

The Future Is Ours – Part 25

“Sacred Circle of Life”

By Dawn

Summary: Wedding Bells

Rated: PG

Kathryn woke the next morning feeling drained. She turned to look at Chakotay sleeping next to her and reached out to rest her hand on his shoulder, loving the feel of his strong muscles underneath the soft fabric of his shirt.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Good morning, love.”

Tiredly, she said, “I’m not so sure.”

“Sure of what? That I love you or that it’s morning?”

Smiling at his questions, she answered, “That it’s good.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“Just don’t feel so great. I hope yesterday didn’t set me back.”

Sitting up, he felt her forehead. “You do look pale. Do you think you’re getting sick?”

“Not sure.” She closed her eyes. “I don’t have a sore throat or congestion, just feel drained and listless.”

“Maybe you’re dehydrated and hungry because you didn’t have your usual evening snack last night. I’ll bring you some breakfast, and we’ll take it from there.”

As he got up, she said, “I don’t remember going to bed.”

“I carried you up here. You fell asleep on the couch as soon as we got home.”

“And you don’t think you could carry exercise equipment upstairs?”

After he pulled on his robe, he leaned over and gave her a kiss. “You weigh considerably less, love. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

While he was gone, she looked at what she was wearing and was impressed that he’d managed to change her into a nightshirt without waking her up. Stretching her legs, she luxuriated in the feel

of the warm bed. It was cozy and made her want to snuggle down deeper into it. She was about to drift off to sleep again when she heard him come back into the room.

“Oatmeal, cantaloupe, and orange juice.” He set the tray down on the bed.

Opening her eyes, she said, “That cantaloupe is for the bachelorette party tonight. Mom delivered the groceries yesterday and is coming back this afternoon to cook.”

“I don’t think anyone will mind if they’re missing a few slices.” He helped her sit up.

“You’re probably right, but you,” she pointed a forkful of melon at him, “get to explain to mom.”

“Gladly.” He sat down next to her and started eating his own oatmeal. “I was a little worried when you crashed as soon as we got home. You slept for almost fourteen hours.”

“I think it was the after-dinner debate with Harren that wore me out. Not a smart thing to do.”

Chuckling, he said, “Yeah, Owen came in while you were in the midst of that and asked if there was an arm-wrestling match going on.”

“Really?”

“Mmmhmm. The way everyone was crowded around your table and cheering you on was something.”

She smiled at the memory. “He’s gotten better at debating this year. I had to stay on my toes.”

“It was just like old times, the two of you arguing in the messhall and none of us understanding a word you were saying.”

“I don’t think many were following us yesterday, either. Their response was timed exactly with the expression changes on our faces.”

“Who won?”

She gave him a blank stare. “Do you really need to ask?”

Laughing, he said, “I suppose not.”

Poking another piece of fruit with her fork, she muttered, “I think he let me win.”

“For old times’ sake? Harren isn’t that nice.”

“Maybe he was feeling charitable, considering my weakened condition.” She took a drink. “Still, I feel bad that I didn’t have more energy for our last night together before the wedding.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It just builds the sexual tension for the honeymoon.”

Glancing at him, she replied, “If I don’t sleep through the first couple of days to recover from the wedding.”

“If you do, you do. I’ll be ready for you when you wake up.” He winked at her.

Warmth spread through her from the flirtatious look in his eyes. “Or we could have a go after breakfast here.”

Laughing, he said, “Wish we could, but we’re expecting company in an hour.”

She looked at the clock. “Who is coming at ten?”

“Tuvok and T’Pel, for morning tea.”

“Hmmm... tough choice. Tea with vulcans or a romp in bed with my soon-to-be-husband?”

“Duty calls, unfortunately.” He studied her face and asked, “Feeling better?”

“Yes. I think you were right about the dehydration. I’d better drink a lot today if I’m going to make it through the party tonight.”

“I’m a little worried about leaving you for the next two nights. Should we ask Phoebe or B’Elanna to stay with you?”

“Not with their girls at home.”

“Katie is old enough to do without her mom, and Miral is spending the night with Owen and Marilyn.”

Kathryn sighed. “If the ladies get drunk, they may want to stay here overnight and that’ll take care of it.”

“Not a bad idea, especially for B’Elanna. She might not want to come home to a house full of intoxicated men. We’re all planning on crashing there.”

“Do you have detox hypos? I don’t want you all to be sick tomorrow.”

“Yes, and you?”

“Got ‘em, although I don’t think I’ll have anything besides a glass of wine.”

He stacked their dishes onto the tray. “For Friday night, I’ll have Mark or Justin sleep inside the house.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I need to get over this fear of being alone. It’s not exactly becoming of a decorated Starfleet officer.”

“Yes, but not on the night before your wedding. Let’s worry about that later.” He gave her a quick kiss and said, “Rest while I take a shower, and then I’ll help you if you need it.”

“I have a better idea. Would you run a bath for me so I can relax while you get ready?”

“I’d be happy to.”

The next evening after the rehearsal dinner, Kathryn walked through the empty house, tidying up the clean rooms. Her family had made sure everything was immaculate, but Kathryn was a little anxious about going to bed and was delaying it as long as possible.

When she couldn’t think of anything else to do, she went upstairs and made sure Justin was set for the night in the guest room.

He said, “I’ve got everything I need. Thank you, Admiral.”

“All right. Good night, Justin.”

“Good night. Yell if you need me.”

“I will. Thank you.” She closed the guest room door and walked down the hall to the master bedroom. Before going in, she looked down over the dark great room and felt an eerie chill run through her. Shivering, she thought, “Katie, get a hold of yourself.”

She went inside and closed the door firmly, asking, “Should I lock it? No, if I need him, he won’t be able to get in.” Laughing, she added, “And now, I’m talking to myself. If anyone heard me, they’d think I’m nuts.”

Kathryn checked her bags one more time to make sure she’d packed everything she wanted for the honeymoon. Then she put on a knit outfit to sleep in. She wasn’t about to wear one of her nightgowns with Justin in the house. She made sure all the windows and the French doors were closed and secure, even though there were forcefields outside all of them and the glass was treated with a polaron energy barrier. “It never hurts to be sure.”

Holding her arms across her chest, she backed towards the bed, taking a visual inventory of the room before she turned the lights out, thinking that the room seemed much larger than before.

When darkness enveloped the room, her heart started fluttering in her chest. She was momentarily alarmed, but then realized that her heart was fine and reminded herself that she was simply nervous.

“A nightlight will calm my nerves.” She turned on the bedside lamp and opened the nightstand drawer to retrieve some of the ‘toys’ that she had procured. After sticking a phaser in her pocket, she climbed onto the bed and powered up a tri-corder to scan for life-signs in the vicinity.

Seconds later, Justin knocked on the door. “Admiral? Are you okay?”

“Damn.” She clicked off the tri-corder and ran to open the door. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“We detected...”

“I know,” she sighed and handed him the device. “I’m just spooked.”

He holstered his phaser and looked at her with understanding. “I could sleep on one of the couches in there with you.”

She looked at the sitting area behind her and suddenly felt very foolish. Clicking her tongue, she turned back and asked, “Wasn’t I the captain who bravely brought Voyager across seventy thousand light years?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a smile.

“Then it stands to reason that I should be able to sleep by myself in my own bedroom, wouldn’t you think? Especially knowing that there are a dozen able-bodied security officers patrolling the grounds, and this house is locked down tighter than Starfleet headquarters?”

“A lot has happened to you, Admiral, and it’s perfectly reasonable to feel ill-at-ease.”

“Thank you, Justin, but I’m going to try to get a grip and make it through the night.”

“I’ll be right down here, and I’ll leave my door open.” He handed the tri-corder back to her and said, “Or turn this on and I’ll be here in a flash.”

“Okay,” she nodded with certainty and started to close the door, but stopped. “I think I’ll leave mine open, too.”

“That’s a good idea, and don’t worry, I don’t snore too loudly,” he said jokingly.

Chuckling, she said, “Thank you, and again, goodnight.”

He nodded and went back down the hall.

Taking a deep breath, she climbed back into bed and grimaced when the phaser dug into her side. Annoyed with herself, she took it out of her pocket and started to put it away before deciding to just stick it under Chakotay’s pillow.

After fifteen minutes, she'd worked herself up into a state of near panic again. She was sitting up in bed with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her eyes continually scanned the room, stopping on every shadow to study it for signs of movement. She knew she was being irrational, but she couldn't stop the fear from bubbling up inside her.

The facts were that someone wanted her dead and even when she'd been guarded by four armed men and a starship, they'd still managed to abduct her. Yes, she had more protection at home, but if someone really wanted her, chances were that no amount of security would be able to stop them.

If she was taken right now, no one would know that she was even gone until they looked for her tomorrow unless, of course, security was monitoring her life signs. They probably were, so there was nothing to worry about. Except that they could easily falsify those readings.

Her lungs shuddered as she took a deep breath, and she thought that perhaps she should call Chakotay. "No," she whispered loudly. "I don't need someone with me constantly. I'm a capable, competent Starfleet officer."

Justin cleared his throat in the hallway and then stepped into the room. "Did you say something, Admiral?"

"Sorry, talking to myself." Embarrassment warmed her cheeks.

"No problem."

"Quick question. Is my life-sign being monitored at all times?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She squinted. "If there's so much as a blip, someone will notice?"

"Yes, in much the same way that I was notified that there was a power fluctuation in here when you activated the scanner."

"Okay. Thank you, Justin."

"You're welcome, ma'am."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I think I might call Chakotay, just to check in."

"That sounds like a good idea. Goodnight, Admiral."

"Good night." After he was gone, she rolled her eyes in annoyance with herself and whispered, "Again."

She retrieved her computer interface and shut the door before she crawled back into bed again. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was a little after ten. Miral would be asleep, but the others probably weren't. She began to key in the connection and then stopped. "This is ridiculous, Katie."

Setting the computer aside, she slumped down into the bed and pulled the covers up. It wasn't that she was really afraid, it was that she was letting her imagination get the best of her. "Happy thoughts, Katie. Happy thoughts." She visualized the wedding ceremony, imagining herself walking down the aisle amid all their friends and loved ones. Nothing could happen there. The entire scene played out beautifully in her mind with peace roses, beautiful dresses, handsome men... and then she heard weapons fire and cried out, "Nooooo!" as she imagined herself a victim of a sniper.

Justin ran into the room, phaser drawn. "Admiral! What is it?"

She covered her mouth in shock. "I'm sorry, Justin."

"Did you see something?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm a mess, I'm so sorry."

Relaxing, he holstered his phaser. "No need to apologize, Admiral."

"My imagination is getting to me."

"Did you contact Chakotay?"

"No, I was trying to convince myself that I can do this."

"Considering the circumstances, I'm sure that it would be okay for him to sleep here."

"It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the wedding day."

Justin shook his head. "I think you can put aside that superstition so you don't have a sleep-deprived bride who's on edge because of her imagination."

She nodded, but couldn't decide what action to take.

"Would you like me to call Sue? I'm sure she'd be happy to spend the night in here with you. She enjoyed last night."

"So we can both deal with the trauma of my abduction together?"

"No, and she shouldn't have told you that she was still having nightmares from her experience as your decoy."

Kathryn took a deep breath. "If I can't get to sleep by eleven, let's call her."

"All right." He held up a hand, "Don't say goodnight."

She cocked her head, eyebrow raised, and glared at him.

Smiling, he said, "Now that's a classic Janeway look. I just need to make you annoyed with me to get your mind on something else."

"Go." She pointed to the door, biting back a smile as he waved behind him. Slumping down again, she muttered, "Make me annoyed? I'll show you annoyed if you keep that up, mister."

Grabbing Chakotay's pillow, she hugged it close and imagined being safe in his arms, just as she had been every night for the last two months. Truth be told, except for the one incident with the panic attack, she hadn't been by herself since she was rescued. She definitely needed to work on this with Deanna, unless she planned to have a personal assistant with her at all times for the rest of her life.

Kathryn concentrated on her breathing, thinking that would lull her to sleep without letting her thoughts run rampant about shootings, abductions, and... "Damn." She sat up in bed again. "This is infuriating." Looking at the clock, she saw that it was 10:36. She wouldn't count this as insomnia until after 1:00, and she had until midnight before it would be bad luck to call Chakotay.

Hoping it would put her to sleep, she picked up her book of poetry and relaxed back into the pillows. All was going well until she thought she saw movement in the bathroom. She reached under Chakotay's pillow and picked up her phaser. Creeping up to the doorframe, she used the wall to protect her body as she reached around the door to turn on the lights. When nothing happened, she peeked inside, letting the phaser lead.

What she saw moving made her feel really dumb. "A plant." She turned off the bathroom light and crawled back into bed with her book. "Stupid plant. Who puts a plant in front of an air vent? Me, that's who." She grumbled and opened to the last page she'd been reading.

When her eyelids started feeling droopy, she set the book down and closed her eyes, content that she'd finally be able to fall asleep. The heaviness of slumber washed over her.

She sat up with a gasp. Her heart was racing and she felt hot. Hands shaking, she covered her face and tried to get her breathing under control. She looked at the clock and tried not to cry when she saw that it was only 11:18. She'd only been asleep for half an hour. Picking up the computer from the end of the bed, she keyed in the code to the Paris house.

B'Elanna answered, "Kathryn? Are you okay?"

"Can I talk to Chakotay? Is he asleep yet?"

“He just went to bed. I’ll be right back.”

He arrived less than a minute later looking worried. “Kathryn?”

“I’m sorry to bother you.”

Touching the screen, he said, “You’re never a bother. What’s wrong?”

“I just…” She laid her hands on her flushed cheeks, willing herself to be calm.

“Do you need me to come home?”

Shaking her head, she forced the emotions down.

“Are you worried about tomorrow?”

“No, I’m just having trouble getting past my fears. It’s ridiculous really. I’m capable of doing this. I really am, and I want to.”

“Fears about getting married?” he asked worriedly.

“No!” She touched the image of his face. “No. Sleeping without someone here.”

He relaxed. “Oh. Isn’t Justin with you?”

“Yes, but in another room. He offered to sleep on the couch in here, but that didn’t feel right.” She rubbed her forehead. “I’m sorry, Chakotay. I fell asleep, but then had a nightmare about getting shot. Before that, my imagination was all over the place. Poor Justin has been in here half a dozen times.”

“I’m coming home.”

“No, I just needed to talk to you.”

“Kathryn, you don’t have to get over these fears tonight. I’m worried about you.”

“Maybe you could take a computer to bed with you and we can keep this line open all night.”

He smiled softly. “Like when I watched you sleep when you were on the Pioneer?”

“That was nice.”

“Only because I couldn’t physically get to you. I can be there in five minutes.”

“I’ll be okay.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m stronger than this.”

“Yes, you are, but that doesn’t mean the fears aren’t real to you right now.”

“They are real because there are people out there who want me dead. I can’t stop thinking about that, regardless of how much security I have. What’s absurd is that this is no different than when the Hirogen or the Kazon were hunting us down. I slept fine through that.”

“Because they were known enemies and we knew when they were coming at us. You also hadn’t been subjected to torture under their hands.”

She looked away. “We shouldn’t be talking about this right now.”

“I know, but I’m trying to convince you that it is perfectly acceptable for you to feel afraid. You don’t need to be ashamed by it, and you don’t have to fight it. Acknowledge that you’re scared and then come up with strategies to deal with it.”

“That’s not easy to do.”

“I never said it was, but I did say that you don’t have to deal with it tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll read myself to sleep again and if I can’t cope, I’ll let Justin sleep on the couch in here.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me?”

Tilting her head, she said sadly, “I want you desperately, but I want to be strong. And I want the first time you see me tomorrow to be when I’m walking down the aisle.”

“I could sleep with an eye mask on,” he offered.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn. I’m taking my commbadge to bed. Call me for any reason, okay?”

She nodded. “I will. Thank you for loving me when I’m a mess.”

Giving her a tender smile, he said, “I love you no matter what. And tomorrow, I’m going to vow to keep doing exactly that for the rest of my life.”

Touching the screen, she said, “I’m looking forward to it. Good night.”

“Good night, my love.” He met her fingers on the screen as they closed the communication.

Kathryn put the computer on her nightstand and turned out the light. Feeling warmed by his love, she closed her eyes and snuggled down into the bed, trying to think about nothing but him.

Not more than a few minutes went by when she heard a knock at the door. She sat up and asked, “Yes, Justin?”

The door opened and B’Elanna stepped in, wearing her pajamas. “Not Justin.”

“Lanna?”

Without explaining, she crossed the room and crawled into bed. “Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Chakotay sent you?”

“Tom was starting to snore and I slept really well downstairs last night. I think the ocean air agrees with me.”

Kathryn put her head back down on the pillow, facing B’Elanna. “There’s ocean air in San Francisco.”

B’Elanna frowned and fished under the pillow. “A phaser?” She held it up in the moonlight.

“Self-defense,” she explained.

“Your nightstand or mine?”

Kathryn took it from her and put it back in the drawer where she got it. Settling back down, she asked, “You don’t think it’s odd to be sleeping in my bed?”

“It’s a great bed, plenty of room. And if you’ll remember, I did help assemble it.”

“So you’re claiming part-ownership?”

“Sure.” She stuck her face in the pillow and said, “This smells like Chakotay. I’ve always thought he has a great smell.”

“Yes, he does.”

“Want to trade?”

“Sure.” Kathryn handed her pillow to B’Elanna and took Chakotay’s in exchange.

“Now I smell you.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not at all. You smell like soap and some kind of flower. I don’t know which.”

“Sweet pea.”

“That flower needs a different name.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Too girlie?”

“Too cutesy.” After a long moment of silence, B’Elanna asked, “Are you okay?”

“I am a counselor’s nightmare, but thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome.” She gave Kathryn’s hand a quick squeeze. “One of the many duties of a bridesmaid is making sure the bride is well rested.”

“I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve already given me everything that makes me happy.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn clasped her fingers around B’Elanna’s. “I’ll share the credit with your husband, though.”

“He’d appreciate that, but…” She whispered as if it was a secret, “If not for you, I wouldn’t have him, either.”

Pride swelled up inside Kathryn for the woman that B’Elanna had become. She thought about how close their friendship had become over the past year, and found it difficult to remember how angry and full of hatred the young Klingon used to be. She held B’Elanna’s hand more securely and said, “Good night, Lanna.”

“night.”

A moment later, Kathryn reached over to her nightstand and grabbed her commbadge. “Janeway to Chakotay.”

B’Elanna sat up. “Kathryn?”

She held up her hand to assure the younger woman that she was fine while they waited for Chakotay to respond.

“Chakotay here. Did B’Elanna arrive?”

“She’s here. I just wanted to say thank you for sending her.”

He took a deep breath before replying, “You’re welcome. I was hoping you wouldn’t be annoyed.”

“Not in the least.” Kathryn squeezed B’Elanna’s fingers.

“Good. Think you can sleep now?”

“Yes. Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight, my bride. I love you.”

Once they were settled back into bed, B’Elanna asked, “You and he have come a long way in six months.”

“A complete turnaround.”

“Nah, I’d say you’ve just figured out how to be a couple despite your crazy life.”

“Perhaps so.” She held B’Elanna’s hand again and echoed their earlier conversation. “If not for you, I wouldn’t have him.”

“You would’ve figured it out eventually, but I’m glad that I could help. Now, get some sleep.”

“Aye, Commander.”

B’Elanna laughed and gave Kathryn’s hand a light squeeze.

Kathryn stood at the kitchen counter and poured herself a cup of hot, steaming coffee. She was full of excitement and anticipation for the day ahead, and more than ready to marry her best friend. Her bath was done, hair washed, and all of her things were ready for transport to the Mediterranean.

The morning had started off rough because she’d been listless and shaky again, but after she’d eaten the breakfast B’Elanna had made for her, she’d felt much better. Now, it was a little after noon and she wanted a nice cup of coffee and a sandwich before her attendants arrived.

Standing at the sink, she could see the workers outside putting up tents over all the decks in the back and knew that the front yard looked about the same. Rain was expected, but that wouldn’t deter them from their wedding plans. She hoped that the drizzle would subside by three when the guests were expected to start arriving.

Kathryn was pulling bread out of the cabinet when the doorbell rang. Drawing her robe tightly around her, she walked through the dining and living rooms to answer it. Before she was able to get there, her guests had already let themselves in.

Smiling graciously, she told Gretchen, Phoebe, and the stylist they brought with them, “Hi, did you have any problems getting through security?”

Phoebe was annoyed and nodded towards the stylist. “They didn’t want to let her through. You forgot to put her on the guest list, Katie.”

“Oh, sorry. The thought never crossed my mind.”

“We’re here now,” Phoebe said. “Ready to get started?”

“Go on up to the master bathroom. I was just making a sandwich.”

“No, no, no... we should get started right away,” the stylist implored.

“I need to eat, first,” Kathryn explained. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Veronica Strahm.”

Phoebe added, “It took longer than we expected to get here, Katie. We’ve got to get started or your hair won’t be ready by the time the photographer gets here at three.”

“It’s going to take two and a half hours to do my hair? And aren’t we posing for pictures after the wedding?”

“That was the plan,” Phoebe said as she began ascending the stairs with Veronica. “But with the rain, you need to be ready for whenever there’s a dry moment.”

Gretchen ushered Kathryn up the stairs to follow them. “Go on up, Katie, I’ll bring a tray of food.”

Kathryn was really hungry, but knew that she was outnumbered. “All right. Bring my coffee, would you? It’s on the counter.” Gretchen was already out of sight by the time Kathryn finished her sentence.

She followed her sister up, taking it slow to avoid getting dizzy, but she picked up the pace when Phoebe said, “Come on, Katie.”

Kathryn sat down in the chair she was assigned, and as Veronica began twisting and spraying her hair, she decided that she should’ve chosen to tie her hair up in a simple bun. The promised relaxing makeover seemed more like the manufacturing of a disguise for an undercover operation.

Gretchen brought up the tray of food, but got distracted before she brought any over to Kathryn.

“Could we take a break while I eat?” Kathryn asked.

“No, I’ve got to get these sprayed and curled so they’ll have time to set.”

“Ms. Strahm, I need to eat. Either give me something or I’m getting up myself.”

Exasperated, the stylist replied and reached over to pick up an apple. “Here you go.”

Kathryn bristled as she said, “Thanks.” An apple wasn’t exactly what she had in mind, but it would do. She couldn’t help but wonder how this afternoon had become less about her comforts than about posing for pictures. It was after 1:00, and all of her attendants had arrived and were busy readying each other and their children. Her mother was outside directing the tentmakers, caterers, and florists.

An hour later, Kathryn’s hair still wasn’t done. She asked the stylist, “Could I have a moment to fix a sandwich?”

“Most brides don’t want to eat. They’re too nervous.”

“I don’t get nervous, but I do get hungry.”

“Just a moment, this is tricky,” Veronica said as she concentrated on something she was doing to the back of Kathryn’s head. Five minutes later, it was obvious that she’d forgotten.

Kathryn wished she’d grabbed a book before sitting down, because she was bored. Indulging in a little self-pity, she sulked at the irony of being ignored on what should be the most wonderful day of her life. It wouldn’t have been so bad if her stomach weren’t rumbling so loud.

About forty-five minutes later, her attendants returned, all admiring her hair. Kathryn had to admit that it looked nice. All the ringlets had been pulled back and cascaded down her neck. Since her bridal party was gathered around her now, she asked, “Lanna, could I ask a favor? Would you make me a sandwich?”

“Sure, what would you like on it?”

Veronica said, “Let me fix something, first. But I need you to be quick because we need to do your makeup.”

Kathryn wondered why this woman was impervious to her death glare. She thought maybe it lost some of its power when reflected in a mirror. “Just give me something to eat. Please.”

“All right,” the woman stepped back and said. “Done. What do you think?”

“It’s curly, thank you.” Kathryn didn’t feel the need to be overly complimentary. Luckily, all the women gathered around oooh’d and aahh’d on her behalf. Determined to take care of her own needs, she quickly stood up from the chair. As her body instantly warmed all over, she knew she had a problem. Her vision tunneled and dizziness washed over her. “Help,” she mumbled as she lost consciousness.

“Katie!” Gretchen shouted as she saw her daughter fall. With the chair in the way, she was prevented from doing anything as Kathryn’s head hit the floor with a sickening thud.

“Oh my God!” Phoebe screamed and came around the chair. “Katie!” She kneeled down on the floor and touched Kathryn’s face.

B’Elanna shouted, “I’ll get the doctor!” as she ran out the door. She hurried down the stairs and saw Harry and Amy first. “Where’s Joe?”

“Out front. Why?”

She ran out the door, scanning the gathered crowd quickly. The sun was breaking through the clouds and the glare off the top of his head told her where to go. “Doctor!”

“B’Elanna? Is something wrong?”

Chakotay had been standing nearby and came over when he saw her running.

She paused for only a second to catch her breath. “It’s Kathryn. She collapsed.”

“Collapsed?” Chakotay was already on his way inside when Joe asked where she was.

The guests became quiet as they saw the men run into the house with B’Elanna.

Chakotay got to the master bathroom first and saw her on the floor. Phoebe moved out of the way as he kneeled down and took her hand. “Kathryn?” He touched her neck and found a slow, steady pulse.

Joe kneeled on the other side, and tapped his commbadge. “Dr. Zimmerman to Starfleet Medical. Transport an emergency medkit to my coordinates.” Within seconds, it arrived and he snapped it open to retrieve a medical tricorder.

“Is it her heart?” Chakotay asked, his own heart aching at the sight of her so pale.

“No,” Joe said. He asked the gathered ladies, “What has she eaten today?”

The women looked at each other in confusion. Gretchen said, “I brought up a tray of food.”

“Did she eat any of it?” he asked.

“I assume so, but I’ve been outside,” Gretchen replied.

Chakotay looked up at the only woman in the room he didn’t know. She looked frightened. “Have you been with her?”

She nodded, terrified. “I gave her an apple over an hour ago. I’m so sorry.”

Beverly Crusher and Amy Murphy rushed into the room. Beverly asked, “Do you need help, Doctor?”

“I don’t believe so, but take a look.” Joe handed Beverly the tri-corder as he tapped his commbadge again, “Zimmerman to Starfleet Medical. I need the following...” He listed off medications and medical tools that appeared instantly by his side. As he administered the hyposprays, Joe assured Chakotay. “She’ll be okay. She has a concussion and she’s hypoglycemic. Her liver isn’t catabolising enough glycogen.”

“Doctor?” Beverly asked as she studied the tri-corder.

Joe looked at what Beverly was pointing to. “Yes, let’s hold off on that until she has regained consciousness.”

Gretchen said, “Her head hit the floor when she fainted.”

Cringing, Chakotay asked quietly, “Why didn’t she eat?”

Veronica said, “I’m so sorry. She asked several times, but I... I’m so sorry.”

“She asked for food and you didn’t give her any?” Chakotay glared at the woman.

Phoebe said, “It’s not completely her fault. Katie was about to eat lunch when we arrived, but I told her we had to get started and one thing led to another, and...” She blanched, unable to continue.

Chakotay directed his attention back to Kathryn. Her color was beginning to return and she was moving her lips.

“She’s coming around,” Joe reported. “Dr. Crusher, would you check her hemoglobin levels?”

“Sure,” Beverly said.

“I suspect they’re not what they should be.”

“You’re right, she’s anemic. Do you have an iron infusion?”

“Kathryn? Can you hear me?” Chakotay touched her forehead. “She’s so warm.”

“That’s to be expected,” Joe said as he gave Kathryn the needed iron and shook his head in dismay. “I should’ve scheduled a check-up before today.”

Gretchen handed Chakotay a damp washcloth. “It might help bring her around.”

As he placed it on her forehead, he heard the stylist gasp. He looked up to see the woman flinching, and asked, “What?”

“That’s going to mess up her hair.”

Chakotay blinked slowly, unable to fathom that being a concern at a time like this. “Her hair?” The woman backed away and got out of his sightline.

Kathryn moaned softly and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at Chakotay for a second and then closed them again.

Joe spoke to her loudly. “Admiral? We need you to wake up.”

She squinted and asked, “Where are we?”

“In the bathroom,” Chakotay answered. “You fainted.”

“Mmmmm.” She closed her eyes again. “Head hurts.”

Joe replied, “You have a concussion, Admiral. We need you to wake up.”

Kathryn squeezed Chakotay’s hand and then released it. She touched the back of her head and then suddenly retracted it, her fingertips covered in blood. Everyone gasped.

Beverly handed the tri-corder back. “Doctor, I did a cranial scan.”

With an overly gentle bedside manner, Joe said, “It’s a minor cut, Admiral, but you nicked a vein.” He pulled a towel off the nearby bar and folded it up. “Captain, help me turn her onto her side.” As they moved her, Joe put the towel under her head to give it support. “We’ll have this fixed up in no time.”

Chakotay rubbed his face as the tension of the situation began to recede. Whether it was Dr. Joe’s calm voice or seeing her awake, he wasn’t sure. He was on the verge of anger at all the women who were supposed to be taking care of her, but as he looked around at their worried faces, the intensity faded.

“There we go, Admiral. Cut is healed and I’ve reduced the swelling. Let’s have you sit up,” Joe said. “Captain, would you support her?”

Chakotay sat on the floor with his back against the wall and let Beverly and Joe lift Kathryn up to rest against him. Someone stuck a towel in between him and Kathryn’s head to protect his tuxedo from the blood, but they were unable to save his boutonniere before she squished it.

She clutched at his lapel saying, “Dizzy.”

Beverly placed a cup of grapes in Kathryn’s hand. “You’ll feel better if you eat something.”

After she ate one, she looked up and realization dawned. “Oh, no.” Her shoulders slumped. “Wedding.”

“It’s okay, love.” Chakotay squeezed her gently.

She ate another couple of grapes and then gasped. “My hair!” She touched her head again. “It’s ruined.”

“It can be fixed,” he assured her, not really understanding the issue with the hair. Whatever they’d been doing to it, it was stiff and loopy and looked very strange on her.

“It’ll take too long,” she said sadly. “What time is it?”

“A little after three,” Gretchen said. “We’ll figure something out. Don’t worry, Katie.”

Chakotay kissed her temple. “We’ll make time.” If it was important to her to have all these odd curls in her hair, then it was important to him.

“You weren’t supposed to see me,” Kathryn said sadly.

Joe asked, “B’Elanna, Mrs. Janeway, would you go down and assure the guests that everything is okay, but the wedding will be delayed slightly? Everyone else, could you give us a moment of privacy?”

They all dissipated without complaint. Chakotay asked, “Do you want me to stay or go?”

“Stay,” Joe said as he got up to close the door behind Sekaya and Kolopak. He quickly made Kathryn a ham sandwich, delivered it, and then sat down on the edge of the bathtub. “We have a problem. Dr. Crusher and I found something when we scanned you.”

Chakotay’s heart fell. “What is it?”

“Admiral, you’re pregnant.”

Kathryn and Chakotay stared at him and then slowly turned to stare at each other for a long moment. She fought a smile as she said, “Oops.”

Joe interjected, “Big oops. Captain, didn’t you take the short-term booster that I gave you a few weeks ago?”

“Yes,” he said with a cough and then cleared his throat. The collar of his shirt suddenly felt a little snug.

Kathryn came to his defense. “We weren’t completely forthcoming with you at that appointment, Joe. The afternoon before, we...”

Joe held up a hand. “I get the picture.” He stood up and paced across the bathroom. “I hate to put a damper on your honeymoon, but we have a couple of options that will need to be addressed as soon as possible.”

Chakotay frowned. “Options?”

“The likelihood that this embryo will survive the first trimester is slim. If we put it in stasis, or find a surrogate...”

“No,” Kathryn said emphatically. “You’re not taking it.”

“I’m not suggesting that we terminate the pregnancy, Admiral. Just that we postpone or relocate the embryo.”

She shook her head again. “No. That’s too risky, and I know it. Until it’s clear that the child or I am in acute danger, it’s staying put.”

“It’s very clear to me that you’re not strong enough for this.”

“I’ll find the strength.”

Chakotay looked at Kathryn, his love for her fortitude growing exponentially as she argued to save the child they’d only known about for two minutes.

“Admiral, you missed one meal today and you fainted. The strain of pregnancy on your body will be tenfold.”

“Then I won’t miss a meal.”

Joe implored, “Captain, you can’t let her do this.”

Chakotay studied the fierce determination in his bride’s gray-blue eyes. He shook his head slowly as he turned back to Joe. “I’m with her on this one. This baby is a precious gift and we wouldn’t want to do anything to harm it.”

“But the chances that it will survive are slim to none, and meanwhile, the strain on you...”

Kathryn stopped him. “Joe, please accept our wishes. I’ll do whatever it takes to carry this child as long as I can.”

“Even if that means being continuously medicated and staying in bed for six months? Because that’s what it might take.”

Kathryn said, “We’ll figure it out when we come to that point. But right now, we have a wedding to get ready for. If there’s no immediate danger, than I’d like to suspend this discussion for three days. You can come and check on me Tuesday.”

Joe packed up his tools. “Far be it for me...”

“Stop.” Kathryn said sternly. “Don’t say anything else.”

“Joe,” Chakotay started to explain, but stopped when Kathryn put her hand on his arm. He understood that she wanted to handle it.

“Joe, I know how much you care about me, and that you’re trying to protect me both emotionally and physically. But for now, I just want to enjoy the happiness of knowing that I have a life growing inside me. Especially today, as we become a family.” She reached out to him, but he didn’t take her hand. “Please, Joe. I want you to be happy today, too, because if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t even be alive right now.”

“Admiral, I only want to keep you healthy.”

“I know,” she said earnestly. “Thank you.”

He nodded solemnly and left them alone.

When he was gone, Kathryn cuddled up into Chakotay’s arms, resting her head on his chest. She said, “Well, this certainly makes my ruined hairdo pale in comparison, and explains my recent energy drain.”

“Yes, it does.” He kissed the top of her head. “I love you. I hope you realize just how much.”

“Oh, I do.” She looked up at him. “I see it in your eyes, feel it in your touch... am I getting too mushy?”

“No,” he smiled. “I assume you want to keep this a secret?”

“That might be best. We don’t want to worry anyone, and if it doesn’t...”

He touched her lips to silence her. “I understand.”

They let the quiet moment linger until they heard voices in the next room. She asked, “Help me up?”

“Of course, but slowly.”

“So, tell me, how many people saw you run in here?”

“Only about half of the guests had arrived. Maybe a hundred people.” He guided her to sit in the chair she’d been stuck in for the last couple hours so she could eat the sandwich Joe had given her.

“Do I dare ask what you were thinking? Who told you?”

“B’Elanna. I wasn’t really thinking, I was running.” He stood behind her and touched her curls. “What is all this junk in your hair?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It’s supposed to make me look beautiful.”

“Hmmm.” He studied it. “The blood offsets it nicely. It’s very Klingon.”

Reaching up to touch her hair, she asked, “Could you help me take the hairpins out?”

“Sure.” It took a moment for him to figure out where to start. “Ah, I see.”

As she watched her hair come down, she asked, “How inappropriate would it be for the groom to take a shower with the bride an hour before the wedding?”

“We might not make it down the aisle,” he winked. “But I can help you get in and stand by in case you need me.”

“I’d like that, but you should probably go back downstairs. I have three attendants. It’s about time they stopped ignoring me and did something useful,” she said as she finished her last bite.

“I might have scared away your hair stylist,” he admitted as he helped her walk over to the shower stall. “I wasn’t very kind to her.”

“That doesn’t upset me in the least.” She hung her robe up as he turned on the water for her. “I’m sure I can manage my hair myself. If she’s still here, would you send her on her way?”

“Gladly.” He licked his lips as he looked at her nude body. “Didn’t we say that it’s bad luck for me to see you before the wedding?”

She laughed. “Let’s amend that and say it’s bad luck for you to see me in the dress. Clearly, I’m not wearing it.”

“That’s crystal clear.” He kissed her softly and then asked, “Are you feeling okay now?”

“A little unsettled, but not faint or nauseous.”

Rubbing his thumbs across her knuckles, he said, “If you can, try not to worry about the baby today.”

“Because Joe is usually overly cautious with me, I take his warnings with a grain of salt. He’s only done a preliminary scan, so I don’t think either one of should worry until we know exactly what the problems will be.”

“Trying to convince you or me?”

“Both. This day just hasn’t gone like I’d hoped.”

“The important part hasn’t happened, yet.”

“I know,” she said with a warm smile. “And as long as we end up married at the end of the day, I’ll be fine.”

He caressed her cheek tenderly before helping her step under the water. “I’ll see you soon, my bride.”

“Yes, you will.” As she closed the shower door behind her, she said, “Get someone to find you a new boutonniere, would you?”

“Aye, Admiral,” he joked as he left the bathroom. He stopped briefly to speak to her attendants who were milling around the bedroom nervously. “Ladies, she’s fine. She’s taking a shower.”

“A shower!” Victoria exclaimed.

Chakotay pursed his lips. “I didn’t get your name?”

“Veronica Strahm.”

“Ms. Strahm, your services will no longer be required.”

“But...”

He held up a hand. “Any items in there that belong to you will be delivered later. One of the security guards will assist you in transporting home.”

“Sir, I apologize, but her hair...”

B’Elanna stepped up and saved the woman from hearing what he really thought. “I’ll walk you out.”

He took a deep breath and turned to Phoebe. “Kathryn could use help getting out of the shower. How long will it take to get her ready?”

Gretchen said, “Let’s delay the start time for thirty minutes. It shouldn’t take long with all four of us working on her. Pictures can wait until after the ceremony.”

“All right. Give her more to eat in about twenty minutes. Sekaya, do you need help with Kol?”

“Sure, brother.” She handed him the squirming child. “Watch your flower, he likes to grab them.”

“Not to worry.” He smiled as a slobbery Kol lunged straight at his lapel. “I need a new one anyway.”

As he walked down the stairs, he cuddled the baby close, a secret smile on his face knowing that he’d have one of his own in less than a year. “Come on, Kol, let’s go find your daddy.”

B’Elanna met him halfway. “She’s gone. I’m really sorry for not checking on Kathryn earlier.”

“Let it go. We all get a little busy and it’s hard to remember that she’s not her usual strong self right now.”

“I keep expecting her to be, but after last night, I should’ve found her as soon as I got here.” She smiled at the baby he was holding. “You’re a natural.”

“Think so?” he grinned happily and kissed the baby’s downy head. “I love this little guy.”

“I can tell.” She pointed downstairs. “Tom has Miral in the great room, and I think I saw Steven nearby. Katie was outside last time I saw her.”

“Thanks, they’ll probably need your help upstairs.”

“We’ll take care of her.” B’Elanna continued up.

He felt a little lift in his steps as he walked, whispering to Kol, “Can you keep a secret?”

Kol looked up at him and said, “Da.”

“Yes? Well, I don’t believe you.” He laughed. “You’d tell everyone!”

When he walked into the crowded room, everyone became silent. He smiled reassuringly as he said, “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Tom said, “Mrs. Janeway said Kathryn isn’t feeling well.”

“She fainted, but she’s fine now. They just got too busy with all the preparations and she didn’t get lunch. I’m sure she’d appreciate it if we all went on with business as usual and didn’t make a fuss over her.”

Owen said, “No doubt.”

“The wedding will begin at 4:30. If you could pass the word, I’d be grateful.”

Tom stood and said, “Let your best man take care of it. I’ll go tell everyone who needs to know.”

“And I’ll take this little bundle off your hands,” Steven said as he took Kol.

“Thanks.” Everyone started to talk again and Samantha came up and unpinned his boutonniere.

“Captain, I’m afraid this is the third casualty due to your nephew’s fixation with flowers.”

Chakotay decided not to share the entire story behind its demise. “Any chance we can find a new one?”

“No problem. The replicator has already been programmed to make them.” She added, “And I’ll get something to de-slobber you, too.”

After Samantha finished with him, he milled around with the guests, finding it amusing that almost everyone said something about Kathryn’s secret being safe with them. If only they knew what the real secret was.

Gayle Struthers, the woman who had begun the publicity buzz about Kathryn asked him, “Captain Chakotay, how are you faring today?”

He accepted her handshake. “Very well, thank you for asking.”

“Thank you for inviting me to cover this event. It’s a real honor, although it does feel odd to be the only reporter in sight.”

“I’m confident that you’ll write a wonderful story.”

“I’ll do my best. And don’t worry; I wouldn’t want to give any hint that the Federation’s favorite heroine is anything but happy and healthy today.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I do. I’m behind her one hundred percent on the need to convey positive and encouraging ideas, and I can’t think of a better occasion than this to celebrate that dawn will arrive, even after the darkest night.”

“I agree.” He said, “Enjoy the ceremony.”

He continued to welcome more guests as they arrived. They were expecting almost two hundred people, so security was challenged to get everyone screened before transport. Delaying the start time by thirty minutes turned out to be a blessing to the frazzled nerves of those who were afraid they’d arrived too late.

B’Elanna found him at 4:10 to announce, “She’s ready.”

Taking a cleansing breath, he said, “Good. How is she feeling?”

“Surprisingly good, considering. I expected her to be irritated with things so off-schedule, but she’s really quiet. Peaceful and content would be a good description.”

Hearing that made his heart soar. He took a black box out of his pocket. “Would you give this to her now?”

“She’s going to love it.” B’Elanna hugged him. “I’m so happy for you, Chakotay.”

“Thank you, B’Elanna.” He sent her back upstairs saying, “I’ll send Admiral Patterson up in a few minutes.” Chakotay felt nearly ecstatic that the time was getting near. He’d been waiting for this for a very long time.

Tom said, “The guests are taking their seats. How are you doing?”

“I’m happy, very happy.”

“Is she really okay?”

“She is,” he said assuredly. “Just fainted because of low blood-sugar.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now, go take your place and I’ll let the wedding coordinator know that we’re just about ready. Enjoy this.”

“I will, Tom. Thanks.”

Kathryn turned away from the window to see B’Elanna coming into the room. She’d been captivated by the ocean waves crashing on the rocks below.

B’Elanna handed her a long, black box. “I told you he didn’t forget.”

All the ladies came to stand around her. “I thought perhaps with all the excitement of the day, it had slipped his mind, but I should’ve known better.” She opened the hinged box to see a silver filigree necklace in the shape of an eagle’s wing.

“It matches his tattoo,” Phoebe pointed out.

Kathryn fingered the delicate, thin metal. “The craftsmanship is extraordinary.”

Sekaya said, “It’s customary for a bride to wear the symbol of her new husband’s family. Usually on a sash.”

Smiling, Kathryn took it out of the box and held it in the palm of her hand. “I wonder what kind of stone this is.” There was a small, iridescent oval at the base of the wing that changed colors with the angle of the light.

B'Elanna said, "He found it on Ordaran, at an outdoor market."

"Ohhhh... he went back for it!" She laid her hand over her heart, remembering how they'd walked through that market together. "This was a stone used in a lot of the jewelry there. He'd managed to get me off the ship for dinner, and then we walked around as the sun set. The light reflecting off these stones was extraordinary."

"Let's put it on you," Gretchen said as she took the necklace and stood behind her daughter. "The chain is absolutely beautiful, too. So dainty and intricate."

"There are earrings in there that match," B'Elanna said.

Kathryn picked up the box again to see the dangle earrings. "Two more of the stones. They're so translucent that I barely noticed them." She put them on and went to stand in front of the long mirror. The filigree pattern at the top was similar to the necklace and the small stones dropped below her ears.

"You look beautiful, sis."

She studied her image, and had to agree. "I feel beautiful." The ivory gown was perfect. It was sleeveless with a deeply cut cowl in both front and back that made her feel daring. The beautifully draped fabric outlined her open back, dipping as low as discretion allowed, but attracted the attention away from the fact that her backside was barely covered.

The loose fabric along the neckline made her chest appear fuller, and from a distance showed only a hint of her breasts. However, anyone standing near would be able to see the almost indiscrete amount of cleavage – certainly more than she'd ever shown in public. It was elegant and made her feel sexy.

The floor-length skirt was full and dotted sparingly with iridescent pearls. She wondered fleetingly if Chakotay had told the dress designer about the jewelry because they matched so well.

They'd done her hair up in an elegant twist with curled wisps framing her face. Phoebe had talked her out of her usual make-up colors, and the soft pinks gave her a more youthful and feminine appearance.

Kathryn touched the necklace and smiled, "Maybe I should get a tattoo of this."

Gretchen's mouth dropped open. "On your face?"

"No, of course not. Somewhere that only he'd see." She absently touched her hip.

Phoebe laughed. "Now that would be something."

“I’m not so sure that it would be appropriate to put the wing on your derriere,” Sekaya offered helpfully.

“Navel?” B’Elanna suggested.

Phoebe offered, “Breast?”

Gretchen shook her head and held up a hand in protest. “All right, girls. I’ll leave you to figure this one out yourselves.” She hugged Kathryn carefully to avoid wrinkling her dress and kissed her on the cheek. “Savor every moment of today... the rest of the day at least. I love you, Katie.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

As she left, Admiral Patterson arrived, bringing their discussion to an end. “Katie, my dear,” he said as he came towards her with outstretched arms. “You are radiant.”

“Thank you, Matt.” She accepted another kiss on the cheek.

“Are you feeling well now? I understand there was a little trouble earlier?”

She purposely frowned. “You weren’t supposed to notice.”

“Hard to miss when the groom, a bridesmaid, and a couple of doctors run into the house with panic written all over their faces.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “But don’t be alarmed if I hold your arm a little tighter than necessary.”

“You just hold onto me as tightly as you need.” Mischievously, he asked, “Do you remember when you were a little girl, about four or five years old, and you came to the office with your father?”

“I brought my toy starships and I distinctly recall one of them flying right into your knee.”

“That’s right,” Matt laughed. “You crashed them far too often for your father’s liking.”

Kathryn smiled brightly. “Good thing I’ve never crashed a real one.”

“No, just lost one.”

“I never lost it. I knew exactly where it was.” She held up a finger and added, “Except for that one time.”

“Only one?” B’Elanna asked, trying to contain her laugh. “Try three.”

Kathryn waved her hand towards B'Elanna. "Semantics."

Matt smiled joyfully. "Your father used to tell us all how proud he was of his daughters. If he were here today, I have no doubt that he'd be so very proud of you now, too. Especially proud of the brilliant woman you've become." He kissed the back of her hand.

"Thank you, Matt."

He held her hand between his. "I only wish I could've kept you safe for him, but trouble does seem to find you."

"That it does." She couldn't help but agree.

"When you were about five years old, your father asked me something."

The serious tone in his voice gave her pause. "What was that?"

"It was never formalized, but he asked me to watch over you and your sister if anything should ever happen to him."

Phoebe asked, "Is that why you come to all of my art shows?"

"Yes, it is. That, and your paintings are extraordinary. I have one of your first paintings from college, framed right next to the one I bought two years ago. Every time I look at them, I think how your father would've been so proud of you, Phoebe."

Kathryn nodded, smiling happily at her little sister's awed reaction. She looked back at Matt before stating, "You sponsored me to go to Starfleet Academy."

"Yes, I did. Edward was still around, but you have always held a special place right in here," he patted his chest. "Since you crashed that little toy into my knee."

Laughing, she replied, "Who knew you'd have your work cut out for you with me?"

"Chakotay's in for a challenge keeping you safe."

"He's had his hands full for over eight years with that. Plenty of practice."

Phoebe handed her the bouquet. "Are you feeling all right? Do you want one last cup of juice or a piece of fruit?"

"If I eat one more thing, I won't be able to fit into this dress anymore."

Katie ran into the room, "Aunt Katie!"

Kathryn knelt down to catch a hug from her niece. "How's my favorite flower girl?"

“I’m very, very excited! You are pretty!”

“Thank you, Katie. You look very pretty, too.”

“Sis, you shouldn’t bend down like that. You’ll wrinkle the dress.”

Kathryn gave the little girl one last kiss and then stood up, letting Matt assist her. She asked Katie, “Are you ready for this? Got your flowers?”

“Yes! All here in my basket.” Katie was practically bouncing in her little white mary-janes.

The wedding coordinator arrived and told them it was time. Sekaya and B’Elanna left first, Phoebe held Katie’s hand, and Matt offered his arm to Kathryn. “Ready?”

“Yes,” she beamed as she held onto him. They walked slowly down the stairs and waited just inside the front door. Once all the bridesmaids had made their entrance and Katie had gone to toss her flower petals, Kathryn grabbed Matt’s arm tighter.

“Doing okay, there?” He covered her hand with his.

“Doesn’t make much sense, but I’m a little nervous.”

“Cold feet?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

“Well, if you want some advice from a wise, old man…”

She laughed. “You’re not old.”

“Once this door opens, look straight at the goal, hold onto me, and smile.”

“Good advice.”

“I wish your father were here to offer it to you.”

She smiled sadly. “He is, in spirit, and he’d tell me the exact same thing. Thank you.”

The doors opened and he whispered, “Eyes on the goal.”

Kathryn had no problem following that suggestion. Her eyes were focused solely on the groom, whose eyes were bright, happy, and full of love.

When she arrived at the front, Chakotay whispered, “You are beautiful.”

The officiate said, “We are gathered here today to witness and celebrate the joining together of Chakotay and Kathryn Janeway in marriage.

“I ask you now to declare your intention to enter into union with one another. Kathryn, will you have Chakotay to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?”

Kathryn was overjoyed as she said, “I will.”

“Chakotay, will you have Kathryn to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?”

“I will,” he responded.

“The marriage of Chakotay and Kathryn unites their families and creates a new one. They ask for your blessing. Will all of you do everything in your power to uphold and care for these two people in their marriage?”

Most of the people gathered were listening closely enough that they said, “We will.”

“Love,” the officiate said, “is a friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. Love is content with the present. It hopes for the future, and it doesn’t brood over the past. If you have love in your life, you are truly blessed.

“Treat each other with respect, remind yourselves often what brought you together, and more importantly, remember what keeps you together. The connection between you deserves tenderness, patience, and kindness. When difficulties threaten your relationship, remember to focus on what is right between you. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the sun in your lives, remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. By keeping what is important close to your hearts, your life together will be marked by abundance and delight.”

“Chakotay, your vows,” the officiate said.

Chakotay took her hands and said, “My beautiful Kathryn, I want to tell you a story.”

She shook her head in amusement, knowing that the angry warrior legend was coming.

Looking like the cat that got the cream, he continued. “There are many ancient legends among my people that tell of the ‘Heart of Heaven,’ the trinitarian spirits of the skies. When their land was invaded, the Heart of Heaven told the people to believe in them and they’d never be alone, that nothing bad would ever happen to them. The spirits would be with them by day and by night, by means of the air, by means of the clouds, the moon, and the stars, and by means of the thunder of the volcanoes and the roar of the ocean. As the people went about their daily lives,

they touched the air.” Chakotay extended a hand to simulate the movement and continued, “And asked the Heart to accompany them in their sorrows and in their happiness.

“I cannot promise that we will never suffer, because we already know the pain of suffering through the unthinkable. Nor can I promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us again. But I can promise that I will be with you,” he said as he placed a hand on his chest, “that I will give you my heart to make certain that you are never alone in your joy or in your sorrows.

“Should I leave this world before you, I want you to look for my heart in the beauty of the stars where we met, and in the sounds of the ocean where we now call home. I pledge to you, Kathryn, as my wife, all of my love and devotion.”

Her lips trembled and she couldn't stop the tears that tumbled down her cheeks. Phoebe came to her rescue and laid a handkerchief on Kathryn's shoulder.

The officiate asked, “Kathryn, you have also prepared vows to Chakotay?”

She nodded, still overcome with emotion from his words. Feeling the eyes of everyone upon her, she attempted a deep breath to regain her composure. However, one look at Chakotay's concerned eyes undid all that and the tears returned anew.

“Kathryn?” he asked as he drew her into an embrace.

She held onto him, embarrassed to have this emotional moment while standing in front of everyone she knew. She whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Kathryn looked over his shoulder and saw Tom standing behind him. He looked at her with so much kindness and compassion that she suddenly had the feeling that all two hundred plus people were looking at her in the exact same way.

She pulled herself out of Chakotay's arms and dotted her eyes with the handkerchief. Knowing that many could hear, she said, “Okay, now I'm ready.”

Quiet laughter came from all those gathered around. She glanced out and saw a sea of happy, caring faces that were all very dear to her. Taking a cleansing breath, she looked back at him and held his hands. “Chakotay.”

She paused to finish collecting herself. “Dante begins his greatest work saying, ‘Halfway along the journey of our life, I awoke to find myself in a dark wood.’ I've awoken in that dark wood far too many times, but since you came into my life, I've had a reason and a means to pull out of it.” Her throat felt tight as she said, “Your vows are a testimony to that.

“We came together over eight years ago, and within moments, we began to lay the foundation of an unbreakable friendship that is a gift beyond measure. We have already experienced what

feels like a lifetime of both laughter and grief, yet this day marks the beginning. My vow to you, from this day forward, is to walk beside you, nurturing our love and our friendship every day of our lives. May our love only grow stronger, our laughter grow more frequent, and our friendships more abundant.”

Chakotay whispered, “Thank you, Kathryn.”

The officiate asked, “May I have the rings, please?” Tom and Phoebe handed him the rings. “These rings are the outward and visible sign of your love that has no beginning and no end. They are a symbol of the sacred circle of life.”

He gave Kathryn the first ring which she placed on Chakotay’s finger. “Chakotay, I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.”

Placing her ring, Chakotay said, “Kathryn, I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.”

The officiate wrapped a white cloth around their joined hands. “In the tradition of the Great Spirit, white is the color of warmth, peace and happiness. I now invite Chakotay’s cousin, Robert Huracan, to come forward.”

Robert spoke loudly to those who had gathered. “As his oldest living relative, and therefore, the eldest of his tribe, the honor falls to me to sing for Chakotay and Kathryn, a traditional blessing in our native language. It translates:

Now you will feel no rain, for you will be shelter to each other.

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other.

Now there is no more loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other.

Now you are two bodies, but there is only one life before you.

Go now to your dwelling place to enter into the days of your togetherness, and

May your days be good and long upon the earth.”

As he sang, Kathryn looked up at Chakotay. Everything around them blended together and became muted as she focused on his face. His deep brown eyes sparkled as he smiled down at her, creating a powerful moment that she wanted to remember forever.

When the song ended, the officiate removed the cloth from their hands and set it aside. “You have declared your consent and made your vows to each other before this body of witnesses. May your bond grow with each passing day, and may your love remain fervent and true.” He then spoke to everyone. “Now that Chakotay and Kathryn have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are husband and wife.”

The surreal quality of the moment intensified as Chakotay drew her close and laid a tender hand upon her jaw. His kiss was soft, warm, and delicate, stirring up goose bumps all along her skin as the sound of applause filled her ears.

He whispered, “My wife,” against her lips before offering his arm to escort her back down the aisle. When they arrived inside their house, they went into the study by themselves, and he kissed her again, a deeper kiss that was only for her, not an audience.

Breathless, she said, “We’re married.”

“So I’ve heard.” Tenderly touching her cheek with the backs of his fingers, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

She hummed and leaned into his touch. “I’ve never been happier than I am right now. I’ve got you, I’ve got a baby... I can’t imagine anything better.”

Chakotay drew her into an embrace, and then realized that he was touching bare skin on her back. He pulled away and turned her slightly so he could see the back of her dress. Letting out a low whistle, he said, “Wow.” He stood back to get a good look at her. “That’s quite a dress, Kathryn.”

She turned a full circle and said, “I feel like a little girl saying this, but it makes me feel pretty. I love the way it turned out.”

“You’re so much more than pretty, and beautiful doesn’t even begin to describe it.” He reached out and touched a soft, springy curl behind her ear. “Your hair looks much better. This is more like you. A soft, romantic you.”

“Thank you. I like it, too.” She touched her necklace. “And thank you for this. It’s remarkable.”

“You’re welcome.” There was a knock at the door. “Later, I’ll tell you the story behind it.”

Rising up onto her toes, she asked, “One more kiss?”

He happily indulged her in a very deep, very sensual kiss.

By the time they finished posing for their photos, the front lawn had been transformed for the reception. The guests were already seated, talking quietly as they waited for the wedding party to join them. Kathryn wanted to circulate and greet everyone, but Chakotay insisted that she sit and enjoy the delicious food that had been prepared.

As they ate, they listened to Phoebe talk about Kathryn's teenage romances. Sekaya returned the favor by telling the wedding party about Chakotay's first crush on a twenty-year old when he was only twelve. Then, Tom and B'Elanna enjoyed recounting both Kathryn's and Chakotay's dalliances in the Delta Quadrant. All the anecdotes were told in good fun, and the entire time, Chakotay remained completely focused on his bride, making sure she was enjoying the stories just as much as everyone else.

As dinner came to a close, dusk had settled in. The candles in the centerpieces cast a soft glow on each table, strings of lights over their heads filled the yard with light, and torch lamps throughout the property were set ablaze. A jazz ensemble began to play love ballads, adding to the romantic atmosphere of the event. Without any grand announcements, Chakotay and Kathryn gracefully took the floor for the first dance.

Holding her close and swaying to the music, Chakotay asked, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Can't you tell?"

"You're a very good actress. I want to make sure."

Kathryn rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'm having a wonderful time. Thank you for all of this."

"You're thanking me?"

She shrugged innocently as she looked around at all the people watching them dance. "I have to thank someone for this beautiful wedding. Might as well be the man I married."

"I see your logic, but if I may make a suggestion?"

"Yes?"

"Thank the wedding coordinator, your mother, and Phoebe for the wedding. Thank me for being insane enough to ask you to marry me."

Her mouth dropped open in shock until she recalled his first proposal. "Oh, I remember. I thought you needed to be carted off to the funny farm when you first asked."

Laughing, he said, "We'll tell our kids about that some day, that you were trying to break up with me when I proposed."

Suddenly serious, she said, "Thank you for that, then. For being so sure of us that you wouldn't let me throw it away."

He started to say something and then closed his mouth, spinning them a little on the dance floor.

"What?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "I was going to argue that you wouldn't have been ready to throw it away if not for me, but that's not really the best thing to say on our wedding day."

"I disagree. You can say anything you want because we just vowed to stand by each other, no matter what life throws at us. Unlike most newlyweds, our relationship has been tested time and time again. I believe that our life experiences make our vows mean that much more."

"I like the way you think."

Raising an eyebrow, she added, "Most of the time."

Shaking his head in amusement, he carefully spun her in time with the music, and then took a more formal dance posture. "What do you say we attempt to actually dance?"

"We haven't done this in almost two years," Kathryn said as she tried to remember the steps to the foxtrot.

"Guess we should've practiced." His eyes scanned the crowd and added, "But they all look happy as clams, so we're either funny to watch or we look like we're having fun."

"I'll settle for both."

"And I'll settle for anything that gets you in my arms."

They remained on the floor for three songs until Tom and Phoebe cut in to have a dance, encouraging the other guests to join them. Chakotay then danced with Gretchen while Kathryn took a few moments to rest.

She found the four guests from the Enterprise sitting at a table near the dance floor. Will and Jean-Luc both stood as Will asked, "Kathryn, would you care to join us?"

"I would love to."

Jean-Luc pulled out a chair for her and when she moved to sit down, he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "You look stunning this evening, my dear Admiral."

"Thank you. I feel it." As the men sat down, Kathryn looked around the table at her new friends. "Did you enjoy dinner?"

"It was delicious," Deanna said. "Although I have my eyes on the groom's cake over there."

Will joked, "Of course. It's chocolate."

"Chocolate cheesecake, actually." Kathryn smiled.

“Even better!” Deanna said with a laugh. “We’ll have to add a chocolate cake to the menu at one of our wedding receptions.”

Will asked, “Kathryn, would you and Chakotay like to join us in August for our wedding in Alaska?”

“We’d love to,” she replied, beaming.

Beverly said, “Better Alaska than Betazed. At least you’ll get to keep your clothes on.”

“And we get to attend both,” Jean-Luc said. “I’m already feeling the need to spend more time in the gym.”

“You’ve been saying that for months, but you’ve only been there once,” Beverly chided him good-naturedly.

Amused, he replied, “Beverly, you weren’t supposed to have noticed that.”

Deanna added, “And none of you need to be concerned.”

“You can say that because you’re young and beautiful, Deanna.” Jean-Luc gave his counselor a meaningful look and then turned to Kathryn. “Speaking of beautiful women, how are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

Beverly interrupted with, “And Jean-Luc, you weren’t supposed to have noticed Kathryn’s situation this afternoon.”

Kathryn said, “Don’t worry, Beverly. I’m pretty sure it’s common knowledge that I fainted today.” She shook her head embarrassingly. “But thank you for asking, Jean-Luc. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d love a glass of iced tea.”

“It would be my pleasure.” He picked up Beverly’s glass and asked, “Anything for the rest of you?”

Will stood and took his and Deanna’s glasses. “I’ll come with you.”

After the men left, Beverly said, “Your new home is incredible, Kathryn. The pictures don’t do it justice.”

Kathryn looked up at the house and smiled. “It’s more house than we’ll ever need, but after living on a starship for most of our lives, we love the large rooms and the privacy.”

“And you can’t beat this location. It’s enchanting,” Deanna said. “Where are we, exactly?”

“South edge of the Oregon coast.” Kathryn leaned closer and whispered, “Gold Beach, Oregon.”

“I understand the need to keep this location private, but it’s discomfoting to be transported somewhere without knowing where you’re going.”

“I apologize for that, but it’s a necessary safety measure for my security.”

Beverly said, “I’m sure that everyone here understands.”

“That reminds me, Deanna. I know we agreed to take a month off during my honeymoon, but I’m having second thoughts about that.”

“Oh?”

“Can I call you later this week?” Kathryn was anxious and knew that Deanna could read her emotions, so she willed herself to relax.

“Of course,” Deanna replied with concern. “The Enterprise is leaving orbit again on Tuesday, but I’d love to keep talking. Is everything okay?”

“In most circumstances,” she said with assurance as the men returned. She accepted the tea from Jean-Luc and said, “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Admiral.”

Kathryn’s eyes caught both Deanna’s and Beverly’s to see that they were looking at her with open concern. When the men began talking about the quality of the beer, the women smiled kindly at her in an offering of unspoken support and friendship.

A few minutes later, Chakotay came up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. When she looked up at him, he asked, “Are you feeling up to another dance?”

“I’d love to.” She took another sip of her tea and asked the table, “Would you excuse me?”

“Of course,” Jean-Luc replied for all of them, but they were all smiling happily at her.

As she was walking away, Will asked, “It really is astonishing to see her so happy and healthy, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jean-Luc nodded. “Hard to believe that’s the same woman we rescued three months ago.”

“It seems like it’s been longer than that,” Beverly said.

Will took Deanna’s hand as he replied, “Probably because of her health issues. I can’t imagine the emotional pain of what she’s had to endure.”

Focused on sensing Kathryn’s emotions, Deanna merely nodded in response.

“Is she as happy as she seems?” Will asked.

Directing her attention back to her fiancé, Deanna nodded. “When she’s with Captain Chakotay, yes. She’s content and at peace.”

A few meters away on the dance floor, Kathryn looked up at Chakotay and stated, “I have a husband.”

He chuckled. “Yes, you do.”

“It feels a bit surreal to say that.” She smiled as he led her gently around the dance floor to the slow waltz.

“But does it feel surreal to be dancing with me?”

Shaking her head, she beamed at him. “Not in the least. It feels perfect and very comfortable.”

“I’ve got you right where I want you, then.” Showing off his dimples, he said, “My next move, by the way, is to make you feel deliciously uncomfortable.”

Laughing fully, she stepped in closer to him. “Here? In front of everyone?”

His right hand settled low on her back, right along the top edge of her backless dress. There, on that area of exposed skin, his fingertips moved in tiny, slow circles. She hummed in response, pressing her body against his.

He whispered, “This spot back here was clearly apparent when you were walking away from me earlier. It’s that sensuous little area that makes you turn to putty in my hands.”

“Mmmm hmmm,” she moaned ever so softly and laid her head on his shoulder. “One of many.”

“Have you any idea how unbelievably sexy you look tonight?”

“A little.” She lifted her head just enough so that they were dancing cheek-to-cheek. “I feel it when I’m in your arms.”

“I’m certainly pleased to hear that,” he whispered into her ear. “Because that’s where you’re going to spend the next month.”

“How about I stay there for the rest of my life?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

His mildly spicy cologne filled her senses, making her a little weak in the knees. “I can’t tell whether I’m intoxicated by you or if I’m starting to feel a little faint again.”

“Should I hold you or help you sit down?”

“Hold me.” She listened as the music changed from the slow waltz to a more languid love song. More couples joined them on the dance floor, hiding them from the admiring gazes of those sitting around the open space. “This is nice.”

“Yes, it is.” He placed her right hand on his shoulder, encouraging her to hug him around his neck so that both of his hands could settle on her hips. Swaying to the music, he asked, “Do you know what’s nice about this?”

A husky sigh came from deep within her chest. “I have to pick just one thing?”

“Of course not, but I’m referring to the fact that this is forever, love. We are dancing here, at our wedding, knowing that we don’t ever have to say goodnight to each other again.”

Smiling against his cheek, her lips pressed a simple kiss near his ear. “Does that mean we get to travel with each other, everywhere we go?”

“Considering what you’ve got growing inside you, I’ll say yes. I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to let you go away without me.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed with amusement. “I think you just might be enabling my co-dependency with that statement, honey. But I understand what you mean. There is no more waiting to be together, no more preparing for our life, and no more uncertainties. It begins now.”

“This is quite the philosophical conversation we’re having here on the dance floor.”

Lifting her head to look at his dark chocolate eyes, she said, “Well, I did quote Dante in my vows.”

“Which were beautiful, by the way. Thank you.”

“And yours had me in tears. You really took my breath away.”

He smiled lovingly at her and gave her back a gentle nudge forward, silently encouraging her to meet him for a kiss. Her body warmed all over as his lips tenderly caressed hers, his tongue joining the sensuous touch that was making her feel weightless, anchored only to him.

Feeling more than a little dreamy and euphoric, she whispered against his lips, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” His hands stroked up and down her back, slowly bringing her back to earth. “Kathryn? The Kimtones are taking the stage.”

Opening her eyes, she straightened up her posture slightly and smiled at him. “Time to acknowledge that we’re not here alone?”

He smiled and took one of her hands from his neck and placed it between both of his. "It might be best, considering that we did invite all these people."

"Okay," she said with reticence and then demanded, "but you'd better make me feel that wonderful again before bed tonight."

"Yes, my wife," he said with amusement. "It'll be my pleasure."

"Mine, too," she smirked and then turned to join the round of applause that welcomed Harry and the Kimtones to the stage area.

They'd asked the ensemble to play all the music, but with Harry having been gone for the last month, they didn't have time to prepare the repertoire that would be needed for such an extended performance. However, they'd promised to play her two favorite songs.

When they finished, Dr. Joe and Annika also performed, singing a duet that they'd rehearsed for the occasion, Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me."

After slow dancing through the romantic ballad, Kathryn said, "I'd like to mingle a little, if that's okay with you?"

"Of course." He led her off the dance floor where they were immediately surrounded by friends who wanted to wish them well. Chakotay extracted himself long enough to bring Kathryn a glass of sparkling cider, which she accepted with gratitude. He saw that an old friend was talking her ear off.

Just by her expression alone, Chakotay understood Kathryn's need for the conversation to end, so he put his arm around her and made up an excuse. "Pardon the interruption, Kathryn, but Beverly asked to speak with you if you have a moment."

"Oh?" She touched the friend's hand and said, "It's been so lovely to talk to you. Please, enjoy the party." As Kathryn walked away, she said to Chakotay, "Thank you. It's not that I don't want to hear about her pets..."

"But, you really don't want to hear about her pets. I know."

Kathryn touched Beverly's back, encouraging her to turn around. "Beverly, you asked to speak with me?"

"I did?" she asked, confused. "Not that I don't want to..."

Chakotay explained, "Doctor, I used you as an excuse to help her end another conversation."

"Oh," Kathryn said with a laugh. "Well, then. Are you enjoying yourself, Beverly?"

“Absolutely, although I wish I knew more people.” She looked between Kathryn and Chakotay and then asked, “Actually, Kathryn, could I speak to you for a few minutes, somewhere a bit more private?”

“Of course. How about we go look at the trellis from the ceremony?”

“That sounds lovely.”

Kathryn asked her new husband, “Honey, you can still see me there, right?”

He hugged her shoulders and whispered into her ear, “You’re safe tonight, love.”

“How do you read my mind?”

“Years of practice,” he said with a wink. “Go talk. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

As the two women walked away from the crowd, Kathryn said, “I didn’t intend to make you and Deanna worried earlier. I just feel a little unsettled about something, and I don’t want to wait a month before talking to her about it.”

“I understand.” Beverly stopped and turned to face her. “Kathryn, I don’t know if you’re aware that I was in the bathroom with you this afternoon.”

“I knew you were there, although I can’t recall that you said anything to me.”

“I didn’t, but I scanned you, and so I know what’s troubling you. I have no doubts that Dr. Zimmerman will offer excellent care, but if you want to talk to another mother, I’m here for you.”

“Thank you. And no, I didn’t realize that you knew. Does anyone else?”

“Only if they were reading the tri-corder over my shoulder and could correctly interpret the readings to see an elevated level of HCG hormones.”

“I’m sure my mother and sister would have said something if they knew. It’s not like them to keep quiet.”

“What I meant to imply is that it’s possible that Dr. Murphy knows.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize she was there.” Kathryn scratched her forehead with her ring finger. “But she’ll be bound by doctor/patient confidentiality, so I won’t worry about it.”

Beverly placed her hand on Kathryn’s arm. “I’m glad that you’re going to talk to Deanna, but if you need to talk to me, call me any time.”

“That isn’t the issue that I want to discuss with Deanna.”

“It’s not?” she asked in surprise and then waved her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

Kathryn gave Beverly’s hand a quick squeeze. “Beverly, I consider you a friend, so please, don’t worry so much about stepping into this sacrosanct area of my non-counseling sessions. If you’re concerned about something, just ask me. I’d love to talk to you more often.”

“I’d like that a lot, too.” Beverly smiled warmly.

“What’s troubling me is the same issue that instigated that panic attack you walked in on last month, my anxiety about being alone.”

“Did you have another attack?”

“Not to that extreme, but I feel the need to punt this problem as soon as possible. It’s damned annoying.”

Beverly tilted her head with compassion. “Kathryn, it’s only been three months. You’ve made a remarkable improvement in that time, especially considering the problems you’ve had with your health.”

“I realize that, but if I’m going to put this behind me, enjoy my marriage, and be able to cope with this pregnancy, then I need to deal with this. Eventually, I also need to get back to work.”

“Just don’t push yourself. Enjoy your honeymoon and that gorgeous new husband of yours. The Federation can wait.”

“That’s very good advice, and I’m sure Chakotay would agree with you.”

“How are you feeling? Any headache?”

“I haven’t really paid attention to it, but I’ll ask Joe about an analgesic for later.”

Beverly put her hand on the back of Kathryn’s neck to feel for tension. “That’s a good idea. You might feel a lot of pressure when you lie down, and I doubt that you’ll want to deal with that on your wedding night.”

“No, I’d rather not. Do you feel anything?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, which is a good sign. I’d touch the injury directly, but I’d mess up your hair. Is your abdomen hurting you at all?”

Kathryn touched her belly. “No, should it?”

“Up here,” Beverly said as she raised Kathryn’s hand above her waist. “Any discomfort?”

“Oh...” She took a deep breath and shook her head. “Not really. Feels a little tight, but it’s been a long day.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has been.” She motioned towards the reception area. “We should get back before someone notices that the guest of honor is missing.”

They started walking leisurely as Kathryn said, “I have no doubts that at least a dozen of them have their eyes on us. They get a little concerned when I wander off.”

“Kathryn, I want to tell you something, but I’m not really sure that this is the right time or place.”

She stopped. “Go ahead. You’ll have me wondering about it if you don’t.”

“I want you to know that I came to respect Dr. Zimmerman a great deal during your hospitalization. The lengths he went to in order to keep you alive were truly extraordinary, not that I wouldn’t have done the same. But if I didn’t know better, I would’ve said that he was driven by a human need to save the life of a beloved friend.”

“Then you saw a glimpse of why the Voyagers think he’s so special.”

“Yes, but I also saw a doctor who will protect your life at any cost.” Beverly’s eyes flicked down to Kathryn’s stomach before repeating her words. “At *any* cost. I spoke to him after he came downstairs this afternoon and he wasn’t happy.”

Kathryn grimaced. “What did he tell you? Not that I wouldn’t want you to know.”

“Nothing that breached confidentiality. He only said that you weren’t listening to reason.”

“I just said that I didn’t want to talk about options today and that I want to keep this,” she pointed to her stomach, “where it is for as long as possible.”

Beverly placed a comforting hand on Kathryn’s arm. “I understand. I really do.”

She looked away towards the dense thicket of trees. “I don’t want to think about the potential complications, yet. Not today, of all days.”

“I know, and that’s why I was hesitant to mention it.” Beverly moved the side to try to catch Kathryn’s sightline again. “I’m not trying to interfere, but if you want to talk through the options he gives you, please call me.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Sometimes it just helps to be able to talk to another woman.”

Nodding quietly, Kathryn reined in her emotions before she spoke again. "I haven't had many close relationships with women in my life, but I can see how, in this case, it will be a near-necessity."

"Yes, and I believe it'll help to talk to someone who has felt what it's like to have a life growing inside of her and understands your medical needs." Beverly took Kathryn's hand. "Don't worry about it for a few days, though. As much as Dr. Zimmerman wants to protect you, he'll also respect your choices. Whatever you decide, I'm sure that he'll do everything in his power to keep you both healthy."

"I know." Kathryn looked up at Beverly and felt comforted by the compassion in her friend's eyes. She hesitated for only a moment before drawing Beverly into a hug. "Thank you."

Beverly held her even tighter. "Let me be the first to tell you congratulations, Kathryn. I'm really happy for you and Chakotay, and I'm looking forward to what I hope will be a lifelong friendship with you."

Unable to form words without losing her shaky control, she only nodded and hugged Beverly longer.

They broke apart when they heard someone clearing his voice behind them. Beverly looked over Kathryn's shoulder to see who it was and to give her a moment to compose herself. "Kathryn, there's a handsome groom behind you."

Kathryn bowed her head and took deep breaths.

Beverly said, "Chakotay, I think she could use a hug from you, too. I'll leave her in your capable hands."

He came around in front of his wife and held her arms. "What is it, love?"

"Well," she looked up at him with eyes full of unshed tears. "Since you became my husband tonight, I guess I needed someone else to fill the 'best friend' role. Seems that I just got one."

Drawing her into his arms, he said, "I wasn't planning on giving up that spot, you know."

"Are you willing to share it?"

"Absolutely, and I'd be honored to share it with Beverly." He kissed her temple before saying, "Whenever you feel composed, it's time to cut the cake."

Kathryn took one more moment of comfort before pulling herself together. She straightened up, carefully wiped her eyes, took his hand, and nodded. "Let's do it."

"Aye, wife."

She punched him playfully in the arm and said, “Cheeky.”

The wedding party gathered around the beautifully decorated rose garden where Kathryn and Chakotay stood behind the cascading tiers of the wedding cake, glasses of champagne in their hands.

Phoebe took the microphone first. “For my dear big sister and this exceptional man she has just married, I want to offer an Irish wedding blessing:

May your home always be too small to hold all your friends.”

She extended her hand up towards the new house. “Katie, you might want to consider downsizing.”

As everyone laughed, Kathryn said, “Well, most of our friends are here right now, and as you know, I'm a scientist at heart. Should we test the hypothesis?”

Amidst even more laughter, Phoebe shook her head. “I have an even better idea. Allow me to offer an alternative Irish blessing. This one is a tradition for many Irish families, ours included:

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And, until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.

May the light of friendship guide your paths together,
May the laughter of children grace the halls of your home.
May the joy of living for one another trip a smile from your lips,
A twinkle from your eye.
Wherever you go and whatever you do,
May the luck of the Irish be there with you.”

Phoebe raised her glass and said, “May your hearts be forever joined in love.”

Chakotay put his arm around Kathryn and brought her close to his side, whispering in her ear, “That means more than your sister knows.”

Kathryn gave him a wink before nestling against his side.

Tom stepped up and asked, “Chakotay and Kathryn, are you ready to embark on a journey?”

She replied, “Haven't we already been on one?”

“Without a doubt,” he said with a huge grin. “When Chakotay asked me to his best man, I must tell you that I was stunned. For those of you who don’t know, we didn’t start out as the best of friends. One could actually say we were enemies. However, you could say that about him and his wife, too.” He paused while everyone laughed quietly.

“Kathryn has told us in speech after speech after speech after speech...” He let everyone chortle for a moment before continuing. “She’s spoken about how tight-knit the Voyager family became. That’s old news. But what she’s never mentioned is how incredible that accomplishment really is.

“All of us on Voyager started out as adversaries, one group sent to capture the other, but yet, the strongest, most extraordinary friendships have grown out of our journey. This wedding celebrates the embodiment of what we became – a united family brought together under the most challenging of circumstances. We’ve been through some rough times, but one thing has always rung true: Chakotay’s and Kathryn’s resilient, unwavering connection.”

He addressed the newly married couple. “I don’t know if your crew saw your love before you did, but I’ll wager that every single one of us knew that from day one – together, you two could accomplish anything. We know that your love for each other, even when you ignored it, kept you both strong, focused, and most importantly, happy while we were out there.”

Raising his glass, he offered, “May your love keep your path steady and full of joy as you continue on your journey as husband and wife.”

Everyone shouted, “Here, here!” and drank to them.

Chakotay took the microphone, smiling at Kathryn’s look of surprise. “Before we cut this beautiful cake, we want to thank all of you for being here with us to celebrate this very special occasion. We are truly honored to have you as guests at our new home.”

He looked at his bride. “Tom is absolutely right that Kathryn and I began falling in love with each other from the first moment I showed up on her bridge pointing a weapon at her. I’m sure it won’t come as a surprise to any of you that she walked right up to me and stole both my heart... and my phaser rifle.” As everyone chuckled, he winked at her.

She cleared her throat and commented, “Funny, that’s not exactly how I remember it.”

Bowing to everyone, he said, “Forgive me, I stand corrected. She let me keep my gun.” After everyone laughed again, he added, “But since that day, she has had my heart.” He took her hand and said, “Kathryn, there’s not a person here tonight who doesn’t love you. In fact, I’m sure that at least half of them would follow you to the other side of the galaxy and back.”

After a round of applause and whistles, he continued, “Sounds like they’re ready to go again. I include myself among them.”

“Thank you, but I'm sure that every one of you would reconsider just as soon as the first crop of leola root was harvested.”

He shook his head in amusement. “Both Tom and Phoebe talked about the strength of friendship, and I couldn't agree more, for today I have married my best friend. Kathryn, I consider myself a very, very lucky man because you have blessed me with your love.” He picked up his glass and raised it. “Please join me in toasting this truly extraordinary woman.”

“Chakotay,” she touched her lips and then placed her hand on her chest.

He smiled lovingly, as he said, “Kathryn, may your strength continue to bring peace not just to my heart, but to the hearts of every person that is touched by your compassion, your integrity, and your love.”

After drinking to the toast, everyone began applauding them, quietly at first, but it soon grew into a full roar. She knew tears were falling down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

When the applause began to die down, he whispered, “Are you okay, Kathryn?”

She pulled back and nodded. Taking his microphone, she said to everyone, “It may be hard to believe, but I'm at a loss for words. Phoebe, Tom, and Chakotay, thank you so much. I'm the one who is blessed tonight to have so many friends and loved ones here to celebrate with.” She took Chakotay's hand and said, “Now, my dear husband, let's cut this cake.”
