

CAN'T STOP THE FUNK

A "Cadillac" Holland Mystery

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*For my own Miss Js;
Joyce and Jackie.
Thank you for your
patience and service.*

Chapter 1

The FBI office in New Orleans waited five years to open an investigation into the police-involved shootings during the chaotic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The focus seemed to be centered on my nominal boss, NOPD's Chief of Detectives Bill Avery. Chief Avery signed off on the judgment of his own department's investigators when they consistently cleared every stressed-out officer responsible for any of the shootings. NOPD's police superintendent at the time selected the detectives who handled these most cursory of investigations. Avery was now under fire for not questioning their conclusions that all of the shootings were justified. The new police superintendent seemed a bit too eager to let Avery be NOPD's scapegoat for everything his predecessor mishandled during and after the storm ravaged the city and its already troubled department.

Chief Avery was my father's partner at NOPD until my father became Chief of Detectives when I was still in grade school. Avery assumed the position when my father retired to spend his days deep sea fishing. This connection his was how a permanent position for a State Police Detective at NOPD was created the very same day I received my gold badge in Baton Rouge. The secret purpose of this unique arrangement was to facilitate my investigation into my father's abrupt disappearance while conducting rescues in the Lower Ninth Ward during the turmoil after Hurricane Katrina. My investigation left me in a worse position with the FBI's Special Agent in Charge than Chief Avery when it was unexpectedly solved a few weeks earlier. Bill and I shared a conviction that his problems were a direct result of my uncovering evidence an FBI agent was involved in murdering civilians, including my father, in the wake of the

storm.

Bill Avery uses being my supervisor to justify having breakfast with me three or four times a week at Strada Ammazarre, the French Quarter bistro I co-own with Tony Venzo. Conducting business over breakfast at the restaurant is both a blessing and a curse for Avery. He gets to enjoy gourmet meals he couldn't otherwise afford, but his waistline is testament to the frequency of his visits. Chef Tony likes to sleep late and usually leaves preparing our breakfast to a cranky fire-plug of a Black woman I have always known as Miss J. She knew my father when he was a rookie officer patrolling the Florida Projects in New Orleans East. She helped my father deal with the Black Panthers, who literally ran the Florida Projects when he was a rookie officer patrolling in New Orleans East.

Bill's breakfast this morning was a gingered fruit compote, grits and grillades, hash browns smothered in onions and gravy, three chocolate croissants, and café au lait. I was happy with fried eggs and grilled andouille sausage. I also invited my Uncle Felix to join us for breakfast under the pretense of his 'just happening to be in town.' His compliments on the plate of eggs Sardou Miss J set before him were met with a smile that hid her indifference to such opinions. She doesn't need Felix's praise to know what a good cook she is. The Creole dish sets a pair of poached eggs atop an artichoke bottom and creamed spinach smothered beneath a blanket of hollandaise, and everything was indeed perfect.

Uncle Felix Deveraux is both a legend and a phantom in Louisiana politics. The best indication of his influence on a situation is the absence of any sign of his involvement. He is cut from the old-school "political fixer" mold and he is the guy you need to call when you are being blackmailed, or when you need someone blackmailed. There had been a brief moment in time when there was a plan for me to join his firm after college. That idea was scrapped when I was an underclassman at LSU. I took ROTC courses to pad my GPA and wound up in the Army. My uncle has never forgiven this betrayal.

The three of us made polite conversation between

bites of food. It ranged from the recent re-opening of the Fairmont Hotel under its previous moniker of Roosevelt Hotel to my uncle's unsolicited endorsement of my dating one of the local State's Attorneys. Uncle Felix saw the potential for us to be a power couple, even though I was still having a difficult time even seeing us as a couple. What we absolutely did not discuss was anything to do with Chief Avery's legal troubles. I could have no part in any such discussion without becoming party to whatever scheme Felix hatched to save Avery. This meal provided a plausible explanation for our meeting if the FBI tried to connect me to any intervention my uncle made on my boss' behalf.

"I need to check on a couple of things," I said and excused myself. I left the two of them alone at the Chef's Table. The table seats six and is tucked into a niche in the sizable kitchen Tony had modeled on the Mafioso-owned trattoria in Sicily where he apprenticed. My family believes Tony is a chef I became friends with while on vacation, but the name we gave to our bistro translates from Italian to the English phrase "road kill." That is what I looked like after an ambush in Baghdad left me with a crushed skull and three bullet wounds. Tony saved my life that night, because he was part of the intelligence mission I was leading when we were ambushed. It had nothing to do with cooking. I am still bound by a security clearance contract which bars me from discussing my years as a Special Operations operator and my later work for any intelligence agencies. This also keeps Tony's and my mutual secrets safe.

I found Miss J alternately stirring three stockpots on the massive range in the prep kitchen. Two pots held traditional Italian sauces; the third was full of the day's fresh pot of gumbo. Tony's apprentices struggled to keep up with her demands for the ingredients required for each recipe. Miss J stands barely five feet tall and requires a foot stool to see inside the tall pots. I bit my tongue about the fluffy pink bedroom slippers she insists on wearing for comfort's sake. She had been with us for three years; I gave up on her changing her shoes a long time ago. Tony and I both understand

how much more we need her than she needs this job. She also doubles as den mother to the staff, in both the front and back of the house. She defers slightly to Juaquin, our general manager, on matters of budget and purchasing. I sincerely believe that she is the first human being to intimidate Tony, and I have seen him make grown men piss themselves.

“Has Mister Bill got you working on anything for him?” Miss J asked when we were alone for a moment. I could smell the garlic and basil simmering in the pot of red sauce. I would smell like a pizza delivery boy all day if I lingered here too long.

“No. He’s got bigger problems than keeping me busy right now.”

“Can you go talk to my sister? Esther’s all upset that someone wants to buy our house. They made offers on all the houses them Make-It-Right folks built.” I could tell she was upset. I also knew there was not going to be an easy way to say buying houses is not a crime.

“I’d be happy to,” I assured her. It took me a moment to realize that the look she gave me was her way of silently questioning why I wasn’t already on my way to see Esther.

“You two okay?” I asked my boss and uncle on my way past their table. I grew up envisioning Uncle Felix as being a cross between a slick-haired used car salesman and the Devil; the one you’d meet at a crossroads around midnight to sell your immortal soul. I still think he cultivates that impression.

“Better than I have been.” It was the first time I had seen Chief Avery smile since Michael Conroy, the head of the local FBI, personally informed him he was under investigation. I began to consider the size of the debt I was going to owe my ‘devil’ uncle as I walked to the garage on Decatur Street.

Chapter 2

The Lower Ninth Ward has always been the city's poorest and least racially diverse neighborhood. Prior to the storm, it was home to the marginally employed, and very poorly paid, faceless Black workers that keep the city's various service industries running. They make beds, wash dishes, dig ditches, stock shelves, and do whatever it takes to put food on their tables. The children of these hard workers don't always want to work so hard for so little money. This attitude led to drug dealing and escalating crime in the neighborhood in the years proceeding Hurricane Katrina. Gang turf battles had killed or wounded hundreds of people. The de facto moat formed by the Industrial Canal made it possible for the city's white minority population to consider the problem of the brutal Black on Black violence to be contained. To be perfectly honest, it allowed many of them to imagine a day when the Lower Ninth Ward might finally kill itself off.

Katrina physically flushed everyone from the neighborhood. This gave rise to both a new hope for the community and a shaming of those who wanted to keep its law abiding and hard-working residents from ever returning. Repatriation was the big issue in the previous mayoral election, and it was front and center in the current election as well. A new mayor would be elected in less than three months. The vast majority of homes lost to the storm

were family owned, but poorly insured. It took efforts by groups like Make It Right and the Musician's Village to get the rebuilding process started. It also took activists and loudmouths like Esther and Lionel Batiste to keep it moving.

The new home Miss J, Esther, and Lionel Batiste stay by on Deslonde Street is built like a fort against future storms. The thunderstorm I drove through to get to their house seemed determined to test the flood walls the Corps of Engineers insisted on patting itself on the back about. They rebuilt every section of flood wall Katrina breached within a year, and were proudly proclaiming they were "just as good as" the ones that had failed so spectacularly. I was driving the bistro's Ford Raptor pickup truck because my low-slung Cadillac coupe doesn't have the ground clearance to handle even the city's normal street flooding. This storm was expected to last for days and was already making a mess.

The Batistes' living quarters are twelve feet above ground level and built atop thirty five foot deep pilings. Only a place to park their ancient Crown Victoria and a storage shed are at ground level. The primary construction materials are storm-resistant masonry and steel. The metal roof is lined with solar panels. A lot of attention went into every aspect of its durable construction, but almost none into making it look like the shotgun house it replaced.

Lionel Batiste opened the door a crack when I knocked.

"Your aunt asked me to come talk to you about someone trying to buy your house." My explanation lessened the scowl on Lionel's face.

"It's all good. Let Cooter in," Esther shouted from behind him. "We don't keep the only good NOPD cop in the city standing in the rain."

"I work for the State Police, not NOPD," I explained to Lionel. I stepped past the lanky twenty-five year old and looked around the open-concept interior. The Batiste's interior decorating appeared to have been handled by one of the local buy-on-credit furniture stores that advertise on late night television. A heavy sectional sofa and glass and bronzed-metal coffee table faced the living room's black metal TV stand and flat panel TV. The dining room table had metal legs and

chairs with plastic cane-look seat backs. The art on the walls only qualified as “art” because the pictures were in metal frames. Each room reflected the Batiste family’s tastes and budget, but the decorating hardly conformed to what the architect likely had in mind.

“That’s supposed to be better?”

I felt confident in assuming he had a bad history with the police in the past. A disturbingly high percentage of the city’s young men have criminal records full of misdemeanors simply because they caught some cop’s eye the wrong way.

“Not really. I just want to be sure you hate me for all the right reasons.” I hoped a combination of sarcasm and honesty might get me through the interview.

“Cop’s a cop,” Lionel muttered and let me past. I finally understood why we had never spoken when he dropped by the bistro to see his aunt. He had absolutely nothing to say to me.

Esther Batiste was in the kitchen. She is a heavy-set woman in her sixties, with Type-2 diabetes and kidney problems. She pointed to the counter separating the dining room from the kitchen. I took a seat on one of the tall wooden stools while she rummaged around in a stack of papers next to the refrigerator. Lionel sat down at the dining room table behind me. He positioned himself so I had to turn to address him, but where I could sense he was staring at me.

“This is what they sent us.” Esther handed me a large envelope. She flashed her son a reproachful look. My taking the time to come here and listen to their concerns obviously did nothing to change Lionel’s opinion of policemen in general.

I studied the large white envelope before I emptied its contents on the counter top. It was sized so the contents could lie flat, which made them seem a bit more formal and intimidating. The logo beside the return address was a square red box with the letters CSA and the words ‘A Holding Company’ in bold white letters. It was likely a shell corporation. The return address was printed on the envelope with an elegant, dark gray font. The address was on the forty-third floor of a building in Mobile, Alabama. I had been in Mobile in the past year and could remember no building anywhere near that height. This was likely a

letter-drop address meant to further conceal the actual nature of CSA.

The contents of the envelope weren't much help. There was a very cleverly written letter of introduction about the company and its mission. Even the company's mission statement failed to explain their real purpose. CSA Holdings billed itself as a real estate investment group looking for opportunities to develop not just homes but entire communities. I wondered if they were buying here to be able to show a loss to offset some far more lucrative development's profits.

The holding company's cash offer was two hundred and sixty thousand dollars for the Batistes' home and lot. It seemed like a great deal of money for a three bedroom home in this part of town. It also sounded like a once in a lifetime opportunity for the family to move to a much nicer part of town. It did not seem like an intelligent investment for experienced real estate investors to make. I could see nothing to be gained by the holding company in making an offer to buy the Batiste's home, much less their entire neighborhood.

"What do you think?" Esther barely let me put the packet back together before she wanted my opinion.

"I think it is the best offer you will ever get if you want to sell."

"Well, we don't." I knew this without Lionel's telling me so.

"Your sister told me that the company wants to buy all of the houses the Make-It-Right Foundation built."

"That's right. Everyone on this street got one of these," Esther confirmed. "They all came to me, to see what we should do."

"What did you tell them?"

"To do nothing at all. I wanted to find someone who could find out what these people are really after."

"Is anyone else buying renovated houses in this neighborhood?"

"Yes, but that's some other company." Esther said this as though she understood there were implications in the fact that the offer made on her home was only made on the homes the Make It Right Foundation had completed. There were only sixteen homes on this street. Three more were under construction. Brad Pitt's pet

project had a long ways to go to get to the hundred and fifty houses he once promised. Still, buying just the finished homes at the price being offered was going to cost CSA well over three million dollars.

“Can I borrow this?” I pointed to the packet. “I need someone better at the business end of things to give me an opinion. I’m with you, though. It doesn’t make any sense for someone to spend this much money to buy these houses.”

“You don’t think they’re worth that much?” I managed to step on another trap in Lionel’s mine field.

“I think they are worth far more than that to the families living in them. I also think the same amount of money spent on the other side of Claiborne would buy a lot more places. If they really want to buy a community, and not just houses, they should be spending the money somewhere over there.”

Lionel couldn’t find a way to attack that tactful response.

“Did you ever find out what happened to Ralph after the storm?” Esther changed the subject on me. Ralph is my father’s name.

“I found someone that said he died pulling folks out of the East right after the storm. I don’t think we’ll ever find his body.” This was my practiced response to the question. What I actually discovered was that he was shot by a private security contractor who later joined the FBI. The combination of me exposing the agent’s crime, and his death shortly thereafter in a suspicious car accident, had me made an a problem for FBI Special Agent in Charge Michael Conroy. I was sure that Chief Avery’s current problems were related to all of this. “I remember he always said the Batistes were his favorite ‘Angry Black Women’. Supposedly, you two could raise a ruckus when you felt you needed to be heard.”

“True dat!” Lionel finally found something to agree with me about.

“I guess I should be glad that I’m not the one making you mad about trying to buy your house.” I tried to joke.

“Lionel and me be mad already,” Esther said. She waved for me to follow her around the corner to the living room.

The wall usually reserved for family pictures had been transformed into what looked like a situation room from my military days. White boards dotted with post-it notes and handwritten comments covered the wall. A piece of plywood set atop a pair of two-drawer file cabinets served as a desk. A

computer, monitor, and printer competed for space with stacks of file folders. I looked over the materials without touching anything.

“What’s all of this for?” I finally had to ask. All of the materials were about the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. There were newspaper clippings, official reports, Freedom of Information documents, and dozens of photos clipped from magazines and newspapers.

“Lionel’s writing a book about the Convention Center. There’s lots of books out there about white people during Katrina, but nobody wants to hear about the time Black folk spent in that place. It’s time somebody stepped up to the plate and told the story. Nobody wants to know what they done to us then, and what they are still trying to do to us.”

“What are they still trying to do?” I only meant to show I was listening.

“They want to get rid of everyone that ever lived here or over in the Treme,” Lionel was the one giving voice to this familiar story line.

“What makes you think anyone is still trying to kick you out?”

“They been buying up houses along the levee all the way back to the Quarters. They fix the houses up and sell them for a bunch more money than they paid for ‘em. Folks can’t even afford to rent a home down here no more.”

“Who is this ‘they’ you keep talking about? Can you give me a name? Is it companies like this CSA Holdings or do you mean somebody specific, maybe somebody local?”

I figured one or the other of the pair had at least one name to spit on the ground.

“How about Alex Boudreaux?” Lionel was still doing the speaking. I was vaguely aware of the guy, and that he had been flipping houses by the score since the storm. I’d seen his name on the bistro’s reservations list. My sister graduated a couple of years after him at Tulane law school. She thought him to be unusually greedy and shallow.

“You know the Government and City Council wanted to keep us from moving back here after the storm. People still be trying to keep us from moving back. Now the city started in to bulldozing people’s houses if they ain’t moved back yet.” Esther was beginning to show her legendary anger.

“I do remember that being an issue.” Most of the

mayoral candidates in the election held just months after the storm advocated rebuilding the city on a far smaller footprint. The only candidate who wanted the whole city back was the incumbent mayor, and he was always going to be remembered for his 'Chocolate City' comments. Most of the current candidates for the office were dancing around the issue while promising to cut through FEMA's red tape and make them rebuild the city as promised.

"I think offering to buy our house is part of a bigger plan to get rid of everyone down here once and for all," Esther said in a calmer voice.

"I'll look into it, but I gotta tell you what I wanted to tell your sister. Buying houses is not against the law. Paying too much for them definitely isn't."

"Maybe not," Esther said and nudged me towards the door. "But what ought to be illegal ain't always a crime, neither.

Chapter 3

The rain continued overnight, so I was still driving the bistro's pickup truck the next morning. There were now entire blocks where the water was over the first steps of the houses and I had to slow down for these residential no-wake zones. If someone really wants to make a fortune, they should come up with a GPS program that routes you around urban street flooding.

My sister is the best civil attorney I know and I was going to need her legal opinion on the contents of CSA Holdings' packet to determine what I needed to do next. Tulip's office is on the lake side of a long block of commercial buildings ending at Jackson Avenue. This stretch of Magazine Street has appeared in nearly as many movies as the late John Wayne. It remains little changed, architecturally, from its heyday in the 1930s. Sidewalk-wide overhangs with low iron railings serve as expansive balconies for the second-floor apartments above the row of small shops and cafes on the river side of the street. I stopped by a quick service joint across the street from my sister's office called Juan's Flying Burrito. I ordered a pair of overstuffed burritos and then waded across the street, which was curb-deep in filthy water.

"Just the man I didn't want to see. I guess it's still raining?" Tulip laughed as I squished my way into her inner office. I took off my waterlogged Merrell work boots

and rain saturated socks before I sat down in a chair facing her desk. She pounced on the Veggie Punk burrito I handed her. My own burrito was stuffed with jerk-seasoned chicken. I let her take a couple of bites of food before I passed the envelope from the Batistes across her glass-topped desk. She eyed it warily.

“Take a look at this. Someone is trying to buy up the houses Brad Pitt built over in the Ninth Ward.” I said by way of explaining my visit.

“You do realize there are more people involved in doing that than just Brad Pitt.” She set her burrito aside and reached for the packet.

“Yeah, but I don’t know any of their names.”

Tulip ignored me as she flipped through the pages of legalese. She came to an abrupt stop and looked up. Her expression was a mixture of disdain and anger that I found uncomfortable to look at. I was just glad I was only the messenger.

“Did you see that the offer is only good until Christmas Eve? Could you have given me any less time to look into this?”

“I wasn’t brought in on it until yesterday morning. It doesn’t really matter anyway because I doubt any homeowner is taking the offer.”

“Does anyone even know why the holding company wants to buy these houses?”

“According to their little packet there they want to build a better world or something. What caught your eye?”

“Well for one thing they are offering a lot of money to the people living in them, but they’d be paying considerably less than what it cost to build any of those houses.”

“What?” I looked up from my lunch. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around the idea that the house I had seen cost more than two hundred grand to build. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms and the place covered less than two thousand square feet, even if you added in the front deck.

“They have famous architects designing the houses. Frank Gehry designed one, and his normal fee is higher than the price of the house they built. They are using the latest green building materials and techniques. Companies

are donating their stuff just to be able to say they are part of what the Foundation is doing. What are they like inside?"

"Very modern. You would probably like one."

"What do you mean by that?" I hadn't meant to rattle the chip she wears on her shoulder.

"I was struck by the irony that people who had never known any place but New Orleans until the storm were evacuated to places that bore no resemblance to where they were from, were kept from returning to New Orleans for over a year, and then given a home that couldn't look any less like what they used to live in if you tried. I don't see a bit of New Orleans anywhere on that street. They look like houses on one of the canals over in Pass Christian. I'd move if I were them, just to get into someplace that feels more like home."

"It would cost you or me almost twice the price they are offering to build one of these places." Tulip was giving me information, not arguing with me.

"I assume the holding company is aware of that fact."

"Anyone with a magazine subscription is aware of all this. Those houses have been in just about every article about the city since the storm. The fact private money is doing what government money has refused to do is big news to some people."

"I've been busy," I grumbled. My nightstand is usually stacked with back issues of *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. I'm used to dealing in theory rather than actual events. "So, what you're saying is that the guys at CSA are trying to get a bargain by offering what only seems like too much money."

"Well, they are offering more than any of those houses will ever sell for. Just because the Foundation spent so much money doesn't make the house worth a bundle. They are still only worth what they appraise for and what people in that neighborhood can afford."

"Now I am lost. Are they stealing the houses or what?"

"Not really," Tulip decided. "But, they will displace the people living in them and that will just about clear out the neighborhood all over again."

"Then this is a bad thing." I was rapidly losing track.

"It is in my opinion, and probably yours. This is not illegal, though."

“A wise woman has pointed out to me that something being legal doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be criminal.”

My sister broke into a huge grin and began to laugh.

“That’s Esther Batiste’s battle cry. She has been using it for years. I don’t know how many times she’s been heaved out of the City Council for making a big scene or held in contempt of court. She even had a show on community access cable for a while before the storm. Stay on her good side.”

“That’s her envelope you’re holding.”

“I hate you, big brother,” Tulip began sliding everything back in the envelope, but she didn’t shove it across her desk. “Do you know the only difference between a case and a cause?”

“The letter U?”

“No. It’s *you* personally.” Tulip said, wagging her finger. Why can’t someone offer to buy a house in a crappy neighborhood and not have you assume there must be some huge conspiracy behind it? I’ll look into who owns CSA Holdings, but don’t expect knowing that will tell you much more than you know now. Do I get to tag along on your date tonight?”

“Why would I want you to do that?”

“This is the Wednesday we get together to plan Mother’s dinner.” My sister and I alternate the monthly chore of having dinner with our mother while she gives a brutally opinionated critique of our lifestyles and career choices.

“I’ll call Katie and cancel our dinner plans.”

“You’ll do no such thing. I’ll join you two for supper and cut out before dessert. I’ll even call Katie to let her know what’s happening.”

I shrugged and began pulling on my still soggy socks and shoes.

“I’d really like to think you have my best interests at heart,” I sighed as I stood up to leave. “But I think it’s safe to assume you’re up to something.”

“What a dreadful accusation.” Her indignation was lost behind the sly grin she couldn’t entirely suppress.

I had only been dating State’s Attorney Katie Reilly for a few weeks and had yet to feel I had any control over the courtship. Katie’s father joined NOPD in the same academy class as our father. Their career paths could not

have been much different, but their friendship was always strong. The pair used to make an annual hunting trip to my father's hometown in the boot heel of Missouri. Katie's father retired there just after Hurricane Katrina. Katie also used to babysit my sister, despite the slim years between them in age. My father packed me off to military school before my hormones kicked in, so I had never given Katie any romantic consideration until I brought her a dog fighting case a couple of months earlier. The years we were apart favored her body more than they had mine. Mine had, in fact, been rebuilt on multiple occasions. My sister even selected my current face from a magazine when it needed rebuilt after my skull was caved in by the butt of an AK-47. Tulip also made sure Katie was waiting in the wings when my last romance collapsed, and the two of them had been driving this train ever since. I didn't mind in the least since the destination seemed to be worth the price of the ticket.