

# A BLOODY MESS



BY

**SOPHIE DRAPER**

Checktrade

# A Bloody Mess

By Sophie Draper

A Bloody Mess, an original short story by Sophie Draper and illustrated by Amrit Birdi, was commissioned by Checkatrade to bring to life real life DIY horror stories. Talking influence from classic horror novel Dracula, A Bloody Mess sees Jonathan Harker recast as a decorator called in to revamp Dracula's castle only to find himself facing DIY nightmares of epic proportions – including red paint seeping like blood from a hole in the ceiling and patterned, chrysanthemum yellow wallpaper horrifyingly hung upside down.



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A castle in the Carpathian Mountains. If I tried to explain why I agreed to travel so far for a job, then you might not believe me. But what with the pandemic and the way things were here, the money was good, all expenses paid, and yes, perhaps curiosity played a role. Every room was in need of a complete overhaul. They were having trouble doing the work themselves and there were no decorators locally. *Apparently.*

I know, I know, I should have seen it coming...

I had to walk the last mile. The car had given up on the narrow, high road, steam turning to ice as it bloomed from under the bonnet. My phone signal had conked out too. I hurried through trees so tightly packed that nothing stirred beneath. Not a blade of grass, nor a dappled beam of sunlight, until finally the road emerged from the forest and before me stood a building so tall, so pinnacled and grey, I knew it had been built into the very side of the mountain.

There were several skips outside and a well-trodden trail of muddy boots. The front door was a slab of solid wood and it had been jammed wide open. I stepped inside and called out.

‘Hello? John Harker here. Decorator.’

A door slammed somewhere over my head and a cold wind blistered down the stairwell, ash fluttering like moths in the fireplace – the only thing in the hall.

‘Welcome to my house, Mr Harker. Enter freely and of your own will.’

I spun around. ‘Sorry, mate, but the door *was* open,’ I said.

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‘Indeed.’ An elderly man held me in his gaze. My client, I assumed. He gestured to the house, the evidence of building work. ‘We are in the throes, as you can see. Your arrival is perfectly timed.’

I tried not to stare. Maybe it was the old-fashioned clothes. And there was something about his voice – too... youthful. It didn’t quite gel with the sallow, paper skin, the way it hung from his neck and folded around his eyes, blinking like some haggard crow. You meet all sorts in this job.

‘Right, er, might as well get started then,’ I said.

‘Any room you like.’ The man waved his hand and bowed, like a waiter inviting me to dine. ‘They all need to be done.’

Funny how I could feel those eyes, still watching me as I climbed the stairs.

Red paint was seeping under the first door. At least I assumed it was paint. I had to balance on one foot to avoid it, gleaming slick and wet as it slid across the stone. I pushed the door and stepped over, thinking there was a spilt tin. What I saw however, was paint running down the inside of the door, pooling on the ground before edging past my feet.

‘Bloody hell!’ It seemed an apt turn of phrase. Was that water falling on my face? I looked up. There was a hole in the ceiling, the joists open to the elements, rain lashing down from a darkened sky. ‘What on earth?’ Two men were on their knees trying to stem the flow of red with old rags.

‘Should have used gloss,’ said one.

‘Should have waited more like, till the roof had been fixed,’ said the other.



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‘Cheers – good to know that, *after* the event.’

‘Told you, you can’t cut corners.’

‘Yeah, yeah—’

I gingerly shut the door. Not in there, I thought. I’m not getting drawn into that one.

No wonder my client had requested the help of a professional.

I took a judicious leap across the hall and chose another corridor. I thought I could hear a buzzing or a scrabbling. It was coming from the hallway behind me. I twisted round to look. Something shot across the floor. At least I thought it had, there was nothing there, only a few crumbs of soil, with the marks of something that had skittered in the dirt. I shrugged, turning away and reaching for the next door.

*Whoa.* Too much yellow. What is it with some people? Bright primary colours in the middle of Transylvania? Scandi bright instead of Scandi noir? This room had chrysanthemum yellow wallpaper hung on every wall. Except, I peered more closely, it wasn’t flowers but a swirling pattern – straight from the 1980’s, Laura Ashley or reproduction William Morris, art deco chinoiserie on acid. Complete with pagodas and undersized trees. A woman crouched in the corner of the room, her hair lank and greasy, her hands pressed against the wall. She was crying.

‘Sorry, luv,’ I said, immediately turning to leave.

‘No, don’t go,’ she cried. ‘Don’t leave the room! Are you the decorator?’

I nodded.

‘Please, you have to help me. This room. They’ve done it to torment me!’

‘What do you mean?’ Must be the wife, I thought. Or maybe the daughter.

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‘She’s in there!’ The woman pointed at the wall.

‘What?’

‘There,’ she said, jabbing with her finger. She gave a strangled cry and scuttled backwards on her hands and feet. ‘Can’t you see?’

‘See what?’

‘Her! Them!’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.’

She stared at the wall. I wondered if there were a room behind it, a secret cubby hole like you get in old houses, a space beneath the eaves.

‘No, you don’t understand. There!’ She lunged for the wall, flattening one hand as if to squash an annoying fly, then jabbing again, this time so hard, her finger bent backwards, her knuckles pressed white.

‘Careful, now. No... don’t do that!’

She paid no heed. She was tearing at the wallpaper, pulling long strips, moaning like a mad thing. I ran forwards, I tried to grab her hands.

‘No, no!’ She cried, fighting me. ‘I tell you, she’s in there!’

‘Where?’

‘Got to get her out! Get her out!’

‘Who? What on earth are you talking about?’

We grappled with each other. She kept reaching for the wallpaper and I thought I caught a glimpse. Of something in the pattern moving like a snake. A dragon, it seemed,



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sliding between the leaves, or was that a figure trapped behind the sickly yellow branches? I let the woman go, gaping at the wallpaper. Someone had hung it upside down. It was *that* tormented the lady so.

‘Go!’ She screamed. ‘Leave me alone!’ How quickly she changed her mind. She’d scrambled to her feet. ‘Get out! You can’t work here, it’s not right.’

‘You’re telling me.’ I thought I caught a whiff of perfume. Sickly sweet. There was at least two days’ work, stripping all that wallpaper and prepping it for new. I decided to leave her to it.

Back in the corridor, I felt a wave of nausea overcome me. That smell was still there. I paused by a window, clutching the shelf. The stone reveal was at least two feet thick. Outside I could see the mountains, grey and white in the distance. Below was the castle garden. A team of men were digging up the beds. Someone had spread a large sheet of plastic on which the earth was piled up. One of those garden renovation projects, I thought. Monty Don or Alan Titchmarsh. Next thing you know and I’d find Charlie Dimmock peering round the corner. I looked down. There was more soil scattered at my feet. These guys weren’t bothered about the mess, coming in and out.

Another set of stairs, this time winding upwards in a tight spiral. I looked down briefly but couldn’t see a thing. No people, just the distant sound of hammering and unseen footsteps echoing in the hall below. Up here, I thought, surely there’d be a room that was intact, fully plastered and ready to be painted. I was tired by now, and the stairs steep. Or was it something else, the air thin from being in the mountains? There was another buzzing by my ear, a pinch at my neck. I pressed a hand against my skin and felt faint. I heard a woman’s laugh. More than one. Not the lady from before, but younger, lighter, a sound like the tinkling

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of broken glass. There came a scrabbling again. From the corner of my eye I saw something whip across the passageway, a long tail rippling out of sight. Was that... an electric sander?

‘What the—’ I gasped and more laughter tittered in the distance.

I was in the attics now, old-fashioned braided insulated wire dragged in loops over my head. A narrow passageway stretched out of sight. I had to duck beneath the beams. There were so many doors, but each of them was locked. I thought I heard subdued voices, or the whispering of wings. I turned a corner to find several empty casket-shaped boxes. One of them had a layer of black earth. There was a hammer abandoned on the floor and a length of copper piping. More soil with a trail of footprints led to another door. I stopped outside. I could hear water, rushing, turbulent water. There was an overwhelming stench of rotting flesh. I turned the doorknob and the door swung back—

I was running, falling, half slithering down the spiralling treads of the stairs. I flung myself round each bend, slamming against the walls at each landing. I dashed along the first floor and grasped the banister of the main flight of stairs. At the bottom, by the fireplace I staggered to a halt.

‘Mr Harker, my man. Why in such a rush?’

It was the old man, his eyes oddly bloodshot. I felt a stab of pain, my hand once more reaching for my neck. This time there was blood. I could hear everything, the hammering of nails, the screeching of a saw, the hiss and fizz of a blowtorch coming from the ground floor. Outside I heard the scrape and thud of soil being dug from the ground and the front door was still wide open. Two men arrived, dragging one of those boxes from the attic, out into the courtyard and towards the nearest skip.

‘There’s nowhere ready,’ I gasped. ‘Every room is a disaster. You don’t need me at all.’

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‘Why Mr Harker – of course we need you. I need you. And you’ve come all this way.’

‘I c...can’t stay. My wife, she’s rung to say her water’s broke. I should have said. It’s our first child, I have to b...be there.’

‘Mr Harker, you don’t have to make excuses, you can go whenever you please.’

‘R...really?’

‘Of course.’ The old man turned to the men. They were carrying another box. ‘Set it down, please. Right there.’ The box landed with a thud. I watched with wide-eyed silence as they removed the lid. The old man held out a hand, clasping the soil between his fingers. He lifted it to his nose.

‘Aah, essence of cedar and sandalwood. Excellent work, gentlemen.’ The old man hoisted himself onto the edge of the casket.

I felt another icy touch against my neck, like a tongue licking up the blood. I caught a fresh whiff of that sickly perfume and there was laughter too, the same laughter as before, coming from right behind me. The old man appeared to be looking past my head.

‘Ladies, I must be on my way. You will, I hope, take good care of our visitor.’

I spun around but there was no one there.

‘You must forgive me, Mr Harker, I will leave you to your work. I have a shipment to meet.’

With that the old man swung his legs into the box and the lid was lowered over him. The two workmen hammered it in place then lifted the box onto their shoulders and carried it outside. I watched them slide the box into the skip.

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I wanted to follow, to step out into the cold night and run to my car. But to what end? My car had broken down and I felt a languid weakness, as if I'd lost the will to live.

The last thing I remembered was the skip being swung up onto a truck. It was yellow, like most skips are, like the wallpaper upstairs. On the side of the truck was a line of dark lettering. It read:

***BLACK SEA CONTAINERS – DESTINATION, WHITBY, UK***

# About the author



Photo credit: Joe Wileman

Sophie Draper's first book, *Cuckoo*, is a gothic psychological suspense set in Derbyshire. It won the Bath Novel Award 2017 and after its publication in 2018, hit the no 1 spot on the Bookseller's Heatseekers List.

Her second book, *Magpie* (pub. Nov 2019) also hit no 1 on the Heatseekers list and went on to reach no 11 in the Sunday Times Bestseller Paperback List. Sophie is currently writing her next book and lives in rural Derbyshire where (as Sophie Snell) she also works as a traditional oral storyteller.

In 2013, she was nominated for the British Awards for Storytelling Excellence as Outstanding Female Storyteller and in 2017, she won the prestigious Friday Night Live Award at the York Festival of Writing.

For more info, see [www.sophiedraper.co.uk](http://www.sophiedraper.co.uk) (writing)  
and [www.sophiesnell.co.uk](http://www.sophiesnell.co.uk) (storytelling).