

Like Never Before



Melissa Tagg



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers

11400 Hampshire Avenue South

Bloomington, Minnesota 55438

www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tagg, Melissa, author.

Title: Like never before / Melissa Tagg.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker
Publishing Group, [2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039202 | ISBN 9780764213083 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Man-woman relationships—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. |
Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3620.A343 L55 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available
at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015039202>

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Cover design by Faceout Studios/Kara Davison

Melissa Tagg is represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To my nephew Ollie

Someday you'll be old enough
to read this and understand
how much your strength
and personality inspire me.
For now, I'll settle for spoiling you
every chance I get.

I love you, buddy!

For I am about to do something new.
See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?
I will make a pathway through the wilderness.
I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.
—Isaiah 43:19



To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley
Subject: Hello?

Hi, Logan,

Yep, it's me again. Amelia Bentley. I know, you'd think after three unanswered emails I'd give up. But reporters—even small-town Iowa ones—have spunk. Except, hmm, maybe you're some Lou Grant-type and you hate spunk.

In that case, I've got persistence, determination, and, fine, a fair bit of stubbornness.

Which is why I'm writing you this third email to see if you have any interest in coming back to work for the *News*. Since Freddie passed away, we're short a reporter. I know you live in LA now, so this is probably crazy talk. But you told me yourself you miss the newspaper world. So I can't help asking . . .

Amelia Bentley

Editor, *Maple Valley News*

p.s. It just occurred to me that maybe the reason you haven't replied is you don't remember me. I was the reporter at your sister's boyfriend's nonprofit's grand opening last month.

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(World record for most possessive nouns used in one sentence?)
We talked for a few minutes. You complimented my Nikon.

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker
Subject: RE: Hello?

Amelia—

I do remember you. And your Nikon. Sorry that I haven't responded until now. My inbox is like something out of a horror movie.

And I remember telling you I miss reporting. I have to be honest: That might have been mostly small talk. Yeah, I miss it now and then. But I don't have a ton of desire to go back to writing about school board meetings and really tall asparagus. :)

—L

To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley

If that's a crack at how often small-town newspapers run photos of oversized produce . . . well, then, okay. (This is Iowa, after all.)

So would you consider coming back if I promised to cover ALL the school board meetings?

Just kidding. I knew it was a long shot. But aren't the best reporters the ones who chase long shots?

—Amelia

p.s. Is signing off with just an initial an LA thing?

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker

There are long shots and then there are looooong shots.

But hey, it's almost graduation time. Check with the area colleges. I bet you can find a journalism major in need of a job.

—Logan James Walker (There. More than an initial this time. Happy?)

To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley

I don't want a journalism major. I want you.

And yes, I realize how that sounds. Don't get smug or anything! I'm just saying, your award plaques still line the office walls. When you worked here, subscriptions topped 5,000. Freddie talked about you constantly. If you change your mind . . .

—Amelia Anne Bentley

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker

The only thing I'm smug about is the fact that I finally figured out the Lou Grant reference in your earlier email. *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, right?

By the way, I should've said earlier: Sorry about Freddie. He was a good guy, great editor. I wish I could've made it home for his funeral. When I heard he died, I kept kicking myself for not keeping in better touch since moving out here.

—Logan

To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley

He knew you were busy. And he always talked about how proud of you he was.

Truthfully, Freddie was ready to be done with the newspaper biz long ago, too. The flood last year did a number on him (not to mention our equipment). He was in the process of

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selling the paper and retiring before he passed. He only passed on the editor mantle to me a month ago. It's all up in the air now—we don't even know who our current owner is.

That's not meant to be a guilt trip, by the way. Just letting you know why I'm grasping at straws and trying to talk an Iowa boy home.

—Amelia

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker

I get it. And I do appreciate you asking me to come back. Believe it or not, I did actually consider it for a few nostalgic seconds. Most of my five years at the *News* were good ones. But my life and work are here now.

Besides, I'm not a reporter anymore.

To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley

Aw, come on. Newspapering gets in a person's blood. You don't just stop being a reporter.

—Amelia

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker

Whatever you say, Hildy.

To: Logan Walker
From: Amelia Bentley

Hildy?

To: Amelia Bentley
From: Logan Walker

You're a reporter. Figure it out. :)



On days like this—when sunlit snowflakes fell like tiny, glistening jewels and a crisp quiet brushed through the cold—Amelia Bentley could almost believe she'd never led another life.

Never stood in front of an altar one morning to begin what a hastily scrawled signature, smudged by tears, would eventually end. Never carved open a chamber of her heart, only to later lock it tight, hiding away the goodbye she'd never asked to say.

Amelia pulled open the front door of the *Maple Valley News* office, bells chiming overhead as she stepped into a cocoon of warmth and familiarity.

Today there were no brick-heavy yesterdays. Only the inky scent of newsprint and the embrace of this wintry town—*her* town. Well, and the yipping voice at the back of her mind reminding her she was—

“You're late.” The *News's* receptionist peered over thin bifocals, silver-tinted hair coifed with enough bobby pins to pick every lock in the county.

Amelia loosened the turquoise scarf at her neck, camera bag slinking down her arm. “I know. Just need fresh batteries for my flash. But Mae . . .” The rubber soles of her fur-lined boots squealed against the laminate floor as she slid to the reception desk. Her voice lowered to an awed whisper. “It's snowing.”

“You think I don't know that? You're tracking it all over my space.”

Amelia glanced down at the puddle forming around her feet. “Sorry. It's pretty, though, don't you think?”

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“If it were December, sure. But it’s the middle of March. No way you’ll hear me calling snow pretty in March.”

“You just said *snow* the way most people say *oral surgery*. Or *taxes*. Or *beets*.”

Mae only harrumphed and turned back to her computer. Amelia nudged the camera bag back up over her shoulder, stomped the last of the snow from her boots, and hurried through the room that contained the ad department—if two women and a part-time intern counted as a *department*. She waved at Kat, Mikaela, and Abby as she passed. Pin-ups of ads for this week’s issue dangled from the cloth-covered cubicle wall separating their desks, and sunshine spilled in through generous windows.

She pushed through the newsroom door.

Just inside, Owen swiveled in his chair. “You’re—”

“Save it. Already got the third degree from Eeyore at the front desk.” Amelia dropped her bag onto the sprawling island counter that gulped up most of the newsroom’s space. Back issues of the *News* and other area papers covered the high tabletop.

“The fire chief’s already called twice.”

“I’m not even five minutes late. You told him to keep his pants on, right?” She bypassed her own cluttered desk and bee-lined for the row of pale blue cupboards lining the back wall. She hoped that at some point she’d remembered to pick up a pack of spare batteries.

Owen stood, straightening the gray vest that matched his slacks, lavender shirt underneath. He was the only sports reporter she’d ever met who dressed like he belonged at *InStyle* magazine rather than a small-town weekly with a circ of barely 3,500. He perched on the corner of his desk, arms folded. “No, I did not tell him to keep his pants on. I didn’t think that the best choice of words, considering your little incident last year.”

Amelia opened a cupboard, hiding her almost-smile. “How

was I supposed to know they'd just gotten back from a drill? How was I supposed to know that door in the station led into the room where they change?"

Nineteen volunteer firefighters in various states of undress. Some things you couldn't un-see.

Nor could she, apparently, live down.

"Twelve months I've endured the taunting of the entire Maple Valley Fire Department." But ooh, score, a foursome of double-As loose in the cupboard. "What are the chances they'll drop it one of these days?"

"Not gonna happen. They love teasing you. Same with the police. The EMTs. Every farmer at the co-op." Owen moved away from his desk, unzipped her camera bag, and pulled out the flash.

Behind him, the mockups of this week's paper still hung from two long, metal strips on the opposite wall, held in place by magnets. Twenty-four pages, final edits visible in red ink. Four spreads less than the issues they'd put out even just two months back.

But short a reporter and with both circulation and advertising down, Amelia was doing good to churn out a paper at all.

Her gaze slid to the dark closet of an office in the corner. How many mornings did she waltz in to work, still half expecting to see Freddie settled in his raggedy chair, slurping on a vanilla shake for breakfast? The window in his office looked out on the riverfront, where late afternoon brushed shades of tangerine and pink through the sky's wispy clouds, and the Blaine River, ice-frosted and calm, cut through the center of town.

"Admit it," Owen's voice cut in. "You may not be a native, but you're the whole town's kid sister."

"If thirty counts as *kid*." But Owen had a point. She'd wandered into town a wounded heart three years ago. The people of Maple Valley had begun sweeping up her broken pieces before

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she'd even decided to stay. She'd spent the time since doing all she could to repay that gift. Made sense that she'd earned some friends along the way.

"You're forgetting Mae, though." She took the flash from Owen. "She's never warmed to me."

"Mae's never warmed to anyone. Except maybe her cat. By the way, Cranford called while you were out."

A groan worked its way up her throat, and she chucked the flash's dead batteries at an already-overflowing trash can. Missed. They hit the wall and clunked to the floor. "Way to bury the lede."

"You can't keep ignoring this."

"Why? It's been working okay for a few weeks now." She reloaded the flash.

"Amelia—"

"Besides, lawyers are still hashing out if the sale was even final before Freddie died. Until I know for sure Cranford Communications is the new owner of the *Maple Valley News*, I don't feel any obligation to take C.J. Cranford's calls. Especially since I know exactly what he'll say." She plopped the flash back in its bag. "He'll do to us what he's done to dozens of small papers—dissolve us and roll us into a larger regional pub. He owns the *Central Iowa Communicator*, you know." A four-color beauty of a paper with a tri-county reach. She could admit to ogling the *Communicator's* zingy headlines and pretty photos each week.

Didn't mean she wanted to see it swallow up the *News*.

Owen only shrugged and picked up the batteries rolling across the floor.

Maybe she shouldn't expect him to share her worry. He was a twenty-four-year-old transplant from Omaha with his eyes on grad school. She'd seen the applications he worked on during his lunch hour, the ones he minimized on his computer screen whenever she walked past.

He couldn't understand Amelia's ties to this town, the paper. Didn't know—*couldn't* know—how they'd filled up the hollowed-out spaces inside her. “Did Cranford leave a message?”

“Mae's the one who took the call, but according to her Post-It—” He walked to Amelia's desk and peeled the note from her monitor. “He's coming to town and wants to meet with you.”

“When?”

“Doesn't say. But there's a number.”

“He's going to have to wait until after the fire department photo.” Which could end up being one of her last tasks as editor. Because if Cranford *did* own the *News* now, what were the chances she'd still have a job after he swooped in? Even if he did keep the paper open, he'd probably take one look at her empty résumé and her nonexistent college degree and wonder why Freddie ever hired her.

Owen stood close to her now, fingers still wrapped around the strap of her camera bag. “Look, it's going to be okay.”

“I'm not so sure, but I appreciate the optimism.” She started to turn, but Owen's hold on her camera bag halted her.

“Just return the call, okay? Meet with the man.” His expression took on an abrupt intensity. “You'll impress him like you do everyone.”

She blinked at his shift in demeanor but reached up to pat his cheek. “You're a good guy, Owen Berry. But I gotta run.”

He released her bag, and she angled around the counter but stopped halfway to the door. “Hey, does the name Hildy mean anything to you?”

He shook his head. “No, why?”

“Just a reference that has me stumped.” Two weeks and she still couldn't figure it out.

She retreated the way she'd come. Mae was helping a customer as she approached the receptionist's desk—a tall woman

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with the kind of burnished chestnut hair Amelia could only dream about and lipstick a jarring shade of magenta. Mae glanced at her as she passed. “Amelia—”

“I know, I’m late.” She swung to face Mae, arms out. “If Chief Daniels calls, tell him to hold his horses.” She fingered on one glove. “And if C.J. Cranford calls again, tell him he’s got the wrong number.”

“Amelia—”

“Better yet, pretend *you* called *him* and try to order a large pepperoni pizza. If he laughs and goes along with it, we’ll know maybe, just maybe, he’s not the corporate buzzkill I’m imagining him to be.”

“Amelia!” Mae barked.

Amelia fumbled pulling her second glove from her pocket. “What?” And why was the woman at the counter looking at her like it was a hand that’d just fallen to the floor, not merely her glove?

Mae gestured to the woman. “There’s someone here to see you.” Her words were slow, measured. “*This* is C.J. Cranford.”

Amelia’s breathing hitched. Her glance darted from the woman to Mae and back to the woman. Oh no. No, no, no . . .

The woman stepped forward, held out one palm. “You must be Amelia Bentley. I’m C.J., but you can call me Corporate Buzzkill, if you like. Now, that was a large pepperoni?”



A few neatly arranged words, clever and concise, shouldn’t be enough to make or break a reputation.

Then again, if they weren’t, Logan Walker wouldn’t have a career.

“I can’t believe we’re driving forty-five minutes in stupid LA traffic just to find a napkin from dinner three nights ago.” Impa-

tience rattled in Theodore Tompkins's voice and the drumming of his fingers on the armrest of the passenger's door.

"Four nights." A blast of cool from the car's rasping air-conditioner chafed over Logan's skin. He may have lived in California for a good seven years now, but the Midwesterner in him still hadn't adjusted to eighty-degree weather in March. "Trust me, it's a piece of rhetorical brilliance written on that napkin. You *and* the senator will be glad we fought the freeway to get it from my apartment."

He glanced over at his friend, sandy blond hair still leftover from the man's past as a competitive surfer. These days, Tompkins was all pressed suits and glossy-hued ties.

Not that Logan was any different. Sure, he'd loosened his tie into a droop, unfastened the top button of his shirt, and abandoned his suit jacket in the backseat before they'd left the firm. But just like Tompkins had deserted his surfboard and tan, Logan had traded in the life of casual jeans and tees, with a reporter's notebook in his back pocket, plenty long ago.

Logan veered his Ford four-door around an SUV and then onto an off-ramp. Only ten minutes from his apartment building now. Maybe he should've waited until tonight to ditch the office and go in search of the napkin he'd used as a notepad earlier this week, but frankly, he welcomed a midday stop at home. A chance to see Charlie for more than his usual too-few minutes at the bookends of each day.

Besides, his house was on the way to tonight's legislative fundraiser.

Theo pulled out his phone. "If what you wrote on that napkin was so brilliant, why can't you remember it?"

"Because I'm a thirty-four-year-old single dad whose brain is at capacity. This morning I called the nanny Kristy instead of Krista." The phrase *If looks could kill* had taken on a whole new meaning. "She pretty much eviscerated me with her scowl."

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“Eviscerated. Nice word. That’s why you’re the speechwriter and I’m just the measly political strategist.” Theo tapped his phone’s screen. “But maybe start writing those fancy words on something other than napkins. Just a thought.”

“When the muse hits, I scribble on whatever’s handy, my friend.”

A siren screeched somewhere in the distance. Not an uncommon sound in this claustrophobic city, even in the relatively nice neighborhood where Logan and Emma had settled down.

Nice or not, they’d sworn the apartment was only temporary, a short-term campout until they picked a house to call home. Then, in a blink and a phone call, everything had changed.

And Logan hadn’t been able to make himself leave.

He reached for the sweating water bottle in the cup holder between the seats.

“What the—!”

Logan dropped his bottle at Theo’s outburst. It plunked to the floor and rolled to where his foot had just slipped on the accelerator. “Man, trying to drive here.”

“Sorry, but this can’t be for real. Seriously. It can’t.”

Logan steered onto Shoreline Road, stretching cement apartment buildings lined up like a welcome crew. Lanky palm trees bowed overhead, the only brush of color on an otherwise beige and gray canvas. Even the sky seemed tinged with an ashen hue.

With his left foot, Logan kicked the swaying water bottle out of the way. “Fantasy surfing team lose again?”

Theo slapped his phone to his thigh. “You will use any excuse to bring that up.”

Logan pushed a flopping piece of dark hair from his forehead. *Emma would’ve made me cut it by now.* She would’ve called the barber, scheduled an appointment, driven him there herself if she had to, and—

He swallowed the swell of memories before he had a chance to taste them. In the distance, the siren's peal grew louder. "I'm just saying . . ." The words took extra effort. "Fantasy surfing? What're you going to pseudo compete in next? Fantasy tetherball?"

"You going to keep mocking the only hobby I still have time for or you going to let me tell you about the email I just read? You're copied on it."

"Fine. Talk." Parking on both sides of the road narrowed his lane, the street seeming to shrink as he reached the final turn toward his unit. Eight more congested blocks.

"It's an email from Roberta S. Hadley. She wants to meet with us."

"Roberta S. Hadley." Two-term senator. Party darling. Shoe-in contender in next year's presidential primaries.

"Roberta. S. Hadley." Theo drew out each syllable, awe hovering in his voice. "You know that can only mean one thing."

"Roberta S. Hadley's putting together an exploratory committee. She's gonna run."

"And she's actually considering *us*."

Of its own accord, Logan's foot nudged the brake, and his car slackened to a crawl. He glanced at Theo. "Is it weird that we can't say her name without saying the full thing?"

"What's weird is we work this campaign, and two years from now, if she actually wins—maybe even if she doesn't—we could have jobs on Capitol Hill."

Washington, D.C. A political speechwriter's Mecca. Every homily he'd ever begun on a napkin—or Post-It or magazine margin or even his hand—had been a resting place for his own hopes and dreams.

'Course, the thought of uprooting Charlotte held about as much appeal as stepping in hot tar. Not even four years old yet and she'd been through so much already. People told him one

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day he'd consider it a blessing—Charlie's young age at the time of the accident. Meant she wouldn't remember it, they said.

Yeah, well, what kind of blessing was it, knowing she'd grow up with so few—maybe no—memories of her adoptive mother? That she had to make do with a father whose career, though promising, was too often all-consuming?

“We'll schedule it as soon as possible, of course.” Not even a hint of a question in Theo's voice.

“A presidential campaign, though. Think of the time commitment. We'd basically be putting the rest of our lives on hold.”

Theo snickered. “What lives? It's not like either of us is swimming in free time right now.”

True. Running an independent political consulting firm didn't exactly equal a life of leisure. “But don't you ever miss the old days?” Pillars of smoke rose in the distance. “You know, back when we were working on local campaigns?”

“Are you crazy? Low-profile races that drew as much attention as ants on the sidewalk?”

A fire truck's lights appeared in his rearview mirror, and he pulled over to let it wail past. “Yeah, but to this day, I've never had more fun than that first campaign back in Iowa. There's something about local politics. Makes a person feel like they really have a voice, you know?”

“Maybe, but it also pays a lot less. If I never see another package of ramen, it'll be soon enough. You're just having a homesick day. That reporter or editor or whoever got to you more than you're letting on.”

He started forward again, grin stretching past his hesitation. No, Amelia Bentley's emails a couple weeks ago hadn't gotten to him, not really. They'd made him laugh more than anything. Leave a career on the brink of actual success to go back to small-town reporting? No thanks.

But he could appreciate her persistence.

“Theo, all I’m saying is—” He broke off as the scene ahead came into view and dread burrowed through him. Fire trucks, police cars, people milling about on the sidewalk, all looking toward . . .

His apartment building.

Instant fear lodged in his throat. “Oh no.”

Theo had gone silent, eyes wide.

Logan swerved his car to the curb, yanked it into Park, and bolted from his seat.

“Logan!” Theo’s call and the sound of his door closing faded as terrified instinct sent Logan flailing down the sidewalk and toward his building. Smoke tunneled from windows halfway up its rise.

Charlie!

He pushed through the barrier of people crowding the lawn behind the emergency responders’ activity, his first prayers in forever beating through him in spurts and fits.

Let her be okay. Let me find her.

His phone—he’d left it back in the car in a cup holder, still silenced following a morning meeting. What if the nanny had been trying to call and—

Strong arms pushed against him. A firefighter, blocking his path. “Sir, this isn’t a drill. You can’t go in—”

“My daughter’s in there. Charlie . . . Charlotte.” He hurled forward once more, but the fireman’s arm jutted out to stop him.

“Please, stay here.”

The man’s firm grip held him in place, his face hidden behind his helmet. He heard jogging steps coming up behind him, Theo’s panting breath.

The firefighter looked over his shoulders. “Your friend?” Theo’s rasped “yes” drew a nod. “Make sure he stays here, okay? I’m sure his daughter is fine. We’ve already evacuated almost the whole building.”

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In a daze, Logan watched the man hurry away, terror twisting every nerve inside him and a voice from the past feeding his dread as he stared at the building.

“I’m so sorry, Logan. If you’d gotten here ten or even five minutes ago . . .”

The shake of a doctor’s head.

An ER nurse unable to stop her tears.

“You almost made it.”

The snap of his heart, like a broken guitar string, sharp and callousing.

Almost wasn’t good enough.

Theo’s hand found his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s start asking around. She’s probably out here with the nanny somewhere.”

Logan nodded, blinked, tried to reach through the fog of alarm for something solid—common sense or courage or . . . something.

Nothing.

“Mr. Walker!”

He pivoted at the frantic call. Krista? The nanny.

Without Charlie.

She reached him, tears streaming down her face, head shaking before he could even ask the question. “I couldn’t find her. I called and called and I couldn’t find her. The alarm . . . and then this firefighter made me leave the apartment and . . .”

Beside him, Theo sprang into action, running after the fireman they’d just talked to. Krista kept talking, waving her hands.

But Logan couldn’t hear over the roaring waves of his own panic.