

# From the Start



Melissa Tagg



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To my siblings:  
Amy, Nathanael, and Nicole  
I love you guys.  
Tons. :)

Melissa Tagg, *From the Start*  
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How in the world had rain earned such a romantic rep? Kate Walker tipped the collar of her jacket and burrowed her chin against the chilly afternoon's heavy breathing. Chicago's usual sticky late-August warmth had gone into hiding today—saggy clouds and a veil of gray creating the perfect backdrop for the swoon-worthy embrace playing out in front of her.

The dashing hero holding tight to his girl in the middle of the park, swinging her in a circle as she laughed with abandon. Oblivious to the rainfall, the both of them. And then . . . the most magic moment of all.

The kiss.

Kate folded her arms.

“I know—sentimental fluff, right?”

She turned at the whispered voice beside her. Oh yes, the guy in the unzipped hoodie and ripped jeans who'd found her wandering around the movie set a few minutes ago. Couldn't have been older than twenty-two, and yet, as he'd led her to the tent under which the hushed production crew for *Love Until Forever* did their work, he'd talked as if he'd been in the film-making biz for decades.

“Say again?”

Raindrops pelted the plastic overhead, and a camera on a dolly scooted along the park's border. Back behind the tent, a rope separated those with set badges and the few dozen onlookers currently getting a behind-the-scenes peek at what might be Kate's last project.

"That's all these quickie made-for-TV features are. Fluff. The kind tucked in between *60 Minutes* and the local news. Nothing memorable, but it's a career start, right?" He flashed a smile that assumed she agreed. "I have film-school friends who'd kill to already have any AD credit under their belt."

Associate director. *And he has no idea who he's talking to.*

She didn't know whether to laugh or sigh or just roll with the punches while insult and embarrassment duked it out.

Guess she couldn't blame the kid. Kate rarely showed up on set—didn't generally have reason to visit. She'd only come today at her agent's request. Marcus called this morning, asking her to meet him here, said he had news.

Funny little word, that. *News*. So many possibilities crammed into four letters.

If only she could still the pecking voice in the back of her mind. The one daring her to hope that maybe, just maybe, this time the news might be good. But better not to get her hopes up.

After all, in the thirteen months since she'd sold her *Love Until Forever* script, she'd racked up a pile of rejections high enough to give the Sears Tower a run for its money. Scratch that—the Willis Tower. You'd think she'd get the name right, considering she'd had to take a part-time job there, doling out tickets, just to make ends meet.

How had so much changed in just a few short years? From multi-script contracts and her first book deal to standing in the rain, hoping against hope Marcus might have the kind of news that saved careers and made possible things like, oh, paying the

mortgage on the cute brownstone in the cute neighborhood she used to think she could afford.

“Cut!” The director’s call ordered.

*Where is Marcus anyway?*

The AD poked her with his elbow. “Hey, I don’t think I gave you a chance to introduce yourself. You are . . .”

“Kate Walker.” She pulled her hand from her coat pocket and held it out. “The writer of that sentimental fluff.”

His grip on her palm went lax. “I, uh . . . I . . .”

The burst of laughter from behind them—of course Marcus chose that moment to show up—cut off the AD’s sputtered reply. That and a glare from the director that told her he hadn’t appreciated the chatter on set. She gave the AD an awkward “See ya” and made her escape, deserting the cover of the tent.

Spatters of rain pricked her coat and caught in her hair for only seconds before footsteps splashed in a puddle beside her and a shadow rose overhead.

“Skulking away, are we?” Marcus’s joking voice accompanied the tapping of raindrops on the umbrella he now held over them.

“I can’t believe you laughed.”

“Oh, come on. It was funny.” Marcus tugged on her elbow, pulling her to a stop. With his reddish hair and stubborn freckles, he’d always reminded her of a grown-up Opie. “He’s a newbie know-it-all. Everybody’s like that right after college.”

“He’s cocky—that’s what.”

“Of course he is.” Exaggerated sympathy dangled in Marcus’s voice.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Of course he doesn’t.”

*But he’s right.*

There they were again, the nagging whispers she could never quite hush—roused from temporary rest by the AD’s prodding.

*You promised you'd write something important. But here you are, thirty years old . . .*

Marcus's umbrella rattled as a gust of wind chugged over the blocked-off street edging the park. "Walker, you're not actually bothered by what that guy said, are you?"

She was saved from answering by the director's yelped instructions from the tent. "Start again from the kiss."

She turned back to Marcus. "You said you had news?"

"Not out here. It's raining, and I can't take you seriously when you're wearing that coat."

"What's wrong with my coat?" She cinched its belt as they started walking again. Maybe a little much for late summer—even a cool summer—but she'd take any chance she could get to wear the tweed trench coat with the oversized buttons and turned-up collar. It had character.

"It looks like something a reporter or detective would wear in an old-time movie. I feel like I should call you Ace and start talking really fast."

"Do it and you'll only encourage me to wear it more, my friend. As for the rain, a few sprinkles never hurt anyone."

Especially not lovers on the brink of happily ever after. Not that she'd know all that much about that. But the hunky actor and his costar currently repeating their kiss for the cameras . . .? The weather couldn't touch them.

Score one for waterproof makeup and extra-hold hairspray.

Kate stopped abruptly, gaze suddenly and unwillingly stuck on the staged love scene in the park. The brilliant green of a Midwest summer edged up to moody skies, the park's border of towering cedar, maple, and walnut trees fidgeting in the wind. She barely noticed Marcus bumping into her. Hardly felt the pull of the breeze in her hair. Heard only the hush of a whispered memory.

*"This is right, Kate. Don't you feel it? Come to Chicago."*



One prodding smile. One long kiss. One naïve decision.  
The moment snapped as the actors in front of her parted.  
*One broken heart.*

She blinked.

“Kate?” Marcus nudged her with his elbow, his umbrella tilting at the movement and sending rivulets of water down its curve. “You okay?”

“Just cold.” She dusted the last specks of her stray memory away with a shake of her head. “It’s Gene Kelly’s fault, you know.”

“What’s whose fault?”

“He did that tap number in a pretend downpour. It’s the reason everybody thinks rain is romantic. Thanks a lot, *Singin’ in the Rain.*”

“You are cold *and* kooky, Kate.”

She shrugged. Speaking of kooky, though . . . under the soft glare and watchful eye of set lights, the actors in the park were still . . . well, acting. Which didn’t make sense. According to the script she’d written, the kiss ended the scene. Ended the whole movie.

Concern picked its way in as the director’s call sounded from the tent once more. The starring couple broke apart—assistants appearing from opposite directions to offer umbrellas and drinks—and a buzz of activity filled the set, cameramen shielding their equipment and someone barking orders at the props guy.

“Let’s go inside.” Marcus steered her toward the house kitty-corner from the park. From the outside, the two-story structure looked like any other house on any other Midwest street. Pale blue siding, white shutters to match the white porch.

But Kate had wandered around the set enough to know the inside of the house was a maze of half-built rooms, shallow staircases, and hallways that led nowhere.

All for show.

Unease wriggled through her as their shoes clomped over the rain-splotched porch steps, same questions as always setting her on edge any time she gave them mental space. Had she built a career as fake as this set? Just like the house's flimsy foundation of wood and plastic—nothing concrete or permanent—had she settled for less-than by peddling ideals she didn't put much stock in personally?

Romance.

True Love.

Happily Ever After.

*Not to sound cynical, but . . . yeah. Right.*

Marcus abandoned his umbrella on the porch, and Kate followed him under the doorframe and into a living room that could've graced the cover of a Pottery Barn catalog. Colorful throw pillows perfectly arranged on a beige couch. Framed photos on redwood end tables. Patterned rug reaching to the point in the room where the décor stopped and set lights began.

Marcus motioned for her to sit, then shrugged out of his raincoat and ran one hand through his hair. The movement carried a reminder.

She pushed a pillow out of the way and lowered to the couch. "How's Breydan?" She shouldn't have waited so long to ask.

Marcus released a sigh, settled into the rocking chair opposite her. "Okay. Last round of chemo next week. We're praying this does the trick, once and for all."

It put things in perspective, remembering Marcus's little boy. She traced the stitching on the pillow beside her. Her concerns about her career were nothing when stacked up to a word like *cancer*. A child like Breydan. *And Mom*.

"Which reminds me—you're coming to dinner Thursday night, right? Breydan wanted me to make sure."

At her nod, Marcus smiled, took a breath. By the time he released it, he'd switched gears. Kate could tell—pressed lips, hesitation in his eyes. Sometime in the past five years, their professional relationship had morphed into a friendship. She usually appreciated that.

But it added an awkward angle to business discussions. Especially . . .

Her hope dissolved even before Marcus spoke.

Especially when the news wasn't good.

"The network said no. Again." She supplied the words for him.

He nodded.

"Okay." She said it slowly, humbling reality loitering in the word.

"It doesn't make any sense. You took home an Emmy. I'm as shocked as you."

Except, if she was honest, Kate wasn't that shocked. It'd been four, almost five years since the Emmy win. And her screenplays had felt forced and dry for a long time now. Which was probably why that scene she'd just watched being filmed had detoured from her original script. Then all those rejections . . .

The warning signs had practically stood in front of her belting out an ominous concerto. But she'd plugged her ears and looked the other way.

Marcus leaned forward, elbows on his knees and concern spelled out in his furrowed brow. "I know this isn't the news you wanted to hear. It's been a hard year."

She pictured little Breydan then. Propped up in a hospital bed. Pale and thin, but with a heart-melting smile powerful enough to reach past all the disappointment in the world. No, she wouldn't pout about this. "It's okay. It's fine."

And the truth was, once she got past the whole blow-to-her-pride thing, maybe it really would be. Okay, that is. Because

hadn't she been telling herself for years now how wonderful it'd feel to someday write something meaningful? Full of impact. Strong.

To feel as if her words had weight and her characters, depth.

Cottony, tentative hope tiptoed in. What if this was her chance? What if this latest rejection was the nudge she needed to finally branch out and . . .

And what exactly? She'd been trying to define her blurry dream for so long, but it never quite came into view. Which is probably why she was still floundering around, writing stories that felt less and less true with every year that passed. Because she didn't have a clue what came next. What was a girl supposed to do after her heart dried up and took her creative spark with it?

*I just need an open window, God.* Just a sliver of sunlight to remind her He had a plan even if she didn't.

"This is a temporary setback, Kate. You'll write another script, and it'll get snatched up, just like that."

"But what if I—"

The buzz of her cell phone interrupted her. And maybe it was rude, but the temptation to escape this discomfiting conversation got the better of her. She pulled it from her bag and checked the display. New York?

She stood, mouthing a *Sorry* to Marcus. "Hello?"

"Hi, this is Frederick Langston. Is this Katharine Walker?"

Frederick Langston. A name she had seen so many times in Mom's handwriting. A name she had written out herself only weeks ago.

*Dear Mr. Langston, I know this letter is out of the blue and I hope you don't find it too strange, but . . .*

"That's me."

"I got your letter, Ms. Walker. We need to talk."



An expectant buzz hovered over the gaggle of reporters and photographers gathered for the press conference Colton Greene never should've had to give.

*One stupid decision.*

And now here he was, six-foot-three frame constricted by a suit and tie and folded into a metal chair, facing off with the media, who would most likely forget about him after today. Manager on one side. Coach on the other.

Make that former coach.

“It’s not a death sentence, Greene.”

If his manager meant the statement as a dose of encouragement, Colton wasn’t swallowing. He closed one palm over the microphone in front of him. “Easy for you to say. I heard Caulfield’s moving up the roster this year. You’ll be repping another starter this season.”

Used to be Colton was Ian Muller’s biggest client. Sure, Colton had spent the bulk of his eight years in the NFL as a backup, bouncing from team to team as if caught in a never-ending game of career hopscotch. But finally—*finally*—he’d hit his stride three seasons ago. Like magic, he’d led the team two wins deep into the play-offs. First time in a decade they’d made it that far. Then two seasons ago, conference champions.

What he wouldn’t give for the story to end there. Colton fingered the collar jabbing into his neck as Ian stood.

*Okay. Show on the road.*

Except not quite, because instead of moving behind the table-top podium, Ian looked down at Colton. “We’ve had this discussion a thousand times already. There’s announcing, speaking gigs, your book contract. After the year you’ve had, a memoir will land you on the bestseller list just like that.”

Ian palmed Colton’s shoulder, leaning over. “You turned your life around once. You can do it again. Which is why we’re here

today. You're going to show the sports world—*your* world—you may be off the field, but you're not out of the game.”

“Cute, Muller. Someone should put that on a motivational poster.”

Ian straightened, pinched grin in place for the cameras, but not enough to mask the irritation underneath. And he probably had every right to be annoyed. Colton had been sulking for months. Maybe he *should* buck up, see this press conference as the start of something new rather than the end of a dream.

Easier said than done, though. Like throwing a pass into triple coverage. You could tell yourself it'd work out all you wanted, but that didn't stop the doubts ready to tackle the last of your confidence.

*Don't think football. Think about Lilah.* His one ray of hope in all of this. Hadn't she said, all those months ago, his career was the reason their relationship wasn't working? Well, after today, he no longer had a career. Which paved the way for the plan he'd dreamt up last night, when dread over today's announcement demolished any chance at sleep.

He slid his hand into one pocket, felt the velvet of the jewelry box that'd been mocking him from his bedside stand for eight months now. No longer. He'd do what he had to this morning, and tonight he'd talk to Lilah. Make everything right.

“Afternoon, everyone. Thanks for coming out today.” Ian spoke into the mic extending from the podium. “We'll make this brief with time for a few questions afterward. Colton?”

Colton stood, far too tall for the wimpy podium, and as he took his place behind the mic, the flash of cameras whited out the already stark walls. Nerves, the kind he was way too seasoned to be experiencing, dashed through him.

“Hey, everyone. I'm sure you can guess why we're here today. I wish it was for a better reason.” Glimpses of familiar faces

poked through the haze of camera flashes. His gaze landed on a writer from *Sports World*, the one who'd been so sure all last season Colton would lead the Tigers to the Super Bowl. "I saw that column you wrote a couple months back predicting I'd be ready to play again by training camp, Crosby. Wish I could prove you right."

Crosby returned his nod, a mix of sympathy and resignation in the movement.

"But the truth is, I'm not ready to play. And unfortunately, according to my doctor, knee and shoulder specialists, surgeons, and probably every patient at St. Luke's who ever heard me groaning my way through physical therapy, I'm not gonna be ready. Not for this or any season."

And then came the pitying hush he'd known was coming. Lasted barely a second before more camera snaps, only long enough to blink. But it was enough to tighten his jaw and set to twitching muscles that had already been tested to their limits during months of therapy. *Just finish the speech.*

"This has been an amazing journey, one for which I'm incredibly grateful. I'm thankful to Coach Johnson, coaches Peterson and Dreck, my teammates . . ." The list spilled out just like he'd rehearsed, his navy tie batting the skinny mic, knuckles turning white as he gripped the podium.

"It's been a great privilege playing for this team and this city. And though it's ended much sooner than I would've liked, I'm carrying good memories into my future."

*My future.* Ian had instructed him to add extra verbal punch to those last words.

Instead they'd come out sounding slight and unconvincing. Ian was probably itching to kick him. Guess he just wasn't any good at faking it.

And that was the real reason he was here, wasn't it?

Because he hadn't been smart enough to leave his emotions on the sideline and focus on the game.

*"You've got to ask yourself what Greene was thinking, going in for that tackle."*

*"Never a good idea for a QB to try and play hero after an interception like that, not unless the game is on the line. Which it wasn't up to that point."*

*"He's always had an impulsive streak. Saw that in his days playing college ball at the University of Iowa. But today? That was pure recklessness."*

He could still hear the drone of voices from the TV in his hospital room. The sports analysts dissecting the fourth-quarter mess of what would turn out to be his last game.

Good memories? Sure, they were there somewhere. Just hard to find under the one that nagged him day in and day out, reminding him that the only one he had to blame for his future without football was himself.

He reached under the podium, fingers closing around a bottle of water. Almost done. He unscrewed the water bottle.

"So today I . . . I . . ." Water sloshed over the edge of the bottle and puddled on the table. *Say it.* "I'm regretfully retiring from the game of football." Almost before the words escaped, he lifted the bottle and gulped down a drink, thankful for the distraction as he mentally grasped for composure.

And then Ian was standing, acknowledging Coach Johnson, who replaced Colton at the podium and said something about Colton's contributions to the team and how they'd miss him and *blah, blah, blah.*

And Colton was back in his metal chair, shoulder aching and the sharp pang in his knee he'd almost gotten used to taunting him under the table.

Then came the questions.



Did his injuries require future surgery?  
How long had he known his career had come to an end?  
Had he still been hoping to make a comeback while in PT  
all these months?

Eyes to the clock at the back of the room. Ian had promised they'd cut this off at the thirty-minute mark. Only five minutes to go. At least no one had asked about—

“About the play that caused your injury—”

The last swallow from his now-empty water bottle slid down his throat, his gaze riffling through the room until it landed on the source of the question. Blond hair in a high ponytail, gray pantsuit, youngish, standing in the middle of the pack. Didn't recognize her.

“I believe that's been fairly well covered by you all. Many times.” Uneasy chuckles fanned through the room. “Listen, it was a bad pass. Great interception by Fallon. I saw him take the ball down the field and my instincts kicked in. Yeah, maybe I should have let him go, but it's football, folks. The point is to not let the other team score.”

A few grins peppered the crowd, and for the first time since that brutal game, he almost felt . . . heroic. Or at least justified.

But the feeling died in an instant as the glaring memory of that failed pass pressed in, along with the reminder that it wasn't his first intercepted throw of the game—but his third. The result of going into the evening game unfocused and ticked off. When the Eagles' corner had picked off the pass, he'd simply lost his mind. Anger took over, and he'd gone after the defender in a desperate flying leap that ended with him at the bottom of a pile.

Cocky, stupid, and, worse—as he'd realized when his throwing shoulder hit the turf—dangerous.

The reporter cocked one eyebrow. “Yes, well, you probably

saw some of the headlines—the ones speculating that your on-field actions were the result of your off-field turmoil.”

Oh, now that was a craftily worded sentence if he ever heard one. What outlet was this reporter with anyway? “Was there a question in there somewhere?”

Another round of tense laughter, but to her credit, the reporter held his gaze. “I suppose if there was, you’re not answering.”

The challenge in her voice was unmistakable—as was the warning in the look Ian shot his direction. *Don’t engage. Stay on topic. And whatever you do, don’t mention . . .*

“Look, if you’re talking about Lilah Moore, it’s true. We went through a bumpy patch right before that play-off game.” *Oh man.* Ian’s expression was shooting bullets. Colton would probably find himself without a manager after this.

But what did he have to lose? Lilah—former actress turned political activist—had already walked out of his life, turned him down before he even had a chance to propose that January day. Annoying thing was, he couldn’t even hate her for it. If there was a chance of getting her back, he’d rush at it like so many defensive linemen had rushed him over the years.

And that’s when the idea took hold. Crazy, impulsive . . . scattered pieces of his once-shattered hope slowly forming into a whole picture.

The ring box in his pocket felt suddenly weighty with significance. Maybe there was a reason he’d brought it this morning. Some kind of divine foreshadowing. Not that he’d been much good at praying lately, not since all the prayers about his injuries seemed to go unanswered. But what if God was opening a door?

What if he won Lilah back right now, in front of the cameras and everything?

If he could just find the right words.

“So you *do* credit your performance in that game to your high-profile break—”

“I credit my performance to a bad pass.” He avoided looking at Ian. Instead made eye contact with the nosy reporter who he just might thank if this turned out well. “As for Lilah, she’s . . . she’s an amazing woman.”

She really was. In addition to her political activities, she still directed Colton’s foundation—not that they’d gotten very far turning the foundation into anything worthwhile. He’d mostly started it last year because that’s what other athletes did. But if anyone could make something of it, Lilah could.

“Even after all these months, I . . . I still . . .” *I still love her.* The words stalled in his throat, hazy uncertainty fogging over him. *Say it, Colt. Make the grand gesture.*

Why couldn’t he get the words out?

And then that same reporter. “Well, have you talked to her since her engagement?”

A thudding silence dropped like an anvil.

“To Ray Bannem. The governor’s reelection campaign manager. Have you spoken with her since the news broke last night?”

Another camera flash.

“I . . . have not.”

*Lilah? Engaged?*

To someone else.

Hadn’t his world already tilted enough?

*Congratulate her. Say you wish her the best. Smile. Don’t let them see . . .*

But all he could do was stand, empty water bottle tipping and rolling down the table.

“I believe we’re done here.”