

Time  
by Carol Sandford

He half hoped she wouldn't be there, keeping their crazy date...but she was. As he climbed towards her, Will remembered their last breathless kiss, and knew that he didn't want it to be their last.

Before Will had even reached her, he was hoping against hope that she wouldn't turn up. As he toiled up the hill, he was angry with himself for all sorts of different reasons.

Firstly for having made the date in the first place. Secondly with having arranged to meet in such a stupid, impossible and ridiculous setting. Thirdly, and maybe most of all, with himself for being here keeping the date.

"With a little luck," he wheezed to himself, "she won't have turned up either."

But she was there.

Leaning against a tree to catch his breath, he could see ahead to the summit of the hill, grimly noticing the outline of her shadowy form, seated on the lush grass, waiting.

"She would be," he thought, half resentfully, half ruefully, "Well, what did I expect? Gave her the full works, didn't I? The full Riker treatment. The whole lot of the old irresistible personality in one go, whang! Right between the eyes."

Poor Deanna, she never stood a chance.

He eased himself away from the tree and continued climbing. He'd be out of breath by the time he'd got to her. Whose idea had it been anyway to make a date on the top of a hill that they had once climbed together a long time ago on Betazed?

"Mine of course, you dumb mutt," he grudgingly admitted to himself, "I must have been as high as a kite at that party. The old personality boy himself. William T Riker rides again. Lock up your daughters, Moms and dads! Will the thrill Riker is back in town."

He had to smile even though he'd felt like he'd left his legs behind a long time ago, but still managed to suffer the searing pain that coursed throughout his remaining parts.

"Why her? Why the one woman that you had dodged for the past fifteen years? Why the one woman that you had no hope of saying no to? Why Deanna Troi, you stupid idiot?"

But he knew he was fooling himself. He'd wanted Deanna Troi from day one, and now he was about to blow it. He had no idea what he was going to say to her, or what he was going to do. It had been a moment of intoxicated madness that he'd swung her into his arms and proceeded to show her some embarrassingly nifty moves on the dance floor. Too much champagne and too much ego had reduced him to an idiot, and she had gone along with it, willingly.

He'd remembered being floored by the gown she'd been wearing. And he had been bowled over by the look in her eyes as she had brazenly stared at him, willing him. Wanting him, to approach her. To make the first move. To take the first step outside of their normally happy safe neutral friendship.

And he had taken it, but not until he'd bolstered himself up with enough Dutch courage to sink an armada. He cringed as he remembered the way he hung over her, on her and around her. He cringed as recalled he'd slurred every Riker seduction line that he'd possessed from the back of his over-used brain.

And she fallen for it, hook, line and sinker.

And now here he was, barely a few metres away from her, meeting her for a date that they'd made only seconds after a kiss that had sobered them both up instantly. A kiss that neither one would ever forget. A kiss that held a hint of something else. Something more. Something that had rocked their comfortable little universe more than it ever had before.

And now they were here, on top of the hill, about to undo the biggest mistake of their lives.

Weren' t they?

Of course they were. Will had another girl. Okay, she was just a casual girl, a girl that like him, liked a good time when and where it suited them, and it hadn' t suited her to be at a party for senior officers. So Will had gone alone.

A mistake.

A huge mistake.

And now he' d come up here to beg for forgiveness. To get things back to the way they were. To say goodbye to what could have been. That was what he wanted, he was sure of it. He was sure that that was what Deanna wanted too.

Wasn' t it?

Of course it was.

He hadn' t told Elaine about his conquest at the party. He didn' t know why and he knew he should have. The Enterprise was a small ship, it wouldn' t be long before she' d hear about his ridiculous behaviour. At least he could use the, ' I was as drunk as a skunk and didn' t know what the hell I was doing.' routine.

Or he could use the ' It was just a kiss, for old times sake, it didn' t mean anything, honest." He chuckled to himself. Hell, he still had it; that old Riker charm. But for the woman that had come to a stand as he approached, charm was the last thing on his mind. This was Deanna Troi he was about to spin a tale or two to. This was Deanna Troi, Betazoid. This was Deanna Troi, the one woman in the universe that he loved.

But it was supposed to be a secret. It was supposed to be something that only the two of them would know. It was supposed to be a love that would one day find its way home and stay for good. Not just a fleeting visit in a drunken moment of madness.

"What the hell am I doing here?" he unreasonably grumbled to himself. But deep inside he knew. It had been that kiss. The kiss that he had snatched almost at the end of the evening, alone in the darkened corner of the dance hall, where he had parked his butt against the wall before humiliating himself even further by falling into an ungainly heap upon the floor.

Deanna hadn' t taken much urging to be pulled into his arms and if he hadn' t know better, Will could have sworn she really wanted to be there.

Hadn' t she?

He wondered if she had gone to her quarters in the same kind of daze that he had. Being drunk had got nothing to do with the feelings that had invaded his mind. What he had felt last night had sobered him up quicker than an ice-cold bucket of water. What he had felt had invaded his soul and he was still feeling its presence; Like a sledgehammer had whupped him around the back of his still tender head.

He got his answer when he came to a halt a few feet in front of her, finally glad to catch his breath and regain his momentum, "This was a mistake. We shouldn' t be here, Will, like this."

As Will stood and took in her features, the way her eyes suddenly pooled with moisture at the frank and totally unwanted admission, he was cast back to when they had first met and when they had first joined souls. Deanna was still the same, and still wanted the same kind of honesty and trust that had seen them through some of the toughest times of their personal lives.

Will threw honesty back at her, "Deanna, I didn' t think you' d come. I honestly didn' t think you would. I' m sorry."

What he was saying sorry for he wasn' t quite sure. Was it for last night, or for leading her on. Or just simply being here, upsetting both of their worlds? Or was he sorry for what could happen? Whose fault was it for what could happen today.

He found himself quietly mumbling it again, "I' m sorry."

The silence grew as they simply stood and soaked up each others confusion, until at last, it was Deanna who turned away and sat back down upon the grass. Will watched as the wall went up around her, and he wondered if he had done the same. He hoped it hadn' t, not yet anyhow.

This was a time for words. Words that could make or break their relationship. Her voice broke his thoughts.

"I' ve been up here a long time, just sitting - and thinking."

"Thinking? What about?"

"Us," she told him. "I mean, us being here at all. I really hoped you wouldn' t come, Will."

It irritated Will to realise that she was thinking exactly the same as him. It irritated him too that she had had the courage to voice the words, "You don' t really mean that, do you, Deanna?"

She turned her face towards him, and he had no doubts then that she did, even before she spoke, "I do." He watched her nervously tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, but it only high-lighted the determination in her steady gaze.

He retaliated angrily, before thinking, "Have you got any idea how much it took to come here? Have you got any idea of what this meeting could do to us, Deanna. Have you?"

Will almost punched himself for asking such moronic questions. Of course she knew. She had gone through the same experience he had, and had came to the same conclusions. The end result would be the same for her as it would for he.

Would they come through the other end as lovers? As friends?

God, he hoped so.

The air was so heavy with tension, in the end they both laughed out aloud at the absurdity of the situation. Will threw himself down onto the grass beside her, picked up her hand and kissed its coolness.

"I' m sorry, Deanna, for being a pig-headed, chauvinistic fool who imagined that you' d be here, palpating as you wondered whether I would turn up and insist that we carried on right where we left off last night."

She chuckled knowingly at him, "Isn' t it awful. I suppose thats why I came. I mean - I thought you' d be upset if I didn' t show. I was surprised to see you."

Will was surprised, "You were?!" he laced his fingers with hers, "I thought you knew me better than that, Imzadi."

Everything came to a stand still as the couple found each others eyes and held fast, letting the intimate reminder of their past bring forth a rush of emotion that wasn' t quite ready to acknowledge its existence, "Don' t say that word, Will, not yet...please."

"Why not?"

Deanna tried to tug her fingers out of his grip, but he held fast, knowing that the connection, albeit a small one, was needed at that moment to force home the attraction that in all honesty, they were both trying to deny. But her answer, the honesty in them and the way they made his heart stop for an instant gave him his first glimmer of what could be,

"Because last night, Will, I fell in love you, all over again."

His voice turned husky at her implication, desperation laced his urgent words in his need to make her see and understand, "I felt it too, Deanna, don' t you see that. Didn' t you feel that last night too?"

Deanna looked tormented as she continued to try and pull away from the steely grip that had moved from her fingers to her arm. "How can you feel that way about me, Will? I know you have a girlfriend."

He growled his displeasure at being reminded, "Elaine is ' not' my girlfriend, she is just someone I date once in a while. Come on, Deanna, don' t throw invisible obstacles in the way of us."

"Why not? it seems we' ve had every kind of obstacle in our way from day one, and Elaine is ' not' an obstacle. She is a woman with feelings, Will, and at least deserves your fidelity if nothing else, and I do not want to be the one that becomes an issue between you two."

Will was stunned, "An issue?!" He had to make her see, understand, "Deanna, the issue between us is the fact that we are Imzadi, whether you like it or not. That is not going to go away and I' m not going to let it, ever."

The final word trailed off and along with it, his anger, and hers, "See, I told you it was a mistake us meeting here."

He couldn' t stop the chuckle that arose from deep within him, "It was that kiss of ours that did it."

"I know," she said painfully, "but what now. What do we do?"

So there it was, the one big question, out in the open. They had both realised that a kiss like that had meant something far more than just the end of a night of flirtation.

Far worse than that, he realised, he desperately needed to kiss her again, "Oh God, we' re in real trouble, aren' t we?"

Deanna nodded solemnly, "Yes, we are."

In the moments that followed, they both had a weird feeling of togetherness, and loneliness. Their hearts ached with a sorrow that could be solved with one single act, but both were too frightened to play it out, knowing that afterwards, their lives would never, ever be the same again.

As the realisation of their actions washed over them, Will slipped a comforting arm around her and pulled her towards him. He kissed her cheek and she sniffed back the tears that threatened to fall. It was a long time before either one of them moved. The welcoming quiet that had followed their scared admission, brought back a touch of sanity to the situation. A situation that they were not yet ready to deal with.

No today.

## Chapter two

On the way back to his quarters, Will told himself with relief that was that. It was all over now. It was just one of those things. A foolish episode in their lives that would soon be forgotten. He' d been daft to flirt with Deanna in the first place and dafter still if he thought he could see her again without it leaving him as it did right now.

Lost.

Lonely.

Bereft.

And aching. God, how he ached. Not just his loins, but his whole being. But worst of all, his heart. Its heaviness threatened to devour him whole. And serves him right. One did not play with Deanna Troi and get away with it.

And yet he' d do it again, in an heartbeat. To feel that way when their lips had met. To feel that way when their souls had reconnected, if only for a nanosecond. It was worth it, it always would be.

Saying goodbye to her barely a few short minutes ago had been somewhat strange. Like...like taking vows of some kind. A vow to be true to one another. A vow to remember and cherish. A vow to go on.

Will felt like he had grown up a little more that day.

For as long as they' d known each other, the past two days had roused feelings that neither had dreamed would

resurface again. And what had it taken? Just a kiss. One solitary kiss, snatched and treasured for a lifetime.

As he turned the corner, Will did a double take to see Elaine standing at his door way. He managed to quickly hide his irritation, fixing her with a grin that he felt far from giving, "Hi, have you been waiting long?"

Her folded arms and rigid position expressed her displeasure more than her words which dripped sarcasm, "Long enough to wonder if you were going to make it home tonight."

Conscious of where they were and the stark reality of her knowing where he' d been, caused Will to nervously look around him before ushering her into the sanctuary of his quarters. Once inside he rounded on her angrily, "Spying on me now, Lieutenant?"

The sarcasm continued, "We had a date tonight. Remember, Sir!?"

He couldn' t stop the mild expletive escaping his mouth, "Shit." not only had he forgotten the date, he' d forgotten just about everything else that happened on board a Starship that he was more or less in control of. He tried to blame Deanna first, and then the woman that stood before him waiting for an explanation to the cruel word he' d thrown at her. Waiting for him to tell her if shit implied that he' d genuinely forgotten or if he didn' t want to go out with her.

Somehow it seemed to be obvious that it was the latter and he found himself apologising, "Sorry, its been a bit rough."

Elaine moved around the small room, reaching out to touch anything that smacked Will Riker. but her next words brought her face to face with him again, "I see," she said acidly, "turned you down, did she?"

He felt the blood drain out of his limbs as he uttered an anguished, "What?!"

He watched as the power of knowledge fill the woman before him with a venom that suddenly made him wonder what he had seen in her in the first place, "Well, you did get off with a woman last night, didn' t you? And you did go and meet her today, in the holodeck, didn' t you?"

Will was going to deny it, going to tell all sorts of lies, but they just wouldn' t come. Instead he found himself sinking into his chair, tapping the seat beside him, "Sit down, Elaine and I' ll explain." he said, somehow relieved that at last he was, at last going to be honest to her. And himself.

But she wasn' t going to take it that easily. her words were remote and hurt, "If you feel you must. If you think it will relieve you of some guilt."

Her words shocked him to the core. Guilt had been the last thing on his mind. He felt he had deserved to give her an honest account of his behaviour. And he felt that he needed to explain the unique relationship that he and Deanna had. But guilt had never come into it, not really. He couldn' t ever feel guilt over his feelings for the one woman he loved more than life itself.

Elaine had known that there was not, nor ever would be, anything serious between them. Will was not built that way. His heart had firmly been captured a long time ago on by a woman that he knew was going over what could have been as much as he.

No, no one could have his heart, it firmly belonged in Deanna Troi' s hands, it always would.

"You' re wrong, Elaine, I don' t feel guilty at all. I' m sorry that we never got past the full blown lust stage, but that was all it was, wasn' t it. Lust?"

At her silence, he ploughed on. "I' m not going to sit here and try to explain, or justify my relationship with Counselor Troi. To be honest, I don' t think I could even begin to. You would never understand, and that is not a criticism, Elaine, its a fact."

"You love her, what's so difficult in explaining that." she said bitterly, "I was beginning to fall in love with you, y' know. It wasn' t just lust for me."

And somehow Will did know. He' d had an inkling that she was trying to move their relationship further than the bedroom, and maybe he thought dimly, maybe that was why he behaved the way that he did. Maybe he knew it was

crunch time; time to move on.

He nodded understandingly, "I thought so, and I'm sorry for letting it go this far. I could never have been true to you, Elaine, and you deserve so much more. You are a wonderful girl and our time together will always stay with me."

He watched as the tears that had built begin to trickle down her cheek, and he couldn't stop himself from pulling her into his arms and letting her spend her tears upon his shirt front. He tried hard not to kiss the top of her head, or coo comforting words to her. They'd gotten close, very close over the past couple of months or so, and he mourned the end of their affair along with her. But his love for Deanna was too strong to ignore any longer.

He didn't want to ignore it any longer either. Sitting here with another woman in his arms only compounded what he should have done a long time ago; Told Deanna's mother to take a flying leap into oblivion and take the delectable Ms. Troi into his arms and keep her there, forever.

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Beverly pulled the openly sobbing woman into her arms and let her get rid of the store house of emotion that had been steadily building since the party the other night. But even so, Beverly knew she had to take one last shot at making Deanna see reason, "What's different this time, Deanna. What makes you believe Will is ready for a relationship with you?"

Deanna pulled back from her embrace, and Beverly found herself looking into puffy, tear-drenched bloodshot eyes. The small shoulders lifted into a helpless shrug as she squawked her response, "I don't know, Beverly, I just know that I want him and he wants me. Its time for us to move on, and on means together for us. Oh, please understand, Beverly!"

With a grim smile, Beverly pulled her back into her arms, her words full of bittersweet memories, and pain - a lot of pain, "Oh, I do, Honey, I do. I just don't want to see you hurt again. I remember what Tom did to you..."

"But Will isn't Tom, Beverly, I know that. Will is different. Will is steady, and true. Will is my best friend - besides you, and I know he would never hurt me intentionally. Will is.." she trailed off helplessly, pulling herself back away so the Doctor could see the sincerity of her words, "Will."

"I love him, Beverly." Taking a deep cleansing breath, Deanna finished her eulogy with fresh tears and an enormous smile on her face, "Its time for us."

### Chapter three

It was almost midnight when Will heard the chime at his door. Lying in his bed, with his hands beneath his head as he contemplated his life, past, present and future. The past was full of memories of her. The present was full of treasured moments with her. The future was full of dreams to be with her.

He smiled into the shadowy darkness as once more her image danced before his eyes. An image of Deanna giving him not only her body, but her heart and soul too. Will moaned with desire, its sound reflecting his body's wants. God, he wished she was here, in his bed. In his arms. He closed his eyes, emptied his mind, filled it with her and called her name; the name that they'd both cherished and worshipped for so long; ~Imzadi~

She heard him call. Lying in her own bed, she'd emptied her mind in the small hope that one night, he would no longer be able to fight the urge to be with her. The same urge that she had been struggling with herself for the past three nights.

Seeing him, being around him by day had been torture. Speaking to him had shattered her heart so many times she wasn't quite sure if she would ever recover. But she did, she had to - for the job. For her sanity. For her patience. For Will.

Three days of hell, that's how long it had taken. Three whole days. With a grin, Deanna slipped on her long silk dressing gown, raked her fingers through her long loose hair. Dabbed a touch of scent behind her ears, and left her quarters.

And now she stood on the threshold of his living quarters, shaking like a leaf and unsure of what the night held in store for her.

For them.

Will knew it was her. Pressing a button beside his bed, he opened the door. Not trusting his voice to sound coherent, he waited for Deanna to seek him out. Barely a moment later, she stood like a vision from his dreams in his bedroom doorway. He felt his body grow warm and his heart soared as he took in her smile.

But he thought he' d gone to heaven when he heard her huskily say, "What would you do if I climbed into bed with you?"

He didn' t even attempt to hide the grin that erupted at her unusual choice of a chat up line, "I' d move over, lay back and think of home - I think."

Lifting her hands, she slipped the silky gown from her shoulders, watching Will' s eyes widen briefly and then smoulder as she revealed the matching night wear beneath, its silky form clinging to her own womanly curves as she moved towards the bed.

Without thinking, Will sat up and pulled back the coverlet, moved over and Deanna slipped in beside him. Pulling the cover over her, settling its edge just beneath her breasts, Will turned his body towards her, allowing his huge hand to rest lightly upon her stomach. His eyes burned into hers, asking - begging her to say the word, or give him a sign, any sign to move on.

He saw the twinkle in her eyes, saw the love, unrestrained and free, "What would you do if I kissed you, Imzadi?"

Humour lit up his own eyes as he pursed his lips, he feigned debating, "Well, I..." but it was as far as he got.

"Oh you....!" Her words were swallowed as she pulled his mouth against hers for a kiss that they had waited a life time for. A kiss that became the beginning of forever.