

THE HOLLOW

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## Signal Thirteen June 2, 2009

“Have you heard about the tiny earthquakes we’re having around the Metroplex?” David’s partner asked. “I think it’s from all the gas drilling in the region. They’re taking all the pressure out of the ground, like popping a balloon or something. I don’t know. I could be wrong. What do you think? Have you ever been in a real earthquake?”

“No,” David said, smiling at the man in the driver’s seat. Officer Fred Tollhouse had been asking questions all morning, so much so that David felt like a criminal suspect. He knew it wasn’t the case. Tollhouse was seven years younger than David and full of nervous energy. He asked questions because he was excited to have a partner, especially one with such a famous history. Tollhouse had been wise enough to steer clear of that history so far; although David had a feeling those questions weren’t too far ahead in the future.

The young cop with the light blond buzz-cut smiled back. “Yeah, me neither. I don’t know if it’d be fun or the scariest damn moment of my life.” He fell into silence, which David knew wouldn’t last long. He could see the young man’s gears turning. Sure enough, Tollhouse’s eyes sparkled as he thought of the next question. “I heard they used to call you Hop. Do you go by that nickname?”

“Nope. Not anymore.”

His young partner looked crestfallen. “I guess they gave you that name in the academy. They’re always handing people crazy nicknames at the academy.”

David took the bait. “Did they give you a nickname?”

Tollhouse grinned but kept his eyes on the road. “Come on, man. My name is Tollhouse. What do you think they called me?”

“Cookie?” David guessed.

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“Bingo.” Tollhouse laughed. “It took all of five seconds. I’ve been Cookie ever since. I got boxes and boxes of Tollhouse Cookies the day I graduated.”

“What would you like me to call you?”

Tollhouse looked surprised, as if no one had ever asked his opinion on the matter before. “Oh, you know. Either’s cool with me. Back in the academy I was angry about it. Cookie isn’t exactly the kind of name that inspires fear in criminals. But once I got my beat, I realized everyone knew who I was because of the stupid nickname. Even the dispatchers liked saying it. All of my classmates are pretty much anonymous, but not me. I’m Cookie. It’s nice to be more than a unit number.”

“I hear ya.” David stared ahead. They were on the east side of Fort Worth heading toward a signal 56—an open structure. As they cruised down Rosedale he saw a few Hispanic kids chasing each other into an alley. School was out, and they were finding distractions wherever they could. David wondered what kind of distraction Melanie was finding. Last night weighed on his mind. He wanted to pull out his cell phone and check on her, but not in front of his new partner. Besides, Melanie would make fun of him. She was the confident one, or at least that was the game face she put on for her father.

She hadn’t been confident last night. Last night she had screamed bloody murder and fainted. The memory sent shivers through him.

“So,” Tollhouse said, throwing more kindling on the mostly one-sided conversation. “Is it different than you remember? Working the beat, I mean. After being a detective and all the time away, how’s it feel to be back?”

“It’s like putting on a comfortable pair of shoes you forgot were hiding in the closet,” David said, which was mostly true. It was an easy rhythm to fall back into. The morning had been fairly routine. Three business alarm calls, two burglarized vehicles, and one domestic disturbance that was over before they arrived. Complainants were listened to, report numbers issued, and all of it remained fairly predictable. The open structure they were headed to would be no different. It would be a vacant house with two or three homeless people holed up in it for shelter. He and Tollhouse would shoo them out if they didn’t flee as the police car pulled up.

And yet, all of it was different. He glanced at Tollhouse, who constantly checked his surroundings for any sign of anything. He was eager and alert. An exact copy of David when he was fresh from the academy. That wasn’t him anymore. He was the outsider now, the one who only got the job out of charity. His heart wasn’t in it, at least not yet. He hoped it would be again in time.

The Crown Vic squeaked to a stop in front of a dilapidated four-plex. The second door to the right was ajar. Tollhouse got out of the car. "Let's go rattle some vagrants."

David followed him to the open door. Tollhouse banged on the threshold with his knuckles. "Listen up!" he announced. "This is Fort Worth Police, and we will be checking the premises. If there's anyone inside they need to come forward and identify themselves now."

No answer came. Tollhouse cocked his head, listening for movement or the sound of back windows opening. He glanced back at David respectfully. "I can take the lead if you want."

David nodded. "Go for it."

For the next ten minutes they went from empty room to empty room. They found a pair of greasy socks hanging on the shower curtain rod in the bathroom, but otherwise no signs of life. Tollhouse looked disappointed. After a dull morning, he wanted any kind of action he could get. As he rechecked each closet one last time David stepped back outside. He was almost to the car when a voice stopped him.

"These old houses. They sit here and rot, forgotten by time."

David saw the man leaning against the corner of the house, peering into one of the dusty windows. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties with a tousele of greasy brown hair that fell over his eyes. He wore wing-tipped shoes and a black suit, which looked uncomfortable in this June heat. David stepped closer to him.

"Did you call this in?"

The man snickered. His laughter was soft but maniacal. "Call it in," he repeated to himself, as if it were a punch line.

Tollhouse stepped outside and saw him immediately. He rounded toward the man.

"Hey, did you break into this house?"

The man in the black suit laughed again, harder this time. His wiry frame shook in hysterics. Through the disheveled hair David saw one of the man's gray eyes glaring at them, wild and piercing.

Tollhouse saw it too. "I think we got a signal thirteen on our hands."

Signal 13—code for mentally ill. David wasn't sure if that was the case, but his internal danger light flickered. Something felt wrong about the man. That didn't stop Tollhouse. He was already past David and in the man's face.

"What's your name, sir?"

The man just smiled.

"Are you being uncooperative?" Tollhouse asked, like a dare. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. You need to tell me who you are and what you're doing here."

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“How ’bout I split the difference with you, Keystone,” the man replied. “I’ll tell you why I’m here before I get a wiggle on. I came here to see someone. Someone I’m told has a very special hand in my fate.” He eyed David up and down and sneered. “But you know what? He looks like a flat tire to me.” A sudden cackle boomed out of him, and he bent over holding his sides.

“All right, buddy. Listen up,” Tollhouse said. “I don’t care how nutty you are. You stay out of houses that don’t belong to you.”

“Oh, I agree,” the man replied, his laughter ending abruptly. “You have to be invited in first.” He tilted his head, and though his eyes were lost behind the mop-top, the man looked at David. “But once you’re invited in, you can have so much fun exploring the rooms. The rooms are endless.”

Tollhouse rolled his eyes. “I’m sure a lot of things are endless for you, pal. Just stay out of this house. If I have to come back out here and find you again, I’m taking you in. Can you comprehend that?” He didn’t wait for an answer but turned back to the car. He paused when he was shoulder-to-shoulder with David. “We’ll drive around the block,” he whispered. “The next time we swing around I bet he’ll be back inside. Then he’s ours.”

“Roasted piggy,” the man said and burst into another fit of laughter.

Tollhouse turned back with a narrow gaze. “What did you say?”

“Roasted piggy,” the man repeated, pointing at Tollhouse directly. “That’s what you are. I’ve watched you die.”

“That’s it,” Tollhouse said. “You’re spending the day in lockup.”

The man spun and disappeared behind the corner of the four-plex. “Hey!” Tollhouse yelled and took chase. David followed, but once he cleared the corner he stopped, realizing there were four-plexes in each direction. The man could have taken off behind any of them. Tollhouse had halted ten feet ahead, his head cocked as he listened for footsteps. It was dead quiet. Wherever the man in the black suit disappeared to, he knew how to do it in complete silence.

“Should we call for Air One?” Tollhouse asked. That was the FWPD helicopter, and with it watching overhead they could spend the next hour searching this block and the surrounding ones.

“What for?” David asked. “We didn’t actually see him inside the building.”

“But he threatened me.”

“He said he watched you die. He didn’t say you were going to. I don’t know if we can call that a real threat.”

“But...” Tollhouse looked back and forth angrily. “I can’t believe he got away.”

David patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Cookie. If he wants to make trouble, he'll pop up again. You can count on it."

Tollhouse looked back at him, the anger melting into a grin as he realized what David called him. "Yeah, I guess you're right. He's a harmless thirteen. Right, Hop?"

David nodded. "Right you are."

They returned to the car with Tollhouse talking about driving the streets to spot him and David thinking he would never get rid of that nickname.

\* \* \* \*

"Ma, I'm going to the store," Dontae announced as he opened the front door.

He exited swiftly, but Ma managed to holler, "Don't forget my appointment."

"I'm just getting a soda at the corner," he called back before the door shut behind him. As he started walking he added, "I swear that woman only had children so they could be her taxi service."

He made a beeline toward the back of the complex. Dontae hardly ever took the front gate. People kept track of the front gate. He didn't always see them, but he knew they were there. He had a knack for knowing when he was being watched. Street traffic was the same. He didn't like taking the sidewalk. He was too exposed out there.

Dontae never thought about why he didn't like to be caught out in the open. It was an instinct, one that served him well in the days after Katrina when looting was rampant and every store had a going-out-of-business sale whether it wanted to or not. His friends from school had been stupid. They shattered front windows with bats and crowbars, snatched what they could and ran. The shopkeepers were waiting, usually with shotgun in hand. Many had been cut down. Some of them buddies of his since elementary.

Not Dontae. He was smart. He broke in through the back door, or better, the roof. The shopkeepers never heard him coming. He lifted merchandise from some sixty-plus stores. The storage shed behind their old house was filled to capacity. The problem was there was no way to flip the goods for cash. Pawn shops were closed. Street dealers had vanished to protect their own supplies. Before he could think of a better option, Erma Scoville decided it was time to leave. Rennie fell right in line behind her. Dontae had no choice but to come along, leaving behind a small fortune of DVD players, car radios and name-brand clothing in a padlocked shed.

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That had been four years ago, and he couldn't forgive his mother and brother. Every time he thought about it his pulse quickened and his shoulders got tense. The same thought always bubbled to the surface. How could he be related to them? Yes, he shared a few physical traits, but the personalities were worlds apart. His best guess was that his father, a man he vaguely remembered except for being enormously tall and prone to singing out loud for no reason, must have been the real player in the family.

That's not how Ma described him. When she spoke of Kenneth Scoville it was with the utmost reverence. He had been a good father and the perfect husband, at least until the lung cancer caught up with his smoking habit. Dontae had been five when it happened, and he recalled his mother wailing like a foghorn in a down draft, her hands clinging to the doorframe she leaned against as if the whole house was about to come crashing down. Shane had been cooler about it, but Shane had always known how to be cool. Dontae remembered his older brother, eleven at the time, sitting in Dad's favorite recliner. He never cried, merely sat in the oversized chair staring off into space. The only movement was in his hands. They kept squeezing the armrests, as if searching for the exact grooves where Dad's hands had rested.

None of it had made sense to Dontae, who spent most of that day hanging out next to Rennie's crib. The little brat liked to wail, too, but at least Dontae was used to that sound. He liked watching the funny faces the kid made when Dontae pinched him. That hadn't changed over the years. If Dontae needed a good laugh, he just had to grab Rennie's ear or cheek and give it a yank. If Rennie wasn't in reaching distance, he could always talk loudly about his favorite memories of their father. Most of them were made up, but Rennie didn't know that. The poor bastard never knew his pa at all, and Dontae could rub his nose in it to his heart's delight.

He reached the back of the complex, stepped behind a dumpster, and pushed aside the broken post in the fence. With a little squeezing he slid through the gap. From there it was just forest. He could walk a mile in total obscurity until he reached the corner store. The path served him well when he needed to make a quick getaway. Cops hated searching forests. They only bothered when they were after a major felon or armed suspect. Dontae was neither. He was small-time, but small-time in a way he thought of as big-time. His father must've known what that was like. He probably had a rap sheet. Dontae knew this because his rap sheet was full of petty thefts and burglaries—make that *successful* petty thefts and burglaries. That talent didn't come from nowhere. Dontae imagined Kenneth Scoville saying goodbye to

Ma as he headed off to work, and then disappearing around the corner, changing out of his electrician's uniform and into a fur coat and eye-popping bling. Who knows? His father could've had his own secret padlocked shed, one so full of riches any gangbanger would swoon in ecstasy. It was possible.

Winding his way through the trees he listened for the Trinity River. Some days he heard it burbling in the distance like a secretive whisper. Today it wasn't talking. The sun beat down and the river wasn't in any hurry to get where it needed to go. Dontae knew the feeling. He wished Rennie could calm the hell down and stop worrying about every little doctor visit. They called it "rescheduling" for a reason. But that was all right. Rennie had wrangled his big brother into doing his chore for him today, but he best believe payback was coming.

A sound came through the forest. Dontae paused, checking behind him. The back gate of The Hollows was already out of sight behind layers of brush and oak trees. He wasn't sure the sound had come from that direction anyway. The sound had been muted and low, like a truck changing gears. But it hadn't sounded mechanical. Dontae had been sure it was human.

It came again. Dontae's eyes widened. There was no mistaking a voice, low and scratchy...and moaning. He looked left and right, but couldn't place it. The woeful noise emanated out of the ground.

"Hey!" Dontae called, checking his periphery. "Who's out here? Where you at?"

The moaning stopped. Dontae waited, hoping the voice would come back again, this time with words attached. Seconds passed in frustrated silence.

A hand grabbed the back of his neck.

Dontae squealed as fingers clamped onto him just below the scalp. He reached back but the hand moved him. His whole body jerked to the left as the hand whipped around. Dontae saw the tree coming, but his arms were up, his hands flailing, trying to grab whoever had him. His body slammed into bark and the breath went out of him. Dontae coughed and slapped at the hand, but it never budged and the pressure intensified. His nose hit the tree and remained against it.

"Stop, man!" he bellowed. "Get off me!"

Something hard, metal, and circular found the small of his back. The clicking noise that followed got his full attention. Dontae went still. The pressure and the pain were very much there, but he couldn't say a word.

"What do you want, boy?"

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The voice was a growl and nothing like the moan that came before. He could hear the man breathing, sucking in large gulps with a wheeze.

“Nothing,” Dontae said, pleading. “I was just walking by. I don’t want nothing.”

“You’re not hearing me,” the voice replied, only inches from Dontae’s ear. A thick tobacco stench curled up in his nostrils.

“I’m asking you a question, Dontae Scoville. I’m asking what do you want—most of all?”

The man knew his name, but Dontae failed to notice. With the metal against his spine and the tree pressed against his front, Dontae could only think of one answer.

“I want you to let me go,” he said, although his tone made it sound like a question.

The man laughed.

“That’s what you want now, but it’s not what you really want. It’s not what you want most in the world. You want something else, and I think I know what it is.”

“What?” Dontae asked. He was ready to agree to anything.

“Respect,” the man said, his voice a whisper. “That’s what a man needs to make it through life. He needs the respect of those around him. He needs others to recognize his superiority and bow in deference. That’s what you want, Dontae. Respect.”

“Whatever you say, man.” He couldn’t stop whimpering. It was everything he could do to keep from pissing down his leg.

“What if I told you I had a gift? It’s a gift that will bring the one thing you want most. A gift that guarantees respect. And all you have to do is help me when the time comes.” The man blew rancid breath into Dontae’s ear. “Would you want that gift, boy?”

“You bet,” Dontae said, nodding even as the bark scratched his face. “I can help anyway you want. I’m here for ya, man.”

The metal left his backside. The man coughed out a chuckle. “Don’t worry, Dontae. I know exactly where you are. We’ll talk soon.”

The hand on his scalp pulled away. Dontae spun around, shaking all over.

“What’s your—” Dontae was going to say *name*, but there was no need. The man, whoever he was, had completely disappeared. Dontae’s gaze jerked every direction, scanning between the trees for any sign of movement. But there was none. Dontae wiped sweat off his brow. His whole body was sheathed in it. “What...what the hell, man.”

Dontae turned toward the corner store and picked up his pace. He wouldn’t be buying soda. Today he needed something stronger.

*ELISE'S JOURNAL: OCTOBER 4, 1996*

David had a bad day. I could see it on his face when he walked through the front door. He tried to hide it like he always does when he's blue. But there's a weight to his expressions that's only a degree or two away from his normal self. His mouth hangs on his face like a heavy coat. And I notice. Wives know their husbands. We see everything. Whether husbands always see their wives is a journal entry for another day.

I waited until we sat down for dinner before I said anything. Melanie bounced in her booster seat. We've been working on her table manners, but she has remnants of the terrible twos in her. Rarely do we make it through a whole meal without a little food in her hair or covering her lap or hanging off the ceiling fan. The child is creative when it comes to food. But she never fails to make David smile.

What happened today? I asked as I sat down with my plate of tacos and rice. David already had his plate, and he held a taco up, about to take a bite. He paused and looked at me, his jaw open, the plane waiting to make it into the hangar. (God, did I just write that? Wow. I need to spend more time around adults.)

Oh, nothing, he said and took his bite. I watched him pretend to be totally focused on eating. He's such a bad liar. My tacos aren't that good.

Come on, I prodded. You're not going to be one of those cop-husbands who keep everything bottled up inside, are you? I'm a big girl. I can take it.

Ta'e it! Melanie agreed, her mouth full of rice. She was in repeat everything mode. I cah ta'e it! I bih gull!

He chewed and swallowed. Then he leaned back in his seat, staring past his food at something I couldn't see. Finally he said, Hector broke his leg today.

Oh, no, I said. Hector's his partner and probably the only guy David genuinely likes hanging out with. We've invited him and his wife over a few times, and they're

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always a lot of fun. A broken leg meant weeks stuck at home or at the desk, both of which stunk for guys who like being out on their beat, working calls. How did it happen? I asked.

David looked at me with troubled eyes. He was in a foot pursuit, he explained. Hector was after a signal 36 actor—a robber, I mean. The guy had kicked some poor lady's legs out from under her and took off with her purse. Hector chased him through a field of high grass. But there was a drainage ditch. The actor must have known about it, because he leapt and kept going. Hector didn't see it in time. He fell three feet and cracked his kneecap on the concrete.

That's terrible, I said.

Tear-bull, Melanie agreed.

It gets worse, David said. We couldn't find him. We heard him on the radio, giving us directions while trying not to moan in pain. But it was a big field with high grass... He waited out there in pain for 25 minutes before I found him.

David wiped his mouth with his napkin and stared into his lap. I reached across the table and ran my fingers down his shoulder.

It's not your fault, I told him, but he grimaced and wadded up his napkin.

I should have found him sooner...Hell, I should've been right behind him.

Where were you? I asked, guessing the answer would be around the block or taking a bathroom break. But no, not my husband.

I had to make a court appearance, he said.

Wait, I said. You were at court—on the other side of town?

Yeah, he said, shrugging. Someone was disputing a citation. But I had my radio on low, so when I heard the pursuit begin I rushed out of there.

I laughed. I couldn't stop myself.

David frowned. What's so funny?

I rolled my eyes. Please tell me you're not beating yourself up over something that had nothing to do with you.

He's my partner, David snapped. We're supposed to watch each other's backs.

Each udder-backs, Mel chimed in.

Hop, I said. You can't blame yourself for things you have no control over. Let me guess. You raced across town to get to him. And even though other units had made the scene, you were the one that actually found him. Am I right?

David looked equal parts baffled and annoyed. He grunted. Yeah, but—

But nothing, I said. You should be proud of yourself for getting to him before anyone else could.

David stared at me with blazing eyes. I could even see traces of water at the edges. He was in pain, he said plaintively. MY FRIEND was in pain, and it might have been avoided altogether if I hadn't wanted to make sure some asshole driver didn't wiggle out of a ticket.

Asshole diver, Melanie said, nodding. (Of course, THAT word she gets perfect the first time.)

Hearing her made David catch himself. Look, he said quietly. I know you're right. My head knows you're right. But I can't help feeling what I feel.

I got up. I stepped around the table and knelt next to him. That's one of the things I love about you, I told him. You've got a big heart. For better or worse it's what drives you more than anything else.

He leaned into my open arms and we hugged, at least until Melanie started pelting us with ground beef. All during the hug the tension in his shoulders was constant. He wanted to let it go, but it would take a while. And I couldn't help thinking: wow, he's taking a friend's broken leg THIS hard. What if something happened to me or, God forbid, Mel? I don't know if he'd ever recover.

I pray I never have to find out.

### **THAT'S IT FOR THE SERIALISATION**

**OF THE FIRST TEN CHAPTERS.**

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