

Holding on to hope
by Carol Sandford

Cooper Landing, Alaska, Earth...

Deanna Troi's dreams were finally coming true - or so she truly, and wanted, to believe. Surrounded by a gaggle of family, and close, dear friends, all were giggling at the gifts that Deanna was opening, one by one.

With a contented smile, she looked around her; Family - Deanna's dream. She was surrounded by soon to be family, and she was beside herself with joy. Even the surprise bridal shower had meant the universe to Deanna, as it meant she was truly accepted, and welcomed, and she could not wait for her wedding, in one weeks time, to finally belong.

There were two parcels to go; Deanna ripped open the pretty paper and stared bemused at the chrome contraption within, admiring its sheen and its strange shape. She held it up precariously between finger and thumb, tuning it slowly about, her confusion escalating by the second, "Its lovely!...what is it?"

The chorus of light hearted banter escalated three-fold at her sweet innocence. Her soon to be sister in law broke between the giggles to tell her, "Oh, Deanna darling, they are pasta spoons of course! You 'are' going to cook for Anthony sometimes aren't you? You do know its the best way to get into his good books, and his pants don't you, honey?!"

Deanna turned crimson at the sexual innuendo but it was lost in the cacophonous laughter that escalated to fever pitch. It was many moments before the noise died down and Deanna busied herself opening her final present. She had deliberately saved it until last. It was from her best friend; the one person who knew her inside and out, and also knew how much the upcoming wedding was going to change her life, for many reasons; Some good, some welcomed and some very heartbreaking.

But for now, it was all forgotten as a chorus of howls and whistles erupted as Deanna inched out the vibrant red see through gossamer teddy, eventually holding it aloft for all to admire. Every person in the room ooohed at its sheer satiny texture, aaaaaahed at the minuscule red hearts that adorned its edges, and winked at the revealing cut away sections, designed to titivate and excite.

Giggling, Deanna held it against her slender body, swirling it this way and that, capturing the translucence of its colours. It only highlighted just how pretty she really was and Deanna wallowed in the momentary power it gave her, "I don't think it will fit me, it looks far too small."

Another sister to be, Janice was quick with a response, "What does it matter, sweetie? you wont be wearing it long enough to make any difference!" The room exploded into giggling pandemonium. Despite it all; the laughter, the tears, and the pains, Deanna knew she would

always remember this to be one of the happiest times of her life.

These women who stood with her now as they hugged her one by one as they passed through the door had become her life; her future life, along with the man that was about to become her husband. It wasn't until she watched them all piling into their various vehicles; their engines kicking into life with a roar, drowning everything except their merriment that Deanna realised that another engine could be heard, only this one was approaching.

As it neared, Deanna's euphoria of her friends excited leaving began to wither away as the shadowy silhouette of the vehicle's driver became apparent. It was the last person she expected to see. It was also the one person that she didn't want to see. Not really. Euphoria turned to dread. Dread turned briefly to joy. Joy turned to fear.

Everything Deanna Troi had worked for; forgotten; buried and prayed for had turned up, out of the blue, on her doorstep, five days before her wedding; Five days before he would have been permanently out of her life for ever.

As his engine cut out, the silence became very noticeable. A dozen set of eyes watched the newcomer with unguarded; even approving interest. Every woman on the planet could not have turned their eyes away from the man before them. Even before he stepped out of the land-jeep, their mouths fell open at his classical he-man looks; dark hair, now long enough to sit upon his shoulders. Eyes that were so startling blue, you had to look twice to believe the colour was true. He looked moody, another trait that seemed to fascinate women. Everyone except Deanna who knew that look; Knew that it was his way of holding his emotions in check. He was scared, she could feel that; she could see that. Luckily her friends could not. To them he was the epitome of a man; a hunk; a hero.

When he opened the mud-splattered car door and stepped out, he proved it even more so, managing to exude an even larger gasp of sexual awareness; he was tall, so tall, every woman before him had to look up and not one of them minded. In fact Deanna thought bemused, she doubted they would have even minded if they were on their knees in full worshipping mode. Such was the power of one William T. Riker.

Chapter Two

Even though he was intent on approaching the woman he had spent a long time searching for, Will still managed to find himself throwing a grin to the ladies that had all but stopped in their tracks to witness his arrival. He silently chuckled when he heard one of them whisper to her mate, 'Call 911, I'm having a heart attack.' But he didn't stop walking until he reached his goal; until he came so close to Deanna he not only could see her fear, he could smell it too.

She was scared to death of him and he knew why. He had come to upset her perfect little world and she knew it. They both knew it. Nothing was said, but what could be said? Will wondered belatedly if Deanna even knew why he'd come? Her heart told her he had come for her, but her head told her he'd come to finalise what they'd left hanging so long ago.

As she watched Will walk towards her stunned position, Deanna wondered how he had

found her, it couldn't have been easy. Deanna's days on the Enterprise were long gone, but never forgotten, she'd never do that. Her whole life was nothing like what she'd left behind. But she couldn't go back because along with the good memories were some of the most painful ones she'd ever had to endure, and they all involved the man now standing still before her.

Will couldn't believe he was finally standing in front of her. He didn't care that she was about to be married. He didn't even care that she had run away from him all those years ago, leaving him heartbroken, beside himself with grief at not only his own loss, but Deanna's too; A time when hopes and dreams disappeared along with practically everything else that they'd had between them.

Except for the love, that was still there. That would always be there. And it was that that Will was clinging on to even though his Imzadi was about to marry another man. Will shuddered as he realised at just how close he'd come to losing her forever.

Unable to stand before her any longer and not hold her, his eyes dropped to the article in her hand and he couldn't resist reaching down and removing it from her frozen fingers. He dangled the transparent scrap of material at shoulder height between them, both eyes drawn to it as intimate images of seeing her wearing it heightened the sexual awareness already evident between them. It was highly erotic.

It was that very thought that snapped Deanna back to the present and reaching up she snatched the teddy from his hands, but not before he'd said, "Very nice, Deanna." He gave her the old cocky grin, the one that used to reduce her to a puddle - still did.

It took only a moment for Deanna to come to her senses and demand, her cheeks stained pink with her embarrassment, "What are you doing here, Will. Why have you come, today of all days?"

But she couldn't break her gaze away from his. Even as her harsh words were being spoken, she was taking his appearance in; imprinting it on her mind once more - just in case today ended with him walking out of her life for good, a thought that sent a pain to her midriff, leaving her to add a desperate plea to questions that she already knew didn't need any answers. She asked again, firmer this time, "Why have you come, Will."

A movement behind them reminded them that they weren't alone. Her fiancé's entire family and friends sat enthralled at the events unfolding right before their very eyes, disappointed that they had been caught out listening in on a reunion between two people who had obviously been more, much more than past acquaintances.

Showing an unconvincing grin that clearly hid an assortment of feelings, Deanna reassured the onlookers that Will wasn't some crazy man come to enact his revenge on her, "Its okay, Will's a very old...friend of mine. I'll be fine, honest. You can all go."

It was clear that not one of them wanted to leave not only because they were worried, they wanted to know just who and what the big man was to her. But when Deanna waved to them and turned to head back indoors, the big man following her in, it was very clear they were

being dismissed, and reluctantly, they began to move off to their own homes.

Once they were inside away from prying eyes, Deanna stood her ground in the centre of the living area, still littered with the remains of her bridal shower; gifts, wrapping paper, and hanging from the door, her bridal gown. Its whiteness was so striking it almost glowed, the glittery sheen within its folds glistened with the last remnants of light that streamed in through the windows.

But none of it was noticed as the couple stood before one another once more. Each devouring each others features, both wanting to say much more than the cursory conversation they were about to have. Their bodies strained against the desire to leap into each others arms. It had been so long. Too long.

Snapping back to reality, Deanna swallowed loudly and broke the silence, staring up into his eyes as he hungrily took in her features, "You really shouldn't have come, Will." She let her voice trail off. Her mouth dried up, her thoughts scattered and her heart pounded so loud she was sure he could hear it.

Steely eyes snapped to attention, capturing hers and making it clear he wasn't going to be swayed that easily. Will was determined, "Nope, Deanna, won't work. We have unfinished business to discuss and I'm not prepared to do it here. This place is..." His eyes flitted around the room, his gaze settling on the wedding dress. He swallowed convulsively as he swallowed the bile that rose as his mind conjured up an image of her wearing the dress for another man. "I can't do this here. I want you to come to my place...just to talk. All I want you to do is listen, help me through this and then I'll bring you home, okay?"

Deanna was horrified, not with revulsion but sheer terror at what he could do to her sanity, and her heart, "Wh...what!! Are you mad?! I can't go anywhere with you, Will Riker. I am engaged to another man - a wonderful man. I'm not going anywhere with you!"

Closing his eyes to hide the wave of disappointment, he raised his hands in a defeated gesture, hurt written all over his face, sadness overtaking his soul. Taking a deep breath, he tried another tact, "Okay, okay, you win. Just grant me one meal in a little diner near here. Let me have my say and then I'll leave you in peace. Deal?"

Deanna pondered for only a moment before deciding. "Deal." She wasn't quite ready to see him walk away, never to see him again without at least finding out what he was up to these days, or if he had any news of her long lost colleagues and friends. And even though she was scared senseless about what he had to say, Deanna knew she owed him that at the very least.

By the time she had found her purse and checked her flushed face in the mirror, with his hands jammed hard into his pockets, Will was already outside, unease radiating from every pore at being in her house. Within a minute he had helped her into the passenger side of the jeep and was speeding off towards town, leaving a trail of dust obliterating the picturesque little house that Deanna called home.

Will drove into town and for all intent and purpose, he appeared to be looking for a parking space in the long but narrow street. Deanna's mind must have been totally lost in the days

happenings because Will had hit the suburbs before Deanna registered that they hadn't stopped, "Wh...where are you taking me Will? There isn't a diner this far out of town."

Will's quick glance at her was stony and determined before he turned his eyes back to the road ahead, his voice taut with tension, "We're not eating at the diner. I'm taking you to my place. What we've got to discuss shouldn't be done in public." He turned to glance at her stricken face again before continuing, his voice breaking at her sudden tears, "I don't think I want people to see my face when you tell me why you ran out on me after our baby died."

Chapter Three

There, he had said it. Those words had bounced around his head for five whole years and now he'd found her, he wanted to know the answer; he needed to know the answer, even if it was only so that he could move on, hopefully with her, but if not, then it would have to be without, but it would be a cold day in hell before gave up that easily again. But at least he would have got an answer to something that had eaten him alive for so long.

Will glanced at the silent woman beside him briefly, taking in her sudden pallor. It was obviously not what she was expecting to hear. He guessed she wanted to know if he was going to take her away from her betrothed. The statement had shocked her, but not as much as it had him five years ago when she had walked out of his life without so much as a goodbye, and now he wanted to know why.

The silence that fell between them as Will continued moving out of town and up higher into the forested landscape told its own story; they were remembering...

It had been a miracle when they had been reunited on the Enterprise D even if they hadn't renewed their once torrid love affair on her home planet. They had grown, time had passed, they had moved on until they had visited a planet called Baku. Will remembered those times with a tender smile; it had been like old times, only better. They were both older and so Will thought, wiser. That was until the day that Deanna had told him about the baby.

He still remembered the animation in her eyes as she'd kissed him, took his hand and placed it on her still flat tummy whispering that they had created a new life. He also remembered how his shock had destroyed the magical moment and that they had never recovered from it. When she had lost the baby two months later it had been the last nail in the coffin for them both.

Believing that Will had been secretly relieved that she had lost their child, as soon as she'd been physically cleared by the hospital, Deanna had left. No goodbye, no note, nothing. Will didn't know where she had gone, or when she had gone. She'd left him while he'd been away on a mission; a mission that he should never have gone on but at the time, he'd thought it was the best thing to do, for both of them. Now he'd known it was the worst.

It had been true, Will had been shocked at the news of the baby. They had only just got used to being together at last, Will wasn't ready to share her with a child just yet. It wasn't so long before he came around to the idea, but the damage had been done. Deanna had never forgiven him for those negative thoughts, even when he had mourned along side her as

they'd watched their baby leave her body prematurely.

Will understood now that it was depression that caused the woman he loved to flee. But back then, it had been different; He was bitter and angry and wallowing in his own misery. He suffered as much as Deanna, locking himself away in his own desolate world whilst Deanna struggled alone in hers. Two souls torn apart and unable to join forces and battle together.

Will couldn't understand why Deanna hadn't sought professional help. She was a Counselor for God's sake. Counselors didn't get depressed - or so he stupidly thought. It hadn't taken him long to realise that doctors were their own worst patients. Never in a million years had he thought that she'd admit to having a problem.

He'd been wrong on that count too, and it was why she had run; escaped him and the stalemate situation they had been locked in, and escaped all the eyes and minds of those close enough to care but not understanding enough to help. It was the worst of times, a time when neither could find solace with anyone but themselves.

Along side the pain of losing the baby and Will, Deanna acknowledged to herself that she needed help, and she needed to leave the ship to find it. Leaving Will, her soul and every other bad memory far behind. Deanna made her way to Earth, found herself an excellent Counselor and had begun her life again, slowly, painfully, guiltily, but necessary.

Meantime Will had made some major life-changing decisions himself. Leaving Starfleet and the Enterprise, he returned to Earth and went home. Only when he had arrived, he found his father in poor health, so poor that Will only got to spend barely four weeks with him before he passed away in his sleep.

Then he discovered that Kyle Riker had signed away Will's family home and the surrounding land to a property developer. Despite his grief, Will had pulled out every ounce of energy he'd possessed and fought the developers all the way until at last, they had all reached a compromise. Yes, the developers were going to build on his land, but homes that Will helped design; Homes that fitted in with the surrounding landscape. Specialised log cabins created with the less fortunate's in mind. Kids that couldn't afford the kind of holiday that Will's dream envisioned; Fishing, pony treks, tobogganing and fun, lots of fun.

Even though Will had earned a good sum from the sale of his home and the land, he had channelled a lot of it back into the project, and managed to build a new home for himself in the next county. He'd found the location of his dreams; Moose Pass. He'd seen it and instantly fell in love with the area. It seemed a galaxy away from where he'd been born and raised, but it hadn't been, not really. It was still the same country and it was still the same beautiful vista. The only difference was the memories. Will had left those far behind in Valdez. Now he needed to start making new memories and a new life. All he needed was one woman to complete the transformation. Deanna.

It had been a labour of love as he watched his home being built, log by log. He finally actually felt like he had come home, and now he was taking Deanna to see it. He wanted her to fall in love with it. He wanted her to walk in the door and never want to leave it, or him,

ever again. He wanted it so bad he was almost prepared to sell his soul to the devil to see it happen. And that was how he'd found himself in Antony Carstair's office. He needed money and he needed it fast. Carstairs had the ways and the means. All he needed to do was persuade the rich business man that he could become even richer, if he invested in Will's dream.

That was until he'd walked into her fiance's office some two weeks ago and discovered that the woman he was selling his soul for, was alive and kicking so much so, she'd gotten herself engaged. The timing, the moment had been so uncanny, Will still had to kick himself to believe it, and he still wasn't sure if it was luck stepping in again or if it was fate. Will chose to believe it was fate. He and Deanna were destined to spend their lives together and he had been given yet another chance to prove it. Only this time there would be no mistakes.

Chapter Four

It had been a shock walking into Antony Carstair's plush office and seeing a framed photograph of Deanna - his Deanna, perched on the edge of his desk. A casual question as to who the beautiful woman was confirmed his worst nightmare; 'That, my man is the most beautiful woman in the universe, and I might add, my fiancee. We are to be married two weeks today. Aren't I a lucky fella?'

Will nearly punched him.

Will had almost died on the spot. It had taken all of his strength to carry on for his reason to being there; he needed financial backing for his latest project and Carstair's was just about his last resort. In the same moment he'd found Deanna, he'd lost his other dream. It was a toss up to which was the worse scenario as in the end, they were supposed to come together; His reunion with his Imzadi and his dream home. Now it looked like could lose both.

It hadn't taken Will long to track Deanna down after that, purely by a process of elimination. He'd expected to find her name amongst the numerous psychologist come Counselor listed in the phone book. He was surprised to find her under consultancy practises, specialising in bereavments. But then when Will sat and thought about it, he realised just how logical her move was.

And now she was here, with him in his jeep heading out to his home, hopefully to stay once he'd gotten her to listen to his side of the story and accepted his apologies - all of them.

He was abruptly brought out of his memories by Deanna's sudden insistence that he stopped, "Pull over, Will!"

He was instantly panicked, but begun to slow the vehicle down, "What for, Deanna? you can hardly walk back to town from here, we're miles away."

Deanna's pleading eyes held a hint on disgust as she turned and faced him, "There are more people than you to consider, Will, I want to call Antony. He has a right to know where I'm going and who with otherwise he will worry. You may not care about him, but I do. Pull

over."

Will flushed beetroot at her tone, but acceded to her request. But then an evil thought spiralled through his mind; yes, this was not such a bad idea, Carstair's knowing that she was off with her ex. Just might be the answer to a prayer.

By the time Deanna had gotten back into the jeep, her mood had reduced to sullenness drastically. She was scared before, but now she was terrified. Will watched her climb back into the cab, his feelings carefully masked, but even so, he couldn't help asking her, "You okay, did you speak to...him?"

She glanced at him sideways, her face contorted into a sneer, her response was caustic, "Him has a name, it is Antony, and yes, everything is perfectly fine, thank you." and on an even haughtier note she added, "and Antony trusts me, implicitly"

But her silence after told another story. Deanna quietly fumed at her fiance's flippant response to her revelation. In fact he'd seemed quite unconcerned; 'Okay honey-bunch, if you need to do this you have my blessing, just let me now when you get back okay?' It wasn't what she wanted to hear. She wanted him to blow his stack and demand that she return home, or even that he was coming to rescue her. It all only reminded her just how passionless their relationship was.

Deanna had met Antony two whole years ago when he was a patient of hers in her newly founded bereavement support group. He had lost his father a short while before and along with the death of his father he had the added horror of taking on a massive business that his father had built up. Antony hadn't known where to start apart from accepting that he needed guidance to deal with his loss. Within weeks he and Deanna were an item.

Antony knew Deanna was carrying around a lot of baggage but he liked to believe that they had been able to help each other. He also knew about her baby, promising her it would be the first thing they would concentrate on after they were married; a family. It was what Deanna wanted most of all. She'd lost Will and lost his baby but Antony was giving her a second chance.

The passion between them was, if not non-existent then very dispassionate. But after Will, Deanna didn't think she would ever know the kind of passion that they'd had. She didn't even know if she even wanted to feel that way again. These days she was content with being content. These days she just wanted to belong, and Antony offered both.

But now the one man that caused all her pain had turned up and it was about to start all over again. Deanna didn't know if she was strong enough to resist him. Lord knows she wanted to, but Antony's indifference to her plight had thrown her and with a growing dread, Deanna knew she was on her own.

The thousand questions that spun through Will's mind got pushed to one side as he began to negotiate the road-less trail that led to his home. Purposely built for seclusion, views, authenticity and a burning desire to have all that, and more, had spurred Will on like a man possessed, until at last it had been completed. But on its completion came the cruel reminder

that he had run out of money.

That was until a close friend and companion had come up with an idea and how Will had found himself in Carstair's office.

Starfleet had been after Will's expertise almost from the day he had resigned his commission. Now they were offering the chance of a little of both worlds. Admiral Drashnau wanted Will to be a test pilot, a job that entailed Will taking command of new ship - any ship and putting them through their paces before being commissioned out to a full permanent crew.

The idea captured Will's attention enough to agree to it which meant he had the opportunity of leasing his home out to the rich who wanted to escape it all and live in the wilds for a while. Everything was too good to turn down. Will couldn't afford to turn it down, period.

But he needed money - fast, to complete the necessary changes to accommodate guests - like a road. As they bumped and heaved along the narrow barely passable track, Carstair's money couldn't come soon enough.

As they continued the drive, Will had to give Deanna credit; she hung on without uttering one word as she was thrown around the cab like a rag doll. At least Will had a steering wheel to cling on to, poor Deanna only had her wits.

He didn't know who sighed with relief the loudest when he at last pulled up in a clearing. As Deanna took in her surroundings, Will felt obligated to apologise, "Sorry about the ride, Deanna, but I do hope to have a road soon."

Hopping out of the jeep he quickly stepped around to her door and swung it open, waiting patiently for her to step out. It took several long, tense moments before she did so, but it wasn't for Will's benefit that she finally did, it was for the panorama that spread out before her.

She turned full circle in the same spot before stopping and uttering in awe, "Oh, Will, what a wonderful place!"

Will beamed and puffed up with pride as he came and stood beside her, taking in the same view that she was seeing even though he'd seen it a million times, and if he saw it another million times, he would still never tire of it. The forest rose around the lodge like a sanctuary; blocking out the world, giving Will the peace that he craved. Almost. All he needed now was the woman who stood silhouetted by the dipping sun to share the rest of his life with.

"I know...I searched for a long time time to find the perfect place and I found it here. I knew as soon as I saw it I had to build our new home here."

Will stopped breathing when he realised what he had just said wondering if she had heard the remark too. But she seemed oblivious to his words, and before long, Will's heartbeat returned to normal as he chided himself for being so stupid. What was he thinking!?

Instead he took her gently by the elbow and steered her towards the house, his boyish enthusiasm unmistakable and infectious, "Come and see inside, I've even got a couple of steaks in the fridge ready to throw on the barbecue. You, are in for the meal of your life, Deanna."

But even as they stepped through the heavy pine door, they were both already thinking about the conversation 'after' the meal. They both wondered if they were even going to be able to eat the meal as simultaneously, their stomach's tightened with tension.

Stepping into Will's home was like stepping into another world. Deanna slowly took in everything around her; the highly polished pine floors. The intricate and brightly coloured native Indian rugs lay on the floor, and murals adorned the walls. Everything fitted even though it was modern. Will had spent a lot of time, effort and money getting it like it was. He was proud of his new home and rightly so.

"Its beautiful, Will."

He grinned at her as he worked his way easily around the kitchen area, preparing the meal that he had promised her, "Yeah, I think so too."

Pouring two tall glasses of something frosted, Will brought them over to her and handed her one, "Here you go."

Deanna muttered her thanks, feeling awkward as they both stood in the middle of the room unsure what to say to one another. It was Will who broke the awkward silence, "You changed your hair."

Deanna automatically reached up to stroke the bobbed length of now straight rich auburn hair, a fanciful attempt at changing her appearance along with everything else she had changed. She grinned ruefully at him before swinging her arm in a wide arc, her eyes following its sweep, "You changed your life."

He indicated for her to sit on the huge, plush comfortable couch, large enough for them to sit beside one another without being in each others laps, "Yeah, I sure did that. Being cooped up on a Starship was driving me insane..." He didn't have to add that she was the cause of his insanity. He seemed to want to talk so Deanna sat back and let him, "I came home only to find dad at deaths door, the house and land about to be sold. I had no job, no prospects and nothing to live for at the time...except to find you, that was my only reason for living back then..."

Deanna watched the bad memories flit across his features but still kept silent knowing that there was more to come.

"Dad passed away." Deanna instantly reached out and touched his arm in condolence, Will stared at her slender hand, until Deanna realised it was the same hand that housed the sparkling diamond ring and she quickly pulled it away. He continued, "Its okay, he was

suffering, his death was a release for him. Anyhow, I then found out about the deal to sell the house and the land. I was very angry about it at first, mostly for dad's deception and insensitivity, but then once I had calmed down and thought rationally about it, it was the right thing to do. The house had ceased being my home the day mom died. It was just somewhere that I slept in and ate in, fought with dad in, then visited in between assignments. It wasn't home, it was just a house."

"Anyhow, I agreed to sell it all on the condition that the homes built on it were met with my requirements, and they agreed to that too. Now there are twenty special needs lodges built on the land designed for the needy, the disabled. Parents send their kids, or come with them and stay at the lodge for a week or whatever." Will beamed with pride again, "They have the time of their lives."

It was clearly evident that Will was proud of his achievements and rightly so. Deanna was proud of him too.

Deanna smiled at him tenderly and asked, "And now?"

Will let out a breath, "And now I'm back working for Starfleet as a test pilot for all the new ships and shuttles. Sometimes I'll be busy, sometimes I won't. The times I'll be busy the lodge will be leased out, and when I'm not busy, I'll be here, at home."

Home. It had such a lovely ring to it as they sat and basked in the word. It was what they had both always wanted and was probably the driving force for Deanna to leave the Enterprise and her old life. She knew she would never achieve her dream of having a home and a family whilst she was out in space, and she had wrongly thought that that was what Will had not wanted. Looking around her now, it was painfully obvious that it was. He craved a home life as much as she. Trouble was, it was probably too late for it to be done together. Time had moved them on; new careers, new lives, new relationships and new ideals.

Time slipped by as they quietly sipped at their drinks and watched the flames flicker in the grate that Will had lit as he'd told her about his life, until suddenly Will jumped to his feet and headed back toward the kitchen, "I'm getting hungry, take a look around if you like. You can have the bedroom to the right at the top of the stairs."

Now alert, Deanna came to a stand, her fear re-established once more at his innocuous words, "Bedroom?! Will, I'm not staying here! Antony is expecting me and this is not a sensible thing for us to do."

Will put down the steak hammer and came towards her. Deanna found herself backing up against the bottom stair, "Its too late to take you home, Deanna, the track is far to dangerous to negotiate at night, and besides, what are you afraid of...Me?"

There it was; the challenge. Deanna thought quickly, her words spilling out even quicker as she bluffed her way out of the tense moment, "Ha ha, don't be absurd, I'm not afraid of you, Will Riker. I know you wouldn't dare lay one finger on me without my say so. And anyway,

there will be a lock on the door won't there?"

Will shook his head, his face alight with merriment, "Sorry sweetheart, haven't gotten around to those yet. And besides, who says I'm going to come in and ravish your body? Lady, right now, nothing could be further from my mind."

Deanna turned crimson at her hasty assumption that Will would come to her in the middle of the night. Then she turned crimson even more as she wondered why the hell not. She was still attractive. He clearly still loved her, while she, God help her, still loved him, but at that moment, it would be a cold day in hell before she would tell him it. She was going to marry Antony Carstairs in precisely five days time regardless of how she felt about William Riker.

She swallowed painfully, "Can...can I use your phone? I need to let him know."

Will shook his head again and moved back towards the kitchen, "Sorry, no phone. The only thing I have is a radio in case of an emergency. You said yourself that Antony trusts you, what are you worrying about? You know I'll take good care of you, and besides, we haven't had our chat yet..."

His last word continued on into the prevailing silence; yet.... The word filled her with dread. She didn't want to drag up the painful past. Nor did she want to talk about her lost child, a child that she had wanted so badly it had almost destroyed her when it had been so cruelly snatched from her.

She tried to reason with him again, her one last attempt to reach his better judgement, "But, I don't have time to stay here, Will. I have things to do. I still have to see the florist, and the priest. I still have to sort out the final arrangements with the caterer. Then there is the photographer, and the holographer..."

Deanna trailed off as the absurdity of her words hit deaf ears. Will had begun pounding the steaks with the mallet, effectively blocking her voice out and her plans. He didn't want to hear about her wedding, or the damn photographer, or the caterer. Damn, he didn't want to hear any of it. And somehow his anger filtered through to her because the next time he looked up, she was slowly ascending the stairs.

Chapter Five

When she descended a while later, Will was missing. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of hissing and spitting and realised he was outside cooking the steaks.

Deanna opened the fly door and stepped out onto the verandah. The sun was setting down below the treetops, its red beams lighting up the sky, gently beckoning the stars to come out. The time, the moment was perfect, or would have been if it wasn't for the tension that hovered in the cooling air.

Will's back was rigid as he tended the barbecue. Deanna didn't know whether to face him head on or turn and hide away. In the end she knew it wasn't going to solve anything. One

way or another, they were destined to have the upcoming dreaded discussion. If not now then later. It might as well be now.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Will's low, melancholy voice, "I'm sorry." Deanna's eyes fell to the hesitant outstretched hand, even though he hadn't turned. His silent plea and pain tugged at her heart and Deanna knew she couldn't ignore him anymore than she could ignore the consequences.

Taking a few tentative steps down to his position, she nervously slipped her hand into his and with a united sigh, they were drawn closer than they had ever been before, not only in spirit, but in body too.

As they stood and watched the steaks sizzle something happened between them. They both felt the change, both welcomed it. It was dream-time; a magical time of just him and her, the moonlight, the memories, the moment. Everything and everyone was forgotten, just for a little while.

Dinner was eaten in comfortable silence on the verandah with only the sound of crickets and chickadee's. A lone owl hooted in the distance reminding them just how alone they truly were.

The meal dragged on, extended by wine they both savoured with relish. It had been a long time since there had been such a time as special as this; Two friends united after eons apart, simply just enjoying the time for what it was; theirs.

~*~

But eventually, the magical time began to drift away. With an inner sigh, Deanna pushed herself to a seated position, intent on rising and leaving the growing unease that was beginning to surround them both like a fog. Little by little as the comforting ambience began to dwindle, so the anxiety began to rise.

It was coming, and they both knew it; recognised the moment was about to be shattered with memories long buried but never forgotten. Past hurts that had no right to be dredged up to refresh that pain.

Will captured her small hand as she made to push herself up from the couch's edge. His silent plea of *Stay.* was the first time he'd sent to her. First time he'd let his guard down enough for her to see the agony, old and new, to radiate through.

It made Deanna gasp with its intensity, and it was then that she truly realised that whereas she had been able to move on; live again. Will had not. The Counselor in her kicked in even though the woman in her wanted to shy away and not listen or see the man before her crumble, and she knew he would, he had to. Will had waited five years to do this. Five whole years carrying around enough pain to destroy any other man. But Deanna had known what had kept Will sane.

Her.

Sliding back into the couch's softness, Deanna was surprised when Will entwined his fingers with hers, looked into her eyes and asked her, "Why are you marrying Antony?"

It was a long moment as Deanna looked into Will's eyes as she tried to understand his reason for asking about Antony and not their lost baby. But whilst she searched his eyes, her mind was searching his soul and only came up with genuine concern and a need to comprehend her need to marry another man.

Her trepidation was fleeting, and with strength in her words, Deanna answered him honestly, "Antony has almost everything I want...everything I need."

Every word slipped past Will's senses as he picked up on the only word that meant anything to him. The only word that told him in an instant everything he wanted to know; Almost.

Almost.

Will didn't need her to explain her reason for saying the unusual word, he knew why; he was the reason. He was the reason why she was giving her heart, her body and her love to another man.

But that man could never own her soul for it belonged to him. It always had and always would, and without that everything else was meaningless. Her marriage to Antony would always be a sham, an empty void that only existed because she was alive. Whereas her soul would live for eternity, within her, and within him, safe and secure.

Before he could respond to her revelation, Deanna beat him to it, "I know what you're thinking Will, and I admit, I'm flattered that I mean that much to you, but I'm afraid it's going to take more than the safe keeping of my soul to kick start any relationship with you."

Will held his breath as he posed the next question, even though it was one that didn't need asking, not really, but he had to anyway, "Do you think you could love me again?"

He was startled by her bitter laughter and words, "Oh, Will, I never stopped loving you. But our lives...our problems, our different goals keep us apart. What I want is not what you want. What I want means living here, permanently, with a home, and a family. To be committed to each other and not any project that keeps us apart. When things go wrong, I want to be supported, and loved...and held when I'm sad. I want the whole package Will, and you are not the one that can give it to me."

Sadness hung in the air like a massive rain cloud getting ready to pour forth. Her words spun around and around in Will's mind, but he couldn't look at her, his eyes settled momentarily on each and every thing but her within the vast room. Each object had a memory, and every memory had her slotted into it, somehow. And it was with those thoughts when he slowly, and miserably answered her, "You're wrong Deanna, about everything."

The silence that followed ticked by, second by second as though a huge grandfather clock

had placed itself between the battling couple and just simply waited, ticking, like a time-bomb waiting to explode.

It happened barely a moment later when Will flew from the comfy sofa, his anger sparked as quickly as a match being struck against a flint, his torment not only etched his face, but his words too as he rounded on her, hovering over her still seated form as she stared up into his contorted face with something akin to terror, "You're wrong, Deanna, I have changed and I do want those things, more than ever; more than you'll ever know."

As quickly as his fury erupted it simmered again, and as quickly as he'd flown from his seat, he'd sat back down again, this time on the edge of the plush seat facing her. Rougher than he'd intended, Will took her cold, trembling fingers within his, forcing her to face him headlong. Forcing her to see the blatant terror, begging, anger, and God help him, the desire that raged throughout his entire being.

But Deanna didn't need to see them, they all slammed through her senses, making her catch her breath with their impact, painting a very dynamic image that begged to be ignored or denied.

No matter how much Deanna wanted what he was offering even if it was her every dream come true; A home, the chance of a new family, peace, contentment and best of all, Will to give it all to her, Deanna was torn in two. Images of times long past, of Will belonging to no one or no where but the stars. Of a baby, wanted by her but not by him, buried alone and waiting for her to join the tiny being one day. Of Will abandoning her in her hour of need; a time when they have should have been there for each other. Too much pain, and too many bad memories surrounded them both now. Deanna just could not see how they could get past them all.

And then there was Antony.

It was Deanna's turn to stand and pace the floor before Will as she attempted to gather her peppered thoughts. The highly charged moment needed diffusing before it escalated into something more than they could both handle right now. Time to talk about them would maybe come later, right now, Deanna wanted to get the thing that she had been absconded for in the open and over and done with, no matter how and what it did to them both.

Physically calming herself inside and out somehow, Deanna steadied her shaking body and voice enough to speak to the waiting man that still sat expectantly before her, "You wanted to know about the baby, Will?"

The clock began to tick again until much to Deanna's surprise, Will stood and began to stride away from her, his words filling the empty space that lengthened out between them, "No, I can't talk about that right now, I'm not ready for it, I'm sorry."

Deanna stood staring at the closed door for a long time before moving her taut body away from not only the image of him walking away from her, but of the image she remembered from so long ago.

Will had abandoned her once more.

Chapter six

Deanna didn't have a clue where Will had gone but it was long enough for her to gather her scattered wits and her few belongings and slip out of the door quietly. Will had told her that they were only a couple of miles from the nearest village in the opposite direction that they had come.

Deliberately turning about face, Deanna began to walk in that direction after noticing a faint track that made itself known as soon as she'd stepped in amongst the dense foliage that surrounded Will's home.

Foot by foot as she stomped her way through the heavy undergrowth, Deanna silently steamed, *Of all the pig-headed, chauvinistic, arrogant, pathetic creatures that ever walked on this planet, why was it me that had to fall in love with him?*

As she trudged on, so her thoughts got more and more testier, and more vulgar, *Damn you, William Riker, how dare you do this to me. How dare you drag me all the way out here, make my life a walking misery, drag things up that should be forgotten. Damn you.*

So intent on putting one foot in front of the other, avoiding the barbed snares that lie beneath the lush ferns, along with the words and the visions that her battered mind was trying to deal with, and failing, Deanna didn't really notice just how deep into the woods she was getting into. The trail appeared to have all but disappeared, which brought on another trickle of profanities that Deanna thought she would never hear herself say.

On top of that, it had begun to drizzle with rain, lightly at first, just enough to barely notice, but now created large pools on the overhanging leaves, conveniently and strategically dumping their load on Deanna's unsuspecting head, emitting a howl of protest from her as the freezing cold droplets woke her from her real-life walking nightmare.

Miserable, wet, lost and furious, Deanna emitted a howl to the blackness surrounding her, not caring if it were man, animal or alien hearing her, "Damn you, you bastard, William Riker!"

Seconds later, she regretted her violet outburst when she heard a movement in the not too distant undergrowth. Deanna watched, petrified to the spot and the low branches swayed and bobbed as the huge, menacing bulk neared her position, reminding Deanna just exactly where she was and what was likely to be out there.

Grizzly!

Deanna screamed into the invading darkness.

~*~

When Will had rubbed down and feed the horses and calmed himself in the process and felt ready for the next confrontation with Deanna, he headed back towards the house. He kinda liked the thought that she was inside waiting for him, it made his heart race with pleasure, despite the circumstances and the impending talk about to happen.

This was what he wanted. This was what he had always wanted; Deanna in his home waiting for him with open arms. Well, he thought wryly to himself, maybe not with open arms, not yet. But one day, soon. The thought made his heart surge with hope and anticipation.

Once he'd stepped back in doors and saw no trace of Deanna, he automatically assumed that she had gone to look around his home. It pleased him no end that she was at least taking an interest in the house and everything that it represented, for both of them. But it soon become apparent that Deanna wasn't there, or in the surrounding grounds. He kicked himself for being stupid enough to assume she was still there by making himself comfortable on the cedar porch swing, planning the sumptuous salmon meal they were going to have. The half hour he wasted there meant that Deanna was half an hour deeper into the woods, with nightfall rapidly falling and the promise of rain close on its heels.

With an heart-stopping sense of dread, Will stood on the verandah and stared into the pitch black woods that surrounded his home, knowing that the woman he loved was out there, alone, in the dark, now wet and fending off not only the elements, but the wildlife that habited the mountain. He also knew all she was armed with was her wit and even Will knew, that wasn't going to keep her alive if she came face to face with the wood's most unwelcome resident; the huge, almost 7 foot grizzly that he himself had come face to face with barely a month ago when he'd been out hunting for turkey.

With an overwhelming sense of dread, Will tried to clear his mind and call out with his mind to her, something that he'd not done for so long, he wasn't even sure he could anymore. But as he called her name and waited, terror washed over him when she didn't respond to his heart-felt call. Seconds later he was racing indoors to the emergency radio...

Chapter seven

The stranger stared at the rain-drenched and clearly petrified woman before him, "Lady, you look like you've seen a ghost."

Deanna could only stammer, knowing that she looked a fright, in more was than one way, "B...Bear!"

The young man swung around half expecting to find a grizzly to be looming over him, although perplexed at how the darned thing had gotten by him, "Bear! Where?!"

"You." She muttered finally, fully aware at just how much the situation surrounding her had addled her brain enough to imagine a man that was in reality no more taller than her to be a raging 7 foot plus bear.

The stranger chuckled, revealing his youthfulness with his amusing rendition of the moment, "Cool!"

In every aspect, the man appeared to be a normal, typical American teenager until you spied the glossy mass of raven hair beneath his dark Stetson. He was clearly a native American Indian, and it was only for a brief moment, a very brief moment that images of scalp hunters and bows and arrows flitted through her mind. It was only a second longer that she dismissed the ridiculous notion as the boy turned away, indicating that she followed him and begun whistling an old country and western style song that even she had heard before.

Deanna was intrigued as to why the man hadn't questioned her, or not even appearing to want to know her name. She thought it prevalent that she told him, "My name is Deanna Troi, and I... I got lost."

He barely threw her a look over his shoulder, but he let her see the tiny smile as he did so, "I know who you are, lady. Why do you think I'm out here in the rain and the dark when I could be home in front of the fire?"

His smile told her he hadn't minded, but In that moment, Deanna knew something else, "Will called you on the radio didn't he?"

The teen stopped, holding back a low branch that would have whopped her full in the face if he hadn't have done, "Yup, said to look out for a gorgeous woman with a huge chip on her shoulder."

After they had passed by the offending branch, the man gently took her elbow and helped her down the incline that sprung up before them. As Deanna negotiated the slippery bank, his voice held a hint of amusement as he spoke, "I can't see no chip...oops, mind your step here."

Once they were on more stable ground, Deanna thanked him for his help, "Thanks, and besides, I left the chip behind at Will's place, I figured he earned it."

As they plodded on, comforted to know that he at least seemed to know where they were going despite there being no evidence of a path. Deanna asked, "I guess you're a friend of Will's?"

He grinned at her again, showing even white teeth, that dazzled even in the dimness of the darkness, "Yep. Me and my family, and lots of others besides, helped Will build his lodge. He told us that you were going to be his first guest."

That brought Deanna up short. Will hadn't even known where she was two weeks ago, she could have been anywhere in the galaxy for all he knew. Deanna went warm at what it implicated; He hadn't given up and was never going to stop looking until he'd found her. The image brought a lump to her throat. What if he'd never found her? He would have never been happy in his new home. A home she'd know all along that he'd built for her; for them, and their future.

The man watched the myriad of emotions flit across the woman's features when he'd told her about Will's plans. He physically started when Deanna turned as though she was going to head back the way they'd come. His thoughts must have registered because moments later, she turned back towards him and began to move in the general direction that they were headed. Gary didn't miss the sheen of tears that shone brighter than the moonlight in her beautiful midnight black eyes.

The forest began to thin telling Deanna that civilisation loomed. It suddenly occurred to Deanna as they moved on through the greenery that she didn't know her accompaniment's name. She broke the comfortable silence by asking him, "Is your name a conservative one or tribal?"

He grinned again, flashing that brilliant set of pearl white teeth, " Gary Black Horse, ma'am."

The grin was infectious and Deanna found herself grinning back.

By the time they had stepped into a clearing surrounding a small dwelling with a welcoming plume of smoke spewing from its chimney, the rain had increased. Gary swung open the door, stomping his feet as he did so yelling at the top of his voice, "Found her, gramma!"

Amused, Deanna wondered why he was yelling when it was clear that the entire floor space of the house was not much bigger than her quarters on the Enterprise, but looking around, it soon became clear how much love lived within the four walls.

Gramma turned out to be a short chubby woman with a serene welcoming smile, and apron that had seen more life than she ever would and voice so soothing, Deanna instantly liked the woman as soon as she'd spoken, "Sit down, its supper time and you must be starving."

At first Deanna was going to refuse, but one swift glance at Gary told her better and she meekly sat at the table. Gary trudged off into another room but soon came back with a woven blanket, draping it across her shoulders as his mother placed a steaming bowl of rich fragrant soup before her.

Deanna grinned as she took in the heady aroma, finally admitting to herself that she was indeed starving. Barely two minutes later, the bowl was empty and her onlookers that had stood and watched every spoonful enter her willing mouth beamed with joy.

Deanna fell back in the chair, completely satiated, "Thank you, Mrs Black Horse, that was wonderful."

The old woman clucked good naturedly as she bent and swept away the empty bowl, "Tsk, t'was nothing, my dear, and the name is Juanita."

Deanna followed her form as she moved to the kitchen area, "Thank you, Juanita, I think you and your grandson have saved my life."

The soothing quiet that followed told another story; Yes, her life had been saved, but it wasn't by a bowl of rich vegetable soup, or by a teenager that had trekked through the night. Her life had been saved by the man that was making his way to her, right now.

Chapter eight

Petunia swung her head and gave her rider a long baleful look. She was the best horse in Will's stables, but didn't like going out after dark and hated the rain, a matter that she stubbornly made known as she deliberately went as slow as she dared in the hope that her master would turn back and ditch her for another more willing mount.

Will threw the horse a sympathetic whisper, but steadfastly continued to make his way through the woods towards his goal; the Black Horse home. His throat was hoarse from constantly calling Deanna's name. It had been two hours since he'd estimated that Deanna had left his home. Two hours in a dark, wet, wildlife infested forest that had no roads apart from a long since used logging track, and it was this track he now plodded towards the place where he'd had no doubts, Deanna would be at.

Gary Black Horse was an excellent tracker even though he was barely 17. He'd lived in these woods since he'd been born and knew the area better than anyone he knew. Mostly because the young tearaway had spent most of his childhood running away and giving the local law enforcement a few lessons in survival as they had trekked out after him, time and time again, only to ever find the boy usually holed up in some cave somewhere, with a roaring campfire going and something cooking on a spit roast, making them all look incredibly stupid.

But things were different now. Gary had turned out to be a Godsend to his grandmother. A credit to his tribe, and a good friend to William Riker.

The horse protested again jerking Will back to the present. The track was narrowing, telling Will he needed to turn off. The turn also lightened Will's heart somewhat as he knew that within five more minutes he'd be at the Black Horses home. But as his heart began pounding at that prospect, his mind was festering with what he was going to say to Deanna when he saw her.

He was angry. No, he was livid, and scared out of his mind. At present there were four people out scouring the local vicinity looking for her. Four lives that were potentially at risk for Lord knows what. Hell for all he knew, she could be lying injured, or dead, or even worse, in the jaws of that hungry grizzly that he'd made his acquaintance with a while back.

Crazy with worry, he dug his heels into the horse's flank urging her on quicker. Petunia snickered her displeasure but picked up her pace none the less.

The sitting area was small and cozy. Gary had wandered off to his bedroom and Deanna could hear the faint hum of music coming from, she assumed to be a radio. Juanita sat in an old rocking chair, her fingers rapidly moving the needles within them as she worked on a

piece of cloth, the colours vibrant and familiar. Most of the hand made articles strewn around the house contained the same colours.

Juanita's voice broke the comfortable lull a moment later, " I figure Will will be here shortly, its only twenty minutes or so on horseback from his place."

Deanna swallowed painfully, a movement not missed by the elderly woman. "Don't worry, my dear. Will loves you and will forgive you. Just promise him you'll never do it again."

Deanna studied the older woman intently for a moment, wondering just how much she'd known about her and what had happened between herself and Will.

She had her answer when Juanita spoke again, studying the fabric in her hands looking for a non existent mistake, "He loves you, very much."

Deanna found out for herself just how much, when ten minutes later, he stood shadowed in the doorway, almost filling every inch of it which his massive size and bulk. His body hidden in a huge rain mac only added to mystery of what his eyes hid beneath a large Stetson, still dripping from the previous rain and what had fallen from the trees above him on his way to her.

But even so, Deanna didn't need to see his eyes to tell her just how angry and worried he was. It seeped from him like a festering volcano, and rightly so. It didn't take much to figure out just how much damage she had caused by pulling her little stunt. A stunt that had risked peoples lives, including her own. Nervously Deanna pushed herself to her feet and prepared to take whatever he was about to hurl at her.

He suddenly stepped into the room and she stepped back. It made him stop when he realised just how afraid of him she truly was. It made his anger drop away enough for the pain of his relief to rise and engulf him. One more step and he was fiercely dragging her into his arms and holding her as though he was never going to let go of her ever again.

Over and over he murmured against her hair, "Thank God you're okay, Thank God. I don't what I would have done if I'd lost you again."

Silently, Juanita slipped from the room leaving them alone. Will was beside himself with grief and Deanna needed this moment to see; to understand. Maybe her inopportune moment of madness had served them well, made them see the truth. There was nothing like a test of fear to bring home what is to be, and this couple were meant to be, that much was obvious.

A minute later, a minute that seemed far to short for the precious time that the couple needed to apologise to each other, Gary Black Horse bounded back into the room with his usual youthful grace, breaking the touching moment before it had barely begun. "Hey there, Will, I found her for you, man. Ha ha, she thought I was a bear!"

Will released the woman in his arms just long enough to grasp Gary's hand in a shake that shook the boy almost off his feet, his gratitude flowing from his words, "I can never repay

you for what you've done for me Gary, ever. Thank you, I'll never forget it, man."

The boy turned crimson, "Hey, no sweat, just glad she's okay, man"

Juanita entered the room as quietly as she'd left, but Will treated her with the same heart felt gratitude he'd shown Gary by sweeping her into his arms for a bear hug, causing the old woman to chuckle, "Thanks for looking after my girl, Juanita, I owe you both big time."

Juanita slapped him of playfully, "Tsk, t'was nothing, I'd have done it for anyone who'd needed a bowl of my vegetable soup."

Will didn't say anymore. Juanita knew how grateful he was to her, and to her grandson, and he knew that she'd be happier knowing that things would take a different turn for them both once they'd left her home, which Will proceeded to do a few minutes later, but not before addressing Gary, "Hey Gary, I've put Petunia in your barn, she's good and mad at me. Okay if I borrow your truck until morning?"

Will noticed Deanna's bemused face beside him, "What?"

She didn't even bother to hide the giggle, "Petunia?!"

Will rolled his eyes, the blush rising on his already ruddy cheeks, "She came with the darned name and flatly refuses to let me call her any other. And besides, it kinda suits her."

Deanna knew not to say anymore, so instead she turned to her hosts and gave them both a huge hug. She too had a lot to thank the couple for. If it hadn't have been for Gary and Juanita, she didn't care to think of what her fate would have been. She shuddered at the images that swept through her mind.

With a chorus of farewells, Will and Deanna were pulling away from the Black Horse home and heading for theirs. Back to reality. Back to whatever they left behind.

Chapter nine.

"You mean there is a road out of here?!"

Will nodded placidly until Deanna suddenly swung away from him and began collecting up her still sodden belongings, "Good, that means you can take me home tomorrow."

Will watched her stomp up the stairs as confused now as he'd been when she'd climbed out of Gary's truck and slammed the door, telling him that in the simmering silence between leaving the Black Horse's home and theirs, Deanna had had a change of heart - again.

Determined, but a little wary, he followed her up the stairs to her bedroom and stood propped against the door jamb silently watching her drape her damp clothes from various limbed artefacts situated around the room. He watched her grab his pyjama jacket that he'd

put out for her earlier, shut herself in the bathroom briefly and emerge in nothing BUT his pyjama jacket. Trouble was, it was long enough to reach her knees, but she still looked as sexy as hell. Will didn't think she'd want to know that right now somehow.

Instead he changed tack, "So you liked the nearest neighbours then?"

Deanna stopped what she was doing and for the first time since they'd gotten back, and smiled, "Oh yes, they were wonderful to me. I'm glad Gary managed to find me before something dreadful happened."

"Yeah, he's a good kid. Wasn' t always, but he is now."

Will noticed the fatigue etched around Deanna's eyes and the fact that she hovered near the bed more than told him she wanted to retire. Pushing himself away from the door's edge, he began to pull the door closed, understanding written in his eyes and his words, "You need some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

Just before the door connected with its frame, Will smiled when he heard her whisper, "'night, Will...Thank you."

It was a long time before Deanna finally succumbed to her tiredness, wandering around the room touching and feeling things that had been lovingly carved or created, their presence holding a whole new meaning to Deanna now she knew who had helped create Will's home. Now all she needed was someone to help create some peace for her shattered mind, her heavy heart and her tormented soul.

Will listened to Deanna pace around the room above him. He wanted to go to her, more than anything in the world, he wanted to go to her. Hold her, love her and show her just how much he wanted and needed her, but he'd known enough had been said and done for one day.

Swallowing the last mouthful of bourbon, revelling in the fire that burned its way down to his gullet, he threw the dregs into the still roaring fire, watching the flames blaze with protest, leaping out at him, creating a glow to his features that showcased the fatigue and worry that left deep creases and dark shadows on his handsome face.

He was tired, damned tired and within half an hour of Deanna retiring, Will made his way up to his bedroom. Only he didn't make it there for a while. Deanna slept deeply unaware that Will stood in her doorway watching her with tenderness, regret and along with the tears in his eyes, he had a little hope in his heart.

~*~

Deanna woke to the smell of coffee and bacon and her stomach growled in response. Chuckling lightly, Deanna made her way into the bathroom and had a quick shower. On returning to her room, she soon noticed that all her clothes were missing, including the ones she had draped around the room drying. Opening the bedroom door to yell down to Will, she almost tripped over the pile of neatly folded clothes. Picking them up, it was soon clear that they had been laundered.

Amongst the grin that spread across her face was the knowledge that at some point Will had entered her room and removed them. It also came to her knowledge that Will hadn't attempted to waken her, or even slip into bed with her. Deanna wasn't quite sure whether she was pleased about that or disappointed.

Would she have refused him? she wondered.

Never.

Will was busy flipping a pancake on the griddle when she finally made her way down the stairs, the lure of breakfast not allowing her to hide away in her bedroom any longer.

"Morning, Will"

His grin lit up not only his face but hers too, "Hey! just in time. I was debating whether to come up and waft a cup of coffee right under your nose to wake you, I thought you were never going to stir."

Deanna laughed, "Why, what time is it?"

"Almost noon."

The cup stopped before it reached her lips, "Noon!? I have to go home now, Will, I really do."

Will carefully put down his utensils and turned off the gas before coming towards her, worry etched across his face, "Please don't, Deanna. Please give us today to try and work things out between us. And besides, its Sunday, there is nothing you can do on a Sunday, everything will be closed."

As they stood face to face, her will battling against his, Deanna knew she'd lost again. One half of her told her she should leave, the other begged her to stay. There really wasn't any other conclusion to her dilemma. She stayed.

She wanted to.

"Okay. Now, are you going to feed me today or what?"

Will visibly swayed with relief before making a grand show of pulling out the dining chair and waiting until she had sat in it before speaking again, "Breakfast a la Riker coming up."

Thoroughly stuffed and more than satiated, Deanna slumped back in her chair allowing more room for the sumptuous breakfast to go down. Draining the last drop of her coffee, she made to put the cup down only to find Will's fingers ready to capture hers.

Her eyes flew to his sensing the change in atmosphere and the urgency within Will, she not only felt it in his heart and mind, but in his fingers as he held on to hers tightly, their pressure urging her to stay.

His next words filled her with dread, "Lets talk now."

"Will, please..."

"No, Deanna, no more running away."

He was right and Deanna knew it. As his eyes beseeched hers, she finally nodded, "Okay."

But he surprised her again when still clinging to her fingers, he stood up pulling her with him, even then he still didn't relinquish her hand. Will steadily watched her as he came up close, so close she could smell his spicy shower soap. She couldn't help the erotic wave that weaved its way through her, her eyes flickering shut, hiding what he was doing to her even though she knew it was pointless. Will knew, he always knew.

He gently pulled her flush against his body. It wasn't a sexual move and Deanna sensed that and relaxed. Tilting her head she looked up into his eyes. He was scared and she wanted to be the one to dispel that fear and she did so by putting her slender arms around his waist, dropping her head and laying it against his chest; a simple comforting hug. A hug that they both understood and needed at that point.

Deanna felt Will physically relax as his own arms snaked around her, gratitude emanated through him.

She understood.

His simple, "Thank you." against her hair was full of emotion and she bit back the rising sob. Tears were for later, much later.

Unified, they broke apart and moved towards the verandah. Will released Deanna's hand long enough to allow her to sit on the gently swaying seat, but he took it back once he'd settled, cradling against his waist with both hands. It was like he was afraid to let her go in case she did.

Deanna felt and heard him take a deep breath. It was here, the time had come.

"I always thought you were the one who left five years ago, Deanna."

Deanna watched him intently, "And now?"

Will sighed, "Physically you left, you walked out, but I didn't give you many options. Stay in hell with me or save yourself. You did the right thing."

Deanna was puzzled, "Then why all this. Why are you still carrying all this pain around with you, Will?"

His response startled her, "Aren't you?"

Her eyes swam with tears at his hurtful words, "Of course, it was my baby too, Will, I loved him..."

She broke off but it was too late to hide the guilty thought that followed, "I know you think I didn't want that baby, Deanna, but I did. It just took me a little time to get used to the idea."

"And that was what was wrong, Will. I loved that baby unconditionally from the moment I realised I was pregnant, you should have too. If you had loved me like I loved you, you would have been as thrilled as I was. That baby was created out of our love for each other - or so I thought. You threw that away, Will. You threw everything we felt for each other away just because I'd fallen pregnant. It shouldn't have mattered that we weren't married, or that we were still on board the Enterprise. None of that should have even entered your mind, but it did."

Deanna gave him a moment to digest her revelations, even though every one of them had been true, but before he had a chance to put his side across, she started again.

"And then, after all that, after everything, when I needed you most; when I had lost our baby you went away on a mission. You actually put your career before my well-being! It was the end for us, Will, you killed just about everything I felt for you; my love, my trust. The Imzadi bond felt it had been ripped apart at the seams with no hope of being repaired, and that was by far the worst. Worse than losing my baby. Losing you. Do you really think we have a future after everything that has happened, Will. Do you?"

Will stared out unseeing at the land that surrounded his home. Tears ran freely down his face and he didn't care. The release was enormous along with the terror that she really had moved on and was ready to start over again - without him.

This was it. This was his one chance to somehow rectify the damage he'd caused, but first he needed to even up the guilt trip, just a little.

"What about me, Deanna. Did you ever stop and consider me in any of this? It was my baby too and I grieved for a long time after, longer than you can ever imagine. Did you know that I visit his grave regularly?"

Deanna was shocked, so shocked she couldn't answer him.

Will sniffed, wiping his nose on his cuff as the tears continued to cascade down his ruddy cheeks, "No...no I didn't suppose you did. Well I do and I always will. That child was a part of me. He was our creation; our son. Our son, Deanna, and yet you treat me as though I had nothing to do with him. I'm hurting too, Dammit!"

The word echoed around the house until it filtered off leaving just Will's sobs filling the silence. He still clung to her hand using it as a lifeline, keeping him sane and seated when all he really wanted to do was run into the woods and scream at the top of his lungs.

He carried on, quieter this time, "On top of all that, Deanna, I lost you. I lost the woman I loved, will always love. I lost my best friend, my soul mate, my Imzadi. I lost my job and for a while I lost my sanity too. I had to run, just like you did. I had to start all over again, just like you did. Only I didn't give up on us like you did. I knew that one day when I had healed my mind I would find you again. I knew that I could never fall in love with another woman, not when I knew you were out there, somewhere..."

Deanna reeled from the onslaught of his words and his emotions, but before she could answer, Will carried on, fully intent of ridding his heart of 5 years of pain and longing, anger and despair, "Only when I did finally find you, I found that you had moved on and left me behind. You're about to marry, probably have a family, live reasonably happy ever after, while I..." Shaking his head with futility and pain, Will choked on his words but managed to squeeze his true terror out; The real reason he was falling apart before her, "I can't, Deanna. I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you."

Deanna finally broke down, weeping along with Will when he told her what his future held without her. Dragging him across and into her arms they both released five years worth of tears. Some for their lost baby and a lot for themselves. The forest soaked up the misery, taking it away and releasing it to the heavens until at last there were no more tears to hear.

The couple stayed entwined, the soothing rocking motion of the seat calming their hearts, soothed their tears. Healed the chasm that had kept them apart for so long.

Gentle hiccups gave way to silence. A lot had been said, things that could have caused irreparable damage, but unlike other couples, Will and Deanna had something more; something that sealed their future whether they liked it or not;

The Imzadi bond.

It held them together even though it had been tucked away five years ago, but not enough to forget, they could never forget, it wouldn't let them. Hope had a way of holding on, and it held on so tight, nothing or no one could stand in its way. It was determined to see the Imzadi couple united, one day.

Chapter ten.

"Let's go fishing."

Deanna pulled away from his arms and looked up into his face. A face that still held the evidence of his tears, "Wh...what?"

"I said, let's go fishing. Let's pack up a picnic, hit the bank and catch us some dinner for

tonight."

Deanna stared at him as though he'd gone mad. Kissing the tip of her nose, Will brushed his hands up and down her arms, wiping away a chill that didn't exist, "We need some air and space and time to think about us. We also need dinner tonight before I take you into town and we hit the local club. I have a surprise for you."

"You do?"

"I do."

Deanna smiled, "Tell me."

Will laughed, it sounded good to laugh again and he did, pulling the woman he loved into his arms, not quite believing that she was here, at last, with him. "No, other wise it wouldn't be a surprise would it?"

She tickled him. He hated that. She tickled him some more. He captured her hands and kissed her. Deanna stopped long enough for Will to let her go and dive away from her before she snared him again. Her laughter ricoshayed around the room but she ceded. For now.

Half an hour later, Deanna was squirming with displeasure as she watched Will manipulate a worm onto the sharp spike of his fishing hook. Half an hour after that they were both whooping with joy as he reeled in his first big catch of the day; an enormous trout that would do them both. But Deanna had caught the bug and by the end of the afternoon, between them, they had caught another four.

Hand in hand they headed back to the lodge. Whilst Deanna washed up, Will got the barbecue going and gutted the fish. By the time Deanna had returned, the fat trout was basted and spitting like a wildcat on the hot coals, and it smelt divine.

This time when Deanna approached Will, it was her that slipped her hand into his. Dream-time was back again, only this time there were no demons lurking between them, only a man. One solitary man.

Deanna thought she had died and gone to heaven when she tasted the succulent fish. A replicator could never in a million years, capture the taste that lingered on her tongue until the bottle of Chablis washed it away. She thought dazedly that it even surpassed her favourite chocolate sundae. She would never forget it. Ever.

~*~

The club was filled to the gills when the couple stepped inside its doors. The heavy beat of the band upon the make-shift stage, thumped out song after song. Every patron sang along and those that didn't sing, danced, whirling around the floor. No one escaped, including Deanna later on.

They'd spotted the Black Horse's as soon as they'd entered the club. Not only Gary and Juanita, but the other members of the Black Horse clan too. Making their way over to their

table, they were greeted like long lost family. And that was Deanna realised, just what they were. Not only to Will, but to her too. The realisation rocked Deanna sideways. She could have what she'd always craved, and she could have it with the one man she truly loved.

Will must have understood her train of thought because in a quiet moment, his eyes had met hers and he had beckoned her into his arms and she had gone, willingly.

Once the evening had quieted down and the music had switched to the old love songs of times long past, things changed. Some people were huddled around their tables chattering away nine to the dozen, catching up on news from the surrounding areas. More were drunk and drowsy, content to just wallow and listen, none wanting to go home. Couples sat cradled within each others arms and let the lull of the music wash over them, evoking memories that they all cherished, one way or another.

Will and Deanna were one of the latter. Deanna sat on Will's lap, her arms around his neck as his circled her waist, holding her as close as he dared without causing an uproar. It had been hard having her so close, so tipsy and pliant, and on his lap when all he wanted to do was kiss her senseless, take her home and make love like they used to before it all went wrong.

They had been good days. They had been the best, and they both still remembered. It was there, between them, sizzling away like a bowl of popcorn waiting to let rip.

But they both knew that there were still something that needed to be dealt with; The solitary man.

It was now or never. The evening was winding down and Will needed to make his move before it was too late. Planting a chaste kiss to her lips, Will firmly moved Deanna from his lap, groaning as he did so, and walked away from her bemused face.

Stepping onto the stage, Will smiled coyly at the crowd that erupted into rapturous applause and caterwauls, and whistles. Deanna watched fascinated as Will bent and spoke to the band, then reached down behind the stage and brought out a trombone. His trombone.

Lifting his arms indicating that the crowd quieted down, Will approached the mike and cleared his throat.

"Thanks folks, I'm sure you'll regret that applause when I muck up big time in a few moments."

The crowd roared with laughter, including Deanna, but when he raised his arm again she fell quiet with the rest of them, waiting.

"Over the years, I've had a lot of time to perfect this song - in private. Its a song that is very special to not only me, but the woman that has waited patiently for the past twenty years for me to get it right. This is for you, Imzadi. Nightbird."

The room went deathly silent for an instant until Will began. This time there was no red alert to break the spell, or the Captain's voice booming through, breaking the magical moment. Nor was there just the creatures of the forest to listen and judge his performance. For once in his life, Will had to get it right, he just had to.

It was beautiful. The note that always failed him before, passed by and Deanna knew he had conquered her most treasured song. Tears streamed down her face as the haunting tune reached her very soul, and along with that came her decision.

Will almost faltered when he watched Deanna stand and walk toward the pay phone. Surely she wasn't going to ring Carstair's now! Not in the middle of the most romantic moment of his life. Will was gutted.

Everything had changed and Deanna knew she could no longer put off talking to her fiancé. Her fingers felt numb as she punched in the code, holding the antiquated ear piece against her ear, waiting for him to answer.

She was dismayed when the answer phone kicked in, and she heard his bland message begin. Clinging onto hope she spoke none the less. "Antony, if you're there, pick up, it's me, Deanna."

She breathed a sigh of relief when he spoke to her in person, "Hey babe, are you ready to hit civilisation yet? I've missed you."

Deanna's heart thumped painfully, "Have you, Antony. Have you really missed me?"

His cheerful voice grated on her already sensitive nerves, "Sure I've missed you, honey-bunch! Oh, hang on, there's another call coming in."

Deanna was incensed when his voice cut off abruptly and she got the monotonous drone of some damn music Antony's holding line provided. As quickly as he'd gone, he returned, "Sorry about that, but it's long distance and it's business honey. Can I get back to you?"

It was all Deanna needed to hear, "Actually no, it's not alright, Antony. I wanted to discuss us. I wanted you to shout and holler and demand that I came home. I wanted you to tell me that you loved me, and cared for me, but you've just told me everything I needed to know, Antony. I will not be put on hold in preference for a long distance call! Goodbye, Antony."

It was a miracle that she managed to replace the phone piece without slamming it home. She wanted to. By God, she wanted to, but she hadn't and that in itself answered another of those little nagging doubts that swam around in the back of her mind. She didn't care. She didn't care that Antony didn't love her enough, nor did she care about the plans they had made or the wedding dress that still hung in her living room back home. But she did care about losing her soon-to-be family, for she loved Antony's family very much.

Turning around she found numerous sets of eyes watching her. Seven sets of eyes as dark as her own watched her intently from across the room along with a solitary pair of intense blue

ones that held an enormous amount of fear and a tiny hint of hope.

She'd found her family, and as the man with the blue eyes approached her, the question in his eyes searched her soul and her heart. Deanna answered him with both. Her smile was tender when she slowly walked up to meet him halfway,

"Take me home, Will."

Chapter eleven

"I can't."

If there was ever a time when Will wished he didn't live in the middle of nowhere without a road, it was right now. The way Deanna was looking up at him, her eyes so huge and damp with barely contained tears tore through him. Expectancy and desire throbbed around them both and he couldn't do a darned thing about it.

Will repeated his revelation again, moaning with frustration and pulling her into his arms as he did so, "I can't, baby."

Deanna breathed out her disappointed, her eyes closing as she drank in his renewed pain. Sliding her arms around his waist and resting her head against his broad chest, she groaned, "I'm sorry."

Surprised, Will chuckled, kissing the top of her curls, "You're sorry! For what?"

Deanna pulled back a little to look up into his handsome features, "I'm sorry for assuming you'd be okay with taking our relationship further. I should have realised that you probably aren't ready to become more intimate. I'm sorry for being insensitive."

Will was stunned briefly into silence as her words sent a surge of something that he'd not felt for a long time. Dropping one arm, Will not so gently cupped one soft cheek of her tiny derriere and pulled her even closer. So close Deanna couldn't mistake his intentions towards her.

As she rose her surprised face up to his smiling one, Will seized the moment, threw caution to the wind, wound his free hand into the soft tangle of her curls, forcing her head to turn. Deanna couldn't, nor did she want to stop Will as his lips captured hers in a heart-stopping kiss that left her trembling so violently, Will had to support her jellified limbs.

Her own arms lifted to circle his neck to not only to hang on for dear life, but also to deepen the intimate onslaught, welcoming its power, welcoming the love that poured into her soul, filling it back up to capacity after being empty for so long.

Will struggled, and failed not to choke with emotion as he kissed the woman in his arms as

though he was offering her his last breath. So long. It had been so long since that he had felt so at peace, and whole. Oh God, she was back in his arms again and he couldn't believe it. On and on he plundered her unresisting mouth, too scared to break away and miss another second of heaven.

But sensibility had a habit of rearing its ugly head and Will slowly came back down to Earth long enough to remember where they were and that there was probably a crowd watching them.

Unable to sever himself from her completely, imprisoning her face within his hands, Will continued to rain tiny kisses over Deanna's face, unsure of who's salty tears he was tasting, until at last they were simply holding each other once more, letting their heartbeats and desire-saturated emotions sober enough to pull apart.

Swallowing convulsively, Will lifted his head from the sanctuary of Deanna's hair and looked about the room. Unsurprising, everyone had moved away. Some had gone, some had retreated back to their seats, contentedly listening and losing themselves in the ballad being played, the song somehow fitting the situation and the romantic mood that floated around the club.

Taking Deanna's hand, Will gently steered Deanna to a quiet part of the club, its previous residents long gone. Sitting himself down, Will eased Deanna down onto his lap and she automatically snuggled in close, laying her head upon his shoulder.

He felt the whisper of her breath against his throat and wondered where they went from here. Past visits to the club usually ended with Will in a drunken stupor, and the club's owner throwing an old horse blanket over him and letting him sleep the night away.

But tonight, Will was stone cold sober and desperate to get the woman in his arms home and into his bed. Will silently cursed his road - or the lack of it. It was far too dangerous to negotiate the track in the dead of night. As much as he loved the fact that the local natives had resisted moving on into the future, there were times when Will could have killed for a transporter, or even a shuttle pad, the other thing on Will's agenda, and another reason for grovelling to Carstair.

He inwardly groaned, alerting Deanna of his discomfort, "What's wrong, Imzadi?"

He shamefacedly looked away from her, his unhappiness pouring from every pore, "I wish I hadn't brought you here tonight."

Taking his bearded chin within her hands, Deanna brought his face back to hers. Will could see nothing but love in the inky depths, and understanding in her heart, "I'm glad we came here, Will. I'm glad. It won't be long before daylight comes, and then we can go."

Lifting her hand to his mouth, Will growled against her palm, setting off an ache so deep inside her, she shifted uncomfortably, showing him just what he was doing to her. But he was in agony too, and he too shifted her body, moving it against his own obvious plight, "I

want to make love to you, Deanna, and I don't think I can wait until dawn."

Deanna chuckled seductively, nuzzling against his ear, making his blood roar with hunger, "Nor can I. Lets go for a walk."

They didn't walk very far.

Stepping out into the sleepy community, the small town bore the signs of desolation. Street lights were muted, curtains were drawn. People were in bed asleep and even the dogs were quiet.

There was no one to hear the couple sneaking into the alley hand in hand. No one to hear the sounds of rapture that soon rose from the darkness, and no one to see love being reborn.

With feet crunching on the sandy ground, the couple disappeared into the shadows. Suddenly Will swung Deanna around, swiftly putting her soft body against the cold timber wall, the muted sounds of music seeping through its seams, the beat dancing in time to the throb of desire emanating from the heated forms as their hips fused rapidly followed by lips.

Deanna offered no protest, her whimper of submission was quickly swallowed by Will's mouth as he hungrily recaptured hers, forcing it wide open with his hot tongue. She let him in willingly, absorbing his groan along with her own.

Fingers fumbled with buttons, and hands swept over every heated piece of flesh exposed. Urgent, desperate touches accompanied sighs and whispered words of yearning. Scorching kisses, burning hot, set their souls on fire with their intensity. Loins, starved of contact for five long years, searched one another out, frantic with need of release from being imprisoned for so long.

Sliding a trembling hand inside her clothing, Will found what he'd been searching for his whole life; Red hot. Deanna was ablaze with desire for him. It was there, in his hands, in her eyes, and in her heart. Will found her tiny aroused bud. Instinct guiding him, knowing that that was what she ached for; his touch. Both moaned as the intimate contact set off a cascade of feelings that left them both weak with longing.

But Deanna wanted more. She surprised him by suddenly pivoting on the spot, putting one hand upon the rough wall, the other guiding his hand back to its previous position, she shifted her feet apart, waiting. Will needed no further invitation.

Liquid heat. Her desire seeped wantonly against his palm and Will stroked her until she was whimpering for mercy and more into the moonlight. His other hand found its way to her exposed breast, the nights chill engorging the dusky nipple and he twisted it roughly between his finger and thumb until she could no longer stand the torment, grabbing his hand, helping him knead the swollen mound, moving in unison against the invasion of her sex-infused body.

Will could stand no more. Unzipping his own pants he set free his own aching desire,

allowing it to create its own homage against her still clad backside. But Will was holding back, Deanna could sense it. It wasn't what she wanted, she was as desperate as he and she wasn't going to let him go on a guilt trip. Not now.

The devil invaded her being, making her become a creature possessed. A creature that was going to stop at nothing to claim her mate. Will was surprised when Deanna stood tall against him again, her hands moving to her hips. He was even more stunned when she brazenly pushed down her own clothes.

Large hands suddenly stopped hers, Will's voice was husky and tormented, "No, sweetheart, you deserve more, it has been too long for me, I wouldn't last a second."

Large determined eyes met his as she looked over her shoulder, but even in the darkness, Will could see that they were infused with a passion that was not going to be denied. Forcibly removing his hands from her hips and up to her waist, Deanna shoved down her panties in one swift movement, her voice, hard, urgent and begging, as she leant over, the wall becoming her support once more,

"Its been a long time for me too, Imzadi. Do it."

He gave up the fight. Grabbing hold of her tiny waist, Will embedded himself into her, both unable to stop the seemingly over-loud grunt that slipped from their lips, its intensity echoing throughout the alley from the couple, intimately locked at the hip, their shadows imprinted into the darkness for eternity.

But Will didn't move. Holding her tight against him, he could feel her inner heat pulsating around his own arousal. This was not how he wanted it to be on their first night, but God help him, he'd needed her so badly. He had dreamed of this night, this moment, but now that it was here, he couldn't do it. He couldn't make love to the woman he had wanted and worshipped for so long.

Deanna held still for dear life even though she wanted to nothing more than to gyrate against the man loving her, but she could feel his inner battle and she realised that it was another hurdle that Will needed to climb over to move on. But God, she'd needed him inside her. She'd needed to feel that connection, a connection that had been missing for five whole years.

Deanna knew it was up to her to free Will from his ghosts. Licking her dry lips, she whispered into the darkness, her last chance to break through and let Will see past the past, "Make love to me, Will...please."

But instead of him beginning to move, Deanna found herself being pulled upright and Will's manhood slipping from her depths. He pulled her still highly aroused body tight against his, wrapping his arms completely around her, the heavy throb of their ardour pounding between them, loins, hearts and minds.

Turning her around within his arms, Will gently lifted her chin and gave her the most tender

of kisses, his apology written in his blue eyes, "I'm so sorry, Deanna. I haven't made love to a woman since we...since we..." But he couldn't say it, he wouldn't conjure up the last time they had made love, it still hurt too much. Still too raw.

Deanna looked tenderly into his handsome face, wanting him to see her, wanting him to believe her own confession, "It has been that long for me too, Will."

Unspoken questions filled the silence, and hope surged through Will's veins, "You and Carstair's have never...?"

Pulling up her lower clothes to cover her nudity, Deanna shook her head, a sad smile flitted across her features, "No. It wasn't a part of our relationship. I thought I was being loyal to Antony, and the opportunity never really arose. It took a while to realise that I wasn't able to, nor did I want to. I assumed that once Antony and I were married that it would happen then." Deanna looked away, sadness invading her soul, "I don't think it ever would have."

"I'm sorry."

Deanna looked back into Will's face, puzzlement etched across her own, "Why?"

Will's shrug was troubled, "For leaving you in limbo. I knew that I was not likely to have another relationship as intense as ours had been, but you clearly wanted to, and that was unfair of me."

Deanna gasped, "No! no, Will. Me of all people should have known that there could never be another. I stupidly thought that moving away from Betazed, and settling here would somehow free me from my Betazoid heritage and its traditions. I should have realised the bond would keep us linked. I tried to ignore it, for so long, but in the end, as soon as I saw you again, I knew I couldn't ignore my destiny."

Stepping away from Will, her head hung low, Will barely heard her murmur, "I'm the one who should be ashamed of myself, Will. I'm the one who has not been faithful to our bond."

Deanna started to walk away from Will, but Will grabbed her arm, swinging her back around to him. He was furious, "Hey! Imzadi! Don't do this to us, not now! Not after everything we've been through! I love you!"

Deanna shook her arm free of his hold, but it was too late, Will watched the woman before him put up a wall so high between them that it might just as well have been that same fateful night so long ago. Her words cut him to the core,

"I'm sorry Will, but I don't deserve your loyalty, or your love. I've let you down. I've ignored our Imzadi bond, and I'm not worthy of anything you are offering me."

Shocked and dismayed, Will watched her walk away from him, What the hell had just happened!? Within ten minutes, he'd gone from been ecstatic with joy to feeling like he was swimming in the bowels of hell. What had gone wrong?

Then it smacked Will beside the head. Guilt! Deanna was beside herself with guilt. She was feeling guilty for being unfaithful to her fiancé, guilty for still having an attraction for him, guilty for not being true to her heritage, and their bond, and guilty for treating him as though nothing was wrong between them. And now on top of that, she felt guilt and embarrassment for seducing him.

Will cursed into the darkness before finally moving his feet to go after her. Searching up and down the dusky street, Will deduced that she'd gone back into the club. Swinging open the door, Will slowly went back inside. He spotted her as soon as he'd entered. She was sitting between Juanita and Gary.

All eyes turned to him, but his eyes were fixed on Deanna. She was scared, and humiliated, he could tell that by the way her eyes wouldn't quite meet him, and by the way that Juanita was looking at him.

It was there; Guilt.

"Damn!" the word slipped from his lips, Deanna saw it and recoiled with alarm. Will was livid, and he had every right to be. What had come over her!? She had behaved like a whore, and to the man that she was supposed to love. A man that had spent a lifetime looking for her. A man who had given up everything; his life, and his career just to look for her, and build a future for her.

A man that was still so fragile that he cried like a baby at the mere hint of being without her, and in one mad moment, she was bowing down to him like a professional whore. She'd wanted him to make love to her so badly she'd ignored just about everything else. Of course Will wasn't able to perform - even if he'd had made a superb effort. Deanna moaned inwardly at the memory. How could she ever face him again?

"Damn!" Will spun on his heels and stormed out of the club. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He couldn't go home and he couldn't go back into the club. He only had one option left; the jeep.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter twelve

His angry pounding shattered the silence of the still sleeping community, but Will didn't care. Scrunched up tight inside his cab, cold, lonely and miserable, Will had watched each slow hour pass, and with every hour, Will's festering mood escalated. Until at last, the blackness began to lift and the first glimmer of dawn began to show itself above the treetops.

Uncurling his long body from the cramped confines of his jeep, groaning in agony at the unaccustomed restrictions of his joints, Will almost fell out of his door as he stepped out onto the rough tarmac. Shuddering against the morning's chill, he took a long leisurely

moment to stretch and work out the kinks, but even that didn't simmer the bubbling storm within his mind.

Walking over to the club house, his footsteps resounding in the quietness, he made his way to the club. Will stared long and hard at the door before him, stopping him from strangling the woman inside, and the same door that had stopped him from barging his way in and dragging that same woman off by her beautiful long neck.

Until now.

He rapped the door hard with his knuckles, evoking a pain that he welcomed, allowing it soak up some of the anger boiling inside him. "Open up, Grey Owl, I know you're in there, you drunken son of a mother..."

It was as far as he got. Mid thump, the door swung open leaving Will staring in startled surprise at the landlord, looking even worse than he did; hair standing on end, stubble that was so long it showed his true age, and worse, he stank to high heaven of beer.

Will recoiled in disgust as Grey Owl stuck his head through the door, breathing the breath of a drunken bear into Will's face, "Whaddaya want, Riker, besides a punch in the mouth?"

One second later Grey Owl found himself on his ass as Will, non too gently, pushed the man aside and stepped into the gloomy room. The club still held a haze of cigarette smoke, and the air reeked with the stench of beer and bodies. Will had to take a deep breath to stop the bile from rising.

Even in the dimness, Will spotted Deanna, her shadowy shapely form clearly outlined by the haze in the room. Other temporary residents of the club began to stir, the commotion of Will's entrance filtering through their drunken stupor. But neither Will nor Deanna took any notice of the figures looming in the fog around her as they all rallied around to support her, reminding Will of zombies gathering for a foray.

It took Will a moment to comprehend what was happening. These people were supposed to be his friends. They were supposed to be rallying around him, giving him support, and not a woman who they'd barely met.

But then he realised what he must have looked like. He had barged his way in, spitting fire and brimstone. He knew he must have looked a fright. He could only imagine what his hair was doing, it didn't behave itself at the best of times, but a night of him ramming his fingers through it in frustration would have created the perfect scarecrow look.

Running shaky fingers through it, Will tried to flatten his hair along with trying to flatten his intense irritation at being treated like the bad guy, when all he wanted to do was pull the darned woman into his arms and say he was sorry.

And he was, more than he ever knew. His eyes softened with sorrow and understanding. His friends having every right to protect Deanna, and eventually even they managed to see his

penitence and they stepped back away from Deanna, just far enough to allow him, and her, the choice to take a step towards each other, if they wanted to.

The air was alive with tension, the silence deafening until Will spoke two words; Two words that heralded the start of another day and another excuse to be with the woman he loved, come what may. Swallowing noisily, Will put his heart on his sleeve and whispered,

"Its dawn."

Deanna stepped out of the shadows with fear in her heart. Not because of what Will was going to do to her, but because of the impending conversation. Talking about their baby had been bad enough. Talking about them had been excruciating enough too, but now she was going to have to talk about herself and that scared her most of all.

And Will knew it.

All night long he had gone over and over her words in the alley. Nothing seemed logical. If anyone should have felt guilty it should have been him. He was the one who let her down about the baby, and he was the one who had run out on her.

He had been the one that was unfaithful to their Imzadi bond, but not with another woman. He had been unfaithful to them; himself and Deanna. It wasn't her fault, it was his and he had to make her see, he just had to. Will was in danger of losing his Imzadi again and he was going to do everything in his power to not let it happen.

But he had to get her home first.

Somehow.

Chapter thirteen

"I...I can't go. Antony will be here any minute to pick me up. I...I rang him a little while ago."

Time stood still and silent as Will swallowed her words with disbelief. Now he understood why his friends herded around Deanna. They knew. They knew that Deanna had rang her fiance to come and get her, and they also knew how he was going to react when she told him.

Will stood still for a long time as his head raced around the fact that the woman he loved was running out on him again without explaining her weird behaviour the night before. What the devil was she trying to achieve. To make him mad!? To make him jealous!? To make him understand that she wasn't going to succumb to his dreams as easily as he thought?

As he mind churned over and over, Will watched Deanna visibly squirm on the spot as his eyes bored into her very soul, searching for an answer. Searching for a way into her heart

and managing to stay there long enough to show her that there couldn't possibly be any other conclusion.

They were made to be together. They had love on their side, a past, a life and an Imzadi bond. Somehow Will had to find a way to get through that invisible wall Deanna had surrounded herself with.

Will crossed his arms and relaxed his posture some. So Carstair's was coming after her. A faint smug smile settled across his handsome features and Deanna glanced worriedly at Juanita as an intense feeling of dread began to invade her body. Will watched Juanita shrug, and Deanna swallow painfully. The ball was back in his court.

Deanna tried to search Will's mind but was unsurprised when she found she couldn't get in. He had effectively blocked her out, and she had no idea what he had up his sleeve. She was confident that he did have something up there and it involved her fiancé. Suddenly it occurred to her that Will was going to fight Antony. She was mortified. Will was at least six inches taller than Antony and probably 25 pounds heavier. He would annihilate him!

She had to stop him somehow, and she knew of only one way. Deanna had to reach his compassionate side, only when she approached him, she hadn't known he'd left it at home. When the chips were down, Will was ready to defend what was rightfully his. Deanna was his woman and no man was going to stand between him and the woman he loved.

Will's eyes never left Deanna as she slowly approached him. He didn't know if the sultry sway of her hips was intentional, or if it was sheer fatigue. Either way he watched it with fascination. The hazy lighting shone through the thin material of her skirt, not only outlining her slender legs, but what lay at their apex.

Will's loins instantly reacted and he seriously began to wonder if he was going to pull off the stunt that he had in mind. He sure as hell hoped so because it was his last chance of proving that Deanna and he could make it together, with or without ghosts.

Will saw through Deanna's charade as soon as she'd reached him, but even so, he still couldn't help losing himself in her huge obsidian eyes as she looked up at him, her hands resting lightly on his forearms.

One movement, that's all it needed to pull her against him and take what she was so innocently offering, but the time for seduction was over - for now. Now was the time for tactical manoeuvres.

Deanna's husky voice held a hint of fear amongst the misplaced excitement, and just then Will belatedly realised she was enjoying having two men fight over her, "You aren't going to do anything....stupid are you, Will?"

Will's eyes hardened, causing Deanna to take a step back with their intensity, "I don't think fighting for my woman is stupid, Deanna. I'm not letting you go without a fight, I've waited too long for you, and when Carstair's gets here, he's going to have to prove that he loves

you more than I do, because, Imzadi, that is the only way he is going to take you away from me."

Deanna stared at him open-mouthed, stunned into temporary silence at the nerve of his words until finally, indignation registered, "I am not a prize for you to win, Will! I am a human being with feelings, and emotions, and I have a life of my own and a mind of my own too."

Will hated doing it, he hated what he was doing to her. But hell, she was making him behave like a boorish bully. Stepping out of arms reach, Will turned and headed for the door, but not before leaving her with something to think about, "You want a fight, Deanna, you've got one. You may have given up on me again, but I haven't. I'm going to prove to you once and for all that we belong together."

Deanna stared at the closed door for a long time allowing his words drift around and around her, making her sway with so many different sensations, she didn't know whether to laugh, cry, scream, stamp her foot or throw something.

She jumped when she felt a soft hand upon her shoulder and Juanita's soothing voice calming her, bringing reality back into focus. "Why do you continue to fight it, Deanna?"

Deanna dropped her head, sighing heavily with misery, fatigue, worry and a little resignation, "Because its our future we're fighting for, Juanita. But our future begins in our past, and its our past is what we can't forget."

"Do you love him?"

Her eyes welled with tears just thinking about a life without Will, her voice was filled with longing and sadness when she spoke only the truth, "Oh, yes, yes, with all my heart."

She felt Juanita's fingers squeeze her shoulder with tenderness, and heard the relief in her words, "Good, then the fight is already over, but maybe the two men meeting will show you were your future lies. Its time to let your heart guide you, Deanna, not your fears, and I know you are afraid, of many things. But so is the man outside. But that man is trying to let go of those fears, its time you did too."

Tears ran freely down her face when she turned into the old woman's welcoming embrace, her words muffled against her plump shoulder, "Oh, God, I want to, Juanita, I really want to. Help me."

They both stiffened as they heard the approach of a shuttle, its engine seemingly loud against the quietness of early morn. Deanna went stiff in the woman's arms and tried to pull away, preparing herself for whatever lay ahead.

But she was surprised when Juanita held her back, her determined voice breaking the silence, "No, this part of the fight is not yours. Your time will come in a little while."

Deanna was beside herself with worry, "But what if Will hits him? Antony wouldn't stand a chance."

Juanita Black Horse held Deanna's cold fingers within her own, and forced Deanna to look at her face on, "He will not use his hands to fight your fiance. Will is going to fight him with his heart."

Suddenly Deanna's legs couldn't hold her up any longer and she sunk into the nearest chair, dread pouring from every fibre of her being. What had she done. What was she doing. Why was she doing it? She didn't need things to go this far.

It was as plain as the nose on her face that Will loved her as much as she loved him. But even so, she still felt she owed something to Antony, even if it was just an apology for not being true to her own heart, especially when it belonged to another. It always had.

But it was too late now. She heard the shuttle door close and heavy footsteps make their way towards the club only to stop close to the entrance. Deanna couldn't bare it any longer. Raising her hands, she covered her ears, put up her mental shield, closed her eyes and shut out what was about to happen out in the street.

Chapter fourteen

Antony Carstair took long slow strides towards the club house. He had been shocked to say the least at receiving Deanna's call in the dead of night to come and get his fiancee from this one horse town, but he could not refuse the desperate and desolate plea in her voice.

So here he was, with dawn only just breaking, and the night's dewdrops giving every surface a crystalline glisten. In another time and another place, he might have thought it beautiful. But not today. Not this morning. Even though Deanna had needed him, he had an eerie feeling that she wouldn't be going home with him.

Antony couldn't fail to miss the town's sole waking occupant propped against the railing outside the club. Despite his casual posture; the legs crossed at the ankle, the arms folded, and the hat on his head pulled low, half obscuring his eyes, Antony could see he was as highly strung as a coiled spring. The man purely oozed tension.

Was this the guy that Deanna insisted she needed to talk to, and was this the guy that she'd had an intense fling with when she was nothing but a kid? Was this the father of her lost child?

Antony's head was telling him no, it couldn't possibly be. But his heart was telling him different. Even though he was dressed in the normal way for this kind of place, he still didn't quite fit the bill. He clearly wasn't a native, his skin wasn't dark enough. But there was a power surrounding him, and it was this power that Carstair's drew him towards the man.

Will watched Carstair's approach somewhat cautiously. He'd deliberately pulled his hat low, wanting to get him as close as possible before revealing his identity to him. He took the

moment to study him, really study him.

He wasn't a bad looking man, but he smacked wealth and oozed spoilt brat. He was clearly used to getting his own way, only he got it with money. Will had the advantage. Everything he'd wanted in his life, he'd earned it, with blood, sweat, tears and persistence.

When Carstair's had gotten close enough, Will lifted his hand and shoved the brim of his hat back, revealing his eyes. He was gratified to see Carstair's immediately grind to a halt, recognition and suspicion flaring in his features.

"Riker!"

Will pushed himself slowly to a stand, acknowledging his rival with a curt nod of his own, "Carstair."

There was a heavy silence as Antony stood and briefly pondered the many reasons why Will would be where he was. Which ever it was, it was clearly to do with Deanna. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, Carstair's briefly nodded his head towards the club's entrance, "Is Deanna in there?"

Will only nodded, his own eyes glancing at the door too, hoping that she wouldn't make her grand exit just yet. He had things to say. Things he didn't want her to witness. He took a few steps towards Antony, his own footsteps crunching on the ground. He too pushed his hands into his pockets, trying his hardest to appear relaxed, but inside, he was trembling with anxiety.

Here goes. "Has Deanna ever told you about me, Carstair?"

Antony nodded, shifting his feet, ready for the obvious confrontation, "She's told me, although I never knew your name. Why?"

Will's eyes hardened, "Did she tell you about the bond we have between us?"

Carstair's grinned, "She told me you two were close, but I guess when you're in a relationship, its the natural way to become. I consider that Deanna and I have a special bond. After all, she is going to be my bride."

Will was growing to hate that word, and it showed. Pushing himself to his full height, Will advanced closer to the man, gratified that he had to look up at him, but even so, Will had to give him credit that he still stood his ground. But then Carstair's didn't really have an inkling what was happening, or about to happen.

"If I prove to you that Deanna is in love with me, always has been and always will be, will you give her her freedom?"

It took all of Will's might to not react when Carstair's laughed up into his face, "You have got to be kidding me, Riker! I have absolutely no doubts that Deanna loves me, and she

'will' marry me this coming Saturday."

Will pinned the man with a look that needed no argument, "If I prove to you that she loves me, will you let her go."

Will had to refrain from punching him when once more he laughed up into his face, his cocky confidence grating on Will's already frayed nerves, "Hell, yes! But I know my girl and I know that she'll stick with me. Y'see Riker, I know about you, and I know what harm you did to her, she would 'never' go back to you and she does 'not' love you."

The two men stood face to face, the air electric with tension between them. One brash and sure, the other filled with hope, and love. God help him if Deanna chose Carstair.

As quick as the stand off started, Will ended it when he suddenly moved towards the club entrance, his eyes never leaving Carstair's face, daring him to move. Carstair' s could do nothing but wait as Will disappeared inside, returning barely a moment later, pulling Deanna out by her hand.

The instant he hit the street again, Will let Deanna go. He wasn't surprised when she made her way to Carstair's side and they clung to one another, waiting. But her little show of bravado didn't bother Will in the slightest, or the amount of fear that poured from her. He had to do this, even though it was going to kill him to watch.

Will came back to stand before the clearly confused couple who both stood silent and scared waiting for what ever Will was going to do to them. Will faintly acknowledged movement and noise behind him and knew that Juanita, Gary and the rest of the club's patron's were watching and waiting with interest from the sidelines.

It was now or never. His voice low and threatening, Will took a deep breath and growled out his demand,

"Kiss her."

Will watched as they both stared at each other, confusion and indignation was written all over Carstair's face. Deanna's was a different story. She knew what Will was up to now and it scared the hell out of her. If there was one thing that was going to give away her true feelings for Will, it was this.

Once the shock wore off, Carstair' s began to splutter, "I will not! Just who do you think you are, Mr. Riker?! I'll have you know that I will not put up with your crap, or your insults..."

"I SAID KISS HER, GODDAMMIT!!!!"

The command burst from Will's lungs with all the force of a man that had all but lost his patience and his sanity. Its ferocity was so fierce, everything and everyone came to a shocked standstill.

The man before him could only stare at the blazing blue eyes, trying their hardest to determine whether to put up a fight or give in. It was only Deanna's violent tugging at his jacket that broke the spell and Carstair turned his bewildered eyes to her.

As her own eyes looked into his, Antony could only see the woman he loved. The woman he was going to marry. The woman who he'd only ever shared a chaste kiss with before, and he wondered if he could deliver a kiss that would shut Riker up for good.

Antony felt his loins tighten with the thought even though they had an audience. He had never done anything this public, or intimate with Deanna before, and it was only now he dimly wondered why not. All they had ever shared was a good night kiss. Deanna had never invited him to stay over, or to even to go further than a kiss. But being a gentleman, he hadn't wanted to push her, knowing that she had her own ghosts to deal with.

But the biggest one was standing barely a meter away, watching, and waiting.

Chapter fifteen

Deanna's eyes beseeched Antony's to show Will that there was something between them; Something more than sex. Sex that neither one of them had shared with each other. Their kisses had never scorched a path to her toes, nor had any kisses they had shared been done in public, and they were both as scared as hell.

Deanna's eyes dropped to Antony's lips, and she subconsciously licked her own, waiting. Almost in slow motion, Antony's mouth touched hers and she was relieved that at least he had gotten that far. But would he go any further. Would his blood begin to heat up and take the kiss deeper?

She got her answer when Antony lowered his hands and pulled her closer to him, she felt his tongue trying to invade her mouth. Deanna, against her better judgement, let him in, and let him get swept away on the tide of emotion that surged through his body, the evidence of his desire pressing into her stomach.

Antony twisted and turned his head, each time devouring Deanna's mouth, feeling himself getting drunk on his own body's awakening. He felt Deanna's arms slip around his waist as she too clung to him, matching his tongue's thrusts as he continued to show the man he knew was standing only a couple of feet away, that he did indeed have a claim on the woman in his arms, but to no avail. Despite her seeming to put everything she had into the kiss, even he could feel that it was a monumental effort on her part, and if he admitted it, his own too.

Riker knew what he was doing when he ordered this challenge and even though right at this minute Antony was as angry as any man would be when faced with an adversary, he could sympathise with him. He only wished he loved a woman with enough intensity and passion, then he would have the kind of love that they had.

Will watched the show before him with interest. A part of him was highly amused as he

watched the couple twist and turn as they fumbled for desire in an action that wasn't there. But the kiss seemed to go on and on, and the other part of him festered at Deanna's determination to prove that she could feel that way for another man. Even Will knew she was fooling herself much more than she was fooling him.

Deanna tried, she really tried. Every ounce of her screamed to her heart to love this man and kiss him as though she really meant it. But as she kissed him, mimicking the action of making love to him with her tongue in the vain hope that something would spark, the magic just was not there and nor was the conviction.

Why wasn't it working? Antony matched her thrusting tongue revelling with the knowledge that it must have been eating Riker alive to watch watch the woman he wanted do what she was doing to him. But from relationships before Deanna came into his life, he could sense and feel. that there was a whole lot missing. An awful lot.

Even though Antony told himself that the relationship was over; that Riker had won, he still wasn't prepared to just hand her over without some kind of effort on his part. Hell, it was his pride at stake too. Moments later, the charade was over when he felt Deanna's hands drop to his hips as the fire petered out of her kiss. He reluctantly let his mouth sever from hers and simultaneously, their eyes opened and they found themselves looking at each other, seeing the truth for the very first time.

They were still staring into each others eyes, searching for a way to say goodbye when Deanna felt a cool hand take one of hers and gently pull her out of her fiance's arms.

Chapter sixteen

No one knew who was surprised more when what was expected to happen, never did. The whole world slipped into slow motion as Will pulled Deanna out of Antony's arms and simply stood her before him, taking her other hand, and gently placing it on top of his own heart, wanting her to feel its none to steady beat. Wanting her to feel the strength of his love for her.

Even Will thought he would end up just pulling her roughly into his own arms and not only devour her mouth, but her very essence, to show Antony and the rest of the world that Deanna Troi was no one else's but his. Could be no one else's but his. That was until he swung her trembling form around to face him and the universe slammed to a halt.

For as long as Will lived he would never forget as Deanna turned her eyes and looked up into his, and he saw everything he wanted to see, and more. Her carbonaro eyes glistened with barely held emotions, reflecting the loss of one man, her joy at finding her soulmate, and her final acceptance that that was what he was. But most of all, they had come alive with love, the one and only thing Will had ever wanted from her, and at last, he'd finally gotten it.

But the realisation that his five long years of searching, of holding on to hope and living on nightmares and dreams, had finally come to an end, and he didn't quite know what to do, or say to the woman that stood before him.

Will couldn't help it, he couldn't stop the powerful surge of relief from flooding his mind, his heart, and his soul, and with a strangled moan, Will crushed Deanna against his own trembling body, totally enveloping it with his arms, afraid of letting her go. Afraid of never feeling the way that he did right then ever again; Complete.

The overwhelming silence told its own story. There had been no need for words, it was there for all to see, the whole story; Two people with a past full of tears, a present that had hovered for five years between darkness and despair. And now there was a future. A chance to start over, start anew. Two lost lovers, reunited and reconnected at every level. This was how it was meant to be. This was love.

This was Imzadi.

Antony watched the union with envy. A little of it was to do with losing Deanna, but for the most part, he was envious of never having, or knowing a relationship with that amount of desire, or obvious devotion. Watching, seeing them together, Antony had no choice but to accept fate. and fate had decreed that he had lost his fiancée to a better man; a man that had the ability to cherish her in a way that he never could, and God knows, she deserved that.

Satisfied that Deanna was not going to disappear ever again, Will eased her away from his body enough to turn her around, still keeping her within the confines of his arms. Still holding her close, the two of them faced Antony headlong and even a blind man could have seen the utter peace that had surrounded and embraced them. They both wore a smile that said everything and in the end, even Antony could only smile in return.

Stepping towards the couple, Carstair stretched out his hand to the much taller man, determined to at least walk away with a little dignity, "Looks like you won, Riker."

With gratitude and joy, Will gripped the out-stretched hand in return, unable to hide the emotion in his voice, "Yeah. Thanks for keeping her safe for me, I'll always be in your debt."

Antony let his hand drop as a wave of an emotion he didn't think he'd feel, stole over his features. He found his eyes leaving the taller man's and settling on his ex-fiancée's, probably for the very last time, and he welcomed the pain, it somehow making him feel almost human. He hadn't felt like that for longer than he could remember, and it felt funny that losing the woman he was about to marry was the final catalyst to remind him that somewhere, out there, was a woman that he could share his love with, a love like they had.

Antony couldn't stand there any longer, it was time to go. Half-heartedly, his hand rose in a gesture of farewell, but he couldn't bring himself to actually say the word. Seconds later, he was back in his vehicle and was speeding away. He never looked back.

Will and Deanna watched Carstair drive away, and Deanna felt rather than heard the sigh emanate from the man still hugging her close to him. Her hands reached up to his forearms and she stroked them comfortingly, he kissed her hair in response to the tender touch,

"Bang goes our road."

Deanna couldn't hide the tiny smile, "Oh, I don't know. I have a house to sell, a house that I'm sure he'd be interested in buying. I'm sure I could...persuade him to give me top dollar for it."

Deanna turned back around still within the protective circle of Will's arms, slipping her own around his waist as she looked lovingly into Will's surprised eyes, "You'd do that, for me?!"

Deanna shook her head, "No, I'll do it for us, on one condition."

"Name it."

"You persuade Starfleet to supply us with a shuttle to go with our new job."

"Our!?"

"Uh huh. If we are going to go ahead with your plans to hire out the lodge while you're away on missions, then obviously, as your wife, I have the right to go with you, unless of course, you want me to stay home and play hostess."

"My wife, huh?"

"Your wife."

"But what about your own job, Deanna, you've worked so hard to build up a good clientele."

"I can still do that. I'll just rent a small office in town for now..." Then she dropped her bombshell, "That is until the children come along."

Her admission sent such a powerful punch to his gut, but he couldn't stop himself from grinning like an idiot, nor could he stop himself from telling her something that he'd been waiting to do for five years, every painful one of them forgotten as he opened up his soul and let her fill it to capacity, "I love you, Deanna Troi."

Will watched the play of emotions and ideas flitting across the face of the woman he loved, his heart overflowing with such an intense euphoria. He wanted to kick himself to see if he was dreaming. He knew he wasn't when Deanna reached up and pulled his face down to meet hers, pausing briefly to whisper, "And I love you, Imzadi." before pulling him that final inch and sealing their lips together, along with their future.

They were both smiling when they eventually broke apart, breathless with exertion and wonder. Deanna giggled self-consciously, "I wonder if we still have our audience? Heavens, they must think we're exhibitionists!"

Will's chuckle was low and seductive, "No, they all disappeared a long time ago when they were satisfied that me and Carstair's weren't going to come to blows."

Will pulled Deanna back against his long body, the impact at how close he'd gotten to losing her washing over him like a tidal wave of despair. It was time to let go. "Lets forget about the past, Deanna. From here on, its us; no past, no nightmares, and no laying blame. We've got to put it all behind us and start over. Just us."

Will felt and heard Deanna's sigh of relief along with a tight squeeze of his body as she understood, "Just us."

Will dropped his arms away from Deanna just long enough to take her hand. His eyes were serious once more again as a touch of uncertainty briefly invaded his soul, "Are you ready to come home now, Deanna?"

Moving away from Will's body, Deanna began walking towards the jeep, her hand firmly clinging onto his. The smile she threw him over her shoulder was tremendous and her eyes glittered with tears of happiness, "Yes, Will, I am."

~*~