

SLEIGHT OF HAND

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**UNCORRECTED | MAY 2020
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SAM

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If I had a lick of sense, I'd have said no. If I had an ounce of sense, I'd be on my way home to start my weekend. If I had any sense at all, I wouldn't be sitting in a juvenile correctional facility, late on a Friday afternoon, staring across the table at this angry, insolent fourteen-year-old boy. But I promised the state child welfare agency I'd have a look at him so here I am.

The kid is slouched in an off-white plastic chair across the table from me. Sneer probably closest describes his facial expression. I'd given him my opening spiel and handed him my business card. He's busy tearing it up and rolling the bits of paper into little balls which he's nonchalantly shooting at my chest with his finger and thumb. He's already torn through Sam and is about halfway through Murry. He doesn't show the slightest amount of respect for the Field Director title under my name. I supposed I could think less of him for the nasty look and the tiny beads of wet white paper stuck on my fleece jacket. But the truth is, I admire the hell out of him.

After what I've seen in the referral packet on him that Children Services sent over I know most people who'd been through what he has would be flat out crazy or at least half-way there. But this kid's not in the psych ward, just really pissed off. He has every right to be. I glance at the notes I'd made that are sitting on the table in front of me. "Wow," I say. "Sixty-four previous foster care and residential care placements. That's a hell of a number. How did you manage it?"

He pauses long enough from launching his weaponry at me to curl his lip up. "Nobody tells me what to do."

I smile as all the automatic adult responses float through my head. Now that's the kind of attitude that gets you into a place like this...Oh yeah? Well. I'm going to tell you what to do...How are you ever going to get along in the world if you think like that? But what I do is slowly nod and say, "Aaahh, an independent

thinker. I get that.”

He looks at me out of the corner of his blue left eye with what I think, and hope, is a flicker of interest. But then his eyes lower again. He hasn't looked me straight on once. His head stays down a lot. He probably doesn't even realize how much. How ingrained the behavior is. His right eye is a floater, a lazy eye it's often called. It's usually resting at the corner of his eye by his nose. That nose, his chin, and pretty much the rest of his face is a study in bad acne. One of his front teeth is chipped in half. His brown hair is a short semi buzz which doesn't help his looks. He's not an attractive kid. Sad thing is, I can tell he knows it.

I look at the book the kid has on the table next to him. It's a funny thing. My adopted son wrote it. “I've read that book. What do you think of it?”

The kid gives it a disinterested look and shrugs. “It helps kill the time.”

High praise indeed. I'll have to pass that along to Kelly. I reach into my pocket and pull out a deck of cards. “Want to see a magic trick?” I'm sure if I wait for an answer, he'll say no so I just flip the cards with my thumb showing him it's full of the usual hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs and instruct him, “Stick your finger in there wherever you want.”

I don't say anything more. I don't have to. I've done this a couple of hundred times and always get the same response from every kid. They don't want to cooperate, but for some reason they just can't resist. True to form the kid sticks his finger in the cards.

“Take the one your finger's on and look at it. Don't let me see it!” I tell him as I avert my head for a second or two.

Once I know he's seen his card, I hold the deck back in front of him. “Stick the card back in there wherever you want.”

Never taking his eyes off me the boy slides it in about half way to the bottom of the deck. I flip the cards a couple more times while looking at him studiously. “Are you thinking about your card? This is a mind reading trick. I'm good at reading minds.”

I think what I might be reading in his mind is you're full of shit but I roll on. “Hmm. Let me see. Yes, yes, I'm getting an image. It's becoming clear.” I give it a dramatic pause. “Is it an ace of diamonds?”

He looks up in surprise, impressed despite himself. “How'd you do that?”

I shuffle the cards in front of him. “Want to try again?”

A brief nod then he pulls out the next card, looks at it, and his eyes narrow sharply at me. This never gets old. I put on an innocent look. “Is it an ace of diamonds?” As I say this, I flip the cards again and he watches all the jacks, two’s, fives, and so on fly by. But then I put the deck on the table and give it a light tap. When I pick it up and flip it in front of him this time all he sees is a whole deck of the ace of diamonds.

For just a few seconds he forgets himself. He forgets where he is. He forgets the image he has to put on to keep the world at bay. He forgets he doesn’t like me, even though he doesn’t know me. For a few heartbeats he’s just a kid. He sits up straighter. “Let me see that deck!”

I slip the cards back into their sleeve. “Tell you what. I’ll let you in on the secret eventually. I’ll even teach you how to do it.”

His guard comes back up. “How’s that going to happen?”

I smile at him and slide over a promotional chocolate bar with Phoenix Foster Care Agency: We Build Families embossed in gold lettering on the back. “How about looking at us for placement number sixty-five?”



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