

ALEX BARCLAY

Blood Loss

HARPER

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PROLOGUE

It was an imprisonment, twice over. Minds captured first by insanity were captured a second time by Kennington Asylum for the Insane. Built in 1904, it was a dignified structure on a salvaged tract of Denver city parkland; mental wellness forged from red bricks and green grass. In appearance, it stood for its promises. But until it became the hollow shell it is today, it never truly reflected them.

In contrast, the grounds were overrun, choked by nature untended, as if the twisted roots of madness, ignored for over a century, were finally unbound.

People had been sent to Kennington to be healed, but when they were captured a third time – by a camera’s lens – they stood in doomed herds, their faces blank, their brains looted. It was clear that the asylum was not a pitstop on a journey to wellness, it was the endpoint of a descent. Their clothes were soiled, their limbs atrophied, their bodies swept into corners like dirt, like something to be thrown away.

* * *

CONDEMNED. Even the sign was. The boy stared at it. The Kennington photographs had been taken in 1950, but they had resurfaced sixty years on to be laid bare across eight pages of a Sunday supplement. They had made grown men cry. But the not-so-grown, the high-schoolers . . . well, the photos made them want to go to that fucked-up place and party with ghosts.

The boy climbed onto the perimeter wall and took a thick black marker from his coat pocket. He gripped the sign with a gloved hand, crossed out the C-O-N and drew an A through the E. DAMNED. Just like a century's parade of lunatic patients . . . just like the people inside the building that he had come for tonight. He was yet to know that he would leave without seeing them. And his inadvertent victim, laughing and throwing back shots, dancing through the abandoned wards this Hallowe'en night, was yet to know that her bright ethanol eyes would be haunted hollows by the time the music died.

The boy made his way through the woods that bordered the drive. It was a tangled mess of trees and bushes, and he moved blindly until his boots hit stone. He looked down. There they were – the signs painted onto the ground to lead the way: small, yellow lightning strikes. He followed them around to the back entrance where a huge timber door had hung until its hinges had been unscrewed, until it had been thrown to one side.

Somewhere in the dark distant heart of the building, voices and music pulsed. He paused in the empty doorway. Up ahead, more lightning strikes were drawn on the ground and he began to follow them, moving toward the sound and to where the final symbol was drawn outside the door of the old electroshock therapy room.

He stepped inside. The room seemed filled with giant

eyes. He blinked. There was a swamp of people in front of him. He blinked again. They were moving like a mass of maggots. He blinked again. This was not his world. He was sober. They were all drunk, or wild or weakened by illegal drugs. He moved through the crowd, and it swelled against him. A door led off into another room. He was about to go in. Then he saw someone. A girl, standing against a wall, talking to a guy. But her eyes were boring into *him*, he could feel it like heat. She left the other guy, and walked toward him, and when she got past him, she glanced back, and her smile was like the answer yes. He followed her. She was wearing a black top that was slashed all the way down the back. Her skirt was *so* short, plaid and pleated. She had black leggings underneath, and boots like his, the tongues out, the laces undone. Her hair was black and shiny and cut into a short bob like a doll's. A small tattoo was growing like a vine up the center of her neck.

She picked up speed down the hallway, down another, disappearing when she reached the last room. He felt his heart surge. She slid on top of the table at the furthest corner of the room, and her knees were apart. She was smiling at him. His whole body was pounding, not just his head anymore. She opened her mouth to speak, but as he pressed himself against her, he could feel that her whole body was exactly the same way, and he knew that no-one should talk.

It was his first time. He had no idea sex could make you so angry. So, so fucking angry. *This is insane*. He laughed. *This is insane*.

He lay there when it was over, staring at the ceiling. They had wound up on the floor. Her hair had come off. It must have been a wig. It was in his hand.

He got up and started to fix his clothes. 'I gotta go,' he said.

When he put his hands in his pockets, he could feel the paper. He didn't need the drawing any more. This had made up for it. She could have it. He crouched down beside her and placed it by her head.

'Thank you,' he said. 'That was awesome.'

As his mouth pressed against her cheek, a small bloody bubble of saliva grew between her lips, and burst.

I

Taber Grace had a slim file on the passenger seat of his car and a cigarette burning down in the ash tray. He was sitting back against the head rest, his bloodshot eyes staring into the dark. He had often thought about sitting in the same position, in his garage, breathing in exhaust fumes through a hose pipe.

Taber Grace was forty-two years old, short and slight. He liked to dress in straight-leg jeans and plain, washed-out shirts, always buttoned to the neck. His hair, thick and brown, fell across one eye. Someone in a bar once joked that it was his private eye. The Private Eye with the private eye. Taber Grace mostly had the sense not to go into bars to listen to drunk talk. He was not a competent drunk. He would recognize the early signs of his drunkenness – the softness around the edge of his vision, the longer search for words – and it was too hard these days to resist being drawn to the dissolution.

After an hour waiting in the dark, watching the snow fall over Denver, Taber Grace knew that his client was not going

to show. November 14, evening: it was to have been their second meeting – to see how the client wanted to proceed, based on Taber Grace’s preliminary findings. These meetings were always the same. The client would sit like a prisoner in the electric chair. But the current came from within – the spark of dueling fears as their suspicions were about to be confirmed or dismissed. There was no comfort in either. And there was no comfort for Taber Grace. He had intimate knowledge of his clients, their lives, the lives of those close to them. He was the stranger-witness to their darkest betrayals. They needed this knowledge, they paid him for it, yet they didn’t want him to have it. Each time he delivered it, he could see in their eyes how quickly he became repellent.

Taber Grace had been the bearer of bad news before. It had been part of his first job. Then, like now, it never touched him. It was a practical delivery of information, uncomplicated by emotion. In that job, he had been bound by propriety. He was on time, he spoke politely, he never swore. When he was fired, it became easy to believe that he was what he had always feared he was – just a small-town boy, shoulder to shoulder with his blue-collar buddies, no taller. The problem was that he had never fit into that small-town world and he had run from it as soon as he could.

Taber Grace had liked the mannerly man he became when he left his home town. He liked his new life in Denver. But what he had loved at the start became what he hated at the end, like a failed relationship. The life that came with his job was like a smart overcoat he had carefully put on, that fit perfectly, but gradually began to slip from his shoulders. And he only realized it was gone when the world got very, very cold. And later, when his home did.

BLOOD LOSS

Melissa Grace, his sweetheart wife, had also liked the mannerly man, and couldn't understand why, despite the early end to one career, her husband appeared to have thrown it all away. But Taber Grace, fired and depressed, slowly convinced himself that his job had been the first thing his wife had seen, the part that impressed her, and promised her so much. It turned out that Taber Grace never believed that his wife loved him for who he was. For his heart . . . or for how it used to be.

The Graces had one son. He had blond hair to his shoulders and an exceptionally pretty face: his mother's face, with his father's long eyelashes. He was christened Taber Grace Jr, but his father, as his own life unraveled, began to call him TJ. He had given him the nickname he swore he never would, because maybe being called Taber Grace would just be bad luck.

Taber Grace knew that he had neglected his marriage to death. Even now, at times, he felt that the life he thought he would have ran parallel to this new, empty one. At times, he felt that back at his house, Taber Grace 1.0, proud, loving husband and father, was having pancakes with his wife and son.

Yet, here he was. He had walked from his marriage not into bars and strip clubs, but down into the sewage pipes that ran under other lives. A client might heft the manhole cover aside; Taber Grace made the descent.

And Taber Grace was the one who came back up covered in shit.

Summer was hiker and biker season in Breckenridge, Colorado, but winter was when the pretty little town really came to life. It was then that its true beauty shone – in the glow of the white peaks, in the sparkle of the fairy lights down Main Street, in the headlights of the groomers, in the bright, after-ski faces.

In winter, the population of Breck could go from three-and-a-half thousand to more than ten times that, yet its magic was how it held its ground and its charm. There were plenty of hotels, inns and condos to accommodate Breck's visitors, and the newest was The Merlin Lodge & Spa. It was a small hotel in a small town with a big heart, and it had a mid-sized problem: it had opened too early.

'That's my opinion, anyway,' said the desk clerk. His name, Jared Labati, was printed on a gold badge on his white shirt. The shirt was a size too small, his black pants a size too big. He was only in his late teens, yet strikingly at odds with the healthy image of the country's skinniest state. His shaggy brown hair curled out at the ends and was combed forward and sideways across most of his wide face.

It was a style for a slimmer kid. A tiny diamond ring shone in a right ear that was prominent enough to poke through his mass of hair.

Erica Whaley was standing at the check-in desk with her husband, Mark. 'It didn't say anywhere on the website that the hotel was brand new,' she said. 'Lucky us.' She smiled.

Mark Whaley was holding his credit card paused in mid-air. He glanced at his wife. They laughed. 'OK – go ahead,' said Mark.

'Did you have far to come?' said Jared.

'No – Denver,' said Mark.

'The rooms are completely finished – don't get me wrong,' said Jared, 'and any extra work that needs to be done won't happen on weekends, so it will be quiet during your stay. The major work is done . . . except for the Spa. Sorry.' He directed this at Erica. But she had turned to see her three-year-old son, Leo, hanging upside down from the back of a brown leather sofa, his face red with the rush of blood.

Mark spoke to Jared. 'Our son tests all surfaces and objects for suitability to climb or swing from.' He paused. 'Then climbs or swings from them, regardless of his findings.'

Erica sprinted for Leo, grabbing him under his arm and swinging him into the air.

Mark raised his eyebrows at Jared. 'That was close. His Spidey sense is weak.'

Jared smiled.

'OK, be honest,' said Mark, leaning in to him, speaking quietly. 'Will this be a comfortable stay? My little girl isn't feeling too good.' Mark's eleven-year-old daughter from his first marriage, Laurie, was on the sofa reading a book, oblivious to her Spiderbrother.

'You bet,' said Jared. 'They're just doing some things like wiring, and putting fancy room numbers on the doors, etc.'

‘Hmm . . .’ said Mark. ‘No room numbers? That could be interesting.’

‘The doors are numbered with laser print-outs for now, don’t worry,’ said Jared.

‘OK,’ said Mark. ‘I just wanted to make sure that if the Parkers are coming back to reclaim Leo that they know which room to go to.’

Jared paused for a moment, then smiled. ‘Peter Parker is Spiderman, right?’

‘Yes, he is,’ said Mark, ‘just so we’re clear . . .’ He smiled, and turned around to see his wife struggling back to the reception desk with her bucking son jammed onto her hip and shouting at her to let him go.

‘Take him,’ said Erica to Mark. She almost dropped Leo at Mark’s feet. The little boy sprang up.

Erica shook her head. ‘He’s like those indestructible, I don’t know, *zombies* that you can’t kill – they keep coming back to life.’

Mark looked at Jared. ‘We don’t want to kill him,’ he said. ‘Honestly. Or return him to the Parkers.’

Erica had clearly heard the Parker reference before. She called, ‘Laurie, sweetie?’

Laurie closed her book and came over.

‘Just like that,’ said Erica, squeezing Laurie against her, and kissing the top of her head. ‘How are you feeling, sweetheart?’

‘I’m fine now,’ said Laurie. ‘I don’t know what happened, but the pain’s gone.’

Erica held the back of her hand to Laurie’s forehead. ‘No fever. And you’ve got good color in your cheeks. I pronounce you fit and well.’

Laurie smiled. ‘Why, thank you.’

Leo was swinging out from the reception desk, his feet

working hard to climb to the top. He dropped to the floor and ran away.

'Your turn,' said Erica.

Laurie ran after him.

Jared went into the back office.

'Loving the loose cannon desk clerk,' said Mark.

'I know,' said Erica. She wrapped her arms around Mark, and kissed his neck. Then she moved up to his ear.

'Is this about hotel sex?' said Mark, leaning back.

Erica smiled. 'That goes without saying,' she said. 'This is about dinner.'

'What about Laurie . . . is she feeling better?' said Mark. 'Is she OK to be left with a sitter?'

'Oh, she's fine,' said Erica. 'I think it might have been a little attention seeking?'

'Or she wanted to make sure we wouldn't leave her to go to dinner,' said Mark.

'No,' said Erica. 'I was just talking to her, she said she was absolutely fine. So?'

Mark hooked his arm around Erica's waist, and pulled her close. 'I promised the kids I'd watch *Toy Story 3*.'

'Well, I promised myself I wouldn't lose my mind,' said Erica. 'So, you watch the movie, I'll go down to the bar and pick up a snowboarder.'

'Mrs Whaley,' said Mark, 'the kids and I can watch the movie while you take a bath, slip into something less comfortable, and by the time you have done the makeup I don't think you need to wear, yet apply so beautifully, I'll be ready to accompany you to the bar to oversee your choice of snowboarder.'

'Deal,' said Erica.

Jared came back to the desk. 'Alrighty,' he said, setting two keys on the desk.

'Old-fashioned keys,' said Erica. 'Nice touch.'

'You'll be in Room 304,' said Jared. 'That's on the third floor. Elevator is that way. You'll be staying in a family suite – two inter-connecting rooms. Do you need help with your bags?'

'No, thank you,' said Mark.

'Well, OK then. Enjoy your stay.'

'Oh, we will,' said Erica.

'We'd like to arrange for a sitter to look after the kids for a couple hours, while we go down to dinner,' said Mark.

'Not a problem,' said Jared. 'For what time?'

'Eight thirty for the sitter?' said Mark. 'Nine for dinner?' He turned to Erica. 'That'll leave us some time to check her out before we entrust our prized possessions to her.'

Agent Ren Bryce sat at her desk in The Rocky Mountain Safe Streets Task Force, a violent-crime squad of eleven based in Denver. It was Saturday night, and everyone had gone to the bar, except the boss, Special Supervisory Agent Gary Dettling, and Cliff James, Ren's big-bear buddy. Cliff was ex-Jefferson County Sheriff's Department. At fifty-three, he was the eldest of the team, and at two-hundred pounds, the most huggable. Cliff and Ren, along with blond, kind, grandma-friendly Robbie Truax and arrogant, short-ass numbers-guy Colin Grabien, had become a mini-squad of movable parts. The arrangement of their desks and the maneuvering of two filing cabinets could create a subtle break in the squad's bullpen that was more psychological than visible. Otherwise, their boss would have done something about it. If he could have only thrown Colin Grabien out into the general population, that would have worked for Ren. The book was *The Three Musketeers*. Not *The Three Musketeers and the Dickhead*.

Ren's cell phone rang, and the screen flashed with a photo of her older brother Matt – her best friend, therapist, and

moral conscience rolled into one. He was thirty-nine – two years older than Ren – and lived in Manhattan with his wife, Lauren, and their three-month-old son, Ethan.

‘Finally,’ said Matt when Ren answered.

Silence.

‘You’re alive,’ said Matt.

‘Yes, I am,’ said Ren.

‘Just, you didn’t text back,’ said Matt. ‘And . . . did you get my voicemails?’

‘Sorry, yes,’ said Ren.

‘Are you OK?’ said Matt.

‘Yes!’ said Ren. ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

Pause. ‘Um . . . maybe because last month, you could barely make it from the bed to the sofa? And you phoned me several times bawling your eyes out. In the middle of the night—’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Ren. ‘I know that’s hard with Ethan and everything . . .’

‘You can call me any time, you know that,’ said Matt. ‘I’m always here, but . . . that’s not the point. You dropped off the face of the earth.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ren. ‘I didn’t mean to worry you.’

‘You never do,’ said Matt.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Ren.

‘Exactly that. You never *mean* to. Next time, keep me posted, that’s all.’

‘Fine.’ *Jesus.*

‘So . . . what have you been doing?’ said Matt. ‘Are you OK? What changed? I was so worried. Ever since Helen . . .’

Ren was bipolar, unmedicated, and shrink-free. Her beloved psychiatrist of two years, Helen Wheeler, had been murdered four months earlier, and Ren and her FBI undercover past had been painfully entangled in her death.

'Positive thinking!' said Ren. 'Talking to you really helped that last time, Matt. You cheered me up. And when I got off the phone, I just said, OK, what can I do? So I went online, looked at positive thinking websites, ordered some positive thinking books on Amazon. I looked up psychiatrists in Denver, printed off a few names . . . and I just told myself, get a grip.'

'And did you find a psychiatrist?' said Matt.

'No . . .'

'Ren . . . you've been very down for . . . months.'

'I'm OK now,' said Ren. 'I'm feeling much better.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear that,' said Matt. 'I really am.'

'And,' said Ren. 'I met this amazing guy.'

Silence.

'Matt?' said Ren. 'Are you there?'

'Yes,' said Matt. 'When did this happen?'

'Two weeks ago—'

'Which might explain the radio silence . . .'

Ugh. 'Anyway, I went out with work, then the guys all went home, I stayed on with Colin Grabien's girlfriend, Naomi. The woman is nuts. Anyway, next thing, I met this really cute guy—'

'And off the radar you go.' His tone was flat.

'I wasn't off the radar,' said Ren. 'I was in work.'

'I got one text from you weeks ago, then nothing,' said Matt.

'You sound like mom . . .'

'Your worst nightmare. We've been through this before, Ren. This is not an on/off thing: you can't call me all upset, then drop off the face of the earth when everything is OK. I didn't know everything was OK.'

'Well, I would have called you if I was going to jump off a cliff . . .'

 Ren laughed.

Silence.

'So . . . how're things with you?' said Ren.

'Exhausting,' said Matt.

'You don't sound yourself,' said Ren. She could hear him sigh.

'So,' said Matt, 'are you going to call one of the psychiatrists?'

'Yes . . .' said Ren.

'Once more with feeling.'

'I will. It's Saturday night . . .'

'Ren . . . Monday morning, please do.'

'Yes, OK. Jesus.'

'Enjoy the rest of your weekend.'

'You too.'

Ren put down the phone.

Well, that was depressing.

Ren turned to Cliff.

'I'm taking advantage of Colin's absence,' she said. 'To ask you this question – is he serious about crazy Naomi?'

'I think he has found The One,' said Cliff, smiling.

'Hmm,' said Ren. 'I'm not sure she feels the same way. I really like the woman. I do. But . . . remember I ended up staying out with her a couple of weeks back? We had a lot to drink, but she was . . . behaving like a single lady. All the single ladies.'

'All the single ladies,' said Cliff. He put his hand up.

'She zoned in on this guy at the bar, like it was her mission to bag him,' said Ren.

'And did she?' said Cliff.

'No, but . . . I was right there – she was hardly going to disappear with him.'

'Maybe she's just insecure,' said Cliff, 'or competitive, or . . .'

'Hmm,' said Ren. 'She's like those women who other women love . . . until they see them around their man. She's a girl's girl, and a man's girl, but . . . you get the feeling she's distracting you with her high-larity, while she's got her hand on your boyfriend's ass.' Ren paused. 'I'm safe for girlfriends and wives. I'll laugh or joke with yo' man, but I don't want him, he's all yours. I think I make that clear. I've never taken someone's man. Naomi . . . I think . . . she *does* want to take other men.'

'And I thought you didn't care about Colin . . .' said Cliff.

Ren smiled. 'And don't mention this to him, by the way.'

'No,' said Cliff.

'It would be quite the irony,' said Ren, 'a manwhore hanging up his riding boots for a womanwhore.'

'Ren, that sentence is wrong "on so many levels",' said Cliff.

'I'll get you coffee for that,' said Ren.

Cliff's phone rang. He picked up. 'Glenn? Shoot,' he said. Glenn Buddy was a Denver PD detective, and Cliff's closest friend.

'Really?' said Cliff. 'No. Nothing. I'm here with Ms Ren. Let me put you on speaker.'

'Hey, Ren,' said Glenn. 'We've got a second rape. Victim's parents found her in her bedroom when they got back from the movie theater. She is hanging by a thread. We think it's the Kennington guy . . .'

'Shit,' said Ren.

'That's bad news,' said Cliff.

'How old is she?' said Ren.

Glenn let out a breath. 'She's fourteen.'