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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Never Look Away**

Written by Linwood Barclay

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# Never Look Away

LINWOOD BARCLAY



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## PROLOGUE

'I'm scared,' Ethan said.

'There's nothing to be scared about,' I said, turning away from the steering wheel and reaching an arm back to free him from the kiddie seat. I reached under the pad where he'd been resting his arms and undid the buckle.

'I don't want to go on them,' he said. The tops of the five roller coasters and a Ferris Wheel could be seen well beyond the park entrance, looming like tubular hills.

'We're not going on them,' I reminded him for the umpteenth time. I was starting to wonder whether this excursion was such a good plan. The night before, after Jan and I had returned from our drive up to Lake George and I'd picked Ethan up at my parents' place, he'd had a hard time settling down. He'd been, by turns, excited about coming here, and worried the roller coaster would derail at the highest point. After I'd tucked him in, I slipped under the covers next to Jan and considered discussing whether Ethan was really ready for a day at Five Mountains.

But she was asleep, or at least pretending to be, so I let it go.

But in the morning, Ethan was only excited about the trip. No roller-coaster nightmares. At breakfast he was full of questions about how they worked, why they didn't have an engine at the front, like a train. How could it get up the hills without an engine?

It was only once we'd pulled into the nearly full parking lot shortly after eleven that his apprehensions resurfaced.

'We're just going on the smaller rides, the merry-go-rounds, the kind you like,' I said to him. 'They won't even let you go on the big ones. You're only four years old. You have to be eight or nine. You have to be this high.' I held my hand a good four feet above the parking-lot asphalt.

Ethan studied my hand warily, unconvinced. I don't think it was just the idea of being on one of the monstrous coasters that scared him. Even being near them, hearing their clattering roar, was frightening enough.

'It'll be okay,' I said. 'I'm not going to let anything happen to you.'

Ethan looked me in the eye, decided I was deserving of his trust, and allowed me to lift the padded arm up and over his head. He worked his way out of the straps, which mussed up his fine blond hair as they squeezed past his head. I got my hands under his arms, getting ready to lift, but he squirmed free, said, 'I can do it,' then slithered down to the car floor and stepped out the open door.

Jan was around back, taking the stroller out of the trunk of the Accord, setting it up. Ethan attempted to get in before it had been locked into the open position.

'Whoa,' Jan said.

Ethan hesitated, waited until he'd heard the definitive click, then plopped himself into the seat. Jan leaned over into the trunk again.

'Let me grab something,' I said, reaching for a backpack.

Jan was opening a small canvas bag next to it that was actually a soft-sided cooler. Inside were a small ice pack

and half a dozen juice boxes, cellophane-wrapped straws stuck to the sides. She handed me one of the juice boxes and said, 'Give that to Ethan.'

I took it from Jan as she finished up in the trunk and closed it. She zipped up the cooler bag and tucked it into the basket at the back of the stroller as I peeled the straw off of the sticky juice box. It, or one of the other juices in the cooler, must have sprung a tiny leak. I took the straw from its wrapper and stabbed it into the box.

Handing it to Ethan, I said, 'Don't squeeze it. You'll have apple juice all over yourself.'

'I know,' he said.

Jan reached out and touched my bare arm. It was a warm August Saturday, and we were both in shorts, sleeveless tops, and, considering all the walking we had ahead of us, running shoes. Jan was wearing a long-visored ball cap over her black hair, which she had pulled back into a ponytail and fed through the back of the cap. Oversized shades kept the sun out of her eyes.

'Hey,' she said.

'Hey,' I said.

She pulled me toward her, behind the stroller, so Ethan couldn't see. 'You okay?' she asked.

The question threw me off. I was about to ask her the same thing. 'Yeah, sure, I'm good.'

'I know things didn't work out the way you'd hoped yesterday.'

'No big deal,' I said. 'Some leads don't pan out. It happens. What about you? You feel better today?'

She nodded so imperceptibly it was only the tipping of the visor that hinted at an answer.

'You sure?' I pressed. 'What you said yesterday, that thing about the bridge—'

‘Let’s not—’

‘I thought maybe you were feeling better, but when you told me that—’

She put her index finger on my lips. ‘I know I’ve been a lot to live with lately, and I’m sorry about that.’

I forced a smile. ‘Hey, we all go through rough spots. Sometimes there’s an obvious reason, sometimes there isn’t. You just feel the way you do. It’ll pass.’

Something flashed in her eyes, like maybe she didn’t share my certainty. ‘I want you to know I appreciate . . . your patience,’ she said. A family looking for a spot drove by in a monster SUV, and Jan turned away from the noise.

‘No big deal,’ I said.

She took a deep, cleansing breath. ‘We’re going to have a good day,’ she said.

‘That’s all I want,’ I said, and allowed myself to be pulled closer. ‘I still don’t think it would hurt, you know, to see someone on a regular basis to—’

Ethan twisted around in the stroller so he could see us. He stopped sucking on the juice box and said, ‘Let’s go!’

‘Hold your horses,’ I said.

He settled back into his seat, bouncing his legs up and down.

Jan leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. ‘Let’s show the kid a good time.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

She gave my arm a final squeeze, then gripped the handles of the stroller. ‘Okay, buster,’ she said to Ethan. ‘We’re on our way.’

Ethan stuck his hands out to the sides, like he was flying. He’d already drained his juice box and handed it to me to

toss in a wastebasket. Jan found a moistened towelette for him when he complained about sticky fingers.

We had several hundred yards to get to the main entrance, but we could already see people lined up to buy tickets. Jan, wisely, had bought them online and printed them out a couple of days earlier. I took over stroller duty while she rooted in her purse for them.

We were almost to the gates when Jan stopped dead. ‘Nuts.’

‘What?’

‘The backpack,’ she said. ‘I left it in the car.’

‘Do we need it?’ I asked. It was a long trek back to where we’d parked.

‘It’s got the peanut butter sandwiches, and the sunscreen.’ Jan was always careful to goop Ethan up so he didn’t get a burn. ‘I’ll run back. You go ahead, I’ll catch up to you.’

She handed me two slips of paper – one adult ticket and one child – and kept one for herself.

She said, ‘I think there’s an ice-cream place, about a hundred yards in, on the left. We’ll meet there?’

Jan was always one to do her research, and must have memorized the online map of Five Mountains in preparation.

‘That sounds good,’ I said. Jan turned and started back for the car at a slow trot.

‘Where’s Mom going?’ Ethan asked.

‘Forgot the backpack,’ I said.

‘The sandwiches?’ he said.

‘Yeah.’

He nodded, relieved. We didn’t want to be going anywhere without provisions, especially of the sandwich variety.



I handed in my ticket and his, bypassing the line to purchase them, and entered the park. We were greeted with several junk-food kiosks and about a dozen stands hawking Five Mountains hats and T-shirts and bumper stickers and brochures. Ethan asked for a hat and I said no.

The two closest roller coasters, which had looked big from the parking lot, were positively Everest-like now. I stopped pushing the stroller and knelt down next to Ethan and pointed. He looked up, watched a string of cars slowly climb the first hill, then plummet at high speed, the passengers screaming and waving their hands in the air.

He stared, eyes wide with wonder and fear. He reached for my hand and squeezed. 'I don't like that,' he said. 'I want to go home.'

'I told you, sport, don't worry. The rides we're going on are on the other side of the park.'

The place was packed. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people moving around us. Parents with little kids, big kids. Grandparents, some dragging their grandkids around, some being dragged by them.

'I think that must be the ice-cream place,' I said, spotting the stand just up ahead.

I got behind the stroller and started pushing. 'Think it's too early for ice cream?' I asked.

Ethan didn't respond.

'Sport? You saying no to an ice cream?'

When he still didn't say anything, I stopped to take a look at him. His head was back and to the side, his eyes closed.

The little guy had fallen asleep.

'I don't believe it,' I said under my breath. Not even

at the first merry-go-round and the kid was already comatose.

‘Everything okay?’

I turned. Jan had returned, a bead of sweat trickling down her neck. The backpack was slung over her shoulder.

‘He’s nodded off,’ I said.

‘You’re kidding me,’ she said.

‘I think he passed out from fear after getting a close look at that,’ I said, pointing to the coaster.

‘I think I’ve got something in my shoe,’ Jan said. She navigated the stroller over to a concrete ledge surrounding a garden. She perched herself on the edge, nudging Ethan and the stroller to her left.

‘Feel like splitting a cone?’ she asked. ‘I’m parched.’

I guessed what she was thinking. We could share a treat now, while Ethan dozed. He’d get plenty of junk before the day was out, but this would be something just for us.

‘Dipped in chocolate?’ I asked.

‘Surprise me,’ she said, putting her left foot up on her knee. ‘Need money?’

‘I got it,’ I said, patting my back pocket. I turned and strolled over to the ice-cream stand. It was the soft white stuff that comes out of a machine. Not my favorite in the world – I like the real thing – but the young girl who took my order did manage a skillful twirl at the top. I asked her to dip it in the vat of chocolate, which clung like skin to the ice cream as she presented it to me.

I took a tiny bite out of it, cracking the chocolate, and instantly regretted it. I should have let Jan have the first bite. But I’d make up for it through the week. On Monday, come home with flowers. Later in the week,

book a sitter, take Jan out to dinner. This thing Jan was going through – maybe it was my fault. I hadn't been attentive enough. Hadn't made the extra effort. If that was what it was going to take to bring Jan around, I was up to it. I could put this marriage back on the rails.

I didn't expect to see Jan coming straight for me when I turned. Even with the sunglasses over her eyes, I could still tell she was upset. There was a tear running down one cheek, and her mouth was set in a terrible grimace.

Why the hell wasn't she pushing the stroller? I looked beyond her, to where I thought she'd been sitting.

She came up to me quickly, clapped her hands on the sides of my shoulders.

'I only looked away for a second,' she said.

'What?'

'My shoe,' she said, her voice shaking, uneven. 'I was getting – the stone – I was getting the stone out of my shoe, and then I looked – I looked around and—'

'Jan, what are you talking about?'

'Someone's taken him,' she said, almost in a whisper, her voice nearly gone. 'I turned and he—'

I was already moving past her, running over to where I'd last seen them together.

The stroller was gone.

I stepped up onto the ledge Jan had been sitting on, scanned the crowds.

*It's just a mix-up. This isn't what it looks like. He'll be back in a second. Someone grabbed the wrong stroller.*

'Ethan!' I shouted. People walking past glanced at me, kept on going. 'Ethan!' I shouted again.

Jan was standing below me, looking up. 'Do you see him?'

‘What happened?’ I asked quickly. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘I told you. I looked away for a second and—’

‘How could you do that? How could you take your eyes off him?’ Jan tried to speak but no words came out. I was about to ask a third time how she could have allowed this to happen, but realized I was wasting time.

I thought, instantly, of that urban legend, the one that got called into the newsroom once or twice a year.

‘I heard from a friend of a friend,’ the calls usually began, ‘that this family from Promise Falls, they went down to Florida, and they were at one of the big theme parks in Orlando, and their little boy, or maybe it was a little girl, got snatched away from his parents, and these people took him into the bathroom and cut his hair and made him look different and smuggled him out of the park but it never got in the papers because the park owners don’t want any bad publicity.’

There was never, ever anything to it.

*But now . . .*

‘Go back to the main gate,’ I told Jan, trying to keep my voice even. ‘If someone tries to take him out, they’ll have to go through there. There should be somebody from park security there. Tell them.’ The ice-cream cone was still in my hand. I tossed it.

‘What about you?’ she asked.

‘I’ll scout out that way,’ I said, pointing beyond the ice-cream stand. There were some restrooms up there. Maybe someone had taken Ethan into the men’s room.

Jan was already running. She looked back over her shoulder, did the cell-phone gesture to her ear, telling me to call her if I found out anything. I nodded and started running the other way.

I kept scanning the crowds as I ran to the men's room entrance. As I entered, breathless, the voices of children and adults and hot-air hand dryers echoed off the tiles. There was a man holding up a boy, smaller than Ethan, at one of the urinals. An elderly man was washing his hands at the long bank of sinks. A boy about sixteen was waving his hands under the dryer.

I ran past all of them to the stalls. There were six of them, all doors open except for the fourth. I slapped on the door, thinking it might open.

'What?' a man shouted from inside. 'I'll be another minute!'

'Who's in there?' I shouted.

'What the hell?'

I looked through the crack between the door and the frame, saw a heavyset man sitting on the toilet. It only took a second to see that he was in there alone.

'Fuck off!' the man barked.

I ran back out of the restroom, nearly slipping on some wet tiles. Once I was back out in the sunlight, saw all the people streaming past, I felt overwhelmed.

Ethan could be anywhere.

I didn't know which way to head off, but going in any direction seemed a better plan than just standing there. So I ran toward the base of the closest roller coaster, the Humdinger, where I guessed about a hundred people were waiting to board. I scanned the lineup, looked for our stroller, or a small boy without one.

I kept running. Up ahead was KidLand Adventure, the part of Five Mountains devoted to rides for children too young for the big coasters. Did it make sense for someone to have grabbed Ethan and brought him here for the rides? Not really. Unless, again, it was some

kind of mix-up, someone getting behind a stroller and heading off with it, never bothering to take a look at the kid sitting inside. I'd nearly done it myself once at the mall, the strollers all looking the same, my mind elsewhere.

Up ahead, a short, wide woman, her back to me, was pushing a stroller that looked an awful lot like ours. I poured on the speed, pulled up alongside her, then jumped in front to get a look at the child.

It was a small girl in a pink dress, maybe three years old, her face painted with red and green spots.

'You got a problem, mister?' the woman asked.

'Sorry,' I said, not even getting the whole word out before I'd turned, still scanning, scanning, scanning –

I caught sight of another stroller. A blue one, a small canvas bag tucked into the back basket.

The stroller was unattended. It was just standing there. From my position, I couldn't tell whether it was occupied.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a man. Bearded. Running away.

But I wasn't interested in him. I sprinted in the direction of the abandoned stroller.

*Please, please, please . . .*

I ran around to the front of it, looked down.

He hadn't even woken up. His head was still to one side, his eyes shut.

'Ethan!' I said. I reached down, scooped him out of the stroller, and held him close to me. 'Ethan, oh God, Ethan!'

I held him out where I could see his face, and he was frowning, like he was about to cry. 'It's okay,' I said. 'It's okay. Daddy's here.'

I realized he wasn't upset because he'd been snatched away from us. He was annoyed at having his nap interrupted.

But that didn't stop me from telling him, again, that everything was okay. I hugged him close to me, patted his head.

When I held him out again, his lip stopped trembling long enough for him to point at the corner of my mouth and ask, 'Did you have chocolate?'

I laughed and cried at the same time.

I took a moment to pull myself together, then said, 'We have to find your mother, let her know everything's okay.'

'What's going on?' Ethan asked.

I got out my phone, hit the speed dial for Jan's cell. It rang five times and went to message. 'I've got him,' I said. 'I'm coming to the gate.'

Ethan had never had such a speedy stroller ride. He stuck out his hands and giggled as I pushed him through the crowds. The front wheels were starting to wobble so much I had to tip the stroller back, prompting him to laugh even more.

When we got to the main gate, I stopped, looked around.

Ethan said, 'I think maybe I want to try the big coaster roller. I'm big enough.'

'Hold on, partner,' I said, looking. I got out my phone again. I left a second message: 'Hey, we're right here. We're at the gate. Where are you?'

I moved us to the center of the walkway, just inside the gate, where the crowds funneled in to get to the rides.

Jan wouldn't be able to miss us here.

I stood in front of the stroller so Ethan could watch me. 'I'm hungry,' he said. 'Didn't Mom come? Did she go home? Did she leave the backpack with the sandwiches in it?'

'Hold on,' I said.

'Can I have *just* peanut butter? I don't want the peanut-butter-with-jam ones.'

'Just cool your jets a second, okay?' I said. I was holding my cell, ready to flip it open the instant it rang.

Maybe Jan was with park security. That'd be fine, even though Ethan had been found. Because there was somebody running around this park, taking off with other people's kids. Not a good thing.

I waited ten minutes before placing another call to Jan's cell. Still no pickup. I didn't leave a message this time.

Ethan said, 'I don't want to stay here. I want to go on a ride.'

'Just hang on, sport,' I said. 'We can't go off without your mom. She won't know where to find us.'

'She can phone,' Ethan said, kicking his legs.

A park employee, identifiable by his khaki pants and shirt with the Five Mountains logo stitched to it, walked past. I grabbed his arm.

'You security?' I asked.

He held up a small walkie-talkie device. 'I can get them,' he said.

At my request, he called in to see whether anyone from security was helping Jan. 'Someone needs to tell her I've found our son,' I said.

The voice coming out of the walkie-talkie was scratchy. '*Who? We got nothing on that.*'

'Sorry,' the park employee said and moved on.



I was trying to tamp down the panic. Something was very wrong.

Someone tries to take your kid. A bearded man runs away.

Your wife doesn't come back to the rendezvous point.

'Don't worry,' I said to Ethan, scanning the crowds. 'I'm sure she'll be here any minute now. Then we'll have some fun.'

But Ethan didn't say anything. He'd fallen back asleep.

# PART ONE

*Twelve Days Earlier*



## ONE

‘Yeah?’

‘Mr. Reeves?’ I said.

‘Yeah?’

‘This is David Harwood at the *Standard*,’ I said.

‘Yeah, David.’ This was the thing with politicians. You called them ‘Mister’ and they called you by your first name. Didn’t matter whether it was the president of the United States or some flunky on the utilities commission. You were always Bob or Tom or David. Never Mr. Harwood.

‘How are you today?’ I asked.

‘What’s on your mind?’ he asked.

I decided to counter curt with charm. ‘Hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time. I understand you just got back. What was it, just yesterday?’

‘Yeah,’ Stan Reeves said.

‘And this trip was a – what? A fact-finding mission?’

‘That’s right,’ he said.

‘To England?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. It was like pulling teeth, getting anything out of Reeves. Maybe this had something to do with the fact that he didn’t like me very much. Didn’t like the stories I’d been writing about what could end up being Promise Falls’ newest industry.

‘So what facts did you pick up?’ I asked.

He sighed, as if resigned to answering a couple of

questions, at least. ‘We found that for-profit prisons have been operating in the United Kingdom successfully for some time. Wolds Prison was set up to be run that way in the early nineties.’

‘Did Mr. Sebastian accompany you as you toured the prison facilities in England?’ I asked. Elmont Sebastian was the president of Star Spangled Corrections, the multimillion-dollar company that wanted to build a private prison just outside Promise Falls.

‘I believe he was there for part of the tour,’ Stan Reeves said. ‘He helped facilitate a few things for the delegation.’

‘Was there anyone else from the Promise Falls council who made up this delegation?’ I asked.

‘As I’m sure you already know, David, I was the council’s appointee to go to England and see how their operations have been over there. There were a couple of people from Albany, of course, and a representative from the state prison system.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘So what did you take from the trip, bottom line?’

‘It confirmed a lot of what we already know. That privately run correctional facilities are more efficient than state-run facilities.’

‘Isn’t that largely because they pay their people far less than the state pays its unionized staff, and that they don’t get nearly the same benefits as state employees?’

A tired sigh. ‘You’re a broken record, David.’

‘That’s not an opinion, Mr. Reeves,’ I said. ‘That’s a well-documented fact.’

‘You know what else is a fact? It’s a fact that wherever unions have their clutches in, they’ve been taking the state to the cleaners.’

‘It’s also a fact,’ I said, ‘that privately run prisons have had higher rates of assaults on guards, and prisoner-on-prisoner violence, largely due to reduced staffing levels. Did you find this to be the case in England?’

‘You’re just like those do-gooders out at Thackeray who lose sleep when one inmate tears into another.’ Some of the faculty at Thackeray College had banded together to fight the establishment of a private prison in Promise Falls. It was becoming a cause célèbre at the school. Reeves continued, ‘If one prisoner ends up sticking a shiv in another prisoner, you want to explain to me exactly how that hurts society?’

I scribbled down the quote. If Reeves ever denied it later, I had him on my digital recorder. The thing was, making this comment public would only boost his popularity.

‘Well, it would hurt the operators of the prison,’ I countered, ‘since they get paid by the state per inmate. They start killing each other off, there goes your funding. Do you have any thoughts on Star Spangled Corrections’ aggressive congressional lobbying for stiffer penalties, particularly longer sentences for a variety of crimes? Isn’t that a bit self-serving?’

‘I’ve got a meeting to get to,’ he said.

‘Has Star Spangled Corrections settled on a site yet? I understand Mr. Sebastian is considering a few of them.’

‘No, nothing definite yet. There are a number of possible sites in the Promise Falls area. You know, David, this means a lot of jobs. You understand? Not just for the people who’d work there, but lots of local suppliers. Plus, there’s a good chance a facility here would take in convicted criminals from outside our area, so that means family coming here to visit, staying in local hotels,

buying from local merchants, eating in local restaurants. You get that, right?’

‘So it’d be like a tourist attraction,’ I said. ‘Maybe they could put it next to our new roller-coaster park.’

‘Were you always a dick, or is it something they teach in journalism school?’ Reeves asked.

I decided to get back on track. ‘Star Spangled’s going to have to come before council for rezoning approval on whatever site they pick. How do you plan to vote on that?’

‘I’ll have to weigh the merits of the proposal and vote accordingly, and objectively,’ Reeves said.

‘You’re not worried about the perception that your vote may have already been decided?’

‘Why would anyone perceive such a thing?’ Reeves asked.

‘Well, Florence for one.’

‘Florence? Florence *who*?’

‘Your *trip* to Florence. You extended your trip. Instead of coming back directly from England, you went to Italy for several days.’

‘That was . . . that was all part of my fact-finding mission.’

‘I didn’t realize that,’ I said. ‘Can you tell me which correctional facilities you visited in Italy?’

‘I’m sure I could have someone get that list to you.’

‘You can’t tell me now? Can you at least tell me how many Italian prisons you visited?’

‘Not offhand,’ he said.

‘Was it more than five?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Less than five, then,’ I said. ‘Was it more than two?’

‘I’m really not—’

‘Did you visit a single correctional facility in Italy, Mr. Reeves?’

‘Sometimes you can accomplish what you need to accomplish without actually going to these places. You set up meetings, meet off-site—’

‘Which Italian prison officials did you meet with off-site?’

‘I really don’t have time for this.’

‘Where did you stay in Florence?’ I asked, even though I already knew.

‘The Maggio,’ Reeves said hesitantly.

‘I guess you must have run into Elmont Sebastian while you were there.’

‘I think I did run into him in the lobby once or twice,’ he said.

‘Weren’t you, in fact, Mr. Sebastian’s guest?’

‘Guest? I was a guest of the hotel, David. You need to get your facts straight.’

‘But Mr. Sebastian – Star Spangled, Inc., to be more precise – paid for your airfare to Florence and your accommodation, isn’t that correct? You flew out of Gatwick on—’

‘What the fuck is this?’ Reeves asked.

‘Do you have a receipt for your Florence stay?’ I asked.

‘I’m sure I could put my hands on it if I had to, but who saves every single receipt?’

‘You’ve only been home a day. I’m guessing if you have one it hasn’t had a chance to get lost yet.’

‘Look, my receipts are none of your fucking business.’

‘So if I were to write a story that says Star Spangled Corrections paid for your Florence stay, you’d be able to produce that receipt to prove me wrong.’



‘You know, you got a hell of a lot of nerve tossing around accusations like this.’

‘My information is that your stay, including taxes and tickets to the Galleria dell’Accademia and anything out of your minibar, came to three thousand, five hundred and twenty-six euros. Does that sound about right?’

The councilman said nothing.

‘Mr. Reeves?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he said quietly. ‘It might have been about that. I’d have to check. But you’re way off base, suggesting that Mr. Sebastian footed the bill for this.’

‘When I called the hotel to confirm that your bill was being looked after by Mr. Sebastian, they assured me that everything was covered.’

‘There must be some mistake.’

‘I have a copy of the bill. It was charged to Mr. Sebastian’s account.’

‘How the hell did you get that?’

I wasn’t about to say, but a woman who didn’t like Reeves very much had phoned from a blocked number earlier in the day to tell me about the hotel bill. I was guessing she worked either at city hall or in Elmont Sebastian’s office. I couldn’t get a name out of her.

‘Are you saying Mr. Sebastian didn’t pay your bill?’ I asked. ‘I’ve got his Visa number right here. Should we check it out?’

‘You son of a bitch.’

‘Mr. Reeves, when this prison proposal comes before council, will you be declaring a conflict of interest, given that you’ve accepted what amounts to a gift from the prison company?’

‘You’re a piece of shit, you know that?’ Reeves said. ‘A real piece of shit.’

'Is that a no?'

'A goddamn piece of shit.'

'I'll take that as a confirmation.'

'You want to know what really gets me?'

'What's that, Mr. Reeves?'

'This high-and-mighty attitude from someone like you, working for a newspaper that's turned into a fucking joke. You and those eggheads from Thackeray and anyone else you got on your side getting your shorts in a knot because someone might outsource running a prison, when you outsource fucking reporting. I remember when the Promise Falls *Standard* was actually a paper people had some respect for. Of course, that was before its circulation started going to shit, when it actually had *journalists* reporting on local events, before the Russell family started farming out some of its reporting duties to offshore help, getting reporters in goddamn India for Christ's sake to watch committee meetings over the Internet and then write up what happened at them for a fraction of what it would cost to pay reporters here to do the job. Any paper that does something like that and still thinks it can call itself a newspaper is living in a fool's paradise, my friend.'

He hung up.

I put down my pen, took off my headset, hit the stop button on my digital recorder. I was feeling pretty proud of myself, right up until the end there.

The phone had only been on the receiver for ten seconds when it rang.

I put the headset to my ear without hooking it on. 'Standard. Harwood.'

'Hey.' It was Jan.

'Hey,' I said. 'How's it going?'

‘Okay.’

‘You at work?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing.’ Jan paused. ‘I was just thinking of that movie. You know the one? With Jack Nicholson?’

‘I need more,’ I said.

‘Where he’s a germaphobe, always takes plastic cutlery to the restaurant?’

‘Okay, I know the one,’ I said. ‘You were thinking about that?’

‘Remember that scene, where he goes to the shrink’s office? And all those people are sitting there? And he says the line, the one from the title? He says, “What if this is as good as it gets?”’

‘Yeah,’ I said quietly. ‘I remember. That’s what you’re thinking about?’

She shifted gears. ‘So what about you? What’s the scoop, Woodward?’