

Surrounded
by Carol Sandford

"Oh no, not now, not today!"

Deanna groaned into her daughter's hair, and this time she didn't breathe in her precious talcum scent that normally brought a guaranteed contented smile to her face. Nor did she place a feather-light kiss upon those tight, soft curls like she usually did when she got within an inch of her beloved baby.

Deanna sat forlornly in her dining table chair, surrounded by breakfast chaos as her mother made her grand entrance, elegantly dressed as though she was going to a business function rather than visiting her own daughter, who was stuck at home with an 'adventurous, mischievous' baby.

Only Deanna knew she wouldn't come any further than the door once she'd seen what she would be walking into.

Lauren's goopy rusk. Correction, the vast majority of Lauren's goopy rusk, was splattered not only over her, but the highchair, the floor, the wall behind her and the remainder, over her mother. Deanna's ebony hair bore streaks of the dripping mess, ensnaring itself amongst her own curls, now mercifully shorter to accommodate Lauren's fixation for ripping it out by its roots.

Deanna despaired of Lauren's fast growing independent streak. The one where they insisted that they do everything themselves, from removing their own nappy, regardless of its contents, to stuffing their food in the general area of their mouths - and missing. In between of course, playing catch with the goopy stuff.

Have you ever tried to catch goopy stuff? The only thing that ever succeeded in catching it, was hair, very successfully.

Lauren let out a squeal of delight when she spotted her grandma, and Deanna quietly seethed. She was tired, crabby, in desperate need of a relaxing bath, and lonely. God, she was lonely.

For that instant only, the decision to live on Earth after her and Will had married, and then been blessed with their beautiful daughter was rapidly becoming the wrong one. But what could she do? Will had brought them a lovely large house, with a back yard most people would die for. Okay, it needed a lot of work and bit by bit, Will was doing it, and loving the challenge.

And what a challenge. But the challenge was taking forever, much longer than they had hoped. The work much more than they had thought too. But it was getting done...slowly.

But it still didn't take away her loneliness; The endless days whilst Will was out there, being a diplomat, and an instructor, and on the odd occasion, an undercover operative for Starfleet. But Deanna gave him his due, when he was there with her and Lauren, he was the perfect father and practising DIY expert. It wasn't often, but those times she cherished, and were all

that kept her going day by day.

Deanna pushed away her resentments knowing that the negative thoughts only erupted with the arrival of her mother. That and the independent tyke that was grinning a two pegged toothy smile at her grandmother as she smacked the highchair's table top with her little chubby hands, sending even more of the goopy rusk into the air.

"Oh, darling! Don't you think you should be teaching Lauren not to do that, she'll never learn table manners you know?"

Elegantly tip-toeing across the scattered debris that littered the floor, Lwaxana Troi made her way towards the table, grimacing with displeasure at not only what lay around her, but the very thought of stepping in 'something'.

As Deanna watched her mother scan the seat for anything that might mark her classically cut skirt, and brushing off invisible dust, just to make sure, Deanna felt obligated to pacify the woman, even though it galled her to know that she'd had a baby of her own and would have known about 'this stage' in a child's development. But then she thought again. Maybe she didn't. Maybe Deanna was passed over to a housekeeper for the 'dirty jobs'. She didn't put it past her and that angered even more.

"Mother, Lauren is a baby, this is how she learns. Its called experimenting, she thinks its fun, and meal times should be fun. They shouldn't be all stuffy and forced. Eating should be an enjoyment. I don't mind if Lauren makes a little mess."

She tickled her daughter under the chin as she said her last words, making Lauren giggle and squirm. Deanna had been lucky, Lauren was a happy baby, and only sad when she was in pain, or over tired, and Will idolised her, even more than herself. She wished he was here so that he could fend off the accusations and jibes that Deanna knew were coming.

But somehow, Lwaxana always managed to come when Will was away. She hadn't decided whether it was a deliberate move or just coincidence. But whichever, Deanna always found herself having to defend her husband along with her role as a mother.

If she wasn't bitching about Will's absence, she was putting down whatever Will happened to be working on, and Deanna wished with all her heart that Will had managed to get a few more tiles up in the bathroom before he had left.

As Lwaxana cooed and aaaahed at Lauren, Deanna managed to scrape away the worst of the goop, before lifting her daughter out of the highchair. "Come on, sweetheart, its bath time for you."

But even as Lwaxana followed the two of them up the stairs, Deanna knew the topic of conversation, "But darling, you should bathe Lauren at night before she goes to bed, that way she would be sleepy and go through the night. I know she still keeps you up, you ought to be stricter with her."

Deanna sighed as she sat on the edge of the bath and turned the faucets on. As she began to

strip the squirming mass upon her lap, who was already trying her hardest to get into the water, Deanna explained herself again, "Lauren 'does' have a bath at night and I like to give her one in the mornings too. She's having trouble with her teeth, that's the only reason she is disturbing me at night. I can accept that, it's part of parenting, mother."

She stopped to blow a raspberry on the now exposed baby pink tummy, creating a husky chuckle from its recipient, before placing her gently into the warm water. But Deanna jumped a mile as her mother shrieked in her ear, "Deanna! You didn't test the water! It might have scalded her!"

Exasperated, Deanna continued to wash the tiny body that was happily splashing the water, creating a geyser of water that saturated her mommy from the neck down.

"Mother, I have been bathing my daughter anything up to 4 times a day for the past nine months. I think I know how much hot and cold water I need. And besides, I assume you didn't see me testing the heat earlier as you were too busy criticising my husband's tiling technique."

Lwaxana huffed, "I suppose your right." It was then she began to pick on the bathroom, "Goodness! hasn't that husband of yours got the radiator put in here yet? Lauren will freeze, poor darling. And when IS he going to finish that tiling, it looks dreadful! Honestly, Little one, you'd think he'd stick around long enough to finish at least one job in your home!"

Deanna quickly picked up the indignant sopping wet infant and wrapped the huge fluffy towel around her. Almost pushing her mother out of the way in her haste to not only escape the increasingly small area of the confining bathroom, but also her mother's over-bearing presence, both of which she'd had enough of. More than enough.

Her temper was beginning to bubble with the relentless attack on her beloved Will. But it wasn't just that, it was everything. The constant put downs, the total lack of support from her one and only blood relative. The one person who should have been there for her when her Imzadi wasn't. Being stuck planet side with no friends so to speak. Talking baby talk day in day out, the endless circle of washing, ironing, housework, and the guilt.

The guilt of loving it all and not having anyone to share it with, apart from her husband who wasn't around enough to enjoy it with her, or long enough to watch and nurture their daughter together. For him to see what she saw every single day; The smiles, the giggles, the goopy play, the day time nap when Deanna could sit and watch the tiny life in the daylight hours and be in awe of the creation that they had made together.

As Deanna powdered and creamed the baby, she ignored the inane natter beside her as her mother prattled about her latest assignment. How every thing was in bloom on Betazed whilst Alaska was rapidly approaching winter - with no radiator in the bathroom. How all her old friends were preparing for the grand summer ball, a huge affair held every year at the peak of the summer season. With ball gowns and barbecues, dancing under moonlit stars and the royal Betazed parade, when the cream of the crop, the top dogs of the top houses joined forces and showed the planet who they were and how important they were.

It wasn't so long ago when Deanna Troi was one of that crowd, and loving every minute of it.

But that was until she met and fell in love with an off-worlder. That was before she left Betazed and sought her future elsewhere, much to her mother's continued chagrin. That was before she married that off-worlder and settled on Earth with the man that meant more to her than any dream she could ever imagine. The man that gave her Lauren.

"...Don't you think pink is terribly girly for Lauren's bedroom, darling. Its so...twee!"

But Deanna wasn't listening to her. Her eyes were fixed on the child before her as she connected the last popper on her sleepsuit, watching the tiny thumb disappear inbetween her rosy cherub lips. Picking Lauren up, she gave her a long comforting cuddle before placing her in her crib for a much needed nap.

But even before she'd turned, Deanna knew her mother's next argument. She silenced the older woman's words with finger to her own lips. Lwaxana closed her own mouth as she realised Deanna's intent.

The two women stepped out into the half decorated hall, pulling the door to before quietly walking back into the kitchen area. Deanna sighed at the mess she faced, but sighed even deeper as her mother continued the conversation she was about to start upstairs.

"Don't you think that Lauren should be kept awake more now. You know you'll never get any sleep if you keep letting her have those naps."

And then she dropped the real reason for visiting.

"Of course, if you came home to Betazed, darling, we could get you a live in nanny so that you could become part of the Betazoid system again. You be with all your old friends, like Chandra. Did you know that she has joined the higher consulate now that she has put her child into day care? I also hear that Wyatt has come home again to resume his duties now that he has got his wanderlust out of his system...unlike someone else I know. You used to be so fond of him, little one. And of course, I would get to see my granddaughter every day!"

Deanna stood speechless in the middle of her kitchen. A kitchen that bore memories of hours of experimenting with her husband as he tried to teach her the art of cooking from scratch rather than using the replicator, now hidden away in the corner of the room, complete with a huge picture of their daughters feet and tiny hands.

A kitchen that through her husbands careful planning and thoughtfulness saw sunshine pouring through not only the original window on one side, but now the other which Will had installed so that the room was constantly bright, welcoming and sunny.

As Deanna's eyes fell to the sturdy table, now adored with the remains of breakfast and the recipe book, opened up onto the page that was to become the next experiment for dinner tonight, that not barely four weeks ago held two almost naked passion filled bodies, oblivious to all and everything but themselves and the moment; A very precious moment. A moment that saw the conception of their next more than wanted baby.

But of course, her mother didn't know any of that. All she saw. All she ever saw was Deanna seemingly at her absolute worst, always up to her ears in goop and gunk. Always dressed in her tattiest clothes ready for the days chores that lay ahead of her, every single day.

What she never saw was the happy, solid family that emerged as soon as her beloved husband stepped through the door, shutting out everything beyond the front door until it had to be opened again.

No, she never saw any of that, because she never wanted to. Because she could never believe that this was where Deanna wanted to be.

Lwaxana was startled when Deanna suddenly snapped out of her reverie and grabbed her forcibly by the arm and dragged her back up the stairs, her indignant squawks withered to silence by the steely look her daughter threw over her shoulder.

Stepping into her own bedroom, Deanna ignored the unmade bed and the dirty clothes haphazardly strewn over the huge rocking chair that Will had brought just before their daughter had been born so that she could rock as she nursed. Instead she extended her arm and pointed to the ornate carved headboard. But amongst the numerous flowers and patterns, was a word, lovingly etched into the glossy yew. It had taken Will six weeks to make and was their pride and joy.

Lwaxana was stunned into silence, but Deanna never stopped, "That, Mother, says 'I love you, Deanna.'"

But before she could comment, Deanna took her arm again and led her into Lauren's 'twee' room and pointed to the mobile hanging above the crib. The intricate shapes danced in the gentle breeze that wafted through the slightly ajar window. Stars, planets and rockets of varying bright colours sparkled as they twisted, the glittery glints bouncing off the walls.

Deanna whispered, harsher than she wanted to but couldn't stop herself, "That mobile says 'Daddy loves you, Lauren.'"

When Deanna returned downstairs, Lwaxana sheepishly followed behind, but Deanna hadn't finished yet. Swinging open the back door, she stood with her arms stiffly folded in the frame waiting for her to get near enough for her to see outside.

Deanna nodded her head towards the tree swing, silently admiring the structure and remembering the last time the three of them had sat in it. Will's arm had been around her shoulders as his other hand alternately lovingly stroked his daughter's soft cheek and then his wife's.

"See that swing, Mother, that is a future of precious times in our garden, with our children, together. It may not be all the time, but those times will be cherished."

Lwaxana looked around the garden finally seeing it for the first time. The sturdy fence around its edge - to keep their daughter safe. The tiny sandpit in the corner, ready for when Lauren was old enough to play in it, probably for hours. She saw the bird bath, the flowers, none of

which were prickly. And finally her misty eyes came back to the swing. She watched it sway in the summer breeze and the image of the three of them swam before her eyes. The laughter rang in her ears and the love surrounded her soul.

Finally her eyes met Deanna's but was relieved to see nothing but understanding and forgiveness, "I'm sorry, Little one, forgive me."

Deanna smiled, "Sure, but only if you go and put the kettle on while I try and scrape this mess off the kitchen floor..."

The two women turned to face the scene before them. One went off in the direction of the utility room for the mop and bucket, the other took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves...