

# DEATHS OF JOCASTA

*by*

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## CHAPTER 1

I couldn't find a seat on the streetcar. It was late afternoon and people were going home from work. I ended up standing near the back. More people got on at each stop. A briefcase was poking into the back of my knee. I thought about "accidentally" stepping on his toes when we jostled to a stop, and I heard a distinctly female "umph" from the briefcase carrier. Saved by her sex. She pressed closer to me as more people crowded on. Definitely female. I could feel her breasts through my T-shirt. The man in front of me got off. He was replaced by a well-dressed woman carrying, you guessed it, a briefcase. She was good looking, career woman style. Long dark hair and a discreet amount of makeup. The streetcar started up with a jerk and threw her into me. I was surrounded by breasts. She smiled an apology to me for having to stand so close. I just smiled back.

"Sorry," she said as another jerk smashed her breasts into mine again.

"No problem," I answered.

She smiled at me again. I could feel the warm breath of the woman behind me tickling my neck. Her tits were still firmly planted under my shoulder blades. The woman in front was staring at me with an arch to her brow that I had to be misinterpreting.

I was dressed in a T-shirt and faded jeans, my only accouterment small pink triangle earrings. It doesn't pay to be too blatant in the Crescent City; we're still below the Mason-Dixon line.

"Do you mind if I hold on here?" asked the woman behind me as she reached around me. Her arm was pressing into the hollow just above my hip, but there wasn't much else to hold on to back here.

"No, not at all," I said, "I understand holding on."

“I’ll bet you do,” she whispered in my ear.

The trolley jerked again, whether stopping or starting, I wasn’t sure. Both women were pressing into me, proving to be quite a distraction.

*Calm down, Micky. When do you go after ever-so-well-dressed career types?* Celibacy does have some drawbacks. Like looking at women who used to be a definite no and thinking maybe... I had been celibate for a long time if a briefcase was becoming a maybe.

The car jerked again and the woman behind me lost her grip and was forced to hold on to me. Her hand was on my hip. Then her crotch pushed against my ass. It couldn’t be intentional, I told myself. The woman in front of me smiled like she knew what was going on behind me.

This is weird, I thought. However, not weird enough to induce me to stop it. From the feel of it, she had a nice crotch.

Then the woman in front lifted her briefcase, using it to hide the movements of her other hand. I knew what she was doing. Her hand was on my thigh and moving up.

“The next stop. You could get off very easily,” she said to me in a husky undertone. Her hidden hand was defining some of the various meanings of “get off.”

“I could,” I answered.

The trolley rolled to a halt. She led the way off. The woman behind me was still behind me. I glanced at her. A stunning redhead. She winked when she caught me looking. The dark-haired woman led the way to a side street, then motioned us into a hidden courtyard.

It never occurred to me to wonder what I was getting into, probably because, with only two dollars in my wallet, robbery wasn’t a big worry. The only other thing these women could want me for was my body. And I had no problem with that.

The redhead closed the gate to the courtyard. Both women dropped their briefcases off to one side. The dark-haired woman got behind me, putting her arms around me to unbuckle my belt. As she was undoing my pants, red hair, now in front, pulled up my T-shirt, exposing my breasts. First her hands, then her tongue and mouth covered them. Dark hair, having unzipped my jeans, was fingering the elastic of my panties, her lips and tongue echoing the movement of her fingers along the back of my neck.

Red hair, still tonguing my breasts, unbuttoned her shirt, then

unhooked her bra and pushed it out of the way, showing her pale breasts and very pink nipples. She pushed them very firmly against mine and started kissing me, tongue in cheek, hers in mine.

Dark hair started going beyond the elastic. Red hair was still kissing me, the weight of her breasts a very pleasant warmth on mine. I felt her tongue start to trace my lips, moving slowly to my chin, another kiss, then her cold, wet nose on my cheek...

Her cold, wet nose?

Hepplewhite meowed. She was sitting on my chest. Kitty paws on my tits I don't find terribly erotic. I had been asleep and she was trying to wake me up to feed her. She meowed again. I picked her up and deposited her on the floor. I hate cats who assume that their stomachs have priority over my erotic fantasies. I sat up, shaking myself awake.

"Go catch a rat." But as I said it, I was getting up and heading for the kitchen to get her some food. Hep has perfected a fingernails-on-chalkboard meow.

I dumped a can of cat food into her bowl, then stumbled toward the bathroom, her official feeding ground. Needless to say, there was a nearly full bowl of food already there.

The phone rang. I ignored my own reasons for going to the bathroom and went to answer it.

"Well, well," said a familiar voice, "this is the third time you've actually picked up the phone yourself. I almost miss talking to your machine."

"Call back and I'll let you," I replied.

"No, thanks. You're the one I want."

"Be still my beating heart. What can I do for you, besides the obvious?" I flirted. Joanne Ranson was my caller, a woman I'd been too drunk and scared to take as a lover when I'd had the chance a few years ago. Now she was involved with another woman.

"How's your leg?" she asked, her tone serious.

"Getting better all the time. Soon I'll have no excuse for not entering a marathon, except that I hate running. I went back to karate last week," I replied. I had been wounded in the thigh. Joanne felt responsible since it was at her behest that I'd gotten involved to begin with. She was a detective sergeant with the NOPD.

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Nothing official or even dangerous this time. Idle curiosity, really."

“Yes?” I questioned. I wondered what Joanne had to ask me that she couldn’t get through her sources.

“An invitation. You have, no doubt, heard of the big bash going on this weekend.”

“Right,” I interjected.

“I got an invitation.”

“So? Most people worry when they don’t get one.”

“How did my name get on that list? Both Alex and Cordelia swear they had nothing to do with it. They’re the only women I know with those connections.”

Alex was Alexandra Sayers, Joanne’s lover. Cordelia James was... well, Cordelia was a long story.

“I’d like to know,” Joanne continued, “how my name came to Emma Auerbach’s notice. Can you nose around a little for me?”

“Sure. Are you going?”

“Alex didn’t give me much choice. Danny and Elly will also be there. I’ll save you a piece of cake.”

“No need.” I was enjoying this. “I’ll be there.”

“Oh?”

Trying to contain my smugness, I replied, “As a matter of fact, I put your name on the invitation list.”

“You?”

“Me.”

“You know Emma Auerbach?”

“Yep.”

“Explain,” Joanne said when I didn’t elaborate.

“Long story and I have to pee. See you there. Say hi to Alex for me.”

“I will.”

“By the way, how’s Cordelia? I haven’t seen her in a while,” I said, trying to be casual.

“I thought you had to pee,” Joanne countered.

“True,” I said, not wanting to appear too insistent. “See you in the country.”

“She seems all right. Very caught up in her work. See you,” Joanne answered, then hung up.

I went to the bathroom, finally, to pee.

I tried not to think about Cordelia. I had been trying not to think

about her for the last few months. Ever since she had walked down my stairs and out of my life, saying she needed time to think. She had called once, leaving a message on my answering machine saying, “I’m sorry, I still don’t know. I can’t be less than honest with you, and I can’t give you a better answer than that. I hope you’re doing well.”

I answered my phone every time it rang, hoping it would be her. But it never was.

Get on with your life, Micky, I told myself as I always did whenever I thought about her. She’s way beyond your reach.

I roused myself, ran a comb through my wild curls, then headed for the grocery store to get enough cat food to satisfy Hepplewhite, at least for a few days.

Every year, on the last weekend in May, Emma Auerbach gives a huge party at her country place. Everybody who is anybody in gay New Orleans is there. Men and women are invited to the Saturday night festivities, but only women get invitations to stay the weekend.

I, however, wasn’t invited; I was working, although I strongly suspected that Emma had hired me to do security more as a favor to my bank account than out of any real need for protection. She insisted that I call her Emma, so I did, always feeling like a kid trying to wear her mother’s shoes when I said it. She was in her sixties now and would always be Miss Auerbach to me. I would do anything that she asked because, more than anyone, Emma Auerbach had saved my life. Not my life literally; perhaps I should say my soul.

I walked up the stairs carrying a heavily loaded bag of cat food. My office/apartment was on the third floor of a yet-to-be-gentrified building. Yet-to-be-made-livable some of us complained.

My so-called office was the large room in the center of my apartment. Off to the left was the kitchen and the bedroom. On the right, a darkroom, the closet, and the bathroom. Not the best arrangement, but it worked for me. In other words, I could afford it.

The door on the landing of the third floor said M. Knight, Private Investigator. I blew some dust off the M. as I locked the door. I was on my way to Emma’s.

## CHAPTER 2

The drive across Lake Pontchartrain is hard to describe. Boring might be a good place to start. Twenty-four miles of you, the lake, and a concrete bridge. My dismal Datsun huffed and puffed its way across. I could almost hear it chanting, “I think I can, I think I can.” Dry land was welcome. After forty-five minutes more of winding country roads I arrived at Emma’s place.

She owned close to two hundred acres. Most of the land was left to itself. Only a few acres had been cut and cleared for the house, an elegant and understated country mansion. It was white clapboard, two stories with ivy twining up all three chimneys. There were several smaller cottages in back for guests.

I parked my car behind the garage, then I went in search of Emma. Via the kitchen, of course. Rachel Parsons, a gourmet chef and Emma’s right-hand woman since probably before I was born, was taking one of a series of pecan pies out of the oven. I had spent many hours with Rachel in the kitchen, helping her and making myself useful, until I felt like I really did belong. And Rachel, with her patience and easy smile, became a refuge for the scared kid I was.

She didn’t seem much older than when I had first met her, thirteen years ago, only a few traces of gray in her black hair giving a clue to passing time. She was still strong, capable, her back straight and shoulders broad, as I had always known them. Her hair was straightened and pulled back into a practical bun. Few wrinkles lined her face, her perfect skin marred only by a faint scar under her left ear. “White boys didn’t see anything wrong with throwing stones at little black girls, like we were plastic ducks at a traveling circus,” she had told me late one

night, when it was just the two of us in the kitchen. It was the only time she ever mentioned it.

“Made enough for the hired help, I hope,” I said as I took a big whiff of the just baked pie.

“Micky, child, do you get taller every time I see you or am I just shrinking?” Rachel exclaimed, putting down the pie and giving me a floury hug.

I squeezed her back. One of the things I always looked forward to was hanging out in the kitchen with Rachel. After Aunt Greta’s immaculate kitchen and her tired meals, it was a revelation to be welcomed into a kitchen where people laughed and you could make as big a mess as you liked as long as the food was good. Everyone, including Emma, would pitch in to clean up after one of Rachel’s extravaganzas.

“You’re the same size you always were, so I must be getting taller,” I answered her.

“There’s a pecan pie with your name on it. You’re getting too skinny.”

“I doubt that. But I’ll eat the pie, just in case. Where’s the lady of the house?”

“There’s only one lady in this house and she’s standing in front of you,” Rachel replied. “Emma is off in that direction. Just go straight and you’ll hear her presently.”

I followed Rachel’s directions until I did indeed hear Emma’s voice. She was on the front porch playing with her latest electronic toy, a wireless telephone. Or rather, in her polite but adamant way ensuring that the florist filled her order and made the high school prom make do with daisies, if need be. She finished the conversation, then got up and gave me a hug.

“Michele, dear, you’re looking well. And punctual as usual. What would you like?” she asked as we sat down.

Emma Auerbach has high cheekbones, a determined chin, and a pile of gray hair turning gloriously silver. She is equally at home in a library reading a scholarly text, in a bank discussing what she wants done with her money, or hosting a gracious party for a hundred guests. In short, she was a lot of things I admired and wished I could come closer to emulating than I was doing at present.

“The usual Scotch?” she continued, not noticing my hesitation.

“No. No, thanks,” I said. “I’ve been...drinking too much.” I hated to admit my mistakes to Emma. But I hated even more to lie to her. “I had to get some control over it. I had to...have to prove to myself that I can live my life without a shot glass beside me.”

“Better to learn that at thirty than at sixty. Or never,” was her only comment.

We discussed the details of the party, then the phone rang and she was off on another involved conversation. I excused myself to take a walk around the grounds.

The real responsibility of providing security at a party like this is to make sure that not too many guests fall into the swimming pond. And to make sure that nothing slithers out of the woods to take a refreshing dip with the inebriated guests.

I walked past the pond, glancing at my reflection on its glassy surface. There was a gazebo on the far side, its airy white sides twined with honeysuckle. I climbed up the stairs and perched on the rail to view the expanse of lawn—verdant grass dotted with explosions of colorful flowers, blue irises, pink camellias, some azaleas in full bloom, and still others I couldn’t name. The color was balanced by somber live oaks with ponderous charcoal trunks and low-hanging limbs fringed with gray Spanish moss. The lawn was bordered by the surrounding woods. The wind carried the smell of pine overlaid with the sweetness of honeysuckle and magnolia. Although the sun was bright, the temperature was still mild. It promised to be a perfect weekend.

I roused myself and headed back for the house. I needed to unpack. I was staying in my usual room, in the main house, next to Rachel’s and across from Emma’s. When I had first come here, Emma had put me there, saying she wanted to discourage any chicken hunting. I was eighteen then, still in high school, and didn’t quite get it, though the other women had glanced at me and laughed knowingly.

I spent the early part of the afternoon running errands for Emma and Rachel. Emma let me drive to town in her silver Mercedes. It’s amazing how much more polite storekeepers are when they see you drive up in a Mercedes than in a faded lime green Datsun.

Rosie, who was working with me, showed up in the afternoon along with some hand-picked college students (from the lesbian and gay organizations)—the rest of the hired help for the weekend.

The first guests began arriving in the late afternoon. After the requisite politeness, I wandered around the grounds, enjoying the colors of the setting sun and the first cool breeze of evening, the calm of twilight. The stars would shine tonight.

“Micky Knight! And I thought this affair had class,” a voice called to me from a newly arrived car.

“Danno,” I yelled back. “It did until you showed up.” I quickened my pace so that Danny and I wouldn’t be shouting across the lawn.

Danielle Clayton and I had both grown up in Bayou St. Jack’s, a small town out in bayou country, but we’d never met there. For reasons as simple as black and white. By the time the schools were integrated, I was living in Metairie with Aunt Greta and Uncle Claude. We met in college, two Southern children up in a harsh Northern city. We’d spent long nights drinking bourbon and wishing for warm weather. Danny had come back to go to Tulane Law School. She was now an assistant district attorney.

Her lover, Elly Harrison, was hauling a suitcase from the trunk when I reached them. “Hi, Micky,” she said. “It’s good to see you running around again.”

“Can’t keep a good woman down,” I bantered, giving Danny a perfect opening.

“Oh, yes you can. The longer the better,” she said with a suggestive movement of her eyebrow. Then she gave me a big bear hug and a friendly kiss.

After graduation Danny and I had lived together for a while, first as roommates, then lovers. But it hadn’t lasted. Danny wanted something serious and I wasn’t ready to settle down. She kept telling me that she loved me. Until I finally had to let slip that I was sleeping around to prove to her that she didn’t. Danny had no choice but to break it off. I was drinking too much to really care. Or notice how much commitment scared me.

Another woman I’d let slip by me, with regret coming much too late. Danny and Elly were in the process of buying the house they had been renting.

Then Elly hugged me, her slight and slender frame replacing Danny’s broad-shouldered sturdiness. I had always felt a little awkward around Elly. Probably because she knows a good deal more about

me than I do about her, including possibly (knowing Danny, quite probably), what I do in bed. At least what I did the summer Danny and I were lovers.

“I’ll show you where you’re staying,” I said, snagging their suitcase.

“How did you manage to get invited out here?” Danny asked as I led them to their cottage.

“It’s a long story, dear Danno,” I replied.

“Which you have to get very drunk to tell, I presume,” she answered.

“That’s the swimming pond over there,” I said, playing tour guide. “You can see a bit of the gazebo behind the oak tree beyond it.”

“I can’t wait to walk around here tomorrow,” Elly said. “Do you know how big the place is?”

“Around two hundred acres, total,” I answered, “but most of it’s forest. There are a number of hiking trails, so you can, if you want, walk your little feet off.”

“You’ve had a busy afternoon,” Danny commented.

“Huh?” was my intellectual response.

“Or did you do research before you came up here?”

“Danny, being a D.A.,” interjected Elly, “wants information. Like how do you know so much about this place after being here only a few hours?”

“Then, Danny, being an assistant D.A., can ask,” I responded.

“Right,” Danny said. “How do you know so much, etc.?”

“I’ve been here before, for one thing. Here’s your cottage,” I said, making a ninety-degree turn, leading them up a walkway to the porch.

All the cottages were different. This one was pale blue with a broad porch complete with authentically creaking porch swing. Off by itself, nestled closely to the woods, it was my favorite. I turned on the porch light.

“This is great,” Elly said.

“I’m impressed,” Danny added as she opened the door and led the way in.

There was a comfortably spacious sitting room with a small kitchenette tucked off at one end and a large red brick fireplace at the other end. Off to one side was a hallway that led to three bedrooms. Joanne and Alex would also be out here.

“Looks like we get our choice,” Danny said from the hallway where she was poking her head into all the bedrooms.

“How about the one with the oak tree outside?” Elly asked. She got their suitcase and put it in the far bedroom.

“Good choice,” I noted.

“Okay,” Danny said from the room. “Where is that...aha!” she muttered to Elly. They came back to the main room, Danny with a bottle of bourbon. “I’m going to make us all drinks and then, dear El Micko, you can enlighten us on how you know so much about this place.”

“Good idea,” Elly agreed. “This has been a hell of a week. I could use a drink.” She went to the kitchenette and started searching for glasses.

“Elly has been having lots of fun with anti-abortionists.”

“Right to life,” she snorted. “Some of them would kill you if you disagree with them.”

“New job?” I asked.

“No, I work part time at Cordelia’s clinic. Cordelia said they’ve had protesters there all week. We’re really just a local clinic in a neighborhood that needs one. You think they’d leave us alone.”

“Better a whole community do without health care, than a single innocent life aborted,” was Danny’s sardonic comment.

Elly took three glasses off a shelf. Danny got an ice tray from the small refrigerator. She cracked it and started putting cubes in the glasses.

“None for me,” I said as Danny was about to put ice in the third glass.

“Would you repeat that? I’m sure I heard it wrong,” Danny said.

“I’m not drinking,” I said. “I’m on duty.”

“‘Duty?’” Danny’s eyebrows shot up.

“Emma hired me to take care of security for this weekend. Hence, no inebriation while I’m protecting the premises,” I circumlocuted. It would do for now.

“Well, that’s nice to know. And I must tell you I feel very secure,” Danny said sarcastically.

“Glad to know that. I aim to keep the guests comfortable.”

“Right. Why do I detect the sound of a bull straining and grunting to drop a big load in the background?” she continued.

“Dan-ny,” Elly chided. “How did you get this job?” she asked me.

“Actually,” Danny broke in, “I’d feel more secure if you were drinking. I’m not sure how to talk to you sober. Maybe that swamp did some brain damage.”

“I have a right not to drink. Particularly your cheap bourbon,” I shot back.

“Cheap never stopped you before.” Danny had some choice memories of my drinking when I was with her.

“Danny, make two drinks, dear,” Elly said.

Sometimes the hardest thing about changing is the people who still expect you to be as you always were. Danny’s most potent recollections of me had to be from college and the summer we lived together. I was a heavy drinker then and proud of it. I thought it proved something. I drank because I knew Aunt Greta wouldn’t approve. I fancied each drink a victory over her.

“And don’t make jokes about that swamp,” Elly continued as Danny made their drinks. “Beowulf lost track at one point and we were almost ready to give up and go off in the wrong direction. If we’d done that, we may never have found you.”

You’d have found me, I started to say. Just not alive. Then I realized that Elly really was concerned. I had been shot in the thigh and forced to hide in a swamp to avoid the men who had shot me. Danny and Elly, along with their hound dog, Beowulf, had helped find me.

“Yeah, Mick,” Danny said, handing Elly her drink, “that swamp was not fun. If you must have gangsters shooting at you, please stay in the city.” But there was a hint of conciliation and apology in her voice. I’d hurt Danny when I’d left her. Occasionally a trace of anger would sneak out. Heavy sarcasm, a strident tone to her voice. I never said anything. I tried, like she did, to pretend it was all part of our usual banter. Then there would be a slight change in her tone and the anger would be gone.

“You think it wasn’t fun? You should have been in my shoes,” I said.

“No, thanks,” Danny and Elly said in unison.

“No way,” Danny continued. “I don’t ever want to see a criminal outside a courtroom.”

"I don't want to see any at all," Elly added.

"Look, I agree," I said. "And from now on I'm taking cream puff jobs like guarding secluded parties with selectively invited guests."

"I'll drink to that," Danny toasted, touching her glass to Elly's.

"Can we build a fire?" Elly asked.

"That's what the wood's for," I answered.

"Good. You know what I love to do in front of the fireplace," Danny said as she put an arm around Elly.

"Cook marshmallows?" I asked.

"Of course, that's what I meant," Danny murmured from Elly's neck, which she was now nuzzling.

"Come on, Danny," Elly said laughingly. "We haven't seen Micky for a while."

"Yeah, Mick. What have you been up to lately?" Danny asked, still making progress on Elly's neck, and, I suspected, not much interested in what I had been doing lately.

"Much as I know you'd love for me to stay and talk, I am a working girl and duty is calling, nay, yelling, screaming for me."

"Oh, too bad," Danny muttered, paying no attention to me.

"So long, Micky. We'll talk tomorrow," Elly said, not yet totally consumed by lust.

I waved to her (Danny wasn't looking in my direction) and let myself out. I cut away from the footpath and walked along the border of the woods.

The stars were bright points of ice against the approaching dark of the evening sky. I stood staring at them, a discreet distance from Danny's and Elly's lovemaking. I didn't want to hear Danny's passion or remember the ways I'd touched her to elicit such cries. I stared instead at the crowded and lonely sky.

I hadn't seen Danny and Elly in about six weeks. I had said I was busy whenever they called asking me over or out. Letting my leg heal and taking it easy, so no parties or dancing, I elaborated for them. But I knew that Danny and Cordelia were good friends. And that if I saw Danny I would see Cordelia. I didn't want to be idly hanging around in front of her, intruding on her life. Even that was only partly true. I was too afraid of her unconcern, or worse, polite, distant solicitude.

I turned from the night sky and walked back to the house. Perhaps

Joanne and Alex were here by now. I could distract myself by trying not to flirt with Joanne. Or Alex. Danny and Elly had reminded me of my past few months of celibacy.

As I stepped onto the porch, Emma called to me, “Micky, dear, you used to tend bar, didn’t you?”

I nodded yes.

“Disaster. These college kids can handle beer, but they’re not sure what a dry martini is. And there are a few women my age who are members of the martini generation.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I volunteered

She touched my arm briefly as I passed. I stiffened without thinking, then belatedly smiled. But Emma was hurrying off in the other direction. I headed for the bar.

Aunt Greta’s oldest son, Bayard, had caught me in the street one day shortly after I’d turned eighteen and moved out of their house and into Emma’s. I remembered him standing there blocking my way, a knowing smirk on his face.

“You know what they say about Miss Auerbach?” he said, hitting the Miss with a hard inflection.

I tried to sidestep him.

“You know what she wants from you, don’t you?” he continued.

I started to turn around, but he grabbed my arm.

“She wants to fuck you,” he said, the “fuck” a hissing whisper. “That’s the only reason she’s letting you stay there. Want to put your mouth on her old pussy? Want to fuck an old woman like that?” His voice a close and foul undertone.

“Better her than you,” I yelled, jerking my arm away, causing passersby to look. Then I ran from him, not stopping until I was breathless and on a street I didn’t remember turning onto.

But he had planted something corrupt and contaminated. It wasn’t until after college, after the hold I thought Emma had on me was gone, only after it hadn’t happened and hadn’t happened over and over again, that I could believe it wouldn’t happen. But before time had taught me trust, whenever she put her hand on my arm, as she had just now, I would wonder, is this it?

If Emma had ever had any sexual thoughts about me, she never showed them. I doubted she did. Now. Now I trusted her. Now I knew better. By the time I finally knew she didn’t want sex with me, I had

pulled back and stiffened too many times whenever she touched me. At times I wanted so much to apologize for my suspicion, but that would mean admitting to it, framing the words to explain how evil I thought she might have been. To take in a scared high school kid with no other place to go only to...fuck, Bayard's tainted word.

"An Old-Fashioned?" I heard the barkeep ask. "How about a new-fangled? I'm better at those," he said with disarming ineptness.

"Want a lesson?" I asked, jerking away from memories to the mundane demands of the present.

"Hi...Oh...Yes, ma'am," he answered to my presence.

"Micky. Don't call me 'ma'am,'" I told him as I pulled the ingredients for an Old-Fashioned.

I proceeded with my Old-Fashioned lesson. I had to send to the kitchen for sugar. A young college girl brought it to me, making sure her hand touched mine as she handed it to me. She was cute, but she still had a little baby fat left in her cheeks, and not a single, solitary gray hair. I would have to steer Rosie in her direction.

The Old-Fashioned was finally done and passed off to the woman who'd had the temerity to ask for it in the first place. She winked and said she'd enjoyed the show.

"What's your name?" I asked the young cutie.

"Melanie," she replied in a broad accent.

"And I suppose you're Ashley," I said to Inept.

"No, ma'am," he said straight-faced. "My name's Rhett, and I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no daiquiris."

"What I have done in the kitchen, I have done," Rachel announced, as she arrived to lean on the bar. "It's bourbon time."

Rhett started to fix her a drink, but she waved him off saying, "I want experience to handle my bourbon."

I made her the drink. "Here you go," I said, handing it to her.

"Fix yourself one," Rachel told me, "and come out from behind that bar."

"I'm having a good time here," I replied.

"I'll bet you are," Rachel answered. "I know you, Micky Knight, and I wouldn't even try to budge you from the best cruising spot in the house."

"I don't know, Rach, I'm getting old. Hit the big three-oh a few months ago."

“Honey, you don’t know what old is.”

“‘Gettin’ older, sugar,” I kidded her. “I’m not there yet like you are.”

Rachel shot me a fierce glance. “Fix her a drink,” she told Rhett. “I almost can’t recognize Micky without a Scotch in her hand.”

It was going to be a long weekend, I could see that. This was not just a party, but a party for people from the party town. Alcohol was a constant.

I decided to cheat. While some brave soul asked Rhett for a drink, I filled a glass with tonic water, adding a slice of lime. No one would tell me to get a drink if I already had one. I edged out from behind the bar, leaving the guests to the tender mercies of Rhett and Melanie. Rachel was getting another bourbon and water.

“Good luck,” I said to her, clicking my glass against the just completed bourbon she was eyeing suspiciously.

“I’ll need it,” she answered, keeping Rhett in suspense.

I left the front room and headed back to the library. Emma was there and in the middle of an argument concerning some obscure area of Baroque music. I didn’t know what they were talking about, let alone have any interest in it. Emma gave me a quick nod, then went back to her debate. As I turned to go, I caught her glance at the drink in my hand. Then she was back in the argument, making a point. I left the room.

I found myself back in the front room, and Rhett was crooking a finger at me. Rachel and Melanie were out of sight, so I figured it was safe.

“Micky, ma’am?” he said as I approached.

“No ma’am,” I admonished.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“What do you want, little boy?” I could get away with that since he was on the far side of six feet.

“What’s a kir royale?”

“Champagne and crème de cassis,” I answered and gave him a kir lesson. Then I scooted around from behind the bar. I didn’t want to be there when Melanie came back. Particularly if she’d heard Rachel tell any stories about me.

“Oh, Micky, sir,” Rhett called. “For you.”

He had refilled my glass and was handing it to me.

“I can make a gin and tonic.” He grinned.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the glass from him. There wasn’t much else to do.

I hurried out to the porch. And right into Joanne Ranson. Joanne didn’t get wet, but I was splashed with a significant amount of gin and tonic.

“Micky Knight, in her usual state,” was her only comment. Drunk, but she didn’t say that.

“Hi, Micky,” said Alex, who was coming up the steps behind Joanne. “Oops,” she continued, seeing my stained shirt. “And gin, too, one of the more pungent liquors.”

“I thought you were a Scotch woman,” Joanne said. “When did you start drinking gin?”

“I didn’t start...” I began.

“Never stopped,” Joanne answered. “Go change your shirt, Micky. Gin does reek.” She turned her back to me to help Alex with an overnight bag. I was being dismissed.

I stared at her disapproving back for another moment, then turned on my heel and reentered the house, quickly climbing the stairs to my room.

As I took off my shirt, I maliciously hoped that Joanne and Alex would walk in on Danny and Elly by the fireplace. Then I told myself to grow up. Joanne can be a hard-ass, but she’s been fair to me, and whatever hurt lingers between Danny and me is basically my fault. And Alex and Elly have done nothing whatsoever to deserve my spite.

I was staring at my less than plentiful selection of shirts, when there was a knock on my door.

I absentmindedly said, “Come in.” I was vaguely aware that I had no shirt on, but it had to be another woman entering, probably Rachel or Rosie.

“I’m sorry I sent you to tend bar. It was thoughtless of me,” Emma said as she entered. There was a slight hesitation as she noticed my state of dress, then she continued, “Given what you told me when you arrived.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I answered, trying to be casual. I couldn’t remember Emma ever seeing me like this. I had always been careful in my actions and appearances around her. “I had fun with those college kids.”

“I saw you with a drink. I thought maybe I had...”

“Tonic water, with a lime. It was the only thing I could come up with to stop people from offering me drinks. What shirt should I wear?” I said, still trying to be nonchalant.

“The burgundy, I think. It sets off your eyes.”

“Then Rhett, the college boy bartender, saw my drink was low and made me another one. A real one this time with a generous amount of gin. I was looking for some place to ditch it when I took a wrong turn and ran into someone. Hence the need for a new shirt,” I babbled to cover my awkwardness.

“Micky,” Emma said. She had picked up the burgundy shirt. “I don’t want anything from you that you don’t want to give.”

“I know,” I answered too quickly, cutting her off.

“Why don’t you put on your shirt if it will make you more comfortable?”

“It’s okay, I’m still drying off,” I lied, unwilling to so visibly show my discomfort by hiding my breasts from her.

“What do you think you owe me?” she asked.

“My firstborn child and any cat that can be guaranteed to hit the litter pan one hundred percent of the time,” I answered. She didn’t say anything for a while, making me regret my smart answer. What could I say? I owed her nothing and my life.

“Well,” she said finally, handing me the shirt, “I hope we get a chance to talk sometime this weekend. Maybe you’ll have an answer then.”

“I hope we get to talk,” I replied.

I reached for my shirt. She was careful not to let our fingers touch.

“Well, Rachel is right,” she said as she turned to go. “You do have nice breasts.”

I dropped my shirt. Then quickly bent to pick it up so Emma wouldn’t catch the look on my face. I would have been less surprised if I’d heard a nun say what she had just said.

“Anything you want,” I blurted out, answering her question, not knowing what she could want from me.

“Nothing physical, believe me,” she replied, framed for a moment in the doorway, mistaking my answer. Or perhaps not. Perhaps that’s what I was offering her.

She was gone, closing the door softly behind her.

I stood holding my shirt.

Damn, damn it, I thought as I pulled it on. I left my room, slowly descending the stairs, wondering what other minefields I might yet step in.

I went back out onto the porch, carefully this time, but no one was there. Then I wandered off onto the starlit lawn, finally pacing the perimeter where the gray yard faded into the dark woods.

I made a wide arc around the blue cottage, not wanting to come near the warm nimbus of light from its windows. I caught a glimpse of Joanne and Danny from one lit window, then Alex and Elly half-framed in another, animatedly talking in front of the unneeded warmth of the fire.

For a moment I almost turned to go knock on the door and ask to be invited in, but instead I kept walking. I was out of place tonight, each step jarring on uneven ground. No one had told me that love and friendship would be so hard. But I don't guess anyone can ever tell you.

I halted my pacing and sat on a low-hanging branch of an old oak tree. Rachel said there were bullet holes in it from the Civil War, but I could never find them. I stayed there, a dark figure in the dark, trying to etch the constellations, but instead seeing only the blinking and shuttering of electric lights in the house and the cottages. When the lights in the blue cottage finally went out, I got up and returned to the house. A few hushed voices came from the living room and the kitchen. I avoided them, going instead into the deserted music room. I turned on the stereo, and used headphones to listen to Holst's *The Planets*, in honor of my stargazing. When it was over, after the last faint notes had faded, I curled up on the couch and fell asleep. I awoke sometime in the dim morning and stumbled up to my bed, setting the alarm clock for a few hours later.