

An excerpt from *If That Breathes Fire, We're Toast!*

Chapter One: In Which I Leave My Heart in San

Diego

Thirty-four white cars in five minutes. That's when I knew for sure we weren't in California anymore.

"Doesn't anyone in Arizona drive a colored car?" I asked. It came out kind of whiny.

My mom glanced at me. I could see myself in her mirrored sunglasses, slumped down in my seat, my nose big enough for two people. "I thought you were still asleep," she said. I hadn't been. "It's just physics, Rick," she explained. "White cars don't heat up as much, and dark colors fade fast out here."

I looked away from the straight line of highway ahead of us to the "out here" whizzing by at a cruise-controlled seventy-five miles per hour. There wasn't much to recommend it, in my opinion. But then I hadn't been asked.

Reading my mind (which I wish she wouldn't do, but she's good at it), my mom said, "You'll get used to it. You may even like it."

"Mom?"

"Hmm?" She fiddled with the radio, trying to tune in a local station. Her finger hesitated over mariachi strains, then punched up Los Lobos singing their hearts out. She lowered the volume to hear me better.

"All those white cars."

She looked questioningly at me.

"They're all going the other way."

We sat in silence for a long time after that. Mom expects me to fit in, to find the beat

right away. That's fine if you know how to dance, but my feet—sometimes I feel like they don't know which way to jump. And my sneakers. Boring, no brand name. No one would even *think* of swiping them.

I'm so average I could be in the *Guinness Book of World Records* if they had a category for it. Not too tall, not too short, dark hair, ditto eyes, ears that stick out, but not that much. Average. I'd lived in California all my life and liked it that way. I'd been looking forward to sixth grade because for that one year I'd be on top, king of the castle. But with this move, I'd have to start over at the bottom of the hill, stuck in some new school where everyone else had been best friends since before they learned to tie their shoes.

I felt as prickly as one of those two-ton cacti stretching its arms up to the sky.

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We pulled up to the new house in Tucson, Arizona 85749, just at sunset—so brightly colored it looked fake. The house wore tired brown paint over stucco. It rambled in two directions like a low-slung shoe box with a porch hanging on the side for shade. A ring of rocks set off the “garden”: a few shriveled cacti that hadn't seen rain since the conquistadores came through.

We stepped right into the living room. A fireplace curved like an eyeball watched us as we walked around. Kitchen and dining area were laid out to the left, bedrooms and a bathroom down the hall opposite. Our furniture sat right where the movers had dumped it, according to Mom's color-coded stickers. The couch looked lost, as if it didn't know where it belonged. I knew how it felt.

Mom ran back out to the van and came in carrying the phone. She plugged it into the

kitchen jack and did a little dance when she got a dial tone.

I slid open the patio door and walked into the backyard. Traces of sunset still stained the sky to the west, although stars were popping out. I'd never seen so many stars. There weren't any outside lights and you couldn't see the city at all.

"Pizza's on its way," Mom announced, when I came back in. "Pepperoni, extra cheese. We can't cook until the gas company turns the gas on. Hard life, isn't it?" She twirled around. "So, what do you think?"

I just shrugged. I felt like I'd been planted on the moon. You'd have less space on a moon colony, though. Our old apartment could fit in here three times over, easy.

"You know," she said, looking at me from under her lashes, "this was once a bunkhouse. You know, history? The Wild West?"

I was interested in spite of myself. "A bunkhouse? What's that?"

"All the ranch hands lived here, kind of like a dormitory. If you look carefully you can tell where the doors were bricked over when the place was converted to a house, maybe thirty, forty years ago. See here." She traced an indentation in the plaster where a lintel had been, sliding her finger down the side of a once-upon-a-time door.

Possible cowboy leftovers, I don't know, maybe rusty branding irons or old bottles hazing violet in the sun, could be waiting to be found. By me. Maybe there'd be a horseshoe I could nail over the door. Weren't they supposed to bring good luck? I could use some.

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Fat Boy woke me in the morning by jumping on my chest and purring. He sounds like a Harley motorcycle revving up. I listened hard, but couldn't hear any other sound.

Unused to silence, I didn't feel comfortable. I got up, clutching twenty pounds of cat to my chest for protection.

There was a note on the kitchen table. "Dropping off my business card and sample shots," Mom had written. "Back late morning. Expect someone from Southwest Gas to inspect the furnace, etc., around 10?" Then she'd hastily added a PS: "Check his ID before you let him in." Didn't she know I was almost twelve? We'd done stranger danger in kindergarten.

Rummaging around, I found milk and juice in the fridge. The Cheerios were on the counter, but I could only find paper plates, no bowls. So I drank my cereal and washed it down with orange juice, adding a glass of water. I didn't want to dry up and blow away like those tumbleweeds we saw along the highway. The water tasted fine. I mean, it didn't have a taste. San Diego *agua* tastes like it's been filtered through steel wool before they add the chlorine to kill the bugs. You can smell it when you turn on the faucet.

Tiles cool under my bare feet, I headed down the hall past my mom's bedroom, darkroom, and office, in that order, before reaching the bathroom and my room at the tail end. I didn't waste any time getting dressed. There was this weird tree growing outside my window. It had a pale green trunk and itty-bitty leaves. Everything was really quiet except for this strange buzzing coming from dozens of kamikaze beetles with iridescent green bellies zooming around the trunk. The August heat pushed its way in, reaching out to mummify me, so I shut the window.

Then I spent some time opening boxes and getting out my stuff, stowing my wet suit and Boogie board way in the back of the closet. Not much chance, actually zilch, I'd find a place to use them here. My shell and sea glass collection went on the top shelf of my

bookcase. Then I remembered and left room for cowboy leftovers.

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Ed Wallace (his name embroidered above the breast pocket of his shirt and printed on his ID) replaced the cover on the old furnace, then rocked back on his heels, absently wiping his grimy fingers on his pants. Snapping off his flashlight, he turned to me.

“Afraid it’s done for, son. Belts shot, burners warped. You’ll never get it lit.” He winked at me. “And if you did, I wouldn’t go smoking any cigars around here. Might maybe explode. I’m surprised an old monster like this still exists.”

Right then the front door opened and I heard my mom’s heels clicking on the tile, so old Ed had to explain it all over again, not that I totally got it the first time. I’m not real mechanical. While he talked, I started checking out the cobwebs around the ductwork. Arizona has creepy bugs, besides plants with stickers. There are scorpions and brown recluse spiders, also the black widow, a real bad-news spider with a red hourglass on her stomach: One bite and you’re dead meat. We have those in California, too. My mom doesn’t like anything with more than four legs. A scorpion skittering across the floor would be a point for my side, though it would take more than that to send her packing.

My mom was saying that she really hoped the furnace might be jury-rigged, at least for one more winter.

Ed shook his head. “You’ll have to get a new one,” he said decidedly. “And if you need a recommendation—”

“Wait a second,” I said. I’d noticed an old label on the side of the furnace and carefully peeled it off. “Take a look at this, Mom.” I read it aloud. “‘Dragonwerks, Ltd. Lifetime Guarantee. Replacement Dragon.’ There’s even an address.” I handed Mom the

label with its stylized dragon curled around old-fashioned writing.

The gas man scratched his forehead. “I don’t know, Mrs. Morales. I’ve never heard of Dragonwerks. It could be they went under long ago. There’s more efficient units available, that I do know, and they’re smaller and put out more heat.”

“It might be worth a try, though,” I said.

“I won’t have the money to put in a whole new system until my business gets going,” admitted my mom. “If I can replace it for free ...”

“Couldn’t hurt,” agreed Ed. “Here’s my number if it doesn’t work out.” He handed her his business card. “Anyways, you’ve got time. You’re looking at three, maybe four months before it gets cold enough you even need gas heat.”

He must have been joking. I bet it never gets that cold here.

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“Ma, have you unpacked the camping stuff yet?”

“Most of it’s there, under the phone.” She pointed to a large box doing double duty as a desk.

I opened the box and groped around inside, grabbing what I wanted. Then on to the fridge, collecting an egg as my booty, and out the front door.

I was ready for a scientific *eggs*-periment. I found a sunny spot—there’s no lack in Tucson, Arizona—and put the iron skillet on the ground. Deftly I cracked the egg one-handed into the skillet and checked my watch for the start time. Accurate records are important. My mom had shown me the skin index in the newspaper, where it tells you how long you can stay outside at different times of the day before being fried. I could argue all I wanted that that index was for Anglos, not me, but I didn’t get very far. Mom

was making a religion out of wearing sunscreen and wanted me to keep the faith.

Anyway, that gave me the idea.

Just then a girl pedaled up on a purple bicycle she'd outgrown. When she saw me, she skidded to a stop, raising dust with her high tops.

"Watcha doing?" she asked, unbuckling her helmet. She pulled it off, revealing flattened straw-colored hair tied back in a ponytail. Her blue eyes took in me, the skillet, and the egg.

I picked out a piece of sun-baked weed from the egg white before answering. "I heard in Tucson it's hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk, but (a) there isn't any sidewalk, and (b) it's not sanitary. It's going pretty slowly though."

"I have an idea," the girl said. She swung her backpack off her shoulder, unzipped it, and rummaged around. She pulled out and discarded two Phillips-head screwdrivers, an Allen wrench, a couple of spark plugs, and what looked like a turkey baster but maybe wasn't. Eventually she located a magnifying glass and offered it to me. "This might work."

"Thanks," I said. The bottom of the egg was starting to cook now, but the top was still watery. I lined up the magnifying glass with the sun and focused its rays on the yolk.

"My little brother used to burn bugs with it, until my mom made him stop," she offered. "You just moved in, didn't you?"

"Yeah, me and my mom." I kept moving the magnifying glass so the egg wouldn't cook all in one spot. "We're from San Diego."

"My friends are there right now, on vacation," the girl said. "My name's Natalie. Natalie Randall. I live at the end of the street, past the park." She pointed behind her.

“Why’d you come here?”

I shrugged. “Back home my mom worried I’d join a gang or something. But the closest I got to a gang was the chess club at school.”

When Natalie laughed, sunlight glinted off her braces. “We’ve got a chess club at our school, too. I’m going into sixth grade in a couple of weeks.”

“Me, too,” I said.

“Maybe we’ll be in the same class.” She looked a lot more enthusiastic than I felt. “I hope you like your egg well done.”

The egg was smoking. It didn’t look good.

“I’m not sure even Fat Boy would touch that.”

“Who’s Fat Boy?”

“He’s our cat,” I told her. “You can come in and meet him if you like.”

“Okay,” said Natalie. She leaned her bike against the house and set her backpack down beside it. It clanked.

Gingerly I tested the skillet handle. I had to wrap part of my T-shirt around it before I could pick it up.

Fat Boy wouldn’t come out from under my bed, not even for a can of Fishy Feast. He backed away further when I showed him the egg. He wasn’t adjusting well to the move. I gave up and stuck the pan in the sink to soak.

Natalie and I went to check out the backyard. A hammock with a couple of busted strings hung between two rough-barked trees with microscopic leaves. The hammock’s dust made me sneeze, but it swung okay. The yard had these trees—Natalie called them mesquites—along with some low cacti called prickly pears. An old barbed-wire fence

surrounded our property. Here and there the wire had sprung loose and lay curled up rusting on the ground. We scared up a few brown rabbits with white tails like cotton balls.

Natalie informed me that if I ever got lost in the desert without water, I could just slice open a cactus and suck on the juices. “Course, you’d have to be pretty desperate.”

I’m the one who found the horseshoe tracks. The ground must have been wet once and the shoes bit in deep. Natalie said if we didn’t have any rain soon, they’d probably fossilize like dinosaur footprints. I laughed. I didn’t find a horseshoe, but maybe I’d found a friend, even if she was a girl.

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“I got Dragonwerks on the phone,” Mom announced at dinner. “I talked to the funniest person. She wanted to know everything about us, how long we’d lived here, if it was just the two of us. I must have talked to her for twenty minutes.”

I helped myself to seconds of frijoles and a tortilla. “So, will they be sending us a new furnace?”

“Yes, and that was another strange thing. She wanted to know the year and make of the one we have. Wouldn’t you think they’d just send the latest model? Anyway, that’s what I told her, but she said the newest dragons weren’t ready, ‘not hatched yet.’ I suppose that means they’re still on the drawing board. She’s sending me a reconditioned one in the meantime, a ‘temporary dragon,’ she called it.”

“I hope that’s okay,” I said doubtfully. I knew about reconditioned cars.

“It’s free. I’m not complaining. I’ll have to pay for the installation, of course, but that should be nothing compared to the cost of a new unit. I was counting on painting the

house with the money I've got set aside. Let's hope we don't have to replace everything. You know what I told her? I told her I didn't so much need a dragon as a fairy god-mother." She sighed. Mom had spent the whole day unpacking and that could make you desperate for a real live human to talk to. But telling our life story to a complete stranger?

"Everything else works, though, doesn't it?" I wanted someone else to take the house off our hands when the time came. "The house just needs, what is it you tell your photo makeover ladies?"

"Some new eye shadow to catch the light?" Mom laughed and shook her head. "I'm afraid this house needs more than cosmetics, Rick. More like plastic surgery." She stirred her beans with her fork, swirling the melting cheese. "Oh, well. It was a good deal and the most I could afford."

Temporarily I called off my campaign of going back to San Diego. I could wait.

"Don't go apologizing on me, Mom. I never had my own room before. I bet you'll be booking weddings right and left once your ad comes out."

Mom raked her fingers through her short dark hair. "The ads will bring in business, but since most people plan weddings months in advance, we may have to wait a while for any money. Don't you worry though, kid—that's my job. I won't be breaking into your piggy bank. At least, I hope not." She shot me a rueful smile. "Soon as school starts in a few weeks you'll meet more kids. What's the name of the girl you met today? Does she have any brothers or sisters?"

"Natalie. She has one little brother. He's five. She has to watch him sometimes. They've got a pool." That kind of balanced things out, I guessed.

"Speaking of water, you wash, I dry? Or I dry, you wash?"

It was her little joke. Don't flip coins with my mom.

“Sure,” I said. As we did the dishes we looked out at the rainbow-sherbet sunset.

Maybe living on the moon wouldn't be so bad after all.