PRIME: Chapter One

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In another month the New Orleans lakefront would stink of fish, filth, and boat fuel, but right now it was a softly gorgeous spring day on Lakeshore Drive. Two young men sat on the seawall, their feet propped on the algae-slimed steps that descended into the murky brown water. Behind them, the levee rose up lush and green; before them was a vista of sailboats, small yachts, an occasional Coast Guard cutter, and far in the distance, the causeway that stretches twenty-four miles across Lake Pontchartrain to Mandeville, Covington, and other pretty little towns collectively known by sardonic city dwellers as "New Orleans North."

One of the young men - his name was Gary Stubbs, but everyone called him G-man - had a cane pole baited with a rubber worm. He sat with his long legs crossed, the pole balanced on the fulcrum of his knee, and stared out at the boats on the sparkling water. His myopic eyes had always been painfully sensitive to light, and his omnipresent dark glasses could not ward off the beginnings of a headache. G-man wasn't the kind of person who got a lot of headaches, though two years of restaurant co-ownership had certainly increased his familiarity

with them. Like many native New Orleanians, he had known how to fish for most of his life, but he was not especially dedicated to the practice. Today he would have been unlikely to notice if Leviathan had risen from the depths and clamped onto his line. His attention was wholly absorbed by a creased and partly crumpled piece of newspaper from which his friend was reading aloud.

His friend was John Rickey, generally addressed as Rickey except by the younger and more timid underlings in the restaurant's kitchen, who just called him Chef. He read in a loud, fierce voice, gesticulating to emphasize points that struck him as particularly egregious. Rickey was very much the kind of person who got a lot of headaches.

They had been together for more than a decade, had worked in kitchens all over New Orleans, had sautéed, chopped, guzzled, and scammed their way from 15-year-old dishwashers at a Lower Ninth Ward diner to chef-owners of an award-winning and successful restaurant. The restaurant had been Rickey's idea from the beginning, and though he had recently insisted on making G-man his co-chef rather than his sous chef, he was still in charge. Rickey always had to be in charge of everything he did; otherwise it didn't strike him as worth doing. He was sharp-featured and intense, handsome despite a slight tendency toward paunchiness. Even the article he was reading commented

on his good looks, though that seemed to irk him as much as everything else about it.

"'Like so many youthful ventures, Liquor is a fine example of why no one under thirty-five should be put in charge of anything.'" Liquor was their restaurant, so named because all the dishes featured that ingredient; as Rickey had predicted, it was an idea perfectly suited to this most alcoholic of cities.

"'The menu shows a certain ambition, verve, and raw talent. So may have the young Michelangelo's daubings, but they do not belong in the Louvre.' What the fuck is the Louvre, G? What does any of that mean?"

"I think it's a museum," said G-man, hoping Rickey wouldn't pursue the other question, though he knew he might as well hope for Jesus Christ to come strolling across the lake and put a nice bull redfish on his line. He tilted his face up to the cloudless sky, concentrated on the lapping water, the bass on a passing car's stereo, the gulls screeching and mewing and saying "You! You!" It was relaxing out here, or would be if Rickey would let it. This was one of the places they'd always come for peace: from their families when they were still teenagers living at home, from the stress and exhaustion of the various kitchen jobs they'd held during most of their twenties, from their own restaurant over the past couple of years. He felt as

if Rickey wasn't honoring that peace now, and it made him a little sad.

"'Of course, most young entrepreneurs have to come up with their own cash,'" Rickey read. "'These two gentlemen haven't even done that, instead relying on Daddy's money. Celebrity restaurateur and Maine native Lenny Duveteaux isn't really either chef's father, but he may as well be for all the work they had to do to obtain his considerable financing. The question of why he chose to bankroll them remains - '"

G-man tucked the end of his fishing pole under his arm, reached over, and snatched the article out of Rickey's hand.

Before Rickey could grab it back, he had torn it into small pieces and scattered it on the surface of the lake. "There," he said. "Maybe now I'll get a bite. I always heard it helps if you chum the water with something really rank."

Rickey stared at him, speechless. G-man stared back, meeting Rickey's bright blue eyes with his own calm brown ones. There weren't many people who could hold that blazing near-turquoise glare, but they had known each other since elementary school, had fallen in love at sixteen, had pretty much stood together against everything life threw at them since then. Rickey could do a lot of things, but he couldn't intimidate

G-man. After a couple of minutes, Rickey shook his head and laughed. There wasn't much humor in that laugh, but G-man supposed it was a start.

"You know I'm just gonna get another copy," Rickey said.

"The goddamn paper's free. You can pick it up all over town."

"Yeah, but until you do, I won't have to listen to it any more."

"I think I got parts of it memorized."

"Rickey - "

Whatever G-man had been about to say was cut off by the ringing of Rickey's cell phone. Rickey removed it from the side pocket of his mushroom-patterned chef pants, glanced briefly at the caller ID. "Lenny," he said. "Again."

"You gonna talk to him this time?"

"I don't feel like it."

The phone stopped ringing.

"You ought to do it sometime today. That article fucked him over pretty good too."

"I know. I just can't do it yet. <u>Daddy's money</u>," Rickey said bitterly. He'd been making wishful noises about buying out Lenny's share of the restaurant for awhile now, and this phrase in particular rankled. He started to return the phone to his pocket, but before he could, it rang again. Without any apparent premeditation, Rickey pulled his arm back, snapped his

wrist forward, and sent the phone flying out across Lake

Pontchartrain. It skipped a couple of times and was gone
forever.

"Dude!"

"I didn't even know I was gonna do that," said Rickey, who looked just as surprised as G-man.

"Dude!"

"What?"

"Was that the phone from the walk-in?"

"Yeah," Rickey admitted guiltily. "Ungrateful bastard, aren't I?"

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Lenny Duveteaux sat in his office at Crescent, one of two successful local restaurants he owned. He had come to New Orleans more than a decade ago, fallen in love with the place, and proceeded to make his own indelible mark on its culinary landscape. Now he ran two successful restaurants, had published a bestselling series of cookbooks, marketed his own spice line, made frequent appearances on Leno and Letterman. A couple of years ago he'd heard about a young cook who had a great idea for a restaurant, but no money to pull it off. In a city where public drunkenness was considered a right and sometimes even an

obligation, Lenny knew a menu based on liquor would pull in both tourists and locals. Fortunately the young cook was talented enough to back up his gimmick with excellent food. Lenny decided to invest in the idea. That was how he'd gotten involved with Rickey and G-man.

Lenny was a stocky man, broad through the shoulders and thick in the neck, slightly seedy-looking. He shaved every day, but usually looked as if he were thinking about starting a beard. His square face was otherwise unremarkable except when he smiled, which made him appear demented. He was not smiling now. He had a closet full of expensive clothes, but right now he wore a pair of houndstooth check pants with frayed cuffs, a white chef jacket, and a New Orleans Saints baseball cap. He didn't look like a multimillionaire, let alone the "dangerously ruthless businessman" this rag accused him of being.

On his desk was a copy of <u>Cornet</u>, a biweekly giveaway paper that covered New Orleans entertainment, food, and politics.

This issue's cover story was about a dowser who had been brought to town in hopes of divining the exact location of Buddy

Bolden's grave in Holt Cemetery, the local potter's field. A marker shaped like a musical note had already been erected for the jazz pioneer, but no one was sure whether it marked the right spot; he'd been buried in an unmarked grave in 1931, and the city had since lost track of him. Ordinarily Lenny would

have been interested in the story - he liked old-time jazz, and the dowser was from Maine, his home state - but today he was only interested in what passed for Cornet's restaurant review.

LIQUOR? I HARDLY KNOW HER!

By Humphrey Wildblood

Much has been made recently of the so-called Broad Street restaurant renaissance. It is true that a certain Mid-City stretch of Broad near the New Orleans courthouse/jail complex - formerly a rather bleak industrial area rife with bail bondsmen, gas stations, muffler shops, and the like - now boasts a number of upscale restaurants of varying quality. The restaurant usually credited with beginning this renaissance is Liquor, located at Toulouse and Broad. Though Chef John Rickey describes the menu as "eclectic French-influenced," local diners know it better as "that place that puts booze in everything." As well they might, for that is the first gimmick that made this restaurant famous, though unfortunately not the last.

Food cognoscenti and haunters of bookstores' true-crime sections may recall the gripping events that took place shortly after Liquor's opening, almost as if choreographed. A grudge-bearing former boss of Rickey's trapped him in the restaurant's walk-in cooler, threatened his life, and actually winged him with a bullet before Rickey was able to use his cell phone to alert co-workers to his plight. Readers who wish to know more can find the full story in Dark Kitchen, a sensational little paperback penned by Chase Haricot, the former Times-Picayune food critic who gave Liquor a glowing four-out-of-five-bean review. here neither to question Haricot's motives nor to examine the questionable wisdom of using red beans to rate finedining establishments. I am here only to suggest that a near-tragedy in the kitchen - though it may fascinate Gourmet, Bon Appetit, and other denizens of the American food press - does not a great restaurant make.

The aforementioned publications came to Liquor for the story, stayed for the food, and appear to have been impressed. (Bon Appetit spoke of "innovative cuisine with

an impeccable grounding in local and global culinary tradition," whatever that may mean.) It is worth mentioning that both magazines also ran prominent color photographs of Rickey, a handsome fellow with a winning smile. Chefs are sexy these days, you know. Doubtless it is only a matter of time before the better culinary schools require 8x10 glossies to be submitted with all applications.

Rickey runs the kitchen with his co-chef, Gary "G-man" Stubbs, a lanky young man with the slightly dazed expression of a California surfer who's just smoked a lid The two have worked together for most of dynamite grass. of their careers. Both are thirty years old, both lifelong New Orleanians complete with dat scrappy ole how's-yamama'n'em Lower Ninth Ward accent, just a couple local boys who done made good. Horatio Alger meets A Confederacy of Dunces, perhaps. Of course, most young entrepreneurs have to come up with their own cash. These two gentlemen haven't even done that, instead relying on Daddy's money. Celebrity restaurateur and Maine native Lenny Duveteaux isn't really either chef's father, but he may as well be for all the work they had to do to obtain his considerable financing (Liquor is reportedly turning a handsome profit now, and Duveteaux still owns a share of the business). The question of why he chose to bankroll them remains unanswered. Some sources say Duveteaux - chef/owner of Lenny's in the French Quarter and Crescent on Magazine Street - believed he had lost touch with contemporary cuisine and hoped these hip young chefs would restore his credibility. This seems unlikely, since Crescent is already excruciatingly hip and the two young chefs were nobodies when Duveteaux met them. More sinister motives have also been suggested. Lenny Duveteaux is known in certain circles as "the Nixon of the New Orleans restaurant world." He is said to record all his telephone conversations, indexing the tapes in his office by the hundreds, and to have the sort of business connections you don't want to cross if you value your health. A former associate remarked on the condition of anonymity, "Lenny is a dangerously ruthless businessman. He plays by the rules - the problem is that he also makes the rules."

But most local diners could care less who's paying the rent as long as the food is good. Is it? Like so many youthful ventures, Liquor is a fine example of why no one under thirty-five should be put in charge of anything. The menu

shows a certain ambition, verve, and raw talent. So may have the young Michelangelo's daubings, but they do not belong in the Louvre. I concede that my meals at Liquor have been well-prepared and reasonably tasty. The problem lies not in the execution but in the conception. after it opened, Liquor won a James Beard award for Best Newcomer, something that doesn't impress locals much but continues to bring in culinary tourists by the score. Sadly, the publicity and acclaim seem to have gone to the heads of Chefs Rickey and Stubbs; they want to have it both ways, wooing the out-of-town foodies but still professing to stay true to their roots. The result is a menu that lacks basic coherence - it's almost a stunt. Pecan-crusted Gulf fish with rum beurre blanc nestles uneasily alongside grappa-flamed pork shank with rattlesnake beans. scented Creole tomatoes joust for attention with Gallianomarinated fresh sardines (a fish fit only for cat food, in this diner's not-so-humble opinion). Is Liquor a contemporary Louisiana restaurant? Is it one of those upscale American places that mingle the culinary traditions of France, Italy, and other hazily imagined Old Countries with no regard for accuracy or palatability? You may decide for yourself, since the chefs surely can't - these days, "eclectic" seems to be a code word for "I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

But at least they look good doing it.

Lenny had already read the article three or four times, but he still couldn't quite take it in. Though he'd had his share of bad reviews, he had never seen one like this. He wasn't even certain it was a review; it scarcely mentioned the food, seeming rather to take umbrage at Liquor's hype, Rickey's looks, and, of course, Lenny's involvement. That had to be the kicker. He'd had Rickey and G-man investigated before he went into business with them. G-man, who was so easygoing that Lenny occasionally wanted to give him a good shake, had no known enemies. Rickey's

only enemy - Mike Mouton, the former boss who'd tried to shoot him - was currently cooling his heels in Angola Prison. Lenny, though, had plenty of enemies. He knew the article was directed at him, though he didn't suppose that would be any comfort to Rickey.

He dialed Rickey's cell number again. This time it didn't even ring, but shunted him off to a recording that told him the number was temporarily out of service. He checked the recording light on the tape machine attached to his phone, then called his attorney, Oscar De La Cerda. He knew De La Cerda had read the article, because he'd faxed it to the lawyer earlier today.

"Run down our options for me," he said without preamble when De La Cerda answered. "I know this is actionable, but tell me the best way to approach it."

"The best way to approach it is to stay the hell away from it," said De La Cerda. "It's obvious this guy's a wingnut.

Don't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging him, and make sure Rickey doesn't either."

"Bullshit. We don't answer the charges, we look like we're admitting to them."

"OK. Everything he says about the restaurant is a matter of opinion - that's not actionable. The stuff he says about you is

murkier, legally speaking. We can make a good case for libel, but he can probably duck all the charges."

"What do you mean, he can duck all the charges? He stops just short of calling me a crook and a thug."

"Well, that's just it - he stops short of it. You do tape your phone calls - you're taping me right now, aren't you?"

Lenny was silent. "See, that's not libel. Everything else, he attributes to sources. That's protected. There are ways to get around the protection, but most of them are about as subtle as a lead pipe to the skull. You use them, you're gonna look like a crook and a thug, or at least a guy who's got something to hide."

"No, I don't accept that," said Lenny. He had taken out a book of matches printed with Crescent's logo and was lighting them one by one, letting them burn all the way to his fingertips before dropping them in a crystal ashtray. The ashtray already contained dozens of burnt matches, but no cigarette butts; Lenny was not a smoker. Among other things, it was bad for the palate. "In fact, I hate that attitude, Oscar, and you know it. A righteous man doesn't defend himself because he's got something to hide. He defends himself because his good name is worth something, and he doesn't let the jackals shit on it just because he's afraid of looking like a meanie."

"Lenny ... " He heard De La Cerda light a cigarette.

Lenny had warned him about his palate, but the attorney didn't seem to care. "Do you really need reminding that certain of your past actions might not look so good in the harsh light of the courtroom? That you have acted, shall we say, outside the law now and again?"

"I've been guilty of $\underline{\text{malum prohibitum}}$ - I'll give you that. Malum in se, never."

"Christ, Lenny, spare me the Gordon Liddy shit. I've already got a headache. Look, let me do some research on this Humphrey Wildblood. Maybe we can get something nasty on him. I'll call you later this afternoon, all right?"

De La Cerda hung up. Lenny lit another match, let it burn until the flame licked his fingertips, let it burn a little longer, then dropped it in the ashtray. He hated it when his attorney spoke disparagingly of his "Gordon Liddy shit."

Liddy's biography Will had been a formative influence on the young Lenny Duveteaux, and if it had never been written, he suspected Oscar De La Cerda would be short one extremely profitable client - and a client who had recently agreed to finance De La Cerda's upcoming run for District Attorney at that; it would be good to have the DA in his pocket. The current one was a real head case.

Lenny had read Liddy's bio just after he opened his first restaurant, and it had changed the way he looked at everything. Liddy made him understand that a righteous man not only had a right to be utterly ruthless; he had an obligation. In particular, the doctrine of the two malums had made a deep impression on him. Malum in se was evil in and of itself - the example Liddy gave was the sexual assault of a child - and it was morally indefensible. Malum prohibitum was wrong only because of laws prohibiting it - Liddy's two examples were the running of a stop sign and the assassination of a newspaper columnist who'd revealed sensitive information about CIA operatives overseas - and it was morally neutral. Lenny had based his entire business career on this doctrine, and it had served him well.

He'd also been intrigued by Liddy's technique of strengthening his will by mastering his reaction to pain, but Lenny's match trick was more of a habit than a way of fortifying himself. After twenty years in the kitchen, his hands were so inured to heat that he barely felt the little flames.

Someone knocked on his office door. He put the matches away and called, "Come in."

It was Polynice, one of his line cooks. "Scuse me, Chef.

My cousin wanna know if you can interview him today."

"The porter position? Tell him I'll be there in a minute."

Lenny thought of all the nasty jobs a porter had to do: lugging heavy bags of wet garbage, scrubbing out the coolers, hosing down the greasy rubber mats that protected the cooks' feet from the punishing concrete floor. Most restaurants went through porters like a compulsive gambler went through money at the track, but Lenny's tended to stay on because they knew there was the possibility of advancement; just a few years ago Polynice himself had been a porter.

Polynice left. Lenny ejected the tape from the machine attached to his telephone and marked it in a way only he could understand before going out to interview Polynice's cousin. He decided to hire the kid, but he still couldn't get his mind off the Cornet review. He tried to call Rickey again and got the same out-of-service recording. Dinner service started in a couple of hours, but today was Monday, a slow night. "How are you set up?" he asked his sous chef.

"I got everything I need and then some."

"Good," said Lenny. "I'll be back in an hour."

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G-man parked Rickey's old black-and-gold Plymouth in front of the little shotgun house they rented on Marengo Street.

Rickey had spent most of the drive from the lake mired in silent gloom. "God, am I glad to be home," he said, just as if they had put in a full day's work. The sweet olives in their front yard were in full bloom, and not until they were halfway up the walk did they notice the figure sitting on their porch.

"Catch anything?" said Lenny heavily, eyeing the pole in G-man's hand.

"Nope."

"You know, I respect your days off. I usually try not to bother you. But would it be too much to ask - " Lenny was looking at Rickey now. "If, on the day you get the worst review of your career - a review that seriously impugns me too - maybe you could turn your goddamn cell phone on?"

Neither a New Orleans public school education nor twelve years of life in the kitchen had taught G-man what impugns meant, but he could tell it was nothing good. "His phone was on," said G-man.

"Then why couldn't he answer - "

"Because I didn't want to fucking talk about it yet!" said Rickey. "Why'd you have to call me every ten minutes? I could see it was you. I would've called you back eventually. I was trying to get some perspective."

"I've had bad reviews before. I could have helped you get some perspective."

"Maybe I didn't want your perspective, Lenny, did you ever think of that? Maybe I wanted to decide how I felt about it before you told me how I ought to feel."

"It doesn't matter how you <u>feel</u> about it. We need to decide what we're going to do about it."

"What do you mean, do?"

By now Lenny and Rickey were standing nose to nose on the porch steps, waving their arms at each other. "Can we at least go in the house?" said G-man.

They ignored him. "We're not gonna <u>do</u> anything," said
Rickey. "It's a bad review. Restaurants get them. After the
insane amount of hype we've had, I'm not even surprised. I
don't like it, but we're not gonna have the guy killed over it."

"I wasn't suggesting we have him <u>killed</u>," said Lenny. "I'm just saying we should consider our options. I like to think I have a talent for finding something useful in every misfortune."

"Yeah, well, I like to think you have a talent for being a big asshole."

G-man stifled a laugh; he couldn't help it.

"That was uncalled for," said Lenny. "But I apologize.

Sometimes I forget who I'm dealing with. Sometimes I think I'm dealing with a mature person, and it just slips my mind that I'm actually dealing with Chef John Rickey, Boy Wonder."

"Lenny, I swear to God, if you say one more word - "

"Shut up!" said G-man loudly. "Shut the fuck up! Both of you fucking idiots just shut the fuck up!"

G-man hardly ever spoke with such force. Lenny and Rickey both gaped at him, glanced back at each other, looked away half-pissed, half-sheepish.

"Get in the house if you want to scream at each other.

Maybe you forgot, but I own part of the restaurant too, and I don't really want everybody on Marengo Street hearing my business."

He stepped between them and unlocked the front door of the little house. The door swung open, and G-man ushered them in, giving Rickey a none-too-gentle poke in the shoulder as he went by.

"I can't believe you guys still live here," said Lenny, gazing at the milk-crate coffee table and thrift store sofa.

"You could afford something a lot more comfortable."

"Thanks for pointing that out," said Rickey. "Pardon us for not taking the Lenny Duveteaux route. I guess we should've moved out to Lakeview and bought an ugly-ass Spanish Colonial cracker palace full of sectional furniture."

"Never mind where anybody lives," said G-man. Lenny was working his nerves too, but he was most interested in getting the two of them to quit bickering. Lenny and Rickey bickered quite a lot, but they seldom really argued. G-man was afraid

this might spill over into a genuine argument if he didn't head it off. "Just shut up a minute and think about this: If that Humphrey Wildblood guy could see us right now, he'd be laughing his ass off."

"What do you mean?" said Rickey sullenly.

"I mean, maybe he thinks Liquor is a shitty restaurant, but at least he thinks we all believe in it. He thinks Lenny's got our backs. Imagine how fast he'd change his mind if he saw you two yelling at each other on the damn porch."

"You're right," said Lenny, spreading his hands in a conciliatory way he had. The gesture always looked so sincere that G-man wondered if Lenny practiced it in the mirror. "We shouldn't let this drive a wedge between us."

"Who is this Wildblood clown, anyway?" Rickey asked. "He hasn't been writing for the Cornet very long."

"No, this is only his fifth review. And the others were puff pieces. I've got Oscar checking him out."

"I'm surprised you don't have new food critics checked out as soon as they get hired."

"I usually do," Lenny confessed. "I've got dossiers on everybody who's even applied for the <u>Times-Picayune</u> job. But the <u>Cornet</u> sort of slipped under my radar. They didn't hire a new food writer when their last one left, and until last month, they hadn't printed any restaurant reviews in a year or so."

"This is just weird," Rickey said darkly.

"I know. That's why I think we ought to look at it a little closer."

"Maybe so. But Lenny ... the guy panned \underline{my} restaurant. I know he said some ugly shit about you, but it's \underline{my} menu that takes the hit. Don't you think \underline{I} ought to decide how we're gonna react?"

In moments of stress, Rickey sometimes forgot that G-man was supposed to be his co-chef. G-man didn't especially care about the title; he was grateful not to endure as much of the media hype and sniping as Rickey did. People who knew them well said that the restaurant wouldn't have opened without Rickey and wouldn't have lasted without G-man.

Lenny was silent for a minute, and G-man wondered whether he was going to blow up again. Lenny was pretty even-tempered most of the time, but the <u>Cornet</u> writeup seemed to have shaken him as badly as it had Rickey. Finally Lenny said, "Yeah, you're right. I'll leave it alone, for now anyway. Take some time to think it over."

G-man wasn't sure he believed that - Lenny thought nothing of saying one thing and doing another as long as he believed his actions were in the service of the greater good - but there was nothing he could do about it right now. At least they were talking rather than yelling.

"Keep one thing in mind, though," said Lenny. "You can talk about your menu all you like, but he hardly said anything about your menu. He made you and G-man sound like a couple of prettyboy pawns. It's not inconceivable that somebody could use you guys to spike me."

"I know it," said Rickey. "I'm just not gonna assume it's all about you when my name is on it too."

"Fair enough. Look, I need to get back for dinner service.

I'll call you tomorrow, OK? Turn on your cell phone."

"I can't. I - "

"It broke," G-man said hastily. "It just started making this weird noise, then died."

"What'd you tell him that for?" said Rickey when Lenny had gone.

"Because he already thinks you're a hysterical asshole. He doesn't need to know you're completely psychotic."

Rickey swallowed some Excedrin PM and went to lie down.

G-man stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes. He didn't want a fancy house in Lakeview, but he supposed there was some truth in what Lenny had said; for one thing, it was ridiculous that they'd never installed an automatic dishwasher. Why bother? he thought. We're never home enough to need much more than clean coffee mugs and a plate here and there. He supposed it would be

fun to have a huge, gorgeous home kitchen like Lenny's, but how often would they ever get to use it?

When they were both eighteen, their parents had tried to separate them by sending Rickey to culinary school in New York. The four-month stretch Rickey had spent there was the most desolate time of G-man's life. He truly believed he would have been dead in a gutter somewhere by now if Rickey hadn't come home, expelled for beating up the queer-baiting roommate who'd dogged him once too often. The roommate thought he'd met a few queers, but he had never met one from New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, the hardscrabble downtown neighborhood where Rickey and Gman had grown up. They'd moved into their first apartment with a few pots and pans, a saggy-springed old double bed one of Gman's sisters had given them, and little else, and had never progressed very far beyond the homemaking level of a couple of clueless eighteen-year-olds. Since then, G-man didn't much care where he lived as long as Rickey was there too. Their little house wasn't going to be featured on the Spring Fiesta Tour of Homes any time soon, but it was clean and comfortable.

He finished the dishes and went into the darkened bedroom. Rickey lay sprawled facedown on top of the covers, his head buried in the crook of his arm. G-man was still a little irritated with Rickey, but he always got over it fast. Things were harder for Rickey, that was all. "How can you be like you

are?" Rickey had asked him on numerous occasions, not critical but honestly mystified and slightly envious. G-man didn't know. Things annoyed him sometimes - you couldn't be a restaurateur without getting annoyed on a regular basis - but they didn't gnaw at his vitals as they did Rickey's. He supposed that was a blessing; they could never have lasted so long together if they were both high-tension types.

He put his hand on the back of Rickey's neck. The muscles were as tight as violin strings, the skin hot and damp. Rickey sighed into the pillow. G-man sighed too, feeling sunburned, wrung out, and a little horny. He began trying to massage the tension out of Rickey, starting at the top and working his way down. It wasn't always possible, but tonight he thought it was worth a try.

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