

Monroe County

Part 1

by Carolyn Faulkner

Monroe County was a quiet, peaceful little place. The sign on Rte 47 on the way into town said, "Welcome to Monroe County – a friendly, family-oriented, well-disciplined community" and it meant what it said - about the "well-disciplined" part, anyway.

The residents of the county subscribed to an old-fashioned view of life where family is of the utmost importance - even if that family was just a husband and a wife. Each man was the undisputed head of his household, and as such it was his right and his responsibility to administer discipline to everyone within the home – including his beloved wife.

On any given day, if a visitor drove through the residential areas of the county with the car windows rolled down, he could find himself serenaded by the rhythmic crack of a paddle (or a belt, or a tawse, or a cane...) and a woman's high-pitched cry of genuine discomfort.

Bachelor party gifts were, traditionally, implements for the groom to use on his new wife when the situation warranted - rubber and leather straps, solid wooden paddles – with and without holes -, canes and the like, and such implements were kept readily available in each house – usually there was an implement in every room. A cottage industry developed to such an extent that fine, handmade implements were available at corner stores, Laundromats, etc, just in case they were needed for the drive home.

Bridal shower gifts, on the other hand, were usually aloe, fluffy pillows, vitamin E, and Kleenex.

The fine tradition of "Punishment Night" continued to this day. Every Saturday evening, long about six or seven, after the dinner dishes were done, pretty much every woman in Monroe County that was married or involved intimately with a man found herself bare-bottomed over his lap, or the end of their bed, or the back of the sofa, getting a maintenance spanking. That same visitor, driving down the street at that time on a Saturday night, would hear a veritable symphony of smacks and yelps coming from every house on every block as Monroe County's husbands diligently set about addressing any transgressions they might have missed during the week, as well as applying a firm reminder about better behavior in the coming week.

The other fine old tradition was Sunday morning brunch at the Bottoms Up Restaurant &

Grille, where the seats were cushy and thickly padded, and it wasn't an entirely unusual sight to see a wife standing in one of the corners of the room if she was disrespectful or sassy during the meal.

It was not an easy thing to be a woman in love in Monroe County. Some times the sittin' was mighty difficult, and facing the man you love when your skirt and panties are around your ankles, knowing that in a few seconds he's going to be applying the unforgiving paddle he has in his hand to your defenseless bottom while you cry and moan and plead like a little girl would make many a woman have second thoughts about just what she was getting herself into.

But no woman in Monroe County ever lacked for discipline OR love. Her man fairly doted on her - she was always the apple of his eye. Pretty much nothing was more important to him than her happiness, her well being . . . and, of course, her behavior.

"C'mere, bare-bottomed girl," her husband's deep, soft voice floated to Marie's ears over the sounds of her own hiccoughing sobs. Without a second thought, she turned from the hated corner and stumbled to him like he was the only solid thing in her universe - and he truly was.

Like the repentant girl he sometimes treated her as, Marie curled up on his lap, tucking her tear-wet face against his strong neck, still shuddering with sobs. Thom's big hand rubbed up and down her bare back, the gentleness of his caress belying the strength she knew he possessed. "Sh-sh-sh, sweetheart." Her sobs were fit to break his heart, but he knew that he'd done right in setting fire to his stubborn wife's bottom. A well-roasted derriere was the only thing that seemed to get through to her when she got her head up and locked about a behavior that he had made clear would not be tolerated.

It had all begun when Thom had insisted that his wife not skip her annual physical. She'd been tired and draggy lately, and he was frankly worried. He had, indeed, accompanied her to the doctor's office, where Dr. Jefferson had pronounced that she had astronomically high blood pressure. He prescribed some medication and advised in no uncertain terms that Marie needed to avoid salt as much as possible. That was a month ago. The medication seemed to be helping, but at the follow-up visit – which Thom also attended - the doc reiterated that she should limit her salt intake.

Thom quickly found himself riding herd over her at the dinner table, having been consigned to the unenviable role of "Salt Police". By the end of the first week, he had had enough, and had informed her in his "no nonsense" voice that if he caught her putting salt on her food then she would be subject to a severe punishment.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning, and Thom woke Marie up in the way they both enjoyed the most, even after all these years - by pressing himself deeply inside her before she was even awake. He loved how warm and silky she was, and her quick intakes of breath as he stretched her open and rode her hard to their complete satisfaction.

Afterwards, he suggested they go out for breakfast at the Bottoms, and Marie agreed eagerly; breakfast was one of her favorite meals, especially when she wasn't the one cooking and cleaning up after it.

Since this would be, traditionally, the biggest meal they would eat today – every other meal would be catch-as-catch can - she had her usual eggs, sausage, home fries, and homemade oatmeal bread, well-toasted, and while Thom was turned around in his chair chatting with a friend of his, Marie sneakily took advantage of not being under his eagle eye for five seconds to grab the salt and sprinkle it liberally over her eggs and home fries.

But she wasn't quite quick enough, though, and Thom caught her in the act of replacing the saltshaker exactly where it had been, so as not to arouse any suspicions. Marie's heart stopped as his beloved face clouded over and he got "that look" . . .

"Did you just salt your food, Marie?" Although he had not raised his voice, the clanking of silverware hitting plates reached her burning ears as the conversation at the tables around them ground to a halt. Her mouth went dry. "A - A little bit?" she gave him a tentative smile, but knew in her heart that there was no saving her butt now.

To her infinite horror, Thom rose immediately from the table, threw a few bills down, and grabbed her by the upper arm, encouraging her none too gently to get out of her chair. "You know very well what the doctor said, Marie Cortina Wilson, and what my rule is about that," he lectured softly, all the way out to their car. "The doc said to cut out the salt because of your high blood pressure. There's enough sodium in that sausage to last you all day and you know better than to pick up that salt shaker while my back is turned." The car door closed as she slunk lower in the seat. He got in beside her, saying those painful words in an exasperated tone, "I am very disappointed in you, young lady."

Marie stared out the window on the too-short ride home, tears already spilling down her rounded cheeks. It was completely humiliating to be lead out of the restaurant like a naughty girl, their meal wholly untouched, and in full view of the eager eyes and ears of the restaurant patrons who knew just exactly what she was going to get when she got home as he scolded her for her disobedience. But by far the worst of it was that, by her own compulsive deed, she had made him think less of her. That pain was nearly more than she could bear, but she knew that that would be put to the test once he brought whatever implement(s) to bear on her defenseless bottom.

He stood aside to let her enter the house ahead of him, swatting her bottom hard once, as if he just couldn't contain the spank any longer. "Strip," he commanded, and she complied hesitantly. Thom often required that she be completely naked during a punishment, believing that it reinforced her submission to her husband. Of course, he remained fully clothed, but with the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up above each elbow. Marie especially hated to be naked in other rooms of the house besides their bedroom. As each new area of her skin was revealed while Thom sat watching from his big overstuffed chair, she felt more and more vulnerable - even though he'd drawn the curtains over the big bow window before taking his seat.

"Bend over the couch," came the not unexpected order, once her last garment - her panties - hit the floor then were folded on top of the neat pile.

Oh, God, no preamble at all! No cuddling. No loving explanation of why he had to do what he was going to do. Marie's mouth was suddenly as dry as the Sahara at noon. This was NOT good. He was completely quiet.

But she knew better than to protest, shivering her way to the back of the divan to drape herself over the plump pastel tapestry cushions. Once she in position, she heard Thom sigh loudly, then felt the warm kiss of his lips to her cool, defenseless bottom-flesh.

The spanking began and ended in silence, the only sounds filling the air were Marie's strident moans and fervent promises of better behavior, and the whistle of Thom's favorite implement as it sang through the air to snap against her tender flesh from the more than amply rounded buttocks to the tops of the sensitive backs of her knees. Over and over, the switch fell unforgiving, relentless, creating a crisscross pattern of thin red weals on the creamy white skin.

Thom worked methodically, covering every last inch of exposed flesh – twice; his jaw clenched grimly, mind set to ignoring the inevitable sobs and cries from his lovely, naughty wife. That was one of the hardest parts of disciplining her - his instinct was always to protect and comfort, yet here he was, deliberately making her wail and beg him to stop with each crisp, stinging stroke.

But if he ever lost her . . .

It was that unbearable thought that was in his mind when he smoothly exchanged the worn out switch for her paddle - the 18-incher with the holes that raised blisters. Determinedly, he clenched his jaw and brought it down with a crack on those lovely hillocks, making her scream from the first. He'd be damned if he'd lose her to something

that was as entirely controllable as high blood pressure. No. His mind rebelled against that idea so entirely that he chanted "no" as he redecorated her bottom and thighs a frighteningly angry shade of red.

When he finally stopped, Marie was barely able to croak out a protest any more but still flinched with each stroke. Thom laid the paddle across the small of her back. "Don't move."

Bereft of his closeness, however angry he was with her, Marie continued to sob despondently. Thom returned minutes later to guide her over to "her" corner of the living room where he could keep an eye on her. The white kitchen timer was set down beside her, tick-tick-ticking away an unknown amount of time that she would have to spend, hands on head, roasted red bottom on full display. Even when it dinged loudly, though, she didn't move. Only Thom's voice from behind could release her, and finally it did.

He let her cuddle on him for a little while, and then carried her down the hall to their room. When he laid her down on the mattress, she knew instantly why he had left her after punishing her so thoroughly - as always, he was thinking of her: he'd changed the sheets on the bed to the soft green silk set that wouldn't hurt her bottom as much as the usual cotton ones.

Before she knew it, Marie found herself full of him for the second time that morning. She knew that, intellectually, he fought internal battles about spanking her: deliberately causing her pain went against his very protective grain. But his body loved it. He was almost always rampantly hard and swollen after laying down his law on her bottom.

This time was different, though. One he'd seated himself fully inside her, Thom gathered her close, burying his face against her neck.

Marie was alarmed when she felt the wetness there. "Thom, are you okay?" She tightened her arms around him.

"Never, never, never, never," he mumbled as he began to move within her.

"Never what, honey?" She was really getting worried until he reared back and plunged hard, his grey eyes still stormy and wet.

"Never-never-never-want-to-lose-you," he emphasized each word with a stroke that brought them each closer to heaven.

Despite the way he was driving her sore bottom into the bed, tears coursed down the

sides of her face. "Oh, Thom, I'm so sorry!"

Her husband bent down and captured her mouth, whispering over and over as he brought them both over the edge, "I love you."

Part 2

It was Ladies Night Out - Tuesday - at the Old Tyme Kitchen, which was more fondly referred to as the OTK by its regular patrons, for whom the initials had a special meaning. The OTK was a warm, friendly place to grab a bite and a drink if you wanted. Hilda MacKenzie tended bar every Tuesday night, often standing right in front of both the razor strop and the wooden paddle that bore her name and had been well used on her ample bottom since she and Harold were married, almost thirty-five years ago. Ninety-nine percent of the women who joined Hilda on any given week were subject to the same strict discipline - using the same type of implements as were displayed so prominently in the bar.

Taking that fact into consideration, the bar stools had extra thick padding, as well as the chairs and booths. Hilda kept a ready supply of extra pillows and Kleenex handy behind the bar, and aloe vera lotion was always available in the ladies' lavatory.

Cindy Carmichael grabbed the first chair she came to at the usual table - there was no way in hell she was going to drag her raw, pantyhose clad butt across the sticky vinyl seats of a booth - ouch! As it was, both Hilda, who was coming over to take her order, and Marie, who was just coming in the door, caught the exceedingly ginger way she was sitting - lots of "oohs" and "ahhs" and fidgeting to find a comfortable position. Marie knew that she was going to have the same reaction to sitting herself as memories of that horrible session flooded through her mind.

Hilda patted Cindy knowingly on the shoulder as she put the cup of coffee down in front of her. Cindy didn't drink - she didn't much like the taste of alcohol, and her drinks were always free because she was the default "designated driver" for whoever in their group might be stupid enough to need one. That kind of behavior would earn any of them a trip across their husband's knee - or worse!

Marie raised a telling eyebrow and sat down with careful aplomb, cutting right to the quick of the matter in the way of good friends, asking, "Andre found out about the overdrafts?"

Grimacing, Cindy clutched her coffee mug fit to break it. "Damned Internet Banking!" she grumbled.

Giggling, Hilda appeared at her elbow, a soft fluffy pillow in hand for each of them. Cindy accepted hers gratefully, but still sat down with obvious discomfort. Marie declined. She was fine, quite on the end of it, and didn't want to take it away from some poor woman who truly needed it.

"I told you to apply for an overdraft loan . . ." Marie chided gently, patting her young friend's hand.

Cindy snorted. "Yeah, right. Like Mister 'I Hate Debt' would go along with that!"

"What did he use?" Marie asked already knowing the answer. Andre was young - like Cindy he was in his mid-twenties - but he was nothing if not consistent - extremely strict with his sometimes irresponsible wife. He could have been a Thom-clone, even though Thom was decades older.

"The usual," Cindy frowned. She didn't even want to SAY the word - somehow it sounded as bad as it felt, stinging its way up and down her bottom and the backs of her thighs . . .

Ssswwwiiitttcchhh.

Every time he used one on her she vowed with all her heart, to chop, burn, or blow up that big old hickory tree in the backyard. Just the sight of one in his hand was enough to reduce her to tears . . . But she just HAD to have that dual handset phone because it would be so convenient and save them the money of having to have the expensive wiring done for another phone jack . . . But that unplanned for hundred-and-seventy-nine dollar check caused a domino effect in their account - leading to overdraft fees in the triple digits, almost as much as the phone itself cost.

"Well, now I know what an apoplectic fit looks like up-close and personal," she commented wryly, shifting her weight again. "And feels like."

"Yeah, me, too, and Thom's decided to take a page out of Andre's book, too - yeow! Now I know what you've been complaining about!" Marie wiggled her butt in complete sympathy with the younger woman.

Beth Kessler joined them at that moment. She was Cindy's next-door-neighbor and worked for the same bank as Marie. "How ya' doin', kiddo?" She patted Cindy's arm sympathetically.

"Okay," Cindy lied with a wince.

Beth chuckled. "I don't think so. Not after the whippin' he gave you last night. I'm surprised Marie didn't hear you screamin' all the way on the other side of town!"

"Was somebody at this table a naughty girl?" Tabitha Verrill crowed loudly as she arrived, shopping bags in either hand. "Naaaaah. No one here EVER gets spanked - we're all waaaaay too well behaved, aren't we?"

Hilda put a Grateful Dead down in front of her before she even sat down. "So, what're we havin' this even, ladies?"

Minutes later, she plopped down several big platters of finger foods - chili cheese fries, onion rings, chicken fingers, and fried mozzarella - all guaranteed to have no calories whatsoever. On Tuesday nights, she used a very special oil that took away all fat and calories from the food it was cooked in. Diet and exercise would be resumed as usual tomorrow, but once a week, they were very, very bad.

Comfort, love, and sympathy were distributed liberally among the friends to Cindy, who lapped up the attention. "She's not the only one who's sittin' a little carefully, is she, Elizabeth Anne?" commented the hawk-eye Tabitha.

Elizabeth blushed bright red, which was Tab's intention. Beth was an Executive Vice President at a very prestigious firm in the city. Her position was extremely stressful, demanding, and high-powered. But in Div Kessler, she'd more than met her match.

Div was a self-made, picked-himself-up-by-the-bootstraps man who had had less than nothing as a child but now could almost rival Mr. Gates for wealth, all-told. Although he hadn't had much materially while growing up, he had the advantage of a strong, loving, supportive family, whom he saw to personally now, providing any comfort he could to his hard working parents, who were now in their eighties.

He could have lived anywhere he chose but he stayed in Monroe County, not that far from the house he was born in. Div and Beth met at one of the many summer barbeques, and, although he was the quiet type who didn't broadcast his interest or his wealth to all and sundry, he determined that night that Elizabeth Anne Wendt would be his wife. And he hadn't gotten where he was in life by taking "no" for an answer.

They were casually introduced that night, but he waited almost a week to call her, weaseling her phone number out of Marie Wilson, who grilled him like she was the girl's own mama as to his intentions, which, he impressed on her, were entirely honorable.

Beth's jaw had clunked loudly onto the floor when she recognized his voice. She hadn't been in town very long, having moved here for the quietness and tranquility, as well as to be near her friends.

She soon discovered Div's quiet demeanor masked a razor-sharp wit and a keenly perceptive mind. Beth was a major sucker for a man with a sense of humor, and Div kept her laughing - and thinking - through their first few dates, until they were at her apartment and he caught sight of the ticket she'd gotten last Sunday driving into town.

"Elizabeth Anne Wendt, were you doing eighty-five in a fifty-five mile an hour zone?"

His tone stopped her in her tracks, in the act of walking towards him for a hug. He didn't look like he wanted to hug her now; he looked like he wanted to -

" - take you over my knee and teach you to drive responsibly, young lady," Div's face was grim and dark as he proceeded to do just what he'd threatened while a stunned Beth couldn't collect her scattered wits fast enough to stop it.

Her lacy panties were down around her ankles before she knew it, and seconds later he had flung her soft knit skirt up over her back and lay her over his bent leg where it was propped on the run of one of her bar stools.

Crack.

She had never been touched as a child, but here she was, at age 32, bare-bottomed over the knee of one of the richest, most powerful men in the world - and the sexiest, too, damn him.

That first swat made her draw in a deep breath, but the ten or so afterwards reduced her to tears and he didn't stop until the count - if there was one - was well into the fifties.

Beth was livid - dripping wet and sobbing her heart out - but livid nonetheless. When he finally helped her up, she laid a vicious slap of her own open palm against his cheek, and found herself immediately taken back over his lap, getting another crisp, even more painful series of swats. When he was done, he held her in place with a broad arm across her back.

Div didn't mention anything about the slap she'd given him. Instead, his lecture concentrated on her driving habits. "I don't want to see you getting any more speeding tickets, Elizabeth. If I do, the spanking you get'll make this look like love pats." His hand

began to massage her lower back as she tried to recover her voice.

"You bastard! You'd better let me up if you know what's good for you!" she growled through choked sobs.

Fifteen or so more sharp smacks landed on her already roasted butt. "Watch your language, young lady," came the stern admonition. "Now. I'm going to let you up, and consider this an end to it. I don't want you speeding – you've become much too precious to me," his words softened her ire at his high-handedness. His big hand caressed the area that it had been vigorously blistering not five minutes before. "I would hate to think of any damage coming to this wonderful soft skin." Div helped her up and pulled her close, although Beth still had a half a mind to slap him again, he knew. "Or this wonderful, soft woman." Div kissed her forehead, then took her lips in a firmly possessive kiss. Her panties were still around her ankles, and his hands cupped her bare bottom, using his hold to keep her in place as one set of fingers explored carefully between her legs.

"Div!" Beth squealed, jerking her mouth from his.

"Shhhhh, honey," his fingers found her wetness and he sighed, knowing he had done the right thing. "When we're married – "

"Married?" her voice broke on the extremely high note. "Who said anything about getting married?" She tried to move away, but he wouldn't allow it.

Div was quiet, just looking at her intently.

"What?" Beth's eyes shifted around as if she was looking for something. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I was just wishing I had a ring in my pocket – I'd propose to you right now."

Beth snorted, pleased, but also embarrassed. "Cut that out – we barely know each other!"

His arms settled around her waist. "I knew I wanted you to marry me the night I met you. And seeing you now, with your lashes all spiky and wet from crying, your face flushed a little, how receptive you were to that spanking, it just reinforces how right I am about you."

But Beth pulled away, saying, "No way, Div Kessler. I know that the philosophy around here is 'spare the rod and spoil the wife', but there's no way I'll ever let you spank me like that again – "

As she finished that sentence, she found herself over his knee for the third time in less than a half an hour, but his hand was merely resting on her red butt, for now.

"Would you like to rethink that?" Div asked patiently.

Oh, God, what had she gotten herself into? "I – I – no, I don't want to – "

Whack!

"Owwwww! No – no - stop!" All of her wiggling and crying and kicking her feet did her no good – the arm holding her in place was like iron.

It was as if she had never spoken. Her already sore bottom was getting it again, but good. "We will be getting married, not too far in the future, Elizabeth. And, from this point on in our relationship, I will be administering whatever correction you may need. Understand?"

His palm cracked rhythmically against her flesh, stealing her breath so that it wasn't easy for her to answer him and she was stunned by his assumption that she was going to marry him. "Y-yes!"

Five more good spanks fell, and then he stopped, turning her to cradle her in his arms, smothering her face with butterfly kisses. "You feel so good in my arms, Beth."

Her panties had flown across the room while she was trying – futilely, it turned out – to avoid the fall of his rock-hard hand. Beth's arms crept around his neck as she tucked her face into his chest. She heard the soft rumble in her ears as he stroked her hair. "May I love you?"

His quiet question melted her heart, despite her throbbing bottom, and, in answer, she pressed her lips to his. Div stood, carrying her to her bedroom to stretch the both of them out on her peach and blue quilt. Beth tried to arch her poor bum away from the fabric, and Div teased, "Sore?"

Beth pouted. "Yes."

"Good." Div set about making sure that she experienced more pleasure from him than she had pain. He would continue to spank her when the situation dictated, but he never wanted Beth to feel that she was abused. He wanted her to feel loved and cherished and needed.

Her skin was very, very soft, and she was shyly responsive. Div found himself positively entranced with her sighs and moans as he lay beside her, his arm bent and his head resting on his hand, running the fingers of one hand up and down her tummy and thighs, then up to drift over an excited peak, then the side of her neck and over her lips and forehead to delve into her thick hair. It began the return trip immediately, and Beth was squirming by the time he got to the soles of her feet, tickling just a little, then kissing up the insides of her calves, and knees. When he would have run his tongue over the vulnerable insides of her thighs, he felt a small hand on his shoulder.

"Div?" Beth sounded young and uncertain, but he solidified his claim before soothing her, moving between her legs, opening them with his body and settling himself into place with his lips inches away from the most sensitive part of her body.

She was trying to move out from under him, but Div held her in place, careful not to hurt her. "Shhhh, baby, don't run away from me. I want to pleasure you; I want to hear you cry out, hear you scream with it . . ." as he spoke, his lips were beginning the wondrous torture he'd been talking about, suckling her love bud avidly while his hands reached up to tweak each nipple in a dual rhythm that had her writhing and moaning just the way he wanted.

Minutes before she reached her culmination, though, he moved his hands to her still-aching bottom, lifting her to him like a sacrifice while squeezing those tenderized globes. Beth tried to arch herself away from his hands, pressing herself into his mouth even further, opening herself to him completely as he drove her over the edge.

Div held her through the storm, riding it out to its natural completion. Unable to stand any more, he leaned forward, positioning himself at her entrance and gently pushing his way into her.

Beth took a startled breath at his size as he stretched her around him, almost to the point of pain. She couldn't quite suppress a moan of fear, and Div stopped, despite how hard it was for him to do so. He caught Beth's eye, saying calmly, "I promise it'll fit. And I'll do my best not to hurt you. Trust me, sweetheart?"

The strange thing was, she did trust this overpowering, overbearing man who seemed to consider it his God-given right to paddle her bottom. Slowly, Beth nodded her head, and the internal pressure – and pleasure – increased as he rocked himself into her.

"That's it, baby, take all of me. Relax, yesssssss," Oh, God, she was so tight he thought he was going to explode before he even began!

As it was, he didn't last much after seating himself fully. She was just too good for him. He was drowning in the wonder of her, and finally, he couldn't fight it off any longer.

Although Beth knew that he was trying not to be too rough, he was so large that she felt totally overpowered by him, especially when he moved a few times within her, rubbing every sensitive nerve she owned and stretching her to an almost unbearably pleasant extent.

But it was over soon after that, and Div found himself breathing explosively, searching for the words to explain why he hadn't been able to control himself better and make sure that she had joined him in the process.

Beth wouldn't let him explain – she kept kissing him in the middle of his speech. "There's nothing to discuss – I can tell you right now that in the future there are going to be times when you'll barely breathe on me and I'll explode, and I'm not going to make any apologies to you. Heck, it's a compliment, frankly, that you're so turned on by me."

She had turned what could have been an embarrassing moment into a compliment, somehow, and he loved her all the more.

Now to get her married to him as soon as possible.

As Div gathered her to him, feeling her sink into sleep, he was already planning their honeymoon and thinking of a list of rules for her behavior.

Part 3

Dean Caldwell looked at his watch for the thousandth time, his denim knee ratcheting up and down furiously – a sure sign he was either angry or worried. It was entirely unlike Lisa to be late – she was the one that dragged him to the airport two hours before a flight – just so she'd know they were there, she'd say. When he finally spotted her coming towards him through the inevitable crowd at their favorite steak place, he rose and hugged her tightly, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

"It's about time!" he chided, automatically scolding her instead of letting her know how frantic he'd been. This was neither the time nor the place for that – later, much later, he'd show her in a couple of different ways exactly how he felt, in no uncertain terms.

Lisa clung to him for a long moment, hugging him extra-hard. Dean always felt so good in her arms – and his arms always wrapped around her with comforting strength. He was

her rock – mentally and emotionally, as well as physically. Dean's presence in her life could probably be construed as overwhelming by some – he dominated it like the benevolent dictator that he was. Work and their menagerie of animals and pretty much anything or anyone else fell along the wayside compared to him.

They had met during a singles night at their church – he was the Pastor's brother and had apparently been drafted into service, regardless of the fact that he was still recovering from a very bad marriage and was not really in the market for another relationship. The church had a "Feed-A-Starving-Single" spaghetti-feed every Wednesday night, and it had naturally grown into a pot-luck over the years. Lisa McCartney went because she was new to Monroe County, and several of her friends from work were going, married or not – the food was well-worth the small donation. Since the main meal was provided, everyone brought side dishes and desserts, and her apple crisp with vanilla ice cream disappeared in record time – Dean Caldwell took the biggest slice, with a huge wink at her as he did it.

She had been wary of his size at first – he was so much bigger than she was, and when she'd seen him lifting weights at the gym a few days later – watching raptly but trying not to watch, but trying mostly not to get caught watching – Lisa realized that he was bench pressing more than she weighed! He'd caught her as she left and asked her out, standing there shirtless and sweaty, his hair mussed up and plastered to his head . . . Lisa crossed her arms over her shapeless Starfleet Academy t-shirt, knowing that sweaty and mussed didn't look anywhere near as good on her.

From there, he bowled her over – not taking "no" for an answer about a date, which rapidly multiplied in to lots of dates over a year and a half period. But Dean was a very conservative person, and he never pressured her for sex during the entire time they were dating. Oh, it was certainly clear that he wanted her by the way he shifted uncomfortably every time they ended up kissing feverishly on the couch in her small apartment. For a man of his size, though, he was nothing but gentle with her. He seemed to like to see just how lightly he could touch her skin – sometimes Lisa would have sworn he was almost reverent about it. Dean found her skin and her hair endlessly intriguing, and even while they were just curled up on the couch watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer – under duress on his end, he would rather have been watching Enterprise or SG1 – he would be slowly running his fingers up and down her arm, sometimes deliberately capturing her hand and holding it so that he could stroke the virgin inside of her arm, chuckling softly at the way it made her shiver as he nibbled on her ear.

He did step in and take over her life, but not nastily. Charmingly, endearingly over-protective, he let her know early on that he expected her to obey him, especially in areas that concerned her health and well-being. Dean liked to make sure she was safe – he

never let her drive herself home from his place at night, and always saw her to her door after a date. He got her to take her car to his own mechanic and made sure she got her oil changed and the tires rotated when they needed it. When she was in a rare bad mood and caustically sarcastic towards him and any other poor unfortunate who might cross her warpath, he would put up with it to a point – trying to cajole her out of it and being lazily indulgent – but when he'd reached the end of his tolerance or if things descended into profanity, he would lean towards her and say in a low, quiet voice that she had better watch herself or she'd be in trouble, which was a euphemism that let her know she was well on the road to a spanking.

If she was smart – and despite a lot of book learning, Lisa didn't always act in the most intelligent manner, necessarily – she would consider that no-nonsense look and back down a notch or two, in which case it would be as if he'd never spoken to her and blatant affection would replace the threat of a trip over his knee. Occasionally, though, she would become sullen and pouty after he'd confronted her, apt to grumble under her breath and, once even brazen enough to stick her tongue out at him as they played tourist, poking their way into and out of the shops on Main Street one warm Saturday morning.

There was no way that Dean was going to let her be disrespectful – public place or not. He popped her on the bottom sharply, just once, as a warning. The thin, light yellow shorts she had on gave her bum no protection at all, and Dean was quite satisfied when Lisa "yeowched" right on queue, blushing a becoming shade of bright pink. She tried to avoid any other stray smacks by skipping a couple of steps ahead of him into a gift shop, one hand energetically rubbing her bottom, but was brought up short when he didn't let go of her hand as she'd expected him to.

Instead he'd used it to pull her back against him, sliding his arm around her waist to anchor her to his side. "Don't get too far ahead of me, young lady," he chided. "I like you where I can get my hands on you." His inflection gave the words a double meaning.

This being Monroe, their exchange attracted no more than a few smiles – approving from the men, sympathetic from the women.

A few months later, when he decided to propose to her, it was with all the trappings – imported champagne, two dozen cotton-candy pink roses, a catered meal at his house, and a slice of turtle cheesecake – her favorite - with a two carat marquis diamond ring peeking out of the dollop of whipped cream on the top. Dean – after extracting the ring from the topping and wiping it on his napkin to clean it off - had unhesitatingly gotten down on one knee and taken her fragile hand in his, kissing the palm and touching it with the tip of his tongue before holding it gently and catching her eye.

"Lisa Ephemera McCartney, I want you to marry me."

How like him! she'd thought with a soft giggle – not asking her to marry him, but ordering her to, with all of his self-confidence and force of personality, and quite sure of his reception, she knew. Dean had very subtly watched her when she haunted the jewelry stores in the mall, not missing a trick of what she liked and disliked. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Of course not," he grinned boyishly in his enthusiasm, entirely unrepentant. "I'm telling you. After all, why wouldn't you want me? I'm fiscally responsible, I'm educated, I'm paper-trained – "

"You're opinionated and stubborn and domineering . . . " Lisa listed with a raised eyebrow, ticking the items off on her free hand.

Dean leaned over and kissed her, slipping the ring onto her finger before she had even answered him. "And you love me anyway . . ." he murmured against her lips.

Lisa looked down at the ring on the hand that nestled safe in his. The tableau portrayed how she felt with him – that he always surrounded her with his strength, supporting her, watching out for her. He kissed her forehead as it pressed against his mouth. "Yes," she whispered, "I love you anyway."

Suddenly, she found herself astride him, her moleskin skirt riding up drastically as her thighs clenched his hips; he was rock hard beneath the zipper of his pants. There was no missing that prominent bulge. Dean's face lay on her silk covered breasts, just lay there. His hands rested on the curves of her hips, but there was no groping or fondling. Lisa did not feel in the least threatened by either her position or him.

"I love you, too, you know. I get a little overly concerned about you, sometimes, but it's only because I love you so much." His arms tightened around her ribs as he rocked them together, murmuring his love and holding her tight.

He'd only had to out and out spank her once prior to marrying her; usually a stern warning or a crisp swat to her behind was enough to bring her back into line.

That first spanking – and the only one she received before becoming Mrs. Dean Caldwell – was about a month from their June seventeenth wedding. Between work and trying to get everything and everyone ready for the big day, Lisa became more and more agitated and cranky. Dean tried to be understanding, and indeed he put up with a lot more than he might have under different circumstances, but there came a point when she freaked out

about a very, very small typo that she hadn't caught on their invitations – but which several of the guests gleefully pointed out – and practically bit his head off when all he was trying to do was diffuse the situation and get her to calm down.

"I cannot believe I missed it!" Lisa was literally banging her head against the dining room wall.

"Stop that, now, you'll hurt yourself." Dean grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips to the red spot she'd created.

"Maybe I'll hammer some sense into my empty head . . ." She was always ready to cut everyone in her life some slack, except herself.

"Lisa."

She knew that tone and didn't even have to look at him to know that he was frowning at her. Dean hated it when she ran herself down in any way. There was a wealth of reprimand in that one "Lee-SUUUH."

Still, she stomped her foot like a little girl, unwilling to let herself off the hook. "It sounds pornographic – 'Dean William Caldwell and Lisa Ephemina McCartney would LICK the pleasure of your company' – it sounds like we're inviting them to an orgy instead of a wedding!"

Dean walked up behind her and rubbed her arms. He hated to see her so wrapped around the axle, and this was something he couldn't step in and fix for her, unfortunately. His mouth hummed at the sensitive back of her neck. "Well, I don't know about an orgy, but I can definitely think of someone I wouldn't mind licking . . ."

Lisa lurched forward, out of his arms to turn around and confront him angrily. "And that's another thing," she ranted brattily, waving the forgotten invitation at her fiancé, whose patience was rapidly waning because of her attitude. "You're never around to help me. You're always working. You don't even act like you want me – OOOMMPHHH!"

In two seconds flat she found her back against the dining room wall as Dean loomed over her, trapping her lower body with his own, the evidence refuting her last statement quite apparent as he lifted her skirt and fit himself into the notch between her thighs. His size forced her to widen her stance embarrassingly to accommodate him. "Don't you ever," he growled, deliberately licking his way across her collarbone and down, stretching the scoop front of her shirt down far enough to reveal her bare, tight nipples, "ever think that because I might not be paying attention to you at that given second that I don't want you to distraction, because, baby, I do. Now. Always. Forever." Dean dragged his neatly kept

mustache over an eager tip, prickling it, making her shudder in his arms, then soothing it with his tongue and lips. "Once we're married I'm going to keep you in our bed for a year and feast on you every chance I get," he vowed huskily.

"But right now you're all about the wedding, and that's fine; it's fine with me. This is your show, and that's how it's supposed to be. I'll wear what you tell me to wear and say what you tell me to say – hell, I'll recite Shakespeare or Dr. Seuss at the altar, I don't really give a damn, as long as you're mine when we're done." Now his goatee gave her other nub the same treatment, and his mouth the same remedy as she arched and panted and moaned softly.

Lisa thought everything was okay, until he looked straight into her eyes and gave her that "you've been naughty" look. "I know you don't mean to give me any guff about working so much, since you and I both know that I'm workin' my butt off so we'll have some extra money for the honeymoon, or towards the down payment on a bigger house, whichever we decide." Both of her nipples were aching buds, straining for his mouth as he gently massaged each breast. "You've been a horror for the past two months or so, and I've had about as much of it as I'm going to put up with. You made your own mother cry last weekend – "

Lisa drew in a quick, sharp breath, biting her lip. Damn! How had he found out about that! Sonofa -

Dean was nodding unhappily at her contrite expression. "You didn't think I knew about that, did you? Well, I do, and it's all about to come to an end. Your bare end."

She found herself pulled helplessly behind him into the living room. Dean sat down on the big taupe leather sofa, reaching under her skirt to pull her panties down to her knees. "Lie over my lap now. I'm gonna teach you a lesson in manners you won't soon forget. You're getting way too big for your britches, and it's going to stop now."

Man, she really didn't want to do this! She did not want to find out how hard this man spanked! No way! Regardless of what she wanted, though, Lisa found herself over his lap, skirt up and bottom high. Her left arm was useless, blocked by a solid mass of muscled man, but the first thing she did was reach back with her right hand, which was promptly trapped at the small of her back by his left hand.

"None of that." The spanking started immediately, and it hurt horribly from the get-go. The scolding continued throughout. "I will not have you behaving like a shrew to me or anyone else – wedding or not. You will call and apologize to your mother as soon as I've finished reddening these lovely cheeks of yours, then I'd better see a radical improvement in your attitude, young lady, or you're going to be sitting very gingerly at our reception

because I'll paddle your butt every day until the wedding if I have to."

Her bottom was on fire, she knew it! The stinging couldn't possibly get any worse, she thought, but then he proceeded to prove her wrong. His hard, sharp swats had her assuring him in no time that she would do exactly what he said if he'd just stop, please.

"I'm soooooorrrrrrryyyyyyyyyy Deeeaaaaannnnn plllleaaaasssse noooooo moooooooooorre!"

But Dean didn't stop until he thought Lisa had learned her lesson – well short of any real bruising, but still leaving her bottom and the tops of her legs a bright, sore red that he knew would remind her when she sat down for several days coming. Her plaintive sobs wrenched at his heart, but didn't even slow the painful crack of his hand against her hot, spank-seared flesh. When he was done, he kept her in position for a little while, giving her time to collect herself a bit, then reached down and pulled her panties up as he helped her to stand. She was still sobbing softly, his own little bride-to-be, all soft and moist and repentant. . . moister in some places than others, he thought as his hand lingered longer than was necessary while helping her panties into their coveted place.

He heard her catch a ragged breath when his fingers molded themselves to her in place of the serviceable flowered cotton, just settling there, not grabbing or groping . . . but with respect and a conscious knowledge of what he held in his hand – what it meant to her and what it meant to him. Lisa looked up at Dean in that moment, her eyes all soft and wet, her face open to him, trusting him in this, too. A small hand found its way to rest on his tense forearm, like a wild bird perched nervously at a feeder, wanting something but not quite sure that the risk is worth the reward.

As he held her sensual heart in his fingertips, Dean leaned forward and kissed her then, his lips sliding quickly over the tear trails to her ear, nuzzling it as he vowed reverently, "You are so precious to me, Lisa-mine. I'm sorry I had to spank you."

She started crying again at the love in his words, in his touch, unable to stop herself; her behavior making her ashamed to the bone. How could she be worthy of such a man when she acted like a spoilt child? The question came out of her lips as it formed in her mind.

Dean smiled down at her, hugging her tight, then releasing her – all of her, with grave reluctance. "You're a bride. You're allowed to be somewhat temperamental." The way he said it sounded so natural, that she didn't give it another thought as he herded her to the telephone to make her apologies to her mother under his watchful eye.

Now, more than five gloriously happy years later, he held out her chair then seated himself at their table. "What happened? You're never late," Dean frowned, leaning towards her and capturing her hand across the table.

The waiter appeared at that moment, and he ordered for them, an eye on Lisa to confirm that he was getting what she wanted – soup instead of salad and a big thick steak cooked medium with sautéed onions on the side.

"Lisa?" he prompted. It didn't bode well that she seemed to be in no hurry to answer.

She smiled big and asked with a patently false brightness, "So, how was your day?"

He didn't have to say anything, just lower his head and look at her from under a dark, furrowed brow, waiting.

Lisa started to squirm immediately, knowing what that heavy stare meant. Suddenly, she began to fiddle with the wrapper from her straw. "I – I," she blew a long breath out then, said it all at once, like ripping off a band aid. "I had to stay late and," she continued in a whisper, "balance the drawers," then she continued in a more normal tone. "And I ran out of gas on the highway."

His tone reflected his expression. "You balanced the drawers that C.C. was supposed to balance?" he asked. "Again? For the umpteenth time, when it's not your job and you're not getting paid for it?"

"Yes," she whispered, sneaking a look up at him then wishing she hadn't and sneaking her eyes back down to her soup in a hurry.

"And you ran out of gas when I told you last night and this morning that your car was low?"

Lisa frowned, concentrating very hard, running what she could remember of their recent conversations through her mind. "You did not!" The best defense, etc, etc, etc, she thought . . . except maybe with her husband, who just managed to look more pissed off at her words.

Her empty soup bowl and his salad bowl were removed, and now there was nothing to distract him from glaring down at her. When he spoke, his voice was abnormally calm and patient. Lisa felt her bottom cheeks clench automatically in reaction. "Yes, my dear, I did. I told you last night just before we went to bed – "

"Well," Lisa interrupted huffily when she knew she shouldn't have, "you can't ask me to remember what you're saying when we're just about to – "

"I certainly can, and I do. Especially when I reminded you again this morning as we were eating breakfast. This is proof positive that you don't listen to me when I speak to you, Lisa."

The disappointment in his tone made her so upset she really didn't want the meal that was put in front of her any more. Oh, damn! The exact conversation he was referring to flooded back into her brain – too late to do her any good, of course, and she flushed with embarrassment.

"So since you were stuck on the highway with no gas, why didn't I get a phone call?"

Lisa could feel his knee going up and down under the table, another bad sign that meant her bottom was in grave danger of getting all too much attention from him when they got home, and what she was going to tell him now was going to put the icing on the cake – or the paddle to her bottom, which was much more apropos. "Because someone came along and rescued me."

Dean sighed, already realizing that he wasn't going to like her answer from her body language – she was looking everywhere but at him, and paying very little attention to her favorite dinner. "Who?"

"Jason Tyler," she barely squeaked out.

Her husband looked like he was going to go into orbit from right there in the restaurant. "The one who made a pass at you last week?" The words barely got out through his clenched jaw.

Lisa rushed on quickly. "He was very nice. All he did was put some gas in my tank. That was it."

Dean reached for his wallet and threw some bills on the table, grabbing her by the arm as he pulled her out of the restaurant. "And I'm sure that putting some gas in your tank is exactly what he was thinking of doing!"

He packed her into his Grand Cherokee, despite her protests. "That's enough. We'll pick your car up tomorrow," he put an end to her arguments and slammed his door at the same time, but couldn't seem to stop himself from muttering under his breath all the way home, something to the effect of, "Jason Tyler. Oily swine. No one puts 'gas' in my wife's 'tank' but me . . ."

Hours later, when they were crawling into bed, he seemed to have calmed down some, at

least until he had a sudden thought. "You did get my tux from the cleaners, though, didn't you? I can drop by and get it out of your car . . . ?"

Lisa got into bed and pulled the covers up over her head, hoping against hope that he would disappear . . .

But then someone knocked on her blanket, saying with disgusting intuition, "I'm not going to disappear, you know."

Her stubborn streak asserted itself. "If I can't see you, then you can't see me."

At least he chuckled, so he couldn't be that mad. "The ostrich defense does not work, young lady."

Uh-oh. "Young lady" was not what she wanted to hear. Nope, not at all. Lisa pushed the covers away and threw herself against him. "I'm sorry! I forgot, I've been so scattered lately – I don't know what the problem is. I have no brain at all. I'll get it tomorrow and drop it off at your office."

As unable to resist her, as always, Dean's arms closed lovingly around her. "I don't know what's going on, either, babylove." His lips pressed to the top of her head in a smacking kiss. "Buuuuuuuuuuut – "

She squirmed as he clamped her to his side, knowing what he was going to say next. "Nooooooooooooo."

But Dean made it "yes" by the strength of his resolve to love Lisa the way he knew she needed to be loved: to the depths of his soul, and with the unshakable knowledge that sometimes she needed to be reminded to pay attention to him and to the smaller, practical details of life. He sat up and arranged his pillows against the headboard, then leaned back against them, arranging her in much the same way over his lap. She was nude – he'd ripped up every nightgown she'd brought into their marriage, declaring that he'd waited long enough for the privilege of touching her intimately that he was going to take every possible advantage now that she wore his name. He could touch her anytime, in any way, he wanted and nothing was going to get in his way of doing exactly that.

A decorative pillow landed over his lap seconds before she did. Lisa hated the embarrassing familiar position that made her all too aware of the wear pattern in the plush rose carpet. The ritual was almost always the same – unless she did something that he deemed needed to be addressed right then and there, which was extremely rare. In that case, he would bend her over whatever piece of furniture was available and blister her

bottom accordingly.

This was the more common occurrence – being helpless, face down over his lap on their bed, wrists held in his strong fingers as his other hand reddened her nether cheeks while he lectured softly, his voice a direct contrast to the powerful swats that had her crying almost immediately.

"I'm not just talking to hear myself talk, you know. I expect you to listen to me when I speak to you. I don't ignore you when we have a conversation. And you need to not allow the people at work to take advantage of you, either. If your shift ends at six, then that's when you leave."

The vulnerability of her position, the sharp pop of his hand on her bottom, and the scolding he gave her made Lisa feel like a six year old. "Dean – no – please – stop – I'm sorry! I'll listen – I'll listen, I'll leave when I'm supposed to, I proooooooooomisssee!" she pleaded, her legs kicking on their own with no help from her, reacting to the tune he was burning into her soft globes with every hard slap.

"You need to pay attention to what's going on around you; to the practicalities of life – the thought of you stranded on the side of the highway at night is enough to make me want to spank you like this every night for a week, since I'd told you that you needed gas . . . and then that letch Tyler happens by – " Dean's hand cracked up and down her backside relentlessly, roasting her good. But he stopped when he thought of Jason Tyler because he didn't want to take his anger at Jason out on Lisa. In no way did he blame Lisa for Tyler's acts. He knew his wife and trusted her implicitly.

Dean forced any thoughts of jealousy out of his mind, absently rubbing the handprints on her butt before he rolled her onto her back. Lisa was still sobbing and groaned aloud when her taut, swollen skin touched the sheets. "Shh-shh-shh, babygirl," he soothed, brushing her hair from her face as he kissed the tears away, his lips settling like gossamer on each wet eyelid, then the tender side of her neck. His hands wandered possessively over her naked body, his motions entirely unhurried as if they had all the time in the world.

Just before he'd given her first spanking, he'd told her that he intended to keep her in bed for the first year of their marriage. Well, he hadn't quite done that – not for lack of trying – but he had required that they have two honeymoons: they each got exactly twenty-four days off from work after their wedding. They spent the first twelve days at small, fairly inexpensive resort close to home – and, besides the way in and the way out Lisa never saw any other part of the hotel. He might as well have kept her tied to the bed, and indeed he'd threatened to several times but then he always let her go a few hours later. The rest

of their honeymoon was spent touring in Cancun.

His mouth found her nipples after his fingers had rolled them into taut buds, surrounding them with the wet warmth of his lips, teasing her gently and drinking in her moans and sighs. Lisa never knew what approach Dean was going to take when he made love to her – sometimes it was fast and almost ruthless. He had come home unexpectedly one day to find her sitting in the dining room. She rose to greet him, pressed herself against him, and ended up laid out on the table like a sensual buffet.

A hairy, muscular leg parted hers gently, its rough texture rubbing against her sweet folds as she whimpered sexily. "Ahhhh, Lisa-love," Dean breathed against the milky under curve of her breast as he settled himself on and in her all at once.

Accommodating a man of his size had not been easy on her from the beginning, and it was only slightly easier now. "Ooo-uhhhhh – " Lisa's face pinched up a little, and Dean withdrew immediately to coat himself in lubricant before representing himself at her gates. He'd learned from her that it wasn't at all the stretching that bothered or hurt her – in fact she had confessed on many occasions that she adored the way his penis forced her to open to him; Dean attributed that quirk to her submissive side. Discomfort only appeared due to dryness.

Still, his advance was incremental as he watched his engorged cock disappear into his wife, feeling her slide over him, clutching him, spasming wonderfully around his length as her body fought to accept his invasion. Her little cries and hitched breathing made him swell even more within her as he settled himself deep inside, hips flexing just a little to watch those full breasts bounce freely, then leaned back a little to give himself access to her treasures.

Lisa arched into him automatically, her hands reaching for him, wanting his weight on her while he loved her. "Dean?" She sounded just a touch desperate and very submissive when he didn't respond and immediately cover her body with his own. "Please?"

His cock contracted at the pleading note in her voice. God, he loved this woman! Dean caught her hands, turning each to bring the palm to his mouth and tongue it naughtily, then lay them on his chest. "Not just yet, sweetie." He couldn't keep himself from riding her gently, making shivers run up and down through him and into her. He arranged her legs so that they were very spread – liking the access and control that gave him. Dean put a blob of lube on his fingers and caught her eye before deliberately placing them on her exposed clit as he pulsed firmly in and out of her. He knew what this did to Lisa.

It drove her out of her mind.

She even tried to wiggle away from him, knowing how powerful her body's response was when he did this to her; the combination of being full of him and having her clit stroked and massaged and rubbed and teased at the same time was too much to bear, but he made sure she had no choice but to bear it.

It was pure, loving torture.

Dean adored doing this to her – making her fly apart but under his hand and on his cock. He bent over her, but not in the way she wanted – one hand reaching up to catch a nipple and roll and pull it in just the way he knew she liked, his mouth landing on her tummy to kiss and lick it, adding sensation on sensation as his thick, hard cock kept her full of him, his mouth sucking and licking at her tummy-flesh, one set of fingers plucking sensitive, upstanding nipples and the other feeling the heat and heart of her throbbing with the ecstasy that he created within her.

He built it so slowly that Lisa thought she was going to have a heart attack before she came. Dean made her wait for it as he reveled in her body and its loud, uncontrolled responses to his loving, bringing her along with at an agonizing pace so that when she came it released every inhibition she ever owned as she fucked him back – hard – to prolong her own pleasure. Lisa reached up to him with a growl and pulled him down to her, kissing him wildly, hyperventilating as she begged him to take her.

Dean was more than happy to oblige his wildly passionate wife, plunging into her with deep, powerful strokes that brought him swiftly to his own end, his lungs bellowing the breath out of him as he laid his head against her neck. She was no better; the two of them sounded like they had just finished a marathon.

Kissing a still pouting tip, he slid to her side to make her breathing easier. "Someday I'm going to die doing this to you – "

"Just take me with you, please," Lisa sighed happily, rolling towards him to kiss his cheek.

It was another couple of weeks before Lisa found out a valid reason why she had been a little scatterbrained lately: she was pregnant. When she told Dean, he swung her around and laughed, then hollered, then made hot, sweet love to her. After Lisa had shuddered her completion beneath and around him, and his body had clenched with his own satisfaction, he kissed his way down to her still-flat tummy to lay his head reverently over where his child lived within her, bathing her with his tears of absolute joy.

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