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Author's Note: This is an Über fic, which means the story has taken the characters of Voyager out of their normal, in this case Trek, setting and placed them in another time and place.

Set in the 1870’s of the American frontier, what some folks call the Wild West. My knowledge of frontier life, articles of clothing, language and slang of the period is limited. I’ve endeavored to research these areas; however, I am certain that I’ve not even scratched the surface. In some instances I simply let my imagination run wild.

Lastly, this time in history was rife with racial prejudices and stigmas. To allow each of our characters the opportunity to contribute to the tale, you may notice some inconsistencies with what would’ve been deemed “acceptable” for this time period.

With all of the aforementioned in mind, I ask for lenience in advance under what is known as poetic license.

Thanks to Elem for the Beta and Vanhunks for kick starting the muse

Summary: An Über fic set in the wild west of the 1870’s. History has a way of repeating itself...

Rating: R to NC17 for language, violence and consensual sex

Genre: action, angst, mystery, romance, smut, western

Pairings: J/C, P/T, K/S

THE REDHEAD, THE RENEGADE & EVIDENCE OF DECEPTION

CHAPTER ONE

The advertisement read, "Help Wanted: Attractive, cultured woman for hostess position of upscale frontier hotel."

What absolute bosh!! Kathryn thought, as she eyed her would be hostess ensemble with ill disguised contempt.

“Mr. Randolph, you can’t possibly expect me to wear that!” Defiance flashed in her blue grey eyes as she addressed the man across the room.

Marc Randolph, a man of indeterminate age, eyed the attractive beauty in front him lasciviously. “You came to me, Missus. If you’re wantin’ the position, that’s what you’ll be wearin’,” the dark haired man decreed.

Kathryn attempted a more civil approach, as she lowered her voice and softened her stance “Mr. Randolph, I appreciate your generosity but it’s unwarranted. When I accepted the position, I told you that I was not in need of additional attire,” she explained with a mid-western twang.
“Look, Kit, --”

“Do. Not. Call me that,” Kathryn hissed.

Marc was taken aback by the venomous manner in which the woman spoke. *Damn, she's gonna be trouble,* he thought to himself. He knew when he received her reply, that Miss Kathryn Janeway wasn't your everyday piece of calico. No matter, she wasn't the first lady from back east he'd gotten here under false pretenses, and she wouldn't be the last.

“Them fancy dresses just ain't goin' cut it. My saloon patron's come here 'spectin' the best these parts have to offer. Them thar dresses ain't goin' give 'em that,” Marc stepped closer toward her as he ran a rough hand down the back of her arm, “Now, if you're needin' some assistance, Missus, I'm more than willin' to oblige,” he husked, as he inhaled the rose scent of her auburn locks.

Although Marc Randolph stood a good ten inches taller, Kathryn didn't stiffen her body or jerk away from her new boss in fear.

Slowly she lifted her left palm, as if to caress the calloused hand on her forearm, “While that is extremely... kind of you. I don't require your assistance at this time,” she answered coolly, before she seized the man's hand in an agonizing reverse grip that, in seconds, had him kneeling at her skirted feet.

Kathryn sneered in his pain-contorted face, “We already spoke about this aspect of the position. I told you, that while my conversation and dancing skills are for sale; that's it. Nothing else is. This was our agreement, was it not?” She asked, as she heard the small bones in the man's hand creak under the pressure she effortlessly exerted.

“The advertisement requested a hostess not a whore,” Marc squeaked in anguish.

“See that you remember that, Mr. Randolph,” Kathryn warned as she released her hold and stepped away from the man.

Marc eyed the petite woman wondering where she'd learned such a trick. *Damn, she's gonna be trouble, all right.*

“Right. I want to see you in *that,*” Marc indicated his chosen ensemble for the woman with a nod of his head, “in three hours time. If you need anything, talk to Rio. Don't be late or it's comin' out of your pay,” he grumbled, as he massaged his aching palm, before he exited the small room.

Kathryn sighed to herself as Mr. Randolph closed the door to her room. Dejectedly, she collapsed on the lumpy bed as she recalled her journey to the Western Frontier.

Nothing, not even her previous overseas travels, could have prepared her for the rude awakening of traveling westward. In all, the trip had taken a month to complete – a week by rail, two weeks by
riverboat, and another week by stagecoach.

Kathryn smiled slightly, as she remembered her weeks aboard the Delta Queen. She’d made a name for herself playing poker during those weeks aboard the steamboat. It had been her hope to resume the role she’d established for herself once she arrived in New Mexico.

However, it appeared that first she’d have to prove to Mr. Randolph that such a position would be beneficial to his establishment. Never before had she been more grateful for the unconventional lessons her father insisted she learn in her younger years.

After completing her education at an Episcopalian convent with her younger sister, Kathryn accompanied her father on his many business trips to Detroit, New Orleans, and sometimes even Europe.

When racing his horses in New Orleans, Kathryn’s father also indulged in another favorite pastime, one in which he excelled - gambling.

He taught his daughter all the tricks he knew about card playing, in the belief that there was more to survival than simply being a proper lady. She was well versed in the social graces at the convent, and since he had no sons to carry on after him, he expected his eldest daughter to be strong, independent and able to care financially for her younger sister when the time came.

He showed her how to gamble on land and on riverboats, and he passed on to her his passionate skill of the game.

Not only did Edward deem it necessary for Kathryn to know how to gamble, but he also demanded she know her way around a pistol, shot gun, rifle or any other firearm she may encounter. When the pair would return from their travels he schooled his eldest daughter in marksmanship. Kathryn previously acquired the skill of horseback riding sidesaddle and her father further instructed her to ride astride in a gentleman’s saddle.

This was another of his passions he passed on to his daughter, the love of horseback riding. Kathryn was known to outfit herself on many an occasion in men’s britches to ride. She also knew how to ride bareback.

Edward taught his eldest daughter one additional skill: the art of knife throwing.

As a result of his tutelage Kathryn was able to hold her own in adulthood, whether she was having afternoon tea at the Woman’s Guild or challenging the local young men to quick-draw contests.

Surprisingly her proficiency at playing pool and billiards were honed by her mother, Gretchen.
During her trip Southwest, Kathryn fell back on her father’s teachings. She established a name for herself on the riverboats as “The Queen of Hearts” in response to her grand looks, as well as, her proficiency as a poker player.

As the waterways yielded to dry land, Kathryn marveled at the sheer beauty of the terrain.

She’d expected barren, flat plains of desert to greet her as she traveled southwest. This expectation became a reality for most of her journey; however, as she neared her final destination, nothing could have prepared her for the absolute grandeur of the mountains.

Kathryn recalled being awestruck and completely captivated as the coach journeyed past the natural giants. On the left side of the stagecoach, all she saw was desert for miles but if she looked to the right, she saw the mountains. It was odd, for the first time during her voyage west, Kathryn felt at peace. How could scenery do that? She’d not felt at peace since before... well, it had been three years since she felt anything akin to peace.

Traveling north, Kathryn and the stagecoach left the desert behind to embark upon lush hills and valleys. The terrain was beautifully rich with what looked like perfectly placed evergreen bushes peppered throughout the hillsides. It was surreal the way the sunlight dappled the hills as they dipped and rolled for miles on end. The various hues of browns, oranges, and reds reminded her of fall in Indiana. And at the same time she marveled as a new spectrum of purples and blues began to emerge. In short, she was beside herself with wonderment.

One can only imagine the shock of learning that in the middle of all this beauty, sat a small squalor of a town. A place made up of rowdy cowboys; outlaws who roamed freely without fear of arrest, and saloons with an abundance of soiled doves spilling into the streets.

For a time, Kathryn wondered about the name of the town but now the name seemed apt. She cringed at the thought of living here in Loveless, New Mexico.

Despite its beauty, New Mexico was a far cry from Maryland. This part of the untamed country held more desperate and dangerous men than any other corner of the West.

Kathryn now found herself in a region that was more remote and less known than the continent of Africa. There were no courts this far west, no accurate record of more than a small portion of deeds done in blood. Nowhere in the world was human life held so cheaply, and never was there a population more lawless.

And sadly, this was where Kathryn found herself calling home for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER TWO

A knock at the door, brought Kathryn out of her reverie.
“Come in,” Kathryn called absentmindedly.

The door opened to reveal an attractive, exotic looking woman with a caramel complexion and thick, wavy black locks. The woman wore a white corset trimmed in black lace, with a matching tulle skirt. Her long legs were encased in black striped stockings suspended by white garters, with a white feather headdress atop her dark locks.

“Hello, Kathryn, right?” The woman asked with a Creole accent. “I’m Rio. Are you settling in all right?”

“Yes, the room is very nice. Thank you,” Kathryn addressed the scantily clad woman.

“I don’t know what you said to Marc, but I’ve never seen him so riled up before.” Rio chuckled.

“Yes, well, we had a bit of a squabble. Seems Mr. Randolph needed to be reminded of our original contract agreement,” Kathryn explained cryptically.

“Don’t take this the wrong the way, but you don’t strike me as the type to work in a saloon,” Rio stated, as she observed the other woman’s posture, her clothing, and the very manner in which she spoke.

“I’ll take that as a compliment then,” Kathryn smirked, “and may I say, that you don’t strike me as one to put up with Mr. Randolph solicitous advances.”

Rio narrowed her chestnut eyes, as she tried to determine if this new girl was going to be trouble. That's all Marc kept mumbling when she’d passed him on her way upstairs from the bar.

Kathryn Janeway didn’t look like trouble. This woman looked refined, polished. She reminded Rio of a true socialite. Her aristocratic chin, intricately coiffed auburn locks and mysterious blue eyes told a tale of an up bringing that did not correspond to the harsh reality with which women of the west were familiar with.

Rio pursed her rouge colored lips before confirming Kathryn’s statement, “According to Hoyle,” she replied.

“I beg your pardon? Who’s Hoyle and what does he have to do with our conversation?” Kathryn asked confused.

Rio rolled her eyes slightly, before she slammed her hands on her hips, “It’s a sayin’. It means, you’re correct,” she drawled.

“Oh,” Kathryn answered simply.
Not only was she going to have to get on without the amenities of home, she was going to have to learn a new tongue as well. Kathryn groaned at the thought. She'd been here two days already, and the only place that offered a hot meal and a bath was the Parlor House.

“All right, I'll teach you what you need to know for tonight and we'll add a bit to your lessons each day,” Rio offered with an outstretched hand.

“I don't have any money yet; so please, take this as payment,” Kathryn stood up and reached for one of her gowns across the bed.

Rio stepped forward and fingered the soft fabric of the dark material. The color was like nothing she'd ever seen before in clothing; she'd only ever seen this shade of purple in gemstones. The dress was very pretty and Rio could honestly say that she'd never owned anything quite so lavish. She took the dress from Kathryn and the women shook hands.

“Well, Kathryn, it looks like we've got ourselves an agreement. Tomorrow, I'll show you 'round town. For now, though you best get changed. Call me if you need help with the laces. I'll be back in an hour to collect you so you can meet the rest of the girls. You may think us a bunch of hard cases, but one thing you ought to know is that we look after our own,” Rio warned as she tightened her grip on Kathryn's hand.

Kathryn returned the grip, “Thank you, for your help. I appreciate the gesture,” she replied knowingly.

Rio nodded sharply, before she turned to leave the room without another word.

Kathryn's shoulders slumped once she was alone. She closed her eyes as she kneaded the tense muscles in her neck. She eyed the laces and the crinoline of the red and black brocade outfit Mr. Randolph commanded she don for the evening as a frustrated tear leaked down her cheek.

“I can do this,” she whispered to herself, “I have to do this,” Kathryn reminded herself. The alternative for an attractive, unwed woman on her own in a town where the men outnumbered the women ten to one, was not an alternative at all.

Besides, ultimately she had volunteered for the position.

Meanwhile across the Rio Grande...

A band of six desperados rode into the deserted plaza of Drexel Ridge, New Mexico in search of respite, just as the sun began to set on the horizon.

The broad shouldered leader of the band sat atop a gleaming black thoroughbred, clothed in all black.
attire. The man lifted a bronzed hand, to call the band to a halt, as he eyed the surroundings of the quiet town.

It was too quiet in his opinion. Usually, around this time one could hear laughter and music filtering out of Fat Can’s. It was nightfall and not one of the red lamps that usually marked the dead zone was aglow. Something was off. The nightlife of Drexel Ridge was legendary, so why was it so darned quiet tonight?

“Primo, somethin’ don’t feel right,” hissed the man to his left.

“Si, Miguel. I agree,” the leader concurred as the hairs on his arm stood on end.

Behind them, they heard Magnus exclaim, “AMBUSH!!” as shots rang through the air.

“Hyah!” The leader commanded his stead into an urgent gallop as he headed for the nearest alley. He knew his men would take cover at various points in the town and he hung his head for the blood that was about to be spilled.

More and more it seemed, he and his band were running out of hospitable places to lay low. Once upon a time, he’d been able to bribe the townsfolk into hiding them, but during these later years that seemed to go to hell in a hand basket.

He dismounted his horse in one fluid motion as he un-holstered his revolvers. From this angle, behind Fat Can’s he could see Main Street and the businesses that held residence there. With a practiced eye he was able to make out the shadows that belonged to his men and those that belonged to the bounty hunters.

His cousin inched up next to him behind the saloon, “Primo, we got problems,” he hissed.

Reeling off a few rounds from his revolver, the leader grunted, “Tell me something I don’t know, Miguel.”

Taking up his cousin’s back, Miguel fired his own weapon above his head, causing the body of a man to fall from the roof of the building. Shouting to be heard over the roar of the gunfight, Miguel informed, “I’ve counted at least twenty this time; they’re bolstering their numbers, hermano.”

“So it seems,” the big man declared, as he downed two of his would be killers from his hiding spot.

“We’re outnumbered and outgunned,” stated his cousin.

“Yes,” the leader confirmed as he stood from his crouched position, to walk over to his horse. “Easy, Venganza,” he soothed the steed lovingly as he patted the animals neck. “We’ll be leavin’, directly,” he promised, as he reached into his saddlebags.
“Ay Dios! Primo, no!” hissed his cousin.

“Yes. We didn't start this. But I intend to end it – at least for tonight,” the man growled as he lifted a handful of dynamite and a couple of bottles of clear liquid from the bag.

“Delta pattern - no witnesses, tell the others!” He commanded as he readied his launching position. During the fight, the leader noticed there seemed to be an awful lot of gunfire coming from the roof of the hotel across the street.

That wasn’t the only place the bounty hunters had set up camp. The money hungry men were stationed throughout the town in various high ground locations. He hadn’t wanted this for Drexel Ridge, this had been home for the last five years, but it was time he reckoned.

It was only a matter of time, before they caught up with him here. Shaking his head, he brought his thoughts back to the matter at hand, riding out of Drexel Ridge alive with his men beside him.

In the distance, he heard Miguel’s dove cry, indicating that everyone was in position. He swung himself into his saddle, before he hurled two sticks of dynamite through a broken window of the hotel.

He kicked Venganza’s sides, urging his mount to gallop back onto the main drag of the street.

“Hyah!” he shouted, as he leaned forward on the horse and rode away from the ticking bomb of the hotel. He’d just sped by the mercantile store before the first of a succession of explosions ripped through the warm, night air. Taking that sound as his cue, the leader tossed a glass bottle of liquid behind him into the nearest inferno.

The resounding boom confirmed the bottle of nitro had hit its mark.

The leader urgently galloped the length of Main Street as he alternatively tossed sticks of dynamite and bottles of nitroglycerin into buildings and down alleys as he rode.

He heard the screams now.

The shrill sound of terror swept through the town as, men and women ran out of the burning buildings. He turned a blind eye as he watched a man fall to the ground with flames rolling over his body. He hung his head, even after all these years, he still couldn't stand to watch a man suffer in that manner. He pulled his gun and shot the poor bastard in the chest. If it were he, he’d prefer to die from a bullet, rather than the excruciating taunt of fire licking over his skin.

In the distance, he could hear the same scene replaying itself over the width of the entire town. The rugged desperado whispered a prayer for Drexel Ridge before he rode to the edge of the town to await his men.
His team was swift. It had only taken an hour to set all of Drexel Ridge aflame, as well as, extinguish all twenty bounty hunters on his tail. The leader had ordered no witnesses. And so, when the band of six men rode off into the night, there was not one living soul left in the town of Drexel Ridge to attest to what the neighboring town's gazette reported the following morning.

**EL DIABLO STRIKES THE HEART OF NEW MEXICO!!! THE GRAND TOWN OF DREXEL RIDGE YIELDS TO THE DEVIL'S INFERNO!**

**CHAPTER THREE – A YEAR LATER**

“Come on, Chief,” Tom Paris goaded the quiet man to his right.

“Mmmm,” the man hummed to himself as he eyed the squat little town of Loveless, New Mexico.

“I know, I know. But boss, I swear it’s better than it looks,” the blonde gunslinger promised.

Shifting the toothpick to the other side of his mouth, the man grunted, “It had better be,” before digging his heels into the flanks of his horse to urge the mount further into town.

There wasn’t anything special about Loveless; it looked the same as every other cattle and mining town he’d ever visited. Riding down the main drag of town, he saw Kim’s Import & Mercantile store, the local Gazette, the Bank, and a barbershop along the “T” intersection.

On left side of the street, he eyed the local library, an Insurance Realty office, and the Clinic. Looking to the right, the graceful stranger eyed the local Boarding House, the Corral and the Livery.

In an ironic twist of fate, he noticed the town’s clinic sat directly across from the town’s saloon. An establishment called *The Final Frontier*.

The main entrance was framed by heavy wooden architraves, while in the middle of the doorway swung the typical saloon style door. As far as he could tell, the entryway beyond the swinging doors led to the drinking area of the establishment, away the main parlor. However, it was the three-story rear of the building that caught his attention. The darkened lanterns that hung from the overhang, informed him he’d just found the red light district.

Strange. Usually, the dead zone or the red light district was kept separate from the wholesome residents of a town. But in this case, the bar seemed to be the prized jewel of Loveless.

“How well are you known here, Kid?” asked the stranger quietly.

“Well, ’nough. I got a gal here with inside connections. You remember me telling about a gal named,
Rio? You can trust the folks here, Boss. This town was built by the lawless. There ain't no Sheriff, and there ain't no Marshal neither. It's the perfect home away from home,” the slender blond advertised.

“How many of us are here?” The man asked, as he chewed on his toothpick.

“Everyone. We been real quiet like settling in tho’, so yous ain’t got no worries thar. You’re the last one here, Chief,” Tom Paris informed the cautious man to his right.

“Everyone?” He asked suggestively.

“Everybody we trust, how’s that? We found out who the traitors were and they was dealt with. In total there’s bout seventy us scattered throughout the desert, up in the mountains, and in this here town,” Kid decreed proudly.

“All right, everybody’s got their cover story together?” The Boss asked.

“Yep. Me and Miguel done established it. The townsfolk are real excited about having a flush cattle rancher settle in town. Mr. Randolph, owner of the saloon and cathouse, insisted that he put you up for your first night here. Boss, I gotta tell you, you’re in for a real nice time tonight. I handpicked your entertainment myself,” Tom boasted.

“You know how I feel about that, Kid,” the man dismounted and secured his horse.

“Yea, but you gotta play the part. Trust me, you ain’t goin be disappointed. She’s the Madam and let me tell you, she’s pretty enough to make you shoot your own pappy.” Tom drawled. “Chief? You hear me?” Kid questioned, as he followed his boss’ line of sight.

In the distance, the two men could just barely make out the profile of woman, attired in a loose top and men's riding britches, astride a bareback gray Andalusian. Although, usual for this part of the west, it wasn't the horse that caught, the boss' attention. It was the rider. She moved with her mount fluidly, as if she and the animal were cut from the same cloth, waves of auburn hair shimmered in the sun behind her, as she galloped out of town.

The men lost sight of her as she ducked beneath a low branch and disappeared into the surrounding woods.

Thomas eyed his boss momentarily, before leading the big man inside the saloon to meet Mr. Randolph. He smirked knowingly to himself as he slapped the older man on the back. There was only one woman in town with hair the color of an autumn sunset.

“Hey, Marc! I got somebody I want you to meet,” Tom called as he entered the saloon.

“Marc's out on business at the moment, Tom. But you're welcome to spell him if you want,” replied a familiar rich voice.
“Bella Torres?!” exclaimed the man at Tom’s side.

“No one’s called me Bella in a very long time,” the woman answered darkly as she turned to lay eyes on the man Tom brought into the saloon.

“It can’t be!” She whispered in shocked awe. “It just can’t be,” she declared, even has she made a beeline for the man.

The woman threw herself at the tall stranger. She hugged him tightly as she buried her face in his neck. “Tayo! They told me you were dead!” She cried, as the man lifted the small woman off the ground as he swung her around.

“I was told the same about you,” he whispered. “Though, no one’s called me Tayo in years.”

The woman smiled broadly at the man, “Well, just what are folks calling you, these days?” She asked.

He stepped away from her, his smile gone as he looked over her shoulder, “You don’t want to know,” he stated darkly.

“No hug, no kiss? What am I chopped liver?” Tom asked, pouting playfully at the woman.

“Hmm..” the woman considered as she looked at Tom. “I dunno, what do you think, Tayo? Does this cowboy deserve a hug or a kiss? After all he is two weeks late and not so much as a letter or telegram,” the woman asked as she eyed the blond haired man with her hands on her hips.

“I think an exception can be made. Just this once – mind you,” Tayo laughed lightly.

The woman sashayed across the room until she stood in front of Tom. She held his eyes as she grabbed his shirt collar and hauled him to her for a passionate kiss.

Tom slipped his arm around her waist as he kissed her back. Slowly he eased them out the kiss; leaning back, he smoothed her hair from her face before smiling.

“Hiya, stranger,” he greeted.

“Hiya, back,” she answered as he kissed her forehead.

“Did I miss something, boss?” Tom asked as he recalled her original greeting to the man leaning against the far wall.

“What? Wait. This is the cattle rancher you’ve been boasting about?” the woman asked.

“Yea, so what of it, Rio?” Tom asked annoyed.
“What’s the con?” Rio asked knowingly, as she placed her hands on her hips.

Tayo smirked at the snapping couple.

‘Tom. You might as well tell her. You’ll get nothin’ by her,” he stated, “I never could, that’s for sure,” Tayo chuckled as he hugged her again.

“How exactly do you know each other?” Tom asked curiously.

“Do you remember when I told you about my travels west? How some folks didn't take to kindly to a Creole woman on her own?” She asked. “I told you about how a group of local men cornered me in an alley and made their intentions plain. Well, Tayo saved my life that night,” she informed.

“You were no damsel in distress, Bella. I simply helped even the odds is all,” Tayo offered.

“I heard tale that you’d been killed by US Marshal’s,” she shared sadly.

“And I heard you went and got yourself hung for shooting a guy,” Tayo informed.

The two friends embraced again, before Tom led them all over to a nearby table.

For the next hour, the trio sat amongst themselves catching each other up on their adventures. When Mr. Randolph returned, Rio excused herself so the men could talk about their business. As she wiped down the bar and tables, she a cast furtive glances towards her long lost friend.

Meanwhile across town …

What a difference a year can make, Kathryn thought to herself as Voyager galloped towards home. A year ago, she arrived to Loveless, New Mexico with only the clothes she could carry and her wits. For the majority of her first year, she lived in the upper rooms of Mr. Randolph’s saloon.

Most nights she worked the bar as an unofficial hostess for the establishment. She spent half the night asking, “What’ll it be handsome?” in sickly sweet tones. The remainder of the night, her job was to brighten the evening of the many lonely men in town, usually starved for female companionship. Her attire consisted of brightly colored corsets decorated in sequin or fringe, over scandalously short ruffled skirts with elaborate feathered headpieces. She and the other girls who worked the saloon spent the majority of their evenings singing and talking to the men, inducing them to remain in the bar, buying drinks and playing poker.

Often Kathryn received gifts or sizable tips from the men she entertained in this fashion. Mr. Randolph demanded that his girls be treated as ladies. He went so far as to have guards secretly
placed throughout the establishment. Any man who mistreated one of the women was quickly escorted out the saloon, and if the gentlemen in question insulted one of the girls, he ran the risk of being shot.

Six months after her arrival, Kathryn suggested that Marc allow a few of the girls to become professional dancers. In typical fashion, first she had to prove to him how profitable the idea could be.

So, for a period of two hours every evening, Kathryn changed out of her saloon attire and into a sophisticated Victorian gown. During those two hours, she sold dances, ranging from waltzes to schottisches, with each turn on the floor lasting about fifteen minutes.

Kathryn’s charm seemed to draw men from all over the county for an opportunity to dance with her. Very quickly, it became clear to Marc Randolph just how profitable a commodity Kathryn Janeway had become. Within a month, Marc selected six of his twelve saloon girls to become full time dance partners.

She chuckled to herself as she remembered the night Tommy the Kid won her in a poker game.

As his first order of business, Lyle Rockwell purchased a dance ticket for her that evening. And he agreed to a poker game as his second order of business. He never should have agreed.

Tom Paris was new in town, a friend of Rio’s, but he was also a known gambler and gunslinger. He played poker, faro, billiards, and pool to name a few. Most men knew they’d walk away from the table empty handed, they expected it. But it was the thrill of the game, knowing that by some miracle they might pull one over on Tommy the Kid.

Poor Lyle never stood a chance. Tom knew the man purchased a ticket for one of her dances and he was set on having that ticket for himself. The men played for what seemed like an eternity as the entire bar watched on.

As Paris declared his win of the game, Kathryn placed her hand on top of the pile, and rested her hip seductively on the table.

She allowed her mysterious blue eyes to rest on Tom’s face as she bent forward slightly, “Now that seems hardly fair, Tommy” she pouted, “I was really looking forward to dancing with Mr. Rockwell this evening.”

Tom grinned as he ran a hand up her bare thigh, “That so, Kate? Whatcha goin’ do to make it worth my while, to have pity on ’ol Lyle?” He asked suggestively.

Kathryn leaned further into him, the action allowed Tom a whiff of her perfumed neck, before she suggested, “How about you and me play a round? I win, Lyle gets his dance and the winnings on the table. You win, you get the pot and I’ll give you a dance,” she leaned into his ear to whisper the last word of her suggestion,
“privately,” as she stroked the side his face.

She watched Tom’s eyes dilate at the prospect of her dancing privately for him. Usually private dances edged on the side of seductive foreplay. Although she never took part in those types of private sessions, Thomas Eugene Paris had been trying to get her in the saddle for the better part of five months.

Tom licked his lips before he answered, “You got yourself a deal, Kate.”

Kathryn bowed her head gracefully before she rose from the table, to take Lyle’s previous position.

She’d watched all the main players in her time at the Final Frontier, and she knew how to read their call signs better than she knew the back of her own hand.

She let Tom win the first round, before she placed a slim hand on his thigh with a desperate plea of ‘Double or Nothing’.

Plied with alcohol and a false sense of victory, Tommy the Kid agreed.

By the end of the second game, Kathryn not only won back Lyle Rockwell’s dance ticket but she’d also cleaned Paris out his entire night’s winnings.

Not surprisingly, that night set a new precedent for Kathryn’s position at the Final Frontier.

In just under year’s time she’d gone from seductive waitress to the Lady of Loveless.

From that night on, she not only played hostess to those entering in the early evening, and dance partner to those who stayed through dinner. She also became a renowned hand of cards, easily picking up where she left off during her card playing days aboard the Delta Queen.

It was a role she played. A lady in a gambling hall who wasn’t of the soiled dove variety was rare. Bedecked in the latest fashions, Kathryn was a sight for the sore eyes of many a cowhand and miner. As a lady of distinction, she never permitted smoking or cussing at her table. Kathryn’s dress and manners dispelled suspicions that she was card shark and she became highly respected.

Due to her popularity, Marc deemed it necessary for Kathryn to have her own table, rather than have men fighting over whose table she would join.

As a precaution, he always made sure to station one of his guards either at her table or just behind her. Kathryn insisted that she take precautions of her own and as such secretly secured a Mare’s Leg Rifle to the underside of the table. The added security of the firearm did not prevent her from carrying a concealed derringer in her bosom and a dagger strapped to her thigh beneath the folds of her gowns.
In a town that was comprised of rough men building hard, playing hard and out number one, Kathryn couldn’t afford not to be cautious.

Throughout her employ at the Final Frontier, Kathryn continued to insist that while her conversation, dancing and card playing skills were for sale, nothing else was. Effectively, shielding herself from the depreciating role of a common prostitute or that of a lofty courtesan.

It didn't surprise Kathryn that only she and Rio were considered off limits, when it came to the seedier side of Marc Randolph's business - The Gentleman's Club; otherwise known as the parlor house. She imagined Rio was off limits due to her explosive temper. More than once she witnessed the woman lay a man low for merely making such a suggestion.

The men who did deign to have a relationship with Rio felt her dominance, often she was cited as being dogmatic and determined, she possessed so much strength that none of her paramours could stand being with her for very long. Neither could she tolerate any man she considered weak willed.

Kathryn heard that in her past, Rio was as a merciless killer when her temper was aroused and there were those who said it didn't take much to arouse her. Kathryn recalled the time word got back to Rio of nasty remarks a stranger had made behind her back. She found the man and menacingly snarled, "So you been talkin' about me? Well, dance, you son of a bitch!" and began blasting away at his boots with her six-shooters sounding like a Gatling gun and aiming at his fast-moving feet like they were a pair of glass bottles standing still on a stone wall. Nobody knew what the original remark was that set Rio off but it must've been awful insulting.

Another time, Rio ran into a rancher who owed her money. She grabbed an ax and said, "If you don't pay me right now, I'll chop the Goddam front wheels off every Goddam wagon you've got." He did the only thing possible -- he came up with the money, paid Rio, and lived to tell the tale.

As Kathryn dismounted from Voyager, she patted the horse's neck affectionately as she tied the mount to the rail in front of her home. She smiled to herself as she thought of Rio. In the beginning, she hadn't been sure that she and Rio would get along. It had taken awhile but now Kathryn counted the younger woman as a close friend.

CHAPTER FOUR - six months later...

Kathryn eyed her reflection in the mirror hesitantly I don’t know about this, she thought to herself. A knock at the door startled her out her thoughts.

“Who is it?” She asked.

“It's me, Chica, Rio called.
Kathryn’s gown rustled as she moved across the room to open the door for her friend. After which she moved back in front of the cheval mirror.

“You’re a vision, Kathryn,” Rio whispered.

Despite her reservations, Kathryn had to admit that the midnight blue silk dress complimented her pale coloring and thick auburn locks perfectly. The strapless bodice left her porcelain neck, shoulders, and arms completely bare. The boning of the corset emphasized her narrow waist and showed off an almost indecent amount of cleavage. The skirt of the dress was narrow, and the various folds draped from her waist down to her feet. The effect formed a very slim outline of her body.

Her waist length auburn tresses were loosely coiled and styled with a center part. The sides were drawn up into a chignon to showcase her ears and neck, while the remaining curls tumbled over her left shoulder.

Kathryn blushed slightly as she turned to face Rio, “Thank you. Although, I’m not sure how proper it is that I wear this gown.”

Rio stepped forward with a questioning look on her features, “Why’s that? It suits ya perfectly.”

Kathryn sighed as she sat on the bed in the small bedroom, “Because it isn’t mine. Well it is, except...” she trailed off uncertainly.

“I don’t understand, Kate. Either it is or it ain’t,” stated Rio.

“It was delivered to me with instructions to wear it for the gala tonight. I have an idea who sent it but – well, like I said, I just don’t know how proper a gift it is.”

“So don’t wear it,” Rio offered.

“I can’t do that,” Kathryn said quietly as she gazed out the nearby window.

“Why can’t ya?” Rio asked, “Who sent the dress, Kate?”

Kathryn shared a knowing looking with her friend.

“Oh,” Rio breathed.

“Yes, oh”

Sensing her friend’s unease, Rio attempted to put Kathryn’s mind to rest.

“It ain’t like; you never met the man, Kate. Alejandro Chakotay has been in town for the better part of six months already. The two of you have been practically inseparable. You’ve played cards and
danced together countless times. Surely, you’ve noticed he’s got eyes for you?” Rio questioned. “He’s ace-high, Kate. A real respectable gentleman,” Rio encouraged as she clasped Kathryn’s hand.

“I know,” Kathryn stated as she rose to pace the small room.

“So he bought you a dress. You already knew you’d be spending time in his company this evening,” Rio continued before Kathryn could interrupt. “Why, even Marc wasn’t successful in keeping him away from you. Tayo nearly rang Marc’s neck when he announced he was taking bids for your company tonight,” Rio chuckled lightly, “I guess Marc didn’t realize what lengths Chakotay would go through to accompany you to the gala.”

“I’m not a courtesan, Rio,” Kathryn growled, “I hate this. It’s like being bought,” Kathryn huffed.

“I’m just trying to put your mind at ease. Chakotay paid a hefty sum for the privilege to escort you tonight. Just think if he hadn’t been here when Marc made the announcement,” Rio suggested, “It could’ve been some seedy character, like some of the Joe’s you told me make your skin crawl. And don’t forget, half of that fee is yours,” Rio reminded.

Kathryn sighed as she rubbed her forehead, “I know. I know, it could be worse. But it doesn’t make me feel any less... bought.”

Kathryn leaned her head back and closed her eyes momentarily, before pinning Rio with a determined gaze. She offered Rio a sad crooked smile as she shook her head, “Come on, we better get down there before Marc gets his back up,” she suggested, as she closed the door behind them.

Little did Kathryn know that Rio had been her saving grace. The attraction between Chakotay and Kathryn was evident for anyone who cared to look upon the couple. Rio and Tom, like many others in the small town, had a vested interest in how and when the couple would evidentially come together. Cultivating his love of gambling, Tom initiated an under the table betting pool. The person or persons, who guessed the date and circumstance of when the towns most gossiped about couple would finally admit their attraction or better yet affection for each other, would be awarded five hundred dollars.

The money aside, Rio knew Chakotay would never forgive her if she had known about Marc’s plans and failed to inform him.

Rio smiled as they made their way downstairs. With any luck, tonight would be the night Kathryn and Chakotay finally came together. Why they fought the attraction she would never know, although she suspected that it was more Kathryn’s doing than Chakotay’s.

That evening it appeared as if the entire town of Loveless had turned out for the Valentine’s Day Gala. The Gentleman’s Club was teaming with eligible bachelors, established couples, and a few working girls for good measure. There was actually a waiting list to get a table in the dining room.
In the spirit of Valentine’s Day there were presents, coy smiles and sly glances exchanged between couples. There was even a rendition of Romeo and Juliet preformed earlier in the day. Not to mention the impromptu wedding ceremony for Samantha Wildman and Joe Carey, performed by Dr. Zimmerman, who happened to be the only ordained person in the room.

Little Naomi beamed at her mother and new stepfather as she watched from her position as flower girl. Kathryn was stunned when Samantha, grabbed her hand and tugged her to the front of the room, insistent that she act as the maid of honor. Rio had simply laughed from her place at Kathryn’s right as bridesmaid and Tom smiled broadly from his place as groomsman.

And Kathryn ... well, she was utterly shocked to see herself standing opposite of Alejandro Chakotay, he having been chosen by Joe to be the best man.

Nelson, the Club’s eccentric cook, prepared an elaborate seven course meal and the wait staff remained diligent in their duty to keep everyone’s glasses full for the evening. The grandeur of the event reminded of Kathryn of the fancy State Dinners she often read about in the Washington Herald.

“Are you enjoying the evening, Chakotay?” Kathryn asked as she sipped punch from her glass.

“Immensely,” Chakotay answered as he eyed the beautiful woman sitting across from him.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Kathryn stated absentmindedly, as she eyed the far corner of the Gentleman’s Club.

Despite the merriment of the evening, Kathryn was concerned. Marla, the new girl, seemed nice enough but she was too softly spoken for her current line of work. During dinner, Kathryn noticed a group of rowdy men taking an interest in the girl and something about them unnerved her.

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind, she watched, uneasy, as a man fondled Marla roughly. It was clear the girl needed help and yet most of Marc’s men were assigned to Chakotay’s corner of the room tonight.

Her eyes searched the opulent parlor, decorated with imported wallpaper and expensive carpet; her gaze passed over the leather-topped gaming tables and gleaming hardwood furniture, until finally she spied the madam Marc employed for the Gentleman’s Club. Kathryn spotted the tall, buxom blonde woman draped suggestively over Joshua Mayer’s shoulder, as she smirked at Marla’s predicament.

Kathryn never liked Anya, something about that woman seemed unnaturally callous. As if she were only happy if everyone kowtowed to her demands. Kathryn knew Anya took more than her fair share of the girl’s earnings for entertaining men at the club. And yet no one said a word. Anya walked the halls of the saloon and parlor as if she were above it all. As if she were superior to those around her.

Anya Hanson had a knack for flaunting her profession by renting a carriage and riding up and down
the main streets, snubbing not only the few proper ladies that might be out on the streets of Loveless but also the other sporting ladies who were not as prosperous, or, in her opinion, were not as beautiful. Known as the Queen of the Blondes, she dressed in a different exquisite costume on every outing. Her clothes were the envy of the women and produced the desired effect on the men, as they stared at her with longing. Children were forbidden to walk near the parlor and were made to shield their eyes when Anya paraded in her carriage.

She was deviant in her dealings as a madam. That much was evident by the new nickname she'd earned for herself a couple months back. Seven of Spades. Kathryn had wondered about the nickname, that is until she heard some local cowhands discussing the matter over a card game; something about shackles, hot candle wax and a braided riding crop.

After the fact, Anya boasted to all who would listen, that she couldn't get enough of the sex that night. How she longed to have a man's cock shoved down her throat, while another man's cock was rammed into her ass at the same time another cock fucked her pussy, while someone jacked off over the swell of her tits or wrapped her golden locks around their manhood as they watched her in the throes of passion.

Kathryn shuddered at the mental image and the knowledge that Anya had willingly allowed herself to be whored by seven different men at the same time. What made Kathryn the most ill was the knowledge that Anya herself made the suggestion. That she let it be known to anyone who asked that she found enjoyment in having seven strangers take her simultaneously.

“Am I boring you?” Chakotay asked, mindful of her sudden preoccupation.

“No. It’s just that - ” she began as she looked back at him.

“Good. I’d hate to think that I could,” he stated seductively as he stroked her slim fingers on the tabletop.

Chakotay watched the curvature of her bosom heave in response to the intimate gesture and felt his manhood swell in response to her reaction. His thoughts wandered as he brazenly continued to caress her hand, sliding his larger golden digits over her slender pale fingers.

He recalled his instant attraction to this woman; his soul had cried out for her before he even knew her. The day he arrived in Loveless, when he’d watched her ride across the mesa before disappearing out of sight. It had taken everything in him to follow Tom into the saloon, rather than mount his horse a race after the elusive redhaired beauty.

For months he watched and waited.
He watched her work a room with a natural grace, unlike any other he’d ever seen. His eyes followed her from the moment she descended into the saloon, until she walked the last patron out the door for the evening.

On more than one occasion they shared a heated glance when she raised her enchanting eyes to lock with his own. He didn’t hide from her in those moments; in those heated moments he let her see the depth of his desire for her.

He took his time to learn her gestures, her likes and dislikes. When he learned of her skill for the game of poker, he was further intrigued. He admired her strength of character and tenaciousness. And delighted in her sharp strategic mind on the evenings they played chess.

Chakotay smiled at the memory of her frame molded to his, the welcome heat of her body and the enchanting scent of her jasmine perfume as they danced.

Unlike many of the men in the county, Chakotay wanted more than to solely lay claim to her body. He also wanted to lay claim to her heart. In this woman, he felt he’d met his match. A woman who could hold her own against him, both in life and in love. The trick was how to go about it, she seemed to be a proper woman and yet there were times when he caught unbridled passion spark her eyes, just as he had a few moments ago.

Kathryn watched Chakotay rake hot eyes over her person, seemingly devouring her without touching more than her fingertips on the table. She felt her skin flush under his heated gaze and inhaled suddenly at the emotions he evoked in her. She lowered her eyes and attempted to hide her blush behind the crystal flute in her hand.

It had been that way from outset. The first time she’d met him, Kathryn felt as if she’d been under a hypnotic spell. Chakotay’s dark sensual eyes seemed to see into her very soul; he gazed upon her, as if he’d known her intimately.

She couldn’t deny that he was an extremely good looking man. From behind the glass in her hand, Kathryn eyed his well dressed frame appreciatively, as she took in the white winged neck collar of his linen shirt and four-in-hands tie. Over the white shirt he wore a black and gray, single breasted paisley patterned waistcoat with chrome buttons. His unbuttoned black suit coat was fitted through the torso with a loosely defined waistline. White disposable, cuffs adorned with chrome cuff links, peaked beneath the long sleeves of his suit coat. Beneath the stylish coat his legs were clothed in black tapered trousers, with the fabric long enough to reach the heels of his black spurred boots. His chrome and black Hickok revolver was sheathed in a stylish black hostler that sat low around his hips, despite Marc Randolph’s rule of no guns in the Gentleman’s Club.

He wore his raven hair long enough to pull back into short ponytail, longer than what some men wore but it suited his mysterious features. Not to mention he wielded the most delicious set of dimples.
when he smiled. His upper lip was framed by a thin mustache and a small diamond shaped goatee rested beneath his bottom lip.

Chakotay's movements were deceptively smooth, despite his muscular build and impressive height. There was a certain amount of animal magnetism about him, a kind of sexual swagger that seemed to draw her in, like a moth to a flame. She wondered why he insisted people call him by his last name. The preference at first seemed strange to her but over the last months they'd known each other, it seemed right to call him Chakotay, rather than Alejandro.

At the most inappropriate times she found herself lost in daydreams of what his lips would feel like against her own. When they danced, her traitorous mind wandered to thoughts of what it would feel like to have his arms hold her in a lover's embrace. Would he be gentle or ravenous when he took her to his bed?

Kathryn glanced at her glass of punch suspiciously and wondered if it was the source of her current salacious thoughts. She had seen Tom Paris over by the punch bowl earlier this evening. It would definitely explain why she was so warm all of a sudden.

Finally, she admitted, albeit stubbornly, that no man had ever had that effect on her. Not even ... well no man had ever made her feel this desirous merely sitting at a dinner table in a crowed room.

She tried to remind herself that she hadn't come to Loveless in search of a love affair. She was here on business.

She tried and she failed.

The sexual tension crackled like lightening between them as they gazed at each other across the table. A sea of faces watched them and yet Kathryn’s vision only allowed her to see Chakotay. The raucous sound of overlapping conversations, boisterous laughter, festive music, and clattering dishes faded into a dull murmur as Kathryn lost herself in the pools of his eyes.

A startled cry wrenched her attention back to Marla and the escalating noise of the room.

Kathryn tried to stay out of affairs that were none of her concern. But as she heard the noise level increase and watched horror etch into Marla's features, she couldn't remain quiet any longer.

Hesitantly, Kathryn broke the heated gaze with Chakotay, “Will you excuse me, for a moment?” she inquired as she rose from the table.

Chakotay watched as Kathryn smiled her way across the teeming room of patrons, to discretely acquire a double barrel pistol shotgun and a Schofield revolver from behind the bar. The graceful manner in which she carried herself disguised the fact that she was now armed.
He watched his auburn haired beauty calmly ascended the staircase of the Club before walking the circumference of the second floor landing.

Kathryn assessed the situation closely while she primed both weapons. It was to her advantage that Marc enforced a no arms rule in the Gentleman’s Club. At least this side of the business wasn’t rife with trigger happy pistoleers. Otherwise, she may have never been able to pull this off.

Chakotay watched as Kathryn, leaned the rifle against one of the supporting beams of the three story building, before she gripped the revolver in her right hand. Her eyes darted around of the room before they settled toward the rear of the building.

Kathryn cocked the revolver and raised a steady arm to aim for the head of the man accosting Marla.

_Bang!_

The action silenced the room immediately, as the bullet snatched off the man’s hat, and pinned the stetson to the wall above his head.

Slowly all eyes turned in shock toward Kathryn’s outstretched arm. Once she was certain that she held everyone’s attention, Kathryn’s rich voice offered a warning to the rowdy element in the room.

“Gentlemen, and I fear that I am using that term lightly. This is not a brothel, control yourselves! You’re disturbing Mr. Randolph’s business, and I don’t believe he’ll take too kindly to the matter. Anyone, who doesn’t think he can-”

_Bang!_

The patrons watched in shock as Kathryn, swung her arm down and to the right, her bullet winging a man who was preparing to draw on her. Her piercing eyes never left the general assembly of patrons, before she completed her sentence.

“-behave in a civilized manner, is free to leave,” she ordered.

Marc barreled into the parlor just in time to see Kathryn heft a rifle in her left hand while aiming a revolver toward the general assembly of patrons.

He halted his run at Chakotay’s table and stared at the petite woman in disbelief, “Damn it to Hell. I _knew_ she was gonna be trouble,” he uttered.

However, Marc’s most influential client merely smirked as he watched Ms. Kathryn Janeway eye the crowd determinedly. After a moment, she caught his eye and raised an elegant eyebrow, as if to ask what he found amusing about the situation.
Kathryn rolled her eyes as she looked away from him; he obliviously found something amusing all of a sudden.

As the patrons began to mill about, returning to their activities, Kathryn lowered the firearms and made her way down the stairs and back to the bar.

“Damn it! Kate, what the hell were you thinkin’?! You can’t just -” She cut him off with a wave of her hand, as she replaced the weapons behind the bar and made her way over to Marla.

“Are you hurt?” She asked the young woman.

Marla shook her head in the negative, despite the fact that both Marc and Kathryn noted the way she held her wrist.

“Mr. Rollins!” Kathryn bellowed.

Michael Rollins, one of the guards assigned to her personal safety, maneuvered into position next to Kathryn.

Casting him a short glance, she ordered “Michael, please escort Marla over to see the Doctor. Have him take a look her wrist and the bruise she’s hiding on her left cheek.”

Marla’s head snapped up, wondering how the other the woman had seen the mark. She’d been sure to keep the left side of her face turned away from Ms. Kate.

Kathryn, eyed her sympathetically as Michael led her out the crowded room. When the girl was out of sight, she whirled to face Marc.

“Do you even care to know what happened to her? She was attacked! Right here, in a room full of people. And not once did Anya come to her defense!” Kathryn thundered, “I know that I was your main concern tonight, but that’s no excuse,” she scolded as she turned to walk away.

Embarrassed and angered, that his clients witnessed the manner in which she’d spoken to him, Marc grabbed her arm roughly as she passed him. Forcibly, he yanked her back around to face him,

“Look you stuck up little bitc-”

Unexpectedly, Marc felt the barrel of hand gun thrust in his side.

“I believe, Sir, that this conversation is over. I’d suggest releasing the lady,” a menacing voice whispered hotly in his ear. “And if you ever touch her in that manner again...I can guarantee you’ll regret it.”

Slowly, Marc uncurled his fingers from Kathryn’s bicep. With a thunderous glare in his direction,
Kathryn lifted her skirts and continued across the room. As she returned to her previous table, Marc chanced a look behind him to see who had held him at gunpoint. To his astonishment, there was no one there.

He eyed the parlor looking for a telltale sign of who the mystery man might be, but found none. His eyes fell on Kathryn as she seated herself at Mr. Chakotay’s table and then he noted the glare that Chakotay sent in his direction as the other man noticed the bruising already forming on Kathryn’s pale skin.

Shit!

He could never be sure if it had been Alejandro Chakotay that issued the warning at gunpoint. But he was damn sure of the warning the man’s onyx eyes bore into him now.

Marc gulped visibly, before retreating back into the saloon.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Are you alright?” Chakotay asked Kathryn intently as she regained her previous seat.

“I’m fine,” Kathryn answered flippantly, as she knocked back her glass of punch. She was so angry at the situation that she failed to notice, that once again her glass had been refilled. Without thinking she knocked that glass back too.

“Whoa,” Chakotay laid a gentle hand on her wrist as she reached for the third glass in as manner minutes, “you may want to take it easy,” he suggested.

He’d had his fair share and Chakotay was pretty sure the punch was spiked.

“I’m fine,” she insisted as she shook his hand off her wrist and drank back the glass on the table.

Needing a distraction, Chakotay countered, “All right, then may I have the honor of this dance?” He questioned as he rose from the table and extended a hand to her.

Kathryn bit the inside of her cheek as she looked at him. She couldn’t refuse him, it wouldn’t be polite and she was sure to cause a scene, something she’d done enough of for one evening.

“I’d be delighted,” she offered with a polite smile as she accepted his outstretched hand.

They, along with the rest of the town, danced, drank, laughed and drank some more for the rest of the evening. Many patrons took advantage of the suites available at the Gentleman’s Club and rented rooms for the evening, too drunk to make it back to their respective homes.
Kathryn giggled girlishly she turned the lock to the door of her homestead and stumbled into the main room. Chakotay chuckled and caught her around the waist as he kicked the door closed.

Kathryn laughed again as she turned to face him, “Com on, you canna ... drive all da way back,” she slurred as she grasped his hand and drunkenly pulled him into the small spare room, she occasionally used as a guest bedroom.

“If’n ya insist,” Chakotay relented as he nuzzled the back of her neck.

“Hey!” Kathryn jerked her head to the side with a grimace, “N-- No funny biznss, mist’r,” she scolded as she swayed into his frame.

Chakotay steadied her with his hands on her waist before he backed them into the spare room.

Kathryn managed to side step him with marginal success, “Bed”, she hiccupsed as she pointed to the small twin bed in the room, “Stay here, I'lls be...back,” she instructed as he watched her amble down the hall way.

When she finally made her way back to the small room, Chakotay had managed to clean out his pockets and undress himself down to his slacks before falling into bed.

In her inebriated state Kathryn had taken longer than usual to return with an extra sheet and blanket. She chuckled at the sight of him sprawled on his back in the bed. As quietly as her condition allowed she stumbled into the room to place extra bedding at the foot of the bed, before she leaned down to pull his boots off.

Once his boots were off, Kathryn stood and leaned forward to sweep his hair off his forehead.

“Mmmm....Kathryn?” Chakotay mumbled sleepily.

"Shhh...go to sleep,” Kathryn soothed.

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Dear God,

Kathryn Janeway moaned softly against the obstinate pounding behind her closed lids. She opened her eyes only to slam them shut against the intense glare of the sun.
Oh, My head.

She felt sluggish, her mind was in a fogged daze as she tried to understand how her bedroom window could’ve moved. Gingerly she opened her eyes again and slowly took in her surroundings.

What the hell happened last night?

Unexpectedly, she felt a hand on her bare hip and then lips on her neck as someone spooned behind her, a very aroused someone. Kathryn’s eyes widened in shock as she snatched the sheet covering her body and sprang from the bed. By some miracle she managed the feat without waking the man who occupied the bed, as he simply grunted and rolled onto his stomach with his head facing away from her.

Kathryn placed her right hand over her mouth as she glanced around the room.

Dear God, No! We didn’t... did we?

As she took inventory of her body, she knew that they had. She was naked, and so was he. Not to mention the fact that she had to consciously make an effort not to hiss due the sensitivity between her thighs.

OH MY GOD! We did!

He was still out cold and she used this to her advantage as she frantically searched the room for her clothes. She quickly made herself presentable and then moved about the room gathering his clothing to toss over the nearby chair. She swept the room with her eyes once again to be certain she hadn't missed any of her possessions.

He can never know about this. No one can ever know about this.

As she backed out of the room with her undergarments bundled in her arms, Kathryn noticed some items on the nightstand. She had to cover her mouth to stop the shriek that wanted to escape. Breathing heavily she snatched the incriminating evidence off the nightstand and hurriedly left the room.

In the safety of her room, Kathryn held the items she’d taken off his nightstand. She sighed tiredly as her headache made itself known and her stomach lurched. By sheer will she swallowed the bile that rose in her throat at the thought of what she’d allowed to happen.

Whatever possessed me? When I see him, I’m going to ring Tom’s neck!

Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose as she closed her palm over the items and rose from her bed. She couldn’t afford to have these things out in plan view, it was better to keep them hidden until she decided what to do about them. She walked over to her bureau and slid out a small rectangular
drawer, she glanced at the items in her hand one last time before dropping them into the small compartment. Hastily she pushed the drawer shut just as she heard a very masculine curse float down the hall.

Kathryn twirled around from the bureau and immediately regretted the action as she gripped her midsection and gingerly sat down on the bed. First things first, she couldn't greet him in the same dress she’d worn the night before; she had to change. With care Kathryn rose and began to disrobe. She tossed the dress across the lower part of her bed as she slipped out of her slip and donned a night shift. Her hair was a mess, but that could be explained away, she reasoned as she slipped on her robe over the night shift. Kathryn dipped her hands into the water basin she kept on her night table and gently rinsed her face, the cool water helping to calm her frazzled nerves somewhat.

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and opened her bedroom door. He could never know. No one could know. What would it look like? She - an unmarried woman being intimate with man who’d just paid for her entire evening. To the outsider it would appear that she was indeed a couretsan – as if Chakotay had paid her for sex. And Chakotay? What would he think of her? He could never know. She just had to make sure he never knew. Kathryn kept up the mantra as she gingerly made her way down the hall.

Chakotay moaned as he rolled over onto his back. His head felt like somebody knocked it with a sledgehammer and he had a horrible cotton taste in his mouth.

_Fuck!_

His vision swam and he groaned against the queasiness in his stomach. As soon as his stomach settled and the room stopped its incessant spinning, he vowed to strangle somebody. He didn’t know who –yet. But somebody was goin’ to pay for his foul mood.

Slowly, Chakotay became aware of the fact, save the sheet across his lap, that he was naked. He was naked in a strange room with the scent of jasmine hanging heavily in the air. Cautiously he swept his eyes around the small room and to his utter disappointment there were no clues to tell him where he was.

With a groan he leaned forward and let his aching head drop to his hands.

He sighed in relief when he felt a cool rag placed across the back of his neck.

“How are you feeling?” Asked a husky voice.

Chakotay released a thankful sigh as he recognized the voice before responding, “Like shit.”
Kathryn chuckled at his response. She reasoned he must feel awful to swear in front of her.

“Join the club. I don't know what Paris put in the punch. But I've learned my lesson. I'll steer clear from now on,” she drawled, her voice rusty from disuse.

“Paris!” Chakotay seethed, “I shoulda known.”

Kathryn chuckled again at his response.

Chakotay looked up to see how she'd fared from the evenings festivities. By the looks of her only marginally better than himself.

“Uh. What exactly happened last night?” Chakotay asked warily. He couldn't remember anything beyond asking her to dance.

Kathryn blushed in spite of herself.

Chakotay graced her with a small dimpled smile, “So... what happened last night to make you blush like that?” He asked with a grin, enjoying the crimson flush that crept into her cheeks. Idly he wondered how low that blush spread.

“Well,” she began “from what I remember, you escorted me home last night. You were in worse condition than myself, how we made this far out safely, I'll never know,” she offered as she dragged the cool cloth across his bare shoulders.

“I made you stay here... in the guest room” she added quickly, “as you weren't in any condition to travel back to town or wherever it is you live. I – I remember getting an extra set of bedding and then – nothing. I woke up in my bedroom. I'd forgotten you were here until I heard you a little bit ago,” Kathryn explained.

Please buy that, please she begged silently.

“Sounds innocent enough, so why the blush?” He asked again.

“Well, it's not exactly appropriate. You staying here with me... I mean, you know how folks talk. Not that I care about what other folks say about me. It's... I hope I haven't lost any respect in your eyes,” she implored.

“I'd say that you did a right neighborly thing, Kathryn. I haven't lost any respect for you. The fact that you allowed me to stay, speaks to your generosity and compassion,” Chakotay reassured as he tucked her hair behind her ear.

He drank in her appearance, fresh from her bed as she tended to him. I could get used to this, waking up with her and being close, he thought to himself.
“Yes,” Kathryn jumped up from his touch and turned back to the door, “well, I'll let you get dressed,” she offered as she hastily exited the room.

Chakotay wondered what was with her, she seemed down right skittish. But he reasoned, it wasn't everyday that a single woman woke to a naked man in her guest room with little to no recollection of how he got there. No matter if he was a close friend.

CHAPTER SIX

“Oh! I'm soaked!!” Kathryn exclaimed with a husky laugh as she and Chakotay entered her homestead.

Chakotay chuckled as he watched her delicate hands push damp tresses out of her eyes.

Kathryn placed her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at her friend, “This is not funny. I look like a drowned cat. And I wouldn't laugh if I were you, you don't look much better,” she teased.

“Well, how about I start a fire to warm us up, while you go change out those wet clothes,” he suggested with a dimpled smile.

“That's fine, I assume we won't have to use bits of my hair this time,” Kathryn teased with a lopsided grin.

“It was one time, Kathryn. You're never going to let me forget that, are you?” Chakotay lamented

“Nope,” Kathryn tossed over her shoulder as she moved deeper in the house. “You can change too, once you've got the fire going. You can't stay in those wet things much longer, you're bound to catch a chill,” Kathryn warned as she disappeared into her bedroom.

In the quiet of her room, Kathryn smiled at Chakotay's thoughtfulness as she moved to the bureau for a change of clothes. Her eyes fell upon the small drawer that she hadn't had the courage to open for the last three months. And suddenly her good mood melted into feelings of guilt.

For weeks she'd been purposely lying to the person who'd become her best friend and she felt sick to her stomach at the thought.

In recent months, she and Chakotay had grown closer and she felt like she could tell him anything. She felt this way but that didn't mean she didn't still have her secrets. Everyone had secrets; things about themselves or their pasts that they kept close to their hearts. She sensed the same was true in Chakotay's case as well. So she didn't pry when they stumbled upon a topic of conversation, that he said he didn't want to talk about. Kathryn shook herself free of the unwanted feelings of guilt as she changed out of her wet clothes.
She'd just peeled the soaked camisol and petticoats from her body when she heard a knock at her bedroom door.

“Yes?” She called out from behind the changing screen.

“Fires up,” Chakotay informed.

“Ok, I’ll be right out. You go ahead and make use of the spare room. There should be extra blankets in the cupboard,” she instructed.

“All right,” Chakotay answered as he silently placed a hand against the door separating them.

Slowly, Chakotay backed away and let his hand drop as he turned away from her door.

His eyes held a far away look as his thoughts drifted back to a dream he’d had the night before. In the dream, he and Kathryn were running through a dense forest. He couldn’t see what was chasing them, only that he held Kathryn’s hand and pulled her along with him as they ran.

Suddenly, she was gone from his side. He searched all around him as panic flooded his veins. A few minutes went by then he found a small sink hole a few feet away from him. He called to her but she didn't answer. Chakotay could feel danger gaining on their position and cautiously he lowered himself into the hole to help her. As he reached her, tears sprang to his eyes. Kathryn lay on the ground unmoving, with her neck bent at unholy angle. Chakotay had awoken to his own screams that night.

He shuddered at the thought as he moved into the spare room of her house. Chakotay hadn’t been able to shake the uneasiness the dream brought him until he’d seen her this morning. He’d rode out to her homestead early this morning to make sure she was alright. Kathryn had smiled indulgently, then invited him to sit and have breakfast with her, before she went into town.

All day Chakotay found excuses to be in her company. As the day bore to a close he’d suggested they ride out to North Bend for a picnic dinner. Pleasantly surprised, Kathryn readily agreed. Half way through the picnic she suggested that they start to head back, said that she sensed it would rain soon.

Chakotay had been so enamored with watching the sunset behind her profile that he’d missed all the signals warning of the impending storm.

He laughed quietly as he wrapped a heavy blanket around his waist. Little did she know it, but Kathryn had the ability to make him forget himself at the most inopportune times.

Dressed in only the blanket, Chakotay gathered up his wet clothes and headed back to the main room. He reasoned it would be best to place the clothes near the fire to dry.
As he entered the main room, Chakotay stopped in his tracks at the sight before him.

Kathryn sat on the floor, dressed in a sleeping chemis and robe, with the her legs to her side as she brushed her hair. Chakotay stood back and watched her ministrations. He was simply mesmerized by her actions and then found himself moving closer to her. He reached out stilling her hand and removed the brush from her grasp.

She glanced back at him, her stomach fluttering with butterflies at his nearness. Chakotay gently began pulling the brush through her long glorious hair, and every so often he would replace the brush with his fingers.

She held her breath as he sat closely behind her, gathered the length of her hair in his hand and then gently tossed the tresses over her shoulder. With confident fingers he began to knead the muscles at the base of her spine and slowly worked his way up until he reached her neck and shoulders. At first, she tensed at his touch, but slowly the tension melted away as he loosened the muscles beneath his hands.

Kathryn leaned her head forward and moaned slightly as she rolled her shoulder. The action caused her robe to slip off one shoulder and pool around her elbow. Kathryn gasped as she felt his lips caress her neck just behind her ear. Ever so slowly Chakotay kissed down the side of her neck and across her bare shoulder. Beyond her control, shivers of arousal danced down her spine.

“Are you cold?” Chakotay whispered as he took notice of her shivering.

“A bit,” she offered as she turn her head toward him.

“Here, take this,” he offered, as he slowly draped a nearby blanket around her shoulders.

Chakotay’s touch lingered on her shoulders as he gazed at her from behind. Most of her hair was dry but there were still a few auburn tendrils that curled against the top her neck. Kathryn closed her eyes as she felt his warmth course through her. She reached up and clasped his hand with hers in a silent gesture of thanks. Chakotay gripped her shoulder lightly before he moved to kneel down beside her.

The air was electric around them and their beating hearts could be heard even over the intensity of the raging thunderstorm. Kathryn mouthed the words thank you, but no sound came out. His intense gaze had literally stolen her breath away. Chakotay’s mind registered her words but he couldn’t reply - his lips were otherwise engaged, as they prepared themselves for what was to come.

Their heads leaned in slowly, carefully; their eyes closed in anticipation, and as their lips met softly for the first time, his heart pounded wildly in his chest. It sent tingles racing through his skin, and Chakotay wanted more. He had never felt anything as soft as her lips and knew he would never be the same again. He brushed his lips once again across hers, deepening the kiss ever so gently, wanting the moment to last longer.
When Kathryn first felt his lips on hers, her breath caught; it was unlike any kiss she'd felt before. Her mouth molded to the contours of his and the lightness of their touch sent a wave of pleasure through her body. As Chakotay pressed in again she responded in the same, relishing the warm sensation that flooded her being.

As the kiss ended she felt her guilt regarding the secret she kept from him rear its ugly head. It taunted her and in response she felt the pleasurable warmth of Chakotay's kiss slowly seep away.

They didn't speak, there didn't seem to be a need. It was as if a promise had been made of things to come. Chakotay stood and stepped back before lowering a hand to help her up. Kathryn accepted his hand and gracefully climbed to her feet. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders as she looked up at him.

Chakotay smiled and handed her the brush back as he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. Kathryn held the brush to her chest and pressed her cheek against his hand for a short moment, before she moved around him.

“You’re more than welcome to stay and use the spare room,” she offered softly with her back to him.

“Thank you,”

“You’re welcome,” she answered softly as she retreated to her bedroom.

CHAPTER SEVEN – five months later ...

"Did he say how long he’d be away this time?” Rio asked she helped Kathryn hang laundry.

"A couple weeks,” Kathryn mumbled around the wooden clothespin between her teeth, before handing it Rio.

"But he just got back," Rio countered as she pegged a stocking to the clothesline, "did he say where he was goin'?"

"He didn't say," Kathryn began as she scrubbed a blouse against the washboard.

"Ain't ya the least bit curious?” Rio asked unbelievingly.

"Well, of course I am,” Kathryn chuckled, "and I was this close to asking him,” she confessed as she held her index finger and thumb no more than an inch apart.

“Well...” Rio prompted as she cocked her head to the side with a raised eyebrow.
Kathryn stopped and leaned forward to rest her damp arms across the top of the washboard.

“Well, I got the feeling that he needed to do this for personal reasons. His behavior lately has been rather peculiar. Remember when he showed up at my door a couple months back?” Kathryn asked.

“Yes,” Rio stated as she sat down on the lower steps and leaned back against the porch.

“Chakotay banged on my door like a madman that day. I actually had my rifle cocked and ready to fire until I heard him yell my name.

“I barely had the door unlatched before he bounded into the house and the next thing I knew, I was wrapped up in a bear hug. But the most unsettling thing about it, was the frantic almost wild look in his eyes,” Kathryn recalled.

“That is odd,” Rio countered distractedly.

“I mean, after he calmed down it was very endearing, but like I said it was odd behavior. And then his alpha male display of warning off any and all prospective suitors before even asking to call on me? That was a bit extreme.

“Now...sometimes I catch him staring at me, but it’s more like he’s looking through me. Almost like he’s trying to focus on something, on another plane of existence,” Kathryn chuckled unexpectedly as she straightened her posture and went back to scrubbing the blouse in the wash bin, “I don’t know... maybe that’s silly.”

“Maybe not,” Rio pondered as she leaned up to rest her forearms on her thighs, “Kate, what were his exact words before he left?” She asked pointedly.

“I don’t know,” Kathryn stated absentmindedly as she rinsed the blouse and walked to the clothesline, “something about a quest or dream or searching for a dream.”

“A Vision Quest?” Rio prompted as she stood up and moved to stand on the opposite side of the clothesline.

Kathryn’s eyes met Rio’s in recognition before she nodded.

“That can be good news or bad news,” Rio supplied cryptically.

“I don’t understand,” Kathryn stated.

“I dunno...I’ve never explained this right. It’s somethin’ that the Indians do for spiritual guidance. It’s really a rather in depth ritual and I’ve known Tayo to seek out the quest when he was spiritually troubled, or if he’d just gone through a traumatic experience. Once, I remember he sought a vision to
understand a recurring dream he’d had.”

“What does the ritual entail?” Kathryn asked intrigued.

“It’s better if Tayo tells you. I tried it once, a long time ago. Let’s just say it was my first and last attempt,” Rio smirked secretly.

Meanwhile high in the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico ...

It had been many years since last he visited this place. Over the years as he’d grown from a young boy to a young man, Chakotay marveled at the sheer beauty of nature here. The flora was breath taking and the fauna...over the years he’d come face to face with a Black bear, a Mountain lion, a Bobcat and once a Coyote. As he thought back over previous visits, it saddened him to see the stark decline in buffalo herds that remained in this area, where once there were thousands, now there were only a few hundred.

Chakotay shook his head to dispel the sudden melancholy that the thought brought. He inhaled deeply before slowly releasing his breathe as he centered himself once again. He could see himself in his minds eye: dressed in a pair of soft buckskin pants as he knelt on the bearskin rug beneath him, in the center of a circle of stones.

It had to happen tonight, this would mark the final night. He’d spent four days and four nights alone on the mountain, without food and very little water, as was the custom of his people. He was to spend no more than four nights during any one vision quest attempt, although frustrated with his lack success as of yet, Chakotay was confident that tonight the Spirits would speak to him.

The scent of sage tickled his nostrils from the medicine pouch around his neck, as he focused on the sounds of the forest around him; the feel the warm night air against his skin, and finally the warm sensation he felt in his belly.

Gradually he became aware of the sensation of being in two places at one time. Chakotay smiled at the familiar sensation of detachment from his body, the ebb and flow of drifting deeper into himself, and then relief upon the hearing voices from within. He thought of his mother, father, brother, and sister; of his grandmother, grandfather and the ancestors, who he could now sense were with him. Those who had been here before him and who were now trying to speak with him.

Chakotay knew from experience to wait. Very soon the voices would narrow to one cadence so that he could understand.

“You are troubled, my son”

Chakotay smiled before answering Kolopak,
“Yes, Father,”

“What troubles you, Chakotay?” Kolopak asked.

“For thirty nights, I’ve had the same recurring dream,” Chakotay shared as his father knelt beside him.

“Do you not remember what your Grandfather told you about dreams? Did he not once tell you, ’that a dream is a vision while you sleep and a vision is but a dream while you are awake’?”

“Yes...”

“So, why are you here seeking a vision when one has already been given to you?”

“I guess I’m seeking an understanding of the vision,” Chakotay informed slightly frustrated with the riddles in which his father spoke.

“Tell me of this dream, my son” Kolopak requested patiently.

“In the dream, I’m...I’m not alone in the dream. I’m with a woman -” Chakotay’s bronze complexion tinted a ruddy color as he spoke.

Kolopak smiled knowingly at his son’s embarrassment, “Go on” he encouraged.

“We ... The woman and myself...we’re in a lover’s embrace. The most intimate, soul binding embrace that I have ever known”

“This is good, Chakotay” Kolopak smiled broadly

“But Father, I have never experienced this. And yet I can see her face aglow with pleasure; I can smell her essence, I can even hear passion resonating in her voice,” Chakotay explained unbelievingly, “but never have I experienced this.”

“Are you sure?” Kolopak asked, “Are you certain this ’dream’ is not in fact a memory?”

Chakotay couldn’t begin to fathom that what he’d dreamt was actually a memory. It just wasn’t possible...was it?

In the distance he could hear his father’s voice trail off as a hazy grey fog swirled around him.

“This time, Chakotay, observe your soundings, remember where you are and what is around you,”

The fog lessened slightly and this time instead of being a participant in the dream, he was an observer. He could see himself on the narrow bed, his body locked with that of a woman. Determinedly he tore his gaze away from the impassioned couple and allowed his eyes to search his surroundings.
He knew this room. He’d awoken in this very room after the Valentine’s Day Gala. Except... there on the night table. The table had been bare when he woke up and yet now it wasn’t. Completely focused on the table in front of him, Chakotay was shocked to see a crinkled piece of paper and two simple gold bands. Reverently he picked up the piece of paper and focused on the type.

...by virtue of the power ... bestow...the Rites of Matrimony between Alejandro Chakotay and Kathryn Janeway by uniting them together as Husband and Wife.

Abruptly, Chakotay found himself slammed back into reality by the sheer magnitude of his discovery.

He snapped his eyes open to peer in the starlit darkness surrounding him, before bowing his head to offer his thanks to the Spirits for their guidance. Closing his eyes he once again brought out the memory to reexamine his discovery.

Joy battled with Hurt and Anger warred with Disappointment. Why had she felt the need to hide this from him? Was she ashamed of him? Or perhaps better yet, was she ashamed of herself?

He would have to be careful how he approached her. Perhaps it was time to challenge some of the parameters Kathryn set on their relationship. He smiled to himself as a plan unfolded in his mind for the best way to lure his wife back into his arms... and his bed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chakotay watched the disheveled woman across the room, as she read from a book in her hand. He chuckled at the title “A New Edition of Domestic Cookery”. Tonight was one of her rare nights off work and Kathryn had insisted that she cook for them this evening.

His eyes followed her slim fingers as they slid down the page, listing the instructions for whatever she was trying to make. He chuckled as he recalled how she’d shooed him out of the kitchen when he offered to help. She’d pointed to the chair across from the fireplace in the living room and told him to “stay put”.

He didn’t expect much from her adventure in the kitchen. Chakotay chuckled to himself, she was determined to learn though. His Kathryn was proficient in everything – everything except cooking. But it was one of the things he loved about her.

He’d come to love her deeply; more so than he thought any one person could love another. After the night of the storm Chakotay made it known to anyone who asked that he was courting Ms. Kathryn Janeway. In fact he’d made that common knowledge before she even granted him the privilege to call on her in that fashion. It wasn’t a surprise to their closet friends as they were used to seeing he and
Kathryn together most times anyway.

In the evenings, after she finished her shift at the saloon, Chakotay often escorted her back to her homestead. Kathryn raised a fuss the first time he insisted on seeing her home. As she mounted her horse, she'd blithely informed him that she was a grown woman and could take care of herself, thank you kindly. Chakotay argued that he wouldn't be much of gentlemen to allow his future wife to travel the woods at night alone. She'd stared at him in shock for a long moment, as if he'd discovered a secret she kept hidden in the depth of her being, before she gently slapped Voyager's reigns to encourage the horse toward home.

He smiled to himself now, little did she know, but he had discovered that particular secret.

Although he'd been to her home before, the size of it still surprised him. Initially, Chakotay expected the house to be small, settled amongst a rock embankment. However, Kathryn had somehow managed to find one of the very few meadows in the area to stake her home. The house was larger than he expected but not overly so. He could easily picture a young family living here. It was obvious that she hadn't built this house herself, the aged wood dated at least five years. The land behind the house was vast. In years to come she could easily build a larger residence if she wanted.

A husky moan dragged his attention back to the woman in the kitchen.

Chakotay felt his pants tighten at the sight of Kathryn sucking her fore finger between her lips. The look of ecstasy on her face, confirmed that their dessert would be coffee flavored.

His Kathryn only ever got that look on her face when coffee graced her taste buds. Despite Doc Zimmerman's warning against the substance, Chakotay would gladly keep his lady love bathed in coffee, if it meant he'd continually get to see such a wanton expression cross her features. If she reacted this way simply to the taste of coffee, he wondered what her range of expressions were in the throes of passion.

If anyone asked him to describe his courtship with Kathryn, he would have likened it to a passionate dance he'd seen once in his travels.

Chakotay didn't recall where he'd seen this dance, but to hear the music demanded you to surrender yourself to desire. The movements between the man and woman were dramatic; both arrogant and passionate. The dance was progressive, each participant took strong, proud steps forward with artistic hand movements. The man's movements were sharp and quick, his chest and head held high as he moved toward the woman in determined strides.

In some instances, the woman would move toward her partner just as determinedly. Often appearing to catch her partner off guard, causing the man the move away from her and thus the woman becoming the hunter and the man the pursued. The role reversals lasted the duration of the dance. The ending of the dance varied. Sometimes the man would rise victorious, other times the woman and sometimes the two seemed to come to a mutual truce.

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“Damn!” her exclamation startled him out his thoughts.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay called as he stood and walked into the kitchen.

Chakotay’s nose crinkled at the smell of burnt cuisine but his eyes softened at Kathryn’s obvious frustration.

“I’m sure it’s fine. We just have to cut off the charred bits. Here, taste that,” she insisted without giving him an option, as she shoved a fork between his lips, “Well?” She asked hopefully.

As he worked the charred piece of casserole around his palate, Chakotay tugged at his collar, “It’s ....good,” he grimaced.

“Really?” she asked relieved.

Picking up a napkin and bringing it to his mouth, Chakotay discreetly spit out the offensive piece of food.

“No,” he eyed her apologetically.

“Damn, well come on then,” she commanded as she untied the apron from around her waist, tossing the article onto the table, “We can make it back to the Club, before Nelson closes the kitchen,” she suggested as she made to move by him.

Chakotay gently held her in place before she could pass him, “I’m not really hungry,” he whispered as he wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her closer to him. “Are you?” he asked seductively, his lips inches from her own, as he delighted in the feel of her heaving bosom against his chest.

“No,” she breathed as she eyed his full lips and clutched the front of his shirt.

Kathryn’s heart thudded in anticipation as Chakotay leaned forward and gently pressed his lips against hers. Soon the kiss deepened into a smoldering flame of passion.

*She had to stop him,* her mind warned, but her body seemed to have a mind of its own.

Lately, ever since he came back from his vision quest, Chakotay had been pushing the parameters she’d set when they began courting. Slowly but surely he was maneuvering her into a more intimate relationship.

He’d started with little pecks to the back of her hand, a stroke across the small of her back, breath stealing sensual kisses, and most recently heavy ’petting’ as Rio would say.

“Cha-ko-tay...” Kathryn breathed as she broke the kiss.
“I love you, Kathryn. You know that I do,” Chakotay mumbled against her lips as he cupped her buttocks.

“Mmm...I love you too,” she confessed as she pushed her lips against his.

Chakotay deepened the kiss as he pressed a hand against her lower back.

Kathryn moaned as she felt his other hand cup her breast through the fabric of her blouse.

“Cha-ko-tay ... we can’t,” she protested weakly.

“Yes... we can,” Chakotay stated heatedly as he hauled her against his body, “we already have,” he declared as he captured her lips in possessive kiss.

In that moment, his kiss branded her as his.

Kathryn dimly recalled a poetic phrase she’d read once: “but his kiss was so sweet, and so closely he pressed, that I languished and pined till I granted the rest.”

Blindly the lip locked couple stumbled through the house as they bounced off walls and knocked over furniture, until they reached her bedroom.

Chakotay pulled the fabric of her blouse free from the band of her full skirt as his tongue sought entrance to her mouth once again. He ground his hips into hers as he unbuttoned and peeled the bloused away from her body. His large hands cupped her bottom as he thrust a thigh between her legs.

Kathryn's hands slipped beneath his soft cotton his shirt to caress his muscled chest. She gasped beneath his lips as he yanked the back of her skirt open and pushed the fabric over her hips to the floor. Kathryn moaned in pleasure as his fingers stimulated her swollen clit through the fabric of her petticoats and underwear. At the sound of her moan, Chakotay deepened the kiss as he deftly unlaced and peeled off her corset.

Anxious to feel more of his skin against her own, Kathryn broke the embrace. She pushed him away from her just far enough to grip the edges of his button down shirt, before she pulled the two halves of the fabric in opposite directions; the garment ripping effortlessly under her passion induced frenzy.

Dimly, she heard buttons ricochet off the wall and floor as she peeled the fabric off his bronze shoulders. Impatiently, her fingers opened the closure of his slacks as her other hand threaded through his thick ebony hair while he kissed and nipped at her neck.

Chakotay tightened his hold, as he felt her hand slip into his slacks and massage his swollen manhood. He ripped her camisole down the middle as he felt her nip his earlobe playfully. He groaned in pleasure as she released him from his slacks and slid to her knees, to allow the warm

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depths of her mouth to engulf his aching member. His hands strayed to her hair to hold her in position as he thrust in and out of her inviting mouth. He groaned again as of her tongue circled his cock and with extreme effort he pushed her off his turgid member, grabbed her shoulders and hauled her up to his lips.

He wouldn’t last if she kept sucking him off like that. Chakotay toed off his boots as he pushed Kathryn against the wall and palmed her left breast. He lowered his head to take the creamy mound into mouth as he finished removing his slacks.

Kathryn’s nerve endings were on fire as she panted and heaved her upper body against his mouth. She felt him pull the tattered remains of her camisole off her shoulders, seconds before he snatched her petticoats and underwear from her hips. His hands seemed to be everywhere at one time. Fingers pinched her aroused nipples as he palmed her breasts. A hand slid down the side of her body, around her waist to knead her bare bottom.

His lips once again suckled her breasts, as she felt his fingers travel over her belly and finally between her legs. His touch was confident but hurried as thick digits raked through the auburn curls at the junction of her thighs. Kathryn threw her head back with a guttural moan has Chakotay pushed a thick digit into the depths of her womanhood. At the same time the thick pad of his thumb applied pressure against her sensitive nerve bundle. A throaty groan echoed around her when he gently bit down on a nipple as two fat digits pumped in and out of her sodden folds. Wantonly, her hips moved in a rhythm that she had no control over.

Kathryn whimpered in disappointment when his lips left her breast only for her eyes and mouth to fly open in shock, as he knelt before her, threw one of her legs over his shoulder and latched his mouth onto her womanhood.

His tongue was relentless and his breath was hot against her sensitive flesh, as he nibbled her hardened nub and his tongue laved her swollen folds feverishly. He teased and tortured her pleasurably, as she pressed and bucked against his mouth and tongue. He squeezed her buttocks as he pressed his mouth against her mound harder, his tongue flicked and circled her swollen nub until he felt her body tense and tighten as she climaxed. She bucked wildly against his face, her hands desperately clenched in his hair, as she cried out his name.

He lowered her leg from his shoulder and stood to kiss her passionately. He forced her to taste herself as his tongue plunged into her mouth and his large hands pulled her body flush against him.

Suddenly he snatched his lips from her mouth and whispered hotly in her ear, “Forgive me,” just before he lifted her left leg around his hip and he forced his cock into the depths of her tight velvet warmth.

Kathryn moaned harshly at the sensation of him unexpectedly filling her.

Her breathing was ragged and she gasped as he thrust into her again and again.
“Forgive me, Beloved,” Chakotay pleaded breathlessly, before he plunged deeper into her womb.

“Chakotay,” she begged.

Kathryn closed her eyes and willed her body to relax, to enjoy the sensations of his thick cock moving inside her depths. She focused her attention on the feel of his member pulsating inside her, stretching her inner walls to accommodate his massive girth and impressive length.

“Forgive me,” he husked as his hips pounded against her.

His body was heavy as he pinned her to the wall and his breath was hot as he panted in her face. His mouth moved to her neck and his teeth marked her skin before his lips moved to pull her breast into his mouth. Chakotay rubbed his knuckles against her hardened clit as he thrust into her repeatedly.

Chakotay knew he was probably hurting her, but he couldn’t stop himself. The feel of her moist velvet heat encasing his member elicited the ancient desire of a male animal to utterly dominate and possess his mate. He groaned as he rocked her against the wall. Her quick intake of breath as he grazed her swollen nub reached his aroused mind and Chakotay concentrated on coaxing the illicit sound from her again. Feverishly he rubbed his knuckles back and forth against her sensitive flesh, until she writhed against him in passion.

He smiled devilishly as he watched her head loll back against the wall and her hips jerk against his repeatedly. A flush appeared across her shoulders and her bosom heaved against his chest, as she panted open mouthed.

Kathryn felt a fire coil tightly in her belly at the sensations shooting through her body. Never had she felt on fire like this before. She moaned deeply as Chakotay altered the rhythm and angle of his thrust. She wasn’t sure what he hit, but when he thrust against her just right, she felt the tight coil of desire in her belly snap abruptly as her inner walls violently clamped down around his length. She shuddered and bucked against him as a husky, garbled scream tore from her throat.

Chakotay bent his head to her shoulder as he thrust rapidly between her inner clenching muscles. He squeezed his eyes shut as he pinned her hips to the wall and repeatedly rocked against her. His pace increased as she cried out his name again. With one last thrust, he buried himself in her depths and he roared his release, as his own climaxed ripped through him.

Slowly the couple slid down the wall, Chakotay still impaled inside her depths, until they landed on the floor, a sticky and sweaty heap of limbs.

Kathryn leaned her forehead against his shoulder as Chakotay smoothed his hand up her sweaty back. He pulled her close to him and tried to soothe her trembling body. Gently he leaned back from her, his forehead resting against her temple a moment, before kissing her sweetly. He slipped a hand behind her neck as he nibbled and licked at her lips.

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“Forgive me, Kathryn,” he panted “I couldn't help myself. I've wanted you since the first day I laid eyes on you,” he smoothed his large hands up to cup the sides of her face as his ebony eyes bore into her grey blue depths.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Chakotay,” she whispered, “We came together mutually. Despite what you think, I know you would've stopped if I asked you,” she assured him.

“I know what happened the night of the Valentine's Day Gala,” he stated abruptly, “I saw us in a vision,” Chakotay continued, “When were you going to tell me?”

Kathryn closed her eyes as she dropped her head in shame.

“I love you, Kathryn.” He stated passionately, “I've told you that countless times. I'm not angry with you but I'm hurt you felt the need to hide it,” he shared as he tipped her tear stained face up.

“I was ashamed. I... we hadn't known each other long and then there never seemed to be a good time to ... And we couldn't have... there's no way to undo it,” Kathryn spoke in circles as she eyed him uncertainly.

“Marriage was always what I planned, although I planned to be aware of the fact that we were getting married at the time,” he smiled.

She gave him a watery smile as her husband leaned forward to kiss her.

“You okay with this? Us being married?” He asked.

“I haven't let myself think about it. As long as you didn't know and I didn't dwell on it, I could almost convince myself that it never happened. And before you ask, I'm not ashamed of you. I was ashamed of myself for allowing something so sacred to come into existence in a drunken debauchery,” she reassured.

“You do love me, don't you. You haven’t -”

“Oh, Chakotay. Of course, I love you. I know I don’t say the words as often as you do. But – well it’s harder for me. But it’s getting easier,” she confessed with a crooked smile as she gazed upon him.

“It's easier for me I suppose, because I feel that I have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times, in life after life,” he breathed against her lips.

Her eyes watered further as she slipped her fingers through his hair. Her eyes caressed his faced, before he lowered his head to pillow against her bosom. She hugged his large body to her small frame as she ran her hands up the back of his neck and gently pulled his head back to look her, before
kissing him deeply.

Chakotay returned her kiss as he slowly stood to his feet and held their bodies locked together. Kathryn moved her hips slightly to rock against him at the feel of his awaking arousal. Chakotay walked them to her bed and gently lowered them until he lay atop of her. He leaned up on his forearm as he eagerly took in her sensuous form with his eyes and hands. As his lips moved back to hers, Kathryn ran her hands down his golden frame, taking the time to admire his muscled shoulders.

He leaned up momentarily to gaze into her eyes as he commenced their dance once again. The passion was evident in both their eyes as they pulled each other close, relishing in the sensation of skin against skin. They molded perfectly into one another, and it was nothing short of bliss as their bodies rocked against each other. Chakotay bowed his head against her shoulder as his hips sunk into her warmth repeatedly.

Kathryn arched into his thrusting body as their peaks were reached together. Still clinging to her, Chakotay shifted to the side allowing his weight to transfer to the bed. He kissed her shoulder and neck while he ran a hand across the smooth skin of her stomach. Kathryn ran her fingers through his hair as he kissed her body. When her eyes finally met his, she reached down to press her lips against his ear.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Chakotay grinned as he claimed her lips, “I love you too, Kathryn.”

For sweet moments they delighted in the soft kisses each offered the other. Finally, exhausted from their expressions of love, entwined together, two couple drifted to sleep.

Early the next morning as the sun’s rays bounced off the mirror in Kathryn’s bedroom, Chakotay stirred. He slid his hand up and down Kathryn’s back as she lay pressed up against him. The feel of cool metal encircling his ring finger was a new, but not unwelcomed sensation. Was it his imagination or had they only been asleep for a few minutes? He knew their love making continued long throughout the night, neither of them wanting it to end.

“Mmm...morning,” Kathryn whispered as she lifted herself to look into his face. Before her gaze fell to the simple gold band on her left hand.

Chakotay leaned down to kiss her lips as he trailed his fingers across her cheek. He thought she looked beautiful with her hair in disarray and sparkling eyes.

“Morning,” he responded as he pressed his lips to hers.

Kathryn pressed her lips to his firmly as she ran her hands up Chakotay’s chest. She couldn’t explain
the feeling that blazed through her in that moment. The way he caressed her cheek reminded her of the numerous times he had done that during their night of passion, and she wanted – no, needed more of him. By the time they finally dragged themselves from her bed the sun had risen well beyond high noon.

CHAPTER NINE – three months later....

“Good Morning, Stadi! Good Morning, Harry!” Kathryn greeted the couple, as she walked into Kim’s Import & Mercantile Store.

“Good Morning, Kate! Checking for that package you ordered?” Stadi asked as she wiped her hands on her apron.

“Yes, actually. We’re getting very close you know,” Kathryn reminded.

The attractive olive complexed, young women smiled, “We are indeed. Does he have any idea?” Stadi asked as she leaned against the counter.

“Not a clue,” Kathryn beamed, “He thinks that no one knows. Well, no one except Miguel, of course. So he’s not expecting anything from me.”


“Thanks,” Kathryn nodded in the other woman’s direction as she removed her leather riding gloves.

“Oh, I nearly forgot. Kate, you’ve received a couple letters yesterday as well,” Harry Kim informed as he unlocked the drawer behind the counter.

Surprised Kathryn, moved to the other end of the counter, “Oh? I wasn’t expecting anything,” she replied puzzled.

“Yup, got ’em right here. There’s one from Mr. William Patterson, your uncle in Maryland and ... ah here it is, one from a Ms. Phoebe O’Connell postmarked from ... Indiana,” the oriental shop owner informed jovially, as he held the envelopes towards her. Too busy trying to make out the post mark, Harry had missed Kathryn’s initial shocked expression, regarding the sender of the second letter.

How in the hell did she find me? She mentally panicked. However, outwardly she was the picture of calm curiosity.

“Strange,” Harry continued, “she misspelled your last name – says to Ms. Kathryn Jane West,” he read.
“Mmm. That is strange. Thank you Harry I shall read them a little later,” Kathryn informed as she took the letters from him and placed them in the pocket of her skirt.

Harry's smile faulted a little, as he realized that she wasn't planning on sharing the details of her letters today. But then unlike the others in town, she never did. He wondered about that. Ms. Kate always went out of her way to help those she could, like when she set Marla up to work in the store after buying out her contract from Marc Randoloh. Although, some folks say it was Chakotay who supplied the money to buy the younger woman's contract.

And like the time she donated one of her fancy dresses for the Church auction to raise money for building the new school. Ms. Kate always had a smile or a kind word for most folks. She had a way about her that made you want to be around her; made it easy to open up and share your inner most thoughts with her. And yet – there was still so very little folks knew about her. Well, about her life before she arrived to Loveless, that is.

Harry's musings were interrupted by the return of his wife, as she carried out Kathryn's package from the back storeroom.

"Here it is," Stadi sang as she placed the square shaped package on the counter, along with a letter opener.

Kathryn smiled broadly as she untied the twine and sliced open the brown wrapping paper. Excitedly, she opened the pine shipping crate, pushed the internal packing aside and lifted out the item contained within.

“Oh!” Kathryn exclaimed softly, “It's perfect. Just perfect,” she murmured, as she smoothed her palm across the glossy finish.

“It's a mighty fine piece, Ms. Kate,” Harry encouraged.

“That it is Mr. Kim, that it is,” she smiled.

Harry blinked. Even after two years of knowing this woman, he still wasn't used to being called Mr. Kim. In fact Kathryn Janeway was the only person in town that referred to him as Mr. Kim with genuine respect.

He'd gotten lucky when the previous store owner died. Surprisingly, upon his death old Brett Anderson bequeathed the store to Harry and his wife. It was unheard of for a Chinaman to own an establishment that wasn't an eatery or a laundry shop. And yet, Harry Kim did.

In the beginning he and Stadi were constantly harassed. Angry townspeople threw rocks through the windows, left dead animals on the stoop, and for a while folks even refused to purchase any goods from him. Instead folks rode clear out to Drexel Ridge, which was a two days ride.
Eventually, common sense prevailed and the residents returned to shopping in their own community.

There were still a handful of folks in town who resented the fact he now owned the Mercantile shop. But it was rare these days to hear more than a mumbled curse or whispered derogatory comment. Seemed folks were real pleased when he introduced the import side of the business, which now allowed catalog purchases to take place.

“Were you needin’ anything else today, Kate?” Stadi asked melodiously, as she re-wrapped Kathryn’s package, minus the shipping crate.

“Yes, actually. I need a can of coffee, a small tub of lard, one medium sack of flower, a medium sack of sugar. Umm...some cinnamon, and a bag of apples,” Kathryn stated, mentally ticking off her grocery list.

“Harry?” Stadi prompted her husband out his thoughts.

“Huh? What?” He asked confused.

“Harry!” Stadi admonished playfully, “Did you hear a word she just said?”

“Umm, not really?” He decided to answer truthfully.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry, I can get it myself,” Kathryn waved him off with a smile, as she moved around the store.

She’d just picked out her last apple, when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Kathryn took a moment to casually flick her eyes around the store. There hadn’t been anyone else in the shop when she’d entered but someone was there now. Someone other than herself and the Kim’s.

Kathryn moved around the store picking out her items nonchalantly, as her eyes surreptitiously searched the corners of the store. Her gaze passed the wall of candies and canned goods, over the display of fresh produce and spices, beyond the bolts of fabric and passed the kitchen utensils – wait! Her eyes dashed back to the fabric. There! On the far wall, she noticed an out of place crease in the curtain against the wall. Normally, the curtain was flat against the side the wall, today the fabric seemed to ripple against the surface.

Kathryn stopped in front of the furniture catalog table and dropped her eyes discretely. She used the action to disguise her inspection of the floor beneath the curtain. Boots. Since when did the Kim’s store mens boots beneath the curtains?

She felt eyes on her. Ah so, this mystery person was following her, they weren’t here to harm Harry and Stadi. Kathryn felt some of the tension leave her body at the realization. She could handle someone coming after her. She straighten up and moved back to the counter.
“Stadi, I think I’m done here,” she called loud enough for the mystery person to hear her.

“Do you want me to charge it to your house account?” Mrs. Kim asked

“Yes, please. Can you send the larger items down to the house?”

“Sure, no problem. Nelson is going your way later this afternoon, I'll just have him drop them off for you,” Stadi assured.

“Great! I'll take the package back with me and one of these,” Kathryn beamed as she replaced her riding gloves and slipped an apple into her pocket.

Package in hand Kathryn, made her way outside to the post where her horse was secured. As always she made a point to caress the animal's nose as she approached, “Hello, Voyager,” the animal neighed softly as her owner encircled her neck. Kathryn laughed, “Yes, I know. I you owe an apple. Here ya go,” she stated lovingly as she reached into her pocket for the apple.

“You’re spolin’ her, ya know,” a woman’s voice called behind Kathryn.

“Hello, Rio. I'm not spoiling her. She learned a new trick. That’s her reward,” Kathryn stated proudly as she smoothed Voyager's white mane.

“You’re spoilin' her,” Rio reiterated.

Rio’s smile faltered as she watched Kathryn tense, her blue eyes locked onto something or someone over Rio's shoulder.

“Kate?” Rio asked as she placed a hand on the other woman's arm.

Taking a breath, a Kathryn spoke, “Don’t be obvious about it, but turn and look behind you. The man about fifty paces to the left, standing outside the barber shop, do you know him?”

Casually, Rio placed a hand on Voyager’s neck and rounded to the left. Kathryn moved as well in the same direction, effectively switching positions. Rio flicked her eyes toward the direction Kathryn indicated.

“Tall, lanky guy? Kinda pale with coal colored eyes and slick black hair?” Rio asked.

Kathryn nodded.

“That’s Cassius. Why?” Rio inquired

Kathryn shook her head, “What do you know about him?” she asked.
“He come to town awhile after Chakotay arrived, looking for work.”

“He's trouble,” Kathryn declared with a harden glint in her eyes.

Rio eyed her friend and then glanced back to where Cassius had stood, “He's gon'. And how do you figure he's trouble? I don’t believe the two of you have ever met,” Rio accused as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“I don't need to have met the man, to know that he's been stalking me for the last month,” Kathryn replied heatedly.

“What?!”

“Keep your voice down!” Kathryn hissed, “He's still around. I can feel it.”

“What do you mean you can feel it?” Rio prompted.

Kathryn closed her eyes in hopes of getting her temper in check, “Look over my shoulder about seventy paces, just inside the Corral entrance.”

Rolling her eyes, Rio casually let her eyes wander in the direction of the Corral. And that's when she saw the whites of a pair of eyes staring back at her.

She lowered her arms to her sides, her fingers a whisper away from her revolver.

“Don't!” Kathryn hissed, “You'll spook him. And I need to know why he's been following me.”

“How did you know where he was?” Rio asked puzzled.

“Something someone taught me a very long time ago,” she offered secretively.

“You've noticed him tailn' you for a month?” Rio asked unbelievingly.

“Yes. At first it was just once in while, the feeling was benign. Sort of like the feeling you get when the boys at the saloon look at you. You know they're looking but there's nothing malicious about it. Over the last week since Chakotay has been gone, I've felt heat in his stare. It's become menacing, almost like he has a grudge or something,” Kathryn commented.

“Have you told Tayo?”

“No! And nor will you. Besides, he's possessive enough of me as it is,” she huffed with a shake of her head.

“Cassius ain't stupid, Kate. I don't care what kinda grudge the man's got against you, he ain't goin'
risk Tayo’s temper,” Rio assured.

“That's just it, Rio. I don't think he has a grudge with me. I think it’s with Chakotay,” Kathryn informed, “this whole business started after we announced our marriage.”

“Come with me,” Rio commanded as she untied Voyager and gave the reigns to Kathryn.

Kathryn mounted Voyager as Rio mounted her horse, Fuego, “Where are we going?” Kathryn asked as she followed the other woman out the town square.

“To see a friend,” Rio commented vaguely.

CHAPTER TEN

“Vince!” Rio called as she and Kathryn dismounted.

At the call of his name, Vincent Toovey looked up from the carving in his hands, as Rio and Kathryn climbed the porch.

“Ms. Isabella, Ms. Kathryn,” he greeted with a tip of his hat.

Rio rolled her eyes at his greeting. Vincent Toovey was one of only two people who still addressed her by her Christian Name. “Kathryn, I want you tell him what you told me,” Rio demanded.

Kathryn eyed other the woman as if she were crazy and then eyed the black man sitting before her.

During the early months of her relocation to Loveless, Kathryn found that she missed her father's book collection. So it was no surprise that she soon found herself browsing the collection of the town's library. What did surprise her was the fact that Vincent Toovey was the owner of the establishment. If the town gossip had any truth to it, Vincent was a freed slave and at one time served as a Buffalo Soldier.

In her dealings with him, Kathryn learned that he was an educated black man. She would almost describe him as a stately gentleman. Vincent could recite Aristotle and Shakespeare as well as any nobleman she'd ever met. His statements were always measured, succinct even. Although he preferred a solitary lifestyle, it was he who initiated their weekly lunch appointments.

Each week they met for lunch or tea to discuss the newest novel or literary classic that Kathryn had read that week. The two debated the works of Alexandre Dumas, Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as female authors George Sand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Bronte sisters.
Kathryn couldn't recall ever seeing Vincent in the saloon or Gentleman's Club. In addition to his literary prowess, she sensed a great deal of physical power beneath the calm, passive exterior the man exuded.

“Tell him,” Rio prompted again.

When Kathryn hesitated, Rio spoke for her, “Cassius has been stalkin' her for the last month. He ain't approached her or nothin'. But it only started after Chakotay announced their marriage. Seems to me that's quite the coincidence, seeing as that's around the same time Tayo's investigation began,” she informed.

Vincent gracefully unfolded his long limbs, as he stood from his seated position.

“Is this true?” he asked in a calm manner.

Kathryn glared daggers at Rio, “Yes,” she hissed, “and what don't I know?” She asked curiously.

“Do you recall the story that ran in the gazette about a month ago?” Vincent inquired.

The only big story that Kathryn could recall was the recent payroll heist. Her jaw dropped slightly as she looked between Rio and Vincent, with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Are you talking about El Diablo's latest heist?”

Vincent and Rio shared a glance of silent communication, Rio nodded once before looking back in Kathryn's direction.

“She's the right to know,” she stated.

“He's involved, isn't he?” Kathryn interrupted as she closed her eyes. “You'd better tell me,” she sighed.

“The incident did not occur as the newspapers reported. Causalities were not part of the original plan. Chakotay only ordered a raid on the supplies,” Vincent informed as he watched Kathryn pale at his words.

As she listened, Kathryn recalled the stories she'd read about the infamous El Diablo. For years, even before traveling to New Mexico, she recalled the newspapers cited him as a criminal, with a vendetta against law enforcement, more specifically the US Marshals. He seemingly appeared overnight raiding various military depots, looting supply shipments and freeing Indians or Mexicans that were being detained by US Marshals. In addition, to being known as an excellent marksman, he was also experienced in the use dynamite and nitroglycerin.

El Diablo's strikes were consistently accurate, causing the military substantial losses. Many thought
that perhaps the bandit possessed military training of some sort. Five years ago, he was captured but
escaped before he could be brought before a judge. During the escape, El Diablo and his band
murdered fifteen US Marshals before they disappeared into the desert.

The reports of the outlaw’s activities changed from that time onward. Instead of only striking military
targets, El Diablo seemed to extend his wrath to the general public. She’d heard stories of the bandit
preying on lone ranchers, cowboys, and prospectors; killing them for food, guns and horses.

The dime magazines called him a man of the people, a sort of Robin Hood for New Mexico. There
were countless tales about poor towns being gifted with gold or supplies coincidently, just after one of
his raids. Kathryn suspected that if this were true, it explained how the bandit was able to elude law
enforcement. If he acted as a benefactor to the community, surely the community would shelter him
from the law.

The most recent article reported El Diablo’s raid on the railroad payroll, making off with more than
one hundred thousand dollars in gold and killing nineteen men in the process.

Kathryn rubbed her temple, “I can't believe this,” she whispered as she stepped away from Vincent
and Rio, “You’re both in on this? Miguel, Tom, and the others?” she questioned unbelievingly.

“Yes, but Kate, it wasn't Tayo doin' the killin'. Not this time.” Rio interjected as she looked to Vincent
for help. If they didn’t explain this right... well it didn't bear thinking about.

“In recent years, Tayo’s philosophy has been nonlethal action. Ordinarily, he’s not the murderin’ type.
In the last couple of months, violent acts have been cropping up all over the southwest, with someone
mimicking his style. The only difference is this copycat has a thirst for blood.”

“Why steal from the government, to begin with?!?” Kathryn asked enraged.

Vincent stepped forward and motioned for Kathryn to sit in the lone rocking chair on the porch. Once
she was seated, he folded his arms across his chest and looked out onto the horizon.

“To understand a man’s present, you must first understand his past,” he stated cryptically.

“In your time together has Chakotay ever spoken of his family?” Vincent queried.

“Not willingly. He had a nightmare once and cried out in his sleep. Based on what he was mumbling, I
gathered that something terrible had happened,” Kathryn shared.

Kathryn watched Rio clench and unclench her fists rapidly, as she leaned against the opposite post.

“Chakotay is a proud man. But he is a wounded man as well. Many who do not know him, assume
him to be an orphan but that is not the case,” Vincent clarified, “He was raised in a small village with
his mother, father, younger brother and sister. When he was old enough, Chakotay enlisted to become
an Indian Scout for the US Army. Only the best warriors of a village were selected for such a post.

One Spring he and a group of scouts were sent on an assignment that would keep them from the village for three days. When the band returned, the village had been razed,“ Vincent paused at Kathryn’s intake of breath.

“The men searched the village for survivors, and soon a grisly picture was painted for them. While they had been away, a group of US Marshal’s laid siege to the village.

“The scouting assignment was bogus, a ruse to lure the warriors away. When he returned to his family’s domain, Chakotay found that it had been burned to the ground. Nothing remained except ashes. The survivors spoke of how his father and brother had been murdered trying to protect his mother and younger sister.

“It was for naught sadly, the soldiers brazenly raped his mother and his sister repeatedly. The men forced his father and brother to watch the act, before killing them in front of the women. No one knew how long the women endured their torture until death came for them,” Vincent stopped his recount as he watched the color drain from Kathryn’s face.

“My God,” Kathryn whispered in shock.

“Chakotay and Miguel tracked the men responsible for the carnage of the village,” Rio continued, “He killed them with his bare hands. Miguel told me he never wanted to see Tayo, like that again. When they left the encampment, not one Marshal survived. Miguel told me that... Tayo... Tayo bathed in their blood that day,” Rio concluded shakily.

Kathryn looked towards her in utter disbelief, “he actually...”

Rio rushed to her side, “He was demented with anger and grief, Kathryn,” she explained

“And the nickname, El Diablo?” Kathryn asked with a sinking feeling.

Rio nodded her head, “that’s what the men named him, when they saw him covered in blood.”

“For some time now we have suspected a saboteur within our ranks,” Vincent interjected.

“In recent years, we have lost the protection of several cities that used to hide us from the law. There was a time when the band could count on the generosity of the citizens. However, a few years ago this began to wane.

“We suspected there was split amongst us and the accuracy at which the US Marshal’s were able to locate us had proven this to be true. In fact, it is only recently that it appears we have escaped their knowledge.”
“Just before Tayo moved to town, Tom and Miguel got wind of who the traitors were. I think what really burned Chakotay, was the fact that, Sezca, the woman he was seeing at the time, turned out to be one of the main culprits. Everyone thought the matter was settled before Chakotay arrived to Loveless, but now it appears the mastermind behind the split escaped.”

Kathryn eyed Rio suspiciously, “What do you mean escaped?” She asked.

Vincent and Rio shared a knowing look between them.

“Chakotay ordered the men who betrayed us be killed,” Vincent informed dispassionately.

“And the woman?” Kathryn inquired.

“Tom told me, that Tayo killed her. He said that it happened on the night of their anniversary,” Rio looked down momentarily, “Tom said, Sezca didn't have a clue that Tayo knew of her betrayal. That night while they in bed together... while they were... he strangled her.”

Unconsciously, Kathryn's hand caressed her throat as she exhaled a ragged sigh.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - two months later

“Where are you tonight?” Chakotay panted as he rolled off Kathryn's naked body.

Upon his return from his latest business trip, Kathryn surprised him with an unexpected, mostly edible, birthday dinner. As a gift, she'd given him an exquisite mahogany humidor, complete with a collection of exotic cigars.

Thinking over the evening, Chakotay recalled that she had seemed a bit distracted. Oh, she smiled, laughed and joked with him like usual. After dinner, she'd kissed him passionately and then pleased him with her mouth as a precursor to making love most of the night.

He realized with a start that they hadn't spent the last hours making love. When they made love, he knew that her body, mind and spirit were entwined with his own.

Tonight her body had been present but her mind and spirit were elsewhere.

'The woman he was seeing...killed her...' Kathryn squeezed her eyes shut against the memory.

“Kathryn?” He questioned as he gathered her in his arms.

She shuddered as he kissed her temple, 'That night while they were in bed... while they... he strangled her.' She couldn't help but remember Rio's words from two months ago and felt the dam holding back hot tears break.
Chakotay felt her tears on his chest as she buried her face against him. He was momentarily taken aback. Never had he seen this woman cry. He had seen her playful, melancholy, angry, joyful and wanton in the throes of passion. But he’d never seen her cry.

“Kathryn? What is it? You’re scaring me, Corazón,” he entreated.

As she calmed, Kathryn wiped her face and looked at him with tortured eyes. Alarmed, he cupped her faced and demanded softly, “What’s happened?”

“Tayo knew of her betrayal.. her betrayal... betrayal...”

Her eyes slipped away from his, “I need to... I need to ask you about something,” she hedged. “And I need you to be honest with me. No matter what the truth is, I need to hear it. Okay?” she asked hoarsely.

“All right,” he said curiously.

“Two months ago, I spoke to Rio and Vincent about the railroad payroll heist,” she declared with a knowing gaze.

“I see,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“There’s a reason that they told me. But first I need to know what happened five years ago. Fifteen men died that day. I need to know what happened,” her eyes begged him for the truth.

Chakotay battled within himself regarding her request. That was a time in his life that he’d tried in vain to force from his thoughts. His dark eyes searched her blue depths and he saw something that he couldn’t explain – guilt, shame. Why would she feel this way? He pursed his lips, before coming to a decision.

In light of the fact that he’d found evidence of burned letters from her uncle and a hidden letter from a woman named Phoebe, Chakotay had some questions of his own that he wanted answered.

“All right, but then I have some questions for you as well. And I expect the same courtesy,” he countered.

Kathryn eyed him suspiciously before she nodded her agreement.

Chakotay leaned back against the headboard as Kathryn draped an arm across his chest and waited.

“It was Spring in the year of 1871, by that time our raids had cost the military substantial losses and Washington was none too happy about it. The papers began to fabricate stories of a ruthless outlaw, named El Diablo. Many of the murders and robberies reported were actually acts of the Army and
Marshal Forces. I was in Drexel Ridge when the Army came. I don't know how they found us,” Chakotay smiled fondly for a moment,

“I'd like to shake the hand of the man who put together that strategic plan, though. It was an elaborate setup that walled us into the city with no route for escape. We were apprehended quickly.

“The captain in charge was a fair man. I believe that under different circumstances, we could have been friends. He leveled with me and told me that although he didn't agree with the Army's actions, he had orders to bring me in, and that he preferred to bring me in alive.

“He walked with me as a horse pulled me along by my bound hands. He could've mounted a horse and rode the long distance, but he chose to walk beside me.

“I never asked his name. And he never asked mine. I remember the manner in which he caressed his pocket watch, as if it were the dearest thing in the world to him. I asked him about the timepiece and he pulled it free of its housing to show me. It was a grand piece, sterling silver with intricate webbed detailing on the shell. Fondly, he told me that it was a wedding gift from his wife. She'd given him the watch on the eve of their wedding with a picture of her inside. I never saw her picture, but the look of love in his eyes as he gazed at her fanned a jealousy of the likes I'd never known.

“I found myself resenting him. He had the freedom to live, love and work as he pleased and I was being dragged behind a horse's ass like an animal.

“Somewhere in the distance, I heard shouts. It took a moment for me to realize the platoon was being ambushed. The captain left my side to go aid his men. I've never seen someone shoot like that before, nor since. He was a master of the weapon; I wouldn't have been surprised if he could conduct a symphony with his six shooters. And that's another thing I remember - his weapons, they were as regal as his timepiece. Odd for a military captain; most military men carry standard issue weapons, but the captain's looked as if he'd personalized them with his initials.

“Somehow, I found myself free of my bindings and joined my men in the ambush. Yes, fifteen Marshal's died that day but so did twenty of my band. And the captain, well he saved my life. I wasn't aware that a young soldier had me in his crosshairs. I heard a shout of “No!” before the gun went off. The next thing I knew, the captain was laying at my feet.

“I didn't have time to tend to him; I did kneel down to thank him. He grabbed my arm and nodded, before closing his eyes.

“I gathered up my men and the horses and we high-tailed it out of there,” Chakotay finished the tale.

Kathryn lay across his chest as silent tears rolled down her cheek. She pressed a kiss into his chest. Chakotay hugged her to him; he couldn't stand the thought of his criminal activities costing him the woman he loved.
“Thank you,” she husked, “Thank you, for being... honest ... with me,”

’Tayo knew of her betrayal... her betrayal... betrayal...’ Kathryn mentally flogged herself.

Chakotay slipped his fingers beneath her chin and raised her face to look at him. The expected look of shock or repulsion was absent from her eyes. But if it were possible, the guilt and shame seemed to have manifested tenfold. He couldn’t understand what was with her tonight. Kathryn wasn’t an emotional woman by nature; something had to have set her off.

“What’s brought this on? And don’t say that you’re ‘fine’” he demanded.

Kathryn pulled herself up to kneel beside him as she gathered the sheet around her body and wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Desperately, trying to forget the mantra repeating itself in her mind and heart.

“Rio and Vincent mentioned that there’s a split in your band. Some of the men are getting restless from staying in one place too long. One man in particular. He’s mimicking your attack style only he’s adding bloodshed to the mix. They believe that he resents you for being ‘passive’ about your action against the military,” she licked her lips before she continued, “They think he may be the mastermind behind the coup that happened in Drexel Ridge. It’s plausible that this man would go to any lengths to get to you. And if he can’t get to you via the US Marshals then that leaves getting to you, through me,” she whispered the last part of her statement.

Concerned, Chakotay sat up in the bed and gently gripped her shoulders, “What’s he done? Harmed you in some way? Who is it, Kathryn?” He shook her gently.

“I don’t know for sure,” she lied, fearful he’d get himself caught in the snare she’d laid for Cassius, “but I’ve had the sensation of someone following me for the last three months. At first, as I told Rio, it was a curious stare - I’m fairly used to them by now - but then they became menacing. I can’t explain it; there was heat in his stares. At first I thought he was just infatuated with me,” she raised her eyes to his, “I hear whispers of what a lot of men would like to do with me in the bedroom, and I thought...”

“Tell me who it is, Kathryn!” He growled as he shook her again.

“Stop it!” Kathryn demanded as she shrugged off his hold.

‘That night while they in bed... he strangled her.’ Kathryn shook her head to dislodge the sudden mental image of Chakotay pumping into her thrashing body as he squeezed the life out of her.

“Don’t touch me like that,” she stated hotly as she pulled her robe on and began to pace the bedroom, “I don’t know, Chakotay, it’s just a gut feeling.”

“Has he followed you to the homestead?” He asked suddenly.
“I don't know. I've not felt his stares way out here. He may not know. I don't exactly advertise where my home is located,” she hissed as she slammed her hands on her hips.

Chakotay ran a hand through his hair as he thought over this new information. If someone was following Kathryn, that meant they were trying to learn her routine or catch him with her. And if someone only wanted to learn her routine, then it was because they were trying to catch her when she most vulnerable.

“I don't want you traveling by yourself anymore,” he raised a hand to stop her argument, “Kathryn, it's too dangerous. I'll post a guard with you at all times, similar to how Marc does in the saloon. You won't even know they're there. But they'll be available if any trouble starts. And I want a man on watch at the homestead when I'm not here,” he demanded.

“I'll not be held prisoner in my own home! I refuse!” She stated indignantly as she passed the bed.

Chakotay grabbed her arm gently as she passed, “Just until this unrest is settled. I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to you, especially if I can help prevent it,” he reasoned, as he tugged her back to the bed.

“I can take care of myself! I don't need—”

“Please, Corazón,” he implored as he locked eyes with her.

Begrudgingly, she accepted his terms with a nod of her head.

“Com’ere,” he growled playfully, “that's not how we seal a deal in this relationship,” he stated before claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss.

Allowing herself to enjoy the fact that her husband was home, Kathryn smiled and then moaned under the kiss as he leaned her back against the mattress. She spread her legs in welcome invitation as he settled his weight on top of her body and rocked against her.

Kathryn emptied her mind of the poisonous thoughts from their previous coupling and allowed only the sensations he evoked in her body to have free reign. Soft lips traveled down her neck while insistent fingers untied her robe, mapping more of her flesh as the robe fell away, until she was naked beneath him.

Kathryn palmed his member as he suckled her breasts and coaxed her arousal aflame. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once. One moment they were sliding up the back of her thigh, to bring her closer to him. The next, his fingers danced across her belly before they tweaked her nipples. He distracted her with sensual kisses as he slid a hand between their lower bodies. Kathryn started slightly he pinched her swollen clit and moaned deeply when he thrust two thick digits into her womanhood, as he suckled her breasts.
Chakotay smiled at the vixen beneath him. She was an amazing woman and he loved her just as deeply as he lusted for her. But there were questions he wanted answered; questions that she always evaded when he asked.

“Kathryn,” he breathed hotly in her ear as he scissored his fingers in her depths.

“Mmm,” she mumbled incoherently

He suckled her breast before releasing the mound with a wet pop, “Where were you born?” he asked hypnotically as his tongue circled a puckered nipple. He reasoned he’d get further if he started the first question with something he knew the answer to.

“Indiana,” she breathed as his tongue first circled and then dipped into her navel.

Chakotay smiled as he nipped her inner thigh, and then blew gently across her heated core, “Who’s Phoebe?” he whispered as he licked her folds. Drunk with arousal Kathryn was powerless to do anything except spread her legs further and arch against him

“My—” her breathe hitched as he licked her again “- sister” she panted.

He swirled his tongue around her bundle of nerves before he forced his tongue further into her warm depths. The action caused her to buck and grind her hips onto his face, as she whimpered and clutched the bed sheets.

Chakotay pried her thighs open as he lapped and sucked her sodden folds. He held her there until her thighs began to burn, with the counter pressure of her instinctive response to clamp her legs around his head. He eased his tongue out of her core and pushed two thick digits into her depths as he leaned up to watch her.

“Who’s Justin?” he whispered as he rhythmically thrust his fingers into her womanhood and then nipped the inside of her thigh.

“Oh!” she called out, blissfully unaware of herself as he flicked her hardened clit. “My – mmmm” she moaned.

Chakotay leaned up as his fingers curled forward inside her molten core. He placed his lips against the sensitive spot on her neck, and blew slightly against the wet spot his tongue had left.

Kathryn shivered at the sensations he evoked in her body. She couldn't think straight. The only thing she could focus on was her encroaching orgasm. She bucked against his hand as his tongue circled a puckered nipple.

“Tell me,” Chakotay commanded softly.
“Husband,” she breathed and then whined disappointedly when his hand stopped moving.

As her eyes started to flutter open, Chakotay captured her lips in a possessive kiss before he positioned himself over her willing body and thrust into her slick heat.

“Mmmmm” Kathryn moaned in ecstasy under the kiss as he filled her to hilt.

Chakotay set a leisurely pace as he moved within her. He slipped just the head of his manhood into her depths and watched her face crease in frustration. He held her like that on the brink of her orgasm fading until he suddenly slammed back inside her.

“Justin?” Chakotay asked hypnotically as he kissed the sensitive spot on her neck.

“Dead,” she panted as he thrust into her pliant body.

Chakotay squeezed her breast in his palm, before he rolled a nipple between his fingers and then pinched the cherry colored peak, as he kissed her mouth. He kept the pace of his thrusts consistent, strong enough to evoke a reaction from the woman beneath him but not enough to hurt her.

The need for air caused him to break the kiss. As Chakotay gazed upon her, he thought he should feel guilty betraying her trust like this, but then he reasoned to an extent, she’d betrayed his trust by lying to him—repeatedly. His pace increased and his thrusts became more forceful as he slammed his hips against hers.

He’d asked her time and again if she had any family of her own. She’d waved off the question saying that her family was dead. That she had a distant uncle in Maryland, but that was it. And here he’d just learned she had a sister whom he knew nothing about. And what’s more that she had been married! Why would she keep these things from him?

He lifted her legs to rest over his shoulder has he pulled her hips against him. Chakotay growled as he gripped her hips and increased the pace of his thrusts.

Kathryn felt lightheaded as Chakotay plunged repeatedly in and out her body. She whimpered as his member left her folds, only to gasp sharply at the feel of his mouth latched onto her womanhood. He flicked, licked, nipped, and slapped her sodden folds until she felt her orgasm rip through her.

Chakotay felt her body go rigid with her orgasm and quickly replaced his tongue with his engorged member. He groaned audibly at the sensation of her inner muscles milking his cock. He thrust into her rapidly as her muscles clenched and unclenched. He kept up the onslaught of her slick folds, until he roared his own sexual release.

He gripped her hips and anchored her to him to ensure the lifeblood of his being spilled into her womb. He wanted to fill her up; fill her up with his cock and his seed. For long moments, he held her

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to him like that, as he watched her drift off to sleep. Lowering her hips to the bed, Chakotay leaned over her inert body and watched her breathing level out into that of deep slumber, before he rested his palm against her belly.

It was irrational, but the thought of her having shared her bed, her body in love with another man.... Chakotay wanted nothing more than to be sure that he was the first man to plant life in her womb. Somehow he knew that she’d never had children. The woman he loved would never have abandoned a child had she become a mother at some point in her past. He placed a kiss against her belly before he lay down beside her for the night.

CHAPTER TWELVE - a few weeks later

After she finished her dinner and her ever present cup of coffee, Kathryn decided to go to bed early. The day had been long, and the private poker game she’d play most of the evening, even longer.
Dressed in a sleeveless, cotton sleeping chemise and her hair in a loose plait, Kathryn banked the fire in the hearth and then extinguished the remaining kerosene lamps, scattered about the front rooms of the house.

She placed the last illuminated lantern on her nightstand, as she made her way to the chest that sat at the foot of her bed. Kathryn knelt on the floor as she opened the large cedar chest. Once the lid was open, she reached behind her for the gown she’d removed earlier in the evening and unpinned the money sock from the inside lining. After she retrieved the fabric from the pin, Kathryn reached a hand into the chest to move her possessions to the side, until she reached the bottom.

As her fingers slide across the wood planks on the bottom of the chest, Kathryn slipped her pinkie finger through a small hole in the floor board. She curled her finger under slightly and then yanked the plank of wood up until it popped out of position.

She paused a moment to gently lift a black velvet pouch out of the hidden space. She held the pouch to her breast before brushing a quick kiss over the material. She gently set the pouch to the side as reached for the larger animal skin pouch she kept hidden. Kathryn flipped open the lid of the pouch and counted the money she kept there. Although no one knew about the pouch, she felt the need to reassure herself that all the money was still accounted for.

Satisfied that was indeed the case; Kathryn loosened the ties of the small money sock and retrieved her pay for the evening. She placed the money in the animal pouch and flipped the lid closed on the large envelope before she slipped it back into its hiding place. She replaced everything back into the compartment and then replaced the plank of wood as well. She pushed down until she heard a slight pop, indicating that her secret hiding place was once again concealed.

She’d just settled all of her possessions back into their normal positions within the chest when the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood on end.

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Kathryn reached for the lining of the chest lid and silently peeled the fabric away to reveal another hidden compartment. Fastened to the wood of the lid behind the lining was a strap that housed a row of small daggers, a total of five altogether.

Below the belt was one additional dagger. Built into the hilt of the dagger was a tiny pistol, equipped to fire only one bullet. This particular dagger was housed in a sheath of its own on a belt that could be strapped around the waist of an individual. Very rarely did she carry this weapon, but something in her gut told her she would need it tonight. Kathryn strapped the weapon around her waist before she moved back to the nightstand to lower the wick of the lamp, extinguishing the light source in the room.

“Tayo! Thank God you’re back!” Rio, called from the entrance to the Final Frontier saloon.

Chakotay steered Venganza, toward her position and tipped his hat in greeting as he reached the saloon.

“Evening, Bella,” he smiled curious as to why she was dress in a blouse and skirt.

“Yeah, whatever. Look, I need to speak with you,” she insisted.

“Now?” He questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes!” She hissed.

Chakotay eyed her curiously, as he dismounted and secured Venganza to the hitch post. He patted the horse’s neck before following Rio into the bar. They didn’t go into the saloon area as he expected, instead she tugged him upstairs, and they were able to go unnoticed due to the noise level in the saloon.

Rio pushed him into a room before she slammed the door shut behind her. She was nervous. He hadn’t seen her, this skittish since the day he found her in that back alley.

“What’s going on?” He asked

“How well do you know Kathryn -- about her past I mean?” Rio asked.

Chakotay narrowed his eyes as he watched her pace the small room.

“Specifically, her uncle in Maryland, that William Patterson fella?” She asked.
“Not much. Kathryn’s a lot like us, she doesn’t like to dwell on her past,” he shared. He wouldn’t reveal what little he did know. Kathryn, herself was still unaware of her arousal induced confession or that he’d found Phoebe’s letter.

“There was guy in here asking about her earlier tonight. I’ve never seen him around here before. If you ask me, he looked like military or something. So I got him drunk, got him talking until he passed out. I locked him in the next room. He kept mentioning her uncle’s name.

I wired a friend back east and asked if he knew of a man name William Patterson out of Maryland. My friend wired back and told me the only William Patterson that he knew of was Admiral William Patterson. And to his knowledge the man never married and doesn't have any sons,” she revealed.

“Go on,” Chakotay encouraged.

“And the stranger said, that this Patterson fellow wanted Kathryn to ‘get out’; that it wasn’t safe for her to be living here anymore. Said, something about ‘El Diablo being on her’" she related cryptically.

Chakotay furrowed his brow as he listened.

“What the hell, Chakotay? What is he talking about?” Rio asked

“I don’t know Bella, I don’t know,” he paced agitatedly, “Was she here when this guy was looking for her?”

“Yeah, but she was over in the Gentleman’s Club playing a private game of poker. Marc’s been adamant that she only play by appointment,” she offered.

“I know. That was my idea when she told me she was being followed,” he explained.

“Wait! She told you?” Rio questioned unbelievingly.

“She told me what?” Chakotay growled, sensing that Kathryn had yet again kept something from him.

Rio backed away from her friend with her palms in front of her, “I’m just surprised she told you. She was adamant that she didn’t want you to know. She thought you’d kill him, if you knew,” Rio stated worriedly.

“Tell me who it is, Isabella,” Chakotay demanded as he grabbed her arm. He shook her, when he saw indignation flare in her eyes, “Don’t, Mija! Loose the attitude! I suspect whoever is setting me up plans to hurt her. So tell me who it is!” he demanded.

“When she told me it had been going on for a month already, that was three months ago. It was Cassius,” Rio informed, as she watched the blood drain from his face.
“What? What is it?!” she called as he wretched to the door open and sprinted down the stairs.

“Whoa! Primo, where's the fire?” Miguel asked as Chakotay knocked into him solidly.

“I don't have time. Mount up and come with me!” Chakotay ordered.

Miguel looked up in time to see Rio running down the stairs, clothed in men’s britches and her bullwhip wrapped around her waist.

Tom Paris and Harry Kim happened to look up to see Miguel and Rio run out of the saloon. They shared a look before each man slapped his cards on the table, took his winnings and ran after them.

“Hey! What's goin’ on?” Tom asked as Rio and Miguel mounted their horses.

In the distance he could see Chakotay urging Venganza out of town at a clipped pace.

Steadying her horse, Rio shared a little of what she knew, “I told Chakotay who Kathryn’s stalker was, amongst other things. As soon as I said, Cassius’ name he flew down the stairs.”

“Hyah!” she called out, as she slapped the reigns against Fuego. “You boys comin' or what?!“ she hollered over her shoulder as she galloped after Chakotay and Miguel.

Quickly the men mounted their horses and followed her.

Kathryn listened intently for any sounds that were foreign to her homestead. The inside of the house was completely dark, except for the slight illumination the moon and the stars provided through the window. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she panned the room for any shadows that may have been out of place.

Suddenly, the sound of breaking glass could be heard from outside, near the direction of the stable. Kathryn silently moved toward her bedroom window, which faced the rear of her property. From this vantage point, she could see the sweeping landscape behind the house. She kept to the shadows, as she inched closer to the window for a closer look. She jumped as she heard a low “whoosh” and then stared in horror as she watched the far corner of her property go up in flames. It wasn't the fire that concerned her, it was the insignia within the blaze: El Diablo.

Kathryn wasn't scared; she was pissed, royally pissed.

The sound of galloping horses caused her to turn from the window. She grabbed the belt of daggers from her bed, and quickly fastened the leather strap around her left thigh. Next, she grabbed the rifle she kept beneath her bed. She hefted the rifle high against her shoulder as she silently inched closer to
the bedroom door. By the sounds outside, there had to be at least ten horses on her property and heaven only knew how many horsemen.

It was pure luck that she happened to look down in time to see a shadow move beyond the closed door of her bedroom.

Someone was in the house! How was that possible? She hadn't heard the front door open, nor the side door off the kitchen. She quietly leaned the rifle against the wall as she took up position just behind the door on her bare feet.

Kathryn listened intently for additional footsteps and was surprised to realize there were at least two men in her house now. She could hear low whispering and a slight shuffling of feet. As she waited, Kathryn quietly pulled a dagger from the strap on her thigh and poised herself to strike whoever walked through the door in the next few minutes. She was small, but she was quick and silent; she also had the element of surprise on her side. She gripped the hilt of the dagger with a steady hand as the door inched open.

The fates proved to be on her side, as the man that entered the room was small in stature, not more than a few inches taller than she was. Soundlessly, Kathryn grabbed the man around the shoulders, slit his throat and quietly lowered him to the floor. With her hands covered in blood, she dragged her would be assailant away from the open doorway. When she was satisfied that his fallen body couldn't be seen from the hall, she wiped her hand across the side of her gown, before retrieving the rifle. She listened closely for the other man that she knew was somewhere in the house. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she hitched the rifle higher against her shoulder. With her back to the wall, she inched the distance from her bedroom to the common room. She was just at the edge of the hallway when the stranger turned to face her direction.

Kathryn slinked back into the shadows as he stared in her direction. The longer he stared, the more she thought for sure he must have seen her. The large man squinted in her direction and then whispered in a language she couldn't understand.

He seemed to call to his friend, and when the call went unanswered, the man started to walk toward her hiding place. Kathryn could still hear additional men outside the homestead, there was no way a gunshot would go unnoticed. Soundlessly, she lowered the rifle to lean on the wall behind her as she removed two blades from her belt. When the intruder turned fully in her direction, Kathryn swiftly let one dagger fly from her hand. He grabbed his chest in reflex as the blade pierced his torso and then collapsed as the second blade sliced through his thigh muscle, a shout left his lips before she was able to silence him.

Kathryn cursed under her breath as she grabbed the rifle and headed for the side door of the kitchen. That was the best way to get out of the house, as she eyed what looked like a mounted patrol arranged in a semi-circle at the front of the of her home.
As she neared the exit, Kathryn heard the sound of running footsteps on the porch. Unfortunately, from her position she was plainly visible from the front door of the house. She cursed again as she drew another blade from beneath her chemise and waited; she didn’t have to wait long.

She heard what sounded like three separate footfalls, three men. Gripping the hilt of the dagger, she kept her eyes and ears trained for any additional sounds. The first of the three men burst into the house aiming a weapon in her direction. Before he could cock his pistol, Kathryn’s dagger was firmly lodged in his chest. She downed the additional two men who burst into the house in the same fashion, then turned and grabbed the rifle before dodging out the side door.

She clung to the shadows outside her house barefoot, clad only in a blood stained, white cotton sleeping chemise. The gravel bit into the soles of her feet as she inched to the back corner of the house. From this vantage point, she could see a total of ten mounts plus her own horse.

Kathryn pressed back against the wood planks of the house and quickly weighed her options. She couldn’t down five more men by gunshot without making a lot of noise. And to make noise would give away her position, which she couldn’t afford to do. Her only weapons readily available were the combination dagger/pistol strapped to the inside of her thigh, and the rifle in her hands. Although, Voyager was extremely smart, he was too far away to be of any use at the moment.

Loud crackling could be heard as she turned to face the rear of her property. The fire was quickly approaching her homestead. She eyed the ax lodged in the stump to her right, before she sat the rifle down against the back of the house.

Kathryn unsheathed the French dagger from her waist and soundlessly uncocked the pistol at the hilt of the weapon. She raised a steady arm and aimed for the man furthest from her current position, and fired. No sooner had the bullet left the chamber did she swiftly propel the dagger towards the man that was the next furthest from her. Her aim once again was accurate, the blade pierced the man’s chest and mortally wounding her would be abductor.

The ax was heavy and awkward in her hands as a weapon and Kathryn knew she lacked the strength to throw the blade the necessary distance, so she waited for the remainder of the posse to come to her. Only two men remained.

Kathryn blew out a breath of relief, she could down them successively; she only needed them to close the distance a few more yards.

Just a few more...

*Thwack!*

Unexpectedly she felt a bullet whiz by her head, as it slammed into the wood of the house. Damn, there was one attacker, most likely the same one responsible for setting the fire. Kathryn reached a hand to her temple and her fingers came away wet with blood.

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She cursed under her breath as she ducked behind a large tree. Sadly, the rifle was now out of her reach. If she tried to go for it, the intruders would also become aware of the weapon.

As fate would have it that evening, Kathryn never got the chance to move more than a few feet from her hiding place.

She heard running footsteps gaining on her position. She incapacitated the first assailant who ran blinding in her direction by throwing an outstretched arm against his throat. She bent down quickly to grab his head before swiftly snapping his neck. As she rose to her feet, suddenly a heavy body slam into her back, forcing her to ground. The body eased off her, one hand gripped a fist full of her hair and the other held a blade to her throat, as the assailant hauled Kathryn off the blood stained ground.

As Kathryn stood to her feet slowly, the man loosened his hold on her slightly and lowered the blade. Unexpectedly, she swung her elbow into his midsection. When he released her, Kathryn whirled around to kick him in the knee. As the man collapsed, she punched him in the face. She only had a few seconds to congratulate herself before something solid collided with the back of her head.

And then she was falling into the dirt. Kathryn’s limbs were heavy and her head hurt something awful. She attempted to get to her knees when someone grabbed and wound a fistful of her hair around their hand and pulled her head back at a painful angle. With the remainder of her waning energy, Kathryn eyed her captor defiantly before the man pulled her to her knees and then released his hold of her.

The assailant whom she’d kicked in the knee, ‘Gimpy’ as she now thought of him, limped over to her position and swiftly backhanded Kathryn across the face. The blow caused her head to swing to the left, pain exploded in her cheekbone, further aggravating her headache as her head banged off the ground.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a man getting ready to kick her. As his booted foot neared her side, Kathryn caught his foot and swiftly turned his ankle.

The man screamed out in pain as he fell beside her. From her position in the dirt, ‘Gimpy’ appeared to be standing in shock. Using that to her advantage, Kathryn quickly swept an outstretched leg beneath her captor’s feet. The sudden action caused the man to fall backward on his butt before his connected solidly with the ground.

Tiredly, Kathryn rose to her feet and leaned against the tree that previously offered her cover from her assailants. She breathed in deeply, as she attempted to get her pain under control. After a few short moments, she released a sigh of relief, only for her relief to turn into a gasp due to a sharp sensation of pain.

Her bloodstained hand shot toward her neck. She fingered a dart of some kind protruding from her throat. As she plunked the dart from her carotid, Kathryn felt herself grow weak. Against her will, her
body slumped heavily to the ground. She had just enough time to realize that she had again missed one of her attackers.

She fought against her body’s desire to sleep but it was a battle that she would lose. Her vision blurred as her eyes fluttered closed. The last thing she heard was a slight laugh and a word in Spanish. *Salvaje. Wildcat.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Miguel and Chakotay raced toward Kathryn’s homestead. As they urged the horses to run faster, the men shared a glance of concern.

When they arrived to her homestead, they found Voyager tied to tree and a raging fire in the field behind the house. Chakotay dismounted from his horse and raced into the house calling for Kathryn. Miguel ran toward the trough to retrieve a bucket of water to fight the blaze. As he exited the side of the house, Chakotay confirmed what both men already knew.

Kathryn was gone.

Chakotay grabbed another bucket and began to help his cousin fight the blaze. Unexpectedly, he looked up to see Tom, Rio, and Harry running toward him. Rio looked to him with hopeful eyes but Chakotay shook his head no. His friend squared her shoulders and stepped forward to help the men fight the fire.

Thirty minutes later and the fire still raged. It was getting closer to the house now. Rio wiped her forehead with the bandanna that was tied in front of her mouth and nose.

“Tayo, it’s no use. We should salvage what we can of her things before the fire reaches the house. Tom, Harry, Miguel keep that blaze away from the house as long as you can. We’ve already wet the down the outside, so that along with your efforts should buy us some time,” Rio instructed, “Tayo, help me,” she pleaded as she grabbed his arm and pulled him into the homestead.

Lantern in hand, Rio and Chakotay entered through the side entrance of the house. She made it only a couple of feet before she gasped in shock. Chakotay hurried to her side, fearful of what he might find.

Scattered through the kitchen and further back toward the front door were bloodstains - substantial bloodstains. There was no way anyone could have survive that much blood loss. Chakotay began to relight the remaining lamps until the entire house was a glow.

Now that they could see, the friends had a better picture of what happened in the house. On the floor were several bloody foot prints, as if someone had come into the house and back out a number of times. Rio called to Chakotay from the rear of the house. As he made his way to her position, he realized he was walking into his wife’s bedroom.
Even here, he could see evidence of blood on the floor and one bloody handprint on the spread across the bed. The handprint could only belong to Kathryn; it was too small to belong to anyone else. Chakotay stepped around to the foot of the bed, as eyed what had caught Rio’s attention, Kathryn’s hope chest.

Rio eyed the hope chest suspiciously, as she called to him again, “Look, Tayo, the lining has been torn, but nothing else seems to be disturbed.”

Chakotay fingered the lining of the lid as he gently peeled the fabric back. He chuckled when he realized there was a hidden compartment behind the fabric. By the looks of it there used to be a dagger and belt of some type affixed to the lid.

He wondered what else the chest hid but it wasn’t his place to search through Kathryn’s belongings.

Rio sensed his struggle and took the decision from his hands.

She began to sift through Kathryn’s hope chest searching for clues of the woman she had come to consider a friend. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the chest. A few quilts, a couple of dresses, hats, and a pair of woman’s boots. When she reached the bottom of the chest one wood plank caught her eye. It seemed soiled, as if it had been handled often over the years. She eyed the small hole in the right hand corner and she smiled.

Rio hooked her finger into the hole and pulled the plank until it came free. To her satisfaction, she found another hidden compartment. She called Chakotay back as she began to search the small space. The first thing she found was a small jewelry box and pouch of money. That wasn’t unexpected everyone hid their jewelry and money to keep thieves from finding them. What caught her by surprise was a pair of sterling silver six shooters with the initials J.W. on the black handgrip. She lifted the heavy holster and passed the guns to Chakotay. The next item she found was a small velvet pouch.

She fingered the pouch in her palm and hesitated for a second, before she opened the small bundle and upended it above her other hand.

A man’s silver pocket watch slipped into her palm. The timepiece was exquisite, the engraved detailing and the polished finished left a tear in her eye.

This was too personal; this watch belonged to someone very dear to Kathryn, for her to have hidden it away. For her to have taken the time to keep it polished and preserved in this manner. It was irrational, but Rio couldn't bring herself to open the timepiece.

As she fingered the pouch, Belle felt something small and round in the bottom of the bag. Turning the pouch inside out she found a small chain with two wedding bands looped like charms on the metal, one large band and one smaller one.
Who did these belong to? Did the rings belong to Kathryn’s parents? Or…. could they belong to Kathryn herself?

A shadow fell over her shoulder as Rio fingered the chain. Chakotay ground his teeth as he spied the wedding bands and the pocket watch in Rio’s lap. This wasn’t the first time he’s seen that pocket watch, nor was it the first time he’d seen the initials J.W. branded on a pair of six shooters.

His vision tinted red as he realized Kathryn’s true identity.

Phoebe hadn’t misspelled her name, for whom better than her sister would know what Kathryn’s real name was. It wasn’t Kathryn Janeway as she led the town, as she’d led him, to believe. It was Kathryn Jane West, widow of the legendary Captain Justin West.

The very captain who had captured him all those years ago, which meant she could only have one reason to keep in constant contact with an Admiral in the Military.

Chakotay was livid. He’d given this woman more than simply his heart. Whether she knew it or not, Kathryn became privy to some very sensitive information. He hadn’t thought twice about introducing her to his friends, sharing with her his travel route or his bed, for that matter.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. He’d been able to glean information from her recently, by keeping her in an aroused haze. Had she done the same to him? Did she even care for him or was he simply a job? He began to wonder if their marriage had truly been an accident. Was that her assignment, to capture and spy on him no matter the cost? What was the phrase -by any means necessary? For all her talk and bluster, she was just a whore after all. Only she’d whored herself for the US Government, rather than Marc Randolph.

Something inside him snapped; as he felt the fuse that was his anger burn white hot. Such anger threatened to consume any shred of love he had towards Kathryn.

Rio rose involuntarily, holding the items to her breast as she stepped back from her friend as she eyed him warily.

She hadn’t seen that look in his eyes for years. He was a smart man; he’d be able to piece the puzzle together just as she had. But the fire that poured from his eyes and the manner in which his nostrils flared and hands fisted, suggested he knew something she did not.

He bared his teeth as he growled in her direction, “Put everything back just the way you found it”, he ordered as he moved to the bureau. Chakotay ripped open the door and pulled out two large carpetbags and a suitcase. He tossed the suitcase and one of the bags on the bed.

“Empty the bureau. Put everything in these two cases, what you can’t fit in them put in the chest. Empty each drawer,” he ordered as he grabbed the remaining carpetbag and left the room.
Although he felt betrayed by his wife’s deception, he couldn’t in good conscious leave her most treasured items to burn. As he moved from room to room, Chakotay grabbed what he could. The silver candlestick holders she loved, her book collection, the quilt he’d bought her as gift, and her lucky coffee cup. Chakotay couldn’t stop the tears that pooled in his eyes as he held the piece of china. She loved this cup, for no other reason than that it was the only surviving piece of china from the wedding set he’d ordered for her. Everything else had arrived shattered and broken. Kathryn had simply smiled and hugged the cup to her chest before kissing her husband and thanking him for thinking of her.

Chakotay wrapped the cup in the silk scarf that he snatched off the living room table. Next, he moved over to her desk and haphazardly emptied each drawer into the bag. He flipped the last drawer over and snatched the hidden letter from its hiding place. His wife still had no idea that he’d found her sister’s letter and better yet, he had no idea if she had even responded.

Miguel burst into the house, “We gotta go. We bought as much time as we could.”

Suddenly, they could hear glass breaking and then Rio screaming. The men ran toward her position and stopped in shock as they saw her. Somehow the lantern she’d been using had shattered and caught fire in the bedroom. Quickly, the men used the bedspread in an attempt to smother the flames that licked up the wall.

“Yes! Get the chest!” She ordered as she picked up the carpetbag and suitcase.

Rio led the men out of the bedroom to the living room. She stopped in shock. The room had been upended. She looked back at Chakotay with tears in her eyes. He had done this. In his fit of rage, he had destroyed the front rooms. Rio then spied the other carpetbag that Chakotay had taken with him and she grabbed it as she ran out the front door.

Chakotay and Miguel were right behind her when they heard a small explosion. They each turned to look in shock as the barn splintered and crashed to the ground.

“Tom!!” Rio screamed as she dropped the bags and ran toward the burning structure.

After setting the trunk down heavily, Miguel and Chakotay also ran toward Tom and Harry’s last known position.

“What the hell? Are you hurt?” Rio asked as she helped Tom to his feet.

“Amo...” Tom coughed as he leaned heavily onto her.

Rio snatched her eyes up to Chakotay before she glanced worriedly at the house. If Kathryn kept firearms in the barn, surely she would have a hidden stash in the house. Wait! She remembered a conversation she and Kathryn had about this topic. The older woman had asked what the best place was for hiding weapons outside of the house.
“The porch! Chakotay, check the porch!” Rio stated frantically as she held Tom.

“What?” Chakotay asked belatedly as he gazed as the burning barn.

“Tayo, we won’t stand a chance if the house blows up too. Is there a crawl space under the porch?” she asked.

“I’ll check it,” Miguel offered as he ran towards the front of the house.

There was another small explosion from the direction of the barn. The sound snapped Chakotay out of his daze and he stepped forward to check on Harry. The younger man said that he was fine and urged Chakotay to go help Miguel.

Rio, Tom and Harry rounded the side of the house just as Miguel handed Chakotay the last of the weapons they’d found beneath the porch.

“We have to go! The back of the house has caught fire,” informed Harry, “We were able to save her wagon before the barn blew.”

“Good work, Harry,” Chakotay offered as he clapped the young man on the shoulder.

“All right everyone let’s get the wagon hitched and loaded up,” Chakotay ordered as he watched the homestead burn.

“We gotta stay, be sure the fire don’t spread any further, Chief,” Tom reminded.

“I know, but I want us ready to move once it’s burned itself out,” the big man stated. “It’s late; hopefully no one saw the smoke.”

It was the early morning hours before the final vapors of smoke and ash settled over the destroyed homestead. Indeed due to the late hour, no one else rode out to Kathryn's home. Chakotay stomped through the blackened remains of the house, allowing his anger and fear to build. He was angry with Kathryn for lying to him, every time he looked up it seemed she was deceiving him.

He closed his eyes against the scorched wood and melted glass, before he looked out to the field behind were the house had stood. He felt his anger burn hotter than his fear as he gazed at the charred remains of his alto ego. The insignia mocked him and then dared him to do something about it. He felt his anger engulf him as he turned to walk back toward his horse.

“Mount up!” He ordered, “Harry, Rio, I want you to go back to town. Act as if nothing is out of the ordinary. I don’t need a posse riding wild right now. Keep a look out for anyone that appears to be military, make sure the girls keep them entertained until we find her. And if that doesn’t work find Vince and have him keep the men hidden in town. Miguel and Tom will come with me. We’ll get the
supplies we need from the hacienda and then head out,” he stated, as he kicked the sides of Venganza and galloped towards his own secret.

Chakotay swallowed as he, Tom, and Miguel headed towards his hacienda. Yes, Kathryn had deceived him but he was no better. While he had shared some aspects of his business with his wife, Chakotay had not told her everything. Kathryn had no idea that he owned a hacienda hidden in the countryside. She had no idea that his band was much larger than the forty men he led her to believe. And his wife had no way of knowing that most of his 'business' trips weren't completely on the up and up.

He hung his head; this was no way to build a marriage. When he got Kathryn back and it was when – in his mind - not if, they were going to have a long discussion.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pain!

That was the sensation that dragged Kathryn back towards consciousness.

Her entire body hummed in agony. Slowly she took inventory of her pain. Her head throbbed and her neck was extremely sore, as were her arms and shoulders. In fact, it was the shooting pains in her shoulders that woke her.

Now she recognized the sensation of being hot; hot and sticky.

When she attempted to part her cracked lips, she added thirst to the list. Hesitantly, she pried her eyes open.

As her vision cleared, she found herself staring at her bare feet. With a concentrated effort, Kathryn lifted her bowed head to an upright position.

In front of her, a few feet away, sat a small pool of water. To her left and right was barren earth. She rested her aching head against her arm for moment. The effort to hold her head upright was almost too much to handle in the stifling heat.

She squinted against the harsh light, as she gazed up. She blinked a few times in an attempt to focus her vision. When the fuzzy images in front of her merged into one clear picture, she saw what appeared to be rawhide bindings around her wrists. Kathryn eyed the rawhide wearily before she closed her eyes and rested her head against her outstretched arm.

Beyond her control, a single tear leaked down the side of her cheek. Her head hurt like something out of this world, the ligaments in her arms screamed in pain as she felt the rawhide shrink further
drawing her arms up and out. She whimpered at the new onslaught of white-hot pain in her shoulders. Despite the fact that she had no way of knowing how long she’d been bound and left to die in the desert, and thus no way of knowing when she last ate, Kathryn felt nauseous.

What she did know, was that she couldn’t afford to waste water crying. She shored up the tears welling in her eyes and focused her energy on surviving.

Her thoughts wandered to the men who had abducted her.

The first clear memory was something biting her neck and then blackness. It must have been a crude tranquilizer of some sort.

The next memory was being tied to a chair in a dark room and forced to drink a foul tasting tea.

Her abductors had appeared in the darkness, grabbed her hair and yanked her head back. When she opened her mouth to cry out in pain she’d found herself drowning under the most bitter substance she’d ever tasted. Someone forced her jaw to remain open as the putrid liquid slid down her throat; some of it going down the wrong way before it fill her mouth and ran down the sides her face.

They must’ve of seen that she could swallow any more but the vile substance kept coming. The liquid poured over her face, slid up her nostrils and burned her eyes. She estimated that she must’ve eventually swallowed at least a gallon of liquid against her will.

They left her alone after that. For how long she couldn’t be sure but then she began to see images; images that in no way could be real. Her senses picked up on sounds and smells that she had left nearly three years ago and in some instances five years ago.

Amidst the swirling images in front of her eyes a face appeared. Cassius loomed in front of her with a feral grin set to his thin lips. He reached to touch her face but she jerked her head to the side. Instantly, pain exploded in the back of her head. Cassius laughed and told her that he would advise against any sudden movements.

Kathryn’s head reeled as the images swam amongst a myriad of color and sound. She was defenseless to stop the unwanted caresses of her captor.

As he circled behind her, she felt his hands rest heavily on her bare shoulders. He stayed that way a moment, just caressing her shoulders and then his hand slipped lower to cup her breast beneath her tattered chemise. His other hand slid even lower to slip between her spread thighs, rubbing rhythmically as he leaned forward to kiss and suck her neck.

In Kathryn’s drugged state of mind, it wasn’t Cassius touching her, learning the weight of her breast and fondling her womanhood. It was Justin’s face she saw as her head lolled back and her hips undulated.

Justin’s face swam before her eyes. She blinked and Chakotay leaned down to claim her lips in a possessive kiss as he caressed her roughly.
Unexpectedly, an orgasm hit her of the likes she’d never endured as he pinched her swollen nub. The orgasmic pleasure boarded on pain as it ripped through her like a serrated blade. It was never-ending, waves upon waves of pleasure and then ... without warning searing white-hot pain rippled over every nerve ending in her body.

The all consuming burning and splicing of her nerves forced a blood-curdling scream past her lips. As she screamed she felt hands fondle and violate her most private of places. Kathryn opened her mouth to scream again and felt something hard and thick shoved down her throat.

Thick, vile liquid poured down the back of her throat as she thrashed her head from side to side. After an eternity, the hands released her and she slumped wearily in the chair. She felt someone thread their fingers in her hair before yanking her head back.

And then the questions began.

Shouts asking, “What is your true name?” “Who is Justin?” “Who sent you?” “How much do you know?” “Tell me what you know?!” “Where is the gold?!” “What is he planning?” “Is the army coming?” “What secrets have you told?” “What’s the next heist?” “Tell me, whore, what is he planning?!” “Does, Chakotay know about me?” “What have you told him?”

Kathryn began to talk. She talked for what felt like hours. She had no way of knowing what spilled from her lips. At some point, she realized that they were asking questions and to her horror, she was actually answering.

She stopped talking, despite how difficult the action was.

Someone backhanded her when she remained silent.

She heard someone say 'give her another dose; this drivel is useless to me. I need to know what that Mexicano has planned.’

Someone else stuttered, 'Cassius another dose could kill her.’

‘I don’t care; she’ll be dead by the time I’m through with her anyway. He killed my woman, it’s only right that I kill his. Give her another dose!’

The sun mercilessly beat down on the three men as they trekked across the scorched earth of the desert. They’d been searching day and night for four days now and there was still no sign of Kathryn Janeway.

Tom wiped his brow with the back of his hand as he looked across the vista with bleary eyes. He was tired. They were all tired. He called for the search party to stop a moment to rest. Miguel and Chakotay rode up to either side of him as the men halted their search.
Miguel watched his cousin warily. He knew his cousin was tired by the low set of his shoulders, but what worried him was the look in Chakotay's eyes. Miguel knew what Chakotay was capable of when his anger was aroused, and Chakotay was way past simply being angry.

Chakotay's jaw was rigid. Every now and then, he seemed to snarl at some hidden memory or thought. His knuckles were white from the pressure he exerted to grip the horn of the saddle. And his eyes, Miguel couldn't even bare to look at his eyes any longer. He knew at this moment that it wasn't his cousin riding with him.

No. The man that rode with him this day and the previous days was a man he'd not seen in over ten years. This man knew nothing about love, only death. And today he was out for blood, he thirsted for it. The only time Miguel ever witnessed a thirst this unquenchable, was when they found their family slaughtered and the village burned to the ground all those years ago, the beginning of El Diablo.

As Tom lowered the canteen from his lips, he spied what looked like a small oasis a few feet to his left.

"Hey! Up ahead, we can water the horses," he suggested, nodding toward the small body of water.

Chakotay and Tom dismounted and each led their horse over to the small watering hole. Miguel dismounted and walked a distance in the opposite direction, citing he needed to handle some business.

Miguel's whispered exclamation “Madre de Dios” alerted Tom that they were not alone at the oasis.

Tom and Chakotay turned and jogged over to where Miguel stood with tears in his eyes.

There before them hung, Kathryn Janeway.

She was suspended between two trees, her arms stretched in opposite directions to either tree beside her. Her blooded wrists were secured by rawhide bindings, which they knew at one time, would have been soaked in water. As the sun warmed the rawhide and the water evaporated, the bindings would've have shrunk and further stretched her arms apart.

Her clothes....the cotton slip she wore was torn and ripped to such a degree, that she looked as if she'd fought off a personal attack. Not merely a physical attack but a sexual one as well. Only the barest of threads kept the article of clothing from slipping off her body. The hem was ripped all the way up to her hip, allowing them a clear picture of the bruises that littered her legs. Her bare feet were blistered and scraped.

It seemed her entire body was mottled with bruises, scraps, and dried blood.

Kathryn’s auburn head hung limply, as a slight breeze danced through the loosened strands of her
Despite the anger and betrayal that simmered in his gut, Chakotay’s eyes soften at the sight of her. It tore at his heart to see the woman he loved in such a tortured state. But then, the side of him that had been made fool because of this woman reared its ugly head. He ordered her to be cut down and watched as Miguel and Tom did so with care.

Regardless of whatever went on between Kate and the big man, Tom knew Chakotay loved this woman. And he knew how he’d feel it were Rio they’d found in this condition.

With care, he and Miguel lowered Kathryn to the ground, unbound her wrists and moved her hair out of her face. Her beautiful face was littered in bruises, as if someone had backhanded her across the cheek. Upon closer inspection, Tom spied what appeared to be finger shaped bruises around her neck.

Miguel ripped a piece of Kathryn’s tattered slip and dipped the material into the water, before he gently touched the moist fabric to her dry, cracked lips. He repeated this action several times before he lifted her head so that Tom could place the canteen to her mouth. Kathryn was limp in his arms; she offered so response as they slowly tried to re-hydrate her body.

When they deemed they’d given her enough water the men gently tended her wounds. Her left temple was caked with dried blood and the damage to her wrists was extreme. Tom inspected her small hands and was shocked to see evidence that she’d punched someone. Tom lifted the edge of her camisole, despite the growl he heard Chakotay emit. She’d been kicked or punched in her side based on the bruising he could see across her ribs. As his eyes traveled the length of her small frame he noticed what appeared to be finger sized bruises on her thighs. He hung his head, that usually only meant one thing.

In the time the two men took to tend to Kathryn, Chakotay had not come near them. He knew his cousin and friend worried what he had in store for Kathryn.

And they were right to worry.

El Diablo had a score to settle with the US Marshal’s and here his wife was a spy for that very organization.

In the one moment he spared to look in her direction, Chakotay saw evidence that his love had put up one hell of a fight. He smiled slightly at that thought; she was definitely a wildcat at heart. Her bruised knuckles and blood-crusted fingernails told him that she’d fought her attackers hand to hand at one point. Silently, he thanked Miguel and Tom for being so gentle with her.

As Miguel lifted her limp body in his arms, Chakotay allowed his anger to melt away.

“Bring her to me,” he ordered softly, as he mounted his horse.
Miguel carried her slight weight over to Chakotay and helped him to position her across his lap in the saddle. He placed one arm over Chakotay’s shoulder and folded her other arm across her waist. Miguel gently lifted her head to rest against his cousin’s shoulder. If not for her pallor, Miguel would have thought her to be asleep in his cousin’s arms.

The men mounted their horses and prepared for the long journey back to Chakotay’s hacienda.

As they rode across the desert, Chakotay couldn’t help but gaze down at Kathryn from time to time. He couldn’t return her to Loveless, not in this condition. Word would surely get back to the solider at the saloon and the man would wire for a sheriff in the nearby county, if he hadn’t already. Chakotay didn’t want the authorities anywhere near Loveless until he could figure out a plan to keep his friends and Kathryn safe from the stigma of his alto ego.

By now, the others would have pieced together the truth. There were a large number of hardened criminals in his band that he barely had control over. If any of these men figured out that Kathryn was working for the government...

The circumstances would demand attention, more so the men would demand retribution. They would demand that he make an example out of her; that he break her. And for a woman of her caliber, of her spirit, there was only one way to do that.

Chakotay clutched her to him.

He could never allow that to happen to Kathryn.

He would slit her throat first.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rio paced worriedly as she waited for the men to return. It had been eight days since Kate’s abduction and she worried what it all meant.

During the last eight days, Rio kept in constant contact with, Preston, her friend back east. She’d sent him wires requesting to know anything he knew about a woman named Kathryn Jane West. As a result, she learned quite a bit about the mysterious Lady of Loveless.

*Her Christian name was Kathryn Jane O’Connell. She married Captain Justin West when she was twenty-three. The couple eventually settled in Maryland where Captain West was recruited as a Special US Deputy Marshal.*

*Preston reported that although it wasn’t commonly known, Kathryn was pivotal in assisting Justin apprehend*
outlaws, apparently her strategic genius extended beyond the game of chess.

Preston also shared the little known story of how Kathryn came to be working undercover as a US Marshal. In fact, she was the first and currently only woman appointed to the position.

Captain West’s commanding officer, at the time was a man named Admiral William Patterson. Admiral Patterson boasted that Justin West was the quickest hand in all of Maryland, however Justin refuted the claim. The Admiral couldn’t fathom anyone quicker than Justin and demanded to know why this man was not a part of the Deputy Marshal’s. Meant merely as fun, Justin wagered that if he drew against the person and lost, then Admiral Patterson would be duty bound to initiate the person as an honorary US Marshal.

The Admiral agreed and ordered that Justin bring the man back to his house the next day. The following evening, Justin returned with a man of small stature. The challenge was to shoot the flame off a candle for twenty consecutive shots. The Admiral chose a remote area on his property to set up two rows of twenty candles. Justin introduced his friend as ‘Quickdraw’ and the two began to prime their six shooters, each one assigned four pistols apiece.

The Admiral called for each man to ready themselves, take aim and fire.

Quickdraw beat Justin by a full twenty seconds. Patterson was beyond impressed and reached into his pocket for a Federal US Marshal Badge, he pinned the badge to Quickdraw’s lapel before Justin could stop him. Captain West reminded the Admiral that it was only to be an honorary position, nothing official.

Admiral Patterson waved the Captain’s concern and thrust his hand forward to shake hands with the young lad named Quickdraw. The Admiral was further impressed when Quickdraw returned a firm handshake, obviously not easily intimated by the Admiral.

William Patterson demanded that Captain West provide a proper introduction. Patterson was reportedly astonished when Justin said, “May I present my wife, Kathryn West, Sir.”

Reportedly, after his initial surprise, Patterson let out a loud rumbling belly laugh. Ushered the couple into the house and called for his servants to bring drinks and cigars to the sitting room. It was a test really, to see if Kathryn could hold her own. And she did. She smoked and drank with the men well into the morning hours. It was during this time that Justin confided in his CO that Kathryn was the genius beyond their many successes.

Upon hearing this news, Patterson informed that he wanted to employ Kathryn’s services officially. So that night in the home of Admiral William Patterson, Kathryn West was appointed as the first female US Federal Marshal. Her employ was kept secret from the men under Justin’s command, but not from the President. In fact, it was Kathryn’s idea that the President employ trained marksmen, and expand an entourage for his personal safety, which the President later dubbed the Secret Service.

Preston informed that Captain West had been the one responsible for apprehending El Diablo five years ago but the outlaw managed to escape. The rumor around Washington was that the extraction of El Diablo was actually the brain child of one Kathryn West, not her husband. The surviving members of Captain West’s
team returned to Maryland to present Kathryn his wedding band, pocket watch and six shooters. Reportedly, one of the survivors informed her that her husband had been shot point blank while he was unarmed by the evil El Diablo. The men, who visited her that day, reported that Kathryn West remained stoic as the Marshal’s shared her husband’s last hours with her.

In the years to follow the outlaw, El Diablo continued to terrorize the residents of New Mexico, Arizona and Northern Mexico. As a result, a new tactic was developed to bring the outlaw to justice. In 1875 under secret employ as a US Federal Marshal, Kathryn West was sent undercover to observe suspected dealings El Diablo had in a town called Loveless, New Mexico. The government had intelligence reports suggesting the there was an undercover criminal ring in Loveless and nearby Drexel Ridge; they suspected EL Diablo was the ring leader.

Rio cast her eyes toward the horizon and squinted as the setting sun blurred her vision.

She knew that Chakotay hadn’t shot Captain West; she also knew that he wasn’t the cold-blooded killer the newspapers made him out to be. He only killed when it was warranted.

And Kathryn...she hadn’t known who Chakotay really was when they married, in fact she hadn’t known until a couple months ago. Rio couldn’t believe the woman she’d come to consider a close friend would hand them all over to the authorities. Something else was going on.

Chakotay wasn’t surprised to see Rio waiting for him as he rode into the courtyard of his hacienda. Night had fallen but his eyes spotted her silhouette in the darkness.

Her sharp ears must’ve detected his approach, “Tayo! Thank God,” she exclaimed softly.

Chakotay didn’t answer her as he dismounted from Venganza. He looked down at the woman in his arms and closed his eyes in sorrow.

The entire ride back she had not once stirred and he longed to see her eyes.

“Madre de Dios! What the hell happened to her?” Rio, cried as Chakotay brought Kathryn’s bruised and limp form into the light.

Chakotay carried Kathryn through the main house and toward his personal sleeping quarters while Rio ran ahead to open the door for him. Chakotay carried Kathryn over to his bed and laid her on the soft surface, before placing a hand on her forehead.

“I need someone to ride to town and get the Doc,” he stated wearily.

“No problem. Did Tom and Miguel come back with you?” She inquired as she moved toward the door.
“Yes. Tom is speaking with the crew we have housed in the mountains and Miguel is speaking with those in the desert. I want to know who helped Cassius. He couldn’t have pulled this off alone. If we know who’s been missing or who was missing, for last six days at least, maybe we can piece together a pattern,” he suggested.

“All right, I’ll ride back and get the Doc,” Rio offered as she turned toward the door.

“No. I want you here. Kathryn’s never been here and I don’t want her startled when she wakes up in a strange place. Send Vince and Rollins,” he ordered.

“Tayo... the only Rollins I know is Michael Rollins,” she hinted “And he works for Marc...”

“No. He works for me. I put him on Kathryn’s security detail at the Saloon. I wanted someone I could trust to watch her back on the inside,” he informed

“I...I never knew he was on your payroll,” she stated.

“You weren’t supposed to,” he stated simply.

Doctor Louis Zimmerman shook his head sadly, as he exited Alejandro Chakotay’s bedroom.

“Doc...” Chakotay and Rio asked simultaneously as the Doctor appeared in the hallway.

Doctor Zimmerman held his hand in front of him to stop the battery of questions that were sure to come his way.

“At the moment I believe she’s stable,” he watched Rio exhale a breath of relief and turned to Chakotay’s penetrating gaze.

“But...” the big man hinted as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“But she has a long way to go. She suffered a severe blow to the head and is unconscious at the moment,” the doctor hedged.

“Doc, just give it to me straight. All of it,” Chakotay ordered.

“Like I said, she suffered a severe blow. I won’t know if there’s any brain damage until she wakes up. There’s a lot I won’t know until that time. The brain is one of the organs we still know so little about.

“There is evidence that she fought her abductors hand to hand at one time. There’s bruising around her knuckles and blood caked under her fingernails. There’s evidence of blood splattered across her torso and forearm. There is also a small puncture wound on her neck, as if she’d been stuck with a
hypodermic needle of some sort.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, there is also bruising on her face. I believe she received several blows across her left cheek. In addition, there are finger sized bruises around her neck; I believe someone attempted to strangle her at one point,” the doctor paused, unsure of how much of his patient’s medical condition he should release.


“I really shouldn’t be sharing this with you, doctor-patient confidentiality and all -”

“Would you kindly tell me my wife’s condition,” Chakotay growled angrily as he clenched his fists.

“Doc, please. How else are we to know how to help her?” Rio reasoned, as she placed a placating hand on Chakotay’s forearm.

Doctor Zimmerman rubbed his fingertips across his balding scalp for a moment before he made his decision.

The doctor sighed heavily before he spoke. “I found more finger sized bruises on her body. She ... I believe she was molested,” the doctor stated quietly.

With a low reverberating roar, Chakotay howled his outrage, as he cleared a low table of its decorative items with the back of his forearm.

Rio jumped, startled by his outburst, but not surprised by his anger.

Chakotay steadied himself with his palms flat against the now empty tabletop. He bowed his head and pushed back from the table a bit, as he breathed harshly through his nostrils.

Rio stepped forward to address the doctor, “Is there more?” She asked.

“I found no evidence of rape.” The Doctor allowed the words to sink in before he continued. “I also believe she was drugged. Her pupil reaction time is extremely sluggish. I’ve no way of knowing what she was given, how much was administered or in what manner. I did not find any additional puncture wounds on her arms, hands or feet. Therefore, I assume she was forced to ingest whatever drug was given to her. Her feet and lower legs are bruised and scraped. I believe she was dragged at least once. I’ve cleaned all her cuts and wounds. The rest is up to her,” the doctor provided.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll see you out,” Rio instructed as she walked the doctor down the hall.

When she returned to Chakotay’s bedroom, she found him kneeling beside the bed with his head pillowed against Kathryn’s abdomen. She couldn’t hear what he was saying but his lips were definitely in motion.
“Tayo?” Rio asked softly as she slid her hand up to rest on his hunched shoulders.

“God, Bella. She should be dead. By all rights she should be dead,” he whispered as he lifted wet eyes to face his friend.

“But she’s not, Tayo. She’s still with us. It will take a little time, but when she’s ready, Kathryn will come back to us - to you,” Rio assured.

“This is my fault. I did this; I brought her into my world and look what happened. She warned me a few weeks back. She was terrified and so sad, she knew this could happen,” he lamented.

“Chakotay, stop.” Rio ordered sternly. “You forget, Tayo, that she has a secret as well. Or don’t you remember what we found in her bedroom,” Rio reminded.

“I haven’t forgotten, Rio. And that’s what makes this even worse. Don’t you see, it is my fault. If I hadn’t been hell bent on avenging my family long after they’d been dead, then Justin would never have set foot in New Mexico, Kathryn wouldn’t have had to endure becoming a widow, and she wouldn’t have had to deceive her family into believing she was dead for the last three years. If I had let her alone instead staking a claim, then she would’ve escaped all this,” he continued to flog himself.

“All right! That's enough! No one is to blame for this attack on her except the men responsible for the action. Got it?!” Rio demanded as she grabbed his chin firmly, “ I can't hear you,” she growled.

“Yeah,” Chakotay shook his head reluctantly.

“Right. Now, I have a story for you. A story of woman and a forbidden love…” Rio shared with Chakotay all she’d learned from Preston regarding Kathryn’s true identity.

Later that night Chakotay climbed into his bed to lie beside Kathryn. He was careful not to jostle her too much as he gently slid his arm under her head and positioned her close to his side.

Silent tears slid down his bronze cheeks for all the pain and loss his love had suffered.

It all made sense now. Her elusiveness whenever he asked about her past or her family, the constant tug of war that shadowed her eyes of late, and the sudden tearful pleading on his birthday. It all made sense.

Chakotay brushed his lips against her temple as he held her tightly.

“He will pay, Kathryn. He will pay for every second you were away from me; for every second you were afraid or in pain,” Chakotay vowed softly.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“She wouldn’t want this,” Rio reminded.

“*She* isn’t here, so it doesn’t matter,” Chakotay declared darkly.

Rio watched her friend as he sharpened the blade of his Bowie knife in a deceptively calm manner.

“Tayo, there’s been enough bloodshed. You can stop this!” She implored.

“Not yet,” he counted stubbornly.

“It’s been three months, you have to let it go,” she pleaded as she knelt before him. “Tayo, let the law~”

“Fuck the law!!” He roared as he launched to a standing position.

“Chakotay!”

“No, Bella. I’ll never have peace if I don’t do this,” he whispered.

“I understand, I really do. But you’re going about it in this manner would pain her, Chakotay. Kathryn would never want this. She wouldn’t want to see this town brought to its knees and more importantly, she wouldn’t want to see you like this. You vowed you’d never take another life! You promised her!” Rio reminded as she watched him hang his head.

“I know,” he whispered.

“You’re going to get yourself killed. Chakotay, she wouldn’t want that,” Rio pleaded for him to reconsider.

Chakotay straightened his posture but kept his back to her, “If that’s the only way to bring my spirit peace, so be it,” he stated numbly, before leaving the house.

“Chakotay! Chakotay!!” She called after him.

“Let him be,” Tom stated softly as he held her from going after their friend.

“Tom, he’s going to get himself killed!” She exclaimed with moist eyes. “Kathryn wouldn’t want this. The Marshal’s are here now, why can’t he let them handle it?”

“You know why, Rio. Had this feud stayed between him and Cassius, that’s one thing, but Cassius did
the unforgivable,” Tom gazed at Chakotay’s retreating form in the twilight.

“And just how do you propose we keep him from getting his head blown off?!?! Those Marshal’s won’t care about another red man being killed! They won’t care that it’s not him they’re after! If he rides off halfcocked it will have all been for nothing,” she fumed angrily as she paced.

“Ms. Torres? Mr. Paris?” a commanding voice interrupted.

The couple turned toward the voice to be greeted by the sight of a broad shouldered, white haired gentleman, dressed in an admiral’s uniform.

“My apologies for intruding, I’m William Patterson, I was hoping to speak with Alejandro Chakotay,” the older man introduced as he offered his hand in greeting.

Tom stepped forward to shake the man’s hand as he informed, “I’m sorry you traveled all this way, sir. Chakotay isn’t here at the moment.”

“Yes, I gathered from your conversation,” Admiral Patterson informed as he clasped his hands behind his back. “I hope you understand that I came as soon as I received your telegram. Regrettably, I fear I am too late. Katie... Kathryn spoke very highly of you, of all of you. I was hoping you could help me end the bloodshed that has erupted in Loveless,” the older man stated as he looked around the charred remains of the Janeway homestead.

“Katie?” Rio inquired.

“Yes,” Admiral Patterson laughed softly as his mind’s eye replayed memories from happier times, “I’ll always think of her as a niece. It doesn’t matter that we weren’t blood, I loved her like my own kin. The first time I called her Katie, she nearly bit my head off. But as the years grew, I believe she came to see it as a term of affection,” the old man recalled.

“Admiral --”

“William, please. I’m not here in an official military capacity at the moment. And I feel as if I’m among family, if I may be so bold?”

“William,” she corrected “We’d love to help you. But our hands are tied in this matter. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do understand, more so than you may be aware. But for the foreseeable future, the President has deemed this area to be under my jurisdiction. I want El Diablo, just as badly as Chakotay does.” he stated.

Rio and Tom shared a discrete look between them, obviously Patterson didn’t know as much as they thought he might.
“Ha!” Rio laughed softly, “Chakotay will deliver more justice in one night than ten years of your courts and tribunals,” she declared as she neared the older man, “just stay out of his way,” she cautioned.

“Oh, I plan to. I’ve seen what the man is capable of when riled,” William stated as he rocked on his heels. “I’ve seen the reports from both sides. I know he’s waging a one-man war against El Diablo. And I know it stems from that lowlife kidnapping Katie. Heaven knows, I’d have done the same in his shoes. I will help him if I can, but this war is spilling into neighboring counties. In the last three months, raids on the railroad have escalated, innocent folks have lost their homes, land, and lives.” he stated passionately.

Tom stepped forward to hold Rio back from letting a scathing comment rip. They didn’t need to be reminded that lives lost had been lost, they knew that first hand.

“Admiral Patterson—” Tom addressed the man, forgoing the previous permission to use his first name.

“I just want to understand Chakotay. Help me to understand him, give me that at least,” he beseeched.

Tom sighed deeply before he spoke, “Kate...Kathryn...she showed Chakotay it was all right to live again, to truly live life again. That with her, he could be safe just being himself. That there was place on this Earth where he was loved, truly loved.”

“And El Diablo took that away?” William asked as he knelt down to retrieve a melted picture frame of Kathryn and Chakotay in happier times.

“He and his gang are gonna wish they’d never touched a hair on her head,” Tom warned ominously. “A man can be an artist...in anything Admiral, be it carpentry, blacksmithing, whatever,” Tom offered as he cleaned his fingernails with a small knife, “It all depends on how good he is at his craft,” he paused dramatically, “Chakotay’s profession is that of a cattle rancher. However, the man’s art is death. And if I know Chakotay, he’s about to paint his masterpiece.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the darkness, he sat silently in wait for his quarry.

Chakotay’s thoughts were a myriad of memories and emotions. He brought to his mind all the tragedies of his life as he lay in the crevice of a rocky outcropping. His eyes burned with unshed tears for the brutal murder of his family; the violation that his mother and sister suffered, and the helplessness that his father and brother surely endured. His heart broke for the other members of his tribe, annihilated merely because they were different. He cried out soundlessly at the thought of his people being slaughtered senselessly in the name of “progress”.

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Until recently, he'd been able to grant the warrior inside of him respite; allowed the revenge hungry beast inside of him to wither and die of starvation, and for the first time in his life, he'd known true peace. And just when he was ready to make a life with his love, the Spirits saw fit to rile the angry warrior in him. He knew no peace now, his peace was gone, would remain gone until this was done. Again, he brought his thoughts to his most recent loss, what he deemed as his greatest - Kathryn.

Chakotay bared his teeth as he growled quietly.

In his mind’s eye, Chakotay saw her beautiful face and radiant smile. He recalled their quiet evenings together, her disastrous attempts at cooking, her passion and zeal for life. And then he saw her battered and bloody. The evidence of his nemesis’ hand’s on her pale skin, marring the flawless canvas of her body. He saw his ladylove as she’d lain in a coma, pale and still as her spirit faded from him.

The angry warrior in him howled at the injustice of it all. In that moment he prayed to the Spirits to give him the strength to be what he once was, and to forgive him for what he was about to become.

Dimly, he became aware of his companion and was thankful for the man’s quiet disposition.

In the darkness Vincent eyed Chakotay worriedly. It had been some time since he’d seen the man this coiled for battle. In recent years Chakotay had learned to fight his battles without allowing his judgment to be clouded by his emotions.

Although, the man next to him was still and deceptively calm, Vincent knew from experience that this was simply the calm before the storm.

“In the church, they to say to forgive,” Vincent offered quietly.

“Forgiveness is between them and God,” Chakotay whispered as he unsheathed his weapon, “it’s my job to arrange the meeting,” he stated simply.

Vincent watched the man beside him grasp a hand full of dusty soil and rub the earth into his palms, before gripping the handle of his Bowie knife.

“On my signal ... unleash hell,” Chakotay growled darkly as he crawled toward the sprawling compound.

As Chakotay neared the compound he noted in the distance the various placements of his men; a glint of metal in the moonlight, a lone wolf call and closer than he realized, a low dove cry.

Miguel.
Chakotay hadn't wanted Miguel to be a part of this; hadn't wanted his cousin to see this side of him again. He'd been firm when he told Miguel to stay behind. In spite of this, Chakotay took comfort in knowing that he had back up.

On silent feet, Chakotay crept closer to the lit window of the structure. He'd counted twelve guards on the outskirts of the facility. Recent reports suggested there were at least twenty men on the grounds; he'd given his band specific targets for each attack party. This left him with the freedom of tracking his nemesis and cutting down any of the enemy that he happened to encounter along the way.

To his left, Chakotay spotted a rugged looking man near the main door he intended to use, Cassius would never expect him to use the front door. Chakotay's lips curled in a menacing smile as he crept up on the man. Before the guard could take his next breath, Chakotay's blade soundlessly sliced through the man's body. The other man made a grunting noise, as Chakotay twisted the knife before he used his boot to slide the dead man's body off the large blade in his hand.

The small fire the guard had aflame would aid Chakotay well in the next phase of his plan. He reached into the small satchel across his back and pulled out several sticks of dynamite and a roll of fuse. He set about tying the fuses and dynamite in bunches of two's before placing them around the front perimeter of the complex.

The lone wolf cry in the distance confirmed that the other guards to the complex had been dispatched by his men. From his previous position on the hillside, Chakotay knew that each of the twelve guards had a small fire burning at their station. He also knew that each of his men carried a satchel like his own. All he had to do was light the fuse of the remaining two sticks of explosive and the entire complex would burn in a matter of minutes.

He'd left explicit instructions that no one was to enter the complex once it was ablaze. However, they were to dispatch any of the enemy seen escaping the inferno.

Chakotay knelt to the ground and whispered a quick prayer to the Spirits. He didn't expect to survive this battle, but he did intend to personally drag Cassius into the gates of Hell. With a determined stance he rose from the ground and lit the fuses to the charges he'd set. As the fuses burned a path away from him, Chakotay ignited the last two sticks of dynamite and carelessly tossed the explosives over his shoulder into the arms house of his enemy, before calmly entering the building.

The quiet night air was shattered by the sudden sounds of an explosion outside. Nonplussed, Chakotay pressed forward in search of his prey. All around him the building burned, fire licked the walls and smoke rolled across the ceiling, blackening his vision in some areas.

“CASSIUS!!!!!!” Chakotay roared in rage.

The smoke worked in Cassius' favor as the man leapt upon Chakotay from an unseen ledge. Both men crashed heavily to the floor rolling for what seemed an eternity until Chakotay finally straddled Cassius, punching the other man in the face repeatedly.
In his mind’s eye, Chakotay saw Kathryn as they’d found her in the desert, and he let the image drive his actions as he pummeled the man beneath him.

Suddenly, Cassius rolled Chakotay off his chest and scampered to his feet in a defensive position. Chakotay found his footing quickly and readied himself for a fight. The Bowie knife glinted dangerously as Chakotay unsheathed the weapon.

“I guess this means the bitch is dead, then?” Cassius taunted as he sneered at Chakotay, “I have to admit you have great taste in women. But then you and I have shared the same woman once before. You never suspected Sezca was used goods?” Cassius laughed as he taunted, “you actually thought she loved you – how touching. Now, Kat – she’s a different case entirely. I can see why you were so taken with the whore.”

“You should’ve left this between us, Cassius. Now you’ve given me no reason to spare your life,” Chakotay growled.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Cassius laughed, “I have to admit your wife was definitely a hellcat,” he taunted as he licked his lips suggestively, “I can still taste her, even after all this time.”

Chakotay knew that man was trying to goad him, and he was doing a hell of job. It took everything in him to continue to circle the other man, instead of charge at him.

“Tell me, Chakotay, did Kat scream for you as she did for me? And that magnificent cunt of hers. Mmmmm .... I shall never forget how greedily she milked my cock. She begged for it like a bitch in heat,” Cassius smiled evilly as he saw his taunt finally hit the mark. Something in Chakotay’s eyes sparked and then he charged forward with a roar.

Just when Chakotay would’ve reached him, Cassius spun out of the way and slammed his elbow into Chakotay’s back. Cassius watched as the big man staggered to ground and then pulled his foot back and kicked the downed man in the ribs.

Chakotay howled in pain as he felt a boot make contact with his side. Quickly, he rolled in the opposite direction and got to his feet. He cursed under his breath for taking the bait Cassius had offered. That trick would only work once; he refused to be goaded like that again.

Chakotay ducked the wide swing the other man threw in his direction. He countered with a punch to Cassius’ jaw and then an upper cut under his chin. Cassius’ head snapped back with a sickening crack as Chakotay rounded on the other man and punched him solidly in the back. The blow landed to Cassius’ kidney and instantly the man was on his knees. Cassius spit blood as he screamed out in pain. Chakotay retrieved his knife and turned back toward his enemy.

Unexpectedly, Cassius dove for a low-lying table. Chakotay knew what the other man had planned and was already two steps ahead of him. While Cassius grabbed the gun strapped to the underside of
the table, Chakotay withdrew a revolver hidden in his boot as he took cover behind a support beam.

Cassius didn’t disappoint as he came up shooting wildly where Chakotay had last stood.

“You’d shoot a man in the back, you coward?!” Chakotay taunted as he fired three shots in Cassius' direction.

“Stand still so I can send you to that hellcat of yours!!” Cassius bellowed as he turned and fired his gun blindly into the thick smoke shrouding the room.

“You missed me!” Chakotay sang tauntingly as he fired back.

The sound of shattering glass, splintering wood, and ricocheting bullets reached Chakotay's ears. The heat of the fire caused sweat to roll down his back in rivulets as the acrid black smoke threatened to choke him. He recognized all of this, just as he recognized that he was now out of ammunition.

“Enough!!!” roared Cassius as his gun jammed, “Let's do this like men! Mano y mano!”

With a war cry worthy of his Mayan and Navajo ancestors, Chakotay gripped the handle of his Bowie knife and leapt upon his nemesis from the shadows of the burning building.

A shot rang out.

Cassius hit his head off the low table as he and Chakotay landed heavily on the ground. The knife was knocked from Chakotay’s hand as he landed and pinned the man beneath him. He swung his arm back and knocked the man solidly across the face, his anger and grief fueled the adrenaline that coursed through his veins, as he rained punch after punch down on the other man.

His fists were a bloody blur as he continued to pummel his nemesis. Chakotay kept punching until he couldn't lift his arms. He coughed raggedly and only now sensed the actual danger he was in as portions of the burning ceiling began to fall to the ground around him.

He became aware of a burning pain in his shoulders and belatedly realized that the Bowie knife hadn’t been knocked out his hand. But rather he’d dropped the weapon as the bullet from Cassius gun ripped through his body. Pain sliced through his shoulder as he rolled off the man beneath him. He groaned as he slowly got to his feet and gripped his shoulder; he howled against the agony that washed over his body. The pain was so distracting that he didn’t register the slight movement behind him. He was exhausted and found that he couldn't breathe properly. He coughed violently against the swirling plume of black smoke that gripped his lungs.

“NO!!!!” A woman's voice screamed.

Out of the corner of his eye Chakotay saw a flash of metal an instant before he felt the blade slice through his injured shoulder.
“AAAHhh!!” Chakotay bellowed in pain as he collapsed to his knees.

BANG!

Dimly, he heard a body hit the floor, and then he felt hands lift him and carry him. He heard someone call his name, as the night air caressed his soot stained face.

He was tired, so very tired.

Chakotay allowed himself to be carried by the fog that settled in his mind. Swirling grey mists tickled his skin as a figure emerged from within the fog. A banner of auburn fanned behind her as she reached for him.

“Kathryn,” he whimpered.

She was dressed in a simple white gown as she called to him with an outstretched hand.

Chakotay ... Chakotay ...

Chakotay smiled as he saw her bathed in starlight, “Kathryn, I knew you’d come to me... I have missed you so. Now, I can have peace... I can finally have some peace,” he murmured as he went to her without hesitation. He smiled contently as blessed unconsciousness swallowed him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“It’s time for you to wake up Chakotay,” his vision of Kathryn instructed.

“No! I won’t leave you, I won’t live without you!” Chakotay refused.

She gazed at him sadly before she spoke, “You will, Chakotay. You will,” she intoned before she slowly faded from sight.

“NOOO!!! KATHRYN!!!” Chakotay jerked awake as he sobbed her name.

“Tayo, it’s alright,” Rio soothed as she gently pushed him to lay back.

Chakotay pushed his fists into his eye sockets as he sobbed.

“Tayo...” Rio sighed.

“You should’ve left me there! It’s what I wanted!” He screamed at her.
“Stop it! Just – stop it! I could never have done that,” she gripped his fists to move them away from his eyes, “You’re too important to us... to me.”

Chakotay ripped his fists from her light grasp and knocked her hands away from him. He was so filled with grief he barely registered the throbbing pain radiating from his shoulder.

“Right. Now that’s it! If I hear you talking like that again, I’ll haul you up to your feet just so I can’t knock you square on your ass, do ya hear!” Rio breathed heavily as her eyes watered.

“Bella--” he looked at her with tortured eyes as she embraced her friend.

“Let it out, Chakotay. You never did allow yourself to grieve. Just let it out,” she instructed soothingly as she held him.

After a while, she realized that he’d exhausted himself again and gently laid him back against the mattress.
When she thought he was comfortable, Rio tiredly slipped out the room. Her heart bled for her friend, he’d had to endure so much for one man. How much more could he take?

Chakotay laughed as he rolled Kathryn beneath him in the grass. He gazed upon her face and fell in love all over again as he stroked her jaw, before he pressed his lips to hers.

Kathryn lifted her small hand to thread through his hair he kissed her, holding him in place as their lips danced together.

“I love you, Kathryn. With my very essence I love you,” he whispered reverently.

“Chakotay...”

Chakotay raised his head to look about them. They were laying in a meadow, tall grasses and wildflowers swayed in the breeze all around them. He could hear the sound of a brook nearby and the song of birds in the trees above.

“Chakotay...”

He lowered his head to look at the woman beneath him. She was beautiful. Her long auburn hair lay fanned beneath her head as her blue eyes called to him. In those eyes, he saw the depth of love she usually kept hidden. She allowed him to finally see all of her.

Slowly he bent his head forward to kiss her. His kisses were soft as they danced across her brow, her eyelids and
down her freckled nose. Chakotay worshiped every inch of her body as he kissed her flesh and caressed her hair.

Kathryn whimpered and pulled him to lie solidly atop her small frame.

“Chakotay ...,” she whispered, he captured her lips in a heated kiss.

Chakotay pushed the straps of her gown down her shoulders until she was bared to him from the waist up. He lowered his head to kiss and lick her neck as his fingers tweaked a cherry nipple. Kathryn gasped beneath him and pushed her breast further into his hand, as his lips caressed the sensitive spot on her neck, just below her earlobe.

He marveled that even in this place her body instinctively responded to his touch.

Kathryn moaned as his mouth engulfed her breast and his fingers circled her clit. She threaded her fingers through his thick raven locks to hold him in place as her hips undulated against his touch. Her breath hitched as he twirled his tongue hypnotically around her puckered nipple.

“Chakotay.” she breathed.

Chakotay focused all his attention on the woman beneath him as he kissed down her stomach. He circled her navel teasingly before he dipped his tongue into the crevice. He smiled as she bucked beneath him in response. He teased her as he kissed her belly before he settled in the cradle of her thighs. Gently he blew a steady stream of air across her heated core, before he leaned forward to kiss and lick her swollen folds.

Her breath hitched as he swirled his tongue around her bundle nerves before his fingertips massaged the same spot. She moaned in pleasure as his mouth and fingers brought her closer to release. Kathryn whimpered and clutched his hair as she thrashed her head from side to side.

Chakotay held her thighs apart as he nuzzled her creamy folds. He flicked his tongue against her clit repeatedly until she bucked against his face. He laved her swollen labia once more before he forced his tongue into the depths of her womanhood. Intently, he forced his face against her heated core until she bucked against him uncontrollably as her orgasm ripped through her.

Like a man starved Chakotay lapped up her essence; he drank greedily of the sweet nectar her body produced for him. Finally, when he had drunk his fill, Chakotay leaned up to capture her lips in passionate kiss.

Kathryn hummed beneath the kiss as she slipped her legs around his hips. She cupped his cheek with one hand as she smoothed the other down the length of his spine. Chakotay licked and suckled her lips until she granted his tongue entrance to dance with her own. His tongue teased and chased hers as the kiss deepened.

Without warning, Kathryn levered their weight and flipped Chakotay onto his back. Stunned, Chakotay could only watch as Kathryn leaned down to kiss him, her hair falling like an auburn curtain around them. He slipped his hands into her hair and held her to him as he kissed her hungrily.
Kathryn eased them out of the kiss. Then she dropped little kisses, on his face, cheeks, and nose. Ever so slowly, she kissed her way back to his mouth; she hovered above him teasing him as she withdrew from his efforts to meld their mouths as one. She revealed a radiant smile before she leaned forward to softly press her lips against his. She continued to kiss him as he wrapped his arm around her back to hold her in place. Kathryn smiled and sucked his lower lip between her teeth, before she nipped him gently and continued to kiss down his chest.

With each kiss she slipped a button loose on his shirt until she was able slide her fingers across his bare chest. Her fingers danced up his sides and over his ribs as he continued to shower kisses across his torso. Her tongue flicked his flat male nipple just before she sucked his chest there. Kathryn’s soft auburn tresses trailed down his chest, as she kissed lower down his torso until she reached his navel while her fingers caressed his manhood through the light fabric of his trousers.

Kathryn lifted her eyes to watch him. She smiled lovingly at the sight of Chakotay with his head thrown back, a look of pleasure on his features as she continued to caress him. Slowly, she allowed her hand to slip beneath the fabric to cup him in her hand. Chakotay moaned as she pumped his length and then spread a bit of his moisture around the tip of his shaft. She heard him whimper as she withdrew her hand and reached for the waistband of his pants. Gently, she peeled the unwanted barrier away from his body.

She allowed her hair to tickle his chest once more as she dropped open-mouthed kisses to his stomach. Her fingers skimmed over his belly and then downward as she ran her tongue down the thin line of hair that trailed from his navel to his crotch. The tip of her tongue slid down the underside of his length, tickling him as she flicked her tongue back and forward. She continued to tease him as she nibbled the side of his length while pumped him in her hand. Kathryn watched as beads of sweat appeared on Chakotay’s upper lip as he clenched his fists at his side.

Without warning, Chakotay felt Kathryn take his entire length into her mouth and down her throat. He groaned as he threaded his fingers in her hair, and held her down on his length as his hips bucked upward. He cried out in pleasure at the feel of her warm velvet mouth surrounding his turgid member. He felt her hands push him back and slowly his arousal-fogged mind allowed his body to follow her silent command. He slowed his pace and followed her lead as she teased him.

Kathryn slowly brought Chakotay’s length out of her throat and began to suck and swirl her tongue around the sensitive tip of his erection. Steadily she increased her pace and rhythm as she stroked him and continued to suck and bob her head up and down his length, her saliva coated his length as her tongue continued to swirl around the head of his hardness.

Chakotay couldn’t control his body, despite the command he issued to remain still, his hands once again wove themselves into her hair; his hips once again bucked against her mouth as he pushed her head down and thrust his member down her throat.

“Ahh!! Kat..Kathryn!” Her name ripped from his throat as he thrust against her mouth in pleasure.

Suddenly, Chakotay yanked her head off his member before he gripped her waist and impaled her womanhood.
with his rigid cock.

“Ohh!!” Kathryn cried out at the unexpected but welcomed intrusion to her body.

His large hands settled on her tiny waist as he guided her to ride him before he leaned forward to capture a nipple between his teeth, while his hand kneaded her other breast. He rolled the pebbled tip between lips before he gently began to suckle her. His free hand slid down her spine to rest on her hip, to hold her in place as he bucked upward. Chakotay’s lips released her nipple with a wet *pop* before he switched to other pebbled peak. He suckled her swollen flesh softly as she rocked against him.

A husky groan ripped from Kathryn’s throat as she threw her head back and languidly ground her pelvis down against his. Slowly Chakotay increased the passion of their coupling as he guided her into a faster pace. Faster and harder, she rode him as he slammed his hips against hers. Kathryn thrust back against him as she ground her hips wantonly in counterpoint to his thrusts.

Chakotay watched fascinated, as she bowed her head and leaned forward to lie against his chest. He savored the feel of her aroused nipples against his chest as her hips gyrated seductively.

“Cha-ko-tay...” she panted in his ear before she sucked his earlobe in her mouth and gently bit down.

He groaned deep in the back of his throat at the sensation, as he pulled her hips hard against him and thrust upward. Chakotay panted as his hands immobilized her while he thrust into her body repeatedly.

“OH!” Kathryn cried out.

Chakotay held her in this position as he pumped into her relentlessly. She was close, just a bit more and he could send them both over the edge. He continued to thrust against her until he felt her inner walls constricting.

Kathryn released a garbled cry of pleasure as her orgasm exploded through her being.

Suddenly, Chakotay rolled them so that Kathryn was beneath him. He kissed her passionately as he pumped his engorged member in and out of her welcoming body. He continued to pump into her feverishly as her inner walls clamped around his manhood in a vise-like grip.

“Love...you” he panted as his release flooded her womb.

He collapsed tiredly atop her as she cradled him between her thighs. Kathryn lifted shaky fingers to caress his face and sweep the damp hair off his forehead.

“I’ll love you, always Cha-ko-tay” she whispered.

Chakotay felt her kiss his eyelids reverently as he rolled off her slightly. Dimly he realized he was going to fall
asleep, here in the only place where he could forever be with Kathryn. He draped a heavy leg over her hip and
cupped her breast in his large hand, as he pulled her closer to his side, before he surrendered to the intoxicating
call of sleep.

“Chakotay,” a woman’s voiced rasped, “wake .... up.”

Chakotay growled in his sleep as he choked the life out of Cassius. The hands of his friends on his
shoulders powerless to stop him

“Puh...lease,” the voice whimpered weakly as Chakotay tighten his grip.

“Chakotay! Stop! It's all right,” someone pleaded.

“You killed her, you don't deserve to live,” Chakotay grunted as he slammed Cassius’ head against the

A scream rent the air and Chakotay jerked his eyes open.

It was dream.

Then why did his knuckles hurt? Dazed he looked down and as if burned by sight beneath him, jumped from the bed. He landed on the floor with a thud as sheets tangled around his hips.

Rio lay coughing and sputtering for breath as her hands rested on her throat. Tom was by her side
trying to make sure that she was okay.

“Chakotay...”

Chakotay didn’t hear his name, he only saw that by his own hand, he’d nearly killed one of his dearest friends.

“Chakotay...”

Hands gripped his shoulder and he hissed in pain. He grabbed the wrist of the person and yanked
them in front of him. With unseeing eyes he gripped the person's wrist and yanked them closer to his

“Chakotay, look at me,” commanded a voice as hands reached for him again.

Chakotay smacked the hands away but the person was persistent. Irritated beyond belief, Chakotay
tackled the person to the floor and forcibly held them there as he bared his teeth in low growl.
“Chakotay…Cha-ko-tay. Look at me, please see me. Please,” the voice pleaded as hands cupped her cheeks.

Slowly the heavy fog that clouded his vision cleared and he could see the room around him. He heard Rio coughing and Tom helping her out of the room. He smelled sweat and blood mingled with… with… jasmine.

“Chakotay, please. Please see me, dear God. Please see me, Chakotay.”

His eyes watered as he saw her frighten face beneath him.

“Kathryn...” he breathed as he leaned forward to kiss her. He kissed her with everything in him and then kissed her as if he'd never see her again.

Belatedly, he realized someone slapped at his chest. Someone whimpered as they pushed against him weakly. He lifted his head and began to smile, until he noticed the blood staining her chest.

“Kathryn!” he called to her in panic as she laid still beneath him with closed eyes.

He felt hands pull him away from her. “NO!” He screamed as he fought to reach her still form, as a door closed separating him from her.

“CHAKOTAY!” Tom slapped him hard across the face repeatedly, “Damn it! Calm down!”

His energy sapped, he raised tired eyes to see Tom before him.

“Chakotay, it ain't hers. The blood, it ain't hers” Tom repeated slowly.

“Not... hers?” Chakotay looked up dazed as he spoke the words.

“Tayo,” Rio breathed. Glad he'd snapped out of what had gripped him, “It's yours. You were hurt, remember?”

“Cassius?” He questioned as he looked at the couple before him.

“He's dead,” Tom assured him.

“Ka..Kathryn? Was it just a dream?” He slurred as his eyes watered.

“Oh, Chakotay,” Rio looked upon him with sorrowful eyes, “We tried to tell you, but you couldn't hear us.”

He looked at her as if he were child and couldn't understand what she was telling him.
“She was only ever...asleep. You thought the coma would kill her. You were so obsessed with Cassius that you missed all the signs of her comin’ around. She woke three nights after you left and she's been waitin' for you to wake up since you got back from the complex,” she explained.

“No... No.... I woke up. I woke up and you were there. No one else,” Chakotay slurred as he dropped his head into his hand.

“Only because Doc made her leave your bedside to rest. You’d been home for three days by then and in all that time, she refused to leave you. She only relented when her own body surrendered to fatigue,” Tom recounted.

“I...I dreamed we... we...,” belatedly he realized that he was only wearing a sheet, “I'm not dressed,” he stated the obvious.

“Yes, well,” Rio smiled “when I came to wake you, you weren't alone. Based on how I found you, I'd say whatever you dreamed last night, wasn't a dream,” she chuckled as he furrowed his brow.

“But that would mean...”

“That Kathryn isn't wearing much more than you are at the moment,” Tom suggested cheekily.

“Bella, I'm so sorry” he apologized as he remembered what he'd done.

“'Tis okay. I'll be fine,” she comforted him as she gripped his hand.

“Kathryn?” he questioned tiredly.

“First, we need to see to you. You've torn your stitches and by the looks of you, you've lost a lot of blood in the process,” she observed as she ran a wet cloth across his shoulder.

“Sssss” he hissed as Rio held the cloth over his wound.

“I bled,” he stated.

“Yeah, you probably tore the stitches late last night. We're lucky, it could've been worse. It was Kathryn who actually called for help. She said that when she woke up she couldn’t move but could feel blood pooling across her chest.” Rio explained as she bandaged his shoulder.

“I need to see her,” he ordered as he stood up and moved to the door of his bedroom.

“Chaaaa--” Tom attempted.

“Tom, please.” he pleaded with a bowed head as he opened the door.
She looked pale in the morning light but he rejoiced in the fact that she was alive.

“Mr. Chakotay, I see you’ve torn your stitches. If you’ll just sit here, I’ll stitch you back up,” instructed Doctor Zimmerman as he pushed Chakotay into the same chair that Kathryn occupied most nights.

Chakotay watched her breathe with feverish eyes. He counted the breaths she took as her chest rose and fell in a gentle manner.

“She’ll be fine,” the doctor assured him, “your ... activities of last evening and then all the commotion this morning exhausted her already limited energy reserve. That woman...” the doctor huffed in an irritated fashion, “there’s no reasoning with her. She does the opposite of whatever I prescribe. I tell her to remain in bed for a week and two days later she's out gallivanting across the countryside, running into burning buildings and such. I tell her to rest and she exhausts herself keeping vigil over you. I tell her no strenuous activity for at least three weeks and ---”

Chakotay grabbed the Doctor’s wrist suddenly, “What do you mean ‘running into burning buildings’?” He questioned darkly.

“I ... I... You have to understand--”

“What the hell did you mean by that, Doc?” Chakotay snarled at the balding man.

“Stop terrorizing the man, Cha-ko-tay,” ordered a tired husky voice.

Chakotay turned his burning gaze from the Doctor to the woman in the bed beside him. He leaned forward, despite the Doctor's protests as he stitched his wound.

“What's he talking about, Kathryn?” He questioned, as he fought to keep from sweeping up her in his arms and never letting go.

But this penchant for placing herself in danger had to be nipped in the bud as far he was concerned.

Kathryn rolled her eyes, “Really, you men are such babies. It's not a big deal,”

“Not a big deal?” He repeated softly.

The doctor felt non-existing hair stand on end by the big man’s quiet tone, “Yes, well...I'll leave you to.. to” he spluttered as he fled the room.

“Not a big deal?” Chakotay repeated again.

“I couldn't lose you, Chakotay,” Kathryn whispered as her breath hitched.
He hung his head and leaned forward to rest his temple against her chest. Kathryn threaded her fingers in his hair before she lifted his face to kiss him. They kissed each other reverently, as if each were the most precious gift.

Chakotay broke the kiss as he climbed into the bed next to her. He caressed her face, shoulders, breasts, and hips before he pulled her against him tightly.

“I'm all right, Chakotay. I'm all right” she reassured him as he kissed her temple. She held him as his body finally surrendered to the emotional and physical exertion that taxed him. Kathryn held him as he drifted to sleep and then silently wept for the trauma he’d endured.

CHAPTER NINETEEN ... three months later

She was tied to the chair again. Her arms were pulled tight behind her and her legs forcibly spread with her ankles tied to the chair legs. Her entire body throbbed in pain and her head felt as if it were about to split open. She could hear heavy breathing and realized she wasn’t alone in the room.

Amidst the swirling images in front of her eyes a face appeared. Cassius loomed in front of her with a feral grin set to his thin lips. He reached to touch her face but she jerked her head to the side. Instantly, pain exploded in the back of her head.

Cassius laughed and told her that he would advise against any sudden movements.

Kathryn’s head reeled as the images swam in a myriad of color and sound. She was defenseless to stop the punishing caresses of her captor. Cassius features reseeded and it was Chakotay who circled behind her. She felt his hands rest heavily on her bare shoulders. He stayed that way a moment, just caressing her shoulders.

“You betrayed me, Kathryn,” he hissed in her ear as his hand slipped lower to cup her breast beneath her tattered chemise. His other hand slid even lower to slip between her spread thighs, rubbing rhythmically as he leaned forward to kiss and suck her neck.

Even in Kathryn’s drugged state of mind, she knew he shouldn’t be treating her this way, groping her as if she were one of Anya’s girls.

“Someone’s enjoying herself,” Chakotay laughed as her hips undulated when he cupped her breast and roughly fondled her womanhood. She could hear several men in the room laughing at his statement.

“Stop it...Chakotay,” Kathryn panted as her body betrayed her.

“Beg, Kathryn,” Chakotay taunted, his men jeered as their hot eyes watched her.

Tears ran down the side of her face as he tipped her head back to kiss her harshly. Kathryn snatched her head to http://nyahsoul.webs.com Published: October 17, 2010 99
the side to escape his lips.

“Beg, Kathryn,” Chakotay demanded as he ripped the front of her chemise and bared her to his men in the room.

“Please, stop” Kathryn pleaded, “I never meant...”

To her utter shame an orgasm hit her of the likes she’d never endured as he pinched her swollen nub. The orgasmic pleasure boarded on pain as it ripped through her like a serrated blade. It was never-ending, waves upon waves of pleasure.

“Here I am about to kill you, have bared you to a room full of my men and you’re wet, Kathryn,” Chakotay taunted as he smeared her essence across her face with the hand that had been between her thighs.

“Where you wet for Cassius as well?” He questioned.

Suddenly, her position shifted. She was no longer tied to the chair, but instead she found herself being held down on a mattress.

Kathryn thrashed against the bed, fighting the hands that held her down. Tears slid down the side of her face as Chakotay straddled her hips and wrapped his hands around her throat.

Panic gripped her as she felt him lean atop her to kiss her.

“No!” She screamed and turned her head away from him.

Chakotay gripped her chin in one hand and turned her back to face him, before he slammed his lips against hers in the same moment that he squeezed her airway shut. Kathryn screamed beneath his harsh kiss as her legs flailed helplessly. After a few moment her struggles began to lessen. Tears slipped down her face at the realization that it wasn’t an enemy torturing her, killing her but her own husband.

Chakotay frantically tried to wake Kathryn from the nightmare that gripped her. He had expected Cassius to visit her in her nightmares. He thought he had been ready for them but what tore at his heart was the fact that it sounded as if she was fighting...him. Not Cassius.

Shaking her and calling her name had not been enough to free her of the nightmare. It wasn’t until Chakotay straddled her thrashing hips, gripped her head between his hands and kissed her for an eternity, did she finally gasp awake.

Never again did he want to see the fright and terror that her eyes reflected.
“NO!!!” Kathryn raged as she bucked beneath Chakotay.

“Kathryn,” Chakotay tried to calm her down.

“Get. Off. Me! Let me go!” Kathryn screamed as she fought to free herself from him.

“No, Kathryn,” Chakotay was determined for her to calm down.

“Please, Chakotay. I’m sorry; I never meant to betray you. Please don’t do this,” she sobbed, “Let me go.”

Hurt beyond measure, Chakotay released her. As soon as his weight lifted from her small frame, Kathryn wrapped a sheet around her body and hugged her knees to her chest, as she held her head in her hands.

Chakotay waited until her breathing returned to normal before he spoke, “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Nothing. It's nothing, I'm fine,” Kathryn lied as a shaky hand smoothed her hair behind her ears.

“It ain’t nothing, Kathryn! You’re scared of me,” Chakotay declared.

Kathryn jumped at the sound of his raised voice, “I’m fine,” she breathed, “It was just a nightmare.”

“Look at me, Kathryn,” Chakotay ordered as he lightly gripped her arm.

Kathryn tensed at his touch and Chakotay felt his hurt manifest into frustration.

“Damn it! You are scared of me. Of me!” Chakotay confirmed, “Not Cassius, of me.”

Chakotay shook his head in disgust as he rose from the bed. The action snapped Kathryn out of her thoughts and she belatedly realized the damage her silence caused. Chakotay slapped her hand away when she reached for him; the action caused frustrated tears to pool in her eyes.

“Cha-ko-tay, come back to bed. Please,” Kathryn requested tiredly.

Chakotay turned back to his wife with hurt in his eyes, “How can I, when you cringe at my touch?”

He asked.

“We have to talk about this, Kathryn. It's been three months. You can't keep this bottled up any longer, it's eating you up,” he stated.

“You're right,” she answered simply.
Chakotay stared at her for long moments before going back to the bed, “Finally,” he sighed.

Kathryn lowered her knees and folded her hands in her lap as she bowed her head. She took a deep breath.

“I – I’ve been having nightmares. And you’re right – they’re about you,” she drew in a strangled breath.

“Except what I’m dreaming is all mixed up. Bits and pieces of it are things that happened when Cassius took me. Some of it never happened at all and the rest happened to someone else,” she relayed cryptically.

“I’m listening,” he encouraged

“I know that it’s not the events that have triggered these dreams, it’s my guilty conscious,” she confessed as she gazed at him.

“Corazón --”

“Let me finish. I betrayed you, Chakotay. I willfully withheld from you my very identity,” Kathryn rasped.

“No. You withheld facts about your past and I did the same to you. What’s important is that we shared our spirits with each other. The love we share isn’t a by product of our association, of our jobs or our past tragedies. It transcends all of that,” Chakotay reminded.

“And I’m betting the nightmares about my strangling you are because you know what happened to Sezca,” he concluded.

Suddenly her eyes met his in fright.

“I’m not proud of what I did then. But I would never do that to you,” he stated as he lovingly cupped her face.

“I love you. You’re my wife, the other half of my soul,” Chakotay implored her to believe him as he searched her eyes, “I could never harm you,” he rasped before kissing her lips.

Kathryn accepted his kiss and felt the tension from the previous weeks seep from her body.

Chakotay felt her relax under his kiss and gathered her in a tight embrace. He kissed her head as he held her small frame to his chest.

“You have to let this guilt you carry go, Corazón,” he whispered, “and I'm not just talking about you working for the government. I’m talking about Justin. I'm sure he'd want you to be happy, Kathryn. If
it were me, I’d want you to live your life; to find love again."

Kathryn leaned back from his embrace, “You’re right,” she whispered, “He made me promise that if anything ever happened to him, that I would grieve but then move on,” she let out a breath.

“Somehow I’d forgotten that promise,” she whispered and wiped away the tear that tried to escape.

“Come on,” Chakotay instructed as he lowered them back to the mattress, “try to rest. We’re due in town later this morning,” he reminded as he spooned behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY – four months later …

“Well, Katie, another job well done,” William Patterson boasted as he hugged his ‘niece’ outside the Mercantile Store.

“I didn’t do anything, Admiral,” Kathryn protested.

“Bullocks!! Why it was you who shot and killed El Diablo!” Admiral Patterson announced.

“Yea, against doctors orders at that,” Tom Paris added, gaining a few laughs from those gathered to see the old man off.

“Had it not been for your weekly reports, the office would never have found the man. I placed a commendation in record, Katie. And with El Diablo and his gang disbanded, the President himself has invited you to the upcoming Governors Ball,” William gushed.

“Admiral --” Kathryn tried to interject.

“Not to mention the medal that’s he’s preparing. You must come, Katie! I’ll not be held to Gretchen’s wrath if her eldest child isn’t present as promised,” he continued.

“Sir --”

“Your mother and sister are beside themselves with excitement. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if they found a way to book the next train west.” Admiral Patterson beamed.

“Uncle William!” Kathryn finally gained the man’s attention, “I appreciate all of this but it isn’t necessary,”

She held her hand to stop the older man from interjecting, “I wasn’t alone in this, Admiral. My husband and several of our closest friends all helped to bring peace back to region.”

“Of course my dear, I haven’t forgotten them. There are medals of honor awaiting each of them as
well,” Admiral Patterson assured.

“Sir --”

“What my lovely wife, is trying to say, Admiral. Is that we’re honored. We’re just glad the unrest in the region is over. That we’re finally free of El Diablo’s wrath,” Chakotay interrupted, ignoring the death glare his wife sent his way, as he shook hands with the older gentlemen.

“Tell Gretchen she can expect to see both of us there,” Chakotay informed, much to his wife’s surprise.

“Excellent! Well, I’m off, Katie. That stagecoach driver isn’t going to wait much longer,” he stated as he hugged her again, “I am so very proud of you, Kathryn. And I know Justin would approve of your choice,” he reassured quietly as he kissed her cheek.

Together with Tom and Rio, Harry and Stadi, Miguel, Vincent and Chakotay, Kathryn waved good bye as the stagecoach rambled out of town.

When at last the dust settled and the coach turned the bend out of town, Kathryn pivoted and turned to face Chakotay, hands on her hips.

“Tell Gretchen, she can expect to see both of us?” she questioned, “Since when are you on a first name basis with my mother?” she asked incredulously.

Chakotay ignored her feigned ire as he pulled her hips against his own, “Since I promised her a grandchild by the time she visits next Spring,” Chakotay revealed.

“Why yo-- mmphh,” Chakotay’s kiss silenced her protest as Tom’s high pitched wolf whistle pierced the air.

Fin.