

NEW BEGINNINGS

Anthology

by:

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Book Description

After ten long months Sarah Jenkins is finally free. She has left her family and her abusive husband behind. This year Christmas is going to be the holiday she's always wanted. Her first Christmas miracle was finding not only a job, but an affordable apartment to go with it. Next, the perfect tree.

Unfortunately, her plans are derailed when she ventures into the forest alone. Instead of finding the perfect tree, she sees a man carrying what looks like a dead body. Can she salvage the peaceful holiday spirit she has craved for so long? And how will a hunky police officer fit into her plans for the future?

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Dedication:

*This book is dedicated to my late sister, Lori
Who always loved everything about the Holidays*

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Chapter One

Sarah crested the hill and stopped. The scenery was amazing up here. She raised her arms in the air and twirled in a slow circle. She was finally free. This year she was going to have the Christmas of her dreams. She could decorate her way, with as many fun, tacky knick-knacks as she pleased. And Sterling couldn't ruin it for her. The memory of her ex-husband dampened her spirits, but only for a moment. She refused to think of her previous life. Her divorce was final now. She had a new job in a new town. She had a new life. Sarah intended to take advantage of her freedom. The first step, find the perfect Christmas tree.

Sarah studied the area. Trina, her new boss, told her there wasn't a problem cutting down a tree in this area. Now, she just needed to find a way to the forest. Well, she was in the forest but this trail was well traveled and had limited options. She needed the perfect tree and for that, she would need to find a way off this cliff. Sarah began to look around, she loved it here. The ground was covered in freshly fallen snow, making a beautiful white oasis as far as the eye could see. The lake was beautiful down below. The cold water mixed with the warmer temperature of the afternoon causing a light, flowing fog to settle over the crystal liquid. The whole place looked and felt magical. Life couldn't get better than this.

Sarah heard a noise and struggled to see where it came from. She was sure it was down below, somewhere near the lake. She moved to the right, into the thick trees, hoping to get a closer look. She was worried about the sharp cliff, but thought she could brace herself against a tree and see down below. As she inched closer to the edge she saw movement. It looked like a man and what was he carrying? Something wrapped in a blue cloth? No, it was a tarp, one of the bright blue tarps the farmers used to cover hay and equipment. What could he be carrying? It looked heavy. Sarah inched closer, wanting to get a better look. Several things happened at once. A limp arm fell from the side of the tarp. Sarah gasped then lost her footing. The only thing that saved her was the tree she had grabbed onto. Dirt and rocks slid noisily down the side of the embankment. Then the man looked in Sarah's direction. Sarah didn't think, she just ran.

* * * *

Max loved it when his schedule allowed for a little hike. It had been months since he'd traveled this particular trail. It was one of his favorites. Especially in the wintertime. Hardly anyone ventured up here this time of year. Which made for a very peaceful afternoon. The scenery was magnificent but dangerous. He couldn't count the number of people who got lost or fell hiking up here. But for someone that knew the area, there was nothing like it. He inhaled

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deeply, enjoying the crisp cold air. His friends thought he was crazy, moving to a small town to be a cop. They all loved the city, he loved nature. As he rounded a sharp bend, he collided with something. Or more to the point, someone.

* * * *

Sarah wasn't watching where she was going. The look that man gave her reminded her of Sterling. She hadn't recognized him. But did he know her? He couldn't be that old maybe just a teenager. But what if he had seen her? She was new here and it was a small town. Most people already knew who she was. It was easier for them to learn one new face than it was for her to learn hundreds. She picked up speed and rounded a corner, colliding with something firm and hard. Sarah screamed and fell to the ground. Large hands reached out to her. Instinctively she cowered, pushing her tiny body backwards until she collided with a rock wall.

Max swore. What was this woman doing out in the wilderness alone? He glanced around then back to her. She was curled up against the rocks and appeared to be shaking. Was she afraid? Of him? He cleared his throat. "Ma'am?" he said softly, taking a step forward. The woman pushed herself closer to the wall and tightened her grip on her knees. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Max, Officer Max Bentley." He took another step closer then paused, waiting for a reaction.

Officer? Sarah looked up, hoping to see a uniform. The man was wearing blue jeans and a hoodie. Not exactly law enforcement attire. She looked closer and realized his jacket had some kind of badge or shield embroidered on the front. Okay, that was a good sign. This was not the man trying to dispose of the body. This man was older, and he was much better looking. Well, if she was honest, Officer Bentley was hot. She shook herself and started to stand. Where had that come from? No man should appeal to her, not after Sterling. She shot another furtive glance at the cop and straightened. Of course it wasn't the man she'd seen down below. That would be impossible.

"Much better," Max said, relieved. The woman didn't look like a frightened, wild animal any longer. Standing tall and proud, she was beautiful. Oh, get a grip Bentley. He was on duty. Having this kind of reaction to a woman obviously in need, was entirely inappropriate. "Mind telling me what frightened you?" he asked still hoping it wasn't him.

Sarah paled. "I saw..." she pointed backwards, in the direction she had just come. She took a deep breath. "I saw a man, or a teenager, I don't know. Anyway he was carrying something wrapped in a large blue tarp. I...well, I think it had a body inside," she said, starting to shake again.

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Max pushed passed the woman, moving a few feet down the trail. There was only one set of tracks. Was she hypothermic and hallucinating? “On this trail? The one you were just on?”

Sarah shook her head. “No, down by the lake.” She wrapped her arms around her body, self-consciously. The man didn’t believe her. She knew that look, Sterling had given it to her a million times, just before he got angry and became violent. Sarah took a step backwards. She didn’t know this man. What if he attacked her, the way Sterling used to. She couldn’t run. She couldn’t fight back. She’d tried that over and over again in her marriage. It always made things worse.

Max was watching the woman closely. She was frightened again and this time he knew it was because of him. “Would you like to see my badge? Maybe my ID? I know I’m not in uniform today, but you can trust me. I’m a cop,” he paused, waiting. “I’m one of the good guys.”

Sarah didn’t move. She didn’t know what to do. Should she run? If he was a cop, that would only make him suspicious. If he was dangerous, she wouldn’t get that far anyway.

“Can you take me back to where you were when you saw the man with the tarp?” he asked. Maybe if he gave her a task it would help calm her. If she really had seen a man dumping a body, he needed to get down there and quick. Otherwise all the evidence would be gone. And if she had scared the man away, there would be even less to investigate. If she was crazy or hypothermic? Well, he’d deal with that when he had to.

“Okay,” Sarah finally agreed. This seemed like the natural reaction from a cop. But what if this guy was some kind of lookout? What if he was luring her back out to the cliff to push her over and get rid of her? One little shove and splat, problem solved. “I think I would like to see a badge first, though. I mean...”

Max reached in his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. He flipped it open and held it out, waiting for her to take it. Not a pushover, good. He would have been disappointed if she’d just taken his word for it and followed him into the woods alone. Anyone could get a coat that looked official.

Sarah took the wallet and studied its contents. On one side was a flat police badge on the other was an official looking ID card that said Pine Ridge Police Department, Officer Max Bentley. It also had his picture and the same shield as his coat. It was enough for her, he was a cop. She handed the wallet back and looked away. “I know you think I’m crazy. I saw it in your eyes. I’m not. I know what I saw.”

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Max frowned. He didn't think she was crazy, well maybe the thought had crossed his mind, but if he really believed she was nuts he wouldn't be going back into the forest. "Ma'am," he began.

Sarah spun back around. She was no longer afraid, she was mad. "Don't patronize me, Officer Bentley."

"Call me Max," he said casually. "Everyone around here does. I'd really like to see where all this happened. I know you're not from around here but do you think you can find the spot again? The place you saw the man with the tarp?" He figured ignoring her anger and her accusation was the best approach.

Sarah frowned. That was not the reaction she'd been expecting. Okay, he wanted her to take him to the scene of the crime. Normal, predictable, but she was still suspicious. He hadn't believed her at first. Was he changing his mind? "Yes," she said, sounding more confident than she felt. She knew it was just over the ridgeline, but could she find the exact spot again? She had to try.

Max and Sarah walked in silence. Max wondered what was going on with this beautiful woman. He stopped and shook his head. What kind of cop was he? He hadn't even gotten her name. He pulled a small notebook and pen from his pocket. "Before we go any further, I'm going to need your name and address."

Sarah frowned. "My name is Sarah Jenkins," she hesitated. "Why do you need to know my address?"

Max smiled. "Never mind." He began to write. "You're the new girl. Trina's waitress. I've got the address. How's the new apartment? I lived there for a short time, but I could never get used to the noise. Jack's not exactly quiet while he makes breakfast in the morning. And at the time, I was working the graveyard shift. The apartment was cozy enough, but I never got any sleep."

Sarah smiled. Jack was like a tornado moving through the kitchen when he cooked. She knew exactly what Max meant, but it didn't bother her. She was an early riser. "It's good," was all she said. But she smiled warmly at the connection. Then she sobered, she didn't want a connection with this man. She didn't want a connection with any man. She needed to stop these insane thoughts before they got out of hand.

Max's stomach did a little flip when Sarah smiled. Before he could react, the smile was gone. He missed it instantly. They continued to walk to the top of the ridge. Max was surveying the area, looking for anything out of place when Sarah stopped.

"We're here," she said, relieved at how easy it was to find the spot again. Her jubilant circle was painfully obvious in the undisturbed snow and she blushed. Maybe he wouldn't

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notice. She glanced at Max then looked quickly away. He noticed and was studying the disturbance with a smile.

“I love it up here too,” he said knowingly. “How close to the edge did you get?” He was following her footsteps into the tree line.

“At first, not close,” she said following him. “I heard a noise and thought I could use the trees to balance, so I could get a closer look.”

Max continued to follow Sarah’s footprints. He could clearly see where she had entered and where she had exited at a dead run. He felt a lump in the pit of his stomach, had she really seen someone dumping a body? In such a small town, the chance of anyone committing murder was a million to one. “Wait there,” Max said, holding an arm out to stop her. “Let me take a look and make sure it’s safe.” He followed Sarah’s foot prints until they came to the edge of the cliff. “Did you fall?” he asked. Wondering why dirt and small rocks were scattered around on top of the recent fallen snow.

Sarah joined Max then began to describe what happened. Once she had finished the story Max took her arm and began guiding her away from the ledge.

“Where are we going?” she asked, conflicted. The instant Max took her elbow and led her from the cliff, tingles shot through her entire body. She had never felt anything like it before. But it felt like he was manhandling her. Something she swore she would never let anyone do again.

“I need to get back to my car and you need to get out of the cold,” he said as he continued to guide her down the mountain.

Sarah was able to keep up with Max, but only because he never let go of her arm. Any thoughts she had of pulling away were ignored. Going back to the lake had been nerve racking. She wanted to get away from here. She needed the safety of her little apartment. This entire situation angered her. She’d intended to have a pleasant, peaceful afternoon in the forest picking out the perfect tree. She knew she would never go back out there alone and she didn’t have any friends to invite. Only Trina, but she was swamped with her café. Sarah wouldn’t burden Trina with her problems.

Once they reached the head of the trail Sarah spotted Max’s truck. He walked to the passenger’s side and held open the door. Sarah climbed in silently considering her options. She desperately wanted a tree. It was the first symbol of her independence. She would not let another man ruin her first Christmas in her new life.

“What were you doing out in the forest alone?” Max asked as he maneuvered the truck back out on the road.

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“Huh?” Sarah asked. “Oh, Trina said it was okay to cut down a tree out here,” she paused. “I was just scouting the area.”

“Just scouting, huh?” Max asked, reading the lie. “How did you plan to get it home if you found one? I mean there’s nothing close to the road so you would have had a long walk. Something could have gone terribly wrong out there. You shouldn’t take those kinds of risk. Never go into the forest alone.”

Sarah wanted to take offense, but she could tell it was the cop talking. Not another man trying to control her life. She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter now anyway. After what I saw today, I could never go back there and I can’t afford the expensive trees at the lot.”

Max reached out and took Sarah’s hand. He was surprised when she jumped and jerked her hand away from his. “Sorry,” he said placing his hand back on the steering wheel. “I was just going to tell you I’m off Saturday. If you haven’t found a tree by then I’d be happy to take you. Not here...” he added quickly when she began shaking her head. “This isn’t an ideal spot for trees anyway. I know a great place we can go and I’ll even bring the hot chocolate.”

“I don’t know,” Sarah began. She didn’t know this man. But could she be any safer? If she had to go back out in the woods, who better to go with than a cop?

“Don’t decide yet,” he said, pulling into the parking lot of Trina’s café. He stopped next to the staircase that led to the upstairs apartment. “I’ll check back tomorrow. Jack might be loud, but his pancakes are the best.”

“What if I don’t work the morning shift?” she asked trying not to smile. She did, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Then I’ll come back for lunch and dinner if necessary.” He turned to face her. “This is not a big deal, just a new friend helping out another friend. You need a tree. I know where to get one. We’ll head out on Saturday, find the perfect tree and I’ll even help you set it up if you want. Then you can repay me with food. We both win.” Max waited for Sarah to respond but she didn’t say a word.

Sarah didn’t know how to react so she just silently climbed from Max’s truck. Once outside she turned. “Thanks for the ride. I was pretty upset back there when I ran into you, literally. Sorry about that, too.” Then she slammed the door and ran up the stairs to the safety of her new home.

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Chapter Two

Max pulled onto the beach. Only the locals knew how to get a vehicle out here. Max had learned quickly. Response time was crucial when breaking up loud parties in this area. The lake was a popular hangout for University kids, especially in the summer. And there was always underage drinking involved. He decided to drive to Aberlie in the morning. The campus police would know if anyone had gone missing over the past few days. Sarah said she thought it was a teenager, but he figured the college crowd was his best bet.

Max glanced up when he heard another vehicle approaching. He hadn't found much, so he was handling the photos himself. The boot prints looked common to him but sometimes the guys in forensics surprised him. He moaned out loud when he spotted his supervisor's vehicle. If the guy wanted an update, Max would have given it to him before he went off shift.

"Bentley." Lieutenant Ben Roberts said as he climbed from his vehicle. He glanced around then settled back on Max. "Looks like you're on a wild goose chase out here."

Max slid the camera and a small evidence bag containing a silver bracelet he'd found near the shoreline into his truck. "I'm not so sure that's accurate...sir," Max said, knowing he didn't sound nearly as respectful as the good LT would like.

"What do you mean?" Roberts looked around again. "Nothing out here but a few prints. Or are you hiding the body in the back of your car? I mean, if you had found anything the ME would already be here."

"I didn't locate a body. No," Max said impatiently. "But..."

"But nothing," Roberts said, clearly dismissing the call and heading back to his truck. "I'll see you back at the office. I expect the report to be finished before you head home tonight." Then he was gone.

Max kicked his tire. The man infuriated him. It wasn't what he said; it was more how he said it. The condescending way he showed up, dismissed the call then drove away. Like Max needed to be told what he did and didn't have. Well Roberts was wrong. Max could feel it in his gut. Sarah saw something and Max wasn't finished investigating. Roberts would have his report all right, but it wouldn't be the report his lieutenant was hoping for. He made one more sweep of the area then followed the tracks into the forest. He wasn't surprised to find they led to the dirt road that came in off the highway. Max took a few more photos of the only evidence in sight, tire tracks. Then he returned to his truck and headed for the office. His shift was almost over and he still needed to write that report.

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Once Sarah showered and dressed she felt much better. Her mind kept returning to the sexy officer she'd met that day. Why couldn't she stop thinking about him? Sterling had been good looking, but he wasn't even in the same league as Officer Bentley. Bentley was gorgeous and self-confident. She wondered if that was Sterling's problem. Had her ex been so insecure the only way to feel in control had been to victimize his own wife? But that was ridiculous. Sterling was a successful businessman. So successful, even her father didn't believe her when she told him what was happening. Sarah had forgiven Sterling the first time he struck her. The second, she wanted to forgive him but couldn't. After that, her life became one big nightmare. A nightmare she was determined to escape, in spite of the consequences.

She had escaped. And it had been easier than she imagined. She'd just cleaned out their savings account, caught a cab and fled. She hadn't even left a note. She stopped at her parents' house but her father had been livid. Kent Palmer was a manager at Sterling's company. He was sure that Sarah's mess was going to get him fired. Nothing she said helped. Ultimately, she had said goodbye to the only family she had left and escaped. That had been ten months ago. She'd only landed in Pine Ridge by accident, but the instant she arrived she knew she wanted to live here. The people were friendly and Trina offered her a job her first day in town. Throwing in the apartment had been a miracle. She thought of it as her first Christmas miracle. Today she had hoped to find a Christmas tree to go along with her good fortune. That hadn't turned out as well as planned. But she had met a hunky cop.

Sarah flipped on the television. She had to stop thinking about Max Bentley. He was bad news. She tried to convince herself Max was like Sterling. But she couldn't do it. Bentley was nothing like Sterling Jenkins and that was what worried Sarah most of all.

Danny Carter sat in his dorm and stewed. Nothing was going his way. He'd been so excited about his date with Jessica. She seemed fun and witty at the party the other night. That's why he planned such a crazy, extravagant date with her. Then she'd gone and ruined the whole thing by dying. It wasn't his fault, it really wasn't.

Jessica had let him buy her that expensive dinner and had even laughed when he bought dessert to go. It wasn't until he snuck her out to that deserted cabin that she started to complain. He had loved it. The place was private and secure. He had even lit a fire for her when she said she was cold, girls were supposed to love that. But the instant he tried to make the next move she freaked. Had he known what a spoiled brat the girl was, he would have brought someone

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else. Anyway, it was Jessica's own fault that she'd died out there. Telling him no had been enough. What? Did she think he was so desperate he needed to force himself on a girl? Apparently he hadn't left quick enough. The bimbo attacked him. He was only trying to get her off him. Okay, so he'd been pissed and he threw her across the room with a little too much force. But really, he didn't make her trip over that table and crack her skull on the rock fireplace. It had been an accident.

So he'd panicked. Anyone would have. He'd grabbed the first thing he saw, that stupid blue tarp and headed for the lake. Sure the place was busy in the summer but Danny had been sure nobody would be around in the dead of winter. Who had seen him? He wished he'd gotten a better look. He was pretty sure it was a woman, but that was all he knew. Had she called the police? Had he left any clues? How was he supposed to study for his chem test tonight? He was going to drive himself crazy, waiting and anticipating. Would the cops break down his door like they did on TV? He slammed his book shut. He needed a distraction. Tim was having a party tonight. At least that would get him out of his dorm for a while.

* * * *

Max missed breakfast the following day. He had to leave early if he wanted to get to Aberlie and back in time for Robert's mandatory meeting. He hoped Sarah would understand. Lt. Roberts was furious after reading Max's report. The guy was an idiot. He gave new meaning to small town cop. Roberts wouldn't know a murder if one hit him upside the head.

The office door opened and Johnson stepped out before Max even reached the steps of the campus police department. "Talk while we walk," Johnson said as he continued down the sidewalk. "I've got a shoplifter at the campus store."

Max filled Johnson in on what he had and waited for the skepticism. It never came.

"I can see what led you to me," he finally said, turning to study his friend. They had attended the academy together and hit it off immediately. "Let me deal with this theft, it shouldn't take long then we can start at the coffee shops. Nobody's been reported missing in the last few days but it's a college campus. It usually takes longer."

Max pulled out the photo of the bracelet he'd found on the beach. "I know a lot of girls wear these, but it looked pretty unique to me."

Johnson studied the photo. "A lot of girls have these charm things, but I've never seen anything like this one before. It might help."

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Chapter Three

Sarah pulled the holiday template from the window and studied her design. Perfect if she did say so herself. She sighed. She'd had enough for one day. This would be more fun if she had a tree, but since she'd been stood up by Max this morning, she was sure that wasn't going to happen. She'd just have to make do with what she had. Now what? She couldn't concentrate on anything but Max. She hated that a man could impact her mood so completely. Max had changed his mind. So what? She didn't need a man in her life. Unfortunately, she now knew she wanted one. With each passing hour, she'd become more and more distraught. Every time a customer walked through the door, she expected to see her sexy cop. But he never arrived. Not for breakfast, lunch or dinner. She finally left the café and returned to her room. Now here she was depressed and lonely wishing for a man she barely knew.

* * * *

Max was exhausted. He and Johnson had scoured the campus for hours. He'd finally given up hope when they stopped for dinner. The waitress took one look at the picture and started to cry. Once she regained her composure they learned the girls roommate, Jessica Andrews, had a bracelet just like the one in the photo and she hadn't come home from her date with a guy named Danny. It took over an hour, but Johnson tracked down Danny Carter. He was a spoiled rich kid whose dad was a lawyer. Surprisingly, the kid never asked for an attorney. After a little prodding, he confessed. Max figured he'd be lucky to spend even a night in jail. Once daddy stepped in, the whole thing would be swept away with a slap on the wrist. At least he didn't have to deal with Jessica's parents. Johnson was handling that. Roberts went ballistic initially but when he learned a body was sitting in a cabin on old man Poe's property, he sprang into action. Roberts took credit for the entire investigation. Max should be mad, but at this point he really didn't care. The case was solved. Now he just needed to find a way to apologize to a beautiful woman.

Max picked up his phone and glanced at the time. Nine o'clock. Not too late.

Sarah was surprised when her doorbell rang. It was late, just after nine. Who would be visiting at this time? She slowly opened the door and smiled in surprise. Max stood in her doorway, his arms full of flowers.

"Any chance I can come in?"

"Oh! Sorry," Sarah said standing back to let him inside. The thought struck her that she'd barely met this man and already she was comfortable inviting him into her home. How

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had this happened so quickly? She watched as Max moved to the kitchen and set the large bouquet on the table. That's when she realized he was also holding a pie.

Max set the fresh pumpkin pie next to the flowers and approached Sarah. He was cautious; he wasn't sure how she was going to react. "I'm sorry I missed breakfast," he said, flashing the most charming smile he could muster. "Work pulled me away."

"Oh?" she said surprised. So maybe he hadn't stood her up after all? "The man from the lake?"

"Yes," Max sighed. "But it wasn't a man. It was a stupid college kid. He took a girl out to an old cabin nearby and there was an accident. The girl fell and struck her head on the fireplace, cracking her skull. She died instantly. The boy panicked and tried to ditch the body. When you saw him, he returned to the cabin and left the girl lying on the bed."

"That poor girl," Sarah said, raising her hand to her neck. "Will he go to jail?"

"Probably not for long," Max admitted. "His dad's a lawyer, a good one from what I've heard. His kid will probably get off with a fine and probation," he shrugged.

"That hardly seems fair, for her parents I mean. But if it truly was an accident..." she considered. "Well the boy's life shouldn't be ruined either."

"I agree," Max said then returned to the table. "So, since I missed breakfast I thought I'd come by with gifts and an apology. I hope we're still on for Saturday." He studied her carefully.

"I guess," Sarah said, not sure how to react to all of this.

"Don't tell me you already changed your mind. I'll be crushed." Max tried to make his statement sound light, but he was actually serious. Something about Sarah drew him in. He was desperate for more time with her.

"No, I just thought you stood me up." Once she said it, she was embarrassed. "I mean..."

"Nu-huh," Max said shaking his head. "If I stood you up, that means we had a date. You agreed to a date Ms. Jenkins."

"I..." Sarah began.

"I think you owe me another one."

"It wasn't..." Sarah was cut off again.

"Saturday, nine o'clock sharp and dress warm. I'm taking you on the best holiday date ever. We'll find the perfect tree, have a nice quiet dinner then I'll bring you back here and we

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can make this apartment look like Christmas,” he paused. “If all goes well, I might even take you on another date. Shopping? Yeah, shopping. You can’t have a tree without presents.” Max cut two pieces of pie and handed one to Sarah. “Peace offering?” He smiled.

“You are pushy aren’t you Mr. Bentley?” Sarah said sitting in the closest chair. She didn’t mind, he made her laugh. Nobody had made her laugh in a very long time.

“I like to call it persistent Ms. Jenkins,” he said shoveling in a mouthful of pie. Once they finished Max stood to leave. He paused when they reached the door. “I have to work tomorrow so I probably won’t see you. But I’m counting on Saturday.”

“Okay,” Sarah agreed. “I’ll be ready.”

“Good,” Max smiled. “I’ll miss you.” Then he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to Sarah’s cheek. “Sweet dreams Sarah Jenkins.”

Sarah stood and watched Max disappear into the darkness. Then she smiled and slowly pushed the door closed. Maybe there were Christmas miracles after all. Not just the job or the tree, but the man. A man that made her feel things she never believed was possible. A man that made her hope for the future.

THE END