

The Future is Ours – Part 18

“A Heart Broken”

By Dawn

Summary: Just when things are looking up...

Rated PG-13

“Aunt Katie! Aunt Katie!” The boisterous five-year old jumped onto the couch, into Kathryn’s arms, and just about strangled her with a tight hug around the neck. “I knew you’d find your way back!”

“Hi, sweetheart.” Kathryn held her tightly, savoring the enthusiastic affection that only a small child could give.

“Katie!” Phoebe exclaimed as she came inside.

Kathryn couldn’t turn her head to look at her sister because the little girl’s hold was so tight. “She’s okay, Phoebe.” What Kathryn wasn’t expecting was to be tackled by her sister at that exact moment. “Ooomph!”

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again!”

Kathryn muttered, “I guess your ‘Katie’ was for me, not her.” Kathryn felt thoroughly squashed, and she loved it. She had one arm around Katie and one around Phoebe. It didn’t matter that it hurt, she wanted to hold them.

Phoebe’s husband, Mike, asked Gretchen, “I assume your prodigal daughter is under there somewhere?”

“She was there a few minutes ago.” Gretchen laughed. “Phoebe? Katie? Can she breathe?”

Kathryn answered from under the pile-up, “Barely, but it’s worth it.”

Gretchen said, “Mike, Phoebe, I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Patty Fields, Katie’s nurse.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant.” Mike shook her hand.

Patty said, “And you as well.”

“Thanks for taking care of my big sister,” Phoebe said as she relaxed her grip

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Richards.”

Phoebe smiled at Patty and then took a good look at Kathryn. “So, do you want the truth or do you want me to tell you how great you look?”

Kathryn laughed. “I’ll take the latter.” She peeled Katie’s arm from her neck so she could look at the little girl. “How is kindergarten, sweetie?”

“It’s vacation time. I don’t have school.” Katie stated as she looked her aunt over. “You look bad.”

“I forgot to eat while I was gone.”

“That’s silly.”

“Yes, it is very silly,” Kathryn hugged the little girl again. “You’ll have to make sure I eat all of my vegetables today.”

“Is Uncle Kotay coming over?”

“He’s already here, in the kitchen cooking our lunch,” Kathryn said happily. “When did you start calling him your uncle?”

“Mommy said he’s gonna be my uncle soon.” She argued, “I asked him and he said I could.”

“Well, of course you can call him that.” Kathryn reassured her by mussing up her hair. “I’ve really missed you. I think you must be an entire head taller.”

“I’m not a head taller! I’m almost a meter!”

Kathryn laughed, “Yes, you are.”

“Daddy?” She jumped up. “Can we find Uncle Kotay?”

“Sure. Let’s go see if he needs help with lunch.”

After they left, Phoebe said, “She’s precocious.”

“Yes, she is, and I wouldn’t want her any other way.” Kathryn hugged her sister again. “How are you doing?”

“Better than I was a couple days ago,” Phoebe looked at her mother with annoyance.

Kathryn looked between them. “You’re upset that Mom didn’t tell you I’d been rescued?”

“Got it one, sis.” Phoebe glared at Kathryn. “Nor did you, I might add.”

“You’re blaming me?” Kathryn asked with disbelief. “I was under a communication block-out and asleep most of the time.”

“Hmph.” Phoebe crossed her arms. “Do you have any idea how...?” She stopped when Gretchen looked severely at her. “Fine,” she said with resignation.

Kathryn said, “I’m really sorry about the need for secrecy, but it was a dangerous situation.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Phoebe glared, “I mean look at you!”

“Hey, what happened to telling me how great I look?”

“I’d like to give someone a piece of my mind,” Phoebe muttered.

Kathryn pulled her sister into another hug. “As would I, sis.”

While hugging, Phoebe responded, “You did in that press conference yesterday. You looked like you were ready to spit nails. You know, right after you managed to avoid fainting.”

“Yes, well,” Kathryn shrugged. “Glad to know that I was clear.”

Mike came back into the room at that moment. “Kathryn, when do you ever not get your point across?”

Gretchen said, “He’s right, you know.”

“Ladies, lunch is served,” Mike announced.

Towards the end of lunch, Kathryn’s eyelids grew heavy and she began to nod off until she felt Chakotay’s arms around her. She whispered, “Sorry.”

“Shhh, let’s get you to bed,” he said as he scooped her up into his arms.

“Need some help?” Mike asked, getting up.

“I’ll let you get the door. Gretchen, could you get Patty?”

“Mommy, what’s wrong with Aunt Katie?”

Phoebe answered, "She's just tired and wants to take a nap. Do you want one, too?"

Kathryn heard Katie answer, "I'm too old for naps," as Chakotay carried her into the bedroom.

Mike said, "Let me pull back the covers."

They got her tucked into bed and after Mike returned to the dining room, Chakotay started closing the window shade.

"Leave it open?" Kathryn asked.

He turned around, smiling. "I thought you were already asleep."

"Just about," she murmured. "I like the light. Too much time in darkness."

Patty came in and got Kathryn's medications out of the case.

Chakotay asked, "May I give them to her?"

"Of course," she said with a smile and started taking Kathryn's heart rate and blood pressure.

He sat on the edge of the bed and released a hypo into her neck. "This is the antibiotic."

Kathryn rubbed the tingling spot. "You're pretty good at taking care of me."

"My life's ambition. How's the pain?"

"Moderate, but I don't want to sleep all day."

Chakotay asked Patty, "Do we have any other analgesics here?"

"No, and I can't give her another kind with a doctor approving it."

He tapped his commbadge. "Chakotay to Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical."

"Zimmerman here. Everything okay, Captain?"

"Yes, just need medication advice." He explained the situation.

"Lieutenant Fields, administer half a dose, and I'll send you an alternative for later."

"Thank you, Joe," Kathryn said.

"You're welcome, Admiral. Sleep well. Zimmerman out."

Patty made the adjustment on the vial and handed it back to Chakotay. “Here you go. I’ll be in the sunroom if you need me.”

“Thanks.” He released the contents into her jugular vein and said, “I do like taking care of you. I hope you know that.”

Grinning sleepily, she said, “Even the trips to the bathroom?”

“Even those. Need one?”

She shook her head and then winked. “I think your favorite was giving me a bath this morning.”

A rosy blush tinged his cheeks. “Yes, I did enjoy that, and I suspect that you did, too.” He leaned down and gave her a lingering kiss, whispering against her lips, “Because you’re smiling.”

“Mmmhmmm. Again?” She moaned softly as the second, longer kiss warmed her lips.

“Time to sleep, love.”

“’kay. Going to have sweet dreams after that.”

“I’m leaving a commbadge on the table. Call for me when you wake up.”

“Mmmhmmm. Don’t let me sleep all day.”

She felt a kiss on her forehead as she drifted off to sleep.

After her nap, she rejoined her family, feeling happy and content as she sat amongst them around the Christmas tree. She’d missed them all so much – not just during her ordeal, but for the entire four months that she’d been gone. And that was just one more reason to stay on Earth as much as possible.

She and Katie put together a puzzle and colored a few princess pictures out of a coloring book. Kathryn felt everyone’s eyes on her, but of course, Chakotay’s most often. At first, she was afraid that he was worried about her, but then she realized that he was just watching, almost as if mesmerized by her presence. She made a point of returning his gazes with a reassuring smile.

After dinner that evening, the promised Christmas re-enactment got into full swing. The family went so far as to rewrap all the presents and act completely surprised when they opened them for the second time. The re-dramatization became hysterically funny as

they overreacted to the simplest of gifts, and did the opposite with what had been their favorites.

After all the gifts had been re-opened, Phoebe picked up another large package and gave it to Kathryn. "I hope you don't mind that I got you a little something extra?"

Kathryn basked in delight as she received the gift. "Now why would I mind that?" She used her fingernail to slice through the tape and then peeled away the wrapping very carefully.

"Are you trying to draw this out?" Mike asked. "Just rip it open."

"That's funny considering you just opened the same presents two times." Kathryn pointed out, "I, however, am savoring the moment." She set the lid on the floor and peeled back the tissue paper. "Clothes?" she asked happily.

"Three new outfits," Phoebe announced. "Good for lounging around and sleeping in."

Kathryn lifted out the first top and fingered the fabric. "It's so soft," she held it against her cheek.

"I thought you might enjoy how silky they feel," Phoebe said. "They're size four, but the pants have drawstrings so you can cinch them up until you get your weight back."

"Thank you," Kathryn looked through them to see that all three were made from the same fabric, but in three different styles and three different colors. "They're perfect for what I have on my agenda."

"Which is what?" Mike asked.

Kathryn held one top against her chest to check for fit. "Sleeping," she announced. "Along with some eating, snuggling, reading, and more sleeping."

"While we're on the topic of snuggling," Chakotay said. "I also have one more gift for you."

She glanced up with interest. "Oh?"

He moved her clothes to the floor before presenting her with a small red box tied with a white satin ribbon. She had a really good hunch as to what it might be, and in response, a flock of butterflies flitted around in her stomach.

"You might want to savor this one, too," he suggested with a glimmer in his eyes.

"I intend to." The corner of her mouth twitched as she tried to contain her smile. The satin ribbon untied easily, and when she lifted the lid, she was rewarded with another

box, a black velvet one with a brass hinge. As she lifted it out, her eyes flicked up to his and she saw that he was intently watching her face for a reaction. Smiling broadly, she opened the hinge and saw a breathtaking diamond ring. She really was surprised by the brilliance of it and gasped. “Chakotay, it’s beautiful!”

He took the ring out and set the box aside. Kneeling in front of her, he held her left hand and asked, “Kathryn, my love, would you spend the rest of your life with me? Will you marry me?”

She caressed his cheek as she answered, her eyes growing moist. “Yes, Chakotay, I would love to.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.” He slid the ring easily onto her finger and locked eyes with her. Ever so slowly, he moved closer, cradled her face, and brought their lips together for a loving kiss.

His lips were warm and sensual as they drew a soft moan from deep within her. The intimate connection was intense; the long dormant sparks of passion igniting like a fire within her. If it hadn’t been for her family watching them, she would’ve wound her fingers into his hair and urged him to take it deeper.

When the kiss ended, their foreheads touched and his fingers caressed her flushed cheeks, cherishing the beautiful moment.

She whispered, “Can I have more of that later?”

“It would be my pleasure,” he whispered into her ear, letting his lips graze her cheek as he drew back.

She looked up at her family who was quietly beaming at them. “I assume you all knew about this?”

“Well, yes,” Gretchen admitted. “One of the many reasons we decided to recreate Christmas for you.”

Chakotay said, “I was going to ask you at the Voyager reunion, in front of the entire crew.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. “That would have been something, but this...” She gestured to all the detritus of Christmas around them, “is the setting I’ve dreamt about for the last few months.”

“I’m glad I could make your dream come true, then.” Chakotay kissed her again and then retook his seat beside her. “Now, we need to think about planning a dream of a wedding for you.”

“For us,” she corrected him.

Gretchen said, “I’ve been thinking about wedding plans ever since he told me that he was going to propose again two months ago.”

“Good,” Kathryn said. “I’d like to plan it for as soon as possible, but not until I have enough strength to keep from sleeping through it.”

He tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “Maybe in a month or two.”

“I’d like that.” She nestled against his chest. “I love you.”

Holding her close, he said, “I love you, too.”

She was comfortable, warm, content, and feeling very sleepy again. As people bustled around them cleaning up, she snuggled in for a little nap. The ring felt curious on her finger, making her want to toy with it as she began to doze off to sleep.

When Chakotay realized that she was settling in for the long haul, he gathered her up and scooted back so he could rest with her. Gretchen put pillows behind his back and made him blush as she ruffled his hair. He felt very at home with Kathryn’s family, soon to be his family. Phoebe tucked a blanket over them, Mike turned down the lights, and Gretchen ushered Katie into the kitchen.

A little while later, Kathryn felt kisses on her cheek as her family whispered goodbye. She had to smother a laugh when Katie whispered, “Goodbye,” about as loud as she could. Once they were out the door, Kathryn began to fall asleep again. Comfortably ensconced in Chakotay’s arms, she mumbled, “This is what I need. A whole lot of this.”

He whispered, “This is all yours, love.”

Chakotay woke up slowly the next morning as the early dawn’s sunlight from the bedroom window warmed his face. He’d left the shades open the night before so that Kathryn could be bathed in sunlight upon waking, per her request. Feeling content and lethargic, he turned on his side to watch Kathryn sleep. She was on her side, facing away from him, with her upper body propped with three pillows.

She’d had a really rough night with multiple nightmares, all of which seemed to revolve around fears of being trapped and beaten. Not that she was a fragile woman by any stretch of the imagination, but the thought of her being assaulted without being able to defend herself made his blood boil.

Each nightmare had drained her energy more than the last. All of them had left her short of breath, her heart racing to handle the adrenaline rush. She’d complained after the last

one that her entire chest hurt from the exertion, and was finding it uncomfortable to draw in a full breath.

Patty had been in contact with Dr. Joe throughout the night and although they were concerned about her chest pain, Joe assured them that it wasn't unexpected with the speed her heart was beating. They'd figured out that she was most comfortable being slightly elevated, and once they had her situated, she fell asleep quickly and managed to sleep for several uninterrupted hours.

He fingered her hair as it cascaded down the sides of the pillows. Since her miraculous return, he couldn't get enough of holding her, watching her, and caring for her. He'd seen her in pretty bad shape in the past, but never had she been so frail and compliant. That alone was an indicator of just how bad she felt, or was a result of the psychological trauma that the incident had caused.

He very carefully added a pillow under his own head to raise his shoulders to her height and then moved closer so he could spoon her in his arms. She had told him once how much she loved being held like that, and he was more than happy to accommodate her. As he snuggled up close, he nuzzled his face against her hair. Seconds later, he lifted his head because something didn't sound right. Her breathing was uneven, shallow, and she was wheezing lightly with every inhalation.

"Kathryn?" He touched her back and felt the muscles around her ribcage working hard. Jumping into action, he pulled back the blankets and turned her onto her back. He'd been told that, in her condition, shortness of breath could be a sign of an impending stroke or heart attack.

"Kathryn," he said as he anxiously patted her heated, flushed cheeks. "Wake up. Come on, love. Wake up for me."

When she didn't respond, he scrambled off the bed and opened the door. "Patty! Gretchen!" Not waiting for their replies, he went back to Kathryn and tried waking her again.

"Kathryn!" He squeezed her hands, her arms, patted her face firmly. Nothing made her stir. "Wake up, love. Please, wake up."

"What is it?" Gretchen rushed in, followed immediately by Patty who started taking readings immediately.

"She's not waking up and her breathing is shallow and labored. Patty, do you have your commbadge? We might need to get her to Starfleet Med."

"Get her into a sitting position." Patty tapped her communicator. "Fields to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical."

“Go ahead, Lieutenant,” Joe responded.

As Patty explained the situation, Chakotay straddled Kathryn’s legs and gathered her upper body in his arms to draw her up against his chest. He begged, “Kathryn, open your eyes. Come on, Kathryn. Can you hear me?”

Joe said, “Give her two cc’s of the stimulant.”

After Patty injected the medication, Kathryn gasped loudly and jerked her head back, but Chakotay was able to catch it before she strained her neck. “Easy,” he said as he looked at her frightened face. “I’m here, love.”

Her eyes had trouble focusing as she struggled to pull air in. “Hurts,” she gasped, trying to compensate with short, rapid pants.

“Try to slow down.” Chakotay breathed as he wanted her to, with slow, full breaths, but she wasn’t able to concentrate on him.

Patty reported, “Her arterial blood gas level is critically low and she’s unable to focus. She’s in pain – could be heart or lungs, I’m not sure.”

“Put an oxygen mask on her, get her shoulders back to open up her chest, and don’t let her panic. I’m on my way.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay tried to catch her eyes, but they were clamped shut as she struggled to breathe. “Look at me, Kathryn.”

Patty struggled with Kathryn to place the mask over her nose and mouth. “Captain, hold her hands so she doesn’t push this off. Mrs. Janeway, climb in behind her.”

“What do you want me to do?” Gretchen asked as she tossed the pillows aside and got into position.

“Hold her up while the Captain talks to her. Scoot all the way back against the headboard and we’ll move her back against you.”

“Hang on, Kathryn.” Chakotay easily lifted her to get her as close to her mother as possible. She had drawn into herself and wasn’t communicating.

Patty said, “Good, now fold your arms around her and take her from him.”

Chakotay guided Kathryn’s head back onto her mother’s shoulder; startling Kathryn and making her open her eyes. “Shhh, you’re okay, love. Try to focus on your breathing.”

“Am,” she gasped. “It hurts!” Tears forming in her eyes, she cried, “Help me!”

“We are and you’re going to be okay.” He and Gretchen worked together to hold her up. “Kathryn, just get as much oxygen as you can. Joe’s on his way.”

“Sharp!” She curled forward against him to try to cope with the pain.

“I know it hurts, but you’re strong and it’ll be over soon.”

Patty said, “We need you to sit up, Admiral.”

She shook her head. “Help me, please!”

Patty said, “I know it’s painful, but you’ve got to sit up so the fluid in your lungs will settle to the bottom.”

“Nooo,” Kathryn moaned as Patty tried to push Kathryn’s chest back towards her mom. “Leave me alone!”

Chakotay supported her head as she curled up against his chest. “I want to help you, Kathryn, but you’ve got to sit up. I’ll hold you close so you can lean against me.”

Patty was clearly frustrated with Kathryn’s stubbornness. “Admiral, don’t fight us. You’re using too much energy.”

When Kathryn wouldn’t budge, Chakotay suggested, “Gretchen, let’s try to brace her chest open. Put your hands on the front of her shoulders.” He put them where he wanted them, and then laid his on top. “Okay, pull her tight against you. She’s going to resist.” Gretchen pulled and Chakotay pushed, and together, they forced Kathryn up and her shoulders back.

“Aaaaaah!” Kathryn cried out in pain, and then sucked in so she could yell, “Stop!”

“Careful!” Patty yelled.

“Ease off!” Chakotay realized too late that they’d hurt her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Kathryn.” He moved in closer so she could rest her head on his shoulder, sandwiching her between the two of them.

“It worked,” Patty said. “She’s getting more oxygen now, so keep holding her.”

Kathryn was still struggling to breathe, now worsened by the forced deep breath that had caused her to start coughing. She pulled air in between every word as she said, “Your...tech...nique... needs...” She couldn’t finish as she whimpered and grabbed at her chest.

“Needs work,” Chakotay finished for her as he tried to support her through the coughing spell. When he saw that she was coughing up a lot of pink-tinged mucus, he glanced

worriedly at Patty who was removing the now dirty oxygen mask and cleaning off Kathryn's hands. "What's happening?"

Patty said quietly, "Blockage from her heart, but the Doctor will be able to treat it."

Joe rushed in and immediately began scanning. "Any improvement?"

Tears were falling down Kathryn's face as she gasped, "Not... nough...."

Chakotay moved out of Joe's way and held Kathryn's hand.

Patty reported, "A slight increase in ABG and she's dislodged some mucous."

"Is the pain focused in your heart or lungs?" Joe asked as he administered a hypospray.

"Both. Sharp... when...bre..." She couldn't finish as she started coughing.

"Kathryn?" Chakotay said worriedly.

"Lay her on her side. I've got to drain the fluid from her lungs."

Chakotay gathered her into his arms and laid her down, facing him, while Gretchen put a pillow under Kathryn's head. Her coughing worsened and she pulled her knees up in a futile attempt to protect herself.

"Hang on, Kathryn." He put his hands in hers so she could squeeze them. It was as much support as he knew how to give. "This will be over, soon."

Joe lifted the back of her shirt and placed an instrument between two ribs. He asked, "Lieutenant, there's a hypo of heparin in my bag."

Still coughing, Kathryn looked at Chakotay with blood-shot eyes. He caressed her cheek as he said, "I love you. It's going to be okay." He wished more than anything that he could take this pain away for her. He asked Joe, "Can you tell where the blockage is?"

"Mmmhmm," he said as he worked, replacing a cylinder on the instrument to gather more of the fluid. "She has a pulmonary arterial obstruction."

As he watched Patty inject the hypo, Chakotay asked, "Is it a blood clot?"

Joe replied, "No, a build up of the infection or a chunk of it has shaken loose and lodged in the valve. It's a very glutinous organism and adheres to itself and everything else. Her right ventricle is working hard to compensate, but not enough blood is getting to her lungs."

Kathryn's coughing had calmed as the fluid level went down. She croaked, "Stop... talking... like... I'm not... here."

"Sorry," Chakotay whispered and kissed her temple. "Does your chest still hurt?"

"Yes," she said definitively, although her body, now drained of energy, was mostly still and limp. She trembled some with every breath.

Joe turned off the instrument and scanned her. "Okay, that's got most of it. Lieutenant, give her 4 cc's of the cough suppressant and a double dose of the new analgesic I sent you yesterday."

"Yes, Doctor." Patty did as asked.

Joe said, "Admiral, I need you on your back, no pillow."

After they got her situated, Joe pulled another instrument out and directed it at her chest. "Admiral, hold as still as you can. Captain and Mrs. Janeway, help her by gently holding her arms and shoulders. I'm removing what I can of the obstruction. Lieutenant, would you assist me?"

As he worked, Kathryn croaked, "How are you going to get it out?"

Joe explained, "This device acts as a microscopic transporter."

"Can you get it all?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I can't remove what's against the valves and artery walls or I risk removing part of that, too. Same goes for the organisms within your cardiac muscle."

They were all quiet while he worked until Kathryn said, "I hate this."

"I know, Kathryn." Chakotay took one of his hands away from her arm and stroked her head. "You're doing great, though. Just relax and let us do the work for you."

"Mmmhmm," she moved her face into his palm. A few moments later, she said, "Joe, I'm dizzy and my lungs are burning."

"Lieutenant, the oxygen mask?"

Patty handed the mask to Chakotay, and he put it on Kathryn. She didn't fight it this time and, once it was in place, she was able to relax into Chakotay's touch. They all remained quiet while Joe kept working, although Chakotay and Gretchen often exchanged worried looks.

When he was done, he took another scan and whispered, "She's asleep."

“Should we wake her?” Chakotay asked.

“Not just yet. We need to talk, and I don’t want to alarm her.”

Chakotay felt a sinking sensation in his gut. “What’s the situation?”

Joe continued to treat her with various pieces of equipment as he talked. “The infection in her heart is spreading to the arteries and veins, causing the build-up of micro-organisms on the heart valves.”

“Okay. What do we need to do?”

“That’s the problem. I haven’t found anything that will fight the infection, nor has anyone else on the cardiac or micro-biology teams at Starfleet Medical. The doctors who treated her last week tried every possible antibiotic, and while they were able to fight off the infections that are common, this one is impervious to everything we’ve tried. Also, I’ve just discovered a strain of it in her lungs, but it doesn’t look like it took hold of the lung tissue.” He held up the cylinder of fluid he’d taken. “It’s in here.”

Chakotay took a shuddering breath. “Options?”

“I’ve contacted the leading cardiac specialist in Starfleet, Dr. Pulaski. She’s stationed at a research institute near Vulcan, but this case has her intrigued. She’s on her way, and will arrive day after tomorrow. I’d like the Admiral to check into Starfleet Medical that morning so we can run tests.”

“Should she go there now?” Gretchen asked.

Joe rubbed his chin. “At this point, what she needs most is rest and nourishment. I’ve cleared all potential obstructions, and there’s nothing else I can do until Dr. Pulaski arrives. I think the Admiral will be more comfortable here.” He looked pointedly at Chakotay. “We all know how irritable she can get when confined to a medical facility, and she’ll rest better if she’s relaxed.”

“Okay,” Chakotay said shakily. “Although she’s been even-tempered about her medical needs. Perhaps not having a starship to command makes her a better patient.” He looked down at Kathryn and felt an overwhelming sense of anxiety.

“Admiral?” Joe asked as he rubbed her hand to rouse her.

“Mmmmm,” she responded, but didn’t open her eyes.

“I need you to wake up for a minute.”

She forced her eyes open. “Hmm?”

“Your chest will be sore for awhile, but most of the obstruction has been removed. I want you to rest today. Absolutely no physical activity, and eat regularly.”

“kay.” She closed her eyes again. “...tired.”

He told Patty, “Her blood sugar is very low. Get her to eat something as soon as possible.”

“We planned to have Tom and B’Elanna over for lunch. Will that be too much for her?” Chakotay asked.

“I’d postpone it until tomorrow, at least. Even then, don’t let her do anything that will get her heart rate up. That includes sitting on the floor with Miral or getting into a verbal sparring match with B’Elanna. If she can rest most of today, she should be strong enough.”

Patty asked, “Should I wait to give her the antibiotics and other medications?”

“Until after she eats, yes.” He typed something into a PADD. “This is the approval code to replicate a medicated oxygen treatment. She should breathe it all day and into the night if her lungs are still burning.”

Gretchen asked, “Should we keep her sitting up or lying down?”

“However she’s most comfortable.” Joe looked at all of them and said, “We’ll figure something out. It’s just going to take a lot of research and experimentation on our part.”

“Thank you, Joe,” Chakotay said as he walked with him to the front door.

“Have Lieutenant Fields call me if the Admiral is in a lot of pain. There shouldn’t be anymore blockage issues for a few more days and by then, I plan to be in the middle of killing this organism.”

After the doctor left, Chakotay went back into Kathryn’s room to find Patty quietly working and Gretchen straightening out the bedcovers over her daughter. He asked Gretchen, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said quietly. “It’s my daughter who isn’t. If I fix her some breakfast, would you try to get her to eat it?”

“I’ll do my best.” He pulled Gretchen into a hug. “They’ve got the best people in the entire Federation working on this.”

She nodded and left the room without saying anything.

Patty said, "I'll sit with the Admiral if you want to get dressed."

Chakotay sighed tiredly. "All right." He walked into the bathroom mumbling, "What a way to start the day."

By the time he finished, Gretchen was bringing in a tray. She said, "Sorry about..."

"Nothing to be sorry about. This isn't easy to deal with."

Gretchen forced a smile. "Let me know if you need anything else. There's enough for both you and Katie." Turning to the nurse, she said, "Patty, I thought he might have better luck getting her to eat. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not." Her reassuring smile was kind. "I think you're right."

Chakotay said, "Thank you."

Gretchen took a deep breath before announcing, "I'll be in the sunroom. I need a few minutes of quiet."

"I understand." He watched her go and then sat on the bed.

Patty laid three hyposprays on the nightstand and a nasal breathing tube on the pillow next to Kathryn. "For after she eats. I'll be in my room if you need help."

"Thanks, Patty." He waited until she left and then touched Kathryn's face. "Love, can you wake up?"

Getting no response, he loudly asked, "Kathryn?"

"Mmmmmmm."

"You need to eat something." He removed the mask.

"Sleepy."

"I know. You're sleepy because you need to eat."

"No," she replied matter-of-factly. "'cause I couldn't breathe."

He leaned forward and kissed her softly to draw a response out of her. As soon as she started moving her lips, he pulled away, smiling. "Now you're awake."

"Devious," she accused. Her eyes were still closed.

“Yes, I am.” He smiled guiltily as he gathered her into his arms and propped her up on a small mountain of pillows.

Sleepily, she asked, “More kisses?”

“Not today, might make your heart rate go up.”

“Mmmmm.”

“Do you want me to feed you?” He was sure this would get her.

“Don’t feel like eating. Too weak.”

That wasn’t the response he was expecting. He picked up the orange juice with the bendable straw and held it to her lips. “Take a sip.”

She opened her eyes briefly and then closed them again as she let him put the straw in her mouth. After she drank a little, she let the straw go. “’s good.”

“Are you in any pain?”

“Some. Wiped out.”

He touched her lips with his finger so she knew that something was there. “A bite of eggs?” He was really surprised when she opened her mouth and accepted it. Her compliance was extremely unusual and concerned him gravely. The pattern of touching her lips and her accepting what he offered continued until she’d eaten about half of her portion of ham, eggs, and juice. She chewed slowly so she could breathe freely and eat at the same time, giving him the opportunity to eat his breakfast between her bites.

Towards the end of the meal, he had to wake her up for each bite and decided that she probably needed the sleep more than she needed the rest of the food. He injected a hypo into her neck, startling her awake. “Sorry about that.”

She moaned and closed her eyes again. “’s okay.”

“Two more,” he warned.

Grimacing, she asked, “Can I sleep now?”

“Yes, but I need to put this on you.” He waited until she opened her eyes before he held up the oxygen tube.

“’kay.” She helped him get the tube in her nose and looped around her ears.

“Joe said it’s medicated and should help your lungs.” Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. “Rest now. I’ll be back in a few minutes to sit with you.”

He took the tray to the kitchen and saw that Gretchen was sitting out in the sunroom, wrapped in a blanket, and staring at nothing. Going out to check on her, he asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“Hmmm?” She turned to him and then it registered what he asked. “Oh, no thank you.”

“She ate more than I expected, although I had to feed it to her.”

Gretchen raised an eyebrow in the typical Janeway fashion. “She LET you feed her?”

“I was surprised, too.”

Sadly, she said, “That’s not my Katie.”

“I think it’s just an indicator of how weak she feels.”

“Or something’s not right with her.” With a tremble in her voice, she asked, “Did they break her spirit?”

His voice was quiet. “I hope not.”

“She gets depressed sometimes. Did you know that?”

“Yes, I do, but I don’t see that in her right now.”

“I’ve been worried about how to tell you without interfering.” Gretchen smiled sadly. “First time it happened, she was in high school. Then the summer she wrote her doctoral thesis. She almost didn’t finish it.”

“And after your husband and her first fiancé passed away.”

“Yes,” Gretchen’s eyes were compassionate as she looked at him. “Did it happen on Voyager?”

“Yes, but we got through it.” He chose not to tell her about last summer.

She looked at him for a long moment and then rubbed her eyes. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to go into town today. I’ve been hiding in this house for a month.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Are you going to visit someone?”

Gretchen nodded absently. "Some friends. I missed all the Christmas and New Year's parties. There's a luncheon tomorrow that I wasn't going to go to, but I might try to make it."

"Take as much time as you need. We'll be fine."

"Thank you." Before he went back into the house, she asked, "Contact me if anything..."

"I will." He gave her a tender smile and then went into the study to place a comm call to Tom and B'Elanna.

Tom answered, "Hi, how is she today?"

"Not as good as we'd hoped. Could we delay our lunch plans until tomorrow?"

"Of course. Do you need anything?" he asked with concern.

Sighing, he said, "To start the last month over, would be nice. We could fake some kind of emergency to get her to come home early."

"Hmm. Well, I can ask my lovely and talented wife to start working on a time travel invention."

"That would be a great help. Thanks."

"We'll jump right on it." Tom said with an understanding smile and then his expression became more serious. "You look like you could use a friend."

Chakotay looked away before he embarrassed himself. "I could use my best friend healthy again. I'm not sure if anything else will do."

Quietly, Tom asked, "She's that sick?"

He took a deep breath and nodded. "She's that sick. But..." He paused to put on a brave face. "She's going to be fine. We'll make sure of it."

"That's right. She will be," he assured. "If you need to talk, one of us can be there in a flash."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. It's just hard when the woman you love is hurting. You've been there."

"Yes, I have, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about it, but I'm willing to listen if you need it."

"Give me a few days, and I might." He shrugged. "Or maybe just a beer."

“Whatever you need. Call us in the morning if want me to bring some over. Otherwise, we’ll see you at eleven tomorrow?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Tom.”

When he went back to their bedroom, he found Kathryn sound asleep. She looked so warm and cozy that he decided to crawl in next to her and rest his eyes. It had been a long night, followed by an even longer morning, and he was exhausted. Moments after his head hit the pillow, he was sleeping right along with her.

When he woke up, he saw that her eyes were open and that she was watching the snow falling outside the window. “Hello, beautiful,” he said affectionately.

She looked at him with a bright smile. “Beautiful?”

“Very beautiful.” He held her hand, weaving their fingers together.

“A new pet name? You usually call me ‘my love.’”

“You are both.” He kissed her fingers. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she said with a sigh. “Chest muscles hurt, and my lungs feel raw, but I can breathe.”

“Always a plus.” He re-tucked the oxygen tube behind her ear. “If you want stronger pain meds, we’ll ask Patty about something else. She gave you a double dose of the mild one.”

“Did you cancel Tom and Lanna?”

“Just postponed until tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing them. And Miral, too. She must be really big now.”

“Well, bigger at least.” He winked. “Day after tomorrow, Joe wants you in for tests. A heart specialist is en route to have a look at you. A Dr. Pulaski.”

“Where from?”

“Somewhere near Vulcan. I’m not sure.”

She shrugged with her head, but didn’t move her shoulders. “He knows best.”

“Do you want to get out of bed?”

“No, but I should because I need to use the bathroom.”

“All right.” He started getting up until she stopped him.

“You don’t need to help me. Patty can.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know, but I'm afraid that I'm wearing you out.”

He shook his head as he got up and came around to her side of the bed. “Taking care of you is helping me heal, and I would feel remiss if I weren’t your primary caregiver.”

“Okay,” she smiled warmly. “I certainly prefer you. Nothing against her, of course.”

“Of course not.” He pulled back the covers and slowly helped her sit up. “Any dizziness?”

“Ugh, yes.” She rested her head against his shoulder.

“Let’s give it a minute, then.”

“I'm afraid I’ll wet myself if we wait much longer.”

“All right then, I’ll carry you.” He gave her the small oxygen tank and lifted her up into his arms. “Okay?”

“Mmmhmm.” Her eyes were clamped shut.

When they got to the bathroom, he set her feet on the floor. “Can you stand on your own?”

“I think so.” She straightened her legs, but her knees buckled immediately. “Aaah!”

Holding her tight, he said, “I’ve got you, but I'm guessing that’s a no.”

They heard Patty call from the bedroom, “Do you need help?”

“Yes,” Kathryn replied, her face buried in Chakotay’s chest.

“Patty, I’ll hold her up if you can help with her pants.”

“No problem.” The two of them worked together to get her needs taken care of and back to bed.

Settled back under the covers, Kathryn said, “Thank you, Patty.”

“You’re more than welcome, Admiral.”

“Mmm. The last thing I feel like right now is an admiral.”

Patty smiled as she took some readings. “That may be, but you’ve earned that title. I can’t say the same for any other admirals I’ve met.”

“Thank you, I think.” Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And I’m sorry about this morning. I was a real bear.”

“Ohh, don’t worry about that. Coping with pain and discomfort while scared is not easy, and I knew that at the time.”

“You’re very understanding.”

She replied with a lilt in her voice, “I’m a nurse.”

As Chakotay helped her resituate the pillows, Kathryn said, “Patty, I want to thank you again for staying with us.”

“You’re welcome, but I consider it an honor.”

“Thank you. I hope you’re not missing time with your own family?”

Patty became preoccupied with the monitor display. “I lost my family when the colony on Dezra was destroyed.”

“Oh,” Kathryn gasped. “I’m so sorry.”

She shrugged dismissively. “A fact of war.”

Sympathetically, Kathryn looked at Chakotay. “I’ve heard the same story too many times.”

He squeezed her hand. “That’s what was so great about Voyager. We created a new family out there.”

Patty smiled at them. “And that’s what is so enthralling about the Voyager crew. For all of us who lost too much during the war, it’s really something to watch how you formed such a close community on that ship after losing your homes and loved ones.”

Chakotay chuckled. “Well, if you keep spending time with us, you might have second thoughts about Voyager’s crew. We’re one nutty bunch.”

Laughing, Patty replied, “Which makes you that much more appealing.” Taking one last scan, she added, “If there’s nothing else you need, I’ll let you get some more rest.”

“I think I’m as settled as I can be.”

“All right. I’ll be in the living room trying to remember how to knit.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Maybe I can help you with that later.”

“I’d like that.”

After she left, Chakotay said, “I like her.”

“Me, too.”

“So, do you feel like sleeping more?”

“Not yet,” she said with a grin.

“What?”

“Do you have Persuasion?”

He laughed. “Yes, would you like me to read to you?”

“If you don’t mind?” she asked with thinly veiled anticipation. “I want to hear more about Anne, and after the last chapter, I’ve been dreaming about what our house will be like. As soon as I’m healthy, we should start looking for one.”

Kissing her fingers again, he said, “I don’t mind at all. Tell me about this dream house of ours while I get the PADD.”

By lunch, Kathryn had gained enough strength to sit up and eat on her own. Then after a short nap, she moved to the sun room so she could have a better vantage point to watch the snow fall. As promised, she helped Patty re-learn how to knit and tried to do a little herself, but had to stop because it made her arms ache. Instead, Chakotay brought her a computer interface and they browsed through some real-estate listings.

Gretchen arrived home in time to cook dinner, full of information about local gossip, including what her friends thought about Kathryn’s situation. Throughout the meal, they listened to Gretchen talk on and on about everything she’d learned that day. Kathryn suspected that her mother was doing all she could to avoid discussing her daughter’s heart issue and to ignore the fact that she was carrying around an oxygen tank.

Dr. Joe paid her another visit that evening and made some changes to her medication. He instructed her to keep breathing the medicated oxygen all night, and told Patty to do another round of hemodialysis.

After a bath, Kathryn put on a comfortable nightshirt and was sitting up in bed when Patty came in to get her situated for the night. After their scare that morning, they all agreed that Kathryn should be connected to the monitor as she slept so that they'd hear an alarm if Kathryn's heart or lung functions were in jeopardy.

Chakotay held Kathryn's hand as the dialysis cuff was attached to the primary vein and artery in her thigh. It wasn't overly painful, but the insertion of the catheters into her blood vessels was far from pleasant.

Patty said, "Just about finished. Usually this is placed in the arm where it's not quite so painful."

"I think I'll ask Joe when I go to Starfleet Med if he can start regenerating the muscles in my arms. I'm tired of them being so useless."

"I know, but it takes proteins for regeneration to work, and right now, your body needs those proteins for more important functions."

Chakotay suggested, "Starting in the morning, we should do an all-protein diet."

"No," Patty said. "A balanced diet. She needs it all."

Kathryn sighed. "Amazing that I spent so much time last fall watching what I ate. This makes me never want to diet again."

"You won't need to with your small intestines half gone."

Groaning, Kathryn replied, "Could I possibly be any sicker?"

"Don't ask that," Patty said as she closed the cuff. "There we go. You're all set for the night. I'm going to set an alarm so that I can check your readings every two hours."

Kathryn clicked her tongue. "I doubt you'll need the alarm if I have a repeat of last night."

"Don't think about it," Chakotay said. "We'll find something uplifting to talk about as you're falling asleep."

Patty covered her up and patted her ankle. "If your dreams become a problem for your heart tonight, we'll see about a sedative. Now, get some sleep."

After she left, Kathryn looked at Chakotay expectantly. “Okay, what should we talk about?”

He chuckled. “It’s kind of like saying ‘don’t think about cats’ isn’t it?”

“Yes. So let’s ‘not think’ about our wedding. Would you like it indoors or out?”

“Hmm.” Resting against the headboard next to her, he replied, “Mid-spring might be kind of risky for planning something outside.”

“But we could always have an indoor back-up plan.”

“How about a holosuite theater? We could have an outdoor wedding on a holodeck.”

She frowned. “Or not. I was thinking of a ballroom.”

“All right,” he said with a grin. “So, where outdoors?”

“If we find a house by then, we could do it there.”

“Sure, that sounds nice. You did say that you wanted a large property in a secluded location. We just have to secure it against unwanted photographers.”

“A large property with a lot of trees. Or on the beach. I’m not sure which I’d want more.”

“And a big house?”

Smiling, she said, “A place that will make me not want to leave. It should be inviting and warm. Lots of windows so we can see the sunshine, nice enough to entertain, and not so fancy that children won’t feel comfortable.”

“Maybe we should have one built to suit us.”

Kathryn fidgeted with the blanket. “A good idea if we don’t find what we’re looking for, although we’d be delayed a few months.”

“It would be worth it to get exactly what you want.”

She wove her fingers through his. “I hope it’s what you want, too.”

“It is, although I’d be happy just about anywhere as long as you’re there, too.”

Turning her head to look at him, she commented, “Oooh, that was nice. Very romantic.”

He shrugged to hide a blush. “What can I say? You bring out the mushiness in me.”

Leaning against his shoulder, she said, "I'm glad I do."

"You know..." He tipped her face up to his. "I've never kissed a woman with a tube in her nose."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Wow, you've been missing out. These things are the new fashion, or they will be if someone takes a picture of me wearing it. Can you imagine?" She laughed.

"Kathryn?"

"Hmmm? Don't you think so? I saw in a magazine that my hairstyle from a year ago is the new thing. Little do they know that I only cut my hair off to begin with because you stole some of it to light a fire. Now, that would be a fun story to tell the next time a fashion magazine wants an interview."

He put a finger on her lips. "Shhhh."

Brushing his finger away, she said, "Don't do that. I can't get a word in edgewise when you do. It's like when you proposed the first..."

He silenced her with a soft, loving kiss. The warmth of it settled deep within her and she felt like she was going to melt.

"I love you, Kathryn," he whispered against her lips.

"I love you, too, and that was more unfair than your finger."

"But you seem to like it better." He kissed her again.

"Yes, but you're not supposed to do anything to get my heart rate up. Patty's going to be breaking down that door any minute if you keep this up."

Shaking his head in amusement, he settled back against the headboard again and said, "Okay, point taken. So, you were saying something about..." He wrinkled his forehead. "Lots of things."

"The wedding. We were talking about the wedding."

"Oh yes, now I remember. You want it outside."

“Mmmhmm. I think we should have a gazebo or some kind of thing to stand under. Not an arch because that’s too cliché, but something to give us a backdrop. What do you think?”

“Sounds lovely.”

“I think all of that stuff can be rented. Chairs, tables, and all that. Should we hire a wedding coordinator?”

Nodding, he said, “Might be a good idea.”

She chattered on. “A coordinator could manage the renting of equipment and could deal with the caterer, florist, and whoever else we need to hire. I wonder what all we need. Oh! A photographer, musicians, security, of course.”

“Of course.”

“All those guests. We should draft up a guest list.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“The Voyagers, of course. Oh, if we reschedule the reunion, we should do it around the same time. Do you think people will come back?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I hope so; I really want to see everyone.”

He stifled a yawn. “And they want to see you, too.”

“You’re getting tired?”

“A little. I didn’t lie around sleeping all day like some people.” He winked at her.

“You could have slept with me. You did a little this morning. Oh... for our house... I definitely want to install a large bathtub.”

“I had no doubts.”

“And a study. We should have a big one so we can work together. I loved working side by side with you on Voyager.”

“With a place for all of your books.”

“Oh, yeah! Lots of shelves would be nice. Maybe you could build some and we can turn it into a little library. Would you like that?”

“Mmmhmm.” He fought another yawn. “Good thing I’m not working this semester.”

“At all? I thought you were just taking a little time off.”

“It’s not set in stone. We’ll just see how things go.” He squeezed her hand. “Aren’t you tired at all?”

“No, but if you are, I can go talk to Mom. She was talkative earlier.”

“You need to sleep.”

She waved it away. “I think I’ll pass tonight. Oh, it’s only eight in San Francisco. Maybe Lanna is still up.”

“You’re going to pass on sleep?”

“Too risky. Or, we could go sleep on the couch. I haven’t had nightmares there.”

He turned to face her. “Patty will be here in an instant if anything goes wrong.”

“But...” She held up a finger. “If I stay awake, then I’ll know if something is wrong before she does.”

“Lie down, Kathryn.”

“I don’t want to.” She pushed her lower lip out.

“You’re pouting? Admiral Kathryn Janeway is pouting?”

Exasperated, she sunk down onto the bed, and said, “There. Are you happy?”

“No. Turn on your side away from me.”

“You’re pushy.”

He stared at her until she turned.

“Fine. What are you going to do?”

“Scratch your back.”

“But that’ll put me to sleep.”

He leaned over her and turned off her light. “Not a chance. You’re far too stubborn to do anything you don’t wish to do.”

“You’re calling your future wife stubborn?”

“Yes.” Snuggling under the blankets with her, he began to lightly run his fingernails all over her back. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes,” she grumbled.

He kissed the back of her head. “Close your eyes, love. I’ll be right here.”

“Fine.” She was asleep within minutes.

When Kathryn woke up the next morning, Chakotay was still asleep. She watched him quietly for a long time, thinking about how she was going to wake up next to him every day for the rest of her life. He was very good for her, pushing when she needed a shove, listening when he knew she needed to talk, and loving her when she needed to feel loved.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Morning.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“You,” she said with a light laugh.

Smiling, he said, “We made it through until morning.”

“Yes, we did. Thank you for waking me up quickly from those nightmares.”

“You didn’t mind the cold cloth against your cheek?”

“Oh, I minded. It was damn cold, but thank you. I didn’t want...”

“I know.” He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

“Thank you.” Smiling playfully, she said, “Let’s go fix omelets. I’m famished!”

“You’re on!”

B’Elanna jumped onto the couch and hugged Kathryn almost as quickly as her sister had. “I almost dropped Miral when I saw you on the news.”

Holding tightly, Kathryn said, "I won't break, Lanna."

B'Elanna squeezed harder and asked, "Are you sure? You feel like you might."

"I'm not brittle," Kathryn said as B'Elanna pulled back to look at her. "Just thin."

"That's an understatement." B'Elanna looked her over and then held her thumb and forefinger together. "We were this close to hijacking a ship."

"I believe it." Kathryn chuckled and looked up at Tom who was standing nearby holding a squirming Miral. "Although I'm glad you didn't, it wouldn't have been a complete surprise if the Voyagers pulled out all the stops to find me."

Tom said, "We certainly dreamed up a lot of scenarios doing just that. No one takes our favorite person and gets away with it." He noticed Patty sitting on the far side of the room and smiled graciously. "Hello, I don't believe we've met. I'm Tom Paris, and this is my wife, B'Elanna Torres, and daughter, Miral."

Chakotay introduced, "This is Lieutenant Patty Fields, Kathryn's nurse. She was with her on the Pioneer and will be living with us for awhile."

Patty replied, "It's an honor to meet you. I've certainly read and heard a lot about the famous Voyager crew."

Tom chuckled. "We may be famous, but we're really just a band of oddballs." He nodded towards Kathryn. "I hope she hasn't given you too much trouble. I've had her as a patient and let me tell you, she can be a handful."

"Mr. Paris," Kathryn admonished. "You do realize that I still outrank you, don't you?"

He winked at her. "Never doubted that for an instant."

Kathryn told Patty, "Don't listen to a word of it. I'm an excellent patient when I want to be."

Tom laughed. "I'm not touching that one."

After giving Tom a 'drop it' look, she said, "Patty, if you want to get out of the house for a couple hours, we're fine. Tom is a capable medic should the need arise."

"If you're sure?" Patty asked.

"I'm sure."

Patty looked at Chakotay skeptically and when he nodded approval, she thanked them and went to her room to change clothes.

Kathryn asked, “Lanna, would you help me stand up?”

“Sure!” She scooted off the sofa while Chakotay stepped on the other side of Kathryn.

He instructed, “Support gently from her ribcage, but let her bear her weight on her legs. Go slow.”

As they got her on her feet, Kathryn said, “I’m doing better once I get upright, but the transition takes a bit more strength than I have right now.”

Tom asked worriedly, “Do you have muscle damage?”

“Loss of muscle mass.” Kathryn said as she took a moment to let her equilibrium stabilize. “My body chemistry is out of kilter and my heart is having issues.”

“Joe can’t repair the damage?” B’Elanna asked, surprised.

Kathryn didn’t want to explain, but she knew that her friends wanted to know. “I’ve had eighteen treatments on my heart in the last week, but the doctors have had problems managing a troublesome infection. I’ve just got to take it slow until it all gets settled out.” She kept hold of Chakotay’s arm as she reached out to touch Miral’s bouncy curls. “Now, how is my little god-daughter?”

Tom said, “Boisterous and demanding.”

“Just like her mama,” Kathryn said as she tickled the baby’s cheek, eliciting a wonderful belly laugh. “Did you have a nice birthday?”

“She thought it was a little dull, actually,” Tom reported. He set Miral on his hip and leaned into Kathryn for a hug. “I’m so relieved that you’re home, safe.”

“So am I, Tom. So am I.” She lingered in the hug and then pulled back when Miral squealed. “Impatient, isn’t she? I wish I could hold her, but I don’t have the strength.”

Chakotay said, “She has a tendency to lunge unexpectedly and I’ve almost lost control of her more than once.”

“Well, come on, then,” Kathryn said. “There are toys out in the sunroom and Mom left us a nice lunch.”

“What just a sec,” said B’Elanna as she grabbed Kathryn’s left hand. “What’s this?”

Kathryn grinned. “Ask your husband. From what I understand, he already knows.”

“What?” B’Elanna yelled at Tom.

Tom told Chakotay, "I'm going to reconsider being your best man if you're going to get me in trouble with my wife."

"I've said nothing to your wife. Talk to Kathryn."

B'Elanna crossed her arms in mock anger. "Could someone please explain?"

Kathryn took hold of B'Elanna's arm. "Chakotay and I will be getting married this spring. Tom is the best man. Does that clear it up?"

"Congratulations!" B'Elanna threw her arms around Kathryn, and would have knocked her down if Chakotay hadn't been on the other side to hold her up.

Over lunch in the sunroom, they caught Kathryn up on all that had happened with the Voyagers in her absence, including the pathetic excuse for an anniversary celebration that would be rescheduled so that she could attend.

After dessert, Kathryn watched B'Elanna play with Miral on the floor, wishing she could get down with them. Even without doctor's orders, she knew she didn't have enough strength, because she was growing more and more fatigued with each passing moment. She wasn't entirely sure if she was getting enough oxygen and was finding it difficult to concentrate on the conversation.

"Kathryn?" Chakotay asked.

It took her a moment to register that he'd asked her a question. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Are you feeling okay?" He held her hand in such a way that he was discreetly checking her pulse.

"Just a little light-headed." She smiled reassuringly at Tom and B'Elanna and then whispered to Chakotay. "I think oxygen will help."

Chakotay studied her face for a moment before saying, "I'll be right back."

"Everything okay, Kathryn?" B'Elanna asked as Chakotay left the room.

Sighing, Kathryn said, "I've been breathing medicated oxygen, but decided to take a break while you were here. He's gone to get it for me."

Tom asked, "Are your lungs infected, too?"

"No." She smiled to calm them. "At least not anymore. I did have pneumonia when they rescued me."

“What was it...” B’Elanna trailed off mid-sentence.

“What was what?” Kathryn asked.

Shaking her head, B’Elanna said, “I don’t need to know. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

Guessing, Kathryn asked the question for her. “What was it like?”

Hesitantly, B’Elanna responded, “Yes, to make you so sick?”

“Dirty, obviously. I don’t know how bad it was because I was blindfolded. Maybe that was a blessing.” She grimaced at the thought and then smiled as Chakotay returned and helped her get the oxygen tube in place.

He sat down and flipped open the medical tri-corder that he brought with him. “I’m not very good at using this thing. Tom, can you help?”

“Sure, what are you looking for?”

“Her pulse is unusually fast. Other than that, I don’t know.”

Kathryn waved away their concern. “It’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

Tom studied the readings and reported, “138 beats per minute. That’s extremely fast, and the problem is in the lower ventricles.”

She pushed away the tri-corder and said, “The oxygen will help because I’m probably just over-tired. Let’s move to the settee so I can doze a little.”

B’Elanna suggested, “We should go and let you rest.”

“No,” she implored. “I don’t want you to leave. Hearing your voices means so much to me, even if I don’t have the energy to participate.”

“She sleeps a lot, but still enjoys visitors,” Chakotay assured their guests as he led Kathryn over to the more comfortable sitting area.

They got her situated so that she could lie on her side, snuggled against Chakotay’s chest. He whispered, “Try to relax. If it doesn’t slow down soon, we’ll call for help. I can feel your heartbeat under my hand, so I’ll keep watch.”

Kathryn tried to follow the conversation for a few minutes, but then she became so tired and lightheaded that she gave up and closed her eyes. She attempted to enjoy the soothing way Chakotay was lightly rubbing her back, and let the sounds of the familiar voices comfort her.

She could feel her heart thudding in her chest. The beats were uncomfortably fast and irregular; a sure sign of exhaustion. It was so disconcerting that she was having trouble relaxing enough to fall asleep. Concentrating on her breathing, she counted slowly to two with each inhalation, and again to two with each exhalation, hoping the technique would calm her mind and body.

Tom interrupted her breathing pattern. “Kathryn? You don’t look at all comfortable.”

“Hmmm?” She opened her eyes and frowned. “Oh, I just can’t seem to relax.”

B’Elanna said, “We really should go because Miral will need her nap soon. We can come back in a few days and visit again.”

Chakotay helped her sit up so they could say goodbye to their guests, but the movement made her head spin. She leaned into his embrace and whispered, “I feel like I’m about to faint.” Before she’d realized that Tom had moved, he was kneeling in front of her.

Tom touched her forehead. “Are you feeling cold or hot?”

Shivering, she replied, “Cold. I’m always cold.” She touched her chest, trying to focus on slowing her heart. “I don’t feel well.”

Chakotay put a blanket around her back and said, “I’ll call Patty.”

“No,” she put a hand out to stop him. “It’s not that bad, and she’s finally getting a break.”

“It’s what she’s here for,” he replied as he tapped his commbadge. “Captain Chakotay to Lieutenant Fields.”

Patty replied, “Yes, Captain?”

“We need you. She’s not well and her pulse is very fast.”

“I’m on my way. Is she breathing the supplemental oxygen?”

“Yes, has been for about ten minutes.” He continued to rub Kathryn’s back comfortingly.

“Good, keep monitoring her pulse. Call Zimmerman if it suddenly drops, but I’ll be there in a few minutes. Fields out.”

Tom opened the tri-corder again and asked, “Have you felt like this before?”

“Yes and no,” she blinked slowly and tried to force away the dizziness. “Hard to isolate the symptoms of each problem.”

Chakotay asked, “Does it feel anything like yesterday morning?”

As she shook her head, Tom asked, “What happened then?”

Kathryn wrapped her arms around herself. “Obstruction in my pulmonary artery.”

Tom asked urgently, “Are you currently feeling any shortness of breath?”

“Some, but nothing like the yesterday.”

“Any pressure in your chest?” Tom scanned her again.

“My heart is pounding.”

Chakotay said, “Let’s just try to relax until she gets here. Tom, can you tell if there’s any fluid build up in her lungs?”

Tom shook his head. “None. It looks like the dizziness is because her heart is going so fast, the blood doesn’t have time to oxygenate. If you’ll tell me where a medkit is, I’ll administer tri-ox.”

“In the bedroom. Turn right before you get to the front door, and it’s the first room on the left.”

B’elanna jumped up. “I’ll get it.”

Miral screamed as soon as her mommy left the room. Tom set down the tri-corder and gave Miral her favorite blankie. “Shhh, little one. Mommy will be right back.”

“No Sh!” Miral wound her face up tight and let loose a howl.

Tom apologized, “I’m sorry. She’s ready for a nap.”

“It’s okay,” Chakotay said as he held Kathryn closer and tried to discretely cover her ears. “Concentrate on your breathing, love.”

B’Elanna ran back in, handed Tom the hypo, and picked up Miral. “Sorry. We’ll go over here and rock.”

Tom injected the hypo into Kathryn’s neck. “That should help with the dizziness. Let me know if it doesn’t.”

Miral calmed down immediately once she got her milk and her mommy. Kathryn breathed a sigh of relief as her lightheadedness cleared some. She straightened up a little and let Chakotay help her rest against the back of the sofa.

Patty ran into the room and asked, "What can you tell me?"

Tom said, "I just gave her tri-ox. Her heart rate has increased from 138 to 162 in the last twenty minutes. The ventricles are pumping twice as fast as the atrium, creating an irregular pulse, and her blood pressure is 130/56. Shortness of breath, chest pain, chills, dizziness. Is this ventricular tachycardia?"

Patty took the tri-corder from Tom and studied the readings. "Sounds like it, but she's been arrhythmic since we got her back." She punched in a couple commands and then said, "I'm going to get a few things. Try carotid sinus massage while I'm gone."

After listening to them discuss her symptoms, Kathryn's anxiety increased tenfold. The dizziness came back worse than before and she felt sure that she was going to pass out. Grabbing Chakotay's arm for stability, she asked, "Tom? Please don't leave yet."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said calmly as he rubbed her arms, gently working his way up so he wouldn't alarm her. "Do they hurt?"

She forced her reply. "Hurt all the time...they were bound behind my back for three weeks."

B'Elanna gasped and Tom's eyes darkened as he found the large point in the artery that supplied blood to her brain. He massaged it gently to stimulate the nerve endings, hoping it would slow her heart rate. With his other hand, he began unbuttoning her shirt. "Patty took the tri-corder. Kathryn, may I touch your chest to see if this massage is affecting your heart rate?"

"Mmmhmm." As Tom laid his palm over her heart, Kathryn closed her eyes and whispered to Chakotay, "I'm scared."

He held her close. "We're right here with you, and Patty didn't seem alarmed."

Tom said, "If you're anxious, there's no reason we can't go straight to Starfleet Med right now."

"Let Patty try, but if this gets worse, take me in."

"We'll take care of you, love." Chakotay kissed her temple.

Patty returned and attached a cortical monitor. "Admiral, let's get this on you so we can see where the problem is."

Chakotay asked, “Tom, didn’t you say the problem was in the ventricles?”

Patty answered, “Yes, but the issue is that the infection is interfering with the electrical impulses that pace her heart. If we can find out where the hang-up is, we can deliver a low-voltage shock to that part of the heart.”

Kathryn’s eyes opened wide and she looked up at Chakotay. “This doesn’t sound good.”

“Give it a chance,” he said soothingly. “You’re in good hands.”

To lighten the mood, Tom nodded towards Kathryn’s chest and said, “You know, I always pictured you as a lace person.”

Kathryn laid her forehead against Chakotay’s cheek and replied almost too softly to be heard, “No, too scratchy.”

Chakotay shook his head at Tom, giving him a silent warning to discontinue the attempted humor.

“Sorry, Kathryn,” Tom said as he helped Patty connect the defibrillator.

“Hmm?” Kathryn wondered what Tom was apologizing for, but didn’t have the energy to pursue it. She was getting more anxious by the minute as she felt the defibrillator start to tingle and send electrical pulses into her chest. Moving her lips right up next to Chakotay’s ear, she said, “I’m really scared.”

“I am, too, but Patty is taking care of you.”

Her voice shook as she said, “Please, don’t let me die. I’m not ready.”

“Not a chance, love. You’re going to be okay. I’ll make sure of it.”

Kathryn cried out as a sudden, crushing chest pain gripped her. Grabbing her chest, she squeaked, “Heart!”

Patty’s eyes widened in alarm as she tapped her commbadge. “Fields to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical.”

Joe responded, “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“We need emergency transport NOW! She’s in ventricular fibrillation.”

Kathryn grabbed for Chakotay. “Failing?”

He was right with her. “Don’t panic – slow, deep breaths.”

She tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but she couldn't understand. The pain in her chest was excruciating. Darkness closed in and the only thing she could see was Chakotay's worried face as she fell against him.

Tom caught Kathryn as she fell off the couch. "Doc! She's arresting! We need transport now!"

Patty yelled, "Start CPR!"

"Stand by," Joe said quickly.

"What?" Tom yelled as he and Chakotay laid an unconscious Kathryn on the floor. "Stand by? Is he kidding?"

"The security net has to come down first." Chakotay hurriedly pushed back the coffee table and put his cheek over her mouth to see if she was breathing. He felt nothing.

Patty instructed, "Paris, chest compressions. Captain..."

"Got it!" Chakotay yelled as he tilted Kathryn's head back and pinched her nose closed.

"Damn it, Doc!" Tom kicked the table back further and got into position. "We're losing her! This can't be happening!"

Fighting down his fear, Chakotay covered her mouth to blow life-saving air into her lungs. He stopped when Patty yelled, "Clear!" and she administered a defibrillating shock. They resumed CPR until Patty yelled again. "Clear!" There was no response, so they resumed their efforts a third time.

Patty yelled, "Doctor! My defibrillator isn't strong enough!"

Chakotay concentrated on blowing into Kathryn's lungs. He became dizzy from the effort, but there wasn't a chance in hell that he was going to stop. As he listened to Tom count, he felt Kathryn's body jerk in response to the compressions, and he prayed hard that she'd survive this.

Joe yelled, "Transporting now!" The beam took all four of them, still in motion.

When they were gone, B'Elanna felt cold chills run up and down her body. She hugged Miral close and cursed, "Ghuy'cha!"

The security guards found B'Elanna and one of them asked, "What happened?"

B'Elanna stood up with Miral. "Admiral Janeway has been transported to Starfleet Medical. She was in cardiac arrest."

They all looked at each other in stunned silence.
