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**Opening Extract from...**

# Clash

Written by Colin Mulhern

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COLIN  
MULHERN  
**CLASH**



For Matthew  
Jack  
& Cameron

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KYLE

I first saw Alex Crow in the toilets on my third day in secondary school.

At the time I had no idea who he was. He was just there, standing at the urinals while I was at the sinks with Gareth.

'I still hate coming in here,' said Gareth. He was picking his nose and trying to examine his nostrils, which wasn't easy considering the state of the mirror. It looked like every kid who ever came in here must have checked his reflection, gobbled on the glass and let it dry.

'They're just stories,' I said. 'Nothing's going to happen.'

But at that very moment the door slammed open and two older boys, big, strapping rugby types, burst in with a scream of, 'Newbies!'

They grabbed hold of Gareth, pulled him from the sinks, and had him flat on his back on the cracked floor tiles. His shirt

came free of his trousers revealing a huge area of white gut.

'Ugh, look at him,' said one of the boys. He gave Gareth a kick. 'You fat slug.'

'Get up,' said the other thug. 'It's time for a wash, newbie.'

The two of them hauled Gareth back onto his feet.

I stood there in shock and terror, wondering at what point they were going to turn on me.

'Let's see if we can get some of that colour out of your hair, eh?'

Gareth had short, ginger hair. Not red or copper, or that pale, strawberry blond that some people call ginger. Gareth's hair was orange. If you drew him, he'd look like a cartoon.

The first thug kicked open a cubicle, but Gareth managed to throw him off and grab the sides of the door.

'Move your arms,' shouted the other, punching him near the elbow. 'Move them!'

His mate was already back on Gareth and together they forced him into the open cubicle.

It was all frighteningly clear. Gareth was going to get his head flushed.

That was when the boy at the urinals, the other first year, zipped up his fly and turned to face us.

In an even, non-threatening tone, he simply said, 'Leave him alone.'

One of the thugs spat on the floor and said, 'Get lost, dickhead, or you'll be next.'

But the boy didn't move. He just stood there, as small and as thin as I was, with his hands in his pockets, watching.

All I could think was that he was mad. He certainly didn't look much compared to those other two but then I noticed the

single gold stud earring in his left ear, a fat rusty-brown scab running along the right side of his forehead and the hint of an old scar on his chin.

But there was something else. His eyes. They were unusually wide; enough to make his pale grey irises float on their whites as he stared, unflinching, at the two older boys.

This was Alex Crow.

He didn't argue or threaten, and he didn't try to put on any kind of show at being hard or tough; he simply walked over and forced his way into the cubicle.

The first thug immediately released his grip on Gareth, pushing him clear. 'You little prick,' he said, as he reached out to grab Alex by the shirt.

Alex didn't try to stop him. He actually allowed the other boy to grab him, to pull him close. Not even a hint of a struggle. I'd never seen anything like it, but then I'd never seen anyone like Alex Crow, and at that moment I had no idea just how violent an eleven-year-old boy could be.

Without warning, Alex slammed his forehead into the centre of the older boy's face. Not just once, but again, and again, each blow vicious and accurate. As the first thug cried out and put his hands to his face, Alex turned on the other.

He didn't just punch with his fist; he used the heel of his hand, the back of his knuckles, as well as his knees and feet in a fast, effective and relentless attack. He even used the other boys' weight against them, putting one off balance, twisting out of the way and hauling him head first into the rim of the toilet bowl with a loud crack, then Alex was holding him by the back of his shirt, slamming his face down again while twisting to elbow the other boy in the throat.

When Alex finally stepped out from the cubicle he walked directly to the sinks, checked himself in the mirror and casually, carefully, washed his hands.

Gareth was staring at the boys in the cubicle. They were getting to their feet, their eyes switching from Alex to the exit, but they didn't make any move to leave.

As Alex dried his hands, I whispered to Gareth, 'Let's go.' But Gareth paused, tried to tuck his shirt into his trousers, then looked at Alex Crow.

'Thanks, man,' he said.

Alex stopped, as though he hadn't even noticed we'd been standing there. He sized up Gareth in a second. 'Say one word about this, you'll get a lot worse. Understand?'

Gareth's mouth dropped and he quickly nodded.

As I looked at Alex, I noticed again those eyes – wide and wild and grey – and I truly believed this boy had lost the plot.

•

The incident stuck with me, and for a long time I couldn't settle when I was out in the school yard – not until I knew that Alex Crow was nowhere near. Gareth was the same.

Usually Alex wasn't hard to find. He had a regular spot where he'd sit alone, staring into space with his back against the wall, one leg pulled up close, the other stretched out in front. He never gave us a second glance.

Then one day, Gareth suddenly nudged my arm. Alex was standing, about halfway between us and the tech block. He was looking right at me.

As Alex continued to stare, Gareth whispered, 'What do you think? Should we leg it?'

I couldn't answer. I could barely breathe through fear as I waited for Alex to come over and make his move.

But he didn't. He stayed just where he was. He watched me for another few seconds then he lowered his eyes and rubbed the fingers of one hand with the other, as though considering something. Then he walked away.

'Jesus,' said Gareth. 'What the hell was all that about?'

Slowly, I shook my head. 'I've no idea.'

For the rest of that week, I was out of my mind with worry. I was convinced that some kind of attack was inevitable. I dreaded break times, but even more, I dreaded going home. The walk to the bus stop wasn't a long one, but it took all my self control not to continually look over my shoulder, wondering when Alex Crow was going to come running.

But he never did, which made me all the more uneasy about what had been going through his mind and why he had been staring at me for so long.

ALEX

I'll never forget the first time I saw Kyle. Some things just stick in your head.

There was a drawing on the wall of our art class. There were lots, obviously, but this one really stood out because it was clearly in the wrong area.

The art teacher had told us on our very first lesson, 'I hate the beginning of a new school year. Blank walls. So let's sort this problem out. Each year group will have a different area.' He picked up a metre stick and whacked the back wall. 'And this is yours, from here to the far end. We'll fill it up with class work eventually, but for now, if you've got something at home, or fancy doing something before next week, bring it in, we'll take a look.'

There were six other classes in our year group, and only two art rooms. Over the next few days, pictures began to appear on the walls of both rooms.

And then the one that really stood out appeared. Not bang in the middle or anything obvious, just pinned up near the bottom, and when I saw it, it knocked me sideways. A copy of some album cover – pastels worked over in pencil – but it was in a league of its own, and it wasn't only me who thought so. One kid asked the teacher if it was a wind up.

It wasn't. He even gave us a name. That was enough for the others, but not me. I needed to find out who this kid was.

A few days later, someone pointed him out in the yard, so I wandered over to get a better look.

He was standing near the prefabs with some fat, ginger kid. I didn't know Gareth at the time, but recognised him from some incident in the bogs. I put that aside though. It was his mate I was interested in. I just kept thinking, *that's him, that's the kid who drew that amazing picture.*

Then he looked over. He seemed a bit edgy, like he expected me to go over and belt him.

I didn't, but I didn't look away either. I sort of felt like this kid was something special, you know? Something better than the rest. He had a genuine talent.

Like me.

Anyway, it was the next day that I nicked the picture. I wasn't a thief, not really, but I knew that someone was bound to steal it, and if that happened I'd never see it again. So I walked in, took it down, rolled it up and left.