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Danger on the Road

JUDD was stunned. Vicki was gone.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Lionel and Ryan looked up from their spots on the floor before the TV. Ryan shrugged. "There's a note by the phone."

Judd grabbed it and read quickly. "Hitching to Michigan to see Bub. Back soon."

He slapped the note on his thigh and caught himself before he swore. What was he so mad about? This was his fault.

Vicki had asked him to drive her to see her big brother Eddie's buddy. Judd refused before he thought about it, telling her he felt responsible for Lionel and Ryan and had better stay with them.

"Let them ride along," Vicki had said.

"Nah," Judd said. "The roads are just starting to reopen. We don't really know where we're going. There are rumors school is going

to open again, and I'd hate to be out of state if that happens."

"You're going back to school?"

"If it opens, sure."

"Why?"

"Because we have to."

"We have to? Judd, what are they going to do if we don't show up? They'll figure we disappeared along with thousands of others. Anyway, if Bruce is right and there's a peace treaty signed between the UN and Israel, we'll have only seven years left to live. Why would I want to spend half that time in school? To learn what? The world is going to hell, and we'd be sitting in class, trying to prepare for a future that doesn't exist."

She had a point. Judd was a junior, but Vicki was a freshman. School did seem like a waste of time, but Judd didn't know what he thought about breaking the law by refusing to go. If it came to that, he assumed they would all go, Lionel and Ryan back to Lincoln Junior High, he and Vicki to Prospect High.

Judd had underestimated how desperate Vicki was to locate Bub. She had never met him, had only seen pictures and talked to him on the phone—the last time the morning of the Rapture. Her brother had met him when he ran off to work in Michigan after

high school. Eddie said he liked Bub at first because he was a wild party kind of a guy. But then Eddie became a Christian. He wasn't able to persuade Bub to quit his loose living, but he kept rooming with him anyway. It was Bub who had confirmed to Vicki that Eddie had disappeared in the Rapture.

"I've been having trouble reaching Bub by phone," she had told Judd. "I want to just go find him."

Judd thought it was a bad idea and said so. He even thought about telling Bruce, but the kids had agreed they weren't going to treat Bruce like a parent. If Judd had known Vicki was going to just leave and hitchhike to Michigan, he would have taken her himself. He hated to think of her out there alone on the road. He felt responsible for her, though he knew he really wasn't. The four of them were on their own now. They all lived together in Judd's house, sure, but it had been their choice to accept his invitation. The only rules were that they would always tell each other where they were. Vicki had fulfilled that requirement.

Judd missed Vicki. There was no other way to say it.

It wasn't that he was interested in her romantically. At least not yet. He hadn't decided how he felt about her in that way.

But she was the easiest person in the house to talk to. She would turn fifteen before he turned seventeen, so they weren't quite two years apart. Lionel was only thirteen and Ryan twelve, so although they were boys, Judd usually chose to talk with Vicki.

But she was gone, at least for a while. He worried about her.

Judd liked having Vicki around because she was a buffer between Lionel and Ryan. They squabbled all the time. Judd told himself he didn't care, but they got on his nerves. He knew they were like brothers and that down deep they liked each other and probably loved each other as brothers in Christ. They just didn't act like it.

Lionel, who had been raised in a Christian home, was a know-it-all who treated Ryan like a dummy. Well, what did Lionel expect from a kid who had hardly been to church? The whole thing made Judd feel old. Here he was, suddenly without parents, and he was worried about people who lived with him and for whom he felt responsible. All this in just a couple of weeks. It was too bizarre.



Vicki feared she had made a mistake as soon as she caught the attention of the driver of an

eighteen-wheeler. She had been praying that a family would give her a ride. If not a family, then a couple. If not a couple, then a woman. Vicki hesitated when the truck rumbled onto the shoulder and awaited her approach. She could have easily ignored him, but, after all, she *had* been standing there with her thumb out.

She prayed as she approached the passenger side. At the trailer park she had grown up in, a friend was a truck driver. So she knew how to mount the steps, open the door, and swing herself inside. But with the door open, Vicki froze. This driver was a man, and he already had a passenger—another man. She smelled alcohol and both men held beer cans.

"Well, well, well," the passenger said, "lookie what we got here!"

He was young and blond with close-cropped hair, and he wore a sleeveless tee shirt despite the chilly evening. He offered her his free hand, but she hesitated, one hand on the door handle, the other on the side of the cab. The man smiled and she smelled his breath. "C'mon in, honey. You can sit right here between us."

"Yeah," the driver said. "We'll take a lady like you anywhere you want to go!" He was muscular and sweaty.

"I was, uh, just wondering how far it is to Mount Prospect," Vicki said. There was no way she'd ride with these two.

"You know good and well where it is," the passenger said. "You had your thumb out there, honey. Now, where to?"

"Nowhere," she said and began to step back down.

"No you don't, sweetie," the young man said, and he pushed the door wide open. Vicki hung from the handle and dangled high off the ground. He pulled the door back toward him, and Vicki had to act. The last thing she wanted was to get close enough for him to reach her. She let go and dropped to the ground.

"Thanks anyway," she called out, heading toward the back of the truck as the door shut. But she knew that was not going to satisfy the truckers when the door opened again and the man bounded out, sloshing his beer can as he did.

Vicki slipped in the gravel and tried to run, her heart thundering. She was no match for a man that size. As she desperately prayed she realized how stupid she had been to take off on her own. What had she been thinking?

The man was gaining on her when another truck rolled off the side of the road, the skidding tires kicking up dust. Vicki found herself

next to the passenger door of that vehicle as it flew open. Now what?

She was relieved to see this driver was alone and older, probably in his sixties, big, barrel-chested, and with a week's growth of white whiskers. His smile disarmed her.

"You ought to be careful, hitchikin' by yourself these days, little lady," he said.

"Can you help me?" she said.

"What's the trouble?"

She pointed behind her, but when she turned, the young man had turned tail and was climbing back into the other truck. Taking no chances, Vicki leaped aboard the new truck.

"Where you going?" the old trucker said.

"Michigan," she said, noticing a leather cross dangling from the CB radio mounted above the dash.

"I can get you as far as Michigan City, Indiana," he said. "How'll that be?"

"An answer to prayer," she said.

The old man was shifting into one gear after the other every few feet, getting back up to speed as he pulled back onto the road. When he finally had the rig in the right lane and rolling with the heavy traffic, he cocked his head and stared at Vicki.

"Did you say that just to get next to me,

'cause you saw the cross? Or are you really a woman of prayer?"

"I am now," she said.

He chuckled and turned his gaze back at the road. "Aren't we all?" he said. "Call me Deacon."

"Deacon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you a deacon?"

"Actually no. But once I found the Lord and started telling everybody on the squawk box, they started calling me Deacon. I'm a little zealous I guess you might say."

"Me too."

"You a believer, Miss?"

"Vicki," she said. "With an *I*."

"Well, praise the Lord, Vicki with an *I*. Tell me your story and I'll tell you mine."

Vicki ran down her whole history before Deacon reached the state line. The ride was punctuated by occasional static from the CB radio, words she could just barely make out.

"That you, Deacon?" came one interruption. "This here's the Fat Fox."

"Hey, Fatty, how ya doin', come back."

"Seventy-threes to you, Deke. Still totin' the Lord?"

"That's a big four, Fats. You will be too if you wanna survive the flip side."

"I got the whole sermon the other day,

Deacon," the other man said. "Just saying hey."

"Well, hey back, Fox. Don't be making the Lord wait on you too long now, you hear? I want to be calling you brother next time I see you."

Deacon explained to Vicki that he liked to preach over the citizens' band radio. A lot of drivers were scared and curious since the vanishings. "I take a lot of heat for it from some. They tell me to put a lid on it or save it for Sunday, but it's way too late to be ashamed of God, don't you think?"

Vicki nodded. "Did you not believe before, or did you just not know?"

"I knew. My mother, God rest her soul, told me every day of her life. But I blamed God because she married the wrong man. He treated her wrong. Me too. I hated him till the day he died, and I always thought she deserved better than a man like that. I quit going to church fifty years ago and never went back. She sent me verses and reminders and letters and prayers every month until she died a couple of years ago. I almost got saved at her funeral. I knew what they were saying was the truth, but I figured that if I came to Jesus I would have too much apologizing to do. Three former wives, you know."

Vicki wondered why he thought she'd know.

"Anyway, my last wife became a Christian about six months after she left me. She wanted to come back, make things right, clean me up, get my life straightened out. I didn't want any part of it. She warned me that Jesus would come back and I wouldn't be ready. Boy, was she right! When everybody disappeared, I only needed to know one thing: Was Janice here or gone? As soon as I knew she was gone, leavin' her waitress uniform right where she stood, I knew it was true. I knew what to do, who to pray to, and what to say."

"Me too," Vicki said. "Quit drinking and smoking too."

Deacon tilted his head back and roared with laughter. "You got off the sauce and the cancer sticks when you got saved too, did you?"

"Yes, sir!"

He laughed louder. "Is that a fact?"

"Yes, it is, and I don't think it's funny. Why are you laughing?"

He wiped his eyes and down shifted. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said. "You just don't hit me as the hard-livin' type, if you know what I mean."

"You should have seen me three weeks

ago," she said. "I never thought I would look like this, talk like this, or act like this either. Most people called me trailer trash."

"Grew up in a park?"

"Yes, sir. Prospect Gardens."

"I know the place. No garden, is it?"

"Never was. Asphalt and dirt."

"And some indoor/outdoor, right?"

"Sir?"

"That plastic indoor/outdoor carpeting that's supposed to fool people into thinking you've got a yard?"

She laughed. "We sure enough had a slab of that ourselves," she said.

Vicki told him of the trailers that had burned, and of her brother's friend Bub, who had been left behind.

Deacon was quiet for a few miles and appeared thoughtful. "Ever wonder if he doesn't want to be found?" he said finally.

Vicki shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference. It's like God put him in my heart and I have to be sure he knows the truth."

"Not everybody reacts well, you know," Deacon said.

Vicki nodded. "That's OK. I'm just supposed to tell him."

Deacon told her that he wouldn't feel right about leaving her at the Michigan state line, not knowing whether she got a ride to Port-

age. "I'll sit with you as long as I can at the truck stop there," he said. "I want to make sure you catch a ride with somebody I know and trust."

"Thank you, Deacon," she said.



Judd wished Vicki had told him she was going with or without him. He would have at least made her promise to call him once in a while so he'd know she was all right. Now how would he get word to her about school? Loudspeakers began blaring late Friday night, informing residents to tune in certain radio and TV emergency-broadcast stations. "Local schools will reopen a week from tomorrow," came the announcements, "and those stations will carry the details."

"What details?" Ryan said, and he and Lionel joined Judd in front of the TV.

"Listen and find out, stupid," Lionel said.

"I just figured you'd know, genius," Ryan said.

"Knock it off, you two," Judd said. "I want to hear this."

"We already know what they're going to say," Lionel said. "We know when, we know where, and we know what. School. Yuck."

"You both go to Lincoln, right?" Judd said. Lionel nodded.

"Me too," Ryan said. "But we're not in the same classes."

"At least I have *something* to be thankful for," Lionel said.

Judd shushed them as the list of schools came up. As the names of junior highs scrolled past, Judd read, "Formerly Lincoln Junior High, now Global Community Middle School."

Lionel seemed to flinch. "Why would they do that?" he said. "Change a perfectly good name. I liked going to a school named after a great president."

The phone rang.

"I'll get it," Ryan said. Judd let him as he watched the high school listings. But the station did better than just list the openings. The news of Prospect High was accompanied by film footage of the changing of the sign out front.

"It's for you," Ryan said from the kitchen phone. "Judd!"

Judd heard him but didn't respond. He stood, staring at the screen. A cherry picker and crane on the back of a truck hoisted a workman to the Prospect High sign. As Ryan nagged him from the kitchen, Judd saw the man on TV trade one sheet of plastic for

NICOLAE HIGH

another that slid in front of the lights on the sign.

Prospect High was no longer. His school would now be known as Nicolae Carpathia High. The sports mascot would also be changed. The teams formerly known as the Knights would now be the Doves.

"C'mon, Judd!" Ryan whined. "It's Bruce for you."