

SARAH CRABTREE

TERROR
FROM BEYOND
MIDDLE ENGLAND



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Excerpt



The July afternoon had decided to turn nasty after all. The wind cruelly ripped off some of the sweetest blooms in the front garden of Hilda's cottage. As Zara and Alan unleashed the iron gate, a decapitated yellow rose threw itself at their feet. Zara cradled it in her open palms: the petals cascaded like lemon butterflies on to the patchy lawn; the stem was too short to be placed in a bud vase. She discarded it amongst the other broken flowers. "It's been a funny old year for flowers," she uttered, almost as an afterthought.

"Yeah," Alan muttered, ensuring the gate was firmly fastened. "Look at poor old Hilda's geraniums! She's always had a wonderful show. They won't even bloom this year. It's too cold and too wet." He followed Zara down the rose petal-confettied path, digging deep into his denims for the front-door key. "Damn!" he spat.

"Oh, you haven't gone and lost the front-door key?"

"Nope. Here it is." He unlocked the door. "I've just remembered I was going to get another lock for that French window. All that excitement at the local constabulary blew it clean out of my mind."

"How are you fixed tomorrow?" She avoided his gaze.

"Work. I'll be out the door by six-thirty. Sorry. You won't have the pleasure of my company. I should be home just after six, though. You've got the whole day to get into mischief."

"I could get a lock for the window. I'm not up to much on DIY, but we could have a go at it when you got home."

A few good shakes and prods were all that was needed to force an exit via the French windows. Zara breathed in the night-scented

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stock and lavender aroma. There must have been a time once when she dreamed of a cottage garden just like this one.

She knew her role in life was to bake tansy cookies and toss marigold salads until a man sucked her identity into his own flatulent one. And in all those fairy tales, the handsome prince was a pretty decent sort of bugger. He had to be, of course, as it was written in his contract that he and the princess were to live happily ever after. Zara recalled reading somewhere that the official interpretation of “happily ever after” was “plenty of orgasms, thank you very much.”

“Need this, Zara?” Alan was holding out the grey plastic wash basket. He’d opened the kitchen window, and she could hear the comforting throb of the kettle boiling. She took the basket and began unpegging the washing, dropping it carefully in. She’d forgotten how much she’d hung out. Perhaps Alan was as good at ironing as he was at persuading her to stay.

“There should be a packet of biscuits in this cupboard down here,” he said, just as she heaved the wash basket on top of the washing machine. He pulled out a red tin, eased off the top, and growled, “Damn! The little buggers.” He dropped the tin in disgust. About a thousand little black ants tumbled and fell out onto the flagged floor.

“How the hell did they get into that tin?”

“How the hell do they ever get anywhere?” he yelled, stamping on them like a maniac. “One side of the tin doesn’t sit properly. They obviously sent their scout. He got a foot in the door and fetched the whole city. I think Hilda’s got some Kybosh somewhere. Take the tea into the lounge and I’ll spray the hell out of them. How dare they rob me of my chocolate digestives! Take that!” He stamped away. “And that!” He stamped again wildly.

At least he’s got his sneakers on, thought Zara as she found a tray to transport the cups into the lounge.

As she sat beside the glass coffee table, sipping, she heard long hisses of spray coming from the kitchen. Seconds later, Alan threw himself out the door, holding his nose. A waft of Kybosh swept menacingly towards Zara’s feet.

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“I shouldn’t go in there for about half an hour. It’s a battlefield out there.” He was still gripping the Kybosh. “We ought to get some more of this stuff. Do you know this is the second can Hilda’s had to buy this month? Last year we just had a few little menacers indoors in May, then the big swarm in July, when all the wingers strut their stuff. But this year they’ve been a nightmare. We had such a bad infestation in June, I actually rang Rentokil for their advice. The three of us spent all one evening trying to rid the house of them. The next morning they were back worse than ever. There was a thick band of them heading back and forth from the rubbish bin.”

“Yeah. My landlady had the same. They all got into her conservatory. They seemed to get turned on by the rain.”

“I’ll just get rid of this empty can and go and wash my hands. Sorry about the biscuits, by the way. Hope you’re making a shopping list. This is the time when I miss Hilda not being around. She always manages to overlap everything. I just wait until it runs out and then wonder what the hell I’ve done with it.”

“Typical man. Hurry up or your tea will get cold.”

Zara listened to him trundling upstairs, then she heard the tap in the bathroom running and reminded herself not to use the hand towel. There were plenty of clean ones in the airing cupboard, thanks to Hilda’s good old-fashioned housekeeping. The one Alan was using now would probably need a run through the boil-wash programme on the washing machine.

“Is it cold?” she asked Alan, who was at last gulping down that cup of tea.

“Nah. This is fine.”

She gathered up the cups and was just about to go into the kitchen, when he reminded her of the Kybosh. So she killed time with the *News of the World*.

Alan could see she was bored. “*Songs of Praise* is on if you want to watch it.”

“I’m not that desperate. But you can have it on if you want. I don’t mind.”

“Okay. I quite like some of those tunes. And sometimes they have some rather interesting people.”

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Zara looked at him in astonishment. "Er, Alan?"

He was already sinking into a chintz armchair, preparing to enjoy the programme. "Yeah?"

"You're not a Jehovah's Witness, are you?"

Alan flicked off Sally Magnusson and turned on Zara. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Jesus. I show you a cathedral and reveal that I enjoy a few hymn tunes, and you have me campaigning against blood transfusions. What is it with you atheists? I'm not some religious freak. I don't go knocking on people's doors, leaving them with a quote from the Bible to mull over while they're having their tea. Now if you don't mind . . ." He flicked the programme back on and joined in loudly with "Tell Me the Old, Old Story."

"I'm not an atheist." Zara gathered up the cups and decided to brave the Kybosh.

Alan broke off and said, "What was that?"

"I said I'm not an atheist!" she screamed at him.

"Good. I'm jolly relieved to hear that, Zara. Now I know that you and I can both share in the Kingdom of God when the time comes. Alleluia!" He then joined in with "Onward Christian Soldiers."

"Smug bastard," she muttered under her breath. It was people like him that put people like her off going to church.

She opened the kitchen door with her elbow. Placing the empty cups on the table, she checked out the damage. Most of the ants were dead. It was amazing how death had so quickly shrunk them. Two or three old die-hards were hobbling around on the flags. She put them out of their misery with two or three stamps of her shoes. The floor would need a good vacuuming and scrub with disinfectant before she'd fancy walking around in her bare feet again.

There was still a strong whiff of Kybosh, which was hardly surprising, as Alan must have used half a can on them.

"What the hell are you doing now?"

Zara kicked off the switch of the vacuum. "What the hell does it look like? Sorry. Did you want to keep the bodies for scientific research?"

Alan's face darkened like midsummer sky on the threshold of a tropical storm. "If you weren't a woman, I'd knock you down for

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that remark. I'm sick to death of people taking the piss out of me for being a scientist!"

Unperturbed, especially as she was the one armed with the vacuum cleaner, Zara responded with a "You should try being an estate agent, or, better still, a banker. Now everybody hates bankers. Even bankers hate other bankers."

"How do you know?" Alan's sudden curiosity in bankers fragmented his anger.

"I've temped in all the main banks. What a load of sad bastards they really are. At least in research you're trying to do something for humanity, not dismantle its integrity."

Alan blinked at her. Had he underestimated her intelligence? "Oh, God, Zara. Here I go again. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I'm a clumsy sod, aren't I?" He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat on it. Leaning back in it, he closed his eyes and sighed, "I just don't know how to handle a woman. Of course I'm lucky not to be a bloody banker. There's just so much I can't tell you, that's all."

Zara dropped the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner, and it clanked deafeningly to the floor. Ignoring Alan's wince, she leaned towards him and put her arms around him. "I think we both need a bit of practice in dealing with the opposite sex. What's wrong with me vacuuming them up, anyway?"

"I was just going to suggest that we sweep them up with a dustpan and brush and then burn them. There's a possibility they might come alive again in the dust bag."

"I think most of them are very, very dead," she assured him kindly. "If not, they'll choke on the dust. Please don't be cross with me. I feel awkward enough as it is staying in a stranger's house, opening and closing a stranger's cupboards. I'm doing my best, you know."

"I know, I know. Zara?" He looked her right in the eye.

"Yeah?" She tried to sound casual, but guessed by the way he said her name that he was about to ask her something she wasn't going to like very much.

"Were you trying to get me arrested earlier?"

"What a strange question. Of course I wasn't. You haven't done anything, have you?"

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He pulled away from her. "You were planning on giving me the slip, weren't you? I can't say I blame you. You don't know who I really am. You're busy battling away trying to find the real you. Tell me something, Zara!"

"What?" Her eyes were filling up again.

"Why did you come here? Why did you come to Lichfield? Why did you come to this part of Lichfield? Why did you gate-crash my party?"

Zara held his sweet, pale, narrow face in her hands and said in her saddest, most serious voice, "I had no choice. Three hours earlier I had been abducted by aliens. When I finally persuaded them to let me go, they dropped me off at the nearest spot. That just happened to be your dear old Rose Cottage, just north of Lichfield. Sorry I couldn't manage a more original answer." She kissed him on the forehead.

"Were you really abducted by aliens? God, Zara. Why the hell didn't you tell me earlier? Some magazines will pay two hundred and fifty quid for a story like that. Will you show me the spot where you landed? I've got some equipment in the attic. You realise you may have been contaminated by radiation? You really should have told me before."

"So you believe my story?"

"Of course I do. That would explain the French windows crashing in. That would be the pulling power of the spaceship as it entered the stratosphere. And those clothes that went missing. It all fits now. Thank God I know the truth. Tonight I'll sleep like a log."

"Captain's log?"

They both thought that was very funny.

"Shall we do some ironing now? I expect you'll need to get your work things ready for tomorrow."

"Um, Hilda usually does all my ironing." Alan wasn't laughing anymore.

"I see." Neither was Zara. Emancipation obviously hasn't hit this spot in Lichfield, even if alien life-forms have. Who would have thought that aliens would arrive here before the Women's Movement?

His eyes glazed with disappointment. "Look, I'm letting you stay

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here rent-free. Is it too much to expect you to iron a couple of my shirts? Anyway, you don't have to do it now. You can do it tomorrow when I'm out working."

"That's it. I'm out of here." She kicked aside the vacuum cleaner, tripped over the biscuit tin lying there like a mini-sarcophagus, and charged up the stairs to find her holdall.

"Come back, you stupid bitch! Where will you go, anyway? Gary and Julia won't want you. Carl's probably shagging Gary's wife. Your landlady's probably interviewing other potential lodgers. She's bound to have given up on you after seeing you whisked off by aliens. Face it, Zara. You need me. We were meant for each other."

Zara dragged her holdall down the stairs. She then rummaged through the clean laundry, pulling out her share of the fresh but creased clothing. She fished in her purse, snatched out a fiver, and threw it at him. "I'd have made it a tenner, but I'm short of cash, and anyway I didn't go much on the hospitality." Before she slammed her way out of the front door, she finally remarked, "Oh, and anybody who thinks that visiting a cathedral and watching *Songs of Praise* are indications of being a good Christian ought to be thrown to the lions. Good-bye and thanks for a memorable experience."

If Alan had just let her go, the story would have ended there. Zara would have dragged her holdall to the nearest bus stop, waited perhaps for half an hour, and then realised that it was Sunday and there were no buses running that evening. She would have then dragged her holdall all the way to the station. By now she would be crying tears of frustration, but the rain would act as good camouflage. Having reached the station, she would be handed that elusive gift of choice again. She could choose to join Gary and Julia. She could choose to travel down to Andover and leap into bed with Carl before Linda got there. Finally, she could choose to return to Reading. Of course none of these choices amounted to much. Perhaps she really would have been better off abducted by aliens. It was happening to everybody these days.

"Zara!"

She would return to Reading.

"Zara!"

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She would ring Julia.

“Zara!”

Carl needed her.

“Zara! I love you!”

Oh shit.

She would persuade him to wash more thoroughly. She would swap that hand towel for a clean one. She would scrub that floor. She would start on that ironing. She would ask him to please not buy the *News of the World* anymore, she was a *Mail on Sunday* girl. And finally, when all was damn well said and done, she would get to the bottom of that thing, whatever it was, that was troubling him. Why? Because she didn't have anywhere better to go. Why? Because he was standing in the rain in the middle of the road crying her name like a sick old tomcat. Why? Because she loved the bugger. God knew how. Also, she had to find some way of breaking the terrible news to him. She was absolutely certain she had pegged out two white T-shirts that morning. When she had fetched them in that evening—and she was sure it had nothing to do with being abducted by aliens—there were, without doubt, three white T-shirts.