

The Future is Ours – part 29

“Ready to Fight”

By Dawn

Summary: Preparing to go to Paris

Rated R

Kathryn was hunched over her computer terminal when she saw a flash of light that nearly startled her out of her socks.

“Why Kathy, I never thought of you as skittish.”

She closed her eyes and tried to slow her racing heart. “Well, Q, a lot has happened to me since you saw me last.”

“That’s putting it mildly. What would a human say to offer sympathy? It seems somehow appropriate that I express feelings of pity.”

“You don’t exactly strike me as the sympathetic type.”

“Oh, but when it comes to you, my dear Kathy, I am.” He snapped his fingers and she found herself sitting next to him on her couch with a cup of vegetable broth in hand.

Taking a sip, she said, “Thank you.”

“I thought I’d drop in, just for old times’ sake. You seemed to be getting a little discouraged.”

“Discouraged?” She raised an eyebrow. “Hardly. I thought I was making progress on that speech I was working on.”

“Speech, smeech. I was talking in more universal terms.”

She frowned. “Tell me something, Q.”

“You want to know why I’m here.”

“Yes and no,” she said with a tilt of her head. “Why do you show up when I don’t need you, yet you fail to come to my rescue when I desperately need a miracle?”

“Who says you don’t need me? I know for a fact that you need me a great deal.”

Blinking slowly, she asked, “Care to enlighten me?”

“Nothing would please me more.” He crossed his legs and put his hands in his lap to mimic her posture. “Just so you know, Kathy, I wanted to help you when you needed that miracle. I’ve never wanted something so much in my eternal existence.”

In disbelief, she asked, “What, were you held back by some Q law that you decided to uphold?”

“When have I ever let the law of Q hold me back?”

“That’s what I thought.”

“My dear little human friend, I can see the bigger picture of the universe, all things at all times. To pull you from that horrible situation early wouldn’t have helped you with your ultimate achievements.”

“So, something happened while I was held captive that will help me? A clue to solving some mystery?”

“There are some things that your limited, humanoid brain must figure out on its own.”

Sighing, she asked, “What can you tell me, Q?”

“You’re worried that your knowledge of the future has affected your decisions.”

“If that’s what you’re here to point out, you needn’t have made the trip.”

Exasperated, he said, “Try to wrap your minuscule understanding of temporal mechanics around this... Yes, your knowledge of the future has affected your decisions, but it was supposed to. The timeline that you’re preserving included you knowing the outcome. Don’t you see?”

“So, the bomb on Sirius, my abduction, my new heart, this risky pregnancy – all of those happened in Timeline B?”

“Yes, of course they did, as well as your bout with the blues. The end result is that your marriage to Chuckles is stronger; your courage and your compassion are greater, and that new heart of yours will save your life again someday.”

Kathryn felt a lump in her throat, but still managed to say, “Thank you. I know you didn’t have to tell me all of that, but it helps to know.”

“Whether you realize it or not, Kathy, I do care for you a great deal. I have no idea why,” he shrugged it off. “Maybe it’s because Junior likes you.”

Looking askance, she asked, "I don't suppose you'd tell me when this heart will save my life, would you?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

She took a deep breath and put her cup down. "What are you here to tell me?"

Off-hand he said, "I merely thought you needed some reassurance."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"What can I say?" he said with a shrug. "I miss our little adventures in the Delta Quadrant."

"I don't think I'll be going on any adventures for awhile."

"Thanks to the little multicellular diploid eukaryote in your womb," he said as he laid his head on her lap. "Hellooooo in there." Looking up at her, he said, "It says hello back and wants you not to worry. It's rather cozy in there."

"Are you sure there's not something else you're here for? Something to do with Romulus? We never did learn more about the Romulan you sent me to meet with."

"Our friend will call you. Try not to worry."

"How do I stop worrying?"

He sat up and threw his hands in the air. "All right, all right. You can be such a pest."

"Out with it."

"As I said, I'm here because you need encouragement. Maybe not right now, but in a few weeks. Stick to your guns, Kathy. You're in the position you're in for a reason."

She pursed her lips. "I suppose that will make sense at some point."

"Yes, it will." He continued, "Call me a softy, but before I go, you should know that in this version of Timeline B, I was with you during your imprisonment."

"You were?"

"I like you, Kathy, and I don't want to see you suffer unnecessarily."

"And you didn't think I was suffering?"

“Yes, but not as much as you would’ve been.” He twirled his hand in the air, “I might’ve put you to sleep every now and again.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Put me to sleep?”

“That, and I think your arms are rather handy. I thought you might like to keep them this time around, not that your prosthetics weren’t lovely. It’s amazing to me that humanoids go to the effort of creating such life-like artificial body parts.”

With a flash of light, he was gone, leaving Kathryn utterly shocked. She looked down at her arms, and couldn’t help the tears that fell upon them. Tapping her commbadge, she said, “Janeway to Chakotay, Oregon 477.”

“Chakotay here.”

Trying to control the shakiness in her voice, she asked, “Where’s here? Where are you?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” was all she could manage to say before her jaw started trembling.

“I’m at home. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“ ‘kay.”

True to his word, not two minutes later, he came into her office saying, “I asked Sue to hold your calls.” One look at her face and he was sitting next to her, pulling her into his arms. “What’s wrong?”

Taking comfort in his embrace, she said, “Q was just here.”

He groaned. “Don’t tell me he wants something else from you?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head and trying to put a rein on her emotions. “Well, nothing new.”

“Then what’s all this?” he asked as he wiped away her tears and handed her a tissue.

She blew her nose and tossed the tissue in the wastebasket. “He told me that everything that’s happened to me was supposed to. I’ve been worried that I messed up the timeline somewhere along the way.”

Holding her close, he said, “You haven’t messed up anything.”

“Well, *now* I know that, but I didn’t.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Damn, this is stressful.”

“So that’s what you’re upset about? Maybe this is just pregnancy hormones.”

She blew her nose again. “If that wasn’t a part of it, I’d have you on the deck for saying that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said as he kissed her forehead.

“The thing that set this off.” She motioned towards her face. “Was when I asked him why he let me suffer. You know what he told me?”

“What?”

“He said he was there, helping me sleep through a lot of it, and that he kept me from losing these.” She rubbed her elbows. “In another version of this timeline, I lost my arms.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and swallowed hard, holding her closer. “Oh, Kathryn.”

“I was just so shocked.”

“I would be, too. I am.” He caressed up and down the backs of her arms. “Let’s take you home.”

“I can’t. I’m meeting with Khurma in an hour to discuss next week’s agenda.”

“Do you need to prepare?”

“I’m ready, I think.”

“All right. Then indulge me for just a moment. Computer, lights out,” he said as he resituated himself to get more comfortable. “Let’s hold each other for a few minutes, okay?”

“I’d love to.” She wiped her eyes again and said, “I can’t believe that I’m crying.”

“Who wouldn’t be in your shoes?”

She nodded against his chest and took comfort in his arms. “I’m glad that I can let go with you like this. Thanks for coming.”

“Thanks for calling me.” Rubbing her back and placing a kiss on her hair, he whispered, “Times like these are when I want to be here for you the most. Don’t ever hesitate to call me.”

“I didn’t.”

“You know what I love most about loving you?”

“What’s that?”

“That I get to see the full gamut of who you are – everything from a normal, emotional and loving woman, all the way to the incredible spitfire that was playing that jerk like a violin last week.”

“I don’t let just anyone see that normal part.”

He gave her a squeeze. “Yes, I know. But I think that in the last year, you’ve been a little more willing to be this part of yourself.”

“Well, yeah. I don’t have to command a lost ship 24/7.”

“Although I loathe giving Q credit, I’m so grateful that he could ease your suffering, even if just a little.”

“Me, too. I’ve often wondered how I survived three weeks of that nightmare.” She snuggled in closer to his warmth and whispered, “I love you, honey.”

“I love you, too.”

Two days later, Kathryn was in her office, studying her notes and looking for correlations in council decisions that her staff might’ve missed. She’d already found two, but was hoping for more. It had been a long day, her heart was pounding with exhaustion, and it was only fifteen-hundred. Knowing Justin would be in to check on her soon, she decided to close her eyes and try to relax.

As had become his habit, Harry walked into Kathryn’s office without announcing himself. One look at her and he dropped his PADD in a rush to get to her side.

“Captain!?”

She slowly opened her eyes, not the least bit ruffled by Harry’s panic. “Was relaxing.”

“Damn...” He laid his hand on his chest, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “If you wouldn’t mind, could you not look so... relaxed when you do that?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said tiredly as she tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Jarvin.”

“What can I do for you, Admiral?”

“Need you.”

“On my...” The door opened as he said, “...way.”

Harry said, “I thought she was unconscious.”

Justin pulled out the medical tri-corder and asked, “Are you feeling ill?”

“Faint. Not sure Harry could take that.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad, Harry. Just so long as you catch her.”

“Good gravy.” He shook his head. “Are you sure you want me to leave on the Enterprise next week?”

Justin said, “She needs food. Would you replicate a sandwich for her?”

“That, I can do. Turkey?”

“Mhmm,” she hummed.

Justin held a hypospray to her neck and released the contents. “Tri-ox. You seem worse than usual, Admiral. Would you like me to call the Doc or Chakotay?”

She shook her head. “Chakotay’s worried ‘nough.”

Harry returned and helped her hold the sandwich. “He has a right to be worried.”

“I know, but he doesn’t know that I know...” She frowned. “...or something.”

“I don’t think it’s much of a secret, Admiral.” Justin pressed the hypo to her neck again. “Just a little glucagon.”

Harry asked, “What’s that for?”

She replied, “Pancreas is on strike.”

“Justin, when did you become so knowledgeable about medicine?” Harry asked.

“Since Chakotay and the Doc gave me hours and hours and hours of instruction on how to monitor her blood sugar.”

She rolled her eyes and mumbled, “Not that bad.”

As he helped her eat, Harry asked, “Justin, how much worse is she? I mean, she’s as weak as she was when...”

“She’s not weak, she’s listless. But she’s coming around now,” he said as he watched the tri-corder readout.

Kathryn took the rest of her sandwich out of Harry’s hand and reprimanded, “I’m sitting right here, gentlemen.”

Harry asked her, “And if I hadn’t come in, would you have fallen to the floor by now?”

“Probably just on the desk.”

He shook his head in dismay.

After eating another bite, she said to Justin, “While Chakotay’s gone, I’ll need you to keep an even closer eye on me so that I don’t have a problem. If I do, he’s likely to never leave again.”

“I’ll do that. Actually, Sue and I were wondering if we could set up camp at your house for the week.”

“Camp?” she smirked. “I do have several guest bedrooms. There’s no need to bring a tent.”

“As I recall, very nice rooms.” With a grin, he asked, “So, what do you say? Want some house guests?”

“Will you make your lasagna?”

“If you’d like.”

“Then you’re more than welcome. By the way, I was just thinking about Paris. We’ll be sleeping in Oregon, but would you look into a day room of some kind? It would be nice to have a place locally to lie down for a few minutes and change clothes.”

“Good idea.” He scanned her again. “Looks like you’re back to normal. Okay if I get back to work?”

“Mmmhmm,” she said with a yawn. “But I think we’d better call it a day soon.”

“Let me know.” Justin closed up the medkit and left her office.

Kathryn asked Harry, “Could I impose upon you to get me a glass of ice water?”

“Coming right up.” While walking to the replicator, he said, “You’ve got me worried, you know.”

After finishing the last bite of her sandwich, she asked, “When do I not?”

“Good question.” He set the glass in front of her and then went to retrieve the PADD he’d dropped earlier. “Is this really the time for me to be going out into space? Sue will do a great job taking notes for you, I’m sure, but...”

“But you’re concerned that I’ll need your help to stay focused like I did last summer?”

Sitting down in front of her desk, he replied, “Yes and no. Permission to speak freely?”

“Always... usually,” she added.

“I feel that you rely on me pretty heavily.”

“Yes, I do. That’s why I’m sending you out in my place.”

He hesitated before continuing, “What I mean to say is that I’m worried you won’t have all of the information you need.”

“I’ve got the basic gist of what the entire quadrant wants to change. Luckily, there’s a pattern.”

“Yes, but if I’m with you, I could slip you notes to remind you what to discuss.”

She shrugged. “While that’s very helpful, I have this great excuse of just having gone through a traumatic experience.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to have that excuse and still be able to pull out all the stops?”

“Oh, I don’t think I do half bad in that area.”

He held up his hand in apology, “Kathryn, that’s not what I meant.”

“Harry, I’m going to be fine.”

“You’re a survivor, I know that. But what if you get overwhelmed? Do you think Sue can step in?”

“I know what you’re trying to not to say.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her desk. “But I’m not depressed.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you think I am?”

“Well,” he hedged. “You’re very tired all the time, and I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help but notice that you called Chakotay to come here last week. When you two left, it looked like you’d been crying. Is it okay for me to be mentioning this?”

With a sigh, she said, “I suppose so, considering how much you and I have been through together.”

“It’s just that I don’t think I should leave at the same time as Chakotay, and I’m not sure I should be gone while you’re in these council meetings.”

“I appreciate your concerns. I really do.” She took a drink of her water. “Two things.”

“Yes?”

“One,” she said while holding up her index finger. “Ask Amy about the primary symptoms of pregnancy in the first tri-mester.”

“Okay,” he said hesitantly.

“Fatigue. It’s a doozy.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Mood swings, too. The second thing I want to discuss is something we talked about before you took this job.”

“What’s that?”

“You can’t stay in this position forever. It’s not good for your career.”

“Kath... Admiral?”

She waved away his concern. “Kathryn is fine. Captain Picard wants you on his senior staff.”

“What?!”

“You heard me.”

“But... now?”

“End of the summer.”

“About the time you’ll be taking a leave of absence?”

She nodded. "I think this is an excellent opportunity for you, and I want you to take this time on the Enterprise to decide if that's where you want to be."

"But..." Rubbing his face, he said, "I know this may sound like a ridiculous excuse, but Amy is trying to get a posting on Earth because we want to be together. You know her, there's no way she'd get a posting on the Federation flagship."

Kathryn raised her eyebrows and shifted her eyes away. "I wouldn't be so sure."

His mouth dropped open. "Did you arrange that?"

"No, and I expect you to keep this completely confidential. Dr. Crusher wants to take Amy under her wing."

"Wow. That would be so great for her." He took a shaky breath. "Should I tell Amy? Should I talk to Picard?"

Kathryn smiled warmly. "I think you should definitely talk to Picard. Let him know that I've told you about his interest, and be open with him about your concerns. Be confident and don't let him intimidate you. He's a good man."

"Oh, I know. He's an amazing man."

"Regarding Amy, it would be best if she heard about it from Dr. Crusher first. If you talk to her about your pending offer, encourage her to apply to the Enterprise."

"She'd never believe that she'd be accepted."

"Then suggest she talk to Dr. Crusher about career advice. That should be less daunting."

"Good idea." He looked up at her again. "But are you sure you want me to go?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "I absolutely don't want you to go, but I also know that this could be the very best thing for you. That, and I'm leaning towards taking a significant amount of time off to be a mother. That's a chance that only comes by once."

He nodded with understanding. "All right, but that doesn't deal with the issue of next week. The Enterprise is going to the Danoba system. That doesn't seem high on our priority list."

"There are a handful of colonies in that direction that could use some attention, including Sirius IX. I believe it will make a much greater impact if someone who survived that explosion is there."

“I can see that, plus I was a witness to that conference when you turned their attitudes around.”

She nodded in encouragement. “And you can remind them about that. I have to weigh the pros and cons of having you here and having you do my job out there. Honestly, there’s no one I trust more to represent me than you.”

“Thank you,” he said earnestly.

With an understanding smile, she said, “I’ll be fine.”

“Whether you like it or not, right?”

“Right.” She straightened up and stacked her PADDs into a satchel. “I’ll try to give you and Judy daily reports, but I expect the same from you. Understood?”

“Aye, Admiral,” he said with a small laugh.

Justin walked into the house and stopped in the foyer to take a comprehensive scan. He held his hand up to the open door and instructed, “Stand by, Admiral.”

Chakotay came in from the study when he heard the voice. “Hello Justin, I wasn’t expecting you two so early.”

Before he had a chance to respond, Kathryn walked in and asked, “Do we really need to go through this whole process when Chakotay is already here?”

Justin replied, “I’d rather not take any shortcuts with the security plan we have in place.”

“Fine,” she waved him further into the house. “Proceed. Make yourself at home.”

“Would you indulge me by remaining here while I make the rounds?”

She nodded with resignation. “Check for lasagna ingredients while you’re in the kitchen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once he was gone, Chakotay welcomed Kathryn into his arms. “Lasagna? He’s cooking for us tonight?”

“Not a chance.” She rose up on her toes and gave her husband a kiss. “Tonight is just for us.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“He and Sue will be ‘camping’ here next week.”

“Camping?” He furrowed his eyebrows. “Outside?”

Shrugging, she said, “That was the phrase he used. They feel the need to keep me company while you’re gone.”

“Ohhh,” he chuckled. “Good thing you’re so accommodating to ‘their’ needs.”

“I thought so,” she said with a wink.

He ran his fingers up the back of her neck and massaged it. “Feeling okay? You look a little pale.”

“Once Justin is finished, I’d really like to take a nap.”

“I think that can be arranged.” He reached up further and removed the clip that was holding her hair. As the strands cascaded down her back, he asked, “Alone or with a friend?”

“I’ll most likely be asleep before you can even crawl in beside me, but I would love to be held. Need to get my fill before you leave tomorrow.”

“Your fill? Does that work?” He gently guided her head until she had it resting on his shoulder and then continued his massage of her scalp.

“Mmmm, gonna fall asleep standing up if you keep doing that.”

“Go ahead,” he whispered as he held her tighter. “I’ve got you.”

“Can I change my mind about you going?”

“Sure, but I still have to go.”

“I outrank you.”

“True, but I promised.” He kissed the side of her head. “Besides, you’ll be busy changing the hearts of over a hundred council members.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “You’d better not be changing any hearts next week, mister.”

Laughing, he shook his head. “My heart is permanently yours, love.”

“Better be,” she joked, giving him a mock glare.

“What about you? Should I be worried with all those good-looking councilmen?”

She nearly guffawed. “Even if I wasn’t in love with you, they’re all aliens.”

“Hasn’t stopped you before,” he goaded.

“You’re bringing up Kashyk? Again?” With an overly-exaggerated sigh, she turned and started up the stairs. “Tell Justin that I’m going to bed.”

“Kathryn?”

Trying to hide her smile, she turned around, looked to make sure Justin was out of ear shot, and whispered, “After dinner, I’ll show you exactly what kind of man I want in my bed.”

Trying not to laugh, he asked, “Not Kashyk?”

She shuddered and acted as if she were sick to her stomach. “Why did you ever let me kiss him?”

“Let you?”

Poking the air towards him, she said, “Your fault. You and that plan of yours.”

Justin came in and said, “You’re secure, but you need garlic.”

“Why? Will garlic ward off unwanted aliens?” she asked.

Chakotay laughed. “Only if you plan on kissing them.”

Stretching her body like a lazy cat, Kathryn lay completely satiated in her bed. She turned her head towards her husband, a satisfied smile on her face. “You make me feel exquisite.”

He propped himself up on his side facing her. “I’m certainly glad to hear that.”

“I bet,” she laughed. “If you keep your woman satisfied, you get to keep her in your bed.”

“Is that a quote?”

“No, but it would’ve been really clever if I had thought of one.”

He smiled at her, clearly amused. "It's not exactly an insult that you're unable to be clever after what I've just done to you."

"Good point." She hummed as she arched her back and moved a little closer to him. "Do you have to leave in the morning? It's only a two-day trip. You could still make it if you waited until Saturday."

"Yes, but the Dean asked me to take some appointments with prospective cadets this weekend." He grabbed a tri-corder off the nightstand and turned it on to scan her. "How are you feeling?"

"Cozy." Kathryn frowned at the device and almost pushed it away until she heard the beeps indicating that he was taking a blood gas reading. "Do I still look pale?"

"A little. I'm transmitting these readings to Dr. Joe. He'll let us know if there's anything to worry about." Chakotay studied the read-out, tapped something in, and then nodded. "The good news is that your blood sugar is fine."

"It ought to be after that delicious dinner. You outdid yourself."

"Thank you," he said as he reached behind him for a hypospray. "Your metabolism is a little off..."

Chakotay's commbadge chirped, interrupting their conversation. "And there he is." Since his jacket was on a nearby chair, he called out, "Open channel. Chakotay here."

Joe spoke, "Captain, I got the readings. Do you have a dose of tri-ox available?"

"I was just about to give it to her."

"Then by all means, proceed." He continued speaking as Chakotay followed his instructions. "Captain, in the morning, I'd like to pay you a house call. Will you be available?"

"Sure. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing that can't wait until morning. I want to re-balance your metabolism."

She grimaced. "You make it sound as if I'm a piece of machinery that needs adjusting."

"A very complex machine, Admiral. You'll be fine if you keep your activity level down for the rest of the evening."

"Darn. I was hoping to run a marathon," she joked.

“I’m trying not to be indelicate, Admiral.”

Chakotay replied, “Understood, Doctor. Anything else?”

“No, not at the moment. However, if you happen to wake during the night, take another scan for me.”

“Will do. Good night, Doctor.”

“Goodnight. Safe travels, Captain.”

When the comm channel closed, Kathryn sighed. “That hologram knows far too much about our sex life.”

“He only has your best interest at heart.”

“Yes, well...”

“You’re doing a lot better. Did you know that you’ve gained six kilos since the wedding?”

“How many women would think it a good thing to have gained that much weight after two months of marriage?”

He gave her a simple kiss before putting the medical equipment back on the nightstand. “Personally, I think it’s wonderful. Even if you didn’t need the weight for your health, I would consider it a compliment to my cooking and care.”

Shaking her head, she looked up at him with enjoyment. “I think you’re just saying that to get on my good side.”

“I’m not already there?”

She glanced away from him and then back. With a shrug, she said, “One side seems as good as the other.”

He chuckled as he drew the sheet down to her legs. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

“What? You didn’t take note twenty minutes ago when you were licking me?”

“I was a little pre-occupied.”

“You seemed quite intent...” She dropped her mouth open in pleasure as his hand wafted over her mons. “How much tri-ox do we have?”

With a huge grin, his hand drifted across her tummy and over her hips. “Back on Voyager, I often imagined how soft the curves of your body must’ve been.”

Eyebrows furrowed, she asked, “You thought I was soft? That’s not exactly a compliment.”

“Oh, but it is. You’re certainly not a ‘soft’ commander by any means.” He glanced at her eyes to gauge her reaction before his fingers ran along the side of her hip. “But this curve here, it was more pronounced then.”

“Towards the latter years, it was entirely too pronounced.”

He shook his head as he leaned over her. “I disagree. I fantasized about how nice it would be to grab your hips and pull you against me for a deep kiss.”

“Where did this fantasy kiss take place?” She pulled him down to lie on top of her.

“Many places.” He touched his lips to hers for a soft, gentle kiss. “In the turbolift, I would’ve pressed you against the wall.” Their lips drifted together again, this time holding the intimacy a little longer. “In your ready room, perhaps I would’ve had you sitting on top of your desk.” His mouth hovered over hers. “Or against the railing.”

“I fantasized about that, too,” she whispered.

“Did you now?” He nibbled on her lower lip as her eyes drifted close.

“Mmmhmm. On my desk, after you got angry with me about something.”

He chuckled. “Did you ever instigate a fight with the hopes I’d end it with a kiss?”

“No, but I dreamed about it at night.”

Nuzzling her nose, he whispered, “When I dreamed about silencing you with a kiss, it was usually in the briefing room.”

“With the staff present?” She ran her fingers through his hair, coming to rest on the back of his neck.

“Noooo,” he admonished. “Afterwards, I would’ve stuck around to give you a piece of my mind, and then you would’ve tried to argue back, but wouldn’t have been able to.”

“Show me.”

He closed his lips against hers, leaving their mouths parted so his tongue could dive inside and stifle any protest she might give.

A low moan rose from her throat as his kiss deepened and re-ignited the embers of their recent love-making.

He tucked his hands down between her bottom and the mattress, curving his fingers around the soft, bare skin before he broke the kiss. "Then I would've held your womanly, sexy derriere."

"I would've liked that." Her chin rose as his kisses moved down her throat.

"Would you have thrown me in the brig if I had run my hands all over your body?" He moved to stretch out along side her so he could caress down her legs and back up again.

"Probably, but it would've been worth it."

He laughed softly. "I think I would've had you pressed up against the bulkhead, and then I would've left you wanting more."

"Tease."

"My hope would've been that you would've crawled into my bed later that night."

"How deliciously improper that would've been," she said with a deep, husky laugh.

"Very, but as the old saying goes... If I'd known then what I know now, I would've changed a few things."

"You would've kissed me?"

"Daily." He drew his hand down over her breast, eliciting a gasp, and then settled on her stomach. "And I would've touched you more. I would've made you feel beautiful with all your luscious curves."

As she watched him caress her belly, she said, "It's a common perception that men prefer women who are very slender with flat stomachs."

"A common mis-perception. I can't recall even one conversation with a man who has said, 'What I really like is for a woman to have zero body fat.'"

She frowned. "Seriously?"

"What? You don't believe me?"

"I'm not going to mention names, but there was a female on Voyager who many of the male crew ogled over, and she had zero body fat."

He rolled his eyes. “When that much body is put on display like that, it’s hard not to notice. And I’d like to point out that most women with zero body fat have no breasts. The female in question is an oddity.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

Glancing up at her, he shook his head. “Let me just tell you what I like, shall I?”

“By all means. The floor is yours.”

“I much prefer to have you soft and supple.” He cupped her breast and squeezed it gently.

Kathryn arched her back, thrusting her breast into his hand.

“And natural, malleable.” Much to his delight, her nipple hardened under his touch. “And responsive. Did you ever notice that the other female in question didn’t show hardened nipples?”

“Can’t say that I cared.”

He smirked as his hand drifted back down to her belly. “More here means more to snuggle against, more warmth, and more to connect with when our bodies are joined.”

“I see,” she said with a laugh.

His hand moved to her thighs. “Down here, I like a well-muscled, strong leg. I noticed the first time we made love just how powerful your thighs were.”

Kathryn pulled her knees up so she could look at her legs with him. They appeared thin and shapely, but not anywhere as strong and muscular as they used to be. “I lost those.”

“They’ll be back,” he said with assurance as he lightly massaged the long muscles. Drifting back to her stomach, he whispered, “We’ll work on it together after this little one arrives.”

“Are you ready for fatherhood?”

He smiled sheepishly and ducked his chin. “I believe I am.”

“I believe it, too. You’re going to make a wonderful father.”

“Thank you.”

“I can picture you walking around the house with a tiny baby nestled on your shoulder, making bottles, changing diapers, singing lullabies.”

A beautiful smile graced his lips. "I'm really looking forward to this. We should start working on the nursery."

"We should tell Mom first, but I still think it's best to wait until I'm showing. Just in case."

"Yeah." Chakotay looked down at her tummy again. "Seems like that should be soon."

"I'd rather delay it as long as possible."

"I know." He leaned over her and kissed the soft, fleshy part of her stomach. "Take care of your Mommy while I'm gone. Okay?"

"Only ten days."

"Just in time for your birthday."

"I'm looking forward to it already."

After saying an emotional goodbye to her husband, then letting Dr. Joe tend to her medical needs, Kathryn spent her Friday morning at the office tying up loose ends. Before lunch, she gave an interview to a reporter from the Fednews Journal for an article that would be published on Sunday. The questions were primarily directed towards her health, her marriage, and how she was adjusting to being back at work. She didn't mind because she knew it would keep up her celebrity status, a tool she needed to continue her work.

As she walked the reporter out of her office, she saw Beverly Crusher waiting for her. A huge smile lit her face, but when the reporter turned to say good bye, Kathryn was all business again.

"Thank you for your time, Admiral. Would you like to see a copy of the article before it's published?"

"That would be nice, thank you. Forward it to Lieutenant Brooks and she'll see that it gets to me."

"Enjoy your weekend," he said as he walked out.

When he was gone, Beverly stood up and pulled Kathryn into a hug. "It's so good to see you, and you look wonderful!"

"Thank you," Kathryn said as she pulled back to look at her friend. "What brings you down to Earth?"

“You, of course. Brooks penciled me in so we could have lunch. Are you game?”

“Absolutely, I’d love to.” She put her hand on her chest apologetically. “Although, I’m afraid we’ll have to eat in.”

Justin said, “Actually, Admiral, we made arrangements for you and Dr. Crusher to go to Luigi’s.”

Kathryn’s lips parted in surprise and then she looked at Beverly. “Well, this is a surprise. I haven’t been out in public much since last summer.”

“Shall we go, then?”

“Andiamo!”

Justin said, “We’re going to transport you to the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. The building has been scanned for…”

“I don’t need to know,” she cut him off. “I don’t want any nightmares about it.”

“All right,” he said with a smile. “Just don’t speak about anything confidential, and the customers in the restaurant don’t know you’re coming.”

“Sounds like an adventure,” Beverly said, her eyes wide with excitement.

The two women walked slowly down the corridor to the transporter room, arm in arm, talking like school girls.

Beverly asked, “How is married life?”

“I highly recommend it. Think you’ll ever give it another go?”

“Maybe,” she said with a small grin. “When the personnel changes start happening on the Enterprise, I might suggest it to Jean-Luc.”

“In the middle of upheaval?”

“When you put it that way, maybe I should wait.”

“Or suggest it now so that he can get used to the idea before he has to get used to new people.”

“That definitely has some merit. We’ve just been keeping status quo for so long.” Beverly shook her head in amusement. “We’re set in our routines. How would we manage living together? Sharing a bathroom alone could be a nightmare.”

“Well, sharing quarters comes with its own set of fringe benefits that make sharing a bathroom pale in comparison.”

“True,” she said with a laugh. “And those benefits sure make him a better captain!”

“Men,” Kathryn mused as they arrived at the transporter room.

Beverly asked, “Are you ready for this?”

“I hope you don’t mind being at the center of attention.”

“I won’t be. I’ll just be sitting next to her.”

Justin communicated with the security team on location and then stepped on the platform with Kathryn and Beverly. The two women let go of each other just before Justin said, “Energize.”

When they rematerialized, the people on the street stopped to look at the commotion, and then gasped in surprise when they saw who it was. Kathryn smiled graciously at everyone, waved, and then went into the restaurant with Beverly.

The host greeted them immediately. “Admiral Janeway, Dr. Crusher, it’s a true honor to welcome you to Luigi’s. Would you follow me to your table?”

“Thank you,” Kathryn said as she looked around the now-quiet restaurant. Everyone had stopped talking the instant they saw her. She smiled at the diners in the same manner she had greeted those outside.

After they were seated, Beverly said, “That went much smoother than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“The media, I suppose. You’re on the Fednews so often that I assumed they followed you everywhere.”

“They used to. Don’t be surprised if there’s a media flurry outside when we leave.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“You know, I think I am. The public hasn’t seen me in awhile. This might generate a little commotion that would be good going into next week.”

The waiter came over and offered a bottle of wine. “The finest we have for our honored guests.”

Kathryn inclined her head in appreciation. “I really appreciate your generosity, but I have to return to work after lunch. Perhaps just a glass of iced tea?”

“Very well, and for you signora?” he asked Beverly.

“I would love a glass of white wine, but your house variety will be fine. Save that bottle for a special occasion.”

“As you wish.”

When he was gone, Kathryn frowned. “I just hate turning people down.”

“When do you think you’ll announce your news?”

Kathryn put down the menu and sighed. “When it’s obvious, I suppose. I’d rather people focus on other things.”

“Could win you some public favor, though.”

“Then perhaps I should announce it when the public is not so happy with me.”

“I have a feeling that will never happen, Kathryn.”

“Fame is fleeting.”

The waiter came back with two house salads and took their order.

As they began eating, Beverly asked, “Are you ready for next week in Paris?”

“I believe so. We need to get the ball rolling with the council because the last four months have really hurt our momentum.”

“I seriously doubt that. After all, you’re as close to a martyr as anyone would want to become.”

Kathryn said softly, “I can assure you that I didn’t *want* any part of that ordeal.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Beverly said as she placed her hand over Kathryn’s.

“I know, but I feel like I shouldn’t use my ordeal to gain anything, as if I’m thankful that it happened.”

“Think of it as using the incident against those who were behind it.”

She thought about the suggestion for a moment. “They tried to do away with me and it only made my popularity greater.”

“Exactly. That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.”

“While that’s not the case with my health, I suppose it applies to my standing in the public eye.”

“Wasn’t it you who said something about taking advantages of opportunities?”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “What? Did you memorize my speeches or something?”

“No, but that first interview you gave really stuck with me.”

She waved it off. “Let’s talk about something else. How is your son?”

“Wesley?”

“I heard he was back on Earth.”

“No, he came back to Starfleet, but he has been assigned to the Titan.”

“The Titan?”

“A Luna-class starship that’s being built at Utopia Planetia. Will Riker is taking command of it later this summer when it’s finished. Will’s there right now and we’ll pick him up on the way out of the solar system.”

“And Wesley is already onboard?”

“Yes,” Beverly said proudly. “He’s on the engineering team that is transitioning the ship from the building stage to the operations stage.”

“Well that’s exciting!” Kathryn reminisced, “Remember when we were young and eager, ready to explore? It would’ve been so exciting to do what your son is doing.”

“If I remember correctly, you had your own brand new ship a little over eight years ago.”

Kathryn smiled. “I still miss her sometimes.”

“But now you’ve got the ‘fringe benefits’ of not having Chakotay as your second in command.” She winked.

“Quite true,” she said with a sigh as she folded her hands in her lap. “Do you worry about the fraternization rules with Jean-Luc?”

“No.” Beverly set her fork down. “After serving together for fifteen years, I think we’ve earned the right to fraternize.”

“Long before now, I’m sure.” Kathryn looked up as the waiter took their salad plates and set down their meals. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Admiral, Doctor.”

When he left Beverly smothered a smile. “He seems almost smitten with you, Kathryn.”

“Does he?”

“Given the chance, I bet you could charm a Ferengi out of his third quarter profits.”

“I’m not sure the Ferengi are susceptible to charm.”

“You never know until you try.”

“Should I ever have a reason to, I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Beverly glanced out at the restaurant and said, “Your public seems to be clamoring for your attention.”

“Should I look?”

“Not until you’re finished eating. The clientele are casting glances in our direction, hoping to catch your eye.”

“I should probably think of something to say.”

“Need to talk through it?”

“They’ll either ask me about my personal life or my upcoming trip to Paris.”

“What would you tell them about your personal life?”

“Mind their own business?” she asked with a wink.

“I’m sure that would only increase your popularity.”

Kathryn laughed. “I’m pretty experienced with redirecting those questions. I give them just enough to keep their interest.”

“So they can feel like they know you.”

“Right. As for Paris, I’m not sure. What do you think they want to know right now?”

“Hmmm. Maybe that you’re ready to take the bull by the horns and whip the council into shape.”

Biting back her smile, she replied, “I’m sure that would go over really well, and Admiral Khurma would love it.”

“You’re rather sarcastic, aren’t you?”

“When I’m not in front of an audience.”

“That, I know. I knew your public persona long before I got to see this side of you.”

“And now that you know me better, do you have less confidence in my ability to straighten out our government?”

“More, actually.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “That’s not what I needed to hear.”

“Why not?”

“Because my public persona, as you call it, is that of a miracle worker. I’m just a person.”

“A real person who can charm...”

“Don’t say it.”

“...the spots off a trill.”

The two friends continued their lunch until Beverly was so distracted by the patrons in the restaurant that they couldn’t carry on their conversation.

Kathryn said, “Well, I guess we’d better get on with this. Do I have any spinach in my teeth?”

“Smile.” Beverly gave her the once over and nodded in approval. “You look great.”

Her eyes widened with amusement as they stood up to leave. As soon as Kathryn turned around, the restaurant became quiet again and everyone was staring at her. If not for her fame, she’d wonder if her hair had suddenly turned bright purple. Instead, she smoothed out the front of her tunic and began walking, nodding kindly to those who smiled at her.

A man suddenly stood up in front of her, startling Kathryn for a moment. Justin was there immediately and put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

The man look flustered as he said, “My apologies, Admiral. I was just... well, I... I wanted to talk to you.”

Kathryn looked at Justin and said, “Lieutenant Jarvin, I don’t think he means any harm.”

“No, no, of course not,” the man said. “I would never!”

“What do you want to ask me?”

“Oh, uh... I just wanted to say that I’m a huge supporter of yours, and that I appreciate everything you’re trying to do.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m grateful for your support.”

“And I wanted to tell you that I think you’re amazing.” He shook his head in awe.

“You’re my idol.”

Kathryn felt her cheeks warm, knowing that everyone in the restaurant could hear what they were saying. “Your admiration and loyalty mean a great deal to me, but don’t forget that I’m only one human.”

“Yes, but...”

A woman next to the man stood up and said, “I’m his wife, and I think what he’s trying to say is that we believe in you. Everyone we know believes in you, and we wish you the best of luck next week.”

“Thank you, both.” Kathryn reached out to shake the man’s hand, but he seemed frozen, so his wife accepted Kathryn’s handshake instead. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should get back to work.”

“Oh, of course, of course,” the man said nervously as he stepped aside. “An honor to meet you, Admiral. A real honor.”

“Thank you,” she smiled kindly as she walked past him. Kathryn glanced back at Beverly who was grinning with joy as they walked out of the restaurant.

Kathryn was instantly assaulted with flashes, cameras, and reporters clamoring to get her attention. She squared her shoulders and marched forward into the tumult where she raised her hands for them to stop shouting. It took a moment for them to quiet down, but once they did, she said, “Good afternoon, everyone. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you last.”

She instantly recognized a young man, but forgot from where. “You, sir, what would you like to ask me?”

“Admiral, ma’am, I’m from the ‘Dine and Dash’ magazine.”

“Oh, that’s right. I believe I told you over a year ago that the next time you caught me coming out of a restaurant, I would tell you how much I enjoyed it.”

He lit up and nodded. “That’s right, ma’am. I’m surprised that you remember.”

Tapping her temple, she said, “I have a head for details. Luigi’s served us an outstanding lunch, and I highly recommend the restaurant to anyone who has an appetite for southern Italian cuisine.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled brightly and nodded to the only other reporter that looked like she wasn’t about to jump out of her skin with eagerness. “What’s your question?”

“Admiral Janeway, have you enjoyed being back at work?”

“Very much so. Four months is a long time to be away, and it’s my hope that we haven’t lost momentum in our efforts to improve the troubled situations throughout our quadrant.” She looked to another young reporter. “Your question, miss?”

“In your most recent press conference, you spoke about your upcoming week with the Federation Council. Is there anything else you’d like to tell us?”

“I believe I covered the gist of what we’ll be doing. We’re taking a specific set of issues and concerns to the Council for deliberation.”

“May we ask which issues?”

“Ones that are common concerns quadrant-wide. Some are requests to reinstate programs that were discontinued during the war. Others are policies and procedures that have affected many of our worlds. On Tuesday, these issues will be opened up for public debate, but it would be premature for me to do that at this time.”

A reporter blurted out, “Did your imprisonment impact your willingness to speak out against the current government, Admiral?”

Kathryn felt Beverly’s hand on her back in an offer of support. “No, it did not. I have never said anything derogatory about our current government because doing so would not support my efforts of affecting positive change. The members of the Federation Council are hard-working individuals who want the best for each of the worlds they represent.”

“I wasn’t referring to the council, Admiral.”

“Noted. Next question?” She felt her blood pressure starting to rise and willed herself to be calm, relying on Beverly’s quiet touch on her back as a source of strength.

Another reporter stated, “There are rumors that council members were coerced into making certain key decisions. Is this true?”

“I have no proof that would confirm that assumption.”

Someone asked, “Have you been coerced, Admiral?”

Kathryn was startled as she felt another hand on her shoulder. She turned to see that it was Admiral Khurma.

He said to the reporters, “It is not within Starfleet’s jurisdiction to speak for the Federation Council. I would like to encourage all members of the Federation to write to your representatives and share with them your concerns.”

Reporters began to shout questions at him, and he held up his hand to stop them. When they were quiet, he said, “If anyone has a question for Admiral Janeway that does not pertain to the council, you may ask it. One at a time.” He turned to Kathryn and looked at her carefully as if to ascertain her wellbeing.

She nodded confidently and gave him a reassuring smile before directing her attention to the reporters again. “Question?”

“Is there anything you would like to tell the Federation before next week, Admiral?”

“Absolutely. Take to heart what Admiral Khurma just said. Your Council representatives want to hear from you, and it is the goal of each and every one of us that we work together to bring strength and vitality back to the Federation by embracing peace, cooperation, mutual understanding, and compassion for others. Pointing fingers and casting blame will not bring resolution. Positive change will.”

One of the negative reporters asked, “Do you really believe that, Admiral?”

“Yes, I really do. When issues are brought to you, keep an open mind. When changes are presented, don’t dismiss them without giving them serious thought. It is my job to listen to concerns and communicate those to the council. It is the council’s job to decide how to proceed from there.”

Someone who hadn’t spoken yet said, “Don’t discount your ability to influence their decisions, Admiral.”

Kathryn’s mouth twitched, but she did not answer. “Thank you, everyone. It’s time for me to return to my office so that I may prepare for next week.”

The reporters continued shouting questions, but she turned and walked away, leaving it up to security to control them. When they were clear of other individuals, she, Beverly, Khurma, and Justin transported back to her office building.

Upon arrival, Kathryn turned to Khurma and said gently, "I didn't need to be rescued, Admiral."

"Hmph," he replied and signaled the transporter operator to leave them alone. "And how were you going to answer that question about being coerced?"

"No, of course."

"It was a dumb question," Beverly interjected. "Who, in their right mind, would actually reply with a yes?"

Khurma said, "The point wasn't to get an answer, the point was to cast doubt on Kathryn's character."

"Why would a reporter want to do that?" Beverly asked.

"Might not have been a reporter," Kathryn said with a sigh. "Regardless, the doubt is cast that I might be susceptible to coercion."

"Everyone is susceptible, Kathryn." He looked at her carefully. "Feeling all right?"

"Do I not look well?"

When Justin pulled out the medical tri-corder, Beverly asked, "May I?"

"Of course, Doctor."

"I feel fine," Kathryn said.

Beverly scanned her and reported, "Nothing abnormal compared to your most recent medical exam."

"You've been monitoring her records from the Enterprise?" Khurma asked.

"Yes, at her request." Beverly smiled at Kathryn and handed the tri-corder back to Justin.

Kathryn explained, "I believe that two heads are better than one, especially when one holographic head has never had a child."

"I can see that," Khurma said as he squeezed Kathryn's forearm. "I want you to get a lot of rest this weekend. Next week's going to be stressful and I need you at your very best."

Tilting her head, Kathryn asked, “Do you say that to all of the admirals?”

“Only the ones I feel fatherly towards.” He patted her arm and turned to Beverly. “A pleasure to see you, Doctor. Give Jean-Luc my best?”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Good day to you both,” Khurma said as he left the room.

“Kathryn,” Beverly said.

“It’s time, isn’t it?”

“For me to go? I’m afraid so.” She held Kathryn’s arms and rubbed them gently. “It’s been wonderful to see you.”

Kathryn pulled Beverly into her arms. “Too many goodbyes today.”

Still hugging, Beverly asked, “Me and Commander Kim?”

“And Chakotay.” She held on for a moment longer before letting go. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will, and I’ll keep monitoring you to make sure you do the same.”

“I appreciate that.” Kathryn turned to Justin and said, “Would you call the transporter operator back in?”

Beverly pointed out, “If security on this building weren’t so high, I could just call the Enterprise.”

“They seem to think someone worth protecting works here.”

“Imagine that,” Beverly said with a laugh. She told the transporter operator, “Would you send me to the Enterprise in orbit?”

“As soon as you’re ready, Dr. Crusher.”

She stepped up onto the platform and looked down at Kathryn. “Show them who’s boss next week.”

“I intend to.” Kathryn winked and said, “Good bye, friend.”

“Good bye. Energize.”

She turned to Justin with a sad smile and said, “Two down, one to go.”

“Goodbyes?” He walked through the door first to check the corridor and then motioned for her to come through.

“Yes. It was good to see her, but I wish she could’ve stayed longer.”

“She’ll be back, and so will Harry and Chakotay.”

“Not soon enough.” She looked at Justin and said, “Thank you for arranging the lunch today. I know that was a lot of trouble.”

“You’re worth it.”

“Glad you think so, because next week is going to be even more trouble.”

“We’re ready,” he said as he opened the door to her office for her.

Kathryn met with Harry that afternoon before sending him off to board the Enterprise. She decided not to walk him to the transporter room since he had Amy standing by to bid him a proper farewell. After he left, Kathryn couldn’t help but think he might have been right about her needing him with her, but she also needed him representing her in space, and it was time that she stood on her own two feet again.

Deciding it was time to get home, Kathryn tidied up her desk and shoved all of her PADDs into her satchel. “Lights off,” she said as she walked out the door.

Her staff was gathered around Sue’s desk, speaking in hushed tones. As soon as they saw her, they instantly became all smiles.

Sue said, “Admiral! Are you ready to go?”

Kathryn gave them all a suspicious look as she tried to discern the reason behind their odd behavior. “You’re either planning a surprise, or there’s something you don’t want to tell me.”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong,” Judy said quickly. “Justin will be right back.”

Blinking slowly, Kathryn said, “I didn’t ask if something was wrong. Spill it.”

Judy, Sue, and Lydia all looked nervously at each other until Sue came forward. “You received a threat. Justin is discussing it with the rest of the security team.”

“And so it begins,” she said with a sigh as she put her satchel down on a chair. “Do you have a copy of it?”

“No, Justin confiscated it as soon as it arrived. He was not happy.”

“I’d be a little concerned if he was. What did it say and how did it arrive?”

“It was on a PADD in the afternoon mail delivery that the regular courier dropped off. Nothing unusual.”

“And the threat?” Kathryn prodded.

“Something about knowing your place if you want to keep your family.”

“And?”

“That was it.”

Kathryn looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and blew it out. She looked around absently and finally sat down next to her satchel. “Have a seat, ladies. The men will likely be discussing this for awhile.”

“Do you want to join them?” Judy asked.

“Not really. I’m sure Justin is on top of it, and I’m not about to let whoever sent that to intimidate me that easily.”

“Okay...,” Judy replied hesitantly.

Kathryn explained, “If it was just text on a PADD that wasn’t hand delivered by an infiltrator, it’s really not that much of a threat. There’s no proof that my family is in danger.”

Sue sat at her desk and began shutting off her terminal and putting things away. “I see your point. Would you like something to eat while we wait, Admiral?”

“No, but I probably should. Is that fruit basket still in the break room?”

Lydia said, “I’ll get something for you. An apple?”

“That would be nice. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Sue called out after Lydia, “Make sure you scan it first.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and started picking the lint off of her pants.

Changing the subject, Judy asked, “What are your plans for the weekend, Admiral?”

“Oh, not too much. Our friends, the Parises, are coming over tomorrow for awhile. Mostly, I want to acclimate myself to European time.”

Sue said, “I’ll use the time that they’re at your house to pack.”

Lydia returned and asked, “What did I miss?”

“My exciting weekend agenda of sleeping and talking to B’Elanna.”

“Oh,” Lydia said quickly as she handed the apple to Kathryn.

“What?”

“What what?” Lydia asked, and then grimaced. “Sorry, Admiral.”

“Relax, Lydia. May I call you by your first name?”

“Of course, Admiral. I just get anxious around B’Elanna. Tom is fine, but I guess I don’t relate to her.”

Kathryn took a bite of the apple and nodded her understanding. “Took me at least a year to become comfortable socializing with her, but once you find something in common, she’s very easy to talk to.”

“What do you talk about? If I may ask?”

“At first, we talked about engineering. You could try that. Ask her about her work.”

“What she does is so far above my head, I can’t even imagine.”

“Not really. Well, maybe on some levels, but she’s doing ship design. Ask her about the ops system they’re installing.”

“That could work.”

Kathryn smiled at the younger women who seemed to be hanging on her every word. She decided that she didn’t spend enough time with them on a personal level and made a promise to herself to change that. “Over the last year, my conversations with B’Elanna have included work, men, children, the wedding, decorating our houses... the usual things one would talk about with a friend.”

“You talk about men with her?”

“Well, sure. We know each other’s husbands quite well.”

Sue nodded. “That’s true. You knew Tom long before she did, and she knew Chakotay.”

Judy asked, "She has one child?"

"Miral is almost seventeen months now. I've been wanting to get together with B'Elanna to talk about motherhood. We haven't told my family, yet, so I can't talk to my sister."

"So that's the plan for tomorrow?" Sue asked.

"That it is. Babies, maternity clothes, and nursery decor."

At that moment, Justin and Mark came in looking very serious. "Admiral," Justin said with a nod.

"Am I secure?" she asked.

"For the moment. I assume Sue told you about the threat?"

Kathryn nodded. "And I have no intentions of changing my plans."

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Admiral. Not only did the assailant use an indirect method to deliver this to you, there's no proof that he or she has access to your family."

She looked at the three women with a slight smirk, and then asked Justin, "Would you check on adding security to my mother's home?"

"Already done, Admiral. And your sister's as well."

"Good work, Lieutenant. Let's head home, shall we?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like to let Chakotay know about this as well, but I wanted your permission to contact him."

She pursed her lips and sighed as she thought. "There's no way we can guarantee we'd have a secure channel when speaking to him, is there?"

"Not while he's in transit, ma'am."

"Then let's hold off until this evening. I don't want to keep him in the dark, but this is less of a threat than what we encountered in Greece."

"As you wish, but he'll want to know."

"Yes, he will, but I don't want to alarm him, either. He's worried enough, and there's nothing he can do from where he is. Let's see how the week unfolds, shall we?"

“Aye, Admiral.”

She stood up, tossed the apple core into the recycler, and said, “I’m ready when you are.”

“Give me just a moment to alert security and we’ll be on our way. Still want lasagna?”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She turned her attention to Judy and Lydia. “Ladies, we’ll see you in a week?”

“Good luck in Paris, Admiral,” Judy said.

“And have fun tomorrow,” Lydia added.

“Adieu,” Kathryn replied with a smile.

That evening, Kathryn keyed up a connection with Chakotay. Once his image appeared, her shoulders dropped and she felt instantly more relaxed. “Hi.”

“Hey there, beautiful. You had a quite a day.”

“Fednews?”

“You were on all the news. During dinner in the officer’s mess, you were quite the topic of conversation.”

“I went out to lunch,” she said with barely contained joy. “It was so nice to be able to do that.”

“With Beverly,” he added happily. “Any problems other than with the press?”

“Some slightly disconcerting hero worship in the restaurant, but it was nothing compared to what happened outside.”

“I’m not sure if Khurma did you any favors by stepping in.”

She shrugged. “It could have escalated out of control, I guess, but I think I could’ve managed it.”

“I’ve heard that you’re not one to be trifled with.”

Grinning, she said, “Spread the word, would you?”

“I’ll make a note.” More serious, he asked, “How was your day otherwise?”

She took a deep breath, trying to decide how much to tell him. “How secure is this line?”

“Not one hundred percent. Did something happen?”

“I know you want to be kept informed, but I don’t think we should risk discussing it.”

His expression hardened and he leaned forward. “Try to tell me.”

Kathryn pressed her lips together as she tried to figure out what to say. Sighing, she said, “I’m too tired to try to think of a way to tell you without compromising security.”

Chakotay’s eyes narrowed. “Stand by. I have to request security’s approval, but I’m going to re-initialize this transmission on a secure channel.”

The screen went dark, and Kathryn let her head fall back with a groan. “I should not have said anything.”

A moment later, the comm terminal chimed and she keyed in her passcode. When she saw her husband, she shook her head in dismay. “I would’ve had no trouble whatsoever keeping this from you a year ago.”

“Then we’ve made progress. What’s going on?”

Slightly ruffled, she said, “Watch it, mister.”

“Sorry, I get terse when I’m worried.”

“I’m aware of that, but you’re about to step into something you don’t want to.” She gave him a warning look before asking, “Did you scan your quarters for listening devices?”

“Yes,” he said coolly.

She brushed her hand through her hair before focusing back on him. “A PADD was delivered by courier to my office with a threat.”

All business, he asked, “What kind of threat?”

“I didn’t see it. Justin took it from Sue and called a security meeting before I knew what was going on.”

“Do I need to call Justin?” he said almost accusingly. “I can’t believe he hasn’t called me, yet. We have an understanding.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do. I just want to be kept apprised on your security.”

“I can appreciate your intentions, but unless you want a full-fledged argument with me, you might want to watch your tone.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it before he said anything else. “I realize that you’re under a lot of stress...”

“Only you know how much.” She took a deep breath and then continued their conversation. “Justin wanted to contact you this afternoon, but he thought I should be the one to tell you.”

“Good, then he can keep his job.”

“Chakotay,” she admonished.

“Did you get the gist of the threat?”

“Something about knowing my place.”

“Sounds like Liyal.”

“That’s what I thought, but it seemed too obvious.”

He rubbed his chin. “What was the threat?”

“Sue said it was against my family, but I don’t have the specifics.”

“I want to talk to Justin. Is he there?”

“Yes, but he and Sue went to bed already.”

“I want him to fortify security at your mom’s and sister’s.”

“Already done,” she said with satisfaction.

“Any photos?”

“Text only.”

Chakotay tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him. “This seems pretty weak as far as threats go.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t think you should change any of your plans at this point.”

“Nope.”

He fought a smile. “You came to the same conclusion, I take it?”

“Yep.”

“So, you really don’t need my advice, do you,” he stated.

She clicked her tongue. “No, I just thought you’d want to be aware of the situation. From me.”

“Thank you, Kathryn.”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“It’s possible that you’ll receive more threats.”

“True, but I can’t show weakness. Not right now.”

Sighing, he said, “I feel like I should come home.”

“If there’s nothing I can do, there’s nothing you can do, either.”

“I can protect you.”

“I still have a job to do.”

“I know,” he said sadly.

“It’s going to be okay. We just have to ride this out and not let it get to us.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he said with a sympathetic smile. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Talk tomorrow night?”

“I can’t wait.” He blew her a kiss before closing the signal.

Kathryn shook her head in dismay, feeling more than a little annoyed with her husband. She decided to shake it off and get ready for bed.

An hour later when she was about to fall asleep, Kathryn’s comm terminal beeped again. She pulled on her robe and padded across the room to answer it. When she saw it was Chakotay, she wasn’t sure how she should feel.

“Kathryn...,” he said softly.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No. I’ve been lying here, replaying our conversation in my head. I need to say that I’m sorry.”

Her shoulders sagged and she felt her eyes grow hot. “Oh, honey. It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I was worried, and things came out all wrong. I made a promise to you, and I...” He got choked up.

“I know you’re worried, but I need to be strong.”

“And I want that for you. That’s been our goal for the last ten months.”

“It comes and goes,” she said quietly.

“It always has.”

Taking a shaky breath, she nodded. “I was just better at hiding it before, I guess.”

“Not really,” he said with a chuckle. “I was just smart enough not to point it out.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Would I be picking a fight if I agreed with you?”

“No, but I would like you to remember that even when you’ve been unsure of yourself, you’ve still moved mountains.”

“Am I still that woman?”

“Absolutely. Remember confronting Liyal?”

She groaned.

“Case in point. You were really distressed, but it didn’t stop you.”

“In fact, my anxiety added fuel to the fire.”

“That’s right.” He looked at her with sadness. “I really want to hold you right now.”

Tears prickled at her eyes as she replied, “I’d like that.”

“Got your pillow?”

“Yes, and it smells like you.”

“I’m only a comm call away, and I’ll be back in just nine days.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be so busy that the time will fly by.”

“Get some rest, love.”

“You, too. Comm me your schedule tomorrow when you know it, so I can call.”

“I will. Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After the signal closed, she crawled back into bed, held the pillow tight, and let quiet tears fall as she drifted off to sleep.
