

"A tale of murder and revenge that fires on every possible cylinder."

—JONATHAN SANTLOFER, author of *The Last Mona Lisa*

A NOVEL

BEN CRANE



A MAN
OF LIES

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PEGASUS CRIME
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*For my Mickey,
who sees me.*

PROLOGUE

So here's the short version of things: I did something stupid, some people got hurt, and I'm about to try something far worse. If you want the longer version, there's some things you need to know first.

My name is Barrett Rye, and I am a confidence man. I've been other things before. When I was eight I wanted to be a magician. When I was sixteen I started working in organized crime. Now, nineteen years later, I'm a professional trickster.

I'm going to make you a promise, right here at the start of everything. It's probably the most important part of the story, so if you can only remember one thing, remember this:

Nothing I say is the truth.

Of course, if you can only remember one thing, then you should put the book down now. You're going to need to remember a lot more than that. If you think you're up to the task, though, I have one more promise, nearly as important as the first:

Nothing I say is a lie.

"But, Barrett," I hear you say, or at least you would if we were capable of having an actual dialogue, "how can that be? How can what you say be not the truth and not a lie?"

“Well,” I say to you in this imaginary conversation, “that’s the trick of it all. If I told you that, I’d give up the whole game.”

FRIDAY

CHAPTER 1

Barrett Rye, 10:22 P.M.

Perhaps we should start in Brock's gambling den, a private club in the back of a garment warehouse in downtown Omaha. An old man sits in a defunct break room, and if you know the password, he'll let you through a broom closet to the space behind, a modern recreation of a prohibition speakeasy. There are six tables inside, two each for poker, blackjack, and roulette. Brock has filled the room with wood paneling and richly cushioned seats. The serving girls wear cocktail dresses and ferry drinks from the bar. The dealers wear crisp cummerbunds.

There's a trio of legal casinos right across the river in Council Bluffs. People come to Brock's for the thrill of the criminality—a moment of excitement in milquetoast lives—or because they are desperate. Brock is more than happy to accommodate them all. The whole room smells of musk and sweat layered with cheap booze and stale cigars, and overwhelming it all is the acrid bite of adrenaline in the corners of my mouth.

There are six of us at the table, but only two matter. There's a hair over three thousand dollars in the pot, and we're the only two left in the hand. The first might be the largest human I've ever seen in person. He's a nearly seven-foot wall of muscle whose eyes sit too close together beneath his encroaching brow. I'd never want to see him across from me in a darkened

alley, but at a poker table? A sucker is born every minute, and this man has a face that screams his idiocy to the world.

As for his opponent, well, what can I say about him? He's handsome—of course—but in a casual way. A way that makes you think he could be your friend. "You're already twelve hundred into the pot," he says, grinning a salesman's smile to the bruiser across the table. "What's three more?" He straightens the cuffs on his perfectly tailored suit.

I'm about to do something profoundly stupid. I'm going to cheat. I might not have become the magician I dreamed of being as a kid, but I know how to vanish a card and replace it with another. Months of planning come down to this one move, but if this bruiser can't get it through his steroid-addled brain that he needs to call, it all will have been for nothing.

It's not about the money on the table here. I need orders of magnitude more than that if I'm going to convince Enrico Scarpello, the head of the largest criminal syndicate in Chicago, not to kill me. But if I'm going to get that money, I need this man to call.

The big man studies his cards a moment more, as though they might have changed since he last looked at them, then pushes his chips to the center of the table and turns over the two pair I knew he had.

And now, if you watch closely, you'll catch me. The moment of truth. Here comes the move.

"Kings and tens? That's good. But not quite good enough."

The four guards whose sole job is to keep the games here honest don't spot it when the flush is turned over. But somehow the giant idiot who hasn't managed to string more than three words together all night does. The cards on the table are not the cards I was dealt.

He stares at them. His forehead wrinkles, skin pinching together around an old scar. His hand darts out, faster than you'd think possible. The whole casino stops for a heartbeat, and there is no sound but the rattling of a roulette ball. Two bouncers materialize at the table side.

My arm strains. There is no fighting him as he turns both of our hands up, working to expose them to the room. It's only then that I see the card. I haven't quite managed to get it all the way down inside the sleeve. There is the tiniest corner of the off-suit jack—the actual card I was dealt—poking up above the cloth.

I feel the gasp ripple through the crowd more than I hear it. The audacity of cheating in Brock's house is staggering. The bouncer's grip descends, and I rise to my feet.

Brock Schmidt, the man himself, comes out from the back rooms. He is a compact man, dressed to match the gangster aesthetic of his establishment, but despite his small size, he commands attention with an easy authority.

"I swear to god, Brock. I don't know how that card got there."

"Be quiet. I'll deal with you later," Brock says. "I want everyone here to know that cheaters are dealt with in the harshest possible terms." Brock turns to the giant, leaning back to take in the man's full height. "Will you join me in private to discuss how we can make this right, Mr.—?"

"Barrett," the man says. "Barrett Rye."

Yeah. The big fucker? That idiot bruiser who can barely talk? That's me. I told you—never the truth, but never a lie. I learned early on that my size might draw attention, but while plenty of people look at me, nobody sees me. They think my identity ends with my biceps, so my brutishness is

the best disguise I have. Nobody wants to think they got outsmarted by the guy who has more muscles than brain cells.

Sorry. I was in the middle of something.

“I didn’t do anything,” my opponent protests, and he’s right. I slipped the card up his sleeve as I grabbed his wrist. “Come on. You all know me.”

“Yeah, Richard,” one of the bouncers says. “We do.”

Richard slumps. The full extent of how fucked he is sinks in. As the bouncers escort him away, I let Brock lead me after them.

“What about my chips?” I ask, looking back at the small pile I had at the table. One of the serving girls is neatly transferring it to a plastic tray.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Rye,” Brock assures me. He’s stopped trying to look me in the eye. It’s too much of a strain on his neck. “Your money will be kept safe. Every dollar accounted for. I don’t believe I’ve seen you in here before.”

He won’t come out and ask me who I am, but I can feel him trying to figure me out. How did I notice what all his people missed?

“No,” I say. “I just moved here.”

“None of my men saw Richard swap that card.”

I shrug. “I don’t like cheaters.”

“No,” he laughs. “I don’t think any of us do. If you ever need work, I could use an eye like yours.” I’m sure having someone who looks like me on his staff would help burnish his image as well.

“I’ve got work,” I say. My tone doesn’t leave room for a follow-up.

“Too bad. In the meantime, we have something of a bounty system around here.” He withdraws an envelope from his jacket pocket and holds it out to me.

“A what?”

“A bounty. Five thousand dollars to anyone who helps uncover a cheat. This is only the third time I’ve had to pay it out.”

“Huh,” is all I say as I take the envelope. I had known about the bounty program, of course. But I don’t want Brock to know that.

The lush appointment of the games room gives way to institutional space in the den’s back halls, and Brock tries to direct me to his office. I watch the bouncers lead Richard in the other direction, out to the dark alley behind the building.

“Is that not satisfactory?” Brock follows my gaze.

Silence, I have found, is one of the most powerful tools I have, and so I am silent. I let my frown speak for me. My hands flex slightly. My shoulders tense. Brock wants me to follow him away from the door, but that’s not where I need to be. I wait for him to have the idea himself.

“You don’t like cheaters,” Brock says, feeling out my words. I don’t respond. I let the silence work. “They make you angry, and you’d like to express that anger.”

I smile back with as much cruelty as I can muster.

“That sounds reasonable to me.” Brock turns from his office and leads me into the alley.

CHAPTER 2

Two Months Ago

Enrico Scarpello, the man who ran organized crime in Chicago, had asked me to join him in his office. Most collection guys wouldn't be meeting with him personally, but I'd been working for him since he was a street boss, so I didn't think anything of it. The guys out front waved me in when I arrived.

The old man sat behind his desk, looking pristine as always. He was laughing at something Mickey had said. Mickey was sitting across from him with an accounts book open between them. That was when I knew something had happened. There was no good reason for me and Mickey to be meeting with Scarpello together. Plenty of bad reasons, but no good ones.

Mickey turned, and his smile dropped a fraction of a degree. His lips drew closed across his slightly crooked front tooth. He hadn't known I was coming either. Two bad signs. I kept my face neutral. No reason to give away my concern. There was still a chance that this was something banal. We'd been careful. We hadn't left any sign of what we were doing.

"What's up, boss?" I asked.

Scarpello looked at me, and I knew how fucked we were. "Thank you for joining us," he said. His eyes flicked over my shoulder.

I felt her moving behind me, but I knew better than to look. Scarpello was in control. Whatever he wanted was going to happen. There was a faint stirring as the door closed, and Laia Quintana took up a position beside me.

Laia was a soldier, like me, but the similarities ended there. She was a gun for hire, and her presence meant Scarpello no longer trusted his own organization. She was a small woman, barely a hair over five feet, but as much of a mistake as it is to ignore me for my size, it's worse to do the same to her. She'd tracked guys halfway around the world based only on a whisper. We'd never gotten along, but I respected the hell out of her.

"What's going on, boss?" I asked again as Laia quickly—but thoroughly—patted me down. I tried to keep my expression empty.

"He's clean," Laia said. She slid a chair into the backs of my legs. I rolled forward a bit but stayed standing.

"Sit down, Barrett." Scarpello's tone was conversational. Of course, he didn't call me Barrett. I had a different name then. But I'll keep it consistent here, for your sake. "You've done a lot of quality work for me over the years. You're one of my best earners, squeezing money out of stones I'd given up hope of ever producing, and that alone is enough to win you my admiration."

Mickey was staring forward, his gaze locked onto the space just below Scarpello's chin. He had never been one for conflict or confrontation. It was one of the things I loved about him. He never let this world we lived in harden him. That wasn't what I needed right then, though.

"But my affection"—Scarpello was still talking—"you earned with time and dedication. This world isn't what it was when I was coming up. But you I could always count on. You're like a sledgehammer. I wouldn't try to

do algebra with a sledgehammer, but when you need something wrecked, it's always gonna be there for you. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Not really."

At the sound of my voice, Mickey snapped out of his reverie. "Boss," he said. "Whatever you think is going on—"

"Now Mickey here." Scarpello silenced him with a gesture. "Mickey is a whole different sort of creature. He's more like a ferret. Did you know you can train a ferret? They can do tricks. You can even put one to work. But it doesn't matter how well you feed it or how often you play with it, it's still nothing but a fancy weasel. If it sees even the slightest opportunity to advance its furry little life, it'll take it. It doesn't care how bad it hurts you. It doesn't even care if it hurts itself. You put one in a cage and prop the door open with a bit of food, the dumb little shit will eat that food and slam the door on itself every time, even if it knows it's sealing its own fate."

I barely felt the needle as Laia pressed it into my neck—it didn't need to go deep—but the anesthetic burned as it entered my bloodstream.

I swung behind me, favoring speed over accuracy, and Laia must have miscalculated just how fast I could move, because my elbow caught the side of her head.

Mickey came to his feet a second after I did. "Barrett," he said. He was afraid. We'd both known this might happen. "You're bleeding."

I ran my hand over my neck. It would heal. Just a pinprick.

"Did you two really think you could get away with this?" Scarpello was still seated, still looking at us calmly. "Did you really think you could steal from me, and I wouldn't notice?"

"We didn't steal anything," Mickey said. "My books are clean."

“Of course your books are clean. You’re smart, Mickey. But you’re not smart enough.”

The anesthetic was working quickly. I had maybe thirty seconds. No time for anything subtle or clever. It always came down to violence in the end. I took a step toward Scarpello.

Except I didn’t. Not quite.

I thought I did. My body moved as though I had, but my feet remained rooted in place, and I toppled over. Maybe I had less than thirty seconds before the drugs took hold.

I hit the ground badly and, doing a quick test of my extremities to see what I could still move, came up with an answer of nothing. I was flat on my chest, my head twisted so I could just see Mickey. The fear in his voice was giving way to full-blown panic.

“Barrett,” he said again as he knelt next to me.

I tried to say something to Mickey. To offer him some reassurance, but my mouth wasn’t working. All that came out was a bubble of drool.

“Out of respect,” said Scarpello, walking around the desk, “for your many years of service to this institution, I will give you one chance to make this right.”

“Yes!” Mickey looked up at him. “Anything. Whatever you need, we’ll do it.”

My vision was starting to darken. The room narrowed down to Mickey and Scarpello and now Laia, standing again beside them.

“Not you, Mickey. You’ve played your hand, and you’ve played it poorly.” Scarpello looked at me. “Remember this, Barrett. Remember what happens when you forget that you work for me.”

Laia drew her sidearm. It was a small piece, a .22LR pistol. You might trust it to take down a raccoon, but not to stop an attacker. She didn't need it to stop an attacker, though. Only a ferret.

I tried to scream. I strained against the numbness that was taking my body away from me, but that battle had been lost before I knew I was fighting it.

"Barrett," Scarpello said as he stepped around Mickey to look me in the eye, and the blackness crawled in from the edges of my vision. "I want you to remember this moment."

"Barrett," Mickey looked away from Laia. He didn't want to see it coming. His eyes met mine. I was supposed to be his protector. I would keep him safe. He had given me everything, and I had given him—

Laia fired three times into his back. The subsonic rounds were pitiful. Mickey deserved a cannon fusillade to send him off, and instead he got this. Three little firecrackers. His eyes went wide, and he fell beside me. His face bounced off the carpet and turned away. I was grateful for this small mercy, that I did not have to watch him go. I couldn't bear the weight of his disappointment in my failure. His hand lay next to mine. I wanted to reach for it. To offer him that small comfort as his life spilled out onto the rug around us.

But I could not give him that. All I had was my failure. The knowledge that when it mattered most, I not only could do nothing but was glad that he couldn't see me. That I didn't have to see him. I wonder now if I could have reached his hand. If I could have tried harder. If the paralytic wasn't the only thing holding me back.

As the black swept down, the last thing I saw was Scarpello leaning over me. I felt dry fingers on my cheek.

“Get me my money.”

CHAPTER 3

Peter Van Horn, 10:25 P.M.

The beam from Peter Van Horn's flashlight glints off the coin as it spins. A damp coil of blond hair falls across his eyes as he catches it. He resists the urge to check the result. Instead, he pushes the errant lock back beneath his patrolman's cap, leaving his fate in suspense.

He stands in the darkened third floor of the U-Store-It, a self-storage facility in a mediocre part of town. There is neither enough crime nor enough money to warrant the expense of hiring off-duty police, but management says it's important, and they're willing to pay. They won't fix the rattling in the beleaguered A/C unit, but they'll shell out for a real badge and gun to walk the halls of rolling steel doors.

Most of the officers who moonlight here stay in the lobby, tucked in a corner where the parking lot attendant can't see them, and do whatever it is a person does when they've got an eight-hour shift and nothing to keep them honest.

No one would know if Peter did the same. The building has no interior cameras. But he is paid to patrol, and he can't afford to risk the money. He leads a frugal lifestyle, but a uniformed cop's starting salary hasn't gone up in Omaha in eight years, while the price of nearly everything else has. Add in the debt from his brother's end-of-life care, and these side jobs are the

only thing keeping him ahead of the increasingly angry calls from the bank.

So he patrols, and he makes a game of it to pass the empty hours. At each intersection and every stairwell, he flips a coin to determine what route he takes and to see how quickly he can cover the entire building. This time, the first two floors took less than fifty minutes, but now he's stuck in a loop on the third floor among the climate-controlled units. When he reaches stairs, a heads tells him to climb, while tails keeps him on this level. He's flipped eight tails in a row.

The coin sits in his closed fist. Surely it can't be tails again. Nine would be absurd. This run could still come in under a respectable two and a half hours if he can get up to the next and final floor. If he can flip a heads. He uncoils his fingers.

Tails.

It isn't the end of the world. It will be nice, he admits as he wipes at the sweat gathering on his forehead, to spend a bit more time in these cooled hallways. The fourth floor is an oven. Better to stay here.

The key to success is to redefine failure.

After a few steps, though, he pauses. He had thought the rattling was just the A/C fans fighting against the summer heat, but the clang echoing toward him now is something else: slow and careful footsteps.

"Hello?" There's a childish warble to his voice. He grabs the railing, flecked paint and spotted rust scratching at his palm, and leans out over the opening. There is nothing but the darkness between the stairs as they switchback to the ground, twenty-odd feet below.

He steps away from the banister. As his light pulls back, he swears he can see it flashing off something brassy, not the white paint of the handrail

but a warm yellow reflection. It's probably a trick of his mind. Like the footsteps. It's only the boredom catching up with him. Even so, he reaches for his taser.

He has it half drawn when he is washed in light.

His first thought—and he will ponder what this says about him later—is one of petulant anger. You can't burn the lights at night. He doesn't think about the danger implied. He doesn't search for cover. His training disappears, and his mind is filled with the storage manager's voice and her overpowering perfume, floral verging on saccharine.

"No overhead lights," she told him before his first shift. "They are on only when we're open. Company policy." Her chins jiggled in time with the waggling of her finger. She could stand to walk the darkened stairs a time or two herself, Peter thought before reprimanding himself for the unkindness.

It's all moot, though. The overhead lights aren't on. A flashlight blinds Peter, and the manager's wrath is the least of his problems.

"Hands in the air!" A voice of authority. The source of the light.

Peter finds himself complying. The voice told him to raise his hands, so he does. Someone else is in charge now. The cuffs of his shirt slide up his forearms. It's been a struggle his whole life to find clothes that fit his lanky frame.

Peter squints into the light but can see only the vague suggestion of a human form. Tall and broad. A straight line from armpit to ankle. The shoulders begin to move. Up and down, in time with the thrumming of the A/C.

"Christ, Petey," the figure says. "You're pale enough, you'd think I'd already shot ya."