

# **Red Diesel**

A Short Story

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‘Rural crime is a huge issue around these parts, and this task force is going to put the balance of power back in the hands of the hardworking people who make East Anglia tick.’

Sergeant Rachel Sharp thanks the reporters for their time and takes her place front and centre in the pack. Twenty-one officers line the steps in front of the station.

Twenty-one.

Like they have nothing else to worry about. Like people-trafficking, paedophiles and punch-ups are a thing of the past. Like crime hasn’t become more complex and the perps more cunning. Like police numbers haven’t been cut. Like their budget hasn’t been slashed by a million quid in the past twelve months.

Like having twenty-one trained officers checking fuel tanks is the best way of keeping people safe.

Operation Red Diesel.

Crims have been nicking the stuff from tractors and combines. It’s no different to the fuel available from the pump – just a load of red dye mixed in. It works just fine in domestic vehicles but is illegal on account of the reduced tax.

Rachel, a townie through and through, wonders whether a more effective solution might lie in asking the farmers to lock up their agri-plant, but she plays the good copper, toes the line, and

organizes the rota – twenty-one of her finest spot-checking cars on the Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire borders.

Disruption is the name of the game. Her superiors have got that right. The diesel thieves are motoring around the countryside with full tanks while her department's running on air.



Two months into the op, Rachel's mobile vibrates. It's her number two, Nik. She thinks about not answering. Always the same story – they've dipped twenty-whatever cars and got nothing.

Still, Nik's a good officer and she should set an example. She picks up.

'We've got red,' he says.

His voice sounds funny, kind of thick, as if he's drunk or full of cold.

'And ...'

'It's not diesel.'

'Nik, speak to me in whats, not nots.'

'Blood. It's fucking blood. A whole tank of it.'

Cars can't run on blood. She knows this. So must he. He's their resident petrol-head.

'How does—'

'There's a second tank ... another tiny filler neck just next to the fuel one.'

He tells her how the Škoda SUV was a random pull-over. That they almost missed it – the fuel dip had come up clear. It was only as he was screwing the cap back on that he noticed the stain. He thought it was rust and peered close, spotted the nipple to the right. Black rubber, about the size of a pea. He pressed it and viscous red liquid oozed onto his fingers.

‘I puked, then I called in CSI. They’re draining the second tank. There’s gallons of the stuff. I should have called you sooner but ... I’ve never seen ... I was—’

‘It’s okay, Nik. You did good. Let forensics do their thing. Just bring the driver in.’



Forty minutes later Rachel walks into the interrogation room. Nik does a *he's-a-weirdo* thing with his eyebrows. She doesn't want to pre-judge but this driver guy is all off. He doesn't have a cornered look about him, but he's not smug either. Impassive, she thinks.

She's still waiting on the CSI people for the haematology report. In the meantime, she needs to find out why Operation Red Diesel has turned into a bloody nightmare, literally.



Twenty-four hours later, it's confirmed. The blood's human.

There's something else – forensics are reporting saliva around the rubber nipple next to the main filler neck on the car.

And Mr Impassive is dead. The CCTV footage from his cell tells them nothing. He went to sleep and never woke up.

But it's weird. He's pale, almost translucent. Like he's been exsanguinated.

Unlike the Škoda's, his tank is empty.