

# KING

*Also by Stephen J. Cannell*

THE PLAN  
FINAL VICTIM

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# CON

A NOVEL

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## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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“TO DECEIVE IS TO ENCHANT.”

—*Plato*

# Prologue

The poker game had been a card-hustler's dream; the players were strictly in the talented-amateur category and the stakes were unlimited. It was rumored that hundreds of thousands of dollars routinely changed hands in the invitation-only game that commenced promptly at seven-thirty every Tuesday night in the luxurious locker room of New Jersey's Greenborough Country Club. There was an investment banker from Cleveland who was a cautious bettor, and refused to step up even when he held sure winners. He'd also occasionally chase a bluff like a puppy after a pickup truck. There was a fat electronics-store owner who was constantly bathed in a sheen of his own sweat and was a shameless plunger. There were two brothers from Greenborough, who owned a Lexus dealership. They were trying to team play, but kept misreading each other. They talked trash, drank too much, and ended up losing five out of six hands.

Then there was Joseph Rina. He was only five-eight, but there was an aura about him. He radiated power and was movie-star handsome. He was reputed to be a New Jersey mob boss, although he had never been convicted of anything. His nickname on the street was Joe "Dancer." He sat at the green felt table, clothed in perfectly tailored Armani. He remained distant from

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

the others, playing without comment, his magnificently handsome face giving away nothing. Joe Rina joined this game once a month. He would drive down from Atlantic City to the Greenborough Country Club and was generally the big winner.

Seated to his right was Beano Bates. He had been trying to get in this high-stakes game for a month. He was a well-known card sharp and con man, so he was playing incognito, under the name of Frank Lemay. Dark-haired and handsome, he had always traded on his looks and charm.

Although he was a world-class poker player, Beano never depended solely on his card-playing skill. He had two "shiners" working on the table: One was a money clip that he could lay on the table directly in front of him. It was shiny, but only reflected directly back. If you looked at the clip from any other angle, it appeared to be dull and non-reflective. Beano could deal cards over the clip, and the shiner would reflect the cards as they were flipped off the deck, giving him full knowledge of what was in play. The other was a "palm shiner," which he used when it wasn't his deal. It was a tiny, upside-down periscope. He could palm it, or hold it cupped in his hand on the green felt table, positioned so he could look down through the space between his fingers. The palm shiner was low enough on the table to read the cards being dealt off the deck across from him. These two shiner positions, plus his natural skill at cards, gave him an unbeatable edge.

By ten-thirty, Beano Bates, a.k.a. Frank Lemay, was eighty-six thousand dollars ahead. The poker chips were stacked in columns in front of him like colorful prisoners captured in battle.

At eleven o'clock they took the main break, and Beano found himself standing next to Joe "Dancer" Rina at the urinal in the overlit men's locker room of the ornate country club. White tile and chrome fixtures glittered under the bright ceiling lights, while the two men arched yellow streams into the shiny

## KING CON

porcelain trough like two teenage boys pissing in a lake for distance.

“You been getting good cards,” Joe Rina said without emotion, his movie-star face revealing no hint of danger.

“Sometimes the cards run that way,” Beano replied as he watched his urine mix with Joe’s and flow into a drain full of bar ice and black pepper.

“You call a lot of six-card optional,” Joe said, referring to a dealer’s choice game that Beano preferred because, after the fifth card was dealt, the players could exchange any one of their cards for a sixth card before betting commenced. Beano liked the game because it gave him more cards to scope with his money clip shiner.

“Yeah,” Beano grinned, “that game’s been working pretty good for me.”

“You ever hear about Soapy Smith?” Joe said softly.

“Don’t think I have,” Beano replied, dreading the story, which he correctly assumed would be some kind of ghastly warning.

“They called him Soapy because he marked cards with soap. Kept a little sliver between his index and middle fingers, used it to stripe the cards. Soapy did real good in Atlantic City when I was growing up . . . drove a big, black Cadillac. All us kids wanted to be like him . . . lotsa women, great clothes. Always wore the Italian or French designers. Everything was great till Saturday, June eighteenth, 1978. . . . That was the day we all changed our minds about being like Soapy.”

“Really?” Beano said, his smile pasted on his face, his puckering dick hanging forgotten in his hand. He put it away, zipped up, and moved to the washbasin, wishing he didn’t have to hear the end of the tale.

In a minute, Joe Dancer’s reflection joined his in the mirror. “Yeah. Poor Soapy got caught jammin’ some players at the Pur-

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

ple Tiger, which was a little card club down on the wharf, by the pier. Those guys he was cheatin' were serious players, and they were real mad 'cause they trusted Soapy, so they held him down and jointed the poor guy while he was still alive."

"I beg your pardon?" Beano said.

"One guy, I think he'd been a medic in 'Nam, amputated Soapy a section at a time, while the others held him down. They had a plumber clamping off veins and arteries so he wouldn't bleed out. Kept him alive for about fifteen or twenty minutes. By the time they took off his left arm, poor Soapy's heart stopped."

Somebody flushed a toilet in the stall behind them.

"That's a damn good reason not to cheat," Beano managed, his insides now frozen like his smile.

"I always thought so," Joe said. And without any expression crossing his gorgeous aquiline face, he walked away from the sink.

The story made its point. Beano figured eighty-six grand was plenty. He decided to just hold even, maybe give some of it back, until the game time limit.

The game was called at exactly midnight, and Beano cashed in seventy-eight thousand in chips. Joe Rina left without saying another word. Beano stayed in the bar talking the losers down for about an hour, drinking and telling everybody it had been the best card night of his life.

At a few minutes past one, Beano walked out of the almost deserted country club and headed to his rental car.

What happened to Beano in the parking lot wasn't as bad as what had happened to Soapy Smith in Atlantic City, but it certainly made the same point.

He had just arrived at his car and was putting his briefcase into the trunk when he was staggered by a massive blow from behind. It hit him with such devastating force at the back of his skull that Beano instantly dropped to his knees, splitting open



his forehead on the back bumper. He spun awkwardly around in time to see a nine-iron flying out of the darkness, right into his face. It was a chip shot from hell that broke all his front teeth and shattered his jaw, skewing it terribly. Beano fell to the pavement, then grunted in horrible, unendurable pain as four more horrendous blows from the golf club broke the third, fifth, and seventh ribs along his spinal column, also shattering his clavicle and sinus cavity.

Beano was barely conscious when Joe Rina stuck his handsome face down so close that Beano could smell his breath and mint aftershave.

“You look pretty bad, Mr. Lemay,” the mobster said. “You might be able to pull this stuff on that buncha buffaloes in there, but you should know better than to try and cheat Joseph Rina.”

Beano couldn't talk. His jaw was locked by bone chips and a break that knocked it badly out of alignment.

“Now I'm gonna take my money back. But let me assure you this has been very helpful,” Joe Dancer said with exaggerated politeness. “I've been having trouble with my short game. I think I wasn't keeping my head down and following through like my guy keeps telling me. Thanks for the practice.” Joe stood up; then Beano felt pure agony as two more blows rained down onto his body for good measure. He started to cough up blood. Beano knew he was badly wounded, but more important, in that instant he felt something die inside him. It was as if the most critical piece of Beano Bates, his charming confidence, had left him like smoke out of an open window. It was his confidence and ego that allowed him to be the best. As he lost consciousness, he somehow knew that if he survived he would never be the same again.

He woke up in New Jersey, at the Mercer County Hospital. He was in ICU. The nurses told him he'd had ten hours of surgery, that three teams of orthopedists and neurosurgeons had spent the night putting his busted face and body back in place.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

His jaw was wired shut. There was a large pair of wire clippers next to his bed. When he was conscious enough to understand, the trauma nurse told him that if he felt like vomiting from the surgical anesthesia or antibiotics, he should get the clippers and cut his wired jaw open, so that he wouldn't vomit back into his trachea and lungs and choke to death. It was sobering advice.

He lay in agony for weeks, feeling every inch of his body throb. Even the impressive list of meds he was taking couldn't completely mask the pain.

The New Jersey State Police transcribed his statement from his hospital room. He talked to them through his wired mouth, forming the words like an amateur ventriloquist. Beano gave his statement under his assumed name, Frank Lemay, because there were three Federal warrants out on him for criminal fraud and various other sophisticated con games. He was also currently on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. It was better if the authorities thought it was Frank Lemay who had been beaten up by Joe Rina. He also didn't tell them that he had no intention of ever testifying against the handsome mob boss.

His old friend and fellow card sharper "Three Finger" Freddy Feinberg came to visit him in the hospital. The gray-haired card shark looked down in shock at Beano, who was still swollen and discolored like rotting fruit. "Jeez, man, you look like a fucking typhoid victim," he said. It had been Freddy who arranged for Beano to get in the game. "I told ya, Beano, I told ya, 'Be careful of that guy Joe Rina.'" And then Three Finger Freddy told him about a rumor that was buzzing around in the street. The word was that Joe Dancer was still pissed and had put out a contract on Frank Lemay, because he had not shown the grace and good sense to die in the country club parking lot like he was supposed to. Three Finger Freddy also told him about how the Rina brothers had taken care of disposal of bodies in the old days. It was another story Beano could have done without hearing.

## KING CON

The police told him that a New Jersey prosecutor named Victoria Hart was coming down to interview him prior to filing the assault-with-intent-to-commit-murder charges against Joseph Rina. Because Joe Rina was a popular tabloid star, the press was swarming to get a story. It was only a matter of time until Beano's alias would be penetrated, so he disconnected himself from the tangle of electrodes and I.V. bottles and limped out of the hospital. It was a move that saved his life, but he was now poised on the edge of a cliff, overlooking a landscape of revenge and violence that would change him forever.