

'Til Death Do Us Part

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Prologue

She was so exhausted she could barely see the doorknob to fit the key into. She was standing alone in the carport at dusk, brailing her way into their—*her*, she ruthlessly corrected herself as her heart screamed against it—house. Dannica stepped into the living room and dark, smothering quiet settled onto her like a heavy, wet duvet. There was no trace of Polo in the air, no light on in the study, no soft undertones of Garth Brooks emanating from the stereo. Danni chuffed under her breath, never thinking she'd long to hear country and western music in her lifetime, while tears ached into her eyes, spilling down her cheeks unheeded. She set her briefcase down next to the ornate occasional table and tossed her keys into the heart-shaped, Wedgwood blue ceramic bowl with a soul-deep sigh.

The sight of herself in the gilt mirror above the table gave her pause for an uncomfortably long second, during which she registered how truly horrid she looked. The stark red of the severe business suit—*de rigueur* for the political events she was now attending with alarming regularity—accented the pasty white undertones of her skin. Despite the light but now streaked make up, the dark circles to her knees screamed of sleepless nights and her hazel eyes had been perpetually bloodshot since—since *then*.

The sixteenth of January last year ...

The eternal lines from their marriage ceremony resounded wrenchingly in her head;

Till death do us part.

Shaking her head hard, trying unsuccessfully to clear her head, Danni reached down to her foot, pried the torturously high-heeled pumps off her feet, and then wiggled her nylon-clad toes in the plush, celery green carpet—it was his favorite color. Eric'd picked it out when they'd redecorated three years ago. Her gorgeous, sexy, macho husband favored lighter, almost feminine colors, which, of course, she never failed to tease him about. He had been the one who'd suggested replacing the awful dark paneling in the den with a creamy white paint and some beautifully detailed stenciling.

After he'd come out with that surprisingly good idea, Dannica had sauntered up to him, swaying her hips provocatively—very, very sure of her reception—her bright eyes locked with his brown-gold ones. One slim finger had traced boldly down the middle of his muscular, t-shirted

chest. “If I didn’t know what a sex-god you were, I’d be a little worried by your color sense, stud,” she’d teased.

Her body contracted with the memory. He’d growled a little—like a wolf recognizing his receptive mate—lifted her up and spread her out on the new wet bar. He peeled her sweats down only far enough so that his eager mouth could get at her, and brought her to a writhing, screaming, panting climax before availing himself of the charms that were now bathed in a mixture of his own saliva and her own unique cream.

The emptiness of the house was a cruel reminder of everything she’d lost less than a year ago. Loneliness slapped her across the face as she ripped herself from that lusciously painful memory and shrugged out of the suit jacket. Throwing it over the back of the floral print sofa, instantly made her flash back on when *she* had been draped bare-bottomed over its well-stuffed back. Her too-rounded posterior had been at just at the right height for him to deliver one of those atrocious warm-up spankings of his—which, with anyone else probably would have been the coup de grâce—but not with her Eric. His warm ups alone were a force to be reckoned with, never mind rest of the thorough punishments that always, always followed them.

Binx, their loveable if slightly brain-dead golden trotted into the room at just the right moment, as always, keeping her from sinking too horridly into the depths of despair, as she had when Eric had first been taken away from her. This time, a pair of her lacey bikini panties, freshly fished out of the dirty clothes hamper she was sure, dangled from that soft retriever mouth, and Danni just had to smile.

“Release,” she said softly and the waggle-tailed dog gave up her prize without a fight. As Danni sank down onto a sofa cushion and cradled the dog’s head in her lap, splotches of wet appeared on the shiny pelt; they were tears of mental, emotional, and intellectual weariness that she didn’t know how to combat. *Not without him.*

Chapter 1

Eric Gelbart had been the love of Dannica Cioffredi's life—the *only* love. He was her soul mate, her best friend, her lover, her disciplinarian and eventually, after he'd graduated from college, her husband. They had met in high school and dated seriously almost from the beginning. He was two years ahead of her and was a natural athlete and a natural leader, especially with her. Danni had lost her father at an early age, and although neither of them chose to analyze it, it was almost as if Eric had stepped in to fulfill that role for her on a very basic level. Danni was a strong enough person on her own, but Eric complimented her strength in ways she couldn't manage herself. He kept her focused on her studies when she might have faltered, with regular, almost frighteningly painful applications of his big broad palm—or whatever implement happened to be handy—to her fleshy, curved—and in the end always swollen and marked—bottom.

And it was just exactly what she'd needed to keep her on track. He was lovingly unrelenting, and wonderfully, attentively dominant. He was also extremely indulgent and physically affectionate, as long as she toed the line and did as he required. But when she rebelled or disobeyed him, even in a small way, then there would be hell to pay, she knew without a doubt, and that idea was nothing but comforting to her. He never let her get away with anything—and she loved him that much more for it.

The first time he'd spanked her, it was over the “D” she'd gotten in chemistry during the third quarter of her senior year, when she was almost to the point of being sprung from the prison of high school and was wound too tightly for her own good. Danni had recently turned eighteen—ahead of almost everyone else in her class. She was feeling her oats, and as far as Eric was concerned, getting way too big for her cute, tight britches. Danni's mom had her hands full with the headstrong girl, and was just as happy to lean on Eric some in regard to her daughter's behavior, as long as it kept the stubborn girl in line and got her through high school and on to college. Renee—Danni's petite mom—was terrified that Danni would blow the scholarship she'd received to Ohio State, where Eric was already a sophomore. Renee had felt that Danni had

really missed out on what would have been her father's steadying presence in her life, and Eric seemed tailor-made to fit that bill perfectly.

When Eric returned for a long weekend, the distressing report card was the first thing Danni's mom had shown him when he came through the Cioffredi's door. Danni was at cheerleading practice at the time. Grimacing, Eric soothed Renee's fears, patting her on the shoulder and reassuring her that this would never happen again, and that Danni's grade would be brought up to at least a high "C" if not a low "B" for the last quarter of the year, if he had to drive the ninety miles home every night just to impress a reminder on that wayward little girl's butt to make it so.

Eric had lit out for the football field at his old high school, hoping to catch her before she drove home. He actually found the squad still hard at practice, and crawled into the bleachers to enjoy the show. Danni adored cheering, and was great at it, possessing natural acrobatic and dance abilities. And it should have been illegal for anyone but him to see her in that uniform, he thought.

When it seemed that they were breaking for the night, and he could see that she was pulling on her sweats, Eric wandered down and caught Danni by surprise from behind. He swung her around with his strong arms around her waist, turned her to lay tightly against him and planted a serious kiss on her full, pink lips.

"Eric!" she squealed and threw herself completely into the kiss, just as she had the cheers a few minutes ago. Danni never felt better than when she was in Eric's sure arms.

He put her down gently, nuzzling her neck and humming against her sensitive flesh, "How's my girl?"

Danni giggled because the vibration of his voice tickled her. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Eric pulled back and looked down at her with a stern, serious expression on his face. "Oh, I was good until your Momma showed me your report card, Dannica."

All of the enthusiasm drained from her face. Damn her mother! If Danni knew her Mom, it was the first thing she did when Eric came through the door, waive that stupid slip in his face and get her into trouble. Big trouble. Last quarter, she'd brought home a "C-" in calculus, and she'd had to do some fancy talking to escape the spanking he had threatened her with.

She decided to put up a brave front—as if she had a choice in methods to deal with him, or in the outcome of this encounter. Once he'd made up his mind, it was usually all over but the

crying. But she was an adult now! He couldn't just go turning her over his lap willy-nilly any time he wanted to ... could he? Danni had a sinking feeling that nothing she did was going to get her butt out of meeting with the palm of his hand rather violently.

"There's nothing at all wrong with my report card." She made a valiant attempt at sidestepping his grab for her hand, but he was too quick for her by far.

"Ah-ah-ah," he tsked at her, tugging her along behind him to his truck.

"What about my car?" she whined as he bundled her into the passenger's side and then went around the truck to slide under the wheel.

He gave her a hard look, and she settled down immediately. "When we're done, I'll bring you back, we'll pick up your car and I'll follow you home."

"Done? Done doing what?" she barely peeped, quite certain she didn't want to hear his answer.

Eric didn't look at her as he pulled out into traffic and answered, "I think you know very well what, young lady."

Danni didn't come out with another word the whole way. She knew where they were going—his brother's vacant apartment. Eric's brother Jeff was away in Europe for a semester, and he'd given Eric the key to keep an eye on the place and use it when he was in town.

It was the perfect place for Danni to receive her first spanking.

When they entered, she was eying him warily. His strong fingers had encircled her wrist from the moment her feet had touched the ground once they arrived, so she had had no chance to run from him, which he wasn't sure she would do, anyway, but now she was looking at him as if she expected him to take his fists to her, which would never, ever happen.

Instead, he tugged her to the perpetually mussed futon, and sat down, pulling her onto his lap. All they did for the next half hour was cuddle and rediscover their connection after his two-month absence. All of the phone calls and letters could not replace his physical and emotional presence in her life, nor hers in his. Her forehead found its usual notch against the thick column of his neck, and his arms wrapped around her as they always had, holding her close for a long, slow snuggle that he hoped would calm her fears.

Eventually, he kissed the top of her head and began to speak as his hand slowly rubbed up and down her back. "I'm very proud of you for maintaining you're 'A' averages in history and English, hon. Great job!"

Normally, Danni would have preened at his praise, but this situation wouldn't allow for that. There was too much dread in her stomach for that.

“And you brought calculus up to a C+, which I'm very happy about that. But your chemistry grade, honey, is unacceptable. I have high expectations of you, sweetie, because I know what you can do. And I understand that you have a hard time with higher math stuff. That's fine. But I also know that you were spending an awful lot of time with your friends this past quarter, *and* with me. You must've known that things were not going as well as I would want. Did you go for extra help? Ask Mr. Belden if someone could tutor you?”

Her lack of response and the way she was toying with his shirt gave him all the answer he needed. But he wasn't about to pounce on her. That was not his style, and it never would be.

“Danni?” he prompted softly.

She buried her face in his shirt, wiggling restlessly on his lap. “But Eric—”

“No buts, hon. Answer me.” He was gently insistent. “Did you ask for extra help?”

More squirming, and finally, with a wealth of petulance, she replied, “No.”

Eric sighed. “I'm not going to ask why, Danni, because I know that you know better than to just let things go like that. You're going to get a spanking, honey. I'm sorry. But I'm not going to let you lose that scholarship and possibly ruin your chance at getting into college—especially the same one that I'm at—just because you're too stubborn to ask for help, or you're having too much fun your senior year to do what needs to be done first, your studying and schoolwork.”

“But I—” Danni couldn't really even come up with a decent excuse. She had done just as he suspected. She'd blown off the piles of homework in favor of going out with the girls, going to every football game she could, and having tons and tons of fun.

Now she was going to pay for the fact that she'd been lax in her studies. She was going to pay in the way that Eric decided—a very painful, humiliating way.

Eric stood her up between his legs, his eyes locked with hers. “I'm going to spank you, honey. It's what you need so that you can learn your lesson and hopefully I won't ever have to do it again for this reason. I'm going to take down your pants and your panties and swat you on the bare bottom.” And he proceeded to do exactly that. Reaching for the elastic of both her sweats and her red uniform briefs at the same time, he slid them down over her hips and her

bottom to just mid-thigh, then guided her slowly over his bent knees until her shoulders and head were on the futon mattress, but her bottom was raised over his legs—the perfect target.

Eric's strength was legendary, both in high school sports and in college football. But Danni had never had an occasion to feel that that strength was there for any other purpose but to protect and assist her—until now. She had never felt quite this vulnerable with him. Even the first time they'd made love, he'd made absolutely sure that she was completely comfortable and not at all nervous about what was going to happen. And he'd been the most wonderful and patient lover.

But as a spanker ... Danni knew she was not in for a fun time, and was just beginning to push up with her arms, trying to leverage her way off his lap before anything unpleasant happened, when Eric's big, muscular arm fell across the small of her back, precluding any possibility of escape. Danni had to come to terms with the fact that, like it or not, she was going to be getting a most thorough punishment.

And she did.

It was unbelievable to Danni exactly how much it did hurt. She'd forgotten how painful spankings were between the time that she'd gotten her last one from her mother when she was eight or so, and now. Of course, spankings from her mom were an entirely different proposition from those that Eric delivered. Her mother was a tiny woman, with little upper body strength who would occasionally grab her and give her bottom a couple sharp swats.

Eric was her mother's exact opposite, physically, and in the way he delivered a spanking. This was not something that was over in a few seconds, or even a few minutes. To Danni, it seemed that his hand would never stop cracking down on her vulnerable, exposed flesh. She arched up with each smack, and even tried to reach back with her right hand, which was the only one that had any hope of reaching her burning butt. But Eric just grabbed a hold of it and kept right on slapping his palm down.

Before he let her up, she was bawling like a baby. Promises of better behavior hadn't fazed him. Tears hadn't fazed him. Wails and moans and groans hadn't made a dent in his atrocious rhythm. When he finally stopped, her bottom was cherry tomato red, and felt like it was literally on fire.

To her ultimate humiliation, that was not quite the end of her punishment, however. Eric helped her up as she hiccupped sobs and shuddered with the force of her breathing, then

brought her over to the wall to position her—pants and panties having dropped to her ankles by now—with her nose in the corner.

“You stay right there until I say you can move. No fidgeting, and no reaching back,” he swatted her bottom crisply several times when he found her hand had already crept back there to try to soothe her over-heated flesh. A fresh round of wails escaped out of her mouth, but she did as she was told, afraid to do anything else lest he spank her again.

She didn’t know how long he’d kept her there—it seemed like days to her, but was probably only fifteen minutes or so. Danni didn’t know and didn’t care. All she wanted was to be able to cover her poor, sore bottom again, and run as far away from Eric as possible. She could not have been any more humiliated. But, yes, she could. He could find out that she was soaking wet between her legs. God, if he found that out, he’d never *stop* spanking her. She’d start getting it for looking at him sideways, because he’d know how much it turned her on.

“Danni, come here,” Eric said quietly, having never taken his eyes off the marvelous sight of her quivering bottom as she sobbed and stood in the corner like the punished, naughty girl she was.

Danni turned around and immediately reached down to pull up her pants.

“No,” Eric said firmly. “Come over here and I’ll do that for you.”

That was the very last thing Danni wanted to do, but she worried that if she disobeyed him, he wouldn’t hesitate to put her back over his knees. So she did what she was told and shuffled over to him awkwardly, until she was standing where she’d begun, between his legs. Eric reached for her pants, then changed his mind and put his hand between her legs. Danni tried to flinch away from him, but he quickly reached around behind her and put his hand on her bottom, making her squeal and arch towards rather than away from him. He’d kept his right hand in the same, embarrassingly intimate spot, and her squirming only drove his hand further into that warm wet crevice.

“Eric!” she squealed, her hands automatically reaching for his broad shoulders to steady herself, feeling the rippling muscles flex beneath her fingers, knowing that the strength of those muscles had contributed considerably to her spanking.

“That’s it. Keep your hands right there, sweetie, and spread your legs more.”

“No, Eric—” she whimpered. Her body was tingling at what he was doing with his hand, but her mind was rebelling at the submissive position, bent as she was at the waist, her face next

to his, those busy fingers rubbing and teasing and probing, driving her crazy and making her legs feel noodley.

Eric suppressed a smile. His woman was nothing if not stubborn, arguing with him after he'd given her a spanking. What was she thinking? He said two words—her first and middle name—in just the right cautionary tone. “Dannica Marie.”

Although it took her several minutes to settle back down—minutes spent dancing in place as she fought her own instincts and surrendering to his will as he demanded—eventually she complied and moved her legs inches apart, humphing and puffing as she did so.

“More.” He whispered the order in to her ear before kissing it, enjoying her groan as she moved her ankles further apart with obvious reluctance. However sadistic, Eric thoroughly enjoyed her struggle to obey him, and treasured the depths of her submission when she did.

Those slim legs inched very slowly wider. When she was fully available to him, Eric pressed his lips to hers, opening her mouth with his tongue as his fingers claimed her intimate parts more fully, swallowing her groan of pleasure as he seated several large fingers inside her and began to flick her throbbing clit with his thumb.

Danni could barely breathe. Her body was flooded with the uncontrollable sensations that Eric effortlessly inspired in her. She began to try to straighten, but his hand reached up to cup the back of her neck, holding her in place for a longer, even deeper kiss.

“No, please, Eric—I-can't!” she begged, pulling away the little he would allow her.

His eager lips found her ear again. “Yes you can, love. And you will.”

They both knew they were referring to what would undoubtedly be an incredible orgasm for her. They had both discussed the idea that he would spank her eventually, and she had agreed to that, knowing it was what she needed—despite how she'd protested when the time finally came. The very thought of being subjected to his loving discipline had amplified her response to him the few times they had made slow, sweet love.

His firm pronouncement made her moan deep in her throat, and she began to shudder.

“That's it, my sweetheart. Come for me. I adore watching you come.”

Danni could no more control the convulsions that overwhelmed her body than she could control the spanking she'd received, and that lack of control only added to her enjoyment. She knew that she was more than safe in Eric's hands—whether being pleased by them or punished. He would always protect her.

When her time finally came, she nearly crumpled into his waiting arms as his fingers drew every ounce of ecstasy from her yielding body. Eric gathered her to him and cuddled her on his lap, murmuring love words against her temple as she recovered in his embrace. Danni loved him even more once he'd proven that he would not hesitate to back up his rules for her with physical consequences.

Years later, she *still* loved him. Breathlessly. Endlessly. With everything she had, everything she was, she couldn't let go of him—*wouldn't* let go! The greeting on the answering machine was still in his voice, the one she could still hear mid-lecture as he punished her, or yelling hoarsely in ecstasy as they came together on their big bed, or in the den or on the dining room table. The same one that would whisper endearments to her as he woke her gently each morning with a nibbling kiss to her ear, trying to ease her into consciousness as he eased her into his arms, softening the transition from sleep to wakefulness because he knew it was always a hard one for her to make.

More and more of the dog's fur turned a darker shade of wet brown-gold as the melancholy rolled through her. Dear God she missed him with every molecule in her body. She screamed silently out to him every second of every minute of every day, sobbing for his arms, crying for his touch at the most inappropriate of times. Without him she was a soulless, empty shell, just like their house, a rudderless being with no anchor, no love, no happiness, and no hope.

But, girding her loins only a month or two after his death, she had done the only thing she could do to carry on his memory; she'd forced herself to take over his bid for City Council. And it had taken—and was currently taking—a tremendous strength of will to do so.

Eric had been a popular person—not that he was particularly gregarious, he wasn't. But he had an excellent reputation around town as a successful lawyer, and he knew everyone and their brother. Danni used to tease him about not being able to take him anywhere; whenever they went out, they were practically accosted by people he knew on the street, in restaurants, even honking at him from cars.

Although she didn't really have the personality to pull it off, Danni desperately wanted Eric to be remembered by more than herself and his family, and she bravely picked up where he'd left off in the campaign. She pushed herself to be more like him, to be more outgoing when her natural inclination had been to hide behind him at social functions. She would have made a

rotten political wife, and he knew that, but he had a deep need to help people, and Danni would have supported him in a quest for the Holy Grail if that was what he felt he needed to do.

She made an even worse candidate, and she knew it. She could see it in the eyes of his campaign manager, Terry Matroni, who was a blunt little man who was barely able to suppress the urge to roll his eyes around her.

But she was going to do it if it killed her, even if she lost, which she knew was a distinct probability—especially considering who the only competition was.

* * * *

On the outskirts of town, in the realm of palatial estates and silver tea sets, Moss Doucette collapsed into his big leather office chair behind what had been his father's and grandfather's imposing mahogany desk. He reached across the reams of paperwork that cried out to be addressed to pick up the antique sterling silver picture frame and stare pensively at that animated, beloved face. As always, he couldn't keep his fingers from brushing over her barely-there smile, imagining how soft her cheek would be beneath his lips.

Dannica Gelbart was the woman he'd loved since his senior year in high school, when he'd been expelled from yet another private academy because of his wild—but by today's standards pretty boring—behavior and ended up at Lincoln High, where his athletic ability had thrown him into Eric Gelbart's path in every sport the two of them had pursued. They might well have ended up rivals, but somehow it never came to that. Instead, they became fast friends, despite the radical differences in their backgrounds. Moss had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Eric was from the wrong side of the tracks and had had a poor, but wonderfully loving upbringing that had made him an affable, likeable person, but never a pushover.

Eric and Danni were already going steady at that point and so obviously, deliriously happy that it frankly hurt Moss to look at them because he coveted his newfound friend's girl something fierce. He seriously considered breaking one of his own staunch rules of conduct and poaching on another man's territory, and was barely able to keep himself from doing so. But when he'd seen her gaze up at Eric, a wealth of love in her eyes, that same slight smile on her lips as in the photo he held, he knew he couldn't do it to either of them.

Instead, he dated any woman that struck his fancy—money was an enormous help in getting women to look past his distinct lack of looks. Moss was no saint, far from it. But Danni was the only woman he ever really saw, and somehow the other women seemed to sense that he was already taken. He pined for her, but kept it so buried within himself that absolutely no one suspected—least of all Danni or Eric. It had nearly killed him when Eric had asked him to be his best man at their wedding, but he'd done it. He'd gritted his jaw 'til it hurt the whole day, having to physically restrain himself at the "I dos" and the "kiss the bride" and the removal of the garter, and any one of a million other points during that torturous six hours.

But he'd consciously stayed friends with them. Any excuse to be around Eric was an excuse to maybe get a glimpse of Danni, despite the fact that it had grown increasingly painful to see them together as their love grew over time, and he had been forced to watch as Danni blossomed under Eric's quiet, loving domination.

Eric was not one to kiss and tell, but he and Moss spent a lot of time together, and he had slipped up—just once—and mentioned having to put Danni over his lap because she'd defied him about buying a new microwave when they hadn't really needed one. Money was not plentiful in their household, especially at the beginning of their marriage. Apparently, Eric had made her take it back immediately, and once she'd done so and had come home to show him the credit slip to their charge card, he'd given her a hard enough spanking—although he didn't mention with what implement or if he'd just used his hand—to make her cry. At the mere mention of this incident, and whenever he'd thought about it later, Moss became rock hard, and the idea of taking her over his *own* lap and reducing her to tears because she'd been naughty only worsened his condition.

Moss couldn't have been any more surprised by that particular revelation, although, when he thought back about what he had seen of their relationship, he realized that he had been present during a few moments when Danni had obviously submitted to her husband's will. Come to think of it, he had always wondered what that little blush of hers was about when Eric looked down his nose at her in a particular way. But Danni was never obsequious about it, and she didn't kowtow to her husband in any way.

Once he knew that Danni was spanked, he'd consciously looked for evidence of abuse, however minute. Not that he thought Eric was capable of it—he knew he wasn't—but he couldn't keep himself from doing so out of a deeply protective streak towards Danni. Moss would rather

have been accused of being a bothersome meddler than have to mourn her when he should have acted. But he'd never seen any painted-over black eyes, and there had never been any broken arms, or noticeable bruising. Otherwise, he would have found himself in the awkward position of having to kill his best friend with his bare hands.

From that point on, she became even more of an obsession—well hidden, to be sure, but an obsession nonetheless. Moss watched her with an intensity that he knew made her uncomfortable around him, but whenever they went out, he found himself trying to discern if she'd been punished recently—if her repositioning in the chair was a result of having her gorgeously full bottom thoroughly blistered before dinner for whatever reason, or if, perhaps, she was being required to wear some sort of an uncomfortable reminder of her bad behavior. He would try to memorize her features for later on when he could bring out those moments with her when he was alone and he could play them over and over in his head. Even now, when he thought of the possibilities, the ways in which he would punish her if she were his, how he would insist on all of the rituals—corner time, scolding, lectures, and of course a very thorough, painful session with the paddle or his belt. There would also be all that wonderful cuddle and forgiveness time afterwards, where he would take great care to make sure she knew that it was over, and all was forgiven. He would show her that she was safe and loved and very much desired. Those thoughts made him literally shake with desire.

But he had been as good as gold and had never laid a finger on her, never let on anything about the raging inferno he felt, even on the rare occasions when they were alone together, as they had been the night of January 16th, 2002.

Eric had invited him over for one of Danni's scrumptious home-cooked dinners, and he'd arrived promptly at seven to find a completely frantic Danni running around like a chicken with her head cut off because Eric was *never* late. He'd called her at five, when he was just leaving the office, and should have been home no later than six and that was even stretching it.

The phone call had come at seven forty-five. Moss had stood as close to her as he dared, in case it was bad news. He'd never seen her look so frail—but, looking back now, he knew it would only get worse as the evening progressed.

He'd driven her to the hospital, and had been there with her in the emergency room when the doctors had approached her with their carefully neutral faces. And she'd known. Somehow, Danni had known what they were going to say about Eric's condition after the car crash as soon

as they started to walk towards her, and she'd broken into an agonized keening that damn near killed him to hear. Moss had stood behind her, holding her, supporting her when she sagged back against him. He'd guided her to a chair and helped her sit down, and she did the thing he had always wished she would do; she clung to him, not letting him let her go, sobbing inconsolably in his arms.

Moss had had to swallow down a hard lump in his throat at the loss of his best friend, but then he turned all of his considerable attentions to her. The doctor was still talking, but Moss had waved him off almost angrily. He had cuddled her to him tightly and stroked her hair, knowing that there was absolutely nothing he could say to her at that moment that would help. He knew from this point on, the only thing he could do was be there for her, and he damned well intended to do exactly that.

And he had. Moss had done all of the things that accompany a death—contacting a funeral home, submitting insurance paperwork, taking care of all of the myriad details that he could so that Danni didn't have to do anything but try to come to grips with her grief. That first night, after they had made that fateful trip to the ER, he had stayed the night in a guest bedroom on a pull out couch that he hadn't bothered to pull out, wanting to be up and with her if she so much as made a peep in the night. He had gotten up at about three, and was wandering down the hall towards the bathroom, when he heard her sobbing all alone in the master bedroom.

He knew he should have just continued on to the bathroom, but he out and out couldn't make his feet go in any direction but towards her. Their bedroom was done in soft blues and peaches, he knew, with a soft ruffled comforter, more feminine than Moss thought Eric would have allowed, but then he always had a soft spot for his wife, despite his disciplinary tendencies. It was dark, but he could see the huddled lump under the covers, and headed straight for it, pulling her into his arms and not allowing her to protest or wiggle her way out of them.

At first, once she realized that he wasn't going to let her go, she'd just huddled against him, drenching his bare chest, her arms wrapping around him desperately but almost reluctantly. Moss guiltily ate up any attention he could get from her—no matter how he abhorred its impetus. But after a while, she pulled back as much as she could, considering the strong arms around her, and he could feel her looking down at him, could almost see the endearing way she bit her lip when she was hesitant about something. “You shouldn't be here,” she whispered hoarsely, trying to move further away.

He was hard as a spike as usual around her. Despite the gravity of the situation, his body had a mind of its own. But he knew there was no way for her to discern his arousal. He wasn't holding her quite that close against his lower body, which would have been improper. "Yes, I should," he asserted firmly. "You need someone to lean on right now. I'm here for you, just as I should be as Eric's best friend. Let me support and comfort you. I'll take care of you the way I know he would have wanted me to."

The mention of her husband's name set her off again, and Moss took shameless advantage of her weakness to encourage her to lay her head back down on his shoulder—where he felt it belonged—and cry her eyes out.

And she had leaned on him to a certain extent, especially about administrative things in general, but she'd never again let him hold her while she cried, and she'd never allowed him to spend the night after that first night, no matter how he tried to sell the idea to her. Grumbling gently, he'd given Danni every telephone number he owned, including personal private numbers that no one else in the world had who wasn't a close family member. He persistently extracted a solemn promise from her that she would contact him even if all she needed to do was talk. He reiterated that he was just across town and if she called him and needed to be held, he could get to her in less than ten minutes.

She hadn't called, of course, as he'd known she wouldn't, but his heart had ached for her as he crawled into his big bed alone that night, knowing she was doing the same just minutes away from him. It came to his mind to kidnap her and bring her home with him, to a place that wasn't so full of eerie memories, but he didn't think Danni would forgive him that, and he didn't want to risk losing whatever remained of their friendship. Eric had been his only ticket to seeing her, and he didn't intend to lose her now.

Moss *was* grieving at the loss of his best friend, but he also appreciated the irony of the fact that because Eric had died, he would have a shot at convincing Danni that he might not be such a bad guy, after all. He'd sent a short prayer to Eric, wherever he was, promising to take care of Danni just as lovingly as he had, and, when there hadn't been an earthquake or a bolt of lightning taking him out, he'd let go of any guilty feelings he might have harbored over wanting Danni for himself.

There was one slight problem, however. He and Danni had never really become friends; Eric had always been somewhat of a buffer between them. Moss didn't know if it was just that

he was a little too overwhelming—not that he tried to be at all—or what, but for some reason, she hadn't taken to him very much even after all those years, tending to be somewhat uneasy around him at best. Of course, his intense perusal of her whenever he got the chance probably didn't help her relax much, and he vowed to stop doing that immediately. He would bide his time, knowing that she needed it to come to grips with Eric's death.

But when he thought she'd recovered, he wasn't going to let any one or anything interfere with his pursuit of her.

And what Moss Doucette wanted, Moss Doucette got.

Over the next few months, she'd carefully built herself up to the point where she could look at a picture of Eric without breaking down, but Moss knew it had been a hard and arduous road. When Danni had called and invited him out to dinner, one night out of the blue, he had wondered what she had on her mind. He knew it was way too soon for her to feel anything even remotely romantic towards him despite his gentle bullying and continued presence in her life, and since that wasn't it, he couldn't possibly fathom why she would be inviting him out.

They'd eaten at a crowded, popular steakhouse in the area, and were interrupted several times by people expressing their condolences to her and patting him on the back about having essentially won the council position by default.

The first few minutes were somewhat awkward, and then they started chatting and talking almost as if Eric was still around, and adopted an easy camaraderie that had Moss mentally sighing in relief, although he did spend a lot of time fending off her thanks for having taken such "good care" of her afterwards. She'd teared up while offering her gratitude, but he'd deflected it entirely. What else could he do? She was Eric's wife. Saying those words, even now, ate at him somehow, reminding him that she had been someone else's before she would be *his*. There was less than no doubt in his mind that he would have her—eventually. He could be very patient; hadn't he already proven that?

He'd been so distracted by the intriguing path of his own thoughts that he'd missed the beginning of what she was saying, and only tuned back in time to hear her say, "—and so I've decided that I'm going to take Eric's place in the run for City Council."

Moss was stunned. With all due respect to Danni, he couldn't imagine a less likely candidate. Not that she lacked the intelligence to do it—far from it. But Danni was notoriously shy and hated crowds. She most particularly detested shaking hands, and Moss could attest to

the fact that that was what he spent most of his day doing—meeting strangers and shaking their hands and asking for their votes. There were publicity spots to do for TV and radio, and countless interviews. He couldn't imagine Danni doing it.

But she had that stubborn look he'd come to know from the past nine years—that expression had been the bane of Eric's existence for as long as they'd known each other. He'd heard about the time that she'd heard an intruder at the door and had cocked Eric's revolver—but not fired it, thank the Lord. And the time that she'd tried her hand at refinishing furniture and had stripped the finish off his grandmother's antique china cabinet. Both incidences that resulted, he assumed but was not told, in some considerable spankings.

When Danni got an idea into her head, it was almost impossible to dissuade her, Eric had confided—except by using that particular method. But there was no one around right now to do that—*yet*, Moss amended to himself.

Trying to be as diplomatic as possible, and not bringing up the idea that she hadn't a snowball's chance in hell, he answered on a hard swallow of water, “Are you sure that that's a good idea?”

Danni gave him a raised eyebrow look and returned without a second's hesitation, “Yes, I am.” That stubborn little chin rose a couple of notches, and Moss had to suppress a smile.

“Well, it's not that I don't think you could do it, Danni—”

“Yes, it is,” she interrupted shrewdly.

His reply was very firm. “No, it's not. It's just that I know you well enough to know that getting up in front of crowds and speaking and facing cameras and microphones is not your usual inclination. You're naturally a very shy little thing.”

Her eyes narrowed and her full lips pursed. “Don't try to demean me, Moss Doucette. I can do anything I need to do.”

He was mildly alarmed at how she had construed what he'd said so far. This was not going the way he wanted it to, not at all. “I'm not. I wouldn't. I know you're an extremely capable woman.” That seemed to mollify her a bit, but not much. “But I feel I need to warn you, it won't be easy for you to win. I had an advantage over Eric already, although he was doing extremely well for a young upstart.” Moss's family name and money had made him practically a shoe-in, but he and Eric enjoyed the rivalry anyway, and were always able to maintain their friendship, regardless of the fact that they were on the opposite sides of most

issues. The campaign had been conducted in a very gentlemanly fashion, with absolutely no mudslinging.

“But I’ll get one segment of the vote that you can’t touch—the sympathy vote,” she responded bravely, her voice choking on the word “sympathy” until she wrestled it under control.

Moss had to clench his fists so that he wouldn’t reach across the table and drag her onto his lap to cuddle and soothe her. He detested the fact that she was in pain and there was literally nothing he could do about it. He cleared his throat, his eyes drifting lazily over her too-pale face. She’d always been slight, almost overwhelmed by her husband’s size, and even more so by his own, but since Eric had died, she’d grown gaunt to the point of being almost ethereal—despite the fact that he knew everyone around her, including himself, needled her about eating and her weight.

Moss kept the talk of her assuming the mantle of her husband’s campaign as casual as possible. The idea annoyed him a little—only in that he felt that it might be too much for her to handle, especially in her present condition.