

MILLION-COPY SUNDAY TIMES TOP TEN BESTSELLER

# LINWOOD BARCLAY

## PARTING SHOT



# ONE

## CAL WEAVER

I ran into someone on the street in Promise Falls the other day, a woman who knew me back when I was a cop here, before I left for Griffon, near Buffalo, and became a private investigator.

She said, “Oh, I didn’t know you’d moved back. How’s Donna? And your boy? Scott, isn’t it?”

I never quite know how to answer questions like this. But I said, “I’m kind of on my own now.”

She gave me a sympathetic look and nodded knowingly. “These things happen,” she said. “I hope it was all amicable, that you’re all still talking.”

I gave her the best smile I could muster. “We talk every night,” I told her.

She smiled back. “Well, that’s good then, isn’t it?”

# TWO

**DETECTIVE** Barry Duckworth of the Promise Falls Police was sitting at his desk when his phone rang. He snatched up the receiver.

“Duckworth,” he said.

“It’s Bayliss.” Trent Bayliss, the sergeant on the desk where people walked into the station.

“Yeah.”

“I got a live one here.” Bayliss was unable to hide the amusement in his voice.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Guy got picked up wandering around downtown. Once they brought him in, he said he needed to talk to a detective. So I’m sending him your way. Says his name is Gaffney. Brian Gaffney. But he’s got no ID on him.”

“What’s his story?” Duckworth asked.

“It’s better if you hear it from him. I wouldn’t want to spoil the fun.” Bayliss hung up.

Wearily, Barry Duckworth cradled the receiver. Maybe Bayliss was amused, but Barry wasn’t. He didn’t view the job quite the way

## PARTING SHOT

he used to. A little more than a year ago, he'd nearly died in the performance of his duties, and it had changed not only how he saw his work, but the world around him.

He liked to think he'd stopped taking things for granted. He knew it was something of a cliché, but he saw each day as a gift. Every morning, he thought back to those moments when he'd nearly had the life snuffed out of him. Took him a while to get back on his feet, too. There was a stint in the hospital, even a little plastic surgery on his face.

Perhaps the most amazing thing was, in the last year he'd actually lost some weight. He'd been about two-eighty fourteen months ago, but was now down to two hundred and thirty-three pounds. According to his calculations, that was forty-seven pounds. For a while he'd been putting new holes in his belt and just drawing his regular pants on tighter, but his wife, Maureen, said he was starting to look ridiculous. She'd dragged him to the men's shop, like he was five years old or something, and bought him some new clothes.

But he'd kept his old ones in the closet. Just in case. There might come a time when he once again found the temptations of Dunkin' Donuts too great to resist.

It had been some time since he'd had one of those.

And he wasn't going to lie. He *missed* them. But he liked being alive, and healthier, even more.

Maureen had been tremendously supportive. She'd already been trying to get him to change his eating habits. Immediately after the incident, she was so happy he wasn't dead that she spoiled him with homemade cakes and pies—no one made a lemon meringue pie like Maureen—but it was Barry who told her to stop. He'd made up his mind, he told her. He was going to take charge of his health. He was going to look after himself.

Which explained the banana sitting on his desk. The brown banana, which had been there since yesterday.

While Barry Duckworth knew what he wanted to do where his health was concerned, he was less sure about his career. It was in

## LINWOOD BARCLAY

his role as a police detective that he had nearly died.

He wondered whether he should do something else. The trouble was, he didn't know what else to do.

He'd been a cop more than twenty years. It wasn't like he could go back to school at this stage and become a dentist. Okay, maybe not a dentist. He didn't understand why anyone would want to become a dentist. He'd rather attend a hundred murder scenes than have to stick his fingers into someone's mouth. But an accountant, now there was a nice, safe job. No one beat your face to a pulp for being an accountant.

While Duckworth coped with the fallout of nearly losing his life, the town itself was struggling to return to normal. Hundreds of Promise Falls' finest—and some not so fine—had died in a catastrophe the year before. People had never stopped talking about what happened, but now you could go an entire day, sometimes even two, without someone bringing it up.

The out-of-towners were the real problem. It was, on a much smaller scale of course, a bit like after the Twin Towers came down, when tourists wanted their picture taken at Ground Zero. This up-state New York locale had become the poster town for revenge, and almost daily someone could be spotted taking a selfie by the "Welcome to Promise Falls" sign.

Duckworth leaned back in his office chair, keeping his eye on the door to the detectives' room. It opened and a man stood there, staring in, a look of bewilderment on his face.

He probably topped out at one hundred and twenty pounds. Skinny, white, early twenties, about five feet nine inches tall. Closely cropped black hair, about three days' worth of whiskers on his face. He wore jeans and a dark blue long-sleeved shirt with a button-down collar. He scanned the room, his eyes darting nervously. Duckworth stood up.

"Mr. Gaffney?"

The man looked at Duckworth, blinked. "That's me."

Duckworth waved him in, pointed to the chair next to his desk.

## PARTING SHOT

“Why don’t you have a seat.”

Brian Gaffney, holding his hands together in front of him, leaning over slightly, as though trying to close in on himself, sat down. He kept looking around the room, up at the ceiling, like someone entering a cave, checking for bats clinging to the roof.

“Mr. Gaffney?”

Gaffney’s fearful eyes settled on Duckworth. “Yes?”

“I’m a detective.” He had a pen in his hand, ready to make some notes. “Can you spell your name for me, Mr. Gaffney?”

Gaffney did so.

“And your middle name?”

“Arthur,” he said. “Are we safe here?”

“I’m sorry?”

Gaffney’s head movements were brief, quick twitches, like a bird taking in its surroundings. He lowered his voice to a whisper as he leaned in closer to the detective. “They might still be watching me.”

Duckworth put a hand lightly on the man’s arm. Gaffney examined it, as though not sure what it was.

“You’re okay here,” Duckworth assured him, thinking, only Bayliss would see this man as a source of amusement. Whatever Gaffney was afraid of might be imaginary, but the fear Duckworth saw in the man’s eyes was the real deal.

Gaffney shivered. “You need to turn the heat up.”

The room was already in the high seventies. The A/C should have kicked in, but had not.

Duckworth stood, slipped off his jacket, and draped it over the man’s shoulders. “How’s that?”

Gaffney nodded.

“You want a coffee?” the detective asked. “That might warm you up.”

Quietly, Gaffney said, “Okay.”

“What do you take?”

“I . . . It doesn’t matter, long as it’s hot.”

Duckworth crossed the room to the table where they kept the

## LINWOOD BARCLAY

coffee machine, filled a reasonably clean mug, put in one sugar and a powdered creamer, and brought it back to the man.

Gaffney wrapped both hands around the mug, brought it to his lips and took a sip as Duckworth sat back down and picked up his pen again. "What's your date of birth, Mr. Gaffney?"

"April sixteenth, 1995." Gaffney watched as Duckworth scribbled things down. "I was born in New Haven."

"Current address?"

"They might be here," Gaffney said, lowering his voice again. "They might be cloaking themselves in human form."

Duckworth's pen stopped moving. "Who's they, Mr. Gaffney?"

Gaffney blinked and said, "I live at 87 Hunter Street. Unit 201."

Duckworth felt a touch of mental whiplash. "That's an apartment?"

"Yeah."

"You live alone, Mr. Gaffney?"

"Yes." Another nod. Gaffney's eyes were now fixed on the banana on Duckworth's desk.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Detailing. Are you going to eat that?"

Duckworth glanced at the brown piece of fruit. "Uh, you want it?"

"I don't think they fed me. I haven't eaten for a long time."

Duckworth picked up the banana and handed it to Gaffney, who took it gently in his hands, then shoved one end of it into his mouth without bothering to peel it. He bit hard so his teeth went through the skin. He chewed quickly, took another large bite, still with the peel on.

Still chewing, he said, "You know what detailing is?"

Duckworth, distracted by what he'd just seen, said, "Sorry?"

"Detailing." He swallowed the last of the banana, washed it down with some coffee. "You know what it is?"

"No."

"Like, instead of just getting your car washed, you get it detailed."

## PARTING SHOT

Like a super- super-cleaning. I work at Albany Detailing.”

“So, that’s in Albany?”

The man shook his head. “No, here in Promise Falls. It’s a franchise thing.”

“Mr. Gaffney, the police found you wandering around downtown. When they brought you in, you said you wanted to talk to a detective.”

“That’s right.”

“So how can I help you?”

“I made a mistake,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

Gaffney surveyed the room for what had to be the tenth time, then whispered to Duckworth, “It’s not your jurisdiction.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I mean, what can you do?” Gaffney shrugged. “Arrest them?”

“Arrest who?”

“What day is this?”

“This is Wednesday.”

Gaffney gave that some thought. “So . . . two nights. I went out Monday night, and now it’s Wednesday, so two nights. Unless it’s, like, the *next* Wednesday, and it’s been nine days.”

Duckworth had put his pen down. “Two nights what?”

“That they had me.” He put down the mug, ran his hand over his chin, felt stubble. “It must be just two. If they had me nine days, I’d almost have a beard by now.”

Duckworth’s brow wrinkled. “What do you mean, they had you?”

“I think I was abducted,” Gaffney said, running his tongue over his lips. “You know about Betty and Barney Hill?”

Duckworth quickly wrote down the names. “They abducted you?”

Gaffney shook his head. “No, they were in a book. Real people. I’ve got an old paperback copy of it. *The Interrupted Journey*, by John G. Fuller. It happened to them, too.”

## LINWOOD BARCLAY

“What happened, Brian?”

“They were driving at night from Niagara Falls back to their home in New Hampshire on September twentieth, 1961. This part of the country, you know? They’d have passed within forty miles of Promise Falls.”

“Okay.”

“He was black, and she was white, although that really doesn’t have anything to do with what happened to them. Unless it did.”

“Go on.”

“So the Hills saw this bright light in the sky, and the next thing they knew, it was hours later, and they were on the road, almost home. There was all this time they couldn’t account for. So they went to a hypnotist.”

“What’d they think the hypnotist could do?”

“Help them remember what happened to them during those missing hours.”

“And did he?”

Gaffney nodded. “They were taken aboard a ship. The aliens experimented on them, put needles and other things into them, and then made them forget it had ever happened.” He shook his head slowly, wonderingly. “I never thought something like that could happen to me.”

Duckworth said, “Okay. So you’re saying you have two days you can’t account for?”

“Yes.” Gaffney trembled, as though he’d had a momentary electrical shock, and took another sip of coffee.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I’d gone into Knight’s for a couple of drinks, like, around eight? You know Knight’s?”

*Ah*, Duckworth thought. Knight’s. One of the town’s best-known bars.

“I know it,” the detective said.

“I had a few beers, watched TV. It gets a little blurry after that.”

“How many beers?”

## PARTING SHOT

He shrugged. "Four, five. That's, like, over an hour and a half or so."

"You're sure you didn't have more than that?"

"That's all."

"You drive yourself there?"

Strong head-shake. "Nope. I can walk to Knight's from my place. Don't want to worry about getting pulled over. Do you have another banana?"

"I don't. I'm sorry. Just a couple more questions and I'll find you something. You remember leaving Knight's?"

"Maybe. When I came out, I think someone called to me from the alley next to the bar. You can walk through there to get to a parking lot out back."

"Was this a man or a woman who called out to you?"

"A woman, I think. At least, it was in the form of a woman."

Duckworth let that go. "What did she say?"

Gaffney shook his head. "It's all pretty foggy. And then there's almost nothing for two days, until I wake up right back in the same place. I guess I stumbled out of the alley, was walking around, and that was when the cops found me. I didn't have any ID on me. My wallet's gone, and my cell phone, too."

"Is it possible you were in the alley for those two days?"

Gaffney slowly shook his head again. "People walk down there all the time. Someone would have noticed me. And they couldn't have done the experiments on me there."

His breathing became more rapid. "What if they infected me? What if they gave me some disease?" He set down the mug again, placed a palm on his chest. "What if I'm a carrier? What if I've exposed you? Jesus, oh man."

Duckworth kept his voice level. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Brian. We're going to get you checked out. Why would you think you'd been experimented on?"

"They . . . took me someplace. It might have been a ship, but I don't think so. There were lights, and I was lying down on a bed

## LINWOOD BARCLAY

or something, on my stomach. I remember it smelled bad. That's where they did it."

"What did they do?"

"It felt like hundreds and hundreds of needles going into me. Probably taking samples, you know? DNA, maybe?"

His face began to crumple. He looked up, as though looking past the ceiling to the heavens above.

"Why me!" he shouted. "Why did it have to be me!"

A couple of other detectives sitting at desks across the room looked over. Duckworth put his hand back on the man's arm. "Brian, look at me. Look at me."

Gaffney lowered his gaze to look into Duckworth's eyes. "I'm sorry if coming here was the wrong thing."

"It wasn't. I'm going to try to help you. Let's get back to those needles. Why do you think that was done to you?"

"My back," Gaffney said. "It's really sore. It feels all scratchy, you know? Stings like hell."

Duckworth, with some hesitation, said, "You want me to have a look?"

Gaffney hesitated as well, as though he wasn't sure he wanted to know. After a moment, he said, "If you don't mind."

They both stood. Gaffney turned his back to Duckworth, untucked and unbuttoned his shirt, then yanked it up over his shoulders.

"How's that?" he asked.

Duckworth stared. "That'll do."

Tattooed crudely on Gaffney's back, in black letters two inches tall, was:

**IM THE  
SICK FUCK  
WHO KILLED  
SEAN**

## **PARTING SHOT**

Duckworth said, “Mr. Gaffney, who’s Sean?”

“Sean?” he said.

“Yeah, Sean.”

Gaffney’s shoulders rose and fell as he shrugged. “I don’t know nobody named Sean. How come?”