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*Take Two*

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# One

KENDALL ADAMS SAT ACROSS FROM HER father in the executive boardroom of his Los Angeles high-rise and stared at the rolling hills of Hollywood in the distance. October was always like this—brilliant blue skies and air as clear as a summer day in Montana. Kendall breathed deep, stood, and sauntered to the window.

“I’m still amazed—” She glanced over her shoulder at her dad. “—that you’re doing this.”

“It’s my passion too.” Her father smiled, and the warmth in his eyes belied his cunning business sense and high-profile international-billionaire status. “I’ve been looking for an investment opportunity like this for years.”

Kendall looked down from twenty-three stories at a busy Melrose Boulevard. What would this venture bring, this decision to team up with Chase Ryan and Keith Ellison? Was filmmaking where she would find healing for her broken heart?

She watched a breeze dance through the palm trees that framed the constant traffic below.

“You’re thinking about him again.” Her father was on his feet, coming toward her. “I can feel it.”

“No.” She linked her arm through his as he came up alongside her. “About the movies. And whether or not this is when life finds its way back to normal again.”

A tight-lipped sigh hung briefly on her dad’s lips. “I wish I never would’ve introduced you to that ... that—”

“It’s over.” Her calm voice reflected none of the pain that still colored the edges of every moment. “I don’t blame you or me. Or God. It’s time for whatever’s next.”

A comfortable silence fell around them, tempered only by the distant sounds of telephones and office staff on the other side of the door.

“Will you tell them? The producers?”

“No.” She didn’t hesitate. “What happened was private. The media never really figured out the story, so no one else needs to.”

Sympathy shadowed her father’s expression. “Good call. You’ll spend a lot of time with Chase and Keith, but it’s better to ... well, you know, keep things on a business level.”

Kendall studied her dad for a long moment. Times like this she still wondered if he merely offered fatherly advice or worried about saving face, about making sure no one knew how much she’d lost over the last year. How much they’d both lost.

A shiver ran down her spine. Maybe if she pretended it never happened, a time would come when she might go a whole day without feeling the pain.

The phone rang from the middle of the long table and her dad answered it. “Yes, fine. We’re ready for them.” He hung up and reached back to give her a hug. “It’s a new day, Kendall. God’s going to use this partnership. I have a great feeling about it.”

Giving her father a smile, she ordered herself to set aside the memories of the past. Her dad was right. This was a new time for both of them.

She smoothed her blouse and stayed at her father’s elbow as he moved to the door. His secretary knocked at about the same time and ushered in Chase and Keith. This was the first time the four of them had been together since the wrap party in Bloomington, Indiana, for *The Last Letter*, so the greetings between them took a little longer than usual.

As soon as they were seated at the table, Chase leaned back and gripped the armrests. “Keith and I truly appreciate you taking the time to meet with us.” He looked at his friend and then back to Kendall and her father. “But with the economy the way it is, we don’t want you to feel obligated to give us additional financial help. We wanted to get that out at the beginning.”

Kendall felt like rushing around the table and giving the guy a hug. Did he know how rare his attitude was in Hollywood? The idea of looking out for someone else first?

She shared a smile with her dad and the look in his eyes told her to take the lead. She sat up a little straighter. “Actually, we’re more committed to your movies now than ever.”

“That’s right. Kendall has great news about your next film—the one we talked about last time we were together.” Her father looked elated. He had said once that his fortune brought him no joy whatsoever except when it could be used to share God’s truth and light, and when it could help make other people’s dreams come true. “And I’m certain you’re needing more funds for the editing process, is that right?”

“Actually, we’re okay.” Keith opened a file he’d brought with him and handed copies of an accounting sheet to Kendall and her father. “The funds you provided at the end of the shoot have gone a long way. We’ll get through the editing process okay. It’s what happens after that.”

“Publicity and advertising—or the P&A budget, as they call it.” Kendall’s father grinned. “Not a problem, guys. Count me in. We want this movie on the big screens.”

Chase looked a little dizzy, and again something about him touched Kendall’s heart. He was sincere and kind, genuine in his desire to make movies for the purpose of reaching people. With everything in her she hoped the movie business never changed him.

Once they moved past the initial budget issues for *The Last Letter*, Kendall took over. “The author of *Unlocked* is still very interested in giving you both the option for her book. It’s been on the *New York Times* Best-Sellers List for ten weeks now.”

“We know.” Keith allowed the hint of a smile. “We figured she must’ve had a hundred offers by now.”

“She has.” Kendall felt her eyes begin to dance. Like her father, she loved this—watching the impossible become a reality for a couple of good guys like Keith and Chase. “But she wants to work with you.” She pulled a notepad from her bag and checked the details. “Stephanie’s on deadline for her next novel. She’ll be busy the next month or so. Then she’d like to fly here and meet you. Get the option in ink.” She looked up. “That should give you enough time to finish editing *The Last Letter* and submit the film to the festivals. Which I’d like to help with, by the way.”

She could see Chase wrestling with a question. After a few seconds he lost the battle. “Brandon Paul? Is that still an option for *Unlocked*?”

Kendall laughed—the happy lighthearted laughter that had once marked her world. “He’s more than an option. I talked to him yesterday. He’s in. We only have to work out the details with his agent, pull together a screenplay and a director.” She grinned at the men around her. “Monumental details like that.”

Both Keith and Chase hesitated, but seeing Kendall and her father’s confidence, they both chuckled and the mood relaxed. They spent the next few moments talking about their families, their wives and kids. Keith was worried about his college-aged daughter, Andi, away at school in Bloomington, and Chase was concerned his wife might get tired of running things back in San Jose. But for the most part, life was good for the producers, and Kendall was glad. They would need to be strong. If their experience was like hers, Hollywood life would test them sorely.

The meeting lasted another thirty minutes while they worked out specific details of the financing and repayment plan for *The Last Letter*. They discussed how Kendall would look for additional investors for *Unlocked* as well. The budget would be considerably higher because of Brandon Paul, but because of her father Kendall was very connected with Hollywood's wealthy elite—people looking for film projects to invest in. She knew she'd find someone.

When the guys left, everyone shared hugs. Kendall hugged Chase last, and not until she was in his arms did she realize with great alarm something that hadn't occurred to her before.

Chase's athletic build was the same as that of Kendall's ex-husband.

She drew back quickly, though not quickly enough to let on what she felt. Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she hurried through one last round of good-byes.

Even before the producers reached the end of the hall, Kendall's father kissed her cheek. "I have to check on another meeting down the hall. Will you be here?"

"No." She still felt flustered, dizzy almost. "I ... I have an appointment in Laguna Beach with an investor."

She bid him good-bye and walked to the elevator, grateful no one else found their way into her car as she made her way down. Why hadn't she seen it before, the physical resemblance between Jay Randolph and Chase Ryan?

She hurried through the lobby and into the parking structure, and when she was alone in her car she leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes. *God ... let me get past this. Please.* She longed for a response. But there was none. And like that, the past played out again in her mind.

The car accident had been horrific, one of the worst in recent history. It had nearly killed Jay, and the details that followed had nearly killed Kendall. Jay had been driving Kendall's car. The head-

on crash had taken place in a handful of seconds, long enough for a drunk driver in a work truck to cross the double yellow lines on Mulholland Drive and barrel head on into a speeding Jay. The mangled metal heaps that remained once the dust settled made it hard for rescue workers to know exactly how many victims they were working with.

At first media reports had it that Kendall had been killed in the wreck. But she was working with Compassion International in Costa Rica when the frantic text messages began popping up on her phone.

*Are you alive?*

*Are you okay?*

*Thank God Jay's alive!*

And dozens of promises to pray. She took a flight back that afternoon, and by the time her plane touched down everyone knew the truth.

The dead body in the passenger seat of Kendall's BMW was not Kendall, but rather the twenty-two-year-old model Jay had been secretly seeing. At almost the same time, another significant piece of information rose to the surface: the young woman had been eight months pregnant with Jay's son.

The story hit the news, of course, but to this day Kendall was grateful it hadn't blown up across the front pages. The media never made much of the fact that Jay was Ben Adams' son-in-law, and since the accident wasn't only Jay's fault, the media lost interest. The same couldn't be said for the lawyers in the case.

The parents of the dead pregnant model hired a team of attorneys days after her funeral. The victim had been the single mother of two little girls—neither fathered by Jay. But since the drunk driver had no insurance, and since Jay was cited with reckless driving for speeds in excess of eighty miles per hour, the lawyers came after Kendall's father—the registered owner of the BMW.

In court the truth about the woman came out. She had been a terrible mother, rarely visiting her children and leaving her own mother to raise them. At the time of the accident, the model hadn't spoken with her mother or her daughters for more than a year. Still, her mother contended that she could continue to raise her granddaughters, but she would need a great deal of money to pull it off. By the time the haggling and courtroom drama ended, the settlement for the woman's daughters had cost Kendall's father just under a million dollars.

The accident cost Kendall a lot more than that.

She talked to Jay just once afterwards, late at night during an unannounced visit to the hospital. She found him hooked to an IV, his legs in a pair of casts, bandages around his head. Even with that, he was watching TV as if he hadn't just been party to a fatal accident, as if his whole world hadn't fallen apart. She stood in the hospital doorway staring at him, seeing him the way he'd looked five years earlier, the night they met.

He must've heard her, because he turned his head, and when he saw her, his face fell. For a long while he held her gaze, then he turned off the TV and looked away. "I'm surprised you came."

"Me too." She moved slowly into his room, clutching her purse in front of her, as if keeping something between them might protect her heart from further damage. She reached the side of his bed and waited. Just waited, because she figured it wasn't her job to do the talking.

The silence quickly became unbearable and he rattled loose a long sigh. His eyes found hers again. "I was going to tell you." He brought his hand slowly to his face and pressed his fingers against his brow. "I just ... I hadn't figured out how."

Kendall could voice just one question. "Did you ... love her?"

He closed his eyes for a long time. When he opened them again he said something that had stayed with her ever since. "Everybody loves everybody in this business." His lips were dry and

cracked. He ran his tongue over them, buying time. “It was my fault. I let it get out of hand.”

“Out of hand?” She wanted to scream at him. His girlfriend had been about to deliver his baby. The baby Kendall hadn’t been able to give him. “Were you planning to marry her?”

Again he hesitated. Then, “It doesn’t matter.”

Kendall thought of a dozen more questions, a hundred things she might say. But in the end she said nothing. The silence between them deafened her, the whirl of machines and the sickly, antiseptic hospital smell filling her senses.

Finally he spoke. “My attorney is drawing up the papers. The divorce will be final before summer’s over.”

And like that, five years were finished.

The trouble was Kendall hadn’t seen it coming. In the days since the accident she had relived every wonderful day of their relationship a thousand times. In all her life she’d never met anyone like Jay Randolph. He had a faith that made him larger than life, and a charisma that made him the center of attention wherever he went. Her father introduced them at an Academy Awards after-party. Kendall liked to say he swept her off her feet and stole her heart all in a single conversation.

Kendall credited the Lord with a pair of miracles in the months since that final meeting with Jay. First, she had survived with a determination to live—to truly live. Part of that came from her desire to help filmmakers like Keith and Chase make an impact in the entertainment industry.

The second miracle was this: her love for God lived still. She’d been tempted at first to walk away from her faith. That’s what Jay had done. In Hollywood, Jay’s beliefs had crumbled and fallen away until they were nothing more than a patch on his sleeve. They hadn’t stopped him from having an affair, so why should Kendall think her faith could help her?

But that attitude had lasted only a few weeks before she literally felt herself wasting away inside.

Kendall grabbed a long breath and opened her eyes. The faith she'd seen in the eyes of Chase and Keith was real, genuine, and that was Kendall's greatest concern. She couldn't stand to see the movie business do to them what it had done to Jay. That's why she'd felt so alarmed by the strange feelings she'd had when she hugged Chase. She could never, ever develop feelings for him. Rather, the three of them needed to stick together, talk about their faith and their commitments, include God every step of the way.

Kendall's resolve grew as she started her car and pulled out of the parking complex. If they didn't keep God at the center of everything they did, the power of their films wouldn't really matter.

Because the next moral failure to hit Hollywood could be one of theirs.