

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Millionaires* and *The First Counselor*



BRAD

THE ZERO GAME

MELTZER

APPROXIMATELY 6 HOURS ABRIDGED ON 4 CASSETTES
READ BY SCOTT BRICK

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Also by Brad Meltzer

The Tenth Justice

Dead Even

The First Counsel

The Millionaires

For Jonas,
my son,
who holds my hand,
tugs me along,
and takes me on the most
cherished adventure of all

Acknowledgments

THERE'S ONE NAME on the cover of this book, but I've always maintained it takes far more than that to transform an imagined idea into reality. For that reason, I'd like to thank the following people: always first, my love Cori. To paraphrase someone far smarter than myself: The words aren't real until Cori reads them. She's always been my first editor and adviser, but for this book, in her real-world position as a lawyer in Congress, she was also my eyes and ears into the complex world of Capitol Hill. What she doesn't know is how humbled I was to watch her do her job. Forever the fighter of the good fight, she thought she was teaching me political mechanics. What she really did was remind me what idealism is all about. I love you for that and so much more. There are endless reasons I couldn't do this without you, C. Jill Kneerim, my agent and friend, whose insights and intuition challenge me to bring honesty to the forefront of my writing. Her guidance is among the first I seek, but it's her friendship that I treasure (even more than she knows). Elaine Rogers, for the amazing work she's done from the very start. Ike Williams, Hope Denekamp, Elizabeth Dane, Seana McInerney, and all the other incredibly nice people at the Kneerim & Williams Agency.

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If the American people found out what was going on there,
they would tear it down brick by brick.

Howard R. Ryland
Capitol police officer
On Congress

. . . the real problem is that government is boring.

P. J. O'Rourke

1

I DON'T BELONG HERE. I haven't for years. When I first came to Capitol Hill to work for Congressman Nelson Cordell, it was different. But even Mario Andretti eventually gets bored driving two hundred miles an hour every single day. Especially when you're going in a circle. I've been going in circles for eight years. Time to finally leave the loop.

"We shouldn't be here," I insist as I stand at the urinal.

"What're you talking about?" Harris asks, unzipping his fly at the urinal next to mine. He has crane his neck up to see my full lanky frame. At six feet four inches, I'm built like a palm tree and staring straight down at the top of his messy black hair. He knows I'm agitated, but as always, he's the perfect calm in the storm. "C'mon, Matthew, no one cares about the sign out front."

He thinks I'm worried about the bathroom. For once, he's wrong. This may be the rest room right across from the Floor of the House of Representatives, and it may have a sign on the door that says *Members Only*—as in *Members of Congress . . . as in them . . . as in not us*—but after all this time here, I'm well aware that even the most formal Members won't stop two staffers from taking a whiz.

"Forget the bathroom," I tell Harris. "I'm talking about the Capitol itself. We don't belong anymore. I mean, last week I celebrated eight years here, and what do I have to show for it? A shared office and a Congressman who, last week, pressed himself up against the Vice President to make sure he didn't get cropped out of the photo for the next day's newspaper. I'm thirty-two years old—it's just not fun anymore."

"Fun? You think this is about fun, Matthew? What would the Lorax say if he heard that?" he asks, motioning with his chin to the Dr. Seuss *Lorax* pin on the lapel of my navy blue suit. As usual, he knows just where the pressure points are. When I started doing environmental work for Congressman Cordell, my five-year-old nephew gave me the pin to let me know how proud he was. *I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees*, he kept saying, reciting from memory the book I used to read to him. My nephew's now thirteen. Dr. Seuss is just a writer of kids' books to him, but for me, even though it's just a trinket . . . when I look at the tiny orange Lorax with the fluffy blond mustache . . . some things still matter.

"That's right," Harris says. "The Lorax always fights the good fight. He speaks for the trees. Even when it's not fun."

“You of all people shouldn’t start with that.”

“That’s not a very Lorax response,” he adds in full singsong voice. “Don’t you think, LaRue?” he says, turning to the older black man who’s permanently stationed at the shoeshine chair right behind us.

“Never heard of the Lorax,” LaRue responds, his eyes locked on the small TV that plays C-SPAN above the door. “Always been a *Horton Hears a Who* guy myself.” He looks off in the distance. “Cut that little elephant . . .”

Before Harris can add another mile to the guilt trip, the swinging doors to the rest room bang open and a man with a gray suit and red bow tie storms inside. I recognize him instantly: Congressman William E. Enemark from Colorado—dean of the House, and Congress’s longest-serving Member. Over the years, he’s seen everything from desegregation and the Red Scare, to Vietnam and Watergate, to Lewinsky and Iraq. But as he hangs his jacket on the hand-carved coat-rack and rushes toward the wooden stall in back, he doesn’t see us. And as we zip up our flies, Harris and I barely make an attempt to see him.

“That’s my point,” I whisper to Harris.

“What? Him?” he whispers back, motioning to Enemark’s stall.

“The guy’s a living legend, Harris. Y’know how jaded we must be to let him walk by without saying hello?”

“He’s going to the can . . .”

“You can still say hello, right?”

Harris makes a face, then motions over to LaRue, who raises the volume on C-SPAN. Whatever Harris is about to say, he doesn’t want it heard. “Matthew, I hate to break it to you, but the only reason you didn’t throw him a *Hi, Congressman* is because you think his environmental record is crap.”

It’s hard to argue with that. Last year, Enemark was the number one recipient of campaign money from the timber, oil, and nuclear power industries. He’d clear-cut Oregon, hang billboards in the Grand Canyon, and vote to pave over his own garden with baby seal skins if he thought it’d get him some cash. “But even so, if I were a twenty-two-year-old just out of college, I still would’ve stuck my hand out for a quick *Hi, Congressman*. I’m telling you, Harris, eight years is enough—the fun’s long gone.”

Still standing at the urinal, Harris stops. His green eyes narrow, and he studies me with that same mischievous look that once got me thrown in the back of a police car when we were undergrads at Duke. “C’mon, Matthew, this is Washington, D.C.—fun and games are being played everywhere,” he teases. “You just have to know where to find them.”

Before I can react, his hand springs out and grabs the Lorax pin from my lapel. He glances at LaRue, then over to the Congressman’s jacket on the coat-rack.

“What’re you doing?”

“Cheering you up,” he promises. “Trust me, you’ll love it. No lie.”

There it is. *No lie*. Harris’s favorite turn of phrase—and the first sign of guaranteed trouble.

I flush my urinal with my elbow. Harris flushes his with a full-on grip. He’s never been afraid to get his hands dirty. “How much will you give me if I put it on his lapel?” he whispers, holding up the Lorax and moving toward Enemark’s coat.

“Harris, don’t . . .” I hiss. “He’ll kill you.”

“Wanna bet?”

There’s a hollow rumble of spinning toilet paper from within the stall. Enemark’s almost finished. As Harris shoots me a smile, I reach for his arm, but he sidesteps my grip with his usual perfect

grace. It's how he operates in every political fight. Once he's focused on a goal, the man is unstoppable.

"I am the Lorax, Matthew. *I speak for the trees!*" He laughs as he says the words. Watching him slowly tiptoe toward Enemark's jacket, I can't help but laugh with him. It's a dumb stunt, but if he pulls it off . . .

I take that back. Harris doesn't fail at anything. That's why, at twenty-nine years old, he was one of the youngest chiefs of staff ever hired by a Senator. And why, at thirty-five, there's no one—even the older guys—who can touch him. I swear, he could charge for some of the stuff that comes out of his mouth. Lucky me, old college friends get it for free.

"How's the weather look, LaRue?" Harris calls to Mr. Shoeshine, who, from his seat near the tile floor, has a better view of what's happening under the stall.

If it were anyone else, LaRue would tattle and run. But it isn't anyone else. It's Harris. "Bright and sunny," LaRue says as he ducks his head down toward the stall. "Though a storm's quickly approaching . . ."

Harris nods a thank-you and straightens his red tie, which I know he bought from the guy who sells them outside the subway. As chief of staff for Senator Paul Stevens, he should be wearing something nicer, but the way Harris works, he doesn't need to impress. "By the way, LaRue, what happened to your mustache?"

"Wife didn't like it—said it was too Burt Reynolds."

"I told you, you can't have the mustache *and* the Trans Am—it's one or the other," Harris adds.

LaRue laughs, and I shake my head. When the Founding Fathers set up the government, they split the legislative branch into two sides: the House and the Senate. I'm here in the House, which is in the south half of the Capitol. Harris works in the Senate, which is all the way over on the north. It's a whole different world over there, but somehow, Harris still remembers the latest update on our shoeshine guy's facial hair. I don't know why I'm surprised. Unlike the monsters who walk the halls, Harris doesn't talk to everyone as a political maneuver. He does it because that's his gift—a son of a barber, he's got the gift of gab. And people love him for it. That's why, when he walks into a room, Senators casually flock around him, and when he walks into the cafeteria, the lunch ladies give him an extra ladle of chicken in his burrito.

Reaching Enemark's gray suit jacket, Harris pulls it from the coat-rack and fishes for the lapel. The toilet flushes behind us. We all spin back toward the stall. Harris is still holding the jacket. Before any of us can react, the door to the stall swings open.

If we were brand-new staffers, this is where we'd panic. Instead, I bite the inside of my cheek and take a deep gulp of Harris's calm. Old instincts kick in. As the door to the stall opens, I go to step in front of the Congressman. All I have to do is buy Harris a few seconds. The only problem is Enemark's moving too quickly.

Sidestepping me without even looking up, Enemark is someone who avoids people for a living. Leaving the stall, he heads straight for the coat-rack. If Harris is caught with his jacket . . .

"Congressman . . .!" I call out. He doesn't slow down. I turn to follow, but just as I spin around, I'm surprised to see Enemark's gray coat hanging lifelessly on the coat-rack. There's a sound of running water on the right side of the room. Harris is washing his hands by the sink. Across from him, LaRue rests his chin in his palm, studying C-SPAN with his fingers covering his mouth. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

"Excuse me?" Enemark asks, taking his coat from the rack. The way it's draped over his forearm, I can't see the lapel. The pin's nowhere in sight.

I glance over at Harris, who's wearing a calm that's almost hypnotic. His green eyes disappear in a soft squint, and his dark black eyebrows seem to take over his face. Japanese is easier to read.

"Son, did you say something?" Enemark repeats.

"We just wanted to say hello, sir," Harris interrupts, leaping to my aid. "Really, it's an honor to meet you. Isn't that right, Matthew?"

"A-Absolutely," I say.

Enemark's chest rises at the compliment. "Much appreciated."

"I'm Harris . . . Harris Sandler . . ." he says, introducing himself even though Enemark didn't ask. Leaving the sink, Harris studies the Congressman like a chessboard. It's the only way to stay ten moves ahead.

The Congressman extends a handshake, but Harris pulls away. "Sorry . . . wet hands . . ." Harris explains. "By the way, Congressman, this is Matthew Mercer. He does Interior Approps for Congressman Cordell."

"Sorry to hear that," Enemark jabs with a fake laugh as he pumps my hand. Asshole. Without another word, he opens his coat and slides an arm into the sleeve. I check the lapel. There's nothing there.

"Have a good day, sir," Harris says as Enemark slides his other arm in. Enemark rotates his shoulder blades and pulls his suit jacket into place. When the other half of the jacket hits his chest, a tiny flash of light catches my eye. There . . . on his other lapel . . . there's a tiny American flag pin . . . a little triangle with an oil well on it . . . and the Lorax, whose big Dr. Seuss eyes smile at me.

I motion to Harris; he looks up and finally grins. When I was a freshman at Duke, Harris was a senior. He got me into the fraternity and, years later, got me my first job here on the Hill. Mentor the hero now.

"Look at that," Harris says to the Congressman. "I see you're wearing the logging mascot."

I turn toward LaRue, but he's staring at the ground to keep himself from laughing.

"Yeah . . . I guess," Enemark barks, checking the Lorax out for himself. Anxious to be done with the small talk, the Congressman leaves the bathroom and heads across the hallway to the House Floor. None of us moves until the door closes.

"The *logging* mascot?" I finally blurt.

"I told you there's still fun going on," Harris says, looking up at the small TV and checking out C-SPAN. Just another day at work.

"I gotta tell Rosey this one . . ." LaRue says, rushing out of the room. "Harris, they're gonna catch you sooner or later."

"Only if they outthink us," Harris replies as the door again slams shut.

I continue to laugh. Harris continues to study C-SPAN. "You notice Enemark didn't wash his hands?" he asks. "Though that didn't stop him from shaking yours."

I look down at my own open palm and head for the sink.

"Here we go . . . Here's the clip for the highlight reel . . ." Harris calls out, pointing up at C-SPAN.

On-screen, Congressman Enemark approaches the podium with his usual old-cowboy swagger. But if you look real close—when the light hits him just right—the Lorax shines like a tiny star on his chest.

"I'm Congressman William Enemark, and I speak for the people of Colorado," he announces through the television.

"That's funny," I say. "I thought he spoke for the trees . . ."

To my surprise, Harris doesn't smile. He just scratches at the dimple in his chin. "Feeling better?"

he asks.

~~“Of course—why?”~~

He leans against the inlaid mahogany wall and never takes his eyes off the TV. “I meant what I said before. There really are some great games being played here.”

“You mean games like this?”

“Something like this.” There’s a brand-new tone in his voice. All serious.

“I don’t understand.”

“Oh, jeez, Matthew, it’s right in front of your face,” he says with a rare glimpse of rural Pennsylvania accent.

I give him a long, hard look and rub the back of my sandy-blond hair. I’m a full head taller than him. But he’s still the only person I look up to in this place. “What’re you saying, Harris?”

“You wanted to bring the fun back, right?”

“Depends what kinda fun you’re talking about.”

Pushing himself off the wall, Harris grins and heads for the door. “Trust me, it’ll be more fun than you’ve had in your entire life. No lie.”

2

Six Months Later

I USUALLY HATE SEPTEMBER. With the end of the August recess, the halls are once again crowded, the Members are frozen in preelection bad moods, and worst of all, with the October 1st deadline that is imposed on all Appropriations bills, we're clocking hours twice as grueling as any other time of the year. This September, though, I barely notice.

"Who wants to taste a food item less healthy than bacon?" I ask as I leave the polished institutional hallways of the Rayburn House Office Building and shove open the door to room B-30. The clocks on the wall shout back with two loud electronic buzzes. The signal for a vote on the House Floor. The vote's on. And so am I . . .

Wasting no time, I make a quick left at the hand-woven Sioux quilt that hangs on the wall and head straight for our receptionist, a black woman who always has at least one pencil sticking in the bun of her prematurely gray hair. "Here you go, Roxanne—lunch is served," I call out as I drop two wrapped hot dogs onto her paperwork-covered desk. As a professional staffer for the Appropriations Committee, I'm one of four people assigned to the subcommittee on Interior. And the only one besides Roxanne, who eats meat.

"Where'd you get these?" she asks.

"Meat Association event. Didn't you say you were hungry?"

She looks down at the dogs, then up at me. "What's up with you lately? You on *nice* pills or something?"

I shrug my shoulders and stare at the small TV behind her desk. Like most TVs in the building, it's on C-SPAN for the vote. My eyes check the tally. Too early. No yeas, no nays.

Following my gaze, Roxanne turns around to the TV. I stop right there. No . . . there's no way. She can't possibly know.

"You okay?" she asks, reading my now-pale complexion.

"With all this dead cow in my gut? Absolutely," I say, patting my stomach. "So, is Trish here yet?"

"In the hearing room," Roxanne says. "But before you go in, someone's at your desk."

Crossing into the large suite that houses four separate desks, I'm thoroughly confused. Roxanne knows the rules: ~~With all the paperwork lying around, no one's allowed in back, especially when we're in preconference—which means, whoever's back here is someone big . . .~~

"Matthew?" a voice calls out with a salty North Carolina tinge.

. . . or someone I know.

"Come give your favorite lobbyist a juicy hug," Barry Holcomb says from the chair next to my desk. As always, his blond hair is as perfectly cut as his pinstriped suit—both of which come courtesy of bigshot clients like the music industry, the big telecom boys, and, if I remember correctly, the Medical Association.

"I smell hot dogs," Barry teases, already one step ahead. "I'm telling you, free food always works."

In the world of Capitol Hill, there're two kinds of lobbyists: those who swoop in from the top and those who burrow in from below. If you swoop in from the top, it's because you have direct connections to the Members. If you burrow from below, it's because you're connected to staff—or in this case, because you went to the same college, celebrated your last two birthdays together, and tend to see each other out for a beer at least once a month. The odd thing is, since he's a few years older than me, Barry's always been more Harris's friend than mine—which means this call is more business than social.

"So what's happening?" he asks. There it is. As a lobbyist at Pasternak & Associates, Barry knows he's got two things to offer his clients: access and information. Access is why he's sitting here. Now he's focused on the latter.

"Everything's fine," I tell him.

"Any idea when you'll have the bill done?"

I look around at the three other desks in the room. All empty. It's a good thing. My other three office mates already have their own reasons to hate me—ever since Cordell took over the Interior Appropriations subcommittee and replaced their former colleague with me, I've been the odd man out. I don't need to add to it by letting them catch me back here with a lobbyist. Of course, Barry may be the sole exception.

Sitting just below the Grand Canyon lithograph that hangs on my wall, Barry leans an elbow on my desk, which is packed with volcanoes of paperwork, including my Conference notes of all the projects we've funded so far. Barry's clients would pay thousands, maybe millions, for those. It's sitting four inches to Barry's left.

But Barry doesn't see it. He doesn't see anything. Justice is blind. And due to a case of congenital glaucoma, so is one of the Hill's best-known young lobbyists.

As I cross around to my desk, Barry's vacant blue eyes stare into the distance, but his head turns and he traces my steps. Trained since birth, he absorbs the sounds. My arms swinging against my body. The in-and-out of my breath. Even the crushed hush as my foot hits the carpet. In college, he had a golden retriever named Reagan, which was great for meeting girls. But on the Hill, after being slowed down by strangers who were constantly asking to pet the dog, Barry branched out on his own. These days, if it weren't for the white cane, he'd be just another guy in a snazzy suit. Or, as Barry likes to put it: Political vision has nothing to do with eyesight.

"We're hoping October first," I tell him. "We're almost done with the Park Service."

"How 'bout your office mates? They moving as happily along?"

What he really wants to know is, are the negotiations going just as well? Barry's no fool. The four of us who share this office divvy up all the accounts—or sections—of the Interior bill, each doing our

own specialty. At last count, the bill had a budget of twenty-one *billion* dollars. When you divide it by four, that means we're in charge of spending over five billion dollars. Each. So why's Barry so interested? Because we control the purse strings. Indeed, the whole purpose of the Appropriations Committee is to write the checks for all discretionary money spent by the government.

It's one of the dirtiest little secrets on Capitol Hill: Congressmen can pass a bill, but if it needs funding, it's not going anywhere without an Appropriator. Case in point: Last year, the President signed a bill that allows free immunizations for low-income children. But unless Appropriations set aside money to pay for the vaccines, the President may've gotten a great media event, but no one's getting a single shot. And that, as the old joke goes, is why there're actually three parties in Congress: Democrats, Republicans, and Appropriators. Like I said, it's a dirty secret—but one Barry is all too aware of right about now.

"So everyone's good?" he asks.

"Why complain, right?"

Realizing the clock's ticking, I flip on the TV that sits on my filing cabinet. As C-SPAN blooms into view, Barry turns at the sound. I once again check the vote count.

"What's the tally?" he asks.

I spin around at the question. "*What'd you say?*"

Barry pauses. His left eye is glass; his right one is pale blue and completely foggy. The combination makes it near impossible to read his expression. But the tone in his voice is innocent enough. "The tally," he repeats. "What's the vote count?"

I smile to myself, still watching him closely. To be honest, if he were playing the game, I wouldn't be surprised. I take that back. I would be. Harris said you can only invite one other person in. Harris invited me. If Barry's in, someone else invited him.

Convinced it's just my imagination, I check the totals on C-SPAN. All I care about are the yeas and nays. On-screen, the white letters are superimposed over a shot of the still mostly empty House Floor: thirty-one yeas, eight nays.

"Thirteen minutes left. Thirty-one to eight," I tell Barry. "It'll be a slaughter."

"No surprise," he says, focused on the TV. "Even a blind man could've seen that."

I laugh at the joke—one of Barry's old favorites. But I can't stop thinking about what Harris said. *It's the best part of the game—not knowing who else is playing.*

"Listen, Barry, can we catch up later?" I ask as I grab my conference notes. "I've got Trish waiting . . ."

"No stress," he says, never wanting to push. Good lobbyists know better than that. "I'll call you an hour or so."

"That's fine—though I may still be in the meeting."

"Let's make it two hours. Does three o'clock work?"

Again, I take it back. Even when he doesn't want to, Barry can't help but push. It was the same way in college. Every time we'd get ready to go to a party, we'd get two calls from Barry. The first was to check what time we were leaving. The second was to recheck what time we were leaving. Harris always called it overcompensation for the blindness; I called it understandable insecurity. Whatever the real reason, Barry's always had to work a little harder to make sure he's not left out.

"So I'll speak to you at three," he says, hopping up and heading out. I tuck my notebooks under my arm like a football and plow toward the door that connects with the adjoining hearing room. Inside, my eyes skip past the enormous oval conference table and even the two black sofas against the back wall that we use for overflow. Instead, like before, I find the small TV in the back and—

“You’re late,” Trish interrupts from the conference table.

I spin midstep, almost forgetting why I’m here. “Would it help if I brought hot dogs?” I stutter.

“I’m a vegetarian.”

Harris would have a great comeback. I offer an awkward grin.

Leaning back in her chair, she’s got her arms crossed, completely uncharmed. At thirty-six years old, Trish Brennan has at least six years more experience than me, and is the type of person who says you’re late even when she’s early. Her reddish hair, dark green eyes, and light freckles give her an innocent look that’s surprisingly attractive. Of course, right now, the hottest thing in the room is the small TV in the back. I have to squint to see it. Forty-two yeas, ten nays. Still looking good.

As I pull out the chair directly across from her at the conference table, the front door of the hearing room swings open and the last two staffers finally arrive. Georgia Rudd and Ezra Ben-Shmuel. Already prepped for battle, Ezra’s got a sparse poor-man’s-environmentalist beard (*my-first-beard*, Trish calls it), and a blue dress shirt rolled up to his elbows. Georgia’s the exact opposite. Too much of a conformist to take chances, she’s quiet, wears a standard navy interview suit, and is happy enough following Trish’s lead.

Each armed with an oversized redwell accordion file, they quickly head to different sides of the table. Ezra on my side, Georgia next to Trish. All four horsemen are here. When it comes to Conference, I represent the House majority; Ezra does the House minority. Across the table, Trish and Georgia do the respective same for the Senate. And regardless of the fact that Ezra and I are from different political parties, even House Republicans and Democrats can set aside their differences for our common enemy: the Senate.

My pager vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out to check the message. It’s from Harris. *You watching?* he asks in digital black letters.

I glance over Trish’s shoulder, toward the TV in the back. Eighty-four yeas, forty-one nays.

Crap. I need the *nays* to stay under 110. If they’re at forty-one this early in the vote, we’ve got problems.

What do we do? I type back on the pager’s tiny keyboard, hiding my hands under the desk so the Senate folks can’t see what I’m doing. Before I can send it, my pager shakes with a new message.

Don’t panic just yet, Harris insists. He knows me too well.

“Can we please get this going?” Trish asks. It’s the sixth day in a row we’ve been trying to stomp each other into the ground, and Trish knows there’s still plenty to go. “Now, where’d we leave off?”

“Cape Cod,” Ezra says. Like speed-readers in a race, all four of us flip through the hundred-page documents in front of us that show the spending difference between the House and Senate bills. Last month, when the House passed its version of the bill, we allocated seven hundred thousand dollars to rehabilitate the Cape Cod Seashore; a week later, the Senate passed its version, which didn’t allocate a dime. That’s the point of Conference: finding the differences and reaching a compromise—item by item. When the two bills are merged, they go back to the House and Senate for final passage. When both bodies pass the same bill, that’s when it goes to the White House to be signed into law.

“I’ll give you three hundred and fifty thousand,” Trish offers, hoping I’ll be satisfied by half.

“Done,” I tell her, grinning to myself. If she’d pushed, I would’ve settled for an even two hundred.

“The Chesapeake in Maryland,” Trish adds, moving to the next item. I look down at the spreadsheet. Senate gave it six million for stabilization; we gave it nothing.

Trish smiles. That’s why she was kissing tush on the last one. The six million in here was put there by her boss, Senator Ted Apfelbaum, who also happens to be the Chairman of the subcommittee—the Senate equivalent of my boss, Cordell. In local slang, the Chairs are known as Cardinals. That’s when

the argument ends. What Cardinals want, Cardinals get.

In quiet rooms around the Capitol, the scene is the same. Forget the image of fat-cat Congressmen horse-trading in cigar-smoke-filled backrooms. *This* is how the sausage is made, and *this* is how America's bank account is actually spent: by four staffers sitting around a well-lit conference table without a Congressman in sight. Your tax dollars at work. Like Harris always says: The real shadow government is staff.

My pager again vibrates in my lap. Harris's message is simple: *Panic*.

I take another look at the TV. One hundred seventy-two yeas, sixty-four nays.

Sixty-four? I don't believe it. They're over halfway there.

How? I type back.

Maybe they have the votes, Harris replies almost instantly.

Can't be, I send back.

For the next two minutes, Trish lectures about why seven million dollars is far too much to spend on Yellowstone National Park. I barely register a word. On C-SPAN, the nays go from sixty-four to eighty-one. It's impossible.

"... don't you agree, Matthew?" Trish asks.

I stay locked on C-SPAN.

"Matthew!" Trish calls out. "You with us or not?"

"Wha?" I say, finally turning toward her.

Tracing my gaze back to its last location, Trish looks over her shoulder and spots the TV. "That's what you're so caught up in?" she asks. "Some lame vote for baseball?"

She doesn't get it. Sure, it's a vote for baseball, but it isn't just any vote. It actually dates back to 1922, when the Supreme Court ruled that baseball was a sport—not a business—and therefore was allowed a special exemption from antitrust rules. Football, basketball, all the rest have to comply—but baseball, the Supreme Court decided, was special. Today, Congress is trying to strengthen that exemption, giving owners more control over how big the league gets. For Congress, it's a relatively simple vote: If you're from a state with a baseball team, you vote for baseball (even the Reps from rural New York don't dare vote against the Yankees). If you're from a state without a team—or from a district that wants a team, like Charlotte or Jacksonville—you vote against it.

When you do the math—and account for political favors by powerful owners—that leaves a clear majority voting for the bill, and a maximum of 100 Members voting against it—105 if they're lucky. But right now, there's someone in the Capitol who thinks he can get 110 nays. There's no way, Harris and I decided. That's why we bet against it.

"We all ready to hit some issues?" Trish asks, still plowing her way through the Conference list. In the next ten minutes, we allocate three million to repair the seawall on Ellis Island, two and a half million to renovate the steps on the Jefferson Memorial, and thirteen million to do a structural upgrade on the bicycle trail and recreation area next to the Golden Gate Bridge. No one puts up much of a fight. Like baseball—you don't vote against the good stuff.

My pager once again dances in my pocket. Like before, I read it under the table. 97, Harris's message says.

I can't believe they're getting this far. Of course, that's the fun of playing the game.

In fact, as Harris explained it when he first extended the invitation, the game itself started years ago as a practical joke. As the story goes, a junior Senate staffer was bitching about picking up a Senator's dry cleaning, so to make him feel better, his buddy on staff snuck the words *dry cleaning* into a draft of the Senator's next speech: . . . *although sometimes regarded as dry, cleaning out*

environment should clearly be a top priority . . . It was always meant to be a cheap gag—something that'd be taken out before the speech was given. Then one of the staffers dared the other to keep it in.

"I'll do it," the staffer threatened.

"No, you won't," his friend shot back.

"Wanna bet?"

Right there, the game was born. And that afternoon, the distinguished Senator strolled onto C-SPAN and told the entire nation about the importance of "dry, cleaning."

In the beginning, they always kept it to small stuff: hidden phrases in an op-ed, an acronym in a commencement speech. Then it got bigger. A few years ago, on the Senate Floor, a Senator who was searching for his handkerchief reached into his jacket pocket and proceeded to wipe his forehead with a pair of women's silk panties. He quickly laughed it off as an honest mistake made by his laundry service. But it wasn't an accident.

That was the first time the game broke the envelope—and what caused the organizers to create the current rules. These days, it's simple: The bills we bet on are ones where the outcome's clearly decided. A few months back, the Clean Diamond Act passed by a vote of 408 to 6; last week, the Hurricane Shelters Act passed by 401 to 10; and today, the Baseball for America Act was expected to pass by approximately 300 to 100. A clear landslide. And the perfect bill to play on.

When I was in high school, we used to try to guess if Jennifer Luftig would be wearing a bra. In grad school, we made bingo cards with the names of the kids who talked the most, then waited for them to open their mouths. We've all played our games. Can you get twelve more votes? Can you get the Vermont Congressmen to vote against it? Can you get the nays up to 110, even when 100 is all that's reasonably possible? Politics has always been called a game for grown-ups. So why is anyone surprised people would gamble on it?

Naturally, I was skeptical at first, but then I realized just how innocent it really was. We don't change the laws, or pass bad legislation, or stroke our evil goatees and overthrow democracy as we know it. We play at the margins; that's where it's safe—and where it's fun. It's like sitting in a meeting and betting how many times the annoying guy in your office uses the word "I." You can goad him and make your best attempts to alter it, but in the end, the results are pretty much the same. In the world of Capitol Hill, even though we're split between Ds and Rs, 99 percent of our legislation is passed by overwhelming majorities. It's only the few controversial bills that make the news. The result is a job that can easily lapse into a repetitive, monotonous grind—that is, unless you find a way to make it interesting.

My pager once again shudders in my fist. *103*, Harris sends.

"Okay, what about the White House?" Trish asks, still working her list. This is the one she's been saving for. In the House, we allocated seven million for structural improvements to the White House complex. The Senate—thanks to Trish's boss—zeroed the program out.

"C'mon, Trish," Ezra begs. "You can't just give 'em goose egg."

Trish raises an eyebrow. "We'll see . . ."

It's typical Senate. The only reason Trish's boss is playing the jerk is because the President has been pushing for a settlement in a racial discrimination lawsuit against the Library of Congress. Trish's boss, Senator Apfelbaum, is one of the few people involved in the negotiation. This close to the elections, he'd rather stall, keep the lawsuit quiet, and keep it out of the press. This is the Senator's way of pushing back. And from the smug look on Trish's face, she's loving every minute of it.

"Why don't we just split the difference?" Ezra says, knowing our usual mode of compromise. "Give it three and a half million, and ask the President to bring his library card next time."

“Listen closely . . .” Trish warns, leaning into the table. “He’s not getting a single muddy peso.”
107, it says on my pager.

I have to smile as it inches closer. Whoever the organizers are—or, as we call them, the *dungeon masters*—these guys know what they’re doing. The bets can go from twice a week to once every few months, but when they identify an issue, they always set the game at the perfect level of difficulty. Two months ago, when the new Attorney General came to testify for the Senate Armed Services Committee, the bet was to get one of the Senators to ask the question, “How much of your success do you attribute to the support of your family?” A simple query for any witness, but when you add in the fact that a few days earlier, the Attorney General insisted that public figures should be able to keep their family lives private—well . . . now we had a horse race. Waiting for the words to be uttered, we watched that achingly boring Senate hearing as if it were the final round of *Rocky*. Today, I’m glued to a vote that was decided by a majority almost ten minutes ago. Even the baseball lobbyists have turned off their TVs. But I can’t take my eyes off it. It’s not the seventy-five dollars I’ve got riding on the outcome. It’s the challenge. When Harris and I put our money down, we figured they’d never get near 110 votes. Whoever’s on the other side obviously thinks they can. Right now they’re at 107. No doubt impressive . . . but it’s the last three that are going to be like shoving a mountain.

108 blinks onto my pager.

A buzzer rings through the air. One more minute left on the official clock.

“So what’s the count at?” Trish asks, swiveling at the sound, back toward the TV.

“Can we please not change the subject?” Ezra begs.

Trish doesn’t care. She’s still scanning the screen.

“Hundred and eight,” I tell her as the C-SPAN number clicks into place.

“I’m impressed,” she admits. “I didn’t think they’d get this far.”

The grin on my face spreads even wider. Could Trish be playing? Six months ago, Harris invited me in—and one day, I’ll invite someone else. All you know are the two people you’re directly connected to: one above, one below. In truth, it’s purely for safety purposes—in case word gets out, you can’t finger someone if you don’t know who they are. Of course, it also brings new meaning to the term *anybody’s game*.

I look around the room. All three of my colleagues take subtle glances at C-SPAN. Georgia’s too quiet to be a player. Ezra and Trish are a whole different story.

On TV, Congressman Virgil Witt from Louisiana strolls across the screen. Ezra’s boss. “There’s your guy,” Trish says.

“You’re really serious about this Library thing?” Ezra shoots back. He doesn’t care about seeing his boss on television. Around here, it happens every day.

109, my pager says.

On TV, Ezra’s boss once again rushes across the screen.

Under the desk, I type in one last question: *How’d Witt vote?*

My eyes are on Ezra as the pager rumbles in my hand. Here comes Harris’s answer.

Nay.

Before I can respond, the pager vibrates one last time: *110*.

Game over.

I laugh out loud. Seventy-five bucks in the toilet.

“What?” Georgia asks.

“Nothing,” I say, slapping my pager against the top of the conference table. “Just a stupid E-mail.”

“Actually, that reminds me . . .” Trish begins, pulling out her own pager and checking a quick

message.

“Is anyone here *not* completely distracted?” Ezra asks. “Enough with the friggin’ Blackberries—we’ve got a serious issue—if the White House gets zilched, you know they’ll threaten a veto.”

“No, they won’t,” Trish insists, clicking away on her pager without looking up. “Not this close to the election. They veto now and it’ll look like they’re holding up funding for the entire government just so they can get their driveway repaved.”

Knowing she’s right, Ezra falls unusually silent. I stare him down, searching for the tell. Nothing there. If he is playing the game, the guy’s a grandmaster.

“You okay?” he asks, catching my glance.

“Absolutely,” I tell him. “Perfect.” And for the past six months, it’s been exactly that. Blood pumping, adrenaline’s raging, and I’ve got an in on the best secret in town. After eight years in the grind, I almost forgot what it felt like. Even losing doesn’t matter. The thrill is in the play.

Like I said, the dungeon-masters know what they’re doing. And lucky for me, they’re about to do it again. Any minute now. I check the clock on the wall. Two o’clock. *Exactly at two*. That’s what Harris said when I first asked him how we know when the next bet is.

“Don’t worry,” he had said calmly. “They’ll send a signal.”

“A signal? What kinda signal?”

“You’ll see—a signal. That way, when instructions go out, you know to be in your office.”

“But what if I don’t see it? What if I’m on the Floor . . . or somewhere else in the Capitol? What if the signal goes out and I’m not here when they send it?”

“Trust me, this is one signal you won’t miss,” Harris insisted. “No matter where you are . . .”

Glancing back over Trish’s shoulder, I eye the TV. Now that the vote’s over, the camera goes back to the Speaker’s rostrum—the multilevel platform the President uses to deliver his State of the Union address. Right now, though, I’m more focused on the small mahogany oval table that’s just in front of it. Every day, the House stenographers sit there, clicking away. Every day, they keep track of everything uttered on the House Floor. And every day, like clockwork, the only objects on that desk are two empty water glasses and the two white coasters they rest on. For two hundred years—according to the rumor—Congress puts out two glasses, one for each side. Every single day. Today, however, is different. Today, if you count the glasses, there’s just one. You can’t miss it. One glass and one coaster.

There’s our code. That’s the signal. One empty water glass, broadcast all day long for the entire world to see.

There’s a soft knock on the door, and all four of us turn at the sound. A young kid wearing gray slacks, a cheap navy blazer, and a blue-and-red-striped tie enters the room. He can’t be more than sixteen, and if the uniform doesn’t give him away, the rectangular nametag on his lapel does. Set against a black background, the stark white letters read:

*House of Representatives Page
Nathan Lagahit*

He’s one of a few dozen—a high school page who delivers mail and fetches water. The only person on the totem pole lower than an intern.

“I-I’m sorry . . .” he begins, realizing he’s interrupting. “I’m looking for Matthew Mercer . . .”

“That’s me,” I say with a wave.

Rushing over, he barely makes eye contact as he hands me the sealed envelope. “Thanks,” I tell him, but he’s already out of the room.

Regular mail can be opened by a secretary. So can interoffice. FedEx requires a return address. And a messenger service would add up to a small fortune if you used it on a regular basis. But the House and Senate pages barely leave a footprint. They’re here every single day, and while all they do is run errands back and forth, they’re the easiest thing to miss. Ghosts in blue blazers. No one sees them come; no one sees them go. And best of all, since the pages get their instructions verbally, there’s no physical record of where a particular package goes.

An empty water glass tells me to be at my desk. A sealed envelope carried by a page tells me what I’m doing next. Welcome to game day.

“Trish, can’t you just meet us in the middle?” Ezra begs as Trish shakes her head.

Refusing to get into it, I angle my chair away from the group and examine the envelope. As always, it’s blank. Not even my name or room number. And if I’d asked the page where he got it from, he’d say someone in the cloakroom asked him to do a favor. After six months, I’m done trying to figure out how the inner workings of the game happen.

Wedging my thumb under the flap of the envelope, I give it a sharp jab and tear it open. Inside, as usual, the notice is the same: a single sheet of paper with the royal blue letterhead of the CAG, the Coalition Against Gambling. The letterhead’s an obvious joke, but it’s the first reminder that this is purely for fun. Underneath, the letter begins, *Here are some upcoming issues we’d like to focus on* . . . Just below that is a numbered list of fifteen items that range from:

(3) *Convince both Kentucky Senators to vote against Hesselbach’s dairy compact bill to:*

(12) *Within the next seven days, replace Congressman Edward Berganza’s suit jacket with a tuxedo jacket.*

As usual, I go straight to the last item on the list. All the rest are bullshit—a way to throw people off in case a stranger gets his hands on it—but the last one on there . . . that’s the one that actually counts.

As I read the words, my mouth tips open. I don’t believe it.

“Everything alright?” Trish asks.

When I don’t answer, all three of them turn my way. “Matthew, you still breathing over there?” she repeats.

“Y-Yeah . . . no . . . of course,” I say with a laugh. “Just another note from Cordell.”

My three colleagues instantly leap back to their verbal fistfight. I look down at the letter. And for the third time, I reread the words and try to contain my grin.

(15) *Insert Congressman Richard Grayson’s land sale project into the Interior House Appropriations bill.*

An earmark. A single Interior earmark. I can actually feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. This isn’t just any issue. It’s *my* issue.

For once in my life, I can’t lose.

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