

One

There were quite a few things in life that Alex Martin understood. They included which fork to use a formal dinner, how to get the plastic on his headlights cleaned with toothpaste, but most of all what he intimately knew was how much trouble he would end up in whenever he agreed to one of his cousin Rook's schemes. On the surface they always seemed like an interesting, intriguing proposition but when it was all said and done, Alex often found himself in more hot-water than he could swim in.

So when Rook Stevens left a voicemail for him about an estate sale in Antelope Valley, Alex had serious doubts on whether or not he should call his cousin back.

"It's just an estate sale," James said as he gulped down a cup of coffee before he headed out to fight crime on Los Angeles's busy streets. As a homicide detective, James's hours were erratic and often times having a cup of coffee with him was the only part of the day Alex got to spend with his husband. "How much trouble can the two of you get into? You get to poke around in some junk, break out your checkbook, spend an obscene amount on cereal box toys and then come home cackling about how much profit the two of you will make. Knowing both of you, that will satisfy your voracious avarice for weeks on end."

"It's not that I don't want to go," Alex protested. "It just that I know as soon as we get over there, something horrible is gonna happen because nothing good ever comes from me going with Rook anywhere. Do you remember the last time he and I just went out for slurpies? We ended up in the middle of a SWAT raid in Little Tokyo and a kilo of cocaine in my backpack."

"It wasn't a kilo of cocaine, babe. The security guard just *thought* it was," the detective chuckled. "It was about a pound of rice flour that a mochi seller accidentally dropped while he was running through the shopping mall chasing that thief. It was just coincidence it ended up in your open backpack. The problem with you when Rook is that if something bad is ever going to happen, it's going to happen to the two of you."

Alex's entire life was played out in a very safe sandbox of society. The first time something dangerous and exhilarating happen to him it'd been a string of murders that eventually lead James to his side. The Hispanic detective had been skeptical and distrusting at first and Alex couldn't blame him. After all, how many comic book store owners ended up with half a handful of dead bodies cropping up like daisies after a rainstorm. They danced around each other — James growling while Alex was mostly confused — then eventually fell in love. Okay, Alex thought, he probably had fallen in love the moment he saw James swagger across the parking lot after the first murder. James, in true James fashion, took a little while to finally get around to admit he was in love.

Now the only murders in their lives were ones that James found it work and thankfully, didn't bring home.

Still, Alex had to admit, he did miss the thrill just a little bit but he didn't want someone to die for it.

"If you want to go, don't go. Make something up like... I was going to say a dead body fell through your ceiling at the store but since you already have had that happen a couple of times, I don't think he's going to buy it happening again. Maybe you could have a mundane lie. Like somebody calling in sick and you have to cover for them?"

"I'd already told him yesterday I didn't have to work and you know as well as I do, I'm the world's crappiest liar." He stopped pacing the kitchen and picked up his cat, Mrs. Whosit. Cradling her against his shoulder, Alec stroked the feline's back, comforted by her purring. "I kind of want to go because it's going to be a big sale. The guy's estate was worth millions and he liked to collect pop-culture stuff and Rook is always able to recognize good deals. I learned a lot from him but I also end up seeing a lot of the inside of jail cells, and that's something I kinda hope to skip this weekend."

“Well, I kind of would like to not have to bail you out again,” James replied. “It’s kind of embarrassing when I have to take off work because my husband is in a pair of handcuffs and they’re not attached to my bed. Shit, I’m *late*. Just let me know what you decide so I can take enough money out of our savings account. Nothing worse than showing up in front of a judge with only enough cash to buy a couple of tacos and a beer.”

Two

In the end, James was right. If there was one thing Alex cannot walk away from, it was the lure of the hunt. Nothing made his soul sing, like digging through mounds of dirty boxes to look for a prize no one thought was there. It was an addiction he and Rook shared, that insane need to ferret out the unrealized. It was treasure hunting at its finest. Amid cardboard and plastic, there were trinkets of lost childhoods and unfulfilled fantasy... And Alex wanted to find them all. He didn’t know if it was because most of his own childhood was spent alone and lost in his own head. As an only child — and a weird child — too often is playmates were ones that he made up in his head but then along came Rook, and suddenly he didn’t feel so odd.

Although he did seem to get into a lot more trouble. Much like having a brother. And an insatiable need to see what the cookie jar on top of the refrigerator held.

The way to Antelope Valley was unremarkable. A lot of people likened it to the prairies the Midwest, dusty and ringed with barbed wire fences. The houses were few and far between in the valleys and as the highway ribboned through the beige grassed hills, Alex was struck by how desolate the area was despite not being much more than 15 minutes away from Los Angeles. They passed a few semis, heavy with groceries and merchandise. The trucks swayed in the high winds, cutting through many dust storms and leaving gritty, tiny tornadoes in their wake.

“I don’t know how you did this kind of sale driving that sports car of yours,” said Rook. “I mean if you bought more than a notepad and a pencil, you’d run out of space in that thing.”

“I really didn’t do a lot of estate sales and private auctions before you came around.” It was hard to admit but the arrival of James and Rook into his life opened up so much of his world. They were different foods to taste, explorations of self that he had never imagined he would do and the journeys he taken with his cousin — even in the small confines of the county — were some of the greatest adventures he’d ever taken. “I guess I was just too busy trying to get the store going and I felt kind of weird doing stuff like that by myself.”

“Well if ever you see anything that you want to do you let me know and I’ll be right there with you,” his cousin assured him. “Dante doesn’t understand sometimes how we get along so well but I don’t think he sees how much we’re alike. People only see the differences. Even when they love you, they don’t necessarily get you. You and me — we like to dig through people’s lives, explore their pasts, and is hokey as it sounds, I think in a lot of ways we like to uncover their dreams. People don’t get that. Sometimes your greatest treasure isn’t something that’s made out of gold, but something that makes you smile.”

“See, that’s what I was telling James this morning. I mean, don’t get me wrong, but you get me embroiled in a lot of stuff that I normally wouldn’t get into. And sure, a couple of times it ends up badly —”

“It often ends badly.” Rook grimaced. “I swear to God I had a perfect track record of not getting caught at anything that I was pulling off until I met you. I don’t know if it’s because you’re just a decent, honest person and there something inherently about you that screams please come arrest me or if a cop can just sense you panicking and hone in on you like you’re a free for one hour donut giveaway.”

“I am not *that* much of a boy scout.”

“Oh yes, you really are that much of a boy scout. They call you to ask you permission before helping an old lady cross the road.” Rook eased around a slow-moving VW van, its tail lights rattling and puffing out balls of blue-gray smoke as it struggled to get up a hill. “You made me go back because the gas station attendant gave you fifty cents more change than he should have.”

“That kind of stuff comes out of his wages. Maybe not immediately because that’s illegal for a store owner to do to his employees by it adds up in the long run so they would have to raise their prices to make up for that kind of loss over time. Having —”

“See, this is why Archie has a hard time with you. He loves you but the normal Martin is not an honest creature. We just aren’t. If there is a way to squeeze out a penny just by shaking someone’s hand, we’re going to break every single one of their fingers and get a dollar.”

“Not *all* of us.” Alex tried to think of an example — other than his parents because they were guilty by association — but as he scrolled through the relatives, he discovered there wasn’t any one of them he could trust any farther than he could throw them. “Well there’s...”

“You can think of one goddamn person can you?” He laughed at Alex’s sour expression. “It’s okay to come from a family of cheats and schemers, so long as you know that’s who they are. It’s the ones that aren’t honest about wanting to stab you in the back, are the ones who end up burying the entire silverware drawer into your chest and *that’s* the kind of people we have in our family.”

Three

“This house looks like Spaceship Ruthie designed it. What’s with all the spaceship things and the turrets? The landscaping is early Flintstones except for that one big tree which is right next to the house. You just asking somebody to break in. I’ll close it is to the roof .” Rook stood in front of the sprawling pale stucco house, seemingly perplexed by the architect. “Why are there so few windows? This house is six bedrooms and God knows how many useless rooms because rich people need rooms just to put their shit into so why are there hardly any windows?”

“Those rich people are the ones who keep us in business, remember?” Alex poked at his cousin’s ribs. “And you’re the one who literally has a warehouse to put stuff into. And you can’t tell me that everything in there is for sale, because I know it isn’t.”

“I liked you better when you were slightly scared of me,” growled Rook. “You were a lot more agreeable.”

“If you wanted agreeable, you’d have gotten a dog,” he teased, climbing out of Rook’s SUV. “Wow, this place is...”

“Deserted,” Rook grumbled, slamming the car door behind him. “Where the hell is everybody? The sale’s supposed to start in an hour.”

“Maybe they got lost?” It didn’t seem likely, especially since the mansion was only three right turns off a main drive but Rook wasn’t hallucinating. There was no one at the house, no other car but their own. “Maybe we’re not in the right place?”

“Address matches the email. So does the house.” Rook checked his phone, scratching his jaw as he scrolled through a few screens. “Nope, it’s today and supposedly in one hour. Let’s go see if someone’s inside. The curator could have been dropped off or sent her assistant to go grab something in town.”

“Maybe...” The prickle of a bad feeling already began to spread over Alex’s spine. “How about if we check the front door and if no one answers, we go get something to eat then head at home?”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, cuz?” Rook’s smile was wicked and that never boded well. “You grab the front and I’ll go around the back and see if someone is there.”

The front door should of been a safer option. It was in view of the road and the driveway. Since the house was situated on a hill, Alex could see for miles around. The low-lying brush covering the California hills was sparse, dry from lack of rain and the landscaping around the estate ran mostly to pampas grass and neglected short palms, hardly anything anyone could hide behind. Still, as Alex mounted the concrete steps leading to the modern looking home, he felt as if he was being watched.

“You think we should call Dante or James first?” After he said it, Alex realized he sounded more like a little girl homesick at sleep over instead of a successful businessman married to a homicide cop.

Thankfully, Rook was someone he could always depend upon not to point those kind of things out. If there was anything that he gained in the emergence of his cousin out of the carnival life that he led and into the Martin clan it was not only a relative he could stand, but also his first true friend. He could depend upon Rook, unlike anyone he had before and Alex is fairly certain that if Rook had already been in his life, opening him up to the possibilities of what the world had to offer, he wouldn’t have chanced falling in love with James.

To his credit, Rook actually stopped contemplated what Alex said. Or at least that’s how it looked. Rule one of dealing with Rook Stevens was to remember he been raised by pack of liars and thieves. His obfuscation skills ran high — way out of Alex’s league — so there was a good chance he was just been

humored. Id like to think otherwise but he knew better. Just because he loved Rook, it didn't mean he was blind to his cousin's faults.

And one of Rook's biggest faults, was leaping before even thinking about looking.

"I think we'll be fine," his cousin said eventually but the gleam in his mismatched eyes gave Alex pause. It was as if Rook welcomed a bit of adventure out in the middle of the sticks and if it wasn't there for him to trip over, he was going to find one. "Besides, by the time either one of them got out here, we could have been murdered four times over. Let's just see what we can find."

A rumble in the far distance sounded just as wicked and foreboding as Rook's smile. Along the mountains a dark sinister bank of clouds rolled towards the valley center, flashes of lightning sparking through their billowy undersides. A stream of mist led the storm's way like the Wild Hunt running free over the glens. The leading-edge was moving fast, eating at the distance between the mountains and the house. Calling Rook's name, Alex wasn't surprised he didn't get a response. His cousin moved swiftly and silently, more shadow than human and Alex resigned himself to knocking on the door and hoping somebody answered.

When his knuckles hit the hard wood, the door swung open and Alex promptly fell into the trouble he was hoping to avoid.

Four

If there was an inch of the front foyer that wasn't covered in blood Alex couldn't find it. Okay, that was possibly an exaggeration but it was difficult to tell because of the shadows and the color of the enormous Spanish tiles stretching down the hall and seemingly throughout the house. A sea of drying red fluids was horrifying enough, the distinct trails of hands dragging through the sticky brown mass left him speechless. His tongue swelled in his mouth and the cry for help that he had in his throat was stuck behind the terror shutting his brain down. He didn't know if he should turn around and run away, screaming at the top of his lungs for Rook or call ahead to psych ward in preparation of his breakdown.

Caught on the threshold, Alex was about to step out to leave the scene intact when the storm reached the edge of the house. It moved in quickly, swallowing up the sun and sucking the light from the sky and when the rain hit, it struck with icy cold fingers. The water was sharp and thin, driving sharp needles into Alex's exposed skin. Thunder shook the house as the storm front hit the valley's hot air and the lightning strikes folded into the cloud banks reached out to strike the hills.

He heard shrieking from the backyard and chills ran down his spine, chasing away what little warmth he had left in his body. The dust on the ground plumed when hailstones struck, pinpricks of ice barely noticeable at first then becoming a carpet of white dots across the sandy, beige landscape. Alex needed to find where the scream was coming from and what the hell happened to Rook.

It didn't take long before he found out the answer to both of those questions. A few seconds later, his cousin came running around the corner of the house, his hands held above his head to ward off the pelting hailstones. If it wasn't for the blood behind him, Alex would've found it funny to see his normally implacable cousin running for dear life. Teasing Rook was an iffy thing at best and it was never something Alex is particularly good at but it seemed like too good of an opportunity to let go to waste. There are a number of things that popped into his head, sarcastic remarks that he'd heard from his employees as they took verbal jabs at each other during the workday but nothing that came to mind seemed to fit the situation. He wasn't going to go for the tried-and-true of screaming like a girl because innately that offended him and everything else that came to mind sounded like something a three-year-old would say.

He was just going with laughing when he noticed the enormous mountain lion hot on Rook's tail.

The creature did not look friendly. It did not look like somebody's pet it would gotten loose and simply hunting down a cuddle. There was nothing domestic about the large, healthy puma rounding the corner at the far end of the house.

"Get inside the fucking door!" Rook yelled, dodging around the palm that the desert colored wildcat failed to avoid. "Move! Move! Move!"

"We can't—"

There was no arguing with Rook. Actually, there was never any arguing with Rook. He, like all Martins, came preinstalled with a stubbornness software set to its higher most levels. Alex would, if pressed, admit to being a little headstrong at times, but not to the extent of his cousin. Rook also had the physical advantage of being extremely strong and possessing a forward momentum Alex could've stopped on a good day.

Considering the mountain lion that was little more than 10 feet away, it was not a good day.

Rook pushed him through the open front door. His cousin's hands fumbled around the handle for a brief second, trying to get a grip to slam it shut behind them. Alex, however, only caught a glimpse of a fanged

furry face through the long window on side of the door and then his feet hit the foyer, its sticky floor catching at his sneakers and throwing him off balance. He landed hard, rattling his teeth and for brief second he thought he broke his nose, judging by the snap of something giving way When his vision went blurry and not crack appeared across his right eye, he realized his glasses took the brunt of the damage.

He tasted blood and wasn't sure if he was looking that up off the floor or if it was coming from his own bitten tongue. Either way the salty metallic taste wasn't something he could easily swallow, certainly not around the slick saliva his fear brought up to coat his throat. Whatever Rook it done seem to pissed off the mountain lion because the large cat wasn't giving up its prey. It clawed at the door, growling loud enough to drown out Alex's thundering heartbeats.

"Jesus, do you see the size of that thing?" Rook took a step back from the front door and before Alex could warn him, he stepped into the sticky drying fluid covering the tiles. When he lifted his sneaker, maroon threads clung to its sole, a viscous weave binding him to the floor. Shaking his foot, Rook fought to break free while keeping one eye on the cat and another on Alex. "You okay? What the hell is this shit?"

"I think it is blood," Alex muttered, struggling to get to his feet. His glasses hung from one ear and one of his lenses definitely a crack but other than the small schism through his world, they were going to have to do. "There's so much of it here, somebody had to been killed. But that's the least of our worries."

"I drop my phone somewhere back there. Give me yours. How can a murder be the least of our worries? " Rook made a face then glanced at the door. The wildcat's aggressive scrambling and growls fought with the growing storm. It was getting harder and harder to hear and the roof sounded as if it was being torn apart by the hail sweeping the valley. "Forget I said that. There's a mountain lion outside wants piece of my ass, we might have a dead body somewhere in the house, and all that's missing from the storm outside is a bunch of flying monkeys and a little girl with her dog. Which one of those things is the least of our worries?"

"I'm not saying all of those things are important but they're not the worst of our worries," Alex sighed. "Don't kill me, but I think I locked my phone in your car."

Five

“Okay, not only does the house not have electricity, the phones don’t work.” Rook grumbled. “This is why it’s very important to always have a landline. In an emergency, a landline generates enough electricity to power a phone. Even if the lights been turned off, you’ll still have a phone.”

“If you’ve paid for the phone to be on,” Alex pointed out.

He wouldn’t say the finger gesture he got from Rook was family-friendly. Well, at least not for most families. For his family that was often a gesture hidden in between pointed words and sharp looks. A Martin never stooped to vulgarity, his grandfather often said — usually after unloading an entire string of profanity — but they sure knew how to tell you fuck off and die in the most cutting way possible. Rook seem to take a more practical approach, hence the gestures.

There was no avoiding ruining the crime scene in the foyer. Their only hope was to get deeper into the house with a cat couldn’t see them and it would give up and leave. From the sounds of the rumbling outside of the front door, it didn’t seem likely. If anything it seemed to be aggravated at the loss of its prey, doubling down on its efforts to break through.

“What did you do to that thing?” Alex wasn’t ready to be worried yet. There was plenty of time for worry. He would be concerned about the cat only if he heard the sound of glass or wood breaking. Judging by the empty rooms they found at the front of the house, there wasn’t anything to defend themselves with except for Rook’s sharp wit, and that didn’t seem to work too well the first time he ran into the mountain lion. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and get hit by lightning.”

“Only you would think getting hit by lightning would be lucky.” Rook was half buried in a closet off the front hall and his voice echoed back to Alex stood in what possibly had been a study at some point.

“I’m not saying will be lucky for him. I’m saying it would be lucky for us.” He was covered in gore and had a silent debate about whether or not he should try to wash it off or leave it for a crime scene technician to take into evidence. “There was going to be a sale here, where’s all the inventory? Are you sure we’re in the right house? So far all we have to show for the day is me being covered in blood, you making friends of the local wildlife, and we have no way of getting hold of somebody to help us.”

“I’m positive it’s the right house. I’m just not so sure that it’s an actual murder.” Rook walked out of the closet holding up what looked like IV bags half-filled with strawberry Jell-O. “Take a sniff at your armpit. Tell me if you smell fruity. Well, more fruity than usual.”

“And here I was thinking you were one of the nice Martins.” Still, he took a little bit of a sniff — after making sure Rook couldn’t see him — and was mildly alarmed and amused to discover he smelt like a fruit rollup. “Oh God…”

“I can totally see you smelling yourself. There’s a mirror right there.” Rook pointed at the very large reflective Art Deco piece hanging on a wall over a gas fireplace. “My guess is that they got hot because there is no AC and ruptured but that doesn’t explain the drag marks or why there is an anybody here for the sale.”

“Well it’s definitely a movie prop so we’re in the right place. Let’s see if I can find something to change into.” Alex longingly eyed the kitchen with its gleaming faucets. “And pray that they left the water on.”

The house was not only enormous, it was built on several levels and it was clear the architect had a deep hard on Escher. They made one turn after another, went up one small flight of stairs, turned a corner and then went down another flight of stairs without seemingly back tracking to where the originally started. None of the rooms make much sense or at least there was nothing left inside of them to figure out their

purpose other than the occasional bathroom. One of the turrets held the inventory or at least that's what Alex thought was in the mountain of boxes stacked in front of several banks of windows.

"Since no one but us is here, and there something outside that is not only willing but able to eat us," Rook said, ripping the tape off of one of the boxes. "Let's at least see what is for sale. First come first serve? That's of the saying goes right?"

"That isn't our property... What am I saying? Look who I'm talking to," Alex grumbled, catching himself before he rubbed his face. "I'm going to go find a bathroom and see if I can't get cleaned up. Wouldn't you think in a house this big, there be a bathroom somewhere in the front?"

"In a house this big, I'm surprised there is in a mother fucking fountain in the middle of the living room," Rook replied.

The tile in the foyer did run through the entire house, large antique Spanish tile in rustic sunset-hued patterns Alex would seriously consider putting into their kitchen at home. It had a graceful elegance to it and seemed like it would clean up extremely easily, fruity IV bags notwithstanding. His glasses were slowly driving him mad and the house was getting dark with the growing storm blocking most of the sun. As deep as they were into the house it was difficult to hear anything other than the thundering chaos and rain outside so he couldn't hear if the cat was still outside but short of trying to find their way back to the front door, he had no idea the mountain lion was still laying in wait.

"Hey, there is a Grendel shirt in here and it still wrapped." Rook pulled out something black swaddled in plastic and began to tear open its top. "It says it's an extra large. Might be a little big for you but it's better than walking around smelling like Strawberry Shortcake. Unless you want me to dig around looking for a Sailor Moon shirt? I know you have a thing for Pluto."

"There is nothing wrong with Sailor Pluto. Just give me the shirt," Alex said, holding out his hand. "On second thought, do you think it could been a collector's item? I hate to ruin the value something —"

"You're walking around looking like a little kid who's fallen headfirst into his shaved ice. I could give a shit if this was the only Grendel shirt ever made. You look uncomfortable and about two minutes your OCD is gonna kick in and you're going to say damn the mountain lion, strip naked and go dancing off in the rain. Then it's going to eat you and I would have to explain to James why all that is left of you is your manky sneaker and the ringing in my ears from your screams."

"You're one to talk about screaming," Alex sniffed. "You were coming around the house howling like an air raid siren. I'm pretty sure if there any World War II vets living in the area, they would think they were kamikaze pilots descended upon the valley."

Rook stood there, silently assessing him. It was odd seeing parts of his face on another man and stranger still to sometimes hear his own voice coming out of his cousin's mouth but the sarcasm dripping from Rook's words was something Alex could never achieve.

"If you're going to try to be a smartass, Alex," Rook countered. "You are going to have to choose a cultural reference that is at least relevant in the past three years. You could've gone with anything and you choose kamikaze pilots? What's wrong with tie fighters? Or even the little dog in Dark Crystal?"

"Fizzgig wasn't a dog," he corrected. "And you of people should know that —"

He would've gone on further, especially since it was on a topic both he and Rook knew intimately. He'd never forgiven his cousin for outbidding him on the Mystic statue and secretly hoped it would be eaten by termites in some of his daydreaming while doing the store's books. But before he could launch into an explanation on why kamikaze pilots were a perfectly valid reference point, Rook kicked one of the boxes over...

... And out rolled a man's arm — without anything else attached to it — and unlike the strawberry scented IV fluid they'd found in the foyer, it stank to high heaven, was partially decayed, covered with maggots and possibly the most vomit-inducing thing Alex had ever seen.

And vomit he did.

Six

"It's not real, Alex," Rook said as he picked up a plastic trident from one of the boxes. Alex could see Rook was trying hard not to gag at the smell coming off of the decaying pseudo-flesh while he poked at the dismembered limb but it was a near thing. "It's definitely a prop from some B-movie. However, this thing stinks. Makes me want to puke."

"Thanks I feel so much better. Knowing that you have a stronger stomach than I do." Alex, however, hadn't been so lucky and he was still trying to get the bitter taste of his own sick off his tongue. "I don't normally have such a weak stomach. And stop poking it. You're spreading the smell."

He lost everything he ate that day, including the cinnamon bun snagged from Rook's kitchen. He might have mourned the coffee more than the cinnamon bun but mostly he regretted losing his dignity. Standing in the middle of the empty house, with the storm raging around them and a rotting animatronics arm flopping about on a sea of Spanish tile, Alex was struck by the sheer adequacy he felt compared to Rook. Their lives mirrored one another, both with the deep affection of pop-culture and an even more intense love for homicide cops but that there was something more about Rook that Alex knew he would never achieve — the innate ability to simply not give a fuck.

"Okay to be fair," Rook conceded, "it does look like it is full of maggots but that is the microbeads they used to stuff the shell. And it's covered with mold so it makes it look like they're —"

"I appreciate you trying to make me feel better but you don't have to," Alex said softly. Sometimes the affection he felt for his cousin overwhelmed him, especially in times when they were knee-deep in something they really shouldn't be into. Rook was actually trying to spare his feelings. With the teasing, the offhand sarcasm, and admitting he had been affected as well, his cousin was trying to make him feel okay... no, not okay... *normal*. Or is normal as either one of them could get. "I just realized something —"

"That it never made sense that Vader didn't know Princess Leia was his daughter when he could sense Luke from across the fucking galaxy?"

"See it's things like that that make me love you yet at the same time would cheerfully murder you by sticking a chopstick up your nose," Alex sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "I realized that you are more than my cousin. I mean, theoretically I'm your double cousin because my parents are related but until I met you I never knew what it was like to have a sibling — a brother — we're so much alike in so many ways that it's like I've known you since we were kids. And I'm really sorry that we didn't grow up together."

"Do you think Los Angeles would've survived the two of us grown up together?" Rook cocked his head, looking so much like their grandfather Alex smiled at the glimmer of Archie in his cousin's expression. "On the other hand, we could have grown up to be mortal enemies like Mojo JoJo and Bubbles."

"I'm assuming," Alex said dryly, "That I am the genius evil monkey with the bad hat in this scenario? Because if there is one thing you always like to project it is that air of naïve innocence that you can't quite pull off."

"Of course you are." Rook grinned. "If you were Bubbles, that would just be going for the expected stereo type. Everybody in his right mind would look to you to save the day and you've got admit sometimes it's really nice to be really bad."

§

"Tell me you don't see the mountain lion," Rook muttered from inside of the study. "The only thing I see here is a sheet of rain and that one of my tires is flat. I bet you that damned thing bit my tire. Cats are sketchy you know. That's why people think they're evil."

"You totally should get a cat," Alex replied. "If there's anyone who deserves to be mauled in the middle of the night because he hasn't clean the litter box it is you."

"Are you kidding? Have you met Dante?" Rook joined him in the foyer, carefully stepping around the sticky pool covering most of the tiles. It was like watching somebody trying to traverse the bog of eternal stench — if that somebody was Alan Swan — and when Rook made it across to the other side, Alex gave him a golf clap. "Well done! And no, I don't see the mountain lion but that doesn't mean he isn't out there. Are you sure this plan is going to work? Are you sure you didn't leave it in the SUV? "

"Well, I had my phone with me when I got out of the car but I probably dropped it when I found Hollywood Baghera sunning himself by the pool. So we basically have two options, pray for somebody to have a premonition and come to find us or try to get to the car and get your phone." Rook looked through the window then whistled. "Got you should see what he did to the front posts. I'm surprised the porch is holding up. I can't imagine with the door looks like."

"That could've been you, you know?" Alex shuddered at the thought. "Of course I don't know the that many people who could out run a mountain lion."

"Fear is a great motivator, my cousin," Rook said with a shrug. "Maybe he's feeble. What I'm hoping for is that he stupid. We've been in here for two hours now. No one is coming for an estate sale and no one is going to come and save us. So, what I want you to do is shut the door behind me as soon as I go outside. I'm going to try to get to the car before the cat can get me. Whatever you do, don't open the door unless it is me —"

"How about if we agree that I open the door to anyone who is human?" The day was getting extremely dark, turning over to late afternoon and if he didn't get a hold of James soon, there probably would be hell to pay — mostly because he would have to admit that things once again with Rook went seriously wrong. "I promise, I will slam the door in the face of anything walking on four legs. So whatever you do don't come crawling back to me."

It was like a synchronized, choreographed dance. They counted to three, Alex turned the door handle and Rook load his shoulder in preparation to sprint across the front drive. As plans went, it was one of the more sound ones they'd ever come up with although theoretically, the project mission of getting a tutu on a hippo technically was flawless, they just hadn't had a chance to ever put it through its paces.

By all accounts, it should of worked. It *really* should have worked.

What they hadn't taken into account, was the dead man lying on the front steps.

Seven

“Okay, we know two things,” Rook said, ticking off his fingers. “One, there is an actual dead man outside. Two, the mountain lion is also outside. Still.”

“Are you sure?” It wasn’t that he didn’t believe Rook. No, it was just too long and unbelievable of the day to have this many disasters pile up on top of each other. The last time he’d been involved in something with the dead body, he met James and as far as Alex was concerned, he’d gotten all out of that situation that he desired.

“Am I *sure*?” Narrowing his eyes, his cousin gave him a filthy look. “Of the two of us, you’re the one the body count that rivals El Mariachi. I’ve really only had the one. Okay, maybe I’ve only had one at a time you’ve had *handfuls*. You should be an expert by now. Scully should be calling you up for advice —”

“As if Scully would ever ask for advice,” he snorted. “I meant, are you sure about the cat?”

“Did you miss the large sand-colored furry thing chewing on the guy’s foot? Did you perhaps think it was a Tusken Raider?”

“Sarcasm *never* helps *any* situation.”

“Sarcasm is like Tapatío,” Rook shot back. “It adds the right spice to anything. Imagine how much more fun baby showers would be if people didn’t take them so seriously?”

“The question is, what are we going to do?” Alex rubbed at his face, dislodging his warped glasses. He was tired, hungry and other than a few handfuls of water from the faucet to rinse the puke out of his mouth, he hadn’t had anything to drink. “We need to get rid of the mountain lion, get to the car and tell somebody about the dead guy. Preferably someone who won’t immediately call up the LAPD and tell either James or Dante what happened here.”

“Oh I don’t see that happening. Dante is like a spider. Something happens — I do something even remotely sketchy — and his web vibrates. He has feelers out everywhere. Even people who he’s met once for three minutes 10 years ago will suddenly remember his face and phone number as soon as they see me. It’s uncanny. I’m beginning to wonder if he microchipped me while I was asleep.”

“If I were him, I would wait until you were sleep,” he muttered under his breath. “I would just tackle you, put that Taser gun-thing to the back of your neck and pull the trigger. I would want you to know what was be done do you.”

“See? And there you had doubts about being Mojo JoJo.”

Resting his head against the wall, Alex took a deep breath and counted backwards from ten. Hero worship would only carry him so far and as try as he might, there was no denying Rook’s enthusiastic denial of reality. Or maybe, Rook truly did live in a world where everything fell into place with little to no effort and the appearance of a dead body on the front porch of a house they’d pretty much broken into was simply par for the course.

“None of this makes sense. How did we get here? What are we doing?” Alex tried to whimper as manfully as possible but it was beyond him. “This is like a giant practical joke...except for the mountain lion and the dead guy.”

“I don’t think the dead guy is real either. He’s *leaking*. Dead bodies don’t leak. And they sure as shit don’t leak... what is that? Red Vaseline? Quick, what kind of goo do they put into those crash dummies? Like ballistic gel but runnier. Stretch Armstrong had it. They put it in the limbs so it’s not that heavy. That’s

what that shit looks like.” Rook pressed his hand against the window and peered outside. “Dude, what did you say? That this is like a giant practical—Holy shit, what the hell is that?”

A thin warbling sound penetrated Alex’s numb haze and he lifted his head, rubbing at the imprint the textured wall left on his skin. The wind shifted around the house, carrying the screech’s rising pitch with it. It was hard to hear and with the ripples of the valley’s uneven hills around them, the incessant wail bounced and dove about. It seemed to oddly be coming from above them and as Alex canted his head, the noise grew louder.

“Is... that on the roof?” Rook asked. “That totally sounds like it’s coming from the roof.”

“Shit, you did say that big pine tree was to close the house. Maybe the mountain lion climbed it. Suppose one of the windows up there is open. Suppose —”

“Look, before you grow a beard, don a white robe, and stand out on the street screaming about the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse coming, let’s figure out what we’re panicking about.” Rook took one last look out the window. “And no, that’s not the mountain lion. That asshole is now sitting on top of my car.”

§

“*Help me,*” a weak voice called out when they reached the top of the central turret. “Can you hear me? Oh God please hear me?”

“Well, either there’s a guy in a tree right outside the window hoping the mountain lion won’t get him or the dude is crazy, climbed a pine tree and is up there singing Metallica.” Rook stood at the top of the stairs, surveying the round room. “And a part of me really wants to believe that fucker is belting out the lyrics to *One* so we can just leave him there.”

It’d taken them 10 minutes to find how to get to the right turret. The desert mansion seem to have been built by deciding what direction a hall or staircase would take by flipping a coin. And whoever had done the flipping, had been drunk off their ass. Unlike most of the rooms in the house, this one actually had things in it. Horrifying things.

If there had been any doubt that the previous owner of the house — its now deceased owner — had been a fan of the macabre, it was evident in what was in that room.

There were body parts everywhere. Not just human parts, or adult pieces. There were alien body parts, tentacles, stuffed animals done by the worst taxidermist in all history, and lots of doll heads. Some of it — but the giant troll torso near one window — was obviously fake but most of it, including a silicone cast of an insectoid-featured face looked alarmingly real. Or at least he thought it did. Rook appeared to have other opinions.

“If that supposed to Kamen Rider, they got it all wrong.” His cousin was ignoring the voice barely penetrating the thick windows. He seemed more intent on inspecting the turret’s treasure trove of special-effects pieces. “And it’s not accurate enough to be an actual insect head. It’s like they couldn’t decide on one bug so they threw in four or five. Look at this part right here. It is more scarab —”

“Can we possibly get the guy out of the tree first?” Alex strode over to the window bank, the glass nearly obscured by the thick needles brushing up against the side of the house. “It’s hailing outside. He must be freezing his ass off.”

“I don’t care if he turns into an asshole popsicle,” his cousin remarked. “This was all a practical joke. He was trying to scare us. Or somebody. I don’t even know who that is. He probably doesn’t even know who we are —”

“*Rook!*” The man shouted. “Open the window! I’m going to freeze out here.”

"It sure sounds like he knows you." Alex struggled to open the heavy window. "The latch is bent. Come help me."

"Maybe karma will kick in and the damned mountain lion'll climb the tree and eat him instead of us?"

"We're safe. *He's* not." He sighed. "It's the right thing to do."

"Give me one reason I should help the dickwad who's been pulling this shit on us since we first got here?" Rook kicked at what turned out to be a bag of eyeballs, sending the round porcelain objects skittering across the floor. A few bounced down the staircase, a waterfall of pinging echoes whispering up the well. "One good fucking reason."

"He probably has a cell phone on him," he replied smugly. "And once I get that off of him, you have my permission to punch whoever that is right in the face."

"Deal," Rook sniffed. "Now get out of the way so I can break this asshole's nose."

Epilogue

"You didn't have to call the cops," Marvin Diego snorled through a bloody handkerchief. "This is so embarrassing. Suppose the news finds out—"

"I seriously doubt anyone gives a shit if they find out you peed your pants because a puma was about to have you for afternoon tea," Rook shot back, flexing his left hand. "And I didn't call the cops, I called... *Dante*."

"Which is pretty much the same thing," Alex pointed out. He was warmer now, swaddled in one of James' zipped hoodies and sitting in the back seat of Dante's large SUV. Under the dubious protection of the house's front porch, Dante and James appeared to be finishing up their conversation with the Animal Control agent the sheriff called in to scare off the mountain lion while the tow truck operator was locking down Rook's vehicle on the flat bed he'd brought to the site. "I can't believe it pulled off your bumpers."

"Yeah, lucky me," Rook mumbled from the front seat. "Jesus, what a fucking day."

"It was supposed to be a joke," Marvin whimpered from the third seat. "To get back at you for stealing that first edition Lord of the Rings I wanted."

"You have a first edition Lord of the Rings?" Alex gaped at his cousin. His envy fought with his awe and he swallowed. "Really?"

"Yeah, all of them. Including the Silmarillion. Prime condition" Rook made a face back at him. "Don't get pissy. It's your Christmas present. And I won them fair and square, Marvin."

"You took a ninety-four year old woman to the sideshow circus so she could learn how to be a trapeze artist," he exclaimed in a huff. "She spent the day in a sparkling pink leotard, performing for five-year olds. How was *anyone* suppose to compete with that? She practically sold the whole lot to you for pennies on the dollar!"

"Sometimes, Marvin, it's not about the money but about the desire." Rook winked at Alex. "And besides, it was for my cousin. I'd have slit your throat to get those books if I had to."

"Okay, we're good to go," James said, climbing into the back seat next to Alex. "We got the sheriff to drop the charges against Marvin—"

"That's a fucking pity," Rook muttered.

"Well, technically you two were breaking and entering as well so let's just go with *that's good* from you. That sale he lured you in with isn't going to happen for another month. The auction house people said they'd give you a call when it's on but somehow, I don't think Marvin's invited." Dante got settled in the driver's seat then leaned over to kiss Rook on the mouth. "You okay, *cuervo*?"

James was holding his hand, rubbing at the ring on Alex's finger but it was still... oddly romantic to see Rook wrinkle his nose then return Dante's gentle kiss. His cousin had changed—was still changing—once Dante Montoya entered Rook's life and the simmering affection they'd banked years ago was finally allowed to grow into a fiery passion Alex envied nearly as much as he did the Tolkien.

"But I have that too," he sighed, bumping shoulders with his husband. "I got the cop *and* the books. Life is *good*."

"What are you muttering about, babe?" James peered down at him as Dante started up the car to drive them back into Los Angeles. "Am I going to have to help you dig a grave for when you kill Rook?"

"Nope, not killing him," he murmured. "Today was a good day. And you know what? Tomorrow's going to be an even better one."

"Why?" James squeezed his hand and smiled. "What are you going to do tomorrow, babe?"

"Same thing we do every day, Pinky," Alex dropped his voice to a rumbling rasp. "Rook's going to try to take over the world. And I'm probably going to help."