

THE BLUE GAROU

A "Cadillac" Holland Mystery

H. Max Hiller



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*For Karen and Carla. There would be no
pages after this were it not for their
encouragement and help in taking an idea
and making it into a story.*

I

I WAKE FROM ANOTHER NIGHTMARE and the familiar surroundings remind me that I am still safe from this memory in both time and distance. My breath and heart rate begin to return to normal and I step out of my bed to get a beer. I smile at the framed banner hanging in my living room as I make my way to the kitchen. It was the campaign banner for a minor candidate in New Orleans's first mayoral election after Hurricane Katrina named Manny Chevrolet. His too-honest campaign slogan was "A Troubled Man for Troubled Times." I adopted it for my own mantra the first time I saw it.

My name is Cooter E. Holland, and I am a troubled cop for a troubled city. My father named me after his hometown in the bootheel of Missouri. Six successive generations of the Holland family have lived on a farm bordering the Mississippi River east of Cooter with a long tradition of the younger sons leaving home to find work elsewhere.

Ralph Holland, the youngest of five sons, was a member of the New Orleans Police Department for over thirty years. He worked his way up from a beat in the Lower Ninth Ward to become Chief of the Detective Division. He also published a series of popular crime novels by the time I graduated from the military prep school he packed me off to after retrieving me from the First District's holding cell after one too many underage drinking incidents in the French Quarter. I abandoned the family's expectations for my future by choosing a military career which meant being apart from the city of my birth for nearly half of my lifetime before returning to a hometown that was as battered as I was. My career as a shadow warrior ended when I was pulled from the brink of death in an ambush on a back street in Baghdad that I knowingly lead my team into.

One of those killed in the ambush was wearing a jacket with my cover name written in the lining. This led to my

family being notified that I was missing and presumed dead after the body was identified. This led to my family being notified that I was missing and presumed dead after the body was identified. I actually had died on an operating table, twice in fact, and it was over two months later before my family was notified I was alive, albeit in a coma and in a hospital in Italy. Hurricane Katrina brought fresh tragedy to my parents and sister less than a month after they were left reeling from the premature report of my death. My father disappeared without a trace after volunteering to assist with the search and rescue operations following the collapse of the city's floodwalls.

I was still in the hospital in Naples when I promised my kid sister that I would return to New Orleans and look for our father. As it turned out, the law enforcement situation was in a very critical situation in New Orleans during the first year after the storm. Over a third of the New Orleans police force either resigned or had been fired and National Guard soldiers, State police officers, and volunteer cops from across the nation had been temporarily deployed to help out. NOPD was in no position to train new officers so I was encouraged to apply to the State Highway Patrol. My politically connected "fixer" uncle brokered a deal with my father's former NOPD partner and the Commander of the State Police to use my overseas intelligence work as work experience so I could graduate from the State Police Academy at the rank of Detective. The LSP could then assign me indefinitely to the use of the New Orleans Police Department. Avery replaced my father as the Chief of NOPD's Detectives, and he willed himself to overlook a worrisome psych profile that my PTSD posed.

The arrangement fell apart almost immediately. Chief Avery and I did not share the same priorities. His focus was on the present and mine was squarely in the past; finding an answer to my father's disappearance. I was stonewalled and sent down blind alleys by people I had reason to believe should have been as concerned about my father's virtual disappearance as I was. My fury caused so many scenes that Avery had no choice but to relegate me to work solo and to help NOPD clear its pre-storm backlog of arrest warrants and to handle a few minor investigations that were taxing his department.

I had just spent the previous week camped out in an abandoned house to monitor a FEMA trailer in the Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhood still remained mostly uninhabited since Katrina's floodwaters had devastated it in

an instant. I had called in the Fugitive Task Force earlier that morning when I verified the squatter was a drug dealer wanted on homicide charges. The stakeout reminded me of similar missions I had done as a sniper with the Army's Tier-One operators and while working as a contractor with intelligence agencies I cannot name. I have compartmentalized that period of my life and stowed those memories and lessons in a part of me that nobody is ever meant to find.

One of the members of my last intelligence mission followed me home to New Orleans and assumed a new identity as well. Chef Tony Venzo, as Antonio Venzo Hussein al-Majid now calls himself, made me a well-compensated silent partner in his Creole-Italian bistro called Strada Ammazarre in the French Quarter. I had helped Tony buy the building on Decatur Street near the Old Mint building at a steep discount and we set aside the third floor for spacious loft apartments with a view of the Mississippi River for each of us. The first floor of the building was laid out for the bistro's kitchen, bar, and large, high-ceilinged dining room. The second floor was divided into private dining rooms, and it was in the smallest of these that I found my mother after I showered and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

"Is the staff following your orders?" I gave her a peck on the cheek.

My mother was taller than me in her heels and was impeccably dressed in a pale champagne Chanel skirt and jacket with a matching silk blouse. Her flawless makeup and improbable mane of lustrous blonde hair made her look much younger than sixty-eight years of age. A cosmetic surgeon had smoothed out what Estee Lauder could no longer conceal.

"Why wouldn't they?" She turned around to face me and looked at my clothes and then at my face, her frown growing by the minute. "Tell me that you are not wearing those clothes or that beard to your father's birthday party."

I was not about to defend appearing before her in jeans and a Jazz Fest T-shirt. Nor was I going to suggest that my father was unlikely to attend his party, mention that this annual party for a man she was divorcing at the time of his unexplained disappearance was a topic of discussion among her guests, or that some of them find any celebrations on September 11th to be in poor taste.

"Of course not, Mother. I just came by to say hello."

I made a strategic withdrawal and returned to my apartment to shower again and shave the week's growth of

facial hair I had sprouted on the stakeout. I reached deep into the back of my closet for the white Armani dinner jacket and black slacks I wear only for this party each year. I then headed to the main floor in search of Tony so we could review the party's menu and proper plate presentations one last time.

I also checked the reservation book with Marie, our hostess, and said hello to a couple of the early diners I recognized. The bar area was filling up with locals who came to enjoy the tapas Chef Tony set out to entice them to the Quarter rather than start their weekend in the revitalized strip of chic bars and cafes in the Warehouse District or further Uptown. The rain that began the night before finally thinned to a drizzle and the breeze coming through the open French doors carried the faint stench of decay from the gutters filled with water that had rinsed the rooftops and exteriors of the centuries-old buildings of the Quarter.

Chef Tony was standing at the bar with Chief Avery. The career lawman is a towering figure with the gait and bulk of the former LSU linebacker he actually is. His voice still has a very deep timbre and a distinctly local accent, but the silver in his closely cropped hair betrays the way this job has aged him. Avery was barely thirty years old when he started trailing behind my father as a rookie detective.

"I hear you found my bail jumper this morning," my boss said and patted my back.

"He was crashing in his uncle's place." I shrugged as though any detective would have thought to stake out a minor relative's house given as a home address when the suspect was arrested for a misdemeanor ten years ago.

"Well, good work," he complimented me and then turned his attention to the frosty mug of beer in his hand and leaned slightly towards Tony. "So, what's on the menu tonight?"

"Don't worry, whatever it is will taste good covered in hot sauce."

Avery thought about this for a moment before bursting into laughter. I couldn't help laughing as well, and Tony grinned because one of his jokes finally made sense. Our laughter was cut short by the sound of police cruisers and an ambulance racing past the double doors opening into the bistro from Decatur Street. Most of the regulars merely waited for the noise to stop and resumed their conversations, having long ago lost their sensitivity to, and curiosity about, the noise from sirens of any sort. Avery's cell phone buzzed about the same time the ambulance passed. He glanced at the text message and broke into a wide grin before he made a short

text in response. I had seldom seen him this happy and I raised an eyebrow in query.

“Yes, indeed. I have to go. Someone just killed Biggie Charles Lynley at the Hard Rock Café.”

“I’ll go with you. Tony, don’t tell my mother or sister where we went.”

I poured our beers into plastic cups before following Avery out the door and heading towards Canal Street. My mother would not appreciate our being late to the party or regaling the table with gory stories from the crime scene. We walked slowly, so as not to spill our beers. Neither of us saw any reason to hurry to see the city’s most famous dead guy. He wasn’t going anywhere.

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THE SIDEWALKS WERE PACKED with the usual late afternoon foot traffic of tuxedo-wearing wait staff on their way to work and gutter punks in filthy rags and expensive boots. There were also tourists in town for the Saints game against the Detroit Lions on Sunday. Avery and I were prepared for 2009 to be another in a long line of Saints' seasons that start well but end up in a shambles. Last year's fourth-place finish in the division did not inspire much hope for this year.

We walked past the bank of television reporters using the murder scene as a backdrop as they recounted the life of the deceased for the audience of their live-on-location newscast. The victim, 'Biggie' Charles Lynley, was a product of both the Calliope Projects and a failing criminal justice system. He was dealing drugs by the time he finished high school and was solidly in control of the heroin trade between St. Charles Avenue and the river by the time he was twenty-two. His undoing was the cold-blooded execution of two undercover DEA agents, but his murder trial was so poorly prosecuted that the DEA agents were being cast as the bad guys by the time the judge accepted a plea bargain to end the travesty. Biggie Charles was sentenced to fifteen years in Angola State Prison and paroled after serving only seven of them over the strenuous objections of everyone who could make one. He returned to New Orleans to build a rap music empire with money from an unknown source, which only added to his mystique. He spent a small fortune, but his label never posed any competition for other local labels because his acts lacked the level of talent at studios such as Cash Money Records.

BC Studios was better known for generating substantial income as an after-hours club. They catered to local bad-boy athletes, twenty-something liberal college coeds, and thirty-something young white-collar wannabe bad boys who wanted to pal around with what they thought were gang members who had managed to pull themselves off the path of

destruction. Biggie Charles Lynley's background ran the smarter celebrities off, yet Biggie continued to show up at places and events he should have been barred from and in photographs with people who should have known better than to stand so close to him. Avery's detectives mentioned Lynley from time to time in connection with an unsolved murder or some sort of drug or weapon sale on which they couldn't make a prosecutable case. The guy was more of a boogeyman than a crime lord. Maybe better yet, he had become a catch basin for any major crimes NOPD couldn't solve but needed to pin on somebody.

Avery led me to the knot of NOPD detectives dressed in sports coats who were milling about while their supervisors, all dressed in suits, were trying to decide how much effort to put into the case. A single New Orleans homicide detective might be assigned more active cases at one time than the entire police department of some communities will see in a year. Their active cases are often an intertwined mess of back-and-forth retaliation for some incident none of the participants can even remember. A detective's failure to make prosecutable cases on most of these homicides will have nothing to do with their personal ability to figure out who killed who, or even why. The arrest rate for the nearly two hundred homicides the previous year was under sixty percent and consequences were not something the city's gang members seemed very worried about. It was becoming an accepted fact that most homicides in post-Katrina New Orleans involved turf battles over drug dealing or other minority-on-minority crimes, both of which tended to be settled on the street and not in the courts even before Katrina.

"Big Chief and Cadillac have arrived. We can all go home," the beleaguered head of the Homicide detectives laughingly greeted us. Avery had been known as Big Chief for as long as he had carried a badge. NOPD's fleet of squad cars was sacrificed to the absolute necessity of patrolling neighborhoods still flooded with brackish water following Katrina. Sewell Cadillac's inventory was appropriated and pressed into service when the shortage reached a critical point. Avery assigned me one of these sedans when he decided I was no longer going to partner with his men. It gave NOPD's patrolmen and detectives an easy derogatory nickname for me. I was still patrolling in a Cadillac, but now I bought my own. This only served to justify the nickname.

"Back off, fellas. This is well in hand," one of the other detectives said. He held up a hand in a not entirely insincere

effort to keep us at bay and whistled as he looked the two of us up and down. Avery was in his best Brooks Brothers suit and I was way over-dressed for this scene. "Did you two just come from a James Bond convention?"

"The hell you have this under control. You don't even have coffee yet," I countered.

"Whataya got?" Avery asked bluntly. It is one of those things he gets to do as Chief of Detectives. A large part of the respect and deference he gets has to do with his habit of reaching over and thumping anyone he feels is not in line with the program.

"Charles Lynley's new pit bull got hungry with just the two of them in the vehicle."

"How do you even know what kind of dog it is?" I asked. The afternoon's rain probably washed away anything of investigative value from the parking lot, but I thought there was little to have been lost by the look of things. The crime scene seemed neatly contained within the interior of the Land Rover. Its side windows were tinted to start with but were now further darkened by what appeared to be gallons of blood. The front windshield was nearly obscured by fresh splashes of arterial spray.

"Biggie's fiancée gave him a pit bull for a birthday present. She and the bodyguard had left the two of them alone for about twenty minutes and came back to this."

The Homicide Chief spoke up in an effort to regain control of the scene. "Who is going to shoot the dog? You can't see the thing so someone will have to open the door so someone else can shoot it."

"You can't do that!" We turned towards the unexpected objection. I had not noticed my sister's arrival at the scene. I wondered if Tony sent her or if she had noticed us as her cab passed the scene. "You can't just shoot the dog."

"Damn it, Tulip, the dog just killed a guy. What's the problem?" Avery didn't need to explain himself to her. My kid sister is thirty-two years old but looks considerably younger. She has been saddled with a name, Tulip Holland, our parents found even more amusing than my own.

I was over-dressed for the occasion, but Tulip was absolutely distracting. She had her auburn hair in a tight chignon and the salon-applied make-up accented the dark brown of her eyes. Her floral-print dress was short and featured a display of her cleavage that was distracting the detectives from the topic at hand. My kid sister is thirty-two years old but looks considerably younger. She has been

saddled with a name, Tulip Holland, our parents found even more amusing than my own.

“Dogs don’t attack their owners without some sort of provocation,” Tulip persisted. “And a trained pit bull would certainly be unlikely to attack its owner.”

“It’s also the only witness to the crime.” I wasn’t trying to make a joke. I turned to one of the uniformed officers who had been first on the scene. “Did they say it was acting funny?”

“No,” he conceded and handed Avery his notes. He gave my sister and me a particularly nasty look as he left.

I looked at the Land Rover and then to where Biggie’s dinner companions were huddled together. They looked a lot more nervous than sad about the way the evening was going. Perhaps someone told them they were going to have to take the dog home with them.

I walked over and introduced myself as Detective Holland, figuring that they could believe I was an NOPD detective if they wanted. I was not at the scene in any official capacity at the moment. The burly Black male identified himself as Bumper Jackson, Biggie’s bodyguard, and the woman as Tyshika Barnes. She claimed to be Biggie’s fiancé, to which the bodyguard nodded his head.

“How long has Biggie owned the dog?” I asked the bodyguard. He was probably in his mid-thirties and carried a lot of muscle on his nearly seven-foot frame, which he used quite effectively to block my access to the fiancée. I couldn’t help noticing that Tyshika was not crying. She just seemed especially angry.

“Since today. It was supposed to be a surprise birthday present from Tyshika. She picked it up on the Northshore a couple of hours ago.”

“Well, I guess the surprise worked.”

The fiancée did not react if she heard me at all. Bumper did flinch and started to say something, but he hesitated. This might have been because of his confusion over my possible rank because of the way I was dressed. My clothes certainly cost more than those of anyone else he had spoken with that evening.

“So are you guys going to shoot the dog or what? Because I will if need be.” The bodyguard’s heavy revolver was in a shoulder holster which was exposed now that he had draped his jacket over Tyshika’s shoulders.

“We were just discussing that. Can you tell me if the dog was at all aggressive towards either of you?”

“It's a trained attack dog, man. It's aggressive towards everyone.”

“A trained dog should protect from attacks. It also should have protected your boss from an attack instead of attacking him.” I avoided commenting on Bumper's own dereliction of duty.

“Look, her cousin works at the kennel and trains guard dogs for a living. He wouldn't give us a dog he thought would do this. This animal is just nuts. Shoot it.”

I assured the pair that NOPD had the situation in hand and walked back to where the detectives were beginning to trickle away. The arrival of DEA and FBI brass and their own agents suggested that there might be a jurisdictional turf battle over who handled any investigation.

“How are they going to get the dog out?” I asked Avery as I returned to the group, which now included SAC Michael Conroy of the local FBI office. I could not remember ever seeing him at a murder scene before. Tulip was still at Avery's side as well. She continued voicing her objections to any discussion of killing the dog.

The SWAT commander had been reached by phone and summarily refused to shoot any dog in front of a bank of TV cameras that desperately needed something interesting to happen. The K-9 unit also distanced itself.

“There has to be a better idea than shooting the dog!” my sister shouted in frustration. The Federal agents and patrolmen around us did not share her view and universally favored putting the dog down over opening the door and turning the beast loose upon the crowd.

“I can't think of one good reason to stop them,” Chief Avery responded just as loudly and then led us both aside. “I do agree that the dog may prove more useful alive than dead if someone wanted it to kill Lynley. But, unless one of you has an idea, I'd say that removing it from the vehicle alive seems impossible.”

The three of us stood there, studying the vehicle and the problem inside, while everyone else continued to kick around ideas on how to shoot the dog. Something had to be done before the vehicle could be processed as a crime scene. This would be a dead-end case for the detective that drew it and nobody would object if this was closed as a dog attack right now. The assembled representatives of the city, state, and Federal authorities all agreed that justice, long delayed, seemed to have finally come to Biggie Charles Lynley.

“I'll tell you what. If your sister has convinced you that

this is anything more than a dog mauling, you can pursue it. You just have to go arrest the suspect.”

I could tell Avery was barely able to hide his glee at coming up with a means of passing any blame and bad publicity for what happened next to the State Patrol instead of his own department. Even Tulip agreed that there were but two likely scenarios here. The first was for the dog to be shot while still in the vehicle. That would make using the dog to prove Biggie’s death was anything but a dog mauling impossible. The second possibility was that the dog might attack anyone trying to remove it from the SUV. That someone would now be me.

“I have never done a murder investigation and you know it.” I didn’t want to actually refuse the assignment.

“I’ll watch over your shoulder. What are the odds this is ever going to wind up in court anyway?” There was no reason to believe the district attorney’s office would want to do anything but pin a medal on anyone I might prove killed someone as loathsome as Biggie Charles Lynley. Tulip told me to hurry up as the three of us were already late to dinner.

“Fine, I’ll take the case, but we’ll both probably regret this.” Tulip gave me a peck on the cheek and hugged Avery. He reluctantly agreed to open the Land Rover’s rear driver’s side door so I could capture my suspect.

I was now cornered into being the guy who got to arrest a murderous pit bull on live television. The thought of acting like I was going to do so and then shooting it in self-defense came to mind. This was not really an option because my sister was going to tell people about tonight and cast me as either her hero or as a dog killer. I stripped off the white dinner jacket and silk tie I was wearing and handed them to Tulip, telling her to bury me in them if this turned out poorly. I then borrowed a ballistic vest from one of the patrolmen and a set of heavy coveralls and jacket, as well as a helmet with a face shield, boots, and leather gloves, from a bemused fireman. What I really wanted was one of the training suits from the canine unit, but all they offered me one was one of their long-handled animal control snares so this hasty improvisation was going to have to work. I was going to have to rely on how fast the fire department was with a fire hose because I did not have a hand free to hold a pistol. My only hope would be if they could knock the dog off me before I was added to the beast’s dinner menu.

I would like to describe the way I bravely wrestled the murderous animal into submission and awed the crowd, but I

can't. Avery opened the rear driver's side door and pressed himself against the front wheel well with his pistol in hand. The crowd took a collective breath as the door opened, and shared a massive laugh in relief when nothing happened. I looked through the open door and found the dog was now calmly licking its victim's face, which was frozen in an expression of unimaginable terror. The dog had a metal choke collar on, with the heavy leather leash still attached. All I could think to do when I saw the grisly sight was to whistle for the dog to come to me.

The dog gave me a quizzical look and then simply walked across the bloodied interior and jumped down to sit at my feet. I could tell the breed only by the square shape of the head. The dog's fur was matted with blood. He shook himself, spraying gore all over everything within a ten-foot radius. I exchanged wry grins with Avery. I thanked him for his assistance before turning to the crowd and taking a deep bow to their greatly amused, and quietly relieved, applause. I then marched the four-legged murder suspect to the fire truck. One of the firemen offered me a hose to wash the dog.

Avery handed my borrowed costume back to its owners while I held the dog steady for the Crime Lab technician to photograph it and take swabs of the matted blood on its fur. The first question in the investigation came to mind as the technician washed the blood from the dog's fur with a slow stream of water. The coat of short hairs had been dyed a very deep indigo blue, so dark I could not make out the dog's actual fur color. The technician took more photos and wrote down my email address to send me copies of the pictures.

"Here's your dog, Tulip. Want to hold his leash?" She did not.

"I'll call Animal Control in Algiers and see if they can keep him until he can be evaluated," Tulip offered. We were going to have to make up a plan as we went along. "I do some pro bono work for one of the pit bull foster groups and they may be able to help."

"Let me know if you need anything else," Avery said and walked off to smooth the feathers he was going to ruffle when he announced his personal State Police detective was going to be investigating the dog's attack as a homicide.

Everybody believed this was a dog attack an hour ago, and nobody wanted to deal with the dog just ten minutes ago. Now that this had become The Blue Dog Murder Case everyone was going to want a piece of it. The news photographers and tourists were busy capturing the Land

Rover's exposed interior for posterity, but the death tableau was never going to be broadcast or see the morning paper.

"So, tell me what kind of evaluation is necessary for a pit bull that ripped a three hundred pound Black man apart like something from a horror movie," Avery wondered as he came back to where I held the dog while the crime lab techs took more photos and blood swabs from its fur. "Crazy is crazy and knowing why it's crazy isn't going to matter, right?"

"Not unless I'm crazy," I tried to joke. "Maybe they can rule out whether or not anything biological triggered the attack. If it wasn't sick or deranged then something else had to make it attack."

"Even if someone found a way to remotely make the dog attack, what are you going to do with a healthy and sane dog that kills people?" Avery barely caught himself before he started to pet the quiet canine sitting between us.

"I guess we'd have to find it a new home," Tulip smiled at Avery. "Say, don't *you* have a birthday coming up?"