

The Night The Buddleia Caught Fire

Alison Jacobs
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We had a fairly normal life until the night we saw fire in the sky and Ed Straker crashed into our garden. Ed Straker of the ash blonde hair and the big secret. I remember it all so clearly, which I shouldn't. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Tom and I met at university and married the day after graduation. It tipped it down. We had already made plans to start our own software company and convert an old barn as both office and home. Five years later, both were going well. We were specialists in advanced imaging and doing good business. We were still working on the barn but it was presentable as well as habitable.

It was the week after our wedding anniversary when I glanced out of the window and saw a space invaders games that had come to life. I could see moonlight glinting off a vaguely conical object that hung in the sky firing laser beams at a car that was swerving skilfully to avoid them. The tarmac was being blasted to fragments, the sound muffled by the double glazing. It was totally unreal.

I called Tom to join me and he arrived just as the car was hit. Out of control, it crashed through the low wall of our front garden and skidded to a halt in the rose border.

For moment everything was still. Then the car's gullwing door heaved painfully open and a man staggered out. White suit, white hair - he stood out like a beacon. So I ran to the door, switched out our own lights and threw it open.

"Over here." I called. "Over here."

He looked up, hesitated a moment, then ran towards us.

There was something about that man. He wasn't particularly big and I could not yet see if he was good-looking but even then, if I hadn't had Tom, I could have fallen for him.

He almost fell through the door as the laser obliterated our buddleia. Then everything went quiet.

"You think they've gone?" Tom asked.

Our visitor looked out of the window. "I think they're landing. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have taken you up on your offer. Do you have a phone?"

American accent, East Coast I thought. I showed him to one, wondering why anyone would be chased by a spaceship round here. He did not look at all phased. He glanced around at the computers as he picked up the handset and dialled. He only held it to his ear for a moment.

"It's dead."

I got the impression, so were we. He crossed back to the window. I looked over his shoulder. The spacecraft had landed in the field opposite and two figures were already climbing over the remains of the wall. The stranger looked like he was weighing up his options.

"Is there another way out?"

I indicated the small backdoor.

"Get out, keep quiet and make your way across the fields. I'll keep them busy here. It's me they're interested in."

I didn't feel inclined to argue. Yet I felt bad about leaving him there. Not quite so bad as I saw him pull a gun. I grabbed Tom by the arm and we wound our way through the furniture. Tom unlocked the backdoor and I lifted the old iron latch.

We opened the door onto a figure in a red space suit. It had a green visor and a gun. We backed away.

Our original visitor was not looking our way. I called out to him. I didn't see him turn because the alien smashed me in the face and I fell.

* * *

I must have hit something on the way down because I woke up with a splitting headache. Tom asked me if I was alright almost before I'd opened my eyes. I nodded. That hurt but not too badly.

I looked around. We were all three of us tied to office chairs. Tom looked OK but our guest had a split lip, a black eye and probably more than that. I got the nasty impression it was personal between him and the aliens. I asked him if he was alright. He nodded. I felt vaguely embarrassed that this had happened in our house.

The aliens were sat at our computers, tapping away. I was at the wrong angle to see what was on the screens.

"I thought they were after me." the American said. "Looks like I was wrong. Who are you people?"

You can ask, I thought but we introduced ourselves - Liz and Tom Parker. He was Ed Straker of Harlington-Straker studios. Which made no sense.

The aliens finished up what they were doing and collected together the data. I wondered what we had created that they wanted. We were fairly cutting edge but to come... I had no idea how far they had come. One of them up walked across and stood over Straker. He looked up at him. The alien karate chopped him across the neck and he slumped.

The alien cut him free, then us, as the other one covered us with his gun. He motioned to us to get up and walk towards the door. The one with the gun picked up Straker and slung him over his shoulder. He went out first.

We were halfway across the garden when somebody shouted "Get down!"

We dropped. Shots rang out. Our guard fell across my legs and didn't move. The other one started to fire indiscriminately. He was using Straker as a shield. It was working. The gunfire stopped. He turned to run.

Tom grabbed him around the knees. He didn't fall but he stumbled, dropping Straker. He aimed at him, kicking out at Tom as he did. I scrambled for the other one's gun. The shooting started again. When I turned round, he was running away.

"Did he kill him?" I asked Tom, alarmed.

He shook his head. "Didn't have time to shoot."

We lay still till the alien was gone and two human men were standing over us. One knelt down to see to Straker. The other gave me a hand up. This one asked his friend: "Is he alright?"

The bigger man answered: "He's been worse." We could hear the spaceship powering up and he added: "Call that in."

The younger man ran off into the dark.

Tom was on his feet now and the two of them carried Straker inside. He was already

starting to stir. The newcomer made sure he was comfortable, then went back to the window. I followed him. The spacecraft was hurtling out of sight.

"Are we out of danger?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm sorry about this."

"That's what your friend said."

He smiled. He had a nice smile. "You shouldn't have any more trouble. It would be Ed they wanted. We'll just need to ask you a few questions."

Tom was already looking at the computers. "They went off with a lot of our software and I'm not sure which one was carrying it."

The man groaned and went round to look at the screen. I waited as I could see the other one approaching. I opened the door for him.

"Come and look at this, Paul." He looked up at us. "I'm Alec, by the way."

We introduced ourselves again.

Straker stirred and Alec was straight to him. After that, there was still plenty to do but it was more the kind of thing we understood. We checked all our files and copied them while Alec spoke to people and a creepy looking doctor arrived to attend to Straker.

We got a message through to say the UFO had got away. Alec swore.

"I heard that." said Straker. "All of it."

Things got weird again.

I'd never seen a film studio before. I didn't see much of this one. We were whisked into Straker's office. He threw himself down in the chair behind his desk and spoke into a silver cigar box. Then the whole room sank into the ground and we were in a dull but seriously impressive underground HQ.

Being down there confirmed my first impressions of the man. The way people moved around him just screamed alpha male.

We sat in a room for several hours and told Straker and Alec everything we knew about anything even vaguely relevant while a lady named Colonel Lake checked the files. We were exhausted by the time we finished - how Straker managed it, the condition he was in, I'll never know. We picked up a few things, though. This was a war. A big, nasty, secret war.

I turned to Tom when we were on our own. "What do you think?"

He nodded. We knew what we wanted to do.

Straker came back alone. He didn't bother to sit down. "Thank you, we think we've got everything you can tell us. We haven't put it all together yet but we will. Someone will come to give you your injections in a few minutes, then you'll be taken home."

Injections to make us forget. We didn't want those. As he turned to go I held up my hand.

"A moment, please. We've got a suggestion."

Tom backed me up. "We think we have skills you can use. We'd like to work here."

Straker frowned. "You do realise what you'd be getting involved in? And that you could never leave? SHADO is for life. However long that is."

We both nodded.

He smiled. "I've already asked to Alec to run background checks on you."

And we were in - if you don't count every aspect of our lives back seven generations being examined in minutest detail and then being half killed by the training course but we pulled each other through that and now we work under Colonel Lake in the technical section. We don't see Commander Straker that often but when we do, he usually finds time to have a word. After all, we did save his life twice in one night.