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ONE

Judd— The Runaway

JUDD Thompson Jr. had always hated having the same name as his father. Until now.

Every time the phone rang and someone asked for Judd, it was “Which one? Big Judd or Little Judd?” The funny thing was, Little Judd was already taller than his father. He had just gotten his driver’s license, and the whiskers on his chin formed a thin goatee. He was tired of being called *Junior*, and if he were never called Little Judd again for the rest of his life, it would be too soon.

But now, for once, being Judd Thompson Jr. was working in Judd’s favor.

This break was meant to be, Judd decided. After days of fighting with his parents about where he was going, who he was with, what he was doing, and how late he would be in, he had just happened to be home one after-

noon. And his mother picked that day to ask him to bring in the mail. If that didn't prove this was meant to be, Judd didn't know what did.

Judd sighed loudly at his mother's request. She said he acted like any small chore or favor was the biggest burden in the world. That was exactly how he felt. He didn't want to be told to do anything.

"Why can't *you* get it?" he asked her.

"Because I asked you to," she said.

"Why do *I* have to do everything?"

"Would you like to compare what you do around here with what I do?" she asked, and that began the usual argument. Only when his mother threatened to ground him did he stomp out to the mailbox. He was glad he did.

On the way back to the house, idly flipping through catalogs and letters and magazines, he had found it—an envelope addressed to him. It was clearly a mistake—obviously intended for his father. He knew that as soon as he saw it. It was business mail. He didn't recognize the return address.

Just to be ornery, he slipped it inside his jacket and gave the rest of the mail to his mother. Well, he didn't actually give it to her. He tossed it onto the kitchen table in front of

her, and half of it slid to the floor. He headed to his room.

"Just a minute, young man," she said, using another of his least favorite names. "Get back here and give me this mail properly."

"In a minute," he said, jogging up the steps.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "By the time you get back here, I'll have it picked up, read, and answered."

"You're welcome!" he hollered.

"A job not finished is not worthy of a thank-you," she said. "But thanks anyway."

Judd took off his jacket, cranked up his music, and lay on his bed, opening the envelope. Onto his chest dropped a credit card in his name, Judd Thompson Jr. A sticker on it told him to call a toll-free number and answer a few questions so he could begin using the card. The letter told him they had honored his request. He could spend tens of thousands of dollars using that card alone.

Judd couldn't believe his luck. He dialed the number and was asked his mother's maiden name and his date of birth. He knew enough to use his grandmother's maiden name and his father's birthday. This was, after all, really his father's card, wrong name

or not. The automated voice told Judd he could begin using the card immediately.

It was then that he planned his escape.

Judd felt desperate to get away. He wasn't sure what had happened or why, but he was sure his family was the problem.

Judd's father owned a business in Chicago and was wealthy. His mother had never had to work outside the home. Judd's little brother and sister, nine-year-old twins Marc and Marcie, were young enough to stay out of his hair. They were OK, he guessed.

Marc's and Marcie's rooms were full of trophies from church, the same as Judd's had once been. He had really been into that stuff, memorizing Bible verses, going to camp every summer, all that.

But when Judd had gone from the junior high to the senior high youth group at New Hope Village Church in Mount Prospect, Illinois, he seemed to lose interest overnight. He used to invite his friends to church and youth group. Now he was embarrassed to say his parents made him go.

Judd felt he had outgrown church. It had been OK when he was a kid, but now nobody wanted to dress like he did, listen to his kind of music, or have a little fun. At school he hung with kids who got to make their own decisions and do what they

wanted to do. That was all he wanted. A little freedom.

Even though they could afford it, Judd's parents refused to buy him his own car. How many other high school juniors still rode the bus to school? When Judd did get to drive one of his parents' cars, one of them told him where he could go, whom he could go with, what he could do, and when he had to be back.

If only his parents knew what he was doing when they thought he was "just out with the guys," Judd thought. How he hated his curfew, his parents' constant watch over his schoolwork, their criticizing his hair, his clothes, and his friends.

Worst of all, he was grounded if he didn't get up for Sunday school and church every Sunday. Just the Sunday before, he had put up such a fuss that his mother had come into his room and sat on his bed. "Don't you love Jesus anymore?" she asked.

What a stupid question, Judd thought. He didn't remember ever really loving Jesus. Oh, he had liked all the stories and knew a lot of verses. But loving Jesus? Loving God? That was for little kids and old ladies. But what could he say to his mother?

"If you want the truth, I only go to church so I can go out on weekends and use the car."

That was clearly not what she had wanted

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to hear. "All right then, just forget it!" she said.

"I can stay home from church?"

"If you don't want to go anywhere for a week."

Judd swore under his breath. It was a good thing his mother hadn't heard *that*. He'd have been grounded for life.

In Sunday school, Judd copped an attitude. He wore clothes his parents only barely approved of, and he stayed as far away as possible from the "good" kids. What losers! They never had any fun. Judd didn't smile, didn't carry a Bible, didn't look at the teacher, didn't say anything. When the teacher asked his opinion of something, he shrugged. He wanted everyone to know he was there only because he had to be.

In church, he slouched when his father wasn't looking. He wanted to burrow within himself and just make it through to the end of the service. He didn't sing along, he didn't bow his head during prayer, he didn't shut his eyes. No one had ever said those were rules; Judd was simply trying to be different from everyone else. He was way too cool for this stuff.

As usual, Pastor Vernon Billings got off on his kick about what he called the Rapture. "Someday," he said, "Jesus will return to take

his followers to heaven. Those who have received him will disappear in the time it takes to blink your eye. We will disappear right in front of disbelieving people. Won't that be a great day for us and a horrifying one for them?"

The kindly old pastor talked about how important it was for everyone to be sure of his own standing before God and to think and pray about friends and loved ones who might not be ready. Judd's little secret was that he had never really believed any of that.

He'd had enough chances. At vacation Bible school, his friends had prayed and received Christ. He was embarrassed. He told them he had already done that at home. At camp a few years later, Judd felt guilty and sinful when a young speaker talked about church kids who weren't really Christian believers. He had wanted to go forward; he really had. But he had also just been named Camper of the Week for memorizing a bunch of Bible verses and being the fastest to look up some others. What would people say?

Judd knew he didn't have to go forward or talk with anyone to receive Christ. He knew he could do it by himself. He could pray sincerely and ask God to forgive his sins and make Jesus the Lord of his life. But later, when the meeting was over and the emotion

wore off, he told himself that was something he could do anytime.

Judd felt the most guilty when he was twelve years old and many of his Sunday school classmates signed up to be baptized. Their teacher and Pastor Billings made clear to them that this was an act of obeying Christ, a step taken by Christians to declare themselves followers of Jesus.

As the students were baptized, they were asked to tell about when they had received Christ. Judd had done the unthinkable. He had quoted Scripture and made up a story about when he had become a Christian "once by myself at camp."

He felt guilty about that for weeks, never having the guts to tell his parents or his Sunday school teacher. Yet something kept him from confessing to God and getting things right with Christ. Now he was sixteen and had feelings and thoughts he believed no one would understand. He was bored with his church, frustrated with his parents, and secretly proud that he wasn't really part of the church crowd. He went because he had to, but someday soon he would make his own decisions.

With the small error on that credit card, Judd Thompson Jr. had his ticket to freedom. He had seen his dad get cash with his credit

card at the bank and at the automatic teller machines. And he knew that almost anything could be paid for with that magic card.

Of course, one day the bill would come and his parents would be able to trace where he had been. But he could put a lot of miles between himself and them in the meantime.

For several days, Judd saved cash, withdrawing as much as he could each day from the automatic teller machine. He hid the money with the passport he had gotten the year before when his father took him along on a business trip to Asia. He had been miserable on that trip and let his dad know it every chance he got. Judd Sr. had finally given up trying to convince Judd Jr. that this was “the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Secretly Judd had to admit that he enjoyed the hotels, the meals, and even learning how to get around in foreign cities with different cultures and languages. But he wasn't about to tell his dad that. Judd knew Dad had dragged him along only to get him away from his new friends, the ones his mother called the “evil influences.” It was also supposed to be a time for him and his dad to bond—whatever that meant. Dad had tried, Judd had to give him that, but there had been no bonding. Mostly it was just Judd

scowling, complaining, arguing, and begging to go home.

At least he got a passport out of the deal. That, along with his new driver's license and the credit card, gave him what he thought was complete freedom. A friend had told him he looked old enough to pass for twenty-one and that he should get a fake identification card that would allow him to buy liquor in Illinois. It was cheaper and easier than he thought to get both his driver's license and his passport copied with a new birth date.

His plan was to take his stash of cash and go to O'Hare International Airport some night. He would take the first flight he could get to another English-speaking country. Beyond that, his plan was not clear. One thing was sure: He wasn't going to bum around begging for a place to stay. He would live first-class all the way.

Now Judd was a criminal. He told himself he wasn't scared. Breaking the law only made him bolder about his plan, and he began making up reasons why he had to get away from home as soon as possible.

As he made his plans, Judd became more and more angry. He disagreed with everything his parents did or said. He was mean and sarcastic.

One day after school his little brother came into his room.

"What do *you* want?" Judd asked Marc.

"I just wanted to ask you a question. Are you still a Christian?"

Judd lied. "Of course," he said. "What's it to you?"

"I was just wonderin' because it doesn't seem like you're happy or acting like one."

"Why don't you get out of here and mind your own business!"

"Will you be mad at me if I pray for you?"

"Don't waste your breath."

"You're makin' Mom cry, you know that?"

"She shouldn't waste her tears either."

"Judd, what's the matter? You used to care—"

"Out! Get out!"

Marc looked pale and tearful as he left. Judd shook his head, disgusted, and told himself Marc would be a lot better off when he outgrew his stupidity. *I used to be just like that*, Judd thought. *What a wuss!*

Judd stuffed some of his favorite clothes in his book bag and jogged downstairs. "And where do you think you're going, mister?" his mother said. Did she always have to talk like that? Couldn't she just ask a simple question?

"I'm going to the library to study," Judd

said. "I'll be there till closing, so don't wait up for me."

"Since when did you get interested in studying?" his mother asked.

"You said you wanted my grades to improve!"

"You don't need to go to the library to study, Judd. Why don't you stay here and—"

"I need some peace and quiet, all right?"

"What will you do for dinner?"

"I'll get something out."

"Do you need some money?"

"No! Now leave me alone!"

"All right! Just go! But don't be late!"

"Mom! I already told you! I'm staying till closing, so—"

"Don't wait up, yeah, I know. Are you meeting someone there?"

"No!"

"I'd better not find out you've been out with your friends, young man. . . ."

But Judd was already out the door.



At O'Hare, Judd found a flight on Pan-Continental Airlines that left early in the evening and was scheduled to arrive in London the following morning. His phony identification cards worked perfectly, and he

enjoyed being referred to as Mr. Thompson. His first-class ticket was very expensive, but it was the only seat left on the 747.

Judd knew it wouldn't be long before his parents started looking for him. They would discover his car at the airport, and they would quickly find his name on the passenger list of the Pan-Con flight. He'd better enjoy this freedom while he could, he decided. He would try to hide in England for as long as possible, but even if he was found and hauled back to the United States, he hoped he would have made his point.

What was his point, exactly, he wondered. That he needed his freedom. Yeah, that was it. He needed to be able to make some decisions on his own, to be treated like an adult. He didn't want to be told what to do all the time. He wanted the Thompson family to know that he was able to get along in the world on his own. Going to London by himself, based on his own plans, ought to prove that.

Judd sat on the aisle. On the other side of the aisle sat a middle-aged man who had three drinks set before him. Beyond him, in the window seat, a younger man sat hunched over his laptop computer.

Judd was stunned at the beauty of the flight attendant, whose name badge read

"Hattie." He'd never known anyone with that name, but he couldn't work up the courage to say so. He was excited and pleased with himself when she didn't even ask to see any identification when she offered him champagne.

"How much?" he asked.

"It's free in first class, Mr. Thompson," she said.

He had tried champagne a few times and didn't like it, but he liked the idea of its sitting on the tray table in front of him. He would pretend to be on business, on his way to London for important meetings.

Captain Rayford Steele came over the intercom, announcing their flight path and altitude and saying he expected to arrive at Heathrow Airport at six in the morning.

Judd Thompson Jr. couldn't wait. This was already the most exciting night of his life.