

By Jot

Many thanks to Elem for the beta (about three months ago!). Since then, I've added a new, I hope better, ending, so all the mistakes are definitely all my own work.

"You're kidding me, right?"

Kathryn Janeway blinked at her sister. She had been expecting support, perhaps a hug and maybe even sibling sympathy, but what she had actually received after sharing details about her feelings for her first officer with Phoebe was looking very much like derision.

Phoebe exasperated at her sister's obvious cluelessness about men, even after seven years locked in a star ship with the one she loved, sighed in frustration and drummed her fingers on the table.

"Why on Earth would he *think* you're even interested now?"

Kathryn looked offended and her brow creased. She was already starting to regret telling Phoebe *anything* about Chakotay. Certainly not the bit about how she was sure that when he'd broken up with Seven within days of returning to the Alpha Quadrant that he would come to her. It was now weeks since they had arrived home and he hadn't even invited her for coffee.

"The debriefings finished early today?" asked Phoebe, before her sister could say anything. Kathryn nodded and opened her mouth to speak. Phoebe jumped in before a retort could form from her sister, "And what's the time now?"

Kathryn's mouth snapped shut. Phoebe could always confuse her in an astonishingly short space of time.

"I'll tell you shall I?" Phoebe didn't wait for an answer. "It's *five thirty*, Kathryn. So why are you still wearing that damned uniform?"

Kathryn looked down at her attire hoping it held a key to Phoebe's bizarre line of questioning. "But Ph..."

"No buts," Phoebe's tone softened. "Kathryn, did it occur to *you* to invite *him* to lunch? Go for a drink?" Kathryn looked nonplussed as her sister continued, "I thought so. I bet you didn't even wish him a 'nice weekend', did you?"

"He'd already gone when I'd finished..."

"Because you'd stayed back for something, hadn't you?" Phoebe looked and sounded vexed. Kathryn wondered how that had happened. How did Phoebe get to be angry when surely it was herself who was the injured party here?

"It was important..."

"Bull shit!"

Kathryn's eyes went wide and she tried to formulate a reply. It had been quite some time since anyone had spoken to her that way. Probably more than seven years.

Phoebe oozed contempt, "I bet you can't even remember what it was about now." Phoebe

challenged, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair.

"Sure I can. Um, it *was* important. It was about the method we used during the first few months in the Delta Quadrant to utilize some slightly impure dilithium when..." Kathryn trailed off to an incoherent mumble under Phoebe's almost lethal glare. A glare that should be registered with the authorities, Kathryn mused. "Okay, point taken," she said quietly, with a look of defeat.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What are you going to do about it? He broke up with Seven *weeks* ago, Kathryn. He's the best looking guy in two quadrants, eminently eligible and incredibly desirable," Phoebe slapped the table to emphasize her point. "He's out there blundering around about to get snapped up by some other blonde bombshell with good taste."

"And he cooks." Kathryn managed to add, even though she felt ridiculously jealous of Phoebe for even noticing any of his more appealing traits.

The two sisters sighed and took a quiet moment to contemplate Chakotay's many attractive features.

Finally, Phoebe slapped the table again. "You've got to go after him."

"How?"

"With subtlety"

"Subtle? *Me?*" Kathryn slouched back into her chair. "I'm doomed."

Phoebe just laughed at her.

"You are *not* doomed, you silly goose." Phoebe tried to contain her mirth. "He doesn't know you're interested. He's used to Captain Janeway and probably hasn't seen *Kathryn* Janeway in quite a while, if at all. There's nothing for it, you're just going to have to court him. Show him your best features."

"Best *features?*" Even Kathryn was surprised at how much like a squeak her voice sounded. "*Court* him?" A croak rather than a squeak. That was *so* much better.

"When did you get so damned negative, Kathryn?"

"I think it was around the time I stranded 145 people 70,000 light years away from home," Kathryn sighed and leaning forward, elbows on the table with her head in her hands. "Or maybe it was when I found out about him and Seven."

Phoebe eyed her sister critically.

"Here now, none of that self pity crap!" Phoebe smacked the table again. Kathryn noticed that Phoebe did that quite a lot. "It's time you got your man. You *do* want him, don't you?"

Kathryn managed a weak smile. "More than I wanted to send you back to wherever Mom and Dad got you from when I was four."

"Wow. More than getting rid of me, huh? That's *big*. He must be some guy, all right. Maybe I should check him out for myself."

"Phoebe, I don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to." Kathryn considered courting Chakotay. It wasn't an unpleasant prospect. "Why don't I just bite the bullet and tell him straight?"

"Because you'll scare him off. You can't go from nothing to 'I love you' just like that." Phoebe snapped her fingers by way of demonstration. "He'll think something's wrong with you."

"Well..."

"Trust me, subtlety is the key. You'll enjoy it, and he'll enjoy it even more, if you take your time."

"You're awfully bossy."

"It's genetic."

The sisters laughed, made more coffee and Phoebe outlined her strategy.

Phoebe paused, halting the fine tuning of the detailed strategic courting timetable she had worked out for her sister. She leaned back in her chair and tapped a fist against her lips with a look of intense concentration.

Kathryn knew to fear that look.

"You know, while we're at it, we really should do something with your hair." Once again, Phoebe had managed to completely dumbfound her sister.

"My hair?" she asked somewhat suspiciously, eyes narrowing.

"What on *earth* do you call that arrangement, anyway? Geez, Kathryn, it looks like an alien growth."

Phoebe was warming to her subject, which was never a good thing in Kathryn's experience. She blinked at her. Phoebe had once more surpassed her sibling astonishment index. Kathryn was going to have to work on a new scale. Maybe exponential.

"You need to get your beautiful long hair back. And truly, what color are you using now, your natural one was lovely, not..." Phoebe waved a hand dismissively towards her sister's head, "boring brown or whatever the hell that is."

"My *hair*." As soon as she spoke, Kathryn realized that once more, Phoebe had reduced her to monosyllables. Well, two words anyway. Why did she bring Voyager home again?

"Your hair," Phoebe added emphasis by tugging at her sister's hair and then letting it go and examining her fingers with a look of distaste, "and for goodness sake, sis, what the hell to you hold it in place with, warp plasma? It's like a damn sculpture. Eww."

Kathryn wondered briefly if she should tell her mother about Phoebe's bullying. Again. Surely it was okay for a women in her forties to get her mother to protect her from her little...

"B'Elanna told me that Chakotay loved your long hair and that he always wanted to run his fingers through it. He'd need to put on protective gloves to go near your current arrangement."

Now all reasonable thought had left Kathryn's apparently badly coiffed head. Chakotay liked, even *loved*, her hair when it was long? How did she not know this detail?

"My hair?"

Phoebe stared at her. "Honestly, Kathryn, are you even paying attention? You've only said two words in the last twenty minutes." Phoebe rummaged around in the bag beside her chair and pulled out an item with a look of triumph. "Right, get your butt upstairs and wash your hair, then come back here. Don't bother drying it." Phoebe twirled the silver object between her fingers.

Kathryn just stared, feeling that she should at least put up some token resistance to her sister's orders.

"I got this from your Doctor. He said he's used this on you before, although he wouldn't tell me why. I'm assuming you got your hand stuck in there somehow and he had to cut it out and repair the damage." Phoebe gestured to her sister to get up and into the shower, "So, you had the opportunity to have a non-ugly look before, but didn't take it. We're not going to make *that* mistake again." Phoebe noticed that Kathryn hadn't moved. "Go! Get up there. Now!"

Kathryn went.

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It was a few days later before Kathryn finally found the courage to ask Chakotay for coffee. He had hesitated slightly and she thought at first that he was going to refuse, but she was delighted when he accepted.

The coffee shop was warm and inviting. They were surprised it wasn't more crowded and managed to get a small booth close to an old fashioned open fireplace, glad of the warmth as the gusty breeze was icy and neither of them had a coat.

"So, how is your debriefing going? We've hardly had a chance to talk since we've been home. "

"I've missed you, too." Chakotay replied with a smile. "It's all going pretty well, I think. We should be finished soon." They weren't permitted to discuss details of their debrief despite the Maquis being pardoned and even offered commissions. "You?"

"A lot better now that I've decided to just answer the questions and not also answer what I thought they should be asking," she gave him a wry grin and a shrug. "It took a while for me to..."

"Not over analyze," he suggested with a knowing smile.

"Exactly. It's a debriefing, not a cease-fire treaty with an unfamiliar enemy." She nodded to the waitress for a refill. "Also, I was getting home late and missing out on seeing my family. I'm trying to reform."

"Good for you."

The waitress bought another coffee and Chakotay ordered another tea.

"Have you changed your hair?"

"I'm trying to be more relaxed. Do you like it?" Kathryn sincerely hoped that didn't sound too needy. She was pretty sure she *sounded* needy. God, she was terrible at this. Kathryn wondered again why she let Phoebe talk her into this kind of scheme.

"It's great. Suits you."

Kathryn gave him a dazzling smile. Phoebe had the *best* ideas.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, enjoying the warmth and their drinks.

"Have you seen the plans for the memorial?"

"Yes," he looked up and smiled. "I was a bit surprised that they've included the crew of the Val Jean."

"You're okay with it, though?"

"Of course. They should be remembered."

Kathryn let out a relieved sigh.

"Thank goodness, I've been worried you'd be angry with me."

He examined her closely.

"It was you? You got them included?"

"Well, they were already considering it, so I just had to give them a nudge in the right direction." She paused and took a sip of her coffee. "Both crews were part of the mission in the Delta Quadrant, so I insisted that they be fully included in any commemoration as well."

"Thank you, Kathryn. From the whole crew."

"Sure." She reached across the table and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I have to admit, although I'll be happy to see the crew again, it's going to be...difficult to see all the relatives and friends of those that didn't make it home."

"Kathryn..."

"I know, Chakotay," she gave him a weak smile and then changed the subject. "Did you know that Tom says that Miral is talking?"

He let her get away with the abrupt subject change and grinned. "Tom is an idiot. He thinks slurping noises are speech."

"Yes, but Miral is still adorable and to be fair, I've heard Tom make slurping sounds when he was trying to speak."

"Ah, yes. The infamous talent night when he recited Shakespeare. Or tried to." Chakotay smirked at the memory of Tom trying to soothe his nerves with a few stiff, but *real*, drinks.

"Tom would've made a grand Portia," she sighed dramatically, as if with regret.

"He was just trying to get into your good books so you wouldn't put him on report for the still you discovered on deck six."

Kathryn laughed and agreed.

"It's a pity I had to have it dismantled. It made good hooch too." Kathryn shook her head, "If you're going to make moonshine, at least put the damn thing somewhere where the captain won't practically trip over it on the way to Astrometrics. I had to wait until they built it again on deck fifteen. Seriously, what do they *teach* people at the Academy these days?"

"You knew it was there?"

"Sure. Where do you think I got my good stuff?"

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"How was it?" Phoebe greeted her sister at the front door with one hand on her hip and the other clutching a mug of coffee.

"Actually, it went pretty well, I think," Kathryn took the mug out of her sister's hand and took a gulp, "I had a good time and he seemed to enjoy himself." She handed back the mug. "He noticed the hair."

They walked down the hall into the kitchen.

"Did he kiss you?"

"Of course he didn't *kiss me*, Phoebes, it wasn't even a date."

"Bummer."

"Yeah."

The pair sat at the kitchen table and Phoebe pushed a clean mug towards her sister who was already reaching for the coffee pot.

"So, did you do what I told you?"

Kathryn nodded while she carefully poured from the pot into her mug. "I let him decide everything."

"*Everything*?" Phoebe asked, somewhat skeptically.

"Sure...well, I might've suggested where to sit and he was quite happy for me to order and..." the mug stopped half way to her mouth. "Oh crap, Phoebe, I can't stop being in charge." Her shoulders slumped. "Do you think I've ruined everything?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Kathryn, it was your first attempt." Phoebe topped up her own drink, "He'd be suspicious if you suddenly became a nice *normal* person." Phoebe completely missed the look of outrage on her sister's face. "No, you'll be fine. Did you make another date?"

"*Appointment*. Sort of." Kathryn ran her hand through her hair, "I suggested dinner after we finish work on Thursday."

"Dinner is neveran appointment, Kathryn." Phoebe smiled. "And I think I've got a *brilliant* idea for the weekend."

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Chakotay struggled to the front door. He hadn't slept well and he'd tossed and turned all night. He would never have guessed that he would miss the ship and the crew quite as much as he did, even after all these weeks of being home. He wondered if he should take Tom and B'Elanna up on their offer to visit more often, rather than mope around on his own during the weekends.

The doorbell rang again as if someone was leaning on it. It was Sunday, in the Alpha Quadrant, on

Earth, there were no debriefings, all the crew were safe, no aliens were attacking, so what the hell was so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow?

By the time he got to the door, he was determined to give the visitor a piece of his mind. His hand slapped the door release, just as the pest outside started tapping out an incredibly annoying tattoo on the bell, the door slid open but the curses died on his lips.

"Kathryn?"

"Chakotay, hi!" she gave him a beaming smile and then asked, "Did I get you up?" in a manner that inferred that it was a ridiculous question.

"Um, well," he ran his hand through his hair and felt suddenly self-conscious in his boxers he put on in the dark last night, hoping that they weren't the pair with little yellow ducks on them that B'Elanna and Tom had given him for his last birthday. He'd never dared to wear them while on Voyager in case of an embarrassing red alert. It took all his willpower not to look down and check. "Kathryn, it's um, lovely to see you. Is anything wrong?"

"Why would you think something was wrong?" she gave him a very odd look and then smiled again. "Nice ducks, Chakotay."

"Tom Paris." he replied with a resigned sigh and rubbed his forehead. Hoping the answer would satisfy her. Her nod seemed to confirm that she understood completely. "Please, come in. So, how can I help you? You said nothing's wrong..."

"Oh, well, I was just going to visit Phoebe's show in New York," she gave him another smile, "and I thought you might like to come with me. I think you'll like her style."

"Isn't it a bit early for visiting a gallery?"

"Early? Chakotay it's nearly midday and by the time we get there..." Janeway gave him a worried look. "Are you okay? Are you feeling all right? Should I call the Doctor?"

"I'm fine..."

"You *never* sleep in. You do look a bit feverish." One of her hands shot up and felt his forehead and the other grasped his hand. He didn't think he felt feverish until she slid her hand down from his forehead to cup his cheek. Her eyes looked at him with such obvious concern that he was truly touched. "Why don't you get back into bed and I'll get you a nice warm drink and..."

"Kathryn, I really am fine. Thank you." He smiled, "I had a late night and I was sleeping in."

"And I got you up," she removed her hand from his cheek and gave his hand a squeeze before releasing it, her shoulders slumped and she looked sad. "Chakotay, I'm so sorry, I'll let you get back to bed." She started back towards the front door.

"No, please. I'm up now." He reached out and grabbed a hand. "Please, tell me about Phoebe."

"Are you sure?" He nodded. "Okay, well, she's got an exhibition opening later today and I thought you might enjoy it."

"Me?"

"Sure you. Who else would I ask?" she gave his hand a small tug, "I thought we could have cake and

coffee in a little cafe somewhere, do the gallery, Phoebe will pick on me until I cry, Mom will break us up and then I'll take you to dinner. How does that sound?"

"Fantastic. And you're going to take me to dinner?"

"I figure I still owe you several hundred dinners, Chakotay. So, what do you say?"

"Can you wait until I get ready?"

"I've waited this long, Chakotay," she laughed. "Are you wearing the ducks?"

"Please. Stop mentioning the ducks."

"No really. I love the whole outfit."

Chakotay looked down. The only thing he was wearing was the duck boxers.

"I'll just have a quick shower and I'll be back." He waved his arm towards the kitchen, "Make yourself at home. There's coffee in the kitchen."

"Ducks and coffee, Chakotay. You're the perfect man."

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"He's the perfect man."

"That's what I said." Kathryn smiled to herself. "And wait until I tell you about the *ducks*."

"Chakotay actually knows about art. I approve of him," Phoebe pushed the muesli towards her sister, who had just sat down at the breakfast table, "He's not a cat person, is he?"

"He's a lovely young man, Kathryn. I agree with Phoebe." Gretchen added, "I think he's charming. And Phoebe, cats are people too."

Phoebe snorted indelicately at her mother's comment.

"I think he pretty much likes all animals, Phoebes. He's very in touch with nature." Kathryn said, reaching for the milk jug.

"Yeah, well he can touch *my* nature any time he likes."

"Phoebe, don't be vulgar," scolded Gretchen.

Phoebe just grinned.

"I think we're going to have be a little more proactive from here on, sis. It's time to implement a few more...interactions."

Kathryn looked vaguely worried. "Such as?"

"Well, I've got a *few* ideas."

Phoebe smiled her 'evil genius' smile. Even her mother winced.

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Chakotay was sitting through the final briefing for the day and for the week. He silently wondered to himself if there was some time dilation field operating in the room because time seemed to be slowing down. This would have to be the most boring and pointless of sessions so far, and he sadly realized that he had plenty of similar meetings to compare.

As he looked at his PADD, he once again cursed himself for not at least installing some games or books that would relieve the boredom of the seemingly endless discussion between two admirals discussing someone else's log entry during an away mission he wasn't even part of and first contact situation on Voyager that led absolutely nowhere and got them no information or supplies. He had to suppress a sigh.

It was when he was looking for something vaguely interesting on the device that he noticed that he had a message. Falling on it like a starving man on food, he discovered that it was from Kathryn.

He blinked at the text, which didn't seem to make any sense.

"What's brown and sticky?"

He stared at the screen for a minute while he tried to process her question. Was she asking about some substance that they'd encountered in the Delta Quadrant? Finally, he just replied he didn't know.

The reply was almost instant. "*A stick.*"

He found himself trying not to laugh, while at the same time trying to follow what the hell Admiral Perkins was talking about, when the old man suggested that something was "quite perplexing". Chakotay closed his eyes and desperately tried to concentrate on the admiral's topic.

The slight vibration from the PADD notified him that there was another message. He couldn't resist. He looked down.

"Two atoms are walking down the street one day, and one of them says to the other: "Hey, wait up a second. I think I lost an electron". The second atom replied, "Are you sure?" The first atom exclaimed, "Yes, I'm positive!"

Chakotay made a little snorting noise and closed his eyes again. A bored Kathryn Janeway was a very dangerous thing. He just never realized that her...*impishness* extended to official debriefings. Sending corny jokes during official meetings? As usual, she never failed to amaze him.

"Are you all right, Commander?" Admiral Perkins looked quite concerned.

"Yes, sir." Chakotay cleared his throat, "I, er, may be getting a cold."

"Dear me. Perhaps you should report to Medical at the completion of this session, son." The admiral may have been tedious, but he was a caring man and Chakotay appreciated his kindness.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. I'll see how I feel." Chakotay smiled weakly at the older man and the admiral checked the documents in front of him, looking for where he was up to.

The admiral restarted his mono-toned exposition again on the interaction of something with someone sometime. Chakotay didn't really care, because at that moment, he felt the PADD vibrate again.

Another message from Kathryn. He was going to kill her.

It probably wasn't the smartest thing he'd done for a while, but he couldn't stop himself from selecting the flashing icon that indicated a text message.

Marked urgent.

"What's the definition of a tachyon?"

Okay, he was confused again. Surely she knew *this*, but before he could make any kind of reply, another message flashed up on his screen.

"It's a gluon that's not completely dry."

The laugh exploded from Chakotay before he could stop himself. Years of training kicked in though and he managed to swiftly cover with a bout of coughing.

Thirty minutes later, the meeting adjourned, for which Chakotay was extremely grateful and relieved.

Waiting for him outside the room was Kathryn Janeway. Her expression was a picture of innocence, her hands held behind her back and not a trace of a smirk or smile on her face. Just as he was about to say something, Admiral Perkins appeared beside him.

"Ah, Katie. You must take better care of your officers, my dear. The poor Commander seems to be coming down with something."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of him, sir." Kathryn threaded her arm through Chakotay's, "Come on, Commander, I'll get Mom to make you some soup and I'm sure Phoebe will have some ideas for you as well."

Chakotay was almost frightened about what ideas Phoebe might have for him.

The admiral seemed satisfied with her suggestions though and left them after ordering Kathryn to 'make sure he's taken care of'. Chakotay waited until they were alone.

"Physics jokes, Kathryn?"

"Oh, come on, Chakotay. I was bored and admit it, you were too. I was just making sure your morale didn't suffer." She lifted her finger to silence him before adding, "And the one about the stick wasn't physics related."

"Hmm."

"Sorry." She didn't look the slightest bit sorry. "I'll make it up to you. Let me buy you dinner tonight?"

"I thought I was getting Gretchen's soup." Chakotay tried not to pout.

"Hey, even better," she gave his arm a squeeze. "Come home with me tonight and I'll let Mom fuss over you. I believe she's made peach pie today."

"Sounds great."

"And tomorrow morning, we'll leave early and hit the running paths around the Academy to help us burn off the pie."

"Damn."

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"So, how's Operation Hotbod going?"

"Phoebe, really, *hotbod*?"

Phoebe sighed her put upon sigh, "Kathryn, as someone in the military, you of all people should know that all campaigns need a plan and a code name and let's face it, 'hotbod' sums it up."

"Hmm."

"So?"

"Pretty well, I think. We've done coffee, the gallery..."

"A master stroke, if I do say so myself."

"...the gallery, done a couple of runs, bought him home to Mom..."

"Showing excellent initiative on that one, sis. Well done."

Kathryn beamed at her sister. It would disturb her later that a compliment from Phoebe was more highly appreciated than a commendation from Starfleet.

"Her peach pie should be a intergalactic treasure," Kathryn said, "I even had three slices."

Phoebe laughed and agreed. "What else?"

"The jokes."

"Excellent. I think we can afford to escalate things a bit."

"Really? I thought things were going pretty well," Kathryn considered Phoebe's idea of escalation, "I'm really getting into this and enjoying myself now that I've..." the expression on her sister's face made her stumble to a halt, mid-sentence.

Phoebe crossed her arms and stared at her. That wasn't a good sign. Her sister engendered a feeling of dread that the even the Borg never managed.

"I think we've reached the point where you need to start making your intentions more clear." Phoebe waited for some comment but when there wasn't one, she elaborated. "Isn't his birthday coming up?" Kathryn nodded. "Okay, well, I'm thinking..."

"A nice bottle of wine?"

Phoebe shook her head. "Kathryn, nothing says 'just good pals' like a *nice* bottle of wine. No, you need to get in his face." Kathryn looked vaguely alarmed at this suggestion. "Oh, for...nothing *creepy*. You need to ratchet up the stakes. I'm thinking flowers and something homemade, like brownies or chocolates."

"Surely *I'm* not making him brownies." The relationship would be over before it even started.

"Mom's brownies. Geez, Kathryn how did you get home without my help? You can do them in a nice box and write something special in the card you make. He'll love them."

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Kathryn Janeway was somehow back in his life. Chakotay wondered how that had happened.

Only a few weeks ago, he was congratulating himself on getting used to not having her around. Now, he was concerned that once again, he was falling under her spell.

Perhaps it was the relief of being finally out from under the burden of command, or maybe just the fact that Voyager and her crew were safe, but Kathryn was relaxed, happy and smiling and, he thought to himself, seemingly appearing every time he turned around lately.

They had gone from a nod and a smile as they passed each other in the corridor on their way to or from a briefing, to her apparently seeking him out, usually with an invitation. She was like the Kathryn Janeway of New Earth, only more so. He hadn't realized how much he missed that version of her. The relentless pressure of the last few years had outwardly eroded all the softness away, leaving a hard, brittle shell and at times he wondered if the true Kathryn had survived the trip.

He felt a little guilty that he'd effectively given up on her onboard Voyager. He'd let himself believe the Captain's persona was all that was left of her by the time Admiral Janeway had come to bring them home, feeling a little ill at the thought of the toll an extra seventeen years would have taken on her.

When he was honest with himself though, he found the newly restored Kathryn Janeway charming and an awful lot of fun. Apart from a couple of dinners and coffees after work, she had sent him flowers and caramel brownies on his birthday, invited him to join her in runs before their morning briefings and had a tendency to just appear at his office during a break.

His only concern, which he didn't really think was an issue, was that due to her still legendary tendency to need very little sleep would be that she would turn up at his apartment at a very early hour, usually weekends, with a 'plan'. Sometimes she insisted that her mother had sent her on an errand to get him. It was a wonderful feature of being home that not only was Kathryn lively and open, but that she came complete with a wonderful family that she was more than happy to share with him.

Phoebe was a revelation. Chakotay admitted to being highly amused by Phoebe's torment and attitude towards her sister. Kathryn appeared uncharacteristically off balance with her younger sibling and Phoebe said and did things to her that would earn brig time if they'd happened on Voyager. There was clearly enormous affection between the two women, but Phoebe didn't so much ride roughshod over her sister as blithely ignore any of Kathryn's protests. It was highly enjoyable to watch. He almost believed Kathryn's theory that the reason Star Fleet were trying so hard to get Voyager home was to have her back to shield them from Phoebe.

Their mother, Gretchen, was a delight. She had a wit and wisdom exceeding both her children with an even more impressive skill of being able to silence one or both with nothing more than a raised eyebrow. Gretchen had also informed Chakotay at their first meeting that he was considered a family member and that if he didn't visit his new Janeway home often, she would deal with him herself. This was no hardship at all, because unlike her oldest daughter, Gretchen was the best cook in two quadrants as far as he was concerned.

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Awoken by the doorbell, Chakotay checked his bedside clock. They'd been given a long weekend and the first session wasn't to begin until after midday. But it was early, very early, on a Tuesday morning, so, after stumbling down the hallway, he was a bit surprised to see her when he opened the door.

"Kathryn?"

"Chakotay, aren't you up, it's...um," Kathryn hesitated and seemed to consider for a second, "la-early-ish?"

Chakotay knew instinctively that she actually had no idea what time it was. He recognized the signs; she had the 'Janeway buzz', as Tom termed it. She'd been fretting about an issue and had decided to do something about it, and in conjunction with near toxic amounts of caffeine, she was on a roll. He couldn't imagine what could possibly be wrong, though. The debriefings were practically over and they could almost start planning their leave.

He padded after her as she strode down the short hallway of his apartment. She stood quite still in the middle of his living room and appeared to be studying his old fashioned analogue wall clock. He was willing to bet that she was trying to figure out if the time it displayed was AM or PM and as he approached she shook her head absently, obviously coming to the conclusion that she didn't know what time it was and that it didn't matter anyway.

Kathryn turned around and Chakotay admitted to himself that he was a little alarmed. Her whole demeanor and body language screamed 'red alert'.

"Seven's got a boyfriend," she said without preamble, in obvious consternation, "I don't know him. Do *you* know him?"

"Kathryn, I'm hardly going to be in the loop with Seven's love life now." He realized straight away he shouldn't have said 'love life', as Kathryn's expression was that of horror, "I don't know anything." He added trying to backpedal out of any reprisals.

Chakotay briefly wondered if he should get dressed but thought that maybe it'd be best not to leave Kathryn on her own. As he examined her more closely, she had all the signs of not having slept in quite a while, and if he knew Kathryn Janeway, the only thing she'd consumed in recent memory was coffee. He corralled her to the sofa, pushed her into it and started making a plan for some breakfast and maybe even herbal tea, as she sat.

Janeway, however, wasn't paying any attention to him. Agitation got the better of her and she sprang to her feet and started pacing.

"I'm not sure I understand what the problem is here, Kathryn," he tried to keep his tone reasonable, as if talking her down from a window ledge.

"Are you kidding? Who is this...this...*guy* she's seeing? He could be...be *anything!*" she ran her hands through her hair, "If the bastard hurts her, I'll kill him. Twice."

"What guy?"

"I don't *know* what guy, Chakotay. That's the *issue*." He could practically hear her teeth grinding.

"Oh," finally he understood. B'Elanna had told him that the Captain thought of Seven as a daughter, but he'd never really grasped it - until now. Actually, she acted more like his own father when

Sekaya had started dating. “*Oh*,” he said again. “Actually, Kathryn, you’re kind of scaring me. Were you like this when *I* was dating Seven?”

“Of *course* not.” she snapped and waved a dismissive hand at him and started pacing again.

He didn’t know whether to be insulted or relieved, but he had to know; “Why?”

“Chakotay,” her tone was of exasperation, as if it was so obvious that she shouldn’t have to explain, “you’re you,” her hand gestured up and down in his direction absently, “I mean, for heaven’s sake, Chakotay, you’re...” she searched for the right word, “you’re perfect. You’re, well...*you*.” She finished as if it were self evident. Explanation apparently complete, she stood still, dropped her head into her hand, with the other hand on her hip. Classic worried Janeway body language.

He stared at her. Seemingly unaware of what she had just told him, she now resumed pacing.

“What are we going to do, Chakotay?”

“Do we need to do something?”

The force of the glare nearly knocked him off his feet. He’d never really seen her like this. Of course, he’d seen her protective of her crew and ship, but this was different. The crew had always joked about the Captain being like a lioness protecting her cubs, but this was truly a mother protecting her young. He was both amused and alarmed at the same time.

Chakotay managed to get her into the kitchen, despite her manic pacing. She needed food and caffeine detoxification. Handing her a large glass of water, he waited until she gulped it down and then pushed her into a seat, while he quickly thought about something for them both to eat.

“How do you know she’s got a boyfriend?”

“She left a message for me on the comm. She can’t come to lunch...” she took a stab at what day it was, “today because she’s meeting this *guy*.” The emphasis on the word ‘guy’ made it seem like the poor fellow was a cross between slime and the Kazon. She had jerked to her feet again and appeared to be about to start pacing.

“Kathryn, you know that she’s been in great demand with all the science departments as part of her debriefing.” He pushed some toast in front of her and gently maneuvered her back onto a chair, trying to remember if she’d always been spring loaded. “It’s probably a meeting about one the projects she’s consulting on.”

“Well...”

“What about you just call her later this morning and talk to her? Then, you can discuss it with her when you’re not so...”

“Upset?”

“Homicidal.”

She seemed to suddenly deflate, rubbing her hands across her face. “I know I’m over-reacting, Chakotay, but even though she’s an adult, she also doesn’t have the usual life experiences that a young woman her age should have. I don’t want her to get hurt or taken advantage of.”

“Of course not, but you can’t protect her from everything at all times. She knows you’re always

going to be there to help and advise her. I'm sure she'll be fine, Kathryn."

Kathryn sat silently, considering his words.

"Can I have a coffee?"

"No."

She shrugged. "Worth a shot." She rubbed her face again and looked at him as if she had just noticed him in front of her. "Chakotay, what are you wearing?"

He had completely forgotten his relative state of undress.

"Um, I just got out of bed." He handed her another tea and made to leave, "I'll just put on some clothes."

"Oh, don't bother for me. I think it suits you." She smiled at him in a way he had never seen her smile at him before. "Almost as much as the ducks."

"That's it. I'm putting pants on."

"Story of my life." Kathryn murmured, as he made his way to his bedroom.

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She was waiting for him in the corridor outside the room of his final session for the day.

"So, how did the thing with Seven go?" Chakotay was almost afraid to ask. "You didn't phaser anyone, did you? Should I hit up the crew for help with the bail?"

"Really well and no, I didn't have to phaser anyone." Kathryn looked a bit embarrassed. "He turned out to be about ninety years old and the supervisor at the Nanotech Division, so it's lucky I didn't actually shoot him."

"That is good news."

"And I had a little chat with Seven about how all men aren't you. She promised to be careful, but I'm pretty sure she now thinks I'm nuts."

"Kathryn, you *are* nuts."

Not the slightest bit offended, Kathryn merely gave him a bright smile.

"You know, speaking of nuts, I could really destroy a satay. What are you doing for dinner?"

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Chakotay walked out into the late afternoon sunlight and breathed deeply, trying to find some inner calm.

Without doubt, that had been the worst day of their debriefings so far. Despite his being 40,000 light years away, the discussion revolved around the final massacre of Maquis on that damned planet.

On a basic level, he knew Star Fleet was mostly concerned with trying to confirm the deaths of some

personnel still MIA from the war after all this time, thinking that they may've been unfortunately present and killed with the rest. Chakotay had no information to share with them, though he wish he did - he knew very well what it was like not to know the fate of loved ones, but though he was familiar with some of the names they put forward, he of course wasn't aware if they had survived or not.

Although he knew it wasn't logical to feel guilty, he was plagued the nagging thought that once more he had not been present to die with either family or friends. Twice he had avoided sharing the horrible fate of loved ones and although logically he knew there was nothing he could have done in either case if he'd been present, it didn't stop the churning, sour feeling in his gut that resulted from the day's discussions. It wasn't that the Star Fleet officers had been anything but considerate or sympathetic in their questioning, and at no time was there any suggestion of issues with his involvement with the Maquis, but Chakotay was left feeling unsettled and sad. Though he tried to keep his anger under control these days, the rehashing the whole ghastly time had bought back the feelings of helpless rage that up until this point he'd kidded himself that he had conquered.

Taking another deep breath and trying to release his anger, he wondered why today, of all days, he was alone at the end of the session.

Kathryn appearing at his elbow at every free moment had become such a common occurrence that Chakotay was surprised when she hadn't popped up at his side as soon as he left the building. He knew that she had a similar timetable to his this week, as he'd spoken to her about it just the day before when she'd arrived at his doorstep in sweats, carrying a backpack and requesting his company for a run before starting work. He had almost resented how good she looked as they finally jogged to a stop outside the officer's club gym, while he felt sure he looked like he'd been dragged through a warp core, backwards.

Chakotay slowly made his way home, taking a short cut across the grounds, strangely disappointed to not find her eagerly waiting for him, smiling and full of plans for a meal or drink, reflecting that he would more than welcome the distraction of her dragging him out of his funk and into yet another coffee shop. The new Kathryn seemed almost obsessed with food, now that she had access to non-replicated varieties. They both enjoyed the charming cafes and restaurants tucked away in obscure corners of the city that somehow she managed to know about.

As he walked along the path, he realized how tired and agitated he was, so maybe an early night would be a good thing.

He almost walked passed her. She was sitting on a knee high stone wall that ran around the gardens in this part of the grounds, hunched over, her elbows resting on her knees and staring down at the ground. She didn't look up until he spoke.

"Hey."

"Oh, hi, Chakotay," her tone was flat.

Sitting down next to her, he wondered what it was that had her so morose.

"I thought I'd see you this afternoon...maybe for a coffee?"

"Actually, Chakotay, I'm not sure I'll be very good company tonight."

Chakotay gave her a hard look. Now that he really paid attention, he could see that she was a little pale and her eyes showed something akin to post-battle strain.

"Are you feeling ill?"

She gave the slightest shrug. It wasn't a shrug of indifference. "We covered the whole Equinox fiasco today."

Now he understood. At the time of the incident, he had some fairly harsh thoughts about his captain. They were nothing, however, in comparison to those that his captain subjected herself to when she had time to reflect on her own actions and decisions. He had seen the scathing report she had made about her own conduct and no doubt so had Starfleet by now.

"Are you in any trouble?"

"No, not really," her tone was not of relief. "They were very *understanding*," a small huff, "and suggested that strain of command and a kind of battle fatigue affected my actions."

"Well, that sounds about..."

"I was weak and stupid and my actions were unbecoming of an officer," she spat out. "I was..."

"Under enormous pressure for five years, with no material or command support and dealing with issues that no captain has ever had to deal with, with no prospect of assistance for thirty years. Kathryn, give yourself a break, it did work out in the end."

"No thanks to me."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair and stood up. Did he want to go down this path of talking her out of her guilt now that she had actually succeeded in getting them home?

All the anger and grief that he'd tried to tamp down during the day's meetings bubbled to the surface and boiled over.

"Kathryn, you've got to let go of this damned martyr complex thing that you have."

Her head snapped up to look at him. "I...*what*?"

Chakotay completely missed the stunned and hurt expression on her face. All the rage, shame, powerlessness and a myriad of other ugly feelings bubbled up into his mind.

"Just move the hell on and stop wallowing. Not everything is about you."

Chakotay didn't even look at her before he stormed off. He made it all the way to his apartment before his stomach finally rebelled and he only just made it to the bathroom to throw up. As he rested his forehead against the cool tiles, he was appalled at his reaction and his treatment of Kathryn. He groaned and wondered what the hell he was going to do.

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Kathryn slumped down with her head in her hands, reflecting that the last conversation had gone badly even by her own standards.

"Captain!" Kathryn looked up to see B'Elanna approaching at red alert speed, with a worried look on her face. "Have you seen Chakotay?"

"You just missed him. Can I help?"

"Well, um," B'Elanna gave Kathryn an uncertain look, "er, I know we're not supposed to discuss our debrief but..."

Kathryn was instantly alert, pushing aside her own distress. She gave B'Elanna a swift wave of her hand to indicate that she should speak.

"I was just talking to Ayala," B'Elanna looked up at Kathryn, "not that we were intentionally..."

"Lanna." Kathryn's worry gave way for a second to wonder when her maverick Chief Engineer had turned into a Star Fleet rule follower. "Just tell me. Please."

"It seems that today's discussion with some ex-Maquis was about the planet." B'Elanna started to pace. "I guess I missed out because I had an urgent call from the Engineering Division about..."

"What planet?" Kathryn interrupted.

"Where the Maquis were all..." B'Elanna couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence, but the look on Kathryn's face indicated that she understood, "anyway, I think they were trying to find out what may have happened to some 'Fleeters still not accounted for after the war."

"That's crazy, you were all..."

"'Safely in the Delta Quadrant', as one of Ayala's inquisitors put it." B'Elanna's tone was bitter. Kathryn didn't blame her.

"Oh god, Chakotay. No wonder..." Kathryn rubbed her forehead in frustration and then concentrated on the unhappy and worried woman in front of her, "B'Elanna are you all right?"

"Fine," the answer was almost forced between clenched teeth.

Kathryn instinctively reached out to the younger woman and pulled her into a hug.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I've let you all down and I am sorry." Kathryn released B'Elanna and patted her arm, "We've got to make sure the crew are all right. I want you to find Harry, Tom, Ayala and anyone else you can rope in and have them round up the whole crew and get them together somewhere." Kathryn stopped to think. "Where's a good place to meet, do you think?"

"How about Sandrine's?"

"Perfect. I'll get Chakotay now," Kathryn smiled, "you did the right thing telling me, B'Elanna, thank you."

"Right, thank you, Captain," her relief obvious. With a nod to Kathryn, she turned and headed back down the path she'd come from, and smacked her comm badge, "Torres to Lieutenant Paris."

Kathryn watched her disappear around a bend in the path and then took a deep breath and started walking quickly towards Chakotay's apartment.

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Chakotay debated with himself whether or not to answer the door. Just as he'd decided to ignore it, the nagging thought that it was another ex-Maquis had endured a similar session and needed him got him to his feet. A quick rinse of his mouth and a splash of water on the face made him feel marginally better, and he made his way to the door. The bell sounded again just as he was getting

opening it.

Kathryn practically flew through the barely opened door and gathered him into a crunching hug before he had properly registered who the visitor was.

"I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

"Kathryn?"

She wasn't showing any signs of letting him go.

"I can't believe I did it to you again." Her words were muffled into his shoulder. Chakotay felt her body shudder.

"What did you do? I think it's me that should be apologizing."

"Don't. You did nothing wrong," she gave him a hard squeeze and then stepped back, "I did it again." she shook her head in disgust, "I got so wrapped up in my stupid issues and was completely insensitive to you *again*. I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Chakotay. Are you all right?" she shook her head again and wiped at her eyes. "What the hell am I asking, of course you're not," she hugged him again. "B'Elanna told me what happened and I've got her assembling all the crew. Do you feel up to seeing them? I need to make sure they're all okay after today's debacle. We'll make sure everyone has someone to talk to. Someone from the crew, in the first instance, who understands." She eyed him critically and gave his hand another squeeze. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Kathryn."

"You *are not*, but I'll make sure you will be." She took his offered arm as he closed his front door behind them. "We're meeting them all at Sandrine's, the real one."

Chakotay walked along side her in almost a daze. As they made their way to the transporter station, he noticed that her hand had clasped his and there was a more vigorous squeeze.

"I can't believe that Star Fleet officers could be so damned insensitive," Squeeze. "Well, I'll be having something to say to the Admiral Beasley as soon as I can," Squeeze. Beasley had overall control of the Voyager debrief. Chakotay almost felt sorry for him. "And don't even get me started on why we have to keep our individual sessions confidential...for something as devastating as this it's not only ridiculous, but just plain wrong." Squeeze. "I totally dropped the ball on this situation, allowing myself to think that now we were home I could relax." Squeeze.

They approached the transporter, hands still joined. Chakotay reflected that she was really working up a head of steam and he felt almost nostalgic for Voyager and the Delta Quadrant.

"Star Fleet can damn-well provide counseling services to the whole crew, *right now*. You and I can double date with Tom and B'Elanna - goodness knows they've got almost as many issues as we do," she stopped, perhaps realizing what she had just said. "Of course, you don't need to attend if you don't want to. God, if I'm not being an insensitive oaf, I'm being a dictatorial one. I'm sorry, Chakotay, I didn't mean to tell you what you should do."

"Actually, I think I could do with some counseling, as well. Sounds like a plan." Chakotay smiled at her, "You mean, you're going to attend counseling too?" He couldn't hide the disbelief in his tone.

"I sure am. Hopefully, my poor shrink won't give up the business after a few sessions with me."

Perhaps I'm a hopeless case."

"Maybe we should double up. I love to watch body contact sports."

"Oh, you." Kathryn reached across with her free hand and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "While I'm at it, I'll ask that this ridiculous confidentiality thing be lifted. After seven years together, it's just stupid."

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In the end, there was no confrontation with Starfleet required. Admiral Beasley had agreed instantly and even apologized before also conceding that there was no reason to continue with the confidentiality and also allowed any of the Voyager crew to avail themselves of any of the Starfleet counselors they felt comfortable with.

Everyone had pretty much recovered from the upset of 'that damned day' as Kathryn called it.

Chakotay had found out that Tom had 'embellished' the details of Kathryn's meeting with Starfleet about the circumstances of the debriefings, letting rumors start about her shouting and glaring at admirals and others, storming into HQ to make her demands. All the crew had been only too willing to believe, as they had all witnessed similar actions over the years. Still, it increased the awe that the crew already felt for her and cheered them greatly after the details of what had happened was shared with them all. The truth had been less dramatic as Admiral Beasley had readily agreed to all her suggestions, diffusing the situation. Though there were only a handful of sessions remaining for all the crew, they were all to be open and meetings could be now discussed fully by the crew.

Counseling had been made available to all the crew, even after it was determined that only Ayala and Chakotay had been questioned about the dreadful fate that befell the Maquis.

Despite the resolution to the debriefing issues and the organization of counseling, Chakotay felt that Kathryn was still feeling guilty about their altercation and although they were still regularly 'meeting', and were indeed attending counseling together on occasions, Kathryn was a sometimes hesitant and uncertain with him and had certainly lost a little of her spontaneity with him. But they were slowly regaining their easy companionship they had enjoyed before his outburst at her.

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"Hi."

"Hello, there."

"Mom says you've got to come over." No preamble, just a demand.

"Kathryn, I don't celebrate Christmas." Chakotay looked uncomfortable.

"Well, our family does, and Mom says you're part of our family," she said simply.

"Oh, really?"

"Really. And I agree. Be ready in ten minutes, Commander. I'll transport over to get you."

"The Delta Quadrant darling and her perks."

"Me nothing. Mom's the wife of an admiral and she scares half of Starfleet. Me included." Kathryn

smiled. "So get ready, I'm on my way."

The screen went blank. Apparently, he was about to celebrate Christmas.

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He had a wonderful time despite his initial misgivings. Having never really celebrated Christmas apart from as a bemused bystander during some of his Starfleet placements years before, Chakotay didn't have gifts for any of the Janeway women and he was shocked that they'd all had a present for him under the tree.

Kathryn had given him socks, handkerchiefs and a cap with little ducks hand embroidered on them, which had sent both younger Janeways into peals of laughter. Apparently, Kathryn had shared a description of his boxers with her sister.

The little ink, almost caricature, portrait of Kathryn from Phoebe had him speechless. He had happily worn his hand knitted sweater from Gretchen all day. Chakotay couldn't believe that all the Janeway women had made the gifts that they had given him. Somehow, it made them so much more special.

The day had been perfect. After a wonderful lunch and the present opening, they'd all sat in the living room talking and looking through photo albums. Chakotay loved the way the sisters bantered back and forwards between themselves for hours. He shared an album of images that the Doctor had taken with Gretchen, explaining the individuals and the circumstances of each shot. Kathryn had ended up sitting on the floor, leaning against his leg, adding little comments here and there, but largely leaving the explanations to him.

His absolute favorite part of his day was the Janeway women's touching. Every question was accompanied by a hand on his arm or a nudge against his leg. Gretchen rested her hand on his shoulder when she got up to get refreshments, resting it there while Phoebe wavered in her decision between tea and coffee.

In the afternoon, the whole Paris family visited for dinner. Kathryn had been a little overwhelmed to find out that their visit had turned into a mini-tradition while Voyager had been lost. The first couple of years had been hard but they had supported each other, but the times after the Doctor's 'away mission' back to the Alpha Quadrant had turned into quite joyous celebrations when they knew that Kathryn and Tom were both still alive.

Tom, of course, took the whole thing in his stride. He was too happy being accepted back into his family to be overcome by the implications of celebrating the holiday with his captain and her family. B'Elanna was, at first, a little awed by the occasion, but was delighted to see Chakotay in attendance. It was only a short time before Kathryn had taken Miral, Phoebe had grabbed one of Tom's sisters and the older Paris' and Gretchen had become engrossed in something in the kitchen.

"Now I know why she was so driven to get us back, Chakotay." B'Elanna whispered, grabbing Tom's hand.

"I think we're all finally home, B'E."

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The cold was starting to penetrate his dress uniform. Chakotay thought that it wouldn't be so uncomfortable except for the drizzle.

The day of the memorial had been a long one for all concerned, although worthwhile.

There was a stiff breeze and it was pushing the icy mist under his umbrella. Now that the official ceremony was over, some of the people attending, but only a hardy few, were taking the opportunity to explore the lovely memorial that had been commissioned by the family and friends group. It was an impressive installation, comprising of a series of walls and gardens that made small 'environments' that allowed some privacy and contemplation as well as being beautiful to look at.

Most of the guests had now made their way to the warm and dry area of the refreshments pavilion. The local Federation representative had organized the dedication of the Voyager/Val Jean memorial as well as providing the tent and a site-to-site transporter station to make the location accessible to even the most frail or elderly of the attendees.

He hadn't managed to have even the shortest of conversations with any of the other senior staff since the opening ceremony this morning. They had all been pulled in different directions and had all spent the last few hours consoling, sharing anecdotes, explaining and listening to stories about crewmates, some of whom hadn't made it home. He'd lost track of Kathryn within minutes of arriving and even Gretchen and Phoebe had been swept up and away by various representatives of the family groups.

The dedication of the memorial was, by its nature, a somber affair and it'd been the last time he'd seen Kathryn. Her speech had been sincere and heartfelt. After discussing it with some of the original and Maquis crew, they'd agreed to have her speak for both of them and she had done a wonderful job, striking just the right tone. The seriousness of the speech had been tempered with just the right amount of personal anecdotes of her interactions with some of the lost crew. It had been a lovely ceremony.

Chakotay was brought back from his contemplation of the service and this site by a sharp tug on his umbrella. The gusts of wind were getting stronger and the rain, harder. And more frigid.

Another quick scan of the site showed that all of the guests had made their way to the tent to be transported to their homes, and the protocol officers were ushering the stragglers inside.

He realized that he was now very cold. It wouldn't be too long before he could decently leave. Another fifteen or twenty minutes in the tent to give the last of the family and friends an opportunity to talk or ask questions, although he didn't think they would need to because he'd already spoken to everyone, either before or during the day of the memorial dedication. Other members of the senior staff had as well and he was surprised and pleased that B'Elanna had taken this 'duty' so seriously. He knew that she had spent a lot of time with Joe Carey's family, leading up to the events and had greeted all of them with an embrace today.

The other person who had been totally and completely accessible to everyone had been the Captain. He knew she had personally spoken to all the loved ones of the Voyager crew that had been lost and he'd discovered that she had also contacted those of the Maquis crew.

Just as he had decided to retire to the tent, make his goodbyes and leave, Chakotay saw Phoebe Janeway coming towards him.

Chakotay liked Phoebe. In fact, he couldn't imagine anyone disliking her. She had a wonderful sense of humor and was so like her older sister in both speech and mannerisms that, except for their coloring, the two women could be twins.

As she got closer he could see that she didn't have that twinkle in her eyes that made him think she

was up to mischief and for the first time since he'd met her, she wasn't smiling.

"Phoebe," Chakotay took her hand with concern, "is something wrong?"

"Kathryn." Phoebe surreptitiously checked to make sure they were on their own and wouldn't be overheard, "she hasn't come in yet and I know that she's been with a lot of the families today."

He knew what that meant. His eyes swept the area trying to spot his former commanding officer but she wasn't in the immediate vicinity. It occurred to him that he should've been with her today.

"I think she's where Joe Carey's section is." Joe didn't actually have his own section but the Friendship One mission had been commemorated and Joe had been honored as part of it.

Chakotay could've kicked himself. He knew that she had taken Joe's loss even harder than she normally mourned the death of a crewman. He had suspected that she had been distraught following that mission although she would, of course, never acknowledge or admit to it. After talking with Joe's family again today, the pain would be fresh again.

"I should go find her, Phoebe," Chakotay gave her hand a squeeze, "I'm sorry that..."

"Oh, don't worry, Chakotay," Phoebe gave him a weak smile, "we're used to her being so hard on herself. Go get her and take her home. I'm going to Indiana with Mom now." Phoebe reached up and kissed him on the cheek but looked worried, "but contact us if she's..." she didn't finish the thought and Chakotay could tell she didn't want to verbalize her worries.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of her."

"That's what she says you do. Thanks, Chakotay." She leaned towards him and kissed him again.

Chakotay watched Phoebe return to the tent and then turned back and started to walk towards the installation dedicated to Friendship One and Joe.

As another gust of wind tried to wrench his umbrella from his grasp, he again noticed how cold he was. The umbrella was less than effective in the swirling breeze.

He rounded a corner and there she was.

She looked small. Smaller than he could ever remember seeing her. Standing, staring at Carey's name on the wall, with her hands clasped behind her back. Hair plastered down, soaking wet and, he thought, oblivious to her condition.

The expression on her face was, sadly, a familiar one. It was of regret, sadness, grief and guilt. All the losses had almost buried Kathryn Janeway's spirit. Captain Janeway seemed to cope a bit better by cutting herself off from the crew and any emotional entanglements. But Kathryn Janeway struggled more and more during their journey.

"Kathryn," he put down the umbrella as it was useless at this point, "we should go home now."

She didn't appear to hear him as she resolutely stared at the names on the wall.

"Come on, Kathryn, let's get you warm and dry." He gave her arm a gentle tug.

She followed him silently back to the tent. There were now no relatives or friends left, only the few Starfleet personnel cleaning up and stacking chairs.

He'd taken her hand, which was like a block of ice and lead her back inside. Her face had lost all its color. She was wet through.

"Stay here, Kathryn," he pulled her out of the wind to wait while he organized transport, "I'll just sort out the location with the operator and I'll be back." An almost imperceptible nod was her only answer. He quickly gave the coordinates to the young officer at the controls and returned to her side. "We'll be home in a few minutes."

They materialized at the transporter station just outside his apartment building and they only had to walk a hundred meters or so. As they approached the entrance, he wondered if she would make it. It was almost as though she were shutting down.

"Do you know, I think this is the first time you've come to my place when I've got pants on?"

Her lack of reply concerned him but he knew that the combination of the memorial and talking to the relatives and friends had affected her deeply. He was determined to not to let her dwell on her perceived failures though.

"Come through here and get warm, Kathryn."

Chakotay bustled her into the living room and activated the 'fire', which threw heat and gentle light into the room instantly.

"Just stay here and thaw and I'll get you some things to change into, okay?"

There was no audible reply but the slight turn of her head in his direction was considered a good sign, although she had returned her gaze to the flames in the fireplace.

Returning to the living room quickly, he handed her sweat pants and two long sleeved t-shirts. They would be way too big, but they were dry, soft and warm.

"Get changed in front of the fireplace, Kathryn and I'll be doing the same in the bedroom. I'll be out in a few minutes." She didn't move. "Kathryn? Put on some dry things and I'll make you a hot drink, okay?"

Kathryn seemed to give herself an almost imperceptible shake and finally managed to nod.

When he returned to the living room ten minutes later, she was changed and sitting crossed legged, staring into the fire.

"You okay?"

"Yes, thank you, Chakotay. I put my wet things in the bathroom."

"Excellent. So, hot chocolate and some cookies?"

"You said you'd make me a coffee."

"No, I said I'd make you a hot drink." Chakotay smiled at her, "Come on, Kathryn, chocolate has some caffeine in it."

"Meanie." Kathryn Janeway poked her tongue out at him. "What kind of cookies?"

By the time he had returned from the kitchen, he could tell that some of her previous dour mood had

returned, despite the prospect of cookies. She was sitting on the sofa, hunched over with her elbows on her knees.

"Hard day, Kathryn?"

"Hard seven years, Chakotay." Kathryn ran her hand through her still damp hair, "I really screwed up out there."

"Kathryn," Chakotay ran his hand through his hair in exasperation, "I know that Star Fleet captains have high expectations of themselves, but you're human and not infallible. Everyone makes mistakes."

"I should've...it wasn't..." finally, she almost shrugged and added quietly, "okay."

"Okay?" Chakotay blinked at her, "Kathryn, are you all right?" He wasn't sure what was more off putting; her meek acceptance or her accepting it *at all*.

"I'm fine, Chakotay but I am sorry I let you down."

"Kathryn," he took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. Before he could formulate a reply, she continued.

"I never got the chance to tell Joe Carey that he was up for promotion."

"Kathryn." She hadn't heard anything he'd just said?

"So many regrets, Chakotay. I don't want things that should have been said to not be spoken."

Chakotay sighed deeply and reflected that a completely reformed Kathryn was rather too much to hope for after only a few weeks but he was getting weary of her constant guilt. It was wearing him down. He took another deep breath and tried to think of something to say to her that would help break her out of her funk but she spoke again before he could form an argument.

"From now on, I should find the time to say things that should be said. No more waiting for a 'better time'. No more subtlety."

"Sounds like a good policy." He sighed in relief.

Kathryn nodded and then took a sip of her drink and seemed to concentrate on the flames.

"You know, Phoebe thought subtlety was the answer, but now I don't think so." Kathryn stared into the fire. "Some things should be said out loud to the people who need to hear them. Like, Chakotay, I love you."

He wasn't sure she was serious or not, despite the tenor of the conversation.

"Yes, that should definitely be said."

"No, really. Chakotay, I love you. It's important to me that you know that not only do I love you, but that I'm *in* love with you. I've decided to do away with the whole..."

"Subtlety thing?"

"Yes, the stupid subtlety thing." She made a small vague gesture with her hand, her gaze lifted

briefly to his before returning to the fireplace. "I've embarrassed you. I'm sorry." She continued to stare into the flames. "But no more 'waiting' or 'planning' to tell people important things. I don't want even more regrets. I just wanted you to know."

"Wow."

"You've moved on, I understand that."

"I don't think you do."

Kathryn went back to concentrating doggedly on the fireplace, one hand around her drink, the other fretting the edge of the soft rug Chakotay had placed around her shoulders.

"I feel the same way." Chakotay finally said. He placed his drink on the coffee table and sat next to her on the sofa.

"About subtlety?"

"No, Kathryn, about loving you." He managed to keep most signs of exasperation out of his voice.

"Really?"

He nodded and smiled and she let out a deep sigh of relief as she leaned into his embrace. Chakotay heard a muffled "thank you" murmured into his chest. When she hadn't moved after a while, he realized she had fallen asleep in his arms.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No. Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Kathryn, we just got back from lunch, you can't possibly be hungry."

"That was hours ago and I want something sweet. We didn't have dessert."

Chakotay looked down on the woman sitting on his lap.

"Oh, I don't know. I think I've got something sweet for dessert right here." He ran his hand suggestively up her thigh.

Kathryn rolled her eyes at the comment and leaned in and ran her fingers over his tattoo. "You do make a good point," she kissed him. "But can we have some pie after dessert?"

He laughed and shook his head. Life was a constant source of wonder for him, especially in the last few weeks.

"You know what's really weird since we got back home?"

"Weirder than you calling Earth 'home', or me sitting on your lap?"

"Yep, even weirder than either of them." She shook her head. "You haven't stopped eating since we got back."

"No, not really. Only since the start of Operation Hotbod."

"Do I even want to know?"

"Phoebe."

That was all the answer Chakotay wanted or needed.

Despite her talk of pie and other desserts, Kathryn remained firmly in his lap. He hugged her tightly.

"Looking forward to getting back to work?"

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

"Yes." He laughed at her.

She resumed her gentle tracing of his tattoo.

"Well, except that it'll probably cut into my dessert time," she wiggled on his lap suggestively, "it'll be good to get back in the *saddle*, again."

"You're right. I'm still hungry," Chakotay managed to stand without sending Kathryn to the floor, but lifted her in a fireman's carry straight away, "I need dessert, right now."

Kathryn laughed joyously as they made their way to the bedroom. "I knew you'd see it my way. I just had to be subtle."

It was quite a while until they had pie.

The End.

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