

The Insubordinate
by Carol Sandford

"Come in, Ensign."

Deanna beckoned the young woman into her office; her smile welcoming as she sensed her trepidation, reluctance and fear. As the tall, pretty brunette stepped hesitantly into the room, Deanna indicated she sat with a friendly smile, launching herself into what she hoped, was a neutral conversation to set the girl at ease,

"Hi, come on in and sit yourself down. Your new on board aren't you Kathleen...It is alright to call you Kathleen isn't it? You can call me Deanna, especially when we are within my office. Out there the Captain likes to keep it formal, but in here, this is my turf."

Deanna watched as Kathleen settled herself nervously down in the seat opposite her, noticing the way she tightly clasped her fingers together upon her lap; her eyes astutely looking anywhere but at the Betazoid. It was almost as if she knew that Deanna was an empath and was busily reading her most intimate thoughts; the thoughts that had brought her here, to this counselling session, on Doctors orders.

Deanna also knew that was what going through her patients mind, they all did. Every person that stepped through her door feared the Counselor's talent. Some wanted to reveal what was plaguing, others didn't, and it was those that Deanna really used her skill on; drawing them out, making them talk; curing whatever ailed them.

Deanna thought back to her chat with Beverly the day before when the red-head had told her that she was sending a new patient her way that in her opinion, 'needed some help'. Ensign Kathleen Carson had been on board The Enterprise for four weeks and was having trouble 'adjusting'. She was beginning to miss shifts from fatigue and despondency.

Beverly had initially thought the girl was homesick until she had checked up her personal file and found that she'd got no body to feel homesick for. Kathleen Carson had fallen foul with just about every form of authority known until she'd joined Starfleet, and only then had shown her true colours and her worth as a promising cadet. Barely one year out of the Academy, here she was, serving on The Enterprise, a rare privilege.

But within four weeks, the once immensely proud ensign had gone from first class employer to gutter level manic depressive, and it had been delegated Deanna's job to search her soul and fix it.

The room fell silent for many long moments as Deanna gently probed the girl's mind, but was disheartened to find nothing much more than bitterness, ennui and stormclouds. Kathleen was deliberately filling her mind with lousy weather images to stop her reaching in any further.

Startled, Deanna ceased the probe and purposely lightened the mood within the room, "Relax Kathleen, I'm on your side, I'm here to help you, if I can...if you'll let me. Are you aware that the Captain thinks very highly of your performances since you've been on board? He has been

considering furthering your career by sending you on the advanced course on Deep Space...."

Deanna was quickly cut off by the stark terror that poured from Kathleen's mind and eyes as she suddenly sat forward, gripping the desk's front with now white knuckles, her face draining of colour, "NO! no, I don't want to leave The Enterprise! He can't make me, can he? I don't want to go!"

Deanna reached across and gently patted the tense fingers, her eyes relaying she hoped, her understanding, "No, no of course not, it is your decision, Kathleen. You've done more than enough to secure your position on board this ship, you don't have to go anywhere. But I would like to know why, can you tell me, Kathleen?"

Happier now that she knew she didn't have to leave the ship, Kathleen pushed herself back into the seat, the mental block already back in place. But Deanna had already felt the small glimmer of comfort that settled over her now she knew she didn't have to leave.

Deanna waited patiently for Kathleen to voice her answer, already knowing somehow what she was going to say, "This is my home now. I've made friends here; this is my career, this is what I want to do."

Deanna knew she was lying about the friends. On further investigation it hadn't taken Deanna long to find out that Kathleen Carson hadn't made any friends. Nor had made any effort to make friends. She had been polite and courteous to her peers and work colleagues, but other than that, she kept herself to herself.

Deanna continued to study the woman before her, wondering why. She was pretty, very pretty really. Her hair was a rich chestnut brown, hanging just below her shoulder blades, but was usually pulled up into a high ponytail when she was on duty. Her skin was flawless except for a largish mole on her jawline, but it was nothing that deflected away from her overall beauty. Her eyes Deanna decided, were hazel. She could see the various specks of colour within the pale brown orbs. A figure that Deanna was envious of because Kathleen was at least 4 inches taller than her, and all the extra length was on her legs.

But besides all the physical attributes, she was intelligent, witty and open. So what had happened?

Deanna changed tactics slightly, deciding to focus on negative reasons to see what emerged, "Have you made any enemies since you've been on board; maybe annoyed someone and it has upset you?"

She shook her head letting the long hair fall over her features, "No, no one."

"How about work; are you coping with your workload? I know it can be very daunting, being on a ship of this size and not knowing many people..."

Again she got a negative answer, "No, honestly, I'm fine..."

But within seconds, Deanna watched Kathleen come to a stand and prowl around the office, clearly eager to get out of there but knew she couldn't until she'd given the Counselor some kind of answer; some kind of insight to her inner battle.

"Look...Counselor. There really is nothing wrong with me. I'm having a little difficulty with a personal problem and I'm not ready to move past it yet, I haven't been able to get it out of my system. But I will, I just need some time."

Kathleen came to a halt before Deanna's desk, her chest rising and falling rapidly with her agitated breath. Deanna could see her frustration at being forced to reveal her innermost secrets, and knew instinctively that today's session was over..

Deanna nodded understandingly at her, watching Kathleen's shoulders sag with relief, "Okay, Kathleen, we'll call it a day for today, but I'd like to see you again tomorrow. Is that okay?"

Defeated Kathleen nodded, "Alright Counselor, I'll be here." Turning, Deanna's eyes followed her out as though she'd got the entire universe upon her shoulders, but inwardly sighed with relief with Kathleen's acceptance that she'd not got away with anything and that she'd known she was coming back.

The question was, were they going to get any further than they did today...?

~~~Chapter two~~~

"Will, have you met Ensign Carson yet?" Deanna took a long sip of her iced tea, absently swirling the ice around the tall glass afterwards, watching the different shades of gold glisten and roll.

Will's bottom lip curled over, his forehead creased as he tried to place the name and the face to go with the name, "Carson, Carson..? No, can't say I can place the name."

Deanna watched his response with a knowing smile as she reeled off the young woman's attributes, "Works in astro-physics, brunette, hazel eyes and extended legs."

His interest was marked at her last two words and she smirked with the knowledge that she'd known exactly what he would do, "No, no, can't say I do. Why, what's she done?"

Deanna sighed, replacing her drink on the glass table top, "That's just it, we don't know. Beverly has asked me to assess her as she appears to having some difficulty adapting. I'm surprised you haven't had any complaints about her work, or her attendance."

Will shook his head along with a healthy shrug of his massive shoulders, "Sorry, but I'll double check my reports, she may have slipped by me. Guess she could have heard about my fearsome reputation and chickened out of her reprimand."

Deanna's eyebrow's rose, but she couldn't resist grinning at the smug smile that lit up Will's face, "Oh well, that's the answer then, the poor girl has gone into shock at the thought of you

breathing down her neck."

Will laughed before lowering his voice and leaning in towards her, "Well, my hot breath doesn't seem to have that effect on you, Imzadi."

Deanna's laughter rang around the room, before she too dropped its tone, "How can I go into shock when I've melted all over your shoes...Imzadi?"

The intimate chuckle that rose from them both somehow defused the rising sexual tension. Both sorry that it did, but both relieved that they were able to do so. They had learned a long time ago that the tiny intimate personal references to their Imzadi bond far out-weighed their need to actually act upon them.

Will pushed himself to his feet, reluctant to break the tender moment but knew he needed to. As much as he would have liked to have dragged her into his arms and actually reduced her to that melted puddle at his feet, Will knew it wasn't to be, and the only way to avoid temptation was removing his sorely tempted body away from her.

Yawning widely, he looked down into her upturned face, "I'll have a look at Carson's file in the morning. She may well have been due for a roasting, and I've missed it somehow, I'll get back to you in the morning okay?"

Deanna nodded, her ebony hair bobbing with the movement, "Thank you, Will. Good night."

Will gave her a smile that she knew was only for her, "Night, Deanna."

~~~Chapter three~~~

"Care to explain yourself, Ensign?"

Will prowled around Ensign Kathleen Carson, acting out Deanna's threat by barely being a hairbreadth away from the sullen looking, albeit beautiful woman. Her head was hung low and Will didn't doubt for a minute that there would be tears in her eyes, there nearly always was in the new female recruits when they'd been brought before their Commander for a misdemeanour.

Her tiny voice scarcely registered to Will's ears even though he was only some 10 inches or so away from her, "Sorry Sir, I...I avoided coming to see you because I was afraid..."

Will's voice boomed off not only her but the four walls that surrounded them, "Speak up Ensign and address your Commanding Officer properly, not like a snivelling schoolgirl. You're on board The Enterprise now, and I expect you behave in a manner accordingly!"

Immediately, Kathleen came to attention, standing straight and tall, her eyes fixed on the long column of her Commander's throat as he'd come to a halt directly in front of her. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not bring herself to raise her eyes and look into his, and she knew that was what he wanted.

Will was intrigued by the woman before him. He'd taken a good long look at her file before he'd summoned her to his office for the shake up lecture that she'd managed to avoid two days ago. He wasn't quite sure how he'd missed the reprimand order, but he had and he felt slightly chagrined to know that she knew he had too. Will also realised that that was why he was going so hard at her. He didn't like looking like a fool, especially in front of a subordinate.

"I'm waiting, Ensign Carson..."

"Sir...I'm sorry sir, I've been having some personal problems and I didn't feel I was able to take the beating that I was sure to get at that point. I would have come to see you sir, I just couldn't do it then."

She was honest, Will had to give her that, "I see...and you think that should exonerate you from your punishment, just because you thought could just 'put it off until another day' just because, 'you' couldn't handle it. What kind of behaviour is that, Ensign. What gives 'you' the right to abuse the system?"

It was then Will got her gaze, full force and he almost stepped back at the intensity of it, but managed to hold his ground, unsure of his reaction to her. Instead he ground out one word, but even he noticed the fierceness had gone, seeing the question in the word rather than the demand, "Well?"

Kathleen took a deep breath, but couldn't stop the rosy hue from travelling up her neck, settling itself upon her high cheekbones, "Two days ago, sir, all you would have received from me would have been a bawling, babbling mess. I didn't want to subject you, or myself to that kind of humiliation. I'm truly sorry sir, I will try to get myself straightened out and make my Captain proud." For good measure she added, "I ~am~ still seeing the Counselor, she is attempting to help me through...this."

Her honest explanation was enough for Will, and with a begrudging acceptance, he issued his warning, "Very well, Carson. Providing you continue to seek help I will allow this moment of laxity to pass...this time. But if you do it to me again, or give me reason to haul your ass before me, I'll have you kicked off this ship before you can say 'adios'. Do I make myself clear, Ensign?"

Will was surprised to see her eyes well with tears, or that she appeared to be too choked to answer him. Reaching out, Will lightly touched her shoulder, his voice changing as he realised just how fragile she really was. "Go on, off you go, we'll hear no more of this okay?"

Will was puzzled as Kathleen glanced down at his hand, still laying gently upon her shoulder, he was even more puzzled when she turned her face back to him, her eyes glistening with barely restrained tears and a smile that would have melted an iceberg. She simply nodded and left the room.

It was a long moment before Will moved. Ensign Kathleen Carson was an enigma and he wondered what really lie beneath the layers of complexity. He vowed to keep updated with

her progress, smiling lightly as he realised he also got to spend some quality time with a certain Counselor Troi.

~~~Chapter four~~~

Deanna welcomed Kathleen Carson into her office, pretty much in the same way as before. But this time Deanna received a welcoming smile, a vast improvement to the sullen scowl she'd gotten yesterday.

Deanna had received her report from Will telling her that Ensign Carson had been duly chastised and that his personal opinion was that she was probably homesick, and probably in need of a good female friend to off-load onto.

As Deanna watched Kathleen settle onto the chair opposite her, Will's words rang in her mind and for once, she allowed him the concession that he was probably right...for a change.

She not only smiled at the image of Will's smug grin but also at Kathleen as she prepared herself to become the woman's friend and confidant. "Hi, you look happier today, are you okay?"

Kathleen smiled shyly, not quite able to meet the Counselor's eyes, "Yes, Ma'am. In between your comforting words and Commander Riker's sermon this morning, I'm beginning to feel slightly less...foggy."

Deanna laughed at her choice of words, "Foggy?! Can you explain why you felt that you were 'foggy'?"

Deanna watched her patient twist her lips into a variety of shapes and forms as she pondered the question, "Well, yesterday I felt like the whole ship was against me, even though I knew they weren't. And today..." She sighed heavily before continuing, "Today I feel better."

She ended her small speech with a shrug, unable to voice her reason why. But even Deanna could see the woman was hiding 'something' But what? How could a very negative Counselling session and a reprimand from your Commanding officer defuse a months worth of assumed misery?

Deanna frowned as she asked. "Are you telling me that you liked being told off by Commander Riker. That you needed his harsh words to shake you free of your...fog?"

Kathleen nodded, "Uh huh, I guess so."

Deanna was completely perplexed, but laughed to hide her confusion, "Why?"

"I can't tell you, Counselor. All I know is that right now, I feel great. I just 'feel', and its great."

Deanna couldn't help but smile. It was good to see a success story walk out of her door, even if she wasn't quite sure how it came about. Deanna stood and grinned at the woman who was sitting, crossed legged and relaxed, "Kathleen, would you like to join me this evening for a cocktail or two in Ten forward, say around...7.30pm?"

Deanna laughed in startled surprise as Kathleen leapt to her feet, her long hair swinging like a puppy wagging his tail, "I would LOVE to join you Counselor, I mean, Deanna."

The two women laughed as Deanna showed her to the door, "Okay, see you later then."

Kathleen chirpy voice echoed Deanna's as she spun into the corridor, waving over her shoulder as she went, "Later!"

Deanna leaned against the door jamb, her head shaking in merriment as she silently congratulated Will's insight into the female mind, "Hot damn, he was right..."

~~~Chapter five~~~

Deanna and Kathleen sat on one of the small tables in Ten forward, sipping the brightly florescent coloured cocktail's; two empty glasses sat on the table along with two more full ones. Kathleen was in full verbal form relating Commander Riker's stern lecture to her that morning along with the perfect accompanying facial mimics and pompous drastically lowered voice.

Deanna held onto her sides as her body shook with laughter. Oh Golly, she had not laughed so hard for years. Making the effort to halt her giggles, Deanna asked her through the gasps as she tried to catch her breath, "Did...did you see the tips of his ears go pink when he was yelling at you?!"

Kathleen nodded vigorously as they both collapsed laughing once more, Will's comical image springing to mind highlighting their mirth even more. She gasped as she tried to contain herself to add another amusing anecdote to the conversation, "Have you...ever seen the way his ENORMOUS nipples stand to attention even more than he does?!"

Deanna gasped in shocked hilarious horror at her companions very personal but highly amusing observation. Deanna giggled as she pushed her long finger over her lips and said, "Shhhhhh, Jeez, Kathleen, do you want to get thrown into the brig?!"

It was a sobering thought, but not as much as the sight of the man that stepped through the door and purposely made a beeline for the pair of them. It was an instant sobering remedy as they both struggled to straighten themselves out and maintain an air of feigned nonchalance as he approached their table, "Evening ladies, mind if I joined the party?"

Deanna wasn't quite sure how she managed to hold back the grin as her eyes fell to his chest somehow expecting to see the object of their previous mirth. Will looked down at himself before searching her face in confusion, "What's wrong. Have I got the remains of my dinner on my shirt or what? Damn noodles are impossible to get into your mouth in one go."

That was it. Before Will knew what had happened, the two girls had broken out into a fit of giggles and had left him high and dry sitting alone at their table as they'd run out of the lounge arm in arm and laughing like a pair of hyena's, high on Lord knows what. He picked up one of their glasses and studied its contents before putting it down convinced he was imagining things,

"Nah..."

~~~Chapter six~~~

"You want to tell me what that was all about last night, Counselor?"

Will stood over the woman he once adored...Still adored, and fired the question at her, not caring that she lay on her couch with a pillow over her eyes to shield them not only from the glare of the light, but the fire that she was sure blazing from his eyes."

"Shhhhhhhh, Will, I have a headache."

Will folded his arms, spread his feet and glared at her, "Good, serves you right. What on Earth were you thinking, Deanna? What possessed you to get rat-assed out of your skull, with I might add an Ensign who's own fragility is still to be questioned, and it seems, the jollities were apparently at my expense. I want an answer, Deanna or so God help me, I'll shake it out of you."

That made her stop and sit up, "What!?"

Will hunched down so he was level with her, hanging onto the arm for support. "Guinan said you and Kathleen were ridiculing my reprimanding technique, AND what I looked like when I was reprimanding. God, Deanna, How could you do that in front of the crew. How could you behave like that with a junior crew member that's barely been on board for five minutes? What on Earth must they all be thinking. What were YOU thinking!? Answer me, dammit!"

Deanna was mortified as she pushed herself off the couch onto the floor between his knees, bringing herself up enough to encircle his waist and hug her apology. "Oh God, Will, I am so sorry. I must have been drunk, it's my only excuse. We were having such a wonderful time, it just got out of hand. I'm sorry, Will."

Will pushed himself to a stand leaving her on the floor to look up at him with shame. He was angry, more than angry, he was furious, "Not good enough, Counselor. What you have done is inexcusable for a senior officer aboard this ship. You leave me no option but to inform the Captain. No doubt he will have a few choice words to say to you too."

Deanna's pleading "Will!, please!" reverberated off the closing doors as she watched her Imzadi hurtle through them, more hurt and angry than she had ever, ever seen him before. What had she done?

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Now Deanna knew how it felt for the other crew members as she stood before her Captain, arms linked behind her back her head hung so low her chin rested upon her chest, and tears swam in her eyes.

"Well, Counselor, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Swollen, moist eyes rose to meet his as she spoke her last few trembling words, "I'm sorry Sir, you'll have my resignation by twelve hundred hours today and I will be off your ship within an hour after that."

~~~Chapter seven~~~

Picard's eyes gleamed with humorous disdain as he thought about Deanna's cowardly words, "Oh no, Counselor, you're not getting off that easily. I want an explanation of your behaviour and then I will consider a suitable reprimand to note on your record."

Picard was furious. Correction, Picard was beside himself with anger and was out for blood. Hers. But Deanna couldn't blame him no more than she could blame Will for 'dropping her in it'. She deserved it, in fact she deserved to be kicked off the ship. But her heart sunk a mile when Picard had made it very clear that she was going to face the humiliation head on and earn herself her very first dent in her otherwise impeccable record.

Deanna wasn't sure which hurt more until Will's face floated before her; Hurt, dismay, disappointment, and humiliation, but worst of all, being knifed in the back by the woman he loved.

Picard's snapping voice made her jump, "Well, Counselor, I'm waiting."

Deanna's eyes searched his for a smidgen of understanding, but found nothing but hardness in the smoky blue depths, "I don't know sir. Myself and ensign Carson were simply enjoying the evening and I think we may have had one too many drinks. Our tongues got loose and I'm ashamed to say that Commander Riker became the topic."

Picard puffed exasperated, "Yes, yes, I know all that, but what I want to know is how you came to put yourself into such a cullible situation. Surely you must have know better Deanna, for God's sake, you're a Commanding Officer on The Enterprise!, I expected you of all people to understand the crucial thinness of the line between yourself and the rest of the crew. They are expected to look up to us, Counselor, and you have removed that with a 'loose tongue'. Would you like to tell me how Commander Riker can reprimand the crew, knowing that he is a laughing stock of the whole ship!?"

Deanna hung her head in shame and mortification, moving it back and forth trying to shake the nightmare away, but it wouldn't go. "I'm truly sorry sir."

Her words hung heavily in the air between them. Neither one of them knew what to say, least of all Picard.

He sighed heavily as he faced the broken woman directly, "Dismissed, Counselor Troi."

He watched the small woman turn about and walk away from him, the weight of her misery heavy upon her shoulders. Picard loathed doing that to her, but he knew it had been necessary even with Will's insistence that he could deal with it. But Jean-Luc Picard knew he needed to be the one to do the dirty deed as he seemed to be the only one at the moment with his reputation in tact.

He cursed at the doors as they hissed shut, "Damn!" What the hell was he supposed to do now?

~~~Chapter eight~~~

"Well, Ensign, there haven't been many firsts in my career, but I've got to say, this is one; a crew member hauled before me twice within 24 hours. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Will circled around the woman for a moment before pulling himself up short, aware now of the need to change his questioning strategy. Instead he moved to the front edge of his desk and sat against it, consciously hunching his shoulders forward to release the tightening grip of his uniform.

But even so, Will couldn't stop himself from glancing down at his own chest to see if the objects of his humiliation weren't on view. Satisfied he wasn't about to be ridiculed, he turned stern eyes to the woman before him again, and in an even sterner voice, muttered, "Well?"

Kathleen tried her hardest to ignore Commander Riker's chest and was lucky to move her gaze away from it just as the piercing blue chips of ice looked back up at her. What could she say in her defence? She didn't have a clue other than sorry, but she knew that sorry wasn't enough.

Kathleen inwardly groaned, 'God, how could I have been so stupid? I know I wanted attention, but not this much!' It wasn't even because she couldn't hold her drink, she knew that she could. But she didn't know that Counselor Troi couldn't. But even so, the intimate conversation about the man before her should never have happened. She should never ever had said what she did, but, it had certainly got her noticed.

She took a deep breath, but it didn't ease the growing pain that slowly climbed through her torso, making her heart throb with terror and trepidation. But the pain didn't stop there, it climbed higher making her head begin to pound as though her brain was going to explode.

It was like everything happened in slow motion. As Kathleen spluttered out a feint, 'I...' she felt her vision, her thoughts go black and she knew she was falling, slipping away into a dark void.

Will watched with stark horror as the woman before him seemingly lose touch with herself and begin to slip to the floor. He barely reached her in time to stop the worst of the collision, but managed to capture her shoulders just in time, stopping her head's impact with the solid

floor. Kathleen Carson had fainted.

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She didn't know how long it was before the blackness in her mind began to evaporate leaving the painful thump in its place. She felt the cool cloth touch her face and the soft words close to her ear, "Hey, its okay, come on Kathleen, wake up."

Despite her continued state of unconsciousness, Will must have realised she was coming to as he raised her head slightly more and she felt the cool edge of a solid object touch her lips.

"Here you go, take a sip of this water, it'll help."

Kathleen meekly opened her eyes instantly colliding with his barely a heartbeat away from her. He was kneeling on the floor and she was across his lap, his arm supporting her head as he tried to administer the drink.

She took a tiny sip, slumping back against his arm as another wave of haziness swept over her. Commander Riker's concern touched her as she heard the worry in his voice, "Do you want me to call Doctor Crusher?"

She was quick to reassure him, "No, no, I just need a minute, I'm okay, honest."

He seemed satisfied with that, nodding his head in agreement, moving the cup towards her mouth again, her own fingers automatically reaching up to aid the cup's movement, the intimate contact going unnoticed by Will as he intently watched her progress.

It was barely two minutes later, when Will pushed himself to a stand and held his hand towards her. Reaching up her own hand, Kathleen took hold of his strength and used it to lever herself to a stand. But as he went to release her, she began to sway. Will didn't seem to have any choice but to pull her against his body and give the support she obviously needed for the moment.

Kathleen, highly embarrassed tried to step away from her Commander's strong but gentle embrace, but he held her fast, "Hey, take it easy otherwise you'll end up back on the floor again."

Slowly as her mind came back into focus and she found her feet again, Kathleen moved away from Will's arms, insisting that she was alright. He let her go, but his eyes never left her face looking for a sign, any sign that she was going to swoon again. But moments later, it was clear she was back to her normal self as she stood to attention before him, her hands firmly clasped behind her back waiting for the interrogation to continue.

Will smiled at her bravado, shaking his head as he did so, "I think we'll leave this conversation until tomorrow, Ensign. I want you to report to sickbay and have yourself checked out before you come and see me tomorrow, we'll continue this then. I may be an ogre, but I'm not heartless. Tomorrow, 0100 hours, dismissed."

Her curt, "Aye Sir." as she spun on her heels was barely registered, but the speed of her exit was. She all but ran out of Will's office. What Will didn't see was her ground to a halt as the doors slid shut and her triumphant smile as she walked away.

~~~Chapter nine~~~

"I hear you fainted in Commander Riker's office yesterday. Trying to get out of your reprimand by any chance?"

Kathleen wasn't sure if Doctor Crusher was being serious until she saw the feint twitch of her lips and the sparkle in her eyes. She watched the tri-corder run up and down in front of her and then seconds later, the doctor switching it off, "You check out fine, I guess it must have been the stress of the moment - either that or Commander Riker's overpowering aftershave that he insists on gassing us all with."

Kathleen chuckled as she slid off the bio-bed and followed the Doctor towards her office. She felt justified in defending her Commander although she didn't know why, she knew she was in for a severe roasting and a permanent blight on her record. "Oh, it wasn't his fault, I guess I just forgot to eat that's all. I hope I behave better later when I have to go back."

Even Beverly recognised the girl's inner terror and even though she was on Will's side, the stories that had been running rampant around the ship had been welcome for their light relief from the normal humdrum gossip. "Okay, Ensign, I know what a bear the Commander can be, I'll recommend that he go easy on you. Just do me a favour okay, be a good girl from now on."

Kathleen's mouth broke into a smile, the first genuine smile she'd let free for a long time. Giving the Doc a brief light-hearted salute, she uttered her thanks and left the sickbay very conscious that her next stop was Commander Riker's office once more...

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Will had decided to make Ensign Carson's castigation as painless as possible, opting to take, on the Doctors advice, the laid back approach. so when the woman in question stepped through his doors barely ten minutes after Crusher's report hit his screen, Will was seated on his easy chair, waiting.

"Come in, Ensign, sit yourself down."

Kathleen hesitated on the threshold, uncertain of what or why her c.o. was doing, "Sir?"

Will's voice rose a little, "Sit down, Ensign, I'm not going to give you the chance to faint on me today, we have things to discuss and we are going to discuss them in comfort and safety."

Kathleen hesitantly stepped towards the proffered seat and sat on its edge, nervously rubbing her palms along her thighs, waiting. "Sir, I'm truly sorry for what has happened over the past couple of days. I know it was highly immature, stupid and humiliating for you, and for that I am really sorry, and it'll never happen again, you have my word."

Will pushed himself back in the chair and crossed his legs. Kathleen licked her lips shakily as she watched Will mull over her words, but her heart hit the floor when he simply said, "But that's not good enough, Ensign. How am I supposed to let you remain on board knowing what you think of your senior officers and your apparent disregard for any form of professionalism

with your choice of words?"

Will couldn't help himself from pushing to a stand as the humiliating scene in Ten forward come back to taunt him once more; As Deanna's mirth crushed his soul into a thousand sharp shards, each one piercing a tiny part of him with pain and disappointment.

Kathleen came to a stand herself, unsure what to do or what to say. Will was clearly still livid with her, but she sensed that it was more than that, much more but she didn't understand what, or why. Why did a few choice words threaten him to the point that he erupted into a festering volcano every time he thought of something?

Her heart thumped as she waited for him to get off his chest whatever it was he clearly needed to remove. He prowled back and forth, back and forth in front of her until at last he came to a full stop, anger pouring from every pore of his body, his eyes spitting fire and hatred, at her.

"Damn you, Ensign." She was startled when he suddenly grasped her upper arms and shook her. She could feel his inner force as he struggled to contain himself. Her eyes searched his; scared and strangely exhilarated by the turn of events that were unfolding in the room.

But no one was more surprised than she when Will ceased shaking her and roughly pulled her body against his, muttering hoarsely into her hair, "Damn you." Suddenly gripping a handful of her hair, Kathleen felt her head being turned forcibly and his mouth clamping onto her, his kiss rough, demanding, angry and so, so erotic. Kathleen felt herself go weak at the knees, and only his firm masterly hold stopped her from collapsing at his feet.

But as suddenly as it began, it ended as Will pushed her violently away from him, his bitter words hoarse and forced, "Get out."

~~~Chapter ten~~~

Kathleen Carson glanced at her watch again, the third time in as many minutes. She was fashionably two hours and 5 minutes late for her shift. Any minute now the hail would come. She lay in bed, the dimness of the room concealing the true hour of the day, but she didn't care, she didn't even care that she didn't care.

She glanced at her watch again, jumping slightly as the delicate chirp of the hailer reached her ears. But it was the voice she was waiting for and sure enough, it soon followed, "Riker to Carson, acknowledge."

She politely ignored him, but he didn't give up that easily. "Commander Riker to Ensign Carson, acknowledge before I send a security team down there to kick you out of that bed."

Grabbing her communicator, Kathleen managed to sound convincingly mortified, "Oh my God!! Oh, I'm sorry Sir, I had a bad night and must have slept through my alarm. Give me ten minutes please Sir,"

She grinned at the sharp response back, "You've got five, move it!" Yup, this was going as

good as she hoped. Okay, she was getting some bad marks on her records, but she figured it wouldn't take long to capture Will's attention, become his girl and then become the model officer once more. Yesterday had been an added bonus. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she would end up not only in his arms, but to be kissed by him too, even if it was out of anger.

The spark was there, Kathleen Carson just needed a little more time to ignite it.

The young ensign had only been on board a matter of days when she'd seen something she wanted in her Commanding Officer, even though she hadn't technically officially been introduced to him. She'd come on board in the middle of some crisis and had been plunged in at the deep end. It was also she acknowledged to herself probably why she hadn't made any friends, having missed the introductory showing around period.

But she wasn't complaining, she had her work and she also had her dreams; dreams that had haunted and tortured, leaving her in a sexually suspended limbo from the moment not so long ago that she had spotted Commander William Riker leaving engineering. Her plan of action was to get in his face so much that he'd see past everything else and focus on her, the woman. A woman who wanted him, by fair means or foul.

Her next opportunity had just arisen.

~~~Chapter eleven~~~

Deanna watched Will push his food around his plate, stabbing at blood red cherry tomatoes not caring if he speared one or not. "I think it's already dead, Will."

It was a long moment before he realised that she had spoken and he looked up at her puzzled and then guilty, "Sorry, Deanna, I've just got a lot on my mind today, I'm not very good company."

She reached over and gently removed the fork from his fingers, putting it down onto the plate and pushing out of reach, she heard him sigh as he fell back against the plush chair back, raking a slightly shaking hand through his hair, leaving it spiky, "I know, that's why we're having lunch together. If you want to talk about it, I'm listening, it'll help to share your thoughts, Will, you know that."

He nodded absently but the frown stayed, the lines etching deep furrows upon his normally handsome face. Will lifted his palm, but just as quickly dropped it onto his lap again, the contact slap echoing around them. "I don't know. The stupid thing is, I don't know what's wrong. The ship is running like clockwork, my social life is as good as it can be..."

She caught his apologetic look but only nodded her understanding, knowing that he was referring to their relationship; A relationship that was so unique it was special and treasured and deeply respected. They both knew that one movement towards each other, would unite them as a couple, but it never came, and they both understood the reasoning behind it, even if somehow they both wanted that one movement to come. But without it, they survived and existed in a world in between friends and lovers; more than friends, not quite lovers. Truly

unique.

Deanna was brought to the present by Will's puzzled voice, "I dunno...I just can't explain it, something's wrong and I can't explain it. I feel like I'm...waiting."

He turned his eyes to hers searching for understanding, knowing that he would find it there, he always did. It was one of the things he adored about her; her ability to understand and resolve.

Deanna Troi got it in a nutshell, "Ensign Kathleen Carson."

Will felt his breath whoosh out not even knowing it had been suspended. Just those three simple words brought everything into a clarity that was so clear, Will didn't know how he missed it. He knew the woman was a problem and that she was having problems. What he didn't understand was that ~they~ were having a problem too.

Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Deanna felt his discomfort, she was surprised when he spoke, "I'm sorry about how I treated you the other day, I was way out of line with you, Deanna and you didn't deserve the treatment that you got." She went to speak but he raised his hand, silencing her with its motion. "I want you to know that I asked the Captain to drop the charges...your record will not be blemished."

Deanna was momentarily speechless as she stared agape at the man opposite her, "You...you didn't have to do that, and Will, I ~did~ deserve it, and more. What I did was probably the worst thing I ever did to not only you, but a fellow officer."

Will waved away her words, "You were drunk, Deanna. I agree you shouldn't have been drunk, but once you are, you're not responsible for your actions...or your mouth. Picard would have hardly given you a black mark for being drunk!"

Deanna blushed, but her gratitude poured from every pore, "Thank you, Will, you will never know how much that means to me."

He nodded, "On the contrary, Deanna, I do."

An understanding silence prevailed for a few scant moments until Deanna voiced her thoughts about the young Ensign, "Do you think Kathleen maybe causing mischief so that she gets a reprimand from you?"

Will blinked with surprise at her question, "I don't know...I'll admit, I am a little surprised at her actions, but all her incidents have all had been validated, I've seen no pattern and no overt behaviour."

Deanna asked even though she wasn't really looking forward to his answer. She still wasn't comfortable with Will's liaisons on board The Enterprise, but had learnt to accept them, for the most part, "Will, has Kathleen come on to you at all. Has she made her feelings known to you?"

Deanna felt the invisible wall leap up between them even though Will shook his head in denial. He had never lied to her before, and she knew he wasn't lying now, but he was holding back something and wasn't prepared to tell her, yet."

Lunch time was almost over and Deanna reluctantly pushed herself to a stand, but continued to look upon the man still seated, "Want some advice, Commander?" He nodded warily, and she continued, "Let someone else reprimand Ensign Carson. Remove yourself from her physically, you're getting too close and I don't mean personally, Will. She has upset your balance and its thrown you, you need to step away and restore your rationality...I'm sorry, I've got to go, I'll see you later, okay?"

Will watched her walk away from him leaving even more subdued and somehow angrier. Why hadn't he confessed that he'd kissed Kathleen? Why hadn't he told Deanna that he'd been so angry at her, that he had brutally kissed the ensign wishing it was Deanna he was punishing for making him feel like he was losing control? And that was how he felt; out of control, and all it had taken was two drunk women and a joke at his expense.

Will felt like he was losing it and he didn't have a clue what to do about it.

~~~Chapter twelve~~~

"Hello, Kathleen, please, come in."

Ensign Carson's appointment with the Counselor was initially scheduled for tomorrow, but Deanna used the excuse of double-booking and asked her to move it forward to today. In truth, Deanna wanted the opportunity to re-access her opinion of the young woman before any more 'incidents' occurred.

It had been a long time since Deanna had seen Will thrown into such a state of discomfort. She'd know it was initially her fault, something she would never forgive herself for. But she'd also known that Will had forgiven her, their friendship was safe, but she wanted to do this for him. She wanted to get to the bottom of the enigma that now sat opposite her smiling.

Deanna smiled back, despite what had happened, their was still a kindred affinity between them. "I hear you've been getting into mischief with the Commander again."

The Betazoid was surprised when the woman before turned beetroot red, it was also then that she'd know her hunch was right; Kathleen Carson was infatuated with Will Riker. "You know your going to get into serious trouble, maybe even removed from the ship. I know thats not what you want, Kathleen, why are trying to jump on your superior's nose? You'll only get slapped off eventually, and you're too bright for that."

She smiled tentatively, clearly keen to reveal her ultimate goal, but unsure of the Counselor's loyalty to her fellow comrade, "Oh, I'm done with behaving like a spoiled brat. I intend apologising to the Commander for being such a jerk. I'm sure he'll be relieved to hear it, he's been marvellous to me, I will never be able to forget his...kindness towards me."



Deanna hid her puzzlement with difficulty. That word, that one word and the way it was said, ~kindness~, totally threw her. It was unexpected and odd and she just had to get to the bottom of it, "I got the impression the Commander was being anything but kind to you."

The ensign grinned, "Oh, he's just a bear face on, but he's very soft and gentle once you get past that."

Deanna's blood ran cold and she was sure her face had just drained of colour, but Kathleen hadn't noticed because she was looking down at her lap with a very enigmatic and shy look upon her face. It was then Deanna knew ~something~ had happened between the two of them, despite Will's denial.

It was with shock that she realised how it had truly been. Kathleen hadn't come on to him, Will had been the one. Will had made a pass at Kathleen! She couldn't stop the gasp that slipped through her tense lips, her eyes shone brilliant with knowledge and dismay, and much to her utter horror, treachery.

Somehow, Deanna centred herself quickly, taking a deep cleansing breath and tried to sooth her soul. The image of Will and Kathleen together continued to swim before her, taunting and laughing and Deanna felt her evil invisible twin clamouring up from somewhere deep inside her and do a little of its own taunting. "Do you know anything about Commander Riker, Kathleen. Have you 'checked him out' as it were, seen if he's dating anyone on board. Or is maybe even married?"

Kathleen frowned, clearly thrown by the Counselors line of questioning. Truth is, Kathleen didn't know too much about the man she'd intended having for herself. She'd known that he was popular, handsome with blue eyes to die for, and could deliver a kiss that was dynamite, "Well...no actually. I do know he's not married as I checked for a Mrs. Riker a few days ago."

Deanna's heart came to a full stop, "Why?"

Kathleen blinked, "Why what?"

"Why did you check to see if there was a Mrs. Riker?"

"Because I didn't want to step on anyone's toes. I like Commander Riker...a lot, I just wanted to know that if I got the the opportunity to...take our relationship further, I wasn't hurting anybody."

Deanna sat back in her chair, trying her best to look cool and collected, her long fingernails tapping quietly on the desk top, "What if there was someone...special, someone who would be deeply hurt by your actions?"

Their eyes met and the cosmos stopped, just for an instant. Everything except the pounding of their hearts, pumping in painful unison. Ultimately, Kathleen who broke the silence and asked the question that Deanna knew she was going to struggle answering. "Is there...?"

The truth of it was, was she special enough to have a right to halt any possible relationship between them, and why this one? Will had countless affairs that were as shallow as any relationship could be. But this girl...this girl rattled Will, and in all her years experience, she'd known that a rattled man was a man that was fighting his feelings rather than his hormones.

And Will's feelings were definitely adrift with Kathleen Carson.

Deanna's breath along with her admission, came out as one and she mentally crossed her fingers, hoping that Will would forgive her if it ever become known what she'd done, "Yes, there is."

~~~Chapter thirteen~~~

The ensign took a deep breath before pressing the button on the control panel outside his door, the chime instant and intruding on her otherwise thoughtful mood. Squaring her shoulders, she took a pace forward as the doors opened, putting her just inside.

The commander sat behind his desk, waiting. Kathleen tried to read his expression but he was liked a closed book, although his eyes were very wary of her. "What can I do for you, Ensign?"

She sighed, took another deep breath and let it out in one fell swoop. "I came to apologise for my behaviour over the past couple of days, and I wanted you to know that it won't happen again, Sir."

Will frowned deeply at her, pushing himself even further back into his chair as he contemplated her words. "I see...And what may I ask brought this change of heart, and more importantly, why should I believe you, Ensign? You have been a prominent pain in the butt since you decided I was worth tormenting."

Kathleen blushed, "I know, and I'm sorry sir, but the Counselor has been very good to me and made me see the error of my ways."

The light dawned and Will nodded thoughtfully, "She's very good at her job."

Kathleen agreed heartily, "Oh yes, Sir, she is. The best."

The silence stretched out for several long moments until Will reluctantly asked, "Was there something else, Ensign?"

She nodded thoughtfully, "Actually Sir, there was. The Counselor mentioned that there was someone on board that was very special to you."

Will bristled with her revelation, speaking harsher than he intended, "Your point, Ensign?"

She pushed on knowing that it was a do or die moment, "Well, Sir, I just wanted to say that there is one hell of a lucky woman out there somewhere on this ship."

Will felt smug, not even bothering to hide the grin, "Oh you do, do you?"

She grinned, "Yes Sir, I do."

Will turned serious again, "Kathleen, are you okay with what happened between us the other day. I never got around to apologising and it should never have happened. I was angry and frustrated and I'm afraid I took it out on you. I'd understand if you wanted to report it to the Captain, you have every right to do so."

Kathleen turned serious too. "No, Sir, its okay. I realise that I had pushed you to the limit, and besides, you only did what I secretly wanted you to do."

Shock registered and Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, "I did."

Kathleen watched him squirm and grinned, "Yes sir, you did. I'll be honest, Sir, I ~was~ trying my damndest to get your attention until I found out that you were otherwise spoken for. But I'm telling you right now, if it had been any other woman than the Counselor, you wouldn't have known what had hit you."

Will was intrigued, "Did De...Counselor Troi actually tell you that she and I were...close friends?"

Kathleen smiled as Will coloured up from the admission, "No, Sir, she didn't have to. A blind man would have known that you and she were much more than friends."

Will looked out of the porthole thoughtfully as he considered her words. It had been a long time since he'd thought of anything other than friendship with Deanna Troi, but the fact that she had warned off another woman meant that there was still something between them, something that was maybe worth exploring again.

Ensign Kathleen Carson silently left Will's office, leaving him to his thoughts about the woman two decks along who was sitting at her desk pondering the self same thing...

~~~Epilogue~~~

"Um...would you like to have dinner with me tonight, Deanna?"

Deanna laughed, the high pitched tinkle cascaded around Will, sending a wave of something he hadn't felt for a long time, and he didn't realise how much he'd missed it until it happened. Her simple word halted his train of thought and the sudden rush of adrenalin that had set his loins on fire, leaving him with an ache that promised to hurt for hours to come. "Why?"

He thought about his answer and briefly wondered why himself. Will had sat in his chair a long time after Kathleen Carson had left his office thinking about her revelation about himself and the Counselor.

Why had Deanna insinuated that he and her were an item? The question had gone around and around in his mind, driving him crazy as he tried, and failed to answer it. It had been a long time - a very long time since he had thought of Deanna in anything other than a friend, a very special friend.

But now he began to question that friendship and why they were nothing more. Deanna Troi was still, and would always be, the most beautiful woman that Will had ever seen, and it wasn't only her physical attributes that he admired. Deanna was beautiful inside too, and sometimes - most of the time, Will knew it was that that over-rode the other.

He cherished her, worshipped her, admired her, and loved her. So why wasn't he loving her the way a man normally loved a woman. Why wasn't he in her arms, her heart and her bed instead of just in her thoughts?

Did she love him the same way? And that was the problem, Will had no idea what she was thinking. Maybe Deanna had wanted more. Maybe she didn't. But if that were true, why did she warn off Kathleen. Why hadn't she warned off the other women that had passed through his life and his bedroom?

What had Deanna seen in Kathleen that scared her enough to stop the relationship before it started?

And more importantly, Why?

Will switched his train of thought to Kathleen Carson. Sure she was a looker and sure when he had kissed her he'd gotten rather hot under the collar, enough to hurl her away from him before he'd taken her there and then. That was until he'd realised that it was not Deanna in his arms raising his temperature to steaming. But why her and why then?

And then it dawned on him that Kathleen reminded him of Deanna, the Deanna of long ago. The Deanna that he had loved. The Deanna that had fire in her blood and eyes that could reduce him to a puddle when she cried.

He realised there and then that Deanna was very much a part of him, and Kathleen had just slapped him around the head and woken him up to the fact.

Will took a deep breath, his voice turned husky as he spoke to the heavens, "Because I think its time we talked about us, don't you, Deanna...Imzadi?"

Will heard her gasp, picturing her face in his mind. It had been so long since he spoken the tender endearment, and wondered why as the intimate word evoked a feeling within him that made his heart thump along with the memory of the moment the word was spoken for the very first time; A memory treasured for eternity.

Will barely heard her whispered answer of 'Yes.' Nor did he realise he was holding his breath until its release burned a path through his chest.

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Will pulled her against him, his arm pinning her small shoulders against his huge chest, his heartbeat hammering, drowning out her own elevated pulse. She slipped her slender arms around his waist, feeling the familiarity and the comfort of an action that too had been missing for eons.

Deanna sighed deeply, soaking up his warmth and closeness, sensing his relief at her acceptance to begin anew. She felt his lips against her hair, his love pouring into her straight from his heart and soul, exulting in the knowledge that it had always been there between them, just tucked away to grow and mature. And now, at last, the love had grown into something more, something so profound and all it had taken was a pain in the butt of a woman, with a heart of gold to show them the way.

Deanna felt the low rumble of laughter against her head, and she pulled away to look up into his face, seeing his amusement lighting up his blue eyes. Confused, she smiled tenderly at him, "What?"

Swooping to gently capture her lips against his, Will muttered as he rained tiny kisses upon her mouth, "Remind me...to...recommend Ensign Carson...for immediate...pro...motion." His last word disappearing into the depths of her mouth as the two of them fell in love all over again.

~~~End~~~