

Conspiracy

Alison Jacobs
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*This is a sequel to my story **Joint Venture**.*

"All you have to do is keep him occupied, Alec. There's nothing underhand about that." Alec Freeman shifted uncomfortably in his office chair. "I know you don't want him to worry but I don't like lying to him."

Kate Straker sighed irritably. "I'm not asking you to lie, I just don't want him fussing over me. I've got enough on my plate without an over attentive husband."

Finally Alec chuckled. "You can't blame him. It's a big deal for him too."

She pulled her swollen body out of the chair. "I just can't cope with Ed *and* the baby. Now, if you'll excuse me -"

She was interrupted as Ed breezed in, saw her and immediately strode to her side. "Anything happening?"

She sighed. "Same answer as when you called me - five minutes ago. What are you up to?"

He looked suspiciously innocent. "Nothing. Just something I wanted Alec's advice on." She pulled a face.

He smiled, running a hand over her nine months pregnant stomach. "Can't believe it's going to be today."

"You don't expect it to be on time, do you?" she asked.

"Why not? I always am."

She snorted. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going back to some female company. They're far more practical about it."

But she smiled as she walked out.

She had asked Miss Ealand to become her alternative birthing partner for two reasons. Firstly, going by their wedding, there was a fair chance that Ed would simply not be available at the crucial moment and she had told him that. Secondly, she did not really want him there. She had not told him that. A few minutes later she was going over her reasons with his secretary once again.

"You know what he's like. If I have a headache he takes it worse than a full-scale spinner attack."

"I think you're exaggerating slightly." Miss Ealand interjected.

"And there I'll be, screaming my head off and he won't be able to do a thing about it. Maybe we call him up at the last moment but really -"

A light went on on the secretary's desk. "That's the gate. He's on his way out."

"Thank goodness." said Kate. "Because I've been having contractions for the last

half-hour. Let's get out of here."

* * *

"So where are we going?" Freeman asked as Straker drove them out of the studio and onto the road.

"London."

"We've got a meeting? Because you don't look like we're going to see Henderson."

Straker laughed. "Not today. Definitely not today. We're bunking off."

Alec stared at him. "You're kidding."

Straker shook his head, filling with a sudden passion. "We are going to the jewellers and you're going to help me pick an eternity ring for Kate and an heirloom for the baby. I'm going to do it right this time, right from the beginning, every detail."

"By bunking off?"

* * *

Kate ticked things off on her fingers in an attempt to keep her mind off the contractions. Half the studio - mostly the female half - was engaged in making sure her husband did not find out for as long as possible that she had gone into labour. At a push - she winced at the pun - Moonbase could come up with a full-scale training simulation. But the main players were Miss Ealand, her own PA Anjuli and - unwittingly - Alec. She felt rather more guilty about that than about fooling her husband, though she was not sure either of them would forgive her in a hurry. She simply could not cope with *men* at the moment - and that included her doctor.

She was lying in a hospital bed now, half wishing she had arranged a birthing pool but not entirely sure about these newfangled notions.

She gasped as another contraction hit, clutching the sides of the bed. How on earth was she going to maintain the dignity appropriate to the Commander's wife?

She came to the conclusion that she was not.

* * *

The traffic in central London was even more snarled up the usual. Ed had intended to head to Asprey's but Alec had directed him to a little place in one of the backstreets off High Holborn.

"We're looking for something special, Gerry. Ed's missus is having their first baby."

Gerry - a small, rather bent over man in his mid-Forties - grinned broadly. "Isn't that lovely? Now, don't you worry, I'll find you exactly what you want. Ring first?"

He turned to a tatty, wooden cupboard and proceeded to pull out tray after tray of gem-covered rings.

* * *

"How long's it going to take, doctor?" Kate asked through gritted teeth.

The gynaecologist smiled blandly. "You're having a very easy labour, Mrs Straker."

"Easy? You try it. And how long?"

"I'm afraid babies take their time."

* * *

"I'd better call Kate." Ed said as Alec placed a Georgian silver rattle with coral teether and a platinum eternity ring completely encircled by diamonds into the glove compartment of the car. There was also a pair of jade bangles that Alec had bought for Kate and a silver money box in the shape of a Saturn V rocket on the launch pad he had had made for the baby.

Ed had shaken his head at that. "You sentimental old thing."

Alec shrugged. "The kid can know about that. There's enough you won't be able to tell

them."

"You shouldn't spend your money."

"Who else have I got to spend it on?"

And secretly Ed was pleased that Alec was so involved with the baby. He had always been fond of Johnny, always been good with him.

Ed dialled the extension for Kate's office. "Miss Mehta, is my wife there?"

The richly cultured voice of Anjuli Mehta replied. "I'm sorry, sir, she is busy at the moment. Would you like her to call you back?"

"No, that's OK. I just wanted to know she's alright."

"She was fine the last time I saw her, sir."

"Tell her I'll... Never mind, I'll be there soon enough."

* * *

Miss Ealand returned to the delivery room. "That was Miss Mehta. Mr Straker is returning to the studio. She wants to know what she should do when he does."

Kate sighed, relaxing a little as the contractions gave her a respite. "Tell them to delay him if they can. Just for a little while. It'll be all over soon."

* * *

Maybe Ed Straker was driving a little too fast. They had crawled through London and once he had got on to the open country roads, he had just wanted to let go.

So he saw the boy at the last moment. Blonde, slim, eight or nine years old. Running into the road.

"Johnny!" Straker exclaimed.

He swerved the car. There was a tree at the side of the road.

It hit.

* * *

Kate screamed, her back arching.

* * *

Ed groaned, consciousness coming back slowly.

"Hold still." Alec instructed from somewhere off to his left.

"The kid?" he mumbled uncertainly.

"He's fine, he's gone for an ambulance and yes he does look like Johnny and you didn't realise you were thinking about him, did you?"

He shook his head, the steering wheel going in and out of focus. "You did?"

"I was hoping not. I ought to be giving you some sage words of advice but I don't think you're in any shape to take them in and you wouldn't listen anyway, would you? Now stay still. Are you hurt?"

He had to think about that one. "Sore ribs. Sore head. I don't think there's anything serious."

His eyes were clearing and he looked over to his friend, who had a bruise forming across his cheek but otherwise just seemed a little shaken.

Then something occurred to Straker. "The presents."

Alec prised the glove compartment open with a squeak. He pulled them out one by one for Ed's inspection. Even the jade bangles were unharmed.

"How much did you pay for those?"

"Never you mind."

Ed groaned again. "We really, really need to make sure Kate does not find out about

this."

* * *

"Just one more push." the doctor instructed.

Drenched with sweat, Kate pushed. "Can you see her?"

"I can see her." Miss Ealand reported, her usual calm shattering into an ecstatic squeak. "She's beautiful. One more push and she'll be out."

"More?" but Kate pushed.

A moment later there was a howl.

"Let me see, let me see." A slimy, wriggling, surprisingly heavy bundle was placed into Kate's arms and she sighed with relief. Her daughter. Their daughter. "Now find Ed."

* * *

Ed winced as the casualty doctor prodded him once more. "There isn't anything broken at the moment but there might be if you don't stop poking around."

Alec dashed in before he could carry out the threat. "She's here. While you were messing around, she's been having the baby."

Ed was on his feet and out of the cubicle immediately, pulling on his jacket as he went.

He stopped, looking around uncertainly. "Which way?"

Alec ushered him into a lift. A few moments later they were stood outside a door in the maternity unit.

"Go on, then."

Slowly Straker pushed open the door. Kate was lying back on the bed, eyes closed and hair damp with sweat. She stirred as he entered, opening her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" he asked quietly.

"Exhausted. What did you expect me to say, ecstatic?" But there was a trace of humour in her voice. "There she is, then."

She indicated the cradle at her side.

The baby stirred as he approached, big blue eyes opening to look at him. He could feel his heart thumping as he picked her up, sitting down on the side of the bed by his wife. A family. Together. So different from the last time. For a brief moment he felt a twinge of anguish but he knew that was not what his son would have wanted. He allowed himself to be lost in the joy of the moment.

When he looked back to Kate she was smiling. "How are *you* feeling?"

Strangely, he had no need to think about his answer. "Forgiven."