

Maybe This Time

By: Claire Yezbak Fadden

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Disclaimer

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dear Reader,

A Corner of Her Heart, the first book in my Begin Again series, introduced three sisters, Monica, Kate and Julie and their separate struggles with trust and abandonment. Through perseverance, prayer and family strength, they each find their happily ever after.

Kate's journey is just beginning. *Maybe This Time* is a novella of how she and Eric fall in love. In *Promises To Keep*, more challenges and obstacles face Kate and her husband, Eric. For a sneak peek, read the first chapter found at the end of this story.

Email me at claire@clairefadden.com for book discussion questions and to share how Monica and Kate's story touched your life.

Enjoy!
Claire

Dedication

Always for Nick.

My family Shawn, Jake, Seth, Lisa, Rachel and Windley. Inspiration, enthusiasm and unconditional love are never in short supply.

Acknowledgments

Writing is a lonely profession, but writers are never alone. My thanks to my beta readers and truest fans Sharon C. Cooper and Kim Yezbak.

This novel is a work of fiction. Any errors, mistakes or missteps are solely my own.

About Maybe This Time

Architect Kate Jameson has sworn off men. That is until she meets Eric, the handsome son of her current client. Fresh out of a messy relationship with a coworker, Kate's not ready to trust her judgement where men are concerned. She dodges Eric's advances, but can't deny the attraction growing between them. Everything—especially his soul-searing brown eyes—makes her want to throw caution to the wind and try again. At her sister's prodding, Kate finally agrees to date Eric, surprised at the joy he brings into her life. But when their budding romance is threatened, Kate is forced to make hard decisions and fight for her true happiness.

Undercover CIA agent Eric Wiley has survived enough loss in his life to ever want to risk being hurt again. He has long since given up on true love. Still, he's drawn to Kate in a way he can't rationalize. Avoiding her isn't working and for the first time in a relationship, he wants to be truthful about his past and his career. Before their romance can bloom, however, Kate goes missing. Recognizing the danger, Eric stops at nothing to rescue the woman who has captured his heart.

Chapter One

Kate Jameson took in the wide expanse of the Clearwater Crossing shopping complex and silently patted herself on the back. What she had originally thought would be a cookie-cutter strip mall with bean counters scrutinizing every dime spent against a balance sheet had become a community center. Her design had taken thirty-five acres of blighted brushland and transformed them into a community square, complete with a grocery store, a cinema, a neighborhood library and a walking trail. The finished result, a perfect mix of functionality and imagination, breathed bustling life into a forgotten corner of Phoenix.

Early on, Kate had pulled every move to get reassigned from the project, but Harry Mack, CEO of Mack & Partners Architects, had specifically requested her services. Seemed as though the development was financed by an old family friend of Harry's who had been impressed by Kate's work on the Ramble Hills Community College Library and Learning Hub.

Completing the local college's project filled Kate with pride and brought her notoriety among her peers. At twenty-eight she was named one of the state's architectural trendsetters, only to be rewarded by Harry with the Clearwater project. She protested, not wanting to be saddled with a life of plotting signage visibility from the I-10 freeway for strip malls.

As she watched the dignitaries, investors and shop employees, she sucked in the air of success. Clearwater Crossing now topped her short list of architectural accomplishments.

"Who's the tall guy on the end talking to the mayor?" Kate whispered to her boss, as she watched eight people, each holding a pair of scissors, nervously stand behind an oversized blue ribbon stretched across the anchoring store's entry.

"You mean Eric Wiley? He's the owners' son," Harry responded.

"Adele and Ben's? I don't recall him at the planning sessions or any of the follow-up meetings," Kate said, taking in Eric's strong build and blinding smile. She guessed he was close to her age and at least six feet tall. The group, poised to cut the ribbon, awaited the go-ahead as a series of photos were taken. From where Kate stood, she had an unobstructed view of Eric's left hand. No ring.

"You probably haven't," Harry stated. "He travels a lot for their company. But you will see more of him in the future. His folks are so pleased with how everything went on this project, that

they want to build more of these across the southwest. Eric, their heir apparent, will be running these jobs going forward.”

Kate smiled. Not the worst news she’s heard today.

“All right everyone, get your scissors ready, but don’t actually cut until I give the go ahead,” the photographer directed. “Okay. On three. One. Two. Three.”

Snip. Snip. The complex was officially opened for business. Kate grabbed a section of the ribbon that had fallen to the ground and tucked the souvenir into her handbag before following the group into the reception.

A small combo played big band music while the eight scissor-holders along with some fifty others mingled, eating shrimp puffs and chicken satay.

Kate understood that an important part of being an architect was ensuring satisfaction after the last tile was laid, the last shrub planted and the last set of keys handed over to the center manager. Still, these glad-handing events left her uncomfortable.

She glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes more and then she could excuse herself without being reprimanded by Harry. She walked about the community room examining the string of framed photos hanging on the walls. Each offered a visual snapshot into the history of Maricopa County. Next to erecting buildings, history was Kate’s passion. That is why she had insisted on the mini-museum exhibit as a design element.

Kate stopped at an enlarged black-and-white photo of four men wearing cowboy hats and read the engraved caption attached to the wall below: *Cotton harvest, circa 1888*. Kate leaned in closer to study the men’s sun-weathered faces, their rudimentary farming tools and determined posture.

She turned to view the next photo and glimpsed Eric pushing his way through the crowd, carrying two glasses of champagne, one spilling as he bumped into Harry’s back.

“Hello,” he said extending a glass toward Kate. “Mom says you’re the mastermind behind this concept. I thought you deserved a toast.”

“Oh, thank you,” Kate said, fighting a swarm of butterflies that arrived when Eric did, and now wanted to reside in her stomach. “This has been a fun project to work on. You’re the Wileys’ son?”

“Yes. I’m Eric,” he introduced himself still holding both glasses. “I’m sorry we haven’t actually met before. From what I’m told, your concept will be replicated across the southwest.”

“I’m just very glad that everything worked out the way it did,” Kate accepted the champagne flute, her fingers briefly brushing Eric’s, causing the butterflies in her tummy to flap their wings faster.

“To Clearwater Crossing and its architect,” Eric said, raising his glass before clinking it against Kate’s.

Kate took a sip and got lost in Eric’s brown eyes, strong and piercing.

“I thought we might talk more about the project, maybe over dinner,” Eric suggested.

Kate closed her eyes, not believing that the man she drooled over moments before just asked her out. There was nothing she’d enjoy more than spending time with him. If only they weren’t going to be working together.

“Are you okay?” Eric asked.

Kate blinked open her eyes. “I’m fine. I’m sorry I need to leave.” She shoved the nearly full glass into Eric’s hand.

“Did I say something wrong? If so, I apologize.”

“It was very nice meeting you,” Kate mumbled and headed for the exit.

Nope, not doing it again, she thought. Not dating anyone from work. After the last time, I’m keeping my professional life far away from my personal one.

Eric watched Kate scamper out the door without a backward glance.

What the hell just happened?

The way Adele and Ben, his adoptive parents, had spoken of their architect, you’d think the woman should be nominated for sainthood. “Why don’t you go introduce yourself,” Adele had instructed moments earlier. And Eric thought, *why not?* Enough time had passed since his divorce from Jenny. Maybe he was ready to start again. At thirty, he wasn’t getting any younger, but even enticing a woman to have a drink with him proved impossible.

“I see you met Kate,” Ben Wiley said, now standing near Eric.

“Just barely,” Eric replied staring at the two glasses of scarcely touched champagne.

“Where did she go? The ladies room?” Ben asked.

“I don’t think so, Dad. She ran out of here so fast, I thought maybe I’d grown a third eye during our short conversation. Here, drink this,” Eric pushed a glass into Ben’s hand. “To Dollar Deals.”

“To Dollar Deals,” Ben echoed, referring to their family business. “Your mother is chatting it up with the mayor. She loves these little soirees. Me, not so much.”

Eric gulped his champagne and set the empty glass on a nearby tray. “Mom loves moving people around her chessboard, that’s for sure.”

“You sound bitter. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything.” Eric regretted starting this conversation but his frustration boiled over and he couldn’t contain his anger. “I’m tired of these missions not turning up anything. I’m tired of chasing a man I may never find. A man who may not even exist anymore.”

“Sssh. Someone might hear.”

“You asked, so I’m telling you. Mostly, I’m tired of being alone. I want to have a real life. And the first time since Jenny and I broke up that I try to introduce myself to a girl, she runs away like I just peed in the punch bowl.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. Kate probably had another business engagement. It probably has nothing to do with you,” Ben said.

Eric scanned the room, searching for something, anything to look at besides the disappointment in his father’s eyes. “I’m sure. She doesn’t know enough about me and what I do to run away like Jenny did.” To be fair, Jenny tried to make their marriage work, but Eric’s obsession with his job prevented any chance of success. Kate’s racing out the door before even the simplest of conversations just preempted the inevitable. She wouldn’t stay around either once she found out he was an agent for the government.

Ben rested his hand on Eric’s shoulder. “Son, you take everything so personal. Sometimes things are what they are.”

“Sometimes.” And sometimes you have to make things become what you want them to be. Eric gazed toward the doorway, recalling the image of Kate’s shoulder-length auburn tresses flouncing with every stride against the back of her olive-green suit jacket. The scent of her perfume lingered in the air he breathed. She didn’t have another appointment, still she left after they barely said two sentences to each other.

He wanted to spend time with this hazel-green-eyed woman. The woman Adele raved about for months. The young architect whose plans for Clearwater Crossing included a kiddie park, water fountains for dogs and special parking for pregnant women.

Eric didn't know why Kate left but he would find the reason. Because like in his professional life, Eric couldn't leave unanswered questions alone.

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Excerpt from Promises to Keep
(Kate & Eric's Novel – Coming Soon)

“It’s a boy!”

Kate Wiley heard Dr. Smith’s voice but her gaze locked on Eric’s deep brown eyes, brimming with a newly discovered pride.

“A beautiful boy, Katie. We have a beautiful, healthy son.” Her husband kissed her hand. He had stayed in the delivery room, constantly by her side during the eight-hour labor. Eric had always been near when she needed him the most. And now they had a son. Benjamin Simon Wiley, named after Eric’s dad, not Stuart, her deadbeat father.

“He’s healthy? All his fingers and toes?” Kate asked, mustering what little strength still pulsed through her veins.

“See for yourself.” Dr. Smith placed the infant on Kate’s belly. Her hand immediately rested protectively on the boy’s back, so small and fragile. *A son. My son.* With her other hand, she stroked his head, sparse with shocks of black hair like his father. Kate had read everything she could about the importance of skin-to-skin contact. She knew this technique kept her infant warm, beginning their lifelong bond as mother and son.

A nurse covered the tiny body with a warm blanket and secured a knit cap on his head. After waiting a few minutes to allow extra blood flow from the placenta to the baby, Dr. Smith clamped the umbilical cord in two places and showed Eric where to cut.

“What are you doing now?” Kate asked.

“Just checking the baby’s blood type.” Dr. Smith moved to where his nurse stood.

At thirty-two, Kate questioned her ability to be a good mother. Eric, only two years older, seemed to have segued into his paternal role seamlessly. She stared at her son’s angelic face, smiling as he wriggled in her arms. Her sisters were excellent examples of motherhood, following the path of their own mother. Kate, however, would never struggle the way her mother had done. Kate had chosen a better man than the one naïve Bridget Jameson picked.

Eric, as stable and strong as a mountain, the backdrop to her life, the foundation to her security, would be with her every step of the way, learning the intricacies, fallibilities and funniness of parenting—together.

They had met four years ago at the opening of Eric's parents' mall in Phoenix. Kate, the project's chief architect attended the ribbon cutting and immediately felt an attraction to the six-foot-tall son of her client. His blinding smile and unruly black hair caught her eye.

Not long after their first date, Eric rescued her from a violent ex-boyfriend who'd held her at knife point. Kate remembered the terror as though the assault had happened yesterday. Eric fired his gun with such accuracy and dispassion that she wondered why a textile importer would be such an accomplished marksman. Whenever questioned, he'd change the subject, never wanting to relive details about the day he had nearly lost her. Kate stopped bringing up the incident, but her curiosity about why he'd happened to be armed never wavered. There was only one fact she was certain of—when Eric saved her life, he also captured her heart.

Yet, there was still something guarded about his behavior. Kate sensed his stuffy, business-like demeanor camouflaged a painful secret. Maybe the mystery had something to do with his first wife.

None of that mattered now. She and Eric were a family. The past was the past, and whatever the future held, they would face together. Still she wished he would cut back on his overseas business trips. Hopefully, now that he was a father, he would relinquish that part of his job to another employee.

"He's doing great." The doctor interrupted Kate's musing. "Heart rate, breathing, muscle tone, all normal. His reflexes and color are great." Dr. Smith snapped off his latex gloves. "Congratulations, you have a very healthy son," he said before exiting.

"Julie and Monica are waiting in the lobby," Eric reminded, his eyes glistening. "My parents, too. We need to give them the news."

Kate's breath thinned nearly to a stop, watching him blink back the pools forming in his eyes. "Are you happy?" she whispered, tears gathering in her eyes. During their courtship and early years of marriage, Eric had never cried. Now a son together bound them. Ecstasy flooded her every sense realizing Eric's tears overflowed from love, tenderness, and delight.

"You three can hang out a little longer before we move you to a recovery room," the nurse instructed. "Then, once you're settled, we'll bring your family, two at a time, to meet your son. I'll pop out to let them know mother and son are doing fine."

Kate's older sisters, protective mother hens in the best and worst of ways, were probably chomping at the bit to know that everything went well. That their baby sis was okay. But Kate

wanted to savor this moment alone with her new family, before opening the doors for the world to enter. She needed this time with Eric and baby Benjamin, her family. Her life. She wanted to soak in these first-time-mommy emotions: happy, frightened, excited, fulfilled, anxious.

As soon as the nurse left them alone, Kate looked up at Eric, his hand resting gently on Benjamin's back. "Having a child changes everything. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. Now we'll cheer for our own son at Little League games instead of Monica's. We'll wonder if some girl has broken his heart in eighth grade and then get to worry about how we'll pay for his college," Eric teased.

"No, I don't mean those things."

"I know what you mean. We're parents now," Eric answered, swiping at an escaping tear.

In spite of the exhaustion fighting to claim Kate, she savored a new energy rising in her chest. A delightful surge ignited from the pride in her husband's voice. "There's that, but now you're not the only man in my life." She winked.

Eric kissed her forehead. "I've waited a long time to be a dad. I'll gladly share your attention with Bennie."

"You're giving him a nickname already?" she questioned.

"Do you prefer Benmeister?"

"Ugh! I prefer Benjamin. He'll tell us if he wants a moniker."

The baby let out a wail leading into full-on crying. "I do believe you're right," Eric chuckled. "This little man will have no problem asking for what he wants."

"He's hungry," Kate said, not sure how to start the breastfeeding process. She had gathered dozens of books on the topic, but now that she held this tiny bundle in her arms, the words were meaningless.

"I'm so lucky I get to do this with you, Katie." Eric bent down and gently kissed her lips. "We're going to be terrific parents."

She smiled at him, her heart full of love for her gentle but complex man. "Yes, we will."

Seconds later, as if on cue, a lactation nurse pushed through the swinging door. "Let me help you. You'll get the hang of things pretty quickly."

They watched as Benjamin first licked and then latched on to Kate's nipple. A sharp pain emanated through Kate, as her body released colostrum into Benjamin's waiting mouth. As the baby suckled, the cramping intensified, increasing Kate's satisfaction in her first unselfish act as

a mother. The responsibility overwhelmed and completed her, sending waves of love for her infant crashing through her like a tsunami.

Benjamin, and any additional children God may bless them with, would have the perfect childhood. She and Eric would stay up late to assemble the big toys Santa brings. While she would teach their little one how to make snowflake waffles, his dad would be the expert on putting worms on a hook and how to shave without cutting himself. Her son would never be left in tears while mean kids teased that he didn't have a daddy. Not on her watch. She'd made certain to marry a man committed to his family. Too bad her mother hadn't done the same.

A son. I have a son.

Eric's pulse pounded in his ears as he stepped back, giving space to the nurse to tend to Kate, without taking his attention off of his wife and child. He had been in the delivery room for more than eight hours. Soon they would be moved to another room, where he could show-off the newest member of his family.

Never one to believe in miracles, today had forever changed Eric's hopes and dreams. Working undercover for the CIA had exposed him to the world's underbelly. Mission after mission had left him jaded by mankind's inhumanity. Maybe there were happy endings for some people and maybe this time, he would be one of them.

Once Kate finished breastfeeding, the nurse left the room, allowing Eric a chance to reclaim his spot next to the bed. He gently stroked Benjamin, now sleeping against his mother's chest.

If only your grandpa were alive to see you. He'd tease me about all that black hair. Your gid would say something prophetic about how lots of hair means a wealthy life.

Eric could almost hear his father's laughter and wished his dad was in the waiting room, ready to share one of the many embellished stories he was famous for telling.

Knowing his real parents, Simon and Leah Khory, would never hold their grandson drove a spike through Eric's heart. He had spent most of his career with the CIA searching to bring their killer to justice. His obsession had cost him his first marriage. He wouldn't allow Anmar X to ruin this one too.

"Can I hold him?" Eric asked.

Kate scooted to sit up on the bed, careful not to disturb the nest of tubes and wiring monitoring her vitals. She handed the infant into his father's outstretched arms. Eric nestled the child against his pounding heart, and felt Benjamin's heart beat sync with his own. Awed by the compactness of this tiny bundle, Eric stared as though the universe pushed a pause button. His world had stopped to make room for Benjamin Simon.

"You are going to be a terrific dad. I knew that truth the night Bodie was born." Kate said recalling her youngest nephew's birth.

Eric grinned. With his free hand, he swiped a strand of auburn hair away from Kate's face. She had never looked more radiant, her skin smooth and flawless, her hazel eyes taking on a new sparkle.

"The night Bodie was born stretched into the early morning. And the hospital administrators didn't do anything extra to make visitors comfortable in their ratty, out-of-date waiting room. My back still hurts from where that plastic chair dug into me."

"Really?" Kate drew out the word and laughed. "You're complaining? That was four years ago. Anyway, Monica's boys will vouch for you with Bennie."

"Now he's Bennie?"

"I guess," Kate replied sheepishly. "Bennie has a loving familiarity to it. But as I said, he'll tell us if he doesn't like the nickname."

Eric drew close and kissed Kate's lips again, lingering for a moment soaking up their sweetness. "I can see where my place is going to be for the next eighteen years."

"We'll figure things out as we go along," Kate said, tears welling in her eyes. "Anyway, my nephews think you're terrific."

"Buy them ice cream and they're fans forever." Eric chuckled just as his phone vibrated in his front pocket. The call better not be from his unit leader, summoning him. His adoptive parents had been taking turns texting from the lobby. Hopefully the message was from an eager grandmother or grandfather, wondering when they could see their grandson and not orders from their operations officer charging him with a new mission to the Middle East.

"I think we've kept the gang from this little man long enough." Kate adjusted her hospital gown and pushed the matted hair gathered around her face away. "We should let them meet Benjamin Simon. I'll bet Colleen is pacing around with bags of baby stuff," she said of her best friend, a former cop who Eric had immediately liked the first time he met her.

“No doubt,” Eric laughed. “She’s been on the text train with your sisters. Everyone wants in.”

“Well?” Kate tilted her head. “Are you going to let them come in?”

“What’s the rush? Let the whole gang sit in those luxurious chairs for another hour,” Eric joked. “Seriously, just give us a minute or two more. I’m not ready to share our family with the world yet.”

Kate smiled. “Yeah, me either.”

Still standing, a gentle sway in his hips, Eric traced a finger down Benjamin’s tiny nose, across his rosebud lips all the while marveling at the crescent fringe of eyelashes gracing each lid. God didn’t miss a detail.

Finally, he kissed the top of Benjamin’s head before returning him to his mother. Life mystified Eric. How could intense joy live on the edge of great despair, he wondered watching Kate swaddle their infant into her arms. He wanted to freeze this moment in his memory, the glint in her eyes, the slope of her mouth, the tenderness of their sleeping child.

Kate kissed Benjamin, her lips puckering in the same maternal way Eric’s mother had. How, as a little boy, he’d squirm and struggle to escape the kissing frenzy she’d unleash on his cheeks as he left for school or to play with friends. He still felt the smoothness of her lips as she smothered him with kisses.

A mother’s kiss, so ordinary and yet extraordinary. A seven-year-old couldn’t understand the depths of a parent’s love. Thirty-four-year-old Eric’s understanding was crystal clear. His mother’s kisses had blanketed him with love. God, he missed her. What he wouldn’t give to be gathered in her arms again. That normalcy, one that children take for granted, had been unceremoniously ripped from his life. Benjamin would never endure that loss. Ever.

Eric’s birth parents had chosen their lives and, as a result, their deaths. They picked risk while Eric wished they had opted for safety. Ben and Adele, CIA agents working with his parents, had adopted him. Eric, only fourteen at the time, was grateful for their love.

Still the hole in his heart continued to grow. Benjamin’s birth enlarged the ache, amplifying Eric’s need to finish the mission. Apprehending Anmar X, the terrorist leader responsible for killing Simon and Leah, remained the only way to mend that growing abyss.

Eric vowed to himself to never let his career, or anything else, separate him from Benjamin. Someday soon, he’d quit the agency and finally end the dangerous trips to foreign

lands. When it was safe, he would tell Kate the whole story. He would divulge his true identity and their son would grow up with both parents present in his life. The need for Eric to travel would cease and Benjamin would never know the pain of losing his father.

Judgment day for his parents' killer was coming. And it couldn't come soon enough to suit Eric.

He squeezed Kate's hand. "I will always be here for you and Benjamin, keeping you safe," he whispered. This was a promise he planned to keep.

Promises to Keep
(Kate & Eric's Novel – Coming Soon)

[A Corner of Her Heart](#)
Monica & Brad's Novel

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About the Author

When she's not playing with her granddaughter, Pennsylvania native Claire Yezbak Fadden is writing contemporary women's fiction. Her books feature strong women who overcome life's challenges, always putting their families first. Claire loves butterflies, ladybugs and holds a special affinity for carousel horses – quite possibly the result of watching “Mary Poppins” 13 times as a young girl.

Claire loves to cheer on the San Diego State Aztecs, her alma mater, and is a big fan of the Pittsburgh Pirates, Steelers and Penguins. The mother of three, she lives in Orange County, California with her husband, Nick and two spoiled dogs, Bandit and Jersey Girl. Claire's work as an award-winning journalist, humor columnist and editor has appeared in 100 publications across the United States, Canada and Australia.

Maybe This Time is a continuation of her Begin Again series, starting with her debut novel, [A Corner of Her Heart](#).

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