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# Danger in the Cafeteria

VICKI Byrne saw the flash. *A knife*, she thought. Her friend Janie turned and screamed as a girl approached with the crude object.

"I'm sorry, Darla," Janie whined. "I'll get you the stuff today. Tomorrow at the latest."

"You won't be gettin' me anything," Darla snarled. "You're goin' down."

Janie scooted under the lunch table and out the other side. Now only Vicki separated Janie from harm.

"I got no problem with you, Byrne. Outta the way."

Janie hunkered down behind Vicki. She knew the damage a homemade shank could do.

"I don't have a problem with you either, Darla," Vicki said. "Put that away. We can settle this without anybody getting hurt."

## DEATH STRIKE

"I said I'd make her pay if she stiffed me again."

Vicki looked for a guard. Darla had waited for the right moment to bring out the knife.

"I didn't stiff you!"

"Shut up, Janie," Vicki said. She turned to Darla. "What if she gives your money back? Then everything's square, right?"

Janie tapped on Vicki's shoulder and whispered, "I don't have it."

"That's it," Darla yelled, pushing past Vicki and lunging toward Janie.

Vicki grabbed Darla's arm and pulled her down as a sharp pain invaded Vicki's side. Someone screamed. A whistle blew. Shouting. People crowded around, looking at her. A guard pushed people away.

"She's bleeding!" Janie yelled.

Vicki felt woozy. The room spun. Something warm ran from her side. The guard shouted, "Leave the knife in! You'll do more damage if you take it out!"



Judd passed the security gauntlet at Nicolae High. There were more Global Community guards this year. Mrs. Jenness, the principal, kept watch at the front.

Judd had vowed to become valedictorian

of his class. Speeches he had heard during the most tumultuous year in history left him hollow. If he had the chance, he would use the opportunity to give a speech his classmates and their parents would never forget.

Judd had never had to work for good grades. But his newfound faith had encouraged him to study the Bible like never before, and the discipline helped in other areas. Before the disappearances, several students had been ahead of him academically. Many of them had vanished. The rest he could pass with straight A's. He set his mind toward the goal.

But Judd had problems. His father's money was quickly running out. The monthly bills, the trip to Israel, and the expense of the *Underground* had drained the account. If he didn't come up with an answer soon, he would be forced to sell the house.

Throughout the summer, Judd and the others had written Vicki. When she wrote back, she seemed hopeful, but Judd could read between the lines. Northside Detention Center was an awful place. Pastor Bruce Barnes told Judd and the others to keep praying. He was working on a plan.

Between his many trips overseas, Bruce had put the Young Tribulation Force through

a rigorous discipleship program. Ryan called it Bible Boot Camp. Judd couldn't believe how much they were growing and learning. And it was fun. Each new insight and memorized verse made him feel stronger. He had once seen the Bible as difficult to understand. Now each passage was a challenge, a truth waiting to be uncovered.

When Bruce was away, Chloe Steele took them through their daily paces of study and memorization. Her friendship had meant a lot to Lionel and Ryan as well. Nothing could stop the pain of losing Vicki. They had no idea when or if she would ever return.

"Thompson, in my office," Mrs. Jenness said. "Now!"

The last time the two had been face-to-face, Judd was in a police station under suspicion for involvement with the *Underground*.

As soon as Judd was seated, Principal Jenness said, "Your friend, Coach Handlesman, is continuing his reeducation with the Global Community. He probably won't be back. At least not here."

"What does that have to do with me, ma'am?" Judd said.

"If the coach really was behind the underground newspaper as he claimed, that little problem should disappear."

*Danger in the Cafeteria*

"And what does that have to do with me?" Judd said without blinking.

"Maybe nothing," she said, studying him. "Just listen carefully during the assembly. The new directives from the Global Community apply doubly to you."



Vicki awoke to searing pain and cried out.

"Lie still and I'll get you something," the nurse said.

Blood stained the sheets. A bandage stretched across her wound. Vicki was afraid to look at it.

"You're lucky," the nurse said. "Didn't hit any vitals. But we had to stitch you up and give you a shot for infection. That was a pretty rusty shank."

The nurse left as Mrs. Weems came in the room. She was a large woman whose presence was felt anywhere she went.

"Care to tell me your side?" Mrs. Weems said.

"I'm fine, thank you," Vicki said.

Mrs. Weems snarled, "You're a strange kid, Byrne. You're different."

"Thank you," Vicki said.

"I hate different. To survive here you have to learn to get along."

## DEATH STRIKE

"That's what I was doing," Vicki said. She explained what had happened.

"That was Janie's last chance," Mrs. Weems said.

"She didn't do anything."

"She was selling drugs," Mrs. Weems said. "She'll be shipped downstate to an adult facility."

Vicki had heard the hard juvenile cases were being treated as adults, but she didn't want to believe it.

"And me?"

"Come to my office as soon as you can move. I have some papers that need to be signed."

"Papers?" Vicki said.

"When you can walk, you're out of here."

"I'm going downstate too?" Vicki said, but Mrs. Weems was already out the door.



The fieldhouse was full. Incoming freshmen were required to sit in the front. Most hung on Mrs. Jenness's every word. Several times Lionel turned around and looked at Judd. Lionel rolled his eyes each time. Mrs. Jenness welcomed students and introduced key faculty members. To her right were Global Community guards in uniform.



*Danger in the Cafeteria*

"Looks like they're stepping up security," John whispered.

"Why do they need eight guards?" Mark said.

"It is our hope," Mrs. Jenness said, "that when you look back at Nicolae Carpathia High School twenty years from now, you will think of a time of unprecedented peace and learning."

*In six years, I won't be thinking about this place at all,* Judd thought.

"Last year a faculty member caused great anxiety on this campus," Mrs. Jenness said. "He is no longer with us. We are grateful that the Global Community peacekeeping forces have been given the power to enforce the new rules."

Mark caught Judd's eye. "Sounds like trouble," he said.

"Belief is a private matter. Individuals must come to their own conclusions. Our new policies include zero tolerance for those who push their beliefs on others. Any student, faculty member, or other employee doing this will suffer quick and severe punishment."

Judd saw several freshmen look at each other. They had to wonder what Mrs. Jenness was talking about.

## DEATH STRIKE

"Students will be expelled, their records destroyed. Hopes for higher education will be lost. Those involved in any divisive activity like last year may be sent to a Global Community reeducation facility."

John leaned over and whispered, "Are these just threats?"

"See all the extra cameras in the hallway?" Judd said.

A freshman raised a hand. Mrs. Jenness shook her head. "We'll save time for questions. Now I want you to see another move toward school unity."

Two students, a boy and a girl, walked on stage and stood by the podium. The boy wore black pants and a gray shirt. The girl wore a black skirt and a gray top. On the left shoulder of both shirts was a dove, the new mascot of the school.

"I liked it better when we were the Prospect Knights," John said. "It's hard to root for a football team called the Doves."

Judd stifled a laugh.

"Beginning tomorrow," Mrs. Jenness continued, "you may purchase these uniforms in the school bookstore. Those who object to our symbol of peace may opt to wear this." She held up the same style of shirt, but in place of the dove was a huge red X.



Vicki winced with each step, but she had to know what Mrs. Weems was talking about. Blood oozed from her wound as she made it to the office.

"You should have listened to me," Mrs. Weems said. "You shouldn't have run away from the foster family."

"I didn't," Vicki said. "When I became friends with their disowned daughter, I knew they wouldn't let me stay."

Mrs. Weems leveled her eyes at Vicki. "Everyone in here is as innocent as Anne of Green Gables. Learn from this, Byrne. Don't get sent back here a third time."

Mrs. Weems shoved a stack of papers toward her. "Sign."

"What are these?"

"Adoption papers."

"What?"

"It's your choice. If you'd rather stay here—"

"No," Vicki said. "I'll sign, but—"

"You want to know where you're going?"

"Exactly."

"You'll find out tomorrow."