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The Search Begins

RYAN heard movement in the hospital hallway and scrunched behind Bruce's bed. "I gotta go now," Ryan whispered. Bruce wasn't moving anymore. "You get some rest. I'll tell everybody you said hi."

Ryan squeezed Bruce's hand. Bruce didn't respond.

Ryan tiptoed to the stairwell door without being noticed. He closed it gently and bolted down the stairs. When he came out on the first floor, he ducked into the gift shop and bought licorice and a candy bar. He slipped past the older woman at the desk and calmly walked out the emergency-room doors.

Outside, three women were smoking. For a moment, Ryan couldn't get his bearings. Had he come from the right or left?

"Which way to Kirchoff Road?" Ryan said.

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A frail woman tried to speak but coughed violently. She pointed to the right.

"Thanks," Ryan said, and he was off.

It felt good to be on his bike again and heading home. Ryan wanted to tell Judd about his visit with Bruce. He knew Judd would be ticked, but he didn't care. Ryan would just laugh and take Phoenix for a run in the park.

As he rode toward a hill, he heard a plane overhead. It was flying low. Too low. Ryan looked up in time to see the underside of the fighter jet. The roar was deafening. Ryan was sure it was going to crash.

He glanced down just as his front tire hit the curb. Ryan struggled to stay up and swerved into the street. Just as he gained control, an earth-shattering explosion behind him threw him to the pavement. His bike skittered ahead. He saw blood on his elbow and a huge hole in his jeans.

Tires screeched. A van was sliding toward him! He stared, frozen, as it demolished his bike and stopped within inches of his face.

He smelled gasoline. Fire crackled behind him. Screams filled the air. More planes flew overhead. Another explosion. Then another. The van backed up and tried to get around him, but his bike was caught underneath. Ryan grabbed the front bumper and pulled

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himself up. The driver was looking back. The man on the passenger side was short with a round face and looked like he needed a shave. Ryan saw something move in the back of the van.

The driver turned and yelled. The other man banged on the window and screamed, "Get outta the way, kid!"

Ryan ran to check his bike. The crumpled handlebars were caught between the back wheel and the bumper. With the explosions and noise around him, his first thought was to run. Find shelter. Get to safety.

But something drew him to the van. He peered through the tinted window. Nothing. He cupped his hand to block the light and was barely able to make out a kid with heavy gray tape over his mouth. Ryan tapped on the window, and the kid turned. *Blindfolded!*

"Get away from there!" the short man yelled as he jumped out and tried to pry the bike loose. "Stupid kid."

Ryan studied the rear license plate, but the short man yelled, "Help me with this!"

Ryan felt the heat from the explosions, and the smoke made it hard to breathe. He yanked the bike loose and watched the short man throw it aside.

"What's wrong with that kid?" Ryan said.

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"What kid?"

"The one with the duct tape."

The man looked at him menacingly. "You didn't see nobody, understand?" The man jumped into the van, and it sped off.

Suddenly it stopped and screeched back right at him. He ran to the hill. The van was right behind him as he neared the top. Flames and smoke rose into the air. Before Ryan could see what was on the other side, the van slid to a stop in the grass, and both men jumped out.

"Get him!" the driver yelled. Before Ryan could react, the short man was on him. They threw him into the back of the van. Ryan banged his head on an armrest and lay on the floor. From there he could see only the kid's hands. Riding boots. Long fingernails. *Weird*, Ryan thought.

The men held Ryan down and taped his hands and feet. He kicked and screamed with all his might, but they were too strong. They laid him sideways beneath the seat. "Sorry, kid," the short man said as the van sped away. "Can't take no chances."

"You're king of the double negative," Ryan said, "you know that?"

The man ignored him and wrapped tape around the back of Ryan's head and over his mouth. *Getting this off is really gonna hurt,*

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Ryan thought. Before the man tied the blindfold, Ryan could see only black smoke out the window. He wondered if he would ever see Bruce or his friends again.



The police, as usual, put Lionel on hold. Finally a cop came on and said, "Your friend will show up, okay?"

"You don't understand," Lionel said.

"No, *you* don't understand," the officer interrupted. "World War III just broke out, in case you didn't notice. We got fires, we got people trapped in rubble, looters, more bombs. Now stop buggin' us. Find him yourself."

Lionel wanted to scream.

"Don't call the police again," Judd said. "All we need is them snooping around here."

"We should at least try to find Ryan," Lionel said. "He'd do that for you."

"I wouldn't want him to," Judd said. "That puts everybody in danger."

"Then why'd you go out this morning?" Lionel said. "That put us in danger."

"That was before the bombs started," Judd said.

Vicki and Chaya pleaded with them to

calm down. "We need to pull together," Vicki said.

"I don't even want to survive," Chaya said. "Going to heaven has to be better than living without my mother or Bruce or Ryan."

Lionel crossed his arms and shook his head.

Vicki put a hand on Lionel's shoulder. "We all want to find him," she said. "It's just hard to even think straight."

"He probably went to his stash of Bibles," Lionel said. "He could be there hiding—or the place could have been bombed and he's trapped."

"Does anybody know where he hides them?" Judd said.

"I was with him when he started picking them up," Vicki said, "but he never showed me where he put them."

Judd sat on Lionel's bed and rubbed his face with both hands. "Let's go through this one more time," Judd said. "You're sure Ryan wasn't at the hospital?"

"We didn't see him," Vicki said. "And they don't allow kids in intensive care."

"That's what I told him," Judd said. "He thought I was trying to shut him out."

"You were!" Lionel said.

"I was trying to take care of him," Judd said. "Let's back up. Ryan was mad because

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we didn't let him in on the meeting about Mark."

"So was I," Lionel said.

"He wanted to go see Bruce, and I told him to forget it."

"Yeah, that's when he took off," Lionel said.

"When he came back he brought me a card and asked me to give it to Bruce when I saw him."

"And you said you would, *if you had the chance*," Lionel said. "If you hadn't been so—"

"This is not helping," Judd interrupted.

"What kind of card?" Vicki said.

"Excuse me?" Judd said.

"What kind of a card did Ryan get for Bruce?"

"Why does that matter?" Judd said.

"It was something about heaven," Lionel interrupted, trying to remember. "That's it. He found a card that looked like heaven, and he wanted Bruce to see it."

"What did you do with the card?" Vicki said.

"I left it over there. Hey, it's gone!"

"He *was* there!" Vicki shouted.

"What are you talking about?" Judd said.

"On the nightstand by Bruce's bed there

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was this card, blue sky with clouds—like heaven. That has to be Ryan's card. He could have gotten someone else to deliver it, but the nurses and the orderly hadn't seen him, so it only makes sense that he gave it to Bruce himself."

"But how?" Judd said.

"You sell him short," Lionel said. "He's a lot smarter than you think."

Judd hung his head. "He may have been inside when the bomb hit."

"You guys don't know him like I do," Lionel said. "If he saw Bruce, he would have come back here fast. He'd have wanted to tell you, Judd. He'd have been juiced about it."

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know," Lionel said. "That's why we have to go back to the hospital."

More explosions rocked the van when they drove away, but then the bombing stopped. The traffic must have been bad. Ryan felt lots of stops and starts. The men didn't say much, and with the tape over his mouth, Ryan couldn't talk to the other kid.

Every time the van stopped, Ryan slid forward and hit his head on the metal posts under the captain's chair. The short man laughed at him. Ryan finally managed to roll onto his side and position himself so he

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wouldn't get hurt at every stop. The floor of the van felt filthy.

Ryan tried to pick up sounds, but mostly he heard the hum of traffic. Someone kept punching buttons on the radio. Finally a news station interviewed an eyewitness to the bombings. A flurry of reports about the damage followed. There were chaos and terror throughout the world. New York City had been hit.

"Ah, who cares about New York?" the driver said. "Maybe it'll clear up some traffic."

The short man laughed, and someone turned up the radio.

". . . devastating carnage everywhere in the heart of Manhattan," the reporter said. "Bombed-out buildings, emergency vehicles picking their way through debris, Civil Defense workers pleading with people to stay underground."

Ryan thought of Chloe and Buck. Their apartment was in New York. They had been in Chicago the week before, but could they have gone back before the bombing?

Ryan heard the panic in the reporter's voice. "I'm seeking shelter myself now, probably too late to avoid the effects of radiation. No one knows for certain if the warheads

were nuclear, but everyone is being urged to take no risks. Damage estimates will be in the billions of dollars. Loss of life is impossible to determine. . . ."

"You think those bombs we came through were *nuc-u-lar*?" the short man said.

"Shh, I'm trying to hear this," the other man said.

"All major transportation centers have been closed or destroyed," the reporter continued. "Huge traffic jams have snarled the Lincoln Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, and every major artery out of New York City. What has been known as the capital of the world looks like the set of a disaster movie."

The other kid sniffled throughout the ride. They were speeding when a huge blast shook the earth. The short man cursed. "Look at that mushroom cloud!" he shouted.

A few minutes later the Cable News Network/Global Community Network coverage explained the blast. "Our news base in Chicago has been taken out by an incredible explosion. The bomb has flattened O'Hare International Airport. No word yet on whether this was an attack by militia forces or a Global Community retaliatory strike. We have so many reports of warfare, bloodshed, and death in so many major cities around

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the globe that it will be impossible for us to keep up with all of it."

"What luck," the driver said. "Can you believe this timing? Even if the kid's dad goes to the cops, they'll be so busy, they won't have time to worry about us."

The traffic slowed; then the van took sharp turns. Finally they stopped. Ryan heard a garage door open, then they drove inside. It sounded as if the two men carried the other kid away. Then they came back for Ryan. They cut the tape over his ankles, and he climbed, still blindfolded, three flights of stairs. The place smelled of wood, and boards creaked under his feet. Ryan heard horns, sirens, and a rumbling. *A train*, he thought. He knew from going to Cubs games with his dad that the elevated train snaked through Chicago, and he guessed it was somewhere along the miles of that track that he'd been taken. But he couldn't be sure. He had been in the van an hour and could even be in Wisconsin or Indiana.

Someone pushed him from behind and steered him to a door. He heard a key in a lock and the driver arguing with the other man.

The short man said, "You should have just kept going and left him there."

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"Too late now," the other man said.

"I could take him to the river or, well, there's a hundred ways to take care of him."

"Let's keep 'em both for now," the driver said. "Stick him in the utility room."

Someone cut the tape from Ryan's arms and pushed a greasy cheeseburger and some fries into his hands. When the man ripped the tape from Ryan's mouth, it took a patch of hair from his neck, and Ryan yelped.

"There's no easy way to do that," the man said. "Sorry."

He led Ryan into another room and took off his blindfold. The room was dark.

"Keep walking," the man said. "Mattress is on the floor. And you two keep quiet."

Ryan sat, letting his eyes adjust. A thin strip of light sneaked underneath the door. Heavy curtains blocked light from outside. Ryan held his hand in front of his face but could barely see it.

The other kid's voice startled him. He hadn't expected the voice of a girl.

Judd, Lionel, and Vicki hurried back to Northwest Community Hospital through massive traffic jams. Smoke still hung in the air. Emergency crews picked through the rubble looking for survivors. Though there were scores of emergency vehicles and hundreds

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of people, an eerie silence hung over the search.

Judd explained their situation to a guard.

"Did anyone inside survive?" Vicki said.

"They found a baby," the guard said.

"Only others I know of were three women on their smoke break outside. They were taken to Lutheran General."

"Maybe one of them saw Ryan," Lionel said. "Let's go."