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ONE

On the Run

SOMEONE was following her in a car. Vicki clutched her books to her chest and walked toward town. She didn't look back. She couldn't risk letting them know she suspected.

Mrs. Jenness had let her go. That was a surprise. But Vicki would have stayed all night without ratting on her friends. But would her friends be as faithful to her?

Seeing Shelly and her mother in the principal's office had sickened Vicki. Shelly had been sincere about her faith, hadn't she? Could it have been an act? The sight of Judd, John, and Mark turning away from her down the hall made her heart sink. Didn't they care? Or were they trying to protect her by keeping their distance?

Vicki had a good idea who was following her: someone from school assigned to see where she went. Perhaps Judd and the others

BUSTED!

had figured that out. They wouldn't have simply abandoned her.

Vicki had to get back to her friends. She had to talk with Pastor Bruce. When Mrs. Jenness discovered she had no parents, all the kids would be at risk. She needed to keep moving and stay away from Judd's house.

Vicki looked in shop windows and followed the reflection of the trailing car. When it stopped, she ducked into a drugstore. She sat at a bench in the back and tapped out a message on the tiny digital system on her wrist that looked like a watch. She asked Judd to meet her at a nearby park. She would try to shake whoever was following her and meet him there.

The front door opened. A man's voice. Loud. "Did a girl with red hair come in here?"

Vicki crouched beneath the prescription window.

"Right there," the cashier said.

Vicki looked up. The overhead mirror ran the length of the wall and angled down. The man behind the counter pointed toward her. Vicki remembered how her little sister, Jeanni, used to play hide-and-seek by sticking her head in the closet, her rear sticking out of the coats.

"Duh," Vicki said as she leapt to her feet.

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"Stop!" the cashier shouted.

Vicki pushed open a door that said
EMPLOYEES ONLY.

"Hey, you can't go in there!" the pharmacist barked.

"We'll get her," someone shouted.

Vicki locked the door behind her. Footsteps and shouts outside. Darkness inside. Vicki fumbled for a light switch. Keys were jangling, getting closer.

"What did she take?" someone said.

Vicki moved toward a thin strip of light on the other side of the room. The back door! She tripped over a chair and banged her head. The doorknob jiggled behind her.

She leaned against the back door, and it swung open to blistering light. A siren rang just above her head. She staggered out. As the door swept shut she read, "Emergency Exit Only—Alarm Will Sound."

She ran.



Judd had waited in his car after school, hoping Vicki would walk that way. After twenty minutes he was about to leave for Lionel and Ryan's school when his wrist messenger vibrated and he saw Vicki's message. He quickly sent another to Lionel and Ryan:

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"Get home and keep watch. I'll be there as fast as I can."

The park had been a late-night teen hang-out. With the rise in crime, a lot of kids were afraid to go there. Judd sat in the parking lot looking at the empty swing sets. Before the disappearances, the place would have been full of little kids. Now there were no families at picnic tables or moms and dads with strollers. It was a ghost town.



"Get the car," the loud man said. "I'll meet you at the end of the alley."

Vicki heard shuffling and then silence. She didn't want to rise up from her hiding place, but the smell was overpowering. She peeked from under the lid of the huge garbage bin. No one. Something furry moved behind her. She bolted.

Vicki ran down the alley. She was halfway to the main street when a car passed. A second later it was back.

"There she is!" a man said, but she didn't see his face. She was running the other way. The alley fence was way over her head—no time to climb. Every door she tried was locked. The car pulled behind her and gunned the engine.



Judd had been so focused on getting to the park and alerting Ryan and Lionel that he forgot to let Vicki know he was waiting.

He backtracked, slowing to look in shop windows and down alleys. He heard the screech of tires and swerved to miss an oncoming car barreling around a corner. He drove past the drugstore and hung a left. Judd sped past an alley and slammed on his brakes. Vicki ran toward him, the car bearing down on her.

Judd made a U-turn and opened the passenger door. Vicki jumped in. "Go, go, go!" she shouted.

"I don't mean to be rude," Judd said, speeding away, "but you look awful."

"Thanks," Vicki said, panting. "Just get me out of here!"

Judd sped through a yellow light. The car behind had a red, but it ran through the light, swerved to miss oncoming traffic, and kept gaining.

"Who is that?" Judd said.

"It's gotta be Handlesman or somebody he told to follow me. They want us bad."

Judd turned at the next light, then into an alley. They careened around another corner and through an empty parking lot.

BUSTED!

"Hang on," Judd said as he crossed a patch of grass and turned into a tree-lined subdivision. He flew across a bridge, spun in the entrance to a park, and came to a halt behind some shrubs. The trailing car was nowhere in sight.

"Better stay here awhile just to make sure," Judd said. "Who gave you the shiner?"

"A filing cabinet, I think," Vicki said.

Through gasps, Vicki told Judd about her interrogation at school. Judd told her they had listened to Shelly and her mother through the bug in Mrs. Jenness's office.

"What did Shelly say?" Vicki asked. "How much were you able to hear?"

"We heard Shelly crying and her mother yelling at her to give you up," he said. "Not much more."

"Then maybe they pushed her into it," Vicki said. "At least that's what I hope."

Judd sniffed. "Is it me, or is there an odor in here?"

Vicki blushed. "I hid in a garbage bin."

Judd pulled a blackened piece of banana peel from her hair. "Pretty resourceful."

"And gross," Vicki said, shuddering and rubbing her arms. "I hate goose bumps."

"Are you cold?"

She shook her head. "Judd, they told me to bring my parents tomorrow."

"They don't know about your mom and dad?"

"If they do, they're not letting on."

Judd paused. "Uh, I want to thank you. We couldn't hear the interrogation, but we could tell you handled yourself well. We were all impressed."

"You would have done the same for me."

"Mark wanted to rescue you. Said we should give ourselves up."

"He didn't think I could handle the pressure?"

"He didn't think it was fair to put you through it."

"I could've choked Handlesman," Vicki said. "He treated me like some dumb little girl, like I'd never have the brains to put two sentences together, let alone a newspaper."

"Don't worry," Judd said. "You'll get your chance to show him Monday morning."

"You're not going through with it again, are you?"

Judd nodded. "Why not? If Bruce is right, the treaty between Israel and Carpathia will be headlined around the world. We can't pass this up. We have to tell people what's ahead."

"Bruce says the treaty signals the beginning of the Tribulation, right?"

BUSTED!

"Exactly," Judd said.

"But how are you gonna get the *Underground* inside? You've got the guard checkpoint, cameras, and every teacher in the school on the lookout."

Judd shrugged. "We've got God on our side."

Vicki ran through all her options, and none seemed very good. Judd waited until dusk to start the car.

"Can we stop and see Bruce on the way home?" Vicki said. "I want to see what he thinks."

"He could pretend to be your father," Judd said.

"That'd be lying," Vicki said. "He'd never do that."

A few cars lined the New Hope Village Church parking lot. *Maybe the Tribulation Force is meeting*, Judd thought. He parked in front and kept the engine running. He waited while Vicki dashed inside. He flipped to a news station on the radio.

"Not a day has passed without some major development with new UN Secretary-General Nicolae Carpathia," the reporter said. "And today was no exception. Cincinnati Archbishop Peter Cardinal Mathews, who some see as successor to the vanished pope, announced a new cooperative religion that

would incorporate the tenets of all major religions. He calls it the Global Community Faith."

"Our religions have caused much division and bloodshed," Cardinal Mathews droned. "From this day forward we will unite under the banner of the Global Community Faith. Our logo will contain sacred symbols from religions that represent all, and from here on will encompass all. Whether we believe God is a real person or merely a concept, God is in all and above all and around all. God is in us. God is us. We are God."

Judd shook his head. What a pack of lies.

"We will elect a pope," Mathews said. "And we expect that other major religions will continue to appoint leaders in their usual cycles. But these leaders will serve the Global Community Faith and be expected to maintain the loyalty and devotion of their parishioners to the larger cause."

The reporter continued. "United Nations Secretary-General Nicolae Carpathia said the move toward one religion is a welcome change."

"We clearly are at the most momentous juncture in world history," Carpathia said. "With the consolidation to one form of currency, with the cooperation and toleration

BUSTED!

of many religions into one, with worldwide disarmament and commitment to peace, the world is truly becoming one.'"

"Another incredible development came when Nicolae Carpathia answered questions regarding the rebuilding of the Jewish temple and the future of the Islamic Dome of—"

Vicki jumped in the car and slapped the radio off.

"Go!" she shouted.

"What's going on?"

"Look," Vicki pointed.

Running toward them was an angry Coach Handlesman. Judd sped away.

"What's he doing here?" Judd said.

"Bruce's office door was kinda open, so I knocked. All of a sudden Coach Handlesman starts yelling! He accuses Bruce of crimes, says he'll have him thrown in jail. I was outta there."

"How could Coach Handlesman know about Bruce?"

Vicki shook her head. "Maybe Shelly gave them his name. Bruce went with me to her house."

"Great," Judd said. "I didn't want to drag Bruce into the middle of all this."

Judd parked near his house and watched for Coach Handlesman. When he was sure

On the Run

they had eluded him, Judd pulled inside the garage and lowered the door.

Lionel and Ryan peppered them with questions until late.

"No lights tonight," Judd told them. And the four would take turns watching the street.