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ONE

On the Edge

JUDD clung to a steel railing as the motorcycle disappeared into the river. He tried to climb the side but knocked more concrete from the edge. If Judd didn't hang on, it meant certain death. He cried for help.

The shaking stopped. Then came a splattering in the woods. *Tick, tick, tick.* He wondered if this was another judgment of God. Then something hit his head. Raindrops, slowly, then pouring.

Judd slipped and nearly let go. The rain beat fiercely. A steel support lay between him and the river. He didn't want to hit that on the way down.

His strength was giving out.

Judd tried once more and found something firm with his feet. He was almost to safety when the slab gave way and tumbled into the water. He fell back, his hands barely

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grasping the railing. Judd closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, but he couldn't hold on.

As he let go, someone grabbed his arm.



The room felt ice-cold. Everywhere Vicki saw sheet-draped bodies on tables. A hand stuck out from the body in front of her. She willed herself to pull the sheet back. The face was chalky white.

Ryan.

Dead.

Vicki screamed as she awoke. Darrion and Vicki sat up in the small tent.

"What's wrong?" Darrion said.

Through the flap Vicki watched men carrying bodies. The earthquake was over. Fires dotted the campsite, casting an eerie glow.

"Nightmare," Vicki said. "Where's Shelly?"

"Somebody came and asked for volunteers," Darrion said. "Shelly said to let you sleep."

Vicki scurried out of the tent, still wearing the same tattered clothes from the morning.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to find Ryan."

Shelly raced toward them. "Good news," she said. "A lady says they've opened a shel-

ter a few blocks from here. It's the closest one to your house, so Ryan might be there."

"Let's go," Vicki said.

"We have to wait till dawn," Shelly said.

"They're shooting looters."

"I don't care," Vicki said. "I have to find him."

"We don't need another death," Shelly said. "Get some sleep and we'll find him in the morning."

Vicki dragged herself back to the tent and tried to sleep, but she kept seeing the white, chalky face in her dream.



Lionel turned the gun over beside him on the bed. The GC insignia was engraved on the barrel of the pistol. He had signed papers that made him a Global Community Morale Monitor. He felt proud, but at the same time, things didn't seem right.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now," Conrad said, sitting next to Lionel's bed.

"Looks like you're going to be my partner," Lionel said.

"Guess so."

"You don't seem too excited," Lionel said.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to feel," Conrad said. "Everything's changing so fast. And that stuff in your luggage has me spooked."

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"What stuff?" Lionel said.

"The Bible and your journal," Conrad said. "I can't wait to get on the Internet and see if this rabbi guy will answer me."

"Maybe when we get to Chicago, we'll figure it out," Lionel said.



The man Judd had talked with on the mountain pulled him to safety. His forearm was huge, and he easily lifted Judd over the side.

"Let's get out of here before another aftershock," he yelled over the rain.

Back in the cave the man handed Judd a blanket and sat him near a fire. "We watched you from up here. You almost made it over."

"I should have waited," Judd said.

Judd was exhausted. The frightened-looking people in the cave were lucky the rocks hadn't fallen on them.

The man introduced himself as Tim Vetter. His wife was a small woman named Marlene. Tim introduced Judd then asked, "Why were you out here? Trying to get to Chicago?"

Judd wasn't sure what he should tell them. If they were somehow linked with the Global Community, he should keep quiet.

"I was traveling with a friend," Judd stammered. "He didn't make it."

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"That wasn't your bike, was it?" Tim said.

"I borrowed it," Judd said.

The other men laughed. "There's not much difference between stealing and borrowing during an earthquake," one man said.

"Tell the truth," Tim said.

"I helped a guy out, and he told me to take it," Judd said.



Was God preparing Vicki to face the death of one of the Young Trib Force? She tried to shake the idea but couldn't.

The birds were out again the next morning, singing in the few trees left standing. It seemed strange that all the sounds were perfect when the sights were so awful. She and her friends passed smoldering craters and collapsed buildings. Car taillights stuck out of the ground. Moaning and crying still came from the rubble.

The shelter was an apartment complex where workers had cleared plants and furniture from the atrium. Vicki told a guard holding a clipboard that she was looking for her brother. The guard showed them a list of names. On another sheet was a list of numbers for those who had not yet been identified. Some numbers were crossed out

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and had the word "deceased" written beside them.

Shelly pointed to a description. "This could be him."

A nurse led them to a storage room filled with beds. In the corner lay someone staring at the wall, a white bandage covering his head.

Vicki looked at Darrion and Shelly.

"You can do it, Vick," Shelly said.

"He can't talk," the nurse said.

Vicki approached warily. The face was covered except for holes for his eyes, nose, and mouth. His left arm was bandaged as well, and Vicki realized he had been badly burned.

"Ryan?" Vicki said.

The kid stared at the wall.

Vicki knelt beside him. "Ryan, it's Vicki," she said.

The boy shook his head. He motioned for pen and paper. "Not Ryan," he wrote.

Vicki sat staring at him.

"Go away," the boy wrote.

Vicki wiped away a tear. "I'm sorry you were hurt," she said.

Vicki asked the nurse if there was anywhere else Ryan could have been taken.

"A furniture store somehow made it through," the woman said. "A couple hundred survivors are there. More than we can handle."



People stirred in the cave as Judd awoke. The men huddled around the fire. Tim motioned for Judd to come and eat.

Judd was sore and had scratches from skidding on the bridge. He ate hungrily.

"Some of us are going back to look for food," Tim said. "There might be a relief site set up by the Global Community."

Judd flinched. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"Will you come with us?" Tim said.

"Think I'll try to keep going," Judd said.

Tim scratched at the embers with a stick. "There's something you're not telling us," he said. "It may be none of our business. But when you share our food and shelter, I think we deserve to know what's up."

"You've been very kind," Judd said. "I owe you my life."

Judd wondered if this was why he hadn't been able to complete the jump. Maybe God wanted him to tell his story, despite the risk.

"My name is Judd Thompson," he began.



Lionel took tests and signed more papers in the morning. Though the earthquake had

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knocked out communication and travel, the Global Community rolled on. A GC doctor declared Lionel fit and ready to continue his classes. Conrad stopped by as the doctor left.

"I don't understand," he said. "Thousands are dead or dying, but the GC has everything set up and ready to go. It's like they expected this."

"That's not possible," Lionel said.

"What if it is? Maybe they were waiting for some kind of disaster to put their next plan in motion. That would explain why they're so hot to get us out of here and on the job."

Conrad showed Lionel his gun, standard issue for Morale Monitors. "Why do they trust kids our age with guns?"

"Maybe when they see how you shoot this afternoon at the range, they won't," Lionel said, smiling.



The girls wound through neighborhoods, taking shortcuts through what had been backyards. They climbed over huge mounds of dirt and rocks, then went around craters. Smoke from the still-burning meteors made them choke.

The furniture store was on the way to the

Edens Expressway, a few minutes' drive away. But with downed utility poles, flattened buildings, pavement that had disappeared, and the girls on foot, it took much longer.

Shelly pointed to a neon sign on the ground. "My mom and I used to eat at that place," she said.

Vicki knew the furniture store. She had been there with her family. The sales staff had eyed them suspiciously, as if they knew she lived in a trailer and had neither the money nor the room for the bedroom set she wanted.

Only the roof of the building was visible. The rest had been swallowed whole. Rescue crews filed in and out, but there was no hurry. Everyone taken from the building was in a body bag.

"This could be a wild-goose chase," Shelly said. "What if he's not there?"

"We're gonna find him and take him home with us," Vicki said.

"How?" Shelly said. "What if he can't walk? We gonna carry him?"

"I'll find a way," Vicki said.

The furniture store was still standing, but there were no roads around it. Emergency vehicles pulled as close to the front as they could, then unloaded more injured.

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"Most look pretty healthy," Vicki said.
"Maybe Ryan's not that bad."

"We've got another problem," Darrion said.

Vicki gasped when she saw Global Community guards at the entrance. Only the injured and those with clearance cards were getting through.

The girls split up, then met again a few minutes later.

"The back is guarded too," Shelly said.

"The side doors are locked," Darrion said.
"There's a lot of smashed windows, but they're too high to crawl through."

"We'll have to get in another way," Vicki said, smearing mud on her forehead. She tore off a piece of her shirt.

"What are you doing?" Shelly said.

Vicki lay on the ground. "Carry me," she said. "And I expect some tears from you two!"

Shelly smiled. She grabbed Vicki's arms, and Darrion took her legs.

Vicki moaned. Shelly and Darrion began crying as they neared the store.

A Global Community guard stopped them at the entrance. "You can't bring her here."

"You have to help," Shelly said. "We have to get her to a doctor."

Darrion kept her back to the guard so he

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wouldn't recognize her. Shelly wept bitterly.
"Please help us," she cried.

"All right," the guard said. "Put her down."
Vicki rolled her eyes and winked at them.