



*Now and
Forever 2*
The Book of Danny

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NOW AND FOREVER 2, THE BOOK OF DANNY
BY JEAN JOACHIM

Chapter One

“This way, Danny.” Cal motioned.

“*No, don’t go that way...*” Danny hollered.

Too late. The explosion might have deafened him, but Danny got lucky. Running away from a bomb one minute, the next, he woke up in an Army hospital in Germany. Still, he was the charmed one—getting the Purple Heart and a trip home. Cal hadn’t been so blessed.

Danny had only been out of the hospital for three days when he hitched a ride on a military transport back to the United States. A long plane ride provided the chance to say goodbye to his buddies.

“Hey, Captain, ever get the guy in Iraq who killed your brother?” asked Sgt. Josh Benson.

“Sure, Benson. Him and the rest, too. All those bastards,” Danny retorted.

“You got the highest score. How many killed?”

“Lost count.”

“More than me.”

“Everybody got more than you, Benson. Jenny behind the desk hit more than you.”

“Can’t see nothin’ on you. Looks like they never touched you.”

“Yeah, looks can be deceiving. How’s your leg doing?” Danny asked, moving away to make more room for Benson’s leg casts.

“Good.”

Danny saw the beads of sweat on Benson’s forehead, his pale face, and knew his buddy was lying.

“Glad to be delivering you back to your sister. Say what does she look like again?”

“Stay away from her, Captain. She’s got enough to do takin’ care of me. She can’t be cryin’ her eyes out over givin’ it to you.” Benson chuckled.

“Too bad. But then if she looks like you, maybe not!” Danny laughed.

“I’m not tellin’.” His brow furrowed, Benson asked, “Say Captain...you sleep good?”

“Okay, I guess,” he lied.

“I see things. I wake up. I don’t sleep all night,” Benson said quietly.

Danny nodded, looking away.

“Will those things go away? Will I always be seein’ Joe or Cal when I go to sleep?”

“I hope not,” Danny said, without conviction, looking down at his hands.

“At least I’m still here. Thanks to you.”

“I told you, just shut up about what happened,” Danny snapped, making a fist.

“Why?”

“Everybody here does his bit. I did mine...with you. Don’t talk about it,” Danny said in a low voice.

“Okay, okay.”

“You’re one brother I’m returning home,” Danny said softly to himself.

“Hey, Maine, we’re coming down over Syracuse. This is your stop, right?” the pilot hollered back to Danny, who moved up to the cockpit.

“Yeah. That’s me.”

“Where do you go from here?”

“I got a ride with Sgt. Marie Willis to Willow Falls,” Danny said.

“Some hick town?”

“College town.”

“You going to school?”

“Teaching.”

“Marie, huh?”

“Better warn her about the Captain,” Benson piped up from the back.

“Shut up Benson or I’ll have to break your arms, too,” Danny called.

“Ever see her, Benson? Don’t think the Captain will be interested.”

“She’s female, isn’t she?”

“As far as I know.”

“I’m interested,” Danny said with a snicker.

“Your vitamin E pack, Captain.”

Accepting the pouch from Benson, he put it in his duffle bag. “Thanks.”

“Just mention the word female...” Benson joked.

The plane landed and Danny parted from Benson and two other members of his squad.

Marie Willis stood at the gate jingling car keys in her hand. Danny stored his gear in her trunk, then got in next to her.

“How long a trip is this, Sergeant?” Danny asked the washed-out brunette.

“Call me Marie.”

“Okay, Marie. How long?”

“Maybe four hours?”

“Too bad. Thought we might need to stop for the night,” Danny said, looking her over suggestively.

“That could be arranged.” Her eyes gave him the once-over, her smile told him she liked what she saw.

* * * *

When he got to Willow Falls, Danny checked into the only motel in town. The next afternoon, he left the motel and hiked the three miles to the reception for new professors. The walk couldn't compare to the long, hot, dry treks with a seventy-pound-pack on his back he endured in the desert.

While he walked, Danny wondered what kind of women he would find here. Danny dated and bedded lots of co-eds in college and graduate school. He achieved an enviable sex life by reciting love poetry by heart and discussing books with young women. Unfortunately, when his lovely bed partners discovered he planned to fight in the Middle East, they dropped him.

Overseas, he got to know only prostitutes, a group of desperate women doing whatever they needed to for survival. He turned to alcohol and women to deal with the pressure, to dull his senses and escape the horror of reality.

He arrived at the dean's house twenty minutes late for the party. The colonial house loomed larger than some in the neighborhood, painted beige with white trim and black shutters. When he rang the bell, an angel answered the door—Dean Eliza Baines, dressed in a chiffon print dress of aqua and soft green, matching her eyes. Her short blonde hair glistened in the afternoon sun, framing a delicate face, a small nose and sensuous lips. The gentle fragrance of gardenia flowed from her slender neck down to the tips of her pink fingernails. Danny couldn't find his voice. He never expected such beauty to be standing right in front of him in the middle of nowhere.

“You must be Dan Maine, I’m Eliza Baines.”

He shook the hand she offered, unable to stop himself from staring. “How did you know?”

“You’re the last one,” she said, her eyes looking him up and down quickly.

“I didn’t realize your house was such a long walk from my motel,” he said, embarrassed.

“Why didn’t you call me? I would have picked you up.” Please come in. You must be thirsty.”

Eliza took his arm and eased him through her living room to the patio in the back. About a dozen new professors stood around with cocktails, eating hors d’oeuvres and chatting. Looking for a woman rated as a top priority in Danny’s life, but in this group, no one came close to the beauty the dean possessed. The other professors were sunk deep in conversations, so Eliza turned to him.

“What are you teaching?” she asked.

“Freshman English,” he said. “You’re the dean?”

“I split the undergraduate students with Mac Caldwell. My field is biology,” she said, stealing an admiring glance at his chest and shoulders.

Danny thought he would like to study a little biology with her as his gaze traveled over the length of her...again.

“You’re spear-heading our new literary magazine, aren’t you?”

“A challenge I’m looking forward to. Do you miss teaching?” he asked, turning his attention back to her face.

“Sometimes I do. You have a more interesting life, let’s talk about you. I hear you just got out of the military?” she said, turning the conversation toward him again.

“Released three days ago.”

“Released? Not discharged?” she started, her brows knitted.

“I meant released from the hospital,” he corrected.

“The hospital? What happened?” Eliza asked, putting her hand on his arm.

“Just some shrapnel and a concussion. I couldn’t hear for a week, but I’m okay now,” he explained, shrugging.

“What about your family?”

“I’m on my own. I don’t have anyone,” he said, focusing on the beer he held to cover his

discomfort.

“I guess Kensington State will become your family,” she said, squeezing his arm and looking into his eyes.

He put his hand over hers.

* * * *

Danny’s plight touched Eliza, wounded in the war and all alone. He seemed to be a self-sufficient man, strong, energetic and good looking, too. Eliza noticed how the green flecks in his hazel eyes danced when he smiled. She guessed his age to be around thirty, much too young for her, though she felt strongly attracted to him. Something vital and alive about this new professor crackled in the air, he exuded a power, electricity, a sensuality that grabbed her. She found herself staring at his lips and wondering what pressing hers against them would feel like.

* * * *

The party broke up around seven.

“Can I help you clean up?” Danny asked.

“Not necessary,” she said, gathering up dirty dishes.

“I want to,” he said, picking up more dishes and bringing them into the kitchen. They spent an hour washing dishes, cleaning and straightening up.

“Are you hungry? I’m making a salad for dinner.” Her warm smile and shining eyes invited him to stay.

“Great, thanks,” he replied, returning her smile before glancing again at her chest.

Together they chopped, sliced and tore up ingredients creating a tempting salad, then sat down to eat.

“I’m sort of an idiot about computers. Does the school have a special system?” he asked, passing bread to Eliza.

“We have an easy one. A professor from the computer department put together a manual, but you have to be a geek to understand it. I’d be happy to give you lessons,” she offered, her gaze straying to his lips, again.

“That’s great. You may have to give me several lessons. On some things, I’m a slow learner,” he said, grinning.

“That could be arranged,” she said, lowering her eyes. “When would you like to start?” She passed the bread back to him.

“How about right after I take you out to dinner, tomorrow night?”

“You don’t have to—” Eliza said, a little color suffusing her cheeks.

“But I’d like to.”

“I’d like that,” she said. “Six thirty?”

“Fine,” he agreed his heart beating a little faster after their hands touched passing the butter.

“Do you know a girl named Callie Richards?” he asked, pushing his plate slightly to the side.

Eliza stopped her fork in midair. “You know her?” she asked.

“She was engaged to marry my brother.”

“Oh!” Eliza gasped and dropped her fork, which landed with a clatter on her plate, “You’re that Danny?”

“So you know her?”

“She’s my best friend,” Eliza replied, picking up her fork again.

“How can I get in touch with her?” he asked.

“Well, well, she’s...uh...she’s coming to the office tomorrow. She arranged for the story on former military personnel becoming teachers at Kensington State. In fact, she’s the reason Kensington State is hiring former military personnel first,” Eliza explained.

“I’ll see her there then. Don’t tell her. I want to surprise her.”

“She’ll certainly be surprised. Do you like to be called Dan or Danny?”

“My closest friends call me Danny,” he said, glancing at her lips.

“Then I can call you Danny, too?”

“Absolutely,” he said, taking her hand.

“I’m going to need housing and a place to buy a car,” he said, changing the subject.

“Jonesy, the administrative secretary, has a list of houses. There is a pretty good used car place we’ll pass on the way to your motel tonight.”

“Great,” Danny said, kissing her palm. “What’s the policy on professors dating administrators?”

“The school feels that is our private business, one policy I agree with. You’re moving pretty fast, aren’t you?” she asked, slowly removing her hand from his.

“When you’ve been where I’ve been, you don’t want to waste time. Why should I play some stupid waiting game? Wait for what?”

“That’s certainly direct,” Eliza said, sipping her coffee.

“No wedding band. You’re single?”

“I became a widow four years ago. I’ve been seeing someone, but he’s away,” she admitted.

“His tough luck,” Danny said. “I’m sorry for the loss of your husband. I lost my brother, my only family, several years ago.”

“I have twin twenty-one year old daughters. I’m a lot older than you, Danny. You might want to rethink this,” she warned.

“Frankly, I don’t care how old you are. Does it matter to you?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, honestly.

“Seeing the things I’ve seen ages you,” he explained.

“I’m sure you’re more mature because of the Army,” she agreed.

“One dinner. One date. Can’t we just have fun?” he asked her, taking her hand when she put her cup down.

“You’re on,” she said, standing up. “Maybe Delsey’s Used Cars is still open.”

* * * *

Eliza wanted to help Danny...besides, the way he smiled at her, touched her hand and occasionally stared at her chest made her heart flutter. His interest was so flattering it kicked her pulse into high gear. Could she have an affair with a man so much younger than her? She had a feeling she would be facing that decision before long. Eliza couldn’t deny her attraction to him...his strong physique, his sensuous lips and the flicker of desire she saw in his eyes lit a fire inside her she thought had been extinguished forever.

He saw through to her loneliness, which made her feel shy but she couldn’t look away. Loneliness and deep pain shone through his eyes, too. She dated Simon because he had become a habit. No real romance lay between them. Now this extraordinary young man looked at her with passion in his heart and it made her giddy. Exciting love, like she shared with her husband, suddenly appeared to be within reach again.

Eliza drove off with Danny, wondering what adventure this fabulously attractive young man would have with her. Whatever happened, she felt alive for the first time since Bill died.

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