

PECK FINCH and the EIGHT OF SWORDS

A Peck Finch Novel

Jerome Mark Antil

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coincidental.*

Heartfelt Thanks To:

My Pamela; Marty Bays; Rick Clancy

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1.

IT WAS THE NIGHT THE ICE CAME. The hot tin roof of the eighteenth-century, shotgun-turned jazz bar—in an alley off Frenchman Street—was being peppered like a drummer’s snare. Whenever hail knocked on the Big Easy, jazz would mute. The band sat it out, sipping scotch.

Peck stood to leave.

“Clean another night, Peck,” Lily Cup said. “It must be crazy cold out there, with everything iced up.”

Peck, Cajun French, in his mid-twenties, was a celebrated “eye of an eagle” tracker with instincts he learned surviving reptile-infested swamps and bayous of Acadiana barefoot since he was five. He’d earn his keep doing private investigative work for Lily Cup’s criminal law practice and for police lieutenant Larry Gaines. On Sunday nights he’d clean Sasha’s real estate offices on Napoleon and Lily Cup’s law office on Carrolton, rain or shine. And it was Sunday night. He took his work and his word seriously.

Peck played with his key FOB, offered a polite wave, turned and went to the bar.

“Charlie, can I ax could I pay tomorrow, frien’?”

Charlie had a Master’s degree in political science from Mississippi State—but he was a good bartender and a good friend, and he would play into Peck’s natural Cajun *patois* as a pal.

“Pay for what, bébé—?”

“—for everybody at our table? With the racket, ain’t been no dancing. Thought I’d pick up my frien’s tab but I’m—how you say—a little short.”

“Git’ outta’ heya—go earn you some green, bébé,” Charlie replied. “I know where you at.”

“Thanks, frien’.”

Then, like a big yawn can sometime make a *pop* in your ear, the racket on the tin roof stopped. The tenor sax

player began mouthing his reed like a popsicle stick—moistening it for a jazz riff that would bring the evening alive again.

Peck left the Blue Note.

In the time it would have taken him to walk the alley from Charlie's Blue Note to Frenchman Street the explosion shook the old house and the ground around it. The boom's concussion cracked the mirror behind the bar and a wall hanging neon beer sign crashed to the floor.

"What the fu—?" Gabe shouted.

"That was on Frenchman Street," Larry said.

He stood, felt a pocket for his badge.

"Peck's pickup!" Lily Cup screamed. "His pickup blew up when he started it. They've killed Peck."

Everyone froze in their seats, already thinking how to eulogize their Cajun French friend.

When it came to personal tragedy New Orleans was like no other place.

In the city of *gris-gris*, physical survival was more hope than promise. The front porch to Gulf winds storming Acadiana like Barbary coast pirates. Politicians destroying nature's ecosystem in Southern Louisiana, permitting the lumbering and chipping of thousand-year-old giant cypress trees into mulch, turning swamps lifeless. That, and a history of Mississippi River dams flooding without warning, burying Acadians alive—their homes, their churches drowned in suffocating silt and discharging lives and dreams, bleeding them into the Gulf.

Denial was the best defense, so most chose *celebration* for distraction—whether it be costumed parades up St. Charles Avenue, or funeral dirges with a Dixieland trombone, a tuba and a drummer man. They'd buy guns to fend off the vultures whose scavenging followed storms like rats in a city dump.

Lily Cup stood to go look.

"I told him they'd bomb his pickup," Lily Cup said.

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“Who?” Gabe asked.

“The sex traffickers,” Lily Cup said.

“Sit down,” Larry said. “It’s not Peck’s pickup.”

“Like you’d know from in here,” Lily Cup said.

“I know from in here because he started it from in here—before he left the table.”

“He did?”

“He stood right here—started it after you mentioned the ice.”

“You sure?”

“I watched him start it. It would have exploded then.”

Lily Cup sat down, took a gulp of her rye.

“Where’s Sasha?” Larry asked.

“She went to pee,” Lily Cup said.

“Folks, stay calm. Stay in here,” Larry said.

“My brother,” Gabe said.

Larry was rushing to the door when the second explosion rattled the jazz bar’s window shutters. This time Charlie jumped over the bar and met him at the door.

“Doesn’t sound good, eh?” Charlie asked.

Larry opened the door to a rolling thermal brightness of billowing flames illuminating Frenchman Street.

He spoke in a low voice.

“That’s a petroleum fire. Charlie, you wait here.”

He pulled his revolver and cautiously made his way through the ice-crusted alley to Frenchman Street. He looked about—stopped short, holstered his gun and ran back to Charlie in the doorway.

“It’s Peck.”

“Ah nah—God damn!” Charlie said.

Larry pressed his mic button.

“Headquarters, this is unit nine-eight-four—I’m at one-two-three Frenchman Street.”

“Sasha’s out there too,” Charlie said.

“Are you serious, Charlie?”

“Copy nine-eight-four,” a voice barked.

"I need units to respond—a vehicle just exploded."

"Copy nine-eight-four."

"Charlie, are you positive Sasha—?" Larry started.

"Peck left his phone on the bar—she ran it out."

"Anyone asks what's up—you don't know, Charlie."

"How about Lily Cup—how about ol' Gabe?"

"Especially not them, Charlie. No time to explain."

"You got my word, bébé. Be careful out there."

"You have a back door?"

"Behind the kitchen."

"If anybody insists on leaving—use it."

"If they do, they're not welcome back," Charlie said.

Larry hurried to Frenchman Street, watching flames and wary of more explosions.

"Checking for injuries," he said into his mic. "Send EMS—fire—have units cut traffic into this area."

"Copy, Lieutenant," a voice said.

"If Officer Downs is on duty, dispatch him."

"Copy, Lieutenant, this is Downs—I'm on my way."

Larry blessed himself with the sign of the cross. He whispered, "Peck and Michelle, it will never be the same without you two."

He stepped off the curb.

"I hate my work."

Peck had been accepted into Tulane's night school. He read a book a week—preferred John Steinbeck to Tolstoy—and was enjoying Hemingway. Their table at Charlie's Blue Note on dance nights would be friends who'd come to dance jazz—the retired career army captain, a Creole named Gabe, the real estate magnate and Acadian French Michelle Lisette (who always went by "Sasha" at Charlie's Blue Note) Sasha's best friend (since they were six), Lily Cup, the cigar-smoking Harvard Law grad and criminal attorney, and Lily Cup's brown sugar and high school basketball flame and now grown-up police lieutenant, Larry. Gabe and Lieutenant Larry were like black bookends

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to an unlikely assortment of characters at any table in Southern Louisiana.

Peck had captured hearts.

2.

LARRY'S FLASHLIGHT GUIDED HIM through the ice. He stepped off the curb and walked toward the flaming pickup as if looking for Peck's and Sasha's bodies. A shower of hail pellets fell like beads thrown from a float at Mardi Gras from their nest on the oak branches above. He brushed them off.

"Larry!"

A wind gust muffled the sounds.

"Over here!"

Larry looked around, full circle.

"Larry?"

"Peck?"

"Larry!"

"Peck, is that you?"

Larry followed the voice and saw a woman's bloody leg with a shoeless foot laying on the sidewalk. He elbow-pushed his way into and through a thick growth of bushes. He found Peck down, lying on top of Sasha, both covered in ice and buried in needle-sharp, prickly holly bush twigs. He leaned over.

"Peck, you're alive."

Peck lifted his head.

"Thank God," Larry said.

Peck's hair was singed and there was blood on his forehead from holly bush branch cuts.

"Talk to me. Either of you hurt?"

"I'm okay," Peck said. "I don't know about—"

"Don't move until we have you checked out for broken bones," Larry said.

"I'm all right," Sasha moaned, her cheek resting on the icy ground. Her eyes opened.

"I think I broke my wrist," she whimpered.

"How about your leg, Sasha?"

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Sasha touched a thigh with her hand.

"I can't feel this leg."

"The calf looks pretty bloody. Don't move it."

Peck raised his arm for help.

Larry carefully pulled him to his feet.

"Careful of Sasha, son," Larry said.

Peck stepped back.

"Sasha, let me check your wrist," Larry said.

She held it up.

"What happened?" Sasha asked.

"Still checking," Larry said.

"Was that a bomb?" Sasha asked.

"Think maybe."

"Where?"

"Peck's pickup."

"Why would someone put a bomb in Peck's pickup?"

Larry didn't answer.

"Did somebody try to kill Peck?" Sasha asked.

"Your face is badly scratched up, Sasha. Did you hit your head?"

"No."

"You sure? I have EMS coming."

"I remember hitting the bushes and landing on my hand. I'm positive."

Larry handed his flashlight to Peck. He examined Sasha's wrist as sirens approached. Three patrol cars drove up, one was Officer Downs. Downs parked at the alley to Charlie's Blue Note and waited for Larry's signal.

"Your wrist isn't broken—you landed hard—maybe a sprain—it'll hurt a spell."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Don't put pressure on that leg until we have it looked at," Larry said.

He and Peck helped her to her feet.

"Who would want to—? Sasha started.

Larry interrupted in a whisper.

“Listen up—both of you.”

“Okay,” Peck said.

“I won’t lie. This has all the signs of a hit—”

“*Aye yi-yi*,” Peck said.

“—until we can check it out, forensics, witnesses. If it was a hit and they know you’re alive, they won’t give up.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Sasha said.

“Peck—just nod your head—you got a place you can hide?”

Peck nodded.

“Sasha, don’t move your lips—whisper. Where’s your car?” Larry asked.

“The Be—” Sasha started to answer, before Larry covered her mouth with his fingers, muffling her.

“Your car...no details,” Larry whispered.

“Garage on Decatur,” Sasha whispered.

“How’s the leg?”

“I can feel it a little. It’s asleep from Peck landing on me.”

“I need you two to hide until I get answers. Peck, take Sasha with you to hide out—I’ll get you to her car.”

Larry flagged Officer Downs over.

“Why me?” Sasha asked. “Why do I have to hide?”

“Honey, if this was a hit and they know he’s alive—they won’t think twice—grabbing you to trade for Peck.”

“Mother of God,” Sasha said.

Using Larry’s flashlight Peck knelt on the sidewalk, examining Sasha’s leg. He pulled glass from it.

“This needs to be covered,” Peck said.

Officer Downs reached his arm over the seatback and held a box of bandages for Peck.

Larry opened the back door of the patrol car. Peck helped Sasha in.

“Have that leg and her face looked at when you get where you’re going, son,” Larry said.

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“Won’t they follow us?” Sasha whispered. “They’re probably watching now.”

“They’re gone—but their game is afoot,” Larry said.

“That’s comforting, Sherlock,” Sasha quipped.

Peck leaned over Sasha’s lap and whispered. “Tell Gabe we’re okay, Larry?”

Larry bent on a knee and whispered back. “Crime scene rule—you never know who’s listening or recording a video. Charlie’s is packed. For your safety I’ll tell them when the time is right.”

“He’s an ol’ man, Larry—his heart can’t—”

“Son, Gabe’s a brother—a fellow vet—I’ll give him the wink.”

“The wink?”

“He’ll know you’re okay and he’ll know not to talk.”

“Understand, frien’, thanks,” Peck said. “Can you find my book, Larry?”

“Book, son? What book?”

“I had me a John Grisham, Lily Cup gave me. It’s got to be somewhere.”

“So that’s what nearly broke my wrist—your book?” Sasha asked.

Larry shook his head.

“Officer Downs, take them where the lady says.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Officer Downs said.

“And tail ’em until you’re sure no one’s following.”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

Larry leaned down and spoke into the window of the patrol car.

“Don’t use phones. You get a call, especially if you know who’s calling—don’t answer unless it’s me calling. In fact, turn ’em off until morning.”

“Can I call Lily Cup?” Sasha asked.

“Especially not Lily Cup. If they’re tracking phones, that’ll signal them and they’ll know Peck’s alive. Worse, they’ll know where you both are.”

JEROME MARK ANTIL

A firefighter walked up to Larry and handed him a Louboutin shoe and broken heel. Larry held them for Sasha and pushed the door closed.

The patrol car sped away, down Frenchman Street.