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## **BLOOD RED CITY**

Written by **Rod Reynolds**

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# BLOOD RED CITY

ROD REYNOLDS



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## CHAPTER 1

Up there, the city sprawled before her. Council estates and hulking tower blocks, a year on from the Grenfell fire. Glittering skyscrapers in the Square Mile and Docklands. A million lights. Faltering lives. The trains moving through it all with the slow grind of bulldozers on a landfill. London laid itself bare; eight million people eating, breathing, sleeping, fucking, dying. A muggy night, the air ripe with ozone, ready to spark. On the wall in front of her someone had ditched a cigarette butt in a champagne flute, and she stared at it as if it held meaning. Two drinks making Lydia philosophical.

The bar was on the roof of a disused council building in Elephant & Castle. Summer months, an arts fund laid out rows of weathered picnic tables and sold Prosecco and Aperol spritz at fourteen pounds per, from a tiki bar that couldn't have been more incongruous. In the lift on the way up, the new intern had described it as 'low-fi chic' – without a trace of sarcasm. The air smelled of lime and mint, undercut with weed – some dickhead thinking it lent cachet in a place where the only thing that impressed was the only thing that impressed anywhere: money.

The view was no bullshit though.

Lydia checked her phone, still unlocked from the last time. Two new emails: an overdue gas bill and one from an email address she didn't recognise. No texts or messages. That same hollow feeling, waiting for change to find her. As if the chance to start over would arrive in a WhatsApp message.

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She looked at the second email. The sender's address meant nothing to her – aplofel159@gmail.com – but the subject read: *Lyds, please watch this*. Seemed like spam, but when she tapped on it to delete it, there was another line in the message body: *Please do not delete, I promise this isn't junk. Call you in a bit to explain*. There was a video file attached.

She stared at the screen, her thumbs hovering over the trash can icon. 'Lydia' was short enough for most people, very few called her 'Lyds', and she never used the nickname herself. Definitely not online, where a scammer would've scraped it from.

'Deep thoughts?'

Stephen Langham at her shoulder. He was holding out a gin and tonic in a plastic cup.

She smiled. 'Can't, I'm on my way in after this.' She raised the one in her hand, as if nursing an empty implied it was her first.

'It's only a single.'

'I've got a load on tonight.'

He set it down on the wall, a faint smile at recognising the code. 'Something big?' He nodded at her phone.

'On the graveyard shift? Come on...'. She slipped it away in her bag, the email still on the screen.

He tilted his head, a hard-luck stare. 'It won't be this way forever, you know.'

'I wasn't complaining.'

'I didn't think you were.' He looked past her, eyes roving over the view; Canary Wharf blinking silently like a heart-rate monitor. 'We've talked about this – management know they've been heavy-handed with you.'

'Management' – distancing himself from it. She put down

her drink and regretted it as soon as she did, nothing to occupy her hands now. ‘Surprised to see you here.’

‘Here’ was leaving drinks for Simone Hewitt, one of the online journos; Lydia knew her a bit, but she’d only been with the company twelve months, and it wasn’t like they’d be swapping mobile numbers when she was gone. Truth of it was, Lydia had showed her face tonight for the same reason as all the others there – to be seen. The irony wasn’t wasted on her: still playing the good corporate citizen.

‘My turn with the company card,’ he said. ‘At the end of the night.’

‘Shame I can’t stay to take advantage then.’

He smiled, glancing at his watch. ‘You on at midnight?’

She nodded, anticipating his next question. ‘And I need to get going.’

‘Let me order you a taxi at least. On the business.’

She started shaking her head, always wary of him perceiving her to be taking advantage. Then she thought about commuting to work on a sweltering Friday night, a Tube train full of party people heading out. The music and the gin eased the words *fuck it* into her mind. ‘Thanks.’



The cab sped towards the river, passing Ministry of Sound; it took her back to her uni days: stumbling out of there with her housemates, the place they saved for really big nights – birthdays and breakups. The post-club ritual, searching for food, fags and a night bus. Fifteen years that’d passed in the blink of an eye. She wouldn’t know what to do in a nightclub now.

The traffic was mostly heading the other way, out of town,

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but everything snarled up around Borough Market. Lydia looked up from her phone and watched the people drinking on the pavement outside the bars and restaurants clustered under the tracks coming out of London Bridge. A few feet from her window, a girl in a floaty dress and red lipstick, chatting and laughing with a boy in skinny jeans and a T-shirt so tattered it had to be designer. The streetlights caught the sheen of sweat that coated their faces. Music came from everywhere at once, different tunes but the bass beats all merging into one, like she was hearing the city's pulse. A middle finger to the terrorists that'd run amok there the summer before.

A chime from her phone made her look down again. The video attached to the email had finished downloading and started to play. Lydia turned the screen to make the picture landscape and saw a Tube carriage being filmed through the emergency door of the connecting one. Two men were standing over a third, some kind of argument in progress. There was no one else in the shot. The man was shrinking into his seat, the other two clearly the aggressors. The train was in motion, and it was outside, not in a tunnel. From their gestures, it looked like they were telling him to come with them.

It carried on that way for a few seconds, then one of them punched the man in the face. It snapped his head in the direction of the camera, a spurt of blood leaking from his mouth. The picture moved sharply and the screen went black, a finger covering the lens – as though the person filming recoiled in shock. When it came back, it took a second to focus again, and the image was shaky now.

The victim got to his feet, but as he did, the taller of the two attackers hit him again, and the other slapped something over his mouth. They bundled him back onto the seat and pinned

him there, one with a hand clamped over his mouth and nose, the other pressing his forearm into his throat. Lydia scrolled the video back five seconds and brought the phone closer to see. This time she saw it was duct tape they'd stuck over his lips. The strike that preceded it wasn't a punch but a thumb jabbed under the victim's Adam's apple, causing him to gag. It made her reach for her own throat.

She let the video play on. The victim flailed, tearing at his own face and the hands covering it, the weight of the two men on top of him keeping him in the seat. They were unmoved, staring at him as they pressed down with all their force. The man bucked a few times more, his eyes bulging, then his movements sputtered out until finally he was still.

One of the attackers glanced around, spotting the camera as he did. He grabbed the other one's arm and pointed, and Lydia felt a small well of panic, as if she was there. The image went haywire, whoever was filming it taking off with the camera still recording.

Lydia looked up and realised they'd come to a stop outside the office. The cab driver was turned around in his seat staring at her, as if he'd just asked a question.

'Sorry?'

'I said, are you alright?'

She glanced at her phone again, the screen reverted back to the email text now the video had finished. She hit the button to lock it. 'Yeah, I'm ... How much do I owe you?'

'Company account, miss.'

She blinked and put her purse away. 'Of course. Sorry.' She grabbed some coins from her pocket for a tip. 'Thanks.'

She climbed out at the foot of the tower and looked up, skyscrapers filling the night with coruscating light.



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The lift sped her to the thirteenth floor. The indicator panel cued memories of the proposal that went round at the start of the year, suggesting the building be renumbered so there wouldn't be a floor thirteen. One of the country's leading media organisations, still riddled with superstition. People reaching for comfort in mumbo jumbo because the world was changing too fast for anyone to keep up.

She scrolled through the inbox on her work phone, trying to prioritise tasks for the night, but details from the video kept coming back to her. The victim's leather document bag, tumbling from his grip as he got to his feet. The man with the tape's long-sleeved black top, worn at the height of summer. The otherwise empty carriage. She surprised herself with how much had stuck from one viewing. The image of him struggling against the hands over his face was the most vivid of all. When she closed her eyes, it was right there.

She couldn't think who would send her something like that. Or why. The Internet was full of violent crap, but anyone who knew her knew she was repulsed by that sort of thing. None of her friends ever shared stuff like that on their WhatsApp groups, and even if it was just a gross-out thing, why the anonymous sender address? Still, it felt too random for spam.

Arriving at her desk, she checked her own phone again, then dropped them both by her keyboard and logged on. Straight to her inbox, new emails stacking up: a publicist trying to set up a 'candid' shoot with his reality TV star in Barbados; a reply from a former *X-Factor* contestant offering a threesome story; a pdf of an article about Prince William clipped from an

American scandal rag, a note underneath from her boss: *Make something we can use out of this.*

She slumped back, tilting her phone towards her but staring right through it. Twelve months of this shit already.

Early 2017, she'd stumbled into the biggest story of her life – and it swallowed her whole. It started with a Freedom of Information request about section 106 affordable housing provision on a luxury development in Camden. The paperwork that came back was mundane, but under scrutiny opened up a new line of questions. It proved to be the start of a breadcrumb trail that eventually led to at least three well-connected individuals who were likely to have profited from social housing exceptions negotiated on the deal – including the former deputy mayor for planning, a close confidant of James Rawlinson, recently departed mayor of London. The sums were six- and low-seven-figure amounts, but the opaque scheme employed was one that could be replicated on any similar development in the capital, and it had been, on dozens of projects just in the last decade. It went like this: as part of planning approval, developers were required to designate a percentage of the build as affordable properties – or make a cash payment in lieu. The big developers hated the policy because every affordable home they had to provide was one unit fewer they could sell as a 'luxury' London flat on the open market – denting their potential profits. Responsibility for agreeing and enforcing section 106 provision lay with local authorities normally, but on large enough developments, the decision could be referred to City Hall. On all the projects Lydia had identified, the rules had been loosened significantly – or even waived – through just that process. From everything she could glean, there was no justifiable explanation for why

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that should've been the case – leading Lydia to suspect that someone at City Hall was taking backhanders. When even a loosening of the rules could be worth more than a million in additional profit on any given development, it was hard to conclude otherwise.

She lodged similar FOI requests on eight projects in Camden, and made an approach through back channels to speak off the record to the former deputy mayor in question, Peter Goddard – now special adviser to Rawlinson's parliamentary bid. She worked eighteen-hour days poring over hundreds of pages of documents, begging help from experts who could guide her through the legalese generated when public policy met property legislation, in the process confirming her understanding that the exceptions granted were unjustifiable. The trail even led as far as various offshore investment vehicles, which she suspected were used to hide such illegal payments. She inched it closer to a story she could stand up.

The bosses beat her to the punch: early summer, a call out of the blue from the editor's number two, telling her to drop all of it. She'd argued her corner but couldn't shift him an inch. The biggest story of her career, canned in a forty-five second internal call. No explanation was offered.

Lydia did as she was told for a week; then she started digging again, urged on by Tammy Hodgson – the paper's no-nonsense investigative reporter, and her mentor-turned-friend. Working under the radar, the paperwork piled up, but the evidence did not – the secrecy around offshore companies stopping the trail dead. And no one at City Hall would talk to her. It came to a head when she confronted Goddard as he stepped off a plane at London City Airport – a stupid shortcut borne of

desperation. He'd no-commented his way past her, and the next morning Stephen Langham was at her desk to tell her she'd been reassigned to the showbiz team. He'd handled her with kid gloves, but it hurt like hell anyway. More so because she'd screwed herself over through sheer frustration.

So now she spent her nights doing grunt work for the Botox Twins. A glorified assistant, appointed to dredge the digital gutters for click bait for the paper's website. Keeping it live through the night for the all-important American audience. She'd have given the bosses what they wanted and quit, if it wasn't for a bank account that was already on life support.

She went back to her monitor, continued picking through her emails: a retired footballer touting the details of his own affair. Monthly figures: traffic numbers going backwards in the UK and only just holding steady in the US. More pressure about to come from above, probably more job losses.

She brought up the video again, steeling herself to watch it on the monitor. A rustle came from the speaker and she realised there was sound; she plugged her headphones in and restarted. Mostly it was just the noise of the train – but as the blood spurted out of the man's mouth, the person recording cried out in a foreign language. She slid the bar back and listened again – a woman's voice, maybe Eastern European. Panicked, horrified – swear words at a guess. She watched the video through to the end, the bigger screen providing unwanted clarity: the look of helpless terror on the man's face as he suffocated, the dawning realisation that he was powerless to stop it.

It made her feel sick inside. She had the same thought she had whenever there was a senseless death in the news – overwhelming sadness for the people left behind. Whoever this

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man was, there would be someone who cared about him whose whole world had just been shattered. But seeing it happen in real time, with such disregard, brought on a bitter sense of anger as well.

There were two additional seconds at the end she hadn't seen first time, the footage mostly a blur as the woman taking it fled the scene. But as she ran, there was a flash of something Lydia recognised. She scanned back slowly, the still shot she wanted of the carriage floor only visible in a handful of frames. She paused on the least worst of them and leaned close. Then she got up and jogged across the office.

It was sparsely populated, only a skeleton staff in place once the first edition of the paper had been put to bed. Row after row of empty desks and black-mesh ergonomic chairs, captured in the forensic glare of overhead strip-lighting. There was a pile of newspapers on a bank of desks in the sports department. The one she was looking for was folded over on the top – that evening's *Standard*. She unfurled it as she zipped back to her desk, certain she was right. She held it up next to her monitor to confirm it: the newspaper in her hand was the same edition as the one on the screen.



The *BBC* had nothing, nor the *Guardian*, *Mail* or any of the wire services. She jumped onto Transport for London's website but there were no incident reports; most of the lines had shut down for the night, and those running the Night Tube showed no delays. A note on the contact page said the press office provided an out-of-hours service for urgent queries. She dialled the number and waited, hearing it click from a landline dialling

tone to a scratchier mobile one. She brought up Google while it rang, flicking back to the email to see if there was anything to identify the video for a search.

A man answered. Lydia briefly described what she'd seen, but it was obvious this was the first he was hearing about it. He pressed her for more details, serving only to highlight how little she actually knew, and finally took her number so he could usher her off the line with a promise to look into it.

She tapped her nail on the desk, the still picture on the screen blurring as she let her gaze slip out of focus. Beyond the monitor, floor-to-ceiling windows reflected the office back on itself, only the red lights capping the skyscrapers piercing the black glass. An attack like that on the Tube, and no one had picked up on it. There were CCTV cameras everywhere; the men in the video acted without hesitation, and gave no outward impression of anger or impetuosity. If they were that calculated, why take a risk like that? And who was the victim to warrant that risk?

Her work mobile rang, vibrating into life on the desk. The number was withheld.

She snatched it up. 'Hello?'

'Lyds, it's me.'

*Tammy.*

'Did you get my email?'

'The video?'

'Yeah.'

'You sent that?' Lydia said. 'Why the anon—'

'Did you watch it?'

'Yeah. Yes. Are you alright?'

'Alright?'

'You sound a bit shaky.'

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'I'm fine, I'm just ... Can you talk?'

'Yeah. What am I looking at here?'

'I meant in person. Can you get out?'

'Now? Where are you?'

'I'll meet you in front of the building in five. Okay?'

'You're outside?'

'I will be.'

Lydia glanced around the empty office, unsettled. 'Okay.'



She spotted Tammy across the plaza, standing against the inside flank of one of the pillars at the base of the office tower opposite. Her hair was coming loose from a ponytail and she was holding a cigarette. A flicker of guilt reared up at seeing her there; it was nine months since the paper had let her go in the last round of layoffs, and Tammy was still out of work. Coming out of the building, security pass clipped to her belt, it felt like the fact she still had a job there was rubbing it in her face.

Lydia offered a smile as she got close. 'I thought you gave up, missus?' She grabbed the cigarette from her hand, took a drag, and whipped it away across the plaza, the taste reminding her why she'd quit herself.

Tammy followed the orange tip with her eyes as it hit the concrete and rolled away down the gentle slope towards the street. 'It was so easy the first time, I thought I could do it again. Seems not.'

Lydia came around in front of her, a hand on her arm. 'Are you OK? What's going on?'

Tammy pushed her hair out of her face. 'You watched the video?'

'Who are they?'

'I don't know the killers.'

'Okay. But...?'

'The victim.' She looked up, meeting her eyes. 'I met him three days ago.'

'What the hell?'

'He contacted me a couple of weeks ago saying he worked in finance and had information on money laundering – would I be interested? He didn't give much away. I mean obviously I was, but I wasn't sure if he was serious or a timewaster, so I told him he had to meet me in person. I was a bit surprised when he turned up, to be honest.'

'Who is he?'

'He wouldn't say. He told me his name was Joe and he was a banker. He'd obviously done his research, because he asked me about my work on the Panama Papers leak and the financial crisis in 2008 and all that stuff. After that, I was the one doing all the talking, so I was thinking about sacking him off, but then he said he had inside knowledge about the biggest money-laundering scheme out there.'

'Jesus. And did he?'

'He talked around it. I think he was feeling me out.' Tammy turned sideways and pressed her back against the pillar.

'"Inside knowledge" – so that means he was involved.'

'I suppose.'

'Then why was he looking to come clean to you?'

She shrugged, shaking her head. 'The only thing I can say is that he looked like he hadn't slept for a year. I mean, he was smartly dressed and everything, but he honestly looked on the verge of a breakdown. Maybe the pressure...'

'Did he give you anything to go on?'



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She shook her head again. 'We agreed to meet next week. He swore he'd elaborate and bring some evidence with him – that was my condition.'

Lydia puffed her cheeks up, blowing out a breath. 'And now this.'

'Someone didn't want him to talk.'

'Seriously? You think that's what this is?'

Tammy opened her hands, signalling her uncertainty. 'Either way, I didn't want to risk putting you in danger, hence the cloak-and-dagger stuff with the email and—'

'What, are you saying you're in danger?'

'No, no, not that I know of. But the timing makes me very nervous.'

Lydia steepled her fingers in front of her mouth, twisting her head to glance around. 'This is nuts.'

'I know.' Tammy opened her bag and took out a packet of Silk Cut, then seemed to forget she was holding them. 'It happened tonight.'

'Yep. Somewhere on the Northern Line.'

'You worked that out?'

'The pattern on the seat fabric.'

Tammy nodded in appreciation.

'You don't know where though?' Lydia said.

'No.'

'What about the police?'

'That's next. I'll take them the video.'

'Where'd you get it from?'

'Facebook. It was in one of those local groups, The Finchley Network. It was posted there...' She trailed off, as if she was embarrassed about something.

'You don't live in Finchley.'

Tammy hesitated, running her hands over her cheeks before she spoke. 'I've joined loads of them, all over London. They're good for finding stories. Local-interest stuff is easier to pitch sometimes.' Her face flushed as she said it, and Lydia looked away, pretending not to see. Tammy Hodgson had been a minor legend in the newspaper industry, at the forefront of some of the biggest journalistic investigations of the 2000s. Now she was reduced to trawling local Facebook groups for stories.

'I nearly dropped my glass when I recognised him,' Tammy said. She flicked her nail back and forth over the corner of the cigarette packet, building to something. 'The thing is, no one's reporting this yet.'

Lydia caught her meaning. 'You know I'm still stuck on the showbiz desk...'

'So? This looks like a professional hit on the Tube.'

'Then you should write it up. That's got to be worth a few quid.'

'If this guy was telling the truth, there's more than a one-off piece here.'

'And if he wasn't?'

'Either way, there's too much work for one person.'

'Tam...'

Tammy pushed herself off the pillar and circled around to face her. 'No one wants to look twice at a fifty-three-year-old woman. Every interview I go to, I'm in a waiting room with kids willing to work for nothing. I'm applying for jobs I was doing fifteen years ago and I get told I've got too much experience. I can't afford not to work, Lyds, and this is my chance to get back in. But I can't do it on my own.'

Lydia held her stare, the desperation in her eyes eating her up. 'Please?'