

LOST DAUGHTERS

by

J.M. Redmann



2009

CHAPTER 1

Where was she? I wondered, as I finished arranging the cheese platter.

The doorbell rang.

It was Joanne Ranson, a longtime friend, briefly lover, and sergeant in the New Orleans Police Department.

Cordelia and I were giving a party tonight. I had just gotten back from some last-minute errands and I was beginning to worry about where she was.

“Believe it or not, Alex is working late and I’m the one on time. She’s at some stupid press conference with the mayor and she can’t get away.” Alex was Joanne’s lover. Her day job was being a political flunky, though she wouldn’t have described it that way. Her polite terms were liaison for culture and arts for city hall. She was good enough at her job to have survived more than one administration.

As I closed the door behind Joanne, I said, “She’s not the only one. Cordelia is working late, too.” I hoped it was just working late.

“I’m the first one here? Am I that early? I came here directly from work.”

“No, you’re just not as fashionably late as everybody else.”

“Three years. How does it feel?” Joanne wasn’t just asking a throwaway question; she could be far too discerning at probing my soft spots and weak thoughts.

“I don’t know. How do you feel about that?” I deflected her.

“Asked you first,” she rejoined easily.

“I don’t know,” I repeated, groping for an answer. “Sometimes it’s wonderful and...sometimes it’s terrifying. I feel I have so much to lose.

Is she all right? Does she still love me? What's wrong with her that she loves me?"

Joanne shook her head at that, but said nothing.

"Sometimes..." Then I paused, wondering if I could be this honest even with Joanne. She and Alex have had their difficulties, I reminded myself. "...I feel caught. Cordelia gets in her let's-clean-the-house-now mode and I'm in my chill-out-and-read-something mindless state. She goes into the kitchen and bangs pots around just so I'll know she's working and I'm not. And, of course, I don't go help her, just to make the point that we're not going to do everything on her schedule just because she's a big important doctor and I'm a shiftless PI. And at some point, she curses in an un-Cordelia-like way and she mutters something like, 'This would be a hell of a lot easier if I had some help.' And I...well, I think I wouldn't have to put up with this shit if I lived alone."

"Last night?" Joanne asked with her usual annoying discernment.

"I told her I'd clean up today and not to worry about it. But...oh, hell." I decided that I didn't want to do the blow-by-blow, particularly as it ended with me yelling at her that she could forget about any anniversary party because we'd only make it to two years and three hundred and sixty-three days as far as I was concerned, before I stomped out in righteous indignation. And realized that I had no place to go, so I ended up sitting on the porch in indignation that rapidly became less and less righteous.

"I gather things worked out. Or is this a divorce party?"

"No, we sort of worked things out." At least I thought so, but where was she? I had waited on the porch until the lights went out and Cordelia had gone to bed before I came back in. The kitchen and downstairs bathroom were both clean. She'd left a note on the kitchen counter, asking if I could please do the bathroom upstairs after my morning shower and a list of things that needed to be picked up. The sight of her scribbled handwriting caught me in a flux of emotions: I was both annoyed and relieved that she assumed we were still together and that we would be celebrating our third anniversary tomorrow. I was also abashed at my behavior, though not abashed enough to completely overcome my irritation.

Cordelia had still been awake when I'd come upstairs.

"Do you still love me?" I asked as I slid under the covers.

“Of course I do,” Cordelia answered, with just the right amount of vehemence to reassure me. “Do you still love me?” she asked softly.

“Yes, I do,” I said realizing that she, too, needed reassurance. “Although there are times...times when your...work ethic is very much in evidence.”

“An interesting way to put it. But it’s not my fault. I have a Yankee mother.”

“At least you have one.”

Cordelia was silent for a moment. “I can’t win that competition. I’m sorry your mother left when you were five, but I can’t change that.” She sighed softly, then said, “I’m too tired for this.” She turned on her side, facing away from me.

I lay stiffly on my back, staring at the ceiling, wondering what to do next. I considered getting up and going downstairs and doing something like vacuuming just so she would know what it felt like to be disturbed by someone else’s industriousness. Some thinking part of my brain vetoed that. Finally, that pesky thinking part of my brain pointed out that I could either keep this going or I could end it. I decided that all the gossips of New Orleans who predicted that a former bayou slut like me could never stay in a relationship with a nice uptown girl like Cordelia would get too much enjoyment if we broke up on the eve of our third anniversary.

I turned on my side and curled around Cordelia. “I’m sorry,” I murmured in her ear.

She responded to my touch and apology, taking my hand in both of hers. “I’m sorry you don’t have a mother. But I can’t—”

“No, you can’t fix that,” I had finished for her. “You’re not my mother, you can’t be.”

“But I can be your lover,” she had answered.

“Hey, you going to come to your own party?” Joanne broke into my thoughts.

“Yeah, I am,” I replied. “I was just thinking...thinking that love is wonderful and exasperating.”

Joanne gave a short laugh, then said, “Yes, it is. So what is it right now? Wonderful or exasperating?”

“Both.” Then I echoed her laugh. “Why is everything so complicated?”

“Because it just is,” Joanne answered easily.

The doorbell rang.

“More guests. You won’t be the only one,” I told Joanne as I went to answer the door.

Danny and Elly entered. Danny and I had been friends for a long time, meeting in college, though we had actually grown up in the same small town. The same small segregated town. We had briefly been lovers after college. She was now an assistant district attorney for Orleans Parish. Elly was her lover; they had been together over five years. She was a nurse and worked with Cordelia at the clinic.

We did the usual round of hugs and greetings and Joanne and I launched into explanations of where our lovers were.

The doorbell again sounded and this time I ushered in my cousin Torbin and his lover Andy.

“We’ve been across the street watching, waiting until a reasonable number of guests arrived. Not too early, nor too late,” Torbin said. He and Andy weren’t loitering. They lived in the neighborhood.

Torbin and I were first cousins, though, of course, we looked nothing alike since we’re not really related. He is the classic tall blond. It had taken us a while to clue in that we were both gay, but once we realized that we shared the common bond of coming from the same family and being queer, we had become close friends and allies. Torbin had many talents, but his most visible one was being a drag star in the Quarter. We both enjoyed immensely how much it annoyed our family, particularly my Aunt Greta. Andy, seemingly Torbin’s opposite, was dark, bookish, and a self-described computer nerd.

The phone rang. It was Cordelia. “I’m at the morgue.”

“But it’s our anniversary,” I blurted out, before the thinking part of my brain engaged. “Why are you at the morgue?”

“They want me to ID a body. Her pants pocket had an appointment card with my name on it,” Cordelia replied.

“How long will you be?”

“I don’t know, not too long, I hope. I don’t like to look at dead bodies. Particularly ones...” She trailed off.

Masochist that I was, I left an expectant silence for her to fill.

“Particularly ones that haven’t been discovered for a week or so. I’ll have to shower and change before I can enjoy myself. They’re calling me. Got to go.” Cordelia hung up.

I put the phone down, wondering why whoever couldn’t have

found the body a day or so earlier. We would have been happier all around. Cordelia and the morgue people wouldn't have had to deal with such a decomposed body and I wouldn't have had our third anniversary celebration disrupted.

"She's at the morgue," I told the assembled guests.

"Stood up on your third anniversary. How tacky," was Torbin's comment.

"I don't think it was her idea."

"The morgue? I hope not. Unless the fair Cordelia is a good deal kinkier than we ever suspected."

"Torbin..." I cautioned, even though Cordelia wasn't around to be embarrassed by his speculation on her sex life.

"As long as she doesn't ask you just to lie there and play dead, you needn't worry," he continued.

I left Torbin to enjoy his wit while I fulfilled my hostess duties. Just as I had gotten a libation of some sort in everyone's hands and the cheese and veggie trays placed around the room, the doorbell again chimed.

I opened the door to Cordelia's cousin Karen. She was, as usual, impeccably dressed, just casual enough to fit in. Cordelia had never been comfortable coming from an old, moneyed New Orleans family. Karen had no such qualms. She liked money and the things that it could buy. She was still struggling with the things it couldn't buy. Despite both being lesbian, she and Cordelia hadn't been close in the way Torbin and I were. Only in the last few years had they done more than see each other at the obligatory family events. Karen had recently become the chair of the fund development committee for Cordelia's clinic. She was good at being greedy and she had discovered how uplifting it was to be greedy on someone else's behalf.

"Where's Cordelia?" she asked, not seeing her cousin. "Not hiding in the kitchen?"

"No, she got held up with work." I forwent the morgue explanation. Karen had problems with pimples, let alone dead bodies.

She rolled her eyes, not able to understand having the kind of work that required missing a party. Karen took advantage of Cordelia's absence to give me a quick kiss on the lips. When I'd first met Karen several years ago (before I met Cordelia) we'd had a brief—more than brief, one-night—fling. Karen still had a bit of a crush on me.

Cordelia was a great believer in the virtues of monogamy and she didn't like being reminded that I had a past that was anything but.

"She'll be here pretty soon," I told Karen. I didn't return her kiss, particularly when I caught sight of the next guest.

Lindsey McNeil was making her way across the lawn. The cane she had to use was the only evidence of the damage done by a car wreck years ago.

Cordelia had to navigate through the women that I'd slept with. Given the size of the lesbian community in New Orleans and how active I'd been, there was no avoiding it. Lindsey was the only one of Cordelia's ex-lovers that I had to encounter. It didn't help that Lindsey was a strikingly beautiful woman, a highly respected psychiatrist, and currently single. It was even less helpful that she and I had had a brief affair. I'd tripped down jealousy lane more than once because of Lindsey. She and Cordelia remained friends. My jealousy journey wasn't helped any by Lindsey working one afternoon a week at the clinic. I had made it a point to start showing up on that day to meet Cordelia after work, until I realized how ridiculous I looked. Then I purposely stayed away, until I hit the ridiculous mark in the other direction.

"Hello, Micky," she said. "Congratulations on three years. Hi, Karen." She nodded in her direction.

Karen took a moment before recognizing her. "Lindsey? I thought you'd gone to Europe."

"I did. I came back." Lindsey leaned in to kiss my cheek, her hand on my shoulder to steady herself.

"Come on in," I said, wanting to get back into the living room with other guests to serve as chaperones. I ushered them in with a quick, "What would you like to drink?" That gave me an excuse to busy myself at the bar.

Then the doorbell rang again and I let in Hutch and Millie. Good, a safe straight couple. Hutch Mackenzie was Joanne's partner. He was Saint-sized—the football sinners, not the canonized variety. He and Millie Donalto had been living together for a number of years and had always put off marriage for "just a few more years of sin," as Millie put it. She was a nurse and also worked at the clinic with Cordelia and Elly.

Their arrival required another round of explanations for Cordelia's absence.

"I'd die if I went to the morgue," was Karen's comment.

"That's one sure way to get there," Lindsey added.

Cordelia's presence at the morgue prompted Danny, Joanne, and Hutch to reminisce on their many trips there. With their medical backgrounds, Elly, Millie, and Lindsey found nothing remiss in descriptions of dead bodies and lost brains. However, Karen looked like the wine (fairly good wine, I might add) she was drinking was rancid vinegar.

"Good thing you're not serving steak tartare," Torbin commented.

Hutch didn't notice the underlying suggestion in Torbin's comment and continued, "It had been over three weeks before they found that body. Let me tell you, three weeks off in the swamps of New Orleans East isn't a pretty sight. And a water moccasin was curled up on his chest, cozy as could be, like a boy and his puppy. It wasn't the body that was the problem, it was that damn snake."

"A live snake can do more harm than a dead body," Joanne pointed out.

"Yeah, so there's this putrid, stinking, rotting corpse"—that sent Karen to the kitchen—"with one huge snake coiled on top of it and four big policemen and the hunter that found him, and we're all just looking at each other."

"Vegetables. We're going to eat vegetables for the next week. Nothing resembling meat," Torbin muttered.

"No tomatoes or red peppers," I whispered back at him.

"Perhaps we should suspend the gross body competition until later. It seems not all of us are enjoying these tales," Lindsey said, earning a few points in the sensitive shrink department.

The door opened and Cordelia entered. It was an understatement to say she didn't look like she'd had a good time at the morgue. I was glad that she had just missed walking into a discussion about dead, putrid, rotting bodies.

"Hi, sorry I'm late," she said. Her face was tired and haggard-looking, as if it had already been a long day before viewing a dead body was added to it. She put up her hands to forestall the chorus of greetings and questions. "I'll be social in a bit. Right now I've got to change." She headed upstairs to our bedroom.

I started to follow her, but the doorbell rang again and I was the only host in the vicinity. I let in Alex, Joanne's lover.

“You know it’s a sad day when doctors, lawyers, cops, and drag queens can get to a party on time, but political flunkies can’t,” Alex said as she entered. She sighed and put her briefcase down next to the door. “Where’s your better half?” she asked me.

“Changing. She just got here.”

“Good, so I’m not so late.”

“No, you’re late. She was just late, too. Your much better half is trading dead body stories with Danny and Hutch.”

“Why I love her—tales of dead bodies and always hugging around the gun.”

“Not to mention the handcuffs.”

“Micky, I’m not that kind of girl.” Alex pretended to be shocked.

I heard the shower upstairs come on. I didn’t think Cordelia needed me checking on her there. “So can I borrow them sometime?” I bantered.

“Cordelia’s not that kind of girl, either,” Alex returned in kind. She and Cordelia had been friends for a long time. Alex claimed that they were born in the same hospital, but Cordelia amended it to meeting in junior high.

“How do you know? Ever try to cuff her?” Alex had slotted Cordelia into the “nice” girl category a long time ago and left her there. I tried not to let her assumptions lie peacefully.

“No, I haven’t. But I do know Cordelia fairly well and I doubt that she’s chained up every night.”

“Naw, it gets boring after a while,” I told Alex.

“What are you two going on about?” Joanne asked as she joined us.

“Your handcuffs and what you do with them off-duty,” I answered.

“Flirting again?” Joanne asked Alex.

“No,” Alex replied. “Micky’s just trying to convince me that she plays with handcuffs in the boudoir.”

“I’m sure Micky has,” Joanne said. Her slight emphasis on my name was enough to let me know that she didn’t like the length of time Alex was spending with me.

“That’s right, Micky’s done anything and everything,” I retorted. “Let me go see how Cordelia is.” I turned away from them.

I heard Alex's "Joanne!" but nothing after that.

Alex and I had been bantering, Joanne read it as flirting, and she didn't want to watch her lover flirt with another woman. But I didn't like being reminded that three years with one woman was a major distinction for me.

Cordelia was just coming out of the shower when I got upstairs. She still had a bit of a tired and distracted look, as if caught in the past events of the day.

"Hi," she said. "Thanks for keeping things going."

"No problem. Alex just got here, so you're not even the latest one."

She gave a slight smile, letting the evening slowly replace the day. "That's good to hear. I'd hate to be the last one to arrive at a party I'm giving."

"We're giving."

Clad only in a towel, her hair still wet and tousled, she turned to me as if I had said something that needed to be paid attention to. And she smiled, not a half-smile, but a full, open smile. "Yes, we are. Thank you for the last three years, Micky. Can I have thirty more?"

"Only thirty?"

"It's a start."

With the ease of those who have touched often, we were in each other's arms. It changes so quickly, I thought. Whatever annoyance I'd felt with Joanne had disappeared, chased away by Cordelia's smile and the comforting warmth of her arms around me.

Then we kissed, a deep kiss that turned from comfort and closeness to passion.

"Think our guests will notice if we don't appear for a couple of hours?" I said when we finally broke off.

"We could just tell them to go home."

We kissed again, lingering together before finally bowing to the demands of the evening.

I knew I should have gone downstairs to be with our guests, but I wanted to hold on to this moment of closeness. I watched her dress. She didn't even have to ask if I would hook her bra; a slight turn in my direction was a perfect and complete communication.

"How do I look?" she asked.

“Gorgeous. No one will wonder why we’ve been together for three years. They’ll wonder what took me so long to find you.”

“Thanks. My ego needed that.” With that, she took my hand and we went downstairs.

“Well, if you two were virile men, we’d know what you were up there doing,” Torbin heralded our entrance. “But I’ve heard from good sources that two women can’t do it in less than half an hour.”

“Torbin, I hate to disillusion you, but your fellow drag queens are not the best source of what two real women can or can’t do.”

“Oh, so you were doing it?” he shot back.

“I took a quick shower and changed my clothes,” Cordelia prosaically answered.

I shook my head at Torbin to indicate that this topic was closed.

“Sorry to be so late coming to my own party,” Cordelia apologized. “But I’m sure most of you know about these last-minute things.”

“I vaguely remember them,” Danny said. “This last month has been mercifully slow.”

“Yeah, I know,” Hutch seconded her. “A few barroom brawls, the usual drug shootings. We could use a juicy serial killer to enliven our days.”

He had spoken jokingly, but Cordelia’s hand suddenly tensed. That gesture told me that the body she’d identified hadn’t died of natural causes.

“Be careful of what you ask for,” Joanne cautioned her partner. As a harsh punctuation, her beeper went off. Then another beeper sounded. It was Danny’s. A moment later, Hutch’s pager added its note to the cacophony.

Joanne clicked hers off and turned to Cordelia. “Just a hunch, but could this have anything to do with your reason for being late?”

Cordelia’s grip on my hand again tightened. “It may.” Her voice was strained. “The woman was...she was...murdered.”

“How? Can you give me any details?” Joanne had left the party and was at work.

“Wait,” Alex cut in. “There are civilians here. I want to be able to sleep tonight. If you must discuss this, can you LEOs at least go out back?”

“Leos?” Karen puzzled. “Are we doing astrology here?”

“Law Enforcement Officers,” I supplied.

Danny had gone into the kitchen to make the required phone call. Hutch was trying to decide whether to head in her direction or to stay with Joanne.

“You’re right,” Joanne relented. “Sorry. Let me call in and see what’s up.” She headed for the kitchen phone, saw Danny was on it, paused for just a beat, then went to listen in on Danny’s conversation. Hutch followed Joanne into the kitchen.

I glanced at Cordelia. Her face had regained its haggard look.

Danny finished her phone conversation and, after a moment of talking with Joanne, came back to the living room. “So much for not working overtime. Sorry, Mick and Cordelia,” she said.

“Will you be late?” Elly asked her.

“Don’t know. I hope not.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Millie said to Hutch, digging in his pockets for the car keys. “The boys in blue can drive you home. I’m not going to be stuck trying to get a cab to the Westbank.”

After a bit more sorting out on the car front, the three of them were gone.

“Isn’t it the PI who always solves the murder cases?” Torbin kidded me.

“Only in books and on bad TV shows. No, I’m perfectly content to let other people go after murderers and rapists. Give me a missing poodle any day to a serial killer.”

“What kind of things do real PIs do?” Lindsey asked.

“Boring, mundane stuff, for the most part. We sit at our computers, we make phone calls, we wait for our calls to be returned. I do a lot of missing person stuff. Other PIs specialize in things like white-collar crime, or work for defense attorneys. Some do only divorces, but I hate that kind of stuff, so I avoid it.”

“How do you actually find a lost poodle?” Torbin quizzed me.

“It’s my specialty—Lost Poodles-R-Us. The reality is that you put up flyers, go to the pound, call the roadkill folks, stand on street corners and call, ‘Here, Precious,’ and make a fool of yourself. I did once help a guy get his stolen snake back.”

“What kind of snake?” Lindsey asked.

“I didn’t ask. My task was to canvass all the local pet stores and

see if any of them had been selling more than their usual load of live mice to his brother or his cousin, the suspects. The brother appeared, bought his more-than-enough mice, and I asked him some putatively innocent questions about what he was going to do with the mice—you know, subtle things like, ‘Are you going to feed those to an anaconda?’ He claimed to be a mouse lover, but his garbage gave him away. I never actually saw the snake, which made me happy.”

“His garbage?”

“Glamorous PI work—we sometimes go through people’s garbage. His had a very incriminating snakeskin in it.”

“How do you find missing people?” Torbin asked.

“Depends on why they’re missing. Is it an army buddy you’re looking for or a deadbeat dad skipping out on support payments?”

“There’s a kid in the show who’s making noises about finding his real parents. How hard is it to find a parent who gave up a child for adoption?”

“That depends on whether they want to be found or not. Some parents want to know what happened to the kid they gave up. They’re willing to be found. Was it a formal adoption? Are the records sealed?”

“I have no idea. But if he keeps whining about it, I’ll send him your way.”

“Sometimes I think you made the better choice,” Alex said to Cordelia. “A lover who has enough sense to choose lost poodles over chasing murderers.”

“I’m very happy with the choice I made.” Though the reply was to Alex, Cordelia looked at me as she said it, with a smile that was both soft and radiant.

I couldn’t help but smile back at her, although I tend to avoid the mushy stuff in public.

“You did make a good choice,” Alex said.

Then I did a round of hostess duties, filling wineglasses and the like, redistributing crackers so the plate didn’t look so one-sided.

While I was busy with my duties, the party sorted itself into two groups; Cordelia, Elly, Millie, and Lindsey were in the living room discussing fun and exciting things from the world of medicine. Torbin, Alex, Andy, and Karen were in the kitchen, pursuing the topic of the differences between gay men and lesbians.

“It’s not just the cat thing. Gay men have cats, too,” Torbin said, defending his ownership of two of the beasts.

“And I don’t know a single lesbian who eats tofu, so it can’t be that,” Karen said.

“Maybe it’s the penis thing,” Alex commented. “If it doesn’t come off, you’re a gay man.”

That conversation sounded much more interesting than winding my way through medical jargon, but I edged myself onto the couch next to Cordelia. Somehow it was important to be close to her, to just feel the warmth of her leg against mine. I remained close to her for most of the evening, except when hosting demands pulled me elsewhere.

Despite the party not breaking up until almost one o’clock, Joanne, Danny, and Hutch didn’t return.

After everyone had left, I poured Cordelia another glass of wine and told her to sit while I did the cleaning and putting away that had to be done tonight. She didn’t argue, she just gratefully sat down on the couch.

“Thank you, Micky,” she said as I came by to pick up some glasses in her vicinity. “I feel like our three years was properly celebrated.”

“Good, that’s how you’re supposed to feel,” I answered as I headed back to the kitchen.

When I came back into the living room a few minutes later, Cordelia didn’t notice me at first. She was staring into her wineglass, her face somber.

“You okay?” I asked as I sat down beside her.

“Yeah...yeah,” she said, looking up at me. “I’m just...that woman upset me.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, not really. I want to get her out of my mind.” Cordelia took my hand in hers. She was quiet for a moment before continuing. “She didn’t die an easy death. I know enough about forensics to know that not all her wounds were postmortem.”

“How was she killed?” Despite her protest, talking about it seemed to be what she needed to do.

“I’m not sure. She could have bled to death. I only saw her face and torso. No marks of strangulation.”

“Was she battered?”

She didn’t reply immediately. “No, not really. At least as far as

I could tell. No bruises. But..." Again she paused. "But she...was mutilated. She was... I don't want to talk about this. I'm sorry...I just can't. Hold me. Just hold me."

I put my arms around her. "Did you know her?"

"Not really. She came in once several months ago. I only saw her long enough to refer her to Jane, our gynecologist. She had another appointment for sometime next week."

"You think this might have anything to do with you or the clinic?"

"No, that's very unlikely. Just bizarre luck that she happened to be one of our patients. But...what disturbs me is that...I think she was a lesbian. I don't know for sure, I'll have to look at her chart, but..." She trailed off.

"Could that have had anything to do with her being killed?" I asked.

"I don't know. I...hope not." She downed the last of her wine, then put her head on my shoulder.

"Do I need to do anything more in the kitchen?" Cordelia asked, although she didn't stir.

"Nope, all taken care of," I assured her.

We sat still for a few minutes more, then she took my hand and we went upstairs. But Cordelia couldn't suppress several yawns as we undressed.

"No wild sex tonight?" I said after her fourth one.

"Probably not. I'm sorry. I really wanted you earlier. Now I'm just tired."

With that, we got into bed.

"Curl around me, at least until I fall asleep?" Cordelia asked.

I didn't reply, I simply did as she asked, molding myself into her, wrapping an arm around her waist.

It seemed not to be thought out, but Cordelia took my hand in hers, pulling our arms tightly together, then she moved my arm and hers over her chest and breasts, as if wanting the protection of bone over flesh.

We fell asleep that way.