

An Excerpt from

**A SPY
IN THE
STRUGGLE**

AYA de LEÓN



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For Sam Greenlee

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“My situation was unique . . . being an African American woman working undercover is exceptionally stressful. . . . When I wasn’t on assignment . . . I would stay in bed, isolated and alone, for days.

*—From Clean Dirt: A Memoir of Johnnie Mae Gibson,
FBI Special Agent*

*Three things cannot long stay hidden: the sun, the moon,
and the truth.*

—Buddha

Part 1

Chapter 1

“So, you were the whistleblower,” the man on the FBI interview panel said.

Yolanda Vance knew he meant it as a compliment. People always did. But after everything that had happened, she wished she had kept her mouth shut.

Yolanda had been a first-year associate at the Manhattan firm of Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney, working for a senior partner in securities. Early one morning, her boss instructed her to take a stack of documents to the shredder.

He looked like he had slept in his designer suit. He was practically yelling as he shoved the papers into her chest.

As a former basketball player, Yolanda deftly grabbed the stack of documents and pivoted toward the copy room, the same way she would have done on the ball court.

Why did he have a junior attorney shredding papers? Couldn't his secretary do it?

As she walked down the hallway, one of the sounds became consistently louder. That sound, that buzz, had been a background hum ever since she came in just after six. Yolanda had mistaken it for the grind of a distant garbage truck or some heavy outdoor construction machinery. But as she

approached, she detected a pulse to it, a rise and fall like mechanical breathing; the monstrous snore of the shredder.

Beside the machine were a few massive towers of papers and a young man in shirtsleeves feeding it as quickly as he could. Various people were adding to the pile, including the senior partner's secretary, who hustled from the file room with a whole box of papers.

Why were they shredding all these documents?

Then she heard a scuffle below and went out to the mezzanine. It was filled with all the other staff. Over the railing she watched as the gleaming marble floor of the entryway was suddenly obscured by a swarm of blazers and windbreakers with large yellow letters.

FBI.

Yolanda would be damned if this senior partner planned to make her an accessory to whatever the hell this was. Instead of shredding the papers, she slipped them under her shirt.

The basement floor of the law office had previously been an Olympic-sized pool. The firm's designers had transformed it into a sunken waiting room with couches on the cobalt tile floor, but they kept the round, beveled-glass windows high up in the walls.

Yolanda waited to be interviewed with others in her department. She sat stiffly on the designer leather couch. Under her navy-blue merino wool sweater, against her tight stomach, were the fifty-something un-shredded pages that the partner had ordered her to destroy.

The FBI agent who called her to his desk was a middle-aged man with half glasses.

"Your firm is under investigation for securities fraud," the agent said.

Yolanda looked around and saw several of the partners, including the one she worked for. He was being escorted to

the conference room where they were interviewing senior partners and higher-ranking staff in the securities division.

“These allegations are in connection with—” the agent broke off as Yolanda pulled the papers out from under her sweater.

“So tell us, Miss Vance, why would you like to work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation?” asked the agent who had called her a whistleblower. He raised his pale eyebrows slightly. The other two agents wore slack expressions that Yolanda couldn’t read.

Her starched white shirt was soaked at the armpits under a tailored designer navy suit. Usually she only perspired when she worked out. The moisture at her scalp caused the roots of her permed and pressed hair to curl slightly. She was grateful that the panel at this second interview was all white. Neither of the crisp thirtyish men nor the dowdy older woman would decode the panic signal in the humid waves at her hairline.

Yolanda faced them squarely, having prepared for the question. She couldn’t tell the truth: *I don’t really want to work for the FBI.* “I’ve always wanted to practice law,” she began. That was true. Watching reruns of *Perry Mason* in middle school, she had always wanted to be an attorney. To stand in a courtroom and bellow beneath thick eyebrows: *But you DID go to the beach house and THAT’S when you killed him, Mrs. Lowell!* Then to watch the woman on the stand, eyes wide, cupid’s bow mouth open in horror, crumple at the accusation, weep, confess.

But that didn’t answer the question of why she wanted to work for the FBI in particular. She couldn’t tell them that she had applied six months ago as a backup plan that she never thought she’d need. But she couldn’t get a job in corporate law since she had turned over those un-shredded papers from Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney.

If she had a little more time, she would have been able to find work in a different type of law, or maybe something out of state. But she was two months behind in rent for her Queens studio apartment. When she left Detroit, she had promised herself that as an adult, she would always have a stable place to live. She needed a job now. Yesterday.

Lester Johnakin's Book of Positive Thinking was the closest thing Yolanda had to religion since she was a kid. In high school, she had become disillusioned with Johnakin, but his words still came to her in times of stress. "Let the world know why you are the right person to receive the outcome you desire."

She spoke with a confidence she'd learned to fake during her teens. She wasn't a young woman on the verge of homelessness; she was a confident Harvard Law School graduate who was ready to be an asset to the Bureau.

"Attorneys at the FBI make significantly less than in corporate law," the woman on the interview panel explained.

"I understand," Yolanda said. What good was the high salary at Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney when she had lost her job after six months when the firm went down for their crooked practices? When a choice not to break the law made her a pariah in her legal field? She had checked the FBI pay scale and retirement benefits. Even if they moved her around from one city to another, it would be comforting to practice with the law on her side.

After the interview, she walked two blocks with her confident strut before she allowed herself to lean against a building and exhale. She looked up at the cloudy Manhattan sky and prayed for the first time in decades: "Dear God or Whatever, please let the FBI hire me." Her unemployment had ended, and she had \$28.62 in her bank account. "Please God. Please." Praying felt ridiculous to her. As she headed to the subway, she peeled off her jacket and exposed her sodden shirt to the autumn wind.

* * *

During Yolanda's second week of FBI training at Quantico, she found herself struggling with marksmanship. She had never shot a gun before. One of her fellow trainees kept boasting about all the guns his family had. Her first day at the shooting range, he situated himself next to her and started shooting before she had her earphones on. She jumped and the earphones fell out of her hand. Her second time at the range, she made sure to get there early, but she was still jittery and anxious. Her first two weeks of evaluations for marksmanship were mediocre. She came to dread the range.

"Not used to dealing with guys so much, eh?" the instructor asked her one day. Special Agent Donnelly was in her fifties, with short graying hair and rimless glasses.

"Excuse me?" Yolanda asked.

"I saw your file," she said. "Women's high school and college. By the time you were in school with boys, you were at Harvard Law. Those guys must have been more mature than this asswipe."

"If you can see he's a jerk, why don't you stop him?" Yolanda asked.

"This isn't law school," Donnelly said. "Criminals don't raise their hands and wait to get called on. You'll need to shoot when you're shaken. When you've got blast concussion. When you're pissed. He's helping replicate field conditions."

"But I'm not trying to be in a real situation with guns and blast concussion," Yolanda said. "I'm an attorney."

"Well, you can quit if you want," Donnelly said. "But you're an athlete. You're smart as hell. Don't let that dick bring you down. I'm committed to making sure all the women graduate from this cohort. Not by coddling you, but by teaching you to kick ass."

Donnelly reminded Yolanda of her basketball coach. Same pep talk: half affirmation and half challenge.

Next time at the firing range, “that dick” pulled the same thing with another woman. Yolanda turned to him and complained loudly. When he shrugged that he couldn’t hear, she motioned for him to pull off his earphones. He waited for that set of tests to end, and finally slid one of the earphones back to hear better. When he did, Yolanda shot off five rounds very quickly and close to him. He jumped, eyes wide.

Meanwhile, the other woman put her headphones on and shot off several rounds, as well.

Yolanda’s shots were wild. But for the first time, she felt the gun as an extension of her arm, not a hostile accessory. After that, she improved steadily.

New Jersey wasn’t New York, but it would do for now. When she decided to escape from her middle school in Detroit, she hadn’t dreamed of the FBI. It wasn’t visions of New Jersey that had motivated her to sacrifice everything for achievement in prep school, in college, in law school. It had always been the glamour of Manhattan. And by high school, it was the opulence of corporate law. She’d lived the dream for those six months at Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney. She recalled walking from the subway to their Midtown offices in the most gorgeous and comfortable suede boots in the entire world. She’d had a beautiful one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea, with a vaulted ceiling and a river view. During the winter, she had an ankle length cashmere coat to bundle her up every time she left the apartment.

But now all her suede and cashmere was boxed in the back of her closet. She wore neat suits to work every day. Her salary was half what she had made at Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney. But she wouldn’t be losing her job because the New Jersey branch of the FBI got shut down as an accessory to securities fraud. And her government job had provided a steady income and a decent place to live for a year.

Besides, she could easily get to New York. She went into

the city most weekends to a blues club in the Village. Blues was nostalgic. It connected Yolanda to her early childhood in Georgia, before her family moved to Detroit. She was getting into the groove and letting the good times roll. Life was going unexpectedly well.

Late one afternoon, Yolanda was in her FBI cubicle in the New Jersey field office when her boss walked in. Special Agent Sanchez, a gray-haired veteran FBI attorney, was the head of the white-collar division where she worked. The office was square and windowless, but she liked working for Sanchez. He was smart, fair, and he valued her mind.

She had just identified a possible link between their money laundering suspect and a Russian mob operation and had been looking forward to telling her boss.

When he entered, she had smiled and opened her mouth to give Sanchez the update, but then another man had walked in. She didn't recognize this fortyish man with a pale blond crew cut. Ex-military, she surmised from the rigidity with which he held his body.

"Agent Vance," her boss said. "This is Agent Rafferty of the Counter Terrorism Squad in the San Francisco office."

Rafferty looked her up and down with no hint of a leer, more of a disapproval. She dressed for men like him, offering him neat, bobbed hair, masculine colors, clothes never tight on her almost boyish figure. Her lips had the natural fullness of a fifties starlet, but she wore them with only a matte balm. Her eyes were large, with long lashes, and she wore neither liner nor shadow.

"Agent Vance, we have a West Coast assignment for you," Rafferty began. "I'm the case agent on a surveillance operation."

"Surveillance?" Yolanda asked. "But I'm an attorney, sir."

She looked to Sanchez, his mouth turned down in a barely visible frown.

"There's a key industry in Northern California with a

vital national security contract,” Sanchez said. “A black identity extremist group is threatening to undermine the contractor. It is unusual to have a new recruit go undercover. But San Francisco thinks you’ll be a good fit. You did extremely well in the Academy, and your work has been excellent in the short time you’ve been on my squad.”

“I appreciate that, sir,” Yolanda said.

“Unfortunately for us,” Sanchez continued, “you are being reassigned to San Francisco. Rafferty will take it from here.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her jaw clenching.

Sanchez escorted her and Rafferty to a conference room, and he began the initial briefing on the operation.

“Agent Vance,” Rafferty began. “We selected you for your connection with the city of Holloway. The Cartwright College link and previous exposure to the subject population distinguishes you in this case, not your skills and track record. In all honesty, I would prefer a more experienced agent.”

Yolanda sat silent. *Then why don’t you goddamn go and get one?* She wanted to say. *Nobody asked you to come up here and blow up my life.*

“But this is an unusual case, because many of the subjects in the organization are teenagers,” Rafferty went on. “I see that you coached at the Teen Center in Holloway. Connections like that don’t come along often for agents, and we’re determined to exploit this opportunity.”

“Teenagers?” Yolanda asked, unable to contain her incredulity. “Sir?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he said. His mouth was tight, as if he had tasted something unpleasant. “The short version is that the black identity extremist organization Red, Black and GREEN! is harassing Randell Corporation, an important industrial contractor with the US government. Our office has

made several unsuccessful attempts to monitor their operations.”

For the first time, Yolanda regretted coaching girls’ basketball, even though she had really enjoyed it. Initially, she had just wanted to look more well-rounded for law school applications.

“I won’t let you down, sir,” Yolanda said coolly when the interview concluded.

“I’m really sorry about this, Vance,” Sanchez said after Rafferty had left.

I don’t fucking believe it, was the line in Yolanda’s head. But instead she asked, “Will I be able to come back to New Jersey when this is over?”

“I’m putting in the transfer request today,” Sanchez said. “I want you back on my squad after you finish the assignment, Vance. You can count on it.”

Yolanda felt somewhat reassured. She could come back. She would come back. She just had to spy on some black extremist teenagers.

Chapter 2

Yolanda read the case file on the flight from Newark. Since she had lived in Holloway for all four years of college, she only needed to skim a lot of the background material on the town. But one article she read closely. It had been published six months before in one of the Bay Area's independent weekly newspapers:

Holloway, CA: How a Has-Been Town Became a Hotbed of Black Eco-Activism

Holloway, California. Population 400,000. A small Northern California city at the end of the BART subway line, just past Richmond. Like its Bay Area neighbors—Richmond and Oakland—Holloway attracted many African American migrants from the South to work in shipyards for World War II. But after the war, those transplants found themselves in a dead-end.

However, on Holloway Avenue, a few relics of the town's former glory survived the riots of the late 1960s. Above the old plywood boards that were nailed over the door and broken windows, a sign with peeling yellow and blue paint still in-

vited pedestrians into Netta's High Class Hideaway, formerly a legendary blues nightclub. For a while in the early 1990s, some local heroin users removed the boards from the back door and used the place as a shooting gallery. A few dirty needles in dusty corners had escaped the hasty and slipshod cleaning of the overworked public health division. No one in the community knew who owned the place, abandoned since the riots. Down the street, another sign had survived: Jimmy Earle's Legendary BBQ.

Today, Holloway Avenue boasts a string of fast food joints, several bars, and a few cheap Chinese food places. For nightlife, Holloway residents have to travel ten miles to Oakland or across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco. In response to repeated shootings, the City of Holloway won't grant permits to any nightclubs.

In the late 1990s, the mayor had begun to push Plan 2000!—an initiative to build a gated biotech research facility that promised to bring thousands of jobs to Holloway. Plan 2000! did bring thousands of jobs, just not to many Holloway residents. The mostly white researchers would zip off the 80 freeway and through the heavily guarded gates, while the clerical workers would take the short walk from the Holloway BART subway stop.

Only the unskilled and custodial jobs ended up going to Holloway residents. Initially, there was some community outcry, but after a handful of protests, the town sunk back into its usual disappointment. RandellCorp isn't the only gated community in Holloway. On the top of the hill, Cartwright College has stood for over 150 years, an elite women's school with a barbed wire fence

around a rustic campus. Eucalyptus trees and brick walls screen the campus from the view of residents. The 27 bus line brings workers from downtown Holloway to and from the campus—cafeteria workers in hairnets, gardeners who maintain the pristine grounds—but the female students rarely venture off campus. Unless they have cars, in which case they can hop on a nearby freeway on-ramp and bypass the town completely.

To the people of Holloway, RandellCorp became like Cartwright College, a fading insult in the landscape of neglect.

However, a few years after Randell was built, the cancer rate in Holloway began to soar. In Randell's fifth year, Randell was caught dumping toxic chemical waste in an abandoned railroad yard not far from an elementary school. Randell agreed to pay a fine and clean up the site. Meanwhile, there were allegations of other dumping sites. And although those sites did show evidence of toxic contamination, there was no conclusive evidence to tie them to Randell.

Meanwhile, environmental researchers released several studies in which the data clearly indicated that the cancer rate had A) grown significantly since RandellCorp began operation and B) risen in proportion to the residents' proximity to the railroad yard and other alleged dumping sites. However, for every meticulously researched independent study that led to damning conclusions, a government-funded study would appear, tracing the cancer to other causes. An op-ed in the West County Herald questioned the habits of the town's predominantly African American residents, encouraging them to "eat a

lower carb diet” and “exercise more regularly.” One study cited the cuts in physical education at Holloway High as a factor in poor health outcomes and another blamed the increased cancer rates on video games.

Two years ago, when a KPFA/Pacifica radio Top 10 list identified the Randell-cancer link as one of the most underreported stories of the year, the issue caught the interest of a national environmental group. Planet Greener, headquartered in Maryland, had long been criticized for a lack of diversity in its senior staff and board of directors. More recently, they had gotten a slew of bad press for having installed oil and natural gas drilling on several of their nature preserves. In response to donor questions about their drilling practices, Planet Greener insisted that the wells were necessary to raise funds for their Minority Community Outreach programs, which they would be unveiling shortly. Although there had been no previous public information on these programs, they began appearing soon afterwards in low-income communities around the nation—one in nearly every state. During that year, Planet Greener hired Marcus Winters, a black activist from Richmond, to develop a community gardening program for youth in Holloway.

Winters, a veteran community organizer, started a youth leadership project that quickly connected community gardening to Holloway’s lack of green space to food justice to environmental racism and police violence. He began to train the teens to organize a multigenerational campaign against Randell. The youth activists picked the name “Red, Black and GREEN!” explaining that Red

stood for Indigenous people, Black for African Americans, and Green for the environment. But these are also the Pan African liberation colors, associated with many radical African American movements, which was not at all what Planet Greener's leadership had in mind. However, Marcus Winters seemed to have a thriving youth project on a very modest budget, and it was the most successful of their Minority Community Outreach Programs.

Many of the teens came from Holloway's St. Anthony housing projects, or from the working-class neighborhood that surrounded the projects, a combination of concrete block apartment buildings and small, single-family homes. The projects are widely known as "The Stats," both a convenient nickname, and for its statistics: high concentration of nearby liquor stores, high infant mortality rate, teen pregnancy rate, incarceration rate, addiction rate, HIV rate, dropout rate, and murder rate.

Although Red, Black and GREEN! has had an impact on the teens in the city, it'll take a lot more than a youth empowerment project to truly make Holloway much greener.

"Welcome to San Francisco, Miss Vance," the agent shook her hand with a firm grip. "I'll be taking you to the apartment the Bureau has for you in Holloway."

As Yolanda stepped out of the airport, the feel and smell of the Northern California air brought back her first trip to the area.

At seventeen, she had come from the Alice Lloyd Prep School to Cartwright College, for the summer pre-freshman program. She'd had a cheap duffel on one shoulder and her

school backpack on the other, with everything she owned in those two canvas bags. Except her winter coat—a blue, nylon jacket with polyester fill—that didn't fit in the duffel.

All those years ago, she had stepped outside the airport doors into an unusually warm day, completely unsure of where to go. So she had first greeted San Francisco sweating and lost, a nomad, wearing too many layers and all her belongings on her back.

Take time to notice how far you've come. As usual, Lester Johnakin's words still came to her.

Every time she flew back into SFO it was better. The autumn of her sophomore year, she came back from her New York summer internship with designer clothes she had bought for wholesale prices on West 27th Street in Manhattan and suitcases on wheels she had bought cheap on the street in Harlem. The following summer, she had returned from Chicago with a stylish new haircut and enough money to pay for a shuttle to Cartwright instead of public transportation.

The agent led her to a dark sedan with government plates. She slid into the back, and they pulled away from the curb. Moments later, they came around a freeway curve, and Yolanda saw the dark San Francisco Bay stretching before them.

The hum of the car lulled her. Yolanda dozed as the sedan sped down the freeway to the Bay Bridge, cruising above the dark water, and then turned north.

Yolanda awoke when they took the Holloway freeway exit. The white letters on the green highway sign indicated a right turn to go up the hill to Cartwright College. Instead, the driver hung a left and headed into the flatlands.

Yolanda peered at the empty streets as they drove into a neighborhood of apartment buildings and vacant lots. The road ahead of them sparkled with broken glass. A side street

had single story homes beneath silhouettes of trees, all pruned into gnarled shapes to avoid telephone wires.

In the dim streetlights, she could see that some of the houses had well-kept gardens, while others had cars parked on overgrown lawns. All first-floor windows had security bars.

The sedan slowed in the middle of a block, just past a pale bungalow with neatly manicured hedges, and a boarded up two-story house. The agent pulled up beside a gray stucco apartment building that rose in a solid block above its neighbors.

They unloaded the luggage and walked to a façade tagged with graffiti. The agent opened the front door with a key, and they entered a musty foyer with grimy brown carpet. A yellowing plastic runner led up the stairs. The agent helped Yolanda carry her bags up to the second floor, and down the narrow hallway to a one-room apartment. He used the second key on the ring to open the apartment door and reached easily for the light switch.

The bare bulb in the ceiling fixture illuminated a small studio, with a single bed, tiny couch, a video monitor, and a desk on one side. A small table with two chairs barely fit in the kitchenette.

The wooden desk turned out to be deceptively simple. The agent used the third key on the ring to open the top desk drawer, which revealed a laptop computer that popped up. The second two drawers opened to reveal a printer/scanner/copy machine that could also print color photos.

The apartment had the impersonal impact of the rooms she'd lived in at boarding school, at Cartwright, and at the FBI academy. Even in New Jersey, she had been living in an extended stay hotel.

She put her suitcases in the tiny closet, but the door didn't

quite close. It seemed closed, but then it opened back up a moment later, she had to really press her shoulder against it.

At least the place was clean. Yolanda detected no odors of cooking or cigarettes or daily living, only a mild lingering citrus scent of some detergent. Yolanda's sense of smell was extremely sensitive. She could smell cigarette smoke half a block away. She could walk into a bathroom fifteen minutes after someone washed their hands and know whether they used peppermint or rose scented soap.

The agent handed her the keys and left. She locked the door behind him.

The bedside clock said 2:20. 5:20 AM East Coast time—she'd usually be waking up at this hour.

She unpacked her suitcase and changed for bed. The polyester bedspread was a southwestern theme in faded turquoise, sandy brown, and burnt orange.

She was tired after the flight from Newark, but she lay awake for a long time in the bed, simmering with outrage. How the hell did these assholes send her to a ghetto to infiltrate some outfit with black teenagers?

She took a deep breath. Focus. Practicing as an FBI attorney was the goal now. Whatever the hell was needed to wrap up this assignment, she would do it so she could get on with her life. Either go back to her job in Jersey or someplace else that wasn't an insult to all she had worked for. And then, after she settled into her resolve, she lay awake some more, wondering if the FBI could hear her breathing.

The next morning, an agent came to pick Yolanda up in a car with a Lyft sticker. He drove her past the storefront church where Red Black and GREEN! held their meetings.

Yolanda hadn't been in a church for over two decades. But the stained-glass window with the image of a black Jesus brought it all back.

As the agent drove her to FBI headquarters in San Francisco, Yolanda recalled their church in Georgia. Her father would get so riled up when he preached, sweat dripping from his face, using a handkerchief to mop his forehead. The square of fabric started out crisp and white but ended up a sodden rag.

The year her father died, the police in their small town had fatally shot three young black people, two young men and a young woman. Her father, a young pastor, had turned the church he'd inherited from his own father into an activist ministry.

Every week, the congregation would pray for the victims and their families. He would call down the blood of Jesus to protect other young people in the community. "The blood!" he would shout, raising a dual specter of the protective blood of Jesus and the blood that had been shed by black people in police shootings.

"Just because we up here in the church—hah!" he said. "Don't try to tell me these police shootings are the will of God. Well! That this is part of God's plan. Saaay-tan! Yes, Satan has a plan, too. And I just might call that plan out today . . . *Racism!*"

The organist would punctuate the key words of the sermon with sharp notes.

"Racism is the work of the devil," her father went on. "Now don't you go out of here saying Pastor Vance said white folks was the devil, or the police was the devil. Police are just men. Hah! Just men, with guns in their hand. In their holsters. In their police vehicles. But Satan! Has put hate in some of these men's hearts. Using that manmade weapon to do the will of the devil. And take innocent black lives. So when we march, we march against the devil. When we call for the firing of the Chief of Police, we're calling out the devil. When we hold a candlelight vigil, we trying to drive

out the devil with our light. I wish I had one or two witnesses in here.”

“Amen!” the congregation yelled back.

“Yes, Lord!”

“Hallelujah!”

Her father would go on, encouraged by the call and response. “I know some folks been telling me I’m getting too political up in the church. But did y’all ever hear of the Civil Rights Movement? If we worship Jesus, then we need to be like Jesus, who fought for justice. Oh I wish some of the saints could hear me right now. Don’t take my word for it. The Biiiiible says so.”

“Praise Him!”

By the end of his sermon, his suit and robe would be soaked with sweat and his voice would be hoarse, but the congregation would be on its feet, screaming and dancing, as the drums played a fast one/two beat and people got filled with the Holy Spirit.

Preschool-age Yolanda had sat in the front row next to her mother. Her wide eyes fixed on her father. She couldn’t quite understand what he meant, but she could feel his power. The charismatic rapture with which he held the entire church. Smiling with pride that this was her very own daddy.

“You need to understand,” Rafferty explained at Yolanda’s first briefing. “These Red, Black and GREEN! kids are very persuasive. They know just how to distort information and manipulate emotions to gain people’s sympathy.”

“I went to boarding school, sir,” Yolanda said. “I coached basketball. I know how to handle manipulative teenagers.”

They were in the conference room of the San Francisco office with a female agent named Peterson. She had long chestnut-colored hair in a bun and a firm handshake. Rafferty had explained that Peterson would be the handling

agent for the undercover operation—Yolanda’s “go-to girl.” Yolanda glanced at Peterson when he said it and caught the slightest downward tic at the corner of Peterson’s mouth.

“The long version of your cover is in the file,” Rafferty explained. “But the short version is that you’ve been hired by a San Francisco law firm. You’re living in Holloway and studying for the July bar in California.”

Yolanda was supposed to be herself, excluding only the FBI, and the fact that she had been the whistleblower at Van Dell, Meyers and Whitney.

Peterson interjected. “Red, Black and GREEN! is trying to recruit more adults, so this upcoming community meeting is a perfect place to make contact. You want to be just the kind of person they’re looking for—a Cartwright alum with a flexible schedule who is concerned about the environment—”

Rafferty cut her off: “Operation HOLOGRAM stands for Holloway Green Amateurs. We can’t have these teenagers mucking around with our national security. The Environmental Protection Agency has dismissed every complaint against Randell as having no merit. And the corporation paid for the cleanup of that one railroad yard issue. So this organization is not only radicalizing these kids, but it’s also teaching them to be victims, whiners, looking for someone to blame.”

Yolanda knew just what he meant. She thought of her freshman year roommate at Cartwright College. That white girl, a self-styled revolutionary, walked into the room with her “luggage,” three black garbage bags. Later it turned out she had a trust fund.

“These clips are from RBG’s last community meeting,” Rafferty said.

RBG? Yolanda caught Peterson’s eye. Yolanda mouthed “Ruth Bader Ginsburg?”

Peterson chuckled silently and shook her head. “RBG stands for Red, Black, and GREEN!” Peterson said.

The screen showed an image of several teenage girls laughing.

A fortyish man stepped into the picture and Rafferty leaned forward. Peterson paused the video again.

“RBG leader, Marcus Winters,” Rafferty said. The man on the screen had African features in a pale face. His short afro was graying at the temples. Winters stood frozen with an overflowing manila folder in his hand. Yolanda scrutinized his rumpled, button down shirt with a faint stain on the pocket, his worn jeans, and off-brand sneakers.

As the image began to move again, Winters rifled through the folder. He handed several papers to one of the girls and then leaned in close to speak with her.

“Bingo! Right there!” Rafferty pointed, and Peterson paused the image, blowing up the shot of the young woman’s face. Her upward glance at Winters made her eyes look particularly wide.

“That look tells everything,” Rafferty said. “That’s how Winters operates. He picks smart kids, skims cream off the top, and coaches them on exactly what to say. He insists he’s not the one pulling the strings, but it’s all right there.”

“There are a few other adults,” Peterson said, “But we don’t have them on video yet—”

Rafferty interrupted “Take the video home to study, as well as this dossier on Winters and the RBG adults. Tomorrow you’ll make contact at their next meeting.”

He handed her a thick pair of files.

“Call if you have questions,” Rafferty explained as Peterson ejected a small drive from a port in the side of the computer. “I’ll expect a report first thing Friday morning.”

After Rafferty walked out, Peterson handed Yolanda the tiny drive.

“Thanks,” Yolanda said. “By the way, is Special Agent Donnelly still in San Francisco?”

Peterson's eyebrows rose. "You know Donnelly?" she asked. "Friends in high places."

"She was my shooting instructor at Quantico," Yolanda said. "I didn't realize she was a bigwig."

"She's on par with Rafferty's supervisor," Peterson said. "She heads the white collar division."

"Special Agent Vance," Donnelly greeted her warmly in the San Francisco office. "I knew you'd make it through."

"Agent Vance is working Operation HOLOGRAM," Peterson said. "Her first day."

"The Cartwright College connection," Donnelly snapped her fingers. "Of course. You gotta let me take you out for a drink one of these days." She handed Yolanda her card.

"I'm impressed," Peterson said as they headed for the elevator. "She's not that friendly with everyone."

Yolanda shrugged and slid Donnelly's card into her jeans pocket.

To: Special Agent Rafferty

From: Special Agent [REDACTED]

Re: ASSIGNMENT OF NEW AGENT TO OPERATION HOLOGRAM

With all due respect to you as the case agent, I would like to take a moment to go on record as saying that I think Special Agent Vance lacks experience for this assignment. I know I don't need to tell you that this is a particularly sensitive assignment, due to [REDACTED]

Although I respectfully disagree with your decision, I understand that I was removed from the operation because I did not establish an effective rapport with the subjects in my brief tenure on this case. While I realize that Vance's youth is an asset in terms of rapport, I believe her inexperience is a signifi-

cant liability. Perhaps I could work directly with Vance on this assignment, as a mentor of sorts.

To: Special Agent [REDACTED]
From: Special Agent Rafferty
Re: Re: ASSIGNMENT OF NEW AGENT TO OPERATION
HOLOGRAM

My decision is final and closed for discussion. Mentorship is out of the question. I want you strictly behind the scenes.