

The Future is Ours – part 28

“Taking off the Gloves”

By Dawn

Summary: Back to Work

Rated PG

After being back in Oregon for a week and getting used to the Pacific Time zone again, Kathryn was ready to go back to work. Harry had sent her a brief status report on each planet they'd been in contact with, and now she was itching to find some resolution to the less-troubled situations so that her team could concentrate their efforts where tensions were still running high.

Kathryn walked into their kitchen and found Chakotay leaning against the counter and reading a PADD while finishing his coffee. “Hi there, handsome.”

“Handsome?”

After depositing her empty cup in the sink, she insinuated herself between her husband and his reading material. “Yes, very handsome,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Hope you don't say that to all the men you see today.”

“Only the ones in my kitchen drinking *my* coffee.” She raised her eyebrows.

“Your coffee?”

She looked into his cup and then back at him. “Yes, my coffee. You don't usually drink it in the morning.”

“I do when I've got a hundred eager commanders-in-training waiting to hang onto my every word.”

“I'd be eager to listen to you, too, if I didn't already have first-hand knowledge of all tactical strategies developed while in the delta quadrant.”

“You never know. You might learn something.”

“Think so, huh?” She rose up onto her toes and kissed him.

“Speaking of Delta Quadrant tactics, you never did tell me what you meant when you said the Borg don't exist.”

Frowning, she said, “When did I say that?”

“Right before your heart transplant. You said you’d explain later.”

“Ah.” She tried to extricate herself from his arms, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“Kathryn?”

Sighing in defeat, she said, “I slipped. No one is supposed to know.”

“No one?”

“Not for a few hundred years.”

“Time travel.” He gave her a pointed look.

“Yes, the Borg were the primary reason why the Federation was near-extinguished by the 29th century in the other timeline.”

“And you believe that threat is gone?”

“Yes,” she said simply, and then glared at him. “Don’t you dare lighten up on anything you’re going to teach those commanders about Borg tactics.”

“Aye, Admiral.” His mouth twitched with a smile.

She let the tension in her shoulders drop and looked at him with barely concealed joy. “I was thrilled when they told me. Shocked, but thrilled. When my older self took out Unimatrix Zero, that explosion traveled through all the transwarp conduits and destroyed the other hubs as well. The rest of the Borg will eventually be overcome.”

“Wow,” he said with complete surprise. “I figured that you were referring to them being destroyed at some point in the future, but I didn’t think... Wow. You destroyed the Borg, Kathryn.”

She shrugged casually. “Took two of me, a virus, and countless battles.”

“Yeah, but...” He was speechless.

“I know. Too bad I can’t tell anyone, although I’m not sure I could handle any more fame.”

“Why can’t you tell anyone? It would allay a lot of fears.”

“They said we’d need the tactics developed for the Borg to destroy another enemy.”

He nodded. "I can see that."

"So, there you have it. You know all of my secrets."

"Are you sure?"

Laughing, she said, "Well, if there are any more, I've forgotten about them at the moment."

He was beaming as he looked at her. "I'm very proud of you, Kathryn."

"Because of the Borg?"

"Because of everything." Taking a step back, he held her arms out to admire her in uniform. "You look great. Are you ready to face the Federation again?"

"Yes," she said with determination. "It's time to take out the garbage and set things right."

"And you're just the woman to do it, too."

"Trying to stroke my ego?"

"Trying to give you confidence, but I doubt that the woman who defeated the Borg needs it. If she can do that, she can do anything."

She shook her head in amusement. "That was pure luck."

"No, if not for your determination and your unwillingness to take the easy way out, we wouldn't have found a way to have our cake and eat it, too."

"Funny... that's the same thing that I told my older self back on Voyager."

"Sounds like something you'd say." He turned and picked up a satchel for her. "Your snacks, lunch, medication, medical tri-corder, and glucose level scanner."

"You know, I have a perfectly good replicator in my office."

"You had one on Voyager, too, but that didn't mean you remembered to use it for anything other than coffee. I'm hoping with this sitting on your desk, you'll remember to keep eating."

"Thank you." She wanted to be irritated with him, but couldn't since he was doing his best to look out for her.

“I also included instructions for Justin. You’ll see that he gets them?”

“You already explained everything to him.”

“I wasn’t sure he understood it all, so I wrote it down.” He wrapped his arms around her again and kissed her softly.

“Thank you,” she said with a happy smile.

“If I kiss you like I want to, neither of us would make it to work on time.”

“Mmmmmmm. Something to look forward to.”

He let her go and then lightly smacked her rear-end. “Remember that if you find any handsome men drinking coffee today.”

“As if I need a reminder.”

When she and Justin materialized in the reception area of Kathryn’s office suite, she was immediately greeted with applause. “What’s all this?” she asked as she looked around at all the people gathered.

“A welcome back party, Katie.” Owen stepped forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Harry said, “An event worthy of a celebration.”

Kathryn smiled at her staff and friends. “Well, thank you.” She accepted a plate of fresh fruit and miniature muffins from Sue. “I’m delighted that you feel that way, because I’m loaded for bear regarding our docket.”

“That’s not all bad,” Bernie pointed out. “We’re more than ready to start attacking our to-do list.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said as she picked up a bite of pineapple to eat. “This is wonderful, everyone. I really appreciate it.”

Khurma came over and gave her a careful hug. “You look great, Kathryn. I trust that you enjoyed your time in Greece?”

“Most of it,” she said so quietly that he was the only one who heard her.

“Greece?” Bernie asked. “Is that where you were off to?”

“Yes, on our own little island in the Mediterranean.”

Justin nodded in appreciation. “Definitely one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen.”

Judy asked, “Did you get to see any of the sites?”

“A couple,” she replied carefully. “But for the most part, we just enjoyed the quiet beauty of the area around our cabin.”

“In my opinion,” Mark noted, “the view from her beachfront was more picturesque than anything I saw while we were out there.”

She playfully elbowed his arm. “You’re just saying that because we didn’t get to see as much as we would’ve liked.”

“No, it’s true. There wasn’t one piece of civilization that could be seen from your vantage point. That’s hard to find.”

“You’ve got a good point.”

Harry asked, “Is Chakotay back at work today, too?”

“Yes,” she said after taking a sip of the deliciously rich coffee that Bernie had poured for her. “Although he’s been at work for a couple days already to prepare for the seminar he’s teaching at command school this week.”

“What was that topic again?” Khurma asked. “It had a catchy title.”

“Tactics: By the Book, On the Fly, and By the Seat of Your Pants.”

“That’s right.” He was clearly amused. “I hear it’s standing room only.”

Justin said, “I wouldn’t doubt it.”

The gathered group chatted for a little while longer before Khurma pulled her aside and said, “Kathryn, I’m very glad that you’re back with us, but promise me that you won’t overdo it. I’ll make sure that you have any resources that you need, so don’t hesitate to let me know how I can help.”

“I will. Thank you.” She set down her almost empty plate on Sue’s desk. “Do you have some time to talk today?”

“For you, I’ll make time. Is there something specific I can help you with?”

“I’m sure there will be a lot you can help with, but what I’d like to discuss is of a personal nature.”

He tilted his head. “Now you’ve got me curious. Would you like to talk right now?”

“Sure.” She faced the group and said loudly, “Thank you, everyone, for this lovely gathering. Please continue to enjoy the wonderful food, but I need to excuse myself.”

They responded with a chorus of ‘welcome backs.’

Once inside her office, she looked around and said, “Feels strange to be back here.”

“It’s been about eight months. That’s a long time to be away.”

“Too long,” she said with a sigh and then directed him towards her sitting area. “Join me, please?”

“Of course.”

Once seated, she asked, “Do you have anything for my agenda?”

“Not yet. I thought it would be best to let you ease back into work at your own pace. I’ve forwarded a list of requests for your time to Lieutenant Brooks, but don’t feel that you have to follow up on all of them. I noted which ones I thought took priority and what they want to discuss.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

After a pause, he asked, “What do you want to talk about, Kathryn?”

“I’m trying to decide how best to tell you.”

An immediate look of understanding crossed his features. “You’re thinking about retiring, aren’t you?”

“No, but I might need a leave of absence.” She held up a hand. “Strike that. I *will* need a leave of absence, although I don’t know for how long.”

“Anything you need,” he said with sincerity. “When would you like to begin?”

“I don’t know, and I probably won’t in advance.” She took a deep breath, and quickly said, “I’m expecting a baby.”

He started to nod, but then, as what she said sunk in, he leaned a little closer. “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes. Almost three months.”

His eyes widened. “Oh, Kathryn. If you hadn’t gotten yourself out of that situation in Greece…” He shook his head, unable to finish.

“I wasn’t about to let that happen, and I can tell you that if Pratin and his men had given me an opening like this one did, that incident wouldn’t have happened either.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Maternal instinct is powerful.”

“This had nothing to do with instinct, Admiral. I was furious.” She sat back and crossed her legs, resting her hands neatly in her lap. “What did we learn from the assailant?”

“You got my message that he was hired in much the same way as Pratin – by way of an unknown source.”

She nodded. “And that the security breach is through the Federation Public Affairs office. Where are we on that?”

“These things need to be handled delicately, Kathryn.”

Narrowing her eyes, she said, “I need a better explanation than that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I like that you’re getting more comfortable with me, but perhaps we could watch the insubordination? Just a little?”

Taking a deep breath, she apologized. “Sorry, sir. It just feels like you’re purposely keeping me in the dark about my own security, and I don’t like it.”

“That’s certainly not my intention. As you know, we’re fully aware that there are high-ranking officials within the Federation government who are not making the most ethical decisions.”

She nodded, wanting to comment, but held her tongue.

“And we’re not completely certain who the ring leader is.”

“It’s the President,” she pointed out.

“No, it’s not.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and then held up a hand and said, “Again, my apologies. I should respect your opinions.”

He smiled with understanding. “I know why you believe that President Zife is behind the corruption, but he is merely the public face, or the puppet, rather. I’ve gotten to know him pretty well over the last three years, and I just don’t believe that he has the intelligence and savvy to pull any of this off.”

Clicking her tongue, she nodded. “All right, I can concede that point.”

“I will tell you that there are persons on the council under investigation, but we must go about this quietly or we won’t get the proof we need to go to trial.”

“And you don’t think I can be trusted with that information?”

“I trust you, Kathryn. I really do, but I also need you to trust me. There are a lot of moving parts that I need to control as much as I possibly can.”

She opened her mouth to comment, but then closed it again. “I see.”

“I need you to continue what you’ve been doing – talking to the council, getting people to trust you, and trying to get to the bottom of the issues. We have learned which council members we can trust because they talk to you. I have no idea how you do it, but your honest search for the truth engenders their loyalty.”

“It’s only because I listen to them. I’ve never given anyone a reason to doubt my integrity.”

“No, you haven’t. What I’m worried about is that if I tell you which council members we suspect are corrupt, you may lose your objectivity. And, Kathryn, we *really* need that from you.”

“I’m a very good actress, Admiral, and I’d rather not be kept in the dark.”

“But you know that in some situations, the people involved have to be unaware of the details in order to react properly.”

Kathryn strummed her fingers on her arm. “I understand where you’re coming from, but you must realize that my personal safety is at stake here.”

“I’m painfully aware of that, especially now that you’re pregnant.”

She studied his face for a moment before asking, “You’re sure the breach has been sealed?”

Nodding, he replied, “We didn’t know until this second kidnapping attempt that the breach was in the public affairs office. They haven’t had knowledge of any of your movements since Joria, and now that we know they can’t be trusted, we’ve cut them out of the loop. Every person in that office is now under surveillance and we’re hoping to find our mole by giving them false information about you.”

“All right, I’m going to continue trusting you, but I need to make you aware of certain limitations regarding what I can do.”

“What sort of limitations?”

“There are some health issues for both me and the baby.”

“Health risks?” he asked with alarm. “Should you be coming back to work?”

She was taken aback by his question and it took her a moment to respond. “I’m still capable of performing my duties, and would like the opportunity to do so.”

“Kathryn, you misunderstand. I have no doubt that you’re capable of doing anything you set your mind to, and while we really need you right now, my first and foremost concern is your health. The strains of this position might not be the best thing considering the circumstances.”

“The strains as they were last fall would be too much, you’re right about that. But now that I’ve made almost all of my initial contacts, the next step is to convince the Federation Council to make the changes that are needed. I can do that without over-taxing myself physically, as long as we can compromise on when and where the meetings will take place.”

“Yes, I agree.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Tell me about these health risks. How will that affect what you can or can’t do?”

“I need to stay on Earth, within transporter range of Starfleet Medical. If off-world travel is absolutely necessary, I’d either like to take Dr. Zimmerman on the Pioneer, or I’d like to request the Enterprise as my flag-ship. Dr. Crusher is one of my primary physicians and will know how to treat me in an emergency.”

“That, I can do. I’m leery of sending you off-planet, but if I had to at this point, Jean-Luc would be the first person I would trust to protect you.”

Her mouth twitched in response.

“What?”

“I’m fighting the urge to tell you that you’re over-protecting me.”

“Can you blame me?”

She shook her head. “I suppose not. However, at some point, perhaps after I return from maternity leave, I hope you’ll no longer feel the need.”

He held up a hand in surrender. “Point taken, but I need you to bear with me for now, especially in the light of this newest development. I know I’m just your commanding officer, but I’m feeling a little fatherly.”

“A common affliction amongst the admiralty.”

“For you, yes.”

“Chakotay and I didn’t plan this, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“I understand. When Samia told me that she was expecting our first son, it really threw me for a loop. I thought we were too young, that my career was too dangerous for me to be a parent, and I didn’t want to raise children on a starship. But it doesn’t take long for a baby to wheedle its way into your heart, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Congratulations, Kathryn.”

“Thank you.” She smiled sincerely. “I don’t want my pregnancy to become public knowledge and take attention away from the issues.”

“Agreed. Who knows?”

“Doctors Zimmerman and Crusher, Counselor Troi, Commanders Paris and Torres, Lieutenant Jarvin, and Lieutenant Yosa.”

“Are you going to tell the rest of your staff?”

“Yes, and Bernie because his wife will know.” Kathryn raised her chin. “My primary health concerns are a failing pancreas and my inability to absorb calories due to an injury I received during my captivity. We have it under control with constant monitoring and medication to regulate my metabolism, but I can’t go without food for more than two hours or I’ll begin to go into hypoglycemic shock.”

“Is that why you fainted before the wedding?”

“That’s correct.” She picked up her coffee and took a drink. “So, if you’re agreeable, I’m going to let Bernie and his wife travel on my behalf.”

“I’d prefer that, too. We can also continue to use Jean-Luc if the Enterprise is available.”

“In that case I’d like Harry Kim to tag along, depending on the situation.”

“A good idea, although you know Jean-Luc wants to steal him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” she said with a smile. “But I’ve convinced him to wait until the end of the summer before he makes Harry an offer.”

“I have high hopes that most of this will be wrapped up by then.” He patted his legs. “Why don’t we make that our goal? In a couple days, when you get settled in, we’ll brainstorm a strategy for how to do that.”

“I’d like that.” She stood with him and they walked towards her office door. “Thank you, Admiral. I appreciate your support.”

“You’re welcome, and I really do understand.” He gave her another hug. “I’m thrilled for you. Worried, but thrilled.”

“Join the club.”

A few hours later, Kathryn and Justin walked into her conference room where the rest of the staff had already gathered. She smiled at everyone as she took her seat at the head of the table. “It’s good to be back.”

Sue said, “The feeling is mutual, Admiral.”

“Thank you.” She looked around the table and asked, “Captain and Commander Young, I assume you’ve met Lieutenant Mark Yosa?”

“Yes, ma’am, we have,” Judy replied. “We were with him when he was initiated.”

“Initiated?” Kathryn asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Mark replied, “We all went out to lunch together last week and the press noticed.”

“Ah,” Kathryn nodded. “Yes, I saw that on the newscast. My kudos to those of you who spoke to the reporters. You evaded questions like the pros.”

“We learned from the best.” Harry said with a wide grin on his face.

She rolled her eyes and went on to say, “Speaking of the press, I want to inform you about a personal situation that I do not want any reporters to know about. I don’t want anyone that I haven’t directly told to learn of it, either.”

Mark and Justin exchanged a look, but didn’t give anything away. Everyone else sat up a little straighter in their seats.

She forced a serious expression. “Sometime this fall, we’ll be adding one more to our ranks.”

“To do what?” Harry asked.

Kathryn scratched her eyebrow in an effort not to laugh. “Eating, sleeping, and calling the shots.”

Justin burst out laughing and then quickly covered it up while Mark struggled not to join him.

“Gentlemen,” Kathryn scolded her security officers playfully. She looked at the other four people at the table and sighed at their very confused expressions. “Let me be a little clearer about what I will be expecting this individual to contribute to the team. In addition to the aforementioned duties, he or she will also be messing diapers, cooing, and hopefully, not spitting up too much.”

Harry’s eyes bugged out. “You’re having... expecting...?”

“Yes, by mid-November, but he or she will likely arrive sooner.”

“Sooner?” Harry asked with open concern.

“Not to worry, Harry.” She patted his arm and then barreled on into her agenda for the meeting. “What this means is that by the end of the summer, I want as much of our current agenda wrapped up as possible. Captain Young, I won’t be traveling unless absolutely necessary, but I will continue to send the Pioneer and the Enterprise to meet with planetary governments as needed.”

“As you wish, Admiral,” Bernie said quietly.

“Judy, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to represent our staff on the Pioneer when necessary.”

She shared a glance with her husband and then nodded with carefully contained enthusiasm. “I’d be happy to.”

“I thought you might.” She turned to her left. “Harry, if the Enterprise’s flight plan allows, I’d like you to be on board to represent this office.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His sparkling eyes gave away his excitement about the prospect of being on the fleet’s flagship again.

“Sue, while they’re gone, I’m going to need you to fill in for them. If it looks like they’ll be gone often, we’ll see about bringing in someone else to help so that you can attend meetings with me.”

“May I suggest Anderson, Admiral?” Sue asked.

Harry jumped in, “That’s a great idea!”

Kathryn smiled at their excitement, but held up a hand to forestall them. “Let’s see what our needs are, first.”

Judy said, “Admiral, if even one of us is away, it would help to have another person.”

Noticing that her staff members were acting a little too eager, she pointed out, “All three of you are looking at me like you want me to grant you permission to build a new shuttle.”

Sue said, “We could really use the help. Two more people might be even better.”

Kathryn took a moment to look carefully at the people around the table. Her three support staff members were visibly anxious about wanting more help. Bernie was sitting back, not making eye contact with anyone, and although her security team members were looking at her, they weren’t relaxed. She sat back in her chair and asked, “What’s going on?”

When no one answered immediately, she said, “I know I’ve been gone for a few months, but my communication style hasn’t changed. If there’s a problem and you all know about it, let’s get it out on the table.”

Harry said, “Admiral, we’ve been working the last couple of weeks to streamline our efforts and get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.”

“That’s good. I always appreciate orderly ducks,” she said in hopes to lighten the tension she was feeling in the room.

Harry cracked a smile and rubbed his hands together to relax. “I wanted to speak with you about this privately, but you’re right, everyone knows. We want help so that we can keep your workload as light as possible. Since you’ve suggested the possibility of two of us traveling, I believe it’s essential that we find more people.”

She frowned and asked, “That’s it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry replied.

Looking at Sue and Judy, Kathryn asked them, “That’s what you were nervous about discussing with me? That we need more people so that I don’t get overwhelmed?”

Sue spoke quietly, “We didn’t want it to seem like we doubted your ability to juggle fifteen balls at once.”

Kathryn looked around the table and, as she made eye contact with each person, they nodded their agreement. She scratched the back of her neck and sighed. “Would I be correct in assuming that, while I’m trying to get back to business as usual as if those three weeks never happened, you are all worried that I’ll never be the same again?”

Harry looked almost stricken. “Our apologies, ma’am. It wasn’t our intention to bring back unpleasant memories.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I realize that the incident affected everyone deeply, and I appreciate the support that all of you have given me, but it’s time to put that behind us. As my staff, I expect you to be straightforward with me. There is no reason to handle me with kid-gloves.”

A chorus of “Yes, ma’ams,” was given in response.

“That being said, yes, I would appreciate any suggestions for keeping my workload light. Just don’t be afraid to tell me what they are.” She focused her attention on Sue. “Please collect everyone’s recommendations for additional positions, what their jobs would entail, and suggestions for who could best fill those needs. If you’re sure that Lydia Anderson would be an asset to our team, then set up an appointment for me to speak with her.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Sue brightened up.

As Kathryn looked at her PADD to see what was on her agenda next, she said, “I have no doubt that my juggling abilities will continue to decline as this baby grows.” When she heard all of them titter in response, she moved on. “All right, the first thing on our agenda is to prioritize the issues. Harry and Judy, I want recommendations for what should be taken to the Federation Council.”

“That’s done. Would you like us to talk about it now?”

Pleasantly surprised, she replied, “Go ahead.”

Harry nodded towards Judy. “It was your idea.”

As Judy prepared to speak, Kathryn was overjoyed with this turn of events. Harry was giving another the chance to shine, and that showed real command maturity. In addition, Judy having come up with an idea that had Harry’s blessing was a first. She felt a significant amount of motherly pride in both of them.

“Admiral, I believe that since our public message has been focused on the underdog, we should take care of them, first.”

Offering encouragement, Kathryn said, “I like the way you think. How do you propose we do that?”

“The problems we’re trying to fix started when the council made the inequitable agreements. If they’ll acknowledge that mistakes were made, they’d be taking the first step towards reconciliation.”

“That sounds simple, but...”

“But it’s not, of course,” Judy interjected. “It’s nearly impossible to get politicians to admit that they were wrong.”

Harry added, “And if they were coerced or blackmailed into those decisions in the first place, they may be afraid to come clean.”

“We’re speaking as if any coercion is in the past, but I think we should proceed with the assumption that it’s in the present as well.” Kathryn sat back and thought about it for a moment, taking a glance around the table as she did so. Justin and Mark were very interested, but didn’t appear to have anything to add. Sue was busy taking notes on her PADD, and Bernie was trying to catch Judy’s eye. When he did, he nodded with encouragement.

Kathryn asked, “Judy, did you find something in those reports?”

Judy glanced nervously at Sue’s PADD and then placed her hand over the screen to stop her from recording. “Can we officially acknowledge that?”

“Good thinking,” Kathryn agreed. “Just in case, let’s not record this part of the conversation.”

Sue put down her PADD.

Judy reported, “I cross referenced Norvellan’s logs with the Federation Council’s logs, and identified a pattern.”

“Go on,” Kathryn said as she sat forward again.

“Just before the mineral agreements were signed, some key votes were changed to support the President’s plan for post-war restoration. There were several options on the docket with some pretty heated discussions over which was the best way to proceed.” Judy glanced at Bernie before addressing Kathryn again. “Admiral, if you’re feeling up to it, my idea is that you could use your special ability to get information we need to pinpoint the source of the coercion.”

She dipped her chin as she asked, “Special ability?”

Harry said, “The savoir-faire you’ve used in every diplomatic conversation I’ve observed. You make people feel like you’re the best friend they never had and then they tell you everything.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Kathryn used her ring finger to scratch an itch at her hairline as she considered it, but quickly put her hand down because she realized it was shaking. “Sounds like we’ve got some wining and dining to do.”

Bernie added, “Under the guise that you’re trying to sway votes. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being a lobbyist and doing some aggressive campaigning.”

“All right, let’s do it,” she said definitively, but blinked slowly at the sudden light-headedness she was feeling. “Now, we need to figure out what I want the council to vote on and why votes would need to be swayed.”

Harry said, “You want the Council to forgive all the unfulfilled contracts so that the worlds involved can be in good standing with the Federation again.”

Sue said, “Sounds like peace, love, and happiness to me.”

“The underdogs will love it,” Judy said as they watched Justin stand and fetch something out of a satchel.

Kathryn shook her head. “No, they’ll think it’s a band-aid, but if any of them ask me about it, I can ask them to give me time to flush out the problem. They’ll understand.”

Justin came back over, scanned her, and handed her a sandwich. “Sure they will, because you’re their best friend.”

That night, Kathryn was curled up on the end of the large couch in the great room, her eyes feeling heavy as she read through Judy’s analysis of the Norvellan data. She was waiting for Chakotay to get home, but having trouble staying awake. Periodically, the words blurred and her head would drop seconds before she jerked it back up again to try to focus.

Chakotay kneeled down in front of her and took the PADD. “Bedtime, love.”

She was surprised at first because she hadn’t heard him come in. However, she merely raised her eyebrows in response. “Practicing for parenthood?”

“Sure,” he said with a smirk as he tugged on her hand until she was standing and in his arms. “You’re falling asleep, and I don’t think I have the energy to carry you upstairs tonight.”

Hugging him close, she asked, “All those commanders-in-training wear you out?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen a more energetic class in my life. What about you? How was the first day back?”

“Tiring, but it felt good. I missed you.”

He pulled back to look at her. “How did it work to have Justin monitoring you?”

“He did fine. He was unobtrusive and timely, although he’s not as good of a cook as you are.”

As they walked toward the stairs, Chakotay asked, “Did he eat dinner with you?”

“He and Sue both. It was nice.”

“Good.” He helped her negotiate the steps because she was so tired. “I would’ve preferred to be here rather than eating with the tactical teaching staff, but they wanted to talk before the evening session.”

“So, what was today? ‘By the book’ or ‘On the fly?’” she asked as she went into the bedroom to begin undressing.

“Both,” he chuckled as he took her clothes to put them away. Holding up her slacks, he added, “Even ‘By the seat of your pants.’ We looked at each incident and categorized it.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said with a yawn as she went into the bathroom.

“Okay. Do you need a snack before bed?”

She shook her head. “No, just want to sleep.” A few minutes later when she returned, Chakotay was waiting with a glass of water and hypos of her medications. With a sigh, she asked, “You sure we don’t need a nurse to deal with all of this?”

“I’m sure.” Patting the bed next to him, he added, “Perhaps I missed my calling in the medical field. I find this interesting.”

“Hmmm.” She rolled her eyes and smiled. “I’m glad you do.”

After administering the hypos, he helped her get settled into bed and said, “Your name came up several times today.”

“I assumed it would. After all, you were discussing delta quadrant tactics. The captain might’ve had something to do with them.”

“Well, yes, but I mean besides that. After the morning break, they asked if I would give them an update on your condition before we got started again. They were very courteous.”

“Didn’t feel like reporters harassing you, I hope.”

“Not at all,” he said as he sat up next to her on the bed so that his back was resting against the headboard.

She snuggled against his leg, sighing as he ran his fingers through her hair. “What did they want to know?”

“How you were feeling, when you’d be returning to work. They were pleasantly surprised to hear you were back at it today.”

“Mmmhmm. We’re doing a press conference on Friday, once I figure out what to say.”

“Any new developments?”

“My staff wants me to wine and dine the Federation Council, get them to divulge their secrets.”

“Not a bad idea. Harry’s?”

She shook her head. “Judy’s. I was impressed.”

“Did you tell them our news?”

“Mmmhmm. Khurma, too. They’re all worried, of course, but they took it well. Also, I had a long conversation with Khurma about the security breach – I’m not the least bit happy.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“He wouldn’t tell me who he suspects because he wants me to play a part – said that I have to be unaware of the details in order to react properly. That really ticks me off.”

Chakotay smothered a grin. “Do I need to remind you that you did the same thing to me?”

She looked up at him. “When?”

“With the Paris situation, when you were trying to flesh out our spy.”

“Oh.” With a sigh, she said, “Well, your life wasn’t at risk. Mine is.”

“No, but my reputation with the crew was on the line. Not to mention the way it made me feel for you not to trust me.”

“I trusted you,” she said defensively.

“And Khurma trusts you – I’m sure of it.”

She chewed on this information for a moment and then admitted, “Well, I was an idiot.” When he didn’t reply, she looked up at him and saw that he was biting his tongue. “Out with it.”

“I want to disagree with you. I really do.”

Pinching his stomach, she changed the subject. “So anyway, I told Harry and Judy they’d be traveling for me, and the whole group wants to add more staff members.”

He whispered, “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” She smoothed away the spot where she’d inflicted pain. “I’m not ready to go out there again.”

Catching her hand, he kissed her fingers. “I know, but when you are, we’ll have to help each other through it.”

“I love you.”

Winking at her, he said, “I love you, too.”

She smiled and snuggled down against his leg again. “So, what else did you tell everyone about me today?”

“Well, they wanted to know if you and I ever fought.”

With a huge grin, she said, “Nah.”

“I told them that we never disagreed over tactics unless a plan put the other’s life in danger.”

“Mostly true.”

“We might have disagreed over other tactics, but we didn’t fight about them. Also, they wanted to know if it helped to have a crew that was so tight-knit. I said that while it sounds great, the truth is that it makes tactical decisions that much more difficult because of how much we cared for one another.”

“Never fun to have to risk the life of a friend.”

He was quiet for a moment while he continued to caress her hair. Full of emotion, he finally said, “Something I never want to face again.”

With a loving pat on his leg, she whispered, “Be sure to tell them that I said they’ll find the strength even when they think there’s none left. I told your sister that last May when she was in labor, and I’m living proof of that truth.”

“I will.”

Kathryn didn’t want to pull her concentration away from her analysis when Sue buzzed her com signal. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Admiral Khurma is here to see you.”

“Send him in.” She took a long swig of her coffee and closed the document she was working on.

As he walked in, he asked, “Kathryn, how are you feeling this afternoon?”

Fighting against giving him a teasingly sarcastic retort, she said, “Fine. How are you feeling?”

“Hmm?” he asked, puzzled, and then realized what she was implying. Chuckling, he replied, “Oh, I’m fine, but then again, I’m not the one who just had a heart transplant. I’m afraid that you’re going to have to resign yourself to indulging my desire to fuss over you.”

Shaking her head in amusement, she replied, “So it seems, but I could’ve come up to your office.”

He waved away her concern. “Got me away from my charming receptionist for a few minutes. I came to see how you were doing and if you need anything.”

Clicking her tongue, she commented, “All right, I’ll indulge you. Let me pull up my list.”

“You needed to make a list?”

“I’ve got so many ideas running around in my head that I thought it would behoove me to organize them.” She tapped her computer screen. “First off, my staff has decided that we need four additional people. Do you have any qualms with that?”

“Of course not. What would they be doing and do you have people in mind?”

“While Commanders Kim and Young are traveling, I’d like Lieutenant Brooks to attend meetings with me, so I need to replace her and Judy. The other two are for research. We

want to track the voting records of every council member to see if we can find any patterns that would help us identify problem areas.”

“I have no problems with additional staff, but it’s not up to us to clean up the Federation Council.”

“No, of course not, but with a little diplomatic pressure in the right places, perhaps we can affect some changes in legislation that will appease the vacillating Federation members.”

“What changes, exactly?”

Kathryn picked up a PADD to read her list. “Pardoning undeliverable war-time agreements, instituting a system within the council to safeguard members against coercion tactics, creating a council oversight committee to monitor any agreements forged by the Office of the President, allocating additional resources for scientific and medical research, offering Federation members assistance with space exploration, instituting practices that safeguard the independence of our members, establish egalitarian policies to ensure that all members receive equal opportunity to bid on government contracts, and re-opening the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy.”

Scratching his neck, he asked, “Is that all?”

“Those are the common issues that have been brought to my attention. Harry and Judy are working on an outline for each, and I’ll bring them to you for prioritizing.”

“All right,” he said with a deep sigh. “Get the people you need, but I want all of these issues kept quiet until we’ve had a chance to discuss them. Some of these changes will appear to be nothing more than a cover to hide bigger problems.”

“True, but if we can start with some small changes, we could generate some good will. It wouldn’t take much to help with space exploration, redo the bidding process, and expand the Academy sponsorship program. We could even make it look like those ideas belong to a few individual council members in return for their cooperation.”

“Agreed. What else is on your list to discuss with me?”

“I’d like to host a press conference on Friday to let the Federation know that I’m back at work and what I plan on doing. Of course, we need to decide what that is. Do you have time tomorrow?”

“I have time, but let’s not jump the gun before talking with the Council Chairman.”

Kathryn nodded in understanding. “Perhaps we can make some general statements to give the feel that we’re working towards something, without giving away what that something actually is.”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m sure between you and Commander Kim, you’ll find the perfect the thing to say. However, I’d like to read it first to prevent inadvertently rubbing someone the wrong way.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Good. Anything else I can help you with?”

She stretched her neck muscles. “Not at the moment, but if you’d like to touch base daily, could we set up a time so that I’m more prepared?”

“Sure, Kathryn.” He stood and made his way to the door. “Have Brooks call my receptionist if you’d like me to stop by.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No, Kathryn. Thank you.” He gave her a wave before he left.

As soon as he was gone, Sue buzzed her again. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Lydia Anderson is here for her appointment. Is this a good time?”

“Early. I like that. Send her in.”

When the door opened, Kathryn had to bite back a smile as she heard Sue say, “...be fine. She doesn’t bite.”

“Admiral?” Lydia said hesitantly as she stepped inside.

Kathryn stood up and came around the desk. “Lydia! Come on in.”

“I don’t mind waiting for my appointment time.”

“I appreciate that, but now is perfectly fine. Admiral Khurma just left, so my train of thought was already derailed.” She put her hand on Lydia’s back and guided her toward the sitting area. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, no thank you.”

“Sure? I’m going to have a snack while we talk if that’s all right?”

“Of course it is.” She swallowed hard and asked, “Perhaps some ice water?”

With a gracious smile, Kathryn said, “Coming right up. Have a seat wherever you like.”

After they both got settled, Kathryn continued to speak. “So, tell me. How is married life?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful.”

“I agree. So many people have asked me that question lately. It feels satisfying to ask someone else.”

Lydia grimaced. “I apologize for not making it to your wedding, Admiral, but we decided to start our honeymoon instead.”

“No need to apologize for that. Honestly, I wouldn’t have even known if you hadn’t mentioned it. There was a sea of people and I really just had my eyes on the groom.”

“I can understand that,” she said with a relieved sigh.

“Where are you and William living?”

“He prefers to go by Bill,” she said and then gasped. “Oh, I shouldn’t have corrected you! I’m sorry, Admiral.”

Softly, Kathryn urged, “Lydia, relax. I love to know little details like that. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a chance to get to know every member of Voyager’s crew as well as I would’ve liked.”

“I’m sure you had more important things to worry about.”

“Not more important, just more demanding,” she said kindly. “Where are you and Bill living? Here in San Francisco?”

“We have a small house in Oakland, not far from Jack London Square on the waterfront.”

“Sounds lovely. And you haven’t found a position here, yet?”

“I was still transporting to my post in Virginia until two weeks ago, and I haven’t looked here because Har... Commander Kim suggested that I speak to you. I hope I’m not imposing, but he insisted.”

“Harry believes you’d be an asset to this staff, and it’s not an imposition at all. My door is always open to anyone from Voyager, especially if you want to work for me.” Kathryn took a long sip of her iced tea before asking, “Do you?”

“Want to work for you?” she asked nervously. When Kathryn nodded, Lydia continued, “I think so. I mean, yes, I do, but I'm not sure what I could do. It would be exciting if there was something you needed help with, although I can't imagine what I could do that Harry isn't already doing.”

“I realize that your area of expertise is ship operations, but none of what I'm working on has anything to do with that.”

“Then...” She stopped, a little flustered. “I'm sorry.”

Kathryn set her drink down. “I'm adding four people to my staff, and if you'd like to work for me, I'd love to have you. Harry and Sue both think you'd be good at taking Sue's position as my personal assistant.”

“Personal assistant?”

“She keeps my calendar, answers my calls, things like that. However, I'm wondering if you might be more interested in one of the other positions. We've got a lot of research to do on tracking Federation Council votes and their publicized opinions. I need two people for that, and it may only be until the end of the summer. The other spot is what Commander Judy Young has been doing. She stays current on the press releases issued quadrant wide, and keeps her eye on what the Federation Council is doing. Does either position sound like something you'd like to do?”

“Oh,” she said with surprise. “Surely there are other people who would be better at that kind of research.”

Kathryn shrugged. “More experienced, probably, but what I'm looking for is someone who is extremely attentive to details, reads quickly, can identify patterns, and most importantly, someone I can trust. Because of security concerns, I can't let just anyone work for me, and I know without any doubts that my crew from Voyager fits that last criteria.”

Lydia nodded thoughtfully. “Are Sue and Commander Young leaving?”

“No, I'm re-arranging my staff so some can travel on my behalf.”

“So, I wouldn't travel?”

Kathryn shook her head. “No, not unless I do. If that happens, it won't be much. Is that a problem?”

“Not at all!” she said quickly. “I'd prefer to stay on Earth. That's why it was so hard to give up my job in Virginia because there were so few opportunities planet-side in operations.”

“That’s true.”

“There’s...” Lydia paused and tucked her hair behind her ear. “There’s something else I should tell you, but I hope it doesn’t make you change your mind about me.”

The anxiety in Lydia’s voice concerned Kathryn, so she took the chance to reach out and touch the younger woman’s hand. “Is everything all right, Lydia?”

“Yes, it’s...” She looked out the window and blinked rapidly. “It’s just that I’m not sure if I want to work or not.”

“It’s okay if you don’t, but why?”

Lydia looked up at Kathryn and took a deep breath. “I just found out yesterday that Bill and I are going to have a baby.”

“That’s wonderful!”

She nodded anxiously, adding, “Yes, but I miscarried twice with my first husband, and I’m a little scared about doing too much. Do you remember him? He was on Voyager when the Caretaker pulled us out there, and died with the others who were in engineering at the time.”

“Oh, Lydia,” she said compassionately. “I didn’t realize. Were you pregnant on Voyager?”

“No, but we were trying again when we both got assigned to your ship.”

“That’s heart-breaking.”

“It is, but he was Sirian, and the Doctor assures me that the problem was genetic.” She closed her eyes. “You don’t want to hear all of this.”

“On the contrary, I do. You see, you’ll be in good company around here.”

“I will?”

Kathryn nodded. “I’m in the same boat, and just as anxious about miscarriage.”

“Really?” Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “You’re pregnant?!?”

“I am, which is why we won’t be traveling much. That, and concerns about my security.”

Lydia closed her eyes in relief. “Bill and I were really worried about me working for you because it might put me at risk.”

Kathryn took a shaky breath. "I can understand. That's a valid fear."

"Did I upset you by saying that?"

"It takes a lot more than that to upset me." Kathryn smiled. "So, what do you think? Would you like to work for me?"

"I would love one of the research positions."

"Perfect. When would you like to start?"

She shrugged. "When would you need me?"

"Immediately. You could talk with Judy this afternoon if you'd like to see which area of research interests you the most. And then, I wouldn't mind if you'd put your head together with the rest of my staff to think about who we might ask to fill the other positions."

"I'd love to. May I contact Bill first?"

"Yes, but mum's the word on my pregnancy. Only my staff and my doctors know."

"Understood, Cap...Admiral." She cringed apologetically.

Kathryn waved off her concern and stood up. "Harry does that all the time."

"Still?"

"When he's distracted." Holding her hand out for a handshake, she said, "Welcome to the team."

"Thank you, Admiral."

A week later, Kathryn had spent the day at home getting ready for a reception she would be hosting for the chairpersons of the ten primary agencies and sub-councils of the Federation Council. She'd slept in to preserve her energy, had Sue come to the house to direct the cleaning and catering crews, and had spent the afternoon going over the notes that her staff had prepared.

Now dressed in a formal pantsuit, she was pacing nervously while waiting for the guests to arrive.

Chakotay said, "Kathryn, sit down before you wear yourself out."

She rubbed her hands together and looked at the very comfortable sofa in front of her. “I always pace when I’m getting ready for something like this.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“It keeps my energy up. Besides, if I sat on our couch right now, I might fall asleep.”

He inclined his head towards the breakfast table. “I didn’t say you needed to sit somewhere comfortable.”

Sue came into the room and asked, “Admiral, are you sure you wouldn’t like to eat some of this food before anyone arrives?”

“I don’t want to be caught with spinach in my teeth.”

“Which is why you should eat now when we still have the opportunity to hand you a toothpick.” Sue set a plate down on the table. “Eat.”

Kathryn frowned at her assistant. “When did you start bossing me around?”

“The moment I realized I could.”

With an overstated sigh, Kathryn sat and did as she was told, mumbling, “First, it was Chakotay, then Harry, now Sue.”

She replied, “And we all have the same goal of your continued wellbeing.”

Kathryn stabbed her fork in the air towards her former assistant. “Don’t you go telling your replacement that he can start bossing me around.”

Chakotay said, “Crewman Foster is far too enamored with you to boss you around.”

“Weren’t you all at one time?”

“Absolutely,” he replied as he sat down next to her with the med-kit. “Just a quick scan.”

She gave a non-committal hum as she chewed her spanakopita.

When all of the guests had arrived approximately thirty minutes later, Kathryn tapped the side of her glass with a spoon to gather everyone’s attention. “First of all, I want to thank each of you for coming here tonight. I realize that it’s extremely early in the morning for some, so we asked the chef to prepare some dishes that could pass as breakfast.”

After they all chuckled in response, she continued. “I know this is a first, for a Starfleet Admiral to host an event like this, but I could think of no better way to have an informal dialogue with this distinguished group. My hope for tonight is to start some conversations on the initiatives that have been requested by the governments I have visited with last year.”

The Secretary-General, Representative Dooha, asked, “Admiral, we appreciate your invitation and are delighted to be here, but how can we know what to discuss without first looking at the petitions?”

“At the risk of sounding like a professor...” She winked at Chakotay and took his hand. “I thought I might throw out a couple of the broader initiatives and invite you to share your thoughts with others as you mingle. Nothing formal need come out of tonight, but it could be a starting place for our upcoming meetings.”

“Very well,” Dooha replied. “It’s a creative approach, and I’d like to encourage all of us to converse without bringing our own political agendas to the forefront tonight.”

“Thank you, Mr. Secretary.” Kathryn bowed her head graciously. “I won’t give you a speech because I’m sure you’ve had your fill of them via the media.”

They laughed as another representative said, “And they were very motivating, all of them.”

“Thank you for indulging me,” she said good-naturedly and held up her wine glass in gratitude. “My primary goal continues to be opening communication between the Council and the troubled members and former members. I’ve said this from the very beginning and I’ll re-iterate it now. It is my belief that what everyone wants most is to regain trust in the basic principles of the Federation, and in order to do so, they need their five most basic needs met: environmental resources, safety, belonging to something greater than ourselves, the search for knowledge, and personal fulfillment. Are we in agreement about that?”

Most everyone nodded and those that didn’t made some kind of non-committal shrug.

“Regardless, the topics that Admiral Khurma and I would like to throw out tonight shouldn’t cause too much uproar. They are the allocation of additional resources for scientific and medical research, offering Federation members assistance with space exploration, and re-opening the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy.”

The room was completely silent until Secretary-General Dooha asked, “That’s it?”

Kathryn turned to her C.O., giving him the opportunity to speak.

Khurma said, "Well, of course there are other petitions to bring to the table next week, but this is a party."

Dooha shook his head in amusement. "Come now, give us one that will liven up our discussions. We love a good debate."

"Kathryn," Khurma said. "Perhaps we should introduce the petition you plan to bring to the table first."

She shrugged. "It's pretty tame. We'd like to discuss pardoning undeliverable war-time agreements for raw materials. It doesn't make any difference to us since they aren't going to be filled, but it will be a visible sign that the Council recognizes that the problem exists."

A representative said, "While that may be tame, Admiral, it brings with it several more volatile issues."

"Yes, it does."

No one spoke until Kathryn motioned towards Harry. "I assume you all know my senior aide, Commander Harry Kim?"

He came to her side and acknowledged the council members' nods with one of his own.

"Commander, you wrote the synopsis for one of the volatile issues that we're all trying not to speak about."

"Yes, ma'am. Egalitarianism."

"Correct. Do you recall your opening statement?"

He cleared his throat gently. "You'd like me to break the ice with that one?"

"Yes, Commander," she said, giving him an encouraging smile.

"Very well. The initiative is for the establishment of egalitarian, unrestricted policies to ensure that all Federation members receive equal opportunity to bid on government contracts." He turned to Kathryn. "If I may say more, Admiral?"

She nodded, trusting him completely.

"This was one of the primary issues with every world we visited. Without discussing past agreements, perhaps we could brainstorm ideas for how to construct an open and fair system. There are numerous examples in the histories of every world that could be compared and contrasted in a non-volatile manner."

Dooha said, "Well done, Commander. Let us now enjoy this wonderful buffet and see what we can come up with."

Kathryn mingled amongst her guests, most of whom turned to innocuous conversation the moment she walked up. The fourth such small group was one she felt more comfortable with than the others, and as she stepped up to them, she asked, "Are you afraid I'll get on a soapbox if you talk about this in front of me?"

One chuckled and said, "No, Admiral. We're just not used to discussing matters so openly with someone who's not on the council. Perhaps you should petition Earth's president to appoint you as a member at large?"

She shook her head. "As much as I'd probably enjoy that, I fear it would be a conflict of interest at this point. Perhaps someday."

"Think about it. We'd love to have you."

"Maybe when the current political climate changes."

Another said, "There will always be political controversy, Admiral. You cannot escape from it by waiting a few years."

"Agreed, but there will likely be a new set of controversies that haven't been stirred up by my prolific speech-giving."

"Touché, Admiral."

While there was a pause in the conversation, Kathryn noticed that all three of them glanced at each other as if they wanted to be discussing something else. She said, "If you'd like me to mingle elsewhere, that can be arranged."

"Of course not, dear," said Representative Gardi, an elderly gentleman who represented one of Earth's colonies. "But perhaps you would tell me more about this piece of art in the dining room. It's quite lovely."

"Ah, yes," Kathryn nodded as she saw which painting he was referring to. As they walked over, she said, "This was painted by my sister as a house-warming gift. It depicts the landscape outside the kitchen window of our childhood home."

"The colors she used are quite striking in this room."

"We designed the room around the painting. I like to think of it as a piece of home away from home."

He turned to her and said, "I could speak in metaphors, but I'm going to be straight with you, dear."

“Please do.”

“Most of us are delighted to have been invited to your home, and we treasure the opportunity to speak openly about the issues you have set forth. However, there are some who feel quite the opposite.”

“I would be surprised if every leader on the Council supported my involvement.”

Gardi took a sip of wine and nodded. “The irony is that the President appointed you to this position, and it’s the President’s supporters who don’t want you meddling.”

Kathryn looked towards the wall closest to the kitchen. “May I show you this painting? My sister did it as well.”

“Tell me about it,” he said as they walked over.

“One of her first pieces that she did as a college student. It’s a flower arrangement that used to sit on my parents’ dining room table.” She absently straightened the frame. “I don’t think the President was well informed when he appointed me.”

“Is that so?” he encouraged.

“I believe that he or his advisors saw my popularity as a means for boosting his ratings. What I don’t think they counted on was that I take my jobs very seriously.”

“That fact would be hard to miss, considering Voyager’s accomplishments.”

She shrugged. “I would’ve thought so, but I welcomed the opportunity to use my popularity to benefit the Federation.”

“Do you still? After all that’s happened to you?”

“Yes,” she said instantly. “Because of all that’s happened, my popularity has increased four-fold. That’s a valuable tool that I intend to use while it lasts. I’m well aware that the people could change their minds about me overnight.”

“How, if I may ask?” He clarified, “You’ve got all of this backing in the press and with the people, and now you’re here to ask us to make some changes. What happens if the Council doesn’t budge? Will you use your power against us?”

She quietly clicked her tongue and tilted her head to the side. “I hope that I’ve never given anyone cause to doubt my integrity or question my principles.”

“I can’t think of any instance, but you didn’t answer my question.”

Her eyes widened perceptively. “I know.”

Studying her, Gardi crossed his arms and rested his chin in his hand. “You really would make a gifted politician, Admiral.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said with a chuckle. “Not to worry, though. As a Starfleet officer, I’m sworn to uphold the Articles and the Federation Council. However, what would be a significant boon to the popularity of the Council, is for you, as a whole, to take a serious look at the initiatives and do whatever is in your power to be fair, generous where possible, and open about your intentions. This group,” she said as she waved around the room. “Sets the tone for the rest of the Council.”

“You are absolutely correct. However, there are some in attendance tonight who, despite your best intentions, will sabotage your efforts.”

Kathryn’s chin rose slightly. “Would you recommend that my staff look carefully at the voting patterns of everyone here?”

“Very carefully, Admiral. You will find some inconsistencies, and when you do, take care as you decide what to do with that information. Many of us think very highly of you and, while we want you to succeed, we also want you to survive.”

“Which is more important to you, Mr. Gardi?”

He took a deep breath and said, “If I were a braver man, I wouldn’t have let things get this bad, but I was comfortable where I was sitting. I don’t want to ask anything of you that I wouldn’t do myself.”

“I’m willing to be uncomfortable, and I’m a brave woman.”

“That you are, and I believe, without any doubt, that you are not out for power or influence.”

“I’m out for justice, sir. For myself and for the Federation.”

“Please, tread carefully as you seek it, my dear. Those whom I do not agree with will stop at nothing to get what they want, and you are more important to this Federation than are any defunct contracts that should be reconciled.”

“I understand, but we’ve got to start somewhere. I believe that the problems we’re facing will snowball out of control unless we work together to stop the avalanche, and my ultimate goal has nothing to do with removing anyone from a position of power. I am completely focused on preserving the Federation.”

“Of that I have no doubt.”

She took a sip of her sparkling cider and asked, "Can you find a way to tell me who can be trusted?"

"That's hard to gauge. While many people's hearts are in the right place, their minds can be changed for them."

"Still, I would appreciate any insight that would improve my chances of success."

He nodded thoughtfully and then seemed to come to a decision. "You know, dear, you are a very inspiring woman."

"I've heard that before, but I prefer to think of it as having spirited integrity."

"Well said," he smiled with amusement. "But what I mean to imply is that you've inspired me. I've been comfortable long enough and perhaps it's time to do something to benefit the people who don't have representation among this group. I'll risk my comfort to help you, and I'm not going to ask for anything in return because I don't want this to seem like a play for power or influence."

"I appreciate that a great deal."

"Good. Now that that's settled, I'm going to see about legislation to get the ball rolling on more medical research as soon as I return to my office later this morning. After all, I am the chair of the Federal Health Organization, am I not?"

"Yes, sir, you are."

"Let's see if we can affect some change while preserving our own health, shall we?"

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your willingness to get the ball rolling."

He winked at her. "I'm hoping to ride on the coattails of your popularity, as well. Now, run along before they think we're up to something."

"Understood," she said with a smile as Gardi walked away.

Before she had a chance to leave the room, the chair of the Federation Security Council came up to her. "Admiral," he said with a nod.

"Can I get you another drink, Representative Fager?"

"No, no, no, I'm just fine." He nodded towards the pictures. "I'm not a student of art. Is there a lot to discuss about this painting?"

"The artist is my sister, and this is one of her earliest works."

His eyes shifted away from the painting back to Kathryn. "I'm wary of the extended conversation you just had."

"Ah," she said with a nod. "I suppose that suspicion is one failing of this type of environment."

"I want to be on your side, Admiral, but you can't be granting favors to help certain council members' agendas."

"Agreed, and I assure you I haven't. What agenda item are you concerned about?"

"The FHO wishes to create a database of every communicable disease on every planet that could possibly come in contact with a Federation world."

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. "And that's a problem because?"

"It presents an enormous security risk to take FHO agents to the planets that are hostile towards the Federation."

"People have been going into tense situations to provide better healthcare for centuries."

"True, but the difference is that these planets don't need better healthcare. They'll think the Federation is up to something deceitful."

"Ah," she said with understanding. "Well, I'm going to let you debate that issue directly with Mr. Gardi's agency. He didn't mention it to me."

"What, then, did he want you to help him with?"

"Nothing. He wanted to help me. I don't know his specific agenda, but he's going to address the issue of expanding medical research to Federation members. We didn't discuss any details."

Fager's mouth opened slightly and then he abruptly closed it. "I see. Perhaps you were right. Suspicion has become all too prevalent within the Council."

"I'm sure that mistrust derives from a perception of dishonesty in recent history, but perhaps now is the time to be more open about our discussions so that trust can be re-established."

He nodded. "A well-intentioned notion, Admiral, but it's my job as Director of the Security Council to watch for fraud."

"A very important job. How long have you had it?"

"Seven months. Enough time to see what really goes on behind closed doors."

“Tell me something, if you would. What has been the average tenure of the Security Director over the last six years?”

“It’s a difficult job. Not many can handle it.”

“I’m relieved that you’re up to the task, then, because several of my initiatives will come straight to you.”

“They’re security related?” he asked in surprise.

She blinked slowly. “Yes, sir, they are. Both internal and external.”

“I’ll be interested to speak with you, then. When we get started next week, let’s set up an appointment.”

“I’d like that, but I’d also like to speak with several of your agency’s members together. Perhaps you, Admiral Khurma, Secretary-General Dooha, and I can work on a list of the best persons to be in on that conversation?”

His chest lifted slightly with importance. “I would be happy to discuss that with you at any time.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your desire to give my concerns attention.” Kathryn graciously bowed out of the rest of the conversation and found herself face to face with her C.O. “Admiral,” she said with relief.

“Everything okay, Kathryn?”

She nodded as she took a drink. “Yes, but I think I’m a bit rusty on my diplomatic skills. The last two conversations wore me out.”

Putting his hand on her back, he directed her towards the food table. “Have you tried these canapés?”

“Yes, but I’ll be happy to try them again.”

Once she got a few bites on her plate, he commented, “I think this is going remarkably well considering the shaky start and the composition of the guest list.”

“You had concerns about the guest list?”

Nodding, he said, “Many concerns, but it’s not like we could invite only a select few to play in our sandbox.”

“Hard to do any weeding if you don’t go into the garden... or something like that.” She grimaced at her own attempt to be clever. “My wit seems to be lacking.”

He chuckled. “Not in the least. In my book, recognizing that a joke doesn’t make sense takes a certain amount of intelligence.”

Kathryn asked, “What do you know about the Security Council Director?”

“That’s what I love about you, Kathryn. There’s no beating around the bush.”

With a shrug, she replied, “Never know when we’ll be interrupted.”

“Fager is new and inexperienced.”

“I can’t tell where his deficiencies lay. Intelligence, charm, or both?”

Khurma widened his eyes to communicate that she might be on to something. “The good news is that he doesn’t seem to be a victim of coercion, yet. It’s quite possible that he’s being ignored and/or being led on wild goose chases.”

“The latter, I’m thinking,” she said with an amused grin. As she reached for a piece of cheese, her ears picked up on a nearby voice that gave her pause.

“Kathryn?” Khurma asked.

She held her finger to her lips and cocked her head to the side to show that she was focused on eavesdropping. The conversation was between two council members that she couldn’t identify without looking at them, but one of the voices was disconcerting.

“Well, I’ve seen enough for one lifetime. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

Kathryn immediately blanched and felt like she was going to faint until Khurma took her arm and began walking her to the kitchen.

Once there, he helped her lean against the island countertop. “Are you ill?”

She shook her head while contradicting herself with, “Maybe.”

Chakotay crossed the great room into the kitchen. “Kathryn?”

Khurma said, “I fear that she’s ill.”

She held up a hand to forestall both men, but Chakotay was not deterred and pulled out the medkit. After a quick examination, he said, “Blood pressure is high, but not dangerously so.” He filled up a glass of ice water and handed it to her.

After taking a sip, she held her fist against her lips to hold down the nausea. “Who was I listening to?”

Khurma replied, “Representative Liyal of Dolsia and Representative Jorl of Moroppa. Why do you ask?”

Chakotay commented, “Both of those planets are near the Bolus system.”

She took another sip of water and grabbed a tissue to dab at the perspiration on her forehead. “We can’t talk about it here, but I want to know if one of them has a special relationship with the President. Are either of them under suspicion?”

“There’s some history there,” Khurma replied.

“Which one said the final statement I heard? Do you know?”

“What statement was that?”

Kathryn shuddered as she said, “About how the mighty have fallen.”

“Liyal. He tends to use grandiose language and likes to gloat.”

Squaring her shoulders, Kathryn addressed her C.O. “He needs to be under investigation. From voice recognition, I believe that he saw me when I was being held captive.”

Chakotay’s eyes widened into saucers. “And he’s in our house?”

“Kathryn, could you be jumping to conclusions?”

“That was a very distinctive voice, and he said that exact phrase about me. ‘Oh how the mighty have fallen.’ I’ve had recurring nightmares about that statement and that voice.”

“All right, I’ll look into it, but we’re not accusing anyone tonight.”

“Admiral,” Chakotay pleaded. “That’s not enough for you to arrest him? He’s in our house!”

“Lower your voice, Captain. He may be here, but he has no idea where this home is.”

Kathryn said, “Stay calm, please.”

“Fine, but I’m not letting him out of my sight,” he replied with anger.

“NO!” Kathryn and Khurma both almost shouted.

She continued, "Admiral Khurma is right. If they suspect we're suspicious, it will show our hand."

Khurma said, "We have no proof that the President was behind your abduction, Kathryn."

"We do in my book," she said. "Norvellen gave us proof."

"There's a difference between the President and his associates."

Getting angry, she replied, "Admiral, this is not to be taken lightly. Whoever hired Pratin is still out there and still wants me dead."

"I realize that," he said coolly. "But if we're going to uncover all the players in this scheme, it's going to take time and careful strategizing. If we start arresting people close to the President based on circumstantial evidence, we'll be shooting ourselves in the foot."

"I didn't ask you to arrest him," she said flatly. "I asked you to investigate him. I want both of those men watched like hawks, twenty-four hours a day."

"They already are." He touched her back. "Kathryn, I have full confidence in your intuition, but we have to proceed with caution. For now, just know that you're safe."

"Hmph. I have to disagree with you on that one, Admiral," she said as he left the room.

Chakotay asked, "What do you want to do about this?"

"Got a phaser rifle?"

With a bemused grin, he pulled her into his arms for a comforting embrace. "If it wouldn't land us both in prison, I'd grab two."

After indulging in his arms for a long moment, she said, "We should get back to the party."

"Okay," he said quietly, letting her go.

"But stick close to me, would you?"

"Like glue."

Kathryn held his hand, put on her game face, and went back into her formal living room. When she arrived, several heads turned to acknowledge her before going back to their conversations.

Secretary-General Dooha came over to them and held out his hand to Chakotay.
“Captain, I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Chakotay said.

“I feel that the honor is mine, Captain. You may not know my history, but I was born on...”

“Niveh, yes. My condolences to you for the hardships that colony faced.”

“I appreciate that, Captain, but I want to offer my thanks to you, as a representative of the Maquis, for protecting that colony. Even though my family relocated to Tarshus when I was still a child to seek a more peaceful life, we had family friends on Niveh. Tell me, did you have anything to do with the Maquis efforts in that region?”

“Yes, sir, I did. Being in the Demilitarized Zone, Niveh was one of the primary protectorates of the Maquis.”

Dooha shook his head in dismay. “I am relieved those days are over.”

“Are they?” Kathryn asked.

He inclined his head towards her. “What do you mean, Admiral?”

“Niveh continues to struggle in the aftermath of the war, as most of their buildings were destroyed. As I’m sure you know, a large grant from a private enterprise on Earth built that colony, and the colonists simply don’t have the infrastructure to acquire the materials they need to rebuild. They’ve made numerous requests for aide, but from their point of view, their appeals fall on deaf ears.”

Dooha rubbed his hands together as he tried to figure out how to respond. “There are limited resources available, Admiral. The Federation Council certainly can’t afford to rebuild every planet that was devastated during the war.”

“Of course not, but from Niveh’s point of view, Betazed and Earth have the resources to rebuild themselves while the colonies such as theirs do not.” She held up her hands to stay off his retort. “I’m not the one to decide how the Council allocates funds, but I urge you to keep that in mind when the next round of projects is on the table.”

Representative Liyal interrupted the conversation, the timbre of his voice grating on Kathryn. “Admiral, I didn’t realize that you’ve appointed yourself to the appropriations sub-council.”

Forcing herself not to react to his presence, she replied, “I would say that my job lends itself to a certain amount of input.”

“And how did you arrive at that presumption?” he asked as the room quieted.

Kathryn felt Chakotay move so that he was standing just behind her left shoulder, much like he did on Voyager when situations became overly tense. “My task is to facilitate open communication between the Council and Federation members, both current and past. How do you propose I do that without taking concerns to the appropriate sub-councils and then sharing the Council’s response with the Federation?”

Eyes narrowed and voice tight, he replied, “We have our own method of telling the Federation what we want them to know, Admiral.”

She clicked her tongue and then slowly shook her head. “An alarming attitude, Representative... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?”

His chin lifted as he asked, “You don't know who I am?”

Pretending to think for a moment, she shook her head again. “No, I don't believe so, but if you'll tell me, we can correct that slight oversight.”

“Liyal of Dolsia, Admiral. To use one of your human phrases, does that ring a bell?”

“Hmmm,” she said as she scratched her chin. “No, I'm afraid not. Are you new to your position?”

With a knowing laugh, he said, “No, Admiral. President Zife appointed me his first week in office.”

“Oh? Are you friends with the President?”

“I have the distinct pleasure of being a long-time friend and supporter of his.”

“Odd,” she said with a shrug. “He never mentioned you when we've met. What sub-council are you chair of?”

“Appropriations, Admiral. The sub-council you seem to have taken issue with.”

She waved away his concern. “Oh, no, no, no. It's not my issue, it's the colonists and former members of the Federation that have taken issue. They believe appropriations are not...” Pretending to search for a word, she ended with, “appropriate.”

Stepping closer, he said, “You're crossing the line, Admiral. May I remind you that you are merely a Starfleet officer?”

Not one to back down when threatened, she met him halfway and was nearly in his face. “A Starfleet officer appointed by the President to clean up the mess that is the Federation, Representative.”

“Who do you think advised the President to appoint you? You were to listen to the colonies whine about their problems and keep them quiet. That’s it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Is that so?” she asked coolly. “You’d like me to tell that to the people of the Federation?”

“You do, and you’ll find yourself out of a job.”

Dooha stepped forward, “Liyal, Admiral, let’s table this discussion, shall we?”

Liyal put his arm across Dooha’s chest and moved as if to clear a path. “Not necessary. Janeway and I have a lot to discuss. Don’t we, Kathryn?”

“I didn’t realize we were on a first name basis...” She asked Dooha, “What’s his first name?”

Dooha shook his head. “Admiral, I think perhaps this is getting out of hand.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t have this job right now if things weren’t out of hand.” She turned to Liyal. “Tell me, Mr. Liyal, what is the policy of the Appropriations Sub-Council for prioritizing rebuilding efforts?”

“There’s a lot more to appropriations than catering to the sniveling and pathetic whines of a dozen minor colonies.”

She looked around to see that everyone else was listening intently. Aware of the danger she was in, Kathryn simply repeated his words. “Sniveling and pathetic whines?”

“How dare you,” he seethed.

She shrugged. “I’m just repeating what you said, but do tell us, because we are all very curious. What, exactly, is most important when it comes to appropriations if it isn’t the well-being of our colonies?”

“I’ll explain it to you since you obviously have no understanding of economics.”

Glancing at Chakotay, she said, “That’s probably true. We didn’t have any big businesses supporting us in the delta quadrant. We had to rely on our own wiles and the generosity of others. Go on, Mr. Liyal.”

His eyes were no more than slits. “It’s very simple. Growing the strength of the business community will enable the growth of the infrastructure that you seem so concerned about.”

“Oh,” she said with mock realization. “So, the strength of the businesses helps the people of those communities rebuild and thrive.”

“Precisely, over time.”

“They will use their profits to ‘grow the infrastructure.’”

“See, even you can understand.”

“Oh, yes. Your point of view is quite clear. One question, if I may?”

He rolled his eyes and nodded. “To help the less educated, sure.”

“Less educated?” she asked with surprise. “I guess I need a third doctorate, but we’re getting off track. My question is, which Earth and Betazed communities are growing from the council’s appropriations to the Bolian, Dolsian, and Moroppan businesses that have been contracted for the rebuilding?”

“You forget that we live in a quadrant-wide community, Admiral.”

“Did I? Funny,” she pretended to chuckle at herself. “I thought you were the one who’d forgotten that. A good reminder for us both.”

“I don’t need anything from you, Janeway.”

“Then why’d you advise the President to give me this job?” She looked around the room as if expecting someone else to answer the question. Directing her attention back to Liyal, she said, “At least tell me what the approved message of the Appropriations Sub-Council is so that I can convey that on your behalf.”

“You need not worry that pretty little head about our message. We can convey our own messages if and when we decide it is necessary.”

She opened her arms in acceptance. “Very well, then. I’ll simply tell the media that the chair of the Federation Appropriations Sub-Council, Representative Liyal, long-time friend of President Zife, refuses to comment about past, current, and future decisions regarding the allocations of the Federation’s resources.”

He got back in her face. “Watch it, Janeway. You seem to forget that you’re very lucky to be alive, and that you’re merely a pawn in a much larger game that’s being played by much more influential people.”

Ignoring the first part of his comment, she asked sweetly, “You don’t think I’m influential?”

“Tell me... what was it like to be silenced? I rather enjoyed a couple months without hearing any of your pandering speeches.”

“Really? From what I understand, all one had to do was turn on a viewscreen and I was all over it.”

“And who do you think was responsible for that? You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

Feeling victorious, she replied, “Oh, but I do. You just told me and everyone else in this room.”

“What are you getting at?”

Khurma stepped between them and with his very commanding voice, said, “Enough. The issue of appropriations will not be resolved tonight, and we have yet to formally bring this petition before the Council at large.”

Kathryn said, “What I’m getting at, Representative, is that the people of the Federation have empowered me to bring to the light of day the wrongs that have been made in recent history. I work for them.”

“You just keep believing that, Janeway.”

“Admiral!” Khurma commanded, using only a look to clearly communicate that she should not respond.

After everyone except Starfleet personnel had left, Chakotay said, “Kathryn, I need to see you in the kitchen, now.”

“I’m fine, Chakotay.”

“Please, Kathryn. You’ve been ignoring my efforts to get you in there for an hour.”

As she walked through the house, she said, “If I weren’t fine, don’t you think I would’ve fainted by now?”

Khurma asked from the breakfast table, “Is that supposed to make us feel better?”

“Yes, actually, it is.” She sat down next to him with a huff. “I suppose you’re going to rake me over the coals now?”

“For not following your husband’s orders?”

“No, for losing my cool with Liyal.”

He slowly shook his head as he typed on his PADD. “I thought you did a remarkable job keeping your cool.”

“Really?” She glanced up at Chakotay as he scanned her with the medical tri-corder, and smiled when he winked at her.

Khurma continued, “As you are well aware, the issues that we’re dealing with in the Federation don’t come without tension. Someone had to break the ice.”

“Liyal is a jerk.”

“Undoubtedly, but he is also what he accused you of being, a pawn.”

“A self-righteous, arrogant, pawn.”

Khurma added, “Don’t forget devious and manipulative.”

“Kathryn,” Chakotay interrupted.

“Hmmm?”

“We need you to concentrate on lowering your blood pressure.”

Khurma looked up. “Is that possible? To do it by willing it to happen, I mean.”

She replied, “Supposedly, if I do some restorative breathing and try to relax.”

“Ah, well,” he said as he stood up. “That’s my cue to get the rest of these people out of your house.”

“I’ve got too much adrenaline to sleep right now.”

Chakotay placed a hypo against her neck and released the contents. “Then I suggest you take a relaxing bath or read a book.”

“Or both,” Sue said as she walked by. “Go on, Admiral. I’ll take care of getting this all cleaned up.”

Harry came in, and announced, “That was amazing!”

Kathryn smiled brightly. “The whole reception? Has Judy left?”

“She just did, and she’s thrilled beyond belief. But I’m talking about you and that creep. It was just like old times on Voyager.”

Justin commented, "I think that was better than anything I ever saw you do on Voyager."

"You might be right," Harry said. "Although there were a few that rank up there with tonight."

Khurma motioned towards the door. "It's time for us to go. The Admiral's 'pretty little head' needs her beauty rest." He turned to Kathryn, and asked, "How did you resist knocking his lights out when he made that comment?"

"Because that's what he wanted me to do." She got up to say goodnight to her guests. "Thank you, everyone. I think we got off to a really interesting start."

"Don't come in tomorrow, Kathryn," Khurma said. "I'll contact you if anything interesting happens."

"I might take you up on that, but we'll see how I'm feeling in the morning."

As they walked towards the door, Harry asked, "Chakotay, I meant to ask you... What was Representative Chial talking about you going to Magadan?"

Chakotay waved his hand and shook his head. "Nothing."

Khurma said, "They'd love to have you, Captain."

Kathryn asked, "Magadan?"

"I'll tell you about it later," he replied and then addressed all of their guests. "Thank you again, everyone."

Once they were gone, Kathryn turned towards her husband with her hands on her hips. "What's on Magadan?"

He took her hands off of her hips and held them. "Another Command School training center. They want me to repeat the 'By the book' seminar."

"That's great!" She tilted her head in an attempt to read his reaction. "Isn't it?"

"I'm not going."

Putting her fingers under his chin, she lifted it until he was looking at her. "Why not?"

His shoulders dropped. "Do you really need to ask me that?"

She studied him for a long moment before asking, "Did the invitation come tonight?"

“On the second day of the seminar.”

“Two weeks ago?” A sensation of sadness washed over her, although she couldn’t explain it. Putting her arms around him, she said, “I’m doing fine being alone.”

“I know, but I’d be worried about you the entire time.”

“We’ve got to get on with our careers at some point.”

“Yes, but not now.” He put a hand on her stomach. “Not with him being so vulnerable.”

Sue walked in and gasped. “Oh! I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Kathryn said as she pulled away from Chakotay. “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I’ve put away the food, but left everything else. A cleaning crew is coming tomorrow to take care of the furniture, floors, and the caterer’s supplies.”

Kathryn pulled Sue into a hug. “Thank you for everything, even bossing me around.”

“You’re welcome, Admiral.” Sue held her for a little longer than necessary before letting go. “Get some rest, and we’ll see you on Thursday.”

“All right.” She opened the door for Sue and said, “Good night.”

Once she was gone, Chakotay said, “Let’s get you to bed.”

“I still want that bath,” she pointed out as she walked up the stairs. “You promised.”

Following her, he said, “It was merely a suggestion.”

Once in her bedroom, Kathryn began taking off her clothes as Chakotay started the bathwater. She went into the bathroom and said, “I want you to go.”

“What?” he asked, sure that he misunderstood.

“To Magadan. I don’t mean to imply that I want to be away from you, but I think I’ll feel better knowing that you’re not putting your career on hold for me.”

He helped her into the bathtub, kneeling down to situate her bath pillow. “My career isn’t on hold. I’m still teaching seminars here on Earth, and besides, I’m doing it for both of you.”

“I could go with you.”

“No, it’s too high a security risk.”

“When is it?”

“Week after next.”

“I’ll spend the week in Paris. It’ll be perfect timing because I was worried about staying on the same schedule as you.”

He leaned his arms on the bathtub and watched her for a few minutes before deciding to say, “I have some conditions.”

“Let me guess. I have to stay out of trouble?”

With a chuckle, he said, “That’s true whether I’m here or not. My conditions are that you have Justin and Sue with you every minute.”

“Every minute?” She motioned towards herself lying naked in the bathwater.

Frowning, he said, “You know what I mean. Also, even though you’ll be on Paris time, I think you should sleep here. Our home is more secure than any hotel could be.”

“All right.”

“And, if you feel the slightest bit exhausted or fuzzy, you have to call Joe.”

“I promise.”

He leaned over the side of the tub and gave her a kiss. “Thank you. I’ll call Chial in the morning.”

“He’s on Paris time. Go call him now.”

Chakotay sighed with amusement. “You’re bossy.”

“Yeah, well? What do you expect? I was your captain for seven years, and now I’m both a vice-admiral and your ball-and-chain.”

He pushed against the tub to get to his feet. “Good point. I’ll be back.”

“What? You’re not going to argue with me?” she called after him.

“I know better. Don’t fall asleep in there.”

“Hmph,” she said with a sigh as she laid her head back. Next thing she knew, Chakotay was lifting her out of the water. “Hey... what are you doing?”

“Putting you to bed.”

“But I just got in,” she said grumpily as he laid her on the bed and began to towel her off.
“Weren’t you going to call Chial?”

“That was thirty minutes ago.”

She sighed. “I fell asleep.”

“Yep.”

“But I didn’t wash.”

He helped her pull a nightgown over her head. “I washed you, but you slept through it.”

“You did?”

“More or less, but I didn’t do your hair,” he said as he tucked her in and gave her a kiss.
“Sleep now.”

“M’kay.”

Caressing her cheek, he said, “And just for the record, I think you have the prettiest head I’ve ever seen.”

She smiled as she fell asleep.
