

The Future is Ours – Part 19

“Rest Now, My Love”

By Dawn

Summary: Starfleet Medical

Rated PG-13

Kathryn fought against the heavy blanket of sleep that surrounded and protected her. She pushed open her eyes to see a soft brown ceiling above her. It didn't look familiar and she wondered where she was, but didn't have the energy to think much beyond that.

A few minutes later, she decided to learn more. She looked to the left and saw a comforting sight. Chakotay was fast asleep in a recliner. Although she had no idea where she was and what had happened, she felt safe because he was there. She was content just watching him sleep and didn't feel the need to wake him to find out where she was and why. He was there. She was safe, and that's all she needed to know. Feeling at peace, she soon fell asleep, too.

The sound of muffled voices brought her back to consciousness. She opened her eyes to try to figure out where they were coming from and who they belonged to.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay rushed to her side and picked up her hand. He brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek and gave her a warm smile. “Hi there, beautiful.”

Her mouth was as dry as sandpaper, but she managed to say, “Hi.” She looked past him to see people she didn't recognize. “Where are we?”

“Starfleet Medical.”

Staring at him in disbelief, she said, “Can't be.”

“Where do you think we are?” he asked gently.

She looked past him again and tried to get her bearings, but her mind was foggy. What she did see was many, many colorful flower arrangements. It confused her. “I don't know.”

One of the other people in the room came closer and asked, “How are you feeling, Admiral?”

“Admiral?” she asked, blinking her eyes to try to clear the grit out of them.

Chakotay said, "She seems disoriented, Dr. Pulaski." He leaned over her and kissed her forehead, whispering, "You're in a safe place, Kathryn, surrounded by people who are here to help you."

"Okay," she said, believing him.

"Do you remember who I am?"

"Chakotay," she answered.

The unfamiliar doctor said, "That's a good sign. Are you in any pain?"

She wasn't sure, so she took a mental inventory of her body. Her chest hurt, her arms hurt, and her whole body ached. She wondered why. Was she in an accident? She tried to remember. Looking back up at the people standing over her, she wondered why they were looking at her so expectantly. She felt nervous as she asked, "Did I say something wrong?"

Chakotay's shoulders drooped and he pulled up a chair beside her. "No, love. We just want to know how to make you feel better."

"You called me 'love?'"

"Yes, I did." He stroked the back of her wrist. "Do your arms hurt?"

"Yes." She tried to remember why. "Did I burn them?"

He shook his head. "No. Does your chest hurt?"

Taking a deep breath, she attempted to find out, but as she exhaled, the pain she felt took precedence. She looked at Chakotay. "My chest hurts."

He stroked the hair away from her face and asked Pulaski, "Is this normal?"

"The confusion suggests that not enough oxygenated blood is getting to her brain. I'll be back with an analgesic, and we'll adjust the settings on her pump and defibrillator."

Kathryn watched the doctor leave the room and then looked back at Chakotay. "Where are we?"

He told her again as if they hadn't been through this line of questions already. Her memory only lasted for about thirty seconds, but he was patient and answered her again and again. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her.

Chakotay looked up as Tom came into the hospital room.

“I’m alone because they wouldn’t let Miral come in. Children are germ factories, it seems.”

Nodding, Chakotay asked, “What time is it?”

Tom looked at the clock on the wall and reported, “Almost dinner time. How is she?”

He shrugged. “Not much has changed since very early this morning. She was awake for about thirty minutes, but very confused.”

“Why don’t you go get something to eat with B’Elanna? I’ll stay here.”

Chakotay shook his head. “I don’t want to leave her.”

“You’ve been in here for three days. You need to get out.”

“Did Gretchen send you?” He sighed, remembering how Kathryn’s mom had been trying so hard to get him home for a few hours.

Tom hmped. “No, but I could get B’Elanna to give you a shove.”

“Kathryn might not recognize anyone else. I don’t want her to be scared.”

“Give me some credit. I think there’s a good chance that she’ll know who I am.”

“That’s true,” Chakotay sighed. “After all, you have been a pain in her backside for many years.”

“I think you’re mistaken, old man. I’ve been a pain in your ass, not hers.”

Chakotay rubbed his face, realizing that Tom was probably right, and he had to admit that he was hungry. “Fine, but I’ll only be gone long enough to eat.”

“It’s a start.” Tom patted him on the back. “I’ll keep your seat warm.”

Chakotay stood with hesitation, really not wanting to leave his sleeping beauty. Caressing her face, he noticed how dark her freckles were in contrast to the pale, translucent skin beneath. She looked so fragile that he wanted to take her into his arms and protect her from everyone and everything that might ever cause her harm. It was an unrealistic desire, but at the moment, he couldn’t help but feel that way.

“B’Elanna’s in the waiting room by the lift,” Tom said, urging him to leave.

Chakotay let his hand linger on her cheek before quietly leaving the room.

Tom gave Kathryn a quick visual examination. She was pale and thin, but not much worse than she had been three days earlier when they had shared lunch. The Starfleet medical gown made her look pallid, but they always had. The feeding tube and oxygen support looked foreign on her face, like some sort of strange alien implants. He picked up a medical tri-corder and took a scan, noting that she was in a deep sleep and breathing steadily. Her blood pressure was on the low side, aided by a small pump that was attached to an intercostal artery. A second implant, a defibrillator, was delivering constant shocks to heart to keep it in a normal rhythm.

Dr. Joe came into the room and said, "Mr. Paris, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Expecting Chakotay?"

"I saw him leave with your lovely wife."

"I promised him that I'd keep vigil while he was gone."

"I've got a monitor on her that will alert us the moment she starts waking up. He need not stay."

Tom nodded, "Yes, I know, but try to tell him that."

"I have." He nodded towards the tri-corder as he came around to the opposite side of the bed. "Any interest in continuing your medical studies?"

"Some. It sure came in handy with her."

"You did very well. The damage would have been significantly greater if you hadn't been there."

"Thanks, although I wish I hadn't broken all of her ribs."

"I have no doubt that she'll gladly take healed rib fractures over brain damage."

Tom nodded. "Chakotay tells us that you're planning on giving her a cardiac implant."

"It's one option, but it depends on how her heart responds to further treatment."

Tom thought back to what she'd told him, knowing the Doctor couldn't break confidentiality. "She said she'd had eighteen or so procedures on her heart?"

"That's right," Joe nodded.

"If her heart were repairable, wouldn't that have taken care of it?"

“If her only ailment was a damaged cardiac muscle then, yes, it could’ve been completely regenerated.”

Tom sighed and looked back at the indomitable woman he admired so much. “They really messed her up, didn’t they?”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Joe picked up a scanner and handed it to Tom. “She’s due for another treatment. Would you like to assist?”

“I’d love to.”

“You’ll notice that there are bacterial micro-organism colonies on her heart valves?”

He scanned it again and studied the readings. “Is that what those are?”

Joe said, “They’re blocking her arteries and disrupting her cardiac functions. We’re finding them impossible to get rid of. There are research teams here, on the Enterprise, and at the Federation Heart Institute all working on it.”

“So if you can’t get rid of them then you cut them out?”

“Exactly. We’re giving it another few days, and if she doesn’t show any sign of improvement, we’ll replace everything that they’ve touched. They’ve infiltrated all four chambers of her heart, causing cardiogenic shock. That led to the cardiac arrest.”

“Will she be strong enough to survive the surgery?”

“I’ll make sure of it.” Joe nodded to Kathryn’s head. “That’s why she has the feeding tube. We want her to gain as much weight as we can to correct her renal failure and balance her electrolytes before we make the attempt.”

Tom sighed. “She’s not out of the woods yet, at all.”

“Not by a long shot, but we have a plan.”

Kathryn’s eyes fluttered open to see Tom sitting next to her reading a book. He was so engrossed that he didn’t notice her movement. Her voice husky from lack of use, she asked, “What are you reading?”

He jumped. “Captain!”

Grinning at his instinctive use of her former rank, she said, “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Putting the book down, he said, "I wasn't expecting you to wake up. How are you feeling?" He held her hand.

"I've felt worse." She tried to move her arms and discovered that she was extremely weak. Looking around the room, she asked, "Are we at Starfleet Medical?"

"Yes. You've been here for a little over seventy-two hours."

"It looks like a flower shop in here."

He looked around with her. "Yes, it does. Chakotay said most of them are from Voyagers."

"They're beautiful."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"You and Lanna were having lunch with us?"

"That's right. And then?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I believe Patty said something about ventricular fibrillation?"

"Do you know what that means?"

"Heart is failing."

Tom looked at her with compassion. "Yes, and then Chakotay and I did CPR until you were transported here."

She closed her eyes in concern. "Is he okay?"

"Worried about you, but we just managed to get him out of here to eat. He'll be back soon."

Joe came into the room. "Admiral?"

She crooked a smile at him. "Had to save my life again, did you?"

"I plan on being able to do that for many years." He asked Tom, "Is she as aware as she seems?"

Tom nodded. "Remembers everything before the CPR."

Kathryn asked, "Have I not been cognizant?"

“No, but your brain is getting the oxygen it needs now.” Joe touched her shoulder, “Are you in pain?”

“My chest hurts, but it’s tolerable.”

“If you decide you want more medication, let me know.”

“Thanks.” She took a slow, steady breath. “What’s in my nose?”

Tom answered, “Same thing Chakotay’s getting right now – a little fresh air and dinner.”

She groaned. “Again? I thought I was done with that.”

The Doctor filled her in on what was going on with her heart and finished by saying, “So you’ll be here for awhile.”

“If I get a say in this, I’d rather keep the heart I have.”

“That’s our second priority. The first is keeping you alive.”

She sighed, feeling sleepy from the exertion of being awake. “How long till Chakotay’s due back?”

Tom said, “He and B’Elanna have been gone for a little over an hour, but he needed the time away. It’s good that he didn’t rush through dinner to get back here.”

She didn’t want to bother him, but she was feeling the heavy blanket of sleep settle over her. “Can I contact him?”

“Sure,” Tom said. He touched his commbadge and opened the link.

Chakotay responded anxiously, “Tom? Is something wrong?”

“Not at all. There’s someone here who wants to talk to you.”

“Kathryn?”

Hearing the hopefulness in his voice, she grinned. “Hey there.”

“Thank heavens,” he said softly. “We’re on our way.”

She could hear in his voice that he was exerting himself to run back. “No, stay and enjoy whatever you’re doing. I just wanted you to know that I’m okay before I fall back to sleep.”

“I’ll see you in just a minute, Kathryn. Chakotay out.”

“I guess I shouldn’t have called.” She smiled tiredly at Tom and Joe.

“He would’ve been disappointed if he’d missed you,” Joe assured her. He opened his tri-corder and took a quick scan. “Looks like you’re fine to sleep through the night. If you need to call a nurse, just push that button, although I’m sure Chakotay will be right here with you.”

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Mr. Paris, why don’t we take our leave so Chakotay can see her alone when he returns.”

Tom stood and kissed her hand. “Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight.” As Tom started walking out, she said, “Don’t forget your book.”

“Oh.” He returned to pick it up off the side table. “Thank you.”

“What’s the title?” she asked. “You never answered my question.”

“It’s just a little light reading.” He blushed as he held it up for her to see. “Comparative Physiology of the Human Heart.”

She smiled in response. “Let me know if you find anything useful.”

“Will do.” He squeezed her hand. “Sleep well.”

Snuggling her head into the pillow, she let her sleepiness take hold. She didn’t know if a few seconds or a few minutes had passed when she felt Chakotay’s hand in hers and his light kiss on her lips. She murmured, “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn.”

She forced her eyes open to look at him and saw that a tear was running down his cheek.

“You’re crying?”

Choked up, he said, “Just relieved.”

“I want to hug you, but I barely have enough strength to move my hands.”

“Let me help.” Without lifting her very far off the bed, he enfolded her in into his arms, carefully supporting her head as if she were an infant. Holding her close, he whispered, “We took care of you, just like I promised, but this ranks right up there with the most painful experiences of my life.”

“Are you okay?”

He laid her back down, but stayed close enough that their foreheads were touching. “I am right now, but it’s been...” He froze up, unable to finish. “I’m okay now.”

“I wish that I’d listened to Dr. Crusher and come straight here from the Pioneer. I’m sorry I put you through this.”

He shook his head. “Not even Dr. Joe thought this would happen. Dr. Crusher has been here, too, and she was equally surprised.”

“The Enterprise is back here already?”

Straightening up, Chakotay said, “Yes, and I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Handling me, are you?” She smiled sleepily.

“Yes, because you should rest. You said something earlier about falling asleep.”

“Okay. Will you sit with me for a few minutes?”

He tucked the covers up under her chin and arranged the pillow how she liked it. “I’ll be here with you all night, love.”

Eyes closed, she mumbled, “Thank you. I’m a little uneasy about being alone.”

Drawing his recliner right up to the bed, he sat on the edge of the seat and leaned his elbows on the mattress. He held her hand between both of his and placed a simple kiss on her curled fingers. “I promise that you’ll never be alone again.”

She felt reassured by his promise, even though it was one he couldn’t keep. Still, she knew that for the next few weeks, he’d keep it and that comforted her enough that she let sleep pull her away.

Hands grabbed her. Assimilation tubules pierced her neck. Flashes of images assaulted her mind. She was bound, helpless. Bony, Kazon knuckles backhanded her and she fell, fell out of the ship, sucked into the vacuum of space, down to a planet, down into a fiery river of hot molten lava. Hot, painful hands pulled her out and squeezed her breasts, burning through her chest and she screamed.

Nausea overwhelmed her as she stamped her broken leg on the ice. She shivered violently at the rotten stench of death. A foul sponge pushed into her mouth, filling her with acrid water, gagging her, making her vomit painfully.

Hands were on her, holding her over a precipice as she retched violently, heaving in unending painful gasps. At the bottom of the precipice, sudden death awaited, with a white tile floor and vomit-covered shoes. Her reality shifted as she heard alarms and people shouting. She couldn't breathe. Her nose was full, her body felt hot. She shivered uncontrollably and her chest felt like it was caving in.

Someone was holding her on her side as she threw up on the floor. Someone else was on the bed behind her, holding her hair back and pulling at the tubes in her nose. When they came out, she gagged, retching again, although there was nothing left to expel. She was exhausted, unable to pull anything but shallow, wheezing breaths as her heart cramped hard in her chest.

"Kathryn?" Chakotay cried out as he held her shoulders, making sure she didn't fall off the bed. She watched the floor come in and out of focus, and her eyes were rolling back into her head as the dizziness of vertigo passed through her.

"I think she's done," Joe said with urgency. "Roll her back. Dr. Trent, two cc's of aminozine. Nurse, where is Dr. Pulaski?"

Kathryn felt her body being moved and then heard the clicks and whines of medical equipment. She gasped in shallow, painful breaths, unable to do anything except suffer through the pain, nausea, and fear. The alarms of medical equipment were deafening. Her eyes searched for and found Chakotay's, red with the tears that poured out of them. She knew they must match her own. She wanted nothing more than to reach up and touch his face, but her arms were too heavy and an unknown doctor had invaded the space between them.

She wondered if her luck had finally run out. Was this when she was going to die? She kept her eyes glued to Chakotay's as the doctors shouted around her. His arms were crossed over his chest, one hand covering his mouth as more tears moistened his cheeks. His whole body was shaking and she yearned to hold him, to save him from his anguish. The sounds around her became muted as her chest seized again in tight, wrenching pain. Her vision grew clouded and darkened until all she could see was his worried face before there was nothing.

When Kathryn regained consciousness, she heard a female voice say, "Good work, everyone. She's back. Nurses, get her cleaned up. Dr. Zimmerman, let's meet in your office. We need to decide where we go from here."

She forced her eyes open to see unknown people turning away and Chakotay stepping in. His eyes were swollen and there was a forced smile on his tear-stained face. Stroking the damp hair away from her cheeks, he said, "Welcome back."

Her throat felt raw and her mouth was sticky and rancid. She croaked, "How long?"

“Just a few minutes,” he sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“That was awful.” She felt completely limp and her chest hurt terribly.

He nodded, unable to comment.

A nurse said, “Captain, would you step outside, sir? We need to change her clothes.”

“No,” Kathryn said hoarsely. “Please, let him help.”

They worked together to take off her shirt, and Chakotay cleaned her face and neck with a warm, wet cloth.

As they untied the drawstring at her waist, Kathryn whispered, “Do we have to change all my clothes?”

Chakotay nodded solemnly. “Can you feel your legs?”

She concentrated as they were peeling her pants off and realized that they were warm and sticky. Cringing, she said, “Maybe they were right, Chakotay. You don’t want to be in here.”

“Shhh,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’m sure it’s quite normal to lose control, and I don’t want to be anywhere else but here, helping you.”

“I hate this.”

A nurse said, “Admiral, it’s just a sign of how sick you are. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, thinking if she could concentrate on something else, it wouldn’t be so bad. As they ran the sonic cleaner over her, she admitted, “I had this problem while I was held captive, but I couldn’t do anything about it.”

Chakotay cupped her jaw and kissed her forehead. “You didn’t have control this time, either.” He whispered so only she could hear him, “If you want babies, I assume you’ll want me to change diapers and clean-up after they’re sick. This isn’t really much different.”

She smiled weakly up at him. “I love you.”

His eyes widened with forced humor as he said, “I know.” Taking the sonic cleaner from the nurse, he ran it over his hands and took off his tunic. He laid a towel on the floor and toed his shoes off. Stepping close to the bed, he ran the cleaner over her face and then through her hair, gently threading his fingers through the strands as he finished.

She melted under his touch, doing her best to ignore the fact that she was naked and three people were cleaning up around her and re-attaching tubes and monitors. She was sore, cold, weak, and just wanted to curl up under a blanket and sleep to forget this episode ever happened. She was pretty sure that her heart had stopped again, but she didn't want to ask Chakotay about it right now.

One of the nurses said, "Before we redress her, we need to change the bedding. I can call an orderly or, Captain, would you like to hold her while we do it?"

Kathryn opened her eyes to see Chakotay's affirmative nod. She tried to stiffen her body to make it easier to be picked up, but she had no strength. It didn't seem to matter, though, because he picked her up with ease and sat down in a nearby chair. He cradled her naked body against his bare chest, tucking her head against his neck. A nurse brought a blanket and covered up both of them.

Chakotay whispered, "Are you comfortable?"

"Very." Her eyes were closed as she listened to the steady beat of his heart, so different from the irregular pumping of her own. Being held like this was a solace for her spirit. "Thank you for staying," she whispered hoarsely.

"I needed to." He kissed her temple, letting his lips linger as his arms squeezed her gently. "I need this."

"Me too," she croaked. "I was terrified. Mostly for you."

"Shhhh," he said, clearly not able to talk about it yet.

Accepting his request, she said nothing more as she let the blanket of peaceful sleep settle over her.

The nurse came over to Chakotay and whispered, "We're ready for her."

As quietly as he could, he replied, "She's asleep. I'll hold her a little longer."

"I need to put the feeding tube back in before I go," she whispered.

Chakotay frowned. "Can't it wait for a few hours? Are they planning on putting more food in her stomach already?"

"I don't know, but I have orders to reattach everything and get her settled in."

“Well, for now, your patient is officially refusing the feeding tube until further notice. Leave her clothes, and I’ll put them on her later.”

The nurse looked at the other one anxiously. “What do you think?”

“If Pulaski comes down on us...”

Chakotay closed his eyes in frustration. “Tell her that I wouldn’t let you. She can yell at me.” When the nurses looked a skeptical, he asked, “Have you attached all pertinent medical devices and scanners?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then you’re done for now. I’ll call if I need help.”

As they picked up their equipment and left the room, Chakotay sighed. He felt completely drained. Looking down at his precious bundle, he thought about how dear and extraordinary she was. Having her in his life during the last eight years gave him much more than the peace he’d always been missing. She made him laugh, she made him think, and yes, at times, she even frustrated the hell out of him. He loved her more than he thought it was possible to love anyone.

The pain and torment she’d been through was heart-breaking, and he wished beyond measure that he could keep her safe and comfortable for the rest of their lives. He’d been half-tempted to tell the nurses to stick their feeding tube up Dr. Pulaski’s behind, but was glad he hadn’t voiced that idea. Pulaski was undoubtedly brilliant, but her bedside manner left a lot to be desired. He’d even heard one orderly comment that the head of hearts had no heart, at all. Still, she’d kept Kathryn alive tonight, and for that, he was eternally grateful.

He wanted to sleep, but only a doctor coming here and pulling her out of his arms would make him let go of her. And while he was holding her, he would stay awake. The need to keep vigil over her was stronger than ever after watching her night-terror transform into a real terror.

He’d tried desperately to wake her from her nightmare as he saw her face contort in agony. Alarms had begun going off at the same time she’d begun screaming, and there hadn’t been a thing he could do. When he’d realized that her screams had transferred to retching, it had already been too late to stop her from aspirating her vomit. He had jumped into action by rolling her over just as the medical staff ran into the room.

Now, repositioning her with care, he hugged her close, tucking the blanket around her to keep the warmth in. He hoped that she wouldn’t have another bad dream while he held her. If that worked, he’d hold her every night.

Dr. Joe came into the room about an hour later, took one look at the two of them, and sighed in exasperation.

Chakotay whispered, "They had to change the bedding and she fell asleep here."

Joe flipped open his medical tri-corder and took a reading. "She's fine, but we really should get her back to the bed."

Kathryn mumbled hoarsely, "You two talk too much."

Joe said, "We've merely uttered two sentences."

She sighed and snuggled against Chakotay's chest. "Move me if you must."

Chakotay reluctantly decided that it was probably the right thing to do. He nodded his agreement to Joe, and the doctor set his things down to lift her out of Chakotay's arms. Together, the two of them got her limp body dressed and settled back into bed where she fell asleep immediately.

Chakotay whispered, "Can the feeding tube wait until morning?"

"It's not going back in. We're planning surgery tomorrow, if she consents, and it will be safer with an empty stomach."

"Transplant?"

Joe nodded solemnly as he crossed the room and opened a drawer. "We think it's for the best." He pulled out a blue medical tunic and tossed it to Chakotay. "Put this on before you make the female nurses swoon."

Chakotay rolled his eyes, but did as he was asked. "She'll want to know all of her options before surgery. Don't hold anything back."

"I do know my patient, as you may recall."

"Yes, Joe, I just don't want Pulaski railroading Kathryn into surgery without letting her come to a decision on her own."

"Dr. Pulaski is not that bad once you get to know her. Took her a few days with me, but I believe I've made significant headway."

"I don't really care about her personality. I'm just worried about Kathryn."

"I know," Joe put a comforting hand on Chakotay's back as they looked at Kathryn sleeping. "I'm worried about her, too. I don't have to tell you how remarkable she is, and how countless individuals would be utterly devastated if anything happened to her."

“I'm not talking about countless individuals, Joe. I'm talking about Kathryn's peace of mind. She wants to have children, and I'm concerned that any choice will make that impossible.”

“Hmmm,” Joe thought. “I'll see what I can come up with. She likes statistics.”

Chakotay nodded. “Good idea.”

“Get some rest, Captain. Tomorrow could be a long day.”

“I'll try.” He sat back down in his usual spot, with every intention of staying awake, but his body had other ideas and he was asleep within minutes.

A hard, painful, irregular thudding in Kathryn's chest woke her from her sleep. She felt like a vice had turned, twisted, and had its way with her heart. Breathing was difficult through the pain that made her eyes water. She gasped, “kotay?”

“Katie?” Gretchen asked as she touched the top of Kathryn's head.

“Hurts bad,” she managed to say.

Gretchen pushed the call button and asked to see a doctor. “Help's on the way, honey.”

Kathryn concentrated on finding a way to breathe that wouldn't aggravate the discomfort, but wasn't having any success. However, she could fix the hot stickiness in her mouth. “Water?”

“Ummm... I'm not sure.”

A nurse came in and asked, “What's the problem?”

Gretchen said, “She's in pain. Where's Dr. Zimmerman?”

“He's in a consultation.”

“Well, get someone,” Gretchen said urgently. “She's hurting.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

Gretchen returned with a cup of water and held the bendable straw to Kathryn's mouth. “Just wet your mouth, honey. I'm not sure if you're supposed to have anything to drink.”

Kathryn gratefully sipped the water, but it didn't help the bad taste. "I want to clean my teeth."

"Oh, that's something I can help with," Gretchen said cheerfully as she put down the water and got the sonic teeth cleaner. She returned and asked, "I hope you don't mind if I do this for you?"

Kathryn cracked open her eyes to see her mom looking down at her. Having someone do everything for her was not pleasant, but the fact was that she didn't have the strength to do it herself. "Go ahead."

It took Gretchen less than a minute, and by that time, Dr. Joe came into the room. Gretchen said, "She's in a lot of pain."

He immediately flipped open his tri-corder and ran it over her. "Is it in your chest?"

Kathryn said, "Yes. Why didn't it hurt like this last night?"

"You were on a lot of pain medication, and it's worn off." He delivered some medication into her neck with a hypospray. "It doesn't appear to be anything more than that."

Within a minute, the pain lessened dramatically into a dull ache. "Thank you," she said gratefully. "My heart is beating hard."

"It's doing the best it can." Joe squeezed her shoulder in sympathy. "I'll be back shortly. We need to talk."

Kathryn frowned as he left the room. "That sounds ominous."

Gretchen sat next to the bed and held Kathryn's hand. "The doctors have been working hard this morning trying to figure out how to help you."

"I bet he wants to do a transplant," she said tiredly.

"Sounds like it." Gretchen caressed Kathryn's arm.

After resting her eyes for a couple minutes, Kathryn asked, "How did you get Chakotay out of here?"

"He's cleaning up and getting some breakfast. He'll be back soon."

"He had a hard night."

Gretchen said, "I heard. Although I think you were the one who had a rough time."

Kathryn would have shrugged if she had the energy. “I merely had to endure it. He had to deal with the grief.”

“A toss-up.” Gretchen smoothed out the blankets and tucked them around her daughter. “He sure loves you.”

“I know. Too much.”

“Is that possible?”

Looking up at her mom, she said, “Only because of the pain it causes him. I'm afraid that my bad-luck with engagements has risen again. Chakotay is going to lose me.”

“No, honey,” Gretchen looked like she was about to cry. “These doctors are not going to let you die.”

Kathryn swallowed hard. “They may not have a choice. I'm not strong enough to survive this.”

“Oh, Katie,” Gretchen wiped away her tears. “Your spirit and determination are strong enough to survive anything. A silly little heart problem isn't going to get you down.”

Chakotay came in as Kathryn responded to her mom, “No?”

“No,” Gretchen said. “It would take something as massive as the entire Borg collective to get you down.”

“Well, since they don't exist anymore, that's not saying much.”

Chakotay asked, “Who doesn't exist?”

“The Borg,” Kathryn said before she realized her slip.

“I wish,” Chakotay said.

Kathryn bit her lip to avoid saying anything more.

Chakotay looked at her oddly and then put his hands on his hips and challenged, “Are you going to explain?”

Gretchen scolded, “Chakotay, relax. There's no need for that today.”

Kathryn licked her lips and tried to hide her smile. Seeing the flash of Chakotay's inquiring eyes as he took her to task even when she was on her deathbed was comforting in a very strange way. “He knows me too well, Mom.”

“Still, I don’t think this is the time or place,” she admonished.

Chakotay raised an eyebrow, obviously enjoying the battle of wills between them.

“If I don’t tell you now, it’ll give me a reason to survive this.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” He leaned over and kissed her. “How are you feeling this morning?”

She felt a chill run through her at the intensity of the spark in his kiss. Each new moment felt like something to be treasured after yet another brush with death. “I’m peachy. Ready to run a marathon.”

“Is that so?” He chuckled. “I’ll race you to the beach.”

“You’re on.” She smiled as he kissed her again, even though it made her heart thud even louder.

Gretchen said, “I’d ask if you two want some privacy, but I’m not sure it would be safe.”

Chakotay was focused solely on Kathryn, but he shrugged his head towards Gretchen. “She’s probably right.”

Kathryn smiled mischievously and rested her eyes, happily enjoying the warmth that had spread through her.

Gretchen filled him in on what Kathryn’s condition had been upon waking. He cradled Kathryn’s cheek in the palm of his hand to offer comfort for what she had gone through, and she happily nestled into his warm touch.

The sound of the door opening made Kathryn open her eyes. Dr. Joe and Dr. Pulaski came into the room, looking somber. Kathryn felt an immediate sense of foreboding and wished she could just skip ahead to the “getting better” part.

Dr. Pulaski said, “Admiral, we have done most everything we can think of to kill the micro-organisms that are impeding your heart function.”

Joe added, “In the meantime, the three heart incidents have damaged your heart to the extent that it will be impossible to completely heal it, even if we find a way to eliminate the infection.”

Kathryn faced the problem with determination. “Have you tried nanoprobes?”

“Yes,” Joe said. “Immediately after you arrived here. While they have a high success rate for restoring brain tissue, they didn’t do anything for your heart and passed right over the bacterial colonies.”

Kathryn said sarcastically, “But nanoprobes are the miracle cure.”

“Not this time, Admiral,” Joe said quietly.

“You said ‘most everything’. What else can you try?”

Dr. Pulaski said, “Radiation, but we’re not sure you could survive the amount that we’ve had to use to eradicate the biopsy samples. We’re sure that it would also irreparably damage the surrounding tissue, including the valves and portions of your heart.”

“So we’d be looking at a transplant, regardless?” Kathryn asked.

“Yes, Admiral.”

Chakotay said, “She needs to know about the other case.”

“What other case?” She looked expectantly at Chakotay.

“One of the men who abducted you was the carrier.”

“Is he immune to it?” she asked.

“No. He died five days ago,” Chakotay responded. “Massive heart attack.”

“What was his name?”

“Pratin,” Chakotay answered.

“The ring leader.” Kathryn didn’t know whether to feel grieved or call it poetic justice that he was dead, especially considering he died from the illness that had caused her and her loved ones so much pain. “How contagious is this?”

Pulaski said, “It’s a blood borne pathogen. We assume it was transferred when he broke your skin by hitting you with a hand that had an open wound.”

Gretchen said, “I hate to ask this, but can it be sexually transmitted?”

“It wasn’t,” Kathryn stated clearly, staring at the ceiling. She had no interest in pursuing this line of questioning.

Chakotay held her hand in comfort as Joe explained, “He’d had the infection for some time, but he was strong enough that it went unnoticed until it was too late. Our research team has studied the results of the autopsy. The bacterial micro-organism colonies not only attacked his heart, but all of his abdominal organs, including the prostate. So,

technically, yes, it can be, but if it had, then the infection would not have attacked your heart first.”

Kathryn implored, “Please, don’t discuss that type of transmission any further, but I need to know. Has it migrated from my heart?”

“Traces have been found in your lungs, but we’ve been able to extract them,” Pulaski responded. “Admiral, I know you want to keep your heart, but the safest option at this point is to move forward with a cardiac implant as soon as possible. We need to remove all traces of the organisms before they break free into your bloodstream.”

Nodding in agreement, Kathryn said, “Do it.”

Joe said, “We need to explain the risks.”

Kathryn was ready for this conversation to be over. “I know there are risks and I’m perfectly aware that I’m not in the best condition for surgery, but I have faith in your recommendation. Just do it.”

“Yes, Admiral. I’ll begin preparations.” Pulaski left the room.

Joe asked, “Mrs. Janeway, Chakotay, would you give me a moment alone with her?”

Chakotay leaned down and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be right outside.”

When they were gone, Kathryn asked, “Do you have more bad news?”

Joe touched her arm. “Chakotay tells me that you’re considering starting a family.”

“I guess this shoots a hole in that plan.” She was tired and wanted to sleep. She didn’t want to think about this anymore.

“Not entirely.”

“Pregnancy with a mechanical heart?”

Joe said, “I’ve researched all of the cases involving this cardiac implant, and none of the patients have had a pregnancy following. However, there’s always a first.”

Her chest felt heavier. “This is too much to think about right now.”

“Hear me out. I just want to put your mind at ease.”

She frowned, forcing herself to listen.

“We’ll do a lot of testing after the surgery and monitor you closely, but I see no reason that you couldn’t carry a child to term once we repair your uterus.”

“Thank you, Doctor. You’ve given me something to think about.” She hoped he would understand the dismissal.

“Is there anything else you want to discuss?”

“No,” she said abruptly and then felt bad. “I’m sorry, Joe. I’d just like to close my eyes for a few minutes. How long before the surgery begins?”

“A little less than an hour,” he said with understanding. “Before I go, I have one more thing to tell you.”

“Yes?” she asked, forcing herself not to look or sound impatient.

“Dr. Crusher received permission for me to tell you that if you want to talk to someone, contact Captain Picard. He’s on his second cardiac implant.”

That did surprise her. “Do I want to know what happened to his first?”

“Maintenance issues, but at that point, his heart was thirty-eight years old. Medical science had improved significantly by then, and the one he has now is twelve years old. According to Dr. Crusher, it is functioning perfectly.”

“She would know,” Kathryn sighed tiredly. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest. I’ll send Chakotay back in.”

Kathryn nodded and closed her eyes. She heard the door open and close twice, but didn’t make the effort to see who had entered her room. She didn’t need to. When he picked up her hand, she squeezed his fingers with the small amount of strength she had left.

He asked, “Are you tired of talking?”

“Yes.” She smiled as he kissed her lips. When the mattress sagged with his weight, she opened her eyes to see what he was doing.

“I feel the need to hold you.”

“You’re not upset that I didn’t consult with you?”

“No,” he said as he picked her up and scooted her over. Cuddling up next to her, he said, “I think it’s the right thing to do.”

She nuzzled against him. “Before I fall asleep, I want to tell you one thing.”

“Do I want to hear this?”

“Probably not, but I need to say it.” She forced her eyes open again to look into his. “If the odds are against me, I want you to buy our house...”

“Kathryn, don’t.”

She placed her finger on his lips to silence him and continued despite his protest. “I want you to buy our house, and surround yourself with friends. There’s enough room in your heart to love me and somebody else, too.”

He closed his eyes, but the tears escaped anyway. “Kathryn.”

“Promise me that you’ll always be among friends, Chakotay. I can’t do this unless I know you’ll be okay.” Her voice cracked with emotion and tears streamed down her cheeks.

“I’ll be okay, for you,” he promised. “But I’ll be better if you’re in that house with me.”

She smiled through her tears. “I know. We have all those places to visit. Remember talking about them in Tuscany?”

“Of course I remember. We’ve got mountains to explore, autumn trees to see.”

“And Hawaii. Where should we go for our honeymoon?” she asked sleepily.

“Anywhere that is quiet. I want to take you away for a long vacation.”

“I’d like that, but if I don’t make it, promise you’ll go anyway? Take my ashes there. I don’t want to be buried in space.”

“Oh, Kathryn,” he choked. “This is too much.”

She stroked his cheek. “Please be strong for me.”

“I’m trying, but these tears keep leaking out.” He held her close.

She turned her face toward his neck to inhale his spicy scent. “I’ve known for weeks that my time might be up.”

“Shhhh...”

“Towards the end, on that awful ship, only escaping into memories of your love gave me the ability to cope. I don’t want to die, but I’m grateful that I’m here with you.”

He kissed her forehead. "I want to be your strength."

"And I want to be yours." She was really worried about him. "The other night, when you wanted to tell me about all the good things in my life?"

"Yes?"

"Would you remember those and forget everything else? I'm probably over-reacting to this, but I don't want to take any chances, and I don't want you to spend the rest of your life angry."

"I understand, and I promise that I'll try to keep the peace that you've brought to me." Chakotay kissed her. "Rest now, my love. I'll be right here."

"You'll be here when I wake up?"

"Always."
