

Milk Run

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In the six months since they had returned from the Delta Quadrant, so much had happened and not happened for Chakotay. His budding romance with Seven of Nine had fizzled out within two weeks of their arrival, with both realizing that where something may've survived, perhaps even flourished, on board Voyager, it was never going to work in this new environment. They had parted as a couple but remained good friends.

Seven had taken a position with a research arm of Starfleet and was thriving. Her aunt had taken her under her wing and introduced Seven to a small but wonderful group of relatives. He knew Seven had received lots of job offers but she'd been determined to stay on Earth with her new family and to be close to Kathryn Janeway.

Janeway herself had thankfully been hailed as the returning hero and not subjected to any disciplinary proceedings due to her actions in the Delta Quadrant. He still felt a little stab of anxiety when he remembered the last thirty minutes on Voyager as they approached Earth. Janeway, Tuvok and Chakotay had hastily planned a strategy for dealing with any adverse situations that they felt they may experience on their return. The possible prosecution of the Maquis, the Equinox crew or indeed, herself.

But when the time came, they realized that no such prosecutions would take place, the relief on his Captain's face had made her look ten years younger. Thinking of that moment still made him smile after all this time.

He hadn't actually seen her in months, though they had been in contact. He'd moved around quite a bit, visiting old friends and helping Ayala and some of the other ex-Maquis unite with their families and start re-establishing their lives.

Janeway had told him of the wonderful few weeks she had spent with her family in Indiana. She had also gone to Vulcan to check on Tuvok, who had responded well to treatment and had recovered well enough to, with his wife, accompany Janeway and her mother on a short holiday to Italy. But he hadn't heard from her in a couple of weeks. If he had time today, he would look her up.

So, here he found himself, still in Starfleet, now a Captain and about to start his first assignment since completing his leave.

It would be a dream mission for him. He was to be seconded to the Federation's Diplomatic Corps to help them mediate and 'facilitate' negotiations between various the governments of planets with

some indigenous groups that Federation and other archeologists and anthropologists wanted to study. The diplomatic corps had been delighted with his acceptance. They had confided in him that he was perfect for the job; culturally, his upbringing had been very similar to the groups, he had a strong interest in the area (they'd obviously read his reports about some of his experiences in the Delta Quadrant), he was Starfleet trained and somewhat detached from the more recent events that had taken place in the Alpha Quadrant.

For the next eight to ten weeks he was a 'kind of' civilian and then he would take up his official posting as a professor at Starfleet Academy.

As he walked towards Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, he wondered what the problem was that had caused them to recall him from the Ambassador's office in Paris.

The ambassador had suggested that he use the opportunity to 'take the rest of the week' and look up some friends before he departed Earth for the Federation Embassy on Bajor.

During the walk along the corridors to the Chief of Security's office he wondered what Kathryn was doing. She must also have finished her leave by now and be back on duty.

On arrival at main Security, he was shown into the office of an Admiral Balak.

The Admiral gave his hand a hearty shake, welcomed him home, asked about his classes he would be taking at the Academy, commented on the information still being analysed from Voyager's discoveries, offered him coffee and then told him that Starfleet believed that violent attempts against his life may be made before or during his assignment. All without taking a breath.

"You're joking, sir."

"I'm afraid not, Captain. But we're fairly certain that if an attempt is made, it will be before you leave Earth. We've had a security detachment following you for the last twenty four hours."

At Chakotay's surprised expression he further explained.

"I'm sorry we didn't notify you before, but there wasn't a good opportunity. Anyway, in a few days you'll be on your way to Bajor and by then, we're hoping to have this situation resolved." He offered Chakotay a large jar. "Cookie?"

"Er, no. Thankyou. Really, Admiral. I can't imagine anyone that would care enough about me to want me dead, even any Cardassians, really."

"I know, it does seem improbable. And I'm sorry this may disrupt your last couple of days before you leave, but quite frankly we don't want anything to happen to any of our Voyager heroes, not to mention your value to the upcoming mission."

"Aye, sir." Chakotay didn't sound convinced.

"Anyway, I've asked the Captain of the Pelorus to join us. The Pelorus will be taking the whole delegation as well as supplying your security detail when you're en route. *If* the threat is still current, of course."

At that moment, the Admiral's intercom sounded and Chakotay didn't pay much attention to the Admiral's conversation. His mind was trying to grasp who could possibly hate him enough to want to kill him. It had to be a mistake.

A gentle knock on the door brought him back to the present.

The Admiral was smiling at him "Captain Chakotay, you know Captain Janeway of course."

His smile had been as automatic as his outstretched hand before he fully absorbed what the Admiral had said. In retrospect, he wasn't sure if he was more surprised that she had ignored his hand and embraced him, or that she had done so in front of an Admiral.

"Chakotay, it's so good to see you." She squeezed him tightly.

"Kathryn, you too. You look wonderful." And she did. Her eyes had lost that haunted look and were, he thought, sparkling. She hadn't looked that fit since he'd seen her the first time on the bridge of Voyager. As they embraced, he noticed that she was growing her hair again and it was in a pony tail. The hug continued and he was assaulted by so many memories that her fragrance had triggered. He wasn't sure how long had passed before he'd remembered where he was. "Sir, my apologies."

"Captain!" Balak barked at Janeway, who snapped to attention. "What's a parsec?"

"Sir, a parsec is a distance of about 3.26 light years. Its name comes from a contraction of 'parallax second' because a star at that distance would appear to shift by one second, or one sixtieth of one sixtieth of one degree, against the background of stars from opposite sides of the Earth's orbit. Sir!"

"Of course it is Katie. Give me a hug."

The Admiral embraced Janeway, while Chakotay looked on perplexed.

"Bally, good to see you. Where's my cookie?" She spotted the jar on the large desk and peered inside.

At Chakotay's baffled expression, Janeway tried to explain.

"Sorry, Chakotay," turning her attention back to him with a cookie in her hand, "I don't seem to know any Admirals who don't give me pop quizzes every time they see me. The Admiral here likes to concentrate on 19th & 20th Century physics."

"And I've got seven years worth to catch up on, my dear. But back to the matter at hand. You've been briefed?" Balak removed his arm from around Janeway's shoulder and now was all business.

"Yes, sir. Although, knowing the Captain, I really don't see who could want to kill him." She gave Chakotay a smile.

"I know Katie, but you will be vigilant anyway. The ambassador seems quite attached to him."

"Not just the ambassador, sir." Janeway replied.

"Well, on your way. Scoot. I'll see you when you get back. Say hello to your mother for me."

As they walked down the corridor together, they were laughing.

"You know, I'm pretty sure that was the first time I've been ordered to 'scoot' by an admiral."

"He's a sweetie, isn't he? He was a friend of my father's and would always try to be scary but I've always adored him. He's been quizzing me the longest of all them. And giving me cookies." She held up her chocolate chip prize.

Today was a day for firsts, it seemed. He'd never heard Kathryn Janeway call anyone a 'sweetie' before or for that matter, say that she 'adored' an admiral.

"So, the day's our own now, Chakotay. Did you have anywhere you wanted or needed to be?"

"No, I didn't really have any plans. I was going to try and find you actually."

"Well, how about lunch? My treat."

"Sounds wonderful. I'm completely in your hands."

"As you should be." she said with a glint of mischief in her eyes.

Chakotay was impressed that Janeway had scrupulously informed Starfleet Security of their location and intentions at all times. He'd laughed at her following protocol so assiduously.

"Kathryn, you know how much I hate protocol."

"I'll let you into a little secret, Chakotay, I always did too. Bally may be a sweetie, but if he found out I hadn't done the right thing, he'd bounce me all over the campus and bust me down to crewman. If I was *lucky*."

They laughed and she linked her arm through his as they walked. Once they'd taken their table at the restaurant, they resumed their normal comfortable conversation style. They talked about what had been happening to the crew of Voyager, as well as Naomi, Seven and Icheb and the Doctor's latest victory, Starfleet rank of lieutenant commander.

He finally asked her about the Pelorus.

"Tom and B'Elanna have signed on, but Tuvok as you know has decided to retire and Harry is still in command school. I'm hoping Harry will be able to join us when he's finished. If he wants to, of course."

He hadn't discussed his decision not to return to a ship with her and this seemed to be the time.

"Kathryn, I'm s..."

"Chakotay, I understand. Really. Quite frankly, it could work out perfectly for me. I have plans." She said mysteriously. "And who ever heard of a ship with two Captains? The pips look good on you."

"But..."

"No 'buts' mister." She looked at him intently. "Are you going to eat that salmon?"

Not waiting for his answer, she reached across the table and skewered it with her fork. "You can have my potato salad." she added, as she turned her plate around and a bit closer to him.

It was like they'd never been apart. Chakotay suddenly wondered how he'd managed to be away from her for these past months and he was very much looking forward to the trip to Bajor, if the last hour was anything to go by.

He'd only been with her for just over an hour and she was already stealing his food. He wondered if that's why they'd both ordered meals that the other would eat. It was hard to believe that someone swiping his lunch could make him so happy. Even she seemed to be enjoying herself too.

And apart from her insisting that Starfleet security knew of their every move, it seemed that some protocols were being ignored here on Earth.

"I can't believe someone wants to hurt you. They must have you confused with some other broody guy with a tattoo."

"I'll have you know that I was once very scary and dangerous."

"You *scary*? Oh, please. Although I can see the 'dangerous' thing."

"I'm a pussycat now though."

"And I've been looking for a pet!"

They had ended up walking along the shore within the Academy grounds, still talking about the crew and speculating on the fate of their beloved Voyager. The trip to Bajor was finally discussed.

"What on earth are you doing on a mission like this anyway?"

"Like what?"

"A milk run. Running a taxi service."

"Chakotay, I'm a Starfleet captain, I do what they tell me to do. Some of us aren't Maquis rebels you know. And why wouldn't I take this job?"

Which was true as far as it went. He knew, however, that the Voyager crew had been given special treatment to a great extent. He had been given the choice of his next assignment and plenty of time to decide. The Captain of Voyager would be able to ask for whatever she wanted.

"Kathryn. It's a bit dull. Not very exciting."

"Maybe I like dull." She gave him her brightest smile. "I like *you* don't I?"

He gave her a jaundiced sideways glance and snorted.

"Yeah, right. And I'll get you for that remark."

"Anyone would think I go looking for trouble if they listened to you." She was trying to sound hurt, but the sly smirk gave her away.

"Well, let's think about it." He made a show of counting on his fingers. "You deliberately got assimilated, you personally rescued Seven from the Borg cube, you were the first person down the chute to rescue Harry and Tom. Need I go on?"

"A couple of isolated incidents in seven years." she scoffed and waved her hand around to emphasise the point. He caught it as it went passed him. She didn't seem to mind.

"Okay, flying through a pulsar, going after Neelix on your own in the Flyer at the Talaxian colony, planning to ram the Dreadnought with Voyager..."

"You really think I'm reckless?" she interrupted, "an adventure seeker?"

"Let's just say that you thrive on action."

"Hrmph. I'm the most placid person you'll ever know. I'm practically boring."

He laughed out loud.

"Kathryn, you won't last a week without doing something crazy."

"Of course I will. Easy." She snapped the fingers of her free hand. "Not a problem for *me*."

"Want a bet?"

"A bet?"

"Yeah, a bet. A wager, gamble, put some money on the outcome."

"I know what a bet is, smart guy." And then she was interested. "What will I win?"

"You won't win. I will. Let's see, when I win, I want a real date. No uniforms, the whole bit, when you can't help yourself and do something 'actiony' within a week."

Her eyes opened wide but she quickly went back to normal. Chakotay thought she looked pleased. At least she didn't punch him.

"You want a date? With who?" He gave her a look with a raised eyebrow that was worthy of Tuvok. "Oh. Is that all? How many of those do you want before... And a week? Why not make it a month? I just can't see any opportunities for my so called 'reckless' behaviour anytime soon."

He tried to look as innocent as possible under her gaze.

"Okay, Chakotay. You're on. But as I'm going to win, Mister-so-called-Kathryn-Expert, I have to think of something I want."

"Like what? Not that it matters. I'll be collecting. And I get to choose where we go, by the way."

"I'm considering my options here, Chakotay. I want to win something special. I might need a cabin boy for the trip to Bajor."

He laughed at her and she put her arm through his and leaned into him.

"I'll give it some thought."

"Well, you'd better be quick."

"I don't think so. I'm stationed in San Francisco for another six weeks after I bring your boringness back from Bajor." She looked smug. "The Pelorus is strictly a science and diplomatic vessel."

"Oh, you mean like *Voyager*?"

Chakotay liked the Alpha Quadrant version of Kathryn Janeway even more than the Delta Quadrant version. She was relaxed, funny and unless he was even more out of practice than he thought, she was flirting with him in a big way. He began to really look forward to the round trip to Bajor.

After a couple of minutes, his arm was around her shoulders and he couldn't remember being this

happy for years.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That dark thing behind the dune over there." She pointed off to her right.

"I don't know Kathryn, it's looks like a shadow to me. Nothing's here, besides us." His attention was on the ground. "The whole beach is surrounded by a security field that prevents the use of weapons or transporters. You know that. Quit worrying. You're not in charge of my security until we leave Earth."

They stopped as he bent down to pick up a shell.

"Janeway to Security."

"Security."

"Really Kathryn, it's just a trick of the light." said Chakotay still examining the shell, standing up, while brushing sand off it.

"We've got intruders on the beach, can you..."

She saw the hand with the weapon in it as the shadow revealed itself.

The noise was like an explosion.

Chakotay hadn't had time to even think what was happening before she had jumped in front of him. He realized what the sound was. It was an ancient projectile weapon.

As the bullet hit her, she thudded into his arms. He felt the second shot hit her as he clutched her close. He could hear the shouts and yells of the Starfleet security officers as they tried to apprehend the would-be assassin. But all he could do in those few seconds was look at Kathryn Janeway's face. She looked surprised. And sad. So very, very sad. When her eyes closed, he knew that she had stopped breathing.

In that moment, he hated the new uniforms. Blood showed up starkly on the gray of her jacket. He mentally chided himself not to panic and was almost oblivious to the noises around him. Phaser fire, shouting, people struggling and fighting where the shadow had been.

Chakotay lowered her to the ground and began CPR. Breathing into her mouth as he had so many years before. As he pumped on her chest, he could hear someone calling for an emergency beam-out to Starfleet Medical, but he knew she was dead.

Knowing and accepting were two different things and he continued to breathe into her mouth and pound her chest as they rematerialized inside a hospital facility.

He had been unceremoniously pushed aside by the medical personnel as they picked up her still body. Someone moved him outside.

No, that was wrong. She needed him there. He started calling her. Trying to get back inside. He didn't even feel the sedative that someone injected into his neck and continued to struggle as someone guided him onto a bed in another room.

He awoke with a start with no idea how much time had passed. Someone had removed his bloodied clothes and even cleaned him up a little. He was still in the hospital, he thought. Not that it mattered anymore. What did anything matter with Kathryn dead?

Finally rousing himself enough to swing his legs over the side of the bed before a familiar figure stood at the doorway. Guilt and grief slammed into him and he almost fell into her arms. He had met Janeway's mother at their official welcome home and at the celebratory ball held in their honor. Gretchen Janeway was an older, if more relaxed, version of Kathryn Janeway.

"Gretchen. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

"It's no one's fault except the man who fired the shots, Chakotay."

"No, if she hadn't been trying to protect me, it would be all okay. It's my job to look after her. I'm her first officer."

"It is all right, Chakotay. Well, not completely. But it will be soon."

"How can you say that? I killed her. She's dead because of me."

"Chakotay, she's not dead. She's not very well right now, but thankfully, she's not dead."

"Are you sure?"

Gretchen nodded and gave him a small crooked smile that made his heart lurch inside his chest.

"She's asking for you. She's convinced that you're dead and we're not telling her. When I left, she was threatening the medical staff."

His smile was bleak, but it was a smile nevertheless.

"So, get your pants on, Chakotay and help me rescue those poor nurses."

As they walked down the corridor, Gretchen Janeway put her arm through Chakotay's. She was concerned that he was going to fall over. He seemed so uncertain on his feet and she knew just how he felt. She'd just had a little longer to get over it.

They could hear the commotion as they approached the door.

"I said *no*. No sedatives until I see Captain Chakotay!"

"Please, Captain...we need..."

"Kathryn!" he had released Gretchen's arm and had practically vaulted to her bedside. Unsure of her injuries, he took her hand and kissed her on the forehead.

"Chakotay, are you all right? I was so worried about you." Her eyes scanned him intently, checking him over.

The nurse made the best of the distraction and administered the medication, earning a glare from the patient.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. God, Kathryn, I thought I'd lost you."

"Tougher than I look. Mom..." and she was asleep.

"Is she going to be okay?" asked Chakotay of the nurse.

"She'll be fine, sir. I'm not sure that we'll all survive *her* though." Came the wry response.

"Gretchen?"

"She'll be okay, Chakotay. There was considerable damage," the older woman gave a little sob, "but the doctor has assured me that she'll be on her feet tomorrow and back at work next week. You saved her life Chakotay. The CPR you gave her..." she couldn't continue.

He sagged into the chair beside her bed. He felt suddenly exhausted.

"How long since...when...I..."

"It's almost eighteen hours. They called me straight away and you'd already been sedated. It's about eight in the morning now."

"Eighteen hours?"

"Chakotay, come and buy me breakfast. I'll explain everything but all we both really need to know is that she'll be fine."

"I shouldn't leave her. What if she wakes up? She might need me."

"She won't be awake for quite a few hours. More tests to run and other stuff that I'm trying not to think about. Now, take me to breakfast and get me some coffee before I completely disintegrate and turn into a blubbering mess. I'm not as adept as my oldest daughter at being brave."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good boy. We're going to get along just fine."

Gretchen and Chakotay had returned to her bedside an hour or so later and it was only a short time after that Janeway was again awake. In the mid afternoon, Gretchen finally relented to pressure from her daughter and had agreed to return to Janeway's San Francisco apartment, obviously needing rest after the trauma of the last twenty four hours.

There had been a steady stream of Starfleet brass to see Janeway. Chakotay wondered if there were any Admirals that she didn't know personally. Balak had been, bringing cookies and another Admiral and had introduced Chakotay to her as "Katie's young man". He thought it had a nice ring to it and hoped that it was true.

Nechayev had also been in and it appeared that the two women were old friends. She had told Janeway that all the 'bravery crap' would have to stop once she was an admiral as 'that's what lieutenants were for'. Janeway had retaliated calling her a 'clerk'. Nechayev had countered calling her friend someone who wouldn't ask for directions when she was lost. Janeway's only retort had been that she wasn't lost as they knew exactly where they were. Most of the time. Chakotay thought that watching the pair of women was like watching a tennis match.

Only a matter of minutes after Nechayev had left, Admiral Hayes had joined them and, living up to Janeway's previous description as a "bit of a windbag" had talked for the whole twenty minutes he was with them before being called away by an aide. They both had thought it a lucky coincidence until Chakotay had received a message from Nechayev to "tell Marco Polo she owes me".

All through these visits she had insisted he stay. When he had risen to leave when Balak had arrived, she had grabbed his hand and said "You're not getting away from me again, Chakotay." And she meant it. She had yet to release his hand through all the visits. Except for Kathryn being injured, he hadn't been happier in years.

All of Voyager's crew stationed in San Francisco had also visited. Naomi had even sent a message from K'Taria where she and her parents were still visiting her grandparents.

The EMH had arrived, checked her chart and declared her treatment 'adequate' and promised to look in on her again that evening. He seemed truly put out that someone else was responsible for 'his Captain's' treatment.

B'Elanna had brought Miral to visit but had to leave to get the baby settled just as Tom had bought him a change of clothes and as the couple passed each other Chakotay spied a figure standing just outside the door. He felt himself get angry. It was a bit late for security as she'd already done their work for them.

However, he managed to greet Tom with a smile and attempted to tamp down the guilt and anger he was directing at himself. It wouldn't help Kathryn.

After receiving an update on his Captain's condition and making sure she was feeling better, Tom shared his news.

"I've just come from my Dad's office. He's threatening to descend on you tomorrow morning by the way, and I've got news about the would-be assassin." said Tom. "It seems that our old friend Teero was a bit ticked off with you, Chakotay. Apparently, he wanted to go after Tuvok, but him being still on Vulcan made it not possible. So you were the next person on his list.

"He's been arrested and it looks like he'll be getting serious psychiatric treatment but they're not sure how successful it'll be. Anyway, it seems that he sent two people after you before he was taken into custody. Security have got the one from the beach, but there's still one person out there.

"Unfortunately, they don't know who the person is and Teero isn't talking. The specialists tend to think that the longer it takes that person to find you, the more likely that they'll 'wake up' and stop."

"Well, that's sort of good news. You'll just have to try to be careful, Chakotay. That's an order."

"Kathryn, I used to be a Maquis, I know how to look after myself."

"Sure, as long as there are no shells to look at instead."

Tom decided to ask about details of the incident on the beach.

When Chakotay looked uncomfortable reliving it, Janeway stepped in and explained up to the point she woke up and couldn't find Chakotay but also included details of their bet.

Tom laughed at Janeway trying to go a month without doing something brave.

Chakotay finally felt equal to taking part in the conversation.

"Kathryn, don't feel bad about losing. You did really well. Almost ten minutes went by before you jumped in front of a crazed gunman."

"I still think it's not fair. I want a rematch."

"But what I want to know is, how come the only time I get to kiss you, it's the kiss of life?"

"I guess I'm just lucky that way." She looked at him with a smile, "you want to try something different?" she wiggled her eyebrows at him.

"Well, you do owe me a date. I seem to remember the details of the bet..."

"Do I look like the sort of girl that kisses on the first date, Chakotay?"

"Whoa, wait a minute. You two have never kissed? *First date?*" Tom looked appalled.

"Now about that bet Chakotay, I think we should go double or nothing. I mean it's really your fault that I had to derring my do."

"Double or nothing? I'm not sure. And what the hell does 'derring your do' mean?"

"There's been *no kissing* in over seven years?"

"Tom, of course there's been kissing. Just not with each other." Janeway turned back to Chakotay. "Come on Chakotay, I mean, I didn't go looking for trouble. It found *you*. And I had to take charge of the situation. I am a 'gung ho kinda gal' someone told me once."

"Yeah, you were too busy kissing a psychopathic genocidal killer in black leather to kiss me."

"Hey, one kiss. And it was in the line of duty. It's good to know you're not bitter about it after all these years."

"You weren't in a relationship at all? And you kissed *Kashyk*?"

"And what about that guy on Quarra. What was his name? Laffen, Jiffy, Jimmy, Jack the Ripper?"

"Jaffen. And he was at least not Borg or a big cricket."

"Or a trick of the light."

"Him I didn't kiss. Much."

"Geez, this is like finding out your parents are getting a divorce. I feel like crying."

Janeway and Chakotay both stopped and looked at Tom.

"What the hell is he talking about?"

"No idea, Kathryn. It was your idea to keep him."

"We can't get a divorce, Tom." Janeway soothed. "We're not married yet."

"Yet?" asked Chakotay.

"You two are nuts."

"Yes, but you love us." said Janeway.

"That's it. You're both weirding me out here." He leaned across and gave Janeway a kiss on the cheek. "Take care of yourself. We'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Thanks for everything, Tom."

"No problem. And Chakotay, I think you should cut her some slack on the bet. Double or nothing. Who knows what she might do on the second date." He laughed and clapped Chakotay on the shoulder.

For all the banter and the laughter, Chakotay could tell that she was tired.

"Okay, that's it for me too. I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

"You're going? Can't you stay a bit longer?"

"Kathryn, I've got to get back to Paris. I'm supposed to ship out on the weekend."

"But, you can't go without me. I'm the Captain." She was pouting.

"I shouldn't even be here. I don't want to put anyone in danger. Maybe I should just go back to Paris or ask for an earlier ship out."

"Please don't go, Chakotay. Bally has increased the security. We'll all be safe. Please?"

So, he stayed at Kathryn's Starfleet apartment with Gretchen that night and promised her that he would be back early the next morning. He'd contacted the Ambassador who had been informed of the situation and had had his gear transported to the apartment. Chakotay would be staying in San Francisco until they left for Bajor.

Now that it was obvious that Kathryn would be fine, he couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

The next morning they found her propped up in bed looking very unhappy.

"Did you bring me any coffee?"

"It's lovely to see you too darling, and you're lucky I didn't bring your sister with me. She did send a special threat though."

"Oh-oh. What did she say?"

"She said that she'll see you when you get to Bajor and she'll deal with you then."

"That can't be good. Was she upset with me?"

"Of course she's upset with you. You almost got yourself killed. *Again*, it seems."

Janeway turned on Chakotay now.

"I see you've been talking out of school."

"Not at all. Although the subject of the bet did come up."

"I still think you should've gone for something *bigger* Chakotay. Like a week together at Lake George."

"Mom!" replied her daughter, scandalized.

"Damn. If only I'd thought of that earlier."

"Well," said Janeway recovering herself, "I'll be winning anyway. I mean, I've got another day here and then on the weekend we'll be onboard the Pelorus and on our way to being bored stiff for at least six weeks."

Gretchen and Chakotay just looked at each, unconvinced.

After persistent wheedling, Janeway was finally able to convince her visitors to move outside to the garden area, sending her mother off to find 'real' coffee. It had the added advantage, she said, of making it harder for the Admiralty visitors to find her.

Chakotay gently helped her sit on the bench and it was clear that she was still suffering considerable discomfort due to the injury.

"It's good to have the sun on my face. Thank you Chakotay." She leaned back and relaxed.

The garden was quiet and they were undisturbed. He suspected that Gretchen was giving them some time to themselves, which was funny considering how much time they had spent together over the past seven years.

He was so content, sitting here with her and the feeling of joy was almost overwhelming when he felt her hand entwine in his. He gently lifted her hand and kissed it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It felt like it. He had another day of this to look forward to and then the thought of being with her, in no command relationship, for the next six weeks filled him with anticipation. He felt like giggling. Life was good.

She leaned into him and he put his arm around her as she snuggled into his shoulder.

Chakotay couldn't remember when he'd last felt this at peace. Probably over five years and half a galaxy ago. The warmth of the morning sun and the wonderful feeling of Kathryn in his arms helped him to relax.

When she threw herself on top of him, he was just falling asleep.

He heard her call "the window!" and was confused at to what she was talking about. What window?

The last thought he had before he lost consciousness was that perhaps one of the EPS conduits had blown on Deck Eight again but then realized he was no longer on Voyager. But it was okay because Kathryn was with him.

"Kathryn?"

"He's coming around." said someone familiar.

"Kathryn!" What was going on?

"Chakotay, it's B'Elanna. You've been injured, but you're going to be fine."

"Is Voyager okay? Where's the Captain?"

"We're home, Chakotay. Remember? We're not on Voyager anymore."

Yes. Now he remembered. He was going to Bajor with Kathryn. On her new ship. He was a Captain now too. They were going to be happy. He *was* happy. He had her hand in his because she was with him.

"Where's the Captain?" he demanded again.

"She's been injured Chakotay. Do you remember what happened?"

"The window. She called out about the window." He had no idea what that meant.

Tom sighed. "She called out to the security guards. There was a guy about to throw something. Security stunned him but he dropped the thing he was holding. It was an explosive. You were both injured."

"Not again. Dear god, not again." He was getting distressed. "Please tell me she's okay."

Tom gave B'Elanna a look.

"She's still in surgery, Chakotay. Her injuries were, um, quite severe."

"But she'll be fine, right? *Right?*"

"We don't know, sorry." Tom glanced at his wife who was holding tightly to Chakotay's hand, "I'll go and find Gretchen and see if she's got any updates for us." He quietly left the room.

"God B'E, she has to be all right. She saved my life again. She protected me. *Again.*" He took a deep breath. "We've been finally able to be ourselves for the first time in seven years. That few hours together before the beach were just magical. It was like a clean slate. It seemed so natural, we hadn't even talked about it. Didn't have time but somehow didn't need to." He finished with a trace of bitterness in his voice. "She just has to be all right."

He didn't speak again, not even to ask about his own injuries. B'Elanna didn't know whether that was a good thing or not. She explained to him that he'd only need to stay for observation for another hour or two, as his injuries weren't severe. This seemed to further upset him and he lapsed into silence again.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when the door opened and Tom and Gretchen entered.

"Gretchen?" The question was almost a plea.

"It's okay, Chakotay. Everything's going to be fine. She'll be fine." Despite her comforting words, she took a shuddering breath and there were tears in her eyes. "I'm too old for this."

"Can I see her?"

"I haven't been able to see her yet, Chakotay. But I've spoken to the doctor and she assures me that she'll make a full recovery, even though Kathryn's still in surgery. She won't be awake until tomorrow they said. I'm meeting her in a few minutes to get a more complete update." She replaced

B'Elanna by his bed and held his hand.

"Gretchen, I'm so sorry. I let her down again. I was asleep. It's my fault."

"Don't start with that again, Chakotay."

"But if I had gone back to Paris, she'd be safe. Maybe I should just leave."

"Chakotay, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. How would making Kathryn miserable be the best for her? She'd be heart broken if you weren't here when she wakes up."

Neither Tom nor B'Elanna were surprised by this statement. It was obvious that a great deal had happened in the relationship between their former Captain and her first officer.

"Besides," continued Gretchen, "the danger is apparently over now. That poor man was the final victim of Teero, so you should be just pick up where you left off once Kathryn is feeling better."

"Was anyone else hurt? Are you okay, Gretchen?"

"I'm fine. The security guard was badly injured too, but he should be okay. The real victim was the poor man that Teero used. He was killed. Apart from that, no one else besides yourself was hurt. Except my baby." She couldn't continue.

B'Elanna put her arm around Gretchen while the older woman quietly wept. Gretchen finally took a breath, and attempted a weak smile at them. "Luckily, no one was in the room on the ground floor near where the bomb was dropped." She leant across the bed and kissed him on the cheek and hugged B'Elanna. "I'll be back as soon as I speak to the surgeon." She got up and left the room.

When they finally were allowed to visit Janeway, Chakotay was shocked that it appeared that she was lying on her stomach. The doctor had explained that her injuries were treated, but that it would be at least twenty four hours before she would be able to lie on her back due to her back needing extensive regeneration.

She seemed to be sleeping and Chakotay and Gretchen only spent a short time with her before they were advised to go home for the evening.

The next morning saw Janeway, while still lying on her stomach, more alert. She greeted Gretchen and Chakotay as soon as they opened the door.

"Are you both okay? You didn't get injured, did you? I have a vague memory of seeing you last night, but I thought I may've dreamed it."

At first they were perplexed how Janeway had known it was them, until they'd seen the mirror apparatus set up beneath her.

Her mother was gently running her hand over her daughter's arm and it seemed to comfort both of them. They hadn't liked to touch her still tender back.

"We're fine baby." She bent down and kissed her daughter on a bit of her face that was exposed, "Chakotay was slightly injured but he came home with me again last night. How are you feeling?"

"Ready to get out of here. The regeneration is just about finished, I think. I hope." Janeway managed

a weak smile. "I'm just about done on this side, they'll flip me over in a few hours. Chakotay, you're very quiet, are you sure you're all right?"

Seeing that he probably wanted to speak to her daughter in private, Gretchen suggested that she would go for coffee.

"Kathryn, I'm so sorry. It's my fault that you've been hurt. I should've gone back to Paris."

"I wanted you to stay. And it is not your fault. It's Teero's fault."

"But..."

"But nothing, Chakotay. If you'd been in Paris, or somewhere else, he may've succeeded and I definitely wouldn't have survived that."

There seemed nothing else to say. He took her hand and kissed it.

"Would you like to know what I've planned for our second date?"

"Does it involve real kissing?"

"I'm hopeful that it does."

"Good. Then surprise me with the details later. I'll save it until I'm pointing in the right direction."

There had been more visits by admirals and other Starfleet personnel, including Harry, Admiral Paris, the Doctor and even Mark Johnson.

Nechayev had dropped by again making more caustic remarks about Janeway's behaviour. The two women had traded banter until the Admiral had to go to a meeting. On her way to the door held open by Chakotay she said quietly, "You'd better be worth her trouble, Captain, or I'll have you parking shuttles on Sika IV for the rest of your career."

Chakotay had been too stunned to reply and could only manage a slight nod to Nechayev, as the Admiral glided out of the room.

The injury hadn't slowed Janeway down to any great extent, it seemed. Once she was "pointing the right way" as she put it, she seemed to be constantly communicating with either her ship, or one or other of the best universities about some stellar phenomena she was hoping to observe en route.

He no longer wondered about why she had taken the Pelorus. It was a dream ship for her. Bristling with the latest in scientific monitoring equipment and experimental sensors, she would be able to pursue her first love of studying the stars while still performing 'normal' type Starfleet activities, like taking the delegation to Bajor. She was clearly delighted that Tom and B'Elanna, along with a goodly portion of Voyager's crew, had decided to join the ship.

"I've been onto Bally and he's arranged for the EMH to be assigned to the Pelorus for this mission. I'll be transferred to the ship tomorrow afternoon and then we cast-off 1900 hours. I've promised Bally that I'll stay in sickbay and then my quarters for a week."

"Kathryn, it's too soon."

"I'll be fine."

"That's my girl." said Gretchen. "Janeway's are congenitally bad patients."

"It's all arranged. Mom will be coming with us to visit Phoebe. Tom and B'Elanna are, of course, part of my crew and Miral and the older Paris' are coming with them too. Seven is joining us to help in the investigation into the Tresk phenomena. We're hoping to get some useful data on the way."

"What's the deal with everyone coming with us."

"Oh, you know, in case anything might be happening...you never know." Janeway started fiddling with the frayed edge of her bed sheet.

"Never know what?"

"I thought, well, um, actually I'd hoped, but if you don't want to...I mean, er, *you know*, um, I was hoping, um. It was actually Mom's idea to try and coordinate everything. And Phoebe's on Bajor too, of course."

"Kathryn, should I get the doctor?"

She closed her eyes and exhaled. Lifting her head, she looked him straight in the eye.

"Marry me."

"I'm sorry?" he laughed.

"I asked you to marry me."

"Oh."

The look on her face was the same as when she looked into his eyes on the beach when she was shot.

"I've assumed too much. I'm sorry, Chakotay." There were tears in her eyes now.

"Yes."

"I hope that this won't ruin anything. I understand that you don't reciprocate...*what?*"

"I said 'yes'."

"You said yes?"

He gently leaned across the bed and softly kissed her lips. She grabbed the back of his head and deepened the kiss.

"Does this mean I don't get my two dates?"

"I'll make it up to you on the way. I promise."

When the time came to transport Janeway to the ship, Chakotay realised that she was still in a

serious condition. Still not able to sit up for any length of time and unable to remain even lying on her back for more than a few hours, she was not really fit to be transferred to the ship. He wondered, not for the first time, how she always managed to get everything her way.

Gretchen would meet them on the Pelorus later as she'd gone home to pack their things, as Kathryn was obviously not prepared as she'd been in hospital for now four days.

"Kathryn, please, you're still very ill. Why don't you wait on Earth another week or so and join us when you're feeling better?"

"Chakotay, there is *no* way you're getting on my ship without me."

"Why not?"

"My first officer is blond"

"Kathryn, your first officer is Tom."

"Details, details."

"You don't trust me?"

"After seven years, I'm taking no chances."

"I love it when you're jealous."

"Hey, I'm *never* jealous. I'm the most un-jealous person you'll ever know."

"Want to bet?"

The End

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