

Two Days

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*This is a sequel to my story **S Factor***

"So, what are my chances of getting off with the best man?"

Kate Allen chuckled. "Oh, I'd say they were pretty good."

The wardrobe mistress and her assistants, who were fitting bride and bridesmaid with their dresses, joined in the laughter.

"And he's good-looking?" asked the bridesmaid.

"Not as good as Ed."

"Fair enough - ouch, mind the pins, *please* - the groom ought to be gorgeous."

"He is."

"And rich?"

Kate shook her head, disarranging her veil on her mousey hair. "Don't let the studio fool you, the only reason Ed's got any money is because he never has time to spend it. Our combined income will be about half what I was getting before."

Nat, the bridesmaid, pulled a face. "Then he'd better be gorgeous."

"Wait till you see him. He'll be back from location soon."

They finished the fitting and went out across the lot. Ed was coming in the opposite direction. He was in full movie mogul mode, white suit and dark glasses with Alec and two good-looking women following him. He looked like a modern dress angel.

They met halfway to the offices. They did not kiss, they rarely did in public.

"Good trip?" she asked.

"Fine."

Nat cleared her throat impatiently. Kate introduced her. "This is my bridesmaid, Nat Cole, also in PR. This is my fiancé, Ed Straker; the best man, Alec Freeman; and I'm afraid I don't -" Ed intervened. "Gay Ellis and Nina Barry, colleagues since the studio was set up."

They both smiled broadly, Nina almost bouncing. "We've been dying to meet you. Ed's never had such a spring in his step."

"Alec's been telling us all about you for months." Gay added with a glint in her eye.

Freeman threw his hands up. "Only because they forced me. So, Nat, is that your real name?"

She smiled at his obvious change of tack. Kate had noticed that they were both sizing each other up. "It's Pat really but I've been Nat since I was fourteen. Bit of an obvious pun."

They chatted over coffee for half an hour before Gay and Nina made a tactful retreat. It seemed the whole of SHADO had made an effort to clear the decks of anything other than the utmost essentials. Both the senior officers were free for the next 36 hours - not that Nat knew

anything about it. She was hitting it off fine with Alec.

Kate was relieved that the female members of staff had taken her upcoming marriage so well. She knew from what she had heard, as well as her own observations, that some of them had set their sights on Ed. Even more of them had the kind of protective feelings towards him that Alec kept barely hidden. As it was, if Gay and Nina were anything to go by, it seemed she had been accepted wholeheartedly.

To avoid stag and hen parties, Kate and Ed had arranged to take the two likely organisers - the bridesmaid and best man - out to dinner. The decor at the Golden Phoenix was overly gaudy but the food was excellent.

"Oops," said Nat. "They've only got chopsticks. I'm going to need cutlery."

"Me too," said Alec as he caught the waiter's attention.

Ed caught Kate's eye and stifled a laugh. She was pretty sure Alec was - being a gentleman? Or improving his chances? She did not like to say.

It was a good evening, with plenty of talk and laughter. Even Ed was relaxed. Ed and Kate drove them back for coffee, both being still sober.

She was following Ed's car down the dark country lane, Nat pestering her with intimate questions, when she saw the lights in the sky. A moment later, Ed flashed his warning lights and sped away. She followed, guessing he was making for the studio.

"What going on?" Nat asked. "What's the - *is that a flying saucer?*"

"Yes. Hang on."

It was firing at them now, apparently undecided as to which to go after. She threw the car around the road. Up ahead, Ed was doing the same.

Please God, don't let him die tonight.

Nat was shrieking in her ear. She had no idea what she saying, if she was saying anything at all. Adrenalin was pumping but it had been along a day.

The steering went. She did not know why, she did not care. She fought it but the car headed straight for the hedge. Her foot was already heavy on the brake. The car skidded to a halt.

Nat unhooked her seat belt, pulled open the door and ran into the road.

"Get down." Kate yelled.

Ed had stopped up ahead and was reversing towards them. Nat had stopped and was looking around, obviously confused and terrified. Kate was out now and grabbed her, pulling her down.

"Do what I say, do what Ed or Alec say. Then maybe you'll get out of this."

Ed pulled up. Both men piled out.

"Kate, are you okay?"

"Yeah but Nat's -"

Ed's car exploded, knocking them all flat.

Alec swore. "Is your car -"

"Totally out of it."

They could hear the UFO coming in to land, no doubt looking for prisoners. Nat was squirming as Kate held on to her.

"This is crazy. This is totally crazy."

Ed thought quickly. "I'm too visible in this suit. Alec, are you armed?"

"Yes."

"Kate?"

"No. Sorry."

"Okay, Alec, you take the two of them and get out of here. I'll go the other way, draw them off."

Kate and Alec both protested.

"Tell me what's going on," Nat insisted.

"Start walking and I will," Kate told her. "Ed -"

"Don't make me order you. Go. You too, Alec."

Alec nodded reluctantly and grabbed Nat's other arm. "Come on. They'll be down by now."

The two of them dragged her struggling between them. Kate glanced over her shoulder to see Ed running off across the fields.

"We didn't get a warning." Alec was saying. "If Mark Bradley let this past him, I'll have his hide."

"What's going on?" Nat wailed, far too loudly.

Kate started to explain because it seemed the best way of moving her along. Was she taking it in? Her eyes were wild but she was going with them as they headed towards cover.

"I think there's a phone box round here." Alec said.

"On the edge of the village." Kate replied.

"This isn't real." Nat kept repeating. "Why would they want to kill us? I haven't done anything."

They pulled her into a copse by the side of the road. There was no sign of the aliens. They must have gone after Ed. Kate's heart twisted. They were supposed to be getting married tomorrow. She looked at her watch. Less than fourteen hours.

"Oh, shut up, Nat. They're not interested in you - unless it's for spare parts. My fiancé is risking his life to protect us - just like he does for someone every day of the week."

"And you're marrying him? You're mad. I want to get out of here."

"Sit still." She had sat them both down.

Alec had already run for the phone, hoping to get help from the studio before it was too late. There was little she could do except sit and keep Nat quiet. She was deeply disappointed by her behaviour.

She started. There was a rustling behind them. She clapped a hand over Nat's mouth and looked round. She hoped it was a fox or a badger. It might be.

It was an alien.

This time she had no gun. Alec had offered but -

She heard shots. The alien looked away, his gun wavering.

She leapt for him. He swatted her away. Her legs twisted. She tried to get up. He clubbed her over the head with the gun.

Stunned, she fell back. She was vaguely aware of Nat screaming. This was it, then, for both of them. She just hoped Ed and Alec got away. They would be devastated, she knew. Poor Ed.

She had sunk to the floor of the forest. Everything seemed to go into slow motion. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of white.

* * *

Alec Freeman jogged along the side of the road towards the village. If he did not see the phone box soon, he would bang on the door of a house until he got help. He could see the first of the street lights in the distance.

He wondered how Ed was doing. The two women ought to be safe. It was hard to think of Kate as a colonel but then, it always took him a few months when someone was new.

He crouched down by the hedge. There was an alien up ahead. It must have got past him when they had diverted into the wood. It was scanning the road for signs of life.

It was too far ahead for Freeman to be sure of his shot. He would need to edge closer, though the cover was minimal. He drew his gun and crawled forward, all the time aware that there might be another one behind him.

In this light and from this angle, he needed to get close. There were twigs and debris along the verge that made it impossible to move silently. He wondered how well the alien could hear through its suit. Probably enhanced in some way.

Ten feet. He lay flat, supporting himself on his elbows. That would be steadiest. Dry leaves scrunched under him.

The alien turned, aiming.

Freeman shot first, three close shots.

The alien fired, the beam raking the ground as he fell.

Freeman breathed a sigh of relief. He ran to check the body. No movement. With no obvious pulse or breathing it was hard to be sure of death. Nevertheless, the damage would be fatal soon if not yet.

He backed away, heading for the copse. He was guessing there was another alien on the loose and if there was, Kate and Nat could be in trouble.

There was moonlight on the road but within the wood it was very dark. He could blunder into a tree or an alien without knowing it and he was making far too much noise.

He heard screams, then shots, up ahead. He ran in that direction.

He entered the small clearing where the women were. An alien was dead, sprawled backwards and half supported by a bush. Nat lay on the ground, sobbing loudly. Ed knelt by a tree, Kate in his arms.

Freeman was sick with shock. "Tell me she's not -"

"I'm all right." Her voice was weak and slurred but still there.

He made it to the phone. The first SHADO vehicles were with them within five minutes but not soon enough to prevent the UFO from self-destructing. They took Kate and Nat back to the studio. Nat had to be sedated before they could give her the amnesia drug. She gave him a look as if to say it was all his fault.

He sighed. It was a shame, they had been getting on rather well. She would not remember in the morning - but he would.

Ed was taking care of his bride. Freeman came in to hear: "... You can't ever tell how people will react. I know it's disappointing but -"

"- but she won't remember in the morning. I know. I will. It won't be the same."

They looked round as one when he came in and the tiniest pang of jealousy shot across his heart.

"What's the verdict?" he asked.

"I'm fine, not even concussion. Told you I would be. How's Nat?"

"Asleep." He pursed his lips and brought forward the small, green leather case he had in his hands. "I've been meaning to do this for weeks but it never seemed the right moment."

He opened the case. Inside was a suite of Victorian gold and sapphire jewellery: necklace, bracelet, brooch and earrings.

"These were my grandmother's. She told me to give them to the woman I was going to

marry. I know that's never going to happen, so, with your permission Ed, I'd like Kate to have them."

What granny had actually said was: "Give them to the woman you'll love forever." An old romantic, Granny, but she had not foreseen that he would fall for his best friend's bride.

Ed whistled. "You've already been more than generous -"

"That's a separate matter."

"And you might marry, one-day."

He shook his head. "I think we both know I'm not the marrying kind."

Ed nodded reluctantly. "If you're sure."

He handed the case to Kate. Their eyes met. Compassion, that was the word Ed had used about her. He saw it now, directed at him.

She knows, he thought. *She knows I love her.*

She took the case. "Thank you. They mean a lot."

He looked away. "We ought to get some sleep. Busy day tomorrow."

He arranged a driver for Kate and Nat, who were staying at what would soon become the Straker marital home. He drove Ed back to his place, where they were stopping. They were both grateful to get to bed.

He woke up to hear Ed already making breakfast.

"I hope you're not messing up my kitchen."

"That would be possible?"

He crawled out of bed and opened the curtains onto louring clouds. "Have you looked at the weather?"

Ed popped his head round the bedroom door, smiling. "I know."

Freeman was puzzled. "You want it to rain?"

"Something has to go wrong at a wedding, its traditional. If that's all it is..."

He scowled. "I'm not convinced. And I don't want to get soaked."

Ed laughter. He was positively bubbling this morning, all nerves gone. The ceremony was not until 2pm so he insisted on popping into the office, where he was promptly shooed off by the other senior staff - who were trying to get themselves ready on time. He smiled and greeted anyone and everyone. They smiled back, half of them - including the studio staff - busy with preparations. The two of them had a snack in the canteen before returning to dress for the occasion.

The wedding car picked them up and they were soon seated in the front pew of the local Methodist Church. The parish Church was prettier but Ed's divorce had made that impossible. The minister here had been very welcoming once it was clear the Kate had had nothing to do with the break-up of his previous marriage.

Ed looked over his shoulder and said in a stage whisper: "Do you think the bride will mind that I have four beautiful women sat right behind me?"

Gay, Nina, Colonel Lake and Miss Ealand giggled.

Alec punched him on the arm. "That's my line."

* * *

"I must have been completely smashed last night, I don't remember a thing."

"You were pretty merry."

"Don't have much of a hangover."

"Good, you've got work to do." Kate turned her attention from Nat to the wardrobe mistress lacing her into the wedding dress. "Tighter, please. For once in my life I'm going to

have a decent figure."

The wardrobe mistress complied until she could barely breathe.

"Kate?" Nat went on, as she fiddled with a trim on her dress.

"Yes?"

"Did I *do* anything last night?"

"What do you mean, *do* anything?"

She coughed. "Anything embarrassing... Like make a pass at the groom or something? Because you seem awfully distant today."

"Sorry. Just preoccupied."

That was partly true. She had had to take care of her appearance in PR - in spite of her short stature and dumpy figure - but she had never before been tweaked, prodded and dusted to this extent. They were still putting on the finishing touches when the wedding car arrived.

"Finally, escape."

It was just a short drive to the church. She gazed out of the windows, thinking that on the way back she would no longer be Kate Allen but Kate Straker.

"Stop the car." She hammered on the partition and the driver pulled up.

"What's the matter?" asked Nat. "Did you forget something?"

"No, I saw something. Stay here."

She got out of the car. What she had seen was a blonde woman, about her own age. A woman who had also stepped out of a car that was parked in one of the village side streets - most of which were chock-a-block with cars belonging to the guests - and who strode determinedly towards the church. They had stopped ahead of her and Kate waited until they were face to face before she spoke.

"Mrs Rutland?"

"Yes."

"I think you can guess who I am." She indicated her wedding dress. "May I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm going to stop the wedding -"

Kate sighed. "No, Mrs Rutland, you are not. Nor are you ever going to disturb my husband - *mine*, not yours - again. Do you understand me?"

"I don't think *you* understand. Do you know what he did to our son?"

Again Kate sighed. She did not want to hurt the woman - not really - but it was best to get it over with.

"Ed told me all about what happened to Johnny. He blames himself. I don't. I read between the lines." She paused. "You and I both know the truth: if you'd let Ed wait five minutes, Johnny would be his father's best man today."

She caught the woman's hand as it flew up to slap her. For a moment they pushed against each other. She could see the tears in the other woman's eyes. She must be going through hell but a hell that Kate would not allow her to inflict on Ed. Then they broke part and Mary Rutland walked rapidly back the way she had come.

Kate went back to the car, her breath coming short and shallow. She was a little light headed. It must be the stress.

There was a small crowd outside the church. Some had probably stopped simply because it was a wedding. Some were perhaps hoping to see celebrities. She smiled at them, patted her dress into place and walked through the doors.

* * *

The organ struck up Jeremiah Clarke's Trumpet Voluntary and Ed Straker turned to see his bride. She looks radiant in her simple, well tailored dress and he was pleased to see she was wearing the jewelry that Alec had given her a few hours earlier.

She glided up the aisle to his side, smiling sweetly at him, then turning to pay attention to the minister. He did the same, though he found himself impatient to get the ceremony completed. He knew there was no official instruction to kiss the bride so he would have to wait until it was over.

Finally he got his chance. He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. She kissed back strongly. Then he felt her go limp in his arms.

"Kate?"

She was unconscious. He was numb with shock. Alec helped him lower her to the ground.

Dr Jackson was hurrying towards them. Alec had grumbled when he had told him he was inviting him. It looked now as if they needed him.

What could it be? Poison? An illness? Her breathing was very shallow.

The minister suggested they carry her into the vestry, where the doctor could examine her better. He took her up in his arms and moved her there, while Alec tried to calm the congregation.

He had little idea what Jackson was doing, he seemed to have his own methods for everything. He took several minutes. Then he turned her on her front, took out a knife and slashed the lacings that the dress tight.

"What do you think you're doing?"

But before Straker had a chance to react further, she was breathing deeply. Her eyes fluttered open. Speechless with relief, he kissed her again. Then, while she recovered, he went out to explain.

"She fainted, that's all."

"I don't have that effect on women." grumbled Alec but Straker could see how relieved he was.

Nina patted him on the back. "Wouldn't you rather we stayed awake?"

Straker explained a little further. "Her dress was way too tight, it constricted her breathing."

A highly embarrassed Kate insisted on remaining in the dress while the photographs were taken. They managed half-a-dozen against the dramatic backdrop of the stormy sky before a downpour forced them back inside. Kate changed into her going away outfit as soon as they arrived at the studio.

The sound stage on Lot One had an arbour leading to the door. Inside, sets from a medieval epic had been adapted to provide a banquet hall for the reception.

Kate squeezed his hand. "Looks great, doesn't it?"

He had to agree. So did the food. The canteen staff had really excelled themselves. All this was their wedding present from the studio. He grimaced, however, when Alec led them to the wooden thrones that had been prepared for the bride and groom to receive their guests.

Ginny Lake was the first up. "Congratulations to both of you. Now I have to relieve Paul."

They had tossed a coin to see who would attend the wedding and who the reception.

They were nearing the end of the stream of people and preparing to eat - Straker found his stomach was rumbling - when he spotted Keith Ford coming towards them.

"Sorry, sir, crisis at the studio."

That meant the aliens were up to something serious, something Colonel Lake could not handle on her own. He looked at his new bride.

"Go." she said.

Alec was already on his way to the door and Ford was passing on the message to more and more of the guests.

"Go." she repeated. "I'll handle things here."

His office was half full by the time he reached it.

"Let's get on with it." Alec said wearily.

Below, they were met by Colonel Lake. "This one's getting weirder by the minute. We thought we had one incoming, then we got six more following it. *Then* they started firing on the first one - "

She was interrupted as one of the technicians called them over. "A small trace broke off the normal one. I think it's dropping things. Look, there it goes again."

"Location?" Straker demanded.

Lake pulled up a larger map. "About a hundred and twenty miles west of the Azores. SkyDiver's a hundred miles north of there and closing. The interceptors took out four of the attackers, Sky One is after the others. I thought it best to get rid of them and see what the other one was doing."

"Agreed. It could all be a bluff or it could be something significant."

Time passed very quickly. Sky One dealt with the first of the attacking UFOs but was downed by the second, Lew Waterman having to bail-out. The rogue UFO disappeared off their screens, probably underwater, after jettisoning four more of whatever it had dropped. Minutes later, another half-dozen UFOs came within range of SID's detectors. Thanks to the interceptors, only one of them made it into Earth's atmosphere.

"I told Henderson we needed at least one more SkyDiver." Straker complained. "You'd have thought that the fact they nearly got him would have convinced him. Tell the one we've got to pick up Captain Waterman, then find me one - if not all - of what it dropped. Then the UFO. ETA?"

So it went on. Paul Foster and Peter Carlin took up SHADO jets to deal with the intruders but they were lightly armed and armoured. A score draw and a no-score draw: Foster downing one but being shot down himself, Carlin's battle being inconclusive. At least there when no SHADO fatalities.

The escaped UFO dived into the sea after the rogue. Too distant to intervene, Diver observed a curious underwater battle before one craft was destroyed.

"Which one?" Straker asked.

Another six spinners came past the Moon.

"Eighteen? They must be really wound up." said Alec. "They can't afford to throw those kind of resources around."

* * *

The reception was busy, despite having lost half of the guests. Or maybe that was why - the others were divided into those gossiping about what had happened and the few members of SHADO left who were trying to change the subject.

Kate weaved between people, offering food and drink as if she was one of the catering staff rather than the bride. Nat was doing the same, slightly hampered because she had not yet changed out of her bridesmaids dress. Kate looked at her. Their eyes met and Nat headed in her direction.

"It's not going too bad -" Nat said - in spite of the groom having deserted us. Where is he, anyway? What's so important he should miss his wedding?"

Kate shrugged, which was a little difficult with the amount of plates she was carrying. "He didn't miss the wedding, he missed the reception. And the studio relies on him. He's a very important man."

Nat pulled a face. "You're still snapping at me. Are you sure I didn't do something last night? Because if I was too blind drunk to remember I don't know what I could have got up to... Please, Kate, tell me."

Was it such a crime? Kate asked herself. I coped. I so much wanted you to cope too. You're my friend, you're my bridesmaid. It's important to me.

You're important to me. I can't let you go over this - even if you did nearly get us killed. I mean, I don't actually know how Ed or Alec coped the first time they saw one.

Kate pulled a face. "You really want to know? OK, let's go over there where it's a bit quieter."

She indicated one of the corners of the sound stage where there was more scenery than people.

Nat raised her eyes to heaven. "I did make a pass at your fiance... husband, didn't I?"

"No." They were among the gothic arches and swags of flowers now. "What you did..."

It was hard to think of something to tell her that would indicate how upset Kate was without breaking SHADO security. Perhaps there was something.

"Last night, when we came out of the restaurant, we were mugged -"

Nat gasped in shock. "Oh my... I know I woke up with bruises but... but I thought I'd got literally legless and fallen over. Mugged?"

"We were mugged. And you... you panicked. Ed and Alec fought them off - they didn't get anything, that's why we didn't report it to the police, that and the bad publicity for the studio - but you -"

Nat hung her head. "I nearly got somebody killed, didn't I?"

Kate nodded.

They stood in silence for a time. Nat tried to speak but nothing would come out. She really felt what she had done. And Kate felt guilty for having told her. After a moment she tried to explain that no, it hadn't been quite that bad and that Nat had been drunk and maybe if she was a bit more careful in future and nobody had really got hurt - and it wasn't like they had had to postpone the wedding. She wondered if she ought to give her a second dose of the amnesia drug - but that would not wipe away her own guilt.

It was hypocritical to expect so much of other people if she could not behave better herself. The last thing she wanted to be was a hypocrite. She had had no need to tell her except to get it off her own chest.

Nat managed a weak smile. "Now you look miserable too."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault. It's just it's all been a bit too much for me."

"Course it has." Nat reached out and hugged her.

Kate was not big on hugs but she returned it. That made her wonder what Ed was doing now and whether she would see him again in the next few hours. A lot better than wondering if she would ever see him again. She looked at her watch. Had he eaten yet?

She put her arm around Nat and steered her back towards the crowd. "Come on, I need your help."

* * *

And so it went on. By the time he looked at his watch it was six thirty. He had thrown everything he could into the area to search for - he still had no idea what the aliens were after and it could be one giant hoax, diversion, anything. He would have to stay here until he knew and then there would be more work to do.

He could feel his fists clench. He and Alec were going over the information *again* in his office.

"What?" Alec asked.

Straker's voice was tight. "It's starting again."

Alec looked at him. "What's starting? You know what the aliens are doing?"

He shook his head vehemently. "Not the aliens - yes - no - I don't know. My life. It's starting again, just like before. I'll have to cancel the honeymoon and then -"

Alec sighed. "It's not the same. She's not the same."

"You tell me she's not going to leave me - but why shouldn't she? Doesn't this show what kind of husband I am?"

"She knows. She loves you."

"So did Mary, once."

Alec did not answer, could not, obviously. He turned away from him, staring into the patterns of the light panel behind his desk. He should have known this was going to happen. He should have known he could never marry, could never make any woman happy, could only hurt those were most important to him.

Then: "Ed, turn around."

Alec's voice was quiet, urgent but unreadable.

He turned. Kate was standing outside the door, struggling with a huge caterers' cardboard tray laden with food. Behind her, one of the security guards was trying to balance an even larger one.

Alec opened the door for her.

"Thanks," she said. "They should be enough here for everyone who missed the meal - assuming you two don't scoff the lot. They're just changing over from the food to the dancing upstairs. Did you want me to ring the hotel and cancel, Ed? Both nights?"

She was completely calm and businesslike but a slight smile played around her lips as she looked at him. A smile he had to return.

"Told you so," said Alec, scooping up a pile of food as he left.

"I'm sorry." Ed told her, once the door was closed.

She shrugged. "So am I - but I'm not surprised. I came into this with my eyes open and I can take worse than a delayed honeymoon. Delayed, mark you, not cancelled."

He nodded. "Delayed."

"I'd better get back. Do me a favour and send up anyone you don't need. I could use a hand with the guests. Oh, and find some reason to get Jackson down here, will you? He's spooking people."

He chuckled. "Sure. I'll come up myself if I can."

"That would be nice." She reached up and kissed him. "Got to go. We can't both disappear."

She walked to the door, stopped, then turned. "And if you going to bracket me with anyone - make it Alec, not Mary."

He smiled guiltily. "Mind reader."

He walked over and kissed her again, passionately.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not surprised I fainted."
Then they both went back to work.