

Blowback

A “Cadillac” Holland Mystery

H. Max Hiller



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To Bill and
Emily and the
road not taken.

BLOWBACK

I

I HAVE ANSWERED to a number of things: nicknames, military ranks, and more or less profane epithets in my thirty-seven years. I have preferred each and every one of them to the name Cooter Holland, which my father bestowed upon me at birth in honor of his hometown in the boot-heel of Missouri. The stories most people tell as to how they washed up in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina are generally self-serving lies. I was born and raised here, but the story of my return after over a decade away involves a classified black-ops intelligence operation that went horribly awry in Baghdad.

The mission ended in an ambush that nearly took my life. I spent a year rebuilding myself physically and mentally from the injuries I suffered in the attack. I returned to New Orleans with Tony Vento, the man who saved my life, in part so he could open the Italian-themed bistro he had long dreamed about owning, but mostly so I could begin to search for my father. He had disappeared while doing rescues after Hurricane Katrina covered New Orleans with water.

My mother's politically-connected brother

H. MAX HILLER

facilitated this second task by using my Special Operations military service and intelligence background to pressure the State Police into taking me into their ranks at a detective's rank upon graduation from their training academy. The LSP Commandant washed his hands of me by assigning me to the indefinite service of NOPD's Chief of Detectives the same day he handed me the badge. Bill Avery, my father's partner, succeeded him in that thankless position.

I say all of this to explain how I came to be sitting at the end of the bar in the St. Charles Tavern on the Saturday before St. Patrick's Day two years after Hurricane Katrina. The Tavern, as its regulars refer to it, dates to the era when this stretch of St. Charles Avenue was lined with dive bars servicing the stevedores and the surrounding working-class neighborhood. It was owned by a low-level mobster at one point, who supplemented the place's income by running hookers on the second floor. It was where my father would scold me over breakfast after gathering me up from a First District holding cell every time I was caught drinking under age in the Quarter. It served as a pre-dawn last stop for generations of Tulane students and Uptown residents on their way home from nights on the town, but the place was struggling to rebuild its brand in post-Katrina New Orleans. The post-storm influx of new people seemed to have little interest in the culinary landmarks of their newly adopted city. They praised New Orleans' history, but seemed quite intent upon rebuilding the place in their own image.

I began making small talk with a dozen of the Hibernian Parade marshals convened there for a free breakfast and cocktails before their annual St.

BLOWBACK

Patrick's parade. The quality of our conversation deteriorated as the Jameson's portion of the annual breakfast took effect. The Tavern became Avery's unofficial office after he followed Miss J here when she couldn't afford to reopen the diner she had operated with her sister, Esther, in the Lower Ninth Ward. Miss J's first cooking job was at a pre-school breakfast program the Black Panthers ran in the Florida Projects when my father was just a rookie cop. She took a moment away from the grill to come ask about my mother and sister, and to see if there was any progress on finding my father. I excused myself when Chief Avery arrived in the company of a group of NOPD Sixth District officers.

Avery was already in the middle of a long day, which had started about three that Saturday morning with a shooting a few blocks away. He arrived wearing the crumpled suit, extra belly weight, and disgruntled look of just about every commander I'd ever served under. Avery is taller than myself, and wider at both his chest and his belt line. He has a head of graying black hair and the local's accent of someone born and raised in the Gentilly neighborhood. His wife broke him of buying off-the-rack suits from one of those places you can get a suit with two pairs of pants and a tie for one low price when he moved up the command ladder. His suits are now from Rothschild's on Canal and fit his build just right, but he still sweats right through a couple of shirts a day, no matter the season. I was, by contrast, in jeans and a hooded pullover bearing the State Police logo. It was as close to a uniform as I ever wore anymore.

I was in better condition than my boss because I exercised every day as physical rehabilitation for the

H. MAX HILLER

gunshot wounds in my shoulder and a knee replacement. Avery tolerated my hair being shaggier than regulation because it hid the surgical scars from where a number of titanium plates were used to rebuild my forehead from the most serious injury I suffered in the ambush. I was still getting used to the handsome new face my sister picked out of a magazine because she had no pictures of me when it was time for the facial reconstructive surgeries. Her choice provided NOPD officers with their first derisive nickname for me: 'Hollywood.'

"What's up?" I asked as Avery pulled a wooden chair across the mosaic tile floor and motioned for me to join him at the table he'd selected by the front window.

"You know that lecture on unintended consequences that you're always giving the detectives I partner you with?"

"I call it blowback. What about it?"

"Suffice it to say that the blowback of your actions mean we need to come up with a Plan B," he said. This was a conversation we both saw coming for a while. I was not a good fit for his department and neither his own detectives nor I were even trying to make things work any longer. "You're too politically connected for me fire you, which was Plan A, but there's obviously no point in assigning you any more training partners."

"You do remember what my father used to say about making plans, don't you? Everything works out but nothing works out the way you planned." It was one of a thousand sayings my father would drop into a conversation to sound far more profound than he ever actually was. "What is Charlie's reason for dropping me?"

BLOWBACK

“Aside from being afraid you’re going to get him shot? I think he doesn’t like spending his nights in the Ninth Ward nearly as much as you do.”

Avery was being nice about this. I had been repeatedly ordered to let the National Guard be the ones to patrol the city’s least-recovered post-storm neighborhood. Less than fifty percent of the city’s evacuated population had returned, but the Lower Ninth Ward had fewer than ten percent of its pre-storm population. Moving home meant having to endure unreliable water and electrical services and almost non-existent mass transportation, medical, or police services just to live in the only place its low-income residents ever called home.

I was irresistibly drawn to the area because it felt so much like the part of Baghdad where I ran my last operation. Avery, and the four detectives he had assigned me in the ten months I had been under his command, saw no practical value in my nocturnal patrols of the unlit streets. He preferred to believe they were part of my ongoing search for information on my father’s disappearance in the area while conducting boat rescues rather than a symptom of the hyper-awareness form of PTSD that still concerned the State Police’s psychiatrists.

Our conversation was interrupted by the server offering us menus. Avery waved them away and ordered omelets stuffed with crawfish etouffee for both of us. It wasn’t what I would have selected, but I knew it was a good choice. They would arrive with a mound of grilled potatoes and onions and fresh-baked biscuits. Avery ordered coffee. I asked for a large RC Cola, this being the only place in town still selling it.

“Anyway, you were about to tell me what you

have in mind.” I prodded Avery to finish his latest admonishment and assign me to my new job.

“I still need to justify your salary to FEMA, and I think your best talent remains your ability to track people down. Your, shall we say, *unique* way of handling things might be the best way to resolve some of these situations. You’re also better at getting people to talk to you than my guys are.”

“What sort of people do you need tracked down?” I was worried that he was stroking my ego before relegating me to doing make-work meant to make me quit my job. I’d spent years tracking down high-value Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in places I found far less friendly and secure than New Orleans. I did not do it by politely knocking on doors and asking if they were home. The methods I would be expected to use to arrest Avery’s fugitives likely involved more surveillance and community cooperation than the sort of violent take-downs I was especially proficient at carrying out.

“To start with, I need you to look for a suspect in a shooting who’s been trying to intimidate the primary witnesses against him.”

“Why can’t your guys handle this?” The situation sounded serious enough to justify that his own detectives handle it.

“Time has suddenly become an issue. The District Attorney’s office has egg on its face. They released the guy when it looked like the shooting he was involved in was straightforward self-defense. Three men attacked him in a nightclub in the French Quarter. He killed two of them before the last one escaped, but we think he may have hit him as well. A rookie prosecutor let him go before the ATF ran the serial numbers on all the guns involved. You know

BLOWBACK

the prosecutor, she used to babysit your kid sister.” Avery’s face relayed the DA’s chagrin at the mistake made by one of his fledgling prosecutors.

“You said finding him is time sensitive.” I sensed that the task Avery was handing me had almost nothing to do with the shooting or the gun involved. Something else had to be sending him in my direction. I also didn’t take the bait, if that was what it was, about Katie Fallon. I had intended to look her up when I got home, but dropped the idea when my sister mentioned she had recently gotten married to an ambitious NOPD patrolman. “What’s really going on?”

“The prosecutor’s main witnesses are Janelle Beauvoir and her husband.”

“The singer?” I had seen Janelle perform at a number of benefits since I had come home. She was active in raising money to help the hundreds of musicians displaced by the storm who were still trying to come back to New Orleans.

“The suspect has threatened to kill her if she doesn’t recant her statement or if she testifies against him. She’s singing the first set at French Quarter Fest, which means you have something like a month to find the guy. She won’t go on stage if he’s still running around loose.” Now I saw Avery’s problem. NOPD definitely lacked the manpower to organize a full-scale manhunt or to provide Janelle and her husband with continuous witness protection. It would also look far worse for Avery than the District Attorney if Janelle Beauvoir was murdered before a live audience. “The best my guys can hope is that the guy gets caught in a traffic stop.”

“Fine, I’ll track him down, but what aren’t you telling me?” I knew Avery’s body language too well to

H. MAX HILLER

believe all I had to do was find one suspect.

“The guys that got shot are tied to a bunch of gun-nuts in Texas. The ATF has been after them for a few years for gun running. They traced the serial number on the gun used in this shooting to a burglary the group did in Wyoming, and we linked its ballistics to a couple of gang-related shootings. Everyone wants to know how a gun from Wyoming wound up being used in a pair of shootings we can’t tie to one another, and then into the hands of a guy we can’t link to those shootings or to the Texans.” Avery was obviously confounded by the particulars of the case. He also seemed very relieved to have dumped the responsibility for sorting things out on the State Police. “One other thing for you to keep in mind is that Janelle and her husband just spent a lot of money opening the Mayor’s new favorite club in the Quarter, so getting this guy off their back will be a nice IOU with the Mayor down the line.”

The mayor was in his last term, but I was in no position to refuse Chief Avery. The only reason my mother used her bankroll of favors to get me into this job was because she wanted me to investigate my father’s disappearance after the storm. All I knew was that he came out of retirement to help with the rescue operations in the days immediately after the city flooded, and then vanished into thin air. I needed the resources and authority of being a State Police detective to facilitate my search, but I had not yet unearthed a single fresh clue. There seemed to be an intentional stonewalling on the subject by everyone who worked with my father that week, and my questions had turned into interrogations that also burned a lot of bridges I could have used working with NOPD.

BLOWBACK

I chewed my breakfast while Avery chatted with the uniformed officers from the Sixth District. He picked their brains for anything they knew about the dead guy in the latest shooting, the neighborhood, and how many residents had returned since the last time he took the Sixth District's pulse. The entire area had flooded and very few residents carried flood insurance, so rebuilding was going to take that much longer. The patrol officers' major concern was the increasing number of muggings involving the hundreds of undocumented Hispanics who came to town to do storm cleanup and stayed on to do roofing and drywall work. They said the local gangs were calling them 'walking ATMs' because they got paid in cash but couldn't open bank accounts.

"One other thing," Avery said with a grin as we started out the door after breakfast. "All I want you to do is to track the guy down. Let me know where he is and I'll send NOPD detectives to make the arrest."

"So the State Police gets the blame if I fail and NOPD gets the collar if I succeed. That's a win-win for you either way."

"And you thought I didn't understand what consequences are." The Chief laughed at his comment harder than I did. He led me around the corner of the building to the parking lot. "You're also going to need a car now that you're on your own. Meet me at the Beauvoirs' club in the Quarter at six. It's on Decatur Street by the Market. Wear something nice."

Avery handed me the keys to the black Cadillac CTS he had been driving. It was one of the sedans appropriated from the Sewell Cadillac dealership in the CBD after the storm. NOPD's entire fleet of

H. MAX HILLER

vehicles had either been flooded or shorted out from being driven in the brackish floodwaters that covered eighty percent of New Orleans, so they were forced to use any cars or trucks they could find. Avery's sedan saw less abuse than what most of the Cadillacs endured, but it showed fifty thousand miles on the odometer and there was wear on the driver's seat from his sidearm rubbing on the leather. Avery pointed to the files he left for me on the passenger seat with the pertinent details about the man I needed to find and the family I was now expected to protect.

"I guess we'll have to change your name, Hollywood," the uniformed NOPD sergeant who followed us out of the Tavern joked as he leaned through the car's open window.

"What do you have in mind?" I wondered aloud. I was focused on making sense of the placement of the sedan's instrument gauges and adjusting the power seat to fit my frame instead of Avery's.

"I think we'll start calling you 'Cadillac.' It suits a rich kid like you better anyway." I let him have his fun without taking any more offense than he intended. Avery shooed him away, but I could tell he would be using the nickname in short order.

2

MY FATHER INFLICTED my younger sister with the name Tulip, which says something about his sense of humor. We were raised in a four-bedroom ranch-style house near the Seventeenth Street Canal in the city's Lakefront neighborhood. It was damaged beyond repair when the canal's floodwalls collapsed under the stress of Katrina's wind-driven storm surge. My father had also built a weekend place on the old highway to Biloxi with the royalties from true-crime books he had begun writing even before he retired from NOPD. What he called a camp was actually designed by an architect from Miami in a style I once referred to as Miami Drug Dealer-Modern, which explained its slab foundation and white stucco-over-concrete construction. Katrina forced water through this place as well, but it was the one which could be rebuilt. My mother used her own savings to pay for repairs the insurance company wasted over a year trying to fight Tulip over in civil court. Her situation was sadly typical because the insurance industry as a whole proved to be ill-prepared to handle the number of claims Katrina created. They were even less prepared for how tenacious Tulip was in ripping apart their

H. MAX HILLER

arguments and bogus engineering reports.

The odor of half a million refrigerators full of spoiled food that homeowners taped closed and tossed to the curb in hundred-degree weather was another factor that drove my mother from the city she barely recognized after the storm. It smelled as though the city itself were dead. My mother supervised the renovations to the house while my sister made a project out of rebuilding me. The women in my life both oversaw the costly reconstruction of things they valued, but which still remain in harm's way. Any future hurricane storm surge is no less likely to wash through the house than I am to be killed while playing cops and robbers.

"Anybody home?" I shouted as soon as I stepped through the doorway to the main house. This being Saturday afternoon, I anticipated at least the maid being around. My mother only drove into the city for PEO meetings and lunch with a diminishing circle of sorority sisters. Tony Vento, with whom I shared the two-bedroom apartment over the empty boat house, doubled as her personal chef and his absence was curious.

"Miss Camille is on the patio," the maid called from where she was cleaning. Ours was a considerably less formal relationship than my mother insisted upon with her paid help.

My mother was indeed enjoying the pleasant mid-afternoon sun's warmth on the slate patio. She was reclined on one of the rattan seats facing the water, with her gin and tonic and her cellphone within easy reach. She was dressed as though she were expecting company, however unlikely that was to happen, and had made sure her makeup was

BLOWBACK

perfect. I could tell she'd recently had her graying roots addressed. She was typing on her iPad and paid me no mind until I blocked her sun.

"Consulting the Great and Powerful Oz again?" I asked to get her attention. My mother had begun consulting an online psychic, at unknown expense, rather than seeking psychiatric help in the wake of losing two houses and one estranged husband in such quick succession. Her electro-swami's cryptic suggestions and observations were quite eerily similar to the fortune cookie wisdom my father voiced over the years, and that familiarity may have been what made her keep asking for this advice. Tulip and I had learned not to point out that she seemed to value her psychic for channeling the voice of a man whom she'd hated for speaking in exactly the same way.

"As a matter of fact, I was." She switched the tablet off but held it on her lap. "He's begun giving me more advice for you and your sister than he does for me."

"What are today's words of wisdom?" I had to get past this to have any other conversation with her.

"That every beginning first requires an ending." She imparted these words and then took a sip of her cocktail while I worked on a flippant response. "He says you have to let go of your past in order to embrace what the future has in mind for you. New Orleans is a city full of fresh opportunities."

"And the Chinese symbol for opportunity is the same as the one for chaos." It was the best retort I could come up with on short notice, but it made her change the subject.

"Are you alone? How did you get here?" There was no motion for me to sit down so I just moved out

of her light.

“Bill gave me my own car.”

“I guess that’s a good sign.” The uncertain tone in her voice was her way of fishing for details.

“We’re going to try what he calls Plan B. It means I get to work alone. He wants me to look for a guy the prosecutor’s office released a bit prematurely.” I wasn’t about to elaborate on Katie’s being the one responsible for the screw-up. My mother adored her when we were growing up and I didn’t want to pop any bubbles unnecessarily.

“Plan B sounds like a way to say your job will be to clean up other people’s messes.” It was as succinct a summation of my situation as could be made. The harsh tone of her voice carried her personal opinion on this development, but she added a little snort to remind me that her unheeded suggestions to play nicer with NOPD might have avoided this.

“At least you’ll see more of me. I’m moving out of the hotel and back to the boathouse.” This was where she could have suggested that I use one of the three empty bedrooms in the main house, but she didn’t. She genuinely seemed to enjoy wandering the home’s empty rooms alone. At least she did not make a single comment about how this would affect Uncle Felix giving me a suite at a five-star French Quarter hotel every Wednesday and sending over one of the escorts he used to ply lobbyists and politicians. Uncle Felix believed showing me the benefits package might be the best way to convince me to give up on law enforcement and learn about influence peddling.

“I’m sure your friend will appreciate that,” was the entirety of her opinion on my moving home at the age of thirty-nine.

BLOWBACK

“Where is Tony, anyway? He wasn’t at the boathouse when I dropped my bags off and he’s not over here serving you tapas.” I wanted her to know I could make sly cuts as well. She peered at me over the top of her reading glasses to let me know I was very wrong about that assumption.

“Tulip took him to the parade. They’re probably drunk by now.” Her sentiments about my sister escorting an Italian immigrant to the Hibernian’s parade didn’t need to be expressed aloud. “They’ll likely be back late, if they aren’t in jail.”

The Hibernians’ St. Patrick’s parade traditionally ends with the participants and spectators joining thousands of other celebrants at a street party in the Irish Channel that stretches several blocks in any direction from a bar called Parasol’s. I would have been in the midst of the throng as well were it not for my pending meeting with Avery.

“I have to meet the Chief in the Quarter later to discuss the case, so I’m going to take a nap and head that way. I just wanted you to know I’m staying here again.”

“I’m sure you and your friend have lots to catch up on. You’ve all but abandoned him here.” Tony arrived almost ten months earlier on the E-2 visa my sister arranged in gratitude for saving my life, but my having to rely on NOPD for transportation made having FEMA pay for a room in the city more convenient than expecting my assigned partners to drive nearly an hour each way from the Quarter.

I needed to be close at hand because Tony and I were now trapped by the stories, or rather the lies, he’d told Tulip about our personal connection while I lay in a coma. She was unaware that we were both former intelligence operatives. He resumed his

H. MAX HILLER

former cover identity as a chef once we arrived in Italy from Baghdad. It wasn't entirely a cover, and his desire to open a restaurant was genuine. He actually had been a chef's apprentice when he was recruited into the Mukhabarat, Iraq's secret police. Their highly effective recruiting pitch had been to threaten to kill his entire family if he didn't work for them, as his father had before him.

He was recalled to Iraq after the First Gulf War and took part in the initial resistance to American troops occupying Baghdad after the second invasion. I found him in a detention center and recruited him to organize a team of Iraqis to help quell the growing civil war that followed the capture of Saddam Hussein. The operation we developed was summarily disavowed by the State Department and Department of Defense within hours of the ambush that ended it, even though they had both lauded our efforts until that very moment.

Tony managed to get both of us out of Baghdad, despite my being in a coma, just steps ahead of our arrest by the new incarnation of Iraq's secret police. I set only one rule in place for Tony's presence here, and that was that he never date my sister. She'd never forgive either of us for hiding the origin of our connection from her, much less what we had done in Iraq.

3

I DRESSED IN A PINSTRIPED HUGO BOSS SUIT with a Jerry Garcia necktie and hung my freshly shined badge on my belt for the meeting with the Beauvoirs. I tested the Cadillac's handling on the two lane road leading into the city and parked in front of the old New Orleans Mint museum on Esplanade Avenue. The Beauvoir's nightclub was in the middle of the last block of Decatur Street before it crossed Esplanade to become Frenchman Street. Frenchman Street is the locals' version of Bourbon Street, with small music clubs and plenty of places to eat and drink without being surrounded by the tourists the Beauvoir's place attracted. The couple's name was prominently stenciled above the waist-high curtains on the club's front windows in gilt letters. There was a uniformed detail cop beside the doorman who greeted me at the open door, but the cop's attention was on the valets and not on me.

"Ah, here is Detective Holland now," I heard Avery say to the couple he was making small talk with as I approached the bar. I imagine they had no idea what to expect when Avery promised the services of an investigator who would focus on their situation alone until it was fixed. I needed to appear

H. MAX HILLER

to be considerably more empathetic than the NOPD detectives and ATF agents who responded to the shooting. They were probably more interested in the dead guys than any effect the shooting had on the couple or their business. I was, too, but my job was to act like I wasn't.

"I hope I haven't kept everyone waiting," I apologized unnecessarily. I was fifteen minutes early.

"I was just giving Janelle my Crawfish Monica recipe," Avery said. When you go to any party in New Orleans there comes a point when all of the men wind up in the kitchen exchanging recipes while the women sit in the living room arguing about Saints trades. "Cooter, I'd like to introduce Brett and Janelle Beauvoir."

I sized up the couple while they made their own first impressions of me. They were both in their early thirties. The husband was tall and slim with his straw-blond hair gathered into a short ponytail. He wore designer rimmed glasses that gave him an unfortunately affected look, as though he was posing as himself in his own life story. The wife was a coppery redhead with a figure and smile that would turn heads, which probably explained the protective arm her husband kept around her, even in the company of armed men coming to their rescue. She was dressed rather provocatively, but she was about to go on stage to sing her set before her husband would emcee the burlesque show the couple used to pack the house for Janelle's own musical act.

We shook hands all around before Janelle motioned to the bartender and he stepped forward to mix me a Manhattan using an expensive selection from the bar's impressive bourbon offerings. I

BLOWBACK

handed the husband my State Police business card, one with my cellphone number written on the back. I had considered having it printed there, but writing the number by hand gave people the impression that they were getting my personal attention.

It had already occurred to me that our meeting here may have more to do with showing off a police presence than anything else. The couple were gracious hosts, but they were acting the part. Avery and I could both see that the pair was very tired and anxious behind this façade of casually enjoying cocktails with us.

“So, tell me again, how are you connected to the local police department?” Janelle asked with an uneasy grin as she studied my business card. I took her questioning as a sign that Avery was struggling to adequately explain the position he created out of thin air just hours earlier.

“I am brought in to handle special cases. FEMA is paying the State Police to place me at the Chief’s disposal. He can assign me to focus entirely on individual cases, such as yours. I will be working on nothing else than taking this situation out of your lives,” I said brightly, with a minimal amount of smugness and sarcasm. It was something Avery appreciated my having worked on. My explanation seemed to reassure her.

“I read your statements in the folder the Chief gave me this afternoon, but I would like you to tell me what happened one more time,” I needed to see the couple’s body language when they replayed the events for me. Body language can be a far better storyteller than the spoken word.

The couple glanced at one another and the husband finally spoke up. “I was in the dressing

room, but Janelle had just stepped through the curtains to start her set when she saw a young man start shooting at a group of other men who were walking past the bar. The other men had guns in their hands, but they never fired a shot.”

“So it clearly looked like self-defense?” I looked down the bar as if I were imagining the shooting. I knew the answer to my question, but I wanted to see how these two witnesses reacted to what might appear to be favoritism towards the suspect. They did not seem to interpret my statement as any indication that I thought the guy was in the right for his actions.

“That was how it was initially ruled,” Avery reminded me.

”And, beyond witnessing the shooting, how are you two still involved in any of this?” I asked Janelle Beauvoir, but Avery spoke up first.

“The prosecutors released the shooter while it still looked like self-defense.” I got the impression that Avery’s interruptions were a way to make the situation the couple was in clear to them. “Now he seems intent on getting Janelle to refuse to testify in hopes the charges get dropped.”

“The man has made threatening phone calls late at night, and he threw a brick through our front window a couple of weeks ago. He tried to poison our dog,” Janelle finally spoke. Her voice was breaking just thinking about their dilemma.

“He poisoned your dog?” I asked incredulously. The surprise in my voice masked my anger towards anyone who would use an animal to make an example or otherwise abuse one. Crime statistics also indicate that crank calls and broken windows are par for this course, but when a suspect escalates

BLOWBACK

to killing the family pet he is very close to the point of being willing to physically harm one or the other of these two. The wife started sobbing softly. Brett covered Janelle's trembling hand on the bar with his own.

I turned my attention to my cocktail to give the couple a moment to regain their composure. Avery seemed very ill at ease around so much emotion. He would get a nice fat IOU for handling this, but what he really wanted to do was to dump everything in my lap and get out of there.

"The report said that he calls every evening, but the physical attacks have only happened on Sundays?" I was at a loss to explain this odd combination.

"Yes, that's right. At first he was very polite, but he insisted that Janelle tell the police she wouldn't testify. He became very angry with us after she refused to do that. Then he pleaded a couple of times. It was in the last call that he threatened to kill my wife," the husband explained. Janelle Beauvoir excused herself and went towards what I assumed was the restroom near the rear of the high-ceilinged auditorium. Her husband waited until she was out of earshot to ask Avery a pointed question. "Is that what it took to get someone on this case?"

"Absolutely not." I defended my boss. "There is just not a lot of enthusiasm for a case that will probably never be prosecuted. He isn't likely to do any time for the shooting, and animal cruelty and intimidation don't justify investing a lot of very limited police resources."

I thought Avery was going to have a heart attack, but Beauvoir simply shrugged at the sad reality. I tried to soften the blow of what I had just said. "Like

H. MAX HILLER

I said, this is the exact sort of case NOPD has me handle. They don't have the time or manpower, but I have nothing else to do. How did he poison your dog? I didn't see it in the report."

"He put something on a piece of raw meat and threw it in the backyard last Sunday afternoon. I happened to be looking out the kitchen window when the bastard threw it over the fence. I went after the steak instead of the man. We're lucky that our vet lives around the corner and I was able to run Cory there in time for Doctor Amy to counter the poison."

"So your dog is still alive?" I asked with a level of empathy that surprised both the husband and Avery.

"Cory is still at the vet's but they think he'll make a full recovery."

"Did the vet say what the poison was?"

"Nobody tested the steak. I threw it away and called the police. The uniformed officers did not take it with them when they came out to take the report. I can tell you that it smelled a little like he had poured kerosene or lighter fluid on it, which is probably why Cory just licked at it."

There was a lull in the conversation and Avery saw an opportunity to make his escape. "Detective Holland, I hope to hear from you soon."

Avery raised an eyebrow that only I could see from my position. It meant to call him with an update when I got home.

"Thank you so much," the husband said with genuine gratitude. He very clearly understood he was out of his element dealing with the situation. His wife was apparently going to hide until I was gone.

I was busy watching the detail cop and studying the interior of the nightclub when Brett spoke to me

BLOWBACK

and I gave him a blank stare. I covered by taking a sip of my tasty cocktail while he repeated the question. "Okay, what happens now?"

"Well, I'd say you shouldn't answer your phone after dark if you don't recognize the number. Feel free to give him my number if he calls tomorrow," I told him bluntly, but as cheerfully as possible. "I'm also going to do an assessment of the club's security system. If someone was bold enough to plan to shoot somebody here once, they won't hesitate to do so again. Do you own a gun?"

"No, should I buy one?" Brett asked with the growing realization that he and his wife were dangerously unprepared for any further gunplay.

"Not if you don't already know how to use one," I shook my head. "Look, you are not in as much danger as you think. The guy has a lot more to worry about than you do. All I have to worry about is finding one needle in one haystack."

"And you will do that before he comes back?"

"I'm very good at what I do," I gave him my most self-assured look. "You've already given me a couple of ideas of where to look. He should be easy enough to round up lurking around outside of your house if I don't find him this week. All the same, why don't you and your wife make room reservations somewhere nice for next weekend? Just to be on the safe side."

I shook the less than reassured husband's hand and headed for the door. I knew Avery would have preferred that I lie to the couple and tell them everything was going to be fine, but nothing was going to be alright until the guy I was looking for felt safe from anyone looking for him, including myself.

4

I RE-READ THE POLICE REPORTS while sitting at the kitchen table in the boathouse on Sunday morning. I also studied the notes on the suspect for anything that might give me a place to start in my search. Tony slept in. He went to bed the night before still nursing the hangover and body aches he'd brought home in the pre-dawn hours. My sister drank him under a succession of tables, starting at Parasol's and ending at Snake and Jake's Christmas Tree Lounge. I could only hope that my friend did not form a lasting impression of the nature and quality of New Orleans' bars from an evening spent in dives, albeit iconic ones.

My quarry's name was Michael Ferris. Michael was twenty-eight years old and a life-long resident of New Orleans. There was no record of any college or military service that would have taken him away from the city of his birth, which meant I was looking for a graduate of the local high school system. This meant he was not someone with any experience or lessons in escape or evasion beyond eluding truancy officers. Michael Ferris's support network was limited to the immediate area, and the two people most likely to know anything were going to be his older brother and the girlfriend who also witnessed

BLOWBACK

the shooting. The only other piece of useful information I was able to pull from the paperwork was that Ferris used a pre-paid cellphone purchased from a convenience store in Houma to make the calls to the Beauvoirs. I have found much smarter, and deadlier, people using less information.

The brother seemed the better choice of the two for questioning at this point. He was family, which means a lot to brothers raised on the Westbank. They grew up in a blue-collar community and surely earned their share of scars and stories hanging out on the proverbial street corners and sandlots with equally rough kids. It was the sort of neighborhood where a big brother was the best weapon to bring to a fight.

There were barely three years between the two, but where Michael had little to show for his time since high school, his brother built something of an empire. Ralph Ferris owned a string of used car lots stretched between Gonzalez and Slidell, with the majority in New Orleans. I had seen his ads on TV. His niche was selling cars priced from five to ten thousand dollars by offering high-interest credit plans where you were expected to turn up every Friday with either cash or the car keys in hand. FEMA had, coincidentally, provided hundreds of thousands of people who had lost their vehicle to street flooding after the storm with checks for between five and ten thousand dollars to relocate wherever they evacuated to.

New Orleans, and the entire storm-damaged region for that matter, were hoping people chose to relocate rather than come back to nothing. The affected areas weren't ready to handle the needs of people unaccustomed to fending for themselves. The

city's collection of flood damaged housing projects were slated for mass demolition and rental rates on the limited number of units available were climbing dramatically. But, this was home to most of them and they took the money to buy cars and make deposits so they could get back.

Being poor was always tough in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina made it nearly impossible to survive. Neighborhoods lost their stores and schools and public transportation was extremely limited. Charity Hospital also seemed unlikely to ever reopen. This was tragic as the number of gunshot wounds was already on the rise as street gangs were beginning to do battle for turf the storm put back up for grabs. There was plenty of legitimate minimum wage work available, but it was mostly hard manual work none of those who had moved back seemed particularly interested in doing.

"Morning," Tony grumbled as he entered the living room from his bedroom at the front of the apartment. What I heard didn't sound at all like this word. Between his uncertain pronunciation and accent, it came out more like a grunt. I was beginning to speak better grunt than Italian, though I had no objection to practicing one of the several foreign languages I learned in the Special Forces.

"It is that," I laughed and let him make his first espresso of the day in peace. He picked up the steaming porcelain cup and joined me at the table. "I think I might have a little something for you to do on this after all."

Tony looked at me with as much gratitude and anticipation as he could muster at the moment. It looked a bit more like he was trying to show he was at least awake. I said nothing about the t-shirt he

BLOWBACK

must have bought in his travels with Tulip. It was one of the large variety of shirts featuring derogatory re-imaginings of the acronym FEMA. This one read Find Every Mexican Available. Underpaid Hispanics had played a central role in the government's initial disaster response.

"I'd like you to help me do a security assessment of a nightclub in the Quarter. It's owned by the people I am supposed to be protecting and they are sitting ducks in there right now. They hired a detail cop Saturday night and all he did was watch the valets to be sure they didn't steal anything out of the cars. I walked right by him carrying a pistol. Anyone could have."

"Okay." It was one of the two words Tony had managed to learn in English that he could use to agree with someone without cursing. Way too many of his English language lessons were by way of American soldiers amusing themselves with hearing slang and profanity repeated back to them in what they considered to be a funny accent.

"You going to be alright? You look like a hot mess." His usually well-groomed thick, long dark hair had resisted his efforts to make a presentable appearance. His dark Sicilian eyes were bloodshot, and there were flecks of what I hoped wasn't vomit in the narrow strip of beard that circled his mouth and followed the sharp edge of his jawline. Mostly he looked vulnerable, and that wasn't something I was accustomed to seeing.

"I think I have figured out why you call something 'life' in English," he paused to take a sip of his espresso before finishing his thought.

"What's your conclusion?"

"Because you had already used the word 'crap'."

H. MAX HILLER

for something else.” He was very proud of his joke and I laughed as much from the unintentional wisdom in his opinion as I did from the delight he took in having mastered enough English to make fun of the language.

“You’re on to something. Go back to bed. I’ll be back this afternoon and we can talk about doing that walk-through sometime in the next day or two.”

I gathered the stacks of sorted paper from the table between us and placed them neatly back into the file. I then placed the file in a black nylon messenger bag that I had begun carrying with me. It contained what I considered to be my essentials: a digital camera and digital voice recorder, a flashlight, batteries for all of these and a spare for my cellphone, three extra clips of ten-millimeter ammunition for my Glock 20 pistol, a spring-loaded knife with a seven inch blade, a Leatherman multi-tool, a mechanical pencil and yellow legal pad, my own iPad, and a medical trauma kit consisting of compression bandages treated with blood thickener, a sheet of plastic for sucking chest wounds, and two tourniquets. My sister refers to it as my ‘bag of phobias’ because it contains something to address just about everything I fear happening to me again.

5

MICHAEL FERRIS' OLDER BROTHER operated Ferris Wheels Automotive from a former warehouse on a side-street near Poydras to the lake side of the Superdome. The location was close enough to Mandina's Restaurant that I decided to have an early lunch of a shrimp po-boy and cold Abita Amber beer rather than confront the second-most likely person to know Michael's whereabouts on an empty stomach.

I ate standing at the bar and discussed the changes in the landmark cafe brought on by the storm with the bartender, starting with the place's very recent acceptance of credit and debit cards. It was becoming an accepted fact that locals were carrying debit cards rather than cash because the city was suffering from an increase in muggings. Businesses had to adjust or lose customers.

The new décor was attributable to the damage done by four feet of standing water. This included newly installed central air, which improved the cooling but diminished the Old-South ambiance of the heavy Friedrich window air-conditioners that had been mounted over the doors and windows for as long as I could remember.

H. MAX HILLER

I steered the conversation to the used car dealership just down the street. The bartender suggested that I look elsewhere for a good car at a better price. The bartender had overheard multiple porters and dishwashers complaining that the place sold and re-sold the same cars a number of times over at the dealership. I recalled similar car lots near military bases where I was stationed years earlier. The dealer would take a down payment and finance the car at a rate and payment designed to be barely too much for a soldier's pay, repossess the vehicle, and turn around and take the next enlisted man's down payment and paychecks. I always wondered if any of the cars were ever actually paid in full.

I found the Ferris Wheels car lot easily enough, thanks to a six-color graffiti-styled sign out front. The cars on the showroom, accessed by way of a steep ramp from street level, were all five to fifteen years old and a glance at the odometer of a six-year-old Chrysler showed what a lot of detailing could do for a car with over a hundred and fifty thousand miles on it.

One of the salesmen, sensing that I was more than likely here for reasons other than buying a car, politely steered me to the receptionist's desk situated just outside of the glass-walled sales office overlooking what passed for the show room floor. The young Latina receptionist, whose fake smile was exceeded in size only by her breast implants, directed me to the building next door when I asked to speak to Mr. Ferris.

I accepted that any element of surprise I may have hoped to exploit would be long gone by the time I finally located Ralph Ferris. The building she

BLOWBACK

directed me to was the real center of the operation, where the magic of converting mere junk into saleable junk took place. A pair of semi-trailers full of used cars were being unloaded and the cars driven, or pushed, up the ramp and into the shop.

I was not the least bit surprised to find the owner of the dealership was a beefy white guy dressed in khaki slacks and a starched dress shirt. He probably hired African-American salespeople to give his customers the illusion of being ripped off by one of their own instead of just another greedy white guy with a Mercedes. I had to give Ralph some credit though; the man was driving a top of the line Audi A8L sedan instead of a Mercedes.

“Nice ride,” I complimented my quarry's older brother. Ralph grinned and stepped away from the sleek black testament to German marketing. I remembered that the first generation of Audi cars were a nightmare for everyone but the car mechanics who put their kids through graduate school working on Audi electrical systems. “You probably bought it for the gas economy, right?”

Ralph wasn't quite sure whether or not he had been insulted. I had the initiative in the conversation and continued to try to keep Michael's brother off balance by asking question after question about the Audi, as though I might be in the market for an eighty-thousand-dollar car myself. Every question I asked made it harder and harder for Ralph to remember any well-rehearsed lines about having no idea where his brother was hiding. I took him for the kind of brother that was going to throw in something about how distant the two of them were. This particular insult of a lie, which involves denying any familial bond, always bothers me more than most.

H. MAX HILLER

The one thing I had yet to find in New Orleans was any set of siblings that genuinely didn't care what was going on in the lives of their brothers and sisters. I had almost perfected my bullshit meter for these lies. It is based on Newton's Third Law of Physics, and assumed that however hard someone tries to distance themselves from the sibling I am looking for is an indication of how closely they are actually involved with the suspect.

"So, Ralph," I finally said when I was ready to question him. "Do we talk here or do you have a nice cozy office?"

"Talk about what?" Ralph sensed he needed to either stall or bluff me.

"Your brother. What else is there to discuss?" I asked as though we had both known all along why I was there. "So, let me ask you again. Here or in private?"

Ralph wasted no more time and led me through the garage to a door opening to the back offices of the dealership. The hallway we entered had a double key-locked heavy metal door to the right and a nicely paneled wooden one to the left that led into Ralph's office. Ralph either had unusually nice taste or a good decorator. I was just relieved that the office did not carry over the pimp-my-ride theme of the showroom next door.

Ralph's desk was mahogany, and very possibly an actual antique. The rug on the slate-tiled floor was a modern-day loomed variation of what was probably an authentic Persian design, but a better choice to have when a mechanic in greasy boots came by to talk. The art on the wainscoted walls were original oils by a local artist named Michalopoulos, noted for his unique view of the

BLOWBACK

Vieux Carre, which is like looking through the bottom-of-a-soda-bottle

Ralph sat in the heavy leather chair behind the desk and motioned me towards one of the low-backed cloth seats in front of him. I moved away from the seat offered and sat on the Art Deco sofa beside the door. I leaned back and stretched my feet out in front of me, which did little to cover the distance to the massive desk.

“What do you want to know about my brother? I’m a car dealer, not a travel agent,” he snapped at me as though it answered everything. Ralph had probably practiced the line to sound like he was indifferent, but what he was actually saying was that he had helped his brother escape. “Let me tell you what I have told everyone that has come looking for him. He and I have both moved on from being just another pair of Westbank punks but we have not talked that much since we buried our mom last year. I have this dealership, and a couple of other businesses, and Michael is supposedly making a decent living out of customizing and restoring old motorcycles. I am not part of Michael’s biker scene and I really cannot think of anything to tell you that would help you find him. Personally, I think he got mixed up with some outlaw bikers dealing guns and took off. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Anything that you think might keep him alive would be a good place to start,” I said after a moment’s pause. I wasn’t going to correct him about the source of the gun his brother used. He was either clueless or trying to throw me off.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Ralph demanded to know.

I let the matter rest for just a moment. I noticed

that Ralph's right hand had left the desk. His hand was likely gripping a pistol stashed in a drawer, or maybe the gun was mounted under the desk. I finally sighed and approached the desk, from an angle rather than from directly in front of the desk, on the chance that the gun was mounted to shoot directly ahead. I did not respond to the question until I was sitting on the edge of Ralph's desk and looking squarely at the Ruger pistol Ralph was fingering. We looked one another in the eye and then I finally broke the tense silence.

"I mean he is just waiting for a bullet at this point, isn't he? I show up and want to ask you about your brother and you have yet to ask for any sort of ID. To me that means so many people have probably already come through here asking about him that you really don't care if it's a cop or somebody's goon anymore."

"Are you a cop?" Ralph belatedly asked, which only proved my point.

"What I apparently am, Ralph, is the only person looking for your brother that cares if he lives or dies," I deflected the question for the moment. "The cops don't care if he gets killed or, if they do care, it is only because they might make a case against the gang that kills him. That is a bigger arrest and headline than dragging your brother in. The bad guys want his hide, but what they really want is whatever it is they think he owes them. Have you considered the next place they might look for satisfaction if they can't find him?"

I saw the lights flash on in Ralph's brain at that unconsidered possibility. He probably had absolutely nothing to do with the gun deal, or with his brother's rackets of any sort for that matter, and was

BLOWBACK

understandably not inclined to be drawn into it now. There was also no way out of this situation as long as he remained everyone's favorite link to the guy we were all looking for. My guess was that these visits and the possibility he was under surveillance were beginning to cause problems for any illicit businesses of his own.

"I know you have probably tried very hard to not know Michael's hiding place," I said just as calmly as I had spoken of the dangers Ralph may not have even thought about. "I also know that he has, or will, contact you for money and maybe even a car."

"Well I won't give him either one," Ralph declared in a cracking voice.

"Sure you will," I laughed and shrugged. "He's your brother, Ralph. You almost have to do something now, don't you? Here is what else I know, just so we are on the same page. I know that the car you drive and the price tag on this office are beyond the means of the size of operation you are running here. You also seem to be intentionally doing business on a cash-only basis. Cash businesses are tricky things, just ask any of the IRS auditors I could call. It makes me wonder if you are a smart enough guy to not let yourself get pulled down as an accessory or made into an accomplice to the first-degree murder charge hanging over your brother's head."

Ralph sank just that little bit lower in the chair he had hoped to use as a show of his authority and to take some measure of control back from the stranger in his office. He had no idea if the charges against his brother could be as bad as I was telling him, but he grasped that I was right about one thing. Ralph wasn't about to take a percentage of any murder

charges.

“I also know that if you don't take your hand off that damn pistol, I am going to slam the drawer on your wrist,” I said in my first direct threat. I was a little relieved when Ralph actually closed the drawer, but was not at all surprised when the office door opened a moment later and a very large bodyguard stepped into the room. The guy was a body-builder and I sized up my slim odds against him before I waved my detective shield and motioned for him to rest his hulking mass on the sofa. “Make yourself comfortable, we are almost done here.”

The big man glanced at Michael and moved away from the doorway, but didn't sit down. I pulled one of the business cards from my shirt breast pocket and placed it on the desk. I placed an index finger on it and slid it next to the MacBook laptop beside Ralph's right arm.

“Just have him call me when he calls you. That's all I need, and it's the best thing either of you can do right now,” I assured Ralph. “If I bring him in, we can control where he is arrested and where he is held. The locals will throw him in Central Lock-Up and he'll get a shiv in his back the same day. The Feds probably want the guys that want your brother a lot more than they want your brother. What they would really like to do, though, is to pin his murder on them when he gets himself killed.”

“And what do you get from bringing him in?” Ralph was left wondering.

“I'll get to go home and wait for something a lot more interesting to do than tracking down your numb-nuts of a brother.”

Ralph just stared as I spun around and walked out the door. The imposing thug was left wondering

BLOWBACK

what he was supposed to do. Throwing me out was both unnecessary now that I was leaving on my own, and unwise as I turned out to be carrying a badge. Ralph probably hoped this was the last he would see of me, but also knew he would continue to attract unwelcome visitors until one side or the other tracked down his brother.

I wandered back through the dealership unescorted and paused for a second at the receptionist desk. I asked her for a piece of paper as though I was going to write a note, but instead spent the next couple of minutes studying the layout and the operation in action. There were deals being made in a couple of the salesmen's cubicles, all involving customers that were dressed as well as they could be on what little money they made. Not one deal involved any of the punks in white T-shirts and loose jeans that I pegged as likely gang members earlier. Six of them were loitering around a late-model Mustang convertible. I noted that all of the salesmen on the showroom floor were actively avoiding them, as though they knew the young men had come to see someone specific and not to shop for a car. One of the salesmen came by and handed the receptionist a stack of papers and a set of license plates that looked like he had just taken them off a car.

"The buyers give you plates? I always thought you were supposed to give them the plates," I said as though making a joke instead of an observation.

The receptionist smiled brightly as she arranged what she had just been handed into a bright red folder. "Oh, no, it is something Ralph likes to do for his customers if they bring us a car as a trade-in."

"What exactly is it that he does for these folks?" I

H. MAX HILLER

asked as though I were interested in her boss's acts of generosity.

"He has me turn their old plates in for them when I pick up the ones for the new owners. Otherwise they could get in a lot of trouble for not turning them in."

"So, you'll turn those in later today?" I asked as though the answer was obvious.

"No, just once a week," she giggled and shook her head.

"Well, how nice of Mr. Ferris to think of that," I smiled warmly.

I was headed towards my car when Ralph and his bodyguard came onto the show room floor. It didn't look as though he said anything to the receptionist and she most likely did not mention the compliment I paid him. She probably just hoped Ralph would talk to the rough-looking guys standing by the Mustang so they would leave.

6

THE PERSON MOST LIKELY to know exactly where Michael Ferris ran off to was his girlfriend. I've always wondered what people are thinking when they leave someone they have persuaded to love them to bear the brunt of any injuries from whatever comes tumbling downhill in their absence. Ferris's girlfriend had done nothing more than attend a burlesque show with her boyfriend when he shot two men to death right in front of her. She then sat in the police station for another six hours waiting for the police to turn him loose, and likely had not seen him since they got home and he packed a suitcase because he knew it was just a matter of time before somebody ran the serial numbers on the guns involved in his altercation. Life on the run would have been no picnic for her, either, but it would have been far easier for me to track the two of them compared to finding one motivated fugitive.

Avery's file indicated that NOPD detectives were checking on her every couple of days. There had either been no request for a phone tap, or more likely the prosecutor's office was unable to convince a judge to help find their lost witness. Michael was

H. MAX HILLER

unlikely to call his girlfriend's house phone anyway, and probably had enough sense not to call her cellphone, either. ATF agents had interviewed her once, as well, but only once. There was an outside possibility that they would keep a loose surveillance on her, if only because the Feds have a big enough budget that they can afford to over-estimate their quarry.

These were the thoughts that rattled about in my mind as I drove towards Annunciation Street in the Irish Channel. This neighborhood was barely a dozen blocks from the mansions of St. Charles Avenue, but light years away from them socially and economically. This was the area of four to six room shotgun-style houses that had been home to successive waves of new immigrants. Irish ditch diggers gave the neighborhood its longest lasting name but, after the storm, this neighborhood became home to an uncomfortable mix of newly-arrived young white professionals, blue-collar workers who had raised families here, retirees whose kids would likely sell their homes when they died, and families displaced from the flood-damaged public housing projects who now occupied much of the overpriced rental stock.

I approached Ferris's shotgun double, a one story duplex split lengthwise, in an indirect manner that would confound anyone watching the house or following me. The streets between Magazine Street and the river are narrow enough that they run as alternating one-way streets to allow for parking on both sides of the street. I drove on the streets running parallel to either side of Annunciation to spot anyone watching the house through the block. I assumed that if I could not see the house from either

BLOWBACK

of these streets then nobody else would be doing surveillance from there, either. The street to the river side of the address is a wide industrial truck-route called Tchoupitoulas. It did not present an opening to see between the houses so I doubled back on the street above my target.

I did see the house by looking over my shoulder on Laurel Street as I went by a patch of open ground that doubled as a playground and ball field. There were a half dozen young Black adolescents loitering by the entrance to the fenced off playground, but that activity was most likely a gang selling drugs. I also noticed a heavily modified Jeep Wrangler parked behind a gray Econoline van on the far side of the park. Neon beer signs in the windows of a tavern across the street from the van opened the possibility that the owners of the Jeep and the van were just enjoying a cold beer in their favorite neighborhood bar, but the Texas plates on both vehicles pretty well ruled out that being the case. The bevy of stickers for the NRA and a variety of firearm brands on the rear window of the Jeep lacked any sort of discretion as well.

The gun-nuts from Texas that Michael crossed were the only other party I could see taking an active interest in Michael's girlfriend. I really hoped they were either going to prove patient, or at least try to be discreet, in dealing with her. I didn't want this to end up as another case where some gang used the unprotected family or girlfriend of someone who crossed them to 'send a message' or 'leave their handiwork.' I just hoped that their very indiscreet presence was meant to do nothing more than instill fear.

I climbed out of the Cadillac and made sure to

H. MAX HILLER

pull my shirt over the laser-sighted Glock I took from my hip and tucked against the small of my back. I locked the doors and sauntered into the corner bar. It was typically cool and dark despite the large plate glass windows looking out on the street corner and the playground. The bar was empty but for myself and the heavysset female bartender. She ignored me until I sat down and set money on the bar for the Abita draft I gestured towards as I spun around and looked out the window.

“Nice Jeep out there,” I said and pointed my beer towards the heavily modified four-wheel drive vehicle.

“Lot nicer than the jerks driving it,” she shrugged and offered her opinion.

“They come in often?”

“Just to use the bathroom and payphone,” she hissed. “They drag cases of beer from Rouse's into that van every day but don't spend a dime in here.”

“Every day?” I faked some disbelief. “Are they living in that van or what?”

“I dunno. They've been there a week now, but I can't say for sure why.”

“Maybe I'll just go find out,” I told her and finished the beer in three gulps. She was more than a little dumbstruck as I walked straight to the van.

I had the element of surprise going for me as I slung my badge on a lanyard around my neck like an experienced police detective might. The hope was that they would react to the badge's familiar location and not the State Police insignia before I sat down and the badge disappeared under the folds of my shirt. I simultaneously banged on the side and pulled open the right-hand rear door of the van, stepping into their possible line of fire with nothing but the

BLOWBACK

flash of my badge and a big smile.

I had barely a second to survey the set up before the pair started to react, first to my presence and then to the badge. There was a small Canon high definition video camera aimed from the dashboard, its output being fed to the large screen laptop computer on a small desk behind the driver's seat. I heard no audio, so I could not immediately decide if they were simply using the computer as a monitor, or were actually streaming the video to other interested viewers.

They had a low-backed upholstered sofa positioned behind the passenger seat, suggesting that they were watching her twenty-four hours a day. The place reeked of sweat, spilled beer, and very faintly of antibiotic ointment. The food wrappers were from the Wendy's a few blocks away, which I took to mean that these two were from so far out of state that they were afraid to eat the local cuisine.

The two were in their early twenties, wearing jeans and T-shirts from a gun shop in Port Arthur, but with no other indications of them being what Avery had described to me as gun-nuts anywhere to be seen. The one sitting up on the sofa had some sort of dark blue tattoo on the back of his left hand, but this was the hand he hastily slipped back under the blanket covering him from his chest to his legs.

Both had sweaty, greasy, hair that was cut fairly short and they were clean shaven. The one on the sofa grabbed what was probably a semi-automatic carbine trapped under the covers, but hastily laid it back down when he saw my shiny gold badge. My element of surprise was gone, so I needed some way to keep them from getting spooked and running. Idiots like these two watching the house was an

H. MAX HILLER

easier situation to handle than whatever their leader's next idea might be.

“Wow, am I glad to see you two,” I said and sat down on the ice chest full of beer, which was the first thing resembling a seat that I could find. “How's the surveillance going?”

“Excuse me?” the one at the desk asked and turned off the computer monitor.

“You're the guys watching Ferris's place, right?” I asked and pointed to the house I was headed to next. I was going to toy with this pair before I did that. “I was told that ATF had two guys sitting on his girl, and here you are. Or are you two watching the crack dealer on the other side of the park?”

I have always wanted to have a camera for those moments when amateurs have to simultaneously digest some really bad news they have just heard, such as the presence of ATF agents nearby, and lie their way through a confusing situation. The spooked young men looked at one another in a hasty effort to decide whether to flee or fake their way through the next couple of minutes. They did not disappoint me with their choice.

“We're just here for the girl. The locals have the dealer on one of their crime cameras,” the one on the cot assured me. I had no more reason to believe that NOPD's crime camera in the area was working than I did that these two actually were plainclothes Federal agents. “Nobody told us that you were coming by. I guess we need to work on our disguise, huh?”

“Start by buying your beer from the bar over there. Be better neighbors,” I advised them. Keeping the locals happy was a lesson I had learned the hard way. I pointed at the house down the street again. “So, is she home?”

BLOWBACK

“She should be leaving for work in about fifteen minutes,” the one at the desk said and went ahead and turned the computer monitor back on. He had been careful not to interrupt the feed, which tipped me that the video signal was important to somebody watching it somewhere else. I couldn't imagine that the show being watched at the far end of the internet feed was thought to be any more exciting than the live action version.

“Well, I need to have a word with her before she does. You guys keep up the good work. Give Hutchings my regards,” I said as I stepped out of the van and started to shut the doors.

“Who?” one of the pair just had to ask.

“Gerald Hutchings,” I patiently elaborated as though talking to people as stupid as I actually thought they were. “You know, the head of the ATF here in New Orleans, right?”

“Damn, I thought you said somebody else,” the other one vainly tried to cover. “Who should we say came calling?”

“Chief of Detectives, Bill Avery.”

I kicked myself for pushing it with the pair. I had no more idea who the head of the local ATF office was these days than they did. I just wanted to see if they knew enough to either challenge the name I gave them, which was the name of my physical therapist, or were dumb enough to simply repeat it. I hadn't really wanted to give them anything useful about myself if I could avoid it, but in a moment they would have me on the video feed. I scrawled the license numbers of both vehicles on the back of a business card as I rounded the van and walked towards the nearby residence, figuring to get Avery to ID the owners the next time we met so I could

bring him up to speed.

The rusty Chrysler convertible registered to Michael's girlfriend was parked across the street from the house. There was a restored antique Harley parked under the carport that led to Michael's customizing shop behind the duplex. The large cycle looked like something Michael might have been riding daily. I wasn't sure whether or not the girlfriend was making a passive-aggressive point in leaving it uncovered in his absence. I had a sudden hope of getting something useful from the interview if she was harboring some sort of anger or grudge that could be tapped into.

There was movement at the kitchen curtains when someone spotted me in the backyard. I turned and waved at the barely visible silhouette. A moment later an attractive brunette in an open necked tuxedo shirt and black tuxedo pants hastily tucked into red ostrich skin cowboy boots opened the back door and came outside.

Whatever bad decisions and wrong choices Michael Ferris had made to this point in his life, convincing this woman to fall in love with him was probably the smartest thing he had ever done. The brief biography contained in the file I was carrying only put the facts of a life on paper. Julie Hart in person was strikingly beautiful without quite being gorgeous. Her skin was lightly freckled, her large eyes were as blue as an afternoon sky, her thick, shoulder-length dark brown hair was pulled back with a simple hair tie, and the man's tuxedo shirt couldn't hide her buxom figure. It also couldn't hide the heavy revolver in her waistband.

She was twenty-nine years old, attended grade school and high school at Sacred Heart and had

BLOWBACK

earned twenty credits towards a degree in architecture at Loyola before dropping out. She stopped attending classes the semester after Hurricane Katrina. Julie was now making a career as a waitress at one of the many Brennan-owned restaurants in the Quarter. She and Michael Ferris had shared this house, which was rented in both of their names, for the past two years.

“Julie Hart?” People always smile when strangers call to them by their first names, but almost nobody does when they are greeted by their full name. Julie, though, came up with a genuinely welcoming smile. It verged on a grin.

“Let me guess,” she said with a faint sing-song in her diction. “You’re not here about a bike.”

“No, but this is a great looking one,” I admitted and ran a hand over the dusty cream-colored gas tank.

“It’s a ’47 Knucklehead,” Julie informed me. “Do you know anything about motorcycles?”

“Not much, but I am sort of an expert on knuckleheads. I’m Detective Holland from the State Police,” I said as disarmingly as possible. “I would guess that I am one in a long line of recent visitors?”

“My favorites were the bounty hunters,” she said and brought her left arm from behind her, holding a Mossberg pump-action shotgun in her hand. “They only came by the one time.”

“And the two guys in the van up the street? Have they stopped by as yet?” I pointed, testing her awareness. I didn’t think she was likely to shoot me, so I tried to ignore the cannon in her hand as best I could. It’s hard to do if you’ve ever been shot.

“They’ve been there since a few days after Michael took off,” she shrugged. “The bartender you

spoke to earlier is my aunt. She liked you.”

“Good for you, Julie Hart,” I grinned and handed her a business card. “Apparently it is too late to warn you that people may come looking for your boyfriend.”

“Fiancé,” she corrected me and looked at the card. She looked up and studied my face for a long moment. I pointed at the shotgun by her side.

“It occurs to me that you are probably pretty well set if they make a move. Can we talk inside?”

“Sure,” she shrugged and led me back the way she had come. She stopped at the doorway as she pulled her boots off. She also set the shotgun in the closet by the door. “We just had the floors done. Do you mind removing your shoes?”

The interior of the century old dwelling had been remodeled, opening what had been five rooms into three. The bathroom and bedroom were the only enclosed rooms, the kitchen, dining room, living room, and a former bedroom had been combined into one large space and the ceiling opened to show the original cypress cross members above the glossy heart pine floors. The windows had been replaced with wood framed double glazed, probably hurricane proof, windows identical in dimensions to the originals. The finish of the work and small touches of more obvious expense, like the marble kitchen counters, indicated that the money coming into this house likely exceeded what I approximated to be their combined legitimate incomes.

“This is a nice place,” I complimented her as I looked around the open area she left me standing in as she went into the bedroom with her boots in hand. I felt a little foolish holding my own shoes in one hand but saw no place to set them down. The

BLOWBACK

pistol was back in whatever hiding place she had for it in the kitchen. I assumed that there were additional firearms secreted about the house.

“Thank you. I did most of the work myself. Our landlord let us remodel in exchange for rent. I think he hopes we'll offer to buy the place. I love watching those shows on cable about doing rehabs and flipping houses. I just don't have the guts to do it professionally.” Julie said through the partially open door to the bedroom. “I have to finish getting ready for work. Ask me whatever you want from out there, okay?”

“You really should consider being a decorator. You have a real talent,” I shouted after her and realized that Julie had completely distracted me. I didn't expect to find Michael behind the sofa, and had no reason to believe she was going to blab anything to me that she had not already told everyone else. This not make me feel any better about having my questioning completely derailed by her being so pleasant.

I looked a little more closely at the open space. The large flat-screen television in front of the Stickley-style leather and wood sofa was tuned to a game show, but the volume was turned down. I turned and looked at the scant library, which was just a handful of literature selections, probably left over from one or both of their years in school, and a couple of dozen big picture books on either design or the history of motorcycles. The bookshelf had one oddly empty spot in it, a gap in a line of photographs of the couple in happier times. The mail on the oak dining room table was addressed to both of them, largely bills and magazines. The Dell desktop computer and monitor were both turned off, as was

the printer. I noted a web-cam clipped to the top of the monitor.

The pictures on the walls were mostly enlargements of architectural and scenic shots one or the other of them had probably taken, but the mats and frames were professionally done. The rest of the décor included the locally requisite Jazz Fest poster – this one for the 2002 festival. I thought it might mark the year the couple had begun dating. The locks on the front door were secured. There were two Yale deadbolts in addition to the short chain. Neither of the locks looked newly installed, but this had not been a particularly safe part of town even before Hurricane Katrina changed the demographics.

“I suppose I should ask about the last time you spoke with Michael,” I finally said loud enough to be heard through the slightly ajar bedroom door.

“I don’t have his new number. It’s blocked on my phone,” she shouted back.

“New number?” I wondered if she had unexpectedly let something slip.

“He left his cell here when he left,” Julie said. She had emerged from the bedroom, her feet now in dressier work shoes instead of the boots that I had rather hoped she would wear. She turned and disappeared into the bathroom. She left the bedroom door open, and I noticed only one side of the antique brass bed seemed to have been slept in. There was no male clothing in sight. There was, though, an unusually large photo on the night stand of Julie and Michael in wetsuits and diving under an oil rig. “Mike texts me every night.”

“Does he?” I asked and looked around for her phone. It was probably in her purse, and the purse

BLOWBACK

was no doubt in her bedroom. I saw no benefit in losing any trust she had in me by having her find me rummaging through her purse without a warrant.

“Most nights,” she shouted. The shouting back and forth had the effect of negating any sense of pitch or inflection in her responses. I sensed that she knew this and had arranged the conversation accordingly. “He just wants his life back.”

“Well hiding isn't likely to get that done,” I said.

“Turning himself in isn't likely to, either. Is it?”

“It would be a good first step. Nobody can protect either of you indefinitely in your current situations, and you probably don't want to live the rest of your own life alone and still having to worry about who shows up looking for him.”

“So, what then? I'm supposed to tell him what a great guy you are and to surrender and you'll fix everything?” she shouted, but I heard the scorn in her voice.

“Well, I do fix things,” I suggested. “It just depends on how broken they are and how badly someone wants them fixed. My task is to find Michael and bring him in, voluntarily or involuntarily.”

“You mean dead or alive?” she shouted again, now a little angrier. I pressed my hands to either side of the door frame, feeling tired of her maneuvering this conversation.

“If that were the case, I'd just go drink beer with your aunt all afternoon until someone else finds him or he gets picked up in a traffic stop years from now. From what I know of the case, he could get a pretty easy deal on the shooting if he gives up the guys he bought the gun from. There are worse things than witness protection, believe me,” I made my case to

the door.

There was a brief pause and then Julie opened the door. Her makeup was minimal, meant to accent her eyes and to conceal the freckling across her nose. She was a little startled by my immediate presence. I realized I had unintentionally scared her and had managed to slip behind the bold mask she wore so well. I backed up a step and brought my hands up in a show of peace.

“Can you give me your version of what happened at the Beauvoirs’ club?”

“Three guys came through the door and headed for Michael. He shot two of them and the other guy dropped his gun and hobbled out.”

“How did your boyfriend know they were coming after him? It sounds like it all happened pretty fast.” I was impressed with his fast reaction to the situation. It didn’t sound like he had hesitated for a moment before defending himself and Julie.

“Beats me. He saw the guns and pushed me to the floor just before he started shooting.”

“Maybe they weren’t after him,” I was talking to myself now. Everyone had assumed they were after him because they were the only ones he killed, and because his gun matched those of the dead guys. Julie just shrugged at this idea. “What were you two doing there, anyway?”

“I was thinking about trying out for their revue. I heard it pays better than waiting tables.” I caught myself before I offered an opinion on what I saw as her promising future in burlesque. “They only started doing shows in the last couple of months. I hear their nightclub is losing a lot of money. They don’t book enough local bands and most of the local musicians think she’s not a very good singer.”

BLOWBACK

This was an interesting rumor to discuss with the Beauvoirs the next time I saw them. The possibility that one or the other, or both of them, had been the intended targets didn't seem nearly as far-fetched as I would have liked it to be. Julie didn't seem to have given the incident any further thought than being glad that it wasn't her or Michael lying on a table in the morgue. I was confident that Michael had told her what he knew before he skipped town, or had at least told her enough that she made sure to always be situationally aware while stuck here by herself.

"Look, you have my card. My cellphone number's on there. Text Michael and let him know that I am looking for him, and that I can help him get ahead of this instead of his being the fox in everyone else's fox hunt," I said evenly. She remained where she was. "I'll even give you a sign of good faith and get rid of the guys in the van for you."

"How are you going to do that? They aren't breaking any laws that you can hold them for, are they?" She sounded unconvinced.

"I didn't say that I was going to arrest them," I pointed out. "I just said I would get rid of them."

"What are you going to do, shoot them to get me to trust you?"

"Would that work?" I laughingly wondered. Julie honestly could not tell if I was joking. I was obviously starting to worry her.

"It would just scare the piss outta me," she admitted and slipped past me to go to the bedroom. I waited for her to slam the door, but she had only gone to get her tuxedo jacket and purse. "I need to get to work now."

"Okay, I'll walk you out," I offered. She

shrugged, figuring that I would do so no matter what she wanted. It also wouldn't hurt for the guys in the van to see her with a cop, even one as strange as I was proving to be.

Julie locked the front door and I walked her to her car, both of us looking towards the van as we crossed the street. I held her car door for her and closed it once she was buckled in. She waved my card at me and tucked it inside her jacket pocket, smiling but not as comfortably as she did when we first met. I turned and blocked the van as Julie pulled out and drove away. The van remained parked, perhaps because of my presence but more likely because she followed her routine so well that they knew where she was headed. I made a mental note to drive by her place of work later and see if there was a van parked there, as well.

I walked back to the bar and came out a moment later with a six pack of Heineken in a paper sack. I walked across the park towards the four junior entrepreneurs on the corner. They ignored me at first, probably thinking I was just another white drunk from the neighborhood headed home with my liquid dinner. One of them may have had a quick thought that they did not remember ever having seen me before, but all of them apparently decided I was neither a potential customer nor any sort of threat even as I walked towards them. The way I suddenly stopped in front of them caused just enough confusion that their reaction was to assume they were being attacked.

“Hey, chill,” I grinned and spoke in an almost conspiratorial voice. I did not reach for my pistol as they each fingered their own. “Have a beer and give me a minute of your time.”

BLOWBACK

The youngest of the bunch, a pudgy Black kid about sixteen years old, snatched the bag and was surprised that it held cold beers. He twisted off lids and handed them around, except to me.

“What kinda cop are you, anyway? You gonna try and take our money or something?” the tall one I had already pegged as the leader finally spoke up. It was telling that they suspected a middle-aged white guy wanting to talk to them of being a crooked cop. This validated my argument with Avery that NOPD lost the trust of the city’s minority communities in the wake of Katrina when they chose to treat everyone as looters rather than as fellow citizens needing food and water.

“Do I really look like a cop?” I sneered. I had their attention, but also saw that most of them were still ready to draw on me at the slightest provocation. Every crazy drunk around here knew better than to stop and talk to these young thugs. “I don’t care what you’re doing out here. I just need a favor.”

“What’s the favor?” one of the other boys asked.

“I own the bike shop over there,” I lied and pointed vaguely towards Uptown. I really hoped that none of them knew Michael or that there was even a bike shop in the next block. They said nothing and I pressed on. “I have to leave town for a couple of weeks and I need someone to keep an eye on my place and my girl. We just found out she’s pregnant and she’s really worried about being alone right now.”

“Yeah, bitches be like that,” one of the others thankfully verified. “Remember when Juanita got herself pregnant and it was all I could do to get outta my place at night?”

“I know, man,” I commiserated, trying to draw

them further into this improvised story. "I just need someone to keep an eye on the place. You know, to walk by a couple of times a day. Let people see you so they know someone's guarding her. It's worth a hundred bucks a week."

"Yeah, I'll do that for you," the leader decided. He was probably nineteen years old, basketball-player-lanky and strong. He looked to the vinyl-sided house I was pointing towards and nodded that he understood the address. "But, it'll cost two bills a week."

"Fine, as long as nothing happens while I'm gone." I acted as though we were actually in negotiations. "I'll be back in two weeks and pay you then."

"Huh uh, you pay right now." The dealer stuck his hand out, palm up.

"Right," I cautiously balked. I didn't want to lose their help, but I also wasn't going to actually give money to any of these kids. "Are you going to give me my money back if I pay you and something happens? If nothing happens while I am gone, I'll put five hundred bucks in your hand when I get back, how's that for a deal? You won't have any trouble collecting because you know where I live."

"What you think's gonna happen?"

"I don't know, but that van never used to park there. I don't think it's the cops. For all I know, some guys are planning to move on your corner. My girlfriend is sure they are casing our place and plan to rob us while I'm gone. I don't think that's the case, but I just don't want anything to happen to my girl, okay?"

"That van?" the leader asked and turned to look at the unmarked panel van. I was counting on

BLOWBACK

neither of the guys in the van looking this way just then. I pointed at it and confirmed that it was the one that was worrying my imaginary girlfriend.

“That’s the one. Just keep an eye on it and I’ll see you soon, okay?” I asked and started walking away. The dealer nodded but kept his attention on the van, now squinting at it as though he had some sort of x-ray vision.

I walked back to my locked car and drove away. I figured one of a number of scenarios would play out fairly soon. There was the possibility that the sudden interest in the house by another bunch of punks would shake Julie’s hard shell enough to call me in a much more cooperative mood. There was now the certainty of some sort of confrontation between the dealer and the duo in the van, and that could work any of a number of ways. The Texans could tell the dealer the truth and he might believe it, but more likely there would be no discussion at all before the bullets started flying. I wanted to disrupt the routine that Julie and her stalkers were settled into, because it was a static situation that was not likely to change on its own, and I hate static situations. Dynamic ones are always so much more interesting and provide better opportunities and options to exploit.

7

THE PHOTOGRAPH I spotted on Julie Hart's bedside table was my best lead on where Michael Ferris was holed up. Ralph wasn't going to be of any help to me, and I didn't have enough time to prove he was actively helping Michael. The photograph was pretty thin as leads go, but it was enough to pursue in the absence of anything else.

I started in Metairie, where there was the largest concentration of dive shops. A couple of them had been damaged or flooded by the storm and never reopened, and I struck out at all of the others. My father paid for my SCUBA certification at Harry's Dive Shop when I was still in high school and I lost an hour catching up when one of my instructors recognized me.

After wasting most of the morning, I realized I should have started on the Westbank. The Ferris brothers grew up in Gretna and were most likely to do business where they were familiar with the people running a place. Temento's Dive Shop in Westwego has been in business since the late 1950s and still supplies most of the area's commercial divers with their equipment.

BLOWBACK

The middle-aged salesman who approached me as I browsed the display of buoyancy vests was disappointed when it turned out I was looking for someone and not something. He was hesitant about touching the photograph I handed him of Michael Ferris, even after I'd shown him the State Police badge on my belt. He did give it a good long look before he tried to convince me that he had never seen Michael. He held onto the photograph as he led me to the clerk working behind the counter, and handed him the picture.

"That's Michael Ferris. What the hell has he done now?" the clerk asked and stifled his instinct to laugh. He could tell that whatever Michael was involved in wasn't being laughed off if a State Police detective was going all over town showing his picture and asking around about him.

"He skipped bail," I simplified my explanation. It was a close approximation and wasn't an answer they would likely question any further.

"Have you talked to his brother?"

"Ralph put as much distance between them as he could." I sensed this clerk had a personal background with one or both brothers that went beyond the store. He looked to be about the right age to have gone to school with one or the other of them, and the Westbank they grew up in was a small enough place that he may have even been a neighbor.

"Sounds like Ralphie," the clerk did laugh this time. "Why are you looking for Mike here, though?"

"I'm playing a hunch. I think he may be looking for work as a diver. He's on the run but he still needs to make a living."

"You might have better luck asking around some

H. MAX HILLER

motorcycle shops,” the clerk offered. “He is pretty well known for his custom work.”

“That’s why I think he’d assume it would be the first place someone would look for him. I’m going with the idea that he must have some other useable skill.” The clerk and I stared at one another for a moment. I was now sure that Michael’s situation was a local topic of conversation and this guy knew at least as much about Michael as was in my files.

“Well, he probably isn’t working as a commercial diver. He’s only got a Master certification, and that isn’t anywhere close to what even the shallow water outfits require,” the clerk finally advised me. It sounded a lot like he was trying to wave me off this line of thought, but I was willing to trust his opinion if not his intentions.

“I don’t know, Pete, he could be working with some of those guys still pulling boats out of Barataria Bay.” The guy who spoke up behind me was wearing a polo shirt with a charter fishing boat’s name embroidered above one breast and Captain Dan over the other one. He was gray-haired and well-tanned, and looked exactly like what I thought a charter boat captain should look like. He was waiting to buy several jugs of something called Corexit.

“Pulling boats?” I had no idea what he meant by this term, but everyone else seemed to be nodding in agreement that it was a viable possibility.

“FEMA’s paying a couple of grand apiece for any boats salvage divers pull out of the channels or drag back into the water from wherever they wound up on shore. Most of the shrimp boats and charter boats down there wound up one place or the other after the storm,” the captain explained. I now recalled the photograph of shrimp boats blocking Route 23 in

BLOWBACK

Empire right after the storm.

“So they’d hire someone like Mike?” I used Ferris’ local name to maintain the illusion that this was a conversation about an old friend and not a detective looking for a fugitive.

“It’s not that tough of work and there’s not near enough divers around,” the clerk added his two cents. “But, most of the outfits he would be working for are going to be hard to track down. They’re not in the phone book or got a website.”

“I guess it’s still worth a shot,” I shrugged. I didn’t want to seem doggedly determined lest one of these guys worry enough to tip off Michael. I needed him to feel safe wherever he was so he didn’t change his new routine. It was hard enough developing a lead even this thin. Having to start all over yet again was going to make it impossible to find him in the time frame I was given. I caught a whiff of something that smelled a lot like kerosene and traced the odor to the gallon jugs Captain Dan set on the counter. “What’s that stuff?”

“Corexit. It’s a petroleum dispersant. You’ll probably be able to track your guy down by the odor of this stuff on his gear. The fly-by-night outfits get around the Coast Guard regulations about containing oil and fuel from any submerged boats by soaking any spills with this stuff. It breaks up oil slicks by making the oil settle to the bottom.” The stranger was being so helpful that I didn’t ask what his own use of the product was going to be. The piece of meat Brett Beauvoir claimed smelled like kerosene might well have tested positive for this chemical, and knowing its purpose nudged me just that little bit forward in my search for Michael Ferris.

H. MAX HILLER

I thanked everyone for their time and headed out the door, but glanced back once to see their reaction to my visit. The topic of discussion appeared to already be on something else by the time I made it to the Cadillac.



I NEEDED TO MEET CHIEF AVERY to do our first debriefing on my progress. We decided to meet at the walk-up barbecue shack across the street from the criminal court building and police headquarters on Tulane Avenue. I arrived ahead of Avery and parked the unmarked Cadillac cruiser on the street directly in front of the barbecue place rather than in one of the pay-lots behind the bright yellow shack. I sat at a picnic table near the huge drum smokers and looked high on the 1930s-era temple of justice across the street to read the engraved reminder to all who enter the courthouse that *'This is a government of law not of men.'*

I began grappling with the nuanced differences between the rule of law and what defines justice long before I hung the badge of a State Police detective on my belt. My college coursework in economics covering Professor Merton's theories about unintended consequences had crept back into my thought patterns. The building's engraved sentiment spelled out my internal thoughts about laws being the intentional consequence of needing to define unacceptable acts, and how those same laws created the unintended consequences of justice; such as sons

H. MAX HILLER

committing crimes to help support households where the father is serving time in prison.

I was not happy with the consequences that rounding up Michael Ferris was likely to have on him and those around him. Catching Michael would make him an easier target for anyone still looking to do him harm. He might be murdered in jail if he was placed in the general population. A sniper could drop him when he was going or coming from court. Michael was definitely a sitting duck if he was released on bond and sent home, and that would unnecessarily endanger Julie as well. I doubted that Michael was a good candidate for any witness protection program, because he probably wouldn't want to leave the only place he ever called home. It was going to be difficult to hand Michael Ferris over to Chief Avery as expected and not feel like I had blood on my hands. There was a point in my life when such things didn't bother me, but that version of me literally died on an operating table in Baghdad, and the guy who woke up in his place had a new conscience.

"Been here long?" Avery asked and shook me from my reverie.

"No. I've just been mulling over what I've put together so far," I said rather than start another argument over what I was actually thinking about. I rummaged through my bag for the yellow legal pad with my notes from the last couple of days. "I think I know where to look for Michael."

"So you have a lead?"

"That would be a generous exaggeration. I have places to look." I set the pad on the table between us. "I may have also stumbled upon a case within a case. I think Ralph Ferris has something going with his

BLOWBACK

car lots. Look into any unsolved crimes involving cars with license plates that didn't match the cars they were on. Ralph may be running a getaway car rental service."

"And you arrived at this theory how?" Avery automatically questions my off-topic 'findings.' The number of these additional investigations that had so far proven to be worthwhile made my hunches hard to ignore.

"The dealership turns in the plates on any local trade-ins once a week. This gives them a few days' float to use them as they see fit. The place had customers that I would profile as gang-bangers, if profiling were acceptable," I said with a wry grin. Avery cracked a smile as well. "None of the thugs I saw at the car lot seemed like they came there to buy a car. They seemed to be waiting to speak with Ralph, which is suspicious in its own way."

"Fair enough, I'll have somebody look into it," the Chief shrugged. "I thought you said that you might have actually made some headway on finding Michael Ferris."

"Oh, I have. There are two guys watching Michael's house in a van parked down the street. They have a camera feed set up for someone else's viewing pleasure, but they haven't made a move against his live-in girlfriend yet. I don't know if they are waiting for a special moment or orders, but I am working on getting them moved off the house," I continued. "I think they are most likely connected to the gun-nuts the ATF thinks stole the guns that started this whole thing. One has what looks like prison ink."

"Explain what you meant by 'moved off the house.' That doesn't sound like a good thing." I

hoped to slip that part of my report past him.

“I suggested to the drug dealers down the street that the guys in the van might be getting ready to make a move on their corner.”

“What did you expect to accomplish by doing that?” Avery asked with more than a little exasperation.

“With any luck the drug dealers will shoot up the van. The guys in the van may kill the drug dealers instead, but that’s a decent trade off. The van will be pulled off the house either way, and there won’t be any sort of indication that the police played a part in doing so.”

“You don’t think they will just replace the van? Ferris did kill two of their men, after all.” He knew it was too late to stop what was already set in motion.

“I’ll bet the guys he shot were flunkies. I think whoever gave Michael his gun is afraid he might roll on them if he gets arrested, which suggests to me that whoever *that* is has a lot of information to trade and is who I should be trying to find.”

“What about the girlfriend?” Avery asked, trying to ignore my suggestion that we change the focus of my investigation. Avery trusts my instincts and has learned to tolerate my methodologies because I get the desired results. I have to remind myself from time to time he is always going to be the one who has to smooth the feathers I ruffle and clear up any legal messes I leave in my wake.

“Julie seems fairly fearless in all of this. She knows she is being watched, but she has good door locks and Michael left her with an arsenal. She keeps the house suspiciously immaculate. Hers is the only toothbrush in the bathroom, and only one side of their bed looks like it’s been slept in. The picture she

BLOWBACK

keeps closest to her is one of her boyfriend scuba-diving near the oil rigs, probably near Grand Isle.”

“What's any of that mean?”

“Well, let's see,” I assumed my familiar briefing role and flipped the pad to a clean sheet of paper. I made a circle of boxes, one for each point, and then drew lines between them to make a central point of intersection. “Michael only shows up on Sundays, but he calls to threaten them almost every night. The chemical he used to poison the Beauvoirs' dog supposedly smelled like kerosene. So does at least one of the dispersants they use on oil and gas leaking from sunken boats. Michael has never lived outside of New Orleans, so he has no known contacts or support network outside of here that anyone knows about.”

“So, where do you think Michael Ferris is hiding?” Avery asked. He seemed more amused than impressed at how quickly I may have found the fugitive's trail.

“I am going to look for him closer to the coast,” I declared and tapped my pencil on the intersecting dot on my notepad. “He bought his burner phone in Houma. I think he went there to find work doing salvage diving.”

“And if he isn't there?” Avery asked, as if he questioned my judgement in the matter. He resisted the urge to laugh at my confounded expression.

“I'll tell you what. You can pick up the tab at K-Paul's if I hand Michael over before French Quarter Fest.” Betting food was the best way to make the Chief of Detectives take me seriously.

“So you figured all this out in two days' time,” Avery laughed as he made the time calculation on his fingers. “Even though nobody else came up with this

salvage diver idea in the last three weeks.”

“Nobody has shown as much interest in finding him for those three weeks,” I pointed out as I stuffed the notebook back into the messenger bag. “I am serious, though, about Ralph Ferris, and that Michael himself is probably a lot more involved in gun running than anyone thinks.”

Avery grunted something about my idea and rose to leave.

“Oh, there’s a couple of things I will need from you. Get a search warrant for Michael’s place and have your guys see if his dive gear is there without making it look like it’s why they are there. They should probably run the serial numbers on any guns they find as well. Also, can you run some license plate numbers for me, and can you get me Julie and Ralph’s cellphone records for the last two months?”

“That’s longer than he’s been gone.” I’d handed him a laundry list of things to get but he was sharp enough to catch the smallest details.

“I want to see who he was talking to before this started. I don’t believe Ralph’s story that he and his brother haven’t talked to one another since their mother died. Being the last two in the family should have driven them closer together.” I found the card with the plate numbers written on it and shoved it towards him. He tucked it into an inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“I’ll take care of this first thing when I get back in the office. The search warrant and cellphone numbers may take a day or two.” Avery turned his attention to the hand-painted menu board over my shoulder while I stowed the notepad in my bag.

9

TONY AND I MET THE BEUAVOIRS at their nightclub Wednesday morning to do the promised security walk-through. It was a way to reassure the couple that I was actively working on the case and that I genuinely cared about their safety. Both things were true, but not nearly in equal amounts. I felt no physical threat would likely be made against either of them during the week based on what they told me of the harassment pattern, but that there was a very strong likelihood of something happening on Sunday. I planned my week around trying to find Michael Ferris between Monday and Friday, having Avery increase patrols around their house and nightclub on Saturday while I took the day off, and then personally watching their house all day Sunday.

Trotting Tony through the nightclub was a dog and pony show as far as I as concerned, but he puts on a good show. Today he was wearing an Armani suit and had one of my pistols in a leather shoulder holster purposefully bulging out from just under his left armpit. He looked considerably more formidable than he did when he was hung over at our breakfast table on Sunday.

H. MAX HILLER

“This is Anthony Vento. He is an international security consultant I have worked with and he has agreed to look over your operation and make suggestions where he sees any issues,” I told the Beauvoirs when we met them outside their nightclub. Tony gave them each a firm handshake before Brett turned to unlock and open the door. Luckily, they didn’t ask any further questions about his background in security work. Brett and Janelle led the way inside. He pulled me aside as Janelle began giving Tony a tour of the main bar area and showed him where the shooting occurred.

“How much is your guy going to charge us?”

“His advice is free and doing what he tells you will be an investment.” I tried to make the second part of this sound like more of a joke than it was. The things I would have recommended, just from what I could see off-hand, would cost thousands of dollars.

Everything that was wrong with their security was immediately evident, but none of it was likely to be changed once the couple balanced the cost-to-benefit ratio. The two front windows were tempered but easily broken. I was guessing that neither of the panes were designed to withstand serious impact, certainly not like hurricane glass. The double doors had insufficient bolts to hold them in place against anyone ramming them. The bartender had a panic button, but it was located at the door end of the bar. He would have to run towards anyone coming through the doors to press the alarm. We had taken three steps inside and found this many issues.

Brett opened the double swinging doors beside the service-well end of the bar and showed us the beer cooler and store room for the liquor.

“What’s upstairs?” I asked when I spotted the

BLOWBACK

antiquated freight elevator across from the beer cooler. It had a wooden lift-gate that had to be lowered for the elevator to operate. It was designed to carry furniture from the top floor to the showrooms on the lower levels, but that was sixty years ago.

“I have no idea,” Brett admitted. “Our lease is only for the ground floor. We hope to expand to open a private club on the second floor at some point.”

I offered no opinion on the viability of that ambition. It was unlikely to ever come to pass if the rumors of financial problems that Julie Hart told me were true. One part of Tony’s purpose in being here was to try to verify what Julie told me as best he could. I had no reason to inquire about such things within the scope of the narrow mission I was supposed to be handling, but I was beginning to think there were more parts to the puzzle than I was originally given.

Tony silently counted the visible security cameras. It would take him a little longer than it took me to realize there were no hidden ones. The cameras were positioned to be as obvious as possible, as though deterrence was their true purpose. The field of view was narrow and few of them gave overlapping angles, which meant there were going to be coverage gaps between the cameras.

“Are your cameras motion-activated?” Tony asked. His English had less of his normal accent today. I knew it was a struggle for him, which was why we rehearsed a number of questions like this one. I was the one who wanted the answers, but didn’t want to be the one who seemed too overly interested in their operation. They were not suspects, and the more I personally made them feel

H. MAX HILLER

like fools about their security, the more they might feel I believed they deserved what was happening to them. Tony was here to do all of that, but more tactfully than I would have.

“No, we turn them on when we get here and then turn them off when we leave,” Janelle said. She sounded like she knew how amateurish this sounded, and that using them in this fashion wasn’t her idea.

“So, you have no idea what goes on when you are not here?” Tony asked them to verify. He shot me a look to be sure I understood the implications. Anyone could pick their locks, or use a key from the landlord, and have full run of the entire building in their absence. The building’s owner could be using the top two stories for any number of purposes they would never know about, as well. “How long do you store your records?”

“Records?” Tony’s question was lost on Brett for a moment, until he sorted out a good translation. “Oh, you mean the recordings. We keep them for a week and then record over them.”

This time the couple saw the look Tony flashed me. They bit their tongues but definitely felt they were being unnecessarily judged. Their security measures were no worse than the average small business that had did the minimum expected of them by their insurance company. They just didn’t understand that businesses that think so narrowly are the ones criminals look for when they chose their targets.

The heavy red satin curtain separating the bar from the nightclub was laughably inadequate to stop anything or anyone. It was anybody’s guess how many people might have been hurt in the nightclub

BLOWBACK

had the three men Michael shot been the ones who opened fire. The nightclub's poor design also did not allow for a way to block access to the dressing rooms from the stage wings. Worse yet, there was a door to the dressing room corridor easily accessed from the vestibule containing the restrooms. A privacy sign on the door was their primary means to secure it. The door itself could be locked from the dressing room side, but it had a button-lock on the door knob and not a deadbolt. The back door was similarly poorly secured. There was a heavy latch bolt on it, but the last person to use the door, likely a beer deliveryman earlier in the week, hadn't bothered to have anyone latch it behind them.

"I've seen enough," I abruptly told the couple once we retraced our steps from the windowless dressing rooms to the stage. "I'm going to leave you in Tony's capable hands. He can make some suggestions to improve your security. You will then have to decide for yourself whether to take his advice."

10

I TOPPED OFF the Cadillac's fuel tank and headed west on Interstate 10 with Wednesday's lunch-time traffic. I ate lunch at a McDonald's in Houma and read the morning edition of the Houma Courier, focusing on the want ads. There were a handful of ads from companies looking for hourly laborers, but none for divers. There were also no companies advertising their services to raise any sunken shrimp or charter boats. My theory had hit a snag.

It took only a few minutes to locate the Conoco convenience store near the Southland Mall where Michael Ferris had purchased and activated the cellphone he was using to call the Beauvoirs. I showed the clerks Ferris's driver's license photograph, and received the anticipated shrugged shoulders and insincere apologies when nobody remembered selling him the phone. A check of the store records indicated that one of the clerks presently on duty was actually the one who made the sale, but he remained adamant about not recognizing the man in the picture. The manager apologized that the VHS videotape with the security camera footage from that date had already been

BLOWBACK

recorded over at least twice.

I stepped outside and considered the possibility that this photograph no longer applied to Michael Ferris. Ferris likely adopted some sort of disguise by the time he arrived in Houma. The photo itself was not the most complimentary likeness, and Michael may have done nothing more to disguise himself than pull a ball cap down to his ears and put on a pair of dark or reflective sunglasses when he bought the phone. He was wise enough to make the purchase at the busiest point on a weekday morning from a clerk who was undoubtedly paying attention to a number of other things at the same time.

My own training in subterfuge and evasion came from experienced professionals. I wasn't dressed like any state trooper any of these clerks had ever seen. I was in wrinkled khakis, a pullover shirt with the State Police logo on one breast which was covered by the light jacket I was wearing that did not have a logo on it, but that did hide my pistol, and a pair of Merrell work boots.

Had I been in Michael Ferris' shoes, I would have come into the store wearing clothes baggy enough to conceal my actual size, either flat soled sneakers to look short or something like cowboy boots to elevate myself, and I would have leaned just slightly forward to throw off my height when I passed the measuring tape on the door frame. A pair of clear reading glasses could change my face as effectively as dark sunglasses without making it seem as if I were hiding behind the glasses. Thick reading glasses would blur my vision and make it difficult to move about the store, but the way those glasses would magnify my eyes could make a sales clerk think I was either blind or someone incredibly

book-smart. Wetting my hair would darken it slightly, and allow me to comb it any way that I might choose. I also might have grown some beard stubble, shoved a cigarette behind one ear and dressed like one of the greasy bums hanging around outside.

Michael Ferris had a three-week head start in our game of hide-and-seek, so he had probably adopted a considerably more elaborate disguise by now. He may have cut or dyed his hair, but it was doubtful that he would have tried to buy a wig to really effect a change. I did not remember seeing any photos of Michael with facial hair in any of the pictures I saw at his home, so he may have grown a moustache or beard. It occurred to me that I might be better off trying to find the reason why Michael chose this particular store to buy the phone from three weeks earlier.

The nearby, but fairly small, Southland Mall would have been a better place to buy the phone and anything else Michael needed to complete his escape. Its parking lot certainly would have been a convenient place to have someone pick him up without being noticed. Michael may have avoided going inside if he thought the Mall security might sense his nervousness or even been on the watch for him, depending on how important he thought the authorities considered arresting him to be.

By now he would have begun to feel that everybody was just waiting for him to surface. Julie, and maybe his brother, surely let him know I was actively searching for him but that was no reason to believe that he would call or surrender. Despite his having shot two men dead, I did not anticipate any resistance or violence once I found him.

BLOWBACK

The region south of I-10 has always been a good place to hide. The oil fields and fishing industry have long been havens for anyone on the lam. This was the home of pirates, privateers, and Cajuns. The Cajuns are associated mostly with the swamps of the Atchafalaya, where they were unceremoniously dumped after being forced out of Canada by the British and refused re-admission to France by their own government.

The pirates and privateers made a good living from the traffic of heavily laden vessels heading to and from New Orleans, and it was Jean Laffite's gunpowder and cannon that saved New Orleans in the War of 1812. His reward for this patriotism was a pardon and expulsion from Louisiana. It was precisely these sorts of encounters with authorities that still encouraged the locals to ignore a lot of what their neighbors were up to and to defend one another against any outsiders, or strangers with badges.

I looked each way at the intersection where the Conoco station was located. The bisecting street ran into residential areas both ways. The street the store faced looked as if there were not much to my right, leaving the narrow commercial corridor near the Mall to my left as Ferris' most likely route. A narrow canal separated Main Street as I headed north, back towards Highway 90. I could have driven further into Houma, but I doubted that Michael had ventured too far into such a town with such a large police force.

The hunch paid off when I spotted the big yellow and red sign pointing towards a recruiting office for storm-related laborers a few blocks from the filling station. The set-up looked as though it moved

H. MAX HILLER

around a lot, so it may have been in a storefront closer to the filling station three weeks earlier.

I parked the Cadillac in front of an empty storefront a few doors down and walked to the recruiting office. It would be a tough sell that I was either a real cop or in need of a low-paying job if I parked that sedan in front of the place.

The office consisted of two folding tables and three dozen folding chairs in what was previously some sort of retail store. The wall supports for the clothes racks were still in place and there were no inspirational or advertising posters for the recruiters on the walls, just one big recruiting poster in the front window.

I took one of the pull-down paper numbers from a dispenser – number forty-two – and took a seat in the nearest metal folding chair. There were a dozen applicants ahead of me, each one needing barely five minutes to hear the spiel and agree to show up wherever they were being sent next or to reject the idea of working so hard for the pay being offered.

My number was called and I shuffled towards the right-hand table. A very tired woman in her fifties went through the practiced motions of gathering an application and employee packet for me as I approached. I might have been able to take a direct approach with her, flashing my badge and shoving the picture in her face, but had a last second impulse to approach it another way. I pulled the picture of Michael out of my jacket pocket and showed it to her.

“My cousin came here looking for work last month. You remember him, huh?” I mumbled and slouched as best I could. I wasn’t overdressed for the role of Michael Ferris’ shiftless cousin. I figured she

BLOWBACK

was more comfortable talking to that sort of applicant than she would be with a detective from the State Police. It occurred to me that Michael would not have risked using his real name to apply, but before I could think what name he might have used, the woman took the picture and gave it a more studied look than I would have given her credit for, then went and asked the other woman.

"I'm sorry, but neither of us remembers seeing your cousin. We see a lot of people here every day," she apologized. "Are you looking for work as well?"

"Well, what's the job?" I persisted in wasting her time.

"Do you have any special skills?" Bless her heart.

"I can scuba dive, I like doing that a lot."

The woman looked through her job offerings but came back to me with a frown. "There were a couple of companies looking for divers quite a while back, but I guess all those jobs are done now."

"What kind of work was that? Were they good jobs?"

"They mostly involved getting boats out of the way. A lot of boats sank after the storm and FEMA was paying a pretty penny to get the channels cleared so people can get back to work. The jobs paid something like twenty dollars an hour in cash daily and some of the companies even had trailers set up if people needed a place to stay."

"Oh, yeah, I would need a place to stay. Mama would not like me coming home smelling like swamp water," I nodded vigorously. It was no lie. My mother would never have allowed me in the house after a day of doing that sort of work. "Do you have the name of any of those companies? Maybe somebody quit and they still got jobs."

H. MAX HILLER

“Okay,” the woman sighed. “Here is a list of the companies we filled positions for. You be sure to tell them who sent you if you get hired.”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you,” I said and gathered up the list.

The list of companies spanned six of the parishes facing the Gulf of Mexico, nearly half the width of the state. I eliminated the ones past Terrebonne as being too far west. This made my day's decision between a run to Grand Isle, which would be the closest, or to Venice. Grand Isle seemed to be the center of the operation, especially with its marina and proximity to Barataria Bay, and it had been the guy with a charter boat that recommended this line of inquiry. My faith in this theory was restored as I pondered the list. These companies were the perfect place to hide. Michael could work among people that did not know one another, but who would undoubtedly cover for each other if someone came looking for any one of them.

There were only a couple of companies on the list in Grand Isle that the nice lady handed me, and it is a very small place to search. It was also literally the end of the line for anyone hiding there, as the single highway leading to the place ends abruptly in the Gulf of Mexico. I backtracked on US 90 to Raceland and headed south on Louisiana State Highway 1.

The narrow two-lane road clung to the banks of Bayou Lafourche as both headed through the swamps leading to Port Fouchon and Grand Isle. Port Fouchon is a speck of a town on the shore of the Gulf that almost nobody had ever heard of, and that most who knew about it ignored, until Hurricane Katrina roared through and reminded one and all

BLOWBACK

what a massive percentage of the nation's oil passes through the place. A brand new, and well-elevated, four lane highway was already under construction in anticipation of the next big storm. I was stuck using the original golf-path of a highway that crossed the speed-bump of a levee at Cut-Off and continued through open wetlands that stretched as far as the eye could see.

It took nearly half an hour to get to Port Fouchon and then another ten minutes to cross the bridge from Camida to enter Grand Isle. There were a few shrimp boats tied up on the north end of the island, but far fewer pleasure craft and charter fishing boats than I remembered being there. At least a quarter of the houses were still boarded up and waiting for repairs from the storm's wrath. The owners of these weekend camps were most likely still trying to put their homes in town back together. It was going to be a while before anyone had time for a vacation.

I drove past the first Grand Isle address on my list without stopping. It was obvious that the salvage operation was gone and not coming back. There was already a For Rent sign on the window. Unlike New Orleans, none of the buildings here had waterlines marked on them by weeks of standing water. The surge that came across here did its work and moved back out to sea in a matter of hours, and the only thing that showed its depth was the utter devastation to wooden structures at ground level and the boards ripped off the lowest camps perched atop piers made of stacked concrete blocks or telephone poles buried thirty feet deep in the sand. People have occupied this island since the 1780s and knowing how to rebuild homes and lives was now a set of skills

handed down from generation to generation.

The second operation was located on the lee side of the island, facing into Barataria Bay. A lot of what had been on Grand Isle before the storm washed into the bay and this company seemed intent on bringing as much of it as they could find back ashore. A handful of the island's thousand or so inhabitants were picking through that day's haul for anything they could claim or buy. I didn't have a lot of faith in this being the sort of operation that Michael Ferris would have chosen as his hiding place, if only for this apparently daily foot traffic.

A twenty-something woman, with sun-bleached blonde hair tucked under a bandana and tanned legs sticking out of a pair of cut-off shorts peeking out from under the man's T-shirt she wore, spotted me as being someone in search of something other than what was currently being offered. She approached me with a mix of island friendliness and a local's distrust of mainlanders. Her calculation that I wasn't going to make her any money and maybe even cause her some sort of trouble showed on her face.

"Anything special you're looking for, mister?"

"Got a minute?" I quickly flashed my badge. "I'm looking for a guy."

"Who are you after?" she asked as though this were a common event in her day. She certainly had better things to do than serve as the island's census taker.

"This guy," was all I said and handed her the photograph.

She studied it for a minute, moving it in the light to reduce the glare.

"He could be here for all I know," she shrugged. "What makes you think he's here?"

BLOWBACK

"I think he's working as a salvage diver."

"A lot of guys look like him around here," she said shrugging. "Has he got a name?"

"Yeah," I returned the shrug. "But I doubt he would have used it with a warrant out for his arrest. These guys never make it that easy."

"Try me," she said.

"Michael Ferris," I told her. She looked at the picture one more time.

"I know three Michaels that got here since the storm. I know we didn't hire him. There's a big salvage operation over by the high school. Do you want me to call over and see if he is there?"

"No, no," I waved my hands to discourage the thought. I certainly didn't want him scared away if he was anywhere in the area. I could drive there myself.

"Okay," she agreed indifferently. She started to walk away but then turned and asked one more question. "What did this one do?"

"You have a lot of these social calls about guys named Michael, do you?" I asked with a smile, but without answering her question.

"You're not the first one to ask me about somebody named Michael. Just the cutest," she said with something like a laugh and walked away before I could ask her to clarify what she meant by the first part of that comment.

It wasn't a good sign that I wasn't the only one to have considered this lead on Michael Ferris.

It was closing on five o'clock by the time I struck out with the third possible outfit. They told me FEMA stopped paying for the sort of salvage work I was talking about within a few months of Katrina. They only meant to get the navigation channels

H. MAX HILLER

open, not to salvage every boat and put everyone back to work. It was now up to the insurance companies to pay for any salvage work.

Leaving Grand Isle at five meant hitting the tail-end of what amounted to rush hour when I arrived back in New Orleans. It was a far cry from the traffic I remembered from the last time I made the drive home from the airport before Katrina. There weren't nearly as many people living in New Orleans now, and there were certainly far fewer people driving home from jobs in Metairie and Kenner than there had been then as well.

II

A GUY NAMED TODD WATERS turned out to be the Special-Agent-In-Charge of the ATF's office in New Orleans. I learned this by reading the metal plate on his door and on the business cards in the handy holder on the corner of his desk. He was a few years older than myself, probably a career agent, and in pretty good shape. He had a very angular face, closely cropped dark hair, and clean-shaven cheeks and lips that lacked any laugh lines. I was dressed in a pair of dark slacks, an Oxford dress shirt with no tie, and a Brooks Brothers blazer for the meeting. My State Police detective shield hung over my belt.

"Detective Holland, what brings you by this morning?" Walters asked with a cheerful and smiling way about him as he sat down in his high-backed leather chair. My dealings with the ATF to this point involved applying for Class 3 licenses for the lethal cache of automatic and suppressed weapons I still owned from my previous career, where they saw more use. I was sure that somewhere in this office there was an active watch-list with my name on it because of this.

"Well, I was hoping we might work together on a

case,” I tried to match his upbeat demeanor, but I also couldn’t miss the wariness in his eyes and the tone of his voice.

“Those requests usually come from somewhere higher on your chain of command than you stand.” So much for his cheerful and smiling phase. He clearly viewed my being in his office as a breach of established protocol, and that seemed to carry more importance in his world than what I was there to discuss.

“You’ll find that I’m kind of special,” I tried to keep things polite rather than take my turn in what now felt like a pissing contest. “I report to NOPD’s chief of Detectives and he encourages me to make my own bargains.”

“I’m aware of your situation with Chief Avery. What sort of bargain are you hoping to make with us?” Walters rephrased his original question. This time I could hear the clock ticking down on the welcome he had extended.

“I need to know what you know about the men who were shot at the Beauvoirs’ nightclub in the Quarter, and the group they belonged to.” It didn’t seem like a lot to share with me. The *Times-Picayune* had two entire paragraphs about the group in the newspaper article on the shooting which Avery thought to include in the files he gave me at The Tavern.

“And what do you bring to the table in exchange? You’re asking for access to years of our hard work.”

“I might be able to deliver Michael Ferris to you. I think he knows more about how pistols stolen out west wound up here than anyone gives him credit for,” I gave it my best shot. I had little to bargain

BLOWBACK

with, and Walters wasn't going to be bluffed.

"But you don't have him and you don't know that he will cooperate if and when you do catch him," Walters threw my lone bargaining chip's lack of value back in my face. "We stand a better chance of catching him."

"Are you looking for him?" ATF agents might have been who the girl in Grand Isle had referred to the day before.

"Not at all, but we still stand a better chance of finding him than a State Police detective working alone," Walters smirked. Smugness is something I hate, and I would remember this exchange.

"Then I guess that's a big N-O on finding out anything about who stole the guns in the first place."

"We'd ask for the Chief's help if we needed it, but our real concern is that the group behind the gun thefts might try to set up shop here. Feel free to keep us in the loop if anything comes up that you think we should know about, but kindly stay away from doing anything but rounding up your lost suspect." Walters went back to hiding behind his bureaucrat's smile and saw me out the door.

I came away from the meeting with less than I hoped to get, but more than Walters thought he gave me. I now knew that the ATF showed almost no interest in locating Michael Ferris because they were more concerned about the threat a bunch of illicit gun dealers posed in a violent city with no gun stores. I'd also learned that Walters was going to sit on the ATF's assets and databases and share what he had only if he saw doing so would be paid back in the form of IOUs issued at the highest levels of any department they partnered with. I had also come away with four of Todd Walters' business cards in

H. MAX HILLER

my pocket that I felt free to use as I saw fit.

I2

I MIGHT HAVE HAD AN EASIER TIME explaining my problems with arresting Michael Ferris to Chief Avery had I described these reservations in terms of my growing sense that Michael was a very small cog in a much larger machine. He wasn't even a cog. He was more like sand in an invisible machine, and his presence caused the machine to not just malfunction but to become visible to the naked eye. Finding Michael at all was now less of a priority than was being the first to find him. Obviously at least one other person thought he was worth locating, or they wouldn't have sent men to get their gun back, or still be menacing his fiancée. It was entirely possible that the dead men and the surveillance team represented the efforts of more than one interested party. I decided that the best way to see who was running the machine was to add more sand.

The ATF was not inclined to help me, but that wasn't my only option for help in bringing chaos to the existing order. I drove to Baton Rouge and parked my shiny black Cadillac among the white Dodge patrol cars lined up in the parking lot. Two uniformed patrol officers started to say something as

H. MAX HILLER

I approached the building but then spotted the detective badge hanging from the belt of my slacks. It was a little embarrassing that I had to ask another officer where to find Captain Kenneth Hammond's office once I entered the State Police headquarters. My contact with the captain who was technically my supervisor was usually done over the phone or via messages relayed to me through Chief Avery.

Hammond hated very little in life, but New Orleans and me, personally, vied for the top of that list. He made sure I knew what he thought of my graduating the State Police academy at the rank of detective the day I reported to his office for assignment. He might have made more of a ruckus were I not headed to a city he despised so much. Coming to him for help on my case was an even larger crapshoot than going to the ATF, which I had every reason to believe might have shown at least some interest in a case involving stolen handguns.

"Tell me you've come to resign and I'll buy you lunch anywhere you like," Hammond blurted out the moment he saw me. We both accepted that I was going to be a thorn in his side, but also that I would never use the connections which put the gold badge on my belt to get him fired or demoted for hating me. It was as close to *détente* as we could get.

"No, but why I *am* here might cost you a lobster supper." I risked overselling what I had in mind, but it did at least get his attention for the moment.

Hammond closed the door to his office and sat down behind his desk. Hammond likes sitting behind a desk less than I do. He started as a patrol officer and earned every promotion he ever received, only to realize he was working his way further and further away from what he really enjoyed about

BLOWBACK

being a member of the State Police. He misses cruising the highway all on his own and getting to personally handcuff bad guys. He is physically robust, maintains his marksmanship rating, and sees to it that the detectives under his command produce cases worthy of his praise. I undoubtedly would have benefited from working under him, but we are both just as happy I will never have that chance.

“What might that be?” Hammond asked once he was settled behind his desk. He also likes to use his desk as a means of emphasizing his rank over me.

“NOPD has me tracking down Michael Ferris, if that rings a bell.”

“He shot a couple of guys with a stolen gun and the State Attorney’s office didn’t figure that out until after they released him,” Hammond demonstrated his knowledge of the case. I realized that any APB for Ferris’ arrest probably would have crossed Hammond’s desk.

“Anyway, I’m starting to worry that my catching him is just setting him up for someone to take him out.”

“Don’t give that any more thought.” Hammond waved his hand in the air.

“What, you don’t think that’s the case?”

“No. You cannot do your job if you start worrying about things like that. Your job is to arrest a fugitive. Someone else will have the job of protecting him once you do that, but it shouldn’t be any concern to you while you’re looking for him.”

“Well, it is,” I shrugged. “Worrying about it made me look at the case against him a lot harder. There are a lot of questions that don’t seem to bother anybody, but which may hold a key to what really happened.”

H. MAX HILLER

“So now you are re-investigating the case as well?” Hammond asked. He was inching back towards his loathing for me and my already well-demonstrated tendency to over-think simple things. “What sort of questions?”

“How do you suppose one handgun, stolen in Wyoming, ended up being used to kill four people in New Orleans? There were already two unsolved, and apparently unrelated, homicides in New Orleans tied to the pistol Ferris used to shoot the men that came looking for him. NOPD isn’t trying to pin either of those first two murders on Ferris. They just wonder what’s going on. Ferris’ brother owns a string of pay-here car lots that seem to be making a lot of money. I have NOPD looking for cases involving cars that had license plates that didn’t match the vehicle the witnesses said were used. The brothers may have a one-stop shop going for gang members, where they can rent a gun and car for the night.”

“We might like a piece of that case,” Hammond finally warmed to my visit. “What do you need from me?”

“Can you spot check a few of the brother’s trailers? It strikes me as a good way to move all sorts of things besides vehicles. That’s a lot of trunks,” I tried my best to plant a seed that would grow into an interest on his part.

“Sure, we can do that. We should be doing it anyway,” Hammond wrote himself a note. “Anything else? I wouldn’t want you to leave and have to come back.”

That wasn’t his problem with my visit.

“Do we have anything on the two guys my fugitive shot? ATF isn’t being very cooperative,” I tossed this out without expecting much of anything.

BLOWBACK

“The ATF is trying to catch a bunch of idiots who have been trading stolen weapons at those damn gun shows you see at the convention center every month. The ATF has focused its efforts on tying that gang to Michael Ferris since the shooting, but it doesn’t seem that there is anything to connect the killings unless he confesses to something when you catch him.” Hammond was a surprising fountain of information. “But, first you’ll need to catch the guy. Start worrying about that instead of what happens next. That is never going to be your problem, Detective.”

“Ah, you called me Detective,” I almost blushed, but I was laughing too hard.

“Get out of here,” Hammond grinned and waved me away. “I’ll let you know if we find anything stashed in the brother’s cars. Don’t expect a call, though.”

I3

I ARRIVED BACK IN TOWN with enough time to spend a couple of hours lifting weights and swimming at the Athletic Club in the Quarter. The schedule I was keeping in my search for Michael Ferris threw me off my normal routine and it had been days since I had taken time to exercise.

I called Tony to let him know I was on my way home and would like to sit down with him to learn what he discovered in his time alone with Brett and Janelle Beauvoir. He informed me that he was getting ready to make supper for my mother and Tulip so I should hurry if I wanted a place at the table. The alternative was going to be take-out, so I decided to see how the Cadillac ran at high speeds once I passed the NASA Center at Michoud.

The stretch of US Highway 90 between Michoud and the Mississippi border had once been the only way into New Orleans from Mississippi. There were very few reminders of those days left. Weekend camps, perched on low pilings, had lined the narrow strip of pavement winding through the wetlands between Lake Catherine and Lake Borgne when I was a kid and my dad would drive the family to the weekend house. They had still been there the last

BLOWBACK

time I saw my father before Katrina. We always made a point to eat at the slew of cinder-block diners for the day's-catch seafood platters the family devoured when my sister and I were kids and the house my mother now calls home was just a place to go on the weekend.

The storm surge that devastated her new home had also scoured the shores of the camps and left a full-sized refrigerator twenty feet high in a tree as a testament to nature's fury and the insignificance of any control man believes he has over nature. My mother now chooses to drive to town by way of Irish Bayou rather than see this empty tableau.

I wasn't blind to any of this, but for these few moments I chose to see the loss in terms of how it reduced traffic on the narrow two-lane highway. I sped at a hundred miles an hour on a couple of straightaways and was smitten with the sedan's grip and handling on the banked curves.

I parked the Cadillac beside the boathouse and walked to the main house. Tony was entertaining my mother and sister in the kitchen with another cooking demonstration. He was busy whipping heavy cream for a mousseline sauce he would use to top the redfish filets that were gently poaching in a copper sauté pan on the massive Viking gas range.

"We were afraid you weren't going to make it in time," my sister greeted me. Tulip speared one of the mussels Tony had simmered in a sauce of tomatoes and wine and held it up to me. I leaned over the counter where she was sitting to eat it.

"I think I have found a place for us to be," Tony said when I moved closer to him. He smacked the back of my hand when I reached for the spatula beside the pan of fish.

H. MAX HILLER

“Do I need Tulip to interpret for you?” I asked him and nodded towards my sister, who was focusing on the appetizers before her instead of the two of us. She understands his broken English better than I do his Sicilian dialect Italian at times.

“A building for the restaurant,” he clarified.

“When did you have time to find a building? You’re stuck out here unless I or Tulip give you a ride into town. Don’t tell me my mother has suddenly decided to get involved.”

“The people you had me talk to, they want out of their lease,” he said and gave me a big grin.

“Really.” I sounded a lot more interested than I was. I was actually worried that the shooting in their nightclub would somehow be blamed for their decision. Having me catch Michael Ferris was supposed to encourage them to stay in town.

“They are losing money and want to move home.”

“I thought New Orleans was their home.”

“Beauvoir is not even their real name. That is Dixon. They moved from New Jersey after the storm because they thought they could fix the city. I was going to kill them both if the husband told me one more time that his family owned a big nightclub in New Jersey years ago.”

“It’s a common mistake people make, Tony. We aren’t like anyplace else on the planet.” I had heard variations on this story before. New citizens seldom immediately get that New Orleans isn’t interchangeable with every other place, and the locals were still adjusting to the fact that they were not living in pre-Katrina New Orleans. There was a brief moment in the wake of the storm when the old order was disrupted and doing business here did not

BLOWBACK

require having local connections to get anything approved, but nearly three hundred years of institutional memory of the way things were always done proved to be stronger than anyone's fresh ideas or the amount of good intentions about pushing the city in a more progressive direction. The Dixons didn't understand that changing their names and trying to impose lessons they learned in far different eras or places weren't going to overcome the problems our local music clubs faced.

"I will remember this," Tony said and finished combining the peaks of hand-whipped heavy cream with the rest of the sauce ingredients before setting it aside and plating the fish filets on beds of bowtie pasta. He spooned sauce on each serving and had me help him move the plates to the dining room table.

"Did Tony tell you about the building?" Tulip asked as she started to take her seat. She seemed fairly excited at the prospect of my friend finally starting the business on which she based his visa application.

"Some. What do you have to do with this?" Perhaps the only thing I was less enthusiastic about than my mother putting her nose in the restaurant Tony wanted to open was my sister getting involved.

"Their lease was handled through an attorney and the building is owned by a shell corporation. I need to figure out who owns the shell corporation so you can make an offer to buy the building."

"Why am I buying the building?"

"Not you personally. You and Tony as partners."

"When did I become his business partner?" I had no recollection of making any such agreement, unless the two of them ran it past me when I was still in my coma or on the morphine drip. I much

preferred that Tony and I have entirely separate lives and sources of income.

“When it became easier for you to get the licenses than a foreign national,” Tulip sighed, as though this were something I should have known all along. “Tony needs your name on the liquor licenses but he is still footing the bill for everything.”

“That’s good to know,” I had to laugh. I had no idea how much money Tony had access to, but I suspected its source. A lot of money went missing at the end of our operation in Iraq. It was why we were being sought for questioning, and part of why I still wanted to keep a little distance between us now.

“Tell us about your case,” my mother said to change the subject. Tulip and I grew up listening to the details of my father’s cases over supper. My mother wanted us to know what our father did for a living, but she always seemed to view his work as some sort of parlor game the family could play together at mealtimes.

“I’m convinced the guy I am looking for is working as a diver somewhere close to New Orleans. He has uses a burner phone to make calls to intimidate witnesses, but he is apparently only able to get to town on Sunday to scare them in person. Friends of the men he shot have his house staked out, but the ATF is acting like he is a smaller fish than that would seem to indicate. His brother owns a string of used car lots and I asked Avery to review any cases that involved cars with plates that did not match the cars they were on. He could be running a crooked car rental service. I also spoke with Captain Hammond at the State Police about shaking the brother’s tree to see if anything drops that connects him to what Michael is involved in. His business

BLOWBACK

moves a lot of cars around and it makes sense that he could use those vehicles to move contraband.” I gave my two-minute summation. Tony gave me the same nod he gave in almost every pre-mission briefing he had sat through, a combination of a head roll and shrugged shoulders. Tulip replayed what I laid out in her mind and looked for holes in the logic or conclusions. It would take her a while to offer any opinions.

My mother, though, wasted no time. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“Nothing. There isn’t a lot to tell at this point.”

“There is always a small detail that gets left out,” she insisted. “Maybe something to do with your working alone on this?”

“What would your psychic say about my doing that?” I tried to deflect the question the only way I knew how.

“I’m asking you, not him.”

“Fine. I’m not very interested in finding the guy I’m looking for. I think doing so will likely get him killed,” I blurted out. My mother just smiled.

“Like I said, small details,” she smirked and took another bite of fish.

I4

THE PHONE IN THE KITCHEN RANG shortly after ten o'clock, just as Tony cleared the dessert plates from which we'd devoured the tiramisu he'd spent most of the morning assembling and Tulip offered cups from a fresh brewed pot of Community-brand chicory coffee. I declined because I was looking forward to a good night's sleep.

Chief Avery didn't sound very happy. "I've been trying to reach you. I figured you must be out at your mama's place."

"Yeah. I was in Baton Rouge and Grand Isle this afternoon. I got home just in time for dinner. Do you want to know what Tony cooked?" This was my usual cruel taunt. There was damn little that Tony cooked that the Chief's doctors wanted him anywhere near.

"I'm almost afraid to ask how your search for Michael Ferris is going."

"It's moving forward," I quickly assured him.

"It was moving forward when I gave it to you. What were you doing in Baton Rouge anyway?" Avery asked me, but then changed the subject because none of this was what he was calling about.

BLOWBACK

“Never mind that. I don't suppose you've been watching the local news this evening.”

“No.” I suddenly wished that I had been.

“Well your stupid antic seems to have paid off,” Avery said in a tone that I heard as more amused than disapproving. “We arrested a couple of Black kids about an hour ago after they killed two men near Michael Ferris's place with AK-47s.”

“Anyone we know get hurt?” I wondered.

“I doubt you knew either of the men killed on the scene, though you may have recently met them. They were living in a van down the street from Ferris' place. One of them had an infected leg wound. I'm thinking that he might be the third gunman from the original shooting incident.” Avery grumbled a bit. He hated messy crime scenes and the messy cases they cause. “I was calling to tell you the FBI arrested Julie Hart.”

“Whatever for?”

“Seems she heard the shooting and came storming out of her place with a handgun just as the uniformed officers arrived on the scene. She started shouting at a couple of other gang members she claimed had been walking by her place all day. Two patrolmen disarmed her when they went over to tell her to shut up.”

“And?” This wasn't in my plan.

“The FBI was on the scene and arrested her. They said her actions were a racist hate crime. For the record, the guns we found in her house were not on the list of guns stolen from the gun shop her boyfriend's gun came from. My bet is they were bought legally,” Avery said to move me past the reaction he anticipated me having to the charges being lodged against Julie Hart. “Oh, my guys didn't

find the boyfriend's dive bag when they searched the place. Hers was there, but not the boyfriend's."

"Any way to get her out of this nonsense? How healthy is our favor bank?"

"You're already overdrawn. The charges probably won't stick anyway. This might be intended to encourage Mister Ferris to surrender."

He was right on both counts. Wasting a favor to get the charges against Julie dropped was something that even a reasonably incompetent attorney could do. Asking for the FBI to cut her loose was not the best use of the favors Avery had accumulated over the years. It was a toss-up whether Michael would even hear any news about the shooting. Turning himself in to get his fiancée freed would be a stupid move that the same reasonably incompetent attorney would tell him not to make. Julie was safer in custody anyway.

"What I found interesting was the Black kids' claim that Michael Ferris asked them to keep an eye on the place. What do you think about that?"

"Kids say the darndest things." He obviously wasn't impressed with my gift for recalling TV tag lines. Avery should have been glad that it wasn't my name or description that the kids gave to his detectives.

"What was that all about?" Tulip asked when I broke the connection.

"They arrested Michael Ferris' girlfriend. There was a shooting down the block and she went storming out of her house waving a revolver and yelling at some of the Black kids who were there. The dead guys had been staking out Michael Ferris' house and a couple of gang-bangers shot up their van."

BLOWBACK

“When was this?”

“Avery said it was about an hour ago,” I said and instinctively looked down at my watch.

“That neighborhood has gone to hell since the storm,” was all my sister had to say on the matter. “How’s this going to affect your case?”

“Something must have changed to make the shooters think they couldn’t wait,” I surmised. Tulip rocked her head as if to indicate she was giving that idea some thought. “Whatever it was probably had nothing to do with Ferris.”

“It’s the most likely explanation. Any work in this for me?”

“Not unless you want to give up civil law for criminal law.”

“That’s a fine line at best, but civil defendants tend to pay their lawyers.” Tulip laughed.

I5

I MADE ANOTHER FRUITLESS TRIP to Grand Isle on Thursday, and started looking for Ferris in Plaquemines Parish on Friday. I tracked down two of the six companies on the list the recruiter in Houma gave me that were still operating in Plaquemines, but neither of them were still at the addresses I had for them.

I could not call any of the companies and ask if a diver matching Michael Ferris' description worked for them, both because I had no idea what Michael looked like at the moment and because doing so might tip Michael off and send him running again. To be honest, another reason I didn't want to alert Michael Ferris was that I believed I knew where he would likely be at some point on Sunday. Michael seemed to be consistent about terrorizing the Beauvoirs every Sunday since he went on the run, and each visit involved an escalation in his tactics. The next leap forward from poisoning a dog is hurting a human.

I took a much-needed day off on Saturday, and was at the Beauvoir home early on Sunday morning. Chief Avery grudgingly approved overtime for a team of four uniformed officers from nine o'clock that

BLOWBACK

morning until six o'clock that evening. Every incident up to this point had occurred between those hours and nine hours of waiting for something to happen is about the limit of anybody's ability to stay focused. Things would happen very quickly, if they happened at all. I needed my backup to be able to leap into action from a standing, or sitting, start.

I stationed the two rookie uniformed officers in the house with Brett and Janelle Beauvoir. I told the couple to make frequent, but brief, appearances in their windows and told the uniformed officers to avoid being seen. Their job was to protect the couple if anyone broke into the house. I positioned the two experienced officers in their squad car at the new Home Depot store on Carrollton to serve as blockers for any car that tried to make a run for the interstate. I wanted to point the as yet unknown getaway car towards City Park. The park was still a mess from the storm and I knew there would be few civilians around if there was any gunplay. My job was to be sure that didn't happen, but I carry scars which remind me how difficult it can be to allow for every contingency.

I parked the Cadillac in the driveway of an unoccupied house on Hardin Street. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were still being repaired, but this one was an untouched one-story house awaiting complete renovation. The familiar scent of decay and mold wafted out of the open windows. It brought back memories of being able to smell New Orleans from miles away when I first came home.

I walked around the corner to take up position on the rear balcony of the Beauvoirs' home. I could lie close to the house and be out of sight from anyone looking over the fence, and I could leap up and have

H. MAX HILLER

a complete view of the back and side yard once anyone breached the fence. My patrol car was a fifteen second dash away, so I figured my trap was as set as it could get.

Janelle brought a sandwich and cold drink to my lair just after noon. The strain of playing bait was taking a toll on her, and I was going to have to apologize long and hard if nothing happened by the end of the stakeout. Luckily the day was clear and the temperature hovered in the low sixties, which made lying outside rather pleasant. The situation reminded me of too many other times I had laid flat on a balcony or sat hidden in an abandoned building to wait and watch for something to happen. You never get good at it, but eventually you learn ways to fight off the boredom that threatens your readiness when the time comes.

My assumption about Michael Ferris' Sunday schedule paid off just after two o'clock. One of the officers from downstairs informed me that a white Buick had circled the block twice. I carefully canvassed the neighborhood before I parked and recalled seeing no Buicks of any color parked nearby, which didn't necessarily mean this one didn't belong here. It certainly warranted close attention, and I was glad Avery sent me at least one officer who paid as much attention as I did. I told him to let me know if it circled again, and how long it took between each pass.

He guessed that the first circuit had taken about five minutes. That meant the car made a larger circle than just a loop around the Beauvoirs' odd-sized block. Whoever was driving the car might be canvassing the neighborhood as well. It was unlikely they would worry about my car, being parked where

BLOWBACK

it was, even if they looked that far down the driveway.

I was still waiting for an update when I heard noises in the low palmettos at the back of the patio. Someone had climbed over the fence and was trying to make their way as silently as possible through a type of foliage that is never easily muffled. I eased my way to the edge of the balcony, and listened for the sound of footsteps on the brick patio. Whoever was there would not likely make a dash straight for the back door, if they even intended to enter the house. There were any number of other things the trespasser might have in mind to scare the Beauvoirs.

One of those was to pour an accelerant against the back of the house. I could smell the gasoline from where I was. I radioed to the officers downstairs what was happening and told them to move the couple to the front of the house, but not to open the front door. It was entirely logical to believe starting a fire at the rear of the house was meant to flush them out of the house. Someone could be waiting outside, or perhaps on the other side of Bayou St. John, to do the couple grave harm once they were exposed.

I peered over the edge of the balcony and saw a tall white male in a baseball cap standing a few feet from the back of the house with a gas can in his hand. I saw no lighter or other means of starting a fire, but doing so was surely their intent. I eased my Glock from my holster and brought it to the edge of the balcony. I slowly rose to my knees and prepared to surprise whoever was down there once they had matches or a lighter in their hand. Tossing gasoline on a house is misdemeanor vandalism. Setting it on

H. MAX HILLER

fire is felony arson. I needed to let them minimally damage the house to have any leverage when I interrogated them later.

What I did not expect was someone else to start shooting. Three shots rang out from where the trespasser had just cleared the bushes. My suspect dropped the can and turned slightly to see who was shooting at him. It is perhaps the most natural, but least intelligent, reaction one can have to flying bullets.

I don't know if he saw who took the shots, but he wasted no more time before sprinting around the corner of the house and heading for the street. I knew that the elderly couple living on the other side of the fence were not good candidates for having taken pot-shots at my failed arsonist. I could not see who fired the shots myself, but I lacked any justification to return fire and did not have a clear shot through the landscaping anyway.

I silently dashed across the balcony to see if the suspect made it through the side gate. They had not, but only because they were waiting for the suspicious white Buick to pull in front of the house. I heard another pair of shots come from the Buick Regal. The shooter this time was firing from the driver's seat and used only his left hand to hold the pistol. He was another white male. He looked to me to be in his mid-forties, and he seemed very comfortable holding the pistol in his off-hand. I heard both rounds strike the bricks on the front of the house, and hoped the shots were meant to cover his partner and not directed at anyone out front.

I waited to act until the suspect opened the patio gate. I shouted at him, which startled him just enough to make him turn towards the sound of my

BLOWBACK

voice and freeze him in his tracks long enough for me to memorize his face. He was younger and much more excited by what he was doing than the driver. He saw the beam of red laser light that linked my Glock to his chest and turned towards the white sedan instead of engaging me in a gunfight.

I waited until he was getting into the car before I fired three rounds through the engine hood of the Buick. The engine gave a most disapproving cough in reaction to this as the driver accelerated. I would have had a difficult time justifying shooting either of the occupants, which was my muscle memory reaction to the situation. I realized at the last second that they weren't there to shoot anyone under my protection, and neither of them ever pointed a gun directly at me. I was mindful of the paperwork and lectures Avery would have given me had I killed either man.

I heard one of the uniformed officers trying to clear the back fence in pursuit of the mysterious shooter. He waved to me just before he dropped over the fence and gave pursuit on foot. My focus was still on the men in the Buick. I ran through the house and out the front door to get to the Cadillac. I was surprised to cross paths with the uniformed officer as I rounded the corner. He pointed at a third white male already crossing the wooden foot bridge spanning the bayou. The figure was a block away and I wasn't very confident the officer would catch his suspect.

My Cadillac CTS was more than an even match with a Buick Regal under normal circumstances, but I wasn't chasing this particular one under normal circumstances. It was wounded like a gut-shot moose and I had no trouble picking up its trail of

H. MAX HILLER

engine fluids. My shots destroyed at least one side of the engine. I speculated that one or more of the ten millimeter hollow-point rounds caused the pistons to stop operating properly, which meant the engine was now running on just three or four cylinders while slowly destroying itself by continuing to force the damaged pistons through their broken cylinders. The engine coughed up a little oil and coolant every time it did so.

The pair did what I hoped and elected to try to lose me in the maze of streets within City Park. I radioed the cruiser sitting at Home Depot and they put out a call for additional units to block off the park. It was unlikely that there were anywhere near enough units in the area to seal every exit. Time was what I had in my favor, and the ever-increasing amount of leakage I was following told me that my pursuit was nearly over.

The marked unit I radioed suddenly appeared in my rear-view mirror, but kept its distance behind me. They were content to be my back-up once I told them the men we were chasing were armed and had fired shots at the first location. We were moving through the park at about sixty miles an hour, which doesn't seem very fast unless you have driven at that speed on unfamiliar, narrow twisting roads. Stretches of the asphalt were still slick with dried mud and desiccated oak leaves dating to their weeks under floodwaters. Trees and branches felled in the storm had simply been pulled off the pavement, but remained as guard rails I needed to avoid sliding into. I watched the driver of the Buick nearly lose control a number of times.

They were headed for Wisner Boulevard, which formed the far boundary of the Park. Their options

BLOWBACK

were going to be limited when they reached that point because they would have to turn left or right, and they had to know there would be roadblocks waiting for them. Bayou St. John runs parallel to Wisner and there are very few bridges across the water. I caught up to them before they reached Wisner but did not immediately approach them for fear of one or the other of the suspects might start shooting again.

My opportunity to end the chase came when they reached the T-intersection and the driver hesitated for a moment as he decided which way to turn. I had ideas of my own and rammed the Buick's rear bumper to shove them through the intersection. I rammed them again and sent their sedan rolling into the bayou. The patrolmen and I were out of our vehicles by the time the pair managed to escape their sinking getaway car. They took one look at the officers aiming shotguns at them, and at the look in my eyes behind the AR-15 I was holding, before surrendering.

"They're all yours," I said and waved the officers standing beside me towards the soaking wet assailants.

"This wasn't exactly textbook," one of the officers laughed as he walked by. "We may have to start calling you 'Crash' instead of 'Cadillac' if you keep doing things like this."

"The Chief says I get to use Plan B. No, wait, he said I *am* Plan B," I joked back, but it was more of a private joke between myself and Chief Avery. The Chief of Detectives wasn't going to laugh about what I had done to the front of his former patrol car. "Did you run their plates?"

"The plates are off a Nissan registered in

Nebraska," the older of the two officers reported.

"Let me guess. It was sold to Ferris Wheels Automotive." The officer gave me a shrug and a very surprised look when I suggested the well-known business was involved. "I have something of a side-bet going on whether the dealership is legitimate."

"Well, you may be right yet. We still need to run the VIN on the car. It could be one of theirs."

"Either of you recognize these two?" I didn't recognize either of the suspects from my visit to Ralph Ferris' dealership.

"They have Texas licenses. They could have stayed home to act this stupid."

"They have probably done dumb things there as well," I shrugged. "Call me when you get their rap sheets."

"You're not staying?" The younger of the officers was surprised that I wasn't trying to claim the arrest for the State Police. Our pursuit was exciting enough to make the television news and papers.

"My work here is done. You two will probably get a nice citation for taking this pair off the streets," I assured the officers and shook their hands once again before I walked back to the Cadillac. I didn't need to be the one to arrest the men, and I also didn't want to spend the long hours testifying in court that giving the uniformed officers credit for the arrests foisted off on them.

The grille was cracked and the front bumper was going to need replaced as well, but the Cadillac started and the gauges didn't indicate I had done anything that might mean I had shortened the Cadillac's life expectancy. I'd come to like the beast in the short time I'd driven it and I didn't figure Avery would give me a replacement patrol car if I

BLOWBACK

destroyed this one.

Brett and Janelle Beauvoir were sitting on their front porch with the two rookies when I parked in front of their house. There was no suspect in custody, however. I would have been very impressed had the rookie officer caught the shooter.

“He got away?” I asked the still winded officer that gave pursuit.

“He had a Charger parked over by Cabrini,” the officer explained. I glanced across the bayou to the Catholic high school and estimated the pair ran about two hundred yards. I would want to remember this shooting suspect’s physical condition if I encountered him again.

“What about the men who took shots at us?” Brett asked. I couldn’t tell if he was paranoid or trying to embellish what happened to look braver to his wife.

“In custody. But neither of them are Michael Ferris. It’s unlikely they are even related to him,” I informed them. Something had begun bothering me as I lay on their porch all morning, and had become an actual question as I drove back from seeing the two shooters arrested. “Did either of you actually see Michael Ferris try to poison your dog? In fact, have either of you honestly seen him anywhere near this house since he went into hiding?”

“He had to have been here. How else did our dog get poisoned?” Brett demanded. It was his story that I was now challenging.

“The same way your house was nearly set on fire. I think these attacks may have been by someone who knows you were likely to blame Michael Ferris.”

“So someone is faking the phone calls?” Brett argued.

H. MAX HILLER

“That probably is Michael. But crank calls are not in the same ballpark with trying to kill your dog or set your house on fire. I’m beginning to wonder if Michael was calling you to try to warn you about someone else with an interest in shutting down any investigation into what happened at the nightclub,” I was thinking aloud now, and realized I needed to stop discussing parts of the case that didn’t involve the couple.

“Like who?” Janelle asked, but not in as defensive of a tone as her husband.

“There are plenty of other people on that list,” was all I would tell her. “I’d say your excitement for the day is over. I’ll let the officers stay around to collect their full overtime, but I don’t think anyone else is coming by to threaten you.”

“Well, thank you for being here,” Janelle sighed and stood up to give me a hug. Brett and I shook hands, but I could tell that he was still upset that I no longer believed his story about Michael Ferris.

I6

I SET MY ALARM to wake up early on Monday morning because I felt it was going to be a busy week, maybe not for me, but certainly for the Ferris brothers. I ate breakfast with Chief Avery to get the ball rolling downhill on Ralph and his criminal empire.

Chief Avery was already aware of what transpired at Brett and Janelle Beauvoirs' residence the day before. He carried the reports from his uniformed officers with him. He greeted me in the parking lot beside the St. Charles Tavern so he could look at the damage I managed to do to his car in barely a week's time. I watched him run his hands over the black and chrome grille and then the damaged front bumper, but held my tongue.

"I hope you know a good body guy. Keep in mind that NOPD isn't responsible for damage done to their vehicles by members of the State Police," he informed me once he was finished apologizing to the sedan for leaving it in my irresponsible care.

"I'll take care of it. I'm so glad you mentioned that part of your loaner policy when you gave me the keys," I grumbled. I could afford to pay for the repairs, but he had just then decided to change our

arrangement and I wasn't happy about it.

"I would have given you a tank if I knew you were going to use it as a battering ram," Avery shot back, but he was laughing and we let the matter drop.

We went inside and sat at his favorite table by the front window. A different waitress was on duty, but she knew to bring black coffee for Avery and an RC Cola for me. Avery ordered his usual omelet and I opted for the chicken and andouille hash I'd spotted on the menu the last time we ate there.

"Have you finished your report?" Avery asked as he stacked the ones from his own officers beside his left elbow.

"No. I don't have anything to add to what your four officers reported," I said and gave something of a shrug. He never approved of my reports when I had a partner, saying they were either too filled with detail or lacked any at all. I found it hard to make cruising nearly nocturnal streets that lacked any streetlights very interesting. He did not want any written record of my interviews related to my search for my father, so usually I had nothing to report.

"That doesn't mean you don't have to write a report. The defense attorney for the pair you pulled out of Bayou St. John will expect to find one in the case file. Two of the officers claim you fired your weapon as well."

"At the car. Your lab will find all three slugs," I pointed out. It turns out that didn't make any difference and he told me which form I needed to fill out for having fired my sidearm. Now I was really glad I hadn't shot anybody, though perhaps if I had killed the pair then there would be no defense attorney to satisfy.

BLOWBACK

“I should put you on desk duty until you’re cleared for the shooting, but I don’t think you’d stay there. Can you promise not to shoot anyone for a while?”

“Not really, but I’ll try,” I saw no reason to lie. I knew I was reaching a point in my investigation that someone might get shot. I’ve been shot and intend to never be the one who takes the bullet again.

Miss J personally brought us our food, wearing the pink bedroom slippers she claims don’t hurt her feet like sensible kitchen shoes do. The meal filled Avery’s mouth and gave him something else to worry about than my shoddy record keeping and failure to adhere to procedure. My hash was a spicy blend of pulled chicken, sliced andouille sausage, chopped bell pepper, red potato, and onion with a healthy dose of spices that Miss J ran across the grill. It was topped with a pair of fried eggs. It was going to burn a hole in my belly, but that would make room for a much milder lunch. The waitress was smart and brought an immediate refill on my drink.

“What did the pair your guys arrested yesterday have to say for themselves?” I asked, as much to change the subject as to learn what they were willing to share.

“Nothing. They lawyered up immediately. The car they were driving told us a lot, though,” Avery teased me by saying this and then stuffing his mouth. I waited patiently for him to swallow the sizeable bite of food. “Ralph Ferris bought the car at an estate sale in Hammond, but the plates we pulled off it were from a 2001 Altima sold to Ferris by a Nissan dealer in Omaha. Normally we might have had a witness who wrote down the number and we’d think they got something wrong when the plate

didn't match the make of the car and let it drop."

"Normally?" I detected something in the way he said what he did.

"I did what you asked and my guys found a dozen incidents of a car being used in a chase or shooting that had plates that didn't match up. Two of those were shootings that involved the gun we recovered at Michael Ferris' shooting," Avery seemed surprised that my idea actually paid off, and I was also guessing he was going to take credit for it.

"So you can tie a stolen gun to one brother and a suspicious car to the other," I knew what Avery was making of these details in the case, but I was looking for a different explanation. "What if the brother with the gun had nothing to do with any of this?"

"I'd be quite surprised," Avery answered. "What are the odds?"

"What if Michael stole the gun from his brother and the brother sent someone to get it back?" This was my new theory on the shooting. So far Ralph seemed to have been more interested in there being no case against Michael than the fugitive was himself. I'd spent Sunday night considering the possibility that Michael's calls to the Beauvoirs were meant to warn them about the threat that Ralph posed to them, not to threaten them himself.

"I could see that. The only thing is, there was nothing connecting Ralph to the guns until we fished those two guys from Texas out of Bayou St. John. We may never know the connection because the ATF gathered them up this morning. Do I need to remind you that none of this has anything to do with what I asked you to do? You just need to find Michael Ferris and let me know where he is." Avery wasn't in a mood to discuss my investigating any part of the

BLOWBACK

case, which didn't even exist until I created it.

"I haven't forgotten. It will just be easier to find Michael if I know who, or what, he is hiding from." Avery tried to stare me down about what we both knew was a rubbish excuse, but I have been stared down by people better at it than Avery.

"You really don't see Michael Ferris as a gun dealer?"

"I don't want to, anyway," I admitted. "You would think that at least one of the guns you took from his house would have been stolen as well if he were dealing in them."

"They all checked out as being either his or hers. That gal has a serious taste for big guns, did I mention that?" Avery hadn't, but I wasn't surprised.

"Do you have enough to arrest Ralph?" Our debate cost me my appetite so I pushed my plate to one side. Avery began picking at what remained of my breakfast, focusing on the red potatoes that had been seasoned in shrimp boil.

"Not really. He could say the car and plates were stolen. The guys that were driving it would just say someone gave it to them, but they don't remember who. That doesn't matter because we'll never see them again now that the Feds have them." My father frequently complained about stolen car cases falling apart from perjury like this when I was just a teenager. Apparently lying was still a good defense. "There is no doubt in my mind that Ralph is doing exactly what you're suggesting, but we are a long way from being able to convict him. We'll have to come up with more. Meanwhile, you need to focus on finding baby brother. At least it seems like you have ended the threat against Janelle and Brett Beauvoir."

"I'm on it," I said and tried to laugh. It didn't

H. MAX HILLER

come out quite right.

“Well, since you have the money to fix the Cadillac, you should have enough to pay for breakfast,” Avery declared and stood up before I even saw him grab his sport coat off the chair next to him. I wasn’t going to argue with him over the cost of an omelet.

“One of these days I’ll be able to feed you for free.”

“How so?” Avery is all about free food.

“Tony plans to buy the building the Beauvoirs are leasing and open that Italian bistro he came here to do,” I tipped him off.

“Well he’d better learn some Cajun and Creole to go with it. That’s all I know about restaurants,” Avery offered his advice. It was good advice and something I tried to make Tony conscious of every chance I got. He could make the world’s best Alfredo, but New Orleans would judge him by his gumbo.

I7

I WASN'T AS SURE about the admittedly inflated charges against Julie being dismissed as easily as Avery seemed to think they might be. Someone was trying to pressure her with the threat of time in a Federal prison for what amounted to yelling at a bunch of kids to get off the lawn. If they weren't after her, they were definitely trying to send a message to Michael. The message he probably heard was to dig a deeper hole if this was how he was going to be treated when he was captured.

Tulip called to say she found something useful about the holding company leasing the building to Brett and Janelle Beauvoir. She couldn't find the name of any officers of the corporation besides their attorney, but she established that the same shell corporation held the deed to every building connected to Ferris Wheels Automotive Group.

The other thing she thought I might find interesting was that the attorney who represented the holding company was a locally notorious criminal defense attorney and not a civil attorney as she expected to find. I thanked her and then asked her to do a title search for any properties solely owned by either of the Ferris brothers. She asked

who was picking up the tab for her time just before my cellphone abruptly dropped the call.

I tucked my phone into the inside pocket of my sport coat and checked my weapon with the desk sergeant before going through the series of doors to reach the interrogation room where Julie sat handcuffed to a heavy metal table. I was tempted to undo at least one of the cuffs, but she looked so miserable and vulnerable I chose not to surrender what little advantage I had over her.

“How are you holding up?” I moved a sweaty bottle of water to within her reach.

“I haven’t been to sleep yet. I didn’t eat whatever it was they gave us for breakfast, either.”

“You’re catching on pretty quick. The food and beds are both a lot nicer where they’re taking you,” I said, knowing that she wasn’t going to feel any better in a larger and cleaner Federal holding cell. “Hopefully you’ll get a judge that sees the charges for what they are.”

“Which is what?”

“Garbage.” I sounded sympathetic only because I practice doing so. “You’re a pawn in a bigger game and the truth is you’re safest if you are off the game board. You can’t be threatened with anything once they take everything from you.”

“That your advice? Just let them lock me up?” Julie wasn’t inclined to do so.

“No. My advice is to get a good lawyer and fight like mad. But fight slowly and use their locking you up to stay safe. What do you think is going to happen if you go home and Michael is still on the run?”

“So you think my only choices are being locked up or telling them where to find Michael?” I knew she was sharp, but this was sharper than I

anticipated.

“I already know where to find Michael,” I sort of bluffed. I had it narrowed down, and I even had a few ideas of where to look if he wasn’t there. She proved hard to bluff.

“Well tell him the cat is at my aunt’s place when you see him. One of us needs to go get her before my aunt calls animal control.” I had to smile. “Why did you really come here?”

“I want to know where Michael got the gun he had the night of the shooting.”

Julie studied me long and hard and then focused on her hands and the top of the desk, which was scratched and scraped from the hundreds of cuffed hands before hers. I was asking her to give me something for free that she knew she might be able to trade for something when the Feds, be it ATF or FBI, started questioning her. I hadn’t lied to her yet, not that she knew of. I had, in fact, done exactly what I told her I was going to do and taken care of the men who were trying to intimidate her. She was here because of her own actions and not because of mine, and she knew that was an absolute fact.

“I’m not real sure,” she apparently wanted to tell me but wasn’t prepared to make up a story. “I had never seen the gun before he pulled it out of his pants.”

“Out of his pants?” A silly image of a bad pun abruptly crossed my mind.

“He wasn’t carrying it in a holster. Usually he has a holster for anything he is carrying,” she better articulated what she meant. I’d understood all along.

“Michael was in the habit of carrying a gun into bars?”

She knew I was asking her to admit Michael

broke the law. “Yeah. He always said that it was the place he was most likely to need one. He was right.”

“I can’t argue that.” I tried to run a number of scenarios through my head that would make sense of what she was telling me. I was largely at a loss, but then had a sudden thought. “Were you two together the entire time you were at the nightclub? Did he step away to talk to anyone or go to the bathroom, anything like that at all?”

“He did leave me at the bar for about ten minutes. I assumed he went to the bathroom, but that was the only time we weren’t together.”

“Ten minutes.”

“It’s not like I timed him or anything. It may have been longer or shorter.” She might have had more to say on the matter, but the door opened and a pair of ATF agents stepped through the door. Neither of them were the Special Agent in Charge but they looked equally unhelpful.

“It’s our turn,” one of them informed me and pointed to the door. The way he and his partner stepped between Julie and myself made the gesture unnecessary. If I wasn’t finished before, I sure was as of that moment. I didn’t have much more to work with than I had when I went into the room, but my previous line of work had taught me how much one can build by stacking one brick at a time.

I now knew how confident she was that Michael was well hidden. I could have rattled her cage about the missing dive bag, but doing so would tip her off to my seeing it as a useable clue to Michael’s whereabouts. What I needed to do was to go back to the Beauvoirs’ nightclub to see how many places I could venture into in ten minutes time, which is how long Michael had to get into trouble the night of the

shootings.

18

IT TOOK LESS than another two hours for Ralph Ferris' world to completely unravel. Captain Hammond called to congratulate me on my tip just before eleven o'clock in the morning. The Louisiana State Police had arrested two teams of truck drivers on narcotics and weapons trafficking charges after doing a cursory search of the trunks on their car carriers at two separate weigh stations.

"They found guns on one and marijuana on the other. I ordered the rigs taken to impound so we can inspect each car more thoroughly. The drivers probably won't be very useful. They are independent drivers and both said they picked up the loaded trailers at truck stops from freight brokers in Texas."

"Check their logs and see how many of these loads they may have had in the past. I accept their story only about so much. Ferris probably wouldn't trust such valuable cargo to random drivers." I did admire Ferris' attempt to put an air-gap between himself and his supplier, though. The freight brokers would likely prove to be fictional and the numbers the truckers called to get the loads already disconnected. They certainly would be when word of

H. MAX HILLER

the seizures made the nightly news. “Are you planning on having a big press conference?”

“We’re working on it. ATF is on their way here now to look at the guns. The State Attorney’s office is getting a court order to seize Ferris’ assets. We’ll probably raid his dealership and make an announcement in time for tomorrow’s evening news,” Hammond was trying to sound very casual about this, which I knew was killing him to do. He didn’t want me to show up and get any of the limelight or credit. I was fine with that, but I didn’t want him spooking Ralph Ferris in the meantime.

“Can you sit on this until I call you? I’m still working on a few things at this end and having Ferris taken down won’t be very helpful. I know Chief Avery would really appreciate your cooperation.” Making the request sound like it came from Avery instead of me was meant to improve my odds of getting his cooperation. There was a very lengthy silence, but I could hear background noise so I knew the connection was good.

“Have him call me when he’s ready so we can coordinate this,” Hammond sighed. I could imagine Avery’s reaction to learning Hammond was positioning himself to take all of the credit for the case.

I only needed to buy a little time to put my own plan in motion. I was sure Ralph would be frantically looking for his trailers later that day, and having two of them vanish was going to make him skittish. My plans were now in danger because I had failed to consider that the investigation might lead to freezing Ferris’ assets. I was still thinking in tactical instead of legal terms. The maneuver Tony and I had in mind wouldn’t work if Ferris’s assets were frozen

BLOWBACK

solid.

I9

I DROVE TO MY MOTHER'S HOUSE and picked Tony up under the pretense of taking him to eat supper at Bon Ton Cafe to get a few pointers about local diners. The ruse was for my mother, not for Tony. He knew we were headed to the Beauvoirs' nightclub to take another look around.

Tony and I constructed a criminal enterprise in our own minds that took into account everything I knew at that moment in time. Cars were being sent to Ferris' dealership laden with guns and marijuana, but maybe they were not arriving there with their cargo. Perhaps any contraband was unloaded elsewhere before the cars arrived at the dealership's garage. We liked that idea because taking them straight to the car dealership meant almost everyone in the shop was aware of what was going on and that was a stupid way to do things.

Ralph didn't strike me as being that stupid or trusting. The contraband would need to be stored somewhere that it would not attract any attention but still be readily accessible. Ralph probably would not keep anything illegal on the premises of the car dealership, but I was still curious about the overly secured room across from his office. I needed to see

BLOWBACK

if any of the buildings that his shell company owned could accommodate a semi-trailer. I decided to call Tulip to find out.

“Do you have the list of the holding company’s properties handy? Do they have any non-automotive buildings in its portfolio in or near New Orleans?” I asked once we had the niceties out of the way and I successfully discouraged her from joining us at the nightclub. The last thing I wanted was for her to get involved in the less-than-legal shenanigans Tony and I felt comfortable doing. She read off a list of buildings and told me what she knew of each. Only one fit the description of what we were looking for, a former retail warehouse located nearby on Elysian Fields. This made the two floors above the Beauvoirs’ nightclub a lot more interesting. Brett and Janelle were the perfect guard dogs because they supposedly had no idea what they were sitting on.

Tony looked over my shoulder as I wrote the address of the other warehouse on a cocktail napkin. I thanked Tulip again for her help and hung up as our second round of drinks arrived. Tony and I considered our options and he agreed that we needed to take a better look at the space above the nightclub. The Beauvoirs claimed they had never gone upstairs because their lease only covered the ground floor. That left a lot of space to search, and little time to do it. I also lacked a search warrant or sufficient reasonable cause to get one.

Tony wanted to get a look upstairs for entirely unrelated reasons. He had regaled me with his plans for converting the first two floors of the building into an Italian-Creole bistro during the drive into town. My friend also used that lost time to pitch creating loft-style apartments on the third floor for each of us

H. MAX HILLER

as a way to get my help. He had an ingenious plan to buy this prime piece of French Quarter real estate for a fraction of its value, and he explained how I had already put his plan in motion without realizing it.

Brett Beauvoir spotted us and came by to say hello, but quickly found a reason to do something backstage. I did not mention the real purpose behind Tony and my showing up for a mid-week performance. Brett was lucky that we were there, because we were a measurable part of the audience that made our way through the curtained entrance to the auditorium. Tony and I took seats at a table near the back of the house so our comings and goings might not be as noticeable.

We sat through Janelle's disappointingly flat rendition of a handful of New Orleans standards, ending with *St. James Infirmary*, and perked up for the first two performances by the burlesque dancers. I left Tony alone at the table as the third one took the stage and was surprised to find the lobby bar had become busier than the nightclub. I was glad to see the bartender flirting with a pair of young tourists at the street end of the bar as I sauntered towards the passage to the storeroom and beer cooler. I didn't want him to be a witness to my searching the top floors without a search warrant, whether or not he understood that was why I was headed to the back rooms.

I slipped through the doorway to the storeroom and coolers and made my way to the stairwell before I started the timer on my wrist watch. I guessed that Michael would have used the stairs as well because the freight elevator would have been heard through the entire building. The second floor was wide open and empty. The dust and cobwebs covering the wide

BLOWBACK

plank floors and tall windows looked undisturbed. I pulled the camera from my pocket and took photographs of the empty space before I climbed the stairs to the third floor. The concrete stairs, likely built to meet one of the sets of fire codes necessary to protect the rows of centuries old buildings from burning one another down, had a coat of dust on them. If anybody was using the top floor to hide anything, they were using the elevator to get there.

A blank wall blocked me as soon as I stepped through the door on the top floor. The wall stood roughly eight feet tall, the length of the sheets of the unpainted plywood used to build it. There was a padlocked metal door in the middle of the barrier. I viewed the wall as being a minimal deterrence to anyone curious enough to climb up and peek over the wall. The ceilings on each floor were easily fifteen feet tall. The metal door was a far more serious barrier, but the padlock was basic, and I could have picked it with little effort. I didn't notice the video camera staring down at me until I looked to the top of the wall. It was too late to worry about being caught on tape at that point.

I took a running start and jumped high enough to grab the top of the wall and then pulled myself up to see what was worthy of such protection. I spotted stacks of boxes on metal racks near the door. They were set well away from the towering windows at the front of the building. I used the flash on the camera to shine enough light on the boxes to read the labels in my pictures. The boxes bore the names and logos of firearms manufacturers. I made a quick estimation that there were a couple of hundred boxes in all.

I was utterly powerless to keep these guns off the

street because I had no search warrant, and certainly wasn't going to be able to get one by showing a judge any of these pictures. Starting a fire crossed my mind, but that would be even harder to explain. Seeing the arsenal underscored the importance of finding Michael and shutting his brother down once and for all. More people were likely to die until I did so. Additional video cameras had clear images of me when I peered over the top of the wall. I did the only thing I thought I could do to sow a little fear into whoever responded to my own intrusion and slipped one of ATF Agent Walters' business cards through the hasp on the padlock.

I was able to get back downstairs and slip back through the door by the service well without attracting the bartender's attention. I also put a few yards between myself and the door before one of the waitresses came out of the club to place a drink order. I smiled at her as we brushed past each other and I hastily returned to my seat.

"Fifteen minutes," I said to Tony after checking my watch. Ten minutes was well within Michael Ferris' capacity to get to the third floor and back to Julie's side the night of the shooting. "There's a gun store on the third floor."

"What are we going to do about it?" Tony asked, fully prepared to consider anything I came up with.

"I left a calling card for whoever owns the guns." I gave him one of the other business cards I palmed from Walters' office and we shared a hearty laugh.

"Do you think this would be a good building for our restaurant?" Tony asked once that moment of levity passed. I was relieved that he was not letting his grand vision for what he could create within these walls blind him to the financial realities of

BLOWBACK

where it was located. The Beauvoirs' business was failing, and they offered nearly naked women. He was going to be selling pasta in a city that loves its rice dishes.

"It's off the usual tourist path, but we're just a block from Frenchman Street. Locals might cross Esplanade for a good meal before heading over there, but it will have be an incredible meal. The other Italian places in the Quarter are situated to serve tourists, but you'd have to draw locals to make it. I hope you have deep pockets because building that sort of loyal business could take a few years." I had no real idea of what business was like in the Quarter after the storm, but I listened to managers and owners when I was eating and drinking in their businesses and few of them seemed very happy.

"What do you think of my idea on buying this?" Tony persisted.

"It could work, but the timing is going to be tricky. Let me ask Tulip what she thinks." A part of me hoped she would say it was a really bad idea and Tony would decide to find an easier place to buy. Tulip answered her cellphone on the third ring. There was much less noise in her background than mine.

"I thought you two were having a guys' night out. Tell me you don't think I will come be your wingman," my sister tried to mock me.

"This is a business call. Can you get hold of the attorney fronting for the owners of the building where the Beauvoirs have their club and tell him you have a buyer for the building?" I didn't want to get into an involved discussion.

"Yes, but I can't imagine why I would." This was her way of asking for more details.

H. MAX HILLER

“Tony wants to buy it. Just set up the meeting for tomorrow afternoon and I will have Tony call you in the morning to work out his offer.”

“You do that,” she said a bit tersely. She knew I was not giving her nearly any of the details behind Tony’s reasoning, and she sounded like she might think I was the one pushing him to buy the place. I doubted that her mood would improve once Tony explained what he had in mind.

20

TULIP PLACED A CALL to the attorney representing what we assumed was Ralph Ferris' shell corporation and requested a meeting with its principals to discuss a cash offer on one of their buildings. The attorney was initially ambivalent about arranging a meeting on short notice, but Tulip's constant use of the word 'cash' in her pitch wore him down.

"Okay, you have your meeting. They will be in my office at three o'clock this afternoon," Tulip called to report as Tony and I finished eating breakfast the next morning. "Maybe between then and now you can explain just what you've got me in the middle of."

"You're helping Tony buy his restaurant building," I reminded her rather than answer the question. "We just need you to draw up a sales contract on their Decatur Street property."

"Fine. How much is Tony going to pay for the building?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars in cash."

"First off, does he have that much in cash?" Tulip seemed more surprised at the liquid resources our Italian friend had than the price.

H. MAX HILLER

“He says he does.” Tony was working on having a wire transfer converted to cash at that very moment. I could almost hear the alarms going off at the Treasury, Customs, the State Department, his bank and anyone else that was going to hear about it.

“That will take care of a down payment. How will he pay for the rest of it?”

“Five hundred thousand dollars is the full offer,” I insisted.

“They’ll never take that. The building is worth two or three times that at least.”

“It may not be by this afternoon. Also, Tony is buying the building and contents. Please, just do what I ask, okay?”

“I’m adding pain and suffering to my own bill, just so you know,” Tulip said and hung up the phone before I could respond. Apparently she still thought I was going to pay her.

The second call I needed to make was to Captain Hammond. He was going to be a lot harder to convince to do anything on faith than was my own sister. Chief Avery, though, was much easier to manipulate. I only had to offer to buy him lunch at Napoleon House.

“You said you had a break in the case,” he said before pouncing on his oyster po-boy. It was going to take hours in the gym to burn off the weight these meetings were threatening to pad onto me.

“The State Police searched a pair of trailers full of cars headed to Ralph Ferris’ dealership and found drugs and guns stashed in the trunks of some of the vehicles.”

“That’s not the case, the very simple case I might add, that I gave you.” Avery was not pleased. Time was ticking away on my deadline to find Michael

BLOWBACK

Ferris, and here I was telling him about spending that time building an unrelated criminal case against the man's brother.

"They are connected. I don't want to drag Michael out of hiding if people still want to kill him. His brother is the real key to what is going on. Trust me."

"I do trust you," Avery said but not in a tone that gave any indication he meant it. "I simply don't understand how or why you've turned a fugitive case into such a production."

"I'm just following the leads as I find them," I tried to console him. He wasn't ready to hear that this was exactly how I had operated in Iraq. One of the things the control agent on my last mission drummed into me was that you can start an avalanche from the top, but you have to start every investigation from the bottom. "And I need your help developing my next lead."

"What do you need?" This came with a deep sigh.

"I need copies of the freight bills from the two loads Hammond seized yesterday."

"So call your boss and ask for them," Avery said with some exasperation. "You don't need me to get them."

"I do though," I insisted. "And I need you to ask for them, because there is something in it for both of us."

"This is where you stop being cute and tell me what the hell is going on." Avery shoved his plate away. There was still food on it so I knew I had hit a nerve.

"The State Police plan to arrest Ralph Ferris and charge him with trafficking drugs and weapons.

They will be on television making an arrest in your own backyard and the optics are going to be that your detectives had no idea what was going on.” I knew how to start a good fight without having to fight it myself. Professional pride was now on the line for both of my two bosses.

“And what does getting copies of the freight bills do?”

“First off, it tells Captain Hammond that you know what is going on and gives you a foot in the door to his case. Secondly, the freight bills will help me find Michael by giving me a weapon to use against the people who want him dead.”

“You’re not going to tell me what is really going on, are you?” Avery finally realized he was going to leave our meeting knowing less about what was happening in my investigation than he did when he walked in.

“Eventually. It’s all part of that Plan B thing you came up with.”

“That was meant as a joke. This isn’t funny anymore,” he complained.

“I could tell you what I’m doing, but then you’d want to kill me,” was the best I was going to give him at the moment. “I will see to it that NOPD shares the credit for breaking the case if you get me the paperwork from Captain Hammond.”

Chief Avery was mumbling to himself as he left the table without paying. Part of what he said sounded a lot like he would call me when he had the paperwork. I tossed money on the bill, but remained seated. I had one minor errand to run in the next few hours. Doing my job now depended on other people doing their jobs first.

21

SEWELL CADILLAC CLOSED ITS DOORS a few years after Hurricane Katrina so I was out of luck on having them repair what was once their car. The last billboards the dealership posted before going out of business were a clever inside joke about their inventory being pressed into service. The sales pitch was that “New Orleans’ Finest Drive Sewell Cadillacs.” A stranger would assume this meant the finest businessmen and citizens, but the locals rolled on the floor laughing at the way Sewell was able to embrace NOPD pressing their cars into service.

Tony walked around the sales floor of the dealership in Metairie while I arranged for the repairs to the CTS’ front end. I chose this particular dealership because they offered me a loaner car that would save the cost of a rental car.

“I understand that’s one of the cars NOPD took from Sewell,” the junior salesman assigned to help me with the loaner car process said. It was a polite way of questioning whether I had the resources to afford a Cadillac of my own. He was younger than most of the salesmen, who were used to selling Cadillacs to people their own age. He was far too hip

H. MAX HILLER

for me, with his hair held in place with gel and an outfit that made me wonder if he had perhaps dressed in the dark.

“Adapt and overcome, that’s what they taught me in the Army. Sewell didn’t need their inventory as bad as the city needed cars.”

“Have you enjoyed driving the CTS?” He chose a good place to start his sales pitch.

“It’s a nice sedan. I wouldn’t say it has the sort of oomph I need in a police car, though.” The car handled well and could get up to a good top speed, but it did not have the quick acceleration a good patrol car needs. Not that I was ever going to be manning a speed trap or needing to build a head of steam from a standing start.

“Are you committed to a sedan?” I liked the twinkle in the young man’s eye. I glanced at Tony and saw the smirk he was trying to keep the salesman from seeing.

I was here to get Avery’s loaner repaired and to borrow a loaner car from the dealership until that was accomplished. I was not in the market for a car of my own. I didn’t even have a garage or parking space in my own name to park the Cadillac I already drove. Tony and I had time to kill and tormenting a rookie car salesman seemed a good of a way to do that.

“Well, no. I don’t transport prisoners or a police dog. I guess I am open to about anything you want to show me.” I made a show of seriously considering the question. It did occur to me that I could drive a coupe. For all the times I had anyone in the car with me, I could have ridden a Harley Davidson motorcycle.

“I’m asking because a customer ordered an XLR

BLOWBACK

coupe but died before they could take possession. I am sure you could get a very good deal on it if you are at all interested in buying a Cadillac of your own.”

“I don’t suppose I could use the CTS as a trade in?” I asked. It was a joke but the salesman wasn’t entirely sure it was how I meant the question. A number of the cars NOPD took from Sewell wound up in Texas and other states with officers who abandoned their stations after one too many nights patrolling the devastated city.

“Uhm, no,” he quickly dismissed the idea and pressed ahead. “Are you genuinely interested in seeing the car?”

“If you are genuinely interested in showing it to me,” I shot back. I wanted to tell him to not waste my time acting like I was wasting his. He was the one who decided to sell me a car when all he had to do was hand me the keys to the loaner demo or used car I was supposed to get.

The young man waved his hand for Tony and me to follow him onto the lot. There was a short row of cars with no stickers or markings on them that I assumed were ones the dealership had prepared for delivery to buyers. They were all a lot shiner and sleeker than the three model-year old sedan I arrived in.

“It would probably be a little unorthodox, but I believe it would satisfy your need for speed,” the salesman tried to quip as he led us down the row of cars. He stopped in front of a car I immediately knew would certainly raise my game in giving pursuit.

The 2008 Cadillac XLR-V he was gradually twisting my arm to buy had a supercharged engine that fed 440 horsepower through its six-speed

H. MAX HILLER

transmission. The salesman claimed it had a top speed that approached that of the Corvette it shared a lot of engineering with. There were just two seats in the convertible's retractable-top interior, which was less of a problem than the lack of a stable roof for a light bar.

There was a flashing light mounted to the dashboard of the CTS, powered through my cigarette lighter, but I could barely imagine the howling protests Avery and Hammond would make over transferring the light into a vehicle like this and calling it a police car. I was equally certain they absolutely would not want to chip in on the gas it would eat.

Tony and I acted far more unwilling to consider the idea of taking a seat in the coupe than either of us were. It felt nearly bulletproof because of how high the sill and bodywork were and how low it rode to the ground. It had every bell and whistle Cadillac could fit into it, with a great stereo, information screen and a heads-up display of the instruments. That would be very handy once the car was pushed beyond interstate speed limits or gave chase on busy city streets. It would be embarrassing to run out of gas mid-pursuit because I failed to keep tabs on my gas gauge.

"Start it up," the salesman suggested and handed me the key fob that activated the push button start. I may have underestimated how wily this kid was. He had the keys on him the whole time and meant to steer me to this car from the moment he approached me. I felt like a sucker.

That realization and sensation did not, however, stop me from pushing the button and bringing the engine to life. It roared awake and I could almost feel

BLOWBACK

the car breathing like an awakened cheetah.

“What do you think?” the salesman slyly asked.

“It’s terrible,” I laughed. Tony and I exchanged looks like two kids stealing candy from a store.

“Like I said, the guy who was going to buy it won’t be and the family doesn’t want it. You could get a pretty good deal on it before my manager puts it on the showroom floor. If you’re really interested.”

“What’s retail?” I had no idea what the sedan I was driving would have sold for if Sewell had the chance to do so.

“Right at a hundred thousand dollars.” The salesman gave the price almost as a challenge. This was where any tourists would get off the train.

“Cash discount?” I asked and tried not to show how much I was bluffing. I had that much money in the bank, but until that very moment was thinking about how nice it would be to be able to afford to retire one day.

“I could get you into this for just under ninety thousand if you’re serious about paying cash. There is a back order on this model so it would sell at a premium over list if we put it on the sales floor.” I couldn’t tell if this was malarkey or true. Plenty of performance cars did sell at a premium so it might have been, but then I had to wonder why his manager was willing to lose easy money.

“If he doesn’t buy it, I will,” Tony declared.

“You’re just on a spending spree today, aren’t you?” I laughed. He was carrying a suitcase full of the cash to buy the building he wanted. This would be a good consolation prize if his crazy plan about doing that fell through.

“Go ahead and take it for a spin. I’ll let you two argue over who buys it,” the salesman suggested. I

H. MAX HILLER

think he was imagining a bidding war between best friends. That was never going to happen.

It was only a few blocks to the interstate and we made it to the airport and back in a short enough amount of time I didn't tell the salesman how far we drove. He didn't bother looking at the odometer to see how far we drove it. The testosterone fueled smiles on our faces showed how much we were going to enjoy our expensive new toy. This was going to be the kid's easiest sale of the year.

"How about a down payment and let me take this as the loaner car for a few days?" I suggested once I parked and led the salesman a few feet from the coupe to talk. I left the car idling and Tony sitting in the passenger seat. It made me look more serious about buying the car. I would have three days to get my check back and cancel any deal.

"I'll talk to my manager," he said and tried not to run to his boss with the good news while I could still see him.

"You're really going to buy this car?" Tony asked when I sat behind the wheel again.

"Well, I figure I can afford it now that I own half an Italian restaurant," I said and gave him my best Cheshire cat grin.

22

TONY WAS DUE at Tulip's office at two thirty. I could not be part of the meeting, and made it clear to both of them that I was not going to have my name on any of the paperwork my sister had drawn up or on the deed to the building Tony was intending to buy at a steep discount. I was not unwilling to help him with the licensing, which I was sure would not be necessary until long after most people forgot about today's business.

Tulip had never seen Tony in one of his bespoke suits. The only roles she saw Tony in were that of a very concerned friend or as a chef showing off his impressive cooking skills. He looked even more handsome and professional than he did in casual clothes, and I worried what effect that might have on my sister. She was also going to experience his unleashing a few of his less agreeable interpersonal skills upon Ferris and his attorney. I was much more concerned what lasting effect that might have on her than his wardrobe might.

Ferris' attorney was notorious in New Orleans for his criminal work. Dan Logan was a post-Katrina carpetbagger. He'd arrived from Brooklyn and built his reputation by getting cases dismissed for lack of

evidence when it became known that the police evidence lockers flooded while the city was covered by the lake's brackish waters. Firearms rusted beyond the ability to be tested, drugs literally dissolved, and documents became mush in the soup that formed in the basement of the court building. It was noteworthy that someone running a legitimate automotive business would use such a criminal attorney as their company's attorney. I suppose some people were wondering about the amount of criminal work I was foisting off on Tulip as well, but at least I saw a difference there. Ralph Ferris and Logan, who looked like an oversized, slick-haired evil cherub, arrived moments before the meeting. I was monitoring the meeting through Tulip's computer webcam.

Tulip made a living in the first years of her career off people wanting to use our mother's family's connections. Hurricane Katrina gave her a chance to take on large insurance companies trying to get out of honoring their obligations. My sister found she could draw upon not just family connections but also the ability to channel our mother's knife-sharp tongue when it came time to deal with the corporate attorneys. Few opposing counsel were prepared for such viciousness from such a sweet-looking young belle.

"Alright, we're here," Logan declared when the four of them were seated in the conference room Tulip shared with a couple of other attorneys in the building. The shared notary came in and quietly took a seat at the end of the table, where they could act like they were ignoring what was going on between the attorneys and their clients.

"And we thank you for coming on such short

BLOWBACK

notice,” Tulip assured them. Tony needed her to control the pace of the meeting because he knew about things that were happening outside of the office neither my sister nor her visitors had any idea were taking place. Tulip wasn’t entirely comfortable with Tony’s grossly low-ball offer on the building because she was now certain that he was not being as forthcoming as she normally required of a client, but if it meant helping Tony put an ice pick into either of the loathsome men in front of her then she was willing to help.

“We are on a tight schedule, so if you’d be kind enough to explain why it was so important that we do this today I would appreciate it.” Logan apparently had his own agenda.

“I am going to buy one of your buildings,” Tony interjected himself. He did not state this as an intent, as a desire, or even as an offer. He wanted it understood that he was going to own Ralph’s building when he left the room. Logan immediately realized who was doing the negotiating and focused on Tony instead of Tulip.

“Anything is possible for the right price.” Logan flashed the crooked smile that made him so unpopular in the local legal circles.

“Money is only one currency,” Tony declared and set the briefcase on the table. He opened it to show the men that he did indeed have a lot of ready cash.

“And what other forms of payment will you be adding to that pile?” Logan asked. He didn’t want anyone to think that he had never seen a briefcase full of cash. “I don’t see enough there to buy anything my client owns, except a car or two.”

“I did tell my client that his offer was low for

properties in the French Quarter,” Tulip spoke up. She didn’t want anyone to think she was as naïve as her client about local property values. Tony glanced at Tulip but did not show any sign of displeasure that his attorney was speaking against him.

“I believe what I am offering will be sufficient,” Tony’s lips also formed a thin smile as he removed a manila envelope from within the briefcase before moving it aside. He left the case open to show the bundles of crisp new bills in their bank bands, within sight but just out of Ferris’ reach.

“As I have stated, this looks more like a down payment,” Logan dug in.

“I would like a few moments alone with Mister Ferris. I believe we can reach an agreement easier without our attorneys,” Tony said and nodded to Tulip that she should leave. She started to say something but spotted something harden in his expression that convinced her to do as he said.

“I’ll hear him out,” Ralph told his attorney and the only two people in the room concerned about legalities left. The notary took her cue and followed my sister into the hallway.

Tony quietly removed the color copies of the freight bills that Avery delivered to me only an hour earlier. You could almost smell the ink, but you could also hear a pin drop on Ferris’ side of the table once Tony slid the papers across the desk. Ralph went pale for just a moment and then leaned over to whisper to Tony, perhaps in fear their private conversation was being monitored. It was a valid fear, but I could still hear.

“Where did you get these?” Logan demanded. Tony noticed the man’s knuckles were white.

“From your State Police.” Tulip would have

BLOWBACK

noticed how much Tony's spoken English abruptly improved. "They found more than this on your trucks."

It was an oddly well-articulated way of saying what needed said without actually doing so. Ralph Ferris knew perfectly well what was on the car-carriers he now realized had not been hijacked or wrecked on some desolate stretch of highway. Any comfort he took in knowing the whereabouts of his lost loads was just as quickly swept aside by knowing who had control of them.

"So this is blackmail," Ferris snapped.

"It is only blackmail if I can stop what is already happening," Tony countered. "I cannot."

"Then why are we here?" Ferris had begun to worry that this was one of those law enforcement traps where they tell fugitives to be somewhere to collect a prize and then arrest them when they are dumb enough to show up.

"Because I am offering you a way to leave," Tony suggested. The term I had practiced with him was 'escape' not 'leave.' Ralph had no trouble understanding what Tony was implying.

"I think it is time that I leave," Ferris decided. Tony took his hand and held him in place.

"My offer is only good for one more hour," Tony said in a tone that made Ralph Ferris as concerned as it did curious.

"Oh, I'm sure you will make a better offer if I don't buy this act of yours," Ferris forced a smile and tried to convince himself Tony was bluffing and the bills of lading were good fakes. But he didn't know where those trucks were and this was an entirely credible explanation.

"You will not be able to sell your building after

that time has passed. I will still buy it, but my attorney says I will have to wait for it to be auctioned." Tony and I assumed this was the case, but we hadn't discussed the matter with Tulip beforehand. Neither of us wanted to tell her enough to scare her away from helping us.

"What are you saying?" Ralph demanded.

"Everything you own is going to be taken by the State Police at five o'clock, and they are going to arrest you." Tony informed him in a tone that made it hard to disbelieve what he was saying.

"So my assets are being frozen?" Ferris wondered aloud. Why he was taking Tony's word for this was a mystery even to Tony, but it indicated who was in control right then. Ferris was beginning to mumble his responses and to stare into a distance only he could see across.

"Yes, but not now," Tony made a production of looking at his watch. He had flubbed another word, I wanted him to say, 'not yet,' but Ralph again had no trouble understanding how temporary this situation was. It was about to become a fact, because I had notified Hammond that he should proceed enforcing the court order to freeze Ferris' assets just as soon as Tony walked out of Tulip's building.

"And that's why you think I am going to sell my building for next to nothing," Logan huffed. He understood that he needed to strike the best deal he could as fast as he could, and that Tony might still be willing to sweeten the offer despite having the upper hand. "The money is no good if I can't spend it."

Tony and I had anticipated Logan's valid argument. He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a second envelope, this one a little lumpy. "I have a jet ready to fly to Panama and these keys

BLOWBACK

are to a house there. I will include these in my offer. Maybe now you know why I did not want the lawyers here?"

"Fine. I'll sell," Ralph declared in a tone that showed how anxious he was about getting out of the building and leaving the country before it was too late.

Tony stood up and opened the door to the conference room. Tulip and Logan returned to their seats and Tulip sat patiently while Ferris explained his inexplicable willingness to give away a valuable piece of real estate to his attorney, who apparently saw no reason to delay his client's departure.

"I guess we have a deal," Logan sighed and gave Tony an openly hostile glare before pressing his forearms on the heavy wooden tabletop.

Tulip handed out copies of the contract. It was a very short contract since Tony's offer was to buy the building and contents as is with no escrow. Tony didn't worry about any liens or anything else that might be messy because the price he was paying left plenty of money for any surprises. It was Logan who looked up from the contract in surprise.

"Why does your client want to buy the contents?" Logan asked in a mixture of curiosity and concern.

"Even the ones upstairs," Tony answered without answering the question.

Tulip sat back and tried to act like she knew what was being said. She had already decided she didn't want to know. Ralph's eyes narrowed just a bit and he stared at Tony as though doing so might let him read my friend's mind. He would have been deeply alarmed to know what Tony Vento was thinking about just then. It mostly involved how he

would have broken Ralph into a ball of naked flesh and tears had they been magically transported to a concrete cell in the basement of an obscure building on the outer edges of Baghdad. I always worry that Tony secretly estimates the breaking point of every person he meets, including me and my family.

“Then all that’s your problem now.” Ralph grabbed the pen Tulip offered him and began signing. Signing the paperwork took barely five minutes. There were no handshakes or goodbyes once Tulip’s notary presented Logan with his copies of the paperwork and Tony placed the envelope with the keys and flight plan into the briefcase and slid it across the table. Doing so made a horrible scratching sound in the otherwise church-quiet room. Ralph grabbed the briefcase and hurried his attorney out of the room. He had a plane to catch.

“What the hell was that all about?” Tulip demanded once I contacted Captain Hammond and entered her office.

“The State Police are about to start seizing Ralph’s assets and arrest him for running guns and drugs out of Texas. It’s why Tony insisted the notary write the time the transaction was made on the contracts.”

“What was in the envelope you gave Ralph?” Tulip asked Tony.

“A plane ticket to Panama and keys to a house,” Tony shrugged indifferently.

“You two just helped a suspect flee the country. I could be disbarred.” Tulip managed to say without screaming. Her facial expression did that for her.

“He’s not fleeing the country,” I assured her. “He is legally considered to be a free man until an arrest warrant has been issued. I asked Avery to delay

BLOWBACK

doing so.”

“Is that what you are going to tell Bill when he finds out what you two have done?”

“Well, there is a jet waiting for Ralph at Lakefront Airport,” I conceded. “It cost Tony a pretty penny. The keys are to an old apartment of mine. Ralph will never find out because the jet is chartered to fly around the Gulf of Mexico until dark and then to land at a private strip out in Houma. Captain Hammond and Chief Avery will be there to greet him, along with lots of news crews.”

“And what was the big drama about buying the contents?”

“Ralph has a stockpile of guns on the top floor. He probably thinks Tony just bought a world of trouble.” I reminded Tony that he’d need to call the ATF to come collect them.

“And you decided not to tell me any of this.” Tulip’s simmering anger was now free to boil over and scald both of us.

“It was a lot to explain in such a short time,” I tried to lie. Tulip punched me on the chest. It’s her normal target because she claims I’m too handsome to slap. She’s probably more worried about hurting her hand on one of the plates covering the rebuilt face she picked out of a magazine.

She and I both knew how unlikely she would have been to agree to be part of this voluntarily. She could now honestly testify that all she was hired to do was handle the transfer contract if Tony’s purchase of the building were ever challenged in court. My name was nowhere to be found on any of the paperwork and Tulip knew better than to volunteer anything that might incriminate herself or a client.

H. MAX HILLER

“I guess this is more pain and suffering you can add to your bill,” I laughed and scurried out her door behind Tony before she could throw anything.

23

TODD WATERS WAS wildly unamused to find his business card stuck in the lock after Tony called to have him seize the weapons he claimed to have found while inspecting his new property. At least Waters didn't cry about it, as Ralph Ferris did when his jet to Panama made an unexpected landing and he and his briefcase full of cash were paraded in front of a waiting bank of local television news cameras and photographers.

His arrest was becoming the stuff of legend for the State Police and NOPD officers who took joint credit for breaking the case. Avery had two of his detectives patch together reports and evidence logs that approximated my handwritten notes in order to get the arrest warrant. It created a potential weak point in the case, but the Chief had an epiphany about how handy having a ghost in his department could be. Neither of us wanted my name on anything to do with the case. I certainly didn't want to face Dan Logan in court, so it seemed like a good time to get out of town and wrap up the last loose end, which was all Avery expected me to do in the first place.

I was still playing a hunch, but was now convinced it was more of an educated guess. Michael

enjoyed scuba diving, but wasn't experienced enough to do commercial work. Someone tossed a piece of meat into the Beauvoirs' backyard that smelled like kerosene to Brett, but it also might have smelled like something called Corexit. Michael Ferris seemed to be pretty well known at the dive shop in Westwego. It wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine he was also popular among the local dive boat captains.

A little bit of research unexpectedly revealed a clue involving the boat embroidered on the helpful customer's shirt at Temento's. The owner's last name turned out to be Hart, and Captain Hart had a daughter named Julie Nicole Hart.

I presented Chief Avery with this argument for looking for Michael Ferris in Venice over breakfast at The Tavern. He listened as though he were interested and then swallowed his last bite of food and set his fork aside.

"I'm convinced, but it doesn't matter. Michael Ferris isn't even wanted as a material witness now that his brother has agreed to testify against the guys from Texas. He even swears Michael had nothing to do with any of his illegal activities. Let it drop," he said and reached for his heavily sweetened coffee.

"I'm still going to check it out."

"I just told you not to bother," Avery said, a lot less cheerfully.

"You know how when you're a five-year-old and you burn your right hand on a skillet, your reaction isn't to grab it with your left hand?" I asked my boss and waited until he turned to see where this was leading. "I always came away with two burned hands. I obviously can't tell you what happened overseas, but I wound up here because I never have learned that lesson. I was told to leave someone

BLOWBACK

alone and disobeyed the order, and paid the price for my persistence. Unless you can give me a reason, and not just an order, I'm going to get in my brand-new Cadillac and drive to Venice to find Michael Ferris. Besides, we still have a bet on my finding him." I tried to not sound too insubordinate.

"Don't let pride be what drives you. I will stipulate right now that you've found him and buy you dinner if you drop it."

"You're not the first person to warn me about confusing determination with pride. It nearly cost me my life the last time, and may cost me a job this time, but I still want to lay a hand on the guy you told me to find. I have to know I am right about where he is." This sounded absurdly prideful even to me, but I still picked up my car keys and headed for the door.

"Do whatever you want, but leave him alone if you find him. The State's Attorney has lost interest in the gun possession matter and the shooting was in self-defense. There are no charges and nobody else cares where he is or what he's doing but you." Avery slammed his meaty fist on the bar top and waved a finger in my face just in case I didn't grasp the extent of his frustration with my persistence. This was the angriest I had made him in some time, and his response seemed well out of proportion to what I wanted to do. He didn't change my mind, though.

24

IT TOOK A LITTLE OVER AN HOUR to drive to Venice. I drove there under a sky that reminded me of a Simpson's cartoon or a Maxfield Parrish lithograph; a pale blue sky with puffy clouds that looked painted onto the sky rather than organic. It was the sort of day that made me wonder why all cops don't get to drive convertibles. Newly paved highway ran as far as Empire, but the final short drive was on a storm-chewed ribbon of blacktop stretched between long vistas of marshy nothingness that ended in the state's lowest settlement. Venice is not only the southernmost town in the state, it is one of its lowest in elevation. It sits one yard above sea level, and is nearly within sight of that sea.

I parked the Cadillac so as to block the entrance to the marina's crushed shell parking lot. I checked my Glock to be sure there was a round in the chamber and that the safety was off before I secured it in the thigh holster I was wearing to show off the fact I was armed. I wore a light-weight nylon jacket with the words State Police emblazoned on the back over the ballistic vest I pulled from the bag of necessities in the trunk in the Cadillac. I wore my badge on a strap around my neck for all to see, but

BLOWBACK

the marina was largely empty.

I started walking down the pier, and reading the names of the charter boats. I wasn't there to search every boat, just the one I didn't even have a search warrant to board. The boat I was looking for was tied off to the dock and on shore power when I located it mid-way down the pier. The heavy metal cover plates over the diesel motors were open and two men were working on one of them. Captain Hart glanced up and recognized me before he ducked his head back down to what he was doing.

"I need to speak with Michael Ferris," I said and rested one foot on the stern gunwale. It afforded me a view directly into the engine compartment at both men.

"Nobody here by that name," the other man said. He was right. Neither of these men fit the description of the man I was after. They were both too old.

"Doesn't mean you don't know where he is," I pointed out. The pair looked at one another and then Dan Hart climbed out of the engine compartment to come speak with me. He busied himself with wiping his hands on a red shop towel and I did a quick threat assessment. He had no knives or tools on his belt or in his hands, and I saw no unnatural bulges under his clothes to indicate he might be armed, which I considered to be unlikely, anyway.

"You harassing me just because we met at Temento's?"

I thought that was a novel argument and I smiled at its simplicity.

"I wouldn't say I'm harassing you. You didn't have to stop working on my account. You could have just said you don't know where he is. Now I think

you do.”

“That would be harboring a fugitive now, wouldn’t it? Why would anybody admit to doing such a thing?”

“Maybe because Michael’s a pain in the ass to have as a future son-in-law,” I suggested. The captain looked stunned, but I couldn’t tell whether I genuinely surprised him by having made the connection to his daughter. “Michael stopped being a fugitive when they arrested his brother the night before last. He’s a material witness at best, or worst.”

“A witness to what?” The captain seemed very interested in a man he’d tried to claim wasn’t around.

“I’m working on this theory that he stole a gun he didn’t know was already trouble for his brother. See, it turns out that his brother was renting out warehouse space to a bunch of yahoos from Texas. Michael found the stash and likely thought nobody would miss one gun, but these guys were a lot more possessive than he imagined.” I saw no harm in telling this stranger what would be in the papers fairly soon. Ralph had tossed anyone he could under the bus when Logan explained to him the range of charges he was facing and the amount of prison time each charge carried.

“So what do you need Michael for if his brother’s the one in jail?”

“Like I said, I still need to hear his side of the story,” I said and waved my hands to indicate I had only professional interest.

“I’m pretty sure this Michael guy wouldn’t want to get involved any further. Not that I know him or where he is,” the captain continued to try to stymie me. We were past establishing his involvement. Now

BLOWBACK

he was just mucking things up.

“It’s probably best if he tells me that himself,” I pointed out. “And then you could get back to what you were doing. How’s that sound?”

“Not very good for Michael,” the captain said. I was slow to realize he had been looking past me and not at me the whole time. It wasn’t apparent until I closed the distance between us as we spoke.

I turned around and caught a fleeting glimpse of a shirtless man running from the deck of a boathouse facing the marina from across the marina. I turned back around to find the captain was running away from me as well, but he wasn’t who I came to see and I ran for my car instead of going after him. I didn’t know if Captain Dan hoped I might follow him, but he was going to be awfully winded for nothing when he finally turned around to find I didn’t take the bait.

I kept an eye on the boathouse as I dashed to the Cadillac. I hastily counted the number of boathouses between the end of the row and the one I now believed Julie’s father gave Michael to use as a hideout. I also kept an eye between the close-set boathouses for any vehicles speeding away. It was an absurd notion to think you could outrun law enforcement on this road. I only needed to radio ahead to any of the sheriffs or state troopers in the area to stop him somewhere along the sixty miles between here and Belle Chase. Then I remembered I was driving a car with neither a police radio nor light bar.

I pulled in front of the boathouse and again used the coupe to block the driveway beneath it. What looked like Julie’s Chrysler convertible was in the driveway and I wondered how it made it from her

house to this location. This wrinkle added the probability that Michael Ferris had the help of someone else I hadn't yet encountered, which meant I might have at least two armed men to deal with once I entered the boathouse.

The movies always show cops boldly kicking in the door at times like this, but what normally happens is that the cop with the coolest head tries the doorknob first. Often, such as this time, the door proves to be unlocked. You still have to choose whether to open it and risk taking immediate gunfire.

I opened the door but pressed myself to the right of the doorframe, out of the line of fire if that was how Michael chose to react. There were so many guns involved in this mess that I had no choice but to assume there was at least one more at his disposal.

I opened the door and was confronted with a screened-in picnic area, designed to let storm surge pass beneath the house, and a flight of stairs leading to a closed door. I was going to be fully exposed the entire way up those stairs. I aimed my pistol and began an adrenaline-fueled slow climb up the wooden steps. I was inclined to shoot anyone who opened the door before I reached it. I did not want to shoot Michael Ferris, but I have learned how unpredictable a man can be when he feels cornered.

"Michael Ferris?" I shouted out before I reached the top of the staircase. "My name is Cooter Holland. I am a detective with the State Police. Can we talk?"

"He knows who you are, Detective Holland. Come on upstairs," a familiar female voice said. I hurried up the stairs as much because I knew it was safe to do so as to find out what the heck was going

BLOWBACK

on.

Julie Hart and Michael Ferris were waiting for me on the sofa when I entered the living room. I had not expected to see her here, but it was the man sitting at the kitchen table that caught my attention first. Todd Walters was seated across from another ATF agent. The way everyone in the room looked at me made it clear they had been waiting for me to arrive. I holstered my pistol and flicked the safety on.

“Nice to see you again, Miss Hart,” I said as I pulled a chair from beneath the table and sat down across from Walters. I turned to him for an explanation. “I can’t wait to hear *this* story.”

“Michael has been working as an informant for the ATF for almost a year now. His brother tried to recruit him into what he was doing but Michael didn’t want any part of it. In fact, Michael immediately came to us with what he knew about his brother’s operation. The night of the shooting, Michael broke into a storeroom above that nightclub to take a gun from the stockpile so we could trace its serial number. Michael went on the lam when the State Attorney’s office decided to press weapons charges before he spoke with us. Julie agreed to tell us where Michael was, but only if she could be with him. We asked the FBI to take her into custody after the shooting she says you played a part in making happen and she brought us here. We can discuss that shooting some other time.” Walters was generous with the highlights, but made sure to end his disclosures by threatening me instead of just asking that I promise to keep his secrets.

“Do you really think your brother sent those men to kill you?” I asked Michael. I’d met Ralph and

still couldn't make up my own mind about this.

"I don't know if they were sent to kill me, but I wasn't taking any chances. I didn't know any of them and they were certainly acting like they wanted to kill me. I also thought they might kill my brother if they didn't get the gun back."

"What's up with those guys from Texas, anyway? One of them tried to set the Beauvoirs' house on fire last Sunday," I really hoped Walters could offer just a little more insight.

"They are members of something called The Grassy Knoll Gun Club in Dallas. The government sells its surplus military guns, mostly old .45s and Garand rifles, to registered gun clubs and this bunch bought all the guns they could before someone in Washington either looked at the name of their stupid club again or just counted the guns they owned. They sold the guns for a small fortune to collectors and used the proceeds to go on a burglary spree. They hit gun stores in four states. Their leadership have connections to some of the wackier militias and white supremacists out west and their intention was to sell enough guns to Black street gangs and drug dealers that they might kill each other off. Mike's brother had a plan of his own and just needed a source of untraceable guns. He offered local gangs a car he could report as stolen and as many guns as they wanted to do their thing. That way they didn't have to worry about having to acquire or dispose of their guns, or stealing a car, and Ralph could keep using the same hardware over and over again. He'd sell the cars and nobody was ever the wiser because the plate numbers never traced back to his cars." I was starting to wonder why Walters was suddenly being so generous with the details of what I was sure

BLOWBACK

was a major case he had yet to prosecute.

“My brother wanted me to run that part of his business because he didn’t want to have to deal with the nutso guys from Texas. It didn’t take me long to realize they were just a bunch of crazy racists, so I turned him down,” Michael spoke up. Having seen this Texas clan in action I could understand why both of the Ferris brothers wanted to keep their distance, but Ralph apparently could not bring himself to stay away from the money this particular sideline generated.

“So, why did you call the Beauvoirs every night and why were the Texans trying so hard to run them out of town?” The answer to these questions was what made the drive to Venice worth the effort. I had a dozen theories, but knew every one of them probably made more sense than the truth would.

“I was calling them to try to get them to leave. Those two were unaware of what was going on over their club, but it was only a matter of time before one of them figured it out and then all hell would have broken loose. The guys my brother was involved with knew I’d be blamed if someone harassed them at home, so they framed me for all of that. They were counting on somebody like you to drag me out of hiding.” Michael’s explanation matched the best one Tony and I came up with. At least it tied everything together.

“Well, everyone gets their wish. The Beauvoirs decided to move back to New Jersey as fast as they can get packed after the arson attempt on their house.” I noticed that my mention of this incident came as no surprise to the ATF agents. “I don’t suppose you knew anything about that, did you?”

“I wouldn’t comment either way if I did,”

Walters snorted.

“Or if it was one of your men who took a shot at the would-be arsonist,” I persisted. Walters simply shook his head, which was confirmation enough for me.

“For the record, your shooting of those two men is still classified as self-defense. I am beginning to think the ATF used the State Attorney’s office to get NOPD to assign someone to look for you rather than expose the fact that you were working for them. Maybe you should have checked in with the prosecutor when you got resettled here,” I said to Michael.

“We’ve already had that conversation,” Walters assured me. I finally had the answers to all the questions that continued to bother me, not that knowing everything would ever matter to anyone else.

“I could follow you home,” I offered Michael and Julie.

“I think we’re going to stay here until things cool off,” Michael said, and I watched him squeeze Julie’s hand. “The ATF wants to put us in witness protection but we told them no. I’m not going to start over just because my brother is a crook.”

“Things aren’t likely to cool off just because your brother rolled over on the guys from Dallas.” I hadn’t heard of any suspects being arrested in Texas so it looked like their mini-vacation might be indefinite. I stood up and acted as if I was starting to leave, but turned to speak with Julie.

“Your dad must be so happy to be part of all this.”

“He’s cool with it,” Julie rebuffed me. “What are you going to do now?”

BLOWBACK

“Leaving people alone really isn’t what I do for a living,” I hated to admit.

“No, you certainly seem to enjoy complicating other people’s lives,” Julie commented. “I was scared to death when those kids started shooting up that van.”

“It certainly got the ball rolling.” I remained unapologetic for my actions. I took out my cellphone and dialed Avery’s telephone number. The couple watched me with considerable apprehension.

“There’s someone I need you to talk to,” I told Walters and handed him the phone before the Chief of Detectives had time to answer. I moved towards the sofa to speak with the couple while the ATF agent was busy.

“I’ll tell my boss what I have to once he knows I did my job, but it won’t involve telling him where you’re hiding. You two are now the ATF’s problem, and they are your problem, so good luck with that.” I reassured the couple and walked back to take my phone from Walters, who was still laughing about whatever he and Avery discussed.

“Bill bet me that you wouldn’t let this drop. It’s why I thought we should be here to greet you. I guess I owe him for an expensive dinner.” Walters said as he returned my phone.

“I’m tenacious.” I shrugged, but I wasn’t about to apologize or let him believe for a second that I felt like a fool for not having figured out Michael’s being his informant. All that mattered to me right then was that I caught the rabbit Avery told me to chase. I was enjoying a feeling I hadn’t had since I was forced to leave Iraq and stopped chasing down truly bad men. “You might keep that in mind.”

Walters had no retort to that and I willed myself

H. MAX HILLER

to walk away without saying another word. My phone rang as I was getting into the Cadillac. It was Avery, who I assumed had to hang up and collect himself before he could talk to me.

“I could have told you about the ATF, but you still would have gone down there.” He sounded like he was in a much better mood than when I had left him.

“Go ahead and laugh. You still owe me that dinner,” I told him and hung up. I drove the whole way back to town imagining ways to run up the tab at K-Paul’s now that I knew that the ATF was going to reimburse Avery for the meal. I also tried to imagine what Avery and Hammond were going to have to say when they learned I was going to use the XLR as a patrol car. I was certain that they were not likely to find the personalized plates I ordered as funny as the sales manager at the dealership did when he wrote down the words ‘COP CAR’ on the personalized license form.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Max Hiller's first taste of New Orleans was as a cook on Bourbon Street at the age of seventeen. His resume now includes many of New Orleans' iconic dining and music destinations. These jobs have provided a lifetime of characters and anecdotes to add depth to the Detective Cooter 'Cadillac' Holland series. The author now divides his passions between writing at his home overlooking the Mississippi River and as a training chef aboard a boat traveling America's inland waterways, and is always living by the motto "be a New Orleanian wherever you are."