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ONE

Word Power

VICKI Byrne awoke with a start at 4 A.M. She could not push from her mind her friend Shelly. Vicki had prayed for Shelly often, but this morning was different. The more she thought of her, the more concerned she became. Was Shelly in some sort of danger?

Vicki wanted to talk to Shelly about God, but each time it was as if the door had closed. Either Shelly was busy or Shelly's friend had barged in and stopped the conversation. Vicki could tell Shelly was still in shock after the disappearances. Shelly needed the truth. Each time Vicki had called her, she either got the answering machine or someone who said Shelly couldn't talk right now. It would have been easy to give up and talk to people who wanted to hear her message, but Vicki

couldn't get Shelly out of her mind. Shelly looked so lost and confused.

She dialed Shelly's number but hung up before it rang. *This is crazy! Her mom will kill me if I wake them up at this hour for nothing.*

She picked up her journal. "Please God," she wrote, "give me a chance to speak to Shelly about you today."



At breakfast Judd told Lionel and Ryan, "Remember to be waiting for us after school today. I don't want to be late for our study with Bruce."

"Yes sir!" Ryan said, saluting. "By the flagpole."

"Too many war movies," Lionel muttered, shaking his head.

"I'm not kidding," Judd said. "Don't be off playing soccer or basketball—"

"We'll be there," Lionel said, scowling at Ryan.

"My newspaper could be what God uses to get to students. Maybe they'll take it home to their parents."

Vicki squinted. Judd was talking as if it were his idea. She felt silly for caring. Couldn't she just be happy it was being done

and that people would be reached? But Judd shouldn't care either.

"We get to help, right?" Ryan said.

"I need everybody," Judd said. "The school paper comes out on Tuesday. I want to beat them and get ours out Monday. Vicki and I will write the articles and get it on the computer, but we need you guys to help print and fold and—"

"Grunt work," Lionel said.

"There's no little job," Judd said. "We're starting with 500 copies. That'll take everybody's help."

"How are you gonna give it out?" Ryan said.

Judd shrugged. "I figure I'll take one entrance and Vicki can take another. We'll hand it out as the kids go in."

Ryan poked at his cereal and shook his head. "What if the principal and that coach, what's his name?"

"Handlesman," Vicki said.

"Yeah. What if they stop you before you get started?"

"He's right," Vicki said. "No Bibles, no talking about God, you know the drill. Everybody's scared."

"Distribution is the least of my worries right now," Judd said. "We need to write the *Underground* first."

THE UNDERGROUND

"Is that what you're calling it?" Vicki said.

"Got a better idea?"



On the way to school Judd reminded Lionel and Ryan again to be ready after school. When they were gone, Vicki said, "You might want to go easy on them. I mean, you can come across wrong if you're not careful."

Judd cocked his head. "I want them to understand how important this is. You know how busy Bruce is, and we only have the weekend to get the paper done if we want to distribute it Monday."

Vicki didn't like having PE first thing every day. Mrs. Waltonen sometimes lost track of time, and they were barely able to dress before second period.

"Byrne!" Mrs. Waltonen shouted as the class ended.

Vicki ran over as the other girls left the gym. Thin and dark with short hair and glasses, Mrs. Waltonen had seemed shattered the week before while talking about losing her grandchild in the disappearances.

"The other day," Mrs. Waltonen said, "you

said something about knowing where people were. The ones who disappeared."

Vicki nodded.

"You know I can't allow those conversations. About religious things."

"I don't want to offend anybody," Vicki said. "I won't disrupt class anymore, if that's what you mean."

"You don't understand," Mrs. Waltonen said, lowering her voice. "After class, on a personal basis, you know, one-on-one, I don't think they said anything about that."

"You want to talk about where your grandson is?"

"Granddaughter," Mrs. Waltonen said. "Not even six months old."

Vicki stared at the teacher. Mrs. Waltonen was older than Vicki's mother, and yet she was looking to Vicki for some kind of hope.

"Everybody's lost someone," Mrs. Waltonen said, "and it's left us without answers. But you're—well, better because of it. Something's different for you, Vicki."

Mrs. Waltonen suddenly seemed so soft. With her shrill whistle and the way she barked orders, she was the last person Vicki would have expected to start such a conversation.

THE UNDERGROUND

"I *have* changed," Vicki said. "And the reason I believe I know about your—"

The bell rang. Girls ran from the dressing room.

"You have to go," Mrs. Waltonen said, touching Vicki's arm.

"It's OK. I want to stay and talk—"

"Maybe later. Maybe Monday."

Vicki didn't want to let the moment go, but Mrs. Waltonen urged her to dress and get to class. Vicki wondered if she would actually have the chance to lead one of her teachers to the truth.

Vicki was late for second period. She wiped her forehead and said, "I had gym." The teacher let it pass. After each class she looked for Shelly. She felt more than ever that something was wrong.



"A kid in homeroom got her Bible taken," Lionel said in the car after school. "They called it 'dangerous material.'"

"All we hear is stuff about self-esteem and peace," Ryan said. "Makes me sick."

Judd thought Bruce Barnes would be overjoyed at Vicki's news about talking with her PE teacher. But they found him weeping, his

head on his desk. A young woman rose to meet them and closed Bruce's door.

"I'm Chloe Steele," she said. "You must be the Young Trib Force."

Judd, Vicki, and Lionel introduced themselves, but when Chloe saw Ryan, she hugged him tight. "I know you, don't I? You used to play with Raymie."

Ryan looked embarrassed and didn't seem to know what to do. "Raymie's her little brother," he explained.

"I'm sorry," Chloe said. "I'm helping in the office, and Pastor Barnes is not having a good day."

"What's wrong?" Judd said.

Before she could answer, the door opened and Bruce waved them inside. Judd saw tearstained pages on Bruce's desk and recognized the church directory. He picked it up and saw Bruce, a bit younger and fuller in the face with a pasted-on smile. Surrounding him were his wife and children. What a treasure Bruce had lost!

On the next page was Dr. Vernon Billings, the now departed senior pastor. Judd quickly turned to the back of the directory and found his own family. His mother and father stood behind the smiling twins, Marc and Marcie. Judd was off to the side, a few inches from the rest, straight and rigid. No smile. He

looked like he wanted to be anywhere but in that picture. Judd flipped through a few other listings and saw friends and familiar faces now gone.

"Let me see," Vicki said. Ryan pointed out Raymie's picture and then grew quiet. Bruce wiped his eyes.

Bruce explained that the reporter, Cameron Williams, had discovered the directory and was impressed by the pictures of the Steele family. Chloe blushed.

"It brought it all back to me," Bruce said. "All the pain that night my wife and kids were taken."

Bruce composed himself and asked if anyone minded if Chloe joined them. No one objected.

"There's been a development with the two witnesses in Jerusalem," Bruce said. Judd noticed the others sit straighter when they heard Bruce's solemn tone. "This is going to be on the news tonight, and you may not want to watch. A half dozen thugs tried to charge the witnesses. I don't know what they thought they could do, but they were killed. On the spot."

"What happened?" Judd said.

"They were burned to death."

Vicki gasped.

"Cool," Ryan said.

"There's nothing cool about it," Bruce said. "God judges his enemies. But you can bet this breaks his heart too. What you saw was a direct fulfillment of God's prophecy in Revelation 11. Grab a Bible and let's read what the angel tells the apostle John."

Bruce asked Vicki to read the passage.

"“And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.”"

For the next half hour Bruce explained this and other prophecies being fulfilled before their eyes. Vicki told of Mrs. Waltonen again and also how worried she was about Shelly. "Why wouldn't God let me see her today?" she said.

"I don't know," Bruce said. "But keep praying for her. Your chance will come."

The six of them huddled to pray and ask God for opportunities to speak of their faith. Bruce prayed that people would have their eyes opened to the truth.



Over hamburgers in front of the TV, Ryan said, "We forgot something."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Lionel said. "I can see pickles. What'd we forget?"

"We didn't ask Bruce about the *Underground*."

Judd smashed his trash and tossed up a shot that bounced around the can and dropped in. "Ask him?" he said. "Since when do we need Bruce's permission?"

"Judd!" Vicki said.

"I just think it would be better to surprise him," he said. "Let's get the first issue done and see what happens."

He didn't return Vicki's gaze. "I'm tired," she said. "I'll write my story in the morning."

Judd sat at the computer in his father's den. The next time he looked up it was 3 A.M. He still wasn't satisfied with the graphics for the *Underground* logo. Creating a newspaper was going to be a lot more difficult than he imagined.

He spotted a copy of the same church directory he had seen in Bruce's office. He leafed through until he came to his family. Judd had clenched his teeth hard at Bruce's office. He had to be strong. He had to be the leader.

What he wouldn't give to have his mom

and dad back! He wanted to ask questions. Life questions. Questions about the Bible. He missed his brother and sister. He just wanted to be with them and laugh again.

One picture haunted him. The youth group. All those kids sitting around a table, smiling and eating popcorn. Every one of them was now gone. All but one. All but him.