

The Future is Ours – Part 17

“Carry Me Home”

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Finally, Some TLC

Kathryn's last morning in sickbay was a flurry of activity as she prepared to go home. Sue volunteered to do Kathryn's hair and makeup since she didn't have the strength to do it herself. Amy replicated a new uniform, and Kathryn cringed when she saw that it was a size zero and still hung loosely on her hips.

She and Harry had practiced walking throughout the evening prior, but each step still took a concentrated effort and someone had to be holding her at all times. Amy offered to put braces on her legs, but Kathryn adamantly refused.

Shortly before ten, Harry returned to sickbay, looking refreshed. “Are we about ready?”

Kathryn looked up at him with concern. “Were you able to get a couple hours of sleep this morning?”

“I'll sleep when I get home,” he assured her. “I'm too excited about today.”

Worried, she said, “Amy told me that you sat up with me all night. I wish you'd tried to sleep.”

He glanced around to make sure no one else was close enough to hear him, and then whispered, “Having never watched you sleep, I didn't know if it was normal for you to be so restless. As it turns out, I was right to be worried. Do you remember how many times you woke up?”

Kathryn's stomach clenched. “Twice?” She really wasn't sure, but she had vague recollections of being surprised when she discovered herself crying in his arms.

Harry drew her into a hug. “Four times, and I want to thank you for letting me help you through that.”

“You're thanking me?” she asked incredulously as she held onto him. “No, I'm thanking you for staying with me. I would've been in sad shape today if you hadn't been there.”

“You're welcome.” He pulled back and gave her a warm smile. “It was a long night, but I told you we'd get through it, and here we are.”

She winked at him. “Yes, you did.”

Justin came up and asked, “Admiral, are you about ready?”

“Yes.” She took Harry’s hand to slide off the bed and then he lowered her into the hover chair that Patty had ready for her. “Chakotay knows I’ll be there, right?” She’d asked the question twice already of two other people, but she wanted to be sure that everyone was communicating and on the same page.

“That’s what Captain Young said.”

As Patty made her comfortable, Kathryn stated, “I don’t want him to be surprised when I show up. I was hoping he’d come up to the ship first.” She’d wanted to place the call to him herself, but Starfleet still had their ship on a communications block.

Sue said, “It’ll be a surprise for the press, not for him.”

Kathryn asked, “Do I look okay?”

“You like fine, Admiral,” Amy assured her. “Too thin and a bit pale, but fine.”

Harry said, “We don’t want you to look perfect. The Federation will think you’ve been on a three week vacation.”

“I can’t believe they’d think that,” she said with disbelief. Looking up at Patty, she said, “Are you sure you don’t mind coming home with me?”

“Of course not, Admiral.”

Amy asked, “Do you want to reconsider and go to Starfleet Medical?”

Kathryn frowned. “I really want to go home. I need to be with my family.”

“I know you do, and that’s the only reason I’m letting you go. Just promise that you’ll listen to everything Patty says and follow her advice.”

Patty said, “I’ll be tough with her.”

Harry nudged Amy with his elbow. “Chakotay will be there. Trust me when I say that he’ll be on his toes about her care, too.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Kathryn added. “Patty, I fear that you’ll be bored because he’ll want to do most of the care.”

“Don’t worry. I like to read and I’ll be as invisible as possible. A lot of healing can take place when being cared for by a loved one. All I’m going to do is help him and be there in case of emergency.”

“Thank you, Patty.”

A comm signal opened and they heard, “Transporter room to Admiral Janeway.”

“Janeway here.”

“Are you ready for transport?”

She did a visual check with the group around her and then said, “Yes, energize.” She took a deep breath and held it as the beam took all of them.

When they coalesced, they were in a transporter room. The attendant said, “Welcome home, Admiral Janeway.”

Kathryn nodded. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

He said, “If you’ll follow me?”

Patty guided the hover chair as they were led down a short corridor and paused outside a closed door. The Lieutenant instructed, “Admiral Paris will receive you here and take you to the press room in a few minutes.”

She forced her features into her disciplined command mask as they went inside. They had to round a corner before they saw anyone, and as soon as they did, Kathryn’s schooled features crumbled. Chakotay was rapidly moving towards her from the other side of the room.

“Harry!” Kathryn said urgently. “Help me up!”

Harry, Patty, and Justin all helped her stand and not more than a second later; Chakotay took her into his arms. Everyone else moved away to give them a moment of privacy.

“Kathryn,” he said hoarsely. They were both trembling as they held onto each other for dear life. “My beautiful Kathryn.”

She was nestled in his protective embrace, her head tucked against his neck. His spicy scent was the most wonderful thing she’d ever smelled, and she knew it was a miracle that she was alive and able to take comfort in his arms. Memories of her thoughts during imprisonment came to mind and she declared, “I did it.”

“Did what, my love?” he whispered, holding her close and placing soft kisses along her temple.

A couple of tears fell down her cheeks as she answered, “Kept myself alive for you. I almost let go, but I kept thinking about this mo...” She choked up, unable to continue.

“Oh, Kathryn.” He squeezed her tighter and rubbed her back in firm, soothing circles. “I love you, so very much.”

“I love you, too.” She wanted nothing more than to stay right there forever. “I’m sorry that I didn’t run away fast enough. I was so close.”

“Shhhh, don’t apologize, not for one thing. You’re home, and we’re going to heal our broken hearts together.” He closed his eyes to fight off his own tears. “Just hold on tight so we can face this. Whatever happened, we’re going to be okay. You’re going to be okay.”

Hoarsely, she whispered, “That’s what I need to hear.”

A few minutes later someone nearby cleared his throat, and Chakotay looked up to see that the people in the room had gathered around them. His voice cracked as he told her, “There are a few people here who want to see you.”

She mumbled into his neck, “Tell them to go away, would you?”

Those standing around chuckled quietly. Chakotay said with amusement, “They heard that.”

She pulled her head back to look up at him. “I love you.”

His eyes were full of emotion as he said, “I love you, too.” He kissed her softly, touching the face he thought he’d never see again.

Kathryn gingerly scooted her feet back a little, but didn’t let go of him. She wiped her eyes before turning to the group. “I missed him.”

They chuckled quietly again as Admiral Paris stepped forward. “Katie.” He hugged her carefully, even though she was still holding onto Chakotay. “Welcome home.”

“It’s good to be here.”

“Admiral Khurma is making his statement now, explaining the round-up of the frauds that hindered our search for you. After your statement, he’ll go into more detail about those who are facing felony charges. You’re going to be a complete surprise to them, and every single one of those reporters seems to be gnashing their teeth, wondering when we’re going to get off our duffs and find you. So prepare for a bit of shock.”

“Does it have to be so theatrical?” She wobbled and instinctively reached for Owen’s arm, throwing herself off-balance. As her knees began to buckle, Patty lunged for her and Chakotay threw his arm around her waist. It took all three to keep her upright.

Paris asked, “Are you up to this, Katie?”

“Barely, but only this,” she said commandingly as Patty and Chakotay lowered her back into the hover chair. “No questions, no receptions, no shaking hands with anyone. Just a statement and then I’m going home. I don’t want to see any reporters or be called to any briefings until I’m ready.” She squeezed Chakotay’s arm and he gave her hand a gentle caress in return.

“As you wish, Admiral.” Paris raised his eyebrows as he used her title.

She quirked a smile at him. “I just want to make myself clear.”

“Crystal clear. I’m relieved that despite your appearance, you’re definitely still in command.” He patted her back and looked at a video monitor to check Khurma’s status. “It’s about that time.”

Chakotay looked down at her and said, “I’m afraid we smudged you a little.”

“Not to worry, Admiral,” Sue said as she held up a small bag. “I’m prepared.”

After Sue quickly fixed her up, Kathryn asked Chakotay, “When I get as far as I can with this chair, would you escort me the rest of the way?”

“Are you under the impression that I’m letting go of you anytime soon?”

She smiled. “All right, then. Harry’s going to have to help me, too, and we’ll need to take it slowly. My legs are being insubordinate.”

“You set the pace, love.”

They wheeled her into the next room where the press briefing was taking place and waited behind a curtain backdrop. Khurma was responding to a reporter’s question about how many of the leads Starfleet had not yet been able to follow up on. “Every lead is worth pursuing because it might provide further evidence.”

The reporter angrily yelled, “Do you not care about Admiral Janeway’s welfare?! You continually evade our questions!”

“On the contrary, Mr. Gordon, I care a great deal about Admiral Janeway.” Khurma replied. “She’s not only a remarkable officer; she’s an inspiring woman and a truly great friend. I doubt that anyone who has met her will disagree.”

Kathryn looked up at Chakotay and whispered, "I'm not sure I can do this."

"Just say the word, and Harry or I will make your statement for you."

Harry said, "I'd be happy to, Admiral. I can get pretty impassioned about this."

Khurma continued. "Please allow me to take a short break to let you hear from another Starfleet admiral who can provide you with further insight regarding the current status of the situation."

Chakotay whispered, "Kathryn?"

She took a deep breath and made her decision. Looking straight ahead, she nodded. "Harry, you're my backup. Let's do it."

Chakotay followed Harry's lead on how to pick her up, and together, they eased her up out of the chair. Once she was stable, they walked out from behind the curtain to hear a collective gasp in the room. She teetered under the bright lights, but her escorts were right with her, holding her steady as she forced her legs to take each precarious step. The applause began slowly, but soon erupted into something akin to a force of nature – quite an achievement considering there were only about forty people in the room.

She greeted Khurma with a nod, unable to let go of Harry and Chakotay. He leaned in and gave her a quick, fatherly kiss on the cheek. "Welcome home, Kathryn."

They helped her to the podium and each man stood behind one of her shoulders with their hands on her hips and back to give her a solid support. Harry discretely slipped a PADD in front of her that displayed his speech.

As soon as the press quieted down, she said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I understand that my presence here today is a surprise, because you've been led to believe that I was still missing." She acknowledged the slight murmurs with an understanding smile. "Before I begin, I want to take a moment to thank everyone who has been keeping me and my family in their thoughts during this difficult time. I've been told that there are some who have gone so far as to keep a candlelight vigil since December 25th, and I want you to know that I was touched beyond words when I learned about it. Your caring thoughts as I continue to recover would be very much appreciated."

The Press was completely quiet as they waited for her comments. "On December 16th, I was abducted as I was leaving a conference on Joria Prime. For seventeen days, I was held prisoner by a group of mercenaries who, as you can see by my physical appearance, did not follow acceptable standards for the treatment of prisoners. I would appreciate it if the media would not conjecture on what that treatment might have entailed."

Kathryn paused as she felt both Chakotay and Harry tighten their grips ever so slightly. "On January 2nd, I was rescued by the Pioneer and the Enterprise, and I've been in the

medical facility on one of those ships for the last five days. Admiral Khurma will give you more details in a few minutes regarding the individuals who detained me.”

She let that sink in for a moment before continuing, feeling emotionally bolstered by Chakotay’s steady presence. “I have no doubt that if members of the press were to ask me direct questions, they would center on how I feel or how this experience has affected me. So, let me be clear about my answer so that no one need ask. I am angry.” She paused as she felt a rush of adrenaline. “I’m angry at the injustice of it, I’m angry that I was made to suffer intolerable abuse, and I’m angry that the individuals involved resorted to a violent and personal attack against me.”

She stopped briefly, feeling lightheaded and drained from the energy surge. Since she knew Chakotay and Harry would catch her if she collapsed, she forced herself to keep going, although she was noticeably weaker and the ever present dull pain in her hips was escalating. “What I want to know in return is how does every member...” She blinked hard and continued her sentence. “...of the Federation feel about this? Are...” She felt her eyes start to roll and her body swayed. Immediately, she felt both men close in against her sides. Their movement startled her back into full consciousness.

Chakotay whispered anxiously, “Kathryn? Time to let Harry take over?”

Kathryn closed her eyes and breathed slowly. She whispered, “A moment.”

Harry spoke into the microphone, “Give her just a moment, please.”

Khurma placed a cup of water in her hand. “We can stop, Admiral. They’ve seen you.”

Ignoring how much her hand was shaking, she drank the cool water, letting it rejuvenate her. With determination, she whispered, “Get my chair. I want to get through this.”

Chakotay gave a nod to Patty who had come out onto the platform area. She understood and brought the chair over. The men lowered her into it as Khurma resituated the microphone and handed her the PADD.

Despite her physical discomforts, she faced her audience again. “Don’t panic if I faint, but I’m going to try to speak to you for a little longer before I begin a leave of absence. Commander Kim will finish for me if I can’t.” She was handed a cup of orange juice and gratefully drank some of it.

The sugar in the juice helped her to keep going. “I was asking if the members of the Federation are angry. I certainly hope that you are, because we have been working for seven months to develop mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation. Then, within a matter of weeks, dozens of individuals felt it necessary to use violence as a means for gaining power and control over us.” Her adrenaline had picked up again, helping Kathryn ignore her pain.

“The arrests over the last few days include those who were directly responsible for assaulting me and murdering a man who was both my security officer and a dear friend. These arrests also include many who claimed responsibility for this inexcusable act.”

“My message to the press is to write your stories, share my words with your readers and your viewers, but keep my message clear: The Federation will not tolerate violence, and we will NOT be coerced.” Kathryn nodded and the press erupted into wild applause. She gave it only a short moment and then said, “I want to add...” The applause was too exuberant for her to speak over.

Admiral Khurma stepped forward and held up both hands to quiet them down, which they did immediately out of respect for Kathryn’s condition.

She continued, “I apologize for curtailing your much appreciated enthusiasm, but I want to add one more thought for those who might become so angry about what has happened to me that you feel the need to do something drastic. Please, do not focus your energy on revenge. Violence, in any form, is intolerable. If you’re going to do something drastic, make a drastic difference in people’s lives. I’ve said it many times – we all need to focus our energy on the basic ideals of the Federation. Those ideals are what made us great, and when we let fear and anger control our actions, we forget about those ideals. Thank you, it’s good to be home.”

In the midst of an even stronger round of applause, she looked at Chakotay. “Take me home?”

“Absolutely.” He and Harry walked next to her as Patty operated the chair. Once they were away from the crowd, she reached for Chakotay’s hand and drew him close to her. He kneeled down and asked, “Are you okay?”

Before she could answer, Amy was running a tri-corder over her and said, “Captain Chakotay, I’m Dr. Murphy. Admiral Janeway has been under my care.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” He stood up to shake her hand. “I received your letter.”

“Her heart is weak, but it’s managing at the moment. She needs to get back to bed before she collapses.” Closing the scanning device, she said, “Did you receive instructions about her care?”

Kathryn was leaning her head against his thigh as she mumbled, “Want to go home.”

Chakotay stroked her hair. “Yes, we’ve made arrangements to have all of the necessary medical equipment at her mother’s home. I understand a nurse will be with us?”

She nodded to Patty. “This is Lieutenant Patty Fields. She has agreed to be the Admiral’s 24-hour home nurse.”

Accepting Patty's handshake, he said, "Thank you. I was expecting a rotation of nurses."

Patty said, "I've been tending to her needs all week and I'd like to stay with her full time to make it easier on her and you."

Kathryn said, "Thank you, Patty."

Amy said, "She has a three-day supply of medication and detailed instructions. The admiral needs a lot of rest and careful attention to what she eats to protect her renal system."

"Understood."

"I'll transfer her care to a physician at Starfleet Medical, and he or she will most likely want to see her tomorrow as soon as she's awake."

Chakotay nodded. "Please consult with Dr. Zimmerman."

Amy tilted her head. "Voyager's EMH?"

"Yes."

"The hologram?" She asked skeptically and glanced nervously at Harry.

"Yes, he's a friend and he's been caring for her for a long time."

Harry said, "I'll go with you and explain on the way."

Amy looked unsure, but said, "Okay."

Kathryn said, "Amy, he may be a hologram, but he's real to us. Do you have an analgesic here?"

"Yes, are you in pain?"

Chakotay kneeled down again. "Where?"

Kathryn replied to Amy, "The usual places, and my knees and hips are throbbing."

"If I give you that analgesic right now, it's going to put you to sleep."

Kathryn closed her eyes. "I just want to lie down."

Chakotay whispered, "We'll get you home as soon as we can, love."

Amy scanned Kathryn again and told Patty, "Give her the analgesic as soon as she's in bed, and run the hemodialysis while she's asleep."

"Yes, Doctor."

Touching Kathryn's back, Amy added, "You'll sleep for a good four hours. Contact me in a few days and let me know how you're doing, would you?"

"I will. Thank you for everything."

"I won't say it was my pleasure, but it was definitely an honor to treat you." Amy then smiled at Harry. "Ready to go?"

"Just a moment." He bent over and whispered into Kathryn's ear. "I just want you to know that my respect and admiration for you has grown tenfold in the last twenty-four hours."

"Thank you, Harry."

He kissed the back of her hand and then looked at Chakotay's surprised face. "And Captain, if you need a break at any time, please don't hesitate to call me." He nodded towards Kathryn. "She'll explain how I can help."

When Harry and Amy left, Chakotay rubbed her back gently. "I assume you'll fill me in later?"

"Mmmhmm," she said as she laid her head on the head rest.

Chakotay touched his commbadge. "Contact Gretchen Janeway, Indiana 529."

Gretchen's voice answered urgently, "Do you have her?"

"Yes, she's right here."

Kathryn's voice shook as she said, "Mom."

"Oh, Katie."

Chakotay said, "Gretchen, she's been released into my care and we have a full-time nurse accompanying us. Are you ready?"

"You'd be in serious trouble if you took her anywhere else first."

"Of course," he chuckled. "We'll be there in a few minutes, and she'll need to lie down."

"Her bed is ready."

Admiral Khurma stepped up. “Captain Chakotay, I understand that you’re taking her directly to Indiana?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We have a security net placed around Mrs. Janeway’s home, and a rotating security detail is on duty outside.”

Kathryn looked up and said, “You don’t need to go to that extreme.”

Khurma said, “I’m not willing to take any chances, especially with you being so vulnerable.”

Frowning, she replied, “This is temporary. I won’t have my mother’s house locked up like that.”

Khurma shared a look with Chakotay and seemed to know better than to argue. “Of course, Kathryn. It’s a temporary measure until we’re sure that all threats have passed.”

“Thank you. How did it go out there after I left?”

“It was fine, and I’m sure you can watch it all on the evening news. But for now, you need to get home, and I want you to focus on recovering. Understood?”

“I have no other plans, sir.”

“Glad to hear it.” He patted her back gently and then addressed Chakotay. “Take care of her.”

“I have no other plans either, sir.”

As Khurma moved on to speak to someone else, Justin said, “I just received notice that a nurse from Starfleet Medical will be here in about ten minutes to escort you home and see that you have everything you need.”

Kathryn groaned. “We’ll manage without them. Let’s just go.”

“Lieutenant Fields, I assume you’re capable of doing whatever is needed?” Chakotay asked as he offered Kathryn some comfort by laying his hand on the side of her head.

“Yes, it’s probably just standard operating procedure.”

As they started moving, Kathryn shifted in her chair to try to get comfortable and take the pressure off her hips. She complained, “It feels like bone rubbing against bone.”

Justin explained to Chakotay, “She was still in sickbay this morning, and just started trying to walk yesterday.”

“I can’t believe the doctor approved her doing this press conference,” Chakotay said with serious concern as he saw a tear fall down her cheek. Taking over, he said, “Patty, get that hypo ready. Kathryn, we’re getting you some relief.”

“Just help me. I don’t care how.” She wrapped her arms protectively around her middle and started curling her body forward. As she did, she lost her balance and started to fall, causing everyone in the room to gasp. Only the quick reflexes of Justin and Chakotay kept her from toppling to the floor.

Chakotay leaned down to get a better hold on her. “Hang on, love. Let’s get you home.”

She groaned in pain as he easily lifted her into his arms. Snuggling against him, she felt something cold released into her neck and seconds later, the throbbing began to recede.

Patty apologized. “I’m sorry, sir. We can harness her in.”

“It’s all right. She’s not used to the chair and I don’t mind carrying her. Justin, could you get the door for us?”

“Aye, Captain,” he said, all business.

As Chakotay carried her past the dozen people who were still in the room, he noticed that they were all standing at attention. The emotional intensity of the moment tugged at his heart and he whispered to his precious bundle, “I’ve got you, my love.”

When they materialized in Indiana, two security officers were walking the perimeter of the house. They paused to stand at attention as Chakotay carried her up the steps, Justin, Sue, and Patty following close behind. Gretchen came running out to help, but wasn’t able to do anything but hold the door open and touch her daughter who was already asleep.

He carried her into the bedroom as if she were no heavier than a child. Setting her almost limp body on the turned-down covers, he said, “We’re home.” Chakotay, Gretchen, and Patty worked together to remove her boots and coat. Kathryn pulled at the zipper to her turtleneck so they helped her with that as well. She heard Chakotay gasp when he saw her bare arms.

She looked up at him and said, “I’ve lost a little more weight.”

“Dr. Murphy warned me, but it’s startling.” He was taken aback as he held her upper arm and was almost able to enclose its diameter between his thumb and second finger.

They laid her back down and Patty said, “We need to take her pants off, too.”

Kathryn mumbled, "They're scratchy."

"Sure," Chakotay said as Gretchen pulled back the covers. They easily pulled her uniform slacks off and gave each other a troubled look because of the emaciated state of her legs and pelvis.

Patty said, "I'm going to attach a dialysis cuff to her thigh."

Kathryn groaned. "Do we have to do this now?"

"It'll be over before you wake up, Admiral, and with the amount of pain medication I just gave you, this won't hurt a bit." Patty easily found the vein and artery in her leg and attached the device that would filter the toxins out of her blood. Once done, she pulled up the covers to Kathryn's waist and said, "Now, I just need to stick these monitors on your chest, and then, Captain, you can tuck her in."

While the devices were being placed under Kathryn's shirt, she opened her eyes and saw her mother crying. "Would you hold me, Mom?"

Gretchen sobbed lightly and slipped her shoes off. She crawled in next to her daughter and held her close, gently stroking her hair as Chakotay pulled the blankets up around the two women.

Kathryn felt Chakotay caressing her lower legs as she dozed off to sleep, feeling safe and loved. This was what she'd forced herself to stay alive for.

As soon as she felt someone touch her face, Kathryn recoiled and tried frantically to break free from her bonds. "Nooooo!" It was dark and she didn't know where she was. Her arms felt like they were on fire and she couldn't get free.

"Kathryn, it's me."

She felt the bonds being lifted and was surprised that she was able to roll away from the intruder. Her breathing was ragged, her heart was pounding irregularly, and her eyes were wide as she tried to get a sense of where she was.

"Kathryn, you're safe," said a calm voice in the darkness. The owner of the voice moved away. "Close your eyes. I'm turning on the light."

The bright lamp assaulted her for a moment and then she saw who belonged to the voice. She cried out, "Chakotay!" and reached for him.

He lifted her into his caring embrace. “Shhhh... you’re safe, love. You’re okay,” he said over and over again while he rocked her and calmed her anxiety.

Patty crept in and checked the monitors. Once done, she whispered, “She’s stable. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thanks,” Chakotay whispered.

As her heart rate slowed down, the adrenaline faded and her body started to relax. “...’m sorry... disoriented.”

“It’s all right.” He rubbed her back. “This isn’t unexpected.”

“I know.” She relished his protective warmth and mumbled, “We should get a nightlight.”

“We’ll do that.” He kissed her head. “I’m sorry that I woke you, but you’ve been asleep for about seven hours and you’re due for some medication. Dr. Joe is here and wants to check on you. We also thought you should eat since you missed lunch.”

“I am hungry, but I could use a little more of this, first. I could use a lot of this.”

“Good news, then. This happens to be my favorite thing to do.” He draped a blanket over her and resituated them to get a little more comfortable. “As far as I’m concerned, love, you can have anything and everything you want for as long as you want. I’m so relieved that you’re home safe.”

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything.”

“I want ice cream, and lots of it.” She looked up at him and widened her eyes.

He chuckled. “I’ll check your food schedule to see when we can slide it in.”

“Not for a few days,” she sighed. “I’ve been asking for it because my throat was sore from being sick and from the feeding tube.”

“Feeding tube?” He cringed. “We’ll see what we can do. I hope you don’t mind, but we’re going to stay here for the foreseeable future. Your mom has gone into overdrive and she’s planning a feast for every meal until you’re healthy again.”

“Is she holding dinner for me? What time is it?”

“She’s still cooking, and it’s just after six o’clock.”

She looked out the window at the night sky. “I forget how early it gets dark in the winter.”

They were quiet for a long moment until he quietly asked, “Are you okay?”

She felt a lump in her throat. “No.”

“Do you want to talk about it, yet?”

Resting her head on his shoulder, she said, “Do you remember a long time ago when I got the ‘Dear John’ letter from Mark?”

“Yes.”

“You said that I’d tell you I was fine if I’d had my legs torn off by a trachon beast. Do you remember?”

“I do. Are you going to try to tell me that you’re fine?”

“No, but if anyone else asked me how I was right now, I’d probably tell them that I am, or that I will be. But I can’t tell you that. Not after what we’ve been through, and not after letting you into my heart.”

His lips rested against her forehead. “Thank you for letting me set up residence.”

“It’s what kept me sane.” She tucked her head against him. “I don’t think I’m the same woman I was a month ago.”

He resumed his rocking and said, “Every experience, good and bad, shapes who we are. Neither of us will come out of this unchanged, and that’s okay. We have each other, we have our family, and we have our friends. We’ll figure out how it affects us one day at a time.”

She sighed, feeling both reassured by him and vulnerable because the time had arrived when she couldn’t keep tamping down her emotional responses. She admitted, “I’ve been craving this, and now that I’m here in your arms, I’m overwhelmed.”

He stroked the downy hair at the nape of her neck. “It’s just me. You don’t have to be afraid to let go.”

“I know. That’s why I’m overwhelmed, because I know its coming.” She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, loving the scent of him surrounding her. He was always willing to care for her and, at the moment, she was more than willing to accept it. “Thank you for the roses and the letter.”

“Roses? Did I send more than one?”

“A whole bouquet of them, but I knew that only one was from you, and I held that one for a long time. Your letter, though... You have no idea how much it meant to hear your voice and to know that you were okay. I listened to it over and over, and yes, it made me cry.”

“I really wanted to be there.” His voice shook.

She straightened up to look at him. “Everything was so complicated and secretive. You could’ve been followed and they were setting all kinds of traps.”

He touched her face as if trying to convince himself that she was real. “I was so sure that you’d...” He got choked up.

“I know.” She felt a surge of emotion and wiped away a few falling tears. “I almost did.”

“I love you so much, Kathryn. I don’t know what I would do without you. I was so afraid.” His eyes were brimming with tears, too.

“So was I. It was horrible.” They held each other for a long moment, trying to regain control over their emotions. She tried to lighten the mood by asking, “So have I used up all nine of my cat lives, yet?”

He smiled and pushed a lock of hair away from her eyes. “I sure hope not, but you’re probably close.”

“Just don’t start calling me Kat.”

Smiling, he asked, “I’ve wanted to ask you if you’d like me to call you Katie? Since that’s what your family calls you.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I love the way you say my name. Besides, Katie was my name as a girl, and I’d much rather be a woman with you.”

He smiled and tugged at his ear. “Kathryn it is, then.”

She kissed him lightly. “We’d better get out there or they’re going to come looking for us.”

“You’re probably right.” Since he was still holding her, he set her down on the edge of the bed. “I asked Sue to get some of your casual clothes from the ship and your house, but she won’t be here until tomorrow. Do you have anything here or should we replicate something?”

“I should.” She experimented with putting some weight on her legs, but they protested and a wave of dizziness washed over her. She had to sit back down.

“Are you okay?” He put his hand on her back.

“Just dizzy.” She held still as it calmed. “There should be a pair of sweats in the middle drawer.”

He went to look and asked, “The blue ones or the purple?”

“I think the blue ones are smaller.”

She dropped the blanket and looked down at her emaciated body. The dialysis cuff was gone, but it had left a small bruise on her thigh. “I look so grotesque.”

“No, you just look ill.” He pulled the uniform tank off, first over her head and then down her arms. “You are beautiful, Kathryn.”

“Thank you.”

He pulled the neck of her sweatshirt over her head and stopped there to lift her hair through. “It’s grown a lot. I love it.”

She smiled happily. “I’m glad I didn’t let them cut it this week, then. Sue wanted to.” As she tried to lift her arms into the sleeves, she stopped and clenched her eyes in pain. “Hurts too much.”

“What does?” He kneeled in front of her.

Cradling her arms across her front, she said, “The muscles in my arms and shoulders will need regeneration once I build up enough proteins, but right now, the simplest movements hurt a lot. The doctors were concentrating on my legs so I could walk.”

With a concerned look, he asked, “Would it hurt less if I moved them for you?”

“Just don’t pull hard or raise them very high.”

“Okay.” He fed her arms carefully into the sleeves, watching her face for any indication that he was hurting her. When he was finished, he said, “Dr. Murphy’s letter didn’t mention anything about injuries to your limbs. Is it just from the starvation? Were they broken?”

Grazing her knuckles gently over his cheek, she whispered, “I don’t want to cause you pain.”

He caught her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers. “If I’m going to help you heal, I need to know what was caused by illness and neglect, and what was caused by physical assault. Please don’t hide anything just to protect me, because I can promise you that my

imagination does not share your benevolence. I don't want to spend my energy trying to figure out what happened. I'd much rather know so that I can help you face it."

Kathryn studied his face, her focus switching back and forth between his eyes as she tried to form a response. "I want to be strong."

"I know you do." He cradled her jaw in his hand. "But you don't have to be, and I'm going to help you rebuild your strength. I promise."

Remembering that she'd told Deanna exactly that; she decided that it really was okay to tell him. She held her arm out under the lamp and pushed up her sleeve. "You see the pink lines?"

"Regenerated?" He supported her hand and touched the hairless skin.

"My arms were bound behind my back with a thin chain, from elbows to wrists."

Distressed, he asked, "Is that physically possible?"

She tilted her head, a mournful expression on her face. "Maybe for a more limber person. It tore all the tendons at the front of my rotator cuffs and caused extensive nerve damage."

He looked like he was going to be sick. "How long were you bound like that?"

Closing her eyes, she said, "I lost consciousness in the corridor on Joria, and when I woke up, I was bound. My arms were already numb. I didn't feel them again until I woke up in sickbay."

He asked tensely, "And your legs, too?"

"Calves, but I could feel them except for the numbing cold." She stroked the soft, black hair on his downcast head. "I don't want you to dwell on this. It's over now, and I'd rather not be reminded. At this point, it's going to hurt you more emotionally."

Looking up at her with tears in his eyes, he nodded. "I imagined different scenarios for what you might have been going through, but this never occurred to me." He caressed both of her arms tenderly.

"Good, because I would've hated it if you'd known what was happening, having no way to help me. It really was mostly neglect."

He looked away, fighting his reaction.

After a moment, she held his shoulder. "Let's get out there. I'm hungry."

Barely making any sound, he stood up and mouthed, "Okay."

She leaned over to pull the pants on and toppled forward.

"Kathryn!" He yelled as he caught her. "Take it slow," he said as he got her back onto the bed, sitting down.

Her stomach lurched from the sudden movement and she was sure she was about to faint. "It's my blood sugar."

"Will you be okay for a minute while I get Patty and Joe?"

"Mmm hmm." She hated feeling this weak and helpless.

He was only gone for a moment when the Doctor came in. "Admiral?"

"Hi, Joe." She wasn't ready to open her eyes, still not quite sure of her stability.

"Chakotay said you're lightheaded?"

She heard his tri-corder click on and said, "No, I'm just waiting for the room to stop spinning." She dared opening her eyes and saw that Chakotay was back, so she gave him a reassuring smile.

Joe's eyes were serious as he studied the readings. "I see that Dr. Murphy's analysis is on target."

"You had doubts?" she asked as she accepted a glass of fruit juice from Patty. "Thank you."

"Not doubts, exactly, but I'd hoped that your condition wasn't as bad as she described."

She took small sips, trying to avoid giving herself a stomach ache. "I think you're being a little dramatic, Doctor."

"May I assume its okay to discuss your condition in front of Chakotay?"

"Of course." She opened her palm towards Chakotay and when he took her hand, she encouraged him to sit next to her on the bed.

"Dr. Murphy suggested another round of antibiotics, and I can see why. You still have residual infections throughout your body, including a nasty one in your heart. The myocardial damage is considerable, and until your blood pressure is back up to normal, we've got to keep a close eye on the arrhythmias. And you're still suffering from severe anemia and renal failure, not to mention the hypoglycemia."

“She and Dr. Crusher said it would return to normal with some weight gain.” She watched Chakotay slip her feet into the pants and draw them up to her thighs.

“That’s true, but with the damage to your colon, that’s going to take a long time. I’m really concerned about your low blood pressure in the meantime. Your heart is very weak.”

“So, I’ll take it slow and eat a lot. I’m not planning on doing anything except sleeping for awhile.” She added, “I’m counting on your expert care to catch any problems before they get too big.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said fearfully.

Patty handed Joe a regenerator. “For her leg. I didn’t want to chance waking her when I detached the cuff.”

“Thank you,” Joe said as he healed the bruise. “Go ahead and administer a dose of analgesic.”

As Patty pressed the hypo against Kathryn’s neck, she rubbed it and said, “I needed that.”

Joe did a visual inspection of her thighs and sighed. “Admiral, I was so worried about you.”

“I hear that it was because of your quick thinking that they were able to find me. Thank you.” She patted his hand and then asked, “Would one of you help me to my feet? Without pulling,” she quickly added.

Joe and Patty supported her from her ribcage as they lifted her up, and once she was on her feet, said, “Now, I’ve got the three of you and my dear mother to take care of me, so I’m going to be fine.” She smiled as Chakotay pulled her pants up to her waist and straightened out her shirt. “Shall we go see what she’s cooking up? Joe, you’re more than welcome to stay and examine me more after dinner, but I’d really like to eat. I’m starving.”

Joe frowned, “Yes, you are, quite literally.”

Later that evening, the five of them sat around the viewing screen to watch the Federation news reports. Kathryn was snuggled into Chakotay’s arms, covered with a warm blanket, but still feeling chilled.

He chafed her arms to try to warm her up. “Would you like us to light the fire?”

“I don’t think it’ll help much, and it’ll just make you uncomfortably hot.”

Gretchen got up to light it. "If I get too hot, I'll put on some shorts, but I want you to be comfortable, Katie."

Patty asked, "Would you like another blanket, Admiral?"

"Not yet, but I might."

Dr. Joe said, "Unfortunately, there's not much I can do to warm you up."

Kathryn winked and said, "No, but I bet Chakotay could find a way."

Gretchen held up a hand and jokingly said, "I think I'll wear earplugs tonight." Looking at the fireplace controls, she asked, "Chakotay, if you can tear yourself away from her for a minute, I could use your help."

"What's the problem?" he asked as he untangled himself and followed her to the basement.

Kathryn looked after them wanting to help, but knew she had to let them handle it.

The Doctor tried to speak discretely by whispering. "I don't think that's such a good idea, Admiral."

"What? The fire?" she asked.

"No, intimacy with Chakotay."

"Oh, I was just joking. But why wouldn't it be?"

"Because of the hormone fluctuations associated with your weight loss, the affect of your birth control boosters has been negated. I highly discourage you from doing anything that could result in pregnancy until you're healthy again. Your uterus has not been fully repaired from the parasite damage."

"Ah," Kathryn nodded. "Chakotay's boosters should take care of that."

"Unless he's seen another doctor in the last few months, he's not up to date."

She sighed inwardly. "Thanks for the heads up, although I don't think I'll have the energy anyway." Thinking for a moment, she wondered, "I wonder what the chances are that I'm actually ovulating in this condition."

"Unlikely, but I'll let you know before I leave tonight. I could bring a booster for him tomorrow, but I don't think giving you one right now is going to work until your hormones balance out."

Kathryn nodded her understanding, but didn't say anything else because Chakotay and her mom were coming up the stairs.

"All set," Chakotay said as he turned the flames up and warmth began to spread through the room. He re-situated himself on the couch, turning so that Kathryn was almost fully reclined with her back against his chest.

Gretchen tucked a blanket around her and then touched her daughter's face. "Better?"

"Much, thank you."

She sighed contently as she tried to focus on the news reports, but since it was all about her, she didn't care. Her mind was now occupied with whether or not she wanted to consider working on a family in the next year. It wasn't long before the warmth and Chakotay's soothing caresses eased her to sleep.

Kathryn felt content wrapped in her cocoon of warmth, lying securely tucked against Chakotay's chest. Under her, his loud and rhythmic heartbeat was music to her ears, and the slow rise and fall of his chest the metronome. She was safe here. Safe and loved, with no decisions to make, no lives to improve, no politicians to win over, no anger to placate, no suffering to bear, and no mysteries to solve. Most importantly, no one here wanted anything from her except her love and her presence.

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw the dancing flames of the fire casting a friendly glow throughout the room. Near the Christmas tree, her mom was chewing on the end of her stylus as she mused over lesson plans. Gretchen had changed into shorts and a summer tank top, the sight almost comical because she was wearing socks covered in a poinsettia design and was surrounded by holiday directions.

Kathryn's heart warmed thinking about her mom and Chakotay. These two wonderful people that she loved beyond measure would've been devastated if she hadn't returned. As she watched her mom work, Kathryn thought about her own job and how it affected her loved ones. She wondered how she could manage to accomplish her goals and protect her family's emotional well-being at the same time.

How could she protect herself, too? Could she really face going back out there again? She had recovered from worse, but never before had her suffering been so acute and so prolonged with so little hope for escape. Never before had she faced death without having chosen to die so that others might live. Never before had she wanted to live so desperately that she could feel her heart breaking as her body was dying.

Perhaps it was time to admit that if the Federation wanted saving, it would have to come to her. Maybe she'd already done enough to change the tide. Besides, if she was going

to marry Chakotay, she was long overdue on making some concessions to him. Or rather, she needed to make some concessions to ensure a healthy marriage and a happy life. That thought warmed her heart and she snuggled against him, sighing contently.

He whispered, “Kathryn?”

Looking up into his sparkling brown eyes, she hummed happily. “HmMMM. Hi.”

“I didn’t realize that you were awake.” He ran his fingers through her long, soft hair as it cascaded over her arm.

“Hi there, sleepyhead,” her mom said as she got up and came across the room.

Kathryn smiled at her mom and said to Chakotay, “I thought you were asleep, too.”

“No, just reading a PADD.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

Gretchen said, “Almost two hours. It’s almost ten.”

“Just in time for bed.” Kathryn touched Chakotay’s hand. “Would you help me sit up?”

“Sure.” He set the PADD down and eased her into a sitting position. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, but I need to use the bathroom.” She frowned. “I’m sorry to say that I can’t manage alone.”

Gretchen said, “Katie, dear, I changed your diapers. You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Chakotay added, “And since we’re in front of your mother, I won’t point out why you don’t need to be embarrassed for me to see you without your pants on.”

Gretchen playfully smacked his arm. “Just for that, you get to help her first.”

“Gladly.” Chakotay kissed Kathryn on the side of the head and then very carefully helped her to her feet.

“Where did Patty go?”

“She’s taking a shower,” Gretchen said. “Katie, would you like a snack?”

“Normally I wouldn’t want to trouble you, but that sounds really good. Some vegetable soup, maybe?”

“I'm happy to cook for you.” Gretchen jumped up and went into the kitchen, leaving the younger two to take care of the other situation.

Kathryn and Chakotay returned before Gretchen did and got resettled on the sofa. He said, “Dr. Joe had a message for you before he left, but I have no idea what it means. I hope you do.”

“Oh?”

“He said to tell you, ‘No, you’re not.’ Any ideas?”

“It means, ‘Yes, you are.’” She grinned at his confusion.

“I'm still lost.”

“He was checking to see if I'm ovulating because he doesn't want us to chance getting pregnant.”

Chakotay's jaw dropped, and then he blinked quickly to recover. “Okay.”

Gretchen came back in, so they didn't pursue the topic, but she could tell that he wanted to. She happily took the cup of soup and dug in. The warm liquid soothed her dry throat. “Thank you, this is wonderful.”

“You're welcome, dear.”

Kathryn asked, “Was it just my perception or was all the news about me tonight?”

Chakotay crossed his legs and angled his body towards her, watching over her as she ate. “You couldn't have made that press conference more dramatic even if you had actually fainted.”

“We've been watching the news all day,” Gretchen said. “You stirred up quite a commotion and people are celebrating. It's like Christmas has finally arrived.”

“It's not just today, though. Everything's been about you for the entire month,” Chakotay said. “Poor President Zife received barely a mention for his New Year's Address.”

“Really? Poor man.” Kathryn rolled her eyes.

“All the speculation about your whereabouts has been dreadful,” Gretchen said with horror. “It was more than I could take.”

“I'm sorry, Mom.”

“It’s not your fault, dear. I didn’t want to hear the hypotheses. I just wanted to hear some answers.”

Chakotay added, “There were twenty-three parties who claimed to have you.”

“Probably only a dozen once the facts were sorted out. My memory is fuzzy, but I think there were only six who were actually negotiating for me.”

“Negotiating for you?”

“To buy me from my captors.” Seeing his shocked stare, she tentatively asked, “You didn’t know about that?”

“People were trying to buy you?”

Kathryn glanced at her mom’s worried face and then back at Chakotay and realized, too late, that she shouldn’t have told them this part. “I was under the impression that you were kept in the loop.”

Chakotay repositioned himself on the couch. “Just that there was a plan to apprehend those responsible. I don’t have any specifics.”

She took a deep breath, willing herself to finish the explanation in such a way as to not cause them any more pain. “My captors were negotiating to sell me to four or more parties, all of whom we can assume had very specific political agendas. I don’t know if my captors intended to complete the transactions or if they were paid in advance by another, unknown party to get me out of the picture.”

Chakotay listened to her carefully. “That’s why there were no firm demands for your release? I thought Owen was keeping information from me, but he really was chasing false leads.”

“Each party believed it was the only potential buyer and began to threaten the Federation prematurely without having any real proof or leverage. I suspect that things got out of hand when they started learning about each other. My captors got nervous and tipped their hand.”

Gretchen commented, “It doesn’t make sense. Why did they treat you so poorly?”

Chakotay answered, but kept his eyes focused on Kathryn. “They wanted her subdued and unable to fight. If their clients, or their backer, really hate her or what she’s doing, they would’ve enjoyed seeing her suffer.” He looked like he was about to be sick.

“Oh, Katie,” her mom said sadly.

Wrapping the blanket around herself, Kathryn tried to conclude the conversation by saying, “Anyway, after I was rescued, we planned an undercover sting, and four individuals were arrested. That’s all I know. I didn’t have the fortitude to read the reports, but my staff gave me a little information.”

“So we have all this security because there are still more people out there who want to do you harm?” Gretchen asked.

“Yes, most likely.” She set down the empty bowl and drew her knees to her chest, noticing that it was far too easy to fold up like this.

Chakotay asked, “Kathryn, how were you involved in the sting operation?”

She could see ire stirring in his eyes and assured him by saying, “They sent in a decoy – Sue.”

He drew in a deep, shaky breath. “Thank you.”

“I wasn’t happy about it. I thought it was too risky if they discovered she wasn’t me, and at the time, I didn’t think it would hurt me because I’d already survived it. I didn’t want Sue experiencing any part of what I suffered, even if it was only for a few hours. It really upset her.”

“I can believe it.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I have someone to thank for not listening to you.”

She frowned, even though he was right. “Bernie shot my idea down the second I proposed it.”

“Good.” He picked up the PADD he’d been reading and attempted to focus his attention on it.

“And yes, it was an incredibly stupid idea for a multitude of reasons. But at the time, I was very medicated and not entirely coherent.”

He bit back a smile and muttered something about miracles never ceasing. She rolled her eyes and straightened her legs out so that her feet were in his lap. His smile showed off his dimples as he tossed the PADD aside and grabbed hold of her wriggling toes.

Kathryn glanced over at her mother whose eyes were closed in what looked like a silent prayer. “Well, you two will be glad to know that I’ll be pushing for a change regarding my assignment.”

“Oh?” Chakotay asked.

“If the Federation wants me to talk to people, they need to bring them to Earth, or at least to the Pioneer, for discussions. I have visited enough worlds now that I know what’s going on, so I shouldn’t need to travel. I’m too exposed on alien planets, and after this incident, everyone can’t help but acknowledge that.”

Chakotay didn’t even try to contain his grin. “Kathryn, that has got to be the best idea you’ve ever had.”

“I agree,” said Gretchen.

She narrowed her eyes at Chakotay. “Yes, another miracle. I’m saying that you were right.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I never said that. I was only concerned about you going down in specific situations, but I like this even better.”

Patty returned, now dressed in Starfleet-issue sweats instead of her uniform. “You’re awake,” she said happily.

“Did you find everything you need?” Kathryn asked, wanting to make sure the nurse felt at home.

“Oh, yes. Mrs. Janeway has been very hospitable. Thank you.”

Gretchen said, “Don’t mention it. We’re glad to have you here and want you to feel welcome.”

“I do, thank you.” She picked up her knitting needles and yarn.

While yawning, Kathryn thought more about the changes she wanted to make. “I hope that the Security Council likes my idea as much as you two do.”

“They might not like it, but they’ll find a way to live with it if they want your help.” Chakotay stifled his own yawn and then added, “Even if you have to go into space in special circumstances, you could still do a lot without exposing yourself. Think of the security precautions in place for the President. That’s what’s needed for you, too.”

“You two are tired,” Gretchen stated. “I think you need to take her to bed, Chakotay.”

He nodded and stuck his PADDs into his satchel. “Kathryn, would you like to sleep alone or shall I join you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that a serious question?”

“I think you have your answer,” Gretchen said as she stood. “You go on. I’ll tidy up in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Chakotay stood up and turned off the fire. “Do you feel up to walking?”

“A little exercise just might wear me out enough to get back to sleep.” She snatched the cozy throw that she’d been wrapped up in and draped it around her shoulders.

Patty asked, “Would you like my help or should I go turn down the bed?”

Kathryn smiled warmly. “I think he can manage it, but thank you for offering.”

“I’m sure he can,” she said with genuine kindness. “I’ll go get things ready for you.”

He squatted in front of her and put his hands around her ribcage. “Is this a comfortable way to do this?”

“I’m not sure there is a comfortable way.”

Sadly, he said, “I just don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know.” She placed a simple kiss on his lips. “This is better than anything involving my arms, but let me try to support most of my weight on my legs.”

He adjusted his hold and said, “Instead of me lifting you by your waist, how about you lean towards me, get your footing, and then we’ll go up together?”

“Okay.” She rested her arms on his and did as he suggested. Once they were up, she smiled at him. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“I’m glad.” His hands still on her waist, he drew her close and gave her a short, warm kiss.

Chakotay took a quick shower while Patty got Kathryn’s monitors hooked up, administered medication, and took some readings that Joe had requested. After she left them alone, Chakotay asked, “Is it okay if I sleep in just my briefs and a t-shirt?”

“Of course. Anything more and you’re likely to get hot.”

He switched on the nightlight and turned off the overhead. “I just don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Come on,” she patted the bed to invite him in. “Your bashfulness is charming, but I’m planning on staying in these very warm sweats, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Bashful?” He tossed his slacks and shirt across a chair and climbed in. “I don’t think you’ve ever called me bashful before.”

She looped her arm through his and rested her head against his arm, sighing contently. “Not out loud, but last spring when you hadn’t yet kissed me, you were definitely bashful.”

He chuckled quietly. “I didn’t want you to think I was rushing back to you because that other... entanglement didn’t work out.” Turning his head to look at her, he said, “Right now, though, I’m being cautious because I don’t know enough about what happened to you. The last thing that I want to do is make you feel ill at ease near me.”

Threading her fingers through his, she said quietly, “You’re worried that I was sexually assaulted.”

“It’s...” He took a shuddering breath. “I...”

Seeing how distressed he was about it, she spoke for him. “The odds of that kind of assault would be high in this type of scenario.”

“So you understand my caution.”

“I do, but if that happened, or if that were to ever happen, your loving touch would never be unwelcome.”

He lifted their entwined fingers to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers. “That statement alone tells me one of three things.”

Slightly amused, she asked, “Oh? What are they?”

“One – You weren’t assaulted in that manner. Two – You were, but it was bearable. Three – You were, but you’ve compartmentalized it, tucked it away, and you’re ignoring it.” He held her hand between both of his. “And just in case it’s number three, don’t tell me right now. We’ll deal with it when you’re ready. I love you.”

She arched her eyebrow, even though she knew he couldn’t see it. “It’s a damn good thing it’s not number three, or I’d be really ticked off right now that you just tricked me into admitting it.”

“How did I do that?” he asked defensively, but with clear amusement.

“Because if I said nothing, it would be clear that’s what it was. Otherwise, I’d put your mind at ease and tell you what happened.”

“Hmmm. I see your point.” He kissed her fingertips again and let their hands relax between them. “But that wasn’t my intention. You could just tell me number one and I

wouldn't be the wiser. I also know that you're clever enough that you could be saying all this just to distract me, too."

Sighing melodramatically, she said, "There you go again."

He turned his head to look at her, encouraging her to meet his sincere gaze. "I love you, Kathryn, no matter what. I love every square centimeter of your body, every nook and cranny of your brilliant mind, and every facet of your loving spirit, regardless of their condition or any suffering they've endured. I love all of you."

"Thank you. I know you feel that way, but it helps to hear you say it."

"You're welcome, and I really do understand that you might need some personal space while you cope."

She shook her head. "No, if anything I need to be held, but bear with me for a moment, and I'll try to get this out by making it impersonal. I'll give you an official report."

"You don't have to do this, especially not tonight."

She squeezed his fingers and then let go, detaching herself so she could give her report on the incident. Folding her arms across her chest, she stared at the ceiling. "One of the solicitors, or possibly the backer, used groping as a tactic for humiliation and coercion to gain information regarding plans to overthrow the president. The assault included the chest and groin, but did not penetrate. When an acceptable response was not achieved, he switched to the more traditional tactic of physical battery to the face, torso, abdomen, and legs. No information was exchanged, and that was the only assault that fits within the context of this conversation. I'd prefer not to speak of it again."

She felt the bed dip as he turned onto his side, but she didn't dare look at him. It was taking all of her willpower to keep the memories detached, but her trembling jaw was a clear outward signal that her emotions were betraying her. When she felt Chakotay's fingers under her chin, she knew the battle was lost. The tears had already pooled in her eyes, and when he turned her face towards him, the warm liquid could no longer be contained.

His warm, caring eyes locked with hers while his fingertips caught the tears that fell upon her cheeks. "Don't hold them back."

"I won't let what he did hurt me." She bit her lips, trying to hold back the torrent.

Chakotay's eyes were brimming as well. "He'll never know."

She cried out, "I'm stronger than this," and then covered her mouth.

Rising up to his knees, he then bent down and picked her up. "Let me hold you."

Her shoulders shook under the pressure of her restraint. “It was just a grope. It was nothing.”

Settling back against the headboard and pillows, he cradled her on his lap, holding her against his chest as she began crying in earnest. “It was bad enough. He touched you without permission and violated the most intimate parts of your body while you couldn’t defend yourself.” He stroked her hair lovingly, giving her encouragement to let go.

“Want to be strong,” she sobbed. “I’m strong.” She thumped her fists against his chest.

“Yes, Kathryn, you are, and I’m so proud of your strength. You were strong when this happened because you had to be, but it’s over.” He tucked her close, and placed a kiss on her forehead. “You’re safe with me, and you don’t have to be strong right now. I’ve got you.”

She stopped fighting and let the deluge begin. It wasn’t just about the personal assault; it was about the whole thing. Now that the damn had broken, she let herself grieve for all of it.

After the flood passed, she lay quietly in his arms and asked, “Why did this have to happen to me? My whole life has been one horrible experience after another.” The tears began anew and she wiped them away angrily.

“Would you like me to tell you about all the wonderful experiences in your life? All the wonderful people?”

“No,” she barked. “I’m feeling miserable and I just want to feel miserable right now.”

“Okay,” he bit back a smile and placed another kiss on her forehead. “I can help with that, too. After all, misery loves company.”

She thumped his chest. “Stop trying to cheer me up.”

“I wasn’t.” Adjusting his hold on her, he tucked her head up under his chin. “Quite the opposite, really. I was crying right along with you for a little while.”

“You were?” she mumbled into his neck.

“Mhmm.” His hand glided over her back, offering a soothing touch to her raw emotions. “While we’ve got this going, is there anything else you want to tell me? Don’t let me push you, but I know how difficult it is to open yourself up to feeling this much.”

“I’m actually kind of numb right now.” She wiped her nose with a tissue and tossed it carelessly onto the floor. “I guess it’s as good a time as any to give you a quick rundown of what happened. I’m not sleepy yet.”

“Only if you want to. Have you written a report?”

“No, haven’t been asked for one.” Sighing, she said, “But I guess I need to since it’ll go to trial.”

“Okay, tell me what you’re comfortable with, and I’ll draft a report in the morning. You can look at it whenever you’re feeling up to it, even if it has to wait a week or two.”

She nodded against his chest. “Harry knows some of what happened, too, so he could add to it. So do Justin and Sue, of course. If you can all contribute, I won’t have to think about it as much.” Quickly, she added, “Not that I want them to read your draft.”

“Of course not.” He waited quietly, not wanting to rush her.

“Do you want a PADD to take notes?”

Gathering her long hair, he drew his hand up underneath to caress the back of her neck. “This isn’t a report, love. You’re just telling me what happened, and I’ll do the report part later.”

Shakily, she said, “Justin’s report will have the incident in the corridor.”

“I read it.”

“From my point of view…”

Later, when she had fallen asleep in his arms, his tears fell in silent rivulets, tumbling unheeded from his face down onto her shirt. It wasn’t the emotional release that he needed to quench his fury, but that would come later when his cherished Kathryn wasn’t tucked peacefully against him. The tears did, at least, offer an expression for his heartbreak over her merciless suffering.

Kathryn struggled against her bonds, unable to move her arms. Flashes of light blinded her and she turned her face to look away, only to have her head forced forward. “Open your eyes!” they demanded, kicking her until she complied. Laughter roared around her as pain burned through her abdomen. She tried to see past the light, tried to see who was laughing at her, but there was nothing but that light. She forced down the bile she felt in her throat. The blindfold was over her eyes again, wrapped too tight. Darkness surrounded her and she felt hands all over her, groping, pulling, pinching, hurting. She clamped her mouth shut to prevent the screams that threatened, but it became too much and she cried out in pain.

The scream transferred into another reality, one where she was hot and shivering violently, nausea overwhelming her and her heart pounding so hard that she felt breathless. Her stomach was retching and there was someone trying to talk to her. Other voices arrived, but she couldn't see, afraid to open her eyes. There was too much pain, too much fear. She wanted it to stop, yelled for it to stop, pleaded with herself to make it stop. After struggling helplessly, her energy began to wane and she fell back, limp, still crying softly for it to stop.

She felt a cool cloth placed on her forehead and someone was gently stroking the back of her hand. She was drawn to that touch and turned her hand over to accept it. The gentle touch became slightly stronger and she cracked her eyes to try to see, but the bright lights were there again. She clamped down hard and turned her head away, trembling with fear that she'd be forced to turn back.

She heard someone whisper, "Dim the lights," and it was only a moment before her eyelids changed from pink to black and she felt relief, knowing she wouldn't be blinded this time.

"Kathryn, are you with me?" a familiar voice asked.

It was so familiar and gentle that she braved opening her eyes again. She saw soft brown, worried eyes looking down at her. Sensing someone else's presence, she looked quickly at another concerned face.

"Katie? Do you know where you are?"

She slowly looked right and left, trying to orient herself, and reality began to settle in. She was at her mom's house. She'd had a bad dream. A nurse was there with her, too. Looking back at Chakotay, she asked, "Nightmare?"

He nodded and replaced the fallen cloth on her forehead, calmly saying, "A big one."

Gretchen sat on the bed and took her hand. "Katie, you're safe."

"I know." She squeezed her mom's hand and then took the cloth off her forehead. "Help me up?"

Chakotay looked at Patty for direction and then told Kathryn, "Not just yet. Let's take it easy." He stroked her arm lovingly

She relaxed and closed her eyes. "I'm okay now."

He touched her cheeks with the cool, soothing cloth. "Give it a minute. Patty, should she should drink some fruit juice?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

Gretchen said, "I'll be right back."

Kathryn looked up at him and sighed, having severe déjà vu to waking up from nightmares two years prior. "I hate this." She rested her hand on his thigh.

"I know." He gently pushed the damp hair strands out of her face.

Patty said, "Your heart handled it fine, Admiral. The monitors didn't pick up anything new that we didn't record during your previous nightmares."

Kathryn explained to Chakotay, "I did this four times last night. Harry was with me. A couple times the night before." With authority, she stated, "From now on, there will be no more discussing my abduction right before I fall asleep."

"Understood, Admiral." He leaned down and gave her a simple kiss.

Her mom returned and they helped her sit up slowly and drink the juice. When they were sure she was fine, they helped her change into a loose pair of pajamas and settle back into bed. Patty and Gretchen left them alone, but her mom looked worried as she closed the door.

"I have to stop this," Kathryn stated.

"Stop having bad dreams?" Chakotay asked as he crawled in next to her.

"Yes."

He stretched out on his side facing her, propped up on his elbow. "Hmmm... let me know how that works, would you? I still have bad dreams from things that happened nine years ago."

"Yeah, but there's a big difference between a bad dream and uncontrollable terrors." She sighed heavily. "Mind over matter."

"It's that easy, is it?"

She looked at the doubt in his expression. "Don't look at me that way."

He rolled forward and kissed her again. "Just give it some time. It's still fresh in your mind. You know it took you months of these middle-of-the-night talks to recover from assimilation. Your nightmare tonight was reminiscent of those first couple of weeks."

Looking into his deep, brown eyes, she felt immeasurable relief. "I wanted you so much the last two nights."

He tilted his head in concern. "You said Harry was in sickbay with you?"

"Yes. For the first few days, I was given a neural suppressant because my heart couldn't take the stress. Dr. Joe wasn't kidding when he said it was weak."

"So I gathered." He lovingly caressed her hand.

"Then, night before last, the doctors wanted to see if my heart could handle the stress without the medication. The counselor from the Enterprise was with me. Next day, their ship was sent off on another mission so I asked Harry to stay with me. We've grown pretty close."

"I sensed that." Chakotay smiled warmly.

She took a cleansing breath and said, "Let's talk about something other than nightmares."

"All right, what would you like to talk about?"

She needed to get her mind on something else. "Miral. How was her birthday party?"

"It was okay. There were too many people there and she got a little overwhelmed, had to take a nap in the middle of it. On the whole, the party was a little subdued because her godmother wasn't there. I won't say why because we're not talking about it."

"Did you take a gift for me?"

"I took one from both of us. A big tangle of colorful wires with beads that she can scoot around."

"Sounds complicated." She frowned.

"Your mom said it was Katie's favorite thing to play with when she was one."

"I should call Phoebe tomorrow."

"She'll be here for lunch and they want to re-do Christmas. Your mom talked to her today after we arrived, and they cried a lot. We hadn't disclosed to her that you'd been rescued."

"We're not talking about that," she insisted.

"So many topics off-limits?"

She glanced at the clock. "After midnight, yes."

"I have one, if you're feeling awake."

“Too awake. Go for it.”

“Joe checked to see if you were ovulating?”

She smiled guiltily. “When I jokingly said that you’d keep me warm, he got worried because my boosters are no longer active and yours aren’t up to date.”

“Ah... so he was giving us the go-ahead to have sex.” He blushed. “That’s great, just what I want him to think about.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She laced their fingers together. “My hormones are so messed up that it wouldn’t be an issue. Not that I’ll be strong enough to attempt it for awhile.”

“Well, I’ll get updated so we don’t have to be concerned.”

She was quiet for a moment, trying to decide whether to tell him what had been on her mind earlier that evening, and off and on during the past year.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Her eyes found his as she nibbled on her lip. Deciding to come out with it, she said, “I’d like to discuss the possibility of not renewing our boosters.”

“You would?”

“If you’re willing,” she suggested hesitantly.

His smile slowly brightened his face. “You want to have a child?”

“Or two.” She looked away momentarily and then back to gauge his reaction, sure that her smile was giving her true feelings away.

“I can’t imagine anything I’d love more than to create a family with you.” He caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

“I have a confession.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s still a smart part about my trip with the Relativity that I haven’t shared with you, yet.”

“Did you encounter the ghost of Christmas future?”

She chuckled. “In a manner of speaking, yes. I met one of our descendants.”

“Descendants?” His forehead wrinkled. “You want to have children to protect the timeline?”

“Nooo,” she insisted immediately. “I’ve always wanted children, but gave up on the idea because of Voyager.” She attempted to explain. “Meeting our descendant was eye-opening because she existed only because you and I created that possibility. I thought I was too old, but there she was, a result of this timeline, so I knew it could happen.”

“You’ve been thinking about this since then?”

“In the back of my mind. I made a promise to my older self that I’d live my life to the fullest to make her sacrifice worthwhile. After almost losing my life last week, I don’t want to put it off anymore. I think having a family with you is about as full as I could make it.”

“Is this why you want to make your job safer?”

“Part of the reason. I’m worried that this experience, that we’re not going to talk about, has changed me, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to go back out there again.”

“It’s too soon to even begin considering the long-term effects.”

Kathryn nodded and took a shaky breath. “Regardless, it’s a wake-up call that I might actually be a mere mortal.”

“You? A mere mortal? How profound,” he joked. “But anything that encourages you to safeguard your life is a balm to my heart right now.”

She put her hand over his heart and rubbed his chest in soothing circles. “If I’m safer, it makes pregnancy viable. I wouldn’t consider putting a child, our child, in danger, and I highly doubt that anyone else would expect me to, either.”

“Okay then. If Admiral Khurma agrees to your stipulations, then as soon as Dr. Joe gives us the all-clear, let’s work on it.”

“If Khurma wants me, he has to agree.” She threaded their fingers together and looked at the way they intertwined so naturally. “However, there is one small thing we need to take care of before we consider starting a family.”

“What’s that?” He smiled as she caressed his thumb.

“A wedding.” She looked up at him. “If the offer still stands?”

He laughed. “Don’t go planning it, yet. I haven’t officially proposed.”

“I believe you said, ‘Marry me,’ or was I mistaken?”

“I’ve caught you on a technicality, Admiral. You said no, so now you have to wait for another proposal.”

She rolled her eyes. “How quaint. I could ask you.”

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “But you won’t.”

“Hmph,” she said as she stretched her body gently. “We should try to sleep. Spoon me?”

He snuggled up behind her, carefully supporting her to avoid putting too much pressure on her shoulder. “I hope this conversation will give you more pleasant dreams.”

“Me too,” she sighed contently and relaxed against him. “If not, you’ll be here, and I’ll be okay.”

“That’s right, love. You will.”
