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ONE

# A Line in the Sand

JUDD Thompson and the other three kids living in his otherwise abandoned suburban house sometimes felt as if it was just them against the world. Judd, at sixteen, was the oldest. Then came the redhead, Vicki Byrne, a year younger. Lionel Washington was thirteen, and Ryan Daley, twelve.

They were the only ones left from their families. Judd's parents and his twin younger brother and sister had disappeared right out of their clothes a few days before. Vicki Byrne, who had lived in a trailer park with her parents and little sister, had seen the same thing happen at her place. Her older brother, who had moved to Michigan, had disappeared too, according to one of his friends.

Lionel Washington had lost his parents,

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his older sister, and his little brother and sister. His uncle, the infamous André Dupree, was thought dead, but Lionel now knew he was alive somewhere—but where?

Ryan Daley had been an only child, and now he was an orphan. His parents had not disappeared. They had died in separate accidents related to the worldwide vanishings of millions of people—his father in a plane crash, his mother in an explosion while in her car.

The kids knew what had happened. At least the three older ones did. Ryan wasn't sure yet. All he knew was that he had been left alone in the world, and he didn't much like the explanation the other three had come to believe.

All three of the older kids had had parents who were Christians. They believed not only in God, but also in Christ. And they weren't just churchgoers. These were people who had believed that the way to God, the way to heaven, was through Christ. In other words, they did not agree with so many people who believed that if you just tried to live right and be good and treat other people fairly, you could earn your way to heaven and to favor with God.

As logical as all that may have sounded, the parents of Judd and Vicki and Lionel

believed that the real truth, the basic teaching of the New Testament, was summarized in two verses in the book of Ephesians.

Chapter 2, verses 8-9 said that a person is saved by grace through faith and that it is not as a result of anything we accomplished. It is the gift of God, not a result of good deeds, so nobody can brag about it.

They also believed that one day, as the Bible also foretold, Jesus would return and snatch true believers away in the twinkling of an eye, and they would immediately join him in heaven. That was what had happened, Judd, Vicki, and Lionel realized, since most of the people in their churches had disappeared too.

But what convinced them more than anything was that they themselves were still here. Judd had never received Christ, though he had grown up in church and knew the Bible. Vicki had hated it when her parents had become Christians two years before, and she didn't want anything to do with it, even though her older brother and younger sister had also believed. She had seen the changes in her family and realized there was some truth to what was going on. She had an idea they were onto something real, but she wasn't willing to give up her lifestyle or her freedom to join them in their faith.

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Lionel had been more like Judd, having been raised by a Christian family and having gone to church every Sunday for years. He had not become a rebel as Judd did when he became a teenager. Rather, he had pretended all along to be a Christian. It was his and his uncle André's secret. They were not really Christians.

Those oldest three kids realized their tragic mistake immediately when the vanishings had taken place. In the midst of chaos, as cars crashed, planes fell from the sky, ships collided and sank, houses burned, and people panicked, they had to admit they had been wrong—as wrong as people could be. They were glad to find out there was a second chance for them, that they could still come to Christ. But though that gave them the assurance that they would one day see God and be reunited with their families, it didn't keep them from grieving over the loss of their loved ones. They were alone in the world until they had discovered each other and Bruce Barnes, the visitation pastor at New Hope Village Church who had agreed to help teach them the Bible. He had given them each a Bible and invited them to the first Sunday service following the disappearances, which the Bible predicted centuries ago.

But Ryan Daley was still a holdout. He was

scared. He was sad. He was angry. And while he had been hanging with Lionel since they had met, Lionel made him feel like a wimp. Well, he didn't just *feel* like one. He *was* one. Lionel seemed brave. He confronted his uncle's enemies, he had been to the morgue to try to identify his uncle's body, and he had gone into Ryan's house after a burglary. Ryan couldn't force himself to do any of that stuff, and it made him feel terrible.

Judd had invited everybody to live at his place. Vicki didn't have any choice after her trailer had burned to the ground. Some of Lionel's uncle André's "associates" had virtually taken over Lionel's place, so he needed somewhere to crash too. Ryan could have stayed at his own house and Lionel would have stayed there with him, but Ryan couldn't make himself go inside. There were too many scary memories. It had been just him and his parents in that house, and now they were dead. And then there had been the burglary, so he wasn't about to set foot in the place. Lionel could make fun of him all he wanted, but Ryan was glad to take Judd up on his offer.

Judd's family had clearly been the wealthiest of the four. His house was a huge mansion. Well, almost a mansion. There were bigger and nicer homes around, but not

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many. In Judd's house, each kid could have his own bedroom and lots of privacy.

No one knew what the future held, at least among the kids. Bruce Barnes sure seemed to know. He had made it his business to become a student of Bible prophecy and must have been spending almost every spare minute buried in the Bible and reference books. He told the kids that it was time to be on the lookout for a man the Bible called the Antichrist. "He will come offering peace and harmony, and many people will be fooled, thinking he's a good man with their best interests at heart. He will make some sort of an agreement with the nation of Israel, but it will be a lie. The signing of that agreement will signal the beginning of the last seven years of tribulation before Christ returns again to set up his thousand-year kingdom on earth."

Bruce explained the Tribulation as a period of suffering for all the people of the world, more suffering even than they had endured when millions of people had disappeared all at the same time. Bruce promised to teach the kids all of the judgments that would come from heaven during those seven years, some twenty-one of them in three series of seven.

Judd had called the kids together one



evening after they had all received their Bibles from Bruce. "I'm not trying to be the boss or anything," he began, "but I am the oldest and this is my house, and so there are going to be some rules. To stay in this house, we all have to agree to watch out for each other. Let each other know where you are all the time so we don't worry about you. Don't do anything stupid like getting in trouble, breaking the law, staying out all night, that kind of stuff. And I think we all ought to be reading what Bruce tells us to read every day and also going to whatever meetings he invites us to, besides church of course. I mean, we're going to church every Sunday to keep up with what's going on."

Vicki and Lionel nodded. "Of course," Vicki said. "Sounds fair."

"Not to me," Ryan said. "I'm not into this stuff, and you all know it."

"Guess you're going to have to live somewhere else then," Lionel said.

"That's not for you to say, Lionel!" Ryan said. "This isn't your house! Judd's not going to make me read the Bible and go to church meetings just to stay here. Are you, Judd?"

"Matter of fact, I am," Judd said.

"What?"

"I can hardly believe I'm saying this," Judd said, "because just last week it made me so

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mad when my parents said the same thing. But here goes. As long as you live under my roof, you follow my rules."

Ryan's face was red, and it appeared he might bolt out of there like he often did when he heard something he didn't like.

"I'm not going to force you to become a Christian," Judd said. "Nobody can do that. Even Vicki and I needed to decide that in our own time on our own terms. But I'm taking you in, man. You're staying here because I asked you to. The least you can do is to join in with what the rest of us are doing. It's all for one and one for all. We're going to look out for you and protect you and take care of you, even if you don't believe like we do, and we're going to expect you to do the same for us. I can't even make you read the Bible, but we're going to go to church and to Bruce's special little meetings, and we're going together. You can plug your ears or sleep through them, but you're going."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you can find someplace else to stay."

"He'll never do that," Lionel said. "He's too much of a scaredy-cat."

"Shut up!" Ryan said.

"Lay off him, Lionel," Vicki said. "You're not going to win him over that way."

*A Line in the Sand*

"You're not going to win me over at all," Ryan said. "Just watch."

"Well," Judd said, "what's the deal. You in or out?"

"I have to decide right now?"

"We have a meeting with Bruce tonight and church tomorrow morning. You go with us tonight and you promise to go tomorrow, or you move out this afternoon."

"The man's drawing a line in the sand for you," Lionel said.

"Lionel!" Vicki scolded.

"I'm just sayin', the line has been drawn. You crossing the line, Ryan? Or are you with us?"

"I'll think about it," Ryan said, and he was gone. The others heard him banging around in the bedroom he had been assigned.

"We need to pray for him," Vicki said. "It's hard enough for us, but imagine what it's like for him. We know where our parents are. If he believes like we do that our parents were raptured and his weren't, he has to accept that his parents are in hell. Think about that. He's going to fight this a long time, because even if he wants to become a believer, that means he's accepting that his parents are lost forever."

"It sure would be nice if we could somehow find out his parents, or at least one of

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them, was actually a Christian or became one before they died," Lionel said.

"Get real," Judd said. "That rarely happens in real life."

"I know."

Lionel was dealing with his own dilemma. His uncle had left a long message on Lionel's answering machine, going on and on about killing himself and feeling so bad that he had influenced Lionel to not be a Christian. He was clearly drunk or high or both, and Lionel had been convinced that André had killed himself. When Lionel and Ryan had ridden their bikes all the way to André's neighborhood one night to investigate, the cops had told them André's body was at a nearby morgue. It had indeed been a suicide, they told Lionel. Because André had had enemies to whom he owed money, and those guys had moved into Lionel's house and kicked him out, Lionel figured they had murdered André and made it look like suicide.

But when Judd had driven Lionel to the morgue a few days later so Lionel could identify the body, he had run into a shocker. While the victim was the same height and weight as André, and while he had carried André's wallet and wore André's clothes and jewelry, the body was clearly not André's.

Finding the truth about that mystery

would be Lionel's mission over the next several days. Meanwhile, he was as eager as Judd and Vicki to learn more about what life was supposed to be like, now that Christ had raptured his church.

Judd agreed that they should pray for Ryan, and that in fact they should pray at the end of all their little house meetings, the way Bruce had them pray at the end of their meetings at church. But first he asked, "Is there anything else either of you needs to talk about now?"

"Yeah," Lionel said. "I just want to say that I'm not really trying to put down Ryan. I'm trying to toughen him up the way I did my little brother and sister and the way my sister did me. I don't want to make him mad or feel bad, but he's such a wuss. It's time for that boy to grow up."

"It's hard to grow up this way," Vicki said. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm having trouble. I have bad dreams, have trouble sleeping, find myself crying over my family as if they're all just dead and gone and not in heaven where I know I'll see them someday. I know we're all going to be called back to school one of these days, and I can't imagine sitting through class with all I know now. If this Antichrist guy shows up soon and does

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sign some sort of a contract with Israel, we're gonna have only seven more years to live."

Judd and Lionel sat nodding. "Anyway," Judd said, "Lionel, you do have to try to encourage Ryan. If he decides against becoming a Christian, I sure wouldn't want to have it on my conscience that I pushed him away. As much as you guys squabble, I still think he looks up to you."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah," Vicki said. "I think that's obvious. He wants your approval."

"Wow."

"You might want to encourage him."

"Hold up," Lionel said. "I'll do it right now."

Lionel hurried to Ryan's room, trying to decide what to say. When he peeked in and knocked, Ryan whirled from what he was doing.

"Hey, little man," Lionel said.

"I thought I asked you to quit calling me that," Ryan said.

"Yeah, sorry. Listen, I just want to say that I'm sorry about getting on your case all the time."

Ryan didn't respond.

Lionel tried again. "I mean, uh, I'm just saying—"

Ryan approached the door, where Lionel

stood, tongue-tied. "You're just saying you don't know what you're saying, right?"

Lionel did not respond.

"Are you finished?" Ryan asked, his hand on the door.

"No, I—"

"Yes, you are," Ryan said. And he pushed the door shut in Lionel's face.

Lionel returned to Judd and Vicki, clearly troubled. He told them what had happened.

"We do need to pray for that boy," Vicki said.

But before they did, Lionel said, "You need to know he was packing up."

"Really?" Judd said. "He's leaving?"

"I don't know," Lionel said, "but he was getting all his stuff together."

And they prayed for him.