

*Poker Slam*

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# *Poker Slam*

A Novel

Neal Gersony

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## **Poker Slam**

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For the special women in my life; Lisa, Alyssa,  
Jessica Toby and Gwennyth



## *Preface*

A glossary of poker terms is provided at the end of this book.



# 1

"He owes us, goddamn it. Willie owes us," Max implored as he paced and kicked his son's toy across the living room. The Tonka dump truck dented the Sheetrock and landed upside down with one wheel spinning.

"He doesn't owe *us* anything," said his wife, Julie, as she picked up the truck and put it in the corner with little Utah's other toys.

Max rubbed the jet-black stubble on his face with the palm of his right hand. His demeanor suddenly softened. "But we've got bills to pay. We need the money." He continued to pace back and forth, shooting Julie a sheepish scowl.

"We'll get by. We always have. Besides, we don't know where Willie is or how to contact him or anything." She paused, straightened her housedress and looked at her son's toys. "I still have inheritance money left. I've been saving it for Utah's education, but if we really need it now ..."

Max stalked over to his wife. "You still have money left? You've been holding out on me." He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Julie closed her eyes and turned away.

"Don't, Max. Please." Her eyes welled up with tears. She stiffened and covered her face with her hands as Max raised his wiry arm skyward.

"Mom? Dad? What's goin' on?" asked seven-year-old Utah as he stood in the doorway between his bedroom and the living room. His parents froze. He looked at his mother. "Mommy, why are you crying?"

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She shook loose from her husband's grip and ran to her son. She got down on her knees so her face was at the same level as his. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, smearing them across her face. "Everything's fine, honey. Your daddy and I were just talking. That's all."

"But he was yelling." Utah stared at his father. Then he turned back to his mother. "And you're crying." He tightened his grip on his G.I. Joe, which accompanied him everywhere he went.

Max grabbed his navy blue parka off one of the metal kitchen chairs. "Go ahead, Julie. Tell him what's going on. Tell him how broke we are. Tell him that you won't help with the support of this family. Tell him everything. I'm leaving."

With a full-arm wave, as if he was dismissing his whole life, the soldier then flung on his down parka and left the military housing unit. The door would have slammed shut, but the strong arctic wind outside caused it to barely catch the latch.

"Momma, tell me what's goin' on. Why's Daddy bein' mean? Who's Willie?" Utah put his hand on his mother's shoulder and rubbed.

Julie raised her head slowly. "Were you here the whole time?" She held his little chin in her hand. "What did you hear?"

"I heard Daddy say that Willie owes us money. I saw my Tonka go into the wall." Utah smiled at his mother. He wanted his mother to be happy. He wanted to see her smile, too.

Julie smiled and gave Utah a big hug. "That wasn't meant for you to hear. It's all just mommy and daddy stuff. Nothing you have to worry about."

She retrieved a tissue from her pocket and gently blew her nose and stood up slowly.

"But I wanna know. Who is Willie?" He looked up at his mother.

Julie hesitated a moment. "OK, I guess now is as good a time as any. I guess you're old enough to hear the truth about your family."

Julie held her son's hand and led him to the greenish gray couch so they could sit down together. Utah put an elbow on his mother's lap, put his head in his hand, and looked up at her expectantly.

Julie took a deep breath, leaned back on the cushion, and turned her head toward Utah. The moist tissue still in her hand.

"My sister, your Aunt Lucy, married a man named Willie Jamison. They were very much in love. Some said they had the perfect marriage. Willie was tall and skinny but very strong, handsome, and tough looking—like a lumberjack or a fisherman. Lucy was the most beautiful girl in the world. I loved her so much ..." Julie turned her head away from her son. She shuddered a soft sob. Utah rubbed her back in gentle circles.

"Are you OK, Momma?" Utah asked as he moved his head close to hers.

"Yes, dear," she answered as she straightened up and wiped her eyes. "It's just very sad to think about her." Julie sat quietly for a few moments to compose herself. She turned back toward her son and forced a smile. "Anyway," she continued, "Willie was very good to her. He would do anything to make her happy. They lived just outside of New York City in a town called Pearl River."

"That's where you're from? Right, Mom?"

"Yes, my father and mother and Lucy and I all lived in Pearl River. She was my older sister," said Julie, brushing back her son's hair with fingers still damp from her tears.

"Then why do we live here in Canada? We're so far away from everything."

"This is where your father works. You know that. A good family goes where the father can work and make the most money. Do you want to hear the rest of the story or not?"

"Yes. Yes." He grabbed the wool blanket off the arm of the sofa and put it over his mother's lap.

"Thank you, honey." She continued her story. "Willie played poker for a living. Every day he'd go into the big city to the card clubs. The more he played, the better he got. He won lots of money, and he gave it all to Lucy. As he got better, they decided to move to the best place in the world for poker. Las Vegas, Nevada."

"Where's that, Mommy?"

"In the desert. It's as hot there as it is cold here."

"That's pretty hot."

"Anyway, they packed up their station wagon and drove across the country."

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The window rattled in its frame as the wind's intensity increased. Utah curled up closer to his mother. She continued to stroke his dirty-blond hair.

"Lucy was always the more adventurous of the two of us. I liked to stay home and sew, watch TV, and listen to the radio with my mom and dad. Lucy was always trying new things and meeting new people. So off they went to Las Vegas. They soon found a beautiful piece of land in the desert, and Willie, with his own two hands, built a lovely little house for them to live in."

"Did you ever see the house?" Utah ran the red wool threads of the blanket fringe through his fingers as he tried to imagine such a place.

"Only once. Lucy was so proud of it. The house was made from wood and stone and had lots of windows. Lucy called it her desert castle. She felt as if she was living her childhood dream—a fairy tale. Everything seemed wonderful. Willie was making even more money than before, and Lucy worked hard on making their new house a home. Then—"

"How could he be so good? At poker, I mean. It's just a card game. Like old maid or crazy eights, isn't it? Just luck. Right?"

"I don't know much about poker, honey. He could beat the odds somehow, I guess. Anyway, Willie started playing in poker tournaments. That's where a lot of poker players get together and play until they run out of money. When one person has everybody else's money, he's the winner. It's very hard to win tournaments, especially the three big ones that were held every year."

"But what happens to all those poker guys who lose? What happens to them?"

"I don't know. They stop playing poker, hopefully. Gambling is a bad thing, Utah. Many people lose all their money really fast."

"Like they say in church. Right, Momma?"

"Right. So Lucy and Willie had been living out there for three years. Willie was so lucky that he decided to enter these three big tournaments—the three biggest tournaments in the whole world. And wouldn't you know it, he won all three of them. No one had ever done that before."

"He must have won a lot of money."

The window stopped rattling.

"I'm sure he did. He became a celebrity. Everyone was talking about Willie Jamison, calling him the greatest poker player who ever lived. He was on TV, in the newspaper, and on the radio. Some author even interviewed him for a book. Imagine having a book written all about you. Anyway, a few weeks later, just as the whole world was celebrating Willie's victories, Lucy came home from shopping and there was a note on the kitchen table. It said, 'I can't take it anymore. I'm sorry. I love you. Willie.' He was gone. Lucy was so, so sad. That's when I went to visit her. She stared out the window every day, waiting for her Willie to drive up. He never did. Lucy died a few months later. I think she died of a broken heart. That was a very sad day for all of us."

"Where did Willie go?"

"No one knows."

"Why did he leave?"

"I wish I knew."

"How could he be so good at a card game? It's just luck, isn't it?"

"I guess he's a very lucky guy."



# *The Hole Cards*



## 2

Pocket jacks are, without a doubt, a premium starting hand in no-limit Texas hold 'em. They are soundly better than 160 of the 169 unique two-card starting hands possible. They are marginally better than six more two-card combinations, and they are huge underdogs to the three remaining possible hands: pocket queens, kings, or aces. In a heads-up match, jacks are pure gold.

It was the hand I had been waiting for as I fought the battle of my life at the Copenhagen Summer Olympics. These were the first Olympic games to include poker, no-limit Texas hold 'em to be exact. I had scratched and clawed my way through fifty-eight of the fifty-nine other entrants from twenty-three different countries in this multiplayer tournament, all of whom started with \$20,000 in tournament chips.

The only two remaining players were myself and Bjorn Bergman, the Swedish national champion. We sat in a small ballroom with only about eight hundred spectators. The real crowd was gathered in the National Memorial Arena down the road. There, twenty-four thousand people watched us and our hole cards on four big screens with a ten-minute delay, the most exciting way to watch a poker match.

For now, only I could see these two red brothers in front of me.

Qualifying for these Olympic games required me to compete in a grueling set of tournaments against forty top American professionals, combined with twenty qualifying competitors. We played a series of twenty matches over three months, earning points based on our success in each event. Only the top four point leaders were selected to represent the United States as poker Olympians. I finished second to Mad Dog

MacIntee. Mad Dog, unfortunately, was eliminated from the Olympic tournament with pocket aces in the first hour of the first day. *Tough way to go.* I was the only American to get through to the final table. My body and mind were starting to feel the effects of this extended and very intense tournament.

We'd been maneuvering very carefully for the first several hours of heads-up play. I had \$555,000 in tournament chips, and Bjorn had \$645,000. The blinds were \$10,000/\$20,000 with a \$1,000 ante. I was on the small blind and first to act.

I pulled my cards forward, looked at them one more time, and then calmly placed them on the glass plate for the camera to record. I stared at Bjorn. He looked stern and statuesque—motionless. The young man was an automaton. He was also confident, aggressive, and anxious for action. I had to decide: Did I want him to play and risk a flop? Or should I take the more prudent course of raising hard and try to force him off his hand right now? Most likely, I'd take the \$32,000 pot without a single card exposed. I decided I wanted to go for a big win. I wanted him to play. I couldn't just check, however. I had to make him pay something. A nice enticing bet.

I tried to show the slightest hesitation as I reached for my chips.

"Raise," I announced. The small crowd moved forward in their seats. I completed the required bet by putting out another \$10,000. I looked at the Swede. Bjorn hadn't budged a muscle. His sunglasses reflected the colorful, giant scoreboard overhead.

Another forty thousand would be the traditional professional raise. Tripling the big blind would make the bet large enough to force weak opponents to fold, but not large enough to scare away a high percentage of marginal hands. It also was the perfect disguise for concealing the strength of one's hand. If I raised more than forty thousand, I'd be saying, "Do not call. I have something like ace/queen or pocket sevens, and I don't want to risk a flop." If I raised less, I wanted callers to play against my big hand. But at this level, those tendencies were all common knowledge, and we often played counter to the classic plays.

"Sixty-seven thousand to go." I shoved twenty-seven orange \$1,000 chips and four gray \$5,000 chips forward, just beyond my cards, and stared at the small Swedish flag on Bjorn's left lapel.

The blond Swede stared at me for five seconds, then pulled his cards toward his chip stack. He shuffled the cards a few times, placed an orange chip on top of them, and leaned back in his chair. After staring me down for a few more seconds, he pinched the upper right corner of his cards and bent them back slowly. Methodically, he squeezed the cards apart as he hunched over. He froze for a moment, then sat up and slowly slid the cards over the glass as if to say, "Look at this, world, I have a monster." Which, to me, meant he didn't.

But I had to admit, for a young kid, Bjorn had a great routine. It hardly ever changed. His outward mannerisms gave absolutely no obvious hints as to what his hand might be. Like a professional golfer before each swing, he went through the same series of movements every time. He took five white chips from one stack and five green ones from another and shuffled them in his right hand, staring at me the entire time. I continued to stare at his lapel.

"I reraise." His staccato voice was heavily accented and sharp. I felt a wave of concern as he grabbed two nearly full stacks of green chips. He pulled back his large blind bet. He carefully measured out two stacks of sixteen gray chips each, then grabbed them with both hands and pounded them onto the felt in front of his cards. "Make it one hundred sixty thousand straight."

Bjorn had built a solid, aggressive image throughout this tournament. My immediate read was that he was posturing and had nothing—maybe a little more than nothing. The probabilities and my gut told me I had the best hand. I had to decide whether to smooth call and turn Bjorn's aggression into my weapon or go all in right then and there, avoiding the risk of seeing a flop. The pot was plenty large at this point.

The loud thud of the chips and the almost exact \$100,000 raise made me think that he didn't want me to call. *\$100,000 at this stage is a substantial percentage of his stack; maybe he has a semipremium hand.* Hands such as ace/nine, king/ten suited, or a small pocket pair crossed my mind. The Scandinavians love small pocket pairs. Americans limp with them, or if it's a multiplayer table, throw them away. The Swedes raise with them.

The problem was that if I let him see a flop, anything could happen. If I went all in now, the hand would probably be over. But if I got a desirable flop, I could double up and inflict a crippling blow to his chip

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stack. I also had the advantage of going second after the flop. Position is often more important than the cards, especially in heads-up play. I could control the action.

I decided to go for broke and feign weakness. Go for the gusto. The huge win. The crippling blow. Slowly, I looked up at his shielded eyes.

“I call,” I said as ominously as I could.

I could sense Bjorn’s disappointment as his shoulders tensed ever so slightly. But that was to be expected. Even if he had aces, it’s always nice to get a substantial pot uncontested rather than risk the exposure of the three unknown community cards. The crowd’s murmuring picked up considerably as the dealer was given the signal to reveal the flop. Bjorn and I watched each other intently as the cards were spread. Both of us looked for any kind of a reaction.

We slowly turned our heads toward the three exposed cards. The war of nerves was on. The flop came:

10♦ K♣ 4♣

Now I was faced with a quandary. The king of clubs was a disturbing arrival to my party. That one card opened up twenty additional hands that would have me dominated—king/deuce through king/jack, suited and unsuited. It could have been worse. Two or even three cards higher than my jacks could have flopped, or three spades, or three clubs. All in all, this wasn’t a bad flop—just not a great one.

On the positive side, I dominated the second pair, which is considered a solid hand in heads-up play. I also detected the slightest uneasiness on the part of young Mr. Bergman. I was becoming convinced that I had caught the young Swede making a move. His forehead seemed tense, and he held his hands tightly against his chin and mouth. Being so close to home, coming this close to victory, he had to be feeling the pressure. He would be a national hero if he could bring home the gold against the evil American in this, the most popular of all participatory sports.

But I also wanted to win the gold medal very badly. Being here was a dream that I wouldn’t have dared to dream just twelve months earlier. But now that I was here, I wanted to win. No, I demanded to win. I was going to play the best poker of my life.

To my utter shock and surprise, Bjorn checked. It was the last thing I expected.

It was now my turn to act. I tried to look at ease and confident. I wiped imaginary dust off the sleeves of my brand-new navy blue and white sports jacket, the uniform for all the Americans. I pulled on the sleeves of my white silk shirt. I shook my wrist, loosely jangling my gold watchband.

The fact that Bjorn didn't make a continuation bet was highly unusual. *What does it mean?* Maybe he had a giant hand, like a set, and he was trapping. I doubted that. He would have bet a little something. Possibly he had no pair and wanted me to think he had a set. Maybe he was on some kind of a draw and wanted to see a free card. Could he be representing weakness to show strength so I wouldn't bet? Clubs seemed very unlikely. He would have bet that out. I didn't even consider an open-ender, because I had two of the four jacks, which cut down the probabilities considerably. Maybe he was looking to take the pot away on the turn. Queen/nine or ace/queen came to mind as possible hands I was up against, but the most likely scenario was a stone cold bluff on his part. He had absolutely nothing and had given up on the hand after I called his preflop raise.

In the end, I knew that if I was ahead—which I felt I was—I couldn't let another card hit the board and let him back into a higher pair or a runner-runner straight or flush. It was time to wheel in the big guns and use all the ammunition at my disposal.

I looked casually at the dealer. Swinging my left hand over my chips and using the same tone I would use to inquire about the health of his wife and kids, I said, "Dealer, I'm all in."