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About the Authors

# At Death's Door

JUDD raised his hands and knelt with the others. Melinda pointed her gun around and tried to support Felicia, who was pale and almost unconscious, her head hanging.

"On your faces!" Melinda shouted.

Charlie, Vicki's weird friend, wandered in, holding a candle. His eyes grew large when he recognized the two Morale Monitors. "I didn't know the water was bad, I promise!"

"On the floor!" Melinda yelled.

What had Conrad and Lionel told Judd about the girls? He knew they were fiercely loyal to the Global Community and their leader, Commander Blancka. Vicki said she thought the GC had turned on them and wanted them dead. Judd watched for his chance to surprise them.

"You don't have to do this," Vicki said.

"We're not going to hurt you."

"Shut up!" Melinda shouted. She stared at Vicki. "You guys all look weird. What happened to your hair?" Melinda let go of Felicia, and the girl fell to the floor. Mr. Stein was still kneeling with his hands folded in prayer.

Melinda fired into the ceiling, and plaster fell. "I said, on the ground!"

*Nine of us, two of them,* Judd thought. *If we rush Melinda, we can overpower her, but someone might get killed.*

Judd caught Lionel's eye. Lionel clenched his teeth and shook his head. Vicki crawled toward Felicia and put a hand on her neck.

"Touch her and you die!" Melinda said, pointing the gun at Vicki.

Judd lurched forward, but Melinda quickly put the gun in his face. "You want it first, Thompson?"

Mark grabbed Judd's ankles.

"Stop," Vicki said. "I feel a pulse." She put an ear over Felicia's face. "Hardly breathing. Help me get her to a bed."

Mr. Stein moved to help.

"Leave her alone!" Melinda shouted. She fired another bullet into the ceiling, sending the kids scrambling.

"She's dying," Vicki said. "There may not be much time."

Melinda brushed dirty hair from her face. "Why would you help her?"

Vicki lifted Felicia's shoulders. "Put her in my room. It's closest."

Melinda didn't move.

"Judd, get hot water from the stove and some rags," Vicki said. "Conrad, drinking water. A lot of it."

"Not him," Melinda said, pointing to Conrad. She nodded to Shelly. "You."

"I'll get blankets, too," Shelly said.

Judd shoved a pot of water over the fire on the ancient stove. The schoolhouse still had no electricity.

"The rest of you stay here," he heard Melinda say from the other room. She called out, "And if you guys try to run, I'll shoot them."

Judd gathered rags and opened a drawer, where he found a heavy rolling pin. He banged it against his palm.



Vicki feared Felicia was near death. Mr. Stein helped prop up her head.

"If she drank from the well," he said, "there is nothing we can do. The Scriptures say thousands will die from Wormwood."

Melinda barked orders in the other room.

Shelly brought water and blankets. Vicki tried to get Felicia to drink, but she didn't respond. "If we can get her to drink, it might wash out some of the poison."

Judd brought the warm water and rags to Vicki's room, and Vicki cleaned Felicia's face. She grabbed the rolling pin from him. "You want to get us killed, Judd?"

"We have to do something," he said.

Vicki tossed it under the bed. Melinda came running.

"If we can't get Felicia to drink clean water," Vicki said, "well . . . it doesn't look good."

Melinda ordered the others into the next room. Judd glanced at Vicki on his way out.

"Why are you doing this?" Melinda asked Vicki.

"She's sick. Why are *you* doing this?"

Melinda laughed. "I'm taking every one of you back. You're enemies of the Global Community."

"So are you," Vicki said.

"What? I've been loyal to the GC since the day I signed on as a Morale Monitor."

"Then you don't know?" Vicki said.

"Know what?"

"The GC is after you. I'm surprised they haven't killed you already."

Melinda stared. "You're lying. Why would they be after us?"

Felicia coughed and gagged, turning in the bed. She grabbed her stomach and screamed, "Make it stop! Make it stop!"

Vicki tried to hold her down, but Felicia clawed at Vicki's face. "Help me!" Vicki yelled.

"Felicia, it's me," Melinda said as she helped Vicki. "Try to drink some good water."

"I don't want a drink!" Felicia screamed. She writhed and fell back, unconscious again.

Vicki felt for a pulse. Felicia's heart was racing.

"I have to get her to a hospital," Melinda said.

"Impossible," Vicki said. "She'll be dead before you get to the main road. And if the GC finds you, you'll be dead too."

Melinda stared out the window.

"Did you drink from the well?" Vicki said.

Melinda shook her head. "I had the cup to my mouth when she fell and started shaking."

"Wormwood," Vicki muttered.

"Worm what?"

"The comet's name," Vicki said. "The Bible

predicted it would fall and poison the water. It also said people would die."

Melinda rolled her eyes. "That's right, you're part of the cult."

Vicki ignored her. "It happened, didn't it?"

Melinda stared at Felicia.

"Did she drink a lot?" Vicki said.

Melinda nodded.

Vicki handed Melinda a drink of fresh water. "You have to be thirsty."

Melinda eyed it warily. "How do I know it's not poisoned?"

Vicki grabbed it, took a drink, and handed it back.

Melinda sipped the water, then drank deeply. Vicki said, "How did you find us?"

"You came back for the dog. The GC planted a chip in his neck that sends out a signal. Felicia and I grabbed the locator and followed."

"You were in GC headquarters?" Vicki said.

"We wanted to find you guys bad."

"What took so long then?"

"We lost the signal, but we spotted Lionel at a pay phone. We tried to follow him, but he was too fast. Took us a couple of days to find this place."

"The GC didn't see you?" Vicki said.

Melinda squinted. "How did you know the GC are after us?"



"Commander Blancka's been killed by the GC," Vicki said. "People who had anything to do with the Morale Monitors are being wiped out."

Vicki dripped water into Felicia's mouth. "My guess is that the GC wanted to erase any evidence that we ever existed. Didn't want to look bad."

Melinda looked away. "They did come after us. We saw them whack Blancka and figured we'd be next. I thought if we could catch Stein or any of you, we'd prove our loyalty."

"And save your own skin."

"Exactly," Melinda said. She stuck her head in the next room and pointed to Shelly. "I saw rope outside. Bring it in here. And don't get any ideas about running if you care about your friends."

Felicia spat water. Her eyes were red and hideous. Her skin, pale when she had arrived, now looked green.

*What a terrible way to die,* Vicki thought.

"I can't breathe," Felicia gasped.

"Drink more water," Vicki pleaded. "It's the only thing—"

Felicia grabbed Vicki's arm. "I can feel it going through me," she wheezed. "It's like acid, eating me up."

Vicki screamed for Judd. Melinda let him through.

"You know CPR, right?" Vicki said.

Judd felt Felicia's wrist.

"She has a pulse," Vicki said. "It's her breathing."

"Do something!" Melinda said.

Judd put his mouth over Felicia's and blew hard. The girl's cheeks puffed out.

"No good," Judd said. "Airway's blocked. Or maybe her throat's tightened up."

"What can we do?" Vicki said.

"I'm not sure," Judd said. He pulled out his pocketknife. "Hand me that ballpoint pen."

Judd took the pen apart, then leaned over Felicia, his hands shaking.

Mr. Stein pushed past Melinda, knelt, and tilted Felicia's head. "Put the pen in the boiling water, Judd; then sterilize the knife over the fire. Hurry!"

Melinda looked over Mr. Stein's shoulder. "Is she going to be okay?"

"It may only prolong her agony," Mr. Stein said, "but we have to try." He shouted for Judd to return. "There's no time. She's turning blue!"

Judd rushed back with the pen and knife. Mr. Stein made a small cut at the base of Felicia's throat. Vicki wiped away the blood as Mr. Stein inserted the pen.

"You're going to kill her!" Melinda screamed.

As Mr. Stein blew through the pen, Judd said, "She'll die if we don't get her some air."

Vicki put a hand on Melinda's shoulder. She jerked away, scowling, then went to check on the others. Color returned to Felicia's face as Vicki watched her lungs fill.

Vicki knelt by her ear. "Felicia, I don't know if you can hear me, but I have to tell you something. God loves you. He died for you so you could live with him. If you can hear me, pray this with me—"

"Get away!" Melinda shouted as she ran back in, pushing Mr. Stein away as well.

Felicia opened her eyes and stared at Melinda. The pen-tube in her neck looked eerie. She tried to take a breath, but her lungs didn't fill. Then came a horrible gurgling sound.

Mr. Stein felt the girl's wrist. He stood and left the room. Judd followed.

"What?" Melinda said. "What happened?"

Vicki looked away and covered her mouth. Mr. Stein returned with a sheet. He pulled the pen from Felicia's neck and draped the sheet over her body.

Vicki couldn't hold back the tears.



"You can't," Lionel said, grabbing Judd's arm.

"The gun might go off and kill somebody."

"I've had about fifteen chances to knock her down," Judd said. "I know I can do it."

"But you can't be sure."

"Then let's both get her."

Lionel shook his head. "You heard Vicki talking to her. She's getting through. Don't blow it now by going all macho."

"And if she comes in here and blows you and Conrad away, you'll wish I had."



Vicki wiped her eyes.

"What did you say to her?" Melinda said.

"I wanted her to know God loves her."

Melinda's eyes glazed. "You still think there's a God after all that's happened?"

"After all that's happened, I can't believe you don't."

Melinda pulled Vicki to her feet. "Get in there with the rest of them."

From the corner of her eye, Vicki saw Judd fly through the doorway. "No!" she screamed, as the gun went off.