

Chapter One of LIQUOR

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It was the kind of October day for which residents of New Orleans endure the summers, sparkling blue-gold with just a touch of crispness, and two old friends were sitting on a low branch of an oak tree in Audubon Park drinking liquor. They had started out with tequila shots upon waking up, but harboring a residual grudge against the drink, they soon switched to vodka and orange juice, which they carried to the park in a large thermos.

John Rickey and Gary "G-man" Stubbs had been born and raised in the city's Lower Ninth Ward, but they'd lived Uptown since they were eighteen: "From the 'hood to the ghetto," Rickey had described the move at the time. Their current neighborhood hardly qualified as a ghetto, but the remark revealed a downtown boy's discomfort at living Uptown. In the Ninth Ward, "Uptown" signified rich and snooty.

They were twenty-seven now, but only Rickey had begun to develop the comfortable little paunch common to natives past their mid-twenties. The few extra pounds did not diminish his sharp-featured good looks, but he wouldn't have cared much if they had; physical vanity was not among Rickey's numerous sources of anxiety. Six months ago he had bleached his light

brown hair platinum. Now it was half split ends and half dark roots, and though it looked very bad, he hadn't yet gotten around to having the bleachy ends cut off. Since he had neglected to brush it this morning, it formed a two-toned nimbus around his head. Rickey was a young man with a great deal of nervous energy; even when he was half-drunk and trying to relax, he had a hard time sitting still.

G-man had no trouble sitting still. He was a little taller than Rickey, and quite skinny for a New Orleanian. Though he wore his chestnut-colored hair very short, a slight curl still made it unruly most of the time. His mother had been a Bonano, one of the city's vast population of Sicilian-Americans, but this heritage was reflected only in the darkness of his large, myopic eyes. Otherwise he looked like his Irish-blooded father, rangy and fair-skinned, with a long blunt nose and a rather sensitive mouth.

Like many young men in New Orleans, Rickey and G-man made a precarious living in restaurant kitchens. They'd begun in their teens as dishwashers and worked their way up to line cook positions. Now cooking comprised most of their lives; asked to define themselves in a word, they would not have given their family names or (as would many New Orleanians) the name of their high school; they would simply have said, "We're cooks." A few

days ago they had been dismissed from their latest kitchen in what they considered a travesty of justice.

Jesse Honeycombe, a country-pop crooner from Florida, had one big radio hit called "Tequilatown" and opened a restaurant on the strength of it. Tequilatown was a French Quarter tourist trap that served indifferently barbecued ribs, elaborate sandwich platters, and margaritas in plastic buckets. Jesse Honeycombe wasn't exactly responsible for the firing, but that didn't matter to Rickey and G-man, who had been cursing Honeycombe's name ever since the incident went down.

Honeycombe had played a show at the Lakefront Arena that night, and fans packed the restaurant afterward in hopes that he would show up. The kitchen was slammed. Rickey was working the hot appetizer station, making loaded nacho platters and spicy chicken quesadillas. G-man, for some reason, was on salads, the most hated position in the kitchen. Everyone from the kitchen runners to the head chef was in the weeds for three solid hours. They fell into a rhythm where they weren't really thinking about the food or how many tickets were lined up; they were just moving their hands and hustling their asses and slamming out orders as fast as they possibly could. When the hellacious rush finally slowed to a trickle, Chef Jerod passed around cold bottles of Abita beer. Drinking was forbidden on the clock at Tequilatown, a restaurant with liquor in its very name, but the

crew had rolled so hard tonight that the chef decided to make an exception to the rule. Of course, the manager chose that moment to drop in and see how things were going.

Chef Jerod managed to hang onto his job by the tips of his knife-scarred fingernails, but the manager made him fire almost everyone else, including Rickey and G-man. This would create no crisis; there were half-assed kitchen workers looking for jobs all over town. The hospitality industry provided New Orleans with its major source of revenue, and the city responded by providing an inexhaustible source of fodder for the industry: poor but able-bodied young men who came into the kitchens with very little training and could be easily replaced when they got fired, quit, or died. Most of these young men were black, but there was a sizeable minority of white boys. Some, like Rickey and G-man, stayed in the business and became skilled cooks. A place like Tequilatown, though, didn't really need skilled cooks; it made sense to replace them with hapless kids who would work for considerably less money.

Chef Jerod had apologized to everyone as he handed out the severance pay envelopes. Though he was a hardass, he was almost weeping with humiliation. "I swear I'd quit this place myself if they weren't paying me so fucking much," he said. No one really held it against him. They knew that the manager, Brian

Danton, was the real asshole. That was almost always how it was, and there was nothing you could do about managers.

So now Rickey and G-man sat in the park passing the thermos, watching the joggers and golfers, occasionally expressing mild amazement at the fact that people would expend that kind of energy when they didn't have to. This was not simple laziness - though they could be lazy with a will - but more a reflection on the sheer physical work of being a halfway-decent cook. Cooks on the line in a busy restaurant spend all their time in motion, preparing the mise-en-place of ingredients they will use throughout their shift, lining up sauté pans on burners and flattops, keeping track of their tickets, burning their hands, reducing their feet to hunks of abused and stinking flesh that feel like nothing more than a couple of raw stumps by the end of a shift. Cooks don't go jogging on their day off.

Rickey and G-man had been friends since their grammar school days. The Lower Ninth Ward was a cross between a country village and a Third World slum, far below the Garden District and the French Quarter and the other parts of the city known to tourists. Most of the houses were old, small, and in disrepair; the streets were prone to sudden flooding; the air smelled of frying sausage and the nearby Industrial Canal. Rickey and G-man had Ninth Ward street smarts and the hoarse, full-throated downtown accent: "Ax ya momma can we have some'a dem cookies

she bought?" They had always been vaguely aware of each other, as the few white kids in the public schools were. The first time they really took notice of each other was in fourth grade, during Job Week, when the class was assigned to pair up and put on a skit about one of their parents' occupations. Even at age nine, Rickey and G-man (then still known as Gary) recognized the thoughtless cruelty inherent in this assignment. Many of their classmates had mothers who worked at McDonald's or as hotel maids, and no fathers to speak of. It wasn't that all black people in New Orleans lived this way, but that the black people who could afford it - just like the white people who could afford it - sent their kids to the superior Catholic schools.

Rickey's father was a chiropractor who lived in California, paid minimal child support, and hadn't seen his son in three years. As a result, Rickey had a distorted idea of what chiropractors (and fathers) did. He and Gary stole a box of red hair dye from the K&B drugstore and borrowed a bunch of Play-Doh from one of Gary's young cousins. Two dowels provided the framework for a surprisingly realistic false arm with a plastic bag of dye tucked into the shoulder end. Gary folded his right arm inside his shirt and wore the false arm in a sling.

"A chiropractor is a doctor who performs adjustments on the spine," Rickey told the class before bending Gary backwards and "adjusting" him, ripping off the false arm and spraying red hair

dye all over the classroom. Gary howled in "pain" and collapsed dramatically on the threadbare school carpet, his legs flailing a bit before hitting the floor with a terrible, final-sounding *thunk*.

That was the first time they were sent to the principal's office together. They had to apologize to their teacher and explain to their classmates that doctor visits were unlikely to result in surprise dismemberments. Gary's mother, who had never known her youngest child to do such a thing before, made him go to confession and tell the priest all about it. (He thought he heard the priest stifle a laugh, but he never told his mother.) Rickey's mother, who had been something of a bon vivant in her youth, found the episode hilarious. She called up the Stubbs family to chide them for overreacting, and the two families ended up friends. To Rickey, an only child, the crowded Stubbs household was pleasantly chaotic; some of Gary's five older sisters and brothers had grown up and moved out by then, but they had kids of their own and there were always children around.

After the false-arm incident, Rickey and Gary got beaten up a lot less, because their classmates now thought they were funny, crazy, or both. More importantly, they recognized something in each other that had kept them together from then

until now, fired and broke, sitting in an oak tree drinking liquor.

Rickey pushed his hair out of his eyes. "It's too damn bright out here," he said. "Can I borrow your extra shades?"

"They're prescription."

G-man had already been wearing glasses in the fourth grade; from his ferocious squint when he removed them, Rickey always figured he'd been one of those little kids who'd needed them since he was three or something. Now he wore dark lenses almost all the time, even in the kitchen when chefs would let him get away with it. "I don't care," said Rickey. "Just give 'em here."

G-man stretched out his long legs, reached into his pants pocket, and pulled out a slightly squashed pair of gold-rimmed, pimp-daddy-style dark glasses. He passed them to Rickey, who put them on, surveyed the park through what appeared to be several inches of murky water, and said, "Goddamn, your eyes are fucked up."

G-man had heard this before and let it pass without comment.

"This orange juice is warm," Rickey complained. "I wish I had a daiquiri."

"You want to walk over to the zoo? I think they got daiquiris in the Beer Garden."

"No, dude, it's like seven dollars to get in the zoo. You know where I wish I was, G? I wish I was in *Tequilatown*."

"Scratchin my balls and watchin the sun go down," G-man sang, riffing on Jesse Honeycombe's big hit.

"Pickin sea salt outta my ass crack ... "

They went on in this vein for several minutes, an extension of the dialogue they'd been having since the incident. Though they were trying to console themselves, the thing always ended up making them mad all over again. This time, Rickey went off first. "Fuck that place!" An old lady walking a Chihuahua near their tree gave him a sharp look, but he took no notice. "Fuck Jesse Honeycombe, fuck Brian Danton, and fuck Jerod Biggs too. Fuck 'em all."

"Rickey ... "

"What? We're the victims of injustice. It sucks."

"This doesn't suck," G-man pointed out. "It's a beautiful day, and right now the poor bastards they hired are prepping dinner and getting ready to take it in the ass all night, and we're sitting here drinking. Tell me how that sucks."

"I'll tell you next week, when our rent's due."

"You're a real cheerer-upper, you know that?"

"Well, damn, G. We got about two hundred dollars in the bank. Favreau's not gonna give us another extension." Favreau was the landlord who rented them a shotgun cottage on the river

end of Marengo Street. They were fortunate that he was a patient man; nonetheless, the mention of his name depressed them further.

The October shine had gone off the day. They rocked glumly back and forth on the tree limb. Rickey drained the last of the vodka and orange juice. "Tequilatown's a shithole. But did you ever notice how much money it's making?"

"About a hundred grand a week, I'd say."

"And the food is garbage. All Honeycombe has is a name. You know, G, we could run a better restaurant than Tequilatown."

"Uh huh."

"We could," said Rickey. "We're *good* cooks." He knew this was so. Right after they graduated from high school - almost ten years ago now - Rickey had even spent several months in Hyde Park, New York at the fabled CIA, the Culinary Institute of America, hardcore training ground for chefs all over the country. He did well there until a run-in with another student resulted in his return to New Orleans, which was not an entirely unhappy thing: living up north was expensive and cold, and he was lost without G-man.

"Course we're good cooks," said G-man. "But it takes more than that. Like money."

"We might could raise some money if we had a good idea."

"Lots of people get ideas. Remember Lamar King's Bordello?" This had been a failed concept by another washed-up rock star, his claim to fame being that he had once shared a stage with Bob Dylan. He and his backers had bought a huge, decrepit building in the French Quarter, spent millions of dollars bringing it up to code and decorating it to look like a whorehouse, or what they imagined such a place to look like: lots of red velvet swags, stained glass, a grand piano. The menu had boasted items like "Pretty Baby Prime Rib" and "Aphrodisiac Oysters." The place closed its doors within a month. Rickey and G-man had passed several afternoons in various bars debating why a rock star would want to open a restaurant anyway. Rickey posited that chefs were actually cooler than rock stars, and Lamar King knew it. G-man thought King might have been around the amps too long.

Rickey was lost in thought. He held the empty thermos in his hand, staring into its shiny depths. A faint distorted reflection of his own eye winked up at him, blue and bloodshot. *Lots of people get ideas*, G-man had said, but how many of those ideas were good ones? More to the point, how many of those ideas were suitable for New Orleans? Plenty of would-be restaurateurs came from out of town, opened a place, watched it fail, and left cursing the city's moribund economy, punishing summers, fossilized tastes, or all of the above. Rickey was

used to all that. Surely he could come up with an idea for a restaurant that would be uniquely suited to his lifelong home. He tilted the thermos and watched one last drop spill out, and that was when it came to him.

"You know what the Bordello's main problem was?" he asked G-man.

"It sucked."

"Yeah, but what sucked most about it? *It didn't deliver what it promised.* It wasn't a bordello, and nobody ever thought for one minute that it was gonna be a bordello. And that, my friend, was its downfall. We could open a successful restaurant if we *promised* a sin we could *deliver on.*"

"Like what?"

Rickey held up the thermos and waggled it in front of his face. He had the distinctly ridiculous expression of a drunk trying to be very serious, but there was also a spark in his eye that caught G-man's attention. It was the same spark he'd first seen in Rickey's eye back in the fourth grade, when Rickey described the idea for the bleeding false arm.

"*Liquor,*" Rickey said.

"Liquor? Dude, I know you're upset about getting fired, but c'mon. Every place in the city serves liquor."

"But no place has a menu *entirely based on it.*"

"You're really losing me."

"New Orleans loves booze. We love drinking it, we love the *idea* of drinking it, we love being *encouraged* to drink it. You think all those drive-thru daiquiri stands in Metairie are just serving tourists? Tourists don't go to the suburbs. Locals are drinking most of those daiquiris, and they could get 'em anywhere, but they love getting 'em at the drive-thrus because it makes them feel like they're doing something *naughty*. We could open a place that does the same thing on a *much bigger scale*."

"A whole menu based on liquor."

"Picture it, G. A nice dining room - looks like, say, a cross between Commander's Palace and Gertie Greer's Steakhouse. Big bar in the front, mirrors, three hundred bottles -- every kind of liquor and liqueur, every brand you could name. But that's just the beginning. The real draw is that we use liquor in all the food. Oysters poached in whiskey. Tequila barbecue sauce. Bourbon-glazed duck. Even goddamn bananas Foster. And that's just the obvious shit. There's not a recipe in the world that we couldn't find a way to stick a little liquor in it."

"You think that'd even be legal?"

"It's New Orleans. If you got enough money, anything's legal."

Rickey gave G-man his biggest smile. All his life, people had remarked on Rickey's smile - its warmth, the way it lit up

his intense blue eyes, its power to beguile a person who had no intention of being beguiled. "Gawgeous!" G-man's own mother had pronounced it once, when she'd been trying to punish them for some infraction and Rickey had turned its full force upon her.

Though G-man knew its charms well, he had long believed himself impervious to its manipulations. Now, for the first time in as many years as he could remember, he wondered.

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Mostly sober and far less cocksure now, Rickey couldn't sleep. He'd swallowed some Excedrin PM, an old habit from his CIA days, but he couldn't stop thinking about his idea. He still thought it was a brilliant concept for a New Orleans restaurant. He just didn't see how he could pull it off. He was great at starting things, but not always so good at finishing them.

Rickey's parents hadn't sent him to cooking school out of any belief that he was destined to be a great chef. Mainly they had wanted to get him out of New Orleans and - more to the point - away from G-man. Rickey's mother had concocted the plan with G-man's parents, then convinced her ex-husband to pay for it. Apparently it was OK for a couple of boys to spend all their time together at age nine, but not OK at seventeen. Rickey

still cringed at the memory of how easily he'd been manipulated, and their actual time apart had been so terrible that neither liked to recall it.

Even so, he sometimes wished he had been able to finish the two-year curriculum instead of getting kicked out after four and a half months. He could have learned a lot about cooking. As it was, he and G-man moved into a crappy little apartment on Prytania Street. Though the apartment was a dump, Uptown seemed luxurious, with its giant oaks and its proximity to the St. Charles streetcar line. G-man already had a decent job at a seafood place downtown. Rickey got hired as a PM salad guy at Reilly's, a restaurant in one of the formerly grand old hotels that still haunted Canal Street like maiden aunts not quite far enough gone to send to the old folks' home. A few months later, G-man quit the seafood place and came to Reilly's too. Soon they were both working on the hot line. Despite the name, Reilly's claimed to serve classic French cuisine, which apparently meant small dry cuts of meat or fish mired in stiffening yellow sauce. It was seldom pretty, and sometimes it was actively disgusting, but it was where they learned the skill of volume: making and putting out vast amounts of food.

They'd been at Reilly's for a couple of years when a cook from the old seafood joint, now a sous chef at the Peychaud

Grill, offered G-man a dollar more an hour to be his saute guy. The Peychaud was smaller than Reilly's and more hardcore. Once G-man had nailed down his position, he lobbied for Rickey when another line job opened up. That was their first experience being part of a crew that was tight in every sense of the word: smooth in the kitchen, close-knit, and more alcohol-drenched than any group of people Rickey had known before or since. New Orleans kids learned to drink young; Rickey and G-man had been able to hold their liquor since their early teens. The Peychaud crew, though, put them to shame at first. They came in at three, prepped up for dinner service, cooked their asses off for four hours, broke down the kitchen, and dragged themselves to the bar, where Dionysian challenges were made and met. There was a pot-smoking area behind the ice machine, a long series of razor scratches on the bar where somebody had scraped up lines of cocaine, entire cases of nitrous oxide chargers that never got turned into whipped cream. Once there was a bottle of ether in the reach-in. It was kind of a dangerous place, but it was also fun. Rickey and G-man partook of everything available. They were intoxicated not just with liquor and drugs but with their status as part of a culinary pirate crew, slashing and burning and taking no prisoners.

They stayed at the Peychaud Grill for nearly five years, but never rose higher than sauté because there was no turnover

among the kitchen staff. The Peychaud was a prestigious place to work, and once you had a job there, you hung onto it. Still, those were pretty good years all in all: they were making enough money to move from the crappy apartment to a little shotgun house on a shade-dappled block of Marengo Street, and they were cooking some great food. Chef Paco Valdeon was a prodigious cokehead who'd learned to cook in France. Though he was usually incoherent by two in the morning, he could answer any food question and discourse on any food subject as long as he remained conscious. Some people considered him a thug, but he was a culinary genius.

Toward the end of this time, though, G-man calculated that they had worked an average of ten hours a day, six days a week, 312 days a year. And they'd spent most of the rest of the time partying. They had no time to see their families who lived just a few miles away, much less to think about hazy concepts like "vacation" or "health insurance." Not yet twenty-five, they felt like broken old men. But they couldn't quit. They'd come up at the Peychaud and imprinted unhealthily on it; it was their gang, their abusive surrogate parent, their hell away from home.

Rickey sometimes wondered what would have become of them if the Peychaud crew hadn't imploded one night in a marathon of apocalyptic drunkenness. No one remembered much of this night, but by the end of it, two cars were totaled, the sous chef and

the bartender were in Charity Hospital, the chef was in jail, and the grill guy's wife was filing for divorce. The owner decided to close the place and they found themselves jobless. Rickey guessed this kind of thing was known as a "wake-up call."

They had spent the past couple of years jumping from restaurant to restaurant, taking whatever job paid best, working together when they could but never getting all that tight with any kitchen crew. Sometimes they had a few drinks after service; mostly they just went home. Life wasn't bad. In a lot of ways it was better than the constant soul-grinding revelry of the Peychaud Grill. But Rickey had put off being disappointed with himself after he left school because he was so glad to be back home with G-man, living the life they had wanted to live since they were sixteen. Then the Peychaud years kept him from thinking too hard about anything. Now that he wasn't drunk all the time and he and G-man were as comfortable as an old married couple, he sometimes felt that he had given up too easily. Given up what, he wasn't sure. He'd never really burned with ambition to be a head chef; most of them worked harder than anybody else and didn't make all that much more money.

And yet ... once upon a time he had been truly curious about cooking. He'd wanted to know everything about it, to be the best cook possible. That was why his folks had been able to bribe him with the CIA. Even now he hadn't completely lost that

curiosity: he read *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*, watched the Food Network, had a big cookbook collection. And he took pride in being a roller. He knew faster cooks and better cooks, but few who were faster *and* better.

Still something gnawed at him. Something always had, really; it was not in his nature to be content. Usually G-man was content enough for the both of them. But right now their situation was bad, and their bitch session in the park had excited the gnawing thing. Liquor: his thoughts seized on that idea and would not leave it alone. A restaurant based on liquor, but not too gimmicky. A really good menu, so people would keep coming back after the novelty wore off. Rickey had spent nearly half his life observing the New Orleans restaurant scene, and he felt certain that the place would be a hit.

But what difference did it make? You needed money to start a restaurant. If you didn't have money, you needed collateral. If you didn't have collateral, you needed rich friends who could invest. And if you didn't have any of that, you at least needed a credit card. Rickey and G-man had exactly none of the above.

He lay in bed thinking about this until the sky began to brighten, but none of it mattered in the least, because he was broke and he had to start looking for a new job tomorrow. They both did. Probably they wouldn't be able to work together for a while. Rickey smoothed his pillow, closed his eyes, and tried

to resign himself to a spell of crappiness. As he did so, G-man rolled over in his sleep and threw an arm across Rickey's chest, and Rickey fell asleep thinking that maybe things weren't *that* bad.

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