



NOW AND FOREVER 1

A Love Story

Jean C. Joachim

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE
Secret Cravings Publishing
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A Secret Cravings Publishing Book

Contemporary Romance

Now and Forever 1, A Love Story

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E-book ISBN: 978-1-936653-96-6

First E-book Publication: July 2011

Cover design by Beth Walker and Jean C. Joachim

Edited by R. Layne

Proofread by Belinda Barton

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PUBLISHER

Secret Cravings Publishing

www.secretcravingspublishing.com

Dedication

To Diana Finegold and Sally Gallagher

Thanks for your love and support go to: Larry Joachim, David Joachim, Steve Joachim, Julie Kelly, Marilyn Lee, Alex Sinclair, Elizabeth Smythe, my publisher, Beth Walker and my editor, Ariana Gaynor

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Chapter One

Callie put the check for \$15,000, half of all the money she had in the world, on the counter of the bursar's office. Her palms were sweating, her eyebrows were knitted in a frown. Kyle, her fiancé killed in Iraq, left her the money. She hoped to do well enough to remain in the Masters of Education program at Kensington State University through the first year and earn a scholarship to pay for the second year. She needed to win this big gamble to get her life back on track. She walked out of the building in the sleepy little town of Willow Falls in upstate New York, turned the corner and plopped down on the grass, leaning against a tree and thought about her last day with Kyle. It was Thanksgiving at his friend, John Weston's house. While the turkey was cooking, some of the men played touch football. Callie went to take a nap in the guest room. Kyle wanted to be alone with her as they only had one more day before he deployed for the last time. Callie undressed quietly and got under the covers. When he joined her, Kyle pulled the covers down slowly, aware of how bashful she was by the blush in her cheeks, even after being his lover for several years.

"Kitten, don't be shy. I want to remember every inch of you," he said, first placing his hand gently on her cheek then leaning over and kissing her softly.

When he got into bed, his kiss became passionate. Kyle was so alive, the air around him crackled with his energy. He moved his hands slowly over her body, memorizing every inch of her with his fingertips. She moaned as he kissed her beautiful breasts. He touched her inner thigh and moved his hand up, to caress her gently, as her growing passion took over her senses.

"Kyle..." she moaned while his lips and hands brought her to a fever pitch. Finally, he satisfied her need for him with the ultimate ecstasy. Afterward, they rested in each other's arms. Callie rested her head on his shoulder, drinking in his masculine scent and the feel of his skin, so familiar to her senses. She slipped her arm across his chest, tightening it, as if a firm grip on him could keep him there with her forever.

Callie loved him deeply. She looked with great hope and expectation at the modest engagement ring resting on her finger. She remembered the night he proposed and a smile came to her lips, thinking about how awkward and shy he was with words. Always a man of action, when he couldn't find the right words to express his feelings, he grabbed her hand and jammed the ring on her finger.

His fingers tangled in her long hair as his other arm pulled her closer to him.

"Remember, you promised to come back," she said.

"I'll love you forever, Callie. I'll be back to make you my wife and then we can do this every night," he said, kissing her.

After this last dangerous tour of duty, they would get married, settle safely on a base somewhere and begin their life as husband and wife. Though he promised her he would come back, it was a promise he couldn't keep.

The Weston's guest room, the last place Callie and Kyle made love and spent the night together, was a cozy room. She will never forget the small lily flower pattern of the wallpaper, the scent of pot pourri from a dish on the old-fashioned oak dresser and the feel of Kyle's smooth skin, his cheek needing a shave, his soft lips tempting her, coaxing her to give herself to him passionately yet again.

During their last night, after making love with Kyle one more time, Callie awoke at four a.m. Kyle was scheduled to leave at eight. She put her shyness aside and turned to him, waking him with a passionate kiss, making it clear she wanted one last chance to make love. Kyle rubbed sleep out of his eyes, turned to her and raised his eyebrows.

“Now?” He asked her.

She nodded, running her hand down from his strong chest, her eyes gazing at his body. The look of surprise when she touched him followed by his wicked grin indicated his delight at her uncharacteristic boldness. He traced the lines of her delicate jaw with his finger, staring at her with a look of true love on his face, before he turned toward her and took over, igniting a fire inside her. He tried to please her, satisfy her hunger for him. They started slowly, both aware this could be their last time making love forever. Callie tried to concentrate on every caress, every kiss, so she would never forget, but he fanned her to flame more quickly than she anticipated.

She urged him to take her, but Kyle waited as long as he could to prolong the memory forever. However, their mutual passion took over and he took her to completion with him. As they stayed in each other’s arms, Callie buried her face in his neck and cried softly, afraid she would never feel his arms around her again, feel his touch, or his lips again, feel him make love to her again. Kyle stroked her hair, and teared up, too, knowing without words she was reacting to the possibility he wouldn’t come home.

“Kitten, no matter what happens, I’ll love you to eternity.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t say that. Say you’ll be home. Be with me. I need you so much, Kyle,” she said, crying.

“You know I will. We’ll be together forever.”

At the end of his tour, he was killed. His death devastated Callie. Days blended together going on endlessly with no meaning, her purpose in life died with Kyle. Getting out of bed challenged her strength every day. She mourned him for two years, never forgetting their nirvana both in and out of the bedroom.

Callie counted on the Masters Degree to restart her life which came to a halt when Kyle died. Even now, he was so much a part of her, her love for him still strong and his memory lived on with her every day. She relied on Kyle to be her present and future after her parents died. Only sixteen then, she thought he was the smartest, strongest, most handsome man in the world, even though he was only nineteen. Now, at twenty-six, Kyle no longer existed and despite the ache in her heart, she tried to move on, alone but determined.

Callie walked around the Kensington State University campus, trying to get a feel for the school and ended up on a bench under a Linden tree, watching small groups of students buzzing about, rushing around to get their schedules, settle into dorms and make new friends.

She found peace in the beauty of Willow Falls a whistle stop town of 5,000, and the campus with its stately trees, well-kept buildings, manicured lawns and shrubs. She began to feel hope her life might begin again, maybe it would begin here.

* * * *

From his office window, Mac Caldwell looked down on the main quad and the growing activity. He brushed his dark hair out of his blue eyes. He was tall and lean, except for the fourth finger of his left hand, which was slightly crooked. He broke it in a high school basketball game.

Mac evaluated his life, with another school year beginning, what was he beginning? The students Mac saw from his window looked hopeful, anxious and single-minded. But what about his life? Mac made some poor choices. He married the pretty but vacant woman he accidentally impregnated and was now divorced. He fathered a beautiful toddler, Jason, he adored but only saw on weekends. Loneliness ate away at Mac. He wanted a family, not this disjointed arrangement. After his divorce, Mac buried his pain and concentrated on getting ahead. It paid off when he was made an undergraduate dean.

Two years later, success wasn't enough. At thirty-four years old, he wanted a woman in his life, but the right woman, someone he not only wanted to sleep with, but wanted to wake up with, too. He stayed away from co-eds, tempting as they could be, they were big trouble for an administrator. He felt frustrated, his life was stalled.

As he looked out the window, he spied Callie sitting alone on a bench in the quad. She looked beautiful with her shoulder length chestnut hair blowing in the breeze and her blue sundress revealing a slim figure. Mac got closer to the window. He couldn't see her perfectly, but enough to know she wasn't familiar. The other students rushing around were in groups, or at least pairs. This young woman was alone. He watched her as she walked toward the administration building, his gaze drawn to the graceful motion of her body, the gentle sway of her hips.

* * * *

At dinnertime, Callie found her way to Doc's Diner, a popular place with students and faculty, run by sixty-year-old Doc Wilson, and his wife, Mary. Doc, not a doctor at all, took the orders and handled the cash register while Mary did the cooking.

She ordered the blue plate special, though she wondered why it was called that because it never came on a blue plate. She pulled out pen and paper to start a budget for the semester. Mac Caldwell walked in. At the sound of the tinkle of the small bell attached to the door to alert Doc when a customer arrived, Callie looked up—their eyes met. He recognized her as the girl he saw in the quad.

"Hi, Mac. How you been?" Doc asked him.

"Fine, Doc. What's on special tonight?" he asked, switching his gaze from Callie to Doc. Callie dropped her attention to her task. He stirred something in her and it made her uncomfortable. She tried not to look at him, but couldn't resist taking a peek when he wasn't looking, feeling a twinge of disloyalty to Kyle to be evaluating this good looking man so boldly. He was older, perhaps a teacher, and very attractive. She looked away turning her thoughts back to her budget, which was depressing. According to her calculations, more dinners at Doc's would be out of the question. With what she would be earning at school and her rent, there wouldn't be much money left over.

Next Callie steeled herself for a big expenditure at the bookstore. When she got up from the table, she couldn't resist glancing Mac's way. He was talking to Doc for the moment, so she studied him briefly—a tall, rangy man, he sat sprawled comfortably in a chair obviously too small for him. Although physically different from Kyle, he, too, was attractive. As she was about to look away, he turned toward her and their eyes met again. This time he smiled warmly at her. She blushed, looked away and left quickly mortified for him to see her showing an interest.

Caught gawking at this great looking guy like a kid or something, Callie, get a grip!

Back in her rented room, Callie was dressed for bed. Her arms ached from carrying all the books she bought. The cost of her books for graduate school was astronomical and had practically wiped out her small savings, which was earmarked for books, with barely enough left for one more semester. She had to learn to live on less.

Callie lay down on the bed, feeling exhausted. She never paid out so much money in one day. All this money paid for a dream, her dream, to become a teacher so she could belong someplace and stop drifting through life. She would learn to live on less.

Deprivation was not new to Callie. After her parents died, she and her sister Sarah unwillingly gave up their comfortable lifestyle. Though only nineteen herself, Sarah took legal responsibility for Callie, giving up her life and her college boyfriend to keep her little sister out of a foster home. She left Wellington College, returned home to live with Callie. While Sarah's sacrifice, a tremendous act of love, was meant to keep them afloat, they were barely able to get by financially. Sarah's heavy burden took its toll on her relationship with Callie.

Callie fended for herself most afternoons and evenings because Sarah was either at work or taking evening classes. The loss, the deprivation drove the sisters apart. Crushing loneliness caused her to drift into a friendship with Kyle Maine. Kyle supported his brother, Danny because their parents were in prison for armed robbery and assault. Friendship quickly became love. Soon Kyle and Callie were inseparable, by age twenty, she was engaged and four years later, he was gone.

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