

Blood Red Deceit – Sample Chapter

My first look at the victim came from the front doors of the nave. Light from chandeliers in the First Baptist Church backlit the nude body suspended on a cross. Their light produced an eerie sheen to the blood-smear silhouette, and where blood and a long drag pattern on the carpet stained the altar.

I asked, “Why are you not using the local coroner?”

“He’s out of town.”

“No backup?”

“Not available either. That leaves you.”

“Do you have an ID on the victim?” I pulled a pair of surgical gloves out of a box in the narthex and tugged them on. Here in a desecrated sanctuary was not where I had in my mind to be since I arrived here two-and-a-half days early to assist Angel with our wedding prep.

“Phillip Robles. He was the minister here at the church.”

The police officer in charge of security at the entrance showed his inquisitiveness with a raised brow. “The detective said it looks like somebody whipped him and then hung him up there to die. What kind of person would do such a thing in a church?”

For some I have known, a church building means nothing more than any other structure. Lack of respect would cross their mind only when confronted with the issue.

I addressed the officer posted at the door. The name *R. Penbrook* etched his name tag.

“I once heard someone refer to the human heart as being full of hidden deceit. Based on my experience, it’s in us all. I’ll bet the chief will agree with that.”

I glanced at Chief Chapman, who moved inside the double doors and stood with his arms crossed. From his expression, he did not agree with my statement. Officer Penbrook snorted and turned away to face the street.

Chief Chapman tilted his head. “C’mon and I’ll introduce you to our detective. He’ll fill you in on his progress.”

The nave held four rows of pews. We proceeded down the middle aisle. A man about fifty years old met us two-thirds of the way to the front. He looked the part of a seasoned investigator in his navy blazer, pale blue shirt, and black slacks. Spiral notepad in his left hand and ink pen in his right.

“Doctor Warner, this is the department’s investigator, Eugene Barnett.”

I extended my right hand. The detective emptied neither hand to shake mine.

“So, you’re the one who caught our purse snatcher. Nicely done.”

I remained silent and waited for the detective to continue.

“You’re younger than I expected.” Eugene’s monotone voice sounded as numb as the expression on his pitted cheeks. He swapped the pen to his left hand, flattened his striped tie with his fingers, even though it hung straight between the lapels of his blazer. “I also heard you have a brother being tried for murder.”

I ignored his insolence. “If either bothers you, why am I here?”

“Contrary to popular belief, not all small-town cops are bumpkins. We put our britches on same as any big-city—”

“That’s enough, Eugene. Just tell the man what he needs to know so we can get the body down from there.”

“Okay, okay.” Eugene tugged the knot in his tie and flared his open collar wider. “Here’s what we know so far.”

The detective started with how the cleric consorted with certain female parishioners, adding one had been one of three or four women shown attention to in ways which were, in the detective’s expressed opinion, unbecoming his position. Somehow, the woman’s husband learned of the attention given to his wife and confronted the pastor about it.

While Eugene talked, I focused on the injuries and evidence visible in the immediate vicinity. The blood patterns on the face, shoulders, and upper chest appeared inconsistent with the injuries to his back and the backs of his arms. Blood turned the hair red near the roots yet the ends looked to be the hair’s natural brown.

“Let’s start with the alleged affair. Has anyone confirmed it or is it hearsay?”

“I’m just telling you what the husband said.”

“Fair enough. Did the man say what time they met?”

“It was early. He told me he went to the pastor’s house before he went to work and he had to be there at six. He said the minister was still alive when they parted ways.”

“Any physical altercation?”

“He denied having any physical contact with the victim. He claims all they did was talk outside the parsonage. Nothing more.”

“I suppose I would deny it too if I were in his shoes. Who called in the report?”

“His secretary.”

“What time?”

“A few minutes before two.”

I checked the deceased's fingers and wrist. Stiff. They extended with difficulty. A sign of rigor mortis in an early stage. The lividity pattern in the legs and arms failed to blanch when I touched them. The postmortem changes exhibited consistency with the man's death before daybreak; also consistent with the statement provided by the witness having seen the minister that morning, if the man had told the truth about the time.

"Has the secretary provided a statement?"

Eugene nodded. "Nothing out of the norm. She said she came by here after being off all morning and found him suspended there and called us."

"Did she tell you why she was not here earlier?"

"Not to my knowledge. Just that she was off. I'll check with the officer who talked to her. Seems a little suspicious her not coming in at regular hours on the day he was murdered."

"Was he married?"

"Yeah. We have an officer over there now. She claimed she didn't see the other man at their home this morning. He never went into the house, according to his statement."

"Have you found his clothes?"

The detective shook his head and continued providing background information on the man who had met with the pastor that morning. "The man's got a record for simple assault that happened over fifteen years ago. Since then, he's become a pillar in the community. I've encountered some jealous husbands over the years, but none I believe would do something this drastic. Not the one I'm talking about. I don't see him doing anything like this."

Light glinted off of an object embedded in the carpet. I squatted for a closer look. Without taking my eyes off the area, I said, "Do you have a flashlight handy, Detective?"

Eugene pulled a Maglite out of a black satchel midway down on the first pew. He walked it over. "What is it?"

I took the flashlight and aimed its beam at a thin strip of copper wire about a half inch long.

"Do you know if they've had any electrical work here in the past few days?"

"No, but I can find out. Why?"

"This." I picked up the wire. Eugene took it and dropped it into a small evidence baggie.

I gazed up at the body. When the light shined on the abdomen, it illuminated a horizontal gash. Two stitches held the cesarean-section-like incision closed. Lack of blood in and around the tissue suggested it occurred postmortem. A bulge in the skin above and below the incision showed a foreign object beneath the skin. Part of its encasement protruded through a swell between sutures.

Eugene leaned over my shoulder. “What is that?”

Eeriness fell over me when I heard a trill muffled by layers of tissue. Only one mechanism emitted that sound.

A bomb.

I spun and pushed upward in one fluid motion. “Get out of here, now!”

Officer Penbrook stood halfway between the front of the building and the street. In his left hand, he held what appeared to be a key fob. He raised his arm. Thumb atop the fob. A red light illuminated on it.

Someone tackled me from the side and shoved me between the third and fourth pew to my right. The shock wave slammed the two of us onto the bench. The twenty-foot pew ripped from the floor, rocked rearward and dumped us onto the one behind it. Blood, pieces of bone, tissue, and splinters of wood flew and covered everything within thirty feet.

The edge of the pew behind me pressed into my ribs on the right. A weight compressed me. Unlike the solidness of wood, I knew it had to be a person. I craned my neck to see.

“Chief? Detective?”

No response.

Liquid trickled along my left jaw and the side of my neck. I smelled its acridness. The thing I did not know was whether the blood was the mine or the person’s sprawled on top of me.

The stillness and darkness of the aftermath intensified the disturbing atmosphere. I squirmed out from under the person whom I knew had saved me from the blast. When the man rolled onto his back, most of his deformed face showed he’d sustained third-degree burns. The tattered clothes and striped tie confirmed his identity.

“Detective? Can you hear me?”

Nothing. I checked his carotid for a pulse. None.

Smoke and burned carpet and wood scents filled the nave. The smoke thinned enough to see obscure images of the destruction.

I heard a cough and a moan several feet away. Thank God. The chief was still alive. I struggled to climb over pews splintered by the blast, my lungs irritated more with each breath I took to get to him. The chief pushed and squirmed to free himself from between the end of a pew and the wall. The right side of his face exhibited second and third-degree burns from the eye down to the jawline. Blood dripped from his nose. He leaned back against the debris-peppered wall. He coughed and struggled to reach his pistol.

“It’s me, Chief. Ridge Warner. You need to stay still.”

A breeze streamed through the nave and dissipated the smoke between our location and the front entrance.

The chief again tugged at the butt of the gun with his fingers. A shard of bone jutted from his forearm. An eerie feeling passed through me when he stared over my right shoulder. We were not alone. He looked at me and lowered his eyes to the weapon lying half out of its holster.

He whispered, "I can't pick it up. My arm's..."

"Hold on, Chief. I'll get help."

His eyes again shifted over my left shoulder. He grabbed me with his left hand and tugged. I rolled rightward and took hold of the chief's gun. A gun roared behind me. The wood atop the end of the first pew splintered inches from my head. Before I could turn to face the shooter, two additional reports from near the front entrance preceded a thud on the floor near what once had been the altar.

I peered toward the church's entrance to get a look at the second gunman. A man dressed in a dark sport coat, a light-colored shirt, no tie, stood backlit in the doorway. The gun in his left hand aimed at the area where I'd heard the thud. As my eyes adjusted to the brightness pouring in around him, I saw enough of his face to recognize him as he eased down the aisle. I raised and aimed the chief's pistol at the man.

The man focused on the person lying in the aisle.

I kept the pistol sights trained on him.

"You can lower that weapon and come out now." The man kicked a dark object away from the motionless man on the floor. Behind him, the first seven or eight rows of the two center sections were now worth nothing more than kindling. "He's no longer a threat."

I turned to Chief Chapman. He was unresponsive. "There's an injured officer over here. He needs medical attention now." I pushed up to one knee while I kept the gun trained on the latecomer. The pew I braced on wobbled. Fewer than half of it remained upright.

The man holstered his weapon. "Emergency responders are already on their way."

"Why should I trust you?"

He chuckled. "If I hadn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation, and you'd be dead."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"This has nothing to do with you, Dr. Warner. It's him." He motioned to the corpse I recognized as Reid Penbrook. He was the officer stationed at the door on my arrival. The person I saw set off the bomb. "This man infiltrated the police force intent on causing harm to certain people in this town, you included."

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

The man turned as two tall and slender female medics rushed through the door. They wore French blue shirts with Ute Pass Regional Ambulance District patches on their sleeves. “Over there.” The stranger directed them to the chief.

The brunette clambered over the rubble to where the chief leaned half-cocked against the wall. She put two fingers to the left side of his neck.

“Pulse is brady. Pupils at four and sluggish.” She studied her watch. “Respirations fourteen and shallow. Chief Chapman, can you hear me?”

He responded with a moan.

An aqua sea of self-confidence beamed from the other medic’s eyes surrounded by hair the color of charred wood clipped up on her head. As she approached, she glanced at the chief’s pistol in my right hand.

“Are you in any pain?”

The name tag pinned to her shirt identified her as Ravenna Tinsley—Angel’s best friend. I decided not to say anything about Angel unless she asked me. My eyes fixated on hers. They mesmerized me.

It was then my cell phone toned an incoming text message. I looked and saw it was from Angel, surprised the phone still worked after the explosion. “*I have info for you. We need to talk.*”

“Sir?” Ravenna leaned forward. She placed a hand on my forearm. Heat transferred from her hand. “Can you hear me?”

Her voice sounded muffled. Tinnitus buzzed my ears. I remembered the blood on my face and neck and, when I checked myself, realized none of it was mine. Numbness blanked the left side of my ribcage. “No. No pain. Not yet anyway. The chief needs your help. I’m okay.”

“What happened here?”

I told Ravenna what I believed was obligatory. I left out the part about finding the reverend nude, suspended above the altar on a cross, and the IED.

“Will you please lower the gun?” Her hand moved to my hand clutching the chief’s pistol. Those eyes beckoned me to do as she asked.

“Do you know him?”

Ravenna glanced at the well-dressed man as he moseyed out the front door, then back at me. “Never seen him before.” She looked at her coworker. The brunette shook her head and applied a bandage over a hand-sized wound on the chief’s upper abdomen, one of several similar injuries visible on his torso and upper extremities.

“Then I’ll hold on to this for now.”

Ravenna again looked at her coworker. The woman shrugged.

“Anybody else in here at the time?” Ravenna asked.

“Barnett,” the chief mumbled.

“I’ll go check him.”

Before I could tell her Eugene Barnett was dead, Ravenna clambered to his side and dropped to one knee. She returned thirty seconds later. She looked at the medic tending to the chief and shook her head.

The stranger wandered back inside and over to the far side of the nave. He produced a penlight and swept its beam back and forth as though searching for something. I shifted to the third pew and sneaked to the aisle. The stranger squatted, stuck his hand into the rubble and picked up what looked like a cube with wires extending outward. He studied the item for several seconds before dropping it into the outside pocket of his jacket. He rose and disappeared around the jagged top of a partition beyond the choir loft.

By the time I plodded across the debris and follow the path he had taken, the man had gone.

Two police officers ran toward the church, their cruisers parked at odd angles on the street at each entrance, lights flashing. A fire engine made its way around one car and pulled up onto the shoulder of the street.

The first officer, a lieutenant, motioned the second officer around the building. “Make sure the building is secure. I’ll have dispatch notify Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms.” The lieutenant bypassed me. He climbed over a section of debris to get to the chief.

With the lieutenant’s help, the medics loaded Chief Chapman onto a gurney and one medic secured him with straps. The rubble forced them to lift the gurney and carry it to the aisle before the medics could lower the wheels and roll the chief to the ambulance. When I tried to assist them, the exertion thrust pounding pain through my left side.

Ravenna asked to have a look. A large contusion in its early stages covered an area the size of a football from below my left shoulder blade down and around to the front of my ribcage. Lacerations within the bruise and across my left triceps oozed blood. I faced the open ambulance while Ravenna assessed my injuries. A black search and rescue backpack sat on the floor opposite the gurney. Loops of rope stuck out of one end.

“Who’s the mountain climber?”

Ravenna glanced where I was looking. She wore a puzzled expression. “I’m part of a mountain rescue squad...I could have sworn I left that at home.” She mumbled her last statement while she lowered my tattered shirt. “You should let a doctor look at you.”

I declined. The ache in my body irritated me more than anything else.

“It will upset Angel if you miss the wedding.”

I acted as if I knew nothing of their friendship. “You and Angel know each other?”

“Know each other. I know Angel’s deepest secrets.”

I doubted that, although I wondered if those aqua eyes ever lied.

End of Sample

Blood Red Deceit: A Crime Thriller by Steve Rush

The idea for *Blood Red Deceit* developed from my career in forensics and, like a former co-worker grinned and referred to protagonist Ridge Warner, “Of course he’s a forensic pathologist.”

Yes, Ridge trained in forensic medicine and became an expert consultant, but expect no cold room full of violent deaths he must autopsy. Fiction characters often want more for themselves and Ridge’s journey led to an unforeseen career detour and this opening paragraph:

“Life threw changes my way, but nothing like this. This latest event altered my future with fiancée Angel Meade. The blood I donated saved her life. An analysis of my blood exposed an inconceivable truth minutes later.”

The major “What if?” question. What will Angel do with this indisputable certainty? As a pantser, not an outliner, I deferred to Angel for the answer. This “truth” annihilates her future with Ridge, ignites her scheme to destroy him, and she dons animosity as if it were her favorite pair of sneakers.

Angel’s reaction becomes an impasse for Ridge, who wishes he knew who wants to kill him. He wishes he knew why. He wishes he never learned the answer.

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Editorial Reviews

BLOOD RED DECEIT is tense, sharp-edged, tight, and will keep you up deep into the night. Highly recommended. —**DP Lyle**, award-winning author of the Jake Longly and Cain/Harper thriller series.

Move over Mission Impossible. Protagonist Ridge Warner promises to give Ethan Hunt a run for his money. Award-winning author Steve Rush delivers a superb thriller that only a former detective and forensic investigator possesses the chops to write. A solid mystery from the opening pages to the nail-biting conclusion. I couldn't turn the pages fast enough. —**Donnell Ann Bell**, Author of *Black Pearl*, A Cold Case Suspense, 2020 Colorado Book Award finalist and *Until Dead*, A Cold Case Suspense, Best Thriller Novel, Imaginarium Convention 2023, Louisville, KY.

Blood Red Deceit by renown forensic crime scene expert, Steve Rush, will keep you on the edge of your seat. Join protagonist Ridge Warner as he struggles to stay alive while unraveling the complicated mystery of who exactly is trying to kill him and why. Rush's scientific background and police experience mesh perfectly with his talent for compelling storytelling to product a page-turner you won't be able to put down. It's a thrill a minute. —**Michael A. Black**, author of the *Trackdown* series, most recently *Devil's Vendetta*, *Devil's Breed*, *Devil's Reckoning*, and the soon to be released *Devils Lair*.

Rush has produced a mysterious thriller loaded with twists, turns, red herrings, and questions that will keep readers flipping the pages. At times the reader will be unable to turn the pages fast enough. —**George Cramer** – Author of the *New Liberty* – The Hector Miguel Navarro Series

In author Steve Rush's fast-paced *Blood Red Deceit* we follow forensic expert, Ridge Warner. Actually, it's more like we race to keep up. He thwarts a purse snatcher, escapes a bombing, and an attempted assassination while trying to prepare for his upcoming wedding day. Then he's asked to assist in the investigation of the local pastor's murder. What could go wrong? As it happens, lots. —**J. D. Webb Author**