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Rumor had it that White House Chief of Staff Brad Benton was a hard man to kill. And after the second failed attempt on his life in the last three days, even Brad wasn't going to dispute the rumor.

He was learning to be very, very careful.

As he gingerly pushed open the door of the Shiloh Baptist Church in northwest Washington, D.C., he wondered how he'd reached a point in his political career where someone—anyone—wanted him dead so badly.

For that matter, he wondered how he could have lived through the events of the past few days. He'd survived the Rapture, which had claimed his wife and three children as well as nearly a third of the world's population. Then he had surrendered his life at last to Christ, only to land in a minefield of death and danger. He'd seen evidence that pointed to the murder of the former White House press secretary. He'd witnessed the horrifying rise to power of a man whom he believed to be the biblically foretold Antichrist. And then the assassination attempts: a shooter had missed him and wounded his closest aide instead. And tonight an

explosion had blasted his Alexandria apartment to bits less than an hour ago.

By the grace of God, he was still alive. He had a few cuts and bruises, though nothing major. He was lucky. That explosion had been meant to kill him.

Brad looked around the building but saw nothing out of place. He drew a weary breath. From where he stood in the foyer, he could see a light on in the back of the church, but the sanctuary seemed to be deserted.

"Hello?" Brad's fear began to mount as he surveyed the empty church. Marcus, at least, had promised to meet him here. Maybe Brad wasn't the only person in trouble right now. Brad had lost too many friends already. He began praying silently.

Brad entered the sanctuary. The only source of light in the room came from the platform area, where a warm glow emanated from the baptistery, which was mounted high in the front wall. The room was peaceful, in stark contrast to the chaos he'd left behind at his Alexandria apartment.

During the cab ride he'd realized just what could have happened to him. The tremors in his hands had spread to his entire body as shock began to set in. After the initial adrenaline rush from being on the edge of the explosion had faded, he'd felt weak and shaken.

But now the adrenaline came surging back.

"Mr. Benton?"

Brad turned to find an elderly black man watching him. He wore jeans and a work shirt with the name *Solomon* embroidered over the left pocket. He was leaning on the handle of a push broom. Brad wondered why he hadn't seen him at first.

"Yes?" Brad's eyes dropped to the embroidered pocket. "Were you expecting me, Solomon?"

"Yes, sir." The man grinned. One of his front teeth was

missing. "That's me. Solomon Grady." He patted the pocket that featured his name. "I used to work as a mechanic for the Metro system before I retired. I just never got out of the habit of wearing my name on my shirt."

"Brad Benton," he said, holding out his hand. Even in emergencies, Brad's long-ingrained political manners held sway. "Thank you for letting me in tonight. Do you know where Marcus is? Is he all right?"

"The reverend told me to expect you," Solomon said. "He's on his way. He's fine."

Brad swayed slightly with relief and exhaustion. "Good. Great, in fact. I'll wait here."

Solomon frowned. His face crumpled into a mass of wrinkles while he surveyed Brad. "I think maybe you'd better sit down, son. Looks like you've been through a lot tonight."

"Marcus told you?"

"Yes." He walked toward Brad, his steps stuttering on the wood floor as he moved in the rhythm of the very old. But Solomon's hand was steady and warm on Brad's shoulder as it eased him into a pew. "Why don't you sit, boy? After runnin' from everybody who's after you, you've got to be tired."

"Yeah." Brad knew he should say something more, but his mind was still reeling. He couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't take more explaining than he was capable of right now.

Solomon didn't seem to mind. "You just rest a minute, Mr. Benton, and I'll get you a cup of coffee. I put on a fresh pot when the reverend called."

Solomon shuffled away, leaving Brad alone in the sanctuary's semidarkness. If there had ever been a time in his life that needed prayer, this was it. Brad braced his forearms on the pew in front of him and dropped his head.

"Dear God," he whispered. The events of the last hours began to replay through his mind. "Thank You for saving my life." Had Brad not gotten that urge to check his mail to-night, he'd have been a dead man. Brad was pretty sure where that urge had come from.

That thought made him remember his daughter's letter. It was what he'd gone to the mailbox to look for. He slipped a hand inside the coat and retrieved the envelope from his pocket. Gently, he ran his finger over the elegant curves of his daughter's handwriting. Megan, his beautiful, artistic daughter who had been so much wiser than he. She was gone now, taken in the Rapture, but she'd told him last Thursday night that she'd mailed him a letter. Was it possible that so few days had passed since then? It seemed like a lifetime.

Brad carefully slit the seal on the envelope. This was the last tangible communication he would receive in this lifetime from his family. Grief and wonder washed over him as he prepared to read his daughter's words.

Dearest Daddy—

Don't know why I felt like writing. E-mail is easier, but I was talking to a friend today about 1 and 2 Timothy, and how intimate and personal Paul is in those two letters.

I realized that I hadn't told you how much we miss you. I know you're doing important work in D.C., but I really wish you'd come home.

It's selfish, I know, and I promise not to whine. Everyone's doing okay. Mom's having a hard time with you gone, but we're helping. Even Brad's not being too much of a pain, though he's taking this 'man of the house' stuff way too seriously. You never should have told him that.

My recital went well. Wish you could have been there. That stupid Middle East peace conference! Mom said she got the tape for you.

I miss you so much, and I want you to know that I pray for you every day. I pray that God will use you to do great and mighty things for Him. Stay strong, Dad. I know it's really hard. Mom tries not to tell us too much, but she lets things slip sometimes. It's got to be the pits being surrounded by people who are hostile every day. I can't even imagine what you must go through. Just know that we love you very much and can't wait until you're home.

By the way, I'm not sure if Mom told you, but I'm auditioning for a summer concert orchestra that tours the U.S. One of their stops is in D.C. If I make it, I'll be able to see you—and maybe you can catch the concert!

*Love you tons,
Megan*

A rush of tears filled his eyes. One slipped past his lashes and rolled down his cheek as he rubbed the pad of his thumb over her signature. How precious his life had been, how wonderful his family had been, and—fool that he was—he hadn't even known it. He'd taken for granted that his loved ones would always be there for him, that his political successes and ambitions were important enough to spend the last year away from Christine and his three teenage children. Had he been the Christian man they had thought he was, the man he had professed to be, then he wouldn't be sitting here now—alone, tired, and on the run. He'd be with them, gone from this world, safe in God's hands.

Behind him, he heard the door creak open. He turned so fast that the letter in his hands floated to the floor.

But it was Marcus, not some new death threat. "Good. You're here."

Brad reached down and picked up the letter, waiting for his heart to stop racing and his breath to return before he could say anything. He folded the paper carefully, put it in his pocket, and looked up at his friend.

The preacher was carrying a grocery bag and a black duffel. Clad in a sweatshirt and jeans, the normally dapper Marcus looked disheveled, as if he'd barely taken the time to pull his clothes on before rushing out the door. He set down his burden on the back pew and hurried toward Brad. "How are you? Are you all right?"

Brad considered the questions. "Define *all right*," he said at last.

"Let's stick with healthy."

"I'm in one piece," Brad said. "It's more than I deserve."

Marcus looked him up and down. "You're sure you weren't hurt?"

"I'm sure. I think I'm falling apart mentally, but I'm fine physically."

"How far were you from the explosion when you called me?"

"Half a block or so."

"I don't imagine you were thinking clearly."

"I wasn't. But I was thinking. I'm rattled but fine."

"Thank God." Marcus dropped into the pew behind Brad. "I've been praying since you called me. Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"I don't think so. I had the cab do some evasive maneuvers. Somebody might have been tailing me, but if so, I lost him. I got out a few blocks ago and walked the last bit. I didn't see anyone."

"Good," Marcus said. "I stopped to pick up some things I thought you might need. Sorry I'm late."

Brad marveled at the deep sense of kinship and brotherhood he felt with this man. Just as it was hard to believe that so much had happened in the past few days, so he found it incomprehensible that he'd known Marcus only a short time. Of course, Brad had met Marcus Dumont, a prominent black evangelist, several times at political rallies and events over the past few years, but it had taken the extraordinary event of the Rapture and the global terror that had ensued to bring the two of them together as friends and new Christian brothers.

Despite his profession and his reputation as one of the D.C. area's finest preachers, Marcus had never accepted his own need for Jesus and the grace of God. Only after the Rapture, only after he'd been forced to admit his rebellion against God, had the dynamic minister humbled himself to ask for God's mercy. Only then had he felt the peace that came from surrendering his life to Christ.

Brad understood. Despite their differences, he saw a lot of himself in his new friend.

"You look exhausted," Marcus told him.

"Yeah." Brad remembered being tired before the evening had blown up in his face. A flight across town later, he felt like he'd been hit by a truck. "I think the shock is setting in." He looked over his shoulder. "Solomon went to get coffee. He was waiting when I got here."

Marcus leaned back in the pew. "He's a good man. He's hurting right now. He lost his wife, his son, and his three grandchildren."

"Oh no." Brad scrubbed a hand over his face. A day's worth of whiskers chafed the inside of his palm. "That poor man. Sometimes I forget I'm not the only one suffering. There's so much grief out there now. You've told me that it's going to get worse. It's tough to believe that it can. I can't imagine what the next seven years are going to be like.

I'm trying to brace myself for the battle, but I have to tell you—" he gave Marcus a look—"that I almost wish I'd been killed in that explosion. At least my suffering would be over."

"But not your mission." Marcus's smile was wry. "God's not finished with you yet. Sorry."

"Good point." Brad shook his head. "My mission. Did you ever wish God had picked someone else?"

"Sure," Marcus said. "And not just me. It's a bit of a paraphrase, but in his second letter to Timothy, Paul reminds his friend that not every person in God's service is designed for the same use. Some are set apart and refined for special purposes. Some are bronze, some are silver, some are gold, and some are just wood and clay." He chuckled. "There have been times when I was perfectly satisfied to be inferior workmanship—God's wood and clay. I never asked to be bronze or silver or gold. Nor did I want to be."

"I guess I'm not alone, then," Brad said. "Does thinking that make me a bad Christian?"

Marcus laughed. The sound was a balm to Brad's raw nerves. If Marcus could still find a reason to laugh right now, then surely everything was not as bleak as it seemed.

"Are you kidding?" Marcus asked. "Do you know how many men and women in the Bible tried to tell God to look somewhere else? Most of the great ones said it at least once. Moses, Gideon, Samson, Rachel, Paul. All of them wanted out of the bargain at one time or another."

A silence settled between the two men.

When Brad didn't respond to his comment, Marcus sighed. "I know it's hard, brother. I guess the real question is: If you'd known this was coming before you accepted Christ, would you still have done it?"

Brad thought that over. He considered the way his new-found faith had sustained and encouraged him, the way

he'd found hope in the belief that he would see his family again. He was sure his loved ones were safe in the arms of Jesus. He thought about the deep bond he felt with his new Christian friends, about the courage he'd found over the past few days in the knowledge that God was protecting him and that God was with him always. Solemnly, Brad nodded. "Yeah. I would have."

"Then wanting to get out of the line of fire doesn't make you a bad Christian. It makes you normal." Marcus leaned forward and braced his arms on the pew. "Tell me exactly what happened tonight."

Brad paused for a second to gather his thoughts. Finally, he recounted how he'd driven his government-issue vehicle home, parked on his street in Alexandria, then unlocked the door of his apartment. As he prepared to go inside, he'd belatedly remembered that he was expecting a letter from his daughter, so he'd propped his briefcase in the door so he wouldn't have to fiddle with the locks again and headed back to check the mail. "I was pulling the mail out of my box when the apartment blew. I was out of the blast zone, sheltered by the foyer's enclosing wall and the building's elevator and staircase. If I'd been inside my apartment—"

"Hmm. It was meant for you then, not a blast meant to destroy something they thought might be in your place. Must have been on a timer triggered by the front door."

"That's what I figured, too."

"Did anyone see you on the street after the explosion?"

"Yes, but it was pretty chaotic. People were running out into the street to see what was going on. One man spoke to me at the mailbox, but I didn't recognize him."

"What did you say to him?" Marcus asked.

"That I was in the neighborhood visiting someone."

"Did you recognize him?"

"I think he lives three doors down."

"Good. If he hasn't seen you before, he probably believed you. If he's a neighbor, it doesn't matter. If whoever planted the bomb sent him to be sure the building blew with you in it, he clearly didn't recognize you. If so, that might buy you some time."

"That's doubtful," Brad said. "Whoever tried to kill me is going to know I escaped as soon as the police can't produce a body."

"I know, but the fire won't be out for most of the night, and the investigation won't start until tomorrow. Your briefcase was in the apartment and your car was parked in the street. For tonight, at least, I bet they'll assume you were there. I think it'll be at least a day or two before they start looking for you."

"Unless they had someone watching the house or keeping tabs on me."

"If they'd been watching the house for you, I doubt you'd have made it here alive. I think they believe that you were in that apartment when it went up."

"Probably true," Brad agreed. His head had begun to throb.

"If you don't go back there for a while—"

"I can't stay away," Brad said. "I have to get the briefcase back."

Marcus's eyebrows rose. "You think it could have survived?"

"Sure. It's fireproof," Brad explained. "And it's supposed to be bombproof. White House issue. They give them to all the staff in case we have to transport classified materials."

"What's so important that you need to risk your life for it?"

"Christine's Bible," Brad said. "I need it back."

"Oh." Marcus sighed. "I'm sorry, Brad."

"Once the fire is out, I'll look for it. If I can, anyway. I'm

sure they'll have the place roped off as a crime scene, at least until they finish the arson investigation."

"I'm still not sure how wise it would be for you to go back there," Marcus said. "Until we can figure out who's behind this, I think the best thing for you to do is stay out of sight."

"I'm getting that Bible," Brad insisted. "And some other things from my apartment, too, if they survived. I had a suitcase with the clothes Christine and the kids were wearing when they disappeared and a few other personal items. I brought those things back from California. The bag was in the back bedroom, so there might have been enough of the structure between it and the explosion to keep the suitcase out of the worst of the blast. The walls were soundproofed. It was one of the reasons I chose the building."

Brad frowned slightly as he remembered unpacking those clothes the night after he'd raced back to Washington for Senator Max Arnold's Capitol Hill hearings. Less than a day had passed before he'd felt the need to put the items back in the suitcase. He'd been unable to bear the thought of them lying in the half-filled drawers of his rented furniture. Christine had been the family-heirloom type. The cold sterility of his Alexandria apartment had bothered her, and though he'd resisted most of her attempts to personalize it for him, there had been a few pictures and mementos she'd insisted he have there to warm up the space.

Still, he had known, somehow, that she would never have been comfortable there. That thought had driven him to repack the clothes. In the back of his mind had been the idea that he should probably look into moving them somewhere more personal. It looked like his instincts had been more accurate than he could have ever guessed. "Those clothes and Christine's Bible—they're the only things in that whole place that really matter to me."

"I can understand that. We'll figure out a way to get in and search for them," Marcus assured him. "I'll ask Mariette in the morning. If there's a person alive who would have a better idea of how to access and search through a disaster area, it would be the assistant director of FEMA."

"You didn't call them when you heard about the explosion, did you? I'd hate to think they were grieving over me." Mariette Arnold and her college-aged son, Randal, were the other two members of Brad's new Christian circle. Both were now believers like him, and along with Marcus they had formed a tight bond since the events of the Rapture. Brad considered them his new family.

"No," Marcus told him. "I called Solomon to ask him to unlock the place for you, but I wanted to talk to you before I told anyone else what had happened and that you were fine."

"I can understand that, but I think we should call them now. Even though it's late, I'd hate for them to see something on the news and assume the worst."

"You've got a point. Besides, we'll need their help. I'm sure Mariette's got connections with the Alexandria police, and I'm equally sure that she's done her share of fire investigation and recovery."

"Okay, then." Brad closed his eyes and dropped his head to his forearm. "Randal's going to expect me at work tomorrow. We need to think about what to tell him. Not to mention what we should tell the White House." Having Mariette's son as his driver had been an answer to prayer—for both Mariette and Brad. Mariette appreciated the influence Brad had on Randal. Randal reminded Brad of his own son. Though new to his faith, Randal had the same zeal and fire that Brad Jr. had possessed. Randal would be outraged, Brad knew, that the bombing had happened. Un-

less he was properly briefed, he would probably be ready to brandish his spiritual sword in warfare for his friend Brad. And if he did, what would happen to him? To his mother?

"I can call now—," Marcus began.

"No," Brad said, lifting his head. "On second thought, we shouldn't call them from here. I've probably already put you at risk by being here. I don't want to endanger them, too."

Marcus tapped his fingers on the back of the pew. "What's your gut tell you about who's after you?"

Brad glanced over his shoulder. Though they were alone in the sanctuary—Solomon still had not returned—he felt the need to lower his voice. "There's only one possibility I can think of."

"You think it's related to the sniper in the parking garage?"

A few days ago, in a widely publicized incident, a sniper had breached White House security and fired at Brad in the parking garage. But Brad had moved at the critical instant, wholly by chance, and his longtime assistant, Emma Pettit, had been shot in his place. She was recovering now in a Washington hospital. At the time, Brad had wanted to believe the attack was a random act of terrorism, but tonight's events had convinced him he really had been the target.

"It has to be," he said. "And I think I know why. I've seen evidence that proves there's a murder cover-up going on among the president's closest advisors. I don't know who's behind George Ramiro's disappearance, but I do know that whoever killed him doesn't like the questions I'm asking. And it has to be a White House insider behind it. To get access to the garage the way he did, the shooter either had to be an insider or had to have a connection deep inside the White House."

"And you think the same person is behind the bomb?"

"It's unlikely that two sets of people are trying to kill me," Brad said. "So, yes, that's my guess."

Marcus nodded. "We might have to consider another possibility, Brad."

"What possibility?"

"That maybe there *are* two sets of people who want you dead. Sure, you've been pushing hard to find out what happened to George Ramiro. But remember what happened today when you and the rest of President Fitzhugh's staff watched Carpathia's little stunt at the UN? Have you considered the fact that you were apparently the only person in that room in the White House—and if the evening news is to be believed, maybe the only person in the world—who saw what happened and remembers that Nicolae Carpathia murdered those two men at the United Nations? If Carpathia's powerful enough to persuade everyone who saw it except you to overlook the horror of that, then don't you think he's powerful enough to know you weren't fooled?"

Brad's eyes widened. That afternoon, he'd watched from the White House conference room as Nicolae Carpathia—the charismatic Romanian former president and new secretary-general of the UN—murdered two of his supporters.

Given the way Carpathia appeared to fulfill certain biblical prophecies about the end times, Brad and his friends were convinced that he was not a mere man—or would not remain one for long. They believed he was the Antichrist, the biblically foretold deadly enemy of all things Christian, the harbinger of the end of days.

Brad had watched Carpathia's mesmerizing performance, understanding why people were so easily deceived by the good-looking, intelligent Romanian. And then the unspeakable had happened. Carpathia had calmly taken a firearm from one of the security guards, ordered his friend

and financial backer, Jonathan Stonagal, to his knees in front of Joshua Todd-Cothran, the former head of the London Exchange, and had summarily murdered them both. Carpathia had then turned to the observers in the room and on camera and expressed his sorrow and grief at witnessing the murder-suicide of his good friends. One by one, the occupants of the room had concurred that they'd seen Jonathan Stonagal wrestle the gun from the security guard, then kill himself and Todd-Cothran. Even the watchers in the White House had nodded at that assessment. Except for Brad.

Brad had immediately turned to his friends for advice. They had met, prayed together, and discussed the future facing them. Brad had finally left the meeting to drive home, where he'd triggered the bomb that had nearly taken his life. But not until just this instant, under Marcus's prodding, had it occurred to him that there might be personal ramifications because he'd witnessed the crime and, apparently, was the sole person to retain the memory of the murders.

"Do you think it's possible?"

"Marcus, you don't think—"

"I know it sounds incredible, but hear me out. That sniper attack might have had nothing to do with Ramiro's death. Didn't you say that the attack happened the same day you asked Emma to begin digging up information for you on Carpathia?" Marcus asked.

Brad blinked away the memory of Emma crumpling to the floor of the garage, shot in the torso and bleeding heavily. "Yes."

"And now this bomb thing." Marcus shook his head. "It may seem unbelievable, but I think that you have to at least consider the idea—"

“—that the enemy of God is after me? Unbelievable . . . you could say that.”

“All I’m saying is, we can’t rule it out.”

The idea made Brad shudder. He was a government servant, a behind-the-scenes guy not even well liked by President Fitzhugh and his people. He’d been given the job because it was politically expedient for Fitzhugh, but he’d been shut out of real power early on. In Brad’s opinion, he wasn’t important enough to be targeted by the Antichrist.

“I just can’t believe that, Marcus. I’m not in a position to threaten him. Besides, if Nicolae Carpathia is after me and he’s powerful enough to know I wasn’t deceived, then I have to believe that he wouldn’t have missed . . . twice.”

“That’s probably true,” Marcus conceded.

“So if for no other reason than to retain my own sanity, I have to believe this is about George.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I’ll lose my mind if I dwell on the other possibility.”

“You really believe that someone would want to murder you simply because you’re asking questions about Ramiro?”

“Someone murdered *him*,” Brad pointed out. “If whatever’s at stake was worth killing for once, it’s got to be worth killing for again.” He shook his head. “Admittedly, they have the worst timing in history. I’m sure that whoever killed George didn’t plan on having the Rapture happen the same night. If the killers had known that they’d have a convenient excuse to cover up George’s loss. They never would have issued the statement that he’d resigned. They just would have let people think he had disappeared in the Rapture along with everyone else.”

“And no one would have gone looking.”

“Exactly. But the resignation story—that was suspicious. Not calling to try to find George when the president needed

him to deal with the media after the Rapture was even more suspicious. It meant that they knew he was gone."

"Then why—?"

"Because it was too late. They'd let the news out before the Rapture, and they couldn't take it back. After all, explanations had to be made right away about where George was, once he wasn't where he was supposed to be. Then, after the disappearances, we were all in the Sit Room. No one knew what had happened, but the story about George's resignation had already begun to circulate. Once the cover-up had begun, it was too risky to change stories midstream. By the time we knew what was happening, it was too late to just point to the Rapture and say, 'A pity about poor old George.'"

"I can see that," Marcus said. "But that still raises the question of why someone wanted George dead. Why do you think they had him killed?"

"I'm not sure. But I have my suspicions about that," Brad told him. "And I have a reporter friend looking into it."

"Then he could be in danger, too."

"She," Brad said with a frown as he thought of Liza Cannley, the young reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* he'd tipped about the potential story. "I've thought about that, but I didn't take it seriously until tonight."

"You'll have to warn her."

"She's in California. I'll call her as soon as I can get to a secure phone. I don't think I should use my cell phone right now, not even my private one."

"That's probably wise," Marcus assured him. "You know, if you flew out to California tomorrow, you could tell her in person."

Brad heard the distinct sound of Solomon's feet shuffling as he approached. Brad wondered where the man had

been all this time. And he wondered what he should do next. He didn't want to leave D.C. How could he make Marcus understand that he wasn't the type to run? He felt like a fugitive, and he hated it. Not only that, but Brad felt like God wanted him to be in D.C. for the long term. It was, as Marcus had said, Brad's mission to be here. But Solomon spoke before Brad had a chance to express that to Marcus.

"Reverend," Solomon said.

"Hello, Solomon. Thank you for coming in tonight."

"Oh, no problem. No problem." He handed Brad a mug of steaming coffee. "Sorry it took me so long. I went ahead and made up your room."

Brad glanced at Marcus, his eyebrows raised in inquiry. "Room?"

"We have a small apartment in the back," Marcus explained. "It's left over from the building's former life as a Presbyterian church. We bought the property several years ago."

"We converted the rectory to Sunday school space," Solomon added, "but we decided to leave the parson's apartment intact."

"For times like this," Marcus said.

Brad took a sip of the coffee. No cream, no sugar, and strong enough to melt a spoon. Solomon must have thought Brad needed fortification.

Marcus stood and reached for the bags he'd placed on the back pew. He tossed the duffel bag to Brad. "I brought you some clothes. I think we're close enough in size for me to guess right."

Brad picked up the duffel bag as he forced himself to stand. His legs ached, and his head was pounding. "Thanks. I hadn't even thought that far ahead."

Marcus picked up the grocery sack. "I got you some ba-

sics, too, enough food to get you through the night. Tomorrow, we can talk about what you ought to do."

"You're sure it's okay for me to stay here?"

Solomon's laugh was genuine and warm. "Lord, son, what kind of stewards of God's house would we be if we refused shelter to one of His neediest children in a time like this? Come on. I'll show you to your room."

Carrying the bags, as well as mental burdens far heavier, Brad followed Solomon into safety for the night.