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Edited by Curtis H. C. Lundgren

ISBN 0-8423-4313-X

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ONE

The Rescue

JUDD'S first instinct was to jump from the car and run to the Goldberg house, but Nada had been pulled inside so quickly that he had no chance to rescue her. He ran his hand through his hair. The gas gauge read almost empty.

Judd left the car running and raced toward Samuel's house. Icy wind whipped at his face. He had lived in Chicago all his life, but Judd had never felt such biting cold. He peeked in the window, but the drapes were closed.

Judd circled the house. He found the secret entrance he and Lionel had used to escape through a few weeks earlier, but it was nailed shut. He kept moving, rubbing his arms to stay warm. At the back of the house Judd climbed onto the wooden porch and stood

on a railing to reach the bare kitchen window. He took a minute to rub a small spot in the ice so he could look inside.

Shadows in the living room, beyond the kitchen. Someone yelled. If Mr. Goldberg had pulled Nada inside, they were in deep trouble.

Judd was surprised to find the window unlocked. Carefully he pushed it open.

"You are with them, aren't you, young lady?" a man yelled. Judd recognized the voice. It was Mr. Goldberg.

"I was worried about your son," Nada said. "Now that I know he is all right, I will go."

"Sit down!" the man screamed. "You're not going anywhere."

Judd pulled himself inside, careful not to make noise.

He closed the window quietly and walked toward the living room. Mr. Goldberg shoved Nada into a chair. "How do you know my son?"

Nada looked away.

The man raised a hand. Samuel shouted, "Stop!" making his father turn. "Don't hurt her," Samuel said, stepping between them. "I was supposed to call her house to say I was all right. You wouldn't let me outside."

"What are you saying? Why would you have to go outside—"

"I've been trying to tell you for days," Samuel interrupted. "I helped Judd and the other boy escape. They showed me the truth about God."

Mr. Goldberg stepped back. "Traitor," he muttered.

"I couldn't call them from here or you'd trace it," Samuel said. "What they've said about Jesus is true. He is the Messiah. I've wanted to tell you so badly—"

"Enough," his father said.

"I have the mark of the believer now—"

"Be quiet!" Mr. Goldberg slammed his fist into a lamp and knocked it to the floor.

"You're the same as Ben-Judah."

"Listen to me," Samuel pleaded. "Rabbi Ben-Judah is right. This weather phenomenon was predicted in the Bible thousands of years ago. At least let me explain it."

"The only thing I want from you is the location of the hiding place of those two."

Samuel shook his head. "I cannot betray my friends."

Mr. Goldberg turned to Nada. "Unless . . ." He leaned close.

"Father, no!"

"Perhaps *you* know where they are."

Nada glanced past the man into the shadows. Judd put a finger to his lips.

Mr. Goldberg picked up a telephone.
"We'll see how quiet you will stay when we have you at headquarters."



Lionel Washington worried about Judd and Nada. Nada's father, Jamal, had watched Nicolae Carpathia's news conference intently. Now he paced the floor, asking questions. Each time Jamal asked about Nada and Judd, Lionel changed the subject.

"Do you think Carpathia means what he said about people who agree with Dr. Ben-Judah?" Lionel said.

"Carpathia will do whatever it takes to stop these plagues," Jamal said, "just like Pharaoh in the Old Testament."

"But if this is true, we can go home," Lionel said. "And Judd and Nada—"

"What?" Jamal said.

Lionel pressed his lips together and rolled his eyes.

Jamal gritted his teeth. "Where are they?"

Lionel shook his head, angry with himself. "That kid . . . Samuel . . . he was going to talk with his dad about God. He didn't call us. Judd thought something might have happened. He and Nada—"

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"How foolish! I told Judd to stay away from my daughter."

Lionel nodded. "Judd tried to make her stay, but she wouldn't listen."

Jamal grabbed his coat and gloves from the closet and explained to his wife what had happened. She put a hand over her mouth.

"Carpathia says we're free to travel and that no one's a fugitive," Lionel said, "so we don't have anything to worry about."

Jamal glared at him. "If I get my daughter back, you and your friend may leave."

Jamal slammed the door. Lionel grabbed a coat and followed, calling after him, "They took your car!"

"I have another."

"Let me go with you."

"You've caused enough trouble!"

Lionel raced down the stairs behind Jamal. When they made it to the garage, both were out of breath. Lionel helped remove a tarp from the car. The plastic was so cold it snapped.

Jamal tried to start the car but the battery was dead. He dug around in the garage and installed another battery. The car sputtered and coughed, then finally came to life.

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"I have to come with you," Lionel said.
"You have no idea where Samuel lives."

"Your daring does not impress me. It is my job to keep my daughter safe."

Lionel lowered his voice. "I don't mean any disrespect, sir, but your daughter has a mind of her own. I know what happened to Kasim, and I'm sorry—"

"What does my son have to do with this?"

Lionel shook his head. "Maybe nothing. But maybe you're so scared of losing your other child—"

"I trust God with my family every day," Jamal said. "We risk our lives to protect his servants. We must not take needless chances."

"But just because a person is young," Lionel said, "doesn't mean God can't use him or that his ideas are too dangerous. God wants to use everybody who believes in him."

"Just tell me where this Samuel lives," Jamal said.

"Only if you let me go with you."

Jamal shook his head.

"Come on," Lionel said. "We both want them back. I can help. I'll show you exactly where they went."

Jamal frowned. "No matter what happens, you will leave my home when this is over."



Vicki and the other kids at the old schoolhouse were freezing. She believed that those with the mark of the believer would not die from this act of God. The others, who didn't have the mark—Janie, Melinda, and Charlie—looked as cold as she was and stayed as close to the fire as they could.

Melinda moved close to Vicki. Her lips were blue and she trembled. "Are we going to die?"

"I hope not," Vicki said, "but I don't know."

"For somebody who says they know the future, you're not much help."

"We don't know everything that's going to happen," Vicki said, "just what God wants us to know." Vicki put an arm around Melinda. "You don't have to be scared. You can know what's going to happen to you after you die."

"I want to know what's going to happen to me now," Melinda said, "and I want to get warm. Is that asking too much?"

Janie and Charlie scuffled near the fire. They both wanted Phoenix to sleep beside them. Mark separated them and placed Phoenix between them. "Now you see why we asked you to carry all that firewood."

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Janie cursed. Mark looked over at Vicki.

"Just leave her alone," Vicki said.

The wind howled through the walls. The generator was dead, so only the fire lit the room.

"We're going to do everything we can to stay alive," Vicki said, "but if you're afraid of dying, why not give your life to God and take care of it forever?"

Melinda pulled the cover up to her chin. "If God gets me out of this, maybe I will."

"Why wait?" Vicki said.

"I'd feel like I was cheating, you know, praying just because I'm in trouble."

"God doesn't care what gets your attention," Vicki said. "All these things—the earthquake, the cold—they're to get to you."

"They've done that."

"Good. Just ask God to forgive you and help you."

Melinda put her head back. "I'm too cold. I can't think." She grew pale. Vicki asked Conrad to help her pull Melinda closer to the fire.

"Just let me sleep," Melinda groaned.

"No way," Vicki said. "Go to sleep when you're this cold and you're dead."

"Fine," Melinda said.

Vicki patted Melinda's face and propped

her against the brick fireplace. Conrad gave Melinda one of his blankets.

Vicki prayed silently. *Please don't let her die.*



As Mr. Goldberg dialed the GC, Judd darted into the room and unplugged the phone.

"You!" the man said.

Judd looked at Samuel and Nada. "You okay?" They nodded. He turned to Mr. Goldberg. "Before you call anyone, listen to your son."

The man raised his eyebrows. "You want *me* to listen?"

"He had the chance to run, but he decided to come back for one more try. He deserves to be heard."

Judd was stunned when Mr. Goldberg sat and said, "Fine." This was too easy.

Samuel looked shocked, but he quickly stood and began. "At the stadium, the final night of the Meeting of the Witnesses, I told you I went to catch the Ben-Judah-ites. That wasn't true. I wanted to know more about God.

"What happened amazed me. People were going forward, falling on their faces. I wanted to go too, but I was scared. I was afraid of what you would say."

"You should have been," his father said.

"When I saw my friends afterward," Samuel said, pointing to Judd, "I knew they would be in trouble. I thought I could save them."

"They are enemies of the Global Community!"

"The more we talked and the more I thought about what the rabbi had said, the more sense it made."

"Nothing that man says makes sense," Mr. Goldberg said. "He is against our leader, the one man who has a plan for this world."

Samuel sat forward, elbows on his knees. "Father, I know now that there is a God and that he loves me. He loves you. He died for us."

"You say this of a god who would take your mother? A god who would allow millions to disappear and millions of others to die in the earthquake and the war?"

"My friends say there are worse things to come," Samuel said, "but this is God's way of calling us."

Mr. Goldberg smirked. "You have peculiar friends. Nicolae Carpathia is my god."

Samuel fell to his knees. "I don't want to disappoint you or disobey you. But I beg you to consider that this may be the truth. On my forehead is the mark of the sealed believer."

"Son, I see nothing on your forehead."

"You cannot see it because you are not one of us."

"Oh, I get it. You have an exclusive club where only the members can detect other members. That would be brilliant if it were true. What does this mark look like?"

Samuel looked at Judd. Judd shook his head. He didn't want anyone knowing the shape of the mark, especially a member of the Global Community.

As Samuel continued, Judd noticed a light blinking on Samuel's father's belt. Why hadn't the man pulled a gun or tried to call the GC again?

Nada jumped into the conversation. "I know all about the Global Community because my brother worked for the potentate."

"I don't care," Mr. Goldberg said. "You have information about the followers of Ben-Judah, and I want that information."

"I would never tell you," she said.

Judd knew something wasn't right. The man was too calm, almost like he was trying to keep the kids talking. A door slammed outside.

Mr. Goldberg smiled. "You didn't think unplugging my phone would keep me from

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signaling my superiors, did you?" He pulled back his coat to reveal a button. "When I pressed this it was only a matter of time before they got here."

"You shouldn't have come," Samuel told Judd.

Someone pounded on the front door.