

Chainsaw Honeymoon

A Ruby Navarro Disaster

Steven Ramirez

Glass Highway
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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For my amazing brother, Randall. Sorry about all the misbegoss before.

*“This is the most fantastic story I’ve ever heard. And every word of it’s true, too.
That’s the fantastic part of it.”*

— PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE

One

“I just can’t take no pleasure in killing.”

— *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)

THEY NEVER GET IT RIGHT in the movies, the things going through your head at the very moment your killer bursts into the room, ready to chop up the party guests—including you and your family—into kibble. It isn’t your life flashing before your eyes like a silent movie or your favorite stuffed animal or the car you thought you’d own when you turned eighteen. And it isn’t the realization that you’ll never marry and have kids or visit Europe.

Nope. It’s something random. Like socks. In my case, it was a nonspecific cheeseburger—juicy and rare—with crispy fries in a cute, little, shiny metal cup. Oh, and a tall vanilla shake with twin barber pole straws. The thought of never experiencing that meal again brought down on me a deep sorrow difficult to describe in words. All I can say is, it felt like getting clobbered with Thor’s hammer.

I can tell you what the movies *do* get right, though. Everything. Slows. Down. And the air gets thicker than fireweed honey. And you can’t move because your fear has you trapped like a mosquito in amber. So, you might as well relax, *jefe*. The entire experience is like a dream really, only you know in your soul it’s not a dream—but you wish it

was, because the reality that's about to turn you into fish food is too horrible to imagine. And I'm all about horrible, so.

They say in dream time you can live an entire life in only a few minutes. If this was a dream, I wished I could wake up, hug my dog and pound down a whole package of Pecan Sandies. But as I cowered against the wall, half-broken from being flung back like a shaving cream pie in a silent comedy, I wondered why I thought I could take on my nightmare of an enemy. It's preposterous. I mean, I can't even do ten push-ups! But there I was. And there *he* was.

Chainsaw Chuck.

Okay, so Chainsaw Chuck was the crazed killer I invented, only he was no longer a character in my machinima project, and he only recently had acquired that name, courtesy of a movie I was involved with. So much to explain, so little time. Anyways, this creature was flesh and blood, and he had come to kill his creator. Standing in front of me, big and scary, he wore his signature black high-crown, wide-brim hat—designed by me—and his weapon of choice dangled darkly from his left hand. An impressive monster, if I do say so myself.

Staring at me in surly silence, he gathered himself up and revved the deadly chainsaw, which echoed up and down the shadowy corridor. Sort of like what old dudes on Harleys do when a pretty girl walks by. I could see his teeth, which were gray and pointy. And I could feel his hot, deadly breath. Yep, I was going to die for sure. *It wasn't fair!* Ed Wood, our over-caffeinated Shih Tzu, had followed me from the party and stood between the killer and me, barking like a maniac and tearing at his long black duster. I guessed my dog's fate was pretty much sealed, too. At least, I wouldn't die alone.

Why? I thought to myself again. No normal person would have chased this demon, let alone tried to take him down. That only ever

happens in the movies—bad movies. No, in real life they would have gathered up their family and their two best friends in the whole world and would've run like hell out of the stinking building while dialing 911 on their phone. Common sense, people!

Not me. I had to be the hero.

Where was I? Oh, yeah. I sat on the floor, frozen, my knees tucked up under my chin. It was like I weighed a million pounds. Maybe if I made myself really, really small—like Ant-Man—he wouldn't see me. Everything was slow and dreamy now, like “Last Kiss” by Pearl Jam. I love that song.

I noticed the gleam in Chainsaw Chuck's tiny, savage eyes, and I knew this was it. The End. *Fin. Fine.* But I couldn't help but feel this *was* a dream after all. A pernicious nightmare I was incapable of awakening from. Talk about your random thoughts. For some reason, I was picturing that poor idiot replicant Leon from *Blade Runner*. I could hear him in my head now, his eyes intense, his voice close and menacing as he was about to shove his fingers through Deckard's eye holes.

“Wake up! Time to die.”

Two

“Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey.”

— *House of 1000 Corpses*

HORROR IS MY LIFE. Seriously. My idea of a Best Birthday Ever is to screen the original 1977 version of *Suspiria* at the Nuart (we don't show movies in LA—we “screen” them), while munching on a large popcorn—thank you very much—drenched in Log Cabin syrup (I have to smuggle that in) and guzzling a Jarritos Tamarind soda (also smuggled in). Next stop, The Apple Pan for a steakburger—rare with extra onions, please—and one cup of black coffee, accompanied by a slice of warm apple pie topped with a humungous scoop of Danish vanilla ice cream.

What, too hipster, you say? Hey, I'm talking *burgers* here, people, not artisanal lawn furniture. Hipster, puh-leeze... Well, maybe a little.

Here are some things you should know about me. So, my name. Ruby Navarro. I turned fourteen this past March and somehow made it through ninth grade with a 3.85 GPA. I'm an Aries, which means I am eager, dynamic, quick and competitive. At least, according to those astrology websites, which I never visit. Mostly. I am also precocious, which explains why I skipped a grade. My two best friends in the whole

world—and the ones I would totally take a bullet for—are Claire Tran and Diego Rivera.

Claire is like my sister. Her Vietnamese name is Hang, which means “moon.” She’ll be fifteen at the end of November, which makes her a Sagittarius. She is inquisitive and energetic, and a traveler of the Zodiac. Diego, a Leo, will be fifteen in August, which makes him almost “driverable.” He is dramatic, creative and outgoing. Not that I believe in any of that astrology jazz. But I will say the three of us make an awesome team. Claire and Diego are the only people in the universe who get me.

Back to me. I sleep like the dead, truly. It’s a medical fact. When I was a baby, doctors at Elm Street Pediatric Research for Effective Sleep Outcomes—or ESPRESO—which is a tad ironic, if you stop to think about it—had marveled at how vampire-like my “mimis” was. I mean, I hardly breathed. And when I did, it was in these huge, irregular, gulping gasps that scared my parents half to death.

According to my mother, the pediatrician had recommended everything: swaddling, SIDS pillows, behavior modification. Even a slowly spinning mobile hung over my crib, which, instead of rainbows and unicorns, featured tiny, gleaming silver daggers and gently tinkled the theme to *The Addams Family* television show. Yeah, Mom’s a “horrorista,” too, which is probably where I get it. Anyways, none of it worked. So my parents, the long-suffering Alan and Stacey Navarro, eventually gave up and...surprise! I’m still here. Moving on.

School had already let out—whoo-hoo!—and summer was upon us. It was Tuesday, and a pretty important one at that. For the eleventh time that morning, Mom was climbing the stairs to the second floor of what

some snoopy realtor once referred to as our “upscale suburban home” in Encino, CA. Ed must’ve had enough cardio for the day because I could hear him snoring peacefully somewhere near my bed. As Mom marched into my room, I braced myself. She was about to resume what the Navarro clan likes to call—Dunt-Dunt-DUN—The Beggar’s Sideshow.

So, all you derps out there who are heavy sleepers, you’ll get where I’m coming from. The Beggar’s Sideshow, which was shorthand for “How to Get Ruby out of Bed without Losing My Freaking Mind,” was a masterwork of music, yodeling and found art that had been honed to perfection over a period of, well, fourteen years. It required, among other things, several large clocks of both the battery-powered and wind-up variety (each with an ear-splitting alarm), a creepy clown doll named Mr. Shivers (purchased at a yard sale when I was three that bore a striking resemblance to Johnny Depp in a blood-stained party dress and mysteriously repeated the phrase *Nuts to you, Wes!* in a Swiss accent whenever you pulled its string), an iPhone-Bluetooth speaker combo with the volume turned way up, and wait for it...

A cowbell.

You heard me right. I think Mom believed the cowbell was a stroke of genius because she was very fond of it. She had purchased it, as well as a cowbell beater, at a local music store owned by a nice family from Minnesota by the name of Swensen. When my mother first told this story, I lost it. Apparently, the pimply-faced kid who sold her the items had made an awkward pass. He, in fact, had said to her—and I quote—“Want me to come over later and show you how to use those?” Oh my gosh, *so* Chad Radwell!

Fortunately, the store manager overheard the horny little dweeb and said, “I told you boyce about talkin’ to the customers. Go checksie da toilet and give it a good scrub.”

Reportedly, “Chad” made a frowny face. “What, now?”

“Yup.” The manager turned to my mother and said, “Sorry. You gotta stay on ’em. Give me a jingle if you got any questions.”

Like a scene out of *Fargo*, am I right? Yer dern-tootin’!

Anyways. I was lying in bed, fully awake, thanks to some thoughtless jerk outside who felt it was a good time to fire up a chainsaw. But I will admit, I do possess a bit of an evil streak and wanted to catch Mom’s performance. So, I played dead. Standing just out of my reach, she raised the cowbell beater and launched into “Honky Tonk Women.” Usually I let her get about eight bars in before cracking an eye open.

“I’m awake,” I said, trying to sound all Liv Moore.

“Sure you don’t want to hear my solo? I’ve been practicing.”

At this point, I was pretty much done. “Can you please stop?”

“Come on, one chorus.”

“No-uh!”

And that, friends and neighbors, is The Beggar’s Sideshow. Tah-dah!

Breakfast was better. Once I get some food in me, I am actually quite pleasant. At this point, you’re probably wondering what I look like—the whole “Ruby vibe” and all. Well, I’m slightly below average in height. Mom says I might hit a growth spurt when I’m a junior. I have straight, shoulder-length blonde hair (courtesy of my mother, which I tend to keep in a ponytail), brown eyes (my father’s) and dimples,

which only ever make an appearance when I'm tickled (which *no one* is allowed to do, by the way—not even my posse). My shoes consist mostly of high-top Converse sneakers in various shades. I tend to wear out the red ones. And my body, well... That's my business.

“Mom?” I said, my mouth full of half-burnt raisin toast piled high with Philadelphia whipped cream cheese and dripping with Seville orange marmalade, which we'd recently purchased at Monsieur Marcel in Farmers Market.

“Yeah?”

My mother was already dressed for work—I'm totally stealing that Lavish Alice cape blazer—but had called in to say she would be coming in late. This was a big day for her, too.

“What time is Dad coming?”

She didn't wear a watch and was always scrambling to find her phone whenever anyone asked her for the time.

“Any minute,” she said.

“Yikes, I haven't even showered yet!”

Oh, that's another one of my sterling qualities. I have zero ability to manage my schedule.

Smiling, Mom watched as I burst out of my chair and raced up the stairs, practically tripping over the dog, who had absolutely no business curling up on the bottom step. Fifteen minutes later, I was running back down, fully dressed and schlepping a camo Army duffel bag I found on sale at Wasteland.

“Is he here yet?” I said, out of breath.

“Not yet. Did you remember to brush your teeth?”

I practically raced to the foyer and deposited the duffel bag next to the front door when my phone went into the *Poltergeist* theme song. Groaning (I'm a groaner from way back), I pulled it out of my back

pocket, saw it was Diego and quickly texted *Can't talk*. He replied *Nos vemos*, followed by a little taco emoji. I was pounding out *Later, dude*, followed by a series of inspired emojis when I heard my mother's voice from the kitchen and instantly rolled my eyes, since it is a scientific fact that the two are darkly connected, like barnacle geese and goose barnacles. Look it up.

"Last chance, Ruby," Mom said.

I heard a light tapping on the cowbell and knew what was coming next. In fact, I lip-synced the words as they left her lips.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?"

And there it was. Mom guilt in all its West Coast suburban glory. Where was Dad already? I needed to blow this pop stand.

"Mom, please, not again."

She emerged from the kitchen, holding my extra one-terabyte hard drive. It's funny. As mad as I get at Mom sometimes, I do love looking at her face. She's beautiful, with these soft blue-green eyes I wish I had. Only, over time they had sort of congealed with fatalism and worry. Is this what it meant to be an adult? Sign me up.

"Thanks," I said.

I reached for the device and tossed it into the duffel bag, where I discovered Mr. Shivers hiding in my underwear. I grabbed the doll and turned to Mom.

"Hey, don't look at me," she said.

I opened the foyer closet door and threw the doll in. Mom was on her knees, closing my duffel bag for me. I realized she was working extra hard at being mature, but it was pretty obvious she was worried about her only daughter. She was probably asking herself why she'd even agreed to this nutty arrangement. Actually, I was surprised myself.

My phone buzzed again. This time it was Claire. *Not now*, I quickly texted back. She responded with a sad face emoji.

“What if he doesn’t look after you properly?”

Mom was picking lint off her skirt, which unfortunately was a nervous habit I picked up.

“Mom, I’ll be okay. It’s not like he’s some pervy relative—”

“Ruby, where did you—”

The doorbell rang—saved!—but it set the dog off. Honestly, when it comes to doorbells, nothing beats a Shih Tzu. Ed bolted between my legs, almost causing me to trip, so he could get to the door first.

“Ed!”

It was Dad, of course.

I don’t know why, but suddenly, I let out this weird little laugh, sort of like that possessed deer head in *Evil Dead II*. In my defense, I hadn’t seen him since the 13 Frightened Girls concert, which he’d taken me to as a surprise, even though he himself prefers straight-ahead jazz. He always looks so impressive, too. I mean, not being a very straight-laced gal, I could still appreciate the sharp gray suit and slightly long dark brown hair. And he’s tall—I like that. When he walked through the door, I noticed he was still wearing his wedding ring.

“Hey, baby. You ready?” he said.

I was practically blinded by the million-dollar smile that had somehow survived the breakup. Even the dog was taken in, rolling onto his back and waiting for a belly rub.

Time to play it cool. “Could you get that bag?” I said. “It’s really heavy.”

But Dad wasn’t paying attention. No, he was looking at Mom. And it was awkward because I’m pretty sure he was still in love with her.

“Hi, Stace,” he said. “You’re looking good.”

“You, too,” she said.

She pretended to search for something in her purse. Wow, could it be she loved him, too?

“Dad, the bag?” I said, trying to break the tension.

He grabbed the duffel bag, and, like an old man getting up from the table at Hometown Buffet, he staggered out the door, muttering. Yeah, despite all his excellent qualities, my dad’s a mutterer.

“And make sure he keeps food in the house,” Mom said with a fatalism Anna Karenina would admire.

She slipped me a paper bag that was warm and smelled good. Unbelievable. Though she had been married to the man for fifteen years, she genuinely worried he would forget to feed me.

I touched her arm and gave her my most serious expression. “Everything will be fine.”

“*I’m* supposed to say that.”

As Dad jogged back inside, Mom hugged me deeply, as if she were never going to see me again. But I knew it would be okay, even though the thought of being away for the whole summer reminded me of how much we as a family had lost in the past year. It was unnatural and happened every day.

Ed was being annoying, sitting at my feet and whining softly. Feeling sorry for him, I knelt and waited for him to roll over so I could scratch his belly.

“Who’s going to miss me?” I said. “Who’s going to miss me bad? *You* are!” Then to Mom, “Can’t I take Ed with me?”

She scrunched her face and looked at Dad. “It’s up to your father.”

“Dad, pleeeeeeeze?”

“Fine, but you’re walking him,” he said.

“Yay!”

I ran into the kitchen and returned with the dog's food, bowls and leash.

"Don't forget to call," Mom said, her voice wavering. Next up, the waterworks. It was definitely time to jet.

"Mom, we gotta go."

I quickly headed out with Dad and Ed as Mom watched, biting her lower lip. Yeah, she's a lip-biter. Wow, three months. How would she survive without her baby? One time while sleuthing, I ran across this old video from when I was practically brand new. Dad had been recording me as I lay in my crib. He loves making home movies; we have tons. Anyways, the two of them were talking.

"Is day care really the best thing for her?" Mom said as she tightened the sheet over the mattress and checked my sleeper.

"Come on, Stace," Dad said off-camera.

I could tell they had done this bit a million times before because it sounded like a play.

"What better security can she have than two working parents? My mom—"

"Worked her whole life and managed to raise a wonderful son." She made a face. "Alan, I know. But something in me—"

"Everything will be fine," he said.

"Promise?"

Unfortunately, the tape ended there, so we'll never know if he had actually promised her. I wondered which part of me Mom would get to keep and which was going with her soon-to-be ex-husband once the divorce was final. You know, that would make for an interesting science experiment. LOL.

Three

“How many times do we have to go through this, Son? Your grandmother is *dead*!”

— *ParaNorman*

DON'T GET ME WRONG. I was psyched to be spending the entire summer with my dad. I loved Mom, but enough was enough. I needed to hang out with the Big Guy for a while. That was not to say Dad didn't have his own issues. Currently number one on his hit parade was a certain Stacey Navarro. I was going to have to play this very carefully. I didn't want to give away too much info, but I also didn't want to blow him off. He would totally see through that. Hmm, or would he? Mom once told me men were thick. Nevertheless, I thought it better not to take any chances.

We were weaving through midday traffic on the 405 in Dad's new Lexus NX Hybrid. Ed was safely harnessed in the backseat. I had on my Wayfarers and, as we passed the Getty Center, I noticed some preppy from Harvard-Westlake oh-so-casually checking me out as he sped by us in his Porsche. *Be cool, Ruby!* I loved that Dad worked at a car dealership. We got to tool around in these fantastic late-model vehicles and pretend we were somebody. For all this bub knew, I was

on my way to the *Scream Queens* set to do a walk-on with Emma Roberts.

I grabbed a snickerdoodle from the paper bag Mom had given me, checked on Ed and fiddled with the GPS. Dad was too distracted to notice. Probably because he'd been looking forward to this day for weeks and, now that it was here, he didn't know what to say. Typical male of the species. Look, I knew Dad loved me and all, but lately he seemed more like a stranger. And he was. Living apart from Mom and me had really hurt our relationship. Time to break the ice.

"I can't wait for self-driving cars," I said, keeping my eyes on the road.

"What? Hey, don't break that!"

Gently, he pulled my hand away from the controls and looked at me with these huge, sincere puppy-dog eyes. Oh, boy. I'd hoped to keep things light, but I could tell my father was in a rut and wanted to spill about the thing that was bothering him. I should've picked up on the clues—the nervous finger tapping and the random humming—and misdirected him with a quick chorus of "Just A Girl." But it was too late. Before I could open my mouth, Dad stepped in it with both feet.

"So, does she talk about me?" he said.

I could feel my mouth going lopsided, which apparently is a thing I do whenever I'm confronted with the kind of bald-faced idiocy only a man could muster. I coughed, spraying cookie crumbs on the car's nice clean interior.

"Dad!" I said.

He turned to me, looking confused. "What, honey? Are those snickerdoodles?"

Hmm, so we were playing hardball.

“She doesn’t say anything. She’s, I don’t know, getting on with her life?”

“I see.”

Do you remember Carl at the beginning of Season 4 of *The Walking Dead*, when Farmer Rick no longer permitted him to carry a weapon? That’s what Dad looked like. Not even an hour into my vacation, and summer already sucked. Nice going, Alan.

“And we’re not doing this third degree all summer,” I said. “It’s boring.”

“Sure, no problem.”

I might have gone a little too far, having accused my own dear father of being the B-word. *Boring*. Like our neighbor Boyd, who taught geometry at a nearby charter school, drove a Corolla, ate Sun Chips, and was a champion thumb wrestler. Boyd, who liked to use words like “discombobulated,” “sammich,” “back atcha” and “yea big.” Boyd, who was happily married to an equally boring woman named Barbara, had four healthy young children—all boring—and a twenty-year mortgage. Boyd, who took the family on annual driving vacations to visit relatives in Nebraska. Yeah, *that* neighbor. Great. Now I felt awful.

Dad let me stew in my own juices for a while. Eventually, we exited at Santa Monica Blvd.

“Want a burger?” he said.

It was like nothing had happened. Hmm... I think Mom may have underestimated men. Not that *I’m* thick! I totally saw what he was doing, but here’s the thing, I couldn’t turn down a burger. No way. Already imagining the succulent juices dribbling down my chin, I found myself laughing like the little girl he no doubt remembered. Oh, he was good.

“Can we go to Shake Shack?” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“Pleeeeeeze?”

“That place is always too crowded. Let’s try Irv’s.”

“Fine,” I said. “By the way, this wouldn’t be a bribe, would it?”

“Hey, would I bribe my own daughter?”

Can I get an amen?

If horror is my life, then meat is my passion. Beef, especially. So when Dad suggested a hamburger, you can see why I folded like a \$5.99 camping chair from Wal-Mart. Anyways. The traffic at Santa Monica and Laurel was nonstop and the parking nonexistent as we pulled up to the venerable Irv’s Burgers in West Hollywood. Fun fact for ya—Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin used to hang out there. Well, at the old location. Mom said they were famous musicians.

Eventually, we found a parking spot and were now sitting at a small outdoor table, eating cheeseburgers. The great thing about Irv’s is, it doesn’t matter how you are dressed or where you’re from or how old you are. We were like a family. One large, carnivorous family.

“I love burgers, don’t you?” I said, my mouth shiny with meat juice.

Dad was still distracted. “Yeah, I do. Listen—”

“I’m pretty sure I was a cannibal in a former life.”

“A cannibal?”

“Did you know scientists have learned that cannibalism goes back at least fifty-thousand years?”

Hoping to avoid any mention of Mom, I continued the anthropology lesson, but my father was finding it harder and harder to stay focused. Look, he’s really a very sweet guy—the best. And I’ll bet he had intended to keep the whole Stacey business to himself. But

from the way he was looking at me, like I might be the NSA of Mom-tel, I knew he was going to pump me for information, or explode.

“So has Mom mentioned any male that’s not me?” Dad said, not making direct eye contact.

Though I felt sorry for the guy, I rolled my eyes and flung an angry fry at his head. It bounced and landed on the sidewalk, only to be inhaled instantly by Ed.

“I’m going to eat *you*, if you don’t quit it!”

To my surprise, he changed the subject.

“Listen, Rube,” he said. “Before we go to the apartment, I need to stop off at the dealership. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Sure, no prob.”

“So, are you done?”

“Hang on!”

Now, I am proud to say I’m a total vacuum cleaner when it comes to food. But as good as I am, I needed more than a few seconds to make half a cheeseburger, a basket of fries drenched in ketchup and a large Diet Coke disappear. In the end, I beat my old record and came in at a minute-forty-five. In your face, Slimmer!

It took us twenty minutes to get to the West Side. Dad worked at Lexus of Santa Monica and had been their top performer for, like, forever. Nevertheless, he hated the sales manager, Rick Van Loon. Though he had never put it into words, I could always tell there was this tension whenever those two were in the same room together. Sort of like Sam and Dean confronting Crowley.

“Wait here in the showroom and look at cars or something,” Dad said, handing me a brochure. “I need to see Rick.”

“Sure, Daddy-O.”

“And don’t ever call me that.”

“Roger that.”

Dad abandoned me, so to pass the time, I Snapchatted with Claire and Diego. Presently, I was sending them pics of Ed and me mugging inside the new cars while Claire gave us a quick clarinet concert and Diego showed me what it was like hanging curtains with his mom. When I turned around, I could see my father through the glass of Rick’s office, fidgeting and looking around.

Rick was standing in front of the big board, pointing at the names of the salespeople and their ranking. Dad’s name was at the very top, of course. I decided to eavesdrop and, putting away my phone, positioned Ed and myself outside Rick’s office, out of sight.

It was pretty obvious to me why Dad hated this guy. He was making these annoying clicking noises with his tongue as he used a dry-erase marker to update the numbers. Truly, he was a strange, grubby little poser who, despite his position, liked wearing ill-fitting Macy’s suits, and he had dandruff and smelled like Dentyne. On his desk sat a framed photo of himself with the governor. Photoshop, most likely.

Oh, and there was something else about Rick you should know. He was pretty much a washout with the ladies. I didn’t know if he insulted them or what. But he must’ve done something bad recently because one of his eyes was swollen shut and two fingers were taped together.

“Hot date last night, Rick?” Dad said.

Though Rick’s legendary facial tic was kicking in, he refused to take the bait.

“So! Looks like you’re a shoo-in to win the sales contest this month.”

Way to go, Dad! You know, I think my evil streak might have come from him. I could see he wasn't letting this go. Smiling, he continued to poke the bear.

"Are you going to press charges this time?"

Rick's cheeks got tight and the pupil in his good eye became a pinpoint. It was as if his entire face was controlled by a single wire that Dad was gleefully manipulating.

"My personal life is not up for discussion."

Rick had said this with an air of importance only a short man could pull off. Boy, Dad must've gotten to him because the next thing Rick did was accidentally knock the photo to the floor, sending glass everywhere. As Dad helpfully picked up the frame, he noticed something. Now I saw it, too—it was the corner of another photo behind the first. *What the...*

Before Dad could say anything, Rick grabbed the broken frame and shoved it into a desk drawer.

"Thank you!" he said.

His face was three shades of red. Popping a couple of fresh sticks of Dentyne into his pie hole, he sat back and smiled like Dexter.

"So are you and Stacey still trying to—"

Wait, did he just mention my mother? When the receptionist Gina came over, I ducked out fast, dragging Ed behind me.

Gina Wallace was a nice girl with unusually large eyes, a cute figure, and these tiny little teeth that reminded me of Del Monte white corn. Whenever I saw her, I got the feeling she was waiting for Rick to "come to his senses" and pick *her*, instead of going another round with the Ronda Rouseys of the world. Thanks to Dad, I knew Gina's whole sordid history. Over the years, she'd nursed Rick through cracked ribs,

broken toes, damaged kidneys, and a singed uvula, which happened the time he went out with a fire eater from a Polish circus.

“Alan, Ms. Heatherly is here,” Gina said, pretending not to notice Rick.

“I thought I was seeing her tomorrow. Okay, thanks, Gina.” Dad smirked at Rick. “So are we done here?”

“Sure, sure,” Rick said. “Mr. Contest Winner.” Then to Gina, “Can you get someone in here to clean up this glass?”

Rick always said “someone” when everyone, including the Pope, knew he meant Gina. And that poor girl would always pretend to call the maintenance guy, when I’d bet a dollar that in five minutes she would be back with a broom and dustpan. Sad, really, when you think about it.

As Dad strolled into the showroom, Gina and I watched as an attractive young woman wearing Armani checked out one of the new models. Gina tugged on Dad’s coat sleeve.

“Elizabeth Banks?” she said.

“Ooh, close.”

Adjusting his tie, he sauntered over to the woman, wearing that million-dollar smile. It was on.

“Ms. Heatherly! Alan Navarro. You know, you remind me of Charlize Theron.”

One of these days I was going to figure out how he did that. And I was about to say this to Gina when I noticed she was gone. A minute later I saw her walking into Rick’s office, carrying—you guessed it—a broom and dustpan. Easy money.