

Inauguration Day

A Novel

by
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ISBN-13: 9780985036669

Friday, November 10

“Why are you bothering me so early in the morning?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this, but . . . but I’ve got some . . . some bad news.”

“What? Spit it out.”

“Okay . . . Here goes . . . Your . . . Your son drove his car off the road.”

“Where? When? Is he okay?”

“I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“You what!”

“I couldn’t chance it. Another car was coming. I’m sure he called 9-1-1.”

“Did it look . . . bad?”

“I’m afraid so . . . He was trying to get away from me. I was just trying to keep him in sight . . .”

Silence

“I have his briefcase.”

“And his cell phone?”

“No. He had it on him.”

“Bring me the briefcase.”

Same Day Washington, D.C.:

Headquarters of the United States Secret Service

“Yes!” Tucker Daniels said to himself, pumping his arm like a golfer dropping a putt.

His retirement papers had come through. The official date was ten weeks away—January 22—the day Henry Garvin would be inaugurated President of the United States. That meant he could book a flight to Hawaii. Retiring and getting married the same week! Big steps, but after twenty plus years with the Secret Service and sixteen before that in the Marines, he felt he’d done his duty to his country and deserved a heaping portion of R and R.

There was a second item in his mail box that he hadn’t noticed at first. He was more than a little surprised when he opened the envelope and discovered outgoing President Edwin Palmer had requested he be agent-in-charge of the team that would be accompanying him to his Nebraska farm over the coming weekend. He’d not been given a Presidential Protective Division assignment since being promoted to a management position in the investigations division a decade ago.

That evening he apologized to Maureen while packing. “Instead of a quiet ten weeks, it looks like they’re going to give me assignments no one else wants.”

She was sitting on his bed, a wine glass in her hands, probably unaware how sexy she looked in her Washington Commanders t-shirt. “That’s not very nice of them.”

“But,” he said, zipping up his overnight bag, “in ten weeks, they won’t have Tucker Daniels to pick on.”

The trip out to Nebraska went smoothly. Saturday morning President Palmer announced he wanted to visit an elderly neighbor. Daniels sent a team ahead per standard procedure and assigned men to the three-vehicle caravan that would drive the President to the neighbor’s farm and back. He didn’t see the need to go with them. After they’d left, he headed to the kitchen of the old farmhouse in search of some fresh coffee.

Daniels was pleased to be retiring before Henry Garvin took office. From what he heard Garvin was mercurial and prone to changing his mind on a whim. President Palmer, on the other hand, had been outstanding during Daniels’ years of service in terms of his treatment of the men and women of the U.S. Secret Service. He could have been like some other presidents—demanding, arrogant, and ready to blame an agent when his own behavior had caused the delay or whatever problem he didn’t want to be held accountable for, but not President Palmer. Old timers compared him to Ronald Reagan—a man who was humbled by the office rather than one of those more recent presidents who expected everyone else to be humble in his presence.

On the flight to Nebraska day-dreaming about retirement, Daniels had reflected on the fact that he would be celebrating his 55th birthday in Hawaii. His father had died of a heart attack at age 55. George Daniels had been a man’s man—rarely home, always working or hanging out with a small group of male friends. He rarely took his wife and children any place as a family—platoon picnics on the 4th of July were his idea of a family outing. Even then, he was likely to leave early with some of his drinking buddies without making arrangements for his wife, son, and daughter to get home.

Tucker had resented the fact that his father had been absent so much, but he had come to understand him when his own marriage had faltered and collapsed alienating him from his only son. Life didn’t always offer easy choices. Now he was retiring while still in good health. It

seemed like he was being given a chance for a different outcome, an opportunity to escape the cycle of black military men burning the candle from both ends.

It wasn't long before he got word Palmer was on his way back to the farmhouse. He pulled on his winter coat to meet the caravan. The wind, which had been fierce earlier, had died down, but the temperature had dropped well below freezing. As he stood at the edge of the front walk, he couldn't help wonder why he'd been chosen for that particular assignment.

"You didn't have to meet me, Agent Daniels," Palmer said as Daniels held the car door open.

"Just doing my job."

"I never got used to people doing things for me," Palmer said as he tromped up the walk towards the farmhouse, "but in ten weeks I'll probably get stuck someplace waiting for my car door to open."

Daniels laughed. "You'll be missed, Sir."

"I appreciate that, Agent Daniels," Palmer replied. "I suspect you wonder why I dragged you all the way out here."

"That did cross my mind."

"This isn't the time or place. I'm putting your name on my schedule for tomorrow. I'll explain then."

Daniels was so stunned he almost forgot to open the front door for the President. What could he want to talk to him about? He hoped it wasn't something that would delay his own exit from government service.

The next day fifteen minutes ahead of his assigned time Daniels arrived outside the barn in which an office had been built for President Palmer. He didn't have to wait in the cold very long before he was ushered inside by one of the secretaries who traveled with the president.

He was surprised when Palmer stood up, came around his desk, and offered him his hand. That was a first.

"I hope you're well, Mr. President."

The bags under Palmer's eyes were more noticeable than usual—a sign of the wear and tear of eight years serving as the nation's commander in chief. Although his posture was less straight than the day he'd been elected, his hair thinner, and his midsection rounder, those changes were offset by Palmer's steel gray eyes, which remained as penetrating as the first day Daniels had been in the man's presence. He'd never known anyone who was faster at zeroing in on what made a person tick.

"I'm fine, Agent Daniels, but I need some fresh air. Let's wander outside for a bit."

Palmer put on a fleece-lined coat, leather gloves, and a brown fedora and led Daniels through a door on the side of the office into the main part of the barn, across the straw-strewn floor and out a door at the back of the barn onto a dirt path cows and tractors had worn down over the years.

Once outside a blast of cold air hit Daniels in the face. Although his jacket was lined, he lacked a hat or gloves and hoped their walk would not last long.

President Palmer didn't say anything until they reached a tractor path that bordered a cornfield where the remains of that fall's corn crop peeked out of snow drifts.

"I apologize for the mysteriousness," Palmer said, adjusting his pace to the bumpy tractor path, "but we needed to be someplace where we would not be overheard."

Daniels had no idea where this was going, but kept his mouth shut. The surveillance cameras on the back of the barn would record their walk, but he wasn't sure if the NSA's listening devices could pick up their conversation. After Palmer told him why he wanted to speak to him, he prayed they did not.

"There's no easy way to reveal what I'm about to tell you, but I'd like you to listen to the whole story before you start asking questions."

"Certainly, Mr. President."

“As I’m sure you are aware, President-elect Garvin’s son, Ethan, was killed Thursday morning in what appears to have been a one-car accident.”

Like the entire country, Daniels had been shocked when he heard the news. Ethan Garvin, who at age twenty-eight had been a visible part of his father’s campaign team, had been pronounced dead when his car was retrieved from a water-filled gully in Fairfax County, Virginia.

“You say ‘what appears to have been an accident.’ Does that mean there’s some indication it wasn’t?”

Palmer stopped and turned to face Daniels. “Not officially, but please no more questions until I finish. This is hard enough for me as it is, as you will soon learn.”

Daniels swallowed an apology, still wondering what this meeting was all about.

“Ethan Garvin was on his way to the White House with documentation of an extremely sensitive nature,” Palmer continued. “I’ll explain what the documentation was in a second, but when I heard about his death, I had my office contact the Fairfax County Police Department to see if the materials he had promised to bring me had been recovered. We were told no documents or digital media were found in the car—no briefcase, no laptop or tablet—not even a cell phone—nothing.”

The president stopped again. “Listen carefully to what I’m going to tell you next because when I’m done I’m going to ask you to take on an assignment that may be a wild goose chase or it may be as vital as given any individual in my lifetime.”

Daniels wanted to ask the president to repeat that last sentence, but Palmer resumed his story.

“Ethan Garvin came to the White House on Wednesday for the first in a series of meetings concerning the inauguration ceremony which he’d been assigned to manage for his father. I thought his asking to come by one day after the election to discuss inauguration seating was a little strange. When I told my staff to tell him there was plenty of time to take care of that, he insisted he needed to start, so I agreed.

“After his meeting with my chief of staff, Ethan asked my appointments secretary if he could have five minutes of my time. I was in the Oval Office in the middle of signing some not very important papers and thought it wouldn’t hurt to hear what the young man had to say.

“When he entered the room, he looked uncomfortable, biting his lip and looking around as if expecting to find someone other than me. After I welcomed him, he thanked me and handed me a sheet of yellow legal paper. ‘There is an issue related to the inauguration I feel needs your personal attention,’ he said. ‘I hope you can read my handwriting.’

“At the top of the page in capital letters he’d written ‘CONTINUE TO ACT AS IF WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE INAUGURATION.’ I looked up and saw fear in his face, as if he expected me to have him thrown out on his ear.”

Daniels tripped on a root and almost fell as he concentrated on the President’s story. Palmer waited for him to regain his balance.

“Sorry, Sir.”

“You okay?” Palmer asked.

Daniels nodded.

“Now where was I?”

“Young Garvin had given you a piece of paper.”

“Right. He put those words in caps. Evidently he was afraid I’d say something that would give away the fact he was not there to talk about the inauguration. Most people think every word spoken in the Oval Office is recorded, but that’s not the case. Ethan may not have known that.

“In any case, I had no idea where this was going, but I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. What I’m about to tell you is the exact wording of what was on that piece of paper.

“It read, ‘My father must *not* be sworn in as president of the United States. He is under control of a high-ranking member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. He

will do whatever this man asks of him. I can provide incontrovertible proof. When you see what I've learned you'll understand why I say my father must not be allowed to take the oath of office.'

"You can imagine my shock at reading those words, but mindful of his initial instruction, I smiled at him and said something like, 'Don't worry, Ethan, vice presidents are always a pain in the butt about seating.'

"He chuckled and told me to keep reading.

"The next paragraph read, 'I have documented proof of my father's status as a Chinese agent, including the name of his handler. If you are willing to examine the evidence, ask me to come back tomorrow morning to continue inauguration preparations. I'll bring the documentation then. If our country's enemies learn what I'm doing, they won't hesitate to kill me. God bless you and God bless the United States of America.'

"Playing along I handed him back his sheet of paper and said something like, 'Can you come back tomorrow morning—say around nine?' He allowed himself a small sigh of relief, nodded, and said he would be glad to do so."

Why is he telling all this to me? Daniels asked himself, but he didn't interrupt.

"After he left, I sat there for a long time not knowing what to think. The idea that the man just elected president of the United States could be a Chinese agent—I wasn't ready to believe that. On the other hand, we've felt for some time that China had access to information they shouldn't have known about. We thought it was a function of advanced hacking, but what if it was as simple as someone's giving it to them?"

Palmer stopped to check if Daniels was with him, then continued his story.

"I ignored as long as possible the buzzing phones on my desk, knowing people were gathered outside the office with piles of papers needing my signature. Finally, not knowing whether Ethan Garvin was mentally ill or a patriot, I decided to do what he suggested. I notified my secretary to clear time for Ethan at nine the next morning.

"The next morning, nine came and went, but Ethan didn't show up. I wondered if someone discovered he'd gone over the edge and was on his way to a psych ward. Then, around ten thirty, my chief of staff buzzed me with the news—Ethan Garvin had been killed in a solo auto accident.

"When I got over the shock, I remembered the documentation he had promised to bring me. He hadn't said in what format the information was stored—on paper, a flash drive, or whatever. I had my chief of staff contact the Fairfax County police to tell them to let us know if they found anything that looked like it was intended for me. As I said, we were informed there had been nothing in the car for me or anyone else—no papers, no briefcase, no cellphone, no tablet, nothing."

The President stopped and motioned they should head back towards the barn. He didn't say anything for a minute as if struggling in his mind about what to say next. He took a deep breath and resumed his account.

"I've shared this with no one else until this very moment, Agent Daniels, for a reason. If Ethan was deranged, I don't want to embarrass his family—particularly now that he's gone, but . . . but if there's a chance what he said is even partially true and I do nothing, I could be aiding and abetting the arrival of an extremely dark day for the country that I love."

Daniels didn't know what to say. "That's some incredible story," he mumbled.

The President nodded. His face was grim. "The bottom line is the whole thing may be the result of a disturbed mind's run-away imagination and a terribly unfortunate accident, but we have to consider the worse case scenario. It's possible—no matter how improbable—that Ethan Garvin was killed for trying to save the country from his own father."

By the time they reached the barn, Daniels' mind was spinning so fast he forgot for a moment he was talking to the President of the United States and not to some college buddy sharing the plot of his next novel.

Before they parted, Palmer gave him an off-the-books assignment, although if Daniels had a second to spare, suicide mission might have been a better description.

“First,” he said, “find out if Ethan Garvin was telling the truth about the existence of the documentation he promised to deliver. If you conclude such documentation exists, find out what happened to it *and, if possible, recover it*. Finally, and this is most important, you must determine the validity of his claim that his father is a traitor.”

Palmer impressed upon him that the entire assignment had to be completed in days, if not weeks. “I’d like an answer by December 1 at the latest, Agent Daniels.”

“I’ll do my best, Sir.”

“You understand why you can’t show up the morning of the inauguration and tell me Ethan was right,” he said.

“Absolutely, Mr. President.”

“That’s all the time I can give you today without making it look like this talk was about something other than two about-to-be retirees reminiscing,” Palmer said as he motioned for Daniels to open the barn door for him.

As they stepped into the barn, Palmer handed him an envelope. “This contains contact information of someone I trust—someone who will do what he can to help you, including financing all necessary expenditures. The envelope also contains the keys to a furnished apartment in the District you can use if needed, as well as instructions for how to contact me with the results of your investigation. Thank you, Agent Daniels. I knew I could count on you.”

After watching President Palmer enter the barn, Daniels stood there for a minute before the cold got to him. He was still in shock at what he’d been told and over what President Palmer had asked him to do.

Fortunately, as agent-in-charge for that weekend, he didn’t have any duties the rest of the day and could avail himself of the office in the wing of the farmhouse that had been added to the main building for use by the Secret Service. The few people who came into the addition that afternoon were too much into their own worlds to notice Daniels’ distress, giving him a few hours to try to wrap his mind around the President’s request.

To begin to slow down his runaway thoughts, he jotted what he remembered of the conversation on a legal pad he’d found in a desk drawer. After an hour, he settled on a strategy. He was inclined to believe Ethan must have been mentally disturbed. If so, and if he lacked any proof to justify his absurd claim, perhaps he drove off the road intentionally. Maybe he only intended to injure himself, but miscalculated. Proving the absence of something, of course, is much more difficult than proving something exists or once existed. Either way, he wondered if he was up to the task. Although an experienced investigator, nothing in his background—either as a Marine or as a Secret Service agent—had prepared him to conduct the kind of investigation President Palmer had charged him with.

He recalled the President’s answer when asked why he chose him.

“You’re a trained investigator whose record speaks for itself. Further, I’ve been impressed with how you handle difficult situations.”

“But Mr. President, shouldn’t this be given to the FBI?”

“I wish it were that easy,” Palmer replied, “but if I go through normal channels, call in the FBI, for example, Henry Garvin will find out and raise the worst kind of stink. This has to be kept between you and me until such time as we find out the truth.”

Daniels nodded to show he understood the president’s reasoning.

“There are only a handful of people to whom I could have entrusted this assignment,” Palmer said. “The longer I thought about it, the more I was convinced you were the right choice.”

Daniels hadn’t known what to say at the moment and when he went to bed that night he was still trying to digest the implications of being given an assignment only he and the president knew about.

“The fact that you’ll be retiring in ten weeks also contributed to my decision,” Palmer had told him. “That means your replacement will be brought on board right away. That should give you the freedom and time to conduct this investigation. In any case, I’m confident you’ll be able to wrap this up quickly.”

“Let’s hope so, Sir.”

Palmer gave him a thin smile. “I understand what I’m asking you to do is unprecedented, but I think you can appreciate how crucial it is we learn the truth of the matter.”

At the end of the afternoon, having memorized the contact name and phone number of the lawyer, he tossed the documents into the fire raging in the annex fireplace along with his notes—not only the page he’d written them on, but the next two sheets on the pad, knowing the slight indentations could be used to recreate what had been written.

Finding it difficult to fall asleep, his mind raced through multiple scenarios. He had been trained to investigate a group of people known unofficially as ‘loonies’—individuals who were off their meds, had illusions of grandeur, or had political axes to grind. Not that such people were harmless, as David Hinckley proved in nearly killing Ronald Reagan. It had been that near tragedy that changed Secret Service policy to eliminate public departures and arrivals and to take seriously even the most far-fetched threat. Every received threat had to be investigated and neutralized, either by convincing the culprit that she or he was not going to be allowed to come within a mile of the president or by taking legal action to put the person in a mental institution or in prison.

This situation was different in so many ways. The person being investigated was dead and the threat he voiced was not against the life of the current president, but a vague, seemingly irrational, accusation against his own father.

What made the situation even more difficult was Daniels realized he could not work through official channels, which meant he would not have access to the resources he normally possessed when looking into a “loony.” Further, without Palmer’s having said so, he knew the President would deny any knowledge of the investigation were it compromised in any way. Being found out could result in a prison sentence or worse, not just for himself, but for anyone he involved.

Daniels knew he should feel proud Palmer had selected him to investigate Ethan Garvin’s claim, but there were so many unknowns about the situation. What if he wasn’t able to prove that Ethan was mentally ill and do so quickly? He didn’t want to think about the alternative.