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ONE

RAGE.

No other word described it.

Rayford knew he had much to be thankful for. Neither Irene—his wife of twenty-one years—nor Amanda—his wife of fewer than three months—had to suffer this world any longer. Raymie was in heaven too. Chloe and baby Kenny were healthy.

That should be enough. Yet the cliché *coconsumed* came to life for Rayford. He stormed out of the safe house in the middle of a crisp May Monday morning, eschewing a jacket and glad of it. It wasn't anyone in the safe house who had set him off.

Hattie had been her typical self, whining about her immobility while building her strength.

“You don't think I'll do it,” she had told him as she raced through another set of sit-ups. “You way underestimate me.”

“I don’t doubt you’re crazy enough to try.”

“But you wouldn’t fly me over there for any price.”

“Not on your life.”

Rayford stumbled along a path near a row of trees that separated a dusty field from what was left of the safe house and the piles of what had once been neighboring homes. He stopped and scanned the horizon. Anger was one thing. Stupidity another. There was no sense giving away their position just for a moment of fresh air.

He saw nothing and no one, but still he stayed closer to the trees than to the plain. What a difference a year and a half made! This whole area, for miles, had once been sprawling suburbia. Now it was earthquake rubble, abandoned to the fugitive and the destitute. One Rayford had been for months. The other he was fast becoming.

The murderous fury threatened to devour him. His rational, scientific mind fought his passion. He knew others—yes, including Hattie—who had as much or more motive. Yet Rayford pleaded with God to appoint him. He wanted to be the one to do the deed. He believed it his destiny.

Rayford shook his head and leaned against a tree, letting the bark scratch his back. Where was the aroma of newly mown grass, the sounds of kids playing in the yard? Nothing was as it once was. He closed his eyes and ran over the plan one more time. Steal into the Middle East in disguise. Put himself in the right place at the precise time. Be God’s weapon, the instrument of death. Murder Nicolae Carpathia.

David Hassid assigned himself to accompany the Global Community helicopter that would take delivery of a gross of computers for the potentate's palace. Half the GC personnel in his department were to spend the next several weeks ferreting out the location of Tsion Ben-Judah's daily cyberspace teaching and Buck Williams's weekly Internet magazine.

The potentate himself wanted to know how quickly the computers could be installed. "Figure half a day to unload, reload, and truck them here from the airport," David had told him. "Then unload again and assume another couple of days for installation and setup."

Carpathia had begun snapping his fingers as soon as "half a day" rolled off David's tongue. "Faster," he said. "How can we steal some hours?"

"It would be costly, but you could—"

"Cost is not my priority, Mr. Hassid. Speed. Speed."

"Chopper could snag the whole load and set 'em down outside the freight entrance."

"That," Carpathia said. "Yes, that."

"I'd want to personally supervise pickup and delivery."

Carpathia was on to something else, dismissing David with a wave. "Of course, whatever."

David called Mac McCullum on his secure phone. "It worked," he said.

"When do we fly?"

"As late as possible. This has to look like a mistake."

Mac chuckled. "Did you get 'em to deliver to the wrong airstrip?"

“Course. Told ’em one, paperworked ’em another. They’ll go by what they heard. I’ll protect myself from Abbott and Costello with the paperwork.”

“Fortunato still looking over your shoulder?”

“Always, but neither he nor Nicolae suspects. They love you too, Mac.”

“Don’t I know it. We’ve got to ride this train as far as it’ll take us.”

Rayford didn’t dare discuss his feelings with Tsion. The rabbi was busy enough, and Rayford knew what he would say: “God has his plan. Let him carry it out.”

But what would be wrong with Rayford’s helping? He was willing. He could get it done. If it cost him his life, so what? He’d reunite with loved ones, and more would join him later.

Rayford knew it was crazy. He had never been ruled by his feelings before. Maybe his problem was that he was out of the loop now, away from the action. The fear and tension of flying Carpathia around for months had been worth it for the proximity it afforded him and the advantage to the Tribulation Force.

The danger in his present role wasn’t the same. He was senior flyer of the International Commodity Co-op, the one entity that might keep believers alive when their freedom to trade on the open market would vanish. For now, Rayford was just meeting contacts, setting up routes, in essence working for his own daughter. He had

to remain anonymous and learn whom to trust. But it wasn't the same. He didn't feel as necessary to the cause.

But if he could be the one to kill Carpathia!

Who was he kidding? Carpathia's assassin would likely be put to death without trial. And if Carpathia was indeed the Antichrist—and most people except his followers thought he was—he wouldn't stay dead anyway. The murder would be all about Rayford, not Carpathia. Nicolae would come out of it more heroic than ever. But the fact that it had to be done anyway, and that he himself might be in place to do it, seemed to give Rayford something to live for. And likely to die for.

His grandson, Kenny Bruce, had stolen his heart, but that very name reminded Rayford of painful losses. The late Ken Ritz had been a new friend with the makings of a good one. Bruce Barnes had been Rayford's first mentor and had taught him so much after supplying him the videotape that had led him to Christ.

That was it! That had to be what had produced such hatred, such rage. Rayford knew Carpathia was merely a pawn of Satan, really part of God's plan for the ages. But the man had wreaked such havoc, caused such destruction, fostered such mourning, that Rayford couldn't help but hate him.

Rayford didn't want to grow numb to the disaster, death, and devastation that had become commonplace. He wanted to still feel alive, violated, offended. Things were bad and getting worse, and the chaos multiplied every month. Tsion taught that things were to come to a head at the halfway point of the seven-year tribulation,

four months from now. And then would come the Great Tribulation.

Rayford longed to survive all seven years to witness the glorious appearing of Christ to set up his thousand-year reign on earth. But what were the odds? Tsion taught that, at most, only a quarter of the population left at the Rapture would survive to the end, and those who did might wish they hadn't.

Rayford tried to pray. Did he think God would answer, give him permission, put the plot in his mind? He knew better. His scheming was just a way to feel alive, and yet it ate at him, gave him a reason for breathing.

He had other reasons to live. He loved his daughter and her husband and their baby, and yet he felt responsible that Chloe had missed the Rapture. The only family he had left would face the same world he did. What kind of a future was that? He didn't want to think about it. All he wanted to think about was what weapons he might have access to and how he could avail himself of them at the right time.

Just after dark in New Babylon, David took a call from his routing manager. "Pilot wants to know if he's to put down at the strip or at—"

"I told him already! Tell him to do what he's told!"

"Sir, the bill of lading says palace airstrip. But he thought you told him New Babylon Airport."

David paused as if angry. “Do *you* understand what I said?”

“You said airport, but—”

“Thank you! What’s his ETA?”

“Thirty minutes to the airport. Forty-five to the strip. Just so I’m clear—”

David hung up and called Mac. Half an hour later they were sitting in the chopper on the tarmac of the palace airstrip. Of course the computer cargo was not there. David called the airport. “Tell the pilot where we are!”

“Man,” Mac said, “you’ve got everybody chasin’ their tails.”

“You think I want new computers in front of the world’s best techies, all looking to find the safe house?”

Mac tuned in the airport frequency and heard the instruction for the cargo pilot to take off and put down at the palace strip. He looked at David. “To the airport, chopper jockey,” David said.

“We’ll pass ’im in the sky.”

“I hope we do.”

They did. David finally had pity on the pilot, assured him he and Mac would stay put, and instructed him to come back.

A crane helped disgorge the load of computers, and Mac maneuvered the helicopter into position to hook up to it. The cargo chief attached the cable, assured Mac he had the size and power to easily transport the load, and instructed him how to lift off. “You’ve got an onboard release in case of emergency, sir,” he said, “but you should have no problem.”

ASSASSINS

Mac thanked him and caught David's glance. "You wouldn't," he said, shaking his head.

"Of course I would. This lever here? I'll be in charge of this."