

## **NOW AND FOREVER 3: BLIND LOVE**

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### **Chapter One**

When half a dozen people get off the train from New York City in tiny Willow Falls, New York on a Wednesday afternoon, it's a big crowd. The group arriving this day was an unusual collection of men and women.

Callie Caldwell, a beautiful woman with chestnut hair and big blue eyes, paced on the train platform. By her side was Jason, her energetic seven-year-old, jumping and skipping, unable to contain his excitement at meeting his only grandfather and uncle for the first time. Kitty, Jason's younger sister, a pretty child with her father's black hair and her mother's soulful blue eyes, followed her big brother, imitating his every move. The train wheezed then crawled into the station.

Waiting impatiently for the father-in-law and brother-in-law she'd never met to step off the train, kept Callie in motion. With no family of her own, she hoped they'd accept her and maybe even love her.

"Do you think Peter will like teaching here?" she asked her husband.

"Like it or not, he's here for a year. Signed a contract."

"What about your dad?" Callie straightened the bow in Kitty's hair.

"He might miss teaching but he'll love the kids."

"We'll keep him busy." Callie's gaze searched the passengers as they stepped off the train.

"Do you see them yet?"

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"Relax, they'll love you," Mac whispered, bending his six foot two inch frame down to her five foot three.

She smiled at him and gripped the hands of her two children tighter. Her husband leaned over and brushed her lips with his. Then Callie spied two men separating themselves from the crowd. Mac waved then joined them. The man with stone-gray hair was tall and handsome. A drop-dead gorgeous, much younger man stood by his side.

When they turned to face Callie, she noticed they all had the same intense blue eyes. After an eight-year separation due to teaching jobs in different parts of the world, the men were not embarrassed to hug each other. When they approached, excitement propelled Jason into his grandfather's arms.

"Grandpa, Grandpa!"

"You must be Jason," the older man said, laughing and hugging his grandson while trying to keep his balance. Peter came over and extended his hand to Jason, who ignored it and threw his arms around him.

"Uncle Peter!"

Peter, blond like his late mother, laughed, his devastatingly handsome face breaking into a charming grin. The three men, all well over six feet, looked like human trees clustered around the small children and Mac's short wife.

"You must be Callie," Sam said, giving her a big hug, "I'm so happy to finally meet you."

"Sam," she muttered, closing her eyes briefly while accepting his embrace. She liked him

right away. Kitty, shy like her mom, hid behind Callie's skirt, peeking out at the men. "And you, young lady, must be Kitty," Sam said. He crouched down to be eye-level with the pretty child.

She nodded, her face serious. Sam put out his big hand, but Kitty shrank back. Callie picked up the little girl and inched closer to Sam. When she got close enough, Kitty moved from the safety of her mother's arms and gave Sam a quick peck on the cheek. He laughed with delight as the child hid her smiling face in Callie's shoulder.

Peter came over, introduced himself and gave Callie a kiss on the cheek. He ran his eyes up and down her lovely face and curvy body. He raised his eyebrows and turned to Mac with a slight nod.

"How did you ever get such a beautiful woman to marry you?"

"Beats me. I ask myself every day," Mac said, making Callie blush. He put his arm around her shoulders, picked up a big suitcase and headed toward the car.

On the drive to Peter and Sam's rented house, Jason and Kitty could hardly sit still.

Excitement bubbled up inside Callie too as the car whisked past familiar sights and she opened a place in her heart for her new family members.

Mac pulled into the driveway of the small three bedroom house he'd rented for Sam and Peter. The wood-frame building was on quiet James Street, an avenue filled with neat row houses, close together on small, well-tended properties.

The modest house was painted a warm, medium blue with white shutters and trim.

Flowering shrubs softened the angles of the front windows. The lawn was tiny but perfectly mowed and the brick path was symmetrical. Flower boxes graced the upstairs windows and hedges lined the small driveway to the right.

Now on leave from Vaal University in South Africa, Peter was in Willow Falls to teach the Survey of Western Art course Marcia Wilton had taught before going on a year's sabbatical. Sam had retired from teaching at Vaal. He'd come to meet Mac's new family. Callie hoped he'd stay in Willow Falls and live nearby. Since losing her parents at sixteen, Callie had attempted to build a happy family. She hoped Sam and Peter would be new additions.

While the men carted luggage into the house, Callie took a long look at Peter. He was even more breathtakingly handsome than Mac. Peter's nose was perfect, his naturally blond hair was straight, thick and slightly long, his lips had the right shape and fullness. She smiled. Kissable but masculine. Just like Mac. His shoulders were broad, his arms muscular and his hands square with long, slender fingers. Callie preferred Mac but she was surprised by Peter's looks. *He's thirty-four years old and never married? Surely it must be his choice.*

When they walked into the house, Peter went straight to the piano in the living room.

"A Woodruff upright! Thanks, Mac."

"It wasn't easy to find a house with a piano. We expect music in this place."

Peter sat right down at the piano situated against the wall by the window and did a few arpeggios to see if the old instrument was still in tune.

"How is it?" Sam asked him.

"It'll do just fine," Peter said.

Jason and Kitty entered the room when they heard the music. Peter began singing. Jason ran to the piano and slid onto the bench next to Peter and clapped along. Kitty, hesitated at the door, looking for her mother. Callie nodded to the shy child and the little girl slowly wandered closer to the music, stopping half-hidden behind a potted plant to listen to the song. Callie wandered in with Mac, who put his arm around her shoulders. She slipped her arm around his waist as he bent down and kissed her when no one was looking.

“I could sit here and play all day, but we better get unpacked.”

Peter got up with Jason to move the suitcases into the bedrooms, then they returned to open boxes stacked in the living room. Shy four-year-old Kitty stuck close to her mother, but she was caught flirting with Peter once or twice, which made everyone smile.

“Cradle robber!” Mac laughed at his brother.

“Now the mother...” Peter said, raising his eyebrows and looking at Callie.

Mac stopped, brows knitted, a frown on his face as he shot Peter a hostile look.

“Don’t go there. My wife is off-limits.”

“Possessive aren’t you?”

“And jealous too, and I like him that way,” Callie said, giving Mac a kiss.

“Dad and I are going to take the kids for ice cream. Do you want to come, Callie?” Mac asked, shepherding Kitty and Jason toward the door.

“I’ll stay here and help Peter get set up,” she said, opening a box.

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Mac walked around to the driver’s side of the car and patted his pockets, no keys. He remembered last seeing them on the front hall table. He tip-toed quietly into the foyer so Callie wouldn’t know he’d forgotten them. He stopped when he heard the soft purr of Peter’s voice. Mac inched his way to the arch leading to the living room and peered into the room, moving back to remain unseen.

“You’ve been married awhile, Callie. Isn’t it time you took a lover?” Peter asked, sidling up to her.

Mac held his breath but couldn’t stop watching.

“Oh, but I have a lover, Peter,” she said, holding his gaze.

Mac froze. His stomach knotted.

“You do?” The surprise caused his voice to rise an octave.

“He absolutely sizzles.” Beads of sweat formed on Mac’s forehead.

“Does Mac know?” Peter raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t think so.” She turned away from Peter and Mac could no longer see her face.

“I don’t suppose you’d tell me who it is,” he asked, leaning toward her.

Callie whirled around to face him, a broad grin on her face.

“It’s Mac. He’s hot, Peter. So hot...I couldn’t possibly, wouldn’t ever need anyone else. Your brother is an absolute pistol in the bedroom.”

Mac’s cheeks puffed up. He quietly emitted a silent sigh of relief and smiled.

Peter laughed loudly.

“You passed the Peter Caldwell Loyalty Test with flying colors.” Peter walked over to an open box needing unpacking.

“You know what I could use?” Callie put her hand on his arm.

“What?” He reached into a box then stopped.

“A brother. I don’t have one of those,” she said, blinking back tears.

Peter hugged her.

“You’ve got one now,” he whispered.

Mac slipped out the front door and returned to the car to find Jason and Kitty pelting Sam with questions.

“Grandpa, do you eat hot dogs in South Africa?” Jason asked him.

“Grampa, do you eat...ice cream?” Kitty asked, imitating her brother.

“Grandpa, do they have lakes in South Africa?”

“Grampa, look, I have a boo boo,” Kitty said, sticking her hand out.

Sam was laughing as the children fought for his attention.

“Okay, enough,” Mac said, “Five minutes of quiet time.”

The children quieted down and sat back. Sam shot his son a look of admiration.

“They listen...impressive.”

“I’m as surprised as you.”

Mac put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway.

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Rex Vesson, a burly man in a sleeveless T-shirt that showed off his muscles and tight jeans carried his small suitcase the four blocks from the train station to a small, neat house with a well-kept yard. He was sweating from walking in the warm May sun when he finally reached his cousin Alan’s small house. He took a deep breath of the fresh country air and let it out. Relief washed over him to be out of New York City and safe in Willow Falls.

Alan answered Rex’s knock with a cool glass of iced tea.

“Hey, Alan. Long time, no see.”

“Come on in. You only have one suitcase?” Alan stepped aside.

“I...uh...left too quickly to pack much. Spur of the moment, you know? Besides, clothes and crap I can buy here, right?” He entered the house.

“Don’t lie, Rex. You’re running away.” Alan closed the door behind Rex.

“What?”

“Come on. I don’t give a damn, but at least be honest about it.” Alan shrugged.

“There were reasons why I left when I did.” Rex licked his dry lips and stared at Alan’s iced tea.

“I’ll bet. Whose wife were you screwing?”

Rex laughed.

“Nothing like that. I’ve got a new business.”

“Lucrative?” Alan raised his eyebrows.

“I do all right. I worked in security at The Hideaway. It’s a nightclub in Harlem. Pretty exclusive.”

“Exclusive and they employed you?” Alan sat on the sofa and crossed his legs.

“Very funny. Yeah, they employed me.”

“You were a bouncer?”

“Yeah, so?” Rex sank into a comfortable chair.

“Doesn’t pay much, does it?”

“It does when you watch famous people coming in there with women who aren’t their wives. It pays even more when it’s famous guys, ball players, politicians, coming in with other guys.” Rex smirked.

“Isn’t the club public?”

“Not every room. Even the so-called public rooms, you need pull to get in.”  
“So you’re a blackmailer too?” Alan sipped his iced tea.  
“Hey, Alan, I’m thirsty. Got any more iced tea?” Rex asked.  
“Sure, sure. A long thirsty train ride, one step ahead of a lot of important, pissed off people. I guess you did need to get out of town.”  
“It pays good, though.”  
“I’ll bet it does.” Alan returned from the kitchen with a tall glass of iced tea and handed it to Rex. Rex took a big gulp before continuing.  
“Meaning I can pay you rent, Alan.”  
“How long do you plan to stay?” Alan settled into a comfortable chair and sipped his tea.  
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“It depends on how good business goes here. This is a pretty small town. Can’t be too much going on here, if you know what I mean.”  
“You might be wrong. For a blackmailer there are secrets everywhere.”  
“True. This might work. Its never-ending money no matter where you live,” Rex said and laughed.  
“Don’t get any ideas about blackmailing me, okay?” Alan said, nervously.  
“You doing something I should know about?” Rex asked, his interest piqued.  
“I lead a quiet, academic life.” Alan shook his head.  
Rex looked at Alan’s face with new interest. Alan was definitely hiding something.  
“Where’s Beth?” Rex asked, his eyes searching the room.  
“She took off with a grad student about three years ago.”  
“Too bad. Or are you a busy bachelor?”  
“I don’t date much. Not many women here I’d be interested in.”  
“Where does a bachelor go here to get some action?” Rex asked.  
“The local strip club, The Wet Tee Shirt might be a place to start.”  
“Ever been there?”  
“A couple of times.” Alan coughed.  
“Can you get laid there? Chicks got good bodies there?”  
“They’re okay.”  
“Only okay? What...you into guys now?” Rex asked, raising his eyebrows.

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“No, no, after a while, they all look the same.” Alan crossed his legs.  
Alan did fine getting laid. Pressuring failing female students to sleep with him for a good grade worked. Maybe he was into a type of blackmail. He provided a service for payment. *Tit for tat*, he laughed to himself. He was a merchant of grades, with no income tax to pay on his gross receipts.  
“Hey, Alan, they *are* all the same. Topless joint might be a good place for me to work.”  
“It’s the closest thing we have to a nightclub here.”  
“Come on. Let’s eat, on me. Maybe afterward, we can swing by this joint and check out the babes,” Rex said, clapping him on the back.  
“Sure, Rex.” Alan looked at Rex’s pumped up body and a wave of envy swept over him, the first time he ever felt jealousy instead of pity toward his cousin.

Rex had been a scrawny, awkward kid, not good in school and couldn’t fight, which got him beat up regularly after school. His father took off when his mother gave birth to him, leaving his

two older sisters holding him responsible for their father's departure and hating him for it. His mother was too tired to have much time or affection left for him.

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*Across town on North Main Street*

Marcia Wilton approached the steps of Willow Falls Medical Center. Her tired eyes noticed the cheerful colors of the spring flowers in window boxes. She walked up the steps of the large brick building slowly. Her husband, Jay, was back in the hospital. He had been fighting cancer for five years and now was losing the battle. Marcia went every day. The pain of seeing her handsome, athletic husband wasting away was intense.

The doctor told her he thought Jay would last six months, so Marcia had taken a sabbatical from her position teaching art history at Kensington State to be with him.

"It's spring outside," Marcia said, walking into his room to find him standing at the window. Jay trained his gaze on her and offered a wan smile.

"Any flowers up yet?"

"Tulips. Don't know what's coming up at the new house."

Marcia and Jay had been married for nine years. They'd waited to have children, but by the time Marcia was thirty-three and ready, Jay was stricken with stomach cancer and neither he nor Marcia could think about anything else. They pooled their strength and fought the disease with everything possible. Two remissions, then the cancer returned and spread. Jay was brave, stoic at times, but now he was resigned.

"You didn't eat?"

"Nothing tastes good." Jay shifted his weight from one hip to the other.

"I brought corned beef today. Try some." Marcia held half a sandwich out to him.

He took three bites and stopped. Fifteen minutes later, Jay dozed off.

Marcia took a bite of the sandwich but could barely swallow it. She took out a crochet project and began work. She often crocheted or read when he slept.

Occasionally she brought a special treat from the Jewish Bakery to tempt him to eat. They would share it and reminisce about the last time they ate chocolate babka. Often there'd be procedures, baths and other events cutting her time short. It didn't matter if she left early because there was nothing waiting for her at home.

Their families rallied around them at first, but year after year of hope then despair, hope then despair wore them out. Now at thirty-eight, Marcia had no children to provide comfort, and her family, who lived far away, had gotten on with their lives.

Jay's mother found it devastating to visit him, but she made the two-hour bus trip once every week anyway. His brother and sister lived on the west coast, too far away to visit. *Death frightens people*, Marcia reminded herself when she felt angry and deserted.

After an hour, Marcia packed up her project, kissed Jay's forehead and left him sleeping fitfully. The tap-tap-tapping of her heels on the hospital corridor echoed her feeling of loneliness as she made her way to the front door.

The bright sunshine mocked her heavy heart as she got in her car and drove almost by rote to the small house on First Street she and Jay had rented for the past three years. They had owned a lovely big house on Fillmore Street in the posh Linden Lake section, when Jay was well and working as the head accountant for Valley Country Club and Resort. But Jay hadn't worked in

the past three years. He was on disability, which didn't bring in enough money, even with Marcia's teaching, to keep the big house. Marcia made only enough money in her job at the university to pay the rent on the small house.

Johnny Novacek, a young man born in America from immigrant Czech parents, was their landlord. Johnny bought several small houses in disrepair, fixed them up with the help of his father, Jakub, and rented them out to support his wife and two young children. When she got home, Marcia put "Let It Be" by The Beatles on the CD player and made herself a strong vodka and tonic. Some days, Marcia pulled out their wedding pictures or pictures of wonderful, sexy vacations on the island of St. John where she and Jay made love on deserted beaches and swam in the clear aqua waters of the Caribbean. When Jay first got sick, Marcia started scrapbooks to help her hold on to their life together.

The longing for her old life with Jay became an ache in her chest. He was so full of joy in the old pictures, always smiling. They used to laugh all the time, because everything is funny when you're young, healthy and madly in love. She couldn't laugh anymore so she put away the pictures and scrapbooks and poured herself another drink.

Even picking up a lamb chop, Jay's favorite meat, at the grocery store reduced her to tears, or hearing his favorite songs on the radio. She cried when she awoke in the middle of the night, reaching for Jay in the empty bed. She cried when she opened the closet and saw his clothes there. Marcia had cried for months. She couldn't cry anymore.

She watched only sports on television because she didn't need to concentrate. It took a supreme effort simply to get the bills paid each month. Sometimes when an attractive man with brown hair and warm eyes came on the television, she remembered how much she adored making love with Jay and touching his strong swimmer's body. He was a good lover, frisky and mad for her. But they hadn't made love in almost three years. She didn't remember the last time and at the time hadn't realized it would be their last.

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Back at the house, Peter took a piece of paper with a phone number on it out of his pocket. He picked up his cell phone and hesitated.

"Who do you still know here?" Callie asked.

"Bianca Trieste. An old girlfriend."

"How old?" Callie unpacked a box of books, lining them up in an empty bookcase.

"From eight years ago." Peter put the phone down and instead pulled shirts out of a suitcase and put them in a pile on the sofa.

"Serious?"

"We were almost engaged."

Callie stopped what she was doing and listened.

"She was the first woman I ever loved. I asked her to marry me and she turned me down to go to Europe on a modeling trip."

He opened another box and took out a fistful of notebooks.

"And you still want to talk to her?" Callie asked, moving several books onto a new shelf.

"I think so," Peter said, stacking the notebooks on the credenza behind the sofa.

"Haven't put it to rest?" Callie said, unloading another box of books.

“Guess not.” Peter collapsed a box and placed it on the floor, then took another.  
“Is that why you’re not married?”  
“Maybe. Maybe I haven’t met the right woman yet.” Peter sat on the floor, sorting a third box of books into two piles.  
“Have you been in love since Bianca?” Callie handed two empty boxes to Peter.  
“Love? No.” Peter laughed but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.  
“Call her. Eight years is a long time to carry a torch.”  
“There have been plenty of women to replace her...can’t seem to move on,” Peter said, standing up and collapsing boxes.  
“You’re a chick magnet, if ever there was one.” Callie blushed at the frankness of her statement.  
“It has its downside too. For once I’d like to start off differently with a woman.”  
“What do you mean?” Callie put another empty box aside and stopped to look at him.  
“I’d like to meet someone who didn’t...who wouldn’t...” Peter waved his hand in the air, unable to produce the words.  
“Someone who wasn’t attracted to you by your looks first?” Callie finished for him.  
“I’m not God’s gift to women or anything, but I’d like to be me first.”  
“Good luck, Peter.”  
“When do we get to see the Caldwell Mansion?”  
“Right after we pick up a rental car for you and...Sam.” Callie stacked a handful of books on the coffee table.  
“Call him Dad, or you’ll make him feel like a stranger. Rental car? Crap. You drive on the right here.”  
“Don’t you?” Callie raised her eyebrows.  
“The left. Crap, means I’ve got to drive. Dad’ll get us killed.”  
Sam and Mac followed the children in the house.  
“I’m driving, Dad.”  
“Good, ’cause I haven’t driven on the right in years. Wouldn’t want to kill everyone on my first day,” he said with a chuckle.  
Peter shot Callie a knowing glance as they herded the children back to the car.

After picking up the rental car, Peter and Sam followed Callie, Mac and their kids to their house for dinner. It was nine-thirty p.m. before Callie and Mac got the kids settled in and gave directions to Sam and Peter as they ventured back to their house on their own. Callie stood at the living room window, holding the curtain open a little to watch them drive away.  
“It’s wonderful to have Sam and Peter here. I already feel like they’re my father and brother.”  
“I’m glad.” He came up behind her and put his arms around her.  
“You must be happy.”  
Mac kissed her neck, then brushed his lips lightly up to her earlobe.  
“I’m glad to see Dad and Pete. But now, I’m happy to see you. In fact, I’d like to see more of you,” he said, easing her shirt up.  
Callie turned around and fell into his arms for a passionate kiss.  
“I’d like to show you what an absolute pistol I am in the bedroom,” he whispered in her ear, cracking a big smile.  
“Mac Caldwell! A pistol? You were listening in today?” Callie smacked his shoulder lightly.

“I came back for the car keys.” He shrugged innocently.  
“You heard our whole conversation?” Color flooded her cheeks.  
“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Callie.”  
“But you overheard me talking about you.”  
“The things you were saying...” Mac said, reaching under her shirt unfastening her bra, “... were soooo nice,” he said, sliding his hands around to cradle her breasts.  
“Mac...” she said, closing her eyes and leaning her forehead against him, her breath coming faster.  
“What, baby?” he said, his eyes closed.  
“It’s all true...you are my lover,” she said, unbuckling his belt.  
They undressed and left their clothes in a heap on the living room floor. Callie ran her hands up his hard chest, through the soft black hair and around his neck. His hands slipped down her back to rest on her firm behind and pull her closer to him. She kissed him, opening her lips to his tongue. Mac picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, pushing the door closed gently with his foot so as not to wake the children.

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