

DEDICATION
To Reagan Michael

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	What's Gone On Before	v
1.	Caught	1
2.	Rayford's Message	15
3.	A Frightening Future	29
4.	Chaya's Grief	41
5.	The Visitor	55
6.	Lionel's Dilemma	67
7.	Judd's New Friend	81
8.	In Hiding	95
9.	Discoveries	109
10.	Secret Documents.	123
11.	The Wrath of the Lamb.	137
	About the Authors	



ONE
Caught

JUDD Thompson Jr. held his breath. The head of the Tribulation Force was about to ask the rabbi to become their new spiritual leader. The other kids joined Judd to listen outside the door. The Trib Force was meeting with a man Nicolae Carpathia hated. Judd couldn't help thinking about the danger.

Rayford Steele, Nicolae Carpathia's pilot, led the rabbi into the room. Rayford looked at Judd and smiled, then left the door slightly ajar. The other kids crowded around.

"Tsion, my brother," Rayford said, "we would like to ask you to join our little core group of believers. We're not asking for an immediate decision, but we need a leader, someone to replace Bruce."

As Judd watched, Tsion rose and placed his hands atop the table. The man was only in his forties, but to Judd he looked much older. The rabbi spoke with a shaky voice.

"My dear brothers and sisters in Christ," Tsion said, "I am honored and grateful to God for saving my life. We must pray for those who helped me escape.

"I am sad, but I see the hand of God Almighty guiding me. I am right where he wants me. I need no time to think it over. I have prayed already. I will accept your offer to become a member of the Tribulation Force."

Judd saw tears in the eyes of the other group members as Tsion said, "I cannot promise to replace Bruce Barnes, but I will dedicate the rest of my life to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, my Messiah."

With that, the man seemed to collapse in his chair, and the others in the room knelt.

"Come on," Judd whispered.

"I knew he'd accept," Ryan said when the kids returned to the living room, "but how do you pronounce his name?"

"Just say 'Zion,' " Chaya said. "That's pretty close in English."

"Do you think he'll teach us like Bruce did?" Lionel said.

"I don't think we'll have much contact with him," Judd said. "After the memorial service tomorrow, they'll probably keep him hidden."



Lionel awoke Sunday morning knowing it might be the toughest day of his life. The excitement and tension of the past week had kept him from thinking much about Bruce. But now, on the day they would say good-bye, he felt a pain deep in his chest.

There had been no funeral for Lionel's family. On the morning of the disappearances, he had discovered only the clothes of his parents and siblings. His older sister, Clarice, had been reading her Bible. His mother had been kneeling in prayer. Lionel still wondered if she had been praying for him at the moment she vanished. He felt so guilty for being left behind. He had known the truth but had not acted on it.

But today was different. Unlike his family, the body of Pastor Bruce Barnes would be there. He could see it. Touch it.

Lionel thought back to his first meeting with Bruce. He had felt so alone that day. The man let them watch a video that explained what had happened. Then Bruce told his own story. God had Lionel's attention. He finally understood that being a Christian wasn't following a set of rules or doing certain things. It had to do with his heart.

And his heart ached. It was hard to lose every member of his family. He had taken them for granted, his mom and dad especially. But losing Bruce was different. When Bruce spoke of spiritual things, Lionel really listened. Now Bruce was gone. Lionel wondered if he would ever have another teacher like him.



Vicki and Chaya stayed at Loretta's house overnight. The next morning they kept to themselves as the adults got ready for the morning service.

"I need a favor," Chaya said. "My mother's funeral is this afternoon as well. You know my dad doesn't want me there, but I have to go."

Vicki placed her hand on Chaya's shoulder. "You don't have to say anything more," Vicki said. "I'll go with you."



Two hours before Bruce Barnes's service began, the Young Trib Force met at New Hope Village Church. Judd prayed, "Give us wisdom and help us do what's right."

Judd welcomed John and Mark. The two

Caught

cousins quickly updated the group. John was off to college in a few days. Mark had rebounded from his scrape with death in the militia. "I'm not going back to school," he said. "I'd like to help you guys any way I can."

"We can use it," Judd said. He looked at the kids gravely. "This is not how Bruce planned it," he said. "I'm sure he wanted to live until the Glorious Appearing of Christ. But that won't happen now. Nobody elected me leader, so I'm open to a vote—"

"We don't need that," Lionel interrupted. "You go ahead."

The others agreed.

"I haven't done things perfectly," Judd said. "When Ryan and I went to Israel with that pilot, Taylor Graham, we may have led the Global Community straight to us.

"And I've done other stupid things. More than once, I was mad at Bruce because I thought he was treating us like kids. Now I know he just cared."

Judd saw Vicki wipe her eyes, and he looked away. He had to hold it together until the service.

"For some reason, God let this happen to Bruce," he continued. "And one of the things Bruce told us was that when bad things happen, they will either turn you away from

God or draw you closer to him. You'll run away or become more committed."

"I want to be more committed," Ryan said.

"Me too," Lionel said.

"Then we have to face the facts," Judd said.

"First, Bruce is gone and we need to grieve for him. It's OK to cry. In fact, it's good. Second, we're hopefully going to see a lot of people from school here. The *Underground* got the word out. But a few might not be here to mourn."

"You mean spies?" Lionel said.

"Or worse," Judd said. "I wouldn't be surprised if there were some people from the administration here to see if they can catch somebody."

"I hope they do come," Vicki said. "They need to hear it like everybody else."

"But we still have to be careful," Judd said. "You know the school will clamp down hard if they can figure out who put the last issue of the *Underground* together."

"I think we ought to spread out during the service," Lionel said.

"Good idea," Vicki said. "That way they won't see us together."

Judd brought the group up to date on Buck and Tsion. "Buck told me about their drive across the desert," he said. "They were in an old bus. Once a Global Community officer

Caught

searched the bus while Buck was stopped. Buck thought Tsion was sleeping in the back, but the officer didn't find him."

"Where was he?" Ryan said.

"Buck found him after the officer left," Judd said. "Tsion said he had to go to the bathroom, so when the bus stopped he found some bushes by the road."

"God works in mysterious ways," Lionel said. Everyone laughed.

"He does," Judd said. "At one checkpoint a guard actually found the rabbi hiding."

"Did they arrest him?" Lionel said.

"No," Judd said. "Tsion was praying God would blind the guard or make him careless, but the man shined a flashlight in Tsion's face and grabbed him by the shirt. The guard said, 'You had better be who I think you are, or you are a dead man.' "

The kids stared at Judd.

"Finally, the rabbi told him his name. The guard said, 'Pray as you have never prayed before that my report will be believed.' Then he said a blessing and walked off the bus."

"Incredible," Lionel said.

"If that's not God, I don't know what is," Ryan said, "but what happened when they got to the airport? That's where we lost the transmission."

Judd explained that he and Ryan had picked up a radio report of the chase on their way back from Israel.

"There were so many squad cars at the roadblock," Judd said, "that Buck and Tsion set the bus on fire and ran. Buck got shot in the foot, but they were able to take off and get back home safely."

As the service grew near, Judd suggested they meet afterward in the same room. Everyone agreed. Judd then asked Chaya to lead the group in a brief Bible study. She took them to several passages in Luke and John that spoke of the cost of following Jesus.

"The Scriptures are clear," Chaya said. "A life of following God is not easy, but when we give our lives to him, he gives us the power to live and the promise of eternal life. What more could we need?"



Vicki couldn't believe her eyes when she looked outside. The service was still a half hour away, but the parking lot was full and cars lined the street as far as she could see. Inside, the crowd sat in silence, staring at the casket or looking at their programs. Many cried, but no one sobbed. Vicki hoped she wouldn't either.

Caught

She sat at the end of a pew toward the front. She stared at the closed casket. She had been to only a couple of funerals, and she hadn't paid much attention.

She opened the program and read the contents. A verse on the back read, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

She had known Bruce since the day of the disappearances. She had lived under his roof and had even been adopted by him. And yet, she felt there were many things she didn't know. The program listed his date of birth, and she realized she had never thought to ask how old he was. Vicki did the math in her head. "Bruce was preceded by his wife, a daughter, and two sons, who were raptured with the church," the program read. Their names were listed.

Several times Vicki looked up from the page to keep from crying. She spotted Buck and Chloe Williams behind her near Rayford Steele's wife, Amanda. Rayford would be on the platform soon, talking about Bruce. If there was anyone who could give a tribute to Bruce and speak the message Bruce would want these people to hear, it was Rayford.

Loretta entered and sat near the back. It

took Vicki a second look to realize she was with Rabbi Ben-Judah.

The other members of the Young Trib Force were scattered throughout the crowd. She thought she would make it without crying until she spotted Ryan. He was in the front row of the balcony, his eyes red. He waved and tried to smile, then buried his face in his hands.

At ten o'clock Ryan saw Rayford Steele walk through a door at the side of the platform. Another elder stepped to the pulpit and asked everyone to stand. He led them in singing two hymns. Ryan couldn't get the words out.

Vicki smiled when she remembered Bruce's singing. Bruce had admitted he couldn't sing well, but that didn't stop him from belting out what he called a "joyful noise" during congregational songs. At the end of one service he had leaned over to Vicki and said, "What I lack in tone, I make up for in volume."

She smiled again as the songs ended. The elder told the congregation there would be no offering or announcements, just the tribute to Bruce. "Our speaker this morning is Elder Rayford Steele. He knew Bruce as well as any of us."

Caught

Judd sat in the back. Bruce had died more than a week earlier, but it still didn't feel real. Hearing Rayford's voice, calm and in control, eased the pain a bit.

Rayford opened his notes and welcomed everyone. "I need to tell you I'm not a preacher," he began. "I am here because I loved Bruce. And since he left his notes behind, I will, in a small way, speak for him today."

Judd imagined himself at the pulpit, wondering what he would say, when an old woman and a young boy walked in. The woman wore dark sunglasses. Judd stood and offered them his seat.

"I want to tell you how I first met Bruce," Rayford was saying, "because I know that many of you met him in much the same way. We were in the greatest crisis of our lives, and Bruce was there to help."

Judd moved to the back of the sanctuary, but people were standing shoulder to shoulder from the last pew to the back wall. He looked into the balcony and saw a space near the sound booth.

Ryan had heard Rayford's story before. He had been best friends with Rayford's son, Raymie. Ryan had even been at their house once when Mrs. Steele had talked about the rapture of the church with her husband.

Rayford explained that he had called the church when he discovered his wife and son were missing. Then he met Bruce and saw the video the former pastor had left behind.

"If you had asked people five minutes before the Rapture what Christians taught about God and heaven," Rayford said, "nine in ten would have said to live a good life, do the best you can, be kind, and hope for the best. It sounded good, but it was wrong! The Bible says our good deeds are worthless. We have all sinned. All of us are worthy of the punishment of death."

Ryan looked around the room and saw a lot of new faces. The *Underground* had done a good job of bringing people in. Now it was Rayford's turn to give them the message.

"I would fail Bruce if I didn't say this," Rayford said. "Jesus has paid the penalty. The work has been done. We can't earn our salvation; it's a gift from God."

Judd exited through the back doors and swiftly made his way to the balcony stairs. The overhead speakers carried Rayford's voice throughout the building.

Judd stopped and listened as Rayford said, "If I can get through this, I would like to speak directly to Bruce. You all know that the body is dead. But Bruce, we thank you. We

Caught

envy you. We know you are with Christ. And we confess we don't like it that you're gone. We miss you. But we pledge to carry on. We will study, and this church will be a light-house for the glory of God."

Tears in his eyes, Judd put his hand on the railing. As he did, someone grabbed his arm roughly and turned him around. The man clamped his hand over Judd's mouth and leaned close.

"Don't make a sound," Taylor Graham whispered. "You're coming with me."