

Peck's been grown for some time now but never 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, he'd create multiple-syllable words and convert their meanings. He knew some French. When telling stories of his past he'd reference 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 *quatre* maybe *trois*." ("I was four maybe three.") When not mowing the lawns at the hospice, he'd be seen at shores casting a trotline or at market 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'd trade with a grocer his washing the store windows for a twelve-ounce can of French Market chicory and a small shaker of ground cinnamon from India. On the hot plate burner in the mill's blade-sharpening shed where he slept, he'd boil three eggs in his morning pot of chicory coffee. Thursday was his one day to mow. Every Thursday he would walk in the morning darkness to this hospice overlooking the calm of Bayou Carencro—it was once the stately Hildebrandt mansion. From the day he first took the job nearly ten years ago, he never missed a Thursday. At first sparkle of sun on the horizon he'd cast his baited trotline for an end of day retrieval before fueling and starting the mower.

But this was a Wednesday, and a private detective just handcuffed him to a bench on the hospice's rear lawn, warned him not to try to escape, wished him good luck and walked away. Alone he sat and waited an unknown fate, and he watched a snapper slowly climb the root of a bald cypress for the morning sun beginning to break through a layer of fog and a crawfish snake

caught his eye while swimming across the shallow to where smaller frogs and crawfish were plentiful. A keen sense of observation wasn't a game to Peck, it was how he survived.

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

He looked through smoky fog at the morning moon resting just above the horizon as if it was waiting to evaporate. A silhouette of the cypress branch appeared as if tattooed on the moon's surface, and hanging moss filtered his view like cheesecloth, but he watched just the same as if the moon was a lost mamma he didn't remember and could only imagine her looking back at him, with a sense he needed her now, more than ever before.

A lady stepped from the parking area onto the lawn, pulling white driving gloves as she approached. Peck studied her walk. Her black skirt had a designer slit baring a milky thigh. She wore a matching, finely tailored, waist-pinched, double-breasted jacket with an oversized silver and diamond-clustered brooch awkwardly pinned to its lapel; white Nike walking shoes. The shoulder bag and black leather valise she was carrying were from Torino in New Orleans. She walked directly to his bench, removing Chanel sunglasses, grasping them in her hand with the gloves, and sat down without asking. She extended a hand as though they had never met, in the likelihood of prying eyes.

"I'm Lily Cup."

Peck gave an indifferent nod as if he knew her, for he did know her from a week or so before, if only for a few hours that night in a jazz bar in the alley off Frenchman Street in New Orleans. He slouched as if body language might best express his anger, and he watched the turtle

on the cypress root smiling up at the sun and he studied its carapace as if estimating its weight for soup.

“Sasha called me,” Lily Cup said.

“When?” Peck asked.

“As soon as she knew which airport your flight was landing. I drove up earlier this morning.”

“What they chargin’ me on?” Peck asked.

Lily Cup didn’t speak. She folded each glove, placed them and her sunglasses in the bag, and set it between them on the bench.

“Dey was talking murder in New Jersey, cher.”

“Who was?”

“The detective, axin’ me stuff.”

“They haven’t charged you with anything.”

“So, why’d they arrest me first place?”

“They want you for questioning,” Lily Cup said.

“Makes no sense, cher.”

“I’m here to protect your rights—see you don’t get trapped saying the wrong things.”

“Just to get grilled I got to be handcuffed to a bench?”