

ALEX BARCLAY

Blood Runs Cold

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Prologue

In the lights of the police cruisers, her face was a strobing image of pain and fear. But she was still, to the child in her arms, a haven. She ran as fast as her violated body would allow, pressing his head to her cheek, his hair soaking up their sweat, blood, spit, tears. A terrible, ruined stench rose from them in the damp heat.

She staggered on, flinching at the stones and branches underfoot, her shoes long lost, too beautiful for the night. The trees swayed toward them and away, and when they gave enough shelter, she stopped. She prised the tiny hands from around her neck, breaking the dead-man's grip of a seven-year-old boy. She tried to smile as she lowered him to the ground. Black pinpricks of gravel shone from her lips.

'Do not make a sound,' she said. 'Not a sound.'
Her voice was edged in nicotine.

The boy quickly clamped his arms around her legs. She shoved him sharply backwards, away from her wounds. He fell hard. She watched without feeling. He got up and moved toward her again, tears streaming down his face.

‘No,’ she hissed, shaking her head. ‘No.’

She crouched down. ‘You have to hide, OK?’ She pointed to the scrub close by. ‘Go. I’ll be right here.’ She squeezed his hand as she released it.

He did as she said. She moved a few steps forward into a clearing, cracking the forest floor. Her face was in darkness. But in the faint glow of a flashlight, relief swept over her features; a picture, flashing like a warning.

The man walked from the trees. He looked at his wife – bloodied and soiled, her hand gripping her ripped-open blouse in what dignity she could find. She slumped against him, the sounds she made raw and disturbing.

The little boy watched.

*As I was walking up the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd stay away*

‘Mira, Domenica,’ said the man. Look.
Domenica turned to where she had run from.

Beyond the trees, a fire raged and smoke filled the sky. She was transfixed.

'Hellfire,' she said.

But her eyes shone with something more than flames.

PART ONE

1

Rifle, Colorado

Jean Transom woke to the glow of her desk lamp and the feeling that someone had laid a trail of explosives under her world while she slept. Two work files lay in front of her – brown manila folders, the pages inside clean, neat and annotated. The top file held no photographs, but was open on a drawing – a basic floor plan, the benign geometry of rectangles and circles and squares coming together on a page to represent a space that had been so malignant. Jean inhaled deeply, but what followed was a broken breath. She pressed her hands on the desk and stood up.

She took a shower, rubbing a bar of soap briskly over her body under the hot jets. She dressed in a white shirt, tan tapered pants and soft leather shoes.

‘Come here, baby,’ she said, smiling as she walked

into the kitchen. She hunkered down and reached out a hand. 'Come here, McGraw, you sweet little boy.'

The shiny black cat stared her down.

'That's why it's called a catwalk, isn't it?' she said. 'You know how to move, don't you? And you know how to look at me like you are fabulous and I am not. But I can be fabulous, you'd be surprised to hear. Yes I can.' She laughed as he turned his back, raised his tail, and made his way slowly to his bed in the corner.

'Lazy, baby,' said Jean. 'I have a lazy man living in my house. And if you're not going to talk to me . . .' She reached over and turned on her old black stereo. For a few seconds, Jean Transom sang along to the music, gently and off-key.

She ate her breakfast – oatmeal, honey and fruit. She filled the dishwasher, wiped down the counters and folded the tea towel by the sink.

As she walked out of the kitchen, carrying a cup of decaf back to her office, pain and sorrow swelled again inside her. Everyone is born with places to hide secrets; mind, heart and body. A family can spread the burden along the branches of its trees; some shatter in the storm, others survive the most relentless assaults.

She sat down at her desk and stared at the diagram – years old, preserved in plastic, drawn in blues and greens by a child's determined hand. It was a diagram that Jean Transom could trust,

a child she knew had screamed in the night with the visions. She put it in her work file and went into the hallway.

Her hand shook as she picked up her purse and pulled out her FBI creds. She snapped them on to the right inside breast pocket of her jacket and walked out the door.

Golden, Colorado

Ren Bryce woke to white porcelain and the feeling that someone had laid her free weights on her head while she slept. She reached a hand up to take them away, but her knuckles hit the underside of the toilet bowl. She opened her eyes wider and saw splashes of what had surged from her stomach at four a.m. Red wine. She rolled on to her back. Her blue dress, beautiful and complimented twelve hours earlier, was open to the waist, limp and stained. She turned her head slowly and saw her stockings in the corner by the toilet brush. She closed her eyes again.

She dragged herself slowly upright and was soon hanging over the bowl, heaving nothing, but hit with the smell of her previous efforts. She retched until silver stars burst before her eyes. She hauled herself standing and turned on the shower, spending ten minutes washing her hair and body with six different products.

From her bedroom, her iPod alarm exploded full volume with Dropkick Murphys.

*Let's finish these drinks and be gone for the night
Cos I'm more than a handful you'll see
So kiss me, I'm shitfaced . . .*

Ren jumped from the shower and ran naked to turn down the volume. She dried herself with a towel from the floor, then threw on pink lace boy shorts, a matching bra, a black fitted shirt, black bootleg pants and black heels. She walked past her dressing table, a wave of nausea sweeping over her at the thought of makeup. But she gave in. Her day was already going to be bad.

She grabbed a clip with one hand, twisted her wet hair with the other and pinned it up. She sat down at the mirror and moisturized in slow motion. Her face was a blank canvas; dark skin, pale green eyes, high cheekbones. Somewhere in her past, there was Iroquois blood. She dragged her makeup toward her and applied a calm surface to the choppy waters.

Vincent was downstairs on the sofa reading the paper.

'Hi,' said Ren.

'Appropriate song choice.' His voice was flat.

'Yes,' she said. 'Sorry about the volume.'

'The volume?' said Vincent, looking up.

Ren stared at him from across the room.

'Is that it?' he said.

'Is what it?' said Ren.

'Have you nothing to say for yourself?'

Ren kept walking into the kitchen. She poured a mug of black coffee.

Vincent came in behind her. 'Can you explain your behavior at least?'

'OK,' said Ren, turning around, 'you've just used three sentences – in a row – that my mom used to say to me when I was, like, seventeen.'

'Stop with the whole mom thing.'

'Yeah, well, it's true. That's what you sound like. I'm sick of listening to you treat me –'

'No, no, no. *I'm* sick. Of all of this.'

Ren opened her mouth.

'Listen to yourself,' said Vincent. 'You are thirty-six years old and you sound like a child.'

'Fuck you,' said Ren.

Vincent held up his finger. 'I can't do this any more,' he said. 'You were way out of line last night.'

Ren put her hands to her ears. 'Shut up. I don't want to know.'

He pulled her hands gently away. 'I know you don't. But you went ballistic.' He shook his head. 'I tried everything.'

Ren remembered the start of the evening, her nice dress, her perfect makeup, her pinned-back hair, Vincent's smile when he saw her walk down the stairs.

'Did you see a work file around here anywhere?' she said. 'Did you tidy anything away?'

'No, I didn't.'

'Shit.' She put her mug down and strode around the living room, opening drawers and lifting up cushions. 'Shit.'

'It's not there, OK? I cleaned the entire place this morning. Can we talk about last night?' He was close to grabbing her wrist.

Ren glanced at her watch. 'Shit. Sorry. I just don't have the time.'

'Tonight?' she called after her as she ran into the hall.

'No,' said Vincent, following her. 'No.'

'OK. What did I do last night?' she said, turning to him. 'Tell me.'

'It was more what you said.'

'I was drunk. It doesn't count.'

'Yes it does,' said Vincent.

'Jesus, why can't you just get that I say things I don't mean when I'm drunk?'

'Because it hurts, Ren. It fucking hurts, OK?'

'But if you know what I'm saying is not true, how can it hurt you? I mean, that's like me getting offended because you call me, I don't know . . . something I'm totally not.'

'Great, Ren. We've been over this before. You have a very simple way of looking at it. You think you can say what you like to me and I'll be fine. But what happens is you totally hook me into

your bullshit. You are so convincing. The way you say everything, I believe you. It's like every time, you're having an epiphany.'

'Well, if you know it's every time, why don't you ignore it?'

'For Christ's sake, Ren, that's just not how it works. Do you even remember what you said to me last night?'

Ren said nothing.

'Well, at least I'm seeing the glow of pre-emptive shame,' said Vincent.

'That's mean.'

'Try this for mean: "Vincent, you're dull is your problem. You're conservative and stifling. You want me to be someone else. You can't accept who I am. You stand there, you righteous prick, and try and tell me what to do? Fuck you, Vince. Fuck you, because you have no idea how to live. None. You court the sameness of life because it is safe. And you like safe." All this, Ren, because I refused to buy the drunken lady here another vodka.'

Ren paused. 'Well, it's not like you are the most spontaneous guy in the world.'

'Oh my God,' said Vincent. 'See? This is what I mean! This is why I believe you! Because in all sobriety, however many hours later, even *you* find the truth in what you were saying. At the same time as trying to claim you were drunk and senseless.'

'I *was* senseless.'

'What, but now you see the merit in your ramblings? Oh God, how many times have I had this conversation with you? It is so fucking painful.' He stabbed a finger her way. '*This* is dull, Ren. This. You accuse me of being dull –'

'Get some perspective –'

'Me? Me? Jesus Christ. That's it. I've had it. I *cannot* do this any more. I can't. I give up.'

'What do you mean, you give up?'

'Exactly that. I'm out of here. I've had too much of Ren Noir.'

She tried to smile. 'You like Ren Noir. She keeps things interesting.'

'Right now? I think she's a bitch.'

Tears welled in Ren's eyes.

'And,' said Vincent, 'I'm all out of sympathy.' He walked up to her and kissed her on the head. 'Look after yourself. I won't be here when you get home.'

Ren stared at his back as he walked away through the living room. *Fuck him.*

Her hand shook as she picked up her purse and pulled out her FBI creds. She snapped them on to the right inside breast pocket of her jacket and walked out the door.

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Breckenridge, Colorado

Downstairs at Eric's was dark, packed and loud. The hallway was filled with kids in snow boots and giant parkas pounding pinball machines. By the entrance to the restaurant, two groups of schoolgirls stood hanging from each others' shoulders, waiting for a table. Half of them were Abercrombied, the other half Fitched. Inside, skinny blondes too old for braids leaned against the wall by the kitchen, flashing the restaurant logo on the backs of their T-shirts: *Downstairs at Eric's: Because Everywhere Else Just Sucks.*

Sheriff Bob Gage sat with a beer in one hand and a clean fork in the other.

'Damn, where is my pizza?'

'On a little yellow piece of paper,' said Mike Delaney.

'Hours from registering on my weighing scales.'

Mike rolled his eyes. 'Can forty-six-year-old men be body dysmorphic?'

'If I knew what that was, I'd love to tell you,' said Bob.

'You know – when you see yourself different to how everyone else sees you. Like *you*, for example, think you're fatter than you actually are.'

'Really? Are you kidding me?'

'No,' said Mike. 'You're a reasonably tall guy, Bob. You can carry a few extra pounds.'

Bob gave him a side-glance. Mike used to be a tanned, blond ski bum. Now, at thirty-eight, he was a tanned, blond, ski-bum Undersheriff, his eyes always a little red, his skin a little burnt, his lips pale from sunblock. Bob had choirboy styling – polished skin, neat side-parted brown hair, conservative clothes – but it couldn't quite hide the crazy. Most women were attracted to both of them, for different reasons.

The first night they worked together, they'd gone on a domestic violence call-out and the woman had told them she'd like to be 'wined and dined with you, Sheriff, so's you could laugh me right into bed with your pal, blondie, here.' Bob had looked at her and said, 'Didn't Blondie sing "I'm gonna getcha"? Yeah, well, gotcha! And probably gotcha for another twenty years for beating the shit out of that poor husband of yours.' She had looked at him and said, 'I would never lay a finger on you, cutie. Can you smell my breath?

It's Wintergreen. Winter in my mouth, but summer in my heart.'

Bob had shot a glance at Mike. 'What you have is Seasonal Affective Disorder,' he said, struggling to cuff her.

She made a grab for Mike's crotch, but he blocked it at the last minute.

'Yes,' Bob said, 'you're clearly very SAD.'

A waitress walked toward them, raising, then lowering Bob's hopes.

'I have not eaten since breakfast,' he said to Mike. 'I shouldn't feel bad about this.' He raised his cellphone, showing Mike a screen that told him Bob had fifteen missed calls or messages. 'Do you see this shit?' said Bob. 'Half an hour I want – of peace – after everything. Just thirty minutes.'

The Summit County Sheriff's Office shared a building with the jail and the courthouse. A riot had stolen his previous three hours.

'You need to keep some beef jerky in your drawer, some trail mix, anything,' said Mike.

'Gross,' said Bob.

Mike started to speak, but both their phones began to vibrate. The calls were from Dispatch.

'Look, let me take mine at least,' said Mike. 'Something is going on.' He pressed the Answer key and held the phone to his ear.

'Mike Delaney,' he said, then paused. Bob could hear a woman's voice talking quickly at the other

end. Mike gestured to a waitress for her notepad. He scribbled across the page, nodding as he wrote. 'OK,' he said finally. 'Me and Bob will be along right away.' He hung up.

'No, no, no,' said Bob. 'Bob doesn't like "along".'

'Ooh,' said Mike, 'Bob is about to go up a mountain on the coldest January day Breckenridge has seen in about fifty years.'

'Oh, dear God, no,' said Bob, checking his watch. 'It's three fifteen. I'm almost home and dry. Why?'

'Search and Rescue got an anonymous tip-off. It all sounded a little bullshit to them, but they checked it out and, sure enough, they found a body.'

'What?'

Mike nodded.

'Holy shit,' said Bob, his eyes wide. Mike turned around to where Bob was staring.

'It's my pizza!' Bob grabbed the waitress's arm. 'In a box, sweetheart. And I love you right now. You have no idea.'

Quandary Peak could breathe with the breath it stole from your lungs. Stony and chiseled, it could turn on you before you had the chance to conquer it. The sky overhead showered unpredictable snow and rain, beamed surprise sun. Two-hundred-year-old miners' cabins hid in the lodgepole pines that marked the timberline before the peak grew bare and rocky up to its full 14,265 feet.

On its south side, Blue Lakes Road stretched two and a half miles off Highway 9 to meet it. In winter, it was plowed halfway. A small group of Search and Rescue volunteers stood by the trailhead sign, like a spread from a North Face commercial. Others sat in their 4x4s, gunning their heating against the outside minus sixteen. They all had different day jobs, but came together every Wednesday night to train for Search and Rescue. They were twenty-two to sixty-two, high-energy, wired and bold.

An empty Ford 150 was the last vehicle in the line. It belonged to the Summit County Coroner, Denis Lasco, aka – depending on who you talked to – the Slowmobile, Heavy D, or Corpses Maximus.

‘Can you believe the Slowmobile got here before we did?’ said Bob.

‘He was probably looking for a place to hibernate,’ said Mike.

‘With a mouthful of nuts,’ said Bob.

‘Lasco couldn’t keep anything in his mouth without swallowing it.’

‘That’s pretty shitty,’ said Bob. ‘He’s probably got a gladur thing.’

‘It’s glandular,’ said Mike.

‘No – gladur,’ said Bob. ‘Glad you’re full, refrigerator, glad you’re full.’

They cracked up.

‘Right,’ said Mike, ‘we’re going to have to step out of the vehicle.’

'Ugh,' said Bob. 'You first.'

One of the volunteers walked toward them as they got out of the Jeep.

'Hey, Sheriff, Undersheriff,' he said.

'Hello, Sonny,' said Bob. 'Mike, this is Sonny Bryant. His father, Harve, and me go way back. I've known Sonny nineteen years or, as the tired saying goes, since he was in diapers.'

'Yeah, I'm over them now,' said Sonny, smiling.

'They'll come back around,' said Bob. 'It's like fashion trends. I'm only a few seasons away from them myself.'

Sonny and Mike laughed.

'Good to meet you,' said Mike, shaking Sonny's hand.

'You too, sir,' said Sonny.

'What have we got?' said Bob.

'There's a body up there, all right,' said Sonny.

'Man, woman, child . . .?'

'I don't think I'm allowed to say,' said Sonny.

'Mr Lasco . . .'

Bob rolled his eyes. 'Let me guess: wouldn't let you commit.'

Sonny smiled shyly. 'Yes.'

'He's some piece of work,' said Bob. 'Is he up there alone?'

Sonny nodded. 'Yes, he went up with a team of three and sent them back down once he knew where he was going. He said he hates people trampling his scenes.'

‘That is too true,’ said Bob. ‘And too repeated. Soon, the day will come when Lasco won’t even allow himself into a crime scene.’

Sonny laughed. ‘OK, I’m going to take you up there,’ he said. ‘Are you both coming?’

‘Sadly, yes,’ said Bob.

‘Should take about an hour,’ said Sonny. ‘We need to get going – that sun is starting to heat up.’

Denis Lasco was standing by the body with his back to them. He was dressed in a giant sapphire-blue parka and green ski pants. His head was bent over his digital camera. He half-glanced over his shoulder when he heard their footsteps in the snow.

‘You all need to stand back,’ he said, raising a hand.

‘Jesus, Lasco, we’re frickin’ miles away,’ said Bob.

‘This accident slash murder could have *happened* miles away,’ said Lasco.

‘Hackles,’ said Bob loudly, ‘are the erectile hairs on the back of an animal’s neck, particularly a dog. For the purposes of the moment, I am a dog. And it appears that, yes, I can confirm, my hackles are up.’

‘Professionalism,’ said Lasco loudly, ‘is the art of performing one’s job to the highest possible standards. For the purposes of this moment and

all moments, I am a professional. And it appears that, yes, I can confirm, this is what makes me a grown-up and the sheriff a jealous baby.'

'America's Biggest Loser,' said Bob, loudly, 'is a –'
Lasco went rigid.

'All right, all right,' said Mike. 'That's enough of that. We can come closer, Denis, right?'

'Sure you can,' said Lasco. 'I've taken my wide shots from where you're standing, so just walk in my tracks.'

Bob muttered to Mike. 'Yeah, they're deep enough to leave a lasting impression on the landscape.'