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# RIPLEY



Angel Hunt

'One of the best and most ingenious thrillers to come my way.' *Daily Telegraph*

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**Title Page**

**ANGEL HUNT**

Mike Ripley

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# Dedication

This one is for Charlie, Vonnie and Caro  
and anyone from the old days who still holds the negatives.

## Author's Introduction

I wrote *Angel Hunt* in the winter of 1989, and it was published in June 1990 during the Diamond Jubilee of Collins Crime Club.

Animal rights activists and the eternal public debate about fox hunting were both in the news at the time, and *Angel* seemed just the guy to have on your side if you wanted to disrupt a fox hunt.

My decision to have a vicar as one of the bad guys was questioned by my editor, the legendary Elizabeth Walter, who had been Agatha Christie's last editor. I sensed she wasn't too happy with the idea, and she went along with it only if I immediately consulted Crockford's Directory and ascertained that there wasn't a real-life Reverend Geoffrey Bell working as a parish priest.

As it turned out, the very week the book was published, the Church of England Synod introduced a motion banning fox-hunting on church land. Ironically, and more seriously, animal rights activists also exploded a bomb in Bristol the same week.

The book garnered my best reviews to date, particularly from Lord Ted Willis writing in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'Very funny, but it is also one of the best and most ingenious thrillers to come my way in many a long day.'

Lord Willis (the creator of *Dixon of Dock Green*) also suggested 'that we have at last an English crime writer who may be mentioned in the same breath as George V Higgins and Elmore Leonard,' although on one design proof of the paperback edition, the word 'Higgins' got left off, and so it looked as if I was a writer who could be mentioned in the same breath as George V. My wife Alyson had hysterics at that and has never let me forget it.

Praise indeed, but a tad over the top, as I told Lord Willis some time later when he invited me to lunch at the House of Lords (where I've had some splendid lunches with crime-writing Peers). I suspect his hype rather grated on the powers-that-be in the Crime

Writers' Association, as *Angel Hunt* never even made the shortlist of that year's Last Laugh Award for comedy, although it was by general consent a much funnier book than *Angel Touch*, which had won the year before.

It did win an award, however, though nobody really believed it. For writers living in East Anglia, there were annual awards for literature run from the Angel Hotel, Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk and called, appropriately enough, the Angel Awards – one for fiction, one for non-fiction. One of the guiding lights behind it was Malcolm Bradbury, professor of literature at my old university, East Anglia in Norwich.

The omens seemed too good to be true, and Collins entered the book and I accompanied Elizabeth Walter to the awards dinner in December, where the master of ceremonies was the Australian poet Peter Porter. Although not on the jury that year, Malcolm Bradbury was in the audience and rooting for the short-listed authors who had been on his creative writing course at UEA.

The announcement of the winning books was broadcast live on BBC Radio Suffolk (it doesn't get much better than that), with microphones on the top table. The non-fiction winner was a biography of Queen Dido of Carthage and then the fiction winner – *Angel Hunt*. As I went to collect my £500 cheque and shake Peter Porter's hand, he leaned in to me and said, in a loud Australian whisper: 'You know, Mike, I thought the fuck in the back of the Transit was the funniest scene in the book.' At which point, a rather flustered BBC engineer hissed: 'We're still on air'; but as by now it was 10.00 pm and we were in Suffolk, no-one noticed.

After the ceremony, the judges offered to answer questions from the assembled diners, and immediately Malcolm Bradbury jumped in with: 'Were there no proper novels in consideration this year?'

I got my revenge about three years later. I spotted Professor Bradbury at Liverpool Street station sitting in the first class compartment of an inter-city train to Norwich. I was with a reporter friend from the *Morning Advertiser*, the newspaper for publicans, who also lived in Colchester. We had been to a very boozy press

conference somewhere, but David was in a worse state than I, and as we saw Malcolm Bradbury as we walked down the platform, I asked my friend, David, if he wanted to meet the famous novelist, and he said 'Oh yes.' I therefore plonked him down in the seat opposite the surprised Professor, placed four cans of beer on the table between them and said: 'Professor Bradbury, this is David. He thinks *Fahrenheit 451* is the best book you ever wrote.' I then left them to it, jumping off the train to wait for the next one.

I did run into Malcolm subsequently at various events before his death – he became a prolific scriptwriter for the BBC's adaptation of Reg Hill's *Dalziel and Pascoe* series – and he was never less than charming. Because I went to UEA and wrote novels, many people assume I was one of his students, but in fact I read history, not comparative literature. I did once, though, try and get on the course he ran on detective fiction, simply because it was the only university course where I had already read all the books on the reading list; but the course filled up with literature students before I could show off my talent.

Winning the Angel Award (for a book called *Angel Hunt* in the Angel Hotel – you couldn't make this up) inspired Collins to reprint the hardback, even though the paperback was due out soon.

I had taken an interest in the original print-run, as something rather bizarre had happened with the first edition.

A canny Scot called Alex Taylor, who worked in the same office in London, had bought his copy at the launch party held in Murder One on Denmark Street. The next morning, he gave it back to me demanding a refund!

By some freak of printing, pages 209-224 of *Angel Hunt* had been replaced by pages 157-172 of *Coffin and the Paper Man* by Gwendoline Butler, also published by Collins Crime Club. Presumably, my missing *Angel* pages were inserted into Gwen's book, though I never summoned up the courage to ask her.

I was assured that only three copies of the rogue edition existed, and one of those had been captured at the printer's in Glasgow. Amazingly, the two that had escaped were bought by friends: Alex

Taylor had one and the late, great Sarah Caudwell had bought the other, although she only realised the error a year later when she finally got around to reading it.

*Mike Ripley*

*Colchester, July 2006*

# Chapter One

It could have been the extra garlic I'd put in the Rogan Josh that woke me at 2.06 am, but it was probably the noise Billy Tuckett made falling through the bathroom skylight and killing himself.

I knew it was 2.06 am because the bedside clock told me so in orange digits big enough to divert aircraft if the curtains had been open. I knew I'd overdone the garlic in the Rogan Josh because I'd been trying to impress Zaria. I'd even gone to the trouble of finding a real piece of rattan jog – the dried bark that gives a deep red colour to the dish – in the fifth Punjabi deli I'd tried. (The first four had told me to cheat and use vegetable dye. I ask you!)

I'd been house-sitting for Nassim Nassim's cousin Sunil in Leytonstone for a week now, which meant that the five-day house-warming party where all my so-called friends drop in to see how I'm coping, how much booze I've laid on and what the music centre's like, had come to an end. Zaria, a relatively new old friend, had been persuaded to stay over that Sunday night as I had convinced her I was missing my faithful feline companion Springsteen, who was back in Hackney guarding the flat we shared. Apart from her obvious advantages, Zaria also took up less space in bed. It could be a case of Back To The Futon for Springsteen at this rate.

Anyway, all that – and the Rogan Josh, which I'd taken real sweat over, right down to serving it with iced bottles of Kingfisher lager and quarters of lime and rice fried with egg, and to hell with the risk of salmonella – was before Billy Tuckett dropped in.

I mention the Rogan Josh because it must be the reddest red food going and, like all good things, it stains. I know this to my cost, as I spent the next few days discovering which Stain Devil cleaning stick was needed to remove most of my portion from Sunil's white bathroom carpet.

It turned out to be the one the manufacturers recommend for blood and milk stains. That had always seemed an odd combination to me. I mean, why should people feel so homicidal towards milkmen?

I needed it because, when I finally disentangled myself from Zaria's legs (another advantage noted: no claws), I padded over to see what the noise was. Big mistake.

At first I thought it had maybe been a cat on the roof, then possibly some inept burglar. There didn't seem to be any sound coming from the bathroom, so I opened the door and fumbled round the corner to find the light cord. Second, really huge, mistake.

There was a Billy-Tuckett-shaped hole in the skylight, which was actually a big picture window rather than the old-fashioned single-pane type, and a Billy-Tuckett-shaped body lying in the bath, one arm and one leg over the side. I took a step forward so I could see over the edge. Third, really crucial, mistake.

If the fall hadn't killed him, the large diamond of glass he'd brought with him and impaled his neck on certainly had.

*That's* when I threw up on the carpet.

I have a Rule of Life (No 74, actually) that says that you can work your way out of most situations if you can give yourself enough thinking time.

With my head bent over the sink, I had plenty of time to work out my options. My problems were: I had a body in the bath right behind me, a girl I'd known for less than 24 hours in a bed in the next room; I was staying in the house of somebody I'd never met, who was currently at a family wedding somewhere north of Karachi; and somewhere down the yellow brick road, I had to call the cops.

I couldn't do anything about Nassim's cousin being in Pakistan, I reasoned as I rinsed my mouth for the hundredth time. And I couldn't do anything about the body, could I? (I did think about that one.) So that meant I had to call the police, always assuming that the local Neighbourhood Watch hadn't. But I could get Zaria out of there and home fairly quickly. Besides, I had something for

her to do.

Good. Decision taken; something to do. I felt better already. I'd wake Zaria and get her out pronto, then bell the local Bill.

At the time, I honestly never gave a thought as to why Billy Tuckett had been poncing around on the roof in the wee small hours or why he'd chosen Sunil's bathroom to fall through. I only just remembered to put some clothes on.

Zaria snuffled and turned on her back as I put the bedside light on. The lamp had a 'gentle' yellow light bulb, which gave her skin an olive tinge. It was a pleasant sight, as all she was wearing was a gold throat chain that spelled out 'ZARIA' in half-inch letters. I don't know why she wore it; my memory wasn't that bad. Maybe hers was.

'Come on, shake a leg,' I said.

'That's not my leg,' she said, without opening her eyes.

'Really? Maybe that's where I've been going wrong all this time. Come on, get your ass in gear. And don't tell me, that's not ...'

She flapped my hands away as she sat up.

'What's the problem?'

She stretched her arms out in front of her like a cat, proving that Springsteen was still behind on points.

'I think we've had a break-in,' I said, thinking it was the best story to push, and concentrating on pulling up my jeans.

'Burglars?'

'No, very persistent Jehovah's Witnesses. Now get dressed.'

I fumbled around on the floor and found her white boiler suit and one of her high-heeled shoes. From what I could remember, that was two-thirds of her clothing. I flung them on to the bed where she should have been, but wasn't.

'Where are you going?' I said in a loud whisper.

'I need to pee.' She rubbed her eyes with one hand and pointed in the vague direction of the bathroom with the other.

'Not in there you don't, believe me.'

It took a couple of seconds to sink in, then she was struggling into the boiler suit, using language, under her breath, that would have made treble word scores in Rude Scrabble.

While she was looking for her other shoe, I stuffed my feet into trainers – no socks – and pulled on my Steel Wheels Tour sweatshirt.

There's something I want you to do, Zed,' I said to her perfectly-formed backside.

'What?' Her voice was muffled because her head was under the bed, still shoe-hunting.

'Post something for me.'

'It's the middle of the sodding night. Isn't it?' She wiggled, and I almost lost my train of thought.

'In the morning. I'm going to be tied up with the cops, I expect.' She froze.

'Is it anything shady?'

No, you silly cow, it's a book club return. 'Just something I was asked to look after, that's all.' Well, that was almost true.

'But it wouldn't look good if the police ... A-ha!' She started to snake out from under the bed, clutching the renegade shoe.

'Just do it, hey. Or do you want to wait until the Law turns up?'

'Shit, no. I'm outa here.'

She sat on the floor and fastened the ankle strap of the high-heel. I hadn't realised how small she was without them.

I held out my hand. 'Come on. Bag?'

'Charming. You've a really nice morning-after manner.'

'No, your handbag, you Doris.'

'Oh. Sorry. It's downstairs.'

We crept downstairs like naughty children, and Zaria collected a leather handbag no bigger than a small keg of beer from the hallway table.

'Wait here,' I told her. I hadn't put any lights on, so with a bit of luck she would stay there.

I fumbled my way into the living-room and closed the door behind me before hitting the light switch.

Whatever Nassim's cousin Sunil did for a living, he did it from an old-fashioned headmaster's desk and a small personal computer. Behind the desk was the room's single bookshelf containing one of the most boring selections of reading material I'd come across. There

were about half a dozen tax manuals, some computer books, a large-scale London *A-Z* and a copy of Duke Ellington's book, *Music is my Mistress*.

Naturally, I'd found that soon after I'd arrived. In fact, five minutes after checking the record collection (nothing worth taping) and the obvious places where you'd lock the booze away from the hired help. With nothing else to read, it seemed to have the edge on the income tax manuals (though non-believers would say only just), so you can imagine how bad I felt when I opened it to find most of the pages had been razored to provide a nest for a small brown envelope.

The technique's not new. I have a bogus copy of Hugh Brogan's *History of the United States* that has been turned into a fireproof combination lock safe; but that was a professional job done by my mate Lenny the Lathe in return for a favour. This was decidedly amateur night, and if the book itself hadn't stuck out like a sore thumb among the reference works, then a quick look at the floppy spine would have given the game away.

I removed the envelope and decided to dump the book, which, empty, was probably even more suspicious. The envelope was about six inches by four and almost an inch thick. It was sealed with Sellotape and staples, a real belt and braces job. I didn't know what was in it; I just had the feeling that Sunil wouldn't thank me if the boys in blue turned it over in their usual zeal to find something to donate to the Oxfam shop.

I found a felt-tip pen in the desk drawer and addressed the envelope to 'Mr F MacLean' care of a pub I knew in Southwark where they knew me by that name. And if there was any doubt, I always had a spare driving licence in that name anyway.

I grabbed my leather jacket from the chair where it seemed to crawl to no matter where I'd hung it earlier, and found the keys to Armstrong in one pocket and a screwed-up five-pound note in the other.

Zaria was hopping from one foot to the other.

‘Do you think they’re still here?’ she whispered, reaching for the front-door lock.

‘Who?’

‘The burglars.’

‘Oh yeah. Sure of it.’

Well, I was damn sure Billy Tuckett wasn’t going anywhere.

Zaria lived just up Eastern Avenue – let’s face it, half the world lives up Eastern Avenue – in Redbridge, in one of those huge roadside vicarage-like houses that has had to be turned into a rest home for the elderly because no-one else could afford to pay the rates. Well, if they could, they wouldn’t live on Eastern Avenue. Zaria was a day nurse, not an inmate.

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The journey there and back took no more than ten minutes once I'd got Armstrong fired up.

Armstrong is my wheels. He's a black London cab, of the traditional FX4S design, world famous on T-shirts, cheap souvenirs and postcards. Even with a mileage clock that stopped at about 190,000 miles, he still runs to perfection, never gets clamped or a parking ticket, and blends beautifully into the city background. They're becoming even easier to pick up once de-licensed nowadays, thanks to the invasion of the upstart Metrocabs, which drive like a Panzer, look like an undertaker's second-best hearse and give the punters a ride that makes them think they're in a telephone-box on castors. Not that I'm biased, of course.

If Armstrong has a disadvantage, then it's that he hasn't got a passenger seat. So Zaria sat in the back, opened the glass screen and whispered frantically in my right ear all the way home.

Mostly she quizzed me about the burglars, and I said they'd tried to get in through the bathroom window and one of them had put a foot through it, probably coming from the roof next door, and I generally made out that there was a whole gang of footpads up there lying in wait for Santa Claus. It wasn't until we got to Redbridge Station that she thought – and I could almost hear her thinking – about the envelope and the fiver I'd given her.

'It's not drugs, is it?' she said suddenly. 'I didn't think you did drugs, and I won't handle them.'

'It isn't, I don't and you're not,' I said, but I was only sure of one out of three. 'But it is valuable and it might just be what those guys on the roof were after.'

She swallowed this, or seemed to. Thankfully she was still half asleep.

'Well ... if you're sure ... I'll post it tomorrow in my lunch-hour.'

I pulled up outside the rest home she worked at and reached through the window to open the back door for her, the way real mushers do without getting out themselves. She leaned in and pecked me on the lips. 'You've got my number?'

I bit my tongue and simply said: 'Sure, I'll bell you tomorrow or Tuesday latest. Okay?'

'Not the mornings, remember. They tend to sleep in the afternoons.'

'Got it. See yer.'

I watched her until she'd unlocked the side door of the big house and turned on a light. You can never be too careful these days. The residents could have been waiting to mug her with a Zimmer frame.

She waved and I did a U-turn – taxis are ace at that – and headed back to the nightmare in the bathroom. Why me? Other people have spiders in their tubs.

En route, I spotted a litter-bin on a streetlamp and I screeched up to it, jumped out and deposited the hollow copy of the Great Duke's book.

If I'd known then what I knew later, the envelope would have gone in with it.

Hassle, hassle, hassle.

I suppose my call went through to Wanstead nick, but I didn't ask. The copper on the receiving end took the details twice, and I didn't blame him. You don't often get people ringing up in the middle of the night to say they've found a body in the bath. Well, not on Sundays anyway. I promised I wouldn't touch anything, having no intention whatsoever of going anywhere near the bathroom again. I hadn't anything left inside me to throw up.

The first two were traffic cops, and they were on the street cruising for the house number, no sirens out of deference to the ratepayers, within five minutes.

I made sure I looked as if I'd just got out of bed and dressed in a hurry – hence no socks and the sweatshirt – and went down to front garden to wave them in.

The one who took the lead looked big enough and mean enough to relish a ruck if there was a chance of one. His colleague, smaller and older, made sure he was going to be second going into any dark places.

‘A break-in, is it, sir?’ asked the big one, tightening his black gloves like he’d seen on television.

I did a double-take before I realised he’d been talking to me. I wasn’t used to uniforms calling me ‘sir.’ Come to think of it, even when the taxman wrote to me, he spelled it c-u-r; which is why I never wrote back.

‘Er ... I’m not sure, officer. There was a guy on the roof and then suddenly he was in the bath.’

The big one looked down at me as if I’d just crawled out from under.

‘The bath? Did you say bath? Or bathroom?’

‘Both. He ended up in the bath which, in this house, is actually in the bathroom.’

Watch it, watch it. That lip of yours will get you into trouble one day.

‘There’s a window in the roof,’ I said quickly. ‘More a skylight, really. He fell through that. He actually landed in the bath itself.’

Quite convenient, really, thinking about the blood.

‘I don’t even know he was trying to break in,’ I added lamely.

‘Odd place to go for a midnight stroll, sir,’ said the older one sarkily.

I didn’t tell him I knew people who did much weirder things than that.

‘And just how did he get up there?’ The big one looked up at the night sky, seeking inspiration. Then, looking at me: ‘Have you called an ambulance?’

‘No. It didn’t seem ... necessary. You see, he brought most of the glass with him and sort of ... slit his throat.’

‘You haven’t touched anything, have you, sir?’ The older one moved forward to take command now that it was clear the Apaches weren’t waiting in ambush.

‘Not bloody likely,’ I said, then wished I hadn’t.

‘Get the gloves, Dave.’

The big one looked slightly disappointed, then trotted back to their car and took a black shoulder-bag out of the boot. They came

into the hallway before opening it and taking out rubber surgical gloves. Since the Aids scare, that was now standard operating procedure. It hadn't crossed my mind, but I was grateful now that I'd been too busy throwing up to examine the body too closely.

'Right, sir, lead on,' said the smaller one.

I turned on lights as we went upstairs.

'Lived here long, sir?' One of them asked as we got to the landing.

'I don't actually live here at all,' I answered honestly. (Rule of Life No 5: always tell the truth; not necessarily all of it and not all at once.) 'I'm house-sitting for a friend of a friend; well, a cousin of my landlord, actually. I've been here about five days.'

'And where are the owners?'

I noted that he'd forgotten to say 'sir.'

'Pakistan. Until after Christmas.'

'I see. And where exactly do you live?'

'Hackney.'

'Hah! Bandit country,' said the big one from behind us.

I let that one go as we'd got to the bathroom, and I opened the door and stood to one side to let them in. I could feel the cold draught from the hole in the roof, but I had no intention of getting any closer.

'Oh, sweet Jesus!' I heard one of them say, followed by a retching sound choked back in the throat.

'Fuck-ing Ada!' shouted the other.

Then the big one appeared in the doorway, ashen-faced and wide-eyed.

'Why didn't you tell us the floor's covered in puke?' he said angrily, hopping on one foot.

'Oh yes. Er ... sorry.'

By 4.00 am I had a houseful of them. A brace of ambulance men, assorted uniformed beat coppers, two plainclothes men and a white-haired, white-coated pathologist who chain-smoked Players Navy Cut. He looked pretty fit for 75, but for 51, which is what he probably was, decidedly rough.

I made a gallon or so of tea until I ran out of milk, then a pot of black coffee, and pressed every cup and mug in Sunil's fitted kitchen into service.

The extra vehicles in the street, with their flashing blue lights, had brought some of the neighbours to their doors or bedroom windows, and one of the uniforms was designated to go and ask them if they'd seen anything. From what I could see, peeping out from behind the lace curtains in the living-room, nobody was admitting to much.

The two plainclothesmen disappeared for about half an hour in their Ford Escort and returned from the other end of the street. Why walk round the block when you can drive?

They hadn't said much to me apart from announcing themselves as Detective-Sergeant Hatchard and Detective-Constable White, and even when they got back inside, Hatchard talked to the pathologist while White went off for a snoop around, as policemen do.

I took a mug of coffee up to the pathologist so I could earwig what was going down. He nodded his thanks as he took it and flipped another cigarette butt into the toilet. Before it had hissed out, he was lighting another.

'Thanks,' he croaked. 'Four sugars?'

'Absolutely,' I said, with the conviction of knowing I was going to live longer than he was.

'Whatderwannaknow?' he asked Hatchard.

'Whatever you've got,' said the Sergeant, his hands deep inside his overcoat pockets.

They didn't seem to mind me hanging in there, but it was getting a bit like the ocean liner scene in the Marx brothers' *Night at the Opera*. Two uniforms were trying to put an extendable ladder up to the skylight – God knows where it had come from – over the bath without actually having to look at the body. Another civilian was trying to set up a camera and tripod to photograph the scene, and everybody was trying to sidestep the vomit on the carpet.

'If the fall didn't break his neck,' said the pathologist in a cloud of smoke, 'then the massive blood loss and shock did. There's a piece of glass the size of your fist in his neck. Damn near took his head