

THE
QUARTER
BOYS

A Novel

DAVID LENNON

Chapter 1

Father Kenneth Brennan lay face down on the bed of his hotel room. He was naked, his wrists and ankles bound to the scarred wooden posts of the bed.

Now this is a vacation, he thought.

“How does that feel, baby?” a soft voice purred near his right ear.

“That feels great,” Brennan replied in his best husky, porn-star voice. “You’re so fucking hot.”

He didn’t really want to talk to the stranger. He just wanted to lose himself in the pleasure he was feeling. He felt he deserved a bit of fun. After all, he kept himself in check fifty weeks of the year back home in Minnesota. He kept his hands off the altar boys, stayed away from the few known cruising spots in the small town, and took only an occasional trip into the twin cities to experience the night life. He felt his annual two-week pilgrimages to the gay meccas of the world were a just reward for his otherwise saintly behavior.

He’d played his way through San Francisco, Key West, Provincetown, New York, West Hollywood, Amsterdam, Prague, Rio and Paris many times during his thirty years as a priest. This was his first trip to New Orleans, though, and so far his first night in the French Quarter was exceeding all of his expectations.

When the knife plunged into his upper back the first time, Brennan thought the stranger had punched him. He lifted his head and tried to cry out in protest but no sound came out.

Instead he felt his chest constrict painfully and a warm trickle ran out of the corner of his mouth. Even in the dim light he could see a dark stain begin to grow on the pale pillowcase.

He felt another punch to his back, lower this time and close to his spine. For a moment he felt nothing, then a searing pain convulsed his body. He gasped and felt a bubble of hot wetness draw inward from his lips and burst. It tasted salty and metallic. He began to claw frantically at the sheets, trying to pull himself out from under the stranger but there was no strength in his arms. His fingers only managed to bunch the white cotton into the palms of his hands.

He felt the stranger punching down into his back again, and then again.

“How does that feel, baby?” he heard the voice whisper again.

The sound seemed to be coming from inside his head. His only reply was a wet, strangled gasp.

He began to feel himself floating up from the bed. The pain was beginning to fade and he was aware only of the connection between his own body and the stranger. He felt the stranger pushing into him more rapidly now and could hear quickening breathing all around him. He was dimly aware of the stranger’s arm reaching around his neck. Suddenly everything stopped for a moment. Then he heard a loud gasp and felt the stranger’s body shuddering against him as the stranger’s arm moved quickly back across his throat.

Then it was silent. He felt no pain. He felt nothing. Where was the stranger? Had he dreamt it? He was very tired. He wanted to sleep. He felt a profound weariness sucking him downward. Then nothing.

The stranger stepped from the bed, picked up the long, red silk dress that lay on a chair by the door, and dressed silently in the dark.

Chapter 2

Joel Faulkner stepped from the bus onto the crowded sidewalk. Even being a native southerner he was struck by the force of the New Orleans' humidity. It had a tangible quality. He could feel it pressing in on him, slowing his movements as though he were underwater.

Maybe I should have moved here after the summer, he thought wryly. That would have given me a whole five months to get ready for this.

He surveyed the crowd at the terminal, carefully studying each face as he looked for Chance. Although he and Chance had known one another since kindergarten, he knew that Chance had probably changed his hair color at least three times since they'd last seen one another six months earlier. Satisfied that Chance wasn't there yet, he settled himself on top of his battered, blue linoleum trunk and lit a Camel Light.

He was used to people running late here. Exact time didn't seem to have much relevance to people in the Quarter—or exact change, or exactly what you ordered, or exact anything. Close enough was good enough and that's what he liked about it. No one seemed to sweat the small details.

That was one of the reasons he'd finally decided to move to New Orleans. Back home in Natchez with his maternal grandparents, Pappy and Mammau Gauthier, everything had to be exact: wake up exactly at 6, eat breakfast exactly at 6:30, always dress and act exactly proper, be exactly heterosexual. He loved his grandparents with all his heart but he knew that he

couldn't stay there. The pressure was just too great and he'd felt like he was playing a role as the perfect grandson. For twenty two years he'd been pretending to be exactly what they expected.

In New Orleans he'd be free to be exactly who he was...whoever that might be. So far all he knew was that the real Joel liked boys and he smoked...at least he had since he'd picked up the Camels at a diner outside Baton Rouge. And he supposed that he was sort of handsome, at least according to Mammau and Chance. Lady Chanel—the “Queen Mother of Bourbon Street”—had even told him he was pretty on his last visit.

“Don't be trying to put too much muscle on them bones,” she'd told him, “or you'll be ruining what God gave you.”

Joel had never met a drag queen before and Lady Chanel hadn't been at all what he'd expected. She had the natural dignity and quiet grace of a true Southern lady. She'd immediately taken him under her wing and told him everything he needed to stay clear of trouble: which areas to avoid, which men were problems, and to never leave his drink unattended on the bar when he went to use the bathroom. Knowing that Lady Chanel was going to be there made his decision to move easier. He loved Chance and knew Chance loved him, but Chance was more than a little mercurial. He felt that with Lady Chanel there he'd have some semblance of a real family and someone to look out for him.

Chance had moved to the Quarter just after he'd turned seventeen, five years earlier. His family had been “river people” for many generations. At one point they'd been traders and fairly well-to-do, but succeeding generations had shown a profound proclivity for alcohol and bad business decisions, and now whatever fortune they'd once had was gone. His grandfather had been a violent drunk, and Chance's father had followed in his footsteps. Chance's mother had finally tired of the beatings and left one night when Chance was seven years

old. His father had taken out his anger about her leaving on Chance for the next ten years.

Chance and his father had lived alone in a house by the river. Joel had seen it only once, but his memory of it was still vivid. One day when they were in the fourth grade, Chance hadn't shown up at school so Joel had ridden his bike the three miles out of town to see if he was sick. At that point in his life Joel had had only a vague understanding that Chance's life was different from his own. He didn't know about things like poverty and abuse and alcoholism. He knew only that Chance didn't talk much about his home and that when he asked his grandparents questions about the LeDucs their responses were hushed and non-committal.

The house sat nestled in the corner of a field, in the shade of a cluster of majestic elms. The rutted dirt road leading to the house looked like a curved reddish scar cutting through the tall green grass. From across the field the house still suggested its former grandness. It was a pale gray two-story Colonial with a low porch that wrapped the first floor and a small fenced yard in front. As he pedaled closer, however, Joel could see the signs of decades of neglect. What had seemed to be shadows along the roofline and sides of the building were scraps of torn tar paper that had been tacked over the clapboard. Occasional patches of faded white paint hinted at the former color. The screens of the porch were torn in the upper corners and bulged outward, rippling softly in the breeze.

He'd leaned his bike against what remained of the low picket fence and walked through the barren yard to the porch. He could still remember the sickly sweet smell, like overripened fruit, that overwhelmed him as he'd stepped through the battered screen door. Cases of empty beer and scotch bottles were haphazardly stacked at the right end of the porch and he'd wondered if the smell came from them. As he'd stepped closer to the door and the open windows leading into the house, however, the smell had grown stronger and his stomach had

begun to churn, both from the smell and fear. He didn't want to go into the house. He didn't want to know what made the smell or what had happened to Chance. He didn't want to see Mr. LeDuc with his swollen angry eyes.

He'd stood there for minutes, his small fist poised inches from the scarred and peeling green door, breathing quickly through his mouth as he felt the sweat trickle down his back. Then he'd turned away, almost running back to his bike, and begun pedaling quickly back up the road.

As he passed the corpses of three rusted cars that peaked out of the tall fall grass, he'd looked back over his shoulder. For a moment he was sure he'd seen Chance's face in a window on the second floor. Then it was gone. There was something in the look on Chance's face that made him feel profoundly sad and embarrassed. He'd decided then not to mention his visit to the house and Chance had never brought it up, though he'd been uncharacteristically quiet for the next few days. Remembering the house now through the eyes of an adult, Joel recognized the feeling of a slow, lingering death that emanated from it.

Chance and his father didn't have any close neighbors, and what few lived nearby kept their distances, so Chance had learned early to look after himself. When he was fifteen he'd dropped out of school and started working for Pappy and Mammau, doing odd jobs around the house. He never told his father and knew there wasn't much chance of his father ever finding out since he rarely made his way to town unless he was headed to a bar.

Joel's grandparents didn't really need Chance's help since Joel could do the work himself, but Pappy knew that Chance was in a bad situation and felt it was the Christian thing to do. He didn't approve of Chance dropping out of school, but he was a pragmatist and hoped that with a little help and guidance Chance might be able to escape becoming like his father. By then Joel had understood exactly what that meant. Pappy gave Chance books to read between his chores and spent hours

talking with him about the importance of taking responsibility for his own life. On several occasions Pappy had told Joel that he knew that Chance was a soul in torment but that he had a good heart and that with support and guidance he could become a fine man.

But Joel knew Chance better than Pappy did. He believed that Chance had a good heart, but he also knew that Chance was a skilled reader of people and a natural chameleon, capable of being whoever he knew someone wanted him to be...and whoever would work to his best advantage. Chance made a great show of absorbing all the lessons Pappy taught him, but he was always just biding his time until he could leave Natchez. At night he would tell Joel about his dreams of moving to New Orleans and becoming a bright light of the city's famed nightlife. Someday he wanted to open a nightclub and have all the important and fabulous people come to him.

Joel felt a little guilty that Pappy was being duped, but he also knew that Chance had to get out of Natchez or risk being killed by his father. So for two years Joel had played along while Chance saved every dime he made, and finally, when he'd saved enough for bus fare and what he imagined he'd need to live for a month, Chance was gone. A week later a postcard arrived thanking Pappy and Mamau for all their help and apologizing for not saying goodbye. The card didn't say where Chance was, but the postmark read "NOLA."

Pappy was unusually subdued for several weeks after that. He didn't mention Chance, but Joel knew that the old man's heart was in pain: he felt betrayed and foolish for believing that he could change Chance. After a while, though, Pappy had begun to ask Joel occasionally if he'd heard any word from Chance, and when the phone calls began six months later Pappy seemed genuinely pleased to hear that Chance was doing well in New Orleans. For all his sermonizing and strict ways, Pappy had a genuinely large and open heart, Joel knew.

A year later Joel had made his first trip to visit Chance in New Orleans. He suspected that in that large and open heart his grandfather knew it was only a matter of time before Joel would want to move on as well. Maybe Pappy believed that with the strong values he'd instilled in Joel and those he'd tried to impart to Chance it would all work out fine in the end. Joel had never talked with his grandparents about his sexuality or Chance's—it just wasn't something one talked about—but maybe they suspected that as well and knew he'd be better off in a place that was more accepting of differences in people. Whatever the case, three years later when he'd told them he wanted to move to New Orleans they'd given him their blessing and five hundred dollars.

A sudden kiss and tongue running up the back of his neck brought Joel back to the present. He turned to find Chance standing behind him, a wide grin on his face.

“Been waiting long, girl?” Chance asked with an exaggerated drawl.

He stood with his hands on his hips, his body twisted in what seemed to be intended as a seductive posture. His straight black hair was longer now, reaching almost to his shoulders on the sides and in back. His light blue eyes peered out through wispy bangs. He was dressed in a tight black tank top that clung to his narrow torso, long baggy green shorts and flip flops. The shorts were slung low on his bony hips and three inches of tanned stomach peeked out. Joel caught a glint of something shiny nestled in the thin line of hair running below Chance's navel.

“So aren't you going to tell me how fabulous I look?” Chance asked loudly, throwing his arms out dramatically and taking a runway turn.

Joel laughed.

“Yes, you do look fabulous, madame,” he said, bowing slightly.

“That’s mademoiselle, bitch! You don’t see any diamond on these fingers do you?” Chance asked archly, wiggling the fingers of his left hand in the air and shaking his head from side to side.

Then he broke into a large smile and threw his arms around Joel, hugging him tightly.

“Give mama some sugar,” he said into Joel’s neck.

They stood embracing for a few moments until they heard the blare of a car horn and a soft, throaty voice called out.

“Am I going to have to get you girls a hotel room?”

Joel turned to see Lady Chanel in the driver’s seat of a turquoise and white Bel Air convertible parked by the curb. It was immaculate, the sun glinting brightly off the polished chrome bumpers. Lady Chanel was dressed in a sleeveless sundress of bright pastel flowers, cinched at the waist by a wide white belt. Her platinum hair was held in place by a thin silk scarf that perfectly matched the turquoise of the car, and she stared at them in mock annoyance over large pink tortoise-shell sunglasses that rested on the tip of her broad nose. Around her neck was a strand of small white pearls that stood out in sharp contrast against her dark chocolate skin. Joel knew that this was a conservative look, toned down several notches from her usual nighttime attire. He also knew that even toned down, Lady Chanel was attracting a lot of attention from the rest of the crowd gathered in front of the bus station.

He and Chance grabbed the handles at each end of his trunk and walked to the car.

“You all can put that in the back seat,” Lady Chanel drawled, “and Chance, you can sit your narrow ass back there as well. Joel is going to sit up front with his Auntie Chanel. And be careful you don’t scratch the paint.”

As Joel climbed into the car Lady Chanel leaned her lanky body across the front seat and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Welcome to your new home, baby,” she said warmly as she put the car in gear and smoothly pulled away from the curb, heading for the French Quarter.