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1

Trouble in Paradise

‘This is my most brilliant idea yet,’ muttered Alex, his ice-blue eyes glinting mischievously under his blond fringe.

It was a beautiful day in Heaven. The kind of day when it seemed like nothing could possibly go wrong. Alex and his best friend and team-mate Big House were in a large garden, crouched behind an enormous ornamental pond, complete with dolphin-shaped fountain.

House eyed the sculpture nervously

‘What are we doing?’ he whispered, trying to make sure his wings didn’t knock into Alex and send him sprawling into the water. Like the rest of his body, House’s wings were several times larger than average and, as everyone at Cloud Nine Academy had learned to their cost, seemed to act as accident magnets.

‘Well, it’s not fair, is it?’ said Alex. ‘The Wingers are the new Cloud Nine five-a-side football champions, aren’t we?’

‘Yeah –’

‘But there haven’t exactly been any celebrations, have there?’ continued Alex. ‘Where are the screaming crowds, the banners, the waving flags? Everyone should know we’ve won, don’t you think?’

‘But it was just a school footy tournament,’ said House. ‘It’s not like we’re champions of the universe or anything.’

Alex turned away.

‘Check this out,’ he said, pulling a large red bottle from his pocket.

House read the label: *Warning – Will Stain Clothes!* He winced. This didn’t look good.

‘Do the rest of the team know about this?’

‘They soon will,’ said Alex. ‘Here they come now.’

From behind a nearby hedge, three winged figures darted towards them: a girl in a striking red baseball cap, a boy with scruffy black hair, and a much smaller boy wearing very large glasses.

‘Hi,’ said Alex. ‘You all ready for this?’

‘Ready for what?’ asked the girl, who was wearing combats, heavy boots, a zebra-stripe top – and a quiver and bow on her back. ‘What are you up to this time, Alex?’

‘He’s got a bottle of dye, Cherry,’ sighed House.

‘What’re you going to do with it?’ asked Cherry, turning to Alex.

‘Whatever it is,’ said the dark-haired boy, ‘it’s bound to be something stupid that gets us into trouble.’

‘*Respite*, I’m hurt,’ replied Alex, not looking it at all. ‘When have I ever got you into trouble?’

‘About as many times as I’ve told you not to call me “Respite”. It makes me sound like a total wuss.’

‘Sorry. Spit.’

‘Better.’

The last member of the gang, Inchy, who barely came up to House’s waist, looked through his thick spectacles at the bottle in Alex’s hands.

‘So what are you going to do with that, then?’

‘*We*,’ corrected Alex, ‘are going to dye the fountain red.’

‘Er, why?’ asked Spit.

‘Red’s our team colour, isn’t it? So everyone will know it was The Wingers who won the championship. It’s like a celebration!’

‘But everyone already knows we won,’ replied Cherry

‘And because of that, it’ll be really obvious that it was us that did it,’ added Spit.

‘No way,’ said Alex. ‘Think about it – we’re the most popular team at the Academy. We’ve got loads of supporters who want to join the celebrations. No one will be able to blame us – it could have been any of them.’

‘It would be cool to have the fountain going in our team colours,’ admitted Inchy, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

‘And it can’t really do any harm,’ agreed Cherry.

Spit grimaced. ‘You’re all nuts. Gabriel will go absolutely *mental*!’

Alex just grinned, and promptly emptied his bottle into the pond.

‘Well, that didn’t do much, did it?’ said House, crestfallen.

The water was slowly turning a pale, unimpressive pink.

‘Hang on, mate,’ replied Alex, ‘That’s just Phase One of this particular master plan.’ He turned to Cherry. ‘How good are you with that bow?’

‘Good enough,’ said Cherry confidently.

Alex pointed to a large brass button on a wall some distance off.

‘Reckon you could hit that from here?’

‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ said Spit. ‘Cherry couldn’t hit her own foot, never mind something that far away.’

‘I’ve been practising!’ Cherry protested.

‘Whatever.’

‘What’s the button for, anyway?’ asked Inchy.

‘It turns on the fountain,’ said Alex, ‘But it’s right under Gabriel’s window – impossible to sneak up to without being seen. But if Cherry can hit it from here, we can set the fountain going and no one will have a clue who started it!’

A slow grin spread across House’s wide face. ‘Genius!’

Cherry fitted an arrow to her bow.

‘We do this and we run, OK?’ she said, raising the bow and taking aim. The gang held their breath.

With a *twang* from Cherry’s bow, the arrow flew across the garden, missed the button by a mile, clattered against the window of Gabriel’s office – and ricocheted right back at them.

Alex sidestepped to his left, as if dodging a defender. Spit flung himself to the right. Cherry ducked as the arrow whizzed over her head, taking her cap with it. Inchy spread his wings and soared up out of danger. In a flash, the whole team had taken perfect evasive action.

Except House.

The next few seconds seemed to play out in slow motion. Trying to avoid the flying arrow, House fell backwards, tripped over Cherry, staggered forward, stumbled over the crouching figure of Alex, lost his footing and . . .

SPLASH!

A plume of bright red water soared into the sky. When the spray cleared, House was sitting in the middle of the pond, soaked. And stained red from top to toe. For a moment, Alex thought about laughing. Then he heard The Voice booming out across the garden.

‘What in Heaven is going on out there?’

‘Quick!’ Alex yelled to House. ‘Get out! Gabriel’s coming!’

House tried to pull himself up, but the bottom of the fountain was slippery with red slime. In the distance, a tall figure in snow-white robes was striding across the lawn, getting closer by the second.

‘Hurry!’ shouted Cherry. ‘Or we’re all for it!’

Desperately, House pulled himself to the edge of the fountain and climbed out on to the side, scattering crimson drops behind him. For a second, it looked like he was going to make it. Then his feet slid from under him and, arms windmilling madly, he fell backwards with another titanic splash that emptied the fountain – all over the white-robed figure, who was now quite clearly recognizable as Head Angel Gabriel.

As Cherry, Inchy and Spit fled, Alex stared, aghast. How could it all have gone so wrong? It was time to get out of there. He leapt into the air, but before he had gone more than three wingbeats, Alex felt a hand – old, calloused and extraordinarily strong – grip his ankle, stopping him dead. As he hung there in mid-air, a quiet voice, deep as a well, whispered one word into his ear.

'*Gotcha!*'

The hallway ran through the centre of Cloud Nine Academy. It was very long, very dark and very cold, and ended in an enormous door. It was the kind of door that, if you found yourself standing in front of it, meant you were almost certainly in a lot of trouble.

Alex, Spit, Cherry, Inchy and Big House knew the door very well indeed. Hardly a week went by without the gang ending up waiting outside it for a telling-off from the Head Angel. Usually because one of Alex's 'foolproof' plans hadn't turned out to be quite so foolproof as he'd thought.

Alex leaned back against the wall and smiled at his four friends. None of them smiled back.

Spit spoke first.

'It wasn't my idea to put dye in the fountain,' he said, his dark eyes fixed on Alex.

'No, it was definitely mine,' Alex grinned back. 'I just didn't think Gabriel would be so upset.'

'You didn't think he'd get upset?' said Spit. 'Old Grumpy Gabs?'

Alex laughed. No one else joined in.

Cherry spoke up, her naturally red hair blazing like fire.

'So why are we all here, then, if it's your fault?' She sighed. 'You're supposed to be training to be an Archangel – one of the leaders of Heaven. Some leader you are – you're always getting us into trouble.'

'*Big* trouble,' said House gloomily, shoving his unnaturally red hands deep into his pockets. 'This could mean big, big trouble.'

Alex looked across at his best friend, wondering how anything could ever worry him. He was at least a head taller than the rest of the gang, well built and unusually strong.

House slumped moodily back against the wall. Unfortunately he slumped much further than he'd intended, and ended up tumbling to the ground and sitting squarely on top of Inchy.

'Oi! Watch out!' squeaked Inchy from underneath House's bulky frame.

'All you ever do, Bungalow,' said Spit insultingly, 'is walk into things and knock stuff over. Is there a day that goes by without you breaking something? We wouldn't even be here if you hadn't fallen into the fountain!'

'Leave it, Spit,' said Alex, stepping in, 'unless you want House to *see* red too and squash you into a ball and boot you down the hall.'

Alex eyeballed Spit, who backed off, muttering to himself. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, Alex extended his wings. They weren't fully grown quite yet, but they were certainly big enough for flying, which, thought Alex, was easily the best bit about being an angel. With a jump, he went to hover by the shiny gold sign screwed to the door. On it were three words – *Head Angel: Shush!* A small halo shone above the 'A'.

From his vantage point Alex watched as House scrambled up from the floor, picked Inchy up with one hand and plopped him back on to his feet.

'Sorry, Inchy,' said House. 'I must've missed the wall.'

'S'all right,' said Inchy, checking his own wings and picking up his bent glasses. 'I mean, a wall's so easy to miss, isn't it?'

Checking that the door to Gabriel's office was firmly closed, Alex did a quick loop-the-loop.

Cherry sighed. 'Alex, you know you're not supposed to fly in the corridors.'

'So what?'

'So we're in enough trouble already. Come down.'

'But there aren't any teachers about,' replied Alex, turning over to hover upside down. 'Relax.'

'Alex,' said Cherry, pulling out an arrow. 'If your feet aren't on the ground in three seconds, I'm going to fire one of these at you and make you fall in love with a donkey. Again.'

The previous week, Alex had used a permanent marker pen to draw a beard on Cherry's face while she was asleep. At the time, it had been really funny, but Cherry had got her revenge by shooting Alex with one of her Arrows of Love while he was grooming

Gabriel's pet donkey. Alex couldn't remember exactly what had happened next, but it had certainly involved a rather horrible hairy kiss and some very bad breath indeed.

'You're not actually allowed to fire that at a person, you know,' he said, nodding at the bow. 'You have to be a fully qualified Cherub.'

Alex suddenly found himself staring down the length of a drawn arrow.

'Try me,' said Cherry. 'Same place as last time, OK?'

Alex's hands instinctively covered his bottom.

'Fine,' he muttered, dropping to the ground. 'I was just having some fun.'

'Like you were with the fountain?' smirked Spit.

'I thought it would be a giggle. How was I to know that Gabriel would come into the garden?'

Cherry lowered her bow.

'I reckon we vote for a new captain,' she said. 'You're rubbish, Alex.'

'Oh, come on,' protested Alex. 'We have fun, don't we? More fun than any of the other teams in the league. That's why Gabriel's got it in for us – he doesn't like anyone to have fun.

'He didn't look very happy at all,' said House.

'No,' replied Inchy. 'But then I don't think he was really expecting to have red dye sprayed all over his nice, freshly ironed, snow-white Archangel outfit.'

'At least I'm red all over. He looked like a huge raspberry ripple ice cream,' said House absently. His tummy gave a loud rumble at the thought.

'Inchy's got a point, Alex' said Cherry. 'Do you ever think before you act?'

'It's not an act,' said Alex. 'I'm just naturally this talented. Oh, and good-looking, but that goes without saying.'

'Then why do you always say it?' asked Cherry.

'Because sometimes you need reminding.'

Cherry opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by the sound of a loud cough from the other side of the door. It was the kind of cough used by someone getting ready to say lots of things, none of them very nice. The gang braced themselves, but the door stayed firmly shut.

After a moment, Alex broke the silence. 'Anyway, I'm sure we've got nothing to worry about. Gabriel's harmless, really,' he whispered. 'He just likes everyone to think he's terrifying. Actually, he's a big softy.'

None of the gang looked convinced.

‘Surely you’ve heard the stories, though?’ said Spit, equally quietly.

‘Stories? What stories?’ said House nervously.

‘Don’t worry, mate,’ said Alex, putting his arm almost round House’s broad shoulders. ‘Spit’s just trying to wind you up, aren’t you Spit?’

Alex glared at Spit, trying to silence him.

‘You mean the stories about what he did before he took over Cloud Nine Academy?’ asked Inchy, wiping his glasses clean with his shirt.

‘They’re just rumours,’ said Cherry. ‘No one believes them.’

‘What rumours?’ said House. ‘What’s everyone talking about?’

‘Let’s just say,’ murmured Spit, leaning closer to House, ‘it’s a good job we’re not demons.’

‘Why?’ said House. ‘What are you on about? What’s any of this got to do with demons?’

‘Nothing. Nothing at all,’ said Spit innocently, although he sounded as if he was enjoying scaring House.

‘Then why don’t you shut up?’ said Cherry.

‘It’s not just rumours.’

Everyone turned to listen to Inchy.

‘There are books in the library, really old ones that most people don’t bother to read. I was researching a project about how angels can use something called chameleon clothing to stay invisible on Earth. It’s amazing stuff! It changes to look exactly like whatever’s around you, so you’re impossible to see. How cool is that? I don’t think we get to try it until –’

‘Inchy!’ interrupted Cherry. ‘Get on with it!’

‘Oh yeah, sorry.’ Inchy pushed his glasses back up his nose and continued. ‘Anyway, I went into this really dark bit of the library I’d never been into before. There was this section called “The War”. The books were huge, some too big to lift. But I managed to open one. It was all about Gabriel.’

‘What about him?’ asked Alex. ‘What did it say?’

Inchy went quiet.

‘Inch?’ prompted House.

‘To cut a long story short,’ said Inchy with a heavy sigh, ‘it basically said that no one kicks butt like Gabriel.’

‘Well, I don’t know about you guys, but that’s really cheered me up,’ said Spit sarcastically.

‘Look,’ said Alex, turning to face the whole of his gang, ‘I’ll say it was all my idea. I’ll tell Gabriel that –’

But they never got to hear what Alex was going to say.

A sharp click cut the conversation dead and then, silent as fog, the door to Gabriel’s office swung ominously open.