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The Alibi

by Fran Duffield

The slam of the front door as she closed it behind her partially muffled the exclamation from Alex in the living room.

“Don’t come in yet,” he called, “there’s glass everywhere.”

She dropped her bags in the hall and peered gingerly through the open doorway into the room. Alex was surveying the damage, arms akimbo and swearing under his breath. A full size brick lay in the middle of the new laminate flooring surrounded by a shining nest of glass. Her eyes followed it’s potential trajectory back to a jagged hole in the conservatory extension roof.

“What the hell has happened?” she said, missing the pointlessness of the question in her confusion.

Alex frowned, unamused by her apparent dimness. “Well, that’s pretty obvious, I would say.”

She looked at him apologetically, “No, no, I just meant...who would do this?”

“Kids on the towpath, the beauty of living by the canal,” Alex was dismissive.

She looked out into the waving sea of new grass that had never been cut since the landscapers had put it down, and at the six foot brick wall at the end of it. She knew there was a further drop on the towpath side.

“They would have had to have a pretty good aim from the towpath,” she said, thinking aloud.

Alex had tiptoed around the shards and retrieved a broom from the kitchen, and was trying to sweep up without damaging the flooring.

“Well, they must have had, musn’t they?” he snapped, with his back to her. He was clearly fuming, but surprisingly incurious about this very unexpected intrusion into his shiny new house.

A horrible thought occurred to her, “You don’t think they got into the rest of the house...?” She looked uneasily up the stairs.

“No, I’m sure they didn’t,” said Alex in a tone that implied she was being ridiculous.

“Don’t you think you should check?” she ventured, and immediately knew she shouldn’t have said anything. Alex stopped sweeping, still facing the window.

“If you are so worried, why don’t you go and see?” he said turning to her with an expression she couldn’t quite place.

“I’m sure you’re right, it’s not the typical way for a burglar to break in, announcing his arrival like that” she half laughed, batting the question away and hoping to improve his mood.

“Of course I am,” Alex looked more calmly at her “You’re overthinking it again, just a bit of mindless vandalism in the inner city. Just a bloody nuisance.”

When the mess was finally cleared up, she retrieved her bags from the hallway and sat him down with a cup of tea. She smiled impishly and waggled the large carrier bags at him.

“Early pressies!” she said, rummaging in the contents to choose which item first. “Things that might come in useful for our little break.”

Alex slumped down in his chair, “I told you not to get me anything,” he said, “you know I don’t do presents.”

“No, but I do!” she smiled. “Anyway, it’s not knick-knacks, it’s something useful: summer clothes for a holiday mood!”

Her smile faded as she saw his expression. He handled the proffered garment as if it might burn him, and then handed it back to her.

“Look, it was really nice of you, but I have cupboards full of clothes. Really, I do, can hardly fit in what I’ve already got. You take them back and save your money, God knows you haven’t got any to spare.” He leant forward and took her hand, giving her one of his most charming smiles, that made it seem almost alright.

She felt stupid, she had misjudged things, offended him. She tried to smile back, then busied herself folding and replacing the clothes in the bag. Alex jumped up as if that ended the subject and started to get ingredients out of cupboards in the kitchen, clattering and banging and putting the radio on. No more to be said.

“Why don’t you go and have a nice relaxing shower while I cook?” he shouted from behind the dividing wall. She might as well, wash the embarrassment away.

“Ok!” she shouted back, and went upstairs, still half expecting an intruder to jump out at her.

The shower was good, one of the new power showers, and the bathroom was spacious, unlike the chilly and poky bathroom in her rented terrace. She reached blindly in the steamy cubicle for shower gel, and poured some out. An overwhelming scent filled the space, and she fumbled for the bottle again to look at it. Lily of the Valley. She stood very still under the thrumming water, and the jets seemed to be hitting her now rather than soothing her.

She dressed again in slow motion, not wanting to think, then automatically put her make up back on.

“Roz! Food’s ready!” Alex yelled from the bottom of the stairs, in a tone that implied a quick response. She hastily gathered up her make up and stuffed it back into her bag.

“Coming!” she shouted back, running a brush through her hair.

They ate in virtual silence, apart from the thanks and appreciative comments on the meal.

“Aah!” Alex sighed, throwing himself into the corner of the sofa. “Come here!” he beamed at her, as if she was the most desirable thing he had ever seen. Roz hung back, demurring that the washing up needed to be done. He frowned slightly:

“That’s what dishwashers are for,” he said, still silky voiced. “What’s the matter?”

She blushed. “I wanted to ask you about the shower gel,” she blurted out.

Alex looked quizzical and put his head on one side “Shower gel?” he said.

“I didn’t think Lily of the Valley could be yours..” she tailed off. Alex opened his big dark eyes wide and shook his head, laughing.

“That’s Ellie’s! She uses it when she stays over”.

Roz blushed even harder. “I’m so sorry, I should have thought.. that it must be your daughter’s” She knew she must appear both stupid and unreasonably jealous.

“Silly thing, it doesn’t matter! Just come here, ‘Ros..ann..na’ he spelled out her full name, the mocking tone at odds with the inviting smile. He could make her feel twenty again, lose herself in the warmth of being wanted. She went over to the sofa and put her doubts aside with her shoes.