

Front Window

“Stop pouting,” chided her mom as she plumped her cushions.

“I’m not pouting,” grumbled Alice, and in the face of the obvious evidence.

“Well, you’ve only yourself to blame.”

No, she could blame her ten-year-old nephew who challenged her to race. She perhaps should have practiced a little more on her bike before accepting the challenge. It had been fifteen years since she rode one, so perhaps wasn’t so much of a surprise that she was now sporting a broken leg. In her defense, wheelies looked super easy on TV.

Her mom propped her into an armchair in front of the window so she could overlook the peaceful little cul-de-sac, and see what everyone was doing outside – so she didn’t miss out on the action. Humph. She’d already been sitting around for five days and she was bored out of her mind.

“There now – the rest of the six weeks will just fly by,” said her mother in the face of the evidence.

Being stuck in a cast over Christmas was hardly fun. She was going to miss out on caroling, and ice-skating, and sledding – all the fun things of the holiday. While, being stuck on her butt, she was lumbered with the boring things – writing cards, wrapping presents, sticking band aids on the paper cuts she got from wrapping presents. Plus, she was now stuck in her parents’ house for the whole period – there was no way she could escape to her own home under the pretense of accidentally leaving the gas on, or needing to feed her cat, when the Christmas arguments erupted. Eighteen years of family Christmases were coming back to haunt her.

“Okay then, sweetie, I need to get to work, and after I’ve got some Christmas shopping to do. You have some snacks, and your tablet, there’s your grabber, and I’ve left a pile of books here in case you want to read. Also, there’s a bucket there in case...”

“I appreciate the thought, Mom, but I will definitely be using the bathroom, even if I have to crawl there.”

Her mom frowned in disapproval, but didn’t argue. Wise move – there was no way in hell that she would be peeing in a bucket, no matter how many doctors told her not to move her leg too much.

“Well, if you insist. Do you want anything from the store?”

Alice chewed her lip and admitted, “I wouldn’t mind some of those gummies in the shape of reindeer.”

“Of course, my angel,” cooed her mom as she patted her cheek.

“And, uh, thanks, Mom, for offering to look after me. Sorry if I’m a little ungrateful.”

“It’s our pleasure – and not to worry, we remember how sullen you were when you were a teenager. You’ll see – it’ll be just like when you were living at home.”

“Oh, good,” she sighed.

Remembering that the bathroom had no lock – specifically so her mom could get in there when anyone was using it. She would lurk outside the shower waiting for her to finish so she could talk about what kind of veggies she wanted for dinner. Her dad wasn’t too bad, but he did wander around in his underpants all the time, and never mind locking the bathroom door, he always just left the thing open. They were good people, but could be pretty annoying.

Still, what choice did she have? Alice glared at her foot. No choice at all.

“I’ve asked our new neighbor to call in on you to check you’re okay – and he’s more than willing to empty out the bucket if necessary. I asked him and he was more than fine with it.”

Ugh. Great, now her mom’s neighbor thought she was peeing in a bucket – or worse, and not only that, her mom had persuaded him to clean it out. “I am not using the bucket!”

“Bye, sweetie pie!”

She heard her mom leave and considered her next move. She could watch TV on her tablet, or maybe crack one of the books her mom left, though a quick glance at them proved them all to be bodice rippers, and all well-worn ones at that.

Alice noticed her dad’s birdwatching binoculars were sitting by the side of the window. They were his Christmas present last year. Her mom was convinced that her dad should have a hobby – she was convinced that he had an interest that they just hadn’t managed to pin down yet. The hall closet was filled with fishing tackle, a metal detector, and even a sewing machine – all bought for her dad and never used more than once. Her dad just wanted to lounge in his underwear watching TV – that was his hobby. Though, he had used the binoculars to spy on the workers who were fixing the phone line a month ago; he was convinced they were actually CIA and bugging the phone lines. Though, why he thought the CIA wanted to hear him ordering cheesy bread and a large cheese pizza every Friday night, regular as clockwork, was beyond Alice.

She picked up her tablet and looked at the Christmas movies on offer. They were all the movies she’d seen a hundred times before. Alice sighed and the binoculars caught her eye again. Well, she did want to get a good look at the Johnsons’ new blow up Santa. Mr. Johnson got a new addition to his blow-up Christmas menagerie every year, and she loved them. Other people in the cul-de-sac complained they were eyesores, but Alice thought they were fun.

Alice gave in, picked up her clawed grabber and, with only a little trouble, snatched them up. She pointed them out the window and giggled as she immediately landed on a robin, hopping around on the garden fence.

“Awww.”

The bird fluttered away, and she lifted her gaze, searching for the garden of blow-up Christmas figures.

“Gah!”

She went too far and hit a bedroom window, where old Mr. Peterson was walking around in his underwear. No, actually, it appeared to be his wife’s underwear. She only saw it for a second, but it was definitely black and lacy. Jeez, she got enough of older gentlemen in their underwear around here, though, at least her dad stuck to his own underwear.

Alice aimed lower – fearing hitting someone else’s window - and smiled as she found a giant low up snowman.

“Finally.”

She looked over all the giant decorations, one by one.

“Oh good, he managed to fix the Christmas cat.”

Last year, the cat got an awful puncture thanks to some douche teenagers throwing rocks at it. The blow up decorations didn’t last very long – five years at most according to Mr. Johnson who once gave her a lecture on blow-up decorations maintenance. But Alice was glad he had managed to eke another year out of the cat.

Her gaze roamed over the decorations until she came to Mr. Johnson. She thought about waving and trying to get his attention – hoping he might come over and give her the lecture again to appease her boredom. But, she frowned on realizing he wasn’t alone. In fact, he was arguing with another of their neighbors, Mr. Bell.

Bell was... well, he was the crotchiest of their neighbors, and a wolf shifter to boot, so people lived in fear of him. Alice couldn’t recall how many balls and Frisbees she lost to his unkempt yard – because, once they went in, they didn’t come out – no one would be foolish enough to go in, not when Mr. Bell roamed the place as his wolf. Five probably.

Mr. Johnson once made the mistake of trying to approach the house to complain about the late-night howling – he was a wolf after all. But, at the time, the Johnsons’ had a newborn baby who rarely slept, and according to the neighborhood charter, there shouldn’t be any loud noises after ten pm. So, Mr. Johnson braved the wilds of Bell’s yard, and almost lost a leg for his troubles. Mr. Bell assured him it was just a playful nip, and after all, he had only needed two stitches. Luckily, Mr. Johnson was an easygoing guy, who was happy to use the time off work to bond with his new baby, plus, after that, Bell hardly ever did any midnight howling.

But, in spite of the uneasy peace that occurred after the ‘nip’ incident, they sure seemed angry now. She increased the magnification on the binoculars as Bell prodded Johnson in the chest again. Bell gestured to the various blow up decorations and bared his fangs. She had to give it to Johnson; he wasn’t intimidated in the least. Lesser men would have fled in the face of those fangs - just about every other man in the cul-de-sac to name a few. But Johnson just jutted his chin and folded his arms. Alice bit her lip and...

“Hey.”

“Aargh!”

Alice screamed in shock and tossed the binoculars through the air and right into the hands of her intruder, who was standing in the entrance to the den as if it was the most natural place in the world for him to be. He smirked at her and she gaped at him.

“Did I startle you?” he asked in amusement.

“Yes!” cried Alice. Her heart wasn’t so much beating out of control as trying to leap out through her mouth. “Are you robbing us? Just so you know we have nothing of value. Our TV was built in the eighties, and I defy you to find any electrical equipment in the house that doesn’t have duct tape on it.”

Her parents refused to throw out or replace anything until they were sure they couldn’t eke a little more use out of it, and even when it died electrically, there were still other uses. Her dad used an old refrigerator as a storage unit for tools in the garage.

Her visitor merely raised an eyebrow, and Alice blushed. Were robbers supposed to be quite this handsome? Because he was absolutely divine. Oh, his legs were like tree trunks, and his huge chest was barely encased in a black t-shirt stretched across it to near breaking point. She wished she wasn’t wearing jogging bottoms and a t-shirt that had a cat on it and said, Meowy Christmas.

“Your mom asked me to stop by, and I’m good for appliances, thanks.”

“My mom?” she repeated faintly.

This god in front of her was their new neighbor?

“You’re Alice, right? I’m Max, and yeah, she cornered me earlier and insisted I come over. She was a little worried about you.”

“Umm, thanks, that was really kind of you.”

Max chuckled. “She didn’t give me much of an option.”

“I know,” sighed Alice.

“So ah, is this the bucket?” he asked, pointing at the offending receptacle.

“It’s empty!” squawked Alice. “I haven’t... I wouldn’t...”

Oh, couldn’t the floor just open up and pull her through it right now?

Max grinned at her. “I’m just teasing.”

Alice let out a nervous laugh. “I swear, as soon as I can get up I’m throwing that damn thing out of the window.”

Max held up his hands in surrender, one still clutching the binoculars. “Hey, look, no judgment from me if you did need to use the bucket. I shift into a wolf all the time, and he certainly doesn’t bother to stop to use a restroom.”

“You’re a wolf shifter?” she murmured redundantly.

He flashed his teeth in answer.

“You know Mr. Bell from across the way is a wolf too, right?”

“I know.”

They looked at one another for a few beats - him smirking and her awkwardly wishing for meteorite to hit.

“So...”

“I am not using that bucket!”

“Noted, but if you want me to carry you to the bathroom...”

“That won’t be necessary,” she hastened to reassure him.

“But, if you did, I’m happy to do it.”

“Duly noted, thank you. So ah,” she started, hoping to move away from bathroom talk, “how long have you lived in the neighborhood?”

“Just been here a week - I’m actually just staying with my aunt and uncle until I find a place.” He gave her a curious, interested look. “Haven’t seen you here before.”

“I’m just staying with my folks while my leg heals.” She gestured toward the pot.

Max came a little further into the room, and peered over at her leg. Oh lord, he smelled as good as he looked – ooh, he was like a fresh batch of snickerdoodles! Damn, she should have asked her mom to get her some from the store.

“What happened?”

“I broke it rock climbing,” she replied boldly.

Max raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Uh, no,” she admitted, crumpling immediately. “I just lied to you and I don’t know why. I was trying to do a wheelie on my bike.”

Max barked with laughter and she blushed and giggled.

“Look, I’ve gotta get going, but I guess you’ll be needing these.”

He handed over the binoculars, and Alice guiltily looked over the window. "I wasn't spying on anyone."

"I'm sure," he said mildly.

"I was just looking at birds and the decorations."

Certainly not watching any of the neighbors arguing, or parading up and down in their underwear.

"I believe you," he said, giving her a twinkling smile. "I'll check in on you later, and," he found a pad and paper, "here's my phone number – call me, if you need anything."

"Thank you," she murmured weakly.

"My pleasure."

He winked at her and sauntered out of the house, and yes, she did watch his butt as he left – her eyes were virtually glued to it. When she heard the back door close, she sagged and groaned and generally just sighed over her own goofiness. Could that have gone worse? Probably, but it could have been a lot better too.

She looked at the binoculars in her hand and let out a sound of disgust. She firmly put them on the table, and picked up a book instead.

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Alice awoke with a start. It was now dark out, and she appeared to have fallen asleep in her chair reading *The Wolf's Passionate Embrace* – it was sprawled on her chest. Neither of her parents appeared to be home yet.

Something had woken her up, and if she didn't know any better, she could have sworn it was a scream. Well, it didn't come from inside her house... Alice hesitated for a second before grabbing the binoculars and looking around outside.

Huh. Nothing appeared to be out of place, except...

"Oh my!" she breathed as she spotted Mr. Bell running out of Mr. Johnson's yard.

He appeared to be carrying something large and heavy, and even the large Mr. Bell was struggling to carry it. A body? Her mind immediately jumped there. Alice watched in rapt attention as Bell's diminutive human wife came out of their house. Obviously, Alice couldn't hear what was being said, but it looked like she was asking him what was happening. Bell seemed to be growling at her, and she looked taken aback by his answer. Bell then disappeared around the back of their house and his wife followed. Alice grunted in annoyance as they both disappeared out of sight. Oh, if only she could...

"Gah!"

The light suddenly flipped on and she found herself once again in the company of the new handsome neighbor.

“Scared you again, huh?” Max teased wagging his eyebrows.

“You... but... what...”

“Your mom called me and said she was running late.”

“Did she?” muttered Alice, only slightly resentful that she called her ‘bucket’ guy before her.

“Yeah, she wondered if I wouldn’t mind getting you some dinner. So, ta da!”

Max pulled his hand out from behind his bag, flourishing an Easy Burger bag.

Alice’s mouth immediately watered. “Oh, I love Easy Burger.” She had hoped her mom would take pity on her and get her some – since they didn’t deliver – but her mom was reliably firm about only cooking heart-healthy meals. It was all sprouts and green beans around there.

“Me too,” he grinned. “I already ate, but my aunt is the worst cook imaginable, so I thought I’d get some for myself too.

He dragged a chair over to her and started digging into the bag. “You don’t need a plate and cutlery do you?”

“Say what?” she mumbled, her mouth already full of Easy Burger’s holiday turkey burger.

“Nothing,” he chuckled, and started digging into his.

She watched in awe as he devoured three burgers and four bags of fries, and then moved onto his fourth burger.

“Wolf shifters really eat a lot, huh?” asked Alice, struggling to complete even one of their monumental burgers.

“Yeah, high metabolism. So, what have you been up to since I left?” His eyes flickered down to the binoculars. “Bird watching at night?” he asked smugly.

“Haven’t you ever heard of owls?” she asked primly, and then immediately crumpled. “Fine, I fell asleep while I was reading, and I woke up when I heard someone screaming. So, naturally, I was worried, and I was just checking outside to make sure everything was fine.”

“And?” prompted.

“And... and I saw Mr. Bell running out of Mr. Johnson’s yard carrying something big and clearly heavy and I think it was a body!” she cried.

“A body?” repeated Max blankly.

“Well, it looked to be the size of a body from here. He seemed mighty upset about it.”

“Well, it could have been anything,” said Max evenly.

“Even a body.”

“Maybe you were still half-asleep,” he suggested in amusement. “You fell asleep reading, right?” He leaned down and came back up with the book. “Reading this, huh?”

He chuckled at seeing the cover of *The Wolf’s Passionate Embrace*. A buxom and scantily clad young woman was in the arms of a man who was turning into a wolf.

Alice snatched the book away. “This is serious. He could have killed someone. You’ve met him, don’t you think he’s capable of killing someone?”

Max nodded. “Probably.”

“Well, there you are then – do you think we should call the cops?”

“What if you’re wrong – you don’t want to be charged with wasting police time, right? And worse, what do you think he’s going to do if he finds out you told the cops he was a killer. Does he strike you as the kind of guy who reacts calmly to things like that?”

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” she admitted with a wince.

The last thing she wanted was an irate wolf shifter making her life hell. After all, he bit Mr. Johnson for merely going into his yard. Imagine how he’s react to this... shudder.

“Yep, what we need is evidence – we’ll keep watching him, and when he slips up, we’ll have our evidence and we’ll hand him over to the cops.”

“Really?”

She lit up excitedly. Not about the idea that the neighbor was a murderer, more that she liked the idea of the new neighbor believing her, and wanting to spend time with her.

Max nodded and smiled. “Definitely.”

“I can’t really watch him after my parents come home,” she admitted in annoyance.

She could just imagine what her mom would say about her spying on their neighbors. Her dad would probably ask her if she’d seen anything good – perhaps she was more like her dad than she thought.

“It’s fine. I’ll watch him tonight, and we’ll regroup tomorrow.”

Alice beamed. “Okay.” Then she faltered. She hated herself for it, but it had been a while... “Umm, since you’re here, would you mind... I just really need to...”

Max's lips curled. "My pleasure. Are we bucketing or bathrooming it?"

She threw The Wolf's Passionate Embrace at his head.

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Alice tapped her fingers expectantly, waiting for Max to arrive. Her patience was wearing thin, and not just because her mom had been trying to feed her like she was a baby earlier. She even gave Alice a bib and wiped her face. Oh, six weeks felt like an eternity!

At least she had something to take her mind off things, even if it was about a lunatic living in her parents' cul-de-sac.

Finally, Max arrived, and after some agonizing small talk with her mom, Max was ushered in.

"Oh, I'm so glad you two are getting along," said her mom, hovering in the den.

"Umm hmm, don't you need to get to work?" asked Alice, trying to indicate with her eyes that they needed privacy."

"Oh, no, sweetie, I have a few minutes."

Max grinned and pulled a chair up to hers again.

"How are you settling in?" asked her mom.

"Great, everyone's so friendly," said Max, twinkling at Alice and making her blush.

"Yes, we have a lovely little group of neighbors here. We're all friends."

Alice arched an eyebrow at Max who smirked.

"Oh yes, all friends here," repeated her mom, "I can't wait for the Johnson's Christmas party. Although," she frowned, "I was trying to call Mr. Johnson last night to talk about what he wanted me to bring to the party and couldn't get hold of him. You know, his wife and the kids are at her mother's until tomorrow, but I thought he was still here. I even went over there a few minutes ago, and the house seemed deserted." Her mom shook her head and then rolled her shoulder. "Oh well, I must be getting along. Have a lovely day, you two, and my angel, I left the bucket over..."

"Bye, Mom!" cried Alice loudly, though, given his expression, clearly Max heard what she said.

She waited until the door finally closed and damn near yelled.

"Did you hear that?"

"About the Christmas party? Sure. I was planning on taking chips and dips. Do you think people will want chips and dips."

“Everyone always wants chips and dips,” she dismissed. “But I meant about Mr. Johnson. He’s apparently missing and last night, Bell was running out of his yard, after they had been arguing that morning – coincidence?”

“Maybe,” said Max with a shrug.

“What if he killed Johnson? Did you see anything last night?”

Max leaned back in his chair. “Nothing, all quiet on the cul-de-sac front.”

“Hmmm.” Alice chewed her cheek thoughtfully. “I wonder what’s he’s doing with the body...”

“If there is a body,” chuckled Max.

“Yes, yes, if there is a body. Oh! What if he tries to cut it up?”

“And then what? Then, rather than one large body, you’ll have lots of little bits of body which are just as hard to get rid of. Nah, if it were me, I’d wait until it was dark, put the body in my car, and drive it out somewhere so I could bury it, or, preferably, sink it so the water wipes away evidence.”

Alice blinked at him. “Have you thought about this before?”

“If you’d ever met my little sister, you’d already know the answer to that. No, if there is a body, he’s gonna want to smuggle it out as soon as he can. We should sit right here and watch the house all day.”

Alice nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, yes, good plan.”

“Hey, while we’re waiting, why don’t we watch a movie or something? I could make us some popcorn.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, sounds good – but anything but a Christmas movie. I must have watched all of them twice since I broke my leg.”

Max grinned. “Deal.”

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The day passed a lot more quickly than the past six days, mostly because she had interesting company. Yes, they were watching the house, but they also chatted, and watched movies, and Max went out and got them a huge amount of food from Easy Burger for lunch. Easy burger in two days – her mom would have a fit, but Alice was just relieved to have ‘real’ food again.

Night had fallen, and still they hadn’t seen anything of Mr. Bell. She was almost starting to think that he hadn’t murdered anyone, when, finally, she spied movement.

“Oh!”

Alice clutched at the binoculars as she watched him digging in his garden.

“Not the time of year to be planting azaleas,” she murmured and then frowned and added, “probably.”

She had no green thumb whatsoever.

“Well, its weird to dig at night anyway.”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Max, walking back into the room, smiling.

“Uh, not important, but what is important is that he’s digging in his garden – who digs in their garden at night unless they’re trying to bury something they don’t want anyone to find? Look?”

She waved the binoculars at him. He took them and peered at their neighbor.

“Maybe he’s planting moonflowers,” quipped Max.

“Or maybe he’s digging a grave,” she suggested ominously.

“You’d have to be pretty dumb to bury a body near where you live – obviously, eventually, it’s going to be found, and the cops will find you,” he said reasonably.

“Well, what else could he be doing? He can’t be burying a pet – I know for a fact that he doesn’t have pets. Cats are terrified of him and I’ve seen the way he barks at dogs.”

Seriously – whenever one crossed in front of his house, he started barking at them as if they were intruding on his territory.

“Yeah, I’m exactly the same,” laughed Max, and the let out a small, suggestive growl.

“Really?” she murmured in interest.

Maybe it was a wolf thing. Though, what seemed annoying from Mr. Bell, seemed plenty fascinating from Max.

“I tell you what,” he leaned forward and placed a hand on her non-broken leg, “why don’t I go over and have a poke around?”

Alice wavered. She did want to find out what was going on. But two reasons stopped her from bundling him over there immediately. For one thing, she worried it might be dangerous – she didn’t want to send him running into peril! For the other, she rather liked him right where he was, sitting next to her, hand on her leg...

“Umm...”

She inwardly moaned in disappointment as he got up and started pulling his coat on. “I’ll be quick.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if he sees you? He might...” Alice made a throat slitting motion, as well as a quick sound for effect. “Maybe you should sit back down...” and put your hand back on my knee.

Thankfully, she managed to stop herself before she said that out loud.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Back soon.”

He winked at her and then he was gone, jogging over the road within seconds. She watched him with unbending attention, and not just because he cut a mighty fine figure as he jogged. He got to Bell’s gate and turned back to her, smirking and giving her the thumbs-up. But, before he could get into the yard, Bell appeared.

“Oh no!” she exclaimed, her stomach plummeting to somewhere around her knees.

Max startled, obviously surprised to see him. Her eyes widened as Bell started yelling and Max tried to placate him.

“Oh, I wish I knew what they were saying! Oh, no, no, no, don’t go in there! Don’t go in there! Run away!”

Bell pointed to his yard and Max followed him into the yard. He managed to glance back at her and gave her an uneasy look. He must know – Bell must know!

Alice tossed the binoculars aside and got up. Progress was slow, but she managed to shamle her way out of her house. She fell down the steps to her house, grunting as she hit the ground. But she couldn’t stop to bother about a little thing about that – she had to save Max!

With every step, she grunted and groaned, but finally, after only slipping on two patches of ice, she made it, and clung to Bell’s gate for dear life. It swung outward with her attached.

“Eek!”

That was the noise she made as she was flung into Bell’s garden, and after spitting up a mouthful of dirt, she called, “Max! Max!”

She started crawling to the house, howling his name.

“What is all this ruckus?”

Mr. Johnson appeared at the gate, along with Mrs. Johnson and their two daughters who were equally as mystified as to why she was crawling through someone else’s garden.

“Alice, what are you doing here?” asked Mr. Johnson.

“What am I doing here? What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be underground!”

Mr. Johnson just gaped, and she perhaps should have realized how crazy that sounded before she said it.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” demanded Bell, storming out of the house.

Alice would say he was in a bad mood, but really, this seemed to be his constant demeanor.

“Language, dear,” murmured his wife, following him. Then she spotted the Johnsons. “Oh, hello, how was your trip? How is your mother doing?”

“It was lovely until she broke her hip – I have lots of pictures to show you,” replied Mrs. Johnson. “She’s okay though, after she gets out of hospital she’s coming to stay with us while she recuperates.”

Mrs. Bell nodded in understanding.

“I think I’m going mad,” murmured Alice as her leg throbbed in pain.

“Shit, Alice!” exclaimed Max, running out of the house.

“Language,” murmured Mrs. Bell.

As a worried looking Max scooped her up into his arms, she gave up and fainted.

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Alice watched as Mac put Flintstones band aids on her knees. She had acquired quite a few scrapes during her jaunt over across the street.

“You’re lucky the damage wasn’t worse,” said Max rather disapprovingly. “Do you need more painkillers?” He had insisted on checking her wounds and plying her with painkillers.

“You’re lucky I’m in no position to damage you,” she cried. “I can’t believe you neglected to mention the fact that Mr. Bell is your uncle.”

“Would you admit to having him in your family?” he asked pointedly. “That argument you saw between my uncle and Mr. Johnson – you know, when you were spying on them yesterday...”

“When I was looking at the decorations and they happened to get in the way,” she corrected.

“Right, that was just Mr. Johnson asking my uncle for a favor – my uncle always reacts like a lunatic to everything.” He pursed his lips at the various abrasions on her good leg, and above the knee on her bad one. “You really shouldn’t be running about like that.”

“I thought you were in danger,” she gargued – meaning grumbled and argued.

Max stopped his chastising to give her a smug little grin. “Yeah, and you ran right over for me, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say run...”

“Calling my name, desperate to see me.” He looked rather wistful and she tried her best to kick him with her uninjured leg, but it was feeling pretty sore, and all it resulted in was an ‘ooh’ of pain from her.

“Okay, okay,” he soothed, “settle down.”

“So where was Mr. Johnson, if not dead?”

“If not dead?” Max snorted. “Baby, he’s definitely not dead, or at least, he wasn’t an hour ago – I take no responsibility if it happened since then.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Fine, where’s he been – since he’s definitely not dead?”

“He had to go get his family. His mother-in-law broke her hip, so they ended their visit early. That’s all. He was just asking my uncle to look after his blow-up family while he wasn’t there.”

“And your uncle agreed?” she scoffed, recalling all the lost Frisbees and balls.

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Mr. Johnson’s his closest friend – has been ever since the biting incident. They usually spend Christmas day together. My aunt and uncle are hosting this year. I’ve been told I can be there as long as I keep my damn mouth shut, and don’t say anything to upset any of the Johnsons. I’ll let my uncle be the one to do that.”

Alice shook her head in confusion. “But, what about the thing he was carrying last night – the thing that looked like a body.”

Max rested a hand on her leg and chuckled. “One of Mr. Johnson’s blow up snowmen – he lost his temper with it and punctured it. He was hoping to get him a new one before he came back – they are his pride and joy.”

“But... but why was he digging in his garden at night?” she spluttered.

“Told you, planting moonflowers – my aunt’s pregnant. It’s considered good luck for the pup if you plant moonflowers two nights before the full moon. It’s a wolf shifter thing; we can be pretty superstitious.”

“Oh.”

Alice sagged back into her chair and frowned. Okay, so, there seemed to be a logical answer for everything, except...

She narrowed her eyes. “You knew all along there was no way that your uncle had killed him.”

“Sure did,” he admitted cheerfully.

Alice threw her arms in the air. “So then, why the heck were you humoring me with this whole murder plot?!”

Max considered it. “Well, you seemed bored, and I thought you needed something to do. Besides,” he grinned devilishly, “I was enjoying myself too. But, I think for our third date we’ll be boring and go out to a restaurant or something. Easy Burger’s always a good choice.”

“Yeah, it definitely is, wait a second! Our third date?”

“Yeah, first date was yesterday, when we were having food and I was putting you on the toilet and all that. Today was our second date, and tomorrow, I’ll take you out for our third date.”

Max beamed in a very cocky manner.

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Thanks. So, Easy Burger tomorrow?”

Alice blushed and smiled. “Definitely.”

He growled and wagged his eyebrows and she tried her best to kick him again.

The end