

# Parish the Thought

*A Cadillac Holland Mystery, Volume 5*

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INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

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First Edition published December 2020  
By Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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ISBN: 9781644562260

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020950144

Cover Image by Carla Derrick

Cover Design by Lisa M. Orban



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QUINCY, IL 62305-3071  
[www.indiesunited.net](http://www.indiesunited.net)

The Cadillac Holland  
Mysteries

*Blowback*

*Blue Garou*

*Can's Stop the Funk*

*Ghosts and Shadows*

*Parish the Thought*

*For Lovena.*

*You deserved so much  
better*

# One

Deputies from the Saint Xavier Parish Sheriff's Office manned the roadblock meant to keep gawkers away from the crime scene. I left my car in the parking lot of a century-old wooden church where a television news crew was setting up for a live shot. I zipped up my rain jacket and walked down the muddy lane to where halogen lights illuminated the interior of the open trunk of a silver Mercedes C63 sedan. Crime scene technicians from the Louisiana state police were using a nylon canopy to protect a deep pool of blood in the vehicle's spare tire compartment from the cold misting rain and dense fog rising from Bayou Beausejour. I witnessed levels of butchery in the Special Forces that still haunt me and knew this was not a survivable blood loss. I approached a pair of LSP detectives sheltered beneath a nearby cypress tree and listened to their theories about the possible sources of so much gore, and understood why they investigate car thefts and not homicides.

I was no homicide detective, either, and I felt like little more than an onlooker. I left the bored detectives to check in with my supervisor at the state police. Captain Kenneth Hammond had a plastic wrap over the Smokey the Bear hat he wore to keep rain from getting beneath his rain slicker. His expression tipped me off that this case was giving him more stress than usual, so I shouldn't add to it.

"Sorry for the early hour," Captain Hammond grumbled.

"I was up," I said to let him off one of the many hooks he seemed to be hanging from. It was just after four in the morning and I would have been wrapping up my patrol of the French Quarter about then, anyway. "What's this all about? I'd say murder, but the detectives you brought usually don't handle homicides."

"They were the closest detectives when the call came in, and

your presence here wasn't my idea." The sight of Judge Cyrus Rogers explained a lot of what he left unsaid. I had recently used the judge's courtroom to expose the combined efforts of an attorney tied to the Dixie Mafia and a local real estate developer to rig the last City Council election. Doing so must have incurred a favor the judge intended to collect.

"Holland. I'm glad you found us out here." The silver-haired judge's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. Judge Rogers acknowledging me gave the parish sheriff a moment's respite from the tongue lashing the judge had been giving him when I arrived. Judge Rogers offered no introductions between Sheriff Mazant and myself. "I didn't call you away from anything important, did I?"

"Always willing to oblige, Your Honor," I assured him. I doubted that he cared in the least what I had been doing when he summoned me to the scene.

"This is my daughter's blood," the judge declared and pointed into the trunk to be sure I saw the reason for his emotional state. "At least we are assuming that it is."

"You couldn't identify the body?" I asked indelicately.

"There is no body, but everyone has a theory. The current favorite is that her body was chained to the spare tire and tossed in the bayou." I doubted this was the case, first because the amount of blood indicated the body was not intact, and second because a corpse tied to anything that floats defeats the purpose of dumping the body. You want to hide a body, not send it bobbing down a busy waterway.

"Is this is your daughter's car?" I asked. Judge Rogers looked at me as if he might reconsider using me for whatever he had in mind.

"Obviously it is. I think someone killed Gwen before they stole her car and dumped it here." I doubted this scenario as much as I doubted those of the auto theft detectives. My dad was a cop and he always said that the amount of blood involved indicated how personal a murder was. Gwen's murderer was likely someone very close to her.

"Okay, why am I here?" I figured I was expected to serve a larger purpose than consoling the judge. Learning why would get us all out of the rain. Captain Hammond's silence left it to the

judge to brief me.

"I need you to find who killed Gwen. That much should be obvious," the judge snapped at me again. He then grabbed my shoulders to steady himself. This wasn't a good time or place to remind him that nothing is ever obvious when it comes to murder. "I'm sorry. This has been rough."

"I take it that you believe the sheriff isn't doing enough." I had arrived at the end of the judge's diatribe, so I missed the exact nature of his problem with the local authorities. My statement was an invitation for one or the other of the two adversaries to tell me what was going on. Captain Hammond cleared his throat to let me know not to push things too far.

"This has been coming for years. Sheriff Mazant's Office has never raised a finger to protect my daughter. Now Gwen's husband has finally killed her." Sheriff Mazant offered no rebuttal.

"So, this wasn't a car theft? Is her husband in custody?" I addressed this to the mute sheriff.

"Kirk is missing as well," the judge elaborated before Sheriff Mazant could open his mouth to speak. "Sheriff Mazant should be looking for him right now."

"Then why do you believe he killed Gwen?"

"The Donovans never get their own hands dirty, as you'll find out for yourself. I think Gwen's husband paid someone to kill her and to make it look like a car theft," Judge Rogers declared loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I am at your service." I assured him in hopes of quieting him down. People were beginning to stare.

Judge Rogers turned to Sheriff Mazant. "Are we clear about who runs things?"

"I always did figure the state police would have to handle this." The way Sheriff Mazant's jaw tightened as he responded to the judge warned me that I was climbing into a hornet's nest. Sides had been drawn and he undoubtedly believed I was Judge Rogers' quarterback. "We'll cooperate in any way we can."

"You'll do better than that. You will give Detective Holland whatever he wants from you whenever he asks for it, Sheriff Mazant," Judge Rogers snarled.

"Let's start with getting the car to the crime lab in Baton

Rouge,” I said and glanced at Captain Hammond. He nodded his agreement and would handle the logistics of getting the car moved.

“We’re done here. Come with me, Detective.” The judge turned abruptly and stormed up the muddy boat ramp. I barely caught up to him before he began speaking again. “Gwen’s only part of why you’re here. Drive me into town so I can explain the rest in private.”



# Two

We had to pass a gauntlet of reporters as we made our way to where I was parked. The TV and radio reporters expected the brush off the judge gave them, and they accepted it as both a part of the job and as a courtesy to a man who was obviously having the worst day of his life. One female reporter, however, decided to stick to us like a tick the entire way to my car. She was not very tall, slender, and in good athletic shape by the way she kept pace with us. Her dark hair was in a ponytail and her voice was quite direct.

“Judge Rogers, what can you tell me about your daughter’s disappearance? Does the sheriff believe Kirk killed her?” the woman demanded to know as she fell in step beside him. The judge turned to show her more respect than her questions did his grief.

“I won’t speculate about that,” he said, but I already knew he had a definite opinion on the matter.

“Who is this that you’re walking with? Is he a police officer?”

“This is Detective Holland from the state police. Feel free to pester him all you want, but leave me alone. Detective, this is Crystal Franks. She owns the local newspaper, which makes her someone you need to avoid at all costs.” The familiarity between them caught my attention, but I ought not to have been surprised that he knew the reporter by name.

“Any comment, Detective?” she moved to fall in step with me.

“The state police has an entire department that handles making comments. Please direct your questions to them.” I knew that I would be expected to abide by the strict code of silence Chief Avery at NOPD and my captain at the state police placed me under after my first couple of comments to the press when I arrived in New Orleans. We left her pouting in the rain.

Judge Rogers also made no comment about the vanity license

plates on my supercharged Cadillac XLR. The deep red coupe bears plates that read COP CAR because there is no other way to make it look like one. You can't mount a light bar on a convertible and the coupe's lack of a back seat for transporting prisoners complicates its use as a patrol car. I drive it because it is very fast and tends to get overlooked by anyone looking for a police car in their rear view mirror. I also lie about having seized it from a drug dealer when I tell the corner boys in New Orleans why they should give up selling dope.

The paved road at the end of the dirt lane led into the biggest town in the parish, as does nearly every other highway there. Saint Xavier Parish is a small link in the chain of thinly populated parishes stretching along the Gulf of Mexico between the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya Basin. Donovan is the seat of the parish government and the headquarters of the Donovan family's business empire. Judge Rogers was warning more than joking when he claimed that there are more alligators in Saint Xavier Parish than people, and the gators are friendlier. The parish lacks the cultural and political diversity of Orleans Parish and shares a particular sort of rural existence with the place my father left home to escape. It is that timeless dynamic of the haves and have-nots, where your dead ancestors' financial and social positions pre-determine your own opportunities.

Judge Rogers told me how Gwendolyn Rogers Donovan suffered the drunken wrath of the son of one of the state's longest-serving Republican senators before her blood allegedly wound up in the trunk of her own Mercedes. He detailed hospital visits made over the past twenty years, and the unwillingness of a long string of Senator Donovan's handpicked sheriffs and judges to intervene in the obviously abusive marriage. Gwendolyn endured the abuse in exchange for the comfortable lifestyle in which she raised the couple's only child, a daughter named Belle, who was currently enrolled at Tulane.

Judge Rogers began giving me directions along the town's foggy pre-dawn streets once we crossed the drawbridge over Bayou Beausejour. Ornate cast iron light poles still lit the divided main street as we passed a row of bed and breakfasts occupying many of the town's few surviving antebellum mansions. Shops in the downtown's two-storey brick storefronts were almost all

named after the town rather than their owners. Our drive ended in front of a sizeable white two-storey Colonial-style home at the edge of town. It abutted the apparently omnipresent waters of Bayou Beausejour and the Intercoastal Waterway.

“Nice place,” I commented as I circled the crushed shell driveway to park behind the judge’s Lincoln Navigator.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” Judge Rogers told me as he got out of the car. “I don’t have much use for it these days. I grew up in this house and let my daughter and her family live here while Kirk built them a place out by his family’s country club this past year. You will get tired of hearing the terms ‘his family’ and ‘the Donovans’ after you’ve been here awhile. The Donovans own everything of real value, and control who gets to have anything else.”

The house seemed like a comfortable place to raise a family, but it was long overdue for an update. The furniture had fallen out of style long before I had graduated from LSU and entered the Army. I wondered if one could still get parts for most of the kitchen appliances. A stack of old DVDs beside the chunky 1990’s era JVC television added to the almost museum-quality setting. All the same, the heart-pine floors were well maintained and the over-abundance of badly dated wallpaper was resisting the peeling and seam discoloration of age.

An enclosed sunroom off the living room would provide a clear view of the Intercoastal Waterway once the fog cleared. Hedges blocked the pool and patio from direct view, but I could explore the expansive premises at my leisure. The judge seemed to be uncomfortable in his own house, as if it held bad memories he didn’t want to face just then. I was curious to see a number of family photos still hanging on the wall ascending the stairway. One of them was of a young naval cadet in his dress whites.

“I didn’t know you had served in the Navy,” I idly commented.

“Sixty-nine to seventy-two, as a corpsman.”

“Vietnam?”

“Two tours were enough. I served with the Third Marines at Quang Tri.”

“I imagine one tour there would have been enough,” I was only generally aware of how bad things were going in Vietnam

during those years.

Judge Rogers was not interested in swapping war stories. “I will expect frequent updates on what you find, but I promise not to hound you.”

We both knew he lacked the capacity to leave me in peace. I took a seat on the staircase and asked him the question that had bothered me since I had arrived at the crime scene.

“Why me, Your Honor? I know you think I can somehow ignore the Donovans’ influence here, but there are plenty of experienced homicide detectives available, and you appear willing to accept that your daughter is dead. What are you really asking me to do?” I was not challenging him or refusing to do his bidding.

“I know this isn’t what you normally handle, but you have a reputation for getting to the bottom of things,” he complimented me. He followed this with what I took to be his real motivation. “I am certain that someone in the Donovan family killed my daughter and I want you to pay the whole lot of them back.”

“I’m not in the revenge business, Your Honor.” I was not about to take the judge literally.

“Revenge, justice, call it what you will. I want you to make the Donovans’ lives miserable until you can arrest at least one of them for Gwen’s death,” Judge Rogers demanded in his deepest courtroom baritone. He tossed the house key onto the kitchen counter. “And avoid Crystal Franks at all costs. She and my daughter were close friends, and I am sure she intends to try this case in the local newspaper long before you solve it.”

“Understood.” I assured him.

“I guess that’s everything. Please don’t make a big mess while you’re staying here.” I was not sure if this was his way of telling me to leave my dog in New Orleans or not, so I said nothing.

I was not going to leave a seventy-pound pit bull to roam about my own apartment for weeks on end while I was out here. I hoped to be back in New Orleans in less than a month, maybe half that if Gwen Donovan’s body and her husband both turned up soon. I also accepted that ruffling a few feathers on the judge’s behalf was about the only way I had to fill my time until either a dead body or a live suspect popped up.

# Three

I scoped out the house for an hour after the judge left. There were still a few personal items belonging to Kirk and his family, but I got the impression that these were items they never had any intention of taking with them. This included some well-used cookware and kitchen utensils I was glad to have. The heated pool and pool house were located about thirty yards from the house, down a paver stone walkway and within sight of where the bayou merged with the Intercoastal Waterway.

I wanted to give Judge Rogers a decent head start before following him back to New Orleans. I had a lot of things to gather for what promised to be an extended stay. There were also things I needed to do and people I needed to see before I made this my base of operations.

A light tan Dodge Charger patrol car blocked the street end of the driveway as I tried to leave the property. The occupant flipped on the red and blue lights atop the vehicle and shone his spotlight at my windshield as I made my way out of the circular driveway. This was meant to blind me to who was in the car. The cruiser was parked with its grille at a sharp angle, perhaps in anticipation of being rammed. Whoever was getting out of the far side of the sedan obviously had no idea what replacing the front end on a Cadillac costs these days.

The officer turned off the lights atop his car but left me bathed in the beam of the spotlight mounted on his car door as he approached my car. I had the top up on the coupe because of the lingering rain.

“Step out of the vehicle,” the cop demanded. He looked to be roughly sixty and stood about my height, but outweighed me by at least seventy pounds of muscle. His hair was cut short and looked to be held in place with some sort of shiny gel. His brown eyes were wary and the edges of his lips showed the tension in

his body. His beefy hand was wrapped around the stainless steel Smith and Wesson revolver holstered high on his right hip. I eased out of the coupe very slowly and kept my hands where he could see them as I set my car keys on the hood and turned to face him.

“I’m a state police detective. My name is Cooter Holland,” I explained with as little expression in my voice as possible. This was not the time or place to debate jurisdictions with this particular officer. He used his left hand to turn me towards my car and proceeded to pat me down as though he had not heard a word that I said.

“Why aren’t you driving a patrol car?”

“This is what I use.” The explanation sounded lame even to me. He tugged the badge and ID from my belt and told me to get back in my vehicle. The officer either ignored or missed seeing my Glock 20 handgun wedged between the driver’s seat and center console.

He sat in his patrol car to have a ten minute radio conversation before he returned. “Your story checks out. I guess we’ll be seeing more of one another. I’m the Police Chief. My name is Chief Theriot. I can spell that for you if you need.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I can remember who you are.” I assured him.

“You’ll want to tread real light around here while you’re trying to find that judge’s daughter. Kirk Donovan is a popular fella and his family draws a lot of water, if you know what I mean. You don’t want to start spreading no rumors.” I made mental notes that he was aware of why I was in town, and that I assumed Kirk Donovan was behind Gwendolyn Rogers’ disappearance. It made me all the more curious about who he had spoken with over the radio.

“I know exactly what you mean. It’s why Judge Rogers insisted the local police departments not be who investigates his daughter’s disappearance. I’m pretty sure you were sent as a welcoming committee to remind me who runs this town because of that. Tell whoever sent you that the warning is duly noted. You can also tell them that I am not about to fight you, but I am not going to let you interfere in my investigation, either.” The line about not fighting him was only half true. I had already decided

which hand I would use to strike his windpipe and how to dislocate his left kneecap if the necessity arose.

The smugness crept from his face when he realized I wasn't going to be run out of town as easily as he thought. I didn't use his name or position because I wasn't about to let him believe either of these had any relevance to me. The parish-level sheriff was my only real hurdle, not the town's traffic cop.

"It sure would be tragic if we had to tussle," the police chief persisted. He was just dumb enough to think he'd win because of his size. He wasn't the biggest man I had ever tangled with, but I doubted that he ever fought a man trained to fight the same way I was.

I retrieved my car keys and badge and returned to the sanctuary of my coupe. I started the car and revved the coupe's supercharged engine a bit before I moved the gear shift into drive. He took the hint and backed his patrol car out of my path before I could push it aside.