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**\$EVERANCE**



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## Excerpt

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Zagorski and Lawrence arrived at O'Hare airport and headed in different directions. They needed a little time apart. Lawrence took the forty-dollar cab ride back to his spotless downtown apartment. Zagorski took the forty-dollar cab ride directly to Wrigley. As usual, there was construction along Irving Park Road, and the cab ride took forever, but at least he didn't have to worry about parking for this game. It was easier to run the second largest media company in the world than it was to find a last-second parking space any closer than five miles away from Wrigley Field.

The moment he walked through the dark gates, Zagorski was in heaven. God, he loved this place. The Cubs had tried to make him hate it, but nothing they did altered the visceral enjoyment of the ballpark itself. There was something there—the history, his history, his life. It was so comforting to know a place could exist forever. He needed that now more than ever.

Not that the Cubs hadn't tried to rob him of his love. They raised ticket prices every year despite having a lousy team. When the bleacher seats went over \$30 apiece, Zagorski stopped sitting out there. Sure, they were the only seats in the sun for the whole game, but they were bleacher seats—they didn't even have backs—and it took a certain kind of cojones to charge \$30 for that. Then they added a few rows and charged even more. He hated the greedy bastards.

But none of that mattered when he walked through the dark gates and smelled the beer-soaked floors.

“Ah,” he said. “I’m home.”

He had a ritual at Wrigley Field. First he bought the five-dollar program he never read. Then he bought the fifty-cent pencil he never used, and then he headed toward the concession stand. He never wasted his time with the main concession stand at Wrigley; he went right for the hot-dog truck with the sweaty woman grilling onions. He could actually feel the salivation forming on his tongue as he waited in line. He bought a hot dog slathered in grilled onions, added a pile of pickled bell peppers and a healthy dollop of mustard, and was about to make his way to his seat when he noticed a man attempting to put ketchup on his hot dog.

“Where are you from?” Zagorski demanded.

“Iowa,” the man said.

“Listen,” Zagorski advised in a hushed voice, “I wouldn’t put ketchup on your hot dog. It’s actually against the law in Chicago.”

The man’s hand stayed in the air, about to press down on the spigot. “Are you serious?” he asked.

“We’re very serious about our hot dogs here,” Zagorski assured him. “See that guard over there?”

Zagorski pointed to an old lady in a Cubs uniform. The Cubs had the oldest security guards in the nation, and without question, the least formidable.

“Yeah,” the man said.

“She doesn’t look like much, but she’s on ketchup patrol today,” Zagorski told him. He patted the man on the back and left him standing there, holding his hand above the spigot, wondering what the hell that was all about. “No ketchup on hot dogs” might not have been an actual law, but as far as Zagorski was concerned, it should be. It was an atrocity to defile the tasty sausage product with ketchup.

Zagorski’s season-ticket seats were in section 228; approximately even with first base, and three sections back, just under the balcony. Zagorski was an old-fashioned Chicago Cubs fan. He actually came to see the game. The players in the red-white-and-blue uniforms came and went, but the game never changed.

And the field, with the bright green grass, the green ivy on the red brick walls, the hand-operated scoreboard, and the red-clay infield was breathtaking. It was an honor to watch Major League baseball players play on this field. And that's why the Cubs management got away with their antipathy toward their own fans. Even a cynic like Zagorski couldn't get enough.

He stared at the scoreboard when he walked up the dark steps into the sunshine. The only day game on today's MLB schedule was taking place right here: the Chicago Cubs versus the Cincinnati Reds. Nothing was going to ruin this day for him now. He was finally, after months of living as a fish out of water, back in his own pond. He took a deep breath and sucked in the stale beer fumes one more time, before taking the last few steps toward his seats.

His potential clients were waiting for him there. They had their game faces on.

"Zagorski," they both said warmly.

"Do you guys know each other?" Zagorski asked.

When Kathleen Stambler looked at the serpent-headed operative, she groaned openly. "Yes, I know him," Stambler acknowledged.

"I know her too," Billy Joe Brooks said. "She looks shorter in person."

"And you look uglier," she countered.

"I came to watch a baseball game," Zagorski informed them. "I don't like it when people talk about things other than the baseball game, unless it's between innings."

"I couldn't agree more," Stambler said. "Baseball comes first."

"Absolutely," Brooks concurred. "The Cubs come first."

He smiled at his rival behind Zagorski's back. Brooks had scored the first point and he knew it. Zagorski took his seat between the two, who also sat down. He placed his program on the floor, put his pencil in his shirt pocket, and unwrapped his onion-slathered hot dog.

"Why do you love the Cubs?" Zagorski asked Brooks.

"I went to Northwestern," Brooks replied. "Started coming

to the games here in the late 60s, with Ernie Banks, Billie Williams, Fergie Jenkins, and Rick Monday.”

“Monday didn’t come until the 70s,” Zagorski corrected him, his mouth full of delectable encased meat product. He swallowed that delicious first bite before continuing. “And I thought you were a humble cracker from New Orleans.”

“Well,” Brooks admitted, “it wasn’t exactly the bad part of New Orleans, and I guess it wasn’t exactly humble. It was more like middle class. But I went to school with humble.”

“At Northwestern?” Zagorski asked.

“Typical,” Stambler muttered.

Brooks leaned across Zagorski to snap, “I heard that.”

Stambler grabbed Zagorski’s program off the floor to brush up on the Cubs. The lifelong White Sox fan wasn’t going to let Brooks get the better of her—if necessary, she was ready to switch allegiances. Meanwhile, Brooks was desperately going through his memory banks to put the Cubs timeline in perfect order to avoid making another obvious Rick Monday blunder.

Zagorski was enjoying the conversational lull as each operative tried to figure out how to effect a stealth recruitment plan right in front of the political opposition. He was halfway through his hot dog when he began to feel a little parched.

“If you see the Pepsi vendor, let me know,” Zagorski said.

Both of them hopped to their feet to scope the entire section. Kathleen Stambler saw one first and nearly ran over a ten-year-old girl to place the order at the far end of the row. While she was gone, Brooks leaned in with a sense of urgency.

“I made some calls, Zagorski,” Brooks whispered. “We can offer you so much more than they can. If you say the word, we’re prepared to clear the playing field for you. The primaries will be a formality. And we will do whatever is necessary to make sure that those Nazis don’t find out about your little skeleton. I’ll need the names of every man you’ve ever slept with, and we’ll get sworn affidavits from each and every one of them denying it.”

Zagorski tried to laugh and eat at the same time, which caused him to choke a little on his hot dog. Kathleen Stambler

came to the rescue with a Diet Pepsi. She was suddenly a triage nurse, hastily taking the plastic top off the drink, and holding it to Zagorski's mouth with one hand while the other hand tenderly held Zagorski's chin. Her concern made Zagorski laugh again, which caused him to choke again—this time on the Diet Pepsi.

Now it was Billy Joe Brooks's turn to be a triage nurse. He grabbed the Diet Pepsi out of Stambler's hand, put it in the cup holder on the back of the seat in front of him, and lifted Zagorski up by his armpits, preparing to Heimlich him. The Cubs fans in the seats behind him started screaming for Brooks to sit down.

"The man is dying here," Brooks said while Heimliching Zagorski.

"So are the Cubs," the fan replied. "And we'd like to see the funeral."

That got a big laugh among the beer-soaked fans, who all high-fived. It was amazing how quickly the beer took hold—it was only one-thirty in the afternoon.

"Hey, aren't you that political guy?" another fan said to Brooks. Brooks flashed him a warm, political smile while bear-hugging his future candidate. He had an out-of-body experience as he realized that this Heimliching looked like he and Zagorski were doing something that would later require an affidavit denying it, so he dropped Zagorski like a bad habit. Zagorski shook his head, pounded his chest, and he was fine.

"Can I have your autograph?" another fan asked Brooks. Billy Joe was only too happy to accommodate the autograph-seekers sticking pencils in his face. While he was signing *Best Wishes, Billy Joe Brooks* on unused scorecards, Kathleen Stambler leaned in to whisper her sales pitch to Zagorski.

"We are prepared to do whatever is necessary to get you elected," she said. She smiled warmly at her candidate for a moment. "And when I say whatever, I mean *whatever*."

Zagorski merely shrugged and reached for the Diet Pepsi. When he saw what it was, he had no choice but to object. "It's bad enough this ballpark doesn't sell Coke, and they've ignored my complaint letters about that for the last ten years, but you just took it one step too far."

“What did I do?” Stambler asked.

“Did you get me a *Diet* Pepsi, Stambler?”

“You don’t like Diet?” she asked, suddenly concerned. “That’s all the vendor had left. I’ll get you a regular one when he gets back.”

“It’s ruining my hot dog,” Zagorski complained, handing her the cup.

“But . . . but . . .”

“The hot dog cannot be ruined,” Zagorski said. His tone left no room for negotiation.

With Stambler hustling around Wrigley Field looking for a regular Pepsi, and Billy Joe Brooks busy signing autographs to people who sort of knew who he was, there were a few blissful moments of baseball for Zagorski. He noticed that the Cubs pitcher didn’t have his good fastball today. That was one of the great things about these seats. The scoreboard in this sight line flashed the speed of each pitch. Eighty-five miles per hour wasn’t going to get it done against Cincinnati. They had too many big bats in the lineup. Sure enough, three pitches later, the ball sailed onto Waveland Avenue.

“Take him out,” Zagorski screamed.

The guy in front of him turned around. “Hey buddy it’s the first inning.”

“He doesn’t have it today,” Zagorski lamented. “I can’t believe they don’t have somebody warming up in the bullpen.”

“Give him a break,” the guy said. “The Cubs haven’t even batted yet.”

“And they never will if they don’t get this guy out of the game,” Zagorski retorted. He pointed up at the radar gun reading. “He’s throwing eighty-five miles per hour. I could hit that out.”

The guy turned back toward the field, shaking his head at Zagorski’s impatience. Of course, he wasn’t shaking his head when the next batter flied out to deep center field, or when the two following hitters doubled off the ivy. Zagorski had no patience for the uneducated baseball fan, and unfortunately that described the majority of the people sitting around him today,

including the serpent-headed liberal operative who finally returned to his seat.

“What did I miss?” Brooks asked.

“The beginning of the end,” Zagorski said disgustedly.

“It’s the first inning,” Brooks pointed out.

“But the pitcher today . . .” Zagorski started to say. He stopped himself in mid-sentence and exhaled when he saw the development in the bullpen. Two of the relief pitchers were taking off their jackets: a left-hander and a right-hander. “That’s more like it.”

“Zagorski,” Brooks whispered, taking advantage of Stambler’s absence to change the subject again. “You were about to give me the list of names.”

Zagorski looked at the director of GoGroovy.org with the sincerest facial expression he could muster. “Billy Joe, I’m not gay.”

“I know that. That’s why we need the names. To prove it.”

Zagorski turned back toward the field as the Cubs manager made the long, slow walk out to the mound. “There are no names.”

“If that’s the way you want to play it,” Billy Joe shrugged. “But my experience in these matters tells me that it will always come out. You can’t stop the press.”

“I am the press,” Zagorski pointed out.

“Ah,” Brooks remembered. “Gotcha. Good point.”

Kathleen Stambler returned with the regular Pepsi and handed it to Zagorski. “What did I miss?” she asked.

“The largest deficit in the history of the United States,” Brooks said helpfully.

And that was it. Zagorski sat back in his seat and allowed the Pepsi to wash down the perfect hot dog. Now all was right in his world, and he didn’t care that an episode of *Crossfire* had broken out in front of him.

“Thanks to the liberal recession,” Stambler replied.

“How can you blame the recession on us?” Brooks said. “Your president, your Congress, your Senate, your Supreme Court. Give us a fuckin’ break.”

“We inherited it,” Stambler insisted.

“You also inherited a budget surplus,” Brooks retorted.

“Illusionary,” Stambler countered. “It was all a theoretical surplus.”

“Which you guys gave away to the richest Americans.”

“Like you.”

“And I don’t need it.”

“Then give it back,” Stambler suggested. She tapped her future candidate on the shoulder. “That one always shuts them up.”

“You guys will just use it to start another war,” Brooks reminded her.

“You love dictators,” Stambler said. Another tap.

“You love oil,” Brooks replied.

“Yes we do,” Stambler agreed. “It drives the economy, stupid.”

“Which is in shambles thanks to you, stupid.”

A man in the row behind them tapped Brooks on the shoulder.

“That’s not a very nice way to talk to a lady,” he said.

“That’s no lady,” Brooks pointed out. “That’s a battle-ax.”

“See what I mean about these liberals?” When Stambler saw that Zagorski wasn’t listening, she dug in. “I thought you liberals liked powerful women. Hypocrite.”

“Yeah,” Brooks said. “And I thought you conservatives liked traditional women. Why don’t you go into the kitchen and cook up a nice hot meal for your man, honey? Isn’t that what your party thinks women should do?”

That one shut up Stambler, but only for a moment. She addressed her comment to Zagorski, but it was clear who the real recipient of the comment was.

“That’s all they can do—attack,” Stambler stated. “They don’t have a plan.”

“So what?” Brooks responded. “Better to have no plan than an openly stupid plan. Your plan is to jump off the bridge. Our plan is to not jump. I’ll take our plan over yours, you bony gasbag.”

“There it is,” she rejoiced. “Another personal attack. They have such hatred for the president that they attack anyone who supports him. This country has never seen hatred like this before. It goes beyond the pale.”

Billy Joe Brooks stood up and started screaming.

“NEVER SEEN HATRED LIKE THIS BEFORE?!?” he yelled, his face turning red. “WHAT ABOUT THE WHOLE DECADE OF THE NINETIES, YOU HYPOCRITE! WHY DON’T YOU TALK TO YOUR HATE-MONGERING HACKS LIKE JOE STRIKER! THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT IS BUILT ON ONLY ONE UNIFYING IDEA—HATRED OF LIBERALS!”

Stambler tapped Zagorski on the shoulder again. “See what I mean?”

Zagorski wasn’t listening. This was exactly like sitting in the living room with his father and his ex-wife. If that horrible decade of the nineties taught him anything at all, it was to tune it out—especially during a baseball game. He was happy the manager brought in the left-handed long man. There were too many left-handed bats in the Cincy lineup.

“Hey down in front,” the man behind them said. Brooks sat down, but he wasn’t finished.

“And let me tell you something else,” he went on, still really worked up but aware that he got a little too exercised, “history will judge what happened to our president and how people like you destroyed him.”

“That’s true,” Stambler agreed. “History is a big fan of blow jobs.”

“And you’re not, are you?” Brooks asked. “Show me a woman who won’t blow her man and I’ll show you a conservative.”

“Ouch,” Stambler said. “Pardon me for not being a deviant.”

“Yeah right.” Brooks pressed his advantage. “You’re not fooling me, Stambler. You probably make your husband lick your feet and bark like a dog. You hypocrite.”

“*You’re* the hypocrite!” Stambler was getting animated now. “A chauvinist who fights for women’s rights. A homophobe who fights for gay rights.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Brooks said to Zagorski, to calm him. “You know how much I love you people.”

“You’re the worst kind of hypocrite.” Stambler’s finger was pointing at her archrival now to emphasize her point. “A rich man with everything he ever wanted in life, pretending to care

about the common man. Conservatives care about the real Americans . . . the people who support this country by paying their taxes.”

“But you don’t make them pay!” Brooks squealed.

“They pay plenty,” Stambler said. “They shouldn’t have to sacrifice everything.”

“Like what? Their yachts?”

“You own a yacht,” Stambler pointed out. “Hypocrite.”

“It’s a schooner,” Brooks corrected her. “And *you’re* the hypocrite. It’s out of the question to ask someone to sacrifice a small portion of their multimillions, but asking someone to sacrifice their life in a war is perfectly acceptable?”

“It’s an honor to serve your country,” Stambler said.

“Then why don’t you serve?” Brooks asked. “Hypocrite.”

He tapped his future candidate on the arm. “That one always gets ’em.”

“I’m not going to sit here and have you besmirch our fighting men and women,” Stambler declared.

“I’m not saying dick about them,” Brooks said. “I’m talking about you.”

“If there’s anyone here who shouldn’t say dick,” Stambler said, holding her thumb and index finger an inch apart, “it’s you.”

The man in the row behind them laughed and high-fived Stambler after that shot. She smiled at the man, and derisively pointed her thumb at Brooks.

“Hypocrite,” she confided.

“Stop calling me a hypocrite!” Brooks squealed. “You guys invented hypocrisy! Tell me if this one sounds familiar. The Conservative Party is the party of optimism, so you better vote for our guy or you may die in a horrible terrorist attack.”

That made Stambler smile. That was her baby.

Zagorski wasn’t really listening to the fight, but the repeated use of one word was getting to him. It was a lifelong pet peeve.

“Can I point out something I’ve always wanted to say when one side calls the other side hypocritical?” Zagorski asked. He wiped the mustard off his chin, and put the empty wrapper and

used napkin back in the box under his seat. The two operatives stopped the fight temporarily, to listen to their future candidate.

“If somebody is a hypocrite because he or she uses opposite reasons for rationalizing a position,” Zagorski said, “and you disagreed with them *both* times, then aren’t you also a hypocrite by the very definition of the word?”

“Exactly,” Brooks said.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Stambler agreed.

Zagorski couldn’t believe it. These political types would never get it, and he hated them all. This was going to be an impossible choice. He returned his focus to the baseball game. He preferred watching the Cubs get torched.

“You stole an election!” Brooks screamed.

“Fair and square,” Stambler replied. “Your judges were trying to heist it.”

“And your judges did heist it.”

“Fair and square,” Stambler repeated.

The two stood toe-to-toe in front of Zagorski, blocking his view.

“War-monger.”

“America-hater.”

“Racist.”

“Atheist.”

“Nazi.”

“Commie.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” Stambler challenged.

“Yeah, I’m a big fan of dried-up old hags,” Brooks said.

“I CAN’T STAND THIS!” Zagorski screamed. He stood up between the two, separating them before they turned violent. “THIS IS COMPLETELY CRAZY!”

Brooks and Stambler quieted down, remembering why they were there in the first place. Their temples eventually stopped throbbing.

“She started it,” Brooks complained.

“He started it,” Stambler argued.

“And I’m finishing it,” Zagorski said. “Sit your asses down

and shut your mouths. These people here paid good money to watch their favorite team lose and I'm not going to let you ruin it for them."

The fans in the row behind him laughed, and held out their hands for Zagorski to high-five. He went down the line one at a time, slapping hand after hand after hand. Stambler and Brooks smiled at the connection their guy naturally made with the common man. That was really going to come in handy.

"That's my guy," Brooks said.

"I knew it," she commented. "You *are* gay."

Brooks gave her an evil smile. "I'd prove to you I'm not, but I'm way too much man for you to handle."

"That's true," Stambler agreed. "When I think of real men, I think of liberal pussies."

"Do you have any idea how shrill both of you are?" Zagorski said as he returned to his seat. "I mean it. I've been listening to this crap now for fifteen years and I can't take it anymore. You want to know the *real* difference between die-hard conservatives and die-hard liberals?"

Stambler and Brooks stood until Zagorski sat down, then they sat on either side of him and scooted to the front of their seats, giving him their undivided attention.

"There is no difference," Zagorski disclosed. "You're both certifiably nuts."

Stambler and Brooks beamed. This guy was good.

The American people were going to eat that shit up.