

THE CHAMELEON

A NOVEL

Matt Micros

For the chameleon in us all...

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THE CHAMELEON

“We are like chameleons, we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us.”

John Locke

This book is a work of fiction.
No part of the contents relate to any real person or
persons living or dead. No events depicted actually
happened or are implied to have happened.

I

THE BET

In a world of pushing, shoving, striving-to-get-ahead at all costs people; to those who knew him well, John Mann was a breath of fresh air. His father, however, had always had a differing assessment of him that usually involved a few expletives sandwiched around the four-letter word, “lazy”. When his friends described him as the smartest person they knew, his father referred to him as an “enormous waste of god-given ability”. The truth, as is usually the case in life, probably lay somewhere in between the two descriptions, although Nick Lawson tended to side more closely with his friends’ version; mostly because he was one.

Neighbors since birth, friends shortly thereafter, and classmates since Kindergarten, John and Nick starred together on our high school football and basketball teams, and starred separately on the baseball and golf teams respectively. They were more complements than competitors. If John had a competitor, he came in the form of a self-motivated, egocentric, intellectual named Alan Huber. I say “if” because in order to have a competition, there needed to be at least two people competing, but John had no interest in that, which is

why he split nearly every award and honor in the school with Alan, instead of hoarding them all to himself. John was number one in the class academically. Alan was number two. (Nick was 97th in case you were curious.) John was President of the Varsity Club. Alan was Student Body President. After graduation, Alan went off to study Pre-Law at Harvard. John went off to play football at Yale. Four years later, Alan graduated as the valedictorian of his class, while John graduated as a two-time All-American and the school's all-time leading rusher.

That was where they took two decidedly divergent paths, and where John's father began to develop his rather harsh opinion of him. Alan eventually became the youngest State's Attorney in Connecticut history. Meanwhile, John moved to California and managed a bar in a comfortable little beach town south of Los Angeles, becoming the owner when the original owner passed away and left it to him in his will. It was at that point that John and Nick were reunited after a six year separation, and without meaning to pat himself on the back too heartily, Nick was convinced that if they hadn't been, John would have continued to drift through a life of relative obscurity, succeeding only when success came easily to him—something that was happening less and less frequently as he grew older.

It was twilight by the time Nick finished the 15 minute ride from LAX to Hermosa Beach, and dozens of volleyball players scrambled to finish their matches before dark. Hundreds of people were also walking along the Strand—the 25 mile bike and walking path that connected Redondo Beach to Malibu—some to

relax after a long day at work, others to continue what had already been a relaxing day.

Facing the clear blue ocean a mere few feet from the sandy courts of pro beach volleyball's most prestigious tournament, *The Shanty* was the definition of a dive beach bar. No matter how many times John had described it to Nick over the phone, he always felt as though he was exaggerating its deficiencies—until he stepped into the place for the first time. It had tall, well-worn oak tables and stools both inside and on the covered patio outside. Stains and carvings on them were more the norm than the exception, as if it was encouraged, and more sand was visible on the floor than hardwood. The sign above the entrance read, “NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO PROBLEM”.

The typical crowd in the bar was one of the more eclectic and diverse ones around. There were the local barflies bellied up to one end of the bar, while a few shirtless pro beach volleyball players shared a pitcher at the other end. A collection of wannabe actors and actresses convened at a large table in the middle of the room, arguing over the merits of the newest batch of television shows they were not a part of. In the far corner, an actual successful actor who was only in *The Shanty* so he could spend a night in relative anonymity, sat with two friends.

Also in the bar at 6:00pm on your typical Tuesday night in November, were three of the most stunning women I had ever laid eyes on. Their six-foot statures and bikini bottoms indicated that they had just stepped in for a drink from the volleyball courts. Most of the men in the bar were far too intimidated to even speak to them. Either that, or they were realistic enough to

know that these women were clearly out of their league. But there was always *one* guy with unwarranted confidence. A good looking guy, who had been a great looking guy a few years back, but hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that he wasn't twenty-five anymore. Steve Abbott was now thirty-something, and carrying a few extra pounds on a frame that was topped off with a tussle of dark hair. He got up from the table of wannabes and marched over to the young ladies in question.

"You know what would look good on you?" he asked one of them.

She cringed at the response she knew was coming.

"Me," he continued.

She rolled her eyes and looked away. Undaunted, Abbott turned to one of her friends as if she was part of a to-do list. "That's a great bikini. I bet it would look even better crumpled up next to my bed in the morning."

"Weak," the girl responded.

He turned to the third one. "So how about a pizza and a fuck?"

With no hesitation, she slapped him across the face with the force of a Serena Williams forehand, before all three walked away.

"What?!" he yelled after her, "you don't like pizza?! We can eat something else!"

With his easy smile, Hawaiian shirt, cargo shorts and Banana Republic flip flops, the man behind the bar looked even more relaxed and casual than Nick had

remembered him, “Could you try not to chase off all the women in the place?” John Mann said.

“I don’t see any women in here,” Abbott responded, looking around.

“Not anymore,” John laughed before he noticed Nick standing ten feet away. “Holy crap,” he continued as he hurdled the bar with the ease of a pommel horse medalist. “As I live and breathe. Nick Lawson. What are *you* doing here?!”

“I got tired of the snow and cold weather,” Nick answered.

“Are you visiting or moving here?”

“Moved.”

“Do you have a job?”

“Nope. But from what I can see, no one seems to work much out here anyway.”

“Do you need a place to stay?”

“Nope.”

“Where are you staying?”

“With you,” Nick said matter-of-factly.

“What makes you think that’s an option?” he smiled.

“Because you need me out here.”

“And why is that?”

“Because someone has to prevent you from throwing yourself into the Pacific.”

“Now why would I do that?”

Nick pointed at the television.

“It’s all over in Connecticut,” Fox News Anchor, Megyn Kelly said, “as a Democrat has been elected the youngest Governor in United States history. At thirty-three years and seven months, Alan Huber has defeated Ron Baldelli by a margin of 52 to 48 percent.”

“I’m happy for him,” John replied, feigning indifference.

“Huber was John’s biggest rival in high school,” Nick explained to the men seated at the bar. “They were number one and two in the class academically. John was number one. Huber was Student Body President. John was President of the Varsity Club. Huber went to Harvard. John went to Yale—“

The older of the two men at the bar interjected, “And now he’s a Governor and John’s a bartender.”

“I’m not just a bartender. I’m the owner,” John answered.

“You own this shithole? I always thought you were just helping out a friend to pick up a little cash.”

“If this place is such a shithole, how come you’re in here all day, every day?”

“Because I can’t afford to go to a nice place.”

“Fair enough,” John laughed. “And no matter what you guys all think, I wish Alan well.”

“A tale of two lives,” Nick said. “Does it ever bother you that you’ve failed to do more with the abilities God gave you?”

“You sound like my father.”

Nick always had been good at pushing John's buttons.

"I'm here because I want to be here," he continued.

"I like my life. I don't ever have to put on a suit and tie except for weddings and funerals. I make an ok living meeting colorful people. I don't have anyone to tie me down. I'm a lone wolf. Howling at the moon."

"You're here because you can't work for anyone else. You've either been fired or walked off of every other job you've had. And if by 'ok living meeting colorful people', you mean hanging out with drunks and bar flies, while making slightly above minimum wage, then yes, I agree. And you don't have anyone to tie you down because you have serious commitment issues. As for that lone wolf thing.... I'll give you that one," Nick replied.

"That Huber guy must have a lot going for him. He'll probably be President some day," the older man at the bar offered.

Abbott was smiling behind John. He knew they had him going now.

"Oh, he's had plenty going for him," John began. "He got into Harvard because his father built the library. He got into Harvard Law because his uncle went to college with the Dean. And after dating the Dean's ugly daughter for four years, the Dean then got him the job in the State Attorney's Office. As for the election, his family had 100 times more money than the other candidate."

"So you're saying the only reason he's successful, is because of the advantages he's had?" Nick asked.

“I’m saying that *anyone* with his advantages would be Governor right now.”

“Interesting,” Abbott said. “I smell a bet coming on.”

“What kind of bet?” John inquired.

Nick thought it over. “So you think with certain advantages, you could do anything and be successful?”

“Anything within reason.”

“Ok. I’m just free-flowing ideas here, but how bout this. We pick ten occupations. From that list, you have to choose five of them. You’ll have a maximum of six months to succeed at each. We’ll give you every advantage you need to help you get the jobs.”

“What kind of advantages can you guys give me?” John asked skeptically.

“I know a lot of people,” Abbott said.

“I’m not sure I want to know the people you know.”

“I’m serious. Anything goes,” Nick told him. “You can lie on your resume. Cheat. Beg. Borrow. Steal. Call in favors. Whatever you need to do to get the job. After that, it will be performance based.”

“What kind of jobs are we talking about?”

“Nothing that would require years of training or would jeopardize peoples’ lives. Nothing like an air traffic controller or Neurosurgeon. But high profile jobs. Jobs that everyone always assumes they can do better than the people that do them.”

“Like a weather man?”

“Exactly.”

“What else?”

“Like I said, I’m just thinking out loud here. You’ve got to give us a couple of days to come up with the list. We can really amp it up. Publicize the hell out of it. Pack this place the night you pick the jobs.”

“Speaking of this place...” John said. It was clear he was giving it some thought. “Who would run it, while I was off doing these jobs?”

“I would,” Nick answered. “I need a job.”

“I’ll help him,” Abbott offered.

“You’d drink all the profits,” John responded.

“That’s the price of chasing glory, my friend,” Abbott said.

“And how do I win?”

“You win by not getting fired, and by doing your job better than the average person would do it. If you were a cab driver in New York City, you’d have to pull in more than the average driver on that route would. I’m not saying that would be one of the jobs. That’s just an example. We’d have to evaluate on a case by case basis once you decide which ones you’re going to do,” Nick explained.

“What are the stakes?”

“What do you want them to be?”

“50 grand.”

“50 grand?! That’s a little steep.”

“I could be giving up over a year of my life.”

“Your life isn’t that great,” Abbott deadpanned.

“Besides, you’d be getting paid to do it,” Nick interjected. “Handsomely in some instances. Plus, you’d have income from the bar and probably a book deal by the time you were done.”

“Not if I’m in jail.”

“They don’t arrest you for lying on your resume. They fire you.”

“How about this? We start with 50 grand if it takes a year, but if it takes six months, it’s only 25 grand. If it takes six WEEKS, then a percentage—like \$5,700.”

Nick thought it over. “Tell you what,” he said. “Let’s pack this place Thursday night. Make it an underground event because we don’t want it to end up in the papers. We give ‘em some food. 150 bucks a person. If we get 300 people, there’s 45 grand, regardless of how long it takes.”

The old man at the bar chimed in. “Put me down for a hundred-fifty.”

“You already owe 400 on your tab,” John responded.

“Then make my tab 550. I want in on this.”

“And if I lose?”

“I didn’t think that would be a possibility in your mind,” Nick smiled.

“It’s not really, but...every bet has to have stakes on both sides.”

“How about if you lose, we throw an All-Day, Open Bar party here at *The Shanty* on you,” Abbott suggested.

John nodded with no hesitation. “Ok.” He shook both of our hands. “It’s a deal.”

II

THE CHOICES

The Shanty looked like the buttons of a too small shirt on a too large person—ready to burst at the seams. Music blared. There were at least three hundred people there. Could have been more. Abbott and Nick stood next to a marker board covered with a sheet in the middle of the bar. John was a few feet away taking it all in. The bar hadn't been that crowded since the night of the Hermosa Beach Open Volleyball Championship the previous summer.

“Good to see America loves to watch a fool make an ass of himself,” Abbott mused.

“Far better to dary mighty things and win glorious triumphs, though sometimes checkered by failure; than to live in the ne-er grey twilight that knows not victory nor defeat,” John quoted. “Winston Churchill.”

“A fool and his money are soon parted,” Abbott retorted. “Ben Franklin.”

“It was actually Thomas Tusser who said that,” Nick informed him.

“It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt. Abraham Lincoln,” John winked.

“Whatever. Ok, Thomas Tusser. You’re up,” Abbott said as he motioned for someone to kill the music.

Nick cleared his throat and began. He wasn’t used to speaking in front of crowds—especially not ones where both alcohol and glass were plentiful. “Thank you all for coming tonight to take part in our little scientific experiment. Is it talent that determines success? Or the advantages one has had along the way? Or is it a combination of the two?” He paused for a moment before continuing. “The rules of the bet are as follows; Our friend, and owner of this fine establishment, John Mann, will be blending into five occupations over the course of the next year or so. A chameleon if you will. He can get the jobs any way he wants. He can lie. Cheat. Call in favors. Whatever. But if he fails to get even one of them, he **LOSES** the bet!”

The bar shook as everyone *roared*. John nodded sheepishly and smiled.

“If he gets the jobs, but gets fired, he **LOSES!**” Nick continued.

Another roar.

“If he gets the job, but they find out about the bet, he **LOSES...**And if he gets the job and manages to keep it, but doesn’t perform better than the average person in that chosen profession would, he **LOSES!**”

A third roar.

“To be clear,” Nick reiterated, “if he fails at even ONE of the five jobs, he LOSES and we get an all-day, open bar, all you can eat, Roman Empire-style orgy filled with sex and rock and roll to be held right here at The Shanty!”

The loudest roar yet.

“But if he wins, he gets to keep every penny in this burlap sack totaling 48 thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars!”

There were some whistles and boos that time. Loud. But not quite as loud as before.

“Written on this board are ten occupations, which, at one time or another, I’m sure we’ve all thought we could do better than the people doing them. If we were only given the chance. Well, John Mann is about to get that chance. Mr. Abbott, the board please...”

Abbott ripped away the sheet and paused briefly for crowd reactions as he read each one.

“Number one! WEATHERMAN! Ah yes, the only job in the world where you get paid for being wrong all the time!”

He wasn’t a meteorologist, but how much worse could he really do than they did every day?

“Number two! CHEF at a mid-level restaurant. Not fast food, but not fru-fru either. These are the places that have to survive by getting a niche or by having a hook.”

To his knowledge, John’s cooking background consisted of making a mean batch of Shoe-booty chili and boneless buffalo wings.

“Number three! ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE.
At one of the big agencies in New York.”

Advertising was sales. Except you were selling to millions of people instead of just one. And if there was one thing John could do, it was sell.

“Number four! RADIO DJ. Any top 100 market will do.”

A few guest DJ spots at the college radio station was the extent of his experience, but he was quick on his feet and personable.

“Number five! PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE!
You pick the sport.”

A college All American in the Ivy League was like being the world’s tallest midget.

“Number six! TELEVISION SPORTS ANCHOR!
ESPN, or any local affiliate.”

This one had him written all over it. Sports background. Check. Quick on his feet. Check. Good looking. Check.

“Number 7! HIGH SCHOOL COACH! Any sport. Either gender. Any town. Anywhere.”

This was another one Nick could see him succeed at. He had been a three-sport athlete in high school, and could have played any of a number of other sports if he only had the time. The question about this job would be how long it would take to succeed. He’d be looking at a minimum of three months, which would limit his time at the other jobs. But it would also probably be the easiest job for him to get.

“Number 8! HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR! One of the most unforgiving jobs on the planet. Can John be one of the few who is good AND popular?”

Nick could definitely see him doing that job as well, but it would require certifications and degrees he didn't have. He would either need to lie and hope he didn't get caught, or find a private school that was so desperate they didn't require them.

“Number 9! HOLLYWOOD TALENT AGENT! Has to be at one of the Big 5 agencies.”

One of those jobs that pretty much anyone could do as well if not better than the people that currently do it, but a hard industry to break into. It would require knowing someone to break in.

“And finally, Number 10! PROFESSIONAL GAMBLER! By definition this job would be a gamble. Would require as much luck as skill. My friend, the floor is yours. Your choices please...”

John rose from his nearby seat and made his way toward the board. The room was silent for the first time that night.

He smiled. “They all sound so appealing, but...I'm going to go with “Radio DJ” for my first choice.”

There was a noticeable buzz in the room. That one would be more difficult than it sounded, both in terms of getting the job and then being successful at it.

“You do realize that you actually have to be interesting to be a DJ, don't you?”

“I'm interesting,” John said defensively.

“Maybe to a couple of drunks and girls looking for free drinks.”

“I resemble that remark,” one of the drunks shouted.

“How am I going to be graded?”

“Simple. Ratings. Your quarterly ratings have to be higher than the person in the same time slot before you.”

“Fair enough.”

His agreeable nature made everyone curious if there was something they were missing. Made them wonder if John had something up his sleeve. Abbott eyed him suspiciously.

“Second choice. High School Administrator.”

Everyone seemed to nod simultaneously. He had the personality for it. He had been forever accused of being a politician.

“But,” John interjected, “I need the stipulation that it can be any administrative role. Superintendent, Principal, Vice Principal, Dean of Students or Athletic Director.”

“Any objections?” Abbott asked the crowd.

No one seemed to have any.

“That one will be a bit more difficult to judge, however. I guess it really depends on which position you get. If you’re a Superintendent, you need to come in under budget and save jobs. If you’re a Principal, the standardized test scores need to be higher than the previous year.”

“That will be difficult for me to do in a six month time frame.”

“Then be an Athletic Director. That’s easy to grade. The program has to run efficiently, come in under budget, and your teams need to have a better cumulative record than the previous year.”

“Again, that would be difficult to accomplish in six months,” John objected.

“Six months is all you have. If need be, we’ll come down and observe, maybe talk to some people, see what you’ve accomplished and how you are viewed.”

“That seems pretty subjective.”

“Then choose a place where your impact is obvious. Or choose another occupation,” Abbott offered.

“That’s ok. I’ll stay with it.”

“3rd pick?”

“Professional athlete.”

“Which sport?”

“Football.”

“We are talking the NFL right? Not some pikey arena league.”

“Correct.”

“*This* I have to see.”

“I was an All-American in college.”

“Yeah. In the Ivy League.”

“I had other DI offers.”

“That doesn’t mean you’d be good enough for the NFL.

“Maybe not.”

“Not to mention you’re 33. As they said in the movie ‘Invincible’, NFL teams need athletes, not 33 year old bartenders. And by successful, it has to be relative to the other players in the league, not Vince Papale.”

“Got it.”

Abbott shrugged. “It’s your money. Next pick?”

“Hollywood Agent.”

Abbott nodded. “Nice. I was hoping you’d pick that one. You have to broker ONE big movie deal. Minimum budget...\$50 mill.”

John mulled it over. “Just have to have a signed deal, right? Because it takes two years to make a movie. Minimum.”

“Just a signed deal with a studio. With major stars attached. And remember. You have to work at one of the five big agencies. EAA, CAA, William Morris Endeavor, UTA or Paradigm. No little Podunk independent agencies.”

“Ok,” John shrugged.

“One more,” Abbott said.

“Professional Gambler,” John answered without hesitation.

The conviction with which he said it broke the place up. He didn’t look remotely close to the part.

“You serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“You know that in order to be successful, you actually have to *make* money?”

“I am aware of that fact.”

“And that the casino is favored in every single game? And that poker is a game of chance?”

“Chance is what you make of it.”

Abbott shook his head in disbelief. “One month. You need to gamble every day. Play whatever games you want. At the end of the month, you not only have to be ahead, but you have to have made enough money to live on.”

Abbott then turned to the crowd. “Ok, folks. You heard him. Side betting is available if you’d like to bet on our boy, or against him. Or if you’d like to bet on how many of the jobs he’ll succeed at, see Joe behind the bar. Daily updates will be available so stop on by. Any major developments will be sent out via email, so make sure we have yours before you leave tonight. In the meantime, drink up and enjoy the night!”

Money began exchanging hands like it was Derby Day at Churchill Downs. John seemed to be enjoying it all by himself, off to one side of the room.

“You know I’d pay a grand to see you pull this off. If I can help...” Nick offered.

“I appreciate that,” he answered.

“Have you figured out what order you’re going to try them?”

“I guess that’ll all depend on what’s available. But I’ll let you know. And thanks.”

“For what?”

“For the much needed kick in the pants,” he said with a smile.