

One More Last Dance

[CLICK HERE TO ORDER THIS BOOK ON AMAZON](#)



A Southern Louisiana Bayou

CHAPTER 1

HE KNEW IF HE DIDN'T RUN FROM BAYOU CHENE, he would die. Cajun French and—best guess—he was nine years old when he waited for the right moment to shimmy up and grab the splintered branch crotch of a bald cypress. It held him long enough to lower himself into a hollow in the trunk. In the dark he stepped on fresh Wood Duck eggs and live ants with his bare feet. Beyond fright he stood motionless for the better part of two days. When he heard cussing and what he assumed an empty whiskey bottle smashing against a rock below and a pickup driving off, he waited until dark, and then chanced the coast was clear. He climbed down and ran along the bayou shoreline and then a mile or so through grassy shoulders of a highway until he saw a flatbed truck with a tarp over its load at a rest area. He climbed on and hid under the tarp for several hours until the truck came to a full stop. He jumped off and tended a bleeding ankle with moist leaves and he crawled in a trash bin at a slaughterhouse to hide. His stomach was too empty to vomit from the smells, but he took shallow breaths and managed to sleep. Before dawn a creaking of hinges awakened him. The lid lifted under a blinding alley lamp and a foreman with torn white rubber boots in his fist growled.

“Scat, boy!” and “On your way, Peckerwood!”— before tossing the boots into the bin. Looking older than his age, the boy convinced the foreman to give him chores in trade for the boots and something to eat. Impressed with his

work, the man handed him bandages for his ankle, two sandwiches and a Saran-wrapped dill, along with the boots and mending tape.

“Check back with me. If we’re short, I’ll give you day work.”

Feeling freedom on his face for the first time, and hoping he had run to a new life he walked about, sack in hand, exploring the town of Carencro and wound up on Bab Road in his patched rubber boots when the sharp, slithering sounds of saw blades ripping dried lumber caused him to pause and look about. Nibbling on his dill like it was a dessert from Antoine’s he couldn’t help noticing through an opened doorway of a small shed large circular saw blades hanging like Christmas ornaments. A man holding a clipboard stepped out and paused. To Peck he looked honest. The boy could see a wood and canvas sleeping cot standing on its end, leaning up against the inside wall behind the blades. The wooden shed was the blade shed for the mill of the boat builder, and he handed the man his hunting knife.

“It’s my Dundee, Mister.”

“Nice knife, son, but I’m not in the market,” the man said.

“Touch the blade, Mister, jes touch it,” the boy said.

The man felt the blade.

“I’m impressed son, but I’m not—”

“It ain’t for sale, Mister. I keep it sharp is all. You got axes, knives and blades about. I see ‘em in the shed.”

The boy tried to barter his blade-sharpening skills for the use of the cot and asked about the broken lawn mower on its porch.

“That old mower?” the man asked.

“*Oui.*” (“Yes.”)

“Only worth the metal, I reckon.”

“It don’ go summore?” the boy asked.

“Not in years.”

"If I can spear-a-ment and fix it, can I use it?"

"You know motors too, do ya?"

"I t'ink I can did dat one. Dass for true."

"What's your name, young man?"

The boy knew his given name— Boudreaux Clemont Finch, but as a runaway he was guarded about making it known to strangers.

"Most I knowed call me Peck."

"How do you keep your blade that sharp, Peck?"

"I rub it with eggshell."

"Broken eggshell?"

"Whole egg, afore it's boiled."

"I thought only my grand-mere knew that one," the man said. "That's how she sharpened her sewing scissors. How old are you?"

"Old enough to do you a good job, mister."

"You got any family, son?"

"Ain't nobody but me."

The man extended his hand.

"The name's LeFleur. Marcel LeFleur."

Mr. LeFleur shook Peck's hand, said yes to his sleeping in the shed in barter for blade sharpening. He gave Peck the broken-down mower and threw in a pair of pliers, two sparkplugs, and a hotplate he had in his pickup.

"Unplug this when you're not using it, Peck. Wood dust sets off easy enough. Let's not help it with sparks."

"I'll make sure I did that, Mr. LeFleur."

"Look in the cabinet. There should be a blanket, a coffee pot, maybe a skillet."

"Yes sir."

"That light bulb stays on at all times."

"Yes sir."

"And no gas cans in the shed."

"Never sir."

That was years ago and Peck's been full grown for some time now but not certain how old he was and when the boat

builder one day said he looked to be in his twenties, he was good with that. Unable to read, write or cipher, he creates multiple-syllable words and converts their meanings. He knows French. When telling stories of his past he references age as—"I could swim," meaning he was eight or nine or "I couldn't swim," meaning he might have been as young as three or four—or as he would say in a Cajun patois, "I was four maybe t'ree." When not mowing the lawn at the hospice, he'd be seen at bayou shores casting trotlines or at town markets trading his catches—snapping turtles, mashwarohn, and frogs to fish-and-egg buyers for a few dollars on good days—for a few brown eggs if his catch was poor. He trades with a grocer his washing the store windows for a twelve-ounce can of French Market chicory and a shaker of ground cinnamon from India. On the hot plate burner in the mill's blade-sharpening shed where he sleeps, he boils four eggs in his morning pot of chicory coffee. He'll eat two and save two for lunch. Thursday is his one day to mow.

Every Thursday morning, he'd walk in darkness to this quiet hospice overlooking the calm of Bayou Carencro—it was once the stately Hildebrandt mansion. From the day he took the job nearly ten years ago, up until a week ago he never missed a Thursday mow. At first sparkle of sun on the bayou he'd be at water's edge casting his baited trotline into the bayou behind the hospice for an end of day retrieval before fueling and starting his mower.

But today is Wednesday, and a private detective just handcuffed Peck to one of the park benches on the hospice's rear lawn. He warned him not to try to escape, that he'd likely be shot and he wished him good luck with the law before walking away. Now alone at dawn, Peck waits an unknown fate, and he watches a snapper slowly climb the root of a bald cypress for the morning sun beginning to break through a layer of fog. A crawfish snake swimming across a shallow to where smaller frogs and crawfish were

plentiful catches his eye. A keen sense of observation isn't a game to Peck, it is how he survives.

"Gators still sleepin," he muttered. "*Vous gagnez cette fois, serpent.*" ("You win this time, snake.")

CHAPTER 2

zone one last time listening to live jazz before he dies. Gabe learned in the army, to lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way, so on the subject of getting to Newport he stepped back and had confidence in Peck's initiative. Gabe was happy and it made him no never mind which way they went as all he was thinking was stretching out on a lawn with a Chivas, some salami or a brick of cheese, and listening to jazz and watching life and sunsets mill around for a week. "Gentlemen," the truck driver said. "That was some good coffee and morning conversation. I've enjoyed your company."

"T'anks for the coffee, frien," Peck said.

"I'll be letting you out about a mile or so up."

"Hanh?" Peck asked, as though he'd just awakened.

"We're coming into Kenner. It's just up ahead," the driver said.

"What do you mean let us out?" Peck asked.

"That's where I make my turnaround. I drop this load and pick up a load of pine logs so I don't deadhead back to Carencro."

"But you say you was going to I-95," Peck said.

"Naw, it was you telling me you were going to I-95, Peck."

"We ain't even took out of Lewisana."

"We did a long haul from Carencro. You're closer than you were this morning."

"But you say you were going—"

"Naw, I didn't, Peck," the driver said.

"You say—"

"You're mixin' my words."

"I'd swear to it," Peck said.

"Peck, ain' no need to be swearing. I asked you where you were headin' off to—I was watching you buy bottles of water at 7-Eleven."

"You did dat, now dass for true," Peck said. "I remember xactly. But then I remember you saying back we could hitch wit you far as you go."

"Well, 'er you go, Peck."

"I remember him saying that, Peck," Gabe said.

"Hanh?"

"This here is as far as I go."

Peck looked at Gabe.

"Seems I might'a ax him where 'far as I go' was."

As they both appeared to think back from the fix they were in—of where they started in Carencro a few hours before, they would have been better off if they had headed straight on up to Memphis and kept going north from there. It was too late for all that, and the cattle hauler-driver pulled into a truck stop in Kenner and braked the rig short of a pothole full of muddy rainwater. Peck had known the driver from drinking beers and shooting quarter-a-piece, eight-ball pool with him at a saloon down the road from the slaughterhouse where Peck worked one summer, killing calves. He liked him.

"This is it for me, boys," the driver said. "Good luck to ya both."

Peck and the driver gave each other a blank stare. Peck reached out with his good hand and they shook hands.

"What happened to your hand, Peck? Why the blood?" the driver asked.

"Tore it with some fishhooks," Peck said."

“Ya’ll might have you a better shot to 95 by starting on the interstate up at I-12,” the driver said. “I take it on my way back, if you want a ride.”

Gabe and Peck looked at each other, considered the proposition and shrugged their shoulders. Gabe pulled a large, canvas, army duffel over the back of the seat and handed it to Peck, who threw it out the open door to the ground.

“Wait up a sec, Peck,” the driver said.

The driver leaned and reached for a first aid kit from behind the seat. He took a tube of Neosporin disinfectant and a box of bandages.

“Here, take these, Peck,” he said, holding his hand out. “Wash that hand you hooked, keep it clean and bandaged tight until it heals. Don’t let it get infected.”

“T’anks frien,” Peck said.

Peck crawled from the truck cab first then helped Gabe climb down. They stepped out of the way and turned as the truck’s airbrakes farted their tweets, lurching the rig forward, right front tire splashing in a pothole and bouncing the diesel’s stack, belching black billows. The driver tugged the leather airhorn strap, sending two friendly goodbye blasts.

When the truck was out of sight, Peck turned with a sheepish look. There was something on his mind.

“Gabe, I know what you must be t’inking about now, but I swear as I’m standing here—I sure enough thought that there rig was our ride to I-95, all the way. Now here we is put out in middle of someplace I ain’t hardly heard of in one of them cities they build and I already got us lost before we get out of Lewisana.”

“Don’t be tough on yourself, friend,” Gabe said. “It could have...”

Peck interrupted. “Might could be I’m jus’ not your guy.”

“Listen to you,” Gabe said.

“Hanh?”

“Here we are on an adventure of a lifetime—well my lifetime, for damn sure—and so what if we took a wrong fork? That’s what life is, son. I’m telling you—so what? The fork in that road we took sure enough is all the proof we’ll need to be certain we’re going to have some fun. That’s what an adventure is all about, Peck—having fun along the way.”

“I don’t see no fun, Gabe.”

“Here we are in Kenner, son. Rejoice, my brother, cause because of this here fork in a road, we’re just a short way from New Orleans and the Quarters and some fun.”

“The Quarters, Gabe? You mean the French Quarter?” Peck asked.

“Not exactly, my brother. Frenchmen Street—it’s near the French Quarter,” Gabe said. “It’s all a difference for those of us in the know, knowing where to go if we’re on a budget and those traveling men or ladies in town overnight on expense accounts looking for beignets and seafood, or maybe a night of some out-of-town boy-toy or poonani.”

“Now there you go, Gabe. You’re thinking fool’s gold, and me I’m just a lawn man. I can’t afford no Quarter or no Frenchmen Street ain’t no way. Oysters there are near a buck apiece and they ain’t no better dan ones from Lafayette. Ain’t no better t’all. Plenty shrimpers tole me and dass a fact.”

“This adventure is on me, son. You be keeping your word by looking after your old friend here, and I’ll see to it you get treated proper and maybe we’ll have some fun along the way.” He reached his hand to Peck. “Do we have an understanding, son?”

“We have us a deal, Captain,” Peck said, shaking Gabe’s hand.

Gabe smirked a satisfying grin, swiping the air with a right cross.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” he announced.

“I’ll go in de truck stop yonder and ax around,” Peck said.

“What for?”

“I’ll see who might be goin’ into de Quarter and can give us a lift,” Peck said.

“It’s early, my brother, and the sun’s warm,” Gabe said.

Peck turned slowly toward Gabe again, head down, looking at the ground in a don’t-distract-me sort of way, like he was about to kick a pebble.

“Gabe, I been meaning to ax you something.”

“Anything, my brother.”

“Now don’t go taking it to any offense or unkindliness, but I t’ink you has to stop calling me your son or your brother. It just don’t seem natural coming off the tongue like dat and it ain’t right your making people have to t’ink more than they ought—like they tend to without help—with you a black man and me being a boney white Cajun and all.”

“Boney, you’re not, my brother. I’ve watched the nurses stare out the windows at you with your shirt off. Ain’t nothing boney about those shoulders. Why those ladies were maybe laying odds on who’d get to your Johnson first.”

“Boney is my way of saying it is all, Gabe. I meant bein’ white, not about my build or nothing like dat. They did? Which ones?”

“Son and my brother are figures of speech for me too,” Gabe said. “I’ll cut them out if it’s how you feel.”

“Oh it ain’t me, Gabe. I’m proud to have your acquaintance and friendship, but it’s other more ignorant folks, you know. It’d be hokay if it weren’t for ignorant folks. They’s a lot of us around, dass for true.”

Gabe pointed east.

“That there’s the way into New Orleans,” Gabe said.

“So we can catch us a ride to I-95 all the way,” Peck said.

“Let’s start walking. Frenchmen Street won’t be far behind.”

“Hanh? Walk?”

“We’ll walk steady and be there by dark or right after sure enough. I saw a mileage sign back a way. Eleven miles.”

Peck balked. “Just hold on. I plumb forgot what I wanted to say. Here I go sneaking you out of hospice and there’s no telling what kind of trouble I’m going to get into for dat, and Gabe, you can lie to your own self all you want but you can’t lie to me—you know you ain’t well or you wouldn’t had been in there in de first place. Now what did you t’ink they’re going to say when I let a sick old man walk from Kenner clear into New Or-lee-anhs?”

“I’ll never tell,” Gabe grinned.

“What will they say when you drop dead, Mr. Captain Jordan, army veteran? They’d get me for murder, sure as I’m standing here.”

“I’m dying, Peck. I’m not sick,” Gabe said. “Let’s go.”

Peck dropped the canvas bag and stomped a foot for emphasis.

“Just hold on a dang minute, Captain. I may be ignorant, but I ain’t *coo-yon*. (*stupid*) If you was in hospice, you is sick, right?”

“My heart and legs are fine,” Gabe said. “I’m rusting out from the innards is all. I got termites in my belly. I can walk—it keeps the pain away. Now I’d appreciate you not reminding me of it every two minutes, and I would enjoy it if you’d have a mind to join me and for once stopped bellyaching.”

Peck relented, and the two started a healthy pace east out of Kenner, canvas duffel over Peck’s shoulder.

“Gabe, now t’ink this one good,” Peck said.

“What’s on your mind, son?”

“Was she the blonde with nice *tétines* who was a looking at me with my shirt off? T’ink more better, old man.”

“It was her and that day nurse, the sister with a green Afro,” Gabe said.

“Both of em? For true?”

“Playing you with their eyes like you were a porterhouse.”

“Ain’ t the blonde one married or going with a dude in a Ram truck dass been dropping her off?” Peck asked.

[CLICK HERE TO ORDER THE BOOK ON AMAZON](#)