

GHOSTS AND SHADOWS

A "Cadillac" Holland Mystery

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For
Brian Fitzgerald
Boss, mentor, and friend.

Chapter 1

I worked with a guy in Iraq whose pet phrase was, “Your tax dollars at work.” He used it the way other people punctuated their sentences with the F-word.

He would watch Apache helicopters rip apart a tree line full of Al-Qaeda gunmen then turn to me and say it. He especially liked dropping it in the middle of Intelligence and Special Forces debriefings about missions that went belly-up. He said it when he advised me to get out of the intelligence business after the agency responsible for an operation he asked me to organize disavowed knowledge of my mission. None of that was on my mind when my phone rang as I enjoyed breakfast on the Tuesday morning after Christmas in 2009. I spent most of the previous night helping NOPD detectives clear the French Quarter of pickpockets honing their craft in preparation for Mardi Gras. The call was from Ken Hammond, my Captain at the State Police. Any call from him was surprising because he transferred me to the command of NOPD’s Chief of Detectives the same week I graduated from the Louisiana State Police academy.

“Good morning.” I tried to sound as if his call were a normal occurrence.

“Are you busy?” He did not wait for a response. “I need you meet one of our arson investigators right now.”

“Sure.” Arson investigation is not normally so time sensitive.

Captain Hammond gave me an address in New Orleans East, but no further details. It was not even clear that I was to investigate anything. I had just washed down a half dozen beignets at Café du Monde with a hot cup of café au lait, so it only took me about five minutes to get to my car.

I own a pair of Cadillacs that I alternate as my patrol car. The Chief of Detectives provided me with a Cadillac sedan when I joined NOPD's ranks nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina. NOPD appropriated it from the Sewell Cadillac dealership in the CBD just days after the storm. The department destroyed its own squad cars using them to patrol the brackish floodwaters covering eighty percent of the sprawling city. I have supplied my own Cadillac ever since, which has earned me the nickname "Cadillac." This name is meant to be far more derisive than I choose to take it, but then again, I drive a nicer car than the police officers trying to insult me get to.

I drove to the Plum Orchard Neighborhood on the lakeside of Chef Menteur Highway. Chef is the old road leading to Mississippi. Vietnamese refugees made up the dominant population along there before Katrina devastated the tight-knit community. What housing was available after the storm was divided nearly equally between returning residents and the influx of Hispanics filling the city's need for cheap labor. I heard Mexican gangs were moving into the area, and was not looking forward to a gang war between the Mexican cartels and the sons of men who fought the Viet Cong and NVA.

State Fire Marshal Clyde Wheeler was standing in front of the address Hammond gave me. Wheeler was talking on his cell phone with considerable animation beside his department-issued GMC Acadia. I parked my red Cadillac XLR coupe with its COP CAR vanity plates behind his marked vehicle. Clyde was a thin-framed guy in his late fifties standing barely taller than my kid sister. I could not immediately see what managed to stir him up this early in the morning. I also could not understand why there was no evidence of a fire anywhere on the block.

"Captain Hammond sent me. I'm Detective Holland." I tried to get him to smile and shook his hand. "How can I be of service?"

"I don't know that you can, Detective. Not unless you can explain where my crime scene went to overnight." He

pointed to the address in question. A bulldozer was leveling a fresh load of dirt on the newly vacant lot. I lacked useful responses to either the question or the situation. "This is the third suspicious fire scene that's been demolished this way."

"There was a fire here last night and an empty lot this morning?" The Fire Marshal had my full attention.

"I even secured the building as evidence. Uniformed NOPD officers were protecting the scene. They claim they were told to stand down and then watched a pair of dump trucks from Mississippi haul the building away."

"Who claimed jurisdiction over your crime scene?"

"Nobody seems to be able to answer that." Wheeler tossed up his hands in frustration. He then explained that the NOPD officers told him someone in a nice suit flashed a badge and told them to leave. The demolition contractor already had city permits for the demolition work.

"Did they remember the agent's name?" I knew better, but asked the question so he would know I was interested.

"Of course not. He said his name, flashed his badge, and sent them on their way. What do you make of it?" Wheeler was calmer now that there was someone with whom to share his problem.

"I take it you called the ATF's duty officer and they claimed they didn't know what you were talking about." Wheeler just nodded. The ATF would be the only Federal agency with any reason to be involved in a suspicious fire that would outrank the State Fire Marshal. "Have you called the city about the demolition?"

"I got off the phone with them just as you pulled up. The planning office said they put the building on the demolition list last week. Today just happened to be their day to tear it down. They did seem surprised that the crew was here so early. They ask for the work to be done between ten and four so that there are fewer people around to complain."

"What was so special about the fire?" I decided to start at the beginning and look for anything else out of whack besides someone not wanting the crime scene investigated.

"It was one of the hottest house fires I have ever seen. That's what has me bothered. Two other houses that were demolished before I could get a good look were also hot fires. They all involved an accelerant I haven't seen used in

the thirty years I've been at this. It was literally white hot in places," Wheeler tried to explain what piqued his interest.

"Apparently, someone wants you to believe the Federal government is blocking your investigation. This is the sort of thing that ordinarily gets the Feds all excited."

"That's what's bugging me the most. I'm used to the ATF taking over my fire scenes, but I've never seen them just throw one away."

"We're also standing here assuming it was the ATF that took your house. Maybe it's an arsonist with a connection in the city planning office."

"That's a reach at best, Detective." Wheeler argued.

"True, but it's also the only conspiracy theory that explains what happened here. Most likely this is just a bad case of our tax dollars at work." Wheeler grinned at this sentiment, but neither of us was prepared to believe my arsonist theory was the actual solution to the mystery.

"What should we do next?" Wheeler wondered aloud.

"Go get some sleep. Call me if you get another fire like this." I patted him on the shoulder and sent him on his way. It was all I could do. Solving crimes requires having a crime scene. I handed him my card with my cell phone number and thought about that old spook named Jack "Casper" Rickman and his favorite mantra for the first time in five years.

Chapter 2

Wheeler's problem bothered me more than most situations tossed my way because of the way it stirred up the memory of Jack Rickman like burnt beans from the bottom of a cast iron pot. "Casper" Jack was the intelligence handler that disavowed me when my work for him nearly caused a diplomatic incident. I called the Fire Marshal and jotted down the addresses of the two other fires he connected to the latest one. The first scene was located in the heart of the Sixth District, lately known as Little Baghdad for the neighborhood's combination of violence and painfully slow rebuilding after Katrina's flooding. The other was in Hollygrove, a notorious neighborhood in the Seventeenth District. Drug dealing likely connected those two, but that failed to link them to the third fire. Arson is too impersonal to be a means of gang retaliation in New Orleans. I was looking for a vigilante arsonist if I wanted to make any drug war or gang-related theory work. It was going to be easier to come up with a new theory than to find a suspect matching such a narrow profile.

I decided to speak in person with the officers shooed off the site earlier in the morning. NOPD's Fifth District Headquarters flooded during Katrina and the "temporary" station was still a hastily converted furniture store on St. Bernard Avenue five years after the storm. FEMA and the City Council agreed on nothing more than tearing down

the damaged station house to stop people from asking when it would reopen.

The duty Sergeant told me I might catch the two police officers I came to see before they clocked out. I found them finishing their daily reports. This was a good thing for me because it meant the details I was interested in should still be fresh in their minds.

“What can you tell me about the Fed that ran you off?” I asked, trying not to sound critical of their quick acceptance of the mystery agent’s authority.

“He drove up in an unmarked Charger with government plates. He was about your height, with short salt and pepper hair. There was a creepy look about him and he had this really weird smile.”

This was a strange detail for the officers to remember. It must have been a very odd look, indeed.

“Yeah. He looked like the sort of creep you would stop and question if you saw him anywhere near a playground without a kid of his own. There was just something wrong about him, but he shoved his badge in our faces and wasn’t taking no for an answer.” The partner’s description was less precise yet far more telling. It actually reminded me of someone I once knew.

“How good of a look did you get at the badge?”

“Not very. It was one I had never seen one like it before, but that just means it was not DEA or ATF. Like I said, he flashed it and ordered us to leave.”

“Was he alone?”

“I didn’t see anyone else in the car, did you?”

The partner answered with a shake of his head, “The heavy equipment showed up as we left.”

“About that. Did you get the name of the company doing the demolition?” They should have been able to get that much since it was probably painted on the side of the equipment or the truck door.

“That’s what really made me think something was going on,” the second officer said and grabbed his report. “Olmstead Incinerator. They’re out of Biloxi. I can’t figure out why anyone would take what’s left of a burnt up house all the way to Mississippi to burn it again.”

“Unless you knew there was something really toxic in the house. I could see them incinerating a house with a meth lab in it, but I don’t think this place did. They smell

like cat pee,” the first officer offered.

“What did this place smell like?”

“I don’t know. Like something metallic burnt up?”

The police officers looked at one another in hopes they might come up the name of the metal, but neither could. I was getting near the end of their reliable information. They would keep talking if I kept asking questions, but I sensed we were getting closer and closer to them just giving me nothing but useless speculation.

Chapter 3

I am fairly new to police work despite my detective's rank. I came to my present job directly from a career in military intelligence and working with those three-letter agencies that keep to the shadows. That work involved hours of picking through piles of raw data followed by a few brief moments of intense action when I led a raid based on what I found. Understanding why something happened, or why anyone would have done it, was only my starting point. My task was to take that knowledge and formulate a plan of action to stop the perpetrator from carrying out their next attack. It took surprisingly little tweaking of my skill set to go from eliminating jihadist cells in the Middle East to arresting criminals in New Orleans. One thing that helped my transition to civilian life was that, in Katrina's aftermath, my hometown struck me as an English-speaking version of Baghdad. My own government destroyed both, using bombs on one and a woefully ineffective recovery bureaucracy against the other.

Washington also liked to blame the local government officials for every delay and obstacle in both of these flawed recovery efforts. Government bureaucrats and their no-bid private contractors spent more time making big plans than actually laying bricks. The widespread dissatisfaction with

the haphazard rebuilding of Iraq, and especially the people handling it, made Al Qaeda's recruiting easier in devastated cities such as Mosul. I recognized this dynamic at work in New Orleans, where I was fighting the toxic combination of thugs rebuilding their gangs and the white-collar criminals siphoning off FEMA recovery dollars. I took no satisfaction in having my comparisons of the two validated when politically motivated knee-jerk reactions and solutions only worsened the situation in either location.

The National Guard, private security contractors, and most of the borrowed police left town as the FEMA money to pay them ran out. I was the last remaining State Police Detective assigned to the personal discretion of Bill Avery, NOPD's Chief of Detectives. Had I consulted Bill first, he still would have sent me to talk to Wheeler about an arson case that seemed to make absolutely no sense. It is the sort of make-work case he likes giving me to conserve NOPD's limited resources and manpower.

Chief of Detectives Bill Avery was not happy with the solutions I gave him to my last two petty cases. The first involved the dog mauling of a rap music mogul. That case uncovered evidence that a rogue FBI agent was behind my father's disappearance after Katrina. The second investigation was into a corporate interest in buying houses in the Lower Ninth Ward. I wound up linking an influential City Councilwoman to the Dixie Mafia and derailed a redevelopment project the City Council was counting on to rebuild the city's poorest neighborhood. Avery barred me from City Hall after the Councilwoman's arrest.

Among the many pieces of advice my father gave me in my youth were to never ask a question I did not already have an answer to, never pull on any string unless I knew where both ends were attached, and to never push against anything I didn't know where the far end was headed.

It was difficult to think of a now weed-covered lot as one end of a loose thread, but it was. Wheeler was worried about the wrong thing. The thread we needed to follow didn't lead to the method. It led to the motive. One end or the other of this thread would explain why someone erased Wheeler's crime scenes in a fashion that gave new meaning to the phrase "scorched earth."

I called Captain Hammond to let him know I was

willing to work with the Fire Marshal. My second call was to Chief Avery. I offered to buy him lunch because he is calmer when he is eating; my pursuing a case with no obvious suspects was not going to relax him in the least.