

BLOOD RED ROSES

Lin Anderson



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**A Prequel to *Driftnet*
with Forensic Scientist Dr Rhona MacLeod**

When does desire become obsession?

A hen night in Glasgow leaves the bride-to-be dead on a toilet floor. Her body is twisted, her face a mask of terror. Who would kill a girl just before her wedding? Dr Rhona MacLeod and her team are called in to find out. As they go through the evidence, they find themselves in a world where sex is bought and sold, and more violent death is lying in wait.

Lin Anderson is a crime novelist and screenwriter. Her first novel, *Driftnet*, became a Scottish bestseller in August 2003 and has since sold to Germany, France and Russia. *Blood Red Roses* is a prequel to *Driftnet*. Lin lives in Edinburgh, with her husband, John. She has two sons and one daughter.

By the same author

Fiction

Driftnet

Torch

BLOOD RED ROSES

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Blood Red Roses

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Dedicated to Detective Inspector Bill Mitchell

CHAPTER ONE

She smiled and he wanted the smile to be for him.

In his mind he licked the blood red lips, tasting sugary alcopops and lip gloss.

Then the others joined in, cackling and crowing. His face flushed with anger.

‘Hey – we’re here – come on!’

The doors opened and the hen party spilled onto the underground platform, waving plastic pitchforks, spiked tails swaying, devil horns blinking red. Hanging back, he waited for the first bobbing heads to reach the escalator before he followed.

Three clubs later she was drunk and needing the toilet. He was waiting on the other side of the saloon doors. She turned a glassy surprised eye on him.

‘What are you doing here?’

He smiled and handed her a drink.

‘Taking a last look before you become a married woman.’

She believed him. They chinked bottles.

‘To a long and happy marriage.’

She met his smile. ‘To a long and happy marriage.’

He watched her swallow three quarters of the bottle.

‘Wow,’ she said. ‘Now I do need a piss.’

She pushed open the toilet door, her knees already buckling, then fell, hard. The bottle smashed against a sink, exploding in a shower of rainbow glass.

Her heels began to drum the floor; her hands clawed the air. Foamy spittle bubbled out of her lips and they turned blue. Her eyes widened in terror. She tried desperately to draw air into her lungs, her chest heaving.

Now his smile was genuine. Served her right, the bitch.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr Rhona MacLeod looked up as the waiter set a bottle of chilled white wine and two glasses on the table.

‘I didn’t order ...’ she began.

‘Compliments of the band.’

It was after midnight and the crowds were thinning. DI Bill Wilson was still there, arms locked round Margaret his wife of thirty years, swaying to the haunting sounds of the saxophone. He was enjoying the remnants of his fiftieth birthday party. The police could throw a hell of a do when required. Even Bill’s boss had managed a five-minute appearance, to drink a glass of champagne before he went off to dinner with someone more important.

Rhona poured herself a glass of wine. The saxophone drew to the end of its piece, sending shivers down her spine. She wasn’t a jazz fan. But tonight had almost changed her mind.

‘Hey.’ Chrissy, her forensic assistant, appeared at her side, a young man by the hand. ‘We’re off.’ She raised an eyebrow at the wine and glasses.

‘From the band,’ Rhona told her.

Chrissy ran a practised eye over the men on stage.

‘Hope it’s the saxophone player.’

It was, but Rhona didn’t say.

‘See you tomorrow then.’

Rhona smiled back. ‘See you.’

Chrissy pranced off, dazed young constable in tow. Rhona secretly wished him luck.

The saxophonist thanked his audience in an Irish accent as though he meant it. He sat the saxophone on its stand, jumped from the stage and came towards her.

‘Hi.’ His eyes were very blue. ‘I’m Sean. Can we talk?’

They talked while the rest of the band packed up. Bill came to say goodbye. He looked happy, his arms round Margaret. Rhona was pleased he’d had a good time. Bill deserved the respect his colleagues paid him. He was a good guy and a good policeman. He complimented Sean on his performance and winked at Rhona.

‘Come on,’ Margaret pulled him away. ‘It’s time I took you home, birthday boy.’

Then they were alone apart from the barman, who handed Sean the keys.

‘You lock up. I’m off.’

‘I own a part share in the club,’ Sean explained as the door shut and silence fell.

Rhona wondered how much of this was planned. How many women Sean had seduced with his blue eyes, Irish voice and saxophone. At this moment she didn’t care.

‘There’s a tune I’d like you to hear.’

He stood on stage, eyes closed, caressing the golden instrument. The sound was dark and sensual.

Mood music.

'That was great,' she said when he finished. 'What's it called?'

'For You.'

She laughed at his cheeky grin. Irish charm. Who could beat it?

They walked towards her flat, side by side, not touching.

Being alone had always been her choice. She loved her work, her flat, her life. If or when men came it was good but never permanent. She wondered if she would invite him up, already knowing she would. Between them was something inevitable, although probably short-lived.

They didn't speak as they climbed the stairs. She unlocked the door and they stepped inside. He undressed her in the hallway, so slowly she wanted to scream at him to hurry. His tongue flicked her lips until she opened her mouth to him.

Her mobile rang, pulling her from sleep. She reached down, searching for her handbag, suddenly remembering. Sean was stretched out beside her, easy in sleep. She checked herself for regret and found none.

She slipped out of bed and found her bag ringing in the hall.

'Rhona?'

'Bill.'

'Sorry to wake you.'

'What's wrong?'

'I'm at the *Excalibur* pub near the Arches. Female body in the toilets.'

'I'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

She shook Sean awake.

As she pulled on clothes, he told her he would wait for her to come back.

She looked at him, puzzled.

'I make good coffee,' he explained.

She nodded, already thinking about death.

She pulled the front door behind her, knowing he wouldn't be there when she got back. Making love to a forensic scientist might be exciting. Waiting for her to come back from a murder scene was not.

Excalibur had a big sword above the door. Long and hard. Frequented mainly by singles, the symbol promised more than it could deliver.

Bill was waiting in the corridor beyond the saloon doors. He looked at her, bleary eyed.

'Happy birthday,' she said.

He pointed her towards the toilets.

The twisted body was sprawled half in, half out of a cubicle, devil horns blinking red. She wore black lycra, stretched over full breasts. A forked tail lay motionless on the tiles among the broken glass of an alcopop bottle.

'A hen night,' Bill said. 'Her mate found her. They called 999. The paramedic that tried mouth to mouth reported a strange tingling in his lips. He called us.'

Rhona ran a latex-gloved finger over the blue lips then touched her own. The spot she touched tingled then went numb. She picked up a piece of glass and sniffed it.

‘What’s up?’ Bill said.

‘Not sure. Could be poison.’

Bill looked surprised. ‘I thought it was drugs.’

Rhona took a sample of the small sticky pool of brown-purple liquid.

‘I’ll collect the glass. If she was poisoned, the bottle was the murder weapon.’

Rhona cleared the face of hair and caught a faint scent of something other than booze and makeup.

‘Did she have asthma?’

‘Her mates are next door. We’ll ask.’

Four devils sat side by side, smeared mascara, eyes clouded by drink. Three seemed unable to speak. Rhona spoke to the fourth, who said her name was Tracey.

‘We were pissed,’ she muttered. ‘Donna went to the toilet and never came back. I went looking for her. She was jerking and moaning. It was horrible. I got scared and called 999 on my mobile.’ She looked at Rhona. ‘She’s dead, isn’t she?’

Rhona nodded.

‘We drank the same amount. How come she’s dead?’ Tears ran black down her cheeks. ‘She was getting married tomorrow.’

‘We’ll need to inform her family.’

‘She didn’t have one. Only her mates... and Jonny.’

‘Jonny?’ Rhona said.

‘Her fiance.’ She spat out the word.

‘You didn’t like him?’ Bill said.

Tracey was defiant. ‘He wanted Donna to change. I liked her the way she was.’

‘Did Donna take her drink to the toilet with her?’ Rhona asked.

Tracey looked puzzled. ‘Why would she do that?’

‘Was she asthmatic?’

‘What?’

‘Did she have asthma?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Are any of you asthmatic?’

They shook their heads.

‘Fucked up, yes,’ Tracey said. ‘Asthmatic no.’

Rhona opened her forensic bag and set about taking samples. The girl’s body was already showing signs of rigor mortis. The muscle stiffening and the macabre grin suggested poison, probably strychnine. But finding the cause of death was the pathologist’s job. Hers was to find traces of the attacker.

There was no evidence of violent or sexual assault, apart from grazed skin from the broken bottle. Rhona sampled the lips and bagged the gloved hands. Then she set about picking up the glass.

The pathologist arrived as she was finishing. Dr Sissons gave her a weary look.

‘Drugs or drink?’

Rhona shook her head. ‘At a guess, strychnine poisoning.’

Now she had his interest. Poisonings were not the usual manner of violent death in Glasgow on a Friday night.

When Rhona got back to the flat, dawn was streaking the sky with red. Her cat, Chance, ran toward her, looking for food. She smelt coffee, then heard Sean humming. Naked, he smiled as she entered the kitchen.

‘Okay?’

She nodded, unsure whether she wanted him there or not.

He tipped a measure of whisky in the coffee and carried it into the bedroom.

‘Want to talk?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

When he moved against her she forgot the blue lips and twisted limbs. She forgot death and celebrated life.

CHAPTER THREE

Bill was seated in his favourite chair. It looked out of place in the modern office. Old leather, with a creak that could not be oiled into silence, it gave him a place to think.

‘Poison,’ he shook his head. ‘It’s like an Agatha Christie novel.’

‘Strychnine. She died quickly, if horribly.’

‘Jonny, the fiance, is a fireman.’

‘A suspect?’

‘How many husbands-to-be kill their bride on her hen night?’

‘We’ve had weirder murders.’

Bill shook his head. The world of murder was as strange as it had been when he started in the force thirty years before.

Detective Constable Janice Clarke stuck her head round the door.

‘Car’s here, sir.’

‘Ready?’

Rhona nodded.

Donna Steven’s flat was in a block on the lower end of Maryhill Road, minutes from Charing Cross. Bill left the driver with the car to safeguard his tyres.

A team was already there. Three white suits greeted Rhona as she entered from the walkway.

The flat was tiny. A kitchen-living room, a bedroom, cramped hall and bathroom. In the bedroom a ivory wedding dress hung on a wardrobe door. On the dressing table sat a fairytale veil. Rhona fingered the dress material, recognising the smooth feel of expensive silk.

She tried to imagine what Donna had been thinking and feeling the last time she was in this room.

‘Civil wedding. A small guest list but no expense spared,’ Bill told her.

‘What did she do for a living?’

‘Worked in a newsagent, Tracey says’.

Rhona glanced again at the wedding frock. ‘If she didn’t have a family...’

‘I take it the dress is expensive?’

‘Silk. A couple of thousand I would say.’

‘Bloody hell!’

Bill had a teenage daughter and a son. Chances were he would be counting the cost shortly himself.

‘So where was the money coming from?’ Bill said.

‘The husband-to-be?’

‘The guy’s in shock. I’ll interview him later.’

‘Can I take a look at the room... by myself?’

Bill nodded. ‘Be my guest.’

Rhona’s mentor in the early days had been Dr Fields, or Eagle-eye as he was fondly known. He d

everything. Medical, fibres, fingerprints, all the branches. He taught her how to get results from what was called reticent evidence. Evidence not willing to give up its secrets. One thing more he'd taught her. Forensics can help, but only if you know what to look for. To know that, you have to get to know the victim.

The wedding dress dominated the room. Below it was a pair of matching silk shoes. A wave of emotion swept over Rhona. Donna wanted to get married. Did someone poison her to stop that happening?

Beside the shoes sat a small wastepaper basket. Below a couple of makeup tissues was a single rose, wilting from lack of water.

Rhona carefully removed it and slipped it in a forensic bag.

Fifteen minutes later Bill was at the door. 'Find anything?'

'Small spots of blood on the bed cover. And some hair samples from the pillow that don't look like Donna's.'

She showed him the rose. 'And this.'

Bill sniffed. 'Shop roses don't usually have a scent.'

'Is Jonny a gardener?'

'He lives in a flat above the fire station. Anyway, garden roses don't flower in November, do they?'

Bill dropped her off at the forensic lab, promising to get in touch after he'd interviewed Jonny Simpson.

Rhona loved the view from her laboratory window, even now in November. She looked down on Kelvingrove Park, the Art Gallery and Museum in the distance. The museum had been her favourite haunt both as a child with her father and later as a student studying at Glasgow University.

Chrissy appeared from the back lab and gave Rhona a look.

'What?' Rhona played the innocent.

'Was it the saxophonist?'

Rhona laughed.

'I knew it. And?'

'And what?' said Rhona, putting on her lab coat.

Chrissy pulled a face. 'You're not going to tell me, are you?'

Rhona shook her head.

'Must have been good.'

'Chrissy,' Rhona warned.

'Okay, okay.' Chrissy took the hint.

Rhona began unpacking her forensic bag.

'The bride in the toilet?'

'I went to her flat with Bill. There was a very expensive wedding dress hanging in the bedroom...'

'Poor cow...'

'And this...'

Rhona showed Chrissy the rose.

'Maybe she had another admirer. One that Jonny didn't know about,' Chrissy suggested.

'Or one he found out about...'

CHAPTER FOUR

Jonny Simpson sat with his head in his hands.

DI Wilson had seen all kinds of grief in thirty years as a policeman. It always left its mark. And you had to be careful. Genuine grief didn't always look the way you thought it should.

'Okay Mr Simpson. Tell me about the last time you saw Donna.'

Jonny lifted a white face.

'I haven't seen Donna since Wednesday night. I've been on call.'

'Did you speak to her?'

'We sent texts.'

'And what did she say in these texts?'

Jonny's face flushed. 'Just private stuff.'

Bill was familiar with the world of text messaging, due to his two teenage children. Text was like email. You could write things you might not say.

'Tracey says Donna didn't have a family.'

Jonny's face clouded over. 'Donna was brought up in a children's home. She only had me.'

'Where did you two meet?'

Jonny hesitated for a second or two. 'In the newsagent where she works. I get my paper there.'

'Getting married is an expensive business,' Bill said.

Jonny glared at him. 'If you mean the dress, Donna's been saving for it since she was sixteen. I don't care about all that, but it was important to her.'

Bill decided to get to the point.

'Did you give Donna a rose?'

'What?'

'We found a red rose in the wastepaper bin in her bedroom.'

Jonny tried to mask the quick look of jealousy that flashed across his face.

'I don't remember.'

'Try.'

'These folk come round the pubs, trying to sell you a rose. Donna was soft. She made me buy them sometimes.'

It was a good answer. Bill almost believed him.

'Why are you talking to me anyway? Why aren't you out there catching the bastard that killed Donna?'

'We'd like you to provide a DNA sample, Mr Simpson.'

'You think I killed her?'

'We need to eliminate you from our enquiry.'

Jonny took a look at Bill's calm face and relaxed.

'I'll do whatever it takes to catch him.'

'Donna had an admirer,' Bill told Rhona later. 'Or Jonny suspects she did.'

'Someone who might give her a rose?'

'Remember the murderer we got because he shared an orange with his victim?'

'Just what I was thinking,' Rhona said. 'The drops of blood on the coverlet weren't Donna's.'

'What about Jonny?'

'We're checking. We've also identified three types of head hair from the pillow. One is Donna's'

The other two are likely to be men. We have roots so a DNA analysis is possible. We'll check them against Jonny. Chrissy's taking a look at the sheets for semen.'

'You think Donna was playing away?'

'Could be. And there were traces of salbutomal on her hair.'

'So someone asthmatic was close to her before she died?'

Rhona considered this. It wasn't uncommon for rapists to take a shot of an inhaler before making their move on a victim. They were so worked up that an asthma attack could be on the cards.

'There was no evidence of sexual assault,' Bill reminded her.

'Maybe watching Donna die was thrill enough.'

A smiling Chrissy left the lab at six to meet PC Williams, the young constable she had met the evening before. Rhona stayed on to work on the Bacardi Coke bottle. On arrival that morning, she filled an empty bottle with a mixture of plaster of Paris, stuck a thin wooden rod down the neck and set it to harden.

Now, using the rod as a handle, she took a small hammer and gently tapped the side of the bottle until it cracked in several places. Then she held it over the waste bin and gave the bottle three sharp knocks. The glass fell away in dozens of shards.

Now she had a plastic replica of the bottle, she could start putting the murder weapon together again. Chrissy had laughed when Rhona produced the Bacardi Coke bottle that morning. She laughed even harder when she heard Rhona's plan.

'No chance,' had been Chrissy's expert opinion.

Rhona suspected Chrissy was right, but she had to give it a try.

She arranged all the pieces she'd picked up on a tray. She would start the long slow process of fitting the jigsaw together tomorrow.

Outside, Rhona shivered in the raw night air. She hadn't brought the car. She could have tried for a taxi but decided to walk. Walking helped her think.

Street lights threw pools of yellow on grey puddles. The rain had dwindled to a faint mist that masked the sound. Cars swished past throwing water in her path. Rhona strode on too absorbed to notice. In her head she was replaying the scene that had ended in Donna's death.

Donna had been given a Bacardi Coke outside the ladies toilet. There were no signs of force. Donna took the drink willingly. But that didn't mean she knew her murderer. Rhona hoped she did. If they were dealing with a psycho who had no link with the victim, it would be even more difficult to find him.

Bill had questioned Donna's mates. They insisted Donna was seeing no one but Jonny. They also said they had seen nobody they knew on the night of the hen party. Only Tracey seemed wary. Wary and scared, according to Bill.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Where the fuck is she?’

Tracey couldn’t tell him the truth. ‘She’s not well.’

Belcher’s fat sweaty face grew redder.

‘Tell her she’s fired if she doesn’t turn up tomorrow night.’

He shoved a rose at Tracey. ‘You do it. Room five and make it good.’

The green baize walls and heavily carpeted hallway smothered all sound. Tracey passed four doors and stood outside number five, waiting for the double vodka to swim through her blood stream.

There were four of them. Spiked hair, designer stubble, muscled bodies under patterned short-sleeved shirts. A stag night maybe? Or just guys who liked getting off on girls like her.

‘Hi Rose. Come on in.’

They were seated round a circular table, three champagne bottles in the middle. One of them handed her a full glass and watched her drink it in a oner.

The music came on. She started on the blonde one with the pale eyes because he looked harmless. She unbuttoned his shirt and with the rose in her mouth traced his smooth chest, lower and lower until she reached his hardening crotch.

The others yelled in delight.

Jonny came in at midnight and took a seat at the bar. Tracey had finished her stint with the four guys and badly needed a drink. She didn’t see Jonny until it was too late.

He grabbed her arm and forced her onto the stool beside him. His face was a mask of hate.

‘She was still doing this, wasn’t she? That’s how she was paying for the fucking dress.’

Tracey didn’t answer.

‘It’s your fault she’s dead. You and the rest of her fucking friends.’

He was right. She had told Donna to stay on at the club. The money was good. She could buy the dress she wanted. She’d persuaded Donna that what Jonny didn’t know couldn’t hurt him.

‘Some bastard gave her a rose. I want to know who it was.’

Tracey recoiled as though she’d been punched.

‘What?’

‘The police found a red rose at the flat. They think I gave it to her, but I didn’t, did I, Tracey?’

Tracey couldn’t speak. She was thinking about the dance she’d just performed. Rose’s dance.

When Jonny left, she headed for the toilet. She reached the cubicle just in time. A mix of vodka and champagne hit the pan. She pressed her face against the cool toilet seat, her body shaking.

Jonny had made her promise not to tell the police about Donna’s job here and the guy who kept coming back again and again to see her dance as Rose. He also made her promise to carry on doing

what Belcher wanted.

~~‘They said you’re good,’ Belcher had told her when she’d finished with the four guys. ‘Very satisfying.’~~ He said the words like he had a hard-on himself. ‘You’re the new Rose.’ He poked a finger in her face. ‘And you can tell Donna that from me.’

She wanted to shout at him. ‘Donna’s dead you stupid bastard. She’s dead!’

But she had said nothing, her stomach tight with fear.

‘The sicko will come back,’ Jonny’s eyes had glinted revenge as he left. ‘He’ll be looking for another Rose. And I’ll be waiting for him.’

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