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The Untied Kingdom

Written by Kate Johnson

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The Untied Kingdom

Kate Johnson



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Prologue

Eve Carpenter was having a bad enough day, even before she fell through the hole in the world. Since she'd suffered eleven hundred bad days in the past three years, however, she failed to notice the significance.

It started with a phone call from Louisa Butcher, smugly enquiring if Eve might like to come over for 'kitchen sups' at her farmhouse in the Cotswolds next week. Eve knew that Louisa knew that her farmhouse was exquisite, that her tennis pro husband was both rich and handsome, that their toddler was adorable and their nanny a treasure. Eve also knew that Louisa knew that Eve was living in a council flat in Mitcham with a damp patch on the wall and that even if she could afford to travel to the Cotswolds, she would be too busy filming a TV show whose working title had been *Let's Humiliate Has-Beens*.

She told Louisa to go and put her head in a bucket, and it set the tone for the rest of the day.

The rest of the show's participants were almost more pathetic than Eve. At least she'd actually once been famous, and recently, too. Well, infamous at any rate. Now she was recording reality TV with ex-wives and stepmothers of minor celebs, a glamour model and a children's TV presenter who hadn't worked since the 1980s, probably because he was the most appalling old leech she'd ever met.

She was so disgusted it didn't occur to her to protest about being sent paragliding on her own with only about half-an-hour's tuition, until she was being strapped into the damn thing. By which time it really was too late, and anyway, she was distracted by the glamour model, who was having

enormous difficulty fastening her flight suit over her obscenely large breasts. Thankfully, the TV crew were pretty distracted too, so there was virtually no one to see her make a pig's ear of her first several attempts at getting airborne.

And then ...

And then City Airport was miles behind her, and she was soaring over Victoria Dock and the Isle of Dogs, and she could see the Tower, and the sheer exhilaration of flying made her forget that she'd spent more of the afternoon fending off the revolting attentions of the children's TV presenter than listening to the instructor telling her what to do.

And then her wing collapsed.

And then the high, spiky gothic parapets of Tower Bridge were looming and Eve saw her death right in front of her.

And then the bridge *wasn't there any more*, and cold hard rain was splattering her face, and a sudden wind was buffeting her, and it was dark, and the river was getting closer very, very fast.

The water hit with a slap that left her breathless, which was just as well because Eve wasn't great at breathing underwater. As the wing which had been pulling her upwards five minutes before started dragging her down, she heard a scream and realised it was her own.

Oh God. She had a radio, but her arms were tangled in the ropes, and besides now she was wet all over, icy water soaking through her flight suit; it was a miracle the radio wasn't electrocuting her. Vaguely she recalled mention of a knife, but did she have one? Had they given her one?

The water was black, and sucking at her. Something was tugging at the wing, and she hoped like hell it was an undercurrent because otherwise there were much bigger fish in the river than she'd ever realised. Submerged to her chest

now, she fought desperately against the ropes but nothing was working. She was trussed up like a turkey and the current pulling at the wing was getting stronger.

Something yanked at her ankle, and the wrenching pain that shot through it jolted her and tugged her deeper.

I don't want to die like this, she thought. I don't want to drown, I don't want to freeze, and I sure as hell don't want it in my obituary that I died filming Let's Humiliate bloody Has-Beens.

But the throbbing pain in her ankle and the ropes lashing themselves ever more securely around her were making it harder and harder to fight off the black water. The cold was seeping through to her bones now, weighing her down almost as much as the sinking wing. Only her head above the surface now, Eve caught glints of gold on the surface and raised her eyes to see what her last sight would be of.

Horried, she realised it was going to be the giant buttresses of a bridge with arches so narrow the water was churning through them. It should be London Bridge and yet it ...

... wasn't. Mad frothy waves thrashed the wooden pier at the base of each arch with a force that would reduce a boat to splinters. Eve didn't want to think about what they'd do to her. Above them, huge buildings loomed, six and seven storeys high, the glowing windows of a chapel in the middle of them. A chapel in the middle of London bloody Bridge.

Oh crap, Eve thought, I must already be dead. I'm bloody hallucinating.

She hallucinated a bell tolling in the chapel, and fires gleaming from the Tower of London. Then, as her head sank under the icy water, she hallucinated something hauling her back up. But it didn't matter, because Eve was already dead. She knew that because the heaviness of the wing and the ropes fell away from her and the water cleared from her mouth and

nose.

Dreamily, she lapsed into blackness.

Chapter One

The day the alien landed in the river wasn't the best of Major Harker's life. But then considering that life, it wasn't the worst, either.

It was all fairly routine until Charlie handed him a list of all the new blood conscripted to fill the gaps in C Company, signed with the name of his ex-wife and current commanding officer. That in itself wasn't so bad, until he noticed the same surname repeated in the Private Soldier column.

Colonel Saskia Watling-Coburg's much adored, intensely sheltered and hugely cosseted little sister had been conscripted into the army as a foot soldier. A foot soldier in Harker's company.

He wondered if he should blindfold and shoot himself now, to save the army the trouble of doing it later.

Saskia's office smelt like paper and coffee, an olfactory combination that took him right back to the schoolroom. Of course, back then teachers had been able to drink coffee. It hadn't all been reserved for high-ranking army officers.

'Why?' he asked, for about the hundredth time since he'd been given the news.

'Why not, Harker?'

'Do you hate me?' he asked. 'I mean, do you really, really hate me?'

'No, of course not.' Saskia shuffled some papers, her eyes on the desk.

'Then why in the name of all that is holy have you assigned your eighteen-year-old sister to my company? I saw your signature on the chit. It was your idea.'

‘Well, of course it was.’

‘But why? Now I’m going to spend the rest of bloody forever making sure she doesn’t get shot at, or blown up.’

‘Yes,’ Saskia said calmly, ‘you are.’

Harker threw himself at a chair. She hadn’t offered him one, but he figured it was his right as an ex-husband to flout a protocol or two. It was bad enough he had to take orders from her; the least he could do was make it clear when he was unhappy with them.

‘Sask, we’re at war,’ he pointed out.

‘Yes, I had noticed.’

‘We’re an active company!’

She gave him a level blue stare. Apparently she’d noticed that too.

‘Do you hate Tallulah?’ Harker asked uncertainly, and immediately regretted it as the air in the already frigid office got a little colder.

‘You know I don’t.’

‘Then why not put her in – in, I dunno, some admin corps, or ... QM stores or something ...’

‘Because she’s not stupid, Harker, and she doesn’t like being patronised. Besides, she’s perfectly able-bodied and there’s always the possibility that someone else will spot that fact and have her on the front line before I can do anything.’

Harker groaned. He’d met Saskia’s younger sister, of course he had, but it was back when they were newlyweds, before the war had blown up, and the kid had been – well, just that, a kid. And of course, now she was of age she’d been conscripted. They were at war, after all.

‘I’m going to play the “active company” card again,’ Harker said. ‘She could still end up on the front line.’

‘Yes, she could.’ Saskia’s expression tightened just a little.

‘With me as her CO.’

‘Yes.’ She gave him a significant look.

‘Come on, Sask, give me a break. I ain’t baby-sitting her—’

‘I’m not asking you to.’

This time Harker gave her a look.

‘All right, I am asking you to. But no more than you do with your other men.’

‘Actually, most of them are women—’

‘Military term, Harker, military term.’

‘I’ve got a war to fight. I can’t give her special treatment,’ he tried.

‘I don’t expect you to.’ At his incredulous look, she insisted, ‘I really don’t.’ Saskia put down her papers and took off her reading spectacles. She pinched the bridge of her nose. ‘Do you really not know why I’ve assigned her to you?’

He raised his palms. ‘You were lying to the divorce lawyer and you really do want to hurt me?’

Saskia, quite sensibly, ignored that. ‘Because your men come back, Harker.’

Harker opened his mouth. He shut it again.

‘Look, the matter’s closed. If you think about it, it’s actually a compliment.’

‘Oh, sure.’ Harker slouched lower in his chair. ‘When you order me a court-martial because she’s got trench foot I’m sure I’ll feel really complimented.’

Saskia put her glasses back on. Harker resisted the urge to punch the desk.

‘Have I said how bad I think this idea is?’

‘Goodbye, Harker.’

She turned her attention back to her paperwork. When Harker didn’t move, she said, without looking up, ‘I said—’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ He stood up, scowling, and flicked the little brass sign reading Col. S.E. Watling-Coburg. ‘I want it put on record that I’m not happy with this.’

‘Work your way up to a higher rank and challenge me, then,’ Saskia said, still not looking up.

Harker gnashed his teeth at her and opened the door.

‘And, Harker?’ she said.

He glanced back. She still hadn’t looked up.

‘If she does get trench foot, I’ll have your head on a pike.’

Harker slammed the door. Dust fell from the rafters as he stomped away.

Bloody Saskia! Higher rank, indeed. She knew he was perfectly happy as a major. Had been perfectly happy with being a captain, truth be told. The higher up he was promoted, the more responsibility they laid upon him, the more paperwork he was stuck with, and the more toffs he had to hobnob with. And each time he moved up a rank, he was put in command of more men, most of whom he didn’t even know, and none of whom he wanted to see die.

Your men come back. Well, of course they did. He looked after his lads, it had never occurred to him not to. Soldiers looked after each other. It was what they *did*. It never failed to amaze Harker how many officers just couldn’t grasp this concept.

He mooched back to the mess, snapped at Charlie and immediately felt bad about it.

‘It’s okay, sir,’ she said when he apologised.

‘Maybe I’m no different from the rest of ’em,’ he said moodily, kicking his boots up on his desk and narrowly avoiding a paper landslide.

‘Of course you are, sir,’ Charlie said, handing him a cup of tea. ‘The rest of them would never say sorry.’

Harker slurped his tea, which garnered a look of annoyance from the captain at the next desk, so he did it again. The air inside the office was chilly, and stale with smoke and cold coffee. Outside, the world beyond the small windows was

dark and damp.

He swung abruptly to his feet. 'I need some air,' he said, and Charlie raised her eyebrows, eyeing the packet of cigarettes in his pocket.

'It looks like rain, sir,' she said.

'I like rain,' Harker said stubbornly. Charlie gave him a look he seemed to get a lot from women, which was interesting since he rarely, if ever, thought of her as a woman. Saskia had done it; his mother, God rest her, had done it; and even General Wheeler did it. It said he was being difficult, just for the sake of it.

Harker liked being difficult. It made life more interesting.

'Rain is good,' he insisted. 'Makes things grow.'

'So does sun.'

'Aye, but imagine if all we had was sun? Country'd be a desert. Might as well go and live in Spain.'

Charlie muttered something that sounded like, 'You've had worse ideas.'

'I hope you're not being unpatriotic, Lieutenant,' Harker said.

'Disliking rain is unpatriotic?'

'It is in England.' He shrugged into his greatcoat. 'We ain't made of sugar.'

'You certainly aren't,' Charlie opined, which made several of the younger officers snigger.

Harker ignored them. 'Where've they put Tallulah?'

He collected his former sister-in-law from her chilly, draughty barracks, and mooched down to the river. Not far away, the crowded little world of London Bridge was lit up against the darkness. The water rushed, deep and black in the shadow of the Tower's mighty walls, churning towards the narrow arches of the bridge, fast and deadly.

Torchlight flickered on Tallulah's pale, fine features. She had her sister's dark hair and straight bearing, but she was so young, younger than Saskia had been when Harker first met her. Like a past version of his wife he'd never known.

No. She might share her blue-diamond eyes and porcelain skin with Saskia, but she wasn't the same person. Saskia would never have slogged through the ranks when she could cut to the chase and buy her commission as Ensign. An officer to the core. Her head, her very voice ringing with duty. Ambition blazing from her fine pale skin.

Tallulah watched him expectantly, her face perfect in its prettiness, its freshness, its eagerness to please. Barely eighteen, mucking in with the rest of the conscripts. Calling him 'sir'.

Saskia had never been like that.

'You've grown,' he said, trying not to notice the precise areas in which she had.

'You haven't seen me in years,' Tallulah said. 'I was a child then. Sir.'

You're a child now, he wanted to say, but he didn't expect she'd like to hear it. Sodding war, conscripting kids like her.

'Don't call me sir, Lu,' he said moodily, kicking at pebbles. He got out his cigarettes and lit one up, inhaling deeply. Much better. 'You never used to.'

There was a pause, then Tallulah said, 'I'm not sure I ever called you anything.'

No. Well, she'd been a kid, and he and Saskia had been young officers. Why would he have spent any time with her?

'Smoke?' he offered, and thought he saw Tallulah's lip curl slightly.

'No. Thank you. Sir.'

Back with the 'sir' again, he thought, tucking the packet away as rain started to fall. 'Well, you wait until you've been

on campaign a few months, soldier,' he blew out some smoke and watched it spiral upwards, 'and we'll see if—'

Light from the Tower's torches glinted off something up high.

'What the hell is that?' he said, staring up. 'A bird?'

Tallulah followed his gaze. 'A pretty big bird,' she said.

The creature gave a cry.

'A pretty big bird that swears,' Tallulah said doubtfully.

They watched it a second or two longer. It seemed to be gliding downwards.

'Lu, you know of any birds with a thirty-foot wingspan?'

'Uh, no,' she said, starting to back away.

'It's spiralling, looks like it's in trouble.'

'Yes, sir ...'

'What the hell is it?'

'I don't know, sir, but it's ...'

Harker instinctively stepped back a little.

'... it's spiralling this way,' Tallulah said, and they both rushed back against the castle walls.

But the ... *thing*, whatever it was, rapidly whipped back towards the centre of the river, and as the light reflected off the giant wings, Harker realised that it was just one wing, one huge curve, and beneath it was suspended ... something ...

'That's a person,' he said, squinting.

'Sir?'

The giant wing was crumpling now, losing whatever force had been keeping it airborne, and the figure suspended by a network of ropes was thrashing about, getting more and more tangled.

And Harker realised the thing was being blown downriver, towards the Bridge, and he didn't even need to look to know the current was smashing water against the piers, churning itself into a mad frenzy against the wood and stone.

His hand went to the gun at his hip, which was a stupid thing to do, because what good would shooting do?

The person tangled in the ropes shrieked, and Harker knew the sound was pure terror.

The Thames would be bloody freezing this time of year. It was dark, it was deep, this close to the Tower it'd be mostly sewage – and he was going to jump into it.

‘Crap,’ he muttered, and handed his coat to Tallulah.

‘Sir?’

‘And these,’ he toed off his boots. ‘And these.’ He handed over his sword and pistols.

‘Sir, you’re not going to jump in? The river – it’s too dangerous!’

‘Well, I don’t see no bugger else doing it,’ Harker said, and started running before he changed his mind.