



CHAPTER

1

“Full house!”

Tom Connor’s eyes narrowed as Nick Brenner slapped his cards onto the tabletop. *Thump*. Nick’s face was alight with the cunning enthusiasm of a cat that had cornered not one, but two plump canaries.

Seated beside Tom and across from Nick in the lounge car of the swaying train, Percy Norton gave a snort of disapproval and waved a large hand at Nick. “Why is it that he never has to bluff?” Tom looked at his fair-haired friend. “Always a good hand, and always better than mine, when I have a good one.”

Percy, a devoted eater who had never met a morsel he didn’t like, and who had, in consequence, attained nearly the shape of the average bowling ball—or the average bowler, for that matter—dropped his cards in disgust and reached for the section of newspaper on his voluminous lap. His other hand closed on the remaining quarter of a cold roast-beef sandwich, his third of the evening. The sandwich, pale and soggy, had long ago given up the battle for freshness, but Percy took no notice and dispatched it in two bites.

Turning back to the table as his friend ate, Tom watched Nick rub his hands together and rake the dozen red, white, and blue chips into the heaping pile before him. Tom said thoughtfully, in answer to Percy’s question, “Could be he’s luckier than we are.” He paused. “Or, could be he cheats.” The

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innocent twinkle in his dark brown eyes and the easiness in his voice belied the incisive mind behind them that scrutinized every detail of Nick's reaction.

Nick's green eyes flinched, and the smile above his pointed jaw flickered out. His thin lips twisted and he brushed a hand through light brown hair. "You don't need to cheat when you're lucky," he said. "What's wrong, Tom? They don't teach poker at Stanford?"

"They must have dropped it from the curriculum," Tom said. "Who teaches it at Berkeley?"

"Me. In night school, among other things." Nick began to rock gently back and forth as his veneer of confidence returned. "You're just jealous, Tom; all those muscles and straight-A grades, but you can't win a hand of poker to save your life." He shook his head and looked from Tom to Percy. "Come on, both of you, quit belly-aching. It's only chips."

True, Tom thought, and I don't care enough about a lousy stack of chips to make a scene. But you dealt yourself two off the bottom last hand, and I've watched you do it all night.

The lounge car, situated squarely in the center of the Empire Builder to provide equal access to passengers on both ends of the long cross-country train, was almost deserted. The reflection of the soft interior lights on the windows, and the little brown curtains swinging back and forth on either side of those windows, obscured the dark contours speeding by, mile after mile of slumbering blackness, an emptiness broken only occasionally by the lights of some brief, anonymous town.

Tom yawned. The monotonous day of travel had begun so early that morning. Now the hypnotic rhythm of the wheels drumming along the tracks and the gentle motion of the car conspired together to weight his eyelids and dull his thoughts. A couple more hands, he decided, lose the rest of his dwindled pile to Nick, then off to bed. Ordinarily he would not have relished the thought of the tiny bunks in the sleeping cabin

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they had pooled their money to reserve, but he was so tired he no longer cared. Tomorrow they would reach the mountains—that was what mattered. His spirits lifted at the prospect.

Nick scooped up the cards. With a flourish, he reached over and opened his hand, letting them cascade to the table in front of Percy. “All right big guy, your deal. Make it a good one. You losers need to be put out of your misery.” He drank deeply from a green bottle plucked unsteadily off the table before him, set it down again, and waited.

Percy ignored the cards. His eyes were on the newspaper folded in his corpulent hands. “Hey guys, listen to this—” He pointed at the page. “It says, and I quote, *‘This Wednesday, after several grueling visits abroad and a series of hard-fought policy campaigns culminating in decisive victory over our current do-nothing Congress, the President of the United States will journey to Glacier National Park for a much-needed respite amidst the splendor of the Rocky Mountains. Asked about the risk of encountering grizzly bears or other predatory wildlife, the president replied that all beasts lurking in the wilds of Montana were entirely tame compared to their suit-wearing brethren in Washington—most of whom seemed to have snaked their way into the Legislature for the sole purpose of bogging the government down in endless partisan savagery.’*”

Percy looked up with a smile. “How about that? If we’re lucky, we might get to see the president.”

Tom grinned. “Nah. If he’s lucky, he might get to see us.”

“My mistake. Right you are.” Percy let the paper fall. He reached for the cards, gave them a single shuffle, and dealt unhurriedly.

Tom picked up his hand. It could have been any one of twenty dealt to him that night. A two, a three, an eight, a jack, and a king. As indifferent as could be, and him left with not nearly enough chips to carry a successful bluff. He looked at

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the two faces staring back at him expectantly, and shrugged. "Pass."

Nick's smile was even broader now. "Bid fifty," he said, pushing five blue chips to the center.

Percy placed five blues of his own in the center. "I'm just about gone anyway."

Tom glanced sideways at Percy. There was a tinge of excitement in the large boy's voice, and the gleam in the bright blue eyes confirmed that his friend had drawn a strong hand. Tom looked up from his own weak cards to the center of the table—and what had abruptly become a large pot—and tossed them down. "I'm out," he said. He sat back against the hard bench seat and folded his arms.

"Ha! One down." Nick's head bobbed approval. "You're next, fatso."

Percy smiled bravely. "We'll see, big mouth. How many?"

"One." Nick flicked a single card off to the side of the table.

With a frown and slump of the shoulders suggesting new doubts about the strength of his hand, Percy dealt one card face down in front of Nick. He straightened again. "And I'll take one."

"You can't scare me like that," said Nick. "Fifty more."

Percy exhaled and tapped a finger against the tops of his cards. Tom expected the inevitable conclusion that it was better safe than sorry, but to his surprise, his friend smiled and pushed forward a stack of blues.

"Your fifty, and," Percy poked his remaining chips into the middle, "sixty more. That's everything."

Nick had ample reserves, though losing this round would dent them and might extend the game by several hands. Tom knew by his furrowed brow that he had not expected Percy to stay in, either.

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Far ahead, the mournful wail of the Empire Builder's horn sounded, a solemn intonation from the soul of the long train in which swirled romance and tedium in equal parts. Tom had thought from the moment they'd boarded how it captured the essence of the journey perfectly.

"Another Podunk town," Nick said, sounding bored. He pointed out the window. Tom and Percy turned to look at the new cluster of lights, but in an instant Tom twisted back. He was too late for a good look; what had happened was already passed. Out of the periphery of his vision, he had seen, maybe just imagined, Nick's slender fingers darting to and from the sleeve above his left wrist. Quickly he counted the cards in Nick's hand. Only five, just what there should be. If Nick had executed a switch, he had done it well.

Percy faced the table again, and Nick said, "Call." He put in chips to match Percy's final raise. "I could just overbid and force you out, you know."

"Nice of you to give me a fighting chance," Percy said.

Sure it is, thought Tom. Still searching, his eyes went down to the table as Nick said, "So, show."

Then, too late, Tom knew. Over to the side, where they had all tossed their throwaways, eight cards sat in a loose pile. Tom added them up. His own worthless five, plus one from Nick and one from Percy made seven, leaving one extra—one Nick must have shunted away in the instant of replacing it with one from his sleeve.

"Hey...." Tom's face reddened in anger, but play was already progressing.

Percy, whose bet had been called, was first to display his cards. "Two pair—king high," he announced hopefully.

Nick drummed his thumbs on the table, finishing with a loud smack as he brought his entire hand down. "Boom! Three jacks!" He cackled at Percy's chagrined face, and swept up the pile of chips. "So long, tubby. You're done for the evening."

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Percy muttered something unintelligible, and stood up, edging past Tom into the swaying aisle. "I think I'll grab an apple," he said.

"That's right. Always tastes better after the third one," Nick said, leering up at him. "Wait, that was sandwiches. Oh well, go on. Drown your sorrows in another round of food."

"You drown things in liquid, bonehead. Like you with your fourth bottle of beer." Percy shuffled stiffly toward a counter where a girl in a white button-down shirt dozed.

Nick turned to Tom. "Okay. We got rid of him. I'd like to say I was hunting big game now, but you haven't been dangerous all night. Your deal." Nick began to hum, shaking his head in time to the tune, drumming away with his fingers on the table.

Tom, incensed, pointed to the pile of exchanged cards, prepared to expose the ploy and demand a confession and apology.

Wait a minute, he thought. Perhaps there was a better way. His mind raced. Could it be done? A smile spread slowly over his face, and he leaned forward. Yes, he thought, much better to strike a searing blow—make him feel it. Give him a taste of what it's like, and maybe he'd be sorry for cheating and not just for being caught.

Tom gathered the cards lying face up in front of Nick's towers of chips, then Percy's losing hand, flipping them all over and mixing them before squaring them on top of the unused portion of the pack. He broke the deck and gave it two fast shuffles, setting it down as Percy returned. He leaned aside for his friend to clamber back into the long seat, and pointed at the napkin in Percy's hand. "Are you going to use that?"

"Apparently not," Percy said, and Tom took it. He pulled a pen from his trousers pocket, scribbled hastily on the napkin, then folded it up and replaced both items in the pocket.

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Nick looked at his watch. “You planning to deal those cards tonight...?”

Tom said slowly, “You’ll wish I hadn’t dealt at all.” He picked up the deck as Percy shot him a quizzical look.

Five cards flicked across the table, alternating with five into a stack before Tom. They picked up their hands. Tom studied his for a moment before looking up to see Nick’s contemplative expression give way to a grin.

“Thirty,” Nick said with conviction, pushing the chips into the center.

Tom waited, shaking his head, biting his lip—baiting the prey to the trap. He gave a barely audible sigh and said, “I’ll stay in.” With a hesitating motion, he put his own chips forward, and raised his eyebrows.

“Two cards,” said Nick. He put his discards on the table as the train clattered over a junction. Tom dealt two off the top of the deck and pushed them across.

“Two for the dealer,” he said evenly, drawing to restock his hand. “To you to bet.”

They were interrupted by a soft, tired voice from the side of the table. The girl had walked over from behind her counter. She had black hair, a good figure, and a face that would have been pretty if it hadn’t been ten o’clock at night and the end of a long shift. Smiling at Tom, she said, “Would you fellows like anything else? We’re closing down soon.”

“No, thank you,” Tom said. Percy, mouth full of apple, shook his head.

Nick said, “No.” He paused. “Not just now, anyway.” His normally abrasive voice turned silky, and Tom watched his fingertips brush with faintest contact over the hand the girl had rested on the table. Nick asked, “Long day?”

She turned with a half smile. “Very long. Boring, but hey, it’s a job. It lets me travel.”

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“I see what you mean,” Nick said, nodding solemnly. “Nothing broadens the horizons like hours watching empty fields roll by on a dark night.”

The girl drew herself up. “Listen, bozo—”

“I’m kidding,” Nick winked at her disarmingly. “Do you get to change routes, stay at different cities between runs?”

She scoffed. “I wouldn’t be here if I couldn’t. The train is strictly routine after the first couple trips.”

“Nothing but lots of work and confined spaces?” Nick’s eyebrows arched.

“Mm-hmm. Work, sleep; quick meals when there’s time. All day, looking after morons like you.”

“Me? That doesn’t sound boring at all.”

The girl smiled, and Nick said, “Don’t worry, we won’t be long. I just have to finish trouncing this guy—” he pointed at Tom, “—and we’ll be out of your hair.” His mouth cocked in a wolfish grin. “And off to bed.”

Tom shook his head and Percy rolled his eyes as Nick added, “Unless you’d let me buy you a drink when we’re finished. Before you close, of course. We could sit upstairs in the observation car and talk a while.”

“Before other things,” Tom muttered. Nick fired an angry glance across at him, but the girl hadn’t heard. She was smiling with her eyes more than her mouth when she said, “Maybe....”

Nick winked again and said, “I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes, then.”

She nodded slowly and moved away, and Tom saw her fingers touch Nick’s. He wondered for the dozenth time what it was they all saw in Nick, why they never figured out this was just a variation on a routine, plied on every girl he met. They might think twice if they could hear him talk the next day.

Nick was talking now, in hushed tones. “You see that? She wants me—” he broke off, sneering. “Uh-oh, Tom, what’s that I see in your eyes? Disapproval?” He laughed as Tom ground

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his teeth. “You’re just mad ‘cause you probably never got a girl in your life. Unlike me. You think it’s all about true love, and honor, and all that crap.” He glanced over his shoulder at the girl and leaned in close. “You’re wrong, man. Don’t be good—be bad. Be a rebel. Girls will jump in your lap if you just—”

“Oh, shut up,” Tom said. His eyes blazed. “You know what I think, and I know what you think. You want them all, and I want just one. Stop blabbering and let’s finish this hand.”

Nick gestured expansively. “You have no clue how easy they all are. Good girls just take a few more daiquiris.” He winked, then looked solemn. “World’s passing you by, Tom. You’re not bad looking. You could get some for yourself if you tried.”

Tom’s glare threatened, and Nick looked away and cleared his throat. “It was my bet, I believe.” He counted the chips in Tom’s stack and pushed forward seven blues. “The bell tolls for thee. Seventy. Come on, just throw ‘em in. I’ve got things to do.”

As Tom shoved his remaining chips into the middle, Nick moved to put his cards down.

“Hold it,” Tom snapped, wanting more than anything, more than avenging the cheating or the endless taunts against Percy, to strike the leering expression off Nick’s arrogant face, the glib words from his smirking mouth. “I’m going to raise you.”

Nick laughed out loud. “You’re out of chips, blind boy.”

“Not chips. The real thing.” Tom paused. His eyes riveted Nick’s. “I’ll raise you the cost of our dinners at the lodge. Loser buys the whole time. And that’ll be you.”

Fire burned in Nick’s face; the thin mouth clenched, but he hesitated and glanced again at his hand.

Good, thought Tom. At last, he’s the one who’s sweating.

Then Tom wondered whether, at a budget of \$15 per person for dinner each day, over eight days, he had pushed too hard.

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Chips were one thing; money was another. Nick might simply fold.

Percy's hand stopped with the apple midway to his mouth. "Say, Tom, that's a lot. Do you know what you're doing?"

Tom nodded. His eyes didn't waver.

Nick shook his head. "I don't think..." his voice trailed off.

"What's the matter?" said Tom. "No guts?"

Nick's finger shot toward Percy's belly. He said angrily, "He's the one with guts. Something's not right—"

"You know what?" Tom said, leaning forward. "You've been talking all night about how good you are—how you're going to whip us all. Well, go ahead—now's your chance. Step up and call me, or else fold up and admit you can't win at this game except by cheating."

"Tom..." Percy's voice was strained, but suddenly Nick was also leaning in, focused, intent. He squinted at something behind Tom's shoulder and a puzzled expression crossed his face. Tom twisted away, caught himself, and turned back.

Nick's fingers, returning from his sleeve, settled to the table, and his cards were fluttering.

Oh, no, thought Tom, as Nick looked up, new confidence spreading across his face.

"All right, Tom," Nick said, straightening. "You're on. Dinners at the lodge. I'll call you. No—I'll raise you. Let's see..." he paused dramatically. "Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Every meal, every day. Loser buys it all for everyone."

Now Tom's heart began to pound. A moment ago, he had been as sure of the outcome of the hand as he was that this train would never get anywhere on time. But now, if Nick had gotten him, had made a switch of some kind with the momentary distraction—had changed the rules Tom had already broken—perhaps he had better fold.

They had budgeted \$30 per person, per day—more than \$700 in all, real money to near-broke undergraduates. More

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than Tom could stand to lose, especially on something as worthless as a hand of poker. But dropping out after his angry stance and lashing words would be a heavy defeat. Even if he folded, he would still be responsible for the cost of the dinners, as initiator of the unconventional bet. His mind clouded with doubt.

Then he remembered what he had forgotten, and knew that unless Nick had somehow switched his entire hand in one go, it would be all right.

Staring back with all the cold steel he could put in his eyes, Tom said, "All right. I call." His voice was resolute. "Let's see them."

Nick's hand trembled a moment, then threw the cards down. "Three jacks." His voice could not mask his feverish tension. "Now show yours."

Tom kept his own expression in check as he drew one card from his hand and laid it slowly on the table.

"King." His eyes never left Nick's.

A second card. "Two kings." Tom paused for full impact. The rumble of the train seemed to have receded into the distance. Nick's eyes were glued to the rest of the cards in Tom's hand as Tom traced a finger over their tops. There were little beads of sweat on Nick's brow despite the cool air in the lounge car. Tom set the third card down and said softly, "Three kings."

Nick stared in frozen torture. His mouth moved soundlessly, then he shot to his feet with a sharp intake of air. "No! You—you're—"

The girl looked up from her counter, startled. Nick pointed at Tom, but Tom cut him off sharply. "Sit down. *Now.*"

Nick sat, face reddening as the full magnitude of his loss sank in.

Tom wiped moist palms on his trousers and reached into his pocket, pulling out the folded napkin. He tossed it across the table. "Read that."

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Nick opened it, and his eyes darted over the scrawled text. Fury shone from his face as he looked up.

“Get the point?” Tom asked.

Nick rose, but did not answer. He rubbed the back of his neck and his eyes focused on Tom’s. His breaths came and went in short bursts. Startling both Tom and Percy, he lunged around the table and seized Tom’s collar between trembling white fingers. Percy jumped, and the girl behind the counter gasped and balled her hand before her mouth. Nick’s face drew close to Tom’s and he said, “Yes, Tom. I get the point. I won’t forget this.”

Tom’s face was level. He said softly, “No, I don’t think you will.”

Nick’s grip tightened, and his voice wavered. “You don’t know me, Tom, not even a little. You don’t want me for an enemy.”

Tom reached up and felt for Nick’s wrist. His fingers closed around it. “I don’t want you for a friend,” he said deliberately, as his fingertips bore in and Nick’s eyes widened. Suddenly Tom clenched his fingers tight. Nick’s pale hand slipped off the shirt, and Tom finished, “—unless you start acting like one.” Slowly he pressed the captive wrist back toward Nick’s chest. Nick strained with all his might, but he couldn’t match Tom’s strength and his hand curved back until it thumped against his own breastbone. Tom held it there motionless for three long seconds, and then released it.

Nick stepped back, massaging the flushed wrist as he glanced at the girl. Her surprise at the change in his demeanor was evident. He turned and glared at his traveling companions for a long, silent moment, then spun around, stalking through the aperture leading to the narrow stairway. They heard his angry tread rising upwards.

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Percy exhaled, a drawn-out whoosh from between flared lips. He looked at Tom. “Did you have to make that bet? He doesn’t take things like that too well.”

“You’re joking.” Tom wiped a forearm over his face as his thumping heart began to calm.

Percy’s face was pained. “I’m quite serious. What he said is true—you don’t know him well. He has highs and lows, and they’re both extreme. This loss is going to upset him, badly.”

“Maybe it’ll wake him up,” Tom said.

“What do you mean?”

Tom pushed the crumpled napkin across the table. Percy picked it up, and his face fell further as he read the text scrawled across it.

“Three kings beats three jacks. How do you like it?” Percy looked up. “You knew what the hands would be?”

Tom nodded.

“You cheated? *You*, of all people?” Percy seemed genuinely shocked.

“To make a point. Only to make a point.”

“But you *cheated*.”

“Look,” Tom said with exasperation. “A policeman drives through a red light when he’s chasing a crook, doesn’t he? Nick was cheating throughout the game. You yourself asked why he always got the good hands.”

“I knew perfectly well how he got the good hands,” Percy said. “He always cheats.”

Tom looked at Percy in surprise. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it? It’s just a game. He’s got some sort of compulsive drive in him to win at everything: cards, girls, even school exams. He hates to lose, more than anything, more than anyone. It doesn’t matter to me whether he comes out ahead at those things—at least when he wins, he’s up and not down.” Percy tapped his skull, “I don’t think his problems are all his own doing; more like some kind of psychological disorder;

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bi-polarity or whatever they call it. He needs support, not corrections officers.”

Tom shook his head. “He needs a kick in the rear end, and so do you, talking like that. He’s sound enough to answer for his actions without hiding behind a lot of psychological mumbo-jumbo.”

“He needs friends,” Percy said earnestly. “He’s always on edge, and you’ve just poked him in the eye to the tune of hundreds of dollars. He’ll be fuming about that now, but later, when the girl doesn’t show up and he decides you also wrecked his chances with her...” His voice turned moody. “It could mean trouble. Wouldn’t be the first time. You’re lucky, Tom, if all he does is get into a funk for a while. My advice is, watch out.”

Tom started to reply, then shook his head.

They sat for a time listening to the clatter of the wheels on the tracks below. The girl walked by and asked them to leave. She didn’t mention Nick, and they did not see her again that night.