

Ken Luber
PO Box 1938
Idyllwild, CA 92549
Ken@kenluber.com

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Razzmatazz
By
Ken Luber

CHAPTER ONE

"I'm looking forward to our Halloween date, Sweetness. Be my witch for the weekend and cast your magic spell. I'm yours forever."

Rick flipped his cell phone aside. He heard the bruising sound of the eighteen-wheeler's horn. A pumped-up heaving mass of speed and power bore down on his back, as Rick cut in front of the silver big-rig and bolted for the off-ramp. An orange "RAMP CLOSED" sign and bright yellow barrels sealed off the exit. He slammed on his brakes, skidded across the gravel shoulder and swerved back onto the freeway. *I've gotta pay more*

attention, he thought to himself. *Sweetness is gonna get me killed.*

Rick smiled as he exited the next off-ramp, his clean-shaven face closing in on middle-age. He knew "Sweetness" sounded more like the name of a horse. But, in a way, that's what Denise was to him. A beautiful, high-strung filly who had raced into his life out of nowhere and carried him into the magical world of love and emotional risk. *A handful of dates*, he thought, driving through a housing tract, *and whack - I'm nearly crushed in the middle lane leaving her a message.* Then he remembered her mentioning something about a doctor's appointment that morning. She was being coy and wouldn't tell him what it was for, just that "it's for us."

Was she pregnant? Yeast infection, something like that? *Why the mystery?* he wondered. *She's got too many secrets for a woman her age, like the sealed off-ramp, too much on the other side.*

They were going to spend Halloween weekend together. *It ain't that far away*, he thought to himself. *Three quick days.*

He was forty-eight years old, with a son, Trevor, in college and a daughter, Amber, working her second year at an ad agency. When he compared himself to other men his age or studied himself in the bathroom mirror, he felt vital, competitive, strong. But Denise was only thirty-three, fifteen years younger than he. Was fifteen years too much to bridge, he

wondered. *Love doesn't need a bridge, he told himself; just lean a ladder against her heart and climb right in.* He straightened his shoulders and patted his tummy. "I'd like to climb in a few pounds lighter," he mumbled.

Denise had regaled him with stories about the origins of Halloween. "It goes way back," she told him, "to an ancient Celtic Festival of Samhain, celebrating the end of the season of the sun and the beginning of the season of darkness and cold, when the ghosts of the dead returned to earth." Her blue eyes would sparkle, her voice shudder, and her long red nails would point like talons above her head as she described the Druid priests prophesying the future. Like his ex-wife, Beth, his latest lover was into all that "weird stuff," Rick thought. Stuff about voices, spirit guides, past lives and unseen worlds. He was an architect, a post-and-beam man. His houses were built on solid foundations using elements he could see, touch and feel. The only world he believed in was the one he was passing through. He never went beyond the boundaries of what stood in front of him.

The road narrowed as he passed a white Lexus. He thought he recognized the driver, a cute, funny real estate agent he'd balled at an office party several years ago. Now that he'd met Denise those days of gunning and running, as his friend Stan called his countless sexual encounters, were over. The high

scorer had been stopped at mid-court by a thirty-three year old blond divorcee.

Denise had told him how the Samhain custom of festival fires, set to ward off evil spirits and death had, over the centuries, morphed into jack-o-lanterns lit in the cottage windows as protection from the devil. "It was the original Celtic home security system," she joked, her sweet pink lips parting in giggles, as they snuggled in the silk sheets of the rattley brass bed, "hailed all the way from Chicago," she told him, "just to keep your buns warm."

He reached for his pack of cigarettes on the dash but pulled his hand back. *Not yet*, he thought. He had kids, a carefully orchestrated career, and some degree of imagined control over his life. He knew smoking was death but, like sex, some things he had a hard time dialing down.

His cell phone rang. His friend, Stan, was on the other end, howling at him.

"I'm just telling you I think you should know."

"Why?"

"Because she's dangerous."

"What woman isn't?" Rick smiled. "I don't see the point."

"Paula hung out with her in Chicago. Denise had a mess of guys running after her. None of them ever got more than a few months with her. Then they were gone."

"Like Jimmy Hoffa gone?"

"Very funny. I'm only telling you what Paula said."

Rick turned onto a less inhabited country road. "Do you know Paula?"

Stan told him that she was a friend of his sister Janet's friend.

"But you've never met Paula?"

"Never." He took a breath that sounded like he was inhaling on a joint, "I'm telling you, the word is your girlfriend's like a beautiful par four with a sand trap you don't see."

"You're getting poetic."

"Make fun; I'm trying to be helpful. What are you doing for lunch?"

"I'm staying in. Lots of work." The conversation ended with Rick promising he'd call Stan the next morning and plan a lunch date.

He didn't worry about putting Stan off. Twenty-five years of friendship wasn't going to shipwreck on a missed lunch.

Rick pulled his Land Rover off the two-lane blacktop and parked in a small grove of trees at the Mequon site. He hoped he wouldn't run into Ellen Butler wandering around the property, taking pictures. *Of course, it's her place*, he groused to himself; *she's every right to be here*. He preferred to stand alone on the raw land, feel the space and light, without having

to answer the pestering questions and concerns of his clients. He liked the pole opposites of freedom and control, each carefully defined by his own needs.

"Good," he thought. "No cars, no one's here." He got out and walked deeper onto the property, past the pines and black oaks, until he reached a clearing. He checked his watch and looked up at the slowly-moving stream of white clouds overhead. He picked up a stick and scattered the dead leaves. On the cleared ground, he scratched out a rough outline of his design for the L-shaped, ranch-style house. "The Butlers wanted more sunlight in the kitchen," he mumbled to himself. "They won't get it in winter unless we add another set of windows."

"Whatcha say?" Rick looked up. A man, in his sixties, was standing ten feet away. He wore a checked flannel shirt, blue jeans and muddied work boots. He carried a hunting rifle in his right hand. The stranger blinked and pulled a pipe from his mouth. "Whatcha all doin'? You from the county?"

"No, I'm the architect. Who are you?"

"Saddles. Jacob Saddles. Call me Jake, if you will." His thick brush of flaming red hair turned abruptly at the temples into a rough white beard, as if the hair on his face or head, one or the other, had been dyed for some kind of Halloween spook show. From his short wide forehead and narrowed eyes, he didn't

look like a man who'd hesitate to use the 30-30 rifle at his side.

"Are you a neighbor?"

"You might say that. I owned this property before the Butlers bought it, and I own the adjacent lot."

"Then you are neighbors."

"Of a fashion. I got myself a small trailer over there but I'm a city man, as well. Don't stay all the time." He tapped his pipe with his finger. "Yet."

"You're planning on it, though."

"What's planning for? You don't know day-to-day what's going to happen to you. Am I right?" He raised his heavy brows, as if he'd just kicked down the eleventh law from the top of Mt. Sinai. With his eyes more exposed, Rick noticed the iris was creased in Seddles' left eye, cloven with a thin yellow line through the pupil, like a shiny split marble, so that Rick wasn't sure whether it was real or glass, or if the intruder was looking at him or the tree behind his shoulder.

Rick nodded. "For sure," he said, fixing his eyes on the 30-30 in the old man's hand.

"How big a house they planning to build?"

"Nothing unusual. Something that fits the land."

"There's a lot of land on this property."

Seddles had his hook in Rick, and all the architect wanted to do was appear polite enough as he wiggled out and swam away. He'd visited the property several times before and never seen the stranger.

"Well they want the land free, keep all these trees, the rocks, so the house won't be too big." Rick turned and rubbed his nubuck shoe, like a giant eraser, over the rough marks he'd made on the ground. He hoped the old man would take the hint and wander off. But, when he looked up, Seddles was still puffing on his pipe and tracking him with his weird eyes. Rick nodded. "You have a good day."

He would have preferred staying longer, but he felt uneasy with those accusatory eyes, vaguely tormented, Rick thought, or simply insane, glaring his way, and he didn't know what arrangement the Butlers had made with their eccentric neighbor.

The old man watched him walk back through the thin grove of trees to the road.

Safely tucked in his SUV, Rick smiled to himself as he drove down the blacktop. *Jesus, ain't he a hoot. I wonder how many times he's going to knock on the Butler's door: don't need no cup of sugar, ma'am; but how about a clip of bullets?*

He reached for a cigarette and this time he took one and lit it with matches from his pocket. He never used the dash

lighter. It made smoking too easy, too convenient, too reminiscent of his past pack-and-a-half daily habit. He was trying to break old habits. Habits more contentious than smoking. Philandering. Deceit. Habits that had spiraled his marriage into divorce seven years ago. Denise, he thought, by the passion of his love for her, was helping him break those habits.

He thought back to Stan's phone call. It didn't surprise him that guys in Chicago were knocking on Denise's door. She'd moved to Milwaukee less than six months ago. If he hadn't put his claim in on her, he knew, by the year's end, she'd enjoy the same kind of serial interest. *And who the hell's this chick, Paula? What's she get from ripping her?*

In warning him about Denise, Rick understood that Stanley was trying his best to be helpful; but Rick also knew that whatever his friend said wasn't going to change his feelings for Sweetness.

He'd known Stanley Berkowitz since high school. In those days they hadn't been friends. Stan, the crazy suicidal art student, with shoulder-length hair and a bad case of acne, and Rick, the school's basketball star, with his choice of adoring girls, didn't hang out in the same circles. That social alienation ended when Rick came back from his years at the University of Wisconsin and discovered that Stan was selling the

best grass on Milwaukee's eastside. Bearded young artist met ambitious young architect. A friendship was born, a handball partner found and, within a few years of Rick turning Stan on to professional painting jobs, the struggling artist stopped dealing grass.

Rick drove up to the parking stalls behind his office building. He walked around the side of the 1920's red-stone mansion, now a gentrified stable of offices for career-entrenched, upscale professionals. Orange and black crepe paper hung like witches' tails from the branches of bare autumn trees. Halloween danced on a chill damp wind.

He climbed the three flights of polished wood steps and walked into his corner office just in time to hear the last ring before his answering machine picked up. "Rick," the shaky voice went on, "Something terrible has happened... To Denise. She was in a car accident. She's in critical..." He grabbed the receiver.

"Leslie, it's me. What happened?"

"Oh, you're there, thank God. Denise was in a terrible car accident on Lake Shore Drive. Some kid smashed into her at an intersection. She's at Columbia Presbyterian. She was in surgery when I called the hospital but I don't know what they're doing to her."

"Who told you?" His voice rose, trapped in a cloud of disbelief.

She told him that a friend of hers lives near the accident scene and walked down to the intersection to see what happened. Leslie paused, trying to keep control of her voice. "And he was telling me this when I called him this morning. We were supposed to have lunch together, but then he started describing the car that the woman was in and I said, 'Oh my God, that's Denise's car.'"

"You're sure?"

"No, I wasn't sure then, but he saw the paramedics carrying her on a stretcher into the ambulance and, Rick, I mean he couldn't see a lot, but, you know, a woman in her early thirties, braided blond hair, red high heels."

"He noticed her shoes?"

"Rick, he's a hair stylist; he's observant. But that led me to think even more it was Denise. So I called every hospital in town, asking them if a Denise Dayton had been brought in. I told them I was her sister." Finally, she said, Columbia Presbyterian confirmed that a patient by that name had been admitted. "I just hope it isn't serious. Rick.. Rick..."

"I'm here."

"Do you want to go down to the hospital with me?"

"If she's in intensive care and we're not going to be able to see her, I just as soon call the hospital when they know more."

"Right. It's just that she has no family here, as far as I know, so I might go down anyway, just to keep her company or keep a vigil. I feel I should do something; I lit a candle. Do you want me to call you later?"

"Please."

It took him a moment to put the handset back on the base. He walked over to the windows. The news pushed slowly into his psyche. *Jesus, she's really hurt, she could die.* He felt numb, distant, as if his body had abandoned him. They had met at a party his friend Leslie had hosted to kick off the football season. But it was immediate attraction, from those sky blue eyes right down to her feet tied up in black leather ankle boots. He wanted her. Rick traced the first letter of her name on the window. Aside from a lauded professional reputation, he was known as a guy who enjoyed the company of women, for drinks, for bed, and then onto the next. Denise was his opportunity to change all that and change his life. She was different from the other women he'd made love to, he told himself. She tapped into something in himself he didn't understand, something remote and forgiving, even though he didn't know what he was to forgive or whom. Certainly her youth, her abundant energy, her

willingness, more than that, eagerness to flaunt propriety, added to her allure. Only she had stood on the hood of his car and shouted "I love this guy" to strangers in a parking lot. Only she had sung a lullaby to him in the softly rocking waves of a fishing boat at sunset. And only she had made love to him in white knee socks with Nat King Cole singing "There was a boy..." in the background.

He sat back down at his desk and then got up again, walked over to the closet alcove and made himself a fresh cup of coffee. *Leslie will call as soon as she knows anything.* The phone rang, but it wasn't her.

"Yes, Mrs. Butler."

"Mr. Seddles called. He said he ran into you at the property."

"That's one way of putting it."

"I don't want to be hard with the old man. He's had his troubles in the past and then his eye injury, but he's a pest. I told him that since he sold us the property, he shouldn't be wandering over any time he wants. He's got a home in town; he should stay there. You don't have to tell him anything about what we're building. It's none of his business and that certainly wasn't part of our agreement."

"I understand. Look, I...."

She didn't let him finish. "Was he wearing a wig?"

Rick paused. "His hair and beard were two different colors, if that's what you mean. But right now I've got someone else in the office."

As if she hadn't heard him, she rambled on, her voice growing more agitated. "He's a crazy old preacher. Neil is out of town, but he'll be back tonight. If you have anything to show us, I'd love to see it. I haven't seen anything since we made the changes."

Rick suggested the next morning at the Butler's home. "But I might have to be somewhere else. I'll call if I do." He was anxious to get her off the phone and return to his own thoughts.

His clients, Ellen and Neil Butler, in their mid-thirties, with a twelve-year-old daughter, seemed very intent on privacy and seclusion. In the Mequon land they bought, they got just that.

Rick swiveled his chair and looked at the view outside his office window. Beyond the thin row of locust trees and bone-white birch, he could see a patch of green hillside slope to the road and across the road to the cliffs, and then the rough, iron gray water of Lake Michigan. *Millioke* the Potawatomi called the land, "a gathering place by the water," long before the French missionaries and fur traders, before the influx of Germans and Poles took the land and the name Milwaukee, pushing the native tribes further north and west. This he had learned in school;

and from his father he learned that his great-grandparents, Frank and Sophia Galdalskaia, had arrived during those turbulent immigrant years. Family stories told how his great-grandfather Frank had squandered his wife's dowry on drink, gambling and illicit affairs. Sometimes he wondered if the old man's ghost was in his loins.

Denise was going to end all that.

He reached over to the phone and tapped out her number. Her answering machine picked up: "Leave your name, message and I'll get back to you. Have a great day." A voice he wanted to hear again, though he knew she was in a hospital, on an operating table, in the middle of a blue Wednesday afternoon. She had told him to expect a "Halloween surprise" on the weekend. This wasn't the surprise he expected or she, he was certain, had envisioned.

The smile on his lips turned ironic and sad.

That wasn't his normal smile. Usually his smile was open and congenial, adding warmth to his face. His nose was slightly broad, like a fighter's nose, and the lips a bit too thick, but the chin brought a unity of structure, reinforcing the strength of his forehead and giving him a handsome middle-age presence, fitting solidly with his six foot-two inch frame. Denise called it a macho look, like a Chicago mobster who took care of his own or the owner of a nightclub where judges ate steaks, pinched the

bottoms of showgirls and took bribes. "That's you, baby," she'd say. "You're my big bad daddy."

He never asked her how she knew so much about gangsters. From the movies, he thought. Curled up on a couch in her Chicago pad, watching "B" black-and-white movies and painting her nails.

Instead of working on the Butler drawings, he tapped the speed dial.

"Amber Gale, please."

A moment later he heard his daughter's voice. "Hi, this is Amber."

"This is your old Polish dog," he growled. "What's the princess doing?"

"Oh, she's sewing vestments for the canine king. What's he doing?"

Rick leaned back in his chair and threw his feet up on the edge of the desk. "Oh, darlin,' life just hit a bump in the road, all too literally."

"Meaning?"

"Have you got a minute? I'm not busting in on a meeting or some deadline project?"

"There's no meeting or deadline more important than *mon pere*," she said. He could hear the smile in her voice, and even that small ray of light lifted his heart.

"Remember that woman I've been dating recently, I met at my friend, Leslie's?"

"Denise."

"Right."

"Of course. You told me she drives a red sports car and that the car fit the woman like a dress, and you winked, as if I was supposed to know what that meant."

"Well, the car and the woman had an accident. She's evidently in pretty bad shape."

Rick explained what Leslie had told him.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I think I'll go over to the hospital later and then pick myself up something to eat on the way home."

"You're sure? My omelets have gotten a lot better."

He smiled for the first time since he picked up the phone. "Raincheck, honey." He looked over to his blue coffee mug. It must be the luck of the draw, he thought. How he got such a sweet daughter. He told her, in his quiet usual way, that he loved her, clicked off and kept the receiver cradled in his hand, as if the warmth of her voice was something he wasn't willing to surrender.

It all goes so fast, he thought. Too fast to contemplate. Beth deserves the credit. I was too busy trying to make a living to worry about the kids, too busy trying to be a star.

At four-thirty he locked his office door and drove over to the hospital. The fact that he wouldn't be able to see Denise was no longer important, in his mind. He wanted to be a part of her misfortune, of her pain and suffering. He wanted to feel something beyond the boundaries of his own self-interest, something to link him to her in a way that wasn't marked by his own physical needs. Like water seeping into the ground, into the darkness of earth to transform whatever it touches and, at the same time, be transformed, he wanted and needed some kind of alchemy. Beth, with her goddesses and witches, her *brujas* she called them, and study of medieval literature, had spoken enough about alchemy. "It's change, Rick. Lead to gold. That simple. And you refuse to. Get off the basketball court," she'd scream in their worst arguments. "The ball doesn't always go to you! You're never open, anyway."

I'm not open and something about Denise, for all her free-swinging charms, isn't open, either. We're a pair, he thought.

Now, driving to the hospital, with darkness crowding the sky and the smell of rain smothering the air, he recalled the days of his mother's death. His father was there in the hospital, and he was there as much as the priority of settling accounts with one's old firm and establishing his new, private practice allowed. He remembered rushing into her hospital room for an hour each day, sitting with his father, watching her

mottled face, the tubes in her mouth and nose, the IV dripping in her arm, hearing the harsh scream of death from her throat, and ruminating on how inconvenient and degrading death can be and how he would have to talk to Marcus, the building super, about acquiring another storage bin for his files, pick up the proofs of his new business cards and stationery from his friend, Leslie, and see what kind of phone system would be best suited for his new office. He remembered taking his mother's hand in his and whispering, "I love you." But he never felt the darkness in her soul leaning against him. He never gripped the moment with his heart and sought the transcendence of grief and longing.

But now, caught in a struggle with his own demons, he needed to be there for Sweetness.