



Dear Reader,

Thanks for giving my second Eddie LaCrosse novel, *Burn Me Deadly*, a try. As the title implies, Robert Aldrich's film adaptation of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* provides the jumping-off point for this story of murder, revenge and dragons...maybe. We meet Eddie's girlfriend, Liz Dumont, and learn about his friends and the undercurrents in his town of Neceda. We also meet a tough gangster, a crazed evangelist and a young princess already versed in the adult world's deceptions. It's meant to be exciting, fun and thoughtful; I hope that's how you find it!

Please feel free to share it with your friends! If you have any questions or comments, stop by my website and drop me a line. I love hearing from readers!

Cheers!

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## CHAPTER ONE

The blonde dashed out of the darkness into the moonlight, right in front of me. My horse, Lola, tried to bolt in surprise. I yanked on the reins and drew her up short. She reared and nearly threw me, but I held on and turned her away so she wouldn't trample the woman. We spun for a moment like a trick rider in a show, kicking up dust on the dry, deserted road. Then she found her footing, I pulled the reins tight and managed to regain control.

The cloud raised by our near-accident momentarily obscured the woman. As it dissipated, I got a good look at her. She was young, with leaves and twigs tangled in her hair. She wore only an oversize man's jacket that hung past her hands and thighs. Scratches laced her slender legs and dirty, bloody feet. She stood with her eyes closed, face screwed up and arms covering her head as she anticipated the impact.

My voice was higher than normal when I demanded, "What the hell, lady? You could've killed us both!" She opened her eyes and stared at my horse for a long, silent moment. Unscrunched, her moonlit features were very attractive. "Wow," she said softly, "that was close."

"No kidding," I snapped, still battling Lola's skittishness. The mare tossed her head and snorted, not convinced that all the danger had passed. If only I'd been as smart.

The woman's dirty face showed marks of recent tears. She grabbed Lola's bridle and said, "Please, sir, I have to get away from here." She looked over her shoulder toward the dark woods from which she'd emerged. "I'm in terrible danger."

"Uh-huh," I said dubiously. I followed her gaze and saw nothing, but unsnapped the catch on my scabbard just in case. Muscodia was still a pretty uncivilized country, and this road ran for miles through the dense, sparsely-inhabited woods between Neceda and Tallega. At this time of night a lot of nefarious things could happen with no one the wiser, and I was too old and too experienced to fall for the frightened-damsel-as-bait bit. "How about you tell me what you're doing out here undressed like that?"

She met my skepticism with a well-practiced imitation of a hurt kitten: she dropped her chin, raised her eyes and pulled her mouth into a tiny pout. I think her lower lip even trembled. "I'm in danger, sir. Please, I'll explain everything later, but right now, I must get away from here." She turned her head and moonlight fell on the marks of big fingers around her neck. "Please. Look at me."

"Your husband get mad at you?"

"I don't have a husband. The men who did this did other things as well, but those things . . . don't show." I scowled. I'd made an overnight run to a big manor house outside Tallega, delivering a sealed parchment and a bag of gold to some woman on behalf of a compromised nobleman. She'd taken the money, laughed at the note and slammed the door in my face. Her footmen made it abundantly clear I shouldn't wait for a reply. Now it was after midnight, and what I most wanted was to be home with Liz, in our nice soft bed with her nice soft body pressed against me. Also, every instinct screamed that this damsel was trouble the same way a hurricane was rain.

Still, I couldn't just leave her half-naked on a deserted road in the middle of the night. "All right, climb on," I said wearily. "I can take you into Neceda." Lola snorted with disapproval as I scooted back to make room for the girl on

the saddle in front of me. She felt skinny and weak as she settled back, both her legs dangling off the left side, and clutched the saddle horn. I nudged the horse with my heels and we trotted off down the road.

The night was clear, and we stood out plainly on the road whenever the moon shone through the trees. I suppressed the urge to keep glancing behind us, or to spur Lola to a gallop. More than likely whoever had injured the girl was passed out drunk somewhere; if not, then I doubted they'd push for a confrontation. The kind of men who beat up women seldom had the stomach for a fair fight.

I said into my new companion's ear, "Okay, so what's going on? Who are you?"

"My name is Laura," she replied. "Laura Lesperitt. And you?"

"Eddie LaCrosse."

"Ah." She turned and looked back over her shoulder at me. The helpless maiden look had been replaced by something far more calculating. "From one of the minor noble families in Arentia, then. If it's the same LaCrosse." She was right, but I saw no need to discuss it; I'd burned those drawbridges years ago. "You know a lot." She nodded modestly. "A little about a lot."

When she offered no further information, I prompted, "And someone strangled you because . . . ?"

"Because I wouldn't tell them what they wanted to know."

"And what's that?"

Again she turned and looked up at me. The moon cast dark shadows that hid her eyes. Her smile was weak and sad. "Oh, Mr. LaCrosse, you think you can help me, don't you? You think you can ride up and save me, like a knight in a children's story. But these are bad, bad people. And if I tell you what they wanted to know, they might do the same thing to you to find it out."

"They might try," I said.

My confidence made no impression. She turned away, looked out at the passing trees and pushed the jacket sleeves up past her elbows. A livid, fresh injury that looked like the touch of a heated iron marred the insides of both arms down to her palms. The pain must've been awful. Her wrists were also rubbed raw and bloody from struggling against ropes or manacles. "They carried me to a small house in the woods three days ago. They took my clothes and kept me in chains. But I had to get away before they made me tell, so I picked the lock when they weren't around and fled. I stole this --" She indicated the jacket. "-- from a farmhouse where everyone was sleeping."

"Why didn't you ask the farmer for help?"

Again the sad, wan smile. "They had children. I didn't want their blood on my head if I was caught again."

"But you don't mind mine."

She shrugged. "I'd prefer not. But I could live with it better."

"And so you're not going to tell me what this is about?"

She shook her head.

I took a deep breath, feeling like an idiot in advance for what I was about to say. "Look, I'm not some farmer. I'm a freelance sword jockey with an awful lot of hilt time behind me; maybe I can help."

Again her eyes rose to meet mine with slow, dramatic amusement. "A 'freelance sword jockey,'" she repeated. "So what does that entail? Saving damsels in distress for a fee?"

"Ideally, yeah. But since I'm my own boss, sometimes it's just because I feel like it."

"And you feel like saving me," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't know about 'saving' you, but I am offering to keep people from beating on you any more tonight. What you tell me after that is up to you."

Something changed in her face, and for a moment she looked ancient, with despair deeper than any I'd ever seen. And I'd seen a lot of despair. "The only way you can help me tonight," she said with slow, deliberate words, "is to get me to Neceda alive. Nothing else will truly help me."

We rode in silence for a bit. The trees began to thin out, and just ahead awaited the edge of the forest. Past it the road descended and snaked across miles of open prairie, as vivid in the moonlight as it might be on an overcast day. Scattered across the plain were small camps of travelers, a few with fires still lit. In the far distance glowed the lamps of Neceda, and just beyond that sparkled the Gusay River. The waxing, nearly-full moon lit the vista in shades of blue and white.

When she saw the distant town she sat up straight and tightly grasped my arm. “We may make it,” she said softly.

“We’ll make it,” I said with certainty.

I was tense, and alert, and experienced in just about every sort of attack. So when the blow struck the back of my head, damn near hard enough to knock my beard from my face, I was so surprised it took me a moment to realize I was falling from my saddle onto the road. I’d heard no one approach, either on foot or horseback. These guys were good.

I landed awkwardly, too stunned to react but not completely unconscious. Sparks danced around the edges of my vision. My body pinned my sword to the ground; the hilt dug painfully into my side. I reached for it, but my limbs would not respond with any speed.

The dust from our pursuers drifted over me. Above the roar of blood and pain in my head, I heard Laura scream. We were too far for any of those camped on the prairie to come to our aid, even if they were so inclined. A horse stopped beside me, and someone dismounted almost in my face. Expensive black boots, decorated with a silver dragon design that sparkled in the moonlight, hit the ground. Above them a stern, annoyed voice said, “Shut her the hell up. You can make her scream all you want back at the house, at least until she tells us where it is.” Laura’s screams were suddenly muffled, as if by a gag or a big hand.

“What about this guy?” another voice asked.

“Bring him along, too,” dragon boots said. “We don’t know what she told him. Oh, hell, he’s waking up.” One of the boots rose out of my field of vision and came down hard on the side of my head.

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I awoke, sort of.

My whole skull was numb. My fingers tingled, and when I tried to wriggle them I found my wrists were bound tightly behind my back. I tried to move any other body part, but nothing cooperated.

I lay face down on a rough wooden floor. A fire lit the room, and I felt its heat from my left. Over its homey smell, I caught the tang of blood and the odor of scorched meat. Or flesh. The air hung with the echo of the sound that had awakened me: a woman’s scream.

“Uh-oh,” a voice said. “I, uh . . . I think she’s dead.”

“You killed her?” another voice demanded. I recognized it as the one associated with the dragon boots.

“No, I didn’t kill her,” the first voice said with professional annoyance. “I do know how to do this, you know. But look how burned she is.”

“From your irons.”

“No,” the torturer insisted. “I didn’t do this. Not on her arms and hands.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m a professional. I have a style. See here on her tits? And here? I made these; they’re very specific, they have a pattern and everything. These others are . . . arbitrary.”

“What the hell does that mean?” a third male voice demanded. “I’m so tired of you and your damn big words, like you’re some kind of wizard or something.”

“It means I didn’t make those other burns,” the torturer sighed.

A moment of silence passed. Again I tried to move, but I was still too foggy. It took every ounce of strength not to fade back into that nice padded darkness.

“No, that’s not what it means,” dragon boots said, his voice cold with fury. “It means she moved them. Sometime between her escape and the time we caught her, she hid them somewhere else. That’s how she got burned.”

“Where?” the clueless third man asked.

“How the hell do I know?” dragon boots exploded. He slammed his hand on a table I couldn’t see. Rattling metal told me it held the interrogator’s special tools. “We didn’t know where she hid them in the first place, so how could we know where they are now?”

“The boss won’t be happy,” the third man said.

“Let me worry about him,” dragon boots snapped.

“What about her boyfriend?” the torturer asked, and nudged me in the side with his foot.

Hands grabbed my hair and bent my neck painfully back so they could look at my face. I played dead, which wasn't hard. “This guy? You saw what he had in his saddle bags. He's just some dumb-ass in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I could still find out what he knows,” the torturer said. His eagerness really did scare me.

“He wouldn't last five minutes in this shape. No, we'll dump them both. Have to start from scratch. We know she hid them around here somewhere, so we'll just keep looking the old-fashioned way.”

He released my hair, and my head thumped hard against the floor. That was all it took; I dove back into quiet, peaceful nothing.

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When I woke up again, I was bathed in moonlight.

The clear sky above was alive with stars, all twinkling happily at me. I blinked, waited for the dizziness generated by that movement to pass, and then blinked again.

I lay on my back on the ground. I was untied, my arms and legs thrown wide like I wanted to embrace the night. A rock dug painfully into my behind, but I lacked the energy to move away from it. With tremendous concentration I turned my head to the right.

Laura Lesperitt lay beside me. Most of her front teeth, one eye and half an ear were gone. She was naked, and her upper torso was a mass of poker burns, cuts and bruises. I saw what the torturer meant: his points of contact were small and precise, but something else had burned the insides of her arms from wrist to elbow. The scabbing told me she'd been alive when most of it happened, but the milky stare of her remaining eye said she was past the agony now. Insects had already collected around the injuries, and a shadowy canine form slipped through the darkness beyond her: a wolf or coyote, cautiously approaching a free meal.

I tried to rise. I managed a feeble finger-wiggle.

We lay in a gully or a dry creek bed, where the light only reached us because the moon was straight overhead. The sides of the ravine rose sharply and seemed to my befuddled brain as if they might snap closed over us, trapping us in darkness like those fly-catching plants.

Suddenly a shadow blocked the moon. A shape in the air above me grew larger and made a high, keening sound. I knew some birds of prey hunted at night, and I recalled childhood stories of giant owls that would swoop down and snatch misbehaving brats from their beds. I'd never seen a bird large enough to lift a human being, but then again, this night seemed to be all about bad surprises.

Then my brain cleared enough for me to comprehend what I was actually seeing, and I used every last bit of available energy to roll twice, just before my horse Lola crashed down onto the spot I'd occupied. Her equine screech of terror ended with the sharp, wet sound of impact. Big globs of something splattered over me.

Three men stood silhouetted in the moonlight on the edge of the cliff. Dust glittered in the air from where they'd driven Lola over the edge. I lay very still; did they realize she had missed me?

I heard their murmurs without catching any words. Then they turned and walked away, apparently convinced I was as dead as my horse, and the girl. Boy, were they in for a surprise, I thought grimly. Especially that bastard with the dragon boots. All I needed was time to catch my breath.

Then I coughed, tasted blood and got a fresh jolt of agony from my side. I realized the girl and I had also been tossed off that cliff. I tried to rise, knowing if I stayed put I'd be dead by morning. But just breathing exhausted me, and before I knew it the night wrapped me up and again took away the pain. If this was death, I wouldn't protest.