



Deadman's BLUFF: A Novel (Tony Valentine)

By James Swain

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–Janet Maslin, The New York Times

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–The Washington Post Book World

A blind poker player named Skip DeMarco is scamming the world’s largest poker tournament in Las Vegas, and cheating-expert Tony Valentine and his son, Gerry, have been hired to find out how. DeMarco is tied to some dangerously desperate characters who will go to extremes—even cold-blooded murder—to ensure that the obnoxious DeMarco wins big.

While Gerry flies to Atlantic City to suss out DeMarco’s secret, Valentine stays in Vegas and teams up with an aging grifter named Rufus Steele, who has his own score to settle with DeMarco. On opposite sides of a deadly game, father and son work their way through a colorful landscape of conmen and hitmen. Together, they will have to prove there’s more to any game of chance than meets the eye.

Featuring insider tips for catching poker cheats, as well as a glossary of card hustler terms!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

James Swain, the bestselling author of *Grift Sense*, *Funny Money*, *Sucker Bet*, *Loaded Dice*, *Mr. Lucky*, and *Deadman's Poker*, is also an authority on crooked gambling and casino scams. He is the winner of the prestigious Prix Calibre 38. He lives in Odessa, Florida, with his wife, Laura, and is currently at work on his next Tony Valentine novel. Visit the author's website at www.jimswain.com.

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"I win," Rufus Steele said. Tony Valentine could not believe his eyes. Steele, a seventy-year-old, whiskey-drinking Texas gambler, had just outrun a racehorse named Greased Lightning in the hundred-yard dash. The race had taken place on the manicured football field of the University of Nevada, the pulsating neon of the Las Vegas strip electrifying the night sky.

Valentine stood in the end zone with a mob of gamblers, many of whom had bet against Rufus. The gamblers were competing in the World Poker Showdown, the world's richest poker tournament. Valentine was there for a different reason. He'd been hired by the Nevada Gaming Control Board to figure out how a seeing-impaired player could be cheating the tournament, and he was trying to help his son avenge the murder of a childhood friend. The fact that he'd solved neither case to his satisfaction had made for a long four days, and watching Rufus fleece some suckers had provided a welcome distraction.

"I want to see the tape," declared a man known as the Greek.

The Greek had lost a half million bucks on the horse. He fancied himself a gambler, but had never swam with sharks as big as Rufus. The old cowboy sauntered over to where the Greek stood.

"Want to bet on the outcome again?" Rufus asked.

"Shut up!" the Greek roared.

Zack, the cameraman who'd filmed the event, rewound the tape, and the Greek and Rufus huddled behind him, staring at the camera's tiny screen. Valentine wanted to see the race again as well, and stared over the two men's shoulders.

Gloria Curtis brushed up beside him. In Vegas covering the poker tournament for a cable sports network, Gloria had filmed the race to be shown on her talk show. "Did you know Rufus was going to swindle the Greek like that?" she whispered to Valentine.

"Rufus didn't swindle him," he whispered back.

"He didn't?"

"No. Rufus tricked him."

"And how is that different?"

“Rufus told the Greek he could beat a horse in the hundred-yard dash. He never said the race would be run in a straight line.”

She chewed her lower lip, thinking it over. “But Rufus put a plastic cone on the fifty-yard line, so the horse had to stop, turn around, and run back.”

“It was a hundred-yard race, fair and square,” Valentine said.

She smiled at him with her eyes, which were the prettiest Valentine had seen in a long time. She’d interviewed him about the cheating at the tournament, and they’d immediately hit it off. He had no idea where the relationship was going, or even if it was going anywhere, but the ride so far was enjoyable.

“I know it looks like Rufus swindled the Greek,” he explained, “but the Greek went into the race with a gigantic edge, and he knew it.”

“An edge?”

“An advantage. The Greek’s advantage was that no human being can outrun a horse. The Greek had to know that Rufus would level the playing field to make the race competitive. And that’s exactly what Rufus did.”

“You still didn’t answer my question. Did you know what Rufus was up to?”

“No.” Valentine sensed Gloria didn’t quite believe him. Normally it wouldn’t have mattered, only she’d been in his thoughts these last few days. So he added, “Scout’s honor.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “Good.”

“Here we go,” said Zack.

The tiny screen on Zack’s camera showed Rufus and Greased Lightning about to start their race. The horse’s jockey stood in his saddle, clutching his crop. Valentine had been the starter, and the audio on the camera played back his voice intoning, “Take your marks . . . Get ready—go!” and the shot of the starter pistol.

Greased Lightning bolted, the jockey gripping the reins for dear life. The horse was out of control, and by the time the jockey managed to stop and turn around, he was ninety yards down the field. By then, Rufus had reached the cone, spun around, and was heading for the finish line.

“For the love of Christ,” Valentine now said under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Gloria asked.

“Rufus tricked me.”

“But I didn’t think anyone could trick you,” Gloria said.

Valentine shook his head, realizing what Rufus had done. The sound of the starter pistol had put Greased Lightning into a frenzy, and prevented the jockey from trotting to the cone, turning around, and galloping

back.

“It happens,” he said.

On the tiny screen, Rufus was huffing and puffing, his arms and legs working in unison, the horse coming up from behind like a runaway train. The ending was decided by inches, with Rufus throwing himself over the finish line as Greased Lightning thundered past. Zack froze the frame, and everyone leaned forward to see Rufus’s hand break the plane of the end zone before the horse’s nose did.

Rufus pounded the Greek on the back.

“I win,” Rufus said.

Professional gamblers did not take IOUs or personal checks. They dealt in cold hard cash, and the Greek had brought an enormous bag of money with him to the football field. As the Greek paid Rufus off, he looked at him pleadingly.

“I want another chance,” the Greek said.

There was weakness in his voice. Rufus glanced up from his counting.

“Want to win your money back, huh?”

The Greek nodded.

“I didn’t bust you, did I?”

The Greek shook his head. “I have more,” he said.

Rufus pulled the drawstring tight on the bag and gave it some thought. Sweat had started pouring off his body right after the race had ended. Valentine had tried to get him to drink water, but he’d refused.

“Well, I used to be pretty good at Ping-Pong,” Rufus said. “How about this. I’ll challenge anyone still playing in the tournament to a game of Ping-Pong, winner to reach twenty-one.”

“How much money are we talking about?” the Greek asked.

Rufus pointed at the sack of money lying on the grass. “That much. Interested?”

The Greek smiled like he’d found sunken treasure. “Yeah, I’m interested.”

“I’ve got one stipulation,” Rufus said. “I supply the paddles. Your man can choose either one. If he wants to switch during the match, he can. I just don’t want some guy showing up with one of those crazy rubber paddles that put so much spin on the ball that it’s impossible to hit back.”

“I’m agreeable to that,” the Greek said.

“Tell Rufus not to go through with this,” Gloria whispered in Valentine’s ear.

“Why not?”

“Takarama is still playing in the tournament. I profiled him for my show the other day. He still practices table tennis three hours a day.”

Shiego Takarama was a world table tennis champion who’d retired to play tournament poker. He was still in tremendous shape, and Valentine envisioned him wiping up the floor with Rufus. He went over to Rufus and pulled him aside.

“You don’t want to go through with this,” Valentine said.

“Of course I do,” Rufus replied.

“But you’re going to lose.”

“Tony, I can play Ping-Pong as good as the next fellow. I’ve got a table in my basement that I play my granddaughters on.”

“But . . .”

“Did you hear what the Greek said? He has money. That’s my money, Tony. The Greek is just holding it for me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some business to take care of.”

There was no stopping a man when he wanted to gamble. Rufus went up to the Greek and shook hands, sealing the deal. Shaking his head, Valentine returned to where Gloria stood with her cameraman. “He’ll never beat Takarama,” he said.

A twinkle appeared in Gloria’s eye. “So, you want to make a bet on that?”

“You mean bet against Rufus?”

“Yes.”

Betting against a grifter was like betting against the sun rising. No matter how outlandish the proposition, the grifter was going to come out ahead.

“Never,” he said.

From [AudioFile](#)

DEADMAN'S BLUFF adds a new twist to the mystery genre as it features Skip DeMarco, a blind, poker-playing con man who is out to scam the world's largest poker tournament. The story also involves murder, plot twists, and the requisite investigators—in this case the father-son duo of Tony and Gerry Valentine. Alan Sklar's narration enhances Swain's effort and helps transform a run-of-the-mill story into an entertaining narrative. Sklar brings an authoritative tone to the story, adding verve and personality to the characters. As the story builds, Sklar increases his pace, allowing listeners to feel as if they're part of the action. D.J.S. © AudioFile 2007, Portland, Maine-- *Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine*

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