

The Future Is Ours – Part 24

“A Reunion of Friends”

By Dawn

Summary: Voyager Reunion

Rated: PG

Kathryn was packing things at her house in San Francisco when Captain Young contacted her. She set a picture frame back onto her nightstand and tapped her combadge. “Captain, I didn’t realize that you were back from Sarcusia.”

“We just returned this morning, Admiral. Are you free for coffee this afternoon? I see that you’re in San Francisco.”

“I’ll be glad to make some time, but this house has a lot of traffic today. A handful of my former crew members are here packing for us.”

“If you don’t mind taking a break for a few minutes, perhaps there’s a room in your house that’s off the beaten path?”

She smiled. “I’ll see what I can do. Stop by any time.”

Kathryn went downstairs to find Chakotay in the living room, carefully wrapping and packing her knick-knacks. She leaned against the doorjamb to watch him scrutinize each item.

Looking up, he flashed his dimples at her. “Supervising again?”

“No,” she said, admiring his gorgeous smile. “It just struck me that it was exactly one year ago that you were standing in that same spot, pulling those very trinkets out of a box, and I bet you were wondering why I had so many of them then, too.”

“You love to keep mementos of everything,” he said affectionately. “I was just thinking about that day last spring. I came here hoping to win back your friendship.”

“You never lost it.”

“Only because you are a gracious and forgiving woman.”

She casually walked over to help him. “We’d been through too much to let a little argument come between us, and you’d forgiven me for significantly worse transgressions.”

Placing his hand on hers, he stopped her from wrapping a ceramic bowl. “Kathryn,” he said as he leaned over the box to give her a light, but lingering kiss. “Thank you for letting me back into your life.” With an intense gaze, he added, “Both a year ago, and six months ago.”

“I let you back in because I couldn’t be without you. In case you don’t realize it, I’m in love with you.” She lifted the bowl and said, “Back when you unwrapped this, I loved you so much that I was determined to make you fall in love with me again, and last August, I let myself continue loving you when you refused to let me go.”

Barely able to get the words out, he managed to whisper, “Thank you.”

“That night you massaged my shoulders, I realized that I was extremely important to you.”

“You’re important to everyone.”

She shook her head. “Not like I am to you. You know everything about me, you’ve seen me at my worst, and yet you were still fighting tooth and nail to keep me. There’s something to be said for sharing my life with someone who loves me, no matter what. Someone who knows every nuance and mundane detail about my likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears. And someone that I know everything about in return. We have that, even if we’ve forgotten a few times.” She placed her hand on his cheek, drawing him towards her for an intimate kiss. The warmth of his lips was just starting to have an affect on her when someone cleared his throat behind them.

Chakotay broke the kiss and looked past her. “Yes, Tom?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Captain Young is here and he wishes to speak with you, Kathryn. He said you were expecting him.”

She smoothed out her shirt before turning toward the doorway. “Thank you, Tom. Would you let him know that we’ll be right there?”

“Of course, and I’m sorry for intruding.”

Waving her hand, she said, “Don’t worry about it.”

When he was gone, Chakotay asked, “We? Do you want me to join you?”

“Yes, that’s what I came down here to ask you. Would you have coffee with us? I believe he has some news, and I’d like your help deciding how to proceed.”

“Thank you. I’d love to.” He took the bowl from her and set it carefully into the box. “Where should we go to talk?”

“We’ll kick B’Elanna and Sue out of the study.” She extended her hand for him to hold as they walked out of the room. “We didn’t bring the dampening field generators here, but Justin can take care of that for us.”

Once they got settled, Bernie said, “We had absolutely no trouble finding Mr. Norvellen’s storage locker, but because we had to breach security and reveal that it had been broken into, we retrieved all of his things. I didn’t want to leave any clues that might indicate whose locker it was.”

Kathryn passed the sugar to Chakotay. “I’m sure he’ll be thankful that his things are safe. Was there much?”

“Not really, a little over a dozen boxes. I assume the trial is over?”

“Yes,” Chakotay replied. “Norvellen was acquitted of all felony charges, but he’s being held in protective custody in New Zealand pending a psychological evaluation.”

Kathryn added, “And for his safety until all of this settles out. He went willingly.”

“I went to see him a couple days ago,” Chakotay explained. “And he’s adjusting well. He’s apprehensive about his safety should he be released, so I suggested that, if and when that happens, he might want to consider staying and working at the penal colony. That seemed to assuage his fears.”

“Good. What about the others, if I may ask?”

“You haven’t read the report?” Kathryn asked.

“No, it’s classified level twelve.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that.” She frowned. “I haven’t actually read it, either. I just know what Khurma told me. All of them were sentenced to life terms at the penal colony on Tantalus V. Even if rehabilitated, they’ll have to find a way to contribute to society from inside the Colony.”

Chakotay asked, “So, what did you find?”

“Quite a lot, actually.” Bernie handed Kathryn an alien data padd. “This is what you sent me to retrieve. I didn’t make a copy.”

Surprised, Kathryn asked, “Did you look at it?”

“Yes, but I didn’t want to upload it to the Pioneer’s main computer, so I wasn’t able to compare this data with our main database.”

“You don’t want an official record that we have this?” Chakotay asked.

“No, and my reports indicate that we found a damaged and unusable data storage device. That was Admiral Khurma’s suggestion before I left.”

Kathryn nodded. “All right. I’ll see what I can do with it.”

“If I may make a suggestion, Kathryn?” Bernie asked.

“Of course.”

“Judy could be given a leave of absence once Harry Kim returns. During that leave, she wouldn’t be required to report on her activities and could do this research on a personal computer.”

Chakotay told Kathryn, “That sounds much better than your taking time to do this right now.”

“Have you spoken to Judy about it, yet?”

“Yes,” Bernie nodded. “She’s chomping at the bit to take a look at it, but I didn’t risk sending it to her.”

“All right, but I want to make one copy for myself, first.” She grinned when Chakotay fished a civilian data storage device out of her desk drawer. Handing him Norvellan’s data padd, she said, “Make sure that doesn’t get packed up today.”

“I’ll put your copy in my pocket, and Bernie, you can take the original home with you.”

“Thank you, we’ll keep it safe.” He tucked the alien padd inside his coat. “Kathryn, did you read my report on my conversation with Norvellan?”

“We both did. He gave you a lot of information. Some of it, I didn’t understand.”

“The leads he gave us on the terrorist activities of his former co-workers were surprisingly accurate.”

“Oh?” Chakotay asked.

“We took advantage of our visit there to place some of our people undercover.”

Kathryn’s eyes widened in surprise. “Does Khurma know?”

“Unofficially.”

On the edge of her seat, she asked, “So, what happened?”

“It was remarkably easy to infiltrate the organization that Norvellen led us to. They call themselves ‘Broken Circle,’ and from what we understand, they have almost a hundred members from eleven different species, all young adults.”

“Broken Circle,” Chakotay frowned. “Odd name for a terrorist organization.”

“That’s what it translates as. I’m not sure what the original language was, but the recruiting speech indicated that they’re taking actions that will force the Federation to notice that their worlds are suffering.”

“To what end?”

“Protection. They’re trying to get Starfleet there.” Bernie leaned forward in his chair. “Kathryn, they are huge supporters of your efforts.”

“Really,” she said with thought. “I wonder how we could work that in our favor.”

Chakotay said, “That seems obvious.”

“It does?” both Kathryn and Bernie asked simultaneously.

“They’re after publicity. Give them some.”

Bernie held up a hand. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. They claim responsibility for twenty-seven terrorist activities over the last two years.”

“What!?” Kathryn yelled.

“This Broken Circle group appears to be responsible for the bombings on nine planets. They’ve caused a lot of physical damage and injury, but they claim to have done everything in their power to avoid the loss of life.”

Chakotay rubbed his face with worry. “That’s easier said than done. I know from experience.”

“Yes, but I fear that if we publicize what they’ve done, we’ll create more problems than we’ll solve. I agree that we need to use this information to our advantage, but we have to proceed cautiously.”

Kathryn looked at Chakotay. “I think we could really use your advice on this. It sounds like the beginnings of…”

“The Maquis,” he finished for her. “Agreed. We don’t want this blown out of proportion. Bernie, we need a clear picture of every situation they’ve been involved in,

from both perspectives. Then the three of us should sit down with Admiral Khurma as soon as possible so we can develop a strategy.”

“Does anyone else know about this?” Kathryn asked.

“My senior officers, plus the three who are working undercover.”

“All right.” She glanced at Chakotay anxiously, and then asked Bernie, “Do we know if they were responsible for the incidents on Sirius IX or the Ktarian homeworld?”

“We know, and the answer is no.” Bernie looked at both of them in curiosity over the tension that just emerged. “The Ktarian authorities apprehended those individuals immediately, and they were part of an organization from Ktaria. The Sirius IX incident last summer was, we believe, a copycat crime.”

Chakotay clasped Kathryn’s fingers. “How can you be sure?”

“When our undercover operatives made contact, they did so in a bar by loudly singing your praises, Kathryn, and while speaking out against the Federation. Once they were introduced to the leaders of the Broken Circle, our people made it clear that they refused to be part of anything that jeopardized the lives of Starfleet personnel, you specifically.”

“And?” Chakotay asked.

“Broken Circle assured our people that they would never do anything that would destroy the Federation’s only hope. That’s you, Kathryn.”

She took a deep breath. “No pressure.”

“How do we know that they weren’t saying that to placate our people?” Chakotay asked.

“We don’t, but it’s not like we’re going to put Kathryn in a vulnerable position, nor will we suggest that she communicate with them.”

Firmly, Chakotay replied, “No, we aren’t. I refuse to let her get involved in this directly.”

Kathryn gave them a fake smile. “Gentlemen, I do believe that you’re coddling me again.” When they both gave her a pointed look in response, she shrugged. “I’m just pointing that out, not that I don’t agree with you.”

“I’m afraid that I will have tendencies to get worked up about your safety for awhile,” Chakotay said.

“I expected that, but…” She looked sternly at both of them. “When I’m sitting right here, I’d rather you not speak about me as if I’m not present. The last thing I’m going to

do is put myself at risk right now, and I would appreciate it if you'd operate under that assumption."

"Of course, Admiral," Bernie said.

"I'm not pulling rank, Bernie." She gestured towards Chakotay. "That would get me into a little more hot water than I'd like, considering I'm about to marry him."

Chakotay squeezed her hand. "My apologies, Kathryn."

She caressed his fingers while speaking to Bernie. "Could you arrange this discussion with Khurma within the next two weeks? As of the Voyager Reunion on March 27th, we won't be available outside of an emergency until May."

"Of course. I'll contact him this afternoon to ask how he'd like to proceed. We'll try to take as little of your time as we have to."

"Thank you." She turned to Chakotay. "Do you have time to give this some thought before we meet with Khurma? It would be fine with me if the two of you hashed out a proposal in advance."

"Of course. I don't have any more lectures scheduled until mid-May."

"Great." She clapped her hands on her legs. "I'm glad we've made some headway on this situation. Do you have anything else for us, Bernie?"

"No," he said, hesitantly glancing at Chakotay.

Chakotay pointed out, "I know that you're trying to get her information on the President, Bernie."

He relaxed. "Oh, okay. You didn't seem to know when I first mentioned it."

"I didn't, but she filled me in as soon as I saw her."

Kathryn avoided pointing out, again, that she was still in the room. "So do you have anything on that?"

"Not yet, but now that we're in proximity of Earth again, we can put the plan into action. We may not have anything before you leave on your honeymoon."

"What's the plan?" Chakotay asked.

Bernie said, "One of our crewmembers has a childhood friend that works in the Federation building in Paris. That friend has an acquaintance that works in the administrative pool for the President, a friend who is ready for a change in leadership."

Kathryn said, "I apologize for not telling you about that, Chakotay. It is such a simple plan that I didn't think to run it by you."

"Sounds simple to me, too. I hope it comes off without a hitch, but it shouldn't be rushed."

"That's true," she said to Bernie. "When you have it, would you get the information to Lieutenant Jarvin? He'll see that it gets to us."

"Yes, I will." He stood up. "I should be getting back to the Pioneer, and I still want to drop by your office to see my wife before I beam back up. Would you excuse me?"

"Of course," she said with a smile. "Tell Judy not to stay up all night working on that data you've got. I doubt it contains anything we don't already know."

"But it will give us proof should we need it." Bernie bowed his head slightly. "Have a good evening."

Chakotay stood up, too. "I'll walk you out."

After they were gone, Kathryn turned on the PADD that Chakotay had copied for her and was immediately absorbed in reading it. When Chakotay returned and closed the door behind him, she looked up and smiled. "Thanks for helping us with this new group."

"I'm eager to get involved." He sat down across from her. "It would be best to avoid acknowledging an organized terrorist group, for everyone's sake. I fear that it would not only force Starfleet's hand to bring these young people into custody, but it would also undermine your efforts to positively change the Federation's attitude."

"You're right. They'd immediately be associated with all of the incidents, including the ones involving me."

"Especially since the identities of your abductors were kept secret." He looked down at his hands and then back up at her. "Kathryn, first of all, I want to apologize again for being over-protective."

"I understand your desire to watch over me, but I'm capable of making decisions myself. My body may still be weak, but my mind is clear, and I'm quite aware of my importance not only to you, but to the Federation. I know that I've still got to convince you that my eight years of risk-taking has ended."

"No, you don't. You are true to your word, and I have no reason to doubt you." He folded his hands together and said, "Second, I noticed that you were nervous about discussing Sirius IX around me. You don't need to be."

“All right,” she said quietly.

Shaking his head, he said, “Please don’t feel like you have to withdraw from me when that incident comes up. I’m still grieving over the pain I caused you, and I don’t want anything to be a taboo subject between us.”

“I don’t either, but like Deanna told us last week, knowing that my depression was made worse by the traumatic stress disorder should help.”

He nodded slowly, still looking down. “It should help, and it does a little, but I still feel like I hurt you more than all your other traumatic experiences combined.”

“You can’t compare them.” She got up and crossed the short distance to sit on his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she said, “You told me less than an hour ago that I was a gracious and forgiving woman, did you not?”

“Yes, I did.” His eyes were closed as he rested his head against her arm.

Kathryn put her fingers under his chin until he was looking at her. “Then please accept my forgiveness. I already know that you’ve forgiven me for the pain I caused you, because you wouldn’t have asked me to marry you if you hadn’t.”

Smiling, he said, “And I suppose you wouldn’t be sitting here now if you hadn’t put this behind you.”

“That’s right.” She kissed his forehead. “I’ve always loved you, despite our arguments, but I wouldn’t be marrying you if I didn’t know, without a doubt, that you would *never* knowingly hurt me.”

“Thank you, Kathryn,” he said earnestly. “I don’t deserve it, but thank you.”

Snuggling against him, she said, “I’ve done many things that don’t deserve your forgiveness, but lucky me, I just keep winning your heart back, over and over and over and over and over...”

He tickled her in response, making her squeal with laughter. “Now who’s being cheeky?”

Laughing, she said, “I’d never!”

He hugged her close to his body and said, “By the way, thank you for trusting me with this Broken Circle situation.”

“I can’t think of anyone better suited for strategizing how to use this information.”

“I appreciate your vote of confidence, and, if Khurma agrees, I'm eager to guide their actions indirectly. Would you be upset if I kept tabs on the situation during our honeymoon?”

Chuckling, she said, “No. Just so long as I don't have to think about it, and as long as you remember the reason we'll be in the Mediterranean.”

“Which is what again?” he asked with a grin.

Saucily, she whispered into his ear, “To keep your new wife humming with pleasure.”

The kiss he gave her in response had her humming for the rest of the day.

A few days later, Kathryn was dismayed as she stood in the middle of her new kitchen, looking at all the stuff that needed to be put away.

“You look lost,” Gretchen said as she came into the room.

“Mom!” Kathryn felt her disposition improve immediately. “I'm so glad you're here!”

Shaking her head, Gretchen said, “Oh, no, no, no. I know that look in your eyes, and I'm telling you now, this is your kitchen and you need to organize it to suit you.”

“I don't cook.”

“So?”

“You know that the first time you use this kitchen, you're going to be reorganizing it anyway, so why not just make it user-friendly from the start.”

“Well, if you think about logically, it will be user friendly.”

Kathryn pointed out, “It takes a *user* to know how to make it *user* friendly.”

“Then have that dear man of yours do it.”

“He, Tom, and B'Elanna are upstairs assembling furniture in all the bedrooms.”

“All right.” Gretchen said with a sigh as she ushered her daughter out of the kitchen. “Go organize your study or your bathroom or something.”

“Thanks Mom! You're the best!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gretchen mumbled as she put the pots and pans in the large cabinet below the cook top.

“Kathryn, it has been a pleasure talking with you this afternoon,” Admiral Khurma said as he and Captain Young were about to leave. “I’m thrilled to see you looking so healthy and energized.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” She accepted a friendly hug from her C.O.

Bernie said, “And really, Kathryn, this house is amazing. I look forward to seeing it all done up for the wedding.”

“Chakotay found a real gem here, didn’t he? I love it, too.” As she walked out onto the porch with them, she described how they planned to set up the front yard for the wedding. “We’ll have the center aisle come right off these steps, and a trellis will be set up for the ceremony over there, in front of the tree line.”

“How many guests are you expecting?” Bernie asked.

She hesitated before saying, “Actually, I’m not sure. The wedding coordinator is dealing with those details.”

“You’re expecting 172.” Khurma explained, “I got the security report this morning.”

“Oh,” she said with a chuckle. “I guess dealing with all of this is quite an undertaking.”

“Yes, but it’s good to challenge our security teams every once in awhile. They’re used to doing major events.”

Bernie looked right and left and then asked, “So, where are you doing the reception? It doesn’t look like there’s enough room here for both.”

“Follow me.” Kathryn stepped down the stairs and went around to the left side of the house to the rose garden. “It’s not in bloom, yet, but there will be flowers arrangements delivered. We’re putting the cake and beverage tables in here, and the dinner seating will extend from here out towards the front. The wedding coordinator assures me that it will fit, and since I’m not fussing over the details, I’m choosing to believe her.”

Khurma said, “I’m sure it will be perfect.”

“I hope so,” Kathryn said with optimism. “It’s been a long time coming.”

“It’s been quite a year, hasn’t it?”

She sighed heavily. “Yes, it has. Eight years, actually.”

“That, too,” Khurma said with understanding. “Well, we should go and let you rest up for tomorrow. Enjoy yourself at the reunion.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Her eyes widened with excitement. “Thank you for coming all the way out here.”

“Our pleasure,” Bernie patted her on the back.

After they transported away, Kathryn went back into the house and plopped down near Chakotay on their new sofa. She slipped off her shoes and stretched out, wiggling her toes up under Chakotay’s arm so that her feet were in his lap. He lifted the PADD he was reading to make room and grabbed hold of one set of wiggling toes.

Closing her eyes, she snuggled into the squishy throw pillows. “I love this sofa. It’s soft and comfy and perfect for naps.”

“Are you settling in for one?”

“Mmmm,” she smiled sleepily. “Sounds nice. I think unpacking has worn me out. I’ve been so tired the last couple of days.”

“It takes more energy than one would expect,” he said while massaging her foot.

“You going to sit here for awhile?”

He spread the afghan out on top of her and rested his hand on her legs. “I can if you’d like.”

“Up to you. Are you still tinkering with the timeline?”

“Yes, because it seems to me that if our people offer too many suggestions too quickly, it will look fishy.”

“Or they could appear to be full of energy and ideas. They’d be a real boon to the Circle’s efforts.”

He shrugged. “Depends on the personality of whoever is commanding their efforts. He or she might feel threatened.”

“Lieutenant Chambers is a fantastic poker player, never gives a thing away. I believe that he has enough tact to know when to use discretion.”

“Well,” Chakotay said with a sigh. “I hope that the Circle takes our people’s suggestions to heart. They’re not making progress with violence, and if they really do support you as much as we think, they’ll have listened to your call for peaceful demonstrations.”

“Have you noticed that we can’t link any of the terrorist activities of the past eight months to them?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t done any of them.”

“I know, but if they’ve really heard what I was trying to convey in my speeches, then perhaps they’ve already ceased violent activities for the time being. Maybe they’re waiting to see what I do before attempting anything else.”

“If that’s true, then what have they been doing all this time? Rallying their troops?”

Kathryn said, “That would be an excellent piece of intelligence for our people to gather. Add it to your list.”

“It’s already there.” He rubbed her leg. “I’m looking forward to watching the Fednews reports next week to see if they use our first suggestion.”

“A march to publicize the social injustices of the last four years on the sixth anniversary of the President’s Inauguration.” She clicked her tongue. “I still can’t believe Khurma is going along with that. Zife is going to be furious.”

“A march is better than a bombing, and despite what Paris and Patterson think, your C.O. is definitely not under the President’s thumb.”

“I know, but if it’s made public that the four of us are the think-tank behind the Broken Circle, there’s going to be some serious repercussions.”

Chakotay shook his head and held up his PADD. “If this plays out like we hope, Zife won’t be in office long enough to learn about our involvement. Once the circle has accomplished their main goal, we can encourage them to disband.”

As she walked down the stairs of their new home, Kathryn smiled at Chakotay who was waiting for her at the bottom. “Do I look okay?”

“You look beautiful.” He studied her pantsuit and asked, “Have I seen that outfit before?”

“Not the jacket. I bought it last spring in Europe. It’s a bit more vibrant than what I’d usually wear, but I thought the color would make me appear more energetic.”

“It works. You look striking.”

When she made the final step onto the marble entry floor, she was immediately drawn into his arms for a tender embrace. Nuzzling against his neck, she sighed happily as she enjoyed the warmth of his body and the spiciness of his scent.

“Kathryn, I don’t think I can remember a time when I’ve felt happier than I do right now.”

“Just wait until Saturday.”

Hugging her even tighter, he said, “That hasn’t happened yet, so it doesn’t count.”

“What has you in such a reflective mood?”

“You do.” He pulled back a little to look at her. “Or rather, your presence does. When we had this reunion three months ago, you’d been missing for twelve days and I was losing hope. It was a rainy, dreary day, and…”

“Shhhh,” she said as she placed her finger on his lips to quiet him. “I love the rain, and if you keep talking about that, you’re going to lose your happiness.” She replaced her finger with a soft kiss. “Just tell me that you’re happy I’m here.”

“I’m extremely happy that you’re here. Euphoric would be a better description.” He returned her kiss with another. “And I was only offering a contrast to illustrate how remarkable it is that we’re standing in our new home, heading to this reunion, and getting married in three days.”

Smiling brightly, she said, “I have no doubt that this trumps what I was doing during the last reunion. Unless,” she smiled even wider. “I was dreaming of being held by you at the time. I bet that’s what it was, although actually being held by you is much nicer.”

Without replying, he wrapped his arms all the way around her in the snuggest of bear hugs.

When he didn’t let go after a long minute, she whispered, “Chakotay? Are you okay?”

He nodded against the side of her head, and with a lot of emotion in his voice, said, “I am now, because you’re okay.”

Rubbing his back, she said, “You are definitely in a reflective mood. Reunions will do that to you if you’re not careful, you know?”

“Reunions, weddings, and acknowledging how grateful one can be in the aftermath of tragedy.”

She gave him another squeeze and pulled her head back. “We should go before you have us standing here in a puddle of tears.”

“All right,” he conceded. “But don’t be surprised if I can’t keep my eyes off of you all day.”

As they stepped out of their front door, she said, “That wouldn’t surprise me in the least. After all, you’ve been unable to do that for more than eight years running.”

He laughed and walked her outside. Several minutes later, they arrived outside the same banquet hall at Starfleet Headquarters that held the last reunion.

Owen Paris greeted them by giving Kathryn a quick hug. “Welcome back to San Francisco, Katie, Chakotay.”

“Thank you, Owen.” She could tell by his demeanor that something was up. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes and no,” he grimaced. “The press has found out about this reunion and they’re chomping at the bit downstairs to speak to you.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and sighed. “Well, it wouldn’t be a day in San Francisco if they weren’t on my trail.”

Chakotay said, “You don’t have to talk to them.”

“I know.” She looked at Owen. “What issues are they clamoring about?”

“Everything under the sun. We should’ve planned a press conference earlier this week in anticipation of this reunion and your wedding.”

“Perhaps so, but I’m not about to hold one today. Or tomorrow,” she added with emphasis. A second later she said, “I have an idea. Give me a minute and have security prepare for my arrival downstairs.”

“All right,” Owen said hesitantly as he tapped his commbadge and started making arrangements.

Chakotay asked, “What’s your idea?”

She winked at him and said, “If they want to hear about the Voyager reunion, then I’m going to bring them some Voyagers.”

He laughed and opened the door to the banquet hall for her. As soon as she walked in, the noisy chatter in the room became suddenly quiet, and then erupted again in an enthusiastic round of applause, punctuated by whistles and whoops of triumph. She put

her hands on her hips and shook her head in amusement. For some reason, this only encouraged the raucous behavior.

She glanced at Chakotay for help with quieting them, but he was a substantial contributor to the mayhem. Realizing that she was on her own, she held up her hands to get them to stop, which only encouraged them to kick the volume up by a notch.

Conceding that she'd lost the battle, she smiled gratefully and mouthed, "Thank you," to all of them. After that, it only took a moment for them to finally quiet down. She motioned for everyone to gather around her, saying, "Come closer so I can talk to you."

When most of her former crew members were within earshot, she said, "Thank you for that enthusiastic welcome. I'm eager to see and talk to every one of you, but Admiral Paris has just informed me that a gaggle of reporters is downstairs clamoring for me to give a spontaneous press conference. But today is about Voyager, and so I'd like a few volunteers to accompany me downstairs. Is anyone willing?"

They all raised their hands and then laughed together.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "But we all won't fit on the front steps of this building. Is there anyone who hasn't been interviewed by the press in the last year?" When about a dozen tentatively raised their hands, she asked, "Well, now's your chance if you want it. Follow me."

Not waiting to see who tagged along, she turned and walked through the door that Justin held open for her. When the security detail directed her to stop at the bottom of the stairs, she addressed the five Voyagers who had accompanied her. "Thanks for your help. I'm going to answer a few of their questions, and then..." She contemplated who might be the best speaker before continuing, "And then, Mr. Yosa, I'll turn to you and ask about your favorite memory from Voyager. Once you've started talking, I'm going to make my exit. Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Mark nodded succinctly. "I'll keep them going for a few minutes and I have an idea on how to bring all of us in on discussing Voyager."

"Great!" She turned back to Justin and asked, "Ready?"

"Not quite yet, Admiral. They're still doing a perimeter scan for possible snipers."

She did a double take and asked with disbelief, "Snipers?" Sighing, she said, "I didn't need to know that, Lieutenant."

"My apologies, ma'am, but once they've done the scan and locked down a protective shield over the area, it won't be an issue."

Mark said, "I'm sure they're just trying to cover every contingency."

“Oh, I know they are,” Kathryn said wearily. “The need for all of this security can be a little unsettling at times. But on the other hand,” she patted Justin’s shoulder. “It’s reassuring to know that I’m as protected as I can be.”

Justin received notice in his earpiece and then said, “Ready to move.”

When they stepped out the front doors of the building, the gathered reporters immediately started calling out questions to her, so many that she couldn’t make out a single word. Annoyed, she clasped her hands in front of her and raised both eyebrows in a show of vexation. Eventually, they realized that she wasn’t responding to them and they quieted down.

Taking the microphone that was offered, she said, “Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, I know that it’s been awhile since I’ve addressed you outside of an organized press conference, and some of you may not have had a chance to interview me before. So, let me share one request. I prefer to hear one question at a time.”

She pointed to the one reporter she’d seen back off immediately when all the clamoring began. “What question do you have for me?”

The reporter perked up and asked, “Admiral Janeway, it has been almost eight weeks since you were released from Starfleet Medical. How are you feeling?”

Pleased with the question, Kathryn smiled sincerely. “Thank you for asking. I’m doing very well, and slowly, but surely, I’m regaining much of my former strength and stamina. Next question?” she asked of another.

“What is your opinion about the Jorian coalition rejoining the Federation in light of your abduction from that planet?”

“One has nothing to do with the other,” she said with finality. “I am delighted that President Nakmyre and the other leaders of the coalition have given us the honor of their allegiance to the Federation. It is a remarkable act of faith in the ideals and principles that we believe in, and as soon as I’m back at work, I look forward to discussing the many opportunities that this union brings for all involved.”

Another reporter asked, “Speaking of unions, do you still have a wedding planned for this Saturday?”

“Yes, Captain Chakotay and I will be married in a private ceremony at our new home.”

“Can you give us any details about the wedding?”

Amused, Kathryn glanced at the Voyagers standing around her before responding with a brush-off. “None at the moment, because today is about Voyager. We’ve been home for

over a year and we're here to celebrate the many changes in our lives, as well as the deep friendships that were formed while in the Delta Quadrant." She turned to Mark and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to one of Voyager's former security officers, Lieutenant Mark Yosa. Lieutenant, what is your favorite memory from Voyager?"

As Mark replied, Kathryn stepped back to let him speak directly to the press. She waited until he was finished and had asked one of the others a question before going back inside. As she walked up the stairs, she said to Justin, "See, no snipers."

"Yes, Admiral." He bit back a smile.

When they returned to the ballroom, she joined Chakotay as they watched the newsfeed on the monitors. He put his arm around her back and said, "That has to have been the shortest interview you've ever given."

"I didn't have much to say." She put her arm around his waist and noticed his look of disbelief. "I know, hard to imagine."

He squeezed her shoulders as he nodded towards the interview still taking place downstairs. "You did a good thing there. The press is giving them a lot of attention."

Tom overhead and joined the conversation. "Yes, but the press is asking about their experiences with you, Admiral."

Shrugging, she said, "They seem to be enjoying it."

Tom asked, "So, are you all settled into the new house now? Got everything unpacked?"

"More or less," Chakotay said. "We've ordered some exercise equipment for Kathryn, but we have no idea how we're going to get it up to the third floor."

"You could always transport it in," Tom suggested.

Kathryn said, "I suggested that he get in some of his own exercise by hauling it up there himself, but he balked."

"There will be a lot of weights, love."

She stretched up on her toes and kissed him soundly on the lips. "Yes, and you're a big, strapping, hunk of a man."

Tilting his head with amusement, he said, "It's a good thing you see me through rose-colored lenses."

Tom said, "Admiral, William McKenzie and Lydia Anderson asked if they could speak to you as soon as you arrived. Is this a good time?"

"As good as any. Do you know what about?"

"Yes, but I'll let them tell you." He led Kathryn away and whispered, "Lydia is very nervous about talking to you."

"Why?"

"She's always been nervous around you, but I know you'll put her at ease."

When they were near enough, Kathryn reached out to shake William's hand. "Lieutenant McKenzie, how are you today?"

"Doing well, Admiral. Thank you."

She held Lydia's hand longer than necessary. "Ensign, you're looking well. I trust that life on the east coast is enjoyable?"

"Yes, ma'am, although I've put in a transfer request to move here."

"Oh? Is that why you wanted to see me? What can I do to help?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am, I would appreciate any leads you could give me, but that's not why we wanted to speak with you."

"All right," Kathryn said amiably. "What can I do for you, then?"

William said, "We realize this is a lot to ask, but we just had the idea yesterday, and it seems like the perfect time with most of the Voyagers here..."

"Yes?"

"Would you marry us today, Admiral?"

Kathryn's face broke into a wide grin. "Marry you?"

Lydia stumbled through her words. "Well, not marry us, no, but officiate a wedding for us this afternoon."

She took one of each of their hands and said, "It would be an honor. I'd love to."

Both of them relaxed as William said, "Thank you, Admiral. You don't know how much this means to us."

“Oh, I think I do,” she said with a wink. “After all, my wedding is only three days away and we planned this reunion so that most of the Voyagers could be here for both events. It’s nice to celebrate these occasions with our special family, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Lydia said with a smile. “Is there anything we need to do before this afternoon?”

Kathryn asked Tom, “I assume there’s time in the day’s schedule?”

“Of course,” he said with a relaxed smile. “It’s already been arranged.”

Amused, she looked back to the couple and said, “As long as you have the rings and two witnesses, I see no problems with performing the ceremony today. You’ll need to take care of some legal formalities tomorrow.” Turning to Tom she asked, “Would you ask your father to assist them with that part? He owes me a favor after that press situation downstairs.”

“No problem.”

“You’re sure it’s no trouble?” William asked. “We were hesitant to ask, not knowing how you’d be feeling.”

“It’s no trouble at all, and I’m feeling better than I have in months.”

Tom commented, “That’s not saying much.”

She jokingly elbowed Tom in the side as she told William and Lydia, “Don’t listen to him. I’m fine,” she said as she rubbed her arms. “Oh...we’re not in uniform. Would you like us to be?”

“No!” Lydia said quickly, and then softened her tone. “No, civilian clothes will be just fine. We’d prefer it to be casual.”

Nodding, Kathryn said, “Now we really have something to celebrate today.”

William said, “We’re celebrating you, Admiral. And without you, Lydia and I wouldn’t have met.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn squeezed both of their hands and added, “I’m glad you found each other, too.”

Tom asked, “Admiral, may I take you to meet Lieutenant Jenkins’ 14-year old niece? She’s on pins and needles waiting to meet you.”

“Of course.” She waved goodbye to the newly engaged couple and left with Tom.

Lydia took a deep breath and said, “Wow. I can’t believe she agreed.”

“I can,” McKenzie replied. “She’s very gracious if you’d just relax and get to know her a little.”

“It’s a little difficult. She’s always been larger than life, and recent events haven’t exactly changed that.”

Harry joined the conversation. “Larger than life? Must be talking about our favorite Admiral.”

“Isn’t everyone?” he asked.

“Yes.” Harry surveyed the room. “It’s not just the Voyagers, either. I would’ve thought that eight weeks without a public appearance or any news would have quelled the public’s appetite, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Lydia announced, “She just agreed to marry us this afternoon.”

“Really?” Harry beamed as he shook William’s hand and hugged Lydia. “That’s great news! Congratulations!”

William said, “We were concerned about whether she’d have the energy to stay here all day.”

“I doubt she’ll be having drinks with us after dinner, but I bet she’ll stick around as long as she can. Are you attending their wedding on Saturday?”

“No,” Lydia said apologetically. “We’re starting our honeymoon on Friday. Do you think she’ll be hurt?”

“Not at all. I suspect she’ll barely even notice who’s there and who’s not.”

Lydia relaxed. “That’s true. She’ll be focused on Captain Chakotay, I’m sure.”

“As she should be.” Harry extended a hand as Amy joined them. “Amy, I’d like to introduce you to two members of Voyager’s operations team – Lieutenant William McKenzie and Ensign Lydia Anderson.”

On the other side of the room, Chakotay said to B’Elanna, “I think your husband has taken possession of my fiancée.”

“Joe gave him strict orders to organize the schedule to avoid wearing her out, and before you got here, Tom told everyone not to swamp her. He’s escorting her around to those that have a need to see her or want to tell her something.”

“She’ll want time to circulate on her own, too.”

“Yes, but Joe thought it would be best to get her around the room before she loses energy.” B’Elanna nodded to McKenzie and Anderson. “Kathryn is doing their wedding right after lunch.”

“So I hear. That’s great news.”

“Lydia spent years trying to work up the courage to ask him out. Ended up that they got together on Quarra and then they kept it going afterwards.”

Chakotay shivered at the memory. “Sometimes I wonder if Kathryn and I would’ve gotten together if I’d been abducted with the rest of the crew.”

“It’s good that you weren’t. First, so that you could save our butts; and second, it would’ve made it harder to keep your distance afterwards. Although I’m still not sure why you two thought that was important.”

“Several reasons,” he stated as an end to the topic. “Have you met Celes’s new friend?”

“No, I don’t think I have.” B’Elanna scanned the crowd until she found them, and then her mouth dropped open. “Wow. He’s gorgeous!”

Chakotay laughed. “I suppose. His name is Charles Hannon, and he’s a doctoral student in tactics. Back in early February, he and I were talking outside my office when she stopped to ask about Kathryn. They went out that night and they’ve really hit it off.”

“Impressive.” B’Elanna leaned in to ask, “And he doesn’t mind that she’s not, well, you know... a tactical thinker?”

“Not everyone considers ship design schematics an exciting topic for a romantic evening.”

B’Elanna offered, “You should try it. Thruster design can be an effective aphrodisiac if you have a dirty mind.”

He rolled his eyes. “And yours is definitely full of engine grease.”

“You’ll enjoy my dirty mind when you see the gifts Phoebe and I are giving your fiancée at her bachelorette party tomorrow night.”

“You’re not going to embarrass her are you? Her mother will be there.”

“I suspect her mother has had sex before,” B’Elanna whispered before she walked away.

Chakotay smirked and went to talk to Tuvok, who was standing back, quietly observing as his wife spoke with Vorik. They shook hands in greeting, and Chakotay asked, "How was the trip from Vulcan?"

"It was without incident."

"Glad to hear it. Have you spoken to Kathryn, yet?"

"My scheduled moment will not take place for another half hour."

Chakotay rubbed his chin. "Sorry about that. I just learned of the plan myself." He winced slightly before adding, "If Kathryn catches on, she might not be very happy that she's being handled."

"I believe that she figured it out by the third interaction. However, she seems to be taking it in stride."

Watching his bride for a moment, he saw that she had a bemused expression as Tom escorted her to the next interaction. "I think you're right. Maybe she's used to it with her new career as a diplomat."

"Perhaps." Tuvok looked directly at Chakotay. "How is her health? I've been... concerned."

Sighing, he replied, "This really took a toll on her. I assume you read on the Voyager blog that she received a heart transplant?"

"Yes, that was quite alarming."

"To say the least." Chakotay watched Kathryn as he said, "The good news is that all traces of infection are gone, and the only major issues are rebuilding her muscle strength and getting her up to a healthier weight so that the residual issues diminish."

"Thank you, that eases my concerns." Tuvok paused for a moment and then asked, "How is she managing the psychological trauma of the experience?"

"If you can believe it, she's grown very cautious about the need for security."

"That is surprising. She's faced death many times, but this experience must have affected her differently. What was the intent of her captors? Coercion? Hostage situation?"

"Neither. It appears they merely wanted her to suffer and eventually die. They hoped to sell her to the highest bidder just before she passed away."

Tuvok subtly shifted of his jaw, the only outward sign that he was fighting to maintain emotional control. "That disturbs me."

“It’s extremely disturbing.” Chakotay fisted his hands, forcing himself to remain calm as he concentrated on the progress she’d made. “Overall, she has handled the psychological hurdles with unbelievable grace. I’ve never been prouder of her as I have been in the last three months.”

“I’m pleased that she had your support to rely on.”

Chakotay nodded thoughtfully. “I am too. I don’t think either one of us would’ve been able to manage this alone.”

“Thank you for your willingness to discuss the details of the situation with me.”

As T’Pel returned to her husband, Chakotay said, “Kathryn would want you to know what happened, Tuvok. You are one of her closest friends and you know her better than anyone.”

“While that may have been true at one time, I believe that you are in error,” he said as he linked arms with his wife. “You, Captain, have stepped into that role.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” he replied with a smile and then acknowledged Tuvok’s wife. “T’Pel, it is good to see you again.”

“And you as well, Captain. I look forward to witnessing your bonding ceremony with Admiral Janeway.”

Chakotay smiled. “Thank you, I’m looking forward to it myself.”

“Are there any tasks that we can assist you with?”

“I think everything is under control, as Kathryn’s mother and sister have handled most of the details. At this point, Kathryn and I are merely participants.”

“Very well then,” she said politely.

Tuvok asked, “If the Admiral has a moment before Saturday, I would like to have tea.”

“I think we can arrange that.” Chakotay scanned the crowd until he found Tom and Kathryn. “When your scheduled moment with her arrives, let her know that I’ve extended an invitation to both of you to visit our home tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“You’re welcome. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to say hello to Mariah Henley.”

“Of course,” Tuvok nodded his approval and then spoke to his wife. “I had an enlightening conversation with the Captain.”

“Does it put your concerns at ease, my husband?”

“Somewhat. I am reassured that the Admiral is in good hands. She has been traveling a difficult path towards recovery.”

T’Pel nodded. “They are a good match. Their auras blend into a striking shade of gold, full of joy and contentment. It’s a sight to behold.”

“I’ve always believed that each one grew stronger as an individual when they became companions.”

On the other side of the room, Kathryn said, “Tom, it’s really not necessary to escort me around. I do know most of these people.”

“Yes, but I want to make sure you have a chance to talk with those who have exciting news.”

She clicked her tongue. “Or maybe it’s that these individuals want to make sure they have a chance to talk to me?”

“That too,” Tom said with a wink. “But since everyone wants to speak with you, we thought it might be easier on you to prioritize.”

“I see.” She stopped and turned to him. “I appreciate your efforts, but I’m not really enjoying being shuffled around like this.”

“My apologies, Kathryn. We were just worried that everyone might flock to you all at once and overwhelm you. How can I make this more enjoyable?”

“Slow down a little? Give me a few names and let me go at my own pace?”

“Okay, Naomi wants to ask you for help with a school project, Annika and Tuvok would like to say hello, and Mark Yosa asked for a moment to speak with you alone.”

Putting her hand on Tom’s arm, Kathryn said, “Except for Mark, those are all people that I would’ve talked to anyway. Who else?”

“That’s it. I think everyone else is concerned about over-taxing you.”

“They shouldn’t be, but I’ll go talk to Mark, and then let me be free to mingle? I’ll do my best to make it around to everyone.”

“You ask as if I’d ever tell you no.” He jerked his head towards Chakotay. “I’ll go see how he’s doing.”

“I’m sure you have all that bachelor-party stuff to discuss.” She started to walk away, but then stopped. “Tom?”

“Yes?”

“I meant to ask you and B’Elanna. Did either of you hire inappropriate entertainment for our parties tomorrow evening?”

“No, we didn’t. First of all, security wouldn’t clear it, and second, your future husband was adamant that there be nothing salacious at either event.”

She caught Chakotay’s eyes, and smiled at him. “Thank you, Tom. Both for following his request, and for helping me today. Now, go and enjoy the party.”

“As you wish.”

She found her next “appointment” and said, “Mark, thank you for accompanying me downstairs this morning.”

“I was happy to, Admiral.”

“I understand that you want to speak with me?”

“Yes,” he cleared his throat. “I would like to work for you, ma’am.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?”

“To continue for Scott Doyle. I want to provide your personal protection, Admiral.”

She closed her eyes to try to cope with the grief that washed over her.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Fighting her emotional response, she said, “Mark, I don’t think I could bear losing another friend like that. I’m still a target because someone wants me out of the picture. Being my body guard could cost you your life.”

“I’m aware of the risks, Admiral, and I would willingly sacrifice my life to protect yours.” More quietly, he said, “And I know Scott felt the same way.”

Moved by his sincerity and compassion, she shuddered through a long breath before replying, “Thank you, but I’m not willing to let you do that.”

“Admiral, only someone who cares for you as much as we do,” he said as he indicated those in the room, “would tackle this responsibility as if his own life depended on it. I’ve been trained to do whatever is necessary to protect my commanding officer, but in protecting you, I would be willing to go far beyond my duty, Admiral.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to say, Mark, but...”

“Ma’am,” he interrupted. “When Chakotay brought me aboard the Liberty, he gave me something I’d never had, a purpose and a sense of belonging to something that was greater than myself. That increased tenfold during our years aboard Voyager because of our close community and your leadership.”

“Mark...” She wanted to stop him, but he pushed on.

“There is nothing that I wouldn’t have done out there to keep both you and Chakotay safe. Now that we’re home, I can’t think of anything that would give me more purpose than protecting you. Not just because of what you’re trying to achieve politically, but because your safety is a gift I want to offer to Chakotay because of what he did for me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. “Mark, you’re making it difficult for me to tell you no.”

“That’s my intention, Admiral.”

Mulling it over, she asked, “Will you promise to protect your own life as well?”

“That would be my fourth priority, ma’am, after you, Chakotay, and your family.”

“How can I argue with that?” She gave up trying to dissuade him and extended her hand. “Welcome to the team. You’ll have your hands full on Saturday, but the upside is that you get to spend the next month in a Mediterranean paradise.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I won’t disappoint you.”

“I have no doubts in your abilities, just fears for your and Mr. Jarvin’s safety.”

“We’ll watch out for each other, ma’am.”

Nodding, she said, “Good. Your first assignment is to let the rest of my staff know you’re on board. Harry is in command at the moment, and he and Sue will take care of all the details to get you reassigned.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She patted his back as she walked away, feeling both humbled by his respect and concerned about the responsibility he’d just accepted. Taking a moment to order her

emotions, she scanned the room and decided that a lighthearted conversation with Naomi would be a wonderful diversion from her anxiety.

Across the room, Chakotay had been watching Kathryn's reaction to her conversation with Yosa. When Tom joined him, he said, "I was wondering how long she'd put up with your escort services."

"Longer than I expected." He took a long drink and then added, "Maybe it was because I kept taking her to people who only had good news."

"What did Yosa want to talk to her about? She was tense and looked a little upset."

"He wants to take Doyle's place."

"I see." Chakotay wasn't sure what to think about that, yet. "What are you drinking?"

"This?" Tom held up his glass. "It's a party. What do you think I'm drinking?"

Chakotay sniffed the clear liquid, but didn't detect anything. Concerned, he said, "It's eleven in the morning, Tom."

"Yes, it is. Almost lunch time." Offering the glass to Chakotay he said, "Try it."

Hesitantly, Chakotay took a sip and when he discovered what it was, he rolled his eyes and thrust it back at the younger man. "You had me going."

"So I noticed," Tom laughed and held up the glass. "Ice cold water."

At a nearby table, B'Elanna sat down with Harry, Amy, and Marla Gilmore. "May I join you?"

"Please do," Harry said. "We were just talking about how great the Admiral looks."

"Great?" B'Elanna glanced at Kathryn who was talking to the Wildmans. "She still looks fragile and mal-nourished. A stiff breeze would knock her over."

Amy pointed out, "But she's happy and is getting around much better than last time we saw her."

"I'm not saying there's no improvement. I'm just saying that she doesn't look 'great.'"

Marla asked, "How bad was she?"

The other three exchanged looks and B'Elanna answered, "Let's put it this way. I watched her die while Tom and Chakotay performed CPR."

Harry added, "The entire ordeal, from start to finish, was a nightmare. After we rescued her, she was unrecognizable. It's a miracle that she's alive."

Amy clasped her hands together, saying, "I can't say anything due to doctor/patient confidentiality."

"That's all right," Marla said. "I'm relieved that she survived. The galaxy is a better place with her in it, and I didn't always think that."

"We know, and it's okay," Harry said. "No one said she was a saint, just a dynamic, commanding, intelligent leader that people want to follow, wherever she may be going."

Not too far away, Kathryn made plans to be interviewed by Naomi for her school paper and then spoke to Tuvok for a few minutes, deciding to continue their conversation in private the next day. That left only Annika to speak with before her itinerary was complete.

Finding her sitting at a table amongst a large group, Kathryn came up to them and said, "Hello, everyone. Enjoying yourselves?"

Joe said, "We're just re-telling some of the great Voyager stories."

"For some reason, they're funnier now than they used to be," Ashmore remarked.

Kathryn said with a smile, "It's easier to laugh at ourselves when we're not in the heat of the moment."

"How are you feeling, Admiral?" Swinn asked. "Don't give us the standard, 'I'm fine,' but the real answer."

Touched by their concern, she replied, "I'm working towards fine, but I've already come a long way in the last two months. So in comparison, I feel much better, although I wish I was as strong as I used to be."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much," Lang replied. "The Federation isn't following you because of your physical strength."

"Thank you, Deborah. I appreciate your faith in me." Kathryn patted her shoulder.

Swinn offered, "If there is anything that we can do to help you, I think I can speak for everyone here, and say we'd jump at the chance."

"I know you would," Kathryn placed her hand over her heart. "I'm grateful for your support, but for the time being, I'm just enjoying seeing all of you, looking forward to my wedding, and ready for the month-long vacation that Chakotay has arranged."

Ashmore asked, "Where will the honeymoon be?"

"The Mediterranean. It'll be a bit too cold to swim in the sea, but regardless, I'm more than ready for some sunshine. It's been a long winter."

"That sounds wonderful. I know you'll have a great time," Lang smiled warmly at her former captain.

Kathryn said, "I don't want to interrupt your conversation, but, Annika, I would like to chat with you for a moment. Is this a good time?"

Standing, Annika said, "Of course, Admiral."

Addressing the whole table, Kathryn said, "I'll see you all a bit later. Enjoy yourselves."

"Could we speak privately in another room?" Annika asked when they were out of earshot.

"I don't think that would be a good idea. People, namely Chakotay and my security team, get a little worried when they can't see me." Looking around, Kathryn said, "Let's go stand by those windows over there. We'll be away from everyone and have some privacy." She caught Chakotay's eyes to make sure he knew where she was headed. Although she wouldn't admit it to Annika, she was just as uncomfortable about being out of his sightline as he was about not being able to see her.

When they arrived in their secluded location, Annika said, "I don't recall you being so accommodating to your security crew."

"A lot has happened in the last year," Kathryn said without further explanation. "How are you enjoying the Daystrom Institute?"

"I've decided to concentrate in the field of astrophysics."

"An excellent choice for your gifts, but that doesn't answer my question. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I find the research challenging, and the individuals are competent. It is a pleasant environment."

Smiling brightly, Kathryn said, "I'm glad. What else is happening in your life? Anything outside of the Institute?"

"There is not much else to do on the station, but I have been seeing another scientist after work on regular basis."

"Oh?"

“His name is Rich, Dr. Richard Holmes to be exact. I find that conversation with him is enjoyable – we have similar interests and he has encouraged me to partake in new experiences.” Annika looked nervously towards a group of Voyagers who walked by.

Kathryn picked up on Annika’s anxiety. “Is this new relationship what you wanted to speak with me about?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “We have not kissed yet and I’m uncertain about my ability to do it correctly in light of your relationship with Chakotay.”

“Annika, your experience with Chakotay has nothing to do with this new relationship with Dr. Holmes.”

“I disagree.” She crossed her arms. “I believed that Chakotay was incapable of invoking a physical response in a woman. I assume you would not be marrying him if that were the case, or are you overlooking that issue because he’s a friend?”

Kathryn pursed her lips to avoid saying what she really wanted. Instead, she took the high road and was completely honest. “Chakotay and I have always felt a spark of arousal when in close proximity because we have chemistry. That appears not to have been the case between you and him. And for that, I am eternally grateful because I’ve been in love with him for a long time.”

“Why, then, were you not dating?”

“Because I was his commanding officer. Whether or not that should’ve been a factor is up for debate, but at the time, I had to do what I felt was right.”

“You didn’t tell me this when I came to speak to you about him.”

“No,” she said clearly. “You came to me for advice about intimacy. While the object of your affection happened to be the same as mine, that didn’t mean that your concerns weren’t justified. I believe that you would’ve come to me regardless of who you were interested in.”

“Perhaps, but my intention was to compare our experiences with him.”

With a forced smile, Kathryn said, “I realize that, but if you’ll remember, I didn’t give you a description of mine.”

“I believed that was because you had nothing to report.”

Kathryn rubbed her hand across her mouth in an effort to keep her comments restrained. “I think we’re getting off topic here. The answer to your question then, and now, is yes, my soon-to-be-husband is more than capable. Just because you did not have chemistry

with him, doesn't mean that you won't with Dr. Holmes." The increase in her heart rate was making her feel a little light-headed.

"I see." Annika looked out the window at the grounds of Starfleet Academy.

Putting her hand on the younger woman's arm, Kathryn said, "Have you felt a connection while you've spent time with Dr. Holmes?"

"As I said, we have a lot in common."

"Not a conversational connection, a physical one. Do you wish for his leg to brush up against yours under the table? Do your fingers crave touching his? Do you long to kiss him? Do you feel anxiety when you think he might be considering kissing you?"

"Those are favorable responses?" she asked honestly.

Kathryn put her hand on the window frame to steady herself. "Yes, very favorable. Have you touched at all, in any way?"

"Yes, just as you said. His leg often touches mine and he continually brushes his hand against my arm. I thought him to be clumsy."

Smiling now, she replied, "Not likely. He's letting you know that he's interested in you without being blatant in case you don't return his feelings. That's a game that Chakotay and I mastered because we could never come out and say directly how we felt."

"I feel uncomfortable with my lack of experience in these matters."

"Don't be. If there's anyone that's going to understand and be accepting of your life experiences, it's going to be someone at the Institute. He knows you well, has spent time with you already, and he's still interested. That should tell you that he'll be open to discussing your anxiety."

"I have discovered that most humans do not appreciate my bluntness."

Kathryn shrugged. "Depends on the situation. My advice is to let him hold your hand the next time he brushes up against it. When his leg touches yours, don't move away. See what happens. You just might feel a spark of your own."

Annika nodded and looked directly at Kathryn. "Thank you, Admiral. I apologize if I caused you pain a year ago."

Shaking her head gently, Kathryn said, "No apology necessary because you didn't know." She smiled as she whispered, "Besides, it worked out. I am marrying him in three days."

After a pause, Annika asked, "Are you feeling unwell?"

She sighed. "My explanation at the table back there wasn't convincing?"

"It was, but I was referring to right now. Your skin color has become pallid."

"Oh, that," she said as she touched her face. "I'm just starting to feel a little tired. If you need to talk more, please contact me and we'll find a time. Okay?"

"I will. Thank you."

They moved back toward the rest of the group as Kathryn said, "I'll let you get back to your conversation. Do you see Tom anywhere?"

Annika called out, "Commander Paris."

Sighing, Kathryn said, "Thank you."

Tom came directly to them. "Yes, Annika?"

"The Admiral wishes to speak with you." To Kathryn she said, "I will be in contact to give you a report."

"I'll look forward to it," she said as Annika was walking away. Feeling faint, she grabbed Tom's arm for balance.

"Kathryn?" Tom asked. "Are you okay?"

"I've completed my list, and I hope you don't have anyone else to add to it."

"None that were pre-arranged, although I'm sure others would like to talk to you. Do you want to sit down?"

"The heat is getting to me, I think. Would you help me find Chakotay?"

"Sure." Tom looped her arm through his elbow and guided her through the crowd. "He's not far, likes to keep one eye on you at all times."

"So I've..." As a wave of dizziness washed over her, she closed her eyes and breathed slowly.

Tom shifted to put his arm around her waist and whispered, "Do you want me to get Doc?"

"No, I don't want to make a scene. I'm just a little woozy. It's hot in here and I've been on my feet all morning."

Chakotay joined them mid-way. “How are you holding up, Kathryn?”

Tom said, “She’s not doing so well. I think she needs to sit down.” He transferred his charge into Chakotay’s arms.

Kathryn said, “It started when my blood pressure rose a little while talking to Annika.”

Chakotay took a good look at her and asked Tom, “Would you discretely get her a glass of fruit juice?”

“I’m on it.” Before heading to the adjoining kitchen, he whispered something into Harry’s ear.

Kathryn said to Chakotay, “It’s not bad, just been a long morning.”

“With more physical activity than you’ve had in awhile.” He held her close. “You’re pale and your cheeks are flushed. A sure sign that you’re blood sugar has dropped.”

Harry came up to them and asked, “Would you like to join us? We’ve pulled up some extra chairs to our table.”

Kathryn said, “Thank you. That would be nice.”

“Right over here,” Harry said as he pulled her chair out for her.

Chakotay held onto her until she was seated and then whispered into her ear, “Feeling stable?”

She turned her face to his and caught his lips with a quick kiss. “Stable enough.”

When Chakotay was seated next to her, Harry asked, “Have you finished your rounds yet, Admiral?”

One eyebrow lifted, she asked, “Are you suggesting that I ‘get around,’ Harry?”

“Only in the diplomatic sense, of course. I was merely referring to Tom’s schedule for those who needed to talk to you.”

“Yes, I know.” She winked. “I spoke to almost a dozen people, I think. Does that sound about right?”

“I think so.”

Tom set a coffee mug down in front of her and Kathryn looked at it questioningly until she tipped it and saw that it was indeed juice. He patted her back and said, “You have to keep up appearances, you know. Your coffee habit is legendary.”

She took a sip and said, “Thank you, Tom. I appreciate the sentiment.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going to check on the status of lunch.”

After he was gone, B’Elanna commented, “I think he missed his true calling – party planning.”

“A man of many talents,” Kathryn said.

Amy asked, “Are you feeling ill, Admiral?”

“Not really. I’m just losing energy quickly, but I’ll blame you and Dr. Crusher,” she said with a smile.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because instead of waving a magic wand over me, you took half of my insides out. Magic would have been so much nicer in the long run,” she joked.

Amy laughed good-naturedly. “I’ll see about adding a magic course to my continuing education studies.”

“Fantastic idea.” Kathryn noticed that Marla looked confused, and explained, “The doctors had to remove some of my GI tract because of irreparable damage. Nothing too traumatic.”

Marla nodded with understanding. “I see. You had me a little worried.”

Harry said, “You wouldn’t be the only one.”

Kathryn waved her hand in front of her face. “Enough about me. Tell me what’s going on in your lives. Marla, what are you doing these days?”

She nodded towards B’Elanna. “Working for her on designing an engine for a new shuttle prototype, but as a civilian.”

Chakotay said, “I hope Torres isn’t being too hard on you.”

After kicking him under the table, B’Elanna said, “I treat her just the same as any other officer. In my book, she still has her commission.”

“Thanks, B’Elanna, but I’m actually enjoying not having the responsibility,” Marla replied.

Billy Telfer walked up to the table with a plate of food. “Admiral, my uncle is trying out some new recipes and would love to have your opinion on these appetizers.” He set the plate down in front of her. “Would you care to offer a taste test?”

Kathryn crooked a smile and asked, “Did Tom tell you to make up an excuse to bring some food to me?”

“Of course not, Admiral.” Billy watched as she took a bite of the bruschetta. “Tom merely asked if there was anything you could pretend to sample for us.”

The others chuckled as Kathryn hummed over the delicious blend of flavors in her mouth. “This is wonderful Billy! I think these tomatoes have got to be the sweetest I’ve ever tasted.”

Billy straightened up with pride. “You’ve had them before. They’re Talaxian tomatoes.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with surprise.

“Neelix had a knack for disguising their natural flavor. He didn’t care for it.”

Kathryn pushed the last bite into Chakotay’s mouth. “Try this.”

He hummed affirmatively, and she replied for him. “He loves it, too.”

Billy added, “Of course, natural sunshine makes them better than the hydroponics bay did. Try the stuffed mushrooms. They’re my favorite.”

She ate one and nodded, “Very good. Tell your Uncle that I love his cooking, would you?”

“I will. Let me know if you need anything else. Appetizers for everyone else will be out within twenty minutes.”

Kathryn ate another mushroom and offered the plate to everyone else. “I feel ill-mannered to be eating in front of you.”

They all declined, and B’Elanna said, “You need the calories, we don’t. And, if you’ll remember, I have a snug bridesmaid dress to wear in a few days.”

“Oh, I remember.” With a frown she said, “Come to think of it, I hope my dress still fits. I’ve gained a kilo since the last fitting.”

“An entire kilo?” Harry asked with sarcasm, making everyone else laugh.

“As small as I am, that makes a big difference.”

Chakotay said, “I see it in your face. You look healthier.”

“Thanks,” she said as she accepted another quick kiss.

B’Elanna said, “Come on you two. Save it for the wedding night. Poor Harry is going to need therapy because it’s like watching his parents.”

Kathryn reached for Harry’s forearm and gave it a squeeze. “No need to worry, Lanna.”

“Yea,” he told B’Elanna. “You should be nicer to me. What happened to missing me and welcoming me home after being away?”

Kathryn asked, “When did you get back?”

“Late last night. I was afraid we wouldn’t make it, but we didn’t even have to push the speed barrier inside the Sol System.”

“How was being on the Enterprise?” Chakotay picked up a piece of bruschetta and handed it to Kathryn, encouraging her to keep eating.

“Different,” Harry said with certainty. “Where Voyager was like a small village, the Enterprise is like a traveling city. Eight times the number of people, and the resources at our disposal are amazing.”

Nodding, Kathryn asked, “Didn’t you augment their systems back in December?”

“Somewhat. I fitted their scanners with the enhanced optical nodes to extend the long-range capability. That’s what we used to find you, actually, because I did the same thing to the Pioneer.”

B’Elanna noted, “Old technology to us, but new to the Federation. We’re running into that a lot.”

“Yes,” Marla replied, “But it’s fun to be able to teach it to others.”

Harry said, “True. I spent a lot of time over the last month teaching the Enterprise engineers how the nodes work, because when I installed them, I didn’t have time to explain more than how to read the results.”

“Did they catch on?” Kathryn asked.

“Pretty quickly, and then we started working on specs for deflector adjustments that would increase the quality of long-range communications.” Harry looked at B’Elanna.

“Not to say anything against your Voyager team, but the engineers on the Enterprise are incredibly bright. It was like working in a think-tank.”

“You sound like you enjoyed it.” Kathryn finished her juice.

“Oh, I did.” He held up his hands, palms out, “Not to worry though, boss. I'm not leaving your team.”

“Yet,” Kathryn said with a wink.

Amy said, “I like having him on your staff, Admiral. It means I get to see him more.”

“How long are you assigned to the Pioneer, Amy?” Chakotay asked.

“Another two months. Then I'll have completed my first year of residency. I'm not sure where I'll go after that.”

Harry said, “Don't worry. We'll figure it out.”

Kathryn exchanged a knowing look with Chakotay, but before she could say anything, Billy stepped up to the microphone and announced that lunch was served.

Tom raised his glass of champagne to offer a toast. “To William and Lydia, may your marriage be a happy one, and may your travels never take you far from your Voyager family. Here's to you.” Everyone applauded the newly married couple.

William stood in front of everyone, holding Lydia's hand. “Thank you, everyone, for allowing us to make our wedding a part of today's celebration.” Looking at Kathryn, he said, “And even more thanks to you, Admiral Janeway, for performing the ceremony.”

“My pleasure,” she replied with a bow of her head.

“We don't want to detract from the real reason we've gathered here today, and that's to celebrate you, Admiral.”

She shook her head and, with a smile, waved his comment away.

He continued, despite her protest. “When you were unable to attend the reunion we held in December, we agreed that we'd do this again when you could be here. I've been asked to speak for everyone, and we want you to know that your ordeal affected us deeply. We know that the sorrow we felt can't compare to your suffering, but we want you to know that every minute you were gone, all of us were thinking about you and hoping for your safe return.”

Kathryn shifted her jaw, trying to stop the tears that had sprung to her eyes. When she felt Chakotay's arms come around her from behind, she leaned against him, drawing strength from his presence. Shakily, she replied, "Thank you, William."

He lowered the microphone so that only she and Chakotay could hear him ask, "Do you feel up to speaking to everyone?"

"I think I can manage it," she said as she accepted the microphone from him and a handkerchief from Lydia. "Thank you." As she blotted her eyes, William and Lydia sat down at a table in front of the gathered Voyagers.

Chakotay whispered, "Do you want me to stay up here?"

"Yes, please." She took his hand and lifted the microphone to speak to her former crew. "No words can adequately describe how I'm feeling right now. Your loyalty and steadfast support mean more to me than you can possibly imagine. We've been through a hell of a lot together. Knowing that all of you continue to stand with me, despite our past hardships, gives me the confidence to keep forging ahead.

"When we returned home over a year ago, I certainly didn't expect that I'd be doing the job I'm doing now, but I know that no matter what happens, I've got one hundred and forty-six friends to come home to." Smiling at the group, she added, "Although our numbers continue to grow as we draw more people into our family."

Kathryn took a deep breath and stepped away from Chakotay. "We lost one member of our family last year, Scott Doyle. I understand that you had a memorial service for him in December, but I'd like to take a moment to say a few words." She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief before continuing. "Scott was a remarkable young man who served and protected every single one of us. On the Liberty, I understand that he fought valiantly to protect the lives of his fellow crewmen. On Voyager, he did nothing less as he patrolled the ship, watched over us during away missions, and guarded us from the security station on the bridge as we slept."

With a shaky breath, she said, "Many of you know that his quick thinking kept me and many others alive last summer on Sirius IX. What you don't know is what happened when he died."

She closed her eyes to stay off the emotions that were near the surface. "Mr. Jarvin?" she asked, knowing he was behind her.

"Yes, Admiral?"

Kathryn extended her hand to take his and brought him to her side. "Justin, Scott, and two others were escorting me out of the conference center when we came under fire. Justin ordered Scott to get me out of the building while he and the others covered us." Taking a deep breath, she continued, "Scott was behind me, and his last words were, 'No

matter what, keep running. I won't let them get you.'" Tears leaked out of her eyes and she saw that many others were wiping at their eyes, too. "He was behind me until the very last moment. He gave his life..." She struggled to get the last words out, "for me."

She lowered the microphone, unable to say anything else. Justin took it from her and Chakotay drew her into his arms. She wasn't sure what Justin told everyone, but they applauded and Chakotay squeezed her tighter.

Tom got up on the stage and said, "We will hold Scott's memory in our hearts, as we do every one of our fallen comrades." He paused before saying, "Please continue to enjoy the reception, and at three o'clock, we'll see a holopic slide show that Dr. Joe put together for us. However," he glanced at Kathryn and Chakotay, "I have one secret to tell you about our favorite command team before I turn it over to Harry and the Kim-tones."

Kathryn and Chakotay looked at each other in bewilderment, having no idea what Tom was about to say.

Tom grinned at them as he explained, "Chakotay confided in me that he had planned on proposing to Admiral Janeway in front of all of us in December. Now, I'm sure that would've been a sight to behold, but I think you'll all agree with me that we're glad he didn't wait until now to pop the question."

The whole group applauded and whistled, but Tom held up his hands for them to stop. "Most of us will be at the wedding on Saturday, but for those that are unable to attend, I've had a request for you to rehearse the final moment of the wedding. Chakotay, this is your chance to kiss your bride like you wish you could at the wedding."

Everyone laughed and whistled as Chakotay took the microphone from Tom and asked, "Just how many requests did you receive to watch us kiss?"

He made a show of counting with his fingers and then replied with satisfaction, "One hundred and forty-three."

As Tom took the mic away, Kathryn put her hands on her hips and looked up at Chakotay, finding the merriment a welcome distraction from her grief.

He whispered to her, "Are you comfortable with a little public display of affection?"

Licking her lips, she said, "I think they want more than a little. Are you game to show them what we don't want the cameras to see?"

"Absolutely." His smile was bright as he threaded his fingers up into her hair, tilted her head ever so slightly, and lowered his lips to hers.

Kathryn felt the warmth begin to build immediately as she concentrated on the feel of his body next to hers and the way his soft, warm lips coaxed her mouth into an open kiss. She could hear the applause begin as his tongue discretely touched hers. When he adjusted his hands to wrap around her back and head, she should have known what was coming, but she was too intoxicated with his touch to pay attention. Seconds later, she found herself being dipped low, so as to hide their faces from the Voyagers. The action was enough to make their audience kick it up a notch by whistling and whooping at them.

Chakotay lightened his kiss while still in the dip and smiled against her lips. He whispered, "I love you."

"I..." She held onto him as a wave of vertigo passed over her. Alarmed, she strained to say, "Chakotay! Bring me up!"

He righted her slowly and held her close, hiding her face from the audience. "Are you okay, love?"

"Don't let go."

"I've got you," he whispered, although with all the whooping and hollering, no one would've heard them anyway.

"Dizzy," she explained, resting her head on his shoulder.

He rubbed her back gently, "I'll hold you until it passes. Just tell me when."

"Don't drop me if I faint."

"Not a chance," he said as his arms wrapped tighter. He looked past her at Tom and raised his eyebrows like he planned to say something.

Tom stepped close and asked, "Yes?"

"She's dizzy. Distract them so we can get off the stage."

"I'm on it." He waved to Harry to start the music and said, "Please, enjoy yourselves."
