

LONDON EYE

TIM LEBBON

LONDON EYE

TOXIC  CITY

BOOK ONE



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For my beautiful daughter, Ellie

Huge thanks to my wonderful agent Howard Morhaim,
and my splendid editor Lou Anders.

“The tide of evolution carries everything before it, thoughts no less than bodies, and persons no less than nations.”

—*George Santayana, 1863–1952*

CHAPTER ONE

CAMP TRUTH

There has been an explosion at the London Eye. Two fatalities are reported, though details are still sketchy. Scotland Yard has issued a brief statement: "There is no indication that this was a terrorist attack." More soon.

—*BBC News Website, 4:34 p.m. GMT, July 28, 2019*

Even though their movements describe a strange, hypnotic beauty, she is certain that the rooks are going to kill her.

She is in the middle of a deserted street. It was silent before, empty, a place she had to herself, though she had been terrified of the silence. Then the peace was broken by the descent of the rooks, and now she is terrified still. She runs for the houses to her right, but though their gates stand open and the front gardens are overgrown and untended, the front doors are all locked tight.

She looks back and up, and the rooks are falling closer. Are they toying with her? Teasing? She cannot say. They circle her in a fast, tight spiral, and she feels as though she is looking into the heart of a black tornado.

Screaming, her voice is lost to the birds, so she decides to run again. Across the street, hands over her ears to block out the rookish cacophony, she stumbles into a burnt-out car, scratching her leg through her jeans. She staggers and falls, feeling tears run from her eyes . . . but she will not show her weakness.

The first of the birds touches her, a gentle stroke of soft feathers across her cheek. She waves her arms but feels nothing. More come

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down, crowding around her now, claws snagging in her hair, wings beating against her face.

She stands, and this time her scream of rage is heard. *This is not the way for me to go!* She snatches a bird from the air and throws, causing a ripple in the wall of black around her.

Through that ripple, a shadow appears. Its movement is nothing like that of a bird. And then she sees it smile.

Lucy-Anne started awake, scanning her surroundings for birds that were not there, and realised she was in Camp Truth. That afternoon when everything was about to change, Jack was there with her.

She sighed and leaned against Jack. He was seventeen but looked three years older. The loss of his parents in London two years before had aged him, and though he wasn't the sort she usually fell for, their grief had brought them close. He had his eyes closed now, but she could see that he was not asleep. When he slept, his worry lines almost vanished.

Camp Truth always comforted her. It was home to photographs, reports, press clippings, testimonies, and artefacts that revealed a thousand lies about the dreadful fate that had befallen London and which could, if successfully exposed, make so many things right. That was why this was the most important place in Lucy-Anne's world. And she never failed to see the painful irony in Camp Truth existing underground.

When they'd been setting it up, the four of them—her, Jack, Sparky and Jenna—had debated whether to try and keep things hidden away, even down here. The decision had been unanimous: if Camp Truth were found, they were all finished, so why not revel in what they were doing? And so there hung a huge mosaic map of London as it once was across one wall, and stuck all over it were dozens of small clear envelopes. Sparky had made a pinboard for the

second wall, and here they had pinned random photographs, cuttings and other ephemera they had gathered over the past couple of years, but which they could not place accurately. Most images were blurred, some damaged by the fires intended to destroy them. A few had been hacked from weapon-cameras just before the people in them were blasted to smithereens.

Lucy-Anne yawned, scratching at her scalp. “Sparky and Jenna coming later?” she asked.

“Don’t think so,” Jack replied, opening his eyes. “Jenna’s out with her parents, and Sparky’s still working on the car.”

Lucy-Anne laughed without humour. “It’s almost forty years old, rusting and dead. Why bother?”

“You know why,” Jack said softly.

Lucy-Anne laughed again but said no more, and that was her way of admitting that, yes, she did know why. Sparky liked working with the impossible in the hope that it could change things. If that old Ford Capri ever started again and took to the road, perhaps it would mean that, against all odds, his brother was still alive somewhere in London’s sad ruin.

Jack sighed.

“What is it?” Lucy-Anne asked.

“Mum and Dad’s wedding anniversary tomorrow.”

“Oh, hell, I should have remembered.” She sat up straight, flushing with dismay at her bad memory, and Jack smiled and shook his head. But his smile turned sad.

“They’d always wanted a weekend in London on their own,” he said, and even though Lucy-Anne had heard this a dozen times, she would always listen again. “They were just . . .” He trailed off, and she pulled him into her embrace and hugged him tight.

They’d been together for almost two years. She would always remember the first time they met; she’d been a fifteen-year-old

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standing on a chair and offering the world out for a fight. They'd gone to the same counselling sessions for orphans of Doomsday—as the destruction of London had become known—and Lucy-Anne had taken it as a chance to rage against the authorities that put them there. *Bloody lying bastards!* were the first words Jack had heard from her mouth. Her hair had been green then, shaved to a half-inch buzz, and the leathers she wore that day were new, creaking, and obviously stolen.

The others in the group had retreated in fear, cried, or simply turned away, and it had taken the three counsellors half an hour to talk her down. She had sat there for the rest of that session, simmering, and swapping cautious glances with this new orphan.

"We should go," Jack said. "Be dark soon."

"It's always dark," Lucy-Anne said, shivering. And in Camp Truth that was true.

Jack led the way up out of the basement. Lucy-Anne followed, and he wondered once again what had become of them. They'd been down in the basement for almost three hours, and there'd been little more than a quick kiss, and then her haunted sleep. A year ago they'd have spent their time doing a lot more. But things had changed between them, and he still tried to persuade himself that it was because they'd moved on from being teenaged lovers to the best of friends.

She was almost seventeen, but sometimes her grief made her look ageless: she'd lost her parents and brother in London. Her current hairstyle was purple spiked, formed into a carefully sculptured I-don't-give-a-damn mess, and her dark jeans and white tee shirt were tattered and ripped. Those rips *weren't* designer, Jack knew. Lucy-Anne had been left with her family's house, but very little else.

"Sun's going down," he said. He stepped through the curtain of

clematis they'd trained across the staircase entrance, and the red splash of dusk exploded across his skin.

Lucy-Anne looked cautiously up into the trees, as if expecting to see a cloud of birds descending towards them from any direction. But the trees were silent, and they were alone. "Red sky at night . . ." she began, and Jack went to her side and put his arm around her waist.

"Shall we check the drops on the way back?"

"Yeah!" She perked up, hugging him with both arms and giving him a kiss. He pinched her bum, she gave him a playful slap, and he welcomed the familiar relief at leaving their secret place.

They walked back through the forest towards their village of Tall Stennington, and on the way they checked the places where truth came to find them.

There were thirteen drops—a number not chosen intentionally, but which the four gang members were pleased with—where unknown people would leave them information about London. They checked them all: a hollow fence post, the space between two half-moon shaped stones, another hole in a fallen tree trunk. And it was only at the thirteenth that they found something.

Lucy-Anne dug the tin from beneath a crab apple tree's roots, lifted the small lid, and squealed in delight when she pulled something out. "It's from Jenna!" she said. She fumbled with the white, flower-painted envelope.

"What does it say?" Jack glanced around to make sure they were alone, always fearful that one day this would be a trap, and there would be soldiers waiting for them. He and his friends would fight to the last, but they could not win, and they'd find themselves taken where all the disappeared went. Into the Toxic City itself, some said. Into the heart of dead London.

"Lucy-Anne?"

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“Okay, okay.” She unfolded the paper and read the note. “It says, ‘My house. I have a nice surprise.’”

Jack’s eyes grew so wide that Lucy-Anne uttered a short, quiet giggle.

“We should go,” he said. ‘A nice surprise’ was the code the four of them had agreed upon for something earth-shattering.

And as they ran across the open field separating Tall Stennington from the forest, the moon began to emerge from the darkening sky.