

When I Look At You

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When I Look At You

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Summary

In the aftermath of the Mars attack Jean-Luc Picard resigns and Beverly Crusher makes a decision.

The sun dipped in the sky, covering the vineyard in a golden glow. Picard sat alone in the backyard of his family home, an open book on his lap, a glass of wine on the table, an expression of regret on his face. The vineyard was as quiet as ever. A lifetime ago— several lifetimes ago — he ran away from this life. Now it was all he had left.

"Admiral?"

The call was quiet. His Romulan guests had started calling themselves caretakers of the estate, but were still working out exactly what that entailed. "Hm."

"You have a visitor."

Picard pursed his lips. He'd received many calls over the past few weeks. Reporters, lawyers, representatives from refugee organizations, synthetic biologists at the Daystrom Institute, and various crew and friends. Laris and Zhaban handled most of them and had reasons for the handful they made him take. Admiral Janeway was the remaining connection to Starfleet. Phillipa Louvois offered legal advice. Geordi and Will and Deanna provided emotional support. Zani and Raffi deserved answers. Most of those conversations went poorly, but at least they were remote.

"Who is it, Zhaban?"

A long moment went by with no answer. The admiral turned and the color drained from his face, his mouth dropped open in shock.

"Hello, Jean-Luc."

"Beverly..."

Tension grew as awkward silence stretched between them. Beverly waited for an invitation to stay or a exclamation to go; Jean-Luc struggled to find words.

Zhaban retrieved a second wineglass from the exterior bar and carried it to the table overlooking the vineyard. He poured wine into the glass and topped off Picard's, then pulled a chair back and looked at Beverly expectantly. At her hesitation, Picard snapped out of his stupor and gestured across the table.

"Yes. Please. Sit."

She sat. Zhaban glanced to the admiral. He nodded and the Romulan returned inside.

The wind rustled through the trees as Picard drank her in. She looked as he remembered her. Her hair was longer and she wore a simple sweater and slacks. No uniform, no communicator, though she did place a small PADD on the table beside the wineglass. He wanted to know everything— where she'd been, what she'd done, why she was back —but he didn't know what to say, how to ask, where to start.

Beverly took a breath. "How are you?"

Jean-Luc frowned. Had someone told her he was losing his mind? That he needed to be saved from himself? "Who's asking?" he said in a sharp voice. Confusion filled her eyes and he realized how paranoid he sounded. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm..." He sighed. "I'm tired."

Beverly nodded, sympathetic. Jean-Luc touched a finger to the stem of his glass. "I've been in Starfleet for over fifty years. My whole life."

"It doesn't define you," she said with conviction.

He looked over with a harsh laugh. "Doesn't it?"

She met his look with steady eyes. Jean-Luc shook his head.

"I have relived every conversation we ever had, again and again, trying to understand. What did I do, what did I say, to push you so far away. Not just from me, but from everyone who even knew me. Will, Deanna, Geordi, Worf." She looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. "They don't blame me. At least that's what they say." His crew was as protective as his Romulan caretakers. "But I do. My failure as a partner. As a captain, as..." His voice trailed off. Lately all he did was fail. Losing her was the first step. They danced around a relationship for so long. Even when they claimed they were together, they still danced. And too often they were out of step.

"I couldn't give you what you wanted. Something else, something different, something more." In his heart he wanted to give her whatever she wanted, or at the least whatever he had. But that desire made him vulnerable, uncomfortable, unmoored. He retreated to what he knew, to what made him feel in control, to what made him feel strong and safe. "Starfleet needed me and I needed Starfleet and now—" He waved his hands. He had nothing left. A square of dirt.

"Starfleet was wrong." She raised her chin. "You were right to resign."

"It doesn't help the Romulans."

"Jean-Luc—"

"Why are you here?" he shouted and she flinched. He was furious. "Congratulations, you were right. Now leave me alone."

Beverly took a moment to gather her thoughts. She squared her shoulders. "There is something I need to tell you."

He looked over, the weight of those words played across his face.

Beverly activated the viewscreen on the PADD. She took a deep breath and slid the device across the table. Jean-Luc reached over to pick it up. The face of a young child looked up at him with a big smile and mischief in his eyes. A mad realization bubbled up into his brain and he was hit with a storm of emotions.

"He's five."

Her calm words were confirmation. He stared at the image of the boy, his thoughts jumbled.

"His name is Jack."

"Jack," he said. *Jack*. His thoughts flew to the man who brought them together, the ghost that kept them apart. It was a good name for a son. Their son.

He looked at her with wild eyes full questions and emotions, but they all caught in his throat.

She reached across the table but didn't quite touch his hand. "I wanted to tell you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was afraid."

"Of me?"

"Of course not." He shook his head. There was no of course about it. She knew he feared turning into his father, it only made sense she feared it, too. But her denial was firm and her fears were bigger. "You were at the center of a controversial, unpopular operation, surrounded by enemies. Constant threats. Do you remember Kalara V? You were held hostage for nine days."

Anger filled his chest with each word. "That's no excuse."

"Every day a new crisis. Reman assassins held a disruptor to your head. A photon grenade detonated meters from you." She blinked at tears. "That's how it would always be. Kidnappings, explosions, battles."

He replaced the PADD on the table and tried to keep his voice steady, calm. "If you had told me, things might have been different."

Beverly gave him a look. "Jean-Luc, be realistic."

"That is not fair."

She leaned back with a sigh. "You were trying to save billions of lives. I couldn't compete with that and I didn't want to." She clutched her arms over her chest. "I didn't want to take you away from them. But it wasn't safe for me to stay. It wasn't safe for a child."

He sat up. "We could protect—"

"No," she said, loud and definitive. "We couldn't, you couldn't, all of Starfleet couldn't." She shook her head, flung out a hand. "Look what's happened. Mars is burning."

Jean-Luc shut his eyes against the images of devastation her words conjured. Beverly dropped her hands, hugged them to her chest again. After a moment he lifted his eyes.

"We could have figured it out together." He swallowed. "You didn't give me a chance."

"I couldn't risk it," she whispered. Tears ran down her cheeks. "I couldn't risk you changing my mind, convincing me to trust you, to trust that it would be okay."

"Beverly—"

"I can't lose another child!"

Jean-Luc jerked back as if slapped. Beverly pulled her lips in over her teeth and focused on her breathing. Silence stretched out between them. After a while Jean-Luc reached over and brushed his finger across Jack's smiling face.

"Where is he now?"

"We're staying in London."

Jean-Luc shook his head. She was so close this whole time. But of course, until recently he'd been far away. One night years ago she wrapped her arms around his waist and imagined raising a child here. He'd stiffened then and again now.

He wanted to meet the boy, wanted to ask her to bring him there or Jack here. The slight possibility she'd refuse paralyzed him. But she understood.

"I want him to know you. I want—" She met his eyes. "I want you to be a part of our life."

He noted the hesitation in her voice, the tension in her posture. Her fear was palpable. He sighed.

"But it's still dangerous," he murmured.

She nodded mutely.

"Why did you come here?" he asked again. Why dangle a better life in front of him. It was cruel. She wasn't cruel.

"I saw—" she bit her lip.

She saw a news story. The announcement of his resignation, Starfleet's statement of regret. They expressed gratitude for his many years of service, but suggested he was out of touch. That the whole Romulan affair was an old man's quixotic fantasy and the Federation was honor bound to take care of their own. The report included a video of Admiral Picard walking away from Starfleet headquarters. He was hunched over with his head down; he looked old, sad, and small. It haunted her for days. It drove her decision to come.

Beverly's throat was full of unsaid words and unshed tears. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then raised her head and stood. Carefully, deliberately, she made her way around the table. Jean-Luc looked up and she placed her hands on his cheeks. They were wet.

"I saw something I'd never seen before. Not after the Borg. Not at your court martial or when Jack died. Not when the *Enterprise* was destroyed. And not one of the times I told you we don't work." She swallowed tears. "I saw defeat and I came here to tell you to stop feeling sorry for yourself." Her hands were warm on his skin. "I came here to tell you to fight."

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