

**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 I tended to side more closely with his friends’ version; mostly because I was one.

Neighbors since birth, friends shortly thereafter, and classmates since Kindergarten, John and I starred together on our high school football and basketball teams, and starred separately on the baseball and golf teams respectively. We 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. (I was 97<sup>th</sup> 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 I were reunited after a six year separation, and without meaning to pat myself on the



back too heartily, I am convinced that if we hadn't been, he 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 I 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 me over the phone, I always felt as though he was exaggerating its' deficiencies—until I 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 I 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 me 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,” I 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,” I 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?”

I 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," I 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," I said. "Does it ever bother you that you've failed to do more with the abilities God gave you?"

"You sound like my father."

I 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," I answered.

"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?" I 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.

I 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,” I 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,” I 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,” I 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,” I 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.”

I thought it over. “Tell you what,” I 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,” I 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.”