

Protected

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VICKI Byrne gasped, sucking in air, trying to slow her racing heart. She pulled herself up and stood in front of the computer monitor. Whoever was out there had disabled the camera.

A thousand thoughts rushed through her mind. Vicki's first fear was the Global Community. Could they have found the hideout and surrounded Colin's home?

Slow down, Vicki thought. The person wasn't wearing a GC uniform, and the hair seemed long and stringy. *Maybe someone's out for a walk in the woods*. No, they were definitely sneaking up on the hideout.

She clicked on another camera and checked the area, but there was no movement.

Vicki put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. Maybe her mind was playing tricks. She had heard of that happening to people who were exhausted. Maybe she only thought she saw a face on the camera. She clicked

the first camera, and the screen remained blank. There had been someone out there—but who?

Vicki didn't want to wake anyone, especially the guys. She didn't want to be a scared little girl who needed help from the big strong boys. Shelly was the obvious choice to awaken, but Vicki decided against it. What was it? Pride? Fear? She didn't know. All Vicki knew was that there was someone walking around outside Colin Dial's house and she had to find out who it was.

She switched to another camera again and focused on the area where the mystery person could be. Nothing. Not a chipmunk, squirrel, opossum, or scary face in sight.

Vicki shuddered. What if the person was hurt or in some kind of trouble, running from something or someone? She kept looking, trying hard not to ignore her feelings.

Each motion sensor came up empty. Whoever it was had either moved out of the area or was in hiding.

Vicki hesitated before she crept past the room where Shelly and Janie slept and grabbed a wool jacket from the closet. Colin Dial's wife, Becky, had told the group that they could share everything they found in the basement. "You kids need something, use it," she had said.

Kids. Vicki smiled at the word. It had been a long time since she felt like a kid. True, she was only seventeen. In a normal world she would have been enjoying her senior year of high school. But this was not a normal world. Each day brought a new set of dangers and problems. She and the others had done their best to think clearly, then

react. But there were some things you couldn't plan for, things that went beyond imagination. Like tonight—helicopters falling from the sky, the threat of an all-out war coming from the most evil man in the world.

No, Vicki didn't feel like a kid. She should have been thinking about her senior picture or buying her first car or what she would wear to the prom. For a split second, as she put on the jacket, Vicki let her mind go. She imagined wearing a beautiful dress and walking into Nicolae High, arm in arm with Judd, her red hair flowing over her shoulders.

A motion sensor beeped and snapped her back to reality. She quickly turned it off and glanced at the monitor. A second camera had gone blank.

Something scratched at the other side of the hideout. Vicki opened a door quietly, and Phoenix scampered up to her, wagging his tail.

"Want to help me?" Vicki whispered.

Phoenix snorted and Vicki led him up the stairs. Going outside was risky, but she had to see who was out there.

Judd stared at the burning wreckage of Z-Van's plane. "I thought we were going home," he muttered.

Lionel put a hand on Judd's shoulder. "I know what you mean. I was looking forward to seeing everybody."

Judd glanced at Westin Jakes, Z-Van's pilot, who spoke to one of the emergency workers near the charred building. Westin pulled out his cell phone as he walked

toward Judd and Lionel. "A GC chopper tried an emergency landing late last night but didn't make it."

"What do we do now?" Judd said.

"Make other plans. Z-Van can get another plane as fast as he wants. Maybe a day or two."

"Can we fly commercial?" Lionel said.

"Planes have been grounded because of the activity last night," Westin said. "Plus, I hear they're requiring people to have the mark to make it through security."

Judd ran a hand through his hair. "We can't go back to Z-Van. He'll turn us in."

"Stick with me," Westin said. "I'll call him and explain about the plane. You can stay in my room at the hotel until we figure out a way to get back."

Westin hailed a cab and phoned Z-Van. After he hung up, he told Judd and Lionel that Z-Van had said he should have stayed with the plane.

"Which means you'd be dead," Lionel said.

Westin asked the driver to turn up the radio. A live broadcast had begun, celebrating the lifting of the plague of boils. Crowds screamed and chanted in the background as the announcer ran down the list of participants. When he mentioned Z-Van's name, the crowd went wild.

Westin pecked the driver's back. "Take us to the concert."

Vicki looked for a pair of Colin's night glasses but couldn't find them. She leashed Phoenix and crept

outside. She knew the dog would probably bark if he saw something, but she felt safe with him close, even if it did alert the intruder.

She stood by the house and listened, letting her eyes get accustomed to the moonlight. Finally, she pulled Phoenix's leash tight and set out.

When she reached the tree line, the dog bristled and Vicki stopped. She thought the camera was straight ahead, about another fifty yards, but was it closer?

"It's okay, boy," Vicki whispered, reaching down and putting a hand on the dog's head.

She knelt beside him, her senses heightened. Suddenly she didn't think coming outside had been such a good idea. What if it was the Global Community? What if Claudia Zander had followed her and burst through the woods with a weapon drawn?

As Vicki stood, a twig snapped nearby and Phoenix growled. He shot toward the noise, the leash slipping through Vicki's hands. "No! Come back!"

Phoenix disappeared into the woods. Suddenly there was movement—someone running. Two people, maybe three.

"Here he comes!" a female shouted.

"Go, go, go!" came the reply.

Vicki's heart raced. She followed the barking and footsteps, dodging trees and brush. Her jacket got caught, and she stopped to pull loose from briars.

Phoenix yelped and Vicki screamed, "Don't hurt him!"

Instinct took over as Vicki plunged farther into the

woods. She didn't care how many people were out there or if they had guns—they weren't going to hurt Phoenix.

Voices and footsteps melted into the woods. Vicki followed Phoenix's bark until she found him by a pine tree. He was standing on his back legs, the leash tied to one of the lowest branches.

She quickly untied it, clamped her hand around his mouth, and listened. Night sounds. Soft chirping of crickets. A small animal skittered across a downed tree in front of her. After a few moments, she decided whoever had been out here was gone. She wrapped the leash around her hand and headed back to the house.

On her way she spotted the soft, red glow of a light on a tree, head high. The tiny camera had been covered with a cloth about the size of a handkerchief. Vicki uncovered the camera and moved to her right, where she knew the second camera had gone blank. This time she found a small glove placed over a lens at the base of a tree.

She stuffed the cloth and glove in her jacket and returned to the house. Inside, Vicki put Phoenix downstairs and turned on the kitchen light to inspect the items. One turned out to be a child's glove, with black, orange, and yellow rings around the fingers. The sight immediately made her think of her little sister, Jeanni. How many times had Vicki helped Jeanni put on gloves so she could play in the snow?

She looked inside the glove for a tag or anything to identify where it had come from, but there was nothing. The piece of cloth was indeed a handkerchief with a series of red rectangles. On the bottom-right corner, Vicki

noticed someone had crudely embroidered the letters *MM* with dark thread.

She turned off the lights and took the items downstairs to the hideout. Vicki knew the others would be upset with her, but she had resigned herself to waking them.

As she passed the main computer, she glanced at the screen and gasped. Something had been placed in front of one of the cameras. Vicki enlarged the view and read two words, scrawled in crayon on a scrap of white paper propped in front of the camera:

Help me.

Judd called Chang Wong's number and left a message as he headed toward the celebration with Westin and Lionel. Westin didn't explain why they were going, and Judd admitted a certain curiosity at what Z-Van had planned.

Chang called back a few minutes later and told Judd he was at work in a secure location. Operation Eagle had gone well, though the man Chang had taken over for in New Babylon, David Hassid, had been killed by GC forces near Petra.

"Last night was incredible," Chang said. "Not one Tribulation Force aircraft was lost, but hundreds of Global Community people died."

Judd explained where they were headed and Chang groaned. "Only Nicolae would celebrate after such a defeat. I've been assigned by my supervisor to monitor deaths of people due to the BIO disaster."

“BIO?”

“Blood In Ocean,” Chang said. “The lakes and rivers haven’t been affected.”

“I wish we could talk with Dr. Ben-Judah about that and find out why,” Judd said. “You mentioned that they suspect a mole inside New Babylon. Are you still in danger?”

“I think I’m okay. I work in an office with about thirty others. I’m trying not to say much to anyone. My superior, Mr. Figueroa, told me this morning that Supreme Commander Moon had been killed.”

“You already knew that,” Judd said.

“Yes, but he said they suspect two airplane stewards of committing the crime. He thinks they are the ones with the contact on the inside.”

“That’s insane!” Judd said. “You told me yourself that you heard Carpathia kill Moon. There were other people in the room.”

“Lying is normal around here,” Chang said. “I’d better get back. I’ll call you later to hear about the celebration.”

The cab pulled up to the massive outdoor venue just as Dr. Neal Damosa, the Global Community’s top education guru, took the stage. “From Jerusalem to Bangladesh, from London to Marrakesh, from Tokyo to Sydney, we welcome the world to this celebration!”

The crowd, pushed into the makeshift arena, clapped politely as Damosa welcomed honored guests. “But some of the most treasured participants of this gathering are right here in front of the crowd.” He motioned, and the camera quickly panned the front row of spectators. Judd felt his stomach turn when he looked at the massive video

display above the stage. The camera caught at least a hundred young people who had taken Carpathia's mark.

"These and many of you around the world are now part of the new society being raised up by our potentate and our god, Nicolae Carpathia!"

The huge screen over the stage switched to different locations around the world. Young and old alike went wild at the mention of Nicolae's name. Evidently they thought the man would make an appearance at the gathering. Instead, Damosa urged those who hadn't yet taken the mark to do it that day in the new loyalty mark centers just opened.

Judd noticed filmmaker Lars Rahlmost at the front of the stage, directing his camera operator and talking into a handheld radio.

"And now, the moment we've all been waiting for," Damosa crooned, putting on dark sunglasses that brought new cheers from the crowd. "Here to debut songs from his new project, *Resurrection*, is the first civilian to take the mark of loyalty, Z-Van—and The Four Horsemen!"

Sam Goldberg had lived through the most thrilling night of his life. After they left Masada, the drive through the desert to Petra had been filled with twists and turns. Chased by the Global Community, their truck had actually been stopped by Peacekeepers, but the band of new believers kept going. At one point, the earth had opened and swallowed several Global Community vehicles chasing Operation Eagle.

Sam tried to reach Judd via cell phone but couldn't get through. He wanted to tell Judd about his adventure and the beauty of Petra. But how could he describe it? He had been there as a youngster with his family, walking through the Siq, a narrow, mile-long walkway. But he hadn't appreciated the city carved out of rock like he did today. Sam believed this was God's place of protection.

As Operation Eagle leaders guided many to the Siq, Sam stayed behind, looking for his friend Mr. Stein and listening to the conversation of those in charge of Operation Eagle.

Sam scanned the crowd and was glad no one with the mark of Carpathia would enter Petra. But he was distressed when he saw groups of people without God's mark on their foreheads. Would these become believers? Would these betray the company of Christ followers?

Older people shuffled along the entrance. Tiny children slept on parents' shoulders, exhausted from the hurried escape from Nicolae Carpathia and his troops. Though tired, most people seemed excited about what was ahead. Sam heard some talk about Micah, while others said they couldn't wait to hear from Dr. Tsion Ben-Judah, who had promised to fly to Petra and meet with the pilgrims.

Sam started to dial Judd again but hung up before it rang through. Something had suddenly made the crowd uneasy. People stopped talking. Some pointed to the east. Sam climbed a steep wall of rock to about twenty feet above the crowd and shielded his eyes from the sun. Three huge clouds of dust billowed across the desert. The clouds slowly separated and continued toward Petra.

“What is it?” someone said.

A murmur ran through the people in the Siq. “Global Community ground forces!” some shouted. “Keep moving!”

Sam studied the clouds. If those were GC troops, they would be armed. One tank firing into this crowd would leave hundreds dead. Instead of a haven, Petra could become the biggest graveyard in the world.

“Keep moving!” someone yelled from behind.