

ZONDERVAN

Take One

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One

CHASE RYAN DOUBTED THERE WAS ENOUGH oxygen in the plane to get him from San Jose to Indianapolis. He took his window seat on the Boeing 737, slid his laptop bag onto the floor space in front of him, and closed his eyes. Deep breaths, he told himself. Stay calm. But nothing about the job ahead of him inspired even a single peaceful feeling. On Monday Chase and his best friend Keith Ellison would set up shop in Bloomington, Indiana, and start spending millions of dollars of other people's investment money to make a film they believed would change lives.

Even during the rare moments when that fact didn't terrify him, Chase could hear the quiet anxious voice of his wife, Kelly, splashing him with a cold bucket of reality. "Only two million dollars, Chase? Seriously?" She had brought it up again on the way to the airport. Her knuckles stayed white as she gripped the steering wheel. "What if you run out of money before you finish the film?"

"We won't." Chase had steeled his eyes straight ahead. "Keith and I know the budget."

"What if it doesn't go like you planned?" Her body was tense, her eyes fearful. She gave him quick, nervous glances. "If something happens, we'll spend the rest of our lives paying that off."

She was right, but he didn't want to say so. Not when it was too late to turn back. The actors were arriving on set in two days, and the entire film crew would be in Bloomington by tomorrow. Plans were in motion, and already bills needed to be paid. They had no choice but to move ahead and stick to their budget,

trusting God that they could make this film for two million dollars, and illustrate a message of faith better and stronger than anything the industry had ever seen.

Failure wasn't an option.

They reached the airport, but before she dropped Chase off, Kelly turned to him, lines creasing the space between her eyebrows. She was only thirty-one, but lately she looked older. Maybe because she only seemed to smile when she was playing with their two little girls, Macy and Molly. Worry weighted her tone. "Four weeks?"

"Hopefully sooner." He refused to be anything but optimistic.

"You'll call?"

"Of course. Every day." Chase studied her, and the familiar love was there. But her anxiety was something he didn't recognize. The faith she'd shown back when they lived in Indonesia, that's what he needed from her now. "Relax, baby. Please."

"Okay." She let out a sigh and another one seemed right behind it. "Why am I so afraid?"

His heart went out to her. "Kelly ..." His words were softer than before, his tone desperate to convince her. "Believe in me ... believe in this movie. You don't know how much I need that."

"I'm trying." She looked down and it took awhile before she raised her eyes to his again. "It was easier in Indonesia. At least in the jungle the mission was simple."

"Simple?" He chuckled, but the sound lacked any real humor. "Indonesia was never easy. Any of us could've been arrested or killed. We could've caught malaria or a dozen different diseases. Every day held that kind of risk."

The lines on her face eased a little and a smile tugged at her lips. She touched her finger to his face. "At least we had each other." She looked deep into his eyes, to the places that belonged to only the two of them and she kissed him. "Come on, Chase ... you've gotta see why I'm worried. It's not just the money."

He caught a quick look at his watch. “You’re afraid we won’t finish on time and that’ll put us over budget and—”

“No.” She didn’t raise her voice, but the fear in her eyes cut him short. “Don’t you see?” Shame filled in the spaces between her words. “You’re young and handsome and talented ...” Her smile was sad now. “You’ll be working with beautiful actresses and movie professionals and ... I don’t know, the whole thing scares me.”

She didn’t come out and admit her deeper feelings, those she’d shared with him a week before the trip. The fact that she didn’t feel she could measure up to the Hollywood crowd. Chase ached for her, frustrated by her lack of confidence. “This isn’t about the movie industry. It’s about a bigger mission field than we ever had in Indonesia.” He wove his fingers into her thick dark hair, drew her close, and kissed her once more. “Trust me, baby. Please.”

This time she didn’t refute him, but the worry in her eyes remained as he grabbed his bags and stepped away from the car. He texted her once he got through security, telling her again that he loved her and that she had nothing to worry about. But she didn’t answer and now, no matter how badly he needed to sleep, he couldn’t shake the look on her face or the tone of her voice. What if her fears were some sort of premonition about the movie? Maybe God was using her to tell Keith and him to pull out now—before they lost everything.

Once on the plane, he tightened his seatbelt and stared out the window. But then, Keith’s wife was completely on board with their plans. Her father was one of the investors, after all. Besides that, Keith’s daughter, Andi, was a freshman at Indiana University, so the shoot would give Keith a window to Andi’s world—something he was grateful for. Andi wanted to be an actress, and apparently her roommate was a theater major. Both college girls would be extras in the film, so Keith’s entire family could hardly wait to get started.

Chase bit the inside of his lip. From the beginning, all the worries about the movie came from him and Kelly, but now that he was on his way to Indiana, Chase had to focus not on his fears, but on the film.

He ignored the knots in his stomach as he leaned against the cold hard plastic that framed the airplane window. The movie they were making was called *The Last Letter*, the story of a college kid whose life is interrupted when his father suffers a sudden fatal heart attack. The kid isn't sure how to move on until his mother reveals to him a letter—one last letter from his father. That letter takes Braden on a quest of discovery in faith and family, and finally into a brilliant future Braden had known nothing about.

The story was a parable, an illustration of the verse in Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” The verse would be their mantra every day of the filming, Chase had no doubt.

He closed his eyes, and in a rush he could hear the music welling in his chest, feel the emotion as it filled a theater full of moviegoers. He could see the images as they danced across the big screen, and he could imagine all of it playing out beyond his wildest expectations.

But the way from here to there could easily be a million miles of rocky back roads and potholes.

They were still at the gate, still waiting for the plane to head out toward the runway. Chase blinked and stared out the window, beyond the airport to the blue sky. Every day this week had been blue, not a cloud in sight, something Chase and Keith both found fitting. Because no matter what Kelly feared, no matter what pressures came with this decision, here was the moment Chase and Keith had dreamed of and planned for, the culmination of a lifetime of believing that God wanted them to take part in saving the world—not on a mission field in Indonesia, but

in packed movie houses across America. Oak River Films, they called themselves. The name came from their love of the first Psalm. Chase had long since memorized the first three verses:

Blessed is the man who does not walk not in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Oak River Films. That everything he and Keith did would be rooted in a delight for the Lord, and a belief that if they planted their projects near the living water of Christ, they would flourish for Him. Chase shifted in his seat. He silently repeated the Scripture again. Why was he worried about what lay ahead? He believed God was sending them to make this movie, right? He pressed his body into the thinly padded seat. *Breathe. Settle down and breathe.*

In every way that mattered, this film would make or break them in the world of Hollywood movie production. Easy enough, he had told himself when they first began this venture. But as the trip to Bloomington, Indiana, neared, the pressure built. They received phone calls from well-meaning investors asking how the casting was going or confirming when the shoot date was. They weren't antsy or doubtful that Chase and Keith could bring a return for their investment, but they were curious.

The same way everyone surrounding the film was curious.

Keith handled these phone calls. He was the calmer of the two, the one whose faith knew no limits. It had been Keith's decision that they would make the film with money from investors rather than selling out too quickly to a studio. Producers who paid for their projects retained complete creative control—and the message of this first film was one Chase and Keith wouldn't

let anyone change. No matter how much easy studio money might hang in the balance.

Moments like this Chase worried about all of it. His wife and little girls back home, and whether the production team could stick to the aggressive film schedule they'd set. Chase massaged his thumb into his brow. The concerns made up a long list. He had to manage a cast of egos that included an academy award winner and two household names—both of whom had reputations for being talented but difficult. He had to keep everyone working well together and stick to his four-week schedule—all while staying on budget. He worried about running out of money or running out of time, and whether this was really where God wanted them—working in a world as crazy as Hollywood.

Chase took a long breath and exhaled slowly. The white-haired woman next to him was reading a magazine, but she glanced his way now and then, probably looking for a conversation. Chase wasn't interested. He looked out the window again and a picture filled his mind, the picture of an apartment building surrounded by police tape. The image was from his high school days in the San Fernando Valley, when a major earthquake hit Southern California. The damage was considerable, but the Northridge Meadows apartment symbolized the worst of it. In a matter of seconds, the three-story apartment building collapsed and became one—the weight of the top two floors too great for the shaken foundation.

A shudder ran its way through Chase.

That could be them in a few months if the filming didn't go well, if the foundation of their budget didn't hold the weight of all that was happening on top of it. Chase could already feel the weight pressing in along his shoulders.

"Excuse me." The woman beside him tapped his arm. "Does your seatback have a copy of the *SkyMall* magazine? Mine's missing."

Chase checked and found what the woman wanted. He smiled as he handed it to her. "Helps pass the time."

"Yes." She had kind blue eyes. "Especially during takeoff. I can usually find something for my precious little Max. He's a cockapoo. Cute as a button."

"I'm sure." Chase nodded and looked out the window once more. Pressure came with the job, he'd known that from the beginning. He and Keith were producers; with that came a certain sense of thrill and awe, terror and anxiety, because for every dollar they'd raised toward this movie, for every chance an investor took on their film, there was a coinciding possibility that something could go wrong.

"You ever wonder," Chase had asked Keith a few days ago over a Subway sandwich, "whether we should've just stayed in Indonesia?"

Keith only smiled that slow smile, the one that morphed across his face when his confidence came from someplace otherworldly. "This is where we're supposed to be." He took a bite of his sandwich and waited until he'd swallowed. He looked deep into Chase's eyes. "I feel it in the center of my bones."

Truth and integrity. That's what Keith worried about. The truth of the message when the film was finally wrapped and they brought it to the public, and integrity with the cast and crew, the investors and the studios. For Keith, every day was a test because God was watching.

Chase agreed, but the pressure he felt didn't come from being under the watchful eye of the Lord. That mattered a great deal, but God would accept them whether they returned home having completed their movie mission or not. Rather Chase worried because the whole world was watching to see what sort of movie the two of them could make on such a limited budget. And if they failed, the world would know that too.

They were in the air now and the woman beside him closed the *SkyMall* magazine and handed it back to him. "I've seen it all before. Nothing new for Max." She shrugged one thin shoulder. "I've been making this trip a lot lately. Trying to sell my house in Indiana."

Chase still didn't want to talk, but the woman reminded him of his grandmother. She had a warmth about her, and something else ... a sadness maybe. Whatever it was he felt compelled to give her at least a little time. "Moving to San Jose?"

"Yes. It's time, I guess." She looked straight ahead at nothing in particular. "Lived in Indiana all my life." Light from the window fell on her soft wrinkled skin, and for a few seconds her smile faded. She had to be eighty at least, but she seemed a decade younger. Then, as if she suddenly remembered she'd begun a conversation with a stranger, she grinned at Chase again. "What about you? Heading home?"

"No." He angled himself so his back was against the window. "Going to Bloomington for business."

She looked delighted that he was talking to her. "Business!" She raised an eyebrow. "My husband was a businessman. What line of work?"

"I'm a producer." Chase fought with the sense of privilege and headiness that came with the title. "We'll be on location four weeks."

"Produce! Isn't that wonderful." She folded her hands in her lap. "My great nephew works in produce. Got a job at the grocer not too far from his parents' house and now he unpacks tomatoes and cabbage all day long."

Chase opened his mouth to tell her he was a producer, and not in produce, but she wasn't finished.

"He's only been at it a few months, but I don't think he'll end up in produce long term. He wants to finish school." She angled her head sweetly. "Did you finish college, young man?"

“Yes, ma’am. But —”

“Well, of course you did.” She laughed lightly at herself. “You must be a produce manager, heading to the farms of Bloomington for harvest season, making sure the crop’s coming up good and going out to stores across the country.” She gave as hearty a nod as she could muster. “That’s a mighty important job.” Her finger gave a quick jab in his direction. “The public takes it for granted, the way we need produce managers. We walk into a store and just assume we can buy a pound of red apples or Vidalia onions.” She settled back in her seat, but she looked straight at him. “Farming’s the American way.” Her grin held a level of admiration. “Thanks for what you do for this great nation ... what’d you say your name was?”

“Chase. Chase Ryan.”

“Matilda Ewing. Mattie.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Well, Mr. Ryan,” she held out her bony fingers. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too. But what about your family back home? Four weeks is an awful long time to be apart. My son nearly lost his marriage once because of that. He was in sales ... had to figure out a different territory to save his family.” She barely paused. “You do have a family, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s hard to be away.” He was touched by the woman’s transparency. “My wife, Kelly, is home with our little girls. They’re four and two.”

She sucked in a surprised breath. “And you’ll be gone four weeks! You must have a peach for a wife. That’s a long time to tend to a family by yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chase wondered if the woman was slightly confused. Seconds ago she was singing his praise, claiming the virtues of his being a produce manager, and now she was practically chastising him for daring to take such a long trip.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she was saying. “Farming’s a good thing. But be careful. Fences pop up when you’re away from each other that long. Nothing on the other side of the fence is ever as green as it seems.” She chuckled softly. “Even in produce.”

The flight attendant peered into their row. “Something to drink?”

Matilda ordered ginger ale, and in the process she fell into a conversation with the person on the aisle. The diversion gave Chase the chance to stare out the window again and think about the old woman and her wisdom. Never mind that her hearing was a little off, Chase almost liked the idea that the kind woman thought he worked producing vegetables and not movies. But more than that, her words were dead on when it came to his family back home. Especially the part about fences.

With all his concerns and worries, he hadn’t thought about how the four weeks away would feel to Kelly and their girls.

He must’ve fallen asleep as he thought about his conversation with Matilda, because in no time she was tapping him on the arm again. “Mr. Ryan, we’re landing. Your seatback needs to be up.”

He stretched his legs out on either side of his laptop bag and did as he was told. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” She adjusted the vent above her seat. “You were sleeping pretty hard. You’ll need that rest when you hit the fields.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chase rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. When he was more awake he turned toward her again. “So ... why are you moving to San Jose?”

At first she didn’t seem like she intended to answer his question. She pursed her lips and stared down at her hands, at a slender gold wedding band that looked worn with age. When she looked up, the sadness was there again. “My husband and I were married fifty-eight years.” She wrung her hands as the words found their way to her lips. “He passed away this last January. My girls

want me to live closer to them.” She smiled, but it stopped short of her eyes. “We’re looking for an apartment at one of those ... senior facilities. Somewhere that’ll take Max and me, both.” Her expression told him she was uncomfortable with the idea, but she wasn’t fighting it. “I can get a little forgetful, and, well, sometimes I don’t hear as well as I used to. It’s a good idea, really.” A depth shone from deep inside her. “Don’t you think?”

“I do.” He wanted to hug the woman. Poor dear.

“My girls say I’m dragging my feet.” She shifted her gaze straight ahead once more. “And maybe I am. When I close up that house and shut the door for the last time, that’ll be that.” She looked at him through a layer of tears. “We spent five decades in that house. Every square inch holds a hundred memories.”

“Leaving won’t be easy.”

“No.” Matilda sniffed. “That’s why I’m saying,” her composure gradually returned, “look out for fences, Mr. Ryan. Produce or no produce, home’s the better place. Kids grow up and God only gives us so many days with our loved ones.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The captain came on, advising them that they’d be landing soon, and the announcement stalled the conversation with Matilda. She started talking to the passenger on her left once more, and not until they were at the end of the jetway did she turn and flash her twinkling eyes his way. “Good luck with the produce, Mr. Ryan. And remember what I said about fences. The greenest grass is back at home.”

Chase thanked her again, and then she was gone; between the gate and baggage claim he didn’t see her again. He rented a Chevy Tahoe and headed for Bloomington. Once he arrived, the first thing he did was call Kelly.

“Hello?”

“Honey ... it’s me.” Chase felt a sense of relief. His words spilled out far faster than usual. “There’s something I should’ve

said, back at the airport when we were saying goodbye. I mean, we stood there all those minutes, but I never really told you what I should have, so that's why I'm calling."

She laughed. "Someone's had too much coffee."

"No." He exhaled and slowed himself. "What I mean is, I appreciate you, Kelly. You have to handle the house and the girls for a very long time, and I never ... I never thanked you."

For a few beats there was no response. "You really feel that way?" A tentative joy warmed her tone.

"I do." Another picture flashed on the screen of his heart. The two of them holding hands in front of a church full of family and friends, and Chase knowing that in all the world he could never love anyone as much as he loved the beautiful bride standing before him. "I love you, Kelly. Don't ever forget that, okay?"

"Okay." She laughed and the sound was wind chimes and summer breeze, the way it hadn't been for a while. "You don't know how much it means ... that you'd call like this."

"I miss you already. Give the girls a kiss for me."

"Okay. Oh, and Chase ... one more thing." She laughed again. "Go get 'em tomorrow ... I know you can do it. I've been praying since you left and I feel like God cleared some things up for me. This is going to be bigger than Keith and you ever dreamed."

Her confidence breathed new life into his dreams. "Seriously?"

"Yes." The sound of the girls singing about Old McDonald's Farm came across the lines from the background. "I believe in you, Chase. I promise I'll keep believing."

"Thank you." He thought about old Matilda and how she would smile if she could see the conversation Chase was having with his wife. "Okay, then ... I guess I'm off to the harvest."

"The harvest?" Kelly still had a laugh in her voice. "What on earth?"

"Nothing." He chuckled. He told her again that he loved her, and he promised to call that evening to tell the girls goodnight.

After he hung up, he caught himself once more drawn back to the sweet woman's words. In some ways he really was headed out to the fields, out to a crop that needed harvesting—the crop of human hearts and souls that might only be found if they created the best movie possible. But more than that, he thought about the fences.

With Keith and him producing, the months ahead figured to be crazy at times. But no matter how bumpy the ride, he vowed to stay on the same side of the fence as Kelly and the girls. Because Matilda was right.

God only gave a person so many days with their family.