

The Hoodoo of Peck Finch

(Nine months later)

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CHAPTER 1

GABE AND PECK SHARED A SMALL SHOTGUN HOUSE in the Garden District. Peck now drove to his work cleaning offices and to a private tutor. One morning Gabe decided to take a walk, for a stretch of the legs to Walmart to get housekeys made. It had been sixty years since the retired veteran had been in a Penny Arcade and played with the pinball machines long before there were video games. Penny Arcades near army bases were nostalgic for homesick soldiers when he was young. When his Army friends had day passes from Korean battlefields and only had time to kill in the 1950s, they'd belly up to a pinball machine.

Needing keys, Gabe remembered hearing of the vending machine that could make duplicate keys while you watched and waited and he heard of other vending machines lining the front hall of Walmart that could virtually do anything else.

Gabe's buddy, a retired sergeant at the VA hospital in Pineville was first to stir his imagination by telling him about the machine.

"Just put a card in and a key you want copied and hit a few buttons and tell it how many you want and if you want it plain or with a favorite NFL team logo on the bow for fifty cents more," his friend would say.

Gabe's imagination did the rest.

He set his mind on the Saturday morning errand to witness this gadget and to get house keys made.

The store's front hall lined with machines was everything his veteran friend had told him. So fascinating was the machine Gabe bought a pair of reading glasses for \$9.95, just to catch all the action behind the window.

"Hey, mister," the young man at the next machine said.

Gabe glanced over at the boy. Twenty, twenty-two was his guess. Clean cut, clothes neat, a book bag on his back. Gabe nodded but didn't answer, busy reading the directions on the key-making machine.

"Mister, can you let me use your card for a second, please? I'll give it right back," the young man said.

"No," Gabe said without looking up.

The young man turned and asked a passerby and was turned down. He turned to Gabe again.

"Mister, this machine won't charge anything to your card, but it'll give me ten dollars and I'll give you two dollars just for letting me use your card. It'll only take ten seconds, and I'll give it back."

"Nope," Gabe said.

"Not even for two dollars, you won't let me use your card?"

"I can't son, sorry," Gabe said.

"You can't? You can't? A grown man telling me you can't? You lying old motherfucker, mister, telling me you can't."

Gabe looked over at the boy.

"Old man you're a dead man the second you walk out of this store—you're a dead motherfucker. You hear me, old man?"

With cold, gray eyes, the boy stared at Gabe and backed down the hall, pointing a finger at him and cursing his threat.

Visibly shaken, Gabe turned to his left and went looking for the store manager.

CHAPTER 2

GABE'S FRONT DOOR PUSHED OPEN and Lily Cup stepped in. "I just spoke with the coroner, the kid's dead," Lily Cup said.

The aging army captain, veteran of Korea and Vietnam, lowered his newspaper just enough to see over the entertainment page.

"Was it murder, Gabe?" Lily Cup asked.

"Close the door, honey, AC's on," Gabe said.

In a black skirt with a matching waistcoat and white Nike walking shoes, she leaned and propped a black leather briefcase against the wall by the door. She stood like an exasperated tomboy, adjusting and refastening her grandmother's diamond brooch on her lapel.

"I heard you've been walking with a cane, dancing man. What's that all about?"

"So?"

"You don't carry a cane."

"I've owned canes for years."

"You jazz dance for hours on end a couple of nights a week and all of a sudden, out of the blue, Sasha tells me you started carrying one everywhere? I know you don't need a cane."

"I just prefer wearing a cane now."

"Wearing a cane?"

"A gentleman wears a cane—a color befitting his ensemble."

"Well excuse me."

"A gentleman carries an umbrella or walking stick."

"Wearing or carrying, it smells premeditated to me, Gabe. What's up with the cane thing?"

"Does Sasha know about it?"

"I've been putting out fires all over town. I haven't had time to tell her anything. She'd have a canary."

Gabe lifted the paper again to read.

"I need to know if it was premeditated," Lily Cup said.

"I don't want to talk about it," Gabe said.

He closed the paper, folded it in half, and in half again. Dropping it on the arm of the chair, he stood and left the room.

"Define premeditated murder," he said from the kitchen.

She tossed a handbag and white driving gloves onto the other chair, lifted Chanel sunglasses to the top of her head.

"Gee, I'll have to think on this one. Hmmm...Oh, I know. How about there's a dead man with no weapon and the police have a cane with blood on it?"

"It's a walking stick. My cane is over by the door."

"Well now it's a goddamned murder weapon, Gabe. They checked for prints, and yours are the only prints on it, and their guess is the lab will say the blood has his DNA."

Gabe came out with a coffee urn in one hand and his finger and thumb through handles of two empty cups. He held the cups out for her to take one.

"No more," Gabe said.

"You're nonchalant for the spot you're in. Why'd you clam up on me like that at the precinct? It didn't set well with any of them. The DA entered a charge of second-degree murder. With pressure from New Orleans tourism folks the police chief put out a warrant for you from his lunch at Brennan's."

He held the empty cups closer to her.

“Just made it. Chicory and cinnamon.”

“If you had a damn television here, you’d have seen it— ‘Daylight killing on St. Charles Avenue.’ It’s all over the news, freaking out the DA and the Visitors Bureau. No telling how many videos from streetcars going by will wind up on You Tube.”

“That’s enough,” Gabe said.

“People can live with violence after dark. That’s expected in any city, but when it’s in broad daylight, forget about it. The DA pushed for an early docket and it’s Tulane and Broad for you at nine a.m. tomorrow.”

“What’s Tulane and Broad?”

“Why don’t you have a television?”

“What’s Tulane and Broad?”

“Magistrate Court.”

Gabe was silent.

“You’re being arraigned in the morning.”

Gabe glanced at the coffee mugs in his hand.

“Congratulations, Gabe, you made the big time. You have to appear before a magistrate to hear the second-degree murder charge against you.”

“What then?” Gabe asked.

“We enter a plea. Guilty, not guilty, or nolo contendere.”

She took an empty cup in one hand, pinched his arm with the other.

“Gabe, look me in the eye and swear it wasn’t premeditated.”

“Is this some technique they teach at Harvard Law, Miss Tarleton?”

Gabe poured her coffee.

“Now is not the time to fuck with me, Gabe. You’re a big boy—you know the difference— premeditated and self-defense.”

Gabe returned the coffee pot to the kitchen, came back out and sat down.

With his silence she rolled her eyes and turned to the other chair.

"The only reason they haven't busted down your door and you're not behind bars is they trust me, Gabe. I know the system and how to get around in it."

"If they come, they come."

"You're a decorated veteran, and I'm your attorney, and I promised you'll show up in the morning."

"Tell me where and when, I'll be there."

"Sasha warned me about you."

"Oh, I'm sure she has."

"You're an ornery, stubborn old coot when you have a mind to."

She sat down.

"I'm never ornery," Gabe said. "But that's enough."

"I should have listened to Sasha."

"You're a damned good attorney, Lily Cup."

"Yeah?—if I'm that good why are half my clients in Angola."

"I know you're good."

"Now that we're on it, there's something I need to tell you."

"I appreciate you."

"You may want to get somebody else."

"You were third in your class at Harvard—"

"Gabe, I was bottom of my class at Harvard—I had to take my bar exam three times."

Gabe sipped his coffee, looking into her eyes.

"Sasha tells everybody I was third in my class—"

"Drink your coffee while it's hot."

"—but I'm smart."

"I know you are, little sister—that I do know."

"I wasn't good with books, even in high school. I'm what they call an observational learner—a hands-on learner. I learned more after I got out of school than I ever did in. It

was painful just going to class—but I never missed a class and that alone got me through.”

“You’re dogged,” Gabe said. “That makes you good.”

“You still want me after tomorrow, Gabe?”

“It’s you and me, little sister—it’s you and me all the way.”

Lily Cup clenched her coffee mug with both hands and a grin like a school girl with a cup of hot chocolate.

“We’re lucky we have Judge Fontenot.”

“Why is that?”

“I heard her dad was killed in Vietnam.”

“I wonder if I knew him.”

“She’s always been fair to me in the past. A new school gal, tough on the letter of the law, but she’ll listen to reason if it solves a case. She hates red tape with a passion, and seldom lets the DA or the defense use the system for delays. If things can get resolved out of court she doesn’t get hung up on tradition.”

“Have you heard?” Gabe asked.

“Heard what?”

“Sasha asked me to give her away.”

“Like she’s been my best friend since kindergarten, she tells me everything,” Lily Cup said.

“How about them apples?”

“It’s sweet.”

“I’m thinking Peck and I throw her a party,” Gabe said. “Something she’ll remember.”

“Costumes, she’ll remember costumes.”

“So, we commemorate their engagement Mardi Gras style. Lots of pictures; close friends.”

“Will you print invitations, like a formal do?” Lily Cup asked.

“But of course,” Gabe said.

“It’s party time! She would flip over a costume party, all our friends would,” Lily Cup said.

“We have to come up with some music,” Gabe said.

"You and Peck celebrating her engagement will mean a lot to her."

"Should we do it here or over at Charlie's Blue Note with live jazz?"

"Gabe, you've got one picture on your mantle, two chairs, and a cardboard box in the living room."

"More space for people," Gabe said.

"This isn't exactly what I'd call a Commander's Palace party room, Gabe."

"I was thinking a streetcar *day pass* in the invite if we do it here."

"That's a great idea—parking sucks on this street."

"I have to make a list," Gabe said.

"When are you going to buy some furniture?"

"I'm too old to impose furniture on Peck."

"You need furniture for you."

"Peck would only feel obligated to keep it after I'm gone. I'll let him and Millie pick out the furniture doodads, curtains, and the dishes when they play house. There's time."

"How's your stomach?"

"What stomach? They removed it."

"I don't mean since the operation. Were you hurt today?" Lily Cup asked.

"He missed me with his knife."

"The DA is having a problem with that, Gabe."

"What problem?"

"They found no knife anywhere at the scene."

Gabe watched the bubble floating on his coffee and took a sip.

"I'm a hospice survivor with some time left in me, hopefully. At least enough time to plan a party."

"You might be partying in Angola if the DA decides to push this to a grand jury," Lily Cup said.

Gabe stood, got the coffee urn from the kitchen and brought it into the living room.

"Let me warm your coffee?"

“Do you two have beds?”

“Of course, we have beds, little sister. Peck thinks he’s a prince—a mattress and sheets after sleeping on a canvas cot most of his life with a saddle blanket that wouldn’t cover his legs.”

“This all must be a new world for him,” Lily Cup said.

“For fifteen years he slept in a shed with no heat at a boat maker’s wood mill,” Gabe said.

“No heat?”

“He had a hotplate for his coffee pot. Saw blades hanging over him like Macy’s parade balloons. It took him weeks getting used to sleeping on a bed.”

Lily Cup stared in wonder.

“I’ll find him curled on the floor, no blanket, with his window wide open,” Gabe said.

“Peck and Millie,” Lily Cup said.

“Peck and Millie,” Gabe repeated.

“They do seem like a good fit,” Lily Cup said. “At least they did when I saw them together. That seems forever ago—last Thanksgiving.”

“She’s loved that boy with a passion from the day he made the Greyhound pull over so he could jump off just to give her a doll she left on the bus,” Gabe said.

“That’s right—now I remember—her baby doll—Charlie, wasn’t it? Sasha told me about the doll.”

“Her Charlie.”

“Hell, I had my Teddy bear all through Harvard. I still have it,” Lily Cup said.

“Millie does love her Charlie,” Gabe said.

“Does she like the house?”

“The girl loves New Orleans.”

“What’s not to love about New Orleans?” Lily Cup said sarcastically. “Killings in the streets before brunch.”

“It’s a different world for her from the strict Southern Baptist home life in Tennessee and Baylor University,” Gabe said.

"Millie is Baptist?"

"She is."

"Oh, my Lord."

"A Southern Baptist."

"Gabe, I had an old maid great aunt one time who used to lecture me. She'd sit next to me at the dinner table and say, 'Honey, a person can't help being black, but they sure can help being Baptist.'"

"I would have loved your great auntie," Gabe said.

"Does Millie know about the ambiance, the dancing, drinking, and debauchery that goes on at Charlie's Blue Note?"

"Little sister, that girl would love Milwaukee if Peck were there."

"Good fit then, I guess."

"Her folks love Peck like a son, and he's a Baptist preacher and she's a missionary."

"As for her liking Charlie's Blue Note," Gabe added, "I'm not certain Millie's even had a good look at this house the few times she's come on her school breaks at Baylor. I know she hasn't been to Charlie's."

"They don't waste time dancing, I'm guessing," Lily Cup said.

"She hits that door, pauses just long enough to hug ole Gabe here a genuine hello and kiss on the cheek, then she'll grab Peck's arm like it's an empty egg basket, pull his bedroom door behind them and climb his bones."

"Damn—" Lily Cup said.

"That pretty much sums up her visits here."

"Sounds like an Erskine Caldwell?"

"What's an Erskine Caldwell?"

"*God's Little Acre*. Caldwell wrote *God's Little Acre*."

"I thought you didn't like books?"

"I like the dirty parts. This one's a hottie about religion and sex."

"I don't know about any praying going on in that bedroom, but our Peck will come out looking peaked, step on the porch for air and go back in for another round."

"Whoa," Lily Cup said.

"The lad has the stamina of a young bull."

"Now that takes me back," Lily Cup said.

"I can only imagine."

"I remember my younger days of wild, reckless abandon," Lily Cup said.

She sipped her coffee, smiling.

"Innocent times," Gabe said.

"They weren't so innocent," Lily Cup said.

"Oh?"

"I remember after school sometimes—Sasha and I'd be feeling randy and we'd corner us a couple of momma's boys we thought showed promise. We'd sneak into one of those backyard storage rooms on Magazine Street and wear them out."

"Lord help 'em," Gabe said.

"The Lord stays off Magazine Street, Gabe. Sinners only."

"Impetuous youth."

"We had perfect lures."

"A pint of rye?"

"Nope."

"A joint?"

"Oh, nothing that prosaic."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Sasha was the first in our grade to wear a D cup bra," Lily Cup said.

"Her girls," Gabe said.

"They were magnets for high school bad boys dying for a peek," Lily Cup said. "The bigger her girls, the 'badder' the boys."

"Youth," Gabe said.

"We developed our fancies. Hers was arousing a dude with his stares and putting his condom on him. She'd ride it

like a sailor on a rowboat—the boy gawking up at her girls in her Victoria's Secret bra she saved her allowance for. She wouldn't take it off. She'd say a boy appreciates a cleavage—why spoil the fantasy?"

"And you?"

"Let's just say I developed a liking for the feel of a firm cigar."

"Ha!" Gabe guffawed. "Is that why you smoke the short Panatelas?"

"Over the years I've learned to keep my expectations low."

"Youth is uncouth," Gabe said. "At least you're sophisticated and couth now, little sister."

"Too couth. I like to get mussed up on occasion."

"You're an attractive woman. It'll happen."

"She's talking about the wedding reception maybe being at Charlie's Blue Note," Lily Cup said.

"If that's true, I'm surprised James hasn't put up a scuff," Gabe said.

"Why?"

"A jazz joint in an alley off Frenchmen Street isn't what I'd call his cup of tea."

"I think the house would be best for the engagement party, fixed up a little. I'll help," Lily Cup said.

"It would be more personal here," Gabe said.

"I think so," Lily Cup said. "This is like home to her."

"This little shotgun? Our Sasha lives in a Garden District mansion."

"But you two are family."

"I'll have Peck paint the porch ceiling," Gabe said.

Lily Cup stood, coffee cup in hand. She walked to the door looking out at the porch ceiling.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm changing the sky-blue to another color, maybe a white."

"It looks freshly painted."

"It's a tradition thing," Gabe said.

"What tradition?"

"A lady at the library told me a sky-blue ceiling on a front porch signals an available woman-of-age living in the house."

"That's phooey," Lily Cup said.

"You've never heard that?" Gabe asked.

"I heard that one and three others like it. Like sky-blue wards off spiders and attracts bees away from people sitting on porch swings. I wouldn't bother painting it."

"I'm a Chicago boy—what would I know from superstitions?"

"It's an old wives' tale," Lily Cup said.

"I thought maybe it was voodoo superstition," Gabe said.

"Blacks weren't allowed to practice voodoo back then, Gabe. It was considered savage, and the French made voodoo illegal for blacks. The practitioners were criminalized and arrested."

"That doesn't make sense—during Korea and our docking in the port of New Orleans, I saw plenty of it. Black voodoo—how'd they get away with it without getting caught then?"

"They added a statue of the virgin Mary and some rosary beads and passed it off as a Catholic ceremony. That kept the law away."

"The things I'm learning, little sister—and me an old man."

"Sasha and I still sit on a roof in the Quarter under a full moon if it's not lightning—bad *Gris-Gris* if there're thunderstorms under a full moon. We light candles and talk through the night about the mystical, mumbo jumbo, and voodoo. It's fun. It's how we play when we're not dancing."

"And I thought most girls play with dolls," Gabe said.

"Only voodoo thing I've heard about front porches in Acadiana is some still clean them with red brick dust to ward off bad spirits," Lily Cup said.

"Can these séances tell my future?" Gabe asked.

"I saw no alligator under the house when I got here. It's life, not death in this house today. I can't speak for Lee Circle, where you did the kid in this morning."

"I still can't quite wrap myself around it," Gabe said.

"Around killing him?" Lily Cup asked.

"A tired old black man like me owning in the Garden District."

"And why not?"

"Fifty years ago, all I could have done here would be scrub floors or wash dishes for *massah*."

"We're sinful and excessive, Gabe, but the survivors grow character, usually in our twenties."

"Talk to me."

"New Orleans is an anomaly of prejudiced behavior," Lily Cup said.

"I see it every day. It's not like any other city," Gabe said.

"We're a melting pot of French, Spanish, African and English—Native American. My daddy made me study it—family cultures—before I took my Louisiana bar exam the third time. Family law was always stumping me. Daddy told me if I didn't study people and cultures along with the law books on family and I failed again it would be my own fault, and I might ought to think of working in a hardware store."

"Your dad sounds like a smart man," Gabe said.

"Throughout and after the Civil War, the French-speaking Creoles of color had racial alignment that was like no other place in the south. That's a big reason we love to cook and eat well, and we live, work, and play together. We respect each other. It was the Jim Crow laws at the start of the twentieth century that fucked it up. Even the streetcars were segregated in 1902. We've had our problems since, but after the Martin Luther King times, prejudice hasn't been

that much of an issue here. Oh, don't get me wrong, Gabe. When a black man offs a white kid on St. Charles in broad daylight, all bets are off."

"So how is it we've gone full circle?" Gabe asked.

"Did Sasha think twice about dancing with you that first night you came into Charlie's Blue Note?"

"She asked me to dance," Gabe said.

Lily Cup pulled a cord, lifting a venetian blind and pointed across the street.

"The Garden District you live in Gabe, is just a Monopoly box with play money, houses, and hotels in it."

She pointed.

"Huge houses like that one that nobody lives in, but the maid and gardener still come to once a week. Mansions in the heart of a pauper-poor, diversity-rich city. The wealthy from the corners of the earth buy here just to show off owning a piece of New Orleans—a city like no other place. They don't need reservations to party with locals during Mardi Gras week. You're special, Gabe. You own and live here. Streetcars work for you just as they have for Anne Rice and for Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote."

"It's still something," Gabe said. "Fifty—sixty years ago, Louis Armstrong couldn't have lived in the Garden District."

"If he had the cash and could afford it, I wouldn't bet he couldn't."

She lowered the blind and turned toward him.

"I don't want you scrubbing floors for 'massah' in Angola. I know you, Gabe, and I know Angola."

Gabe looked at his coffee mug.

"My guess is you had a reason for killing him, but that's not good enough in a court room. I have to hear from your lips that it wasn't premeditated. I'll defend you in any case, but I have to hear it. There's a lot of fucking prep work to do."

"It's not much to look at—Lily Cup—we're missing furniture, draperies and trappings—but it's more than a house. This is our loving, blessed home. As long as we're here, it is Peck's and my private sanctuary away from those parts of our lives that have haunted their full share of pain and suffering. This is our safe haven—our resting place. It's always welcome to good friends like you and Sasha—"

"Gabe, I can't help you if you won't—"

"Our home is not the place for these words and for conversation of this nature. I'm asking you as a friend to kindly respect our space."

"I'll pick you up in the morning. We'll talk then," Lily Cup said.

"I'll have Peck drive me in the morning. He likes sporting me about in his new pickup."

"Peck drives?" Lily Cup asked. "Since when?"

"He does."

"In this short a time? What's it been—a couple of months since he's been here?"

"Nine months—" Gabe started.

"Has it been nine months? He's been cleaning our offices all that long? I never see him."

"And he can read every word in the driving manual."

"He reads?"

"He only missed two questions on the written test. He didn't know what 'yield' meant. I forget the other. Now he's trying to read a John Steinbeck novel, can you imagine?"

"Which one? Like it matters."

"*Cannery Row*. He got it with his library card."

"He's like one of those big fat cans," Lily Cup said. "You know, the restaurant ones, I think they call them number-ten cans. They fill them with beans, but he's filled with brains waiting for someone to come along with a can opener," Lily Cup said.

"That's Peck," Gabe said.

"Amazing."

“Listen to this one,” Gabe said. “He’s reading out loud, one word at a time, after telling me it was harder for him to read out loud than it was reading to himself.”

“Huh?” Lily Cup asked.

“It makes no sense, right? So I ask him why he doesn’t just read to himself with no talking it out.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said, ‘Gabe if’n I don’t say ‘ever’ word out loud so I can hear ‘em good, how am I supposed to know what they sound like so I can say ‘em good when time comes to use ‘em proper?’ Can you imagine?”

“Know what’s scary?”

“What?”

“He has a point,” Lily Cup said.

“How can you not love the boy?” Gabe asked.

“When will he get his GED?”

“This month. Illiterate to a high school diploma in months.”

“Jesus.”

“Sasha’s tutor friend is a miracle worker,” Gabe said.

“Polly Lou, she was the smartest one in our school.”

“She actually taught him conjugations in a French he understood—and had him translate them into English. He was reading in weeks.”

“She’s damn good.”

“When Millie comes in for the ceremony, we’ll celebrate at Dooky Chase’s—you too.”

“Does Peck know about today?”

“No, he was gone when I got home from the police station.”

“Where’s he now?”

“Probably on his way.”

“Should I not be here so you can tell him?”

“Stay. He went over to Tulane, talking with a guidance counselor. After that he may be talking with Xavier. Depends on how it goes at Tulane.”

"You must be proud of him."

"We knew he had it in him," Gabe said.

"We did," Lily Cup said.

"Do you think James is right?" Gabe asked.

"What?"

"James."

"You mean right for Sasha?"

"Yes. Think he's right?"

"Where in the hell did that come from?"

"You're her best friend."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Think James is the man?"

"Why are you asking now?"

"No reason."

"What's on your mind, Gabe?"

"She's full of life, she's giving—she's successful, intelligent—a great dancer," Gabe said.

"But?" Lily Cup asked. "I know there's a *but* coming..."

"But—and girlfriend, this goes no further than these walls..."

"I swear," Lily Cup said.

"The woman has much more to offer the world and James is a...well, James is a..."

"Yeah, I know," Lily Cup said.

"James is a self-indulgent dilettante, full of himself," Gabe said.

"He's all that all right."

"I mean is he just a bad habit or does the woman love him?"

"She says she does."

"Sombitch doesn't even like to dance," Gabe said.

"James is an asshole," Lily Cup said.

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

"Maybe he's hung like a polo pony and knows how to use it," Lily Cup said. "Ever think of that?"

"You mean like our Peckerwood, little sister?"

Lily Cup swung her head around, eyes in a wide-open glare.

"Hush," she declared, grinning through clenched teeth as if someone might hear. "I was drinking rye. Murder case on my mind."

"I heard, little sister. Sasha shared."

"No one is to know about that night. You're a friend—keep it between us that Peck and I ever...you know."

"I saw the smile on your face when I put you in a cab," Gabe said. "I think they call that smile an afterglow."

"I can't remember it that well."

"I think you remember, lawyer lady, and you weren't drunk when the two of you had coffee and disappeared. You skipped from the bar to the lady's room to knock one off. You remember."

"I always get drunk before a murder trial."

"Your only regret is people gossip."

"Drunk and horny—I can't help it—before every murder case, ever since I finally passed the bar."

"Murder makes you horny?"

"Drunk makes me horny—murder makes me drink. Rye."

"You choose to mask a tryst the night you met Peck behind rye? Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you."

"Does Sasha smile like that after James stays over?"

"Like what?"

"Like you did that night?" Gabe asked.

"Not even," Lily Cup said.

"I've wondered."

"She says it's good sex, but I never catch her looking into space."

"What do you mean?"

"Women know these things."

"Do tell."

"We'll play good nights over in our minds. There're girl signs only girls know how to read about a morning after. Her and James? Not even close."

"Sex isn't all there is, I suppose," Gabe said.

"It isn't?" Lily Cup asked.

"There's more to life than a roll in the sheets."

"Damn."

Lily Cup's eyes brightened in a mischievous smile while interrupted by the front door opening and Peck walking in.

"Hey, cher, how you are?" Peck asked.

He gave her a hug and a kiss on each cheek. He picked up her cup from the cardboard box, slurped a mouthful and set it back down.

"Hey, Captain," Peck said.

"How'd Tulane go?" Gabe asked.

"I'm goin' to night school—I start in June," Peck said.

"My man!" Gabe snorted.

"I can work the days and school and study the nights. I liked him a lot. Nice man."

"Didn't laugh at you, did he?" Gabe asked.

"Nah, nah," Peck said. "Not ever."

"No one worth a salt will ever laugh at a person trying to get ahead, trying to improve themselves," Gabe said. "I told you."

Peck turned to Lily Cup.

"Lily Cup, can I clean the law offices daytime instead of night when I start night school?"

"Sure—but it'll have to be on Sundays or early mornings and be out of there before nine."

"I can did that. Sorry, cher— I mean I can do that."

"I knew what you meant," Lily Cup said.

"I'll clean before you open up," Peck said.

"Congratulations, Peck—"

"Hanh?"

"—on getting into Tulane," Lily Cup said.

"T'anks, cher."

She paused a reach for her coffee, copping a reminiscent glance at his package, then up at his eyes.

“How come I don’t ever see you come and go?”

“I always come after dark.”

“When are you coming this week?”

“Midnight tonight.”

Peck’s cellphone beeped. He opened the text and with a wrinkled brow studied the words. Gabe flicked his finger at Lily Cup so she could watch Peck reading.

“It’s Millie,” Peck said.

He reread the text.

“Gabe, it say here she’ll be in New Or-lee-anh in May, she coming for all summer,” Peck said.

“Your lady is always welcome in this house, Peck,” Gabe said.

Peck read another text.

“Millie say here can she meet my mamma,” Peck said.

Peck lifted his head and looked over at Gabe.

Gabe looked at him, turned his head catching Lily Cup’s eye, winked as he leaned on the chair arm to bolster getting up and standing.

“Peck, my brother—we’ve been blessed with Sasha’s and James’s engagement and now with you— a bonafide Tulane man, and we’re blessed with our Millie. I’m going for a walk and when I come back I’ll take my nap. What say you and I grab shrimp and grits and a couple of drinks at the Columns tonight? The streetcar will give us some quality time to talk and catch up.”

“Hokay.”

“We have a deal, son?”

“We got a deal, Captain,” Peck said.

They shook hands.

Peck kissed Lily Cup on both cheeks and exited to go read in his room. Seeing the bedroom door pulled closed, Gabe leaned toward Lily Cup, lowering his voice.

“Has Sasha ever told you anything about Peck’s childhood—about his foster mother or nanna or whatever and her old man—gator man?” Gabe asked.

Lily Cup stood, paced nervously as if she was hoping to avoid any subject only Sasha knew she was far too familiar with. Lily Cup knew gator man had “disappeared” and how. She believed if it got out it could get her disbarred, or worse. She walked to the coffee maker, filled her cup and returned. Seated again, she placed her cup on the cardboard box and played with her driving gloves as a distraction. She looked up at Gabe.

“Not much. Oh, I heard some things, but not much.”

“Apparently they’re a couple of mean bastards—vicious drunks,” Gabe said. “I’m surprised Sasha hasn’t told you.”

“Does Peck ever talk about it?” Lily Cup asked.

“Not to me.”

“He’s blocking it. Nothing wrong with that,” Lily Cup said.

“Oh, he called himself a boney white French Cajun boy one time but not much else.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t told you more, Gabe, as close as you are.”

“I don’t think he likes to talk about it. I know he told Sasha some things that time we were all up in Providence,” Gabe said.

“Do you think Millie knows anything?” Lily Cup asked.

“Anything?” Gabe asked.

“He ran away from home when he was ten or something, didn’t he?”

“Eight or nine,” Gabe said.

“Jesus.”

“I hear you, little sister. And since the age of eight or nine, whichever it was, the boy hasn’t taken a handout or one penny of welfare.”

“Where he get the name *Peck*?” Lily Cup asked.

"Around these parts they'll call a poor white, usually a no-account from the swamps and bayous a *Peckerwood*."

"Meaning white trash?"

"Yeah. Like calling me nigger. Same thing."

"Lucky he wound up in Carencro," Lily Cup said, "and not here."

"How so?"

"Beggary and the handout are a way of life in New Orleans."

"A city's poverty wouldn't have changed him, I don't think," Gabe said.

"You don't think it would have swallowed him up?"

"The boy has character in his blood."

"I can see that, look at the year," Lily Cup said. "And now Tulane."

"I think he would have assimilated with blacks, the French, and the Spanish—but still he would have mowed lawns and sharpened knives to get by, just as he did in Carencro. I could see him throwing his trotline somewhere each morning and selling his catches to restaurants or trading at the market for his eggs and chicory."

"His character had to come from someone," Lily Cup said.

"My thought exactly," Gabe said.

"It'd be interesting to know from whom."

"Knowing would be the Holy Grail," Gabe said. "Maybe one day we'll know the story and can give him a past he can be proud of."

"I heard some of it..." Lily Cup started as she prepared to leave.

Gabe lifted his walking stick from the corner it leaned against and stepped out of the house alongside her as she headed to her car. He pulled the door closed and adjusted his honey-cream, linen newsboy cap.

“Charges for second degree murder are no easy thing,” Lily Cup said. “We have to declare a plea to murder—guilty or not guilty—no in-between—there’s no getting out of it.”

Gabe nodded his head, with an understanding of the situation.

“It’s not smart to be cavalier, Gabe. They know you killed the kid. They didn’t see a weapon on or around the body. I need to know if it was premeditated.”

Gabe stood there motionless.

“The DA can really hurt you. Why won’t you tell me? I can help. I’m good—I know my way around.”

He paused on the step above the sidewalk.

“If I knew myself, darlin’, I’d tell you in a heartbeat, and that’s the truth,” Gabe said. “I’m not holding anything back. I’m not being cavalier.”

“Then why won’t—?” Lily Cup started.

“I’m just not sure, yet. I need time to think it through.”

“We have no time, Gabe.”

“It’s the way I am. Sorry.”

“Whatever you do, don’t talk tomorrow. Don’t say a word unless I tell you it’s okay to speak. Putting your foot in your mouth can wind you up in prison.”

“Fair enough.”

“And if I say you can speak and you don’t know something tell them you don’t know. Don’t be caught in a lie.”

“Let me work it out in my mind,” Gabe said. “I’m an old man. I need to make it right in my head and with God.”

“It’ll take more than the Almighty in the morning, Gabe.”

“There’s a young man lying naked on a cold, stainless-steel table in the city morgue because of me,” Gabe said.

“I think I need a drink,” Lily Cup said.

“God gave me a longer life to live. He didn’t give me a longer life just so I could take another life. I have to work it out in my head.”

“What are you going to tell Peck?”

“About what?”

“You know about what, Gabe.”

“Millie meeting his mother?”

“Well that too, dancing man,” Lily Cup said, “and about the trouble you’re in?”

Gabe didn’t answer.

She stepped down to the sidewalk and started walking toward her car. She turned and looked at him standing on the step as a gentleman would, waiting for her to reach her car.

“Sasha isn’t sure that lady is his mother, right? You knew that much, didn’t you?” she asked.

“I knew.”

“I’m going over and light a vigil candle at St. Patrick’s for you, Gabe, and the Almighty.”

“You mean that, little sister?”

“I’ll see you at the courthouse in the morning. Don’t be late.”

“Light two,” Gabe said stepping down to the sidewalk and turning away for his walk. “Better light two.”

Lily Cup turned again.

“Gabe?”

Gabe paused and looked around.

“Yes?”

“In there you said I was smart—did you mean that?”

“I meant every word, my little sister. Every damn word.”

“I’m not all that book smart, Gabe, in case you want to get somebody else.”

“You’re street smart, Lily Cup.”

“I am that.”

“Plenty street smart, little sister.”

“I know my way around pretty good.”

“Lily Cup, you’re Peck in a skirt.”

“Peck is plenty smart. You really think I’m—?”

“Street smart is better than book smart any day,” Gabe said.

“I’m lighting three candles,” Lily Cup said.

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