

The Future is Ours – Part 16

“The Good Ship Lollipop”

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Beginning to Recover

Gretchen stepped into her living room to see Chakotay standing in the entryway, staring intently at a PADD. “Chakotay? Who was at the door?”

It took him a moment to answer. “Owen Paris. He brought me this.”

“What is it?” She wiped her hands off on the towel she’d brought with her and went to him.

His hands were trembling. “A letter from the Pioneer’s CMO. Evidently, Kathryn asked her to write to me.”

“What does it say?” Gretchen took his arm and encouraged him to sit down with her on the couch. Her insides were knotted in anticipation of what the letter might say about her daughter’s condition.

Chakotay cleared his throat and read out loud:

“Dear Captain Chakotay,

Admiral Janeway asked me to write to you on her behalf. As I type this, she has just fallen asleep holding a rose with the bud resting against her lips. She looks very peaceful, and if I understand the nature of your relationship correctly, I hope that image brings you comfort.

He paused to wipe his eyes and sniff. His voice cracked as he continued,

I believe that she won’t mind if I tell you that she cried when Captain Young delivered your flowers a few minutes ago. She has been concerned about you knowing her status since the moment she regained consciousness, and receiving your acknowledgement gave her some peace.

The Admiral wants me to give you a report on her condition without alarming you. I’m afraid that I can’t do one without the other, so I’m opting for the former. Before I begin, however, I want to assure you that we are doing our best to keep her pain-free and comfortable. She is very weak and has spent most of the last twenty-four hours asleep, having been awake only three times for short periods. The first was about four hours

after she arrived. Since then, she has slept in ten to twelve hour intervals. Her disposition is good and she seems more concerned about her health and her loved ones than she does about her ordeal.”

Chakotay stopped reading and closed his eyes.

Gretchen rubbed her hands. “It seems to fit with her personality not to dwell on what happened.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “She tends to keep painful memories locked away until the danger has passed and she feels in control enough to face them.”

“You sent her roses?”

Holding up the PADD, he said, “I didn’t know if I could send a message like this because of security reasons. I sent her one specific type of rose because I knew she would’ve realized who it was from the moment she saw it.”

“You should send her something in response.”

“She said she likes to hear my voice. I should record something.”

Gretchen asked, “Would you like me to read the next part for you?”

He took a deep breath and said, “No, let’s just get through it. I have a feeling this is going to be difficult.”

“Dr. Crusher, CMO of the Enterprise, has been assisting me with the Admiral’s treatment. We healed as much of the repairable tissue damage as her body will accept, but our primary concerns remain – widespread infection and malnutrition.

I’ll address the malnutrition first. The Admiral was not given food during the seventeen days she was imprisoned. I know that you are aware of the parasite that she carried prior to her abduction. Because she was unable to complete the course of treatment for the parasite, it returned and caused extensive damage to her intestines. The irreparable tissues have been removed; however, the combined impact of the parasite and the starvation has resulted in the Admiral’s current weight being 35.38 kg. The ensuing complications are as expected – loss of muscle mass, renal failure, anemia, abnormal heart rhythm, hypoglycemia, and electrolyte imbalance. The shorter length of her intestines and colon will impede normal weight gain, thereby delaying her recovery.”

Chakotay’s voice had shaken as he read the last half of the paragraph.

“What parasite is she talking about?”

He filled her in and then said, “She’d already lost weight, but I can’t begin to imagine what she must look like at 35 kilograms.”

“She hasn’t weighed that little since she was twelve.” Gretchen looped her arm through Chakotay’s and said, “Keep going, although I’m not sure I want to hear more.”

“The widespread infections have impaired her vital organs with the most significant damage being to her heart, but we are working relentlessly to counteract the resistant infections and repair the damage. It is our hope that by the time we bring her home, they will be eradicated. A virulent case of pneumonia has already been cured, although her lung tissue will take longer than usual to heal because of the complications from the malnutrition, as is the case throughout her body.”

Again, it is not my wish to alarm you, but she will need constant care once we return to Earth. You’ll want to make preparations for that in advance if you want her at home rather than at Starfleet Medical.

Admiral Janeway also asked me to include the following message: ‘Tell him that I’m still looking forward to the TLC he promised and to hearing the rest of that novel.’

Dr. Amy Murphy, CMO Pioneer”

Chakotay took a steadying breath, but said nothing.

“What novel?” Gretchen asked.

He smiled for what felt like the first time in weeks. “When she was recovering from the parasite, she was physically exhausted, but wide awake. So when we talked in the evenings, I read to her. We were about halfway through a Jane Austen novel.”

“Which one?”

“‘Persuasion.’ She hadn’t read it before and it seemed fitting.”

Gretchen said, “I haven’t read that one, either. What is it about?”

“A woman who had given up on love seven years earlier, and finds it again. She remains faithful to her past and still moves forward into the future.”

“Perfect.” Gretchen laid her head on her future son-in-law’s shoulder. “You’re good for her.”

“I hope so.” He looked at the PADD again. “I’m going to take a leave of absence from the Academy for the coming semester.”

“You don’t need to do that. We’ll make sure she has care.”

Shaking his head, he said, “I don’t want to leave it up to anyone else. She’s too precious.”

“You make her sound like she’s going to break, and you’re the one who keeps telling me that she’s strong. You know how stubborn she is. Spending day in and day out caring for her would not be healthy for you or your relationship. We don’t know how long her recovery will be.”

He studied the letter for a minute and then said, “Perhaps you’re right in the long term, but not at first. I’ll let the Academy know that I won’t be back for at least a month or two.”

“We’ll know more when she gets home, but it sounds like once she gains some weight, she’ll be fine.”

Sighing heavily, he said, “I hope that’s all it is. What worries me is what the doctor didn’t say.”

“You don’t think she told you everything?”

“She didn’t list any specific injuries like concussion or broken ribs, nor did she discuss what Kathryn’s condition was upon rescue.”

Gretchen patted his arm and got up. “Then she must not have any specific injuries because that report indicates that her health problems are the result of being kept in unsanitary conditions and not fed. We’ll get her back on her feet in no time.”

Kathryn’s eyes felt dry and grainy, but there was a tug on her fingers that she had to investigate. She pushed her eyelids open to see the blurry image of Sue Brooks in a sickbay gown sitting with her. “Sue?”

“Admiral?” she asked shakily. “How are you feeling?”

“Ready to run a marathon. You?”

“Hmph. About the same.”

Kathryn looked at Sue’s gown again and then realized why she was wearing it. Dread washed over her. “Oh, Sue. You’re back from going undercover, aren’t you?”

Pushing tears out of her eyes, Sue nodded. “Just finished getting treated about thirty minutes ago, but Dr. Crusher won’t release me until morning.”

“Treated? Were you hurt?”

Sue’s jaw shook and she looked away.

“Sue?” Kathryn begged for a reply. “Please tell me.”

“We had to make it look real. Those chains,” Sue sobbed. “How?” She covered her mouth and cried harder. “I’m sorry. You don’t need me to fall apart like this.”

Tears fell down Kathryn’s face, too. “I couldn’t feel my limbs after awhile. A day maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Oh, Admiral.” Sue picked up Kathryn’s hand and held it against her cheek. “I was only bound for about six hours, and I know it wasn’t as tight as you were. Then I kept thinking about Scott and how he’d died, and…”

She gasped, “Scott is dead?”

“Yeah,” Sue nodded as she cried.

“Oh, no.” Kathryn felt like she was going to be sick.

“I had Justin and a few others right there with me the whole time. He kept reassuring me when he could, but I kept thinking what it must’ve been like for you. I just can’t imagine seventeen days, and without food, and the beatings you suffered…the isolation…”

“Sue!” It was too much to bear and a severe wave of nausea engulfed her. Kathryn clamped her eyes shut. “Need doctor.”

“Dr. Crusher!”

“What?” Beverly ran in. “Admiral?”

“Gonna be sick,” Kathryn managed to say.

“Hang on.” Beverly picked up a hypospray and injected something into Kathryn’s neck. “Take slow, shallow breaths. We’re going to turn you on your side so you don’t aspirate.”

She retched as they moved her, but thankfully, nothing came up.

As Beverly tenderly stroked Kathryn’s hair, she instructed the older of the two nurses, “Patty, would you hand me a cold compress set to level two?”

Seconds later, Kathryn felt the cool cloth on her forehead and the queasiness was beginning to fade. “Is Sue still here?”

“Right behind you, Admiral.”

Kathryn whispered, “Would you hold my hand?”

She came around and picked up both of Kathryn’s hands. “I’m sorry that I upset you.”

“Shhhh...” She started to retch again, but managed to control it.

Beverly’s gentle voice said, “You’re safe, Kathryn. Let it go if you need to.”

“Rather not.” She licked her dry lips. “Sue, talk to me about knitting. I need to think about something else.”

“I haven’t done...” Sue hesitated, and then plunged ahead. “I’ve been waiting for you to get back to keep going, but I’m still excited about the projects we were talking about. Do you remember the basket weave afghan pattern I found?”

“Mmhmm. Color?”

“I’m leaning towards emerald green. What do you think?”

Kathryn asked, “May I have a sip of water?”

Beverly continued her soothing touches. “Patty is getting it.”

“Emerald is hard to match with furniture. Darker might be better.”

Sue gently stroked Kathryn’s forearms. “Or a sage green would show off the pattern more.”

“Mmmhmm.” She felt a straw against her lips and took a small sip. “Thank you.”

Patty said, “You’re welcome, Admiral. I’ll hold it right here if you want more.”

Beverly adjusted her hold on Kathryn. “I always like dark yarns because they hide my mistakes.”

Kathryn asked, “You knit, too?”

“I attempt to knit, but I have one blanket that I started years ago. It’s six meters wide and about eight centimeters tall. And, it’s rather bumpy.”

Sue laughed and then stopped abruptly. “Sorry.” Then she laughed again.

“That’s quite all right.” Beverly chuckled, too.

Patty added, "All I've ever managed is a scarf that's not long enough to go around my neck, and I've been fiddling with it off and on for forty years."

Eyes still closed, Kathryn said, "Sounds like my first project. It became my sister's doll blanket."

Beverly asked, "How are you doing now, Admiral?"

Kathryn took another sip of water and said, "Better. I think it's passed."

The cloth was removed from her forehead. "Let me know if you want this back, but you get cold so easily."

"Can I eat something?"

Beverly scanned her with a tri-corder and then said, "Not, yet. I'm sorry. We have to do this gradually or you'll go into shock."

Kathryn sighed. "As soon as I can have it, I want ice cream, and lots of it."

Beverly patted Kathryn's head. "It'll be at least ten days, but you can pick any flavor you want."

Sue and Kathryn looked at each other and in unison, said, "Coffee."

Patty asked, "Admiral, would you like to stay on your side or roll back?"

"Roll back, please."

Once they got her settled, Beverly told Sue, "I'm sure I don't need to remind you to keep to innocuous topics."

Looking miserable, Sue nodded. "I'm sorry."

When Beverly left, Kathryn pointed out, "I asked you to tell me about it."

"I know, but I didn't need to go on and on. I'm really sorry."

Kathryn's fingers found Sue's and squeezed them. "Let's commiserate when I'm not as likely to vomit, shall we?"

"Maybe by then, I won't feel the need to."

"Hopefully, I won't either, but I need to know... when did Scott die? Was he abducted with me?"

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “It was instant. Phaser blast in the corridor where you were taken.”

Kathryn took a deep breath, trying to cope with yet another loss. She’d had far too much experience over the years and knew that she needed to set aside her grief until she could come to terms with it. “Tell me about the outcome from today.”

“It was successful. We arrested four individuals and took their crews into custody for further questioning.”

“Do we know who they are?”

“I don’t, but Captains Picard and Young do.”

“Where are the prisoners now?”

“The four are in the Enterprise brig. The crews were transferred to a starbase, but I’m not sure which one. Interrogations begin in the morning.”

“To see why they wanted me?”

“Yes, and to see who else they know. These arrests represent four or five groups who claimed that they had you, but the last I heard, there were fourteen claims.”

“Fourteen?” Kathryn’s eyes widened.

Sue nodded. “The number seemed to change hourly because it was hard to decipher what was accurate information. It got a lot higher at one point until someone figured out that there was duplicate data.”

“Wow.” Kathryn yawned. “That’s pretty complicated.”

“That just touches the surface.” Sue groaned.

“I want to know more, but I’m about to fall asleep on you.”

“Sleep, then. We’ll fill you in later.”

“You said you’re stuck here for the night?”

“Yes, I had a concussion.”

Kathryn’s eyebrows furrowed. “Were you hit?”

“No,” She made a face. “I fell over.”

With a smile, Kathryn asked, “If you’re not too tired, would you sit with me? Touch feels good after the isolation, and what you were doing earlier with your fingernails felt soothing on this new skin. It’s itchy.”

“I’d love to.” Sue picked something off of the floor and said, “Did you drop a rose?”

“Oh, no! Is it smashed?” Kathryn felt a sense of loss as she held the withered bud.

Sue nodded towards the vase in the corner and whispered, “I could get you a new one.”

Chewing on her lower lip in thought, Kathryn said, “You wouldn’t tell Chakotay that I ruined this one, would you?”

Laughing, Sue said, “Your secret is safe with me.” She took the sad looking one and tucked in the back of the arrangement. “Besides, some water just might perk it up. Here... This one looks good, and the thorns have already been trimmed.”

Kathryn accepted it happily and held the petals against her lips. “Thank you.”

Pulling a chair up beside the bed, Sue said, “Rest now.”

“Thank you for taking my place today. I didn’t want them to ask that of you.”

“I know. Captain Young told me that you weren’t in favor of it, and I knew why. Just so you know, I did it to keep you from going back in there. And I think every woman on both ships would have done the same.”

“I wanted to go, but...”

“I know. Today’s operation made all of us sick.” Sue began running her fingernails lightly over Kathryn’s forearms. “We all adore you. I hope you know that.”

A smile graced Kathryn’s lips. “When I’ve had my coffee, sure.”

“There used to be a ‘weather report’ on Voyager, where the crew would warn each other about your mood before you arrived. Did you know about that?”

Chuckling, Kathryn said, “Nooo. I heard the term used, but I thought it was the general mood of the crew.”

Sue laughed quietly. “Not the crew, just you, so that we could inform each other what type of mood you were in – social, introspective, detached, playful, commanding. That sort of thing.”

Even though her eyes were closed, Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “I asked Chakotay often what the weather report of the day was. The first time, he gave me the strangest look and I thought he didn’t realize what I meant.”

“We never did this to steer clear of you. I hope you realize that.”

“Are you sure about that? One of those moods could easily have been hostile.”

“No, it never was. We all realized that the stress you were under was profound, and although we couldn’t do anything to alleviate that, we wanted to be what you needed us to be, socially. Sometimes, that would be a friend, like right now. Sometimes, that would be a colleague.”

Kathryn opened her eyes and looked at Sue. “That’s...” She pushed past a lump in her throat. “I think that’s one of the nicest things I’ve ever heard. Are you sure that’s not just you talking?”

Sue shook her head. “Not just me. I wanted you to know so that you can be reminded of how much you’re respected.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn took a shaky breath and closed her eyes again. Sleepily, she said, “Incredible, isn’t it? How an experience like this can affect a woman? By the media’s standards, I’m probably one of the most respected women in the Federation right now. But a handful of...” She took a deep, unsteady breath.

Sue laid her hand on Kathryn’s shoulder. “No, Admiral. Keep your thoughts on Voyager’s crew right now. Think about the time when we were trapped in that closed subspace anomaly and you built a new Federation and lived by those ideals. We were never prouder of you.”

“You’re good for me, Sue.” Kathryn smiled. “I think I just might have to keep you around.”

“I hope you do. I don’t want to work for anyone else.” She resumed her soothing touch on Kathryn’s arms. “How many other commanding officers would want me to give them healing touch?”

“Ones that are friends,” she mumbled, dozing off to sleep.

Kathryn heard people talking quietly through her haze of sleep, but it wasn’t enough to wake her up completely. She let the quiet conversation drift over her, not really listening, but not completely ignoring it either. When it stopped, she wondered why, so she opened her eyes. What she saw surprised her, and she wasn’t sure if she should let them know

she was awake or close her eyes and pretend to sleep. Opting for the first choice, she said, "Is this a new development or are you two just really good at keeping secrets?"

Sue and Justin jumped apart, both of them covering their mouths with their hands. "Admiral! We thought you were asleep."

Eye-brow raised, Kathryn said, "Obviously."

Justin's face had turned a deep shade of pink. "My apologies, Admiral. This was completely out of line, and I would never..."

"Justin?" Kathryn interrupted.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Are you under the impression that you've offended me?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You haven't."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Justin?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Stop saying 'Yes, Ma'am.'"

"Yes... Okay."

Sue came to his rescue and explained. "Admiral, he came to check on me, because today he was with me the entire time, helping me through the whole thing. Not just as a security officer, but as a friend."

"You don't need to explain," Kathryn said with a warm smile.

"I don't..." She looked at Justin, who was nervously studying the floor. "We don't want you to think that we just happened to choose your bedside as a place to make out. That was our first kiss, and it happened unexpectedly."

"It's my experience that the best first kisses are never planned, but I think this one is going to be a great story for you to tell someday. Especially to other Voyagers, and they'll get a great laugh, thinking it's at my expense." Kathryn winked. "But go ahead and tell it. I'll enjoy it, too."

Sue pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh.

Justin said, “Thank you, Admiral, for being so understanding. Today has been a very emotional day, and I'm afraid that I'm not thinking very clearly.”

Kathryn's mouth crooked into a smile, and she calmly called out, “Doctor?”

Beverly came around the corner. “Yes, Admiral?”

“Is Sue okay to return to quarters if she promises to return for a checkup first thing in the morning?”

Beverly glanced at the three people looking expectantly at her, and pulled out her tricorder to take a scan. After a few beeps, Beverly's eyes shifted to Justin and then back to her patient. “It's never a good idea for a patient who is recovering from a severe concussion to be left alone, unmonitored. I'll attach a cortical monitor, but I'd feel better about releasing you if you can arrange to have someone check on you hourly.”

Sue glanced at Justin who nodded discretely. She replied, “I can make arrangements.”

Beverly said, “I'll be right back with the monitor.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Sue said.

“A word of advice,” Kathryn said. “Those cortical monitors are very sensitive to heart rate and body temperature changes.”

Justin suddenly had a small choking spell as Beverly returned. She asked, “Is he okay?”

Kathryn said, “Just swallowed wrong. He's fine.”

“Are you awake, Admiral?”

“Yes?” Kathryn opened her eyes to see Amy standing over her, obvious excitement in the young doctor's eyes.

“A gift arrived for you!” She held up a mini-PADD and two earpieces. “Captain Young passed this along to me at the staff briefing. It contains an audio-only transmission from Captain Chakotay.”

She gasped. “Really? How could he send it?”

“He must have sent it through the same channels that I used to send him the letter.”

Letting Amy put the buds in her ears, Kathryn asked, “You sent that already?”

“Of course, I did it as soon as you asked.”

“I was hoping you’d let me read it first.”

“Oh,” Amy touched her chest. “Please accept my apology, Admiral.”

Kathryn shook her head slightly. “It’s fine. I’m just surprised.” She took the PADD and smiled. “Besides, if you hadn’t sent it, then this wouldn’t have arrived.”

Amy helped Kathryn place the earbuds so she could listen privately. “Unless you need anything, I’ll leave you alone to listen to it.”

“Nothing right now, but thank you. I’m eager to hear this.”

“Enjoy!”

Kathryn’s fingers were trembling as she keyed in the commands to play the recording. She closed her eyes to let his voice wash over her.

“My dearest Kathryn... I... I love you and I miss you so much.” He paused. “I’m...” He stopped again for a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Maybe if I just talk quickly, this won’t be so difficult. More than anything, I want to be with you right now. Your message said you’re still looking forward to my TLC, and that’s exactly what I want to give you.” His voice broke as he said, “I just want to hold you, and keep you safe, even though I know that’s impossible.”

Kathryn wiped at her tears. The raw emotion in his voice was intense and she wanted nothing more than to hold him, too.

“The first thing I want to tell you, just to put your mind at ease, is that I’m okay, more or less. I’m at your mother’s house, and she and I are the only ones who know about your current status, outside the admiralty. You were exactly right when you said that our friends and family would be there for me. I had to be strong for some, and others were strong for me, although I’m not sure how strong I would’ve been in the long run. Right now, I’m trying to keep myself isolated because I’m sure that the joy in my eyes will be an immediate giveaway.

“I’m so thankful to have received Dr. Murphy’s letter. Of course, I’m not at all pleased with your condition, but knowing is better than not knowing. All Owen had been able to tell me is that you were in bad shape and that you were treated inhumanely. I’ve had to really fight to keep my fears from running rampant. The letter put your mom’s heart at ease, because she believes that your health issues include only what’s in the report. I’m not going to try to convince her otherwise, but I know that can’t be all there is.”

He paused again before saying, "I don't know what to say that will give you comfort, except that I'm thinking about you constantly, and I hope that you're no longer in pain and able to rest comfortably. I love you, and knowing that you were suffering breaks my heart. You are precious to me, and I would give anything to erase the last month for you."

After taking a moment to clear his throat, he said, *"I'm getting a bit emotional. My guess is that you're probably crying, too. I hope someone has a large box of tissues for you."* He took a deep breath. *"Now, because you've told me that the sound of my voice makes you feel better, I'm going to give you a lot of it. And so that you don't have to hear this part of the message again unless you want another really good cry, press the forward key to hear more of 'Persuasion.'"*

Kathryn wiped her tears away and happily did as instructed.

"I don't know if I'll be able to send more than this one chapter, and I suspect that you may listen to this a few times, so I'm going to tell you one, very important thing that I want you to hear over and over again before I start reading. I love you, Kathryn."

"Now then, chapter fifteen: Sir Walter had taken a very good house in Camden Place, a lofty dignified situation, such as becomes a man of consequence; and both he and Elizabeth were settled there, much to their satisfaction."

Kathryn remained very still, afraid to make a sound. She sensed that someone was near, but the ever-present darkness pervaded her senses and she couldn't see. Her hearing was muffled, but as always, she could feel the vibration of the ship beneath her. She swallowed painfully past the dryness in her sore throat, trying not to groan from the emptiness caused by her hunger and thirst.

An unexpected sound startled her and she gasped in terror knowing she was about to be beaten again. She could feel her heart racing as she prepared for the assault. When someone touched her arm, she recoiled and screamed, "Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

The lights blinded her and she turned her head away. A hand touched her face and she flinched, knowing she was about to be hit. "Pleeeeeeeeeeease, no more! Pleeeeeeease," she begged.

The blinding lights lowered again, and her earplugs were being taken out. She shook her head vigorously to delay the loud yell that she new was coming. Strong hands held the sides of her face, forcing her to remain still. She knew that she was crying, but she couldn't help it.

"Shhhhhhh," a kind and confident voice said. "You're safe, Kathryn. You're safe."

“Please don’t hurt me,” she whimpered.

“I won’t hurt you. You’re safe here.” The restrictive touches on her face changed to soothing strokes through her hair. “Kathryn, you’re safe. It’s just a bad dream.”

“Noooo,” Kathryn kept her eyes clamped shut.

“Open your eyes. The lights are down and you’ll see that you’re on a starship. I will never hurt you.” The soothing touches moved down to her hands and massaged them very gently. “You’re safe, Kathryn.”

Barely audible, she cried, “Too much pain to be safe.”

“Where does it hurt? Your arms?”

Kathryn nodded and turned her face away when the gentle hands left her. She jumped when she felt something cold sting her neck. Her eyes opened in alarm. “What!?”

“Shhh,” Beverly laid her palm against Kathryn’s cheek. “It’s just a pain reliever.”

“Where?” Surprised, Kathryn looked around the room.

“The Pioneer’s sickbay.”

“But...” Kathryn touched her face and her arms, trying to connect with reality. “I was about to be attacked. I was...”

Beverly shook her head and looked at her with compassion. “It was a nightmare. You’ve been here for over forty-eight hours.”

Eyes wide, Kathryn said, “But it was so real.”

Pulling up a stool, Beverly sat down and held Kathryn’s hand. “Tell me about it.”

“No,” she shook her head. “It’s too awful. You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do. Remember, I know what your condition was when you were extracted, so I doubt that anything you tell me is going to upset me anymore than that did.”

“It was...” Kathryn’s throat felt like it was on fire. “May I have some water?”

“Yes, although, would you prefer some warm tea? It might be more soothing?”

“Could I?”

Beverly squeezed Kathryn's fingers and got up. "Yes. It's time we started introducing some clear liquids into your diet."

"If that's so, may I have some vegetable broth instead?"

"Absolutely." Beverly ordered it from the replicator and returned. "Let's see if we can get you sitting up a bit, too." She called in Patty and together, they resituated Kathryn so that she was reclining, the rose lying on Kathryn's lap. "This should make keeping the broth down a little easier."

Kathryn accepted the cup, but realized quickly that she didn't have the strength to hold it. "Can't!"

"I've got it," Beverly assured her, and then told Patty, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll call you if we need help."

"Of course, Doctor."

Beverly not only held the cup, but she held Kathryn's right arm, too. "We'll work together."

Swallowing the first sip of warm liquid that she'd had in weeks, Kathryn sighed happily. "That feels good."

Beverly smiled. "Simple pleasures."

After another sip, Kathryn asked, "Can you take this tube out of my nose now?"

"Not tonight, but if your electrolytes are leveled out by tomorrow afternoon, you'll be done with it." Beverly was practically hugging Kathryn to help her hold her own cup. "So tell me, what made you think you were back on that cargo ship?"

Frowning, Kathryn said, "I'd hoped you'd forgotten."

"I may be getting old, but my memory isn't that far gone, yet."

"Old? You can't be much older than I am."

"You'd be surprised," Beverly smiled as she helped her take another drink. "I'm 54, and you're trying to change the subject."

Kathryn sighed and then explained, "It was dark, my arms hurt, I was hungry and thirsty, and my ears were plugged."

"Did your captors plug your ears?"

She took another sip. “Mmmhmm, and I was blindfolded. I'm not sure how long it was before I began hallucinating from sensory deprivation.”

“That’s difficult to predict, probably a couple of days.”

“The only time they interacted with me was when I was about to be attacked. What alarmed me here was a noise that I couldn’t distinguish, probably because my ears were plugged with the earbuds. I assume that was about the time you touched me. At least, I assume you did.”

“Yes, to try to calm you because your heart rate had escalated. The noise you heard was someone leaving sickbay.”

“Too many associations,” Kathryn admitted quietly.

“And nightmares aren’t unexpected. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to administer a suppressant to keep them at bay for a couple of days until your heart has had time to heal.”

“Fine with me. I’d rather not deal with them at all.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not likely, but at least we can hold them off until you’re healthier and can start seeing a counselor.”

Kathryn groaned. “I don’t know if it’s the thought of a counselor or the broth, but I'm feeling a little nauseous.”

“Both, perhaps.” Beverly took the cup and set it down. “Let’s take a break. The Enterprise has a counselor if you’d like to talk to her.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head adamantly. “I'm sure she’s perfectly fine, but I'm not ready yet.”

“Her name is Deanna Troi and she’s a very good friend. However, she’s an empathic Betazoid, so you can’t get much by her.” Beverly smiled. “But there’s no pressure. I know that it’s difficult enough to start a conversation with a counselor in the first place, but to have to change horses midstream, so to speak, is a pain.”

“I’ve met her before.” Kathryn tried to remember where. “She’s a friend of Lieutenant Barclay’s, isn’t she?”

“Yes.” Beverly chuckled. “Reg used to be stationed on the Enterprise and Deanna was his counselor. She’s one of the few people he feels comfortable interacting with outside of holograms.”

“Ah,” Kathryn said with a click of the tongue. “That explains some things. I was afraid they were an unfortunately mismatched couple.”

Beverly laughed loudly. “No, no, no, no, no, no... in Reg’s dreams perhaps, but Deanna is engaged to Will Riker.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with interest. “I went out on a blind date with him at the Academy, but I’m embarrassed to say that I walked out in the middle of it.”

“Oh?” Beverly laughed. “I’d love to hear the story, and so would Deanna.”

“All right then, I’d love to meet her.” She held up a finger. “But not as a patient.”

“I’ll let her know.” Beverly winked.

Kathryn continued to sleep most of the time, but knew that she had a lot of visitors from the Pioneer crew because they left notes of encouragement for her. Even though she didn’t have the energy to visit with all of them, her spirits were lifted knowing that they were thinking of her.

The men from security had come by and played a no-stakes poker game with her. It was fun to laugh with them, but she’d had to recruit Justin to hold her cards for her. Halfway through the game, she fell asleep, but at least she’d had time to talk to them about what had happened the night she’d been abducted. She assured them that she didn’t hold them responsible even though they hadn’t forgiven themselves, yet.

Amy spent the days with her, and Beverly spent the nights so that one doctor was always on duty to administer the continuous treatments her heart required to fight the infection that had set up residence. Regardless, she was slowly gaining strength and, by the fourth evening onboard, was able to feed herself and hold her head up without support.

She had just finished eating soup when she heard the doors to sickbay open. Knowing she probably had visitors, she patted her mouth with a napkin and set the cup aside.

Beverly poked her head around the corner and asked, “Kathryn? Are you feeling up to some company?”

“Yours? Of course.”

“I brought friends. Are you game?”

“Sure,” she said with a smile.

Will Riker walked into the room first, with a huge grin on his face. “Kathryn Janeway,” he said as he kissed the back of her hand. “After all these years.”

She smiled. “It’s been awhile. How are you, Will?”

“A lot better than you, I’d say.” He didn’t let go of her hand as he asked sincerely, “How are you feeling? Are you comfortable?”

His charm was as engaging as she remembered. “I’m as comfortable as I can be. Evidently, my little adventure qualifies me for the really fantastic pain-relievers.”

“Little adventure?” he asked with disbelief, and then a smile spread across his face. “I was about to ask what you’d consider a big adventure, but then realized I already knew the answer.”

She laughed. “Yes, I’ve had a rather large adventure, too.”

“Well, you did tell me years ago that you wanted to explore a part of deep space that no one has seen before. You got your chance, didn’t you?”

“I can’t believe you remember I said that.”

He winked at her. “What can I say? I was enamored with you.”

Deanna walked up and said, “Lucky for me, Will, she wasn’t as enamored with you.” Smiling brightly, Deanna extended a hand. “I’m not sure if you remember meeting me, Admiral. I’m Deanna Troi.”

“I do.” She accepted the handshake with as much strength as she had. “You were at the Pathfinder reception.”

“Yes, as a guest of Lieutenant Barclay.”

“Our honorary Voyager crew member.”

“Does he know about that? He’d be honored with that title.”

Kathryn felt instantly at ease with the beautiful woman. “I’m not sure if he does or not, but I’ll find out.”

Beverly said, “Kathryn, I told Deanna that you and Will were an item back at the Academy.”

“An item?” Kathryn tried not to cough.

Will corrected, “We had one blind date.”

Deanna asked her fiancé, “So, why didn’t you ask her out on a second date? Was she too good for you?”

Kathryn laughed and said, “I’m afraid I’m the one to blame. I ran out on him before we even had a chance to order coffee.”

He asked, “Why did you do that? I never knew.”

Deanna nudged him. “I can just imagine what you were like at the Academy – probably anything but her type.”

“Hey now,” he said with a laugh.

“Actually, I expected you to be extremely arrogant and full of yourself, Will,” Kathryn said. “But I found you to be exactly the opposite. You were the most attractive, intelligent, charming, and wonderful man I’d ever met.”

Wide-eyed with mirth, he asked, “And that made you run for the door?!”

“Yes, it did,” she chuckled. “I was far too serious of a student.”

“Well, you did have very lofty goals of becoming a science officer.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. “And you were going to be a captain and invite me to be on your crew. Does that offer still stand, Commander?”

They all laughed as Will said, “Absolutely, Admiral.” He winked at her again. “I would do the honorable thing and offer a former classmate a hand up, especially one whose career never took off.”

“Well, what can I say? I got lost.” She leaned forward a little and whispered, “Do me a favor, though, would you?”

“Anything for you.”

“Don’t tell my dear friend Chakotay what I just said about you.”

Deanna laughed. “All you said was that Will was the most wonderful man you’d met by the time you were what? 19?”

“True,” Beverly said. “You didn’t meet Chakotay until you were…”

“35,” Kathryn answered. “I was sent to capture him, and it seems that I did.”

Will asked, “So the rumors about you and your former first officer are true?”

“Depends on which rumors.”

He whispered, “How long have you two been an item?”

“Hmmm...” Kathryn made a show of counting with her fingers, and then proudly announced, “Ten months.”

Will laughed. “I don’t believe it for one second.”

She shrugged. “Well, that’s how long ago we acknowledged it.”

“Yes, but...” He stopped when his commbadge beeped. “Pardon me, please?”

Kathryn nodded and waved at him that it was fine.

He tapped his badge. “Riker here.”

Picard’s voice responded. “Commander, I hate to cut your visit short, but there’s a situation that requires your attention. I’ll brief you when you return.”

“Understood. On my way.” He cut the comm and bowed, “Ladies, it’s been a pleasure.” Taking Kathryn’s hand, he kissed it again and said, “I hope your recovery is quick and that Beverly keeps giving you those terrific drugs.”

They all laughed and waved good bye. Beverly said, “If you’ll excuse me, too, for just a minute, I’m going to relieve Dr. Murphy.”

Deanna looked back at Kathryn. “You’re feeling happy.”

“Beverly told me that you’re empathic.”

“Empathy has nothing to do with it,” she stated matter-of-factly. “You have a huge smile on your face.”

“I think it was your charming fiancé.”

“Yes,” Deanna smiled. “He does have a way with people, when he wants to.” She leaned in to conspire. “But rest assured, he can be a real bear.”

“Can’t we all?”

“So true.” Deanna pulled up a stool. “Beverly told me that you have zero interest in talking to a counselor, and I respect that, but I want to make sure that you’re coping before the Enterprise leaves your side tomorrow.”

“Honestly, I haven’t even begun to cope with it, and it’s not that I don’t want to see a counselor, I’m just not ready, yet.”

“Of course you’re not. It’s only been four days.” Deanna’s response was heartfelt.

Kathryn pointed to her head. “And Beverly has been giving me a neural suppressant so that I’m not having nightmares. That ends tonight, however.”

“In preparation for going home?”

“Yes.” Kathryn took a steadying breath.

“Are you ready?”

“For nightmares? No. For going home? Yes. It’s been five months since I’ve seen Chakotay, and even then, we only had one good day together.”

“One good day?” Deanna asked.

Kathryn closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I just told you that.”

Deanna laid a hand on Kathryn’s arm. “It’s all right. You don’t have to talk about it.”

“Oh, it’s just that we had an argument last summer and it took a lot out of me.” With a trembling voice, she asked, “What do your empathic skills detect about me now?”

“That you’re hurting,” Deanna said quietly. “And that I really wish the Enterprise was going back to Earth with you.”

Kathryn sniffed and wiped her face. “It’s probably best that you’re not, because in, what? Two minutes? I’ve told you more than I’ve ever admitted to a counselor in my life.” Smiling ruefully, she shook her head at Deanna. “You would not be good for helping me rebuild my carefully constructed emotional barriers.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The two women looked at each other and then laughed. Kathryn said, “I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize, Admiral.”

Groaning, Kathryn said, “Please, don’t call me that. I don’t feel very admiral-like right now, especially since I’m being so emotional in front of a complete stranger. Tell me, do you affect everyone like this?”

Deanna smiled. “Most people who talk to me are doing so with the intention of releasing pent-up emotions, so yes. But maybe you just need a friend to confide in. If you do, I

would be honored if you'd let me be that friend. I'll still treat anything you say with the greatest confidentiality."

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

Deanna touched Kathryn's hand. "Are you okay with going home?"

"Yes." She felt a lump in her throat. "Chakotay has been my rock for the better part of the last eight years, and I really need him right now." A shiver ran through her with the intensity of her longing.

"Do you want to try to talk through your 'little adventure' with me?" Deanna held up a placating hand. "As a friend."

"No," Kathryn shook her head. "I'm putting it off until I can be with him."

"May I ask why?"

Kathryn lifted her shoulders in the slightest of shrugs because it was all she could manage. "Because he'll catch me when I fall apart." With watery eyes, she looked at Deanna. "Probably not what you'd expect to hear from Admiral Janeway, is it?"

"Why do you say that?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "Because of who I am, this larger than life officer who brought a ship home from the Delta Quadrant and who is supposedly reunifying the Federation."

Deanna stared at her compassionately for a long moment and then sighed softly. "I wonder if Captain Picard would mind if I took an extended leave of absence."

She said through watery eyes, "You don't want to do that. Chakotay will help me through this, just like he's helped me through every traumatic experience for the last eight years. He knows me better than anyone else, and he'll know how to pull me through."

"Yes, but you're also in love with him."

"And that's a problem because?"

Deanna said, "Because you're going to try to protect him by not telling him the worst of it. And if anything from your argument is unresolved and causing you pain, you're not going to tell him that, either."

Kathryn quickly looked up at the counselor, wondering what she sensed. "He's a good man."

“I'm sure he is, but if your relationship hasn't completely healed from that argument, this could put too much strain on it. I just want you to consider seeing a counselor sooner than later.”

“No, I'm happy to say that you've got it wrong.”

“Oh?” Deanna asked with a smile. “I love it when I'm wrong. Tell me.”

Laying her head back tiredly, Kathryn gave Deanna a suspicious look. “I have no idea if you're joking.”

Deanna laughed. “My empathic skills usually guide me correctly. When they lead me astray, it fascinates me. Honestly.”

With a grin, Kathryn admitted, “Well, you're right in that I probably won't describe the worst of the vivid details to him, but he'll know. However, this won't strain our relationship. If anything, my health forces me to make some changes that will bring us closer together. And don't worry, that argument has long since been over, even if I feel sad that it happened.”

“Okay.” Deanna accepted her reasons. “I won't push you to see a counselor, but I would love to keep talking to you, even if we have to do it over the comm.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow humorously. “And that's not seeing a counselor?”

“Not officially, unless you want it to be. I meant it when I said I'd be honored to be your friend.”

With a yawn, Kathryn asked, “What's your clearance level?”

“Depends. Why?”

“Because some of the things that are weighing me down involve issues that I can't discuss with just anyone.”

“We'll figure it out. I can get clearance as needed or you could speak in non-specifics. I'm a full-commander, but I've been granted special clearance on a case by case basis.”

“Will you be upset if I don't call for awhile?”

Deanna smiled brightly. “No. I'm just thrilled you're considering it.”

“I'm surprised, too. Will you let me keep up a few of my self-imposed emotional barriers? I've never seen a counselor that wasn't intimidated by me, so I'm not sure what to expect.”

Shaking her head in amusement, Deanna replied, “Just knowing you have those barriers is half the battle. When and with whom you use them is entirely up to you. Oh, and just so you know, my empathic skills don’t work over long-distance, so you’ll actually have to tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Good to know.” Kathryn’s eyes were feeling heavy. “I’m afraid that I’m going to fall asleep on you.”

“That’s all right. Can I get you anything for you?”

“No, but thank you for asking.”

“Admiral?” Deanna started to ask a question, but stopped, looking uneasy. “I’m not sure what to call you if you don’t want me to use your title.”

“Kathryn works pretty well between friends.”

“Thank you for trusting me with your friendship, then.” Deliberately, she spoke her name. “Kathryn? Would you like me to stay near tonight in case your nightmares return?”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that. I have plenty of experience dealing with them, far too much experience, really.”

“I’d like to stay.” Deanna motioned towards the outer room. “I can keep Beverly company and then I’ll be here if you need a friend. There’s no reason you need to face difficult memories alone when we’re here to help you through it.”

Kathryn suddenly felt unsure about facing anything. She bit her lips to ward off the unwanted emotions and her voice broke as she admitted, “I’m not ready to discuss what happened.”

Deanna took Kathryn’s hand, and looked at her with compassion. “I know, and I won’t ask you talk about it. I’ll just be here with a box of tissue.”

“I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Beverly and I will both be monitoring you, and if you show any sign of distress, we’ll wake you up.”

Letting her heavy eyes drift closed, Kathryn whispered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Computer, lower lights to ten percent illumination.” Deanna tucked the blankets up around her and very gently caressed her arm. “Sleep now. You’re safe.”

Kathryn ran as fast as she could, but just as her fingertips touched freedom, she was ruthlessly yanked backwards into darkness. She screamed in terror as a fiery pain burned through her back and made every nerve in her body sizzle with an agonizing sting. Something stung her neck and her body arched forward, right into someone's comforting arms. Kathryn clung to that person with every ounce of energy she had.

"You're safe, Kathryn. You're safe."

She was trembling and out of breath, unsure of where she was, but on some level, she knew that the person belonging to the soft, comforting scent wouldn't hurt her.

"Kathryn, take deep, slow, breaths. It's just a bad dream. You're safe, and no one will hurt you here."

She felt the woman's hand rubbing her back and concentrated on that sensation as her heart raced, beating hard and heavy in her chest. Tears fell unheeded down her cheeks as she was held in a tender embrace.

When Kathryn calmed some and felt a little less alarmed, she whispered hoarsely, "Who are you?"

The woman pulled back a little to reveal her black eyes and long, dark hair. "Do I look familiar?"

Kathryn blinked slowly and then looked around to see a woman with bright blue eyes and red hair scanning her. Then it all started falling into place. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. With a groan, she said, "Sorry. Was disoriented."

Beverly said, "That's all right. Do you know where you are, now?"

"Yes, Pioneer's sickbay. How long have I been asleep?"

"About three and a half hours. Pretty good, considering we didn't taper you off of the suppressant."

Sighing, she looked back at Deanna. "I think I'm okay."

"I know you are." She smiled at her reassuringly. "Or at least you will be. It takes time for the subconscious to cope with trauma."

"Don't I know it? I've been through this a few times." Kathryn put her arms back to lower herself and then yelped in pain.

“I’ve got you!” Beverly said as she supported Kathryn’s weight and helped her lie back down. “Don’t do that to yourself. Your poor arms.”

“I keep forgetting that I barely have any arm muscles left.”

“Within a week, your body should be healthy enough to accept more regeneration. I could put braces on them until then, if you’d like.”

“NO!” Kathryn yelled, and then realized how loud she was. Softer, she said, “Thank you, but no. I’d rather them be free.”

“I understand.”

Kathryn nodded at the closed tri-corder. “How did my heart handle that nightmare?”

“Your heart rate skyrocketed, but your cardiac muscle kept up. I gave you a very slight stimulant to wake you up so that you wouldn’t have to endure too much of it.”

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes tiredly. “Since you’re both here, I have a question for you.”

“What’s that?” Deanna asked.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice tonight’s scheme to get me to see a counselor?” Kathryn glanced first at Deanna and then pointedly, but with amusement at Beverly.

Beverly didn’t meet her eyes. “Whatever do you mean, Kathryn?”

“It was clear as a bell that Picard’s call was a well-rehearsed line.”

“Actually, he’s a very good actor,” Beverly noted.

Kathryn pointed out, “And then you made an excuse and never came back.”

“I got busy.” Beverly shrugged. “But it seems to have worked.”

“Yes,” Kathryn nodded at Deanna and told Beverly. “She wants to follow me home to make me well again.”

Beverly held Kathryn’s hand. “So do I, and from what I’ve heard walking around these two ships, so does everyone else.”

Kathryn sighed. “So I can get back to work.”

“No,” Deanna said. “Because you are highly respected and adored.”

“I wasn’t fishing for a compliment, but thank you.” Her tears began to flow anew and she looked at Deanna. “You said something about a box of tissues?”

As Deanna handed her one, Beverly softly caressed Kathryn’s shoulder. “I should let you get back to sleep. Do you need anything?”

“No,” she closed her eyes and crossed her arms over her body, hugging herself as much as her strength would allow. When she heard footsteps, she opened her eyes and saw that Deanna was still with her. “I don’t have to talk about the nightmare, right?”

“Only if you want to.”

Kathryn closed her eyes. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“But disorienting.”

“Waking up always is.” Remembering the fear, Kathryn felt the heat of tears wash over her again and did her best to curl her body as the emotional onslaught took over. She was grateful when Deanna helped her roll onto her side, facing her newest friend.

“Let it go. You’re safe with me.” Deanna rubbed her back. “Computer, dim lights to ten percent.”

Feeling freer in the near darkness, Kathryn cried harder, accepting Deanna’s comforting touch and admitting the truth, “I was running... trying to get away,” she said through her tears.

“And you were so close to the exit. I know.”

Kathryn tucked herself into a tighter ball, still crying. The raw emotions continued to ebb and flow as the memories of that night came back to her. She kept trying to stop, but memories of what happened and thoughts about what Chakotay must have gone through when she didn’t call kept assaulting her. Deanna continued to soothe her without saying anything. Just her touch and her presence gave Kathryn permission to let go for awhile.

When a lull in the emotions arrived, Deanna spoke quietly. “What they did to you is inexcusable, Kathryn. When you get home and have had some time to recover, I want you to tell Chakotay how angry and upset you are. Express that anger however you need to, but get it out. Throw things or hit something, whatever it is that you need to do. Then, I want you to call me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said weakly. “I’m sorry about this emotional display. It’s not me.”

“I assure you that it has never, once, crossed my mind that any Starfleet captain or admiral would be prone to emotional outburst. However, enduring seventeen days of torture would break anyone’s emotional fortitude.”

She hadn't thought about it as torture, but Deanna was right. It was. Kathryn covered her mouth as the tears came again. "Oh, God. I want to go home. I need him."

Deanna leaned over her and gently held Kathryn's shoulders, whispering, "I know you do and it'll only be one more day. Cry yourself to sleep if you want. I'll stay right here with you, and by the time you wake in the morning, this ship will be in the Sol system."

"Thank you." Kathryn wiped her nose and tucked back into her ball. She had every intention of getting a hold on her emotions, but then the counselor stroked her hair and it felt so much like something Chakotay would do that she broke down again and did exactly what Deanna suggested – cried herself to sleep.

Kathryn woke up with a start and realized that she was cold and shivering. Pulling the blankets up around her, she attempted to snuggle back in and get warm.

Beverly stepped into the room. "Kathryn?"

Lifting her head, she asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost six. Are you okay?" She came around to the side of the bed and touched Kathryn's shoulder.

"Yes, just cold and a little nauseous."

Beverly said, "You're probably hungry. Do you need to use the lavatory?"

Sighing, Kathryn said, "Yes." She hated this part of being so weak and helpless, but it couldn't be avoided.

Beverly called in Patty, and together, they helped Kathryn do what she needed to do and, in no time at all, got her back in bed with a fresh gown.

Once settled, Beverly gave her a bowl of hot cereal and fruit. "Your diet expands today, natural sugars."

Kathryn looked at the mush and sighed. "I am a firm believer that the sugar in ice cream is very natural."

"You can believe that all you want, but unless you want to go into diabetic shock, I'd suggest avoiding it for a little while longer."

With a grimace, Kathryn ate a bite of the cereal. Begrudgingly, she admitted, "This tastes better than I expected."

Beverly laid an extra blanket on top of Kathryn. “If you get too warm, you can throw this off.”

“Thank you.” After another bite, she asked, “Are we in the Sol system yet?”

“We will be within the hour. I'm due back on the Enterprise before seven, and Deanna has already gone back. Do you want to talk to her again before the Enterprise takes off for Deep Space Three?”

“No, I'm not sure I have the emotional strength. She makes me cry.”

Beverly smiled with a small laugh. “I suspect that she probably just helps you cry. I know I've spent many a night in her company crying over a good... well, I won't mention it.”

“A good what?”

“Something that you want, but can't have.”

“Something with unnatural sugar?”

“You got it in one. A word of advice regarding Deanna – if she ever visits you in person, she is easily bribed with a good quality chocolate.”

“Noted.” Kathryn finished the cereal and set the bowl down. “Thank you for setting me up to talk to her last night.”

“You're welcome.” Beverly helped Kathryn lie down and snuggle under the blankets. “Hopefully, you'll sleep for awhile longer. Dr. Murphy will work on getting you on your feet this afternoon in preparation for leaving tomorrow.”

“Do you know they want me to do a press conference in the morning?”

“Yes,” Beverly said warily. “How do you feel about that?”

Kathryn shrugged tiredly. “I'm not sure that I'm strong enough. Seems a bit hasty to put me in front of the public so soon.”

Beverly sighed. “In my medical opinion, you need to go straight to Starfleet Medical, and I think this is a really bad idea.”

“Did your opinion get overridden?”

“Yes and no. I understand the need for the public to see you, and it will be very dramatic. However, I've made it clear that I expect certain precautions to be in place.”

“I trust your judgment, but I think it’ll be fine if I can stand up on my own. I’m not sure what I’ll say, however. Maybe Harry Kim can write something for me.”

“He’s a fine officer.”

“Yes, he is.” Kathryn yawned. “One of the best.”

“Computer, illumination down to twenty percent.” Beverly tucked the blankets up around her patient. “Are you comfortable?”

“Very.” Smiling contently, she said, “Thank you for everything this week. I really appreciate your care and your friendship. It means a lot to me.”

Beverly’s eyes grew moist. “You’re welcome, Kathryn. It’s been an honor getting to know you and I think you’re a remarkable woman.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn blinked back the tears. “Now you’re going to make me cry, too.”

Grabbing a tissue for both of them, Beverly said, “It’s been an emotional week, one that I’ll never forget.”

More controlled, Kathryn asked, “Next time you’re on Earth, will you let me know? I’d like to talk when I’m more like myself. Perhaps for some unnatural sugar and coffee.”

“I’d like that a lot.” Smoothing out Kathryn’s blankets, Beverly said, “Now, get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Would you thank Deanna for me?”

“Of course. Send us a message after you get settled in at home so we know how you’re doing.” She patted her hand through the blankets. “Goodbye, Kathryn.”

“Good bye.” She felt happy that she had two wonderful new friends, but a little sad that they had to part ways so soon. Still, she only had to wait a little over twenty-four hours and she’d be in Chakotay’s arms. That definitely put a smile on her face as she dozed off to sleep.

The morning went by quickly. Her first physical therapy session got her out of bed and standing precariously for a few minutes, and then Kathryn asked her staff to come to sickbay for a meeting. However, after about thirty minutes of status reports, Kathryn began wearing out and was getting easily confused.

Harry asked, “Admiral, may I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.” She squinted as she tried to concentrate.

“We’ve been operating under the assumption that you wouldn’t be back to work for awhile.”

“That’s true. I’m planning to take at least two months, if not longer.”

Harry nodded. “My suggestion, then, is that you don’t try to get a grasp on all of this information right now. Everything is going to change in two months and nothing about this conversation will be relevant.”

“You’re right,” she let her eyes close. “Why am I trying to think about this?”

Sue said, “If I know you, it’s probably because it’ll help you regain your bearings.”

Harry noted, “The first thing you always asked for after returning to duty after a stay in sickbay was a full systems report.”

“Standard Operating Procedure.”

“Hard habit to break,” Justin noted.

Kathryn looked around at her group and asked, “How are all of you doing?”

They exchanged glances with each and Harry spoke for everyone. “We’re fine, Admiral.”

“You are?” she asked doubtfully.

Judy asked, “Do you want the ‘chin up’ response or do you really want to know?”

“I really want to know.”

Sue said, “It’s painfully obvious that we’re one man short, and that we were...” She shook her head, unable to continue.

Kathryn looked at all of them and no one would say anything, so she finished for them. “That if my extraction had come just a few hours later, you’d be two people short.” Then she nodded at Justin. “Or that the weapon that took Scott from us also shot Justin and me.”

Harry said, “We’re going forward with the ‘chin up’ method of dealing with this because we have to.”

“I know.” Kathryn patted the underside of her own chin. “Mine must have an invisible force-field holding it up because I have no idea how I'm managing otherwise.”

They all did a double take and then slowly began to smile.

She looked at them with understanding. “We’ll do a memorial service for Scott with as many Voyagers as we can gather. I’ll tell you then what his last words were, but I’ll break down if I do that now.”

“We understand,” Judy said.

“So,” Kathryn said as she took a deep breath. “Harry, I’ll leave it to you to manage all of this in my absence. Don’t let Admiral Khurma intimidate you. He’s a good man, and he wants what’s best for the Federation. Once my status is made public, I don’t think any of these worlds will expect me to do much in the near future, so there shouldn’t be any pressure.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Harry said.

Justin said, “Admiral, all you should concentrate on is getting stronger so you can keep kicking a...”

She cleared her throat to stop him. “Noted, Lieutenant.” She winked at him and then spoke to everyone. “Thank you for all of your work this fall, and I hope that you’ll take some time off, at least a month.”

As they got up to leave, she asked, “Harry, a moment please?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“May I ask a favor?”

“Anything for you.”

“I have no idea what to say at the press conference in the morning. Do you?”

He smiled. “I was hoping you’d ask. I have several ideas.”

“Thank you. I need to sleep right now, but I’d love to hear them a little later.”

“Comm me whenever you’re ready.”

“I will.” She looked around the empty sickbay. “Where’s Dr. Murphy?”

“She said she’d be back in a few minutes. Do you want me to call her or the nurse?”

“I just need help lying down. Would you mind?”

Harry quickly set his PADDs down. “Of course not. What do I need to do?”

“Just support me as I lie back because I can’t put any weight on my arms.” Kathryn felt a little self-conscious, but quickly realized that she had no reason to be. He was so much like a son to her that it was very natural. As he tucked her in and turned down the lights, she smiled at the thought of having a son of her own some day.

Kathryn woke to a grumbling stomach and decided to practice sitting up on her own. She didn’t get far before she felt like she was going to pass out from dizziness, but luckily, Patty had seen what she was trying to do and caught her before she fell off the bed.

“Admiral, be careful!”

She sighed. “Just attempting to assert my independence.”

Amused, Patty got her situated and asked, “Would you like some lunch?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Patty returned a minute later with a bowl of soup, and while Kathryn ate, Amy came in to do some regenerative work on her legs.

During the procedure, Kathryn asked, “You haven’t mentioned Harry in a few days. How’s that going?”

Amy gave her a pained expression. “Not well.”

“Oh? Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I feel a little awkward since you and he are so close.”

Kathryn nodded. “I understand, but I won’t be upset if you tell me that you’re not interested in him.”

“No, no, no, noooo. That’s not it at all!”

“Okay,” she replied patiently.

“It’s just...” Amy held her breath and then said, “I think I’ve confused him so much that he has probably decided I’m not worth the trouble.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I have no idea how to approach him, now that I’ve messed things up.”

“Tell me what happened and we’ll come up with something.”

A short time later, Amy nervously rang the chime to Harry’s quarters. When he answered, she forced a smile and asked, “May I come in?”

“Of course.” He welcomed her in and asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.” Looking around anxiously, she asked, “Could we sit down?”

“Of course.”

Once they were settled, Amy said, “I know that I’ve been challenging this week, and I’m sorry.”

His shoulders relaxed. “You don’t need to apologize. This was the worst possible week for us to start dating, and I’m sorry if I put any pressure on you.”

Amy looked into his patient and understanding eyes. “I asked the Admiral about you the first day she was back. I still can’t believe I had the nerve, but I did.”

“What about?” he asked with an anxious laugh.

“I don’t mean to make you nervous.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not. She is very dear to me, and if there was something that you felt you couldn’t ask me directly, I wouldn’t trust anyone else to give you better advice.”

“I asked her if you were the type who had a lot of girlfriends. You know, a player.”

Harry threw his head back in a laugh. “What did she say?”

“I think she was trying not to laugh like you just did. Of course, she could barely move her head at the time.” Amy couldn’t help but smile with him. “She said that I could trust your intentions to be honorable.”

“She’s right. Although I’ve dated a lot, I don’t have the best of luck.”

“She asked me a few minutes ago how it was going because I hadn’t mentioned it again. Has she spoken to you?”

“No, she hasn’t mentioned a thing, but I don’t think she would unless I brought it up. She’s not exactly the type to play matchmaker.”

Amy took a deep breath for courage. “She gave me some advice, so here goes. This might make things more awkward between you and me, but the Admiral believes it’ll do exactly the opposite and she knows you better than I do, and I’m rambling, so here goes...”

“Amy, you don’t need to be nervous.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

He held her hand. “It’s true. I’m not at all intimidating. I’m just Harry – a regular, normal, friendly guy.”

Looking down at their clasped hands, she plunged forward. “The truth is that I’ve been trying to act aloof and a little subdued so that you wouldn’t see how infatuated I am with you.” She bit her lip and braved looking up to gauge his reaction.

He knitted his brow. “I was under the impression that you found me dull.”

“Noo!” She placed her hand on his arm. “I can’t stop thinking about you, but I was afraid that I’d scare you away.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Harry said, taking a deep breath. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we met last July.”

“Really?”

He nodded pitifully. “I was disheartened because I’d turned you off so quickly.”

“Far from it. I’m so sorry, Harry. Could we start over?”

“I’d rather just keep going from here,” he said with a smile. “If you’ll promise to be yourself and completely open with me?”

“I will, but you may not want to hear everything that’s going on in my mind.” She wrung her hands. “I do this when I fall for someone. I start planning our entire lives.”

He chuckled. “I’d love to hear about my future, as long as you keep in mind that since we’re in Starfleet, we have to remain somewhat flexible with whatever life throws at us.”

“Like being thrown into the Delta Quadrant?”

Winking, he said, “A prime example.”

“I'm not entirely sure what my career path is anyway. After the last two months, I'm feeling rather inadequate as a doctor.”

“Come here.” He opened his arms and drew her into them, cuddling her close. “I suspect that no one in their first year after medical school would have been able to handle the Admiral's condition, so don't get too discouraged. Tell me about your dreams. What do you think about when you fall asleep at night?”

Nuzzling against him, she said, “Lots of things – none of which I should tell a man before I've even kissed him.” She sat up quickly. “Oh! I forgot!”

“What?” he asked, startled.

“Admiral Janeway! I lost track of time.” Amy looked at the clock. “I was supposed to give you an explanation, kiss you, and bring you back before she fell asleep.”

Harry squeezed her shoulder affectionately and tapped his commbadge. “Kim to Janeway.”

Kathryn replied with a sleepy, husky voice. “Yes, Mr. Kim?”

“I understand from Dr. Murphy that we have an appointment?”

Sounding groggy, she replied, “At some point today.”

Harry chuckled. “I have a... personal situation that I'd like to attend to. Could we postpone for just a little longer?”

“Take your time.” The smile in her voice was evident. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Kathryn said, “No rush. I'm just going to doze until you get here. Janeway out.”

Pulling Amy back into his arms, Harry said, “Now, I believe you were saying something about kissing me?”

Having just opened her eyes, Kathryn asked huskily, “Has your personal situation been resolved to your satisfaction?”

Harry gasped and then closed his eyes in embarrassment. “I didn't realize that you were awake, Admiral.” A warm blush spread across his cheeks from the double meaning of her question.

“So it seems,” she replied with a smirk.

He glanced around the corner to check for Amy and then leaned in close to whisper. “Thank you for advising her to talk to me.”

“I trust that you were conscientious with her feelings?”

“Of course,” Harry said with a tender smile. “I think I’m falling in love with her.”

Kathryn knew she was beaming. “Did you tell her that?”

“Not in so many words.” Harry looked up again to check for the subject of their conversation. “She seems a bit inexperienced with relationships so I don’t want to rush it.”

“I sensed that, too. She’s only a couple years younger than you, but she lacks your confidence and social skills.”

Harry sat up straighter and smiled, announcing, “She’s awake.”

Kathryn turned her head to see Amy coming in. “Hello, Doctor.”

“Admiral,” Amy said, her cheeks tinged with a slight blush. “Would you like to keep working on your speech or are you ready to try walking?”

Kathryn glanced at Harry, and in an attempt to hide what they had been talking about, said, “I think we’re at a stopping point, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said quickly. “Shall I come back?”

“Nope,” Kathryn said. “I’d like you to help me, if you’re willing.”

“I’d love to.”

Amy said, “Let’s do a couple of stretches before we start. Harry, would you ask Patty for a cup of orange juice?”

“I’ll be right back,” Harry went into the outer area of sickbay.

Amy quickly whispered. “Thank you, Admiral. He was as understanding as you said he’d be.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said with a huge smile as he came back into the room.

Harry looked suspiciously at both of them. “You were talking about me. I can tell.”

Kathryn said, “Just some girl talk. Nothing to worry about.”

“I can tell already that this is what it’s going to be like when I introduce you to my family.”

Kathryn told Amy, “But when Mrs. Kim serves you a very strange apple pie, do your best to eat it, but don’t tell her it’s the best thing you’ve ever had or you’ll have to eat it forever.”

Laughing loudly, Harry said, “Oh man, I’m going to have to eat that again this week, aren’t I?”

Amy’s commbadge beeped. “Ral to Dr. Murphy.”

She set Kathryn’s leg down and tapped her badge. “Yes, Commander?”

“Captain Young has called a senior staff briefing to discuss Pioneer’s schedule for the next month. Are you available?”

“When will it be?”

“As soon as everyone arrives, Doctor.”

Amy frowned apologetically at Kathryn, but relaxed when Kathryn nodded her assurance that it was fine. “I’ll be there in a few minutes, Commander.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Ral out.”

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” Amy said.

“Don’t be.”

Harry added, “If anyone understands, she does. Really.”

“I hate to delay this again.”

Waving her concerns away, Kathryn said, “Not to worry. Have Patty standing by out there, and Harry and I will give it a go.”

“You’re sure?” she asked skeptically.

“Yes, go on.”

“See you in a little while,” Harry said. When she was gone, he added, “She’s worried about leaving you alone now that Dr. Crusher’s not here to back her up.”

“We’ll be fine. And since we’re in the Sol system, if an emergency situation comes up, help isn’t far away.”

“I’ll remind her about that.”

“Ready to help me up?”

He leaned over and wrapped his arms under her. “Ready?”

“Yes.” She’d learned from doing this a few dozen times to keep her eyes open so the vertigo wouldn’t be so strong. Her legs were strong enough that she was able to swing them around on her own. A moment later, she was sitting up and leaning against him for support.

“Should I let go?”

“Not yet.” She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, feeling at home. “If not for your scent, I could easily mistake you for Chakotay. You’re built just like him.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean I smell bad.”

“Not at all. You smell like soap, a fruity soap. Chakotay smells spicier. It’s his aftershave.”

“That first day you were here, I came to see you. I was helping Amy rub lotion into the new skin on your arms when she was called away. You stirred a little and you thought I was him.”

Kathryn thought back through conversations. “I think I remember someone telling me that I mistook you for him, but the first part of the week is a little foggy.”

His hold became stronger. “I had come to see you because I couldn’t sleep. I’d been awake for, I don’t know, over 48 hours, but I had to see you with my own eyes.”

“Harry.” She wasn’t sure how to offer him comfort except by letting him hug her.

“It was after that video transmission. I couldn’t get the image out of my mind, and I couldn’t sleep until you were safe.” His voice cracked with emotion.

“What transmission?”

“The one that led us to you. The images of you in the cargo hold.”

She looked up slowly. “What? They sent pictures of me?”

“You didn’t know?”

She began to feel nauseous. “Who saw them?”

“It wasn’t individual pictures. It was three minutes of recorded video, sent to us two days before we found you. The two bridge crews saw them, and I believe that Young likely forwarded it to Khurma.”

Taking a deep breath, she asked, “So it wasn’t broadcast on the Fednews?”

“No!” he said quickly. “Absolutely not. God, no.”

She relaxed against his shoulders again, feeling a little better. “What were they doing to me?”

“Nothing. It was just you, in obvious pain and very sick. At first, we didn’t even recognize you. We thought you were a child.” His fingers splayed across her back. “I can’t believe how they mistreated you.”

“And supposedly just for profit.” She knew that he could feel how thin she was because his hands were on her protruding ribs. While it should’ve bothered her, she took comfort in the fact that he wasn’t disgusted. She was worried that she looked like a skeleton with skin.

Harry said, “There’s got to be some other reason besides profit, or they wouldn’t have hurt you so much. We poured through every ounce of research, but I know we’ve missed something. This was a much larger operation than any of those terrorist cells could’ve done by themselves. I don’t know. Maybe they joined together.”

“I think that’s what the culprit wants us to believe, but I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop. This isn’t over, yet.”

He groaned and held her tightly again. “Don’t say that.”

“It’ll be okay, Harry.”

Looking at her, he asked, “Are you okay, Admiral? I mean really okay?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I think that gives me my answer.”

“The support I’ve received this week has been incredible. I haven’t woken up once by myself, and not an hour goes by when a friendly face hasn’t stopped in to say hello. I’m

sure you know that I wish Chakotay was here, but since he can't be, you and the rest of my friends on this ship have made it easier to bear."

Shaking his head, he said, "Please don't think this is inappropriate, but I have to tell you how much you mean to me. I care about you, deeply. The whole time you were gone, I was terrified."

"I know how you feel."

"Do you? It's not..." He sighed and threaded his fingers through his hair. "This is difficult to explain, and I'm afraid that I'm embarrassing myself."

Tilting her head sympathetically, she asked, "Would you like me to make this easier for you?"

"I'm not sure you can."

"Our Voyager family is a very special one, and within it, there are some bonds that are extremely unique. This," she nodded between them, "is not exactly normal."

"No, I don't suppose it is." He blushed. "I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable."

"You haven't. Even though I'm still your commanding officer, it's different now that I'm not your captain. For one, this hug would never have happened on Voyager, nor would you have been helping me through my depression last summer."

"I know." He looked into her eyes. "Is that okay now? I've never known how to ask about that."

She nodded. "It was caused by an angry and heated argument, by a severe lack of communication, and," she tapped on her head, "by an imbalance. It wasn't the first time, but you didn't hear a word of that. Clear?"

"Crystal."

Kathryn took a deep breath. "As I was saying, while our Voyager family is special, I feel like the bond between you and me is familial."

"But it's a little different than that, too."

"Yes, but sometimes, you definitely feel like a son to me, and..." She cringed in pain as she tried to lift her hand.

"What?" he asked with alarm.

"Shoulder pain." She sighed. "Sorry, I just wanted to pat your arm."

Chewing on his lower lip impishly, he picked up her hand, and supporting the weight of her arm, put her fingers on his bicep. “There?”

Laughing, she said, “Close enough. I was going to say that I care deeply for you, too. I have since we almost lost you to the Ocampo.” She squeezed his arm.

“That seems like a lifetime ago,” he mused as he set her arm down. “My mother might have issues with you feeling maternal towards me.”

Kathryn’s mouth curved playfully. “Mrs. Kim needs to stop forcing you to eat that pie or you’ll start coming to my house for the holidays.”

He laughed. “You might just be onto something there.”

Looking at him with affection, she said, “Harry, I’m so thankful that you’ve been with me the last eight months. Your presence has helped me more than you can possibly know.”

“You’re welcome, and thank you.” He took a deep breath and stepped back. “I suppose we should get you on your feet, or we’re going to end up in a puddle of tears.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time this week.”

Handing her the juice, he said, “Better drink so you don’t collapse on me.”

“Thanks.” While she drank, she asked, “May I ask another huge favor of you today?”

“Definitely.”

She hesitated. “I’m a little anxious about this one.”

“Must be big.”

“It is for me.”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

Tipping her glass as if toasting him, she said, “Yes, thank you. Although, this particular one has a positive side affect for you.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll get to spend all night with Amy.” She waggled her eyebrows and then added, “Unfortunately, it would be in here.”

He put his hands on his hips and shook his head in amusement. “Funny. I hope you don’t want to work on reports all night.”

Taking a deep breath, she admitted, “Until yesterday, I was on a suppressant to keep nightmares at bay. A counselor from the Enterprise was with me last night.”

His expression sobered and he nodded promptly. “There’s no question. I’ll be here, and I’ll wake you at the first sign of distress.”

“It’s not that easy to rouse me, and I usually don’t know where I am. The goal for tonight is to see if my heart can handle the stress of a nightmare without being brought off of it with medication. Hopefully, I won’t have one, but if I do, I’d appreciate having a friend.”

His face was set in determination. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I know this can’t be easy.”

She shrugged. “At least I won’t have to explain anything to you.”

“Do you know what aftershave Chakotay wears? I can put some on if it’ll help.”

Kathryn smiled. “I wish that’s all it took, but just smelling him didn’t help me a bit after we destroyed Unimatrix Zero.” At his gasp, she clicked her tongue. “You see? I don’t need to explain a thing. Shall we try walking now?”

He took her juice glass, set it down, and helped her slide off the bed. Once her feet were on the floor, he asked, “Feeling stable, Admiral?”

“Don’t let go.”

“Not a chance.”

She leaned toward him to center herself, positioning her feet so one was slightly in front of the other. “And, Harry, I think you need to stop using my title.”

“All right.” He took a small step back to give her space to move forward. “Shall I decide on a new title, then? ‘Madame President’ has a nice ring to it. Or perhaps ‘Senator’?”

“Cheeky – that’s what you are.” She eyed her feet warily. “I used to know how to walk, didn’t I?”

“Pretty sure you did, although it was more like a strut.”

“I do not strut,” she said emphatically as she picked up one foot and the other knee buckled. “Aaah!”

“I’ve got you!” Harry kept her upright. “Don’t worry, I was expecting that.”

Once both feet were firmly planted again, she looked up at him. “Do I strut?”

“No,” he smiled warmly. “Just ribbing you.”

She made a face and grumbled. “I don’t strut.”

“Try shifting your weight to your left leg before lifting your right.” He guided her center of gravity to one side. When she cautiously bent her right knee, he said, “That’s it, I’m not going to let you fall... too hard.”

“Gee, thanks.” She practiced lifting and replacing her right foot several times. “The muscles aren’t responding automatically. I have to make a concerted effort.”

“Do you have the same problem with your arms?”

“No, they move when I want them, they’re just weak and the pain is sharp. My legs, especially in my hips and knees, are very sore and don’t want to cooperate. Different injuries and different side affects.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to try moving forward with it.”

“I’m ready.”

This time, after she lifted her foot off the floor, she leaned into him, and placed the foot between his. Once it was settled, she let him guide her forward and then she dragged her other leg up to join it. With an accomplished smile, she said, “Just like riding a bike.”

He laughed. “Maybe it would be easier to just wheel you out to the podium tomorrow. The plan is to have you in a hover chair up until the public can see you.”

“Not an option.” She looked at her feet, and then back at him. “Yet.”

“Let’s keep going, then.” He took a step back and then joked, “I could call you Mommy.”

She leveled a mock glare at him. “Now you sound like Q, Jr.”

He helped her shift her weight to her right leg. “So, not Mom, either?”

She stepped forward gingerly with her left leg. “My legs feel stronger than I expected, they’re just not cooperating. I’m not entirely sure that my knees are linked to my brain.”

“You’re doing fine.” He steadied her as she wobbled.

“I’d rather save ‘Mom’ for my children.”

“Really?” he asked with surprise.

“I’m not that old,” she pointed out and transferred her weight. “How about Kathryn? It’s not a bad name, and most of my friends think it suits me just fine.”

Harry chuckled. “It’s a beautiful name, but it’s going to take some getting used to. It feels so personal. Congratulations – two steps.”

“Thank you.” She smiled playfully. “And it is personal, but after what we’ve been through together, I’m quite sure that our friendship has become exactly that. Are you game?”

“I’m game. I’m honored, actually.” He stepped back again.

She shifted her weight back to her left side, tottering a little because she went too fast. “The only reason I didn’t ask you to drop my rank at the same time as I asked Tom and B’Elanna was because you were, and are, still working for me.”

Guiding her forward, he said, “I wasn’t offended because I assumed as much.”

“And I’m sure you’ll know when to throw in an Admiral here and there?” she asked as she transferred her weight.

“When we’re not alone, unless we’re with family. Voyager family, that is.”

“Right.” She smiled at him. “Four steps. Amy will be proud.”

Amy spoke from where she was leaning against the bulkhead watching. “I’m very proud.”
