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CONTENTS

What's Gone On Before

1. The Ride 11
 2. In Place 21
 3. LeRoy Gets His 31
 4. Meeting the Missus. 47
 5. New Truth 63
 6. New Lives. 79
 7. The Good News and
the Bad News 95
 8. Revealing the Enemy 107
 9. Now What? 123
 10. Facing the Future 133
- About the Authors 149



What's Gone On Before

JUDD Thompson Jr. and the other three kids living in his house had been involved in the adventure of a lifetime. But it wasn't something they would have chosen.

They had been horrifyingly left alone a few weeks before when their families disappeared in the global vanishings—or, in the case of Ryan Daley, when his parents had been killed in accidents related to the disappearances.

Judd was the oldest at sixteen, the only one who could drive. His father, mother, and younger brother and sister had disappeared in the middle of the night.

Vicki Byrne, fourteen, had lost her parents and her little sister, who had vanished right out of their trailer home. Her brother, who had moved to Michigan, had also disappeared.

Lionel Washington, thirteen, had lost his

FACING THE FUTURE

parents, an older sister, and two younger siblings. His uncle, André Dupree, had been left behind too, but his recent murder had led to the situation in which the four now found themselves.

They had stumbled onto each other and a young pastor at a local church. The older three of the four had been church kids and knew immediately that the disappearances meant only one thing: What they had heard about in church, what their parents had warned them about for years, had come true. Jesus Christ had returned to snatch away his church, his true believers, in the twinkling of an eye. All over the world, millions had disappeared right out of their clothes, leaving behind everything but flesh and blood and bone.

Ryan, twelve, had had little idea what had happened. All he knew was that he was suddenly an orphan. His father had died in a plane crash when the pilot had disappeared. His mother was killed in a gas-main explosion during the chaos that followed the vanishings.

Ryan had been the last of the four to see the truth and the last to make the decision to believe in Christ, to trust him for forgiveness of sin and to assure himself that he would go to be with God when he died.

Vicki's trailer had burned to the ground. Lionel's home had been invaded and taken over by his uncle's "friends." Ryan was afraid to stay alone in his own house, especially after it had been burglarized. So, the four new Christians had settled into Judd Thompson's huge home in the Chicago suburb of Mount Prospect, Illinois. They attended New Hope Village Church and sat under the teaching of Bruce Barnes. While dealing with their grief and fear over the loss of their families, they were also striving to learn as much as they could about what had happened and what was to come.

Bruce Barnes had been that rare full-time Christian worker, on the pastoral staff, who himself had been left behind. He had lost his wife and small children to the vanishings. He knew immediately that he had never been a true believer and quickly turned his life over to God. In his grief and remorse he became an outspoken witness for Christ, telling everyone who would listen that they needed to come to God.

He also taught that the Rapture (Christ's snatching away of the church) was not the beginning of the seven-year tribulation the Bible predicted, where the earth and its inhabitants would suffer tremendous devastation and loss. No, he said, prophecy indi-

FACING THE FUTURE

cated that a great leader would arise, the Antichrist, the great enemy of God. He would make a pact with Israel, and the day that was signed would signal the beginning of the seven years.

The kids left behind were fascinated by what Bruce taught, and they wanted to be on the lookout for the Antichrist. He was, Bruce said, a great deceiver who would appear to be an attractive and articulate peacemaker and would fool many. They didn't want to be fooled. They wanted to stand and fight. And they wanted others to come to Christ too.

But in the meantime, just surviving had become a chore. Lionel's uncle André had appeared to have committed suicide after realizing he had been left behind. But when Lionel went to identify the body, it wasn't André's!

LeRoy Banks, leader of the small band that had taken over Lionel's house, had murdered an enemy and forced André to make it appear the body was his own. André first called Lionel's answering machine and left a long, rambling, pitiful message about how he was going to do away with himself. Then the deed was done in André's apartment, and the victim—about André's size—wore André's clothes and jewelry and carried his identification.

What's Gone On Before

When the body turned out to be someone else, Lionel and his new friends set about trying to find André. But when LeRoy found out that Lionel had discovered the truth about the fake suicide, he was afraid Lionel or André would reveal the truth to the police. He sent André into hiding, putting him in the apartment of another friend, Cornelius Grey.

Lionel made Cornelius Grey's sister, Talia, take him there to see his uncle. When LeRoy found out, he was sure they were conspiring to expose his murder to the police. Just after Talia and then Lionel had left André, LeRoy charged into Cornelius Grey's apartment, shot André, and set the place afire.

Judd, who had been nearby waiting for Lionel, raced into the burning building and helped Lionel drag his uncle out. But it was too late. LeRoy had murdered yet again. Now Lionel was in danger from LeRoy, who would have to keep killing to be sure no one was alive who knew what he had done.

Judd enlisted the aid of Chicago police sergeant Tom Fogarty and came up with a plan to lure in LeRoy and his friend, Cornelius ("Connie") Grey. Sergeant Fogarty set up a phony legal office in Chicago, and Vicki Byrne called Cornelius to tell him that insur-

ance money might be due him because of the fire in his apartment.

The plan was to call LeRoy from Ryan's house, just in case he grew suspicious and tried to trace the call. Ryan, Lionel, and Judd sat quietly while Vicki dialed. She threw on a very adult-sounding voice. Cornelius Grey answered the phone.

"Mr. Grey, this is Maria Diablo from the law offices of Thomas Fogarty in Chicago. Mr. Fogarty is representing the insurance company handling the settlements in the destruction by fire of your apartment building last week."

"Yeah, what do we get?"

"Well, sir, I'm not at liberty to discuss the amount over the phone, but I can tell you it is substantial. Unfortunately, the payout must go to the payer of the rent over the last several months, and our records indicate that it has not been you."

"No, the rent's been paid lately by a friend of mine, helpin' me out. Name is LeRoy Banks."

"Would I be able to speak to him?"

"Sure!"

Judd and the others heard Cornelius Grey quickly fill in LeRoy on their huge stroke of luck. "Let me have that phone," LeRoy said, clearly doubtful.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

Vicki went through the same routine with him, in its entirety, just the way Judd had scripted it. Rather than let LeRoy build on his doubts, she made the prize a little harder to get.

"Of course, sir, we would not be able to issue a check of this magnitude unless you were able to prove to us that you are the same LeRoy Banks who has been paying the rent on Cornelius Grey's apartment."

"Oh, I'll be able to prove it all right. What time did you say Mr. Fogarty could see me?"



On the way back to Judd's house, Lionel and Ryan congratulated Judd for his idea and Vicki for her performance. When they arrived, Judd prepared to call Sergeant Fogarty to fill him in on how things had gone. Not only did he want to tell Fogarty when to expect to see LeRoy Banks and Cornelius Grey, but he also wanted to beg to be there himself to see the big arrest. It was only fair that Vicki be allowed there too, but he couldn't imagine the Chicago Police Department allowing civilians close to what could become a dangerous situation.

FACING THE FUTURE

Still, he would ask. He wanted above anything to see the look on LeRoy's face when he found out he was not getting a check but rather getting arrested for murder. When Judd reached for the phone, however, it rang.

"Are you watching channel nine?" Bruce Barnes asked Judd.

"No, we're in the middle of—"

"Turn on nine," Bruce insisted. "I've got a hunch the guy they're interviewing could be the one we're supposed to watch out for."

"You mean the Antichrist?" Judd asked, grabbing the remote control. He wanted to tell Bruce the story of the sting, but that would have to wait until he talked to Fogarty.

He thanked Bruce and turned on the television, watching in fascination. "You'd better call the sergeant," Vicki suggested.

"Yeah!" he said, turning down the volume and dialing the number.

Fogarty was ecstatic, and he wasn't closed to the idea of Judd and Vicki being there when it all happened. "We have a one-way mirror at the back where my backups will be. That's where they'll come from to surprise these two when I give the signal. I think if you two agree to stay there until it's all over, you could have a great view and stay safe. It'd be too risky to have your young friend there, and we don't want the murder victim's

What's Gone On Before

nephew in the neighborhood at all that day, just in case."

"But Vicki and I can come, really?"

"Sure. Just be sure you're an hour early and park far away."

Judd couldn't wait. As he hung up he looked at his watch and decided he and Vicki would have to leave within the hour to be downtown in time to be in place. He turned up the TV and watched more of the interview with the man Bruce now suspected could be the Antichrist.

Boy, would he and Bruce have a lot to talk about the next time they got together!