

LOVE LIKE RAIN

A Novel by Kenneth Davis

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October 2017

PART I

Chapter 1

Life before desolation. If Jude forgot, he would perish. Nestled in wicker chairs on the porch, he and Trish had often watched the sun sparkle on the lake. Trish had said that the sun sprinkled diamonds, but if you reached for them they would vanish. It was a trick of nature to show you a glittering thing you couldn't possess. They'd talked about their plans, the children they would have. That was four years ago, an empty space that stretched out in memory. He kicked the porch railing with the toe of a battered hiking boot. "Trish, I'm sorry." He walked to the edge of the lake, now a crater, the last muddy patches dried out. The scorched remains of walleye and trout lay in furrows. It had not rained in two years. A cup of water was worth more than a chest of diamonds.

Jude went to bed. There were no night sounds. The crickets were flecks of ash, or maybe they were underground, lying in wait like thieves; if the rain returned they would swarm the planet. He tried not to think. He spoke softly to Trish, begging her forgiveness.

Morning came. Another day. Jude had tried to differentiate one from another by focusing on particular events: the day he fixed the busted hinge on the front door, the day he patched the crack in the cistern. This method had worked awhile, but there were so many days, too many to recall. It made him edgy that he'd forgotten. To calm himself, he thought of Trish.

Someone rapped on the front door. Quiet and still, Jude hoped the intruder would go away. Poachers and freeloaders had given him trouble before, roaming onto his property, some threatening, and a few resorting to violence. He'd driven off marauders at gunpoint. But since the summer, none had bothered him. When he drove his Cherokee to scavenge gas, he found bodies strewn on roadsides, poor souls who'd run out of provisions and had set out on one final death march. Most, however, had died in their

beds. They were entombed in cottages, apartment buildings, and deluxe condominiums.

The rapping grew impatient. Jude strode into the living room. A shotgun stood under the mantel of the fireplace. It was a 16-gauge, two barrels. A blast at close range would kill a wolf, a bear, or a man. He grabbed the weapon, cocked it, and curled his finger around the trigger. The butt pressed to his shoulder, his eyes fixed on the lock on the front door. It was a deadbolt, a model secured with three-inch wood screws. Since he was a teenager he'd hunted game. He'd shot deer and elk at a thousand yards. But if the time came and he had to defend himself, he wasn't sure he could kill a man. Unless he came face to face with a blood drinker. His finger tightened around the trigger. A fist pounded in bursts of three. Just when Jude figured the intruder wouldn't quit, the pounding stopped. Jude let himself relax. The barrel tipped down.

The porch creaked and a man with hair like wire peered through a window. The man wore a black t-shirt, the front torn from the collar, giving the impression that he was wearing a busted leash. His fingernails tapping on a windowpane, his face was hungry and wolfish. His twisted lips turned down on one side as if he'd had a stroke.

Jude slid the bolt, and lifted the latch. He tugged on the oak door, his other hand gripping the barrel of the shotgun. The door swung open, and when the man shambled forward, Jude blocked his path with the muzzle. The man stumbled backward, looked at Jude and stared at the shotgun. A sheath with a hunting knife hung from the rope that served as a belt. "I'll have that knife," Jude said. The man eased it from the sheath and gave it to Jude handle first. Then he raised his hands, bearing the expression of someone unjustly accused. "Don't mean any trouble," he said. His voice was like sandpaper against wood. "I haven't had water in two days." He licked white paste from the corners of his mouth. "Give me some water. Please, if you got some." He lowered his arms in

slow motion and mashed his lower lip between his thumb and the knuckle of his bent forefinger. "I got money." He placed a hand over a front pocket of his jeans. "Is it okay?" he said showing a sheepish smile. Jude kept the shotgun pointed, watching the man's hand. "Don't do something crazy," the man said. He wormed his hand into the pocket to pull out crumpled bills. He shoved them at Jude.

Jude stepped back. "Save it."

When the man tried to stuff the cash into a pocket, a ten fell at his feet. He didn't pick it up. "No reason to point that thing at me. I don't mean any harm. All I want is some water." Two or three sizes too big, his jeans were frayed at the knees, which were skinned and marked with clotted blood. The man scratched his mane and tilted his head to get a better look at the interior of the cabin, his eyes jiggling as he sized up the situation. He smelled of grease and sweat. "I'll work for water," he said pitifully, maybe trying to sound that way.

Jude lowered the shotgun. "Come on." The man slithered in, tripping on a moccasin that Jude has left on the rug. He lurched forward, an armrest of the couch breaking his fall. Jude noticed a cross carved into the man's forearm. The man drew the arm behind his back and whistled. "Can't hardly stand," he said, showing that sheepish smile again. He followed Jude into the kitchen. Jude clicked on the safety and propped the shotgun against a wall. The man sat on a chair at the kitchenette. His fingernails were dirty, his knuckles etched with ridges like walnut shells. He had a hard look, and the muscles that showed were lean and taut.

Jude took a warm pitcher of water from the refrigerator. To conserve fuel, he ran the generator in the basement mostly at night. Jude filled a glass. The man clutched it with both hands, and, trembling, he raised it to his mouth. He smacked his lips and

swallowed, as if reminding himself how to drink. When water spilled on the table, he moaned. Jude wondered if this wolf-man would lap up the puddle on the table. At first the man sputtered between gulps, but he sped up his consumption as if cranking up a motor. He made guttural sounds while his whiskered Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Sure enough, when the glass was empty, he dipped a forefinger into the puddle on the table and raised the finger to his mouth. The man looked at Jude beseechingly, and held the glass, arm extended. Jude tipped the pitcher and poured.

Jude asked the man's name.

"Amp," he said. He had trouble getting the word out as if he'd forgotten, or maybe it was too taxing to talk.

"Amp who?"

"Just Amp." Amp looked around, craned his neck to peek at the bedroom, which was behind the kitchen. Jude scooted across the room and closed the door. Trish wouldn't have wanted the eyes of a stranger on her bedroom, especially when socks and underwear were strewn on the floor. Jude would straighten things up when Amp had gone. Almost as an afterthought Amp asked for Jude's name. "Jude Madsen." Amp grinned, showing yellow teeth. Jude noticed that a canine was cracked and seemed to be rotting. It occurred to Jude that a problem as minor as a cavity might be fatal in a world where guile and perseverance were the only safeguards against death. Then again, bacteria had probably died off, and viruses were most likely dormant. A man, in this sanitized environment, might live a hundred years as long as he could find food and water. The shotgun was still leaning against the kitchen wall. Jude decided to leave it there. This man was no threat, and in any case, exposure to the sun, thirst, and hunger had weakened him.

"You must be hungry," Jude said.

Amp's voice was still scratchy, but not as much as before. "Could eat a cow, hoofs and all." He chuckled and rubbed his eyes red.

"You like chili?"

"You bet," said Amp. The jug was on the table. Amp eyed it, glanced at Jude, and then refilled his glass.

Jude opened a kitchen cabinet, which was stocked with cans stacked two high, four deep, and ten across. He removed a can of chili con carne, and pried off the lid with an old-fashioned can opener, the kind with a blade you had to work up and down. Jude scooped out the chili and poured it into a ceramic bowl. After he'd scraped out every last bit with a wood spoon, he inspected the can to make sure he hadn't missed a morsel. Jude passed the bowl to Amp, who gripped a tablespoon with a fist. He gobbled his meal, sauce dripping onto his beard.

"Where you from?" Jude asked.

"Here and there," Amp said with his mouth so full Jude barely understood him. Sauce spilled on the table.

"You have a place around here?"

Amp shoveled chili into his mouth. "Nah," he said. He hummed while he ate; Jude supposed that Amp was unaware of that. When Amp used an index finger to gather what was left of the chili, Jude noticed that Amp's ring finger was a nub.

Amp stopped cold. "What you looking at?"

Jude said nothing.

"Put my fist through a window. Sheared half the finger right off." Amp wiggled the nub as if it were a dog's stubby tail.

"Lost your temper?"

Amp sniggered. “You know how women are.”

The spoon clinked on the bottom of the bowl. Amp sighed and leaned back in his chair. He wiped his beard with a hand and wiped the hand on his jeans. Jude decided he would give Amp a change of clothes.

Jude and Amp walked to the living room. It was cavernous with a high paneled ceiling and a scorched brick fireplace. One benefit of the drought: plenty of dry wood from dead trees. Jude had calculated that his store of matches would last another six months. The head of a deer was mounted on the wall near the fireplace. The poor creature looked dazed. Jude had never liked having those timid eyes follow him around, but he’d never found the time to remove the mounted head.

The house used to be a hunting lodge that was too big for two people, but Jude and Trish had planned to have children. They’d bought the property because of its view of the lake, and because the lodge, which needed work, was a good buy. When Trish was pregnant, Jude had begun to renovate the second floor. Trish was going to plant a vegetable garden. She’d bought packages of cabbage, squash, and cucumber seeds that were still in a kitchen drawer.

Amp stretched his legs. He picked at a scab on his knee. A picture of Jude and Trish rested on the mantel, Jude’s arm around her shoulder, hers around his waist. Their heads were tilted toward each other. Jude remembered how her hair smelled. Her skin had a sweet, natural scent like a delicate perfume.

“Your wife?”

“Yes,” Jude said. He walked to the fireplace and picked up the picture frame. He was staring at it when he realized that Amp was beside him. “Real pretty,” Amp said. He took a closer look. “Wouldn’t mind....”

“Wouldn’t mind what?” Jude said.

Amp moved even closer to the picture. Jude faced him.

“Didn’t mean any disrespect,” Amp said.

Jude shook his head. “No problem.” He glanced at Amp’s hands, which were callused. The man’s fingers were moving like worms. Jude placed the picture frame at the far end of the mantel.

Jude wandered to the kitchen. He gazed out a window. From his vantage point he saw only the far end of the massive hole that was once a lake. He imagined the lake as it was four years ago, sparkling, teeming with life. But now the sky was cloudless and relentlessly blue. He shrugged. Who would have believed that a blue sky would be a curse and that he would pray for storm clouds? Nimbus clouds, he remembered from high school science class. He longed for the turbulence of those plump, charcoal-colored clouds. And he yearned for Trish. Sometimes he had magical thoughts. If he painted the bedroom, she would show up to praise his industriousness. If he arranged her love letters chronologically, she would read them to him. He never surrendered to these impulses, for he felt that they would hasten his journey into madness. It was creeping up on him like the poachers he’d held off at gunpoint. Sooner or later one of those thugs would overtake him. Knowing that the end wasn’t far off didn’t frighten him. Sometimes before going to bed he’d mentioned that to Trish.

“Turn around,” Amp said. The shotgun was pointed at Jude. Amp smirked. The rasp in his voice was gone. “Sorry, cowboy, but you’ve got one hell of a set up here. I need your water. And your food. Your woman too.”

Jude raised his hands. His Walther PPK was in the glove compartment of the Cherokee. If he broke for the Remington above the mantel, Amp would blow out his back

before he got the rifle off its brackets. His only other option was to rush the son of a bitch. Watchful, he leaned against the sink. “You don’t have to do this,” he said.

“Where’s the woman?”

Jude didn’t say a word. To bargain with Amp over Trish, even to mention her name, would have defiled her memory.

“Couldn’t find nothing.” Amp said. “Where’s the water come from.”

“There’s enough for both of us.”

Amp angled the barrel away from Jude’s chest. He stepped closer to a window, pulled a curtain, and, while he kept an eye on Jude, he took a peek outside. It was another sunny day, too hot for April. A breeze that ruffled dried-out tree limbs gave no relief. He eyed Jude, the gun trained on Jude’s belly. “Too late for deals. I’ll figure out about the water.”

Jude diverted his eyes from Amp to the swirls in the linoleum. He let his shoulders slump and his body slacken. The shotgun drifted downward, its barrel pointed at the floor. A window creaked, maybe from the breeze. When Amp turned his head, Jude lurched forward. The barrel of the shotgun swung upward, grazing Jude’s forehead. Amp stepped back. He had a clear shot and squeezed the trigger. The gun didn’t fire; the safety was on.

Amp wielded the shotgun like a club, smashing the stock on Jude’s back. Jude grunted and collapsed to the floor. Amp drew back the weapon, and was about to wallop Jude again, when Jude charged, driving Amp backward until his body thudded against the wall. He dropped the shotgun. Jude threw him to the floor and got on top of him. Grabbing wiry hair, Jude yanked Amp’s head back, and wrapped his arm around Amp’s throat, but Amp elbowed Jude in the ribs, reared up. When Jude lost his grip, Amp

scuffled away.

At opposite ends of the kitchen their eyes met and they stopped. Jude bent an arm around his throbbing back. A rib may have cracked. “Get out of here. Just get the hell out.”

“You don’t have a chance,” Amp growled. “You don’t have the stomach for killing. Getting rid of you doesn’t trouble me, not one bit.”

Jude went for the gun, but before he could take hold of it, a knee jammed into his side and the crook of Amp’s elbow was a vice around Jude’s throat. Jude gagged and twisted, managing to grab Amp’s forearm. Amp clawed and dug his nails into Jude’s neck. Jude’s skin stung like hell, a warm line of blood sliding down to his collarbone. They spun around in circles until Amp clipped Jude’s jaw with a solid right, and, when Jude rocked backward, Amp tackled him. They slammed into the kitchenette. The jug of water shattered on the floor. One of the legs of the kitchenette gave out, and Jude and Amp crashed to the floor, a shard of glass from the broken jug slicing Jude’s palm. Amp lifted a chair, held it over his shoulder, and hurled it. As Jude dodged the chair, Amp rushed him and connected with a roundhouse left to Jude’s temple. They tussled and, when Jude got Amp in a bear hug, Amp dug his teeth into Jude’s ear, biting all the way through. Jude released Amp, and cupped his hand over his ear. They retreated to opposite ends of the kitchen.

“You’re losing blood,” Amp said. “You’re almost done.” Amp was breathing hard. “All I have to do is wait you out. I’m getting stronger while you’re getting weaker.”

Amp bulled into Jude’s gut, and muscled behind him, pressing his thumbs into the sockets of Jude’s eyes. “I’ll blind you, you son of a bitch.” As Amp said this and his thumbs bore in, Jude squeezed his eyes shut, tugged at Amp’s arms, and tried to flip him

over. Amp buried his finger deeper, and Jude saw splotches of black and white. An electric jolt buzzed inside his head, and he thought he might vomit or pass out. Amp's legs clamped around Jude's waist. Jude couldn't turn, couldn't twist. There was no air. Amp tightened the vice.

One of Amp's forefingers was sticking right out. Jude grabbed it, and bent it back. Amp struggled to straighten the finger, but Jude had leverage. The middle joint held for a moment but then it snapped. The sound was loud and sharp like a dry twig breaking. A strand of ligament popped through the skin. Amp shrieked, "You broke it, you son of a bitch." The left forefinger dangled at the knuckle. Amp screamed like a madman, scurrying to the far end of the kitchen. He glared at Jude while he tried to reset the finger. Jude shouldn't have given him time. The shotgun within reach, Amp scrambled for it, and, using his good hand, he swung it wildly. Jude ducked and the shotgun struck the handle on the refrigerator door, the stock of the weapon detaching from the magazine. Amp threw the gun at Jude who sidestepped as the weapon missed him and thwacked on the floor.

Bent at the waist, hands on his thighs, Amp was gasping. "You think you got me beat, but you're wrong. You don't have the guts to kill." He gulped air, snatched a couple of breaths. "That's why you're a dead man." He cradled his broken finger, trying to turn a grimace into a smile. They both eyed what was left of the shotgun, but neither made a move.

"You can't win," Jude said. "I'll let you walk out the front door."

The muscles in Amp's jaw were working; his eyes were slits. "I can see it in your face, how scared you are." Folding his dislocated finger into a fist, he was hunched over, girding himself. Swollen and purple, the knuckle of the finger was the size of a grape.

“I’m giving you a chance to save yourself,” Jude said.

Amp backed off a couple of steps; his tone was skeptical. “You’ll let me walk?”

“Just get your ass out of here.”

“I’ll be needing my knife.”

“No knife.”

Amp showed that mawkish smile. “Okay. No knife.” He drifted toward the butcher block counter, clutching the swollen finger. “I know when I’m beat.” Back against the counter, he wobbled. When his knees buckled, he braced himself on the countertop. He stretched his arms. The guy was about to keel over, maybe pass out. As Jude bent over to pick up the shotgun, Amp seized the can opener, rushed forward, and sliced the skin of Jude’s forearm. Amp lashed out in jerky movements, nearly catching Jude, but he soon began to miss by larger and larger margins, laughing in short bursts until he swung awkwardly and ponderously. Amp staggered. Before he could recover his balance, Jude grabbed his wrist, and wrestled him for the can opener. When Jude smashed his fist on Amp’s dislocated finger, Amp yowled. Jude wrenched the can opener from him.

The blade, in one deft swipe, bisected Amp’s trachea. The structure bent like a rubber hose as the blade cut it in two. Jude slashed again and severed the carotid artery. After the fight that Amp has waged, Jude could hardly believe that he had dealt these blows so easily. He held the can opener ready to strike again, but there was no need. It clanked on the linoleum floor. Blood spurted like a fountain, pulsing with every heartbeat. A red arc surged, dipped, and surged again. Amp’s eyes were wide open, his mouth agape while he clutched his neck. Gagging, he staggered backward, swooning, reeling left and right. Head bowed, he dropped to his knees, blood flowing between his

fingers, soaking the front of his t-shirt. He howled like a dying animal.

Life gushed out of him. Blood splattered on the floor and puddled at his feet. His boots left scarlet footprints, a viscous pool spreading like a malevolent growth. Nearly black, blood ran along the crevices in the linoleum. Thick and oily, it covered half the kitchen floor, spread under the refrigerator and stove, and seeped under the bedroom door.

Jude surveyed the wounds to his hand, arm, and ear. They weren't too bad, not life-threatening. He'd tend to them as soon as he could. He moved quickly to the sink, wrung out a dishtowel, and hurried to Amp, who thrashed and gurgled. Kneeling, Jude could not staunch the bleeding; the man would die.

The rip in Amp's throat was like a second mouth. It looked as if Amp had gorged on blood and now was vomiting red. Jude held Amp's twitching head. There was a river of blood, but soon the flow subsided to a trickle. Amp's legs spasmed, his pupils black, empty spaces. His head tipped back, widening the gash, exposing a yellowish membrane, and a trachea sliced in two. There was a final paroxysm, a series of clicks that came from deep in his throat, and then he was still. His eyes were locked on the kitchen ceiling until Jude closed them.

