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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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Edited by Curtis H. C. Lundgren

ISBN 0-8423-4295-8

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	What's Gone On Before	ix
1.	The Hiding Place.	1
2.	The Visitor	11
3.	Night Meeting	21
4.	The Chase.	35
5.	The River	47
6.	Over the Edge	61
7.	Pavel's News	73
8.	The Hearing	85
9.	The Plan	99
10.	Springing Vicki	115
	About the Authors	129

The Hiding Place

LIONEL saw the chopper and had to do something. Judd and Vicki looked scared. *They should be*, Lionel thought. *I have to get rid of Melinda and Felicia.*

The two Morale Monitors started toward the chopper, then turned.

"You two go and get Blancka," Lionel said. "We'll let him sort out this mess."

"They could run," Melinda said, nodding toward Judd and Vicki.

"I'm staying," Felicia said.

Lionel grabbed his gun. "If they run, I'll shoot 'em."

The girls hesitated.

"Conrad and I can handle these two," Lionel said. "Go! The commander will be waiting."

Melinda and Felicia ran toward the chop-

per, and Lionel put away his gun. "We have to hurry. Conrad, I'm assuming you're with us."

"I don't know about this God stuff," Conrad said, "but I'm with you."

"Vick and I need to get out of here," Judd said. "Question is whether you guys go with us."

"We should work behind the scenes for now," Lionel said.

"You're crazy," Conrad said. "I don't want to stay here."

Lionel shook his head.

"It's almost dark," Judd said. "They won't be able to see us soon."

"We could hide or find what's left of my house," Vicki said.

"No way," Conrad said. "The chopper's high-tech. Lights, night vision, even heat sensors. They'll spot you in two minutes."

"Time's running out," Vicki said. "If we stay here, that commander guy—"

Judd cut her off. "Ryan's place. Under the church."

"You think we can get in there?" Vicki said.

"It's worth a shot," Judd said. "Could the chopper find us under all that concrete?"

"Yeah," Conrad said. "It wouldn't be easy, but they'd still spot you."

"Not if they think we ran," Judd said. "You

The Hiding Place

two cover for us and send them the wrong way."

"If they'll believe us," Conrad said.



Judd took Lionel's flashlight. It was pitch black inside the church basement.

"You sure this is where Ryan's hideout was?" Vicki said.

"We're close," Judd said.

"Look stable?" Lionel said.

"Can't tell," Judd said, pulling at loose stones and dirt.

"Another tremor and you guys will be smashed," Conrad said.

Judd held the light while Vicki climbed through the opening. A block fell near Vicki with a sickening thud and she froze. Gathering herself, she continued.

When she reached the bottom she called out, "There's an old steel desk down here that should protect us."

Judd followed her inside. When he heard chopper blades, he turned. "What about you guys?"

Lionel pushed him. "We're OK."

"No," Judd said. "If those girls find us gone, they'll know you helped." Judd climbed out of the hole.

Lionel looked over his shoulder. "Get back inside!"

Conrad held out his gun to Judd.

"What?"

"Take it and smack me underneath the eye," Conrad said. "I'll tell them you overpowered me."

"I can't hit you."

"You're saving us both," Conrad said.

Judd took the gun and carefully hit Conrad just under his eye.

Conrad frowned. "My grandmother can hit harder than that." But his eyes watered and a red mark rose on his cheek.

"Get in there!" Lionel said, ripping the radio from Conrad's shoulder and tossing it into the hole. "Sit tight and keep an ear on that. We'll be in touch."

Judd climbed into the darkness and followed Vicki's voice to the steel desk.

A shot rang out. Then two more.

"What was that?" Vicki said.

"Lionel," Judd guessed. "Hope he knows what he's doing."



Lionel had keyed his microphone when he fired. He wanted the commander to believe he and Conrad were hot after Judd and Vicki.

The Hiding Place

But he also wanted to scare Phoenix away. It worked. Phoenix darted into the rubble of the neighborhood and disappeared.

Lionel keyed his mike. "This is Washington! The suspects are getting away! Graham got knocked down!"

Commander Blancka sounded enraged. "What's going on down there?"

"The guy hit him, sir," Lionel said, waving for Conrad to run with him. Lionel was out of breath. "He grabbed Conrad's gun! I got a couple of shots off!"

Lionel heard Melinda protest in the background. Commander Blancka said, "Where are they now?"

"We're in pursuit," Lionel said. "East of the ruined church. Send the chopper!"

Silence.

Come on, Lionel thought, believe me!

A few moments later the commander barked, "Washington and Graham, bring it in."

"They're getting away!"

"That's an order!"



Judd squeezed under the desk with Vicki. He turned the radio down. The dust made him cough. It felt good to be close to Vicki again.

JUDGMENT DAY

There was a long silence. Vicki finally spoke. "I can't believe Ryan's not coming back. Why would God let that happen?"

Judd shook his head. "I remember how hard it was for Ryan when Bruce died. It was hard on all of us, but him especially. Now I know how the little guy felt."

"He hated you calling him that," Vicki said.

Judd nodded. "He had a lot of heart. He never gave up."

Vicki sniffed, and Judd could tell she was wiping her eyes. "Sometimes it feels like God doesn't care," she said. "Like he's a million miles away."

Judd's leg cramped and he scooted lower under the desk. He braced himself on the bottom of the desk drawer and felt paper taped to the underside. Carefully, he loosened a thick packet.

"What is it?" Vicki said.

Judd put the envelope on the floor and cupped his hands around the end of the flashlight. In the dim light Judd saw Ryan's name on the front of the envelope. Judd tore it open and looked inside.

"Verses," Judd said as Vicki held the light. "Bruce's handwriting."

Judd read aloud, "Ryan, if you ever lose hope, this will help you. Isaiah 40:30-31."

The Hiding Place

Even youths will become exhausted, and young men will give up. But those who wait on the Lord will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

Judd stuffed the envelope in his pocket. "There's a whole stack of those. And stuff Ryan wrote about talking to people about Christ."

"We'll read it later, right?" Vicki said.

"For sure."



It was dark when Lionel and Conrad reached the commander. Melinda and Felicia stood near him with arms folded.

Before the commander spoke Lionel said, "Start east of the church."

"We'll handle it," the commander said, inspecting Conrad's eye. "How'd you get this?"

"Guy hit me with my own gun," Conrad said. "Made Lionel put his down too."

"Lucky he didn't kill you," the commander said. "Where's your radio, Conrad?"

"Must have lost it in the struggle."

Felicia smirked. "Or maybe you two gave it to them."

JUDGMENT DAY

Lionel turned on her. "We almost get killed, and you—"

"Enough!" Commander Blancka said. He radioed the chopper pilot. "Search the area. Let us know when you have something."

"I'm telling you, sir," Felicia said, "these two were like big pals with Lionel. Why wouldn't they take his gun?"

"How should I know?" Lionel shot back.

"He's helping them," Felicia said.

"Enough," the commander said.

"Sir, request permission to help in the search," Lionel said.

The commander said, "You're here at base until this gets straightened out."

"But, sir—"

"You're staying. Is that clear?"

The radio squawked. "Got something, sir."



Vicki held her breath as the chopper flew overhead. Judd whispered, "Sorry to get this close, but the smaller we are the better."

"It's OK."

Vicki was glad Judd was back and safe, but their troubles were starting again. She had told God she would do anything to help others come to know him, but she wanted

The Hiding Place

just one day where everyone she loved was safe. Every time she thought of Ryan she felt a pain in her chest.

The chopper hovered, then turned south and away from them.

"What happens if they catch us?" Vicki said.

Judd put his head against the desk and sighed. "Lionel's smart. He'll lead them the other way."

"Then where do we go?" Vicki said. "Every place we know is flattened. The GC are crawling all over the shelters. They're sure to spot us there."

"How about Darrion's house?" Judd said. "That bunker Mr. Stahley built under the hill was like a steel fortress. If the hill hasn't collapsed around it, we might be able to get inside."

"That's pretty far away," Vicki said. "I don't see how we can get there on foot."

"We'll have to find a vehicle," Judd said. "What do you think?"

"I'm willing to give it a shot. We just need to—"

Judd put a finger to Vicki's lips. "Some-one's outside."