

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 bootheel 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 remains classified information involving an intelligence operation gone horribly awry in Baghdad.

The mission ended in an ambush that nearly took my life. It did cost me nearly a year to rebuild myself physically and mentally from the injuries I suffered in the attack. I returned to New Orleans with Tony Vento, the man who had saved my life, in part so that he could open the Italian-themed bistro he had long dreamed about, but mostly so I could begin to search for my father, who had disappeared days after Hurricane Katrina. My mother's politically-connected family facilitated this second task by using my intelligence background to pressure the State Police into taking me into their ranks at a detective's rank upon graduation from their training academy. They wasted no time in assigning me to the supervision of NOPD's Chief of Detectives, Bill Avery, who had followed my father into 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 making small talk with a dozen of the Hibernian parade marshals who had convened for breakfast and cocktails before their St. Patrick's parade in the Irish Channel in 2007. The quality of our conversation deteriorated as the Jameson's portion of their breakfast took effect, and I excused myself when

Chief Avery arrived in the company of a group of NOPD Sixth District officers. The Tavern had become Avery's unofficial office after he followed a favorite cook here from one of his favorite eateries that had not reopened after the storm, a cranky but talented Black woman everyone here called "Miss J."

Avery was already in the middle of a long day, which had started with a shooting a few blocks away at about three in the morning, and he arrived wearing the crumpled suit, extra belly weight, and the same 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 had broken 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. 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 swam a couple of miles every day as physical rehabilitation for gunshot wounds to my shoulder. Avery tolerated that my hair was shaggier than regulation, because it hid the surgical scars from where a number of titanium plates had been used to rebuild my skull from another of the injuries that ended my previous career. I was still getting used to my new face, which had already 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 had both seen 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 connected for me fire you, which was Plan A, but there's obviously no point in assigning you any more 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 things my father would use in 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 protect the city's least-recovered post-storm neighborhood. Less than thirty 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 back 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 they ever called home. I was irresistibly drawn to the area because it felt so

much like the part of Baghdad I had operated in up until I was ambushed and nearly killed. It was the only place in the entire city I felt safe or at home. Avery saw no 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 this area while conducting boat rescues rather admit the patrols were a sign of the PTSD that had so deeply 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 chosen, but I knew it was a good choice. It would arrive with a mound of grilled potatoes and onions and fresh-baked biscuits. Avery ordered coffee but I asked for a large RC Cola, this being about the only place in town still selling it.

"Anyway, you were about to tell me what you have in mind." I prodded Avery to either finish his latest admonishment or assign me to my new job.

"We're backlogged with cases that need attention but we don't have the manpower it will take to clear them. I still need to justify your salary to FEMA, but I think your best value 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 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 had spent nearly four years tracking down high-value Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in places 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

was employing in arresting Avery's fugitives involved a lot more surveillance and tactical planning than NOPD was used to.

"I need you to find a suspect in a shooting who's trying to intimidate the primary witnesses against him."

"And your guys can't handle this, why?" This sounded fairly serious.

"Time has suddenly become an issue. The District Attorney's office has egg on its face because they are the ones who 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 shot 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. The gun he used turned out to have been stolen in the same burglary as the guns used to ambush him. The gun he used had also been used in a couple of other shootings locally that we can't imagine he had anything to do with. Both of them were gang shootings and we have nothing linking him to either gang." Avery's face relayed the prosecutor's chagrin at this development.

"You said finding him is time sensitive," I sensed that the task Avery was handing me had almost nothing to do with the burglary or the guns. Something else had to be sending him in my direction.

"The prosecutor's main witnesses are Janelle Beauvoir and her husband."

"The singer?" I had seen Janelle perform a number of times in the few months I had been home. She was active in raising money to help the hundreds of musicians still displaced by the storm still trying to come back to New Orleans.

"She's set to do the first set at French Quarter Fest, which gives you

something like a month to find the guy. The suspect has threatened to kill her if she doesn't recant the statement she gave or if she testifies against him, so she won't go on stage if he's still running around loose." I saw Avery's problem. Avery definitely lacked the manpower to organize a full-scale manhunt, or to provide Janelle and her husband with continuous witness protection. It was going look worse for him than the District Attorney's Office if Janelle Beauvoir was murdered before a live audience. "The best we can hope to do is catch the guy 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 some a bunch of gun-nuts in Texas. The ATF has been after them for a few years for gun running, and it turns out that the gun the guy you're looking for used in the shooting was one the ATF tied to a burglary that group is suspected of doing up in Wyoming. Everyone wants to know how a gun from that burglary 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 tie to either shooting. The 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 had just started his last term, but I was in no position to refuse Chief Avery. The reason my mother had used nearly her entire bankroll of favors to get me into this job was because she wanted me to investigate my father's disappearance after the storm. He had come 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 my State Patrol commission to facilitate my search, which had yet to unearth a single fresh clue. I also knew I needed a way to use my training and experience that didn't involve becoming a mercenary. My answering machine was full of messages offering me "security" work I wanted no part of.

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 had taken the District's pulse. The entire area had flooded and very few residents had carried flood insurance, so rebuilding was going to take that much longer. The officers' major complaint was the number of muggings involving the undocumented Hispanics that had come to town to do the 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 a current model-year sedan 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 had used any cars or trucks they could find. Avery’s sedan had seen less abuse than most of the Cadillacs had endured, but it already had fifty thousand miles on the odometer and the driver’s seat showed wear from his sidearm rubbing on the seat. Avery had left a file 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 had followed us out of the Tavern joked as he leaned through the car’s open window. 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.

“What do you have in mind?” I wondered aloud.

“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 offense.