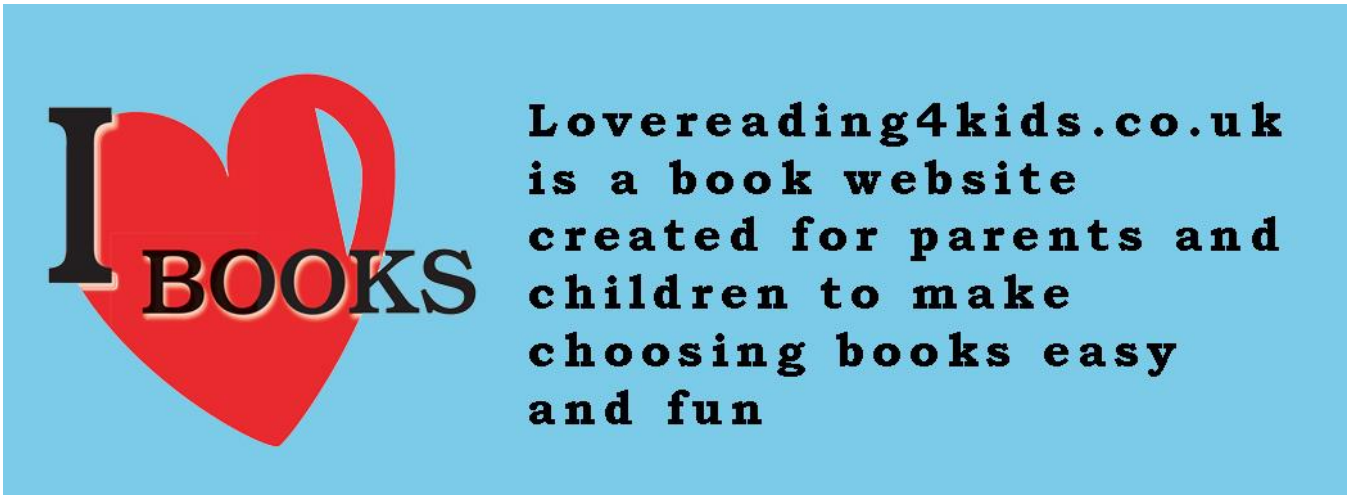


Opening extract from

Chase

Written by

Linwood Barclay

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PROLOGUE

The moment the White Coat entered the room filled with cages, the prisoner just knew what he was planning. The White Coat was going to kill him.

It might have been the way White Coat man smiled at him through the bars of his cage. The man almost never smiled. He looked at the prisoner through his oversized, black-rimmed glasses. This White Coat was in his fifties, with thinning grey hair. He was a spindly, pale man who spent most of his days sitting at a computer or supervising in the lab, where many of the experiments were conducted and the installations performed. A security card that allowed him to move freely through the building hung around his neck on an elastic strap.

The security card displayed his picture, and his name: SIMMONS.

It made sense to think of him by his actual name. There was only one Simmons, but there were very many White Coats. White Coat men and White Coat women. Some of the others the prisoner had seen over

the years were Daggert and Wilkins and the red-haired woman they called Madam Director.

It had been a long time since the prisoner had had a good feeling about any of them. The White Coats were not good people. Oh sure, they fed him and looked after him, trained him. But they did not *love* him.

There'd only ever been two White Coats – that man and that woman – whom the prisoner really believed were his friends. But he hadn't seen them in a long time. A good twelve months now. The prisoner had liked them a lot. He'd liked to hear their stories, and had felt warm all over when they had rubbed and patted his head with affection.

The prisoner was pretty sure something bad had happened to them.

But the more immediate concern was Simmons.

What had caught the prisoner's attention was that Simmons had both hands in the pockets of his long, white coat, as though he was hiding something. The prisoner had a pretty good idea what it might be.

The prisoner moved warily towards the back of his cage.

The other captives must have noticed something was up, too. There were nine others in here, each in his or her own cage. The cages were stacked against the one wall, five in the bottom row, five in the top. Three of the captives began to snarl and bark and

pace, although pacing amounted to little more than walking in a tight circle. They had to be picking up the same signals from Simmons as the prisoner.

The prisoner wished he could communicate with his fellow captives, to know what they were thinking. But the White Coats had been careful to disable any sort of sophisticated communication between the subjects, fearing that if they could forge mental links they might band together against the White Coats. The prisoners could still express themselves through whimpers and growls and tail-wagging and raised hackles – the old-fashioned ways – but they'd all moved far beyond that now.

Simmons came to within a foot of the prisoner's cage, smiled – a little bit of spinach visible between his two top teeth – and said, 'How we doin' today? How's my boy?'

The prisoner just stared back at him. It struck him that it might be better not to be confrontational. It would be better not to let Simmons know he suspected anything was wrong. Then again, Simmons was not stupid. Simmons knew that while the prisoner was one of the programme's failures, he still possessed a high degree of intelligence.

It was, after all, the White Coats who had designed and installed all of the prisoner's implants. Right there, on the other side of the room, on what looked like an operating table, with a bank of lights suspended over it,

and a dozen monitors on the wall beside it. These were the people who had programmed him to be so much more than just a dog – an animal with talents and abilities light years beyond what he'd come into the world with. When he was little, still just a pup, he could never have dreamt that one day he'd be able to read and understand multiple languages, analyse data, be the eyes and ears for a multi-billion-dollar secret organisation.

When he was a pup, he hadn't dreamt about much more than chasing squirrels.

The White Coats knew that while the prisoner had exceptional abilities, he was deeply flawed. Despite their best efforts, this subject was a failure. His natural instincts could not be suppressed by technology. No amount of software could overrule his canine characteristics. He was, first of all, too distractible. He could not be trusted to stay focused on the task at hand. The White Coats could send him, for example, to sniff out the location of a terrorist bomb, the lives of thousands hanging in the balance, but if he caught sight of someone tossing around a ball, he'd interrupt his mission to go and chase it.

The prisoner knew this was why the White Coats were going to do something very bad to him.

'Look what I brought you,' Simmons said, taking his left hand out of his pocket. He held something small and dark in his fingers, not much larger than a marble.

A treat.

A beefy, salty, delicious treat.

The prisoner felt his tongue slip from his mouth, running along the sides of his jaw and over his snout. It happened before he'd even realised it. They knew him so well, knew how much he liked these treats. It was one of the prisoner's many weaknesses. They knew just how to turn him against himself.

The prisoner nearly stopped himself from looking eager for the treat, then realised that wagging his tail, which would have been his normal response, was the way to go.

Let the White Coat think he was happy.

Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, Simmons worked the treat through the chain-link grill that separated him from the prisoner.

'Come on,' Simmons said. 'Bet you'll love this. You know how much you like to gobble these down. Yum yum. They're so delicious! I could almost eat one myself. They're your favourite.'

The prisoner raised his head slightly, to within a few inches of the roof of his cage, and sniffed. The man wasn't lying. This treat was definitely among his favourites. His nostrils flared ever so slightly as he took in the smell, almost tasting it.

He kept his tail wagging, but stayed pressed up against the back wall of the cage.

'What is it, sport?' Simmons asked. 'You not hungry? I was hoping you might be. I've got lots more of these in my pocket.'

The prisoner couldn't help but notice that Simmons's right hand was still in his other pocket. His nostrils flared again, taking in more of the essence of the tasty morsel.

There was something wrong with it. He was sure of that now. There was something wrong with the treat.

It did not smell right.

He did not dare eat it. But if he didn't take it, the White Coat Man would suspect the prisoner was on to him.

So he padded to the front of the cage, stretched his furry neck forward, and took the treat gingerly between his teeth.

'There ya go!' Simmons said. '*Dee*-licious!'

It took every bit of strength the prisoner had not to give the treat a couple of quick chews and gulp it down. But he couldn't just let it sit there in his mouth. He had to pretend.

So he made his jaw go up and down twice, then closed his mouth, keeping the treat tucked beneath his long, wet, pink tongue. It would not take long for the treat to dissolve on its own. If he kept it in his mouth long enough for that to happen, he might as well swallow it.

Couldn't do that.

'Starting to feel a bit sleepy there, Chip?' Simmons asked. 'I suspect you will very soon.' He smiled

sympathetically. ‘I have to tell you, this hurts me more than it hurts you, in a lot of ways. We’ve grown attached, you and I. We really have. We’ve been through a lot together. I can’t help but think about what might have been, had things worked out.’

Ah, the prisoner thought. *I’m supposed to get sleepy.*

He would play into that. With this tranquilised treat in his mouth, it made sense to fake some symptoms soon. He stood there, cocking his head slightly to one side, as though he really cared what this man had to say.

‘It’s too bad about you, Chipper. You’re a mighty fine dog. You’re the kind of mutt anyone’d be happy to have around the house, but that just doesn’t cut it here. And it’s not like I can just hand you over to some family, let them raise you like a normal dog. Not with everything we’ve put inside you.’

The prisoner named Chipper blinked. Let his eyes close for half a second, allowed his head to droop.

‘I mean,’ Simmons said, leaning in close to the cage and whispering so the other animals wouldn’t hear, ‘we’d have to cut you open and take everything out first, and that’d probably kill you anyway, so this is the way we’re going to have to do it. Look at you, getting all dozy. Why don’t you just move back a bit there while I open up the cage?’

The prisoner took two steps back, then sat down on his haunches, front legs extended, head lowered. A passive posture.

The cage opened with a squeak of its rusty hinges. Several of the other animals continued to whine and bark. The room smelled of fear and fur.

'That's a good boy,' Simmons said. 'I want you to know this isn't going to hurt. It'll be over before you know it.'

That was when the White Coat man began to withdraw his right hand from his pocket. There was something in it. About six inches long. Narrow and cylindrical.

Shiny at the tip.

The prisoner knew what that was. Any second now, Simmons would be injecting that needle deep into the fleshy part of his hind leg. Forcing down the plunger with his thumb.

Filling him with sweet, instant death.

That's how smart the prisoner was. He knew about all these things. It was Simmons who'd taught him. It was Simmons, and the other White Coats, who'd filled his memory banks with the knowledge of such things. And yet, ultimately, they still thought they were so much smarter than him. They were foolish enough to think he wouldn't figure out what was coming.

Chipper knew much more than they could ever have imagined. He slowly and non-threateningly rose

up on all four paws, positioned his hind legs against the back wall of the cage.

'Just hold still there,' Simmons said soothingly, raising his hand with the syringe as the other went to hold him down.

Suddenly, the prisoner drove his back legs hard into the wall, using them like pistons to shoot himself out of the enclosure, a missile with fur.

The poisoned treat slipped out from beneath his tongue a millisecond before his jaws clamped down on Simmons's wrist. He drove the teeth in, causing the syringe to fall and clatter to the tile floor, barely making a sound.

What did make a sound was Simmons. He screamed in horrific pain as the animal's teeth broke skin and pierced an artery. The man fell to the floor, clutching his wrist with his other hand, the dog's jaws still clenched on his arm.

'Help!' he screamed.

The other dogs went into a frenzy. A symphony of canine rage and fury and excitement.

The smell of blood filled the air.

The prisoner was able to read more into the sounds the other dogs made than his human captors ever could. In those barks and snarls he heard anger, fear and more than a hint of satisfaction. All the prisoners here shared contempt for their master captors, these cold people who worked to turn them into high-tech tools.

Chipper relaxed his grip on the man's wrist and turned his attention to the security card hanging around his neck. Simmons jerked back in fear as the dog clamped his teeth on the elastic strap, snapping it so that the card broke away and skittered across the floor.

'Help me!' Simmons screamed again, looking up to the corner of the room where the surveillance camera was mounted. But it was the middle of the day. Chipper hoped no one was watching. Didn't they mostly keep tabs on this room at night, in case agents of some foreign power or a competing agency tried to break in and steal, or kill, the animals? Was it even likely anyone would hear his cries for help over the chorus of barking and growling?

Chipper couldn't get his mouth around the card lying flat on the floor, so he used his tongue to lap it up, as if it were a cracker. Then, once the card was in his mouth, he moved it around, held it gingerly between his front teeth, and ran over to the door while Simmons writhed on the floor, clutching his arm. The card reader was mounted next to the door, about three feet up. The prisoner had watched the White Coats use these cards a thousand times. All they had to do was wave it in front of the small green light that was no bigger than the end of a pencil.

The prisoner raised himself on his hind legs, put his front paws on the wall to steady himself, and

positioned the card in front of the light, prompting the door to retract sideways into a pocket in the wall.

As he scooted through the opening, he glanced back to see Simmons struggling to his feet.

'Stop!' Simmons said, scrambling towards the door. 'Get back here, you miserable mutt, or—'

The door whipped shut before Simmons could reach it. And without his card, he couldn't get out.

Chipper sprinted down the long hallway. He knew the way out. They took him and the others outside all the time for exercise and training purposes. As he neared the end of the hall and the next door, he put on the brakes, but the floor was marble and had been waxed overnight, and he slid right into the door with a thump, nearly losing his grip on the security card. He reoriented himself, got up on his hind legs again, waved the card in front of the green light.

The door opened.

Now he was in the main lobby. People – some in white lab coats, others in suits – were briskly walking from here to there, going about their daily rituals. That's the way it was at The Institute. No one dallied. Everyone moved with purpose.

The main door – *the door to The World* – was open. Cool, fresh air wafted into the building between the two retracted glass panels. A million scents from outside – every last one of them smelling of freedom – found their way to his nose.

Everyone stopped. They were not accustomed to seeing one of the subject animals free, unleashed and unattended. They certainly weren't accustomed to seeing one with the fur around its mouth matted with blood, a security card held gingerly between its teeth.

Maybe they'd think he'd been taught a new trick!

Chipper, his eyes on that open door, poured on the speed, allowing the card to slip from his mouth. He didn't need it any more.

'Stop him!' someone shouted.

'Get that dog!' shouted another. 'Don't let him get out!'

The first person yelled, 'Shoot him!'

'Don't be crazy!' said another. 'He's worth a fortune!'

No time to look over his shoulder and see who might be taking aim at him. All he could do now was run.

The glass doors were starting to close. Someone had hit a button.

The prisoner ran faster.

The doors were nearly shut.

Chipper slipped through, the door closing on the tip of his tail. He gave a small tug, and he was free.

He was a prisoner no more. Chipper was free.

But simply getting free was not the point. There was something very important he had to do.

Find the boy.



01

'You call this clean, Jeffrey?' the woman said, pulling back the curtain and inspecting the shower stall. 'This isn't clean.'

'I'm sorry, Aunt Flo,' Jeff said. 'I really scrubbed in there.'

'You know how I can tell it's not clean?' she said. 'When I run some water into the shower, like this.' And she turned on the cold, pulling her hand back quickly so as not to get herself wet. 'You see what the water does when it hits the tiles? It just kind of spreads out. But if that wall were clean and shiny, the water would bead up into drops. Do you see any drops?'

'I see some,' Jeff said tiredly. He'd been awake since six o'clock, before the sun was even up. That struck him as awfully early for a twelve-year-old kid to have to face the world. Especially in the late summer, when there was no school. It would resume in a couple of weeks, and this was the first time Jeff could ever remember looking forward to going back.

Today was a Saturday, which, at one time, was a day when Jeff got to sleep in, and even when he did finally get up, goof off. But it had been a long time since he'd had that kind of Saturday. It was only ten in the morning, but Jeff felt as though he'd been up for days.

Saturday was the busiest day around here at Flo's Cabins. Most people who came to his aunt's fishing camp here on Pickerel Lake, at least in the summer months, stayed for a week at a time, and that week ran from Saturday to Saturday. So on those days, many or all of the eight cabins would be vacated, and new guests would check in. Turnover Day, Aunt Flo called it.

One of Jeff's many jobs on any given Saturday in the summer was to get those cabins cleaned as quickly as possible. Calling them cabins made them sound pretty rustic. And while they were not exactly palaces, each cabin had running water and a proper bathroom with a shower. Of all the jobs Jeff had to do, cleaning the cabins was the one he hated most. You get a bunch of fishermen renting a cabin for a week, and it can be a pretty frightening sight by the time they leave. Scum-caked dishes, half-empty beer bottles with cigarette butts in them, fish guts in the trash can. An amended line from a musical his mom liked ran through his head: 'These are a few of my *least* favourite things!'

But Jeff would rather vacuum a hundred carpets, wash a thousand windows, clean a million stoves, before having to clean one bathroom used by three middle-aged fishermen for an entire week. That was major GBI: Gross Beyond Imagining. Did none of these guys know how to aim? Did they actually wash their hands *before* using the hand towels? Did they even take their muddy boots off before stepping into the shower?

Aunt Flo was a neat freak, so no matter how good a job you did, she'd find fault with it. Like she was doing on this particular Saturday morning, looking into the shower stall of Cabin Four, which was the last cabin Jeff would have to clean today. At least he wouldn't have to clean Cabin Eight, where there would be no turnover. It had been rented for the entire summer by old Mr Green. He pretty much looked after the place himself.

The only good news was, even though Jeff had several cabins to get clean, there were no new guests arriving today, unless someone without a reservation drove in off the main road. That was always a possibility. But it was nearly the end of summer, Aunt Flo explained, and that meant families were getting ready to go back to work and preparing their kids for a return to school.

'I don't think fishermen really care if all the tiles glisten that much,' Jeff said to Aunt Flo as he

continued to struggle with the shower. 'As long as it's pretty clean, I think they're okay with it.'

His aunt sighed. It was her favourite sound to make. She'd quickly breathe in, then let the air out long and low, shaking her head at the same time.

'That's your whole thing, isn't it?' she said. 'All it has to be is *good enough*. Well, good enough is not good enough for me. I want things perfect.'

One might have thought, listening to her, that she was running a Hilton hotel instead of a fishing camp.

'Many of these men,' she continued, 'may not care if everything sparkles, but quite a few bring their wives and the rest of their families, and we don't want any of them to think that a cabin rented to them by Florence Beaumont is anything less than pure perfection.'

'Fine,' Jeff said, getting out his sponge and bottle of green cleaning spray and taking another run at it.

Aunt Flo, satisfied that she had defeated her nephew, went off to inspect his work in Cabin One. As the boy scrubbed, the cleanser fumes started getting into his lungs in the confined space of the shower and he thought maybe he'd pass out. *Which*, he thought, *might not be the worst thing in the world. It would be like a mini-vacation.*

At least once he was done here, he'd be outdoors. There were plenty of other chores that would get him out into the fresh air.

Aunt Flo had half a dozen fourteen-foot aluminium boats she rented out, which were tied up at one of several old, wood docks. Jeff had to make sure they were cleaned and respectable. After finishing with the shower, he walked down to the water's edge, a short distance from the cabins, waving some mosquitoes away from his face along the way.

The first boat he looked at made him think someone had been killed in it. The bottom appeared to be filled with gobs of tiny intestines, floating around in an inch of dirty water. But Jeff knew they were worms, or as many of the fishermen liked to call them, 'night crawlers'.

At least the boat didn't have any— oh, yes it did. Someone had cleaned his catch in the boat. Cleaning did *not* mean someone used some Windex and paper towels to make a fish all shiny. Someone had gutted the fish – sliced it open on the underside and pulled out all the insides and dumped them in the bottom of the boat.

This is a really great job, Jeff thought, *if your hobby is barfing*.

But it didn't matter how sick this made him feel. He had to get into the boat and deal with it. There was an old, rusted coffee can tucked ahead of the seat in the bow that he could use to scoop a lot of the mess out.

He stepped in, placing his feet on the seat so as not to ruin his sneakers. He'd done this a hundred times,

and was always able to keep his balance, even when the boat shifted beneath him.

But what he didn't know was that there was one squirmy, slimy, slippery worm on that seat, and when his right foot landed on it, it was like stepping on a banana peel.

And before he knew it, he was in the air.

Jeff landed right in the bottom of the boat, thudding against the aluminium hull and creating a small splash. He was covered in dead worms, mud and bits of slimy fish guts.

Jeff shouted a word he was usually careful not to say around grown-ups. If his parents had heard him use it, they'd have chewed him out big time.

Wouldn't that be great? To have parents who'd chew you out big time.

But instead, it turned out to be Aunt Flo, standing right there near the end of the boat launch, who heard him. She might not be happy to hear a twelve-year-old use that kind of language, but what was she going to do? Send him to his room? Who'd do all the chores then?

She stood and looked disapprovingly at Jeff, arms folded across her chest.

Jeff looked from her to his gross hands, a dead worm wedged between two of his fingers. At that moment, a mosquito landed on the tip of his nose, and instinctively, without thinking of the consequences, he slapped at it.

Now, all that stuff he'd been sitting in, including that dead, slimy worm, was splattered across his face.

Aunt Flo let out one of her trademark sighs.

She said, 'Are you going to just goof around all day, Jeff Conroy, or are you going to get some work done?'

* * *

After Jeff cleaned up that boat, and himself, he had to go to the garbage dump. That meant loading up all the cans of trash that had filled up over the week, lifting them up onto the bed of Aunt Flo's old Ford pickup and heading a mile down the road to the local landfill site.

He'd tried to explain to her that, at twelve, it wasn't legal for him to take her truck on the county road that ran past her place, even if Jeff's dad had taught him how to drive on Aunt Flo's fifteen acres when they'd all been up here as a family the year before. Not that there was all that much to it. You just pulled the column shifter over to 'D', put your foot on the gas and away you went.

'That's ridiculous,' his aunt had said when he protested. 'Your legs are long enough to reach the pedals. You're taller than I am, and I don't have any trouble driving the truck. Good Lord, if you're this tall now, I can't imagine what you'll be when you're eighteen. Your father told me you used to go to the go-kart tracks all the time, so I know you know how to drive. And most important of all, that garbage isn't going to walk itself to the dump.'

'But if the police stop and ask for my driver's—'

Aunt Flo waved a hand, dismissing his concerns. 'The police will understand. If they stop you, you tell them I'll rent them a boat for free for the afternoon to go fishing. The police don't do anything anyway. There's no crime around here. They might as well sit out in the lake with their pole in their hands.'

She snickered.

Jeff drove the truck around the camp, loading the full cans. Then he steered the old Ford out to the end of the driveway, where it met the paved road, and where one might see a car every ten minutes. Jeff turned right and headed for the dump.

He looked over at the empty seat next to him and wished that Pepper were there.

Pepper had been his dog. She'd only gotten to ride in this truck once.

She was a four-year-old black and white border collie. Her right eye was surrounded with white fur, her left with black. That one trip she took with him in this truck, at the beginning of the summer, was enough to see she loved it. She'd stick her head out the passenger window, nose into the wind. The only thing she had loved more than the ride to the dump was the dump itself, where she could run about chasing squirrels and rats and seagulls.

If she were there now, she'd be revelling in the scents of the countryside, taking short breaks from the window to dash over and lick his face.

He loved Pepper so much.

But Aunt Flo didn't like dogs, and that was her one condition before agreeing to take Jeff in after his parents died. She would not have that dog living under her roof. Another home would have to be found for her. So a week after Jeff got there, he had to give her to a family back in the city that lived on his street.

Jeff thought about Pepper, and Aunt Flo, and this new life of his, and got so wrapped up in his thoughts that he failed to notice a huge pothole just ahead.

The front right wheel dropped into it.

BANG!

A millisecond later, the back right wheel dropped into it.

BANG!

And then Jeff heard a distant crash. He glanced into the rear-view mirror, and there was one of the garbage cans, on its side in the middle of the road, trash strewn everywhere.

Jeff couldn't leave a mess like that all over the road, so he hit the brakes. But before he got out of the truck to run back up the road to clean up that mess, he touched his forehead to the top of the steering wheel and closed his eyes.

He wanted to cry.

He hated it here.

He hated it here so much.

He missed Pepper.

But even more than Pepper, he missed his mom and dad. Losing your parents when you were just a kid, well, that just sucked.