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TABLE OF CONTENTS

What's Gone On Before.	ix
1. Jeff Williams	1
2. First Sighting	15
3. Bandits	27
4. Breaking News	39
5. Devastating News	51
6. Death Toll	63
7. Tsion's Message.	75
8. Confrontation	89
9. Mac's Story	101
10. Questions	113
11. Kasim's Plan	125
12. The Final Attack.	137
About the Authors	



ONE

Jeff Williams

VICKI Byrne stared at the man. She couldn't believe he was actually Buck Williams's brother.

"I live with my dad not far from here," Jeff said. "We've tried to keep the business going, but it's been tough."

"Business?"

"Dad owns a trucking company. We bring fuel into the state, mostly from Oklahoma and Texas. At least we used to. With everything that's happened, we're just scraping by."

Jeff explained that he had worked his way up in the family business and now handled the day-to-day operations. "Dad always thought Buck would come back and help us out, but he went away to school and we haven't seen much of him since. He wasn't here when Mom died. . . ."

As others left the house, Jeff moved toward

the door. "Better get back. Nice talking to you."

"Wait," Vicki said. "You must have come here for a reason."

"I heard about this church from a guy. This is only my second time."

"Do you have any other family?"

Jeff looked away and took a deep breath. "A wife and two children. They're gone."

"I'm so sorry," Vicki said.

"My wife was picking up our kids at a retreat in the mountains. There was an accident. Her car flipped. The state police never found her body, just her clothes."

"The night of the disappearances?"

Jeff nodded. "They found a late-night snack burning on the stove and a hundred sets of pajamas, but my kids were gone. I took the four-wheel drive up there to see for myself. Then I went to the cabin where all those kids were."

Jeff sat and put his face in his hands. "Thought I was over this. I told Dad I was finally moving on, but hearing you brought it all back."

"What was your wife like?" Vicki said.

"Sharon and I had our problems before the kids came along. We even split up for a while but got back together after she got religion. She really changed. Losing her and the

kids has been the hardest thing I've ever gone through."

"Have you talked to the pastor here about this?"

Jeff glanced at the man. "Dad would have a fit if he knew I was here. He doesn't agree with Buck that we're not Christians."

"What do you think?"

Jeff looked away.

"Your wife and children didn't die that night," Vicki said.

"Buck talked to my dad and told us his theory."

"It's not a theory. The Bible is coming true all around us every day. . . ."

"At first I thought this whole thing was like the last judgment of God. But if he took all the good people and left the bad ones, why were my dad and me left behind? What did we do to deserve this? Earthquakes, meteors, and stinging bugs. This can't be from God."

"God cares about you, Jeff. He gave his life for you, and now you've been given a second chance to follow him."

Jeff scowled. "Promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't ever tell Buck or anybody else that you saw me here."

Vicki glanced at Conrad and Shelly, who

seemed to be listening. "We won't. But we'll be here another couple of days. There are answers that you and your father should hear."

Jeff shook his head and walked toward the door. He turned and said, "Leave my dad out of this."

Conrad, Shelly, and the pastor joined Vicki. The pastor said he had seen Jeff only once before. "I tried to talk with him myself, but he slipped out before I had the chance."

"Buck has tried to get through to him, hasn't he?" Conrad said.

"Sounds like they haven't had a very good relationship," Vicki said.

"Maybe we should try to find him and his dad," Shelly said.

The pastor shook his head. "I don't want to scare him away. Let's pray and ask God to work on him."



Judd listened as Sam told more about being questioned by the Global Community. Sam didn't know for sure why he had been released, but he thought his father might have been involved. Plus, he had spoken so much about God that many prisoners had believed in Jesus. The most troubling part of Sam's

story was that Nada and her family had been taken into custody. Judd and Lionel pulled Sam aside and asked to hear the whole story.

"The guards brought Kasim and Jamal inside and treated them roughly," Sam said. "Kasim got the worst of it. They put them in separate cells so they wouldn't be able to talk. Kasim was near me."

"Did Kasim talk with you?" Judd said.

Sam nodded. "Kasim wanted to be careful. His lip was bloody and he was in a lot of pain. But he whispered that the GC came a few nights ago. Kasim and Nada slipped out a window and thought they had gotten away, but a squad car cornered them in an alley."

"How could the GC have found them?" Lionel said.

"Kweesa," Judd said.

Sam nodded again. "Kasim told me about calling his old girlfriend in New Babylon. He was sure she was the one who gave his family away. They probably traced Kasim's call."

"Then the GC know who he is," Judd said.

"Kasim thinks they'll try him as a deserter," Sam said. "And you can bet the deputy commander recognized Jamal and the rest of the family as soon as he saw them."

Judd put a hand to his forehead. "You're

right. Woodruff was questioning them in the apartment when he got stung. He'll fry them."

"We have to get them out," Sam said. "Our only chance is my dad. We should pray for him to believe the truth and then somehow release them."

"There might be another way," Judd said.



Mark Eisman tried calling Vicki throughout the day but didn't connect until late evening. Vicki said the trip to Arizona had been interesting, but she wouldn't go into detail.

"A lot's been happening here too," Mark said. "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"They're starting up school again."

"What school?"

"The Global Community Department of Education made a statement today. They're setting up satellite schools around the country. I just heard a couple days ago about the final decision."

"Let me guess," Vicki said. "Carl found out about it in Florida."

"Bingo," Mark said. "He was going through some top secret GC files and found a memo from the GC's top guy in education, Dr. Neal

Damosa. He's handpicked by Carpathia for the United North American States."

"What did the memo say?"

"They've been planning this for a long time, but with each judgment, they've had to put it off."

"Put what off?"

"Requiring everyone under the age of twenty to go through what they're calling continuing education."

"Brainwashing," Vicki said.

"Exactly," Mark said. "There are thousands of sites across the U.S. where they'll register kids and have them go through training beamed by satellite."

"What are they going to teach?"

Mark pulled up the memo on his computer screen and read parts to Vicki. *"We exist to make our students better members of the Global Community. We will teach tolerance and the ideals represented by our leader, Potentate Nicolae Carpathia.*

"Our hope is to also identify those who might be candidates for our Morale Monitor squad. Each location will be asked to screen students for this elite team of committed young people."

Vicki sighed. "I had hoped after Commander Blancka that the Morale Monitors would end."

"It gets worse," Mark said. "Listen. *Not only will we identify those loyal to our cause, but we will also target those against our goals. Some would like to see the downfall of the Global Community. No doubt they have been brainwashed by parents, friends, or heretics such as Tsion Ben-Judah. Young people who refuse to attend our learning facilities will be rounded up and processed.*"

"Processed?" Vicki said. "Like we're slabs of meat."

"They mean business," Mark said. "We showed the announcement to everybody here today, and a bunch of unbelievers left."

"Melinda and Janie?"

"No. Janie's worried about getting sent back to prison. Melinda says she's waiting until you get back before she decides what to do."

"Then we have to come home right away," Vicki said.

"You have more meetings."

"We've been gone too long. Cancel our other meetings and tell the groups we'll do our best to reschedule. I need to clear up a couple of things here, and we'll hopefully make it by the end of the week."

"I'll tell Melinda," Mark said.

"One more thing. How close is the nearest GC learning center?"

"A few miles from the town where we found Lenore," Mark said.

"Sounds too close," Vicki said. "If those people who stayed with us rat us out, we're dead. We need a plan in case the GC come looking."

"I'm on it," Mark said.

He hung up and wrote e-mails to the groups who had requested teaching from the Young Tribulation Force. He said he hated letting them down, but he hoped they would understand.

Lenore sat by Mark and looked over his shoulder. "Maybe having all those people stay with us wasn't such a good idea."

Mark kept typing. "We all agreed to take care of them. What we need is a backup plan in case any of them inform the GC about us. Any suggestions?"



Judd closed the bedroom door and huddled with Sam and Lionel. He pulled out a sheet of paper and drew a diagram. "They held me in the same jail. I know how the offices and cells are laid out. Sam, you were just there. If we can figure a way in, I think we can get them out."

Lionel shook his head. "We've done enough damage. If the GC catch us . . ."

"Damage?" Judd said. "If it were you in there, Nada would try to get you out."

"That's what's wrong with her. She shouldn't try that kind of thing."

"I'm not leaving her in there!" Judd shouted.

Sam started to speak, but the door opened. Mr. Stein walked in and sat on the bed. "I know what you're thinking, and I don't blame you. I can't imagine what Jamal's family is going through. But I can't let you attempt an escape—"

"We have to get them out," Judd said.

"Kasim's life's at stake."

"I know that. Allow me to finish. I can't let you attempt an escape without *my* help."

"You'll help us?" Sam said.

"We must come up with a plan we all agree on," Mr. Stein said. He looked at Judd and Lionel. "That should be no small task."

They laughed, then spread out several sheets of paper on the bed. They worked until early the next morning.



Vicki looked for Jeff the next day but didn't see him. She sped up the teaching and told the participants that she and her friends had to leave that night. When Vicki opened the floor for questions, kids asked about the start-up of the Global Community satellite schools.

"What should we do?" a girl asked.
"They could brainwash us, and we'll lose the mark of the believer. But if we don't go, they'll know we're against the Global Community."

"You don't have to worry about losing the mark." Vicki explained that the kids who believe in Jesus are held not by their own power, but by God's. "Each of you has to make up your own mind. By going you might be able to reach some people who don't know about God. But it might be too much for you to listen to the GC's blather."

"What are you going to do?" another teen said.

Vicki glanced at Conrad and Shelly. "I'd like to ask you all to pray for us as we head back tonight. We have to resolve some issues about the place we're staying and some people we've taken in."

Kids stood and held hands. The pastor led them in a prayer and asked God to protect Vicki and her friends as they traveled. Other kids prayed simple prayers and thanked God for bringing Vicki and the others to help them learn.

As they were praying, the door opened. Vicki looked up and noticed Jeff Williams slip into

the back of the room. When they were finished, Vicki walked up to him. "I'm glad you came back."

"What you said makes sense, but I'm not sure I can believe it."

"Why?"

Jeff frowned. "It would mean Buck was right." He sat and leaned back in his chair. Shelly, Conrad, and the pastor joined them. "I'm ticked off at Buck right now. I mean, I'm proud of him and everything. He's accomplished a lot. But he didn't even come to Sharon and the kids' memorial service."

Vicki started to speak, but Jeff held up a hand. "I know he was probably busy with a story or something. I also know I shouldn't base a spiritual decision on what Buck did or didn't do."

The pastor leaned forward. "Jeff, you know the truth now. You were left behind because you didn't have a true relationship with God like your wife did. Give your heart to God right now."

Jeff stood. "I need more time."

"I understand," the pastor said. "But don't wait too long. We don't know how many will make it through the next judgment."

Jeff turned to Vicki. "You promised not to tell my brother or anybody else that you saw me here."

Vicki nodded. She felt bad as she watched Jeff leave. She wanted him to pray right then and bring his father to the church. But she knew no one could make the decision for Jeff. He had to make it himself.

Before they left, the pastor gave the kids some extra food to take on their trip. Since the man's computer had been destroyed in the earthquake, Conrad suggested they let him have theirs. Vicki and Shelly agreed.

Vicki's phone rang. "I just heard from Carl," Mark said. "Are you sitting down?"

"Just tell me."

"Remember the guy who helped you out in Tennessee?"

"Omer?"

"Yeah. He and a bunch of others from Johnson City stormed the GC prison to try and rescue the believers."

"Is he—?"

"The GC killed most of them. Omer's gone, Vick."

Vicki slid to the floor. Shelly knelt beside her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"The worst part is that the GC were getting ready to release Omer's mom. Carl said if they had waited a few more days, everything would have been all right."