

Snow Falling Softly

Chapter 1

2370

Dr. Beverly Crusher stared at the terminal screen long after the Federation symbol had faded to black. Nana had died. She'd known it was coming, but Nana hadn't yet reached one hundred twenty five, considered the young end of when Howards tended to die. Allie had sent her messages when Nana had taken ill, but the *Enterprise* had been too far away to make it back to Caldos in time. The illness had taken her quickly. Andrew's message told her that Nana would be placed in stasis so that Beverly could attend the funeral, and perhaps Wesley if he could get away from the Academy. Her son's reply had been short and to the point: *Exams. Send my best.* End of transmission.

Wesley, Allie, Andrew, and little Gracie, all that was left of her family. Only Allie and Andrew would be there with her to say goodbye, and Gracie, not entirely understanding what was going on, only that her grandmother was gone. Nana had taken care of the twins for all of their sixteen years and Gracie for all four of her, Beverly and Wesley their cousins who flitted the skies while they stayed on Caldos.

Or so they were told. So everyone was told, with Nana and Beverly holding the truth tight to their hearts. As the screen blinked off, Beverly remembered the past that was running full force to catch up with her present.

2354

The snow fell outside. Beverly sat on the end of Nana's couch, watching the dying embers in the fireplace pop and sizzle into darkness. *Was it snowing on Earth, where Wesley was?* The thought floated into her mind before she realized she'd been thinking of her son. And the thought of her son brought forth images of her dead husband. *It was snowing when Jack died.* She had been outside with Wes, making snow angels in the backyard. They clattered inside, stomping off snowy boots, peeling off soaking wet mittens and hats, picking up mugs of hot chocolate from the replicator, her barely four year old son dropping marshmallow after marshmallow into his. She settled him into an armchair with a quilt that had been sent from Nana and stoked up a fire. Aside from starships, she had never lived in a home without a fireplace.

Crossing the living room back to the kitchen for her own mug, she'd seen the light blinking on the terminal. In the days to come, she often thought if she hadn't read the message, then perhaps it wouldn't have happened. But life doesn't work that way, only dreams, and never in nightmares. You could only scare yourself awake, yet by then, the nightmare had already happened.

A touch on her shoulder jolted her out of her daydream. "What were you thinking?" Nana asked, settling herself on the other end of the couch.

The words came to her mouth, unbidden. "It was snowing when Jack died."

“They planned this, you know. The weather modification net.”

“We were making snow angels.”

“They do this every year, at Christmastime, a reminder of old Scotland and their yearly holidays.”

“It will be snowing when...” Beverly stopped. A pocket of pine sap burst in the flames, filling the silence.

Nana’s hand reached out for hers, the older woman’s fingers squeezing hers in reassurance immediately felt. “When your twins will be born. It’ll be soon, I can tell you that. And then you can go back to Earth, and back to Wes, and bury yourself in your work so you can forget.”

Beverly bit her bottom lip in her effort not to cry. “Some things I don’t want to forget.”

The hand squeezed again. Warm wisdom flowed from Felisa’s touch. “You won’t forget the good things. There are things, Beverly, that haunt you. They fall around you, the soft flakes of memory, and refuse to melt and let you go on. And now you’ll associate snow with everything that has happened in this year. I’m afraid you won’t be able to enjoy it again, to throw snowballs with your children, to drop into the cold blanket of winter and carve snow angels out of it like you did as a child.”

“I won’t be able to make snow angels with my *children*,” Beverly said. “Only Wes, my child. These two won’t know me as their mother, they’ll never know their father, they’ll have you, as their grandmother, Wes and me, as their cousins. And how can this be carried off? What about the people in the village? Won’t they figure it out?”

“No one has seen you in these past months. None of them know how many children I had, only that I’ve had at least one, your father Paul. How could they deny that these two wouldn’t be my grandchildren?”

“Records, they could search through—.”

“They wouldn’t. Our family seems cursed in some way, they feel. Your parents dying and you having to be raised by your grandmother. They won’t think twice with these two. I know it. We’ve been through these arguments often enough.” Nana paused. “You want to take them with you, don’t you?”

“What I want and what has to happen are two entirely different things.” Beverly bit her lip harder.

“You haven’t told their father.”

“Nana, it shouldn’t have happened at all. We made a mistake, we’ve betrayed Jack, betrayed Wes, betrayed ourselves. We haven’t spoken since and we can’t,

because if we do, we have to acknowledge something of what happened. It needed to be forgotten.”

“And you can’t.”

Beverly shook her head. “Not anymore. Not when I found out...and I couldn’t terminate. I couldn’t, even though it would’ve been for the best.” Her voice cracked.

“I think, my child, that had you done it, the guilt would have eaten you alive. Every day the idea of those two lives would pass before you, two lives which you created and then ended...” She paused. “You love him, don’t you?”

The blush crept into her cheeks, tugged along by the guilt that filled her. “Differently than Jack, I never would have left Jack, I didn’t love him more than Jack, but I thought, at first, it was infatuation. And now I know it wasn’t.”

“You still feel you’ve betrayed him.”

The metallic taste of blood signaled she had reached her limit in biting her lip in an attempt to stave off the emotions that demanded to be released. She could only nod, nearly imperceptibly. Her chin trembled and Nana’s arms were around her and pulled Beverly to her shoulder. The story tumbled out of her mouth in a flurry of words. “He brought Jack’s body home. I demanded to see the body and Jean-Luc took me. The entire walk to the morgue, he warned me, over and over that I shouldn’t remember him like that. I just thanked him for being there. The guilt coming from him had nearly knocked me over at first. And then the sheet draping Jack’s body was removed and he was...Nana, he was a shell. No longer Jack. It hit me, that he was gone, Wes and I were alone, and I couldn’t stop myself from crying. Jean-Luc was awkward at first, not knowing what to do, then he put his arms around me and let me cry myself out. He took me home. Distracted me with stories, distracted Wes with stories, made us dinner. Built a fire. Wes fell asleep, Jean-Luc carried him to his room and put him to bed.”

She stopped.

Felisa didn’t speak. Waited.

Beverly continued. “He came back out and I had fallen asleep in front of the fire. He managed to find one of your quilts and placed it over me. As soon as it touched me, I had started to wake up. I felt him, he’d knelt next to the couch, brushed my forehead with his lips and he choked out, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I should have saved him and I couldn’t, he should be the one here taking care of you. I’m sorry.’ The right thing to do then was for me to pretend I was asleep and let him leave quietly. Instead, I opened my eyes and found him so close...so I reached out. Reached out to the man who had taken care of me that day, to the other man I loved, seeking to drown out the pain of losing Jack. Drew him onto the couch and kissed him, not allowing him to speak any protests, needing his love and comfort. Wordlessly, we made love with only the dying fire as witness. Sleep took us. Barely an hour later, he woke before I did and slipped out the

door, leaving only a note behind. I pocketed it, put it away, locked it up and never read it. When I woke and found him gone, I went to the door, opened it. Snow had started to fall again and his boots had left his trail behind him, the new snow swirling to cover it up. I thought it would be the end, all the evidence erased, no one would ever know, especially Wes. We didn't speak after the funeral. The days went by and became a blur. A month, two months passed. And then I found out that evidence had been left."

Beverly stopped again, hand moving to her abdomen, swollen with nine months of a pregnancy with twins. "Nana, Jack and I had been trying for another child. He was supposed to have come home later that month, and I'd stopped the birth control regimen so we could try again. And instead of Jack's children, I'm carrying Jean-Luc's. If he knew, if he knew the guilt would kill him as surely as a phaser blast would. I've known Jean-Luc long enough that I know what he does with guilt and with those he feels guilty about. He avoids it, so he can remove it from his memory, so he can continue to function as the Starfleet captain that he is. Telling him would end everything for him. And Wes...Wes is so angry at him, for him being alive and Jack being dead. One thing keeps Wes from hating him, that night when he told Wes stories about his father, all the funny things he father did, situations he got into, things he said about Wes, about me. Jean-Luc gave Wes a storehouse of memories about his father that night and somehow, Wes knows what a good thing it was. If Wes knew what happened after he fell asleep, I'm afraid that would take those good things away from him. I can't do that. It hasn't even been a year since his father died. He needs those things. I need those things. Jean-Luc needs those things."

Felisa's arms tightened, as if to give her strength to her granddaughter. "I can't give you absolution. You can only do that for yourself, and only when you're ready. You won't be a stranger to your children. You'll see them every year, you'll see videos and have photographs."

"They won't know me as their mother."

"They will, in time."

Beverly stiffened. Fear raced through her. Nana was right. That time would come and it scared the hell out of her. While the choices were the good ones for the moment, as time passed, they would become less obvious, less *right*. Out loud, she said, "They'll be angry."

"Of course they will. They'll come around in the end."

Beverly stiffened again.

Felisa's voice drew into a sharp concern. "What's wrong?"

"They've decided it's the beginning."

Within four hours, they had come out squalling, brother following sister in lusty cries to match the shouts their mother had hurled during her labor. She fell asleep, each of them nestled in her arms. When she woke, she found that Nana had placed them in their bassinet. Beverly got up, took one at a time to the window. Dawn was breaking, the faint rosy lines of morning reaching up the horizon onto the clouds to pull up the sun. The clouds had continued to drop snow and flakes danced to the ground. First her daughter, holding her up so that her clear blue eyes could take in what they could, Beverly kissing her mass of dark brown, nearly black hair. Then her second son, squirming in protest, his eyes a gray like the clouds blanketing the sky outside, his own hair barely visible, a downy cap of red gold.

“You haven’t told me their names,” Nana said from the doorway.

Beverly turned and went to the bassinet, placing her son next to his sister. “I hadn’t decided. Till now.”

Felisa raised her eyebrows.

Beverly smiled. “Natalie, because she was born on Christmas, and it’s one of those old traditions that Jean-Luc would appreciate.”

“And the boy?”

“Andrew.” She didn’t have to give any further explanation to Nana. Andrew had been Beverly’s grandfather, a kind soul who had a way with animals, he’d been the veterinarian for the colony before he had died in a flyer accident. He’d been on his way to help a mare give birth to a difficult foal.

Beverly had a month with her infants before she had to return to her oldest son and her life as a Starfleet doctor. By then she looked as she had before she’d left to visit her grandmother, lithe and fit, showing no signs of having borne twins.

2356

She and Wes managed to visit Caldos once a year. Wes never questioned the appearance of his new cousins. He was too excited of having relatives his own age. By the time she and Wes were able to visit for the first time, the twins were already walking and had started to talk.

Felisa had greeted them at the door, the children hot on her heels. Wes immediately gave his great-grandmother a hug, then bolted to play with his cousins. Beverly stood in the doorway, amazed at how much they had grown. She’d known on one level, because of the photographs and videos Nana had promised that she’d received. Yet to see them in person, walking, nearly talking, little people. “You’ll let the flies in,” Felisa said, hauling her granddaughter into the cottage. “Come inside.”

Beverly barely noticed her being led inside, her eyes on her youngest two. So far, they resembled their Howard side enough that nothing would be suspected. Wes had taken all his features from his father. Beverly often realized that if she hadn't given birth to him, she would've doubted him being her son at all. Of course, she knew he was. His features served as a memory of his father and the legacy he had left.

She listened to her oldest son converse with them as they played with giant blocks painted with primary colors. Toys she had played with as a child, toys that had been stored in the attic until recently.

Her daughter reached up to place a block on the top of the tower they'd constructed. "Allie, no," Andrew said.

Beverly looked over at Nana.

"Andrew had trouble saying Natalie. Came out 'Allie.' It stuck."

Beverly smiled and continued to watch. Andrew attempted to complete a bridge.

"Not that block, Drew," Wesley said.

Andrew turned on Wes sharply. "Andrew," he said. "My name is Andrew."

Nana's explanation came before Beverly could ask. "He won't let anyone shorten his name. No nicknames for him, he hates them. Pitched a fit once when the mayor called him Andy."

The same way Jean-Luc had become about his first name. Anyone calling him Johnny got stared down quickly, the same glare Andrew had now fixed on Wesley, with eyes that were images of his father's. A tug on Beverly's leg brought her attention to Allie, who had gotten bored with the arguing boys and wandered over to the new adult. With her dark hair, bright blue eyes, porcelain skin and red lips, Beverly thought of her as her little elf. The doctor picked her up and was rewarded with a grin.

2370

A tap on her shoulder jolted her from her memory. "Doctor, are you alright?" Alyssa Ogawa, her head nurse, had found her in her office, starting off into nothingness.

"I'm fine, fine. I just got distracted." She glanced at the chronometer. 1915 hours. After missing breakfast this morning, she'd promised Jean-Luc dinner that evening. At 1900. Fifteen minutes ago. She grabbed her lab coat draped on the back of her office chair and zipped out the door of Sickbay, Ogawa keeping her smile hidden until her boss had left the room.

"Come." Whether it was his quarters or his ready room, Picard's baritone always gave the same command when someone wanted to enter his domain.

Beverly stepped through the parting doors, turned to face him, and tripped over one of his boots. She tipped forward, looking atypically not graceful. Picard caught her. For a moment, she found herself tantalizingly close to his face, staring right into his eyes. With less grace than her trip, she backed away, and explained her lateness. "Sorry, I got distracted by work."

A wry smile tugged at his lips. "Isn't that always the case?" He motioned towards the table, dinner waiting. "Perhaps we should eat before it gets more cold?"

She glared at him as she shucked her lab coat and tossed it onto one of his armchairs. "It's not like I did it on purpose."

"Of course not."

Beverly resisted an outright frown. Jean-Luc had been odd with her, ever since their experience on Kesprytt. No, not that. The experience afterward, when he had suggested moving their relationship forward and she had told him they should be afraid, then practically bolted from his quarters, leaving him with his discomfiture and those lit candles. None of which were present at the moment, only normal cabin lighting. He had disrupted the comfortable friendship they'd settled into after she'd returned from her year away when she took the helm of Starfleet Medical. It had taken them nearly a year to become comfortable again. She'd left him after they had nearly rekindled their relationship. In truth, they had rekindled it entirely, only for her to stamp out the flames the very next day. That time, she was the one who rushed off and left, refusing to speak of it when she returned to the ship. The captain had only questioned her once. Her reply had been so sharp and hurtful that he had never broached the subject since. She preferred it that way.

"Something's bothering you," Jean-Luc said.

"What?" She picked up her fork.

"You've been staring at your plate for a few minutes. Lost in your own thoughts."

"Sorry," she said, offering no explanation.

The captain made no efforts to hide his frown yet left the subject alone as he proceeded to eat his own dinner. Beverly fought off any more recollections lest Picard start questioning her again. "I need to request leave," she said after some time.

He looked up. "You're automatically granted a week's bereavement leave when a close family member dies," he said.

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten." She ignored his questioning gaze.

Picard placed his fork on his plate and sat back. He'd finished, whether he had sated his hunger or not.

Beverly recognized the look, the body language. He wasn't going to let this go.

His words confirmed it. "Something's wrong," he said. Resolution carried in his tone, this time it was a statement. A pronouncement.

"I'm fine." She didn't want to play this game. Not now. Of all the times she had relied on him for support, this wasn't a time he could provide it, not by any means.

"You are not." His face softened. "Is it because your grandmother died?"

Truthfully, part of it was. She nodded, unable to verbalize anything, lest he ask more questions. Her nod should suffice, and he would take what he will from it and leave the subject be. She watched as he stood up, walked over to her, took her hand. "You hate being upset."

"So do you," the reply shot back without any thought on her part.

"You hate anyone knowing you're upset," he corrected.

"So do you," she said again, feeling a smile creeping up on her.

"Are you going to let anyone comfort you through this?"

She saw the question he had truly asked. *Are you going to let me comfort you again?* Fear shot through her from her ears and out her toes. She couldn't let him in, not about this. He couldn't know. Couldn't be told. Her reply came, hard, firm. "No."

At her tone, Picard had taken a step back, eyebrows up as the shock registered. Hardly any of her rebuffs of offered care had ever taken quite the tone he'd just heard. Words deserted him as he could only attempt to keep his mouth from gaping.

At the emotions that played out on Jean-Luc's face, Beverly knew she had to leave before she changed her mind, before she found herself in his arms, drinking in the safety he gave her. "I can't," she said. With that, she turned and left.

Picard watched her go, his expression unchanging.

*

When Beverly entered her quarters, a blinking communicate light at the terminal on her desk awaited her. As she sat down, she hit the button with particular strength. A request for a real-time face to face transmission. Wesley. She keyed in the acceptance, expecting her son not to be around and having to leave the same missed-message notice he'd left her with the blinking light. Not so. His face appeared before her, more mature than the last time she'd seen him, eyes darker than before. Something was wrong. "What's wrong?" she said.

"I'm sorry I can't make it to the funeral," he said, sorrow in his eyes.

“I know. It’s okay, you’ve got exams.”

Wesley grimaced. “Not just that.”

Beverly’s look matched her son’s. “Then what?”

At first, the cadet studied something below his communication terminal. Then he looked up again, his eyes meeting hers.

He knew.

“I know,” he said. “And I can’t face them. I don’t know how I’m even able to face you, Mom. Of all the things for you to do, for the captain to do. How could you?” He let his question hang between them, accusing.

Panicked, Beverly tried to feign ignorance. “Wesley, what are you talking about?”

Wesley’s reply started out softly. “I wanted to know what would happen to my cousins,” he said cousins as if it were an epithet. “Wanted to know if they had any other family except us. Because if they didn’t, they’d have to stay with you, on the *Enterprise*. Instead of just the two of us, there’d be five. A big change. I looked around. Looked for this great-uncle that was their father, my grandfather’s twin brother. Only, I couldn’t find any records of him. Not one single record outside what was on Caldos. But he wouldn’t have been born on Caldos, he would’ve been born in North America, like my grandfather. Birth records would be there. Guess what?”

She didn’t dare say.

He continued for her. “Not a single one. Then I figured I’d go looking for their birth records, trace them back. Figured out their birthday, figured out when they were conceived. It wasn’t till then I started to wonder, all as I searched. Do you realize how hard it is to find sealed records?”

“Sealed records tend to be sealed for a reason. Finding them isn’t hard, it’s finding what’s in them that is.” Her stomach dropped. “You found a way, didn’t you?”

“Mom, I can hack into anything. And there it was, printed out for anyone to see.”

“Not for anyone to see,” she said, her tone rising.

Wesley matched her tone. “Of course not,” he said. “Of course you had to hide it. It happened when I was asleep, didn’t it? Dad hadn’t even been buried yet, he was still in the morgue.” He was shouting now. “He wasn’t even in the ground!”

“Wes—” she started.

He cut her off, finally losing his temper, an occasion so rare with his happy-go-lucky temperament. “How can you even imagine what it’s like, for me to find out that

Captain Picard didn't just keep us sane through that night, but *slept with my mother*? Do you know what it's like, staring at two birth certificates that prove my mother having an affair? That prove that she has two illegitimate children by a man I once admired?" He laughed harshly. "And he doesn't even know, does he? Does he even know about them as our 'cousins'? Or do you have to keep them hidden away because he'd figure it out?"

"Wes—."

He wouldn't let her speak. His voice had dropped again, nearly a whisper, yet harsh as ever. "But that wasn't the end of it. You know, I might have forgiven that. A mistake. I remember, it was a hard time for all of us, including the captain. I think, on some level, I could understand that."

Those words gave her some hope at salvaging the relationship with her son.

So he crushed them, bit by bit. "You couldn't let it end there, could you? Once you were on the *Enterprise*, you couldn't let him go. I know why you left to head Starfleet Medical. You'd done it again, had another accident, another sealed birth record. That one was harder to trace. You'd constructed a better parentage for Gracie, found records of a cousin that had existed and died. Then created a new record of him marrying and having a child before he and his wife were killed by a plague on a distant colony planet. This time, I knew what I was looking for. And again, it stared me right in the face, plain as day, this affair that you can't give up, and the mistakes you keep making."

Anger flared up, covering her sadness in an instant. "They weren't mistakes," she said. "Not mistakes," she said again, more to herself than to Wesley.

He exploded. "They why were they hidden!? If you weren't ashamed, then Captain Picard would know, everyone would know. Hell, we could all be a family."

"Wes—."

"Don't 'Wes' me, Mom." His eyes narrowed. "You're still sleeping with him, aren't you? Can't give it up?"

"Wesley!" she said, shocked at his insinuation.

He ignored it. "So you see why I can't go to the funeral. I can't face them, the *mistakes* of you betraying my father. Can't face you and the captain, two people so cold and unfeeling that they can't stop from sullyng the memory of someone they supposedly cared about. I finally know how much family means to you." His finger stabbed the termination button, leaving Beverly with the Federation communication symbol, then a darkened screen.

When she was finally able to move, she could only make it to her bed, and fall into a fitful sleep.

Chapter 2

The screams were unbearable. Shouts of unforgiving pain from the bedroom, shouts that only created more pain, an endless loop. How could a three year old shriek with such vehemence? "Save me! Save me!" Words formed in the screams only to collapse into agonized sobs. "Mama!"

Beverly Crusher awoke with a start, the screams echoing in her ears. She'd never heard them, only read the letters Nana had written, talked with Nana on the terminal as they sought the reason for Andrew's pain. All that could stop the pain at first was a medication that rendered Andrew temporarily deaf, a condition which frightened him slightly less than the pain. Medical expertise on Caldos wouldn't be able to diagnose Andrew's condition. Federation doctors would delve into Andrew's genetic history, into his birth, to find an answer. Beverly knew of just one Federation doctor she could trust in this matter. Her urgent communique to Dalen Quaiice on Delos IV had been answered with equal urgency.

2358

The older man's time worn features held the concern Beverly had once found in her grandfather. "Beverly, what's wrong?" Quaiice asked.

She frowned. "Dalen, I have to ask you a favor."

"Of course, there should be no problem with—."

She held up her hand. "Hear me out first. There's risks with this. I have to ask for your complete secrecy. I need your word."

Quaiice knew that Beverly Crusher was a fine doctor with a solid if not unyielding grounding in ethics. Whatever she would ask, he knew it wouldn't break any morals he already held himself. "You have it."

Beverly let out a sigh of relief. "I need your help. There's a little boy my grandmother is taking care of. He's very ill and we don't know what's causing it. I suspect it's congenital, as he hasn't been sick in quite some time. There aren't any facilities for diagnosis, much less treatment, on Caldos. Nana will have to bring him to Delos IV. If you agree to help, I'll transmit you his medical file and those of his parents so you can search them."

The other doctor frowned. "I don't see what it is you feel has to be kept secret."

She spoke softly. "The boy you're treating...he's my son."

This time it was Quaiice's turn to frown. "Wesley? I thought he was with you, not your grandmother. Are you afraid this illness would somehow hinder him in the future and you want it kept under wraps?"

Beverly shook her head, her eyes squeezing shut. When she opened them again, Quai ce saw them vulnerable, something he'd only seen when she had had an emotionally wrenching case that had ended tragically. Her voice had become so soft that he had difficulty hearing what she said. "It's not Wesley." She paused. "Dalen, I have another son. He's three years old, his name is Andrew. He also has a twin sister, Allie."

His medical instincts kicked in first. "Is the girl ill as well?"

"No, just Andrew." She saw the curiosity under his concerned. "Dalen, I'll explain what I can when I reach Delos IV."

"You're coming as well?"

Her jaw set determinedly. "He's my son."

They made the arrangements.

Beverly sent Wesley to visit his grandparents, giving them an explanation of some particularly difficult research. On some levels, it was the truth. However, the slight deception pained her. She wanted to be honest. The doctor arrived at the colony before her grandmother and the twins, giving Beverly time to explain the situation to her mentor before confronted with the reality of a very ill child. She sat across from Quai ce in his office. "Don't think less of me," she said.

He reached out and took her hand. "I would never. As soon as you've gone, this will all disappear from my mind. Everything will be off the record."

"Thank you," she said, wanting to say more, but knowing any more talking would set off her tears.

Quai ce seemed to understand and said nothing more of the secret. Instead, he handed her a PADD.

"What's this?"

"I figured out what's wrong with him." He continued his explanation as she studied the results on the PADD he'd given her. "It's genetic. Shalaf't's syndrome. All the males in his father's family have it, it's a very rare condition, it's no wonder Felisa couldn't figure it out. I've only treated one case in my lifetime. Lucky for us, it's harder to diagnose than to treat. Won't take me long to fix it and the boy will be up to mischief in no time."

"Thank you," she said again. Andrew would be okay. He wouldn't be in pain much longer. Soon he'd be able to hear his sister teasing him again.

Crusher and Quai ce made all the necessary preparations as they waited for Nana to show up with the children. By the time the small group walked in, they were

ready for the operation. Beverly, however, was not ready to see her son in his condition. Normally a fiercely independent little boy, he refused to leave his great-grandmother's side. One hand gripped Felisa's tightly, his gray eyes were large with fear. Instinctively, Beverly went to give him a comforting hug, reassure him that he would be okay. As she approached, Andrew hid behind his grandmother, closely observing Crusher, who had stopped, still kneeling.

Her own son didn't trust her. The doctor met her grandmother's gaze, a gaze echoing Beverly's own. "He's having a very hard time," Felisa said.

Allie approached her, placed her small hands on Beverly's shoulders. "He's really scared, Beverly," she said. "He won't even talk. He hasn't talked in *days*. Even when I tease him."

Immediately, Beverly replied, "You shouldn't be teasing your brother."

Allie's brow crinkled in the same manner as her father's when something annoyed him. "I'm only trying to get him to talk."

Felisa patted the girl on the head. "I'm sure you are, dear."

Crossing her arms, Allie switched her look from Beverly to her grandmother. Behind Felisa, Andrew smiled. As Allie and Felisa continued to give each other glares, Beverly held her hand out to Andrew. The boy stepped out from behind Nana and tentatively took her hand. She lifted him up and onto the biobed. Dr. Quaiice scanned him with his tricorder. Beverly had to hold back a laugh when Andrew fixed Dalen with the same look his sister had just given her. *I wish Jean-Luc could see them. I wish Jean-Luc could be here to comfort his son.* Quaiice raised his eyebrow at her at the change in her facial expression, yet didn't mention it. Instead, he said, "We're all set to fix this little problem now."

"And what is this 'little problem'?" Nana asked.

Beverly turned to her. "Shalaft's syndrome. Hold on." She stepped into Dalen's office and picked up the PADD. Handing it to her grandmother, she said, "It's all in there. Little ears—."

Felisa nodded, giving a small smile.

"Little ears what?" Allie asked. "Are you making fun of my ears?"

"Of course I am," Beverly replied, earning her another irritated look.

"You said for me not to tease."

"I said for you not to tease your brother. I said nothing about me teasing you."

"That's not fair."

“I didn’t say it was.”

Allie glared at her and looked up at her brother, glare disappearing. “Are you going to fix him? Nana said you were a doctor and could make him better, that’s why we had to see you.”

“Yes.” She motioned towards the other doctor. “This is my friend Dr. Quaice. He taught me a lot about being a doctor and he’s going to be the one fixing your brother.”

Allie stuck out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Quaice.”

Quaice bent down to the girl’s height and shook her hand. “And I you. It isn’t every day that you meet such a pretty young lady.”

Allie blushed. “Please help my brother,” she said.

“That, I will do.”

Beverly sat with Nana and Allie in Quaice’s office as he worked on Andrew. Allie demanded that Beverly explain how Quaice would fix her brother. Crusher explained as best she could to a near four year old. True to his word, the procedure went without any difficulty and didn’t take long at all. When Dalen announced he was finished, the nurses moved Andrew to a recovery bed. Allie ran out to see him. “Will he be able to hear?” she asked Quaice.

“He should be.”

“What about his screaming? Will it hurt him still?”

“It shouldn’t. Do you want me to wake him up so you can see for yourself?”

“Yes.”

As the two had talked, Beverly and Felisa had walked up behind Allie. Quaice pressed a hypospray to the base of Andrew’s neck and the boy’s eyes fluttered open. “How do you feel?” Nana asked.

The group was rewarded with a flashing grin from Andrew. “I can hear, Nana,” he said. “And it doesn’t hurt!” He made eye contact with Beverly. “Thank you,” he said.

“Thank Dr. Quaice. The doctor standing next to you. He’s the one who did the operation.”

Andrew sat up and in a rare show of unbridled emotion, gave Quaice a hug. “Thank you.”

Dalen returned the hug and ruffled the boy's hair. "My pleasure, young man. It wouldn't be nice of me to let your sister continue to say awful things about you when you couldn't hear them."

"Hey!" Allie said. "You can't tease me!"

"I didn't say anything about Dr. Quaiice teasing you, either."

Allie frowned. Quaiice bent to her level again. "How about I make it up to you. I'll take you and your brother for some ice cream to celebrate. How's that sound?"

The children looked over at Felisa. She waved her hand. "Fine by me." The two grinned and ran out ahead of Quaiice.

Before he followed them, Dalen said, "I'll be back in an hour or so."

Beverly nodded and went back to his office. Felisa followed her. When Crusher fell into one of his chairs, her grandmother sat right next to her, taking her hand. "Harder than you thought?"

She'd known it would be hard. She knew taking a role away from her children, taking a role of a cousin instead of a mother, would be hard. But this incident had torn at her, seeing her son not seeking her out for comfort, almost afraid of her. And all his screaming, when the sounds tormented him, she'd missed it all. "I missed it all," she said out loud. "First words, first steps. Every dream and nightmare." Then her throat closed up, her grandmother took her into her arms, and held her as she cried.

2370

The chronometer alarm shook her from the memory. "Off," she said. Obediently, the alarm stopped. If only other things in life could be commanded that easily. In the lavatory, the face that stared back at her seemed a stranger. Red, puffy eyes, the dried tracks of tears, the haunted look. "I look awful," she said to no one. "Jean-Luc will ask questions." He'd want to know. She couldn't bring herself to lie anymore, all she could do was evade.

Once she was ready, she went to grab her labcoat and realized she'd left it in Jean-Luc's quarters. Normally, it wouldn't have been a problem, she'd just get it when she went for breakfast. But she had no intentions of eating breakfast with him this morning. With her stomach churning over the recent events, breakfast seemed entirely out of the question. In Sickbay, she buried herself in her working, needing the distraction. The *Enterprise* crew seemed happy to oblige and gave her a steady stream of injuries to tend. As she tended one wayward ensign who'd gotten overzealous in a racquetball game, she heard the reduction in normal din of Sickbay. A reduction that signaled the arrival of the ship's captain. Even the ever-imposing Worf didn't get that type of response. Beverly grimaced.

“Something wrong, Doc?” the ensign asked.

“No,” she said.

“Cause you got that look on your face—.”

“Ensign,” she said, warning. “Nothing is wrong.”

He held up his free hand in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

“Done. Next time, use your racquet instead of your wrist. Now get out of here and don’t let me see you again.”

The ensign did as he was told. Beverly steeled herself for the confrontation with the captain. “You forgot something,” the captain said.

She turned and saw he had nothing in his hands. “And where is it?”

He lowered his voice. “I thought it might send the wrong message if I returned it in full view of everyone.”

A smirk barely kept itself hidden, while her eyes glinted with humor. “Jean-Luc, you make it sound as if I left unmentionables in your quarters instead of a labcoat.”

The tips of his ears turned red as his brow crinkled. “Doctor, I hardly think—.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, interrupting him before he could wind himself up into a full-blown scolding. “Was there anything else?”

He asked to speak to her in her office. She acquiesced, but her heart trembled inside her chest. Instead of perching herself on her desk like normally would, she chose to sit in her desk chair to put some distance and a physical object between herself and the captain. She picked up a PADD and waited for him to speak. “You missed breakfast this morning,” he said.

“Wasn’t hungry,” she replied, tapping at the PADD.

She heard him exhale a small breath. “Did you want to have dinner?”

“No. I’ve too much to do. Which reminds me,” she looked up. “When will we arrive at Caldos?”

“Within the hour,” he said, bewilderment on his face. He quickly composed his strong features. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.” Back to her PADD.

After a moment, he'd reached out and placed his hand on hers. "Is it anything I've done? Is there anything I can do?"

She couldn't take his concern, listen to him attempt to give comfort. Beverly stood, removing her hand from underneath his, letting her frustration raise her voice. "Jean-Luc, everything isn't always about you."

Picard blinked, then got to his feet as well. "My apologies, *Doctor*," he threw back at her. Then he turned and left.

When the door shut behind him, Beverly threw the PADD across the room. Of course it was about him, but there wasn't a thing he could do. He'd given the same type of apology when she'd first come aboard the ship. His *apologies* at blocking her assignment to the ship to protect her in some way. He'd balked when she informed him that she'd requested the assignment. Barely an hour on board and already arguing with him. Then he yelled at her son on the bridge. Yet just before that...just before that when she told him who Wesley was, the look on the man's face as he said, "Your son," and seemed speechless. Nearly stuttering when he told the boy, "I knew your father."

In those instances, her mind had shouted to tell him, tell him other things he didn't know, about children he didn't know he had. Two times, she'd nearly gotten it out. Once, on Rutia Four, being held by the separatists. "Jean-Luc, there are some things I want to say...just in case we don't get out of this," and the lights had literally gone out as their rescuers found them once they'd shut off the power. She never finished and he had forgotten in the confusion of the action that followed. So she assumed. He'd never brought it up afterward. Then when Wesley had gotten her trapped in that damn warp bubble, she and him the only ones left on the ship, the only ones in the universe, it seemed. She'd gotten out, "For quite awhile now there's something I've been meaning to say to you. I may not get another chance. Jean-Luc, you and I —." And he'd disappeared, like every other person had. She didn't even know how she'd have finished her sentence. *You and I, we have children. You and I, we need to stop ignoring our past. You and I, we're the stupidest people in the universe. You and I, we need to get our heads out of our asses.*

That, at least would get his attention, and his ire, at the same time. And then all the other times, when she'd nearly lost him entirely, and never even had a moment to tell him before he would've been gone. The Borg. Standing on the bridge, listening to the father of her children say, "I am Locutus of Borg. Resistance is futile. Your life as it has been is over. From this time forward, you will service...us." Realizing he would never know. Wanting to leap over and tackle Will so that he couldn't give the order to fire on the Borg vessel and at the same time, wanting to leap over to Tactical and fire on the ship herself, to protect her children from the Borg. Finding him on the Borg ship, close in proximity and miles away in reality, trapped in the world of the Borg. Back on the ship, watching as his humanity struggled to get through so he could help Data destroy the Borg. Yet once he was recovering, even with everything she helped him through, she'd not told him.

And it haunted her over and over. Him being lost with Wesley before Wes left for the Academy. Taken down on that planet by that Tamarian captain. Sent to Romulus on the covert mission to contact Ambassador Spock. The twenty minutes when he lay unconscious on the bridge, linked to an ancient probe. His capture on Celtris III. And the latest, when they had thought him dead, for weeks they had thought him dead. Standing with her friends at the memorial service, apologizing to him and her children that they'd never know their father, missing him desperately. He didn't owe her any apologies, it was she who owed *him*. And she couldn't offer them. Had to stay angry at him, to keep him at a distance, so he wouldn't pry.

Beverly left Sickbay without a word to her staff. So many things to do. Needed to get into her dress uniform, contact Andrew or Allie, pack to stay at the cottage, rehearse the eulogy. Standing in the turbolift, she ran through her mental checklist. The 'lift came to a stop. Jean-Luc Picard stepped in. Crusher masked a grimace.

He nodded towards her. "Doctor."

She gave an equally curt nod. "Captain."

The silence between them hit harder than any physical blow could. Picard broke it first. "Computer, halt." He turned to face the doctor.

Beverly crossed her arms. "Yes?"

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Picard frowned. "Do you still want us to accompany you to the funeral?"

"Yes, of course." Saying no would serve only to make them concerned for her well-being. While her friends were certainly her friends, when one wanted to be alone, and they were concerned, being alone was the last thing they'd let happen.

He nodded, as if that's all he wanted to ask and the answer made perfect sense. "Resume."

The wall fell between them, as palpable as one constructed of brick, and three times harder to break.

Chapter 3

Snowflakes brushed past her eyelashes, trying to cloud her vision. Beverly kept her eyes resolutely on her notes, reading her Nana's eulogy to the small gathering of mourners. Most of her friends had remained on the ship, letting Jean-Luc and Deanna represent them. She and the other two had beamed down just in time for the start of the service, no time to greet the remaining members of her family with any familiarity other than an acknowledging nod of the head and the flutter of recognition between eyes.

The words of the eulogy slipped by without pause and with no comprehension in her own mind. Her mouth formed them of its own volition as her mind did as it pleased, thinking of the three children standing nearby. It frightened her, how much they'd grown since she'd seen them last, nearly a year and a half ago. Allie now as tall as she, lithe and long legged, a body composed from a little girl's promise of beauty into the reality of a young woman. From Andrew's letters, she knew Allie captured the attention of more than enough boys and caused her brother no end of trouble. The girl's blue eyes had remained as clear as the day she'd been born, her hair as dark, skin as porcelain. Her brother stood even taller, gone were the softer features of a little boy, replaced by strong lines of a young man. His jaw seemed etched from stone, but she could see the slight workings of it as he set it against showing his sorrow. Where Wesley had been slight, Andrew was well-muscled, a testament to the athlete that he was, along with his sister. The gray wide eyes of the boy had turned to a steel color that matched the winter sky. The same winter that turned Andrew from a summer towhead to being touched with fire in his close cropped hair.

The eulogy continued without thought from her higher processes. No one noticed any discrepancy. Little Gracie stood between her brother and sister, tightly holding a hand from each, her knuckles as white as the snow beneath her feet. Not yet even five years old, her auburn hair braided behind her, her eyes the same color as her brother's, her fair skin missing the smattering of freckles the taste of the summer sun bestowed upon her each year. Of the three, she was the least successful at not showing she was upset. Tears tracked down her cheeks, as lazily as the snow drifted around her.

Beverly wanted to reach out, to gather her into her arms, tell her it was all okay, she wasn't alone.

She couldn't. She had to finish the eulogy. "Rest in peace, Nana," she said. Of that, she was certain. Felisa Howard would rest in peace, leaving the living continuing in their own storms created by the lives they had chosen to lead. Three of those lives stood next to her, as she'd stepped away from the place directly in front of the gatherers, and to Allie's side. Three lives who'd had no choice in what direction they'd taken, no choice in knowing who they truly were, or what it was like to have an intact family. What it was like to have a mother, a father.

The governor, Maturin, gave his conclusion. "And so now we commit her body to the ground. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope that her memory will be kept alive within us all." A closing millennia old to a passage as old

as the human race. The mourners processed in front of the cherry stained coffin raised above the hole in the ground that would be its final resting place. The headstone stood guard nearby, waiting for its eternal posting. As the procession continued, those at the head of the line had already left, the crowd growing thinner and thinner, until all that remained were the governor, Beverly's friends, and the last of Beverly's family, sans her eldest son.

"It's okay," she heard a soft male whisper. Andrew had said this to Gracie. Beverly realized two things. First, her son's voice had gained the even timbre of his father's, so similar that she feared everyone would know as soon as he opened his mouth and let words out. Second, that she hadn't moved a muscle, her cold toes letting her know that they needed, at the very least, to be wiggled. She complied, but moved nothing else, watching.

The three children had gone to be next to the open grave and the ready coffin. Andrew had squatted down to Gracie's height, hand drawing her by the waist in a hug. The little girl was biting her lower lip, her hand now grasping a camellia flower instead of a sibling's hand. "It will die," Gracie told her brother.

Andrew bit his own lip for a moment, composing himself again. "It's already dead," he said. "As soon as we cut it from its roots, it was dying."

Gracie shoved her brother with her free hand. "Then we killed it!" she said and stepped away from him.

Andrew took her by the shoulders and gently brought her closer. The cold air had drawn blood to their cheeks, staining them red. "No, we didn't," Andrew told her. "Every one of the flowers Nana grew had a purpose, something it was destined for. Picking it for that purpose isn't killing it, it's letting it live fully. Something can't stay attached to its roots forever, or it will never fully live. We didn't kill the camellia, Gracie. We helped it in its journey. This flower, its job is to say good-bye to Nana. You're helping it like it's helping you say good-bye."

Gracie's voice became so quiet that Beverly had to strain to hear. "I don't want to say good-bye."

This time it was Allie who spoke. "We have to. Nana has somewhere else to be now. And you know how she got when we kept her waiting."

The comment brought a slight smile to Gracie's lips. She turned and dropped the camellia on the coffin, bright against dark, a testament to a life gone by. "Good-bye, Nana," Gracie said. She turned her back to the coffin, looked up at Andrew and Allie. "I don't want to be here anymore," she told them. Her eyes fell on Beverly. "Can we go now?"

Captain Picard was immersed in some sort of conversation with Maturin. The doctor recognized the opportunity to slip away and nodded her assent to Gracie. She

motioned to Deanna as they walked out of the graveyard proper. The snow hadn't stopped. Beverly reminded herself to check the weather modification net to see if it was planned or if something had gone wrong. The counselor had fallen into step beside her. "We have to take care of things at the house," Beverly said. "Would you mind coming along?"

"I'd love to," Troi replied. "I think that was a beautiful eulogy."

"Thank you." She wondered if Deanna had felt any of the other thoughts that had crossed her mind during the entire thing. If Deanna knew that her only thoughts weren't of the eulogy at all. "I haven't introduced you to my cousins," she said, motioning ahead of her. The group paused on the path to the cottage. "The tall one, there, is Andrew. The other tall one is Allie, his twin sister. And the short one, that's Gracie."

"I'm not short," Gracie said. "I'm exactly average for my age."

Troi smiled. "Now I *know* you're a relative of Beverly's. Pleased to meet you." The counselor looked at the other two. "And you as well."

They nodded in reply.

"Come on," Allie said to Gracie. "Let's go before your toes freeze and fall off."

"They wouldn't fall off," Gracie said.

"No. They'd stay inside your shoes, dead toes next to live ones," Andrew replied.

And Gracie gave her brother the look so familiar to Beverly. One she'd seen earlier that day from Jean-Luc, the crinkled brow and the certain light in the eyes that said he was annoyed at someone he cared about and was trying not to swear at them. Again, her thoughts ran away with themselves, Deanna's entire conversation slipping by unnoticed as memories surfaced.

2364

She'd gone to him and she shouldn't have. In the gymnasium, Beverly worked through her *mok'bara* routine that Worf had set out for her. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She punctuated each admonishment with a blow to the heavybag in front of her. They'd made it through the odd Psi 2000 intoxication look alike with nothing actually happening, despite some fairly good efforts on her part. Came so close in that holodeck scenario. The change in clothing, in roles, had freed up thoughts and feelings that they kept locked away behind the fence formed by their uniforms and duties. In the ancient twentieth century garb, immediate reminders of those locks had been thrown away without even the tinkling sound of a key tossed carelessly to the floor.

"Do we have time to see your office?"

"I don't see why not."

The light playing behind his eyes, behind hers, she remembered it. If Whalen hadn't been there to remind them of who and where they were, they could've fallen into the mistake they'd avoided months earlier during the intoxication.

Then Armus had taken Tasha from them. An instant of pure evil, unprovoked and without meaning, Tasha had been killed. That alone had hurt. The security chief left a living will and her comments addressed specifically to Beverly and the captain proved the doctor's undoing.

"From you I have learned to strive for excellence, no matter what the personal cost."

How could Tasha know what those words actually meant? That striving for excellence was all a mask, hiding the cost of it, what she had to do to keep the mask in place. Her sixteen year old son, with her on the ship. Both of them without his younger brother and sister, now nearly ten years old and living on Caldos, having no idea they had a mother, an older brother, both alive and well.

"Your fierce devotion comes from within. It can't be diminished." Oh, but it could, so easily. If she had truly fierce devotion, all of her family would be with her, without shame, without any masks.

"True to yourself, your ideals." No. She was a liar to them all.

Her jabs became more vicious. The spiderweb cracks in her resolve spread from repeated blows as Tasha's hologram made comments to the captain. *"I can't say you've been like a father to me, because I never had one and I don't know what it feels like."* How Andrew and Allie must feel, never having a father, never knowing that it feels like, yet feeling that same gaping hole everyone felt at not having a father. The one she found when her father was killed, the one Wesley carried in his own heart from the death of his father. But she and Wes, they had the memories, something to patch up the hole to keep them going. When you didn't have one at all, you didn't have the memories to even conjure up what the reality would be, nothing to fit into that gap that only a father could fill.

"But if I could choose someone in this universe to be like, someone who I would want to make proud of me, it's you. You who have the heart of an explorer and the soul of a poet." Raw emotion flowed from that last statement and Beverly put everything into trying to split the heavybag. The nightmares had woken her up, her feet took her to the one person on the ship who would understand how she felt.

Instead of the normal command of "Come" when she'd pressed the notification panel outside his doors, she heard saying, "This had better be good," as he opened the doors from his side. When he saw who waited on the other side, his features softened and concern showed plainly. "Beverly," he said.

She couldn't talk. Standing there in the middle of the corridor in the ship's night, wrapped in her warm robe, arms hugging her sides. Him standing there in his own robe, arms at his sides. Those strong arms reached across the doorway and pulled her inside the safety of his quarters. "Come inside," he said, steering her to the couch. "Can you even talk?" he asked.

She shook her head. No. The tears had started and she felt even more stupid, crying in front of him again, letting him comfort her again. His arms had gone around her and pulled her to him, her ear on his chest, the metronome of his heartbeat lulling her into security. The tears dried up. She sat up suddenly, realizing where she was, who she was with. He laughed.

"You're laughing at me," she said.

"No. Well, yes. I mean, you...hold on." He got up from the couch, handed her a tissue, sat back down.

She smiled in spite of herself. "I must be a sight."

"Yes," he said.

It wasn't the sight she'd been referring to that she saw in the warmth of his gray eyes. "I should go," she said, standing. His hand on her arm stopped her mid-motion, leaving her in a silly looking position of half-stand.

"Don't go."

"Jean-Luc, I can't—."

He drew her back down to the couch. She let him draw her back down, she wasn't a woman to go where she wasn't willing. His finger moved to her lips to stop her from talking, followed by his own lips.

The memory searing her mind, Beverly let loose another jab, shouting her frustration. She'd stayed the night, slept with him, needing him and his comfort. Again, she'd lost her resolve. The offer that had been dangled in front of her the week before waited for her in her office. Head of Starfleet Medical. She'd been sitting on it all that time, debating. A huge leap in her career if she took it. But Wesley had it good on the *Enterprise*. Her friends were here. Jean-Luc was here. Chances to practice real medicine instead of pushing around proverbial papers.

And now, it offered escape. Escape from her weakness yet again. Another shout, another jab, and a shocked comment from the half-Betazoid counselor who'd happened to walk into the gym. "Started early this morning?"

"Sleep walked right in here," Beverly said. "Woke up to find myself beating the hell out of this heavybag."

“Have you succeeded?” Deanna asked.

Beverly let her arms drop. “No.” It wasn’t the heavybag that needed the beating. Her conscience needed a good righting of itself.

Troi frowned. “I think the shore leave will do you good.”

Only if it was away from Jean-Luc. “I think so too.” She motioned towards the stretching mats. “Shall we?” And they started their daily workout.

Beverly had just transmitted her acceptance of the new position when the calls came in from the bridge of casualties to treat. Her endeavor to avoid her commanding officer until her departure had largely succeeded until she interrupted what seemed a tender moment between Picard and Jenice Manheim. The captain had immediately pulled away from the woman and guilt flashed in his eyes. The explanation was quick. “She’s an old friend.”

The doctor couldn’t help the tone of hardness she took. “I gathered that,” and went right to business. Once Jenice had left, the captain took it upon himself to attempt to rectify whatever had gone wrong between himself and Beverly.

“Doctor,” he said.

She frowned and faced him.

He gave her a moment, to see if she’d say anything. When she didn’t, he continued. “I haven’t seen Mrs. Manheim since Paris.”

She didn’t want to hear this. His need for explanation of his relationship with this woman showed her some of his feelings about what had happened. The fact that he felt he owed her any sort of explanation supported her need to get away from the *Enterprise*. “You needn’t explain, Captain.”

He continued. “It was a very long time ago.”

“Yes, she’s a lovely woman.” Again, she turned to leave.

“Beverly,” he said.

This time, when she faced him, she allowed the irritation to show on her face. “What is it, Captain?” she asked, putting emphasis on his rank to make sure he noticed her use of that instead of his first name.

He frowned. “Nothing, I’m sorry.”

The later visit from Counselor Troi was anything but unexpected. Beverly fiddled with instruments and tools as her friend stood near her. The doctor wouldn't give Deanna any leeway by talking first.

"All you all right?" came Deanna's question in her lilting voice.

Beverly's tone was as sharp as the one she'd taken with Picard earlier. "Why wouldn't I be? I've got one of the medical wonders of the galaxy dying in my Sickbay." She picked up a wayward tricorder and started walking towards the closet where the extras were stored.

"That isn't what I meant," Deanna said.

"I don't think I want to talk about what I think you mean." Beverly's hip smacked into a table that had meandered into her path. She swore under her breath and continued towards the storage closet.

Troi continued to press. "You're not helping the situation by pretending it doesn't exist."

At that, Beverly whipped around, knocking a stack of PADDs to the floor. She swore again, louder, and bent to pick them up. The question with the obvious answer came out, "I'm making it worse?" As if the chaos she'd caused in her own Sickbay in those past moments wasn't enough. With her last round of swearing, her staff had made themselves scarce.

While the doctor couldn't see her friend's face, she could certainly hear the frown. "I didn't say that. I said you're not helping it. Or yourself. Or the captain."

Beverly frowned. Exactly what information did the counselor have? The discomfort between her and the captain was observable in the past days and had only become more apparent in the previous day or so, with the appearance of the Manheims. Particularly the appearance of an old love of the captain's in the form of Jenice Manheim, the woman she'd found in Picard's arms in her Sickbay earlier. Now she knew she was being overly dramatic. Jenice was a woman grieving over her nearly terminally ill husband, seeking comfort.

Seeking comfort. Beverly swore again, then said to Deanna, "That's his problem." She finished stacking the fallen PADDs, picked them up, and replaced them on the counter. Her friend continued to watch her with those dark Betazoid eyes, calm, collected. Exasperation coursed through her, at this questioning, at the situation, at everything. "All right. I'm still not sure how I feel about him. Now it looks as if I'll never know. There. I said it. Are you happy?"

Deanna frowned. "Talk to him."

That, Beverly knew, would be a mistake. “No.” She paused. “I can’t compete with a ghost from his past. No one could.” Beverly herself was a ghost from his past. Was she competing with herself? She didn’t even know if she wanted to compete. Yes, she did know. The answer was no. Were it otherwise, she wouldn’t have accepted the new post.

Deanna continued. “She’s not a ghost. She’s here, right now.”

Beverly stopped moving the equipment. Depending on what Deanna’s empathic senses were telling her, she could be talking about Jenice or Beverly. It was true. Right now, she was present. Right in front of him, unsure of how to act or what to do or what she really felt. “She may be in the here and now, but it’s the ghost he sees. No, he’ll have to work it through without me,” she searched for the right word. “Input.” The answer she’d given the counselor, Beverly knew, was for the captain’s situation with Jenice and the situation with Beverly. The captain would have to continue to do without the information Beverly held close to herself, even without Beverly’s presence, soon enough. The doctor picked up the last tricorder and slammed it into its slot. “There, now I feel better.” And she stalked off into another part of Sickbay.

Troi observed her, her friend’s emotional turmoil rolling over her in unrelenting waves.

2365

Jean-Luc had tried to stop Beverly from leaving to assume her new post. The last of her belongings packed into the small bag that hung at her side, her final good-byes said to Wesley, she stepped up on the transporter pad. As the transporter room door opened, Beverly saw the captain walk through and got out, “Energize,” to the transporter chief before Picard could say anything to her.

“Belay that order,” the captain said.

She glared at him. “Captain, you’re going to make me late in reporting.”

“I think you at least owe me an explanation.”

“I hardly think a step up in my career needs explaining,” she replied, then looked at the chief manning the controls. “Energize.”

“Keep belaying that order,” Picard said, then changed tactics. “Chief, you’re dismissed.”

The young chief nodded solemnly and left the room. Beverly felt the anger rising through her, threatening to let loose on the captain. All she could do was continue her glare. A glare that, for the time being, left Picard unfazed.

“We need to talk,” he said. “You and I, we need to sort things out.”

“There’s nothing to sort out. I’ve accepted my post, I’m leaving. Everything taken care of.”

He frowned. “Look, you and I...it can’t just keep happening and then not be talked about.”

She hadn’t wanted to talk about this. That. Whatever “it” was. “Why do you think I’m leaving?” she asked.

Ever so slightly, his face fell. Knowing him as well as she did, the control he had over his emotions and facial expressions, she knew his heart had fallen far more than his face would ever show, even in that slight movement. He said nothing, his eyes searching hers, looking for the truth, for what she truly felt.

Beverly knew she had to leave right then, or lose her resolve entirely. “Jean-Luc, let me go,” she said.

His reply was to step behind the controls of the transporter and beam her to the surface, as she’d asked the transporter chief moments before. A lifetime before.

Beverly Crusher had settled into a routine at Starfleet Medical with ease. After she’d been there two weeks, her grandmother had contacted her with a request. The twins wanted to visit Earth and see what the Terran home planet was like. That was how, three weeks later, Beverly found herself summoned to the emergency room at Starfleet Medical Hospital and faced with an irritated Starfleet Security officer, an irate nurse, and two scratched, bloodied, and mud-covered children. When she entered the room, all four of them started to speak at once. The doctor held up a hand. “Please, one at a time.” She looked at the security officer. “Lieutenant, you first.”

“Doctor, I found these children on the Academy quad after a report of two people fighting. When I got to the quad, they were in one of the flowerbeds and beating the hell out of each other. Children should not be on Academy grounds without an escort, as you know. I understand that they’re under your care?”

Beverly sighed. “Yes.”

The lieutenant studied his feet for a moment. Then, “Well, doctor, the groundskeeper would like to speak with them and you when they’re cleaned up.”

“I’ll see to it,” Crusher replied. “Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

The officer nodded and left. Beverly turned to the nurse. “Your turn,” she said, though by looking at where the nurse sat, she could see why he was irate. The man sat between Andrew and Allie and by the looks of him, had spent a lot of energy in keeping them apart. His uniform was nearly as dirty as the two children that flanked him.

“Doctor, they won’t stop fighting. And I can’t get them into an exam room or even try and get them cleaned up until they do.”

Beverly frowned. “I’ll give you the afternoon off for going above and beyond what’s required of you. I’ll take care of these two.” As the young nurse made his way out of the room, Beverly turned a glare on the two ten year olds. “Follow me,” she said.

The doctor marched the two down to one of the exam rooms next to the lavatories. Once in the room, she replicated two sets of hospital pants and shirts, gave a set to each child, and showed them each into a lavatory. They cleaned up faster than she thought and once they were out, she marched them into the room again, and shut the door. “Sit,” she said. They sat. Beverly studied them. Andrew had a long cut that looked like it had bled a good deal along his cheek. Allie had quite a few scrapes on her arms. Wordlessly, Beverly fixed them up. Neither of them dared move or speak. That done, she asked, “What happened?”

Andrew said, “There was a spider.”

Allie said, “He came after me.”

Beverly sighed again. “From the beginning. Andrew?”

“She put a tarantula in my pants,” he said, in his most serious tone of voice.

The absurdity of his statement almost had the doctor laugh out loud. Keeping the amusement out of her voice, she asked, “And how did that happen?”

“Her stupid pet! Why anyone would want a spider as a pet is beyond me. It’s not like it’s a dog or a cat or something with fur that you can play with. It’s a *spider*.”

“This isn’t about your sister’s choice in pets,” Beverly reminded him.

He frowned. “If she didn’t have a pet tarantula, it would’ve been a lot harder for her to put one in my pants.”

The boy had a valid point and said it with such a straight face that Beverly didn’t trust herself not to laugh if she tried to say anything. So she waited.

He continued. “Anyway. I was working on my homework and felt something brush on my leg, below my knee. I stood up and shook out my pants and a huge brown hairy tarantula came out.”

Allie burst into giggles. “Beverly, he freaked out! He ripped his pants off and went shouting into the bathroom! I didn’t think he knew that many swears!” She was carried off by another set of giggles.

Andrew stood up. “Shut up! It’s not funny! I hate spiders!”

“Sit down,” Beverly told him. Then she told Allie to stop laughing.

Andrew continued, doing his best to ignore his sister. “I went up to my room, got a new pair of pants and then back downstairs to find Allie.”

“So, you set out to kill your sister,” Beverly said.

“I wasn’t going to *kill* her. Maim, maybe.”

“He chased me,” Allie said. “Murder was in his eyes.”

The boy glared at his sister. “You’re being dramatic. Besides, I wouldn’t have had to chase you if you hadn’t run away.”

“Like I was going to stay put and let myself be murdered.”

“Allie,” Beverly interrupted, “Exactly how did your tarantula end up in your brother’s pants?” It was all the doctor could do to keep a straight face when she asked the question.

“Honestly, Beverly, I don’t know. He got out of his tank this morning and I spent all day looking for him. I mean, not that the result wasn’t bad, you should have seen him!” Mirth glinted in her eyes.

The doctor looked over at Andrew, his face now flushed with anger. “I’m not talking about it anymore,” he said.

Allie continued the story for him. “He chased me all the way to the Academy and onto the quad. Didn’t catch up until I tripped over a root. Then he tackled me into this flowerbed that was being watered and then the Security guy found us.”

The doctor decided that whatever discipline the groundskeeper could come up with would work the best. She had them sit in silence as she made the appointment, then escorted them home. Later that evening, the children in bed, she managed to get Nana on a communique and related the entire story to her. They laughed until they had tears streaming down their faces. That night, she woke from her sleep in a cold sweat. Only, it wasn’t from a nightmare. She couldn’t even remember dreaming at all and instead, the waking itself became the nightmare. Even with the sweat soaking her sheets, she refused to believe its truth. Only one thing made her wake up in cold sweats. Dread tugging on her heels, she made her way to her medkit, flipped open the tricorder.

Not again. It was statistically impossible. “Improbable,” she corrected herself out loud. “And still stupid.” *Not again.* Was it something about her being grieved that made her conceiving so very easy? Beverly threw the tricorder into the bath, where it split in two and the halves spun around to opposite ends of the tub. The sound woke up no one. And when she didn’t wake up, she was faced with the truth. *Again.*

She ignored the issue as best she could for the last week the twins would be in San Francisco. Felisa arrived a couple days ahead to accompany Allie and Andrew back to Caldos. In the weak light of pre-dawn the day the trio would leave, Felisa found Beverly in the kitchen, poring over information on several PADDs and ignoring the mug of tea nearby.

Felisa placed the two pieces of the broken tricorder on the table. “Which one was it?”

Beverly started at her grandmother’s voice. She hadn’t thought anyone else to be up and about at this hour and had chosen the time to attempt to compose a letter to Dalen Quaiice on Delos IV. The subject being her current dilemma. “What?” she said.

“The tricorder. Which one was it that broke it? Allie or Andrew?”

Beverly said nothing and began to stack the PADDs.

“Oh, it wasn’t either of them. Was my grown up granddaughter instead.” Felisa took a seat across from her, felt the mug that held the doctor’s drink. “Tea’s cold,” she said.

“So it is,” Beverly said, making no motion to do anything to rectify it.

The older woman put her hands on Beverly’s, stilling them in their task to find busywork in moving about the PADDs. The action caused the doctor to look up. Her clear blue eyes met Nana’s vivid green ones. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” Felisa asked. “I can’t imagine Starfleet approves of its doctors breaking tricorders all the time over nothing.”

“I don’t break them all the time.”

“I notice you didn’t say it was nothing.”

Beverly placed her head on the table. “Oh, Nana, it’s something alright.” She felt Nana’s hand on her head, reassuring.

“I always thought those two troublemakers could use a younger brother or sister. You do what you need to do and we’ll be waiting. Always could stand to have another cousin in the family. Now, let me warm up that tea. You look like you need some.”

Beverly Crusher didn’t think she would ever figure out her grandmother. Felisa never brought it up again, let Beverly handle all the timing and paperwork. Once he received Beverly’s message, Quaiice answered immediately and with an offer for her to work on a research project with him on Delos IV. Crusher wrapped up the projects and things floating around Medical’s headquarters, assigned someone to cover her post as she attended to a high priority—as Dalen called it—research assignment.

To her relief, Dalen hadn't told a lie about the project. It was important enough to bring her from headquarters, he'd only bumped the scheduling for it up a few months to help his friend out. As the project went along, so did the life growing inside the doctor. Finally, the new child made her way into the world. Quaiice delivered the child himself, cleaned her up, handed her to Beverly. The old doctor had tears in his eyes. Beverly teased him about that, he did the same thing every time he delivered a child. He insisted that it never got old and got him all worked up inside.

"Am I wrong in saying she's got her father's eyes?" he asked her.

"No," she said, looking down at her new daughter. "You aren't."

The grandfatherly man reached out with one finger and stroked the child's downy auburn hair. "My wife and I should've had more of these."

"Maybe I should've told you the tarantula story a few more times," Beverly said.

Quaiice smiled. "Wouldn't change my mind." He paused. "What's her name?"

"Mary Grace. After the woman who first introduced me to dance."

"Heavy name for a little girl. How about you name her that and I'll call her Gracie?"

"Better than naming her Dalen."

The elder doctor chuckled as he walked away. He stopped in the doorway. "You'll be okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

He sighed. "You get yourself into such binds. One day, you'll stop being so hard headed and so will he." He wandered down the hall, muttering to himself the arguments and kind chiding he'd given her for the past months. It made Beverly smile. Some things could always be counted on.

Felisa arrived the next day to pick up the new Howard, a child that had barely survived the plague that killed her father and mother. Beverly missed the communique from Nana and had to settle for the message saying they'd arrived on Caldos safely. In her rush, she nearly missed the post script. *The snow dusted the ground in a carpet for Gracie's arrival. I thought you'd like to know. -Nana*

Chapter 4

2370

A squeal brought Beverly's attention back to the present. Andrew had picked up Gracie and thrown her over his shoulder. She pounded at Andrew's back with small fists. "Put me down!"

"No." He continued trudging towards the small house that had come into view.

"Andrew, please!"

"No. Not until you apologize."

"I'm not saying I'm sorry." Gracie scowled.

"Then I'm not letting you down." Andrew's even tone of voice hadn't changed. Even as Beverly watched one of the small scenes she'd missed because of her choices, fear of Deanna recognizing the similarity of Andrew's voice to Jean-Luc's tainted the amusing image.

Gracie resumed beating on her brother's back. He ignored it. "You know," he said, "If you don't say you're sorry, and you stay up there all upside down, all the blood will rush to your head and it'll pop."

"You're lying. Like when you told me there were trolls under every bridge on Caldos." Gracie's scowl became deeper.

"There *are* trolls under every bridge on Caldos," Andrew said. "I told you the truth. It's Allie that told you different. Who are you going to believe? Allie or me?"

"Allie," came Gracie's immediate reply.

Andrew's eyes shot a look at Allie. In reply, Allie shrugged. "It's not my fault you're the world's worst liar."

"I wasn't lying. And she believed me for two straight hours. Then you ruined all the fun, like you usually do."

With Andrew distracted by the argument with Allie, Gracie renewed her struggles to break free of his grip. As they drew up to the house, Andrew finally dumped Gracie into the pile of snow built up alongside the walkway. Allie stepped onto the porch and opened the door, warm air flowing into the chill of the outdoors. Beverly watched as Gracie ran full-force at Andrew's back and pushed him into the snow. "Hey!" he shouted as Gracie gave into a fit of laughter.

Beverly felt her heart continuing to crack. How many of these moments had she already missed?

“Come on inside,” Allie said, motioning while she went inside herself.

Beverly saw Deanna’s question before her friend could ask it. “Please, come in,” she said to her friend. “Have some hot chocolate before you head back to the ship.”

“The ship!” Gracie said as she struggled out of the snow. “The *Enterprise*, right?” she asked Deanna.

“Yes, that’s the ship I work on with Beverly,” the counselor answered.

Gracie walked up to Deanna, took her hand, and whispered into Deanna’s ear, “Andrew really wants to see the ship.”

Unfortunately, Gracie’s idea of a whisper carried quite well to anyone within earshot. “Andrew heard that,” her tall brother said, with both irritation and hope fighting for expression on his face. Beverly wondered what Andrew really wanted to do with his life. He had never shared his true aspirations with anyone.

“Do you?” Deanna asked.

Beverly eagerly awaited the answer, wanting some insight into what Andrew Howard wanted to be. Andrew remained silent as they entered the house and began to peel off the layers of clothing required to stay warm in the winter. The boy finally opened his mouth to answer when a large dog came bounding into the room and up to the group.

Deanna looked terrified. Beverly fought a smile at the counselor’s reaction. The large dog was actually a *very* large dog, one of the giant breeds of Earth’s canines. While the Irish Wolfhound weighed a good one hundred and sixty pounds, and his size alone looking fearsome, the dog was actually a big baby who loved people.

“What is that?” Deanna asked.

Andrew didn’t hold back his laugh. “A dog. His name is Conal. He’s friendly, wouldn’t hurt you, I promise.”

Troi didn’t move, obviously not convinced. “Are you certain that’s a dog? A Terran dog?”

Andrew grinned. “Yes, I’m sure. It’s a very old breed, called an Irish Wolfhound. They look all scary, but they really just like to sack out in front of the fireplace.” He rubbed the gray dog’s head. Conal licked the boy’s hand in reply.

Deanna glanced over at Beverly for reassurance.

The doctor’s smile broke free. “Deanna, I had no idea you were afraid of dogs.”

“It isn’t funny!” said Troi.

“He’s a big teddy bear,” Beverly said.

“And he’s much better than any of Allie’s choices of pets,” Andrew said.

“I heard that!” Allie shouted from the kitchen, then walked into the living room. “There’s nothing wrong with horses.”

Deanna glanced at Beverly again. “Horses?”

The doctor nodded. Troi shook her head in disbelief.

“I wasn’t talking about the horses,” Andrew said to Allie.

“Oh, honestly.” Allie had reached the point of exasperation. “My tarantula died years ago. When will you get over it?”

“Never. It’s still a tarantula.”

“Isn’t that a large Terran spider?” Deanna asked.

Andrew nodded. “Big hairy one at that.”

Gracie stepped over and whispered into Deanna’s ear. “Andrew’s afraid of spiders.”

The boy glared at them all, pulled on his coat, and went outside with Conal. “He doesn’t like to be afraid of anything, does he?” Deanna asked.

“No, he doesn’t,” Beverly said. “He doesn’t. But he has such an overactive imagination.” She continued explaining as they made their way into the kitchen. “He’s had problems with it since he was very small. He had horrible nightmares and became convinced that things lived in his closet and under his bed and they would attack him when he was asleep. At times he refused to even go to sleep.”

“And he’s stubborn as hell,” Allie said from her seat at the table.

“You aren’t one to talk,” Beverly shot back.

“If you’re going to be technical about it, Doctor,” Deanna said, “You shouldn’t be talking either.”

Gracie climbed into the seat next to Allie. “That leaves only me,” she said. Then frowned. “Except I don’t know the story.”

Beverly almost didn’t know the story either. Nana had used all her knowledge and experience to figure out a solution to Andrew’s sleeping problem. Only when everything failed and Andrew continued to refuse to sleep did she tell Beverly about the boy’s troubles.

Beverly Crusher finally got a moment to have a face-to-face communique with Nana instead of text. The first thing Felisa said was, "I need your help."

Crusher blinked. "Who are you and what have you done with my grandmother?"

Felisa gave her a woeful smile. "I can't figure it out, Beverly." She went on to give her granddaughter an explanation of the situation. A few months ago, Andrew had started having insomnia. Once he was finally able to sleep, he'd wake up screaming from nightmares. He'd then say that there were monsters everywhere in his room, hiding, waiting to get him when he fell asleep. Nothing seemed to calm him down or make him feel safe. The boy was starting to suffer from some serious sleep deprivation. "You didn't have problems like this as a child," Felisa continued. "Neither did your father." She paused. "Did the boy's father have problems like this as a child?"

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Beverly asked.

"I didn't want to worry you. You have so much to do on your ship and so many people to take care of. I didn't think it would come to this." The older woman's face held concern in its wise features.

Guilt once again took hold of Beverly's emotional well-being. "I should be there."

Felisa frowned, one so slight that it could only be detected by those who knew her well, as it passed across her face like a subtle wave. "No, you shouldn't."

"What?" The question shot out by reflex.

This time, the frown stayed on the older woman's face. "You'll remind him. Because you serve on the *Enterprise*, and you faced the Borg, and..." she trailed off.

Beverly finished for her. "He thinks the Borg will get him."

"Yes."

Quiet spoke. Neither woman knowing what to say, let the quiet speak for them. Growing uncomfortable, Felisa changed the subject. "Remember how wonderful your grandfather was with animals?"

The conversation shift bothered the doctor, but the prior silence had bothered her more, so she went along with it. "Yes. He always insisted on keeping horses in the old stables, on having cats in the barn, and two dogs around the house." The memory made her smile.

"Allie has decided that there should be horses in the stable again." Felisa sighed. "I think we have another vet in the family."

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“It is when when there’s three horses in the barn as we speak. That *girl*.” A smile pulled at Felisa’s mouth. “Reminds me of someone I know.”

“And what about Andrew?” Beverly ignored her grandmother’s continued attempt at keeping the conversation away from her son’s trouble. She drummed her fingers on her desk. “Nana, do you remember what I did whenever I was scared?”

“Other than wake me up in the middle of the night?”

“When I stopped waking you up. I found something else to keep me feeling safe. I had one of the dogs sleep in my room with me at night. I knew if anything tried to hurt me, she’d protect me. Maybe that could help Andrew.”

Felisa nodded. “You know, you could be right.”

So Andrew had picked out a puppy from a new litter in town. Nana sent Beverly photographs of the boy with the pup as both continued to grow. Andrew had neglected to tell his great-grandmother exactly how big an Irish Wolfhound would be full-grown, and Nana’s letters when she found out were full of expletives Beverly hadn’t known her grandmother to use.

2370

Beverly went up to her grandmother’s room after Deanna bid her goodbyes, saying she’d be visiting again in the morning. The doctor wanted to find her grandmother’s journal and get a closer look at all she’d missed of the lives of the children that were now downstairs completing homework. Her mind wandered as she looked around, this time thinking of her present difficulties. With Nana’s death, Allie, Andrew, and Gracie would be under Beverly’s guardianship. She knew the captain would grant permission for the three to come aboard the *Enterprise*, but having them in such close proximity to the captain was the last thing she wanted. Or really, the last thing she could deal with at the moment. Wesley’s discovery had been hard enough and she and her oldest son hadn’t even finished dealing with it between themselves.

Realizing the journal must be in the bedside stand’s drawer, Beverly tread lightly across the ancient hardwood floor, counterpoint to her heavy thoughts. *What if Wesley told the captain?* The question jolted the doctor to a dead stop. She shook it off. If Wesley had told the captain anything, then Jean-Luc would have already been down here demanding answers. For a man who played on the holodeck by dabbling in mystery novels, he certainly detested mysteries in his own life. No, so far, he had no idea. And with Beverly not beginning to be able to predict his reaction to her secrets, she had no desire to tell him. She didn’t want to destroy the friendship they had so carefully built up again after nearly killing it entirely when she’d left for Starfleet Medical. Ever so slowly when she returned the next year, they settled back into the secure roles of best friends, and never mentioned what had happened before she left.

But now it seemed, there was no obvious and painless escape for anyone involved. She would have to decide between the children and Starfleet.

A shout from downstairs interrupted her line of thought. “That’s the stupidest argument I’ve ever heard!” Allie said.

“Obviously you haven’t been listening to your own then!” replied Andrew.

“I just want to hear what happens to the wolf!” said Gracie.

Beverly’s legs carried her quickly back down the stairs. She stopped at the bottom, presented with Andrew holding one book, Allie holding another, and Gracie standing on the couch watching them both.

“You’re reading her the worst translation possible. Completely untrue to the original text,” Allie was telling Andrew, shaking her book for emphasis. “He starts one of Earth’s oldest stories with the word ‘So.’ So! Totally incorrect.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “And that’s because whenever you start a story, you use ostentatious words like ‘lo!’ and ‘behold!’ complete with a flourish from your arms.”

“Can someone please just tell me what happens to the wolf!” Gracie said again, her piping voice nearly as loud as she could make it.

The doctor finally intervened. “What’s going on?”

“I was telling Gracie a story,” Andrew said, turning to face her.

“A *mistranslated* story,” Allie said.

“Only if you insist on being blindly literal,” Andrew said.

Allie threw up her hands. “Fine, you tell her whatever stories continue to pop into your head. Maybe you’ll add some trolls to the story, too.”

“I don’t see why I’d have to, there’s already a dragon.”

“A dragon? Really?” asked Gracie. “But Grendel wasn’t a dragon.”

“No,” Andrew said, lowering his voice, “Grendel was a monster. He had a twin sister that was—.”

“That’s enough,” Beverly said before Andrew could get out whatever insult he had ready for his twin. Allie shot Andrew a parting glare and went upstairs.

The boy tapped the book on his free hand, his gray eyes showing his troubled thoughts. “Beverly, she’s more grumpy than usual,” he said. “I mean, normally she’s fine with whatever stories I tell Gracie, and really doesn’t care that much about what

translation of *Beowulf* I use. Do you think you could talk to her? I'd try, but I think she'd throw the book at my head, knock me out, and ask questions later."

Beverly nodded. At once, she felt both excited and daunted by the task. It was becoming harder and harder not to fall into the role of mother and remain in the role of an older cousin.

"Okay. Good. 'Cause I have to tell this monster what happens to Beowulf."

She left them on the couch, Andrew reading the ancient tale to his younger sister. Allie had gone into her room, the door shut. Beverly knocked. When no reply came, Beverly cracked the door a bit and peeked through the small opening. "Can I come in?" she asked.

"Oh, it's you. Yeah, as long as my brother isn't around."

"No, he stayed downstairs, figuring you'd try and knock him out if he came up." The doctor opened the door and slipped inside. "Anything you want to talk about?"

Allie avoided eye contact. "I don't know." With the soft light from the lamp on the desk, Beverly could see melancholy creasing the girl's brow and swimming in her eyes. "I mean..." She sighed. "Not yet."

"I'm around whenever you need someone to listen."

Allie nodded. "Oh. Tomorrow." Change of subject. The doctor recognized the tendency to avoid expressing being upset, much less what made one upset. Something she dealt with with herself, and with a certain man in her life.

Beverly raised an eyebrow. "Tomorrow?"

"I forgot to tell you. Tomorrow, Andrew and I have a fencing tournament. Final one of the season and all that. Nana said she'd haunt us for eternity if we didn't compete, since it's a team event for our school and our teammates need us." Allie gave a slight smile. "Funny, how now she'll support our 'barbaric sport' from the grave, but when she was alive, all she could say was that we were barbarians for wanting to stab other people with swords."

"She knew how important it is to you both. She also knew that you need to keep on living your lives, even though she's gone." Nana had been like that. Knowing exactly what people needed, exactly how people thought.

Allie bit her lip for a moment, then said, "I think I'll call it a night."

The doctor bid her goodnight and went back to Nana's bedroom. She'd forgotten about the fencing. When Nana had told her, with indignant outrage, about the barbaric sport the Caldos school had introduced, and the immediate interest the twins had taken in it, Beverly had been pleased, serving to irritate Felisa even more. Each time one or

both of the children did something that reminded her of their father, she felt they had some kind of connection to him, even though neither party knew of the existence of the other. With the news fresh in her mind, Beverly had asked Jean-Luc to teach her how to fence, so that if she ever got to watch them or talk with them about the sport, she would know what was going on. He'd been so surprised.

2368

"This is still a shock to me," he told her, lacing up his shoes from his seat on the bench beside her.

"I'm curious," she replied. "I always wondered why you indulge in such a barbaric sport."

Her comment made Picard look up sharply, eyebrows raised in protest. "I'll have you know that this sport is one of the most civilized in existence, one hundreds of years old, a fine tradition."

Beverly graced him with a smile. "You know what I think?"

He stood up, looking at her with trepidation. She knew that particular look well. He most certainly wanted to know what she was thinking, but knew it would be a poke at his expense. "Yes," he said, in his most captainly tone.

"I think that men couldn't give up their sword fighting once mounted cavalry was replaced by mechanized cavalry and they turned it into a sport."

Picard snorted. "That is not the case."

She picked up her mask and sauntered out to the gym floor. "You're biased, Captain," she threw back as she left the dressing room.

Despite her teasing, the captain turned out to be a very good fencing instructor. Patient and knowledgeable, able to keep Beverly from losing her temper at setbacks. He'd explained to her the differences between the three weapons, the nuances of each. The doctor soaked in all the information, wanting to make sure she'd be able to hold her own. During each lesson, she steadfastly ignored the looks he gave her when he thought she wasn't paying attention to him, or when he thought she was looking the other way. At how the tone of his voice changed, became softer, whenever they were in close physical proximity. She ignored how much she looked forward to the lessons, to their time spent together.

And she most certainly ignored how he looked in his fencing gear. The traditional fencing whites of knickers and jacket hugging his well muscled form closely. As she ignored, he paid more and more attention to her. While her own gear accentuated her lovely features, he found himself fascinated and bound to her persistence in learning, in

wanting to do her best, in her willingness to work with him on something completely outside any of her realms of expertise.

Weeks later, they finally started bouting against each other, Beverly finally feeling ready to try her hand at something other than drills. In one movement, Picard lunged at the doctor and his tip got stuck under her armpit, just long enough for Beverly to counterattack and score a touch. His attempts to regain control of his foil had caused her to break into laughter once the touch was recorded by the score box.

“It’s not funny,” he said, taking off his mask.

“Oh, it was,” she said. “I swear I could hear you whispering under your breath ‘Give me back my weapon!’”

“I did not.”

“You did.” She took off her own mask, drawing herself up to her full height and facing him full-on.

“I did not. You imagined it. I was nothing but graceful and that touch was a figment of your imagination.” He took a step towards her.

“In that case,” she said, “You had better report to sickbay to have your eyesight checked. It seems you’ve developed some temporarily blindness.”

“I’m anything but blind,” he said, taking another step.

“I beg to differ.” Beverly closed the distance between them, challenging. She poked him in the chest with a gloved finger. “A sighted man would’ve seen that entire exchange. Since you insist it didn’t happen, you’ve got a medical issue involving your eyes.”

“I certainly do,” he said.

She realized how close he’d gotten. His tone had changed again, becoming that caress she dreamed about, the one she had ignored during the past weeks. Beverly wondered when exactly the captain had stopped talking about the touch and started talking about his feelings about her. As long as she could, she resisted meeting his eyes, a few seconds becoming years as she felt his look, unable to ignore it. She felt his ungloved hand touch her cheek.

“Perhaps I address it with my doctor,” he said. Soft, as soft as the hand on her cheek, moving to under her chin, urging her to lift her head.

She gave in and met his eyes. Immediately, she regretted and rejoiced in her decision. After all the time she’d spent keeping him at a certain distance, not wanting to have him look at her as he was right then, not wanting to hear the tone of voice he’d caressed her with again, not wanting to risk blowing apart everything, she missed it. The

way his eyes searched hers, wanting to find emotions mirroring his own. How those eyes were so similar to her children's. To be able to see him as she could so rarely see him, lest she betray anything, as the father of her children.

And she closed the final distance between them and surrendered herself to the caress of his lips. He responded eagerly, as if he wanted this as much as she and had been waiting for her to come to her senses. He pulled her against him, deepening the kiss. Then it struck her—she couldn't let this happen. Couldn't do this again, not to him, not to her, to them. She pushed away from him. "Jean-Luc, we can't."

That crease in his brow, the annoyance in his eyes. So like her children. Their children. Then the annoyance was replaced with something else, a deepened sadness, one that could only result from being thoroughly beaten into the soul from repeated blows. She barely heard his question. "Why?" It came out rough.

The truth threatened to break free, a raging bull with her conscience as the rider, struggling to hold on for the full time so it could be corralled again. "I'm sorry," she managed to get out. Then she made her way out of the gymnasium as fast as she was physically able. The captain remained in his spot for some time, staring down at the mask and foil she left behind. Slowly, carefully, he picked them up and brought them back to his quarters, knowing she would have to get them some time.

Except she never asked him to fence again.

2370

Nana's journal lay unopened in Beverly's hands. What waited inside, the doctor didn't feel up to reading that night. The house had gotten quiet around her, the opposite of her noisy thoughts. She got up, went down the stairs. In the living room, the fire had burned down to a few glowing embers. Andrew and Gracie had fallen asleep on the couch, the book splayed open on Andrew's chest, little Gracie snuggled under her big brother's arm. Both were silent in their sleep, so quiet that Beverly crept up next to them, making sure she could hear them breathing.

Jean-Luc slept like that.

She pushed the memory of him out of her mind. "Hey," she said. "Wake up." She put a hand on Andrew's chest, then moved it to Gracie's, softly shaking. "Come on."

First Gracie's eyes opened, then Andrew's, once the little girl had elbowed him solidly in the ribs. Two sets of identical gray eyes, clouded with the haze of sleep. "That wasn't very nice," Andrew muttered to Gracie, then pushed her off the couch.

Beverly caught her and glared at him. "And that wasn't very nice of you," she told him.

"Oh, you're here," Andrew said.

The doctor stifled a laugh. "Who do you think woke you up?"

He frowned. "You know, I wasn't sure." He sat up, rubbing his face.

Gracie had already fallen back asleep, still in Beverly's arms. "I'll get her to bed," she said to Andrew. "And you get yourself to bed. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Mmm," he nodded. When they stood, he surprised her with a tight hug. "Thanks for being here," he said. "Sleep well." And before she could reply, he was up the stairs. Enigmatic, like his father. Capable of such gentleness where no one would expect it. She maintained her tenuous grip on her emotions and carried Gracie up to her bed, putting her in her pajamas and tucking her in. For a moment, she stayed next to the little girl's bed, brushed a lock of auburn hair of her face, kissed her forehead, bade her good night.

With the light off, she could see outside, the light of the lone moon of Caldos reflecting off the fresh snow. The small house had settled into its night, quiet aside from the creaks of the old foundation. For the first time in years, and the first time in Gracie's lifetime, Beverly would be able to sleep in the same home as her children. She would be able to see them when they woke up. So much, she wanted to keep it this way, caring for them as she should. Loving them as she should. But when she had looked at those sets of eyes in Andrew and Gracie, she'd seen their father, and realized if she kept her dream here, then she would have to give up Jean-Luc entirely.

Outside, the night remained clear.

Chapter 5

Shouts from downstairs welcomed Beverly Crusher to the morning.

“Where the hell is my good foil?” Andrew yelled.

“I don’t know,” came Allie’s equally loud reply, “But I’m going to shove my foil up your ass if you don’t stop screaming about it.”

A little voice from Beverly’s doorway observed, “I think that would only make him scream louder.”

The doctor was already laughing as she opened her eyes to see Gracie standing shyly in her doorway. “Good morning,” she said. “You’re right. It *would* only make him scream louder. And neither one of them would end up fencing today.”

Gracie giggled. By the time they got downstairs, Andrew and Allie had sorted themselves without resorting to weapons being placed in unwanted orifices. Allie was now running around making sure she had all her gear while Andrew shoveled bites of oatmeal into his mouth while working on a blade on the table. Counselor Troi arrived just as the group was scrambling out the door. Beverly indicated for her friend to join them. After a short walk into the town proper, they entered the fencing salle. Inside, they made their way to the competition floor. The floor stretched in front of them, holding ten competition strips, seats for spectators, tables for the bout committee. An armorer had a booth off to the side where equipment was checked and stamped for safety. Andrew and Allie darted out to join the other white clad fencers as they warmed up with jogs and drills. Gracie caught sight of the other younger siblings of the fencers and bounded off to play.

Beverly and Deanna found seats among the bleachers. “So how did last night go?” Deanna asked.

The doctor continued observing the activities on the floor. Tall windows encouraged the weak winter light to fall into the large room; a room that was becoming noisier by the minute as fencers moved from drilling to warm up bouts on the strips, setting off the buzzers with each touch scored. “Fine,” she said.

“Did you manage to find your grandmother’s journal?”

“Yes.”

“Did you read it?”

“No.”

“Are you going to give me anything more than one word answers?”

Beverly finally looked over at the counselor. “I will if you change the subject.”

Troi raised an eyebrow at Beverly's forthrightness, then asked about the tournament.

That, Beverly could answer. "Today, they're both fencing foil. It's a team format, men's and women's, with the nearby colonies having sent teams. Allie told me they do this tournament every year and Caldos has yet to win. If you have any questions about how the scoring works when they start, I'll be happy to answer."

Troi nodded. The two fell silent as the competition began, looking like chaos to those unused to how fencing competitions tended to be run. Nine of the strips were in use, surrounded by clusters of fencers watching and cheering. "Why aren't they using the tenth strip?" Deanna asked.

"Oh, that's for the finals. It's why it's raised and directly in front of the bleachers." Beverly stopped when she noticed Deanna's attention drawn to the opposite side of the room. The doctor followed her friend's line of sight and found what had gotten her attention—Maturin had walked into the salle, accompanied by Jean-Luc Picard. Beverly cursed under her breath. She had a moment of hope that the two wouldn't notice her, despite the vibrant color of her hair. Then she had to give up that hope when Deanna waved them over. Picard and Maturin waved back in acknowledgment and navigated their way over to the women. When Picard saw Beverly next to the counselor, his face lighted up and he smiled. They met at the bottom of the spectator area.

"Good morning," Maturin said. "I was giving your captain a tour of the village today and I mentioned the tournament. When he told me that he was a fencer himself, I decided he needed to see the event."

Beverly fought her body's urge to start shaking as her brain starting into panic mode. If Jean-Luc stayed, he would almost certainly meet the three children. "I'm sure the captain has seen plenty of fencing tournaments," she said to Maturin.

It was Picard who answered. "It's been years since I've been able to watch a good competition. Maturin has been gracious enough to show me much of the village already."

"There are still outlying areas that are fascinating," Crusher said.

Picard turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "Beverly, it almost sounds like you're trying to get rid of me."

No, no, of course not. That's only exactly what I was trying to do. Out loud, she said, "You know me better than that."

The captain nodded, but didn't seem entirely convinced.

Maturin spoke above the din of the fencers. "I need to take my leave of you, Captain," he said. "My own duty calls me for the rest of this day. I think you will be fine in the company of Felisa Howard's granddaughter. The Howards make fine hosts."

In her head, Beverly cursed, a string of expletives she'd learned long ago in medical school, when her class was first confronted with the smell of real dead bodies.

Deanna turned to her and gave her a sharp, questioning look.

Beverly ignored it and bid the mayor farewell. They went back to their seats, the captain following, practically jovial. "Maturin said the fencing here today would be particularly good. The rivalry between the colony schools is very tense and leads to some highly charged fencing."

As they sat down, Picard took his seat next to the doctor. Beverly felt herself bristle at first, then managed to stem the reaction caused by her fear.

Deanna gave her another look and she ignored it. If the captain noticed the brief reaction, he didn't point it out.

"I know why I'm here," Picard said. "But what brings the two of you to a fencing competition?"

The doctor stared steadfastly in front of her, wishing the bleachers would split down the middle and suck her into a parallel universe, preferably one where she hadn't chosen to hide the presence of her children.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Deanna asked Picard cheerfully. "Two of Beverly's cousins are fencing today for Caldos."

The captain turned to the very still doctor. "Is that so? I didn't even know you had cousins here," he said. "I thought your grandmother was the only family you and Wesley had left."

Beverly supposed that technically, the last time they had spoken about the family left to her, Nana *had* been all that was left. "I didn't tell you about them?" she asked.

"If you did, I don't recall. And I think I'd remember something like that."

She didn't know what to say. Until this point, she hadn't directly lied to him. Certainly, she had omitted many, many things. And right now, she would have to give him the cover story about the three children, all while scared nearly senseless, and next to an empath who had already given her a couple significant looks. "Their parents died when they were very young," she said. "Nana's been their guardian." She covered her unwillingness to look either of her friends in the eye by searching the floor for Andrew and Allie.

“Yes, I would have remembered that,” Picard said. “I’d certainly like to meet them.”

He certainly would. Beverly felt another Betazoid look drilling into the back of her neck.

“Beverly, are you feeling o—.” Deanna’s question was interrupted by a five year old sized auburn haired distraction barreling up the steps of the bleachers.

“Beverly,” Gracie said, stopping just short of plowing into the doctor. “Can I learn how to fence, too? I want to stab people like Andrew and Allie get to do.” She brushed an errant clump of hair out of her eyes.

“Your grandmother said it’s barbaric,” Beverly told her.

“Andrew says there’s nothing wrong with being a barbarian,” replied Gracie.

“Did you know that Beverly fences as well?” Picard asked the child.

The little girl’s attention flickered over to the captain and back to Beverly. “Who’s he?” she asked. At the same time, Deanna shot Beverly another look.

“He,” Beverly said, continuing to ignore her friend, “Is Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Captain, this is Gracie Howard, my youngest cousin.”

“Hello,” Gracie said, extending her hand.

Picard accepted it and shook it with equal seriousness. “Hello yourself,” he said, then grinned.

She grinned right back at him. The scene in front of the doctor dug up both happiness at seeing those matching grins, seeing father and daughter meet for the first time, and knowing that neither had an inkling of their relation.

Gracie hopped up one more step and plunked herself next to the captain, then started in with questions. “How did you know that Beverly fenced?” she asked.

“Because I taught her how,” Picard answered.

“I’ve never seen her fence. She hasn’t fenced with Allie or Andrew.”

Picard glanced over at Beverly. She saw the momentarily unmasked hurt in his eyes as he said, “She hasn’t fenced in a long time.” The statement was directed at Beverly, his voice tinged with some of the roughness she remembered. She could kill him—he knew exactly what he was doing.

Gracie, in her innocence, continued along, addressing the doctor. “Why don’t you fence anymore?”

“Nana told me it was barbaric,” came the quick reply from Crusher. Her quip caused the matching look of annoyance from the captain and Gracie. The doctor had managed to wiggle out of a direct answer for the time being.

Picard looked over at Gracie. “So who are Allie and Andrew?” he asked her.

“My older brother and sister. Well, cousins, actually, but I’ve lived with them and Nana since I was a baby and they’re like my older brother and sister. Or something. They’re twins.” She searched the room for them to point them out, but it was hard to find them in the sea of fencers dressed in white knickers, jackets, and silver lames. “I can’t see them right now,” she said.

“That’s okay,” he replied.

The tournament continued as Gracie kept peppering the starship captain with question after question. For a man who claimed to be uncomfortable around children, he fielded Gracie’s questions and unwavering attention with considerable aplomb. Normally, the girl would have run back to play with her friends after a few minutes, but she seemed quite fascinated with Picard. As for Crusher, she continued ignoring Deanna’s decidedly pointed line of questioning regarding her current emotional well-being. Becoming exasperated, the counselor asked the captain to watch Gracie and dragged Beverly outside for a few minutes, citing a need to give her ears a break from the noise.

The doctor felt trapped. She couldn’t run and it seemed her friend was bound and determined to figure out what was wrong. Deanna’s question confirmed it. “Beverly, please tell me what’s going on. The emotions I’m sensing from you are all over the place. You’re angry, then you’re incredibly sad, and what I don’t understand is that most of the time, you’re afraid. What are you afraid of?”

Beverly reached out and scooped a handful of snow off the railing of the steps that lead up to the salle’s entrance. The midmorning sun had softened it just enough that it clumped together easily. She manipulated it with her hands, grateful for the distracting bite of its cold. “I can’t tell you.”

The counselor reached out with her hand, gripping the doctor’s upper arm with a surprising strength. “It’s tearing you apart, I can feel it.”

Beverly squeezed the snow in her hand, feeling the carefully crafted ball begin to dent from the pressure of her fingers, the same fingers that had just made it now causing its demise. “I know.”

“You’ve got to—.” Deanna was cut off by the door suddenly swinging open and Gracie running through.

“Beverly! Deanna!” she said. “You have to come back inside, they’re starting the finals and Caldos is in them.” Then as quick as she’d run outside, she ran back in.

Troi frowned. "We'll speak about this later," she said.

Of that, Beverly had no doubt. Deanna went into the building before her. Once she was out of sight, the doctor threw the remains of the snowball onto the walkway below, watching it splatter with a certain satisfaction. It wouldn't be that easy for her to get out of this situation. She was more certain that she couldn't get out of it at all. Jean-Luc showed no signs of wanting to abandon her company, nor did Deanna. Gracie assuredly would object if Beverly picked a fight with Picard and drove him away within the next few minutes. No, she'd have to face it, and deal with whatever happened.

Inside, she found Gracie speaking with Andrew, who had taken off his jacket. "I thought Caldos made it to the finals," Beverly said.

Andrew looked up. "The women's team did. My team got thrashed." His face told her exactly how displeased he was about his team taking third and not advancing to the final round of the direct elimination table. Gracie patted him on the hand as if to comfort him. In reply, Andrew stuck his mask on her head, making her yelp in outrage.

"It stinks!" she said, ripping it off her head and chucking it at her brother. Andrew easily caught it and put it away in his bag.

"Of course it does. Where do you think all my sweat goes?" he said.

She glared at him, then stomped back up the stairs and sat next to the captain.

Andrew chuckled. "It really is too easy with her," he said, following his little sister's movements. Then he noticed who she sat next to. "Isn't that Captain Picard?" he asked Beverly, who hadn't moved since she'd walked in.

"Yes." Of course Andrew would notice. And soon, he would meet him.

Andrew frowned. "How long as he been here?"

"All day. Maturin brought him and then Jean-Luc decided he wanted to stay and watch the competition."

The boy raised an eyebrow. "You're on a first-name basis with him?"

She sighed inwardly at her mistake. "We've known each other for over twenty years, I'd hope so."

Andrew nodded, then told her he was grabbing a quick shower before he joined them to watch the finals. Beverly made her way back up to their seats, noticing Deanna watching her intently. The doctor chose to sit next to Gracie, putting some space between her and the counselor and the captain.

Gracie smiled at her when she sat down and pulled Beverly closer so she could whisper into her ear, "The captain asked me if the boy you were talking to was competition for him. I told him no, it was our cousin. What did the captain mean?"

The doctor held in a laugh when she saw the tips of Picard's ears turn red, Gracie's inability to whisper striking again. Beverly whispered into Gracie's ear, just as loudly, "Why don't you ask him?"

Picard's eyebrows raced up his forehead as laughter escaped from Deanna. "I was merely confirming whether or not the young man to whom you were speaking was indeed your cousin," the captain said quite formally, as he did when trying to regain lost dignity. He was saved from further explanation when the finals began.

Each team consisted of three members and the event was run in a relay-type format, first team to 45 touches. Each bout was scheduled for 3 minutes or to five touches, whichever came first. Once one team reached 5 touches, the next to opponents would step onto the strip. So, after the first bout, one team would have five and the other some number less than five. The second bout would go to a score of ten touches, with one team only needing five touches and the other having some sort of difference to make up. This made for exciting fencing near the end, as the scores could be incredibly lopsided, such as 40 to 25, and a particularly good fencer could catch the losing team up to the opponent and tighten the match. Beverly explained the scoring system to Deanna.

As the director gave the first command to fence, Andrew came quietly up the stairs and sat next to Beverly. Surprisingly, Gracie stayed in her seat between the doctor and the captain. The little girl worshipped her older brother and almost always bolted to sit next to him whenever possible. Andrew made no indication of wanting introductions and waved a quick, distracted hello as he watched the bout intently. From the corner of her eye, Beverly saw that Jean-Luc and Gracie watched the bout as intently, while Deanna watched the three of them with the same intensity.

The Caldos team held the left side of the strip. Andrew kept a running commentary throughout the match. "Mackenzie isn't watching her distance," he said. "She's going to run herself right onto their tip."

And she did. "Touch right," said the director. Andrew swore, as the opposing team had reached five touches to Caldos's two.

"Where's Allie?" Deanna asked.

"She's anchoring the team, so she'll fence third," he said, attention still on the strip. He swore again. "Why's Cait fencing? She's the fourth, what happened to Mairi?"

"Twisted her ankle," Gracie supplied.

Andrew flashed a glance over at her. "How did you know?" He held up his hand. "Nevermind, I don't dare ask." The boy shook his head. "Cait's way out of her league, she's got to be nervous as hell. I hope Allie's able to keep her calm."

Below, the two fencers danced along the strip, both defensive and not making any committed attacks. "Second intention," both Andrew and Picard said at the same time.

As if she'd heard them, the Caldos fencer executed the exact move. Touch left. Once Cait had gotten that first touch, she seemed to find confidence and managed to get Caldos up to 9 touches. Allie stepped onto the strip. Andrew didn't make as many comments about his sister's fencing until Picard said, "I think she's forgetting her distance."

Andrew shook his head. "No, she's messing with tempo. She's setting up for a backbeat and then she'll fleche right from that. Works almost every time. Once she gets into the right distance, it's damn hard to stop." Allie then did just that. Andrew gave a shout of approval.

"I'd just like you all to know that I have practically no idea what you're talking about," Deanna said. "The most I understand is when the director says 'touch left' or 'touch right'."

"That's okay," Gracie said. "That's the important part anyway."

The match continued. Andrew and the captain now traded comments as it progressed, arguing over points of strategy and finesse. By the end, both of them were on their feet when the match went to 44-44. Allie and her opponent saluted each other for the *la belle* bout. As they fenced, Andrew said, "Bet you she does her move again. She might not, though, the other clubs have basically trademarked it to the both of us. But if Allie can draw her into the right distance, I don't think she'd be able to stop it."

"I agree. Even knowing that the attack is coming, if the distance is right, it would be too fast to stop," Picard said.

"Now!" Andrew shouted as Allie scored the touch with her trademark attack. The Caldos team swarmed onto the strip to celebrate.

Gracie stood up. "Captain, I have to introduce you to your competition."

Beverly snorted with laughter as Picard's face turned a slight red.

"And who might that be?" the captain asked.

Gracie rolled her eyes. "Captain Picard, this is my brother Andrew. Andrew, this is Captain Picard. Since you two have been talking for the entire match, I thought you should know each other's names."

Andrew shook the captain's hand then looked at his younger sister. "Competition?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Beverly said to ask the captain."

Andrew looked expectantly at Picard, his eyes as mischievous as Gracie's. "Sir, what are your intentions towards my cousin?" he asked.

Gracie clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh!" she said.

Beverly looked down at her. "What?"

The little girl motioned for her to bend down. The doctor knew whatever Gracie would say, most likely it would be embarrassing. "I think he likes you," she whispered.

This time it was Deanna who snorted with laughter.

Beverly cursed under her breath. Suddenly, it seemed like a good idea to go outside for some air. "You can talk to him about it," she told Gracie. "I'm going to go outside for a moment." She looked at Andrew. "Meet me outside?"

He nodded. "I'll go tell Allie." He held his hand out towards Gracie. "C'mon, kid."

Gracie took Picard's hand. "Now I have to introduce you to my sister," she said, leading him down the stairs. Beverly gratefully left them behind and exited the room, taking a short walk around the building. The snow crunched softly under her feet, now hardening again as the sun had been hidden by moisture-laden clouds. The silence wrapped around her, as comforting as an old blanket.

"You're running away from something," Deanna said from behind her, ripping away the blanket.

"Yes," Beverly couldn't deny it. She kept walking, wishing Deanna wouldn't follow.

The counselor caught up to her, fell into step beside her. "You don't want to talk about it?"

"I do, actually," the doctor replied. "But I can't." She stopped walking and leaned against the building.

Troi's brow furrowed. "The captain's very concerned about you."

"I know." Beverly dug her toe into the snow under her feet.

"I think he's also very taken by Gracie," she said.

The pang of fear shot through the doctor before she could control it.

“There,” Deanna said. “That fear again.”

Beverly closed her eyes. She heard Deanna’s footsteps, coming closer, stopping just in front of her.

“Beverly, who are they?” Deanna asked, her voice dropping to a whisper.

The doctor kept her eyes closed. The longer she kept them closed, the longer she could avoid looking her friend in the eye, the longer she could keep everything from coming apart. She bit her lip.

“They’re yours aren’t—.” The counselor let the question go unfinished as they both heard the voices of the children and the captain coming around the corner.

“What’s this boy’s name?” Andrew was asking.

“I’m not telling you,” Allie replied.

The group came around the bend. Gracie shot forward and hugged the doctor around the legs. “Allie likes a boy,” she said.

“Does she?” Beverly asked, opening her eyes. Deanna had stepped aside to let Gracie near the doctor.

“I do not,” Allie said, defensiveness creeping into her voice. “He likes *me*. I don’t know if I like him.”

“I don’t know if I like him,” said Andrew, frowning. “I haven’t heard good things about him.” He shifted the long fencing bag on his shoulder. “We should go home and get lunch.”

“Do you feel like you need to protect your sister?” Deanna asked.

The simple question caused both Andrew and Allie to burst into laughter. “Allie has beaten up more boys than I have,” Andrew said, then got serious. “I just tend to want the best for the people in my life, is all. And I don’t think I like this guy.”

Allie rolled her eyes. “Before I know it, you’re going to turn into some overbearing Neanderthal,” she said.

“I prefer the term ‘barbarian’,” Andrew replied.

“Well, barbarian,” Allie said. “Maybe you need to brush up on your skills so that next time, both Caldos teams can take first.”

Andrew glared at her. “Fine. Maybe I *will* pay this boy a visit.”

Allie glared back. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Is that a challenge?” he asked.

Beverly smiled at the lighthearted exchange, one fraught with the familiarity of arguments constantly underway. The banter continued as the group made their way towards the cottage. Gracie had taken the captain’s hand and was chattering away. Deanna sidled up next to Beverly, the two of them bringing up the rear of the group.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Beverly said before Deanna could say a word. Above them, the clouds began to release their hold on winter, and tiny flakes of snow floated lazily around them.

“It’s snowing!” Gracie shouted, bringing a soft chuckle from Picard.

“Andrew and Gracie,” Deanna said, so softly that no one but Beverly would be able to hear, “Have the captain’s eyes.”

Chapter 6

Beverly Crusher felt the flush work its way from the tips of her toes through the roots of her hair. Her friend knew, had figured it out that quickly. She ignored the empath beside her, coming to grips with her own thoughts and feelings on the matter. Dread crept throughout her body, following the warm path of the blushing with tendrils of a chilling cold. Before her, she watched as her youngest walked hand in hand with her father, blissfully unaware of her relationship to the man. And the man, Beverly knew there was no telling how long he'd remain unaware, either through his own deductions or by Deanna's information.

"How did you know?" Beverly breathed.

The counselor took a moment to hook her arm through Beverly's in a gesture of reassurance. "I figured it out once I knew what I was looking for."

The doctor briefly closed her eyes. "What if I deny it?"

Troi looked significantly at Crusher, then moved her gaze to the people walking in front of them, Andrew and Allie walking together, going over the events of the tournament, the captain and Gracie talking away. From behind, their features weren't as apparent. For that, Beverly was grateful, so that they didn't serve to reinforced Deanna's conclusions. It was then, walking in the whispering snowfall beside her best friend, with her three children walking in front of them, and the man she still loved at the head of the crowd, that Beverly allowed herself to think in the forefront of her mind the idea she'd held manacled to the back. *I could resign from Starfleet.*

A solution as simple as choosing a bagel for her morning meal over a croissant. Her grandmother's death had left an opening in the small community for a healer. She had a home awaiting her, three children, all of whom she could "adopt" making no one the wiser. In front of her, she imagined Jean-Luc's form disappearing. He'd be gone, out of her life. She couldn't imagine he'd go quietly, quite the opposite, really. Kicking and screaming, except it would be the Picard type of kicking and screaming. A seriousness with such gravity that you felt compelled to listen, felt guilty at even causing that seriousness. Like a big giant's hand of the pressure he felt dropped on your own shoulders, and it was all you could do to keep your knees from buckling. When she imagined the captain disappearing, Gracie's arm had fallen to her side, her body not as spire-like as before. The little girl would lose him, too. Beverly would take him away from them, excising him from their lives before he could spread his roots and become more firmly a part of them.

Of course, he already was. Allie and her seriousness, the absolute devotion to which she gave to her pursuits, the child who would fall to logic rather than flights of fancy and story telling. Beverly could continue Allie's interest in riding to her grandfather, but shackled alongside her idea of resignation had been the acknowledgment that Allie had also gotten that interest from her father. Then so-serious Allie would have the brief moments of delight at poking fun at her brother or sister, disguised at first in her stolid

manner. And once that manner was broken, Allie would revel in being at ease with those who knew her best. She devoted all she had to her study of veterinary medicine, wanting to become a vet as quickly as she could, knowing it was exactly what she was meant to do. Nothing would deter her from her goal. So much like Jean-Luc had been in his determinate to become a starship captain.

Then enigmatic Andrew. On the surface, he seemed more like Beverly than his twin sister. His wit was sharp and frighteningly accurate. A natural storyteller, Nana had on so many occasions told Beverly the tales he'd make up for his younger sister, or the tales he'd tell his twin sister to get out of a jam. But the stories kept his true self hidden, more under lock and key than his serious sister. He told no one of his own dreams, instead changing the subject with such a wild tale that he'd have those who'd asked him in stitches, making them forget that they'd tried to get closer to him. He'd inherited genes from the Howards, long legs making him taller than his father already. Where Wesley had taken so long to fill out from being the all arms and legs teenager, Andrew's physique had developed quickly, wrapped in lean muscle like his father's. Yet Andrew wasn't imposing to those who knew him, those whom he let inside his walls. The boy was his little sister's hero. Gentle, incredibly gentle, as Beverly had been privy to at Nana's funeral. She realized why Andrew kept so many people at arm's length—like his father, he sought to protective his sensitive nature. And little Gracie, so disarming and filled with kindness, was safe to both of them.

Gracie. She could get anyone to talk with her. The moment she began to speak, people were instantly at ease. Unlike her fiery elder siblings, she could create a sense of peace among a group of people. Beverly was continually amazed at how quickly people trusted her. Even her attempts at whispering reflected her openness. Nothing needed to be a secret because she believed no one would hurt another. Simple for her, because she never even entertained the thought of deliberately causing another being pain. Nana had told her a story of one of Allie's horses being injured. The horse's intestines had twisted inside its abdomen and the horse was in excruciating pain before the vet could arrive and fix him. Gracie had gone out to the barn with her sister, only four at the time. As Allie separated herself from her horse's pain by becoming distinctly technical about it, Gracie had gone and placed her hand on the horse's head, just below the ear. She spoke softly to it, calmed it during the time it took for the vet to arrive. Once the vet arrived, the little girl had gone snuffling into the house, tears leaving streaks in the dirt caked on her face. Felisa had automatically folded the child into her arms, and the four year old let out the pain she'd felt from the horse.

A bark jerked Beverly out of her thoughts. They'd arrived at the small house, Gracie had opened the door, letting the excited Conal outside to greet his humans. Picard reacted with much more calm than the counselor, taking the large dog, a dog big enough to be a small pony, in stride.

The doctor realized that her friend hadn't said a word since Beverly's last question. As if the verbal observation had been enough for now. Certainly enough, Crusher figured, to send her own thoughts up into a tiny storm. Perhaps the storm had

been Deanna's goal. Inside, the group separated, the adults heading for the kitchen while Allie and Andrew put away their fencing gear, Gracie trying to cajole the two into letting her see their medals. Without asking the others, Beverly put a pot of water on to boil. Nana had a replicator for days when she was in a hurry, but the doctor found something comforting in pouring water into the old teapot, giving her hands something constructive to do, however momentary.

When the three had entered the kitchen, door swinging behind them, the captain's demeanor had changed. From the lighthearted expression he'd had during his conversation with Gracie, to the concerned seriousness that Beverly had done her best to avoid. The statement he said first surprised the doctor, so different than his facial expression. "Your cousin," he said, "The little one. She is enchanting."

For a moment, fear trickled past her throat, threatening to take hold. Had his expression changed because he suspected Gracie's true parentage? Beverly's hand trembled slightly as she placed the tea bags down on the granite countertop.

"That she is," Deanna said, settling down into a chair across from Picard. "If I didn't know better, Captain, I'd think you were getting more comfortable around children."

He gave a slight smile. "Perhaps it has to do with seven years of commanding a ship with so many of them on it. Or," he said, sliding a glance towards the doctor, "It's only those children related to our ship's doctor with whom I feel comfortable."

Cold dread began to wrap around her neck. He couldn't know. She looked over at Deanna, but the counselor's serene visage revealed nothing.

"Howards are always enchanting, Captain," Beverly said, her light tone hiding the depth of emotion she felt.

"It seems that red hair does run in your family," he said. "It seems nearly all Howards have some sort of red. Except Allie, for the moment."

She did have an answer for that. "Oh, there's a child in every generation with hair as dark as hers," she said. "My ancestor, the first we can trace back to in Scotland in the seventeenth century, her oldest daughter had hair just the color of Allie's. And Nana has many photographs, somewhere around here, of other ancestors of ours. Many, many redheads, and every generation or so, there's one Howard with nearly black hair." In fact, it hadn't been Allie's hair that worried her when it came to the children's parentage being revealed. Instead, it was Andrew's. She'd hoped it would darken a bit as he got older, turning a darker auburn like Gracie's, but it hadn't. When Beverly had seen photographs of Jean-Luc's nephew Rene, seen the boy's sandy colored hair, she had remembered the captain telling her what happened to so many Picards. As children, they were towheads much of the time, then as they got older, half had their hair darken to chestnut, while half stayed fair haired. Andrew's, unfortunately, had not darkened into auburn. Thankfully, it had also not darkened to chestnut, what Beverly most feared.

Instead, it stayed the same, and at least in the winter, it carried enough red that he'd be taken as purely Howard.

"With those big blue eyes," Deanna said, "She looks almost like those elves in old Earth stories my father used to tell me or read to me from picture books when I was a child."

Beverly nodded. "Sometimes, the older folks around here would refer to her as one of the fairy people."

Picard's brow furrowed. "I thought the fairy people were tales from Ireland," he said.

"Yes," Beverly answered, "But remember, some of the population of Scotland came over from Ireland long before it became Scotland. The stories traveled with the people."

"Oh yes, that's right," he said. "So how did your cousins end up in your grandmother's care? Are Howards just cursed to have their parents die while they are young?"

A curse flew into the doctor's thoughts, though not the type of curse the captain had referred to. She couldn't decipher whether the captain asked the questions with the goal of exposing who these children were to him, or whether it was his natural curiosity. The teapot whistled its piercing readiness and Beverly jumped. "Tea?" she asked her friends. They nodded. She handed them mugs and readied herself for another question from Picard, renewing what he had asked only moments before.

Then a shout came from the living room. "I'll die before I say uncle!" Andrew's strong voice. The adults abandoned their tea and made their way into the front room.

On the floor, Allie had pinned Andrew in what looked like a nearly impossible physical position, also looking particularly painful. The grimace on Andrew's face confirmed Beverly's supposition of pain. "I won't say it," he continued.

"Yes, you will," Allie said. "Or you can stay like this forever."

"Forever it is."

Gracie rolled her eyes, opened the front door, and called for Conal. The gray dog bounded inside and started barking at the two combatants on the floor. At first they tried to ignore him, but he walked up to them, growling, nudging with his head, pushing with his paws, barking in their ears, licking their faces. Finally, the two separated before the dog made them deaf. Conal sat between them, tail wagging.

"Nana said that Conal was a blessing," Gracie said. "He's the only one that could make them stop fighting."

Beverly looked at Allie. The girl sighed. "It's true. When we were just eight, Nana came home to Andrew having me pinned and me shouting that I'd die before I said uncle. She insists she had a hell of a time trying to separate us, and once we were separated, keeping us from trying to kill each other again."

Conal barked. Allie glared at him.

Inwards, Beverly ached. Her grandmother hadn't told her that story, hadn't mentioned the two having such a rivalry, or being so stubborn that they refused to give in to the other. Not that it surprised her, considering their parents. Yet she should have known that story of their early childhood, their current story of Andrew's peacekeeper of a dog.

"A dog like Conal could come in handy during negotiations, then," Picard said.

Allie laughed, a bell like sound that Beverly had missed. She nearly let out a sigh of relief, it seemed the excitement had caused Picard to forget his previous line of questioning. Then came the captain's next comment. "Since you all showed me such a good competition and brought me into your home, I thought I'd extend the invitation for you to take a tour of the *Enterprise*."

Beverly tried to influence their decision in her head. Say no. Say no, say no, say no.

Of course, being who they were, they immediately said yes.

Deanna shot Beverly another one of her looks. Crusher figured that in the past twenty-four hours, she'd been on receiving end of enough of those particular looks to earn a lifetime free pass of having to answer any probing questions. Because Deanna didn't believe in those types of passes, Beverly ignored her friend. Idly, she wondered if she ignored Troi long enough, that the counselor herself would need counseling by the complex she must be developing.

In answer, the doctor felt another look burning into the back of her head. At this rate, her neck would bear some serious charred marks.

"I have to go feed and tend to the horses first," Allie said. "Then I'll be ready to go."

"You have horses?" Jean-Luc asked, perking up like a small child.

"Yes," Allie replied. "Right now we've got four."

"Would it be too much trouble to take a ride before going up to the ship?" the captain asked.

"Not at all," Allie said. "I haven't gone in a few days, so I'd love to go."

Gracie jumped up. "Can I go too?"

"I didn't know you knew how to ride," Beverly said.

"I learned last year," Gracie answered, then looked over at her sister.

"Sure," Allie said, getting up. "Go change while I change." She turned to the captain. "What about you?"

"I'll beam up to the ship and do the same. I'll also get my saddle."

"You have your own saddle?" Andrew asked, a smirk pulling on the edges of his face.

The captain drew himself up into his very serious posture, prepared to give the answer that the *Enterprise* crew had heard several times.

Deanna supplied it before the captain could. "Of course he does. Every serious rider has their own saddle. It's common knowledge."

Andrew raised an eyebrow at the counselor, trying to gauge if she was really serious about her answer, then grinned. "Of course it is," he said, matching his seriousness to the counselor's.

Beverly's eyes widened every so slightly. It was that tone of voice that she'd just heard from Andrew, a tone she heard so many times on the ship under Picard's command, whenever the captain sought to communicate the utmost dignity. The doctor glanced sidelong at Deanna and saw recognition on the counselor's face.

As for the captain, his face didn't betray if he'd recognized the voice or not. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, then beamed up to the ship. Gracie and Allie had already gone upstairs to change.

"You aren't going?" Deanna asked Andrew.

Andrew shook his head. "Not much of a riding fan. I mean, I can ride, but there's other things I'd rather do."

"I completely understand," Deanna replied.

Twenty minutes later, the trio of riders had trooped off to the barn and made their way into the woods on horseback. At first, Beverly felt relief run off the fear that had taken hold inside her. With the captain gone, his recent tack on questioning went with him. Then Deanna spoke up again. "Did you want in any help in sorting through all the boxes?" she asked. "I'm interested in seeing all those old photographs and recollections of your family's history," she said to Beverly.

The counselor. Beverly cursed under her breath. She hadn't cursed this much since exam time in medical school.

"I heard that," Andrew said.

"How about you and your super sensitive ears take a trip down into our cellar and bring up a couple of Nana's boxes."

Andrew blanched. "Beverly, there's spiders down there."

She gave him a sweet smile. "I know."

His brow crinkled in annoyance, then he turned and went down the old stairs, muttering obscenities about his cousin the entire way down. Beverly sat in one of the armchairs, then noticed the fire hadn't been lit. She got back up, retrieved some logs from the stand near the fireplace.

"That wasn't very nice," Deanna observed.

"Serves him right for having hearing like that," Beverly said, setting the logs next to her on the granite stones that were in front of the fireplace. Then she reached over and pulled kindling from another bin and arranged it.

"That look he gave you, just before he went downstairs," Deanna said.

Beverly cut her off before the counselor could say it aloud. "I know."

Deanna continued anyway. "It's the same look I've seen the captain give you when you've annoyed him. I know he's given others that same look. It's the way his forehead crinkles, and there's this wrinkle of...honestly, it's got to be pure annoyance, right above the bridge of his nose."

Finished with the kindling, the doctor reached for the logs beside her and began stacking them. Building up a tiny wall. The bark felt rough underneath the pads of her fingers, as rough as Jean-Luc's voice had been saying good bye to her after dinner, the one they'd shared after their experience on Kesprytt.

"Perhaps we should be afraid." Her own words cutting her nearly as deeply as it had him. She knew he interpreted her reply as afraid of a relationship between the two of them, a real relationship that carried into the every day, one of care and comfort, love and respect, arguments and apologies. That wasn't what she feared, in fact, she wanted that relationship with nearly the entirety of her heart. Except a relationship like that, one she wished for and he apparently did as well, would require full honesty.

And she couldn't be. It had been hard enough on the planet, with those mind links, to keep from even a passing thought about the three children on Caldos. Dreaming of her grandmother's vegetable soup had been damn close enough. Yet that night, with the fire crackling before them, hearing his thoughts, then the question had

run out of her mouth, giving caution the finger on its way out. *“Why didn’t you ever tell me you were in love with me?”*

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t known. She’d always been fairly certain of it. Had he ever told her exactly what he felt, exactly what she felt from him right then, she knew she would’ve told him. But by then, it was too late, and she couldn’t tell him. So she’d gone along with the facade they both presented of being friends, only friends, that nothing had happened between them in the past, and nothing would happen between them in the future. Nothing.

She groped around for a match.

“You must be their guardian now,” Deanna said.

Beverly nodded, finding the box of matches.

“What are you going to do? This fear from you that I keep sensing, you couldn’t survive it every day on the *Enterprise*.”

The doctor struck a match, tossed it into the paper below the kindling. The infant fire began to eat away at the paper, crawling closer to the kindling. *I’ll resign*, she thought, saying nothing aloud.

“Do they know?” Deanna asked.

Beverly struck another match, threw it in. The fire took hold of the kindling. *Of course they don’t, they’d be as angry as Jean-Luc would be, learning that I had deceived them all.*

“They don’t,” Deanna said.

The fire licked at the logs, at the tiny wall Beverly had built minutes before.

“Have you ever told him how you feel?” the counselor asked.

And the fire roared to life, sending smoke up the chimney, throwing heat into the living room. Beverly stared into it, the dancing flames reflected in her pupils. “I can’t,” she said. “And you know it.” She bit her lip. Damn her friend, damn all of them.

“I don’t think he’d be as angry as you must imagine. He’s a very perceptive man, he’s going to start putting two and two together. I already wonder if he has, even subconsciously. Asking you those questions earlier.”

So he did suspect, in the most basic, hidden areas of his brain. Areas able to pick up small details and start assembling a puzzle he hadn’t realize was a puzzle. She lit another match and flicked it in, despite the already healthy fire blazing away. Yet the hottest flames of the fire before her wouldn’t be able to rid her of the chill that sprinted up her spine. He’d be able to find more pieces, as he was probably doing so in that

moment, riding with Allie and Gracie. More bits awaited him, when they'd go to the *Enterprise*. When the three children interacted with the crew, saw him on a day to day basis. Gracie would continue to push for them to get together. Aloud, she said, "He can't know."

"I don't know how much longer you'll be able to keep this to yourself," Deanna said, speaking so quietly that the pop of a sap pocket nearly washed away her words.

The gentleness of the tone made it no less poignant. She could keep the secret much longer if she resigned. Let go of everything on the *Enterprise*, everything to do with Starfleet, with traveling across the galaxy. Let go to all of those things that had become her life and hold on to the life she could have here, on Caldos.

Heavy footsteps plodded up the stairs from the cellar. Andrew nudged open the door with his shoulder and dropped two boxes soundly onto the floor. "I *think* these are them," he said, dusting off his arms and rubbing his hand through his hair. "And I don't think any spiders tagged along." The boy slid the two boxes over to the wide area in front of the hearth. The three of them began sorting through them, pulling out old photographs, piles of paper, drawings, letters, journals.

Beverly had a stack of photographs in her hand, studying them one by one before setting them aside. Then she came across on photograph she nearly dropped. Nana must have taken it before she left Delos IV with Gracie. How could her grandmother have done this? Beverly had been incredibly conscientious in making sure none of the many photographs Felisa took had been with any of the children in their infancy. Pictures like that could lead people down the path of supposition that Deanna had already taken and arrived at the revealing end. It felt almost like a betrayal, looking at this intimate photo of Beverly and Gracie. They had fallen asleep on the biobed, the infant Gracie in Beverly's arms. Faces relaxed in respite, they mirrored one another, practically proving that they were in fact mother and daughter, and not cousins.

"What's that picture?" Andrew asked. "You've been staring at it for ages. It must be a good one."

Beverly's eyes widened. How long has she been looking at it? "Oh, just an old shot," she said.

"Can I see it?" he asked.

"No, no, it's embarrassing," Beverly said, panic causing her grip on the photograph to tighten, nearly wrinkling the paper.

Andrew grinned wickedly. "All the more reason to see it," he said. "Come on, you've seen plenty of embarrassing photos of me."

"That's only because all photographs of you are embarrassing," Beverly replied.

Andrew's hand went above his heart in mock pain. "That stings, Beverly," he said. "The pain! How will I ever recover?"

"The condition is terminal," the doctor said, pocketing the photograph. "And incurable. I'm afraid you're entirely out of luck."

"Some doctor *you* are," he said, going back to rummaging through the box in front of him.

The back door clattered open. The three got up to see Allie walking back inside, taking off her jacket. "Where are the other two?" Beverly asked.

"Little people walk really slow," Allie replied. "They're outside in the yard." She put her jacket on a hook and went over to the replicator. Leaving Deanna and Andrew in the living room, Beverly stepped out the back door, hugging her arms around her for warmth. She saw the captain and Gracie standing in the middle of the yard. They faced away from her, towards the forest, but looking up. They didn't notice Beverly's presence.

"Is every snowflake really different?" Gracie asked.

"Yes," the captain answered.

"How come?"

"You see," he said, Beverly hearing the tone he took when gearing up for a story. "A man in the sky once created the first snowflake. When he saw what he had made, he realized its beauty, as did all the others around him. Now, he knew he had to make more, because he had been given the task of creating snow, all starting with that one snowflake. But he couldn't bear to diminish the beauty of that first snowflake by making any others just like it. So he made another, different, but equally as beautiful. And so he continued, all the snowflakes beautiful but unique." His hand brushed the top of Gracie's head. The girl had taken her hat off, something she did as soon as she was out of sight of grownups that made her wear it in the first place. "I've heard that little girls are all made that same way. Each one different, but equally as pretty."

"Captain," Gracie said, accusing. "You're in love with all the girls!"

"I am not," he said, indignant.

"You said they're all pretty!"

"No. I said all *little* girls are pretty. Like you."

"Do you think Beverly is pretty?" Gracie asked.

The doctor held her breath.

“No,” said Picard, giving no explanation.

A comment like he would give to her whenever he was trying to get a rise out of her. All because when she asked questions and knew the answer, he liked to give her a good shock before admitting the truth. The tactic worked nearly every time. Beverly held her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing aloud as Gracie turned on the captain, hands on her hips. “Why not?”

Humor tinged his voice as he turned to face the girl, placing his hands on his hips to mirror Gracie’s posture. Crusher’s sides shook in silent laughter, tears in her eyes. Picard spoke. “Because she is not a little girl.” He paused, and when he spoke next, his tone had gotten rough. “And she is beautiful.”

“You should tell her,” Gracie said, then ran into the house, not noticing the doctor leaning against the wall of the house, hands now in her pockets, trying to get warm.

The captain saw her. “I think I just did,” he said, the words dropping between them, heavier than the snow, yet soundless on the ground. He didn’t move from his spot in the yard.

She wanted to go to him. Wanted to go to him, recklessly fall into his arms, tell him thank you, tell him she loved him. Then she felt the side of the photograph as it brushed against her fingers, made its way into her palm, crushed when her hand went into a fist of frustration. Beverly turned and went inside, leaving the captain standing in the middle of the backyard, gray clouds above, white snow below, and every heated word he wanted to say caught in his throat.

Chapter 7

When Beverly Crusher materialized in the transporter room of the *Enterprise*, the familiarity of the ship brushed over her, a recognition of her home. *No, not my home. I left my home on the planet below us, that is my home now.* Yet she still felt at home aboard the ship as the group made their way out of the transporter room. Beverly observed her children carefully, watching how they each reacted to being on a starship for the first time. They'd all been in space, but they had never been on a Starfleet vessel, much less a Galaxy-class starship.

Allie seemed nonplussed over the entire matter. For her, a ship couldn't hold her interest for long. Space travel was a means to an end, a way for her to get where she needed to be. Her idea of exploration remained with understanding animals and how to heal them, not in flying through the stars. She walked next to the counselor, asking her questions that Beverly couldn't hear.

Up ahead, Gracie maintained her hold on the captain. Now the questions she threw at him were about the ship, about space, about what it was like to be a captain. As they made their way to the turbolift, her gray eyes were opened as wide as she could get them, taking in every detail of the ship. Occasionally, she'd turn around and make faces at Andrew, who walked beside Beverly.

As for Andrew, Beverly had a hard time figuring out if he was incredibly interested in the ship or didn't care about the ship at all. He didn't say much, and anything he asked was in a very hushed tone. His attention seemed to be on everything and nothing all at once. The boy didn't notice his little sister making faces at him. Shrugged off comments from Beverly about the *Enterprise*. Then she remembered Gracie's comment to Deanna, about Andrew really wanting to see the ship. Suddenly, his behavior made sense—he was hiding his interest, almost with a desperation. Beverly couldn't fathom why. She wrestled with the urge to take him aside, speak to him about what scared him about letting others know his dreams. But, at the same time, she knew exactly what scared people about revealing dreams. Sometimes, you got scared that those dreams would hurt others, that the very dreams that you held dear could cause someone else to hate you for them.

She knew a lot about those kinds of dreams.

Before they reached the turbolift, Deanna excused herself from the group. They had barely entered the turbolift when Geordi LaForge's voice carried over Picard's communicator. "LaForge to Captain Picard," he said.

Picard tapped his communicator. "Picard here."

"Captain, Data and I have some readings from the planet's weather modification net that we'd like to discuss with you. Could you come down to engineering so we can brief you?"

With a slight grimace, Picard said, "On my way, Commander. Picard out."

Gracie glared up at the captain. "You're ditching us."

"I most certainly am not," he said.

"I don't know, Captain," said Allie. "Seems like you going to Engineering and leaving us with Beverly is a lot like ditching."

"See," said Gracie.

Picard sighed. "I will make it up to you, I promise," he said. "I will meet you for dinner in Ten-Forward if I have to ditch every other person on this ship. Understood?"

Gracie nodded. "Good."

Picard fought a smile. "Your cousin is completely capable of giving you a tour of the ship herself, and you'll be allowed to see whatever parts of the ship that she sees fit to show you."

The little girl followed him when he exited the turbolift in Engineering. Shrugging, the rest of the group followed her lead. The captain stopped short of the main section of Engineering. "I think I'm being followed," he said, knowing that Gracie was a scant three paces behind him.

"I thought you could tell us about Engineering since you're here, then you can stay and we can keep touring," Gracie said, matter-of-fact.

"Sounds like an order," Picard said, rubbing his chin.

"Wouldn't disobey it if I were you," Andrew muttered.

The captain turned, eyebrow raised. "What was that?"

Andrew looked at him. "Disobeying an order from that munchkin is generally a bad idea. She'll make your life miserable." Then Andrew seemed to get a better idea. "Actually, disobeying an order from any Howard woman usually turns out to be a bad idea."

Allie punched him in the arm.

Picard nodded. "I know exactly what you mean."

Beverly shot the captain a look of her own.

Gracie took Picard's hand. "Come on, Captain." Once in the main room, the captain introduced the group to Geordi and Data. Allie fell back and talked with Beverly as Andrew and Gracie followed the Chief Engineer around the deck, eyes barely able to

stay off the thrumming warp core. As Beverly watched them, Gracie now holding her brother's hand, she wished she could provide them with what they obviously wished for—to be on a starship. Where Allie had her roots firmly entrenched in the ground, already knowing that a planet was where she belonged, Andrew and Gracie already had their heads in the stars. More so than her brother and sister, Allie's choice was a reflection of her heritage. Not only was she so much like her great-grandfather, she was also like her grandfather on Jean-Luc's side. Tied to the soil, content to raise crops of grapes and produce outstanding vintages of wine. Jean-Luc had followed his heart into the stars, unlike his brother Robert, the children's uncle. Allie would get along with him so well, understanding the choices he had made better than Jean-Luc could, perhaps even serve as a bridge between the two men.

But that could never be. Instead, Allie would remain on Caldos with her family. Andrew and Gracie would stay on the planet, staring up at the stars instead of playing amongst them. Beverly knew she was the one taking these things away from them all. The doctor realized Allie was talking about riding with the captain.

"He's not so bad at all. Like Wesley had said in his letters, the man really warms up once he gets to know you and relaxes. He knows so much, too. Not just about starships and things, but he reads a lot, like we do. We talked about *Beowulf*," she grinned.

Beverly grinned back. "Let me guess, he likes your translation better than Andrew's."

Allie shook her head. "Not exactly. It's like he understood where we were both coming from, explaining to me that we each appreciated different aspects of the work, and our choices in translation reflect that. That Andrew loves a good story, language that's formed well, and that I prefer accuracy and historical detail over an engaging tale in any language. And that either view wasn't necessarily better than the other, just different."

"He's a wise man," Beverly said.

"Yeah," said Allie. "So what's the deal with him and you?"

Beverly raised an eyebrow. "The deal?"

"Oh, come on. Don't play ignorant. There's *something* there. The way he looks at you when he thinks no one's looking. The way you look at him when *you* think no one's listening. You'd have to be stupid not to see it."

You'd have to be stupid to throw it away, Beverly thought. "Maybe I am stupid," she said aloud.

Allie snorted in derision. "Sure. You're avoiding the question."

Beverly made her face as straight as she could possibly get it. "I have no idea what you're talking about." Then she summoned Andrew and Gracie over to release the officers from their grasp and let the two commanders go about briefing the captain, also effectively throwing Allie off the path of her questioning. Beverly decided to first take them to an observation lounge, so they could see the planet from orbit, and see the stars when they didn't twinkle.

The moment the lounge doors opened, Andrew and Gracie bolted to one of the large transparent aluminum windows. "You could almost touch it," Gracie said.

Andrew crouched down to Gracie's level. "Almost," he said.

"The stars don't wink at you up here," she said.

"That's because they don't think you're pretty," Andrew replied.

Gracie pushed her brother. "Captain Picard thinks I'm pretty," she said.

"The captain's in love with all the girls," Andrew said, trying to hide a smile with very little success.

"No. I think he only loves one." That matter-of-fact tone again.

"Is he your paramour now?"

Gracie looked over at Andrew. "A para-what?"

He sighed, eyes remaining on the view before him. "Paramour. Remember, when I told you the story about Tristan and Isolde, or even about King Arthur, with Lancelot and Gwenivere?"

"I remember," she said. "He's not my paramour. He's *Beverly's*."

The comment drew the boy's eyes away from the stars to face his sister. "Is that so?"

She nodded solemnly and turned her attention back to the stars. "I wish we could stay up here forever," she said quietly.

Andrew said nothing.

From their spot close to the door, Beverly and Allie could hear everything. Gracie continued to chat with Andrew as the two kept looking outside into space. How had her children ended up so observant? "Andrew thinks the same thing," Allie whispered. Unlike her younger sister, she had a full grasp of what whispering was. Her words reached Beverly's ears alone.

Of course he does. "He told you that?" she asked.

“No. He doesn’t tell anyone anything. But the things he does, that tells everything. Always using his telescope on clear nights, watching comets, studying stars and nebulas in the sky. He had this book that Nana had given him when we were very little. An ancient book, centuries old. It told about the Terran home system, all they knew in the twentieth century, which was practically nothing. Yet Andrew looked at it constantly. Nana and I used to talk about it all the time, when he wasn’t around. Everything’s a secret with him. It’s like he’s embarrassed about wanting to leave Caldos. And I know that’s what he wants. Nana did, too. He’s always been so jealous of Wesley. They wrote each other all the time, Wesley telling him everything about serving on this ship, about the crew, about you, about the captain. He got so pissed at Wes when he got into trouble at the Academy. Managed to get a face-to-face communique and ream him out.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to get Andrew really mad. But when he gets that mad, he doesn’t get loud. He gets...intense. I swear, that intensity gets to you more than any amount of yelling ever would.”

Beverly held in a sigh. Like his father. Wesley must’ve felt like he got a double-dose from Picard, then, between the two of them. She frowned to herself. She’d had no idea that Wes and Andrew had kept in such close contact.

“Andrew said he hasn’t heard from Wes since Nana died,” Allie said.

“Wes is in the middle of exams,” Beverly replied.

Allie nodded. “Exams can’t last forever.”

They could, actually. Exams only took on different forms as you got older, sometimes unrecognizable until you’d already completed them and failed miserably. Watching her younger son and younger daughter stare into the stars, hypnotized by them, she saw two of her failures. Not in either child, but in her decision to keep them spirited away in some ridiculous notion of being able to hide them from their father and their heritage forever.

“So, you and—” Allie started.

“What exactly did Counselor Troi tell you?” Beverly asked, making note to scold her friend soundly later.

“Nothing that you don’t already know,” Allie said with a grin.

Beverly decided it was time to move on with the tour. She showed them Sickbay, the arboretum, shuttlebay, cargo bay, gymnasium, holodeck. They reached stellar cartography. The doctor showed Andrew how to manipulate the controls, but the boy waved her off, saying he could already work the computer. Then he showed her that he did, in fact, know exactly how to operate it. He tapped a bunch of instructions into the panel, keyed one more, and the room sprung into life, starcharts surrounding them, as if they stood in the middle of space.

As the doctor looked around the display, she realized Andrew had shown the path of the *Enterprise* since it had first set off from the Utopia Planitia Shipyards. From Farpoint Station to Vagra Two, Rutia Four to Wolf 359, on and on, every stop, every mission. "He kept track," Allie said.

"Yes," Beverly said.

"He kept track of other things," she whispered. "After his nightmares about the Borg, after he got Conal and was able to sleep, he started reading about Captain Picard. I asked him about it, so many times. Why he read about him, why he tracked the *Stargazer*, every ship Picard had been on." She smiled. "I finally got to him, made him lose his temper, and he told me. Said that because he had nightmares about the thing called Locutus, he had to know the human that Locutus had been, and the human that came back after Locutus was killed. So that he wouldn't have nightmares anymore, because he'd know the person, not the thing."

Beverly nodded. Jean-Luc would have done much the same. Done his best to understand the motivations behind a person, so that he would see the good as much as the bad was obvious.

The display suddenly disappeared. Gracie shouted her dismay as Beverly looked over toward the control panel. Andrew had heard Allie's last comments, his face set determinedly, willing away the hurt and fear he must have felt, determined not to show anyone anything, even when it was spoken aloud by others. Especially so, then. Beverly said nothing to him. Instead, she left the room, and the three others followed, and they made their way to Ten Forward. In the turbolift, Allie and Gracie sensed Andrew's unease and chatted him up, teasing and cajoling, until he began to brighten again. Beverly wondered how her son truly felt about the captain. If he was a reminder of the Borg, or if that had changed, and instead became the Starfleet captain, a hero to so many. The thought brought a memory of the latest Captain Picard Day, and she smiled. Jean-Luc got so flustered at the idea of people seeing him as a hero or role model, as anything more than the person Jean-Luc Picard. When Jean-Luc would deny those other roles he had in other people's lives, he'd become so unlike the staid captain. He would stutter, he face would blush, the tips of his ears would become red, he would search for excuses. Beverly adored him when he got like that. In those moments, she could see the little boy he had been, long before he became the starship captain. The humble man that he truly was, the man she loved.

The man she was removing from her life completely.

The turbolift door opened and they entered Ten Forward. Guinan stood behind the bar, serene and happy, dispensing drinks and advice with equal ease. When they walked inside, Andrew's long legs took him swiftly to one of the viewports. Because the lounge's windows pointed forward, the planet wasn't visible, only the stars stretched out forever. The view held Andrew in thrall.

Gracie went to join him, clambering into a chair just behind the viewport. With a longing glance back at the stars, Andrew settled into a chair that faced the window, Beverly and Allie joining them. One of the servers began to walk towards them, then was intercepted and waved off by Guinan. The El-Aurian sat in the empty seat that waited for the captain. “Now, I know you,” she said to Beverly, her voice calm, soothing. “But you three, I’ve no idea who you are.”

At the sound of her voice, Andrew let his eyes drift away from the stars. “Andrew,” he said. “My name’s Andrew. I’m Beverly’s cousin. Actually, all three of us are.”

The two girls supplied their own names. Beverly watched Guinan’s eyes carefully, searching for any sort of recognition on the bartender’s part. The woman seemed to know everything, and the doctor feared Guinan would have everything figured out in seconds. But Guinan’s expression gave away nothing, impassive.

“And you are?” asked Andrew.

“Guinan,” said the El-Aurian, raising an eyebrow—well, the area where an eyebrow would be if she had them—at Andrew’s question, which had come in the form of a command.

“Are you going to eat with us too?” Gracie asked. “Because if you are, we’ll have to find another seat. The captain is supposed to meet us here.”

“You’re friends of the captain?” Guinan asked, turning to look closely at Gracie.

“Yes. Isn’t everyone?” Gracie asked.

Guinan’s mouth spread into a wide smile. “Some are closer friends than others. I do, however, count Captain Picard as one of my closer friends.” The bartender then took their orders for dinner and drinks and left the table to put them in. Moments later, the captain strode through the doors of Ten Forward. He quickly located them and measured strides brought him to their table. As he greeted them, he sat in the seat recently vacated by Guinan, between Allie and Gracie, his back to the windows.

Beverly glanced over towards the bar, saw Guinan watching them, saw the knowing look now in Guinan’s eyes. The doctor turned back towards the table, her family before her, only Wesley missing. Gracie animatedly telling the captain about the entire tour, Allie glaring at her brother, Andrew, eyes back on the space outside, oblivious to his sister’s glares. The boy’s eyes had gotten that fuzzy look, the one she’d seen on the captain when he looked at the stars outside, when he thought no one else could see him. Like he knew, right then, that he was where he most wanted to be. Gracie, though not as hypnotized as her brother, kept glancing over at the windows. Maybe it was the eyes. Those gray eyes also carried the gene for space exploration, and those who inherited that color were meant to be explorers. She wondered what color Robert’s eyes were, if they really were different from Jean-Luc’s, if any credence

could be given to her theory. She knew that she didn't much care if she were on a starship or planet, starbase or colony, as long as she felt at home. And Allie seemed much the same way, and bore the same blue eyes as her mother.

She wondered exactly what Guinan saw. If she saw four Howards and a Picard, or four Picards and a Howard. Guilt shot through her. None of the children in front of her should be carrying the name of Howard. Rightfully, they were Picards, each of them.

And she would never let them be.

"Andrew, Allie's told me what she wants to do with her life, but you haven't said a word about it. What exactly do you want to do?" the captain asked.

Andrew's attention came quickly back to the table. "Be a pirate," he said, straight faced.

Allie laughed. "Here we go," she said.

Picard played along, and as Andrew and Picard went back and forth, the rest of the table became highly entertained. "What kind of pirate do you plan on being?"

"Seafaring," said Andrew. Both he and the captain maintained their straight faces.

"How long have you wanted to be a seafaring pirate?"

"Since I was six."

"And how did you arrive at this career plan?"

"I figured out I had two of the requisite skills."

"And they would be?"

Andrew finally broke his straight face and grinned. "You see, when I was little, I hated the question of 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I could never come up with a good answer. Then I learned to sail and after that, I learned to fence. Once I learned saber, I figured I had two of the skills necessary to become a pirate, and that became my answer."

"He never gave in," Allie said. "Ever. First he used to get sent to the principal's office, then it became the counselor's office."

"Then they gave up," Andrew said. "But I can use a saber and I can sail, so I think I could be a pirate."

"You know, you could be redbear if you grew a beard," Allie said.

Andrew glared at her. "I'd look more like Kris Kringle."

Gracie laughed. Andrew moved his glare from Allie to Gracie. The little girl only smiled at him. "I'm not afraid of you," she said.

Andrew sighed. "You never were."

"Do you know how to sail as well?" Picard asked Allie.

"In theory," she said.

Picard raised an eyebrow.

Allie let out a sigh of her own and told her story. "Andrew was supposed to teach me how to sail and he did, but in his own special way. I've never liked swimming or being on the water. There we were, out in the middle of the lake, the boat tipping like mad as Andrew kept sheeting in so we'd gain more speed as we tacked upwind. Then, I asked a really stupid question."

"No question is stupid," came Picard's reflexive reply.

"Trust me, this one was, because it gave him an opening. And you never, ever, give a Howard an opening. I turned to my sweet brother and asked, 'What happens if we capsize?' My brother was nice enough to give me an answer." She stopped, glared at Andrew.

Andrew smiled innocently.

"His answer was to capsize, right then and there."

Beverly laughed, she'd never heard that story. Had always wondered about Allie and sailing and why she never went. Bittersweet, to hear it, and realize she should have witnessed it. Picard also laughed. "Then what happened?" he asked.

"I yelled in surprise, of course. Then helped him right the boat, crawled back onto it, helped him sheet in again and start back up."

"And then promptly pushed me overboard," Andrew said. "I cracked my head on the hull on the way down, got a mild concussion, and Allie had to sail the boat back to the dock. Nana was pissed."

"That was the end of my sailing," Allie said.

Laughing, Picard said, "I can't figure out if you two hate each other or love each other."

"Oh, we love each other," Allie said.

"It's why we're both still alive," Andrew finished.

“Not for lack of trying,” said Beverly. “Honestly, the letters I’d get from Nana. And that incident with the tarantula.”

“I’ve always considered tarantulas to be among the most disturbing of Earth’s fauna,” Guinan said, appearing with a tray of drinks, a server carrying a tray of food right behind her. “I’d love to hear the story about the tarantula.”

As they ate dinner, they told the story about the tarantula. The captain told them stories of he and his brother when they were boys, of chasing after his older brother with a cast iron frying pan, taking a swing at Robert and knocking over a vase instead, breaking it on the floor. Or when Robert chased Jean-Luc down the paths between the vines, the smaller Jean-Luc cutting through a crack in the vines, his brother trying to follow, and knocking down the entire row, drawing the ire of their father. Beverly didn’t recall the captain telling these stories to Wesley. She’d heard them, certainly, but couldn’t recall Wes ever hearing them. Even after the group had finished eating, they continued talking away until the captain’s commbadge chirped. “Bridge to Captain Picard,” said Will Riker’s voice.

“Picard here.”

“Sir, we’ve recorded some significant changes in the weather patterns on the planet, I think you should come take a look at them.”

“On my way,” the captain replied. He looked at the group, met Gracie’s withering stare. “What?” he said.

“You’re ditching us again,” she said.

“You’re assuming that,” Picard replied.

“Well, you’re going up to the bridge, we’re not allowed up there, and so you’ll be leaving us.”

“Who said you aren’t allowed on the bridge?” the captain asked the little girl.

“I believe you said that,” Beverly teased him.

Picard looked up, shocked. “I said that?”

“Yes. I believe your words were,” she paused, drawing herself up into a posture of utmost dignity, setting her face as stony as the captain’s had been back then, and continued, imitating his voice and cadence as best she could. “Children are not allowed on the bridge, Doctor.”

Gracie burst into giggles. “You sounded just like him!”

“Sounds quite rude,” Picard said.

“Quite,” said Beverly.

“Well, then I certainly have to make up for it.” He stood. “Shall we?” Motioning for the group to follow, they did, and left Ten Forward. Once the lift had reached the bridge, Gracie bolted out, followed by Andrew and Captain Picard. Even Allie, who had been mostly disinterested in the inner workings of the starship, showed some awe.

Commander Riker came up the ramp from the command center. “You didn’t mention you’d be bringing company,” he said to the captain.

“Slipped my mind,” Picard said, then introduced the three to Riker. He asked the commander to show them the bridge. He turned to Beverly. “Doctor, could I see you in my ready room?”

Her first instinct was to say no, absolutely not. Yet he was, after all, her commanding officer for the time being. “Yes.” Leaving the three children behind in the capable hands of Will Riker, she trailed the captain into his office just off the bridge.

Picard went straight to the replicator. “Tea, Earl Grey, Hot.” He looked over at Beverly, who had seated herself on the couch. “Do you want anything?”

“No.” She couldn’t possibly drink anything. Her mind ran itself in circles trying to figure out why the captain wished to speak with her. To ask about the children? To shout at her regarding their conversation earlier?

“I wanted to update you on the situation on Caldos,” he said, relieving her fears for the moment. “The weather modification net has suffered some serious problems, hence all the snow,” he pointed out. She *had* wondered about that. Winters on Caldos usually weren’t as snowy as the current one. “Geordi and Data are working on correcting the problem, but aren’t sure how long it will take until they can figure out exactly what’s wrong. It’s something to keep in mind while you’re on the planet, so you don’t put yourself in any undue danger by getting caught in a storm unprepared.”

“Right,” she said, and nothing else.

The captain set his teacup down, then sat on the edge of his desk. “I don’t like this,” he said.

“It isn’t snowing up here,” Beverly said, fending him off, willing him not to pry. She avoided his eyes, knowing that they had been taken by the soft concern he held for her.

“You know very well that wasn’t what I was referring to.”

She said nothing.

“I’m surprised you’d never told me about your cousins before,” he said.

"I didn't think you'd want to know." About cousins of hers, maybe. But that they were his children, he'd want to know, he'd want to know everything about them. Already he was learning about them, as much as he could, and he only saw them as Beverly's cousins, nothing more. So she continued to tell herself.

He frowned. "Of course I would. You're important to me, and so is your family."

This part of my family is more important to you than you realize. The current subject bothered her more than speaking with him about their quasi-relationship, one which she sought to make a non-relationship. She shifted in her spot on the couch. "I didn't realize," she said, looking at him.

A mistake. His eyes not only graced her with his concern, but now held hurt masking over love she knew was there and saw through small cracks in the pain she had caused. "Didn't you?" he asked. And she saw it, that look, the one she last saw, lit by the small fire in the night on Kesprytt.

"I never knew you felt that way."

"Didn't you?"

"...but I had no idea how strongly you felt...why didn't you ever tell me you were in love with me?"

He had in so many ways and she continued to deny it, deny him. In her silence, he'd moved from his perch on the desk to a seat next to her. "Beverly?" he said. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she said, too quickly.

He frowned. "You don't seem yourself."

"I think Nana's death is hitting me harder than I thought." It was, in a sense.

Picard reached out, caressed her cheek, drew her closer.

She closed her eyes. "Don't do this," she whispered. "Please, Jean-Luc. Just leave it alone."

"I can't," he said, his voice now becoming hoarse.

Opening her eyes, she reached out with her own hand, caressed his cheek as he had done to her. Loud laughter carried through the closed doors from the bridge, she recognized it, her children laughing at some joke Will must've cracked. *The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.* And the three children outnumbered the two adults in the ready room, outweighed any chance of their having a relationship. Jean-Luc, not the starship captain, sat before her, his needs much the same as hers, wanting to be with the person with whom they felt completely safe, at ease, loved, human. He would

protect her, if given the chance, from the storms within. Instead, he had to settle for the storms on the planet below, the snow that continued to pile up outside her house. His fire for her melting the cold she'd enveloped herself in. In her head, she chided herself for writing her plight as a role in some tragic romance novel. Oh, my fire and my love, and our little fires outside that door, waiting. If she hadn't been so hurt and frustrated, she would have laughed. She heard Allie's voice in her head, telling her all the scientific reasons for why snow fell, and it had nothing to do with fate or fortune. It just *was*.

Finally, she spoke. "You have to. I would only hurt you, as I know I'm doing now." Her hand dropped from his cheek and she practically ran out of the ready room. Beverly gathered her three children and departed the ship. She cursed all the while, cursing fate, fortune, and science all in one go, unwilling to let any of them go unscathed, lest it be the thing responsible for confronting her at every turn, not letting her be.

Not letting any of them be who they were.

Chapter 8

Allie shrieked.

Beverly had been musing to herself as she stood in the living room of the house on Caldos that she really needed to stop running away from things. At the sound of her oldest daughter shrieking—and Allie wasn't one to shriek—Beverly went running towards the room her daughter was in. Andrew had apparently heard the shriek as well and he ran smack into Beverly.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It's okay,” she said, opening the door to the library Nana had kept downstairs. Just as the door opened, Allie came practically flying out the same door, taking the knob from Beverly and slamming it behind her.

“Don't go in there,” she said, taking in deep breaths.

Andrew frowned. “Why? Is there a masked murderer in there?” He went for the doorknob.

She slapped his hand away. “I'm not kidding. There's a bat in there.”

Andrew burst into laughter. “A bat? Allie, you love animals, a can't be bat bothering you.”

She turned to him, crossing her arms. “It flew into my hair.”

Andrew kept laughing.

Beverly couldn't help it. Despite her better efforts, she joined Andrew in laughter. The idea of the girl who kept tarantulas as pets, tended to horses, had never been bothered by a single stinging insect, being afraid of a *bat*, felt absurd.

“Beverly!” Allie said, outraged. “Don't encourage him!”

“I'm sorry,” the doctor choked out.

“Honestly!” the girl said, and stalked out of the hallway, leaving Andrew and Beverly to deal with the bat.

“Does this happen a lot?” Beverly asked Andrew.

His brow furrowed in thought. “Allie freaking out? No. Only over bats. I really should look into getting a bunch of them for pets, I could get to like this.” The boy's gray eyes shined with mirth.

“Do you have a death wish?” Beverly asked.

“You’re right,” he said, sighing. “Let me go take care of the bat.” Andrew slowly opened the door and slid inside. Footsteps ran about the room beyond the closed door. She heard windows being thrown open, more footsteps, a click, then Andrew racing into the hallway. “Done,” he said.

“What did you do?” she asked. She couldn’t remember what she and Nana had done when bats invaded the house when she had been a girl.

“Opened all the windows and turned off the lights. The bat will fly out at some point tonight.” He frowned. “I can’t believe that rhymed. At least it helps people remember. ‘Open all the windows and turn off the light. The bat will fly out some time tonight.’”

She remembered now.

Andrew shouted to Allie that it was safe now and to keep out of the library until morning. “Anyway, I think I should—.” A yawn caught him mid-sentence. He gave Beverly a wry smile. “Get to bed.” Like the night before, Andrew pulled her into a hug without warning. “It’s good to have you here,” he said, then stepped away. “I mean it.” Then he was up the stairs before she could reply.

The doctor wandered into the kitchen, not quite ready for sleep, her mind too much on the intense day she’d experienced, and with things still left to do. She needed to at least glance at Nana’s journal, she had a letter of resignation to write, legal papers to file, children to tuck into bed. Putting the teapot on the stove, she smiled at the thought of tucking them into bed. Of course, Andrew and Allie were at the age where they’d be awfully miffed at the idea. But Gracie was only five, and expected things like that. Tucking her in, that was something she could get used to. Light footsteps sounded behind her. Looking up, Beverly saw that Allie had walked into the kitchen, appearing about as tired as Beverly felt. “You should go to bed,” she said.

Allie nodded. “I know.” Then she sat down at the table, communicating that she also wasn’t ready for sleep.

The water heated, Beverly poured another cup in addition to hers, then handed it to Allie without a word. The girl cupped her hands around the warm mug, put her face over it. “It always seems colder at night,” she said. “Even though I know the house is the same temperature as the daytime.”

Beverly sat across from her. “Probably the bat,” she said.

Allie glared. “You’re as bad as Nana.”

“Where do you think I got it from?”

Allie said nothing, took a sip of her tea. For awhile, they sat in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts, the wind howling outside, the fire crackling in the living

room. Beverly took the moment to observe her eldest daughter. Physically, Allie looked the least like her father, with her nearly black hair, those wide blue eyes, the porcelain skin. Everything seemed to be Howard, except in this moment, when her pensive daughter held her mug of tea absentmindedly, and Beverly could see something about Allie's expression that resembled Jean-Luc when he got like this. At least once she finished cutting her ties with the *Enterprise* along with her captain, she would have these reminders. Somehow, she appreciated the subtle ones, such as Allie's expression, as much as the obvious, like gray eyes of Andrew and Gracie.

"What's going to happen?" Allie asked.

The girl hadn't looked at Beverly when she asked. The doctor wasn't even sure if Allie knew she'd asked the question out loud. "What?"

Allie looked over. "To us. To me, my brother and my sister. You and Wes are all we have now, and we're not old enough to be guardians for ourselves, much less Gracie. Was today some sort of introduction, to get us used to the idea of living on the *Enterprise*?"

Beverly shook her head. "No, that wasn't planned. Not by me, anyhow. I was as surprised as you were when the captain asked."

"Then what will happen?"

"I'm going to stay here," Beverly said. It was the first time she'd made any verbal indication of her plan.

Allie pushed her chair back slightly in shock. "You're going to resign?"

There, decision made. "Yes."

The girl frowned. "I don't like it."

"How come?"

"I don't want you to have to give up your life for us," she said. "It isn't fair. It's not like you asked to have to take care of us. We aren't your responsibility."

Beverly couldn't say what she wanted. Couldn't tell her that she was very much her responsibility. That she wouldn't be giving up her life, instead she would finally be welcoming it. That is was she who was unfair, to have left them and denied them a mother, not to mention a father. To Allie, she said, "You are my responsibility. You're family."

"It still isn't right that you sacrifice your career to stay here on *Caldos*." Allie refused to back down.

Beverly realized that as much as Gracie was her father's daughter, so was Allie. The young lady had seen something she viewed as unfair, and would seek to make it as far as possible, and not give any ground. Luckily, Beverly had a lot of experience in dealing with this sort of Picard determinism. "My career is being a doctor, something I can do as well here on Caldos as I could on a starship." Appealing to reason.

"I don't see why we couldn't go with you on the *Enterprise*." Allie took another sip of tea, looking at Beverly over the rim of the cup.

"Of all three of you, I think you're the last one I expected to be so adamant about going on the ship instead of staying here. You love it here, you have your horses, your studies, your home is here. I can't take you away from that. Instead, I can make it my home again." Beverly felt odd, hearing the arguments she'd had in her head for twenty four hours voiced to her sixteen year old daughter.

Allie sat back. "And it will be here whenever we come back. Planets are like that, they tend to stick around. I'd have to leave sometime anyway, to go to veterinary school. I can get someone here to stable the horses while we're away. Then there's Andrew and Gracie, they would love it up there, being in space all the time."

"They would, wouldn't they?" She didn't need to ask the question, they both knew the answer. Neither Andrew nor Gracie were meant to stay on a planet for any long length of time. They were meant for the stars.

"And Gracie seems really attached to Captain Picard," Allie said, then slyly looked at Beverly. "I'd also like to take this opportunity to bring up your relationship with him once again," she held up her hand to quiet Beverly's coming protest, "But considering the late hour, I'll hold it in abeyance until tomorrow."

"How long have you been this reasonable?" Beverly asked.

Allie smiled. "Nana insists that I'm like this whenever Andrew isn't trying to get a rise out of me."

The doctor sighed. "I do think it's for the best for me to stay here with you three, for now. I don't want to take you all away from what you've known your entire lives." *I don't want to risk people finding out who you really are*, she thought.

Allie stood up, putting her empty mug in the sink. "I still think it's a mistake."

"You're allowed to think that." Beverly moved her fingers across the warm surface of her mug.

Allie gave her a hug as warm as the one her brother had given earlier. "Good night," she said, then walked towards the door. She stopped, turned around. "And thank you," she said quietly. "For being here." Then she was gone.

Beverly stared through the empty doorway for a few moments, letting everything settle, become real. Then she was up from her chair, putting her cup in the sink, walking into the hallway, up the stairs. She wanted to make sure Andrew had been able to fall asleep. Many times, Felisa had written to her granddaughter about Andrew's insomnia. Allie's door was closed, she'd already gotten to bed. At the end of the hall, Andrew's door was still open. The boy lay on the bed, paging through a large book. Beverly recognized it. She'd sent it to him when he was a small boy, when she found it in an antique bookstore in San Francisco. An old book called *Our Universe*, from the late twentieth century Earth, the book Allie had talked about earlier. She rapped softly on the door. Andrew looked up, shut the book quickly, set it aside. "Come in," he said.

She smiled. "You know, with that reaction, someone might think I caught you looking at something more risqué than an old book about the Terran system."

The tips of the boy's ears turned red. "Sorry," he said. "Habit."

Beverly took a seat on Andrew's desk. "You're embarrassed because of the book?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, not exactly. I don't know if I can explain it, really."

"Would you like to try?"

He shrugged. "I just never really talked to Nana about it." His hand motioned towards the closed book on the floor.

"You aren't exactly talking to me about it, either," Beverly said.

Andrew gave her a self-deprecating smile. "I suppose I'm not." The boy got up, went to his bookshelf. Grabbing a book, he opened it, took out a photograph he'd tucked inside, handed it to Beverly. It was a photograph of a sunset. Something about it looked off. The setting sun looked too small. "That's sunset on Mars," Andrew said when he saw the confusion on her face. "Not a recent one though. That one is from one of the first Mars rovers that managed to make the trip from Earth to Mars and land safely." As she looked at the photograph again, Andrew picked up the book, paged through it. Then he handed it to her. "That's an artist's conception of what sunset on Mars would look like, drawn twenty years before that picture was taken."

She took the book from him, studied the artist's rendering. "I still don't understand," she said.

"You weren't meant to yet. I had to show you these before I could explain. I mean...think about how someone in that time period must have felt. Seeing that drawing as a child, then in young adulthood, being able to hold a real photograph of what they'd only imagined of as a child. How amazing it must have been." He paused, stopping next to the window, trying to peer outside. As it was night, all he could see was a reflection of his face. "And that's how I feel, every time I get to go off planet and into space."

Beverly placed the photograph carefully between the pages of the drawing and shut the book. "And you feel guilty about that?"

He nodded, still looking out the window. "Nana was always so tied to this place, to being here. Allie, too. I thought, me wanting to leave, wanting to join Starfleet, would be betraying them somehow. So I never talked about it with them. I did, a little bit, with Gracie, she understands. I mean, I think she does. She's only five."

Beverly frowned at the sadness in his voice. "Nana knew, you know."

He turned around. "She did?"

Crusher nodded. "It's something I learned as a girl. Nana knew *everything*."

Andrew smiled. "What did she say?"

"Oh, she wrote to me about how her silly grandson needed to stop pretending to be someone he isn't just to please everyone else. That he wasn't fooling anyone." Yet, Beverly knew he had fooled her, because she hadn't seen him each day like Felisa had.

"I heard that from her a lot," Andrew said. "That line."

"You're not fooling anyone, you know," they said together, and laughed.

"Yeah, that one," he said, taking his book back from the doctor and placing it on the bookshelf. "I'm not ready for the exams yet. I won't be for at least another year." The sadness drifted into his voice again.

Beverly wanted to tell him to talk to Captain Picard, that he could be a great help, guide him in his studies. How easy it would've been to tell Andrew to just go talk to his father, and everything would be okay. She couldn't, so she said nothing.

Andrew looked at her. "So now you know." The expression on her son's face was incredibly vulnerable in that moment. He had revealed something to her that he'd kept close to himself, well guarded, and now he had no idea how she'd react.

"I think," she said. "That Nana would be very proud to have seen you in Starfleet." *And so would your mother and father.*

He blushed. "Thanks."

She decided it would be best to let him be. "Do you think you can sleep now?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Goodnight, then," and she started towards the door.

His next words stopped her mid-step. "You know, Wes is really lucky."

“Why’s that?” she asked, knowing that he’d say something about how Wesley got to spend his life on starships, got to fly a starship, was already in the Academy.

Andrew’s ears were still red. “He has you for a mom,” he said.

It was Beverly’s turn to blush, stammer out a thank you, nearly fall into the hallway and down the stairs. She’d wanted to stay and ask for an explanation of what exactly the boy meant, what she’d done in the past few days that made Andrew say that, but couldn’t deal with the answer. Couldn’t even deal with the first statement, really. In the living room, the fire had burned down. The doctor stoked it, picked up a couple new logs, placed them on the fire, sparks flying upwards, following the smoke.

She turned to the couch behind her, where Gracie had fallen asleep curled up in one of the many quilts around the house. Beverly leaned down and kissed her youngest child’s forehead, then sat quietly in one of the armchairs, PADDs stacked next to her. Allie had been right, she shouldn’t be giving up her career in Starfleet. But after the experience she’d had in those two months at Starfleet Medical, she knew she couldn’t deal with something like that again.

2365

The morning after Beverly Crusher had broken her tricorder in the bathroom of her San Francisco home, she had to wake the twins early, to get them to their early appointment to be scolded by the Academy groundskeeper. The idea of bringing them on Academy grounds filled her with dread, paranoid that someone would recognize the children for who they were. She already had a hard enough time dealing with looks she’d get at Medical, and she supposed those looks were only formed by her own paranoid thoughts. But bringing them to the Academy didn’t help matters much.

Both of them unwillingly rolled out of bed. Allie bounced awake after just a few minutes and began torturing her brother to make him get up. At first, the doctor wasn’t quite sure of what she saw. So she stopped outside Andrew’s door and confirmed that Andrew had most certainly thrust his hand, and only his hand, outside the covers and given his sister a rude gesture. Allie replied by sitting on him, causing Andrew to shout. Beverly did nothing to intervene, the boy had brought it on himself with his crude communication. Though, Beverly did recall herself giving the same gesture to roommates in the Academy who were morning people.

On the way to the grounds, Andrew remained bleary eyed and Allie practically skipped the entire way. Briefly she wondered how she had given birth to such a morning person, then she remembered that Jean-Luc always seemed chipper in the morning. “Beverly, can you get her to stop?” Andrew asked.

“I doubt it,” she replied.

“Damn,” he said.

“Andrew!”

“Sorry,” he said automatically. Then he looked over at his skipping sister. “Mostly.”

She didn't have the heart to scold him, she knew exactly how he felt. There had been breakfasts when Jean-Luc had been so thrilled to be awake that she'd had to use her best emotional control to not take the spoon in front of her and stab him until he turned properly somber for the early morning hour. They arrived at the shed Boothby had specified for the early morning meeting to find the groundskeeper already waiting.

“You're late,” he said.

Beverly frowned. “Are we?”

“I wouldn't have said it if you weren't.” The old man, who had been old when Jean-Luc was a cadet, when Beverly was a cadet, when everyone was a cadet, looked down at the two ten year olds. “And you're the two who ruined my flowerbed.”

“Sorry,” they said together.

“Mmm. I'm sure you are. People are always sorry this early in the morning.”

“Allie's not,” Andrew said. “She likes the morning.”

“Some people are strange like that,” said Boothby, tossing a sack of soil into a wheelbarrow. “A cadet I knew a long time ago was punished by being forced to run before dawn when he was a freshman. He hated it, which was why they made him do it. So to spite them, he entered the Academy marathon, and I'll be damned if he didn't win. First freshman to do it, too.”

The doctor wondered why Boothby had brought that up. The cadet in question had been Jean-Luc. Had Boothby figured it out already?

“Are you going to make me run?” Andrew asked.

“No, no. You get to help me fix my flowerbed, make things right.” He pointed to Allie. “You too, young lady.”

Beverly had to be at Medical soon. “How long will it take?” she asked.

“Oh, about noon,” the groundskeeper said. “Can you pick them up then?”

She nodded.

He nodded back. “See you then.” And he went about directing the two children on what to do.

She came back at noon as instructed to find a pleased groundskeeper and two tired, hungry, and thirsty children. After thanking Boothby for the lesson, she walked them back towards her home and off Academy grounds. That morning, they'd been lucky, as very few cadets and officers were up and about. But at noontime, the campus teemed with them, flowing from building to building, then surging towards the cadet mess hall. None of the cadets gave the group a second glance, they were used to officers and their families being around the Academy.

It was the officers who gave them second, longer, glances. Especially in the admirals, as she imagined in their faces as they must be thinking that these children were certainly not her cousins, but must be hers. And there'd be no other reason to think that, because most had no idea that she had her cousins visiting. Medical did, but the command officers rarely ventured over there, much less kept up on scuttlebutt. So they must be assuming that they were her children. Then they would be trying to figure out who their father was. She hustled the two of them along, eager to get home, and away from Starfleet.

2370

Another pocket of pine sap burst, making Beverly jump. She shook her head to rid herself of the memory she'd been thinking, but to no avail. As much as she wanted to give Andrew and Gracie, even Allie, the chance to live on a starship, she couldn't stay with them and remain in Starfleet. The doctor couldn't deal with the surreptitious glances, idle comments. Couldn't deal with having to run interference to keep the three of them from becoming so close to the captain that any one of them could figure out what was going on. And two people on the ship already knew. Deanna and Guinan had figured it out so quickly, so easily. If Beverly stayed on the ship, brought the three children with her, it would only be a matter of time before others managed to put it together. And god forbid if Lwaxana Troi showed up on the ship. Everyone would know in a heartbeat if that happened.

Beverly's gaze moved from the firelight to the sleeping five year old on the couch. But she couldn't leave them behind, either. She'd already missed five years of Gracie's life, sixteen of the twins' lives. No more. The decision was made—she would not miss any more of her children's lives. As Allie had said, for a different thing, it wasn't fair. The doctor's hands snatched up one of the PADDs beside her, typing in a simple resignation letter, effective immediately, as long as the captain read it and entered it into the ship's log. She placed the PADD aside, got up, picked Gracie up, quilt still around her. The steps made no sound as she carried the little girl upstairs. All was quiet on the second floor except for the sound of Conal's breathing. The dog padded out into the hallway, followed them into Gracie's room, watched as Beverly settled the girl into bed. Gracie sighed and snuggled up under her covers. Conal went over, licked her face, then walked back out of the room, apparently satisfied that one of his charges was well and asleep.

The doctor left the room as well, went into her grandmother's room. Immediately she saw Nana's journal, picked it up. The book fell open to an entry made after Beverly

had spoken to her grandmother about Kesprytt. She remembered that conversation well, as Felisa had given her a hell of a hard time over it. Remaining standing, Beverly read the entry.

That child will be the death of me. I can't fathom how she could have told that man no. How many times has she told me she's in love with him? I could go back and reread all my journal entries to check, but I feel safe in writing that it's a lot. I've seen it with my own eyes, how the two of them are. How he looked at her at her wedding, how he looked at her during Jack's funeral, how he must have looked at her on that planet when he admitted his love, how I'm sure he looked at her when he suggested exploring their feelings.

I fear for the devastation in both of their lives when everything comes to pass. I know that things will resolve, I'm sure that one day, they will all be a family, but the road between then in now will be a furious one. And the longer they delay, the longer my Beverly keeps that man at bay, the more harsh the road will be.

Tonight, when I spoke with Beverly, I didn't tell her what was happening here, outside. Didn't tell her that nature knew exactly what was going on, that it had been snowing since the day they were captured on that planet. She doesn't believe in portents, in signs, in symbols. One day, she will. And that will be the day her family comes together.

There was more scrawled in Felisa's elongated handwriting, but Beverly slammed the book shut, threw it on the bed. She imagined Allie's voice in her head again. "Snow forms when the atmospheric temperature is at or below freezing and there's a minimum amount of moisture in the air." Nothing to do with any sort of supernatural anything. She imagined Andrew's voice declaring it bullshit.

The doctor found herself going back downstairs. The letter had yet to be sent, so she picked up the PADD from beside the chair and went into the small office across from the library that most likely still held the bat. The terminal powered up easily and Beverly transferred the data from the PADD to the terminal. She studied it one more time.

To: Picard, Jean-Luc. Captain. Commanding Officer, *USS Enterprise*

From: Crusher, Beverly. Commander. Chief Medical Officer, *USS Enterprise*

I resign my commission from Starfleet effective upon receipt of this message.

Simple and to the point. The doctor stabbed the transmit button and the message disappeared from the screen to reappear in the comm traffic of the ship in orbit of the planet. Her life now beginning again, she went out into the living room, settled herself on the couch in front of the dying fire, and fell asleep.

In the dark pre dawn on Caldos, Beverly was awakened by a dog shoving his face into hers. Without opening her eyes, she pushed him away, only to have him bound right back and continue shoving his face into hers and snuffling. Finally, she got up, glanced at the chronometer, glared at the dog.

Conal looked at her, looked at the door, looked at her. She got the message. Groaning as she got up, she let the large dog out into the backyard. Now fully awake, she went upstairs and went about her own morning ablutions, enjoying the solemn quiet of the household. She'd just gotten back downstairs to get something for breakfast when there was a knock at the door.

She frowned. Jean-Luc couldn't have read the message already. She purposely transmitted it on such a low priority that he shouldn't receive the message until midday. Most likely, it was Deanna, sensing some sort of cognitive dissonance in her and wanting to talk about it. Letting out a sigh at having to verbally fence with her friend, Beverly went and opened the door.

On the stoop, snow blowing in around him, stood Wesley.

Chapter 9

As Beverly Crusher stared at her son standing outside the door, her throat closed up and refused to open, letting her know that if her brain hadn't realized it yet, she was inching very close to her breaking point. Trying to will her throat into working, she studied Wesley's face, searching for any indication of what had caused him to visit. Whether he felt guilty, angry, sad, everything, or nothing. Her throat as stubborn as her mind, it continued to stay closed. The doctor reached out with her hand to pull the young man inside, out of the cold. Some motherly instincts would never go away, no matter how angry you were at the child in question.

When her fingers came into contact with the material of his winter jacket, Wesley flinched, his eyes finally coming alive and staring her down. She saw it then. Anger and its hot familiarity. Recognizing its origin, her throat loosened and allowed her anger out to answer his unspoken challenge. "If you aren't going to come inside, I'm going to have to shut the door in your face before it starts snowing in here."

In reply, he took a few heavy steps into the front room. Staring her son down, Beverly shut the door quietly behind him. Wesley stood in front of the fireplace, his jacket and boots still on, his hands shoved into his front pockets. He made no motion to make himself comfortable by taking any of the outer garments off. They were a sort of armor he felt he needed. Since he continued to stand and say nothing, Beverly went about starting another fire, working around her eldest son, letting him stew. Paper, kindling, logs. Another tiny wall.

Wesley watched.

Beverly lit a match. "If you've come here to argue with me, feel free to start. But don't you dare raise your voice and wake up the other people in this house." She held the match to the edge of the paper until the paper caught fire, then flipped it away, into the fireplace.

"I want to know what you're going to do," Wesley said quietly.

The doctor set the box of matches down on the hearth, stood and went into the office. As she passed the closed door of the library, she wondered if the bat had managed to fly out during the night. In the office, she found the PADD she'd used the night before. Back in the living room, she handed it to Wesley. Then she squatted back down in front of the fireplace, lit another match, and held it under paper on the opposite side of the pile of logs. A thump from behind her told her that Wesley had dropped the PADD onto an armchair.

"You're resigning," he said.

"Resigned. I transmitted that last night." She put the box of matches away and studied the fire as it began to take hold, eating away at the kindling.

“Does Captain Picard know?”

“Not unless he read every single transmission that came through during the night. I sent it on a low priority to give myself some time.” She stood, still looking at the fireplace.

“Does he know?” Wesley asked again, yet a different question.

“No.”

“If you don’t tell him, I will.”

Beverly turned on her son, her eyes burning into him, hotter than the fire beside them. The statement brought Beverly’s anger flaring, drawn by the frustration and pain of the last few days, her inability to fix anything, at having to choose between one person or another, over and over again. At this boy trying to take control from her through his own indignance, as if he were the only one who’d been hurt. She spoke slowly and carefully. “You will not,” each word its own command.

“You’re just going to disappear from his life? Just like that? Never tell him he has three children by you?” Wesley’s tone bordered on disgust.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But whatever I decide, it’s my decision. Not yours.”

“Maybe it’s what you do. Leave people behind. After all, you left me,” he said.

She blinked. “What?”

He looked up from the floor, meeting her eyes, his brown ones blazing as much as her blue. “That second year, on the *Enterprise*. You went to Starfleet Medical and left me on the ship. So you could spend time with *them*.” Then he glanced down at her abdomen, then up the stairs. “And have *her*.”

Beverly wouldn’t stand to have one child take away the identity of another. “Your sister has a name.”

“But she isn’t my sister,” Wesley replied, seeming to take some sort of perverse pleasure in the revelation. “She’s my cousin. Isn’t that what you told me? Told everyone else? The poor kid thinks her parents died when she was a baby. You know what? I think it’s true. Except her parents died way before she was ever alive. They died the night before my father was buried.”

No, they were dying now, as they spoke, and Beverly was killing them. “I didn’t know,” she said, the truth escaping, slipping away through a tunnel made underneath the wall that protected her from her son.

It was Wesley’s turn to be surprised. “What?”

“When I left for the position at Medical. I didn’t know about Gracie.”

He threw up his arms. “Then why did you leave? Did you leave me just to go spend time with your other children?”

She crossed her arms, fixed her eyes, angry again, on her son. “If you recall, Wesley Crusher, you were supposed to go with me to Earth. You chose to remain aboard the *Enterprise*. So don’t go accusing me of things that you decided on your own. I left the ship because I was trying to get away from Captain Picard. To stop this relationship that you seem to hate with all your being.”

“Mom, stop—.”

“What? You don’t want to hear that I’ve had moments of reason? That I’m not the cold heartless bitch you think I am?” She took a step closer to him. “You want to hear it all? I’ll tell you. It happened after Tasha died, the night of her funeral. And it was only once and it was a mistake. I couldn’t let myself stay on the ship with him, not while I didn’t have any bearings. He wanted me to stay, you know. He’s wanted to make things right for a long time, for us to have a real relationship instead of what we have—.”

“Stop, I don’t want to hear this!”

If he couldn’t tell her what he wanted, she couldn’t give it to him. “Then what did you come here for? To get me to beg you for forgiveness? Because that isn’t going to happen.” She didn’t need his forgiveness, she needed his love. He was her son.

Wesley muttered something under his breath. She couldn’t hear it, the crackling from the fire covered it. “What?” she asked.

When he looked at her, his eyes were reservoirs of disgust. “I said that a whore wouldn’t ask forgiveness for her bastard children.”

She went numb, couldn’t feel her fingers or toes, a white noise nearly filling her ears. “If I hadn’t given birth to you,” she said to Wesley, “I wouldn’t be so sure right now that you’re my son.” He went to protest and she cut him off. “I raised you. I kept you with me since you were little, choosing assignments where I knew you’d get good schooling, good experiences, be able to have friends. I raised you better than you’re acting. I see you right now, standing before me, looking exactly like the son I’ve known for his entire life, and I don’t know who you are.”

“It’s not like I know who you are.” He motioned upstairs. “Or they know who *they* are. Or Captain Picard knows who he is. You hold everything, you know who everyone is, and you keep it all to yourself, as if you’re the only one who matters.”

Something inside Beverly collapsed. Wesley was so certain that she was sure of who she was, when she was the least knowledgeable out of all of them. What she blamed on fate, on fortune, on superstition, or science, he blamed on her, slammed it

squarely on her shoulders, an unyielding anvil. "I am your mother," she said, one thing she was certain of. "And that will never change, no matter how you feel about me."

His reply shot back to her, mocking. "And that's another thing that the all-important Beverly Crusher gets to decide?" The young man managed to lob his words as if they were thousands of tiny daggers, picking at her wherever they landed.

Any possibility of a rejoinder was cut off by small steps on the stairwell. Gracie walked down the stairs, fists rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She stopped right before reaching the first floor, when she saw Wesley. "Hi," she said. "I didn't know you were visiting."

"Neither did I," said Wesley.

"Want some breakfast?" Gracie asked. "I'll make it for you."

Beverly stared at her son, daring him to be as rude to the little girl as he'd been to his mother.

For the briefest of moments, he stared back at her, challenging. Then he turned to Gracie and said, "That would be great," and followed her into the kitchen.

The doctor stayed in the living room, needing some space between herself and her eldest son. Scratching came from outside the front door and Beverly let Conal back inside the house. The large dog shook the excess snow from his fur coat, then settled down in front of the fire, his dark eyes watching her. She took a seat on the floor in front of the fire, leaning back on the couch. Everything seemed to be imploding around her. The hidden aspects of her life had been dangling over her, swords on gossamer threads. Nana's death had started the sawing of the razors of reality and every passing minute cut another thread, releasing another sharp point. She wanted nothing more than for everything to be fixed, for her to have Jean-Luc in her life, as husband and father, for all her children to be able to know one another as brothers and sisters. Instead, she would have to keep striving to have everything separate. The captain away from the family entirely, never knowing what he was missing. Wesley away from the other three, staying a cousin and not taking his role as the oldest child.

Child. The cadet who had shown up on her doorstep earlier that morning was no child. In his three years at the Academy, her son had become a young man, now twenty one years old. A young man that now seemed to loathe his mother, whoever she had become to him. Wesley's reaction to his discovery removed any options she might have considered of telling Jean-Luc about the three children. If even-tempered Wesley reacted like this, Jean-Luc's reaction would be only stronger, and hurt that much more.

She knew he would be coming down today, once he read her resignation. Demanding answers. She couldn't allow him in. If she could keep him out, this one last time, then he would have to leave her alone, and she could set aside this sword, reinforce at least that one thread. Make it into a rope, weave it into a net, and finally an

impenetrable wall. But she didn't want to, didn't want him gone. Then again, you couldn't always get what you wanted in life. It just was.

She had no choice. A whine from in front of her broke her from the reverie. Conal sat there, his eyebrows quizzical. Then the dog moved forward, licked her face, wagged his tail. Her hand moved to her cheek—she'd been crying without sound. "It must be so easy for you," she whispered to the dog. "All you do is love unconditionally, and expect no less from others. And that's what we give you back, unconditional love. If only it were that easy with people." Conal licked her face again, then placed his head in her lap. Absently, she patted his head.

A soft male voice behind her. "Are you okay?" It was Andrew who had asked, sounding so much like Jean-Luc that it hurt as much as it comforted.

"Oh, I'm fine," she said.

He sat down next to her, stretching his socked feet towards the fire, wiggling his toes. Conal's tail thumped on the warm granite stones of the hearth. "I think you're lying," Andrew said. "I should know, I suck at it too."

I'm a better liar than anyone knows. "Don't worry about me," she said aloud.

"I'm not worried about you. The person who practically raised you died a few days ago, it's perfectly normal for you to be upset. I was concerned."

"You see a difference between concern and worry?"

He nodded. "Sure. Worry eats you up, it's all you think about, whatever or whoever it is you're worrying for. When you're concerned, you care, but it doesn't become all of who you are."

"So what makes you concerned about me?" she asked.

"Conal has some sort of sixth sense. Or dog sense. I don't know. He just knows when people are really hurting and tries to make them feel better. He's good like that." Andrew frowned. "He also hates fighting."

He must have heard Wesley and I fight, she thought, *maybe I'm as horrible a liar as my second son.*

"I heard Wesley's voice," Andrew said, confirming her suspicion. Tendrils of fear brushed against the back of her neck. "Couldn't make anything out." The boy cast a glare in the direction of the kitchen. "Though he seems to have done a damn good job of upsetting you."

"I'll manage," she said, scratching Conal behind the ears.

"You won't tell me, will you?" he asked.

She shook her head. “No. It’s something Wes and I have to work out between ourselves.”

“I understand,” he said, and said nothing more about it.

So she sat companionably in front of the fire with her second son and his dog, both of them quiet, yet giving the other support. Beverly realized that Wesley could learn as much from Andrew as Andrew thought he could learn from Wesley. Somehow, Andrew had gained so much from Nana in terms of empathy, knowing exactly what to do and say to make a person feel somewhat settled in times of tumult. The doctor wondered where she’d gone wrong with Wes in that regard. He was a good man, had high ideals, yet she hadn’t managed to instill that same empathy in her son as Felisa had in her great-grandchildren. It could be because Beverly didn’t possess that empathy herself. No, it wasn’t that. She wouldn’t be a good a doctor as she was if she didn’t have empathy. Most likely, it was example. She had been working so much, that Wesley rarely saw that empathy from his mother other than short glimpses. He never watched his mother work as Andrew had watched Felisa work out of her home. Wesley hadn’t lived with other siblings and learned to deal with the ups and downs of that sort of love.

She’d done him a disservice and they both suffered now as a consequence. There was also the question of paternity, of Wesley being his father’s son and Andrew his own father’s son. Jack had been the type to outwardly confront things, not let them simmer and sort out in any way within himself before bringing them into the open. So forthright at times that he could hurt as he healed others. He’d always been so amazed at Beverly’s ability to comfort so easily, without any conscious thought on her part. Yet, he’d been a good man and Beverly had loved him. Wesley was like Jack—the act of comforting was a learned thing, not something he’d been born knowing how to do.

After awhile, Andrew got up and went to the kitchen. The morning passed slowly, at least to Beverly. She dreaded that contact from the captain she knew was coming. It was inevitable. And the closer it got to midday, the more tense she became. Allie and Andrew inspected the library and declared it free from bats. Andrew sequestered himself in the library after that, then Allie in the office, Gracie pulled Wesley into a game of checkers. Hunger brought them all into the kitchen around the same time and they found themselves seated around the table. Together.

At first, they’d eaten quietly. Then Gracie grew restless. “How’d your exams go, Wesley?” she asked.

“Fine,” Wes replied around a bite of his sandwich.

“What were they on?”

“Starfleet things.”

Gracie made a face at him.

“You know, you could give her a little more detail than that,” Allie told him. “Maybe she might want to go to the Academy one day. More information could give her a leg up on the competition.”

Wesley muttered something.

“What’d you say?” Andrew asked, eyes narrowing.

Wesley met his look. “Nothing.”

Andrew frowned.

The doctor breathed an inward sigh of relief.

Then Wesley spoke up, addressing Gracie. “Anyone ever tell you about your parents?” he asked her.

Beverly’s head snapped up. Andrew stopped eating. Allie put down her sandwich.

“Not really,” she said. “They died really soon after I was born. I never knew them.”

“Haven’t you wondered what they were like?” Wesley continued. “If you looked like them, if they had your sense of humor, if they were smart, any of that?”

Listening to him, Beverly became immobile. Each word shoved her guilt deeper inside, ripping as it went.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Have you ever dreamed about them, about them still being alive?”

Beverly stared at the stranger across from her, the man who claimed to be her son. Torturing a small child with words meant to cut, not just the girl, but also her mother.

Gracie bit her lip.

Wesley didn’t give up. “I mean, just imagine, what it would be like to live with your parents, to be a family—.”

“Shut up!” Andrew shouted, standing up. “Are you trying to make her cry? Because if you are, you damn well succeeded.”

Indeed, Gracie’s attempt to stem her tears hadn’t been at all successful. She didn’t move, didn’t make a sound, but the tears fell anyhow.

“And what if I am?” Wesley stood up.

Beverly watched in askance as the brothers faced off. Andrew was already taller than Wesley, more muscled. Yet Wesley had been trained in Starfleet defensive techniques. It couldn't come to a physical fight, she had to stop them, but she was riveted to her chair, chained by shock.

Andrew stepped over to him. "Then you'd better stop, right now, and pick on someone else."

Allie drew herself up between the two boys. "That's enough," she said. "I'm not going to watch you two fight over who gets to be the alpha male." She turned to face Wes. "I think you need to go for a ride and cool off. You're being an asshole, I don't know why, and I'm sick of it. I've been trying to ignore you all morning and it worked until now."

Wesley tried to protest. "I'm not being an asshole."

She raised her eyebrows. "Fine. You aren't being an asshole."

Wes nodded.

"You're being a dick," she said.

He glared.

"Fine, you know what? We're all going for a ride to cool off. Me, you, and Andrew. So go put warm clothes on and get to the barn." Allie's request had the cadence of a command, and the boys did as she said without further protest.

Beverly watched them grab jackets and winter hats and walk outside. The snow was light, only a few inches accumulated on the ground, they'd be fine. And maybe, when they got back, they'd be calm. The doctor turned away from the window and towards the table. Gracie had disappeared. Frowning, Beverly went in search of her. Then she heard footsteps on the stairs, Gracie's light ones followed by Conal's heavy ones. She let them go, giving the little girl a head start on collecting her feelings before going up to speak with her. Beverly needed some time to figure out what she would say, to gain control of her own dreams, the ones Wesley had spoken about.

A sharp knock sounded on the door. The doctor glanced at the chronometer out of reflex, but she knew exactly who it would be. A sigh escaped her and she girded herself to be resolute through the coming confrontation. It seemed the day's onslaught would never end. But knowing this could be the final confrontation with Jean-Luc gave her some hope. At the end of it, there would be some resolution, and she could move on, free.

The doctor opened the door and found Jean-Luc Picard standing there, wearing only his regular duty uniform, and holding a PADD. He shoved the PADD at her as he stepped into the house without her invitation and asked, "What the hell is this?"

She took it from him, took in the look he was giving her, filled with anger and outrage. Met him head-on. "I thought it was pretty self-explanatory," she said, relying on instincts. "I'm leaving Starfleet." Then pointing to the door she said, "You can leave now."

His face darkened, became resolute, he would not give in. "The hell I will," he told her, staying put.

She crossed her arms and stared at him, as resolute.

"Beverly, you can't just leave Starfleet," he said. While his face seemed set in steel, his voice was gentle, almost pleading.

When she answered, her voice matched the hard look on her own face. "I can. And I have." She decided to offer up the explanation she'd concocted. "I've decided to stay on Caldos and become a healer, like my grandmother. It's a proud Howard tradition, and I've decided to uphold it."

"Just like that?" he said.

She nodded.

"Is this about your cousins? Because I'd give you permission to bring them on the ship, they are your family, and I can't imagine there being anyone else to take care of them aside from you."

It wasn't about her cousins. It was about her children, their lives, and hers. "It isn't about them."

"Does Wesley know?"

"Yes."

"I can't imagine he approves," the captain said.

"It isn't his decision to make," she replied, as she'd told her son earlier that day.

His face softened a bit, showing he felt emotions other than the anger he'd been solely expressing. "I think it's a mistake."

Allie had said that. *I still think it's a mistake.* "You can think that all you want," Beverly said. "But it isn't going to change my mind. This is my life. I've made my decision and I'm not going to change it." She made her voice as hard and unforgiving as forged steel. "So please leave me alone."

And when she met his eyes with her challenge, and saw something break inside the gray of the winter sky he held in his irises, she knew she had won. It was over, the confrontation done, he would let her be. She thought she should be rejoicing and

instead, felt something inside of her break as well. Another thread, another sword dropped, and when it fell it pierced them both to depths they hadn't known they possessed.

When he spoke, it was so soft she had to strain to hear. His voice had broken too, broken from the self assured baritone to the gentle, hoarse whisper. "I suppose I should be leaving, then." He looked at her.

She realized it would be for the last time. The doctor willed her hands not to ball into fists, willed herself not to cry, willed herself not to reach out to him and tell him not to go. She nodded.

He nodded back. "Have a good life, Beverly." He tapped his communicator, holding her gaze. "Picard to *Enterprise*. One to beam up."

Chapter 10

Beverly Crusher waited for Captain Picard to disappear in that all too familiar shimmer of blue Federation transporter beam. But he didn't. They both frowned at finding themselves still looking at one another despite having severed their bonds of friendship and relationship, despite being so shaken they couldn't have given you their first names if you had asked them.

"Picard to *Enterprise*. What's going on?" Last names, reflexive roles they could remember and act out.

Will Riker's voice replied. "I'm sorry, Captain. The storm system that's taken over most of the colony as a result of the weather modification problems has created magnetic shifts in the atmosphere making it impossible for transporters to be used safely."

"What about a shuttle?"

"I wouldn't advise that, sir, unless it were an emergency. The atmosphere would be one hell of a bumpy ride and could tear a shuttle apart."

"Understood. How long until we're able to fix the net?"

"Geordi and Data are working on it, but can't even give me an estimate other than 'we're looking at hours here'. I'll contact you as soon as I have news, Captain. Riker out."

The captain gave Beverly a slight smile, trying to ease the discomfort. "I'm sure you'd mind if I stayed, but it looks as if I have no choice."

The words came out as a reflex. "You're always welcome in my home." Inside her head, she cursed. It should be over now. It was supposed to be over now. Done with. Except it continued, not abating, mirroring the atmosphere above them.

"I didn't realize," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Didn't you?" And just like that, within scant moments, they had gone from the relative safety of goodbye and so long to treading on treacherous ground.

Beverly saw it, in his eyes, unspoken. *Why haven't you ever told me that you're in love with me?*

She closed her eyes, unwilling to answer the silent question, then opened them. Motioning towards the fire, she said, "Warm yourself up. I can't believe you came out here not wearing any winter clothing. What kind of a starship captain are you?"

That small smile again. “One who is ill-prepared for planetary weather when on a mission of getting back his best friend.”

“Replicator’s in the kitchen. Make yourself some tea, find a book in the library. I need to check in on someone upstairs,” she answered, unwilling to play the game they played so often, so easily. Then she left him, walked up the old stairs to find her daughter.

Upstairs was quiet. Wondering if the girl was asleep, Beverly walked to Gracie’s door, pushed it in a bit. Beverly found her laying on her bed, Conal’s head resting on her chest, just under her chin. “Is it okay if I come in?” she said.

“Yeah,” came the girl’s reply. Very much awake.

The doctor sat close to Gracie’s feet, put her hand on her forehead. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I’m okay,” Gracie said.

Beverly raised her eyebrow. “Really?”

Gracie bit her lip again. “No.” And the tears that Beverly had wanted to let go fell from her daughter’s gray eyes. The little girl reached out and Beverly gathered her in her arms and held her, comforted her, protected her. “Why did Wesley say those things?” she asked, yet Beverly knew it was a question the girl didn’t expect the answer to. “Did he know the dream I had last night? Was he trying to get me to tell?”

“What dream was that?” Beverly asked into her daughter’s hair.

“You’ll laugh,” Gracie said.

“I will not. I promise.”

“I dreamed last night that I was happy. I dreamed that you were my mother, that the captain was my papa, and we were all together. Wesley must have known, and he knows how silly it is of me, to dream things like that. A fairy tale, something that never happens in real life, only in the stories that Andrew tells me.”

No it isn’t silly. It’s no fairy tale. It’s exactly what the truth is. Your mother is holding you right now and your papa is downstairs next to the fire. And outside it’s snowing.

Snowing. The wind had picked up, whistling under the eaves of the house. Her other three children were out there in the storm and she had no way of getting them back. All the technology at her disposal, an entire starship in orbit, and she was at nature’s mercy. Her grandmother’s words came to her, the ones she had read the night before—that the day she believed in signs would be the day her family would come together. It was all she had left now, to believe in the portents that Nana had stuck by so

fervently. It would be hours before the storm would die down and that was the positive end of the estimate. Jean-Luc would be here for all that time; Wesley, Andrew and Allie at the mercy of the storm. Wesley was trained in survival, Allie and Andrew knew the forests of Caldos, they could find shelter and keep themselves alive. But it didn't stop her from being concerned. Worried. In no way was she concerned in terms of Andrew's definition of concern. She was a mother, her children were in danger, there was nothing she could do to help, and therefore, she worried.

Beverly made a decision. As Gracie cried herself out, the girl's eyes drooped, fluttered shut. The doctor picked her up, drew back the covers, tucked her daughter into bed. As she did, she whispered to her that her dream was true, that she was her mother, and her papa was the Starfleet captain downstairs, only he didn't know he was a father and Beverly would have to tell him.

She kissed Gracie gently on the forehead, bade Conal to watch over her as she slept. Then the doctor slipped downstairs, cursing her grandmother all the way down, because she was going to tell Jean-Luc who he really was.

Allie kept her head close to her horse as the snow raced at them, blinding them. "We need to find shelter," she said, shouting over the wind. Snow blew into her mouth and she coughed.

"I said that ten minutes ago," Wesley said.

"Aren't you just the know-it-all," Andrew said.

"Shut up," said Allie, not acknowledging her cousin's point, which had been entirely accurate and she'd ignored out of spite. "I used to go explore around this area when I was younger, there's got to be a cave close to us. Follow me." All of them keeping their heads low, they managed to locate the caves. The first three weren't big enough to shelter the horses and they kept plodding along against the ever increasing wind. The last one they managed to find yawned at them, a hill settling into sleep. "Here!" Allie yelled.

The group dismounted, led the horses into the cave, then tethered a rope to a sturdy tree outside and tied the horses up with enough leeway to keep themselves warm inside the cave. As they made their way further inside, Wesley pulled a flashlight out of his pocket to light the way.

"Prepared cadet," Andrew said.

Wesley ignored him.

They continued a bit deeper, seeking a spot deep enough so that they could talk without shouting, yet shallow enough to keep tabs on the horses. Another few steps

caused a disruption in the fauna of the cave and Allie found herself hitting the dirt floor and shrieking as bats grazed their heads.

“Just bats,” Andrew said.

“Just spiders,” she mouthed to him, glaring. Allie shivered in spite of the relative warmth of the cave. The darkness beyond them seemed to slither in, trying to take them into its maw.

Andrew shrugged. “Here’s as good a place as any,” he said.

“I suppose,” Wesley said.

“And I *suppose*,” Andrew said, facing him, “You have a better idea.”

Suddenly, the cave felt much more cold. All day, Allie could tell first that something was bothering the hell out of Wesley. Her cousin was normally an easy going guy, someone she really liked to be around. But that day, for the first time in her life, she’d wanted reach out, grab him by the balls, and twist until he asked for mercy. Then she noticed that her brother was equally as bothered, another oddity. Andrew, for the most part, was unflappable by anyone except his twin sister. The two boys together seemed ready to jump into a fistfight at the slightest provocation. So of course, they continued to provoke one another, each trying to get the other to throw the first punch.

“I didn’t say that,” Wesley told Andrew. “I just think I should be the one in charge.”

“Because you’re a Starfleet cadet? Because you’re the oldest? What?”

“No. Because I’m the one with the most experience in survival around here.” Wesley’s tone had started to rise, and not because the storm outside had gotten any louder.

“And we’re the ones who have lived here all our lives,” Andrew replied. “Allie’s the one who knew where the caves were. You don’t have any right to tell us what to do any more than we do you.”

“Yes I do,” Wesley said.

“What the hell does that mean?” Andrew asked, moving closer.

“Nothing.”

Then Andrew as face to face with him. “The hell with nothing. You said that right before you tried to tear my little sister’s feelings to pieces, so I know it has to be something.”

Wesley grinned. “How about you? Did anyone ever tell you about your parents?”

“Go to hell.”

“Haven’t you wondered what they looked like? Have you even seen pictures of them?”

Andrew said nothing. Stared at him, eyes hard.

“Have you ever dreamed about them, wished they were still alive?” Wesley’s tone had shifted to being entirely mocking. “Wondered why no one ever told you stories about them, why you don’t have any pictures?”

Allie couldn’t take it anymore. “What the hell is your problem?” she asked.

“Your parents are still alive,” Wesley told her.

“Bullshit,” Andrew said. “You’re just trying to hurt us and I can’t for the life of me figure out what we’ve done to you.”

“You were born,” came the cadet’s reply. “You were born, that’s what. Because your mother is my mother.” He laughed. “But that’s not the best part. Because you see, you *father* isn’t the same as mine. Oh, no. I wouldn’t hate you for that.” And he stopped.

Allie realized that he was toying with them, he was going to make them ask, make them ask for the answer he knew would hurt them. Her mind ran over everything, about the role Beverly had always had in their lives, how close they’d been to her, nearly as close as they had been to Nana, how much they both looked like her. They always figured it was genes, that they all looked like Howards. She glanced over at her brother, saw the same look in his eyes as he came to the same conclusion she had. Wesley most likely wasn’t lying.

Wesley caught them looking at each other. “Go ahead, I know you want to,” he said. “Ask me. Ask me who your father is.”

And Allie realized, she didn’t need to ask. She knew. Everything fell into place, aside from when and how, but the truth made so much sense that she couldn’t fathom not having known it. *It was the captain.* She swore under her breath. It was why Beverly had been so tense and panicky and upset lately, why she wouldn’t talk about the captain, why she kept pushing him away. Why Allie had felt so at ease with the man, that something about him was familiar, and now she knew. When she looked at him, she saw the same eyes she saw every day when she looked at her brother, at her younger sister. They had the captain’s eyes.

She slid another look at her brother, saw him fighting the urge to ask, not wanting to give in to Wesley. His jaw worked and she could see who his parents were, as sure as if someone had handed her DNA evidence. The way his jaw was cut, the way he carried himself, even that damn dimple in his chin. She also knew how much he admired the captain, way before he’d ever met the man. Once Wesley told him, the

older boy would be sure to crush Andrew's feelings and grind them underneath his wet boot. She saw Andrew make his decision, begin to open his mouth. "No, don't," she said. "Don't give in."

Wesley turned to her. "Figured it out, didn't you?" he asked, not waiting for an answer. "I wonder how long it will take our brother to figure it out for himself."

Allie knew that Andrew wouldn't be able to stand being the only one not knowing. Her brother asked in a voice that Allie knew sounded nearly exactly like the captain's. "Who is my father?" he asked, intensity picking up, projecting into his words.

The cadet brought his face inches from Andrew's. "Don't you know?" he said. "It's Captain Picard." And he laughed.

Andrew's face went white, his chest stopped moving, everything about him froze. The boy worked through the same thought sequence his sister had just followed, came to the same conclusion, realized that Wesley was absolutely right. And hated him for it, hated him for knowing when he didn't, for hating him for being something he couldn't help.

"How does it feel?" Wesley asked.

Andrew said nothing, though the question had been directed at him.

"I asked you how it felt, how it feels to be the bastard child of a great starship captain," Wesley asked again, a smug smile plastered on his face, making him into a grim visage of a jack-in-the-box.

Then Allie realized that her brother had been rendered speechless not from anger, but from pain. She swore under her breath again. Wesley had gotten past Andrew's defenses, ones that Andrew kept carefully crafted so that people wouldn't take advantage of how truly sensitive he was, and try to rip him apart. As Wesley was so creatively proceeding to do in front of her.

She shouted at Wesley, walked over to him, and punched that smug look right off his face.

Jean-Luc didn't turn as Beverly came down the stairs. The doctor had gone down the stairs as she had as a child, trying to sneak into the living room much too early on Christmas morning. Or as a teen, trying to sneak back upstairs after being out too late. The third step down creaked when you stepped on it in the center. Taking no chances, Beverly skipped the step altogether. The construction of the front room of the house didn't help much at all in any of her sneaking endeavors. The entire face of the stairway was exposed to the front room, the other side up against the far wall. Crusher stopped

her descent and leaned up against the wall in question, taking a moment to think of exactly how she would say what she had decided to say.

The freedom the entire idea offered felt like true freedom, unlike the other kind, what had been a facade. Yes, she would have to endure anger, fear, sadness. But she experienced all of those already and what she thought of in her own head were three headed monsters of what the real reactions could be.

Or the real reactions could be six headed monsters for all she knew. She studied Jean-Luc as he relaxed in front of the fire, unopened book in his hand. He'd found the library. The firelight reflected off the crown of his head, emphasized the sculptured lines of his face. She frowned. How could she have denied this man as many times as she had? How could anyone? But she had. And now she would face each one of those denials, a confession long time in coming. The penance would be none of the old ones, from the old ways, simple and painless. No, penance would be harder than confession, forgiveness a faint light waiting at the end of the pilgrimage.

Beverly finished her journey down the stairs without subterfuge. Picard turned away from the fire and towards her. "I spoke with Will while you were upstairs. He reports that it will be at least ten hours before the repairs can be completed. Their current theory is some sort of metaphasic life form has infiltrated the system."

"Metaphasic? Sounds like another word Geordi or Data have coined to describe a phenomenon they've never encountered."

"I believe that's precisely how the word came about," he said, giving her a slight smile.

She nodded, returning the same smile, nothing remotely cheerful behind it. "Gracie is the only one upstairs," she said, knowing that Picard had assumed all of the children were up there.

Frowning, he got up from the armchair. "Where are the others? They aren't out in this storm, are they?"

"They went riding earlier. Before you arrived." She paused. "Wesley is here. Andrew and Allie, they went out with him."

"You let them go out in this?"

Anger rushed into her face at his judgmental tone. "First off, it wasn't storming when they left, only a snow shower. Second, you know as well as I do that trying to stop them from doing something they are absolutely determined to do does nothing to actually sway them."

He gave her a curious look. "No, I wouldn't know that as well as you do."

Yes, you do. Their parents, you and I, are the exact same way. For so long, The doctor had thought of the truthful answer and had to think of a cover answer that she nearly gave him another lie. Then the cover story already weaving itself in her mind fell apart, threads disintegrating, dropping those swords as they went, the clanging echoing only in her mind. She recognized the clanging as her heartbeat, picking up the pace as it readied for what was coming. “Yes, you do,” she said. “Their—.”

A bark came from behind her. *Damn.*

Conal stood up and walked to her, just under her hand, ignorant of his awful timing. Then the large gray dog paced, whining again. Beverly followed him down the hallway and into the kitchen where his nails clacked on the floor. He went to the door and barked. Looked at her, pawed at the door, barked again. As Conal had trained his humans as well as they trained him, the doctor obediently opened the door and let Conal outside so he could relieve himself. Except instead of doing that, the dog gave one last bark and raced into the forest, leaving only pawprints behind him, already being covered by the deepening snow. “The hell?” she said. Poking her head out the door, she shouted for the dog to return. The only reply was the fury of the storm, the wind driving hard flakes of snow into her eyes. A word popped into her head to describe the conditions outside. *Blizzard.*

Her children were out there. The doctor stayed, the door wide open, searching the white curtain of snow. The snow that made its way inside, the cold that crept past her and into the large kitchen, making her hands lose feeling. She stood there, one hand left on the door, the other bracing against the doorframe, as if her vigil could bring them back, trudging through the snow, healthy. *Alive.*

A strong, warm hand moved the one of hers that held the door, gently guided her away from the cold and shut the door, denying the storm entry into the house. “Taking the full brunt of the elements isn’t going to bring them back,” Picard said.

The doctor remained in front of the door, looking out the frosty windows, unmoving.

“They’ll have found shelter,” he said. “Wesley is trained for this sort of thing now. And I’m sure Andrew and Allie know their way around. They’ll be fine.”

She turned on him. “How can you be so positive?” How dare he, when she could lose all of them save one, the smallest one sleeping upstairs, blissfully unaware of the events unfolding around her.

He studied her. “The important thing is to think positively and not to give up hope.”

Too bad he doesn’t know I gave up hope a long time ago. Not a single civil word came to her mind regarding his advice. Consciously, she knew that her subconscious wanted to chase him away. It recognized the situation developing, them falling into the

roles they rarely allowed themselves to be. With each other, offering support and comfort, building walls around them instead of between them. She couldn't stonewall him now. Not with what she had to tell him.

So she left him in the kitchen and went back into the front room, taking the iron poker from its stand beside the fireplace, stabbing it into the fire, watching the sparks fly with satisfaction. The doctor knew she couldn't begin to tell him unless she had both her temper and subconscious under control. The task was already a hard one, one that would hammer on them both. Her being angry and raising her voice, or throwing in barbs to drive him away, would only serve to make things worse—and it was already going to be bad enough. She resisted the urge to jab the hot poker into her stomach, as if it could eat away the cold that settled there. Her own mind and body, trying to keep her from what she had decided, everything waiting at the tip of her tongue.

And her children, at the mercy of the storm.

She dropped the poker into its stand, then dropped her body heavily on the couch behind her, curling into a corner. Staring into the fire, she remembered. *It was snowing when Jack died.* That damn snow could take Wesley, the last thing she had of Jack. Then it would take Andrew and Allie, the two borne out of love in the aftermath of the man's death. All of them, hypothermia lulling them into a warm sleep, and as they slept, the cold stealing that warmth, draining it from them, leaving them frozen in the forest. Distantly, she felt a quilt being draped over her. Her eyes remained unfocused. She knew who was there, trying to comfort her. Jean-Luc.

"It was snowing when Jack died," she murmured.

The hands that held the quilt hung in midair. "What?" Picard asked, voice as soft as the worn blanket in his hands.

She felt the memory drifting onto them both as the wind blew snowdrifts into hills outside. Each of them had two memories, one a memory they both held together, another each held separate. Picard recalling the final moments of Jack's life, Beverly another moment in front of this same fireplace. The moment when Beverly had confessed to Nana what had happened and her grandmother had given no absolution. Between them, through the familiar gauze of memory, the fire burned away.

His hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said.

"No," she said.

"I shouldn't have," he continued. "I should have left you alone, let you sleep. But seeing you there, it hit me that Jack wouldn't be there to take care of you, to help you when you fell, as you had done so many times for him. You were alone and it was my fault. And I went to you, and apologized, and then I should have left."

“Don’t do this to yourself,” she said, looking not at him, but at the fire. *Don’t do this to me.*

“Is this what sits between us?” he asked. “That I took advantage of you?”

Beverly couldn’t allow him to bear any guilt, not when it was hers alone. “Jean-Luc, I’m not a woman to be taken advantage of. If I hadn’t been a willing party, I believe you would have found yourself with a black eye.”

The remark didn’t bring even a rueful smile to his face. The moment had gained too much intensity, had nearly gained its own life. “Then what is it? Did we betray him?”

“No.” Eyes on the flames, couldn’t look at him. The anger had dissipated, her subconscious had gone quiet.

His hand moved from her shoulder and up to her cheek as he shifted closer. “This person you’ve been over the past few days, she isn’t the Beverly I know. While I realize you were close to your grandmother, I doubt that her dying would change you this much.”

She said nothing. Picard turned her head towards his for her. And now she saw his eyes, saw everything behind them, his concern, his comfort, his love. Sensing what was coming, her body trembled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “What’s really wrong?”

The last barrier had been burned away and the words floated out between them, almost tangible, finding their place in the light of the fire. As she spoke, her fingers played with the quilt, her eyes remained focused on her fidgeting. “You left something behind that night, after you’d gone.”

He nodded. “Yes, I know. I left you a note saying goodbye.”

She shook her head. “Not the note. I didn’t know until two months later that I was pregnant.” The doctor managed a quick glance upward, moving only her eyes, saw his face had gone as pale as the snow.

“How...”

Eyes back down on her fingers, she explained to him that she and Jack had been planning on trying for another child, that she had stopped the birth control regimen. “I couldn’t terminate,” she said. “So I had them. A boy and a girl. Twins.”

“Andrew and Allie,” he rasped.

“They’re yours. And mine.” Unable to stop now, she continued, wanting everything out before he could react. “I had them, left them on Caldos with Nana. I never saw them often enough—.”

"I never saw them," he whispered.

Beverly ignored it, she had to, if she was to finish. "I couldn't tell you, because I knew you already felt guilty over what had happened, and if you were to continue to be the Starfleet captain, you had to pack that guilt up in a strong box and leave it there. Telling you about Andrew and Allie would break open that box and I was sure there would never be one strong enough after that." She took a breath. "Nana and I managed to create records to make it look like the twins were Nana's grandchildren, not her great-grandchildren. Everything was settled...until I came aboard the *Enterprise*. When Tasha died."

"Gracie," he said.

"Yes. But by then, it had been so long since the twins were born, I knew I couldn't tell you about her, because then I would have to tell you what happened that night. And the time in between, it was too long, and you would've been hurt all over again. So Nana took in another child." Her own voice dropped to a whisper. "I pretended nothing had happened. When Nana died, I became their guardian, as I should have been in the first place. Then I realized, I couldn't bring them on the *Enterprise*, I couldn't bring them anywhere near Starfleet again, because someone would figure it out. Deanna already has. So I resigned."

It was done. Beverly looked up at him, now wanting to see how he had taken it, but his gray eyes were vacant. After a few moments, he got up and moved to an armchair, vacant eyes on the fire. Beside her, where he'd been sitting, was a cold mass of air. Unable to stay in the same room, she left him as she'd found him when she'd come down the stairs. Keeping the quilt around her, she went into the kitchen, angry at herself, angry at him for not reacting. Shouting would have been better, yelling, cursing, even his intense anger, the most frightening of his moods. Anything except the cold ignorance he gave her. She shut her eyes, but the image of his vacant look stayed before her. Of all the reactions, this was the one she hadn't imaged. That he wouldn't love her, that he wouldn't hate her, but he would ignore her. At least with hate, there was still an attachment, an acknowledgment of her existence. To him right now, she was nothing.

It made her feel very small.

"What's wrong?" A child's voice.

Beverly looked up, out of the quilt. Gracie's gray eyes, showing the concern and love she'd seen in Jean-Luc's eyes, minutes now having become an eternity ago. The doctor bit her lip. The little girl crawled into her lap, put her arms around her. "It's okay," she said. "You can cry." Beverly wrapped the quilt around the two of them and let the tears fall.

Chapter 11

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stared at the fire, more stunned than if Beverly Crusher had told him she was really a figment of his imagination and that for the past fifteen years, he had been locked away in a Starfleet mental health facility. The anger that had overwhelmed him merely minutes before had been shunted away by a profound sense of loss. Perhaps his assessment wasn't far off at all, that the Beverly he'd known for the past seventeen years was a hologram, a fake. At the same time, he knew it was untrue. The captain had had too many arguments with Beverly over the needs of people and their well-being to believe that she had hidden the children out of spite. But even without a malicious intent, it hurt not a whit less. He went back over the events of the previous day, meeting each of the children, trying figure out how he hadn't realized what stood right before him.

Certainly, he had noticed the resemblance between Beverly and the three children. But he'd shrugged it off as a familial resemblance, supposing that Howard genes ran strong, completely disregarding that Wesley looked much like his father despite his mother being a Howard. Picard's fingers traced the edges of the book in his hands, seeking some touch with reality. How could he not have seen it? The day before, when little Gracie had boldly stuck her hand out to shake his. He'd noticed the red hair, the lines of her face, but how had he failed to take note of her eyes? So very similar to the eyes that greeted him every morning when he shaved. Instead, he'd reflected on the girl's similarities to Beverly, imagining that Beverly must've been much the same as a small child. The impertinence, the intelligence, that ability to say whatever she wanted to say and damn the consequences because it needed to be said. Such a pleasure to be around. There had been that moment that afternoon, telling the girl about snowflakes, when he imagined he could be telling a daughter of his own the same thing. And when she had asked him about Beverly, he wished in that moment, that the girl would be their child, one that could only exist if they'd had the courage to be together.

Wishes had very interesting ways of granting themselves. Not just one child, but three. It was so obvious now, he couldn't even comprehend not knowing. Andrew, the same eyes as his sister. The same color and shape, the lines of the boy's face, down to the dimple in his chin that Picard's mother teased him about when he was a boy. Andrew's voice, the baritone. Yet he'd taken note of Beverly in the boy. The reddish hair, the long legs, fair skin. All that he could deny, but nothing could deny what he saw in the boy's eyes when he looked at the stars. After all, he knew that he still got the same look in his, even after all his years in Starfleet.

And Allie. The hair had taken him by surprise, with the other two being so fair. Her skin so much like Beverly's, the eyes strikingly blue. But the shape of her face reminded him of his mother, her views on staying close to the land like his father and brother. Then like he'd done with her brother and sister, he'd seen only Beverly. The beauty, the impish nature, completely unknowing she would get young men tied up in knots over her. He knew she must give those boys hell. *I don't envy her father*, he

thought. It hit him. *I'm her father.* He was her father, and he hadn't gotten to intimidate a single one of those suitors.

Because of Beverly, he'd missed out on sixteen years of the twins' lives. Their first words, first steps, first day of school. He hadn't been the one to introduce them to fencing or riding, though his children apparently found themselves naturally drawn to those sports. Not helped them deal with bullies, tell them happy birthday, tell them stories, watch them grow taller each year. Even those moments they'd told him last night, Andrew capsizing the sailboat on his sister, Allie pushing the boy out and giving him a concussion, he hadn't had the chance to scold them while trying to keep a straight face. They had never met their uncle, their aunt, their cousin Rene. Didn't even carry his family name.

The captain told himself he couldn't place the blame entirely on Beverly. If he had stayed that first night, after Jack died. Stayed and talked to her, instead of running away from his ship and staying away from her for the next ten years, he could have been a part of their lives. He realized that she, too, had missed all those moments. She had Wesley, though. She had seen all of those things with her son and Picard had missed them all with his own. Anger pulsed through him again, then faded as quickly as it appeared, sadness settling into the ashes.

"Didn't you ever wish that you had kids of your own?" Wesley had asked him that on a shuttlecraft, years ago, on the way to Starbase 315.

"Wishing for a thing does not make it so." Apparently, he'd been wrong. It did, and yet it didn't. In his wishes, it had been a traditional path towards children. Marrying, considering, planning, *then* having children. In all those wishes, the woman he married had been Beverly, the children had been their children. Now there were children, but Beverly remained across a chasm he wasn't sure he could ever cross. Hours ago, he had been willing to risk his career, his life, not to lose her. All that had changed. The revelation she'd given him had pierced so deeply, found the gap in his armor so easily, he wasn't sure if he could allow himself to be vulnerable to her again.

In front of him, the fire sputtered. As he had lost himself in thought, the fire had dwindled, leaving only a small flame on the end of a log and the hot embers below. The captain glanced around the living room, found the poker resting in a stand beside the fireplace. Standing, he pushed the embers and ashes to expose the hottest ones, then added a few logs, watching the fire until it became strong again. Then he stayed there, remembering that night, when he had tucked the then five year old Wesley into bed, and knowing that was the first time he'd ever wished to be a father. Before, fatherhood had never crossed his mind in any positive manner. That night, for just that moment, it jumped to the forefront of his mind, to be buried until his experience of being Kamin.

Anger reached through his hands, into his fingers, squeezed the iron poker as if he could bend it to his will. He had tucked children he had never truly had into bed while he was Kamin. He had even tucked the son of his dead best friend into bed. But he had never done so for his own children. Now it was too late for two of them, they'd never

stand for it. One of them, though, she was still small enough. And if he accepted his role, could put aside any anger involved with the children, he could be a part of their lives from then on.

Picard's gaze travelled to the window, assessing the storm raging outside. The first thing he would do would be to bring them home.

Assured of his decision, he walked down the hall, into the kitchen. At first, Beverly didn't hear him come in as she cut up various vegetables on the counter. Vegetable soup. *"My grandmother used to make it, with beans and peas and carrots..."* Picard forced the memory out of his mind, focused on the present, the Beverly in front of him. He saw the droop in her shoulders, the look of defeat. The skin around her eyes bore the puffy red evidence of crying. Guilt clouded over him. He had been the cause of her crying, he was the cause of her defeat. Yet he couldn't bring himself to reach out to her, tell her he loved her, it would work out. He wasn't certain that it would, not with the hot pit of anger writhing inside him, still stronger than any other emotion he had. Gracie was over at the pantry, calling out names of spices and asking if they were the right ones. It was she who noticed the captain in the doorway.

"Are you going to help?" she asked him.

At the question, Beverly stopped cutting the carrot and turned to face him, her face neutral.

The look in her eyes whittled away some of the anger, sadness growing to fill its place. "Not with this," he said.

"Then how are you planning to help?" the doctor asked, putting down the chef's knife.

In the back of his mind, Picard thanked whatever deities there were that she had done so. "I'm going to go find them."

Her hands went to her hips. "Absolutely not." Then she quickly told Gracie to go watch the fire in the living room since no one was in there. The little girl left the room quickly, as if she knew the argument was coming.

"This isn't up for discussion," he said, finding his boots in the corner. His saddle was in the barn, as was the last lonely horse.

"I think it is," Beverly said. "Because if you go after them, there will be four people stuck out in that storm instead of three, not three people being rescued. You yourself said that they wouldn't need rescuing."

He jammed his foot into the boot. "I have to do this."

"Jean-Luc."

His boots on, his coat and everything else he needed within reach, he brought himself to look up at her. "Beverly." Everything even, neutral. Keeping the tone.

She broke it. "Please," she said and he heard her breaking.

The captain closed his eyes. "I have to do this." When he opened them, the doctor hadn't moved.

"I realize that I might have lost you as my friend and I accept that," she said, her voice shaking. "But what I cannot accept is the storm taking every person I love from me by taking their lives."

He couldn't deal with this right now. Except emotions never picked the best times to be dealt with. More often, the worst times became the worst times because emotions decided to come out and play. Picard's emotions decided to betray him. "What are you saying?" he asked. In his stomach, he felt the wrestling match, as his reason and sadness were trying to subjugate the anger. But none of those emotions were what made him ask the question.

The doctor spoke slowly in an attempt to keep her voice from shaking. "What I'm saying is that three of my children are trapped out in that storm and they could very well die. If you go out after them, you could die as easily as they might, and I would lose everyone I love, except for my youngest child."

An echo in his head. *Why didn't you ever tell me you were in love with me?* Stupidly, he realized that nothing could defeat the anger aside from love, but he couldn't bring himself to risk it, because the anger could keep him safe. To love was to be vulnerable. It seemed his subconscious was having a field day of sorts, because he asked the question aloud, the same question she had asked him on Kesprytt. "Why didn't you ever tell me you were in love with me?"

The answer was swift. "Because I thought you'd hate me."

Of everything he'd felt in the past hours, hate wasn't one of them. Hate wasn't an emotion he could fathom associating with Beverly, no matter how angry he was. "I could never hate you," he said.

"And them."

A solid weight dropped onto his shoulders, holding him to the chair. "You thought I would hate them? What would make you think that?" That she could even think he'd hate his own children made adding loathing to the mix inside him.

"I don't know, exactly. I was afraid. Afraid that out of guilt or anger or both, you would hate me, and them by proxy, because I never told you. Because I kept running away from you. After we were on Kesprytt, I wanted to tell you. But by then, it was too late, I was in too deep. Telling you would mean telling you everything and I didn't dare."

“Because you thought I would hate you.” It wasn’t a question. “That I would hate them.”

“In part. Also because I knew children were never a part of your life plan. I couldn’t risk it.”

“They weren’t,” he said, glancing outside.

She said nothing.

He looked back to her. “Then seventeen years ago, I tucked your son into bed. For the first time in my life, I considered children of my own.” Beverly’s face revealed nothing as he continued. “I know I haven’t told you much about my time as Kamin. But he had two children. As Kamin, I told the mother of those children that I’d always thought I didn’t need them to make my life complete. But after they were born, I couldn’t imagine life without them.” Picard watched her closely as he walked over to stand in front of her. “Since then, there’s been an empty part of my life, because I knew what I was missing.” He willed himself not to touch her. “And when I dreamed of the path I hadn’t taken, it was you whom I had married, and you who was the mother of my children.”

She closed her eyes, hugged her arms around herself.

“Any of that, I don’t know anymore.” He reached for her shoulder, making her open her eyes. “But what I do know is that Wesley is out there, that my son and daughter are out there, and that the three of them are innocent of anything that happens between us. And I have to go find them and bring them home.”

He saw her twitch, resisting the urge to hug him, the same urge he felt to wrap her up in his arms, and tell her it would be okay. He couldn’t. He couldn’t allow himself to do that until he knew that the woman before him wasn’t a stranger. That the woman in front of him wouldn’t hurt him.

Beverly nodded, waved a hand as if saying goodbye, and left the kitchen. With a last look down the hallway, Picard shrugged on his coat, found hat and gloves, and headed for the stables. The blowing snow obscured the house from his view by the time he was halfway across the yard.

As Allie drew back for another jab at the cadet on the ground below her, she felt someone grab the back of her jacket and pull her away. She knew the feel of her brother’s pull, he’d broken up many a fight between her and an obnoxious boy when they were kids. Andrew’s intervention brought her back to her senses. Now wasn’t the time to beat the hell out of Wesley for being an ass. She could do that in the comfort of her own home, once they got there. Or she could even try to be diplomatic and figure

out what the hell was wrong with the guy, because it was completely unlike him to act as he had. "Thanks," she said to her brother.

He nodded. "No problem." Then he tackled the cadet slowly rising from the ground.

"Hey!" Allie shouted. She'd be damned if her brother got in on the fight after dragging her away from it. "What the hell?"

The two boys wrestled on the ground, each one seeking the upper hand. Allie saw that the two of them were fairly well matched. Andrew was taller and more muscled, but Wesley had better training. As they rolled around, Allie searched the cave for something to help her separate them and came up empty handed. A dark form bolted into the cave from the wall of blinding snow. Allie gave a yelp of surprise, then froze. Relief warmed her when she heard the bark, knowing it was Conal. The large dog, matted with snow, bounded over to where the boys fought and barked more insistently. The dog snapped and growled and pawed, finally getting the two to separate.

Andrew and Wesley sat on the floor of the cave, glaring at each other, breathing hard, faces red from exertion. When either of them even leaned slightly towards the other, Conal growled at them, letting them know that he wouldn't allow any more fighting.

"We should conserve our energy," Wesley said. "There's no telling how long we could be stuck here."

"Good idea," Allie said without a trace of sarcasm. Wesley gave her an odd look, but said nothing. She pointed to his blackening eye. "That, by the way, felt good."

He glared.

"And if you decide you'd like to talk about this whole situation like a civilized person, it might even be worth it," she said.

"I don't know if he's capable of being a civilized person anymore," Andrew said.

The cadet turned his glare on Andrew.

"Shut up, Andrew," Allie said, causing her brother to glare at her. She sighed. A glare party. She turned back to Wesley, sliding down to sit on the ground across from both of the boys. "Can you at least tell me how you figured this out?"

"So you believe me?" Wesley asked.

"Yes."

The cadet looked at Andrew. "What about you?"

“Leave me alone,” replied Andrew.

“Do you believe me?”

“I said, leave me alone,” Andrew repeated.

Wesley walked over and stood over him. “I asked you a question,” he said, ignoring Conal’s warning growl.

“And I gave you an answer,” Andrew said, not looking up at him.

“I didn’t like that answer, so I’d like another one,” Wesley’s voice took on an unnatural menace.

Andrew finally looked at him. “Let me show you what you can do with your other answer,” he said, exploded off the floor and slammed Wesley up against the wall of the cave. The cadet managed to drop the taller boy to the floor, Andrew scraping his cheek against a rock on the way down. Wesley’s flashlight clattered onto the ground.

“Knock this shit off!” Allie yelled at them, nearly drowned out by Conal’s barking. “You can fight for alpha male once we’re back home!”

Conal got them apart. Each of them sat on opposite sides of the cave, wiping blood from their faces.

“It’s not my home,” Wesley said.

Allie rolled her eyes. “You know what I meant.”

Wesley studied the mouth of the cave from his spot on the ground. The storm showed no sign of abating. He sighed. “I wanted to know what would happen to you guys, since Nana died. To see if you’d end up staying with my mom, if there was really no other family.”

Allie had the question ready, but it was Andrew who asked first, his voice soft. “What did you find?”

If Wesley had been surprised by Andrew asking the question, he gave no sign of it. “I looked for this supposed twin of our grandfather. Only he didn’t exist, except for in false records on Caldos. Everything got so confusing. I mean, none of what I was digging up made any sense. So I traced all the birth records on Caldos, found yours. Found sealed documents that were your real birth records. And there it was, simple as that.”

Allie thought she saw hurt in Wesley’s eyes, the hurt that must be what the anger was covering for. “And?”

Wesley dropped his head between his knees. "You were conceived the night before my father was buried."

There wasn't a thing Allie could think of to reply to that statement. The storm gave its howl, the snow hissing across the rocks outside. Andrew stayed put, laying on his back and staring up at the cave's ceiling.

"Anyway. Mom left me with my grandparents, came here to Caldos, had you guys, then left."

"Went back to you," Andrew said. "Always back to you. We only got to see her once a year, twice if we were lucky. You saw her every day, she got to watch you grow up."

"It's not like we could've been a family," Wesley said.

"Why not?" Allie asked. "Why the hell not?"

The cadet raised his head, looked at her. "Do you really think that Mom will bring you on the ship? Besides, she already resigned. She resigned so she could stay with you and keep you away from Captain Picard."

Allie frowned. "So she did resign."

"You knew about it?" Wesley asked.

She nodded. "I talked to her about it, last night. I told her that we could come aboard ship with her, there wasn't any point in her resigning. That it..." she trailed off.

"It wasn't what?"

Allie looked at Wes. "I told her it wasn't fair. That she shouldn't have to give up her life for us, her career, because it wasn't like she asked to have to take care of us."

"She should have in the first place," Andrew muttered.

Allie ignored him.

Wesley didn't. "She shouldn't have *had* you in the first place."

Allie couldn't ignore that. Turning to Wesley, she said very slowly, enunciating each word, "Stop being an ass."

"I'm not," he said, looking at her.

She lifted her eyebrow at him.

The cadet stared.

“What?” she asked. Her cousin—brother—had never looked at her like that before.

“Mom does that,” he said.

“Does what?”

He pointed to his eyebrow. “That thing you did, with your eyebrow. I said something that was blatantly untrue, and you didn’t say a word, just raised your damn eyebrow. Mom does that. All the time. Bugs the hell out of me.”

“That’s probably why she does it,” Allie told him.

He gave her a slight smile, the first hint of humor he’d shown since he’d arrived at the colony.

Allie decided that her two brothers were taking enough of a hard line with everything that she could afford to think things through. She didn’t think that if she had been given the same situation, if she would’ve done anything differently. Beverly had taken a great deal of care in making sure they were provided for, that they kept in touch, that she and Wesley were important parts of their lives. And the past few days, she’d been a huge help in adjusting to Nana’s death. There were so many good things that Beverly had done, Allie had a hard time throwing away their entire relationship because of one bad thing. And Allie wasn’t even sure it was entirely bad. “Is Captain Picard really a bad guy?” Allie asked Wesley. “We visited the ship last night, he had dinner with us. He seemed a decent fellow.”

“He is,” Wesley said, then nothing more.

“You didn’t tell us about Gracie,” Andrew said, changing the subject.

Wesley shrugged. “It happened the first year we were on the *Enterprise*. I don’t know when. Mom transferred to head up Starfleet Medical. All I could find is Gracie’s birth certificate. She was born on Delos IV, but her father is the same as yours.”

Andrew sat up suddenly. “Delos IV?”

“Yeah,” Wesley said.

“That’s where I had the operation on my ears,” he said. “Dr. Quaiice did the operation.” The boy stood up suddenly, started pacing, kicking rocks. “It hurt so much. Someone would whisper and I’d feel like screaming, but if I screamed, I’d feel like I was being split from the inside.” He picked up a rock and hurled it into the deeper black depths of the cave. “And she wasn’t there for that.”

“She was back on the *Enterprise*,” Wesley said.

Andrew turned. “Exactly. Back on the *Enterprise*. Back with you.”

“Where she belonged,” said the cadet.

Andrew took a step towards him, eyes narrowing. Then he turned around, snatched up the fallen flashlight, and stalked into the cave. Conal started to follow, but Andrew stopped him with a command of “stay.” The dog stayed.

“Are you going to go after him?” Wesley asked.

“He’ll come back when he’s good and ready,” Allie replied.

Wesley put his head between his knees again. “Good for him.”

“What’s she like?”

“Who?” Wesley asked.

“Mom.” Allie hid a smile when Wesley looked at her sharply.

“You already know her,” he said.

Allie wished that were true. She only knew the doctor as her cousin, not as her mother. The operation on Delos IV that Andrew had remembered, Allie remembered it too. Recalled how worried Beverly had been, how gentle she was with both of them, but at the same time, teased Allie with her wit. Maybe she did know her. Maybe this whole act of secrecy to keep her and her brother and sister a secret was the only thing they hadn’t known about her, that everything else was genuine, as if to make up for the secret. Once you knew her, you *knew* her.

Conal let out a loud bark and raced for the mouth of the cave. Allie squinted as she looked towards where the dog had gone. “Is it just me or is the storm dying down?”

“It’s just you,” Wesley said, standing up next to her.

“You could be a bit more positive,” she said.

“I failed that course at the Academy,” he replied.

She glared at him.

Conal barked again and padded back inside. The horses stirred. “I think I heard someone,” Allie said.

“I think you’re being too positive,” said the cadet, who still followed her as she walked towards the mouth of the cave.

A shadow fell across the opening. Then Allie saw him, it was the captain. “I heard there might be some young people here who need some help,” he said.

“Oh, them,” Allie said, before she even realized the remark existed in her mind. “They’re in the next cave over.” She spoke like that whenever she felt safe, saying whatever came to mind. When she’d heard the captain’s voice, she’d felt that way, knew they’d be okay.

Picard smiled as he strode into the cave. That smile—like her brother’s. How had she not noticed it before? Then he frowned and asked, “Where’s Andrew?”

Allie swore.

“He went somewhere back into the cave,” Wesley said.

As if they had already agreed to it, neither of them mentioned knowing the truth about the captain and Beverly.

“I’m right here,” Andrew said, stepping out of the last shadow. “I started walking back when I heard Conal.”

Allie realized that Andrew hadn’t been in on their unmentioned agreement not to mention anything. His face gave it away, the way he studied Picard, kept a certain distance between them. The day before, he hadn’t kept that distance, hadn’t been giving Picard that look. Allie knew how Andrew felt, it was like meeting a new man. Yesterday, he’d been Captain Picard, friend of their cousin. Today he was Jean-Luc Picard, their father.

Picard’s look changed as well, his eyes meeting Andrew’s, studying him in the same manner. Then he nodded. “You know,” the captain said.

The horses stamped behind them. “Yes,” Andrew replied. “We should go home.” Nothing else was said as they gathered themselves, mounted the horses, and trotted out of the cave and back into the storm.

Chapter 12

Andrew kept his lips pressed tightly together so he didn't inhale any of the biting snow. It pelted all of them, tiny particles of fury, the impacts feeling like they should have left welts. Before them, the trail they'd broken heading out from the house was nearly completely covered, Conal's prints beside theirs all but gone. The captain must have paid close attention to tracking their path to be able to find them. Andrew rode in the rear of the group, not wanting his sister glaring at him or giving him any sort of look at all. He knew she was confused by him, at his anger, at him walking away in the cave. It wasn't like he knew exactly what made him leave. All he knew was that in that moment, he had to get away. Seeing Wesley, right in front of him, he'd been nearly blinded by the rage reaching out across his vision. It scared him. Scared him like he'd been scared back then.

Before the bout with Shalaff's, he hadn't experienced pain like that. Nor had he experienced anything as bad since then. Waking up, Nana saying good morning, and having a voice that used to be so warm become a spike through his brain. He'd screamed in return, and the scream made the spike expand with the force of an explosion, threatening to break apart everything inside his skull. His hands had flown to his ears, covering them, but it didn't help. Nana had tried to soothe him, but that meant talking, even in hushed tones. He didn't make the mistake of screaming again, whimpered instead. It still hurt.

Nana consulted with a doctor in the village. Like Felisa Howard, the doctor had no idea what was wrong with Andrew. Together, they concocted some sort of medication that rendered him deaf. That scared him as well, only slightly less than the pain of hearing. A world that had been so full of noise and distractions had gone completely silent, bare and lonely. He'd wanted his mother. During that time, Nana took care of him, and he loved her for it, but she wasn't his mother. Despite not knowing his mother the instinct was there, when he was scared and vulnerable, to want her comfort. He had screamed for her, once he couldn't hear, and could feel the vibration of the scream in his throat. Then Nana had brought him and Allie to Delos IV, to Dr. Quaiice, to Beverly, and she had fixed everything. Like a mother would.

Andrew shook his head, as if he could banish the memory as easily as shaking the snow from his hair. Distracting himself with the present, he studied the captain at the head of the group, leading the way to home. The man was barely taller than Beverly, but had a presence to him that could command attention from a person far more effectively than any taller man could. Andrew had made himself a student of Picard's career a few years ago.

He remembered why.

Then no amount of head shaking, of staring into the driving snow, could stop the memories from returning.

A knock on the front door brought Andrew running from his studies in the library to answer it. He slid across the old wood floor on socked feet, an action that normally brought him the wrath of his grandmother. Most of his socks ended up torn, dirty, or both. The twelve year old flung open the door. It would be Beverly and Wesley, come to visit. Beyond the door, three figures waited. Andrew didn't move from his spot, not believing what he saw. Then one figure walked in, the whine of machinery working with each heavy step, each step becoming doom itself. Finally, the red beam from the cyborg's eye fell on his face. "Resistance is futile," the being said. Andrew recognized it. Locutus. The thing that had butchered so many at Wolf 359. And it had come to deal with him, to take his sisters and his grandmother, to take him. He would rather die, but he wouldn't be given the chance. Then the two remaining figures stepped through, laid their searching beams on him, speaking in monotones. The first face, it had been Wesley. Pale and cold, covered with the machinery. The last being that stepped through the doorway, when Andrew saw who it was, he fell to the floor, realizing there were things worse than death. The Borg that was Beverly told him, "You will be assimilated." And Andrew screamed.

He came awake quickly, the nightmare wrapping around his head. Sweat poured from his body, the sheets soaked, but he was cold, clammy. His breaths came in short gasps, as fast as the heart pounded inside his chest. The dark walls of the room closed in—they were the cube of the Borg ship. He had to escape, get outside, out into the open. Without any thought to shoes, coat, anything to protect him from the cold of winter, he ran outside.

Andrew ran out into the snow of the front yard, ran until he couldn't feel his feet, his lower legs, until he fell down, half buried. The moon rose above him, the only witness to his escape. Winter's night nipped at him, but it couldn't change that he was no longer enclosed, there were no walls, nowhere a Borg could hide.

Felisa found him minutes later, shivering and curled up in a fetal position. Vaguely, Andrew was aware of her presence, of her helping him up, bringing him back into the house. "My mother," he murmured, over and over again. "I want my mother." Nana had wrapped him up in a quilt, rubbed him down to get him warm again. He felt the love from his grandmother, he knew she was taking care of him, but it wasn't what he needed. He said it again. "My mother."

"She can't be here right now," Felisa replied.

And he cried. His mother had to be dead, so long ago that he didn't even know her. Couldn't even imagine her in his mind, like Wesley could with his father. Not a single picture could be found, as if his mother had never existed except to give birth to him and his sister. The jealousy found him again, ready prey, jealous of Wesley, having a mother. Having Beverly as a mother, someone whom Andrew had imagined could be his mother. Or what his mother would have been like.

"I hate him," he said.

“Who?” Nana asked.

Andrew sat in front of the fire Felisa had started, holding the quilt around him like a shield. “Wesley.”

She had been going to the kitchen to get the boy something hot to drink, but returned at his words, knelt in front of him. “Why do you hate him?” she asked.

“He has a mother.”

Nana frowned. “Do you hate every boy that has a mother?”

Andrew closed his eyes, he couldn't look at Nana. He knew he was a horrible person for thinking it, and most of the time, he managed to forget he even felt this way. “No,” he said.

“Then why Wesley in particular?”

Andrew's answer came back, fierce, all the emotion from his nightmare channeled into his reply. “Because his mother is Beverly. He doesn't know how lucky he is.” He sat back, covered his head with the quilt, unwilling to talk anymore. Nana had left him alone after that, speaking to him only to chase him back to bed. When he awoke in the morning, he'd thought the entire episode a dream.

When he came down for breakfast, Nana seemed no different than when he had said good night to her the day before. Then she spoke. “Andrew, we're going to get you a puppy,” she said.

He blinked. “What? Why?”

“I think you need a dog,” she said.

Andrew didn't argue. He'd wanted a dog for awhile, he knew what kind of dog he wanted, knew where he could find it. “Mairi's father's dog has puppies,” he said. “They might be ready to go.”

Nana had taken him later that morning, visiting the puppies. The gray male had padded over to Andrew first, licking his fingers, his tail waving. “Conal,” Andrew said. “I'll name you Conal.” He'd given a lot of thought to what he'd name a dog. It had been Conal who had avenged Cuchulainn's death when he killed Lugaid in the stories of the Irish Ulster Cycle. The name meant strong wolf and Andrew knew that Conal would grow to be a big, strong dog. One that could protect him and his family.

From that first night, Conal slept in Andrew's room. Slowly, the nightmares had gone away, fading as the puppy grew. Andrew studied his dog, wondering if warm-hearted Conal could ever do anything he wouldn't fathom doing. If Conal would ever be capable of hurting anyone, unless he was made to do it. Immediately he thought of Locutus, of what Captain Picard had become, and if he had been controlled, made to do

those awful things. So he studied the man called Jean-Luc Picard. The more he read, the more he realized that Picard must have died a thousand times while he was Locutus. Must have desperately wished for death rather than to have caused the death and suffering of so many people.

Andrew discovered what scared him so badly about the Borg. It wasn't the death, it wasn't Locutus, it certainly wasn't Picard. It was the idea that he could be made to do things he'd rather die before doing, all without the hope of escape, without the hope of death, and instead would spend a lifetime dying.

2370

Andrew felt fur under his hand. He looked down to find Conal loping next to him, nudging his head under Andrew's hand to get him out of his reverie. His dog certainly had grown into a large one. The wolfhound weighed more than the average human and stood more than three feet tall at his shoulders. Yet Conal was one of the most gentle beings Andrew had ever known and he trusted him with his life. The dog gave him a bark, then raced ahead of the group. Andrew realized they must be close to home.

Beverly Crusher continued the stew's preparations as night fell, a dark curtain over the snow, doing nothing to dull the sound of the wind. Gracie helped to her best ability, finding spices and vegetables and trying to decipher Nana's handwriting. Then the little girl had started in with her questions. "You argued with the captain," she said.

"Yes," Beverly replied.

"And he left."

"Yes."

Gracie peered up at her. "Is he coming back? Or is he going to be lost like the others?"

The doctor knew that Jean-Luc would come back. It was one of those things, a certainty, that he would come back. Even when he had been taken by the Borg, had been transformed into that horrible creature called Locutus, somewhere inside her, she had known he would come back. He always did. "The captain always comes back," she told Gracie.

"Good," she said. Beverly barely had time to take another breath before Gracie caught her off-guard again. "Are you my mother?" she asked.

The doctor looked down at her youngest daughter. "Yes," she said. Then she knelt down and looked Gracie in the eye at the girl's height. "I'm sorry."

The girl reached out with her hand, put it on Beverly's cheek. "Why are you sorry?" she asked.

"Because I didn't tell you sooner," she said.

"Oh," said Gracie. "I thought it was because I was a bad kid."

In spite of the situation, Beverly let out a small laugh at how absurd it was, for Gracie to be considered a bad kid. "Don't you ever think that," she told Gracie. "You're not a bad kid."

"Then I wasn't dreaming. Because when I was falling asleep last night, I thought I heard you tell me that you were my mother and that the captain downstairs was my papa." Gracie put her small hands on Beverly's shoulders. "Is that true, too?"

"Yes," Beverly said.

"But he got mad when you told him." Gracie's gray eyes were glistening. Beverly knew that the girl thought her father had rejected her. And it hurt all the more, because within the space of a day, the child had come to love her father, without even knowing who he was.

The doctor reached out and drew Gracie into her arms, squeezing her tight. "He was mad at me," she explained. "For not telling him. He wasn't mad at you, he's not mad at your brother and sister, either. He loves you, I promise that." And she knew it was true.

Scratching at the door and then barking alerted them that Conal had come back. Gracie broke free from Beverly's arms and ran over to the door, flinging it open and nearly tackling the wolfhound. "You're back!" she shouted to the dog, who was now doing his best to lick Gracie's face clear off her head, his tail wagging wildly.

Beverly stepped around the dog and her daughter to look outside. A smile spread across her face as she saw four figures pitched against the wind, slowly making their way to the house. As they walked in, she took note of their appearances. Allie and Jean-Luc looked none the worse for wear, aside from cheeks flushed with cold. When she saw the state of her two sons, she knew Wesley had told the twins. Her oldest son's left eye was almost swollen shut, purple bruising mottling the skin surrounding it. Andrew had a good sized scrape down his entire right cheek, encrusted with snow and blood. The boy noticed her looking at his wound. "It looks worse than it feels," he told her, stamping his feet to dislodge the snow, not meeting her gaze.

"I'm sure," she said, her tone letting him know that she didn't believe him.

He ignored her.

The door shut, the group shed their boots, coats, hats, gloves, trying to warm up. Without anything being said, they all went upstairs and changed into dry clothing.

Gracie found a towel and dried off Conal in front of the fire. They each came downstairs one by one. Beverly gave them soup, feeling like she was doing something to help them, knowing that the storm inside the home was brewing in this quiet. Jean-Luc was first.

“Thank you for bringing them home,” she said.

He nodded, accepting the mug she offered him. “You’re welcome,” he said. “They know.”

She sighed. “I know, I knew as soon as I saw Wesley’s eye and Andrew’s cheek. Did you talk to them at all?”

The captain shook his head, frowning slightly. “No. But they all look at me differently. I can see it.”

“They aren’t seeing you as the captain anymore, they’re looking at you now as their father, and wondering what you’re like as a father.”

“I wonder that myself,” he said. “If I’ll be any good at it.”

Before she could stop herself, she took his free hand, gave it a quick squeeze. “You’re off to a good start. You brought them home.” She let go of his hand, unable to read his expression.

Wesley, Andrew, and Allie made their way into the kitchen, removing any chance of Picard replying to Beverly’s comment. The doctor found her medkit and herded the group into the warmer front room. She went to Wesley first, his eye in more need of attention than Andrew’s cheek. The cadet accepted his mother’s ministrations as she mended his eye.

“I think you should’ve left him with it for at least a day,” Allie said from her spot leaning against the armchair closest to the fire.

“You just wanted to admire your handiwork,” Wesley said, his voice not like it had been earlier that day. It almost sounded as if he were good naturedly teasing his sister.

The doctor swung her head around to look at Allie. “*You* did this?” she asked.

“I told you she could take care of herself,” Andrew answered. “Boys were scared of her when she was little.”

Beverly listened as she moved from Wesley to Andrew, holding his face still while healing his cuts.

“What do you mean, ‘were scared’?” Allie asked.

“Did I say that?” Andrew said, trying to look over at Allie.

Beverly kept him from moving. “Hold *still*,” she said, reminded of telling his father the same thing while trying to heal bruises from a fistfight.

Andrew met her eyes, his gray ones with her blue. For a moment, she thought she saw hurt, sadness, anger. Then it was gone, covered as fast as he could blink and regain his composure.

Wesley spoke from his seat across the room. “She went to me first.”

Andrew was out of his chair before Wesley finished his sentence. Wesley met him halfway, the two of them grappling, then letting fists fly. The room became its own cloudburst. Gracie yelled as Beverly shouted, Conal barking and shoving himself between the two boys, Picard helping to separate them. After a short scuffle, Wesley and Andrew were drawn apart, Beverly standing between them, her eyes boring holes into them both. “Upstairs,” she said. “To your rooms.”

Wesley and Andrew began to protest.

“Now,” she said.

Recognizing the unwavering tone of voice in their mother, both boys headed up the stairs, trading glares with each other but not even contemplating fighting. Beverly followed them, wanting to make sure they didn’t try and kill one another again. She didn’t allow herself to feel relief until their doors were shut. Conal, as if he understood the situation, stationed himself in the hallway, watching the doors. Running her hand through her hair, the doctor found herself walking to her grandmother’s room, the only place she thought she could find some peace. She needed respite from the situation, time to gather her thoughts into some sense of coherence. Footsteps behind her caused the doctor to turn around. Allie stood there. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Beverly gave her a half smile. “I’ve been better.” They walked together into Felisa’s old room. Took in the rightness of the space, at the signs of Felisa’s passing, the journal on the bedside stand. The doctor picked it up.

Allie sat down on the bed. “I’m not mad,” she said.

So forthright. “You aren’t?” Beverly asked. She knew Wesley was mad, Andrew seemed to be, though he hid it aside from lashing out at Wesley. Gracie, she had attributed her lack of anger to her age or that she hadn’t come to realize that she was angry. She hoped for the former.

“I was at first,” Allie said. “Especially when Wesley first told us. When I decked him.”

“That was a nice shiner,” Beverly said.

“Some of my best work,” Allie said lightly, then grew serious again. “But then once Andrew and Wes stopped fighting, then fought again, then stopped, I decided one of us had to be reasonable about this, think things through instead of just reacting.”

“Your father does that,” Beverly said, then held her breath, not knowing how Allie would react to the comment she’d given without thinking.

“So I’ve heard,” she replied with a wry smile.

Beverly started breathing again.

Allie continued. “I’m too tired to talk about everything right now, but I asked Wesley what you were like. He told me that I already knew you. And that’s what I wanted to know.” She studied Beverly’s face. “I wanted to know if I do know you, if this secret you kept from everyone except Nana, is the only secret you have. That now that I know this secret, I really do know you, and I can trust you.”

“You can,” Beverly said. Then she handed the journal to Allie. “Read that. I think it will help you understand me better, understand why I did what I did. I even think Nana understood me better than I do myself.”

Allie stood. “I think that was just Nana. She knew everyone better than they knew themselves. Creepy, if you ask me.” The girl cast a glance in the direction of the other bedrooms, where her brothers were. “And I don’t know what’s wrong with Andrew. I mean, I know why he and Wes keep fighting, maybe. But I don’t know if he’s mad at you, or the captain, or whoever.”

Beverly didn’t know what to say. This was one of those moments, the ones you had nightmares about, or dreamed of, but then you woke up and couldn’t remember what you said. So when it happened, you still had no idea what words were appropriate. Earlier, with Gracie, it had been easy, but the youngest was so open that it had been natural. Allie wasn’t so young. She’d had sixteen years without her mother, compared to Gracie’s five.

“I think,” said Allie. “That you’ll be fun to have as a mother.”

Beverly lifted an eyebrow.

The action made Allie burst into laughter. “Wesley,” she said, trying to bring herself under control. “Wesley freaked out when I did that to him. Raised my eyebrow. Said you did the exact same thing to him all the time. I didn’t know exactly what he meant till just now.”

“He always gets panicky when I do that,” Beverly said, smiling. “Which is why I do it.”

Allie had said the last part with her. “And that’s what I told him. That you must do it on purpose because you know it bothers him. That’s what I meant by fun—.” A yawn cut her off.

“You should go to bed,” Beverly said.

The girl gave her an impish smile. “Yes, *Mom*,” and left the room before the doctor could say anything more. After Allie’s footsteps had gone into her room, Beverly heard more, heavier ones. Jean-Luc. Quietly, she made her way into the hall, catching a glimpse of the captain carrying a sleepy Gracie into her bedroom. The doctor crept down the hall, listening to the conversation, completely unnoticed by either party.

Jean-Luc had settled the blankets around the little girl when she stirred. “I was supposed to ask you a question,” she said.

“What question would that be?” Picard replied, his voice gentle.

Beverly bit her lip as she heard her daughter’s question. “Are you my papa?” she asked. The doctor could imagine the courage that must have taken after watching her reaction earlier, when she had thought Picard had be angry with her.

The captain answered, reaching out with his large hand, smoothing the hair on top of the girl’s head, “Yes.” Beverly could barely hear him.

Gracie said, “Good.”

This reply brought a chuckle from Picard. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you had said otherwise,” he said.

“Are you mad at Beverly?” Gracie asked.

The captain’s voice remained as soft as before. “I don’t know,” he said.

The little girl seemed to consider that for a moment. Then she said, “Can I tell you my fairly tale?”

“Certainly,” Picard said, a bit stronger.

Beverly crept back down the hall, the words of Gracie’s dream, the one she had told Beverly about the day before, floating behind her. In her grandmother’s room, Beverly found the photograph she had found before, when she and Deanna and Andrew had searched through the boxes. The doctor did her best to straighten it out, trying to remove the creases she’d made when it had been balled up in her fist. Once it was flat enough, she left the room again, catching the tail end of the conversation between Gracie and Jean-Luc.

“Can you try?” she was asking him. “To make it come true?”

"I'll do my best," he said. "You should sleep." Beverly watched as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Good night."

"Good night, Papa," Gracie said, partially muffled by the pillow she'd snuggled into. Beverly didn't know if she had ever seen Jean-Luc as vulnerable as he looked then, right after his daughter had first called him Papa. The captain stepped out of the room, closed the door quietly behind him. Crusher cursed at herself, knowing that Papa should have been Gracie's first word, and Jean-Luc should have been present to hear it.

They made eye contact. She motioned for him to come downstairs, so they could talk and not wake the others. Once they were in the front room, she handed him the photograph, let him see what his daughter had looked like as an infant. Beverly watched as he stood, lit by the flickering light of the fire, staring at the photograph as if he could disappear into it. Watched as he began to cry, soundless, trying to stop and trying to look like he wasn't crying at all. "So tiny," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said from behind him.

"It's like what I dreamed of, you holding her, my child and her mother. But what I had dreamed had already happened."

"I'm sorry," she said again.

When he turned around to face her, she expected anger, prepared herself for it. Yet on his face was anything but anger. "I never thought she would be so small." He met her eyes. "I never told you about my dreams before, because I thought you would reject them, you would reject me. You see, I gave up on those dreams because I wanted to keep you in my life, and telling you what I wished for would chase you away. And I never told you." He held out the picture. "And she is so much smaller that I could have imagined, and you were more beautiful than I ever thought. If we had...if we had been completely honest with one another, we could have had this, together. Us." He motioned upstairs. "Them."

"And it didn't happen because we were both too afraid," she said.

"Yes, exactly," he said, nodding. "We each thought the other would hate them, reject them completely, think so ill of them that we would leave the other entirely."

She followed him along his path of reasoning. "But we each knew we would never hate the other or push them out of our lives entirely."

"Though we both did our damndest to try."

"Yes, we did."

She wasn't sure exactly when it happened, but they now stood toe to toe, face to face, for the first time, revealing the truth in its entirety.

“I think,” he said, reaching down for her hands. “That—.”

His communicator chirped. “Riker to Captain Picard.”

Beverly swore to herself that she would hang Will Riker by his toes the next time she saw him.

The captain took a step away from her. “Picard here.”

“Sir, I wanted to let you know that the weather modification net has been fixed and you can beam up whenever you wish to return.”

She saw the change in his stance, in his face, in his eyes, and knew he would be returning to the ship. The moment had passed, the chance for them to settle things between themselves, to become more than they had been, was gone.

Chapter 13

As Beverly Crusher felt the moment slipping away, Picard said, "Acknowledged, Number One."

She frowned. "You aren't going."

He raised his eyebrows, the fire illuminating his face. *I love firelight*, lighting his face as it had been on Kesprytt. "Beverly, I've made the mistake of leaving too many times. Right now, my place is here, even if it's to sleep on the sofa."

The doctor smiled at him, a full smile she hadn't had in a long time. Stepping towards him, she took his hands. "And you thought that what? What were you saying before Will interrupted you?"

"I don't recall," he said, the playful nature of his comment given away by the look in his eyes. Such a master of the straight face, his hands warm in hers, the photograph nestled between their palms.

Beverly brought their hands up against his chest, moving closer. Everything between them had gone, the room around them had disappeared. The secret of their children no longer built a stone wall, allowing the truth of everything to move freely. The light played on the remnants of tears left on his cheeks. He hadn't wiped it away, instead he allowed them to remain, refusing to cast away evidence of being moved by his own child. The doctor felt her heart cave in on itself at the thought, that he had accepted his role in spite of all she had done. *All she had done*.

She dropped his hands and stepped away, the photograph fluttering to the ground between them. The conversation in the kitchen, when she had told him that she thought he would hate her, hate the children when he found out. His expression told her of the loathing he'd felt then. Loathing, it's how he felt for her. It had been a mistake to think that he had settled things out in his head, wanted a relationship with her. Delusional as when she'd thought she could keep the children a secret forever.

The captain knelt down, keeping his eyes on Beverly. Carefully, he picked up the photograph, brought it to her. Then he began to talk, his words carrying an unhidden affection. "Since I left for the Academy as a young man, I've carried a family album with me. More a scrapbook of sorts, filled with every important memory I've experienced. Photographs, letters, announcements. Like some sort of lovesick schoolboy, I framed your photograph with a paper heart."

She fought a smile. The idea of Picard, the composed starship captain, acting like a schoolboy.

"It belongs there," he said. "And I'm not angry at you."

“I saw it. I saw it on your face earlier. When I told you I thought you would hate me, hate the children, I saw the loathing.”

He grimaced. “That wasn’t loathing for you.”

“It wasn’t?” Her hand gripped the arm of the chair she’d sat in, scrabbling for an anchor.

“It was for me. That I could act in such a way that you could think I would ever hate you, or hate my own children, it abhorred me. The very idea.”

“Then why?” she asked. “Why did you avoid me after I told you?” Her words sounded unafraid, yet her heart gave long pause, then began tripping over itself in its rush to beat.

“I had to sort things out for myself. At first, I was angry. Then I wasn’t. Then I was. Back and forth, and everything coming up in between to keep me from being angry. Sad, guilty, embarrassed, mourning. I missed so much,” he said and she heard the crack in his voice. “Missed so much. And then I was angry at you again, for making me miss all of it.”

Something reached around her heart and crushed it. *He did blame her.* “I’m sorry.”

Picard reached out, placed a comforting hand over hers, her hand that clutched desperately to the chair. “And I realized you had missed those moments as well. That you hadn’t done anything out of spite, out of any intent to hurt, and in doing so, you caused yourself as great of a pain, perhaps even greater. You carried the guilt of knowing, and denying yourself your children, denying yourself whatever you saw between us, giving up your future to keep the past from hurting anyone else.”

He drew her hand off the chair, into his other hand, the photograph resting between them again. “And because of you, and your courage to admit the truth to me, for the first time in my life, I was able to tuck my daughter into bed.”

Beverly could only watch, her eyes wide, willing herself to maintain control over every emotion doing cartwheels inside her chest. Watched as Jean-Luc’s jaw trembled in his own attempt to control his.

The captain continued, his voice the whisper of autumn leaves whisked along the wind. “You gave me a gift which cannot be given any sort of monetary value, cannot be measured by any standard known to man.”

Beverly watched as he gave in, opened himself to her, allowing her to see those very hopes and dreams he thought could destroy him. The fight inside him ceased and the tears flowed as freely as any new father that had just seen his child born before him. “She told me her dream, she called me Papa.” The captain continued, regaining some

strength to his tone. "I realized I could no more reject her mother, because to do so would be to reject her." He paused. "And I couldn't reject those whom I love."

The moment was on them again, his eyes searching hers, looking for the same acceptance, for him to be able to trust her with what he held most dear. As if of its own accord, her hand free hand sought his cheek, traced the wet trail of a tear. Her lips followed her hand and she kissed the tears away, offering him comfort as he had for her so many times before. Then she reached around, grasped the back of his head, placed her forehead on his. "Neither could I," she said.

His hand disengaged from hers, placed the photograph on the coffeetable, almost reverently. Then he brought those warm hands up under her jaw, brought her closer to him, closing the distance between them forever. She felt his lips on hers, inviting, and she accepted him without reservation. The room closed around them, collapsed and wrapped them up. The kiss deepened and became several, promises made of what would be.

For the first time, Beverly allowed herself to be who she was, and Jean-Luc was with her, being who he was. It just *was*. They found themselves, in front of the fire, comforting one another as they had so long ago. No secrets between them, no guilt in their actions, only the love that had started it all.

The fire had dwindled, the light it offered barely enough for Beverly to see the man holding her tightly, the quilt Jean-Luc had gotten after they had made love snuggled around them both. "We can't stay here on the sofa," he said.

"I know," she said into his chest. "But I don't think any of our children would be ready for us to be sharing a bed."

With her head tucked under his chin, she felt his smile. "Our children," he said.

"Who are having one hell of a hard time," she said, thinking of Wesley and Andrew.

"We'll get through it." He kissed the top of her head. "We should also get some sleep."

She sat up. "Well, since you're sleeping down here on the couch, you had better put some clothes on." And when she left him downstairs, the bond stayed between them, nothing felt broken. It felt right.

Wesley Crusher had to finish. Had to finish cutting through the nacelle before everything went up and they all died. His father floated next to him, the environmental suit shielding his face. Wesley stopped, trying to see it, fear lacing through him and freezing his movements. "Back to work," Jack said. "You have to finish. You started this,

you have finish.” Wesley looked down at the phaser rifle he held in his hand, the heat from it penetrating his own environmental suit’s gloves. Space hung around them, infinite and impossible, the stars witnessing, unwavering in their attention. Despite the danger that waited if they didn’t complete their task, Wesley continued to hold his fire. “Dammit, you have to finish,” Jack said.

“I don’t want to,” Wesley said. “This isn’t what I want.”

“It isn’t about what you want, this is for everyone. If we don’t finish what we started, everyone will die.”

“We could die. I could die out here.”

“Finish what you start.”

And Wesley let the phaser rifle go, let it drift away from him, out of their reach. His father swore, renewing his efforts to cut away the nacelle. Blocking his father’s yells from his ears, Wesley headed back towards the ship, away from his father, leaving him behind. There was a spark, a bright explosion that caused Wesley to turn away, and the nacelle flew away from the ship, end over end. The fires died instantly with no oxygen to fuel them. Wesley turned back and came face to face with his father’s environmental suit, his father in it, and the tritanium shard that had pierced the facemask and cut into his father’s head. It was his fault, he’d left him behind because he hadn’t wanted to finish what he started with his father, and now he was dead. Wesley screamed, pushing away his father’s body, sending himself end over end like the nacelle. He would die, adrift, and no one would hear his screams.

Wesley Crusher woke up. Moonlight from the lone moon of Caldos played inside of the room. The storm had abated. Wesley sat up, peering out the window. He’d loved staying here as a kid, on a real world with real snow and real seasons, things he missed on a starship. And on this world he’d had three cousins as close to him as siblings. He and Andrew had been friends for so long, writing to each other about every day things. Things Wesley missed about life on a planet, things Andrew wanted to know about being on a starship. Wesley used to pretend Andrew could be his little brother, wish that he was. So when Nana died, Wes had wanted to see if his mother would be taking his cousins in, if they could come that much closer to being a family.

Then his wish had been granted and destroyed all at once and he’d gone to seek out those who had hurt him and hurt them back. After the past day, he’d begun to realize why he’d felt so close to his cousins—brother and sisters—in the first place. Sometimes he wanted to stop hurting them. And other times, he couldn’t help himself. He knew Andrew was as hurt as he was. He and Andrew had talked about fathers, mothers, having parents. Andrew once looked up to him, when he was small.

Wesley and Andrew knelt behind the wall of snow they'd built together. It was their fort, to keep out of the girls that seemed determined to kill them with snowballs. "Whose idea was it to make this guys against girls?" Andrew asked.

"Yours," Wesley replied. "Not the best idea you've ever had."

"How was I supposed to know Nana would be so accurate?" Andrew asked.

"You live here with her," he said, giving his cousin a look telling him how obvious the answer was.

"Doesn't mean we have snowball fights all the time," the younger boy said.

Wesley shifted uncomfortably, trying to rid his back of the wet, cold and now melting snow. "Your sister shoved snow down my back."

"She's mean. I told you before. She beats up boys *all the time*. You're lucky she didn't split your lip."

Wesley glanced at him, dubious. "She's nine. I'm fourteen. I'm bigger than she is."

"Wes, you don't understand," Andrew said. "She fights dirty."

The older boy sighed. "How long do you think they'll keep us pinned down?"

Andrew peeked over the top of the wall and was met with hail of snowballs. Ducking back down into cover, he said, "Until we surrender."

"I'm not surrendering," Wesley said immediately.

"Of course not," Andrew said. "Howards never surrender. But I do have an idea. If we throw enough snowballs over there to distract them and get them to hide, we can run to the barn and they'll never know we aren't behind the wall. So they'll just be sitting there in the snow, getting colder, while we watch and laugh from the barn."

"Excellent idea." The boys executed their plan and made their way into the barn. By the time the women in their family came out of hiding, they had managed to get to the second floor of the barn and find a good position to watch them.

After awhile, Andrew had gotten bored and moved over to the window on the opposite side of the upper room. Wesley followed, looking at charts the other boy had set up, diagrams tacked to the wall. "What's this?" he asked.

Andrew looked up from the book he was writing in and shrugged. Then he closed the book and put it aside. "Your mom got assigned to the *Enterprise*," he said.

Wes nodded, the excitement building up again. The flagship of the fleet, a *Galaxy*-class vessel, so he'd be able to stay with his mother the entire time. So many things to do, many opportunities to learn, and he could finish studying for the Academy entrance exams. Maybe he could even see the bridge of a starship. Best of all, the captain of the ship would be Captain Picard, the man Wesley had looked up to as he'd grown up, once he got over hating him. He'd hated the man for coming back when his father hadn't. Then the captain had taken care of them that one day, told him and his mother stories about his father, made them dinner, even tucked Wes into bed. Once his anger had died out, Wesley had come to admire him, not only because he was such a great captain, but also because he'd shown him and his mother such great care.

"You're lucky," Andrew said.

"I know," Wes replied.

Andrew stared out the window. "What's it like," he asked. "Having a mother?"

The older boy shrugged. "You have Nana."

"That's not the same thing. She's my grandmother, *your* great-grandmother. It's not the same."

Wes frowned. "I don't think I can explain it."

"I didn't think you could." Andrew stood up, still facing the window.

Wesley could never figure Andrew out. He got serious like this a lot, going from a normal nine year old kid to talking like some enigmatic philosopher. Wes watched him for a second, again realizing how strong Howard genetics were, how much Andrew looked like Wesley's mother. Oddly, Wes sometimes got jealous at Andrew inheriting the red hair of the Howards and Wesley not seeming to have a single gene from his mother. He looked like Jack Crusher, his father all over again. At times, it made him feel like a ghost. Everyone expected him to be in Starfleet, to follow his father. Wesley knew he wanted to, and would, but never felt it was his dream. Like he didn't have one of his own at all. Andrew was lucky in his own right, that he didn't have a father he would be expected to follow. "You're lucky, too," Wesley said.

Andrew turned towards him. "I don't see how. I don't have a mother."

"And you don't have a father."

The boy walked over to Wesley, standing toe to toe, glaring up at him. "I wouldn't call that luck."

Wes took a step back. He hadn't meant to piss Andrew off. "I mean..." He sighed, trying to figure out how to word it. "I look like my dad. Everyone say so. As I keep getting older, I look *more* like him, and everyone thinks I'll do exactly what he did. Become a Starfleet officer."

Andrew sat down on one of the bales of hay. "I thought that's what you wanted to do."

"It is." He walked up to the window, looked at the sun breaking through the clouds to light up the snow on the ground, at the trees reaching for the attention of the sun so sparse in winter. "It isn't."

"Might be a good thing to figure out before you enter the Academy," Andrew said.

Wes gave him a rueful grin. "You think?"

Andrew nodded. "Might be good to follow a dream of your own instead of your dead father's."

Wesley sat down on a bale of hay across from his cousin. "That's what I mean by luck," he said. "No one expects you to follow your dead father's footsteps."

"Only because he hasn't left any." Andrew studied his feet, kicking the bale of hay with his heels.

Wesley noticed Andrew's voice change, become serious, more so than before. "You'd want that?" he asked.

"Who wouldn't? Andrew said, looking at him closely. "I mean, I've got two holes in my life, in *me*, that can't be filled. Ever. Because I don't have parents. I'd rather be in your place, where you have a mother still alive, and you had a father, at least for a few years."

And Wesley wished again that these two cousins were his brother and sister, so they'd have a mother too, and he would have a bigger family. "I wish you could stay with us," Wesley said aloud.

Andrew looked back down at his feet. "Me too." When the kid glanced back up at Wesley, the older boy saw what looked like tears in Andrew's eyes. "I wish your mom was mine," he said. Then Andrew ran down the rickety stairs, into the yard, where the women spotted him and assaulted him with snow.

2370

Wesley turned when he heard a knock on the door. Frowning, he watched as Allie cracked the door open and came in. "Good, you're awake," she said.

He glared. "And if I hadn't been?" Brought his anger back up to protect him.

"I'd wake you up." She held up a book. "You need to read this."

"Why would I want to?" He kept his tone harsh.

She glared back at him. “Will you just shove it? I’m sick of dealing with this ‘I’m pissed off and angry at everyone around me’ act of yours.”

“Then you could not wake me up in the middle of the night,” he shot back.

“You were already up.”

He sighed and looked at her, saying nothing.

She sat on the edge of the desk. “What’s this I hear about your failing classes at the Academy?”

Wesley frowned. “How did you know?”

“I have my ways,” she said. “You’ve been a shithead since that whole incident with the cadet who died.”

“Josh,” Wesley said softly. The guilt came back, the guilt over failing his mother, his father, the captain.

“I heard he came down on you pretty hard.”

“Who?”

“Captain Picard,” Allie said, looking right at him.

Andrew must have told her about the dressing down he’d gotten. Wesley hadn’t thought he could ever feel more awful than when Josh had died. Then more had been heaped on—his mother’s sadness, the captain’s disappointment and cold, absolute anger at what he had done. “Yeah.”

“What’d the other cadets think about his involvement?”

Wesley blinked. “Where are you going with this? Why are we talking about this in the middle of the night?”

“I’ll tell you if you answer the question.”

He looked at the person he’d known since she was a baby, whom he’d trusted until a week ago. Realized it she was the same person she’d been before, he was the one who had changed. “They acted like the captain was my stepfather. Some of them even thought he *was* my stepfather. Everyone giving me crap about letting him down, how it must be so awful to have failed such a legendary man. One cadet said it must be hard being the failed stepson of the great Captain Picard.”

“You aren’t his stepson,” she said.

Wesley turned back to the window. "I know. But it didn't hurt any less." He faced Allie again. "I looked up to him. Tried to make him proud of me like I did my mother, and my father. Sometimes, I wished that he was my stepfather." He felt his throat constrict, heard his voice harden. "Now I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because he's one of the people that destroyed my wish. Him and my mother." It all came out, everything that had hurt him, all with a tremor in his tone. "When we were little kids, when we'd come visit, those were my favorite memories. The three of us, then the four of us, and my mother, all a family. We got to do normal kid things on a normal colony planet. I loved it. And I wished for it to be true. I wished that you and Andrew were my brother and my sister and not just my cousins."

"And you were hurt it when came true?"

He could barely see her through his clouded eyes, clouded with tears he refused to let fall. "It was a dream," he said. "A wish. Something that wasn't meant to come true. And never in the way that it did." Shame flushed his face.

She frowned. "It's that bad? Being my brother?"

"Of course not," he said. "I just...you can't tell."

"Tell?"

"Tell anyone my wish, okay? Tell anyone why I'm acting like this." Wesley grabbed her shoulders. "I'm serious."

Allie glared down at his hands. He removed them, deciding he didn't want her to do something drastic, like cut them off. "I promise not to tell if you promise to try and work things out without being a dick."

"I can try."

"All I ask."

Wesley frowned. He'd been so focused on Allie and Andrew and Gracie that he hadn't given any thought to his mother and the captain. "Where's Captain Picard?" he asked, fearing Allie would tell him that he was nowhere to be seen and must be in Beverly's room.

"Asleep on the couch," Allie replied.

He let out the breath he'd been holding. "Good."

Allie responded by tossing the book she'd been holding in his direction. He caught it just before it clocked into his nose. "And that's why you need to read Nana's journal."

"What for?" he asked.

"So you can understand how *my* parents feel about each other," she said.

He couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Promise me you'll read it."

Wesley knew he owed her and nodded.

She nodded back and went to leave.

"Hey," he said, catching her attention. "What'd you come in here for, anyway?"

Allie shrugged. "Wanted to talk to my brother." The door shut behind her, leaving Wesley to stare at it, wondering why Allie had chosen him and not Andrew.

Jean-Luc Picard opened his eyes when he felt a small hand patting him on the head. "Wake up," he heard Gracie say. "Come on."

"No," he replied. "I order you to allow me to sleep."

"You can't give me orders," Gracie replied, sounding strikingly like her mother.

He felt her body move away from his and decided she was allowing him a bit more sleep. Then he heard heavier footsteps, ones with nails clicking on the wood floors, and Gracie's voice again. "Come on, Conal," she said. "Wake him up."

Not wanting a bath from the wolfhound, Picard sat straight up. "Okay, I'm awake," he said.

Standing next to the dog was his youngest daughter, beaming at him, and all his annoyance drifted away. "Good," she said, and crawled to sit next to him. "I want to know something."

"What's that?" he asked.

She put her arms around him, buried her face in his chest. He heard her say something, but it was completely muffled.

"What?"

Gracie looked up at him. "I said I wanted to know how long my papa is going to sleep on the couch."

He frowned. "I don't know."

She sighed. "For a Starfleet captain, you don't know much, do you?" she asked.

Surprised at the cheeky comment, Picard's search for a rejoinder was stopped by a chirp of his communicator. "Speaking of," he said.

Gracie rolled her eyes.

"Picard here," the captain said, after tapping the communicator.

"Sir, there's a priority transmission for you from Admiral Nechev," said Data.

The captain frowned. The type of transmission he'd have to take on the ship, a transmission that would most likely be a priority mission, a mission that would take him away from the family he had only started to get to know. But nothing could be done, he was a Starfleet officer, and he did what he had to. "I'll be up to take it in a moment, Commander," he said. "Picard out."

Gracie had pushed herself away from him. "You're leaving," she said.

"Yes."

Her face crumpled and she left the room quickly, so quickly that he couldn't catch her and tell her he would return. But he didn't know what the mission would be, didn't know where or how long it would take, didn't even have time to say goodbye, much less make any promises he couldn't keep.

Chapter 14

Content. That's how Beverly Crusher felt as she stepped out of her grandmother's bedroom—ready to face whatever difficulties her children would bring. She and Jean-Luc had managed to work things out between themselves and rather nicely at that. A small smile tugging at her lips, she started down the hall, only to be nearly bowled over by a five year old running headlong down the same hall.

Gracie threw her arms around her legs, making it impossible for Beverly to move forward or backward. "Papa left," she said. The contentment that had suffused her moments ago rushed out, leaving nothing in its wake, waiting for more information from Gracie.

Beverly knelt to Gracie's level, holding her by the shoulders as the girl gripped her arms tightly. "What happened?" she asked.

The little girl's jaw worked, attempting to stem any more hurt from reaching her voice, certainly her father's daughter. "He got a call from the ship and they said he had a message from some admiral and he had to go take it. He said he was leaving."

"He'll come back," Beverly said. Yet even as she assured her daughter that her father would return, the doctor didn't feel as certain as she sounded. However, she'd learned a lesson of command from the captain when they were stuck on Kesprytt. Even when a captain has no idea of where to go next, he must give his crew the illusion of confidence. And she would give that to Gracie right now, her relationship with her father strong and fragile at the same time.

"Are you sure?" Gracie asked.

"I'm sure," Beverly replied.

The little girl nodded slowly, then headed back downstairs. Conal got up from his post between the two bedrooms. He shook himself, looking at Beverly. "Did you stay there all night?" she asked the dog. There hadn't been any shouting during the night, and if everyone was still alive, she assumed he must have. Conal snuffed, wagged his tail, then went down the stairs. Beverly hoped he could distract her youngest.

A voice from behind her said, "I don't think you're as sure about him coming back as you sounded."

Beverly stood up and turned to see Allie. "Losing faith in your father that quickly?" she asked with a hint of teasing.

"No," said Allie. "I have faith in Starfleet's ability to keep him away from here an awful lot. You didn't get around here much." She moved towards the stairs, falling into step with Beverly as they made their way down to the first floor.

“Starfleet wasn’t the only thing that kept me away,” she said, wondering if Allie held a grudge against Starfleet, if how Allie felt was part of what made Andrew keep his dreams secret. “I kept myself away.”

“Why?” Allie asked.

Beverly stopped their walk in the front room, not wanting Gracie to hear things she wouldn’t be ready for, or could take the wrong way. The doctor studied Allie’s face, seeing the open curiosity. “So you wouldn’t figure it out. So that others wouldn’t notice.” She frowned. “So I wouldn’t become too attached.”

“Didn’t work, did it?” Allie said, the smile making her lips twitch at the edges.

“No, it didn’t. I ended up attached to all of you and it hurt enough when I left you once or twice a year that I couldn’t deal with having to leave you more often. I would have taken you with me, and that wasn’t something that could happen, so I stayed away.”

“I understand,” Allie said. “Do you think he’ll come back?” Apparently her children had as much difficulty with intense emotion as she did and would change the subject accordingly.

“Yes. I just don’t know when. He doesn’t owe me any details, I’m not in Starfleet anymore. Actually, I don’t even think he’d be able to tell me since I’m not an officer. I don’t know. He will come back.” *He will come back.*

“You shouldn’t have resigned,” Allie said evenly.

“I know,” said Beverly. Then she put her arm around Allie’s shoulders and they made their way into the kitchen. It wasn’t anything she wanted to discuss further. Her decision had managed to work—even after Jean-Luc had found out about the children—in keeping them away from one another. Contentment slipped even farther away. Gracie had gained back her usual cheer and worked away at replicating a breakfast as Conal watched her.

Wesley walked into the kitchen, dark circles under his eyes indicating that he hadn’t slept well, if at all. “Morning,” he said.

Gracie studied him, as if trying to decide whether or not her oldest brother would bite if spoken to. “Do you want coffee?” she asked.

The cadet laid his head on the table. “Please.”

She smiled at him. “Nana always needed coffee when she looked like you do.”

Beverly caught the glimpse of a smile from her son. The night seemed to have taken some of the edge off of him. She gave Allie a questioning look but she just shrugged and immersed herself back into her own breakfast. The doctor sighed. Only

Conal would have any idea of who talked to whom during the night. She wished Jean-Luc were there to help.

But he'd been called away by Starfleet. She had chosen to leave that life and had to live with her decision and figure out how to make it work. It wasn't as if she had any right to him, she wasn't even married to him. Though she was the mother of his children. Watching Gracie make peace with her oldest brother with a mere cup of coffee brought back some contentment. The little girl could grow up to become a brilliant diplomat with the effect she had on people. But she was only five, who knew what path she would choose, if she would choose medicine, Starfleet, or blaze a path all her own. Then there was Allie, well on her way to becoming the veterinarian she knew she wanted to be. She would be applying to schools in the next year or two, Nana had written her about that. Allie had her hopes on an Earth school, though not one in particular as of yet.

The doctor looked over as she heard more footsteps enter the kitchen. Andrew had come down, looking more rested than Wesley. Beverly hid a frown. Andrew might look more rested, his face completely neutral, fully composed, but she knew something was wrong. His face was *too* neutral, *too* composed. He said nothing as he sat down, only nodding towards the others. She couldn't even read his eyes, see what was behind them, though she'd become a master at reading the gray eyes of his father. The father who exhibited the same mannerisms when he was upset and not wanting to deal with it. Perhaps Jean-Luc would have to speak with him, if he came back anytime soon. If he didn't, she would have to muddle through it, trying to reach him.

At first, Andrew didn't make eye contact with Wesley. The coffee had done its work and Wesley was sitting up, now mostly awake. "Good morning," Wesley said to Andrew.

Andrew looked up at him, said nothing, and went back to looking at his breakfast.

"I said good morning," Wesley said.

Andrew ignored him.

Wesley threw a piece of cereal at him, bouncing it off Andrew's head.

Andrew stood, nearly knocking his chair over in the process. Wesley matched his action and they glared at one another across the table, the air between them filled with a strung tension, waiting for the snap of a fight.

"Cut it out," Allie said, remaining in her seat, her eyes not even glancing toward her brothers.

Both boys glared at Allie. For a moment, Beverly thought they would ignore their sister. Then Wesley gave a small sigh and returned to his seat. Andrew gave Wesley an odd look at his reaction, gave his sister an equally odd look, and sat down with a shrug.

The doctor began to suspect that they had talked amongst themselves last night, maybe not all of them, but at least Allie and Wesley.

“So what’s going to happen?” Gracie asked, putting her dirty dishes into the reclamator. “Are we going to live here or will we go up to the starship?”

“I resigned,” Beverly said. “We’re going to live here.”

Gracie frowned.

“You wanted to go on the starship, didn’t you?” Wesley asked, the malice of the day before completely absent from his tone, replaced by affection.

She nodded. “Yeah. We could see so much, all those stars. And the ship goes everywhere, and finds more stars, and nebulas, and planets. So many things to see! Plus whatever life is out there, you know, people we’ve never met before. I mean, people that the Federation doesn’t know about yet.” Her eyes lit up at the very thought.

“It isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Wesley said.

Beverly turned towards him, trying to figure out if he was trying to hurt his sister.

As he continued, she realized he wasn’t. “Some of the time, you wish you were somewhere else. You miss the changing seasons, you miss seeing people, you miss staying in one place. At first it’s this huge adventure, then you start to think maybe your adventure is somewhere else and you flew right past it at warp seven.”

It occurred to the doctor that Wesley might be speaking about himself, about having doubts of where he was going with his life. That his current moodiness might not be just about his family, but about his life in its entirety.

“I still want to go,” Gracie said. “I’d never get tired of it. Andrew wouldn’t either.” She looked expectantly at her other brother.

Andrew said nothing, instead returning his dishes to the reclamator. His reaction to his younger sister disturbed Beverly more than his neutral facial expression. Andrew had always been protective of Gracie, gentle with her, telling her stories, playing with her. And Gracie worshipped her older brother. He was her hero. Felisa had told Andrew how his little sister felt about him and since then he had always been careful not to hurt her feelings. But now, the thought didn’t seem to occur to him, that his behavior would hurt Gracie.

Gracie looked back at Wesley. “I don’t think he would, anyway,” she said.

“I think your brother has a lot on his mind,” Beverly said, casting a significant glance to Andrew, being sure to catch his eyes.

They were hard when he looked back at her. The doctor realized he was angry, moreover, he was angry at her. Most likely, he felt he couldn't confront her about it, and hid everything, letting it out only when Wesley could provoke him. It felt as if the chasm that had kept her and Jean-Luc apart had been moved, not destroyed, when they managed to come together. The chasm had moved to stand between her and their son, one who had only days before been kind, open, loving.

Her thoughts and attention were interrupted by the sound of a transporter beam in the living room. Gracie ran from the kitchen. "Papa!"

Beverly frowned. How could he be back so soon?

Allie shook her head. "She took to him awfully fast," she said.

"He's like that," replied Wes, entirely nonchalant.

Gracie came running back into the kitchen, barely sliding to a stop before hitting the counter. She looked at Beverly. "He said he needs to talk to you," she said. "Alone."

Beverly ignored the raised eyebrow Allie gave her, informed her sons not to kill each other while she was gone, and went to the front room. There Jean-Luc stood, back in uniform, ever the captain. "I thought you'd left me," she said, teasing.

"I could never do such a thing," he replied, then motioned towards the office. "We should speak behind closed doors."

Bewildered, she followed him into the other room, shutting the door behind her. "What's going on?" she asked. "Gracie told me that you had gotten a call from the ship earlier and were leaving."

He nodded, leaning against the desk. "I did." With that, he started pacing the room.

Beverly watched him, trying to figure out what was wrong. Something had to be wrong, he only tended to pace when some sort of difficult decision had to be made. She decided to wait him out and settled into a chair, trying not to look amused. Meanwhile, the contentment had continued to creep back at seeing him there.

He finally stopped, this time his back to the window, leaning on the windowsill. "Admiral Necheyev has ordered the *Enterprise* to rendezvous with her vessel so that she can deliver orders for the next mission in person."

Beverly raised her eyebrow. In person orders tended to be quite significant. "And?" she asked.

He let out a deep breath. "And I have a problem."

"Only one?"

Then he gave her that look, his brow creasing, his gray eyes annoyed with her for teasing while he was trying to be serious.

Her hand hid her smile. "Sorry," she said.

"You aren't making this any easier," he said, the look still on his face.

"Considering I don't know what 'this' is, I don't see how I could cause it to be easy or difficult," she replied. Her curiosity was certainly piqued. She also felt nervousness behind that curiosity, causing her to tease rather than be serious.

He crossed his arms. "Simply, I do not have a Chief Medical Officer."

In return, she crossed her arms. "Dr. Selar is a capable physician."

"She isn't you."

She sighed. Got up and placed herself on the edge of the desk, right across from him and the window. "Jean-Luc, I resigned," she said.

"Did you really want to?" he asked. "Did you really want to leave Starfleet? Or were you trying to escape from me?" His eyes held hers, intense.

"I was trying to escape from you."

"So you would have no qualms about returning now?" he asked.

She glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "No, I have three qualms."

Frowning, he moved from his spot in front of the window, over to her. "I meant what I said, Beverly. I couldn't just leave you. Or them." He shook his head, slowly, as if he were still getting used to the idea, which he most likely was. "You're my family, and I can't stand the notion of leaving you all behind on this colony, not when I captain a perfectly good *Galaxy* class starship meant for families." Picard went back to pacing. "There's no way I could ask you to marry me and come back aboard the *Enterprise* by rights of being my wife. You're a doctor, it's who you are, and when you're on the *Enterprise*, you're the Chief Medical Officer. Nothing less." The pacing stopped. "And it seems that in my haste to prevent you from leaving the ship and leaving Starfleet, I hadn't entered your transmission into the ship's log as read. If you were so inclined, you could delete that transmission and we could pretend you never tried to resign at all." When he'd finished, he was leaning against the windowsill again, his head had dropped to study his feet intensely, unable to look at her.

Smiling, she got up and walked over to him. He raised his eyes as she walked, searching her face. She replied by kissing him fully. "I love you," she said.

Her statement caused him to study her more. "That's the first time you've told me that," he said.

Furrowing her brow she said, “Is it? I thought I must have said it at least once before, most likely last ni—.”

He cut her off with a kiss of his own. “And I you,” he said. “About that transmission?”

“Never happened,” she said, the contentment rushing back as quickly as it had left her that morning, when Gracie had said her papa had left. “How long before the ship has to leave?”

“About ten more hours,” he said.

She frowned. “That’s not enough time to manage the quarters situation. My quarters don’t have enough room for three more people. There’s empty quarters next door, I know Geordi’s people can adjust the modulars and rearrange mine, but they wouldn’t be ready for—.”

“Five more hours,” Picard finished for her.

She crossed her arms. “Bit presumptuous, don’t you think?”

He smiled, that half-smile he gave when caught by her in his confidence act. Then he turned to more serious matters. “We need to tell the children. We haven’t long to get this house secure, and there are the horses to think of, and packing to do.”

Beverly nodded. They found Allie and Gracie in the library, searching through the shelves of books. Gracie held her face up close to the a row of books, slowly reading each title along each spine. Allie had found a ladder and was reading the titles on the upper shelves. “I can’t find it,” Allie said.

“Look harder,” said Gracie. “I know it’s here. Andrew told me the story.”

“Why don’t you just ask Andrew where it is?” Allie sounded fairly exasperated.

“Because he’s being a jerk and I don’t want to,” Gracie replied. She reached for one book and slid it out. “I think I found it.” She opened the book and frowned. “I can’t read it. Come look.”

Allie nimbly got down from the ladder and headed towards her younger sister, acknowledging her parents with a nod. Beverly caught the idea that Allie wanted them to hear what Gracie had to say to her, in case it told them more about Andrew. “You can read perfectly well,” Allie said as she got closer to her sister.

“I don’t think this is Standard,” Gracie said, handing her the book.

Allie studied the book, paging from where Gracie had opened it to the front page. “That’s because it isn’t in Standard. It’s in French.” And she handed the book back to the younger girl.

"I don't know French," she said, frowning more. "Andrew does. And I'm not talking to him until he's nice again."

"You could stop being stubborn," Allie said.

"It would be easier to stop breathing," came Gracie's reply.

Allie laughed. "There might be another solution," she said, then looked over to where Beverly and Jean-Luc stood. Her gaze caught the captain's. The doctor saw a glint of mischief in her daughter's eyes when she spoke. "Dad, you speak French, don't you?"

Picard's eyes widened slightly, caught off-guard by Allie choosing to address him as Dad. He regained his mental footing quickly and replied, "I do. What are you looking for?"

"That story about Lancelot and the lady Gwenivere. Allie found Mallory's version, but that's one Andrew says is crap, and not the one he told me. The good version is by someone named Chret..." She trailed off, trying to figure out how to say the name.

"Chretien de Troyes," Picard said for her, with the correct pronunciation.

The little girl brought the book over, handed it to Picard, and watched him expectantly.

With a look at both Allie and Beverly for getting him into this mess, he browsed through the book. "Are you looking for *Lancelot, le Chevalier de la Charrette*?" he asked.

"Lancelot, yes," she said. "But I don't know what the last part means."

"It means 'The Knight of the Cart.' Your brother is certainly well read," Picard said, handing the book back to her. "And I can tell you the story if you'd like."

Gracie rewarded him with a smile. "When?"

"I don't know yet," he said.

Gracie turned to Beverly. "I really thought Starfleet captains would know more," she said.

The doctor knelt to her level, trying not to laugh at Jean-Luc's expense. "Would you like him to tell you the story tonight?" she asked.

"Yes." The girl looked suspiciously over at her father. "But I thought he was leaving."

Beverly took her hands. "What would you think if we went with him?"

“Are we really?” she asked, very seriously looking back and forth between her parents.

“We’re leaving in five hours,” Beverly said.

Gracie squealed and threw her arms around the doctor’s neck. Then she let go of her mother and wrapped her arms around Picard’s legs. She only stayed for a moment and went to her sister, grabbing her hand. “Come on,” she said. “We need to go pack.”

Beverly straightened up and looked at Allie. “I know we have your approval.”

Allie grinned, picked up her little sister and held her upside down over her shoulder. “I knew you wouldn’t really resign. I already have someone set up to take care of the horses.” And she swept out of the room, Gracie pleading to be let go.

“Two down,” Beverly said. “And now the two who are having a harder time of it.” Knowing Andrew was angry with her, and not knowing if he felt the same about Jean-Luc, she figured he should be the one to tell Andrew. She said so.

“And Wesley?” he asked.

“I’ll tell him. Then I need to arrange a groundskeeper while there’s no one here. I think your talk with Andrew will take longer than mine with Wes.”

Picard nodded. “What’s going on with the boy?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s doing what you do, shutting everyone out and pretending that he’s absolutely fine. He isn’t saying much to anyone. Certainly not any pleasantries. Maybe you can get through to him.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

She kissed him on the cheek. “That’s all anyone can expect,” then left him so he could go find his son.

Jean-Luc Picard crunched through the snow in the backyard of the Howard home, heading towards the barn. Andrew hadn’t been anywhere in the house and unless he’d run away, the barn was the next likely option. As he walked, he mentally kicked himself for mentioning marriage. Beverly hadn’t said a word about it and he hoped that she hadn’t been offended or hurt. But that had been his other plan, if she had refused to return to Starfleet. Marry her so that he could per regulations have her and the children on board the ship as his family. Of course, it sounded much too like the marriages of convenience in twentieth century America, where people gained citizenship by marrying current citizens. He shouldn’t have *mentioned* the other plan, even in passing as he had. They hadn’t spoken of the ramifications of their relationship at all, much less discussing the possibility of marriage.

Though it would be nice to wake up each morning with her beside him. He shook his head. There were other matters at hand, primarily trying to reach his son in some way, connect with him. At least so that he could tell him to pack to go on board the ship. The captain could see his breath, puffs of mist, even in the barn. Hearing someone come into the barn, the horses shifted in their stalls, neighed a welcome.

The face of his son appeared on the second floor. The entire floor was open to the inside of the barn and it was over the guard rail that Andrew looked. His cheeks were rosy with cold, his hair covered by a knit cap. Picard felt startled at how much Andrew resembled him when he couldn't see his reddish hair. The nose was smaller, but the lines of the face were the same. "Is that Tim the ostler?" Andrew asked.

The captain recognized the game. Beverly would play the same one when she was uncomfortable, turn the situation into a banter that wouldn't hurt either party. He played along. "I wouldn't make a dashing highwayman, so I must be."

"That's good," Andrew said. "I wouldn't make a good landlord's daughter anyway. My hair's too short, entirely the wrong color, and I have no idea what a blood-red love-knot is." Then his head disappeared from view.

Picard chuckled. It fascinated him how these children could inherit such different things from their parents and be complete individuals. Still chuckling to himself, Picard found the old narrow staircase and went up to find Andrew. The boy was at the opposite end of the barn, behind a few bales of hay. As he drew closer, Picard saw that Andrew was packing up a telescope, putting away astral charts, closing up a journal.

The boy must have heard him approach. "I didn't hear a whistle to my casement," he said, continuing his task.

"You said you were no landlord's daughter."

"I said I wouldn't make a *good* one," Andrew corrected. Then he seemed to pack faster, rolling up charts and shoving them into a bin.

"How long have you been stargazing?" Picard asked. He'd done the same, when he was a boy, watching the stars he wanted to be amongst.

Andrew didn't answer. Kept packing.

The captain decided to share, see if he could get Andrew to see the connection as well. "I used to do the same when I was little. I'd go out every night, find all my favorite constellations, dream about the adventures I'd have when I got older."

Andrew snapped the bin shut and turned around. His eyes met Picard's, just as gray, just as intense. Picard saw the boy's jaw working. "When I was little," Andrew said, "I had nightmares about being assimilated by the Borg." For a moment, he stood and

watched for Picard's reaction. The captain gave none, not having suspected this sort of reply. Then the boy picked up the bin and slipped down the stairs.

Thoughtlessly, the captain followed close behind. Andrew didn't say a word to him, passed by Beverly at the back door, went into the house. The doctor gave her son a questioning look which was also ignored. She moved the questioning look to the boy's father. A light snow had started to fall and he looked at Beverly through the flakes, his face as neutral as his son's.

Chapter 15

A strange silence filled the house. Beverly Crusher noticed it and frowned. The family hadn't even left yet, the house should be noisy with shouts and verbal sparring and frantic searching for items that had to be packed. But as soon as Jean-Luc had entered the house with that damn neutral look on his face, Beverly had felt the silence. Starting with Andrew, it had continued entering with him, and had yet to leave. The doctor attempted to ply information out of the captain, but he gave away nothing. She found herself finishing up the packing with a fury to her movements, driven by frustration over the two of them, Andrew and Jean-Luc, stonewalling everyone. "I'm sorry," she heard from the doorway. Turning, Jean-Luc stood there, the mask gone. "He caught me by surprise and I had to set things straight in my own head."

Beverly clicked shut the lid of the last bin. "What did he say?" Then she saw the haunted look in his eyes and only one ghost could cause that haunting. As she waited for his reply, Felisa's words slid into her head. "*You'll remind him. Because you serve on the Enterprise, and you faced the Borg.*" How could she have forgotten? Jean-Luc would be a reminder much stronger than herself or the ship. For so many people, the captain was Locutus, they saw no difference. Those who knew him well enough saw differently, that Picard had fought to his best ability, that they had nearly taken away his soul. He had gone through many, many counseling sessions, but the Borg would always haunt him. Their mention would always unsettle him, as it must have done at some point in his conversation with Andrew. When he hadn't answered for several minutes, she said, "Jean-Luc."

His eyes snapped back to the present, to her. "He told me that when he was a little boy, he had nightmares about the Borg, about being assimilated."

She closed her eyes. "Oh, Andrew." It sounded as if Andrew had done it on purpose, thought of what would hurt Picard the most, and thrown it at him as hard as possible. If it was meant to drive his father away, it seemed to have worked.

"Did he?" Picard asked.

Opening her eyes, she nodded. "It's why he got Conal, so he would feel safe. But he didn't just have nightmares about assimilation."

"I was in them." The captain's voice was flat.

"Yes. And more than a few times in those dreams, he tried to kill you." Andrew wouldn't talk about those dreams, only once had he told Felisa about them, who had in turn told Beverly. But Felisa's visceral reaction had been so strong that Andrew never spoke about the dreams again, at least in detail.

The captain walked fully into the room. If Beverly's information surprised him, it didn't show. "It must be very hard for him," he said.

“And for you,” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, but this is about him.”

Beverly stacked the last bin on top of the others. Most things were packed for storage. Only a couple bins would be beamed to the ship for Beverly, mainly keepsakes. She had tried to find the box of pictures, but met without success. One of the children must have gotten to it first. Once the box had been put down, she looked up at the captain again. “He was ashamed,” she said. “And I think that’s when he decided to read about you, find out who you really were. When they toured the ship, he was able to call up the entire route of the *Enterprise* since it left the shipyards. Allie told me that Andrew read about you so he could know the person and not the thing.” She sighed. “But I think first coming face to face with you, then finding out you’re his father had to upset that process.”

He nodded again. “I’ll have to tread carefully.”

“We all will.”

The captain said nothing more about it and Beverly was content to leave it alone for the time being. Her belongings were beamed up to the ship and then went to check the progress the others had made. They had finished as well. Allie went for a final goodbye to the horses. Andrew readied Conal for the trip. The ship did allow pets, and with the modification to Beverly’s quarters, they would be big enough for the dog. Coupled with the holodeck and the arboretum, Conal would be perfectly happy. As for Andrew, nothing was entirely certain. Beverly held in a sigh as they made their last preparations and beamed up to the ship.

The doctor felt a sense of *deja vu* when they left the transporter room, Gracie at the head of the group, pulling the captain by the hand. Except Allie walked with Wesley and Andrew walked alone. Gracie raced into the quarters and ran into each bedroom before declaring which would be hers. Beverly took a quick trip around the cabin to see what the engineers had done. The bins had been left stacked in the center of the living area. Andrew took a couple of them and moved off into one of the rooms Gracie hadn’t claimed, Conal close to his heels. Allie glared at her brother’s retreating form and muttered, “Cranio-rectal inversion.”

A laugh escaped from Beverly, a chuckle from Picard.

“Cranio what?” Gracie asked.

“She means your brother isn’t being very nice,” Beverly explained.

“Oh,” said Gracie. Then she glared much as her sister had. “No, he isn’t.”

“Mom,” Wesley said from behind her.

She turned, remembering Wesley requested his own quarters. “Right,” she said.

Wes nodded. Beverly turned to Jean-Luc. "I'll be back. Think you can handle it?"

"I'll be fine," he said, a slightly panicked look on his face.

She smiled, patted his arm, and left with her oldest son. Wesley was quiet on the turbolift, the thrum of the moving 'lift the only conversation. Unlike the trip before, Beverly allowed herself to feel settled, at home again. While Andrew had grown worse, it seemed Wesley had calmed down. Maybe maturity was finally catching up with him. They arrived at the quarters assigned to the cadet. "Here you go, your very own quarters. And they're as far away from mine as possible, so you won't even have to see me if you don't want to," she said. The banter picked up again, so neither of them had to be serious if they didn't want to be.

He gave her an annoyed look as he stepped into the cabin. "Mom, you know that's not why I asked for my own quarters this —."

She cut him off. "No, no. You don't have to explain. There comes a time in a young man's life when he doesn't want to stay with his poor old mother, I understand." The doctor wasn't sure why he wanted separate quarters. She had ideas, knew that they most likely had to do with the past few days. But she didn't want to discuss it, not when Wesley had finally started acting like a normal human being again.

Wesley recognized the teasing and intentions behind it. "I'll come visit you in the old Doctor's Home every Sunday," he said.

It made her smile. Good, he would play along, and the day could conclude without anyone else being struck by well-honed emotional barbs.

Then Wesley put a hand on her shoulder. "Mom, I don't hate you."

"I know," she said, knowing that she had no idea how he felt and that her son had decided he wouldn't play the game.

He continued explaining as he paced around the room. "I mean, I think I did at first. But only briefly. Then I was just...angry. Angry at everything and everyone and I wanted to make sure that everyone else felt just as angry and hurt as I did." He caught her gaze from the opposite side of the room. "Especially Andrew, Allie, and Gracie. I felt like such an ass for hurting Gracie like that. She's just a little kid, she doesn't know anything, and nothing is her fault at all." He stopped, considering his words.

Beverly watched, realizing her son had certainly grown up during his time at the Academy. While he had reacted at first, he had then been able to think things through and act appropriately in the end, mostly. "What happened with you and Allie?" she asked.

“She gave me a talking-to, that’s what,” he said, then gave her a wry smile. “She’d already tried to kick my ass before that. If Andrew hadn’t pulled her off me, I think she would have succeeded.”

“*Andrew* pulled her off you?” She thought Andrew would have cheered her on.

Wesley nodded. “Only to come after me himself. Which made Allie mad as hell.”

“I can imagine,” Beverly said. Allie tended to have the more fiery temper, tended to hit first and ask questions later, if she even bothered to ask questions. For Andrew to pull Allie away, she must have thought he was trying to get her to come to her senses. For him to then go after Wesley himself, it was a wonder Allie hadn’t clobbered her twin brother for it.

The cadet sat heavily on the bed. “She’s a lot like you,” he said.

Beverly lifted her eyebrow.

Wesley pointed. “See! Exactly. Exactly like that. I *hate* that.” He glared at her while she smiled. Then he flopped back on the bed and started to talk. “She came into my room last night, wanted me to read Nana’s journal.” At Beverly’s questioning look, he said, “No, I haven’t read it yet. Anyway, somehow she got me to talk. About what was really bothering me. Made me realize that I was hurt that things hadn’t been out in the open earlier.”

“You would have been less hurt?” she asked. The doctor couldn’t imagine him knowing at such a young age about his brother and sister, about where they came from, if it would have hurt less. If she had stayed with Jean-Luc, if Wesley had grown up with him for a stepfather, with his brother and sister.

As he sat up again, Wes nodded. “I think so.” He looked at her, his brown eyes serious. “Growing up, I had this wish. I wished that Allie and Andrew weren’t my cousins, but were really my brother and sister. I’d pretend that they were a lot of the time. So when I found out that they were, I was hurt, and at first, I thought it was because of when they were conceived. But I was wrong, for the most part. I was more angry at the lost time.” He paused, taking a breath.

Beverly listened.

“Allie asked me about the incident at the Academy, when Josh died. Asked what it was like with Captain Picard there. I told her the truth, that some of the cadets thought he was my stepfather. I wouldn’t have felt any less guilty if he had been, either. And knowing what my wish was, about Andrew and Allie, and Gracie later, it made me angry that it was taken away.” Wesley looked down at where his fingers picked at the bedcover. “All of us, we could’ve been a family all this time. Getting through everything together, instead of alone.”

"I'm sorry," she said. It was the only reply she could come up with.

Wesley stood up, hugged her close. "I know," he said. It was the first time he'd hugged her since he had appeared on the doorstep on Caldos.

It had been the right thing for her to say. Hugging her son, she knew that it would be okay between him and her. "What makes you fight with Andrew still?"

The cadet took a step back, shaking his head. "I don't know. I wish I did. I see him and something just sparks off in my brain, and I'm angry, and trying to make him just as mad."

Beverly thought it was probably much the same with Andrew when he saw Wesley. She said so.

Wesley shrugged. "Maybe it's because we're brothers," he said.

"You could talk to Captain Picard," she said. "I know he fought with his brother for a long time."

The look Wesley gave her was pained. "I don't think I'm ready for that. To talk to him." He motioned with his hand. "For any of this, I mean. You and him." He sighed. "Now *I'm* sorry."

This time it was Beverly who reached out hugged her son. "It's really good to have you home, Wesley. Really."

He nodded. "It's good to be home. Really." He smiled.

Beverly said her goodbye and headed back to finish settling in. If Wesley wanted to talk more, he'd come to her. That he wasn't comfortable with her and Jean-Luc didn't sit right either. Before, when he was younger, she knew Wesley had hoped she would get together with the captain. But the knowledge he had now, it wasn't even something he could think about anymore. One more issue to deal with. She sighed and boarded the turbolift. "Deck Eight." The 'lift had only been in motion for a few moments when it stopped to allow another passenger to enter. The doctor looked expectantly at the door and Deanna Troi stepped through. "Fancy meeting you here," Beverly said.

Deanna gave her a knowing smile. The counselor had known exactly where she was. "I have no idea what your sarcasm is insinuating," she said.

"Mmm." The doctor concentrated on the now-closed door.

"Mind if I accompany you back to your quarters?" Deanna asked, in a not-so-innocent lilt.

Beverly gave her friend a sidelong glance. "Do I get a choice?"

Deanna smiled. "Of course you do. You get to say 'yes' or 'no' and I come visit you and your family anyway."

"That's not much of a choice," Beverly said.

"I didn't say it would be a good choice," said the counselor. She paused, changing her tone to one more serious. "How's everyone handling things?"

Beverly got an idea. "Since you're coming to my quarters anyway, how about you stay for dinner and see for yourself?"

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "That bad?"

The doctor gave no reply as the 'lift doors opened and the pair exited. She hoped her friend could give some insight into Andrew.

Deanna Troi walked into Beverly Crusher's quarters and they were met by no one. The living area was completely empty. Deanna could see a few empty packing bins shoved to the sides of the room, PADDs scattered across a coffeetable, stray bits of clothing someone had dropped. The cabin already looked more inhabited than when Wesley had shared it with Beverly. As they made their way into the living area, they caught a strong baritone voice telling a story. Deanna recognized it as one of the many Arthurian legends from Earth. The two women walked to the doorway, finding the captain reading to Gracie from a book. The little girl heard them approaching and said hello when they appeared.

The captain turned around quickly and Deanna saw the tips of his ears turning red, an outward sign of his embarrassment. "Doctor, Counselor," he said, nodding. Bringing his attention back to Gracie he asked, "Can we finish this later?"

"Of course," she said, and slid off the bed, heading towards the living area with perfect dignity.

Deanna had to resist shaking her head in amazement at that tiny phrase and action from the five year old. She made eye contact with the captain. "She's your daughter," she said. "After seeing that, I wouldn't even need a DNA scan."

"Seeing what?" he asked, standing and tugging the bottom of his tunic straight.

"Nevermind," she said. "Beverly said something about dinner?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Did she?" He glanced at Beverly, who crossed her arms.

"Yes, Captain, and you're replicating," the doctor said.

With an annoyed look towards the doctor, Picard strode out of Gracie's bedroom. Deanna turned back to Beverly. She studied her friend carefully, noting the minute changes in her facial expressions. For many days past, there had been overriding worry scribbled across her brow. Her emotions during those days had been much the same, worry jumbling up everything, crashing over all other feelings, overtaken only by those moments of absolute fear. While the worry had dissipated somewhat, the fear had gone entirely and softened the features of her face again. Deanna also sensed something else, that the tension driven between the doctor and the captain like a glacier had sublimated. She suspected it had sublimated into the beginnings of a solid relationship, nothing quite resembling what had occurred between the two before. The counselor reached behind her and triggered the door shut. "What's going on?" she asked Beverly as soon as it closed.

The doctor frowned. "I don't know yet."

"Well, something's changed."

Beverly nodded, moving back towards the door. "When I figure it out, you'll be the first to know," she said and left the room.

With a frown, Deanna followed her out of the room. The captain and Gracie had managed to rope Allie into helping and dinner sat on the table. Beverly watched the door of the room where Andrew had retreated, then looked at the captain, and back again. Gracie noticed the looks and ventured to retrieve her brother. The tall boy that walked into the living area was nothing like the boy Deanna had met only a couple days before. Gone was the caring regard for his younger sister, the caring respect for his twin sister. His face showed none of the playful mirth it used to hold. The Andrew whom Deanna had met was a young man with a witty retort at the ready, a facetious story ready to be told. This Andrew held none of that. The boy's face was bland, entirely void of any true emotion. His gray eyes were hard flecks of stone, his face a stony reflection of his eyes. As an empath, Deanna was granted a view behind the mask the boy wore and the emotions there buffeted her best defenses with hurricane driven breakers. *Shame. Anger. Sadness. Pain.* The counselor realized why Conal kept so close to Andrew's side. The dog could sense something as well, could sense how Andrew drew up the mask of stone to protect himself.

Andrew noticed Troi studying him and fixed a glare in her direction. Deanna shifted her gaze, watching the rest of the newly formed family interact. Gracie, her auburn hair resting against her shoulders, feeling contentment at being with her papa. Allie surreptitiously glancing at her twin, entirely confused about the boy's current mood. Beverly, at once content with finally having her children with her yet troubled by Andrew, by Wesley. However, whenever Beverly looked at the captain, Deanna recognized the emotion projected for anyone to feel. Love. The same emotion the captain projected when he looked at Beverly, at Gracie, at Allie, at Andrew. The counselor smiled. It would work out.

Gracie saw Deanna hanging back in the shadows. "Are you going to come eat?" she asked. "You can sit next to me."

The smile still on her Grecian features, Deanna went over to the table and sat next to the little girl. The group settled in to eat.

"Are there any animals aboard this ship?" Allie asked. "Or are they all holodeck animals aside from pets?"

"There's a small zoo of sorts," Beverly answered. "The biolab has many different species of animals, though mostly smaller ones."

"No horses," Allie said. "I knew it."

"You'll only find those on the holodeck," Picard said.

Beverly spoke up. "There is a vet aboard ship," she said. "With the crew's pets aboard, someone has to take care of their medical needs. I'll introduce you tomorrow. Perhaps you could intern with him. Would you be interested in that?"

Allie's eyes lit up. "Absolutely," she said.

Deanna broke in, one duty that needed to be attended was the schooling of each child. "They all need to be registered and placed in the ship's school," she said.

"Other kids!" Gracie said. "Andrew and Allie are boring."

"I am not," said Allie. "You just don't like the things I do."

Gracie crossed her arms. "Reading the latest journal articles on veterinary medicine isn't fun, no matter who you are."

Deanna sensed the mischievousness in Picard before he spoke. "Actually, I find the latest in veterinary medicine a scintillating read."

Beverly looked at him, a barely hidden smirk on her face.

Gracie turned towards Picard, her arms still across her chest. "You're lying," she said. The girl leaned in, studying her father closely. Gray eyes met gray eyes, Gracie trying to read the deception, Picard giving no ground in allowing her to find out. The captain had many years of straight face while playing the diplomat. "You're doing what Andrew does," Gracie declared, sitting back, a triumphant look on her face. "I know this game."

At the mention of Andrew, the table's occupants looked in his direction. His face remained the same, but he did stop eating, looking up to meet their gazes. When Picard locked onto Andrew's look, the haunted feeling from the captain nearly knocked her over. She hadn't sensed this from the captain in over a year. Then she realized why it

had nearly bowled her over. It wasn't because she hadn't felt it in a long time, it was because the emotion was mirrored by Andrew and the mirroring amplified the already powerful emotion.

What problems did Andrew have with the Borg? Deanna wondered what had transpired between father and son in the last day. From Beverly, the troubled feeling ramped up to worry as she watched Picard and Andrew stare each other down, one challenging the other.

Gracie spoke, "This isn't the same game," she said. "This isn't straight face. Andrew's just being mean."

The girl's comment, her voice changing from the strong assuredness to a fragile almost gossamer tone, caused Andrew to break the stare from Picard and flicker quickly over to his sister. For a moment, Deanna caught the look in his eyes break, the concern about his younger sister allowed to surface again, then it was quickly shoved back down, and the steel doors slammed shut over them. No apology would be forthcoming. Gracie stared at him as the boy refused to make eye contact. "What did I do?" she asked, her voice having regained its strength. When Andrew didn't answer, the girl got out of her seat, went and stood next to him. "What did I do?" she repeated. With no answer a second time, she reached out, placed a small hand on his arm. "What did I do?" Fragile again, easily broken.

The contact made Andrew jump from his seat, knocking Gracie over in the process. Ignoring the girl on the floor, Andrew stormed off into his bedroom.

Gracie got to her feet. "I hate you!" she shouted to his retreating form. She picked up a pillow from the sofa and threw it in the direction of his room. The pillow thumped harmlessly against the shut door, a throw as futile as any attempt to break through Andrew's defenses. The little girl turned, saw the others watching her, her eyes got wide, the flush racing up her cheeks. "I hate him," she said. "He is *not* my brother." And she ran into her own bedroom.

Rising from her chair, Allie said, "I'll talk to her." Then she followed her younger sister, leaving the adults at the table.

A profound silence had fallen over them. Deanna knew then exactly why Beverly had declined to explain everyone's reactions and had instead invited her to dinner. As they stood, the reactions defied description. Allie, mainly content with the idea, having come to some sort of understanding deeper and faster than her siblings. Andrew, so upset that he couldn't face himself, much less his family. Gracie, happy that she had her mother and her father, thrilled to be on a starship, and heartbroken at her brother's actions. Deanna sensed that it would be best to leave Andrew alone for the night, let him try to sort himself out, at least so he didn't feel threatened.

"He should be left alone for awhile," the counselor said. "He feels threatened."

Picard nodded. "I can see that."

Beverly's eyes glanced over at the closed door of Gracie's room. "I think she does, too."

"Yes, she does," Deanna agreed. "But she doesn't feel threatened about letting other people know she feels that way. Even now, I can sense her calming down just by talking to Allie. She has that ability—she can talk through her emotions, be open to others with them. Right now, Andrew doesn't. Acknowledging any negative emotions to anyone makes him feel incredibly vulnerable." Deanna looked at the captain. "Much like his father."

Picard grimaced. "I'd like to think I've gotten better," he said, giving Beverly a significant look.

The doctor reached out, grasped his hand, held it. "You have," she said.

"But Andrew hasn't learned yet and it's going to be a difficult road," Troi said and turned her attention to the captain. "He'll need to spend more time with his father. Actually, all of them do. They need to get to know you as their father, and continue to bond and form a relationship with you. They should spend time with you both individually and together. I suggest starting with Gracie, I think it would be the least painful for both of you. She already looks up to you a great deal."

Picard nodded. "I've noticed." And he couldn't keep himself from smiling, his own look tracking to the closed door. "And at the same time, Andrew needs to be reached."

"Yes," Deanna agreed. "And that will be the most painful, for the both of you. Yet at the same time, it would be the most beneficial." The counselor sat back. "Have you decided what you're going to tell the staff?"

"No," Picard said, frowning.

"I'm not sure," Beverly said. "While I don't want the general crew knowing all the details, about exactly what's happened, I do think the senior officers should know most things."

Deanna agreed. The entire situation was awkward for all involved, yet the children and their parents had assumed their true identities, and any further attempts at keeping it secret would hurt the progress being made within the family. She said as much to the two people with her.

"I agree," Picard said. "I suppose we could explain the situation at the senior staff meeting tomorrow morning. Although how, I'm not certain." He looked at Beverly.

The doctor sighed, dropping her chin into her hands. "I think it would be best to come clean," she said. "Otherwise there will be questions on questions."

The captain's eyebrows raced towards the bald crown of his head. "I hope you aren't considering all the sordid details," he said.

Beverly glared at him and straightened up. "Of course not." She paused, obviously mulling over exactly what to say.

The counselor broke into Beverly's thought process. "Perhaps I can help with that. I don't know the details at the moment. All I know is that none of the children nor the captain knew who they were or about each other. Depending on what you're comfortable with, you could explain..." Deanna trailed off, frowning. "You know, there is no easy way to say it." And there wasn't. Even with all of her psychological training, to explain this situation, to even fathom this situation occurring, seemed near impossible without a lot of discomfort among all involved.

"I'll just tell the truth," Beverly said, resigned. "That they aren't my cousins, they're my children, and the captain is their father, and I hadn't told anyone about it except for my grandmother."

The counselor was the one to sigh this time. "I wish there was a better solution."

Beverly gave her a sad smile. "I created a nice mess." Then her gaze went to the closed doors and back to Picard. "Deanna, I'm going to walk with the captain back to his quarters, so we can talk a bit. Could you stay here and make sure my children don't kill one another?"

Troi nodded. The least she could do. She watched them go.

Beverly Crusher said nothing as they made their walk from her quarters to the turbolift, from the 'lift to Jean-Luc's quarters. Once they had entered the cabin, the silence remained. Then Beverly felt him move closer, lift her chin up with his hand, his other hand sliding to the small of her back.

"Hey," he said. "It will work out." His eyes sought out hers, seeking to reassure.

She wrapped her arms around him. "If only I could be as positive as you."

"One of us has to be a realist," he said, releasing her and leading her to the couch. "How about I bring Gracie to the meeting with the school tomorrow and then spend some time with her, as Deanna suggested."

Beverly nodded. "I think for the time being, I'll let Deanna try and get Andrew settled into school, I can work with Allie." When she said Andrew's name, she saw the moment of haunting on Jean-Luc's face. Sitting down next to him, she caressing his cheek, getting his attention. "You'll be able to reach him," she said.

"I thought you were the cynic," he said with a slight smile.

“No, I’m the realist,” she said. “I know Andrew and I know you. It will work out. It won’t stay like this.”

The captain’s gray eyes grew distant. “I don’t want to be estranged from him. It happened between me and my own father. And I always told myself, if I ever had a son, I wouldn’t allow the same thing to happen between myself and him.”

Beverly moved her other hand to his other cheek, cradling his face. “You underestimate yourself,” she said. “And you underestimate him. He’s deeply troubled, and more angry at me than he is with you. With you, it’s something else, the anger is hiding it. It’s a gap you can bridge, I’m sure of it. You’ll make a good father.” She’d known he would, once he could accept the role. Once she offered him the role instead of deciding against it for him.

The captain’s reply was to draw her into a kiss, one starting out as comfort, then growing deeper. She eased into his arms, allowed it to happen. Then she pulled away. “Jean-Luc, I have to get back to my quarters. Deanna is there. I can’t make her wait that long.”

Picard nodded, though looking as if he’d like to disagree, to say the hell with it, and ravish her on the spot. But he was a considerate and kind man, and he wouldn’t take more Deanna’s time on his own whim. Beverly reconsidered. It would be both her own whim and his. “All right,” he said. “How about dinner tomorrow? Nineteen thirty? Just you and me. I’ll speak with Allie about watching Gracie.”

“Are you asking me on a date?” she teased him.

“I believe I am,” he replied, straightening into his captain’s dignity. “Would you do me the honor?”

She stood. “I would be delighted, Captain.” With one parting kiss, she left him, knowing that if she stayed a moment longer, it would be much longer afterward that she would finally leave. In the turbolift, she allowed herself to smile again. A date. It seemed they were doing everything completely the wrong way. Not even quite backwards. They had three children, yet had never gone on a date, much less married.

Married. Marriage. Crusher had completely forgotten what Jean-Luc had said that morning. “*There’s no way I could ask you to marry me and come back aboard the Enterprise by rights of being my wife.*” The words hadn’t registered with her consciously, not with everything else going on in that moment. Now she remembered, wondered if he had been serious in any way. She knew that if she had declined to withdraw her resignation, if she wanted to be on the ship with Jean-Luc, they could marry. Regulations stated that immediate family was allowed on the ship, including spouses joined in whatever matrimony their culture deemed legal. But she had agreed to staying in Starfleet, so the conversation about marriage hadn’t progressed past the brief mention. The memory remained with her as she walked, of the sunlight of a clear day behind him, a morning without a hint of snow.

Chapter 16

Captain Jean-Luc Picard resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably in his seat at the head of the table in the main observation lounge. There were already enough of his senior staff shifting in their seats, and as he had to be the example, he needn't shift himself. He would be the paragon of control, all while his mind ran the gamut of the reactions that would come after this appalling silence. Beverly's words hung over them, her soft explanation of Andrew, Allie, and Gracie's presence on the ship.

"You are the senior officers on this ship, and my friends, and you deserve to know what's going on. My grandmother was the guardian for three children. When she died, the guardianship was left to me as their only adult surviving relative. However, these children are not my cousins, as you may have heard. They are my children and for many reasons, I kept that fact hidden from them, from everyone, including Starfleet, and including their father. They know who they are now, and their father also knows who he is. Their father is Captain Picard. I know you'll have questions. Feel free to ask them and I will answer as best I can."

As the silence formed, Beverly had slowly lowered herself back into her seat, her eyes unable to hide the worry. Picard wanted to reach out to her, let her know that it would be okay. He couldn't think of a way that wouldn't be completely overt to the rest of the staff, something out of kilter for himself and Beverly. The captain had never been one to share details of his personal life. Vash's presence on the ship some years ago had disrupted his carefully constructed facade, indeed her intrusion had ultimately ended their relationship. Then there had been the short-lived relationship with Nella Darren and his inability to separate sending a crewman into danger and sending a loved one into danger. His crew had to know their captain would always be the captain. Yet they, his senior staff, knew he was a human being as well. A person as flawed as any of them. His supposed death at the hands of mercenaries earlier that year had rocked the entire ship, shaken them to the very core. He was more than a commanding officer to them now. As a crew, as a senior staff, they had been together a long time. The captain knew he hadn't always been this way. On the *Stargazer*, his officers had become his friends. Ben Zoma, Pug, Greyhorse, Jack.

Jack, it had been he who caused Picard's shift in command temperament. His death, rather. The captain had taken Jack's death hard, too hard, and thought he had to separate himself from his crew afterward. So it wouldn't happen again. Had to be the infallible captain. Somehow in that measure, within the last seven years, he had failed. These people had become his friends. These people in front of him. Riker, just to Picard's left. His blue eyes were contemplative, his hand stroking his beard as he tended to do while in thought. Deanna, next to Will. A friend who often gave invaluable advice, her nearly black eyes now watching the crew, looking out for emotional difficulty. All while glancing at Picard, and especially at Beverly, offering support. Geordi, following Deanna, his eyes hidden behind his visor, his bewilderment communicated by his ever-expressive eyebrows. Data, giving his normal look of confusion at human interaction. But Data somehow also gave support near the level of Deanna. Data had become more

human than he would ever be able to admit to himself. Worf, the Klingon, glowering at the others. Then Picard saw Worf's eyes change. Worf, of all of them, had gone through an experience similar to Picard's and Beverly's. When Worf's mate K'Ehleyr had been killed, he had been left with a son he hadn't known existed. Like Beverly, K'Ehleyr hadn't been ready to divulge the paternity of her son to the boy's father. Like Picard, Worf had been blindsided by the knowledge once it was revealed and struggled between anger and love at the mother of his child.

Worf was finally able to resolve that struggle and accept the boy's mother entirely as his mate. Then she had been killed, taken from him by Duras, and with her death their future together had ended. The captain looked at Beverly, reached out with his hand, took hers into his, giving it a squeeze. She turned to him, surprise in her eyes, then came a small smile meant only for him—she understood. Her posture straightened, her confidence regained. Picard noticed Worf give a short nod of approval towards them. Worf also understood.

Then the Klingon security chief spoke, pushing the silence away with his resolute words. "I believe it is our responsibility to welcome these children aboard the ship." He turned again to Picard and Beverly. "I would welcome the duty myself." And with those sentences, Worf managed to dissipate the discomfort.

Riker broke into a grin first directed at Worf for his honesty, then to his captain and Beverly. "I agree," he said. "I admit, I had no idea what to say. I was uncomfortable. Not because I've lost respect for you captain, doctor. But because I had questions and every single one of them seemed like I was trying to pry. I don't think I need details. If either of you decide I—or any of us—should know, you'll tell us. Otherwise, we've three more people to welcome aboard the *Enterprise*."

Deanna graced Will and Worf with an approving smile. The others nodded enthusiastically. They had all met the children before, when the three of them had toured the ship. "There may be some problems," Deanna said. "Specifically with Andrew. He's having great difficulty adjusting to his changed identity. I felt you all should be aware of that, in case you notice, and I think you will, that he's acting much differently than he did when he came aboard ship the first time."

Almost like a stranger, Picard thought. His senior officers gave their acknowledgments of Deanna's observations. The captain stood, the day needed to get underway. "If there are no more questions or issues?" he asked. Heads shaking. "Then you are all dismissed." The officers filed out of the room. Deanna took Beverly by the arm and spoke with her in low tones as they left together, Beverly giving Picard one last look of comfort. When he saw it, he felt a warmth inside, one that he had missed. The captain looked out the observation port, at the stars streaking by. Someone cleared their throat behind him. He turned.

Worf. "Yes, Lieutenant?" Picard asked.

“Sir, I would like to offer any,” the security chief fished for the right word, “support you would need during this time. My own son had great difficulty adjusting, as yours is right now. If you have a need for insight, I may be able to provide it.” Unlike moments before, Worf now looked distinctly uncomfortable. It was one thing for Worf to have great insight and proclaim it, it was another to so personally offer his commanding officer emotional support.

“Your help would be greatly appreciated,” Picard said. “Thank you.”

The Klingon nodded. “They would have the hearts of warriors,” he said.

The captain raised an eyebrow.

Worf explained. “You are a warrior. Dr. Crusher is a warrior. Your children would also be.”

Picard smiled. “Thank you, Worf.”

Another curt nod. “I have...advice.” Again, Worf’s voice suddenly became unsure.

“What is it?” the captain asked.

“It might be too personal,” Worf said. “I do not wish to overstep my bounds.”

Picard looked directly at Worf, right at his eyes. “Worf, I served as your cha’ Dich. Right now, we drop ranks and speak, one man to another.”

“Very well,” said Worf. “Klingons are much more romantics than others seem to think. This I say to you as a man who lost his mate, who lost time with his mate due to his own obstinacy. Do not waste time. I have seen what is between you and Beverly, I am familiar with it, as I once had it myself, and had to mourn its passing.” The large Klingon placed a heavy, firm hand on Picard’s shoulder. “Do not make the same mistake as I did. Make Beverly your mate.” Then Worf withdrew his hand, gave another short nod, and headed out of the room to leave Picard to mull over this new information.

When Worf was just short of the door, the captain spoke to him. “Thank you,” he said.

“Sir,” Worf said, and left.

“Computer, time,” Picard said.

The computer’s female voice replied, “The time is oh eight thirty.”

He had less than half an hour before the rendezvous with the *Adelphi* and subsequent meeting with Admiral Necheyev. No time to ponder over Worf’s sage advice. The captain moved over to the replicator and set to work. He had done his research and sought to mend the rift that had formed between himself and the admiral.

It did no good to anyone for a Starfleet captain and admiral to continue to be adversaries. The lounge's door opened to admit his first officer as Picard was carrying a teapot to the table.

Riker surveyed the table, studying the food Picard had already replicated and set out. "Earl grey tea," he said, his eyes shining with humor, "Watercress sandwiches, Bulgarian canapes." The commander finally looked over to the captain. "Are you up for a promotion?"

I hope not. The last thing he wanted was to be ousted from the command chair. "I'm trying to establish a new relationship with the admiral," Picard explained. "In the past, there has been a certain amount of tension between us." A tension that needed to cease, especially in light of his new personal situation.

Riker continued his sly humor. "Tension's not the word I would use."

The captain ignored his first officer's dry remarks, keeping his tone serious. "I'd like to get things started on a better note this time. Make her feel at ease, that she's welcome aboard the *Enterprise*."

Will didn't give up, now playing the innocent. "I don't know why she wouldn't feel welcome here."

The captain relented and gave Riker an annoyed look. "Maintaining an atmosphere of conflict serves no purpose." He crossed his arms. "Did you have a purpose in coming in here other than to harass your commanding officer?"

"Yes, sir," Riker said. "However, when I saw the chance to harass you, that took precedence and now I've forgotten my original reason for being here."

Somehow, the captain doubted Riker had forgotten. He studied his first officer, seeing a sudden discomfort and he knew why Will had claimed forgetfulness. "I appreciate you not asking, Number One. But you have the right to know." He let out a long breath. "Beverly and I...we had had a few moments that could have led to a relationship, but we chose to run away from them and never act on them. I never suspected other ramifications of what had happened between us."

Riker cocked his head. "And she never said anything about being pregnant?"

Picard shook his head almost mournfully. "No. Frankly, I wasn't terribly surprised that she hadn't told me. You're familiar how she's very independent, very strong willed."

"Very familiar, sir," Will said, the smile returning.

The captain's communicator chirped. "Data to Captain Picard."

Necheyev must have arrived. "Picard here."

“Captain, Admiral Necheyev has beamed aboard and is being escorted to the observation lounge by Lieutenant Worf. She will arrive shortly.”

“Acknowledged. Picard out.” The captain held in a sigh.

“What are you going to tell her, sir?” Riker asked.

He let the sigh out. “I’ve no idea, Number One.” And he hadn’t. He’d spent the better part of the night before trying to figure out how to explain the situation and had come up with nothing that wouldn’t cause Necheyev’s ire. There was the matter of the resignation that had disappeared, about letting his personal matters interfere with his command, about his relationship with Beverly. No regulations had been broken. Starfleet had nothing in the books against fraternization between officers close in rank or in the command structure of the ship. The rules written were to provide guidance in separating personal matters from duty. As long as they kept things separated, they would be fine. They had managed to do so thus far, in their odd friendship-relationship of the past seven years. They should be able to continue.

The door opened to admit Worf with the admiral. “Admiral Necheyev, sir,” Worf said, and stepped aside. Necheyev, short in stature, managed to convey a much larger presence than her petiteness belied. Her blonde hair was bound up tightly to the back of her head, her red and black admiral’s jacket perfectly arranged, PADD in one of her hands.

Picard took his cue to move forward, proffering his hand. “Admiral, welcome aboard the *Enterprise*,” he said as warmly as he could muster.

On her part, Necheyev gave Picard’s hand a quick perfunctory shake. “Thank you.” All business, she dismissed Riker and Worf from the room.

Picard caught Riker’s wide smile as he left, letting Picard know Riker felt he had the better end of the deal. With Necheyev standing in front of him, the captain had no recourse to communicate his displeasure at Riker’s insinuation. Right to matters, he could play the gracious host to his best ability. He motioned towards the food on the table. “Admiral, would you like some—.”

She cut him off. “I’ll cut right to the point, Captain. A situation has developed on the Cardassian border that—.” Her eyes had finally followed Picard’s motion and she noticed the food. “Are those Bulgarian canapes?” she asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” he answered. “I took the liberty of speaking with your aide, he said you were quite fond of them.”

The normally frosty admiral took this information in. Picard watched as her expression changed and she saw Picard’s motives in smoothing things over. She returned the overtures and settled herself in a seat, a gesture in kind. “That was very thoughtful, Captain,” she said. “Thank you.”

Once the captain had finished pouring tea and taken a seat himself, Necheyev handed him the PADD she'd brought in with her. As he read, she briefed him on the situation. The treaty with the Cardassians had been finalized with the agreement upon the designated borders of each power. As the borders had been moved with this new treaty, some Cardassian colonies and some Federation colonies found themselves now on the wrong side of the border. Necheyev explained that those colonies would have to be moved. The idea caused Picard concern. He raised his concerns with the admiral, but she said the negotiations were final. "Your mission is to evacuate the colony on Dorvan V," she finished.

He frowned. "Dorvan V." The colony sounded familiar. He remembered. "That's the colony where the North American Indians settled, isn't it?"

The admiral confirmed his suspicions. "Yes, they settled there about twenty years ago. They have a small village on the southern continent."

Picard sat back in his chair, frown growing deeper. The parallels between this particular colony being forcibly removed from their homes and the history of their people being continually forcibly removed from their homes, indicated that something here was amiss. "This group originally left Earth two hundred years ago to preserve their cultural identity," he said.

Necheyev, obviously fighting her own frustration, explained the steps of the past three years with the Federation's negotiating council. An Indian representative had been brought in, history had been discussed, the original dispute over the planet brought up. "In the end, the moving of the colony on Dorvan V was a concession that had to be made in the name of peace," she said. "There is always a price."

The captain nodded. "Indeed," he said. "What if the colonists refuse to evacuate?" he asked. It was a situation he didn't want to have develop.

Necheyev placed her teacup quietly on the table, her actions grim. "Then you are ordered to remove them by any means necessary," she said.

Picard stared at her, at the gravity of the order, at the astonishing parallel to history. A history that should never be repeated, and yet had, time and time again. It seemed the galaxy held no regard for the Native American culture and would continue to chase it, hunt it down, extinguish it. He wanted no part of it.

The admiral continued. "I understand your moral objections, Captain," she said. "If you wish, I can find someone else to command the *Enterprise* for this mission."

Whatever he might want, he had his duty to attend. He was the captain of this ship, and he would captain it. "That won't be necessary," he said.

Necheyev gave him a direct look. "I don't envy you the task. But I do believe it's for the greater good."

"I understand—." Picard's reply was cut off by a call from the ship's comm system. "Captain Picard to the bridge." With a look towards the admiral, Picard stepped out of the room and onto the bridge, the admiral close behind. "Report," he said, making way down to the command center.

Will rose from his chair. "There's an object of some kind closing in on our position," he said.

His face unreadable, Picard said, "On screen."

As the small object appeared on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge, Data reported the object's specifications. "It appears to be an unmanned probe, approximately half a meter in diameter. It has no identifiable armaments."

From his position at tactical, Worf said, "You are being hailed, sir. By name."

Picard blinked, then exchanged glances with his first officer. Being hailed by name from a probe was certainly unexpected. "Open a channel."

"The message is pre-recorded holographic image projection," said Worf.

"Allow it through, Mr. Worf," said the captain.

An image of a Ferengi DaiMon appeared in front of the viewscreen. Picard recognized him immediately. "Bok," he said. The last time he had encountered Bok, the Ferengi had sworn vengeance after his attempt was thwarted when the mind-control device was destroyed. The other people on the bridge stared at the image, as mystified as Picard. Necheyev in particular, standing just outside the conference room door.

The image of Bok spoke, his eyes filled with hatred. "I trust you remember me, Picard. I haven't forgotten you. Or how you murdered my son. For fifteen years I've thought about how to avenge his death. But nothing I could do to you could equal what you did to me, until now." Bok's face broke into a grotesque smile. "You thought you could hide him from me, didn't you? But I found out about him. Andrew Howard is as good as dead. I'm going to kill your son, Picard, just as you killed mine." The taunting mockery of a smile was the last thing to disappear as the communication stopped.

The captain allowed himself a moment to be baffled. Then he gave orders. "Lieutenant Worf, put a tractor beam on that probe and determine if it's safe to bring on board. I want to know where it came from." Turning to Riker he said, "I want you to contact the Ferengi Government. Bok was wearing a DaiMon's uniform. If he's regained his rank, I want to know why." His crew in motion, Picard walked into the refuge of his ready room to figure out how he would tell Beverly, how he would protect his son.

It would be a very short refuge. He had just sat down behind his desk when the door chimed. "Come."

Admiral Necheyev strode in, her mouth a thin line of determination. "Captain, I would like to know exactly what's going on, especially in light of this threat being one that also affect the mission to Dorvan V."

Picard rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Of course, Admiral." He motioned for her to take a seat. The hope that his personal life wouldn't affect his professional life had just been wickedly smashed by a revenge-bound Ferengi. Once Necheyev had taken a seat in one of the chairs placed in front of his desk, Picard launched into an explanation. "I recently came into the knowledge that I have three children."

Necheyev raised an eyebrow. "Three, Captain? Different mothers?"

The captain did his best to keep from allowing the annoyance he felt to show. "No, Admiral. They all have the same mother. Dr. Beverly Crusher."

Necheyev crossed her arms, sat back in her chair. Picard suddenly felt like squirming and sympathized more with how Beverly must have felt this morning. "This does explain the ship's logs I was reading this morning," the admiral said. "I must say, these children do make me curious. And that your doctor kept them a secret from not just you, but Starfleet as well. Seems almost impossible, one would think."

"I wouldn't be one to underestimate the capabilities of Dr. Crusher." If anyone could have accomplished what Beverly did, it would be her.

"Almost as impossible as a doctor accidentally getting pregnant," Necheyev continued. "Wouldn't you say?"

Picard placed his hands flat on the desktop. "Are you saying she did it on purpose?" he asked the admiral, the challenge unmistakable in his voice.

The admiral's reaction of true bewilderment showed she had only been speculating. "No, of course not, Captain. The doctor has an exemplary record and has shown exemplary character in her duty to her patients. I highly doubt she would ever do such a thing. I was only thinking out loud, how impossible it seems, and yet here it's happened." She met his gaze. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

Yet he had been. He nodded. "Of course."

Necheyev sat forward in her chair. "Captain, you must understand that the mission to Dorvan V cannot be compromised. You have permission to do whatever is necessary to protect the boy, but you cannot allow this DaiMon Bok to jeopardize your primary mission. Understood?"

All too clearly. "Yes, admiral."

The admiral relaxed into her chair. "Captain, you look as if you expected more of a scolding."

“In all honesty, I did.”

Necheyev smiled, something Picard wasn't sure was possible, much less had ever seen. “Everyone's human, Captain. Or whatever species they might be. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone does things that can be embarrassing. Eventually, things catch up with you. You're an adult, the doctor is an adult, and whatever you do, as long as it doesn't interfere with your duty, is between the two of you.”

Though Picard knew the regulations, hearing an admiral tell him the same thing with the knowledge of what had happened, made relief wash through him. He nodded to the admiral.

She smiled again, more than before. “What are they like, Captain?”

And Picard did something he never thought he would do while in the presence of Alynna Necheyev—he smiled warmly. “I don't know if I can explain,” he said.

The admiral stood. “The look on your face tells me enough,” she said. “I'm heading back to my ship. Keep in close contact with me over Dorvan V. And keep me updated on your son's safety, as well.”

He nodded. As she moved out of the room, he followed her. They entered the turbolift together. “Are you transferring to the *Adelphi*, Captain?” Necheyev asked after telling the 'lift her destination.

“No,” he said, pausing to tell the computer his. “I have to tell my son's mother about Bok's threat.”

“Understood,” Necheyev said, and they rode the 'lift in silence.

Jean-Luc Picard entered Sickbay, still surprised at Necheyev's reaction to the entire thing. The woman had even seemed...warm. If at all possible. He found Beverly in one of Sickbay's adjoining labs. At first she didn't notice him standing there and he took the moment to watch her. Her jaw set in determination as she worked with a specimen, brow furrowed in thought, her lovely blue eyes intent on her work. He loved the way her lips pursed when she was figuring out a puzzle, as they were right now. She tucked an errant bit of her copper hair behind her ear as she adjusted the microscope. At some point she had shed her lab coat and tossed it onto the unused chair well behind her. His eyes traveled down, appreciating her curves, her long legs.

When she cleared her throat, he realized he'd been caught. He looked up, knowing his cheeks were burning. He met her look despite his blushing, at her lips being tugged by amusement. “Jean-Luc,” she said.

“I have news,” he said, making sure to make his tone serious, despite the previous amusement.

Her smile dissipated, she had caught the tone. “What's going on?”

He explained to her what had happened on the bridge and afterwards with the admiral. As he explained, he saw the worry creep into her face, throughout her body as she crossed her arms.

“How safe is he?” she asked.

“As long as he’s on this ship, he shouldn’t come to any harm from Bok,” Picard replied. He was certain of it. As long as they were wary and Security did their job, Andrew would be in no danger. But it didn’t make him feel any better, not with a threat as direct as the one Bok had leveled, not with the mission that lay before him. As he looked at Beverly, he saw his worries reflected in hers. Though they both knew intellectually that Andrew would be safe, they would still worry until Bok was caught. There was also the issue of Andrew himself, his emotional difficulties continuing, and if those difficulties would prove to do more damage than the renegade Ferengi ever could. As he lost himself in thought, he felt Beverly’s arms wrap around him.

“Thank you for coming down here to tell me,” she said.

“How could I not?” he asked.

“You could have easily told me over the comm system.”

“And you would have easily thrown me out an airlock for being such a coward,” he said.

She swatted him on the arm. “Jean-Luc, I would do no such thing.”

He gave her a dubious look. He had been witness to her becoming a she-bear over any threats to Wesley. The captain imagined that tendency extended to her other children as well. “I’ve seen you react to threats to your children. I’ve also seen you react when you think someone is being a coward. I doubt that you wouldn’t do such a thing,” he said.

Beverly smiled. “I wouldn’t throw you out an airlock,” she said. “I’d do something worse.” She glanced at the chronometer. “You should go pick up Gracie. Because of your meetings, Deanna took her to register for school. They should be done by now.”

Glancing around to see if anyone was looking into the lab, he found no one paying any attention. Opportunity given, he kissed the doctor quickly. “Okay,” he said. “See you tonight.”

“Tonight,” she echoed. Yet by the time he’d reached the doorway, she was immersed back into her work, her lips pursed, her brow furrowed. Picard recognized the coping strategy. The more she put into her work, the less she would worry about her son.

The captain went down to the school and found Gracie waiting with Counselor Troi. When the little girl caught sight of him, she released Deanna's hand and went running for him, saying, "Papa!"

Hearing the girl, his daughter, call him that still made him feel warm, a warmth he'd never felt before having a child and a warmth he never wanted to lose. He knelt to her level and allowed her to nearly knock him over with a hug. "Hey," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring you myself."

"It's okay," she replied. "Deanna explained."

"Good," he said, standing up. Gracie kept ahold of his hand. "What shall we do now?"

"I'll leave you two alone," Deanna said. Picard had forgotten the counselor was there. When he looked at Troi, she was smiling at him. He suspected why. "Captain, I'll meet with you and Beverly later about school placement." The Betazoid turned to Gracie. "And I'll see you later," she said.

Gracie told her bye, then brought her attention back to her father. "I want to learn how to fence," she said.

She was only five. "Most fencers don't start until they're seven or eight," he told her.

At his words, the little girl crossed her arms, her jaw set, her lips pursed, and her gray eyes flashed determinedly. Picard felt like he faced a tiny version of an angry Beverly, one angry with Picard for underestimating her capabilities. "I can do it," she said. "I'm sure."

He relented. She was his own child, perhaps she would take the sport as he and her older brother and sister had. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

Just outside the entrance of the gym, they ran into Allie. She had her fencing whites on and carried her bag. They entered the gym together. The fencing area was empty, as were the rooms storing fencing gear. "No partner?" Picard asked Allie.

She shook her head. "No. Andrew's..." she trailed off. "I can't think of a single nice thing to say about him."

"I'm sorry," he said.

Allie gave him an odd look. "It isn't your fault," she said. "He's the one choosing to act like this. He needs to grow up."

Picard glanced down at Gracie, hoping Allie would catch on, and they could continue this conversation later, without the youngest child present.

Allie understood. She knelt down to her sister's level. "Speaking of growing up, what's this about you wanting to fence?"

"You think I can't do it either?" Gracie asked, the determination coming back into her voice.

"I didn't say that," Allie said. "Who said that?"

"Papa," Gracie said, shooting Picard an accusing look.

Allie turned to him, lifting an eyebrow.

That damn look. Beverly did that. "I only said that most people normally take it up at seven or eight," he said. He needed to change the subject or he'd get himself in deeper trouble with Gracie. "I need your help," he told them. "I have a project that I need your help with."

"Why us?" Allie asked.

He knelt down, gathering them closer. "Which one of you managed to get the pictures from your house on Caldos?" he asked.

"That would be me," said Allie.

"I need them," he said.

"What for?" both girls asked in unison, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"A surprise," he said.

"Not unless you tell me what it is," Allie said. "Those are important pictures."

"I know," he said. He did know. The photographs from Caldos were as important to him now as they were to them. His family as well as theirs. Something he wanted to make sure stayed that way. "But I can't tell you. One of us hasn't yet mastered the ability to whisper and keep a secret." As Picard fixed his gaze on Gracie, Allie did the same.

"It's not my fault," the little girl protested.

Picard sighed. "Well, if you're going to be that way." He stood up. "Let's get you some fencing gear to wear," he told Gracie.

Once Gracie was in a changing booth putting on her new jacket and trousers, Allie spoke up. "I'll get them for you," she said quietly.

"Thank you," he said.

She put an arm around his shoulders, pulled him close. "This better be good," she said, "Whatever it is you're planning."

"It is, I promise," he said.

"And we'll talk about Andrew later?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes." Even as he watched his youngest step out wearing fencing whites that would be that white only once in her life, as his oldest daughter hugged him for the first time, the worry over Andrew invaded him, cutting the warmth with the cold of winter.

Chapter 17

Wesley Crusher threw the book across the room. Felisa's journal opened as it flew, growing wings that did nothing to keep it aloft, wings as useless as Wesley's frustration. Wings that collapsed when the book smacked into the wall across from the armchair with a solid thump. The pages whispered as the journal skittered downward and finally came to rest on the floor.

Wesley glared at it. What he'd read in that book couldn't be possible. He ran his hands through his chestnut colored hair. Even as he tried to rid his mind of what he'd read, the last of Nana's words floated before him, ever defiant. *How he looked at her at her wedding, how he looked at her during Jack's funeral, how he must have looked at her on that planet when he admitted his love, how I'm sure he looked at her when he suggested exploring their feelings.* That's when the cadet had thrown the book away from him. The captain had loved his mother for longer than Wesley had been alive. But he had said nothing, nothing to her. His mother hadn't loved the captain until after his father died. No. She'd loved him before that, but differently. Thinking it was infatuation, never thought of leaving his father. Wesley knew that Beverly had loved Jack. That knowledge had made him smile, that his father hadn't been cuckolded, that his mother had been true to his father. And, it seemed, untrue to the captain.

The cadet frowned. That's what had made him throw the book. Over and over again, his mother had rejected Picard. Refused to allow herself happiness, denied relationships with her children, with the man she loved. Many people went through their lives, one soulmate each, and once they were gone, so was that happiness. But Beverly Crusher wasn't one of those people. Reading his great-grandmother's words, Wesley saw what Felisa saw—that Beverly was one of the lucky few. She had two, and when one died, another stepped into his place. Another as noble as the first, as caring as the first, the best friend of the first, and who better to take care of her? Wesley couldn't fully blame his mother, as he held part of the blame himself. He had been so focused on his mother betraying his father and his memory that his blame kept her from accepting the captain. Then there were his siblings.

Wesley rose from his chair and went over to where the book had fallen. Picked it up, sat down where the book had been a moment before. Thumbed through the journal, searching for the entries about their births.

I write this as I watch my granddaughter sleep after having given birth to twins. Two little children who sleep as their mother does. Yet they sleep in peace, in innocence. Only an hour earlier, they had come into this world loudly, now they're quiet, so quiet I can't hear them breathe, can just see their tiny chests rising and falling, a calming rhythm. I look at them and see our family history, the boy, with that reddish hair that so many Howards possess. And the girl with her mass of black hair, those clear blue eyes, the same eyes as her mother and grandmother. And I remember Wesley had that hair, though it lightened as he got older. So much of his father in that boy. Beverly had been so happy when he was born, so thrilled to show his father what they had created together.

Cursing, Wesley fought tears. His mother had been happy, happy with Jack, happy when Wesley was born. He kept reading.

My granddaughter is as pleased with these two. While I can see their mother, their grandmother, their grandfather, everyone I know in them, when Beverly looks at them, I know she sees their father. And that happiness she has with them—the same as when she had Wesley—disappears. With Wesley, she could look over at his father, sharing her life with him as she had. With these two, she has excised their father from her life, yet desperately wants him to be able to see these infants. I look at them and try to see what she sees of their father. Those eyes of the boy's, they're a mirror of the weather outside, the gray clouds of a coming storm. I know it in an instant, they are his father's eyes. With the girl, arms now wrapped around her brother, I can't see it physically. Her traits will come later, in her personality. But those eyes of the boy's. I can't get over them, how they keep the snow in Beverly's life. It's another sign, of the rightness of their being alive, of how they came into this world, and of the wrongness of it all, that they're denied their father, their family in their brother Wesley. All out of stubborn pride. No. That's my own frustration talking. It's out of pain, Beverly doesn't want to cause anyone else more pain than has already been caused. But it will tear at her, constantly. Especially when she looks into the boy's eyes.

The eyes of his brother. The cadet wiped at his own eyes, as brown as his own father's. The stupid snow. He remembered, when he read that part of Nana's journal. He had been making snow angels with his mother right before they'd found out. Now Wesley knew why they'd never done that again, because it had been snowing when his father died. He cursed again, this time over Andrew, how stupid Andrew couldn't get over himself and come out of his shell. Work things out like the rest of them were. Like their sisters.

He smiled again. His sisters. Little Gracie, the same eyes as their brother, the red hair of their mother, and wise beyond her scant years. Wesley knew he adored her. Both of them. Allie, fiercely independent, brilliant, stubborn, astonishingly beautiful. In the talks he and Allie had had over the past day as they explored the ship, he'd seen more than a few crew member's heads turn. He'd gotten the chance to act as the older brother, staring down those crew members for looking at his sister like that. Allie had punched him in the arm more than once, but it hadn't stopped him. He had years to catch up on. Not like Andrew, who had been with her as she grew up.

He frowned. Andrew. His hands balled into fists. Stupid Andrew, throwing away everything he had, the chance to have a whole family. His father alive and there with him, his mother, two sisters, a brother. A brother Andrew rejected at every instant, as if they had never discussed it when they were younger, about pretending to be brothers because that's the way they felt. Not anymore.

Suddenly the room felt like a cage. He needed to get out, distract himself. The cadet left the room in a rush, chased out by his memories.

Wesley found himself in Engineering. Geordi would have something for him to do. He could bury himself in tasks here so he wouldn't have to think, to feel. He could forget. The chief engineer, standing at the large diagnostic table, noticed him as he walked in. "Wesley!" he said. "There you are. You've got to take a look at this."

Curiosity piqued, Wesley followed him over to the warp core chamber and peered into the bulkhead panel his friend opened. Geordi continued talking. "Remember how we always talked about improving the quantum efficiency by creating a new plasma-dyne relay? Well, feast your eyes on this." With a flourish, he stepped aside to let Wesley take a closer look at the workings inside.

Wesley obliged, studying the modifications, trying to shove away the extraneous thoughts. "You've only got one micro-fusioninter-relay in here. The converter interface will never hold up," he said. He couldn't imagine how Geordi didn't see the mistakes.

Geordi turned to look at him, eyes hidden under his visor, his brow showing his disapproval. "Hey, I ran the diagnostics myself. This little baby will withstand over five hundred Cochranes of warp field stress."

The cadet ignored his friend's defensiveness. A chief engineer should have this sort of thing under control, he shouldn't be ignorant of the most current studies in engineering. "I don't think so," he said. "You'd better put a secondary phase inverter in there." He moved his hands around for a better look, studying the other circuitry, saw more mistakes. "In fact, this entire subprocessor matrix needs an overhaul."

Geordi closed the panel door so quickly that Wesley nearly had his hand caught in the process. "I guess we don't have all the fancy new equipment you have at the Academy. We make do with what we've got." The engineer's brows had continued their downward journey.

Wesley grew irritated, feeling the anger bubble up inside him, urging to be let out at the most convenient target. Geordi was asking for it anyway. "Haven't you read the latest paper by Vassbinder? He has some brilliant new theories on warp propulsion inter relays." He pointed towards the closed panel to make his point obvious. "A lot of this stuff is almost obsolete."

La Forge crossed his arms. "What's wrong with you?" he asked, irritation now tinged by concern.

Wesley didn't want his concern. Didn't want anything from him. "Do you want my help or not?" he asked, the harshness of his anger forming his words.

"I was doing this for you," Geordi said, his irritation ringing clear, the concern ousted. "I thought you'd be interested."

Wesley was tired of people thinking what he should and shouldn't be interested in. "Well, I'm not," he said. Without another look toward his friend, the cadet left engineering.

Not even twenty steps away from the main engineering room, Wesley realized how he'd hurt Geordi. It was too late to go back and apologize, he'd have to let it be. His frustration with himself grew. He was letting Andrew get to him, he was treating others like Andrew was. Hurting them purposefully, striking at where it would hurt them the most, where their defenses were at the lowest, because it was a place you let your friends see, because you trusted them not to hurt you. Like Andrew was doing with Gracie, deliberately rejecting her, making her cry, making her hate him. Maybe that's what Andrew wanted, for everyone to hate him. Wesley decided he'd be happy to help in that regard. Andrew even acted as if he hated the captain, hated his mother. They didn't deserve hate, they deserved sympathy. They had caused themselves enough pain, a penance given many times over.

He needed to talk to Allie. She could help him figure this out, help ground him. Somehow, she had managed to be reasonable throughout all of this, even before she'd read Nana's journal. Ever since the cave during the storm, she had been the mature one. Andrew was her twin, maybe she knew something more about him than anyone else could. Wesley began to head towards the veterinary office, that would be the first place to look. As the cadet rounded the corridor, he plowed right into his brother. The impact made them bounce off each other. They squared off, staring each other down.

His enemy was in front of him, so convenient. He could make Andrew see reason, get some sense into him. Though Andrew was taller, had muscle that Wesley could never seem to develop, Wesley knew he had the training to take the other boy down. He met the other boy's eyes, eyes that had the look of steel, nothing like the forgiving clouds of a winter's snow shower. He would teach him. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"You're not my keeper," Andrew said, wary.

"My brother's keeper," Wesley said. "Remember when we used to pretend we were brothers?" His question wasn't an attempt at peace. It had formed into a spear, striking Andrew in places he'd kept hidden.

Andrew glared.

"How's that hole in your soul now?" he asked. "Now that you have your mommy and daddy, what's it like, was it everything you hoped it would be?"

Andrew struck back with his own sharp memories. "How's that hole where your father used to be? Is it as wide open as it was when your father died?"

The irrational anger at betrayal infused the cadet. "What's it like, having everyone hate you? Hating everyone else? Your own mother, your own father. I know your

secret,” Wesley said. And he did, he’d read it in his great-grandmother’s journal. “You wished Captain Picard was dead. Not only that, but you killed him yourself, over and over again, every night in your dreams. At least I never wanted to kill my own father.”

Wesley’s words had hit their mark. ‘Father’ had hardly left the cadet’s lips when Andrew tackled him to the deck, fists seeking out his face, looking to leave damage wherever they could. Wesley returned the damage, bringing his legs up, twisting, shoving the taller boy off him, taking the advantage. Andrew got to his feet, Wesley slammed him up against the bulkhead of the corridor, making the other boy’s head bounce off the hard wall. The cadet drove his fists repeatedly into Andrew’s ribs, cursing him and his unwillingness to talk, to see reason, to be a brother. Andrew managed to get his arms between himself and Wesley and push him away. They met in the middle of the corridor, grappling, still swinging away. Shouts came from behind them, around them, barely heard in the white noise of their anger.

Men and women in the black and yellow uniforms of Security raced in, pulled them apart, each boy struggling against the restraining arms of the officers, trying to reach the other, inflict more damage. “She hates you,” Wesley shouted to Andrew. “She hates you, you know. Wishes you were dead.” He purposefully left out the name, knowing Andrew would wonder if she was his mother or one of his sisters, or all three. It would eat him up.

“At least I’m not a liar,” Andrew taunted back.

Wesley lunged at him, breaking through the restraining arms, managed to land another punch before he was forced to the deck. With Wesley on the floor in front of him, Andrew capitalized, giving two kicks to the ribs before the officers holding him took him down to the deck as well. They lay there on the ground in the corridor of the *Enterprise*, faces mere inches from one another, faces full of vile and hate, utterly devoid of brotherly love. Wesley stared at Andrew, stared at those eyes, those stupid eyes that were the same as his youngest sister’s, the same as the Starfleet captain he admired. The same as the brother who completely failed at being a brother.

The boys were roughly hauled to their feet. Wesley saw one more black and yellow uniform stalking down the corridor. This one held a large, particularly pissed off looking Klingon. “What is the meaning of this?” he said, none too nicely. Quite the opposite, actually, Wesley realized.

The question was directed at him and Andrew, not Worf’s subordinates. The lieutenant’s gaze rested on Wesley. He didn’t answer. It wasn’t that he wanted to be difficult, not with an angry Klingon, but because he didn’t *know* what the meaning of it was. If he did, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place.

Worf’s glare moved to Andrew. Unlike Wesley’s noncommittal shrug, Andrew’s gray eyes glared right back at the security chief. Like he wasn’t afraid of anything. Certainly not the security chief of the Federation’s flagship.

The Klingon looked at his officers. "We will bring them to the brig and sort it out there, so we do not have to risk having them fighting again. They can fight with the force fields of their cells."

Shit, Wesley thought. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"Come," said Captain Picard when the chime to his quarters signaled someone outside his door.

Allie walked in, carrying a standard plastic packing bin. "I've got them," she said, motioning with the bin. Then she tripped over one of his errant boots. Kicking the offending footwear out of the way, she frowned. "You'd think a starship captain would be better organized."

He rose from his chair behind his desk. "I am human, you know."

"Mmm," she said, nodding. "Gracie also tells me you don't know much, either."

"She's five," Picard said.

As Allie placed the bin on the dining table, she looked at him, blue eyes flashing. "So how did you become a starship captain knowing less than a five year old?"

He gave her an annoyed look as he walked over to the table. Like her mother, the look didn't phase her in the least and she laughed.

"I'm sorry," she said, seating herself in one of the chairs, tucking her legs underneath her. She didn't sound sorry in the least.

"You are not," he said, opening the bin.

She laughed again. "No, I'm not. See, Andrew leaves his shoes everywhere. Nana and I used to trip over them constantly before we decided to start hiding his shoes whenever he left them out. We wanted to see if that would cure him of his habit."

"My mother did that to me when I was a boy."

She surveyed his living area. "Looks like it worked as well with you as it did with Andrew." Allie sighed. "Do you have any idea what's wrong with him?"

He stopped looking in the bin, turning to his daughter. The captain met her eyes, saw the seriousness and concern. The information would be safe with her. "Your mother thinks that it has to do with his nightmares about the Borg, and I agree with her."

Allie nodded. "The ones where he tried to kill you?"

“Yes,” he said. “Does everyone know about this? And does Andrew know that you know?”

The girl gave him a small smile. “No, not everyone. I know because I read Nana’s journal. I already knew about the nightmares, but I didn’t know they were that bad.” She frowned. “But I don’t think that’s entirely it. Something is wrong between him and Mom, I’m sure of it. He’s never acted like this with her before. I mean, he’s always liked her company, the two of them got along really well. And now it’s like he can’t stand to be near her. With you, it’s like some sort of fear, of facing his nightmares and what he’s done. But with Mom...I don’t know.”

“She knows he’s angry with her.”

“That much is obvious.” Her brow furrowed in frustration. “If he would just *talk* about it, we could work things out.”

“It’s never that easy,” Picard said. “Sometimes, it’s easier to withdraw, to protect yourself from being hurt any further.” The captain realized his son must be more like him than he thought. “Andrew is very sensitive, isn’t he?” he asked.

Allie looked up at him. “Oh, yes. He does his best to hide it. Most people have no idea, because he does a good job at that. He cares a great deal about people, a great empathy for how people feel. At one time, he thought he wanted to be a doctor in Starfleet, like Mom.” Allie grinned wryly. “Well, Beverly, at the time. Anyway, he used to go with Nana to visit people. I remember him coming home after witnessing a baby being born for the first time, tear stains on his cheeks. He wouldn’t talk about it, but Nana told me he’d had rivers of tears the entire time. A week later, he saw his first death, that same baby, some stupid virus. Andrew held the newborn as it died. When he came home, he was still crying, and he said he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t watch as people died and be helpless in easing their pain. It hurt too much. After that, he wouldn’t talk about his dreams anymore. I knew he wanted to be in Starfleet, because he never stopped watching the stars at night.”

Picard nodded. “I do much the same thing. I withdraw, as he is doing now. Though, I’ve changed a lot over the years. At least I’d like to think so. He’ll have to come to terms with his fear, with feeling threatened, with being hurt. Like any of us do.”

“You’ll have to reach him,” Allie said. “If he knows that you trust him and love him, even when you know about his nightmares, then he might be able to understand Mom.”

“It’s much harder than it sounds,” he said, knowing Allie was right.

“I think it’s even harder than that,” Allie said. Then she looked at the bin and back at him. “What’s this all about, anyway? You wanting these photographs?”

In answer, the captain retrieved his family album from one of his shelves and handed it to his daughter. She studied the cover, feeling the old, worn leather, tracing

the shield of the family crest, then the name Picard stamped into the leather. Then she opened it up, turning through the pages, studying the photographs and lithographs, drawings and writings. After a few pages of pictures of the very first Picards, she looked up at him. "They had a lot more hair back then," she said.

He gave her an annoyed look as his hand reflexively moved to his head. "You know very well that those were wigs," he said.

"It was still hair," she replied, looking back down at the book. She got to the last page, the one where Picard had placed the photograph Beverly had given him of her and Gracie, where they were asleep on the biobed, mother and newborn. "She wasn't even this small when Nana brought her to Caldos," she whispered.

As he watched his oldest daughter studying the picture of his youngest, he felt tears stinging his eyes, and then felt like an idiot. Quickly, he tried to compose his features so it didn't show his sadness, how touched he was.

At his silence, Allie looked up from the album. She watched him for a moment, then said, "Don't do that."

He blinked. "Do what?"

"Andrew does that. That's what he does. I saw it, you were sad or upset or something, I don't know what. But then you tried to hide it." She shut the book. "Don't *you* start." Then she rose from her chair, facing him, her blue eyes challenging.

Picard wondered if this was what parenting was. Scrabbling for footing on ground so treacherous that you never saw what was in front of you, under you, or behind you. As he faced his daughter, he knew what he had to do, for her and for his son. "I'm sorry," he said, and stopped trying to mask his feelings.

Allie noticed immediately, her own features softening to concern. "You're sad that you missed it," she said.

He hadn't the slightest idea what to do. Andrew must feel this way all the time, so vulnerable, where the slightest verbal misstep by someone could hurt deeply. His hands hung at his sides, limp. The urge to bolt raced through him. Then Allie reached out, came forward, hugged him. Then the words came pouring out. "I never held any of you," he said, the words soft and tinged with pain. "When you were infants. None of you."

"You're holding me now," she said. "That's got to count for something."

Picard laughed. "You're much taller," he said.

Allie let him go and smiled at him. And he felt the warmth again, comfort in seeing a smile so similar to Beverly's in his daughter. "That's why," she said, tapping her finger on the bin. "That's why you wanted the photographs."

“Partly,” he said, regaining some composure. Not hiding his emotions, just getting them under control. “It’s all I have from when you were infants, when you were little children.”

Allie sat down again, her legs tucking under as before. She reached for the album and opened it. “Mom missed those moments, too. She held us, when we were born, but not for very long. Nana said she spent a month with us before she left. With Gracie, she only got two days. She missed nearly as much as you did.” Allie fingered the photograph again, the one of her younger sister and her mother. “There’s only one solution for it,” she said. When she turned to him, she had an impish look in her eye. Beverly’s children all seemed to have inherited her streak of wicked humor.

“I’m afraid to ask what it would be,” he said.

She shrugged. “It’s fairly simple. Just have another one.”

Picard stared at her, trying to keep his jaw from dropping.

Allie grinned. “Simple.”

He frowned. “Allie, this...” he paused. “It occurs to me that this would be a good time to scold you using your full first name. And I’ve no idea what it is.”

“Natalie,” she said.

The captain resisted smiling at the nod to tradition, he was supposed to be scolding. “Natalie,” he said. “Your mother and I aren’t even married. We haven’t even had a first date.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a traditionalist,” she said. “I mean, there’s already three of us and you think you have to marry our mother to have another? I can’t believe you haven’t had a *first date*.”

He crossed his arms. “As a matter of fact, I asked your mother to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, good, then you can get started on another straight away,” she said.

Allie was rewarded with the Picard annoyed look, the one her brother and sister also possessed and used nearly as frequently as the captain. “Somehow I doubt this is even a subject I should be discussing with you in any manner.”

She leaned forward. “So you do want another.”

“I didn’t say that,” he said.

She crossed her arms and stood, mirroring him. “But you didn’t *not* say it.”

He frowned.

She smiled. "And if you haven't completely discounted that possibility, and you're the traditionalist you say you are, then you must want to marry my mother."

The annoyed look came back. "You're as bad as your sister. Honestly, she's been after me since before she even knew I was her father. And now you starting in as well?" The captain narrowed his eyes. "Is this some sort of conspiracy between my daughters? As I told you, we haven't even had a first date, it's hardly the time to be proposing."

"So you've thought about it."

He felt like banging his head on the bulkhead. Allie was merciless. If she didn't have her heart set on being a vet, she could easily be a brilliant lawyer. The captain said nothing aloud, indignant.

"And you've done everything in a completely screwed up order by this tradition you talk about. If you keep with the same sort of non-plan you guys have had so far, you'll marry her and *then* propose." Allie closed the album again, traced the Picard on the front cover. "Hey, then we could all have the same last name."

"Pardon?" he asked. The rapidity of her subject changing made his head spin.

"I meant to tell you earlier, but I got sidetracked. I'm changing my last name from Howard to Picard."

"You don't have to do that," he said.

Allie gave him a soft smile. "I know. And I don't generally do things that I don't want to. Look, you're my father, and I want to have your last name. Don't argue with me about it either. I've already made up my mind."

This time he made no attempt at hiding how he felt. The captain hugged her and whispered, "Thank you."

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she teased him.

His communicator chirped. "Worf to Captain Picard." Picard stepped away from his daughter and quickly drew mask back over his feelings, switching to the role of captain of a starship. Allie noticed and raised her eyebrow at him as he answered. "Picard here," he said.

"Captain, we need you down in Sickbay. There is a situation which requires your attention."

Allie's left eyebrow lifted even with the right.

"On my way," he replied and closed out the channel. He looked at Allie. "Feel free to stay as long as you wish."

“You put on that mask awfully fast,” she said.

“Years of practice,” he said. “Comes with the territory of being a captain. It’s harder than it looks.”

She nodded. “I’ll bet.”

He left her looking through the album.

When Jean-Luc Picard entered Sickbay, he found Beverly Crusher fuming in her office. Lieutenant Worf stood just inside the doorway. Picard wasn’t sure if it was to guard Beverly from her staff or her staff from Beverly. “What’s going on?” he asked Worf.

Beverly answered for the security chief. “They’ve been fighting, that’s what,” she said, stalking from behind her desk. Despite his better judgment, Picard stepped into her office. Worf keyed the door shut. “It took a team of six security officers to pull them apart. Fighting in the middle of the corridor on deck thirty-six,” the doctor continued.

“Where are they now?” Picard asked, understanding why Beverly was so angry.

“They’re in the brig,” she replied, then glared at Worf. “They shouldn’t be there at all.”

“Doctor, I did not see another option to keep them from fighting. They resisted my security team and attempted to assault one another even after they had been pulled apart. I placed them there for their own safety and that of the crew. They will be released to yours and the captain’s custody once you have spoken with them.”

Picard said nothing, allowing Beverly to take the lead. He felt his own anger building and sought to control it. Arguing was one thing, but a fistfight on his ship was quite another matter. Something that simply could not happen, especially when one of the young men involved was a Starfleet Academy cadet and the other was his son. Beverly stopped glaring at Worf and looked at Picard. “Jean-Luc, you go talk with them. Maybe this is something they need to hear from another man, maybe you can say something that will get through to them that a mother’s words just can’t seem to communicate.”

He nodded. Perhaps she was right. As a man who fought with his own brother quite often, he would have a different perspective.

“Thank you,” she said, giving him a tight smile. “I’ll speak to you about it tonight.”

“Yes, tonight,” he said. Then he and the security chief made their way down to the brig. Picard felt oddly reassured having the Klingon beside him.

Once in the turbolift, Worf said, “They are...brothers.”

The captain knew exactly what Worf meant. The Klingon had a brother of his own, as did Picard. Relationships between brothers were complex, a constant tension between love and competition, pride and jealousy. The fact that Wesley and Andrew shared the same mother yet had different fathers only added to the tension and complicated the resolution of the tension that much more. At the same time, both Picard and Worf had come to terms with their own brothers. For both of them, it had taken years. The captain hoped it wouldn't take Andrew and Wesley that long. "Yes," he said to Worf.

Worf nodded, knowing that Picard had understood what he meant. The lift brought them to corridor just outside the brig. The two officers stepped in and the crewmen inside snapped to attention. "Captain, Lieutenant," they said.

From where he had entered the room, Picard could see the two active cells. Worf had wisely placed the brothers in cells next to each other rather than opposite, so that their actions wouldn't incite the other. Either way, words would, and from the harried expressions of the two crewmembers in charge of the brig, words had been a constant volley between the two. The captain studied the two boys closely as he brought his anger to the forefront, making it cold and calculated. The anger felt familiar to him—it was the same that had caught him two years before, when found out Wesley had lied to the inquiry board. He never thought he'd be in this same situation again, with the same anger, with the same task of bringing reason down like a sledgehammer onto a young man. Two young men. No. Boys, the both of them.

Both boys stood as close to their force fields as was physically possible. Wesley's uniform was torn on the arm, his commbadge gone. A red welt stood out on his cheek. Idly, Picard wondered if it were a wall or a fist that had caused the mark. Andrew had no torn clothing, but had a red mark on his temple. Each of them had eyes glowing with frustration, anger. The captain turned back to the security personnel behind him. "Please wait outside," he said quietly. The two crewmen looked ready to protest, but when Worf gave a curt nod and walked outside, they followed suit. Picard moved forward as the main door closed, moved to face the two cells.

Both boys stared at him defiantly. It was Wesley who spoke first. "Worf called my mother, not you," he said.

Picard's eyes snapped straight to Wesley. "That's Lieutenant Worf, cadet," he said, emphasizing the Klingon's rank. "I am the captain of this ship and this is a security matter. Therefore, this involves me and not your mother."

Wesley said nothing.

The captain continued. "You are a Starfleet Academy cadet," he said. "You are to conduct yourself as an officer and you did exactly the opposite on this ship today. Instead, you acted as a callow youth, something that should be below your maturity level." He turned his glare to Andrew. The boy glared back at him. "And you are the son

of two senior officers on this ship. You are to conduct yourself appropriately and that means not getting into a fistfight with a member of Starfleet.”

Andrew went to speak and Picard cut him off. “I don’t want to hear anything from either one of you. Your behavior was reprehensible. You reflected badly on your yourselves and your family,” he said, shifting his glare between both boys. “You have an obligation to comport yourselves with civility. If you cannot manage to at least be civil beings, you do not deserve to be let out of this brig. Understood?”

Andrew’s glare remained unchanged.

“You aren’t my father,” Wesley said. “You have no right to lecture me.”

Picard stepped closer to Wesley’s cell. “I *am* your captain,” he said, his voice dropping to an intense whisper. “And what I order as the captain must be followed by the Starfleet personnel on this ship.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the cadet, finally looking cowed.

The captain stepped over to stand in front of Andrew’s cell. He searched the boy’s gray eyes to see if he could find what he hid behind them, the pain, the fear, the sadness. Yet he could only make out the anger. Anger he was sure Andrew saw reflected in his eyes. Picard wished he could explain to him it was an entirely different sort. But he couldn’t, it wasn’t the right time. “And you,” he said, voice just as intense and soft as before. “Are not a member of my crew. However, I am your father, and when it comes to the safety of this ship and my family, I expect to be obeyed.”

For a moment, Picard thought he saw something change in Andrew’s eyes, a flicker of recognition, then the boy turned around and walked to the back of the cell. Lay down on the bunk and refused to look at him. He wondered if he had done irreparable damage to the chance of getting through to his son. Looking at the two boys, he knew they wouldn’t be fighting anytime soon. As a captain who had given enough stern lectures to wayward crewmembers, he could recognize when he had been heard. Picard left the brig, leaving Wesley’s words of protest behind him over him not being free to go. Outside the room, Picard ordered Worf to let the boys go after another three hours. Worf nodded in agreement, knowing as Picard did that they needed the time to finish cooling off.

*

In his quarters, the chime sounded at exactly nineteen thirty. “Come,” he said, hurriedly putting away the bin Allie had brought to him earlier. Beverly walked in the door, wearing a sage green dress he had never seen, one that set off the burnished copper of her hair. “Beverly,” he said with a warm smile.

“Jean-Luc,” she said, returning the smile. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

He raised his eyebrows, walking towards her. "Have you?"

She stepped forward, pressed herself against him, and kissed him as she had the previous day. "Does that answer your question?" she asked. He could feel her breath on his ear, her hands gripping his upper arms. It certainly did.

Picard brought his hands up to cradle her face and found himself kissing her, returning what she had given him in sevenfold. When he broke off, she placed one of her hands on his chest, giving him a small smile. "Certainly answers my question," she said.

"Oh, I've been waiting to do that all day," he said, teasing. "But you never asked."

Beverly sighed. "If only it were that simple," she said. "There seems a conspiracy to keep us apart, with all that's going on."

"That's odd," he said, leading her over to the dining table. "I seemed to have come across another conspiracy to get us together."

She sat back in her chair. "Let me guess. Allie and Gracie."

He nodded as he sat in his own chair across from her. "They're very determined." Watching her reactions, he couldn't decide if he should tell Beverly about the conversation he'd had with Allie.

"It's Andrew and Wesley who comprise the other side," she said. "What happened when you went down to the brig with Worf? I heard some rumor from a couple of my techs that you kept the boys locked up in the brig even after you'd spoken with them."

From the look on her face, the tone of her voice, he realized she didn't believe that rumor. Not only that, she disagreed with it. "I did," he said.

"You didn't." She didn't think he was kidding, her statement was one of hope, that he would be kidding, despite what she knew.

Picard pushed his chair slightly away from the table, trying to put some distance between himself and the doctor. "I did. I thought they needed some time to cool off. Lieutenant Worf released them three hours later on my orders. They didn't speak with you?"

"No," she said. "Jean-Luc, they didn't belong in there in the first place. I can't believe you would order to have them stay there longer." A hint of anger touched her voice, the pitch rising.

The captain felt his plans for the night slipping away, like a caustic laughing cheshire cat saying goodbye, taunting him with the smile on the way out. "Beverly, they

disrupted order on this ship. They fought each other and then fought with the security officers who separated them. They had to be kept safe and so did my crew.”

“All well and good for you. They’re brothers, they’re going to fight.” She stood up, palms flat against the table, her tone quickly reaching the one she’d had earlier in Sickbay. “You had no reason to *keep* them in the brig.”

“They were released three hours earlier. It wasn’t as if they were tortured. They simply couldn’t go anywhere. They had to sit and think. Most importantly, they couldn’t fight with one other.” He realized that at some point, he had done something wrong, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

“They’re boys,” she said.

The captain stood up as well. “One of those boys is a Starfleet cadet. He’s lucky he wasn’t charged with conduct unbecoming.” Her eyes grew wide for a moment, then narrowed into a glare, and Picard knew he had made a fatal misstep. He had named a threat to her son’s career.

“You wouldn’t have,” she said, the tone of her voice dropping to an almost menacing intensity.

There would be no correct answer. “I would have if it came to it,” he said. “I have a duty to this ship as the captain.” He hoped she would see that.

Beverly crossed her arms, taking a step back. “You have a duty to your son as well. He isn’t a Starfleet cadet. He’s only sixteen.”

“Old enough to know better than to fight in the middle of a starship’s corridor. That kind of behavior can’t be tolerated, not from anyone, much less the son of two senior officers,” he said. The frustration he had set aside earlier came back full force into his voice. “And you can’t expect me to fall short in my duties as a captain.”

The doctor’s voice went upward again, passing the anger she’d had earlier. “And I didn’t expect you to fall short in your duties as a father.” She held eye contact for a moment, then stalked out of his quarters, leaving him alone standing next to his dining table, dinner untouched, candles flickering their wasted intimate light.

Jean-Luc closed his eyes. *I’ve failed.*

Chapter 18

Beverly Crusher sat at a table in the far corner of Ten Forward, a forgotten drink beside her hand, her eyes on the stars outside but seeing nothing. It had taken her five minutes to storm from Jean-Luc's cabin to securing a lone table in the lounge, ten minutes for to her order a drink, and fifteen minutes for her to realize what she'd done. *I walked out on him again.*

"Damn," she said, pushing the drink away from her, as if the drink had caused her problems.

"It tastes much better when it's cold," came a voice from behind her. Guinan stepped into view, clad in her heavy robes and with her trademark wide brimmed hat. "I can't imagine how awful that drink must taste when it's lukewarm." The El-Aurian settled herself into a chair across from Beverly.

The doctor returned her gaze to the stars, trying to ignore Guinan. The one person on the ship who had an innate ability to get anything out of anyone and then help them see a solution. The only other person Beverly had known to be like that was her grandmother. She sighed.

Guinan refused to be ignored. "So how are the three little Picards settling in?" she asked.

The doctor's head came around sharply. "How did you know?" She regretted the question as soon as she asked it. There wouldn't be an answer. Beverly had figured out that Guinan knew during that first visit to Ten Forward with Jean-Luc and the children. Knew without being told, knew with barely a glance, barely any interaction. Yet once a question was asked, it was there, waiting for an answer. She took back the drink, fiddled with the glass.

"I just did," the bartender said, with no note of mocking in her answer. As she spoke, she gestured with her hands, her dark brown eyes picking up the light from the stars outside. "It's who I am, I haven't questioned it in a long time. When I saw those three walk into this lounge with you, I knew immediately who they were, and where they were meant to be."

"Here," Beverly said, answering the unasked question of if she knew where her children belonged.

Guinan nodded solemnly. "Here. With their mother and father. Together."

Beverly peered into the tumbler, trying to see if the liquid inside could reveal what to do, what was right, and how her children managed to bring them together and pull them apart all at the same time. "Maybe," she said.

"You were certain before," Guinan replied.

Beverly sighed, resigned. She had no idea why she fought it. She'd known from the moment she walked into Ten Forward that Guinan would pull the story from her whether she gave it up freely or told it kicking and screaming. "That was before their father kept my two sons in the brig for hours longer than they should have."

"Ah," said Guinan.

Beverly gave the bartender another sharp look. The woman across from her didn't seem appalled in the least over what the captain had done. "Didn't you hear what I said?" Then she cursed in her head. Another question with another obvious answer.

"Awful things happen in places like that," Guinan said. "Interrogations, tortures of all kinds. Bad food, bad beds, bad prisoners that are as much criminals inside as they are out." The El-Aurian sat back, steepling her hands on the table. "Did I ever tell you how I ended up on Earth in the nineteenth century?"

"No," said Beverly.

Another nod from Guinan. "I was hiding from my father. You see, I had decided to leave my planet and go listen to other species. Just listen, because there were so many stories and so many lives, and much more talking going on with species who aren't comprised entirely of listeners. Well, my father disagreed, thought I was too young to leave. He came after me. I ended up on some planet in the Delphic Expanse populated by humans that had been abducted and enslaved by Skagarans. I found it a fascinating society. The humans had overthrown the Skagarans and made their former captors their own slaves. It was the first time I had seen things like this first hand. Before, I had only been told stories from others. At first, I only listened to the humans. Then I got bold and went to listen to Skagarans as well. I got caught."

"Caught?" asked the doctor. She was familiar with this colony, it had been discovered by the first *Enterprise* in the twenty second century. "By your father?"

Guinan shook her head. "Oh, no. Caught by the humans. You see, by my listening to the Skagarans, they said I was teaching them. Which, of course, was against the law, punishable by ten years in jail. Eighteenth century Earth civilization jail. Inedible food, diseased water, straw ticks for beds if you were lucky enough to get a bed at all. I managed to get a message out to El-Auria about my plight. I got a message back fairly quickly. Told me that I had chosen to go out listening on my own and I would have to face those consequences on my own as well. And I spent nine years in that jail."

The doctor crossed her arms, disbelieving that Guinan's father would allow that, even though he had been angry with her. If anything, he'd sounded protective. And spending that long of a time in a jail of that sort would certainly be dangerous. "Your father left you there?"

"My father never knew."

“What?”

Guinan nodded. “I was hiding from my father. I sent the message to my mother. It was my mother who sent a message back to me.”

“Your mother left you in that jail?”

“For nine years,” said Guinan. “And it was exactly what I needed. I listened and learned more in those nine years than I did in the next ninety.”

“Your mother left you in that jail.” This time, it was a statement. Beverly saw what Guinan was helping her to see. That Jean-Luc had done exactly what needed to be done. Wesley and Andrew had been done no harm. Instead, they’d learned the consequences of their actions and were given time to think and calm themselves before being left to their own devices again. The captain hadn’t been a bad father. He’d been a good one and she’d told him otherwise. Then she’d left him there, walked out on him again. Beverly peered into her drink. Nothing.

The El-Aurian patted the doctor’s hand. “She did.”

And Guinan had turned out perfectly fine. Better than fine. Beverly sighed.

Guinan leaned forward, elbows on the table, placing her chin on folded hands. “So who won?”

The doctor started. “What?”

“Well, your sons were put into the brig for fighting. Who won?”

Frowning, Beverly said, “Neither of them. Security broke them up.” Guinan’s current line of questioning confused the doctor more than most of her normal questions. Not like her normal questions weren’t confusing enough. It didn’t matter who had won the fight. What mattered was what caused it.

“So what were they fighting about?” Guinan asked, on cue.

Beverly sat back again, looked away from Guinan, away from the table, away from everything, and outside the ship’s window. She’d no idea. Her sons were fighting over nothing and everything. They hated each other and hated themselves for hating the other. How had Wesley explained it to Gracie? *“At first it’s this huge adventure, then you start to think maybe your adventure is somewhere else and you flew right past it at warp seven.”* Wesley had had his entire life planned out since he was four. He’d study constantly, learn everything there was to know about starships and Starfleet and the Federation. Pass entrance exams to Starfleet Academy. Graduate, enter Starfleet and become a Starfleet officer, like his father had been. As soon as Wesley had come up with his plan, it had been knocked about by the universe. His father killed in action. Failing the entrance exams. The incident with Nova Squadron. Maybe Wesley was thinking that his adventure waited for him elsewhere, that he might have missed it

already, having been so focused on Starfleet, on his father and following him. And now he had to learn another role entirely as brother, older brother to two sisters and a younger brother.

Andrew, the brother that saw the stars for himself, didn't follow anyone's footsteps and chose to break his own path. At least, that's how Wesley must have seen it up until very recently. But as Wesley struggled with deciding where his future would be, Andrew struggled with deciding who he was. Deciding if he hated himself or everyone else, deciding if everyone hated him for who he was. That was the thing—he didn't know who he was. Neither of them did.

"I don't know," Beverly said.

"It's funny," Guinan said. "I once stood very near here with your son, looking out those windows. He wanted to stay here but wouldn't even allow himself to ask, because he was expected to leave and join you on Earth. When he chose to stay here, it was the first time he'd done something entirely for himself and it wasn't what everyone expected him to do. But when he chose to stay here, it was exactly the right thing. If he had gone to stay with you, he would have found things out that he wasn't ready for, everything would've come apart. Funny, how history seems to work itself out like that."

Funny, indeed. Like how Guinan knew everything, as if she were prescient, and helped guide people to choose to do the right thing.

The El-Aurian continued. "Picard wouldn't have been ready then. He learned a lot having your son on this ship without you to go to for help. He needed that time. And now his son—your son—is on this ship, at exactly the right time. It's how it's supposed to be. Except he's avoiding me."

Beverly looked up. "Captain Picard?"

"No. Your son, Andrew." As it was her way, Guinan didn't give any further explanation of her statement.

The doctor frowned. "How do you know he's avoiding you?"

With her small enigmatic smile, Guinan said, "Because he's Picard's son. He's damn determined to figure everything out on his own and won't talk to a soul. He knows that if he comes in here, he'll end up talking, I'll end up listening, and somehow he'll figure out the right thing to do. So he doesn't visit. Picard does the same thing when he knows he's thinking something through and can't get an answer from himself. I always have to chase him down."

Beverly nodded. "I know the feeling."

Guinan leveled her gaze at the doctor. "He isn't the only one I have to chase down."

Crusher suddenly found her now room temperature drink fascinating.

“And sometimes,” Guinan said, “People show up down here when they’re supposed to. Makes things much easier for me.” Then she stood up. “Excuse me.”

At Guinan’s sudden dismissal, Beverly looked up from the table and saw why Guinan had taken her leave. Jean-Luc had walked into the lounge. His hawk-like gaze quickly spotted her in the far corner and he strode towards her with a purposeful determination. The captain sat down in the chair Guinan had vacated moments earlier. When he sat, they both spoke, their words overlapping.

He said, “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

She said, “I’m sorry I walked out on you.”

A second of silence passed between them before they each began to laugh. The tension that had ratcheted up inside the doctor over the past hour slowly began to ease. It wouldn’t be as hard as she thought. She reached out and took his hand. His smile slightly lessened, afraid of what she was going to say. “I’m sorry I walked out on you,” she repeated. “You were right. It was no worse than grounding either of them or sending them to their rooms and it kept them from beating the hell out of each other. Which means they stayed out of my Sickbay.”

Picard squeezed her hand and smiled. “Where I imagine their mother would have killed them both herself.”

Her eyes went wide in mock horror. “Not in *my* Sickbay.”

He sighed. “I’ve realized I haven’t the slightest idea what I’m doing. Being a father, I feel like I’m flying by the seat of my pants, something I’ve never done as a captain. It’s so much easier to face down Romulans or Cardassians than your own children.”

“Jean-Luc,” she said. “No one is born being a parent. You sort of learn as you go and hope you don’t screw them up too badly.”

Picard’s eyes flicked to his left, looking at the stars, then back to her. “I wanted to connect with them. With Andrew. I don’t understand, how it was so easy to connect with Allie and Gracie, and Andrew will barely exchange two words with me.”

It was Beverly’s turn to sigh. “Andrew will barely exchange two words with anyone,” she said. And he wouldn’t. Breakfast that morning had been miserable for all involved. Gracie glaring at her brother when he even glanced in her direction, then when he turned away, her eyes sorrowful with the hurt of having lost her brother. Then Allie, yelling at him whenever she got the chance, trying to shake him out of whatever funk he was in. Even the dog was in on it, practically on Andrew’s heels whenever he

was in their quarters, then waiting by the door until Andrew returned. Nothing had worked. “Did he say anything to you earlier when you talked to them in the brig?”

The captain shook his head. “No, nothing.” Then something changed, sadness crept over his face, hand in hand with shock. “I felt like my father,” he said, looking at her. “I think I sounded like him. The lecture I gave them. But it wasn’t even that, it was when I told Andrew that I expected to be obeyed. As if I wanted my son to be some sort of martinet, like my father wanted out of me.”

Beverly frowned. “How did you word it? That doesn’t sound like you at all.” The captain wasn’t a leader who expected blind obedience from his crew. He expected intelligence and discussion, the uses of individual strengths to compensate for weaknesses from his people. She had suspected he would be much the same as a father.

Picard thought it over for a moment. “I told him I was his father, and that in matters of safety regarding my ship and my family, I expected to be obeyed.”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “That isn’t a bad thing. That was telling him the truth, a truth that holds for any member of your crew. You’re a very fair man, except when your ship and crew are threatened. Then you become absolute and will not compromise on their safety. It’s a strength of yours,” she said.

He didn’t seem to hear her and continued on the same line of thought. “And after I said that, he looked at me for a moment and I saw...something. I don’t know what. Something in his eyes. Then he turned around and lay down on his bunk and refused to even look at me.” In counterpoint, the captain made eye contact with Beverly. “Maybe I shouldn’t push him,” he said. “Maybe I should leave him alone, let him come to me.”

Beverly resisted the urge to laugh out loud but didn’t quite succeed. That would never work, waiting for Andrew to go to anyone when he was like this. It’s exactly what he was trying to do, to keep everyone away from him. She covered her mouth in an attempt to hide her amusement, but Picard noticed.

“What?” he asked, slightly annoyed.

“Does that ever work with you?” she asked.

Picard frowned, then shifted to a look of annoyance directed at the doctor. “No.”

Satisfied, she sat back, crossing her arms. “Exactly. It won’t work with your son, either.”

He sighed. “So I should press him? Keep after him?”

“Isn’t that how we deal with you?” she asked. “I seem to recall having to rope the entire ship into the plan just to get you to take a damn vacation.” *So you could find yourself one hell of a girlfriend*, she thought, then shoved it out of her mind.

Her comment made him smile. *Was he remembering Vash?* Again, she was forced to kick the errant thoughts of out of head. *Shut up, self doubt. Shut the hell up.* “You know, this parenting thing doesn’t seem so bad when we work together,” he said.

“Yes.” Yes, she knew. When Jack was alive, Wesley didn’t seem as hard to raise. When she got frustrated, she could talk to Jack about it. Kids didn’t come with manuals and having another adult around to try and figure out how your kid worked came in handy. Wesley had been the cause of some rip-roaring good fights, too. Some minor point of parenting they would disagree over and they’d be at it. Hours later, they’d come to their senses and wonder how the hell a kid could do that, make them fight like that. The thought of raising a child had been a daunting task, one made less daunting with a partner. Then Jack had been killed.

It was snowing when Jack died.

And the comforting thoughts she’d had in the past two days, in the comfortableness of her relationship with Jean-Luc, of the paths it could take, of having someone at her side for her life and her life with these kids, vanished. They were replaced by panic, fear, every foil of comfort that existed. When she looked at the man sitting across from her, at the earnestness of his face, the contentedness continued to leave her. That look on his face he’d had in his quarters after that post-Kesprytt dinner, the one on his face right then, as he took her hands in his on the tabletop.

“We’ll have to figure out how to manage this, to remember to stay a team in raising these children,” he said.

She nodded. They could be a team, they’d done it before. But he could be killed, as Jack had been killed, and she would be left alone again, now with three more children to raise single-handedly, after being used to having two extra hands.

The captain sought out her eyes, drew her in so he could study her face. “I don’t want any of you out of my life,” he said. “You’re a part of it. You have been, for a long time. That year, when you were at Starfleet Medical, was one of my hardest years on this ship. I’d go down to Sickbay, and just before I walked in the door, I’d expect to see you. Then I’d walk in and you weren’t there. I’d gotten used to you being around, as a part of my life, during that first year. And when you came back, everything felt right again. The *Enterprise* was home again. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Then she would get used to him being there, comfortable with him, and then he would be killed. She would be left alone again. It would be easier to stay alone in the first place. “I’ve been a single parent for a long time,” she said aloud.

He was looking at her like that again. That look, the one where she knew he was going to say something significant, something that could change their lives and their relationship. Immediately her brain recalled the throwaway comments he’d made in the past day, the day before, how he could try and get her on the ship if she refused to take back her resignation. *Not now.* She had to get him to stop, get him to not say this, or ask

this, or whatever he had planned out in his mind. It would hurt them both. Beverly couldn't remember if she'd ever told Jean-Luc to shut up.

"Did you want to remain a single parent?" he asked.

She had to calculate, had to figure out what to say to him, what would make him stop cold, and not ask her what she thought he was going to. Then she thought of it and it came out and struck him as if she'd clobbered him over the head. "When I married Jack, I didn't think I'd be single again," she said.

When she saw his face go from the openness it'd had before, seconds before she'd spoken, to the neutral mask of the captain, she knew she'd chosen the right thing to say to make him stop talking. But it didn't feel right. She felt like she'd hit herself over the head as well, reeling from the emotional door she'd slammed in the captain's face. But it had to be right, not to let him even ask. Nearly dizzy from the tumult of her thoughts, she got up and walked out of the lounge. The doors hissed shut behind her and it took no time for her to realize she'd walked out on him again.

Damn.

Jean-Luc Picard realized he'd misjudged, read her entirely wrong, and in doing so had nearly done the most wrong thing possible. She was right. The two of them, they weren't meant to be, they couldn't be. He was associated with Jack's death in so many ways, it was his fault she had been a single parent in the first place. If he wasn't the ship's captain, he would have laid his head on the table and wished for the deck to swallow him up.

"Why the are you still sitting here?"

Guinan. While his head wasn't on the table, he hadn't moved. Instead, he'd watched Beverly go and hadn't looked away from the doors after they closed on her lithe form. "To keep myself from saying the wrong thing. I very nearly did."

The El-Aurian crossed her arms. "Picard, I'm not even going to sit down for this conversation. What wrong thing?"

He didn't get up. He knew that his standing up would be half the fight for Guinan. "It's absolutely ridiculous," he said. "Exactly what no one would expect. Everyone would expect the captain to wait, plan things out, not rush into things, to be completely reasonable. That I was even contemplating it is entirely ridiculous." The captain had directed the words towards the table, not looking at his friend.

Guinan regarded him with her deep, knowing eyes. "Sometimes the expected thing is exactly the wrong thing to do," she said.

Picard gave her a questioning look.

And the ancient, wise woman who looked no older than her mid-thirties, glared at him. "Are you being dense on purpose?" she asked.

The captain blanched. His old friend only challenged him like this when she felt particularly strong about some mistake he was about to make.

Guinan caught him in his realization. Leaned down to face him. "Go after her," she said. "And don't take no for an answer."

He went without a backwards glance.

Once outside Ten Forward, he headed towards the nearest turbolift. His stride was quick, but not so quick that passing crew members would think the captain running in a panic. Of course, that's exactly what he felt like. In a panic, thinking that his mistake was a mistake was a...mistake. "Computer," he said as he moved, "Location of Doctor Beverly Crusher."

"Doctor Crusher is on Deck Ten."

He frowned and rounded the corner. There he found Beverly, who hadn't even made it onto the 'lift. She stood outside it, leaning against the bulkhead, staring at the ceiling. Then he knew what to say. "When you married Jack," he said, "I thought I would be single for the rest of my life."

The doctor's head snapped down and she looked at him, studying him as he had her minutes earlier. Her blue eyes growing wider as he approached, drew next to her, then in front of her, taking her hands. He brought her hands between them, on his chest. His face inches from hers. "When you married Jack, I thought I would never have children. When you married Jack, I thought I would never tuck my own child into bed. When you married Jack, I thought I would never get a talking-to from my own child about me showing my feelings. When you married Jack, I never thought I would be reaching out to connect with my own son." He saw she was biting her lip, a sure sign that tears would fall, but he pressed. "When you married Jack, I thought I would never tell you that I was in love with you." Soundlessly, Beverly cried in front of him. He said one more sentence. "When you married Jack, I thought I would never ask you to marry me."

She closed the distance between them, the inches that could have been light years, and kissed him. He tasted the salty tears that he had caused, kissed her more deeply, seeking to comfort her. Then he broke the kiss, whispered in her ear. "Don't answer. I had to say it. The next step is yours, whenever you decide to take it." He pulled back, looking in her eyes, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. "I believe I owe you dinner," he said, and pulled her into the turbolift.

In his quarters, they finally ate dinner, pretended the earlier events of the evening hadn't happened as they talked about everything else. Anything else. The captain

played the game, danced the dance that had become their instinct. It was an intricate dance that kept them in their status quo during their time aboard the *Enterprise*.

But he had declared, with no uncertainty, that he wanted to end the dance. Now he waited for her reply, not knowing if it would take days, weeks, months, or years. With their track record, with his courtship already having lasted more than fifteen years, her reply could also take that long. Once they had finished eating, he immediately got up and retrieved his family album. He'd wanted to show her this earlier, before they had argued. When he handed it to her, she wordlessly settled herself onto his couch and began to page through it. She got to the photograph he had of her and smiled. "I thought you were kidding when you said you had a paper heart framing my photo," she said.

"I don't kid," he said.

She didn't look up at him, but he caught the lift of her eyebrow. Picard sat next to her, looking over her shoulder so he could see what pages she was on. The doctor had reached the pages he worked on that day. The photographs of their children. Beverly and Gracie just after she'd been born. A shot Felisa had snapped of Andrew and Allie together in a bassinet. A shot of Andrew standing next to a snowman, a shot following it of Allie toppling both the snowman and her brother. Allie astride her first horse. Andrew and Allie in a posted portrait, in fencing gear and holding their epees. Action shots taken during a few fencing tournaments. Andrew holding a three year old Gracie upside down, her small fists beating against his chest but her laughing face telling all she loved it. "Where did you get these?" Beverly asked.

"Allie," he said.

The doctor continued to look. Gracie dressed in her first fencing outfit. "When was this taken?" she asked. "I didn't know Gracie had started fencing."

"Yesterday," he said.

She looked over at him. "What? Isn't that a bit young?"

"I thought the same thing," he said. "But she was absolutely determined."

"Seems to be genetic," she said, closing the album. The rest of the pages were blank. As Allie had done earlier, Beverly traced the Picard name stamped into the leather of the front cover. "I'm sorry you missed everything," she said. "That you never got to hold them, see them take their first steps, hear their first words."

"Allie certainly learned to use her words well," he said.

Beverly turned to him. "Why, what did she say?"

He decided it didn't matter what he said, so he told her the conversation he'd had with Allie that afternoon, before Wesley and Andrew's fight.

The doctor shook her head. "If we have another one, it should be planned. Absolutely planned. No more surprises. I'm a doctor, accidents shouldn't happen." She smiled. "And that one could be a Picard before it was even born. I think being a Picard wouldn't be so bad."

He stared at her. "What?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll file the paperwork tomorrow to change my last name. Very easy."

The look he gave her crinkled his brow, annoyed. She was teasing him. If she was teasing, she was dancing again, and the game would continue. When Beverly saw the look, she leaned over and pulled him into a kiss. He returned it eagerly. She drew him down onto the couch and he soon forgot what was expected, forgot what he worried about in their conversation earlier. This conversation was easier. *This* he knew was right.

Chapter 19

Allie stood in front of her brother's bedroom door. "Come out," she said.

"No," came Andrew's reply.

Gracie sat coloring at the dining table. "Leave him in there," she said.

"No," Allie told her. Then she banged on Andrew's door. "Come out."

"No." Same tone, same answer.

"He'll just be mean if he comes out," said Gracie, now turning around to watch as Allie continued to bang on Andrew's door.

"Hush," Allie said. "Andrew, I'll keep knocking until you come out. And you know I'm not bluffing." She was going to get information out of him even if it killed the two of them. He'd fought with Wesley today and she wanted to know why. Wanted to know why Andrew refused to talk to anyone aside from daily pleasantries. Even those pleasantries were anything but pleasant. They'd been given the task to watch Gracie tonight while their mother had dinner with their father. Instead, Andrew had ensconced himself in his room and left Allie to be the responsible one. And Allie had grown tired of his bullshit.

The door opened and Andrew stood in front of her. Apparently he'd grown tired of her continual harassment. "What?" he said. That even tone, like he was nearly emotionless.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked.

He didn't say anything, just looked at her with those cold gray eyes.

She was going to chip away and break through that ice. "Why won't you talk to me?"

He looked at her.

Allie pushed him in the chest. "Say something."

"No." Even tone, eyes unchanging.

Some stranger had replaced her twin. Two days ago he'd been a warm, fun-loving guy. A great brother most of the time. Now he was worse than a Vulcan. She'd rather have a Vulcan at this point. She pushed him again. "Tell me."

"No."

“Is that all you can say?” There, an opening, something offered to him so he could at least joke around a bit. Make light of things, change the mood, go back to an old pattern. Anything but this. She wanted him to love her or hate her. Not ignore her and Gracie and everyone else like this.

And he looked at her. Nothing. Not a damn word. No humor in his eyes.

Allie decided she'd go for the jugular. “I know about your nightmares,” she whispered so that Gracie couldn't hear.

His eyes widened ever so slightly at the corners. A reaction. She'd gotten a reaction.

So she continued. “I know you dreamed about the Borg. About our father.”

Andrew's hands gripped the door frame, white knuckled, as if squeezing the bulkhead could stop Allie from talking, get her to go away, make everything disappear.

It didn't work. Allie could see she was breaking him, getting through that wall he'd built up. Could see it in his eyes, no longer cold, but with fear moving through them, anger racing through them. Could see panic playing its pipe in her brother's head as he reacted to its music on the realm of his face. His whole body was taught, a reflection of his white knuckled grip. A bow held at the end of its pull, vibrating. “Shut up,” he said, the volume not even reaching that of a whisper.

Allie reached out and snapped the tension, put her hand on her brother's shoulder. She felt the tremble, however small it was. “About you killing him,” she said so softly that she could barely hear it herself.

Andrew took a step back, making Allie's hand drop away from his chest. Then he reached for the panel to key his door shut. She grabbed his wrist before his fingers got to the panel. It was her turn. “No,” she said.

“Let go,” he said.

“No.”

His eyes met hers, the gray now entirely enveloped in panic. “Let me go,” he whispered.

She looked at him, saw the pleading. But she'd started to break through, had gotten emotions out of him, she wasn't going to stop now. “No,” she said.

He leaned forward. “I know you hate me,” he whispered.

Allie was so shocked at his words, that her brother could think that, that her hands went slack. The moment she let go, he brushed past her, stalked through the

living room and out the door. Watching the main door shut behind him, she wondered where he was going. Then she realized she didn't care.

"Told you," Gracie said from her spot at the table. "You should just ignore him."

Allie ignored Gracie's commentary and looked over at Conal, now sitting by the door Andrew had just gone through. The large dog seemed as perplexed as she did. Allie sighed, glanced at the chronometer. "Time for you to go to bed," she told Gracie.

Gracie made a face, but got down from the table anyway. As the little girl changed and washed up, Allie watched as she fought her sleepiness. She had to hold in laughter when Gracie tripped on the way to her bed and tried to pretend she hadn't. Once in the bed, Gracie seemed to remember where her parents were. "Mom and Papa are on a date?" she asked.

Allie smiled. "Yeah," she said. "Their first date."

Gracie yawned. "Maybe soon, Papa can tuck me into bed every night."

"I hope so," Allie said.

"I miss Andrew," Gracie mumbled, then she was asleep. *Me too.* Allie shook her head. The kid always dropped off so fast. Allie left her sister's room, keyed the door shut behind her, programmed it to open if anyone came within a certain proximity. She'd already programmed it to recognize Conal. Sighing, she sat down hard on the couch. Conal padded over from his post next to the door, laid his head in her lap. "I know," she said.

Conal snuffled.

Allie still wanted to know what had made her brothers fight like that. Wesley obviously had gotten through Andrew's walls more successfully than she had. Either that or it was equal, and it hadn't gotten to blows because Andrew wouldn't hit girls unless attacked. As she thought, she tapped her fingers on Conal's head. She felt the dog's eyebrows shift and looked down: he was glaring at her. "Sorry," she said, and rubbed his head. His tail thumped. Dogs were so easy. Unconditional love, given and gotten. She needed to talk to Wesley. "Computer," she said. "Location of Cadet Wesley Crusher."

"Wesley Crusher is in Shuttlebay Three."

She decided to go. Quickly, she instructed the computer to notify her in Shuttlebay Three if Gracie woke up. Finding that biosign monitoring program helped a great deal. "Keep an eye on Gracie," she told Conal and left in search of her older brother. Shuttlebay Three wasn't a restricted area, but it also wasn't generally an area people wandered to. The crewman standing outside the door gave her an odd look but

said nothing as she walked in. Wesley squatted next to what looked like a probe, an access panel popped open and his head stuck inside a hatch.

“Do they normally let folks just released from the brig into shuttlebays?” she asked when she’d stepped behind him.

Wesley jumped, smacking his head on an inside panel. He swore and pulled his head out. “That wasn’t nice,” he said. “Sneaking up on me like that.”

“You should’ve been paying more attention,” she said.

“It’s not like I expected visitors,” he said, tapping some notes into a PADD. Then he looked up at her suddenly. “How did you get in here?”

She shrugged. “Charm.”

Wesley snorted and stuck his head back into the access hatch while saying, “You don’t have any charm.”

Frowning, Allie walked over to the cadet and hauled him bodily from the hatch. “What did you say?” she asked.

“You’re the most charming person I ever met,” he said. “Can I go back to my work now?”

Allie pretended to dust off her older brother’s shoulders. “Of course.” She took a walk around the probe. “So what exactly are you doing, anyway?” The probe looked rather beat up. Scorch marks, gashes, dents. She heard Wesley mutter something from inside the hatch as she came back around to where he was. “What?” she asked.

The cadet came back out, added more notes to his PADD. “I said I was trying to decrypt the navigational systems for this probe. It’s the one Bok sent that carried the threat. If I can decrypt this thing, we can at least figure out where it was launched. It’ll help us track Bok, at least.”

The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. “Should I know who this guy is?”

Wes crossed his arms, a slight frown formed on his face. “You haven’t heard?”

“Obviously not.”

“Bok is a Ferengi, used to be a DaiMon. His son was on the Ferengi vessel involved in the Battle of Maxia. Bok blames Captain Picard for his son’s death. Six years ago, he set up some elaborate plan using the *Stargazer* and a mind-altering device to get the captain to destroy the *Enterprise* by reliving the battle. The plan didn’t work, Bok was arrested by Ferengi officials. Except now he’s gotten himself out of prison somehow. He sent this probe to project a message to Captain Picard that he’s going to

kill his son just like the captain killed Bok's son." Wesley looked at her, waiting for her reaction.

"Andrew."

"Yeah, Andrew," he said. "Anyway, Bok encrypted the nav system on this probe so we can't figure out where it came from. Like I told you, I'm trying to crack it. Wesley turned back to the hatch, now keying information into the control panel on the door.

Allie stood behind him, drumming her fingers on the probe's metal shell. She couldn't decide what to approach first. His fight with Andrew, her fight with Andrew, Andrew in general, Wesley's whole angsty bit lately, or her parents. She could start there, with Nana's journal. She decided on non sequitur. "My parents are on a date," she said.

"Fantastic," Wesley said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Is that sarcasm?"

"Actually, it wasn't," he said. Then he held a PADD over his head and back towards her. "Can you hold that?" he asked.

The floor was perfectly capable of holding the PADD. She told him so.

"I'm trying to get you to stop drumming your fingers." The cadet finally stood up and turned to face her. "Why exactly are you down here? Are you trying to pick a fight with me too? Because I won't fight you. I've heard you fight dirty."

"What made you fight with Andrew today?" she asked, her voice quiet and entirely different than the teasing earlier.

Wesley's face dropped, became sad. He sat down on the floor, leaned up against the probe, then patted the ground next to him so she'd sit down next to him. Allie did and waited for the explanation, watching her brother closely.

He sighed first, as if to give himself strength or relax. "I don't know, really," he said. Then he changed his mind. "No. I do. Part of it anyway. Andrew acts like he hates everyone." Another change of mind. "Shit, no, not that either. I thought it was hate, at least I did right before we ran into each other. But as I sat in that cell, after the captain came in and read us the riot act—which, by the way, he's exceptionally good at—I thought about how Andrew reacted to what Captain Picard told him. The entire time, Andrew didn't say a word. Nothing. Then he went to his bunk and completely ignored the captain. How weird is that? That's when I realized, it's exactly what he's doing. Ignoring everyone. I can't seem to figure out why."

Allie knew. "So he doesn't have to involve any emotions. So he doesn't have to deal with them."

Wesley gave her a puzzled look. “How do you think that?”

She shifted, the shuttlebay floor wasn't designed to be a chair. “Nana used to have this saying, I don't know if you ever heard it. She'd say, ‘Love me or hate me, but please don't ignore me.’” Allie chewed the inside of her cheek, trying to remember how Nana had worded it. She and Andrew had gotten into some fight over how one of Andrew's books had gotten lost. It'd been that book he absolutely loved, that universe book their mother had gotten him. Well, cousin, at the time. They had a huge argument in the kitchen. Allie got pissed because Andrew didn't believe she hadn't taken it or destroyed it or lost it and ended up throwing a platter at him to make him shut up. Nana got upset over the broken platter and had scolded Andrew. After that, he refused to speak to her, even acknowledge she was around. She'd let it go for one day, then Felisa had taken them both aside and explained her little aphorism.

Allie gave the explanation to Wesley. “When you love somebody, there's an emotional connection. With love, that's also a completely obvious thing. However, the same is true for hate. Even if you hate someone, there's still emotions involved, and fairly strong ones at that, on par with the intensity of love. When you ignore someone, you cut off emotional ties by pretending they don't exist. That's what Andrew is doing. He thinks that we must hate him, that he must be an awful person for what he dreamed about, so if he ignores us, it'll hurt him less.”

The cadet frowned. “Do you think it's working?”

Allie shook her head. “Not by the look on his face earlier today. I confronted him about it, told him I knew. Bit by bit, I told him, first that I knew about the nightmares, then the Borg, about our father. As I talked, you could see all the emotions he'd been sitting on racing across his face. First he was afraid, then he was pissed. Then he panicked. When I told him about him dreaming about killing our father, he bolted. Told me he knew I hated him and left.”

“Shit,” Wesley said.

She gave him an odd look.

“That was my fault,” the cadet said. “I'm an asshole. I told him that earlier, except I left it open ended. I told him ‘She hates you. She wishes you were dead.’ I figured it would bother him, get under his skin.”

Allie punched her older brother in the arm. “You *are* an asshole. Like it wasn't bad enough before.”

“I'm sorry.”

She sighed. “And you can't talk to him now. He'd just as soon punch you in the nose over taking a heartfelt apology.”

Wesley resumed his explanation from before. “So when I thought he hated everyone, I was mad at him because he was throwing away something good. I mean, he has this opportunity to have a family. Two sisters, both parents alive and well. And he was throwing it away by hurting everyone. Gracie adores him and he’s been awful to her. And then way he’s been with Mom and Captain Picard, he’s giving them more pain when he should be giving them sympathy.”

She smiled. “So you did read the journal.”

He nodded. “I did. I also threw it across the room.”

Allie gave him a sharp look. “You hate the idea of them being together that much?” she asked, not anger but sadness slipping into her tone.

“No,” he said. “I threw the book because I was frustrated with my mom for rejecting the captain over and over again. I had no idea he’d tried so many times to get her to see reason. I was frustrated with myself, too, because I was part of the reason she kept rejecting him. She didn’t want to hurt me and it ended up hurting her. Both of them.” He hit the side of the probe, a solid thud. “They should be together. We should be a family.”

“I think we are, technically, but well under the category of dysfunctional at the moment.” She hadn’t expected Wesley to come around this quickly and the depth of the emotion caught her off guard.

He laughed with a half smile. “Solidly under that category.” He looked up from the piece of floor he’d been studying as he talked. “What’s this about them being on a date?”

“Their first date,” she said, then grinned wickedly. “And if it went well, they could be started on another one of us *right now*.”

Wesley let out a yelp and covered his ears. “Stop! Stop right there. I said I’m okay with them being together but that is not an image I want in my head. Ever. *Ever*.”

She paid no mind to his agony. “Probably in his quarters—.”

He cut her off. “I wasn’t finished with my explanation.”

“I’ll have to remember that torture method to get information out of you in the future. It worked rather well.” She smiled in light of his glare.

His feet tapped a mindless pattern on the deck. “The other part of it has nothing to do with Andrew. Well, not entirely.”

“Does this have to do with you failing classes at the Academy?”

He nodded. “Maybe. I think I’m lost.”

“I can replicate you a compass.” That earned her another glare. It was nearly as fun as antagonizing Andrew when he was in a good mood.

“That isn’t what I meant and you know it.” The frown came back to his face. “I’ve always wanted to be a Starfleet officer, for as long as I can remember. Shaped my whole life around it. I’ve always done what everyone expected of me. Right before Mom and I came aboard the *Enterprise* for the first time, Andrew and I talked about it. He’s the only one that’s known how long I’ve been wondering if I’m doing the right thing. Told me it’d be good of me to figure out before I went to the Academy. I guess I should’ve taken his advice.”

Allie turned to study him. She’d seen pictures of Wesley’s father Jack. Knew how much Wesley looked like him, how much he stood out against the rest of his family, him with brown eyes and all of them with light eyes, him with chestnut hair, most of them with some shade of red, except for Allie. It had made her feel close to him, that she had dark hair as well. “Why do you want to be a Starfleet officer?” she asked. She knew the answer, at least his standard answer, that he was following in his father’s footsteps.

As he studied the floor, he quietly said, “I don’t know.”

“Maybe you need to figure out what the right thing is for you,” she whispered. He gave no answer. Allie saw that he needed to think and left him in the shuttlebay. She stayed deep in thought herself as she made her way back to her quarters. Wesley really had helped her in figuring out her twin, even if he didn’t realize he’d helped. After her confrontation with Andrew earlier, she also knew she couldn’t push that hard again. She’d have to be slow and steady with reminders. Using Nana’s aphorism whenever she could, try to get him to see exactly what he was doing.

Conal greeted her when she entered her family’s cabin. Allie checked on Gracie, the kid was completely out. Looked in her mother’s room. Empty. Allie smiled. “She’s not home yet,” she told the dog. “Could be good news.” The wolfhound licked her hand and wagged his tail a bit harder. Then he went over to Andrew’s door and scratched at it. Allie went over and let him in, the dog immediately jumping onto her brother’s bed. She went back out into the living area and settled herself on the sofa, book in hand. Her mother came in awhile later, treading quietly as soon as she got through the door. Allie smiled. *She must think I’m asleep.* “I’m not asleep,” she said, sitting up.

Beverly blushed.

Allie burst out laughing, smothering the sound into the pillow she grabbed so she wouldn’t wake up Gracie. When she finally got herself under control, she said, “Went well, huh?”

Her mother lifted an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “Yes. As a matter of fact, it did.” Despite the obvious flush of embarrassment, she managed to make her voice serious. “And your father told me what you told him this afternoon.”

Nonplussed, Allie said, "I hope you took my advice."

Beverly sighed. "You're impossible."

Allie grinned. "Nana always told me I was a lot like you."

"No wonder her hair went gray," the doctor said. "And you really should be in bed."

"I was just waiting up for you. I'm headed there now." Allie said goodnight, still smiling. At least something seemed to be going in the right direction.

Jean-Luc Picard heard a voice as he slept. "Picard, can you hear me?" The captain came fully awake, sitting up in his bed and seeing Bok standing in front of it. The voice had been no dream. The damn Ferengi had gotten onto his ship. Bok continued speaking. "I will kill him, Picard. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Without addressing the Ferengi, Picard slapped the comm panel close to his bed and said, "Security to captain's quarters!" When he turned back, Bok had disappeared. The captain slid out of bed and donned a uniform. When a Security team led by Lieutenant Worf showed up five minutes later, he was dressed. He explained to Worf what had occurred.

The Klingon glowered. Picard knew why—Bok had somehow defeated all of Worf's security measures. "Our shields were up," he said. "How could he have beamed through them?"

"I want you to assign a security detail to Andrew," he said.

"And yourself, sir?" Worf asked.

Picard sighed. "I'm not the target, Lieutenant. Andrew is."

"Computer," Worf said. "Current location of Andrew Howard."

"Andrew Howard is in the gymnasium."

The captain frowned. "He should be asleep in bed. Lieutenant, I'm going to go down there and tell him what's going on while you get that detail together."

Worf gave a curt nod. "Sir," and left to attend to his duties.

Picard followed, then went in the opposite direction. He had his own duties to attend to. He was going to have to try and connect with his son much sooner than he thought. As he walked down the corridor on Deck Twelve towards the gym, he wondered what the boy was doing up so late, and if Beverly knew he wasn't in their

quarters. When he entered the fencing area, he heard the repeated buzzing sound of someone practicing lunges on a target box. For a moment, he studied his son, the fluid movements of his lunge, each lunge nearly identical. The boy had broken a sweat, his reddish hair sticking up in odd directions from it, his breathing was sure and controlled. The captain understood why Andrew was here, working on a task familiar to him, a task that was all muscle memory. It got the body under control with something to do and left the mind free to wander and try and untangle whatever problem it had. He hated to interrupt, but it had to be done.

“Andrew,” he said.

The boy didn’t turn at first. He walked forward and shut off the target box, then turned around, eyebrows raised. His question entirely nonverbal, yet as effective as saying ‘what’ aloud.

“I have to tell you something,” Picard said.

Andrew picked up a towel from the bench, rubbed it on his hair to take off the excess sweat. “Which is?”

The captain realized that those were the first two words Andrew had spoken to him since...since Andrew had told him about his nightmares. “I’ve had Lieutenant Worf assign a security detail to you.”

“I don’t need a security detail. Is this about the fight? Because I don’t have any plans on fighting Wesley again. There’s no point in assigned a detail to me, I’m sure those officers have better things to do,” Andrew said evenly.

“This isn’t about the fight.”

Andrew dropped the towel on the bench, picked up a water bottle. As he unscrewed the cap, he asked, “Then what’s it about?”

“Someone’s made a threat against your life. His name is Bok, a Ferengi whose son was killed in the Battle of Maxia. He wants to take revenge on me by killing my son in return.” He waited for a reaction.

The boy drank some of the water, buying time to compose his thoughts. Then he set the bottle back down on the bench. “I should be safe enough on this ship. Why a detail?”

“Bok just appeared in my quarters. We’re investigating if it was him or an image of him, but while we’re unsure of which, precautions are being taken.” Something was different with the boy. Picard couldn’t place it.

Andrew nodded, saying nothing.

The captain decided to try something else. “Do you often fence in the middle of the night when you have insomnia?”

The boy looked down at the floor, then back up at Picard. “Not if you’re going to tell me that you often fence when you have insomnia.” His face went neutral again.

That was it. Just before Andrew had looked at the floor, he’d allowed emotion on his face. Then he’d realized it and broken eye contact, come up with something meant to push Picard as far away as possible. So it wouldn’t happen again. Picard decided he wouldn’t give ground. “I wasn’t going to say that. I was going to ask if you’d like to fence sometime, as long as it wasn’t in the middle of the ship’s night.”

The captain saw it. He would have missed it if he hadn’t been looking for it, if he weren’t so familiar with the process of masking himself. Surprise had registered, ever briefly, on Andrew’s face. Surprise at the rebuff not working at all. The surprise was followed by what seemed like frustration as Andrew spoke. “Look, Captain—.” He paused, brought his gaze directly onto Picard. A half smile as he shook his head, voice rising from the even tone he’d managed to keep so far. “Captain, Father, Dad, Papa, Jean-Luc...I don’t even know what to *call* you.”

“Whatever makes you feel comfortable,” Picard said. When the boy frowned, not fighting any of the emotions that hit him, Picard knew he’d reached him, even if it was only a chink in the boy’s armor. A start. It was a start.

“I don’t know what that is,” Andrew said. Discomfort came between them, as palpable as any physical blockade.

Not wanting to risk losing any of the ground he’d made with his son, Picard changed the subject. “The security team will be outside. I’d recommend you go back to your quarters before your mother wakes up and finds you gone.”

Andrew nodded, his brow furrowed. The captain turned to leave, deciding to let the boy be and think things out some more. That much, he understood. When emotions you’ve been sitting on for awhile start to come out, you needed time to sort yourself into control.

“The nightmares,” Andrew said behind him. “About being assimilated. They were nightmares because I was made to do things I’d rather die before doing.”

Picard turned around to face his son. Andrew’s hands worked over the grip of his epee, his voice the most unsure the captain had heard from him. His gray eyes were clouded with hurt and uncertainty. His son was offering him something and he wasn’t sure what it was.

Andrew bit his lip when he saw his father turn back to him. Then he continued. “And you had to live through that, without dying, but you must have felt like you died a thousand times over on the inside. It must have been very hard, afterwards.”

“Yes,” Picard said, surprised by how rough his voice was.

“Did my mother help you get through that?” Andrew’s question carried another layer of uncertainty, almost fear.

“As much as I let her,” Picard answered honestly. She had been able to help him only once he allowed her in, past his defenses. As he would only be able to help his son.

Andrew nodded. “I guess that’s how it is,” he said, this time with strength that had been missing before. Then the boy picked up the rest of his gear and strode into the locker area, out of Picard’s sight. His son had offered him a small insight, had shown Picard that he had indeed managed to create a crack in his armor.

Chapter 20

Snow drifted around him. Spun and danced on its way down, whispering its music against his body as it landed. Each flake had its brief life of beauty against the black material, individual and alone. Then others joined it, piling up, becoming a uniform white that he brushed onto the ground. A ground covered by the masses of snowflakes, a field of white, surrounded by white, everything around him, all that he saw. Even his eyelashes, where flakes perched delicately, claimed the white.

As he brushed away that first clump of snow, he noticed that he alone changed the landscape. Black, everything on him was black. He tried to peel it off, he stood out, black against the snow, and they would find him. It stuck to him, a second skin trying to become his only skin. The panic threatened to overtake him, scream out of him in frustration as his labors continued to be fruitless. He gave up and went to bury himself in the snow, cover himself entirely and blend in, a pocket of safety. The boy went to his knees and began to dig with bare fingers. First they hurt, turned red, then went numb. He scabbled and scraped but the snow refused to give up more than a few inches. Blind, whether by the snow or his fear, he ran.

Ten feet and he ran into the side of the house. Followed the wall until he came to the door. Stumbled inside and found his family. Found them on the floor of the living room, all in different positions of final repose. There was no blood on the floor or walls, no blood anywhere except around the wounds in their bodies. The fire crackled merrily in its hearth. It would either die on its own or rage out of control. He didn't care. His family were the lucky ones. They were already dead and nothing else could be taken from them.

The snow blew through the open front door, the wind nipping at the edges of the fire. Outside, they waited. A uniform of black and machine against the white, faces as pale as the snow they tread on, uniform in their being. Each of them starting unique then forced into a greater mass, one that transcended their individuality and made them one. He saw the red searching beam skitter across the door, the back wall, the splayed leg of his youngest sister, finally resting on his own face. He made contact with the eye next to the machinery of the beam, an eye that was once as human as his own.

"No," he said, his voice barely reaching above the volume of the cyborg feet crunching towards the house.

He became frantic, ran back towards the kitchen, snatched up the knife his grandmother had been using to cut up vegetables for the stew, before she had been thrown against the wall and had her neck broken. The knife clutched in hands pricked by needles of thawing, he ran back to the front room, back to a stream of drones pouring through the door.

"No," he said, his voice stronger than the thumps of heavy feet treading on the wooden floor.

Impassive, the Borg with the red beam with the familiar eyes told him, "Resistance is futile. You will service the Borg." He would be the last to enter the house, standing in the yard just outside the door. The boy pushed past the other drones, through their throngs, until he met the Borg outside. He would not go into the house. His hand had the feeling back, full of pain from the cold, it adjusted its grip on the handle. Then it found its mark, plunged into the chest of the Borg who had sought him out.

Drops of blood on the snow, bright red on the canvas of white.

The boy went to shout his joy, he had defeated him, but the body that collapsed in front of him stood out against the snow, against the canvas of Borg. The snow caught the body as the boy watched, a body dressed in the black and red uniform of a Starfleet officer. He'd killed him. No celebration, no joy would be forthcoming. The man once called Jean-Luc Picard lay in the snow. The sea of Borg surged forward and around the boy, cut off the view of his dead father. They moved to take him. "No," he said for the last time, his voice broken and cracked.

Andrew came awake suddenly, his eyes flicking open. He shivered, his body covered in clammy sweat, the sheet under him soaked. Slowly, he breathed in and out, brought his heartbeat under control, his breathing. Emotional control threatened to escape him as it had in his sleep. Throwing the covers aside, he slipped out of bed, paced the floor. Conal lifted his head from his dog bed in the corner. "I'm fine," Andrew told him. The dog put his head down, but kept his eyes open, as unbelieving as anyone else in his life. As unbelieving as his father seemed to be. His face burned with shame.

"Stay," he told Conal, then crept out of his room, over to the windows. Resting his forehead against the transparent aluminum, grateful for its slight cool, he remembered their conversation from only hours before. Looking at his father across the room, seeing those eyes full of life, so different from the nightmarish Borg, he knew he wanted his help. But the dreams he had, killing him again and again, the feel of the knife in his hands. Andrew lifted his head from the window, ran his fingers through his short cropped hair. That feeling, of being connected with the man he'd killed, the blade in the man's chest, the handle in his hand, was unspeakable. He shuddered, shook out his hand, trying to get the feeling to go away. The dreams set them apart from one another. He couldn't allow the man to be his father when he dreamed about killing him. The dreams had stopped for a long time, Andrew had thought them gone, himself redeemed. Then they had come back in the past few days, showing him that he wasn't worthy of the love extended by his father.

He saw it, in his eyes, had seen it last night. He'd almost broken, right then. Wanted to say, "Dad." But the words that came to mind reminded him of who he really was. *You can't be loved.* His mouth had replied with some crap line about not knowing what the comfortable answer would be. Picard had changed the subject and gone to leave and he was betrayed by his need for his father. Instead of pushing him away, he'd let him in, closer.

Andrew wanted to be like his sisters, accept him as his father, let him be a part of his life. Love him as he loved them. No, he already loved him, his father was a good man.

A good man you've killed over and over and over again.

Bright red drops on the snow. Witness to who he was, his patricide. Andrew cursed, glaring at the stars outside. He'd dreamed of this, of being on this ship, with Beverly as his mother. Now he had it and it hated him. It had been a *wish*, something that wasn't supposed to come true, that was the stuff of fairy tales and contrived stories of fate. Otherwise, people wouldn't know how to react when they found out they were some long lost son of a far away kingdom and they were really a prince and not who they thought they were. Or the son of a legendary Starfleet captain and a woman he'd always wanted to call Mom. Andrew cursed again, softly punching the transparent aluminum in front of him. It could have been his life if *she* hadn't taken it away from him. So many times he'd needed a parent, a mother, a father, someone he could talk to without reservation, who understood him and wouldn't hurt him. No matter how vulnerable he felt or how much of his true self he let them see.

Now he couldn't talk to either of them. His mother because he was too angry with her, she'd left him on purpose. His father because of what Andrew had done. That left his sisters, but they hated him too. Allie knew who he was now, he was sure of it. And he'd abandoned Gracie. Watching the two of them as they developed their relationship with their father, listening to them tell their mother they were changing their last name to Picard. They got to be Picards, they got to live their wish. He would be stuck as Andrew Howard, never being able to be Andrew Picard. Not being able to continue the direction his father had taken, away from the vineyard and into the stars, explorers.

Andrew moved away from the window, over to the terminal. He'd read all he could about Jean-Luc Picard, now the family history pulled at him. Something different from the Borg, to remind him of who the captain was. On the terminal, he called up immediate family. Robert Picard, older brother, Marie Picard, sister-in-law, Rene Picard, nephew. Then Andrew found his sisters, already entered in the database: Natalie Picard, daughter, Mary Grace Picard, daughter. Frowning, he punched past current family, going back farther. Veterans of World War II, French Army generals, vintners, astronomers, counts. The first Picards of La Barre, Madame de la Barre and Francois Picard. He looked at the family crest, granted to the first Picard count. The meanings of its contents were listed next to the graphic. The background of gold and blue meant generosity, truth, loyalty. The quartering of the shield's background stood for honor. Rampant lions of deathless courage. The staff crossing over the shield was from that first Picard, the first recognized to have faith and knowledge in his deeds. The stars signified that he was the first Picard to be granted a coat of arms.

He read as the rest of the night drifted by, following journeys of Picards who had chosen to leave the vineyards. One Sabine Picard had married a Spanish soldier by the name of Cristobal Maribona. Following the Spanish tradition of children receiving the surnames of both mother and father, their son was named Javier Maribona Picard. This

Picard, referred to using his father's name Maribona by the Spaniards, had followed his father's path and entered the Spanish Army. From there, he was sent to the Americas and assigned to Juan de Onate's expedition.

Andrew breathed in sharply. Onate had been the officer responsible for the massacre of the Acoma rebels in New Mexico in 1599. To exact revenge for his brother's death at the hands of the Indians, Captain Vincente de Zalvidar was sent by Onate to deal with the villagers. Zalvidar's revenge had been monstrous: six hundred villagers killed, six hundred captured, seventy warriors were killed one by one by being thrown off a rock 150 feet above the canyon floor. Of the remaining captives, each male over twenty five had a foot cut off. All were sent into servitude of the Spaniards. And Javier Maribona Picard had been Zalvidar's lieutenant.

He viciously thumbed the terminal off. He felt revolted and comforted at the same time: *at least I'm not the only one*. The door to his mother's room opened and she walked out into the living area, already dressed for the day.

"Good morning," Beverly said.

Andrew nodded.

For a moment, it looked as if she was going to try and say more. Instead, she went into Gracie's room and woke her up. The little girl came out of her room rubbing her eyes, hair tousled from sleep. Allie didn't come out until Gracie had finished washing up. Noticing her brother, Allie made a rude gesture behind her back before heading to the lavatory. Andrew held in a sigh. She'd done that either because she did hate him or she was trying to get him to be his normal self. He wanted to be. He really did.

But he couldn't. Not talking to them through breakfast as they chatted. Today they were going to the ship's school. Gracie was beside herself with excitement, constantly wiggling in her chair, unable to contain her energy. Andrew wanted to tease her, be the big brother he normally was, but he kept his quiet. As they got up from the table, it was Gracie who filled the silence. Allie sidled up to him next to the door, their mother had already left. His sister whispered in his ear, "Love me or hate me, but please don't ignore me."

He stared at her, teeth clenched. His twin took Gracie's and led her out the door. Allie wasn't fighting fair, bringing Nana into this. But then, neither was he.

Gracie didn't even look at him, not once. Andrew stood outside the door to their quarters, glaring at the two security officers assigned to guard him. He'd been wrong, his mother hadn't left yet, she waited outside the door, leaning against the wall across from it.

Waited till he made eye contact. "Be careful," she said.

He nodded, then started to the other 'lift. She caught him as he passed, put her hand on his shoulder. Andrew stopped, looked down at it, then back up at her. His hard eyes said it more harshly than any words. *Don't touch me.*

Beverly pulled her hand away. Then she bit her lip and walked quickly to the turbolift. He knew what that meant, his sisters did the same thing. Hell, he did. Bit their lip so they wouldn't cry. It was what he wanted, to have her hurt as much as he did. But all it did was make him feel worse, sharing the pain he had caused her in addition to his own.

"Aren't you supposed to be going to school?" one of the security officers asked.

"I suppose," he said and headed once again in the direction of the other turbolift for the deck. He'd studied the ship's schematics before he'd gone to bed the night before, wanting to figure out how to lose the security team and be left alone. There was a Jeffries tube hatch right outside the 'lift door. If the officers got distracted, he could jump into it and make his escape through the maze of tubes that provided access to the entire ship.

When they reached the 'lift, the officers made a mistake. The doors opened and they walked in before him. Andrew bolted off to the side and into the Jeffries tube. Shouts of dismay followed him. He took a quick left, another right, then went upwards. The shouts quieted to nothing. He stopped for a moment to gain his bearings. If he took the next tube to the left, it would connect him to a deck with a little used observation lounge. He took the left, then crawled slowly to the opening, listening for passers-by. Hearing nothing, he stuck his head out of the hatch and found himself hauled out of the tube by the strong arms of the Klingon security chief. When Worf adjusted his grip, Andrew shifted out of it, tried to bolt in the opposite direction, knowing he couldn't fight past a Klingon.

But Worf reached out and got him by the back of his shirt before he'd made even two steps. Andrew struggled and Worf ended up pinning him to the deck. Rage and frustration worked their way out of his brain and into his limbs as he tried to get out of the pin. Nothing worked. "I would ask that you stop struggling," Worf said, "As my duty is to keep you from harm and you might harm yourself if you do not stop."

He gave up. For now, he would have to do what was expected. He *really* needed to learn a martial art. "Okay," he said.

"You will not run if I allow you to stand up," Worf said.

Andrew wasn't sure if it was a question or a command. "Right," he said.

The Klingon let him go. Andrew turned around to face him, eyes hard.

Worf seemed to be studying him intensely, as if looking for something significant, but Andrew couldn't think of what it would be. "What?" Andrew said.

“You do have the heart of a warrior,” Worf said.

“What?” Andrew asked. The Klingon’s answer hadn’t cleared anything up.

“You are your father’s son,” Worf said, nodding resolutely to himself. “A warrior’s heart.”

Andrew remembered Klingon culture. Honor, warriors, battle. He crossed his arms and stared back at the security chief. “As if it were a question,” he said.

His comeback made Worf laugh, a sudden loud Klingon laugh. Andrew decided that he rather liked Worf.

“Yet you must go to school. I will escort you and remain with you for the rest of the day,” Worf said.

Andrew didn’t think he liked him quite that much. He was escorted down to the school deck, where Counselor Troi waited for him. “Hello, Andrew,” she said.

He nodded. “Hello.” Gave her nothing else. He knew what she was thinking, that he was entirely different than the boy she’d met a few days ago, and she wanted to speak with him about it. He didn’t intend to. It would mean revealing who he really was.

“Your class hasn’t started yet,” she said. “You can go on in.”

He held in another sigh and entered the room. Paid little attention as the teacher started droning about the subject, something Andrew couldn’t recall. History of some sort. He heard the teacher mention something about Texas—it would be History of the Americas. Andrew decided it would be better not to pay attention. He’d learned enough about the history of the Americas early that morning. Then he heard the name Onate. “You have to be kidding me,” Andrew muttered.

“You have something to share with us, Mr. Picard?” the teacher asked.

Andrew’s head jerked involuntarily, startled. That wasn’t his name, he hadn’t changed it. Only his sisters had changed theirs. They must have assumed he had as well. All of them were listed as Picard’s children, as well as Beverly’s. The teacher’s use of the captain’s name made the other students pay more attention to him as well, all of them looking at him, studying him, all because he was the captain’s son. He realized they were all waiting for an answer. “No,” he said.

“Then let’s keep quiet, shall we?” the teacher said. Andrew couldn’t remember his name, Troi had told him yesterday. The man’s salt and pepper hair flew in all directions, as if he hadn’t bothered to brush it after getting out of bed this morning. As he lectured, he got excited about the material, and his speed picked up while color rose into his cheeks. At least he was enthusiastic about his subject.

As he studied his teacher, Andrew realized he'd asked him a question. The man watched him expectantly, as did the eyes of his classmates. "What?" Andrew asked.

"I simply wanted to know if you know what the three G's of the western expansion are."

He really didn't want to participate. So he didn't answer, hoping the teacher would move to someone else and leave him alone.

He didn't. "You look perplexed, Mr. Picard," the teacher said.

Andrew stopped himself from frowning. He did *not* look perplexed, he'd kept his face neutral.

"All right, I'll give you the first two," he said. "Gold, God, and what?"

Glory. "Girls," Andrew answered, drawing laughs from his classmates.

Except the answer drew ire from his teachers. "Glory, Mr. Picard, glory. And you may take your glory outside of my classroom until you can take this material seriously."

Andrew stared at him. He couldn't be serious.

"Out with you," the teacher said. "I do mean it. I will call security if I must."

That would be a short trip for Worf, he's right outside the door. Deciding it wasn't worth it, he shot a final look of defiance at the teacher, then shrugged and left the classroom. As expected, Worf was right outside the door. "Your class is not over," he said.

"It is for me," he said.

The door behind them opened again and the teacher walked out, carrying a PADD. He handed it to Worf. "Lieutenant, I'd like you to bring this boy and this report to his parents."

Worf nodded. "I will."

"Good." The teacher went back into the classroom.

Worf looked down at Andrew.

"What?" he asked.

"You should be respectful of your instructors," the Klingon said.

"I was until he started asking me questions," Andrew answered. "And I didn't want to answer any."

The lieutenant said nothing as he studied Andrew again. Then he said, "I will escort you to sickbay so that your mother may address this matter."

No way he was going to have his mother deal with this. "I'd rather you brought this to my father."

"That is impossible," Worf said. "He is down on the planet conducting negotiations. I do not know when he will be back aboard the ship. Therefore, I have no choice but to bring you to Sickbay."

Suddenly he felt like being back in the classroom.

Beverly Crusher looked up from her terminal to see Deanna Troi strolling towards her office, her face partially hidden by the caduceus frosted onto the glass of the window. Deanna stuck her head through the door. "Mind if I come in for a visit?" she asked.

"I'm with a patient," Beverly said.

"Oh?" said Deanna, looking around. "Certainly a well-hidden patient."

"Invisible," the doctor said, eyes on her terminal.

"If you're with an invisible patient," Deanna said, seating herself in one of the chairs in front of Beverly's desk, "Then I'm just the person you need."

Beverly sighed and looked up.

Deanna leaned forward, her luminous eyes looking intently into the doctor's. "Help me to understand," he said.

Crusher raised an eyebrow. "Understand what?"

"I can't tell if you're happy or you're sad. You keep going back and forth between the two. It's quite distracting. So help me to understand why you can't decide how to feel?"

Beverly dropped her head into her hands, elbows propped on the desk. "Andrew won't speak to me," she said. "And I think Jean-Luc proposed last night."

"When did this happen?" came Deanna's shocked question.

Crusher decided she'd tease her friend, that way she wouldn't have to deal with the seriousness of either issue. "Well, Andrew really hasn't said much to me since he came back to the house with the others during the storm."

Troi placed her hand on the doctor's forearm. Her eyes were serious. "We'll talk about him in a bit," she said. Then her face brightened. "You *think* he proposed?"

Beverly sat back and told her friend what had happened the night before. When she left him the second time, she hadn't been able to make it to the turbolift. But she hadn't been able to turn around and go back, either. She'd stood there, trapped by fear and love, each wrestling for the upper hand, to move her in one direction or the other. She hadn't expected him to come after her. After all, he never had before. Each time, he'd given her the space she requested, backing away once she managed to say the right thing to drive him off. Now he was breaking the pattern. First, he had stayed on Caldos and in the house that night, not beaming to the ship at the first opportunity. And then he had come after her, found her in the corridor, told her exactly what his heart was telling him. That was the speech she repeated to her friend, word for word.

Troi sat back, blinking. "He proposed to you," she said. She grinned. "I'm guessing you told him how you felt?"

"I haven't given him an answer, if that's what you mean," Beverly replied.

"That wasn't what I meant, but it was a question I was going to ask," said Deanna. "What's your answer going to be?"

"I don't know," Beverly said.

Deanna frowned.

The doctor knew she wanted an explanation. "I mean, I do know. I just don't know when I'm going to tell him. And I have to talk it over with my children and that means one of them has to be speaking to me." She wanted them to know, wanted them to be prepared for the next change in their lives. With Jean-Luc living with them, maybe he could reach Andrew better, given more opportunity. He'd stopped by her quarters, late last night, to tell her about Bok's latest threat, about the security detail, about where Andrew was at that moment. How he thought he'd made some progress, however small, in helping Andrew. So badly this morning she wanted to hug him, reassure herself of his presence, reassure him that he was loved. But he kept himself away from her with his silence, with the distance he put between them, not even wanting the slightest touch from her.

"I can try to talk with him," Deanna said. "As ship's counselor."

Beverly knew she meant Andrew and not Jean-Luc. "I don't think he'd give much up," she said.

Troi nodded her agreement. "Everything is barely under the surface. His control is very fragile—." She stopped at a tapping on the glass.

The doctor saw Worf standing outside and motioned him in. Behind him walked Andrew. Beverly frowned.

“Andrew’s teacher instructed me to bring him here,” Worf said, handing Beverly the PADD he’d carried. “I will wait outside.”

Crusher nodded. Andrew didn’t look at Deanna as he sat down in one of the other chairs. He also didn’t make eye contact with Beverly. The doctor glanced over the PADD—he hadn’t even lasted an hour in the classroom. Beyond that, he’d been late in the first place because he’d manage to ditch security by going through a Jeffries tube when they weren’t looking, causing Worf to be assigned to him personally. She looked across the desk at him, studying him. He didn’t look up. That was a change. Before, he would challenge her with a glare or stare right back. She looked at his hair, remembering how light it got during the summer, the sun taking out the red, the winter bringing it back. She missed him. Beverly missed the son she’d had only a few days ago, when he didn’t know he was her son. He was there, lurking under this mask he’d constructed, caged. “Andrew,” she said.

Her son’s head snapped up, the challenge back in his gray eyes.

“Can you tell me what happened?” she asked.

Nothing, his face neutral.

She looked him in the eye and concentrated on what upset her. “You gave the Security officers the slip. What made you do that?”

Eyes like gunmetal.

Despite her growing frustration at being locked out of his thoughts, even locked out of his realm of acknowledgment of another living being, she kept her tone even, though intense. “Andrew, whether you like it or not, I’m your mother. Your safety is important to me. Your *life* is important to me.”

For a moment, she saw the anger slip into his eyes, then he blinked it away. He said nothing.

“You’re my son,” she said, not looking away.

This time, fear crept through, ranged across his face, a wave to anyone who was watching for it, as Beverly was.

She wouldn’t let go. This was too important. His determination at remaining closed off was putting his life in danger. Panic made his eyes flick away from hers, she sought them out and held them. “Andrew,” she said. “Please let me be your mother.”

Her son rose from his chair. “No,” he said, as quiet as the rustle of turning the page of a book. “You chose to leave me. You *chose* it. The captain deserves to be my parent more than you do. He didn’t chose not to be there. You made it that way.”

Beverly had no answer for him. She knew he was right.

“Can I go now?” he asked, his voice like sandpaper.

Sandpaper drawn expertly across an open wound. Looking at his eyes, she saw her own hurt mirrored in them, but her throat had closed up, unable to deal with all she wanted to say. So she said nothing at all.

And he left.

Chapter 21

Andrew walked out of his mother's office only to have Worf clamp a strong hand on his shoulder and steer him into the corridor just outside Sickbay. The Klingon then faced him fully, his look not angry, but perturbed. "When you are dealing with issues that are difficult for you to handle emotionally, you must tell the truth. You must continue to act as who you are and not seek to cause others the same difficulties you face. While you may not be ready to discuss them, nor want to, you have a duty to be up front with others. You have made a mistake."

"I know." Andrew couldn't bring himself to look at Worf. He knew when he heard the office doors close behind him that what he had done had been wrong. He wasn't angry. He was *afraid*.

Worf saw it. The hand came down again, but it was a different sort of grip. One meant to convey that he understood. "You are frightened."

Andrew nodded. Yes. He did need his mother, as he'd needed her when he was younger. Now he had the chance for her to be a part of his life, but he was afraid she would leave again.

"When people are threatened, even when warriors are threatened, they must close out what threatens them. What you use to close others out can be as sharp and dangerous as a *bat'leth*. It must be wielded with the same caution and knowledge as any weapon. A warrior cannot fight those battles outside himself when his own battle rages within. He must reach out to those whom he can trust. For many, that is family. When you cannot bring yourself to trust them with that you hold closest to you, you must explain that you will speak about it when you are ready. You must seek to maintain who you are on the outside while you decide who you are on the inside. You must not cut others with the weapon formed of your own discord," Worf said.

"I didn't realize Klingons had that sort of philosophy," Andrew said, surprise evident in his tone.

Worf drew himself up to his full height. "A warrior must be clear in his thoughts in order to be a great. Many do not know this about Klingons. It can be seen as a vulnerability. It is not. It is only vulnerability when it controls you." He leaned down again. "You must apologize for your misdeed."

"Now?"

The security chief nodded. "The longer you let it go, the more it will fester. It will bring inner conflict with you and your mother. This is a time when you need those bonds of family in order to resolve your own difficulties."

"You're right," Andrew said.

Worf nodded again. "Of course I am."

Andrew looked up at him, curious. "You sure you aren't running for ship's counselor?"

Worf's mouth contorted into a look of disgust. "This is the sort of thing you discuss with warriors and those with whom you are close. With family and bonded friends."

"You've only known me for a day."

"As I said, you are your father's son. You are also your mother's son. They are two of my closest comrades. Two whom I would trust with my life. As a warrior, one must be a good judge of character. You have honor, but you have hidden it. You must find it again. I will wait here."

It was Worf's way of ordering him to go back inside and apologize. He remembered the counselor was in his mother's office. In his anger, he'd completely forgotten her presence. She would hear this, too. Andrew stepped through the doors, went back over to his mother's office, tapped on the glass. The two women looked up, unable to hide the shock that took to their faces. Deanna motioned him inside. Andrew went in, looked first at the counselor, then at his mother, now seated next to the counselor, closest to the door. Studied her eyes, saw in the blue of them what he had caused, what plagued him on the inside. She shouldn't have it too. "I'm sorry," he said, surprised at how quiet his voice was. "I was wrong."

Beverly shook her head. "No, you were right. I did choose to leave you."

"I wasn't right in the way I meant it," he said. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me, or Allie or Gracie. You did it to save everyone pain and took on all the hurt on your own. What you heard from me was something else. I'm not ready to talk about it yet, but I'm ready to at least be myself to everyone."

The doctor stood up, put her hand out as she'd done that morning, then drew it back suddenly, expecting him to reject her touch. She didn't deserve that, he knew. So he reached out with his own arms and hugged her firmly. "You are my mother," he said quietly, roughly. "It's about time I let you be."

He felt her arms tighten around him. "Thank you," she said, her tone as rough as his, the sound of walls torn apart. Then she stepped back, hand gripping his shoulders. How she looked at him hadn't changed, it was how he looked at her. And the pain was nearly gone from her eyes, most of the hurt he had caused.

Andrew felt a bit uncomfortable now, not ready to allow any more walls to be dismantled yet. "I need to go," he said.

She nodded, she understood. When he left, he saw her biting her lip, different from the morning. It was the release of something she'd held inside, eating away at her. It would eat away no longer.

Worf gave him a nod of approval when Andrew exited Sickbay. "You have done the right thing," he said. "I would like to teach you how to wield a *bat'leth*, the weapon of the Klingon warrior. It is more," his mouth twisting in disgust again, "effective than your current knowledge."

Andrew glared at him. "Are you insulting my sport?"

"No. I am merely pointing out its practical flaws."

Andrew crossed his arms. He did want to learn the *bat'leth* and the *mok'bara* that came with that training. However, he didn't want to allow his sport to be insulted as it had. "I'll try your sport if you'll try mine."

"The training with a *bat'leth* is not a sport," came Worf's indignant reply.

"I don't care what you call it, I'm still challenging you." Andrew held the Klingon's gaze, showing him the determination in his own eyes.

"I will...accept your challenge," Worf said. "But we start with mine. Now."

"Agreed." Andrew followed the security chief.

Captain Picard massaged his temples in an effort to concentrate more closely on the task at hand. He thought better of it. He was concentrating, but so hard that everything had turned into one unintelligible mass of words, specs, and diagrams. Geordi and Data had come up with some theories about how Bok was managing to get himself on the *Enterprise* without detection. Yet making sense of what exactly the two of them were trying to describe by coining new words and phrases was growing difficult. The captain rose from his chair, went to the replicator. "Tea. Earl Grey. Hot." The cup materialized and he removed it from the slot. When he turned back to his desk, he found Bok sitting in his chair. Oddly, he wished it were Q sitting there, rather than Bok. The gravity of the situation became more apparent with the thought of preferring Q over anyone.

"If you want me to stay and talk, you'd better not call for Security this time," Bok said, steepling his hands in front of him.

Picard disliked how cozy Bok had made himself in *his* chair. But he wanted more information. He made no move to call.

"How do you like your boy, Picard?" Bok asked, the mocking smile revealing his sharp, pointed teeth. "Is he everything you'd always hoped for?"

The captain frowned. *Yes, he is.* But that wasn't something he would tell this Ferengi. "It's a risky game you're playing, coming here. Next time, we'll be ready for you. Why don't we settle this now?"

Bok sat back in the chair. "How do you propose to do that, Picard? You murdered my son."

"It was in self defense. He fired on my ship."

Bok stood, his voice growing shrill. "You were in Ferengi space!"

Once again, Picard wished that Bok's son had told him so in the first place. "I wish he had told me so. I would have withdrawn." Bok's eyes were disbelieving. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do to bring him back," Picard said.

The Ferengi put his hand over his heart. "How touching. But your apology is worthless to me. I demand that you repay me for my loss."

He would not give up his son. He wouldn't allow Bok to take him away when he'd just found him. "You can't put a price on life."

Those jutting, pointed teeth came out in a sinister smile. "Oh, but you can. You can pay me with your son's life."

"No," Picard said, the fear creeping into his tone in spite of his efforts to hide it.

Bok heard it. "I'm afraid you don't have any choice," he said. "I insist on being paid." He pushed at a device on his wrist and disappeared in a transporter effect Picard had never seen. The captain leapt to try and stop him, but found himself landing on his empty chair.

Picard summoned Geordi and Data to his ready room. When the commanders entered, he apprised them of the situation. The two set to work, Geordi scanning the room with the same scanner he'd used in Picard's quarters. Data walked about waving a tricorder. The captain paced, his tea long forgotten, his mind on how to protect his son. Worf had sent him reports of the day as soon as he'd beamed back to the ship. The boy had managed to give the security officers the slip only to be found by Worf. The security chief had to reassign himself to Andrew to keep him from escaping again. They couldn't seem to get the boy to understand that his unwillingness to stay with the security detail put his life in danger. Danger that Picard wasn't sure he could stop anymore. The notion formed a cold stone of fear in his stomach. He couldn't lose him. He and Beverly couldn't lose him.

Geordi spoke up. "Captain, I think we've found something."

Picard looked up. Data and Geordi were standing next to his chair, not even two feet from the captain. In his thoughts, he hadn't even noticed how close they were. Not heard their movements. "What is it?" Picard asked.

Data motioned towards the chair. "Bok was in direct contact with this chair for an extended period. It is showing a distinctive subspace signature as a result."

Geordi took his cue to explain the finding. "We think he's using some sort of subspace transporter to beam aboard the *Enterprise*."

The Federation and Starfleet had researched subspace transport for some time before discarding it. "My understanding is that such devices are impractical," he said to Geordi and Data.

Data answered. "The Federation abandoned its research in the field because the technology was found to be unreliable as well as extremely energy intensive."

"In order to transport matter through subspace, you have to put it into a state of quantum flux. It's very unstable," said La Forge. "The quantum effect would explain why our sensors are unable to detect Bok's presence as well as why he was able to penetrate our shields."

Picard scowled. Bok was using dangerous technology. He would stop at nothing to gain his revenge, even if it meant his own death. With that sort of outlook, Bok hadn't just changed the rules, he'd ditched them entirely. "What kind of range would these transporters have?" Picard wanted to hear *the range is ridiculously small and he must be within our immediate sensor range. In fact, we've already found him and he's awaiting your presence in the brig.*

Instead, Data said, "In theory, it could operate over several light years."

The captain fought the urge to glare at his second officer. It wasn't Data's fault the news wasn't good. But this was one of those times when Picard wanted Data to not sound so...cheerful.

"If Bok uses his transporter again, we may be able to trace the subspace signature and locate his ship," Data continued.

"Is there a way to keep him from beaming aboard the *Enterprise*?" the captain asked. The question had to be asked, even though he knew the answer would be less appealing than Data's previous one.

Geordi answered this time, his tone appropriately somber. "I don't think there is."

The stone grew into a boulder, threatening to take over the entirety of his insides. He could not let the fear control him. "If he has the ability to beam aboard, he might be able to beam someone away."

"It is a possibility," Data said, still sounding a bit too cheerful to Picard.

He turned to Geordi. "Is there any way we can protect him?"

La Forge shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I will get a team together and continue to work on this. Perhaps we can figure something out when we look at it more closely. Especially since we know what he's using now."

The captain gave him a curt nod. "Make it so." He watched his two officers leave. Glanced over at his chair. Felt like it needed to be sterilized after that damn Ferengi had seated himself in it. Glaring at his chair, Picard knew helplessness was treading just beyond his mind. He wasn't helpless yet, but he was starting to feel that way. This development with Bok added onto the negotiations planetside. The colonists didn't want to leave. He didn't blame them in the least, he wouldn't want to either. The entire affair sat wrong with him but he had his duty to fulfill. A duty that couldn't be interfered with by the threats to his son.

But that was a duty as well. His duty as a father to protect his son. To be a father to him. He wasn't sure how he could do it. The boy had offered him something the last time they'd talked, shown him part of what he hid beneath those granite walls of his obstinacy. What had he said when Picard told him about Beverly helping only as much as he'd let her? *"I guess that's how it is."* Andrew had let him help last night, even if only a small amount. Time was too short to go in such small bursts. Picard closed his eyes. He could lose him and never have truly known him.

Before he knew he'd made the decision, his feet carried him out of the ready room and to the bridge. His mouth told his first officer he had the conn and then Picard was in the turbolift. Then he realized he didn't know where Andrew was. "Computer, location of Andrew Howard."

"Andrew Howard is not in the ship's directory," the computer replied.

What the hell? "Computer, location of Lieutenant Worf." If Andrew had been harmed, Worf would have notified him.

"Lieutenant Worf is in Holodeck Five."

"Deck Ten," Picard commanded the turbolift. As the 'lift moved, he mulled over the reports from that morning. Not only had the boy earned himself the security chief as a veritable body guard, he'd also gotten asked to leave the classroom at the school. Nearly nothing like the boy he'd met at the fencing tournament on Caldos, in Felisa's home. The 'lift stopped and Picard strode quickly towards the holodeck. He checked the panel for the running program: Worf's calisthenics. Frowning, the captain entered.

Worf heard the door open and said, "Computer, freeze program."

None of the ghouls Worf usually fought were present. Only Worf and Andrew.

"Lieutenant," Picard said. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

“Certainly,” Worf said and stepped forward. Andrew wandered a bit up a hill, *bat’leth* in hand.

“Should I be asking you why my son is now wielding a *bat’leth*? Picard asked.

“Sir,” said Worf, coming to near attention. “He issued me a challenge. He would learn my art if I would learn his. Due to his actions today, I felt that he should learn a martial art. Captain, he *does* have the heart of a warrior. I saw it today.”

“Because he lost your security team?” Picard asked. He couldn’t see how that would be worthy of Worf’s praise. Actually, he could. It would take a bit of talent to so quickly escape the eyes of Security.

“No,” said Worf. “He made a mistake. I informed him that he had done so. He admitted to the mistake, then went back and made amends for it immediately. That is honor.”

Picard lifted an eyebrow. “Lieutenant, I understand it being honorable, but how would that become a warrior?”

“Any man who would turn back and face Dr. Crusher after having angered her would have the heart of a warrior.”

The captain couldn’t argue with that. It was true. He’d had enough arguments with Beverly over aspects of the Prime Directive to know her anger was not something to toy with. “Yes,” Picard said to Worf. “That is entirely accurate. However, there is the matter of why I came down here. Bok appeared in my Ready Room not long ago. Geordi and Data have figured out he is using some sort of subspace transporter, undetectable to use and able to penetrate our shields.”

It was Worf’s turn to scowl. “If he can beam in, he can beam someone out.”

“Exactly what I said, Lieutenant. And there is no way to counter that tactic if he uses it.”

“That is unacceptable,” said Worf. “That places Andrew in great danger.”

Picard nodded. “Of that, I’m well aware.”

Worf held his weapon as his side. “Captain, you must speak with him.” The Klingon lowered his voice. “If anything happens, you would only have this time with him. You must be able to remember him as your son. He must enter *Sto-Vo-Kor* knowing you truly as his father.”

The lieutenant’s words registered with Picard, but he wasn’t looking at Worf, he was watching Andrew as he walked back down the hill. The Klingon weapon he held in his hand seemed already a part of his arm, as if it were instinctive for him to wield that weapon. Worf’s gaze followed the captain’s, saw the boy.

“He is a natural warrior,” Worf said, approval filling his voice.

“I’m sure his mother will be pleased,” Picard muttered. He decided he would let Worf tell Beverly about Andrew’s new hobby. The captain had enough to deal with. He certainly didn’t want the ship’s chief medical officer chasing him down the corridor with a *bat’leth* of her own.

“Speaking of,” Worf said. “Have you given any thought to my words?”

Picard knew he meant Beverly. “I have asked, but she has not given an answer.” He wondered how long it would take. Now that he’d gotten the actual words out, the idea had become something that he dearly wanted. After his experience as Kamin, he sorely missed having a family, people to come home to, people who knew him as who he was and not as a starship captain.

“She will answer in the affirmative,” Worf said.

The captain looked at Worf, startled at how certain the Klingon was. “How can you be so sure?” he asked him.

“Because I am,” said Worf. “I will wait outside” And he left the holodeck, leaving Picard staring after him in amazement. Never underestimate a Klingon, a wonderful and complex people as a whole. His security chief being one of the most complex people he’d ever known.

The captain turned find to his son, who’d finished walking back down the hill and had found a rock outcropping to sit on, *bat’leth* now driven into the ground and standing upright nearby. Picard picked his way up the hill, onto the outcropping, sat next to Andrew. “You could have talked to me from down there,” Andrew said.

“I’ve never made it past the valley in this program,” Picard replied. “All of Worf’s demons stood in the way. I came to tell you that we’ve found a way to trace Bok’s ship,” he said. Then he motioned towards the door, where Worf had gone. “This could all be over soon and you won’t have a security detail staying with you all the time.”

Andrew nodded, his face grave. “You should probably tell my mother,” he said. “She’s been worried.” Concern laced the boy’s voice as he studied the ground below, not looking at his father.

“I will,” Picard replied. In the strange light from the sky of Worf’s demon spawning world, Andrew’s hair seemed more red, more like Beverly’s than the fair hair that Picards tended to have as children. “You’ve spoken to her?” he asked.

“Worf told you something, didn’t he?” Andrew asked.

“He told me that you went back and faced her after making her angry,” Picard said. “And that meant you have a heart of a warrior.”

The captain saw the boy's lips part in a brief smile. "I hadn't thought of that. She does get awfully scary when she's pissed. But it was either face her or continue to face Worf and I can't figure out which one of them is more scary when they're mad."

"I'd call it a draw," the captain said.

Andrew said nothing and the silence fell between them, the first pebbles of another stone wall.

The captain decided to lay everything out, tell him exactly what he was thinking. Worf's words had shaken him deeply, the stark reality that Bok could succeed and Andrew could be killed before he told him how he felt as his father. "My father and I were estranged, he thought I should stay home and tend the vineyards and I wanted to join Starfleet. He died before we could come to terms about it, and I've regretted that all my life." He paused, taking a breath. "I don't want the same thing to happen to us."

When Andrew still kept quiet, his heels stopped kicking the rock behind them, Picard thought he'd made a mistake. The boy was already afraid and now Picard had scared him even further in his efforts to reach him. In trying to help him feel safe, he'd made things worse. Minutes passed, Picard waiting for his son to say something, anything. When he didn't, the captain decided he should go update Beverly and stop scaring his son. He put his hands behind him on the rock and started to push himself up.

And Andrew started to speak, no louder than a whisper, sounding like a shout to Picard after so long a silence. "When I was little, my mother gave me a book, an old one. The book was about the Terran system, all that they knew in the twentieth century, anyway. It was my favorite book. It got lost and I blamed my sister. We had this fight, in the kitchen, and she threw Nana's favorite platter at me. It hit the cupboard next to me and shattered, the pieces flying everywhere. Nana got mad at me for it, I got sent to my room after she finished giving me a lecture about having more respect for things. Then I got mad at her, because if she meant what she said about respecting things, then she would've cared about my book." The boy frowned, his eyes on the ground below. "It hurt because it felt like she didn't care, so I stopped talking to her. Didn't even act like she was around, like she didn't exist. Lasted for about a day and by bedtime the next night, she took me aside. Seemed to get another idea, got Allie too. She said to me..." he trailed off, taking a breath. Rubbed his hands together as if he were cold. "Love me or hate me, but please don't ignore me."

Andrew looked over at his father, resting his palms on the rock underneath him.

Picard didn't know what to do. He knew he had to be Andrew's father now, but he didn't know how. "How can I be a father to you?" he asked. Maybe Andrew knew, had some idea.

"You can't," Andrew said. He sighed, looked up at the strange cloud cover, squinting as he studied it. "I can tell that somehow, you love me. I think it's because you

look at me the way you do my sisters. But you can't. If you want some kind of connection with me, then you have to hate me. And I promise not to ignore you."

"I won't do that," Picard said. "That, if anything, is not being your father."

"You wouldn't want to be," Andrew said, taking his eyes off the clouds, right at Picard. "You died in my nightmares and I wished for it."

"I know." The captain held Andrew's eyes. "I wished for it myself, even after I was brought back, after all the bits of machinery they put in me were taken out, I remembered. I remembered watching every ship destroyed, every life taken. You were right, I died a thousand times over. So I know." Paused, made sure Andrew was stilling looking at him. "And I still want to be a father to you."

Andrew stood up. "No you don't. You don't know, you don't understand. I killed you, even last night in my dream, I killed you. Your blood was bright red on the snow. I don't deserve it, for you to be my father. And now you know why."

The captain realized it was the first time he'd heard Andrew raise his voice. The walls had fallen with the boy standing above him, trembling, his jaw working. The shattered pieces of his protection scattered around them as real as the rock below them. Picard stood up, put his hands firmly on his son's shoulders, looked him in the eyes. Eyes so familiar, ones his saw every morning, but different in what reflected back. The boy's vulnerability leapt out of his gray eyes now, nothing holding it back, he was in absolute fear. One wrong word would bring iron doors securely shut between them, doors that could take years to break. "I know," Picard said, the quiet intensity of his tone no less meaningful than Andrew's raised one. "I've known. You can't be held responsible for your nightmares. You're only responsible for what you do with them after you wake up. So, you see, it doesn't change anything. You're my son and like it or not, I'm your father. It means something. It means I won't hate you. It means I won't ignore you. It means I love you and no matter how many times you try to chase me away, I won't leave. I won't give up."

The boy's trembling continued, his eyes clouding over, matching the sky above. The captain went with his instinct, pulled the boy closer, into his arms. At first Andrew went rigid, as if had no idea what to do. Then his arms came up, returning the hug as firmly as it was given. "I'm sorry," Andrew whispered, his words catching as they came out. "I'm sorry, Dad."

Picard knew Andrew was crying. He needed it, as badly as anyone, letting everything that had been eroding his inner self to escape. "It's okay," he replied. The warmth he'd felt, of being with his daughters, came back to him now, being with his son. The son who finally claimed him as his father.

After a few moments, Andrew stepped back, looking sheepish. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Sorry," he said, referring to the tears. "At least Worf wasn't here."

"I imagine Klingons view tears as warrior like expressions of profound emotion," Picard said, knowing lightheartedness was what they both needed now.

Andrew smiled at the comment, wiping at his face. "Somehow, I wouldn't be surprised." He looked over at Picard again. "The book I told you about, it had this artist's conception of what a Mars sunset would look like. Allie gave me a photograph from the twenty first century around when I originally got that book. The date of the book and the date of the photograph were only fifteen years apart. I always wondered what it must have been like, to be a child with only an artist's conception of sunset on another planet, to being a young adult, and seeing it in an actual photograph. I wondered if it was how I felt, about wanting to go out there and see more sunsets from planets we've never been on. When you were little, and you looked at those constellations, was that how you felt?"

"Yes, exactly." He knew that feeling exactly, had known it from his earliest memories.

Andrew smiled again. "I guess it *is* more than physical features that are heritable," he said. His eyes flicked upwards towards Picard's head. "Though I'm suddenly worried about my hairline."

Picard laughed, then remembered how the computer hadn't found him. "Do you know anything about why the computer can't find you in its directory?"

Andrew jumped down off the rock, heading towards the door, tossing his answer over his shoulder. "Did you ask for Andrew Picard?"

The captain, who'd been following Andrew, came to a dead stop. "You changed your name?" he asked.

The boy glanced back at Picard. "Well, not exactly. The school entered the wrong name in the computer, the regular ship manifest updated from that new log, and I never bothered to correct it." Andrew walked through the opening door.

Shaking his head, Picard followed, finding Andrew just outside talking with Worf. Smiling. He felt good, seeing his son smile. It had been a long time.

Andrew looked away from the lieutenant. "Personally, I can't wait to see Worf in fencing whites," he said to the captain. "What do you think, Dad?"

Picard did his best to seriously imagine the large Klingon in fencing gear. Tried to think of a mask that would fit him, wondered how much programming it would take to make a properly fitting mask. Of how odd a foil would look in the Klingon's hand. Of all the comments Worf would make as he tried to learn the sport, comments of dislike, Klingon swearing, all while wearing whites. He couldn't help himself and chuckled.

Worf glared at the captain.

“I’d love to be there for his first lesson,” Picard said. Before Worf could get court martialled for maiming his captain, Picard excused himself to the bridge. The urgency of the prior turbolift ride had disappeared. He and Andrew were okay. They would be okay.

He entered his Ready Room and was confronted by his own empty desk chair. Briefly, he saw Bok there, his own fears playing mind games. He heard him again. *“You can pay me with your son’s life.”* And he was helpless to stop him from exacting that price.

Chapter 22

Beverly Crusher returned to her quarters to find them empty aside from the wolfhound who greeted her enthusiastically. Living with three children, she'd expected at least one of them to be home. She smiled. *Home*. The doctor wandered around their quarters, taking in the signs of the new environment they provided. Gracie had attached a few pictures she'd drawn and painted on the wall next to her door. At first she'd been upset at the retracting doors, how their recessing into the walls made it impossible for her to put her pictures on the door itself. They'd compromised on the wall. Beverly studied the pictures, one was obviously on Caldos, dots indicating snow falling, people she'd drawn representing her family. The most impressive part was the quality of Gracie's sketching. Her daughter was only five and each person looked like who they were supposed to be. Maybe Gracie would be an artist.

The drawing included each of them, Beverly in her blue and black uniform, Jean-Luc in his red and black. Gracie had even gotten the different shades of red between Beverly, herself, and Andrew. The doctor's own copper, Gracie's darker auburn that showed genes she'd inherited from her father, Andrew's reddish blond. Then Allie and her dark hair, Wesley and the chestnut. Gracie had included all of them, despite all of the problems lately between Andrew and Gracie, Andrew and everyone. But Andrew's actions earlier had surprised her. He'd come back, come back and apologized and meant it. Wanted her to be his mother.

After he'd left, Deanna had explained how frightened he was, how he wasn't certain that Beverly would always be there now. Fear of abandonment, that's what the counselor had called it. It would take time and patience, trust and love on both sides to help him overcome that fear. But they could do it. They were both too stubborn to give up. She'd let some of her tears fall in her office with Troi, yet they weren't sadness, exactly. Happiness, almost, that she had her son. Patched up the difficulty between them with much more healing to do. A start.

Then there was Wesley, not talking to her about what else was bothering him, getting into that argument with Geordi, of all people. She needed to—.

The chime sounded. "Come in," she said, turning towards the door.

Jean-Luc walked through. At her surprised look, he said, "Have you forgotten about the reception?"

Yes, she most certainly had. "When is it?"

"We have half an hour," he replied, giving Conal an affectionate rub on the head. Satisfied with the greeting, the dog went and settled himself in a corner.

Beverly lifted an eyebrow. "You're here awfully early, then, aren't you?"

“I wanted to talk about everything that’s going on,” he said. “And I knew the children weren’t here.”

“At least you know,” she replied. “Where are they?”

“Fencing,” he said, offering no other explanation.

“Each other?” They could be trying to kill one another. While she knew the sport of fencing didn’t involve actual killing, she wouldn’t put it beyond any of them to do their very best to run their sibling through if they were angry at them.

“I imagine,” the captain replied, hint of a smile on his face.

Beverly put her hands on her hips. The man was hiding something. “You know something I don’t, don’t you?”

The hint of smile caught in his eyes, making them shine. “I know a lot of things that you don’t.”

“I know more,” she tossed back, heading towards her room to change into a fresh uniform. In fact, she knew what her answer would be and he had no idea. She would tell him, but hadn’t decided when. Perhaps today. Maybe during the reception, where he would struggle to keep his reaction in check. Could be fun to watch, him desperately trying to keep that captain’s mask and hide his joy from his crew.

He followed her. “I had a conversation with Andrew on the holodeck earlier. He wanted me to hate him, though he’d rather I love him, because he thought he didn’t deserve it. Told me that at least with hate, there was still a connection there, emotions involved. ‘Love me or hate me, but please don’t ignore me,’ he said.”

Beverly’s hand paused in the air in its movement from the closet to the bed, uniform in its grasp. “Nana used to say that,” she said.

“Yes, he told me. I had no idea what to do,” he said.

She waited. She knew him, he was gathering his thoughts into order so he could express them in the way he thought would be best. This could go either way for him, this pause. At times, when he went with his instincts, amazing words could flow from him, ones that seared the soul. Like what he’d told about her marrying Jack. Like his proposal, done obviously entirely by accident, yet exactly the right thing to say. Other times, it was this thought process that brought about eloquence and a precise expression of what he felt.

“I told him I knew what he’d done in his nightmares,” Picard said, roughness along the edges of his tone. “That I loved him and no matter what he did to try and make me stop being his father, I wouldn’t give up. And for a few moments, he just stood there in front of me, trembling.”

Beverly imagined Andrew had looked much as Jean-Luc did now, absolutely vulnerable, absolutely touched by the honesty. She went to him, took his hands as he continued, his gray eyes locked on her blue.

“This instinct, it must be something innate about being a father, I don’t know. It just kicked in, and I reached out and hugged him. Then he hugged me back, almost clinging to me, as if I were keeping him alive. He was crying. Told me he was sorry.”

The doctor leaned into him, kissed away the few tears that had spilled as he told his story. Wrapped her arms around him, letting him know she would be as protective of his vulnerability as he had been with their son’s.

“He called me Dad,” Picard whispered.

She smiled. “How about that,” she said, stepping back so she could kiss him. He returned her kiss until she smiled again. “Hey, you’re not so bad at this,” she told him.

The smile he gave her was sheepish, an interesting new look for the starship captain. “Thank you.”

The doctor changed, talking to Jean-Luc all the while, well aware that he was watching closely. “And you never finished explaining what our children are doing,” she said, pulling the uniform up. As she zipped the back, she turned to the captain. “Well?”

A slight blush graced his cheeks. “Sorry, I was distracted.”

“I’m sure you were,” she said, an impish glint in her eyes. She went to the lavatory to double check her hair, leaving the door open.

“Andrew and I came back here, he wanted to show me a photograph. Allie and Gracie came home and Andrew actually apologized to them. They both took it well, as you can just tell that Andrew’s back to his normal self for the most part. He’s still holding something back, but I think it has to do with you.”

“It does,” she said, coming out of the lavatory.

He nodded. “I thought so. What happened?”

She sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed, and told him what had happened. What Andrew had told her first, how he left, then how he came back and explained himself, explained that he would talk about everything when he was ready. “He isn’t ready yet,” she finished. “And I’m sure that’s the bit he’s holding back. But he’s patched up for now. I missed him.”

“I did too,” Picard said, taking a seat next to her. “Allie told Andrew that Gracie had had a fencing lesson, so the three of them went to the gym for awhile to fence one another. They aren’t trying to kill one another.” He frowned. “I don’t think.”

Beverly stood, her feet taking her back out the the living area. “Wesley,” she said.

“What about him?” the captain asked, sitting in an armchair as she began to pace.

“I just don’t know what to do, Jean-Luc. It’s as if someone’s taken my oldest son and put a stranger in his place. It’s only become more obvious to me today after Andrew stopped being a stranger,” she said, hands curling into fists then stretching back out again. It seemed that all the problems wouldn’t be solved. They’d get one out of the pile and another would be thrown on in its place.

“He left here a boy,” the captain said. “And he’s returned here a young man. I’d think it’s a hard transition for anyone, particularly on mothers and sons. I recall the difficulty my mother and I had when she visited me at the Academy. Then there’s Felisa’s death, learning about Andrew and Gracie and Allie, there’s a lot for him to process.”

Beverly shook her head. “No, it’s something different. He had an argument with Geordi in Engineering, he’s been sullen and rude, almost lost. Did you know he’s failing courses at the Academy? He’s been remote and defensive. If he doesn’t shape up, he’s going to wash out next term.” She was afraid that he would, then what would Wesley do? Certainly, he could do whatever he decided to put his mind to, but her son had planned on being a Starfleet officer for his entire life. She wasn’t sure he would take failing out of the Academy without any emotional backlash.

“I went through a rough patch of my own,” Picard said. “During my sophomore year, I also nearly washed out. I didn’t take my mother’s death very well. In truth, I acted much like Andrew had been acting. Took Boothby to help me realize what was happening to me, and I pulled out if it. I’m sure Wesley will do the same.”

The doctor sat next to him. “Maybe you could talk to him. Maybe this is the sort of thing a boy,” she corrected herself, “a young man needs to hear from another man.” Jean-Luc had reached Andrew, perhaps he could reach Wesley as well. Wesley had always looked up to him.

Slowly, the captain shook his head. “I don’t think he wants to talk to either of us right now,” he said, his tone gentle.

“He needs help,” she said. *We all need help*, she thought.

“I know he does, but Wesley is different from Andrew. The more we push Wesley, the more it will drive him away. He’ll have to work this out on his own and I believe that he will.” He put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. “I know that doesn’t make it any easier, but we’ll get through it together, and have faith in him.”

Beverly reached up with her hand, took his chin, guided him to look at her. “I think you might even be pretty good at this,” she said.

He blushed. Laughing, she kissed him and when he returned this one, it was filled with passion. She reached behind him, moving her hand to his neck, pulling him closer. Jean-Luc's hands drifted into her hair.

Then the door opened. They pulled apart quickly, looking guilty as their three children walked in. Andrew rolled his eyes. "Oh, please," he said. "There's three of us you've managed to have. If we see you kissing one another, it isn't scandalous." If he had anything else to say, it was cut off by Conal pushing him in the leg with his head, begging for attention. Andrew bent over to scratch the dog's ears and Allie took the opportunity to stretch out one of her long legs and kick her brother with just enough pressure to knock him over. "Hey!" he said.

Gracie took her own opportunity and jumped on top of him. "Say uncle," she said.

"Absolutely not," Andrew said.

It was Allie's turn to roll her eyes as she turned to her parents. "Don't we have a reception we're supposed to attend?" she asked them as Andrew and Gracie continued their argument.

"Yes, and I completely forgot about it. You should get ready. It isn't formal, so it shouldn't take you long." Beverly had forgotten that the welcome reception for the Dorvan V colony was an open reception and she'd asked the children to go as well.

Allie disappeared into her room and Beverly looked up just in time to see Andrew stand up and in one fluid motion, grab his little sister's ankles and suspend her upside down, Conal licking her face. "Put me down!" she said.

"Andrew, please let your sister go," Beverly said. "She needs to get ready, too."

Her son lifted an eyebrow at her.

She resisted smiling, she knew exactly what he was thinking, if he were to literally do as she said. "Without dropping her on her head."

"Fine," Andrew said, gently putting Gracie back on the ground, who then punched him in the leg and ran to her room, shouting behind her that she was going to get ready.

"What did you do with Worf?" Picard asked him.

"Traded him in for a new model," Andrew answered, shooing his dog away. "The current model was much too insightful." At his father's look of annoyance, Andrew amended his answer. "I mean, he allowed a two-person detachment instead of himself when I agreed that I'd stop trying to ditch the detail."

"Thank you," Beverly said. The question about Worf and the Security team reminded her of another problem, another worry, Bok's damn threat to her son.

Andrew nodded, then excused himself to his room.

“He’ll be okay,” Picard whispered to her, knowing what she was thinking.

“You can’t be sure,” she replied.

His gray eyes glanced at his hands, face now somber. “I know,” he said.

She kissed him on the cheek, stood up, held a hand out to him. He took it, allowing her to help him stand. “Wasn’t that a bit backwards?” he asked.

“Jean-Luc, it’s the twenty fourth century. Since when are gender roles so important?”

“You know perfectly well that wasn’t what I meant,” he said, indignant.

Another one of the reasons why she loved him. With those whom he was comfortable, he was easily teased, and that look he got on his face when he was annoyed was priceless. Beverly pulled him into another kiss, only to be interrupted by Andrew coming into the living area and muttering, “Get a room,” in their general direction. Laughing, the doctor looked over at her son, who was now ready to leave.

Andrew certainly cleaned up well. With his reddish hair, those gray eyes, lean muscular build, and the cut lines of his face, Beverly realized Allie hadn’t been kidding when she said the girls on the ship that saw him kept developing crushes. And her son was utterly clueless about how handsome he was. While Allie knew full well the effect she had on boys, Andrew had no knowledge of his effect on the opposite sex. If he knew, it would make him blush madly. Allie had told Beverly that she was saving up that particular ribbing, waiting to spring it on him at the perfect time.

Allie came out at the same time as Gracie, each of them equalling their brother in the looks department. Beverly couldn’t figure out how she and Jean-Luc had produced children like them. When Allie stepped next to her, Beverly whispered, “There’s going to be several boys tonight with broken hearts.”

Allie gave her a knowing smile. “I have to give Andrew and Dad a challenge, to chase them all off.”

Jean-Luc had heard and commented from close behind, “It makes me very happy that your sister is only five. She’s going to be as beautiful as you are and if you both were your age, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Allie grinned at her father. “You would give them that fearsome captainly glare and they’d drop dead on the spot. Easy enough.”

Picard let go a large, pained sigh. “Shall we go?” He offered his elbow to Beverly.

Looping her arm through his, Beverly said, “We shall.”

When they walked into Ten Forward, Gracie clung to her father's hand, her gray eyes wide. "There's a lot of people here," she said.

Allie moved forward and took her other hand. "You can stay with me," she told her sister. "Papa has to go be the captain. We'll go harass some boys." The two of them moved off together as Andrew wandered over towards the windows. The two Security officers assigned to him stationed themselves next to the doors.

Ignoring what the guards meant, Beverly watched Allie and Gracie closely as they approached a table of children Allie's age and sat down with them. Watched the boys compete with each other to get into Allie's good graces. Her youngest did her best at matching her sister. "I think Gracie is flirting madly with those boys," she said to Jean-Luc.

He shot her a look, then his eyes traveled to where his daughter sat. "She is not," he said. "Beverly, she's five. It isn't funny. It's hard enough speaking with all these colonists and avoiding the difficulties of the situation on the planet while trying to keep an eye on boys moving close to my oldest daughter. Now you're telling me I have to watch out for both of them?"

"They're at the same table," she said, patting him on the arm. "That should make it easy on you." One of the colonists made his way towards them. As he did, Beverly took a slight step away from the captain, unsure of how he felt about a public relationship. Not that the presence of three children gave anything away. Or that he'd proposed, quite unexpectedly, and a marriage between them would be anything but private. She inched back towards him. He noticed, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Captain Picard," the colonist said, finally reaching them. "It is good to see you again."

The captain nodded. "And you as well Anthrawa." He gestured towards Beverly. "Let me introduce my Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Beverly Crusher."

Anthrawa extended his hand to shake hers in greeting. "Good to meet you, Doctor," he said.

"Likewise," Beverly replied. The colonist had salt and pepper hair that went past his shoulders, a well tanned face lined with the crags of time, solemn and dignified. She was reminded of the photographs she'd seen when she was a child in school, learning about the Western Expansion and the horrible impact on the natives of the Americas.

"So I've been trying to familiarize myself with the history and traditions of your people," the captain said, his face brightening with interest, the scholar of ancient societies. "I was quite interested to learn that it was your grandfather Katowa who led the group of Indians who initially left Earth two centuries ago."

The mention of his grandfather caused Anthrawa's face to warm instantly. He was a man who loved his grandfather intensely, admired and respected him, all of that apparent in his expression. "He was a great man," he said. "I was very proud of him. The other children grew tired of hearing me talk about him."

"It must have been a very difficult decision for your grandfather to make, uprooting your people, leading them into the unknown for an undetermined amount of time while not even knowing if you ever would find a new home," Picard said.

Beverly recognized the connection between Jean-Luc's own difficulties as a young man and leaving the family's vineyards for the stars, all in the face of his father's opposition. She also saw two men in front of her who, if in other circumstances, would have become good friends. They were very similar—strong leaders, strong morals, strong love of peace, strong ties to history.

Making eye contact with both the captain and the doctor, Anthrawa said, "There was great deal of opposition. Even my own father was against it. But when Katowa made his decision, that was it. My father never said another word."

Crusher noticed a slight frown curl the corners of Jean-Luc's mouth down ever so slightly. Anthrawa didn't notice and expression left the captain's face nearly as soon as it had appeared. She knew that had the captain's father made a decision that he didn't agree with, he would say as many words as needed until he could make his father understand his point of view. But sadly, for Jean-Luc and Maurice Picard, the many words that passed between them, then the long silence as demonstrative as any words, hadn't been enough. Father and son had not reconciled before Maurice died.

After a pause, Picard said quietly, "It's never easy to leave one's home, to give up the safe and familiar. But there are times when the greater good demands that sacrifices be made. I'm sure your grandfather knew that." Ever the diplomat, attempting to make ties where they could, using ways of the others to help communicate more effectively.

Anthrawa regarded Picard for a moment, studying him. Then he said, "His grandson does too. But there are also times when a people have sacrificed too much. When they must hold on to what they have, even if it means standing up against overwhelming opposition." The colonist's tone of voice was the same volume as the captain's, yet much more intense. He would not change his position, yet he did not want to make enemies. He was going what he believed to be right, what he believed to be best for his people. Beverly saw that and she was sure Jean-Luc did.

As the two men looked solemnly at one another, discomfort about the direction of the conversation quite evident, Beverly realized that the captain agreed with Anthrawa. He thought it wrong to force this colony to move, that it was only another offense in the growing pile of offenses people would commit against the natives of the Americas. Even after they had departed their homeland, their planet, their solar system, they were still

persecuted. But the captain had his duty, his assignment, and he would conduct it to the best of his ability.

Anthrawa ended the uncomfortable silence. “So what do you know about your family, Captain?” he asked.

Picard smiled. “A great deal, actually. My father was a strong believer in passing along the family history and traditions.” He glanced reflexively to where Allie and Gracie were.

The colonist followed Picard’s gaze. “Your children?” he asked.

Picard nodded, the smile remaining, his eyes warm. “Yes.”

Anthrawa gave him a knowing nod. “Children are the reason why our ancestors did what they had to do. Captain, tell me about your family. We have very strong ties to our ancestors. We believe their actions guide us even now. Knowing more about your family might help me to better understand you.”

Beverly listened for a moment as Jean-Luc started telling the colony’s leader about the Picard family history, the same family that her children were a part of, that she would be a part of eventually. The doctor excused herself from the two men with a light touch to Jean-Luc’s arm and a warm smile at them both. She saw Guinan in a corner, her serene gaze falling over the entire room, and made her way over there. Beverly needed to ask her a question.

She sidled up to the El-Aurian. “Did you say something to Captain Picard after I left Ten Forward last night?”

Guinan turned her head towards the doctor’s, raising a nonexistent eyebrow. “Why, did he do something unexpected?”

Beverly raised an eyebrow of her own while crossing her arms. “You could say that.”

Her friend’s lips broke into a wide smile. “I only helped him tell the difference between right and wrong.”

The doctor opened her mouth to continue the conversation, but the doors to the lounge opened and Wesley walked in. She and Guinan weren’t the only ones to notice, either. Andrew had been sitting at one of the tables and speaking with a colonist near Wesley’s age since he’d come into the room. Her younger son saw his older brother walk in and lifted an arm to wave him over. To Beverly’s astonishment, Wesley went and Andrew introduced him to the other young man, and the three of them fell into what looked to be a serious and interesting conversation. “They aren’t fighting,” Beverly said aloud.

“People are doing the unexpected,” Guinan said. “I take it Wesley is having trouble.” Statement, not a question.

The doctor nodded. “Yes.”

“He’ll find the right way for him.” Guinan gave Beverly’s arm a squeeze, one transferring her wisdom, her sureness about what she said. “He’s been in this place before, trying to decide if what’s expected of him is what’s right for him. Even now, he’s doing just that, speaking with Lakanta and with Andrew.”

“Lakanta is the other boy with them?”

“Yes. He is Anthrawa’s son.”

Somehow, Crusher wasn’t surprised in the least. The evening moved on as Beverly floated between her friends and the colonists, talking with Deanna and Will, joking with Geordi, keeping an eye on her children, watching her captain. The hour grew late and soon Beverly found Allie walking up to her, Gracie fighting sleepiness, Andrew just behind them. “I think we’ll have to call it a night,” Allie said. “I know you and Dad have to stay.”

Gracie rubbed her eyes. Andrew reached down and easily picked her up. “I guess I’ll be nice and carry you,” he said. In reply, Gracie put her arms around her brother’s neck and her head on his shoulder.

Beverly nodded. “Actually, I think your father is getting tired of playing diplomat. You three will make a good excuse for him to escape. We’ll be right behind you.” She watched at they left Ten Forward, the two Security guards tailing them. *Bok*. Beverly cursed. Nothing could be easy. Sighing, she found Jean-Luc and he said his farewells. As they walked towards the turbolift in the empty corridor, she found herself instinctively reaching for his hand. He entwined his fingers with hers, a smile playing across his lips. “I was very happy,” she said, “Watching our children. Then I saw the Security detail.”

Nothing had to be explained, he knew exactly how she felt because he felt the same. “I know,” he said. “I know.” The lift doors opened and they stepped inside.

When the doors shut, Beverly decided she wanted to get Bok out of their minds for as long as they could, until he made himself apparent again. She took one of Jean-Luc’s hands and placed it around her, raised her mouth to his and kissed him fully. Picard drew back for a moment, gray eyes intense with emotion. Beverly looked at him, emotions mirrored, at the eyes of her children. Like she had years ago on the fencing strip, seeing him, if only for a moment, as the father of her children. And now he had that role, she saw him as their father each day. Now she realized she wanted him in another role, saw him in it, as her husband. “When I married Jack,” she said, “I never thought I’d say yes to another proposal.”

The captain stared at her dumbly for a moment, as if he didn't believe she'd said what he thought she said. Then gently, he pulled her lips to his, and kissed her soundly until the lift doors opened on Deck Nine.

They entered her quarters to find Gracie still awake. Beverly shot the older two children a questioning look. Allie shrugged from her seat on the couch, book in hand. "She refused to go to sleep until her papa tucked her into bed. How am I supposed to argue with that?"

"I had a few ideas," Andrew said as he studied something at the terminal on the desk. "And not all of them involved sedatives."

Gracie glared at both of them. "Come on," she said to Picard. "I'm tired." She took him by the hand and he followed obediently, thrilled to do so. Beverly stood outside the door, listening to the two of them talk. They were enamored with one another, father and daughter. "I missed you last night," she said.

Jean-Luc spoke so softly that Beverly strained to hear it. "Soon I'll be able to tuck you in every night. I asked your mother to marry me and she said yes."

The little girl let out a squeal of delight and bolted from her bed into the living area. Andrew stood up and glared at Picard as he walked out of Gracie's room. "What the hell did you say to her? The little monkey was almost asleep." He turned the glare to Allie. "Did you put a spider in her bed?"

Allie crossed her arms as she stood to face her brother. "Of course not."

"Shut up!" Gracie told them with her words and the gray eyed glare she fixed on them. Andrew and Allie looked at her, shocked. The little girl was forthright, but they didn't think she had ever sounded quite that commanding. Certain that she had their attention, Gracie repeated to them what her father had just told her.

Beverly smiled as she saw the warm reactions on both of their faces, grinning at their parents. Then they all set about getting Gracie to sleep, sending Jean-Luc back with her, informing him that he was not to excite the little girl again.

"It's about time," Allie said, sitting back down with her book.

The doctor sat next to her. "We're a bit thick headed," she said.

"I'll say," said Andrew.

The captain walking out of Gracie's bedroom and thumbing the door shut saved Andrew from scathing remarks from his mother and sister. "I should be going now," Picard said.

Andrew frowned. Allie frowned at the same time. "You should stay," they said at the same time, a reminder that they were twins.

Picard crossed his arms, fixing them with a stern look. "It wouldn't be proper," he said.

"it's entirely proper for you to sleep in the same quarters as your family, to sleep next to the woman who's the mother of your children and is going to be your wife," Allie said. "And you still need to get started on another one of us."

"Now you've gone too far," Andrew said to Allie.

She ignored him. "Well?" she asked, looking at her father, then at Beverly. "I notice you aren't objecting."

"Because I have no objections," Beverly said, casting a smile in Jean-Luc's direction. The captain was busily giving them all his look of annoyance.

"I know that look," Andrew said. "It means you're annoyed that we've convinced you to stay despite your arguments to the contrary."

Jean-Luc's continued look confirmed Andrew's supposition. On his part, Andrew wasn't phased by the look. He got up from behind the desk, PADD in hand. "And with that, I'm running out."

Beverly turned to him. "Where are you going?"

"To talk to my brother," he said. When their eyes asked questions, he said, "I said talk, not fight. Talk."

"Be careful," the doctor said.

"I can take him," Andrew replied, the mischief reflected in his eyes.

"That isn't what she meant," the captain said, giving him a serious look.

Andrew frowned. "I know. I just didn't want to think about it."

Beverly shared a look with Jean-Luc. None of them wanted to think about it, but that was the problem of living. Eventually, you always have to deal with your thoughts, you always had to deal with what threatened you.

Chapter 23

Andrew Picard thumbed the control panel outside of his brother's guest quarters. His security team had stationed themselves on either side of the door. At Wesley's shout of "Come in!" Andrew stepped inside, leaving the guards outside, thankful for their absence of reminder, of that stupid sword that hung over all their heads. He tried to remember the name of the man the original sword had hung over.

"Damocles," he muttered as he walked in.

"Excuse me?" Wesley asked from his seat behind his desk.

Andrew looked up at him. "Sorry, was remembering a moral anecdote from Greek legend."

Wesley frowned. "Whatever for?"

Andrew tapped the PADD idly on his other hand. "Damocles was some courtier to Dionysus and always flattered him, saying that it must be nice to have so much power, all these great things within his grasp. Dionysus offered to trade places with him and Damocles lived it up in the top chair of the feast until the very end. When he looked up, he saw a sword hanging over him by a single, thin thread. Suddenly, everything wasn't so great. It's that notion of impending doom," he said. Then he motioned towards the closed door with the PADD. "The Security team outside. Whenever I get them out of sight, I feel much better, and I can forget about that Ferengi. Then I see them again and I think of that sword."

The cadet studied him for a moment. "You should read less classical literature."

Andrew scowled. "And read more about fluid dynamics and warp theory? I'd rather watch paint dry."

This time the look Wesley gave him was serious. "Is this cease fire for real?" he asked. "We're okay?"

The tall boy settled himself in the armchair after moving it to face Wesley's desk. "I figured we should start acting like brothers instead of—how did my father put it? Oh, yes." Andrew drew himself up in a posture much like the captain's. "Callow youth," he said, imitating Picard's stern voice.

Wesley laughed. "That was bang-on. You'd better not let him hear that," he said. "But he's right. I mean, you're right." He drummed his fingers on the desktop.

"Yeah," Andrew said. The cease-fire was declared.

The cadet looked up again. "That's the first time you've referred to him with me as your father," he said.

“Mmm,” Andrew said. “We had a talk. A couple talks, actually. And Worf talked to me, too.”

Wesley started. “Worf? You mean Lieutenant Worf? Security chief, Klingon, constantly glowering?”

“He’s chock full of insights. That man takes in much more than he lets on. It’s creepy, if you ask me. But useful at the same time. I like him,” Andrew replied. “He’s also very good at maneuvering you to do what he thinks is right, what the honorable thing is. And then the *captain*...” he trailed off, unsure of how to explain his father’s talks.

“I understand,” said Wesley. “I completely understand. He has this way of getting completely under your skin and stabbing you right in the heart when you’ve done something wrong. He knows it and he wants to make damn sure you know you’ve disappointed him.”

“The incident with Josh?”

Wesley nodded. “He never really raised his voice, either. It just got more powerful, more intense, intimidated the hell out of me. And when I realized I’d disappointed him, I felt even worse, when I hadn’t thought I could. The man was pissed. I didn’t recall him ever being that angry, and it was a cold anger. Terrifying. That wasn’t what really got to me though. It was the idea what I’d failed him, the man I’d looked up to for so long. I’ve always wanted him to be proud of me, like I wanted my mother to be. I thought that if Captain Picard were proud of me, then I know my Dad would be, too. He and mom, they’re the only connections I have left to my father. The other cadets only made it worse, when they treated him like he was my stepfather. Some of them even thought he was my stepfather. When I was younger, I wanted him to be, you know. Marry my mom and be my stepfather for real.”

Andrew knew he had to tell him. “He will be, you know.”

The cadet looked up from the desk. “I know. I mean, it’s inevitable. It’s obvious he wants to be a part of your life, of your sister’s lives. I know he loves Mom and she’s loved him for just as long.” Wesley opened a drawer and pulled out a book. “Allie had me read Nana’s journal.” He tossed it to Andrew. “You should read it, too.”

Andrew easily caught the book, but didn’t look at it. Instead, he looked at Wesley. “They’re your sisters, too. Not just mine.”

Wesley shrugged. “Habit, I guess. I’ll get used to it.”

“Well, my father is going to be your stepfather sooner than you think. They told us tonight that he proposed and Mom accepted,” Andrew said.

Wesley raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t think he’d ask that soon.”

"I don't think anyone expected him to," Andrew said. "But when you think about it, they've waited long enough."

"True," said Wesley. "They should've gotten married ages ago. Part of why I was so mad at the both of them. All that time wasted between the two of them, between you and me and Allie and Gracie. Except now we have a problem."

"We have a problem?" Andrew had figured Wesley would accept Picard, now that he really did seem to understand what dynamics were between their mother and Andrew's father. And Andrew didn't have a problem with it at all. His father had been a great help in helping him figure out how to get past the walls he put up. Having him around more, living with his family, he knew the captain could continue to help. Maybe even help him patch things up with his mother.

Wesley nodded, motioning at the terminal screen. "How many times has Captain Picard violated the Prime Directive?"

Andrew gave his brother a curious look. "What's the Prime Directive have to do with my parents getting married?"

"It has to do with Captain Picard," Wesley said. "What's going on down there is wrong, you and I both know it. Lakanta knows it. Anthrawa. We're interfering with their culture, it's violating the Prime Directive."

"Isn't that the guiding principle of the Federation and Starfleet?" Andrew asked, frowning. "Violating the Prime Directive is serious, you do that and the repercussions can be life damaging. Are you saying that this mission is violating that very principle?"

"Yes. The captain has violated the directive nine different times since he's taken command of the *Enterprise*. Nine times. And he's still the commanding officer of the Federation's flagship, so obviously each of those times, it was the right thing to do. But if he goes along with this mission without question, removing those colonists, he's violating the directive for the wrong reason," Wesley said, his face growing darker with frustration.

Andrew remembered some of the cases he'd read about Picard's career, some of those violations. "Wasn't one of those violations about you? That he didn't allow the Edo to execute you, even though you'd broken one of their laws?"

"It was a completely arbitrary law," said Wesley, tone hardening to the defensive.

"But it was their law," Andrew said.

"It was an arbitrary law. It was absolutely enforced. It made no sense."

"Exactly. It made no sense. The record of the incident stated that absolutely enforced laws bring about no true justice. Absolute obedience, I imagine, would mean much the same," said Andrew.

The cadet smiled. "For a minute there, I thought you were objecting to me not being executed."

Andrew smiled back. "If I had said that yesterday, you would've been correct." He glanced at the ceiling, trying to remember more incidents. No specifics came to mind.

Wesley, however, had the information on the terminal. He had been studying it before Andrew had visited. "There was another time, I was serving on the *Enterprise* when it happened. Cultural contamination happened on Mintaka III when a duck blind failed. There were injuries, fights. Mom actually beamed one of the Mintakans onto the ship to heal her injuries. Got into an argument with the captain over the prime directive, how they had an obligation to heal her because they had caused her injuries. When asked about retrieving the last team member from the planet, Picard said it could only happen if he were not surrounded by Mintakans, no more contamination could occur. He said that Starfleet officers took an oath to keep the Prime Directive, even if it meant their lives. Then he violated it when he went down to the planet himself to show those people that he wasn't a god. Had one of the Mintakans shoot him with an arrow to prove it. He could have died breaking the Prime Directive, when he had said dying could be a part of preserving the Prime Directive." Wesley smiled, another memory had caught him. "Mom was pissed that he let himself be shot."

"Big shock," Andrew said, then went back to Wesley's story. "So, it's not that the captain is absolute about the Prime Directive. He's absolute about doing what he believes is right...and he's not doing that right now."

Wesley nodded. "And that's our problem. He's your father, he'll be my stepfather. How long have we both looked up to him? I don't understand how someone with his integrity can just let this happen, let history repeat itself. I have a problem with that. The sort of man Captain Picard is right now, that's who I'd want to marry my mother. But who he'll be if he goes through with his orders? I wouldn't want that man to marry her."

History. "There's more," Andrew said, chucking the PADD to Wesley. "That's why I came here, I remembered something I'd read about my family history when we were talking with Lakanta earlier. It's a nasty bit of work. The whole account is there, but the summary of it is that Javier Maribona Picard was the lieutenant to the man who was one of the primary causes of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. They massacred a village, killed six hundred, maimed most of the six hundred taken captive by cutting off the right foot of every male age twenty five and older."

"Holy shit," Wesley said, eyes riveted on the PADD.

"What's interesting, not that a massacre isn't, is that the measure where they cut off the feet was following Spanish law. Arcane, harsh laws, but laws. Without question. Absolute law followed absolutely." Andrew stood up, paced, hand rubbing through his hair in exasperation. "It can't happen again. Someone from my family can't just blindly follow orders that are clearly morally wrong, following them only because they're orders."

“Maybe it’s fate,” Wesley said.

“Since when do you believe in fate?” Andrew asked.

Wesley shrugged. “Blame Nana. She talks a lot about fate in her journal. But maybe that’s why the *Enterprise* was sent here, why Captain Picard has to conduct the negotiations, why you and our sisters are part of his family now. Why you and I have to talk to him about this. Maybe it’s up to you and him to redeem your ancestor.”

“You really want to confront him with this?” said Andrew. The lecture they’d gotten while in the brig had been bad enough. The lecture Wesley got over the accident was the stuff of legend. But confronting Jean-Luc Picard with the truth, with what he already knew to be wrong, to challenge him directly, that would be hellish on all sides. “Do you realize what we’d be getting ourselves into?”

A grave look came over Wesley’s face as he studied his younger brother. Andrew studied him back, noticing how much older Wesley looked lately. Despite being taller and stronger than his brother, Andrew knew that Wesley was a young man and that he was still a boy. And the idea of confronting his father wasn’t something he relished. It was easier to be a boy, but then the easiest thing normally wasn’t the right thing. Wesley said, “Do you really want to allow this move to happen to the colony? Have history repeat itself instead of fixing itself?”

Andrew sighed in exasperation, dropping heavily into the armchair. “It won’t go over well.”

“One thing I’ve learned about the captain is that he listens to all opinions and then makes his decision,” Wesley replied.

Tapping his feet on the ground, Andrew tried to think of what else they could do. “Right, but we’d be boxing him into a corner. Anyone boxed into a corner gets defensive, even my father. We can’t just say ‘hey, you’re wrong.’ We have to give him a solution, too.” It came to him. “Wait. Why does the Dorvan V colony have to stay in the Federation? Wouldn’t it be up to their society to decide what side they want to be on? They’re pretty damn determined to stay where they are. Have they even been told they could leave the Federation?”

“I didn’t even think of that,” Wesley said. “If they joined the Cardassian Union, they could stay on Dorvan V. But I bet the Federation is so prejudiced against the Cardassians that it hasn’t even been presented as an option.”

Even coming up with a possible solution didn’t make Andrew feel any better. “Why is it that the idea of being kidnapped and killed by a Ferengi seems the easier course of action than talking to the captain about this?” Andrew asked.

“Because it *is*,” Wesley said. “This was a lot easier when it was all philosophy. When we’d send letters back and forth arguing some minor point of some incident

where the Directive was violated. But this is real, there are people down there, not philosophical hypotheticals.”

Andrew stretched, suddenly exhausted. “I wonder how the colonists would react to the idea of joining the Cardassian Union.”

Wesley sat up straight. “I’m a Starfleet cadet, I could go down there. Talk to people, try and get a feel for the situation. Maybe even find Lakanta and see what he thinks.”

“Good idea,” Andrew said.

The cadet looked at him. “You sounded like your father just then. And if you tell me to ‘make it so,’ I will kick you.”

Andrew glared at him, then wandered back into his own thoughts. Being a starship captain brought a great deal of power but the duties and obligations and lives at stake that accompanied the post took away a great deal of the allure. “Damocles,” he said, standing up.

“You’re mumbling stuff about Greek myths again, aren’t you?” Wesley asked.

Andrew nodded, ignoring the jibe. “The captain has it worse than any of us,” he said. “That sword hangs over his head constantly. Always having to do the right thing, always having to make decisions that could have someone live, have someone die.”

“I know,” Wesley said quietly.

Andrew grimaced. *His father died under the captain’s command.* “Sorry,” he said.

The cadet waved him off. “Don’t be. I’m tired and I get grumpy when I’m tired.”

“So go to bed. I’ll head there, too. Just let me know when you get back from the colony.”

With Wesley’s nod, Andrew left his brother’s quarters and headed for the turbolift. The Security officers fell into step behind him, their footsteps reminding him of the sword hanging over his head. Andrew swore. *Damocles.*

“Finish what you start.”

They floated in the airlock in their environmental suits, the hatch to the barren space outside still closed. Jack had taken a phaser rifle from the rack, then taken another, handing it to Wesley. “I haven’t started yet,” Wesley said.

"You did as soon as you volunteered for this duty," Jack replied, thrusting the rifle into Wesley's gloved hands. "And you have to finish. People are depending on us."

Space winked at them from the small window in the hatch. "I don't want them to. I wasn't given a choice."

"You always have a choice. Follow me," Jack said, opening the hatch. The cold, empty embrace of space welcomed them through the round opening.

"There's nothing out there for me," said Wesley.

"You finish what you start," Jack said and started towards the nacelle's support pylon.

Wesley had no choice. Had to follow him, help him with his duty. Then he arrived at the nacelle, his father firing through the tough metal, shearing off the nacelle slowly. He said nothing to Wesley until seconds passed by and the young man hadn't fired his phaser.

"You made a choice back there," Jack said. "You could have stayed. You chose to come after me. I told you, you always have a choice."

Wesley stared at his father. "You said to finish what I start."

"Then start something else. You aren't helping. If you aren't helping, you're in the way. Go find something to do, something you can finish. There are others who will help me. They're already coming." The phaser rifle continued its steady firing, beginning to overheat.

Wesley looked up and found it was true. Another man had emerged from the open airlock hatch, carrying a phaser, determination on his face. Pug. And the boy realized he didn't belong here, it wasn't his place, wasn't supposed to be here with his father. He headed back to the airlock, not knowing where he was supposed to go, but knowing where he wasn't meant to be. Halfway back to the hatch, the explosion's shockwave flattened Wesley to the hull of the ship. Pug's unconscious body floated by, then was grabbed by sure hands in another environmental suit, brought back into the airlock. Within minutes, the man with the sure hands had come back outside to challenge the empty space, the space that took lives in its attempts to fill itself, but the vast emptiness could never be sated. The sure hands found Jack's body, taking it back to the airlock. The boy followed, floating in the airlock until the hatch sealed shut behind them, the environment change triggered. Gravity sent them to the floor, helmets came off. Then Wesley saw the man with the sure hands, the man who had made the hard decision, the right decision, crying over Jack's body. The scream of fury at his father's death died in his throat, silenced by the death of another kind he had witnessed.

Wesley Crusher opened his eyes and punched the mattress beneath him with his fist. He hated those dreams, the dreams that visited him whenever he had some sort of

dilemma on his mind. Last time had been on Caldos, the place he loved, the place that didn't move, had real seasons. He needed to go back there. He'd known for awhile Starfleet wasn't something he wanted to stay in, at least his subconscious had. It wasn't as if he'd intended to fail courses, become argumentative, withdraw from everyone. At least, he hadn't made a conscious decision to do so. Now it made sense, after talking with Andrew about the situation on the planet below, at feeling restless, feeling like he'd missed the turn to his life years ago. Jack Crusher had already lived his life, however short. Wesley had his own to live, he wasn't meant to follow his father if it didn't feel right, even if it was expected.

So many of the good choices people made, himself included, had been those choices that no one expected. When he'd stayed on the *Enterprise* instead of going to stay with his mother on Earth. When he'd chosen to come clean with the investigators of Josh's accident instead of keeping his mouth shut in the pact of team silence. When Andrew chose to apologize to their mother for being a jerk while everyone expected him to continue ignoring her. Or even Captain Picard proposing to Wesley's mother. The cadet hadn't expected that, not so soon. Yet when he found out, it seemed the exact right thing to do. As long as Picard continued to be the man that he was, Wesley looked forward to having him as a stepfather. So that the man who had guided his best friend's son toward adulthood could at last have an official nature to his role. Wesley wanted him to have that, but if the same man who had steered him back on course couldn't see the right one for himself, he wouldn't want it after all.

The cadet glanced over at the chronometer. 0900. The alarm hadn't been set, he had lost precious hours during a time when minutes were hours in themselves. He showered and changed as fast as he did when late for morning formation at the Academy, stuffed a muffin from the replicator into his mouth, downed a glass of juice and bolted out the door. Chief O'Brien manned the controls in the transporter room. "Chief, can you beam me down to the village, please?"

O'Brien lifted an eyebrow at him. "For what reason?"

"Field study," Wesley replied. "I think I could learn a lot down there."

The chief shrugged. "Whatever suits you, cadet," he said.

Wesley found himself in the middle of the village moments later. He looked around, taking in the layout of the place, the construction. The use of adobe reminded him of the pueblos, reminded him of the revolt he'd read about late into the night before. The revolt itself, El Pope's leadership, the ten years that the Pueblos were not under Spanish rule. They had chosen it for themselves. "Wesley!" called Lakanta's voice from behind him.

The cadet turned to find his new friend walking up to him. "Good morning," Wesley said.

Lakanta nodded. "And you as well. What brings you here?"

“I spoke more with my brother last night.”

Lakanta inclined his head towards a path outside the village proper. “Walk with me,” he said. “And tell me about this conversation.”

As the pair walked along the path in the meadows near the village, Wesley told him about their knowledge of Starfleet’s orders, about the Prime Directive, about the Picard family history, about one Javier Maribona Picard. Lakanta listened intently, nodding occasionally. “We’re going to speak to him,” Wesley finished. “Andrew and I, we’ll speak with Captain Picard, try and change his mind.”

“Do you think it will succeed?” Lakanta asked.

The cadet kicked a rock in front of him. “It has to.” He came to a halt, looked back at the village. “It has to.”

“I spoke with my father last night,” Lakanta said, his eyes looked at the village as well. “He had already researched Picard’s history, knew about his ancestor. My father believes it is fate that Picard was chosen for this assignment. Fate that he will erase the stain his ancestor left on his family.”

Wesley shook his head, a half smile on his face. “I told my brother the same thing last night. Except I got the idea from my great-grandmother’s journal. She talked a lot about fate, put a great deal of faith into it, that the universe will work itself out.”

“Your great-grandmother was a wise woman,” Lakanta said. “Tell me, did your brother agree with you?”

Wesley turned to the colonist. “About this situation? Yes. About fate? He didn’t say. Avoided the question.” He looked back to the village, saw movement in the center of the town. “What’s going on over there?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Lakanta. “My father told me that negotiations wouldn’t resume until this afternoon.”

Dorvan’s sun beat on Wesley’s neck, then the wind picked up, evaporating the sweat that had formed. Pebbles blew across their path. “We need to get back there,” Wesley said, then took off in a run. Lakanta ran with him. If Lakanta’s belief in fate was true, they had a reason to be there, in the village, and not on the path outside it.

The slowed to a walk just outside the square, Lakanta stayed at the edges while Wesley wandered into the group of Starfleet officers and crew surveying the area. Worf carried a tricorder and was giving out orders to officers as he walked. “Lay out a confinement beam trace along the Southwestern edge of the village. Be discreet, we do not wish to alarm the population,” he said to two officers. They nodded and set about their task.

Wesley went to speak with Worf. "What are you doing?" he asked the security chief.

The Klingon quickly glanced around them to make sure they were alone. Lowering his voice, he said, "We are laying out Transporter coordinates for a security perimeter. It may become necessary to remove these people by force."

The cadet blinked in shock. It was worse than he or Andrew had thought, they wouldn't just be moving these people, they were moving them by force. History repeating itself. He slid his eyes to look at Lakanta, who was watching them with great interest. Looked around the rest of the square, saw Anthrawa striding down the street towards the groups of Starfleet personnel, saw other curious villagers gathering in the road and square. He turned back to Worf. "Worf, we can't do this. These people deserve better than to be taken from their homes."

The lieutenant's frown grew deeper. "I understand. But this is not the time or place to—."

He was cut off as Wesley made eye contact with Anthrawa and made his decision with his next words. "Do you know what they're doing?" He shouted to Anthrawa, to Lakanta, to all of them. "They're preparing to beam you away, to take you to their ship! You're not going to just let them do that, are you?"

Lakanta strode to the middle of the square, in front of the now yelling villagers. "No, we won't," he said.

Anthrawa stood beside him. "Leave. Now," he said to Worf.

Worf called for immediate transport and Wesley went with the rest of the Starfleet officers back to the ship. When they materialized, Worf turned to Crusher. "You will report to the observation lounge. I will inform the captain of what occurred at the colony. You will wait in the lounge until the captain says otherwise."

"Yes, sir," Wesley said, then watched as the rest of the officers left.

When the doors closed, O'Brien spoke from behind the transporter controls. "How much trouble are you in?" he asked.

"More than you want to know," Wesley answered, then left the room. "Computer," he said, "Location of Andrew Picard."

"Andrew Picard is in the corridor on Deck Twelve."

Wesley realized his brother must be going to the gym. He had to talk to him before he got reamed out by the captain, Andrew needed to be there, they both had to talk to him about this. It went beyond Starfleet, beyond Wesley's status as a cadet. It included both of those things, but it was also an issue of family. The cadet ran to the

turbolift. No one else got on the lift and he reached Deck Twelve in seconds, raced off the 'lift, barely clearing the opening doors. "Andrew!" he shouted.

Andrew, at the far end of the corridor, turned around. "What?"

The two Security officers with Andrew turned as well, but said nothing. Wesley swore. He'd forgotten about them.

They met halfway. "I have to report to the captain. I just created an incident in the colony, told them that Starfleet was going to remove them by force. You need to meet me up there."

Andrew's eyes widened. "Just in time to collect your body after the captain crucifies you," he said.

"Stop making jokes," Wesley said, irritated that Andrew had picked up that mannerism from their mother, using humor distance themselves from the situation. "Tell me you'll meet me there?"

"Give me five minutes," Andrew said. "I have to find a place to stow this bag." He turned to the two officers. "Are you going to stop me from going?"

One shook his head. "No. We have orders to follow you and make sure you aren't abducted. Other than that, we aren't to interfere."

"Fine," Wesley said, then took off back towards the turbolift.

The observation lounge was empty when he entered. Felt as empty as the space outside. Wesley shivered, remembering his dream. The cadet went and sat at the end of the table, farthest away from where the captain normally sat. Within seconds of his sitting down, the doors parted to allowed Captain Picard to walk in. His face was dark, the lines of his face becoming chiseled granite, his eyes flecks of steel. Wesley wasn't sure if pissed came close to describing how angry the captain was.

For moments, or minutes, or hours, as it seemed to Wesley, the captain said nothing. Simply regarded him with that hard stare. Then Picard looked out at the stars, at the planet suspended below the orbiting ship, back at Wesley. His voice came out ringing, hammer on an anvil, the cold fury carried fully. "Inexcusable. You defied the orders of the ranking officer on the scene, put the entire Away Team in jeopardy, and made an already tense situation worse. Your actions reflect poorly on this ship and on that uniform. I want an explanation, Mister Crusher, and I want it now." And the captain waited, the hammer at the ready, Wesley the anvil.

Wesley looked the captain in the eye. "What you're doing down there is wrong," he said. "What you're choosing to do is not true to man I've known since I was a boy."

The captain's expression remained unchanged.

Picard's words kept ringing in Wesley's ears, but he couldn't stop. He had to finish what he started. The cadet stood, removed the communicator from his chest, placed it carefully on the table in front of him, looked at Picard again. Saw that his eyes had changed slightly, a tiny light of astonishment at Wesley's actions. "What I'm choosing to do is true to who I am. I am not a Starfleet cadet."

Before Picard could reply, the door to the lounge opened again and Andrew practically ran in, then came to a sudden stop when Wesley and Picard both turned to look at him. Andrew's gray eyes looked at Picard's steel ones, Wesley's brown ones, then down to the gold communicator on the black table, putting it all together. That Wesley had resigned. "Shit," Andrew said.

Wesley realized it was an apt appraisal of the situation. With the arrival of his brother, the words he and Picard had just exchanged became merely the preliminary to the main event that was about to unfold between the three of them.

Chapter 24

Wesley Crusher watched Captain Picard and Andrew Picard as each of the others did the same. Two pairs of similar eyes, each now tempered steel, waiting to see who would speak first. It was Andrew, breaking his gaze from Picard and settling it on Wesley. "You didn't say anything about resigning," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Picard asked Andrew.

Wesley spoke without giving Andrew a chance to answer the captain. He alternated looking at each of the other two, trying to get them to stop glaring at one another. "This is what I decided," he said. "I was trying to follow my own father, do what he did. But that isn't my path to take. Everyone expected me to follow him, everyone expects me to stay in Starfleet. But just because everyone expects it doesn't mean it's right. Right now, I want to live on a planet, live on a place with seasons, a place that doesn't pass everything at warp seven. I need to know who I really am."

His words were enough to deter Picard's focus from his son. The captain turned to Wesley, the cold fury from before not diminished in the least. The hammer struck again. "That still does not excuse what you did on the planet. You've provided a spark to the tinder of the situation down there and it's become a conflagration."

Andrew broke in, addressing Picard, the boy's body rigid, his voice a scalpel, calculated to cut exactly. "Blindly following orders doesn't excuse you from your moral responsibility," he said.

"I do not follow orders blindly," Picard replied. "This issue has been brought up more than once by Admiral Necheyev to the Federation Council. The council spent years negotiating these terms, brought in a representative from the Native American nations, and this is what they have decided. We cannot override what those experts have said is the best way only on our emotional whim." Picard split his intimidating look between his son and Wesley.

"How many would it take before it becomes wrong?" Andrew asked before the captain could even take in another breath. Before Wesley had fully comprehended Picard's words. The captain *had* protested, he had brought up the issues that he and Andrew were speaking about. And he began to wonder if he and Andrew were wrong and should shut the hell up before the consequences of their actions would become irreversible. Andrew didn't seem to have any thoughts along Wesley's lines, his words continued in a train, a train barreling headlong into a dark tunnel with no outlet. "Six hundred? Six thousand? Six million? How many before we've crossed the line?"

Picard's presence increased within the room, threatening to squeeze the two others against the walls in its forcefulness. "That is not the case here," he said.

"We do have a responsibility here," Andrew said.

“We?” said Picard. “You have a responsibility to yourself, not to any of Starfleet’s actions. Wesley had a responsibility to Starfleet, one that he abandoned in his actions on the planet and in his decision to resign.”

Andrew had drawn himself up to his full height, his frustration pushing against the other two in the room, though he hadn’t moved from just behind the head of the table near the door. “You’ve abandoned your responsibility to yourself, your responsibility to your family and your ancestors. You have a responsibility to not repeat history.”

“We cannot be held accountable for all the actions of humanity,” Picard replied. “This is not about ancient history, this is about recent history, the present, and Mister Crusher’s actions on the planet. None on which your opinion has any bearing. As this is a Starfleet disciplinary matter, I would ask you to leave.” To one without resolve to face down that which he feared, Picard’s tone would have pushed them out the door before any defense could be mounted. He would find himself outside, the doors closed, wondering how he got there and how he had kept his skin.

Andrew was not of that sort. He took one step forward, directly into the path of the captain’s unmitigated fury. “His name was Javier Maribona Picard. Son of Sabine Picard and a Spanish Army officer.”

“This has no bearing—.”

Andrew took a step closer. “Assigned to Juan de Onate’s expedition as a lieutenant to Captain Vincente de Zalvidar while putting down a revolt by the natives of Acoma.”

“You will leave this room—.”

Another step. “Their orders were to exact revenge for the deaths of Spanish men.”

Picard raised his voice. Wesley hadn’t heard the captain raise his voice in a long time, the last time had been enough for Wes, enough for anything within earshot. Bearing the full force of the voice was to stand in the path of a storm, buffeted by the high winds, hoping you wouldn’t be taken aloft and away by the wind. “This will go no further!”

Wesley felt his body attempting to merge itself with the floor, hoping to become a bit of furniture in the room so that he wouldn’t also fall prey to the captain’s anger. Or to Andrew’s anger, staring defiantly at Picard as the captain’s hard eyes drilled into him.

In answer, Andrew only took a step towards his father, raising his voice to the same level as Picard’s. “They took their revenge, under orders—.”

“I have asked for you to stop—.” Each exchange ratcheted up the volume, the projection.

“Under orders,” Andrew repeated, “By killing six hundred of the villagers, capturing another six hundred, cutting off the right foot of every man age twenty five and over, then throwing seventy warriors to their deaths off a cliff. All within the confines of Spanish law, all within the confines of given orders.”

Wesley looked at Picard expectantly, waiting for the backlash, for the call to Security to take Andrew out by force. But the order never came. The stone visage had dropped from the captain’s face, his eyes widening just so, some of the fury had run out, chased out by shock. *He hadn’t known.* The captain hadn’t known about that ancestor, about that massacre, about the terrible crime against humanity committed by Javier Maribona Picard. When the captain finally spoke, his tone had dropped to match the stricken look on his face, eyes vacantly pointed in Andrew’s direction, yet not seeing his son, or anyone. “That was seven hundred years ago,” he said.

Wesley’s eyes flicked back to Andrew. He realized his younger brother had not been full of courage, or perhaps he had been, and it had been expended entirely. His body had slackened from the hard resolve from before, relieved that Picard hadn’t entirely lost his temper. That he hadn’t ripped open a rift between him and his father. When he replied, it was the strained whisper of a voice in the aftershock of conflict. “And seven hundred years later, one of the same family is under orders to commit an immoral act.”

“This is not the same thing,” Picard said, but Wesley heard it, heard Picard question what was right, what was wrong, in this situation. They were getting to him.

Andrew looked near collapse at the emotional strain. Wesley took the lead, set the path towards their goal. “No, Captain, it’s not the same thing. But it doesn’t make what you’re ordered to do, what you’re prepared to do, any less immoral. Your orders violate the Prime Directive. They violate the guiding principle of the Federation, they interfere with another culture by taking them away from their home. Each time you’ve violated the Prime Directive, it’s been for the right reason. You did not follow orders absolutely. If I recall, absolute obedience doesn’t bring about absolute moral right. It brings about the ignorance of the truth. I’ll repeat the words you told me. ‘The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth—be it scientific truth, historical truth, or personal truth. It is the guiding principle upon which Starfleet is based.’ The truth, Captain, has been staring you in the face for days, and you’ve closed your eyes so that you won’t have to see it.”

A whisper came from Andrew, words mumbled underneath his breath. Wesley couldn’t make them out. Picard must have heard more, because his head snapped over to where Andrew stood, supported by leaning on the table with one arm. “What did you say?” Picard asked, a sharp edge to his tone, Andrew’s words had sailed past Picard’s armor with ease.

Andrew looked at up, all the fight gone from his gray eyes, the steel giving way to the liquid of sadness. His reply came quietly, the silent trip of an arrow shot true. “The very first time any man's freedoms are trampled, we are all damaged,” he said.

Picard's eyes widened once again. Wesley recognized the words, phrases Picard had declared to Admiral Satie in the drumhead years ago, when an inquiry board sought traitors that never existed. When that board's quest, all by following orders, had taken away freedoms of the people aboard the ship.

Andrew continued. "With the first link, the chain is forged. The first speech censured, the first thought forbidden, the first freedom denied—chains us all, irrevocably." The boy's head lifted, studied his father, searching his eyes. "Are we still chained? Are we the next link in a chain forged seven hundred years ago?"

The captain finally spoke, his face beginning to recompose into the captain's mask, his voice strengthening, yet with none of the hardness brought by the fury of before. The anger was gone. "No, we are not."

"Then I don't understand why you aren't doing the right thing. Why the man I've looked up to, the man I was proud to call my father, is willing to violate his own principles. As if nothing he's done before bore any meaning at all," Andrew said.

"This has to do with your family," Wesley said. "Past and present. The man you've been, that's the man I've wanted to be my stepfather. The man I wanted to marry my mother. The man you will become if you keep your eyes closed on the truth, he isn't the man I know." Wesley continued when Picard shifted his gaze from Andrew to him. "You used to know when to do the right thing, you knew what it was when I didn't see it myself. I learned from that, I learned more from that moment in your Ready Room than from years of philosophy courses, years of serving on this ship. Would you render that meaningless?"

"What would you have me do?" Picard asked them both. "My hands are tied."

"Then untie them," Andrew said. "Overcome your own cultural prejudice and tell the colonists all of their options. That they can remain on their planet if they withdraw from the Federation and join the Cardassian Union. Given the choice between Cardassia or death, they may choose Cardassia. Or they may choose death. But if they choose death in that instance, they will live that choice in their last moments knowing the entire truth of what has happened to them."

When Picard didn't reply, when Andrew said nothing more, the silence of space flooded in through the windows, filling the emptiness. None of them looked at each other, their eyes turned inward, each seeking the truth within themselves of who they truly were. What would be right. The captain looked over at Andrew, at Wesley, back to Andrew. "Do you have anything else to say?"

Andrew shook his head. "I have nothing more to say to you until you've done what's right." He straightened, removing his hand from the table.

Wesley saw the light in Picard's eyes dim a little at Andrew's disapproval. When they met Wesley's eyes, they dimmed a little more. "Wesley?" *Not Mister Crusher.*

“No, I—.” His reply was cut off by the sound of a transporter gone wrong. Picard and Wesley looked towards the front of the room, where Andrew was half dematerialized by Bok’s foreign transporter beam.

“Riker to Picard,” came the first officer’s voice over the ship’s comm system. “Geordi traced a signal and Bok is trying to beam Andrew off the ship.”

“I know,” Picard replied. “Andrew is in here.”

Wesley realized he’d never seen the look on Picard’s face before. *Helplessness.*

“Geordi is establishing his own lock on him now,” Riker said.

La Forge’s voice joined the comm channel. “I’m losing his signal! Bok’s re-establishing the lock!”

The captain surged forward, as if to join Andrew in the transport and be taken with him if necessary. But by the time Picard reached Andrew’s spot, the boy was gone. It took only seconds for the captain to compose his face, seconds for Riker to come running into the room behind the two Security officers. Seconds for Wesley to realize what the captain would choose to do in this situation.

Picard looked at Wesley, the former cadet an afterthought. “Consider yourself confined to quarters,” he said, then left the room with his officers.

Wesley went over to the window, seeing the planet below, mind racing, thoughts derailing everywhere, scattering ignorance. The captain would choose the duty to his family over the duty to his career. The colonists would never hear all of their choices, the entire truth. In the aftermath of Andrew’s abduction, Wesley would fulfill the duty abandoned by the captain. He knew his brother would approve, otherwise, Wesley would be as helpless as the captain was in this moment.

Beverly Crusher’s day had started out nothing like her oldest son’s. She came half-awake in her own bed to realize there was a well muscled arm encircling her, the hand resting on her hip. Behind her, the father of her children slept peacefully, the lines gone from his face in his sleep as she had seen before. She barely heard him, resisted the urge to reach over with her own hand to touch his chest, reassure herself that Jean-Luc was indeed breathing. But when she shifted slightly, the hand on her hip stayed there, moving of its own accord to match her movements so it wouldn’t be separated. And they could continue their sleep, no one having to make a midnight dash for their own quarters, could wake up and start the day without guilt.

The doctor heard little feet beyond the closed door of her bedroom, then the door opening to allow Gracie to run into the room, climb onto the bed. As the little girl burrowed herself in the space between her two parents, she mumbled a good morning

and promptly fell back asleep. A glance at the chronometer told Beverly they had a couple more hours left before the alarm would go off. She turned her head to see if Jean-Luc was awake. The gray eyes that looked back at her were his, not their daughter's. The smile on his face matched the contentedness in his eyes, Beverly returned it, then settled back into her pillow. She fell asleep again, Jean-Luc's arms encircling her and their daughter.

When she awoke again, Gracie had disappeared from the bed. The youngest shared the morning person tendencies her older sister had. Her supposition was confirmed when she heard Gracie banging on Andrew's door and Andrew's shouts for her to leave him alone, go away, he was trying to sleep. "I keep forgetting that with children around, you don't have to set the chronometer's alarm," she said.

Jean-Luc chuckled behind her, then kissed her neck. "Good morning," he said.

Beverly hid her face in her pillow. "You're completely awake, aren't you?"

"Yes. Call it what you will, but once I open my eyes, I'm fully awake nearly instantly."

"I call it a sick, twisted trait to welcome morning with such cheerful aplomb," she replied. "You get the lavatory first and I'll sleep. Then you can deal with those barbarians while I take my shower." Now she knew exactly where Allie and Gracie had inherited their morning-person nature.

With another laugh, the captain did as he was told, then touched her on the shoulder when he was out, making sure she did wake up. He kissed her forehead, already dressed in his duty uniform, looking sharp. In return, she glared at him, got up, and sauntered into the lavatory. When she entered the living room dressed for the day, she was fully awake but not yet fully thrilled about being awake. Jean-Luc had gotten the four of them breakfast and a fifth place was set for Beverly. Now that her brother was back to himself, Gracie pestered Andrew with questions.

"Allie said you have a fencing tournament soon," Gracie said.

"Mmm," replied Andrew.

"Are you going to fence epee or foil?"

"Epee." Andrew hadn't looked at his sister, only at his breakfast.

"Will you fence me in foil?"

"Not right now."

"When?" Gracie's voice was bubbling.

"Right after you stop asking me questions." Andrew's voice was not.

“What if I stop right now?”

“What if I throw you out an airlock?” Andrew said, finally looking across the table at Gracie.

Gracie glared at him. “You would not.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t. It’s too early for that sort of thing,” Andrew said, then went back to his breakfast.

Allie laughed at Gracie’s indignant look. Smiling, Beverly took her seat across from Jean-Luc, who seemed to be lost in thought. The doctor knew he had negotiations resuming that afternoon, that most likely he’d started running through all the points of contention in his head, trying to find a common ground for compromise. She left him to his thoughts, grateful for the quiet, though not given a choice by her youngest. Having reached a halt with questioning her brother, she turned to her mother. “Can I see where you work?”

Andrew gave Gracie a shocked look. “You *want* to go to Sickbay?” he asked.

“Yes,” Gracie said, as if the answer were completely obvious. Which, it was. Then she turned back to Beverly. “Can I?”

The doctor shrugged. “I don’t see why not. I don’t have much scheduled this morning except paperwork, which means there are many other things I’d rather do, such as show you around.” Maybe her youngest would become a doctor. Beverly glanced at Andrew. “When’s this tournament of yours?”

“Not until next week,” he said after he’d swallowed the mouthful of food. “I’m trying to get an epee team together, so we can do individual and team events. There’s enough decent epeeists on the ship, I can’t believe they hadn’t done any team events.”

Nana had told Beverly that Andrew had done the same thing on Caldos. There had been a foil team and no epee team, but plenty of epeeists. So Andrew had made the team himself and within a few months, taken them to the Federation’s top tournament. The salle’s coach had said that while Andrew was an outstanding epee fencer, it was his strategy and leadership that gave the team its needed cohesion to take them as far as they went. When the coach told Andrew as much, the boy had denied it was him at all, it was entirely the team. If he continued on his course, Andrew could become a starship captain. He had the raw talent for it, it only needed to be focused, honed.

Allie made a face. “I have to see Counselor Troi,” she said.

“I want to see Counselor Troi, too,” Gracie said.

Allie sighed. “Fine, I’ll try to see if she’ll let me bring her to Sickbay. Then you can ask her five hundred questions and she won’t have time to ask me any.”

Beverly frowned. "You're supposed to be seeing her for a reason," she told Allie.

"I know," Allie said. "But there are some people," she looked over at her brother, "who need to speak with her a lot more than I do."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Andrew said, not looking at his sister, instead casting a sidelong glance at the chronometer. "And would you look at that, time for me to go." He stood, gathered up a couple PADDs, and was out the door with a quick good bye.

Andrew's farewell had brought Jean-Luc out of his reverie, looking at the chronometer himself. "I should go as well," he said, standing.

"You were very boring this morning, Papa," Gracie told him.

The captain gave her a warm smile. "I have a lot on my mind with our current mission. I promise I will make it up to you and try not to be so boring again." Then he kissed the top of her head, Gracie rewarding him with a broad smile.

Beverly gave him a smile of her own as she stood. She would need to get to Sickbay soon, check the logs from the night before. Jean-Luc gave her a soft kiss goodbye, saying he'd fill her in later about the negotiations and what the time frame would be. In the meantime, Allie had gotten up, moved over to them and gave her father a hug. "Thank you for staying," she whispered to him.

"Thank you for asking," he replied, kissed her forehead, and left to captain his ship. Allie followed soon after, leaving Beverly with a chattering Gracie to bring to Sickbay.

Once in Sickbay, Beverly's staff was entirely willing to entertain her daughter as she read the logs. Alyssa Ogawa took to Gracie immediately, showing the little girl how to work tricorders, medical scanners, showing her pictures from the computer's medical texts. Even Dr. Selar lifted an eyebrow in appreciation of Gracie's enthusiasm and curiosity. When Gracie promised not to break it, Alyssa finally allowed Gracie to use one of the medical tricorders, the child zooming around Sickbay, managing to stay out of the way, yet scan every person within reach after she'd asked permission.

The doctor stepped out of her office in time to see Gracie begin to scan anyone within reach. Alyssa stood next to Beverly. "Think she'll be a doctor?" Ogawa asked.

"I don't know," Beverly replied, smiling in Gracie's direction. "She gets so curious about everything, asking so many questions. I doubt she'll be choosing what she wants to do with her life anytime soon."

Sickbay's doors opened to admit Allie and Counselor Troi. True to her word, Allie had asked Troi to visit Sickbay and see Gracie. Seeing her mother, Allie gave her a grin,

letting her know she'd gotten away with it. When Beverly looked at Deanna, just behind Allie, the counselor winked. Allie had not gotten away with anything.

Gracie ran over to them. "Can I scan you, too?" she asked.

"If you are Sickbay's newest doctor," Troi said. "Then you can certainly scan me."

Gracie scanned her, pronounced her in good health, moved to her sister. Allie had been entirely unsuccessful in keeping a straight face. "Are you sure she's healthy?" Allie asked her.

"The tricorder says she is," Gracie replied.

"Tricorder isn't always right," Allie said. "Scan me."

Gracie did so. "You're healthy, too."

Beverly knew Allie was up to something. Her challenge to her sister to scan her had been some sort of set up. Her suspicions were confirmed when Allie proceeded to pretend to faint. If Beverly hadn't known Allie was pretending, she would've believed it. She would have to get Allie involved in her next production, the girl had something there.

"You're faking it," Gracie declared. "You can play dead all you want. I know the tricorder isn't broken." She walked over to Beverly. "I'll even scan Mom to prove it."

The doctor waited as her daughter gave her a medical once-over. As Gracie's gray eyes read the read-out, her small mouth drew into a frown. "I broke it," she said, then looked over at Alyssa. "I'm sorry."

Alyssa shared Gracie's frown and took the tricorder from her to check. The nurse read the information, glanced up at Beverly, read the information again. Then she handed the tricorder over to her boss without a word.

From her spot on the floor, Allie asked, "Gracie, what did the tricorder tell you?"

Beverly stared at the information that had made her nurse do a double take, trying to keep her jaw from falling open. There was no way. The tricorder was broken. Alyssa, having come to the same conclusion, was already handing her another tricorder to double check the veracity of the information. Meanwhile, Gracie answered her sister's question. "It told me that Mom was *two* people. That's impossible. I must have broken it."

Allie was up on her feet in an instant, her long legs carrying her quickly to where Beverly and Ogawa stood. "It's not broken at all," she said to her sister. When she reached her mother, she said, "Let me see that."

Beverly frowned.

Allie sighed. “Please.”

Crusher looked across the room at Deanna, the counselor’s eyes already knowing exactly what the tricorder meant. Hell, everyone within earshot did, except for Gracie. Everyone in the medical field knew what two life signs from a human female meant.

“What’s it mean?” Gracie asked.

Beverly sighed, handed the second tricorder, which had given the same reading as the first, over to Allie. Then she knelt in front of Gracie. “It means,” she said. “It means you’re going to have a little brother or sister.”

Having heard her mother’s words and read the tricorder, Allie burst out laughing. “Mom, this is statistically *impossible*. Absolutely impossible. I mean, I’m assuming you and Dad,” Allie checked to see where Gracie was—she was safely now gabbing with Troi over by the door, “Are both on birth control. Seriously. You’re a doctor.”

Frowning more, wanting to know how it had happened, Beverly motioned her daughter to follow her into her office. As she sat down at the terminal and starting calling up information, she answered Allie. “Your father is. I wasn’t, well, I am now, but I wasn’t until very recently. Subdermal implants, both of us. It should be impossible for this to have happened. Ridiculous. Maybe all the tricorders are broken. Or something is wrong with the captain’s implant.”

“I assumed you would have checked it recently,” Allie said.

The doctor felt slightly uncomfortable talking about these things with her daughter, but at the same time, Allie was an intelligent, mature young lady. Better to be open and honest than have Allie have to resort to other means to get information. “I have, it was working perfectly fine.” Beverly drummed her fingers on her desk, re-reading the captain’s medical file. “There has to be something different with your father’s body chemistry that we haven’t caught.” Then she saw it. The artificial heart. The neurochemicals and hormones used to keep his body from rejecting it not only rendered Jean-Luc’s type of implant ineffective, but reversed the effects and *increased* the chance for pregnancy. Normally, if the female involved had an implant of her own, it wouldn’t be a problem, as it used different compounds. If not, there was an overwhelmingly large statistical chance that if the woman had ovulated recently, pregnancy would occur. Which explained Andrew and Allie, which explained Gracie and now apparently, explained little whomever. Beverly relayed this information to Allie.

Who laughed. Hard. She struggled to regain control as she brushed tears out of her eyes. “You have the worst luck *ever*,” she said. “I mean, it’s what, one or two shot kids?”

“Allie.”

“You even go two for one the first—.”

“Natalie.”

“Just wait till Dad hears about how fertile he is, he’ll feel all manly—.”

“*Natalie.*”

Allie looked up, blue eyes wide, the smile tugging hard on her lips, the girl desperately trying not to laugh in the face of her mother’s apparent ire. But she couldn’t keep her composure and the laughter started all over again. Beverly gave up trying to be serious and joined her daughter in laughter. Then the doctor’s communicator chirped. “Riker to Dr. Crusher.”

The laughter stopped. “Crusher here,” Beverly said.

“Doctor, the captain needs you to report to his Ready Room. Bok has abducted Andrew from the ship.”

She and Allie exchanged a shared look of terror. Then Beverly was up and out the door, almost running up to the bridge. She couldn’t lose him. Not now. For a few brief moments, she had forgotten Bok, lessened her vigilance. And now there would be no more denial. The turbolift couldn’t move fast enough.

Chapter 25

Captain Jean-Luc Picard pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers as the admiral on the small viewscreen in front of him began to speak. "I am en route to Dorvan V on the *Adelphi* right now and shall arrive within hours, Captain. What is the current status of your mission?"

Dorvan V. The mission on Dorvan V. "The colonists are diametrically opposed to being moved." The most succinct answer he could come up with, as the fires had been stirred on the planet below by a certain former cadet. He had to consciously make himself put strength into his voice. With the admiral's sudden communication, he even had to delegate the task of telling Beverly about Andrew to Commander Riker. She would be up here at any moment.

Necheyev frowned. "Then you will have to move them by force," she said. "I know that you find this action distasteful, as do I, but we must do what has to be done."

Picard couldn't get the argument he'd just had out of his head. Everything both boys had said rang true. This mission did violate the Prime Directive. Following the orders to move the colonists by force was morally wrong. Andrew's remarkably clear question. "*Are we the next link in a chain forged seven hundred years ago?*"

"Pardon?" Necheyev said. "What chain?"

The captain started. He'd said the words aloud. "Admiral, it's been brought to my attention that the orders given to move the colony on Dorvan V violates the Prime Directive. We are interfering in the matters of another culture, an action directly against the guiding principle of the Federation. Tell me, how am I supposed to act in this instance? I realize I have broken the Prime Directive before. Yet in each of those instances, I sought to preserve a way of life that our inaction or action would destroy. Each of those times, I could sleep at night after making the decision and carrying it out. If I were to forcibly evacuate these colonists, I would negate every action I have made thus far for or against the Prime Directive." Wesley and Andrew had been exactly right.

The admiral sat back in the chair on her side of the comm channel, her face growing dark. "You've just complicated matters."

"I realize that." Would the last words of his son to him be "*I have nothing more to say to you until you've done what's right?*" He would have to act in the best interests of the mission, in his duty as captain. But he also had to act in his duty as a father, rescue his son from the clutches of a vengeance blind Ferengi.

"Do you have a solution to your little moral complication?"

Picard frowned. "I'd hardly call it little, Admiral."

"I'm sorry," Necheyev said. "It's a fault of mine. I tend towards sarcasm when caught in a tough situation." As of late, Alynna had become much more human to the captain.

"Understood," Picard said. Beverly tended to do the same, as did Allie. And Andrew. *Andrew*. "The solution requires you to answer a question for me. My question is this: were the colonists presented with the option of leaving the Federation and joining the Cardassian Union?"

Necheyev leaned forward. "I think you're the last person I ever expected to mention that. And no, they haven't been. It never came up in the negotiations. I would think the Federation assumed the colonists would want to remain in the Federation." Her brow furrowed. "If we move these colonists by force without informing them of all of their options, we would be violating the Prime Directive. They must be informed, Captain and you must be the one to do so."

"Yes, Admiral." It would be his responsibility to do so. Andrew was also his responsibility. The two duties wrestled one another, neither one willing to bend to the other, no compromise offered.

"Captain?"

Picard looked up. "Yes?"

"That's the second time I've tried to address you with no answer. You're preoccupied, something that's rarely seen in Jean-Luc Picard. Has this to do with your son and the threat made on his life?" The admiral's question held no accusation, held no note of scolding. Her concern was genuine.

The captain glanced at his hands gripping the edge of his desk. "Andrew was abducted not five minutes ago from the *Enterprise*." No matter how many times he said it, whether it was to Will, to Data, to Geordi, it didn't get easier. The sentence had barbs that tore as it traveled outward. "He has been using a subspace transporter, undetectable until it's been used, able to penetrate our shields. My chief engineer and second officer are currently tracing the course of the last subspace transporter beam in order to find the exact position of Bok's ship so that we can retrieve Andrew." *Or his body. He would bring home another body to Beverly.* The quickness of the decision startled him, he hadn't been aware of it until that thought. He would go and bring back his son.

Necheyev leaned forward again, propping her elbows on the desk, resting her head on her hands. "Jean-Luc," she said quietly. "Tell me you aren't going to be the one to try and get him."

Picard looked back at her, his face blank.

“Captain, you are the only one who can defuse the situation on Dorvan V. It’s threatening to become a galactic incident. I am giving you a direct order for you personally not to be the one to retrieve your son.”

“Admiral, I can’t just leave him.”

“I’m not finished. While you are not to go yourself, I *do* order you to mount a rescue effort. No one can expect an officer to perform his best when a member of his family is in danger and nothing is being done. And I would not want anything happening to Andrew, as I look forward to meeting him.” She studied him again with her piercing eyes. “Captain.”

He looked back at her. A direct order. If he went to get Andrew, he would be throwing away his entire career. But what was more important, his career or his son’s live? It wasn’t even a question.

Necheyev sat back, sighing. “I trusted you with this mission at the outset because I had faith in Jean-Luc Picard to find a way out of this moral morass. I will trust you again to choose the right thing. Necheyev out.”

Picard found himself staring at the Federation symbol. He stood and went to the lone window in his Ready Room, stared at his reflection instead. At the communicator on his chest, the four pips of his collar. His power as captain meant nothing in this, it gave him no more power or leverage than any ordinary man. If anything, it reduced any power he might have, given his duty was in the opposite direction of his endangered son. He went back to the communicator. Wesley had found the courage to do what needed to be done for himself and for those about whom he cared. He had taken off that communicator, that restriction, and placed it on the table in the conference room, black against gold. Except even if he wasn’t a Starfleet captain, he had a duty to the colonists below to inform them of all their choices, to keep them from dying for nothing, when they could have chosen another path. He could delegate it to Riker. Will could handle things down there. Or Deanna, both, as a team. Going to retrieve Andrew would be throwing away his career, but in the long run, that meant nothing. The colonists would have the truth and he would bring home his son. His fingers traced his communicator.

The chime made him jump. “Come,” he said, more force in his tone than he intended.

Beverly practically threw herself through the door. “Where is he?” she asked. “Jean-Luc, where is he?”

Picard turned to her, placed his hands on her shoulders, his grip a deep touch, one meant to calm. “I don’t know. I suspect Bok has him. Geordi and Data are working on it right now.”

The doctor broke free of his grasp, began to pace the room like a caged animal, like any mother of any species would be in this situation. "He could die. Die at Bok's hands. He and I never finished talking to one another, he never told me how I had hurt him, what he was so angry at me for." She spun and looked at the captain again. "I never even got the chance to tell him I loved him."

"He isn't dead," Picard said. He wasn't. He couldn't be. The captain wrapped Beverly in his arms, each laying their heads on the shoulder of the other. "It's all we have right now, the hope that he's still alive. If we give that up, we have nothing left."

She said nothing, only held him more tightly. The chime sounded again, breaking them apart. "Come," Picard said.

Data and La Forge entered. If they noticed anything off about either the captain or the doctor, they made no mention of it. "Captain, we've traced the position of Bok's ship. It's holding position approximately three hundred billion kilometers from here," La Forge said.

A long way from Dorvan V. In his head, Picard cursed.

"It would take twenty point four minutes to reach Bok's position at warp nine," Data said. "Do you wish to plot the course?"

He couldn't. He couldn't take the ship away from the planet, the ship had to stay, the negotiations had to be finished. But it would take a couple hours to reach Bok in a runabout. "No," Picard said.

Beverly looked at him sharply. She thought he was choosing his career over his son.

He wasn't. "Data, the modifications you made to our transporter. Is there any way you could try a subspace transport from here and get me aboard Bok's ship?" the captain asked.

Beverly's look became a needle.

Data said, "It may be possible, but I would advise against it."

The doctor voiced the reasons why. "Subspace transports can wreak havoc on your cells. Remember the early days of transporter technology? The sludge that ended up on transporter pads from botched transports? That's what subspace transport can do to a living being. It's incredibly dangerous and unstable."

Ignoring the doctor, Picard looked at Data. "Go make the modifications." Then he looked at Geordi. "I want you to go equip a runabout to make the run to Bok's ship. Fastest you can get."

“Yes, sir,” La Forge said, then followed Data out of the room, leaving Picard and Beverly alone again, now facing off.

“I’m going,” Picard told her. “I have to bring him home.”

“Absolutely not,” Beverly said, arms crossing. “Using subspace transport? Jean-Luc, that could get you killed, and then I’ll have lost two people.”

She had a point, but he wasn’t willing to lose his son and live with the knowledge that he didn’t try everything in his power to retrieve him. “Nevertheless, I’m going.” He traced the contours of his communicator again, reached for a PADD to type out instructions for Riker and Troi for their role in the negotiations on the planet. “I’m going to have Commander Riker and Counselor Troi replace me in the talks with the colony. Deanna has been working with me the entire time, she and Will should be able to pull this through. I’ve spoken with Admiral Nechejev about the situation, it turns out the colony wasn’t fully apprised of all their options—no one told them they could withdraw from the Federation, join the Cardassians, and remain on their planet.”

“And Nechejev is going to just allow you to assign your first officer to this critical mission after she specially selected you?”

He looked up from the PADD, he knew he’d been hiding his eyes behind it, unwilling to meet her blue ones. Meet their anger, their fear. “No.”

“So you’re deliberately disobeying orders?” she asked, the shock resonating in her voice. “You’re throwing away your career when you could send someone else, anyone else, in your place?”

“Yes.” His hand moved to the communicator, removed it, placed it on his desk. Gold on black.

Beverly immediately reached out, picked it up. Brought it up to the level of her face, studied it. “No,” she said. “You can’t—.”

The chime sounded. “Come,” said Picard. Beverly replaced the communicator on the desk.

His first officer hurried in then came to a quick stop as he hit the wall of tension in the room. The commander’s eyes narrowed a bit at Picard and Crusher, then he spoke. “Captain, there’s been a change in the situation. A Cardassian survey team has arrived on the planet. The leader, Gul Evek, is requesting your intervention with the colonists. He says they are taking up arms against them.”

It didn’t seem the way of Anthrawa’s people. The Cardassians were a survey team, had not engaged in any military offenses, the communique from Starfleet had assured it. “Did he give a reason for the uprising?”

Riker cast a sorrowful look at Beverly. “Sir, the Cardassians have taken Wesley as a captive, claiming he interfered with their survey team and must be removed—.”

“Wesley?” said Picard. “How did he get down there? He was ordered confined to quarters and certainly not allowed off this ship.”

“We don’t know, sir. But the colonists have taken two of the Cardassians hostage in return. They’re at a standoff. I don’t think powder keg can even begin to describe what’s going on down there.”

Picard knew from the slight edge of panic in Riker’s voice that he believed the situation beyond his diplomatic abilities. He felt Beverly’s fingers brush his, turned to look at her. Her statuesque face had hardened to granite, but her eyes were searching his, looking for strength to keep her resolve. Now both of her sons were in danger.

“La Forge to Captain Picard,” came Geordi’s voice over the comm.

“Picard here,” said the captain.

“Sir, I’ve got good news and bad news. Data wasn’t able to modify our transporter coils to use subspace. However, I’ve tweaked a runabout with enough warp power to get to Bok’s ship in an hour,” said La Forge.

“Understood,” said Picard. He made snap decisions every day, decisions on the fly during a battle. And still he couldn’t decide where to go, he felt like he was being split in two, and half of him would do neither place any good at all.

“I’m going,” Beverly said.

Both Riker and Picard looked at her sharply. “No,” Picard said, the reply automatic.

The glare Beverly gave the captain was razor-sharp. “You’re the only person who can defuse the situation on that planet. Wesley is down there. The Cardassians have him. If everyone is to come out alive, you have to do it. That’s your place, that’s where your duty is. I’ve done covert ops, I’m as trained as anyone else. I’ll take a team in the runabout and find Andrew.”

She was right and he knew the look he saw in her right now—she wouldn’t take no for an answer. “I don’t like it,” he said.

“You can not like it all you want,” she replied. “But you have to accept it. It’s a solution and the best one for everyone involved.”

He nodded, looked at Will. “Number One, I want you to stay on the bridge and coordinate between the runabout and the planet. Tell Mr. Worf to assemble a Security team to accompany Dr. Crusher on the runabout.”

Will nodded his agreement. "Sir," and exited to the bridge.

The captain felt Beverly's fingers lacing through his, her free hand reaching out and take his other hand, making him face her. She rested her forehead on his. "Tell me we'll get through this."

"We'll get through this. They'll come home," he whispered. Then she kissed him, soft, reassuring, and left for her mission. He watched her go. "Come home," he said to the closed door. The captain took a moment, composed himself, picked up his communicator from where Beverly had placed it on his desk. He had a duty to fulfill and he had to be the captain to do it.

Captain Picard stepped onto his bridge and addressed Riker. "Commander, have you contacted Gul Evек?"

"He is expecting you in the village square, Captain," Will said.

Picard nodded. "Have a security team meet me in transporter room three." He was on the turbolift before he heard Riker's acknowledgment.

The scene they transported into held at the very edge of a riot, the mob playing chicken with the precipice to chaos. Picard surveyed the area as the security team spread out. The Cardassians had stationed themselves in front of one of the adobe structures. Guards stood in a perimeter, phaser rifles trained on the colonists. In the center, two Cardassians had Wesley on his knees, hands tied behind his back, a phaser rifle held point blank to the back of his head. A crowd of colonists surged around the perimeter set up by the Cardassians, shouting, jeering, moving back and forth over the slight line of no return. Not long enough to incite a violent reaction, but long enough to irritate the Cardassians further. In the center of the colonist mob were their two Cardassian hostages, held in the same position as Wesley. Picard could hear the hum as the mob began to take on its own life. Off to the side stood Lakanta, leading the angry cries for the Cardassians to leave. When Lakanta saw Picard looking at him, he moved through the crowd, the way parting before him. "Picard," Lakanta said.

"Lakanta. Why have you taken these men prisoner?" the captain asked as quietly as the noisy mob would allow. The two of them drifted towards the middle of the confrontation and into no man's land.

Lakanta glared in the direction of the Cardassians, then glared at Picard. "They were invading our homes, violating our privacy. This is not their world. They have no right to be here. They took Wesley captive as soon as he beamed down. That's when we fought back, that's when we took our own captives. They wouldn't even let us speak with a Federation representative!" His last comment was shouted towards the Cardassians.

"You mean Wesley?" Picard asked. He noticed a Cardassian Gul heading in their direction. Picard surmised it to be Evек.

“Yes. I assume that’s why he came down here, to give me news of what was going on. He said it was very urgent that he speak with me. Then he ran into this survey team, questioned them, and they beat him and took him captive,” replied Lakanta.

Gul Evek’s deep voice clarified. “He resisted arrest and my men had to use necessary force in order to detain him. Your cadet interfered with my survey team. He would not allow them to pass by until he had spoken with this man.” Evek pointed to Lakanta. “We have a right by the treaty to survey this planet and that is all we were doing. These colonists and your cadet have blown this entire thing out of proportion.”

Lakanta spun to stare at Evek. “We don’t recognize that treaty. We’re not going to let the Cardassians have Dorvan Five. No matter what the cost.”

Evek looked away from Picard, down at Lakanta. “We will not be chased away from this planet by some unruly crowd,” he said.

The captain resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow, the sun of this planet reminding him of Kataan. He shifted his gaze back over to Wesley, seeing the evidence of the beating he’d gotten from the Cardassians: blood ran from a cut running down the side of his cheek, a split lip, one of his eyes blackening. “Gul Evek, we could defuse this situation simply by beaming away our respective parties and reconvening at a negotiating table.”

“I will not allow you to take away our prisoners,” Lakanta said. “You have no authority here, Picard.”

The captain turned towards Lakanta again, giving him the full force of his frustration. This boy had done as much damage as Wesley, the two of them together. And now Wesley had left the ship without permission, gotten himself taken hostage, and the boy in front of Picard held a book of matches to the growing tinder of the mob. It seemed the boy liked to play with fire. The captain would give him plenty of fire. “You are Federation citizens and I am sworn to protect you. In that duty I have to your people, I have authority to disallow any violent actions that may cause interstellar war. In taking your two hostages, you have done exactly that.”

“They took Wesley first,” said Lakanta.

“Wesley interfered with the Cardassian survey team. He had no authority to be here. He was here entirely without permission and not as a representative of Starfleet,” said Picard.

Lakanta frowned at Picard. “He is a Starfleet cadet!” he said.

“He is not,” the captain said. “He resigned this afternoon.”

The colonist gaped. “He didn’t mention anything about that.”

Dust swirled between them, shouts of the crowd growing louder, chaos beginning to swirl its own way through the crowd, covering more than the dust. A wrist communicator on Gul Evek notified Evek that his strike team was ready.

“Gul,” said Picard. “If your troops attack the village, my security forces will respond.”

Evek replied in a tone matching Picard’s. “I hope you realize the consequences of Federation officers firing on Cardassian troops.”

Two veteran generals, each having served their countries in war, each knowing the horrors of war and wanting to avoid it, stood in no man’s land, dancing around the land mine between them. The boy named Lakanta had been forgotten. “I do. That’s why we need to stop this, before it’s too late,” Picard said.

There was a shout from the crowd. Evek and Picard turned at the same time to see Lakanta, having snatched a phaser from somewhere, rushing into the Cardassian perimeter. He fired blindly, oblivious to every soldier on the square that he had never fired a weapon before. His shots puffed up dirt from between the stones of the street, put scorch marks on the whitewashed adobe walls, then one hit at the foot of a Cardassian. The trooper raised his weapon and squeezed off one shot. The beam knocked the boy backwards, off his feet, and he landed with a thud on the ground between the two groups. He didn’t move. The wind carried the smell of burned flesh, the smell of battle, the smell of death.

The rest of the Cardassians raised their weapons and trained them on the colonist mob. The colonists saw they had the advantage of numbers and they began to press forward, towards Lakanta’s still body. Picard and Evek made eye contact, saw that their eyes reflected the same fear—that they had come to war in the seconds of Lakanta’s charge. Their shouted orders had no power over the volume of the mob, feet crushing the pebbles beneath them, arms raised holding makeshift weapons.

“Evek,” Picard said. “Beam your men away. Stop this now.”

“My people?” asked Evek. “What about yours? These Indians are your citizens. Beam them away.”

“You knew as well as I do that it would take much longer to beam this crowd out of here.” Picard stared hard at the Gul. “Evek, the last war caused massive destruction, took millions of lives. Don’t send our two peoples back down that path, not like this. History is in your hands, right now. Give us one last chance for peace.”

The colonists moved forward, knuckles white from the grips on their few weapons, hands shaking, voices shouting. The Cardassian soldiers maintained their positions, adjusting the grips on their rifles, sighting the colonists along the barrels. The trooper left next to Wesley hauled him up halfway, so that Wesley couldn’t support

himself with his legs, the phaser at the boy's temple. Wesley's face was ashen, his eyes empty.

"Evek to Vetar. Lock onto our troops on the surface and beam them aboard. Leave me here," the Gul said into his communicator.

Picard regarded him, allowing the surprise to show in his eyes.

Evek looked Picard in the eye, allowing his remorse, his sadness to show. "I had three sons, Captain," he said. "I lost two of them in the war. I don't want to lose the last one." The Cardassian reached out, grasped Picard's shoulder, a gesture of sincerity from one man to another. "We will make this peace work."

"Yes," Picard replied. "We will." *I don't want to lose my son either.* The captain looked over to where the Cardassian soldiers stood, watched as they dematerialized. Wesley dropped slowly, down to his knees, sitting on his feet. *Nor do I want to lose my stepson.* Picard started moving towards Wesley.

But when the Cardassians had beamed away, save for Evek, the mob churned away from where Wesley sat, where Lakanta's body lay, and towards the lone remaining Cardassian. Picard moved between Evek and the crowd. He would not have the peace broken now, not when they had come so far. "Stop!" Picard said.

The mob paid his command no mind. He had power in name only, but had no true authority over these people. When rational, they would listen to him, but irrational, they would not hear any of his words. The captain found himself inches from the start of the mob, having nowhere to go, Evek just behind him. One colonist raised the axe he'd found. *There will be a war after all,* Picard thought.

Behind him, Gul Evek had the same thought.

"Stop!" came a strong voice from a porch, a strong voice from the colony's leader, a strong voice from the man whose son lay on the cobbled street. The crowd stopped. The hum went away. Silence fell over the square, the only sounds were Anthrawa's feet on the wooden steps, then on the stone of the street. The leader stopped before Lakanta's body. Motioned to his son. "One boy has already died. These men have agreed to peace and we would break that peace? Our history, our tradition, has been one of peace, moving only to war when threatened with harsh rule. These men who came, they were surveyors. The mistakes of two boys left one dead, the other injured. War between the Federation and the Cardassians would bring many more deaths. I will not allow this to happen. Not here. Disperse."

And they did. Within moments, no evidence was left of the near-massacre, except for Lakanta and Wesley.

Both Evek and Picard looked at Anthrawa with awe. A leader, a true leader, the kind that comes along only once a generation, if that. Anthrawa knelt to touch his son,

traced the contours of his face, kissed his forehead. Picard walked quickly over to Wesley, unbound his hands. Wesley rose on trembling legs, went over to his friend's body, to his friend's father. Tears tracked through the dust and blood streaked across Wesley's cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Wesley said to Anthrawa, reaching out to touch Lakanta's hand, to assure himself that his friend was truly gone. Picard had done the same with Jack, had to touch his hand, feel that the life had left his friend before he would admit it was true.

Anthrawa lifted his hands from his son's face. Placed his old hands on Wesley's cheeks, traced the contours of Wesley's face, ignorant of the sweat, dust, and blood. Then as he had done with his son, he kissed the boy's forehead. A kiss of peace. "You are forgiven," Anthrawa said, his voice rough and gentle. "It is the way of life." The colony leader stood. "Wesley, help me carry my son's body to my home."

Picard and Evek saw that between Anthrawa's age and Wesley's injuries, they would not be able to carry Lakanta alone. "Fathers should not have to die before their sons," Evek said. "Nor should any man have to bear his son's death alone."

In silent agreement, Evek and Picard stepped forward and helped Anthrawa and Wesley carry Lakanta to his home. A woman, Wakasa, Lakanta's mother, met them at the door, having been told of what had happened. She shed the tears that Anthrawa had not let fall, her hands cupping her dead son's face. Anthrawa bid them to leave, that the negotiations would resume tomorrow, after Lakanta had been buried. The door shut, leaving the three off-worlders outside. Evek and Picard nodded to one another, then Evek beamed to his ship.

Picard walked back onto the stones of the street, Wesley followed. Night had fallen, the wind had died. The village oddly silent, in mourning for their actions, in mourning for their thoughts. "I came here to help," Wesley said.

"I know," replied the captain, turning to face him.

"I thought you would go after Andrew. Someone had to tell these people what they could do instead of dying." The boy's brown eyes flicked back to Anthrawa's home. "Someone died anyway." Eyes back to the captain. "I'm sorry."

"Wesley," Picard said. "Anthrawa has already forgiven you. Now you have to forgive yourself. That will be the hardest thing of all."

"I was trying..." Wesley trailed off. "Captain, if you came here, who went after Andrew?" He was beginning to struggle to remain standing.

"Your mother," Picard answered, putting his arm around Wesley's shoulders to help him stand. His other hand moved towards his communicator. "Come on, let's bring you home."

Chapter 26

Beverly Crusher's fingers drummed on the panel in front of her, her eyes staring into the stars beyond the transparent aluminum forward window of the runabout. Her drumming came to a stop when Worf's hand snaked out from his flight control panel and clamped down onto hers. "Please refrain from doing that," Worf said, then removed his hand.

"Sorry," Beverly said, placing her own hand in her lap. Her foot began tapping on the deck underneath her.

"Doctor!" Worf said, glaring at her foot.

"Sorry," she said again. At this rate, she was going to have to sit on her hands and her feet. Glancing at the flight navigation indicators, she saw that the time to intercept indicator was only visible to the lieutenant. "How much longer until we arrive?"

"It has only been five minutes since your last inquiry," Worf replied. He looked up from the readout, studied her with his dark eyes. Then he glanced over at the doors separating the pilot compartment from the rest of the runabout. The Security team had settled themselves into the aft compartment, taking the time to rest before the possible battle ahead. His eyes came back to her. "You are anxious," he said.

Not at all. "Worf, my oldest son is being held captive by Cardassians and my second son is being held by a mad Ferengi. I've no news on what's happened on Dorvan V since our departure and Bok has had Andrew for over an hour."

"We will be victorious," Worf said.

"It isn't a victory if I lose either of my sons," she told him.

The Klingon's eyes opened a bit wide. "I know," he said. "The captain will retrieve your son from Dorvan V alive. I am certain of it. We *will* retrieve Andrew from Bok. Alive."

"How are you so certain?" she asked.

"*IeSSov*," said Worf. "Foresight." As if there would be no question about it, not even glancing up from the navigation controls.

Except Klingon foresight had nothing on fate. The Ferengi's ship hung in space, waiting for them, shields down, an invitation to witness the execution. While the rest of the team had beamed to the bridge in order to secure it, Beverly and Worf materialized in Bok's cargo hold, where Andrew's biosigns had been found. Bok stood in the middle of the hold with two Klingon mercenaries. They had indeed been waiting for them.

Andrew had been forced onto his knees, his hands bound behind him, blood falling from a cut at his temple. One Klingon held a *bat'leth* poised right behind Andrew's

neck. Beverly looked at his eyes, saw the shock at her arrival, saw the anger seething towards his captors, saw the defiance nearly masking his fear. He made eye contact with her, telling her that he was fine, at least in his opinion. But with her physician's eye she found more cuts, welts, bruises, her own anger rising and Bok and his mercenaries. *You hurt my son.*

Behind her, Worf growled. "You are Klingon," he said. "This has no honor!"

"We are mercenaries, we find honor in getting paid. When we kill this boy, we will be paid. Then we will have our honor," the one not holding the *bat'leth* replied, his disruptor trained on Worf.

"Shut up," said Bok. "I've heard enough from this boy alone." The Ferengi's beady eyes moved over them. "Picard wouldn't come himself, would he? Couldn't face his son's death?"

The doctor drew her phaser and aimed it at Bok. "Lower your weapons," she said to the two mercenaries, "Or Bok is dead."

"Lower your weapon," sneered Bok, motioning with his phaser toward Andrew, then pointing it at Worf. "Or the boy dies."

Beverly adjusted the grip on her weapon. "You will not--."

The cargo hold's doors opened and a Ferengi crewman was dragged inside by two Klingon warriors, a Klingon female close behind. "Daimon!" the crewman shouted. "They've taken over the ship! They'll take the ransom from Starfleet themselves!"

"There is no ransom," Andrew said. "He's just going to kill me." The words came out strongly, but tainted with a slight slur of pain. The Klingon with the *bat'leth* turned the blade around and hit Andrew in the back of the head with the handle, sending him to the deck. Without his arms to catch him, he caught the metal plating cheek first, revealing where the cuts and bruises had come from. "No ransom," Andrew said into the deck.

The mercenary hauled him back up to his knees, placed the *bat'leth* at his neck, fingers working on the leather grip. "Shall I, Bok?" he said. "Before my--."

"Stop." The Klingon woman had spoken. Her two warriors had dropped the other Ferengi onto the deck where he curled into a protective ball. She addressed the mercenary with the *bat'leth*. "You have run far enough, Tirlath. You will no longer bring dishonor to your house."

"Get off my ship!" said Bok. "You have no right to be here."

Moving further into the room, the armor clad Klingon woman continued speaking. "Yes, I do. You see, I've been chasing this *petaQ* for over ten months. He brought dishonor to his House then refused to fight when challenged to battle to the death. I have found him and I will make him face his dishonor."

“You have no right,” said Tirleth. “The only one with the right is the head of my House and you are not. My father is the head, you are only his mate.” His fingers squeezed the grip of his weapon again.

The Klingon woman continued towards him. “I am your mother and I’ve been sent by our House. I will not see you die in dishonor, nor run away in dishonor. Even if I have to challenge you to battle myself.”

“Bet she could kick your ass,” Andrew muttered.

Tirleth reacted by flipping the blade over again and dealing Andrew another blow, knocking him back to the deck.

“I mean,” Andrew said, cheek pressed against the plating. “If you can only handle a human boy if he’s tied up, then I’m sure your mother could take you with her eyes closed.” He struggled to get back onto his knees. Beverly willed her son to stop talking, but from her spot, she couldn’t see his eyes, couldn’t communicate with him at all. She knew exactly what he was doing, using his remarks to show Tirleth he wasn’t beaten, and that could get him killed as easily as Bok firing a phaser.

“Shut up, human,” said Tirleth, kicking him for good measure, knocking him back to the floor. Then an armored boot came down on the arm that hit the deck as Andrew rolled to the side.

Beverly the doctor heard bones breaking. Beverly the mother heard Tirleth continuing to hurt her son. Bok meant nothing now. “No,” she whispered.

Andrew let out a short gasp of pain, shifted his head to face Beverly, eyes the tempered steel of resolve. But she saw the film of tears over those eyes, the flush of the pain reddening his cheeks. The doctor mouthed ‘stop’ at her son, but he kept talking, ignoring her plea. “Hey, Bok!” he said. “You could even make a profit from it. Set up a betting pool and then—.”

“I said shut *up!*” said Tirleth. The mercenary placed a booted foot on Andrew’s back, raised the *bat’leth*, this time with the blade pointed downwards, his intentions clear. The blade began to descend.

“No!” Beverly shouted, shifting her phaser away from Bok and firing at Tirleth. The beam, set on stun, knocked the mercenary backwards, the *bat’leth* falling from his fingers, point-first. The doctor’s headlong body followed her phaser fire and finished the job of knocking Tirleth to the ground. The cargo hold lit in a fireworks of phaser and disruptor beams. Worf shot the other Klingon, Bok tried to shoot Worf and was put out of commission by one of the Klingon female’s warriors. Beverly saw and heard none of this as she scabbled on the deck for the fallen *bat’leth* as Tirleth had drawn a Klingon knife. The tall Klingon got to his feet as Beverly found the weapon and managed to draw it up in time to fend off Tirleth’s first slash. She saw immediately that he was trying to get to Andrew, that she wasn’t his quarry at all. *He tried to kill my son. With two moves,*

Beverly caught Tirleth's knuckles with the blade and he dropped the knife. Within three more moves, Beverly had him pinned, the point of his own *bat'leth* held at his neck.

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder, a voice above her said, "SoS'Qeh. That is enough, he will not harm your son." The hand shifted, pulled Crusher to her feet. Beverly turned to find it was the Klingon woman who had spoken.

"How did you know he was my son?" Beverly asked.

"I suspected at first, seeing some physical similarities. The hair, the coloring. But it was the SoS'Qeh that told me the truth," said the woman. "I am Korvek." She pointed at Tirleth, who remained on the ground. "You have already met my son." Her hands motioned to her warriors, who then moved and dragged Tirleth to his feet.

"SoS'Qeh?" The doctor pronounced the Klingon word hesitantly. "What does that mean?"

Korvek turned to look at the others in the room. Bok now sitting next to his crewman, neither of them moving under the glowering eye and trained phaser of Worf. The other mercenary sat close to them, glowering at the Ferengi as distastefully as Worf. Andrew, trying to get up with his hands still bound behind him. Korvek nodded in the direction of the Security chief. "The son of Mogh will tell you," she said. "You must take your son home as I must bring mine home." Then Korvek nodded solemnly to her. "May your son continue to have honor," she said. "And may mine find his."

Beverly nodded back. Then she went to her son, cutting through his bonds with Tirleth's dropped knife. "Come on, Mom, I could've taken him," Andrew said, a half smile on his face, in his eyes, the other half holding in the pain. With his arms free, her son pushed himself up on his good arm. His attempts to stand were less successful. Finally, she put her arm around his shoulders so he could lean on her and helped him up.

More Klingon warriors had arrived and were escorting Tirleth and the other mercenary out. Andrew caught Tirleth's eye. "How about that," Andrew said. "My mother kicked your ass instead."

Tirleth growled and tried to move towards them, but Korvek grabbed him by the neck and led him out of the cargo hold with the rest of the group.

"What shall we do with these?" Worf asked, unable to keep the disgust from his voice.

"Is it true there was no ransom?" the crewman asked.

"It is true," said Worf.

"Then we will take Bok into custody. There is nothing in it for us without profit," said the crewman, ignoring the glare from his former Daimon. Worf nodded and allowed the Ferengi to summon the rest of the crew, then walked to where Beverly stood and

Andrew was doing his best to stand. One he was close to them, they beamed back to the runabout. The security team joined them, once again settling themselves in the aft compartment, each discussing what had happened on the bridge with the Klingons.

Beverly had Andrew sit in one of the two extra seats in the pilot's compartment as Worf plot the course back to the *Enterprise* and engaged the warp drive. The doctor had gotten the medical kit and ran the tricorder over her son, looking for injuries other than his obviously broken arm. Reaching his head, she frowned. "Can you sit in the other chair?" she asked him.

Andrew frowned back at her. "Why?"

"I need a better look at the back of your head." She had seen him take two solid blows to the back of his skull, and with his mouth, she'd no idea how many more he'd been given before she and Worf arrived.

"Am I going bald?" Andrew asked, still trying to joke. Then he took a look at how serious she seemed and moved over to the co-pilot's seat without saying anything else.

She scanned a few times with the tricorder, then felt the back of his head for good measure. No skull fracture, with a mild concussion and a scalp wound, he'd escaped without any traumatic brain injury. Both of the bones in his forearm had been broken, one cut on his cheek was fairly deep. All but the arm she could heal in the runabout. The doctor got a hypospray and a sling from the medkit, spun Andrew's chair around so she could get a better look at his arm.

For a moment, she got a better look at her son. The past few hours she had worried that she would never see him again, at least not alive. Would never have told him that she loved him. Now she looked at him again and the words caught in her throat, worried that he would reject her. Andrew's eyes were full of questions but his mouth kept silent. "Does your arm hurt?" she asked, wondering if he would try to deny it.

He lifted an eyebrow at her question, looking so much like his father when he did that. The eyes, the determination, the gallows humor. "Oh, no, it's fine," he said. "I normally have it in pieces like this. It's more useful, really."

Beverly lifted the hypospray to his neck and injected the painkiller so that his arm wouldn't cause him agony when she moved it. After a few seconds, the analgesic had taken effect and she slid her son's arm into the sling. The medicine would keep his arm out of pain for a few more hours, more than enough to get him to Sickbay and healed up good as new. Next she grabbed a plaser, spun him around again, and began healing the cuts to his scalp. The blood that had gotten into his short cropped hair gave it a dark rusty hue, a darker red than he even had in the winter. She felt better just being able to physically touch her son, reassuring herself that he was there, he was alive, he would be okay.

But the words remained stuck in her throat.

Worf began to speak in his low rumble, his eyes remaining on the flight panel before him. “Lady Lukara, the wife of Kahless the Unforgettable, once went hunting with three of her sons. Her youngest was very young, not yet a warrior. Yet the son of Lukara and Kahless had decided he would hunt with his brothers and he was not denied the opportunity. Their quarry was *mil’oD*—the sabre bear. Lukara gave her sons a warning about the sabre bear—it is most deadly when it is trapped without hope of escape. Therefore, her sons would always provide the bear with an honorable way out if they wished to survive the encounter. As two older sons began tracking a bear through the forest, the youngest son had already spotted a bear cub. This son set onto the cub in a silent run, his spear held at the ready. The cub spotted the son of Lukara and raised up on his two hind legs, claws out, ready for him. They would meet in an epic clash.”

Beverly had no idea why Worf had decided to recite a Klingon myth, but listened anyway, fascinated. Andrew’s scalp was nearly healed.

Worf continued. “The boy and the cub were within feet of each other when a roar sounded from depths of the forest and the cub’s mother—the *mil’oD* that the boy’s brothers tracked—bounded into the clearing. Another roar—and Lukara stepped into the place behind her son. The two she-bears faced off, they would protect their sons at all costs. They had both been drawn into a hopeless trap by their progeny. The forest had fallen entirely silent as the mothers regarded one another. Then the Lady Lukara took her son by the shoulder, removed the spear from his hand, snapped it in half, and tossed it to the ground. The *mil’oD* brought her mighty paws up and into her cub, sending him tumbling away. The boys who had put themselves into danger were chastised. The mothers gave each other a nod and parted ways.”

Finished with Andrew’s fully healed scalp, she turned him around so that she could attend to his face. When she saw his eyes, they were deep in thought, contemplating the story Worf continued to tell. Beverly held Andrew’s chin to keep his head still as she healed the cut on his cheek.

And Worf still told his story. “Kahless said of this tale: ‘This is the reason for *SoS’Qeh*: No man, whether father, son, brother, friend, or foe, should ever think to survive if he is to step between a mother and her child. A mother will become more wrathful than the sabre bear, will stop at nothing to protect her child, even if it means her own death. To anger a mother is the most hopeless situation for any man. To do so is to invite death at her hands.’” Worf paused, finally looking away from the control panel and at the two of them. “That is what happened today,” he said. “What we saw was *SoS’Qeh*, mother-anger. It is something that cannot be described fully, it can only be witnessed to truly understand what it means.” The Klingon stood up. “I must go debrief my officers.” And he went into the aft compartment.

Beverly was left facing her younger son alone. She had finished healing the last cut on his face, all that remained was the blood. Her hands dropped so that she held his cheeks, feeling the lines of his face. Then she finally looked at his eyes, eyes she’d been avoiding as Worf told his story. She knew exactly what Worf meant, what Korvek meant, how they explained her ability to bring down a Klingon warrior twice her size. It

was something that could be explained only by *SoS'Qeh* and how easily they recognized her as Andrew's mother was because of that. What she had done for Andrew, she would do for any of her children without a second thought. Because it just *was*.

His eyes trembled. They skittered back and forth searching her eyes, their tremble matched by one in his body. "I can't do this twice," he whispered, trying to avoid her look, she not letting him go.

Beverly kissed his forehead. "I love you," she said. "I was afraid you would die and never have known."

Her son closed his eyes, forcing out a tear he'd been holding back, lowered his head. She knew, she knew he didn't want to cry twice, be vulnerable first in front of his father and now his mother. "I would have known," he said. "I've known since I was little." He raised his head again, opening his eyes, looking directly at her. "I made myself forget, because it hurt too much. I needed you."

"I'm sorry," she said.

Andrew shook his head. "When I had Shalaft's, I needed you. When that pain hit me, stabbing through me as if it was taking me apart cell by cell, I needed you. When I woke up screaming at night, running out into the snow because I thought the Borg had taken you, I needed you. When Nana was dying, I needed you."

She reached out for him again, laying her hand on top of his head. "Andrew, I'm sorry. I—."

He cut her off. "Let me finish. Please."

She waited.

"Then when I got abducted by some crazed Ferengi, then couldn't keep my mouth shut and was about to get my head sliced off by some dishonored Klingon, I needed you. And suddenly, you were there, launching yourself through the air across a room to tackle a Klingon twice your size, then beating him soundly with his own weapon." He paused, took a breath. "Before, when I wasn't talking, when I was hurting you and everyone else because of my own problems, I was trying to deal with how I felt about you. I've known since I was little that you loved me. Love me and Allie and Gracie. All of us wished that you were our mother, or that you could adopt us, or something like that. And then you *were*, as if some fairly godmother had been written into our little story and we were granted our dearest wish. Then every time I needed you came back to me, every time I was scared, worried, alone, sad, angry, all of those times. And I thought now you'd be there for me, since you were my mother. But then I thought, wait, you were my mother that whole time, and you weren't there. I know now that you couldn't be. I know now that you can be. I know now that you *are*."

Beverly bit her lip, but it did nothing for impeding the tears. Andrew reached out with his good hand, brought her head closer, kissed her on the forehead. A kiss of absolution. "And I love you for it," he whispered. "But you have to tell me."

She started. "Tell you what?" Off the top of her head, she could come up with about fifty things that she knew and he didn't and he'd love to know. Starting with his yet-to-be-born sibling.

Andrew grinned, that fantastic smile that reminded her of Jean-Luc. "Where you learned to kick ass like that? Honestly, the look on that Klingon's face, I thought he'd die out of pure embarrassment. And when did Worf teach you to use a *bat'leth* like that? I've had one lesson and I ended up wielding the *bat'leth* like I was a drunken monkey."

Her son's words drifted around her. *Jean-Luc. Wesley.* She still hadn't heard anything about the mission on Dorvan V, if either of them were alive.

"Mom?"

Beverly blinked and looked at her son. "Yes?"

Andrew frowned. "Are you okay?"

The doctor nodded. Worrying him over his father and brother wouldn't do either of them any good. "I'm fine."

Her son sat back. "You're not fooling anyone, you know," he said. "Something's happened and you're not telling me."

You'd always have to deal with what threatened you. "Your brother was taken captive by Cardassians on Dorvan V. Your father went down to the planet to negotiate his release and conduct more negotiations between the colonists, the Cardassians and the Federation." Yet somehow, the way Andrew had gotten the information out of her made her feel better, because it had been what Nana had done.

Andrew paled. "Wesley must have gone to tell them about our idea."

Before Beverly could ask for more information, Worf entered the pilot compartment again. At the two surprised faces, Worf said, "They are debriefed." He checked the navigation panel. "And we are ten minutes from docking with the *Enterprise*," he said as he took his seat.

The doctor settled in for one of the longer ten minutes of her life. She had one son back, now she had these last ten minutes to wonder if she would have the other alive as well. And Jean-Luc.

Jean-Luc Picard stood in the main shuttlebay, resisting the horrible urge he had to fidget. He'd left Wesley in Sickbay glaring at Dr. Selar because she wouldn't let him go until Beverly had had a good look at him. Not that Picard didn't blame Selar for her unwillingness to release the doctor's son. When it came to stepping between Beverly and her children, one tread with extreme caution.

"Riker to Picard."

He tapped his communicator. "Picard here."

"Sir, Admiral Necheyev is aboard and waiting for you in your Ready Room."

The captain frowned. He hated keeping an admiral waiting, but he wasn't going to leave this shuttlebay until he was certain the rest of his family was home safely. "Tell her I'll be on my way shortly, Number One," he said. "Picard out."

The comm channel closed. Then the alarm sounded for the opening shuttlebay doors and the activation of the forcefield. The captain couldn't keep the small smile off his face as the shuttle glided to a stop on the bay's floor. The security team members left the shuttle first, filing out of the room as quickly as they'd filed out of the runabout. Lieutenant Worf stepped out, nodding at the captain, then took a walk around the runabout as he finished the post-flight checklist.

Finally, Beverly walked out the runabout's hatch, followed by Andrew. Silence briefly held them all, none knowing what to say aloud, none knowing what thoughts went through their heads. The captain looked at his son, the boy's arm in a sling, some blood on his face near where he must have had cuts that Beverly would have healed on the return trip. Picard realized he had no idea where he stood with Andrew and stopped himself from going to the boy and wrapping him in his arms, happy to have him alive. Then Andrew came right towards him, threw his good arm around Picard's neck and hugged him close. "You did the right thing, didn't you?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Yes," the captain replied.

"And Wesley?"

"He's in sickbay. He's going to be fine." *They would all be fine.*

"Are we grounded?" Andrew stepped back, the mischief glinting in his gray eyes.

"I haven't decided yet," said Picard.

Andrew laughed and went towards the shuttlebay's doors. The captain saw Beverly approaching him, her smile tight, her eyes flipping between anxiety and relief. "He's fine, Beverly," he repeated, reaching out, drawing her to him. "Wesley is fine."

"Thank you," she whispered into his ear. Then she kissed him softly. "I'll be in Sickbay," she said. "Are you going to come down?"

He shook his head. "No. Admiral Necheyev is waiting in the Ready Room."

She graced him with one of her brilliant smiles. "Maybe you're the one who's going to get grounded," she said, then was out the door before he could think of a retort.

When Captain Picard stepped into his Ready Room, the admiral awaited him in one of the chairs set in front of his desk. "Captain," she said, rising.

"Admiral," he said.

She sat down in her chair as he settled into his desk chair. "I've heard that your son was retrieved safely?"

He allowed himself the sigh of relief he'd been holding in. "Yes, sorry to keep you waiting. I was in the shuttlebay to..." he trailed off, not knowing exactly how to explain why.

Necheyev smiled. "To make sure, with your own eyes, that they were okay. I understand, Captain. No harm done. I'm also very pleased that you didn't disobey a direct order. Frankly, I thought you would even though I tried my damndest to get you to keep your head in the situation on Dorvan V. Can you tell me what happened down there? I've heard bits and pieces about some sort of mob riot."

"It wasn't me," Picard said. "It was Anthrawa who stopped the mob. Gul Evек had just beamed all of his men off the planet, aside from himself. This was after the boy Lakanta had tried to take on the Cardassian camp by himself and died in that cause. When all of the other Cardassians disappeared, the mob turned to the last one left—Evек. Despite my being there between them and Evек, they were determined and very nearly managed to get to him. I'm certain they would have murdered him. But Anthrawa appeared out of nowhere and called for the colonists to stop. And they did, every single one of them, then dispersed with his one word." Picard rubbed his head. "It was one of the single most amazing displays of leadership I've seen in my life."

"If only he could have arrived before that point," Necheyev said.

"I think Anthrawa would feel the same way. Lakanta was his son," replied Picard. "As such, he has agreed to continue negotiations tomorrow, after Lakanta's burial. They will be presented with all of the information, including the option to withdraw from the Federation. An information packet has already been sent to Gul Evек regarding the matter and he has sent it along to his superiors. Now the nego—" The captain stopped speaking when his Ready Room door opened and his youngest daughter bolted inside.

"Papa!" she said.

The captain stood up. "How did you get on the bridge?" he asked.

"Took the turbolift," she replied, her tone informing her father that the answer was absolutely obvious.

“No, I mean, who let you in here? How did you stay on the bridge?” Inwardly, Picard grimaced at how easily the five year old could throw him into a tizzy.

“I told Commander Riker that I had something really important to tell you,” she said, walking over to him, her eyes roving about the entire room, seeing the lionfish, the window, his Complete Works of Shakespeare. “This is a great room. No wonder you don’t let anyone up here.” She finally noticed Necheyev. “Hello,” she said. “Who are you?”

The admiral was smiling at her, either enchanted by Gracie or amused by the girl’s effect on the captain. Or both. Necheyev held out her hand. “I’m Alynna,” she said. “And you are?”

The captain’s youngest daughter shook the admiral’s hand. “Gracie,” she said. “Are you Papa’s boss?” she asked, looking at the pips on Necheyev’s collar.

Picard had reached his limit. “Mary Grace,” he said, keeping his face and tone as stern as he could. “You said you had something really important to tell me?”

“Oh! Yes!” She clapped a hand to her mouth. “I’ll whisper it in your ear,” she said, finishing her walk over to him, tugging his arm so he knelt to her level. Too late, the captain remembered that Gracie had a certain inability to actually whisper. So her next words were quite loud enough for Necheyev to hear. “Mom told me this morning that I’m going to have a little brother or sister.”

Unfortunately, the admiral had chosen that moment to make eye contact with the captain. At first, all of the blood drained from his face. Then he realized Necheyev was looking right at him, had heard Gracie’s entire little secret, and she certainly looked as if she was going to burst out laughing.

Which she did. An admiral-like dignified laugh, but laughing nonetheless. Picard wanted to become part of his desk. Or the floor. Or anything other than the Jean-Luc Picard who couldn’t seem to not get his Chief Medical Officer pregnant. He could only hope that Gracie had misheard somehow. Gracie’s small hand patted his cheek. “Papa, your face matches your uniform,” she said.

He turned to look at his youngest daughter. At her striking gray eyes, the spray of freckles across her nose, the delicate lines of her face, the soft auburn hair, and that streak of utter mischief she’d inherited triplefold from her mother.

“Even your ears,” she said. “And the top of your head!”

“Gracie,” he said. “Enough.”

“Apparently *you* haven’t had enough, Captain,” said Necheyev, now regaining her composure, but the amusement not leaving her eyes. “I think we have another situation to discuss.”

Chapter 27

Beverly Crusher felt the elated mood from returning to the *Enterprise* with her son alive dissipate as the doors to Sickbay opened. Reality jumped out and blindsided her and Andrew with the mess on Dorvan V, with Wesley's time as a hostage, with Andrew's own brush with death. When Beverly stepped through the doors, she located Wesley immediately. Jean-Luc had been right. Physically, Wesley looked fine. But once she saw his eyes, she knew otherwise. The dust of regret had settled onto them, fading them with the haunting of the events he had experienced. He sat on the biobed, his shoulders slumped in the tunic of the Sickbay-issue clothing, eyes barely lifted to meet hers and Andrew's.

"I was only trying to help," Wesley said in a youthful voice trampled weak by harsh experience.

Andrew started heading in his brother's direction and Beverly grabbed his arm before he made it two steps. His legs were too shaky to allow for him to walk across the room. Her second son gave her his annoyed look, but let her guide him to the closest free biobed. Wesley saw and came to them, Beverly gathering him up in a hug, he was alive, they would be okay. "I was only trying to help," Wesley said again, then let go of her, sitting in the chair next to the bed.

The doctor started to ask what he was trying to help with exactly when Allie ran through Sickbay's doors. "Gracie gave me the slip. That little weasel. I'm going to strangle her. We're in Ten Forward and someone mentions that the captain was back. I look around Ten Forward, trying to find Guinan and see if she knew anything, I look back and that weasel was *gone*." She looked at her brothers. "Nice to see you guys alive," she said to them, hiding her anger with her brothers in her humor. But her mother and brothers were all familiar with the tactic and knew exactly how she felt.

"You've no idea where your sister is?" Beverly asked Allie, she would have to address the rest of it later.

Allie shook her head. "I mean, I did, but she kept moving. And moving fast. Last I heard, she was on the turbolift heading towards the bridge. That's when I figured I'd come in and tell you, because I don't feel like getting yelled at for being on the bridge."

Beverly cursed in her head, then summoned Dr. Selar. "I need to go to the bridge," she told the Vulcan. "Please take over for me."

Selar nodded. "Certainly."

Beverly caught Wesley's faded eyes. "We'll talk later," she said. He nodded. Then the doctor nearly flew out the door, changing tracks from her sons and their problems to her youngest daughter. In the turbolift, she could only think of one thing that would make Gracie escape her sister and risk going to the bridge. The little darling wanted to break her wonderful news to her father. With Admiral Nechev in the room with him. And the

little girl couldn't whisper to save her life, much less anyone else's, such as her father's. Or her mother's, for that matter. The lift doors opened to reveal the bridge. Beverly stepped onto it to see Will Riker rising from the command chair. "Will Riker," she said.

"Beverly Crusher," he said, unable to keep the smile off his face.

"You wouldn't happen to know where my youngest daughter is, would you?" she asked, knowing perfectly well that he did, heading straight towards her bearded friend.

"You know, strangest thing. She talked to me about this news that she desperately had to tell her papa. Of course, she's got that killer smile and she's so charming that I couldn't resist letting her in to see him. Then I completely forgot that the admiral was in with the captain. Horrible mistake on my part, I'm sure I'll get a reprimand on my record for it." Light danced in his eyes.

He knew. "She told you."

"Oh, no. She whispered it to me. Two things, actually, since I am apparently out of the loop." Now he was all out grinning.

She was going to kill him, slowly and painfully. After she figured out what to do about her child. *And she was going to have another one.* "Will," she said.

"Really," he said. "I want to know how it's possible."

"Will." What was it with people doing this to her?

"It's either dumb luck or some medical miracle sort of thing—."

Will.

"What?" Cheshire cat.

Beverly wanted to knock those pretty white teeth right out. "I already had this conversation with my daughter. Who actually came up with some better remarks. You, I will take care of later. Right now, I have someone else to deal with." She spun away from the first officer and went straight into Jean-Luc's ready room.

To be greeted by a little Gracie Picard entertaining a certain Admiral Alynna Necheyev. Beverly knew immediately that Gracie had broken the news, as the tips of Jean-Luc's ears were still red. She could imagine exactly how red he must have gotten.

He stood up. "Beverly," he said.

"Mom!" Gracie said, standing up and running to give her a hug. "Papa told me that everyone is okay," she said, then she pointedly looked at Beverly's abdomen. "Everyone?" she asked.

The doctor held back a grimace. "Everyone," she said. "Now I want you to do me a favor." She knelt down to Gracie's level. "Can you go out to the bridge and tell Commander Riker that he's to give you a tour of the bridge? And that he isn't allowed to send you back in here unless he wishes to die a slow and painful death?"

Gracie's gray eyes grew large. "You'd really kill him?" she asked.

Beverly smiled. "Of course not. But he doesn't know that. So don't tell him that part."

"Right," said Gracie, then bolted out of the room, leaving the three adults behind.

When the doors shut, Admiral Necheyev said, "So it *is* true."

The doctor sighed and seated herself on the couch. "Yes." She looked over at Jean-Luc, his face slack with shock, the blush rising from his neck and quickly working its way up. The poor man. He had no idea. She decided to explain before either the admiral or the captain found the words to ask how. "You see," she said. "It has to do with the captain's artificial heart. Now, this medical discovery wasn't even made by researchers until recently, but there's a problem with the traditional birth control subdermal implant and the hormones and neurochemicals that keep his body from rejecting his artificial heart."

Picard frowned. "Which is?"

Beverly rubbed her hands over her face, then looked at him, the admiral, then the captain again. "The problem is that those chemicals render the implant ineffective. In addition, it exponentially increases the chance for pregnancy if the woman in question has no implant, a malfunctioning implant, or has ovulated."

"Let me get this straight, Doctor," Necheyev said. "What you are essentially saying is that Captain Picard has some sort of super-sperm?" Somehow, the admiral asked her question with a straight face.

Beverly wanted to become part of the couch. A sidelong glance at Jean-Luc told her that he felt much the same.

Necheyev gave a big smile. "At least now that you know what's been happening, you can plan these sorts of things out. Now, your daughter has also informed me that you are planning on getting married," she said, looking from one to the other.

"Are you paying this informant?" Beverly asked, her usual tight control of her acerbic replies vanishing after the trying events with Andrew earlier, after seeing Wesley's face after his own experience, after having Gracie spring the news on her father with an admiral present.

"No," replied Necheyev. "I haven't found the need. But her last bit of information gives me cause to ask you a favor."

“What would that be?” Beverly asked.

“If you are able, I would love to perform the ceremony. Something I would rather enjoy is finally seeing this unrequited-loved-unrequited love between the captain and the doctor of the *Enterprise* ultimately requited.” She frowned. “If you ignore the three and a quarter children.”

Not even a quarter, Beverly thought. She kept the comment to herself.

Jean-Luc seemed to get his ability to speak back. “If we are able, we would love to accommodate you, Admiral,” he said, his captain’s mask pulled back on.

“Excellent,” said Nechejev. “Now, about the negotiations, Captain. You already have a good relationship with Anthrawa and Gul Evrek after the events of today. I want you to continue this relationship and conduct the negotiations tomorrow. Also, I want you to speak with Anthrawa to find out the proper etiquette concerning his son’s death, if there should be any sort of delegation sent by Starfleet.”

“Of course,” replied the captain.

Nechejev nodded to him. “Keep me informed, Captain,” she said. She started towards the exit. “And congratulations,” she said.

“Fantastic,” Picard said as the doors closed behind the admiral. The doctor thought she detected a hint of sarcasm, but his eyes betrayed nothing. “I’m going to speak with Anthrawa now,” he said, looking at her from behind his desk.

Beverly walked over to him, perched herself on his desk next to him, taking his hands. “I wish I could have told you myself,” she said. Then she sighed. “I wish we could have planned this one as well.”

The captain extricated one of his hands from hers, placed it on her flat stomach, fingers splayed out. “I think what matters most in this situation is that we’ll both be able to see everything. That I’ll see you for the next nine months, every change reminding me that you love me enough to carry our child. That I’ll see this one being born. That you won’t have give give this one up, that you’ll hear him or her say their first words, take their first steps, that we’ll be able to comfort this one after nightmares, everything.” He looked up at her. “That’s what matters,” he said.

She leaned over, sought out his lips, kissed him. “I love you,” she said. He always knew exactly the right thing to say. Slowly, she let go of his hands, slid off his desk. “I’ll let you speak with Anthrawa. Come by my quarters after you’ve finished?” she asked.

“Always,” he said.

And she exited, collecting Gracie on the way from an enchanted Will Riker. Beverly let another curse go inside her head. She couldn’t very well inflict her daughter

on anyone if they kept finding her so charming. Allie was right, Gracie was a little weasel. And adorable little weasel whom she loved, but still a weasel.

Andrew Picard watched his mother leave Sickbay, going after his younger sister. "I'm glad I'm not her," he mumbled, then looked over at his brother. "What the hell happened down there?" he asked. Wesley's eyes had frightened him. Earlier that day, they had been bright, absolutely determined in doing the right thing, absolutely believing in what he would do. When he and their mother walked into Sickbay, Wesley's eyes revealed none of that, instead they were infiltrated with the ghosts that dulled them. Concentrating on Wesley would also allow him to forget, for a moment, the look on his mother's face when Tirleth started that downward movement with the *bat'leth*, intent on cutting off Andrew's head.

"I tried to help," said Wesley, studying his feet. "After you were taken, I went down to tell Lakanta. Everything was a mess. Lakanta died."

Andrew jerked upwards, turning towards Wes. "Lakanta died? How did he die?"

Dr. Selar pushed Andrew back to the biobed. "I advise you not to sit up again," the Vulcan said. "Or make any sudden movements." She slid his arm into the regenerator, Andrew felt the brush of the restraining field placed over his arm, causing the hairs on his arm to rise.

In a broken sentences punctuated with the long pauses of overwhelming emotion, Wesley told Andrew about Lakanta's desperate last charge, about Anthrawa's intervention as the last minute, about carrying his friend's body back to his home. "His mother was there, waiting for us," said Wesley. "As soon as we stepped through the door, she was crying. She didn't have to say a word to us, we all knew how she felt. When we left, she was kneeling next to the bed we'd placed Lakanta on, holding his face. All I could think about was Mom, how Mom would have reacted if you or I had been killed today. That look on Mom's face, her holding one of our faces like that, because we did something stupid."

"He brought peace," Andrew whispered.

"That's what I was trying to do," Wesley said.

"Maybe it wasn't your job, maybe you were supposed to go down there, a trigger for Lakanta to to his job, and all of that was supposed to happen." Andrew paused. "Maybe his death had a purpose." He wasn't sure, but he wanted it to be true. But Wesley's story about Lakanta's mother only made Andrew recall his mother's face as she saw Andrew about to die in front of her, die for some meaningless reason, leaving nothing behind except memories and sadness. "Heroes die young," Andrew said.

"He was no hero, no more a hero than I was," said Wes.

"I don't think heroes know they're going to be heroes, unless they're some sort of mythological character. I don't think courage is all intelligence, it has to have an amount of stupidity to it, of blindness. Otherwise, a hero would see the consequences of his actions before he took them, the immediate consequences, and he might stop, leaving whatever destiny he might have had unfulfilled," said Andrew. He knew what he'd done earlier had nothing to do with courage and everything to do with stupidity. Taunting a Klingon holding a *bat'leth* to his neck, irritating him enough to continue beating him, finally angering him enough to try and kill him. And if his mother hadn't been there, he would be dead. But maybe it she was meant to be there just as Lakanta's mother wasn't. If *SoS'Qeh* were true, and he was sure it was, Wakasa would have somehow stopped Lakanta from dying. And perhaps there would be no peace.

"I wish he hadn't died," Wesley whispered.

"Me too," came Andrew's reply.

"Even now the Vulcans wish that Surak had not died so young," said Selar, concentrating on the readouts from the regenerator. "Yet his death served a purpose as an illustration of his living by his ideals through the midst of battle. Surak said that 'Time is a path from the past to the future and back again. The present is the crossroads of both.' It is logical to assume that one such crossroads occurred on Dorvan V today." The doctor looked up from the readouts, at Andrew, at Wesley. "Your friend died on the path to the future. It is up to those now living on that path to continue his journey. Nobility lies in action, not in name. Make your peace with your friend's family." Selar nodded at Andrew. "You are healed. However, you are not to leave Sickbay until your mother has given you clearance." Then she released the restraining field and went to fill out her report.

Andrew flexed his hand experimentally. It felt fine, the last of his outward injuries were healed, erasing the last of his bodily evidence of his stupidity. Selar was right, they would have to figure out what to do, and the first thing would be going to Lakanta's funeral.

"Must be nice to be a Vulcan," Wesley said.

Allie looked back from watching Selar walk off. "I wouldn't say that," she said. "They have to keep tight control of their emotions so they don't show them outwardly. It isn't like they don't have emotions. Personally, I wouldn't want to be a Vulcan." Then she fixed a glare on her brothers. "And what the hell did you two think you were doing? You should've told me about this."

"You were never interested in the Prime Directive before," Andrew said, trying not to let himself be intimidated by the glare from his sister.

"I might not be, but I am interested in knowing what my brothers are up to when it concerns their safety either from outside sources or from pissing off the captain," she replied. "How else am I supposed to protect you?"

Wesley snorted derisively. "I don't need your protection."

Andrew said nothing, since he was sitting on a biobed after just having had his broken arm healed and been saved only a scant couple hours earlier by his mother's protective instincts.

Allie looked at Wesley, looked at the PADD Selar held, looked back at Wesley. "Hardly," she said. Wesley studied the floor intensely, point taken.

Their mother walked through the door, Gracie in tow. Allie glared at the both again. "We're not done," she said. "But our little sister is in more trouble with me than you two are." Allie stood up, went straight over Gracie, stepping directly in front of her.

At Allie's downward glare, Gracie glared right back, her arms crossing. "I'm not afraid of you," she told her older sister.

"Oh, you will be," Allie answered, taking Gracie's hand. "You and I are going to have a little chat. Come with me." She then led Gracie out of Sickbay, the little girl throwing a backwards glance at her mother and brothers, showing them she was indeed afraid of her older sister's impending tongue-lashing. Beverly watched the exchanged, entirely nonplussed. Gracie had obviously caused some sort of trouble on the bridge, but despite their pleas for Beverly to tell them about it, she remained tight-lipped. Once the doctor had read over the two PADDs with the medical information on both her sons, they headed back to their quarters for some much needed rest.

Jean-Luc Picard strode through the corridor towards his family's quarters. His conversation with Lakanta had gone well as could be expected, the colony's leader had planned on sending a communique to Picard if the captain hadn't done so before, so Picard's own communique wasn't an interruption at all. The man had requested that Picard attend the ceremony as well as Wesley and Andrew. Wakasa had then reminded Anthrawa that Picard had two daughters also, and that they should attend, as well as the children's mother. For a moment, it had looked as if Anthrawa were going to object to Beverly's presence, then Wakasa had laid a gentle hand on her husband's forearm. "She is his wife in all but name. She is his family and his family must mourn with our own." Anthrawa had nodded solemnly, asking forgiveness for his lapse into prejudice. They were to go to Anthrawa and Wakasa's home before dawn, as Andrew's and Wesley's roles began there.

Picard entered the cabin, finding Wesley asleep on the couch, Andrew asleep in an armchair, and Conal running up to greet him, then was beaten out by Gracie. The captain nearly shook his head in the domesticity of it all. A week ago, he would never have thought this possible. Now, he couldn't imagine living without it. His daughter looked up at Beverly, who was helping Allie set the table. "Now that Papa's home, can I wake them up?" Gracie asked.

Home. Picard exchanged a warm smile with Beverly, sharing the same thought. They were home.

“Go ahead,” Beverly told Gracie.

The little girl sent the wolfhound after Wesley, the large dog jumping and landing his front paws on Wesley’s chest, bringing the young man quickly awake. Wesley complained as the dog licked his face, finally shoving Conal off him and standing up out of the range of the dog’s muzzle. Gracie went after Andrew, poking him in the chest. “Wake up,” she said. “You have to eat dinner.”

“Go away,” Andrew said.

“Mom said you have to eat dinner, doctor’s orders.”

“She did not.”

Beverly spoke up. “Andrew, you have to eat dinner.”

With a martyred sigh, Andrew got up from his chair, trying to rub the sleepiness out of his face. Picard saw that his son had cleaned up and changed, no more blood on his face, nor dirt, nor the blood that had dried to his hair. From how Andrew and Wesley acted, the captain was certain Gracie hadn’t told him her news. From the look Allie was giving him, he was certain that she knew. As they sat down, Allie sidled up to him. “Glad you took my advice,” she whispered into his ear.

He felt the tips of his ears burning. Allie grinned at him and took her seat while he looked at her, annoyed. She was absolutely impossible and he loved her for it—most of the time. Meanwhile, Gracie decided that she couldn’t possibly hold in her news any longer and as soon as each of the boys had started to eat, she blurted it out. “We’re going to have a new little brother or sister,” she said.

Andrew choked on his roll.

Wesley’s drink went down the wrong pipe, sending him into a paroxysm of coughs.

“You have to be f—,” Andrew stopped when Beverly and the captain gave him looks. “Kidding me,” he said, editing himself. “How?” And he remembered who he was talking to. “Wait, no. You know what? I don’t want to know. I’m not going to question it. Not one bit.”

Wesley continued coughing.

“So when’s the wedding?” Allie asked, delighted in her brothers’ discomfort.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Beverly said.

Picard hadn't made any suggestions to Beverly yet, trying to decide on his own what he'd like to do, so he would have something to discuss with her. While he wanted his ancestral home, his brother and sister in law and nephew involved, he also wanted to be family in name as well as feeling by the time they got back to Caldos. And Caldos would be their destination again after the negotiations were finished, as the sudden departure hadn't allowed for Andrew, Allie, and Gracie to say appropriate farewells to their friends. After all that had happened on that colony days before, he felt very strongly about their return. The *Enterprise* wasn't scheduled to return to Earth for at least eight months, maybe as many as eleven, possibly a year. While he and Beverly could take leave, the suddenness of it would leave the ship with a sizable hole in the command structure. Perhaps they could arrange to take two month's leave, possibly more, surrounding the time when the baby would be born, and have this next Picard born in La Barre. He also wanted Wesley to be a part of the ceremony, it being appropriate to give his mother away, and he had no idea what the boy's plans were now, where he would be going.

"I think we should be a family when we get back to Caldos," Allie said.

Picard gave her a surprised look, wondering if she'd listened in to his thoughts. He hoped not. There were other thoughts of his that his daughter shouldn't be aware of when it came to her mother. "The *Enterprise* is stopping by Caldos on our way to our next mission, as none of you got in any proper farewells."

"I'd like to stay there for awhile, too," Wesley said, now recovered from his coughing fit. "Nana's house always felt most like a home to me, since it never went anywhere. I think that would be a good place for me to figure out what I want to do."

"So you haven't any ideas?" Beverly asked.

Wesley shook his head. "No. Not really. I mean, I know the things I'm interested in, but I don't know what I want to do for the rest of my life." The boy tapped his fork on the side of his plate. "And I want to be there for your wedding, so I can give you away."

"Wouldn't it be too soon?" Andrew asked. "Basically, what you and Allie are saying is that you'd like to have it within the next week."

"I say they've waited long enough," Allie replied, casting looks at Beverly and Picard.

"You also have family on Earth to consider," Beverly said. "You have an aunt, an uncle and a cousin you've never met living in France." She glanced across the table at the captain. When he looked into her blue eyes, he saw what she wanted—she wanted to be a family by the time they got to Caldos. She wanted to step again onto the snow there and know that everything had changed, that her dreams were now true. Except she also wanted to include his family, include his feelings on the matter about having Robert, Marie, and Rene present for the ceremony.

But he felt the same way as the rest of them, that the meaning of Caldos needed to be changed with finality. They could visit his family afterwards, he would bring up his idea of leave with Beverly later. "I think we could visit them at a later date," he said aloud. "I suspect Guinan would have no arguments over having a wedding in Ten Forward in the next few days. That is, if your mother and none of you have any arguments against the same."

Beverly smiled at him. "I don't," she said.

"Good," said Gracie, summing up their feelings on the matter.

The captain hated to ruin the good mood, but he also had to bring up the matter of the funeral tomorrow, before he forgot. "We all have an obligation tomorrow morning," he said. "Anthrawa has requested that our family attend Lakanta's burial. Andrew and Wesley are to have some sort of role in the ceremony."

Andrew and Wesley nodded, their eyes going serious, thinking over what they would be doing in the morning.

"When do we need to arrive at the colony?" Beverly asked.

"Before their dawn," Picard answered. "And before you ask, I don't know what Wesley and Andrew will be doing. Anthrawa and Wakasa didn't explain."

Gracie looked at her brothers, then her father. "Who are we saying good bye to?"

"Lakanta," Wesley answered quietly. "He died this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," the little girl said.

"Me too," said Wes.

Dinner finished quietly after that, the remorse from Andrew and Wesley dampening the good news of the wedding and the new child. Both boys went to bed soon after, the naps they'd had earlier not enough to keep them awake any longer than they had to be. Allie wasn't far behind, wanting to get enough sleep to be able to wake up for the next day. The captain tucked Gracie into bed, the little girl falling asleep in the midst of her questions about the wedding, about being a flower girl, about whether the new baby was going to be a boy or a girl, what they would name it.

Picard walked out of his youngest daughter's room smiling. "She's awful," he said. "Nearly as impossible as Allie," he said to Beverly, following her to the bedroom.

"Speaking of," said Beverly. "What did Allie say to you that made you blush before dinner? The one that made you give her that—" she paused, seeing the look she was talking about currently forming on his face— "look you have on your face right now. That annoyed look."

“She told me she was glad we took her advice,” he said, grumbling.

Beverly laughed. He shot her the look she’d mentioned. It only made her laugh more.

“I can only imagine what Gracie is going to be like when she gets to be Allie’s age. I’m beginning to wonder if she does it on purpose, embarrassing me like that. I know for a fact that Allie does it on purpose,” he said.

The doctor put her arms around his neck, drawing him close. “You’d better get used to it,” she said. “I think Gracie is only going to get worse as she gets older. And she adores you, so you get to be her primary victim.” Beverly smiled wickedly at him. “And I, for one, look forward to those years, of Gracie continuing to torture her father with her innocent insights and inability to whisper.”

“I was right, she did inherit it from her mother,” Jean-Luc said, moving his hands to her hips.

She reached up and brought his face to hers. “Oh, her mother adores you, all right. But in an entirely different way.”

And she proceeded to show him.

Chapter 28

The sun on Dorvan V hid behind the mesas, hesitant to make its appearance, the gray twilight before dawn beginning to erase the darkness of night. One light penetrated the gray of the pre-dawn, the warm light from the home of Anthrawa and Wakasa. Jean-Luc Picard and his family moved towards this light, Andrew and Wesley leading the way. When the door opened and Wakasa stood before them, each of them said nothing aloud, their eyes saying all that needed to be said. One at a time, Wakasa cupped their cheeks with her hands, kissed their foreheads, offering them peace and forgiveness. Anthrawa motioned the boys inside, towards the room where he and his wife had kept vigil with their son's body. The rest of them entered the home, each of them greeted by Wakasa the same as Andrew and Wesley. Lakanta's mother bid Picard, Beverly, Allie, and Gracie to sit and watch, Allie between her mother and father, Gracie moving to her father's lap.

A soft knock at the door, another kiss of peace from Wakasa, and Gul Evek entered the room of the vigil. Picard and Evek exchanged nods, each knowing why the other was present: *Nor should any man have to bear his son's death alone.* Wakasa asked Evek to sit near the others on the bench, the Cardassian sat hesitantly next to Picard and Gracie. The little girl watched Evek curiously; she had never seen a Cardassian before. The captain turned his attention back to Wakasa, at her eyes, her face, her posture as she watched the ceremony for her son begin. *Nor should any woman have to bear her son's death alone.* Anthrawa exchanged a look with his wife, offering her comfort through the warmth and strength in his own eyes. Picard exchanged a similar look with the woman who would become his wife in the near future.

Wakasa asked Andrew to hold a bucket of suds for her, then handed it to him. He took it and held it without trembling as Wakasa carefully washed her son's dark hair. Once she had finished, she toweled it dry, folded the towel back up slowly, set it and the bucket aside. She then braided his hair and placed the braid across Lakanta's shoulder and down to his chest. As Wakasa and Andrew worked together, Anthrawa had Wesley hold a cup of ink. The colony leader took a slim brush and wrote words in his ancient language on Lakanta's hands and feet and forehead. He began with Lakanta's left foot, writing words and chanting in his ancient language, then repeating the chant in Standard.

The left foot, "In the house made of dawn."

Then he moved to the right foot, continuing. "His feet, my feet, restore."

Left hand. "His limbs, my limbs, restore."

Right hand. "His body, my body, restore."

The man moved up to his son's forehead, wrote in old script with the dark brown ink. "His mind, my mind, restore." He placed the brush in the cup, took the cup from Andrew, set it next to the towel.

Wakasa chanted, "In the story made of dawn, on the trail of dawn." She moved to a shelf, took out a long white cloth, a shroud. Quietly, she gave instructions to Andrew and Wesley, and together with Anthrawa, they wrapped Lakanta in the shroud. Last they drew the shroud to cover the boy's peaceful face. Together, the boy's parents said, "To the house of your kindred, up there you return. To the house of happiness, up there you return. To the house of the sky, up there you return. To the house of the rain, up there you return. To the house of your kindred, the rain will return."

The colony on Dorvan V believed the white shroud covering the body represented the cloud spirit that would return to the sky and bring good rain upon the village. Anthrawa turned to Wesley and Andrew. "Sit with me, in front of my son's body," he said, lowering himself to the ground to sit cross-legged. Wesley and Andrew followed suit, sitting as Anthrawa was. Behind them, Wakasa stood next to her son's body, her hand on his chest, over his stilled heart.

The captain felt Gracie move, her hand stretch out to touch the face of the Cardassian beside them. "It's okay," she said. "I'm sad, too." And she wiped the tear from the stranger's cheek.

"I will tell you a story of the dawn," said Anthrawa. "You must listen closely. This is how Kotcimanyako scattered the stars: As the tribe started south a little girl was left behind. Our Mother called, 'Kotcimanyako, come here,' and she gave her a little bag made of white hand-woven cotton to carry on her back. 'Do not unwrap what is in this bag, no matter what happens.' The girl promised she would keep it wrapped carefully. Kotcimanyako started off."

"'Be careful, little daughter. Do not unwrap what is in your bag,' Our Mother repeated. Again, Kotcimanyako promised not to uncover it. She did not know what it was she was carrying. As she went along, she began to wonder why she couldn't unwrap her bundle, why she was strictly forbidden to peek into it. At last Kotcimanyako thought she would peek and see what she was carrying. She stopped, put her bundle on the ground, and stooped over. She untied the last knot and then the bundle was overflowing. Still, she didn't know what it was that came out from her bag. She was frightened and tried to put everything back into the bundle, but they all flew out into the sky and scattered all over the heaven. They were all to have had different names, and be put in special places, but now they were scattered. A few she succeeded in getting back into her bag, and when she came to the end of her journey, she unwrapped the few stars she still had in her bag and they were put in their right places. For this reason we know only a few stars by name." Anthrawa stopped speaking, studied each boy before him intently.

In return, each boy did the same, studying Anthrawa. Picard thought that the little girl in the story could easily be Gracie, her curiosity and innocence taking over a promise she might have made, he could see her accidentally spilling the stars into the sky.

Anthrawa spoke again. "This story is for each of you. Wesley, this is the story of a child who thought they knew their path until she found the courage to take one of her own. Without her courage, we would not have the stars to explore." Anthrawa turned to Andrew. "Andrew, this story is also for you, that if the child had not veered from her path, these stars would not be set out before you, a large expanse of discoveries to be made." The colony leader gestured to them both. "You each must take the path that is meant for you, do not dwell on the past except to bring you into your future." The man stood, followed by the two boys.

"Come," said Wakasa. "Let us bring Lakanta to his future in the Sky City."

Anthrawa asked Picard and Evek to come forward. The captain handed Gracie over to Beverly, stood with Evek. They would carry the bier along with Wesley and Andrew. Wakasa would lead them, Anthrawa would follow. They left the adobe home and found the rest of the colony gathered outside. The gray of the sky nearer to dawn was the same color as the eyes of Picard, of his son and daughter. The entire colony processed before them along the path leading up to the nearest mesa, all of them listening as Wakasa and Anthrawa told the tale of their culture's first experience with death.

"They were coming up from Shipap. One of their children became sick and they did not know what was the trouble with him. They had never seen sickness before. They said to the Shkoyo chief, 'Perhaps our Mother in Shipap will help us. Go back and ask her to take away this trouble.' He went back to our Mother and she said to him, 'The child is dead. If your people did not die, the world would fill up and there would be no place for you to live. When you die, you will come back to Shipap to live with me. Keep on traveling and do not be troubled when your people die.' He returned to his people and told them what our Mother had said. In those days they treated one another as brothers, all of them," Lakanta's parents said.

The last line brought them to the base of the mesa, where a grave had already been dug, waiting for Lakanta. Slowly and carefully, the body was lowered, then colonists bearing shovels began to throw dirt over the shrouded body. At the foot of the grave, Anthrawa lit a fire, saying that it would burn for four days to help Lakanta in his journey to the sky.

A moment held as the small group watched the flame, thought of the boy and his spurious charge, of the flash of light that had been his life. Picard looked at son and stepson, knowing that it could have been either of them to whom people would be saying farewell. Wesley and Andrew, both staring ahead at the flames, eyes traveling up with the smoke as it rushed towards the sky, reaching for the Sky City of Lakanta's tradition. The muscles in both of their jaws worked, their eyes glistened with rain they would not shed for their friend. Then Gracie's small hands reached up and grasped one hand from each of her brothers. Picard heard her whisper to to them, all of them heard her whisper. "It's okay to say good bye," she said. "He lived for his purpose. So you say good bye now."

The captain watched as the tears fell from every adult in the group, from every child in the group, like rain pattering the ground to bring about new life. The larger hands of the two boys tightened over Gracie's small ones, their tears fell as they said good bye. Between him and Beverly, Allie reached for their hands, held them, crying and not knowing exactly why. They all were, as they all made their farewells to everyone that had left them behind for their new life.

The negotiations began when they returned to the village, between only Picard, Anthrawa, and Evek. The rest returned to their homes, whether it be within the village or on the *Enterprise*, the two boys walking with their heads down, arms around Allie, Beverly holding Gracie's hand tightly. The three men found themselves once again in the austere surroundings of the meeting room for the Tribal Council. "I have been given authority to speak for the Council," Anthrawa said when Evek and Picard gave him questioning looks over the absence of the others. "Please, sit down."

Anthrawa sat at the head of the table, Picard and Evek on either side. "In those days," Anthrawa said, "They treated one another as brothers." The man looked from Picard to Evek. "And that is how I wish to conduct these negotiations today. We hold our family sacred, gentlemen. You have shared a sacred moment within my own family, you were witness to my son's death. I do not wish for his death to be in vain and I do not wish to have any more deaths as result of this colony's actions. You see, in his pursuit of independence, my son became blinded to our founding tenet of peace. This adherence to peace is why we have moved to many times, that if our difficulty with a people could not be solved without violence, we left rather than incite it. While we do not wish to move, we also do not wish to have war."

"There is another possibility," Picard said. "It's one that my son and stepson brought to my attention yesterday, before all of this happened. Wesley has told me it is why he came here in the first place, to tell Lakanta the entire truth. You see, there is one possibility that has not been mentioned, and that possibility is that you have an option to withdraw from the Federation and join the Cardassian Union."

"This is true," said Evek. "Our side also neglected in our duty by not mentioning that option. We extend that to you now, Anthrawa."

The leader nodded, looked from Evek to Picard. "Then that is the option we must take. There would be no more bloodshed, nor would there be any more moving. We would get to stay on our home."

"Anthrawa, I want to make absolutely sure you understand the implications of this agreement. By giving up your status as Federation citizens, any future request you or your people make for assistance from Starfleet will go unanswered. You will be on our own and under Cardassian jurisdiction," said Picard. "I say this because I will not allow any more truth to be held from you."

The colonist nodded. "I understand, Captain, and my people are willing to take that risk." He turned to the Gul. "Will the Cardassian government honor the agreement we've made here?"

"I believe that I can convince them this is an equitable solution. I cannot speak for every Cardassian you will encounter, but if you leave us alone I suspect that we will do the same," Evek replied. "Captain, will this be acceptable to Starfleet Command?"

Picard sighed. "I will take some doing," he said. "But with Admiral Necheyev's support, I think they'll go along with it in the end."

Gul Evek stood. "Then if there is nothing else, I will return to my ship." He gave a small smile, sharing the frustration of the constancy of bureaucracy. "I have a lengthy report to write." Evek started towards the door, then stopped. "Anthrawa, I mourn for your loss." Turning to Picard, he said, "Picard, I was truly pleased to hear of your son's safe return and I am grateful for your daughter's sympathy this morning." With a nod to both men, he departed.

The captain rose from his chair. "I have a long report to write as well, Anthrawa," he said.

The leader rose as well, taking a long look at Picard. "You have wiped clean a very old stain of blood," he said. At the captain's surprised look, Anthrawa smiled. "I knew about your ancestor since I found out the *Enterprise* was assigned to help with the negotiations. I knew we would not lose our home, that you would erase that stain on your family's history. Your son and stepson did well to remind you of your task towards history, as mine did for me. I had been blinded as much as he had, to forget peace in the name of independence. He made me remember." He extended his hand. "I wish you well, Picard."

The captain shook the other man's hand. "I wish you the same, Anthrawa." Then he left the room and departed for his ship.

Once he materialized in the transporter room, he made his way up to the bridge, to his ready room and started in on the report while everything was fresh in his mind. He went between two PADDs, typing in the experience from the funeral and the impact it had on the negotiations afterward. The impact the boy Lakanta had on all of them, the hole it left in Anthrawa and Wakasa's fabric of life. He had only gotten two paragraphs into the report when the terminal next to him beeped to notify him of an incoming communication. Turning, Picard saw Admiral Necheyev on his screen. "Admiral," he said.

She nodded. "Captain. I wanted a preliminary report on what happened during the negotiations, especially when I found out you had already returned from the colony."

"They have decided to withdraw from the Federation," Picard answered.

Necheyev sighed. "I suspected they would. The Council will fight this."

"I believe once the Council reads about the death of the boy that they will agree to the terms. It is a way of peace and we shouldn't let our own prejudices against the Cardassian Union force another people to reject their home," said Picard.

"Yes," said the Admiral. "I read your report. How are Anthrawa and Wakasa?"

"As well as can be expected," Picard said. "Their burial rites leave plenty of room for hope on both the part of the deceased and those left behind. Gul Evok also took part. It was a...moving experience." The words he used couldn't come near the fullness of the experience. But for some things, there were never adequate words.

"Well, I look forward to your report," said Necheyev.

"Admiral, I have a favor to ask."

"Yes?" She quirked an eyebrow.

He drummed on his desk with his fingers. "Would you be able to officiate a wedding the day after tomorrow?"

She blinked, staring at him momentarily. "Isn't that a bit soon, Captain?"

"I was outvoted," he said, his voice plain.

The admiral smiled. "As I said before, I would love to. Send me the details. Necheyev out."

The screen faded to the Federation symbol, then darkened. The captain picked up the PADD once again and returned to his report. It had to be finished before he could turn his concentration to the other matters rushing up. Three more paragraphs into it and the door chimed. "Come," he said.

Andrew strode in. "I heard a stuffy old captain is cooped up in here," he said.

"I have no idea who you're talking about," Picard said, keeping his eyes on the PADD after hearing who it was. "And how did you manage to get on the bridge?"

"You might want to get a better first officer," Andrew said, settling himself into a chair.

The captain dropped his PADD with a clatter. "Riker. Damn him." Andrew lifted an eyebrow. "Don't give me that look," Picard said. "It's bad enough that your mother and sister do. Please tell me you have a good reason for coming up here and interrupting my work."

"I do. Worf's free for the next few hours, I have some things to work through, so I figured he could have his first fencing lesson. Then I remembered that you wanted to see it, thought you probably had a few things to work through, too, found out you were here, and came up to ask if you wanted to go," Andrew said.

The captain crossed his arms. "The ship has a comm system for a reason."

"It's much easier to say no to a voice disassociated from a body. I thought maybe I could charm you into it."

"The answer is no," Picard said, picking up a another PADD. "I have to finish this report."

Andrew heaved a dramatic, stretching his long legs in front of him. Picard was suddenly and distinctly reminded of Beverly. "This means I'm sending Gracie up next," said Andrew.

The captain paused mid-movement. "You know as well as I do that's not fighting fair."

The boy stood up. "I never said I'd fight fair. So, that report'll take you what, another hour? Meet me in the gym in about an hour and a half?"

"Fine." If he wasn't finished with the report in an hour, then he writing skills would have vanished anyway.

"Two hours maximum," said Andrew. "Then I sent the short one." He grinned.

The captain started waving him out, then stopped. "Do me a favor?" he said. "Please try to look properly chastised for coming up here and disturbing me. It might deter my first officer from allowing my children on the bridge in the future."

Andrew nodded his agreement, composed his face into what looked like a sincere sorry, and left the ready room. Picard made a note in his head that if he saw that look on Andrew's face again, that it wouldn't be sincere. Within forty five minutes, he'd transmitted the report, spoken with Guinan about the wedding, then transmitted those details to Necheyev. Picard left the bridge to his second officer and went down to the gymnasium, still in full uniform. Entering, he found his son kneeling at a bench, working on the tip of one of his foils. Andrew must have caught the movement out of the corner of his eye because he flinched in his ministrations on the foil's tip, let go of the end, and the spring went flying across the room.

"Shit," said Andrew. "I'll never find it now." The boy looked at Worf standing in the corner. "We'll have to fence epee," he said.

"As long as it's a warrior's weapon," Worf said.

Andrew rolled his eyes.

"I do not understand why you cannot replicate another spring," said Worf.

Andrew scowled. "You should know as well as anyone that parts of weapons, especially bladed ones, aren't the same when they're replicated instead of forged." The boy looked over towards the door, finally noticing his father. "You know how to fence epee, right?"

The captain nodded.

Andrew turned to Worf. "Care for a demonstration of your warrior's weapon?"

"I would," said the lieutenant, then he walked into the main fencing room. Picard quickly changed into his whites, grabbed one of his epees and joined Andrew and Worf in the main room. Worf stood next to one of the spectator benches as the captain and his son hooked up to the scoring boxes. Picard hadn't fenced epee in awhile, the other fencers on the ship tended to fence either exclusively foil or saber. He took a few minutes to warm up, then stepped onto the strip. After saluting and donning their masks, they began moving up and down the strip, sizing each other up. They looked for shoddy footwork, open target, tempo changes. Andrew had explained to Worf while the captain changed that the entire body was target in epee. Picard feinted at Andrew's shoulder, drawing a slight parry from the boy. The captain feinted towards the same place again and Andrew caught him on the underside of his arm, getting a touch.

The walked back to the middle of the strip, starting again. They went up and down the strip, trading touches, keeping fairly even. Picard realized that the rule of three didn't apply to Andrew. Normally, you could set a pattern of two and break it on the third, or make a mistake twice but not three times. Andrew, however, could see mistakes immediately. Picard made a mistake in his extension, exposing his hand. Andrew nailed the tip of his father's thumb. The score box lit up.

"That was not honorable!" said Worf.

Andrew took off his mask, frowning. "Why not?"

"You got a touch on his thumb. That does no significant damage."

The captain removed his own mask. "Actually, lieutenant, if he'd cut off my thumb, I would find it hard to wield a weapon."

"That is true," said Worf.

"You willing to learn yet?" asked Andrew.

Worf indicated that he was and the two Picards began to teach their Klingon friend how to fence.

Beverly Crusher tapped the PADD in her hand against the desk in her office. The terminal next to her held information on some report she'd read at least fourteen times in the last hour and had retained none of it. She had no idea why she even bothered to try and work this afternoon, with all the preparations she had to finish for tomorrow, except Deanna and Allie had said they would gladly make the preparations for her. Then this morning she'd had Dr. Selar perform a checkup to make sure the baby was developing properly. Though very early in the pregnancy, with DNA scanning, Selar had already determined the baby's sex. The PADD contained the report of the checkup and the doctor had spent the past hour trying to decide if she wanted to know. Her eyes locked onto the caduceus on the window, PADD continuing to be tapped on the desk.

"I didn't realize this what how you got so much work done," Deanna Troi said from the doorway.

"That's because it isn't," Beverly replied.

"I just spoke with Guinan," said Deanna, settling herself into a chair in front of the doctor's desk. "Everything's all set for tomorrow."

"Mmm."

"Gracie told me that she wants a pet tarantula," Troi said.

"Gracie hates spiders," Beverly replied, finally looking away from her window and at her friend.

"Oh, good, you were listening," said Deanna. "Gracie actually came with Allie and me to help find and fit dresses. She's terribly excited."

"I can imagine." Beverly continued to tap the PADD.

Deanna leaned over and snatched the PADD from her hand. "What's this?"

"Report from this morning. I had Selar do a check up on me." Crusher drummed her fingers on the desk. "Jean-Luc finished moving his things this morning. I think. Though he insists on staying in his cabin tonight, something about it being his last night as a single man. However, Andrew and Wesley said they're going to stay with him. I think they're doing some sort of father-son bonding or something. I don't know. Male-oriented. They're even taking the dog." Beverly frowned.

"Conal *is* male," said Deanna, reading over the report.

"Mmm." Beverly frowned again. "Will's not involved in this is he? I mean, I trust him with my life, but there's things in life that I don't trust him with. Like my younger son's innocence, for example."

"I don't think you have much to worry about yet. Andrew hasn't even realized how attractive he is, so I don't think Will would have much influence over him."

“So Will *is* involved?”

Deanna put the PADD down on her lap. “Do you want to know or not?” she asked, smiling.

Beverly placed her head on the desk. “Yes. No. If it’s a girl, I’m afraid she’ll turn out like Gracie or Allie. If it’s a boy, we’ll just be horribly outnumbered.” The doctor moved her eyes to look at her friend while keeping her head on the desk. “Tell me.”

The counselor grinned and set the PADD down on the desk next to Beverly’s head. “You’re officially outnumbered,” she said.

The doctor closed her eyes. “I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“Ask the captain,” came Deanna’s lilting voice, then changed the topic to the schedule for the next day.

Beverly decided to tell Jean-Luc that night as they finished sorting through the rest of his things. Gracie pulled his sextant from a bin and ran off with it. Andrew and Allie had gotten ahold of the Picard family album and were leafing through it on the couch, drawing glares from the captain every time they snickered. “Hey, that’s a Jesuit,” Andrew said, pointing to one of the photographs, a man in a long black cassock.

“Gabriel Lalement,” said Jean-Luc, not looking up from his book. “His mother was a Picard. Gabriel entered the Jesuit order in Paris and was sent to Canada as an assistant to John de Brebeuf. They were both taken prisoner and killed by the Iroquois.”

The doctor watched as the twins considered this. “We should name this next kid after him,” said Andrew. “I mean, Gabriel, not Lalement.”

“Could work for a girl, too,” said Allie. “It makes sense. He or she came about as this whole Dorvan V situation was made and resolved and the mistake of that one Picard was wiped off the slate. Seems only fair to wipe the slate for the other side.”

“Exactly,” said Andrew. The boy noticed his father wasn’t paying the best of attention. “And it won’t be one of those silly sounding French names.” And he started reading off each of the names he found in the album, exaggerating the French accent.

Jean-Luc snapped his book shut. “Enough. I heard you,” he said. “I think you and I will have a little chat about the French language tonight.”

Andrew made a face.

Beverly studied the captain as he studied their son with that annoyed crinkle in his brow. Andrew returned the same look as Allie ignored them both. The doctor wondered who the next child would look like. If he would have darker hair like Allie, or some shade of red like Andrew or Gracie. If he would have blue eyes or gray. If he would be as stubborn as the rest of them, as inquisitive as Gracie, as fiery as Allie, as

strong as Andrew. Smiling, Beverly went and sat on the arm of the chair Jean-Luc was in. "It's a boy," she whispered in his ear.

"Thank God," he whispered back, looking at Allie, then over at Gracie, who was returning with the sextant.

"Jean-Luc!" Beverly said, smacking him playfully on the arm. "That's an awful thing to say."

Gracie put the sextant down on the coffee table. "What'd Papa say?"

The doctor opened her mouth to give her youngest a truthful answer, but Jean-Luc cut her off. "Papa said that he is very happy to find out that you'll be getting a little brother because he couldn't bear to have another daughter as pretty as you."

The little girl beamed.

Beverly let loose a curse under her breath. Gracie was absolutely wrapped around her father's finger. He could do no wrong. The father in question gave her a self-satisfied smirk. The rest of the information seemed to finally work its way into Gracie's head and she gave a shout. "I'm getting a little brother!" she said.

"Named Gabriel," Andrew and Allie said in unison.

"I like that name," said Gracie.

The name argument continued until Gracie started falling asleep on the floor. Her father tucked her in, then headed back to his quarters for one last night, accompanied by Andrew and Conal. Beverly fell asleep on the couch to be woken by the chime announcing Deanna's arrival for breakfast and the sounds of Allie and Gracie running about their morning routine. The smallest girl seemed a bit out of sorts without having her brother to torture. She went over to her mother. "Get up," she said. "Deanna's here and you're getting *married* today!"

"To Deanna?" Beverly asked, doing her best to wake up.

Gracie's brow crinkled. "No. To *Papa*," she said.

"Oh, right. Him," Beverly said, getting up and making her way to the lavatory as Deanna laughed. She was awake when she came back out and tore into the late breakfast. The rest of the morning passed quickly as the final touches were made. Gracie had to make a last minute trip to the arboretum to steal a camellia and found her brothers on the way back.

"Are you ready yet?" Wesley asked when they came in behind their sister. Both boys had on dark suits chosen by Allie.

Beverly glared at her oldest son.

Wesley balked. "I guess not," he said.

"Dad's ready," Andrew said. "He complained that you weren't there to fasten his collar. I don't understand why he can't do it himself. It's the wrong size anyway, too small."

"Vanity," said Deanna, making a couple final touches to Beverly's hair.

Andrew and Wesley snorted. Beverly stood up. "I'm ready," she said, turning to her sons. Wesley let out a whistle while Andrew raised an eyebrow. "I'll take those reactions as compliments," she said.

Her second son walked over and gathered her into a hug, lifting her off her feet. "You look great," he said. "I'll go tell Dad you're ready."

Wesley escorted her down to Ten Forward where everyone waited. When they entered, everyone stood, and Beverly saw all of her friends, their eyes shining in reflected happiness. Jean-Luc was standing in front of the admiral, Will and Andrew next to him. Deanna, Allie, and Gracie waited across from them, Gracie holding a camellia in her hands and grinning from ear to ear. The girl had explained earlier that it was for Nana, that this camellia had its own purpose of watching the wedding for her great-grandmother. Beverly saw Jean-Luc holding in a grin as wide as his daughter's, the smile on his face genuine, the grin lighting up his gray eyes. Wesley shook the captain's hand and then Beverly took Jean-Luc's hand as her son went to stand next to his brother.

They exchanged their vows in front of their friends and family, became husband and wife. Jean-Luc and Beverly Picard shared their first dance together, then those friends and family present joined them on the dance floor, equally celebrating the new beginning. After a few dances, Gracie cut in on her mother to dance with her papa. She squealed when Jean-Luc lifted her up and spun her around. Andrew asked Beverly to dance and she happily agreed. "Thank God you're having a boy," Andrew said quietly, watching Gracie. "I don't think I could take another sister."

Beverly slid her look over to her husband and younger daughter. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong with that," Andrew said. "It's Allie. She keeps making girls ask me to dance. It's awful."

The doctor smiled at him and knew the girls must find his complete ignorance at his own good looks incredibly attractive. The dark suit brought out all his features, the reddish tint to his fair hair, the sharp gray eyes, the chiseled lines of his face and body. Nothing arrogant about him at all. Allie swayed by with Wesley and Beverly exchanged one son for another, keeping her eye on Allie and Andrew to see what would be said. The poor boy was trying to look inconspicuous, the attention getting to her quiet son. But when dancing with Allie, his opposite, relishing in the attention the boys lavished on

her, flirting madly with each of them, he had no chance of going unnoticed. Allie whispered something in Andrew's ear and his face flushed a deep scarlet and his sister laughed, her laughter carrying across the room like a choir of bells. She'd told him. Beverly laughed as well.

"I see she finally told him," Wesley said.

Beverly lifted an eyebrow at him. "You knew about that, too?"

"There's only so many times you can be asked by girls if your brother is attached before you figure it out," Wesley said. They watched as the captain switched partners with Andrew, saving Andrew from further torment from his twin sister, the boy obviously preferring to be tortured by the younger. His face was still red.

"I have an evil stepfather now," Wesley said.

Beverly turned toward him, thinking he was serious. Then she saw his grin and returned it.

"Except he isn't very *good* at being evil," said Wes.

"I'll let him know," Beverly replied.

"I'm glad it's a boy," Wesley said abruptly, his eyes on Gracie. "Honestly, another sister would be awful. Allie and Gracie are bad enough."

The doctor poked her son in the shoulder. "What is it with the men in this family?" she asked. "What's so bad about the women?"

Wesley shook his head and sighed. "Nothing, Mom. That's the problem." Beverly's laughter mirrored her daughter's.

Before they spent their first night as husband and wife, Jean-Luc and Beverly added a new, final entry to Nana's journal: the date of their wedding. Then they placed a photograph of them from the wedding into the family album. In the ambassadorial cabin they decided to stay in that night, they looked through the album together after they made the new entry. "I'd like the baby to be born in La Barre," the captain said quietly. "We could take a couple months leave, centered around the due date. All of us could spend time together, the children could learn about their roots in France—."

She cut him off with a kiss. "Jean-Luc," she said. "You're babbling. I've already decided that's what I wanted to do." Beverly followed her statement with another kiss, one that he deepened, and she led him to their bed. They would talk in other ways for the rest of the night.

Three days later, they arrived on Caldos, beaming down soon after the ship entered orbit. The moon peeped from behind the cloud cover to reflect brightly on the snow, lighting a path across the yard to the house. Gracie pushed Wesley into the snow,

he whispered something in her ear, and the two of them began to make snow angels. Allie shoved her twin into the snow next to them, Wesley whispered something to the two of them. Then Beverly realized that Wesley remembered.

She reached out and took Jean-Luc's hand, and they went into the yard to join their children, a light snow greeting them from the night sky above. *It was snowing...*and Beverly had no ending to her sentence, the future open, no longer tied to the past.