

Mistaken Identity

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*This story comes somewhere after my story Conspiracy.
(I have slightly fudged the dating on this. It ought to take place in the early 1980s but refers more to the Stratford of the present day.)*

"Relax." Kate said. "Will you relax?"

Ed Straker smiled sheepishly at his wife. "Sorry."

Tall, slim, ash blond and in his early Forties, he was dressed in a formal - if rather modern - suit. It did not entirely fit the setting. He looked around the colourful, traditional public gardens with their bright bedding and across to the waterfowl filled river. "It's just been so long since I've had any time off."

"Don't I know it." she smiled up at him, resting her hand on his. She was nearly a foot shorter than him, plain and mousey but dressed for once in a light summer frock. "But there's nothing to worry about. Alec has everything under control at the studio. You will remember to switch your phone off when we're in the theatre, won't you?"

He pulled a face and she laughed.

They were sitting on a bench in the sunshine, eating a picnic lunch, a hundred yards from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford on Avon and Kate had managed to get two tickets for the matinee performance of Henry the Fifth. She had practically had to shanghai her husband in order to get him there, despite the fact that he was as keen on Shakespeare as she was. But they were having a holiday, two days away from home and they were going to enjoy it, whether he liked it or not.

She was not sure he remembered how.

It was early summer, a fine day with a light breeze, and there were people scattered all across the extensive riverside gardens. There were three old ladies on the bench opposite, a party of middle aged Italians, a woman with two toddlers and a baby playing on the lawn and several school parties being shepherded about by harassed teachers.

"He looks like you," said a girl's voice behind them.

Kate and Ed turned to see three youngsters standing on the pavement. Two of them, a boy and girl aged about eleven, did indeed have the same improbably pale blond hair as Ed himself. The older girl was also a blonde but darker. It was, presumably, she who had spoken.

"You're right." said Kate. "I've never seen anyone with hair Ed's colour except our little girl."

"You've got a little girl?" asked the boy. "Is she here?"

"No, she's staying with her godmother."

"You don't think you're our rich uncle, do you?" the younger girl asked Ed.

He shook his head. "I doubt it."

"You're a Yank." she exclaimed.

"You probably not our uncle," said the boy "but you must be rich."

"Behave, you two," said the older girl. "That is not polite. I'm Tania and this pair are Leah and Ryan."

"I'm Ed and this is Kate, my wife. Are you here for the theatre?"

"No," said Tania. "We live near here. We've got a birthday present to buy."

"Oh, right," said Kate. "Anything in particular?"

Ed stiffened. "Kids, do me a favour, will you? Just walk away." He reached in his wallet and pulled out a ten pound note. "Go buy yourself an ice-cream or something. I've just seen someone I don't want to meet up with."

The children looked at each other, unsure of what to make of this but pleased at the unexpected bonus.

"Are you OK?" Tania asked.

"Yes, fine."

"Are you sure?" asked Ryan.

"Go, please." said Kate. "Forget you saw us."

Ed was already on his feet. Kate packed the food away swiftly and joined him as he headed away from the theatre and towards the footbridge over the river. Behind them, the children watched as they walked away.

"What's the matter?" Kate asked as she jogged to keep up with him. "See someone you recognise?"

He slowed. "Not exactly. That guy in the dark suit - he moves wrong, his manner is wrong. I could be wrong but I think it's alien possession."

"Oh *bother*." She flicked a glance in the man's direction. "No, he's not following us, Ed. He's..."

They both turned, hearing the screech of breaks as a black car pulled up alongside the children. The two of them sprinted back, leaping the low wall that divided gardens from pavement. People were looking round, wondering what was going on. Two men had jumped out of the car, the one they had already seen was zeroing in on the children.

Ryan and Leah were running towards Ed and Kate. Tania was squaring up to one of the men, trying to protect the younger pair. Kate shouted at her to run but the man had grabbed her and was wrestling her towards the car.

A second, blue, car braked swiftly. It was level with Leah and Ryan. The man in the passenger seat leapt out and grabbed the girl. The driver was running around the bonnet.

Ed grabbed him, throwing him down and turning to deal with the second. He had his hands on the man when a hand grabbed his ankle and he slammed into the pavement.

Breathless and bruised, he tried to call out. In front of him he saw the girl's slim legs as she was dragged into the car. Taking a leaf out of their book, he took hold of her ankle.

Someone stamped on his back, another kicked his wrist. A boot connected with his temple, dazing him and he had to let go.

Meanwhile, Kate was kicking at the first man, the one Ed had noticed. Another grabbed her from behind as Tania fought to stay out of the car.

The man behind her chopped Kate across the neck and she fell, unconscious.

Tania was kicked in the back of the knees and fell forward into the car. Leah was already in the second car. Ryan was jumping up and down, yelling for help, as passers-by surrounded

him protectively.

The first man tried to pull Kate into the car. Tried and was gradually succeeding, for all she fought. Another was grappling with the dazed Ed. He was putting up enough of a fight to deter the man.

All five men piled back into their cars and drove off along the winding road towards the parish church.

Straker stumbled back to sit on the low wall, looking around to see who was where. He groaned when he realised how bad the situation was.

Ryan ran over to him. "What's happening? What's going on?"

People were buzzing around, telling each other to dial 999 and patting Ed on the back. The police would be here soon. He needed to call Alec. He needed find out about the children. He needed Kate.

He sat the boy down beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"No. No I'm not. I... I shouldn't have run away."

"You did the right thing..." He struggled for the boy's name. "Ryan. We'll need to know a lot of things before we find your sisters and you can answer some of the questions."

"Are you really a rich Yank?" Ryan asked.

"No but people might think I am. I run a film studio. Don't worry, we'll work it all out."

A policeman had appeared from somewhere and was heading towards them. "Excuse me, sir, could you and your son answer a few questions?"

Straker blinked. "Son?"

"This lad's not your son?"

"No, I'm not," said Ryan definitely.

"But it would explain a lot." said Straker, half to himself. He beat down the memories that were rising within him. To the policeman he said: "Could we go somewhere more private? And I need to make a phone call."

As he got to his feet he gave an involuntary gasp of pain, totting up his likely injuries as he moved. Now the adrenalin was wearing off he could feel them but he doubted there was anything too serious.

"You're hurt," said Ryan and the policeman together.

"I'm OK."

"You should see a doctor," the policeman insisted.

Straker was going to refuse until he realised that that would give SHADO time to get into action before the police did. He needed to get things moving in order to trace the kidnapers.

He allowed himself to be taken to the local hospital on the edge of town. He insisted Ryan be examined first, though the boy protested that he had not been hurt. It gave Ed the chance to make his phone call, though as the policeman remained with him he had to be circumspect. A few moments later he was through to his second in command, Alec Freeman.

"Don't tell me you've got into trouble already." Alec joked.

"Not me," Straker said. "Kate."

Alec's tone changed immediately. "What do you need?"

"She's been kidnapped, along with a couple of kids who were passing. I'm with the police. Just get things moving, will you?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Why do people keep asking me that?" Straker snapped.

"Probably because you are. Don't worry, I'll deal with everything. We can get the details

off the police computer."

Ed was shown into the examination cubicle.

"You are going to have some lovely bruises but I don't think there's anything broken." the doctor assured him. "However, if you have any trouble I'd advise an immediate return here. There is still a possibility of concussion and I'd prefer it if you'd allow yourself to come in for observation."

"I'm fine, Doctor, really. There's too much going on for me to spend the day in bed."

When he came out, Ryan was wearily talking to another policewoman. "I've already told him, my dad's gone to the motor racing and Tania knew all the details and now I don't know where Tania is and I want to know what you're doing to find her and Leah."

The conversation had obviously been going on for some time.

The woman turned as Straker and the doctor entered. "All in one piece, I hope?"

The doctor nodded. "But keep an eye on him."

"I'm fine." Straker repeated. He had always found medics a little difficult to deal with.

The woman spoke to him. "Then perhaps you could answer a few questions, starting with your name?"

He told her who he was: Ed Straker, head of Harlington-Straker film studios, an American with an English wife who had just been kidnapped.

"I'm Chief Inspector Longton. You think your wife was the target?"

"Her or me, I'm not sure."

She nodded. "Ryan tells me they'd never met you before."

"That's right. We met a few minutes before it happened. Tania, the older girl, thought I looked like Leah and Ryan."

Their eyes met. She got the picture.

"I think you'd better come back to the station."

* * *

Kate Straker kept her head down and her mouth shut as the car sped through Stratford and out into the verdant Warwickshire hills. The most important thing was to learn what she could about the situation. It was probable that their abductors were working for the aliens but it could be a simple commercial kidnapping. Indeed, for all she knew, the real targets could have been the children. It was them that the men had originally attacked but she could not free herself of the guilt producing idea that they had been taken because of some horrendous mistake that linked them to Ed.

Tania was in the car with her, also keeping her mouth shut and her eyes open. Kate had no idea who was in the car following them: Ed, the other two children or simply more of their abductors.

She found out a short time later. About five or ten miles out of the small town - it was hard to tell on the winding roads - they turned along a driveway overhung with trees. At the far end of stood a substantial, half-timbered manor house that made Kate's mouth water. The age, the size, the quality and the location meant it had to be worth several million pounds. Round the back she could glimpse the edge of a formal garden.

She was dragged by the arms out onto the gravel drive. She did not bother to resist. Tania followed her.

Leah was pulled, scowling, from the other car. "I can walk."

There was no sign of either Ed or Ryan. Good. Not that that meant that Ed was out of danger, he would put himself in enough to rescue them.

For a brief moment she worried that he had been killed. Quickly reviewing what she had seen of the kidnapping, she decided it unlikely. But still possible.

They were pushed in through a substantial porch and through a black-and-white floored hall to the main staircase. The furnishings were as opulent as the building. The three prisoners were propelled up the wide, shallow stairs for two storeys, then along a corridor to narrow backstairs and up into the attic. They were locked into a small, white walled room with little furniture: only a bed, a chair and a small table. A Dormer window looked out across the countryside but when Kate rattled it, she was not surprised to find that it was locked.

She turned round to the two girls. They were sitting themselves down on the bed.

"Do you know what's going on?" Tania asked.

"We've been kidnapped." said Leah. "Use your brains."

"I want to know," said Tania with exaggerated patience "if she knows who's done it or why."

Kate took a deep breath and sat down on the chair. "What we didn't get the chance to tell you was that Ed and I run a film studio. That doesn't mean we're rich but people think we are. I'm assuming this is a straight forward kidnap for money."

"And they think we're your daughters or something?" asked Leah.

"Something like that."

Tania walked over to the window and looked out. "You seem very calm about this. Do you have any training in what to do in this situation?"

"You're not doing too badly yourself. I've got some training," Kate said. "Goes with the kidnap insurance. Basically, you keep yourself to yourself, comply with any reasonable demands and don't do anything to annoy them. It's in their interests to look after us or they won't get their money."

She hoped she was telling the truth and that there was not an alien spacecraft standing just outside Moonbase's sensor range, waiting to swoop down and steal their organs. Or worse.

"Do you think we'll get fed?" Leah asked.

"You've just had lunch," complained Tania.

* * *

The Stratford police station was a modern, redbrick complex on Rother Street, near the marketplace. It was very much part of the modern world, holding a variety of courtrooms as well as probation services and the like. However, like most places in the centre of Stratford, it stood next to a row of half-timbered cottages.

When Ed Straker walked through the doors, he was surprised to see a familiar face. "Gay? I thought you were on vacation."

Gay Ellis, a neat figure in a peach trouser suit, gave him a wry smile. "I was, I'm supposed to be at my cousin's barbecue right now. She lives this side of the Cotswolds so Alec gave me a call. He should be here soon."

Straker introduced her to Longton. "Gay's one of our senior executives, been with us since the studio opened."

The two women shook hands.

"You people are efficient," Longton said.

"We try to be."

Ryan cleared his throat loudly, so Straker introduced him to Gay as well. She was allowed to stay with Ed as he was taken to a side room to answer questions.

"Can't I stay?" asked Ryan.

"I expect you've got questions of your own." Ed told him. "I'll see you later."

As a policewoman led him away, Straker heard him ask: "Can I see the police dogs after? I mean, it's been a rotten day and I might as well get something out of it."

"You found the parents?" Ed asked Longton.

"We've got the family details but he doesn't know where his father and his partner are. Motor racing somewhere. We're checking who's got an event on today but we can't spare many people to look. We've got officers questioning witnesses, examining the scene, checking the databases. You've had no threats, no rumours?"

Ed shook his head. "Nothing. I guess Alec - he's my number two - will be looking at that. He's more plugged into the industry grapevine than I am."

He took a moment to phone the studio again, spoke to Miss Ealand and set up a direct line to the station. "Don't know where the ransom demand will come. Or when."

He looked at Longton, could see she was thinking he was too calm but did not know how to show a little more of his feelings without letting them all out.

They ran him through who he and Kate were, what they did for a living, what they earned - "We break-even, that's all, but if they want money I'll get it." - what they were doing in Stratford - "She really wanted to see the play. To get tickets and be able to get away, it just doesn't happen for us." - and Ed told as much of the truth as he could without telling them about the aliens.

He wanted get back to the studio, back to the office and to work. He wanted his wife back.

A step in that direction happened a moment later when Alec breezed through the doors, Ryan and a couple of nervous policeman in tow. "There you are. They told me I couldn't see you yet. I found this lad, though. I can see why someone might think there was a connection."

Alec was a big man with a big personality, accustomed to carrying all - except Ed - before him but as he entered Ed could see the concern he was trying to hide. He was very fond of Kate and the situation was a mess, a likely security breach that could easily turn into a disaster. He was also minding his language, trying not remind Ed of something he had so far had little chance to think of - Johnny. Johnny Straker had been younger than Ryan when he died and the resemblance was superficial but the fact that people kept mistaking Ryan for Ed's son hurt.

Alec greeted Gay and was introduced to the Chief Inspector. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Ed's number two at the studio. Our people are on standby. They don't know what's going on but they're used to doing odd things in a hurry. Now, Ed, did you get lunch? Only Ryan tells me he's hungry and you wouldn't have the sense to get yourself any food."

Ryan, standing beside Alec, was smiling for the first time since his sisters had been snatched. He looked - Straker decided the word was reassured. Alec did tend to be reassuring. Unless you got on the wrong side of him.

Ed remembered his interrupted lunch, which was probably scattered across the gardens unless the police had picked it up as evidence. If he mentioned it, Alec would promptly sit him down in front of a three-course meal and stand over him until he finished it. On the other hand, it might give them a little privacy to discuss what was really going on.

Longton suggested they use the station canteen. She wanted him available if a ransom demand or new evidence came in. They took Gay and Ryan with them, piling food onto the boy's plate to keep him distracted. Ed was not entirely sure it was working.

"Anything you don't want, I'll have," Gay told him. "I missed my barbecue. Say, you think they'll give us a tour of the station?"

Ryan pulled a *don't patronise me* face. "I've got more important things to do. Unless... I never did get an answer about those police dogs."

Gay went off to find out and for a while the three of them ate in silence at a table away from any others that were occupied. Still, Straker could feel eyes on him from the police men and women on their breaks, observing with curiosity or concern. More used to being on that side of the divide, they made him uncomfortable. He was glad of the station's strong coffee.

Ryan looked up at him. "What *are* we going to do?"

Alec patted him on the shoulder. "I know you'd rather get out and look for your sisters but that's the police's job. We have to sit and wait. Maybe, when we hear from the kidnappers, then we can do something. "

Ryan wrinkled his nose. "You think I'll be able to do something?"

"I don't know, I don't know what will happen."

"But you don't think so because I'm eleven."

Alec shrugged. "You wouldn't believe what I got up to when I was eleven."

"I would." said Ed. "But you're an Australian. More room for trouble."

"You don't sound like an Aussie." said Ryan, frowning.

Again Alec shrugged. "Long story."

Ryan thought a moment, then shrugged himself. "You ever seen a kangaroo? In the wild?"

"Oh sure." Alec replied. "And wallabies and koalas. The whole shebang. And I've been in Africa and Asia, seem all kinds of things."

Alec shot a quick look across at Ed but he shook his head - *leave me out of this*. He had other things on his mind. So for the next few minutes Alec told a series of tall tales, until Gay returned with a big sergeant.

"Good news. They have got dogs - not police dogs usually but a couple of lost ones - and then Sergeant Simpson is going to introduce us to Hercules, his dog."

Ryan hurried off with her. At the door he stopped and turned back to Ed.

"Will you be OK?"

Ed smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine. You go see the dogs."

Ryan nodded. "You'll call me if anything happens? I mean, it's not that I'm not worried about Leah and Tania but ..."

"There's not much point in just sitting around." Ed concluded.

"Yeah."

Both men nodded in agreement as he went out. Finally they could get down to business.

"We got the details off the police computers." Alec said. "They don't know much but we're checking descriptions, cars, etc against our own sources. We've got a security team on standby. Ford's looking for any unusual communications coming out of this area - though, frankly, if we don't know where they are they could be using the phone and we wouldn't be able to track them. On the other hand, you'll be pleased to know that Moonbase and SID have nothing to report so it doesn't look like they'll be taking her off the planet. At least, not in the immediate future. Have you got anything to tell me?"

Straker shook his head. "Only that I think the first one was brainwashed, maybe the others too. I didn't see them so well but he had that odd manner about him."

"I wouldn't know," said Alec. "Seems you're the only one who can spot them. But that means you're sure it's the aliens?"

He nodded. "Who else would it be?"

* * *

The door of the attic room opened and the man Kate had first seen entered. Two others remained outside, difficult to observe, on either side of the door.

Kate got to her feet. "What do you want?"

Stony faced, the man indicated the two girls. "These are not yours."

For a moment she thought of denying it but it seemed they now had the correct information so she brazened it out. "You've finally twigged, have you?"

"They are of no use." he stated blandly.

She sighed with partially simulated annoyance and turned to sit once more. "And here was I thinking you'd suddenly got bright. They're children. Children make good hostages. Therefore they're useful."

She was not sure if he took any notice of her. She still had her back to him when he said: "Their organs are not yet mature but they may be of some use. They will be transported with you after Straker is in custody."

"Then we could all be waiting a very long time."

She heard the door shut behind her and tried not to shiver.

"Organs?" asked Tania. "Transported? What's going on?"

Leah was banging on the door. "Hey, give us some food, will you? We won't be any use if we're starving."

Kate pulled her away and with Tania's help sat her down on the bed. "Don't annoy them. They might decide you're not worth keeping."

"Then tell us what's going on." the younger girl replied.

Kate took a deep breath. They would almost certainly have to use the amnesia drug on the two of them anyway - assuming they all got out of here alive - so she could break security to some extent. But what would they believe? Not the truth, surely?

Tania was looking at her. "Am I right in thinking you belong to some kind of security organisation?"

"Yes, you are."

"And that the man we saw you with is your boss and not your husband?"

"Actually, he's both."

Tania frowned. "Surely that's not a very secure arrangement?"

Kate shrugged. "It has its pros and cons."

"What's going on?" demanded Leah.

"I'm finding that out." Tania told her.

"Slowly. Very, very slowly."

Tania was too grown up to pull a face at her so instead she turned back to Kate. "Who are the enemy?"

Kate looked at her carefully. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Both girls nodded.

"Aliens."

"Oh please!" protested Tania. "That's ridiculous."

Kate shrugged. "It's the truth."

They stared at her for a moment.

"*Really* aliens?" asked Leah hesitantly.

"Yes, really." Kate said. "Although the people who took us are human enough. I think they're brainwashed though they could have been bribed in some way."

Tania had been looking out of the window but now she turned back to Kate. "Assuming

you are telling the truth... What do we do about it?"

* * *

It was Alec's mobile phone that rang.

"Yes?" He took a deep breath. "You'd better tell him yourself."

Ed was intrigued and worried by the momentary look of confusion on Alec's face as he handed the phone across.

"Hello?"

It was his secretary, Miss Ealand, speaking from the studio. "Sir? We've just received a ransom demand for Mrs Straker and two children. The demand is for half a million pounds and was delivered by a motorcycle courier. He's been detained but I don't think he can tell us much."

Straker felt as if his brain was shifting sideways into a different gear. The kidnapping had nothing to do with the aliens. Or had it?

"Read the note to me."

But it told him no more than she had already said.

Moments later, he was explaining the situation to Longton. She arranged for local police to question the courier - though Straker knew that his people would already have extracted any information the man had. The same went for forensic examination of the note. SHADO was also checking every database in the country in a search for potential abductors. And then there was the small matter of trying to raise half a million pounds in case that was the only way to get Kate and the girls back.

Ryan beamed with relief. "You've got half a million, haven't you?"

"Not exactly... But don't worry, we'll find the money if it comes to that."

Ed looked at his watch. The note said that the kidnappers would make contact again in two hours, though it gave no indication as to where or how.

He went outside to get a breath of fresh air, Alec dogging his footsteps.

"You're going to try and raise the money?" his friend asked.

Ed nodded. "Have to, don't I? You think Henderson will help out? He's the only person I know can clear the money. He can't hold it back at a time like this."

Henderson was Straker's senior officer and they had been fighting a turf war since their friendship had broken down years earlier. He also did not like Kate, for reasons Ed had yet to fathom. He did, however, have access to the money - even if he was notoriously tight-fisted with it.

"I'll check-in with the studio." Alec said, looking as worried as Ed felt. "You know, we might have kept ourselves to ourselves but we do have friends in the industry. *Film* industry I mean. And some of them aren't short of a bob or two. We could ask..."

Before he could do anything about it, Alec's phone rang once more. He took the call and his face fell.

"We've got spinners." he said.

"Where? How many?"

Spinners. UFOs. The enemy. What a time to pick. Straker knew he ought to be back at HQ, dealing with them.

Or were they coming for Kate?

Alec relayed the facts as he got them. "Two approaching Moonbase, one coming the other way. Interceptors are launching. You think we can find somewhere more private?"

* * *

"I could probably get the window unlocked -" said Kate "- but we're an awful long way up and making a rope out of the bed clothes is really not as practical as it sounds on television."

Tania checked. "We've got two sheets and a duvet, I think you're right."

"And I suppose banging on the door and saying someone's ill won't work?" asked Leah, standing by the door and ready to go.

"I'm afraid not." Kate replied. "Not unless they're exceptionally stupid."

"They might be."

Tania gave her a look. "They're not the only ones. But we do have to do something. If what you say is true and they're not simply after money, we have no guarantees they'll let us go."

"That's true." Kate agreed.

"And you'd be out of here if it wasn't for us."

Kate smiled. "Maybe."

"How?"

"Tell us." said Leah.

Kate raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Er, I'd unlock the window and make a rope from the bed clothes. But it is very, very chancy even if we get to the bottom. We don't know what security they've got."

She stopped abruptly, listening. In the distance she could hear the soulless, mechanised warbling of a UFO. She strode to the window and checked the sky. No sign yet. Or perhaps it was coming down behind the house.

* * *

Ed and Alec had retired to Ed's car, now parked just down the road from the station. Not for the first time, Ed was directing operations over the car phone. Normally he would be dashing back to the studio. He wondered for a moment if he could make his excuses and go - the ransom demand had been delivered there - but it would be all over long before he could get there.

"What are they doing?" Alec kept asking. It was a rhetorical question because the speaker was on. It was simply that Alec was feeling as helpless as he was.

"One target destroyed." came the report from Ayesha, followed by "Interceptor Three damaged. Heading for base. Crash crews on standby."

Straker clenched his fists, hoping his pilot would be OK.

A moment later: "Second target destroyed. Third target entering Earth's atmosphere. Sky One launched but intercept unlikely. Target is headed for England, South - no, Midlands. Sir, I think they're coming your way. Confirmed. They're over Warwickshire. Over Stratford."

"Look." Alec was pointing at the sky. "We have visual contact."

Ed gunned the engine, half of him grateful for the sighting and half worried as to how many people would also have spotted it. What a clear up job this might turn out to be. Yet people had an amazing capacity for ignoring what they did not expect to see.

Alec turned to keep it in sight. The fact it was in the atmosphere slowed it down considerably but it was still far faster than the car. Ed followed it along the roads that had taken Kate away from him, hoping there were no stupid pedestrians and why did he have to drive such a recognisable car? Especially with the police already involved?

He had to find her, had to. But she could be anywhere. There was no way he could keep up.

They lost the UFO as they wound through the town's streets but as they hit the green countryside, he opened up the throttle and Alec caught another glimpse.

"We're going the right way." he called. "Can Sky One over-fly the area? See what he can spot?"

"Already on it." came the reply. "Captain Carlin is making good time."

"Is that him?" asked Alec as a jet passed over them at high altitude.

"He should be near you. You want me to patch you through to his frequency?"

"Just give us the results." Straker ordered.

He eased up on the speed as they now only had the general direction in which to go. They would have to rely on the pilot to find their destination.

* * *

Kate was half way out of the window, checking the strength of the rope, when the men came back. She was expecting them. Indeed, it was part of the plan.

They hauled her back in and manhandled her and the two girls downstairs and out of the back door. Her shoulders slumped in a show of dejection and she went almost limp as she saw the conical, metal shape of the UFO sat on the lawn two hundred yards away. The sight of it really did make her sick but there was no sign of any aliens.

Looking around, she checked the back of the house for possible lines of escape. There was the formal garden off to one side and swathes of bushes in the other direction. It would have to do.

Kate panicked. She screamed and thrashed about, lashed out, kicked at their captors. They did exactly what she had hoped. The two holding her tightened their grip and the other two were distracted.

The girls, astonished by the sight of the spaceship, still managed to obey their orders. They kicked out, managing to pull away from their captors and run for it. They headed for the bushes.

They were slower across the open ground. The men were catching up. If they could make it into the undergrowth they would have a chance. Kate turned her performance up a notch and managed to kick one of the guards in the stomach. He fell back. Maybe she had a chance herself. Or not.

* * *

Ayesha swore, loudly. Which she was not in the habit of doing.

"What?" Straker demanded.

In response, she patched Peter Carlin through from the plane. "Sir, there's two of them. One behind a big house, the second on a hill ten miles away. I'm going lower for more detail."

"Peter, which was the one you were chasing? Did the other come down first?"

"Yes. That's the one by the house."

"Give me the coordinates. Send the security team after the other."

As the information came in, Alec checked the map. "We're going the right way. Take the next left and through the village. It's another two miles."

* * *

The aliens were exiting the UFO. They were bringing a transport capsule with them, a metal cylinder used to taking prisoners back to their own planet. The red suited figures advanced on Kate and she knew that there was no chance of escape. With any luck they would forget about the girls.

Except the girls were coming back, brandishing branches over their heads and roaring

defiance.

"Girl power!" shouted Leah.

"Get out." shouted Kate.

Tania pointed the aliens out to her sister. "Get those ones."

The aliens faltered in their stride. But not for long. They put the capsule down and reached for their guns.

"Run!" Kate shouted.

The two girls hesitated, looking from the aliens to the bushes.

"Run." Kate repeated.

Out of nowhere came the noise of a car engine and the squeal of brakes. The long, sleek shape of a SHADO car darted round the side of the building and slewed across the lawn. It passed between Kate and the UFO. On the far side, Alec was hanging out of the window firing at the aliens.

The driver's gull-wing door flew upwards. Straker hurled himself out, gun at the ready. He took out the man attempting to grab Leah, then turned in Tania's direction.

Two of the men ran at him from opposite sides, ignoring the bullets. Kate knew how hard it was for him to shoot an unarmed human even when they were controlled by the aliens. She herself was still grappling with the third man.

He hooked his foot behind her and she fell. He aimed a kick at her head as she rolled out of the way.

Concentrating on her own fight, she caught mere glimpses of what was happening around her. One alien leaking green goo from its shattered faceplate while its counterpart attempted to drag Alec out of the car window. Ed falling, not turning fast enough to deal with the second man. Tania and Leah with their branches, running to her aid.

The man was on top of her but could not deal with the sustained woody onslaught, yet in his possessed state he could not give in. He got his hands around Kate's throat and squeezed. She did the same to him but with better technique, pressing hard on his carotid artery.

She felt sick, dizzy. It began to grow dark.

The man keeled over. Whether it was due to her efforts or the girls' she had no idea.

She looked around for Ed. Time went into slow-motion. He was on the ground, trying to get to his feet. A man stood over him, the first man she had seen in the gardens. He was holding Ed's gun, aiming it down at its owner. Clear shot, point blank range, couldn't miss.

The car boot shot open. Ryan's head popped out, looking around. His mouth formed an O as he saw Ed. He ducked back down.

It was the spanner she saw most clearly as it impacted with the man's back. As he fell, Ryan struck him across the back of the head to make certain.

Which still left one alien.

Ed retrieved his gun and hauled himself to his feet but before he could fire, the alien fell. Alec had...

She could not see what Alec had done and for the moment she did not care. They were all safe.

When the clean-up started, they found both aliens were dead. So were two of the humans. The other two were out cold. The youngsters, coming out of shock, were buzzing with excitement.

"We did it," shouted Leah.

"We did." said Alec. "And now we have to get you home. Your dad must be going spare."

"And you two had better make yourself presentable." he said, turning to Ed and Kate.

"What -" but Ed was interrupted by Ryan.

"Will we see you again?"

"Can I get a job with you?" asked Tania. "When I finish school, I mean."

"You can do the studio tour," said Kate.

"You really do run a film studio?" asked Leah.

"Yes we do."

"Can I be in a film?"

"Maybe." said Ed. "Tania, to your question, also maybe. Alec, what are you talking about?"

At that moment the car phone rang. Alec grabbed it. "Miss Ealand? You have? You're an angel."

He put the phone down and looked at his watch.

"*Alec.*" growled Ed.

"You don't have time to clean up," he said. "You've got half an hour to get to the theatre, tickets for the front of the circle waiting at the box-office. Amazing what you can do if you ring up and say you're from a studio. Now get going. This will all be cleared up by the time the curtain falls."

"Henry the Fifth." said Kate happily.

"Henry the Fifth." said Ed.

"I'd rather go to the pictures," said Leah.