

## ***The Future Is Ours – Part 12***

### **“Fixing Kathryn”**

Rating: NC-17

Summary: Trying to make things right

By Dawn

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Chakotay looked up when he heard the restaurant become quiet. Kathryn had just come in and was speaking to the host near the entrance. His heart fluttered because he knew that their entire future was hinging on the success of this evening.

When she was escorted to their booth, Chakotay stood up to welcome her. “Kathryn,” he said with a smile and leaned in to innocently kiss her cheek.

“I hope you’ll accept my apology for being late again.” She scooted into the seat across from him.

“It’s no problem. Did you have a busy afternoon?”

“It was a quiet day actually, but it never fails that someone calls just before I’m ready to leave.” She furrowed her brows apologetically. “I had planned to go home first and change.”

“I don’t mind. I’m just glad you’re here.”

“I almost called you to reschedule, but I thought…” She trailed off, not finishing her sentence.

“It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you’d like to go home, but it wouldn’t hurt to get a bite to eat at least.”

“That’s true,” she caught his eyes for just a second before redirecting her attention to the menu in front of her. “Have you been here before?”

“It’s a first for me. Justin recommended it when I called him about setting this up.”

While they were looking over the menu, their waiter brought them a bottle of the house wine, compliments of the chef for the two very special guests.

A few minutes later, the waiter came back. “Pardon the interruption, Admiral Janeway, but we have a young guest in the restaurant tonight who would love to have your autograph.”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay who seemed unperturbed, but she wasn't sure if he was hiding his opinion. She accepted the paper menu and pen from the waiter and scribbled a quick signature. Politely, she said, "If you receive any more requests, would you convey that I'd prefer not to sign anymore this evening?"

"Absolutely, Admiral," he said courteously. "I apologize for the intrusion."

When the waiter was gone, she said, "I'm sorry about that, Chakotay."

"There's no reason to be. It comes with the territory."

"You didn't feel that way last..." She stopped and waved her hand in front of her face. "I'm sorry. Forget I said that. No reason, whatsoever, for me to go there."

He reached across the table and gave her hand a simple squeeze. "I was out of line last week, and I assure you that I completely understand how you need to maintain your public image. If I may be completely honest with you, I think you handle it all with grace."

Her eyes stayed with his slightly longer before she averted them. "Thank you. We should probably decide what we're going to have."

They were quiet until after the waiter took their orders. Chakotay broke the silence by asking, "How was your day other than quiet?"

"There was nothing really worth mentioning," she said casually. "Especially in light of your first day of classes. How did they go?"

"I was a little nervous since I haven't done this for so long, but once I got up in front of the students, I felt right at ease." He tugged on his ear in slight embarrassment. "That and they were a little star struck."

She laughed quietly. "I'm sure they were. Did you get a lot of Voyager questions?"

"Of course. And Maquis questions, too. I don't think either class absorbed much of the syllabus, but since they were eager to start discussing specific incidents, I punted my plans and we dove right in."

"What did you talk about?"

"They wanted to know a lot about how the Maquis operated, which I glossed over. Then, of course, they wanted to discuss how many times we triumphed over the Borg and how we managed to do it."

She smiled. "And what did you tell them? Pure luck?"

“Luck is not something we take into consideration in tactics,” he noted. “I told them that letting the Borg attempt to assimilate a torpedo is a nifty trick, and when you have Borg in your cargo bay, depressurizing works best. Oh, and any Borg that are left behind can eventually become a really good friend, with a lot of patience and care.”

Teasing, she said, “Just don’t try to kiss one.”

“All right,” he clicked his tongue. “I deserve that one.”

“Of course it won’t help your students, but having Annika and her nanoprobes around was a tactical advantage in quite a few situations.”

“That’s true. Also won’t help them for me to explain that we also had you. They’ll need to know how to gain a tactical advantage without having the super women of Voyager on board.”

“Super women?” she asked with a smile.

“You, Annika, and B’Elanna.”

“And all three of us butting heads – a First Officer’s nightmare.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “I just tried to stay out of the way and to keep it from coming to blows.”

The waiter interrupted the conversation as he brought their dinner. After they began eating, Kathryn said, “Of course, the likelihood of them facing the Borg isn’t what it used to be.”

“You think we did that much damage?”

“Yes, I do,” she said with assurance.

He looked at her quietly for a moment.

“Penny for your thoughts?” She sipped a drink of wine.

“Oh,” he blushed slightly. “I was just thinking how nice it is to see you smile.”

She stiffened and looked away. “Yeah, I’ve been a little…”

When she didn’t finish her sentence, he said confidently, “We’re going to turn that around.” Without pause, he changed the subject. “One of my students wants to interview me for an article in the campus newspaper.”

It took her a moment to change gears, but then she asked, “Any specific topic in mind?”

“Just a get-to-know-the-faculty article, I assume.”

“I look forward to reading it.”

“Just in case there’s something about me you don’t know?” He winked at her. “So, how was Paris? Did you make any headway?”

“Some.” She explained in more detail, and that led them to talk about the last two peace conferences that he hadn’t heard any details about. Kathryn didn’t ask his advice on anything, but she didn’t have trouble telling him about what she’d learned.

After they finished dessert, they stopped on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. Chakotay asked, “May I walk you home?”

“I have my ground car back at the office.”

“Oh, I forgot about that.”

Justin, who was standing by, offered, “Admiral, it’s almost as far to the office building as it is to your house, and both routes have been secured for you. We can move your vehicle for you so you’ll have it in the morning.”

Uncertain about what to do, she stood still and absently scratched her forehead with her thumb. She said so that only Chakotay would hear, “I’m not sure. I feel so off-balance.”

Chakotay reached out for her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. He turned to Justin and asked, “To her house?”

“Aye, sir.” Justin corrected himself, “Yes, Chakotay, I mean.”

As they walked ahead of her security, Kathryn whispered, “What was that all about?”

“Justin, you mean?” When she nodded, he continued, “Yesterday, I asked him to relax around me. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Yes, I know.” She relaxed a bit, too. “One of the reasons I like having him on my staff.”

He patted her hand.

When they arrived at her door, Kathryn hesitated before unlocking it. She looked back to see that Justin and the other guard were not within hearing range if she kept her voice to a whisper. “Chakotay, thank you for dinner tonight.”

“You’re welcome, but I should be thanking you for joining me. I thought it was a nice evening.”

She looked away. “Yes, but…” She was having a lot of trouble finishing sentences this evening.

“Before I go, could I ask a favor?”

Nervously, she asked, “What’s that?”

“May I use your restroom? I have a long walk back.”

Kathryn slowly crooked a smile. “Sure,” she said as she pressed her thumb on the security panel. “Come on in.”

Once inside the entryway, she froze and he almost ran into her. “On second thought, I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“It’s not?”

She turned around and tried to usher him back out. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Kathryn, wait. What’s wrong?” He stopped her by holding her elbows. “Surely you’re not that uncomfortable around me?”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “No, I just forgot that I left a mess in here and I don’t want you to see it.”

Amused, he let go of her arms and stepped back. “What have you been doing? Rebuilding your replicator again?”

“No,” she said desolately, rubbing her eyes with her fingers.

He guided her into the living area. “Come on, it can’t be that bad. I saw it a week ago.”

They both stopped when the lights came on. He looked around and tried to hide his reaction, but Kathryn could see that he was stunned and that there was a flash of distress in his eyes. Her feet were frozen to the floor with embarrassment.

He moved first. “Well, you have been very busy with work since you’ve been back. I’m happy to lend you a hand.” Picking up as many dirty coffee cups as he could carry, he walked into the kitchen saying, “After all, it was I who filled up your evening tonight. The least I could do is assist with what I can.”

When he returned, she hadn’t moved an inch. “Kathryn, may I help you with your coat?”

“Hmm?” she asked as he stood behind her. “Oh, my coat.” She unbuttoned it and let him ease it off her shoulders. “Thank you, it’s hot.”

As he hung it up, he nodded to her shirt. “Are you wearing the standard double layers, too? Why don’t you go change while I help you a little down here?”

“You don’t have to,” she said sadly.

“I know, but I don’t mind at all. Go on up.” He waved at the staircase as he gathered up more dishes off her coffee table.

She did as directed and made a bee-line past her bed to get into the bathroom for a quick shower. Every time she looked at her bed, she was faced with the memory and the physical evidence of sleeping with Chakotay.

As she showered, she was unsure what to think about him being downstairs, not to mention what to think about the entire evening. It felt so natural for him to take care of her this way, but she was extremely embarrassed by what he’d seen. He’d alluded to her feeling depressed, but now that he’d seen the state of her house, it was hard to hide that she was not herself. Worse yet, she’d been completely unable to step into her professional compartment around him. She felt uncomfortably exposed.

When she finished showering, she dressed in a tank-top and pajama pants, having no reason to impress him, she’d taken off her makeup and brushed out her hair. She headed down the stairs, but stopped midway to watch him working in the kitchen with his back to her. She acknowledged that he was a good man at heart, despite his recent behavior.

Once she’d fully opened herself up to loving Chakotay, she was vulnerable in a way that she’d never felt before. With Mark, she’d been in complete control of the relationship. She merely needed to crook her finger and he’d do whatever she asked, whenever she asked it. She knew it wasn’t a healthy relationship, but it worked for her at the time and it gave her confidence.

Now, she had Chakotay. Like her mother said, a good relationship requires give and take. The problem was that she had nothing to give, and what she wanted most was to receive his support, his affection, and his confidence in her. He’d told her in May that he didn’t want to wait until she was done with her mission to be together, but since his tirade, he hadn’t even told her that he loved her. Not since after Justin’s death had she felt so lost and alone.

“Kathryn?”

Startled, she opened her eyes. “Sorry, was just thinking.”

“That’s all right,” he extended his hand to encourage her to finish coming down the stairs.

She rubbed her tense neck as she said, “You really didn’t have to clean all those dishes. I’m embarrassed for having been such a slob.”

“I didn’t mind a bit, and I know how they can pile up when you’re busy.”

She moved around him and gathered up the dirty clothes she’d left on a chair. Not wanting to be in her bedroom, she’d been changing downstairs and hadn’t cared enough to take her dirty clothes up to the hamper.

He watched her take them up and took the time to stack PADDs, wipe up spilled coffee, and throw away used tissues. The sheer number of them meant that she was either struggling with a cold or she’d been crying heavily. He had little doubt that it was the latter, and surmised that it had happened while B’Elanna had been there that morning.

When she came back down again, she descended the stairs slowly, taking stock of the situation. He couldn’t help but notice her and smiled. “You look like you’re strategizing.”

“Do I?” She stayed at the bottom of the stairs, away from him. “Well, professor, what’s your advice for the best tactical maneuver?”

“That depends on what you’re trying to accomplish.” He set the trash can down. “For example, if you’re looking for the nearest exit, you’ve got a problem because there are security guards outside.”

“And the windows are all reinforced with a polaron energy barrier.”

“That presents a substantial obstacle.” He walked a little closer and held out his hand. “Let me rub your neck. You’ve been pulling at it all night.”

“Not necessary,” she held up a hand to stay him off.

He bit back a grin. “With that tone of voice, I almost expected to hear my former rank behind your protest.” He turned back to the couch, straightened the sheet that covered it, and sat down on the end opposite her pillows. “You know you need it, and you know I can help. It’s just a simple neck rub.” He patted the couch in front of him.

She hesitated and then asked, “Just my neck?”

“Shoulders, too? Whatever you’d like.”

“That’s not quite what I meant.”

“I know.”

She stepped into the sitting area, but didn't close the distance. "I was strategizing how to gracefully ask you to go home. Have you used the restroom yet?"

"Funny, I forgot all about that."

Raising an eyebrow, she asked, "Using tactical maneuvers to get into my house?"

"It's not beneath me." He tugged on his ear, his smile showing off his dimples.

"I'll note that for future reference." Eyeing the couch, she said, "Just a simple massage? No underlying strategies for weakening my resolve?"

"None."

She eyed him suspiciously as she tentatively sat down with her back to him. "Why don't I believe you?"

As he laid his hands on her shoulders, he said, "I know it's going to take some time, but I'm covertly trying to regain your trust."

"You just blew your cover." She sighed as he ran his fingers through her hair to gather it to one side.

"Darn, now you know my ulterior motives." His fingers expertly found the spot that always bothered her the most.

"Just so you know, I do trust you."

"With information and your safety, yes. But not with your heart."

She was quiet as he worked on her neck, feeling him press firmly to relieve the pressure on the two knots that were giving her trouble. She began to relax as his fingers threaded up into her hair to massage the back of her head. His therapeutic touch calmed her anxiety and made her feel more comfortable with him. It was nothing like the massages he'd given her on Voyager. They'd always had a hint of sensuality that was enough to arouse her. She'd often wondered if he'd sensed that.

"May I work on your shoulders?"

"If you'd like."

"Is there still lotion in the guest bathroom down here?" he asked as he got up.

"There should be." She used the moment alone to redirect her thoughts away from anything sensual. She'd be weakening her own resolve, confusing him, and prolonging the inevitable.



She gave him a guarded smile when he returned, but the smile turned genuine when he handed her a hairclip. She gathered her hair up off her neck and secured it tightly.

“I’m not trying to suggest anything, but could I lower the straps of your tank?”

She did it for him, afraid that letting him do it would be too suggestive.

He put lotion on his hands and began to work his thumbs into the stiff muscles of her shoulders. It would take awhile to loosen her up, but he’d take however long was necessary. Looking at the sheet they were sitting on, he said, “Just a suggestion, and one you can disregard, but you might want to move back to your bed. Sleeping here is not doing your neck any good.”

She tensed up in response, and then relaxed as his hands pushed her shoulders back down. “I haven’t felt like doing laundry.”

His fingers paused and his eyes closed in a moment of grief. She was avoiding her bed because of that night last week. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he took a calming breath and began massaging again. He pushed past the lump in his throat to make an excuse for her. “Laundry isn’t my favorite thing, either. Did you know that I rarely made my bed on Voyager?”

“Good thing I never enforced crew quarter inspections.”

“More than you realize. You would not have been at all pleased with some. I could tell you stories.”

“I’d love to hear them sometime.”

“And I would love to tell them.” His fingers were digging deep and hard into the muscles, but they were so tight that the pain probably felt good. As he began to work down her back over the shirt, her commbadge beeped.

She groaned and dropped her head before saying loudly to her coat on the nearby coat rack. “Open the channel. Janeway here.”

“Kathryn, this is Admiral Khurma. I hope I’m not calling at a bad time?”

“What can I do for you?” She was grateful that Chakotay hadn’t stopped rubbing her back.

“Representative Niceen just called to tell me they have a proposal to present to us tomorrow in Paris.”

She took an unusual pause before replying, “Would it be possible to convene the meeting here? I’m concerned that if we go to Paris for one meeting, we’ll be pulled into others, and I’ve got a lot on my calendar tomorrow.”

Khurma paused, too. “I don’t know. It would be highly irregular to ask a council committee to meet away from the Paris headquarters. I could insist that we have to return immediately.”

“If they can’t come to San Francisco, I’ll go, but I’d prefer to stay here.”

He paused again. “Kathryn, are you not feeling well?”

Chakotay’s hands stopped.

“It’s just late, Admiral. Please accept my apologies.”

“No apology necessary. As I’ve told you before, you may speak freely at any time. I’ll contact Niceen to find a better date or location, and leave you a message so I won’t interrupt your evening again. Get some rest, Kathryn. Khurma out.”

Chakotay hesitantly resumed the massage, but started again at her shoulders to ease down the tension the conversation had just generated.

“That went well,” she said with a sigh.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. He seems very understanding.”

“I just didn’t want to go to Paris again so soon. As you know, I wanted to be home as much as possible, but it’s not turning out that way.”

“Things rarely turn out like we expect, but I’m sure that you just got that point across.” He worked his thumbs into the muscles on the left side of her upper back.

“We communicate pretty well on official matters. He and I have a briefing at least once a day, sometimes more.”

“I remember you telling me about that. You said you’re very comfortable working for him.”

“I am, or I was.” She pulled her knees up to her chest and leaned forward to give him better access to her back. “I haven’t mentioned it to you, because of... well, you know. But it’s been a little tense since he gave me a formal reprimand.”

“A formal? On your file?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “That was hard to swallow.”

His hands stroked lightly down her back in an attempt to soothe her without hugging her. “And then I called.”

She only nodded in response as she bunched up a pillow and rested her chin on it.

He continued his light touch on her back. “Do you remember when you gave me a formal reprimand?”

“You don’t like to talk about her.”

“I’ll make an exception. I was so upset that I had let you down, because in my heart, I thought I was doing what I could to protect you and the rest of the crew. I felt really brave going in there to get back the technology she stole. When you brought Voyager in to rescue me, I felt like an idiot.”

Her eyes were growing hot, but she pushed down the feeling. “It’s hard to get knocked down when you think you’ve done a valiant thing.”

“And even harder when it comes from someone you love.”

She straightened her back and changed the subject. “Lanna and I made plans to play velocity tomorrow night.”

“That’s good. It’ll probably help release more of this tension.”

“I think so, too.”

“Just promise me that you won’t pretend my head is the ball.”

She chuckled. “I wouldn’t.”

Putting more lotion on his hands, he said, “Let’s work your arms, then. So you’ll be limber enough to give her a good match.”

“Aren’t your hands getting tired?”

“Not at all.” He paused before starting on her arms. “Unless you’d like me to stop?”

“It’s helping a lot. I just don’t want to wear your hands out, or give you the wrong impression. And it’s getting late.”

He began to work her right shoulder and her upper arm. “My hands are fine and it’s only nine, so relax.” He continued, “I’ve been told that touch is a great healer, and I’m under the impression that we both need healing.”

She let him work quietly for awhile as he moved from one shoulder, digging in deep across her upper back. “Lanna was here this morning.”

“I thought she might’ve been.”

“Oh?” Kathryn turned her head.

“She called me to tell me I was a P’tak.”

“Was that all she said?”

“That was the gist of it, but she’s worried about you.” He moved to the other shoulder.

“We had a long talk, and I told her more than I should have. About us, I mean, but I don’t think I said anything that she didn’t already know.”

“I’m glad that you two are developing a strong friendship. Would you have imagined it seven years ago?”

“Not at all.” She turned her head to watch him work her arm. “I was going to tell you tonight that this is it for us, but Lanna has threatened me within an inch of my life if I do.”

He didn’t pause at all as he said, “I’ve had similar threats from her. She’s fierce when she’s determined.”

“That she is.”

Shrugging nonchalantly, he said, “Well, then, for B’Elanna’s sake, maybe we should get together again later this week or over the weekend. Whenever you’ve got your resolve back up.”

She shivered as he took the clip out of her hair. “You think you’ve torn it down, some?”

“Of course not,” he joked. “You’re much too stubborn for that.”

Her back and neck stretched up as he massaged the tension back out of her scalp. “I’m not stubborn. I’m strong-willed.”

“Is that what you call it?” She leaned her head back to make it easier for him to get the sides of her head.

“Yes.” She turned around to look at him, a serious expression on her face. “Chakotay, despite what Lanna said, this...”

He held a finger against her lips. “Don’t say it.” Pulling it away, he added, “Not tonight. If you’re sure about this, waiting won’t change anything, but if there’s any doubt in your mind whatsoever, waiting just might change everything.”

She looked into his eyes for a long moment and finally nodded. “We’ll wait.”

Looking at the couch, he said, “Let’s get you settled in, here. I’ll sit with you for awhile.”

“You don’t need to stay. I’ll be okay.”

“I need to stay, so that I’ll be okay.” He got up and fluffed her pillows for her, knowing exactly how she liked them. She hesitantly stretched out, but relaxed into the pillows as soon as her head touched them. Covering her with a blanket, he said, “I’ll turn out the lights.”

“You’re going to watch me sleep?” she asked as he walked away.

“I still have my book here. Thought I’d read for awhile.”

“All right.” When it was semi-dark, she closed her eyes and soon drifted off to sleep.

He pretended to read until he was sure she was out, and then he tiptoed up the stairs to remove ‘his’ mess. It was eleven by the time he’d finally remade her bed, put her clean clothes away, and tidied up as best he could. He thought it strange how, even though it was her house, it felt like his home, too. He’d never felt like a visitor.

Although he didn’t want to wake her, he thought he should say goodbye and let her know that she could move upstairs if she wanted. He kneeled down in the dark, next to her head, and whispered, “Kathryn?”

She hummed quietly, but didn’t wake up until he caressed her arm. “Kotay?”

“Shhh... just wanted to tell you that I’m leaving. Your bed has clean sheets if you want to move upstairs.”

Lifting her head, she asked, “You washed them?”

“They’re all clean. Do you want help going up?”

She laid her head back down. “Comfy here.”

“You look it.” He so badly wanted to kiss her, but knew she wouldn’t want it. Feeling brave, he picked up a squishy throw pillow, and lifted her arm to tuck it up close to her.

“A pillow?” she asked sleepily as she accepted it.

“The support will help your back.” He worked up the courage to stroke her hair back from where it lay on her cheek, causing her to open her eyes and look at him. He glanced at her eyes for a second and then redirected his gaze back to her hair. “I have a very special pillow that I sleep with when I miss you.” He squeezed the one she was holding. “If it’ll help you, think of this as me.”

He could see the moon’s reflection in the moisture of her eyes. Hoping her shields were down, he kept talking. “I know that I’ve hurt you deeply, and I’m very sorry. I was scared out of my mind, and I’m afraid that I temporarily lost my mind as a result. I would never, ever intentionally do or say anything to cause you pain. You are my life, Kathryn. I love you so much it hurts.”

Tears fell swiftly down her cheeks as she asked, “You still love me?”

“Of course, I do. More than ever.”

Her lips trembled. “You haven’t told me in so long that I wasn’t sure.”

“I haven’t told you?” His heart fell.

“Not since before...” She closed her eyes, making more tears fall.

“Oh, my love. I am so sorry. I didn’t even realize.” He caressed her hand. “Can I hold you?”

She lifted her head and shook it. “I can’t, I’m sorry.”

The rejection made him feel like he couldn’t breathe, but he refused to let it get to him. “I understand, but I’m not leaving you like this.”

She wiped her tears away. “You should go sleep.”

“No, I should be here with you. You’re hurting, and despite what you say, I know you need me.” He leaned forward and kissed her temple, causing her to recoil slightly. “Even if you can’t accept my love, I’m giving it to you.”

She turned her face to bury it in the pillow as she began to cry in earnest.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said as he gathered her hair and laid it over her shoulder. “It’s just me.”

“That’s just it.” She sat up and wiped her tears away angrily. “I don’t want you to see how hurt I am. I don’t want to be weak, and I hate it that you’ve weakened me so much.”

“No, love. I need to see this so that I know what an idiot I’ve been.” He handed her the box of tissue.

“But deep down, you must believe those awful things you said about me. I’ve been trying to decide if they’re true.” She blew her nose and then took another couple of tissues to wipe her eyes.

“No,” he swore. “They’re absolutely not true. I was way out of line.”

She covered her mouth with both hands and the tears fell as her body began to shake. “But I did almost kill Noah.”

Unable to stop himself, he got up on the couch and pulled her into his arms. “It was an awful situation, Kathryn. You know how undeniably stressed you were, and you’ve already let go of this. I am so sorry that I even mentioned it. That has got to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.” He rubbed her back as she cried into his shoulder.

She clung to him as she said, “I wasn’t trying to kill my officers. I treasure every single one of them.”

“I know you do.” He wrapped his arms completely around her. “I’m so sorry. And you’re not out for blood, either.”

Her hand reached out for a tissue and then she blew her nose right up against his shirt. When she was done, she mumbled, “I am a little.”

He bit back a smile and then kissed her head. “Zife has really made a mess of things, hasn’t he?”

Nodding against his chest, she said, “I want to wring his neck.”

“So do I, love. So do I.” He held her in silence for awhile. She went through a couple dozen tissues as her tears ebbed and flowed a few times.

When she finally calmed down, she sat up on her own and rubbed her face. “I’m a mess.”

He took her hand between both of his and watched her for a minute. “Have I convinced you that I’m an idiot, yet?”

She crooked a smile. “You didn’t even need to try.”

He squeezed her hand and smiled in return. “I deserve that.”

She let him hold her again for awhile and then said, “I need some time to deal with this.”

“I’ll give you whatever you need if you promise me that you won’t isolate yourself.”

Absently playing with his sleeve, she said, “It’s easier by myself where I don’t have to put on an act.”

“I know.” He squeezed her gently. “But it will get worse. We’re going to get you through this, Kathryn. I won’t let you sink, and none of your friends will either.”

Tears fell again as she admitted, “I need help, but I don’t want to let you in again. You broke my heart, and you broke me. This isn’t who I am – this sad, vulnerable, overly-dependent woman. I hate this.”

He clamped his eyes shut in pain. “I know my apologies don’t really help, but somehow, we’ll get you back on your feet. You’re not alone in this.”

“But I’ll be stronger if I can do this without you.”

“You’ll be stronger when you can rely on your best friend to keep your heart safe. When you can do what you need to do and feel secure that I’ll love you, no matter what.”

“I don’t think I can.”

He brushed his fingers through her hair. “Let’s take it one day at a time, just like we did a couple years ago. I promise that I’ll always be here for you.”

“You can’t promise that.”

After chancing a light kiss on her forehead, he said, “I can until my dying breath. After that, there are many people who love you and they will give you strength. You’re going to be okay.”

“I have to be.”

He resituated her a little so they could hold each other more comfortably, and then lightly caressed her back with just his fingers. As the deep, even rhythm of sleep settled over her, he let himself cry silently for all the grief and pain he’d caused.

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The next day, Kathryn met B’Elanna bright and early to walk the track at the officer’s health club. She reported that although she hadn’t broken up with Chakotay, yet, she’d made it clear that the relationship couldn’t go back to the way it was. She was irritated when B’Elanna shrugged off her decision with a “We’ll see.”

Her meeting with the small committee of Council representatives had been relocated to San Francisco, for which she was grateful. It took only an hour for them to present their strategies for resuming pre-war services to all Federation worlds. Khurma told her



afterwards that although it was a small step, it was an issue that had received no acknowledgement before she got involved.

As he was preparing to leave her office, Khurma said, “I know I just asked last night, but you didn’t directly answer my question. Are you feeling all right, Kathryn?”

“I’m fine, Admiral. Do you have concerns about my work?”

“No, not at all. You’re doing an excellent job. I just like to make sure my staff members are happy and healthy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you ask all of them periodically if they’re feeling all right?”

He thought for a moment. “Now that you ask... it seldom comes up.” He looked carefully at her. “I believe that this position we’ve placed you in could become overwhelming if not handled with a certain level of detachment. I would hate to see that loss of fire in your eyes become permanent, so if there’s anything we need to change, please feel free to tell me.”

“I’m as determined as ever, Admiral.”

“Yes, I can see that. Just don’t let that determination take over your entire life. This is just a job.”

She felt slightly uncomfortable with the conversation, but refused to show it. “Understood, sir.”

“That’s not an order, Kathryn. Just some advice from an old man.”

“You’re hardly old,” she hedged a smile.

“Old enough to know that there is much more to life than Starfleet. Don’t miss it,” he said as he walked out the door.

She sat down behind her desk and put her head in her hands. It was time to let go of what happened a month ago. Khurma had only known her for a short time, but her depression had even become obvious enough that he felt the need to say something.

Her personal life, on the other hand, was a royal mess. If she were to take the time to make a pros and cons list regarding Chakotay, she was pretty sure that the pros would be victorious, but it was the cons that kept her from following her heart. As Chakotay had said, waiting for a short time had its merits. He’d definitely made a complete turnaround in his interactions with her, but she wasn’t convinced that it would last forever.

B’Elanna had guessed right. Kathryn had been thinking about how martyrdom might benefit the cause. She didn’t have a death wish, but she wondered if she was popular

enough that her demise might positively affect the Federation. If the unthinkable happened and she was killed, she hoped her speeches would be taken to heart so that her goals might be accomplished post mortem. What she didn't want to consider was the grief and pain that her death would bring to Chakotay, her friends, and her family.

Martyrdom might work, but not as a deliberate ploy. She trusted her instincts to know when it was important to put her life on the line, but she also had a gut feeling every time about whether she'd survive or not. If she let the fears of her loved ones influence her actions, she was worried that she might become too cautious and fail to do her job.

Sue beeped in and interrupted her introspection. "Admiral, Dr. Zimmerman is here to see you. Are you available or would you like him to return at a later time?"

Kathryn thought it unusual that Sue didn't ask if she wanted to see him, but rather when. She said, "Now is fine," although she couldn't imagine what he needed to see her for.

"Good morning, Admiral," he practically sang, entirely too chipper.

"Morning. What can I do for you today?" She wondered what was in the bag he'd just set on her desk, making himself at home.

"Just a social call. How are you?" He was practically bouncing on his photonic feet.

"I'm fine," she said guardedly, but with slight amusement. "However, you look like you're just about to burst with good news. Do you have something to tell me?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just want to be clear that this is a social visit between friends."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What's in the bag, Joe?"

He opened it up. "Now that you ask, I'd love to show you the latest innovation in medical tri-corders that we've developed over at Starfleet Medical. Come around here, and I'll give you a demonstration."

As she joined him in front of her desk, she said, "That has got to be one of the most unoriginal excuses you've ever used to get me to submit to a physical."

"It seems to have worked, and it is new technology." He ran the scanning interface slowly around her head.

When he stopped, she asked, "Only a brain scan today?"

"Are you feeling unwell elsewhere?"

"What makes you think I'm feeling unwell up here?" She tapped the side of her head.

“Not a thing, Admiral. I’m just giving my new scanner a test run. Care to see the results?” He handed her the tri-corder.

She sighed. It was a scan of her brain chemicals and activity, and she knew from personal experience what these particular results meant. “Who sent you?”

With faked surprise, he asked, “You want me to reveal my sources?”

“Yes, I do.” She frowned. “Sources? Plural?”

He evaded the question. “Officially, you’re perfectly healthy, Admiral. I have nothing of note to report from this social visit.”

“Unofficially?” She decided to play along with his game.

He put the tri-corder away and handed her an unmarked container of medication. “One dose per day will help.”

She opened it to see tiny white capsules. “What are they?”

“The same placebos you took a few years ago, but in a form that doesn’t require a hypospray.”

“Is there any record of them?” she asked, knowing full well that a diagnosis of clinical depression would likely end her career. However, she could tell by his covert approach that he obviously knew that, too.

“No record at all,” he assured. “Your neurons will be firing at full strength again once your serotonin is leveled out.”

She had to admit that she was relieved that there was something chemically wrong. It made her weakness easier to accept. “How many doses are here?”

“Six weeks, and that should be enough, but I wouldn’t mind testing out another tri-corder on you at that point. Your first dose,” he said as he injected her with a hypospray. He gave her a second, and said, “A mild analgesic. Now, if you’ll sit down here, we’ll take care of your headache.”

“I didn’t tell you that I have one,” she said as she sat in one of her low-back visitor chairs.

He stood behind her, and began manipulating her neck. “You didn’t have to.”

After a resounding pop, she felt the tension ease away. As he continued to make slight adjustments on her skull, she said seriously, “I would like to know who sent you, Joe.”

“Two of your friends came to see me. B’Elanna and Chakotay.”

“They told you that I was depressed?” She was surprised, and a little concerned that they would both violate her privacy.

“Not directly. B’Elanna asked yesterday for advice about an unnamed friend who might be experiencing symptoms, wondering if there were non-medical interventions she could try. I suggested exercise and keeping the friend socially engaged. I didn’t know she was talking about you until Chakotay came to see me this morning.”

“And what did he say?” She wasn’t really annoyed at them, but a little embarrassed that they’d gone to Joe.

He came around to sit across from her. “I assure you he said nothing to breach confidentiality.”

The slight rise of unease deflated. “Then how did you know?”

“He merely asked me to make a social call because he was concerned about your headache. I could tell by his mannerisms that there was more to the story, but he wouldn’t say anything further and I didn’t feel it was appropriate to push him. I knew something was up, and then I put it together with B’Elanna’s call yesterday.”

“All right. I won’t berate them too harshly,” she acquiesced.

“They are your closest friends, and they do have your best interests at heart, as do I.”

“I know, and thank you. He and B’Elanna have both taken me on as their personal reclamation projects. However, I foresee a conspiracy to keep my evenings full.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” Joe picked up his tri-corder and scanned her entire body. He didn’t look at her when he said, “Might as well seize the moment to get a full physical in.”

She rolled her eyes, but let him continue.

After Joe left, she sent a quick text-only message to Chakotay. “Your covert maneuvers have been exposed again. Joe just left here. You might want to rethink your tactics, Professor.”

A few minutes later, she got a response. He wrote back, “What you don’t realize, love, is that part of my tactical strategy involves exposing my maneuvers for your contemplation. Was he able to treat your headache?”

She wrote back simply, “Yes, and more.” A few years ago, she’d told him about the so-called placebos that the doctor had given her after her last dive into depression. It had reassured both of them that she was able to retake command of the ship.

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Over the next two weeks, life returned to a semblance of normal. Her workdays were busy, and her evenings were filled with casual invitations from friends and family. Although she and Chakotay only went to dinner once more by themselves, she saw him almost every night because he received most of the same invitations.

The evening that was the most confidence-strengthening was hosted by Tuvok. He invited Voyager’s former senior staff to his personal defense classroom for a brush-up. They all balked at first, but decided it could be fun to battle each other.

Kathryn watched with enjoyment as the opponents sized each other up. The challenge with this group was that no one wanted to hurt anyone else, but as the evening wore on, their competitive natures began to take over. She was first matched with Harry and easily and good-naturedly took him down. Tuvok informed him that he should not be afraid to assault his commanding officer if need be, generating a lot of laughter from everyone.

The air of competition was high when Tuvok instructed, “Admiral, Captain, please take the mat.”

She immediately sensed his hesitation and formulated a strategy based on his weak spot – her. Her usual approach was to wait until attacked before defending herself, and she knew exactly how to do it, regardless of the size, weight, strength, and any weapon her attacker might have. She faced Chakotay with a determination to win the battle. Knowing he wouldn’t expect it, she made the first strike with what she knew would be the quickest and most effective way to incapacitate her opponent – a powerful right thrust straight at his nose.

He deflected it by grabbing her arm and twisting it, forcing her to turn with it. She knew that he intended to pin her against him, but she ducked and rolled out of his grasp before hopping back up to her feet.

Chakotay’s eyes narrowed as he hunkered down. “Impressive move.”

“You think you’re stronger than me.”

“I know I am.” He waited for her to attack, knowing that offense was her weak spot. She didn’t disappoint and did a leap attack accompanied by a full kick to his abdomen. He recoiled in pain before running back at her. This was what she was waiting for. She dropped her center of gravity and charged, throwing him over in a somersault.

“That’s two hits, Captain.” She knew she looked smug as he got to his feet.

Tuvok said, "All right, let's have..."

Chakotay interrupted. "This isn't over, Admiral."

She raised an eyebrow as she hunkered back down. "Give me your best shot."

When he lunged forward, she swung out her right leg to disable his knee and he dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Growling, he jumped back up before giving her time to anticipate his action. Knowing he wouldn't hit her, the only remaining defense was to deflect his full body charge by spinning fast around and elbowing him in the back.

Roaring in response, he reached behind him and grabbed her arm so fast that she had no time to react. Within seconds, he had her pinned against his front with her arms trapped. "Now, what are you going to do?" His voice was low and heavy in her ear.

Arousal shot through her from being restrained against him. Licking her lips, she had a plan to use her own reaction against him. She struggled just enough that her back was slightly arched, her arms pinned tighter, and her breasts heaving. She breathed deeper than she needed to, just to emphasize his favorite part of her body. As Tuvok took a step forward, Kathryn shot him a glare with the clear instruction to stop.

Chakotay asked, "Not ready to give up?"

"I never surrender. You know that."

"There's a time when even that is the best option, Kathryn."

"Really? You want me to surrender next time I'm attacked?" She felt it as he immediately tensed. She knew he'd been referring to surrendering to him, personally, but she had to use what she had, and talking to her opponent was one of her greatest strengths.

He recovered by saying, "Depends on the nature of the attack." Pulling her arms tighter, he said, "You're not getting away from me."

It was time to strike. She relaxed her body as if she was giving up, and pressed herself back into him, knowing her rear was right in line with his crotch. It was enough to make him gasp in surprise and forget what he was doing. She pulled her arms out, grabbed his, and took him down. Before he realized what had happened, she was straddling him with his arms pinned to the floor.

"You relaxed your guard, Captain." She was still aroused as she looked triumphantly into his eyes.

He could see the fire in her, and his heart leapt for joy. She was back. “How do you know that wasn’t my strategy all along?”

Realization struck her, and she knew she’d been caught. Her cheeks felt warm as she looked away and stood up.

Tuvok said, “Very nice maneuvers from both of you.”

Kathryn nodded in appreciation and went to stand next to Annika. She felt slightly flustered under Chakotay’s intense gaze from across the room.

Before they left for the evening, Chakotay caught B’Elanna alone and said, “Definite progress.”

“Agreed,” she answered, not wanting to talk at length with Kathryn watching.

They all went out for drinks afterwards, but Kathryn kept her distance from him. Normally, he would’ve been offended by the cold shoulder, but he knew it meant her resolve was dissipating. She didn’t trust herself around him. In response, he purposely caught her eyes as often as possible to give her a loving and reassuring smile.

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Two days later, Kathryn walked back from Khurma’s office with a heavy heart. He’d just informed her of a new mission, one that she didn’t feel ready for.

When she got back to her desk, she decided that she’d better let Chakotay know as soon as possible, although she was dreading making the call. The nature of what she’d be dealing with in the months ahead meant that their relationship couldn’t continue, and she owed it to him to talk to him face to face.

He answered immediately. “Good morning, Kathryn. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m sorry for bothering you during your advising hours,” she said quietly.

“No apology necessary. I’m always happy to talk to you.” He paused, noticing something in her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve.” She started to tell him and then stopped. “I need to talk to you.”

“Okay. What about?”

“In person. Could we meet over your lunch?”

“Sure, I have a class at 13:00.”

Her shoulders dropped. “And I have a briefing at noon.”

“Kathryn, what is it?”

She hesitated. “I’d rather speak in person.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She knew she didn’t sound convincing.

“Do you have time right now? I can come to your office.”

“I don’t want to take you from your work.”

“My appointments can be rescheduled. I’ll be right there.”

While she waited, she finished the work on her desk. He arrived about fifteen minutes later and was immediately let in by Sue. Kathryn finished up a communiqué and rose to get him a tea, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

His proximity was difficult to ignore. “I’m okay. I have an opportunity to pursue one of my obligations.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been asked to begin diplomatic conversations with the Romulan Empire.”

His mouth dropped open. “Wow!”

She relaxed with his unexpected enthusiasm. “I was shocked when Khurma told me. Someone in the Romulan government, who Khurma trusts, wants to initiate a dialogue with the Federation.”

“Wouldn’t something that huge be handled by the President?”

“They don’t want to talk to him. They’ve asked for me, specifically.”

“Well, it makes sense, considering all of the publicity you’ve had.”

She nodded, “Yes, that’s how they learned about me, but I have to proceed confidentially. No one is to know that I’ll be having these conversations. They merely want to open a discussion to explore possibilities and believe that I’m the best person to talk to.”

“Do you think Q had anything to do with this?”



“Possibly,” she shrugged. “But I still haven’t heard from him.”

“I expected him to show up again before now.”

“I did, too.” She placed a hand on his arm. “Khurma wants me to leave as soon as possible.”

“You’re going to Romulus?”

“The location of the meeting is confidential, but my orders are to proceed to the Neutral Zone. I don’t know how long I’ll be, or if I’ll be able to communicate if we head out of Federation Space.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not sure you do. I don’t know what to expect when I get there, or how long I’ll be gone. When I’m done, Khurma wants me to immediately begin a diplomatic tour along the outer borders of Federation space since I’ll be out there. I’ll be gone for at least four months, but depending on how much time it takes, it could be well into next year before I get back. It’s too soon to tell.”

His shoulders sagged. “Oh.”

“Chakotay, I don’t want to go, especially not right now, but how can I turn this down?”

“You can’t,” he said sadly. “Who knows about this?”

“They contacted Khurma directly yesterday afternoon. Only he, you, and I are to know about it. The Pioneer crew won’t even know until we leave Federation space.”

“I should thank him for trusting me.”

“I insisted.”

“Thank you, then.” He looked deep into her eyes. “Oh, Kathryn. Will you be okay?”

“You mean with my undiagnosed problem?” She put some distance between them.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I know. There’s a lot riding on this and I have to be at my best.” She took a steadying breath. “I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon.”

“So soon?”

She closed her eyes, not wanting to confront this issue at the moment, but she had no choice. “Chakotay... I can’t wait any longer.”

“I understand that you need to go. It’s okay.”

Shaking her head, she said, “That’s not what I meant. You asked me to wait to end our relationship, but I’ve got to do it now.”

He faced her with resolve. “No, Kathryn, you don’t.”

“Don’t make this harder than it is. I’ve been putting it off for over two weeks.”

Determined, he said, “I’m going to make this as difficult as possible, because I refuse to let you do this to us. I refuse to let you do this to yourself.”

She begged, “Please, Chakotay.”

He took her hands and waited until she looked directly at him. “Kathryn, do you love me?”

Looking away, she said, “Don’t make me answer that.”

“I already know the answer, but I want you to say it.”

“I can’t lie to you.”

“I know.”

Facing him again, she answered, “Yes, Chakotay, I love you, but...”

He stopped her by covering her lips with his fingers. “There’s no buts. You love me, and I love you, and we’ll work this out, however long it takes.”

Pulling his fingers away, she said, “You keep doing that.”

“What?”

“Putting your fingers on my lips. It’s annoying, and I can’t get a word in edgewise.”

He smiled guiltily. “That’s why I do it.”

“Yes, I love you,” she repeated as she moved away from him, “but I have to let you go. It’s too hard for me out there, knowing that any decision that I make is going to torment you, and I can’t take your negative reactions.”

“You don’t trust me, yet,” he said sadly.

“I don’t want you to put your life on hold while I do what I have to do.”

“That’s not your choice to make.”

“Yes, it is. By letting you move on to find someone else, I’ll know that you’ll be okay if something happens to me.”

With disbelief, he asked, “You really think that I can just find someone else and magically stop loving you?”

“You wouldn’t be alone.”

“That is the most absurd thing you’ve ever said. Kathryn, I can’t possibly be with anyone else but you, and whether you’re here or not, I’ll be in love with you, and only you.”

“But you told me that you didn’t want to put our relationship off until I get all of this taken care of.”

He stared at her dumbfounded, and then rolled his eyes. “Of course I’d rather not wait to live happily ever after, as I’m sure you’d rather not, either, but that’s not how this is working out. Are you afraid that if we suspend things for six months, our love will diminish?”

“Yes, it did in the last six.”

“Only because I was a jerk.”

“And because I pissed you off.”

“Let’s resolve this, right now.”

“How?”

“Let’s take the unknown element out of our relationship completely.” He kneeled down in front of her. “Kathryn, would you marry me?”

“You can’t be serious. Marry you?”

“Yes. We can get married tonight. Owen could officiate, and then we’ll have a party with your family. We can spend a wonderful night together before you have to leave.”

She groaned. “Chakotay, you’re insane.”

“Just say yes, and I’ll prove to you that my commitment is forever.”

“I’m trying to break up with you, not commit to a lifetime of fighting. You don’t want to be stuck with a woman who makes you angry every other week.”

“As I said, that’s not your choice to make. I will do everything in my power to avoid fighting with you. We’ll talk calmly through every issue and we won’t let things build up.” He rubbed his thumb tenderly across her knuckles. “Take a chance on us, Kathryn. You know this is meant to be.”

“Meant to be? Don’t you think that’s a little idealistic?”

“Not when it comes to us. Forgive the sappiness, but I believe you’re my soul mate. You’re brilliant, you’re brave, and I love you with every fiber of my being.”

Rolling her eyes, she begged, “Give me an insulin shot, please.”

He couldn’t help but laugh as he stood up. “Forgive my schmaltziness, but it comes with the territory when proposing marriage.”

“Chakotay, you can’t promise never to fight with me. I don’t want you to turn into…” She sighed. “Into Mark, always willing to make the sacrifices to keep me. It’s not right.”

“All right, if you want me to argue with you, then I will, but I’ll do it without insulting you. That doesn’t change who I am.”

“I can’t change who I am, either.”

“And that’s the last thing I’d want.” Chakotay tilted his head in concern. “Do you know that Tom and B’Elanna heard part of our argument?”

“Yes.”

“They corrected a huge misconception that I’ve held for years, because I was blinded by my fierce need to protect you.”

“And what’s that?” She crossed her arms.

“That you don’t risk your life because of arrogance; you do it because you care.”

She crooked a smile and looked away, and then back. “Most of the time, but even I have to admit to being a touch overconfident in some situations.”

“Your confidence gives you an edge, and I was literally sick to my stomach when I realized that I took that from you. Now that we’ve been through this, I’ve learned an invaluable lesson. I’m not going to turn into Mark,” he said with a smile, “But I’m a wiser man, now. I will strive to protect your heart as much as I try to protect your life.”

She looked at the floor, where the figurative remains of her resolve lay shattered at her feet. “Having an admiral marry us is not exactly the kind of wedding I’d want.” She watched his eyes light up as he realized that she wasn’t turning him down.

He winked. “Then spend the night with me anyway, and we’ll have a wedding whenever and wherever you want.”

She shook her head in dismay. “You really want to marry me?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m a handful, you know.”

“No one knows it more.” He kissed the back of her hand. “How about this? Let me go make arrangements to cover my classes, and then we’ll have lunch after your noon briefing. We’ll make a list of things that need to be done before you leave, and you can tell me then what kind of party I’m planning for this evening.”

“What *kind* of party?”

Before triggering the door to open, he replied, “Wedding reception, engagement party, or going-away party.”

As he walked out the door, she knew her smile was one of her ridiculous, toothy grins and probably ten meters wide. He’d just turned her heart right side out, and she honestly had no idea how he’d managed it. Perhaps he was the better tactician after all.

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He was waiting outside her office when she returned from the briefing. She was delighted to see him, but there was a silly butterfly dance going on inside her stomach that hadn’t been there since those first kisses six months before.

“Did you get everything worked out?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m all yours.”

She smiled brightly. “Yes, I do believe you are.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” He laughed.

Kathryn took a couple minutes to touch base with Sue before going into her office. Once inside, she said, “I’ve already sent the rest of my staff home to get ready to go, including my security detail. Should I call for backup or would you be willing to stick with me for the rest of the day?”

“I think I can watch your back. I’ve been doing it for years,” he said. “How was the briefing?”

“Typically not brief at all, but how could it be when the reason behind it was to completely eliminate every task on my desk that has nothing to do with where I’m going?”

“Feel lighter at least?”

“Yes and no.”

“I understand.”

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll be ready to go. Could we have lunch at my house? I’d prefer being alone.”

“I’d like that, too.” He waited patiently for her to finish up what she needed to do.

Kathryn was quiet on the short trip home. They held hands the entire time, something they hadn’t done since they first started dating, and it felt warm and natural.

When they arrived at her house, Kathryn dropped her things on the entry table and said, “Let’s sit down.”

“Would you like me to prepare lunch?”

“Not just yet, let’s talk for a minute.” She tugged on his hand until they were both sitting on the couch, turned towards each other.

He quietly waited for her to begin. When she was silent for over a minute, he said, “This makes me think I’m not going to like what you have to say.”

She took his hand. “Tonight, I’d like to have just a quiet dinner with my family, and you of course.”

“Okay.” He took a deep, shuddering breath.

“I’ve dreamt about our wedding for years.” She smiled when he looked at her in surprise. “Yes, in my weaker romantic moods on Voyager, I’d let myself dream about a future with you. Does that surprise you?”

“Well, yes, actually. I didn’t think you’d ever allowed yourself that kind of luxury.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, when things were going well and I felt a longing for you, I’d imagine our future. It made me feel hopeful, and a little indulgent.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“When I imagined our wedding, it definitely was not a quick, rushed civil ceremony in an admiral’s office.”

“What? Isn’t that every woman’s dream wedding?” He laughed nervously.

“Not exactly.” She resituated herself so that she was curled up next to his side with his arm around her. “I pictured an outdoor setting, maybe in the woods, wearing a dress, flowers in my hair, my sister at my side, and Katie and Naomi dressed in pretty little dresses with flower baskets.”

“It sounds beautiful. Was I there?”

She felt the warmth in his humor. “Yes, in a tuxedo, although I couldn’t decide who would be your best man.”

“Well, if the wedding were today, I’d probably ask Tom, but maybe Ayala.”

“I don’t want to get married when we’ve just barely begun to heal, and I’d rather not rush our wedding so that it can be a relaxed day when we aren’t feeling sad that I’m about to leave. Then I’d like to go away with you for a couple weeks, and start our life together.”

“It’s a perfect plan.”

She cradled his jaw in her palm. “Provided we can keep ourselves on an even keel until I get back, I will agree to marry you. I don’t mean that to sound like an ultimatum, but I’m sure you understand my hesitance, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

She looked down. “I can’t seem to control my emotions when I’m with you, and I don’t like being out of control.”

He lifted her chin and caressed her cheek. “We’ve just had a hard time adjusting and finding a balance with each other, but how much we love each other hasn’t changed. You have nothing to worry about with me. Regardless of how many arguments we have and how many brainless things I say, I’m here for you, and I love you.”

“I’m a little worried that we’re only good at friendship.”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, we’re just not good at communicating. I jump to conclusions too quickly, and when you’re out there, you get completely focused on your job.”

“Yes, I do, and I don’t think I can change that. Not right now.”

He looked at her sadly for a long moment and then said, "I'll accept that if you'll promise to do everything in your power to stay alive for me."

She smiled warmly. "I'll do my best. You give me something to live for."

"Thank you." His thumb stroked across her cheek.

"It's a relief to put this behind us." She said quietly, "Thank you for not letting me go."

He leaned forward and gave her a short kiss. "I never will."

"We'll keep talking," she said confidently. "Even when I'm out of range, I'll record messages to you."

"And I'll do the same. When you get home, we'll have to be tenacious about merging our lives."

She laced her fingers with his. "I don't want to officially get engaged until after I get back."

"Superstitious?"

She crooked a smile. "You know me too well. I don't have much luck with engagements."

"Oh, I don't know. I think I got pretty lucky when your last engagement didn't work out."

She nodded quietly.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"No, that's okay. You're right, and if you ask my Mom, she'll tell you that you're a much better match for me. Mark was... comfortable."

"And I'm not?"

She smiled mischievously up at him. "You have a knack for making me feel deliciously uncomfortable."

He coughed in surprise, and his voice cracked as he said, "I wasn't expecting you to go there."

She patted his knee and stood up. As she went into the kitchen, she said, "Not for about eight hours."



Blushing, he followed her into the kitchen to get lunch. As they sat down to eat, she squeezed his hand, trying hard to keep her emotions in check. She was relieved when he directed the conversation towards business.

“Let’s make a list of things we need to do.”

“All right. First thing is to call my Mom and make plans for tonight, and to let her know that I’m leaving. She won’t be happy.”

“She’ll understand. Will you be able to tell her where you’re going?”

“I’m not supposed to, but I’ll tell her what I can.” She left it at that. “There are so many things I need to do, but I find myself wanting to spend every moment with you. I’ve wasted the last two weeks.”

“They weren’t a waste. Maybe taking a step back was what we needed to make this stronger in the long run.” He smiled sweetly. “So, what is it that you need to get done? The faster we do it, the more time we have.”

“Well, I need a haircut. Katie’s birthday is Saturday and I haven’t found a present for her. I need to do some cleaning, close up this house, and take care of my personal business for who knows how long.” She sighed. “It feels exactly like it did eight years ago when I took command of Voyager.”

“Well, I can’t help you with the haircut, but I can take care of the rest for you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I know, but I want to. If we won’t see each other for awhile, then I’m going to make sure I spend every available moment with you before you leave.”

“Thank you.” Her mind was spinning with everything that needed to be done. “Oh, I might not be here for Miral’s birthday, too.”

“Miral is only going to be one. She won’t notice that you didn’t personally pick out a gift for her. Tell me what to pick up for Katie, and I’ll go do that while you get your hair done.”

“I should just deal with that on the ship and take time to pack instead. Since I’ll be out for awhile, there are a few more things I’d like to take with me.” She took a bite, and then held up a finger until she finished. “Oh, I meant to tell you – a messenger will be arriving shortly to deliver some documents for us to sign.”

“What for?”

“I called our family lawyer after you left this morning. I’m naming you as my beneficiary and giving you power of attorney so that you can conduct business on my behalf while I’m gone.”

“Okaaay,” he said skeptically.

“When I was reported missing on Voyager, my assets froze, and it ended up costing me a lot of time and expense to get all of that figured out when we got back. If something should happen…”

“It won’t.”

“I like your optimism.” She squeezed his hand in reassurance. “I’d also like you to be able to pay the gardener, keep up the utilities, and whatever else needs to be done in my absence.”

“I’m happy to, but I don’t think I need power of attorney to do that.”

“I know, but all of this would be simpler if we were married, and this will take care of the legal aspects.” The door chime rang, interrupting their conversation.

When she came back, she pulled a large computer pad out of the packet, and said, “I’m sure there are easier ways to handle this, but it’s something I want to do.”

“If it’s important to you, I’ll do whatever you like. I want to put your mind at ease.”

She set it down, and looked at him. “I want to do this so that you can make decisions with our combined resources.”

“What kind of decisions?”

“Earlier this summer, I was considering selling this house and buying another for both of us. Would you be interested in that?”

He smiled. “You didn’t tell me about that.”

“I know. The idea hadn’t solidified in my mind, yet. But if we’re going to get married, it makes sense.”

“This house is fine. I like it here.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have a home with some land? It would be nice to get out of the city and live amongst nature. We could keep this house, too, for when we need to stay close by.”

“I’ll look,” he smiled. “But Kathryn, I’m capable of securing the financing and purchasing a home for us.”

“Maybe near the ocean,” she smiled. “And you won’t need to secure financing.”

“I won’t?”

She held up the padd. “Not if you sign this. It’ll give you access to my assets.”

“Oh.” He realized what she was saying. “You have enough resources to purchase a home outright? And keep this one?”

“We do, yes.” It felt good to be taking this step with him, even though she’d been ready to call the whole thing off only a few hours earlier. Trust and acceptance was liberating.

He took a deep breath. “I’m a little surprised by all this.”

Reaching across the table, she laced their fingers together. “My heart feels lighter because this feels like a permanent commitment. I’m resolving myself to the fact that no matter what happens, you’re sticking with me. I’ve been so worried about making you wait, trying to keep this relationship strong over a long distance, and managing that while I’m doing my job. Something clicked today, and I’m going to let go of all that. Now, I want to make sure that you’re okay if something were to happen to me.” She knew what his credits were, and they consisted only of a lump sum from Starfleet upon returning and what he was earning as a professor.

“I will never be okay if something happens to you, but my heart feels lighter today, too.”

She smiled brightly. “I tried to get rid of you, but failed miserably.”

“Good,” he said with a smile.

She moved the padd in front of him so he could see. “Okay, let’s do this, so we can get back to the list.” She pointed to the screen. “This is the primary resource account that’s available to take care of any minor needs that come up.”

His eyes widened. “That alone is enough for a house, Kathryn.”

“Not the kind of house I want.” She pressed the keypad to scroll to the next screen. “This is the total of the accounts available for that.”

His jaw dropped. “You’re joking, right?”

“No.”

“I had no idea.”

She shrugged. "Wealth doesn't matter a hill of beans inside Starfleet."

"No, but resources like that can give you a certain amount of influence."

"I prefer not to think of it that way."

"You really want to use that much on a house?"

"Heavens no, but a house with land would be nice, somewhere secluded with lots of trees." She smiled. "I thought you might like it, considering how much you enjoyed exploring and working with wood on New Earth."

"That's very thoughtful of you, but I have to say that I feel slightly uncomfortable about this, mostly because of this." He pointed to the total line.

"Give it some time to sink in. Explore some possibilities. I honestly don't know what it would take to find what I'm imagining."

He took a deep breath. "I should know by now not to be surprised by you, but I am. Continually."

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"Thank you, Scott," Kathryn said as she closed the door to her house. She heard the locking mechanism click into place as she turned to Chakotay. "Well, that's it. You can't get out until seven in the morning."

"Are you getting used to the security, yet?"

She followed him into the kitchen. "Oh, I don't know. It feels a little strange having the security detail at home, but perfectly natural as I'm walking around. It's not like Tuvok would ever let me go anywhere without it."

"That's true." He watched her get a glass of water to take upstairs. "Your family was in a surprisingly good mood tonight."

"I think it was an act."

"How can you tell?"

"They were in too good of a mood." She walked past him into the living room where she picked up a couple things, and then started up the stairs. "All that genuine interest in what I'm doing. They've never expressed it in that much detail before."

“Probably because they knew you wouldn’t tell them,” he suggested as he followed her up, grabbing his overnight duffel on the way.

“Did you hear Katie? She thinks I’m going on a vacation.”

“It would be hard for a five year old to understand. She seemed to enjoy the gift, though.”

“Are you kidding? She loved it!” Kathryn set the things she brought upstairs into her Starfleet trunk. “Of course, what little girl that age wouldn’t love dolls? You did a great job picking them out.”

“Thanks.” He leaned up against the door frame as he watched her move around the room, putting more things in the trunk. “Can I help with anything?”

“Hmm,” she looked around. “Yes, in my study is a stack of poetry books next to the chair. Would you grab those?”

He did as instructed and went into the next room, which she’d set up with a desk and computer interface. As he picked up the books, he noticed a picture of him and her from the awards banquet and picked it up as well. Remembering that night, he touched the image of her beautiful face. He was missing her already.

“Shall I put them in?” he asked when he returned.

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll be just a minute,” she said from the bathroom.

“Take your time.” He set the books and picture in, and then glanced around her room to see if there was anything else he thought she might like to have with her. Seeing nothing of note, he decided to get more comfortable and took off his shoes and socks. He smiled to himself when he heard her start the shower and was glad that he’d taken the opportunity to clean up when he’d gone by his apartment earlier.

His stomach was in knots, not because she was leaving the next day, but because they planned on being intimate. The last time had been such a painful experience for her that he was anxious about her reaction this time. He turned down the overhead lights and switched on the lamp by his side of the bed. He slid his shirt off his shoulders as he considered what her reaction might be. Would she be nervous? Would she have lower expectations? Or would she have higher expectations? They hadn’t really kissed for weeks, and even then, they hadn’t felt the same electricity that had been there back in May.

Every time they’d been together had been a completely different experience, so he didn’t know what to expect. The first time, she’d been almost shy. It had been so unlike her, yet even under her uncertainty, she had been quite passionate. Other times, she had been

gentle and loving. And there were two times when she'd been very aggressive. 'Those were fun,' he thought, a silly grin on his face.

"Chakotay?"

"Hmm?" he asked as he turned around.

She was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wearing only a thin chemise. She raised an eyebrow. "I was all ready for a grand entrance, and you're over there staring at the wall."

"Sorry." He smiled with slight embarrassment as he walked over to her. "You're beautiful, Kathryn." Coming right up next to her, he put his hands on her waist. "I was over there thinking about all the times we've made love."

Cracking a smile as she leaned into him, she asked, "Do you have a favorite?"

"They're all so special, it's hard to choose. What about you?"

"You're evading the question."

He chuckled nervously. "It's the truth. The first time was very sweet."

"I'm a little embarrassed about that one."

"Why?" he asked in disbelief.

She shrugged. "I was a little virginal, which is not exactly me."

"As long as you'd been abstinent, you might as well have been. It was a breathtaking experience to seduce you into opening up to me that night."

"I wonder how long I'll be gone this time. You might have to do that all over again."

"I hope you're not gone that long, but I'd be delighted to relive that experience." His hands dropped to her hips and slid around to her backside. "What about you? Your favorite?"

She leaned further into him. "Depends on my mood. Sometimes I want the slow and intimate connection. Sometimes I prefer the unbridled passion."

"What's your mood tonight?"

She glanced away. "I'm not sure."

Finding her nervousness endearing, Chakotay caressed her back through the slippery fabric. “Well, since you don’t have to report to the ship until thirteen hundred, we’ve got plenty of time to try both, several times.”

“Don’t you have class in the morning?”

He shook his head as he reached up to slide his fingers along her jaw. “It’s all taken care of.” Lifting her face to his, he sprinkled two light kisses on her lips before settling in to coax her mouth slowly open.

She unexpectedly pulled her face away to look at him.

“What is it?” He cradled her cheek in his palm.

“I’m nervous.”

Smiling affectionately, he said, “So am I.”

“I want tonight to be amazing, but I’m too worked up about it to relax.”

“To make up for the last time, or because it’s our one night together for awhile?”

“Both, and because it’s also make-up sex, and you asked me to marry you today.”

He took her hand to lead her over to the bed. “May I point out that you turned me down?”

“I didn’t turn you down,” she said as she crawled under the covers. “I am going to marry you someday.”

After switching off the lamp, he took off his pants and stretched out on his side next to her, his head propped up with his arm. His fingers roamed over her moonlit face. “If I may offer a confession, I’ve thought of you as my wife for a long time.”

“Have you?”

“One of the many reasons I wouldn’t let you go. As far as I’m concerned, this became a lifetime commitment from the first kiss.”

“Back on New Earth?”

He remembered that night fondly. “Maybe not back that far, although at the time, it would have been a lifetime commitment since we were alone on that planet. But I was thinking about that night at your mother’s.”

“When I was drunk?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “I’d already decided that if you let me in, I’d be setting up residence. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, despite my withdrawal.”

He leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly. “I was really worried about you.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Shhhh...,” he kissed her again. “No apologies needed. Well, except by me, since the whole thing was my fault. I can be such an ass when my head isn’t on straight.”

She laughed. “I’m glad you said it.”

“But you were thinking it?” he asked with a smile.

Kathryn reached up to touch his face and looked deep into his eyes. “Even though I will have to take some risks, I will do whatever I can to stay safe, for you.”

A chill ran through him. “Thank you.” He saw worry float across her eyes, and knew that he needed to reassure her, too. “If the worst happens, and you don’t come back to me, I’ll find a way to keep going. It will break me, but our friends will pull me through.”

Both of their eyes were overly moist, but she smiled in despite of it. “We’re a pair, aren’t we? Lying here in bed on our last night together, and we’re talking about such a dreary subject.”

“Maybe this connection is what we need more.” He brushed his fingers through her hair, knowing how much it relaxed her. “May I kiss you?”

“You’ll never need to ask permission to do that again,” she said as she drew his head down.

His mouth moved against hers, gradually encouraging her lips open to taste her sweet tongue. She threaded her fingers into his hair, pulling him down to deepen the kiss. The delightful sparks between them were alive and well, sizzling through his veins and targeting all of the energy into his arousal. Kathryn moaned, arching her body to give him the clear signal that she wanted to be touched.

His hand slid down to fill his palm with her supple, warm breast. In response, she moaned again and pushed her tongue into his mouth, arching her chest further into his hand. The satiny fabric made it delectably easy for his palm to slide over her puckered nipple, one after the other as he gave each breast the attention it deserved. He was reminded of her reaction when she’d been pinned against him a few nights before. She’d



responded immediately to being held tightly and seemed to be unable to tamper her arousal from the forcefulness of his maneuver.

Their kiss lightened in pressure, but progressed into a slow dance of tongues and lips, each wanting to tantalize and tease the other. Sliding his hand down her satiny stomach to the edge of her gown, he carefully gauged her reaction when he first stroked her bare leg. He didn't want to push her too fast, but when she opened her thighs to invite him in, all uncertainty flew out the door. His fingers skimmed up the inside of her leg and grazed the red, springy curls. The intimate contact drew another deep moan out of her, enticing him to linger there, caressing the soft fur and coaxing her into a higher state of arousal before sliding his hand up under her gown to satisfy his craving to feel her bare breasts.

She broke the kiss in a gasp as his hand squeezed the fullest part of her breast, slowly drawing his fingers away until he was lightly pinching only her nipple. He'd never done that before and her breathless reaction was definitely worth remembering. He whispered, "You like that, I see."

As he did it again with a slightly firmer pinch at the end, she whimpered, "Yes," and arched her back, giving him an open-mouthed gasp. "Hurts so good."

He switched to the other breast, circling around it teasingly before squeezing it as well. It was definitely when he got to the tips that she reacted the strongest, panting with quiet gasps.

The image of her pinned were still foremost in his mind, so he pushed the chemise up over her head, fully exposing her luscious body. Before he could pin her down, she reached up to bring him down for another deep kiss. He let the dance of their mouths continue as he took hold of her wrists and pushed them ever so slowly back down onto the bed. Never letting go of her hands, he moved his knees between her welcoming legs and knelt over her. He pushed her wrists down and behind her waist, pinning them behind her back. "Are you okay with this?"

"I don't know. What are you planning to do?"

He leaned over and kissed her soft belly. "Kiss your body."

Breathing heavily, she replied, "I'm very okay with that." His tongue circled her naval and then with brief, slow licks, he worked his way up to her breasts.

Hovering over her nipple so that his warm breath caressed it, he said, "I've been thinking about that night at the gym, when you were pinned against me. You were aroused, weren't you?"

She tried to push her breast up into his mouth, but he wouldn't accept it. "How could you tell?" she asked as she panted, her mouth forming an 'o' as she imagined his lips taking what they wanted.

“I can tell when you’re aroused, and right now,” he darted his tongue out for a quick lick. “You are very, very aroused.” He licked it again. “If that room hadn’t been full of people, I would have had you on the mat, just like this.” His tongue darted out, but he purposefully missed. She gasped anyway.

He looked up into her eyes and adored the fire he saw in them – it had been missing for far too long. While he was locked in eye contact with her, he lowered his tongue and licked slow and hard across the distended nipple. She closed her eyes as she gave him a deep, guttural moan. He whispered against her other nipple, “I love that sound. Give it to me again.”

She said, “Make me.”

“Is that a challenge?” His eyes widened, and he repositioned himself to lie with his belly pressed hard against her pubis, his hands holding her arms securely, and his face just centimeters away from her breasts.

“Yes, and next time we reserve the gym for ourselves. There’s some equipment in there that…” she gasped in surprise as he latched on to her nipple.

He sucked firmly as he pulled away, tugging the nipple lightly between his teeth. She couldn’t help but moan deeply in pleasure as his tongue tickled the tight, taught nub. When he let go, he asked, “You were saying?”

Panting, she said, “I forgot.”

He licked up her cleavage. “Something about equipment in the gym. You’d like me to lay you over it?” He licked underneath her breast and up the side.

“Uh huh.”

He clicked his tongue in rebuke and then darted it across her nipple again. “Now that would be a serious breach of regulations, Admiral.”

“Uh huh,” she whimpered as she arched as best she could with her hands pinned. She begged, “Please.”

He was happy to oblige and dropped his mouth widely over her full, ripe breast, adoring the fact that she’d gotten a little softer in recent months. She’d grown even more luscious and inviting than she’d ever been before. His lips were in heaven as they roamed over her silky breasts, making her tremble and writhe beneath him.

When she’d had enough, she pulled her arms out and latched onto his head. “I need you. Now.”

“I can see that.” He chuckled as he pushed up to sit between her open legs. He drew two fingers up through her folds to find her dripping with clear, slippery juices. He wanted to dive in and taste her, but he could tell by her impatient writhing on his penetrating fingers that she really did want him inside immediately.

She commanded, “Do it now or I'm throwing you on your back and doing it for you.”

“I'd like to see you try.”

Her eyes narrowed right before she pounced. Although he knew what was coming, it took him a second to register what had happened when he found himself on his back with her straddling him. He gasped as she impaled herself in one, fast movement.

Kathryn stretched her body to its full height as she leaned over his chest and caught his lips in a deep kiss. He grabbed two silky handfuls of hair to hold her close, and moaned deeply as she squeezed her inner muscles around him. He was in heaven.

She pushed herself up, positioned her knees for the best leverage, and began to rock against him, maneuvering it so that her clitoris was getting all the benefit of the grinding movement. He let her continue pleasuring herself, not minding at all that his penis was inside her, going along for the ride.

However, not wanting her to come yet, he laced his fingers through hers and pulled to encourage her to lay down on top of him again for another kiss. He put one arm around her back and one holding tightly against her bottom. “Hold on.” As soon as she locked her legs with his, he rolled them over so that she was under him again.

He remained still for a moment, looking into her eyes. At first, she looked sweet and loving, but then the side of her mouth crooked wickedly and she squeezed her vaginal muscles hard. His eyes widened as he asked, “Is there something you want, my love?”

She squinted while she ordered him very calmly to, “Get moving. Now.”

He licked his lips as he tried not to smile too wide. “Yes, ma'am.” He lifted her legs into the air and began thrusting powerfully into her. She rose up on her elbows and threw her head back in ecstasy, clenching her abdomen tight into the fold he had her in. The tension was exquisite for both of them as he pumped in and out. When it became too intense for him, he opened her legs in a V, but didn't let go of her ankles.

She dropped back onto the bed and let him have his way with her as he positioned the angle of his thrusts so that his hard penis rubbed against the inside front wall of her vagina. The pressure was intense and Kathryn could feel her body begin to tremble through no control of her own. There was nothing she could tighten or maneuver to control the intense pleasure that was centered deep inside her. Her mouth dropped open as she repeated, “Oh, Oh, Oh,” over and over again in perfect timing with his thrusts.

When the deep wave overtook her, she cried out in ecstasy. Chakotay knew he had her right where he wanted her, and slowed down to savor the delicious moment. She'd had a vaginal climax, not something they'd achieved but once and it was only when the passion had been deep and all-consuming. After the tremors stopped, he quickened his pace again, not wanting her to come down from the high.

Letting her legs drop, he leaned over her and worked hard and deep to keep her going. When he knew he was about to come, he reached down and pressed his fingers against her clitoris. She arched up in surprise and opened her legs even wider. The tension was incredible at the height of his climax. He shouted, "Kathryn!" as he felt the hot semen shoot deep inside her. He held her thighs tightly against the sides of his hips and thrust fast several times, pausing between each one.

When his mind cleared he looked down to see her smiling beautifully at him. Her voice was husky as she said, "touch me." Staying inside, he coated his fingers with her juices and let his fingers glide slowly up from her folds to the hard, protruding nub that was firmly out from under its protective hood. He caressed it very slowly, keeping his eyes locked with hers. When he saw her eyes roll back into her head, he slid his finger twice across the tip, causing her body to convulse under him.

He watched over her as she lost control, drawing his finger along her folds, but taking care not to touch the oversensitive tip again. She had almost a dozen aftershocks until she finally dropped her arms and legs limply to the side.

After pulling out of her, he stretched out against her side, carefully moving her arm out of the way. He leaned over her and gave her lips a soft kiss. "Was that amazing enough?"

"Unhuh." She was completely sated and unable to move.

He pulled the sheet over them and enfolded her in his arms, whispering, "Thank you for forgiving me. I love you, Kathryn."

She forced her eyes open and lifted her hand to glide her fingers around his face. "I love you, too."

They looked at each other in the moonlight, both trying to memorize the moment so they could remember it in the months to come. She turned on her side and snuggled up in her favorite place, sighing contently.

Chakotay moved his fingers lightly over her back as he watched over her. He wanted to savor the way she looked, the way she felt against his side, the softness of her skin beneath his fingers. A slight chill ran through him at the disconcerting thought that something might happen to her, but he pushed it away, not wanting to cloud this time together with worries about the future.

He felt something tickle his chest and looked down at her face to see that she had it covered with her hand. When he drew her hand away, she lifted her wet, tear-filled eyes up so he could see what he'd discovered.

"Heeeey," he said as he wiped her cheeks. "Why are you crying?"

"Can't seem to stop it," she said as she smiled through the tears. "I think it's just an emotional release."

"Well, then, you should get it all out. Do it properly."

She laughed as more tears streamed down. "This is absurd. I'm a Starfleet admiral for goodness sake."

"True, but you're also a woman who has had a tough couple of months, and now that it's settling down and you've had a physical release, I'm sure it's a perfectly normal reaction."

"Just don't tell any Romulans that deep down, I'm a normal, emotional woman."

He held her close and kissed her forehead. "Your secret is safe with me, as is your heart."

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