


THE  
BOOK OF  
FATE



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BRAD MELTZER



WARNER BOOKS

NEW YORK BOSTON

The events and characters in this book are fictitious. Certain real locations and public figures are mentioned, but all other characters and events described in the book are totally imaginary.

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THE  
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Whatever limits us, we call Fate.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

God does not roll dice.

*Albert Einstein*



Six minutes from now, one of us would be dead. That was our fate. None of us knew it was coming.

“Ron, hold up!” I called out, chasing after the middle-aged man in the navy-blue suit. As I ran, the smothering Florida heat glued my shirt to my chest.

Ignoring me, Ron Boyle darted up the tarmac, passing Air Force One on our right and the eighteen cars of the motorcade that idled in a single-file line on our left. As deputy chief of staff, he was always in a rush. That’s what happens when you work for the most powerful man in the world. I don’t say that lightly. Our boss was the Commander in Chief. The President of the United States. And when he wanted something, it was my job to get it. Right now President Leland “The Lion” Manning wanted Boyle to stay calm. Some tasks were beyond even me.

Picking up speed as he weaved through the crowd of staffers and press making their way to their assigned cars, Boyle blew past a shiny black Chevy Suburban packed with Secret Service agents and the ambulance that carried extra pints of the President’s blood. Earlier today, Boyle was supposed to have a fifteen-minute sit-down with the President on Air Force One. Because of my scheduling error, he was now down to a three-minute drive-by briefing sometime this afternoon. To say he was annoyed would be like calling the Great Depression a *bad day at the office*.

“Ron!” I said again, putting a hand on his shoulder and trying to apologize. “Just wait. I wanted to—”

He spun around wildly, slapping my hand out of the way. Thin and pointy-nosed with a thick mustache designed to offset both, Boyle had graying hair, olive skin, and striking brown eyes with a splash of light blue in each iris. As he leaned forward, his cat’s eyes glared down at me.

“Don’t touch me again unless you’re shaking my hand,” he threatened as a flick of spit hit me in the cheek.

Gritting my teeth, I wiped it away with the back of my hand. Sure, the scheduling hiccup was my fault, but that’s still no reason t—

“Now, what the hell’s so damn important, Wes, or is this another vital reminder that when we’re eating with the President, we need to give you our lunch orders at least an hour in advance?” he added, loud enough so a few Secret Service agents turned.

Any other twenty-three-year-old would’ve taken a verbal swing. I kept my cool. That’s the job of the President’s aide . . . a.k.a. the body person . . . a.k.a. the buttboy. Get the President what he wants; keep the machine humming.

“Lemme make it up to you,” I said, mentally canceling my apology. If I wanted Boyle quiet—if we didn’t want a scene for the press—I needed to up the ante. “What if I . . . what if I squeezed you into the President’s limo right now?”

Boyle’s posture lifted slightly as he started buttoning his suit jacket. “I thought you— No, that’s good. Great. Excellent.” He even painted on a tiny smile. Crisis averted.

He thought all was forgiven. My memory’s way longer than that. As Boyle triumphantly turned toward the limo, I jotted down another mental note. Cocky bastard. On the way home, he’d be riding in the back of the press van.

Politically, I wasn’t just *good*. I was great. That’s not ego; it’s the truth. You don’t apply for this job, you’re invited to interview. Every young political gunner in the White House would’ve killed to clutch this close to the leader of the free world. From here, my predecessor had gone on to become the number two guy in the White House Press Office. *His* predecessor in the last White House took a job managing four thousand people at IBM. Seven months ago, despite my lack of connections, the President picked me. I beat out a senator’s son and a pair of Rhodes scholars. I could certainly handle a tantrum-throwing senior staffer.

“Wes, let’s go!” the Secret Service detail leader called out, waving us into the car as he slid into the front passenger seat, where he could see everything coming.

Trailing Boyle and holding my leather shoulder bag out in front of me, I jumped into the back of the armored limo, where the President was dressed casually in a black windbreaker and jeans. I assumed Boyle

would immediately start talking his ear off, but as he passed in front of the President, he was strangely silent. Hunched over as he headed for the back left seat, Boyle's suit jacket sagged open, but he quickly pressed his hand over his own heart to keep it shut. I didn't realize until later what he was hiding. Or what I'd just done by inviting him inside.

Following behind him, I crouched toward one of the three fold-down seats that face the rear of the car. Mine was back-to-back with the driver and across from Boyle. For security reasons, the President always sat in the back right seat, with the First Lady sitting between him and Boyle.

The jump seat directly across from the President—the hot seat—was already taken by Mike Calinoff, retired professional race car driver, four-time Winston Cup winner, and special guest for today's event. No surprise. With only four months until the election, we were barely three points ahead in the polls. When the crowd was that fickle, only a fool entered the gladiator's ring without a hidden weapon.

"So she's fast, even with the bulletproofing?" the racing champ asked, admiring the midnight-blue interior of Cadillac One.

"Greased lightning," Manning answered as the First Lady rolled her eyes.

Finally joining in, Boyle scootched forward in his seat and flipped open a manila folder. "Mr. President, if we could—?"

"Sorry—that's all I can do, sir," Chief of Staff Warren Albright interrupted as he hopped inside. Handing a folded-up newspaper to the President, he took the middle seat directly across from the First Lady, and more important, diagonally across from Manning. Even in a six-person backseat, proximity mattered. Especially to Boyle, who was still turned toward the President, refusing to give up his opening.

The President seized the newspaper and scrutinized the crossword puzzle he and Albright shared every day. It had been their tradition since the first days of the campaign—and the reason why Albright was always in that coveted seat diagonally across from the President. Albright started each puzzle, got as far as he could, then passed it to the President to cross the finish line.

"Fifteen down's wrong," the President pointed out as I rested my bag on my lap. "Stifle."

Albright usually hated when Manning found a mistake. Today, as he noticed Boyle in the corner seat, he had something brand-new to be annoyed by.

*Everything okay?* I asked with a glance.

Before Albright could answer, the driver rammed the gas, and my body jerked forward.

Three and a half minutes from now, the first gunshot would be fired. Two of us would crumble to the floor, convulsing. One wouldn't get up.

"Sir, if I could bend your ear for a second?" Boyle interrupted, more insistently than before.

"Ron, can't you just enjoy the ride?" the First Lady teased, her short brown hair bobbing as we hit a divot in the road. Despite the sweet tone, I saw the glare in her leaf-green eyes. It was the same glare she used to give her students at Princeton. A former professor with a PhD in chemistry, Dr. First Lady was trained to be tough. And what Dr. First Lady wanted, Dr. First Lady fought for. And got.

"But, ma'am, it'll just take—"

Her brow furrowed so hard, her eyebrows kissed. "Ron. *Enjoy the ride.*"

That's where most people would've stopped. Boyle pushed even harder, trying to hand the file directly to Manning. He'd known the President since they were in their twenties, studying at Oxford. A professional banker, as well as a collector of antique magic tricks, he later managed all of the Mannings' money, a magic trick in itself. To this day, he was the only person on staff who was there when Manning married the First Lady. That alone gave him a free pass when the press discovered that Boyle's father was a petty con man who'd been convicted (twice) for insurance fraud. It was the same free pass he was using in the limo to test the First Lady's authority. But even the best free passes eventually expire.

Manning shook his head so subtly, only a trained eye could see it. First Lady, one; Boyle, nothing.

Closing the file folder, Boyle sank back and shot me the kind of look that would leave a bruise. Now it was my fault.

As we neared our destination, Manning stared silently through the light green tint of his bulletproof window. "Y'ever hear what Kennedy said three hours before he was shot?" he asked, putting on his best Massachusetts accent. "*You know, last night would've been a hell of a night to kill a President.*"

"Lee!" the First Lady scolded. "See what I deal with?" she added, fake laughing at Calinoff.

The President took her hand and squeezed it, glancing my way. "Wes, did you bring the present I got for Mr. Calinoff?" he asked.

I dug through my leather briefcase—the bag of tricks—never taking my eyes off Manning's face. He tossed a slight nod and scratched at his own wrist. *Don't give him the tie clip . . . go for the big stuff.*

I'd been his aide for over seven months. If I was doing my job right, we didn't have to talk to communicate. We were in a groove. I couldn't help but smile.

That was my last big, broad grin. In three minutes, the gunman's third bullet would rip through my cheek, destroying so many nerves, I'd never have full use of my mouth again.

*That's the one,* the President nodded at me.

From my overpacked bag, which held everything a President would ever need, I pulled out a set of official presidential cuff links, which I handed to Mr. Calinoff, who was loving every split second in his folded-down, completely uncomfortable hot seat.

"Those are real, y'know," the President told him. "Don't put 'em on eBay."

It was the same joke he used every time he gave a set away. We all still laughed. Even Boyle, who started scratching at his chest. There's no better place to be than in on an inside joke with the President of the United States. And on July 4th in Daytona, Florida, when you'd flown in to yell, "*Gentlemen, start your engines!*" at the legendary Pepsi 400 NASCAR race, there was no better backseat in the world.

Before Calinoff could offer a thank-you, the limo came to a stop. A red lightning bolt flashed by us on the left—two police motorcycles with their sirens blaring. They were leapfrogging from the back of the motorcade to the front. Just like a funeral procession.

"Don't tell me they closed down the road," the First Lady said. She hated it when they shut traffic for the motorcade. Those were the votes we'd never get back.

The car slowly chugged a few feet forward. "Sir, we're about to enter the track," the detail leader announced from the passenger seat. Outside, the concrete openness of the airport runway quickly gave way to rows and rows of high-end motor coaches.

"Wait . . . we're going out on the track?" Calinoff asked, suddenly excited. He shifted in his seat, trying to get a look outside.

The President grinned. "Did you think we'd just get a couple seats in front?"

The wheels bounced over a clanging metal plate that sounded like a loose manhole cover. Boyle scratched even more at his chest. A baritone rumble filled the air.

"That thunder?" Boyle asked, glancing up at the clear blue sky.

"No, not thunder," the President replied, putting his own fingertips against the bulletproof window as the stadium crowd of 200,000 surged to its feet with banners, flags, and arms waving. "Applause."

"*Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States!*" the announcer bellowed through the P.A. system.

A sharp right-hand turn tugged us all sideways as the limo turned onto the racetrack, the biggest, most perfectly paved highway I'd ever seen in my life.

"Nice roads you got here," the President said to Calinoff, leaning back in the plush leather seat that was tailor-made to his body.

All that was left was the big entrance. If we didn't nail that, the 200,000 ticket holders in the stadium, plus the ten million viewers watching from home, plus the seventy-five million fans who're committed to NASCAR, would all go tell their friends and neighbors and cousins and strangers in the supermarket that we went up for our baptism and sneezed in the holy water.

But that's why we brought the motorcade. We didn't *need* eighteen cars. The runway in the Daytona Airport was actually adjacent to the racetrack. There were no red lights to run. No traffic to hold back. But to everyone watching . . . Have you ever seen the President's motorcade on a racetrack? Instant American frenzy.

I didn't care how close we were in the polls. One lap around and we'd be picking out our seats for the inauguration.

Across from me, Boyle wasn't nearly as thrilled. With his arms crossed against his chest, he never stopped studying the President.

"Got the stars out too, eh?" Calinoff asked as we entered the final turn and he saw our welcoming committee, a small mob of NASCAR drivers all decked out in their multicolor, advertising-emblazoned jumpsuits. What his untrained eye didn't notice were the dozen or so "crew members" who were standing a bit more erect than the rest. Some had

backpacks. Some carried leather satchels. All had sunglasses. And one was speaking into his own wrist. Secret Service.

Like any other first-timer in the limo, Calinoff was practically licking the glass. "Mr. Calinoff, you'll be getting out first," I told him as we pulled into the pit stalls. Outside, the drivers were already angling for presidential position. In sixty seconds, they'd be running for their lives.

Calinoff leaned toward my door on the driver's side, where all the NASCAR drivers were huddled.

I leaned forward to block him, motioning to the President's door on the other side. "*That way*," I said. The door right next to him.

"But the drivers are over *there*," Calinoff objected.

"Listen to the boy," the President chimed in, gesturing toward the door by Calinoff.

Years ago, when President Clinton came for a NASCAR race, members of the crowd booed. In 2004, when President Bush arrived with legendary driver Bill Elliott in his motorcade, Elliott stepped out first and the crowd erupted. Even Presidents can use an opening act.

With a click and a thunk, the detail leader pushed a small security button under the door handle which allowed him to open the armored door from the outside. Within seconds, the door cracked open, twin switchblades of light and Florida heat sliced through the car, and Calinoff lowered one of his handmade cowboy boots onto the pavement.

"And please welcome four-time Winston Cup winner . . . Mike Caaaalinoff!" the announcer shouted through the stadium.

Cue crowd going wild.

"Never forget," the President whispered to his guest as Calinoff stepped outside to the 200,000 screaming fans. "*That's who we're here to see.*"

"And now," the announcer continued, "our grand marshal for today's race—Florida's own . . . President Leeeeee Maaaaanning!"

Just behind Calinoff, the President hopped out of the car, his right hand up in a wave, his left hand proudly patting the NASCAR logo on the chest of his windbreaker. He paused for a moment to wait for the First Lady. As always, you could read the lips on every fan in the grandstands. *There he is . . . There he is . . . There they are . . .* Then, as soon as the crowd had digested it, the flashbulbs hit. *Mr. President, over here!*

*Mr. President . . . !* He'd barely moved three steps by the time Albright was behind him, followed by Boyle.

I stepped out last. The sunlight forced me to squint, but I still craned my neck to look up, mesmerized by the 200,000 fans who were now on their feet, pointing and waving at us from the grandstands. Two years out of college, and this was my life. Even rock stars don't have it this good.

Putting his arm out for a handshake, Calinoff was quickly enveloped by the waiting crowd of drivers, who smothered him with hugs and backslaps. At the front of the crowd was the NASCAR CEO and his surprisingly tall wife, here to welcome the First Lady.

Approaching the drivers, the President grinned. He was next. In three seconds, he'd be surrounded—the one black windbreaker in a Technicolor sea of Pepsi, M&M's, DeWalt, and Lone Star Steakhouse jumpsuits. As if he'd won the World Series, the Super Bowl, and the—

*Pop, pop, pop.*

That's all I heard. Three tiny pops. A firecracker. Or a car backfiring.

"Shots fired! Shots fired!" the detail leader yelled.

*"Get down! Get back!"*

I was still smiling as the first scream tore through the air. The crowd of drivers scattered—running, dropping, panicking in an instant blur of colors.

*"God gave power to the prophets . . ."* a man with black buzzed hair and a deep voice shouted from the center of the swirl. His tiny chocolate eyes seemed almost too close together, while his bulbous nose and arched thin eyebrows gave him a strange warmth that for some reason reminded me of Danny Kaye. Kneeling down on one knee and holding a gun with both hands, he was dressed as a driver in a black and bright yellow racing jumpsuit.

*Like a bumblebee*, I thought.

*" . . . but also to the horrors . . ."*

I just kept staring at him, frozen. Sound disappeared. Time slowed. And the world turned black-and-white, my own personal newsreel. It was like the first day I met the President. The handshake alone felt like an hour. Living between seconds, someone called it. Time standing still.

Still locked on the bumblebee, I couldn't tell if he was moving forward or if everyone around him was rushing back.

*"Man down!"* the detail leader shouted.



I followed the sound and the hand motions to a man in a navy suit, lying facedown on the ground. Oh, no. *Boyle*. His forehead was pressed against the pavement, his face screwed up in agony. He was holding his chest, and I could see blood starting to puddle out from below him.

*"Man down!"* the detail leader shouted again.

My eyes slid sideways, searching for the President. I found him just as a half dozen jumpsuited agents rushed at the small crowd that was already around him. The frantic agents were moving so fast, the people closest to Manning were pinned against him.

*"Move him! Now!"* an agent yelled.

Pressed backward against the President, the wife of the NASCAR CEO was screaming.

*"You're crushing her!"* Manning shouted, gripping her shoulder and trying to keep her on her feet. *"Let her go!"*

The Service didn't care. Swarming around the President, they rammed the crowd from the front and right side. That's when momentum got the best of them. Like a just-cut tree, the crush of people tumbled to the side, toward the ground. The President was still fighting to get the CEO's wife out. A bright light exploded. I remember the flash-bulb going off.

*"... so people could test their faith..."* the gunman roared as a separate group of agents in jumpsuits got a grip on his neck... his arm... the back of his hair. In slow motion, the bumblebee's head snapped back, then his body, as two more pops ripped the air.

I felt a bee sting in my right cheek.

*"... and examine good from evil!"* the man screamed, arms spread out like Jesus as agents dragged him to the ground. All around them, other agents formed a tight circle, brandishing semiautomatic Uzis they had torn from their leather satchels and backpacks.

I slapped my own face, trying to kill whatever just bit me. A few feet ahead, the crowd surrounding the President collided with the asphalt. Two agents on the far side grabbed the First Lady, pulling her away. The rest never stopped shoving, ramming, stepping over people as they tried to get to Manning and shield him.

I looked as the puddle below Boyle grew even larger. His head was now resting in a milky white liquid. He'd thrown up.

From the back of the President's pile, our detail leader and another suit-and-tie agent gripped Manning's elbows, lifted him from the pile, and