Bestselling author of *HOLES*

LOUIS SACHAR

THE CARDTURNER

A Novel About
a King, a Queen,
and
a Joker

Chapter Sampler

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A Note from the Author

Imagine you were abducted by aliens and taken away to their home planet. After living there awhile, you learn to speak their language, and then actually become a pretty well-known author. You were a huge baseball fan back on Earth, so you decide to write a book about baseball. You know that none of your alien readers have ever heard of baseball, but you think it will make a great story, and besides, you really love the game. . . .

As you attempt to write it, you quickly find yourself entangled in words with multiple meanings, like *ball* and *run*. When you try to describe a triple play, you get so bogged down explaining the rules about force-outs that the excitement of the play itself is lost.

That was the predicament I put myself into when I wrote *The Cardturner*. It's not about baseball but about bridge, a card game that was once extremely popular but that, unfortunately, not too many people play anymore, especially not young people. In fact, the people who do play bridge seem to live in their own alien world.

My publisher, my editor, my wife, and my agent all said I was crazy. "No one's going to want to read a book about bridge!" they told me on more than one occasion.

Still, I really love the game. . . .

1

My Favorite Uncle

Ever since I was a little kid, I've had it drilled into me that my uncle Lester was my favorite uncle. My mother would thrust the phone at me and say, "Uncle Lester wants to talk to you," her voice infused with the same forced enthusiasm she used to describe the deliciousness of canned peas. "Tell him you love him."

"I love you, Uncle Lester," I'd say.

"Tell him he's your favorite uncle."

"You're my favorite uncle."

It got worse as I got older. I never knew what to say to him, and he never seemed all that interested in talking to me. When I became a teenager I felt silly telling him he was my favorite uncle, although my mother still urged me to do so. I'd say things like "Hey, how's it goin'?" and he'd grunt some response. He might ask me a question about school. I imagine it was a great relief to both of us when my mother took back the phone. Our brief conversations

always left me feeling embarrassed, and just a little bit creepy.

He was actually my great-uncle, having been my mother's favorite uncle long before he was mine.

I didn't know how much money he had, but he was rich enough that he never had to be nice to anyone. Our favorite uncle never visited us, and I think my mother initiated all the phone conversations with him. Later, after he got really sick, he wouldn't even talk to her. My mother would call almost daily, but she could never get past his housekeeper.

I had only met Uncle Lester face to face one time, at his sixty-fifth birthday party. I was six years old, and to me, his house seemed like a castle on a mountaintop. I said the obligatory "Happy birthday" and "I love you" and "You're my favorite uncle" and then steered clear of him.

"His heart is as cold as a brick," my father said on the drive home.

That phrase has stuck with me, I think, because my father used the word *cold* instead of *hard*.

My elementary school was a brick building. Every day on the way home, I would drag my fingers over the hard, and yes, cold surface.

I'm in high school now, but still whenever I walk by a brick building, I feel compelled to touch it. Even now, as I write this, I can almost feel the hard coolness, the sharp edges, and the roughness of the cement between the bricks.

2

A Turn for the Worse

Uncle Lester has taken "a turn for the worse." That's a phrase I heard a lot around the first of this year. Another phrase that came up a lot was "complications resulting from diabetes."

I wish I could report that these words brought great concern and sadness to our household. True, when my mother spoke of our favorite uncle's unfortunate turn, her voice had a somber tone, and sometimes she would place a hand on her heart, but I would say the overall mood was one of anxious anticipation. Once, I actually saw my father rub his hands together when he mentioned that Uncle Lester was not long for this world. December 25 might have come and gone, but there was a sense that Christmas was still just around the corner.

To be fair, I should mention that my father worked for a company that manufactured and installed insulation material. He often complained how the synthetic fibers

made his hands itch, and that could have been the reason he was rubbing his hands together.

Nevertheless, the only person who seemed genuinely worried about our favorite uncle was my sister, Leslie. She was also the only one of us who had never met him, unless you count his sixty-fifth birthday party. She was about four months old when we went to his dark castle on the mountain. My mother put extra emphasis on the first syllable of my sister's name when she introduced Uncle *Les*ter to his new grandniece, *Les*lie.

Leslie was eleven when Uncle Lester took his turn for the worse.

"What's diabetes?" she asked me.

"It's kind of a disease," I answered. "It has something to do with your body not being able to turn sugar into insulin."

"Why do you need insulin?"

I didn't know.

"Is Uncle Lester in pain?"

Complications-resulting-from-diabetes was just a string of words to me, and I never gave much thought to their meaning. Unlike me, Leslie could feel the suffering behind the words.

A week later I found out just how complicated his condition was. My uncle Lester had become blind.

"I guess he won't be playing cards anymore," my father said, rather callously, I thought.

It was the first time I'd ever heard anything about my uncle and cards.

According to my mother, we were Uncle Lester's closest living relatives. By this, I think she meant we lived the closest, which I doubted had any legal significance, but she seemed to think this was important if, God forbid, anything should happen to him.

He had no children of his own. He had one brother and two sisters, and they all had children (including my mother), and their children had children (including Leslie and me).

That was a lot of people with whom to split any inheritance, but my mother seemed especially concerned about Mrs. Mahoney, Uncle Lester's longtime housekeeper. "I think there's more going on there than just housekeeping, if you know what I mean," she said one evening during dinner.

She was speaking somewhat cryptically because of Leslie. I knew what she meant, of course, and I'm pretty sure Leslie did too, but I really didn't want to think about my old uncle and his aging housekeeper while I was eating.

There was somebody else who was even more worrisome to my mother than Mrs. Mahoney. That person was Sophie Castaneda.

I'd heard about the Castaneda family all my life, "the crazy Castanedas," but I never quite got my uncle's rela-

tionship to them. It was complicated, to say the least.

From what I understood, Sophie Castaneda was the daughter of Uncle Lester's ex-wife's crazy sister.

When Uncle Lester was in his twenties, he had been married for less than a year. His wife had a sister who went insane. The sister had a daughter named Sophie King, who later changed her name to Sophie Finnick, and then became Sophie Castaneda when she got married.

See what I mean?

According to my mother, all the Castanedas were bonkers. I met Toni Castaneda, Sophie's daughter, at my uncle's sixty-fifth birthday. Toni was about six years old, and I remember I was glad to find someone my own age to play with. Toni ran up to me. She covered her ears with her hands, her elbows sticking out, and shouted, "Shut up! Leave me alone!" and then she ran away.

She didn't do that just to me. I watched her tell other people to shut up and leave her alone too. I thought she was funny, but when I tried playing that game, I got in trouble for saying shut up.

3

By the Way

This is very embarrassing.

Have you ever been in a situation where you've been with someone for a while and you don't know that person's name? It's too late to ask, but you know the longer you go without asking, the more awkward it will become. So even though you feel really stupid, you finally just have to bite the bullet and say, "By the way, what's your name?"

That's how I'm feeling right now, only in reverse.

By the way, my name is Alton Richards.

A talented author would have skillfully slipped that in earlier, probably on the very first page. "Alton, come tell your favorite uncle how much you love him." Something like that.

Part of my difficulty, you have to admit, is my name. If I tried to slip *Alton* into the conversation, you might not have recognized it as a name. You might have wondered, "What does that word mean?"

And if I tried to slip in my last name, chances are you would have thought my name was Richard Alton. A number of teachers have called me that.

I'm seventeen years old. I am five feet, ten and a half inches tall, and I weigh 150 pounds. My hair is brown, and more fluffy than curly. I have dark, "intuitive" eyes and a "warm" smile.

My ex-girlfriend, Katie, is the one who described my eyes as intuitive and said my smile was warm. That was before she dumped me. Afterward she probably would have said I had a pathetic stare and a goofy smile, but since I'm the one writing this, we'll stick with intuitive and warm.

I asked Katie what she meant by "intuitive eyes." She said I could see right through all her phoniness and I always knew exactly what was in her heart.

The truth is, I never had a clue.

Maybe that's why I fell in love with her. People are attracted to mystery. No doubt I once seemed mysterious too, but by the time we broke up, I was to her, just as I am to you, an open book.

4

And, And, And . . .

By mid-March Uncle Lester's health had taken another turn, whether for the better or worse depends on your point of view. Sophie Castaneda had installed some kind of New Age nurse in my uncle's household. This nurse, Teodora, put him on a vegetarian diet and had him doing yoga and meditation.

"She's just prolonging his suffering," my mother said, and maybe she really believed that.

Mrs. Mahoney didn't like the new nurse either, and complained to my mother that Teodora paraded around the house half naked.

"Which half?" I asked.

My mother ignored my question. "When Mrs. Mahoney suggested to her that she might want to dress more appropriately, do you know what Teodora said? 'What does it matter? He can't see me.'"

"What does it matter?" asked Leslie.

"It's disgusting, that's what" was our mother's reply.

I mentioned earlier that my mother didn't trust Mrs. Mahoney, but you wouldn't know that from listening to her end of one of their daily telephone conversations. She'd chat and laugh and say things like "Isn't that just like a man?"

Mrs. Mahoney was her only source of information. It wasn't until after my mother hung up that the smile would leave her face. Then she'd wonder out loud if Mrs. Mahoney told Uncle Lester how many times she had called, or if Mrs. Mahoney had relayed even one of her dinner invitations.

My father was wrong when he said that Uncle Lester would never play cards again.

"He's been playing cards four days a week with Toni Castaneda," my mother informed us one evening, her voice stewed in bitterness.

I didn't see how that was possible.

"What can they play?" Leslie asked me later in my room. "Go Fish? 'Do you have any sevens?' Then what? Toni looks at his cards to see if he has any sevens. She could cheat like so easily!"

"Why would she cheat an old blind man who's about to die?" I asked. "It's probably just the opposite. He asks her if she has any sevens, and she says, 'Darn it, you got me again,' and hands him a six and a king."

"And then he changes his will and leaves her all his money," said Leslie.

Leslie had come into my room for the computer, but I was still using it. I had priority, not just because I was older and the computer was in my room, but because I usually waited until the last minute to do my homework, and so I had a greater urgency. Leslie did her homework the day it was assigned, and therefore could wait.

I know it's not fair. I'd get rewarded for my laziness, and she'd get punished for her diligence, but that's how it was.

"Well, I guess we'll soon be able to afford a second computer," I said.

"I guess so," Leslie agreed.

Neither of us wanted to sound overly excited about the prospect.

"And we'll probably be able to download all the music or movies we want," Leslie added.

"Probably," I agreed.

"How much money do you think Uncle Lester has?" she asked me.

"I have no idea."

"More than a million?"

"Definitely."

"More than fifty million?"

I shrugged. "It's not like we need a lot," I said. "Still, it would be good to get the pool finished."

Leslie agreed with that.

We currently had a big hole in our backyard, with some warning barriers around it. Our parents were involved in some kind of lawsuit with the pool company, although it had never been quite clear to me who was suing whom.

"And I can get my own phone," said Leslie, "with unlimited text messaging!"

"And I can get my car fixed," I said. "Or maybe even a new car."

"Or a new house that already has a swimming pool," said Leslie.

"And a hot tub," I said.

"And a game room, and a pool table," said Leslie.

"And a giant TV with surround sound, and every kind of video game."

And, and, and . . . That's the trouble with money.

5

Cliff

Whatever Teodora was doing for my uncle must have been working, because by the end of the school year, our hole in the ground was no closer to becoming a pool. My best friend, Cliff, landed a job as a lifeguard at the country club, so I figured I could probably sneak in there if I wanted to go swimming.

The reason I haven't mentioned Cliff before now is because even though he and I had been best friends since the third grade, we had stopped spending too much time together. He had a new girlfriend.

Her name was Katie.

If that name sounds familiar to you, yes, it's the same Katie who told me I had intuitive eyes.

I don't know why it hurt more to think about Katie with Cliff than Katie with somebody else, but to put it lightly, it tore at my insides.

That was my problem, I realized, not Cliff's. It wasn't his fault she broke up with me.

Cliff had asked my permission the first time he went over to her house. "You don't care if I go to Katie's to study for the French test, do you?"

What was I supposed to say—"No, you can't study with her, even if it means failing the final exam"?

I said some pretty terrible things to Katie when she dumped me. I called her awful names. Then I begged her to take me back. Then I called her more bad names. And then I begged some more.

It wasn't my finest hour.

I often wondered if Katie had told Cliff any of that. Did she tell him I cried?

If she did, Cliff never mentioned it to me. He was too good a friend.

I've gotten way off track here. When I started this chapter I was simply trying to relate my state of mind at the end of my junior year, and then I somehow got started on Katie again.

I guess she'll always be a part of my state of mind.

It was the second-to-last day of school. I didn't have any summer plans, just a vague notion about getting a job. I had just driven Leslie to her friend Marissa's house, and

when I got home I heard my mother say, "Alton would love to spend time with his favorite uncle!"

I froze.

"Yes, he's an excellent driver," said my mother.

I should point out that whenever my mother rides with me, she grips the armrest while slamming her foot on an imaginary brake.

"I think I just heard him come in. Alton, is that you?"

She walked into the kitchen where I was standing. Her eyes were filled with delight. She placed her hand over the phone and whispered, "It's Mrs. Mahoney. She wants you to play cards with Uncle Lester on Saturday. He and Toni Castaneda got into a big fight!"

I brought the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Do you know the difference between a king and a jack?" asked a gruff voice that did not belong to Mrs. Mahoney.

"Uh, yes, sir," I said.

My mother's eyes widened when she realized to whom I was talking. "Tell him he's your favorite uncle," she urged.

"Do you know how to play bridge?" asked my uncle.

I didn't, but thought that maybe I could fake it.

"Tell him you love him," said my mother.

"No," I said to my uncle (and to my mother).

"Good!" barked my uncle. "It's better that way!"

"I could probably pick it up by Satur—" I started to say, but Mrs. Mahoney was back on the line.

"Hello, Alton?" She told me that Mr. Trapp needed to

be at his club by one o'clock, and that I should pick him up no later than twelve-fifteen. I would be his cardturner, which meant, as far as I could tell, that he would tell me what card to play and I would play it. It didn't make a lot of sense, but I was having trouble concentrating on everything Mrs. Mahoney said, because my mother, thinking that I was still talking to Uncle Lester, kept telling me what to say.

"Well?" my mother asked once I hung up.

"I'm supposed to take him to his club on Saturday and play bridge with him."

My mother put her hands on my shoulders, looked me straight in the eye, and gave me her best motherly advice.

"Don't screw it up, Alton."

6

Are You Sure?

I knew that bridge was a card game, but that was about it. It seemed dull and old-fashioned. Maybe, at one time, bridge might have been some people's idea of fun, but that was before computers and video games.

I called Cliff, and hoped Katie wasn't with him. I'm always amazed by the stuff he knows. If anybody could teach me how to play bridge by Saturday, it would be him.

He was no help. According to Cliff, bridge was a card game little old ladies played while eating chocolate-covered raisins.

"Anyway, your uncle's blind," Cliff pointed out. "So he won't be able to tell whether you know how to play or not."

I wasn't quite sure about that. I went online and found a Web site that sold bridge books. There were hundreds of books on bridge, possibly a thousand. There were

books for beginners, and for advanced and expert players. Just your basic how-to-play-bridge book was over two hundred pages, but even if I wanted to read it, I wouldn't get it in time for Saturday.

Mostly, the whole thing struck me as very odd. Why would there be so many books about one game?

I found another site that had the rules of bridge. I learned that bridge was a game played by four people. All the cards were dealt, so each person got thirteen cards. You were partners with the person who sat across from you.

I was lost after that. There were two parts to a bridge hand, *the bidding* and *the play,* but I couldn't tell you what you were supposed to do in either part. There were also things called a *contract,* and *trump,* and a *dummy,* and the directions north, south, east, and west seemed to have something to do with it.

"Didn't Uncle Lester say it was good you don't know how to play?" Leslie asked me, looking over my shoulder.

"I guess," I muttered, but that didn't make a whole lot of sense either. "How are we supposed to be partners?" I complained. "He can't see the cards, and I don't know the rules!"

"Don't yell at *me,*" said Leslie.

Saturday, my mother made me wear a jacket and tie. This despite the fact that it was over eighty degrees outside, and also despite the fact that *"He can't see what I'm wearing!"*

"You're taking him to his *club,*" replied my mother.

She let me take her car, thankfully, since mine wasn't all

that reliable, but first I had to wash it. That made even less sense to me than wearing a jacket and tie. What, would all the other people at the club be looking out the window to make sure he arrived in a clean car?

My Internet directions said it would take forty-three minutes to get to his house, but it took me over an hour. Once I left Cross Canyon Boulevard, I had to follow a labyrinth of winding roads up a hill, and most of the street signs were hidden behind trees and flowering shrubs. I followed this simple rule: when in doubt, go up. My uncle's house was at the very top of the hill.

The house wasn't the castle I remembered from when I was six, but I could see why it had made that impression on me, all stone and wrought iron with giant beams of wood. Nor was the hill a mountain, although there were great sweeping views in all directions.

Not that the views were much good to him now, I thought somewhat morbidly.

An iron knocker in the shape of a goat's head, horns included, was attached to the massive front door. I was tempted, but used the doorbell instead. A dog barked inside.

Mrs. Mahoney opened the door. "Well, aren't you a handsome young man," she said, no doubt referring to my jacket and tie. "Hush, Captain!" she said to the dog, who did not hush.

"You'll have to excuse Captain. He's gotten a lot more protective since Mr. Trapp lost his eyesight."

Mrs. Mahoney was dressed in a peach-colored pantsuit and

wore a jade necklace. At first glance she seemed very refined and genteel, but the way she grabbed Captain by his collar revealed a woman with muscular arms and a strong grip.

She invited me inside.

Captain was a mixed-breed, with just enough Doberman pinscher to make me wary about entering. However, my hope of seeing the half-naked Teodora was greater than my fear of my uncle's dog.

"He knows I've never played bridge, right?" I asked.

"Don't worry about that," Mrs. Mahoney assured me. "He will tell you which card to play."

"And you will play that card!" declared my uncle, coming through an archway. "You will not hesitate. You will not ask, *'Are you sure?'*"

For someone who was supposedly on the brink of death, his voice was loud and strong. He was a large man, both in height and weight. His hair was cut short, but there was still some black mixed with the gray. The only clue that there might be something wrong with him was his dark sunglasses.

"But you are to wait until I tell you what card to play, before you play it," he continued. "Even if you are certain what that card will be. Even if a diamond is led, and the ten of diamonds is the only diamond in your hand, you will wait until I say 'Ten of diamonds' before you place it on the table. Because if you play that card before I call for it, then everyone will know it's a singleton, won't they?"

I shrugged, which, I realized, was as meaningless to him as his words were to me.

"Mr. Trapp takes his bridge very seriously," said Mrs. Mahoney.

Captain continued to stare threateningly at me as my uncle rubbed him behind his ears. "What's your name?"

"Alton. Alton Richards."

"Your niece's son," said Mrs. Mahoney.

"Does he know Toni?" asked my uncle.

"Ask him yourself."

He didn't ask. Instead, he launched into a tirade of bridge gibberish.

"Dummy's got king, queen, ten of spades, and I'm sitting behind it with ace, four, doubleton. Declarer leads the deuce, partner plays the seven, and declarer calls for the king from dummy. 'Four of spades,' I say, without the slightest pause for thought. And what does Toni do? Does she play the four? No. She *hesitates*. She asks, *'Are you sure?'* A few lessons and she thinks she knows more than I do!"

"Toni doesn't think that," said Mrs. Mahoney.

"Well, she just told the whole table where the ace was, didn't she?"

I hoped that question wasn't directed at me, because I had no idea what he was talking about.

"What's your name?" he asked me again.

"Alton Richards," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Dumb question, ain't it? Hah!"

7

Teodora

Teodora came drifting through the same archway as had my uncle, although he hadn't exactly *drifted*. The only half of her that was naked was below the knees and above the neck. She wore five ankle bracelets, all on the same ankle.

I should mention that my interest in Teodora, and what she was or wasn't wearing, wasn't due entirely to my total lack of maturity. I was required to report back to my mother on whether or not she was "alluring."

Teodora reminded my uncle to breathe, and to focus on the Here and Now.

She was about half my uncle's age, about twice mine. I wouldn't call her alluring in the normal sense, not that it was a word I would ever use. She was plump, and had a pockmarked face, yet when I shook her cool hand, I found myself looking into her dark and—there's no other word for it—*alluring* eyes.

I found her voice alluring too, which probably mattered a whole lot more to my uncle than her complexion. When she introduced herself to me she said her name was "Day-o-daughter," with the *gh* in *daughter* not quite silent. She called Captain El Capitan.

She confused her singulars and plurals too. As my uncle and I were about to leave, she put her hand on my arm and told me not to let him eat any "cakes or cookie." "And no *café*!"

I led him to the car, his left hand holding my right elbow. I was unsure whether I should open the front or back door for him. Was I his chauffeur, or were we family? It seems silly now, but as we moved closer to the car I really agonized over it.

Finally I just asked. "So, do you want the front or the back?"

"Shotgun," he said, "so I can watch the road."

I guessed that was a joke. I smiled politely, which, I realized once again, meant the same to him as if I had stuck out my tongue.

Mrs. Mahoney had given me directions to the club, but unfortunately they began by telling me to head back down the hill the way I had come. Even on normal, right-angle roads, I get confused when I try to follow directions in reverse. It was nearly impossible to try to figure out my way through the tangle of streets.

My uncle must have realized I was having problems. He suddenly asked, "What street are you on now?"

I edged past a shrub so I could read the street sign. "Skyflower," I said.

"You're not too far off. Turn right, then make another right on Ridgecrest."

I did as I was told.

"It's easy to get lost up here," he said. "I moved here for the view. Hah! Doesn't do me much good now, does it?"

That was exactly what I had been thinking earlier, but it didn't seem right to agree with him. "Well, you can still kind of feel it, can't you?"

"What does a view feel like?" he asked.

I felt foolish, but I pressed on. "An aura," I tried. "Can't you still kind of sense, in some way, that you're on top of the world?"

"I could be living across the street from a junkyard," he said matter-of-factly, without a trace of bitterness.

8

The Club

If you were expecting a fancy club, with plush carpeting, leather chairs, wood paneling, and people sipping brandy and smoking cigars as they discuss the stock market, then you've come to the wrong place.

Maybe I should have realized that earlier, when I saw that my uncle was not dressed up like me, but I think I chalked that up to his blindness. I guess I thought that blind people could get away with wearing anything. Other people would just assume they made a mistake getting dressed, and would be too polite to comment.

My second clue was the club's location. Mrs. Mahoney's directions took me through the parking lot of a carpet warehouse, and then into a complex of industrial offices. I parked in front of building number two, then led my uncle up some concrete steps to the second door on the right, where the words BRIDGE STUDIO were stenciled on the glass.

Three rows of square tables. Eight tables per row. Four chairs at each table. Computer printouts posted on the

walls. And all around me, people were speaking bridge gibberish.

"I'm the only one to bid the grand, which would be cold if spades weren't five-one."

"Unless you can count thirteen tricks, don't bid a grand."

"I had thirteen tricks! Hell, I had fifteen tricks, as long as spades broke decently."

I asked my uncle where we were supposed to go, and he told me he always sat at table three, South.

In the center of each table was a laminated placard that indicated the table number and the directions: North, South, East, and West. Each direction corresponded to one of the four sides of the table.

As I negotiated our way to table three, a woman wearing a big hat approached my uncle. "Trapp!" she demanded. "One banana, pass, pass, two no-trump. Is that unusual?"

It sounded unusual to me.

"That's not how I play it," said my uncle.

A moment later a man in shorts and a torn T-shirt came up to him.

"Trapp, can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you remember that hand from last Monday, when you were in four hearts, and dummy had six clubs to the king?"

"King, nine, eight, six, four, three," said my uncle. "Your partner led the five, clearly a singleton."

"Could I have set you?"

"You needed to cash the king and ace of spades before giving your partner his club ruff."

"I didn't have the king."

"Your partner did."

"How was I to know that?"

My uncle gave a half-smile as he raised his left shoulder about an inch, then lowered it.

Even though I didn't understand what they were talking about, I think that was my first inkling that bridge wasn't just a simple game, and that there maybe was something extraordinary about my uncle.

When we reached table three, there were two chairs in the South position. My uncle told me to take the one closer to the table, and then he sat in the chair to my left and a little behind me.

"Well, I see you have a new cardturner," said the woman sitting across from me in the North seat. "Do you think maybe you can keep this one?"

"He's perfect," my uncle said. "He knows nothing about bridge, and even better, he knows he knows nothing."

I wasn't sure whether I was being complimented or insulted.

"Well, aren't you going to introduce us?" asked the woman.

My uncle didn't say anything.

"You don't know his name, do you?" accused the woman.

He remained quiet.

She reached her hand across the table. "I'm Gloria."

"Alton," I said, shaking her hand.

"Don't feel bad, Alton. I've been Trapp's partner for eighteen years, and he only just learned my name last Wednesday."

"Hah!" laughed my uncle.

9

Shuffle and Play

Gloria was an elderly woman with blond hair. She wore lots of jewelry, including earrings that looked like cards, the queen of hearts and the queen of clubs. She was nicely dressed, as were most of the women in the room. It was mostly the men who were slobs.

You know what? I'm not going to describe anybody else as *elderly*. Let's just say that if you take my age and double it, I would still have been the youngest person in the room, *by a lot*.

A man came around and placed two metal trays on each table. The room, which had been abuzz with bridge gibberish, began to quiet down.

"There are fourteen tables," the man announced. "We will play thirteen rounds, two boards a round, with a skip after round seven. Shuffle and play."

I didn't know he was called the *director,* or that the

metal card-holding trays were called *boards*. This isn't easy. I'm trying to relate my overwhelming sense of confusion and at the same time let you know what was going on—even though I didn't.

A board is a small rectangular tray, with four slots for the cards. The slots are labeled *North, South, East,* and *West*. Each board is numbered. Our boards were numbered five and six.

One thing did become clear to me. Gloria was my uncle's partner. I was to be his assistant, his cardturner. Before each hand, I was to take him aside and tell him what cards he held, and then he would tell me which card to play.

That made more sense.

Sort of.

The cards were shuffled and dealt; then each hand was placed back into the slots on the board. I learned later that this would be the only time all day that the cards would be shuffled. The same hands would be played over and over again at different tables.

We began with board number five. Everyone removed their cards from their corresponding slots. Since my uncle and I were in the South position, I removed the cards from the South slot. The bridge studio was now as quiet as a library.

It may seem silly, but I suddenly felt very nervous.

I stood up and led my uncle to the coffee alcove. I think that was why he always sat at table three. It was the one closest to the alcove.

No, I didn't let him have any *"café."* Even if my family did hope to inherit his fortune, I wasn't about to do anything to speed up the process. The coffee alcove was just a place where I could tell him his hand without other people overhearing.

I spoke quietly, slightly above a whisper. "Nine of spades, king of hearts, three of clubs, jack of spades, ten of di—"

"Stop!" he suddenly shouted, covering his ears. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Just telling you—"

"Are you a moron?" he asked. "Or are you just trying to drive me insane?"

I didn't know what I'd done wrong. Everyone in the room had stopped what they were doing to look at us.

The director hurried over and asked if there was a problem.

"Yes, there's a problem," said my uncle. "My new card-turner is an imbecile!"

"Keep it up, Trapp," the director warned, "and I'm going to penalize you half a board."

"Yes, penalize him," said Gloria, entering the alcove. "Maybe he'll learn some manners." She said this even though penalizing my uncle would also have meant penalizing her.

My uncle threw up his hands. "He just starts rattling off cards!"

"Well, did you explain how you wanted it done?" asked Gloria.

He sputtered a moment, then admitted he had not.

"Then I suggest you do," said Gloria. "But first you owe him an apology."

She gave me a sympathetic smile, then returned to the table.

He didn't apologize, but he did explain how I was supposed to tell him his cards. I had to sort them into suits first, and then tell him his spades, highest to lowest, then his hearts, then diamonds, then clubs. Always that order.

"You got that?" he asked.

"Spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs," I repeated, trying to sound bored and uninterested, as if I found the whole thing beneath me. I was angry that he'd called me a moron and an imbecile in front of everyone.

I gave him his hand as directed. "Spades: ace, jack, nine, three, two. Hearts: king, nine. Diamonds: ten, six, four. Clubs: ace, queen, three.

"Is that better?" I asked, filling my voice with contempt, both for him and for his stupid game.

He didn't seem to notice my tone, or care about what I thought. His mind was focused on those thirteen cards.

We sat back down. On each corner of the table there was something called a bidding box.

Gloria reached into her bidding box, took out a green pass card, and placed it on the table. "Pass," she said aloud. At every other table, the bidding was done in silence.

The man next to her, in the East seat, also passed.

"One spade," said my uncle.

I reached into my bidding box, removed the 1♠ card, and set it on the table. "One spade," I repeated.

I should mention that nobody bothered to explain bidding boxes to me. I figured out what I was supposed to do all by myself, but do you think my uncle gave me any credit for that?

No.

Over the next two and a half hours we played twenty-six hands of bridge. "Nine of hearts," my uncle would say, and I'd set the ♡9 on the table. "Queen of clubs," and I'd lay down the ♣Q. He never once forgot what cards he held. His voice remained flat, so I had no clue how well he was doing, but after a while I got the impression that my uncle and Gloria were doing very, very well.

Each time, one of the hands became the dummy. That hand was placed faceup on the table for everyone to see. The dummy's cards were said aloud for my uncle's benefit, once and only once, always in the same order: spades, hearts, diamonds, then clubs. So not only did he have to memorize every card in his own hand, he had to memorize all of the dummy's cards too. That's twenty-six cards, half the deck.

Every North-South pair was a team, and every East-

West pair was a team. When we finished a hand, everyone would place their cards back in their original slots on the board. We played two boards each round; then the East-West pair would leave and a new team would sit down against us. We would pass the boards we had played to table two and get new boards from table four.

It was like some sort of odd dance, with the people moving in one direction and the boards moving in the other. After the seventh round, every East-West pair skipped a table to avoid playing boards they had already played.

At least three women commented on Trapp's "handsome" new cardturner. Gloria always had to introduce me since my uncle still didn't know my name.

It might not have been just the jacket and tie. Women over a certain age tend to think I'm handsome. Girls under twelve too. According to Leslie, all her friends think I'm hot. Whenever her friends are over, I can hear them giggle when I walk past. The first few times it happened, I checked to make sure my fly was zipped.

When it was all over, Trapp and Gloria had played against every East-West pair except for the team that had skipped them. (I'll call him Trapp, since that's what everyone else called him.) They'd played twenty-six of the twenty-eight boards. The director gathered all the score sheets and entered the results into the computer.

"Did you win?" I asked.

"We'll have to wait and see," said Gloria.

It was odd that after playing for almost three hours, we had to wait for the computer to tell us who won.

"Thank God for computers," said Gloria. "In the old days, we had to wait around for almost an hour while the director tallied the scores by hand. Sometimes we didn't find out until the next day."

Gloria explained that the final score depended on how she and Trapp did on each board, compared with every other North-South pair. So even if they only took two tricks on board nineteen, they would still get a high score on that board if most other North-South pairs only took one trick.

I liked that. I was unlucky when it came to cards. Cliff always beat me at poker. He must have won close to a hundred dollars off me, and we only played for quarters.

I guess that was the one good thing about him being with Katie. We hadn't played any poker for a while.

But in this game, luck wasn't a factor. It didn't matter if Trapp was dealt bad cards. It was just how well he played those bad cards, compared to every other person sitting in the South position, who had to play the same bad cards.

A woman came up to my uncle and asked his result on board fourteen, a hand we probably played an hour and a half ago.

My uncle thought for no more than seven seconds. "We set three no-trump two tricks."

"You set it? They made an overtrick against us!"

"You have to knock out dummy's king of spades," said Trapp, "and then hold up twice on your diamond ace."

But he still couldn't remember my name.

The printer spat out the results, and the director posted them on the wall. The scores were given in terms of percentages. Trapp and Gloria won with a 65 percent game. That might not sound like much, but second place was only 56 percent.

I take back what I said about luck. The East-West pair who skipped table three was very lucky.

10

An Apology of a Sort

We drove back in silence, which was just fine with me. I was having a difficult enough time trying to follow the directions from his house to his club, in reverse.

"I'm going to give you thirteen letters," he suddenly said. "I want you to repeat them back to me."

Before I could even say *"What?"* he began rattling off random letters. *"G-b-c-d-i-o-a-o-r-y-t-g-l."*

I gave it my best shot—"Um, *g, b, c* . . ."—but then stopped. "Look, I get it," I said. "Your memory is better than mine."

"It's not memory. It's context. I'm going to give you the same thirteen letters, but in a different order. Concentrate really hard now."

I sighed.

"G-i-r-l, b-o-y, c-a-t, d-o-g."

I didn't bother saying them back to him.

"Hah!" he laughed, then said, "They're the same letters.

I just sorted them into suits for you."

———————

Half an hour later we were parked in his driveway and I escorted him to the front door.

"How much did Mrs. Mahoney tell you?" he asked.

About what? I thought, then noticed him fumbling with his wallet. "She didn't say," I said. "Just whatever you paid Toni is fine."

"This has nothing to do with Toni. We have a different arrangement. How about seventy-five?"

"Sure."

He handed me his wallet. I removed three twenties, a ten, and five ones, then gave it back to him.

Teodora opened the front door. "Thank you so much, Alton," she said as she shook my hand, using both of hers. "This means so much to him."

"It's just a card game," groused my uncle.

She led him inside, and I returned to the car.

Okay, I admit it. When he handed me his wallet, the thought did occur to me that I could take any amount of money I wanted and he wouldn't know the difference. Not that I would steal from a blind person. Not that I would steal from anybody, even if he was so rich he'd never no-

tice, and even if he did call me an imbecile and a moron in front of a roomful of people.

Besides, I was no longer angry at him, and it wasn't just because he paid me. I think the girl-boy-cat-dog thing was his way of apologizing.

"You will return that money!" my mother said the second I stepped into the house.

She had obviously chatted with her dear friend Mrs. Mahoney.

"Get back in that car, drive straight to his house, and tell him you have no interest in taking any money from him. You're doing it for the joy of spending time with your favorite uncle."

"He'll think I'm crazy!" I protested.

"No, he'll respect you for your integrity."

"I'm not being unintegritary," I replied. (Don't bother looking up that word.) "I've been gone for almost six hours. Seventy-five dollars is barely minimum wage. And then there's the price of gas."

I thought "the price of gas" would be my trump card. I couldn't remember a single day when my parents didn't complain about gas prices—not that it stopped my father from buying an SUV.

"You think you're doing this for a measly seventy-five bucks?" asked my mother. "Seventy-five dollars is squat! In a few months Uncle Lester will be . . ." She didn't fin-

ish her sentence. For a brief instant I thought I saw a flash of sadness on my mother's face, as if the words she was about to say suddenly meant something to her. But that was only for an instant. "All right, you can return it to him on Monday."

"What's Monday?" I asked.

"He goes to his club every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday."

So this wasn't a onetime thing.

"What about my job?" I asked.

"What job?" she scoffed.

"I was going to get a job this summer."

She stared at me, hands on her hips.

I turned and skulked into my room.

Okay, I was too lazy to get a job, and my mother knew it, but I wasn't as lazy as she thought I was. I was fairly certain that I could have packed groceries or hauled boxes from one end of a warehouse to the other with as much vim and gusto as anyone. My problem was I couldn't get motivated to actually get into my car and drive to every supermarket, restaurant, movie theater, and appliance store just to ask to fill out a job application. Especially since I was pretty sure they'd throw my application in the trash the second I walked out the door.

I phoned Cliff and told him about the bridge club. "It's crazy," I said. "These people are like from a different

planet. Planet Bridge. They even speak their own language."

"They're just a bunch of old people," said Cliff. "It's either bridge or bingo."

For some reason I felt offended by that remark. Bingo was just a game of luck. Bridge seemed more like a sport, a mental sport, like chess, only with a partner. And my uncle was a superstar of the sport.

"My uncle is amazing," I told Cliff. "Everybody's always coming up to him and asking 'How should I have played this hand?' or 'How would you bid this hand?' And he can't even see the cards."

Cliff wasn't impressed. "You told him what cards he had, right?"

"Right, then he told me which card to play."

"Well, what's so amazing about that?" Cliff asked. "Now, if he could somehow know his cards without you telling him, that would be amazing."

I tried again, but he showed little interest. In fact, he didn't seem all that interested in talking to me, quickly dismissing whatever I said.

Then it hit me: Katie was over there.

I can be such an idiot! I told him I had to go, and hung up.

A Conversation with LOUIS SACHAR

When did you take up bridge? Is this an interest that was sparked as a young adult or later in life? How often do you play?

I learned to play when I was young by watching my parents. They often had other couples over for a night of bridge. They would occasionally let me sit in on a hand. Nobody my age played the game, and I didn't play again until I was almost forty. I continued to read the daily bridge columns in the newspapers, however. When my daughter was in kindergarten, we became friends with her friend's parents. The mother had a sister who liked to play "duplicate bridge" and said she was always looking for new partners. I'd read about duplicate bridge in the bridge columns and was always intrigued by it. A few weeks later I played my first game with my daughter's friend's aunt. (We won, and I didn't realize what a big deal that was.) I've been hooked ever since. I now play about four days a week, and occasionally travel to tournaments.

Can you explain the concept behind the whale icon found throughout THE CARDTURNER?

The greatest difficulty in writing this novel was trying to figure out how much bridge the reader would want to try to understand. Obviously all readers are different. The whale icon was chosen by the narrator, Alton, since he had trouble getting through *Moby Dick* in his English class. He gives the reader permission to skip the bridge if he or she finds it too boring or confusing. I doubt if too many readers will actually skip it, but it at least lets the reader know that the author recognizes this part is difficult, and it's okay if you don't understand it. It is followed by a summary box, which gives a shorter version of what the reader just read.

For you—and the main characters of THE CARDTURNER—bridge is clearly more than just a game. What lessons do you take away from bridge that you see as applicable in every day life?

A good bridge player learns to think things through, plan ahead, gather information, and make changes in the plan if the situation changes as the game progresses. It takes judgment. You have to know when to be daring, and when to be patient. Most importantly, bridge is a partnership game, and a bridge player has to rely on and trust his partner, while being a trustworthy partner himself. Finally, bridge is a highly ethical game. It's not like other sports where players try to get away with whatever they can, so long as the refs don't catch it.

What do you hope young readers will come away with when they read THE CARDTURNER (other than a possible new interest in bridge)?

I never set out to teach a lesson in a book. To me, a good book is one that allows both the writer and the reader to explore different boundaries of our minds. I hope when the reader finishes the book she feels like she's been somewhere she's never been before.

You've said you see yourself in Alton's character. How so? We heard that your daughter had a different take on that than you did, can you explain?

When my father was about fifty years old, and I was about seventeen, I remember him telling me that he was often surprised by the face he saw when he looked in the mirror. He said that on the inside, he still felt the same as he did when he was eighteen. I'm not sure I quite believed him. I do now.

The Cardturner is a book about, among other things, the relationship between Alton, a seventeen-year-old boy, and Trapp, his seventy-five-year-old great-uncle. It is told in the first-person by Alton. As I was writing it, I felt that Alton was very much me, although I tried my best to

disguise him. When I finally finished the manuscript, the first two people who read it were my wife, Carla, and my daughter Sherre, who was probably about twenty-one at the time. After Sherre read it, she said to me, "He's a lot like you, isn't he?"

I was disheartened that it was so obvious. I thought I had done a good job of turning Alton into his own independent character. "You mean, Alton?" I asked.

My daughter looked at me like I was nuts. "No, Trapp," she said.

Can you talk about the fantastical elements in THE CARDTURNER? Was this something you envisioned from the beginning, or did it develop as you wrote?

It's always difficult to remember what ideas came when. Initially, I simply threw Alton and Trapp together, and waited to see what developed. However, I think the idea of using the fantastical elements came to me fairly early.

We see seventeen-year-old Alton at the center of many key relationships. Can you comment on the role that family dynamics play in the development of his character?

Alton, like many seventeen-year-olds, feels disconnected from his parents. He's figuring out who he is. That's one of the main reasons I write about young people. The world is wide open to them, and they are trying to figure out their place in it. While Alton and his parents seem to clash at every turn, Alton has a younger sister, who is smart, sweet, and brings real heart to the family.

What's next? Is there a chance that you'll revisit Alton's story?

I don't know. Until I get caught up in a new novel, I *can't* tell you what the next book will be about—and then, once I am caught up in it, I won't tell you.

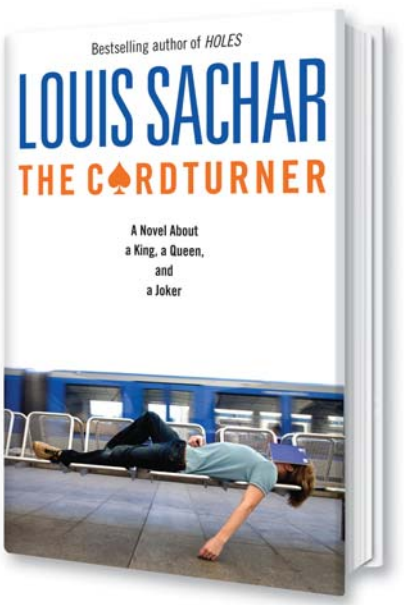
Where do you get inspiration for your writing? You have such an enthusiastic fanbase. Do they ever inspire ideas?

Inspiration, what little there is of it, comes from within. I simply try to come up with something that interests me enough to want to explore it a little more. In *The Cardturner* that was simply the idea of having a seventeen-year-old boy turn cards for an old blind bridge player. At first, I knew nothing about either of the characters, or what brought them together. Initially they weren't related. The real inspiration comes as I'm working on that idea, day after day after day.

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

In high school, great writers were my heroes: J. D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Steinbeck. I remember being thrilled when I found out that in my English class we'd be reading something by Faulkner, or Hemingway, or F. Scott Fitzgerald, not because I knew anything about these authors, but because I had heard of them before, and now I was going to get the opportunity to read their books. I wonder if there are high school students who still feel that way. To me, there was no higher achievement than writing a great novel. And even now, when I finish writing a book, there is a great sense of having completed something meaningful. People ask about what it was like winning the Newbery, or having *Holes* made into a movie, but nothing comes close to the feeling of accomplishment I get from the actual writing of a book.

PLAY THE HAND YOU'RE DEALT



Meet Alton Richards: honest, indecisive, and his own worst enemy. This summer, he becomes a "cardturner" for his rich, blind uncle, helping him to play bridge. Much to Alton's surprise, this uncommon job and the people he meets finally give him something to be passionate about—and change his life.

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