

**D\*U\*C\*K**



# **D\*U\*C\*K**

**A tale of men, birds, and one's purpose in life**

**Poppy Z. Brite**

Subterranean Press ★ 2006

**D\*U\*C\*K** © 2006 by Poppy Z. Brite. All rights reserved.

Dust jacket art © 2006 by Greg Peters. All rights reserved.

First Edition

ISBN

1-59606-076-X

Subterranean Press

PO Box 190106

Burton, MI 48519

[www.subterraneanpress.com](http://www.subterraneanpress.com)





*This story is dedicated to the memory  
of Buddy Diliberto,  
alive in New Orleans hearts forever;  
and to Bobby Hebert,  
the only act who could follow him.*



# WHERE THE STORM NEVER HAPPENED (FOR NOW)

*A few words about D\*U\*C\*K*

**A** new body of literature has begun to emerge from New Orleans, South Louisiana, and the Gulf Coast. It's known as "Katriniana," and I've collected almost every piece of it published so far. This book, however, is not part of it.

After the storm and catastrophic flooding of 2005, I initially thought I would never want to write about these events. I wanted to keep writing about the New Orleans I had loved, a city that had never been destroyed. I wanted my Liquorverse to continue as I had known it, even if nothing else in my life could. I soon came to see that this would be not only irresponsible and callous, but impossible. For those of us who lived and continue to live in New Orleans, these events are all we've thought about for months. They will continue to haunt us and change our lives forever. Of course I would have to write about them.

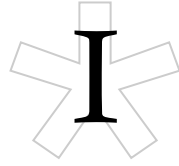
But not just yet.

*D\*U\*C\*K* is the first piece of original fiction I've completed since the storm. I think of it as slightly-alternate-universe fiction, a kind of fairy tale set in the same world of chefs and restaurants I've been writing about for several years now, but in which the storm didn't come to New Orleans. Maybe it took a different path (there's a slight hint of this in the story), maybe it never entered the Gulf in the first place. I plan to deal with

it in the next Liquor novel, *Dead Shrimp Blues*, and probably another one after that. Just for now, though, I wanted to write a story where the one-eyed bitch wasn't a factor. Doing so was a balm for my soul and helped me get closer to the time when I will have to read all that Katriniana I've collected and write some of my own.

I've taken a couple of minor fictional liberties with the lovely little town of Opelousas, but Ducks Unlimited ([www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)) is a real organization, an excellent one that promotes the conservation of coastal wetlands and other waterbird habitat. Protection of these wetlands probably could have prevented much of the devastation from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and, if carried out in a more responsible fashion than in the past, could help prevent future tragedy. Dave Hammond, the badly behaved waiter at the beginning of this tale, is named for a reader who won an eBay auction to have a character named after him. 100% of the proceeds from the auction went to Ducks Unlimited. Thanks to Dave, and also to Henry Barber, The Boudin Link ([www.boudinlink.com](http://www.boudinlink.com)), Gene Broussard, Cathy Campanella, Chris DeBarr, Joel L. Fletcher, Kris LaMorte, Kevin Maroney, the Palace Café of Opelousas, Greg Peters, Bill Schafer, and Carl Walker. For information on the New Orleans Lakefront Airport, I am indebted to Mark Grady for his May 5, 2005 article in *The Southern Aviator*.

—Poppy Z. Brite,  
New Orleans, May 2006



## RICKEY TAKES OUT THE TRASH

**E**verything you've heard about summer in New Orleans is true. The only tourists who visit during that infernal season are hardy Germans and Australians, who can weather anything, and people from Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, who are used to it and don't have far to drive. The deepest pits of Hades have nothing on your average August day in the Crescent City. (You can say Crescent City if you like, because the Mississippi River cups the city in a crescent shape. Say "the Big Easy," or, worse, "N'Awlins," and people will know you're a tourist.)

Because of the sun pounding down out of the coppery sky—because of the stickiness that turns the air into a dishcloth from which you feel certain you could wring dirty water if only you could catch hold of it—because of that stink that rises off sidewalks and asphalt parking lots, choking the unwary with ghosts of shrimp shells, dogshit, burning tires and armpits—because the temperature seldom drops below the high eighties even at midnight, the people of the city try to keep their physical exertions to a minimum. In the heat of the day, there might be one old white man in a seersucker suit

moving snail-slow along a sidewalk, or a group of black teenagers gesturing languidly at each other on the corner. Certainly there will be an ancient woman carrying a shopping bag and an umbrella; there's no chance of rain, but she's using the thing for a sunshade. These folks, you expect to see. The middle-aged man in the Broad Street neutral ground, standing motionless with a sign in each hand, occasionally putting one of them down to take out a handkerchief and blot the sweat from his smooth ebony dome—he is an unusual sight. His signs are handmade, but neatly printed. One reads **THOU SHALT NOT KILL**. The other says **ENOUGH IS ENOUGH**. You don't see him every day, but if you're from New Orleans or know the city well, you understand immediately what he's talking about.

There will be these people, and somewhere nearby there will be a chef hard at work. Kitchen workers don't have the option of keeping their labors to a minimum. Through sweat-soaked Julys and Augusts they preside over stovetop flames and the hot breath of ovens, swampy dish sinks and desert heat-mirages rising off grills.

On this particular August day, a hard-headed chef named John Rickey was taking out a bag of wet trash, muttering and cursing over it with no idea that a few minutes from now he would be wishing his head were a little harder. He was muttering and cursing not because he thought a chef-owner was too good to take out the trash—he knew better than that—but because he had told one of the low cooks on his kitchen totem pole to do it an hour ago, and the cook hadn't done it. Devonte was a hell of a lot more seasoned than he had been when Rickey hired him, but occasionally he just sort of...spaced. It might mean he was thinking about the tricked-out car he hoped to buy, or the pussy he hoped to score at his favorite hip-hop club, or nothing at all. This time of year, it might also mean he was looking forward to

the beginning of the basketball season, in which case Rickey's partner and co-chef, G-man, would probably be looking forward to it right along with him. But G-man wouldn't space; G-man was the solidest cook in the kitchen.

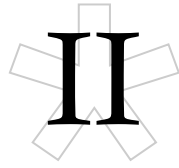
The whole crew was solid, even Devonte and the new kid, Jacolvy, most of the time. Still, Rickey missed Devonte's predecessor, Shake, with whom he and G-man had been working for years. Shake had snagged a sweet sous chef position at La Pharmacie, a hot new restaurant on Magazine Street. The chef over there had basically poached him from Rickey's restaurant, Liquor, but Rickey didn't hold it against Shake: there wasn't much room for advancement at Liquor and Shake had given them a good three years. He wished he had Shake back just for tonight, though; there were three major conventions in town, Liquor had two-fifty on the books, and they were going to get hammered.

Half-absorbed in these thoughts, still muttering about the trash, Rickey heaved the bag up and over the edge of the Dumpster. The ripe sour-milk smell of garbage wafted toward him, but he barely noticed it; just as the zookeeper ceases to smell elephant shit, this was one of the normal odors of his life. He was turning to go back into the restaurant when his world exploded with a tremendous crack that seemed to come from inside his skull. He felt his knees connect with the concrete apron around the Dumpsters. His field of vision went red, then turned to a field of glittering silver and blue stars that seemed to drip through the air before his eyes like fireworks... except that his eyes were closed, weren't they? While he was thinking about this, the pain arrived, a huge pair of pincers that grabbed him by the temples and squeezed. Faintly he could hear somebody yelling: "How you like it now, you fuckin' faggot? You shitfuck! How you like it now, asshole?" Rickey tried to lift his hand to the back of his head where the

## Poppy Z. Brite

---

pain seemed most concentrated—if his fingers encountered wetness and a hole, he would know he'd been shot—but before he could get his arm up, another explosion came. This one bounced his forehead off the concrete, and he passed out.



## THE LURKER BY THE DUMPSTERS

**R**ickey's croutons were burning. G-man could smell them from all the way across the kitchen, where he was prepping fresh porcini mushrooms to go with tonight's duck special. "Rickey!" he hollered. "You got shit on fire in here!"

No answer. G-man sighed, crossed the kitchen, and pulled the sheet pan of croutons out of the oven. They were a few shades darker than they probably should have been, but with everything else that needed to be done today, he wasn't going to throw them out. Where was Rickey, though? It wasn't like him to walk off and leave his prep work to die.

"Rickey!" he yelled again.

"I think he took out the trash," said Devonte, coming in from the hall that led to the walk-in cooler, employee restroom, and office.

"Coulda sworn I heard him tell *you* to take out the trash a while ago."

Devonte looked away. "I got to doin somethin else and forgot. Sorry."

"Yeah, well, I just want to know where Rickey is."

G-man laid his knife on the cutting board and headed for the back door, limping a little on the foot that had been bothering him for a couple of months now. It was no big deal, just a bone that felt like it was going to pop out of place every now and then. If he sat down for a minute and flexed his toes the right way, it usually faded to a dull ache. He had just turned thirty-two, Rickey would catch up with him in September, and they had been working in kitchens since they were fifteen: plenty of time to build up a generous assortment of aches, pains, scars, and calluses.

He whacked the pressure bar and stuck his head out the back door, expecting to see Rickey talking to some purveyor who'd just pulled up with an order: that seemed the likeliest thing to delay him. Instead, G-man couldn't immediately process what he was seeing. Because his eyes were weak and light-sensitive, he always wore dark glasses in the kitchen, and for the first couple of seconds after he opened the door, the relentless sunlight blinded him: he just saw dark shapes and bright patches. Then the picture resolved into something horrible. Rickey was lying prone on the ground between the Dumpsters and the restaurant, his face against the hot asphalt. A big guy was standing over him kicking him in the ribs. Lying on the ground beside Rickey's head was a two-by-four with a smear of blood on it.

G-man turned in the half-open doorway as if he was planning to go back into the restaurant. "TERRANCE!" he shouted as loud as he could. "HELP ME!" Then he darted back around the door and into the parking lot. The guy had already taken off running, but G-man caught him easily, rabbit-punched him in the back of the neck, then spun him around and kneed him in the balls. The guy staggered for a second, then fell to the asphalt groaning.

G-man ran back to Rickey. Terrance, their 280-pound grill guy, was already there. "Grab that asshole!" G-man panted.

“Don’t let him get away!” He dropped to one knee beside Rickey, who was already trying to push himself up onto his forearms. A thin trickle of blood ran from one nostril and his eyes were like twin zeroes in a slot-machine window. “Fucker got the drop on me,” he mumbled. “Burned my fucking croutons.”

“Yeah, you did. Don’t worry about it. Here, lay your head on my leg.”

Rickey did, and blood began to soak into the houndstooth fabric of G-man’s chef pants. Meanwhile, Terrance had lifted Mr. Two-By-Four as easily as he would a fifty-pound sack of oysters and dragged him back over to the Dumpsters. “You know this asshole?” he said, cuffing the guy on the side of the head to make him turn his face toward G-man.

G-man found it hard to look away from Rickey, but he made himself squint up at the guy’s face. Yes, he realized; he *did* know this asshole. Had, in fact, handed him his last paycheck not two weeks ago, after Rickey had fired him.

Rickey wasn’t too tyrannical as far as bosses went, but he had a few strict rules, most of which were directed at waiters and other front-of-the-house staff. It wasn’t that he failed to discipline his kitchen crew, but that he tended to hire kitchen people he already knew he could trust. The front of the house was trickier. Neither Rickey nor G-man had much experience handling it; as lifelong kitchen guys, they were naturally suspicious of waiters, whom they secretly believed to work half as hard as cooks and make twice as much money. The waiters sensed this ill-concealed animosity, and the turnover rate among Liquor’s servers was higher than Rickey and G-man would like it to be.

One of Rickey’s most holy rules had to do with chewing gum in the dining room. Some of the servers liked to do it so they wouldn’t breathe halitosis fumes on the customers, but Rickey thought it looked tacky and forbade it. He even bought

tins of Altoids and left them at the wait station, which mostly got the message across, but apparently this guy—Dave, G-man remembered, his name was Dave Hammond—didn't care for Altoids. The first time Rickey saw him chewing gum on the floor, he gave him a warning. The second time, he lurked in wait behind the kitchen door, and when Dave came through, Rickey smacked him on the back of the head so hard that the wad of gum flew out of his mouth and stuck to the opposite wall. Only Dave's pride had been hurt, but apparently the message still hadn't gotten through, because Rickey caught him folding a stick of gum into his mouth during service a couple of weeks later and gave him his walking papers.

Rickey and G-man had grown up in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the scrappier parts of a generally scrappy city, and knew how to hold their own in a street fight. G-man was a basically peaceful soul, but even after having most of his rough edges smoothed off by the comparatively genteel world of restaurant ownership, Rickey was maybe a little too inclined to use his fists. No waiter could have put him on the ground in a fair fight, G-man knew that much. Guy must have hidden behind the Dumpsters and waited for Rickey.

"Call the cops," he said to Devonte, who'd just come out the back door. Then he glanced down at Rickey, who was bleeding freely from a gash on the back of his head. "And an ambulance."

"No cops," Rickey gasped. "No ambulance." By gripping G-man's forearm, he managed to lever himself into a kneeling position. Those twin-zero eyes settled on the bloody two-by-four. He groped for it, grabbed one end, and, using it like a cane, pushed himself to his feet. G-man hovered behind him, ready to catch him if he went over backwards. Instead he advanced on Dave and half-raised the board. The waiter struggled in Terrance's massive grip.

“How many times he hit you?” said Terrance. “I’ll let you get your fair licks, but I ain’t gonna hold him while you beat his head in.”

“Let me go, you damn...”

Terrance put his face close to Dave’s. “Damn *what?*”

The waiter seemed to consider what he could get away with. “Dishwasher,” he said finally.

Terrance laughed. “Ain’t been a dishwasher for three years now. Not since that guy you just clobbered hired me to work the grill.”

Rickey took another step, hesitated, then dropped the board, spun, and stumbled. G-man caught him by the waistband of his pants and held him as he doubled over and threw up on the side of one of the Dumpsters.

Approaching sirens split the heat of the day. Terrance met G-man’s eyes and sighed. “Ain’t this some kinda fuckarow,” he said.





## RICKEY CALLS THE WRONG PLAY

**T**hese sounds, even in the haze:

The familiar engine of G-man's old Mercury, chugging steadily. Apparently he or somebody else had convinced G-man to dispense with the ambulance.

*(what ambulance?)*

The streetcar, rattling along its track; from its proximity, he could tell it was the St. Charles line, not the new one on Canal.

A hollow ringing in his head that seemed to emanate from the very spot where the board had hit him.

*(what board?!)*

G-man's voice, cutting through the fog. "Dude, we're here. C'mon, can you stand up? Just hang onto my arm. Jeez, he really got you good. I can't wait to put his ass in jail."

"G...I was just taking out the trash...I must've fell and hit my head..."

"*Somebody* hit your head, awright. C'mon, look, be careful on these stairs." G-man's strong arm encircled his waist and practically boosted him up a small flight of stairs.

"Where are we? We gotta get back to the restaurant, dude, we got two-fifty on the books."

“I know it,” G-man said grimly, but he kept hustling Rickey along, through a door and up another flight of stairs. At the top of that flight was a big, airy room where Rickey was allowed to sit down again. He grayed back out for a while.

The next thing he knew, a searchlight was probing his left eye. “He’s pretty groggy,” said the voice of God. Rickey didn’t believe in God, but he knew G-man did. Were they in church? They’d better not be, if G-man knew what was good for him. It didn’t make sense anyway; why would G-man make him go to church when his head was hurting so bad?

“Yeah,” said G-man. “What about all that blood?”

“Oh, that’s nothing. Scalp wounds bleed like a bastard.”

Would God say “bleed like a bastard,” if he were real? Rickey didn’t think so, but he wasn’t sure.

“I’ll get the nurse to clean it up and put some Dermabond on it. Nothing to worry about.”

“Who are you?” he managed.

A face resolved itself in his vision, old and bearded but not enough of either to be God. “Dr. Herbst. Your friend Lenny Duveteaux called me, asked me to squeeze you in so you wouldn’t have to go to the emergency room. I owe Lenny a couple favors.”

“Everybody owes Lenny a couple favors.”

“See,” the doctor told G-man, “he’s starting to make sense.”

The doctor had that Uptown New Orleans drawl that tried to sound Southern and didn’t quite make it. He’d never say “awright” for “all right” or “axe” for “ask”; that was for lower-class downtowners like Rickey and G-man. They’d moved up to Marengo Street years ago, well within the boundaries of Uptown, but their Brooklynese speech would forever mark them as Lower Ninth Warders.

“Any blurred vision?” The doctor held up a newspaper in front of Rickey’s face. “What’s the headline say?”

“ANOTHER NEAR MISS.” A category-5 hurricane in the Gulf had jagged northeast and gone to Florida last week.

“What’s the caption?”

“Some shit about morons buying bottled water and plywood.”

“I really think he’s OK,” the doctor told G-man. “Cracked his coconut pretty good, but as long as he rests in bed for a couple days, he’ll be fine.”

Rickey’s eyes met G-man’s. G-man was still wearing his customary shades, but Rickey could see the alarm behind them.

“Can’t rest,” Rickey said. “We got two-fifty on the books.”

“Excuse me?”

“Reservations,” G-man explained. “Two hundred fifty customers.” He took a deep breath, then said bravely, “But it doesn’t matter, Rickey. You gotta go home and rest.”

“Yeah, right, and you gotta bite my crank. I’m working tonight. If I keel over, you can drag me off the line and dump me in the walk-in to cool down. I’m not laying on my ass at home while y’all get slammed.”

He stared at Herbst, expecting an argument, but the doctor just shrugged. “It’s your head. You’ve got a concussion, but if you think you can work, you probably can. Might want to keep a bucket nearby—you’ll likely make yourself sick.”

“A concussion!” said G-man.

“It’s no big deal,” Rickey said. “Remember that Saints game in ‘89, when they played Tampa Bay? Bobby Hebert got a real bad concussion, but then the backup quarterback got hurt too and Bobby went back in. Played the rest of the game. He was a fucking iron man.”

“Did they win?”

“Well, no. And he called a couple wrong plays, plays he had in college. But he didn’t, like, die or anything.”

G-man frowned but offered no further argument. *If you can stand, you can work* was part of the cooks’ gospel.

The cops had wanted Rickey to come to the police station and make a statement about the attack, but he managed to convince them he didn't want to press charges. As far as he was concerned, the beef was between him and Dave Hammond: he'd smacked the waiter on the back of the head, the waiter had smacked him back a little harder. If he ever saw Dave again, Rickey would probably take him down, but whining to cops and judges was for sissies. Even so, dinner service had already begun by the time they got back to Liquor. G-man came around to help Rickey out of the car, and Rickey gripped G-man's shoulder, steadying himself.

"You sure you gonna be OK?"

"I better be, huh?" Rickey touched the swollen lump on the back of his head and grimaced. "I'm just embarrassed that a fucking *waiter* got the drop on me, that's all. It was a fair fight, I'd a kicked his ass into the middle of next week."

"Course you would. Like you even need to tell me that."

They entered the restaurant through the back door and walked into the kitchen. The crew was already busy with the first wave of early diners, but as soon as they saw Rickey, they all stopped whatever they were doing, put down their knives and spatulas, and broke into applause.

"Aw, now, what the fuck?" said Rickey, but he was grinning.

"Thickest skull in New Orleans!" Terrance hollered.

"You wanna get the drop on Rickey, you gotta sneak up behind him and hit him with a damn *plank!*" This from Tanker, their pastry guy.

"Plank, hell," said Devonte. "That was the whole *tree!*"

"And Rickey was still ready to kick his ass!" That was Marquis, who'd been the freshest meat in the kitchen before they hired Devonte and loved to lord it over the poor kid.

"OK, OK." Rickey held up his hands. "Yeah, I'm ready to work, but I feel kinda wobbly on my feet. Y'all gotta help me

out tonight, keep an eye on what I do, let me know if I fuck something up. OK?”

“We’re always ready to let you know if you fuck something up,” said Tanker. “Not that you ever admit it when you do.”

Rickey took his customary place at the expediting station. The expediter stood at the front of the kitchen, called out orders to the various stations as the tickets came out of the printer, and put the finishing touches on plates just before they went out to the dining room. In automotive terms, he was both the kitchen’s driver and its steering column. G-man, at the sauté station, was the carburetor; taking raw materials and turning them into finished dishes, he produced the majority of the food that came out of this kitchen. Marquis wasn’t yet seasoned enough to work sauté by himself, but he was assisting G-man tonight, a sort of booster fuel. Terrance at the grill, Tanker in his dessert nook, and Devonte at the cold-appetizer station were wheels; while their role wasn’t as close to the heart of kitchen as G-man’s, the car wouldn’t go anywhere without them. And the diners were the network of streets upon which the car traveled; they weren’t central to the design of the vehicle, but without them, it would have nowhere to go.

(The front of the house, as far as Rickey was concerned, was the old coot who drove twenty miles an hour right in front of you on a road with no passing lane. Today’s events had not improved his view of this unavoidable but highly irksome facet of restaurant life.)

The night went smoothly enough at first. Dr. Herbst had given Rickey a vitamin shot, which didn’t have much to do with his head but had pepped him up a little. As it wore off, the tickets seemed to proliferate and blur before his eyes. He could still read them, but he had to squint to keep the letters from jiggling wildly all over the little slips of paper. He had to stop and think about how to finish each plate, normally an

automatic process: did the chervil sprigs go on the redfish or the softshell crab? Was it the pork or the mackerel that got a dash of chili oil from the squeeze bottle? Several dishes needed more than one final touch, and that increased his confusion. The kitchen was very hot, very bright, very loud. He began to feel nauseous, but stepped on that in a hurry: he could get sick later. Instead he pulled another ticket from the printer and scowled at it. The words sizzled and danced, but he thought he could make them out. “G,” he called, “ordering one Indian lamb shank, two lobster with fried spinach, one stuffed quail.”

The kitchen sucked in its collective breath. The cooks were too busy to really stop what they were doing, but there was a slight, hushed pause that would have been undetectable to anyone not familiar with their rhythms.

“Dude,” G-man said at last, “those aren’t dishes we have. Those are *Peychaud Grill* dishes.”

The Peychaud Grill was where Rickey and G-man had earned their chops. They’d worked in a bunch of restaurants before that, but the Peychaud Grill and its chef, Paco Valdeon, turned them from half-assed hot-line meat into formidable cooks. The Peychaud had gone down in flames and been closed for years now, with Paco variously reported to be cooking on the beach in Mexico, running cocaine in South America, or dead. Whatever had become of him, he would always be Rickey’s first real chef, the one who had not just given him permission to be serious about food but shown him that there was no acceptable alternative.

Evidently Paco’s dishes were hardwired into some reptilian part of Rickey’s brain, accessible even when his own creations had begun to fail him. He wondered if he might actually have some kind of brain damage, but tried to brush the thought aside; there was no time to worry about that right now

and anyway he had never been MENSA material. Instead he made a monumental effort to collect himself, and then G-man was there beside him, gripping the meaty part of his arm: “Dude, what do you need? I think I better stay on sauté, you don’t have the energy for that, but I could put Devonte on desserts and let you take his station, and Tanker could expedite, or—”

“No. I’m fine. I can do it.”

“You’re *not* fine. Look, I’m not mad, I’m just worried, but you’re calling out orders from ten years ago. That’s not fine and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know it. But let me just get my shit together, G. Anything else happens, I’ll go be a pantry bitch.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“OK.” G-man’s eyes were doubtful, but Rickey knew he couldn’t afford to hang around discussing it. “I better go get my own shit together, then, before everything crashes and burns.”

Rickey wanted nothing more than to hook an arm around G-man’s neck and let G-man lead him out of the overbright, pulsing hell his own kitchen had become, but instead he just said, “Sure. Go on.”

As G-man walked back to the sauté station—limping slightly, Rickey noticed; damn, but they were a gimpy crew tonight—a young waiter named Tommy peered through the pass. “Hey, Chef?”

“Yeah?” Rickey scowled at him, expecting an earful of woe about how long his tables had been waiting for their entrées or the like.

Instead, Tommy stuck his arm through the pass. Cupped in the palm of his hand was a tiny pocket mirror, and on the mirror’s surface were a cut-down drinking straw and a short line of cocaine. “I know you’re having a rough night because

of what Dave did,” the waiter said. “I just wanted you to know that some of us are on your side.”

Rickey gave him a long look, then bent over, picked up the straw, and snorted the coke without taking the mirror from Tommy’s hand. “Thanks,” he said. “How they looking out there?”

“Oh, drunk. They’ll be all right.”

Rickey’s vision seemed to miraculously clear as he looked at the row of fresh tickets. He hadn’t had cocaine in years, wasn’t a big fan of the stuff, but right now it was hitting the spot. *Just what the doctor ordered*, Rickey thought, and laughed aloud to think of the useless Dr. Herbst prescribing it. *Take one bump and call me in the morning*. Maybe he could get through this night after all.

# IV

## GALL AND WORMWOOD

**G**-man saw Tommy at the pass with something shiny in his hand, saw Rickey bend over the waiter's outstretched arm, shiver a little, then straighten his shoulders and scan the tickets in front of him with renewed confidence. He guessed what Rickey was doing and rolled his eyes, but he couldn't get too worked up about it. After all, Paco Valdeon had been quite the coke fiend. Maybe Rickey needed to get into Paco mode to survive this shift.

"Yo, G," said Terrance from his spot behind the grill.

"Yo, T."

"What you call this veal bone sauce again?"

"Um, avocadomeno."

"AVGOLEMONO," Rickey shouted. "Jesus Christ! It doesn't have anything to do with avocados. It's a classic Greek egg-lemon sauce, except ours has Citron vodka. Morons."

*It's the coke talking,* G-man silently reminded himself. He looked forward to the time when the coke would shut up, but as long as Rickey could expedite in a way that made some kind of sense, he didn't particularly care if Rickey acted like an asshole. He hoped the drug wouldn't interact badly with the

knock on the head Rickey had taken, but as long as Rickey didn't keel over dead, things could hardly get worse than having your expediter call out dishes that weren't on the menu.

"And we serving it with ouzo, right?" said Terrance, tipping G-man a wink.

"ORZO!" Rickey bellowed, unable to see that Terrance was messing with him. "Orzo pasta. Jesus fucking *Christ!*"

It was a long slog of a night. In the end, G-man could find nothing in it to be proud of except that nobody had walked out and only two diners had sent their food back. One of those was a steak Rickey had called out mid-rare when the diner had ordered it mid-well, and people who ordered their steaks mid-well often took a perverse delight in sending them back to be further incinerated, so that wasn't too terrible. The other was worse: an entrée Rickey had simply forgotten to order, one of a six-top. The other five diners had gotten their food while the poor woman sat and stewed. The kitchen made her duck special on the fly, but by the time the waiter got it to the table, she was drunk and belligerent and simply refused to eat it. "I guess she showed *us!*" the waiter had cackled, cramming the succulent slices of duck breast into his mouth, but G-man felt bad about it: that woman would have unpleasant memories of Liquor forever, would tell anyone who'd listen about her deplorable evening there. The flawless appetizer she'd eaten would become gall and wormwood in her memory. The free drinks the waiter had plied her with would only haze her anguish a little.

The coke had long since worn off by the time they broke down the kitchen, and G-man was able to get Rickey home without much trouble. They sat slumped at their kitchen table, Rickey gingerly feeling the goose egg on the back of his skull, G-man just staring at the white ceramic tabletop because anything more stimulating would overtax his mind. "You sure you're OK?" he asked Rickey finally.

“Yeah, man, I’m fine.”

G-man made a fist. “How many fingers I’m holding up?”

Rickey laughed, reached across the table for G-man’s hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed one of the many fine white scars on the knuckles. “For real, I’m fine,” he said. “I got a head too hard for any goddamn waiter to crack.”

“I guess you do.”

The sheets on their bed sometimes got a funky smell from too many nights of coming home and falling into them without showering off the kitchen grime, but Rickey had changed them the day before and they were still crisp and clean. G-man expected to be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, but instead he lay awake for a long time, listening to Rickey’s even breathing and wondering what he would have done if the guy had seriously hurt Rickey. All at once he was engulfed in a white-hot, pounding rage almost completely foreign to him. He felt as if he’d just taken a punch to the chest, had to work to catch his breath. Jesus. Rickey talked about being pissed off all the time. Was this how he felt? G-man didn’t see how anybody could stand it.

He closed his eyes, folded his hands across his chest, and muttered under his breath, “OurFatherwhoartinheavenhal-  
lowedbethynamethykingdomcomethywillbedone—” After years of being estranged from the Church of his childhood, he had started to come back to it a little. Not the endless dogma and rigmarole, but the deep quiet place he was able find inside himself on the rare occasions when he went to Mass. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with this renewed faith, attraction, reprogramming, or whatever it was, and Rickey, who took certain of the Church’s positions as personal affronts, loathed it. Still, after all that had happened today, he couldn’t help but offer up his thanks for Rickey’s extraordinarily thick skull.

Without warning or logic, G-man found himself thinking of their first kiss. They’d been sixteen, in Rickey’s bedroom,

Rickey's mother away for the weekend. G-man had simultaneously known and not known it was going to happen; it seemed both inconceivable and inevitable. When Rickey finally did lean over and kiss him, G-man's hand had risen as if of its own accord to cup the back of Rickey's head, not wanting him to draw away. He realized as his fingers twined in it that he had never touched Rickey's hair before. It was silky but slightly tangled, as Rickey and his hairbrush had only the most passing of acquaintances. That hadn't changed in all these years.

The details, the memories, the automatic gestures and associations incomprehensible to anyone outside the hermetic twosome of the relationship—these were the things G-man could not imagine losing when something, against his will, made him contemplate losing Rickey. No one else in the world would remember that kiss, how scary it had been and yet how the world had opened wide around them, infinite with possibilities that hadn't existed the instant before. Where would all that go if one of *them* were gone?

No. Better to hope, at least, that there could be some kind of permanence, some link that survived. And that, G-man's sister Rosalie had once told him, was one of the reasons why you kept saying the prayers even when you weren't sure you believed in them.

He said another Our Father, more slowly this time, really thinking about the words. He could forgive those who trespassed against him; he'd never been able to hold much of a grudge. But those who trespassed against Rickey? That was harder, that was the test.

Suddenly he wanted to wake Rickey up, wanted Rickey wrapped around him, on top of him, inside him as intensely as he ever had. His gut clenched with an atavistic, purely sexual desire; his heart cried for Rickey, craving the physical and emotional engulfment of this man who was the center of his

life. He moved toward Rickey, stopped, made himself roll over on his back again. What was he doing? You didn't wake up a concussion victim who'd just had a night from hell because you were horny.

He reached down and cupped his balls with one hand, grabbed his dick with the other and squeezed the head so hard that he gave an involuntary little grunt of pain.

"G, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You jerking off?"

"Kinda."

"Is there some particular reason you'd lay there yanking your crank instead of just waking me up?"

"Well...I figured you needed your rest."

Rickey snorted. "I couldn't sleep anyway with all that whispering, you old Holy Joe."

"Sorry. I just couldn't quit thinking—"

Rickey stopped his mouth with a kiss, palmed his dick and stroked, squeezed, stroked, mustering the expertise and affection G-man had been unable to summon. G-man wrapped his arms around Rickey's neck, careful to keep away from the knot on the back of Rickey's head.

And just like that, life was good again. There was no pall of fear, no blinding rage. He felt effortless tears on his cheeks. Rickey wasn't bothered; he just rubbed his face against G-man's, wetting them both further. One of Rickey's unspoken erotic mottoes was *the more bodily fluids, the better*; he loved the taste and feel of come, sweat, spit, tears. He also liked to talk a lot; they both did, the meaningless call and response of love: *you like that, you want some more, yeah, oh, give me it, please give me it*. Their tastes were simple and similar and, sixteen years after that first kiss, as happily pedestrian as those of any old married couple.

Sex had almost always been able to fix things for them, whether tension between themselves or the depredations of the world at large. It was never complicated, never something they used as a tool or a bargaining chip, nor lost the knack of even on the rare occasions when something else was off-kilter between them. G-man didn't know if other couples were this lucky, but for their sake, he hoped so. The inextricable blend of friendship, passion, and soul-deep comfort with Rickey was by far the sweetest gift the world had ever given him. He couldn't imagine what life would be like without it; he suspected that without it there might well be no life.



## SHAKE MOVES UP IN THE WORLD

**S**hake Vojtaskovic was deeply and secretly ashamed of the fact that when he got promoted to head chef of La Pharmacie, his first thought was *This is really gonna put the piss in Rickey's cornflakes.*

There was no reason for such a flash of pettiness. He'd worked with Rickey for more than a decade, off and on. Rickey wasn't always easy to get along with—hell, let's face it, Rickey wasn't *usually* easy to get along with—but Shake genuinely liked the guy. He was funny, insanely talented, basically good-hearted. There was just something about him that set your nerves on edge, that put tinfoil between your teeth, that made you think about pissing in his cornflakes.

Of course there was also the fact that Rickey had originally worked under him—Shake had been sous chef at the Peychaud Grill when Rickey and G-man were raw line cooks—and he had ended up working under Rickey, but that was no big deal. Rickey had hit the jackpot three years ago with one genius idea (a menu based entirely on booze) and financial backing from celebrity chef Lenny Duveteaux. Shake was more of a journeyman cook, fast and solid but not long on

ambition. Though he'd been cooking since he was seventeen, this was the first head chef job he'd ever held, and he had only gotten it by way of a horrible accident.

Chef Götz LaVey took inordinate pride in his long, luxurious blond hair; he claimed it was a chick magnet equivalent to if not greater than a badass car, a fat bank account, or a huge dick (which he also claimed to possess, not that anybody wanted to know about that). He wore it pulled back in a ponytail when he was cooking, of course, but that hadn't helped him on the day the automatic meat slicer jammed while cutting the beef daube glacé. If anything, the 'do had made it easier for the machine to yank his face into the gleaming machinery when the thing kicked back on as he was examining it. Individual strands of hair might have ripped out of his scalp, but the ponytail reeled him in like a bull redfish. During his twenty-one years in restaurant kitchens, Shake had grated his knuckles, sliced through his nails, amputated his fingertips, worked with hangovers and the stomach flu, and smelled chicken that had been rotting in a powerless walk-in cooler for two weeks, but he was proud of the fact that he'd never puked on the job...until the day of the daube glacé. There was no shame in it, though; everybody in the kitchen had puked that day.

Chef Götz wasn't incapacitated for long, but he would need plastic surgery and skin grafts. Worse, he'd turned blade-shy; word was he couldn't even touch a paring knife. The head chef job was Shake's by default, starting that night.

La Pharmacie achieved its trendiness by unearthing ancient Creole dishes and replicating them with a twist, often an ill-advised one; Götz had been planning to serve the daube glacé with pineapple-Tabasco crème fraîche and Indian fry-bread. After he rode off in the ambulance, Shake pried the big jellied hunk of beef and aspic out of the slicer, washed off the blood, pared away the portions that had come in closest contact

with Götz's rearranged physiognomy, and sliced it by hand. It didn't come out as paper-thin as it would have in the slicer, but then again, Shake still had both cheekbones and all of his nose. He trashed the crème fraîche and Indian frybread, sent the pantry bitch out for several boxes of Melba toast, and served the daube with a garlic horseradish cream. It was the bestselling app they'd had in weeks. La Pharmacie's owners started thinking maybe Götz should have made an appointment with the meat slicer ages ago.

Today, with Götz's mishap a few weeks in the past, *Big Easy* magazine had sent a photographer over to take Shake's picture for a feature on new chefs at old restaurants. Less than a year in business, La Pharmacie didn't qualify as an "old" restaurant by any standards, let alone New Orleans ones whereby any restaurant open for under two decades was considered a young upstart. Shake guessed there hadn't been much top-end turnover at Antoine's, Arnaud's, or Broussard's lately. He didn't mind having his picture made, but the photographer had left him a few back issues of the magazine, and as Shake flipped through it while eating his staff meal, he reflected that he didn't think he had ever seen an issue of *Big Easy* without a picture of Rickey in it. If it was possible to receive blowjobs from a magazine, *Big Easy* would put G-man out of business. Rickey had been on the cover twice already, once when they'd named him Chef of the Year and once when Liquor had won a James Beard award. Not that he didn't deserve it—he'd blown away most of his competition for the local honor, and a Beard award was a huge deal in the food world—but Shake couldn't help wondering whether Rickey would have made the cover both times if he'd looked like, say, Danny DeVito. Maybe so; God knew Lenny Duveteaux was no looker, and he'd probably been on more *Big Easy* covers than any other chef in history.

The picture Shake was looking at now showed both of Liquor's co-chefs at the top of a story about The New Cocktail Culture, whatever the hell that was. Both were dressed in their whites. Rickey sat at a table holding a glass of what could have been any kind of whiskey, but Shake knew it was Wild Turkey. That and beer were about the only things Rickey ever drank. His hair was a lot shorter than it had been the last time Shake had seen him, almost buzzed. His vivid eyes, more turquoise than strictly blue, blazed out of the photograph. Rickey was not a skinny guy by anybody's standards, but there was a sharp, nervous cast to his features that the camera loved. G-man stood behind him, tall and rangy, arms folded across his chest. He had removed his shades for the photograph, but Shake thought he should have kept them on; his squint and his long, blunt nose gave him a moleish look.

"Cocktails are a way of celebrating different cultures," Rickey was quoted as saying. "Look at how the Sazerac symbolizes New Orleans, how the daiquiri makes you think of pre-Communist Cuba. It's a little bit of somebody's world, right there in your glass." Shake knew Rickey loathed Sazeracs and thought any mixed drink with more than two ingredients was "floofy." He wondered if he, too, would have to become fluent in Media Bullshit now that he was a head chef. Maybe he should call Rickey, get some pointers.

He thought he'd done all right, though. He wondered if he'd hear from Rickey when the issue featuring him came out. Shake had always believed in giving credit where credit was due, and this interview had been no exception.



## STANK-ASS MOTHERFUCKER

**G**-man could usually tell whether or not it was going to be a good mail day by the look on Karl's face when he handed over the mail. Karl was the *maître d'*, and he knew Rickey's moods as well as anyone in the front of the house. Bills were neutral, a fact of life. Personal letters were bad, as they usually indicated a customer who'd been unhappy enough with some aspect of his meal to pen an impassioned screed about it. Food and trade magazines could go either way—Rickey liked looking at them, but generally found something in them to piss him off. Today's mail looked iffy: a hand-addressed letter from something called Ducks Unlimited, probably a financial solicitation, and the new issue of *Big Easy*.

Rickey was in the office making out next week's schedule. G-man dropped the letter on his desk and started paging through the copy of *Big Easy*. This didn't look good. A feature on new chefs at old restaurants quoted Shake Vojtaskovic, late of Liquor and currently of La Pharmacie, saying, "If I've learned anything from my last few jobs, it's to avoid the gimmick. Don't go for a cute trick or an easy sell. Just make good, simple food—that's what diners really want."

G-man must have made some small sound in his throat, because Rickey looked up, saw the expression on his face, and snatched the magazine out of his hands. He read silently, his lips moving. For a moment G-man dared to think maybe there wouldn't be an explosion. Then it came: "GIMMICK? GIMMICK? I'LL GIVE HIM 'AVOID THE GIMMICK'!" Rickey grabbed the phone. G-man hoped Shake wouldn't be at the restaurant, but it was no good; Rickey knew Shake's cell number.

A torrent of invective such as G-man had seldom heard, even from his notoriously foul-mouthed partner, came pouring out as soon as Shake picked up. "Gimmick? GIMMICK? You stank-ass motherfucker! You shit-sucking bitch, I'll give you a gimmick right up your wide tan track! You got such a problem with my gimmick, how come I never heard nothing about it when you was working here, making goddamn good money too, you motherfucking bitch-ass cracker—" At his angriest, Rickey tended to revert to a Lower Ninth Ward street patois that was somewhere between black and yat.

"Rickey," G-man could hear Shake saying on the other end. "Rickey, listen."

"Yeah, listen to my ass in your face, you fucking shit-stain—"

"Rickey—"

"Give him a chance," G-man murmured.

"What," Rickey said finally. It was not a question; nor was there any hint of open-mindedness in it. Rickey was sensitive about his gimmick, always had been.

"Look," said Shake, and G-man reached across Rickey to punch the button that would put him on speakerphone; he wanted to hear this. "I know it sounds like I was talking about Liquor, but I swear to God, they took my shit out of context. I was talking about the stupid-ass gimmicks of the guy who

was chef here before me. You know he was gonna serve beef daube glacé with pineapple-Tabasco crème fraîche?”

Rickey was stunned into silence, but only for a moment. Then he glanced back down at the article and said, “Yeah, so what’s this shit about your *last few jobs*? Seems to me working here was one of your *last few jobs*.”

“Well...”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much what I thought.”

“It was just the damn liquor all the time!” Shake cried, real desperation in his voice. “I think you’re a hell of a chef, Rickey, and Liquor’s a great restaurant. But god-DAMN, don’t you ever get tired of having to find a way to stick booze in everything?”

“Booze set me free,” Rickey said, and now his voice was not ghetto-raw, but icy. “Booze gave me a way to have my own restaurant with G, and cook the food I want to cook, and you better fucking believe I’m not sick of it. What I’m sick of is cooks who make their reputations here, then get a job in some trendy shithole and take a dump on us the first chance they get.”

“Hey, I didn’t make my *reputation* at Liquor. In case you forgot, I was sous chef at the Psychaud when you were one of Paco’s little line bitches.”

“Oh, right, and the name Shake Vojtaskovic was on the lips of culinary New Orleans. I guess I did forget. You know damn well the only cook that mattered at the Psychaud was Paco himself.”

“Yeah, yeah, Paco Valdeon, a.k.a. God. I hadn’t known Paco better, I’d a thought maybe you and him had a thing going on, the way you talk about him.”

“WHAT? LISTEN, YOU CAN SUCK MY HAIRY NUTSACK, YOU FUCKING WAD OF FUCKJUICE—”

G-man plucked the receiver out of Rickey’s hand, leaving Rickey to gawp at him in utter, frozen surprise. He put the phone to his own ear and said, “You know what, Shake? That

was low even for you. But guess what? We forgive you, because you got no idea what you're getting into taking over that place, and the shit you'll be dealing with is gonna be worse than your wildest dreams."

Gently, he replaced the receiver in its cradle. For a minute he and Rickey just stared at each other. Then Rickey said, "Well, I think you handled that better than I did."

G-man laughed. After a moment, reluctantly, Rickey did too.

"Fuck him," said G-man. "It's his first head chef job, he thinks he's hot shit, that's all. He'll be Flavor of the Month for a little while and then everybody'll move on to some other trendy joint. People might laugh at our gimmick, but we got staying power."

"Yeah, cause New Orleanians like to get drunk."

"It's not just that and you know it. Here, open the rest of your mail."

"Just junk," Rickey muttered. He picked up the envelope from Ducks Unlimited and slit it open with an old paring knife. As he read, his eyes grew wide and the scowl left his face. When he had finished, he handed the letter to G-man.

Dear Chef John Rickey:

I am writing to you as a representative of Ducks Unlimited. As you may know, we are a major conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of wetlands and other waterfowl habitats. We are currently planning our annual banquet for 300 members to be held on December 14 at the Delta Grand, a historic theater in downtown Opelousas, which has a banquet space and a full cafeteria-style kitchen. We will have a number of guest speakers including our Guest of Honor, avid sportsman, bona fide Cajun, and former New Orleans Saints quarterback Bobby Hebert. We are interested in having you and your crew prepare the banquet as we

want to do something a little different this year. We plan to have every course feature wild duck shot in Louisiana, and we understand that you are an expert at planning gourmet menus based around one ingredient. If interested, please contact me with a quote for the meal.

Sincerely yours,

Aristide "Tee" Fontenot  
President, Ducks Unlimited,  
St. Landry Parish Chapter