

# To Boldly Go: The Best of Friends

A U.S.S. *Providence* story

by Cleve Johnson

## ***Captain's Log: Stardate 53013.2***

*The crew of the starship Providence has just completed two weeks of shore leave on Earth. Everyone seems reenergized after spending time with family and friends and they are eager to resume our mission to the unknown reaches of space. Some of the crew have requested family members to join our journey, which I have granted. It's good to see families on a starship again. We are en route to Starbase 82 for several system upgrades and additional crew. Since our course takes us near the Mugami Nebula, I have decided that Lieutenant Commander Adams and I will take a runabout to catalog some gaseous anomalies that our long-range sensors have detected. Commander Leeson will take the ship to Starbase 82 where we will join them in a few days.*

Captain Robert P. Stuart finished packing his suitcase. He just latched the case shut when the familiar, and sometimes annoying, chirp of the door chime sounded. "Come," Stuart said as he grabbed his suitcase, placing the strap over his shoulder.

The door slid open, making its usual swishing sound. Commander Melanie Leeson stepped in.

Stuart headed for the door, toward his first officer. "Here to see me off?" he asked.

Leeson stepped aside, allowing her captain to exit from his quarters. She followed him out and strode down the corridor beside him. "I still don't like the idea of leaving you and Mister Adams by yourselves," she stated.

"There's nothing around for several light years," Stuart replied. "We're going to do a simple survey of the nebula and we'll meet you at the starbase within a week."

"Lieutenant Commander T'Les could conduct the survey...," Leeson started to say.

"Commander T'Les will be needed for the sensor upgrades," the captain interrupted as he and Leeson entered a turbolift.

"Please state destination," the computer asked as the turbolift doors closed.

"Shuttlebay," Stuart commanded.

Leeson remained silent, but only for a moment. "I'm your first officer," she said. "And you know how seriously I take my role when it comes to your safety," she added.

Stuart allowed a hint of a smile to cross his face. "You are fulfilling your role as the first officer very well," Stuart said. "But I'm a big boy now. Don't be such a mother hen."

The doors swished open and Stuart, followed by his second-in-command, headed for the shuttlebay.

“I was a Starfleet security officer for twelve years,” Leeson proudly stated. “It’s my job to be a mother hen,” she added half-heartily.

Stuart smiled at that but did not reply as the door to the shuttlebay slid open, allowing him and Leeson to enter the large facility. As they approached the runabout in the center of the large room Blake Adams walked around from the short-range craft checking one of the warp nacelles.

“Just finishing the pre-flight checklist,” Adams stated. “We can launch when you’re ready, Skipper.”

“I’m ready, now,” Stuart said as he turned toward Leeson. “The ship is yours, Exec.”

Leeson nodded to her commanding officer. “Be careful, Sir.”

Stuart entered the runabout as Adams and Leeson lingered over the warp nacelle. The first officer stared momentarily at Blake Adams. She placed her hand on his shoulder, a serious expression on her face. “Be careful out there, Blake,” she said.

“We’ll be okay,” Adams replied. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

Adams entered the runabout as Commander Leeson exited the bay.

## **Chapter 1**

The Federation runabout U.S.S. JORDAN flew toward the nebula. Inside, Captain Rob Stuart and Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams carefully watched their instruments as they scanned for anomalies. Stuart seemed to be bothered by a thought or feeling but did not quite know why.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” Blake said to his CO. “Anything wrong?”

Stuart did not turn his gaze from the viewscreen on the console. “I’m just concentrating on these readings,” he replied. “I haven’t seen this many oxygen particles in a class three nebula before.”

Adams had known Rob Stuart long enough to realize that an elevated number of oxygen particles would not keep him silent for almost an hour, so something else must have been on the captain’s mind.

“I’ve got a sneaky suspicion that something might be wrong,” Adams stated. “Are you going to tell me about it?”

Stuart looked away from the screen as he thought about what to say. Then, looking at Blake, he said “No,” and went back to scanning the nebula.

But Blake, being himself, would not let it drop. “I think that you need some female companionship to lighten you up.”

Rob did not look up, but Blake thought that he saw something --a tear?--glistening in his friend’s eye. “You and the doctor have been spending a lot of time together,” Adams said. “Are you and her developing some sort of relationship?”

Rob looked at Blake and smiled a somewhat *forced* smile. “Doctor Edwards and I are friends,” he replied. “She also just happens to be one of the best Tri-level Chess

players on the ship.”

“And she has brown hair, blue eyes, and ...,” Blake started to say.

“Yes, she is a very attractive woman,” Rob interrupted, “but I don’t think a captain should get romantically involved with a member of his crew.”

“Why not?” Blake asked.

“It could affect my judgment,” Rob stated. “And I don’t want the temptation of showing any favoritism.”

Blake kept pressing the issue. “Your judgment wouldn’t be impaired one bit,” he said. “You are an experienced Starfleet officer and know the dividing lines between duty and your personal life,” he continued. “I think it’s okay to let yourself have a little romance every so often.”

Stuart stood and walked toward the replicator. “Want something to drink?”

“No,” Blake stated. “And don’t try to change the subject, Rob.”

Stuart returned with a cup of hot tea. Sitting back at the console, he sipped from his teacup and set it down. “It seems to me that you should concentrate less on my love life and more on yours,” he told Adams. “It looks to me like you and Commander Leeson are getting on friendlier terms.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not at all,” Stuart said. “In fact, I’m happy that you two have been able to overcome the difficulties in relating to each other that you had a couple months ago.”

“How come you don’t have a problem with your senior officers having relationships, but you don’t allow yourself the same courtesy?” Blake asked.

“I’m the captain,” Stuart replied. “I’m supposed to be married to my ship.”

Blake was not getting anywhere with his friend. But knowing that something was eating away at Rob’s inner self kept him from dropping the matter. Blake got up and walked toward the access hatch to the corridor of the tiny spacecraft. “I need to go to the head,” he stated.

Rob Stuart felt relief that Blake’s inquisition was over. At least it would be over until Blake returned. Rob suddenly realized what had been bothering him since he and Adams left the ship. He thought that he was over the pain, but seeing the nebula at such a close proximity brought back memories of the life that could have been his. The life that he could have shared with *her*. But then there was the nebula.

## **Chapter 2**

Blake Adams thought about Rob’s reluctance to share whatever was bothering him. Blake just had to find out, so that he could help his best friend through it. “Computer,” he said. “Display personal logs of Captain Robert P. Stuart.”

“*Please state stardates requested,*” the computer stated.

“Good question.”

*“Please rephrase.”*

*This machine is so literal at times*, Blake thought. “All stardates,” he said. “And show only logs that pertain to discussions of his romantic relationships.”

The computer screen began to play a log concerning how Admiral Hathaway, Rob’s uncle, kept trying to “fix Rob up” with young ensigns and junior lieutenants. It was actually kind of hilarious to hear Rob tell how uneasy it made him feel.

Another log played, another, and another. Finally, Blake stopped the computer. “This will take forever,” he said to himself. Then a thought came to him.

“Computer, cross-reference previous search with any personal tragedies that Captain Stuart may have encountered.”

A log started playing. As Blake Adams viewed and listened, he began to realize the anguish that his friend must be suffering.



Rob Stuart tried to continue scanning the cloud of gases within the nebula, but his hidden emotional pain would not let him concentrate. He thought about her. He thought about the last time that he saw her. The mission to the nebula that was a hundred sectors away from his present location. He thought about his friendship with Blake Adams and how he had never shared his greatest hurt with his friend. Then Stuart realized that he had treated Blake with the disservice of not trusting him into the inner place of his heart.

Blake entered the cockpit of the runabout. “Rob,” he began. “I want to apologize for interfering with your life.”

Stuart motioned for Blake to sit at the pilot’s console. He looked at his friend with a sadness that Blake Adams had not seen on his captain’s face before now. “I need to apologize to you, too,” Stuart said.

Blake did not understand why Rob needed to apologize for anything, but he waited to hear what his friend needed to say.

“Blake,” Rob said, trying not to choke up. “We’ve known each other for a long time.”

“About eight years,” Blake said.

“And in that eight years,” Stuart continued, “we have saved each other’s life on more than one occasion.” Stuart forced a chuckle. “We’ve played Chess, Poker, Volleyball,…”

Blake continued the list of activities. “...Fought Jem’Hedar, surfed, lived adventures in the holodeck.”

They both smiled genuinely at each other.

Stuart looked away from his friend momentarily as he collected his thoughts. “I consider you my best friend, Blake,” he finally said. “And I’ve done you and myself a great disservice by not sharing the innermost part of my life.”

Blake did not say anything. He read the logs, knew about the accident. He

remained silent, knowing that Rob had to get this burden off his chest --a burden that had been bottled up for the past nine years.

“I want to tell you about a young woman that meant more to me than my own life,” Rob stated. “We met when I was on leave....”

### **Chapter 3**

Dublin. A beautiful city where the air is fresh and the grass is green. Lieutenant Commander Rob Stuart had just shuttled in from San Francisco after meeting with his uncle. Rob had several weeks of shore leave due to him and decided that now would be a good time to use some of it.

Stuart walked the streets, re-acquainting himself with the city where he had been raised. Little had changed since he was a boy. Mister Riley’s bakery was still producing the finest bread and baked goods within a hundred kilometer radius and O’Mallory’s cafe still served the best Irish coffee ever made. There were many good memories associated with Dublin for Robert P. Stuart.

Stuart turned down a familiar alley that he and his older brother had used as a shortcut home from school as boys. The houses that lined the adjoining street appeared just as he remembered. And at the end of the street was the Stuart homestead that had been in his family for six generations. Or was it seven?

Stuart walked through the gate that led into the front yard. Sean, Rob’s older brother, opened the front door of the old house just as Rob started to walk down the sidewalk toward the porch. His brother ran out the door toward his younger sibling.

“Sean,” Rob exclaimed and held out his arms to embrace his brother.

“Great to see you, Robby,” Sean Stuart replied whole-heartily. “We didn’t expect you until tomorrow.”

“My ship returned to Earth earlier than planned,” Rob said. “Where’s Dad?”

“His last class didn’t end till four,” the older brother said. “He should be home by seven.”

“Seven?” Rob questioned.

“You know Dad,” Sean chuckled. “He would rather take the airtram than use a transporter.”

“Well,” Rob said, “we’ll have some time to catch up before he gets home.”

The Stuart brothers walked into the house to discuss old times and filled each other in on where their lives have taken them.



The sun came up early this time of year and Rob wanted to bask in its presence. He lived on starships with artificial gravity, artificial lighting, and recycled air. But now, while at home, he wanted to enjoy the natural elements of Earth. He lay in a hammock in the yard, relaxing and listening to the birds sing in the treetops.

Not realizing that he was being watched, Rob Stuart closed his eyes and began

humming an ancient Irish tune that he had heard as a boy. He did not remember the words, but he thought that the title of the song was *Danny Boy* or something similar.

The watcher smiled at the youngest member of the Stuart family, hoping that she would have a chance to meet him. She had heard of the young man who had lived next door, but she had never met him. However, she felt like she knew him since his father made a point of talking about him constantly.

The door to the Stuart house opened, revealing the head of the family. Sean Michael Stuart the third walked onto the porch calling for his younger son. "Robby."

Rob stopped humming and rose from the hammock. "Good morning, Dad," he said cheerfully.

"You're up early," his father said matter-of-factly. "Or did you sleep outside all night?"

"I just wanted to see the sunrise," Rob said. "I almost forgot what it looked like." Rob stood and approached his father. "Off to work?" he asked.

"No," the older Stuart said. "I canceled my classes for today."

"Why?" Rob asked.

"I wanted to be home to greet my son who was supposed to come home today," Sean Michael chided.

Rob smiled at his father. "I guess you were surprised at my early arrival."

"I'm glad you're home, son," the head of the Stuarts said warmly. "Come with me. I want you to meet someone."

Rob followed his father into the neighbor's yard, wondering who he would meet. He heard that the Callahans had moved away a few months ago, but did not know who lived here now.

A young woman opened the door. "Professor Stuart," she said with a surprised voice. "I didn't know you would be by today."

"I don't want to intrude," he started to say.

"You're never an intrusion," she said.

"I wanted to introduce you to my youngest son," he said. "Robby, this is Kathleen O'Connor."

Rob was astounded by the beauty of this woman. She seemed to have an inner light that radiated from her soul. Her blonde hair and hazel eyes were perfect for her complexion. "I'm glad to meet you, Miss O'Connor," he said.

Kathleen smiled. "Please call me Kathleen," she said.

"If you promise to call me Rob," the younger Stuart replied.

Professor Stuart laughed. "He tolerates me calling him Robby, but I don't think that he likes it now that he's a grown man."

"Kathleen smiled again. "I understand that you are a Starfleet officer."

“That’s right,” Rob said. “I’m home for two weeks while I wait for my new assignment.”

“I thought about joining Starfleet,” she said. “But my parents wanted me to study at MIT.”

“That’s where you met my father?” Rob inquired.

“I was one of his students,” she said.

“And now she’s the most sought-after theorists on stellar formation that this planet has seen in over thirty years,” Rob’s father interjected.

“It was quite a surprise when I moved here and discovered that we were neighbors,” Kathleen said.

Rob’s father quietly went back to his house, allowing his son to talk privately with the “girl next door”. They sat on the porch and continued to get acquainted for the next two hours.

#### **Chapter 4**

“...And I spent time with Kathleen every day that I was on leave,” Rob said. “In fact,” he continued, “I think my brother may have been a little jealous that I didn’t spend as much time with him.”

Blake leaned back as he listened to Rob tell about Kathleen. “You fell in love with her,” he said, more of a statement than a question.

Stuart forced a smile. “I loved her very much,” he said.

“And I take it that she loved you, too?” Blake inquired.

“We were planning to be married,” Rob replied.

“So what happened?” Blake already knew the answer, but he also knew that Rob needed to get this off his chest.

“On my last day of leave,” Rob started, “I said my farewells to Dad and Sean. My mother was several hundred sectors away on the *Melbourne*.” Rob rose from his chair and started to pace the deck as he told his story. “I went next door to say goodbye to Kathleen, but she wasn’t home.”

Blake listened intently, wondering why Kathleen would not be at home when she should have known that Rob would want to see her before shipping out. Of course, he also knew that a woman in love usually let her emotions dictate her actions.

Stuart continued his story. “She left a note on the porch,” he told Blake. “It said that she loved me and was sorry that she couldn’t say goodbye in person.”

“That must have hurt you pretty badly,” Blake interjected.

Rob nodded. “At the time, it did,” he said. “But when I beamed up to the orbital spacedock I got the shock of my life.”

Blake could see Rob’s face light up as he let out more of his memories. “What happened?”

“She was waiting at the airlock for me,” Stuart said, his eyes filled with joy as he continued. “It was the best surprise that I have ever experienced, especially when I hugged her and she told me...”

## **Chapter 5**

“I have wonderful news,” Kathleen said, excitedly. “I’m coming with you.”

Rob could not believe his ears. “What?” he exclaimed. “How did you arrange this?”

“Your father introduced me to Admiral Hathaway,” she stated. “He did the arranging.”

“My uncle pulled some strings,” he said with mixed feelings. “I don’t know about this.”

Kathleen’s expression turned sour. “You do want to be with me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Rob said. “I just don’t like having an uncle, who just happens to be an Admiral, showing favoritism.”

Kathleen approached Rob, taking him by the hand. “It so happens that the *Republic* needed a scientist who specializes in stellar formation theory,” she said. “Starfleet didn’t care if the person for the position was in Starfleet or a civilian.”

“And you are the best theorist in your field,” Rob commended her. “I do want you with me.”

“Then be happy and come aboard,” she said. I’ve already settled in.”

Rob and Kathleen walked through the access corridor, hand in hand, toward the airlock leading to the *Ambassador*-class U.S.S. *Republic*.

## **Chapter 6**

The U.S.S. *Republic* sped toward the nebula known simply as NT47. A scientific vessel had been reported lost in its vicinity several days before, and now the *Republic* sensors detected a faint trace of titanium alloy near the nebula.

Rob Stuart sat across from his captain in the forward observation lounge. He respected Captain Gardner and knew of his reputation for being a good-hearted man who cared for his crew. “I know this may be presumptuous of me,” Stuart said, “but I was wondering if you would be willing to allow Doctor O’Connor and I to be married on the ship.”

Gardner smiled. “It’s not presumptuous at all, Mister Stuart,” the captain said. “I wish you and the doctor a happy life together,” he added.

“I would be honored if you would perform the ceremony, Captain,” Stuart said. “That is if you would be willing.”

“The honor is all mine, Commander.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Stuart said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“When would you like the wedding to take place?” Gardner inquired.



“I’ll ask Kathleen,” Stuart said. “I suspect that she will want it held within the next couple of weeks if possible.”

“On this ship,” Gardner stated, “anything is possible. I believe you are off duty and you would do well to spend your off-duty time with your fiancée’.”

“Yes Sir,” Stuart said, rising from his chair. “Thank you, Sir,” he said as he turned and walked briskly toward the door.



Rob entered Science Lab 3, surveying the room until his eyes located Kathleen. When he saw her, she was already moving toward him from the other side of the room. He took her hand and led her to a quiet corner of the lab. “I wanted to ask you something,” Rob said, “but I needed to work out the details with the captain first.”

Kathleen was intrigued by Rob. She smiled, wondering what question he wanted to ask her. “It must be serious if you had to go to the captain,” she teased.

Rob looked directly into Kathleen’s beautiful eyes. “Will you marry me?”

Kathleen smiled. “Of course I’ll marry you,” she said. She kissed Rob and would not let go of him. The love that she had for him was great although they had only known each other for little more than four months. “When can we get married?” she asked the man who loved her without hesitation.

“Captain Gardner said just name the date,” Rob stated. “I told him it would probably be within the next two weeks.”

“Let’s make it today,” Kathleen excitedly pleaded.

“As much as I would like that,” Rob said, “I need to make arrangements for family quarters and getting a best man lined up.”

Kathleen kissed Rob again. “You’re right,” she said. “We need to get some details figured out first.” She led Rob toward the door. “Tell the captain that I would like the wedding to be in four days if it is convenient for him,” she said as the door slid open.

“Why four days?” Rob wanted to know.

“Because it gives you time to work out the details,” she stated. “And,” she added, “it gives me time to take a close look into that nebula.”

“What do you mean?” Rob asked as the door slid shut, separating him from the woman that he loved.

## **Chapter 7**

“You were going to get married,” Blake said. “What happened to stop the wedding?”

Stuart stared out the forward viewport. His eyes were intent on the colorful, swirling gases of the Mugami Nebula. “Kathleen and a junior science officer took a shuttle into the nebula to collect samples of unknown gases that were detected,” he said. “They were trying to determine if an unknown element might be preventing us from detecting the lost science vessel.”

Blake watched as his friend continued to look out the window, into the past. Into the painful reminder of the love that was lost. “I know that this is hard for you, Rob,” Blake reassured his friend, “but don’t stop now. I think that you are dealing with a deep hurt that you have suppressed way too long.”

Stuart turned his stare toward Blake. “Are trying to take over for James?” he asked coldly.

“I don’t want to be ship’s counselor,” Blake replied curtly. “I’m just trying to be your friend. I’m trying to help.”

Rob Stuart lowered his gaze. He felt bad for offending the one person in the galaxy that he had considered his best friend. “Sorry,” he said. “I know you’re trying to help.” Rob sat back at the console and continued telling Blake Adams about the tragedy. “The shuttle flew into the nebula...”



“Keep monitoring the shuttle’s position Mister Stuart,” Captain Gardner said from the center seat.

“Everything appears normal, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Rob Stuart said matter-of-factly from the OPS station. “Telemetry looks good.”

“Captain,” the young officer at the aft science station said. “I am detecting an excessive buildup of unknown gaseous particles near the shuttle’s location.”

Gardner looked toward the tactical station. “Hail the shuttled Mister Carter,” he ordered the officer manning the station.

“Aye Sir,” Carter replied. “I have the shuttle,” he said after a momentary pause.

“Doctor O’Connor,” Gardner said. “There is a buildup of gases near you.”

*“We’ve detected that, too,” Kathleen’s voice said over the intercom. “We’re going to collect a sample and head back to the ship.”*

Gardner looked at Stuart, noticing the concern displayed on his face. “Be extremely cautious,” Gardner stated.

A long silence permeated the bridge. Stuart kept careful watch over the OPS panel, monitoring the shuttlecraft systems for any signs of trouble.

*“Is Commander Stuart on the bridge?” Kathleen’s voice asked.*

“He’s here,” Gardner replied. “Would you like to speak to him?”

*“I just wanted to see if he’s getting cold feet?”*

Gardner nodded to his OPS officer, indicating permission for him to speak.

“I’m doing okay,” Stuart said. “But I’ll feel better when you’re back aboard with me.”

*“I’ll be back in your arms in fifteen minutes,” Kathleen said. “We’re on our way out now.”*

Over the intercom, the bridge personnel could hear the whine of the shuttle’s

impulse engines starting up. Then, without warning, the next sound that Stuart and his shipmates heard caused their hearts to skip a beat. An explosion.

“Kathleen!” Stuart yelled.

No response.

Again, Stuart tried to call his beloved. Again, there was silence.

Captain Gardner rose from his command chair and slowly approached Stuart. He came from behind and gently placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder, trying to bring some sense of comfort. “I’m sorry son.” But the words could not comfort the overshadowing loss that Rob Stuart now felt.

## **Chapter 8**

“There was a memorial service for Kathleen and Ensign Gomez the next day,” Rob told Blake. “Captain Gardner wanted me to take a few weeks shore leave, but I refused.” Rob looked up from his console. “I didn’t want to have time to think about losing Kathleen.”

“So you buried yourself in your career and blocked out the suffering instead of dealing with it,” Blake said.

Stuart did not reply. He knew what Blake had just said was true.

Blake got up and walked back to the replicator. After a few seconds, he brought Rob a cup full of hot cinnamon tea. “What caused the explosion?” he asked, handing the cup to Rob.

“We thought that the unknown gases were highly volatile,” Stuart said. “And the impulse engines ignited the gas pocket that was near the shuttle.”

Blake sat down and looked Rob straight in the eye. “Losing Kathleen was a terrible tragedy,” he said. “But the greater tragedy is that it has kept you from living your life to the fullest for so long.”

Stuart said nothing.

“And as your friend,” Blake continued, “I think that you need to crawl out of Kathleen’s grave, quit hiding behind a false sense of protocol, and move on with your life.”

Rob set his cup down and closed his eyes. Blake’s words hit a tender spot in Rob’s heart, but he knew that his friend was right. Rob Stuart had hidden behind his career and buried his pain over Kathleen’s loss for more than nine year’s. Rob realized that to continue living without the ability to love or allow himself to be loved would be an insult to her memory.

Rob Stuart opened his eyes and grabbed Blake’s hand, squeezing it tight. “You’re absolutely right,” he said. “I needed to hear the truth, as painful as it is.”

“That’s what makes us the best of friends, Rob,” Blake said. “We can talk to each other about anything.”

“And help each other to work through our deepest pain,” Stuart said.

Rob Stuart looked out the viewport toward the nebula, the edges of his lips turning slightly upward. He looked and saw, at least in his imagination, Kathleen smiling back at him. *Goodbye, my love*, he thought.

Blake watched his friend staring out the window. He noticed Rob's face had changed. Blake could see that Rob appeared sad, yet hopeful. He could see life returning to his best friend.

Stuart turned toward Blake. "Does Starbase 82 have any good restaurants?"

"I hear that there's a nice place that specializes in Betazoid cuisine on level forty-eight," Blake replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking about asking Doctor Edwards if she would like to have dinner with me," Rob said.

"Maybe Melanie and I could join you," Blake said with a big grin on his face.

Stuart looked at Blake. "And maybe James Kirk was a monk."

Rob and Blake burst out laughing, knowing that they could count on each other in any situation. But double dating was another matter.

"Let's go home," Rob said to Blake, as they both continued to laugh.

And the runabout, its course set for Starbase 82, jumped into warp space.