

DEATH BY THE RIVERSIDE

by

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CHAPTER 1

The stairs had gotten steeper, or maybe I was just getting older. Or maybe I just hated the prospect of using my good Nikon to take pictures of graying middle-management businessmen in hotel rooms with cheap blond floozies. The kind with bad dye jobs. M. Knight, Private Investigator, said the door at the end of the third floor landing. I'm M. Knight. The "M" stands for Michele—this racket is tough enough as it is. My close friends call me Micky.

Hepplewhite meowed as I opened the door. Not a name I would have chosen for anything, dead or alive. I got her as payment for a job. Best mouser east of the Mississippi, they said. I can see the Mississippi out of my bathroom window, if I stand on the toilet. Best shedder, if you ask me. White hair on anything dark, black hair on anything white, well, gray.

Maybe what I really hated was that I wasn't going to be able to turn down the next divorce case. I tried to keep away from the real sleazy ones. But rent had to be paid. Right now I wasn't working. I could go tend bar at Gertrude's Stein if I got desperate. Real desperate. I get into enough trouble in bars as it is.

January was a slow time in the Crescent City. The Sugar Bowl was over, the Super Bowl was being played elsewhere, and Mardi Gras wasn't close enough to get excited about. Gertie's might not even need any bartenders.

Hepplewhite meowed again.

"Go catch a rat. I haven't gotten paid for that divorce case yet," I said. They were divorced and remarried, and I still hadn't been paid.

Heppy shut up. She had been around long enough to know my tones of voice. But I poured her some dry food anyway.

The phone rang. It took me a while to figure out which pile of junk it was under. It kept ringing. Bill collectors are persistent.

“Hello, this is the M. Knight Detective Agency,” I said, trying to sound like the secretary I couldn’t afford.

“Hello,” came the reply. A woman’s voice. All my bill collectors are men. Big, burly men. “I need to see Mr. Knight as soon as I can. It’s urgent.”

I told her to come on down, that we could fit her in this afternoon. I didn’t tell her there was no Mr. Knight. She would know that soon enough. Besides, once she made the trip all the way down to this section of town, she would be less likely to dance off to some all-male dick shop. I needed the business.

I straightened up a little bit, trying to make the piles look like important cases in progress rather than things I was too lazy to move to their rightful home, the junkyard.

Half an hour later she knocked. A brief knock that I barely heard because I was blasting trumpet concertos by Vivaldi.

I let her in. She was a blond with pearls. She had on a tastefully conservative gray suit. Her hair was tastefully done. Her shoes and purse matched, tastefully, of course. I was getting a bad taste in my stomach. I don’t run a detective agency patronized by tasteful ladies.

“I’m here to see Mr. Knight,” she said. One point for guts. I’d half-expected her to take one look around the joint and disappear back down the stairs as fast as her high heels could clackety-clack.

“I’m Mr. Knight,” I answered. “My real name’s Michele, but not in this business. Why don’t you tell me what your problem is and I’ll see what I can do for you.” I wanted to know why she was here. I wanted her to talk to me. She looked like the type who would talk more to a Ms. than a Mr. And talk she did. Maybe she liked the idea of spilling her story to another woman. Made it seem more like girl-talk.

Her name was Karen Wentworth. She wanted me to find her fiancé, Harold Faber. He had disappeared three days before the wedding, leaving a note that said only, “Goodbye—it’s for the best.” That was over a month ago. His friends didn’t seem to be worried, but they wouldn’t answer her questions. Just told her to not worry and to get on with her life.

Why had she come to me, I asked. That was the big question in my mind. Tasteful ladies, as a rule, do not come to me for help with their marital difficulties.

She had been to several other agencies, she said, but they had all said that I was the best for the job. Then she handed me a picture of Harold Faber, and I knew why they had thrown this one to me. Add a mustache, remove some clothes, and that picture was a dead ringer for Hot and Hard Harry, the latest crotch throb of all the boys I knew down at the Spread Eagle Bar. This was a bad news case. And I was to be the bad news bearer. This lady wasn't the type you easily told, "Hey, honey, your guy dumped you for another guy. Probably lots of them." That didn't happen in her tasteful world.

I took the case. Somebody had to do it and I'm too poor to keep my hands clean.

We agreed on expenses and fees. She didn't even blink at the figure I named. Too bad I felt so rotten about this one, or I could have strung it out for several days and let the money pile up.

She said goodbye, tastefully, of course. I told her I'd call her as soon as anything developed. After she left, I checked on the level of Friskier Mix in Hepplewhite's bowl—starving cats are not a pretty sight to come home to—then headed off for the Spread Eagle.

As usual, I was the only woman in the bar, but that was the way I wanted it. Scotch, with no distractions. Ralph, the barkeep, is a friend. I spot weirdoes for him and he lets me hang out as long as I want. And he keeps a bottle of Walker Black with my name on it. I showed him the picture that Karen had given me. As I expected, Ralph confirmed that Harry was performing in the O.K. Corral at the Cowpoke Bar.

I asked him for a couple of promo shots of Harry. Ralph shrugged, but didn't ask why. Good old Ralph. He handed me some pictures. I took the one that was a solo shot of Harry. The most tasteful of the bunch. I almost told Ralph that he could cut off the bottom half, but then I figured it might be easier if Karen saw just where Harry had gone, rather than my trying to explain it. A couple more Scotches and I was on my way. So was tomorrow.

I didn't call her until late afternoon. Partly because I wanted her to think it took a little time for me to track this one down and partly because Hepplewhite finally caught a mouse and left it for me as a present. Thanks, Hep. I never did find all four legs.

She answered my call by saying she'd come right down. Which she did. She was at my door fifteen minutes later. I didn't say anything, just handed her the picture.

She looked at it for a long minute, then said, "No, that can't be Harold." I still didn't say anything, just let the picture sink in. "I don't believe it. This must be some monstrous joke."

"Sorry, Ms. Wentworth. It's common knowledge in the gay bars."

She didn't ask how common.

"Could you take me to Harold?" she said.

I lifted an eyebrow.

"I would like to talk to him, that's all." Her baby blues were pleading.

Well, if you ask me, it was pretty crappy the way he had dumped her. She at least deserved to yell at him for that. Okay, I'm also a sucker for damsels in distress. Particularly ones with big blue eyes. Or green. Brown, too. But these are my only weak points. I agreed to take her to Harry. But only if she did what I told her to do. We were heading for no-woman's land. I told her how to dress: blue jeans, boots, preferably cowboy, some kind of baggy sweater to hide her tits (to her I said, "disguise your breasts"), and a blue jean or bomber jacket. No makeup and her hair under a hat. Then I said be back here at ten o'clock. She agreed.

This could be a problem. I figured the best thing would be for Tasteful Karen to wait outside for me while I tried to catch Harry between acts, public and private. Now that those blue eyes were out of sight, I was beginning to get worried about this caper. Live and learn, as they say. I stretched out on the couch to take a nap until ten o'clock arrived.

CHAPTER 2

She was on time. I almost didn't recognize her. She looked like a pretty boy, not a tasteful lady. She had even gone to the expense of a wig. I, on the other hand, had pulled out the relics of my hard-core butch days. Black leather jacket (bought for fifteen bucks on Canal Street—the one in New York City, not the one here), black cowboy boots, hair slicked back, and, courtesy of Richard, a theatrical makeup artist, a perfectly convincing mustache. I began to think we could pull it off. I gave Karen a good look over. There was one problem. Even the heavy sweater and bomber jacket didn't hide her breasts.

"They show, don't they," she said, catching the line of my gaze.

"Ace bandage time," I answered. I rummaged around to find my supply as she took off her jacket. When I turned back to her with the bandage, she had also taken off her shirt. No bra. Two shapely breasts were within three feet of me. Some say tits, some say ass, I go for whatever's pointed in my direction. And they were pointed. The cool air made her nipples stand up.

"Here's the bandage," was all I allowed out.

"I'll need help," she replied.

Damn straight women, can't even put on an Ace bandage by themselves. I helped her. I had to get those pink nipples wrapped quickly. So there I stood, my fingers passing just millimeters away from her breasts, our bodies close together because I had to reach around her with the Ace. Maybe after we got finished at the Cowpoke, I'd head over to Gertrude's Stein and see if there were any cute girls left. Or maybe Karen would need some consolation once the truth about

Harry sank in. For a cynic I can get ridiculously optimistic. I finished wrapping her, and she put her sweater and jacket back on. Just in time.

We left. It was still a little early, but we didn't really need crowds for what we wanted. We got into her car, a sporty little red BMW. Somehow, somewhere this woman had money. I usually immediately dislike rich types who drive prestige cars, but the older I get, the more tolerant I become.

We arrived at the Cowpoke. Even this early there were things going bump in the night. And that was just in the parking lot. I told Karen to stay in the car while I looked things over. She wasn't happy with that suggestion, but after a little haggling we worked it out.

I went into the bar. It was an old warehouse over by the docks. I'd never been here before. It had kind of a rough reputation, more for what went on outside than inside, though. The door people took my money and handed me a condom and a safe sex pamphlet. I just smiled at the bouncer and said no way was I going to have unsafe sex with any man. The top floor was a bunch of little rooms and maze-like corridors. I didn't need to explore there. The main floor was the dance floor and the basement was the showroom, where Hot and Hard Harry and the Humpettes would be performing. I headed in that direction.

I took my time and checked out the joint. I got a drink and caught the end of a drag show. I had to figure out how to get backstage. I decided that I was a reporter for the *Gay Commodity News* and that we wanted to do a feature on Harry's spread sheets. I had just convinced the stage manager that I was legit and that Harry would be very upset to miss the opportunity when a familiar figure appeared at my elbow. Karen. Damn, I had told her to wait in the car. She must have been listening to my whole story, because she said, "I'm the photographer," and marched in with me. I was pissed, but I didn't say anything. After all, she was paying the bill.

And there was Harry in his dressing room, wearing only very tight, very lavender briefs and surrounded by stills of himself wearing nothing at all.

Then Karen surprised me by pulling a real camera out of her canvas satchel and taking real pictures.

"Hi, Harry," she said. "It's nice to see you again."

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, taken aback at seeing her.

I stayed at the door, figuring my job was to keep other people out, make sure things didn't get out of hand, keep my mouth shut, and in my spare time, wonder why Karen was taking pictures.

"Surprised?" she asked. She seemed mean about it. Maybe she had finally gotten angry at him. "You shouldn't be. You knew I'd find you."

"Get out," he ordered angrily.

"All right," she said and turned to leave.

"No, wait. Give me the film." He lunged after her, grabbing at the camera. She tried to push him off and run away. I put out a foot and tripped him. It was time for us to get out. But Harry didn't want to say goodbye.

"Stop them," he yelled after us. "Get that camera!"

The stage manager tried to grab me. A mistake. Eight years of karate and three of aikido. I flipped him over my shoulder without breaking stride. As we exited the backstage area, I caught a glimpse of him reaching for a phone.

"Don't head for the main door," I said, "unless you can move faster than the speed of sound. Let's find a back way out." I grabbed Karen's arm and pulled her up the stairs to the dance floor. Something queer (so to speak) was going on here, but I didn't have time to figure it out just then. There had to be a fire exit around somewhere and we had to find it. And not get caught.

"We've got to get out of here," she whispered in my ear.

"No. That's what they're expecting us to do. The best place to hide is where no one expects you to be. Let's go upstairs."

"What's up there?" she asked.

"The real thing." And we headed up another flight of stairs.

Halfway up, I stopped for a second, pulled off my jacket, handed it to her, and motioned her to do the same. A little disguise might not hurt.

Then she found out what I meant by the real thing. The floor was dimly lit by dark red and blue lights and there were animal groans and moans over the music.

"Come on. Act friendly," I said as I put my arm around her shoulder, partly to fit in and partly to keep from losing her in the dark. "This way."

I led her in what looked like a promising direction. We turned a

corner and then another corner. Then I heard some voices behind us that didn't sound like they were interested in sex. We turned another corner and another, and then there was a wall in front of us. Off to either side were rooms, behind us the men with the unsexy voices.

"In here." I pulled her into an odd-shaped room on the left and back into a dark corner.

"Okay, we're in Rome," I said. "Act like a Roman." There were already several couples in the room, but they weren't paying attention to us.

"What?" Karen yelled in my ear.

"Time to blend in with the scenery," I said as I pulled out the condom and started to unwrap it.

"You mean act like we're doing that?" she replied, pointing to one of the serpentine couples in the room. "You have got to be kidding."

"No, I'm not," I answered. "You'd better fake it, sugar, or we'll find out if this place really does belong to the Dixie mafia."

I acted like I was putting on the condom, then stuffed it into my pocket. Realism counts. I put my arms around Karen. Hopefully we looked like two guys getting down to business. I pushed my crotch up against her. There was a lull in the music, and I heard one of the voices say, "Check those rooms."

"Act like you're enjoying it," I snapped at her. "At least get some rhythm going." She obliged by swaying a little. I put my hands on her hips and gave her a hard thrust.

"Don't knock my head against the wall," was her thanks for my realism.

One of the guys in the room was screaming, "Fuck me, baby, fuck me, c'mon, harder," and someone else sounded like he was having his appendix out without anesthesia. Karen gave a few barely audible moans. I heard the voices again, this time over the music.

"They're getting closer," I said bending over her. I pressed my face into her neck, hoping it looked like passion, not to mention making it harder to see me. I started rocking back and forth.

"I'm getting seasick," she said.

I grunted loudly in her ear. "Pretend you're having fun," I told her.

"I'm not," she replied. "Those men are after us. We've got to get out of here, and you're trying to have sex with me."

“I don’t want to have sex with you. Last thing on my mind. You want out of here? Why don’t you lead the way?” I demanded.

“That’s what I’m paying you for,” she retorted.

I had had enough. As far as I was concerned, it was her fault we were in this mess. I had told her to stay in the car, but she didn’t listen, and I suspected there was a reason for those pictures that she wasn’t telling me. Besides, no karate in the world can stop a bullet.

“They’re looking for you, not me. I can walk out of here anytime I want,” I reminded her.

“Don’t,” she said, a hint of apprehension in her voice. “I’ll behave. Just get me out of here.”

“I’ll try. Can you act like you’re enjoying this a little bit?”

“Should we kiss?” she asked.

“Think you can survive kissing a woman?”

A male voice outside the door said, “Look in there.”

“Definitely,” she replied and to prove it, started kissing me. I mean, really kissing me, more than I thought this tasteful lady was capable of. Her tongue was in my mouth, doing a search-and-explore mission. Then she really surprised me, pleasantly, I might add, by putting her hand between my legs. I decided to return the favor and put my hand over her crotch and started massaging the denim between her legs.

She gasped and started pushing against my hand. Damn, but she was doing a good job of acting like she enjoyed this.

I heard the voices at the door of our room.

“Not in here. Just the usual trade.” Then they left.

I gave them a couple of minutes and Karen a few more moans and gasps. I toyed with the idea of finishing her off, but decided it was more important that we get out of this place.

“Sorry, honey,” I whispered in her ear, “I just can’t keep it up.” I took my hand away and acted like I came for the benefit of anyone watching.

“Let’s go,” I said. I dropped the condom into a trash can for the realistic touch, and we headed back into the maze. I was sure that I had seen a fire escape from the parking lot. If it wasn’t at this end of the building, it was time to try the other end. We followed the maze until we ran into another wall, but this wall had a door with a panic bar on it. Classic fire escape. I ran my hands along the wall until I found the wire leading to the alarm. It had been painted over several times and

was hard to break. I destroyed the blade of my pocketknife cutting it. Something else to add to the bill. Then we were out in the cool night air. Easy as pie. We were on the way home.

Almost. Halfway across the parking lot, one of the men with the unsexy voices yelled, "Hey, there they are."

And we were being chased. We got into Karen's BMW in record time and squealed out of the parking lot. I counted no less than three other cars following us.

"You'd better drive this car for all it's worth," I told Karen. Then I got an idea. "Get across the river."

She didn't say anything, she just drove. Her face looked pale. But then so did mine. I had seen a quick flash from one of the following cars. They were trying to shoot out our tires. At least that's what I hoped they were shooting at.

We were on the south side of the river and heading out into the country.

"Head for the old bridge over the bayou," I said, giving her directions. I hoped that the digital clock on her dashboard was precise. This time I heard the shot. We turned down the narrow bayou road. Maybe its twists and turns would make us a difficult target. Karen was a pretty good driver. She hit the turns fast and didn't slow down. I could've done better, but not by much.

Another turn and we were heading for the bridge over Bayou St. Jack's. Every night at exactly twelve-fifteen they raised the bridge to let the fishing boats docked in the bayou head out to the Gulf. We turned onto the Bayou St. Jack's Bridge at twelve-fourteen. The warning lights were on, but the barricades hadn't dropped yet.

"Go for it," I told Karen. She gunned it.

The barricades started to lower. We were heading for them doing around seventy.

We just made it. Karen had to swerve to get past the far one, but we were the only traffic on this side of the bridge.

"Don't look relieved yet," I said as she started to slow down. "Better get out of firing range first."

She looked wide-eyed at me. "You mean they were firing guns at us?"

"Yep."

She sped up again. I directed her through the back roads. We kept going until we were in the middle of nowhere.

“Turn here,” I told her. We went up a twisted dirt road, past an old abandoned-looking shipyard. Then I directed her to pull off into a deserted lot behind some trees. It used to be an ice cream stand, a long time ago, but nothing remained now. Hurricane Camille had taken down the last tattered wall. She didn’t ask me how I knew my way around these parts. That was good, because I didn’t want to tell her. I grew up down here, but that was another story. And not one that someone like Karen Wentworth would give a damn about.

“Now you can relax,” I said.

“Thanks, that was rough,” she answered as she pulled off her wig. I peeled off my false mustache. It was beginning to itch.

“Why did Harry not want you to take pictures?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he thinks I’ll hand them over to his mother.”

“Why did you take them?”

“Do you ever go off duty?” she countered. “Or do you dream of solving cases in your sleep?”

“Answer my questions and I’ll answer yours.”

“I’m not sure. I guess to prove it to myself...and revenge, I suppose. I can’t stand the idea of him laughing at me for having been foolish enough to love him. If I make him look ridiculous, then he can’t laugh at me, can he? Those pictures do make him look ridiculous.” She stopped for a minute. I said nothing. I wanted her to go on talking.

“Despite what you may think, by my...uh...performance in the bar, I’m afraid I’m rather naïve. Harry needed a girlfriend for college and family. I was available and willing and he used me. Not sex, but as window dressing for his life. He didn’t touch me much. I thought he was a gentleman. It hurts.” She turned her face to the window. But she didn’t cry. I’ll give her that.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. Maybe I was wrong in smelling a rat. Maybe she was just a confused woman who had gotten kicked in the teeth. I continued, “I think we can head back now. We’ve lost those guys. And they’ll be looking for men, not women anyway.”

“No, do you mind staying here a little longer? It’s so peaceful. Besides, I have something to ask you.” She turned back to look at me.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I’m not sure how to begin. In the bar, when we were...well...”

She stopped, lowering her eyes.

“Yes,” I encouraged.

“Well, I enjoyed it. What we were doing.”

“And that surprises you?”

“Yes, it does. I thought that sex was okay, but nothing to write poetry about. I figured it would take someone like Robert Redford to make me excited about it. What I didn’t expect is that it would be a woman.”

“Kind of a lot of things to find out in one night,” I answered. I never ever jump into bed (or the back seat of a car) with virgins, so I played it cool.

“It is, isn’t it? At least the information is positive.”

“I hope you feel that way in the morning,” I said.

“I will,” she answered firmly. She was looking at me again. “What you did to me was very exciting. That’s why I was being such a pain about it. I really was enjoying it and didn’t want you to know. If I hadn’t been so scared I would have come the second you touched me. Please finish what you started. Make me come this time.”

I never, ever touch virgins unless they’re very sure of what they want and they practically beg me. (This happens more often than you think.) She sounded pretty certain to me. I was still thinking when she decided for me. She put her lips against mine and started kissing me. I found the tilt lever under my seat and let it all the way down. The advantages of expensive cars.

I have a lot of experience in the back seats of cars, but not much in front seats.

Karen made up for lost time. Either that or she was a fast learner.

I need more cases like this one.

She dropped me off at my office sometime just before dawn, saying she would call me in the next day or two to settle the bill... and for other things. I smiled agreement. Perhaps my luck was finally changing, I thought as I climbed the stairs. Hepplewhite meowed as I opened the door.

I have one big room that functions as my office. My living space is off to the side. Both sides. Bedroom and kitchen off in one direction. On the other side, a study that is now a darkroom, a very disorganized

walk-in closet, and the bathroom. My destination was a comfortable, if somewhat lumpy, couch. I do have a bed, but it's not in the best condition since a rugby team came to town a few months ago and stopped off at Gertie's. I ended up taking home a six-foot-three player and, between the two of us, we managed to break a leg and do untold other damage. She offered to help fix it but had to leave early in the morning, and I had better things to spend my energy on. So the bed remains as it is and I sleep on my couch. Some day I'll get to it.

Hepplewhite moved quickly once she realized that I would indeed use her for a pillow if she didn't.