

## THE BLUE GAROU

Chief Avery very reluctantly agreed to stand guard over the pit bull while I went to get my car. The way the dog was grinning at him made him nervous. I was lucky that a dog kennel I had bought for a previous case was still in my garage. The Chief of the Homicide squad remained at the scene with Avery and Tulip. NOPD's detectives had voiced a collective willingness to write the death off as an animal attack and mocked the idea of a murder investigation but Tulip remained unapologetic about having raised her objections.

I was back within a matter of minutes and took the leash from Avery. He walked with me to my Cadillac CTS-V sport wagon. I had just purchased the vehicle but was going to have to risk the dog shaking off more blood since my other car was a Cadillac two seat convertible. The dog stepped into the kennel as soon as I pointed to its open door.

"I have informed our Homicide squad, the FBI and the DEA that you are looking into this officially and not just to pacify your sister. Homicide and the Feds are ready to close the case, so getting any sort of cooperation might be tricky. What do you think should be done first?" Avery helped me lift the kennel into the car once I had the dog secured.

"We should make sure they process the vehicle as though it really is a murder scene. That car is probably going to give me the only clues I'll get." I realized Avery was quizzing me like a rookie patrolman. "I'm sure a lot of people wanted Biggie Charles dead. I need to expand the list of suspects beyond the dog, which I doubt had much of a motive."

We both looked at the dog in its new kennel and I sensed Avery was ready to agree that the dog had likely not acted alone. Humanizing the critter for a second, I thought the next step in an assassination would be for whomever wanted the dog to kill its master to now be the loudest voice advocating its death. The short list of suspects consisted of the fiancée, the bodyguard, and the cousin that had trained the dog. I was most likely looking at a combination of at least two of these people, but I was not interviewing any of them this evening. My immediate task was to quarantine the dog at the LA/SPCA facility across the river in Algiers as quickly as possible. My mother might forgive me for missing most of my dad's birthday party if I at least made it back in time for the cake cutting.

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The LA/SPCA had built a new animal control center on the West Bank following Hurricane Katrina. The bright modern structure replaced their previous facility located beside the Industrial Canal in the Upper Ninth Ward. That cinder block animal warehouse had filled with flood water and would have drowned every animal there had they not been evacuated in the last hectic hours before the storm hit.

"I'm bringing a dog in for quarantine, Steve," I told the after-hours receiving clerk when he answered the buzzer on the rear door. I read his name on the badge over the left breast pocket of his polyester khaki shirt. Steve was a young man of about twenty with a crew cut and a diamond earring in his left earlobe. The look on his face when he peered into the dog kennel changed to the face of someone wishing this had happened on a different shift.

"Is this the one the cops just called about?" Killer dogs traditionally arrived in the company of uniformed police officers, not shaggy-haired detectives wearing Armani and driving a Cadillac. That I had a badge and gun under my jacket was not going to assuage this young man's qualms.

"Yes," I said as I let the dog out of its transport kennel and took hold of its leash.

The dog was not pulling on the leash, but had actually laid down. It had sat up in the dog cage for the entire fifteen minute drive, seemingly very interested in its surroundings but not in the least interested in me personally. "The dog is evidence in a homicide and it's definitely the cause of death. We need a toxicology screen run to see if maybe drugs caused the dog to attack. It's a trained attack dog, so something triggered the incident. Make a note that I am to be the only detective with access to it."

"Let's get him cleaned up a bit more and we'll draw some blood. You won't get the lab results for a day or so."

Steve led the way through the neutrally painted hallways to a room set aside for quarantined animals. Steve was so practiced in his actions that I knew he had handled a lot of animals before this. He allowed the dog to sniff his hand before he reached over to replace the dog's metal collar with a nylon one and a metal lead. Steve made a disparaging remark about metal choke collars as he handed me the collar and heavy leather lead.

I rinsed the collar's tags in a hand sink so I could read them. There was little harm in doing this as the cleaning removed very little of the blood on the collar itself. There was an engraved metal tag with the

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name TAZ, the dog's veterinary tags and city license, and a yellow tag for its microchip.

Steve and I would have liked to have given the poor beast a proper bath and to have removed the blue hair dye from its coat, but I needed to be sure that the forensic team had what they needed before I mucked about with the evidence. Steve approximated the dog's age at almost three, making it nearly fully grown. I left the building still wondering the reason for the dye job, and why Tyshika hadn't just bought Biggie a puppy for his birthday.

Three years is a lot of time to trace in a dog's life. The dog may have been trained and sold, and perhaps then returned and sold again. There could prove to be such large gaps in its life that I would never be able to establish an accurate history. The likelihood that Taz had a secret attack trigger nobody knew about was going to make handling the dog risky. I followed Steve and the dog to a room with a couple of other cages, both housing dogs that had also recently attacked humans. All of these dogs faced a certain death sentence unless their time in quarantine showed some reason beyond their own control for their attacks.

I considered a variety of murder scenarios while I drove back across the river. The fiancée might have wanted to kill Biggie based on some real or imagined insult, but that would have meant kissing off her only means of support. There is a long tradition of bodyguards turning on their masters, but there is usually some sort of profit in doing so that eluded me in this case. I could not imagine what the guy who trained the dog might have had against Biggie, and I wouldn't think selling killer dogs would help the kennel's reputation. There was the tantalizing lead that two of the suspects were related, but this could just prove to be a coincidence. I found myself as lost on the matter of likely suspects as I was on a plausible motive. Biggie being gunned down in a drive-by shooting would have made more sense and offered a more traditional route to finding his killer. Someone being imaginative and original about this murder had only made my first murder investigation all the more complicated.

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