

Made to Last



Melissa Tagg



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Melissa Tagg, *Made to Last*
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*To Mom and Dad:
because more than anyone I know,
you've shown me what
"made to last" love and faith look like.
And because I love you.*

Chapter 1

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

On any other day of the year, in the lull of routine, she could almost forget the lie she lived. But today's would-be anniversary made forgetting about as easy as building a house from cotton sheets.

Miranda Woodruff hooked a thumb under her tool belt and stepped onto the outdoor set, squinting against the familiar glint of studio lights. The light crew usually played off the sun when taping outside, but this evening's canopy of low-lying clouds dimmed the valley already hazed over by the smoky cover of the Appalachians.

Mission: Smile. Access her inner Colgate commercial and convince everybody she meant it. Forget the date on the calendar, and while she was at it, pretend this afternoon's lousy interview never happened. Hey, if anybody could fake it—

“Randi! Where’ve you been?” Across the set, Whitney’s heels clicked over the bluestone patio. How did her assistant walk in those stilts? Especially with a tangle of cords and wiring webbing the set.

Miranda skirted around a camera to meet Whitney, pasting on a grin about as plastic as the lighted Ficus trees hedging the patio. Only one more sequence to shoot, and then they

could call this week's taping of her show, *From the Ground Up*, a wrap.

Whitney reached her, disapproval tugging her face into a frown. "What's with the cookie crumbs all over your shirt, girl?"

Busted. "Got a secret stash of Chips Ahoy! in the truck." Along with enough Coca-Cola to de-corrode a few car batteries. The stuff of emotional self-medication.

"Let's see, we've covered your season finale, plans for next season. Now I'd like to get personal for a moment." Hours later, that reporter's nasally voice still played on repeat—accompanied by a feeling so achingly routine it barely stung.

Fine, not true. A dozen raging wasps couldn't do to her what today's interview did.

"What do you have to say regarding the rumors about your marriage?" Miranda's shoulders stiffened all over again at the memory of the reporter's averted eyes as she posed the question—the subtle-as-a-foghorn interest edging her words, the disappointment when Miranda's underwhelming answer fell flat. "I'm sorry. I don't talk about my personal life to the media."

"You know everybody's curious about where you disappeared to today." Whitney brushed the crumbs off Miranda's white V-neck tee.

And probably annoyed, too, since her last-minute appointment with the magazine journalist meant taping would run late tonight. "One of those spur-of-the-moment interviews. Brad coerced me."

"We need this, Rand." Why the worry in her manager's voice as they'd spoken over the phone? Surely after their third season finale her homebuilding television show had finally hit its prime. "Is the crew mad?"

Whitney stepped back, glance darting from Miranda's boots and denim up to her signature tee. "Not mad. A tad irked,

maybe. No one likes to stay late. Might've helped if you'd hit the catering table with everyone else. You always eat with the gang."

Except on October 4. But none of the studio bunch knew the gut-punching significance of the date. And she'd just as soon keep it that way. Otherwise there'd be no holding it together through tonight's taping. "Needed a little quiet. That's all."

"Well, let's hope the break has you in top form so we can close this in one take. That dark sky won't hold out forever." A spotlight snapped on as the set hummed into post-break activity. Whitney pulled a tube from her pocket. "Now, pucker up."

"Right, because a girl can't build a house without lipstick."

"Correction: lip *gloss*. Now get out there and do the Home Depot thing."

As Whitney pranced away, Miranda turned her eyes to the green ridges peeking through dusk's fog. Those paunchy clouds *did* promise rain, and soon. They just needed to get through this taping. . . . Correction: *she* needed to.

And she would. Always did—on all four October 4ths since *he* left.

Robbie.

But she couldn't let her mind wander there—to Robbie, the anniversary. She needed to ditch thoughts of that prickly interview, too. *C'mon, think favorite things. Real Sound of Music-like. Bubble baths. Bonfires. Ooh, or how about the new Powermatic 2000 3HP table saw?* Now, there was something to put a little spring in a girl's step.

"Oh, please tell me that grin means what I think it means."

Her focus slid to the right. Brad Walsh. Yup, there he stood in all his hair-gelled, leather-shoed, this-century's-William-Holden glory.

"And what do you think it means?" And why in the world did her manager have to pick today of all days to visit the set?

“That you’re happy to see me,” Brad said, sweeping his arms wide. “That you realize, after years of my devotion, you’re finally ready to make the move from client to dinner date.” He honed in on her mouth.

Don’t even think about it, Walsh.

“Kid, you’ve got lipstick on your teeth.”

She brushed a finger over her front teeth. “Uh-uh, lip *gloss*. And thanks. But no dice on the dinner date. We’ve had this chat a thousand times.”

Brad rolled his chocolate-brown eyes. “I know . . . I’m city, you’re country. Hogwash.”

Despite the blues she’d lugged around all day, giggles pushed out now. “Hogwash? Is that your way of trying to fit in down here in backwoods-ville? Nice attempt, but you need a debutante, an urbanite. Maybe a ballerina. I’m too . . . flannel and scrambled eggs.” Seriously. He should see her at breakfast.

She stepped away from Brad, nodded at the head cameraman as he settled in his perch at the Panasonic, and found her own spot behind a granite-top island.

“You’re hardly a lumberjack, Rand.” Brad moved beside her. “You’re television’s tomboy darling. So said *TV Guide* last week.”

She surveyed her props for the closing how-to segment: pitcher of water, steam iron, oak slab. “What’re you doing here, anyway?”

“Lincoln called, said we needed to talk.”

Sure enough, the show’s producer strode across the set now. He stopped, exchanged words with the director, and then angled for Miranda and Brad.

“He looks intense,” Miranda said.

“Always does.”

Lincoln reached them, held out a hand to Brad. “Good to see you, Walsh. Randi, I need a few minutes with the two of you.”

Oh, please don't let it be bad news. Anything else today and she'd need a bucket of ice cream to go with the rest of her cookies. "Should we sit?" She gestured to the rattan furniture positioned on one side of the porch set.

Lincoln leaned against the island counter. "Actually, let's make this a standing meeting. I've got to run in a sec. Here's the thing: I've got good news."

Miranda tasted relief, syrupy sweet.

"And some bad."

Good-bye, Aunt Jemima. "I vote for the bad first."

Lincoln folded his arms over his black sweater, which matched his wide-rimmed glasses. "Okay, I'll give it to you straight: Season four of *From the Ground Up* is on shaky ground."

Was it just her, or were those heavy clouds sagging even lower in the sky? "Well, we knew the network was looking at fiddling with our time slot, right?"

Lincoln was shaking his head before she even finished. "I'm not talking a time-slot switch up. We may be on the chopping block."

Which explained the ripples of anxiety in her manager's voice when he'd called about the interview. Brad must have sensed this coming. "Doesn't compute," he said now. "The show's done well for three seasons. Randi's as popular with viewers as ever."

"And we're half done filming season four," Miranda added.

"I know it's unpleasant to hear, but if you look at last season's ratings and future projections, it's not entirely unbelievable. But nothing's certain. We have time to make our case to the network before they settle on the spring lineup. Which brings me to the good news."

Lincoln straightened his glasses and leaned forward. "I've had the best publicity brainstorm of my life. I have a plan to save the show and up your celebrity status by the zillions, Randi, dear."

Why did that sound more foreboding than hope inspiring? “Whatcha gonna do? Parade me in front of every grocery-aisle tabloid?”

Lincoln’s smug smile stretched his cheeks. “Not just you.”

Brad’s sharp intake of breath signaled his realization. She met his eyes, read his “stay calm” expression. What had he just figured out that she hadn’t? “Who else?” A niggle of alarm slipped under her skin.

“Drum roll, please. . . . Your husband.” Lincoln’s words rushed like the breeze now rolling into a steady mountain wind. “You know, the unseen character on your show. The one who taught you all you know.”

Oh. Oh no. Disbelief crowded out the elation of only seconds earlier. He couldn’t be serious. Lincoln Nash didn’t know what he was asking.

Except that he did. And somehow that made it worse. Miranda hugged her arms to her body. “That’s impossible. You know I’m not . . . never was.” Her voice dropped to a hush. “You know Robbie left before the wedding.” The one that would’ve happened three years ago today.

“What I *know* is you talk about him in every show.”

“Because of you, the audition, the pilot. Because while we taped the first season, I naïvely believed I’d be married by the time it aired. Because my contract stipulates . . .” And then there was the little matter of her guilt. She shot Brad a pleading look, swallowing sour desperation. *Say something!*

But Lincoln spoke first. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen the fan websites, tabloid headlines—‘Who is Randi Woodruff’s mystery man?’ Not naming the guy was the best decision we ever made. Especially since, well . . .”

He didn’t have to finish. They hadn’t named her husband because the man who should have filled the role had ducked out early. She’d shielded that truth from her fans, even most

of the crew, citing her desire for privacy. Up until now it had worked.

“Anyway,” Lincoln went on, “you finally give people the peek they want, and you’ll save your show. Be sure of it.”

“The only thing I’m sure of is”—pain latched itself to her shell-shocked words—“I don’t have a husband.” She felt Brad’s palm on her arm, the chill of the coming storm.

Lincoln only shrugged. “So we get you one.” He checked his watch. “Gotta run. We’ll chat more.”

And before she could hurl even one of the arguments clogging her throat, Lincoln was off.

“He’s dead serious, isn’t he.” She slumped against the island counter.

“Like Colonel Sanders in a chicken coop.” Brad’s eyes were pinned on Lincoln’s retreating form.

“And I’m the chick with her head on the chopping block.” As Brad placed his arm around her shoulder, grumbling clouds drew her gaze. And suddenly all she wanted was escape. She itched for the comfort of the mountains, her workshop. The heady smell of sawdust, the feel of wood underneath her fingers, glass-smooth and waiting for her magic. Home.

Where her lies couldn’t find her.

Well, apparently, until today.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

“This is officially the stupidest thing you’ve ever talked me into.”

The click of Matthew Knox’s shoes echoed on the heels of his brother’s hissed words, the empty, dark hallway stretching before him like a cave. Only a slit of light beckoned from under the closed door at the end of the corridor. On the other side of that door, a journalist’s treasure trove.

For real—he’d hit the jackpot this time. Political favors,

special-interest pandering. The evidence was at his fingertips. As long as he didn't get stuck with one leg into this gaping window of opportunity.

Matthew paused. This was the direction he'd seen the former politician walking, right?

Behind him, his brother heaved a sigh. "Dude, did you even hear me? I'm talking epic proportions of stupid."

So his older brother didn't approve. So what was new? "Voice down, camera ready. Is that so much to ask?" The story hovered so close, he could feel it. Surely it completely justified breaking into the zoo's administration building.

No, not breaking in. After all, he and Jase hadn't busted any locks or climbed any fences. They'd only followed ex-Senator McKee in. From a safe distance. When no one was looking.

"What about Margaret McKee?" Jase whisper-shouted. "She's the celebrity. Your article's supposed to be about her. You asked me to come to take pictures of her and the glamour crowd. Instead we're sneaking around an empty building while she's out dazzling the masses. You know Delia Jones is out there, too, right?"

"Course I do. And Jones is going to throw up when she realizes she spent the night buddying up to the senator's daughter when the senator himself was playing dirty politics right under her nose."

Yes, it was a departure from his assignment—to write a feature on recent acting phenom Margaret McKee, daughter of the former senator—but surely the editor of *Today* would forgive him. And, oh, how spicy the taste of victory when he beat Jones to the story.

It was his nemesis, Delia Jones herself, who'd let it slip that the *real* news of tonight's gala at the zoo was the former senator's plans. "*Rumor is McKee's stepping back into the political boxing ring with a little prompting from Shawn Keegan.*"

Keegan was not only the zoo administrator but also an investor with fingers in no less than a dozen corporations and foundations in the Twin Cities . . . and whose underground influence in politics was the stuff of electoral legends. It would make sense the man would want a friend in the State Senate.

And while a local political scoop wouldn't normally be of much interest to a national magazine like *Today*, surely the fact that the ex-senator happened to be the father of celebrity up-and-comer Margaret McKee would help Matthew's case.

Finally a hard news break. Good-bye fluffy human-interest pieces, hello nitty-gritty reporting.

"Come on, Jase, this is my chance. Besides, you should be thanking me. With business slow at the gallery, I'd think you'd appreciate picking up a photo sale to *Today*." Anyway, he hadn't asked Jase to join him for this extracurricular portion of the evening. Jase could've stayed outside with the rest of the Twin Cities' fancy-schmancy types.

He just wants to make sure I don't get into trouble. And considering Matthew's recent history of botched freelance gigs, could he blame him? Still. "Don't mess this up for me, Jase."

Jase sighed. "You're that convinced?"

Matthew squinted in the dark. "Would I have rented a tux, endured this whole hoity-toity fund-raiser, if I wasn't?" He raked his fingers through his short brown hair. He'd sacrificed his shaggy look in favor of a close cut for tonight's gala, had even gotten reacquainted with his razor—no hint of his usual five-o'clock shadow. *Anything for the story.*

And the good senator's daughter seemed to like the change, too. Two days ago, during their initial interview, Margaret McKee had been about as attentive as a narcoleptic. Tonight she'd hovered at his side, claiming his arm at every dance.

Too bad he was out to dig up her father's wrongdoing. Rumors of the senator's up-for-grabs votes—for the right price, of

course—had dogged McKee throughout his two terms. Now he was meeting behind closed doors with one of the state’s biggest financial tycoons. Oh yeah, there was a story here.

Jase switched his camera bag from one shoulder to the other. “You better be right. How many times have we gotten into scrapes over your hunches? Oh, right, not hunches. Journalistic instinct. I’m just surprised your ‘instinct’ hasn’t landed us in jail.”

“Yet.” Matthew grinned and continued down the hallway.

“That’s not funny.” Jase shuffled behind him. “You can James Bond it all you want, but I’ve got a wife and daughter.”

Matthew only waved Jase on. The faint strains of the orchestra’s music glided in from where the city’s movers and shakers mingled over hors d’oeuvres and champagne. He reached into his coat pocket, clasped his digital recorder.

“What if you’re wrong?” Jase’s whisper filled the silence.

Polite of Jase not to tack on the obvious: Wouldn’t be the first time. “Then we shrug and say we got lost looking for the restroom.”

“You always do this, Matt.”

Seriously, did Jase have to be so talkative tonight? He clearly didn’t get *covert*. “Do what?”

“Dig for something that’s not there. What happened to my trusting kid brother?”

Disappeared the same night Dad did. Matthew sucked in a sharp breath. “I’m not wrong this time. I saw the senator and Keegan sneak off. Considering what Delia told me—”

“And that’s another thing. Why, of all people, would *she* tip *you* off?”

Fine, so that question had poked at Matthew all night, too. The woman despised him. “Maybe she didn’t realize what she was giving me, or maybe she’s finally forgiven me.”

He could practically hear Jase’s eyes roll. Right. Not likely.

But Delia's reasons didn't matter right now. He stopped outside the office door. Recorder on. Hands sweaty.

"Now what?" Jase whispered.

"Um, truthfully? I haven't thought that far ahead." He fingered his collar, loosened the strangling bow tie.

"Perfect. What do you think we're going to find, anyway? Two men smoking cigars, inking a contract with the mafia?"

"Jase, I just need you to trust me." Even as the words left his lips, he gulped for their return.

"*Son, I just need you to trust me.*"

Trust. Yeah. Right.

A laugh boomed from the other side of the door. Matthew pushed his ear to the wood. The senator's muffled voice leaked from the room, words tinged with reluctance. "I don't know about this. But a deal is a deal, I suppose. Perhaps it *is* best I lay low."

"The things we do in the name of elections, eh?" This from Keegan.

Matthew held his breath. *Keep talking, Senator.*

"You think there's really a shot with a write-in campaign this late in the game?" Keegan.

Ah, there it was. "Here's what I'm thinking, Jase," he spoke in a hush. "We wait here until they leave. Soon as they open the door, you snap a photo."

Jase grunted. "Nothing doing. They'll call Security and have us arrested."

"So what do you suggest? Busting in on them?"

"Hey, you're the captain. Lead away. For the record, I still think this is—"

"I know, I know. The stupidest thing we've ever done." But it was possibly the best career move of his life. If he could only land something concrete. Allegations alone did not an ethical article make.

Like trespassing and eavesdropping are ethical?

“All right. New plan.” He lifted a fist, knocked.

The voices on the other side of the door silenced. Another knock, and the door swung open. Matthew grinned as the ex-senator’s burly form filled the doorway. He had a few inches on Matthew’s six feet three, and his shoulders suggested a past career in the NFL rather than the statehouse.

“Uh, if you’re looking for the restrooms—” McKee began.

“Actually, no. The name’s Matthew Knox, and I’m here to talk to you and Mr. Keegan.”

“Party’s outside,” Keegan called from inside the room.

“Yes, but—”

“And you’re trespassing,” the zoo administrator finished.

Matthew would have pushed past McKee if the man didn’t look poised for a takedown. Instead, grasping at confidence, he folded his arms. “Look, I’ll cut to the chase. I know you’ve got an announcement to make soon, maybe even tonight. I know you’re planning a late entry into the election, and I can write an article hinting at your plans and thus fizzle your big PR splash, or you can let me in on it. What do you say?”

The senator raised an eyebrow as Keegan joined him in the doorway. Jase coughed.

“So you’re paparazzi, are ya?” Keegan’s eyes pressed into slits.

“We’re not paparazzi!” Matthew blurted. “Are you kidding?”

“Dude, I don’t think you’re the one who should be offended here,” Jase muttered.

“I promise, you won’t be sorry,” Matthew gushed. “Just talk to me.” Way too close to begging. Why did his voice sound so tinny? And why were both McKee and Keegan smiling all eerie-like? Not good.

McKee chuckled. “Oh, I know *I* won’t be sorry, son.”

Matthew angled to see Jase swiping beads of sweat from his forehead.

“You see,” McKee continued. “That big announcement you’re talking about . . .” He lifted his hand, checked the watch on his wrist. “I’m guessing it’s going down right now. And you, my friend, are missing it all.”

“So you’re not . . .” And just like that, it made sense. Delia’s divulging what she knew about McKee’s plans. No, what she’d concocted. She’d planted the idea in his head knowing he’d bite, knowing he’d go and do something stupid. And now she was out there with the real story while he faced the fiery amusement in McKee’s eyes.

“We should go, Matt,” Jase urged.

“Yes, do.” Keegan poked a finger at Matthew’s chest. “Else I’ll arrange for an escort.”

Matthew whirled on his heels after Jase, the back of his neck burning with heat. Jase stalked ahead, spine rigid.

“I can’t believe you!” Jase called over his shoulder as they burst outside. “We could’ve been arrested.”

Strings of light decorated the zoo’s courtyard, enveloped in late-summer warmth. A server walked past with a tray, trailed by the scent of shrimp. Maybe whatever announcement McKee had alluded to hadn’t happened yet. Maybe Matthew hadn’t missed it.

Maybe he hadn’t royally screwed up just yet. Again.

He scanned the crowd for Delia.

“I’ll never be able to bring Celine to the zoo,” Jase said, stopping, yanking on Matthew’s arm.

“There are other zoos—”

“You just couldn’t let it go, like always. You’re wasting your talents.”

“Hey, I didn’t ask you to follow me.”

“It’s because of Dad and that article, isn’t it? You’re trying to prove something.”

Music, dancing, it all faded as dark hurt snaked through him. “Don’t go there, Jase.”

His brother trapped him in an angry stare until the blare of his cell phone broke the moment. Jase exhaled and pushed past Matthew, reaching into his pocket for his phone.

Matthew turned, gaze falling to the ground, where his shoes glowed against overhead lights. Alone in a glitzy crowd. Frozen by humiliation.

And the truth of his brother’s razored words.

“Matthew?”

And the hits just kept on coming. Not Margaret. Not now, with that pouncing smile.

“Matthew Knox, you missed my announcement.” She slithered an arm through his elbow.

And there was Delia. Watching from the crowd, grinning as if she’d nabbed a trophy. Ever the rival, ever a step ahead. The realization thudded through Matthew.

“You mean *you’re* the write-in candidate?”

Margaret’s confirming nod jabbed the final stake in this failure of a night. “I purposely waited until my father disappeared for a few minutes. I want people to vote for me as me, not just as ‘the senator’s daughter.’ People think I’m only into the acting scene, but I’ve always intended to make a difference in a bigger way. And since I’m convinced our current pool of candidates don’t cut it, I decided to jump in.”

And *Today* could’ve had the story ahead of everyone if he hadn’t ignored his assignment. *Done for. So completely done for.*

A yank on his arm jerked his attention from Margaret.

“Whoa, bro, what’s the hurry?”

“It’s Celine. She’s in the hospital. Bike accident.” Jase shoved his camera bag at Matthew, his cell phone balanced between his shoulder and his ear. “Honey, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

And in the time it took Jase to clamp his phone shut, all thought of Margaret McKee and his repeat failure fled. In its place, the kind of pulsing dread he hadn't felt since . . .

Since the day everything fell apart.



“Listen, we’ll figure this out. I’ll talk to Lincoln.”

Miranda pulled away from Brad’s hold. No amount of her manager’s optimism could erase the suffocating truth: When Lincoln Nash made his mind up, he was as immovable as the Smokies.

“I don’t have a husband.”

“So we get you one.”

Like men waited in droves to stake a claim on a woman more comfortable in Levi’s than lipstick. Catching her director’s impatient glare—right, there was still tonight’s taping to finish—she moved into place behind an oak two-by-four balanced over two sawhorses. “Tell Lincoln husbands—pretend or otherwise—don’t grow on trees.” And that even if they did, it was just too easy for a restless wind to blow them away.

Brad’s chuckle defied her morose words. “You know, if you think about it, maybe it’s not such a bad idea.”

The sounds of the set crew filled the air—voices, footsteps on the patio, cameras rolling into place. “It’s a horrible idea. It’s bad enough I’ve gone along with a lie for three seasons straight, all because it supposedly cutes me up.” But she had to admit it had worked. She’d protected her privacy, holed away in the mountains, drew a strict line between her public persona and personal life. “Now you want me to bring the lie home by playing house with a pretend husband? And what about Robbie? He’s out there somewhere and—”

“That’s it, isn’t it? You’re worried if you do this, Robbie

will catch wind of it, maybe think you're really married, and never come back."

With her back to Brad, she ran a hand over the oak slab. Smooth and unmarred, perfection. But why hadn't someone from props dented the wood already? The whole point of this episode's how-to was to highlight her repair techniques. Couldn't do that with a pristine piece of lumber.

Brad stepped closer, spoke over her shoulder. "Robbie's still got a clutch on you."

She pulled out her hammer, poised to do the job herself. "Don't start. Not today."

"Three years and an ocean. And you're still holding on."

Grip tight around the hammer, she faced him. Overhead, cumulus clouds rolled and growled. "*Stop*. Don't you dare come here and Dr. Phil me. You're not my therapist. You're not my friend. So just . . ." She whirled, raised her arm with hammer held high, and pounded into wood, a lightning-like crack echoing over the set. The slab rattled and stilled.

"Rand." Brad's clipped word punctured the now-quiet set as a wave of mountain air scraped over her cheeks.

She couldn't look at him. Not her friend? What was she thinking? He'd found her a wallowing mess three years ago on her bathroom floor. He'd answered every single middle-of-the-night call those first few months. He might be her manager now, but they'd been college pals first. And if *he* wasn't her friend—being one of the few who knew . . . all of it—then who was?

She ran a hand through her curls and turned on her heels, hammer swinging. "Brad—" And hit a wall. A soft, growling wall. And what was that warm . . . ? Oh, swell. Coffee, hot and oh-so-brown against the white of her shirt.

"Good evening to you, too, Randi," Tom Bass, the show's director, spoke in monotone.

"Sorry," she muttered. "And sorry for the holdup." She

peered around Tom to see Brad's retreating form. *I didn't mean it, Brad.* It was just this brutal day.

Eyes back to Tom, her gaze traveled from his gray whiskers to his dusty and now coffee-covered jeans. "I, uh, had an accident with the wood."

He folded his arms. "I see that. It's cracked."

Possibly along with her mental health. Someone handed her an apron, and she slipped it over her shirt, covering the coffee stain. She had to focus. *You're Randi Woodruff, homebuilder extraordinaire, tool-belt-wearing how-to girl.*

"Tell props we need a new two-by-four," Tom barked at a passing crewman. "Look, I know you don't like our show closers, but don't go around breaking stuff. Thing is—"

She held up a palm. "I know. Viewers love the cutesy *how-tos*. Endears me to them."

Tom patted her cheek. "That and your good looks and charming personality. Now, I don't know what you, Brad, and our illustrious producer were chatting about—"

"Believe me, you don't want to."

"Or what's been bothering you all day. But we've got work to do and an impatient crew. Think you can pull yourself together for one more segment?"

She nodded, then breathed in deeply as Tom left the spotlighted patio, the scent of coffee mixing with pine and heat from the lights. Brad met her eyes from where he'd taken up residence by the picked-clean food table, hopefully catching the apology in her wave.

She could do this. Finish the taping, then escape to the mountain. Drag herself through one more episode ending, try to ignore the guilt these closing segments always caused. Like sandpaper scratching her heart each time she forced the words.

You made your bed . . . Yeah, sure, a bed of nails.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Tom boomed from off set.

Focus. She tucked a runaway curl behind one ear and stepped to the patio table in the corner of the set, connected with the camera.

Three, two . . . “I don’t know about you, but sometimes no matter how careful I am, I end up with dents in my wood.” Cue cute pout followed by we’re-all-in-this-together expression. *See, easy.*

If she could only silence her conscience.

“But most dents are fixable. All you need are two things: water and a steam iron.” She picked up the iron posed atop the table, then walked over to the newly placed board, practiced grin still in place. “Now, some people would be too impatient for this repair technique.”

This was it. The line the whole sequence hinged on. *Don’t think about what you’re saying.* The glare of the set lights whited out her scenic surroundings, the faces of the crew. Just her and the camera. And the lie.

“My husband, for instance, bless his blasted heart, is so impatient he eats TV dinners half frozen.” *My husband.* Sandpaper. Scratching. Scraping. *I’m sorry, God.*

“He may have taught me everything I know, but if it were up to him, we’d throw out this damaged slab. But I say, don’t be so quick to pitch a good thing.” Oh, if ever words held such layers. She hid a grimace, gestured to the lumber. “Now, with softwoods, like pine or cedar, just wet the dented area to swell and raise the sunken wood. But for hardwoods, you need an iron.”

Her eyes landed on the groove in the oak board, a blight on an otherwise perfectly usable piece of wood. And suddenly all she could see was her own heart. Dented. Damaged. She closed her eyes against forming pools. She hadn’t made it all day only to fall apart now with cameras rolling, everyone watching.

Quick, do the Maria von Trapp thing. Sleeping in, feather pillows, maple syrup . . .

But it didn't stop the screeching of her conscience, the emotions swirling inside her. The interview, Lincoln's news . . . the anniversary.

And then, movement. A flash of orange as a man strode along the side of the set. That profile! Crooked nose, high forehead, floppy hair. So like . . .

The pang in her heart pushed out a gasp as a whoosh of mountain wind painted goose bumps over her arms. The first raindrops spattered on the wooden slab. She dropped the iron.

“Robbie?”