

THE BLOOD OF ANGELS

by David Bradwell

Chapter One

Tuesday, December 29th, 1992

SOMETIMES things happen for a reason. And sometimes that reason is that you've had far too much to drink.

Tobias Mertens opened his eyes, tried to close them again, and then experienced an immediate sense of urgency. He had to get out of there. Back to the hotel. What was her name? No idea. But if he could escape before she woke up, he'd avoid all of the usual post-coital recriminations.

He got out of bed, and dressed quickly in last night's suit.

And what a night it was. Boys will be boys. Men will be men. And hey, while you're on, it's Christmas.

She was what? A six at a push? Probably significantly less in daylight, when sober. So, certainly not the most attractive girl he'd come across in Paris, but definitely the most willing. And if nothing else, he'd done it for Germany. He smiled, despite the crushing pain shooting through his head. Result. As long as he escaped before the horror of having to pretend he wanted to see her again.

A few minutes later, he was staggering back down the alleyway. It looked vaguely familiar. Actually, scratch that. He had no idea where he was. Nor what had happened to Karsten. Presumably he'd be back at the hotel already, sleeping it off. There must be a Metro station somewhere near, though.

Tobias remembered the club. Remembered chatting to the girl. Asking her about her studies at the Sorbonne. Buying her a drink. Then another and another. But after that, it was every man for himself. Boys will be boys. Men will be men.

Although Pascal Duclos applied the brakes, the rubbish truck continued its journey. He watched on, powerless, as the ice beneath the wheels gradually afforded some kind of traction. He hated this time of the year. It was bad enough normally, but somehow it seemed inhuman to be at work so early, while everyone else was sleeping off the festive spirit. And the amount of extra rubbish ... *Mon dieu*. At this rate they'd have to do two runs, which was the last thing he needed when he still had to apologise to his wife, for all the things he'd said to her father.

He checked his mirrors. Watching for the thumbs up that would allow him to move on. He frowned in frustration. Why were they taking so long?

Tobias Mertens saw the rubbish truck slide to a halt. Poor bastards, out before dawn. And especially when it was so, so cold. The two men had stopped loading bags, though, and were instead standing motionless. He took a step to the

left to get out of their way, but then saw what had grabbed their attention.

The arm protruding from beneath the pile of cardboard.

You wouldn't want to be homeless on a night like that.

But how many homeless people wore a gold watch? How many homeless people wore a suit like Karsten's?

Tobias stopped walking, his eyes fixated, as his hungover brain tried to process what he was seeing. And as it did, his voyeuristic curiosity was replaced by the vicelike grip of horror.

Chapter Two

Tuesday, February 23rd, 1993

W E all have enemies. I've made a few in recent times. Not all of them want to kill me. I expect some would prefer eternal suffering. But aside from one recent lapse of judgement, I've always tried to do the right thing.

Occasionally I've taken a decision to ensure my own survival, but who wouldn't? I really believe I'm fundamentally a good person, even if, these days, I'm the only one who thinks so. Because the handful of people who don't already hate me now believe I'm dead. Rest in peace Clare Woodbrook, albeit with minimal emphasis on "peace".

I sat back in my leather armchair, in the mahogany-panelled Piano Bar of Cologne's Excelsior Hotel Ernst. Most people came here for the luxurious ambience, the cocktails, or the selection of eighty whiskies. I just wanted a safe haven to reflect on recent developments, trying to understand why getting everything I'd risked my life for should have left me feeling quite so hollow.

I extinguished my cigarette, and signalled to the barman for a second drink. My Mercedes 190E hire car had been soothing company, but now I'd returned the key, it was time to switch off and contemplate the future. There were so many decisions. What was I going to do with my life, now I had the money to be free, but perversely had sacrificed true freedom in its acquisition? Where was I going to live now I could no longer go home? I was beginning to favour Canada. Would they even let me in? Was thirty too early for a midlife crisis? *What on earth had I been thinking?*

Two men were making small talk at the bar. One of them left, but I continued to watch the other, quite taken by his well-groomed appearance, his chiselled features, impressive physique, smart navy jacket and highly polished brogues. He noticed my gaze and smiled at me, but I quickly turned away, embarrassed to be caught. It was tempting to get to know him, but my need for privacy and anonymity was greater than any urge for physical contact, however tempting the illicit thrill of transient passion.

Instead, I returned to my English-language newspaper, idly toying with the new ring on the third finger of my right hand. I loved the blue and white, the diamonds framing a beautiful blue Ceylon sapphire. It was bigger than the one I'd had to leave behind, but I felt I deserved it. It was strangely comforting; a compensation for the sacrifices I'd made, not that I imagined anyone would feel sorry for me.

I read the same story again and again, desperate to analyse every word, in case I'd overlooked any nuance. There was the helicopter crash, the disgraced

former journalist believed to have died on board, and the details of the art fraud she'd committed. At least they'd got my age right, even if some of the other aspects lacked a certain forensic certainty. Finally, I folded the newspaper and put it aside. I was an admirer of the British press. It had paid well and given me a career, but that part of my life was definitively over.

The barman placed my cocktail on the table. I nodded in thanks, then my attention returned to the suave-looking man at the bar. He was perhaps in his early forties. On second thoughts, maybe an hour or two of reckless abandon would help me clear the mental fog. New life, new vices.

He caught me again, then stood up, and indicated a spare chair at my table as he approached.

"Do you mind if I join you," he asked in German-accented English.

I nodded assent, and he pulled out the chair and sat down, facing me across the table. A tingle of butterflies shot through my stomach.

"I'm Steven, Steven Ponndorf," he said.

Behind my eyes, recent events played back like a film on fast-forward. I reached for my cigarettes and offered him one. Then decided on a name.

"I'm Charlotte Sadler," I replied. That should do for now.

"What brings you here?" he asked, taking a cigarette and then offering me a flame from his silver lighter.

Now there was a question that was difficult to answer honestly.

"I thought it would be refreshing to have a few days in Cologne, getting away from it all," I said. "And you?"

"Very much the same I think. Taking in the scenery."

I should have been appalled by the wink that accompanied the obvious innuendo, but I didn't have the energy. It was a D for effort, but at least it proved we shared an agenda.

"And has anything in particular caught your eye?"

"It has." He smiled, as if any further underlining was needed.

"What line of business are you in, Steven?" I asked.

He hesitated, and I knew that whatever he said next would be a lie. It was part of the game. The less we knew about each other, the better. Just two lonely people, sharing a moment in time, destined never to see each other again.

"I'm in the exhibitions industry," he said, at last. "Let me guess what you do."

He leaned back in his chair, taking the opportunity to look me up and down.

"Beautiful clothes and your jewellery is quite spectacular, so I assume you're successful. Clearly independent. You're in great shape and appearance is obviously important. I love your dark red hair. So ... " He pondered for a moment. "You run an international company, perhaps in fashion. But live in a prestigious apartment in London with a private gym. Am I close?"

"Close enough," I said, returning the smile. The apartment aspect was worryingly accurate, although I could never go back there now.

I took a sip of my cocktail. I was tempted to finish it there and then, and save us both any more unnecessary small talk. But I was enjoying the mounting sense of anticipation. I took a second sip before returning the glass to the table.

Out of nowhere, he stifled a yawn.

"Sorry, am I boring you?" I said, with a hint of mischief.

"No, far from it," he said. "And please excuse me. It's been a busy couple of days. On the contrary, I find you quite stimulating."

"Really?"

"Very much so."

"Interesting." I left it there. I was trying to play the femme fatale but I couldn't stop myself from laughing. I leaned forward. "So tell me, Steven. Does your wife know you're in Cologne, talking to strange women in hotel bars?" I let

my eyes fall to the wedding ring on his left hand. There was no point in him denying it.

"She, um ..."

"My turn to guess. She doesn't understand you? She has a lover of her own, and has given you permission to stray?"

"Does it bother you?"

I thought for a moment. Of course it bothered me. Not for my own sake, but I didn't want to do anything that caused hurt for anyone else. There'd been more than enough of that already. But then, if it wasn't me, it would be someone else. He didn't look like the faithful type. Of all the crimes I'd committed, this would barely even register.

"I could be persuaded to turn a blind eye," I said, dropping my voice to little more than a whisper.

"Are you staying at the hotel?"

"I am. Are you?"

He nodded. I leaned back and finished my drink, then stubbed out the cigarette. He did the same. It was now or never.

"I could show you my room, if you like," I said. "See how it compares to yours."

His eyes were alight with possibility.

"I would be very interested to see it," he said. "Shall we?"

I nodded, then collected my bag from the floor. He did the same with his small leather holdall, and I led him in the direction of the lift. As we waited for it, a man strolled in from the lobby, joining us. I gave him a sideways glance. It was Steven's companion from the bar. The younger man was tall but his slightly dishevelled appearance looked even more out of place in the brightly-lit hotel lobby. I expected Steven to acknowledge him, and maybe continue their conversation from before, but there was only the faintest nod of recognition. All

three of us entered the lift in silence.

We arrived at the second floor. Thankfully, the other man turned in the opposite direction. I took Steven's hand.

"Follow me," I said, my heels sinking into the opulent carpet. As we arrived at my room, I reached into my bag for the key card, then turned to him as I inserted it.

I was shocked by the change in his appearance. His skin looked pale and sickly, sweat beads running off his forehead. And before I'd even opened the door, he'd collapsed unconscious at my feet.

Chapter Three

I DROPPED to my knees, trying to stay calm. It had the makings of a crisis, but I'd been in worse. And yet there was still a gnawing sense of panic. How could I explain this, when the whole point of being in Cologne was to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble?

I checked for a pulse. He was still breathing, but he was out cold.

Perhaps alerted by the noise of the fall, the man from the lift was running towards me from the end of the corridor.

"What happened?" he asked as he dropped to the floor beside me, his voice urgent. He was maybe late twenties, and had a German accent but spoke in English. How did he know to do that?

"I don't know, I ... He just collapsed."

"Let me help." His eyes looked kind and full of concern.

"Are you a doctor? Do you know him? He just came over all weird."

He shook his head.

"Is this your room?" he asked. I nodded. "We can't leave him here. Can we lie him on your bed?"

"Of course."

"Come on, give me a hand."

The man propped up Steven from behind, lifting him beneath both arms, then started to reverse into my room. I lifted Steven's legs, the door closing automatically behind me. Even with someone taking the bulk of the weight, it was a struggle to lift him up to the bed, but eventually we managed it. Between us, we arranged him into the recovery position. Then I remembered Steven's bag, and brought it in from the corridor, putting it on the chair by the desk.

"Thank you," I said to my saviour. "Sorry, I don't know your name?"

"Henning," he said.

"Henning, I'm so pleased you were there. I'll phone down to reception and ask them to call an ambulance."

I should have seen the signs. Had I not been preoccupied by Steven, I would have noticed the way he'd moved between me and the door.

"An ambulance won't be needed. He'll wake up," he said.

"I hope so, but we need to get him checked out."

"No," he said, his voice getting ever-less compassionate.

"Okay, well thank you again for your help, I can take it from here," I said, taking a step towards the door, suddenly keen to get rid of him. But Henning moved to block me. His expression made the unconscious body on the bed seem like the least of my worries.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice hard and defiant. "Money? Jewellery?"

He shook his head.

"No, I want to speak to you, Clare."

"Who's Clare? My name is Charlotte Sadler."

"No it isn't."

I'd heard enough. I tried to push past him, but he grabbed both of my arms, then took a step back so he was flat against the door. I was trapped.

"Who are you?" I snarled. Then I noticed the shoulder holster under his jacket, and my breath stopped.

"I'm not here to cause you harm. But we know who you are, and we know what you've done."

"Who's we?"

"The people I work for."

"And what have I supposedly done?"

He laughed, but it sounded spiteful.

"Do you really need me to remind you? You were an investigative journalist in London. You masterminded an art fraud, then killed your colleagues and faked your own death. How much detail do you want?"

He still had hold of my arms, but his grip had loosened. I shook myself free and took a step backwards.

"I think you're getting me confused with someone else," I said, knowing it was futile.

"Let's not play that game," he said. "I've just saved your life."

"*What?*"

He nodded in the direction of the man who lay prone on my bed.

"Check his jacket."

I'd been hoping to give my brain a rest, but suddenly it was in overdrive. I did as directed. I found Steven's wallet. And his BKA warrant card.

"The BKA is the *Bundeskriminalamt* – the Federal Criminal Investigation

Office," said Henning. "And his bag."

Again I followed the instruction. There were handcuffs and a gun. I thought about grabbing the weapon and using it to save myself, but there was a significant risk I'd take a bullet in the process.

"He was here to arrest you," Henning continued. "I slipped something into his drink. If I hadn't, you'd now be on your way to prison, if you ever made it that far."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. This was all a bit too much.

"I'm on your side," said Henning.

"You've got a funny way of showing it."

He took a step towards me, but it wasn't threatening.

"I have a proposal for you."

That sounded ridiculous.

"What sort of proposal?"

"I need you to come with me."

"Where to? I don't even know who you are."

"You don't need to worry about that."

"Forgive me for sounding traditional, but I'm not in the habit of going off with strangers, whether they've allegedly saved me from the police or not."

He took another step towards me, then stopped.

"It's in your interests to do so," he said. "I told you, I'm not here to hurt you. We're aware that you recently had something of a career change. That you might be looking for new opportunities. My boss is impressed and would like to meet you, and make you an offer. To come and work for us."

"That's deeply flattering, but I'm not actually looking for anything at the moment."

He laughed again and shook his head.

"So what are you going to do? Call reception? Get an ambulance? Call the

police? Wait till they discover you've drugged one of their own? Tell them your name and give them your address, and wait around until they speak to their colleagues in London?"

"I haven't drugged anyone."

"What will you say, then? Sex game gone wrong?"

I looked back at the man on the bed. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"Because even if you think you can talk your way out of this," Henning continued, "it's only until he comes round. And even if you think you can go on the run after giving a false name and fake address, they'll find you again. It's what they do. I can help you disappear properly."

I let out a deep breath, struggling to comprehend exactly how things had gone so wrong, so quickly.

"Ask yourself how come I'm here, in your room right now," Henning continued. "You can't hide on your own. But my boss is a reasonable man and he merely wants to meet you. He sent me here to do you a favour, so now you need to do me a favour in return."

"And where is he?"

"Paris."

"*Paris?* How am I supposed to get to Paris? If you know anything about me, you know I'm going to struggle to get around for a while. I'm red hot. As you've quite clearly pointed out, people are looking for me. I turn up at an airport and I might as well wear a badge saying '*arrest me*' in flashing lights."

"We have a helicopter waiting. I'll drive you there."

What sort of person had a helicopter waiting? It was all so surreal.

"And what about him?" I nodded in the direction of Steven.

"He'll be unconscious for a couple of hours. We can clean this up for you."

I didn't dare to ask what that meant. It was madness, but it was becoming apparent that I really didn't have a choice.

"Can I at least pack my suitcase?"

"Put whatever you want in hand luggage. There's no need for anything more. You won't be staying long."

"But I can't just leave everything here."

"I'll sort all that out for you."

"For God's sake."

I sighed. I wasn't overburdened with options. It was a risk, but in the circumstances, probably a smaller risk than doing nothing.

I emptied Steven's bag onto the bed and packed a few essentials into it. Henning took the gun before I had a chance to grab it. A few minutes later, I was ready.

"Don't try to run," he said, as though reading my mind. "We found you once, we can do it again, and it would not look good if you fail to return our courtesy."

"Okay, I'm not running." I was still alert, though. Looking for a means of escape at the first opportunity, because that was far from the most reassuring thing he'd said.

The door closed behind us. Henning checked it was locked. Then we took the lift to the ground floor and headed out to the nearby private car park. I was still wearing heels. Why hadn't I thought to change? I wasn't thinking straight.

We reached the car park, then Henning nodded in the direction of a black Audi 100.

I didn't see his assailant approach, but I heard a sickening crunch as the baseball bat connected with his skull. Before he'd even hit the ground, I was being bundled into the back of a people carrier, its tyres squealing in revolt as the driver floored the throttle. And for the second time in the last few minutes, I was looking at a gun.

Chapter Four

MY first instinct was to fight, but the weapon persuaded me otherwise.

"Sorry about that," said the man with his finger poised on the trigger, in a surprisingly refined English accent.

I guessed he was somewhere in his mid-forties, but he was dressed young for his age, in dark combat trousers and a white hoodie under a black leather jacket. The impressive physique, rugged stubble and piercing blue eyes all helped give him the aura of an ex-SAS hero, and definitely not someone I was going to beat in a fist fight.

But that didn't mean I was going to go quietly.

He seemed to sense that, and shot out his left hand, ramming it over my mouth with rapid and unnecessary force. I feared a cut lip at least, and possibly an urgent need for dental realignment.

"Please don't scream or shout, and I'll explain everything," he said, in a voice that was far more polite than his hand gesture.

My eyes narrowed as my brain tried to process every possible scenario. Eventually, though, realising my chronic disadvantage, I nodded. His grip loosened. I pushed his hand away, and then replaced it with my own to check for signs of blood.

"My name's Matthew Sommer," he said. "Friends call me Matt."

"I'll stick with Matthew," I spat back, edging away from him, as far as the car door would allow. We were still powering through the streets to God-knows-where.

He lowered the gun.

"It's not loaded, by the way," he said with a shrug, putting it in the side pocket of his jacket. "But we couldn't let you be taken by the Pencil."

"What do you mean, the Pencil?"

"Henning Bierstadt. HB. That's his nickname. It's a type of ..."

"I know what an HB pencil is, for God's sake. Who was he? More to the point, who are you?"

"He was a local lowlife. A sub-contractor. He'll have a headache for a few days, but I'm pleased to say you won't need to worry about him again."

"Evidently." I waited for him to answer the second part of my question, but instead his next comment scared me.

"Clare, we know you. We know what you've done."

Was there any point protesting?

"I've just had this exact conversation with the man you knocked unconscious," I said, still struggling to regain my normal voice.

"I expect you have. And what did he tell you to make you go with him? Are you comfortable by the way? I'm sorry I had to grab you, but needs must."

I took a deep breath and turned to look out of the window. We'd progressed to an autobahn, and the city streets had given way to wide open fields. The driver hadn't spoken. I hadn't even noticed him look in his rear-view mirror. He was like a robot, completely uninterested in the abduction behind him.

There didn't seem to be anything to be gained from lying.

"He said his boss wanted me to go to Paris. Something about a job offer," I said. "And I'm fine, assuming I don't need dental reconstruction."

"Sorry. I don't know my own strength sometimes. And you agreed to go along with that?"

"He didn't leave me much choice. There was an unconscious policeman in my room. If you know what I've done, you'll also know that's probably not a good position for me right now. And on balance, he'd already had the chance to kill me, if he wanted to. So, I thought it worth giving him the benefit of the doubt."

Sommer shook his head and smiled. His expression was part-friendly, part-pitying.

"Clare, I hate to say this, but you have a lot to learn."

The tone of condescension was infuriating. As if I didn't already have enough to be livid about.

"Are you actually going to tell me who you are and why you've just kidnapped me?"

"I am. But first, let's fill in the things Henning didn't tell you. Don't take this the wrong way, but there wasn't a job offer. It's true that he didn't want you to get arrested, but only because you owe his boss a lot of money. And if you were behind bars they'd have no chance of reclaiming it."

"What do you mean I owe his boss a lot of money? I haven't borrowed anything from anyone." But I had a sickening feeling that I knew where this was headed.

"Henning was working on a contract for Nicolas Thiel," Sommer continued.

"Do you recognise the name?"

"Should I?"

"Maybe." He reached into his inside pocket and then passed me a small colour photograph. There was a sharply-dressed man with slicked-back hair. In his late forties, I'd have guessed, and tall, judging by how far he towered above the woman standing next to him. "He runs a strip club in Paris, and he's pivotal in the local drugs trade. And he bought paintings from Dominique Chernin."

I looked away but could feel his eyes on my face, testing for a reaction.

"Where's this going?" I asked.

"And again, excuse the imposition, but you dealt in stolen art. Agreed?"

I refused to acknowledge the accusation, even though I knew it was true.

"Thiel was one of your leading customers," he continued. "But since you've been exposed, all the paintings you sold to him are going to be repossessed, leaving him hugely out of pocket. And he wants you to repay him. But not by going on the payroll. If I hadn't stepped in, you'd have been whisked off to Paris, probably tortured until you made a bank transfer equalling whatever he gave you, plus punitive interest, and then almost certainly killed. So, yes, Henning might have prevented you from being arrested, but believe me, that would have been infinitely preferable to what Thiel had lined up."

This was all a lot to take in. Today was supposed to be the start of my new life. Calm, quiet, and out of the public eye.

"So, who are you, and what do you want with me? Did your boss buy pictures too?"

He laughed.

"No, far from it. And even if she had, I think she'd have applauded your ingenuity."

"She?"

"Indeed. But believe it or not, I've genuinely been sent to protect you. Because unlike the others, I really do have a proposal, and I really would like to offer you a job."

I hope you enjoyed this preview.... The Blood Of Angels is out now in ebook, paperback and hardback at Amazon and everywhere else!