

# Forever in Love

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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## Chapter One

John Howard Beauchamp, of the Weldon, Vermont Beauchamps – a long line of hard-working, early to bed, early to rise, live in the same town all of their lives types – heaved a huge sigh as he sank his muscled bulk down into his well worn recliner. Burying his face in his hands, he let the tears come freely for the first time in a very long time.

It was finally over. No more getting off a twenty-four hour shift at the station and going straight to the nursing home. No more trying to fold his six-foot-four frame into some semblance of a comfortable position that didn't leave him walking like Quasimodo after sitting for hours in one of those horrid molded plastic chairs, all the while doing his level best never to let go of his mother's twisted, twig of a hand.

It had been one of her worst fears – really the only one he could remember his exceedingly strong mother confessing to, beyond spiders and the usual concern for her family's health – she was terrified of dying alone, especially once Dad had died. So all of the kids took turns visiting her more and more frequently as she'd deteriorated, and this last week they had all pretty much been there 'round the clock...

Not that she would have known the difference. She would never again lick her thumb and spit wash the marshmallow fluff off his face, or sit up worrying about him when he was out with his friends, or despair over her lack of grandchildren. Although she had four already, he'd always pointed out with a mock frown, she would pipe right back up at him from her huge five-foot-two stature that she had none from *him*. He'd never see her performing her own personal tradition of standing on the porch and waving good bye to him as he drove back to school or even just across town to his own place.

He'd lost the loving, wonderful person who'd raised him a long time ago to Alzheimer's.

The three of them had sat vigil for the past six days as her heart slowly gave out, and she succumbed to the pneumonia that set in – it was a toss up as to which one really was the killer. Evelyn Patterson Beauchamp, or Babe, as she had been known to almost everyone she met, hadn't wanted any heroic doctoring done to save her life – her children knew that, and as hard as it was to do, they would never think of doing anything but honoring her wishes. Their father, who had died several years ago, before the memory loss had become acute, had been the love of her life, and she missed him with every ounce of herself. All of their kids were grown – hard-working, tax paying citizens every one of them - all of them married except John, the youngest. Her work here was done – joyful as it had been – and she was going on to an eternity of Dean's arms around her. And she deserved it.

Dean Howard, Jr., Kathryn Marie, and John Howard had glued themselves to her bedside to wait for the worst – and the best – inevitable end. The staff at the nursing home had been phenomenal through the entire ordeal, taking wonderful care of their mother through the years' long decline, as well as her grieving children when the end finally came. Snacks, drinks, sandwiches and ice magically appeared outside their mother's door as the staff tried to be as unobtrusive as they could, while supporting the family as much as possible.

They had always been a close family. Heck, they all still lived in the same town – Kathy lived next door to their parents. There had never been any of the in fighting, arguing, and hatred they'd all seen in other families. They might not have said it enough, but they always showed it, they loved each other, and the kids had learned to put that love into action from the excellent examples their parents provided. Their father had never wanted to be anywhere but with his family. His job was just that, a job, not an obsession. He excelled at it and worked hard – often at several jobs at a time in the beginning when he and Babe hadn't had the proverbial pot – because he knew it meant good things for the family. But they had dinner together *every* night he was home – at first only at home, because of money constrictions – enjoying Evelyn's wonderful cooking, but later at various restaurants around town. The Beauchamp dinner table was a thing to behold, and somewhat of a trial for the faint-hearted.

Dean liked to "discuss" all sorts of topics. His interests were varied, and he heartily encouraged Babe and the kids – once they got big enough – to chime in. Although neither Dean nor Evelyn had gone to college, they were smart people who read everything they could get their hands on, and they had passed that trait on to the children, who were read to practically from the time they were conceived.

As a result, the kids all headed for college – not that their parents were going to give them any choice in the matter, anyway – and they grew up having dinner each night with parents who never talked down to them. Dean reaped the benefits of what he and his wife had sown; although manners and courtesy were expected at all times, "polite" dinner table conversation was not for his tribe, and more was the better for it, as far as he was concerned.

Instead, puns and plays on words, in jokes and light insults – anything cruel would result in a deep, warning, "that's enough of that" from him and that was all that was ever needed – flew like black flies on a Maine summer night. They mulled over everything, religion, politics... all of the topics one was not supposed to discuss and more, as well as what was going on in everyone's day, including his and Evelyn's. They firmly believed in keeping their kids informed about what was going on. It was an informed dictatorship, though, because there was never any doubt as to who was in charge of the family: Dean was, although Evelyn was never considered by any of them – least of all Dean – to be the lesser of the two of them in any way.

Some friends the kids brought over fit in really well, weren't intimidated by the noise, laughter and only slightly smothered shouts. Or the fact that Dean, when he wanted to instigate, would often use his best "boarding house reach" to put his big hairy muscular arm right over their plate while he was, ostensibly, reaching for something, his face a picture of innocence. The fact that Kathy would occasionally sink her teeth full of braces into him in warning didn't deter him in the least. In fact, he was the one who would laugh the loudest when she did it, protesting his innocence the whole time, of course.

All of these thoughts and memories swirled through John's mind as if they had lives of their own, increasing the ache of the tears he'd suppressed for too long, as well as his monstrous head ache. He rubbed his hands over his face, hard, and the pain felt good to him as he wiped away the traces of his most recent tears and ran his fingers through his hair. He snorted. Another good thing his father gave him, he was just the other side of forty and still had a full head of, only somewhat graying, black hair. The gray he could handle – but almost every one of his friends was bald. They were always threatening to break into his house some night and scalp him for his pelt.

His father had died at sixty-seven, still with a full head of hair, albeit white. He would've said his kids drove him to every single one of the white hairs. But John didn't have any kids to blame the gray for.

He blamed Sylvia instead.

Feeling every one of his forty-one years, he lifted himself up and stumbled into the kitchen, downed a large glass of tap water, then wandered slowly down the hall to his bedroom.

Sylvia Caulfield. Satan herself. Funny he should think of Syl at a time like this – she'd been no comfort to him when he was married to her – why should she come to mind now? Lord knows, she'd have been of absolutely no comfort to him in this situation, even if they'd stayed married by some miracle. She could never bear to have the attention – especially his – on anyone except her for any length of time.

As he slouched his way into bed, fully clothed, he realized that just rolling her name around in his mind didn't create that stabbing pain in his heart that it always had.

Compared to the pain of losing his mother, Sylvia's shenanigans weren't even a blip on the radar.

Tears filled his eyes one last time as he rolled over, pulling the comforter around him as he curled into a ball and sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

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Across town the next morning, Laurel West bit her lip as she frowned and read the obituary. Evelyn (Babe) Patterson Beauchamp, 75

Weldon - Evelyn P. Beauchamp, 75, of Meadow Lane in Weldon, died Tuesday in the Haven House Health Care Facility after a long illness.

She was born May 26th, 1929 in St. Albans, Vermont, the daughter of Jack and Alva (Meehan) Patterson. She moved to Weldon as a teenager after living near Boston for most of her childhood.

She graduated from Weldon High School in 1947 and married Dean Howard Beauchamp in 1949. Mr. Beauchamp predeceased her in January of 1993.

Evelyn is survived by three children, Dean Beauchamp, Jr., Kathryn (Beauchamp) Norton, and John Beauchamp, all of Weldon, as well as four grandchildren and several nieces and nephews.

Mrs. Beauchamp was devoted to her family, enjoyed cooking, gardening, and reading.

Visiting hours will be from 4 to 7 Wednesday at Crestwood Funeral Home. The funeral will be held Thursday at the Weldon Methodist Church. A private burial service will follow at Oak Hill Cemetery.

"Oh, God, Kathy, I am so sorry!" Laurel sighed heavily. She had to go to at least the wake – probably the wake and the funeral – to be polite. She really, really, didn't want to do this. Damn her mother for giving her a social conscience! There were few things in this world that Laurel hated more than having to hug – or be hugged by – people she barely knew. She wasn't the touchy-feely type, except with those closest to her, and, since she'd been out of town for so long, she was going to get hugged and patted and have to make small talk with people who'd known her parents, but she could barely remember them, if at all. She couldn't quite claim that she didn't know Kathy...and her disturbingly sexy youngest brother, but it's not like they'd been particularly close, not for a long time, anyway.

But she had to go. For her mom. For the foursome they had been.

Alex and Roberta West had lived next to Dean and Evelyn Beauchamp forever, it seemed. They had all gone to school together – although Evelyn hadn't come into the picture until high school – bought their houses at the same time, and had kids at the same time. Dean and Babe had their three, and Alex and Roberta their two – Adriana and Laurel. Laurel and the Beauchamp's

youngest son, John, were born within ten months of each other, and they grew up as inseparable friends until adolescence hit, and they each went their separate ways, only to come together again during a disastrous summer vacation from college.

By that time, John was already working at the fire department, studying hard to become an EMT. He was everything Laurel wasn't. Frankly, steady and mature, even in his early twenties. He was conservative with his money, already had a nice bank account from overtime and was eyeing a small house that would be just right for starting a family.

Thoughts of that summer still brought a deep, dull ache to the pit of Laurel's stomach. It had been idyllic. They'd spent his off days on the beach at Lake Dunmore, chasing each other through the water, playing cards and eating out with friends. Everything about it was carefree and casual – there was no commitment between them – they were just two young people having a good time together, except when his lips met hers.

Laurel had been in love with John Beauchamp as far back as she could remember. They'd kissed as children, and, if she was in the mood to be excruciatingly honest with herself – which thankfully only happened on the rare occasion she let herself get tipsy – she'd admit that she was still in love with him, even more than twenty years later. When they were little, they'd had more than one pretend marriage ceremony, officiated by whoever of their somewhat older friends was around. But nothing in her life, especially not the fumbling kisses of other boys as she'd grown up, had prepared her for what it felt like to be held in those strong, capable arms. His big palm cupping the back of her neck with just the perfect combination of firmness and gentleness, tilting her face just right as he melted his mouth down onto hers. There hadn't been a hesitant, tentative bone in his body. Laurel had whimpered the first time they'd kissed as adolescents, and every time thereafter, at the sheer hot sweetness of it, desperately wanting more, wanting to give him all of her. If he had just asked, she would have been his that summer, and every day ever after.

She wanted him as her husband. She wanted him as her lover.

Even more intimate than either of those, she'd wanted him to spank her. Laurel couldn't imagine letting anyone touch her like that except John. She'd craved spankings ever since she could remember, but knew innately that it was not an interest to be revealed lightly – not something to be trusted to just anyone – and the only person she had ever been able to consider in the role of her disciplinarian was John.

And he'd fulfilled it, if only once. She'd lived on those dreams, on the repeats of that potent episode that she played in her mind when she was alone in her bed at night.

He'd spanked her – and not in a playful, boyfriend-girlfriend way, either. It had hurt something wicked! John had found out that she'd taken up smoking. She'd been as discreet as possible about it, trying to make sure that that no one she knew was around to see her when she decided to indulge – usually when she was out with the girls, or occasionally when she was strolling around downtown. That was actually pretty easy to do, considering that everyone she knew – most rabidly John – was anti-smoking. She wasn't even exactly sure why she'd taken it up – it was a lark, and she still didn't consider that she was hooked. It was just something she decided to try for a while, regardless of what anyone else thought.

But John had been coming back from having one of the department pickups serviced one afternoon and had seen her standing in line for a movie with some friends. Laurel spotted him at about the same time, and she could see John's face darken even from a good distance. She'd hurriedly thrown the butt down and ground it out, but she'd had an inkling, even then, that wasn't going to save her *own* butt.

John hadn't said one word when he got to her. Not a word – but his expression said it all. His beloved grandfather had died of lung cancer several years before, and Laurel had known this was something he wouldn't be very happy about. She had understated his anger at least ten fold.

He'd grabbed her, wrapping his strong fingers around her upper arm and dragging her back to the truck with him, while her girlfriends all tittered and pointed. Laurel's face flamed.

"Let me go!" She'd tried – with a complete lack of success that was in itself an embarrassment – to wrench free.

But he was having none of it. He pushed her into the truck ahead of him, and got in beside her while she was busily trying to find how the door lock worked on her side. Those fingers captured her left wrist this time, encircling them as securely as any metal handcuff. "Oh no. You're not going anywhere, my dear, except over my knee."

Laurel turned from the door handle she'd been concentrating all of her futile efforts on to stare at him wide eyed. John had paused for a moment and seemed to be breathing very slowly and deeply. She snorted in disbelief. "You're not going to spank me," she stated with more conviction than she felt.

When he raised his eyes to hers, she knew her fate was sealed. He put the truck into drive and brought them a short distance from where they'd been. Laurel recognized it as the deserted parking lot of an abandoned warehouse just the other side of the shopping plaza where the theatre was.

It had already seemed like years ago when she'd been standing, carefree, in line with her friends. Frantically redoubling her efforts to work the lock didn't help. John slid slowly, inexorably to the middle of the big bench seat and used his hold on her to pull her over his knees almost before she realized what was happening. He had her jeans down by her ankles seconds later, despite her struggles.

When his fingers insinuated themselves beneath the waistband of her plain Jane white panties, she reached back with her left hand to try to stop him but didn't even connect with him as he bared her completely.

"No, John, don't!"

He hadn't bothered to answer her, especially since it was a moot point.

Seconds later, without so much as a by your leave, his hard flat palm began connecting with her tender flesh in a barrage of stinging slaps that had her arching her back convulsively and tearing up within the first five cracks.

Damn, how could she have thought that she wanted this from him? Perhaps it was a case of being careful of what you fantasized about...

*Very careful...*

She'd never known how long he'd spanked her, or how many swats she'd endured – her entire mind had been taken up with just trying to live through it – not that a mere spanking was likely to kill her, but it almost seemed that way at the time. Laurel had been quite sure that, at the very least, her butt was going to burn to a cinder by the time he was through with it. Every swat had rapidly become unbearable to her thoroughly tenderized skin, and she had long since been reduced to helpless, sobbing tears – and it looked like there was no end in sight.

That was when he began to lecture as he spanked, the words torn from his mouth as if each was a lump of flesh. "You are not smoking any longer, as of this moment. If I ever see you smoking again, you'll get double this with my belt, which I should be using now. Tomorrow, I'm going to take you to the lung cancer ward at the hospital – maybe that'll help you kick the habit."



He'd finished her off with several more rounds of impossible to tolerate spans that had her twisting and writhing to get away, but in truth, she had been unable to avoid even one well aimed slap.

Finally, there were no sounds in the utilitarian cab of the truck but his heavy breathing and her heartfelt sobs. John turned her gently, subduing her when she started away from him and brought her against his chest, hugging her as fiercely as he'd spanked her seconds ago. His lips kissed the top of her head reverently.

And suddenly, somehow, she could do nothing but collapse into him, pressing herself against his strong chest, dissolving in the way he held her so tightly, rubbing her temple with the side of his thumb and rocking her as much as the cab would allow.

It had been her first – and last – spanking. She had wanted John to be her first in many ways. Always, and in all ways, it had always been and would always be John.

But it was not to be. Her idyllic world came to an abrupt halt once Sylvia entered the picture. Everything had been wonderful, until Sylvia shimmied her way into every man's heart. Some of them followed her around like puppies, but she wanted the one who wasn't doing that – John. Laurel's John. And what Sylvia wanted, Sylvia got. Hook or crook. She snorted. Looking back, John never stood a chance against that bulldozer.

Laurel had known something was wrong from the moment he picked her up on that horrible evening, and the fact that he wouldn't look her in the eye merely confirmed her suspicions. That over sexed she-cat had been drooling over John like a starving person eyeing a Vegas buffet. Laurel could see the writing on the wall – she was no Farrah Fawcett and didn't have the poise or confidence that Sylvia had. She had no real hopes of competing. What happened was almost an inevitability, as far as she was concerned.

They were supposed to go to dinner and then a movie, but instead he took her to a quiet spot – the overlook at Meadow Lane Hill, where most couples went to make out – and told her that he was with Sylvia now and couldn't see her any longer. Laurel took cold comfort in the fact that, at least, he'd had the grace to look ashamed.

Since that day, they still managed to studiously avoid each other, despite the fact that they lived in the same town. Laurel had moved away for a few years in her twenties, but she came back when her parents' health became frailer. Her background in banking stood her in good stead, and she was able to get a job as an assistant branch manager almost the day she moved back to Weldon. She saw Kathy occasionally – she had accounts with Laurel's bank – but they were never again as close as they had been, although Kathy had called her after John dumped her to tell Laurel that she thought it was a rotten thing to do.

Laurel sighed heavily, an almost overwhelming sadness pervading her spirit. She'd already lost her parents, and it was even more depressing to realize that there was no one left of the four musketeers that the two older couples had been while she was growing up.

And John Howard Beauchamp. Just bringing his still strong and handsome face to mind brought a dull ache to her heart. She was still deeply in love with him. Didn't want to be, but there it was. She should have been absolutely livid at him, considering what he'd done. He had hurt her in a very fundamental way, and at a tender age, but still, if he snapped his fingers at her, she wasn't at all sure she could resist him.

He'd never married again, in all these years. Sylvia had, predictably, to those who knew her ilk, dumped him. Their marriage had been short but certainly not sweet, from what she'd been able to glean, which, in a small town, was a good amount of information that was probably reasonably accurate. Apparently, no one else had really struck his fancy since then. Laurel knew

that he'd dated on occasion, but had never heard of him getting serious with anyone. He was free as a bird...and owned her heart.

And that was reason enough to avoid him at all costs.

But if she went to this wake and funeral – not that it really was an "if" – there'd be no getting around him. Maybe even hugging him...or worse, letting him hug her. That thought made her stomach clench, as well as areas much lower that shouldn't even have noticed. But those areas had never reacted to anyone *but* John – and she had already acknowledged the fact in her own mind that the situation was unlikely to change any time soon.

Hell, she'd mooned over him for most of her life, why should things suddenly be different? Oh, it wasn't as if she hadn't dated at all – she had. Some of the men she'd gone out with were jerks, or at the very least a bad match for her. But some of them were really nice guys who even seemed to want what she wanted more than anything else in this world, to have a loving marriage and a happy family, however un-PC that was to aspire to nowadays.

They were funny, smart, pleasant men.

But none of them were John Beauchamp.

So, at first, she dated but generally, not steadily or often. And when she had stumbled on that rare breed of man that would be just perfect for any woman but her, Laurel always ended up having to have that uncomfortable talk with them, about how despite the fact that they were compatible on nearly every level, it just wasn't working for her. It was the truth, and she didn't want to lead anyone on.

Her heart was taken, and, eventually, she concluded that it was false advertising on her part to even date, so she decided to forego that particular ritual, since she couldn't imagine allowing it to arrive at its inevitable conclusion with anyone but John.

Even now, all he would ever have to do is settle those sharp brown eyes on her, and she'd cave completely...

Laurel crumpled the paper noisily in her hands. She was such a wuss, no willpower at all. Hell, she found it easier to diet than to think of saying "no" to the big, broad and burly Mr. Beauchamp, even after what he'd done to her when they were younger. "You're pathetic," she mumbled to herself despairingly.

And in less than two days, he'd be right in front of her – large as life, probably smelling of that woody cologne he always used, those sharp, dark eyes missing nothing, even in a casual glance. She was tingling all over just thinking about it...

"Cut that out! There's nothing worse than a middle aged broad with puppy love!" Scolding herself didn't work very well, so she decided to clean the house as a distraction, which only had a mildly soothing effect. Thoughts about how it had felt to be held tightly to him, her young breasts pressed against his rock hard abs kept creeping into her mind while she was vacuuming, or dusting, or loading the dishwasher. There was never any shred of doubt in John, even about matters of the flesh, when she would have bet he hadn't garnered much more experience than she had. He just seemed to know what to do – know what she wanted and how to give it to her. He was firm without being pushy – she never felt pawed, used, or cheap. And he always made sure she was comfortable with what he was doing – before, during and afterwards.

Not that they'd gone all the way – they hadn't. But they'd done enough that Laurel had spent most of the days of that summer feeling like a cat in heat, wanting to rub up against him all the time, wanting his hands on her, practically throwing herself into his arms when he picked her up at night.

The phone rudely interrupted her reverie, and Laurel caught it before the machine kicked in. "Hello?"

"Did you see the obit?"

She slumped into the nearest chair, which happened to be a rattan stool at the snack bar that divided the spacious, open kitchen from the dining room. "Yeah," came the sighing response.

Niki Mazziello could read her best friend like a book, even over the phone. "You're going to the funeral, aren't you?"

Laurel's lips twisted. "I don't have much choice."

"Oh, man, don't give me that. Of course you have a choice."

Clearing her throat loudly, a sure sign of irritation, Laurel warned, "Take off your psychologist hat, Niki. I'm not one of your patients. I'm too sane."

The snort that greeted her ears left no doubt that Niki severely doubted that statement, but she wisely remained silent on that point. "Then don't tell me you don't have a choice."

"Fine, I have a choice." Laurel got up suddenly, feeling angry and not liking it one bit, and opened the refrigerator door as if she was going to need it to hide behind to dodge enemy fire. Nothing in the cramped little shelves appeased her rapidly deteriorating mood. "But not really. I'm going because I have a social obligation –"

"To your dead parents?" Niki interrupted, blithely ignoring her friend's growing ire. They knew each other well enough that there was very little that would ever tear them apart – together, they'd been through grade school, high school, separate colleges, Niki's two disastrous marriages and the death of both of Laurel's parents. Although she heartily disapproved of the fact that Laurel was still carrying a torch for a man who hurt her so badly almost twenty years ago, she'd been unsuccessful in getting her to move on. Laurel was *so* stubborn! If they hadn't been such good friends, it would have been a matter of professional pride for Niki to help her get over this man, who was really just a blip on the radar of her life.

But needling her friend was a lot more fun than analyzing her, which always pissed her off.

"Grr."

"That was a witty comeback..."

"Did you call me just to point out to me that I have a non-existent choice about whether or not to go to this funeral?" Laurel asked with somewhat mock testiness.

"Pretty much. I have to get my jollies where I can."

"I'm so honored to have been a source of amusement for you."

Sarcasm was pretty much Laurel's forte. Sometimes her voice positively wallowed in it. "Glad to hear it. I think I'm going to go with you. Are you going to the wake, too?"

"Huh?" That was the first thing Niki'd said that Laurel had actually bothered to listen to. She actually paused in the act of placing an obscenely large finger full of cold out of the fridge Hershey's Hot Fudge sauce into her mouth. If anyone could say something that actually deterred her from shoveling chocolate into her face – however short a time the pause – it would be Niki. The finger had resumed its inevitable route before she answered, her voice thick with chocolate and largely incomprehensible. "You comin' wim me?" she garbled out.

"Put down the peanut butter cups for five seconds –"

Laurel swallowed a luscious, mouth warmed scoop of pure chocolate bliss before answering dryly but with relish, "Wrong – it's hot fudge topping – well, cold fudge topping because I haven't bothered to heat it."

Niki emitted a long, suffering sigh. "Whatever. I'm going with you. Where should we meet, and when are you going?"

"Forget that. Why are you going? You barely know the family."

"I know them quite well through you," Niki answered back with a trace of indignation, as if she was amazed that Laurel would question her motives.

"Puh-leeze!" Laurel injected that one word with a wealth of emotion, just as she lifted another chocolate encased finger to her lips. "You're only going so you can get some sort of vicarious jollies out of watching me and John." The digit disappeared into her mouth, to be sucked out again loudly.

"Watching you watch John, you mean."

"Whatever." Laurel hated it when Niki was right.

"So answer my question – when are you going, and where should I meet you?"

Laurel sighed, knowing there was no way she was going to win this one. They quickly made arrangements and hung up – small talk didn't go far with them anymore. They were too close to put up with it.