

# **Sweet Dreams**

**A Novel by Fred McKibben**

**Copyright – Fred McKibben, 2017**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and events depicted in this book are a product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

I felt someone's hot breath on my ear.  
"Sweet dreams, Mr. Rose."

## Chapter 1

*She's gorgeous*, Dr. Miles Denton kept thinking to himself. He was supposed to be listening to the young woman, making notes and occasionally asking insightful questions. But, mostly he just watched her, jotting a word or two on his little notepad from time to time. Fortunately, the machine on his desk was recording everything so he could fill in the blanks later.

There would be questions he should have asked, and he would make a list of those for the next session. Any good psychologist would do that. The paper trail was so important these days. More than one of his colleagues had gotten in trouble by forgetting their professional standards with a beautiful client.

Dr. Denton tried to focus. She was still

talking about her parents.

“The thing is, I know they’re right,” she was saying. “But, I can’t help it.”

“It’s not important to you now,” Denton said, “but it will be.” This was ground they had covered in earlier sessions. Zoey had tested to near genius level IQ, yet she was a mediocre student, at best.

“I’m sure it will be,” Zoey Patriz agreed. “But, that’s then, this is now.”

“Tell me about the other things,” Dr. Denton suggested. “The things that are more important.”

“You won’t understand.”

“I might,” the psychologist said. “I was seventeen once myself.”

“Were you a seventeen-year-old girl?” Zoey asked, turning her head to look at the psychologist.

“No, but I knew a lot of them.”

“I’ll bet you did,” she said, still staring at him. “How’d it work out? Did you get lucky?” He could feel his face flush as the girl’s eyes continued to bore into him. At 33, Denton still possessed the youthful looks of his college days. He was six feet tall, with a slender, but athletic body that the gray slacks and button down checked shirt might have been tailored for. His hair would have been thick and dark if he let it grow, but instead, he kept it cut only

slightly longer than his two-day beard. But the things most people noticed, especially women, were the deep blue eyes and perfect teeth.

“We aren’t here to talk about me,” Dr. Denton said.

“What a shame. It might be fun to talk about you for a change.”

“Your parents pay me to listen to you talk.”

“They’re not here,” Zoey said. “We can talk about anything we want to talk about and you still get paid.”

“I’m a professional, Zoey,” Dr. Denton said. “Now, tell me about those things that are more important than school?” She looked away now, and Miles Denton studied her closely. He knew the girl was 17, but if she’d been a stranger and told him she was twenty-seven, he’d have had no problem believing it. She had the same light-brown skin as the many beautiful Creole women he saw on the streets of New Orleans, and the color was smooth and uniform from her forehead to delicate feet at the end of her shapely legs covered by form fitting jeans. Lush, dark brown hair swept around her face and rested on breasts that moved slowly up and down as she breathed. Except for the light red lipstick on her full lips, he couldn’t see that she was wearing any makeup at all.

“OK, Doc,” Zoey said. “When you were seventeen, were the smart girls really hot, too?”

“Some of them were,” Denton answered.

“And did they hang with the really cool crowd?”

“Not particularly, I guess,” Dr. Denton admitted. “The one I’m thinking of had more important things on her mind.”

“So, there was just one smart girl that was hot?” Zoey continued to quiz him.

“You mean ‘who was hot’ instead of ‘that was hot’,” Denton corrected her grammar and immediately regretted it.

“Fuck you,” Zoey said. She got up from the leather armchair and walked to one of the large windows that looked out onto to Henry Clay Avenue.

“Is it important to be in with the cool crowd, Zoey?”

She turned to face Denton, “They’re my squad.”

“Let’s try a thought experiment, Zoey,” the psychologist suggested. “Suppose you had a choice: You could become a world-renowned scientist and have an amazing fifty-year career, or you could be ‘smokin’ hot’ for the next ten or fifteen years. Which would you choose?”

“Smokin’ hot,” she answered immediately.

Miles Denton simply nodded his head, but said nothing.

“I know that’s not the right answer,” she continued, “but it’s what my body is telling me

to feel now.”

“How do you think you’ll feel ten years from now?”

“I’ll be different then,” she answered. “Maybe I’ll be a scientist, maybe not. Maybe I’ll be married to a great guy, maybe not.”

“Is there a particular boy you have in mind when you say, ‘great guy’?”

“Not a boy,” Zoey said. Again, she stared into Denton’s eyes.

“You’re not interested in any of the boys?” the psychologist quizzed her.

“Some of them are fun to hang out with,” Zoey said. “But, when I think about hooking up with someone, I look for older guys.”

“What attracts you about older guys?”

“They’re not clueless,” Zoey responded.

“Clueless about what?”

“Sex. How to treat a woman.”

“Some older men haven’t learned that either,” Dr. Denton pointed out.

“I’m pretty sure the one I’m thinking of has learned it,” she said.

Miles Denton felt his face flush as the young woman kept her eyes on him. It wasn’t the first time a client had flirted with him, at least he thought she was flirting with him, and he’d never felt such a strong impulse to flirt back. He cut his eyes to the clock behind his desk. A few minutes remained in the session, but he felt it

best to end it early in order to preserve his professionalism.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said, “but I need to end the session a few minutes early today.”

“Oh, just when things were getting interesting,” Zoey pouted.

“Sorry, but there’s something I need to handle.”

“What a shame you having to handle your ‘something’ all by yourself,” Zoey Patriz said as she started toward the door.

Once again Dr. Denton felt the blood rush to his face. He said nothing as the young woman closed the door behind herself, but listened to her footsteps in the hallway leading to the front door of the old mansion. The home had been in the family for four generations. His parents, both professors at nearby Tulane University, had deeded the house to Miles two years earlier and retired to Spain. He’d moved his office into the home two months after that. Now, he used the money he was saving in rent and mortgage payments to make a number of renovation to the house and grounds.

When he heard the front door close, Miles Denton walked to one of the big floor-to-ceiling windows and watched as Zoey reached the sidewalk and turned right. She’d gone only a few steps when a young man about Denton’s

age got out of a nearby car and approached the girl who kissed him quickly on the lips. They spoke for several seconds, then the man opened the car door and held it while Zoey slipped inside. He circled the car and got into the driver's seat. As the vehicle pulled away from the curb and disappeared down the street, both relief and disappointment washed through Miles Denton's mind. Obviously, Zoey Patriz's older man was someone other than himself.

## Chapter 2

The morning air was still quite cool as I walked down Calle Canal toward the Jardin. When I reached the square, workers were still busily cleaning up the remains of the party from the previous night. Dia de los Muertos — Day of the Dead — might sound like an unpleasant episode, but it was, in fact, one of the most festive events of the entire year in Mexico. And nowhere in Mexico did Dia de los Muertos better than San Miguel de Allende.

The tradition originated with the Aztecs over three thousand years ago as a tribute to the cycle of life. The pious conquistadors tried their best to stamp out the custom, but in the end, they simply gave up and incorporated the celebration into their own catholic tradition

each November 1st and 2nd. In recent years, San Miguel had added the Festival la Calaca — the Skull Festival — which included parades, art, music and dancing. In general, a very lively party.

I stepped into the Starbucks at the corner of Canal and Hidalgo, ordered a latte and found a small table near the back. I dropped my phone on the table and opened the laptop to bring up the morning's New York Times. The political situation in the U. S. looked ridiculous. I didn't know whether to be glad to be out of the country, or worry about damaged relations with my new country of residence. I scanned the table of contents looking for any items that would provide more pleasant reading. A piece about a new solar power technology looked promising so I pulled it up and began reading.

Two paragraphs in, I heard my distinctive ringtone and glanced at the caller ID. At first, I didn't believe it. Kay Luckett, my ex-wife. In the eight years since the divorce, we'd only spoken to each other three or four times, then only when it was unavoidable. My first instinct was to tap the "Ignore" option on the phone, but I didn't. Several possibilities went through my brain, all of which were serious. Kay Luckett would not be calling Eddie Rose if it wasn't serious.

I tapped the phone and raised it to my ear. "It's Eddie," I said.

"Eddie, it's Kay," her voice spilled into my ear.

"I know," I said. "Caller ID."

"I'm sorry to bother you," she began, "and I wouldn't if it weren't something really serious."

"OK. What going on?" My first thought was our daughter, Ann, who was fourteen weeks pregnant in Tampa, Florida, where both she and Kay lived. Ann and husband Larry were so excited about the baby, and I was horrified that there might be a problem. "Is it Ann?"

"No," Kay said. "Ann's fine."

"Thank god," I sighed. "What is the problem?"

"It's my niece, Zoey," Kay said. "She's missing."

"How long?" I asked. I thought I had met the girl once. She must have been five or six at the time.

"Two days," Kay told me.

"The police?"

"They wouldn't do anything until she was missing forty-eight hours. Now, their working on it, but it's New Orleans, the police are overwhelmed."

"I'm sure that's true," I said.

“My sister, Lilli, asked me to call you. She remembered that case you had a few years ago when that man faked his own kidnapping, but you figured it out.”

“Does Lilli think Zoey faked being kidnapped?”

“Of course not,” Kay said.

“Has there been a ransom note?”

“No.”

“How old is Zoey now?”

“Seventeen.”

“How was her relationship with her parents?” I asked.

“Strained,” Kay said.

“Any history with drugs?”

“No. At least, Lilli doesn’t think so.”

“Parents don’t always know,” I pointed out.

“That’s what I told Lilli,” Kay said.

“She’s probably at a friend’s house just to show off her independence.”

“Lilli’s called all her friends,” Kay said.

“At least, the ones she knows.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Come to New Orleans,” Kay said.

“I don’t have a private investigator’s license in Louisiana,” I pointed out.

“Lilli’s husband, Warren, has it all figured out,” Kay said. “He’ll explain when you get here.”

I tried to think of some other reason to stay out of it, but came up empty. Truth was, Kay's sister, Lilli, was about the only member of her family who I actually liked. "OK," I said. "I'll be there tomorrow."

"Text me your flight information and I'll pick you up at the airport," Kay said.

I hesitated. Being in a car alone with Kay was a painful thought. "Don't worry about it. I'll take a cab to the hotel."

"Call me when you get here. Warren has a suite set up for you at the Avalon Hotel."

"OK."

\*\*\*\*\*

I met Samantha Loggins for lunch at Mama Mia, a block off the Jardin on Umaran. As I tried to explain the trip to New Orleans, I realized it probably made no sense at all to her and shouldn't make sense to me. Samantha and I had known each other for a couple of years. The romance side of things progressed slowly at first, but on my last visit to San Miguel, we both knew it was time to take things to a new level. I gave up my apartment in Tampa and moved into Samantha's beautiful home in Mexico.

"I thought you despised her," she said of my ex-wife.

“That’s probably not a strong enough word for it,” I said.

“Then why go?”

“For the kid, I guess. And for Lilli.”

“Can you really help?” Samantha asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said. “At least I can stay after the police. I’ll probably have to hire a local investigator.”

“That’s going to be expensive.”

“Lilli and her husband have plenty of money,” I observed. “He owns a chemical company of some sort. Kay said they’ll cover all the expenses.”

“When will you go?”

“I have a flight from Querétaro tomorrow at eleven,” I told her. The small airport was only an hour away and had direct flights to Houston and Dallas. My connection to New Orleans would arrive before five o’clock. I’d thought about trying to get a flight that afternoon, but that would have meant a breakneck rush to Mexico City and I would likely still miss the flight.

“When will you be back?”

“Just a couple of days I think.”

“Let’s hope so,” Samantha said.

“The less time I spend with her, the better.”

\*\*\*\*\*

After lunch, I walked Samantha back to her office on Calle Zacateros. Through ten years in San Miguel, Samantha Loggins had built a highly successful real estate business focused on American and Canadian retirees, of which there were already thousands in the small city. San Miguel was far enough south to avoid most of the cold air of winter, and at sixty-five hundred feet, summers were cool and dry.

Once Samantha disappeared through the office entrance, I followed Zacateros back to Umaran, where I turned left to find Quebrada a block away. I walked slowly up the narrow street and over the bridge that crossed Calle Canal, my thoughts on the young woman missing in a dangerous city. Forty-eight hours without a ransom demand was too long, so I doubted that kidnapping was the reason Zoey had vanished. On the other hand, some people took pretty young women for reasons other than money. I remembered a strikingly pretty, precocious little girl of five or six and could imagine that she had grown up to be quite beautiful.

I turned left onto Calle Blanco, a street so narrow that many vehicles couldn't pass through it without folding back their side-view mirrors to avoid scraping the high adobe walls of the houses that lined the cobblestone path. Twenty yards along the way, I unlocked the

large wooden door and stepped into Samantha's beautiful garden. Bright sunshine streamed through the leaves of a large laurel tree while two jacarandas waited patiently for their springtime show. Bougainvillea and ivy climbed the interior of the twelve-foot terracotta colored walls. The beauty of the garden struck me every time I stepped inside from the claustrophobic closeness of the plain, bare exterior walls that lined the street.

I made a small pot of coffee and started the process of packing. New Orleans in November would be warm, but not stifling so my San Miguel clothing would probably be just right. I found my passport and threw it into my laptop bag, along with a charger for my phone and an assortment of office supplies.

Finally, I grabbed another coffee and had just settled into a cushioned chair on the rooftop patio when my phone alerted me to a text.

*Meet for dinner at Zumo. Expect a proper send-off when we get home!! Sam*

The thought of a "proper send-off" raised my spirits considerably. Other than being somewhat kind and considerate, I couldn't think of any reason why this beautiful woman had fallen in love with me, a fifty-five-year-old freelance insurance investigator whose career

ambitions had mostly dried up years ago. I'm 5' 9" and 160 pounds of reasonably distributed weight, but my short white beard and the ring of gray hair around a bald dome make me look a few years older than I am, so I knew it wasn't my looks that impressed her. Samantha was a few years younger than me, having recently turned forty-nine, but her slender figure, thick brown hair and smooth skin made her look younger than that.

Since I'd moved in permanently at the beginning of September, I'd only left once for an arson investigation in Kansas City. The five days away from her had been excruciating and I dreaded this new separation, especially considering that Kay would be there. Well, at least I would have a chance to renew my tourist visa on the return trip.

### Chapter 3

I stepped out of an exit from baggage claim at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to find a gray sky and a light rain falling. I looked at my watch, 5:56. Daylight savings time was in effect for a few more days, so I had expected more light, but the cloud cover had brought the evening on early. I rolled my single carry-on bag with a computer bag strapped to it toward the nearest taxi stand, where I waited behind three other travelers until it was my turn.

“Hotel Avalon,” I said to the driver once I settled into the cab.

The driver, of Middle Eastern or Pakistani origin, said nothing but put the vehicle in gear and pulled out into traffic. I checked my phone

and saw a missed call from Kay Luckett, my ex-wife. I tapped the phone to dial her number.

“Are you at the hotel yet?” Kay asked upon answering.

“Just left the airport,” I said. I guess neither of us felt the need for “hello” or some other nicety.

“There’s a bar off the lobby at the Avalon,” Kay said. “Warren, Lilli and I will meet you there at seven o’clock.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “I’ll drop my bag in the room and be down as soon as I can.”

I checked my watch, 6:20. Once the driver had merged into traffic on Interstate 10, I leaned forward a little. “I need to be at the Avalon by seven o’clock, can we do that?”

“No problem sir,” he said with a musical accent that sounded more Pakistani and less Arabic.

I felt the cab accelerate as we weaved between slower cars. Fortunately, most of the traffic was going the opposite direction. I gripped the armrest a little harder as the cab squeezed between an Econovan with a roll of carpet hanging out the back and an eighteen-wheeler delivering cheap Chinese goods to Walmart stores. I breathed easier once we’d accelerated past the big truck and I saw more open road in front of us. A few minutes later, the highway made a wide swing to the right where Interstate

610 split off toward Slidell and our lanes headed toward downtown. I thought about the way this place looked the last time I'd seen it in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Insurance companies were swamped with claims and I had been part of an army of adjusters and investigators trying to sort out wind claims from flood claims and determine the cause of the many fires that destroyed properties with little damage otherwise.

By the time my driver made a tire-squealing exit onto St. Charles Avenue, full darkness had taken over the sky and the rain had gotten harder. After several blocks, the stores and restaurants that lined the busy street began to give way to stately mansions. Massive oak trees draped their large limbs over the roadway, illuminated by lights on arched metal poles along the street car line that ran along the median. A block ahead, one of the ancient cars had stopped to pick up passengers, its bright interior lights illuminating a dozen or so tired looking riders.

The cab pulled into a circular driveway almost directly in front of the streetcar stop. The Avalon Hotel was not much larger than the mansions that neighbored it, but the bright lights under the portico announced that it was indeed different. I settled with the driver using cash I'd gotten from an ATM at the airport and hurried inside. It was almost seven and I desperately

wanted to brush my teeth and change shirts before meeting with Lilli and Warren.

At the registration desk, I learned that the Avalon had twenty guest rooms and I would be in the Cardinal suite on the top floor. The receptionist assured me that all my charges had been guaranteed by Mr. Patríz and I should enjoy my stay. I thanked him and headed toward the hotel's one elevator just off the lobby. I glanced into the bar to my right, where I saw Kay, Lilli and Warren already waiting for me.

The old elevator slowly creaked and groaned its way up to the fourth floor where I found a large set of double doors with a sign that read "Cardinal Suite". I slipped the green key card into the slot on the door and heard a click as the digital lock recognized the coded card and flashed a green light to welcome me. I pushed the door open and stepped into the most stunning hotel suite I had ever seen. As my eyes swept around the sumptuous sitting room, I felt as if I'd somehow stepped through a time machine into some gentle time in the long history of this great city.

I wanted to stand there and study the beautiful room, but people were waiting for me, so I dropped my bag and computer onto the large four-poster in the bedroom and dug out my little toiletries case to take care of the tooth brushing. I'd intended to change shirts, but decided to get

on with the meeting downstairs. Warren and Lilli would understand and I really didn't care about impressing Kay.

\*\*\*\*\*

As soon as I walked into the bar, Kay Lockett saw me and stood up to wave me over to the table. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen her in a casual setting, but could only remember lawyer's offices and courtrooms for at least the last eight years. I had to admit, she still looked good. At twenty-five, my weakness for redheads had led me to fall madly in love with her and I pursued her until she finally said yes. But, one day the magic faded for her, and Myron Lockett came along to take her away. I was devastated at first, but eventually, the pain faded and I began to realize the magic had probably never been there.

Like I said, she looked good. The hair wasn't red so much as it was copper, like a new penny. And it cascaded thickly just past her shoulders with an occasional curl for emphasis. A small streak of blond swept off in each direction from a part in the center of her forehead. Little wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes were barely noticeable. A simple black blouse and blue jeans looked elegant on Kay. Like I said, she looked good.

“Thanks for coming, Eddie,” Kay said when I reached the table. Warren and Lilli stood to greet me as well.

“Of course I came,” I said, then turned to Lilli, “I so sorry about the circumstances, Lilli,” I took her hand as I said it.

“We appreciate it,” Warren Patriz said. He was tall, over six feet, and had the dark hair and complexion of his Latin forefathers. I’d met Warren on a few other occasions and was always surprised by his swarthy appearance. Lilli, on the other hand, was a picture of meekness, as she had always been. She was shorter than Kay, almost petite, with short blond hair and a little more roundness to her figure than I remembered from previous meetings. She had dark eyes that never seemed to look directly at you. Lilli was usually an elegant dresser, but tonight she wore plain black pants, a simple white sweater, and no makeup.

“Are there any new developments?” I asked as I took the chair Warren had moved into place for me.

“The police are working on it now,” Warren said. “They wouldn’t do anything for two days.”

“So I understand,” I said. “Do they have any leads?”

“They’ve interviewed the psychologist, Dr. Denton,” Warren told me. “He may have seen something.”

“Psychologist?”

Lilli looked up as if to speak, but hesitated.

“Yes,” Warren said. “Zoey was going through some things.” I noticed Lilli sink back into her chair, her desire to speak apparently passed.

“What sort of things?”

“The same things most kids her age go through, I guess,” Warren answered. “She wouldn’t listen to her mother or me. Not interested in her school work; angry at times, particularly at Lilli.”

“Was there any particular thing that would trigger the anger?”

“We wanted — want — the best for Zoey. She has a brilliant mind, but she doesn’t seem to care much about using it.”

“Zoey is also an exceptionally beautiful young woman,” Kay interjected. “There are a lot of competing pressures on a young woman like that.” She seemed to be speaking to Warren rather than to me. I had a feeling this was part of an ongoing conversation. I looked from Kay to Warren, then to Lilli, who gave a slight nod toward Kay.

“Did the police learn anything from the psychologist?”

“He told the police he saw Zoey get into a car with a man who was apparently waiting for her outside his office,” Warren told me.

“The doctor must have walked out with her,” I observed.

“He said he watched her through the window,” Warren informed me.

“Like I said, Zoey is the kind of girl men watch through windows,” Kay observed.

“Sure,” I said to her, then to Warren, “You said the man was waiting for her, so it must have been someone she knew. Do you have any idea who it was?”

“No,” Warren Patriz said. “We’ve spoken to several of her friends and none of them had any idea who it might have been.”

“What kind of car was it?”

“Jaguar,” Warren answered. “Not one of the cheap ones either.”

“A kid with money then,” I observed. I hadn’t been aware that there were cheap Jaguars.

“Not a kid,” Lilli said, finding her voice now.

“How old?”

“Thirty, maybe a little older. That’s what Dr. Denton thought,” Lilli said.

“Are the police looking for the car?”

“I guess that’s one for you to ask them,” Warren Patriz said. “They aren’t telling us much at all.”

“They probably won’t tell me anything,” I said. “I don’t have a PI license.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Warren said. “My head of security at the plant moonlights as a private investigator. You’ll work with him.”

“When can I meet him?”

“I’ll pick you up here in the morning at 8:30.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The Avalon had a small dining room off one end of the bar and Warren signaled that we should take the remains of cocktails and wine glasses to a table where a freshly laundered white tablecloth had just been spread and set after an elderly couple had just left. Once we were all settled around the table, Warren ordered a collection of appetizers for the table and he and I both ordered a bowl of seafood gumbo, which he assured me was actually made at Louie’s a couple of blocks down the avenue, and was among the best in the city.

“So tell us about life in Mexico,” Kay said, diverting the subject away from her missing niece for a while.

“I love it,” I said.

“So Ann tells me,” Kay said. Somehow, the idea of my ex-wife and grown daughter discussing me was a little disconcerting.

“My plan is to gradually reduce my work in the states over the next couple of years, then

drink margaritas full time.” I meant it as a joke, but I probably sounded pretty sincere.

“Ann is dying to meet the new girlfriend,” Kay said. I cringed a bit. This didn’t seem like a conversation that should be taking place in front of Warren and Lilli.

“They’re coming down to San Miguel in May,” I said. “I can’t wait to show them around.”

“Do you think your girlfriend will like having a two-month-old baby in the house?”

“Samantha is excited about them coming,” I insisted. “Now, it’s been a long day and I think I need to get some rest before tomorrow.” As I stood to leave, I could see a hint of red on Kay’s cheek, which raised my ire another notch. This woman had left me for a golf buddy eight years ago, and now she was jealous of my new life.

**Other Books by Fred McKibben**

[Hot Times in the Garden of Eden](#) (The Gardeners #1)

[The Salt Castle](#) (The Gardeners #2)

[The Carnival Road](#) (The Gardeners #3)

[Seven Deadly Sinners](#) (The Gardeners Story)

[The Shadow of Death](#) (an Eddie Rose mystery)