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ONE

# New Hope

JUDD Thompson Jr. had always sized up situations quickly. It was clear to him that of the four kids who had fled to nearby New Hope Village Church during the greatest crisis the world would ever see, he was the oldest. The redhead, the only girl, had a hard, bitter edge to her. But still, if Judd had to guess, he would have said she was younger than he was.

Ah, what did he care. How could he ever care about anything anymore? The end of the world, at least the world as he knew it, had come. Millions all over the world had disappeared right out of their clothes, leaving everything but flesh and bone behind.

It wasn't that Judd didn't know what had happened. He knew all too well. As he had heard in church and Sunday school and at

home his whole life, Jesus Christ had come back to rapture his church, and Judd had been left behind.

He even knew why. It didn't take the earnest visitation pastor of New Hope Village Church, Bruce Barnes, to explain that. Of all things, Pastor Barnes himself had been left behind.

Bruce Barnes had spent the last several minutes telling Judd and the three other shell-shocked kids his own story. He finished by telling them there was still hope. Life would be miserable from now on, of course, and they would be alone except for other new believers, but it was not too late for them to come to Christ.

Bruce had urged them to think about it and not to waste much time. The world had become dangerous overnight. With so many Christians disappearing from important jobs, the result was chaos. No one had any guarantees. Life was fragile. Judd was impressed that Bruce seemed so eager to convince them that their only hope now was to trust Christ.

Judd knew it was the truth. He had to face himself, and he didn't like what he saw. His whole look, the way he carried himself, the me-first attitude, the secret that he had never really become a Christian—all those things sickened him now.

Why had he wanted to appear so old? Why was it so important to him to know where he fit in every crowd? Everything that ever mattered to him now seemed ridiculous. He had been a tough guy, a big shot, the one with all the plans and schemes. He had stolen his dad's credit card and bought phony identification papers that said he was old enough to travel on his own. *Yeah*, Judd thought, *I was a real player.*

But though Judd had come to some hard realizations about himself, he still had a major problem. There was no question Bruce was right. Judd didn't want to live without his family and without Christ. Though he knew he had had every chance and could have been in heaven with his parents and brother and sister right then, everything in him still fought to blame somebody else. But whom could he blame?

His parents had been wonderful examples to him. Even his little brother had recently asked Judd if he still loved Jesus. If he couldn't blame his family and he didn't want to blame himself, that left only God. He knew there was no future in blaming a perfect and holy God, but right then he had to admit that he didn't much care for God's plan.

Whatever happened to the idea that God loved everybody and didn't want anybody to

die and go to hell? What kind of a God would leave a sixteen-year-old kid without his family?

Judd knew he wasn't thinking straight. In fact, he had to admit he was being ridiculous. But just then he didn't like God very much. He was mad at God because there was no one else to be mad at.

Besides, Judd was grieving. No, his family had not died. But they might as well have. He was glad for them, he guessed, that they had gotten their reward for believing. But that was of little comfort to him.

Bruce Barnes asked the four kids to introduce themselves and talk about themselves a bit. Judd didn't see the point of that. Bruce began with the youngest boy, the little blond who appeared stocky and athletic.

Judd was reminded of his own little brother, Marc. Marc and Marcie were twins, nine years old. Both had been tremendously athletic. While Judd had lost interest in sports after Little League, Marc and Marcie had seemed interested in every sport imaginable. They had both been dark-haired and younger and smaller than Ryan Daley, but still Judd found it hard to listen to the boy without thinking of them both. Already he missed them more than he could say. Just being around someone even near their age cut like a knife deep into his heart.

Ryan was telling his story at just above a whisper. Judd could tell the boy had spent a lot of time crying that day. No doubt there would be more tears until he could cry no more.

"I don't know what I think about all this stuff you've been saying, Mr. Barnes. If it's true, I don't think either of my parents went to heaven. For sure my mom didn't because she was killed on the road sometime this morning. My dad was listed with the passengers that went down in a plane crash. I don't think he would have been one of those who disappeared. I mean, he was great and I loved him, but he never said anything about being a Christian or even going to church."

Ryan told about waking up to find his mother's note and then hearing from the police about her death. When he stopped and buried his head in his hands, Bruce Barnes leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "So you've never, ever been in church before?"

"Well, not never," Ryan managed, raising his head. "Somebody invited me to one of those Bible school things they have in the summertime at church once—"

"Vacation Bible School?" Bruce said.

"Yeah, that's it. But I was really little then and I don't remember much about it. My

friend—his dad's an airline pilot—wanted me to go to church with him here. I never did."

"And who was that?"

"His name was Raymie Steele. He tried to tell me all about this, the way you just did. I thought he was nuts."

"What do you think now, Ryan?"

With that, Ryan buried his face in his hands again and sobbed. Bruce began to ask him something, but Ryan wrenched away and shook his head. Judd thought he knew exactly how Ryan felt.

Bruce turned to Lionel Washington. Judd noticed that the lanky young boy with the smooth face and chocolate complexion had sat expressionless since they had begun. His wide, dark eyes seemed to rarely blink. He merely sat forward, his chin resting on his fist, listening. Judd couldn't tell if he was interested or not, but something had brought him there.

Bruce asked Lionel if he knew any of the others. "No, but my sister Clarice knew Vicki here. They rode the school bus together."

"How do you feel about all this?" Bruce said.

"Oh," Lionel said, "this is nothing new to me. I know exactly what happened. You're right, we all missed it. The real Christians

have gone to heaven, and we've all been left behind."

Ryan leaped from his seat and ran out, shouting through his sobs, "It's not fair! It's not fair! This is crazy! Why would God do this?"

Judd, Bruce, Vicki, and Lionel watched him go. "Aren't you going to stop him?" Judd asked Bruce.

Bruce shook his head. "He'll be back. Where else does he have to go?"

Lionel, who seemed to Judd to have been shaken by Ryan's quick exit, finished his own story of having grown up in a Christian family and gone to church all his life, only to never have made a true decision himself to become a follower of Christ. "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but I can't say I'm surprised or that I didn't get exactly what I deserved. I don't know if I believe there's really still a second chance, but if there is, I want it."

"Believe me, there is a second chance," Bruce said, "and I think it's something you'll want to take advantage of right away, don't you?"

"You better believe I already prayed the prayer," Lionel said. "If that's what you mean. I told God I was sorry, begged his forgiveness, and asked him to save me once and for all. You're saying it's not too late?"

"That's what I'm saying. Welcome to the family."

"To tell you the truth, sir," Lionel said, "I'd rather be in heaven with my own family right now."

"You and me both," Bruce said.

Judd was stunned at how much he and Lionel had in common, though they had never even seen each other before. Lionel, like Judd, also had a younger brother and sister. And Judd and Lionel had been raised in the church by Christian families.

Now it was Vicki's turn. "Well," she began with a quavery voice, "I guess I should have known better too."

Judd noticed how young and scared she sounded for someone who said she was fourteen years old. Of course, he felt very young and scared himself just then, but she looked like a tough girl. Whatever edge there had been to her seemed to have been stolen away when her mother, father, and little sister had been raptured. She told her story about growing up in the trailer park, about the weekend beer brawls and dances that had one time, seemingly out of the blue, begun with an evangelist preaching for just a few minutes and resulted in her parents becoming Christians.

"I saw big changes in their lives," Vicki

admitted, "but actually I hated it. I hated church, and I didn't want to have anything to do with religion. They kept telling me it wasn't religion, it was Jesus, but I didn't see the difference."

"Now you do, of course," Bruce said.

"Of course," she said.

"Forgive me for being pushy," Bruce said, "but what are you going to do about it now?"

Vicki looked down and busied herself tracing a pattern on the floor with the toe of her shoe. "Actually, even though I know you're right, I just don't want to make a decision like this while I'm still in shock."

Bruce seemed to be trying gently to push her into seeing that, despite the trauma she had just been through, she really shouldn't take more time. "You know the truth. That makes it your responsibility to act upon it."

"I know," she whispered. But she would not return his gaze. Her body seemed rigid. To Judd it seemed as if she was through listening or talking about it. He was surprised when she looked up and appeared to be listening when it was his turn to tell his story.

Judd kept his account short. He merely mentioned that he too had been raised in a Christian home and knew exactly what had happened. He told of his plan to run away from home and be his own person, and how

it had all come crashing down on him when the Rapture occurred while he was on a plane over the Atlantic on the way to London.

"I have to say, though, Pastor Barnes, I feel like Vicki here. I know what I'm *supposed* to do, what I *should* do, and what I'm sure I *will* do. But I just feel too much pressure. I can hardly get my mind around the fact that I'll never see my family again."

Bruce stood and moved near to Judd. "Don't you kids see? That's my point! If I'm right and a seven-year period of tribulation begins soon, it's unlikely any of us will live through it. We had better be prepared to see God, or we'll wind up without him for all of eternity."

Judd knew Bruce was right, but he caught Vicki's glance and knew the two of them were still determined not to be pushed. He only hoped that it wasn't simply a pride thing. He was pretty sure it wasn't. He was way past pride now.

"I'm sorry, Pastor Barnes, but I just need more time to deal with all of this," Judd said.

"Me too," Vicki said.

"Don't be waiting too long now," Lionel said. "I waited way too long as it is."

"I couldn't have said that better myself," Bruce said.