

Forever in Love

by Carolyn Faulkner

Chapter 1

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 and letting 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.

At least he could take comfort – small thought it was – that he – they'd – been able to allay 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 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 from him. And 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 goodbye 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 that she had left. 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 and drinks and 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 see 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, when they could afford it without strapping themselves, 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 and 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 Dean and Evelyn’s. They firmly believed in keeping their kids informed about what was going on – it was in 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 and weren’t intimidated by the noise and 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 like the salt, 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 headache. 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 wrong 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 balding to varying degrees. 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’d’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, downing a large glass of tap water, then wandering 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.

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 Heavenly Arms 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 in 1949. Mr. Howard 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, 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 certainly didn't know them from Adam. She couldn't quite claim that she didn't know Kathy . . . and her disturbingly sexy youngest brother, but it's not like they were particularly close - not for a long time, anyway.

But she had to go. For her mom. For the foursome their parents 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 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, it seemed: steady and mature, even in his late teens and early twenties. He was conservative with his money, already had a nice bank account from overtime and was eying 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 were 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, and 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, despite her intense dislike of the rare ones she got from her Father, 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 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 extremely 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 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 that 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. “Oooooooooh 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, and 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. Her plaintive, “No, John, doooooooooon’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, it only seemed that way at the time. Laurel had been quite sure that, at the very least, her butt was going to be burned 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, but 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. Laurel 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 most of the time. 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.

Chapter 2

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. Laurel snorted. Who was she kidding? There was no way she wouldn't throw herself at him if he so much as breathed in her direction.

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. But, 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 he still owned her heart, lock, stock, and barrel.

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 was 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 came to the conclusion 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 woodsy 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 pecs 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 or 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.

“Grrrrrrr.”

“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 shot back with a trace of indignance, 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 any more. They were too close to put up with it.

The parking lot was still nearly empty when she arrived – early, as was her usual habit. Crestwood Funeral Home was a family owned and run operation, and had been for nigh onto a hundred years. The family still lived on the premises of the big gray mansion on Main Street. Her own parents had been waked there. Mr. Crestwood had gone to school with the foursome, and he was still tooling along nicely, even at his ripe old age. He was the first person she saw when she entered the tastefully appointed foyer.

“Laurel,” he said in his soft, kindly voice, approaching her with a characteristically warm smile and his hand outstretched.

She reciprocated, shaking his hand firmly. “Mr. Crestwood,” she practically whispered. It was amazing how places like this fairly demanded a lowered voice.

“It was good of you to come.” Even though it was his job, when George Crestwood said something that would – to most people – be a platitude, you believed it, because he truly

meant it.

Laurel was appalled to feel her eyes ache with tears instantly. She'd been giving herself a pep talk on the way here about keeping her runaway emotions in check – but that had been a total waste of time, apparently. Her voice was even softer and obviously choked when she answered in a completely heartfelt manner, “Nothing would keep me away.”

Although she would have liked to chat with Mr. Crestwood, she didn't want to let the tears get the best of her so early in the evening. She knew that if she stayed, he was going to want to talk about her parents, and if she got started on that path she'd never recover.

So, despite the fact that it was horridly rude, she fairly ran away from the man, stopping briefly to sign the guest book. There were two easels set up just inside the room, packed with pictures of Babe Patterson Beauchamp – in the surf in Maine, camping, vacationing at Niagara Falls, young, middle aged, and older. Some of the pictures included her own parents, and Laurel found her eyes misting painfully over again, before the torture had really even gotten started. There was a big picture of the two couples walking hand in hand down the beach at Wells, Maine. Laurel had a copy of that exact picture – where all of them were smiling happily and looking so carefree – on the wall in the Rogues' Gallery in her own place. She could remember when it was taken – before they all gradually got sick and died.

The tears that had threatened seconds earlier overflowed with a painful vengeance. Damned good thing she'd been smart enough not to wear mascara, but she knew that they were laying tracks into her light makeup. Ah well. There were plenty of pictures she hadn't seen, and Laurel deliberately took her time and looked at every one of them despite how her heart was falling apart inside her chest, seeing several of herself as a little girl – ham that she'd been, she'd managed to worm her way into tons of pictures when she was growing that had nothing whatever to do with her. Nowadays, she avoided cameras like the plague.

“Laurel?”

She recognized that soft, tentative voice from the past. “Kathy!” They fell into each other's arms as if they hadn't been estranged for twenty years. This went much further than anything her brother had done to her. This was –essentially – family.

Laurel began to rock naturally side to side and pat Kathy's back as her old friend cried softly on her shoulder, then pulled back.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I'm getting you all wet – “ Kathy dabbed ineffectually at the dark spot

she'd created on Laurel's coat with a lacy handkerchief.

"Puh-leeze," Laurel hugged her friend again, brushing away her hand. "You can cry on me any time! I certainly did on yours when it was my turn." Kathy pulled back again, looking only a little less embarrassed. "Are you all right?" Laurel asked, seriously.

The response was a little while coming. She watched Kathy swallow hard several times, trying to control her emotions. Laurel put her hands over Kathy's tightly clenched ones.

"I – I – uhhhh . . . I'm all right."

Laurel nodded, allowing a small smile to touch her face. "That's all anyone could ask. Take care of yourself. Your Mom's up there with your Dad, drinking my father's horrid dissolve-the-spoon coffee and trading recipes with my Mom."

Kathy smiled through tears, and almost laughed. "I remember your father's coffee. The first time I had a cup when I was a teenager and Mom finally let me drink coffee, it kept me awake for three days straight."

"Yeah, well, your Father's wasn't much better, but his spaghetti sauce – mmmmmmmmm!" Laurel wrapped her arm around Kathy's shoulders and squeezed gently, then turned the both of them towards the rest of the room and ran directly into a wall of navy blue flesh that was definitely of the masculine persuasion.

A very familiar wall of flesh, come to think of it, that didn't yield, and smelled much better than it had a right to – which her mind should never have registered in this situation, but it did.

Strong, firm fingers wrapped around her upper arm, and also around his sister's, steadying them both. "Sorry," he apologized quietly, the deep, velvety tenor of his bass voice settling familiarly onto her eardrums, like a hug from a close loved one.

But he wasn't likely to be hugging her any time soon.

Wrong.

"John," Laurel tried to be as businesslike as possible – however ridiculous for this situation – and extended her hand.

John, in his inimitable, takeover fashion, pushed it aside as if he hadn't seen it and hugged her. Really hugged her. It had been a long time since she'd been hugged like that

by a guy who wasn't then trying to cop a feel of her butt. It felt damned good. Distractingly, wonderfully good. She wanted to melt into his arms, but this was hardly the time or the place. Laurel did indulge herself somewhat and hug him back just as generously, feeling her breasts pressed against the gold buttons of his dress uniform coat. Her arms couldn't really begin to make it around his huge shoulders, but she did the best she could, hugging him hard until her muscles began to hurt, and whispering, almost against her will, "I'm so sorry, John." Even on her tippy toes, she wasn't quite tall enough to speak into his ear. Damn, he was big! She'd forgotten how dwarfed she'd always felt in his arms.

Dwarfed, but always just as safe as if she was under her Father's watchful, loving eyes, which was an incredible compliment to him, considering how much she loved her father.

She pulled back first, reluctantly, but not wanting to extend common courtesy longer than was polite, just because she wanted to spend an eternity there, wrapped up so safely. Taking a step or two away from him, she felt immediately bereft and disconcerted because of it. Nervously, Laurel contemplated her feet, then his, which were big enough to be hard to miss. The old saying about what big feet meant on a man made her face blaze red, and she completely missed what he'd said in reply. Blushing even brighter, she looked up at him, melting inside when she met his eyes, "Beg pardon?" she asked, hoping he'd repeat what he'd said.

"I was just saying that you don't need to be sorry. She's happy now, instead of miserably wasting away here with us."

The tears that had receded while she was drying Kathy's made a full force reappearance. If there was something Laurel detested in this life – and generally she was pretty easy going – it was crying in front of people. If she was going to cry, she much preferred to do it in private. But, as she got older, and ended up in some situations not having any choice in the matter, she did her best to ignore her own discomfort. She lifted her wet face to his and said, "No, I'm not sorry for her; I'm sorry for you. And I agree. She's in a better place. I was just telling Kathy that they're probably all up there having coffee together."

She watched tears fill his already swollen eyes, and his lips tightened for a second before he smiled. "Yeah. Your Dad and mine have probably got Heaven all arranged to their liking by now . . ."

"Yeah, and the Devil's probably mighty nervous that they'll set their sights on his place next. You know how they hate to sit still!" That got a soft chuckle from the both of them, and then the conversation died down to an awkward silence.

For lack of anything else to do, Laurel turned towards the beautiful open mahogany casket. “Do you want me to come with you?” John offered, after she’d taken a very tentative step towards it.

Laurel turned back to him for a second, saying, “Thank you, no. I’ll be okay.” Their eyes met fleetingly, then Laurel looked down and turned away, continuing her sad journey.

She hated the practice of open casket wakes or funerals, but nevertheless approached the body slowly. Babe looked as if she was asleep, which, of course, was the whole idea. Laurel almost snorted, then realized that would be highly indelicate under the present circumstances. She wasn’t asleep, she was dead, and seeing her wasted, heavily made up body wasn’t going to change that fact one iota.

Laurel’s harsh thoughts softened as her eyes settled on the familiar countenance. Babe had been riding shotgun while Laurel’s mother drove frantically to the hospital when she was six and had hurled herself over the handlebars of her three speed bike. The two mom’s – John’s and hers – had packed passels of kids into the back of whoever’s station wagon and carted them up to the lake nearly every afternoon during those long summers off from school. Babe was at her graduation, both high school and college, and had been like a second mother to Laurel.

She was the last of the old guard. The last of the parents she’d been close to.

She bit her lip and sighed. It sucked to be an orphan. There was just no way around it.

When she turned around, she found herself nearly repeating the collision of a few minutes before, stepping back abruptly, almost knocking into the casket. Disconcerted, she whispered, “Excuse me!”

John reached out to steady her – again – and said without a trace of apology in his voice, “You looked like you were going to faint.”

The look Laurel gave him conveyed all of her disdain at that thought. “I have never fainted in my life – “

“You lie – you fainted when you asked me to pierce your ears, remember?”

His crooked, endearingly gentle smile should be outlawed. She didn’t need him to use it on her – it was highly unfair. She was already in love with the big lout. What more did he want? “Yeah, well. Under normal circumstances . . . “

“You sure you’re okay?” John asked, tugging at her arm when she tried to make a beeline for one of the uncomfortable looking chairs that had been set up for mourners.

“Yes, I’m fine. You’d better get into the receiving line, there; it looks as if most of the town has decided to make an appearance.”

He did as she suggested, with not a little reluctance, but kept his eyes on her, she could feel it. Laurel threw her London Fog raincoat onto the chair next to her, saving Niki a seat the old fashioned way, and sat down near the aisle, watching hoards of people filing in to convey their condolences to the children, who were standing to one side of the bier, shaking hands and hugging people from the long line that stretched all the way out the door.

Well, Laurel thought, it wasn’t surprising that there was such a turnout. Kathy was a teacher, and had been for years, so all of her fellow employees probably put in an appearance, as well as a lot of her students, present and former. Dean Junior and John were both firemen, and had been since they were in their teens, so at one point the room was full of men in dress uniforms – both of their shifts, except a skeleton crew – came to pay their respects, as well as several crews from adjoining towns.

Niki inserted herself into the line while waving frantically at Laurel, who waved much more discreetly back and generally tried to pretend she didn’t know her friend. Not that Laurel wasn’t busy herself – pretty much everyone who knew the family knew Laurel, and there were tons of people stopping by her seat on their way out, or actually sitting down to chat for a while.

Chapter 3

When she wasn’t having to make polite small talk about how much she looked like her mother and talked like her father, Laurel watched John. Greedily. Hungrily. No one around here was going to notice it; they were concentrating on the family, so she could feast her eyes to her heart’s content.

He was so damned handsome in his uniform – and he filled it so well! She knew that there was no padding at those broad shoulders – it was all John. He stood head and shoulders above almost everyone else in the room – except his own brother. He greeted everyone with a hearty handshake or a genuine hug, if that’s what they preferred. During breaks in the crowd, he rode herd on his nieces and nephews for his sister, who was spending a lot of time in her husband’s comforting arms. Laurel’s eyes filled with tears when she saw him go over to his eldest nephew, who had knelt alone at the coffin and was crying. John unselfconsciously wrapped one of those strong arms around him and

hugged him, rocking slightly back and forth while the youth cried his eyes out on his Uncle's shoulder.

She could see his lips moving as he murmured to the boy, whose name she thought was Tyler, and could well imagine the soothing nothings he was saying. Tyler eventually pulled away, and John offered him a Kleenex, then bent down to kiss the boy – who was just beginning to become a man himself – on the top of the head. “You okay?” she saw him ask, a serious look on his face.

Tyler nodded his head, and John patted his shoulder fondly, then they both joined the line again – John next to his sister, with Tyler between them.

God, he was wonderful with the kids! It made Laurel wonder why he hadn't found someone and had his own tribe of them. But as far as she knew – not that she was kept informed on that kind of thing, really – he wasn't seeing anyone, and Laurel found that very surprising. He was a catch and a half. He should have been married with ankle biters to come home to every day, and a white picket fence . . .

He should have been coming home to her.

That stark thought hit her like a gut punch, and her finally dried cheeks were instantly wet again. Somehow, some way, she had to come to grips with the fact that he was not a part of her future, and never would be. But looking at him, standing there tall and proud, strong and loving with and for his family, his loved ones, made her ache to be considered one of those people.

And it was almost too much for her. Laurel had reached for her jacket when Niki began to side step her way in front of her to claim the seat Laurel's coat had just vacated. “Where are you going? I just got here.”

Laurel sank back into her chair, whispering crankily, “Well, those of us who got here on time have been here for a while . . .” It was a useless jab, like a raindrop in a reservoir. She loved Niki to death, but they were complete opposites when it came to promptness, or in Niki's case the considerable and continual lack thereof. And lateness was one of the few things that really stuck in Laurel's craw, not that pointing it out to Niki was going to change things after all these years. Bitching about it was more a force of habit than anything else, just like her automatic comeback.

“Not everyone likes to arrive while they're still dressing the body, you know.”

“Yeah, but before they bury her would be nice . . .”

The unusually nasty tone in Laurel's voice made Niki stop fussing with her dress and coat and take a good look at her long time friend. She looked frail, almost delicate. Laurel never looked delicate unless she was hurting emotionally, and even then she was much stronger than she appeared. Niki's face pinched when she took in Laurel's swollen eyes and tightly clenched hands, and the nervous way her right knee was bumping up and down, as if her leg was spasming uncontrollably. She was stressed, that much was obvious, but it wasn't just the funeral, Niki knew. It was seeing John.

Niki's eyes found the big man easily, and she couldn't suppress a shiver. He'd hugged her, even though she wasn't all that close to the family, and she could almost see what it was that had Laurel all googley eyed over him for so long – that man was a man, with a capitol M. He exuded more testosterone in one completely innocent hug than most men did during sex. If it weren't for Laurel, she'd probably want to sample some of that herself, but he was strictly hands off. There was no way she'd hurt her best friend like that.

But she couldn't keep herself from wishing that Laurel would either piss or get off the pot about him, instead of mooning around for literally decades. An unholy smile spread across Niki's face, and she was surprised she wasn't struck dead by her thoughts, considering how inappropriate they were to the situation. She knew Laurel would never say anything to John herself – she was too afraid of the rejection and still wounded from their mildly sordid past.

Niki nearly snorted. It was twenty years ago, for crying out loud. She'd tried to help Laurel get over it, but the hurt – and the attraction – remained firmly embedded. Maybe what she needed was to work it out – either get it on with him or get him out of her system, once and for all. Maybe all she needed was a little push in the right direction.

She could help with that, Niki nodded to herself. She sure as shit could.

Laurel looked at her broadly grinning, nodding friend and wondered exactly what she might have snorted, smoked, or rubbed into her belly before coming here. She certainly was acting strangely, smiling at nothing in the middle of a funeral . . . “Uh, what's the Cheshire cat for? If you keep smiling like that the family is going to think you're happy she's dead.”

The smile disappeared immediately, but Laurel was sure no one else heard Niki's discreet, “Bite me.”

The catch-all phrase was rapidly becoming Niki's response to most questions she

considered beneath her notice – at least those from Laurel, who wasn't likely to be offended. Laurel wasn't put off that easily, though. She caught her friend's eye and raised her eyebrow inquiringly. "What kind of dangerous things were rolling around in that empty head of yours that put that evil smile on your face?"

"Never you mind," Niki responded dismissively, not rising to the insulting bait, instead picking imaginary lint off her suit. "Watch the wake." She proceeded to do just that herself, pretending valiantly not to notice that her friend was still considering her with an intensely curious gaze.

Laurel didn't know whether to believe Niki or not, but she decided she'd probably hear about whatever it was later, anyway, so she let it go, despite her distinctly uneasy feeling about that smile. The service went on for several hours as most of the town paraded through. Niki left after an hour or so, making arrangements to have dinner with Laurel later in the week. She was still wearing the remnants of that sneaky grin, and it set Laurel's teeth on edge in warning. Something was up, but she had no idea what – and with Niki, one truly never knew.

As it was winding down, Laurel stood up and began to gather her things, slipping awkwardly into her coat. Suddenly, reaching for the sleeve hole became a lot easier, and she realized someone was helping her on with her coat.

She also knew exactly who it was, without having to turn around and confirm it. "Thank you," she murmured, reaching down to grab her purse.

John cleared his throat, and that made Laurel look at him. He seemed nervous, but there wasn't an uncertain bone in his body, Laurel would have bet. What was making him uncomfortable, she wondered? "The family's getting together at my house tonight – and I –" he changed his wording immediately, "we'd like it if you came, too."

She didn't know if it was the invitation or the endearingly boyish way he delivered it, but the tears were back, and she found herself having to blink heavily to keep them at bay. Suddenly, she was as nervous as he appeared to be. "I – I, uh, don't know what to say. I'm not family –"

John caught her hand and her eyes at the same time. "In some ways, you're closer than some of my extended family. I didn't have them living next to me while I grew up. Our memories are your memories. Come share them with us."

That was a heartfelt invitation that she could not refuse. Laurel nodded shyly. "I'll be there – what time?"

He seemed to relax visibly. “Oh, give us a little while to wind up here, say a half hour or so?”

“Okay.”

“Do you need directions?”

She was busy looking anywhere but at him, gathering her long hank of honey colored hair and pulling it out of the back of her coat, futzing with her purse trying to find her keys. “It’s the old Parker place on Elm, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s all mine.” John wanted to cringe as soon as those words were out of his mouth. Idiot! He chastised himself.

Laurel took several steps away from him, then turned back and hugged him. It was a wonderful, sweet gesture of pure, innocent feeling. “I’ll see you then,” she whispered, leaving quickly, as if he’d burned her.

He knew she’d burned him with every chaste touch, every wide-eyed look.

He wanted her. So badly that he’d nearly embarrassed himself with his body’s blatant response at his own mother’s funeral. But then his body had always had a mind of its own – kind of like what happened with Sylvia. At least this time it seemed to be exhibiting quite a bit better taste.

John had stayed away from Laurel after the Sylvia fiasco – not wanting to hurt her more, but aching inside whenever his mother would casually drop her name into the conversation, saying she was seeing this person or that person. He’d watched her move away, knowing she was taking his heart with her, but figuring that he probably didn’t stand a chance with her anyway after what he’d done, and trying his best to wish her well.

But he didn’t want to. He detested the thought of another man’s arms around her, another man holding her tight to him, catching her moans and cries in his mouth as she fulfilled her sensual destiny to the tune of some other man’s kisses.

The invitation had been a lark – although he knew that the rest of the family felt the same way about her – that she was family – or he would never have made it. He figured she’d turn him down politely, and he wouldn’t see her again for another five years or so unless some other mutual acquaintance died.

But she'd accepted, and his heart leapt and banged hard against his sternum when she'd agreed to come. His eyes settled for one of the last times on his Mom's face. Was it wrong to feel such joy during such a time? He liked to think his mother would answer a hearty "no" to that. She was in favor of love, having had so much of it in her lifetime, and would have encouraged him in his pursuit – funeral or no funeral. His marriageless state had been a source of consternation to her until she could no longer remember to be concerned about him. She'd wanted him married with a herd of kids around him, and she'd known and loved Laurel since before she was born.

John found himself drifting over to stand beside his mother, and he touched her cheek gently. "Thanks, Mom," he whispered. "Thanks for everything." Tears raced down his cheeks, and suddenly he was surrounded by his family.

The group hug lasted for a very long time, arms extending around each other as members broke down in sobs one by one until they were a wet, soggy mass that practically threatened to overwhelm the casket. Finally, it was the kids that distracted the adults by becoming a little rambunctious, and they broke up, spending some time with Mr. Crestwood before leaving together to gather again at John's place.

Kathy was the first to arrive, children and husband in tow. Luckily, John saw his nieces and nephews frequently enough that he had toys and videos around that kept them occupied. They sat down to watch "Finding Nemo" for the twelve hundredth time, and left the adults to their own devices.

When he got home, he immediately changed into more comfortable clothes. He hadn't had to do any clean up around the house – rarely did – because he was rarely home. He fluffed the pillows on the couch, wiped down the counters and put some utensils and plates out, and called it good.

There was no dearth of food. The Fire Department had cooked – which wasn't always a good thing, depending on how hot and spicy you liked your spaghetti sauce – and all of John's neighbors and some of his friends had dropped off enough casseroles and goodies so that he wouldn't have to cook for another year or so, even after everyone stuffed themselves. Matroni's Restaurant had sent over a huge pan of lasagna. John had gone to school with Rick, and they'd been good friends ever since. There was homemade banana bread, cupcakes, muffins, three-bean casserole, shepherd's pie . . . enough food to feed a small army. He was going to have to get Kathy and Dean to take some home with them, but he knew that they had tons of food at their places, too.

Every time the door opened he looked up eagerly, and for the better part of an hour he

was disappointed. Glad to see his family, and all that, but she wasn't there yet. It wasn't like her to be late – she was just like her father in that respect – “hurry up and wait” had practically been the West family motto.

It wasn't until nearly everyone else had arrived that he heard the doorbell – a rarity in his house, since almost everyone who visited him was family and just used their keys or banged hard and came in, announcing their presence loudly enough to wake the dead. Just as he reached for the doorknob, it struck him that she might have been purposely late so as not to be alone in the house with him. But that was very unlike Laurel. She wasn't particularly shy . . . at least she hadn't been when he'd known her well. John wondered if she'd changed that much?

But then he opened the door, and she stood there on his doorstep, looking abnormally withdrawn and frail. Maybe she had changed. He put out his hand, feeling the delicacy of her thin fingers as he wrapped them up with his own larger, sturdier ones. “C'mon in,” he tugged a little when she hesitated a second, then she stepped into his house for the first time.

Even under torture he would never reveal this, but he had thought of her when he'd first seen this place – remembering her love of old houses and how she had lamented the fact to him once that it was a terrible thing that the majority of the older homes in the town were being converted either to condos or chopped up into apartments. Granted, this house was far from the mansions that decorated Main Street in Weldon, but it was built some time in the thirties, as far as he could tell, and although it was smallish by some standards – more like a cottage than a full-sized family home – it was solid as a rock and built to last. He'd decorated it in muted solid shades of earth tones, buying serviceable furniture and thinking, in the back of his mind that eventually he'd marry someone who'd take the decorating bull by the horns and do a much better job than he ever could. John was always happy to wear a uniform to work – it cut down on having to try to color coordinate his wardrobe, and trying to get a whole house to look nice – color wise – was damned near impossible, as far as he was concerned.

So he'd pinned his hopes on that elusive woman who would become his wife . . .
. . . who seemed to always have longish curly blonde hair and bright green eyes, and a voice that sent shivers up his spine . . .

Laurel, who was a terrible house nut and watched all of the home improvement and house buying shows she could on cable, was trying not to gawk too much.

“You haven't been here before, have you?” he asked, watching her blush.

“No, you bought this . . . after . . . “ her words trailed off awkwardly, and she got even redder, staring at the carpet at her feet.

John cleared his throat. “Well, how about the nickel tour?” he offered with pride. It wasn’t the Taj Mahal, but he’d made a lot of improvements to it himself, and he liked his house . . . however empty it was to come home to when he got off shift in the morning.

“This is the living room,” he said in a bad imitation of an announcer’s voice. His voice was too deep to pull it off, but she laughed softly, and he felt his heart – and other areas – swell.

“I think I got that idea, somehow. Since that’s where the couch and the TV are . . . “ The couch was of truly massive proportions – much too big for the size of the room. And upholstered in deep, dark chocolate velour, with – horrors – a matching, equally out sized easy chair. There was a lot of unrelenting brown in that room. If she was in a mood to be uncharitable, shit brown.

He took about five steps away from her. “And here we have the dining room.”

“Beautiful table and chairs.” It was solid oak, all of it, she’d bet. When Laurel moved closer, she could see that it was well worn, but lovingly cared for. She could also plainly see where the initials “LEW” were carved into one of the leaves. “That’s your Mom’s old table! And with my initials still in it!”

“Yep.”

“Boy, did I get a spanking for that one! Worse than if I’d done it to my mom’s table – but I couldn’t – it was Formica.” She whirled on him. “It was your fault I got spanked, you know. You dared me to do it.”

John was wearing an entirely unapologetic grin, leaning against the door jam that led to the kitchen.. “I didn’t make you, though. You could have just not done it . . .”

That wasn’t much of a possibility, since Laurel was had been as stubborn a child as she was now as an adult. She snorted. “Yeah, right. Not likely.”

Still grinning, he bulldozed his way through the crowd of his family, saying, “Tour coming through. Make way!”

Everyone hugged Laurel as if she was a long lost sister.

“This is the kitchen,” John announced loudly, as if it was news.

“What was your first clue, I wonder?” Dean needed.

John frowned down an inch or so at his older brother, knowing it would have no effect at all. “Come over here and I’ll show you the bedrooms.”

“Keep the doors open, John . . .” came Dean’s teasing warning.

“You sound just like Dad, Junior, and in this case, that is not a compliment.”

He showed her down the hall to the guest bedroom first, which was small but relatively well appointed as an office, with a computer and desk, but also a twin bed for when his nieces or nephews visited. The hall bath was next, where he proudly informed her that he’d done the plumbing himself.

“Yeah, that’s why when you flush the toilet it backs up into the tub,” Rob, Kathy’s husband, snuck in the comment as he sidled between them and into the aforementioned bathroom.

“Ignore them all, please,” John commanded, a pained look on his face as he led her to the master bedroom.

But Laurel was smiling. His family was so much like hers had been – it made her feel wonderful to hear the banter back and forth. “You don’t have to tell me about them. My family was just like that, remember? Never missed an opening.”

John nodded, opening the door to his bedroom. “This is the master bedroom suite – I get to call it that because I added a bathroom off it, so I don’t have to share with my guests.”

“Yeah, I remember you don’t share well with others,” Laurel commented, oohing and ahing in all the right places, she hoped.

John was almost beside himself. She seemed to be the same easygoing girl she’d been when they were younger. Laurel hadn’t changed much, and he was extremely happy that she hadn’t. The more time he was spending with her now, the more he wanted things to return to the way they were before Sylvia appeared on the scene and helped him wreck his life.

As the evening progressed, he found himself watching her, and trying, with only a modicum of success, to do it surreptitiously. She fit in to his family like hand to glove –

they all had the same warped sense of humor, and even though this was an extremely sad event, and they were all devastated at the loss of their beloved mother, they laughed a lot, too. John choked up a little when he thought that his Mom wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"Remember the time" became the catch phrase of the evening, and Laurel laughed as hard as everyone else. John watched how her eyes sparkled with wonderful memories, her hair floating around her shoulders like a golden cloud.

He was sitting at the head of the table, though, and, although he ached to do it, he couldn't figure out a way to put his arm around her shoulders comfortingly when she teared up when the conversation turned to her own parents. Instead, he covered the tightly clenched fingers of her hands with his own and smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner when she looked back up at him, apparently somewhat startled at his gesture. It was a good thing that she couldn't read his mind at the time – however inappropriate, it was unprintable. The moment his hand touched hers, all he could think about was touching more of her – a lot more. That unwanted – well, out of place – reaction was getting to be commonplace around her.

John shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Good thing Kathy was doing to hostess thing – he wouldn't have to get up for a while. Hopefully, things will have died down by the time he couldn't avoid standing.

Chapter 4

Eventually, things did die down naturally, but not for quite some time – not until everyone had both laughed and cried themselves almost into exhaustion. The weariness in the room was palpable. It was after midnight when Laurel glanced at her watch in amazement. She stood, yawning. "Wow! It's way late for me, guys. I've got to go home and get to bed."

John considered it a high mark of honor that he didn't make an off color remark, despite the ample opportunity she was providing. "What? Do you turn into a pumpkin after midnight?" He stood too, ready to see her out to her car.

She brought her glass to the sink and washed it out automatically, putting it in the drainer. It was such a naturally domestic action that it set John to thinking that it would be nice if it was the two of them sending everyone off – although it didn't look like his family was going anywhere for a while yet, which was fine.

He helped her into her coat, and then walked her out to her car, helping her in and

closing the door. He hunkered down beside it, and she rolled down the window. “Thank you for coming over. It meant a lot to us – to me in particular.”

Laurel was glad it was dark, and he couldn’t see how her face had reddened. “You’re welcome. Thank you for inviting me. It was wonderful to sit around and talk about how we all grew up.”

In the moonlight, she looked like an angel. Hell, even in the direct sunlight she looked like an angel. He knew he still thought of her as one. For a long moment, neither of them said anything. John was busy drinking her in, and Laurel was busy fidgeting under his intense gaze. Finally, he asked in a voice deliberately low so that she would have to lean closer to him to hear him, “Go out with me?” He didn’t quite phrase it as a question, as if not doing so somehow made it less likely that she would turn him down, which she, of course, had every right to do, especially considering their circumstances.

She leaned back, and he tried to mentally prepare himself for her rejection, his jaw working overtime. He wanted to kiss the stuffing out of her and have her fall into his arms, but he knew that wasn’t likely to happen. At least not for a while. He did his best to be patient, and he thought he did admirably well, considering he definitely wasn’t a patient man, especially about something he wanted this badly. But he forced himself to be still and wait for her response, whatever it was.

Laurel was taken aback. She hadn’t expected this, although she supposed she should have, considering the way he’d been looking at her all night – like the Holy Grail to a crusader. She wasn’t at all sure what she was going to say, until a soft “Yes,” slipped out from between her lips before she had a chance either to stop it or even consider the situation. She looked as stunned as he did when she said it, and almost immediately wanted to take it back. Laurel didn’t need the potential heartache he represented . . . but, damn, it had been nice to be around him this evening – and his family. She’d forgotten how easy it was to be around him. How comfortable it was . . . and how unbelievably sexy she found him. How just the mere sight of him played on her senses relentlessly, inevitably softening her towards him. How else could she have just said yes?

The poignant memories of being close to him had assailed her all night – the firm yet gentle way he’d always held her. How infinitely safe she’d always felt with him. How they had laughed often together, and just enjoyed each other’s company immensely.

Not to mention how she went off like a rocket whenever he kissed her. He was her first love – and her last. The Alpha and Omega. Definitely Alpha, she thought to herself with a wry grin.

That grin put John on alert, however. “Why are you smiling like that? Are you going to stand me up?”

Laurel scoffed. “Of course not.”

John hunkered down next to the car, staring straight into her eyes, not flinching away although the impulse was there. “You have every right to do exactly that, you know.”

It was Laurel who looked away first, running her hands around the steering wheel nervously. “I realize that.”

“Of course, you know that I’d come and get you if you did.”

She almost snorted. With John, that was pretty much a given. “When?”

John thought fast, standing to stretch out his legs then bending down towards the window. “Thursday night. I’ll take you out to the Dog Sled.”

Although he’d just named one of her all time favorite restaurants, she balked at how fast he was moving. “Thursday? How about next month some time?” She liked how vague that sounded – so she didn’t have to think about what she’d agreed to until sometime well into the future, when she could reconsider her answer and cancel.

“No, Thursday,” he reaffirmed strongly, with a mirror of her previous wry grin. “I don’t want to give you too much time to think about it, or you’ll call me back and tell me you don’t want to.”

Laurel laughed softly at how well he knew her.

“I’ll pick you up at your place at five.”

She didn’t answer immediately, as if she was thinking hard about something.

“You’re not allowed to take back your ‘yes’, in case that’s what you’re mulling over.”

He looked like he would be willing to spank her over it, and she wasn’t about to press her luck. So she settled for just glaring up at him.

With one thought, her glare turned into a frown. “I was thinking more about the idea that it probably doesn’t look particularly great for you to be going out on a date so soon after you – “ she hesitated, pausing awkwardly, not wanting to hurt him with what she was

about to say.

John sighed, and, in the faint light she could see that he was tearing up. “Well . . . “
Laurel waited patiently for him to collect himself. John cleared his throat and went on. “I know my Mom wanted to whup my butt for what I did to you. She hated Sylvia with a passion. And I can’t think she’d be anything but pleased as punch for us to go out – any time at all. And, anyways, anyone who doesn’t like it can kiss my – “

“John!”

He gave her a rueful, if still somewhat watery, grin, and then said seriously, “We have a lot to talk about.”

The look on her face when he said that, how her face changed from relatively open and happy to completely closed – tight and sad – made him wish he could retract those words. The last thing he wanted to do was to remind her of their less than stellar history, although he knew it was something they would have to deal with eventually. But he shouldn’t have brought up such an unpleasant reminder so early in what he hoped would be their reconciliation.

“Thank you for having me over,” Laurel said with stiff politeness, starting the car as a deliberate signal that the conversation was over.

John sighed, cursing himself for a fool a thousand times over – for his verbal misstep just then, and his adolescent, purely hormonal idiocy in giving up this woman for the snake he ended up with.

“Thursday at five,” he repeated, trying to consolidate the meager gains he’d made with her today.

Laurel nodded, but didn’t look at him again as she drove away.

Later that evening, as he was slipping under the sheets – naked, as always except when he was at the station - John couldn’t keep from thinking about how strangely the day had ended up. He’d certainly never expected to find himself garnering a second chance with Laurel out of his mother’s wake. He chuckled to himself. His mother was probably up there beaming down, having orchestrated the whole thing. He wouldn’t have put it past her to do just that. She’d never said a word against Sylvia, but he’d known she was disappointed at his choice. She’d been nothing but sympathetic and helpful, though, when her unspoken reservations had proven correct, and the witch left him flat.

It had seemed so right to include her with the family gathering – she fit in as if she was a younger sibling, although that was hardly the type of feelings she inspired in him. Hell, he wanted nothing more than to play the cave man and drag her into his bedroom – or better yet carry her in, lay her down and feast on her body. When they had made love before – although they had never gone all the way – he had loved the way she'd arched and moaned against him, soft unselfconscious whimpers escaping her lips occasionally, along with lots of long, throaty sighs.

His body was aching to a degree it hadn't in a very long time just thinking about her. John wondered starkly in the back of his mind if he really had a chance to capture her again, to hold her to him for longer than the few summer weeks they'd had before. He knew he was going to do everything in his power to keep her this time – older and wiser now, he knew what he'd missed when he'd pushed her aside, and he was not about to let go of her again.

Laurel was having much the same thoughts across town, although they were much less confident and much more trepidatious. What had she gotten herself into? Was she crazy, agreeing to go out with him when he'd already stomped on her tender heart once?

She rolled around in the big bed, dislodging both cats in one swipe, unable to find a comfortable position with the thoughts that were rolling around in her head. It didn't seem to matter to her mind or her body that he'd hurt her badly before. It only mattered that she got to see him, and perhaps even touch him, even in the most casual of ways. That he might touch her – even just to help her out of the truck or something equally as innocent – made her back arch involuntarily, her hips wanting to thrust, although she caught herself just before she gave in to the lewd gesture.

Her long, exasperated sigh broke the silence. It was atrocious to realize that she didn't have anyone but herself to be angry at – she could just as easily have said no.

But then, truly, she couldn't. Being with him tonight . . . surrounded by familiar faces, by people who were once as close as family, made her yearn for what they'd never had – what might have been. It was a feeling with which she'd become all too familiar in the past years.

Now, though, there was another prevalent feeling mingling with all those unsatisfied yearnings – fear. Of letting her guard down with him . . . of being hurt again . . . of falling even deeper and losing herself in him – how could she not?

She loved him.

It took hours, and she lived to regret it, but Laurel did finally fall asleep, only to conjure mostly disturbing dreams about a certainly overly dominant firefighter.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" The person looking back at her from the mirror was not cooperating at all tonight. So far, in the process of getting ready for a date she wasn't at all sure she wanted to keep, she'd torn off a pretty pastel Argentinian Pinkini colored nail, torn a run in the first pair of stockings she tried on – brand new out of the package, of course – and now she was busy scarring her forehead with the blasted curling iron.

Unlike most females of her generation, Laurel hadn't made friends with the tools of the trade of being a woman for quite some time. She had naturally curly hair that had been feathered back since birth, and with the right cut, it looked as if it had been permed it was so curly, those ringlets framing her soft face beautifully and cascading down to about her mid back. She'd never fussed much about her looks, anyway, having come to the bald conclusion that she was no Cindy Crawford, and being generally the lazy sort, she preferred to concentrate on things she considered more important than what few looks she had.

But, on special occasions, she would fuss more, and this definitely qualified as one of those times. So she soldiered on, swearing and “ouching” occasionally, but in general, ended up relatively satisfied with the results. In her pink roses and cream bedroom, Laurel let the waist of the soft jersey dress settle around her middle – her slightly expanded middle, which was something that she generally tried to avoid thinking about, but being around John, or even just thinking of being around him, made her a lot more self-conscious about her body and exactly how much there was of it.

She addressed herself in the full length mirror, turning around carefully to make sure she wasn't dragging toilet paper on her heel, and checking that the back of her dress hadn't caught in the waistband of her pantyhose, or that something equally as embarrassing hadn't happened in the course of getting herself dressed. She'd once gone on a date with her shirt turned inside out, and was completely mortified that she hadn't realized it until she took it off that night before bed.

Nothing of that ilk seemed to have happened. She looked almost presentable. Nervous, but presentable. When the doorbell rang, both cats came running into the bedroom, as if she was going to save them from him.

Laurel wasn't even sure if she was capable of saving herself from him, much less them.

When she opened the front door, their eyes met and he smiled, melting her heart down her nylon clad legs to puddle at her strappy sandals. Damn, he looked good! He'd dressed

too – not formally, but not jeans; he was in a nice pair of khaki's and a white golf shirt that stretched across his broad chest as if clinging for dear life to the muscles beneath it. Like Laurel wanted to . . .

“Ready?” he asked, staring at her with a quizzical expression on his face.

Startled out of her dreamy reverie, Laurel answered a bit too loudly, “Yes,” and reached back into the small deacon's bench next to the door to grab her tapestry bag. John's hand settled at the small of her back as they walked to his truck, and Laurel felt electrified where he touched her, even though it was a casual enough touch through several layers of fabric. She shook her head, mentally and physically, hoping against hope to clear the cobwebs of sensual attraction out of what was left of her brain.

He came around to the passenger's side with her and opened the door, then, without ceremony and without asking, John proceeded to lift her into the seat, even going so far as to fasten the seatbelt around her before he slammed the door shut and came around to get in his own side.

“I can get into a truck by myself, thank you,” she informed him firmly.

He gave her a Cheshire cat grin as he slipped behind the wheel, and the truck roared to life. “It's quite a ways off the ground – are you sure you want your dress riding that far up on our first date?”

Laurel's brow drew together in a frown. She hadn't considered that, mentally smacking herself for the lapse. She should say something, she thought. “Uh, thank you, I think.”

John chuckled, soft and low, sending shivers up her spine that were so insidious that she actually had to force herself to sit straight in the seat, just to counter them. She was terribly afraid that her pebbled nipples were already broadcasting her responses to him – damn this clingy jersey material! It was only about three minutes into the date, and she was already cursing her wardrobe choices because of her uncontrollable body. This was not a good sign.

He guided the truck confidently and skillfully through the evening traffic – what there was of it in a small Vermont town. “Thank you for coming to the burial. It meant a lot to me – us. All of us.”

Laurel nodded. She'd gone to the funeral the day after the wake, but the notice in the paper had said that the burial would be private, and she hadn't expected to attend it. But John had waited the limo for her after the funeral and had practically kidnapped her into

it, saying the family wanted her to attend.

Laurel had been skeptical about just who in the family it was that wanted her attendance, but she kept quiet, and no one protested her presence, in fact Kathy and Dean had thanked her for coming at least as heartily as John had when it was finally over.

“So, how’s the world of banking treating you?”

An entirely unladylike snort left Laurel’s mouth before she had a chance to stop it. “You mean besides the people who scream ‘I can’t be overdrawn; I still have checks?’”

He chuckled, and her nipples got, unbelievably, harder.

“Well, I spend most of my days cleaning up after the messes my branch manager leaves – she’s never there anymore because of the requirements the bank has about managers bringing in new business – so, essentially, I run the shop. Usually, I like it. As long as it’s not the first of the month, or a Friday.”

John nodded. “Yeah, for us it’s the full moon.”

Laurel’s eyebrow rose. “More fires on a full moon?”

“More people likely to pull fire alarms, more crazies come out of the woodwork and decide they like the lights and sirens.”

“Ahhhhh.”

“Thunderstorms are like that too, though.”

“Huh?”

“Thunderstorms. Lightning, etc. Sometimes it does actually set fire to something, but you’d be amazed at how many people call the fire department because they’ve lost their electricity.”

“Okaaaaaaay . . .”

Their small talk on the way was a little forced, but not terribly bad. Eventually, they fell into a relatively comfortable silence. When they pulled into the restaurant’s big parking lot, he patted her shoulder, saying, “Stay put.” He rounded the back of the truck and opened the door for her, then lifted her down, sliding her close to him, but not quite

against him, his hand remaining possessively at the small of her back as they walked into the restaurant.

The Dog Sled restaurant had been around forever but never got old - at least not for Laurel or most of the population of New England, judging by their unflagging popularity. Customers ordered from a blackboard that was strategically positioned just inside the door. John and Laurel gave their order and went into the lounge, where John had a beer and Laurel a soft drink.

“You never were much of a drinker,” he commented with a gentle smile.

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Blech. I’ve tried it. Even been drunk a couple of times,” she revealed, shuddering delicately. “Yuck. I don’t much like being out of control.”

His voice lowered considerably as he tilted his chin. “I bet I could change your opinion about that.”

“Alcohol?” Laurel questioned innocently, being deliberately obtuse.

His eyes darkened, ignoring her attempts at keeping the conversation light. “You always were wild in my arms. Do you remember?” Instead of leaning forward, which might have made her feel cornered, or think he was just on the make, he leaned back in a relaxed pose he didn’t feel. His barely risqué remarks might be going a little fast for her, but he gauged her reactions carefully. A deep, dusky blush appeared high on her cheeks – and it wasn’t a makeup trick either. He was very happy to see that she remained as natural as she always had been. There wasn’t tons of gunk on her face or around her bright eyes. She was looking down at her drink and fidgeting, biting that enticingly full lower lip of hers. He was seconds away from offering to nibble on it himself, but managed to reel himself in before he went too far and scared her away.

“So, do you like working at the bank?” he threw out, surprised at her career choice. She had hardly seemed the buttoned up banker type – he could remember her as a little girl, long blonde hair streaming almost to the ground as she swung confidently from a tree limb, and remembered her as a mischievous teenager doing exactly the same thing. Banking seemed awfully restrictive for a free spirit like that.

Laurel shrugged. “It pays the bills. Not all of us find our calling as early in life as you did,” she chided gently. John had never considered being anything else but a fireman – it seemed to be in his blood from the time he was a toddler. His favorite toy had always been a big red fire truck that squirted water through its hoses – Laurel and his brother and

sister were, of course, his favorite targets.

The hostess came to seat them then, and after they were settled in front of their appetizers, he put his elbows on the table and stared straight into her eyes. “What would you rather be doing than banking?”

“Almost anything else,” she answered back, not quite honestly. But she could hardly tell him that what she desperately wanted to be doing was being a wife to him and taking care of their children.

He took a deep swallow of ice water. “If you’re that unhappy, you should change jobs.”

Laurel picked up the tossed salad that was already at their table and served herself some. “Eh. Too much bother. I’ve got seniority, and I’m in a relatively comfortable rut.” She motioned towards him with the salad bowl and he nodded eagerly. While dishing him out some, she added, “And I really love the people I work with. They make it possible to put up with all the crap.”

John nodded. “Yeah, I love my job, but I also like almost everyone I work with, too.”

They chatted through dinner, talking about mutual acquaintances and his family. Laurel delicately skirted the issue of his Mom, not wanting to bring the mood down.

“Kathy’s husband’s been having some health issues lately, so she’s been incredibly stressed the past year.”

Laurel frowned. “What kind of health issues?”

The waitress came to see if they wanted dessert, but both of them begged off. They were already stuffed by the enormous amount of food that came with a dinner there. “Well, his doctor caught some patches of skin cancer – “ Laurel looked suitably alarmed at that news “ – early. He caught them before they became a problem, luckily. But, still, it was scary for her, naturally. And then he had some digestive problems that they were worried were colon cancer.”

“Oh, man, that’s terrible!”

“Yeah. They put that poor guy through the mill looking for something, and it turned out to be ulcers.”

A broad grin spread across Laurel’s face. “I can imagine. I have ulcers, too, but some of

the things they did to determine that it was something relatively benign and treatable were pretty horrid.”

John was nodding in enthusiastic agreement. “Yeah, like a colonoscopy.”

She knew she was blushing, but asked anyway, “You’ve had one too?”

“I think they’re a requirement now once you turn forty.”

“Yuck. What a horrid rite of passage – excuse the pun – that is! I saw parts of myself on the big screen that God never intended me to see. When it was done, I didn’t know whether to slap the doctor or leave a fat tip on the gurney on the way out,” she concluded ruefully, winking at him outrageously.

He found himself choking on his coffee at her impromptu diatribe. “I don’t know about the tipping part, myself . . .”

Chapter 5

The prettily compartmentalized bill was slipped unobtrusively onto the table, and they both reached for it at the same time, but John got to it first, smacking the back of her hand lightly while out and out growling, “I don’t know who you’ve dated in the past, but when we go out, I’ll pay.”

“Chauvinist.”

As he was fishing in his coat pocket for something, he looked her straight in the eye. “In some ways – hopefully the good ways – yes.”

What he pulled out of that pocket then surprised her, but made her smile broadly – it was a case of half-glasses that he donned with a sheepish glance at her.

There was no way she could resist that opening. “Reading glasses! Boy, someone really is getting old, isn’t he?” She was smiling so broadly her cheeks hurt.

He perused the bill silently for a moment, and then turned a heated gaze on her. “Be very careful about poking the bear, little girl. You never know when he’ll turn and devour you.”

There was no missing his meaning. He was blatantly letting her know that he wanted to make a meal out of her. And, Lord knew, despite what her skeptical mind kept telling her

about being cautious, she wanted him to – desperately. If he'd made a move to clear off this table and take her, here, in the middle of the restaurant, she doubted she'd have the strength to resist him.

He'd owned her, body and soul, for too long. And her body was demanding his attention. But she wasn't about to let him know she was that interested that quickly. "I forgot my stick. I'll remember it next time."

John put a credit card in the holder with the bill, putting his glasses away, his eyes all the while settled on her heavily. All of a sudden, he leaned forward and caught her hand where it lay on the table, folding her smaller hand into his. "You always were a sassy one. I'm glad you haven't lost that. But you need to be careful, too, honey. You know I won't put up with much, and your sassy mouth can still get you a trip over my knee."

There was no mistaking the shudder that ran through her body at his words, and Laurel knew that he had felt it, too. It was cause for John to hope against hope that the woman he'd love from afar for so long after hurting her so badly might actually share his inclination towards spanking.

The one time he'd spanked her – back when they were first dating – was a very real spanking, because he'd found out that she was smoking. And although she was genuinely remorseful – because of her thoroughly blistered bottom more so than anything he'd said about the evils of smoking – he also thought he'd detected a note of sensual acceptance in her manner . . .

But perhaps he'd been deluding himself all these years, seeing that which he wanted the most, rather than any reality on her part. He'd lost his head with Sylvia not very long after that one spanking, and he'd never had a chance to question her further about it. But he was determined to do so this time around.

Knowing Laurel and her sometimes mischievous manner, he was sure that she would present him with more than ample opportunity to roast her enticing little rear end. He just had to be patient.

John was unusually silent on the walk out to the truck, and Laurel found herself getting a little concerned. "Are you okay?" she asked him seriously once they were on the road again.

He smiled at her somewhat wolfishly. "Darlin', I'm wonderful." He reached across the bench seat and threaded his fingers through hers. "Thank you for coming out with me. I know accepting my invitation couldn't have been very easy." John hated the way his

words tightened her lovely lips and made her stare straight ahead, off into space, but they needed to be said. “What are you doing tomorrow night?”

That snapped her out of it. “Tomorrow night?” she fairly squealed.

John chuckled softly at her outrageous surprise. “Yeah. It’s Friday night. What would you like to do?”

“I – uh – well, I don’t know . . .” She should have been prepared for this. John wasn’t acting like he was going to just take her out once and then let things lie. He was acting the way she’d always wanted him to – as if he wanted her, permanently, in his life – as if he wanted to date her seriously, and then, maybe, even more.

But Laurel was scared to really build those dreams she’d had about him – scared and scarred from the last time. She’d loved him too long and too deep to just jump in hip deep again, she thought.

But John –being John – wasn’t about to take “no” for an answer. “How about if I cook for you?”

She gave him a purely skeptical look. “I’ll be sure to bring my giant, industrial sized bottle of Pepto Bismol, and I’ll call ahead to the ER to make sure they have all of the necessary treatments for ptomaine...”

He managed to smile and looked suitably indignant at the same time. “I’ll have you know that I am the favorite cook on my shift.”

“Uh huh.” Laurel sounded completely unconvinced. “I remember the time you tried to bake chocolate chip cookies. They came out like hockey pucks.”

“That was twenty-five years ago or more!”

Laurel sobered unintentionally at that remark. “Jeez, we are old, aren’t we?”

“Getting’ there,” he answered softly, squeezing her fingers gently.

Not liking the more somber tone that had settled over them, Laurel asked, “So what’s your specialty?”

John grinned evilly. “Homemade spaghetti sauce.”

“Mmmmmmmmm – just like your Dad,” Laurel sighed. If she had one bad eating habit, she had a zillion, but one of her worst bugaboos was pasta and sauce – preferably with tons of meatballs. She hadn’t had sauce from anything other than a jar in too long to remember.

John wasn’t letting her go without a firm commitment. “So, I’ll see you at my place, six sharp tomorrow night,” he practically commanded as he pulled into the parking space in front of her apartment.

Laurel gathered her pocketbook and coat around her, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Gee, when you put it so genteelly like that, how could a gal possibly resist?”

He stopped her as she reached for the door, using his hold on her hand to tug her inexorably across the seat towards him. His lips settled onto hers before she had a chance to protest – not that she really wanted to. Damn, he was a good kisser – just right pressure, not conquering or demanding or too forward with his tongue . . . just right moisture-wise, not too wet, not too dry. His lips were firm but not hard as they slid slowly across her mouth, coaxing it open so that his tongue could carefully explore first her lips then further into her mouth, connecting with her own much more tentative tongue in a wonderful, electric dance that Laurel hoped would never end.

When he finally moved away, but not far, just enough to disconnect them, they were both breathing heavily. The windows of the truck were foggy. “Damn, woman, I can see the sleepless nights ahead of me . . . “

Laurel looked confused until she followed his gaze downward, to the part of his anatomy that was near the steering wheel, and then she quickly glanced up, a tremendous thrill surging through her. He wanted her! The proof was obvious – those nice pants of his were tented in all the right places – because of their kiss! A warm flush flowed through her body, and Laurel let herself dream a little. Maybe this would work out, after all.

John stole one more long, languorous kiss, then separated from her with a deep sigh. “I’d better get you inside, missy, or we’re going to end up christening my front seat!” Again, he opened her door for her and helped her out of the truck, guiding her to her front steps and even taking the keys to open the door and going so far as to check out the inside of the place for her, just to be safe, he’d said.

“My parents never even locked the door!” Laurel protested.

He drew her against him in the doorway on his way out. “This is not forty years ago. Unfortunately, there are some bad elements in town now. Not a lot, but some. Enough

that I want you to be careful even though we live in Podunk, USA.” He stared down at her, his demeanor sternly warning. “Do you understand? You are always to lock your door.”

“I do that anyway,” she huffed, not liking the way he was laying down the law to her, as if he had the right. She tried to squirm out of his arms, but wasn’t going anywhere unless he let her.

“Good. You better never let me catch you leaving it unlocked, or you won’t like the consequences.”

John kissed her, hard, then turned to leave, barely catching what she muttered almost automatically under her breath as she turned away from him.

“Consequences-smoncequences.”

His hard, flat palm connected with her softly rounded bottom with a resounding crack that was barely muffled by her layers of clothing. “Yeowch!” Laurel’s back arched as she tried to skitter just her bottom out of his long reach, her hands automatically going back to cover the offended area. But, before she could construct any kind of defenses against a further assault, two more swats connected at least as hard as the first.

“Cut that out!” Laurel turned around, facing him – which wasn’t much comfort, as far as she could see, but at least it removed his target from within easy, stinging reach.

She was cute even when she frowned. The thought drifted unwanted through his mind, almost making him smile. But he didn’t want her to think that he was anything but deadly serious about this issue, or any other that involved her health and safety, so he deepened his own frown back at her and advanced on her. The stubborn little cuss didn’t move an inch – he should have guessed she wouldn’t. She always was the type to stand her ground and damn the consequences. John reached out and took her already tipped chin between his forefinger and his thumb. “I know this is probably going a little fast for you, but you’re mine, and I watch out for my own.”

It was in Laurel’s mind to snort derisively, but she thought better of it, although she called herself a thousand times a coward for not doing it. She’d been spanked by him once already in her life, and although the fantasy was one thing, the reality was another, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she’d pretty much do anything to avoid being tipped over his lap again.

So her mouth remained firmly shut, although she was clenching her jaw and giving him

her best, most seriously angry look.

Despite every outward appearance that she'd sooner be covered with spiders than anywhere within a ten mile vicinity of him, he gathered her firmly but gently against him and proceeded to melt her against him with a stunningly passionate kiss that drove every other thought out of her mind except those that were of him, and the luscious thing he was doing to her.

He left her with a wink and a small smile, standing there in the middle of her rose upholstered living room, shaking, barely able to draw a breathe, shell shocked and throbbingly, achingly in love with him.

Again. Still. Yet.

She undressed and got ready for bed in a sensual haze. With that one kiss – well, actually, by his mere presence next to her most of the evening, but mostly with his final kiss – he'd set her body to a longing that made the interminable years of yearning since their break up seem like nothing at all. Her breasts tingled and ached; her lips still sought the wonderful dominance of his . . . and she knew she needed a fresh pair of panties even before she got to that point of dressing for bed.

Laurel'd turned on the TV to watch a Tivo'd recording she'd made of that campy gothic soap opera she'd fallen in love with when she was much younger – Dark Shadows – hoping it would distract her body and mind from the pervasive – and somewhat perverse – thoughts that were running through her all too active imagination. The phone trilled loudly from her bedside table, and she reached absently over to get it.

“Yello?”

Niki started in with no preamble at all, sounding for all she was worth as if they were still in high school and she'd just been out on her first date with John ever. “Well? How'd it go? Spill it, girl! What was it like?” The more excited Niki got, the shriller her voice became – Laurel had often wondered if that was true during sex, too, but she'd never remembered to ask.

Laurel sighed heavily into the receiver. “It was . . . wonderful, of course.”

“Tsk. There's no ‘of course’ about it. Did he make a move? Is he there beside you now? Is that why it was wonderful?”

“Niki!” Laurel laughed. “Not all of us are as sexually advanced as you are – “

“I don’t want to hear about that, considering which of us has the spanking fetish!” Niki replied in mock defense. She knew that Laurel would never just climb into bed on the first date with any man, even John. She, on the other hand, had no such qualms if it felt right to her.

For the nine thousand and twentieth time, Laurel had cause to regret the night when she and Niki had a girls’ night together when they were much too old to be doing so – staying at her apartment and playing with each other’s hair, watching “Beaches” and “Wuthering Heights” and eating Ben and Jerry’s New York Super Fudge Chunk right from the carton. Niki had brought the makings for pina colodas – the one and only drink that Laurel could tolerate the taste of – and fixed Laurel two stiffly spiked ones in quick succession. Their only slightly drunken conversation rolled around to sex – as it did frequently even when they were sober – and Laurel let it slip that she wanted to be in a relationship where she was spanked – that she wanted John, in particular, of course, to spank her. She’d even blurted out to her somewhat stunned friend that he’d already done it once, and it was what she had been living on all those years.

There were few words in the English language that Laurel hated as much as the word “fetish”. “It is not a fetish,” she corrected petulantly.

“Uh huh,” Niki answered back, entirely unconvinced, as usual. “So? What are you waiting for! Tell me how it went!”

Laurel stretched and yawned, realizing there was no way she was going to escape doing exactly that, so she gave in and described the evening in excruciating detail – but leaving out the part about him swatting her bottom on the way out. Niki would just have too much fun with that, and it was too late in the evening to hear her friend gloating and giggling in her ear about it.

“So, when are you going to see him again?”

An unexpected blush settled on Laurel’s features, making her glad that Niki wasn’t there to see it. “Uh . . . “

“Come on – after a night like that he didn’t ask you out again?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“So? When?”

For some reason, Laurel didn't want to admit that they were getting together again so soon, but she knew Niki wouldn't let it lie. "Tomorrow. He's cooking for me tomorrow at his place."

Niki's knowing, dragged out "mmmmmmm-hmmmmmm" made Laurel frown fiercely at the phone.

"Can I go to bed now?" she asked petulantly.

"Yeah, I guess so . . . "

"You're soooooo generous – not!"

"Humph."

"G'night already!"

"Night."

Amazingly, Laurel was asleep almost as soon as she put the phone down. It seemed that annoying friends demanding intimate details of your evening were excellent diversions, not to mention sleeping potions.

The day was not going well. Work was flat out with problem after problem, and she was barely able to leave on time. Laurel had taken a half-day off from work, using part of her one and only personal day, to re-register her car. She left work at lunchtime and, of course, hit noon traffic downtown, which might not seem like much in a small New England burg, but when you weren't used to it, it was awful. She had to circle the block around Town Hall four times before she found a space, and even then, when she slipped into it and got out of her car to feed the blasted meter, she realized she was in front of a fire hydrant. Well, she rationalized, she was only going to be in there for a few minutes – as long as there wasn't a line – then she'd be right out. Practically running into the building, she told herself that if she heard fire trucks, she'd run and move her car.

The process took longer than she'd thought it would – of course – because there was a small line and only one person working the window. "So much for where my city taxes are going," she thought. "It certainly isn't into employing enough people to handle the volume of customers."

By the time she got out of there, she was grumpy and cranky and just wanted to get home. The administrative end of owning a vehicle was a pain in the neck, as far as she

was concerned – taxes, registration, inspection, insurance – sheesh! She was busy trying to put her wallet back into her purse as she trotted down the steps to her car, so she didn't see him before she ran right into him.

John Beauchamp was standing on the edge of the sidewalk, near the front bumper of her car. And he looked as unhappy as she felt. When she walked into him, he was so solid she practically bounced off of him, throwing herself backwards a couple of stumbling steps. His hands shot out to catch her before she fell, steadying her firmly. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you there." She tried for a light, friendly tone and a small smile, but knew she failed miserably at both.

"Obviously, there are a lot of things you don't see." He stared pointedly at the fire hydrant, then back at her.

"Oh," Laurel mumbled. "I was only in there for a few minutes –" Her voice trailed off as a police cruiser pulled up alongside her car, and the officer got out.

"Hey, John. Ma'm." He touched the tip of his hat to Laurel. "What do we have here?"

"She's parked in front of a hydrant." John said the words as if he was saying that she'd set fire to a baby or something equally horrific.

Both of the men looked at her in that disappointed fashion her father had when she'd done something wrong. Laurel began to feel like a naughty schoolgirl at the principal's office instead of an independent woman in her forties. "Look, officer, I had to get my car registered – today's the last day. You wouldn't want me to drive around in an unregistered vehicle, would you?"

"I'm more concerned about the fact that, by parking in front of a fire hydrant, you've endangered other peoples' lives."

"Yeah," John agreed heartily. "What if there was a fire?"

Laurel knew there was going to be no winning this argument. "Fine, fine. Give me a ticket, officer, and I'll be on my way."

To her chagrin, he proceeded to do exactly that, saying as he was leaving, "Thanks for calling me, John. There's been too much of this lately. Someone's going to get hurt."

"You called him and told him that I was blocking a hydrant?"

John nodded, but didn't seem inclined to talk. He grabbed her arm again and was guiding her none too gently around to the driver's side of her car, but Laurel was livid. "Are you crazy? Do you know what's going to happen to my insurance because of that ticket?" She was about as close to yelling as she'd ever gotten in her life – making a scene and being loud wasn't her style at all.

He didn't look at all regretful. His jaw was working as furiously now as hers had been last night when he'd smacked her. Moreso. And he managed to look a lot more threatening than she ever would, towering over her with a truly angry expression. "It's going to go up – which will hopefully make you remember not to do that again every time you pay it." He opened her door and pressed her into the driver's seat. "But I intend to give you an entirely different kind of reminder that will hopefully make an even more indelible impression on you." He slammed her door shut then leaned in the window. "You are to drive to my house. I'll be following you – " John held up a hand to stop her when she opened her mouth to protest. "Not a word, Laurel. And no funny business, either. Drive straight to my place."

Sitting and fuming behind the steering wheel, Laurel didn't start her car immediately. She was too angry. Her hands were shaking – both from anger and from just a tinge of concern - not quite fear – about what was going to happen to her in the next hour or so, although she figured she had a pretty fair idea, and she didn't like it at all.

He was right behind her, and she sat so long that he revved the engine of his hulking truck at her to get her going. Finally, she pulled out of the impromptu parking space that had gotten her into so much trouble. Now she heartily wished she'd gone around the block a gazillion times instead of trying to make do.

A few short minutes later – too short as far as Laurel was concerned - she pulled into his driveway and he pulled in behind her, blocking her escape – not that she thought he'd ever let her go if he didn't want to. Laurel sat stubbornly in her car, not wanting to get out. Getting out was almost like admitting defeat, and she was too stubborn for that. She knew she wasn't going to like what was going to happen once he got her into his house, so she decided to stay right where she was for as long as possible.

But John wasn't about to let her do that. He was very, very unhappy with her, and was quite intent on teaching her a good lesson. In a way, he was almost reluctant to do it so early in their renewed relationship, but maybe it was a good thing to lay down the law with her and let her know exactly what kind of consequences she was facing whenever she misbehaved like this. He wasn't interested in abusing her in any way – never could, never would. But he was going to correct her behavior when need be, in the exact method he knew had worked for her father – and had worked for him that one time he'd

employed it BS – before Sylvia.

He walked slowly up to her car and tapped on the window, crooking his finger at her imperiously. John wasn't going to give her the chance to argue with him. He opened the door and held out his hand, palm up.

Laurel sighed. Had it just been a few days ago when she had thought of him spanking her with a longing that had nearly floored her? Nah, that couldn't have been her. She looked up at him for some sign of softening, of yielding, but there was none. He was as stone faced as she'd ever seen him, and getting more so the longer she delayed complying with him.

Reluctantly, resolutely, she put her fingers in his warm palm, knowing that, in a few minutes, his palm was going to be warm for an entirely different reason other than natural body heat. John's fingers closed around hers quickly, as if he didn't want to give her the chance to rethink what she'd done. Before she knew it, he'd brought her up the short walk and into his house, only letting go of his iron grip on her once he'd closed and locked the front door behind them.

Chapter 6

Laurel clasped her sweaty hands together nervously. "I'm really sorry about parking there, you know," she began, with little hope that any sort of mea culpa at this point would get her anywhere at all with him. There wasn't an iota of forgiveness anywhere to be seen in his entire body.

His dining room table had been his grandparents' originally, before his mother had inherited it – a big claw footed oak monstrosity with six sturdy, straight-backed chairs. He moved the one at the head of the table – where he himself sat on the rare occasion he decided not to eat in front of the television – out from the table to face them, then sat down on it and extended his hand to her again.

The stubborn side of Laurel was getting tired of his imperiousness. Who did he think he was, anyway? But her saner side prevailed. She didn't want to get herself into any more trouble than she was already in. Slowly, as slowly as she dared, considering how angry he looked, she moved towards him, until her fingertips barely touched his outstretched hand.

"You know what's coming, don't you?" he asked in that deep, velvet tone of his.

She tried to retract her hand, but he was too quick for her. Before she knew it, she was face to face with his dining room rug, his hard thighs forming a platform for her tummy,

her legs hanging free in the air, ready to kick up at a moment's notice. It was a position she wasn't entirely unfamiliar with, considering that her father had employed it a few times when she was a little girl – although really, considering what a hellion she was, she'd spent very little time over anyone's lap.

And this was the second time he'd taken such liberties with her.

John flipped the pale lilac ankle length skirt she was wearing up over her back, revealing suntanned panty hose over demur white panties. He smiled secretly to himself, but tried not to let himself get derailed by the sight of those lovely legs of hers, not to mention that wonderfully well rounded bottom he'd soon be setting fire to. He made short work of her panties and her pantyhose, even while she was struggling not to let him be quite that familiar with her.

Finally, he leaned over and growled, "If you keep struggling, I'll start adding strokes."

The fight died out of her immediately . . . sort of. "You let me go, John Beauchamp! You have no right to do this!"

His palm fitted itself tightly over the ample curve of her bottom, daring to heft it as if he was judging its weight and composition. "Yes, I do. I told you I look after those I consider to be mine. You are mine, whether you know it or want to acknowledge it yet. I think you always have been." Those had been her thoughts almost exactly only days ago.

But not while she was in this position!

"And this is one of the ways I take care of my woman – I discipline her when she needs it – and, if you think that you can get away with something like this around me, you're about to be proven wrong, missy."

Laurel had arched up to try to refute what he was saying, but she never got the chance. After his last word, John began to spank.

And he meant business. She was crying within the first ten unbelievably painful swats. He might as well have been using some sort of evil implement on her – Laurel would have sworn he had to be using something other than his hand. Hands don't hurt that badly when they spank, do they?

Apparently, his did. She was humiliated at how quickly she was totally lost to the pain he was inciting in every square inch of her rear end. He left no molecule untouched, from the top of her creamy hillocks to the top of the backs of her knees – he condemned every

bit of it to mimic a hot summer evening's sunset – varying degrees of ripe, hot red and searing pink. After the first volley of twenty or so, he rubbed his hand over her backside and let her catch her breath just a little. "I'm a fireman. You've been around firemen all your life. What could you have been thinking that would have made you park where you did?"

Laurel didn't know if it was a rhetorical question, but she certainly hoped it was, considering that she could barely get the breath back into her lungs and answering was quite beyond her. She'd already been reduced to a sniveling mass of humanity, tears dripping off the end of her nose, eyes practically swollen shut. No amount of wiggling or shifting or begging or pleading seemed to make any difference. She knew it was far from over, and she had not an ounce of dignity left.

"Well, Laurel Evelyn West, the next time you see an open space where there's a hydrant, I can guarantee that you're going to think more than twice about taking it and possibly costing some people their lives just because you couldn't be inconvenienced by a short walk."

There was no doubting that she'd be doing exactly that by the time he got through with her. She had already resolved even before he brought his palm down on her practically virginal bottom that she was going to register her car online next year.

By now, she'd stopped begging, stopped wiggling, and practically stopped breathing. The only thing she hadn't ceased doing was crying. Her hair was wet with sweat and tears, and she knew that her face was at least as red as the side he'd been tending to.

John kept her over his lap for a few more minutes, listening to her trying to gather her senses about her. It had been a very hard spanking, and he almost regretted it. Almost. But this was not a matter he felt he could let slide. Despite his hard assed demeanor throughout this event, he found himself absently rubbing the small of her back. It wasn't as if hurting her was something he enjoyed doing – despite their past. But there were some things she was going to need to learn not to do, and this was most definitely one of them.

"Are you all right?" he asked, almost afraid of the answer. She'd quieted, but had become almost too quiet for his tastes.

Laurel took that as a sign that she could get up, struggling to her feet with as little assistance from him as was possible. She straightened her skirt and wiped her face, all without looking at him once. John got up and brought her a box of Kleenex. Laurel availed herself of several tissues, blowing her nose loudly and not caring much that he

heard her.

She remembered where the garbage was, and threw the tissues away, then tried to stalk past him with what little dignity she could muster gathered tightly around her like an armor against him. Laurel wanted nothing more at that moment than to be alone in her apartment where she could lick her wounds.

But John didn't want her leaving like that. He had a feeling that if he let her go, she'd find excuses never to see him again, and he wasn't about to lose her. Not after they'd been separated for so long because of something stupid he did. This wasn't stupid. This had been the right thing to do, whether or not she was willing to admit it.

He caught her just as she tried to brush past him, turning her around mid stride so that she collided with him violently as she seemed to have a habit of doing all on her own, not that he minded at all. He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her to him with one hand spread out at the small of her back, carefully above the area he'd just singed, and the other holding the back of her head, effectively trapping her against him. John didn't say anything – he didn't think there was anything he really could say. What he'd done definitely spoke for itself. Despite the fact that her beautiful little fanny was probably throbbing, he didn't want her running away from him – he wanted her to run towards him, to be comforted.

Being in the arms of the man who just roasted her rump was not Laurel's idea of fun. All she wanted in the world at that moment was to be alone to nurse her wounds – face down on her bed, of course. She doubted she'd be sleeping on her back or sitting comfortably anywhere for a while. But none of her struggling or wiggling did her any good – just as it hadn't when she was getting spanked. Finally, she had pretty much exhausted herself and sighed heavily, too tired and embarrassed and hurting to even be angry any more.

When she leaned her head on his shoulder – not in a relaxed manner, but face first, as if she was still protesting being held and didn't want to give him an inch – John kissed the soft, sweet smelling hair that was just under his nose. “Poor baby. I'm sorry you had to be spanked.”

“I didn't have to be spanked,” came the automatic protest.

John began to rock them both gently back and forth as they stood there, rubbing his hands up and down the length of her back soothingly. “Yeah, you did. You need to know that someone is going to make sure you behave – that you take care of yourself and follow the rules. You've always needed that. And I'm just the man who can provide you

with exactly that type of security.”

She was shaking her head vehemently, but wasn’t struggling to get away any more, he noticed. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world, bar none.”

“I am not!” she mumbled against his neck.

“Are so.” His lips made a pilgrimage from her ear to her mouth, barely touching her skin along the way, setting her to tingling with the anticipation of his kiss. When his lips touched the corner of hers, she’d melted. She loved him. She wanted him. How could she resist him?

She couldn’t. When Laurel tilted her head to meet his kiss, something deep inside John relaxed. He’d been very worried that what he’d done might have been the death knell for them – yet again. But it was important to him that she accept his discipline, and obeying laws that had to do with fire safety were ones he would never be willing to overlook in anyone, much less his woman.

Kissing her made him wish he had the time to devote to truly make her feel better . . . but he didn’t if he was going to be able to feed her this evening. A thought struck him, and he drew back from her just a bit to look down at her. She seemed to be avoiding his eyes, and he could see how swollen and red hers were – kind of like her bottom cheeks.

“Dinner is still on. Six o’clock,” he stated emphatically, as if trying to warn her somehow.

When she said nothing, not even raising her head to look at him, he continued in the same tone of voice, “Or else – “

“I know, I know!” Laurel sounded more aggravated than someone with a still badly throbbing behind should, but she was aggravated – with him and with herself . . . but mostly with him. “Or you’ll come and get me.”

John nodded, watching her carefully.

“You really need to get some new lines – you’re already repeating yourself.”

His tone became even more serious. “Would you like me to repeat what I just did to your bottom?”

Her head snapped up and her eyes slid warily past his. “No, thank you,” Laurel answered

softly.

“Well, then I suggest you lose the attitude, sweetie.” He didn’t seem to be angry, just serious, but when she tried to twist away from him this time, he let her go.

A little nervously, she began to back towards the door, as if she expected him to sneak up on her and try to throw her over his lap again. “I – I – uh – I’ll see you, then,” Laurel swallowed hard. “At six.”

John tried to smile gently, although he wasn’t sure whether it hit his lips or not. “Bring your appetite!”

Laurel closed the front door behind her and leaned back against it for the shortest of moments, then continued to her car, trying not to sit too hard in the seat. When she got home after driving with abnormal care and following every speed limit, she practically ran into her bedroom and tore off her clothes to stand in front of her mirror, craning her neck into entirely unnatural positions trying to see exactly what her poor tender nates looked like.

They were a collidescope of various shades of pink and red – mostly red. His handprint was visible everywhere; she was physically stamped with the brand of his ownership. Her skin radiated heat, as if she’d fallen asleep in the July sun. But that portion of her anatomy wasn’t often exposed to the sun.

She lay on her bed, on her stomach, replaying the scene in her head over and over. Had she let him take too many liberties too early in what seemed to be a reconciliation between them? Was she crazy to let him touch her like that at all, considering their past?

Although it had certainly hurt enough at the time, as the pain of the spanking faded, a warmth replaced it – not only in her hind end, but also places south of her navel. Laurel could feel herself dampening with thoughts of John and how wonderfully dominant he was. If they stayed together for any length of time at all, she was sure she could look forward to many more scenes just like that.

Laurel puttered for the rest of the day – too uncomfortable to sit in front of her computer, she did some light housework and lazed around. After all, it was a half-day off. She didn’t want to do anything too strenuous. After a somewhat cooler than normal shower in deference to her roasted rump, she pondered what to wear, then decided on a pretty peach, blue and cream flowered shirt and jeans.

It wasn’t until she had already pressed the doorbell that she remembered she had

fleeting thought of not coming this evening. That thought had assailed her at the height of the spanking, when she was writhing and moaning the loudest. But she could no more deny herself a chance to be with the man she'd loved from afar for so long than she could turn off the sun.

Suddenly, her eyes were filled with John, who was also in a t-shirt – although it had the Fire Department logo on it, not frilly flowers – and jeans. Dinner was wonderful – he'd even put a cushion on her chair for her, so she wouldn't be uncomfortable on the hard wooden surface while they ate. It did give her a tingle, however, to think that she was sitting in the chair she'd been put over for a spanking. Now, every time she saw his dining room set, that was what she was going to think of first and foremost, before anything else.

Although she would have bet against it, he was a decent cook. John – being big and tall and brawny – just didn't look like he'd excel at much that was domestic. But her impression was wrong – at least regarding this meal. It might well be the only one he knew how to cook, but he did a great job of it. There was a tossed salad and several choices of dressing, garlic bread with cheese, and the famed homemade spaghetti sauce, complete with meatballs that were the size of Laurel's fist. He also popped open a bottle of wine and enticed her into having a glass with him.

The sauce was spicier than she was used to, but she liked spicy food, and the garlic bread helped defer some of the fire in her mouth.

John grinned at her, halfway through.

“What? Do I have spaghetti sauce in my hair?”

“No, you're just doing much better than I thought with the sauce. It's pretty kicked up – even though I toned it down some.”

Her eyes bugged. “Toned it down?”

“Yeah,” he said on a laugh. “The guys at the station like it so hot they sweat and cry while they're eating it.”

Laurel raised an eyebrow. “Just what I want to do when I'm enjoying a meal – sweat and cry. Sounds more like what I do when I'm at the gym!”

They had a great, relaxed meal. There was no tension at all left over from this afternoon. Laurel had worried about that – that there would be an awkwardness between them. But it

just didn't happen. They slipped into their usual easygoing patterns together as if it had never happened. She tried to help him clean up from dinner, but he wouldn't let her, putting the dishes to soak in the sink and waving her back to the dining room. "Do you drink coffee?"

"Occasionally," she answered. "I'd like some if you have it."

"Excellent. It'll go great with dessert."

"Dessert? You baked?" She was bug eyed.

John brought the coffee and dessert in on a tray. "No, no. That's one thing I don't do – as you can remember from the cookies. I never got any better after them, and finally my Mom begged me to stop trying. I got something I thought you would like from the Dinette."

The Calhoun's Dinette was famous – to the locals – for its down home atmosphere and to-die-for baked goods. Laurel's mouth began to water when she set her sights on a huge chocolate cheesecake.

"You are a corrupting influence," she accused when he set a big slab down in front of her.

"Good. You're not fat. You can have dessert every once in a while. Please don't tell me you're on a low-carb, no real food, Jones Beach diet."

Laurel snorted, dissolving into bliss at her first mouthful. "No, I'm more likely on a Coney Island diet. I really shouldn't eat as much as I do, even though I do eat good meals because even though I live alone I cook dinner for myself. I just eat too much of it."

John couldn't even begin to touch his cheesecake – he was enjoying watching her sensuously devouring hers. Every molecule of his body was brought to stiff attention at her first orgasmic moan, and he had to shift in his chair to accommodate his own expansion. He was sure his penis was going to resemble an accordion before she was through; he was having to try to fold it and force it into contortions to keep it from being too noticeable.

He settled for taking a sip of his coffee, which he took strong and black. At least she didn't seem to be bearing a grudge about this afternoon. He had worried about that a bit, considering her attitude afterwards, but her bad mood – or whatever it was – didn't seem to have taken hold. She appeared to be enjoying herself as much as he was.

But he wanted more. He wanted all of her. He knew he should wait – knew he should consolidate his position with her before he took their relationship to another intimate level so soon. But he ached for her like he'd never ached for any woman in his life. And it wasn't just physical – although that was certainly a big part of it. He wanted her to sleep next to him. He wanted to extend his protection to her, and to be there for her, as his father had been there for his mom. He wanted forever with her, and, for the first time since he'd seen her at the funeral, he let himself think that there might be a chance for them, if he played his cards right.

They had moved into the living room, sharing the couch, and Laurel caught him staring at her unblinkingly. "Uh, hello?" She waved her hand in front of his face. "Are you in there, John Boy?"

He frowned at the hated nickname she had used every chance she got when they were going up, just because she knew how much it annoyed him. "Cut that out."

Laurel laughed softly. "Yeah, that always works to stop me."

He scooped over the short distance between them. "I know something that will definitely work. I'm going to keep your mouth occupied so that you don't have a chance to say it again."

He was going to kiss her. Laurel thought for sure she'd melt in his arms, but when she did he caught her against him, holding her boneless body tight to his strong, hard one. Tentatively, her hand came up to touch his cheek, and he moaned. In the heated haze, she took note of his reaction and reveled in it. She loved that he responded to her like that.

They kissed for what seemed like minutes but was really hours. Finally, John pulled away from her and looked down into her eyes, then he stood and put his hand out. His voice was gravelly with passion. "Will you let me love you tonight?"

Laurel bit her lip. She wanted to put her hand in his with everything she was. But was it the right thing to do, especially after such a short reacquaintance?

He seemed to understand her hesitation. "There'll be no repercussions if you say no. I just want to love you so badly . . ." John looked tellingly down at the tent at the front of his jeans, then back up at her, his heart in the depth of his eyes. "I don't think there's ever been anyone for me but you, Laurel West."

She stood and put her hand over the rigidity there. "I know there's never been anyone

for me but you. I've tried to replace you, but it never worked out."

"Good," John said vehemently. His arms came around her, and she felt like she was home, for the first time in a long, long time.

Something strange was buzzing near her ear, and it was incorporating itself into her dream as a big pterodactyl screeching as it picked up one of her friends and carried her aloft. Laurel struggled up through heavy layers of exhausted sleep in time to hear someone mutter under his breath, "Shit shit shit," just before she was nearly crushed by a behemoth rolling over onto her to punch out the alarm clock.

"I'm sorry," someone with a very sexy, husky voice whispered into her ear. "I meant to catch that before it went off. I have to get up, but you don't."

Laurel tried to keep her mouth as closed as possible, lest he get a whiff of her morning breath. "Where do you have to go today? It's Saturday."

His soft chuckle tickled her ears as his hands began to gently explore her. "Weekends don't mean much in the Fire Department, honey," his words breezed into her mouth.

She tried to turn away from him, but he kept her in place with a firm hand on her jaw.

"Why are you trying to avoid kissing me already?"

Laurel was in the middle of a huge yawn, and could only shake her head at him. "No no no. I just want to spare you my morning breath."

John gave her a disbelieving look. "Get real. My breath can't be any better than yours this morning – we ate the same things last night. C'mon. I have to go risk life and limb to keep the city safe. Kiss me like you mean it."

She was still giggling at the superhero send up he was giving himself, but when his lips returned to hers, she let him in eagerly, wiggling further beneath him and pressing herself against him. John groaned and grabbed her hips, pulling her almost violently into him, his arousal pressing itself insistently against her lower tummy.

"God, I wish I could take advantage of you again this morning," he growled, nibbling her ear, then down the sensitive column of her neck.

Chills beset Laurel and her nipples popped to attention, along with all of the rest of her. There was no longer a sleepy bone in her body. "Who's stopping you?" she teased,

trailing her fingertips down his rock hard chest.

John leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose, and sighed, then fairly vaulted out of the bed. If he hadn't just been so obviously interested, Laurel might have worried at his precipitous departure. "Work. I like to sleep in so much that the alarm is set to go off at the last possible moment before I'll be late."

Chapter 7

He was headed for the shower. "You stay here, though, as long as you like. As a matter of fact, I certainly wouldn't object if you were still in that position when I came home tomorrow morning . . ." He winked at her outrageously then ducked into the bathroom.

She did fall back asleep, and only barely awakened when he climbed into the bed and pressed his lips to hers gently, saying, "Don't wake up. I just wanted to kiss you good-bye. Sleep well. And I meant it about staying here. Make yourself to home. I'll call you later."

Laurel didn't take him up on his offer. She didn't feel comfortable being in his house without him. They were still much too new for that. So, not long after he left, she did – but only after cleaning up the kitchen for him. She mused on the way home that she'd probably put things where he'd never find them again, but that was the chance he took leaving her to her own devices.

She was on cloud nine. She floated through the day. Every once in a while, she'd stop in the middle of her laundry or vacuuming and just let the memories flow through her. It was . . . magical – no matter how clichéd the term. It made her wish she'd been less invested in being a virgin when they were first together. A huge smile spread over her face. He'd been suitably startled when he realized that she was still untried, but Laurel wouldn't let him leave her when he made a move to slide away. She was so ready for him that she knew any small amount of pain would be completely overlooked in the realization that he'd finally made her his.

And she was right.

He'd taken his time with her, even before he knew she was virgin territory. They luxuriated in each other – touching and teasing and petting and kissing until neither of them could stand to be apart a second longer. When he rolled her beneath him, parting her legs and ending up on top of her, she had a moment of concern – not quite fear, just apprehension. But John soothed her immediately. He saw her eyes widen, and just thought that she might be concerned about the differences in their sizes or something. He

cupped her cheek and kissed her face gently, moving himself very slowly into position. “Shhhh, sweetie. There’s no need to be alarmed. It’s just me, and you know I’d never hurt you.”

Thoughts of the spanking she’d endured just hours before had totally fled her mind, luckily. Laurel had grabbed a hold of his forearms, looking up at him with her soul in those bottomless eyes of hers. John pressed forward, intending to seat himself within her in one stroke, but something was preventing his advance, and it took him several long moments to recognize what it was.

That was when it dawned on him, and he tried to get off her, wanting to somehow start the whole evening over again. But Laurel wouldn’t let him go. Her hands clung to his back, drifting downwards and making him wish he was a stronger man. But he couldn’t resist her, although he knew he should. Those small fingers were no longer clinging, but brushing over his buttocks tantalizingly. John didn’t know if he could hold himself back, but he was going to do his damndest for her.

In the end, though, she was the one who was begging for him to take her completely, and he finally gave in to her demands, burying himself deep inside her, almost losing himself at the warmth of her surrounding him, finally, after all those years.

Laurel was shocked and surprised to find him inside her – despite the fact that she knew intellectually that that was what was going to happen. But the reality of it flooded her mind. She was his, for the first time. Perhaps, for the only time, but he was with her now, and they were as close as any two humans would ever, could ever be.

John’s face was a rictus of pleasure above her. She hoped it was pleasure, anyway. It could just as easily have been agonizing pain. She felt a huge shudder go through his body and his eyes closed spasmodically. His hips began to move himself in and out of her, almost against his will. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he began repeating.

“Don’t be,” Laurel whispered, rubbing his back and shoulders, trying to lift herself into each thrust, taking some of her own pleasure from him. “I’m fine. What can I do to make it better for you?”

He almost smiled. “Ohhhhhhh, sw-weeettiie – ” He drove into her several more times then spasmed above and inside her while she held onto him with every appendage she owned, clutching her to him and holding him tight.

When his breathing had calmed down some, he moved to one side despite her protests that she wanted him to stay where he was. He could tell her breathing was labored

because of his weight. "I'm sorry, Laurel."

Her eyebrow rose and she turned to him. "About what?"

"About going ahead without you."

She was stumped for a moment, and then blushed a bright red. "That's all right."

"No, it's not," he stated baldly. "I don't want you thinking I'm some selfish lover who doesn't care about my partner's pleasure. I'm not. You just caught me by surprise – I certainly hadn't expected to be your first, and it was a bit of a . . . stimulant, apparently." He snuggled her under his chin. "Give me just a minute to recover, and then I'll make it up to you."

And he had proven to be a man of his word – and then some.

She had never felt so treasured in all her life. The first thing he did was strip away the covers, revealing her naked body to his greedy eyes. She tried to grab the covers back, but he wouldn't let her. "Uh uhuh. I wanna see you, lady. I want to feast my eyes."

"Jo-ohn!" Laurel tried to cover the strategic areas, but he threatened to tie her hands out of the way if she didn't move them.

"You wouldn't dare!" she responded with only partially exaggerated outrage. The look he gave her told her that he wasn't kidding. "You're waaaaay too kinky for a beginner!"

"Try to relax." He kept up a very light patter the whole time his hands learned every secret place she owned. They skimmed the tips of her breasts as they strained for more, cupped the curve of her waist and carefully fit themselves between her knees, following the inside of her thighs up to the place that most ached for him.

But Laurel was feeling especially shy, and she tried to push his hand away. "You don't have to do this, you know. I'm fine."

"I know you're fine, honey. I've known that for a very long time." Laurel looked away, embarrassed by his praise. "I want to pleasure you." He stared at her and spoke as his fingers touched her where she was most a woman, where no other man had ever touched, flicking that most sensitive spot with the tip of his index finger and making her jump . . .

In the midst of her reverie, the phone rang.

“You were gone all last night,” Niki accused immediately.

Laurel’s mouth twisted. “Well, hello to you, too!”

“Enough of the niceties – tell me what happened . . . as if I don’t already know!”

Laurel wasn’t about to kiss and tell. “We had dinner.”

“He had you for dinner, you mean . . . “

“I do not mean that! And he did not.”

“Well, I’m surprised. I wouldn’t have thought he’d be the ‘wham, bam, thank you ma’am’ type . . . “

Falling right into the trap, Laurel defended John vociferously. “He is not at all like that!”

“Ah-ha!! So you did spend the night with him!”

“I’m not saying a word.”

Niki sighed heavily in exasperation. “You are no fun at all!”

“Stop trying to get your thrills vicariously through me. Isn’t Brian keeping you satisfied?”

“Brian was two boyfriends ago,” Niki admitted in a wry tone of voice.

“I rest my case. Who is it now? I don’t have my scorecard on me . . . “

“Just because I didn’t spend twenty years pining for a man who dumped me . . . “

There was a moment of silence. “Good thing I love you, or I’d have to deck you,” Laurel spoke first.

“Uh huh. So where are you guys going from here?”

Laurel shrugged. “I don’t know. We didn’t talk about anything – even another date. And I’m certainly not going to push him.”

Niki tsked loudly. “Gonna spend another twenty years waiting for him?”

“Hey! No, I’m not. I’m just not going to assume anything.”

“All these years, and I haven’t learned you nothing about men, have I?”

She wasn’t able to glean much more from Laurel about her evening, despite her valiant attempts. Laurel was totally mum, as if she didn’t want to jinx things by talking about them. When she hung up the phone, she slipped right back into that luscious, true to life fantasy she’d started before she was so rudely interrupted.

John had been the lover of her dreams and fantasies for so long that it was amazing to her that he managed to live up to her inflated expectations, but he had – and then some. He set every nerve she owned on fire, then laid back for a long moment and did nothing but watch her writhe with loving, admiring eyes. Laurel – whose eyes were long since closed against the intimacies he was perpetrating on her body – opened them to find him staring at her.

“What?” she asked, suddenly very self-conscious. She’d tried to reach for the covers, but he deftly moved them out of her reach with a foot.

“Ah-ah-ahh-hhh, none of that, none of that.” He adored the way she was blushing so furiously. Most forty-something year old women were somewhat jaded, having had at least several partners if not several husbands by that time. But this lovely woman knew only him, and he was determined that she was going to have a wonderful first experience . . . and last experience, about forty years from now.

“You’re gorgeous, and I love to look at your beautiful body.”

Her snort of complete derision about herself got her rolled onto her tummy for an impromptu couple of stinging swats to her derriere. When John rolled her over again, immediately beginning to rekindle whatever fires the spanking might have dampened, he was pleasantly surprised to find that she was bathing his hand even more copiously than she had before, despite her protestations about those few snaps on her butt. He slid his big, thick fingers inside her very gently, listening for signs of distress. There were none – in fact she arched and ground a little against his hand.

“I think you protest too much,” he whispered against the crest of her breast, his eyes deliberately holding hers just before his mouth settled on a swollen tip with excruciating slowness. Laurel’s soul deep, pleased sigh melted over his heart. He wanted to make her do that with every move, and he pretty much accomplished his goal – she seemed to love everything he did to her. How could she not? John gauged her responses to his every

touch or lick, cataloguing them for future reference and repeating those that garnered the biggest sighs and moans.

He touched every inch of her – none were too intimate that he would allow her modest protestations to stand. He wanted to know all of her, and by the time he carefully placed her legs over his shoulders as he finally lay before that most sacred of buffets. He had spent long moments preparing her for this, so that each time his fingertips touched her anywhere it elicited a keening sigh that revealed just how attuned to him she was. He'd never seen a more responsive woman, and she was all his.

Her eyes were starkly wide, and he held them with his as his mouth descended inexorably onto the most sensitive spot on her body. John felt her shudder as he sealed her with a kiss, surrounding that throbbing button of flesh and just pressing the flat, warm back of his tongue against it. Laurel had arched up and cried out his name, and mere seconds later, when he began to move just the slightest against her, she grabbed for him, screaming once – a short, completely impromptu utterance that he felt her stifle as she convulsed violently in his mouth.

Laurel snapped out of her white-hot remembrance and found herself in a hot sweat that was entirely John's fault. Her lower body ached for him – hell, her entire body ached to be in his arms, in his bed . . .

She shook herself out of it. She'd spent too long pining for him already. Now that she knew what it was like to be his, though, she found it was a double-edged sword: it made it just that much harder to think that it was an impermanent thing and that all she could be left with in the end were these wonderful – if slightly pornographic – memories. It might have been a blessing in disguise that on their first go around, they didn't do all that much . . . considering how much she now knew there was to do.

Housework called, as always, and she tried to throw herself into it, although she was entirely unable to work up any enthusiasm . . . not that that was necessarily an unusual thing. Laurel tried to keep herself busy all day, so that she wouldn't keep thinking about John and whether or not he would call her. He'd said he would, and she wanted to believe him. But she seemed to be a mass of insecurities when it came to him, and it made her hate herself. She refused to cling. If their night together didn't go anywhere, then she'd clutch those wonderful memories to her every night for the rest of her life.

When the phone finally did ring near nine o'clock, she almost didn't get to it because she'd been downstairs tending to the mountain of laundry she generated all by herself during the week. That was the price she paid for being a clothes horse, she guessed. When she answered the phone after sprinting up the stairs like a teenager in heat, she was

entirely breathless. “Hello?” she fairly panted into the receiver as she collapsed into her favorite overstuffed chair.

John’s amused chuckle warmed her better than the impromptu exercise. “Wow – I hadn’t expected an obscene phone call when I was the one making the call . . . “

A hearty Bronx cheer was all she had the breath for at first.

“What were you doing that’s got you so out of breath?”

“Laundry.”

“Good. At least there isn’t some guy I need to punch out.”

“Yeah, right – the only person you could aim at is yourself, and you know it.”

He gave a heartfelt groan. “I wish I was in a place where I could talk to you about that, but unfortunately I’m not.”

“Awwww. Poor baby.” Her voice conveyed a distinct lack of sympathy, despite her words.

“You just wait, missy. You’ll have your own turn when I get my hands on you again.”

Laurel took a swallow of the diet soda she’d been nursing through the evening.
“Promises, promises.”

“And you know that I’ll deliver on those promises, don’t you, Laurel?” he rasped, adjusting himself on the uncomfortable folding chair that sat by the phone.

She just couldn’t help it – her whole body shivered and convulsed, just from the tone of his voice and his provocative words. But she didn’t say anything. She couldn’t – she was too choked with sensual memories.

“Don’t you?” he prompted on a gruff whisper.

“Yes, I do,” Laurel admitted in a much softer, more hesitant whisper.

“Damn straight,” he replied in a surprisingly gentle but firm tone. “So what did you do all day?”

“Housework. Weekends are for housework.”

“Ugh. My condolences.”

Laurel giggled. “Yeah – not my favorite of activities – that’s why I pretty much put it off as long a possible.”

They had a great talk until he had to go – easy and casual and never an awkward moment. “What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked purposefully.

“More housework.”

“Good Lord, woman, your place isn’t that big and can’t be that dirty!”

On a chuckle, Laurel admitted, “You’d be surprised. I’m a slob.”

“Well, save out tomorrow afternoon and evening for me. We’ll go do something fun as a reward for your drudgery.”

“What?”

“I don’t know yet, but you’ll see when we get there.”

Their goodbyes were almost as long as their entire conversation, neither of them wanting to get off the phone. When they’d finally hung up, Laurel stared at the phone for a long moment, then burst into tears that continued into dry, hacking sobs. She rocked back and forth, hugging herself.

Her dream was coming true.

She only hoped it had a happy ending this time.

Laurel was in heaven. She and John had been dating – very steadily – for almost six months. He was everything she’d ever wanted him to be – fun, respectful, very protective and extremely sexy. He always wanted to have his hands on her, and hers on him. They seemed to get along with very little effort on either of their parts – and they had tremendous fun doing it. That Sunday, he’d ended up taking her canoeing. They’d also gone hiking and horseback riding and shopping. John was a surprisingly patient shopper, and designated himself the pack mule when she announced that she couldn’t see him one Saturday because her favorite department store was having a bargain basement sale on clothes, and she just had to go. His willingness to sacrifice himself to the mania of a

clothes horse on a mission was one of the reasons she knew he was serious about their relationship. He'd looked almost comically uncomfortable and out of place surrounded by the frilly women's clothing she was looking at – this big, muscular guy laden with bags following her around like a body guard – but he never complained. Not once. He even offered the occasional suggestion – some more vocal than others – when she held something up to look at it, and he out and out vetoed a short, slim white skirt she was casually eyeing.

“No. Put it back,” he said in no uncertain terms.

She'd turned to him in amazement, but then she should have known him better. “Excuse me?” Laurel's back went up immediately. He wasn't generally so autocratic with her, preferring a more firmly gentle approach.

“Put it back and pick out something else. There are enough clothes here to outfit a small army. Find something that's less revealing.”

Until he'd mentioned his objection, she hadn't been considering it that seriously – he was right – it really was too short. But she wasn't about to knuckle under and adjust her shopping habits just because he was a prude. “If I want it, I'll buy it,” Laurel said with quiet strength.

Still burdened with shopping bags, John took one step toward her. Laurel was proud that she didn't automatically take a step back, but stayed put where she was, looking up at him with expectant defiance.

He lowered his voice a little, but nowhere near enough for Laurel, considering what he said. “You can buy it, of course. But if you do, I'll spank you when we get home and you'll wish you hadn't. And the skirt will find its way to Goodwill before you ever have a chance to wear it.”

Her huff of absolute indignation had no noticeable affect on him. He merely stood there, to all outward appearances a mild mannered man. But Laurel knew now, from way too many personal experiences in the last six months, that when she crossed him or did anything that he thought wasn't right for her to do – and, if she'd admit it, she knew she shouldn't do it either – that she'd end up sitting very gingerly for days if she got stubborn about this and disobeyed him.

With a dramatic, and obviously exasperated, sigh, she put the skirt back. “Good girl,” he said.

“Arf,” Laurel replied, putting as much sarcasm into the response as one could to an animal utterance.

But she did find that, in general, the fact that he spanked her didn’t go to his head at all – he wasn’t a control freak at all, didn’t get jealous if she had to work late or anything like that. He completely respected her career at the bank and supported her when she applied elsewhere for better positions – providing a pair of strong, warm arms when she didn’t get the positions for whatever reason. What he expected of her was no more and no less than her best – which is what she should always have been expecting of herself but sometimes failed to do.

That was when he stepped in. He didn’t come into her life and try to rewrite it to his specifications. He wasn’t demanding and he didn’t look for things to spank her for. Usually, like the fire hydrant incident, they reached out and smacked him in the face. John did curb her a little – as he had in the department store – especially her language, and if he ever heard her running herself down. But overall, she didn’t feel smothered or stifled at all by the fact that she occasionally found herself over his lap.

John was also walking pretty proud lately. He was with the woman he’d wanted all his life – he’d just slipped his interest in her to the back burner after Sylvia, figuring he didn’t have a chance with Laurel after what he’d done to her. But he was determined to make up for what he’d done, and didn’t intend on letting her get away from him under any circumstances this time. If he had his way – and it was likely that he would, he thought – they would be married within the next year or two, and he would be the happiest man on Earth. He knew that the next step for them should be for her to move in with him, but she didn’t seem to be in any hurry, and he didn’t want to frighten her away. He figured six months was a good time to suggest it, so he decided to take them away for a long weekend and make the suggestion then.

Laurel loved the ocean. Their two families had vacationed there almost every summer when they were growing up – when they weren’t exploring up and down the Eastern seaboard. So he found a hotel right on the beach in a place they were both already familiar with, but he figured neither of them had been for a while, so it would be almost new for the both of them. He’d considered Boston, but it was such a hassle to get around, and he frankly hated really big cities so much that he dismissed it almost immediately. Maine was the perfect getaway. Well away from home, but not a horrendous drive, and lots to see and do . . . if they ever made it out of the hotel room.

He didn’t tell her where they were going, but told her he was going to take them away for the three day upcoming holiday, and told her to pack a suitcase with comfortable, casual clothes and a swimsuit. The ocean might be too cold to swim in – as always – but

the hotel had a heated pool. Laurel was surprised and excited by his suggestion that they go away, and intrigued by the mystery of not knowing where they were going. John swung by her branch that Friday night, and they motored east. When they turned from Interstate 93 onto Route 101 towards Hampton, Laurel guessed their destination correctly.

“Are we going to Maine?”

John’s smile was enigmatic. No help there. All he would say was, “You’ll see.”

Chapter 8

She was right, of course. They were staying at a hotel that was a place she’d always dreamed of staying, right on the beach. When they were kids, their parents couldn’t afford for them to stay right on the beach, so they always ended up a mile or two away on Route 1, and then trekked down to the beach every day religiously, from nine until four or so. But their room in this gorgeous hotel had a private balcony and it was on the first floor – they could practically roll out of bed and onto the beach.

Once he’d registered, John grabbed all of their bags and guided her into the room. It was huge, with a king sized bed and a Jacuzzi tub. “Wow!!! This is wonderful!!!” She wandered to the sliders and peered out at the view. “God, it’s gorgeous!”

John put the suitcases away and pulled Laurel into his arms, kissing her passionately. “Not as gorgeous as you are,” he growled, lightly nipping her lips.

“Thank you for bringing us here – this was a great idea!”

“You’re welcome. I hope you like the room – I’m not sure whether I’m going to let you out of it for the next three days . . . “

Laurel blushed. Their hunger for each other hadn’t waned. In truth, it seemed to have grown exponentially. Sometimes she barely made it in the door. He’d actually taken her in the foyer, already having gotten her to the floor before he remembered to close the front door.

They did make love, long and slow and sweet, and then went up to Portland to scrounge some seafood for dinner. They found a place where the fish was practically still flopping when it was cooked, and sated themselves on big fisherman’s platters and waddled home, sated in nearly every way.

They barely had the strength to make it to the bed, but managed to collapse there anyway, cuddling together and listening to the sea just outside their door.

Eventually, John found the strength to lift his head from where it lay atop hers and posed a question that startled her out of her almost sleep. “What do you say we move in together when we get back?”

“Where did you get that one from?” Laurel wondered out loud rather defensively.

He moved a little away from her to look down at her, in the general vicinity of her eyes but it was really too dark to tell. “You mean you haven’t even considered it in all these months?” John’s tone made it clear that he highly doubted that.

“Well . . . I didn’t say that.” She started to squirm a little, but John kept her at his side.

“Have you?” he pressed.

“I guess, yeah, I have. But things are going too well, I don’t want to rock the boat.”

“Moving in with me would rock the boat?”

Laurel sighed. “It’s not something I would consider casually at all.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I know.”

There was a long but not uncomfortable silence.

“I’ll never hurt you again, you know.”

Laurel’s reply was noticeably choked. “I know.”

John hugged her once, hard, and then relaxed his grip. He desperately wanted her to say yes – and was tempted to remove the decision from her entirely – but he wanted her to want to be with him. To trust him enough to commit that much of herself to him. Later, after they’d been together for a while, he would start working on the idea of marriage. But he’d be happy to have her under his roof, as soon as possible.

“I need to think about it,” she finally responded, kind of expecting that he’d put up a fight and want a definitive answer immediately. John wasn’t the patient sort when he really wanted something.

He took a deep breath and sighed, and Laurel fancied that she could feel him reigning himself in. “Okay.” And he didn’t mention it again for the rest of the weekend. Sometimes she could see that he wanted to say something, but he didn’t. She admired his restraint, especially considering that she knew it wasn’t his usual style, but John seemed determined not to press her.

She ended up getting into trouble that weekend, however, by using language that he didn’t consider to be acceptable when they got caught in traffic on their way to dinner the next night. He was of a mind to pull off the road and spank her right there in the front seat of the car – an advantage of being in a place where no one they knew would be driving by. But, instead, he let her know in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t happy with her choice of words and that she would be paying for them dearly later.

Laurel spent dinner - which they ate at a boathouse restaurant that was practically in the harbor next to tankers and yachts – on pins and needles, her bottom already tingling furiously with the sure knowledge that she was going to get spanked when they got back to the room. She could barely concentrate on what she was eating, and couldn’t really even follow his conversation.

John grinned at her broadly every time she had to ask him to repeat something – which was with atrocious frequency. He even added to her discomfort by ordering dessert to drag out her anticipation of the event.

As he mowed his way through the chocolate cheesecake, he replayed a conversation they’d had about how she felt about being spanked. His spankings were not light. There was nothing playful about them. He had a point to make, and he was going to make it on her rear. She always cried during a spanking, sometimes out and out screaming. After that first spanking, he had taken to spanking her on his big bed, just so she could have a pillow to muffle her cries, and he always made sure that all doors and windows were shut. All in all, though, considering her violent reaction to his crisp swats, he really couldn’t be sure that the neighbors weren’t getting an earful, not that his house was all that close to them.

He’d asked her one night while they were cuddling after a slow, soft lovemaking session – soft because he’d taken stripes off her bottom the night before for getting a speeding ticket – if she felt that his spankings qualified as abuse, and she was so vehement in her denial that he believed her completely and let a huge sigh of relief from his lungs at that. He didn’t, either, and he would never abuse her in any way, but he had concerns about how it looked and felt to her.

His next question had her thinking for a moment before she answered. “Do they arouse

you at all?”

Finally, she answered, “Not when they’re happening at all – I’m usually too busy begging and screaming.”

John kissed her temple gently. “Yeah, I know.”

“They do arouse me, but later, when I can run them around in my mind. And, frankly, just the fact that you spank me is arousing to me.”

He was pleasantly surprised. “It is?”

“Yes.” Laurel was blushing so furiously she was thankful for the darkness of the room.

“Well. I’ll be.”

Laurel laughed nervously. “I’ve always had a thing for spanking, and when you spanked me when . . . when we were together before, it was exactly what I wanted.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s some weird fixation on my father, but you’re a lot like him – very strong, and always doing the right thing, and you hold me to the same standards he did, the same way he did. And, although I hate to admit it, I need that in my life.”

It was a totally unexpected bonus that what he was doing was actually adding to their sex life. He would have continued to do it even if it hadn’t, but it certainly was nice that she was into it. He was very much like her in that the actual act itself didn’t arouse him, but the nuances of it did – her naked or very close to it over his lap, the connection of his hand with her well-rounded bottom, her wiggling against him trying to escape – which was never successful, of course.

John finished the last forkful of the rich, fudgy cheesecake and stood up, putting his hand out to her to help her up, then tucking her little hand in the crease of his elbow as he guided her out to his truck. The ride home was much too fast for Laurel’s tastes. It seemed they were there in half the usual amount of time, and she found herself over his lap well before she wanted to be. She was only wearing a loose fitting elastic waist short set, so her shorts and panties were on the carpet beneath her feet within seconds. He had her over his lap on the bed, which seemed to be the way he preferred to punish her lately. She wasn’t complaining; it was more comfortable for her, too.

He lit into her bottom with his hand, stinging every inch of it plus up and down the backs of her legs. He spanked hard, as usual, and Laurel was – as always – mortified at how easily he reduced her to tears. She always promised herself that she wouldn’t cry this

time, and he always broke her resolve within a humiliatingly short amount of time, and this time was no different. Before he'd delivered more than fifteen or so swats – nowhere near the end, she knew from prior unhappy experience, she was reaching for a pillow to sob into.

“I don't like to hear you use language like that. You're too smart to sound so dumb.” He was accenting each word with a smack that thudded the flat of his hand against her already tenderized flesh. “So no more.”

When he felt he'd roasted her nates enough with his hand, which was several torturously long moments later, he reached under his pillow and produced a ping pong paddle, with which he proceeded to pepper her backside crisply.

Laurel had thought his hand was bad enough, and when he had mentioned several spankings ago that perhaps he wasn't getting through to her with just his palm, she had begged him not to get anything else. But, apparently, she hadn't had much effect on him, because here she was, bent over his lap, getting wasp stung with that awful thing. She knew she would never be able to play ping pong again in her life.

It was the first time she'd truly struggled to get away. Oh, she'd made halfhearted attempts before that he had seen coming and had easily subdued. But this time she was very determined, and he had to use his strength – carefully, so as not to hurt her – to keep her in place. And she got extra swats for resisting him.

By the time he put the paddle down, he had a very sorry – and very sore – little woman on his hands. He adjusted her – while she was still bawling and crying – so that she was lying in his arms, held tight against his chest. She was naked from the waist down – and he liked that – and John was fully clothed.

Experimentally, and to throw her a little off balance, he let his hand trail down her belly to delve his fingers into her folds gently. Laurel started, but didn't refuse him. In fact, she opened her legs to give him easier access, her wet face still buried against his neck, huddled in his arms as if against a storm.

John was heartened to see that she had a matching wetness between her legs that belied the ferocity of the spanking she'd received. He scooped some of her cream onto his middle fingers and settled it on top of her pretty little clit, rubbing softly but insistently, firmly coaxing her towards a climax she probably didn't even know she wanted. When she exploded it was almost silently, with tears of pleasure overwhelming her and sending her rocketing against him.

His arms closed around her automatically. John's eyes closed, too, and he said a silent prayer of thanks to his Mother, who he was certain was behind this match up somehow. If anyone could find happiness for him, it was her.

They were basking in the glow of their loving when someone rapped sharply on the door. They certainly weren't expecting company – they didn't know anyone up here. John got up and looked back at her on his way to the door. Poor Laurel was trying to scramble into her shorts and be somewhat presentable.

When he opened the door, John was shocked to find a cop on the other side, and he didn't look like he was in the mood for fun and games. "Sir, we had a complaint about a woman's screams coming from this room. Is there anyone else in the room with you?"

Laurel peeped tentatively around John's shoulder. "Yes, Sir."

John motioned the officer inside. He didn't want to be having this conversation in the hallway. The officer's gaze swept around the room. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

Obviously, he thought John had been beating Laurel. And, of course, he had. But there were no overt signs of that, beyond her swollen eyes. Laurel was obviously nervous, and moved closer to John, who wrapped his arm around her waist protectively. "Yes, I'm fine, thank you."

"Have you two had a disagreement, or what?" The cop never stopped assessing them and the place – once he'd completed his quick once over, he started back again, probably trying to take in more details.

John was mortified, and looked hastily around the room, trying to see what the cop was seeing. The first thing he saw was that the sliding doors were wide open. Then he saw the ping pong paddle lying in plain view on top of the blanket, the red of it stark against the cream colored blanket. He took a deep breath. There was no hope for it now. If the cop had any experience at all, he could probably put two and two together and deduce exactly what was going on.

He watched the guy's face and saw the instant he made the connection. It was when his eyes lit on the paddle. John squeezed Laurel tighter to his side and looked down at her, winking slightly. He was sure his own face was at least as red as hers.

They both expelled a huge breath of relief when the officer turned away from them and headed to the door, a slightly amused expression on his face. When he got to the door, he turned and said in a warning tone, "I don't see any problems here, but please keep it

down in the future, folks.”

Both John and Laurel were quick to assure him that they would. When he was finally gone, John practically collapsed against the door, and Laurel fell onto the bed and flung the paddle away from her. After a long moment, she grumbled accusingly, “That was all your fault, you know. If you weren’t such a prude about language – ”

From his position at the other end of the room where he was carefully closing and locking the sliding doors, John warned, “Don’t start or you’ll end up back where you were a few minutes ago, honey.” Fully recovered, he advanced on her like a stalking lion and lay fully atop her.

Laurel had buried her face in her hands. “I’ll never be able to show my face around here again. I’m going to go to the truck with a bag over my head every time until we leave.”

He smacked a loud, juicy kiss onto what he could get to of her jaw. “That’s the best thing about doing this somewhere where neither of us knows anyone. No one cares.”

“I care!” Laurel wailed unhappily.

John was silent, which made her peep out from between her fingers to look up at him. He was looking down at her as if she was a buffet and he was a starving man. “I bet I can make you not care . . .”

And, of course, he did.

When they came back from their little romantic getaway – during which he did not allow Laurel to wear a bag on her head even once – he decided he wasn’t going to ask her to move in with him again. She didn’t bring it up again so neither did John. Instead, he was going to assume that she was going to do it, and went ahead making preparations.

He also started convincing her to stay at his house more often. Since she was in an apartment, it made more sense for her to move in with him – he owned his house. Eventually, he hoped she would, too. One night he turned to her in bed and said, with a consciously casual tone, “So, when is the lease on your apartment up?”

Laurel had been reading a romance novel from her favorite author, but he could see that she’d paused at his question, although she was still looking at the book. “Uhhhhhhh . . . why?” Her question was a blatant delaying tactic, and they both knew that, but John went along anyway.

“Because I’m trying to plan when I can get the guys together to move you into the house.”

“What house?” Laurel parroted, being deliberately obtuse.

He let that go unanswered and remained silent for a little while, letting her stew a bit before he started again. “So?”

“So what?” She still had yet to take her eyes off the page in front of her.

“So answer my question.”

She fervently hoped her put upon sigh gave him the idea to cease and desist on this topic, but she kind of knew that that was too much to hope for. Laurel fidgeted around for a while, but he continued to stare at her, making her feel uncomfortable, of course. Finally, with another clearly exasperated sigh, she mumbled, “Month after next I think.”

“Find out for sure for me, please, and I’ll start making the arrangements.” John kind of wished she’d say something, but apparently she wasn’t going to. He was a little worried about her distinct lack of enthusiasm about living with him, but he wasn’t really sure he wanted to push her about it, either, and possibly have her turn him down flat. He was just going to ride the wave of her apathy as far as it would get him . . .

And that turned out to be quite far. She ended up moving in with him, all right, but she never really talked to him about it. She gave her landlord thirty days notice and slowly boxed things up, but she refused to discuss it with him, as if she thought that talking about it too much might jinx it. He was never happier than the day that he rounded up a slew of friends who owed him favors, promising them the de rigeur pizza and beer afterwards if they’d help him move her. Things went more smoothly than he’d anticipated. She seemed to have a good idea where she wanted things to go, and directed the guys hither and yon as the burly crew manhandled her belongings into place.

John kept a weather eye on her, not completely trusting her complacency, but giving her free reign to order his friends around to her heart’s content. As long as she was in his bed at night – on a reasonably permanent basis – then he was happy. And she’d be there tonight. He was instantly harder, and that was rapidly becoming the norm. He’d been in perpetual heat ever since they’d started dating. Heck, since he’d seen her across the funeral home. There was probably a special hell for a guy who got a hard on at his mother’s funeral, but he couldn’t help it.

He loved her.

The thought left him thunderstruck. He wanted her, wanted to be with her all the time, had to have her, and was halfway through a plan to finagle her into marrying him. But he'd really never thought about love much. It was more of a woman's concept, as far as he was concerned. Granted, he loved his family, and there were male friends of his that he'd known forever that he would pretty much die for. But, especially since Sylvia, he hadn't really applied the concept of love – most particularly that special kind of love his parents shared – to himself, as if he was somehow exempt from the condition.

Well, not any more, apparently. He was well and truly caught, and it scared the crap out of him. But, at the same time, he wouldn't change a thing – he would only have done one thing differently, and that was the complete debacle that was Sylvia. Barring being able to go back in time, he was going to continue on his current course.

Only a helluva lot more vulnerably, which made him extremely nervous.

When they met in bed that night it was really the first time they'd been together all day – the guys had a tendency to hang around after the job was done; it was an unfortunate side effect of the beer. But Laurel was able to get a lot of unpacking done. The guys had pretty much left her to her own devices, and she was so nervous that she used all of that extra energy to unpack almost everything. He'd been as good as his word – he'd told her the night before that she could change anything she wanted – but that she wasn't allowed to touch his Star Wars collection, which was set up on shelves in the back bedroom. Laurel had no problems with that.

He even let her get completely rid of the shit brown furniture in the living room, replacing it with her much smaller, better fitting, femininely upholstered couch and recliner. She put her own dining room table and chairs into storage in the attic of his garage until they could have a yard sale, though. There was no way she was going to replace Evelyn's beloved dining room table – there was too much family history there – both of theirs.

Everything else had fit wonderfully. Their stuff blended as if they'd always been together. His kitchen was woefully under equipped – she knew he almost never took the time to cook for himself – so there weren't any duplicates amongst their kitchen stuff. There was plenty of counter space and cupboards, and, within a very short time, she had everything all organized.

John gathered her tight against him, pressing his lips to her ear. "Is everything rearranged the way you want it?"

Laurel snuggled her butt back against his crotch, noting the way he poked against her interestedly. “Pretty much. There are some small things that I need to tweak, but generally, yes.”

“Did everything fit?”

“Yeah, it did. Our households blended well together,” she admitted on a loud yawn.

John’s hand drifted slowly down to nestle between her legs, while his voice revealed none of his intentions. He was glad she recognized how well they fit together, and not just sexually. “I knew they would.” A thought struck him. “Do you like this house? If you want, we can look around for something else . . . “

“No, no. This house is wonderful. It’s just right – not too big, not too small. Especially since your renovations. It wasn’t nearly this nice when it was the Parkers’.”

He snorted into her hair. “Yeah. And they had, what, six kids or something? I don’t know where they put them all – it’s only a three bedroom house!”

“Yeah, but it would be just about right for one or two kids.”

Her comment was offhand, but it set John to thinking. “Do you want children?”

Laurel’s eyebrow rose, although she was facing away from him, and he couldn’t have seen it in the dark, anyway. “I do. I’m not in any hurry, although at my age I suppose I ought to be, but I don’t really hear my biological clock.”

“I think two kids would be perfect for us – one of each. John, Junior and Gertrude.”

“Gertrude? I don’t think so. If you’re naming the boy after you, then I get to name the girl.”

His arms tightened around her. “Deal.” John loved that she was talking to him about their children. He already had them married with the regulation two point five kids, but they hadn’t discussed it before. Even though this was a very casual conversation, he was going to hold her to it.

Chapter 9

by CFaulkner

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John patted his pocket nervously as he guided Laurel into the restaurant with his hand at the small of her back. It seemed sometimes as if they'd always been together – as if the twenty or so year separation had never happened. He was exceptionally happy, and looked forward to spending all the time he could with her. He liked to think that what he felt for Laurel was something akin to what his father had felt for his Mother – he knew that, in finding someone who fit so perfectly with him – he was incredibly blessed.

It was Laurel's favorite place – the Dog Sled – and the site of their first date. Well, their first date the second time around, anyways. He didn't think the little hotdog stand they'd gone to the first time around was even still in existence. Besides, despite his liking for tradition, their tastes had definitely matured.

They were seated almost immediately, since they got there a little earlier than usual, and their appetizer fresh juices and self-serve salad bowl were already on the table. They had a very slow, leisurely meal, raveling in every course. John had an end cut prime rib that was big enough to have been continued on another plate. It looked like he'd been given most of the cow. Laurel's eyes had nearly bugged from her head when she saw the size of his portion. She had ordered a small teriyaki steak. Their server dished up homemade smashed potatoes and fresh off the cob corn, and then left them with big slabs of sticky buns for good measure.

The last bite of sticky bun melted in his mouth as John leaned back and patted his over stuffed stomach, groaning slightly. Laurel sighed and closed her eyes, pushing her plate away. "I couldn't eat another bite."

John leaned forward, capturing her hand in his. "I could." He caught her eye, and she blushed, even after all this time. They'd been together for almost a year and a half, and he could still make her blush beautifully any time he cared to. She was the perfect partner for him – smart and funny and innocently curious in bed – and he wanted her to be with him for all time.

Their waitress cleared their table and left them alone. John caught Laurel's eye, his face more serious than she was used to.

"Are you okay?" she asked, leaning towards him. He looked anxious, like he might be sick at any moment.

John cleared his throat. He didn't think he'd ever been this nervous in his life. "I – " He stopped and took a deep, slow breath, trying to release some of his nervousness. It would have helped if he'd had much of any inkling about how she would feel about this, but he didn't want to wait any longer. Finally, he steeled himself and took the plunge. "Laurel, I

love you. I love you the way your Dad loved your Mom, and my Dad loved my Mom. I want us to be together forever.” He pulled a black velvet ring box out of his pocket and opened it towards her. “Laurel West, will you be my wife?”

There was a one carat emerald cut diamond solitaire blinking out at her from where it was nestled into the dark velvet. If she was truthful with herself, she couldn’t really be surprised at his proposal. He’d been gently maneuvering them towards this inevitability since they’d gotten back together. Still, a part of her had refused to consider it, wanting just to enjoy what they had and not consider the future.

But there was no denying how she felt about him. She was his. More his than she’d ever been when they were together before. More his than she’d ever dreamed of being. He was the first thing she thought of in the morning and the last thought in her mind as she fell asleep. She loved him. He was her world, and there was no way she could say “no”.

John held his breath as long as he could, but she was taking so much time to respond that he had to begin breathing again or pass out. Laurel’s face gave nothing of her thought processes away, and the longer she was silent the more convinced he became that she was going to turn him down. His heart began to sink when she reached and grabbed his other hand, holding it tight, squeezing his fingers. Their eyes remained locked as she said in a very soft, almost tentative voice, “I would be honored to marry you, John.”

It was all he could do not to whoop his way through the restaurant. As it was, he leaned bodily over the table and practically kissed the life out of her. He was so excited that she’d said “yes” that he forgot to put the ring on her finger. Finally, Laurel prompted him by pointedly eying the ring box he still held in a death clench in his hand, then looking up at him. “Ahem. I believe you have a piece of jewelry for me to wear?”

Chuckling softly, he slipped the ring onto her finger, and followed it with a kiss. “Thank you,” he said softly, choking up as he spoke from his heart. “Thank you for letting me back into your life.”

Laurel smiled and squeezed his hand. “I don’t think it was really even a matter of that. You’ve always been in mine – I’ve always loved you, whether I wanted to or not.”

“I promise I’ll never give you a reason to doubt my love. Ever. You are all that I want.”

When their waitress got wind that they’d become engaged, she brought a bottle of champagne to the table, compliments of the house, and everyone in the room toasted them and offered their congratulations.

It was a fairy tale night, and Laurel left the restaurant on the arm of her fiancé, her feet barely touching the ground. But that fairy tale night came to an abrupt, nightmarish ending when they weren't far from their car. John recognized the couple first and tried to walk faster to avoid them, but there wasn't any avoiding this confrontation.

Sylvia Caulfield was heading towards them – weaving would be a better description, obviously drunk - her still taut, tight body practically bursting at the seams from a dress that wouldn't have looked out of place on a streetwalker. John's jaw tightened as he heard her shrill laugh – how could he ever have found that woman attractive? She looked so cheap and tarnished, especially next to his love's bright, open face.

He could tell when she'd spotted them – when she was able to drag herself away from whoever it was she'd been able to convince to take her out, apparently some older better off schlub who couldn't have any idea what he was getting himself into. John almost felt sorry for the other man – almost. Sylvia stopped short, then continued towards them, eying John as if he was a particularly intriguing morsel on a buffet even as she leaned closer to the man whose arm she clung to, whispering something into his ear that had them both laughing.

Laurel had come to a full, stark stop, her eyes wide and tear filled. John wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tried to shepherd her away from the other couple as best he could. But Sylvia and her mark seemed to be making a beeline for them.

“Why, if it isn't my ex, John John!” she accented the word “ex” so that even a deaf person would know that she had found him wanting in every way as her mate. “And who do we have here?” Sylvia asked as if she had a right to question who he might be with.

John pulled Laurel against his side. “I'm sure you remember Laurel West.”

Sylvia nodded, her lips pursing. “Ah, yes. The shy, innocent one. How goes spinsterhood? Still pining for this one?”

He felt every muscle in Laurel's body tighten at Sylvia's crass words.

“You're gonna have to pump up the volume, honey, just like I did if you expect to get him between the sheets – “

“Laurel is my fiancé, Sylvia,” John said, cutting into her lascivious speech in a deadly tone. “You keep your drunken trap shut. Go find someplace to sober up before your mouth gets you into real trouble.”

He finished escorting Laurel to his truck, lifting her in gently. She looked pale and withdrawn, like she might be in shock. John hurried around to the driver's side, not paying one iota of attention to whatever Sylvia and her man du jour were doing.

During the drive home, John kept Laurel close to his side, but she seemed tense and unnaturally quiet. The wonderful mood of their engagement had been spoiled by a ghost from the past come to life, but John was determined not to let Sylvia spoil things. Again. When he pulled into the driveway and cut the engine, he turned to her, sighing at the distant look on her face. He could see the silent tracks of tears down her cheeks.

"Sweetie, please don't let us seeing Sylvia screw up our celebration of our engagement. You and I are together, and I promise that nothing and no one – " he emphasized the "no one" – "is going to drag me away from you. Please believe me."

Laurel smiled in what she hoped was an encouraging way, but inside she was too shocked at the sight of Sylvia to process much. They went inside and she fed the cats and got undressed mechanically, all under John's watchful eye. "Are you all right, honey?" he asked as they met in the middle of their big bed.

She nodded and settled into his arms as she always had, but John could sense that she was still very troubled by their encounter. He kissed her on the top of the head. "Don't let her bother you, sweetie. She's no threat to you. None at all. I have what I want in life right here."

John's strong arms contracted around her, and Laurel tried to take his words to heart, but she was troubled and it took her a very long time to get to sleep, even after John tried his usual sleep remedy on her, bringing her to a mind shattering orgasm that left her panting and gasping for air.

Her mind buzzed with depressing thoughts – thoughts about John leaving her for Sylvia yet again, even though he'd done everything humanly possible to reassure her that he wasn't about to do that. She'd watched him like a hawk while the confrontation was going on, and the only emotion he showed towards Sylvia – even though she was nearly bursting out of her dress in all the strategic spots – was contempt. And he'd jumped to her defense as well as referring to her as his fiancé. It was annoying to realize how much control that woman had over her, even after all these years – to realize that she was still that insecure, despite the fact that she'd just committed her life to the man she loved.

Laurel awoke well before John the next morning, her mind still whirring from the events of the previous day. She considered trying to get back to sleep, but pretty much knew it was a lost cause, so she got up and showered. John didn't stir, but then he could sleep through a nuclear war, she would swear. She often wondered how he managed to get up

for a fire alarm – he could probably sleep through that, too. Laurel stood for a long moment at the end of their bed, looking down at his sleeping form. He was on his left side, where he preferred to sleep, the sheet low around his waist revealing the beautiful lines of his healthily muscled and tanned body. She shivered just looking at him, remembering the feel of his hands on her body – strong and capable, never hurt except when he was spanking. She could actually feel as if he was covering her just by looking at him, so well remembered was the feeling of his big body settling confidently over hers.

Her eyes filled with tears. He was gorgeous. He was wonderful. He was everything she ever wanted. And he was hers.

She thought. She hoped, anyway. If Sylvia didn't try to get her clutches into him again. That thought just seemed to seep into Laurel's mind and fester there like a rotting tooth.

Sylvia's reappearance was just enough to set off alarm bells in Laurel's head, and when she turned away from him to leave the room, she knew that she needed some time to herself to get her head straight about it, or she was going to end up looking and – worse – acting like an insecure ninny.

With thoughts of him in her aching heart, she left the house for parts unknown. Maybe she would drive to the ocean – she'd always found great comfort in the consistency of the sea. It reminded her of her parents' love – always there, always reliable. Or maybe she'd hike into the mountains, which would be closer. Laurel just knew she needed to go somewhere quiet and collect her thoughts, gather her gumption around her.

But she knew one thing for sure: she wasn't going to give him up easily this time. She wasn't going to just lie down and let Sylvia take him away from her. No way, no how.

He was hers.

She battled back the niggling thought that lay in wait in the back of her head: what if he wanted Sylvia instead of her, just like the last time?

Laurel buried that thought until she felt better – more prepared – to deal with it, and headed for her car.

John woke about an hour later after hitting the alarm several times. He knew that this was his last reprieve, and he'd better damned well get up or he'd be late for work. He rolled to her side of the bed, throwing his arm around air that he'd expected to be filled with Laurel.

That made him sit upright in bed. She was nowhere to be found. He couldn't hear the TV in the living room, so she wasn't having one of her infrequent bouts of insomnia or gotten up earlier than he did and gone out to the living room to watch TV so that she wouldn't wake him. Considering what had happened last night – their engagement being totally overshadowed by the appearance of that witch Sylvia, his stomach was rapidly twisting into a pretzel within the confines of his taut belly. "Laurel?" he called out as he threw back the sheet and bolted out of bed, scouring the house with a thundercloud frown on his face.

Hands on his hips, he sighed as he stood stock still near the hall, trying to make his sleepy mind think clearly, which wasn't easy without his first cup of coffee in the morning. Where could she have gone? That answer was depressing: anywhere she wanted. The more important question was where would she go when she was as troubled as she was? It wasn't like stubborn Laurel to run away – she'd stood her ground in front of him and argued her point even though she knew a spanking was definitely in the offing.

Calling himself twelve kinds of fool for not putting her on a leash after last night, John grimly got ready for work. He couldn't very well call in and say he had to stay home and hunt for his woman, especially when she was probably perfectly all right. But that thought didn't do anything to soothe the burning ache in his stomach or the painful throbbing of his heart.

There was no way he couldn't continue to try to locate her, though. Before he'd even made it to work, he'd called every friend on their mutual speed dial, and didn't make any friends for calling people at seven thirty on a Sunday morning, either. But none of them had seen her. Not even that crazy Niki she loved so much, which was really where he'd thought she'd gone. If she was going to go to anyone with a hurting heart, it was Niki, who, for all her weird ways and strange sense of humor, was one of the most loving people John had ever seen.

Although she had had the guts to call him several days after their first date and urge him to continue seeing Laurel while at the same time warning him not to hurt her, Niki had taken him to task the first time they'd really met face to face in a social situation. He didn't count his mother's funeral. They'd had dinner together – John, Laurel, and Niki, and Laurel had excused herself to the bathroom just before they left. John had been pleasantly surprised by Niki's reception of him – she knew what had happened in the past. But she'd seemed to accept him quite readily, happy that Laurel was so obviously happy with him. And she was. He took that thought to heart. Niki had laughed and complimented him and been a wonderful dinner companion for them, seemingly not having a care in the world.

But, when Laurel left the table, she turned on him like a momma pit bull, leaning over the table and staring into his eyes, doing everything but baring her teeth, sounding a million times more ferocious than she had on the phone. “If you so much as give her a case of the jitters about whether or not you’re one hundred percent committed to her, I’ll make you wish your mother didn’t have any children that lived.”

He was taken aback that such a low, threatening growl could come from someone who looked like such an innocent little puffball of a person, but he didn’t question her motives. He knew she loved Laurel at least as fiercely as he did, and he told her so. He also told her that he intended to marry her, if she’d have him.

That only seemed to placate her a little, but when Laurel returned to the table, Niki once again became the gracious, amiable friend that he’d met originally. But John knew when he’d been given a dead to rights warning, and he took heed. Laurel inspired a lot of love and loyalty in her friends, and he had no doubt he’d be sleeping with the fishes – or Niki’s equivalent – if he hurt Laurel again.

But, apparently, she’d vanished off the face of the Earth. No one had heard from her. It was a Sunday, so she wasn’t expected to be anywhere – except with him, which was where she damned well belonged, he thought angrily, as he was mopping the floor at the station, attacking it like it was an affront to him. He couldn’t believe that she would take off without leaving him a note or anything. It’s not like she was a prisoner or anything. He’d never given her any sort of hassle about going places; he wasn’t one of those men who couldn’t stand to have his woman away from him for more than five seconds at a time. He didn’t get jealous of her job, or of her friends – of which she had many. John had never asked her to change her habit of going out on Friday nights with the girls, or lunching and shopping on Saturdays or Sundays, or both. She’d done it herself, adapting to an “every other weekend” type of thing in order to spend more time with him.

By that afternoon, only eight hours into a twenty four hour shift, he was just about desperate, and seriously considering calling the local hospitals. He’d already called in every favor he was owed by anyone and everyone in the local police department, as well as a couple of states he knew. They’d all be on the look out for her car.

But no one called.

Including Laurel, which was making him more and more frantic and more and more angry. This wasn’t like her at all, which had him envisioning every slasher/kidnapping movie he’d ever seen. She always told him where he was going or left some sort of message, because she expected the same courtesy from him. When he got a hold of her,

after he hugged her to smithereens, he was going to do his best to make sure she would never, ever even think of doing this to him again.

When midshift came and still no word, he did something he almost never did and called in a sub to work the rest of the shift for him. Everyone in the station house knew that he was preoccupied with something, but not everyone knew the exact story. John drove around town for a few minutes before heading home to his now empty house – not really wanting to go there, even though it was the place she was most likely to be. He was too afraid she wouldn't be there when he got there, and then he had no idea what he'd do other than go stir crazy waiting for her.

So he drove by her favorite haunts – Maragarita's Restaurant, the Mall, the quiet spot down by the river, but there was no sign of her. As he drove, he checked in with her friends again, but still batted zero. No one had heard a thing from her. As he counted it, she'd been missing for at least twelve hours, but he knew that the cops wouldn't touch her until she'd been gone at least twenty four hours, and even then, they tended not to do much because most people didn't want to be found and would reappear when they were good and ready to. Especially since there were absolutely no signs of foul play in the situation. As far as he knew, she just needed to go somewhere to get her head around the jolt of Sylvia's reappearance.

Finally, he gave up driving around town and headed home, arriving in the driveway just before her little import pulled in behind him. Although the back of his mind was seeing red, he couldn't do anything from the moment he saw her but slam his way out of his truck and practically bulldoze into her, grabbing her up as she got out of her car and hugging her to him as if he wanted to break every bone in her body. His hands touched her everywhere at once, as if he was trying to EMT her and discern if she was injured at all, but also as if he was trying to imprint his stamp of ownership on her, which he'd already done quite thoroughly in several different ways during their renewed relationship.

"Wow, I didn't expect quite this enthusiastic a reception!" she chuckled, but when John reared back to look down at her, the smile was chased from her face. He looked as if he was about to cry. Laurel's hand automatically came up to cup his cheek. "Sweetie! What is it?"

He didn't say a word, but instead scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the house, as if they were already newlyweds. He didn't set her down at all, even maneuvering the door closed and locked behind them with her still in his arms. When John got to the bedroom, he sat down on the end of their bed, keeping her close on his lap, never letting her go.

“What? What is it? Did something terrible happen?” Laurel was growing more worried by the second. Had something happened to her sister? His sister? One of her kids? His brother in law? What was going on to make him touch her so fervently, as if she’d come back from the dead or something?

John buried his face in her neck, letting the tears that he had been fighting off all day flow down his cheeks. Although the words were clogging his throat, making it ache with the pressure of them, he spoke in a rough, heartfelt voice, at almost a croak, “You left me. I had no idea where you were, if you were dead or alive.”

He hugged her again, fit to crack her ribs, and she hugged him back, not quite as hard as she didn’t have his strength. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I got up with thoughts of Sylvia buzzing through my mind, and I just had to get away to mull things over and decide how I felt about it. How I wanted to deal with it.”

Chapter 10

John sighed, tucking her head under his chin and rocking her back and forth with arms that wrapped tightly around her. “Laurel, you’re not going through this alone. I haven’t abandoned you to run into Sylvia’s arms, and I won’t. I don’t know what I can do to prove that to you besides be here every day. This is a situation we both have to work out how to deal with. If she bugs me, or you, I’ll get a restraining order. I’ll stand on my head and spit nickels if that’s what I have to do to prove to you that I’m not going to leave you for her.” He tipped her head up so that she had to look at him. “I want you.” John fondled her ring finger where his diamond perched, nestled in gold against her flesh. “You’re the one wearing my ring. You’re the one I want to spend the rest of my life with, have kids with, grow old with. Not Sylvia.”

Laurel laced her fingers with his. “I know. I know. I had to work that out within myself, though.”

“That’s fine,” he kissed the top of her head. “What’s not fine – under any circumstances – is ditching me without so much as a scrawled note about needing to go find yourself. The next time you’re hurting, if you need to get away, that’s fine. But something else you could also try is coming to me. I have broad shoulders and wide open ears, especially where you’re concerned.” He sighed. “Or go so your crazy friend Niki. I don’t care what you do – just let me know what it is, so I don’t end up a basket case because you’re missing.”

He was using that tone of voice. The one that meant that she was in deep, deep trouble. She didn’t like it when he spoke to her like that, because it seemed to mean that she

would inevitably end up bottoms up over his lap within the next few minutes, and be screaming bloody murder only a short while after that. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

She hated the pleading note that had entered her voice, but it always seemed to creep in when she knew she was in trouble, and this seemed like a lot of trouble. Not that it had ever helped her avoid a spanking. It just seemed to be an automatic response to him.

For her part, Laurel hoped that her peace of mind was going to be worth the spanking she knew she was in for. And, in truth, it had been. Even just the drive itself had done her a world of good. She always thought very clearly while driving, and having the windows down and the wind blowing in her hair had helped enormously to clear her head. And then, once she made that turn off the traffic circle in Portsmouth and headed over the Piscataqua River Bridge, getting her first blast of salty sea air, things became even clearer.

If she hoped to have any kind of a life with John – which was what she had always wanted – then she couldn’t keep holding on to the old hurts from when they were teenagers. She had to let go of them and trust the man she saw today – the one who’d never left his mother’s side through a wrenching illness, held her as she died, then been a rock solid support to those he loved. She’d never even heard about him with someone else, never heard that he’d done what he did to her to another woman. Heck, he was practically a saint. His reputation around town was pure gold because he said what he meant and did the right thing. He’d never so much as looked at another woman the entire time they’d been together. There had been no “hang up” phone calls, and he’d given her no reasons at all to think that he might dump her abruptly for anyone, even Sylvia.

As she was sitting on one of the benches in front of the vast, wild expanse of Ogunquit Beach, she remembered something that solidified her faith in him – his look of complete and utter distaste when Sylvia appeared in front of them, as well as the way he’d told her off.

And he was telling her – as a mature, stable, responsible man – that he loved her and would never leave her. Ninety nine percent of her wanted to hear him and believe him, and that majority slowly beat her past insecurities into submission.

She loved him. More than enough to marry him – and that had to be enough to trust him completely with her heart, and know that he would cherish and keep it forever.

“Well, you did,” John answered flatly, rubbing his hand up and down her back and snapping her rudely back to the present. “I was inches away from calling the hospitals just in case you’d been in a wreck. I had all of my cop buddies on the lookout for you –

where the hell were you, anyway?”

She had the grace to look down. “I drove to the ocean.”

“The ocean? You drove to Maine?”

“I like the ocean – it helps me center myself when I’m really troubled. I spent a lot of time there – on Ogunquit – after my parents died. It soothes me.”

“I thought that was what I was for.” He made her feel as if he thought she didn’t value him, or felt she couldn’t turn to him when she was in trouble.

Laurel didn’t really know how to explain it to him. “I know, and you are. But this was different.”

He sighed. “Because of our past.”

Laurel fiddled with the collar of his golf shirt. “Yeah. I just needed to get away by myself and straighten my head out.”

“And that’s fine. I’m not your jailer. All I want is the courtesy of a note or a call or something that lets me know that you’re still alive and not lying in a ditch somewhere . . .”

She had never felt such remorse in her life. She never wanted to do anything in this life to hurt this man. She loved him.

Her time by the sea had helped her enormously. Without the humdrum of normal life – away from phones and TV and radio and other people, she was able to sort through her feelings and realize that she was no longer a naïve ingénue who let things happen to her. She was stronger than that. Finally. Even if John decided to leave her for Sylvia again – which she highly doubted – she’d still be fine, and she could still have a good life. There could be someone else out there for her, or maybe not. Either way, she would be fine.

Of course, she’d be a helluva lot better with John in her life and in her arms every night, loving her, fathering her children . . . keeping her in line . . .

It was the “keeping in line” part that came into play next.

A shudder ran through his big body as he closed his eyes and breathed against her cheek. “I thought you might be dead.” Running that thought through his mind again tore him

apart as badly as if she wasn't in his arms, perfectly fine, right now.

Laurel's heart contracted at the emotion in his voice, and she tried to imagine how she'd feel if he had done the same thing to her. She leaned back, almost out of his arms, although he obviously wasn't interested in letting her go for another few decades or so.

"I guess you should spank me, then, huh?"

John looked like he'd swallowed a big juicy frog that got stuck in his throat, but she could definitely forgive him. It certainly wasn't like her to admit she needed to be spanked. It was much more likely that she would spend several long, futile moments trying to talk him out of spanking her – especially when it was going to be as bad as this one was likely to be - not that she'd ever been able to wheedle any sort of reprieve, unfortunately.

"Yeah, I'm going to spank you all right. I'm not sure I should do it now, though. I'm not very happy with you at all."

Laurel didn't look like she was really worried about that. She snuggled back into his arms as if she'd never left them. "It's okay. I trust you."

John tilted her chin and stared into her eyes, trying to fathom just what she meant by that.

"You do?"

Laurel put her small hand on his brawny forearm as her bright eyes met his. "Yeah. I do. In every way."

John's heart was singing, at the same time it was heavy because he knew he had to discipline her. It wasn't something he did lightly or easily, especially when it was such a basic lesson – let someone know where the heck you are.

He surprised her by gently pushing her off his lap and standing up next to her. "I'm sorry, honey, but this time just a spanking isn't going to get the point across, I don't think." Her eyes grew round as saucers as he undid his belt buckle and snicked it out of his pant loops, gathering the end of the belt and the buckle into one big hand, doubling it over.

Laurel stood transfixed. She'd been subjected to the business end of that belt before, and it always left her hoarse from screaming – and she knew that John hadn't considered any

of the other offenses that had gotten her the belt to have been as bad as the one she was going to be punished for now.

Oblivious to the thoughts running through her mind, John brought a big fluffy pillow down from the head of the bed for her to lie over, and one about mid way for her to cry into. He made sure all of the windows were closed – an automatic leftover from that untimely encounter with the cop in Maine – and turned on the stereo, even though there really weren't any houses that close to them.

When his attention returned to her, she was still standing there, staring at the belt that hung from his hand, biting her lip. She looked like a little girl lost, and John's heart contracted. He reached out and pulled her to him, the belt dangling down her back to rest just above the area it was about to become intimately acquainted with. "Shhh, sweetie. Don't look so frightened."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew how that thing felt against your backside."

John snorted. "I know how a belt feels on a backside, believe me."

"Yeah," Laurel countered, "but you don't know what it feels like when you're the one giving the spanking!"

He cocked his head. "You're right, and I'm not likely to." He eyed her firmly. "But you are."

Laurel frowned.

"You know the position, honey. You've been in it enough times . . ."

That made her huff indignantly. "You make it sound as if I'm awful, John Beauchamp!"

He smiled, but only slightly. "Well, you're not, of course, but you do need some smart reminders to keep you from doing stupid things – like going off and not telling anyone where you're going, or even checking in to let someone – anyone – know that you're still alive and not lying beside the road somewhere . . ." It was those thoughts that allowed him to steel his spine and do what he knew needed to be done.

"Over the pillows, love. Time to pay the piper for running out on me like that."

She was almost in place when she popped back up again. "I did not run out on you!"

His chin dropped to his chest, and he didn't say a word, just looked at her with those piercing, no nonsense eyes. She resumed her position, taking a minute or so to adjust things to her liking while he busily divested her of her jeans and panties in one swell foop, muttering all the while something about how unwise it was of her to be complaining to him when he was the one with the belt in his hand.

Eventually, he stood to her left side, the belt resting, harmless now, against his leg. John drew a deep breath. "You know I don't like to do this."

He saw her head nod up and down emphatically. She did know. He was much more the type to be protective of his woman than to hurt her physically in any way.

"And, this time, you're going to be punished for doing something not to yourself, but to those who love you – Niki is as frantic as I am, as are all your other friends. I don't have to tell you how irresponsible and hurtful your behavior was. You're more than old enough to know better, aren't you?"

Laurel felt his rough fingertips at the vulnerable small of her back. "Yes, Sir."

"Well, I'm going to try to help you remember not to give me ulcers before my time. If you ever do something like this again, what I'll do will make this look like a walk in the park."

He didn't say another word, just let the strap do the talking for him, and let Laurel do the screaming for the both of them. Tears streamed down his face as he brought the leather down again and again on that rapidly reddening pristine white flesh, creating stripe after livid red stripe from her stem to her stern. Eventually, they all began to blend together into one big swelling red mass. Laurel's whole body jerked with every stroke, and she was crying from the very first connection of that lethal strip with her delicate flesh. John tore into her good, determined to make an impression on her. He never wanted to feel like that again – like he might never see her alive, helplessly picturing the worst possible outcome when she was probably enjoying the sea spray in her face.

The pillow beneath her face was drenched, and she was having a hard time breathing when he finally stopped; the belt falling from his numb fingers to pool like a particularly venomous snake at his feet. His voice was as hoarse as hers when he said into the eerie quietness, "Don't you ever, ever do that to me again."

Laurel heard him, but could only nod, still trying to come to grips with an agony in her bottom and down the backs of her legs that was much, much worse than anything else he'd ever subjected her to – and more than she would ever have thought that she could

endure.

John lay on the bed and pulled her on top of him before she had a chance to protest the fact that she was dripping some unappetizing things at that moment. He reached down and dried her eyes and nose himself with the hem of his t-shirt, then grabbed her back up in a bear hug. It felt strange to Laurel to be half naked atop him while he was fully clothed – her burning butt glowing in the twilight, she was sure. It felt . . . very vulnerable, but freeing somehow, and definitely sexy.

He didn't seem to want to let her go. He kept her next to him the entire night, never letting her get more than arms' length away from him before dragging her back against his body. At one point, he slid himself between her legs from behind, pulling her into that utmost of all vulnerable positions on all fours with her bottom in the air, head resting on her folded arms while he slapped himself against her still blazing butt. Not content to feel her contract around him once, he reached around to the front of her most private place and manipulated that little button until she begged for release, then delayed her ultimate pleasure until he could time his own as closely as possible to hers, his fingers continuing to tease until he was sure they would reach paradise at nearly the same time.

Sometime near dawn, they lay sprawled in each other's arms. "Did you get your head on straight about Sylvia?" he asked, almost fearing the answer.

"Yeah, I did."

"I'll never leave you, you know. I only want you, and our babies, and our life together. I want us to have what our parents had."

Laurel turned and looked up at him in the faint light and clung to him. He was her world, and she was his. "We would be blessed if our lives were only half as love filled as theirs."

John rolled onto her and brushed her hair away from her eyes. "I intend that we'll have more."

"I feel like I've always been in love with you," she sighed, almost asleep in his arms after his slow, searing loving.

John's heart swelled in his chest. It was the first time she'd admitted her love for him to him. "We've always been in love with each other, and we always will be."

"Forever in love," Laurel breathed as she slipped into sleep, a secret smile on her face.

Epilogue:

Sylvia did reappear in their lives, but only once more, making the mistake of calling John at their home several weeks after the four of them had seen each other at the restaurant. Apparently, she opened the conversation with an extremely lewd proposition that had John both seeing and turning red. But his only response to her was to say stonily, "I think you ought to speak to my fiancé about that." He had turned and handed a stunned Laurel the phone, saying apathetically, and loudly enough that Sylvia could plainly hear him, "It's Sylvia. She says she wants me back and that she can do things in bed for me that you can't or won't do. She was quite boringly explicit about it, too." John leaned down and gave Laurel a long, wet kiss that left them both moaning, oblivious to the open phone line. "Somehow, I don't think she knows you very well. Why don't you straighten her out, and I'll be waiting in our bedroom?"

That was all it took. When Laurel put the phone to her ear, out of curiosity more so than anything else, all she heard was a disgusted, "Tsk! Oh!" and then a dial tone.

Needless to say, they never heard from her or even saw her again. Word around town had it that she up and married the poor soul she'd been with the night they saw her, and left town to live in New York City. Neither John nor Laurel felt that was any loss at all.

Months later, Laurel rolled over onto a very sore bottom, in the same room they had had when they first went to Maine – although this time he had made doubly sure that all the doors and windows were closed before he took her to task - stretching gingerly as John stirred next to her.

"My bottom hurts, and it's all your fault," she pouted, fidgeting and folding the sheets fussily.

He opened one bleary eye at her. "Not my fault. I don't get your fanny smacked, you do."

Her indignant humph didn't stop him from closing that eye. "I didn't do anything to get my fanny smacked."

The eye reopened, and what she could see of his face that wasn't buried in the pillow was drawn into a frown. "I thought we settled that last night. Do you need a refresher on why it's not acceptable to me that you toilet papered the Fire Chief's house during your bachelorette party?" Chief Edson had not been happy with his upstart employee's fiancé's high jinx, and he had let John know it in no uncertain terms.

“It was Niki’s idea,” she grumbled, not really willing to accept defeat, but hoping he’d drop the idea just the same. She didn’t want to recall either the spanking she’d endured last night or the fact that he’d made her go over to the Chief’s house and clean up the mess they’d made, as well as apologize, in person, to the Chief and his wife. Since John had no control over Niki, she hadn’t had to pay any of the consequences that Laurel had.

She reached back and rubbed her bottom delicately. None of them at all.

But Laurel was having no such luck trying to pass the blame, as well she shouldn’t: she was the one who produced the case of toilet paper they’d used, and John had known that, since it was missing from their pantry. John turned towards her and put out his arms. “Come here. I can see I’m going to have to give my new wife some remedial lessons in obedience.” He liked saying that: “his wife”. “His new wife”. He liked the sound of that a lot. He liked the sound – and feel – of being her husband even more, though, not that he had any illusions that his lofty position meant that she was going to be any better behaved. He wasn’t delusional enough for that.

Laurel went into his arms more than willingly, despite the residual pain in her backside. “Awww, sweetie, can’t you think of something else you’d rather do?” She walked her pink tinged fingertips through his chest hair. “I can . . . We are on our honeymoon, after all . . .” They were staying here for several days, and then taking a plane from Portland to Orlando. They were going on a cruise to the Bahamas, although Laurel wasn’t at all sure she was ever going to get to see the island at all, considering John’s appetite for her.

As she’d hoped, John’s attention was definitely captivated. He proceeded to pin her to the bed and slip inside her in one smooth move, making her eyes go round and a rough groan escape her lips. No matter how long they were together, his entry set off every nerve she owned, every time. “I guess the spanking’ll have to wait,” he growled, taking her mouth with his and beginning to move on her, slowly, deeply.

If Laurel got her way, it would be quite some time before he got around to that particular spanking. She would certainly do her level best to keep him distracted. But she knew there would be plenty more – there always were - because he loved her enough to give her what she needed.

He was her forever love, and she was his.

The End

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