

The Future is Ours – Part 21

“Recovering From A Nightmare”

By Dawn

Summary: Recovery

Rated PG-13

Kathryn felt the heavy lethargy of sleep weighing her down, but she knew that she must wake-up and face the music. She forced her eyes open and saw Chakotay leaning over her with a loving smile on his face, his eyes shining with unshed tears. She asked, “Is it time?”

“Time for what, love?” he asked affectionately as he brushed his fingertips through her hair.

“For the surgery?”

He kissed her head and remained close as he quietly said, “It’s over.”

“It is?” She was dumbfounded. “But I just fell asleep in your arms a few minutes ago.”

He shook his head. “That was over a week ago.”

“A week?” she asked, taken aback.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, holding her hand. “It took your body awhile to adjust to the new heart.”

Still a little foggy, it was a long moment before she registered what he’d said. “New heart,” she repeated as she laid her free hand on her chest.

Laying his hand over hers, he asked, “How does it feel?”

She pressed her fingers against her sternum. “It’s tender, but doesn’t hurt like it did.”

“Progress,” he said sweetly and then nodded towards their clasped hands. “And your grip seems stronger.”

The fog was starting to lift and she squeezed his hand in response. Remembering their conversation before she fell asleep, she said, “But I was supposed to die.”

“Supposed to?” He frowned with worry. “Another premonition from the future?”

“No,” she whispered, too emotional to speak. “Just resigned.”

He drew her up to his chest where she snuggled against him, tears falling down her cheeks. Rubbing her back with broad, soothing strokes, he said, “Shhh... you’re okay, love. We took care of you, and you’re okay.”

Chakotay held her for only a couple of minutes before she fell asleep in his arms. Very gently, he laid her back down, smoothed her hair back from her face, and tucked the blankets around her. He was watching her sleep when B’Elanna came up behind him and squeezed his shoulder.

“You okay?” she asked.

Chakotay nodded. “I’m glad Joe decided to call me when he did. I wouldn’t have made it, otherwise”

“She’s been stirring all afternoon, but she never got to that point where she seemed aware of her surroundings. He was waiting for that.”

“I know. I’ve been worried that it hadn’t happened yet. I thought it would be a couple days ago.”

“Was she in pain? She seemed okay.”

“She said her chest felt tender.”

B’Elanna hugged herself and rubbed her arms. “This whole ordeal has been a nightmare.”

“Let’s just pray that it’s over.” He stood up and looked out the window that overlooked the city. “Do you think everyone would be willing to continue the watch rotation, even though she’s awake now? Would Harry keep organizing it?”

“I’m sure he would, but don’t you want to be with her?”

“I do, but if she’s here much longer, I’ll go stir-crazy sitting in this room all day and night. Even now, it feels...” His throat tightened up, making it impossible for him to continue.

B’Elanna said, “I understand. I’ll talk to him, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to do it. He’s eager to help any way he can.”

Chakotay nodded absently. “I promised her that she wouldn’t be alone, but I...” He found himself unable to keep the emotions in check.

“Go. I’ll be here until ten, and Harry is planning to stay through the night.” B’Elanna asked, “Did you meet with the realtor? What was her name?”

Glad for the change in conversation, Chakotay took a deep breath and said, “Celia Brouillette. I’d just arrived at the house when I got the Doctor’s call that Kathryn was waking up.” He glanced back at Kathryn sleeping peacefully in the bed, and his heart felt heavy.

“So you saw the big house? Is it what you want?”

“The location is nice, but I didn’t see much. It’s peaceful – far away from everything that’s here.” That gave him an idea. “If you’re sure you can stay, I’ll call Celia back.”

“I’d planned on being here anyway. If she wakes up again, I’ll tell her that you needed fresh air and she’ll understand.”

“Thanks.” He wasn’t sure that leaving was the right thing to do, but as he looked down at Kathryn again, the memories of her dying assaulted his mind. He’d hoped that once she was on the path towards recovery, he wouldn’t need to keep forcing himself to be strong. Instead, it felt like his control was slipping. He needed to get out of there and he needed to be alone. He turned towards B’Elanna and said, “I’ll come back to visit after dinner, but if she seems sad that I’m not here, call me?”

“I will.” B’Elanna ushered him out the door.

When Chakotay got out into the hallway, he nodded to the two security guards and walked to the lift as fast as he could. He needed to get out of the hospital before he broke down.

He hurried to the transporter station, refusing to acknowledge anyone along the way for fear of running into a reporter. The transporter attendant immediately returned him to the location he’d just left – the front lawn of the vacant house that he’d been about to see. The house was set in the middle of a secluded forest, and seclusion was what he wanted most at the moment.

Chakotay ran into the dense woods until he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He bent over, braced his hands on his knees, and let the emotional deluge begin. His entire body shook and tears rolled down his cheeks as relief, anger, worry, joy, fear, and love all fought for his attention. He’d been holding himself together for so long that, now that the dam had burst, he was powerless to stop it.

Even though she was safe, alive, and on the path towards recovery, the fear that he’d been afraid to acknowledge was washing over him in torrents. It had been six painfully long weeks since he’d learned that she was missing, and during that time, he’d been scared out of his mind, beset with grief for her probable death, and loving her so much

that it caused a physical ache in his heart. He knew that his pain couldn't compare to hers, but there was no medication or surgery that would ease his.

He sat down with his back against a tree, his fist hitting the ground as he looked up at the sky through his watery eyes. "Why?!?" he yelled. "Why did she have to go through this?!? Why do the people I love have to suffer?!?"

His body continued to shake as he remembered her deathbed pleas. They'd nearly been his undoing as she'd cried out for help when he'd been unable to do anything except hold her. And now that she was awake, he was doing the last thing he'd ever expected – running away. But deep down, he knew that he had to remain strong for her, and having a breakdown at the hospital was not an option.

It took awhile, but Chakotay began to calm as he listened to the sound of the ocean waves crashing on the shore less than a kilometer away. The salt in the air complimented the now drying tears on his face. Although the emotional onslaught had purged much of his pent-up anguish, he was left feeling numb and exhausted. As he looked around him at the dense pine forest, he could definitely imagine himself living in such an earthy, natural, and peaceful place.

At Matt Patterson's suggestion, he'd decided to contact the realtor to get his mind out of the cycle of constant despair. She'd dropped everything to show him properties that fit his requests – a secluded wooded or ocean-front property.

He still had a hard time believing how much he and Kathryn were about to spend on a home. It would've been inconceivable in his tribe for a single family to amass the kind of wealth he now had at his fingertips, because theirs had been an agricultural society that invested everything back into the community. However, as he looked at the woods around him, he had to admit that it would be wonderful to live with Kathryn in such an extraordinary setting.

He got to his feet and returned to the house. Knowing it was empty, he walked around the outside to the back where he could see the Pacific Ocean. He leaned against the deck railing and breathed in the moist sea air. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sounds of the waves crashing on the rocky shore below. "This is paradise."

He remembered a moment on an alien planet long ago when he'd found Kathryn walking along a moonlit shore. She'd told him that she was homesick and hoped that hearing the sounds of an ocean would take her back, even if just for a few minutes. He'd desperately wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her that night, and even though he saw a longing in her eyes for him to do just that, he'd resisted. Later, he wanted to kick himself, thinking that if he ever got her alone on a beach again, he wouldn't hesitate.

Tapping his commbadge, he said, "Captain Chakotay to Celia Brouillette, Pacific Northwest Realty."

“Captain!” she responded with surprise. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you.”

“I know. I’ve transported back to the house near Gold Beach. Do you have time to meet me?”

“Of course! I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you. I’m on the back deck.” He looked down at the ocean, wondering if there was a place to walk in the moonlight. His thoughts took him back to that night again and this time, he imagined kissing her.

Chakotay could hear Celia’s footsteps on the deck and acknowledged her arrival with a nod, saying, “This view is incredible.”

“Yes, it is. It’s cloudy today, but I imagine when the sky is clear, the sunset will be breathtaking.” She waited patiently while he continued to look out over the ocean.

“Kathryn regained consciousness and we talked for a few minutes, but as soon as she fell asleep, I had to get some fresh air. I hope it’s okay that I came back here.”

“Of course, Captain.” She paused before asking, “Are you okay?”

Taking a deep breath to keep the surge of emotions at bay, he nodded. “I will be.” He pushed away from the railing and asked, “Shall we go inside? I want to see the rest of the house.”

Kathryn snuggled into the pillows, thinking how nice it felt to sleep. She loved sleep, even though she’d had a hard time with it during her life. Between nightmares and her restless mind, there’d been far too many nights when she’d lain awake staring at the stars. Right now, however, she had nothing to keep her mind busy, she knew that she was safe at the hospital, and that Chakotay was keeping watch.

Thinking about him made her want to open her eyes. She raised her head in surprise when she saw who was there. “Lanna.”

“Kathryn!” she exclaimed as her magazine fell to the floor. “How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad, I guess,” she said with surprise. “Which is good.”

“I’d say so,” B’Elanna said with a huge smile. “Can I get you anything? Water? Help with your pillow?”

“A sip of water sounds wonderful.”

“Coming right up.”

Kathryn took inventory of her body, and said, “Feels like I'm still hooked up to all manner of wires and tubes.”

Holding the water cup for her, B'Elanna said, “Well, you are a bionic woman now. I suppose some electrical wiring is required.”

“Not permanently, I hope.”

“I doubt it.” B'Elanna helped support Kathryn's head as she drank. “Chakotay stepped out to get some fresh air. He hoped you wouldn't be disappointed.”

“Of course not,” she said as she signaled that she was finished drinking. “I imagine this room has gotten pretty boring. How long have I been here now? I've lost track.”

“Fourteen days,” B'Elanna said as she sat back down. “He started getting a little stir crazy about four days ago, so a group of us have been sitting with you.”

Kathryn nodded tiredly. “Thank you. I appreciate that you were all taking care of him.”

“We're Voyagers. It's what we do.”

Smiling with her eyes closed, she agreed. “Amazing, isn't it? I never thought I'd be so close to so many people.”

“It hasn't been just Voyagers. Your mom and sister, Tom's dad, Captain Young, Patterson.”

“All those people?”

“Several times each. I think Admiral Khurma wanted to sign up for a shift, but felt uncomfortable around all of us.”

“Really? My C.O.?”

“He came in to sit with us during your surgery, but spent most of the time talking to Owen and Admiral Patterson.”

“They were all here?”

B'Elanna nodded. “I hope you don't mind, but we had quite the party in the lounge down the hall.”

Kathryn smiled as she tucked her hands under the blanket. “Hopefully to keep Chakotay distracted?”

“To keep us all distracted, but he was in pretty bad shape.” B’Elanna narrowed her eyes, and said in jest, “I have a bone to pick with you, by the way.”

Amused, Kathryn asked, “Why? Because I got sick?”

“No... even if you really believe you’re about to die, no more conversations about your ashes and him moving on. Ever.”

Her face fell. “B’Elanna.”

The younger woman sniffed and looked away. “Damn these emotions.”

“I had to tell him that I was okay with dying.”

“Were you?”

Kathryn took a deep breath while she thought about how to answer. “I was more okay with it after having the chance to say good bye and while being here with the people I love.”

“So you what? Tell the person you love the most that it’s okay to let you go? Do you have any idea how hard that was for him?”

Her voice thick with emotion, she replied, “Probably about as hard as it was for me to say. What’s worse? Being the one who leaves or being the one left?”

B’Elanna blew her nose and then rubbed her face hard. “God, we were so scared.”

Kathryn reached out and held B’Elanna’s hand. “So was I.”

“I’m sorry, Kathryn.” She looked away. “We really need to change the subject before I start crying.”

Kathryn gave B’Elanna’s hand another squeeze. “I don’t mind the tears – they tell me how much you care, and your friendship is something I never want to take for granted.”

Smiling through her watery eyes, B’Elanna replied, “We fought hard enough for it, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we most certainly did. So... any fun stories about my visitors?”

It took B’Elanna a moment to switch gears, but then she laughed. “Dr. Murphy – you didn’t warn me about them.”

“Them?”

“Harry and Amy. She’s sweet, but…” B’Elanna crossed her eyes.

“If you haven’t had a chance to get to know her, I think you’ll be surprised when you do.”

“I’m sure that chance will come soon. They seem well suited for each other.”

“Mmmm,” Kathryn hummed and closed her eyes. “Yes, they’re a good match.”

“Are you sleepy?”

“Yes, but don’t stop talking. It’s nice.” She lifted the blanket so she could try turning on her side, but found herself tangled up without having moved a centimeter.

B’Elanna stood up. “What can I do?”

“Not sure. I don’t know what’s binding.”

Folding back the blankets, B’Elanna examined the situation. “Well, first of all, this gown is twisted around you. How did you manage that when you’ve only been on your back?”

“I have no idea.” She relaxed as B’Elanna lifted her legs and shifted her clothes around. “I’m looking forward to having enough strength to do this myself.”

“No doubt,” she said as she worked. “I don’t know what some of these wires do, but we’ll assume they’re all important.”

“I didn’t come with engineering schematics?”

“Not that I can see, but I think I’ve got it. Now, do you have the strength to roll or do you need help?”

Kathryn clenched down her abdominal muscles and rolled, relying on B’Elanna to keep her from going off the bed, but then she was stuck, unable to push up to scoot back to the center. “I hate this.”

“Don’t worry,” B’Elanna said as she got her positioned. “You’ll be back to your old self in no time, kickin’ alien ass.”

Kathryn laughed, remembering the incident on Ktaria. “You saw that, did you?”

“The entire Federation saw it. It was awesome.” She pulled up the covers and then sat down. “Over too many beers one night, we decided that you were doing exactly that when you were missing.”

“I would’ve liked to.” Kathryn crooked a smile and then noticed her hands. “My fingernails are manicured.”

“Hmm?” B’Elanna looked at the white-tipped nails with her. “Oh, your sister did that. Your toes are done, too. Bright red.”

She chuckled and then nodded towards the magazine. “What are you reading?”

“Oh, nothing much. It was in the lounge,” she admitted guiltily. “I was reading the article titled, ‘Sexy Surprises He’ll Love’.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And what are they?”

“You sure you want me to read this?”

“Sounds like fun,” she said sleepily.

“Well, the article talks about how surprises give you a buzz. They’re kind of ridiculous.”

“Going to try any out on Tom?”

B’Elanna shrugged. “Maybe a couple.”

“Let’s have it, then.”

“All right, but you asked for it – whisper into his ear in French. You could do that, especially if you spend more time in Paris.”

“Just be sure the commbadges aren’t anywhere in sight.”

“Yeah, that would definitely ruin the effect.”

B’Elanna continued, “Run a bath for him and lather him all over.”

“Mmmm... a bath sounds wonderful.”

“Have a spontaneous food fight.”

“Could be fun, but do it before the bath, I suppose.”

“Don’t wear panties and be sure to inform him after you leave the house.”

“Oh, my.”

“Pinch him in the rear in public. Buy him gifts. Oh... this one is interesting... Wear an apron while you’re cooking dinner.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“That’s all you’re supposed to wear.”

“Oh, I see,” Kathryn laughed. “Be sure to pull the drapes and don’t fry bacon.”

“Mmhm. Oh, and the next one is along the same line. Do a strip-tease.”

“Wouldn’t take much with only an apron. You know, I don’t think I even own an apron.”

“Get a bare-all waxing. Wear garters. Those two would work together.”

“Now, could you wear garters and an apron? Would that count?”

“I doubt there’s a final exam,” B’Elanna noted.

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that.” They both laughed.

Chakotay came into the room and asked, “You two sound like you’re having fun in here.”

“We are,” B’Elanna said as she tucked the magazine out of sight.

Chakotay caught the movement and said, “I don’t even want to know what you’re reading.”

Kathryn said, “No, you don’t.” She held out a hand to him and asked, “Did you have a nice evening?”

“Actually, I did.” He widened his eyes with amusement as he kissed her hand.

Recognizing the look on his face, she asked, “What are you up to?”

“A surprise.”

B’Elanna snorted and then covered her mouth. The outburst made Kathryn laugh, too.

Chakotay shook his head in amusement. “You two are something else when you’re alone together.”

“Oooh!” B’Elanna exclaimed. “Can I throw you a bachelorette party?”

“I’d love it.” Kathryn said as Chakotay laughed.

“I’ve got to call Phoebe! I know just what we’ll do.” Now excited about making plans, she said, “I’m going to scope out more reading material in the lounge. Call me if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Chakotay hugged B’Elanna loosely and then took her place beside Kathryn’s bed.

“What kind of surprise?” Kathryn asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you, now would it?”

“Not even a clue?”

“Nope,” he laughed at her frown. “But I promise that you’ll find out the moment you’re strong enough to walk out of here on your own.”

“Something to look forward to.” She sighed contently and closed her eyes.

“You seem to be feeling well.”

“I am. Tired and weak, but it’s not bad. My arms don’t hurt anymore.”

“They did a lot of therapy on them while you were asleep.” He caressed her hand. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here tonight.”

“Don’t be.” She looked at him. “I completely understand your need to get out of this building, especially now that the crisis is over.”

“I want to be here with you, but this room is getting to me.”

Softly, she asked, “Are you okay?”

His voice cracked as he assured her, “I’m fine.”

“Chakotay?”

Their eyes locked, love passing between them. “What else can I say except that I’m fine? That’s what I need to be right now.”

She nodded. “I know what you mean. I’ve ‘been fine’ while all hell’s breaking loose many times in my life.”

“But you’re better now, and…”

“...and now all the anguish is catching up to you. Am I right?”

He looked down at their clasped hands and then back up at her bright blue eyes again. Hesitantly, he said, "I'm hoping that if I let it out, just a little at a time, I'll be able to cope with it."

"Sounds like a good plan." She caressed his chin until she had his attention. "Just don't hide it from me. I may not be physically strong, but I can still listen and comfort you."

His eyes began to fill. "I love you, Kathryn."

"That makes me a very lucky woman." She laid her hand on his chest. "Would you lie down? Let me hold you?"

"I don't want to disturb all of these wires," he said as he lifted the sheet.

"Then move them out of the way. You'll have to move me, too."

He very carefully gathered her and all of her medical paraphernalia into his arms and scooted her over to the far edge of the bed. "I wanted to hold you so many times while you were sleeping."

"I wouldn't have minded."

"No, but the medical staff would've." He toed off his shoes and slowly stretched out next to her. "You're sure this is okay?"

Kathryn motioned for him to scoot down a little so he could rest his head on her arm. "I'll let you know if it hurts."

Once he got settled, he closed his eyes and sighed as she drew her fingers through his hair. "I need this."

"I'm here, and I'm going to be just fine." She placed a kiss on his forehead and added, "I'm sorry for scaring you."

"That..." He paused to clear his throat. "That is not something you need to apologize for."

She cupped his jaw to bring his face up and said, "Kiss me."

Their lips touched in a soft, warm kiss that spread a surprising chill through her body. Although simple, it felt like a confirmation of life.

Still close, Chakotay whispered, "This feels like a dream."

"Want me to pinch you?"

His eyes dancing with joy, he replied, “No, I want you to marry me and live happily ever after.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

He gave her another soft kiss and then asked, “Will you be okay if I don’t stay here all night?”

“I’ll be fine,” she ran her fingers through his hair. “And so will you. Are you staying at your apartment?”

“Didn’t I tell you that I gave it up?”

“You did?” She tried to remember if he’d mentioned it.

“I moved into your house back in October.”

“Oh,” she recalled. “I knew that, but I didn’t put two and two together.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I gave away all that furniture you helped me pick out.”

She smiled while shaking her head. “Not at all. Who’d you give it to?”

“It’s still in the family. A group of Voyagers decided to get an apartment together.”

“Oh?”

“It’s ironic, really. After all their bickering on the ship about sharing quarters, Bristow, Chell, Rollins, and Vorik decided that they were used to each other.”

Kathryn laughed. “That’s great.”

“So anyway, I’ve been at your, I mean our, house the last few nights.”

“How is Mom doing?”

Chakotay closed his eyes. “Oh, no. I completely forgot to call her.”

“She’s been here though, right?”

He nodded and tapped his commbadge. “Chakotay to Gretchen Janeway, Indiana 529.”

“Chakotay?” Gretchen replied sleepily. “Are you all right?”

“I’ve got someone here who’d like to say hello.”

Gretchen gasped. “Katie?”

With a huge grin, she said, “Hi, mom.”

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Sorry to worry you.”

“Never mind about that. How are you feeling? Would you like me to come up?”

“I’m feeling pretty good, actually. Weak and tired, of course.”

“Oh yes, of course you are. Did you just wake up?”

“A little earlier, but you don’t need to come down tonight. Maybe in the morning?”

“Absolutely. I was already planning on it.”

Kathryn gave Chakotay a wink. “Would you bring me something?”

“Anything.”

“Chakotay was reading me a book. It should be on the bedside table.”

“I know just the one.”

“And my knitting bag in case I feel like doing some stitches.”

“All right. I’ll throw a few other things in, too. Get some rest, sweetheart.”

“I will. Goodnight mom – I love you.”

“Love you too, Katie.”

When the signal closed, Kathryn sighed. “Thought I’d give her something to do. She likes that, you know.”

“Just like her daughter.” He brushed a few strands of hair away from her temple. “I should go so you’ll fall back to sleep.”

“Not just yet.” She felt like she was melting under his touch. “Can I call you honey?”

“Honey?”

She shrugged. “You call me your love and beautiful, and I feel like I need a name for you, but I can’t figure out what feels right.”

He chuckled lightly. “Don’t worry. You could call me ‘butthead,’ and I’d still want to sleep with you.”

Joining his laughter, she replied, “So next time we’re in the throes of passion, I should call out, ‘I love you, butthead?’”

“Well, when you put it that way, ‘honey’ has a nice ring to it.” He held her closer and they snuggled together quietly, each soaking up the physical presence of the other. After a long moment, he sighed with contentment. “I’m looking forward to taking you home and holding you like this every night.”

“Me too, but I don’t want to hurry home this time. I want to walk out of here healthy.”

“Even though I’m having trouble coping with it, I have to agree. I don’t want to take any more chances with your health, ever.”

She took hold of his hand and said, “Remind me about that next time I brush off a doctor’s appointment, would you?”

“I’ll carry you there myself if I have to.”

She groaned and then laughed tiredly. “The only place I’m ever going to let you carry me is to bed. That, and over the threshold after I marry you.”

“I’ll do that.” Kissing her fingers he said, “You really should get back to sleep. Your body needs it.”

“You’re probably right.”

“If you want me back later, I’m only a com call away. Joe said you’d be on a suppressant to keep nightmares away for awhile, so we don’t need to worry about that.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Harry will be here in an hour to sit with you, just in case you need someone to distract you.”

“He doesn’t need to come up.”

“I’ve already talked to him, and he’s looking forward to it. I’ll feel better knowing that someone is here looking after you.”

“Because the entire hospital staff isn’t capable?”

“Forgive me for being over-protective.”

“Don’t stop. I’m feeling the need for it.”

He caressed her hip lovingly.

“You want tell me something,” she observed.

“Am I that transparent?”

“Not always.” She placed another kiss on his forehead. “What is it?”

“I’m struggling with whether to tell you that I hope you remain convinced that you should stay on Earth more, if not permanently. I know this isn’t the time, but I’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

The worry in his eyes was as clear as day. She traced his tattoo as she said, “I should’ve explained the reasoning behind that decision more clearly. If I had, you wouldn’t be looking at me like that.”

He remained quiet, closing his eyes under her touch.

“When I’m not so sleepy, I’ll tell you how I think it’ll work, and you can help me work out the kinks.”

“Thank you.”

She put her hand on his. “Get some rest. I’ll call you if I need you.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Send B’Elanna back in. She can read me to sleep and I bet I won’t wake until morning.”

Chakotay stood and helped her get resituated on the bed. As he pulled the covers up around her, he gave her a soft kiss, and said, “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey.”

“That has a nice ring to it.”

“Yeah, it does.” She opened her eyes for just a moment and then said, “Sleep in tomorrow. I’ll be fine.”

“It might be the first night since mid-December that I’ll be able to sleep soundly.” He caressed her leg one last time before leaving. “Good night, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight.” She was asleep before B’Elanna returned.

They developed a pattern over the next week and a half. He would come to visit for a couple hours every morning and stay through lunch, then return in the evening for a goodnight kiss. She had physical therapy twice a day and got into a good cycle of sleeping.

Although she missed Chakotay when he wasn’t there, she was glad that he was taking care of himself and recovering a little of his equilibrium. The many friends and family members that sat with her gave her someone new to talk to every time she woke up. She mused that she wasn’t getting the least bit bored being in the hospital.

Most of her keepers, as she’d begun calling them, vacated to the lounge when Chakotay arrived up for his nightly visits. On the fifth evening of this pattern, she and Tom were playing cards when Chakotay arrived.

“Good evening, beautiful,” he said as he kissed her. “I’m glad to see that you’re sitting up on your own.”

“Without being propped up, even,” Tom noted.

“I’m anxious to get out of here,” she said. “That surprise you mentioned is niggling at me.”

“Surprise?” Tom asked as he folded his cards.

“Don’t play coy, Tom,” Kathryn said as she showed him what would have been a losing hand. “I’m sure you know all about it.”

“No one knows *all* about it.” Chakotay said as he pulled up a chair beside the bed. “But speaking of surprises, I brought you one.” He held out a bag for her.

“Ooooh. What is it?” She took it from him and peeked inside. Her eyes popped open wide. “Is this what I think it is?”

“I checked with Dr. Joe and he said it was fine, but I did have to get the smallest one.”

“What is it?” Tom asked.

She pulled out the small cup and peeled off the lid. “Mocha fudge ice cream,” she said with pure delight.

Chakotay took the lid and exchanged it for a spoon. “Enjoy.”

Tom said, "That must mean your kidneys are back to normal."

The first bite was heavenly. It was soft and melty the moment it hit her tongue. "Mmmmmmm." She laid back against the pillows so she could concentrate on savoring every bite.

"You definitely know the way to her heart," Tom said. "Can we still say that now that she doesn't have one?"

"Sure we can. She's got a state-of-the-art-heart. Fully equipped with bioneural circuitry."

"Awe, that's perfect! A little piece of Voyager tucked inside her heart forever."

As he watched her savor the dessert, Chakotay said, "And she's oblivious."

"Mmm mmm," she shook her head. "Blissful."

Tom asked, "Care for a hand while she's savoring?"

"Sure. What's the game?"

"Five card draw. Deuces wild."

As they played, Tom asked, "So, what have you been up to this week?"

"Catching up on sleep at first, but yesterday and today, I taught two tactics seminars."

"I thought you were taking the semester off."

"I was, but the students were disappointed, so I agreed to teach a seminar here and there. Personally, I think they just want to meet me."

"Well, you are famous."

"We all are," Chakotay said.

"Not like you two. She and I were watching the newsfeed earlier. They're still speculating on her status."

Kathryn came out of her ice-cream induced trance long enough to ask, "How did they find out I was here?"

Chakotay answered, "Reporters noticed the Voyagers coming and going. They got me one day and my body language gave it away."

Tom said, "It's not like you'd want to mislead them."

"No," Chakotay sighed with irritation, "but I didn't want to talk to them about it, either."

"Are they still following you?" she asked.

"Yes, but my glower keeps them at bay."

Concerned with his obvious irritation, Kathryn frowned. "Your glower?"

"It keeps them from bothering me. As long as they think there's no status change, they don't ask."

Tom suggested, "Maybe some good news would cheer everyone up. Yourself included."

Chakotay shrugged. "Feel free to tell them."

Kathryn was surprised by Chakotay's reaction to the press. She'd have to talk to him about it later.

Tom suggested, "Maybe Starfleet can issue an official statement once you're released."

"Perhaps," Kathryn said. "I could make an appearance, too. Reassure everyone."

"Dad is here tomorrow afternoon. Ask him about it."

"I will. Who's my keeper overnight?"

"Captain Young," Tom said.

"Really?" Kathryn appreciated the gesture. "But he's a newlywed."

"That was six months ago," Chakotay noted.

"Still, I'll be fine."

"Let him do it," Tom said. "Everyone wants to be here for you, and I think it's helping all of us heal."

Still eating her ice cream, she agreed. "I suppose. Although, it would probably be a good idea to have someone here tonight."

"Why's that?" Chakotay asked nervously.

"I might be awake for awhile. Dr. Joe wants me to try sleeping without being medicated."

“Would you like me to stay?”

“I’d love for you to, but you’re leading that discussion in the morning.” She said reassuringly, “I’ll be okay with Bernie. He’s very easy to talk to.”

“Okay,” he said with uncertainty.

Dr. Joe came into the room, “Good evening. How was the ice cream, Admiral?”

“Delicious,” she said happily.

He scanned her carefully and then closed the tri-corder, a triumphant grin on his face. “Congratulations, Admiral. Your electrolytes and kidneys are officially stable, and your pancreas is much improved. You may eat whatever you want, whenever you want it, as long as you keep sugars and simple carbs in small amounts.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said with a smirk. “I just knew your exemplary care would sort me out.”

“Me and a few dozen others. However, I suggest small meals often, and keep trying to gain weight.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She winked.

When Joe left, the three of them began to play cards again. Kathryn noticed that Chakotay’s thoughts were somewhere else and she couldn’t help but wonder what was going on with him.

“So, Kathryn?” Tom asked while surreptitiously glancing at Chakotay. “What are you going to have for your first unrestricted meal?”

“Hmmm. That’s a good question. Italian food, perhaps.” She noticed Tom trying to attract Chakotay’s attention back to the conversation. That meant that she wasn’t the only one who realized that he was acting strangely.

“What kind of Italian?” Tom asked a little too loudly, realizing that she was aware of what he was doing.

Kathryn bumped into Chakotay’s cards seemingly accidentally, jarring him back into the conversation. “Oh, excuse me.” She looked at Tom, “To answer your question, Tom, I have so many good memories of Italian food that I’m not sure which would be best.”

“Italian food?” Chakotay asked. “At this hour?”

Tom said, “Nah, maybe tomorrow. What do you think, Kathryn?”

“What was the name of that restaurant you ordered from that night you were painting your bedroom, Tom?”

“Luigi’s,” Chakotay replied.

“But then there’s Billy’s uncle’s place. That’s good, too.”

Tom suggested, “Maybe we should have him cater the Voyager reunion redo.”

Chakotay nodded. “Good idea.”

“Luigi’s then. I love the cannelloni.”

When Chakotay said nothing, Tom asked, “Chakotay, do you have time to pick some up for her lunch tomorrow? I could, but I’m due at Utopia at thirteen hundred for a test flight.”

“Sure. What would you like?” He glanced up at Kathryn.

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. After all, it’s your first un-restricted meal.”

Kathryn bit back a smile. He really hadn’t been listening. “I’d love the cannelloni. And bruschetta. Would you share it with me?”

“Sounds delicious.” He was focused back on her now. “Do you want to keep playing cards or call it a night? Are you getting tired?”

“A little tired.” Although she wasn’t feeling the least bit sleepy, she realized that he needed an excuse to leave. “Tom, would you give us a moment? I’d like to kiss him goodnight.”

“Of course. I’ll be right outside.”

Chakotay picked up the cards and placed them on the side table.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Me? I’m fine.” He tossed her ice cream container in the trash bin. “Why do you ask?”

“I know you don’t like being in this room, but you seem more distracted than usual. Are you worried about tomorrow?”

He sat on the edge of her bed. “Not really. Tomorrow will be fine. It’s just a seminar for some officer training. We’re discussing first contacts that went badly.”

“Sounds like fun,” she grinned. “Will you tell me about it over lunch?”

“You want to know how many of Voyager’s contacts come up?”

She waved that away. “I know how those turned out. I want to hear about the others, or any funny anecdotes. I’m always game for a laugh.”

Taking her hands, he said, “I’m sorry if I was preoccupied. Nothing to worry about.”

“Is it the media? Have they been harassing you?”

“I’m fine,” he dismissed. “It’s in the past.”

“I can be a fairly good listener, you know.” She put a finger under his chin to get him to look her in the eye. “At least that’s what it says on my curriculum vitae under diplomat.”

He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. “It’s not important.”

Before he backed away, she caught his face between her hands to make sure he stayed close. “Hey,” she said softly. “If it’s important to you, it’s important to me.”

Taking a shaky breath, he said, “I don’t want to burden you with what’s going on in my head right now.”

“You are never a burden,” she stroked her fingers through his thick, black hair. Sympathetic to his frustrations, she said, “I imagine that the last thing you’ve wanted during all of this is to have your emotions broadcast all over the Federation.”

He smiled guiltily, amused with her keen perception. “Got it in one.”

“I’ll ask Owen to make a statement tomorrow. That should get them off your back.”

“You don’t need to do that.” He shook his head. “They have to respect your privacy.”

“I don’t mind everyone knowing, especially now that I’m on the mend. Maybe it’ll spark some hope. And I bet that soon, they’ll forget all about whatever media confrontation is troubling you.”

With a sigh, he said, “I’m not sure that I’ll ever be comfortable in the public spotlight.”

“You don’t need to be. Leave it to me to be the extrovert.”

“Gladly.” He leaned forward so that their foreheads were touching. “I love you, Kathryn.”

“Lucky me,” she smiled against his cheek. “I love you, too.”

“I’m worried about leaving you tonight.” He drew her into a hug.

Melting into his embrace, she said, “I’d change rooms if it wouldn’t be a lot of trouble.”

“I don’t think it’ll matter what room you’re in. You’re still lying in a hospital bed.”

Looking up at him, she asked with concern, “Are you having nightmares?”

“Not that I know of, but I haven’t been sleeping well.” He caressed her arm. “It’s what haunts me while I’m awake that bothers me.”

“I should be out of here soon, and then…” She said with excitement, “I get a surprise!”

He laughed. “Yes, you do.”

“Are you building me another bathtub?”

“Would you like one?”

“Only if you’re in it, honey,” she said with a mischievous smirk.

“That can be arranged.” Taking her face between his hands, he kissed her softly. “Goodnight, love.”

With a happy smile, she said, “Yes, it has been a good night. Ice cream AND kisses.”

He gave her another lingering kiss before saying goodbye. After he left, Tom played cards with her for another hour until Bernie arrived. At first, Kathryn was nervous about talking to him because she hadn’t seen him since leaving the Pioneer. However, his easy spirit and friendly demeanor quickly put her at ease. It was no wonder that he was such a good diplomat. They talked for over an hour before she finally drifted off to sleep.

Kathryn walked along the empty corridors of Voyager, wondering where everyone had gone. There wasn’t a soul in sight, and every room she checked was empty. The messhall was dark, not even the open flame on the stove lit her path. Only the reflected glow coming through the viewports allowed her to see her hands in front of her face.

Where was the crew? Could she make out some figures in the corner? She called out, “Hello? Who’s there?”

Suddenly, Neelix appeared out of nowhere and turned to the still figures. “They’re right there. Don’t you see them?” And then she did, her best friends, all dead. She screamed. She was going to die alone.

The images around her transformed into the same, haunted corridors, now glowing red with emergency lighting. Pink, noxious gas hissed as it poured from the air ducts to suffocate her. She yelled out for help, but no one was there. Her lungs burned and then there was nothing.

The burning pain in her lungs seized her chest. She clawed at herself, screaming against the pain of electric volts that attempted to restart her dead heart. The tight, intense pain of her heart forced the air from her lungs as she screamed again, afraid to die.

The pain spread through her veins like wildfire, the heat focused on her hand where she’d been pierced by the fangs of a snake. The venom pulled her down, away from life, into the darkness of something beyond.

Her arms were being pulled, tightly, bound behind her. Someone was shaking her, but she couldn’t see who it was. Did she hear her name? It was Chakotay, holding her, she was dying in his arms. Already dead. He was crying for her, begging her to stay with him, but there was nothing he could do. She watched as her limp body, tucked against his chest, faded away into the oblivion of an unknown planet in an unknown space.

She felt a sting on her cheek. Someone hit her. Borg-green lights invaded the darkness around her. She screamed out as tubules pierced her neck. She yelled out, “Nooooo! Help me!”

“Kathryn!”

The voice returned. He was there, fighting against the hands that held her down. When the phaser blast hit her square in the chest, he was there, but he didn’t catch her. She fell down to the bottom of the precipice, screaming for her life.

She was shaken again. The Doctor was waking her. His cold, inhuman eyes seemed to mock her as he erected a force field and told her it was time. She would die now to save everyone else from the pain of her suffering. Her voice became hoarse as she yelled out, begging someone to help her.

“Kathryn! Wake up!”

She was pulled up, firm arms wrapping around her. The room was dark and she was afraid to open her eyes. Afraid to confront another death, she yelled, “NOOOO! LET! ME! GO!!”

“Kathryn! You’re safe! You’re safe.” The arms around her pulled away and held her face. She reeled back from the touch, afraid of what the strange man would do to her.

“Noooo!” she cried, begging, “Let me go!”

“Kathryn, you’re okay,” the voice softened. “It’s just a nightmare. You’re safe.”

The word nightmare triggered a memory. She floundered around, looking for a safe haven. “Chakotay?” she asked.

“Shhh... you’re safe, Kathryn.” The voice was calm and reassuring now. “You’re safe.”

She braved opening her eyes so she could find out who was talking, hoping there was light enough that she could see. Chakotay would be there. It was his hands that held her. The dark blue eyes that greeted her startled her and she instantly recoiled.

“It’s me, Bernie. Do you know me?” He pulled his hands back when she looked down at them in fear. “You’re safe.”

Looking around, she tried to figure out where she was, tried to figure out who this man was. She asked for her love, “Chakotay?”

He asked quietly, “Would you like me to call him?”

“Yes,” she gasped as she wrapped her arms protectively around herself. She knew Chakotay would be able to help her.

Bernie tapped his commbadge. “Captain Young to Captain Chakotay, San Francisco.”

A hoarse, but anxious voice answered, “Bernie? What’s wrong?”

“She’s asking for you. Terrible nightmare and she’s frightened and disoriented – doesn’t know me.”

“On my way!”

The conversation gave her long enough to get her bearings and realize what had happened. She whispered hoarsely, “Bernie.”

“That’s right,” he said as he braved moving towards her, but not touching her. “Do you know where you are, Kathryn?”

“Starfleet Medical.” Embarrassment flooded over her and she held her knees close to her chest. Bowing her head, she said, “I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, nooo, please, don’t be. I’m your friend and I care about you. Don’t be embarrassed.”

Suddenly feeling cold, she pulled the blankets up that had been tossed away in her terror. “You called Chakotay?”

“He’s on his way.” He touched the bed near her. “Can I get you anything?”

She shook her head, not comfortable enough to make eye contact. She desperately wanted Chakotay, but she knew her pain would upset him. He was already far too sad, and if she’d had her wits about her, she wouldn’t have sent for him. The chilly air made her shiver and she wrapped her arms tighter around her legs.

Bernie laid a blanket over her shoulders. “Does that help?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said quickly. She didn’t want to hurt him, but she needed him to go away and for Chakotay to hold her. The need for his arms around her was so strong that it made her shudder.

The door opened and Chakotay charged to her bedside, breathless from running. “Kathryn?”

Unable to stop herself, she flew into his arms. “Chakotay!”

“I’m here. Shhh.” He sat on the bed and held her close, rocking her side to side, her face buried against his neck.

“Oh, God,” she cried.

“Shhhh, shhhh.” His hand made gentle circles on her back, soothing her trembles into slow, even breaths.

She hated feeling this weak and needy, but the images of dying over and over again affected her deeply. “I need you,” she sobbed.

The slow rocking motion accompanied his soft voice. “I’m here, love. I’m here.”

Bernie whispered, “I’ll wait outside.”

Kathryn pulled back, startled. She hadn’t realized that he was still there.

Chakotay drew her close again, sheltering her from her loss of composure. He asked Bernie, “How long did it last?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe three or four minutes, ten if you count agitated REM. I tried everything I could think of to wake her up. I was about to call a doctor.”

Kathryn asked shakily, "How long do they usually last?"

"Not that long." Chakotay kissed her forehead. "Thanks for calling me."

"She wasn't herself, very disoriented."

Chakotay replied, "She usually is. They're always bad after a trauma. Started after a run-in with the Borg."

Kathryn shook her head against his chest. "After Dad and Justin died."

"Justin?" Bernie asked with genuine concern.

Chakotay closed his eyes, obviously not realizing how long these bad nightmares had terrorized her.

Kathryn answered, "My first fiancé." She and Bernie had become close enough friends that sharing personal details wasn't unnatural. Having an uncontrollable night-terror in front of him was another matter entirely.

Dr. Joe peeked into the room. "I came to check on our patient."

"I'm here," she said, muffled against Chakotay's chest.

"She had a nightmare," Bernie stated.

"I could tell. I was watching the cortical monitor readout," he said as he scanned her with a tri-corder.

"And you didn't help?" Chakotay asked with disbelief.

"There was no medical reason to intervene, and studies show that waking someone from a nightmare could add to their fright."

Kathryn sighed, but didn't look up. "Joe, program a nightmare for yourself sometime and then ask yourself if you'd like to be woken up from it."

"That would be an interesting case study. I'll consider it."

She could feel that Chakotay had tensed and was fighting against giving Joe a tongue-lashing. She asked, "Bernie? Doctor? Could you give us a moment alone?"

"Before I go," Dr. Joe said. "I want to tell you that your new heart handled the fright remarkably well."

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said with barely contained exasperation as he left. There were times when he still was oblivious to the human nature of a situation, and this was definitely one of them.

Chakotay asked, “Bernie? If it’s okay with you, I’ll stay with her for the rest of the night.”

“Of course, I think that’s a good idea. I’ll say goodnight and leave you be.” He patted Kathryn’s arm and left.

When they were alone, she looked up at Chakotay sadly. “I’m sorry, honey.”

“No, love, I’m sorry.” He drew her close again. “I should have stayed with you. I had a feeling.”

The frightening images were fading as his warmth comforted her. “You make me feel better,” she admitted.

He began rocking her again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Her eyes clamped shut. She was afraid to tell him, afraid to add to his heartache. It took a lot for her to admit, “I think I should see a counselor – the one from the Enterprise. I feel comfortable with her.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” He held her tightly. “Is there anything that I can do? Would it make you feel better to tell me?”

She struggled against her desire to tell him.

“Kathryn?”

“I... I don’t want to add to your pain.”

“Oh, Kathryn.” His embrace shifted to draw his arm around her shoulders. “We’re in a fix, because I don’t want to burden you with what’s in my thoughts, either.”

“Sounds like we both need professional help.”

“I think we do.” He kissed her temple. “Although I’m guessing there’s a good chance that we’re upset about the same thing.”

She pulled back to look him in the eyes. “My death?”

Caressing her cheek, he nodded solemnly. “I’m afraid so.”

“The nightmare was flashes of all the times I’ve faced death. How can I be so afraid of something that I’ve coped with so many times?”

He shrugged. “Each time, we’ve had to consider that it might be the end. Maybe it has a cumulative effect.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Too many sleepless nights,” he said sadly.

She looked away before saying, “I was wondering if death would be easier to accept if I had some kind of terminal illness, rather than just bad luck.”

“Nothing would make it easy, but I think it’s high time we changed your luck.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she smiled weakly. “If only it were possible.”

He hugged her again. “For now, let’s just hold each other. What do you think?”

Melting into his embrace, she said, “I think you’re on to something.” His clothes caught her attention. “You came here in your pajamas?”

“I didn’t take time to get dressed.”

Kathryn lifted the blankets. “Well, come on in here, then. You’re ready for bed.”

“I’d love to.” He stood to toe off his shoes. “Do you think there’s room?”

“I plan to hold on tight.” She scooted over, relishing the ability to do it herself.

“Sounds perfect.” After getting situated, they quickly fell asleep in a loving embrace.

“Are you ready?” Chakotay asked as Kathryn wrapped the deep blue pashmina around her shoulders.

Glad to be finally leaving the hospital, she said, “Very ready. How many reporters are gathered?”

Owen answered, “About a dozen. We limited it to the primary Fednews agencies only.”

She nodded and then turned to Chakotay. “You don’t have to come with me.”

“Yes, I do.” He stood close and gently held her upper arms. “Besides, what are you going to tell them when they ask you what you’ll be doing over the next couple of months?”

The corner of her mouth tugged upwards. “You want me to make an announcement?”

“It’s as good a time as any.”

Affectionately, she replied, “As you wish.”

When they emerged from the hospital room, the busy medical staff stopped what they were doing. Kathryn didn’t know if they were concerned for her or if they were just trying to catch a glimpse of the celebrity in their midst.

In the lift, she caught Chakotay’s eye and winked at him. “Nervous?”

“Only about your reaction to my surprise.”

She laughed. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Owen said, “I have no doubt she’ll love it.”

“You know about it?” Kathryn asked.

“Of course. We’re providing security.”

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows, wondering what Chakotay could be up to. She didn’t think long, however, since the lift soon deposited them on the main floor of the building. A security escort, including Justin Jarvin, accompanied her to a meeting room that was acting as a temporary press room.

When she entered, she was greeted with a round of applause. It made her feel more like a performer than a military diplomat, but it seemed to make them happy, so she accepted it gracefully.

Chakotay and Owen remained next to the wall as Kathryn took position at the lectern, smiling at the gathered press as they continued to clap for her. The cameras were a bit daunting, considering she hadn’t taken much effort with her hair, but then again, what could they expect of a patient leaving a hospital? She certainly had to look better than last time they saw her.

When the applause died down, she said, “Thank you for that generous welcome. I’m addressing you today because of the concern regarding my health during the last month while I’ve been a patient here at Starfleet Medical.” She paused to glance at Chakotay who was listening intently. His mouth twitched into a contained smile when he realized she was looking at him.

“While I hope that you’ll respect my privacy by not asking specific questions about my health, I would like to assure you that I am well on my way to a full recovery. The last four weeks,” she stopped to correct herself. “The last eight weeks have been difficult, and I appreciate the care and concern of all those who have been keeping me and my loved ones in your thoughts.” She paused before saying, “I’ll answer a few questions.”

“Admiral, is the rumor true that you were transported here in emergency? If so, can you tell us whether you were assaulted at that time?”

Kathryn was surprised that people were thinking along those lines. “Yes, it was a medical emergency due to complications that arose from an illness I contracted while held captive. No, I have not been assaulted since my rescue a month ago.”

“Admiral Janeway, how critical did your illness become while you were a patient here?”

She took a deep breath to give herself a moment to decide how to answer. Since her hesitation likely gave it away, she was straightforward. “As critical as it gets.”

The room was silent for only a moment before another reporter asked, “Admiral, does your illness affect your ability to continue as Federation Security Council Envoy?”

“I will be physically capable of continuing after a full recovery.”

Another asked, “Admiral, you said you would be capable, but you didn’t say whether you would be willing. Are you?”

With her strongest command presence, she stated, “I gave my commitment that I would work towards re-uniting the Federation. I’m not going to let a few bullies undermine what we’ve accomplished in the last six months, but I will have to make some changes regarding my accessibility and personal safety to ensure that I’m around long enough to make a difference.”

Much to her surprise, she received a round of applause in response. She glanced at Chakotay to gauge his reaction and he was applauding right along with everyone else. The glimmer in his eyes was apparent from halfway across the room. When the applause died down, she said with a grin, “It appears that you agree.” After giving those gathered in the room a moment to chuckle, she asked, “Next question?”

“How long do you expect your recovery to take?”

She smiled. “The doctors would like me to take six months off, but I’m not one who likes to be idle. However, I will probably not be returning to work until May.”

“Admiral, do you have any special plans during your leave?”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay and received a nod in return. “Yes, I do. Captain Chakotay and I will be getting married next month on March 30th.” She didn’t know what she expected the response to that statement to be, but it wasn’t the quietly pleased expressions on everyone’s faces.

“Do you have any details about the wedding that you’d like to tell us, Admiral?”

She laughed quietly. “No, nothing to report, other than the announcement itself. We’ll be keeping the event private.” They hadn’t discussed that, but she had no doubt that it would be best. “I’ll take one more question.”

“Admiral, as you begin your leave of absence, is there any message that you’d like us to convey on your behalf?”

Thinking for only a moment, she replied, “Yes, there is.” Turning her focus to the group of cameras, she said, “I want to ask every member of the Federation to keep a positive state of mind about the strength of our alliances. Negativity feeds on itself, and it’s not healthy for us. We’ve made significant progress and that progress will continue. My staff is carrying on in my absence so that all we have accomplished will not be in vain. In the meantime, you can do something for me – encourage our young people across the Alpha Quadrant to take a stand for what is right. Make sure your leaders hear your voices to work towards a positive, cooperative, and peaceful future for our worlds.”

She took a moment to acknowledge the renewed round of applause before stepping away and taking the arm that Chakotay offered her.

Once they stepped out of the room into the quiet hall, he kissed her cheek and said, “You are inspirational.”

“I’m afraid I went a bit overboard. Maybe Mike was right when he said I should just become a motivational speaker.”

Owen agreed, “You’d be good at it. While we wait for security to make arrangements, I’d like to ask you if we can set up a time to talk about some developments.”

“I’m not ready to work, yet.”

“I know, but I want to make you aware of a few things. You can decide if you want to become involved, unofficially.”

“Sounds intriguing. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Enough shop talk,” Chakotay stated.

“You’re right,” Kathryn said, redirecting her attention back to him. “So, this surprise – is it a vacation of some kind? Are we going away?”

“Only for an hour or two. Your mom is expecting us for dinner.”

“Hmmm.” She had no idea what he was going to show her. She’d been guessing a vacation get-away since he first mentioned it. Then she thought maybe he’d done a project at her house, or maybe built something at her mom’s house. “I know what it is!”

“You do?” Chakotay asked with amusement.

“Voyager. You’re taking me to see her!”

He laughed, but said nothing.

Owen received communication that they were ready on the other end. He said, “Off you go. I’ll look forward to hearing about her reaction.”

“Close your eyes, Kathryn.”

She did as instructed and gripped Chakotay’s arm tighter as the transporter beam took them.

When they were deposited at their destination, Chakotay turned her, saying, “Keep your eyes closed.”

It was chilly and she could tell that she was standing on grass. Her ears began to tune in to the sounds around her. “Do I hear the ocean?”

“Okay, love. Open your eyes.”

She opened them to see a large, yellow house. They were standing on an expansive green lawn surrounded by a dense thicket of forest. “Where are we? Whose house is this?”

“It’s our house, if you want it.”

“What?” It took a moment for what he was saying to soak in. “You bought a house?”

“Not yet, but all it needs is your approval. The building inspection is finished, security and mechanical upgrades are ready to begin, and all the legal documents are in order.”

She looked again, this time studying the house in greater detail. It was three levels high, with the uppermost rooms inside a high, arched roof. The house was similar to an old Victorian era home with bay windows and a large porch, but with definite traces of current architecture and design. The entire home was pale yellow with blue and white accents, and there were many, many windows.

“First impression?” Chakotay asked.

“I’m trying to take it all in. It’s a beautiful house. Where are we?” She turned to look around and then stopped when she realized that a security team was standing in a semi-circle behind her, on full alert with tri-corders scanning the perimeter. She knew they’d be here, but she wasn’t expecting them to be so vigilant. There was also another woman that she didn’t recognize standing not too far away.

“We’re in Oregon.” He waved the woman over. “Kathryn, I’d like you to meet Celia Brouillette, our realtor.”

Kathryn apprised the woman quickly, noticing how blonde and beautiful she was. Dismissing those thoughts, she graciously extended her hand to receive Celia’s. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Admiral Janeway, the pleasure is all mine. I’m honored.”

The young woman’s smile was infectious. Kathryn asked, “Where in Oregon are we?”

“Near Gold Beach, at the southern end of the coast. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you.”

Kathryn took Chakotay’s hand as they followed Celia around to the side yard. They walked up a few wooden steps to a stone path that wove through a neglected flower garden full of overgrown rose bushes. She wondered if Chakotay knew they were roses. Kathryn glanced at him and saw that he was watching her for a reaction.

The sound of the ocean was growing louder as they rounded the corner of the house. Kathryn was surprised at the immense size of the home. It looked modest from the front, but that was deceiving. She found it hard to imagine owning a home this large, but couldn’t help but be captivated with the beauty of the architecture.

“Kathryn?”

“Hmm?” She asked Chakotay.

“Stop looking at the house, and look over there.” He pointed past Celia.

Kathryn followed his finger and gasped. “Oh!” The Pacific Ocean in all its glory was spread out before her. “Chakotay!”

“Come here.” He tugged on her hand to bring her to the edge of the deck so she could look out over the railing. The home was situated high on a cliff overlooking a rocky cove. “This reminds me of that rocky beach we walked on in the moonlight a few years ago. Do you remember?”

“On Corius?”

“I’d forgotten the name.”

“I almost kissed you that night.”

He laughed. “And all this time, I thought it was I who almost kissed you.”

The chilly February air sent a shiver through her and she wrapped the pashmina tighter around her shoulders.

“You’re getting cold.” He rubbed her arms for warmth.

“A bit, but this view is spectacular.” Looking at Celia, she asked, “Are there other homes along the beach?”

“Some, but this property runs about a half kilometer in each direction.” She pointed towards the north edge of the cove. “The guest cottage is just around that bend.”

“Guest cottage? How large is this property?”

“Four acres.”

Startled, she looked at Chakotay. “How much does all of this cost?”

“It’s at the maximum end of what we talked about, so we might want to consider selling your townhouse in San Francisco.” He smiled happily. “Celia, can we show her the inside?”

“Of course! We can go in through the back here.”

They were only a few meters into the great room when Kathryn said, “This is home.”

“You like it?” Chakotay asked.

“Oh, yes.” She looked up at the vaulted ceiling, the cozy stone fireplace that was in the center of the home, and the floor to ceiling windows that allowed a magnificent view of the ocean. To her right was a sitting area covered with a plush carpet, and to her left was an eating area and a very large kitchen. “It’s all so warm and inviting, even without furniture.”

Celia said, “Come see the rest of it.”

They walked through the open kitchen and into a formal dining room on the front of the house. “I love how much daylight comes in,” Kathryn said as she looked at the tall bay windows that almost surrounded the area where the table would be.

“Look in here, Kathryn.” He led her through a living room large enough to easily seat over a dozen people, and then across a spacious foyer with a beautiful, grand staircase that led upstairs, and into another room. It was long and narrow, extending across the entire side of the house, with a bay window on the front, and a picture window with a view of the ocean on the back. Every available wall space was lined with golden oak bookshelves, and there was a door at the far end that led back around to the great room. Chakotay said, “A joint study and plenty of room for your books. We’ll both be able to work from home some.”

She spun around, looking at the beautiful woodwork. “I wouldn’t ever want to go to San Francisco.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and whispered into her ear, “That’s what I’d hoped you’d say.”

She laughed. “We might have to entertain alien diplomats, but in a home like this, we could certainly manage it.”

Celia asked, “Would you like to show her the upstairs?”

“Sure,” Chakotay said.

Kathryn went in front of him up the wide open staircase in the foyer, but was finding it difficult to make it all the way up.

“Are you okay?” he asked when she stopped just over halfway.

Nodding, she said, “Just a little out of breath.”

Celia offered, “We can finish the tour another day.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head. “Just give me a moment.”

Chakotay took her free hand and pointed to the second story window that was above the front door. “This is the perfect vantage point for seeing that window.”

A smile tugged on her lips. “Is that another way of saying ‘look on the bright side’?”

“Something like that.” He looked at her with compassion. “This is a lot for one day.”

“A press conference, a tour, and a celebratory meal? Pretty normal day, actually.”

“Except for the fact that you were also released from a medical center.”

“Minor detail,” she said with a wink. “Andiamo,” she said as she restarted the ascent.

After taking another break at the top of the stairs, Celia gave them a quick tour of three standard bedrooms. “I won’t take you up to the next level right now, but it has one more bedroom, a bathroom, and a large recreation room.”

“So, a place for children to relax while we’re entertaining downstairs.”

“Sounds like a good use for it,” Celia said with a laugh. “Ready to see the master bedroom suite?”

“Suite?”

“Yes,” Chakotay said. “It’s not much smaller than my apartment was.”

“Wow.” Kathryn stood at the entrance to the room, amazed by the spaciousness and the detail of the woodwork. “There’s room in here for both a king-sized bed and a sitting area.”

“Perfect for your insomnia,” Chakotay said with a grin. “You could be on the other side of the room reading without worrying about waking me.”

“I love the carpet,” she said as she walked on the plush, white fibers. “And these windows are beautiful.”

Celia opened one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and said, “They’re French doors, Admiral, and there’s a balcony out here.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with excitement. She stepped outside and sighed happily. “I can’t imagine any house being more perfect than this.”

Chakotay said to Celia, “I think she likes it.”

“What’s not to like?” Kathryn asked as she looked down from the balcony that had a great view over the deck below and the ocean beyond.

“You haven’t seen the bathtub yet,” Chakotay said.

“Oooh! Show me!” She went back inside and into the master bathroom. Her eyes widened as she saw it. “That’s a full-size jacuzzi!”

“Yes, it is,” Celia said. “And, it has a heater, too.”

Kathryn said, “Ms. Brouillette, you’ve just sold a house.”
