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ONE

# Vicki's Final Words

SWEAT trickled down Vicki Byrne's forehead and her heart galloped. The moment the kids had dreaded was here. The Global Community had discovered their hideout.

Vicki was frantic about getting to safety but also excited about speaking to thousands, perhaps millions, of kids around the world as she interrupted the GC's top education man.

Phoenix barked at the warning bell, and Darrion rushed into the house to quiet him as the kids scrambled into the secret passageway. Everyone was gone now except Charlie. Vicki waved at him to leave, but Charlie crossed his arms and stood by the door. He whispered, "I'm not leaving without you. Finish your talk."

Vicki turned back to the camera and

smiled. "It looks like this is my last chance to speak with you. The Global Community is asking us to move out."

Vicki had to sit still because there was no one to work the camera. She peeked at herself on the monitor across the room, took a breath, and continued.

"I was talking about my friend who bought into Enigma Babylon One World Faith. She's been in a lot of trouble—used drugs, lied to her friends, and wasn't a nice person. She thought God couldn't forgive her, so she didn't try to change."

Charlie walked out of the room and quickly returned. "They're pulling up. Hurry."

"Maybe you think with all the people who have disappeared or died that it really doesn't matter what you do with your life. I want you to know it does.

"There's a God in heaven who loved you enough to die for you. You're not just a number to him. You were created to know him and live for him. And like he did for my friend who messed up her life, he can change you from the inside out."

A rumble shook the schoolhouse, and Vicki feared the walls would fall in. "If you want God to change your life, pray with me right now."



Judd, Lionel, and Sam stood outside Teddy Kollek Stadium and watched the huge monitors. Judd had gasped when Dr. Neal Damosa, the GC's top educator, lowered his voice and tried to put the audience in a trance. But when Vicki interrupted him, it was all Judd could do to keep from cheering.

As Vicki talked, Judd watched the kids nearby. One tall boy who looked no more than fifteen said, "Not her again! That girl is a Judah-ite!"

Another shushed him. "If the GC didn't want her back on, she wouldn't be up there."

Lionel put a hand on Judd's shoulder. "Something's wrong."

Judd studied Vicki's face. When he first met her more than three years earlier, Vicki looked a lot older than fourteen. Now, at seventeen, she had grown into a mature young woman. But Lionel was right. Her eyes darted off camera. Someone said "driveway," but Judd couldn't hear the rest.

"Aren't your friends in a secure hideout?" Sam whispered.

Lionel stared at Judd. "The GC has found them."

Judd pulled his friends to the back of the

crowd near a fence. He put one arm around Lionel, the other around Sam, and bowed his head. "God, you know the trouble Vicki and the others are in. They need your help right now. You've done incredible things here for us. Now do something incredible there."



Mark Eisman called for quiet as the kids walked through the Civil War-era tunnel. They had all heard of the Underground Railway in school. This tunnel was a secret passage that had given safety to runaway slaves. Mark hoped it would give them a chance to escape too.

The tunnel led down the hill from the schoolhouse and ended just before the river. Mark turned on a flashlight and noticed the muddy ground. When they came to the end, he turned and put a finger to his lips.

Water trickled and gurgled against the riverbank not far from them. A light rain soaked the ground at the tunnel's end. In the distance, a GC diesel truck chugged up the driveway to the schoolhouse. Mark turned the flashlight on the others and counted five: Conrad, Janie, Melinda, Shelly, and Darrion, who still held Phoenix by the collar. Phoenix whimpered, and Darrion clamped his mouth shut.

Conrad broke the silence. "We shouldn't have left Vicki."

"Charlie will get her out of there," Mark said. "We have to get to the satellite truck. If we leave before sunup, we have a chance to get back to the main road before the GC finds us."

"Wait!" Conrad said. "The computer. We left it inside."

"Too late."

"But that's the only way we'll keep track of the Web site and communicate with Judd and the others."

"We can't go back now," Mark said. "Let's get to the truck."

Mark wondered if Vicki was still on the air. A long cable ran from the back of the truck to the makeshift control room Conrad had built inside the schoolhouse. The kids would have to unhook it before they pulled away.

Mark crawled through the muddy opening at the end of the tunnel and looked back. Four GC vehicles approached with headlights on high beam. The huge GC truck led the way.

Conrad peeked out and gave a low whistle. "You think that thing's filled with Peacekeepers and Morale Monitors?"

"I'm not staying to find out," Mark said. "Quick. Everybody!"

The kids crawled out of the tunnel and headed for their truck. Phoenix barked.

"Let him go, Darrion," Mark said. "He's going to give us away."

Darrion let go and Phoenix scampered into the night.

Earlier, Mark had parked the satellite truck deep in the woods on an old logging road that snaked behind the schoolhouse. Janie slipped and fell in the mud. Shelly tried to help, but she fell on top of Janie. By the time the kids reached the truck, they were all wet and muddy.

Mark opened the back door and spotted the monitor screen. Vicki was still on, her head bowed.

"Conrad, I want you to unhook the cable as soon as she's finished," Mark said.

No answer.

"Conrad?"

Darrion wiped mud from her face. "He's not here."



Carl Meninger guessed this was the end of his Global Community career. He had started as a communications specialist in the GC Navy, where he had met John Preston, one of the kids from the Young Tribulation Force. John had shared the same message



Vicki was now giving just before a meteor slammed into the ocean, creating the biggest tidal wave in history. John had given up his place in a minisub so Carl could live. It took Carl time, but he finally believed the message and became a member of the Young Tribulation Force. By that time, the GC had assigned him more responsibility, and he finally wound up in the satellite communications division in Florida.

As Vicki continued, Carl flipped switches and hit buttons like he wanted to take Vicki off the air. But a simple raise of his knee would activate a secret button he had wired the night before.

"Shut the power off!" Carl's boss yelled. "Do whatever it takes, but don't let her finish!"

Carl glanced at the screen every few moments. When Vicki began her prayer he yelled, "How in the world are they jamming us?"

"I thought you fixed this!" Carl's boss shouted, grabbing his arm and spinning him around. "I could have you executed!"

Carl had heard of Nicolae Carpathia killing people for little or no reason. GC officials who treated their employees harshly were rewarded. The media didn't publicize those stories, but Carl knew they were true.

Vicki said, "In Jesus' name, amen." She looked at the screen, smiled, and gave the kids' Web site address. "Be careful about this Gala that begins Monday. The entire event is evil. Listen and watch closely, and check our Web site during the week. I'm Vicki B. God bless you."

Carl grabbed a fire extinguisher from a cabinet and brought it down with a crash onto the console, smashing to bits meters and lights. He leaned forward and punched the secret button. The screen switched to Teddy Kollek Stadium in Jerusalem, where the crowd remained deathly silent.



When the monitor switched to the Jerusalem stadium, Vicki took a deep breath. Charlie yelled and Vicki followed. Then she glanced back and stopped.

"What are you doing?" Charlie said.

Vicki raced to Conrad's crudely made console and grabbed the laptop computer.

Charlie climbed through the trapdoor that led to the subbasement and took the laptop from Vicki. She followed, closing the door.

"Forgot a flashlight," Charlie said as darkness enveloped them.

"I remember where the door is," Vicki said.

*Vicki's Final Words*

She felt around in the dark and finally found the latch for the door. The tunnel was damp and musty, and with no light, Vicki couldn't go as fast as she wanted. She felt mud and water on the walls.

"Hold up," Charlie said.

"No! We have to get to the truck before—"

Charlie found her mouth with his hand, covered it, and whispered, "There's a light up ahead."



When Vicki finished her broadcast, Mark unhooked the cable from the truck and asked Darrion to carry it down the hill. "Throw the other end of it in the river. Maybe the GC will follow the cable."

"What about Conrad?" Darrion said.

Mark pursed his lips. "If he doesn't come back soon with Vicki and Charlie, we'll have to leave without them."



Vicki watched the light draw nearer, shining on the walls of the tunnel. Could it be a Morale Monitor?

Someone whispered, "Vicki? Charlie?"

"Conrad," Charlie said, "we're here!"

Before they could move, the ground rumbled above them. Dirt and rocks tumbled. Vicki grabbed a tree root to brace herself.

"Another earthquake?" Charlie said.

"I don't know," Vicki shouted over the noise.

Suddenly, the roof of the tunnel gave way, and mud and grass flooded in. Charlie pushed Vicki and fell under the earth and rock. Vicki crawled a few feet away, coughing and sputtering. She covered her mouth with her sleeve and tried to breathe.

"You all right?" Vicki said.

No answer.

She felt her way back on her hands and knees, frantically feeling for any sign of Charlie. She stood and reached up and felt metal and rubber near her head. And she heard voices above.

"Sunk," a man said. "All the way up to the axle. Gonna be murder getting that thing out of there."

Another called for quiet. "We'll get the truck out later. Get to the house! We don't want them to escape."

Something moved behind Vicki. "Charlie?"

She knelt and felt along the wall. A hand. Vicki clawed at the mud like an animal.

"Charlie!"

## *Vicki's Final Words*



Carl and the others in GC satellite control sat with their heads in their hands. Carl's boss had left shortly after Vicki's final words. Carl ran his fingers through his hair. "Sorry, guys. I went over this console and the signal routing a hundred times."

A young techie picked up the remains of the console and tried to fit some pieces together.

Carl waved. "Don't worry about it. It's wrecked, and so's my career."

"You go down, we go with you, sir," another said.

Carl asked everyone to leave the room. Only the young techie was left when Carl's boss called and asked him to come to his office.

"Be right there, sir."

"Think I found something," the techie said, crouching under the console.

Carl stopped and turned. "What is it?"

"Something under here looks new. Could be how they got that girl on the air."