

A memory for keeps.

by Carol Sandford

The amber liquid sloshed over the side of the glass, the stain spreading into rapidly growing circular patterns on the chequered cloth, but the cloudy blue eyes that studied the formation didn't see the beauty of the action. Nor did he let the soft melancholy notes of the saxophone playing in the background filter through his thoughts.

He was lost in a time past. The memory of the woman so strong he could still smell her exotic perfume as it had drifted around him, tugging at his senses and filling him with a longing that he knew could not be extinguished, ever.

She was a fantasy, a vision that he once touched and kissed, held in his arms and allowed himself to be swept away. He had fallen in love.

Hearing the Cardassian tell him to his face that his love for her was so strong they'd assumed that she was real, had really thrown him. Then thinking that she was a part of his life in reality was a surprise to him, but no more than the surprise of knowing that his feelings for her had out-weighed what he had felt, and still felt for Deanna, and he never, ever thought there would be anyone else that could step into her shoes.

But she had, somehow. In a mad, lonely moment, Minuet had stepped into Will's subconscious and taken it over, completely.

The shock of seeing her on the screen, kissing him and playing with their son had evoked such a deep sense of mourning since, Will hadn't been able to shake her from his mind. She invaded him wherever he went and whatever he did. She was there, with him, all the time.

What he would have given to have been able to go back and live it all again. The pain of finding her gone and not held in the computers memory bank had been one of the worst things he had ever had to contend with.

It wasn't finished. There was so much left undone, and unsaid. He wanted her to stay with him. He wanted her, period. In amidst the chaos of her co-conspirators deception, Will Riker had fallen in love with a dream.

But had she fallen for him? Is she really out there doing the same again with another man? Did she really love him or was it really just a figment of his imagination? Was it just a ploy to stop him finding out what was happening to his ship outside the holodeck doors, or did she really fall for him as hard as he'd fallen for her?

Will thought he'd gotten over her. He thought he'd moved on with his life and put her firmly into a pocket within his memories, but obviously not. She was still there, she was still with him and still in his heart, for keeps, forever and he wanted her back.

Picking the glass up, Will stared into the amber depths searching for answers. Did he try to

forget her and move on with his life? Did he continue to live the dream, wallow in his memories of a magical moment in time when he found another woman that made his life worth living for? Or could he go back and persuade the Bynar's to reveal her whereabouts, if she really existed.

But Will didn't know if she did and that scared him more than anything in the universe. What was worse; Pretence or reality? Hope or devastation? Longing or mourning? Every one of them left him with a whole in his heart as large as the Cosmos.

Will didn't hear her approach until he felt her small warm hand rest upon his shoulder. He felt his body sigh with gratitude at her intrusion. He thought he'd wanted to be alone, but now that she was here, he realised that he didn't. He needed her presence, and her logicity.

Will needed her to tell him that it was okay to think about Minuet and mourn his loss. He needed Deanna more than ever, and somehow she knew that, she always did.

He watched her slide gracefully into the seat beside him allowing the hand that trailed down his arm be captured within his fingers. She felt their chill and sensed his agony and wanted to pull him into her arms, but her knowledge of the man before her knew he needed to unburden himself.

And he did moments later.

He studied their linked hands, sorrow hugged him like a shroud, "I miss her, Deanna. I don't know why, but I do."

She squeezed his fingers lightly, their firmness bringing him back to the painful present, but a present he needed to focus on to get him through his thoughts. He swallowed, the movement painful. He swallowed again, his eyes flicking away from hers to settle on the saxophone player as the man continued to churn out a melancholy melody.

He didn't think about how the band knew to play something sad, or why for that matter, and as the notes drifted over, he let his thoughts drift along with them.

His voice broke, "I know she was just a hologram, and I know I'm never going to see her again." He shrugged uncomfortably, as though the movement would shift some of the burden, but it failed, "I also know that its not healthy for me to be doing this to myself, but I don't seem able to stop it."

He moved his eyes back to hers, seeing what he expected to see; compassion and understanding. But somehow it upset him more. He wanted her to shout and rave at him to 'grow up' and 'get real', but wouldn't, not to him.

She crossed her slender legs, tucking her one spare hand between them as though she wanted to stop it from doing something. He didn't know what but he hoped it wasn't to stop touching him. He needed her touch right then, even though she still had her other hand firmly held in his.

Her gentle voice broke the silence, "It doesn't matter whether she was real or not, Will. Her presence is as strong to you as though she were standing right here between us. The fact that she isn't gives you that right to miss her. In time, you'll let go of her and she'll be where she belongs; in your past."

He shrugged again, "I know, I know, and I thought I had. I thought I had it firmly under control, until Barash created that fantasy. Deanna, I was ~married~ to her. We had a ~son~! Did I really love her that much?!"

Deanna faltered at the passion and pain in his voice. Could his love for Minuet be as strong as theirs had been so long ago? It was possible, she surmised. She was certain that he still loved her in the same way that she still loved him, but it was a different kind of love now.

Theirs was a closeness that surpassed ordinary love, the bond had secured that for them. But to feel the kind of love that Will was experiencing for Minuet, that was something else, and it was real, for him.

She could only be honest, "Yes, Will, you did and you still do. But you have to let go. You've got to look upon her as though she has passed away, otherwise she is going to haunt you for the rest of your life."

Making a snap decision Deanna came to a stand pulling Will to his feet along with her, slipping into his arms as though she did it everyday. They began to sway to the music, and Will felt his muscles begin to relax, pulling her close enough to bury his face in her hair, "Mmmm, I remember dancing like this with Minuet, but you smell different...lavender. Hers was more exotic."

Deanna trailed her hand up his back, letting it come to a rest on the nape of his neck. Her demand came out huskier than she intended but was powerless to stop it, "Dance with me, Imzadi. You're in my arms now, not hers. Dance with ~me~."

He moved away from her enough so that he could look into her face. So that he could read what lay in the depths of her inky black eyes. All he saw was Deanna, his Deanna, the one solid, dependable, non-judgemental person in his life that he could rely on.

He felt the pull of her lips, their magnetism hypnotising him, urging him closer and closer. Inch by inch, his face moved nearer to hers until at last, their lips lightly touched. He felt Deanna's hand move to his head, pushing him closer to her, demanding that he deepen the contact.

His mouth opened and she swept him in, leaving him in doubt how much she wanted him. He moved her body closer to his, circling her small frame and hugging her tightly against him. He moaned deep in his throat, feeling his loins respond to her as she melted against him.

Seconds later, Deanna ripped her mouth away from his and gasped urgently, "Dance with me, Will!"

As if by magic, the saxophone and his accompanists stepped up the intoxicating beat, and Deanna began to sway in his arms, moving in time against his body. Will had to follow her. He wanted to.

She was sensual and vibrant, her onyx eyes smouldered with desire as she watched his face. In tune with each others bodies, Will held her as she dropped her head and upper body back, revealing the long smooth line of her throat. Will couldn't resist as he bent forward and fastened his mouth to the pounding pulse he found there, his body reacting with the intimate contact.

On and on they danced. Hips joined, arms linked, minds melding as the intoxicating music saturated their senses, until finally, the last haunting note filled the air and they stood gasping in the middle of the floor amazed at what had passed between them.

In the echoing silence, Deanna reached on tiptoe and lightly touched her lips to his once more. Senses that she was going to go, he held her close to him, but her gentle push away was firm enough to tell him that she wanted releasing.

As his eyes searched hers beseechingly, longingly, the saxophone began playing again, back to its melancholy song. Cupping his jaw with her hand, Deanna whispered, "If you need her, Imzadi, call me instead, okay?"

Will couldn't say anything as she stepped back from him and walked away. Was it really that simple?

He had his answer moments later when he turned and stepped towards the door himself, leaving behind a memory.

Yes it was.