Chapter 1

I didn’t recognize the face looking back at me in the mirror. My last haircut was long gone, replaced by something resembling tumbleweed. I had developed sallow, Steve Buscemi-like eyes. “What’s it like being a loser Barry?” I mumbled to the reflection in the bar countertop. My clothes, right out of a homeless collection, along with the foul odor wafting from me, acted like a force field protecting me from those who would approach. I looked down at my hand, gripping the whiskey glass like a drowning man hangs on to a life preserver. A month ago I hardly drank alcohol at all. I raised the glass to my cracked and parched lips. My trembling hands ensured more landed on the bar than in my mouth. Even worse than the reflection looking back at me, I was starting to forget what my life was like before the deal. The deal. I have to tell you about the deal before I really do lose my mind.

My name is Barry Trotter and all of what I am about to tell you started on a blazing hot day about a month ago in my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas. The day started poorly. You know that expression, “Their marriage was on the rocks?” Well, our marriage was adrift in the midst of a hurricane, heading right for the biggest and rockiest fucking boulder on the coast. The issues? There were many, almost too many to name. I lost my job at an advertising company and finding another in the recession of 1982 was not proving to be easy. No, no that’s not right. The problems started well before. My wonderful wife Jane and I had allowed our marriage to drift, losing sight of those things we used to enjoy about each other. I thought in some ways Jane still loved me, but the respect was gone. If I could just get out from under things I knew I could win her back.

“At least I’m working towards something,” she’d said as she left the house that first morning to go to her receptionist job. This was code for “Loser.” Jane was constantly on my case about not reading enough or doing something to improve my mind. “Look at me,” she would say, getting all judgy, “I come home after work and study for the real estate exam every night.” So that’s okay for you, that’s your thing. Mine is watching reruns of Wheel of Fortune.

Prior to her slamming the door with the Loser comment, we had gotten into an argument over breakfast. It started when she had asked me the same question she always asked, “What are you going to do to contribute today Barry?” God I hate that question. As a freeloader, I resented the implication.

I mumbled something like, “Going to talk to some people,” and asked her if she had any advice for me.

She said “Normally in an interview they say act yourself, but in your case, that might not be such a good idea.” Jane always seemed to have an endless supply of shots to send my way.

I dragged myself off the couch sometime after noon. I dressed and shaved and forced myself to head out to talk to people about a job. I knew I was going to have to be flexible in accepting offers and I might even have to start at the bottom. My boss at the advertising firm felt I didn’t have the right level of creativity and drive. That was probably code for “fuck-up.”

I knew a few people in the business and started dragging my ass around asking people I hardly knew if they would let me buy them a coffee. The net result after 2 hours was lots of coffee, but no prospects. A surprising number of people had already heard the news through the grapevine. Apparently I was branded as unsuitable for the business. “What? I was the guy who came up with the slogan for Murray’s Mints: ‘Our Customers are Worth a Mint’. As for why I am out of work… well that’s just creative differences. A number of the clients will in time follow me to my next firm.”The best I got for my effort was vague promises to keep an eye out.

It was around 4 pm that day when I decided to reward my job search efforts with a quick drink. The few times that I drank, mainly in social settings, I might have overdone it. Jane liked to say my favorite drink was always the next one. The first Jack went down rough. The second and third were much better. Gus the bartender was a good listener or maybe I just needed to unload. Over I don’t know how many drinks, I ranted about management, losing my job, the economy, Jimmy Carter, my wife and even the plight of the Saints in New Orleans. I had verbal diarrhea. I was stumbling back from the washroom trying to appear sober when a well-dressed man approached me.

“Can I buy you another drink, mate?”

“Mate, like we’re on a shhhip? Who’s the captain?” I said doing a bobble head imitation followed by a bout of ridiculous laughter.

“Maybe a cup of coffee might be better for you?” the newcomer asked.

I looked him up and down. “Is this one of those bars? Will I have to beat you off with my ….” I looked around looking for a ….I forgot what I was looking for. Gus put a cup of coffee in front of me. “Listen …mate, I really need to be going. I was supposed to have supper ready for her ….she’ll be pissed.” I looked down at my watch, but my eyes were having trouble focusing.

“It’s only 7 o’clock. I think you’ll feel better once you have some coffee.”

“Since your insissssting…what, are you from Austria?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee and trying hard not to slur my words.

“Australia.”He said with a smile, watching me drink my coffee. “Would you be more comfortable sitting in a booth?” He took a drink himself from what looked like a water glass. What kind of a guy drinks water at a bar?

“Okay,” I replied. He told Gus to take away my whiskey glass and to keep the coffee coming. He then carried my coffee over to a booth alongside the window. I followed him, over-concentrating and trying not to fall into people’s laps as I staggered across the room. Once we were both sitting, I drank more coffee and put my head back, admiring the spinning designs in the ceiling.

“So how’re you holding up mate?”

“Pretty good…lost my ….,” I started looking under the table and around the bar, once again forgetting what I had lost.

“You lost your job, right?”

More bobble head as I squinted at him. “Is your name Kreskin?”

He gave me a funny look like he didn’t know who Kreskin was. Well everyone knows Kreskin, and he knows everyone. This struck me as funny and I started to giggle. My Aussie companion waived to Gus to refill my coffee cup.

The coffee started to work and after a while, I found myself blabbering on again, repeating pretty much the whole tale I had told Gus earlier. I don’t know how much of what I said he could understand, but he continued to nod his head and ask short questions, encouraging me to get it all out. By the time I was talked out, he knew just about everything there was to tell about me. I looked at my watch and saw it was now nearing 10 pm. Jane would be as angry as a yellow-jacket trapped behind a window.

“I think I better be going Mr….?”

“James, Peter James,” he said, holding out his hand. He had soft hands, his handshake feeling like warm laundry. “I’ll drive you home. I think it’ll be safer for everyone,” he said with a smile.

“Really? Thank you.”

“Before we go I was wondering if you would be interested in a little proposition. Something that can make your money troubles disappear and get you back on your feet again?”

I was still more than half drunk, but the offer seemed to sober me up. “Seriously, I don’t even know what you do?”

“I own a firm that does research. Research of all types. What I have in mind is a little study that would pay you $10,000 per month and would probably last 3 months.”

“What?” I was still having trouble concentrating. “Could we get another drink and you can tell me more?”

“I think you have had enough to drink. I’ll save the final details on the job until you’ve had a good night’s sleep and aren’t so zonked. You need to give it your full attention. If you want, you can ring me tomorrow after lunch.”

We piled into Peter’s BMW and I gave him directions on how to get to my place. Once we had gone a couple of blocks I turned to him and said, “Wait a minute, how many laws will I be breaking?”

“No worries mate. It’s a research job, remember?”

“How dangerous is it? Like will I be injecting myself with LSD or something?”

“Nah, nothing dangerous lad.”

We made it home by 10:30. As he drove into my lane, I went a little overboard in thanking him for saving me from alcohol poisoning, listening to my tale of woe, offering me an opportunity and making sure I got home safely.

“No problem mate, give me a ring tomorrow,” he said as he handed me a business card. The card said Peter James, Research Consultants. “Oh, and a word of advice on dealing with the coming typhoon when you go in. Just remember tomorrow’s a new day and a new opportunity. Last thing Barry, and this is very important. Don’t say a word to Jane about what we discussed. If you say anything to anyone, the deal is off.”

I thought about his final words as I walked into the house. Why couldn’t I share this with Jane? It made me suspicious. Jane had already gone to bed when I got in. On one hand, I was glad to avoid the fight, but, on the other hand, sad that she wasn’t concerned enough to wait up for me.

Chapter 2

Jane gave me the silent treatment the next morning. She didn’t even ask if I had plans for the day. I battled the hangover with a shower and shave. I made a special effort to make myself presentable, even remembering the Hai Karate cologne. I put a load of laundry in the machine, and then headed out to the market to pick up something special for dinner. I was going to apologize my ass off. I contemplated driving over to Jane’s office and taking her for lunch, but decided against it. Better to let her settle down and then I’d hit her with the apology as well as the details of whatever Pete had to offer. Besides, I’d left my car at the bar the previous night.

I found it hard to contain myself. I had been thinking about the $10,000 a month and what it would mean for us, the whole morning. I knew it was foolish to start mentally spending it without even knowing the details of the job, but I couldn’t help myself. When I called at 12:05, Peter answered right away. “Oh, hello, Barry. Thank you for calling. Did everything go alright last night?”

“Yes everything is fine, mate.” I had subconsciously started talking like him.

“Can we meet for a cup of coffee? I imagine you want to know the particulars.”

“Just name the place, matey!”

He named Hester’s at 1 pm, a café downtown. “We can have a coffee and it’s nice and private. No stickybeaks listening in.”

After taking a cab to retrieve my car, I got there 5 minutes early and checked the place out. I had a copy of my resume on the table in front of me along with two steaming cups of coffee. When Pete arrived precisely at 1 pm, he was dressed casually in an open neck shirt and khakis.

“G’day mate,” we both said at the same time. He laughed at that and thanked me for the coffee. He took his time reviewing my resume before putting it down and taking a long sip of his coffee.

“So let’s go over the position Barry, have you been thinking about it?”

“A little,” I lied.

“So what I have shared so far is it’s a research position and the grant we receive is from the Ole Miss psychology department. We need someone to help us with a project that will probably last up to 3 months. In return, the person will receive $10,000 tax-free per month. How does that sound?

“Tax-free?”

“This type of bursary is recognized by the state as tax-free income.”

“Wow.” This job was sounding better and better every minute. “What does the research entail?”

“Like we covered last night it is perfectly legal, not hard work and most importantly not dangerous.”

I suppressed my desire to just say, “I’ll take it, whatever it is.”

“I have to remind you no one, absolutely no one, is to know about the research - including Jane. Can you agree to that?”

“You mean even after I take the job, I can’t tell Jane?”

“Absolutely not. If you do then you will be terminated immediately.”

How would I be able to keep this from Jane?

“I need your oath on this Barry; otherwise I will make the offer to someone else.”

I did the math about on what 3 months of $10,000 with no tax would do for us before I said, “I promise.”

“Alright,” giving me a big smile. “Here’s the deal; the study is about the impact of personal hygiene and societal interactions.” I shrugged my shoulders; his words were not sinking in. He must have read my blank face and continued, “For up to 3 months you are not allowed to do any personal grooming. You are to record people’s reactions to you in this diary.” He passed a date book across the table to me.

“Personal grooming? What, like shaving?”

“Yes, it’s pretty simple. I don’t want you to shave or get a haircut for 3 months, can you do that?”

“Of course,”

“Can you get by without brushing your teeth?”

“Ugh,” I said, before saying I guess so.

 “Can you go 3 months without deodorant or that god awful cologne you are wearing?”

“Seriously you don’t like Hai Karate?”

“Not much lad; you won’t be able to wash either, or launder your clothes.”

“I’m to wear the same clothes every day without cleaning them?”

“I know how you feel. You can have a nice soak in the tub when you’re done and think about how you’ll spend your $30,000.”

“I don’t know Pete, this is pretty weird research. It wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“I understand, and if you don’t want to take the job then it’s not too late to say no. There are all kinds of university kids who would jump at the chance to make $30,000 for basically living like a pig, like they’re doing already.”

I took a big sip of coffee and thought this through. He made a good point about students. If they could do it, so could I. How could I manage the marriage though? I would have to convince Jane I was worth waiting 3 months for. I was still weighing out the options, contemplating how far my life had sunk, when Pete pulled a bundle of 20 dollar bills out of his pocket and put it in front of me.

“That’s $2000. Let’s call it a bonus should you decide to sign on.”

I picked up the bundle of twenties and fanned through it. This was getting to be unreal.

“Take it if you want the job, you’ll still get the other $30,000 once we’re done. Provided, of course”….he paused for effect, “you don’t share any of what I tell you with anyone. Oh and one other thing. You have to continue living in your house as normal, looking for a job, interacting with people.”

“Why is that, what’s the harm in just telling a couple of people?”

At this point, Pete reached across the table and took back the twenties. “Because Barry, if people knew it was a research project they would naturally treat you differently. In psychology, you have to make sure you have an absolutely pure experiment.”

“So how will I collect the money?”

“You and I sit down each month and I review your diary for people’s reactions to you, and then I give you the $10,000 cash.”

I hadn’t worked out how I was going to manage the home front, but I reached across the table and took the twenties back. “When can I start?”

Chapter 3

Pete said I could start the following day. I decided to follow through on my plan to cook dinner for Jane when she got home. As she walked in the door she could smell the roast chicken and knew I was up to something. I had set the table with our best china and linen and spent some of my new found wealth on a bouquet of flowers. As she entered the kitchen, “I’m so sorry about last night Jane. I have no excuse.” She was going to say something cutting, I could tell by the expression. I continued, “Jane I have been a horrible person to live with since,” I threw my hands in the air, “I don’t know how long. I am so sorry…the thought of losing you would be unbearable.” I think that might have done the trick as her expression softened.

The meal was fantastic. She was full of questions about the previous night and what had led to the turnaround. After every question, I would try to change the subject, getting her to talk about her work. This was a subject I had never really cared about. She talked about the customers coming in complaining about their house being sold from under them, how she loved the course she was taking, how everyone in the office is so kind to her and so much fun to work with and how the new boss was being especially nice to her…blah, blah blah.

After the meal, she went back to the questions. I stifled those with a bottle of champagne and something we hadn’t done for months.

Chapter 4

Jane let me sleep in the next morning, something I attributed to my prowess in the bedroom the night before. When I got up, I was about to jump in the shower when all of a sudden reality hit. No shower, no brushing my teeth. Thank goodness coffee was not a banned substance. I sat down with Mr. Coffee and read the paper from cover to cover. Ok, I had killed 10 hours so far. There were only 2160 hours left to go.

It was July and incredibly humid. I decided I would wear track pants over gym shorts along with a sports shirt over a black t-shirt with no socks in my runners. That way if I got hot I could just ditch a layer and be comfortable. I pulled out the day timer he’d given me and wrote:

Day 1

I almost jumped in the shower before I remembered the rules. You would be proud of me Pete!Jane pestered me with questions last night, but I tricked her into telling me all about her work and then wowed her with my sexual creativity. Who says I’m not creative? Anyway I’m going to hang out around here today. Going for a repeat performance tonight. My wife still loves me and this research thing will be a walk in the park.

Day 2

Made dinner for the second night in a row and kept busy in the evening doing chores so she couldn’t ask me anything. Over dinner, I got her telling me about real estate business in Corpus Christi. Pretty scary stuff! How can anyone pay an 18% mortgage rate? Geez it must be difficult for her at the office with everyone coming in worried about losing their house. She asked me why I was wearing the same track pants two days in a row and I said I was taking up exercise during the day. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

Day 3

Pretty hot outside so I decided mid-day to spend time at the library. The air-conditioned library! I even applied for a library card. This is going to work out fine. No one said anything about my breath, which I think is getting rank. Had to walk home in the heat so slipped down to my t-shirt and shorts and made like I was jogging. When I got home I put some talcum powder in my shoes. Not against the rules I hope, but going barefoot in running shoes leaves a bad smell. When Jane came home I made dinner for the third night in a row. I dusted and vacuumed after dinner. She looked at me funny when she saw I was going to bed in the same track shorts and t-shirt I’d worn all week. She was going to put the clothes in the laundry, but I stopped her. Don’t you worry honey; I’ll be taking care of the laundry going forward.

Day 4

You said I needed to look for a job, so I decided to apply for a job working at Dicky-D ice cream. I was thinking air conditioning, which would be a relief. I ended up not going for it because they said I would have to wear a uniform. I figured that probably wouldn’t work for you. My sports shirt now has huge sweat stains and a lady at the park moved when I sat down beside her. Is this the kind of reaction you were looking for? The night was ok, we ordered take out because neither of us wanted to face my cooking for 4 straight days. I spent most of the evening watching television with her. Separate chairs.

Day 5

I went to the employment office to register for a job. I had no idea there were so many people out of work. The recession has done a number on a lot of local factories and there had to be a hundred people ahead of me in line. I noticed the people in front of me and behind me were looking at me funny and trying to leave a little extra space. Hopefully, that will help with the research project. After almost an hour of waiting in the hot sun, my nerves were getting frayed as I made it to the front of the line. “I’m here to apply for a job,” I said to the middle-aged, overweight female at the desk. She rolled her eyes at me and let out a sigh, asking whether I had completed the W2 form. I said, “What the fuck is a W2 form?” From her expression, I think she doesn’t like the word fuck.

So when she gave me a W2 and a bunch of other shitty forms, I said, “Thanks a fucking lot…do you have a fucking pencil?” She replied by putting up a closed sign and leaving her desk.

Day 6

Saturday. Just another day. I made Jane breakfast and then avoided her questions by washing out the bathtub and then tackling the fridge. She persisted and asked me about how the job hunt was going. I felt like telling her it was none of her fucking business, but I was sweet, thanking her for her concern and told her that taking care of her and the house were enough for me. She approached me as if she was going to hug me, but detoured at the last minute. When she brought up that annoying money issue, I told her I spent some quality time yesterday at the employment office discussing various jobs. Then I flashed what was left of the twenties you gave me. And suggested we go out for dinner. This seemed to placate her.

Day 7

I smell like shit. Literally I smell like shit. My breath reeks, my teeth feel like they are wearing gloves. My dark hair is full of little white specks and my scalp itches like crazy. If I make it through today then I will have endured this for a week. Jane hates sports, so I spent the day lying on the couch watching football. She went to the park and came back saying it was a little warm outside. Warm…she actually said warm….it’s fucking hot. After take out again, she asked me if I wanted her to run a bath for me. Hahaha! Not a chance, I’ll do it myself.

Day 8

I woke up determined to make the best of things. It was a great day to visit the beach. I was thinking some of the beach smell would stick and mask the other odours. When I got there I contemplated going for a dip…you see there’s a difference between bathing and swimming isn’t there? I was getting up to walk to the water when a shadow came over me. It was you Pete, congratulating me for making it past one week. When you asked how it was going in your snotty accent, I lied and told you it was easy peasy. You correctly guessed I was considering going for a dip. Despite the fact, I said I wasn’t, you told me swimming was against the rules. As you walked away I gave you the finger.

Day 9

I have arbitrarily decided spraying the house with pine-scented Glade and then running around naked waving my arms was not against the rules. I now smell like a tree. I spent most of the day outside after that, digging up the flower bed. I celebrated my new outdoorsy smell by making Kraft dinner with little cut up wieners. If I was going to live like a student I might as well eat like one. Apparently this wasn’t good enough for Jane so I ate alone playing Atari. She interrupted to ask if I had any news of jobs. I lied and said I was a little over-qualified for what was out there now, but I was exploring some promising leads. This must have appeased her because she actually tried to have sex with me. Yech! I told her I had a headache from too much sun.

Day 10

How close are you watching me? Would you know if I quickly jumped in the shower? A quick brush of my teeth would make my day so much better. I stood there in the bathroom contemplating risking everything, when the phone rang. It was you again Pete. You told me about featuring me in a medical journal and sharing the results once the research was over. I said that was peachy and then asked you a hypothetical about what would happen if I snuck in a little bitty shower? I did not appreciate your tone in telling me you had me under surveillance and I would not only lose the $30 grand but would have to pay back the $2,000 bonus. I hate Australians.

Day 11

I went for a walk today and people were trying to avoid me. Even their dogs were cowering in fear as the smelly man approached. Is that the kind of reaction you want in your fucking stupid research? I could save us both a lot of time and aggravation here, FYI civilized human beings generally want to avoid smelly, disgusting people. For that reason, I don’t feel I need to write something in this fucking book every day.

Day 12

I have a friend in the Corpus Christi Police Department I have known since grade school. Rodney agreed to meet me in the park outside the police station. It was good to see him. He seemed concerned about me and asked whether I was out looking for a job. I said I had pretty well given up. He offered to pull a few strings for me in the department, but I said I wasn’t quite ready yet to start back to work.

Day 13

It’s Thursday, I am going to the market and see who I can scare away. One shopkeeper waived his hand in front of me and told me they gave their leftover produce to one of the Missions downtown. You know, downtown where homeless people like you can go and have a hot shower. I gave him a smile, showing him my brown teeth.

Day 15

I found the name Brad and a number written on a pad by the phone. My mind automatically leaped to, “Jane’s having an affair.” I haven’t completely lost my mind. I stink like hell, and Jane is a very attractive woman. On impulse, I dialed the number on the pad and was connected to Bayview Psychiatric Hospital. So we’re even. While I had jumped to the conclusion she must be cheating on me, and she leaped to the conclusion I must be out of my mind.

Day 17

Wednesday. So what? As Jane was leaving for the office she said she was getting tired of this. By this, I believe she meant me. Apparently I was no longer the man she married. I showed her my fucking library card. The insults have returned. After I rhymed off all of the things I’ve done around the house she replied, “Keep talking, maybe you’ll eventually say something intelligent.” I spent the day drinking my face off, thinking of a comeback.

Day 19

It rained today so I stood in the downpour all day. This helped tremendously. I didn’t bother to check with you as people can get caught in a quick rainstorm at any time. The only issue, of course, is I had to sit around in wet clothes. Jane came home from work to a meal of brain food. Alpha-bits and bananas. When she saw I was drenched from the downpour she told me to smarten up and take off my wet clothes before I caught a cold. I ignored her and poured myself some more reading material.

Day 21

I am starting my 3rd week. Jane didn’t come home tonight but called. She said she was staying overnight with a friend. When I asked her why she said “You know.” When I asked what friend? She just said someone I didn’t know, and asked me what I was going to contribute tomorrow?

Day 23

Had a brainwave. I went down to Rene’s Car Wash today and applied for a job. The guy looked at me kind of funny, but I begged him for a chance to show him what I could do. You know the rest of it. Before I had a chance to take the job you drove your prissy little car in and told the guy I was some kind of child molester. Don’t you think that’s a little unfair? Two can play that game…just watch.

Day 24

I don’t know how you know what you know, but I figure you must have put a bug in the house. I went around with a hammer and smashed holes in the walls looking for it. Then, I thought maybe you installed a camera so I broke most of the mirrors. When Jane got home and saw the mess you made me make, she cried. Are you happy now? Jane confessed to calling Brad. She called him a doctor. Yeah sure! Anyway she made an appointment for us to go down and see him at Bayview. Lots of people apparently suffer breakdowns after losing their jobs. I spent the afternoon watching reruns of Wheel of Fortune. It all goes straight to the brain.

Day 26

I snuck out of the house so no one watching could see me. I went out and got a job today. I did it. I will finally have something constructive to tell Jane. I was surprised when the guy said I could start right away. Make a note of this - not everyone is put off by a filthy, stinky unkempt man wearing disgusting track pants and a badly stained t-shirt. It’s good honest work. While it only pays minimum wage, what the hell! It will help me pass the time. Jane will be so happy when I tell her; she’ll probably want to make love.

Day 27

Jane wasn’t impressed with my decision to get a job at the city dump. She said that was beneath me and that she didn’t want to be married to a garbage man. I told her I wasn’t a garbage man, I was a garbage sorter. When I suggested a little romp in the hay later she suggested I go sleep with the pigs. She started to laugh as she went out the door. I could hear her howling all the way down the street.

Day 28

Good day at the dump today. It was hotter than hell, but no one seemed to mind. There’s some neat stuff getting thrown away. I brought home a lamp that was a bust of a policewoman with her blouse open showing her bare chest. In the place of nipples, it had light bulbs, the size you see on Christmas lights. I offered to pay for it, but my boss said “No, go home and give it to the little woman.” When Jane got home she was not impressed. She laughed again as she was leaving to go out.

Day 29

I could work at the dump for the rest of my life. No one expects much from you. I rescued an old radio and some ratty old curtains to fix up our lunch room. The guys were very impressed. I think I’m one of the better smelling guys here. I put a picture of Jane up on the wall of the lunchroom and the guys all thought she was pretty hot. One guy wanted to take her picture into the bathroom. The ultimate compliment.

Day 30

Someone’s taken down her picture and did some pretty disgusting things to it. When I asked who did it, one guy spoke up about seeing Jane with another guy downtown. He said they were you know...then he did a humping motion. At first I thought it was just another sick remark aim at getting a rise from me than I thought maybe it was Dr. Brad.

Day 31

I called you today. I believe I have more than earned my $10,000. On my message, I said I wanted to meet at the coffee shop to collect my money and show you the precious notebook. You never returned my call.

Day 32

Ok, I’ve made it past a month. I threw out my sports shirt. I couldn’t stand it anymore. I’m still on a high about earning the money. I think I may just take the $10 grand and quit. You can get a student to finish. You haven’t called me back and I’m getting a little worried. At breakfast, Jane told me she had another sleepover planned for tonight. When I complained she said it would be a late night studying because the big exam is a week away. I said something like “Who gives a rat’s ass?” Without missing a beat, she said, “If anyone would know a rat’s ass than it would be you”.

Later I felt bad about the argument and decided to surprise Jane at work. When I got close to her office I saw a black BMW parked beside her Chrysler. The car looked familiar. I wasn’t positive, but it sure looked like your car.

Chapter 5

“Okay let's not jump to conclusions,” I said to myself as I watched from down the street. “Maybe you’re looking for real estate?” My eyes were riveted on the door as two people came out. Pete must have a lot of money. Maybe one of the agents is working with him on commercial real estate for his research business. I rejected that idea when I saw him put his arms around my wife. They huddled together by Pete’s car. It still didn’t have to mean anything. Now he was bending down and kissing her passionately for one, two, three, four, oh come on. I watched as he backed out and drove away. I thought about following, but what’s the point? What’s the point of anything?

So here I sit in the same spot where I first met Pete. The Red Bailey’s Tavern. This is where the story began. I had plenty to drink about. I had lost my wife and I smelled like shit. I wasn't yet in the bag, but give it time. I bet there was never going to be a payoff. I bet this was just a setup all along. This was just a way to get me to appear crazy so my wife would leave me. Meanwhile, he would be there to pick up the pieces. Fuck, fuck, fuck! I finished my drink and signaled Gus to make the next one a double.

Half way through the next round my anger at being taken changed to a modest admiration for the con Pete had run on me. He must have a powerful longing for Jane to have gone to such trouble. He even went to the trouble of getting business cards. He came up with that bullshit story and forked over two grand at the perfect time. He was pretty slick. Well, I’m glad for Jane; she will finally get what she wanted. A man whose best years were still to come. Not a guy working in a garbage dump. I won’t cause trouble. When she asks for the divorce she can have it. She can have the house too. All I want is that lamp I rescued from the dump. There’s a saying in the circus, and that's what the last month had been. Come see the infamous stinky-man. There's a sucker born every minute. That's what I am ....a sucker.

I was into my third drink when I summoned the courage to make the call. Dialing the number for the real estate office from the bar’s pay phone, my heart skipped a beat when I heard, “Woodland Realty, Jane Trotter speaking?” I tried my best Aussie accent, “Greetings from down under Sheila. I was wondrin’ if I could have a bit of a conversation with my brother Peter James?”

“Uh….it’s Jane, not Sheila.”

“Bloody hell, of course, of course. No worries Janey. Is he about?”

“The only man working in this office is the owner, Jim Peterson,” she answered tentatively. She then added, “And he’s definitely not Australian.”

“Bloody hell,” I repeated. I was about to hang up when I thought the similarity in the name was too big a coincidence. Dropping the accent, “He doesn’t perchance drive a black BMW does he?”

She took a moment to clue in, “Barry is that you? Oh my God, Barry. You are out of your mind. What’s this all about?”

I repeated the question about the car and she confirmed her boss Jim drove a BMW. “Jane listen to me one last time. I’m not crazy, nor am I a garbage man. Well yeah, I’m a garbage man, but not for the reason you think. I can explain everything and when I do, believe me, Jim Peterson is not who you think he is.” I said all this not realizing she had already hung up.

I made one more call to my friend Rodney. After I told him about Peter James, he made a few calls and called me back to say Peter James, aka Jim Peterson and a number of other names, was wanted for white collar swindles. I asked him to swing by the bar so I could make a formal complaint. When he got there I tried to get in the cruiser but he said, holding his nose, “Bad idea Barry.”

As a personal favor to me, Rodney used lights and sirens as I followed him to the realty office. When we pulled into the parking lot and entered the office there was a flurry of activity. Jane’s eyes went from wide-eyed surprise to narrowing suspicion when she saw me enter after the police officer. She directed her question past Rodney at me. “What crazy accent are you going to use now, Barry?”

“Just listen Jane...” I started to say when we heard a commotion from the back office. Pete had started towards us, but upon seeing the policeman, abruptly turned around and headed towards the rear exit.

“Stop right there Mr. Peterson,” commanded Rodney. Jane was back to wide-eyed shock as her eyes darted from Rodney to Pete and then back at me.

After a brief discussion, the situation was explained to Jane, and Pete was led away in handcuffs. It didn’t take long for Jane’s tears to flow. I resisted holding her, not because of the smell, but because I no longer wanted to. “I feel so stupid!” she cried.

“That would be an insult to stupid people,” I said. My last image of Jane was her wild-eyed look as I walked out and got in my car. I was going to find a hotel somewhere with a hot bath.