

PLAYING
THE CARDS
YOU'RE
DEALT



VARIAN JOHNSON

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CHAPTER 1

The house always wins.

At least, that's what us card sharks say when things don't go our way. It's an old saying about gamblers. No matter how skilled, sharp, or slick you *think* you are—if you ain't smart enough to quit when you're ahead, you'll eventually lose all of your hard-earned money to the "house." Which, for all you youngbloods out there who don't know better, means the casino.

The house. It is all powerful. It sets the rules, it stacks the odds in its favor, and given enough time, it's unbeatable.

Now, every Joplin man worth his salt knows this—even young Anthony. But the thing is, the saying doesn't just apply to casinos. You see, when it comes to *family*

matters, what Ant's daddy usually says is: *Your mother is the house, and the house always wins.*

And that was for sure the truth this morning. Before Ant even touched the knob to the back door, his mom appeared in the kitchen with hands on hips, lips pursed, and eyeballs zeroed in on him.

As us OGs used to say back in the day, youngblood was cold busted.

"Where do you think you're going?" his mother asked. She was already dressed in her usual getup of navy-blue scrubs and white sneakers.

"To school?" Ant offered.

"This early? Without letting me or your father know?"

"I left a note." He offered a sly smile. "I thought you'd be happy that I was trying to be early on the first day."

"Umm-hmm," his mother said, eyeing the torn half sheet of paper Ant had left on the kitchen table. The boy had even tacked on *Love, Anthony* at the end of the note—a little sugar to soothe the sting of slipping out on his parents.

Let's be honest—everybody in that kitchen knew that Ant wasn't getting up all early because he was excited for school. It was more that he didn't want his parents to *walk* him to school on the first day. He knew his mom

was already gearing up to take a gazillion photos of him—first at home, then out on the front porch, and then again next to the big sign by the front doors of Gerald Elementary. Meanwhile, his daddy was probably prepping for one of his legendary first-day-walk-to-school pep talks. Last year’s talk was about peer pressure, and the year before was about focusing in class. Ant had a sneaking suspicion that his father was going to spring The Talk on him this year—the one too embarrassing to name—and there was no way he was sticking around to hear that. Ant wasn’t even interested in holding hands or swapping spit in the first place. Plus, the way he saw it, most of the girls he knew were too bossy, anyway.

So no, Ant didn’t want any part of his daddy’s talk this morning.

And coincidentally . . . if he left early, he figured that his momma wouldn’t be able to ask him about the deck of playing cards stashed at the bottom of his backpack.

His mother finally finished reading the note. “Nice try, sweetie. You get an A for effort. But I didn’t move my shift around this morning just for you to sneak off on me. Now sit down. I’ll scramble some eggs.”

Ant scrunched up his nose. “Does it *have* to be eggs?”
“Keep talking, and I’ll make grits instead.”

Ant clamped his mouth shut. He wasn't a big fan of grits—he thought they tasted like bland, soupy white rice. When his grandma cooked them, he could usually dump enough salt or cheese on them to make 'em edible. But Yolanda Joplin—bless her heart—wasn't exactly skilled in the cooking department. His momma's grits came out more like hard grains of white sand. Wasn't enough salt or cheese in the world to save them.

Ant trudged back to the table and shrugged off his backpack. He didn't get why everyone was working themselves into a tizzy about the first day of school. It wasn't like anything was changing. It was the same building and same students. Honestly, he was looking right forward to returning to something familiar, especially given how much some things had changed at home.

Or rather, how much *someone* had changed.