if they didn't see each

other for two days. Novak would assume that Hollick would have cancelled his plans with Fletcher altogether.

He would also think that Hollick would be waiting in L.A. Proper, biding his time at a fleabag motel until the meeting on Sunday. He would have no reason to believe that Hollick would be anywhere near Marina Del Ray and his houseboat. Hollick stopped in Venice, but not to see Fletcher, instead he picked up tourist clothes and an expensive set of binoculars. He changed in the car and continued on to Marina Del Ray.

Hollick reached his destination just after two in the afternoon. He had less than two hours to check on Novak. He parked the Crown Vic out of sight and began walking to the docks in his tourist clothes, complete with sunglasses, a beach hat and big binoculars. He looked nothing like an agent in this getup, more like some weirdo beachcomber.

Edging towards the dock, he found a street side bench, which worked wonderfully as a point to watch Novak's houseboat. His Porsche 944 sat in the lot along with a white Mercedes convertible. Hollick feared this was the Mercedes Hansen was talking about, Cathy Carnahan's new car. He remained for an hour, but there was no activity.

Then the door opened and Novak walked out, followed by Cathy Carnahan, the widow of fallen agent Travis Carnahan, corrupt Agent Travis Carnahan. Hollick nearly dropped the binoculars. He had expected Donovan, maybe even Clay, but not the very woman who Novak was investigating with the intention of handling her internally.

Hollick couldn't hear anything and couldn't really lip read what they were saying to each other. Novak gave Cathy a passionate kiss that made Hollick rather uncomfortable. There was no tongue, but it was far more than a friendly peck. Novak had a big fat smile on his face. He was wearing a bathrobe. If this was an affair, it seemed odd that twenty-five year old Cathy would be interested in a man over twice her age.

Novak lit up a cigarette and looked out at the other boats as Cathy began walking to her car. He watched as Novak sipped the same whiskey that he and Hollick shared right before he left L.A. Cathy pulled away in the Mercedes.

Now there was no doubt. John Novak was corrupt. This wasn't about protecting Hollick, Fletcher or the bureau. Novak was simply in it for himself. All the talk of our beloved country was a smoke screen, which Novak had used to appear as the American boy next door. Hollick was now questioning if the Secrets Division was even real or just an optical illusion to keep Escondido from boiling over.

Hollick knew he could no longer lie to protect Fletcher. It wasn't going to save her from what was coming. If Hollick could explain things right by only telling her what she needed to know, then she might be able to protect herself. He knew if he stayed in L.A. too long, they would both be dead.

Hollick crept back to the Crown Vic. He pulled out of Marina Del Ray and headed to Fletcher's house in Venice. He lit up his second cigarette of the day and downed some more Percocet to take off the edge. He knew the next twenty-four hours may be his last and that he may never leave L.A. alive.

Fletcher Residence Venice, CA
Saturday September 7th, 1985 4:03 p.m.

Hollick pulled up to Fletcher's house. He inspected the car for bugs, but there were none. He left his shoebox in the car and walked up to Fletcher's seaside home. It was a beautiful house situated on the California coast with breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean. He hadn't been here in over a year, since he had helped her move to Venice.

Fletcher was renting the house from a relative who gave her the place at a steal. This may have been why Hansen had suspected her as a conspirator. Hollick winced at the thought of Hansen in his Crown Vic

watching Fletcher undress from across the street. Of course, there were far bigger problems, especially now that he was dead.

A few moments after he knocked on the door, Fletcher opened up. She looked as beautiful as she had at the field office the day before. Her clothes were far more casual, but still accentuated her curves. Her green eyes took on a blue hue when facing the California sun.

"Come in, Hollick," she said simply with a smile. Hollick followed her into the kitchen where she had already begun the Chicken Parmesan. The meal was cooking in the oven and smelled just as nice as Bellanti's. Her golden brown hair was up in a ponytail that fell carelessly down her back. She turned to Hollick and smiled, "So how was your prior obligation?" she asked.

"Not so great. A fellow colleague of mine passed away."

"Another car crash?" she asked with a look of concern.

"No, he was an agent from San Diego. We were having dinner and he had a heart attack right in front of me. He was only thirty-three. I tried to help him, but..."

"I'm so sorry, Hollick. Were you two close?" she asked.

"Close enough, I respected the man."

"So young to have a heart attack," she replied with a sad look in her eyes.

"Yeah, he was a father to be."

"That's so awful. It reminds me of what Cathy's going through right now."

"Very similar situations," he replied.

"Your friend's wife will probably get benefits. The bureau stopped paying Cathy's in July."

"Really?" he asked with a bit of shock.

"Yeah, they told her that it's some type of clerical error, but she hasn't gotten a check in two months."

"That's awful."

"I tried to talk to John about it, but he said it was out of his hands. He said it was a problem in Washington. Hollick, do you think you can help her?" she asked, "It would mean a lot to me and I know it would have meant a lot to Carnie."

"Of course, I'll talk to someone in D.C. about it."

"Thank you."

"Do you spend a lot of time with Cathy?"

"Actually a lot more since Carnie died. I'm thinking about moving to Pasadena to help her out with the kids."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? This seems like a great place you've got right here."

"Some things are more important than comfort, Hollick. You should know that about me by now. Carnie saved my life. It's the least I can do," Hollick nodded. He thought about Hansen, what he had said about Fletcher's gun.

"Fletch, did you get your service weapon back after you got out of the hospital?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"It just took a while to get mine back. When did you get yours?" he asked.

"I don't really remember. That was a while ago."

"Did you get it before the funeral?"

"Oh yeah, now I remember. I got it a few days before the funeral. John brought it to me when he drove me home from the hospital. I don't really have much use for it now," she said shrugging her shoulders.

Hollick felt a little better. Hansen's theory was incorrect. The gun Novak had used in Mojave wasn't Fletcher's. This was only a silver lining to a very dark cloud. Hollick's gun was looking more and more like the murder weapon. Because Hollick's .38 was a service weapon, it wasn't a simple equation of dumping it

in the river. His weapon was tied to him. He was accountable for the gun no matter who pulled the trigger.

Fletcher put the food on the table. Hollick set down a bottle of wine he had been holding on to from Bellanti's. He thought about Cathy Carnahan. He wasn't surprised Fletcher and Cathy were still friends. Cathy was only a year older than Fletcher was. Her husband had died saving Fletcher's life, at least that's what she knew. Hollick would soon be shattering that illusion. He felt like a monster for having to do so. Fletcher poured him a glass of wine, "Take it slow, okay?"

"Yeah, listen, I'm sorry. I was in a bad place. I said something really stupid."

"It's okay. I was in a bad place too and you did say something really, really stupid, but I forgive you, Hollick," she said with a smile, which Hollick returned.

"This is delicious, Fletcher, thank you."

"Jen can cook," she said with a grin.

"Without a doubt," he replied.

After dinner, Fletcher invited Hollick onto her patio to continue sipping wine and to watch the sunset over Venice Beach. He felt amazing around Fletcher. He wanted to just put her in the Crown Vic and run. Hollick pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. Fletcher looked over at him, "I thought you only smoked in times of grief."

"Fletcher, I haven't been completely honest with you. I have to tell you something," she nodded nervously, "I can't tell you here. Can we go to your car?"

"Why?"

"It's important, Fletch."

"Okay," she said in a shaky voice. They walked out to her Bonneville. Hollick quickly grabbed the shoebox out of the Crown Vic. He inspected Fletcher's car for wiretapping equipment, "Hollick, what are you doing?" she asked, he didn't respond. Jumping in the driver's seat, he turned the car radio on. Fletcher sat next to him, "What is it, Hollick?" she asked with both impatience and anxiety in her voice.

"Just listen," he said while placing the Paul Sterner interview tape in the cassette deck of the Bonneville. He rewound the tape and let the interview play. Fletcher's face turned white as a ghost, her jaw dropped and she began to cry. She went into hysterics just as Cathy had at her husband's funeral. Her words were unintelligible for a moment until she calmed down enough to speak.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said.

"I know," he replied.

"What the hell!"

"Fletcher, you need to listen to me carefully. You may be in danger."

"But I didn't do anything."

"They don't care."

"Who?" she asked

"I can't tell you who. Doing so would put you in even more danger."

"Well you better tell me something, Hollick!"

"You're going to be okay and you're going to be safe. Just do what I say and don't ask me any questions about what I'm going to tell you. Can you do that, Fletcher?" she nodded. "Okay, everything I'm about to tell you can never leave this car. Do you understand?" he asked, Fletcher nodded again. Hollick looked around the car to make sure they weren't being watched.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"A division in the bureau has made it their mission to bury Carnahan's involvement in these robberies. They believe if this gets out, that it will change the bureau for the worse. They think they destroyed the only copy of this tape, but I made this copy on my answering machine at LAX four months ago. The only ones

who know about this copy are me and now you,” Hollick scanned the surroundings again.

“There are many people around you right now who you should not place your trust in anymore. I can’t tell you who, because you need to keep being yourself and pretending everything is fine. If they notice a change in your behavior, they’ll kill you. Don’t have any doubt about what I just said. They will find a way to kill you, but only if they think you know about Carnahan’s involvement.”

“But how am I supposed to act like nothing happened?”

“You will, Fletch. You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever known. Don’t call in sick to work for any reason. Don’t try to figure this out by asking questions. The people involved in the SOCAL robberies investigation are the most at risk. That would be you, Novak and me, but don’t go to Novak. I think he may have been involved too. You have to do this,” Fletcher nodded as she continued to cry.

“Now this next part is really important. You need to avoid the most at risk people in your life. You need to distance yourself from Cathy Carnahan. She is a very dangerous woman, especially to you. Then there’s Novak, if he gives you a strange vibe or asks you to do something out of the ordinary, run. Finally, there’s me, I’m the most dangerous person to you right now,” he said.

“You, Hollick, you?” she cried.

“I know about the corruption, but I played no part in it and neither did Joe. The difference is that I’m alive and he’s not. If they kill me, you and Novak will be next. I leave for D.C. tomorrow to resume my work in homicide. We can’t talk to each other for a while. No phone calls, no letters, no communication whatsoever. When I feel the time is right, I’ll come back out here to see you.”

Fletcher nodded, but she was still trying to understand how her fragile life had changed so much from one tape, “Stay with me here tonight, Hollick, please. I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want to be without you yet. I don’t want to be without you at all.”

Hollick held her close as she continued to cry. As the crying subsided, Hollick took out the tape and put it in the answering machine before dumping it in his travel bag. They walked inside together and sat on Fletcher’s couch. Hollick poured more wine into their glasses. The Merlot seemed to help Fletcher calm down as much as anyone could in this situation.

She looked at Hollick, not with a friendly smile, but with a look of lust upon her face. As she began to lean in towards him, he asked, “What are you doing, Fletch?”

“Something I’ve wanted to do since the Christmas Party last year.”

Fletcher kissed Hollick passionately and pressed her body into his. Hollick removed her shirt and then her bra, kissing her exposed skin as she pressed her breasts against him. As they stood, she slipped his shirt off over his head and they began to stumble toward her bedroom. They began to remove each other’s pants. Hollick took Fletcher’s off with such intensity that he almost ripped them in the process. She slid her panties off and then began removing his boxers, kissing his naked body as she went until she had his whole in her mouth.

Hollick moaned in ecstasy. As she stopped, she pushed Hollick onto the bed, climbing on top of him and putting him inside of her. She began grinding against Hollick as he caressed her breasts. She moaned in pleasure as he thrust himself deep inside her. She moved like a goddess. He grabbed her hips and pulled her against him rhythmically as she screamed in pleasure.

As they climaxed together, their bodies came to a rest. Their hearts beat furiously against each other as they lay there. Sex with Fletcher was much different than Hollick had ever dreamed or imagined. The intensity was far greater than he had ever expected. She wasn’t the filthy whore that he had been envisioning since being tortured, but a beautiful passionate woman sharing her body with him and him alone. She was amazing.

“Oh my God, Oh my God,” she repeated in a soft voice until she had succumbed to exhaustion. Hollick left

the bed and put his clothes back on. He enjoyed a cigarette on the patio. He looked out at the ocean, feeling as if he were the luckiest man in the world for having tasted Fletcher's love, but he also felt like the unluckiest man in the world, because he would be leaving her behind tomorrow night.

Fletcher Residence Venice, CA Sunday
September 8th, 1985 9:28 a.m.

Hollick awoke in Fletcher's bed, but she had already woken up. He walked to the bathroom where Fletcher had taken a shower and was now getting dressed. She looked at him and smiled as if the night before was one of Hollick's dreams, but Hollick was still on Percocet. He knew that Fletcher was just being her usual strong self.

"Good Morning," she said.

"Good Morning, Fletcher. Do you mind if I take a shower?"

"Not at all," she said turning the hot water back on for him.

The water felt good. It was healing, just as it had been at Quantico. Fletcher's shower was clean and smelled flowery. Hollick got out and dried off. He wrapped the towel around himself and began looking for his shaving kit. Then Fletcher walked back into the bathroom, "Hollick, I want to talk to you about this," she said. She was holding his Percocet bottle.

"I got that from a doctor at Quantico."

"For what?" she asked.

"My accident in Virginia," he replied.

"Hollick, this is a prescription from June, its September. There's supposed to be thirty pills in this bottle, there's forty-six. I counted."

"Fletcher, I need those."

"No, you don't. You were using these last night while we were drinking wine. My cousin died from doing the same exact thing. She was seventeen."

"I can't deal with this right now."

"You have to deal with it sometime."

"You know what's going on in my life and you're going to bring this up right now?"

"I care about you. Actually, I think I'm in love with you. I wanted to tell you in the hospital before you left," Hollick froze. He didn't know how to react. He was leaving in eight hours.

"I can't talk about this right now."

"So these feelings aren't requited? You just wanted to fuck me?" asked Fletcher nodding.

"No, it's not like that. I do want to talk about us. I just have a lot to deal with today."

"Okay, next time we see each other then, which will be soon, right?"

"I'm going to try to come back in two or three weeks. I have to see what's coming out of the rumor mill in D.C.," he said reassuringly, Fletcher nodded and took a deep breath.

"Well I don't suppose I could talk you into going to church with me. We could go to confession together," she said smiling.

"I wish I could. I've got plenty to atone for," said Hollick nodding, Fletcher smiled.

Hollick changed into his FBI uniform. He left out the jacket. It was too hot for that. This was his last day to finish business in Los Angeles. He had no idea when he could come back or if he would come back. Fletcher walked him outside to the Crown Vic. He turned to her, "Fletcher, you know what you're facing," she nodded, "You know what you have to do."

"I understand," she whispered in his ear.

“I love you, Hollick.”

“I love you too, Fletcher.”

They kissed passionately one last time. Hollick soon withdrew. He hated the sense of loss he was feeling. He got into the Crown Vic and started the engine. Glancing at her one more time, he drove away from the woman of his dreams. The lovely Miss Jennifer Fletcher; beautiful, smart, ambitious, funny, caring...terrifying.

Chapter 10: Last Goodbyes

Carnahan Residence Eagle Rock, CA
Sunday September 8th, 1985 11:01 a.m.

Hollick sped through L.A. traffic, darting around Sunday drivers just as his cabbie had when he arrived in town two days earlier. He had gotten a late start from Fletcher's house in Venice. He hadn't even had the chance to shave.

He had three important meetings before his six o'clock flight out of LAX. The first one would be a surprise visit to Cathy Carnahan. Hollick would play it out like a social call while in L.A. on business, making it look like he was there to reconcile their differences after the funeral disaster. In truth, Hollick would be attempting to learn information about her finances and how much danger she had exposed Fletcher to during their friendship.

Eagle Rock was wedged between Hollick's Pasadena and Novak's Glendale. This was a familiar area to Hollick. He had visited Agent Carnahan in this same house seven times in the last two years. He knew Cathy and the kids well and had always admired the beautiful family. This would be a piece of cake compared to Novak.

Cathy was twenty-five, about ten years younger than Travis Carnahan was. She bore him two beautiful children, Josh and Alyssa, ages three and five. She was a pretty woman with light skin, blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair, many of the same features as her husband. She played the role of housewife at first, but in the last year, she had gotten her realty license. She talked of having a career, but Carnahan had never supported the idea.

Hollick had learned of this in late 1984. Carnie would complain of her ambitions interfering with his own career. They had bought a home in Eagle Rock four years earlier. Eagle Rock wasn't the most expensive town in L.A., but Cathy had insisted on a huge bungalow near Glendale, where her parents lived. Despite being a house mouse, Cathy wore the pants in the family, a contradiction to Carnie's alpha male nature.

If the things Paul Sterner had told him about Carnie's finances and Cathy's bad money management skills were actually true, then it all made sense. The Carnahan's had lived beyond their means and were drowning in a sea of debt. Cathy wanted to get into real estate to keep up the lifestyle and that's when Carnahan made a deal with Paul Sterner and Doug Lind, a deal, he would not live long enough to regret.

Hollick had unanswered questions. Why had Carnahan left Hollick's name out of the conversations with Lind and Sterner? Why had Carnahan lied to Lind and Sterner about who really ran the robbery division?

Was Carnahan trying to protect Hollick if things went south or trying to leave himself some small bit of ammunition if Lind and Sterner turned on him? Anything was possible.

Hollick looked around the street. The gas truck Hansen had spoken of was gone, but the Mercedes SL convertible Cathy had purchased sat in the driveway next to Carnie's F150. The car was a beautiful pearl white that looked fresh off the lot. This car cost thirty-grand easy. Hansen was telling the truth about this part, widow's benefits would not have covered house payments and this car.

He walked up to the front of the house. The inner door was open. Hollick knocked on the screen door. He heard footsteps and Cathy's voice getting closer. She was talking to someone on the phone. With the receiver wedged between her head and shoulder, she approached the door. She was holding the base of the phone. She continued to talk to the person on the other end, but Hollick could only hear her side of the conversation.

It sounded like business, a charming two-story home in Burbank equipped with a swimming pool and close to schools, parks and houses of worship. Cathy could sell. So much so, that she had a hard time getting off the phone with Mr. Fielden, the client. She assured him that they would meet on Monday, she said, "I've got a visitor, an old friend, we'll talk tomorrow," then she hung up.

"Agent Hollick, I thought you were in Washington."

"I came to town on Friday to give a speech at the field office."

"A speech, are you going into politics?" she asked smiling. They both laughed, "Come in," she said opening the door for Hollick.

Hollick followed her inside and looked around. The house was clean, but not quite as clean as Fletcher's was. This was probably because Cathy had two children. As they walked past the living room into the kitchen, Hollick noticed a large television and expensive home electronics along with a respectable VHS collection consisting of mostly kids movies. Expensive furniture lay around the living room and family pictures hung from the walls, none of which featured her deceased husband, "Nice photos," he commented.

"Thanks," replied Cathy without much enthusiasm.

"How come Travis isn't in any of them?"

They stopped in the kitchen. She was making herself a cup of coffee. Her back was turned to him, "The kids are traumatized enough. The pictures were making things worse. I love my kids and I want them to be happy. They will know about their father, but for now I'm just trying to help them get through this ordeal."

"Where are the kids, Cathy?"

"They're in Anaheim. My folks took them to Disneyland for the weekend."

"That's nice."

"It is," she said as she turned around sipping her coffee. "I'm sorry, Agent Hollick, would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That would be great and please, call me Alex," Hollick had flipped back into acting mode, just as he had with Hansen on Friday night. He looked around the room. He tried to spot wiretaps, but nothing stood out.

"Cream and sugar, Alex?" she asked.

"Yes, please, Cathy," Hollick watched as she prepared his coffee, making sure she didn't slip anything into it. He had no idea how much she knew, but it looked to Hollick like she acted in complicity. He suspected that Mr. Fielden on the phone was really Novak and that Cathy was trying to signal to him that Hollick was there. Cathy handed Hollick his coffee, "Can we go outside on your deck, Cathy?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, leading Hollick to the large back deck of the home, which looked out over Los Angeles. Hollick couldn't see any obvious signs of wiretapping, but he couldn't really inspect the house. That would arouse suspicion. If Hansen was right and someone was spying on Cathy Carnahan, there had to be at least a few bugs placed in her home.

On the deck, Hollick and Cathy sat in wicker chairs with a glass table between them. She pulled out a pack of smokes and lit one up, "I didn't know you smoked, Cathy?"

"Only in times of grief, Agent Hollick," she replied.

"Cathy, please call me Alex," she nodded taking a puff, "May I have one of those?" he asked. She slid the pack and a book of matches across the table. Hollick took out a cigarette, struck a match and lit up. The cigarette was menthol, but it was nicotine and Hollick had left his own cigarettes in the Crown Vic. He started with small talk.

"This is a beautiful view, Cathy. You can see everything."

"Thank you. Travis and I spent a lot of nights out here."

"Yeah, about Travis," he said.

"Alex, I said some things at the funeral I didn't mean. I know you weren't responsible for what happened that day. I was overly emotional. I had just lost my husband. You can understand that," Hollick nodded.

"Travis was my best agent and for a while, we were best friends. We spent a lot of time together, at work, at the gym, on cases. I don't know if he told you, but he was actually my partner. He was my second-in-command. He directly helped me to solve cases."

"I didn't know that, but it doesn't surprise me. Travis was an extraordinary man."

"He put others above himself. He saved our colleague, Agent Fletcher's life that day."

"I miss him," she said after exhaling from her cigarette.

"I miss him too. Not a day goes by that I don't treasure the time we had together."

"He always liked you, Alex. He considered you a good friend."

"As I did him," he replied, Cathy nodded as Hollick took another drag.

"So, to what do I owe this visit today? It's great to see you, but it's kind of unexpected."

"I'm sorry I didn't call you first. I'm going back to Washington tonight and I wanted to make sure that you and Maria were doing alright."

"I assume you're talking about Maria Velasquez?"

"Yeah, Joe's wife, have you seen her?"

"Not since the funeral."

"What about Chief Novak or Agent Fletcher?"

"No, Alex. You're the first person I've seen from the FBI in almost three months."

"Since the funeral?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said simply.

"You must be very lonely."

"Well the kids keep me busy and I'm a real estate agent now so there's that."

"How is the real estate business treating you?"

"It's okay."

"How's the market? Are there any opportunities I should be looking at?"

"There's nothing available, Alex," she said with a flirtatious grin, they both laughed.

"I saw the SL in the driveway, it's a beautiful car."

"Thanks, it's a lease."

"Well I still like it," Cathy nodded and took another puff, "Cathy, did Travis have some sort of life insurance policy?"

"Not that I know of, why do you ask?"

"Well, the car, the furniture, the home electronics, I know the real estate market is hot, but you seem to be doing a little better than okay."

"What are you suggesting, Alex, that I stole these things?"

“Of course not, I just know what the widow’s benefit amounts are and the math here doesn’t make sense, not even on the high end.”

“So you’re an accountant now?” she said with a suspicious look and raised tone.

“Cathy, calm down.”

“I will not calm down, Agent Hollick. For your information, I earn my money. I don’t sit on the government dole pretending to be some super cop taking checks from taxpayers. You have no right to come into my home, spy around my house and interrogate me like some IRS agent. Now get the hell out of my house!” Hollick put his cigarette out and stood up. He looked down at her. She looked down. Her body language suggested guilt.

“I’m going to leave now, Cathy. I apologize if I’ve offended you. Before I go, I’d like to say something. I believe you’re a good woman who may have been caught up in something you had no part in creating. I believe the longer that you’re a part of this, the more danger you put yourself and your family in. Think about your children and your parents. Now if you’re afraid to get out, I am willing to help you. I know people in Washington. I can--,”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Agent Hollick. I’ve asked you to leave my home. If you don’t go, I will call the police,” she said, Hollick nodded and left.

The visit with Cathy had left a bad taste in his mouth. She had lied countless times in their conversation. He had seen her with Novak on his houseboat less than twenty-four hours ago. Fletcher told him that they were becoming close friends and that she was helping Cathy with the kids, even planning a move to Pasadena just to be closer to her. Hollick believed Cathy was scared and with good reason.

She was a good mother and an ambitious woman, but a terrible actress. When she said she didn’t, “sit on the government dole,” Hollick knew what she really meant. She had told Fletcher that the benefits had stopped, but not Hollick. If Cathy and Novak were involved, why would Novak cut her widow’s benefits?

They seemed very friendly with each other on the houseboat, but Hollick had the feeling there was some sort of arrangement between them, that Novak was telling Cathy how and when she could spend SOCAL money, money that was covered with the blood of police officers, armored guards, civilians and FBI agents. So what was in it for Novak? Bureau Chiefs are paid incredibly well and Novak owned his house outright. It was risky at best.

Hollick used to think highly of Novak, but now he seemed to be running the L.A. field office like a racket. Hollick regretted that he had helped him every step of the way, believing it would save his own skin. Now there was only one small piece of evidence against Carnahan, a short statement from a criminal. How useful was this tape? As Clay said, Sterner was a thief, a murderer and now a corpse.

Hollick thought about Fletcher. He hoped she was as strong as he believed she was. He wondered if he had made the right choice in giving her information that may get her killed. Without it, she may have died anyway, but with it, she may have a chance to protect herself. Joseph Velasquez had a special woman too, Maria. Hollick was confident she was safe, but he owed her an explanation.

Velasquez Residence Culver City, CA
Sunday September 8th, 1985 12:15 p.m.

Hollick pulled up to the Velasquez house and turned off the Crown Vic. He took out his binoculars and looked around the street to see if there was anyone following him. There didn’t appear to be anyone tailing him. He put the binoculars down on the seat and then he saw it, a bug taped under the lower dash of the Crown Vic. He took a closer look, the bug was held securely with electrical tape.

The bug wasn't there when Hollick took the car. It could have only been planted there between dinner with Fletcher and his visit with Cathy Carnahan. Had Novak put it there or perhaps the Secret Division? The rogue agency Hansen had told Hollick about was spying on Cathy's house, maybe it was them.

Hollick exited the car and walked up to the home of Maria Velasquez. The home was large, but modest. Velasquez had a large family that lived together in this house. Though she had only one child, Julio, she and Agent Velasquez rented the home with Maria's large family. The few times that Hollick had visited this house, he had met the entire family. Hollick thought the family was beautiful, eating large meals together and watching each other's children. He respected the Mexican culture despite hating the food.

He knocked. A minute later, a large muscular man opened the door. Hollick had never seen him before. He said nothing. He just looked at Hollick with a suspicious eye.

"Hello, is Maria home?"

"Why? What do you want with Maria?"

"I just want to talk to her for a minute."

"Maria is my sister. Anything you need to talk to her about, you can tell me," Maria walked up from behind and tapped on her brother's shoulder.

"It's okay, Carlos. He worked with Jose. They were friends," Carlos turned around and walked away without apologizing.

"Mrs. Velasquez, you do remember me?"

"Yes, you're Alex Hollick. You were Joe's boss," Hollick nodded with a smile.

"The reason I'm here is to see how you're doing."

"Did the FBI send you?"

"No. I work in Washington D.C. now. I'm just in L.A. on business."

"I'm doing better, Agent Hollick."

"That's good to hear. How is Julio?"

"He is a little boy. He's sad and he misses his father."

"I miss his father too. I think about him all the time. I know you do too, Mrs. Velasquez," she nodded sadly in agreement.

Hollick took off his sunglasses, "Mrs. Velasquez, I want to tell you something about your husband. On our last operation, the day Joe died, he went above and beyond his duty. We had the suspects cornered and we were waiting for backup. The suspects began firing at civilians and Joe confronted them to save those civilians from an increasingly dangerous situation. He distracted the suspects and they stopped firing at innocent bystanders.

"Your husband saved the lives of about fifty innocent people that day. He pursued the suspects without any hesitation. He showed more courage and valor than any FBI agent I've ever met before. He put his life on the line to protect those people. I will never forget your husband and the bravery he showed in the face of danger."

"Thank you, Agent Hollick," she said. Tears began to roll down her face.

Hollick nodded and put his hand on her shoulder for a moment, "Is the bureau sending you the widow's payments they owe you?" he asked, she nodded, wiping tears from her face. "That's good," said Hollick as he reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"Mrs. Velasquez, I want you to have this. It's a money order for five-thousand dollars. With this money, you and your family can put a down payment on a house, but this is your money and you can spend it however you think is best."

“That’s very kind of you, Agent Hollick, but I can’t accept your charity,” she tried to hand the envelope back, but Hollick pushed it firmly into her hand.

“It’s not charity, Mrs. Velasquez. Your husband saved many lives that day including my own. This doesn’t even begin to repay the debt I owe him.”

“Thank you,” she gave Hollick a hug and clutched him as she began to cry. These weren’t tears of joy, but of sorrow. This was the first time she had truly felt the freedom to grieve without feeling like a burden to her family. This was a moment of weakness in an otherwise strong woman. It had been three months since her husband’s death. She still didn’t make any sounds, but rather leaked small waterfalls from her beautiful eyes onto Hollick’s shirt.

“I have to go, Mrs. Velasquez. Please take care of yourself and Julio,” he said, she let go of Hollick and nodded.

“Agent Hollick, Joe once told me that you were a man of honor. He was right.”

Hollick smiled and walked away. He finally felt good about something. She would eventually feel some sense of closure and the boy would grow up, not with a father, but with loving aunts and uncles who would care for him and teach him about his father. His mother would one day explain how his father had died bravely saving lives.

He got into the Crown Vic and started it with the bug still taped under the dashboard. He couldn’t remove it. He had to pretend he didn’t even know it was there. He was just happy whoever was responsible hadn’t used a bomb instead. Whoever planted the bug wanted Hollick alive for now. That gave him enough comfort and reason to believe that it was probably Novak keeping tabs.

On his way to Marina Del Ray, he considered the possibilities of the meeting, none of which were great. The worst-case scenario would be Novak killing him and dumping him in the ocean now that he had outlived his usefulness. The best-case scenario would be Novak letting him go back to D.C. until he needed him to kill Cathy and her family.

All he knew for sure was that this meeting with Novak was his last opportunity to get the answers to a myriad of questions, questions surrounding Novak’s true level of involvement in the SOCAL robberies. Hollick was equally compelled by and afraid of the truth. Once the meeting was over, the consequences of all Hollick had done with Novak to bury the past would begin to emanate into the future, an uncertain future.

Novak’s Houseboat Marina Del Ray, CA
Sunday September 8th, 1985 1:33 p.m.

Hollick pulled into a parking lot in Marina Del Ray. He parked in a spot where he could see the houseboat and the Crown Vic would be hidden from Novak’s view. He grabbed his binoculars and got out. He walked up to the bushes and looked at Novak’s houseboat, then the docks, then the area around the docks. He was looking for traps, cars, G-men.

After five minutes had passed, he still saw no activity. There was no sign of Secrets Division, FBI, LAPD, Cathy Carnahan or even Novak. His Porsche 944 was still parked next the docks, but in a different spot than before. The car had definitely been driven somewhere since yesterday. This was cause for concern.

Hollick’s worst fear was for Fletcher. If Novak knew what she knew, he might try something. Hollick worried that he would walk into a setup. He feared that he would walk into Novak’s houseboat and find Fletcher tied up with Novak waiting to kill them both so he could dump them out in the middle of the Pacific. He should have checked up on Fletcher one last time, but he couldn’t bear to leave her again.

Hollick put down the binoculars and pulled out his travel bag. He changed into the Miami Vice outfit that Novak had insisted he wear. Hollick looked at his reflection in the window of the Crown Vic. He looked like

an idiot. He looked like a white version of Tony Montana during the chain saw scene in Scarface.

He looked out one more time with the binoculars, but still saw nothing. He took a deep breath and got back into the Crown Vic. He drove over to the docks and parked a few spots down from Novak's Porsche. When he exited the Crown Vic for the second time, he took one more look around with his binoculars, just to be cautious. The docks were very quiet. He pulled out his .38 Special and tucked it in his sock, just in case.

After putting on his shades, he slowly walked down the dock towards Novak's houseboat. He stopped every fifteen steps or so to listen. It was still quiet. Hollick thought it wise to be a few minutes early to this meeting so he could get a feel for the place and look for anything suspicious. He walked up to the houseboat and listened again.

He had walked very softly so as not to give Novak any warning that he was coming. He looked around the boat a bit, but unfortunately, the only window on the boat was facing away from Hollick, which prevented him from seeing anything. He had to rely on his ears at that moment. He thought he had heard a glass clinking and something being poured. Did Novak have company? Hollick looked back over at the lot, but nothing looked out of place.

He looked down at his watch. It was now 1:56. Novak would be expecting him to walk through the door in four minutes. He put his ear up to the door, but he couldn't hear much. He stepped back a bit trying to delay the meeting as long as possible, just as he had on Memorial Day at the field office. Then Novak opened the door. He was still in his bathrobe and taken aback to find Hollick outside, "Alex, you scared the shit out of me."

"I thought you were expecting me, John."

"I am. I mean I was."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Yeah, come on in," he said. Hollick followed Novak into his houseboat. Novak was alone. The room was much smaller than Novak had boasted to Hollick about a few years ago, but it was big enough for the two of them. He said, "Go ahead, have a seat, Alex."

He motioned for Hollick to sit on a plastic chair while he sat in another one a few feet away. A pull away table sat between them. There was an ashtray on the table with butts in it from two different brands, Novak's full flavors and Cathy's menthols. Novak took two shot glasses full of whiskey, placing one in front of Hollick. He took his shot and said, "Come on, Alex, drink up."

"No, thanks, I'm not thirsty, you drink it," he replied. Novak grabbed the shot glass, got up and poured it down the sink.

"I've been drinking too much lately anyway."

"Yeah, you've really been partying hard this weekend, haven't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Alex?"

"Nothing," replied Hollick simply. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. Novak shrugged it off, took a deep breath and sat down across from Hollick.

"Can I have one of those, Alex?" he asked. Hollick slid the pack across the table to Novak. He pulled one out and lit it up, "Thank you," Hollick said nothing.

"So how'd it go with Hansen?"

"It went great, John. He flopped around a bit and then landed face first in his entrée right before shitting his pants. It was a real dignified death. I'm sure that Mrs. Hansen's thank you card is already in the mail."

"Alex--,"

"She's six months pregnant, John."

"And the bureau will take care of her."

"Like they're taking care of Cathy Carnahan? Why'd they cut off the checks?"

"Cathy told you that?"

"No, Fletcher told me."

"When?" asked Novak.

"At the field office on Friday, after my speech, she asked for my help. Cathy told her there was some sort of clerical error," Novak pondered, trying to think of an answer, "So why cut off the checks, John. I thought you wanted to bury this thing. Why arouse suspicion? Wouldn't that tip off Cathy?"

"She wasn't spending the money fast enough. I had to cut off the checks. It was the only way to make her dip into the SOCAL money."

"Why was she on this boat yesterday?"

"Cathy Carnahan?"

"Don't bullshit me, John. I saw it with my own eyes."

"You were spying on me?"

"I'm sorry, John. I had to know too," Hollick tossed the bug onto the table. Novak studied the bug, picked it up and threw it out the window into the ocean. He leaned against the sink, putting a few more feet between him and Hollick. "What's the matter, John? You don't trust me to do your dirty work?" he asked. Novak just stared at him, "I get it, trust but verify, right? That's what the Gipper would do," said Hollick nodding.

"Alex, I've never seen that before in my life."

"Bullshit! Clay thinks I'm out here to give a speech. You said he'd kill us if he knew about Hansen. You put me in that car and you put that bug in the car."

"Look, Alex--,"

"Why was Cathy here? Was that your idea of handling her internally, Carnahan's widow? Jesus Christ, John, what the fuck have you gotten yourself into?"

"Now you wait one goddamn minute! She is part of an ongoing criminal investigation! She acted in complicity!"

"That's your defense, complicity? You're worse than Carnahan. At least he saved Fletcher. You're going to fuck his wife and then throw her to the wolves just to save your own skin. Is that what happened over in Nam? You got the wrong Intel and threw your own men to the wolves, because you made a mistake?"

"Fuck you, Alex! You have no idea what that was like. You were playing basketball in junior high while I was over there protecting this country from the threat of communism!"

"Yeah, whatever," he replied. Novak looked at the floor. He walked to his seat and sat back down. Hollick reached into his sock, pulled out his .38 Special and set it on the table. Novak's eyes widened, "Hansen said a .38 Special was the murder weapon in that cop killing you did back in June, a .38 Special just like this one right here. This gun that magically appeared in Quantico two days after the murder, express shipped from San Diego with an L.A. postmark," Novak's hands moved towards the gun at a snail's pace as he kept eye contact with Hollick. Then Hollick picked up the gun and leaned back in the chair, "You used my gun, John? You used my gun so you could put it right back in my hands?"

"Of course not, Alex," said Novak, looking at his identical .38 Special over on the counter, just out of reach. Hollick followed his eyes and looked over at the gun.

"Oh, that gun? Don't tell me you were stupid enough to kill a cop with your own fucking service weapon."

"No, Alex, it was a .38 I bought on the street. It's untraceable to either of us."

"Where is that gun? Did you send it to Chief Rayburn yourself?"

"Read the front page news," he said. He slid a copy of the L.A. Times across the table to Hollick. There was a picture of a gang member being arrested. The headline read, "Compton Drug Dealer Linked to Mojave Murder." This is what Novak had been up to on Friday night.

"You set this guy up to take the fall for you? He's gonna get the death penalty."

"Would you rather it be you in that picture, Alex?" he asked. Hollick looked up at Novak. He continued, "Nobody cares about some highway hog out in Barstow or some drug dealing nigger in South Central."

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!” shouted Hollick with his gun pointed at Novak. He lowered the gun to his side and took a deep breath. Novak looked back at his gun on the counter. Hollick looked back up at him and smiled.

“I bet you wish that gun was a few inches closer right now, huh, John? Go ahead. I’ll give you a three-second head start. I’ll give you the chance that you never gave that kid in the desert!” he shouted.

Novak turned to face Hollick in an attempt to calm the situation. Hollick pointed the gun at him, “Alex, I don’t want to kill you and I know you don’t want to kill me.”

“Are you sure about that, John?”

“If you pull that trigger, you’ll never leave L.A. alive. You know it and I know it.”

“Is that so?” he said, Novak nodded without saying a word. “Well it’s a good thing I got an insurance policy,” he said as he reached into his travel bag and pulled out his answering machine. He plugged the machine into an outlet on the wall.

“What’s that?” asked Novak.

“Oh this, well on Friday you played a message Hansen left for me. I’m going to play you a message that I left for myself,” he replied. Novak looked both confused and intrigued by the statement. The tape stopped.

Hollick pushed play and looked back up at Novak as the Paul Sterner interview played. The one piece of evidence that proved there was a scandal to bury Escondido. Novak listened, shaking his head while Hollick smiled. He stopped the tape halfway through the interview. Novak looked up at Hollick, who was still holding his .38 at rest on the table.

“I can play the rest of it if you want.”

“How did you...?”

“I made this tape right before I called you from LAX. Right before you put me on a plane headed for Virginia, where I was kidnapped by three CIA agents posing as FBI. You knew what was going to happen to me, John. You acted in complicity. How does it feel to know that the day after Barstow, you sat in my apartment, fifteen feet away from this tape, writing Carnahan’s eulogy while I was taking a shower?”

“You stupid son of a bitch, if that tape gets out you’re a dead man.”

“So are you, John. You’ll be arrested, tried for treason and executed. You won’t even be remembered as anything but a corrupt FBI Chief and a cop-killer. You’d be lucky to live long enough for the trial. My new division would probably take you out first. Don’t be fooled into thinking that you’ll be around to enjoy my untimely death. It’s in both of our interests that this tape never sees the light of day.”

“So what do you propose?”

“It’s not a proposition, John. It’s an order directly from me. First, you and I will never speak again after today. I’m going to walk out that door, fly back to D.C. and start my new job. I don’t work for you anymore. I’m through eating this shit sandwich we call Escondido. It’s in your hands now. I’ve done my part and most of yours. Whatever you’ve got yourself mixed up in is your problem now.

“Secondly, don’t call me and don’t write me for anything...ever. Don’t ask me to destroy evidence, don’t ask me to kill a fellow agent and don’t call me to fly out to L.A. to give some bullshit speech under false pretenses. I’m not your bagman. I’m not your employee. I’m not even your friend. I don’t want to see you or hear about this bullshit scandal again.

“Finally, you should probably know that there’s a second copy of this tape right here in L.A. If something happens to me. If I die or disappear or get set up for a crime the next time I’m in town, my friend is going to send this tape to Washington. I’ve already explained everything that will happen to you after that.”

“Fletcher, she’s this friend in L.A. that you’re talking about?” he asked with a grin.

“No. She’s still in the dark and I want it to stay that way. But, if anything should happen to her and John, I do mean anything, I will come back here with this tape and burn your precious field office to the ground, right after I kill you. Your number one priority is to keep Fletcher safe and happy. I don’t want her to ever

know about what happened here and if you tell her...,” Hollick tapped the gun against the answering machine three times.

“Now how can you say that, Alex?” he asked, “She’s like a daughter to me!”

“Yeah, just like Cathy Carnahan. Remember when you fed me that bullshit line?” he asked, Novak looked down again, ashamed of himself. “I’m not fucking around, John. You’ve only got one chance to get this right.” Hollick unplugged the answering machine, tossed it in his bag and stood up to leave.

“Alex, don’t leave like this. We can talk this out.”

“Our business here is concluded,” Hollick walked out of the houseboat and slammed the door behind him. He walked down the docks towards the Crown Vic. Novak came out and watched as he walked away. Hollick got in the car, started the engine, backed up and peeled out. Novak looked down and went back into his houseboat.

He looked down at his copy of the L.A. Times. Then, he grabbed his .38 Special off the counter and ejected the chamber. He dumped the bullets onto the table and placed one back into the chamber. He spun the chamber and pushed it back into the gun. He put the gun against his temple. He began to sweat with his finger clasp the trigger. He cocked the gun and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened, “Fuck,” he muttered.

Los Angeles International Airport
Sunday September 8th, 1985 4:56 p.m.

Hollick sat on a bench in LAX waiting for his six o’clock flight back to Quantico. He had used his downtime wisely. He took the Crown Vic to a car wash in L.A. Proper. He paid for a full detailing of the car and even gave a twenty-dollar tip. He asked for an extensive detailing job, a wash, a wax job and a steam cleaning of the entire interior and trunk.

Hollick wanted to be sure that Novak hadn’t done anything to the Crown Vic that would implicate him in any criminal activity. Hollick felt confident, as Novak had signed for the car personally. Still, he needed to be sure. Once he had arrived at the airport, he walked into the bathroom and changed out of his Tony Montana getup and back into his FBI uniform. That’s when Novak’s level of involvement had really sunk in.

Hollick knelt down and vomited into the toilet. It was Fletcher’s Chicken Parmesan from the night before. Hollick cleaned himself up, took some Percocet and sat down to relax after another wild weekend in Los Angeles, cleaning up Novak’s dirty laundry. He felt good that it was finally over and he had done his best to help protect the most innocent people involved, Fletcher and Maria Velasquez.

He was confident that Novak was well cornered. The idea Hollick had come up with for the two tapes had seamlessly come together over the weekend. As long as Fletcher did what he told her to do, Novak would continue to believe she was in the dark. Moreover, if he believed Fletcher was in the dark, Novak would acknowledge that he would never find the second copy of the tape, which was now residing at Mr. Castillo’s house in Pasadena, only ten miles from Novak’s Glendale home.

This was a safe plan. Novak would harm neither him, nor Fletcher, believing he would risk everything. Novak would be motivated to leave Hollick alone and clean up any collateral damage by himself. No longer would he ask Hollick to commit crimes and act in complicity, as Novak had put it.

Hollick was worried about Cathy Carnahan and her family. Even if she had acted in complicity, her children and her parents had done nothing wrong. Hollick had taken a big risk offering her a way out. If she had taken him up on the offer, Hollick would have had to leak Agent Carnahan’s involvement in the SOCAL robberies. A move like that may have prompted Clay to kill him.

She would likely tell Novak everything about their conversation, but Hollick couldn’t help her now. Cathy

had made her bed and she had to lie in it with the honorable John Novak, who had made some type of arrangement with her. The parameters confused Hollick. How did their arrangement work? Was Novak taking a cut of the money he was instructed to destroy? Had he told Cathy about Hansen, Mojave and the Secrets Division?

Hollick couldn't yet put it together. He boarded his flight, American Airlines Flight 267 to Washington-Dulles. He was ready for six hours of quality sleep. Tomorrow would be his final test at Quantico before starting his new job with the Secrets Division, investigating Satanic Ritual Abuse. He would do the job the best he could. As Clay told him in Washington four months ago, he had reached the point of no return.

Washington-Dulles Airport Dulles, VA
Monday September 9th, 1985 3:33 a.m.

Hollick got off the plane at Washington-Dulles. This time, there was nobody there waiting for him. He looked around for ten minutes. Silva wasn't there, but the Crown Vic he drove to the airport was. He checked it out of long-term parking. He looked around cautiously for signs of trouble, feeling a bit nervous being out of his element of Southern California.

First, he looked all around the Crown Vic for bugs, but the car was clean. Then he checked under the car for a bomb, but there was nothing suspicious about the car. It looked just as it had when Hollick had left it there four days ago. He popped the hood and looked around just to make sure, even though he really didn't know what to look for anyway.

After Hollick decided it was safe, he got in and took off. He took the 28 South back to Quantico as some early morning rain came on. It wasn't the heavy rain that had caused the fictional accident he was allegedly involved in earlier that year. This was the kind of rain that required selective use of the windshield wipers.

He thought about his past, present and future. He reflected on the events of the past that had begotten the present and wondered what would lie ahead of him in the future. Would life get simpler? Would the hell ride continue in D.C. with new players, but the same tricks? Escondido was three-thousand miles away, but seemed to have a knack for finding Hollick.

Now would begin a new chapter in Hollick's life, a new job, a new town and new friends. Hollick didn't mind saying goodbye to Cathy Carnahan, John Novak or Maria Velasquez even though all three were very different people. Hollick knew that it was time to withdraw from all of them. It only hurt to say goodbye to Fletcher, but he knew he had to suffer in silence in order to keep her safe.

Hollick arrived at Quantico shortly after four o'clock. He walked into the conference room and made some coffee. He downed some pills and turned on the television. He watched crappy shows and thought about Agent Donovan, who he hadn't seen since the meeting at the Black Room. Hollick wondered if he was in some other part of the country spinning a press release or cleaning up some operation gone terribly wrong.

Today was graduation day from the Secrets Division crash course. Hollick would be tested in investigative practices, hand-to-hand combat, theology studies and target accuracy. He was eager to do well. He had looked forward to impressing his trainers who he had grown so fond of over the summer.

The team members, Sheldon with his file, Stallard with his notes and Bagley with nothing but his presence walked into the room shortly after eight. They all sat down across the table as they had done the first day he began his training. They collected themselves and then Sheldon looked up at Hollick, "How was L.A., tiger?"

"It was good, nice weather."

"Better than what's happening out there, that's for sure. Well, this is the day we've all been waiting for and if I may say so, a day we have not been looking forward to. Today we say goodbye to you, our good friend

Agent Hollick.”

“I’ve really enjoyed my time here and I want to thank all of you for helping me.”

“We’ve really enjoyed it too. You’re an exemplary agent and I know you’re going to do some amazing things out there in the field.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hollick replied.

Sheldon nodded and resumed, “So, Alex, we haven’t much time so we’re going to skip the testing and just give you our opinion.”

“Sir?” he asked.

“Well, Liaison Silva is downstairs in the lobby. He wants you to accompany him to D.C. in about half an hour. So we’re going to go by last Thursday’s results and I’m going to tell you how you did.”

“Okay, sir,” he replied.

“Alright, Investigative Practices, my curriculum, you scored ninety-nine percent, very impressive, your target accuracy hit ninety-seven percent last week, so we’re going to leave that one alone. Hand-to-Hand combat, you got eighty-nine percent, well above average and finally, Theology Studies, one-hundred percent. You are more than ready to go out into the field.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said with a smile.

“You did great in here, Agent Hollick, now it’s time to do some good out there.”

“Understood, sir,” Hollick replied.

“You’ve got thirty minutes to pack up your room and then you’re headed to D.C. with Liaison Silva. Take care of yourself, Alex, okay?” Hollick nodded. They rose and shook hands, all saying their goodbyes. Bagley took Hollick aside for a moment.

“Remember, it’s called a blue badge of courage,” said Bagley, Hollick nodded and smiled.

“Thank you, Bagley. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” Bagley nodded and left the room with Sheldon. Stallard had left before them, but he returned with a box. He handed it to Hollick. The box was heavy and bulky.

“This is a care package, Agent Hollick. You don’t have to open it here. They’re just some things that might help you in your field. It’s a token of my appreciation for being a good student and for that matter, a good teacher.”

“Thank you, Dr. Stallard. I’ve really treasured the time we’ve had together.”

“Me too, Agent Hollick,” he replied.

“Please, call me Alex.”

“Okay, Alex, you can call me Shawn,” said Stallard with a grin, “Alex, if you ever need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask. Of course, I’m not entirely sure I’ll be able to deliver, but I’ll try.”

“Thank you, Shawn. That means a lot to me,” Stallard shrugged and left the room. Hollick went to his room and began packing. He thought about the summer camp called Quantico he had enjoyed so much. Given the circumstances, it was highly unlikely he would ever need to come back. Hollick’s first time at Quantico was easily forgettable, but this time was different, this time was special.

Hollick walked down the stairs and saw Silva. He was sitting on a bench waiting for him. Silva was back in his uniform, the one he had worn in the Black Room. He saw Hollick in the elevator with a small dolly stacked with boxes. Silva stood up and walked over to Hollick, “Are you ready, Agent Hollick?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” he replied. Hollick didn’t even know where they were going. He just put his boxes in the trunk and jumped into the Crown Vic. Silva took the wheel and pulled out of the FBI Training Academy. He pulled onto 28 North and began the hour-long drive to Washington. Hollick pulled out a cigarette, “Liaison Silva, do you mind if I smoke in here?”

“No, Agent Hollick, make yourself at home.”

“Would you like one?”

“No, thank you.”

Hollick lit up his cigarette. He cracked the window slightly to let the smoke out without letting rain into the car. He felt good about where he was going, even though he wasn't completely sure where that would lead. He just knew there would be no Novak, no CIA agents posing as FBI and no Escondido. Life was renewed, it felt fresh and for once, it felt good not to know.

Bonus Material

THE ALEX HOLLICK F.B.I. SERIES
PART ONE: THE BLOODBATH RITUAL
A CONTINUATION OF THE ALEX HOLLICK: ORIGINS
WRITTEN BY ANDREW DOWNS

Chapter 11: Life in Exile Hollick
Residence Washington D.C. Tuesday
October 1st, 1985 10:33 a.m.

Hollick milled around his apartment wondering what to do with the day. It had been three weeks since his arrival in Washington D.C. and he hadn't received a single phone call or visit from anyone in Secrets Division or the FBI. Silva brought him into the district to this apartment. He offered to help Hollick learn the layout of the city, but Hollick declined. He had visited D.C. six times since high school.

The apartment arranged for him was amazing. It was a swanky two bedroom on Constitution Avenue, just a short distance from West Potomac Park, The White House and The Washington Mall, with breathtaking views of the Potomac River. The apartment itself was luxurious with hardwood floors, a dishwasher, garbage disposal and even a nice Jacuzzi built into the bathtub.

The apartment was furnished when he got there; a leather couch and loveseat, a large television and stereo system, a king sized bed, beautiful bureaus and cabinets. There was also a desk with a typewriter, paper and a built in file cabinet. Hollick thought a senator or secretary of state might have once occupied this apartment. He looked for bugs for the first few hours, but the apartment was clean of any wiretapping.

Hollick was living the good life and not a peep from L.A. No phone calls, letters or messages had come through in the last three weeks. Hollick even bought a subscription to the L.A. Times to monitor happenings in Southern California and aside from an obituary piece on Hansen, nothing. L.A. was eerily quiet considering what had happened nearly a month ago.

Hollick felt good, but he was starting to get bored. He had done everything there was to do in the district twice. He visited all the memorials and monuments in Washington and even took a tour of the White House. He wanted to get a photo op with President Reagan, but he thought the Secrets Division would frown upon that. Hollick had actually voted for Walter Mondale in the last presidential election. He just thought a photo with the Gipper would make a nice keepsake.

Aside from boredom, life was mostly going well. He was glad to have Novak and Escondido off his hands. He did however miss Fletcher. He had worried that his well thought plan to protect her may have gone awry. He had not followed through on his promise to come back in two weeks. He still felt it was too soon to stir things up in L.A. He was worried that Novak may try to have a visit with him if he knew he was in town.

A few days after he got into Washington, he opened the box that Stallard had given him. It was for lack of a better term, a satanic care package. The box was filled with cassettes of heavy metal bands, T-shirts and books about Satanism, Witchcraft and the Occult. The nicest part was a copy of, "The Satanic Bible," by Anton LaVey. It was an original first edition printed in 1970. Aside from the yellowed pages, the book was in great condition.

Stallard had written a note to Hollick on the first page, which was mostly blank aside from the title. It read, "Alex, if you know your enemies better than yourself, you will never lose," and it was signed, "Your friend in theology, Shawn Stallard." Stallard had also put his phone number and mailing address. Hollick thought it might be nice to go up to New Haven and sit in on a few of his classes at Yale sometime.

The music Stallard had given him was actually quite good. As a fan of classical music and classic rock, heavy metal translated quite well to him. He would listen to bands like Skin Stabber, Tooth and Nail and Death Deceiver on a Walkman during his morning jogs around Washington. The music was wonderful, but Hollick didn't care for the vocals very much. As it was, he knew he had to concentrate on the lyrics.

The Percocet that Hollick had acquired from Dr. Abernathy was running low. He had done all he could to stretch it out, sometimes taking only one pill per day. He was now down to just five pills. He needed a new doctor to write a prescription for him. He pulled out a book that Silva had given him. The book served as a directory for government agencies and had the contact information for everyone in the FBI, CIA, ATF and DEA, from agents to bureau chiefs and more importantly, doctors.

Hollick was thumbing through the doctor's section of the FBI when he saw a familiar name, Dr. Patricia Jones, Psychiatric Specialist. Hollick remembered her from his hospital stay in Quantico. She was the one who broke the news to him about his "car accident" outside Manassas. Hollick liked her very much. She was both smart and beautiful, but Hollick wasn't looking for a date, he was looking for a refill.

J. Edgar Hoover Building Washington D.C.
Tuesday October 1st, 1985 1:46 p.m.

Hollick arrived at the J. Edgar Hoover Building, which was the national headquarters for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This was the very same building that Agent Hansen hoped to work in one day, thinking that an internal attack on the L.A. field office with Hollick's help would put him on the fast track to Washington. Hollick had only been here a handful of times, but he knew Dr. Jones worked somewhere in the building as it said so in the contact book.

His FBI special credentials got him through the door at lightning speed. From there, he took the elevator to the eighth floor where her office was located. Hollick walked through the doctor's floor reading door name after door name until he finally saw hers. The door was closed. It read, "Dr. Patricia Jones M.D. Psychiatric Specialist." Hollick could hear her talking to someone, it sounded like an agent in therapy.

The agent was complaining of an operation. He had accidentally killed a young boy during a raid at a drug manufacturer's house in Oklahoma. He felt guilty about his mistake and Hollick could relate. Jones did not comfort him, nor did she scold him. She was a good psychiatrist. She used logic and reasoning to help the agent realize that he was human and that all humans are capable of mistakes.

She was leading the agent out when she noticed Hollick standing there. She looked just as pretty as she had on that day in Quantico; Black hair, blue eyes, olive skin, just as Hollick had remembered. He tried to focus on why he came here in the first place, "Alex?"

"Dr. Jones, it's good to see you again."

"Likewise, are you here on business? I thought you worked in Los Angeles."

"I got promoted actually. I live here in D.C. now."

“Really, well congratulations, that’s great news,” she said smiling.

“Thank you very much, Dr. Jones.”

“So what brings you to this floor today?”

“I actually came to see you. Do you have a minute?”

“I have about five minutes till my next appointment. Come into my office,” Hollick followed Dr. Jones into her office and sat on the couch where most of her patients would lay down. Jones sat in an easy chair. Her office was much larger than Hollick’s old office in L.A. and had a nice décor. She smiled at him, “So, Alex, what can I do for you?” she asked.

“Actually, I’m looking for a therapist.”

“And you think that I would be a good candidate for that job?”

“I do, but it’s not for a work related reason, it’s the accident I had back in the spring.”

“I remember,” she said nodding.

“Well I still don’t remember much about the accident and it bothers me that I can’t put the pieces together. I lose a lot of sleep over it honestly.”

“Okay, well I’m accepting new patients and it would be nice to talk to you some more,” she grabbed a day planner and thumbed through it, looking for openings, “Okay, Alex, I have an open spot on Thursday at three o’clock.”

“Here in this office?” he asked looking around, Jones nodded, “Dr. Jones, due to the sensitivity of my new job, I was wondering if you could maybe make a house call in my case.”

“A house call?” she asked smiling.

“Yeah, I have a place over on Constitution near West Potomac Park. I’ll make you dinner,” Jones blushed and smiled at Hollick.

She took off her glasses and set them in her lap, “Alex...,”

“It’s not a date. I just need discretion when it comes to my mental well-being. This is a brand new job. You understand, don’t you?”

“Discretion, huh?” asked Jones with her arms folded. She gave Hollick a suspicious and flirtatious look. She turned her head, looked out the window for a moment and then looked back at him, “Okay, Alex, I’ll make an exception for you this one time, but any follow up visits are going to have to take place here in my office.”

“Agreed, are you free tomorrow night, Dr. Jones, say six?”

“Yes, Alex and you can call me Patricia if you like.”

“I would like that,” he said smiling ear to ear.

Then her next patient knocked on the open door, another field agent. Jones deflected and guided Hollick out of the office, “Well thanks for coming in, Agent Hollick. I think we’ve made a lot of progress today,” she said.

“Thank you, Dr. Jones, you’ve been incredibly helpful,” he said smiling. Hollick handed her a small piece of paper and whispered, “This is my number and address, thanks, Patricia.”

Hollick began to walk away from Jones. She stood in place for a moment with a flirtatious smile on her face. Then she turned and walked into her office with her next patient. Hollick felt great. He knew Jones liked him and was willing to make an exception just for him. As long as he was convincing at their session, she would help him get more painkillers and he hoped it would be soon enough so he wouldn’t miss a dose.

As he walked down the hall, he caught something out of the corner of his eye. He stopped and looked at an open door, which read, “Dr. Leonard Alden M.D. Family Medicine.” Hollick hid behind the edge of the door and peered inside the room. It was Dr. Alden, the man who was paid to care for Hollick during his torture session. Dr. Alden was focused on his paperwork.

In this setting, Alden looked like some high school science teacher grading papers. His demeanor seemed

cool and relaxed. He placed so much concentration on his work that he didn't even notice Hollick peeking in at him. Hollick wondered how the man could work as a family physician for the FBI during the day and moonlight as a doctor for torture sessions at the behest of the CIA.

Since money was the root of all evil, it seemed the likely answer to Hollick. His feelings about Alden were conflicted, because Alden may have been the only reason Hollick had lived. It did however make him uncomfortable to know that Alden lived a double life, with access to information from his public employer and monetary motivation from his private employer or whoever pulled Alden's strings.

Hollick Residence Washington D.C.
Tuesday October 2nd, 1985 5:54 p.m.

Hollick sat waiting for Dr. Jones. He had spent the prior evening reading, "The Art of War," the only non-theology book Stallard had given to him. The book was about military strategies and tactics. Hollick had been so caught up in the book that he fell asleep reading. When he woke up, he realized he only had the day to clean his apartment, which was littered with books, empty boxes and food containers from restaurants.

Hollick didn't cook much, so he had relied on D.C. area restaurants for most of his sustenance. He found a place almost as good as Bellanti's from back in L.A. The food was genuine Italian cuisine, but the staff seemed to be far more Americanized even speaking without an accent. It seemed to Hollick that most people in D.C. talked this way. Not even a drop of their ancestry left of their native tongue.

Florino's however did get the food right. Hollick stopped there a few hours after cleaning the apartment and ordered almost one-hundred dollars worth of food. No expense was spared. Hollick bought garlic bread, salads, two Chicken Parmesan entrees and tiramisu for dessert. After purchasing the food, Hollick went to a wine store to pick up a one-hundred dollar bottle of Merlot before heading back to his apartment.

He took out the fine china that was already in the apartment and gave it a quick rinse before setting the table. The garlic bread, salads and the Chicken Parmesan were placed carefully on plates. He discarded all of the boxes after putting dessert in the freezer. Two candles illuminated from the center of the table. Merlot sat still in a pair of wine glasses.

Hollick was down to four Percocet, but he took one anyway. The pill helped a little, but he still had a bit of anxiety over his first dinner guest in Washington. He knew he needed to impress Dr. Jones and appear to have a legitimate problem. He also felt some guilt over misleading her with false pretenses. Hollick hoped he could ignore this guilt just long enough to get a script.

Jones was about three minutes late. It seemed to Hollick that she had rushed from work to get to his place on time. He greeted her at the door and showed her into the apartment. The sun in D.C. was already setting on this early fall evening in 1985. This helped the candles illuminate the room very nicely.

"Welcome to my home, Patricia."

"This is a very nice apartment, Alex."

"Thanks. I like this place. It's a good place to think."

"I bet. You've got some really nice views of the Potomac."

"Yeah, I know, come check this out."

Hollick led her into the living room to show her an oil painting he was working on of children playing at West Potomac Park. He had only recently gotten into oil painting, but was becoming rather good with the brush. To pass the time while waiting for his job to start, he had decided to take an art workshop at one of the local colleges. Hollick had masterful brush strokes and his interpretation of West Potomac Park impressed Dr. Jones, "Wow! You're an artist?" she asked, "This is really good, Alex."

"Thanks, I'm just a hack. I've been taking a class. It actually helps me relax."

“Well you obviously have a knack for oil painting.”

“Again, thank you, but it’s just a hobby.”

“I think I smell Italian food.”

“That would be dinner. Let me show you to my dining room,” Jones nodded. She took off her coat and set down her bag. Her jaw dropped when she saw dinner on the table.

“Alex, you really shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. Go ahead, have a seat.”

Jones pulled out the chair and sat noticing the wine in front of her as she did. Taking a sip of the Merlot she said, “This wine is really good, Alex, do you drink it often?”

“Well it’s a new favorite. I can’t find the Merlot I usually buy in L.A. so I described the wine to a man who owns this wonderful shop. He suggested I try this Merlot.”

“And does it compare to the wine you’re so fond of in Los Angeles?” asked Jones. Hollick paused and thought about Fletcher, despite being asked about the wine.

“It has a lot of similar qualities, but it’s not the same,” he said, she smiled and nodded. “Go ahead, dig in, Patricia.”

“Thanks, I am pretty hungry. It’s been a busy day.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Well, I saw six agents for consultation today and then I had to evaluate some of Dr. Alden’s patients too.”

“Dr. Alden?” he asked with a false curiosity.

“Yeah,” she said nodding.

“What is he, like your boss?”

“No, more of a colleague,” she replied smiling.

“Do you like him?”

“Dr. Alden?”

“Yeah,” replied Hollick reaffirming his question.

“He’s okay, he’s very quiet and he’s very scientific about his methods.”

“And you question these methods?”

“No, I guess what I meant to say is that he just reminds me of a scientist, you know? He’s got this beard and this wild hair, he just reminds me of Albert Einstein,” they both laughed. “Alex, this food is amazing. Where did you learn how to cook?”

“Oh, well my mom is Italian and my dad is Polish, so there was always a lot of cooking going on around the house.”

“It’s really amazing, Alex. It reminds me of...Florino’s,” she said with a mischievous, flirtatious grin on her face.

“Now why are you not a field agent?” he asked.

“In all fairness, I’ve eaten at Florino’s once a week for the last six years. I’d recognize this Chicken Parmesan anywhere. I think it’s really nice that you put forth so much effort.”

“Well you are doing me a favor so I have to do something to show my appreciation.”

Jones smiled, “It’s very nice,” she said, Hollick nodded.

“So you said you had an Italian mother and a Polish father. Are you a first generation American, Alex?”

“On my dad’s side, but my mother’s family has been here since the twenties.”

“Was your father in the war?”

“World War II?” he asked, she nodded.

“No, he was too young. After the invasion in ‘39, his family snuck him out of Poland. He came to the United States to stay with friends of the family in New York. His parents, my grandparents went to Auschwitz. He never saw them again. My dad was raised by those same friends until he found his place in

the world.”

“And where did that lead?”

“He studied psychology at NYU for two years. He had to stop to go over to Korea and when he came back in ’53, he became a brick mason and gave up the psychology dream altogether. He met my mother through the Catholic Church. Four years later, I was born and then my brother and thirty-one years later they’re still just as in love.”

“That’s beautiful,” she said smiling, Hollick nodded.

“What about you, Patricia?”

“Well I’m mostly French. Both my mom and dad came here in the twenties with their families and they both moved to New York City. They met at a dance while they were in college and married after graduation. When my dad came back from the war, he became an accountant and my mother was sort of his secretary while she raised my sister and me.”

“That’s a nice story too. So you’re from New York?”

“Born and raised. I earned my degree from Columbia.”

“That’s very impressive. So what led you to the FBI?” he asked inquisitively.

“Well I did have a successful private practice in Manhattan for a few years, until I quit.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I find the work at the bureau and the people at the bureau much more interesting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in New York almost all of my clients were middle-aged stock brokers, you know, Wall Street guys,” Hollick nodded, “Well they would come in crying and whining about how these arbitrary numbers on the stock exchange would make them feel depressed and suicidal. I mean, we’re talking about millionaires here. They didn’t need my help, not like these agents do.”

“Still, you must have made a pretty penny.”

“Thirty-five dollars per hour when I got out, Alex, it wasn’t an easy choice.”

“Wow, that’s over twice what I made last year working with the robbery division,” they both laughed for a moment.

“I saw your records at Quantico. I noticed that you studied psychology at Harvard. Why are you a field agent?” she asked before sipping some merlot.

“Well I told you my dad never finished college,” she nodded, “It was his dream to become a psychologist, so when it was my time to go to school, I was going to be a psychologist. I loved the field, but just as I started my graduate studies, an FBI recruiter, a man name John Novak approached me. He said he saw things in me, which honestly I didn’t see in myself. Two weeks later, I was on a bus to Quantico to start training for his robbery division.”

“How did your dad take it?”

“He took it hard. He wanted so badly for me to fulfill his dreams. I think it would have meant a lot to him if I had at least finished my graduate studies, but John told me that the FBI was my calling. He even talked to my parents. He actually convinced them that it was more important than finishing school. He’s very persuasive.”

“Any regrets about that decision?”

“None whatsoever, what about you?” he asked.

“I have never looked back, Alex,” they both smiled at each other. “Did you want to get started?” she asked.

“After dinner, if you don’t mind,” he replied, she nodded and smiled.

Hollick continued to charm Dr. Jones, talking about different aspects of psychology, her work at the FBI and her life in Washington. He did this because he didn’t want to talk much about himself. He used the “ask questions” approach he had learned back at Harvard. While this worked on many people, Hollick had his

doubts that it would work on Jones.

After dessert and a few more glasses of wine, they transitioned to the living room, where Hollick laid on the couch. Jones took the sofa. This was Hollick's idea, to create a more therapeutic environment. Now it was time to be convincing without giving too much away. Hollick knew she liked him. Half the battle had already been won.

"Alex, do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No, Patricia, go right ahead. I was thinking about having one myself," she handed Hollick a cigarette and lit it for him.

"So before we get started, I'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?"

"Like the ones you asked me at Quantico?"

"No, a little more personal than those questions."

"Okay, fire away."

"Well, first, I would like to know how your relationship is with your parents."

"My parents and I never really saw eye to eye."

"You mean you didn't get along?"

"No, we got along fine. I think they're wonderful people and I appreciate everything they've done for me."

"What do you mean by that statement then?"

"I've just never really felt a connection with them on any level. They both lived through the depression and the war. They subscribe to this really hokey vision of America as this great country where anybody can rise from being a window washer to the president."

"And you disagree with this vision?"

"Don't you?" he asked defensively, Jones nodded, "Maybe when I was really little back in the early sixties I bought into those things, but after Vietnam, the riots in Chicago, The Kennedy Assassinations, Martin Luther King Jr., Kent State..."

"The illusion had been shattered?"

"Yes, exactly and as I got older it became more evident. I saw that there were huge problems with discrimination against women and minorities. It made me wonder how this land was any better than the one our forefathers had run away from."

"It is your job to help protect this country, Alex. How do you reconcile your philosophy with your profession?"

"I think America could be great and in many ways I think America is great. I just think we need to be a little more honest with ourselves about how great we are."

"What do you do in your new job?"

"I'm a special agent with the homicide division."

"How do you like that work?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a single case in the first three weeks and I know homicides are happening. I read the Post, but I haven't been assigned to work on one yet."

"Why do you think that is, because you're new?"

"No, I think they're saving me for something."

"Like?" asked Jones.

"I don't know, like a case where they can really test my mettle. I wasn't brought here all the way from L.A. to shoot fish in a barrel."

"Speaking of L.A., do you have any feelings about your last case out there?"

"Plenty," he replied.

"Would you like to discuss these feelings?" she asked. Hollick paused, took a drag off his cigarette and put it out before answering.

“Have you ever seen the Godfather?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one where Al Pacino shoots those two guys in the restaurant, right?”

“Right, but I’m talking about way after that. You know, after Michael goes to Italy and they blow up his wife’s car. Then he comes back and Sonny’s dead and then Don Corleone dies so Michael has to carry on the family business.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, that’s what I’m feeling right now. That’s what I’ve been feeling since the operation.”

“Chaos?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it’s more than just chaos. It’s just like what Michael had to do to protect the family, the decisions he had to make, not that I’m comparing myself to Michael Corleone.”

“That would be a stretch,” she said smiling.

“Yeah, anyway, I guess what I’m trying to say is that the pressure of all of these people that Michael became responsible for is the same pressure I feel about that case. Two of my agents had wives and children. I don’t know how they could not all look at me and say how could you let this happen to my husband and how could you let his children grow up without a father.”

“It is a difficult responsibility. It’s a common problem, one that I hear all the time, when an agent accidentally shoots an innocent civilian. They send those agents right to me.”

“They aren’t the same though. I knew these agents and their families for years. I’ve spent time around their children. These agents depended on me to guide them safely through our operations so they could go home to their families who depended on them.”

“Do you think about these agents and their families a lot?”

“All the time, they haunt my dreams, not the families, but the agents.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have nightmares about my agents and the day our operation ended.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“Well they’re in my dreams, sometimes wearing the wounds they sustained during the operation. Sometimes they’re covered in blood and surrounded by evidence.”

“What do they say?”

“Nothing, they’re just there.”

“Is Agent Fletcher in these dreams?”

“No, just Velasquez and Carnahan,” lied Hollick.

“So just the two agents who died?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“How do these nightmares make you feel?”

“Alone,” he said sadly. She moved from the sofa to the couch and sat close to Hollick.

“How long have you had these nightmares?”

“Since the incident happened, four months ago or so. After my car accident, I was given Percocet for the pain, but it actually shut out the nightmares. I’m almost out of them though and I’m very nervous that without the medication, these visions will resume again.”

“Alex, I think you somehow have come to the conclusion that Percocet has been blocking out your nightmares, which in my professional opinion is unlikely. I think it’s good for you to withdraw from this drug. You could develop an addiction to Percocet if you don’t withdraw from it after recovery. I believe your nightmares are starting to go away on their own.

“I am however concerned with your feelings of loneliness in the aftermath of this major life event. Loneliness is not good for the human psyche. We all need to create special bonds with people in our lives in order to maintain a healthy state of mind.”

“What about you? Do you ever feel alone?” he asked.

“All the time,” she said as she inched closer to Hollick.

They both looked at each other as they slowly began to move towards one another. She leaned into him, kissing him with a passion that surprised and pleased Hollick. He reciprocated the kiss, breathing in the wonderful fragrance that was Jones while gently running his fingers through her long flowing hair. She caressed his well-toned body continuing down to his firm manhood. They began to undress each other, caressing, kissing and stroking as they went.

In a frenzy of need and desire, she climbed on top of him placing him inside of her. She rocked against him with expressed longing. Tilting her head, she began kissing him, pressing her supple breasts against his chest. Hollick grabbed her hips, feeling the motion of her body. She continued to slide him into her as they both began to moan with pleasure. Her body began to tremble as she climaxed, letting out a scream of sheer ecstasy. Hollick pressed her down onto him, thrusting deeply within one last time as he released.

Sex with Dr. Jones was much different than with Fletcher. While they had many similarities in their lovemaking and were both great at it, Jones had a mature way about her. This translated in the form of experience. While Fletcher had great sexual instinct, Jones seemed to be more finely tuned in comparison. Her lovemaking may be even a bit better than Fletcher who was about twelve years her junior.

She smoked another cigarette with Hollick and got dressed. She gathered her belongings. Jones was not planning to stay over, which bothered Hollick because he was enjoying her company so much. Jones may not have been the love of his life, but she was the material of a very close friend who was intellectually matched with Hollick.

“I’ve got to go, Alex. I’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Thanks for coming over. I’ve really enjoyed your company, Patricia.”

“Likewise, oh, we didn’t really ever get to talking about your accident.”

“Then we’ll have to have another therapy session. Maybe you would be willing to make another exception and come back over for dinner again,” Jones stopped and gave Hollick a mischievous and flirtatious grin.

“I suppose I could do that, in the interest of discretion,” Hollick smiled. “I’ve got a conference in Florida. I fly out tomorrow. What if I call you when I get back? I’d love to have more of your home cooked Italian food,” she said, bursting into laughter.

“Yeah, that sounds great.”

“Have a good night, Alex.”

“I already have.”

Jones smiled again and left the apartment. Hollick went to the window and watched her walk to her car. He thought about how nice it was to be able to like a woman so much without being in love with her. There was definitely a deep respect and admiration for Dr. Jones, but he didn’t feel he could ever love her the way he loved Fletcher. He may not have gotten his Percocet prescription, but he was grateful for a new friend in a new city.

Florino’s Italian Restaurant Washington D.C.

Friday October 25th, 1985 7:49 p.m.

Hollick sat at a booth in the back of Florino’s waiting for Dr. Jones, who was to meet him there for an eight o’clock reservation. Today was Dr. Jones’ birthday and Hollick had asked her out to celebrate the occasion. Florino’s was a restaurant they had both come to love. The restaurant provided a nice, quiet atmosphere where intimate conversations were possible.

The friendship between Jones and Hollick had grown substantially in the last three weeks. What had started out as an impromptu therapy session had quickly turned into a budding kinship between the two of them. While sex had become a part of the equation, most of their time had been spent talking about psychology, politics and books that they enjoyed.

Hollick had bought, "The Art of War," at a bookshop near his home. This would be Dr. Jones' birthday gift. He hoped she would like it since he had mentioned the book many times in the last few weeks. She did seem genuinely interested in reading the book and not just for the sake of humoring Hollick.

He had still not heard a word from Los Angeles. He kept reading the Times and L.A. was still pretty quiet compared to his last visit nearly two months ago. He also hadn't heard anything from Secrets Division, which worried him. He made it a point that he was going to page Silva if he didn't hear anything by the first of November.

Dr. Jones walked in a few minutes late, but looked beautiful as usual. Through asking her about her graduation year, Hollick had surmised that she was born in 1949, making today her thirty-sixth birthday. Hollick would be turning twenty-eight in a few weeks himself. The age difference had never bothered him. He appreciated the wisdom, grace and maturity that Dr. Jones offered. In a few fluid steps, she came and joined him at the table, "Sorry I'm late, Alex," she leaned in and gave him a peck on the lips.

"It's okay. Happy Birthday, Patricia!"

he said. "Thank you, Alex. It's good to spend it with you."

They both ordered the Chicken Parmesan with salads, garlic bread, wine and tiramisu. This was a meal they both enjoyed, a reminder of their first dinner together just three weeks earlier. They talked a bit before

Hollick pulled out the gift-wrapped book, "Patricia, I got you a gift." "I told you not to get me anything."

"It's nothing, just a token of my appreciation."

"Well thank you, Alex," she replied as she tore the wrapping paper off the book, "'The Art of War,' this is the book you've been telling me about, right?"

"Yeah, I've learned a lot from it. I think you'll like it too."

"Well I can't wait to read it. In college, I must have walked by this book twenty times wondering what was in it."

"Well now you'll know," he said. Hollick smiled at her and she returned the smile, flirting with her beautiful blue eyes, "Patricia, you remember that art museum in New York City you were telling me about?"

"The Metropolitan?"

she asked. "Yeah,"

he said smiling.

"What about it?"

"Well I was thinking about flying up there and spending the weekend in New York. Do you have any plans for the next two days, maybe we could go together?"

"That sounds like a lot of fun, but I have a very busy weekend. I have to go to a convention in Pennsylvania on Monday morning. Maybe we could go the weekend before your birthday, the weekend of the eighth.

What do

you
think?"

"Sounds great, so when do you think you'll get back from Pennsylvania?" "Wednesday the thirtieth, why, what's up?" she asked.

"Well the reason I ask, is that Thursday is Halloween," Jones nodded and smiled, "I was wondering if you'd like to come over and help me pass out candy to the little ones, maybe watch some bad movies, pop some popcorn?"

"Sure, I can be there at seven. Would that be okay?"

"That would be great," they both smiled. "Would you like to come over tonight?" "I wish I could, but I've got a lot of preparation to do for this convention."

"It's cool, I understand," he replied.

They talked a bit more before going their separate ways. Hollick spent the next week doing his usual routine of jogging, reading and oil painting while eagerly awaiting his next opportunity to see Dr. Jones. She had become a great friend and was helping him deal with the pain and sense of loss he felt over the events of the last six months. Jones was his therapist, his friend and his lover.

He was always careful not to mention certain subjects around Jones. He knew he couldn't talk about Novak, Fletcher, Secrets Division and the Escondido cover up, the subjects he would have to take to the grave. Fortunately, this left room to talk about much more lighthearted subjects.

Hollick still wondered about Fletcher. He feared for her safety, but took solace in the quiet headlines that had graced the L.A. Times for the last two months. He thought Novak had maybe come to his senses and was trying to save any shred of dignity he could. Maybe he had talked some sense into Novak. So far, it seemed like Novak had kept up his part of the deal, but for how long he wondered.

Hollick Residence Washington D.C.
Halloween 1985 6:56 p.m.

Hollick sat on his couch watching television. He was waiting for trick-or-treaters and more importantly Dr. Jones, who had agreed to spend the evening with him. Halloween in D.C. was similar to Los Angeles. Not a lot of kids came by, just a few who lived in the building or close by. Shortly after seven and a few more kids, Dr. Jones knocked on the door. Hollick answered the door expecting more kids. He was happy to see Jones standing there and smiling flirtatiously at him.

They spent Halloween night differently than they would most nights. The heavy intellectual conversation gave way to a refreshing simplicity. They reflected on their memories of Halloween as children and drifted in and out of movies like, "Halloween" and "Friday the 13th."

They smoked a few cigarettes and drank some wine while snuggling on the couch, occasionally getting up to answer the door for a trick-or-treater. Hollick had bought far more candy than he needed in anticipation of Halloween. His three baskets of various candies were still nearly full. At nine, Jones looked up at Hollick, "I've got to go, Alex."

"No, stay, I think we can officially call Halloween

for 1985.” “Alex, I have to go get my daughter.”

“Your daughter?” he asked, “You never told me you had children.” “Is that a problem?” she asked.

“Not at all, I love kids. When can I meet her?”

“Alex, before I bring you into my life you’ve got to figure out what you want. I’m fine with what we have here and I enjoy our time together. If you want to meet my daughter, you have to understand that what we have right now will turn into something far more serious. Why don’t you think about that for a few days? So you can make an informed decision.”

“Okay,” he said, Jones nodded. Hollick looked at his candy baskets, “I don’t eat candy and I’ve got a lot of it here. Do you think your daughter would like to have this?” he asked.

“I know she would, but I think her dentist would like it even more. She had two cavities earlier this year. Thanks anyway, Alex,” they embraced each other and kissed passionately for a minute. Then Jones released from the kiss.

“Patricia, the first time we had dinner together you said that you feel alone all the time. I took that to mean that you didn’t have anyone special in your life. Certainly your daughter is special to you?” he asked.

“Very special, Alex, but the word ‘alone’ means different things to different people. Look, I’ll call you in a few days, be thinking about how you would like to proceed, okay?”

Hollick nodded and closed the door behind Jones. He sat back on the couch and continued watching movies. While he tried to focus on the films, his mind wandered thinking about Jones and her daughter. He wondered if this was the new start he had needed. He had always wanted children and he had daydreamed about having them with Fletcher. He began to wonder if Jones was the right woman after all.

The last three weeks had been incredible. He loved spending time with Dr. Jones, even if they were just sitting on the couch and reading separate books in each other’s company. He had withdrawn from Percocet, which had become increasingly difficult. The nightmares had come back in a different form, which were almost as haunting as the first ones.

Now his dreams took place at Romero’s in Old Los Angeles. In his dreams, he would be sitting at a booth across from Agent Hansen, who was dead with his face in his entrée. Hollick was finishing his black bean

quesadilla. Fletcher would stand over him and scold him for what he had done to Hansen, telling him how he had killed a father and a husband. When Hollick tried to respond, Fletcher would shake her head in disgust.

He would try to explain that he was just trying to protect her and the bureau. She would slap him and force him to look at Hansen, whose eyes were wide open and glazed over. Without a source for Percocet in the D.C. area, Hollick fought these dreams by sleeping less and reading more. He was now so involved with Jones that he couldn’t ask her to write a prescription. These dreams haunted Hollick, giving him feelings of guilt and shame.

Sometime after Jones left, there was a knock at the door. It was one-thirty and a little late for trick-or-treaters. Hollick cautiously rose from the couch. He walked to his door and looked out of the tiny peephole. A man in a delivery uniform stood with his face facing the other direction. Hollick slowly walked towards his desk and retrieved his .38 Special as the man knocked on the door again, “Yes, who is it?” he asked inching towards the door.

“Pizza, I’ve got your pizza!”

“I didn’t order any pizza. I think you have the wrong

apartment.” “Sir, please open the door.”

“Just a second,” he said. Hollick pulled back the hammer and slowly opened the door. He was sure this was a pizza from Novak. The pizza was probably topped with the same ingredients that Hollick put in Hansen’s beer at Romero’s. Maybe the pizza guy was an assassin in disguise. The only thing he knew for sure was that he had not ordered a pizza. He opened the door about six inches and realized it was Jonathan Silva, Secrets Division Liaison. He was wearing a delivery uniform and holding a piping hot pizza.

“That’ll be twenty-three dollars and seventeen cents, sir,” said Silva. Hollick put his gun in the small of his back and pulled out his wallet. He retrieved a five and a twenty-dollar bill, which he handed to Silva, “Ahem,” said Silva. Hollick pulled out his wallet again and gave Silva another five dollars, “Thank you, sir, enjoy your food and have a wonderful evening.”

“Thank you,” Hollick replied.

Hollick brought the pizza in and set it on his coffee table. He sat down on the couch and looked at it with confusion. He was sure Silva had better things to do than bring him unordered food in the middle of the night. He smelled the box. The aroma of a three-meat combination poured out. He listened, but the box wasn’t ticking. He slowly opened the box and there sat a pizza with a message scrawled on the cardboard interior.

BLACK ROOM
TWENTY MINUTES
RESERVATION: LAZZARO

Hollick stared at the message for about five seconds and then jumped up. He feverishly put on his uniform, packed his travel bag and left his apartment. The test of mettle he had been waiting for had finally come.

This story continues in, “The Bloodbath Ritual,” the full-length novel by Andrew Downs.

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