

CUT & RUN

The Misadventures of Alex Perez



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*In Memory of Joyce Elliott—A most remarkable mother-in-law.
Dedicated to those who shared in the adventures, especially Bear.
Special thanks to my dear wife, Betsy, for funding my writing
efforts and to Roger for his sense of humor.*

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Chapter 1



Marriage Trap—Houston—1975

I opened my eyes, peeked out of the blanket, and saw frost on the windows. Damn, it's cold again. Another northern . . . third one this month. How is that possible? This is Houston, for heaven's sake! Other than annoying rain, our winters are supposed to be mild. I lowered the blanket, exposed my head to the elements, and saw my breath. I hate cold weather. The house I lived in was old and drafty, and during cold snaps you could hang meat inside.

Ramona's body was wrapped around mine; she was a good source of heat, but she had a snore going that was rattling the windows. To get her to stop, I would have to wake her up, and then she'd get amorous. I was not in the mood. Last night's lovemaking session had drained me, frankly. What I needed was a cup of hot tea, yet abandoning my warm bed did not seem appealing in the least.

I slipped a foot out from under the blanket and further explored the climate. I knew immediately that bravery was needed for this feat. I had been foolish after our tryst and allowed Ramona to talk me out of putting my pajamas back on. I took a deep breath, jumped out of bed, slipped on the slippers, reached for my robe, put it on, and went into the living room to stoke the fire in the iron stove.

The central heating unit had stopped working late last winter. All we had for heat now was an old wood stove we purchased at a neighbor's garage sale; it was suitable. There is something about the smell of burning wood that makes a person feel good about life—especially if it's mesquite. The aroma was stimulating; it gave the old place a sort of rustic ambiance. The bookshelf that constituted my library stood in the corner of the living room. The piano no one ever played (but was a good place for family photos) took center stage. The entertainment center with my record player, LP albums, and eight-tracks added a harmonious touch to the décor. I loved living here.

The stove started to put out heat. I went into the kitchen, put the kettle on, grabbed a few teabags, and proceeded to make our morning drink. As I passed by the kitchen window I noticed Charlene's car pulling into the driveway. Oh no, the bitch from hell is here. I left the kitchen and scrambled to the bedroom but found the bed empty. I cruised to the bathroom and opened the door.

"Hurry up and get out of the shower. Attila the Honey is knocking at the door."

A wet middle finger extended out from behind the shower curtain followed by a harsh, "Be nice to my mother. She pays the bills."

I had to agree, for Charlene was funding Ramona's existence, and I was riding on her daughter's coattails . . . a matter that galled the old woman. She often said (to me) that I was nothing more than a bump on a log, an immigrant trying to live the "Life of Riley."

This was a wrong assumption, of course. It was true that I was temporarily out of mainstream work, but I was presently engaged in pursuing a literary career. Charlene had a myopic view of things, which was why she considered me to be a freeloader. To be frank, her opinion bothered me because the old goat assumed I had no value. But, hell, I made love to her daughter an inordinate amount of times, and I also mowed the lawn. Most importantly, I provided

Ramona with suitable companionship. The last boyfriend her daughter had wore leather and straddled a motor.

Ramona was a very pretty Caucasian woman with long, slender legs, straight dark hair, and sensuous brown eyes. She also had large mammary glands, and honestly, I loved those big tits. (Who wouldn't?) Ramona not only fed me, she also washed my clothes, ironed my shirts, and gave me nice and useful gifts. Except for dealing with her insatiable desire for physical attention, I had it easy. She demanded very little of me. I loved my life, such as it was.

A few months back, finding myself in need of more than rum and cigarette money and not wanting to ask my girlfriend for an increase in my "allowance," I was forced to sell my purple Fiat 128 Sedan. Needing to replace my wheels, I purchased a brand-new English bicycle—a sleek Raleigh ten-speed. The store manager gave me a good deal on a red one. She was a beauty to look at and a pleasure to pedal. Ramona owned a German-made VW Beetle, so whenever I needed to wander far from the area, I garaged the bicycle and borrowed her car.

We were fortunate to live in the Montrose area of Houston, a place filled with head shops, restaurants, record stores, boutiques, and sidewalk cafés. Montrose had a thriving artists' community, which suited my sense of belonging.

I enjoyed riding my bike to La Dolce Vita, the corner Italian café where I could always find a number of friends to discuss or debate anything. These discussions over espresso or cappuccino were fun and provided me with a good way to pass the time. Being of sound mind and body, I observed a strict set of rules with my circle of friends: Politics and religion were off limits. I preferred to keep my arguments and criticism focused on literary matters—a deep enough pool considering that someone in the crowd was always willing to have their novel critiqued.

After hearing several heavy-handed knocks on the front door, I reluctantly opened it. Biting my lip, I prepared to greet this most aggressive woman.

“Hello, Charlene. What brings you here so early in the morning?”

“Not your sorry ass, Alex, that’s for sure. Most men are at work by now. Where’s my baby?”

“Ramona’s going on twenty-five. She hasn’t been a baby for at least six years now. Presently she is in the bathroom. May I offer you a cup of tea?”

“You know I don’t drink that sissy stuff. Don’t you have any coffee in the house? You know, the stuff grown-ups drink in the morning?”

I gritted my teeth. The woman grated on my nerves. I was about to curse her when I remembered that Charlene was funding my life. I took a deep, calming breath and tried to think of pleasant things. No need to start a ruckus this early.

“I have a can of Café Francois, but it’s instant.”

“All you have is that French crap? Don’t you have any *real* coffee around?”

I was getting ready to show Charlene the door when Ramona walked into the living room. Her stance implied she was in a combative mood. I needed to tread on rice paper if I wanted to enjoy the morning. Like her mother, the woman loved to argue.

“Quit being an ass, Alex. Go make Mother some coffee. Use the chicory blend we brought from Louisiana last weekend. The can is in the back of the cupboard, left side, third shelf.”

I willingly left the living room. Charlene’s abrasive personality drove me crazy, and Ramona changed sides so often I suspected she was part inhuman. I found the coffee, started a pot, and then tried to sneak across the dining room toward the safety of our bedroom. Halfway there, Charlene beckoned. By the tone of her voice, I knew I was going to experience another one of her dissertations concerning my purpose in her daughter’s life.

I had always suspected these personal attacks were tacitly supported by Ramona. Call it male intuition or a sixth sense, no matter, but the glimmer in their eyes told me I was about to become the victim of a double-pronged offensive. I braced for trouble.

In an uncharacteristically soft voice, Freddy Krueger started her advance. “Alex, do you love Ramona?”

“Yes,” I said, without thinking that statement through.

“She loves you too, and to be truthful, I can’t imagine why. You’re not what I consider a catch.”

“Mother, please. You promised to keep it friendly.”

“Okay. You’re right, I did . . . sorry.” She apologized to Ramona without giving me so much as a glance.

She smiled and fiddled with her curls for a second. Recognizing the move, I took a deep breath and prepared to withstand another assault.

“Let me get straight to the point, Alex. I want to know if there’s any reason why you two should not get married.”

She looked into my eyes, and my knees quivered. If the first attack was designed to soften my defenses, it worked. I was pale as a ghost. She followed the brutal frontal charge with a brilliant flanking maneuver. She looked at Ramona and uttered words that cut me to the quick.

“Do you want to marry him, sweetie?” she said with a loving smile.

I was in big trouble. This situation had the feel of a well-planned and orchestrated campaign aimed at robbing me of my bachelorhood. Ramona complemented Charlene’s battle strategy by launching a surprise attack of her own.

“Yes, Mama, I love him. I want to marry him.”

Her declaration caught me with my pants down. This marriage stuff between us was old news. We had discussed it a number of times and had agreed to keep the relationship only sexual and friendly. I was about to speak when Genghis Khanine swarmed all over me.

“Is there any reason why you do not want to marry my daughter, Alex?”

All of a sudden, my brain became void of blood. With my bachelorhood lying on the line, my wits failed me, and I uttered a state-

ment that doomed me, “Why should I bring the cow home when I’m getting the milk for free?”

Charlene bristled at my insolence. Ramona burst into tears and fled the living room. Gathering my thoughts, I foolishly believed that what I had said actually worked to my advantage. Without Ramona there to cut off my escape route, I felt safe.

I was wrong, of course. Godzilla was not done attacking me. Charlene smiled, fiddled with her curls again, and took a different approach.

“Listen, Alex, I’m going to lay it out clearly for you. You either marry Ramona or I will pull the plug on her finances. As much as I love her, I will not stand by and see her be used by someone I suspect is nothing more than a Latin American gigolo. It is obvious to me that she loves you, but I’ll be damned if I am going to pay for both of you to play ‘Hide the Salami.’”

She paused for a moment, making sure I was taking it all in. I was. Then she glued her beady eyes on me and continued to hammer away at my resolve.

“Maybe your salami has magical properties, the proof being the constant smile on my baby’s face. I can accept that, and her happiness is important to me. Still, smiley face aside, I am not paying for my daughter to get laid, period. You either marry her, or I won’t put out another dime.”

She let me roll that statement over in my mind, and then, just as my eyes showed a glimmer of panic . . . she came in for the kill.

“As your banker, I require security for my investment. A marriage certificate would do fine for a start. What do you say, Alex? Will you marry Ramona, or would you like to hang your hat elsewhere?”

All I could think was, Oh God, please help me! I’m about to be eaten alive by this female praying mantis. I was doomed, and I knew it. I could not allow her to cut off the money flow as poor Ramona needed one more year to graduate from the University of Houston. Besides, the thought of leaving Ramona’s home scared me to death. It wasn’t that I couldn’t take care of myself but that I

did not *want* to take care of myself. Not only was she good in bed, but she gave me money and was an excellent cook. Feeling corralled, I mustered up my reserves and went on the offensive.

“In my country, it’s customary to give the groom a dowry. If you want me to marry Ramona, I want that white 190 SL Mercedes Benz convertible you keep in the garage and drive only on Sundays. I also want an all-expense-paid vacation to Panama. I will marry her in the presence of my own dear, sweet mother. And furthermore,” I said, getting all puffed up, “you must promise to pay all the bills while we are gone, as I plan to drive there, and I have every intention to take my damn sweet time.”

Charlene bristled some more. Her eyebrows narrowed, her beady eyes came together, and her right cheek began to twitch. For a fleeting moment, I thought I had won the battle. What a babe-in-the-woods I was, not even aware that victory was never even remotely possible. I was being attacked by a woman who wanted her daughter married. I was completely overmatched.

Charlene’s beady eyes caught fire, and she glued them to me. I swallowed hard. When I noticed her lips begin to develop a slight upward curve on the corners, I panicked. I knew she was fixing to put the lid on the jar.

“It’s a deal,” she said, “and since I’m the one giving the dowry, there are some stipulations I must insist upon.”

“And they are?” I asked defiantly.

“The Mercedes Benz will be placed in Ramona’s garage *after* you two are married. The title will be signed over to you when you celebrate your first wedding anniversary—my present to you. I will pay all the bills until Ramona graduates; I planned to do that anyway. I’m fine with the trip to Panama. If we’re going to be related, it would be nice to meet your mother. However, since I didn’t fall off the turnip truck yesterday, I will go with both of you to Panama. I must be sure an official marriage ceremony takes place. You can’t blame me for being mistrusting, Alex, because you know as well as I do how much of a scoundrel you are. We can take my brand-new Mercury Marquise station wagon. It’s sturdy enough to

make the long trek through Central America, and it will provide us with cold air and comfort.”

I glared at her, but my knees were shaking. Sensing my vulnerability, the abominable snow-woman leaned my way and growled, “The stipulations that I have put before you are non-negotiable.”

I swallowed hard again. I was in pain. The woman had a dead-grip on my balls. There was nothing for me to do but let out a sigh. What the hell, I knew this free ride wouldn’t last forever. I had been feeling the sharpness of Charlene’s claws for a while now. Unable to find a way out of my predicament, I looked into my future mother-in-law’s eyes and said, “Okay, Charlene, we have a deal.”

“Good. I love a man that understands when he has been bested.”

Dumbfounded, I walked away. I couldn’t believe I had just bargained my status as a single man for a car. Needing to think things out, I grabbed the road atlas and entered the bathroom. Despondent, I sat on the throne and began to study it. After calculating the distance between Texas, Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica, a huge grin came upon me. If I throw into the equation some out-of-the-way places to visit, it could take us at the very least three weeks to get to Panama. Surely that was enough time for me to find a way out of my marriage contract. I rubbed my hands together with devilish delight and began to work on a plan of escape. Surely, for a guy with my take on life, avoiding a priest should be nothing short of a cakewalk.