Lethal Voyage – The Poker Scenes (director’s cut)

Special Edition for my poker-player fans

**Author’s Note**: Since I started writing the Mike Stoneman Thriller series, I’ve been looking for an opportunity to get my protagonist to a poker table and write a poker scene. As soon as I made the decision to have book #3 set aboard a cruise ship, I knew I had my venue. All I needed was a way to work it into the story. I also have established a little tradition of having some New York Mets reference in each book. It made sense to work that into the poker scene, and what better ex-Met to use than . . . well, if you haven’t read the book yet, you’ll see.

The problem is that a really good poker scene, written to be appreciated by poker players, is either boring or incomprehensible to non-poker-playing readers. I could explain everything to the uninitiated readers, so that all the terminology makes sense and they can understand what’s happening, but that’s boring and off-putting to the poker-savvy readers, and it adds verbiage to the chapter that is dull for anyone not riveted by the poker sequence. Finding a happy medium isn’t easy.

In the end, I cut down the poker scenes (both of them) to keep the spirit of the game and the connection to other events in the story, and still keep the scenes short enough that they didn’t interrupt the fast pace of the book or distract anyone not particularly interested in the poker pay. A lot ended up on the editing room floor.

Here, however, I have the chance to resurrect the original scenes in their full form, without worrying about how detailed they are. So, for the benefit of my poker playing readers, and for anyone who wants to see what the pre-edited version of these scenes looked like, I’m happy to present: The Poker Scenes from *Lethal Voyage.*

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Michelle and Rachel went off to find the rock climbing wall. Mike and Jason adjourned to the ship’s casino. Mike wanted to play in the preliminary round of the cruise’s poker tournament. Jason wanted to watch.

The poker tournament was set up with five preliminary rounds and then a final table populated by the five winners. If there were enough players over the preliminary rounds, the winner of the final table would get a free cruise for two. Jason, who was not a card player, had heard Mike talk about the strategic elements of poker and wanted to see if Mike was really as good as he claimed to be.

After using his key card to pay the $100 entry fee, Mike commented on how easily the ship was able to separate him from his money without him ever having to open his wallet. He took his place at the single poker table inside the tightly packed casino floor, while Jason found a stool at the nearby bar where he would have a good view. When the pit boss made an announcement to the room that anyone interested in playing in the poker tournament should make their way to the table, other players started to gather. Five minutes later, there were eight players around the table, including two women, one young man who looked barely eighteen, one very elderly gentleman, and four middle-aged men who looked much like Mike. Almost everyone had a drink in front of them, including the elderly man. Mike had a Diet Coke.

Mike introduced himself to the man next to him, Quentin Richardson, from Huron, South Dakota. Quentin was a big man, at least 300 pounds, with large hands, a round face that was perpetually smiling, and a mop of blonde hair. He was a talker. He reminded Mike of the John Candy character from *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, although he couldn’t remember the character’s name. They quickly determined that Quentin and his wife were the occupants of the cabin directly next to Mike and Michelle. Quentin promised to keep the noise down on the balcony, and mentioned that he felt like he already knew the couple in the next cabin from overhearing their conversations. Mike asked if he meant the Blooms, but Quentin didn’t know for sure.

The game started while there was still one empty seat. Then, after the second hand, their last playing companion rumbled in. The man was rather short, but had bulging muscles around his neck and shoulders and he had oversized biceps pressing against a tight t-shirt. He had a weathered face, with a scraggly goatee beard, but had clear, bright eyes peeking out under a baseball cap that was pulled down low over his forehead. The man was accompanied by two large bodyguard-types, who stood several steps behind the player. He carried a tumbler with ice and a golden liquid that Mike guessed was whisky. As soon as he sat down, he drained the glass, letting the ice cubes rattle against his mouth. Then, he held up his glass and one of his companions grabbed it and headed toward the bar, presumably to fetch a refill.

Under any circumstances, Mike would have pegged this guy as a loose and likely very aggressive player, whose alcohol consumption would make him unpredictable. In this case, Mike also thought that the guy looked familiar. He scanned his face, then noticed that he had a thick gold necklace around his neck. Dangling from the braided gold was a charm of gold script letters, reading “*Nails.”* Mike then looked at his right hand and saw the ring. It was oversized and square, with a large diamond in the center, set on a diamond-shaped field on a blue background. A circle of smaller diamonds surrounded the center stone. The border of the square seemed to be made up of words that Mike could not read from across the table. But he knew what they were. They read “WORLD CHAMPIONS” and had the number “19” on one side and “86” on the other. Mike had seen pictures of that ring, given out to members of the World Series winning 1986 New York Mets. The man sitting across the table was Lenny Dykstra.

Mike played the next few hands while watching Dykstra carefully, trying to gauge how skilled a player he was. He knew that Lenny had a reputation as a gambler, but he wasn’t sure if poker was his game. Mike didn’t give away the identity of his celebrity table-mate to the other players. He bantered casually with all the other players, complementing winning hands and good decisions. The players were all comfortable and having fun. The $100 buy-in was not so much that anyone was taking it too seriously, and the ultra-turbo structure of the game – intended to complete the little tournament within about ninety minutes – did not give anyone a deep enough chip stack to play conservatively. Mike knew that the key to success in such an event was to pick your spots and play very aggressively. A secondary key was to recognize the players who were novices and who were prone to make bad decisions and not try to bluff them, since they often didn’t understand the game well enough to know that they should fold. Nobody at the table recognized Mike.

After thirty minutes, three of the original nine players had busted out of the game. Mike watched Dykstra play a very aggressive game, shoving all-in repeatedly to put pressure on the other players, who were afraid of making a call for all their chips. The ex-ballplayer had amassed a stack of chips equal to Mike’s, without having to show his cards once. Mike observed that Lenny was savvy enough not to try to bully Mike. This may have been because Mike had a big chip stack, or it may have been that Mike looked like he knew what he was doing.

Mike made a flush and knocked out his neighbor, Mr. Richardson. Then, Dykstra showed a hand that turned out to be pocket aces to knock out two players. Now there were three players – Mike, Lenny, and the elderly man, who had played very conservatively, rarely playing a hand, and only when he had premium starting cards. Mike was comfortable that this man would be easily beaten, but before he had the chance, Dykstra took him out with a flopped two pair that beat the old guy’s pocket tens. That left just Mike and Lenny, who was on his third Jack Daniels. At this point, Mike decided to pull out the Mets fan card.

“Nails, I just want to say that I always appreciated your hustle on the field. When you hit that home run off Houston in game 3 I jumped three feet off my bar stool.”

Dykstra shrugged, apparently not wanting to talk about his playing days. He looked down at the two cards that had just been dealt to him, then up at Mike.

Mike peeked at his cards: two sixes. “Hey, c’mon, Lenny. You can’t walk around wearing that ring and that necklace and expect that fans won’t recognize you. I was there when they brought back the ’86 championship team at Shea. A great day. I remember when you came out you couldn’t find your way out to the big cardboard placard with your picture on it out in the outfield. We all thought you were drunk. Were you?”

Dykstra glared at Mike. He picked up his glass, but then changed his mind about taking another drink and set it back down. Lenny was first to act in this head’s-up battle. He reached with his left hand and fondled his championship ring, then pushed out a bet of four times the amount of the big blind. At this point in the tournament, the blind levels, which were going up every ten minutes, would soon leave them both with relatively short chip stacks, even though they now had all the chips that had been on the table between them. Lenny had a slightly larger pile. Mike took his time, then slid out a call.

The cards in the middle of the green felt on the flop were 5-7-9, with three different suits – a terrible flop for most of the range of cards that Lenny should have been making such a big pre-flop raise with. Lenny checked. Mike checked back, figuring that he likely had the better hand, plus a draw to a straight. The fourth card on the board, the “turn” card,” was the queen of hearts. Lenny stared at Mike for ten seconds, then announced himself to be “all in.”

Mike stared back at Lenny, thought about it for ten seconds, then announced, “Call.”

Dykstra grimaced, then tossed his two cards face up on the table, showing jack-ten of hearts. Mike had been correct that Dykstra was bluffing when the queen hit the board. Lenny still had two over cards to Mike’s pair of sixes, but when the eight of spades turned up on the river – giving Mike a straight that he really didn’t need, Mike scooped up all the chips, leaving Lenny with a tiny stack. On the next hand, Dykstra moved all-in before the flop and Mike called. Mike’s hand proved the best and he accepted congratulations from all the folks who had gathered around the table to watch the ending. Several guests crowded around Lenny, now that his identity had been revealed, as Mike walked away toward Jason.

“How did you know he was bluffing?” Jason asked.

“I didn’t know for sure,” Mike replied, “but I knew that he was a bully at the table and he was annoyed with me for talking about the Mets, so he really wanted to end the game quickly. It seemed likely that if he had a queen or otherwise a really good hand, he would have tried to milk me a little bit and not shoved so fast. Of course he still could have gotten lucky and caught a Jack or a ten on the river, but I was pretty happy to get it all in there. Now we’ll see if he can play his way to the final table by winning one of the other preliminaries so I can do it to him again.”

“I have to hand it to you, Mike, that was damned impressive. I’ll come watch you at the final table on the last day.”

Mike smiled and asked Jason to order him a scotch, now that the poker was done.

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**Chapter 41 – Variance**

MIKE SAT CALMLY AT THE POKER TABLE in the casino. It was 6:40 and the four men and one woman who had started playing the final table of the ship’s poker tournament were whittled down to the final 3. Jason, Rachel, and Michelle sat on stools, facing away from the casino bar, watching the developments at the table. Each player had started with 4000 chips. Mike had a stack in front of him that Jason calculated to be about 6,000 out of the 20,000 total chips in play. Across from Mike, Lenny Dykstra hunched over his chips. Since his back was to Jason, there was no way to count his stack. The other player was a tall, thin guy with a goatee and a soul patch named Bruce. His wife, Terri, was sitting next to Jason and had been telling the story of how Bruce had beaten Dykstra in the preliminary round on Sunday. Dykstra just have qualified for the final table in the last preliminary tournament, earlier that afternoon. Bruce was between Mike and Lenny and Jason figured him for about 9,000 chips, which would mean Dykstra had around 5,000.

The big blind in the poker game was about to go up to 800, so the three-handed game was likely to end pretty soon. Jason had given Mike a quick summary of his conversation with Darci just as the game was getting ready to start. They agreed that there was no great rush to go back to talk to Miller and then probably talk again with Max. He wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was Darci. There was a free cruise at stake in the poker tournament, and Michelle said she was excited about the possibility of getting a do-over cruise; one without any dead bodies. So, Mike was playing cards, while the others watched.

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Before they could continue the discussion, Jason looked up at the action at the table, which had become interesting. He couldn’t see Mike’s cards, but from the action, he could tell this was a big hand.

Mike stared at Dykstra, who avoided eye contact. Mike knew that the former ballplayer wanted desperately to beat him this time. With the big blind level at 800, Mike had only about 7 big blinds worth of chips. He was in “button” position, since the big white disk was in front of him. Lenny Dykstra, with only about 6 big blinds, was in the small blind seat to Mike’s left, with 400 chips on the table in front of him. Bruce, the chip leader, was in the big blind seat, with 800 chips over the betting line.

In the three-handed game, Mike was first to act and looked down at his two hole cards – two black Queens. Mike knew from playing with Dykstra before, and from watching his play at the final table, that the ex-Met was likely to be very aggressive. Dykstra might bluff if Mike put out only a small bet, and so Mike tried to induce the bluff by pushing out a call of the minimum bet of 800 chips.

As Mike hoped, Dykstra immediately announced himself, “All in,” and pushed his stack of chips across the gold line on the table. Mike smiled. His trap had sprung. He might lose, but he was pretty sure he would have the best starting hand when they flipped up their cards after he made the call when it was his turn again. Then, Bruce announced that he was also “All-in,” and pushed his stack of chips into the middle, which was enough to cover both Lenny’s bet and all of Mike’schips. Mike thought about his odds and equity for only about ten seconds. There was no second place in this tournament; only the grand prize winner. If Mike called the two all-in bets and won the hand, he would knock Lenny out, which would be satisfying in itself, and he would have a huge chip lead over Bruce. If he folded, he would be way behind whoever won the huge pot. And, he would not likely have better cards again before the tournament ended. It was an easy call.

When they all turned up their cards, Mike was not surprised to see Lenny show a jack of clubs and a nine of diamonds – a total bluff. Bruce turned up an Ace and a King. When the flop hit the table with an Ace in the middle position, Mike’s head dropped. Bruce’s pair of aces held up, and Bruce pulled in all the chips and won the free cruise. Mike shook his hand, then walked around the table to shake Lenny Dykstra’s hand.

“Nice game, Lenny,” Mike said. “It was an honor to play with you.”

“Same to you,” Lenny said, not remembering Mike’s name. The former ballplayer picked up his half-consumed drink and fell into the consoling arms of his entourage, who told him he was a brilliant player and just had a “bad beat.” Mike chuckled to himself that they had no idea what they were talking about.

Jason walked over to Mike. “Tough one.”

Mike shook his head. “Nah. It was pretty standard. I would have done the same thing there with ace-king. It’s just normal variance. I was only a slight favorite, maybe 42% before the flop. I’m going to beat Lenny most of the time, but I beat the ace-king there only about half the time, and I lose half the time. I’m fine with that. You can’t get upset when you make a good play and it loses. That’s probability. Now, if I had lost to Lenny, that would have hurt.” Mike and Jason shared a laugh as Michelle stepped in and grabbed Mike’s arm. I’m proud of you, Mike, even if we don’t get the free cruise.

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Thanks for reading! As I look at it again, I can see why my wife and my editor both told me that the poker scenes were just too long. They broke up the flow of the rest of the story too much. Yeah, I get it. But I’m glad you got to see the original scenes.

Book #5 in the Mike Stoneman Thriller series will include a road trip to Las Vegas. You can look for Mike to be back on the felt, at least for a little while, in that book. For now, keep calm and run good!

-Kevin G. Chapman (November, 2020)