

NECESSARY
EVILS



NECESSARY EVILS

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NEESA HART



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Entertainment Weekly

His clothes smelled terrible.

The acrid scent of burning fuel and rubber from the exploding limousine clung to everything Randal Arnold was wearing. He ignored the piercing gaze of Harmon Drake, head of the Secret Service office at the White House, and sniffed his arm. It wasn't just his clothes. His skin smelled, too. He reeked of that horrible burnt-hair odor he'd experienced only once before when he'd recklessly ignited a propane grill with a too-short match.

The scent made his nose twitch. "I need a shower," he muttered.

Drake gave him a hard look discernable even in the small dimly lit room where a bank of television monitors showed the frenzy of activity that now engulfed the White House. "Are you amused by this, Mr. Arnold?"

"No. No, I'm not." Randal rubbed his hands on his trouser legs and tried not to squirm. "I just noticed that I smell like the inside of an ashtray." His gaze darted to the monitors where he could see the still-burning wreck.

Minutes ago, a limousine designated to carry the presi-

dent to the National Press Club for a major announcement had exploded near the White House portico. Acting on a tip from his boss, White House Chief of Staff Brad Benton, and information from his father, Senator Max Arnold, Randal had narrowly prevented the president and Nicolae Carpathia from boarding the bomb-laden limousine just seconds before the blast. Spouting a story about a missing security log on the lead limo—it was the truth, but not the real reason he was panicked—Randal had managed to persuade the Secret Service agent in charge of loading the motorcade to pass up and park the first car and load the president and Carpathia into the second vehicle.

The president's motorcade had barely left the White House gates when the parked limo had exploded. The force of the blast had scattered pieces of the armored vehicle across the White House lawn and knocked Randal and several other bystanders to the ground.

Still shaken, Randal had found himself plucked from the pavement and hurried to Drake's office by a Service agent. Within seconds of the blast, while White House security was still scurrying around to ensure that the president's vehicle was safely on its way to the National Press Club and had not been sabotaged too, the guard had all but shoved Randal into the hard chair near the bank of security monitors.

Randal suspected that Drake wanted a crack at him before Conner Trellis, the head of White House security, worked him over. Territorial feuds between White House security and the Service were common. It was no secret that Drake and Trellis were bitter rivals. Since the day a sniper had taken shots at Brad in the secure White House parking lot, both sides had been scrambling for jurisdiction of the case. Reggie Lawton, Drake's second in command, was heading up the Secret Service investigation, and Conner

Trellis had roundly criticized both Lawton and Drake for their lack of progress in the case.

Praying earnestly for wisdom and discernment, Randal had tried to gather his composure for the coming interrogation. He'd quoted every verse of Scripture he knew to keep himself calm, but the adrenaline rush from the blast had left him feeling boneless and weak. He could hear the steady pounding of his blood echoing in his ears. The longer he sat there, the more aware he became of the ache in his head and the sting in his shoulder. Now he tried to ignore the pain as he focused on Drake. "You know how it takes a while after a big shock like that before you start to notice stuff. Well, I knew my head hurt, and I was sure that my shoulder's killing me, but I hadn't noticed until now that I stink. Did you notice?"

"Yes. But I don't care." Drake's exasperation was evident. "I'm going to ask you again," he said. "But I have something I want you to look at first." He punched a button to rewind a security tape. Images moved across the monitor in an accelerated blur—like reading microfiche at the library.

Randal's stomach churned in queasy discomfort as his head began to swim. He closed his eyes until he heard the tape grind to a stop. Drake had paused it on a frame that showed Randal and Brad stepping into an elevator. "You entered the elevator with Mr. Benton here." Drake pushed another button and indicated a second monitor. The screen showed Randal and Brad in the elevator. "What was on that piece of a paper he handed you?"

God, please, Randal prayed wordlessly, *I need Your help. I need Your wisdom.* He didn't want to lie, but he didn't want to tip his hand either. Until he talked to Brad, he had no idea how much he should reveal to Harmon Drake—not when he knew someone was trying to kill Brad and had

already failed three times. Brad's would-be assailant could be a White House insider whom Brad was close to implicating in the murder of former press secretary, George Ramiro.

Or even worse, it might be one of Carpathia's own operatives who knew that Brad hadn't been fooled by the secretary-general's cover-up of his assassination of international financier Jonathan Stonagal and Joshua Todd-Cothran, the former head of the London Exchange. Carpathia had murdered both men the morning of his installation as secretary-general of the UN. Impossibly, he had apparently managed to brainwash all the eyewitnesses into believing that Stonagal had killed Todd-Cothran and himself in an unexplained act of violence.

Brad had witnessed the event via closed-circuit feed to the White House Cabinet Room and, unlike the other White House officials watching with him, had not succumbed to whatever evil forces Carpathia had used to alter the memories of the witnesses. Fantastic as the story seemed, Randal believed that God had supernaturally protected Brad from Nicolae Carpathia's power.

With that knowledge, however, came the very real possibility that Carpathia knew about Brad's resistance. Brad and Randal had often discussed the fact that it was highly possible George Ramiro's murderer wasn't the only person who wanted Brad dead. The chilling truth was that the Antichrist himself might be after Brad. And with good reason.

Randal rubbed his palm over the tight spot that had developed in his chest, then dragged his fingers through his tousled hair in a futile attempt to straighten it. Drake was still watching him intently. "It's like I told you," Randal said. "Mr. Benton told me earlier he'd be really tied up today with the Carpathia visit. He asked me to check on some things for him. Did I tell you already that I went to see Emma Pettit this morning?" Randal had driven to Loudon,

Virginia, to deliver a message from Brad to his friend and assistant. Emma was recovering at home after being shot two weeks earlier in the White House parking garage.

"Yes."

"Oh." The flat answer told him the other man's patience was waning. "I'm feeling a little confused. Like I said earlier, I whacked my head when I hit the ground. Maybe I've got a concussion or something."

"The paper, Mr. Arnold."

"Oh. Yeah. That. It was just a reminder note. Something Brad had asked me about. It's personal, you know. I don't really feel like I can tell you what it is without talking to Mr. Benton first."

Drake frowned slightly. "You know, Arnold, ever since Benton returned from Kansas, people have been commenting on the fact that you seem to be more like his assistant than his driver."

Randal shrugged. "Well, with Mrs. Pettit out and all that—I'm just trying to help out."

Drake looked unconvinced. "And I don't suppose that in your role as his substitute secretary, you might have come across any information that we'd find useful in this investigation?"

"I really don't pry into Mr. Benton's business. You'd have to ask him about that." For a moment, Randal thought he'd demand more details, but the older man hit another button on the remote control instead. "But whatever it was, that note sent you running from the elevator to the pay-phone bank outside the Press Room."

Randal had watched his own image hurry down the long hallway near the Press Room and duck into the phone booth. He'd never realized he was quite that tall. It was weird looking at himself like this. "I had to make a call. It wasn't a big deal."

"So you used a pay phone? Not an inside phone."

"It was a personal call. I don't like to make personal calls on House phones."

"I appreciate your conscientiousness," Drake said with unmistakable sarcasm. "Your cell phone wasn't working?"

"I don't get good reception downstairs. Maybe I should look at switching carriers. Does your cell phone work down there?"

Drake crossed his arms over his broad chest and propped one hip on the edge of the monitor rack. The only light in the room came from that bank of monitors. Limned in the glow from their screens, he looked menacing. "You are aware, of course, that every phone in the House is on auto record?"

"I guess so. Yeah."

"That includes the pay phones. You might as well tell me now. I'll have the tapes of your conversation in a few hours."

Randal didn't respond. By the time Drake got the tape of the call, Randal would be able to talk to Brad, who would know what to do. In the meantime, Randal was going to keep his mouth shut.

Drake turned his attention to the monitors again. The tape showed Randal hurrying down the hall toward the portico doors where the motorcade was parked. The president, Carpathia, and their contingent were moving steadily toward the doors when Randal rushed past. Studying the tape intently, Drake asked, "Do I need to point out to you that if anything I discover on those tapes implicates you, Benton, or whomever you called, in that limousine explosion that criminal charges will be filed?"

Like I'd have risked my neck to save the president and Nicolae if I'd been involved. But I don't think it'd be smart to say that just now. "No, sir. You don't need to point it out. I'm aware of that."

“And there’s still nothing you want to tell me?”

“I’ve told you everything I can.” Randal watched Drake’s profile. The man was obviously suspicious, and though Randal’s interactions with him had always been pleasant in the past, something told him that he couldn’t trust him now. The Holy Spirit, Randal had to believe, was prompting him, guiding him to hold his tongue. *Please, God, please show me what to do.*

Randal rubbed the knot on the back of his head while long seconds of silence stretched into agonizing minutes. As Harmon Drake watched, rewound, and watched the tapes again, Randal begged God to get him out of here so he could talk to Brad.

What Drake couldn’t seem to understand was that even if Randal had wanted to talk to him, he didn’t have many answers to give. In fact, with the very clear evidence that someone had tried to murder the president, perhaps Brad Benton as well, Randal had nearly as many questions as Drake did. That piece of paper that Brad had handed him had a single name scrawled across it: *Major Nuñez*. Randal had asked his dad for information about the guy. And that had cascaded into the whole chain of events that had led him to derail the assassination attempt, which had led him to this chair. What did the name mean? How had that name led Max Arnold to discover the assassination plot in time to stop it?

The shrill ring of Randal’s cell phone startled him. Drake’s gaze swung from the monitors to the phone clipped on Randal’s belt. “It seems that your phone is functional again. You have a call.”

Randal looked down at his cell. The phone rang one more time.

Drake met his gaze. “Answer it, Mr. Arnold. You never know. It might be important.”

Randal pulled the phone from his belt. His fingers were shaking. "Hello."

"Randal? Thank God!"

"Mom?" It was his mother, Mariette, and she sounded really upset. Mariette was the deputy director of FEMA, and she'd headed into work unusually early this morning to avoid the inevitable traffic jams and road closures Carpathia's visit to the White House would cause. She didn't have any reason to call—unless she'd heard about the explosion. By the tone in her voice, she'd heard.

"Yes, this is your mother. Honey, I just saw the news. They showed footage of you getting blasted across the White House lawn. I was worried sick. Are you all right? Why didn't you call me?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I can't talk right now," Randal said.

"Company, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I see." Mariette paused. "Do you need anything?"

"No. Like I said, I'm fine. Look, I'll call you later."

"Does Brad know what's going on?"

"I'm not sure."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do about that. And I'm going to call Marcus," she told him, referring to their mutual friend and pastor, Marcus Dumont. "I'll let him know what's happening."

"Thanks."

"I'm praying for you."

"I need it."

"Be careful."

"Mom—"

"Okay, okay. Sorry. Call me when you can."

"Yes, ma'am. Bye." He flipped the phone shut and looked at Drake. "My mom. She caught the news."

Drake hesitated for a moment, then tossed the remote

onto the control table. In two long strides, he was towering over Randal's chair. His dark gaze had turned menacing, soul-less even. Randal's head ached too much to tip it backward. Instead he stood, bringing himself to eye level with the security chief. Though Drake was uncomfortably close to him, neither man backed away. "All right, Mr. Arnold. If you're sure you have nothing else you want to say . . ."

Randal held his gaze for long seconds, then shook his head. "No, sir."

"Then get out of here." Drake waved a hand toward the door. "If you want someone to take you to the infirmary . . ."

"It's okay. I know the way."

"Fine. Have them check out your head. Maybe tomorrow you'll feel less . . . *confused*."

The subtle emphasis on the last word was not lost on Randal. "Maybe."

"In the meantime, if you find yourself being questioned by Conner Trellis, you'd be wise to remember that he may think this is his House, but the president is my responsibility. And when it comes to his security, I can be a real pain in the—"

The door of the control room swung open before he could finish. The shaft of bright light sent a spike of pain through Randal's head. "Mr. Drake?" The agent who had ushered Randal to the control room stuck his head into the room. "Eagle is on his way back to the nest."

Drake nodded. "I'll be right there."

Randal understood the code. The president's press conference was completed and the motorcade was en route back to the White House. That was good. He'd be able to talk to Brad soon.

"Get out of here, Arnold," Drake said. "I'll let you know when I need to talk to you again."



Brad checked his watch for the tenth time as the president tried, once again, to wrap up questions from the media. They'd heard the news about the explosion shortly after the president's limousine had turned off Pennsylvania Avenue. Brad, who had already been struggling with the fact that he was seated less than ten inches from Nicolae Carpathia inside the president's limo, nearly lost his composure when Carpathia started gushing about his profound thanks for the president's excellent security and their narrow escape.

Fresh in Brad's mind was the vision of Carpathia executing Stonagal and Todd-Cothran at the UN barely a week before. Though Carpathia certainly oozed the humble charm that had made him a media darling, Brad was more convinced than ever that the man was the embodiment of evil. With eyes as blue as the Caribbean waters where Brad had spent his honeymoon on a cruise with Christine, Carpathia was handsome, smooth, sophisticated, and almost irresistibly boyish. Even now, as Nicolae listened to President Fitzhugh field questions about the United States' involvement in and its position on his proposed reforms and UN programs, he appeared slightly humbled and overwhelmed by the attention paid to him by America's head of state. Had Brad not known better, he too might have fallen for the act.

Already today Fitzhugh had issued a statement to the press announcing that he was going to lend Carpathia the new *Air Force One* for the treaty signing in Jerusalem next week. All who were close to the president knew how shocking the offer had been. Fitzhugh was like a kid in a candy shop when it came to the new plane. To give up the right to make the aircraft's maiden voyage had been a major concession on the president's part.

But only those closest to the administration knew what Fitzhugh had gotten in exchange for the offer: Carpathia had finally agreed to allow the U.S. to chair the International Nuclear Disarmament Committee. Though he'd made allusions to his willingness for the U.S. to play such a prominent role, Carpathia had never formally promised Fitzhugh the chairmanship until today.

Gerald Fitzhugh's critics would be surprised to learn that the man was capable of putting the best interests of the U.S. over his own personal agenda.

As far as everyone at the White House was concerned, the meeting with Carpathia had been productive. The U.S. had given little but gained much in the game of international brinkmanship, but Brad found the entire thing highly suspicious. He alone seemed to remain immune to Carpathia's feigned naivety and false humility. Brad had noticed something odd—Fitzhugh seemed to personally dislike Nicolae when he talked about him in closed circles, but their interaction today had been nothing but cordial and warm. And it didn't feel like politics as usual.

Brad's blood chilled each time he made eye contact with Nicolae Carpathia and felt the cloak of evil that surrounded him. Ever present in his mind was the thought that Carpathia might know that Brad had not been duped by his efforts to cover up the assassination of Todd-Cothran and Stonagal. Though he strongly suspected that the same men who had murdered George Ramiro were behind the recent attempts on his life, it was not beyond reason to believe that Carpathia could count him as an enemy as well. After all, as a child of God and a follower of Christ, he was at war with the evil Carpathia served.

Brad was grateful he'd prayed with his pastor and close friend, Marcus Dumont, this morning. Marcus had prayed for a hedge of protection around Brad that would shield

him from Nicolae's evil. Both men were aware that Brad might find himself in serious danger before Carpathia's visit concluded. If, indeed, Carpathia knew that Brad had witnessed and remembered the murders at the UN, there was no telling what kind of revenge he might exact. Though Brad had discerned no animosity in the secretary-general's countenance, there was something chilling, a certain understanding in the man's eyes, that made Brad wary.

The feeling had only gotten worse when news of the explosion at the White House had come. Brad had itched to call Randal for a full report, but knew he wouldn't have the time or the necessary privacy until the press conference ended. He'd taken some comfort in the information from the White House that no one had been injured in the blast. Randal was fine, and the fact that the president's limousine—the vehicle that would have carried President Fitzhugh and Nicolae Carpathia to the Press Club—had been sabotaged, was compelling evidence that Carpathia or one of his people had not been the likely assassin. Brad found small, ironic comfort in knowing that whoever wanted him dead, it apparently was not the man who was the center of evil in the universe—at least not today.

"Mr. President," a reporter called from the back of the room, arresting Brad's attention, "about the explosion—"

President Fitzhugh held up his hand as a Secret Service agent stepped onto the dais with him. "Please. We don't have any information on that. Forrest Tetherton will keep you informed as we get the details."

"Do you think it was an attempt to stop you from signing the treaty?" another reporter demanded.

At the urging of the Service agent, Fitzhugh turned to leave. A third reporter yelled, "Was it some kind of protest?"

The president stopped to look at the crowd of reporters. His mouth was turned up in amusement. "Protests take

place in Lafayette Park across the street from my office," he said caustically. "Assassination attempts, if that's what this was, are treason."

"Do you think they were after you, or Mr. Carpathia?"

"Hard to say," Fitzhugh responded. "When you do what we do for a living, you make a lot of enemies. The Bible might call peacemakers blessed, but there are a lot of people who'd like to argue the point."

Another barrage of questions followed, but the Secret Service agent prompted the president with a hand at his elbow. "Mr. President, please. We've got to get you to a secure facility."

Fitzhugh shot Brad a look as he exited the platform. Brad understood the wordless communication and mounted the dais in an easy stride. Holding up his hands to quiet the clamor as the president and Carpathia left the room, he squared his shoulders and glanced at the faces in the crowd. He'd faced this same bunch hundreds of times, taken their questions, engaged in their banter, traded wit for wit and jibe for jibe. He respected them, and they seemed to respect him.

But today, the crowd looked different, more frustrated, desperate. He'd been noticing that same look of desperation on faces a lot lately. He'd mentioned it to Marcus. Marcus said it was the dawning of a collective understanding of the dismal state of the human race. In a world where all of God's children had disappeared, a world where now only a few new believers were struggling to bring light to the ever-encroaching darkness, people were only beginning to understand the absolute misery of life outside the Garden of Eden.

Brad rubbed a hand over his face. He was weary. The stress of the morning had taken its toll. He hoped he was projecting his usual confidence—for he was far from feel-

ing it just now. "Ladies and gentlemen, please." He waited for the room to still. "Please." His voice was lower now. "We're thankful that no one was hurt today. The president and Secretary Carpathia have made significant strides, as you know, but we have an evening of long meetings and a state dinner ahead of us." He managed a slight smile. "And I've still got to change into my tuxedo."

That won a slight laugh. The reporters often called him Fitzhugh's Fashion Plate. They didn't know that his reputation for sartorial perfection was a product of his wife's good taste, not his own. Now that Christine was gone, taken in the Rapture, Brad was on his own in more ways than one. It was, however, the least of his current problems.

Brad motioned behind him for the rest of the White House contingent to file from the room. "As soon as we have any additional information, we'll let you know."