

THE TREE

Written by

Hans Bauer and Richard Stern

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### DAY ONE

God’s truth, cross my heart, and on my mother’s life, here’s what happened. I was making the rounds at the annual White House staffers party, working the room, when the tree suddenly exploded. Not the one in the gaily-decorated foyer in the East Wing, but the seventy-seven-foot specimen visible across the lawn in President Park, better known as the National Christmas Tree.

I’d done my research. The tradition of having a national Christmas tree began way back in 1923, the first being a balsam fir, a forty-eight-foot midget donated by Vermont, the Green Mountain State. President Coolidge did the honors, pushing a button that lit 2,500 electric candles while 6,000 citizens watched in slack-jawed awe. Living trees weren’t used until 1972; before that they were all cut; probably more than you wanted to know, but anyone who knows me will say I’m a stickler for details, especially when it comes to the White House, fact, and/or, fiction. So go ahead, I dare you. Ask me anything.

Anyway, the live broadcast of the tree lighting had taken place two weeks before, on the 4th, and it was now the 20th, four days before Christmas, and for the first time in ninety-five years the nation’s capital was treeless. Just fifteen minutes earlier I’d been manning my cubicle in the West Wing, perusing an online travel brochure (beachfront bliss, blue lagoons, tiny tropical islands, shipwrecks, paradise) and double-checking the weather report. Outside my window, the Washington Monument barely visible, a wicked winter storm pounded the beltway swamp, painting the First House an even whiter white.

My cell phone trilled.

 “Ben Ballard’s office,” I answered in my best officious tone.

“Benjamin, please hold for the president,” a woman’s voice.

Panicked, I sat up straight, adjusted my Turnbull & Asser pink twill tie, a gift to myself for my recent twenty-eighth birthday, fumbled for some breath spray, and gave myself a half-dozen squirts.

“Ben, this is your president.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, humbled and astonished that the world’s most powerful human actually wanted a word with me. “What can I do for you, Mr. President?” I puzzled out an obnoxious laugh amid the buzz of merrymaking on the other end. “What’s funny, sir?” I dared question.

“Ho, ho, ho! Get that rod out your butt, Ballard,” came the less than presidential response. “Christ, you’re easy. You actually, actually thought you’d get phone time with the ‘Man?’ Sucker.”

“Hey, screw you, Jackson,” I said, relaxing, but only a little.

“Dude, you’ve got to come to this party. We’ve got an international smorgasbord of lookers.”

“Be there in a few,” I said. “Just firming up some last-minute reservations.”

Shortly afterward I was in the East Wing milling among my peers. I stopped at the bar for a drink. “I’ll have what the president drinks, Chester,” I said to the bartender.

“Washington gargled port, Carter worshipped lemonade, Nixon guzzled Chateau Lafite, Bush drank a little of everything,” Chester said. “Lincoln favored—”

“Lincoln didn’t drink,” I corrected whatever he was about to say. “His favorite song—‘Dixie.’ Favorite color—blue. Favorite book—anything by Shakespeare. Favorite animal—goats. He had two, Nanny and Nanko. He also didn’t eat much, but when he did—corned beef and cabbage,” I educated him. “Eggnog’ll be fine.”

“Old-fashioned, brandy, or bourbon?”

“Bourbon.”

“Nutmeg or pumpkin spice?”

“Nutmeg.”

Jackson Parker, another mid-level staffer, joined me, a drop dead gorgeous Asian babe in tow. “Miko, I’d like you to meet the biggest ass-kisser inside the beltway,” Jackson said.

“Nice to meet you, Mistah Assa Kisser,” said his date, deadpan, not even trying to be funny.

“Still going to the Bahamas over the holidays?” Jackson said.

“Leave in two days,” I said. “Nine glorious days of surf and sun.” Something across the room caught my eye and I excused myself. Making my way through the crowd, I approached a distinguished looking gent, Chief of Staff Caldwell Taylor escorting a stunning model type, a half-foot taller than he is, draped on his arm. “Glad I caught you, sir,” I said, handing him a Tiffany gift bag. “Just a little something for all the opportunities you’ve given me throughout the year. Anything I can do to help advance policy—”

“Thank you, Benjamin.”

I turned to the model type. “Your husband is a role model for me, ma’am,” I said.

“I’m not his wife,” she said, her voice like chipped ice.

“Daughter?” I said sheepishly.

They both gave me frosty looks.

Just then, the chandeliers flickered and died, casting us into gloom. Thirteen seconds later, when the lights returned, Caldwell and his wife, daughter, granddaughter, whatever, were gone.

Alone in the men’s, after I’d emptied my bladder, I let the hot water run until it clouded the mirror over the sink, then used my index finger to write ‘BAH HUMBUG’ on the damp glass. In case the message wasn’t clear, I added triple exclamation marks.

Back in the party room, I stood apart in a corner, sipped my eggnog, and observed the festivities. A female staffer approached, gave me a peck on the cheek, and tried to drag me into a group torturing holiday carols. Which was the exact moment it happened; a lightning bolt incinerated the National Christmas Tree.

### DAY TWO

Lifting my Ray-Bans, my eyes shifted nervously.

Air Force One unavailable, big surprise, not, the single engine puddle jumper in which I was the only passenger wobbled through a soup of boiling thunderheads. An elderly stick-thin hayseed in aviator shades worked the controls. His name was Wiley, something he’d shared when he picked me up in Spokane.

“Soon’s we get out of this mess, you’ll feel a whole lot better,” Wiley assured me. “Then again, you might not.”

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” I said, a bald-faced lie.

“Hey, it’s your suit,” Wiley said, indicating my Brooks Brothers uniform beneath a Ralph Lauren double-faced cashmere topcoat with fold-over cuffs.

The plane suddenly dropped through the clouds, revealing an ocean of undulating green and white studded with jagged, snow-smothered peaks stretching as far as the eye could see. The only thing moving was the dark shape of a tractor-trailer rig belching smoke as it wound up a thin, looping ribbon of mountain road.

Wiley reached across the seat, his moist armpit about an inch from my face, and rummaged through a storage pouch. He handed me a doggie bag. “Courtesy of the Bonanza Steak House,” he said. “Only been used once.”

I grabbed the bag and heaved into it, just in time.

Twenty minutes later the plane touched down, taxied down a dirt runway, and stopped beside a control booth sized like a closet. Wiley climbed down, came around to my side, opened the hatch, grabbed my Louis Vuitton monogrammed overnight bag purchased at a D.C. area Bloomingdale’s, and dropped it in a puddle below the wing.

“I make it a rule never to criticize the man flying the plane,” I said, once my feet were back on solid ground, “but let me say just one word.”

“Say it.”

“Deodorant.”

A mud-splattered school bus packed with what looked to be middle-graders idled nearby. The frail old lady behind the wheel honked. Wiley grabbed my bag and hustled over to the bus. “Thelma, this here’s Ben Ballard,” he said, “the fella from the White House.”

The kids in the bus cheered, something I wasn’t prepared for.

“Can you get me back to Spokane by ten?” I asked.

“Come here for the new tree,” said Wiley, ignoring my question.

More cheers from the kids.

“I’ve got to catch the red eye back to D.C. I’m going to the Bahamas,” I said, as if anyone cared.

“Fella’ says I sorta smell,” Wiley still ignoring me.

The kids went wild.

“Well, hon, all God’s creatures smell one way or another,” Thelma said, and slapped her knee.

My pilot and the bus driver exchanged a passionate kiss under the mistletoe suspended over the bus door, something else I wasn’t prepared for.

The kids sang Christmas carols as we crept up a recently hewn logging road. For the last nine miles we’d been stuck behind a derelict semi towing an empty flatbed trailer. Black smoke chugged from the smokestack, making it nearly impossible to see. Sitting up front with Wiley, I thought of the rig I’d seen from the Cessna, and wondered if it was the same.

I stole a glance over Thelma’s shoulder at the speedometer—ten mph. “I’m kind of on a tight schedule,” I said, glancing at my watch.

“You government boys have a hard time relaxing, don’t you?” Thelma said, maintaining speed.

“Can we get around him?”

“You willing to pay the fine?”

“Ma’am, we’ll take care of it,” I said.

Thelma honked and flashed her headlights, but the semi trundled along at the same speed. She stuck her head out the window and yelled, “Hey, truck boy! What is your major defect? Get that smoking stack of crap off the road!”

I glanced at the speedometer again—seven mph.

An arm eased out the cab window, waving us to pass.

Thelma made her move, picking up speed, rumbling alongside the semi. Looking over, all I could make out in the cab was a friendly arm shrouded in exhaust waving “bye-bye.”

Five minutes later, still rolling, Wiley had pinned a deputy’s badge on his parka and now whipped out a ticket book. “Speeding. Illegal passing. Reckless endangerment of fellow human beings,” he said. He ripped the ticket from his pad and slapped it in my palm.

We finally reached our destination: a high altitude clearing where snow-capped peaks fell away on all sides. A magnificent evergreen dominated the scene. A backhoe was busy digging around the base. An industrial-sized crane stood nearby, ready to do the heavy lifting. Beside it, a dune of burlap sacks. A couple dozen backcountry folk in bib coveralls and quilted flannel jackets stood facing a wooden stage. The mayor and a handful of cronies sat on makeshift bleachers. A local two-man TV news crew were there to cover the event. The mayor rose and stood behind a podium, flanked by the kids and me.

“Young Mr. Ballard here’s not just another beltway Scrooge come to rob us of a national resource.” he began into the mike. “He knows this tree means a lot to the folks around here!”

All heads turned to me, so I gave a little wave.

“We couldn’t refuse the president, but our loss is America’s gain,” the mayor went on. “And so, it is with great pride that I formally donate this magnificent specimen as the official tree of these United States!”

There was a smattering of contained applause.

Then it was my turn.

I stepped to the mike, pulled out a wad of paper napkins, and read the speech I’d cobbled together hours earlier somewhere high over the Midwest. “The president dearly wished he could be here today,” I began, “but pressing affairs of state kept him in Washington. He did, however, ask me to convey his sincere gratitude and that of a grateful nation!”

No one applauded, but I easily guessed what they were thinking. What the holy heck? We waited an hour for this? I crumpled the napkins, returned them to my pocket, and turned from the podium.

The camera guys had already packed their gear and were heading for their van.

I decided I wasn’t finished yet. I turned back to face the crowd. “Let me also add—that this tree will become, not only a symbol of the spirit of Christmas, but also of the spirit of the good people of this community!”

This time, mild applause, a bit more generous, but I sensed they wanted more.

“Furthermore,” I went on, “some look at the freak (I struggled for a better word than “freak,” but in the moment it was all I had) accident that destroyed our nation’s tree and see something deeper—more malignant, a nation with a sickness, a sickness of the soul!”

Everyone nodded and muttered in agreement, adding fuel to my fire. The camera guys quickly unpacked and began filming again.

“But I happen to know that the president doesn’t see it that way,” I marched on. “He sees an opportunity—to renew and restore the spirit of this special season for each and every one of us. In fact, just this morning during breakfast in the oval office he told me something I’ll never forget. He said, ‘Benjamin, America used to be the kind of place where, if just one voice dared to utter ‘humbug,’ a million more would drown them out with a simple phrase—‘Merry Christmas.’ And he sincerely believes we can be that America again—that this tree will be the symbol of that spirit. God bless this tree and God bless America!”

The crowd sat mute-faced, not a twitch.

Defeated, I climbed down the stage and approached the tree. I puckered my lips, smooched a low-hanging branch, and that time they went haywire. They swarmed me, patted my back, and offered their congratulations. I smiled broadly, like a candidate who’d just bagged an election. Their mayor offered me the keys to the town and a promise of everlasting hospitality. Although secretly hoping never to return, I humbly accepted. Thelma planted a wet one on my cheek. Wiley tore up the traffic ticket.

After some time, I finally found my voice again. “But now, dear friends, I must return to Washington!”

I raised my arms and flashed a V for Victory.

The lobby of the Two Bears Lodge was packed with late night yokels and symbols of the season: a decorated tree, holiday bunting, a fire blazing in a massive stone hearth flanked by two hand-carved wooden bears. I sat on a scuffed Naugahyde couch wedged between Wiley and Thelma.

“Tell me again why we can’t fly out until morning?” I was saying.

“We fly, we die,” Wiley said matter-of-factly.

“I’m going to the Bahamas,” I said for the third or fourth time that day.

“If Buddy Holly would’ve listened to him, he’d be a grandpa today,” Thelma said. She cocked a thumb in my direction and nudged her lover.

I slumped back on the couch and glanced at my watch.

An hour later I was sacked out in my second-floor room over the bar. I knew it had to be the bar because the sound of a karaoke machine seeping through the floorboards had kept me awake ever since the moment I hit the sheets. Below, someone took the mike.

“My name’s—Elvis Presley!”

Big applause and cheers—never mind that it was about the lamest Elvis impression ever.

“It’ll be lonely this Christmas—!” the Presley voice began to croon.

The bedside clock beamed midnight.

I pulled the pillow over my head.

### DAY THREE

The clock beamed 2:33 AM and I was still wide-awake.

“Thank you, thank you—this is a little number called—’I’ll Be Home for Christmas!’” That Presley voice again. I groaned and yanked the pillow back over my head.

I was finally asleep, when the room phone on the nightstand rang. 5:17 AM. I fumbled for the light and grabbed the receiver. “Hello—”

“Ben, this is your president.”

“Aw, c’mon, don’t screw with me, Jackson,” I moaned. “I’m having a bad night.”

The voice on the other end sounded annoyed. “What the hell’s going on here, Caldwell?” the voice fainter, as if the speaker had turned to someone close by.

Chief of Staff Caldwell Taylor’s voice came on the line.

Ben, this is Caldwell Taylor—”

I snapped to my senses and sat up. “Yes, sir,” I said, immediately getting official.

“I’m sitting here with the president.”

I jumped out of bed dressed in my Ralph Lauren cotton pajamas and began pacing the plank floor. Three hours ahead it was 8:17 on the east coast. I pictured the White House Oval Office: an oversized holiday tree with presents stacked around it, a beagle curled before a blazing hearth, and the American president in silhouette behind his desk, sitting with his Chief of Staff Caldwell Taylor. They had me on a speakerphone.

“How’s it going, Ballard?” the first voice again, but one I recognized from a hundred TV appearances and news conferences.

“Very good, Mr. President.”

“Don’t bullshit me, son. I’ll have you wishing I’d sent the White House gardener instead.” The president kidding around.

“Sir?”

“This sound familiar?”

I heard a faint crackle, like someone crumpling a candy wrapper, or maybe a paper bag.

“Static, sir?”

“That’s the sound of a fire going in the Oval Office.”

I blanched as I pictured the president and his chief of staff watching my off-the-cuff tree speech on TV.

“I gotta tell you, Ballard, I’m a little p.o.’d that you fibbed up that little breakfast chat we had,” the president said.

“Oh, crap,” I silently mouthed, then said, “You saw that, sir?”

“Hell, yes. We all saw it, Ballard.” Caldwell’s voice again. “C-SPAN picked it up. MSNBC. Fox. Judas Priest, Ben, I send you out there to say a few words and you end up running for office.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was only trying—”

“Just pipe down and listen,” the president again. “Benjamin, I want you to ride with that tree. Make sure it gets here safe and sound.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“The first lady and I plan on having a little dedication ceremony, three days from now. Christmas Eve.”

Three days, sir?”

“Any later it’ll be next year. We’d look pretty stupid dedicating a Christmas tree in January. You want to tell me you’re not up to it?”

“No, sir, Mr. President.”

“Dang it, son, you blow this for me and your career’s piss in the Potomac.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.”

“Then get the wax out your ears and listen up.”

“No wax, sir.” I glimpsed myself in a mirror, moaned, and could have clubbed myself to death.

“It’s already the 21st. Hook up with your driver and have that tree here by the 24th. Not a minute later.”

The line went dead.

“Ah, sir—?” I hung up the phone. “Crap, oh holy crap.”

Bright and early, still dark, I was back at that mountain clearing, accompanied by Wiley and Thelma. This time, thick ground mist shrouded the scene, obscuring the breathtaking view of the previous day. Our mode of transport had also changed. We’d made the trip up in Wiley’s pickup.

He dumped my luggage on the ground and extended a bony hand. “Been a pleasure, Mr. Ballard.”

I half-heartedly shook with him, picked up my luggage, and started into the mist.

“You want us to wait?” Thelma called after me.

“No, thanks, I’ve got it from here,” I said without looking back.

Titanic tree shapes loomed in the fog. My eyes darted right and left, alert for mountain lions or bears or Big Foot or whatever else might be lurking up there. Before I knew what was happening, I lost my footing and slalomed down the side of a dirt crater. I came to rest in a cold puddle at the bottom.

“Crap! Crap! Crap!”

Moments later, Wiley and Thelma appeared looking down at the rim.

“Forest service must’ve dug it up last night,” Wiley said. I assumed he meant the tree.

“Driver’s probably already on the road,” Thelma said.

I thrashed in the muck, located my bag, and yanked it out of the puddle. Brownish water trickled out the seams. I tossed it over the side and clambered out the pit, Wiley and Thelma lending a hand.

“Which way did he go?” I asked

“Route 58. Be the only way,” Wiley said.

“Somebody shoot me,” I croaked. I stripped off my waterlogged coat.

The plan was to pile in the pickup and catch up to the tree-hauling truck, but a few miles down the trail we ran into a problem—a colossal dead tree straddling the road. The obstruction hadn’t been there thirty minutes earlier.

Wiley brought us to a hard stop. He wrote out another ticket, ripped it from his pad, and handed it to me.

“What’s this for?”

“Stop sign, ‘bout a mile back.”

“Stop sign? But you’re the one driving.”

“Still want somebody to shoot you?” Thelma said.

We decided to part ways. They weren’t too particular with the details, only that the pickup wasn’t going any further, but if I continued down the road, with any luck there was still some chance of my crossing paths with a semi hauling an oversized evergreen. I distinctly remember the word “switchback” being used several times. Somehow, I scaled the deadfall and made it to the other side without gutting myself. Wiley tossed over my luggage. Thelma threw over my coat. And there we parted company.

Thirty minutes later, dawn light filtering through the forest, I was standing at the bottom of the hill, one eye fixed on an intersecting two-lane, the other still alert for hungry, prowling wildlife. Another twenty and I heard a faint rumble, growing louder and louder, like the approach of some mythical beast. Birds took flight. Squirrels dove for cover. A deer bolted across the road. Headlights stabbed between the tightly packed trees. Finally, a column of black smoke appeared above the treetops.

“What. The. Hell?”

A derelict semi lumbered around a bend, and somehow, I knew it was the smokestack that had delayed my first trip up the mountain. I dropped my bag, stepped into the middle of the road, and tried to flag it down. The beast kept coming. I stood my ground, frantically flapping my coat like a matador. The honking truck barreled toward me—SEMI CRAZY emblazed on the mud-splattered grill. I leapt aside as a sixty-foot evergreen strapped to a fifty-foot flatbed blew past, the root system encased in burlap, ten feet of tree draping off the back. The driver finally hit his air brakes and shuddered to a halt three hundred feet down the road.

I picked up my luggage and started for the sputtering monstrosity.

The driver’s door slowly opened. Shrouded in exhaust fumes, a beer-barrel shape on beer-barrel legs climbed from the cab. The fumes cleared, revealing the lettering on his cap—IF YOU CAN’T RUN WITH THE BIG DOGS, STAY OFF THE PORCH. The cap wearer marched toward me.

“Damn, you okay there, little fella?” said the big guy in the faded blue bib overalls. “Thought for sure you were bumper puddin.’”

I mustered all my authority. “Ben Ballard. Presidential aide.”

The trucker’s face lit up. He suddenly grabbed my hand, pumping it with unrestrained vigor, a kid trapped in a giant’s body. “Davey. Davey Hacker. You the fella I was supposed to hook up with?”

“That’s right. The president sent me. Maybe you’ve heard of him—lives in a big white house in Washington—”

I could see he was offended. “Trucker’s job is leaving on time,” Davey Hacker said. “That means leaving on time.”

“Mr. Hacker,” I said, “the president personally asked me to supervise the transport of this tree to the nation’s capital.” I’d planned to say a lot more but he cut me off.

“Between you and me, when they asked would I mind haulin’ this living monument, I ‘bout cried,” Davey said, and looked like it might still happen.” He picked up my luggage. “Honored to be at your service, Mr. Ballard—you, me, and the tree. This is going to be just great.”

I followed him to the truck where he opened the passenger side door and tossed in my luggage. An empty oilcan fell out and clattered down the incline. Inside, the cab was a pit; worn out upholstery barely visible beneath the fast-food wrappers, Chinese take-out cartons and still-wrapped fortune cookies, soiled clothing, old newspapers, and empty Big Gulp containers. A miniature Christmas tree decorated with tiny twinkling lights perched atop an outdated VHS player on the dash.

Davey gave me a nudge. “Just dig yourself a hole. Not used to having company,” he said. He jogged around to the driver’s side and hauled himself up behind the wheel.

I climbed up beside him and began shuffling debris, trying to get comfy. I reached under my butt and pried off the slice of pizza I’d just sat on. I held it up in disgust. Davey helped himself to the slice.

“Oh, thanks.”

He took a bite and tossed it on the dash.

“Guess we’re about cleared for takeoff,” Davey said, shifting into gear and blowing the horn. We rumbled down the mountain road, the radio turned down low playing upbeat country Christmas.

“Think of this as your home for the next three days, Mr. Ballard,” Davey said. “Mi casa, su casa.”

 “Benjamin. Ben.”

“Wow. Friends already. Ben it is.”

Splattered and still soaked from my crater tumble, I struggled to pull off my Gucci loafers. I rubbed my aching feet. Davey produced a can of “odor-eaters” from under his seat and gave them a blast, dousing my hands with powdery spray. “Gotta housebreak those puppies,” he said.

I wiped my hands on my pants.

“Can I offer you something?” Davey said. “Cup of Joe? Fig Newton? Chicklets? Got an assortment of Hungry Man frozen TV entrees in the fridge. Fried chicken, Salisbury steak, macaroni and cheese. Reduced calories. Heat and serve.”

“You’re quite the host,” I said, “but thanks, I’m good.”

“How ‘bout popcorn and a video? Nothing like a good Christmas movie to make a grown man cry.”

I noted the little TV mounted next to the Christmas tree on the dash. A black and white holiday classic playing, the sound off. “You drive with the TV on?” I asked.

“Sound only. Eyes on the road, mind on the job.”
 I tried the GSP on my cell, but there was no reception.

“Your casa wouldn’t happen to have a GPS, would it?” I’d already guessed the answer, but felt I had to ask anyway.

“You’re looking at it.”

I scanned the dash but saw no evidence of a Global Positioning System. “Could I take a look at your road atlas?”

“No need. Know every highway and byway in America,” Davey said, pointing at his head. “Got Rand McNally permanently tattooed on the old noodle.”

“I just need a map, not a brain surgeon.”

“Might be one in the glove box.”

I tried the box but it was jammed shut. My host handed me a screwdriver. “Try this.” I pried and the box burst open, pouring out a ton of trash. I sorted through the stuff, found a tattered road atlas, and opened it.

Davey rattled off stats. “Page sixty, F-5, two inches from the squished roach—that’s us.”

I flipped to page sixty, found the roach and saw that he was dead-on.

“Pretty darn good, huh?”

Admittedly, it was.

I stuffed the atlas back in the box.

“Hit the road, know your load, that’s my motto—what separates me from the rest,” Davey went on. “Ask me anything about anything—I’ve hauled it. Tampons to tomahawks, and now, this tree—a Northwest White Spruce—a perfect specimen of size, symmetry, and beauty. At least three hundred years young.”

“Three days, huh?” I said, slumping in my seat.

He wasn’t finished, nowhere near it. “Welcome to Davey Hacker’s America. Barring any mishaps, we’ll log thirty-seven hours, not including motels and meals, pass through all or parts of eleven states and cover 2,486.9 memorable miles before we plant our roots at 222 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

“Any way to shorten this trip by, say, a day or two?”

“That’s the Christmas spirit. I hear ya,” Davey said. “You want to get there early so the masses can ogle its splendor that much sooner.”

My hope lifted a notch.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he went on. “Got laws to obey. Road and weather conditions to navigate.”

Hope turned to dust. I was already on the brink of cabin fever.

“Here’s an idea,” Davey said. “We could maybe do an Olympic torch kind of thing. I can see it now. Crowds waving as we pass through each town, Ben Ballard standing proud with the tree while I serenade it. I do this great Elvis—‘It’ll be lonely this Christmas—’”

“That was you?”

“You thought maybe it was the King, huh?”

“You just handle the truck,” I said. “I’ll handle the rest of the country.”

“Hey, sure, you know what you’re doin’.’”

Rounding a bend, the view through the windshield suddenly went widescreen, a panorama of snow-covered plains stretching away to the east, to home, and all that implied.

I kicked back, shut my eyes, and was about to doze off. A second later my eyes slammed open again. A collage of Christmas-themed centerfolds stared back at me from the cab ceiling.

I huddled on the seat, dead to the world. We were stopped, only I didn’t know it yet. Then, suddenly, I did. A loud thump on the frosted window snapped me out of it. I bolted upright and banged my head on the headliner.

I saw the driver’s seat was empty. Elvis had left the building. Then, there he was, standing outside my side of the cab, his mouth moving, a Polaroid camera slung around his neck. “You’ve got to see this,” he shouted from behind my rolled-up window.

“Something happen?” I muttered. “Where are we?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, the door flew open and he yanked me out into the frigid air. My driver steered me around to the rear of the truck. I stood there, huffing steaming breath into my cupped hands.

“This place is so drenched in history,” Davey said.

I did a slow three-sixty. I made out a half-dozen Stone Age concrete shelters shrouded in domed snow. Next to me stood what appeared to be a giant lizard’s leg. Gazing up, the limb belonged to a fuchsia painted, cement Tyrannosaurus. The faded wooden sign in its jaws read:

WELCOME TO BEDROCK, IDAHO

Across a snowy field stood another dinosaur—a colossal, jungle green, cement Brontosaurus. Nearby us—an oversized cement couple, Fred and Wilma, dressed in painted Stone Age caveman costumes.

“Meet the Flintstones,” Davey said.

Speechless, I stared in disbelief. Instead of hightailing cross-country, we were wasting time in an abandoned, low rent amusement park.

Davey handed me the camera. “I’m putting together a little photo album.” He stepped over to Fred and Wilma, scrunched between them, grinned, and draped his arms around their concrete hips.

My teeth chattered. My hands trembled. I raised the camera and snapped his picture. Good luck with that, I thought.

As soon as we were back in the cab, I laid down the law. “No more unscheduled stops. We drive, eat, and sleep. That’s it.”

“Hey, I won’t hold you to it,” Davey said, “you see something you like, I won’t say no.”

We hit the interstate and the Stone Age fell behind, voyaging across the State of Montana version of nowhere. All around, white-cloaked plains stretched everywhere and nowhere. Here and there darkish specks of huddled cattle, red-sided barns, and silver-domed silos dotted the landscape.

“Montana, aka ‘The Treasure State,’ is the fourth largest state in area,” Davey informed me, along with about a dozen other useful facts and figures.

“Good to know,” I said.

“Then here’s something you probably didn’t know. There’s a city called Montana located in northwest Bulgaria.”

“Anything else?” I said, “in case I’m ever back this way—or Bulgaria?”

Apparently, he hadn’t caught my tone. “Well, let’s see.” He thought a moment. “Hannah Montana is a musical comedy TV show about a girl named Miley Stewart. She lives two lives: a famous teen pop idol named Hannah Montana, and an average high school girl. She’s played by an actress named Miley Ray Cyrus, also known by her birth name of Destiny Hope Cyrus.”

“Sounds like a guilty pleasure.”

“Damn straight it is. You can catch it in reruns.”

I turned to the view outside my window, rolled my eyes, and fluttered my lips.

Davey hummed along to holiday music on the radio—“Ohhh the weather outside is frightful—” He dialed down the volume and turned to me. “How about a nice cup of soup?” Not waiting for me to answer, he handed me a tin cup and began pouring noodle soup from a thermos. Just then the truck hit a pothole. Dropping the thermos, the soup wound up everywhere but in the cup. I screamed, the spilled soup flooding my seat. I hoisted myself with the hand bar to avoid being scalded.

“Say there, you okay?” Davey asked. “Jiminy Christmas. Remind me to get those shocks checked.” He dug a filthy rag from under his seat and passed it to me. I wiped off the noodles as best I could. “When they dry, they’re hell to get off. Fly’s love ‘em, though,” he said. I squirmed, trying to get comfortable. Just as I settled in again, we hit another pothole. A seat spring exploded through the vinyl under my crotch and nearly circumcised me.

Mile after snowy mile Davey kept along with the radio—this time it was Alvin and the Chipmunks—“You better watch out, you better not cry—” while I hugged myself against the cold. Gusting sleet blew horizontally across the empty interstate.

“Excuse me, Pavarotti? What happened to the heat?” I dared to ask.

“You cold?” Davey said. Dressed in a thermal jacket, he thumped the dash with his fist. “Weird. This heater never conked out before. And I mean never.” He removed the miniature Christmas tree from the dash. “Mind holding this?”

I uncurled a frozen fist and took the tree.

“They bury the main circuit breaker just—about—here,” Davey said, pounding the dash even harder. The radio suddenly conked out. “Nope—gotta be a fuse.”

“No problem,” I said under my breath. “I’ll just shove a stick up my butt, pretend I’m a popsicle.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said, sounding sorry. “You’re worried about the tree. I get that. Making jokes. Relieving tension. Just kick back and relax. That root structure’s insulated down to a negative ten. Three layers of aluminum space blankets, twelve hundred pounds of irrigated peat, four layers of hemp. You know what makes me different from other drivers?”

“Let me guess. Their heaters work?”

“I’ve never lost a load,” he said, again sounding offended. “I’m not about to start with this one.”

The heater suddenly kicked back on, the blast like someone’d just stoked an industrial furnace. I set the tree back on the dash.

“What’d I tell you?” Davey said. “She’ll get you where you’re going. Every time.”

Twelve minutes later the heater conked out again.

Davey handed me the little tree.

“Oh, man. Hold this.”

Not yet evening and we were making good time, the ‘Treasure State’ behind, the northeast corner of Wyoming in our windshield. We finally stopped for a bite at a truck stop diner housed in a towering concrete wigwam.

Inside, the place was over-decorated with holiday bric-a-brac. Badass truckers dominated the joint. Rows of cardboard snowmen crisscrossed the ceiling. A dozen competing Christmas tunes blasted from two-dozen tabletop jukes.

“Hey, Colonel, private Hacker reporting for foo-dy!” Davey bellowed.

A patch over one eye, the crusty owner looked up as we entered. He lit up at the sight of Davey. “Well, now, if this ain’t some kind of holiday surprise,” the Colonel said. “How the heck you been, number twelve?” He extended a hand and Davey shook it, which involved an elaborate secret society handshake, one possibly only known to truckers and truck stop operators. “Been so long, I thought I might have to wipe you off the menu.”

“Colonel, I want you to meet a pal of mine, Ben Ballard,” Davey said.

The Colonel extended his hand. I hesitated before slowly extending mine, this time a plain, gentlemanly handshake. “Pleasure,” I said.

“Two Hacker platters!” the Colonel growled to his grill man.

“We’re hauling the National Christmas Tree to Washington. Ben here works for the feds.”

Everyone in the place froze, the word “feds” apparently poison in these parts. Every head swiveled toward me. I loosened my collar, cleared my throat, and opened my coat to show I wasn’t packing. “I come in peace,” I said.

An elderly waitress whose nametag said ‘Polly,’ her hair a platinum beehive, came over and actually patted me down. “He’s clean, boys,” she said, making a joke of it and the chatter resumed.

Seated at a window booth I sipped a Coke while Davey scanned the selections on the tabletop juke.

“Anything on there that’s not a holiday tune?” I asked.

“Thank God, no.”

Polly delivered the #12 ‘Hacker Platters’—which were nothing more than ordinary cheeseburgers—lettuce, sliced tomatoes, pickles—a thimble of coleslaw, and a side of greasy fries.

“Do you have any Dijon?” I asked.

Polly stared at me like I was some kind of heretic.

Davey methodically prepped his namesake, applying two-handed squirts of catsup and mustard. He folded the lettuce, planted the tomato, and overlapped the pickles. He picked up a fry, studied it, nibbled, and then devoured it. He swigged his Sprite and belched. Polly stood by in reverence, waiting for the master to speak.

In contrast, I hastily assembled my burger. Paying no mind to the Zen master, I sawed the bun in half.

“You cut it,” Polly said, stunned.

“Excuse me?”

The Colonel suddenly appeared and slid in next to me. “How you plannin’ on eatin’ that?” he asked suspiciously.

“Burger’s a burger.” I shrugged and took a huge bite.

“They eat different in Washington,” Davey explained.

“They do a lot of things different in Washington,” said Polly. “I don’t trust him.”

Our audience got up and left, shaking their heads. Davey looked me square in the eye, and said, “Burger etiquette. You never slice a burger. That’s like a crime against nature. Gotta do the ‘burger turn.’ Bite and rotate. Bite and rotate. Your burger growing smaller and smaller till that last magic bite.” He lifted his burger, examined it like an art appraiser, turned it slowly, and licked his chops in anticipation. “Cheeseburgers are good for you. Make you happy. Look at this beauty—buns soft as a baby’s butt—golden yellow cheese caressing five ounces of ground ecstasy—dressed to kill.” He took a king-size bite, grunted, groaned, and about had a gastronomic orgasm as he savored every chew.

I began to worry that he might pass out. “Hey, you okay?”

He snapped out of it and gulped some Sprite. Refreshed, a big grin lit his face.

I picked up my burger, studied it, and looked around. Every customer was doing the ‘burger turn,’ deep satisfaction plastered on each and every face. I rotated my burger to the uncut side, took a bite, and felt—nothing. I shook my head. I still didn’t get it.

### DAY FOUR

The early minutes of day two. Midnight found us thirty miles across the state line in Minnesota, the truck parked in a motel court on the outskirts of Luverne. Other than stopping for a single meal, and to empty our bladders and gas up, we’d been going non-stop for eighteen hours. Not knowing what kind of deal he’d cut with the U.S. government, I offered to pay for Davey’s room, but he said Uncle Sam had him covered.

Freshly showered, three candy bars and a bag of peanuts under my belt, my arms and legs stiff like rigor mortis, I crawled into bed, picked up the remote, and turned on the TV. Finally, after surfing a bit, something grabbed my attention—a Christmas episode of The Waltons—John-Boy and rest of the Walton clan saying “good-night.” Day one behind us, I left the TV on, rolled over, fluffed my pillow, and promptly went to sleep.

‘O Christmas Tree’ performed by a soaring choir. A hawk’s-eye view skimmed low over a breathtaking vista. Spring. Snow-dappled mountains. Flowering meadows. Cool blue lakes amid an ancient blue green conifer forest. The view shifted to a clearing featuring a pair of magnificent evergreens. A male squirrel scampered after a female, playing ‘cat and mouse’ around the paired trees. She scampered up the smaller tree. He raced up the companion tree, leapt across, and cut her off. They vanished among dense branches. A limb began to tremble, faster and faster. A pinecone tumbled to the forest floor. The cone landed among others in a soft bed of pine needles. A miniature whirlwind wove through the clearing, gathering up male and female cones, whirling them around and around, the mating dance of life.

I rolled over and plumped up my pillow. The bedside clock glowed 1:11 in the AM. I snuggled back to sleep and returned to dreamland.

Months later. A light dusting of snow on the piney boughs. A twelve-inch sapling had taken root in the shadow of Ma and Pa Evergreen. A winter storm whipped through the family tableau, causing the adult trees to swish and sway. Their only child, now six-feet tall, bent in the onslaught, holding its own against the elements.

I stumbled to the bathroom to empty my bladder. I crawled back under the covers—2:39. Back to dreamland.

Seasons had come and gone. A twenty-foot tree now thrived alongside the parent trees. A bull moose strolled over and sniffed the sapling. A pinecone dropped from above and beaned the moose between the antlers. The moose grunted and trotted off.

I got up to take another leak—3:50.

Years later—the evergreen had grown to a strapping forty-footer. A family of bears ambled up and began to sharpen their claws on the trunk.

I got up to turn down the heater, then back to bed—4:22.

Decades had passed—the tree now grown to fifty-feet, towering over senior trees. A family of woodpeckers peered from a hollow high up in the trunk.

 I got up, stepped into my slippers, went to the window, drew back the curtains, and looked out at the parked tree bathed in moonlight—5:59.

A century later—the tree now towered nearly sixty-feet. A tree to shame all surrounding trees. A lumberjack strode up, swinging a paint can in one hand, a paintbrush in the other. The brush dipped in the can. Two quick strokes applied a crimson X on the massive trunk—

I awoke to pale sunlight streaming through the curtains. Dressed in a Fila jogging suit under my topcoat, I studied my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Two more days, Ballard,” I told myself. “You can do it. You are the man.”

I picked up my bag, forced a fake smile, inhaled a deep breath of wintry air, and opened the door fronting the motor court. Out in the sunshine, tractor-trailer rigs were taking off on their journeys, families were packing their vehicles, gawking travelers stood around the tree parked on the far side.

An SUV drove past an empty swimming pool, a small tree strapped to the roof. The happy family waved to me. I started across the court to the truck. Another family drove past, a small tree protruding from an open trunk. They likewise smiled and waved. A mounted cowboy clopped past me, a small tree strapped across his saddle. “Merry Christmas, pardner,” said the cowboy, tipping his Stetson. A Native American girl walked past pulling a sled with a tree tied to it. “God bless you, mister.”

I looked around, but there wasn’t a tree lot anywhere in sight.

Then it hit me.

I hustled over to Davey’s truck.

My driver was standing on the flatbed, singing while he sawed a small limb off the tree. “O, Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how lovely are your branches—” He handed the generous branch to a young couple holding a toddler. They offered some small change in return. Davey put up his palms, denying their offer.

“There’s the man who made all this possible,” he shouted, pointing me out. “Gentle Ben Ballard.”

A small gathering of overnighters applauded.

 “That’s it! That’s it! This is federal property,” I yelled. “Theft of federal property is a very serious crime!” I attempted to grab a branch from a blind Veteran of Foreign Wars. A tug-o-war ensued. “You don’t let go, you’ll regret it,” I seethed. “If you go to prison, it won’t be on my conscience.” The vet’s seeing eye dog began to bark. The guy let go of the tree. I lost my balance, slipped on a patch of ice, and landed hard on my butt. Climbing to my feet, I spotted a little boy holding a little tree. “Give me that, junior,” I demanded.

The kid was about to shed tears.

“You don’t want Santa to forget you, do you?” I taunted.

“There is no Santa,” be blubbered—and punched me in the gut.

We were back on the interstate, me silent, slumped against the passenger door.

Davey tried to break the ice.

“Looking out for the tree. That’s what you’re here for. I appreciate that, a man doing his job,” he said. “You’re one hundred percent correct. I should have gotten your approval. Knew you’d understand.”

“You think I’m some kind of moron?” I said, ready to get into it. “Don’t try sweet-talking your way out of this, Hacker. You knew damn well what you were doing. Ripping off government property.”

“Ripping off my government?” he said. “I love this country. I’ve fought for this country. I pay my taxes on time. I vote. And I buy American.” He turned and eyeballed my $3,200 topcoat. “Have you tried doing that lately?”

“Hey, I’m impressed. You’re a model citizen. If I wasn’t around, you’d be delivering a toothpick by the time you got to Washington.”

“I know what your problem is,” Davey said. “You missed your breakfast. Nine out of ten doctors agree—man isn’’t worth a bean till he’s had his Wheaties.”

“God help me.”

“Say that again.”

I shot him a black look.

He shot one right back, but then, after a moment softened it. “It’s been gnawing at me ever since I nearly ran you down. John-Boy. The spitting image.” Davey said, a departure so sharp and sudden I wondered whom I was talking to. Who was this guy? I’d forgotten all about last night’s TV show and had no idea what he was he going on about.

“Hey, anyone ever tell you that?” he blabbered on. “Sure they have. Didn’t occur to me until last night. You see it? A Walton Christmas, John-Boy working hard, busy providing for the family. Listening to everybody’s problems. Studying his butt off to get out of that depressed town just so he could come back and help it out of its depression. It was me, I woulda’ killed myself. But hey, you ever hear that guy complain?”

“You mind zipping the lip?”

“I’d like to listen to your problems, Gramps,” he went on, ignoring me while ad libbing John Boy, “I really would, but I’ve got a hankerin’ to go out tonight, maybe get laid—before I explode.”

“Know what? You’re giving me a migraine.”

“Don’t think I don’t know what that pounding in the noggin feels like. Once, on a run from Tallahassee to Toledo, I had a whale of a brain-buster. Talk about ironic. Cargo was aspirin.”

I couldn’t take any more and went ballistic, just lost it.

“Well, why didn’t you just rip off a case and get rid of your friggin’ migraine? Isn’t that how you guys make the extra pocket change? By selling off your cargo?”

He looked like I’d hit him with a tire iron.

I was on a roll and couldn’t stop. “Where do you come off butchering the National Christmas Tree? You think I’m here because I want to be? I’m here because the president must know you. ‘Holy shit, Davey Hacker’s hauling the national tree? He’s not to be trusted, Benjamin.’ Who the hell hired you, anyway? No, wait. Don’t tell me. I’ll just take a look at my enemies list.”

Given that I’d just unloaded both barrels, Davey’s counter was surprisingly calm. “For your information, we’re transporting a delicate life form,” he said. “It’s been yanked out of the earth, its lifeline bagged in burlap. Its limbs needed trimming because they were causing stress to the root system. I tried to give those little trees away, but folks were too proud to take ‘em, so they gave me what little they could. Get it?”

He dug deep in his pockets, pulled out some crumpled bills and loose change and dumped them in my lap.

We were nearly halfway home, thank God, skirting the lower half of Nebraska, angling east on I-80 toward Missouri. Davey Hacker had spoken his mind, but it was only the first phase. My punishment wasn’t over, not by a long shot it wasn’t.

“My old man won her in a poker game in ’02. When he retired, I took her off his hands. At the time, she had a V-8 Leroy, a two-speed rear, and a five-speed overdrive trans,” Davey was saying, going non-stop about his truck for the last twenty-two miles.

I could hear, but didn’t see him. I’d built a makeshift partition by draping a ratty blanket between us.

“She also had a busted flywheel and a missing driveshaft, but once I replaced the parts, she turned out to be a pretty good tractor—”

If he’d bothered to peek, he would have seen my hands clamped over my ears.

We hurtled past a road sign that read:

LINCOLN – 193 MILES

I buried my head between my knees.

Another eighty-miles. His filibuster droned on and on, still no end in sight.

“By ’06 she was about ready for another overhaul. That time I went for a 265-horsepower Cummins V-8 diesel, changed the trans to an Eaton Roadranger R-96 with a single-speed rear axle with a 4.62 ratio. After twenty-two years and 1.4 million miles I had her restored again—”

My head was still buried between my knees, rocking and moaning. My ears had begun to bleed.

We blew past another sign:

LINCOLN – 105 MILES

Davey continued his talkathon, intent on annoying the crap out of me. “In 2012 I got another engine rebuild, with another V-8 902, a 9509 trans, and a Hendrickson walking beam tandem axel suspension with a 3.70 ratio—”

Another sign:

LINCOLN – 44 MILES

My hands were cupped over my ears.

Finally, he fell silent, but it didn’t last long.

“I’m open for apologies,” he said. He’d lifted the blanket separating us.

I moaned and tapped my head against the dash.

“Too late. Shop’s closed,” Davey said. And with that he dropped the blanket and started up again. “Last year, I replaced the Hendrickson with a Neway air ride—”

Around midday, on the other side of Lincoln, we pulled over and eased up beside a chipped concrete longhorn missing one of its horns. Next to it was a ‘Big Cow Steakhouse,’ and beside that, ‘Honest Abe’s’ used car lot, a statue of Abraham Lincoln towering beside it. The steakhouse parking lot was crammed with cars and tractor-trailer rigs.

I reached behind the seat for my luggage. It wasn’t there. I searched some more. “Where the hell’s my luggage? You sell that, too?” I demanded to know. I began frantically tossing garbage out the cab. “How can you find anything in this shitcan?”

Davey ignored me and hopped down to check on the tree.

I climbed down and followed him, not letting up. “You’re unbelievable, you know that? You’re in charge of the freight. My luggage was freight. Just one phone call and I could have your license,” I barked, wagging my cell in his face to show I meant business. “For the next day-and-a-half, I own you.”

I’d finally gone too far. Davey stopped dead in his tracks and turned to me. “Why you pompous little bureaucrat,” he said, addressing unfinished business. “Did you happen to notice the smiles on those faces back there? They made me feel good.” He bent to the space between the back of the cab and the front of the flatbed. “We put a little holiday cheer in the lives of some decent, hardworking folks,” he went on, not looking at me. “This is the kind of load that makes me darn proud of my profession. I wouldn’t trade this job for nothin.’ It’s my life. Sorry you don’t feel the same about yours. Merry Christmas.”

Oh, really? Merry Christmas? I felt I’d been kicked in the teeth. Finally, all my pent-up frustration surfaced. I stripped off my coat and dropped it, a gesture with a clear message: “If you want a fight, I’ll give you a fight.” I slugged him, surprised by the pack I put into the punch. Twice my size, Davey dropped like a boulder. But he didn’t say anything. Instead, he got up, dusted off the snow, and turned his back to me. Finally, it dawned on me what he was doing—unhitching the flatbed, cutting my tree loose!

“Wait. What’s going on?” I said, incredulous.

“And Happy New Year, pal.” He climbed back in the cab, fired it up, and started to pull away.

I totally panicked.

“Hey, you can’t quit!”

I trotted along beside the moving truck.

“We can work out our differences!” Yeah, right.

He wouldn’t look at me.

“A little détente!”

I pulled out all the stops. “I order you to stop on the authority of the President of the United States!”

He angled onto the interstate. And then he was gone, vanished in a spray of slush.

I’d been left with a truckless tree. There was no time to waste. I looked around. Desperate, I jogged up to the nearest trucker heading for his rig.

“Excuse me, sir. You wouldn’t happen to know a trucker looking for a little work?”

“That’s a tough one, being the holidays and all,” he said. “A lot of men having families and such.”

I asked a couple more guys, each time getting a thumbs down, followed by, “My family,”—“It’s Christmas,”—“A tree?”

My desperation mounted.

I got on my cell, intending to Google trucking companies, but the reception was spotty. Nearby was a phone booth, the first one I’d seen in ages. After buying a roll of quarters from a waitress in the ‘Big Cow,’ I ran to the booth, tore open the phone book, and began thumbing pages.

“Television—trees—termites—” I flipped back—“Trophies—trees—” I flipped back and forth. “Where the hell are the trucks?” I finally got the picture—the handful of pages listing trucking companies had been ripped out. I banged my head against the glass. I finally got a hold of myself, loaded some quarters, and dialed a number I knew by heart. I took a deep breath between every ring. The party on the other end finally answered.

“Happy holidays, this is the White House. How may I direct your call?” asked the White House operator.

“Tom Kelly’s office, please.”

I drummed my fingers against the glass while she transferred the call.

“Merry Christmas, White House travel. Mr. Kelly’s office,” a bubbly voice answered. It was Judy, good old Judy.

“Ben Ballard calling for Tom.”

“Oh, my. *The* Ben?” she gushed. “Benjamin Ballard. Judy Walker. Tom’s assistant. I can’t tell you how excited we are. The tree’s the talk of the town. People are booking hotels all over. Are you still seeing that pretty girl who works on the first lady’s staff?”

“I really have to speak to Tom.”

“I’m afraid Tom wasn’t feeling well. He’s gone home for the day. May I help you?”

“It’s confidential.” Then, after a pause, “Can I trust you on this?”

“Oh, my, yes. The gossip faucet is out of service.”

I pictured her locking her lips with a twisty finger and tossing the key.

“My driver came down with food poisoning. He won’t be able to make it the rest of the way. I need someone responsible to finish the job. Think you can help me?”

“Oh, my. That *is* serious,” followed by, “Perhaps we can get together for drinks when you get back.”

“Yeah, sure, sure.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet. Let me access the Department of Transportation’s approved carrier list.” She fell silent for a moment, then returned. “Where are you?”

“Lincoln, Nebraska. Remember, my lips and your ears.”

I heard her giggle. A half-minute later she was back again. “Oh, yes. Here we go. I’ll just patch you through to an approved carrier in your area. See you soon, Benjamin.”

She transferred me. A moment later a man’s voice answered. “Lightning Trucking. You call, we haul. What can we do for you?”

“My name’s Ben Ballard,” I said. “I work for the White House, for the president. I won’t bore you with my credentials. You come highly recommended.”

The line was suddenly clogged with static. It sounded like someone crumpling a paper bag or candy wrapper next to the receiver. I heard, “Sorry, bad connection.” Then, “Fading in and out,” followed by, “Talk louder.”

“I have an emergency,” I practically yelled. “I need a driver! I’ve got a tree and—”

“What kind of tree?”

“A big one!”

“How big?”

“Huge. Trust me.”

“Who’d you say you work for?”

“The president!”

“Of what?”

“Of these United States!” Now I was screaming.

“Jeez, you don’t have to yell.”

I brought it down a notch. “I need to get to Washington D.C., A.S.A.P! I’ll pay double your going rate!”

“Did I hear you say double?”

“Double. Do we have a deal?”

“When you get serious, gimme a call at 1-800-GET-REAL”

The phone went dead. Crap, I’d been transferred but hadn’t been given the actual number. I loaded more quarters, redialed July’s number and we started again. That time I got the number. I dialed it. One ring. Three rings. Five. The guy finally picked up. “Hello? Hello? Oh, it’s you. Are you trying to squeeze me?”

Silence.

“Alright, make it triple,” I gave in. “This is a matter of national importance.”

Nothing.

“Do we have a deal?”

I thought I heard something.

“Sorry, I can’t hear you.”

Again nothing.

“Please, please don’t force me to call another company.”

The phone went dead again.

Down to a single quarter, five dimes, and three nickels, I dialed again and he answered, started in right away. “Okay, here’s the deal, Mr. Ballard. I accept this job, I don’t want you yanking my chain.”

An odd request, considering we’d never met.

“You got it. No yanking. Fine, whatever.”

“What’d you say happened to your original driver?”

Also odd, since I hadn’t mentioned a previous driver. “I didn’t,” I said. “But since you asked, bad cheeseburger. He’s hospitalized.”

“Okay, now that’s a yank. Two more and it’s sayonara.”

How could that be a yank, but “Alright, okay, okay.”

It had taken me awhile, but I was getting suspicious.

“Wait a minute? You know that guy?”

“It’s posted on the interstate. Danger, insensitive prick next 1,500 miles.”

Finally, it dawned. I slowly turned, and there stood Davey Hacker, cell clamped to his ear. Amid the commotion of arriving and departing rigs, I hadn’t heard him drive up. “You can have no conflict without being yourself the aggressor,” he said, eyebrows raised.

I gestured to the statue of Lincoln. “Abe?”

“No. Presley,” he said. “‘Kid Galahad.’”

Hooked up and rolling again, we flew through the rest of Nebraska, then across Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, all without further incident. Despite the delay, we were still making good, even excellent time. Forty-two miles west of Toledo, Ohio, three hours before our planned midnight stop, a dire weather warning interrupted Brenda Lee belting out “Jingle Bell Rock.”

“Heavy snow and icy road conditions throughout the night in much of the heartland, so stay off the roads. But if you have to drive, strap on those chains,” the radio voice cautioned.

“Please, please say we have snow chains. Say it.”

Davey gave me a sidelong glance.

A short while later the white stuff started coming down. Fourteen miles later it turned to a blizzard. By the time we hit the outskirts of Toledo the whiteout had turned treacherous.

Our second night together on the road, this time spent at the Laze Daze Motel. Davey opted to spend the night in the cab’s sleeper, saying he had a bad feeling about the tree, and wanted to be close by so he could check on it. I muttered, “Whatever,” and hightailed it to the check-in office.

### DAY FIVE

The room heater didn’t work. The last time I’d checked, the thermometer mounted on the door dared me to believe it was three degrees. I sat on the toilet lid, shivering inside a blanket, teeth chattering, sipping a cup of Swiss Miss, my feet soaking in the tub filled with steaming water.

Someone pounded on the door.

I ignored it.

The pounding became more insistent.

“Open up! We’ve got a problem!”

I craned my neck so I could see the bedside clock. It taunted 4:33 AM. “C’mon in!” I yelled. The door rattled. I’d forgotten it was locked. Cocooned in the blanket, I swore under my breath and staggered to open it.

Davey stood there, shrouded in Arctic attire: flannel shirt, padded vest, faux fur coat, mittens, three scarves, fur lined earflap hat, his arms loaded with heavy weather garments, like he’d dropped by on his way to the dry cleaner.

 “What’s going on—?”

“Tree caught a cold,” Davey said. Brushing past, he dumped the clothes on the bed. “Get dressed.”

 Through the open door, I could see the blizzard had passed. Snow mounded vehicles littered the motor court, exhaust wafting from tailpipes. The dark, huddled shapes of stranded motorists filled the motel office window. Blinking yellow neon fronting the highway said NO VACANCY.

“You handle it. I’m going back to bed.” I crawled back in and drew the covers over my head.

“We don’t act fast, it’s lumber,” Davey said. “We’re a team, remember?”

“You handle it,” I muttered from under the covers.

“I know you feel like a bucket of frozen crap,” Davey sympathized. “But you’re the one with the special relationship. That tree’s gonna save your career.”

I inched the covers down level with my chin. “I thought *you* were going to save it.”

“I can’t do it without you. This is your chance to reciprocate.”

I refused to budge. Davey started for the door, stopped there, and turned to me. “I’ve never lost a load in my life. I don’t plan on starting now.”

“Tell old man timber I hope he’s feeling better,” I said, and pulled the covers back up.

Disgusted, he turned his back and left me.

Twenty minutes later I awakened to the squeal of piercing feedback, followed by an amplified voice. “Testing—one—two—three!”

I burrowed deeper under the covers.

“I sure could use some help here, folks!”

Aw, Jesus, what now?

“Four score and seven years ago, all trees brought forth on this continent were not created equal!” I recognized Davey’s voice.

Hauling myself out of bed, a blanket wrapped around me, I padded over to the window in my bare feet, drew back the drapes, and peered out. What I saw floored me.

Davey Hacker stood atop the truck cab, CB mike in hand, addressing the motor court. A dozen trash barrels had been rolled into place, surrounding the flatbed. The glow of burning rubbish cast the orator’s flickering shadow upon mounded snow. Even from a distance, I could make out the silvery patina of ice sheathing the burlap insulating the evergreen’s tangled roots.

“—fellow travelers, the world will little note, nor long remember that we spent a night at the Lazy Daze Motel—”

Nothing in the motor court moved.

Davey hopped down onto the flatbed beside the tree and began pacing. “—but it can never be forgotten what together we might accomplish on this dark and snowy night—”

Nearby, a kid climbed from a car, stepped to a barrel, and tossed in a pile of comic books. The flames burnt brighter. The kid held back a single comic, probably his favorite, then tossed it too.

“—that this stupendous spruce, appointed as the National Christmas Tree, born and reared in the great state of Montana, and bound for our nation’s capitol—”

One by one, room lights came on. Sleepy-eyed travelers, singles and whole families emerged from their rooms and scattered vehicles. The place was waking up, reborn, coming to life.

“—that this terrific tree shall not die in vain—”

A burly, tatted, bearded biker type sporting flaming red hair and a matching beard appeared from nowhere and burst into my room. I’d forgotten to lock the door again after Davey left.

I quickly grabbed a chair to defend myself. “Take anything you want,” I yelped.

He helped himself to the chair, having to pry it out of my hands. Hefting a nightstand under his other arm, he stomped out.

I quickly shut the door, relocked it, and stood at the window.

Outside, the biker type began busting the furniture apart, turning it into firewood. Gathering up the pieces, he began handing them out. People tossed them in the barrels, further fueling the flames.

“—that this everlasting evergreen shall have new life—”

A young couple unloaded some firewood from the bed of their pickup and began tossing it on the flames.

“—and that this tree—”

A snowplow cleared the way for a news van arriving on the scene.

“—of the people—”

A drunk poured half a bottle of 120 proof in a barrel. The flames leapt six-feet high.

“—by the people—”

An elderly man wearing a minister’s collar made the sign of the cross and blessed the tree.

“—and for the people—”

A guy dressed as Santa tossed a phone book on the flames.

“—shall not perish from this earth!”

I got dressed in record time. I waded through the crowd, dressed in coveralls, thermal jacket, mittens, a hat and boots, a bundled blanket slung over my shoulder. I circled the tree, tossing my personal wardrobe, about four thousand dollar’s worth—Gucci, Burberry, Hermes, even my shoes—all of it into those flaming barrels and garbage cans.

Drip. Drip. Drip—the ice coating the tree’s burlap insulation began to melt.

Erik the Red, the biker type, sipping something hot from a Styrofoam cup, stepped up to me and said, “Beautiful thing, ain’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Name’s Frosty,” he said, extending a ham-sized paw.

“Like the snowman,” I said, shaking it.

The big guy nodded and offered me a sip from his cup. “Cocoa?” I eagerly accepted. “Peace, love, and happiness,” he said. “Sorry about the chair. And the nightstand.”

We stood there taking in the scene.

A party was now in full swing.

A German couple sang “O Tanenbaum.”

Kids playing ice hockey skated through the crowd.

The minister and his wife roasted marshmallows over a barrel and passed them out to bystanders.

A lady reporter and her cameraman approached me. “I’m standing here with White House aide, Ben Ballard.” She turned to me, somehow knowing my name, and stuck a mike in my face. “Ben, you must feel honored that the president personally asked you to ride along with the National Christmas Tree.”

Davey stepped up beside us and waved to the camera, but I upstaged him, milking the moment. “Yes, ma’am, I do. Tonight the holiday spirit resonated here at the Lazy Daze Motel, where people from all walks of life joined together to save the National Christmas Tree as it makes its journey across America. God bless this tree and God bless America.”

Returning to my room, I found a dozen men, women, and children sacked out on the bed and floor, all available space taken. Tired but ecstatic faces beamed back at me.

I went back out to the tree. “Glad you made it,” I said, not bothering to question why I was talking to a tree. A limb popped free and whacked me upside the head, as if the monumental pine actually understood what I’d said. “Guess I forgot to say, ‘thanks.’” I gently tucked the limb back in place.

I stepped to the cab and rapped on the sleeper compartment door. “Hey in there. It’s me.”

Davey brought the window down halfway and stuck his head out. “You ought to be catching some zee’s,” he said.

“You sleeping?”

 “What’s on your mind?”

“My room’s been taken over by some of Santa’s helpers.”

“Want me to help you toss ‘em out?”

“No. They earned it.”

“You did a pretty good job. Once you yanked that cork out your butt.”

“You heard that?”

“Felt pretty good, huh?”

He sensed I was holding back, fishing for something, like maybe an invite into his inner sanctum, and took the words out of my mouth. “Join me?”

“Sure.” He rolled up the window and opened the sleeper door.

I was about to climb up when a cute waitress sporting cat’s eye glasses and a bubblegum pink apron popped her head out and climbed down. Seconds later she was followed by her twin. The Laze Daze didn’t have a diner, so I guessed they came from Twangs, a rockabilly joint we’d passed the night before when we arrived.

Then Davey hopped down.

I attempted a futile effort to make myself presentable to the ladies.

Davey introduced us. “Paris. London. Ben Ballard.”

The twins stepped back and checked me out. “Shame we have to get back to work,” Paris said. They each gave Davey a peck on the cheek. “See you boys at breakfast,” London said.

“What do you girls call what I just had?” Davey asked.

They giggled and strolled off.

A minute later I was sitting in the cab. I could see Davey through a parted curtain, straightening up and making room in the sleeper. “Go on, plug it in,” he said.

I didn’t understand.

“The tree. Use the lighter.”

I plugged the little tree on the dash into the lighter. Miniature lights and ornaments twinkled and glowed.

“So, what’s our strategy?” I asked.

“Hey, if there’s a strategy, nobody filled me in on it.”

I sighed. “If we don’t get that tree there on time, I’m dead meat.”

Davey poked his head between the seats. “Ben, buddy, I really don’t give a crap what your future’s worth. If you wanna mope, feel free to step outside.”

Chastened, I nodded, point well taken. “Remind me never to do that again.”

“Better.”

Davey finished straightening up. “Care to join me in the lion’s den?”

He made room and I crawled between the seats into the sleeper, my first glimpse of his “man cave.” A cramped but well-organized space, it resembled a cozy den; Christmas decor, shelves lined with paperbacks, a 25-volume set of Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia, videos and cassettes, a laptop on a folding table, and a mini fridge. Davey popped a bag of popcorn in a mini microwave. I settled beside him on a narrow sofa bed. He dimmed the lights, grabbed the TV remote and hit the power button. A “video” fireplace blazed on the small TV, Handel’s “Messiah” faintly audible on the soundtrack.

“Anything we say here is strictly off the record, okay?” I said.

“Between me and the Big Guy,” Davey said solemnly, placing his hand over his heart.

The microwave beeped. He removed the popcorn and poured us each a bowl.

“You must think I’m one self-serving, disingenuous asshat,” I said.

“To say the least.”

“That was easy.”

“Nah, you’re just a guy who thinks he’s the center of the universe. But people aren’t interested in anything that complex.”

“People used to come to me for help,” I said. “Problem solving came second nature to me. I was the guy with all the answers. I know people.”

“Ben, buddy, you don’t know the first thing about people.”

“I know plenty about people.”

“We just passed through nine states. How many folks’d you talk to?”

“When I have something to say, I say it.”

“Guess I’m just some bumpkin delivering your tree. You haven’t asked me once if I’m tired, or how I’m doing. You haven’t asked a single question about my life.”

“I don’t need to ask. You never stop telling me,” I said, but not in a mean way, at least I didn’t think so.

“It’s called chit-chat,” Davey said. “I say something, you respond. I say, ‘Some weather we’re having.’ You say, ‘It’s miserable.’ See? Simple. Don’t worry. Place isn’t bugged.”

We sat there a bit watching the faux fire before he spoke again. “Why do you hate your job, Ballard?”

“I don’t hate it. I’m good at what I do.”

“I *love* what I do.”

“I get goose bumps just walking down the same halls as all the great presidents.”

“Must make your family real proud.”

“The first family *is* my family.”

“That just makes you important. It doesn’t make you happy. Ever consider a career change?”

I let that slide, not prepared to answer.

“So this is pretty much home, huh?” I said instead.

“Living room, kitchen, bedroom, and sometimes john, all rolled up in one handy habitat.”

“Good thing you don’t have a family.”

That appeared to hit home. “Yeah.”

By mid-morning the blizzard had passed, the new day clear, bright, and blue. We climbed down into a tide of tightly packed, door-to-door, bumper-to-bumper, snow-mounded vehicles. A solitary snowplow worked the highway. The few who had shovels began excavating their rides, then lent them to fellow travelers. Gradually, the lot began to thin, folks on their way to wherever.

A few minutes later, Davey steered us onto the interstate, the last leg. Home sweet home.

“What’s our time?” I asked, just to be sure, having already checked my cell’s GPS.

“Eight, hours, with time to spare,” Davey said. “Sit back and enjoy the ride.”

My cell trilled.

“Yeah,” I answered, not looking at the caller ID.

“Ben Ballard, please.”

I knew right away who it was, shut my eyes, and took a deep breath. “Speaking.”

“Please hold for the president.”

A moment later he came on the line. “Hello? You there, Ballard?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good Lord, Ballard, I send you out there to pick up a tree and you’re still running for office.”

“You saw that, too, sir?”

“Heck yes. Got calls coming in from all over the country. Got one from. Sweden. Where are you?”

“Ohio, sir.”

“How’s my tree doing?”

“Fine, sir, fine. And you?”

“Sound pretty excited, son. We’re all pretty excited here, too.”

“That’s great, sir.”

“Judy in the travel office tells me you had some kind of problem.”

“No big deal, sir.”

“Hope it wasn’t even an itty-bitty deal.”

“No deal at all, sir.”

“Good, good. I’ve decided to let the entire planet watch me plant that thing. Got all the networks committed, cable too. You’re on the fast track now, son.”

“Good to know, sir.”

“When you get back, you’ve got yourself a senior advisor position. How’s that sound?”

“You can count on me, sir.”

“Now relax, we’ll see you in a few.”

“Yes, sir.”

The line went dead.

“Who was that?” Davey said, keeping his eyes on the road.

“The president.”

“Oh.”

Stopped at a railroad crossing near Zanesville, still in Ohio, we watched a nearly mile long freight train clatter past. Davey appeared hypnotized. “I love trains,” he finally said. “Fifth Christmas, my mom and dad bought me a Lionel circus train; locomotive and six cars, a generous loop of track, plastic animals, goofy clown, the works.” He pinched his nose. “Hold your nose as the elephant car passes by. Gasp as the lion tamer runs for his life. Finally passed it on to my sister’s kid last Christmas.”

He pulled out his wallet and showed me a dog-eared photo of his sister’s kid posing with a train set.

“Brings back memories, huh?” I said.

I pulled out my wallet and showed him a photo in return. “This is a group shot we took on the whistle-stop last year. That’s me,” I said, pointing.

“Who’s the pretty blonde?”

“Just a campaign worker,” I said, side-stepping the question.

The caboose was finally in sight when the train came to a long, screeching halt, blocking the crossing.

I groaned and gave my umpteenth worried look.

“Probably just some routine inspection,” Davey said.

A workman hopped down from the caboose.

Davey leaned out the cab. “What seems to be the delay?”

“Bridge about a mile up, barge took out a pylon,” the guy answered.

“How long you think we’ll be here?” I asked, glancing at my watch for about the hundredth time.

“Hey, it’s a bridge,” the workman said.

My lips fluttered. I groaned.

Davey sat there a few moments, deep in thought, then said, “Don’t panic,” We turn back, take the 77 to the 50. Easy-peasy. Sets us back an hour, maybe two, max.”

For once we agreed. Across the road, to the left stood a vacant lot, room enough to swing the rig around. Davey threw the gear in reverse, peered in his side mirror, began inching back, and suddenly hit the brakes. “Uh-oh,” he said.

Looking back in my side mirror I saw about three-dozen vehicles and more arriving stacked up behind us. “Time to play traffic cop,” I said.

I hoped out, unknowingly leaving my wallet on the seat, and marched back along the line of vehicles, waving my arms, frantically trying to get motorists to back up. “Back up! Back up! Bridge is down! Truck needs to turn!” Cars and trucks and more cars were still arriving. At the rear of the queue I stopped and assertively held up my hand. “Stop your vehicles!”

A minivan skidded to a stop, and WHAMO, it was rear-ended by an SUV. There followed a chain-reaction, a dozen vehicles joining the pileup, creating an impossible impasse. I gawked. My mind’s eye flashed on the president dedicating an empty hole.

I hurried back to the truck and climbed inside. The glove box stood ajar, the open road atlas on the floormat. It’s hopeless,” I panted.

Davey blew breath. “Left this on the seat,” he said, handing me my wallet. “Some things are hard to replace.”

I gave him a suspicious stare and tucked the wallet back in my triple X thermal vest.

Ninety minutes later the train finally began to move again.

I was beside myself, in total despair. “That’s it, I’m screwed,” I said. “Murphy’s Law—whatever can go wrong, will. I turned to Davey. “What’s next, mothertrucker? We blow a couple of tires? Rear-end a mule? Know where we can get a rocket? Strap one on the son-of-a-bitch and airmail it?” Stacking nonsense on top of despair, I couldn't stop myself.

Davey considered and mused aloud. “Hmmm, am I willing to commit a felony for the President of the United States?”

“Hell, yes!” I said. “Absolutely!”

“I’d have to break every law in the book,” Davy countered.

“Consider it a challenge,” I said.

“Only one thing we can do,” Davey said.

I waited.

“Hell Ride,” he said, deadpan serious.

I was ready to get moving, but damn sure didn’t like the sound of that.

Across the tracks, the fifteen-mile backup slowly rolling past, we were parked on the shoulder, hunched over a battered steamer trunk. Scuffed lettering on the lid spelled out HELL RIDE. Davey pounded the lock with a hammer and it sprung open. Inside the trunk swirling dust revealed an assortment of cobwebbed gear; a five-gallon plastic jug connected to a looping tube, a cattle prod, a dozen bottles of pills. I puzzled out a seat cushion studded with ball bearings connected to a power cord.

“Not too late to reconsider,” Davey said.

“I don’t see that we have much choice,” I said, clueless to what he had in mind.

First chance, we pulled into a Circle K where I topped off the jug with high-octane java. I lugged it to the pimply-faced teen cashier. Davey dumped a couple dozen packets of ‘No-Doz’ on the counter already piled high with Hell Ride stuff.

Back in the truck, I slid a cassette in the tape deck—Ronnie Specter belting out “Frosty the Snowman,” and cranked up the volume. I plugged a power cord into the cigarette lighter. Davey nearly hit the roof liner as his seat cushion rumbled to life.

After that, we were off and rolling.

Davey right away began sucking on the plastic tube looping to the jug now suspended from the ceiling, like a hospital IV. I yanked the tube from his mouth.

“Whoa there, big fella—gotta pace yourself,” I cautioned.

I took a hit from the tube before handing it back.

Thirty miles down the road I slapped a TV dinner on the dash. “Suck on this,” I said, handed him a frozen wedge of something barfy brown and yellowy. Eyes on the road, Davey popped it in his mouth and sucked it like a popsicle.

Another thirty. A dozen open packets of ‘No-Doz’ lay scattered on the dash. I poured a packet into Davey’s open mouth and emptied one into my own.

Coming up fast through the windshield, a weathered truck stop billboard featured Davey being served a ‘Hacker platter’ by a comely waitress.

I turned to stare at him.

He grinned back.

Davey was starting to nod off.

“Hey—!” I nudged him.

He snapped to, enough to correct the nineteen inches he’d strayed into the oncoming lane. Five minutes later he was nodding off again.

“Hey, c’mon, pay attention—”

He stretched, rolled his shoulders, and flexed the foot not on the accelerator.

Another ten miles and I and was losing him again. “C’mon, man, I’m losing you.”

His head lolled like a bobble doll. He mumbled something I couldn’t understand.

“Damn it, man, stay awake,” I barked.

He couldn’t hear me. I jabbed him with the cattle prod and startled him alert, sort of, anyway. He rolled down his window, blasting us with frigid air. “Hey, look, we’re famous,” he said. I looked and saw a man and his dog standing on the shoulder, the dog wearing a sign around its neck—

I BARK FOR THE TREE

The dog barked.

We whipped past.

Thirty minutes later, blowing past an elementary school, a gang of sixth graders pelted us with snowballs. I rolled down my window, snagged one in midair, and handed it to Davey. He rubbed it all over his face. I did the same.

Approaching another town, huge letters scrawled on the water tower read:

EVERGREEN, OHIO

WELCOMES THE TREE

Passing through another burg, we ran a gauntlet between hundreds of cheering locals. Fried, nearly comatose, Davey and I could barely wave to our fans. Twins, two high school cheerleaders bore a banner stretched across the road:

TREE FOR PRESIDENT!!!

Not slowing, we blew through, shredding it.

Around nightfall, five in the afternoon, we barreled through a little burg already shut down for the night, holiday lights strung across Main Street, Christmas displays glinting in the store windows. The tree’s branches snagged overhead lights along a three-block stretch, the tree decorating itself. A Santa mannequin in a Woolworth’s window waved as we blew past. I saluted back.

I rocked back and forth, using body English to nudge the rig huffing and puffing up a steep incline.

“Faster,” I urged, “faster, faster.”

Davey sucked down the last drops of cold coffee.

“I’m already doing eighty.”

“Give me five more.”

Cresting the rise, we hurtled down the other side. A sign at the bottom said:

WASHINGTON D.C. - 170 MILES

“Congratulations,” Davey said, “we’re still five hours ahead of schedule.”

“You be okay?” I asked.

“Nothing to it. Wake you when you’re home.”

All smiles, I propped my feet on the dash and shut my eyes.

Half awake, it occurred to me we were creeping along at a snail’s pace. Bolting upright, I saw we were stuck in a smalltown Christmas parade. Kids dressed as elves riding decorated bikes wove between cars. Tractors and mule-drawn wagons bedecked as humble floats. A high school marching band played a discordant version of “Joy to the World.”

“Favorite son, Ben Ballard, brings with him, after its long journey across America, on its way to the nation’s capitol, the National Christmas Tree,” bellowed from a loudspeaker mounted atop a vintage fire truck.

Favorite son—What the—?

“Hey, I know this place—”

The entire population of Quiet Dell, West Virginia, lined the sidewalks, a Norman Rockwell cover of the Saturday Evening Post sprung to life. Not that I know much about parades, Christmas or any other kind, but my hometown had to be one of the few that held theirs at night and just two days before Christmas. I peered out at familiar faces waving at me.

Livid, I turned to Davey. “You son of a bitch, you hijacked me.” A portly woman I recognized as my high school English teacher ran up and attached a homemade ornament to the tree. Someone else ran up on the other side and handed Davey a holiday gift tin. “Best fruitcake in all of West Virginia,” the giver said.

“Since it was on the way, more or less,” Davey explained, “I thought it’d be a kick in the pants to drop by, show the tree off to your home folk. Wish the family a happy holiday.”

I made eye contact with a pretty young woman standing in front of a barbershop. An unspoken moment passed between us. I turned back to Davey. “You’re invading my privacy, mister.”

“Hey, just curious what a tight ass like you has to hide,” Davey said good-naturedly.

It suddenly dawned on me what had happened. “You had no right to go through my wallet,” I said. I also understood what the open road atlas I’d earlier seen on the cab floor was about. “Get me the hell out of here. We have a job to finish.”

“Relax. We still have a couple of hours to spare,” Davey said. “Plenty of time.”

I’d been tricked, conned, bamboozled, the wool pulled over my eyes. This was no longer about transporting the National Christmas Tree. I’d discovered too late that Davey Hacker’s mode of transport was no ordinary truck, nothing of the sort; it was a time machine transporting me to the unwelcome landscape of my not-so-distant youth.

The rig made a turn and bounced down a rural road accompanied by a caravan of country vehicles. After a couple miles we pulled up beside a weathered, two-story clapboard house nestled in a backwoods hollow.

“Benjamin Ballard, this is your life,” Davey said, patting my knee. I didn’t budge. A football ricocheted off the windshield and jolted me out of the moment. A teenager ran up and opened my door. It was my younger brother Jason, whom I hadn’t seen in a couple of years. “Hey, Benny. When’d ya change jobs?” Jason said.

I forced a smile, opened the door, and climbed down.

An old bloodhound sauntered up, stood up on his hind legs, and slobbered all over my face.

“Jesus, Oglethorpe,” I said. “You still love me?” I snapped my fingers. “What does a good dog do? What does a good—” Oglethorpe lifted a leg and dribbled on my loafer.

“You can run, but you can’t hide,” Davey said.

The entire Ballard clan: brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, gathered around and escorted me toward the house.

Davey stood by the truck taking it all in.

An elderly couple stood waiting on the porch.

“Hello, Granny,” I said.

I gave her an awkward hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“The Lord has certainly blessed us this day,” Granny said.

“Still working for that moron in Washington?” Gramps asked, looking me over, but offering his hand to shake it.

I groaned, gave him a bear hug, and said, “Where’d you get that idea, Grandpa?”

Bringing up the rear of the caravan, a battered pickup decorated as a float pulled into the yard. Faded lettering on the door spelled out:

QUIET DELL COAL CO.
WEST VIRGINIA

My parents, Orin and Dolly Ballard, climbed out, dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. My mom stepped close but stopped short of hugging me.

“We were just passing through,” I said, kind of shy about it.

“Welcome home, sweetie,” she said, and kissed me on the cheek.

My dad stepped to my side. “Remember the time we rescued that huntin’ dog from the jaws of that mountain lion?”

“Pop, that never happened,” I said, confused.

“That’s right. Just makin’ sure you ain’t an imposter. What brings you to these parts, anyway?”

I turned and gestured to Davey. “Government work.”

Upstairs in the shotgun bedroom that ran the length of the house—five narrow beds stood aligned all in a row. Davey, freshly bathed, sat on the one with BEN carved on the headboard, the shelf above it lined with Lincoln memorabilia. Jason lounged on his bed with a couple of nephews while I rummaged in a closet.

“We used to wake up middle of the night, Ben’d be dressed in a beard and this tall, black hat reciting some kind of speech,” Jason was saying. “Scared the bejesus out of us. We all slept a lot better when he went away to college.” That got some chuckles.

I turned to them wearing a moth-eaten beard and a black stovepipe hat, the hat fashioned of cardboard. “Pop spent all day every Sunday praying for me,” I said.

“Hey, still does,” Jason said, and everyone had another good chuckle.

Mom appeared in the doorway and studied my getup. “Mr. Lincoln, your bath is ready,” she said.

Beside her a handmade placard on the door read:

LINCOLN’S BEDROOM

After Davey, it was my turn to soak in our old claw-footed tub. A washcloth covered my eyes, my arms draped over the sides. “Mr. President, on behalf of the people of this glorious nation, I present you with—the Tree.” I paused to savor the sound of imagined applause. “Thank you, thank you. Really, it was nothing. But thank you.” My tone turned confidential. “About your job offer as a senior staffer, Mr. President—I’ll have to think about it,” then quickly added, “Yeah, sure, okay, why not?”

The sound of actual applause, half-hearted at best, snapped me out of my reverie. I whipped the cloth from my face. The pretty young woman from the parade stood in the open doorway holding an armload of freshly laundered, neatly folded clothes. “Nice to see some things never change,” she said.

If you haven’t already guessed, Jenny Love and I had a long history together.

 “You look—”

“Like Olivia Newton John,” she cut me off. “Whatever happened to her?”

We were sharing a private joke.

“You took a long vacation,” I said. “After the goldfish died, I figured you weren’t ever coming back.”

“Having a boyfriend between two and four in the morning wasn’t what I had in mind,” Jenny countered. “I didn’t like who you were becoming. Your granny always told me, ‘What good’s a pie if it ain’t got no fillin’?”

“Well, that’s who I am now,” I said defensively.

“And I’m sure the world’s a much better place for it,” Jenny said, without an ounce of conviction, actually mocking me. She dumped the clothes on the floor. “Better get dressed. Your public awaits.”

Afterward, we all gathered in the living room. A ten-foot Christmas tree decorated with handmade ornaments occupied most of a corner. A Ballard family tradition, they’d sawed it down in the nearby forest. Davey sat in the adjoining dining room stuffing his face with deep-dish blueberry cobbler. Dad sat with him as family members scurried in and out.

“Benjamin’s working in the mine during Christmas break. It’s ten below. Old man Whitfield comes down, tells us to triple production,” Dad was saying. “My fifteen-year-old kid politely says, ‘I’m sorry, sir. We didn’t hear you. Your voice was drowned by the sound of our freezing nuts. The men wanted to elect him union proctor right then and there.”

Davey looked up from his cobbler and joined everyone in a good hoot.

I glanced at my watch.

Seconds later, dad’s laugh turned into an uncontrollable, hacking cough. Mom poured him a shot of whiskey in a mason jar. “Nothin’ like a shot of the recipe to loosen a man’s soul,” she said, but with a worried look.

Davey took the liberty of helping himself to a sip and toasted his hosts with a forkful of cobbler. “I’ll eat to that,” he said.

I glanced at my watch again. How long had we been here? Days? Weeks?

The cozy late afternoon wore on into early evening.

Gramps and Granny sat in front of a roaring fireplace, he whittling, while she quilted. Mom was helping the kids hang their Christmas stockings. Dad sat in his recliner smoking a pipe. Jenny shared the couch with Davey flipping through a scrapbook of articles clipped from our local rag, the *Smoky Mountain Gazette*.

“Ballard elected student body president—Favorite son wins senior debate—Quiet Dell youth invited to White House—Ballard off to Harvard—” Jenny was saying.

Davey looked over at me.

“Harvard man, huh?” he said, impressed.

“Top of the heap,” said my dad.

“Mom’s way of salvaging the past,” I said, trying to sound humble but failing.

“Hey, it’s you, pal,” Davey said. “Real life isn’t like a story.”

He flipped to another page, this one showing a Halloween group shot of a bunch of kids in traditional scary costumes. The odd boy out was dressed as Abe Lincoln, the red circle drawn around an arrow pointing to me.

I glanced at my watch again and announced that we’d better be going.

“Keep your shirt on,” Davey said. “We still have a little time.”

One of my young nephews, Deaner, stepped up to me.

“Uncle Benjamin, is that really the president’s tree?” he asked pointing out the window to the truck.

Not feeling too clever, I said, “Not exactly.”

“It’s everybody’s tree, sweetpea,” Jenny said, coming to my rescue. Looking back, it wasn’t the first time she’d saved my goose. Buried deep, a part of me hoped it wouldn’t be the last.

One of my young nieces approached.

“You’re, ah—?” I said.

“Francine.”

“Have you been good this year, Francine?”

“Grandma says you’re a very important man,” she said, “but you don’t look so important.”

I faked a hurt look, threw in an “Ouch” for good measure, and growled at her. She scooted off and ducked behind my sister Tammy. Everyone had a good laugh at my expense.

Mom came over and handed me a present. “Merry Christmas, hon,” she said. “Go ahead, open it.”

I did. It contained a coffee mug with my name stenciled on the side: ‘Ballard for president.’

Dad handed Davey a present. “Anybody puts up with my son’s malarkey deserves something,” he said.

Davey stripped away the wrapping, revealing a hand-knitted sweater, a big Christmas tree on the front, the word ORIN stitched across it. Just that once, the trucker was reduced to a single word. “Wow,” was all he said, and meant it. He put it on.

“I already have a couple dozen,” Dad said. “She knits me one every year.”

After that, Davey parked himself at our old upright piano and began fiddling with the ivories. Looking out the window at the night sky, he pretended to see something.

“Who’s that I see riding across the sky?”

He broke into a rowdy rendition of “Must Be Santa.” Some of the family accompanied him on mountain instruments.

“Who’s got a beard that’s long and white?” Davey sang. He stopped playing and began to conduct the entire family.

“Santa’s got a beard that’s long and white!”

“Who comes around on a special night?”

“Santa comes around on a special night!”

“Special night—”

“Beard that’s white—” Jenny’s voice had joined in.

“Must be Santa, must be Santa, must be Santa, Santa Clause!”

Dad took the lead. “Who’s got boots and a suit of red?”

“Santa’s got boots and a suit of red!” we all chimed in.

“Who wears a long cap on his head?”

“Santa wears a long cap on his head!”

 “Cap on head—”

“Suit that’s red—”

“Special night—”

“Must be Santa, must be Santa, must be Santa, Santa Clause!”

Needing some time alone, I went outside and stood by the truck, listening to the celebration indoors. A crescent of neighbors and assorted locals stood at a respectful distance, ogling the tree.

Away in the distance, the pop and spray of distant fireworks lit the night sky.

A little girl and her father approached.

“Mind if she touches it?” he asked.

I nodded and the kid stepped close, stroking the branches.

“This is the most beautiful tree I ever seen,” she said.

That did it. I grabbed an ax from a chopping block, lopped off the top six feet of the tree, and handed it to her father.

“Merry Christmas,” I said.

“God bless you, Ben,” the man said.

I have to admit, I felt like a million bucks as they walked away. Turning to the house, I couldn’t help but join in the sing-along. “Must be Santa, must be Santa, must be Santa Clause!”

Right afterward, when the singing stopped, Dad stepped out on the porch. “You boys got a job to finish.”

It was time to hit the road. We all stood around the truck, saying our “good-byes.”

“Take care of my son,” Dad said to Davey.

“He’s a survivor,” Davey said.

“Don’t lie to me, Hacker.” Dad said, suppressing a cough.

There followed hugs and handshakes all around.

“We’re all so proud and love you,” Mom said.

I started to pull away, but she held me tight and whispered in my ear. “And I know you love us, too.” I didn’t so much return the hug as allow myself to be hugged.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Dad said.

Davey and I hauled ourselves up into the cab and settled in for the final leg.

“I owe you a big thanks,” Davey said as we pulled out, the humble home of my youth, unfulfilled romance, the murky shapes of my relations falling behind and turning to shadows.

“For what?”

“Been years since I’ve been around a real family.”

I glanced in my side mirror and saw the porch light wink out. “Hey, you didn’t have to grow up with them,” I said in a near whisper, then quickly shook it off and brightened. “In a few hours you’ll get to meet the ‘first family.’ That’ll give you something to talk about.”

Finally, four hours and twenty-six minutes later, at a quarter to midnight, I was back in my own land, among my own tribe, my people. I’d been given a quest, a mission, a calling. I’d embarked on a hero’s journey. Against overwhelming odds and obstacles, I’d met the challenge and somehow survived. Now, transformed, a champion, a daredevil, a mercenary, I’d returned with the booty, the loot, the magic potion. A tour de force of purpose and serene resolve, I was unbeaten. A grateful, adoring nation would bow before me. My king would shower me with riches and bestow upon me his fairest daughter, fairest in all the land. Fine, fine, whatever, there was no king and he didn’t have any daughters, but you get my point—in another time and place— In a word, as Davey Hacker might have put it, I’d done good.

Rolling through the empty, snow-clad streets of my city, its temples basked in moonlight. Jefferson smiled upon me. Lincoln nodded his approval. The Washington Monument shimmered in appreciation. Escorted by a helicopter and a fleet of police cruisers who’d joined us when we crossed the Potomac, we swung wide onto Pennsylvania Avenue, heading for the finish line—the Nation’s House. Davey pulled up beside an imposing gate dressed in holiday bunting.

“What a ride, huh? Davey said.

“Ride of my life,” I said.

A trim marine stepped from a guardhouse.

Davey rolled down his window. He said, “Delivery for the president.”

The guy stood back, taking in the length of the flatbed and its load. His face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “Yes, sir!” he said. He returned to the guardhouse and made a call. Moments later he came back.

“Which one’s Ballard?”

I leaned forward. “I am.”

“The president would like a word with you.”

Davey and I climbed down and followed him into the guardhouse. The marine handed me a phone.

“This is Ben Ballard,” I said.

“Damn you, Ballard. Thought you’d gone and turned un-American on me,” said the president, not exactly what I was expecting.

“No, sir, we made it, sir.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you and that driver are true American heroes.”

“His name’s David Hacker, sir.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“The president wants to speak with you,” I said, handing Davey the phone.

Davey, nervous, stiff as wood, put the phone to his ear. I leaned close so I could listen.

“Loosen up, Hacker,” I heard the president say. “Last thing this town needs is another statue,” the president correctly guessing Davey’s demeanor.

Davey turned to the White House and gave a little wave. “Hello, Mr. President, sir.”

A tiny figure standing on a balcony, wearing a bathrobe, waved back.

“How does it feel to be a hero, Hacker?” the president asked over the phone.

Davey shot me a grin and a wink.

“It’s beginning to feel a lot like Christmas, sir,” Davey said, draping an arm across my shoulder.

Later that evening, Christmas Eve, refreshed after napping in my K Street apartment, I was back at the White House, a new Louis Vuitton overnight bag at my feet, special delivery by none other than the Secret Service. I quickly stood when an attractive female staffer emerged from the Oval Office. She handed me a small wooden box embossed with the presidential seal. “Give me a call if you need anything,” she said, flashing what I took to be a mildly suggestive smile before returning to the office. Opening the box, I saw it housed an ornate skeleton key nestled in a bed of black satin.

A Service agent ushered me to a door on the southeast corner on the second floor, but I didn’t need a guide; I’d been a devout Lincolnphile since my early teens and knew the layout be heart, exactly where in the White House the Lincoln Bedroom was, just as I already knew the contents of its period décor. Blindfolded, I still would have found my way there, never having to retrace my steps.

“Be sure to wear this at all times,” said the agent as we stood outside the bedroom door. He pinned a special Level-4 access badge to my chest, proof of my status as an overnight guest. I wondered who was the last before me to have slept here: a world leader, a famous celebrity, the Pope? It didn’t matter, somehow, I knew I’d feel at home.

Due to fatigue, I’d missed the tree lighting in President Park where a platoon of National Park employees had been busy throughout the day, digging, planting, and decorating, but watching the ceremony on TV from my apartment, and hearing the President of the United States mention my name, more than made up for not being there.

“With citizens like Benjamin Ballard and David Hacker as national role models, our future must surely shine bright,” he’d said, a glowing Davey posted between the president and the first lady. From the look of him, you’d think he was at the Olympics, the intrepid coast-to-coast sprinter about to be awarded a box of gold medals.

The last I’d seen of him was parting company at the White House gate, me climbing into the back of a police cruiser taking me home, Davey in the back of another cruiser taking him to a room at the Mandarin Oriental, the five star accommodation courtesy of Uncle Sam.

On the TV, the first lady leaned toward the mike. “Ben Ballard, I hope you’re watching this,” she’d said. “Tomorrow morning, while many of you are still opening your presents, Ben Ballard and David Hacker will be joining us in the Oval Office for a breakfast chat—”

Dressed in a Brunello Cucinelli cotton spa robe and matching silk pajamas, fingers entwined behind my head, I lay on the satin covers on the massive, canopied, rosewood “Lincoln bed” in the perfectly preserved room filled with period appointments, a deep reverence on my face. A portrait of the 16th president hung over my head. I’d already checked out the most significant treasure in the room, the signed and dated, fifth and final copy of the Gettysburg Address, which, as many of you must already know, was handwritten by the great man himself. No one had mentioned anything about not being allow to take photos, so naturally I took some.

Hearing a knock at the door, I dared to hope it might be the president, or maybe the first lady, come to pay a visit. Or, and I should be so lucky, Lincoln’s ghost. If that happened then it wouldn’t be the first time. The most famous incident was in 1942 when Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands allegedly heard footsteps outside her White House bedroom and answered a knock at the door, only to see Lincoln’s spirit standing in front of her. What a trip. After which she promptly fainted. But I digress.

When I stepped into the hall there was only a silver-domed platter on a serving cart. I looked up and down the hall. There was no ghost, no president, and no first lady. Not a soul.

Back in the bedroom I puzzled out the cart. I hadn’t ordered anything from room service, so I assumed it was a late-night snack, courtesy of the round-the-clock kitchen staff. When I lifted the chrome dome, I found a cheeseburger, a tub of slaw, fries, and a Coke—in some parts known as a ‘Davey Hacker Special.’ I opened the Christmas card tucked under the platter. Inside was a hand written note. It read, ‘Cheeseburgers are good for you. Cheeseburgers make you happy.’

Okay, I admit it—it made me happy.

### DAY SIX

Thirty minutes later, around midnight, still bundled in my pajamas and robe under a designer coat and slippers (‘cloud soft comfort’), I stood alone in President Park. All that daytime on-and-off napping, I hadn’t been able to sleep. A light snow was falling, dusting the magnificent evergreen. Sure, it bore a few battle scars, but still, it took my breath away, and not because its 3,000 bulbs were lit, because they weren’t—the lights went off each night at 10:00 PM. The tree was a thing unto itself. It simply was. The surrounding walkway, the Pathway of Peace, featured 56 smaller state and territory trees decorated with handmade ornaments.

Nearby, a white limousine pulled up. A beautiful young woman bundled in a mink coat climbed out, cocktail in one hand, a small terrier in the other. She set the dog on the ground. “Do it for mama,” she cooed. The dog made a beeline for the tree. She saw me standing there. “Beautiful tree,” she said, raising her glass.

A Northwest Blue spruce,” I said, because by then I’d learned a thing or two. “*’Picea pungens*.’”

“Oh, is it?”

The pooch cocked his leg against the trunk and did his thing. An ornament came loose and smacked him on the head. Startled, the dog scampered back to the limo. The young beauty scooped him up, said “Merry Christmas,” climbed in, and was driven away.

I picked up the ornament and hung it back where it belonged. “You’ll be okay,” I said, talking to the tree, not the ornament. Okay, it could have been my imagination, but hook me up to a lie detector and I’d swear the boughs stirred a little. I scooped up a handful of pine needles and inhaled deeply.

“You always talk to trees?” a familiar voice asked.

Just then, Davey Hacker stepped from behind the evergreen. Dazzled by the mighty pine, I hadn’t noticed his rig parked nearby. The flatbed was gone, replaced by a semi-trailer.

I went over to him and we stood side by side silently admiring our piney charge.

“Don’t know when I’ll be back this way,” Davey finally said. “Thought I’d take a last look.”

“You find a load back?” I asked.

“Three thousand cases of toothpaste,” he said. “Headin’ for El Paso.”

“Fluoride?”

“Tartar control. With baking soda and peroxide.”

“You taking the turnpike?”

“As far west as Quiet Dell, then I cut southwest. I better shake a leg.”

We shook hands, eased into an awkward hug, and he started for his truck.

“I’ve got a few days off,” I said when he was halfway there. “I was thinking of visiting my ‘real’ family.”

He stopped and turned.

“I could use a lift,” I said.

Davey gave it nine seconds of thought. “We’d have to set some ground rules.” he said. “Means this time you’d have to do your share of the driving. You good with that?”

“C’mon, you know I can’t handle a stick.”

“Barely an inconvenience,” he said. “I’ll teach you.”

He agreed to wait while I returned to the Lincoln Bedroom, got dressed and packed my bag. I put the key back in the box and placed it on a pillow. Taking a final look, I tipped an imaginary hat to Abe’s portrait. Oh, and in case you’re wondering, I didn’t help myself to any of the bathroom amenities, not that I wasn’t sorely tempted, because I’m sure the staff expects a certain amount of pilfering. Okay, I fibbed. I’d helped myself to a roll of toilet paper and a bar of soap, which I figured were the least likely things to be missed, unless they had someone on staff keeping track. Like I said, I’m a sucker for all things Abe.

It had turned Christmas morn, just barely, when I got back to the tree. Davey picked up my bag, escorted me to his rig, opened the driver’s door, and tossed it inside. Hey, déjà vu all over again.

“Be my guest,” Davey said, “climb in.”

I climbed in.

After a brief course in the broader points of navigating an eighteen-wheeler, we got out and switched places. Then it was my turn in the driver’s seat, to fire up the ignition and ease her into gear. The truck lurched—jolted to a hard, grinding stop—lurched again—stopped—lurched—

“Wait. Something I have to do,” I suddenly remembered.

Davey reached across and took the wheel while I fished out my cell and made a call. It rang for what seemed a long time before a light came on in a second floor White House window. A sleepy voice answered. “Yes—hello.”

“Mr. President, sir,’ I began. “This is Benjamin Ballard. Something unexpected has come up and I’ll have to postpone our breakfast this morning.”

The truck slowly circled the mighty evergreen—lurch—stop—lurch.

“Please give the first lady my apologies,” I added, and keeping it simple, ended the call.

Hand over hand, together Davey and I steered—lurch—stop—lurch—stop—and around and around and around we went.

The End