

Blowback

A “Cadillac” Holland Mystery

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To Bill and
Emily and the
road not taken.

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 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. 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 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?”

“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 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 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.

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 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 INFILCTED 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 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 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.

“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 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.