Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Blood Loss

Written by Alex Barclay

Published by Harper

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

ALEX BARCLAY

Blood Loss

HARPER

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2012
1

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* in 2012

Copyright © Alex Barclay 2012

Alex Barclay asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

ISBN: 978 0 00 738343 6

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

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.

1

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.

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.

2

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.'