

The Future is Ours – Part 3

“A Friendship Restored”

By Dawn

Rated PG-13

Summary: A continuation of Part 2 – Janeway and Chakotay getting settled into life on Earth and redeveloping their friendship.

A month after the debriefings ended, Kathryn was getting settled into her new townhouse that was just inside the city limits of San Francisco. She'd been on a wonderfully long vacation and was ready to have a place of her own again. Chakotay called one afternoon and asked if she had any plans, but she was in the middle of unpacking so she invited him over to help. The movers had delivered her things the day before, and she was enjoying re-discovering her belongings.

Although they had spoken to each other during debriefings, it was the first time they had been alone since their arguments almost two months before, and also the first time they didn't have anything ship-related to discuss.

He brought a couple boxes into her living room. “Where would you like these?”

“Anywhere is fine, thank you. I hope these are marked correctly. When this was all packed up years ago, I don't think the movers cared about keeping everything organized.”

“That long?” Chakotay opened one of the boxes. “I didn't think I recognized any of this from Voyager.”

“No, most of this stuff is from the house that I owned seven years ago.” She pulled out a large item wrapped in a protective film. “This, I think... Yes!” She held it up triumphantly. “This is a vase that my sister, Phoebe, gave me as a house-warming gift for my last home. She bought it on Alpha-Centauri. I think it's beautiful.”

“Very beautiful.”

She glanced at him before placing the vase on a table in front of the large bay window. He was acting a little nervous and distracted, so she figured that it was up to her to bring some ease back into their friendship. “My house was sold when we were pronounced dead, and while Mom couldn't stop the sale, she did manage to have my things pulled out before they went up for auction.”

“Auction?” After unwrapping items, he placed them on a shelf for her to put away later.

“Yes, unfortunately. My trust stipulated that all of my assets were to be liquidated at the time of my death, and my lawyer chose auction as the best means for doing that. Luckily, he’s also Mom’s lawyer and she was the primary beneficiary of the trust, so she had some influence.” She found a few more knick-knacks which she proudly placed on the fireplace mantel. “Needless to say, I’m going to be changing that trust for the future.”

“I see.” He found another container marked fragile and opened it. “So, did you spend all month in Indiana?”

“No.” She smiled, remembering her vacation. “But I did spend the whole time with my family. We spent a week at Mom’s house, but then I felt like seeing Earth again. We went to Ireland, hopped around Europe a little, spent two days at the most wonderful spa in Switzerland, and then a couple days in Japan.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“It was. Phoebe insisted that I have a whole new wardrobe so we shopped everywhere we went. I ate the most wonderful food, and spent time really taking everything in. I saw sunrises over the ocean and sunsets in the mountains. I love this planet.” She looked out the window at the park across the street.

He chuckled. “That, I know.”

“It would be fine with me if I didn’t ever leave it again.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute. The explorer in you wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She turned back to her box and pulled out some more items. “I spent a lot of time with my niece, Katie. Did I tell you about her?”

“I think you showed me pictures.” He grabbed another box from the hallway and returned. “You sure have a lot of books.”

“I know.” She touched the spines of the books reverently. “I’m relieved that nothing happened to them.”

“So... you spent time with your niece?”

“Yes,” Kathryn went back to her container. “She’s almost five and absolutely precious. I want to spend as much time with her as I can. I really want to be part of her life.”

Chakotay said, “I went to the Banora colony for a couple weeks and spent time with my sister, Sekaya. She’s expecting her first child, and I can’t wait. It makes me feel like there’s a future for my tribe, even if they’re mostly gone. It’s hard to explain.”

She touched his arm. “Oh, I understand. Completely. With this second chance we’ve been given, I have a desire to really make Earth a better place. I feel like being involved in the lives of all the children I know so that I can nurture them somehow.”

“That’s exactly what I’m feeling.”

“I spent some time holding and rocking Miral during the debriefings. It was the most wonderful feeling – holding that innocent little life.”

“She’s a beautiful baby.”

“I’m eager to see her again. I’ll have to call on them later.”

“I’d like to go with you.” He glanced at her nervously. “If I may?”

“Of course.” She found his hesitation unlike him, although he was likely still feeling self-conscious about his behavior regarding Seven. It had been far from endearing.

Taking a deep breath, he asked, “So... have I irreparably damaged our friendship?”

“No.” She didn’t look up from the books she was putting on the shelves. “It can be mended.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She glanced at him with a smile that she was sure would put him at ease. “It might take some time before I feel like being nice to you, but I think you’re worth it.”

His eyes brightened. “You think so? I’m feeling pretty foolish.”

“Good.” She looked around the room. “What do you say we clear these empty boxes out of here and go to dinner? I’m getting hungry.”

“Sounds great.” He broke down the boxes and took them to another room.

As she watched him go, she felt content being near him again. During the last month, she had made a point not to worry about their friendship, letting them have a much needed break from each other.

The time away from the crew had been a welcome respite. Her family had gone out of their way to make sure she rested both physically and mentally by refusing to let her wonder what her crewmembers might be doing or if they were settling in okay. They were excited to hear her stories about the past, but they insisted that she needed to stop worrying about them. She’d been doing it for seven years straight.

That evening at dinner, they'd talked more about their vacations and about where Chakotay might get an apartment. He wanted to be in San Francisco so that he would be accessible to the crew. They had grown to be such a tight-knit family over the years that he didn't want to be too far away.

As she climbed into bed that night, she decided that since their friendship was well on its way to its former ease, her next step would be to get settled into her life on Earth and get used to not having the constant pressure of commanding Voyager. Once she and Chakotay relaxed a little, she figured that gradually easing flirting back into their relationship should come naturally. She hoped that he would come to the realization that he didn't want to live without her.

During the next month, they talked every day and saw each other several times a week. They checked on all the Voyager crew members and re-familiarized themselves with the bay area. A lot had changed in the city since the war, and there was still work to be done. Kathryn also kept busy with her new house, having it updated and refurbished to suit her needs, while she also helped Chakotay shop for furniture for his new apartment.

It was late on one Thursday afternoon when Kathryn decided to stop by Tom and B'Elanna's new home. She'd been at a meeting nearby and was craving some time with Miral.

Tom answered the door wearing an old shirt with paint on it. "Well, hello, Captain. Please come in."

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Only a little painting. We got the urge to redecorate our bedroom today."

"Kathryn? Is that you?" B'Elanna called from further inside the house.

"It's me, Lanna." Kathryn followed the voice to the living room where Miral was nursing. Chuckling when she saw B'Elanna with green paint on her face, she said, "I like the color, but I'm sure it looks better on the wall."

"Go take a look," B'Elanna responded.

Tom led her back to the master bedroom. He said quietly, "I don't think today was the best day to do this. Miral's feeling needy, which leaves only one of us able to paint at a time. We had hoped to get done with this by bedtime."

Kathryn surveyed their work. All the furniture had been piled on the bed in the middle of the room, and only one wall had been finished. The other three were in various stages of

prep work. “Looks like I came to the right place. Hand me a paint brush or hand me a baby.”

Tom chuckled. “We wouldn’t ask you to help paint, Captain.”

“Baby, it is.” She headed back out to the living room where B’Elanna was buttoning her top. “I was hoping for some cuddle time.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” B’Elanna said as she handed the baby over.

“Not in the least. Miral and I have some bonding to do.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Tom helped her get settled into the rocking chair with a pillow to prop up her arm, a burp cloth, and a baby blanket. “She hasn’t slept for several hours, so I think she’ll be out in no time, especially in your arms.”

Kathryn was as happy as a lark to be doing nothing but looking into the dark brown eyes of the most precious little bundle of Klingon imaginable. She was almost three months old, and it seemed like it was just last week when B’Elanna was going through all the false labors on Voyager. When Miral finally dozed off, Kathryn rested her head on the back of the rocker and fell asleep, too.

She woke to the sound of people stirring in the entryway and was surprised to see that darkness had settled in. Whoever had arrived was whispering so quietly that she couldn’t hear what they were saying. She adjusted Miral carefully so as to not wake her up and stood to indulge her curiosity. Pleased when she saw who it was, she whispered, “Chakotay.”

“Hi,” he smiled brightly. “We thought you were asleep.”

“I was.”

Tom whispered, “You’ve been out for a couple of hours. It’s almost seven.”

“Great time of day for a nap.”

“I brought dinner.” Chakotay indicated the containers that he and Tom were holding. “Luigi’s.”

“Mmmm... smells wonderful.” She let the men pass her and head into the kitchen. As they pulled out all the food and set it on the table, she asked, “How many people are you expecting?”

“Just the four of us, but B’Elanna said to get plenty because she’s starving.”

When Tom left them alone to get his wife, Chakotay whispered, "How'd they rope you into this, too?"

She laughed quietly. "I just stopped by for a baby fix. They were more than happy to hand her over and she's been asleep ever since."

He stood close and rested his hand on the small of her back, looking at the sleeping baby in her arms. "You do have a way with her."

Turning to look up at him, her face was only inches from his. "She knows that I have no intentions of putting her down anytime soon."

She saw his gaze flick down to her lips for just a moment before Tom and B'Elanna came in and redirected their attention.

B'Elanna commented, "If that baby didn't have forehead ridges, one could mistake the three of you standing there for a happy little family."

Kathryn smiled and let Chakotay pull out her chair. "We were just adoring yours."

"Uh huh," B'Elanna gave Kathryn a knowing look. "I'll put her in the bassinet so you can eat."

"I can eat one-handed." She begrudgingly gave up Miral.

"I'm sure you can, but she'll be fine. Besides, she'll need to wake up soon if she's going to get to sleep at bedtime."

During dinner, they chatted about news they'd heard of various crewmembers. Kathryn was thankful for the company and the easy-flowing conversation. She also enjoyed how Chakotay's leg seemed to brush up against hers every time he passed a dish. She was trying to figure out how she could keep him passing food so his thigh would remain next to hers, but she couldn't think of a polite way to ask. He seemed to know what she wanted, anyway, because he eventually left his leg beside hers, just as she'd hoped he would.

"So, Captain. What were you doing in the neighborhood today?" Tom asked.

"I was at the Fednews station for a meeting."

"Oh? What for?" B'Elanna asked.

"It was a preliminary introduction to Gayle Struthers." Kathryn shrugged it off.

Chakotay added, "She's been hounding Kathryn for an interview since the day we returned."

“Isn’t she the one that does the really deep, intense interviews on Sunday nights?” Tom asked.

“That’s the one,” Kathryn answered.

“Did you agree to do it?” Chakotay asked.

“At first I was going to tell her no, but...”

“She roped you in?” Chakotay was amused.

“She’s very persuasive and did her best to convince me that the entire Federation is dying to know more about us and our experiences.” Kathryn was amused at the exaggerations that the media often used. “She reminded me that all the public has seen is repeated broadcasts of the press conference in December, and various ‘sightings’ of us around town, so maybe it’s time to give people a little more.”

“I don’t think it’s us they’re interested in, Captain,” Tom said. “Everyone wants to know more about the valiant captain of Voyager.”

“You make me sound so illustrious, Tom.”

“Well, you are. What you accomplished is going down in the history books.”

She shook her head in amusement. They’d had this conversation many times over the last couple of weeks. “What <I>we</I> accomplished. You seem to have forgotten that I didn’t run that ship by myself. If anyone should be famous it should be you, Tom, for flying us all the way home.”

Chakotay spoke to Tom and B’Elanna. “She’s never going to own up to it, no matter how much praise we heap on her.”

Sighing, Kathryn said, “Well, this interview might just do the trick for you. With all the attention and pampering I received this afternoon, I felt like the President of the Federation.”

“Must have been rough for you,” Tom said sarcastically.

“It felt strange, but I’m sure that tomorrow will be even more so. They’re coming to my house at eight in the morning to set up and we start filming at nine.”

“Doesn’t the guest always have some momentous confession on that program?” B’Elanna asked.

“That’s what I hear,” Kathryn sighed. “And she won’t tell me what questions she’s going to ask, either. She wants to catch the ‘full emotion of the moment,’ as she put it.”

Chakotay squeezed her forearm and said, “Just put on your best diplomatic face and you’ll be fine. If I know you, and I think I do... you won’t give anything away unless you damn well want to.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I watched this show last week. She had a dignified actor start crying about how his father didn’t love him enough. If she can do that to a rather imposing-looking older gentleman, what’s she going to do to me?”

“He’s an actor,” Tom pointed out. “They can call up emotions in a heartbeat and they really are looking to put on a show. You, on the other hand, are adept at burying your emotions.”

“As Chakotay said, you’re not going to give anything away and you’re not exactly one to tangle with,” B’Elanna said. “All you have to do is to let people get a taste of the real Kathryn Janeway.”

“Well, hopefully I can steer her towards asking about Kes. I can easily get emotional about her and it’ll give her what she’s looking for. I don’t know what I’ll do if she asks me about the Admiral’s sacrifice to save the people she loved, although that’s confidential, so she probably won’t know about it.”

They were all quiet after that statement, as if they’d almost forgotten what the Admiral had done for them. Tom was able to start the conversation again by offering dessert.

After dinner, Kathryn stayed awhile longer to play with Miral while the others painted. It gave her a chance to think more about the upcoming interview and what her answers might be to difficult questions.

When B’Elanna put Miral to bed, Kathryn decided that she’d better get home to straighten up the living room and get to bed herself. Even though they hadn’t finished painting yet, Chakotay offered to walk her home. Tom and B’Elanna asked them to come back the next evening to finish up and so Kathryn could tell them how the interview went.

After Tom closed the door, Chakotay offered Kathryn his arm and they set out into the crisp night air towards the transporter station.

“Have you rehearsed what you’re going to say tomorrow?”

“More or less. Miral was a good audience.”

“I hope I don’t make you feel uncomfortable, but what if she asks you about Justin and your father? You’ve never felt at ease talking about them.”

She took a deep breath. "I think that's so far in the past that it won't come up, but if it does, I can give them the facts, I suppose."

"And destroying the array?"

"I'm sure that'll come up, but I think my guilt over that has ebbed, thanks to you." She glanced up at him and smiled.

"I'm sure it also helps that we're home, safe and sound."

"Yes, it does."

He asked, "Assimilation?"

"You're just full of cheery topics, aren't you?"

"I'm just asking you the questions that you're probably apprehensive about rehearsing."

"And if I have nightmares tonight?"

"I'm only a comm call away, and I'd come over in a heartbeat."

She took a steadying breath. He had been a godsend those nights after assimilation, and she was sure that if not for his support, she'd still be having those nightmares. He had stayed up with her many nights talking about anything and everything to get her mind off her ordeal. "It's not as if everyone isn't upset by assimilation. I don't think it'll be a shock that I am too."

"No, probably not." He put his arm gently around her shoulders. "I don't think they'd be privy to the Equinox, would they?"

"No, that's classified. Anything that doesn't paint a rosy picture of Starfleet is classified."

They arrived at the transporter station, and Kathryn was happy for the lull in conversation so she could gather her thoughts. When they started walking towards her house, she said, "She might try to interview you next, you know."

"I'm not sure anyone wants to hear what I've got to say, especially about the war."

"You might be right. 'I told you so' just might not sit well with some."

They walked in silence for a little while until they reached her door. She turned to him and said, "Thanks for walking me home."

“You’re welcome.” He took her hands and said, “I have one more question for you.”

“Okay.” She swallowed hard, not sure she wanted to hear what he had saved for last. They were standing so close that she could smell his aftershave and the wonderful masculinity that was all him.

“If she asks you about me, what are you going to say?”

“You?” That wasn’t what she had been expecting. She squeezed his hands. “I would never say anything that would put you in a bad light.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” He looked intently into her eyes. “What I mean is... what are you going to say if she asks about us?”

“Oh.” She was quiet as she stared into his questioning eyes, trying to decide how best to answer him. This could be the opening she was waiting for, but she didn’t feel that the ease between them had rejuvenated itself far enough, yet. “You’re asking because the press seemed to think that you and I were involved as soon as they saw us together?”

“I thought it might be prudent for us to talk about this before you share your feelings with the entire Federation.”

“Does it bother you that they thought we were together?” she asked.

“It did at the time, but that was because...”

“...of Seven... Annika, I mean.” She smiled gently. “And now?”

He glanced down and then back up at her. “I’d rather you not announce to the entire Federation that there is absolutely nothing between us. We are friends, at least I believe we’re still good friends, despite... everything.”

“Of course we are.” She could see that he was still worried. “Chakotay, when you were angry with me, I knew why, and I also knew that eventually it would work out. It’s not like it was the first time we’d come to blows. As far as I’m concerned, our friendship is as strong as it’s ever been.” Smiling, she said, “Look at it this way, we’re spending all this time together when we don’t have to, and I’m enjoying it.”

“I’m relieved.” He rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “I don’t know how you feel about it, but if you’re asked, I don’t think there’s any harm in letting the rumors continue. It would be preferable to denying that anything exists. After all, we’ve probably been spotted together a lot.”

“Yes, I’m sure we have.”

“If you deny it, people are really going to think something is going on.”

She felt slightly breathless. “I plan on answering the question honestly – that we’re very dear friends and we grew very close out there.”

“That is true.”

She waited for a moment to see if he would say something more, because she couldn’t tell if he was about to suggest they move this forward. When he didn’t say anything else, she looked away, unwilling to push the issue... yet. “Well, I’d better get inside and make sure all the boxes are hidden.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Thank you for asking, but I’ll be fine. I’ll call you tomorrow after the interview?”

“I’d like that. Would you like me to be here for it?”

“No, I think I might be attempted to look at you too often and give things away that I shouldn’t.”

He chuckled. “You’ll be fine. Call me anytime tonight if you need to talk.”

“I will.” She withdrew a hand and touched his chest, feeling the need to convey how much she cared for him. “Good night, Chakotay.”

After she shut the door, she closed her eyes and rested against the wall. Their friendship had definitely returned, but where it was going next and how quickly it might proceed was making her heart feel a little exposed and vulnerable – emotions that she didn’t care for in the least. It was uncomfortable allowing someone to have that kind of affect on her, but if she was going to let anyone into her heart, there was no one she trusted more than she did him.

After the interview was over, Kathryn felt completely drained. It had lasted over three hours, even though only an hour would be aired on the program. When the film crew finally left her house, she tidied up the living room and then replicated a sandwich. Her mind was numb as she ate, not having enough mental energy to think about anything.

It wasn’t until she recycled her dishes that she remembered she was going to call Chakotay, and that he was probably waiting for her. She sat down at the comm terminal and keyed in the connection.

He answered immediately. “Hi! You look beautiful, Kathryn.”

Touching her face, she smiled gently. “They put a lot of makeup on me. I probably look fake and pasty up close.”

“I doubt it. Did you wear that?”

She put a hand on the dark blue blouse. “Doesn’t it look okay? The stylist looked through my closet and picked this out.”

“Looks very nice. I’m just surprised that you aren’t in uniform.”

“Oh. No... Gayle wanted to interview the ‘woman behind the uniform,’ as she put it.”

“Well, you look great. How did it go?”

“Emotional. Exhausting.”

“Did she manage to make you cry?”

Kathryn laughed. “I got a little misty-eyed, but didn’t shed any real tears. She’s good, I will say that.”

“What got you emotional?”

Shrugging, she said, “Several things, but not about what I expected. We talked about how alone we felt out there, and how we relied on each other. And the joy we felt when we finally made contact with home.”

“Well, that’s good.” Chakotay smiled softly. “Anything bad?”

“Yes and no. We talked about some of the more difficult things, but she was able to keep the conversation moving, so we didn’t dwell on any one thing in particular.”

“I’m relieved. I was worried about you.”

“Thank you.” She felt warmed by the compassion in his eyes, but she didn’t have the energy to talk about it. “About tonight... would you give Tom and B’Elanna my regrets? I’d really like to go to Indiana this afternoon and stay for the weekend.”

“Of course, although I think B’Elanna was hoping to have a watch-party on Sunday night. We talked about it last night while we were painting.”

“Oh.” She was disappointed. “I wanted to watch it with my family, and I was going to invite you to join us.”

“Really?” He was surprised.

“Absolutely. I’d like to watch it with both you and Mom, and she asked me to invite you to her home for dinner sometime.”

“I’d love to join you. B’Elanna can still have her party without us.”

“If you’re sure, I’ll call you tomorrow with the plans.”

“I look forward to it. I’m sure Tom and B’Elanna won’t mind at all.”

“Thank you.”

After the comm closed, Kathryn quickly changed her clothes, washed her face, and threw a few things into a bag. The morning left her feeling so drained that she wanted nothing more than to spend some time with her mom and enjoy a little bit of Indiana springtime.

The following Sunday afternoon, Kathryn put her puzzle piece down when she heard the front door open. She told her niece, “I’ll be right back, Katie.”

She stepped into her mother’s foyer to greet Chakotay. Mike, Phoebe’s husband, had met him at the transporter station and brought him to the house. She took the bottle of wine that he held out to her and she said, “Thank you, and welcome to Indiana.”

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. “It’s beautiful here. I’d like to see more of it sometime, but I must say that I’m glad you sent Mike to meet me. I don’t think I would’ve found the house otherwise.”

“Come on in.” She led him into the sitting room and said, “Make yourself at home. I’ll be right back.” She went into the kitchen to put the wine in the cooler and to let her mom and sister know that the men had arrived. When she returned, Chakotay had sat at the end of a sofa and was talking to Mike about something they’d seen on the walk.

Katie had crawled up onto her father’s lap and was eyeing Chakotay suspiciously from across the room, a sight that was both cute and amusing. Kathryn said, “Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes. Mom loves to cook the old-fashioned way so the meal is in the oven.” She sat in the middle of the sofa, and waved Katie over. The little girl reluctantly slid off her daddy’s lap, but didn’t go any further.

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay who was watching Katie’s reaction. He smiled but said nothing.

“Katie, I’d like you to meet a very dear friend of mine. His name is Chakotay.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Katie.”

Taking time to size up the situation, Katie finally decided to creep around to Kathryn, but staying as close to the wall as possible and watching him intently the entire time. When she finally reached Kathryn's lap, she slowly pulled herself up, never breaking eye contact with Chakotay. The adults were enjoying watching her as she quietly stared at him. Finally, she stated, "You need a wipe. You drew on your face."

Kathryn and Mike laughed, and Chakotay smothered his grin. He said, "It's called a tattoo, and it's a symbol of my tribe."

"Would you like me to color it for you? It looks like a rainbow. The first color is red, the second is orange, the third is yellow, and then green, but we need more stripes."

Chakotay had to smile. "No thank you, but if you want, we can draw it on paper and then you can color it. It's an eagle's wing."

"I might," she said matter-of-factly, and then as if deciding he was okay, she jumped off of Kathryn's lap and stood right next to his leg. "My name is Katie. It has five letters. Do you know what they are?"

"Hmmm... I'm not sure. Do you know?"

"K-A-T-I-E." She pointed to Kathryn. "And this is my Aunt Katie. Her name has five letters too, and they are the same as mine. K-A-T-I-E."

"I see," he said in amazement. "How old are you, Katie?"

"Four. The number that comes before five."

"Yes, it does. Is that your favorite number?"

"No. My favorite number is..." She had to think about it. "My favorite number is seven."

"Oh, why's that?" Chakotay glanced at Kathryn.

"Daddy says it's lucky so that's how many pieces of candy Grandma gave me for my dessert after lunch." She held up her fingers and counted to seven before asking, "What did she say your name is?"

"Chakotay."

"That's a funny name."

Mike said, "It just sounds different and you've never heard it before."

“No, I’ve heard it before.” She said it out loud, slowly, “Cha...ko...tay. I think the first sound is two letters.”

“You’re right. C and h,” Chakotay said.

“Cha... like chair.”

Mike said, “That’s right, Katie. Good work.”

Finished with that conversation, the little girl asked, “Can we play with the puzzle now, Aunt Katie?”

“Sure,” Kathryn got down on the floor again and went back to work with the puzzle they’d been assembling before the men arrived. She glanced up at Chakotay who was watching her and asked, “Did you help Tom and B’Elanna any more?”

“Yes, Friday night and we finished yesterday morning. The room looks great with all the furniture put back.”

“I hope they understood?”

“Of course. I think B’Elanna was disappointed about tonight, but she’ll be okay.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Without me there they can make more comments, as I’m sure they’ll want to.”

He smiled warmly at her and then broke the connection by looking around the room. “This is a beautiful house, but somehow, it’s not what I expected.”

“Oh? What had you imagined?”

“A farmhouse. I’m not sure why. Maybe it was when you were talking about learning the basics.”

“Oh that... well, this isn’t the house I grew up in. Mom sold that about fifteen years ago. It wasn’t a farm, but it did have a large plot of land. We grew our own vegetables.”

“This is a very nice home.”

She let her eyes wander around too, enjoying the airiness and the spacious ceilings. “Yes, it is. I feel very content here. When she bought it, I thought it was way too much house for her, but it’s very comfortable for houseguests and there’s a lot of room to spread out. I’ll have to show you the sunroom later. It’s my favorite spot.”

“I’d love to see it.” He caught her eyes again and smiled gently.

Phoebe chose that moment to come in. She sat a little too close to Chakotay and held out her hand, as if for a kiss. “Hello there, I’m Phoebe.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said as he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Kathryn rolled her eyes at her sister’s flirtatious nature, and glanced at Mike who just shrugged and picked up a book off the side table and absently leafed through it. She knew that Mike didn’t feel threatened in the least, but that he liked making a big show of ignoring it.

“Tell me, Chakotay,” Phoebe purred. “Are you as dangerous as they say you are?”

He leaned into her personal space and with a deep voice, asked, “Who says I’m dangerous?”

“People said that I should be worried about my sister, stuck out there with a dangerous man, hell-bent on revenge. So I want to know... are you dangerous?”

“Very dangerous... to anyone who dared threaten your sister.” His smoldering gaze found Kathryn and her pulse quickened with the intensity of it.

Phoebe withdrew, obviously quite satisfied with herself, and turned to wink at Kathryn. “He’s delicious, Katie.”

Kathryn smiled at the pink tinge that showed Chakotay’s slight embarrassment.

He recovered quickly and replied, “Phoebe, if you weren’t Kathryn’s sister and if your husband wasn’t sitting over there pretending to ignore us, I’d show you just how delicious.”

Little Katie asked innocently, “Mommy, why do you think Cha-ko-tay is yummy?”

Kathryn smothered a laugh.

“He just is, sweetheart.” Phoebe stared into his eyes for a second longer and then climbed onto the floor with Kathryn and Katie. “And so are you, my little pumpkin!” They all laughed as Phoebe attempted to nuzzle her squealing daughter’s neck.

Kathryn decided to get out of the way of mayhem and pulled herself up onto the sofa next to Chakotay. She squeezed his forearm and let her hand rest on his wrist. Softly, she said, “Sorry about that. She’s something.”

His chest rumbled quietly with laughter. “She certainly is. I like her already.”

Gretchen came into the room and asked, “What’s all this ruckus?” Without waiting for an answer, she came right up to Chakotay and took his hand. “I’m so glad that you’re able to join us.”

“Thank you for asking Kathryn to invite me. You have a beautiful home.”

“Why, thank you. I do hope you’ll consider it your home too when you’re here. Anything you need, you just look around for it or ask me. Now, I made Biryani. Katie said you enjoyed the replicated recipe?”

“Yes, very much. She made it on special occasions.”

“Well, we don’t allow her anywhere near a real kitchen, but she does have pretty good luck with replicators.”

Chakotay had to laugh. “Sometimes.”

Kathryn felt the need to defend her honor. “I only burned a handful of dinners.”

They both looked at her with amusement, and Gretchen said, “Well, come on into the dining room. Everything is just about ready.”

Over dinner, they had pleasant conversations about Katie, Chakotay’s family in Ohio, his sister’s pregnancy, and about the status of the rebuilding in San Francisco following the war. Kathryn was growing nervous about the interview broadcast so she didn’t say much, but she enjoyed listening to everyone else.

While Phoebe and Mike were negotiating with Katie about how many bites she had to eat before dessert, Chakotay leaned close and asked Kathryn, “Are you feeling okay?”

“Hmmm? Oh yes. Just a little anxious.”

Gretchen heard her answer and said, “Well, this is a pretty big deal. We’re in the midst of a celebrity now.”

Kathryn shook her head, amused. “It’s just me.”

“Oh, Aunt Martha sure doesn’t think so.”

Chakotay couldn’t help but add, “I’ve heard about Aunt Martha.”

“Have you?” Gretchen looked knowingly at her daughter. “Martha is having a gathering at her house tonight, with everyone she knows to watch the interview. Did I tell you, Katie, that she called a short while ago?”

“Still trying to get me to come over?”

“Yes, but failing that, she wanted to know if you’d be saying anything embarrassing.”

“Good ole, Aunt Martha.” Kathryn shook her head. “It’s quite possible that I will be embarrassing myself, but I don’t think she has anything to worry about. Her name didn’t come up at all.”

“She’d be surprised to hear that,” Phoebe joined in on the conversation. For Chakotay’s benefit, she added, “Aunt Martha is absolutely sure that she was the inspiration for Katie to go into Starfleet, so all of Katie’s accomplishments are really Martha’s accomplishments.”

“Funny,” Chakotay said. “I don’t remember her name on the Voyager manifest.”

“I can’t imagine,” Kathryn closed her eyes to block out the thought.

Gretchen stood and said, “Let’s get this cleared up so we can get situated in front of the viewing screen. I’m so excited, I’m about to bust!”

Kathryn and Chakotay stood to help with the dishes, but as the guests of honor, they were dismissed and banished to the hearth room after their first trip into the kitchen. She didn’t mind because it gave her a few minutes alone with Chakotay. Her favorite sofa was in this room – an oversized love seat. She relaxed into the cushions, crossed her legs comfortably, and savored the plush warmth of the soft fabric.

Still standing, Chakotay watched her enjoyment. “We need to find one of these for your house. You look like you’re in heaven.”

She opened her eyes and patted the seat next to her. “Join me. You’ll love it.”

As requested, he relaxed into the cushions as well and sighed deeply. After a moment of quiet, he said, “I love your family, Kathryn.”

“I’m glad. They’re pretty special to me.”

“I can see why, and I don’t even feel like an intruder.”

“You’re not.” She laid her hand on his arm just as she had before dinner. Looking at the clock, she realized the interview would be starting in twenty minutes. She really hoped that Gloria had pulled things together well.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, just wondering if I should’ve asked to see the final version before it was aired.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. I can’t imagine you being anything but eloquent and graceful... just like you always are when diplomacy is required.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t usually discuss my personal feelings during first contacts.”

He looked at her intently, as if trying to decide whether to ask something.

“What is it?” she wondered.

“It’s that vulnerability thing again, isn’t it?”

“Vulnerability thing? Again?”

“After you got back from Quarra. You said you’d never felt more vulnerable because the crew and everyone at that station had seen you with your hair down, happy, and carefree. You told me that you felt immensely more comfortable behind the captain’s pips and wanted to get that planet behind as soon as possible so that we’d all forget. You have the same look about you now as you did after you got your memories back.”

She waved it off. He had nailed it, but she wasn’t about to start thinking deeply about her innermost psyche. “I’ll be fine... just a little nervous about being so open.” The rest of Kathryn’s family came into the room as she said, “I’m worried that this isn’t going to answer everyone’s questions, and they’ll be stalking me for more.”

“You’re a celebrity now, sis. Everyone wants to know the wonderful you!” Phoebe curled up with Mike on another loveseat, and Kathryn felt instantly jealous that she wasn’t free to do the same with Chakotay. She’d love nothing better than to hide in his arms for the next hour.

As they got settled in and the program was about to start, Gretchen said, “This is just so exciting... My baby girl on Gayle Struthers!”

Kathryn groaned and hid her face in her hands. She felt Chakotay’s hand touch her wrist to pull it away from her face.

“You’re going to miss it if you hide.” He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it softly, but instead of letting it go, he held it between his and urged her to lean against him a little. Even that slight contact made her feel warm, as if he was bolstering her up emotionally so that she could confront her next big obstacle. She relaxed into him a little more and directed her attention at the viewing screen, her thoughts not far from the way his thumb gently rubbed the back of her hand.

The announcer said, “Coming up next: A tell-all interview with Captain Kathryn Janeway of Voyager.”

Kathryn’s image appeared on the screen and Phoebe asked, “You wore that?”

“It’s the one you picked out at that little boutique in Belfast.”

“Yeah, but I thought you’d be in uniform. You should’ve worn red. That jacket we found in Milano, maybe.”

She knew exactly which one her sister was referring to and had to agree. “Yes, I do love that one.”

Chakotay asked, “What new jacket is this?”

“I don’t think you’ve seen it. Too dressy for what we’ve been doing.”

Their conversation ended as the program began. Gayle Struther’s image said, “Tonight, I have the distinct honor of bringing you an in-depth interview with Starfleet’s Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager that recently returned from an unplanned seven-year exile in the far reaches of the galaxy’s delta quadrant. Voyager’s return has been hailed as an extraordinary accomplishment and nothing short of a miracle. Tonight, we’ll learn intimate details about the woman who made it all happen.”

Kathryn didn’t know whether to be embarrassed or flattered by that introduction. She squeezed Chakotay’s hand and felt him return the gesture in reassurance.

The image on the screen switched to Gayle in Kathryn’s living room. “The first question I have for you is one that has been on all our minds since that day in December when Voyager burst through the flames of an exploding Borg sphere. Tell me, Kathryn, how, exactly, did you feel at that moment?”

The camera switched to her, and the lighting showed her looking very soft and feminine. Kathryn felt pleasantly surprised by how her eyes seemed to sparkle. “After what it took to get us there, I was stunned, to put it mildly. I couldn’t believe that we’d actually made it and survived the experience.”

“Although the news broadcasts showed that moment over and over again, we don’t know how Voyager came to be in there. What can you tell us? Did you happen upon the sphere and think, ‘Hey, the Borg are heading our way. Let’s hitch a ride?’”

“Well, yes, actually.” Kathryn laughed. “A large part of the details are classified, but yes, we did ‘happen upon’ a Borg transwarp hub that we decided to destroy, but before we did, we used it to get home. After we entered the conduit that brought us here, we fired torpedoes behind us and were able to destroy the hub. That sphere was sent to assimilate us and when we realized that we wouldn’t be able to outrun it, we allowed it to take us inside. We counted on our shields to keep the Borg out long enough to make it home. Once we realized that we’d been successful, we fired a torpedo at the sphere’s primary power source. Thanks to the outstanding piloting skills of Lieutenant Tom Paris, we high-tailed it out of there in the nick of time.”

“That’s an incredible story. What did you think when you saw Earth for the first time?”

“It was absolutely breathtaking. I was so grateful to be home again and relieved that we’d made it.”

Gayle asked, “What did you miss most about Earth?”

“Everything.” Kathryn thought for a moment. “The seasons, the sunrises and sunsets, the coffee, but most of all, I missed my mother.”

“You’re close to her,” Gayle stated.

“Yes, very close. I hate the pain that my disappearance caused her, but because of it, our relationship has strengthened a great deal. We wrote letters every chance we could in the last few years.”

Gretchen interrupted and told Kathryn, “Thank you, Katie. I loved the letters, too.”

Kathryn smiled at her mom before the interview pulled their attention back.

“Tell us who Kathryn Janeway was before she became Captain of Voyager. You were engaged, right?”

“I was,” Kathryn nodded. “To a philosopher... a brilliant man, whom I loved very much.”

“But he didn’t wait for you.”

“He did for two years, but I don’t fault him for his decision to move on. I wouldn’t have wanted him to grieve endlessly, so I’m glad that he found love again. I sincerely wish him all the best.”

“Your father was a Starfleet Admiral who died in the line of duty. Were you close to him?”

“He was an inspiring man, but I was twenty-one when he died, so he still seems larger than life to me. I did everything in my power to make him proud of me.”

“Do you think if he were still alive, he’d be proud of what you’ve accomplished?”

Kathryn smiled, “I sure hope so.”

“You were with him when he died, were you not?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly. “I was in the same shuttle accident.”

“And someone else was in that accident too?”

“Both my father and my first fiancé were in that shuttle. I was the only survivor... but that was a long time ago.”

“How did that change who you were?”

Kathryn answered, “How can that not have changed me?” She sighed and thought carefully before answering. “I believe that it gave me the determination to make them both proud, so after a period of mourning, I went on to command school and focused my energy on doing just that.”

“Tell us about Voyager. Your mission was supposed to last three weeks, if I understand correctly? What was that mission, if I may ask?”

“It shouldn’t be that much of a secret. We were sent to apprehend the Maquis ship Liberty, commanded by Captain Chakotay.”

Gayle smiled. “It appears that you were successful.”

“Yes,” she held up a finger to add, “but not quite the way I planned.”

“Were you and the Maquis ship thrown out there together? How did they end up on Voyager?”

“The displacement wave took the Liberty first, and when we were looking for them, we got caught up in the same phenomenon. It wasn’t until a few days later when Captain Chakotay sacrificed the Liberty to save Voyager that the Maquis came to be on our ship.”

“What is a displacement wave, exactly?”

Kathryn tapped her temple. “It would take a lot longer to explain the physics behind it than we have time for in this interview, and we don’t really understand the phenomenon completely anyway. Suffice it to say, a sporocystian life form was the caretaker to a species called the Ocampa. He brought ships out there from across the galaxy in an attempt to find a life form who could take over his role. He died before he could send us back.”

“The Ocampa... you had one on your ship for awhile didn’t you? What were they like?”

A pleasant look crossed her face. “Kes was the Ocampa who joined us. They are a very unique species in that they only live for nine years, but achieve adulthood by age one. Kes was a dear and brilliant young lady and made an inspiring difference to what felt like a very grim situation. She was full of hope and amazement for every discovery, every adventure.”

“So... the Maquis were on Voyager, and they became part of your crew. Was that a smooth transition?”

Chuckling at the memories, Kathryn said, “It was a learning experience for us all, and I’m sure harder on the Maquis than on the original crew. Captain Chakotay agreed to become my first officer and that eased the transition. He helped me a great deal by encouraging me to appoint B’Elanna Torres as my chief engineer. I have never met a more gifted and intelligent woman. We are alive today because of her incredible gifts.”

“So, you were stranded out there, with a ship full of Maquis, and no means of getting home. What kind of thoughts were running through your head? Did you ever think you’d see home again?”

“I was determined to find a wormhole, another sporocystian life form, or anything that would provide us with a shortcut. I would not believe that the Delta Quadrant was the end of our story. And there was a magnificent chance to explore and discover so many new worlds. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and at times, I felt like we were the first Enterprise seeking new life in uncharted space. That ship had no backup, and neither did we.”

“Did anything in your past experiences prepare you for the Delta Quadrant?”

“Absolutely not.” Kathryn smiled. “But with the combined experiences, knowledge, tenacity, and wits of the entire crew, we were able to figure it out as we went along. We made some mistakes along the way, but we also became a tight-knit team that was able to accomplish the impossible more than once. I am extremely proud of my crew.”

“If you could go back in time and had the choice of not embarking on that journey into the Badlands, knowing then what you know now, would you still go?”

“What a question.” Kathryn thought hard about that one. “Would I disobey orders? No, but I dearly regret the loss of the forty-seven lives along the way. Most of those were from the impact of the initial displacement wave, but there’s not one loss that doesn’t break my heart.” She wiped away the moisture that had collected in her eyes.

The Kathryn who was watching the interview swallowed hard and squeezed Chakotay’s hand. He put his arm around her and held her against his side.

Gayle asked, “When you first made contact with Earth, how did that affect you?”

“We rejoiced because our friends and family knew we were alive. It was a connection to home that we really needed, even though it didn’t bring us any closer or allow us to communicate.”

“It was a couple years later before communication was possible, wasn't it? When you and the rest of the crew started learning about what was happening here with the war, what were your reactions?”

“We were devastated. Some people had received good news, and the crew at large tried to rejoice with them, but knowing that our home was in turmoil and there was nothing we could do to help was really difficult. The Maquis members learned at that time that all of their comrades had either been murdered or imprisoned, and it opened some old wounds that were hard to recover from. Suddenly, we all felt as helpless to protect our homes as the Maquis had felt trying to protect the estranged colonies.”

Chakotay squeezed Kathryn tightly and whispered into her ear, “Thank you.”

She turned to him and whispered, “I wanted people to know.”

Gayle asked, “I’m sure you encountered some horrible situations out there, some that you're likely unable to talk about, but what would you like the Federation to know about what you endured?”

“I don’t want the people of the Federation to have nightmares, so maybe we should move on to another question.”

“Kathryn, we know that you weren’t on a seven-year vacation of exploration, and you don’t have to tell us details, but we would like to know what kind of challenges you faced. What’s out there?”

She thought carefully before answering. “The good news is that we successfully outwitted or outran all of the more troublesome species, so if any of our stories give you concern, know that they can be beat.” Taking a deep breath before speaking, she said, “The most disturbing species, for me, was one of the first we ran into. The Vidiian. Their entire race was ravaged by a plague that they called the phage. Their medical technology was beyond ours by leaps and bounds, but they depended on organ transplants to survive. The frightening part was that they harvested their organs from living donors.”

“Good heavens.” Gayle looked horrified. “Did you lose any crew to them?”

“Yes.” Kathryn watched herself answer the question succinctly, and knew that during the interview, she had been thinking about all the people who’d died, and how she didn’t want their families to know the circumstances.

“Any other encounters that you can tell us about?”

“Well, there’s always the Borg. We ran into them quite a few times.”

“And two of your crew were former drones, weren’t they?”

“Yes, Annika Hansen was the only remaining Borg on Voyager after our first encounter with them. Our Doctor was able to remove most of her implants, and over time, she regained her humanity. She is, without a doubt, the most intelligent person I have ever known, and I care deeply for her. The other is Icheb. He was one of four Borg children that joined us after we found them on a derelict Borg cube. We placed the other three with their own people, but Icheb stayed with us and has grown into a remarkable young man.”

“What was the most difficult part of the journey?”

“One thing comes to mind above all others... We found ourselves in an area of space that the crew dubbed ‘The Void.’ It was a region that was devoid of any life. No stars, no planets, nothing to break up the monotony of the day and night. We were expecting to face two years of that.”

“How did you manage?”

“Everyone pulled together to make the best of it, but luckily, we encountered a race of people that needed our help, and through that encounter, we found a wormhole that cut sixteen months off our journey.”

“Did you or the crew ever feel like giving up?”

“Yes, but never all at once, so we pulled each other along.”

“How did you keep your faith?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer. We relied on each other more than any crew has ever had to, and at those times when things looked dire, there was always something that came along to renew our spirit.”

“What are some of the discoveries you made that you can share with us? Cultures, science, or whatever you feel like sharing.”

“Wow... there are so many discoveries that it’s hard to isolate them. Maybe one of us will write a book,” Kathryn laughed.

“Tell us about your first-officer, Commander Chakotay. We know him as a former Starfleet officer who joined the Maquis, who then became your chief confidant. What kind of person is he?”

Phoebe, Mike, and Gretchen all glanced at her as Kathryn felt Chakotay squeeze her shoulders. They listened intently to her answer. “Chakotay is a remarkable man. He taught advanced tactics at the academy, but left Starfleet when the Cardassians destroyed his home colony and murdered over three thousand people who were living there. He’s a

peace-loving man who did what he could to get supplies to the surviving colonies and was able to thwart several Cardassian attacks, including a couple against Bajor.”

“And when he agreed to serve under you, was that a smooth transition?”

“Yes, actually, it was. I don’t want to speak for him, but I do know his opinions well, so I hope he won’t mind if I tell you. Chakotay knew that the Federation was trying to avoid a war with Cardassia, and that their hands were tied when it came to the destruction of his home. It was a horrendous tragedy, and his anger was focused on the Cardassians who committed the atrocity. When I asked him to put on the Starfleet uniform again, he did it without hesitation. There was nothing we could’ve done out there to affect change here, so our primary focus was to build a cohesive crew that could face the challenges we would come up against. It wasn’t easy for everyone to put aside their feelings, but eventually, everyone understood why it had to be done.”

Kathryn chanced a glance at Chakotay who had let go of her hand to put his fist against his mouth as he listened. When he looked at her, she saw that his eyes were moist. She said, “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “You’re exactly right. I didn’t realize how much you understood.”

She patted his leg as he gratefully accepted a handkerchief that Gretchen offered to him. While they’d been talking, Gayle asked about Kathryn’s impressions of the impact of the war on the Federation.

“It’s devastating, and I’m sure that I haven’t seen the brunt of it. The visible impact on San Francisco is shocking, so many buildings and landmarks were destroyed. Nothing can replace the lives that were lost – so many of my classmates and friends are gone. It’s...” she shook her head. “It’s inconceivable to me what the Federation suffered through.”

“And Starfleet itself – have you noticed any changes?”

“It’s hard to say. Ask me again in six months. We were debriefed and then we’ve been on leave, so I haven’t really had a chance to get a feel for it yet. I’m sure the loss of life has impacted Starfleet severely. I know just from speaking to my own family that it feels like the proverbial rug was pulled out from under them. We’ve been living with the security of knowing that Earth and the worlds inside the Federation were safe places to live, that Starfleet would protect us, good would always triumph over evil, and that this idealistic society we’ve created would be our Utopia. But suddenly, that’s not true anymore and there’s a crisis of faith.”

“I’ve never heard anyone say it quite so eloquently, Kathryn, but you’re right.” Gayle was just as caught up in the emotions as Kathryn was.

Kathryn continued, "I don't know what I can do, but I hope that the desire to recreate our sense of peace and security is just as strong with every member of the Federation as it is with me."

"Let's hope we can move mountains to make that happen," Gayle said.

"It only takes a grain of faith within each of us."

"Kathryn," Gayle asked. "What does it feel like to have made such a huge difference?"

"How so?"

"This miracle that you've accomplished by bringing Voyager home, the uniting of your crews, the hope that it's given to so many people, the extraordinary stories of how you survived your ordeals, and the impact that you and Voyager must have made on the many worlds you made first contact with. All of these things are because of you, your leadership, and your decisions. How does that feel?"

Kathryn was silent as she thought about the question. "That's a question that I don't know how to answer."

"Your impact on the galaxy is far-reaching and you've brought us hope in miracles. Do you have a feel for the impact you've made?"

The Kathryn watching felt reassured as Chakotay took her hand again, lacing their fingers together as he had five years ago on New Earth and many times since when she needed his silent support.

"In retrospect," Kathryn answered, "It is easy to see that we accomplished something monumental. It's also easy for me to say that I made the decision to strand us out there in order to protect an innocent race of people, and that I was willing to make that sacrifice because it was the right thing to do.

"But, I didn't realize how much that decision would affect me and the lives of countless individuals. We go about our days, all of us, doing our jobs as best we can. You know the old adage – I put my pants on one leg at a time just like everyone else.

"This difference you're talking about isn't something that I decided to do one morning. It was merely living one day at a time, making the best choices I could with the information I had at the time. It was about encouraging the people who were out there with me to do the best that they could.

"Making a difference is about making the best out of your circumstances. It takes the strength to stick with it and perseverance when times get tough. In other words, to be as stubborn as a mule. I'm not saying that I didn't make mistakes, nor was I always positive

and hopeful. There were some very dark times out there, but just as I cared for the crew of Voyager, they also cared about me. That's what made the difference."

Gayle asked, "Still, there must have been choices that you made where you knew the outcome would be significant?"

Kathryn answered, "There were some opportunities that we took advantage of, and yes, we knowingly helped when it was within our power and ethics to do so, but no more than any Federation ship would do. There were quite a few times when I didn't think Voyager would survive. It was either sheer luck or the grace of God, but here we are. Some of us didn't make it, and I'm surprised that I'm not one of them."

Kathryn paused before saying, "There are countless stories of men and women who have made a difference by doing just one thing. I suppose that we were lucky to have little moments like that almost every day. We had almost five hundred first contacts. Ninety percent of those went well, and I hope that with the remaining fifty, we were able to leave a mark, plant an idea, or encourage a little thought. It's hard to tell what the impact will be of every little decision, choice, or even simply the expression of an idea.

"I'm no different than anyone else. The abilities that I've needed have emerged as I confronted situations. When that failed, someone has always stepped up to fill the void."

"Who was that person?"

"Oh, it was so many people, but I'd have to say that, for me, one person rose above all the others – my first officer. It was the never-failing and steadfast support of Chakotay that helped me. His ingenuity and resourcefulness are remarkable, and he stood by my side, every day, so that we could face the challenges together."

Kathryn felt Chakotay's hand begin to tremble slightly, so she held it reassuringly.

"It was also Tuvok's logic, B'Elanna Torres' brilliance, the trust and intelligence of Harry Kim. We were motivated by our EMH's thirst for humanity and the search for Annika Hansen's identity. Tom Paris' humor grounded us and brought us levity in the most dire circumstances – not to forget his unbelievable piloting abilities and genuine compassion for others. The list goes on and on. Everyone gave each other what they could and we became a family who relied on each other."

Gayle asked, "What can you do now? What will top this?"

"I don't think there's anything that could be more difficult or more rewarding than the last seven years. I'll just keep doing what I have been doing – to care about the people in my life, and to do all the good that I can, whenever the opportunity presents itself."

"I have one last question for you."

Kathryn smiled, "What's that?"

"How are you?"

She laughed, giving the viewers her full, bright smile. "I'm thrilled to be home."

"Yes, but after seven years of such intense responsibility, how challenging has it been for you to reintegrate with life here on Earth, and at the same time, struggle with letting go of your role as captain for nearly one hundred and fifty people?"

"Well, I don't think my role as captain of Voyager's crew will ever be one that I'm willing to let go of. Being a captain in such a closed community is a far-different role than that which is typical. I love each and every one of them and I hope we find ways to continue to be an integral part of each other's lives. Chakotay and I have been checking on everyone, making sure they're getting settled in. We'll soon be discussing what's next for each of us, and I hope to make that transition smooth and encouraging."

"And your personal reintegration?"

Kathryn smiled brightly, "I've been enjoying Earth like I never have before. It's remarkable and I cherish every sunset, every flower, and every little piece of natural beauty I see. I feel like my head has been in the clouds."

"It has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today, Kathryn. You truly are an inspiration to us all. I wish for you, and all of those on Voyager, a warm welcome home."

"Thank you."

The show ended and Gretchen clicked off the viewscreen. The room was quiet until Katie asked, "Are you done talking now, Aunt Katie?"

Kathryn laughed. "Yes, I think I've said more than enough."

Mike said sarcastically, "I feel motivated to go make the world a better place now."

"We'll miss you, Mike," Kathryn joked in return.

Gretchen said, "I'm speechless, Katie."

Phoebe added, "I had no idea you were such a good speaker, sis. That was really something."

"It's no wonder that you were exhausted after that interview was over." Gretchen told everyone, "She came here and slept all afternoon."

Kathryn turned to Chakotay who was quietly listening to everyone. “What did you think? Did I come close to describing the experience out there?”

“Yes,” his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “Absolutely.”

Phoebe said, “Well, it’s obvious to me, Chakotay, that my sister thinks you’re pretty wonderful.”

“I do,” Kathryn said softly.

“So it seems,” Chakotay replied.

Mike said, “I’m anxious to see what the response to this interview will be. You said some pretty significant things that should motivate some change.”

“I didn’t intend to start a revolution.”

“No,” Gretchen said, “But you certainly were clear about your opinion of the Maquis.”

“Doesn’t everyone feel that way now that the war is over?” Kathryn asked.

“No,” Mike said. “Many think they were the stimulus behind it. There aren’t many who think the war was inevitable.”

“Hmmm,” Kathryn thought about that. “Then I’m glad I could shed some light on it.”

Chakotay asked, “Even if that means you just shot yourself in the foot regarding your career?”

“I don’t really give a damn about my career. There are a lot more important things in life.”

Gretchen added, “And your statement about the Federation being in a crisis of faith may be true, but that’s the opposite message than what the President of the Federation has been trying to convey.”

“Oh,” Kathryn frowned. “I didn’t realize that.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Phoebe said casually. “Not many people agree with him.” She stood up and said, “I think it’s time to get Katie home.”

“Noooo... I want to spend the night!” Katie insisted.

“Not tonight,” Mike said. “You have preschool in the morning.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere tomorrow!”

Gretchen asked, "Would you make a picture for me tomorrow at school? I love your paintings so much."

Katie sighed dramatically, "Okay."

Kathryn chuckled lightly at the exchange and watched half-heartedly as her sister gathered up all of their things. She looked at Chakotay, who was very still and quiet. "Did I upset you?"

He slowly turned his eyes to look at her. "No, not at all. I'm worried about you, but I'm not upset. In fact, I'm rather touched."

"I really don't think you should worry about my career. I'm not interested in heading out there again."

"I know." He smiled softly and pulled his arm out from behind her to hold her hands. "I just don't want you to be at the center of any coming trouble."

"I'm not worried about Starfleet or the Federation."

"I'm not either," he said intently. "It's anyone outside the chain of command that I worry about. They may latch onto something you said."

"If anyone like that exists, and if they truly listen to what I said, the end result could only be positive."

"If they listen... that's the key." He squeezed her arm and said, "I'm probably worrying about nothing."

She smiled, trying to reassure him, "I don't think I said anything that momentous."

"Give yourself some credit," he winked. "You were very inspiring, and always have been."

She shook her head as they rose to say good-bye to Katie.

After Phoebe, Mike, and Katie left, the other three retired to the sun room, although the sun had set hours earlier. The room was surrounded by open-air screens, but had a warm, gas stove that kept the chill out of the night air. It was decorated with large, comfortable furniture and overlooked a patio and private garden behind the house. At night, the garden was lit with small lights sprinkled throughout the flower beds and along the walkway. Kathryn relaxed into the settee and let Chakotay pour wine for all of them.

Her mother brought out some fruit and cheese and handed Kathryn a plate. Taking a seat across from her, Gretchen said, “Katie, that interview was really something.”

“I’m happy with the way it turned out.” She nibbled on a slice of mild cheddar. “Although I hope I didn’t appear arrogant.”

“Not in the least,” Chakotay said as he sat down next to her. “If anything, we wish you’d take more credit.”

“I think it’s very clear that as captain, I was the leader, but everyone deserves the recognition. I want to make sure that the Federation learns about our whole Voyager family, not just me.”

“Your modesty is very becoming, dear.” Gretchen smiled at her daughter. “I’ve always been proud of you, but listening to you speak tonight might just have been the icing on the cake.”

Kathryn felt warmed by her mother’s compliment. “Thank you.”

Gretchen said, “Tell me about the two of you. You’re much better friends than Edward was with any of his first officers or captains. When did this friendship become so strong?”

Chakotay and Kathryn looked at each other and smiled. He said, “It was pretty gradual. First, we had to get comfortable with each other’s crew.”

“Yes, although I trusted you immediately.”

“You did?” Chakotay asked.

“Do you think I would have asked you to be my first officer, otherwise?”

“I assumed that it was to keep the Maquis in line.”

Gretchen asked, “Yes, but when did you start becoming friends? I hated to think about you out there isolated from your crew.”

“They were a unique crew in that they didn’t let me isolate myself.” Kathryn looked at Chakotay. “Several invited me to the social gatherings often.”

He replied, “True, but I think it was around that first Christmas, about nine months into the trip. We’d found Amelia Earhart and a whole society of humans that had been abducted from Earth in the twentieth century. We gave the crew a choice about whether to stay or not and anyone who wanted to was to gather in the cargo bay.”

“No one did,” she remembered fondly.

“Afterwards, you held my hand briefly in the corridor,” Chakotay said.

“Hmm,” Kathryn said to herself happily. “Yes, I guess I did. And then we had a Christmas celebration and you and I exchanged gifts. You gave me that collection of short stories.”

Addressing Gretchen, Chakotay said, “And she gave me a dream catcher to decorate my quarters. They were pretty spartan.”

“And the next day you went off and disappeared with that young Kazon. I was not the least bit happy about that, you know.”

“It’s not like you never disappeared,” Chakotay said playfully.

Gretchen said, “Now, I didn’t mean to start an argument.”

Kathryn took a sip of wine. “It’s an old argument. We saved each other’s hides more times than either of us cares to remember.”

Chakotay said, “Your mother doesn’t need to hear that.”

“I’m not oblivious to the dangers of being in Starfleet,” Gretchen responded.

“Our friendship…” Kathryn thought back. “I think it really blossomed the following fall.”

“New Earth,” Chakotay said.

“Oh?” Gretchen asked.

“He and I were bitten by an insect and the Doctor couldn’t find a cure that would allow us to leave the planet. Something in the atmosphere kept us alive.”

Chakotay continued, “So they had no choice but to leave us there.”

“It was a beautiful planet. We named it New Earth, and it was just the two of us for almost two months. That was definitely when our relationship changed.”

“Two months alone? I should say…” Gretchen gave them a knowing look.

“No, Mother, we didn’t take our relationship that far. It was mostly just a close friendship.”

“Mostly?” Gretchen asked.

“I kissed her,” Chakotay volunteered. “But then the ship came back for us, having found a cure.”

“It took you two months to kiss her?”

“So anyway...” Kathryn changed the subject. “Our friendship grew after that, although it had its ups and downs.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes and said, “I don’t believe you two for a second.”

“If you’ll remember, I was engaged to Mark at the time.”

“Oh, I remember,” Gretchen refilled their wine glasses. “A mistake in itself. You’d been engaged for three years.”

“By that time, it had been five, but that’s beside the point.”

“No, darling, it’s not. Anyone who’s your age and can wait three years to get married doesn’t really want to, in my opinion.”

“It’s a moot point now, anyway.” Kathryn sighed heavily. Her mother was hitting a little too close to home. “Did you call Aunt Martha?”

“You really must want to change the subject to bring her up.” Gretchen popped a grape into her mouth.

“You’re right.”

“No, I didn’t call her, but I also silenced the comm so no one would interrupt us tonight.”

“Probably a good idea,” Chakotay responded. “I think this interview is going to put you in demand, Kathryn.”

“It was supposed to satisfy their curiosity, not create more.”

“Yes, but I’ll bet now that the whole Federation knows how personable you are, they’ll all want to talk to you even more.”

Kathryn sighed. “It was the part about making a difference, wasn’t it?”

“Likely,” Gretchen agreed. “You could be an inspirational speaker with that theme. If you ever want to retire from Starfleet, I think you could really do something with that.”

“That may come sooner than later, depending on what they want to do with me now.”

Gretchen asked, “Chakotay, have you given any thought as to what’s next?”

“I’ll probably wait to see what they offer me, but I’d rather stay here than go out into space again. Overall, I was happiest when I was teaching.”

“Sounds like a good plan. If Starfleet doesn’t want you, just come see me. I’ll get you in on the faculty at IU, where I teach.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Gretchen said, “Speaking of that, I do have an eight o’clock class of freshmen in the morning, so I should turn in. Chakotay, you’re more than welcome to stay the night. We have plenty of room.”

“Thank you, but I’ll find my way back to the transporter station.”

“Nonsense.” She stood and waved off his statement. “Stay here and enjoy yourself. You two can go back together in the morning.” Leaning down to kiss her daughter’s head, she said, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Janeway.”

“Gretchen, call me Gretchen,” she said as she went back into the house.

Chakotay looked after her. “She’s wonderful.”

“Yes, she is. Smart as a whip, too.”

“Just like her daughter,” he smiled.

“Flatterer.” She winked and asked, “So, would you like to stay?”

“It would be nice.”

“All right, then.” Closing her eyes, she laid her head on the back of the couch. “Now we can just relax. I love the night air here. Isn’t it peaceful?”

“Yes, very.” He refilled their glasses again and asked, “I hadn’t thought about Kes in a long time until tonight. I wonder what she’s doing now.”

“I hope she’s back on Ocampa. That’s where I imagine her.”

“That sounds nice. She was such a special young woman. It’s hard to imagine her out there alone.”

“She needed people. I missed her so much at times that it hurt.”

“She was like a daughter to you.”

Kathryn’s eyes watered with the emotional memories. Trying to lighten the mood, she said, “Yes, and then I tried to replace her with Seven. Night and Day. I wonder which would be more like my real daughter, had I ever had one.”

“You’d like to?”

Lifting her head, she asked, “Have a child?” When Chakotay nodded, she continued. “I don’t know. It seems a little late in life to be thinking about it, but Phoebe’s only four years younger than I and she’s thinking about having another.”

“She is?”

Kathryn nodded. “I should be content to live vicariously through her.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Chakotay touched her arm. “Don’t dismiss the idea without giving it some thought.”

They continued quietly discussing the memories that the interview had brought up for a couple hours. During a lull in the conversation, Chakotay said, “Kathryn, I’d like to apologize again for my behavior with Annika.”

She held up a hand. “You really don’t need to. Let’s just call it water under the bridge.”

“Thank you, but I keep beating myself up over it. Your friendship is a lot more important to me than she ever could’ve been.”

She took his hand and held it. “Your friendship is important to me, too.”

He sighed, “I guess I just... I’m sorry. You really don’t want to talk about this, do you?”

“Not really, but if you need to, we can.”

“I’d just like to explain myself, but I haven’t figured out how.”

She smiled. “Sometimes our actions are beyond any reasonable explanation, or they’re at least beyond anything we care to admit. I’ve had my share of irrational behavior, too.”

“I was flattered by her interest.”

“I understand.”

“And when she decided that she wasn’t attracted to me, I felt really foolish for getting involved with her in the first place.”

She held his hand tighter, “I can assure you that it had more to do with her inability to feel than it did with your sexual appeal.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“I’m serious, Chakotay. She said that she enjoyed the first two kisses when she was in control, but then you initiated the intimacy. Most women would enjoy that a lot more, but I don’t think she can feel arousal. If you think about it, having someone put their tongue in your mouth without any feelings of stimulation would be rather repulsive.”

“You talked about it in that much detail?” He cringed.

“She needed to talk about it.”

“It’s discomfoting to know that my girlfriend and my best friend were talking about me that way.”

“I didn’t feel comfortable with the conversation either. She asked if I’d ever kissed you, wanting to know if I experienced a similar non-response.”

He closed his eyes. “Do I need to know this?”

After taking a sip of wine, she responded, “I declined to answer her.”

Pondering that for a moment, he quietly asked, “Will you answer that question now?”

“You want to know if I enjoyed kissing you? That was five years ago.”

He shifted so that he was facing her, with a sudden mischievous glint in his eye. “It seemed to me like you did.”

“You were the last man on earth, so to speak.” She downed the rest of her wine quickly.

“You’re blushing.”

“It’s the wine. I’ve had five glasses, I think.” She stared at her empty glass trying to remember. “Maybe six.”

“So you didn’t like the kiss?”

She chanced a glance at him and he was looking far too amused at the turn of the conversation. “I didn’t say that. It was nice.”

“Nice?”

“I would’ve let you kiss me again, if Tuvok hadn’t called us the next day.”

“I thought so.” He smiled as he finished off his wine too.

“Care for a refill?” she asked as she poured a little more for herself and drank quickly.

“No, but I would like your help with something.”

“What’s that?”

“An evaluation.”

“Of?”

“A kiss.”

“I see.” She felt a flood of warmth infuse her, but didn’t want to give it away so she finished off her wine. “What are the criteria for this assessment?”

“Well,” he took their empty glasses and set them on the side table. “Don’t you agree that getting feedback on one’s performance indicates areas that need improvement?”

“Of course, but my feedback may or may not have any bearing on any future recipient’s preferences.”

He shifted closer so that their legs were touching. “Oh, I think it might.”

She shivered as his cool fingertips caressed her alcohol-warmed face. At least, she thought that was why she shivered. “Your fingers are cold.”

He smiled just before his lips descended and kissed her lips tenderly. He closed his soft, warm lips against her mouth several times and a soothing warmth settled over her. When he withdrew, he looked steadily into her eyes. “What do you think?”

She leaned back and shrugged. “It was sweet.”

“That’s all?”

“Chaste.” She tried not to smile, but she wasn’t entirely successful.

“I see.” He licked his lips. “Can you suggest areas of improvement?”

“This is just my preference, but I’m fond of a more open-mouthed kiss.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“And your hands... touching the chin is a nice starting place, but then they need to move.” She waved her hands in front of her face, watching them carefully as they seemed to blur.

“Do you have a specific destination in mind?”

“I like to be surprised.”

“Mm hmmm.” He leaned in to recover the distance she had put between them. “Could I impose upon you for a re-evaluation?”

“You think your performance will improve that quickly?”

“I’d like to find out.”

He was leaning forward about as far as he could and it was up to her to complete the distance. She put a hand on his chest and pushed him back a little. “First, I think we should get a little more comfortable. I think you might agree that for a good field test scenario, it’s important to have proper placement of the subjects.”

“Of course.” He opened his arms as she snuggled closer to his side.

“And I’d like to suggest that the duration of the test be long enough for a thorough evaluation.” She could tell that her words were slurring a little.

He wrapped his arm around her back and pulled her close. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

She looked up into his deep, dark eyes, feeling as if she was in a dream. Her only connection to reality was the tingle his finger created as it traced along the top edge of her lips. Her breathing grew shallow as he gently tugged at her lower lip, opening her mouth seductively to receive his kiss. Ever so slowly, his lips descended, and fuzziness pervaded her senses, causing her to fall into him with her mind, her body, and with the love for him that she’d felt for a long, long time.

Following her suggestion, he caressed her face for only a moment before his fingers threaded into her hair, eventually finding their way to the back to cradle her head tenderly in his hands.

Kathryn melted when the soft warmth of his tongue joined the kiss. Her hands gripped his shirt, silently urging him to take it deeper until their tongues met in the most erotic kiss she’d ever experienced. As he steadily coaxed her into arousal, a moan came from deep within her chest. Much lower, a warm, wet heat settled in her belly where the sensations spiraled up through her until she was light-headed and unable to do anything

but react to his kiss. Her body felt afire as his kiss deepened even further, entangling their mouths, and making her crave his touch all over. Unable to stop herself, she arched her body against his, letting him know that she wanted more.

They stayed in the kiss for a long moment until his fingers disentangled from her hair to lightly touch her shoulder. Gently, he held her arm as he brought them slowly out of the kiss. When he drew back, her eyes remained closed and she felt dizzy. Not wanting the arousal to end, she settled against him and laid her head on his shoulder.

He whispered, “Kathryn?”

She didn’t want to open her eyes or move even the tiniest muscle. “Hmmm?”

“Are you okay?”

“Mmmhmm.” She forced herself to speak. “I think I’ve had too much to drink.”

“I see.” He hugged her close and caressed her arm to warm her up. He didn’t know that she was already plenty warm, but the touch felt good nonetheless.

After a few minutes, she managed to open her eyes and look up into his kind and caring face. “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself.”

“I think you passed your field test,” she slurred.

“Oh? Was the tongue an acceptable element?”

“It was delicious,” she hummed, feeling languid and dreamy.

“I’ll have to remember that next time I kiss a woman.”

“Oh? Who’re you planning on kissing?”

“You’ll be the first to know.” He kissed her temple.

She smiled up at him, thoroughly enjoying being in his arms, held and cherished in a way she’d only imagined.

He said, “It’s a beautiful night.”

“Mmmhmm.” Slowly, she turned her head until she could see the screened windows.

“I’ve always loved Indiana in the springtime. I should’ve bought a house here instead of California.”

“Is this where you’d like to retire?”

“Maybe so, although I’d like to live in the mountains too. Somewhere in a natural setting.”

“Well, there’s nothing saying you can’t move.”

“True, but I think I’ll stay where I’m at for a little while longer.”

They sat in silence for a little while, content to hold each other. He slid his hand up and down her arm, and she lay against him with her head on his shoulder. She felt like drifting off to sleep, but didn’t want to miss a moment of being close to him, so instead, she listened to his breathing and the quiet sounds of the night around them.

He broke the silence by asking, “When are your meetings this week?”

“Start tomorrow afternoon.” Starfleet wanted to work through their evaluations and recommendations for the crew. “I wish you could join me, though. Maybe I’ll suggest that.”

“I wouldn’t mind. I’d like to have a say in what positions and ranks are offered to our people.”

“I think they want my opinion first, but it would be more efficient to go through it together.” She yawned and snuggled into him. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“I think we should go to bed.”

“I’m quite comfortable right where I’m at.”

He chuckled and nuzzled her hair. “Me too, but if we fall asleep out here, our backs will complain all day tomorrow.”

She made no effort to move and held him tightly.

“Come on,” he said as he unfolded her from his arms and helped her to her feet. “You need sleep.”

“Mmmm... but I was so warm.”

“I know.” He collected most of the dishes and headed inside to the kitchen. When he returned, she was still standing where he’d left her, holding two empty wine bottles. “Let’s go in,” he said as he wrapped his arm around her and led her forward. “I think you’re a little tipsy.”

“A little,” she slurred. “But I’m fine.” As she set the bottles on the counter and one fell over, she laughed. “Oops.”

He straightened out the bottle and said, “We can wash everything in the morning.”

She felt a little giddy as he took her hand to walk through the house. Stopping outside the guest bedroom, she leaned into him and said, “Here’s your room.”

“Where’s yours?” he asked quietly as he held her steady.

She pointed to the room at the end of the hall. “Down there.”

He turned her in that direction and urged her forward, but she stopped and turned back around, bringing their faces very close together.

She asked, “Don’t you want to practice kissing a little more?”

“Not tonight,” he kissed her softly on the cheek. “We need to get some sleep.”

“Too bad,” she said as she laid her head against his chest and heard the steady beat of his heart.

“Come on,” he turned her again to walk down the hall.

She reluctantly let go of him when she saw her large, cozy bed and flopped down on top of the quilt. She hugged a pillow and closed her eyes, feeling like she was sinking into the mattress. When she felt the flutter of movement over her, she looked up to see him covering her with a blanket.

“Goodnight, Kathryn.” He brushed back the tendrils of hair that had fallen across her face.

“G’night, ‘kotay.” She happily drifted off to sleep.
