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ONE

The Getaway

VICKI mashed the accelerator to the floor and glanced in the rearview mirror. Flashing lights from an oncoming Global Community squad car cast an eerie glow in the rain. A shadowy figure darted across the wet street. *Natalie should have come with us*, Vicki thought.

Charlie craned his neck to see, and Vicki told him to stay down.

"You think they're going to shoot at us?" Darrion said.

Vicki shrugged. "Just stay down."

Phoenix squirmed in the backseat. Charlie grabbed his collar and pulled him to the floor. "He's excited to see you!"

"I'll be excited to see him once we get away," Vicki said, gripping the steering wheel. She kept the lights off, hoping the GC car

wouldn't spot them in the rain. Vicki's heart raced so fast she found it hard to breathe.

She remembered the driving instructions Conrad had given during their trip west. "Make sure you stay calm behind the wheel," Conrad had said. "If you're angry or scared, don't drive."

"Great," Vicki had said. "I'll never learn because I'm always angry or scared."

Conrad had helped Vicki get comfortable with driving in all kinds of weather. During a severe rainstorm in California, she drove in an empty parking lot, sliding when she made sharp turns. Now, as she rushed down the wet road, the practice was paying off.

"Where are we going?" Charlie said.

Vicki quickly explained about the kids in Wisconsin. "We may not make it tonight, but we'll try." She turned a corner without touching her brakes and grazed a parked car.

"They're stopping at Maggie's house," Darrion yelled.

Vicki drove on, wondering what Natalie would say to her boss.



Natalie Bishop leaned against the car, rain dripping from her hair, as Deputy Com-

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mander Darryl Henderson stumbled down Maggie Carlson's front steps. He fell in the wet grass with a thump.

Natalie screamed in mock pain. She quickly reached into Henderson's car, stuffed his keys in her pocket, and kept screaming. She fumbled with her key chain—a combination pocketknife, flashlight, and Mace dispenser.

Natalie had seen a few prisoners who had been maced. Their eyes turned red and filled with tears. She could only imagine the pain.

"Bishop!" Deputy Commander Henderson shouted. The man was on his feet again. "Bishop, what happened?"

Natalie pulled the Mace dispenser close as lights swirled from the oncoming GC squad car. She glanced at the car Vicki was driving and saw it move around a corner.

This is my only hope, Natalie thought. She had planned it this way, and so far everything was working. Vicki and the others were gone, and if Henderson believed her, she might be able to keep working for the GC.

"Where are they?" Henderson screamed as he opened the car door.

Natalie closed her eyes tightly, pressed the nozzle, then opened them as the spray filled her eyes. For several moments she could hear nothing but her own screams. Unbelievable,

searing pain! Her eyes felt on fire. She covered her face with her hands and rolled on the pavement, unable to focus on anything but the pain.

"Where are my keys!?" Henderson said.

Another GC squad car pulled up, and an officer tried to help Natalie. Henderson screamed for the man to follow the car that had just pulled away.

"I didn't see any—"

The officer sped off and Henderson barked orders into his radio. An older woman arrived, and Henderson questioned her about her car. She gave him the information, and he called for all available units to respond.

The woman knelt by Natalie and asked what was wrong. Natalie said she had been sprayed with Mace, and the woman helped her into the house. "We need to flush your eyes with water."

As Henderson combed the yard for his keys, the woman took Natalie to the kitchen. "That was a brave thing you did for those kids," she whispered.

Natalie tried to open her eyes but couldn't.

"It's okay," the woman said. "I can see by the mark on your forehead that you're a believer. I'm Maggie Carlson."

Natalie sobbed, forced to her knees by the pain. "I took Henderson's car keys so he

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couldn't follow," she whispered. "If he finds them—"

"Where are they?"

Natalie patted her right pants pocket and Maggie took them out. "I'll care for them. Keep your eyes under the running water."



Judd Thompson Jr. sat alone on a leather couch in Z-Van's hotel suite and prayed for his friends. He had sensed danger several times before, but never so strong as now.

As the New Babylon sun peeked over the palace a few blocks away, Judd took a bottle of water from the small refrigerator and walked into the main living area. Z-Van's sheet music lay stacked on the grand piano, but Judd couldn't look at the words. The man had seemed possessed since the day Carpathia had risen from the dead, spending every waking moment writing his tribute to the risen potentate. Judd knew Nicolae could take power over people's minds. Was Carpathia controlling the singer?

Judd used a laptop to log on to the kids' Web site. He read Tsion Ben-Judah's latest message again and shuddered at the prophecies about the Antichrist. Soon the Global Community would require every living being

to receive a mark on the hand or forehead and swear allegiance to Carpathia. Anyone who willingly took that evil mark would never be able to come to God.

That's why we have to tell as many people as quickly as we can, Judd thought.

Around the world, loyal citizens were prepared to kneel before Carpathia's image. The GC had been working on biochip technology that would accompany the mark, but Judd didn't know how long it would take to distribute the machines used for the injection.

Judd thought of the trip Z-Van had planned to Jerusalem. It would be safer to hide or get out of New Babylon altogether. But something in Israel tugged at him. Was it Sam? Mr. Stein? Nada's family? Lionel felt it too, so they had stayed.

Judd typed a short note to his friends in the Young Tribulation Force and asked about everyone. He knew Charlie had been taken by the GC and wondered if this was the reason he felt the need to pray.

Judd was astounded at the number of e-mails to the Web site. He had known when they started it that many would read its contents, but he had no idea hundreds of kids would e-mail every day from around the globe. They asked everything from how to become a true believer to what was coming

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next on the prophecy timeline. Mark and the others had done a good job of listing the most frequently asked questions, or FAQs, but some wanted a personal response.

One girl from the former country of France gave a first name of Eleta and wrote:

I grew up knowing nothing about God. My parents and teachers never talked about spiritual things, believing religion was unimportant or just superstitious. Now that Nicolae Carpathia and Leon Fortunato have performed miracles, many are saying Carpathia is truly a god. They want to worship him, but I'm not sure. The things you have posted make me wonder if Carpathia is really evil. Please help me understand the truth so that I can tell my family.

Judd's heart leapt. This was exactly the kind of person the kids had hoped to reach. Judd sent a message, quickly explaining more about what the Bible revealed about God and how important it was to not follow the Global Community's twisted religion.

Sadly, others wrote in support of Carpathia. One man said he was monitoring the Web site and had notified local GC authorities. *It's only a matter of time until they find you and shut you down!*

Judd heard someone stir in the next room. He started to leave the Web site, but a new message sparked his interest. The subject line read *New Babylon believer—help*.

Lionel walked into the room with Westin Jakes, Z-Van's pilot who had become a believer. Judd waved them over and put the e-mail onto the full screen.

Dear Young Trib Force,

I am seventeen and a believer in Jesus. I have been visiting New Babylon with my parents. My father is a huge supporter of N. C. and came to pay his respects at the funeral. He and my mother do not know of my faith in Christ.

My father wants me to work for the GC. Though I'm still in high school, I have a number of skills with computers. The GC have given us a free apartment until I can be processed for employment.

The last thing I want to do is work for the Global Community, but my father insists. We have had arguments and he will not listen. Me working for Carpathia is an honor greater than anything my father can imagine. Can you help me? I have only two believers I can talk to right now. Please write as soon as possible.

C. W.

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Lionel studied the message. "You think it's a trick?"

"Looks genuine to me," Westin said.

Judd nodded and typed a reply. "I think this is someone in a real jam."

"We have no idea who this C. W. is," Lionel said.

"Doesn't matter. If he's a fellow believer, he deserves our help."

"What advice are you going to give him—or her?"

Judd smiled. "No advice. I'm going to set up a meeting."



Vicki made her way through backstreets and alleys, trying to stay out of sight. A few minutes after they had escaped, she took a wrong turn down a dead end. As they turned the car around, a GC squad car passed on the street in front of them, its lights flashing.

"Maybe we ought to find a place to hide," Darrion said.

Vicki shook her head. "The GC will be crawling all over here by morning. It's dark and raining. We should try to get as far away as we can."

Lightning struck nearby and the sky thun-

dered. Phoenix whimpered in the backseat and Charlie tried to comfort him.

With their lights still off, Vicki found what was left of Rand Road and headed north. Anytime she saw the lights of GC squad cars, she turned at the nearest street and stayed out of sight.

Charlie leaned forward. "When are we going back for Bo and Ginny?"

Vicki stole a glance at Darrion. "Natalie couldn't get to the Shairtons."

"You mean we're just going to leave them?"

Darrion turned in the seat. "We need to get you to safety, and then we'll see about them."

"I don't want to get to safety. I want to help them. They were like a mom and dad to me. Can we turn around?"

Vicki shook her head. "I don't expect you to understand, Charlie. We need to keep going."

Charlie slumped in his seat and put his face in his hands. Lightning flashed and Vicki spotted a sign that said "Wauconda." Several headlights approached from behind. A few miles later, Darrion spotted a street sign and asked Vicki to turn. They followed a muddy road into the countryside.

When they reached what looked like an

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old general store, Vicki parked in the back. With each flash of lightning they spotted abandoned barns, cornfields, and old farm equipment.

Vicki fished Maggie's cell phone from her pocket and called Mark in Wisconsin. He was glad to hear they were safe and asked about Natalie. Mark offered to meet them, but Vicki said they would keep driving and call again before daybreak.

The three sat in the car, staring out at the darkness. The only sounds were the patter of raindrops on the roof and Phoenix panting. Finally, Darrion broke the silence. "My mom and dad used to bring me up here every fall to pick apples. I wish I could get a mug of hot apple cider right now."

Vicki smiled. "Or a caramel apple." She turned and put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "It's good to have you back."

"Didn't think I was going to get out."

Vicki scooted down in her seat. "Tell me more about picking apples."

"My dad would hold me on his shoulders so I could get the high ones. Then I'd find the biggest pumpkin, and he'd carry it back to the car."

"Petting zoo?" Vicki said.

"How'd you know?"

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

"One of our neighbors knew a farm family. I always liked the hayrides."

"The place we went to had a corn maze. They'd cut rows out of a cornfield and you'd have to try and find your way to the middle."

Vicki thought of her little sister, Jeanni. Just the sight of cows by the side of the road made the girl squeal with delight. Vicki closed her eyes and began to cry. Darrion put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm okay," Vicki said. "I was just thinking about my sister petting those farm animals. She always laughed when she fed the goats. For some reason I can't remember her face anymore. I try hard, but . . ."

A light flashed inside a house behind them. Tears ran down Vicki's cheeks as she started the car and headed for the main road.