

# ~ Before the Beginning ~

by Omega13

---

## General Disclaimer (NC-17 Rating)

This is a post Endgame story with a twist. It contains graphic depictions of sexual interaction between two of my favorite fictional woman as they struggle to find themselves and each other.

When Star Trek Voyager began I couldn't wait to see a woman take the helm. Throughout the series, I warmed to Janeway, and grew to really enjoy the character more so than any other. However, the moment Seven of Nine stepped aboard Voyager the dynamics shifted completely. The subtext between J/7, whether intended or not, for me, deepened and brought vibrancy to both characters. To my delight, Janeway seemed to morph into a captain who was not only trying to get her crew and ship home, but into a hot-blooded woman with eyes that fired up whenever Seven was around her. The ending of the show led me to search out J/7 fanfic. It rocked my world. Thankfully, the passion and desire to keep the characters alive and on their journey - wherever that might be - continues to burn bright.

To all J/7 fanfic writers out there, thank you for taking me on many amazing voyages. To the new ones waiting in the wings, go on, you know you can do it.

Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters belong to Paramount Pictures and Viacom, except when they hop into my universe, and get involved in all sorts of reprehensible and definitely non-canon behavior.

All comments welcome.

Omega13  
[Omegathirteen@gmail.com](mailto:Omegathirteen@gmail.com)

---

### *Chapter 1*

"Thank you, Tuvok," Janeway said wearily sinking into a deep sofa nestled in a darkened alcove. "You're a good friend."

"You are welcome, Kathryn."

Janeway watched her ex-crew member cast an alert eye around the bar he'd accompanied her into moments earlier. She smiled faintly, aware that the Vulcan, given a choice, would never frequent this type of place - the bar was too dark with too many unknowns. In a place like this, Tuvok's professional vigilance would not allow him to relax, even though he was now no longer a security officer.

Slowly, Tuvok took a seat on the sofa opposite Janeway then focused on her. "I understand that this time is difficult for you, Kathryn," he said positioning himself in his usual straight-backed

manner.

Although she heard concern in Tuvok's voice, Janeway focused on the elegant blonde waiter who placed her whiskey and ice on the low table in front of her. Janeway smiled up gratefully at the young woman when she straightened and made eye contact.

"Thank you," Janeway said her voice deeper than usual from all the talking she had done throughout the day.

The younger woman smiled at her warmly then nodded. "You're welcome," she replied her eyes lingering on Janeway's face.

Janeway recognized the look; a mix of curiosity and desire to get to know her better. The waiter, she knew, was wondering if she was available.

Since Voyager's return to the Alpha Quadrant, some months ago, the crew's anonymity, and in particular hers had been completely removed in one fell swoop. Nowadays, obscurity was almost impossible for her. But here, in this bar, in the downtown quadrant of San Francisco, the staff seemed to respect her need to be left alone. While the waiter served her often, she had never once engaged in conversation, respecting Janeway's boundary. It was that distance, Janeway had convinced herself, which made her return to this place whenever she was home, and not the fact that the young blonde was strikingly similar to a former Borg drone.

Janeway picked up the drink that she'd promised herself as a reward for enduring the torturous ceremony she had been required to attend today. Taking a long drink, she felt herself relax just slightly. Leaning back, she looked at her ex security officer. "Meaning exactly what, Tuvok?" she asked curiously, her eyes appraising him.

"Meaning, Kathryn," Tuvok replied, his eyes lingering on the blonde before returning to her, "that since our return to the Alpha Quadrant, you have been under intense media scrutiny not helped by a substantial schedule of tours organized by Starfleet." He raised an eyebrow. "In short, Kathryn, unlike the rest of the crew, you have not received or, it appears, sought vacation time."

Janeway smiled indulgently at the Vulcan then sipped from her glass. She was relieved that he had not hit upon the actual reason for her detachment today. "I promise, old friend, that after this tour, I'll reduce my workload and book some vacation time."

Tuvok looked at her. "The news comms have not abated as I thought they would." He tilted his head. "I received a request only yesterday to appear on Terran International News. Two days before the request, a Terran journalist interrupted my lunch break at the Academy. He took an uninvited seat at my table then proceeded to launch into a narrative. Would you like to hear it?"

Delighted that her friend was trying to lighten her mood, Janeway chuckled. "Please, continue."

Tuvok nodded then repeated verbatim, "Voyager has finally returned home from the Delta

Quadrant. The indomitable Voyager captain and her crew have brought back a bounty of information amassed from seven years traveling in a virtually unknown area of space. By returning to the Alpha Quadrant, Captain Janeway has ensured that your debilitating condition was treated, and that the Doctor was not only able to put the record straight about his holonovel, but finally claim his sentient status." Tuvok raised an eyebrow when Janeway chuckled. "Needless to say," he added, "his discourse lasted for an additional ten minutes regarding the merits of Voyager and her crew."

Janeway smiled. "Like you Tuvok, the continued attention surprises me." She ran a hand through her shoulder length red hair. She sipped her whiskey then sighed inwardly. Since Voyager's return, Starfleet had maximized the media frenzy around the starship's time in the Delta Quadrant. In particular, she had been paraded as the returning hero. She swirled the whiskey in her glass. Even after all these months, she and her former crew were constantly in some media headline, somewhere. 'The Diminutive Captain Janeway's Herculean Effort to Return her Crew and Ship Home' was a caption she had read only this morning on the front screen of a daily media portal serializing Voyager's return. The attention was unrelenting and, unfortunately, Tuvok's experience with the journalist was not unusual. Janeway hated it. Still, she knew that many of the crew seemed to revel in the publicity. In some instances, the media hype had gone straight to some of their heads; Tom Paris and Harry Kim in particular. And much to Janeway's regret, B'Elanna and Tom, even though they had a child, were no longer together. It seemed he enjoyed his playboy image a little too much.

"I'm tired of talking about how lively the Delta Quadrant is," Janeway said her husky voice registering the strain. "I'm all talked out about the many star empires, alliances and species the Delta Quadrant holds."

Since her return, Starfleet had scheduled Janeway on every Alpha A List available. The only reason she had agreed was to keep her mind off a specific individual. The redhead frowned. Until today, it had almost worked. Her heart clenched when her inner voice whispered, I told you keeping yourself busy wouldn't work.

Wanting to focus on something else, Janeway forced a smile. "It was lovely seeing your son, Sek, and your granddaughter T'Meni, today," she said warmth crossing her eyes. "T'Meni is beautiful, Tuvok. You must be proud that your son named her after your mother."

Tuvok bowed his head. "Yes."

Janeway studied the Vulcan. Although there was no change in his facial features, she could read that he was delighted and deeply honored that his son had been so considerate.

"Kathryn," Tuvok said, the warmth disappearing from his eyes. "What is the update regarding the investigation?"

Conscious that Tuvok was deeply disturbed by Starfleet's tactics of selling her as the hero returned, while at the same time carrying out an investigation regarding her behavior on many fronts during Voyager's tenure in the Delta Quadrant, she replied carefully, "No court martial."

The honeymoon period of their return had quickly ended for Janeway. The last few months had been difficult for her. They were both well aware that if it had not been for the recent Dominion War, there was a good chance that some within Starfleet's senior command would have hung her out to dry, even if she was one of their own. Wanting to play down the difficulties that she had experienced recently, she swept an elegant hand down the leg of her dress whites and added, "I was quietly exonerated."

None of Tuvok's facial features moved, but Janeway saw the relief in his dark eyes.

Picking up his glass of water, the Vulcan stated, "You have been avoiding me."

Surprised, Janeway choked on her whiskey. "What?" she asked. Quickly, she wiped her chin with the palm of her hand, catching the spillage.

"Kathryn, we have met only three times since our return, and you have not responded to any of my communications."

Janeway smiled a little to herself. If she didn't know better she would have thought Tuvok's feelings were hurt.

"In fact," he continued, tilting his head. "Given your propensity of avoiding me and many of your crew, it would not have been illogical to assume that you would choose not to attend Seven and Chakotay's wedding ceremony today."

Janeway sucked in her breath. Wedding, her inner voice yelled in pain. She ignored it. Stymied, she tried to rationalize her feelings as her heart began to softly thud. Why did you let it happen? her inner voice asked with a note of defeat. Janeway closed her eyes briefly. How could I stop it? she asked. No answer was returned.

Even now, Janeway still found it difficult to believe in the veracity of Chakotay's feelings for Seven given his lack of trust in her at the beginning. The change in his attitude never sat well with her. For Janeway, first impressions always counted. She trusted her instincts implicitly, and it was rare that she changed her mind about anyone. She found Chakotay's absolute change jarring and unsettling.

What a pity Vulcans didn't indulge in the art of small talk, Janeway thought as she looked at her old friend. "Tuvok," she said slowly placing her glass on the table in front of her. "Since Voyager's return from the Delta Quadrant, I have been inundated." She sighed and leaned forward. "I'm sorry that it seems I'm avoiding you." She waved a graceful hand dismissively. "Although it may appear that way, I promise, I'm not avoiding you or anyone."

"How many times have you been home to San Francisco?" Tuvok asked bluntly.

Unsure of where Tuvok was going, Janeway frowned and said slowly, "Several." She watched in surprise when Tuvok glanced at the young, blonde waiter who was serving a table close to them.

She wondered if he too noticed the similarities between her and an ex-crew member of Voyager. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Janeway pinched her nose reflexively at the thought that Tuvok would have an inkling of the primary reason she frequented this bar.

Tuvok looked at her. "Have you seen any of Voyager's crew since your return?"

"Of course," Janeway answered picking up her glass. Although she knew with certainty that it wasn't a streak of jealousy Tuvok was showing, she indulged the idea for a moment and teased, "Why do you ask?"

"Clarification is required, Kathryn," Tuvok answered. "I would like to understand why you have not been in contact with the many of the crew with whom you have spent the last seven years."

Feeling more than a little frayed after the ceremony today, Janeway was in no mood to indulge this conversation.

"Tuvok, my engagements since our return have prevented me from seeing many of the crew as much as I would like." She raised a hand to stop any response. "However, now is not the time to claim negligence." She held a finger up to make her point. "You of all people should know that."

Tuvok nodded in acceptance. "Negligence is not a word I would ever associate with you, Kathryn."

Janeway smiled and inclined her head slightly. "Thank you, Tuvok."

"Perhaps," Tuvok said raising an eyebrow, "avoidance is more appropriate."

The smile slipped from Janeway's face. "Tuvok," she said crisply. "I think it is fair to say that I have been spending time with those I think need it most." She looked at him. "Like B'Elanna."

"How is B'Elanna?" Tuvok asked with a faint note of fatherly concern. "Unfortunately, circumstances today prevented me from spending time with her."

Thankful that the conversation had changed direction, Janeway nodded. "I know what you mean. Today went by so quickly." She gulped down the remainder of her whiskey. What? Her inner voice stated. You're kidding me! Today was agonizingly slow.

Janeway looked at Tuvok. "B'Elanna is struggling." She chinked the ice in her empty glass. "She is still finding the split from Tom difficult."

Tuvok inclined his head. "And Seven?"

Janeway raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Have you spent much time with her?"

Janeway's heart began to hammer. She shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

Tuvok's elegant Vulcan hand placed his barely touched glass of water on the table. He sat back and steepled his fingers. "Seven and Chakotay were married today, Kathryn."

Increasingly uncomfortable, Janeway signaled to the young, blonde waiter that she required a refresh. She then gave Tuvok a force ten look and scowled. "I'm aware of that Tuvok. In case you've forgotten, I was there."

Unperturbed, Tuvok held Janeway's gaze. "Logic dictates that you would have found today difficult."

Her heart beating rapidly, Janeway stared at the Vulcan. All these years Tuvok had been by her side, providing quiet, solid support. Other than their skirmish at the beginning of her career, where he criticized her in front of three admirals for failing to follow proper tactical procedures during her first command, they had somehow forged a friendship, and when Tuvok was later located to Jupiter Station, they kept in contact by utilizing the out-dated method of letter writing. Ten years on, there was no doubt in Janeway's mind that Tuvok was her most trusted friend.

Where is he going with this? She thought eyeing him. Aware that the Vulcan was very astute, she waited. He knows, her inner voice warned. She closed her eyes briefly, and silently prayed that he would not go down this road. He can't, she thought.

The waiter returned with a fresh glass. Thanking her, Janeway swallowed some whiskey then relaxed slightly when the heat in her belly spread. Feeling confident that she had done an excellent job of hiding her feelings over the last five years she asked, "What is your point, Tuvok?"

"Seven of Nine is my point, Kathryn," he replied bluntly. "I want to talk to you about the marriage, and your feelings for Seven."

Her inner voice quipped, How well did you say you hid your feelings again? Janeway gulped then swallowed a full mouth of whiskey

Tuvok raised an eyebrow and waited for a response.

There was no doubt in Janeway's mind that being lost in an unknown territory had encouraged a stronger friendship than she would have probably had with the Vulcan, but regardless of how strong their friendship was, never once had she openly confided in him about matters of the heart, and she wasn't about to start now. She looked at the chronometer hanging on the wall over the bar. "Tuvok," she said putting her glass down. "This has been a rather long day. As much as I love being with you." She stood. "You're right, I've been doing too much lately." She straightened her dress tunic. "I think I'll catch a shuttle home."

"Kathryn?" Tuvok responded looking up at her.

"I'm sorry, Tuvok," Janeway said. Her tone firm, she added before striding out of the bar, "Consider this matter closed."

### *Chapter 2*

If he were human, Tuvok knew that he would have sighed heavily at this moment, and cursed Admiral Janeway from the alternate timeline for putting him in this situation. However, he was not human and, as he watched Janeway leave, he was forced to use logic and reason to work through this growing problem.

Tuvok frowned. He took out the PADD that Admiral Janeway had given to him and placed it on the table in front of him. He had attempted to create a situation today where he could pass the PADD to its rightful owner, Kathryn Janeway, but he had failed. The opportunity had not presented itself until now, and he had not handled the situation as well as he had intended.

Looking at the PADD, Tuvok picked up his glass and sipped from it. He thought back to those last days before Voyager returned to the Alpha Quadrant.

\* \* \*

Tuvok tapped commands to allow access to Holodeck 2. There, Admiral Janeway stood keying instructions into the console. "Thank you for coming, Tuvok", the silver-haired Janeway said without looking up. She finished keying in her commands then moved away from the console. She stood beside him.

Tuvok watched the holodeck change showing a room setting. He raised an eyebrow when Chakotay and Seven of Nine appeared. Although there was no sound, it was evident that the interaction was intimate; Chakotay was nuzzling Seven's neck.

"This is where it happened," Admiral Janeway said with a wistful note.

Tuvok looked at the elegant silver-haired woman. "What happened?" he asked intrigued.

"This is where everything changed," she replied watching Seven's holopogram closely.

"Explain," Tuvok said placing his hands behind his back.

"A few days ago," the older Janeway said raising a hand. "My younger self needed to find out why Seven of Nine was late for duty." She focused her slate gray eyes on Tuvok. "It will be fresh in your mind that she has been late more than once for duty recently?"

Tuvok inclined his head. "Yes, it has been brought to my attention."

The Admiral pointed at the couple. "Using her command privileges, your Captain tapped into the simulation that Seven has been running. This is where she stood and observed this interaction."

Tuvok noted the pain in her voice.

Admiral Janeway looked at Tuvok for a moment then stated matter-of-factly, "Janeway is in love

with Seven."

Tuvok's brow rose.

"When she watched this," the Admiral said, her eyes never leaving the couple. "It changed everything. A part of her," she hesitated. Turning, she looked at Tuvok, her eyes showed deep pain. "A part of her changes forever." She looked back at the couple. "Janeway will withdraw from Seven, from the crew, from life. Not noticeably at first but slowly," she smiled faintly, "tactically." The Admiral placed a hand on her hip. "She has only ever loved a few people in her life," she paused. Eyes warming, she studied Tuvok. "But, you know all about that, don't you?"

He nodded. "Not directly, Admiral, as you know. But yes I am fully cognizant of Captain Janeway's past."

The Admiral smiled then lifted an elegant finger. "In the end, no matter how hard Seven tries, your Captain will let her down." She folded her arms. "And for over twenty years it has haunted me."

Aware that she had switched to first person, Tuvok observed the older Janeway for a moment then asked, "What is it that you want, Admiral?"

The Admiral looked at Tuvok and replied with a note of sadness. "I forgot how much I missed your candor, Tuvok." She eyed him for a moment then moved toward the console and froze the program. "In three years time, Seven is going to die in the arms of her husband, Chakotay." The Admiral paused and gazed at the couple then, as if the image was too much to endure, she looked down at the console. "And Kathryn never gets the chance to reconcile her feelings." She added almost to herself, "I never get the chance."

The Admiral looked at Tuvok then approached him. "Do you know that Janeway loves to hike?"

Tilting his head, Tuvok looked at her enquiringly. "Yes."

"She loves the outdoors. Loves the air, the sense of freedom, but in particular she loves trees." The Admiral laughed. "I bet you didn't know *that* Tuvok?"

"No," Tuvok responded evenly. "You are correct Admiral. I am unaware of that particular fondness." He looked over to the simulated holo-couple and added, "It seems that I am unaware of many of Captain Janeway's predilections."

"Don't take it too personally, Tuvok," Admiral Janeway said then smiled warmly. She's spent a lifetime keeping secrets." She folded her arms. "When she was young her father took her to see the giant redwoods on Earth, in California; the sequoia trees."

Tuvok watched Admiral Janeway's eyes warm as she remembered.

"Otherwise known as wizened sentinels," the Admiral added softly. "But for all their stature,

Tuvok. All their mass, alive a tree is a remarkably delicate thing. All of its internal life exists within paper-thin layers of tissue, just beneath the bark. However tall a tree grows, it's just a few pounds of living cells spread between roots and leaves, and because of that they are vulnerable." She looked at him. "Just like Janeway." She unfolded her arms and placed a hand on her abdomen. "But most people don't see that." She half-smiled at her friend. "Even you."

"Agreed," Tuvok stated. "However, Admiral, there is no doubt that you and Captain Janeway are formidable characters."

Admiral Janeway's nodded. Her eyes took on a determined look. "In the next few hours," she said straightening her red tunic and picking up a PADD. "I have to convince your friend to return to the Alpha Quadrant, the only way I know how," she looked pointedly at Tuvok, "by telling her about Seven's death."

Tuvok frowned.

The Admiral looked at Tuvok for a long moment then revealed another of Captain Janeway's secrets. "She will send this ship to hell and back to save her." She placed a hand on Tuvok's shoulder. "And I need your help, old friend." She squeezed it. "I need you to give her this."

Tuvok unclasped his hands from behind his back and took the PADD that Admiral Janeway held out to him.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, Tuvok," Admiral Janeway said. "But being my oldest friend comes with some responsibility. This PADD will tell her everything." The Admiral's face filled with tenderness. "Katie cannot do as I have done," she said with deep emotion. "Seven must know how she feels." She removed her hand and suddenly she was back in command. She added briskly, "I have provided Janeway with all the armor and weaponry that she will need from the future, and this will make it possible for Voyager to pass the Borg unharmed."

Tuvok looked over the Admiral's shoulder and studied the two frozen forms in a tight embrace. "It would seem Admiral that your arrival appears by all indications to be more than a little too late to encourage the Captain to declare her feelings for Seven of Nine."

Admiral Janeway moved away from Tuvok and toward the console. "Maybe," she replied. "Then maybe not." Standing at the console, her eyes pierced Tuvok. "I want her and the crew to have a chance. I want to get Voyager home. But," she added. "There's a catch. You must only confide what I have told you when Janeway is back on earth, and settled. Right now, all her focus must be on getting this ship and crew back to the Alpha Quadrant." She smiled showing some of her old charm. "She is more likely to listen to you than she is to her disappointing future self."

The Admiral lightly touched the console and the program disappeared. She looked at the empty space for a while then turned, and approached Tuvok. "Come, we have work to do." She ran her arm through his. "In the PADD that I have given you, there is a sequence of commands that will ensure that the future technology I brought is disengaged as soon as Voyager docks at DS9." She quirked an eyebrow and looked at Tuvok mischievously. "We don't want Starfleet to get its

hands on that kind of technology." Her lips tweaked. "I know only too well how greedy some individuals can be."

Surprised, Tuvok raised his eyebrows. Those words about Starfleet would never fall from Captain Janeway's lips. He looked at the Admiral as they walked through the doors of Holodeck 2 and was suddenly aware that although they might be physically identical and share the same history, both Janeway personalities were indeed very different.

Admiral Janeway laughed heartily. "B'Elanna would have a minor fit if she realized that her daughter Miral was the one who helped me find the solution to ensure that all the technology I brought will dematerialize as soon as the command sequence is entered, otherwise Katie or I may have the Temporal Integrity Commission hot on our tails." She removed her arm from Tuvok's when they entered the turbolift. "I'm hungry," she said. "Let's go eat." She smiled. "Believe it or not I do miss Neelix's cooking on occasion."

"Admiral is that wise," Tuvok asked as they exited the turbolift, and entered the Messhall.

The Admiral grinned. "What? Eating Neelix's food?"

"No, telling B'Elanna that her unborn daughter is under your command." Tuvok frowned. "I am unsure how well she will receive the knowledge that you have involved her daughter in a highly illegal mission."

"Well in that case, maybe I should tell her, just to get a reaction from our half-Klingon." Janeway replied then grinned at Tuvok and added impishly, "You will find this hard to believe Tuvok, but the years have settled her down." She chuckled lightly. "It would be good to rouse some of B'Elanna's spark again."

Stopping abruptly, the Admiral breathed in the aroma wafting from the entrance to the Messhall. "It has been such a long time," she said with a tinge of loneliness as she looked around the low lit and quiet Messhall. "It looks like it's more than B'Elanna who needs a little shake up. Don't you think, Tuvok?" she said then approached the galley with more than a challenge in her gait.

When he saw Admiral Janeway, Neelix stopped chopping, and stood to attention. "Admiral Janeway," he said stiffly.

"Ah, Neelix," she replied warmly to the little Talaxian whose reddish-brown spots shone on his head with the effort of preparing food for the Alpha shift. Eyes twinkling, she waved a hand to dismiss his nervousness. "At ease before you sprain something."

Nodding his head vigorously, the stocky little Talaxian's plume of ginger hair bobbed up and down as he replied. "Yes, Admiral."

"How is Dexa?" the older Janeway asked.

"Wonderful, Admiral. She is just wonderful." Neelix responded. "Admiral, I can never thank you

enough for allowing Dexa and her son to travel with us on Voyager."

"You're welcome," Admiral Janeway replied then grinned. "Anyway, how could I refuse," she looked at the little Talaxian with great warmth. "I was delighted when you found your own kind, Neelix, and even more grateful that you and Dexa made the decision to continue on our journey to the Alpha Quadrant." She winked. "However, in my timeline it took sixteen years to return home." Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "And you and Dexa made good use of that time by increasing the Talaxian population substantially."

The Talaxian looked at the Admiral in surprise. Color crept up his pale skin slowly. "This is wonderful news, Admiral," he eventually managed to say. "Wonderful news, indeed." Admiral Janeway looked at the abundance of food on the galley, and smiled. "Ah Prixin," she said with a note of wistfulness. "I forgot it was approaching."

Neelix nodded. "Admiral," he said with delight. "I'm so glad you remember Prixin." He spread out his hands. "We have leola root soup, Talaxian stew, chadre-kab, Trellian crepes and of course Taga cake." He put down his knife, and moved toward the cooler. "And for you, Admiral," he said opening it, "nothing less than a bottle of Talaxian moon ripened champagne to toast your arrival."

Admiral Janeway bowed her elegant head. "I'm touched, Neelix," she said, her eyes glowing softly, "and honored that you would chose to share such precious cargo with me."

The Talaxian's color deepened. "You will remember that my culture places great importance on family connections." He smiled. "And it seems rather fitting that you are here to share this." He tapped the bottle, then puffed out his chest and started the traditional salutation, "We do not stand alone. We are in the arms of family: father, mother, sister, brother, father's father, father's mother, father's brother, mother's brother, fa-"

"It is sufficient to say," Tuvok interrupted, raising an oblique eyebrow at Neelix's overly exuberant behavior, "that the list is extensive."

Admiral Janeway looked from Tuvok to the miffed Talaxian. "It's good to be back gentlemen," she said. She grinned then finished with a shorter version of the welcome gesture. "We are in the arms of family. We gather this day to extol the warmth and joy of those unshakable bonds. Without them we could not call ourselves complete. On this day we are thankful to be together. We do not stand alone."

\* \* \*

"Sir, can I get you anything else?" The young, blonde waiter asked, bringing Tuvok out of his thoughts.

"Just the credit charge, thank you." Tuvok replied. He stood then tucked the PADD that Admiral Janeway had given him all those months ago back into his dress coat. He should have passed this to Janeway shortly after Voyager returned as the Admiral had instructed, but he had not. Logic had told him that challenging the younger Janeway about her feelings for Seven of Nine would

prove more difficult than the rite of Tal'oth, where he had survived in the Vulcan desert for four months with only a ritual blade.

Tuvok settled the credit charge and prepared to return to his family. He made his way outside. Although the evening air was cold, the gentle breeze soothed him. Even though he had returned to teach at the Vulcan Institute of Defensive Arts, San Francisco would always hold a special place for him. It was the headquarters of Starfleet Command after all and home to his close and struggling friend, Kathryn Janeway.

Vulcan training had taught Tuvok to ignore illogical emotions. And, Admiral Janeway's confession of love for Seven, while the young woman was wrapped in the arms of her future husband seemed illogical to Tuvok. However, years of being among humans had taught him that when it comes to affairs of the human heart, it is wise to look beyond logic.

Given Admiral Janeway's confession about her and consequently Captain Janeway's feelings for Seven of Nine, Tuvok had intended to inform the younger Janeway of the admission, but at the right moment. However, that moment never arrived. Once the captain made the decision to return to the Alpha Quadrant, which was shortly after his meeting with the Admiral, she was too preoccupied to spare even a moment of her time. Even when he asked to speak to her privately - a request that he made rarely - Janeway refused. Unless it was a matter of life or death, she told him, the plan to blow up the Borg conduit took precedence.

Disturbed by the depth of emotion in the younger Janeway's eyes and increasingly aware that this matter needed, as Admiral Janeway had informed him, to be handled carefully, Tuvok had decided to follow the Admiral's instructions and wait until their return to the Alpha Quadrant. However, when Voyager returned, Seven and Chakotay appeared such a couple that instead of speaking to Janeway, Tuvok decided to seek guidance in the Temple of Amonak on Vulcan before approaching his friend regarding such an intricate and intimate matter. There he was told to remember that a Vulcan served no purpose with matters of the human heart.

*"A house divided cannot stand," the Priest told Tuvok.*

*"Explain." Tuvok asked.*

*"All three love?"*

*"It would seem so," Tuvok responded.*

*"Then, my brother, they will all fall if you chose to divide them."*

*Tuvok looked at him solemnly.*

*"Prayer is required my brother. It is there, you will find the answer."*

*"Perhaps." Tuvok responded.*

Tuvok pulled his coat closer against the strong wind as he walked along the San Francisco bay toward his hotel. He placed his hand in his coat pocket and felt the PADD that carried a personal communication for Captain Janeway along with instructions for dematerializing the technology the Admiral had introduced to Voyager. The same PADD the Admiral had passed to him trusting fully that he would carry out her instructions, but the instructions had never been initiated.

As he walked in the wind, Tuvok thought back to that day in the Messhall with Admiral

Janeway. After having her fill of Talaxian stew, the older Janeway insisted that Tuvok give her younger self the PADD only when he felt it right. "I trust your logic." She had told him patting his hand. "It is something that I have missed dearly, my friend. "I also know that you will do what is right when it comes to the technology I have brought with me." She had looked at him carefully. "Do what you feel is right."

His thoughts returned to Janeway. Since his return, the Vulcan found that prayer had not provided an answer and wondered if the Admiral understood all along that his logic would dictate that the technology, now they had been exposed to it, was too valuable to confiscate when they docked at DS9. He recalled Janeway reprimanding him while aboard Voyager for intentionally sacrificing his career in order 'steal' the spatial trajectory from the planetary inhabitants of Gath Labin who had harnessed a technology that could fold space to allow long distance travel in an instant. Captain Janeway was offered the device by unscrupulous means, but refused it accepting that the planetary inhabitants had their own prime directive which prevented them from sharing their technology with less advanced races.

Tuvok understood that logically it was unwise to ignore a technological device that could in an instant place Voyager some forty thousand light years closer to the Alpha Quadrant. As such, he had decided to act as the agent during the transaction to not only protect Janeway's ethics, but at the same time deliver the crew closer to home. However, it transpired that the technology was incompatible with Starfleet technology.

After the event, Janeway privately reprimanded him, and in her reproach told him that that as one of her most valued officers and oldest friend she depended on him, not only as her counsel but as a moral compass. It was a strong lesson for Tuvok in further understanding the complexity of Kathryn Janeway.

A strong sense of T'Pol, filled Tuvok. The enduring power of their marriage and ultimately their devoted connection gave him great inner strength. His thoughts returned to Janeway. Since his return, the Vulcan found that prayer had not provided, and this morning when he tucked the PADD into his coat pocket, and escorted his family to the wedding of Seven of Nine and Chakotay, he had decided that it was the right time to pass on Admiral Janeway's communication to Kathryn.

Tuvok believed now he understood why he was disturbed by the look that Captain Janeway had given him when he asked to speak to her privately before Voyager returned to Earth. The look carried something that Admiral Janeway's did not. Kathryn's look was not one of loss, but one of deep, intolerable fear; a fear that he had never seen in her eyes before.

Entering the hotel, the words of Tom Paris rang through Tuvok's ears. "You know something, I always thought that beneath that cold Vulcan exterior lay an even colder Vulcan interior, but now I'm convinced you're a hopeless romantic." Tuvok responded by telling Mr. Paris that there was no need to insult him. But, as Tuvok made his way to his room, he was uncertain whether Tom Paris's observation held a grain of truth.

Entering his hotel room to the familiar and warm sounds of his wife and his family, Tuvok

understood that he may have failed Janeway.

### **Chapter 3**

Janeway looked out at the most iconic symbol of the city of San Francisco from the balcony of her apartment; the Golden Gate Bridge, a suspension bridge spanning the opening into San Francisco Bay from the Pacific Ocean. It had been almost two months since the wedding, and she was nervous at seeing Seven for the first time. The honeymoon had been extensive, and the thought of seeing the younger woman made her stomach churn.

The comm system alerted Janeway that Seven had arrived. She checked her reflection before activating the console to allow Seven entry. Her heart almost pounded out of her chest when the door slid open. Seven stood before her in casual clothes; dark slacks and a black tight fitting turtle neck top. Janeway caught her bottom lip, sucking on it lightly she noted that Seven's hair was down, a style the younger woman rarely wore.

"Kathryn," Seven whispered as Janeway ushered her in. "It is very pleasing to see you."

Janeway smiled and inclined her head. "Thank you, Seven," she replied aware that for Seven that meant she had missed her. "And it is very pleasing to see you also," she responded as the door slid shut.

Seven looked at Janeway with clear blue eyes. "I believe it is customary to hold close a friend that one has not seen for a period of time."

Eyes widening in surprise, Janeway blinked for a moment, then smiled encouragingly. "Yes," she replied as Seven moved close to embrace her. "I believe it is."

Holding her breath, Janeway felt Seven's arms fold around her waist then pull her close. Exhaling, her eyes closed involuntarily as she leaned into Seven's long, lean throat. Breathing in deeply, her senses were assaulted.

"It has been sixty-two days, six hours and twenty-three seconds since I saw you last," Seven whispered in Janeway's ear.

Janeway's response was immediate. It was an innocent comment, but the connotation for her explosive. An electric spark flickered then flared through her entire body. The hair on her neck stood erect. Her respiration increased rapidly. She was on fire. Unable to control her response, and aware that the ex Borg would be able to analyze her every physiological flux, Janeway stiffened, and pulled out of Seven's arms. "Come," she said hoarsely.

Quickly, Janeway moved toward the kitchen at the back of the apartment, and prayed that Seven would not query her response to their physical contact. "I'm keen to here all your stories from your honeymoon," she said to the blonde with forced interest. She pulled out a stool at the breakfast bar and gestured for Seven to sit. "Would you like some refreshment?"

"A glass of water will suffice, Kathryn," Seven replied, sitting down.

Busying herself, Janeway tried to focus on the task at hand, but she was unnerved.

Placing a cup and a glass on the counter, she noticed a slight tremor in her hand.

"Are you all right, Kathryn?"

"Yes, of course I am, Seven," Janeway responded immediately. Forcing herself to clamp down on the almost overwhelming desire Seven's words and closeness had awakened, she made an excuse. "I think I exercised rather too strenuously this morning." She smiled. "These bones are getting old."

Sitting with her back straight, Seven said nothing, but watched Janeway closely as she poured a cup of coffee and then a glass of water.

"Adapting to your absence was," Seven said accepting the glass, "difficult."

Still reeling from the physical contact and Seven's words, this further declaration of need from the blonde made Janeway's stomach clench then flutter. Fighting hard to keep her composure, she sipped her coffee slowly. Eventually she managed, "But, we've been in regular contact."

Since Voyager's return, regardless of her busy schedule, Seven ensured that Janeway made time for her. Telling her that she needed to 'maximize' her leisure time when she wasn't on tour, and what better way than with her. Janeway knew that Seven's view of her 'leisure time' involved more than a few trips to Indiana. Fortunately, her mother Gretchen and younger sister, Phoebe, had taken an instant liking to the ex Borg.

Janeway understood why Seven adored Indiana. It had been brought home to her what a beautiful place it was when she had refused a site-to-site transportation to the family home, where the celebration of her return was taking place. Instead, she commandeered a shuttle and flew the scenic route over the 300 miles of Ohio River Byway. Flying close to the mighty river, through the twist and turns, past the cypress swamps, scenic overlooks and archaeological sites, she headed for her hometown of Bloomington.

Janeway remembered feeling a sense of exhilaration when she flew over the vineyards, orchards, and church spires of the traditionalist county where she had grown up. When she eventually passed the rural village and church yard near her family farm, she struggled to contain her emotions. When she set the shuttle down, and stepped out onto the farmhouse yard, tears shimmered when the all too familiar humidity of an Indiana summer hit her. But it was the sight of her family bursting through the farmhouse doors that brought the tears flowing. At last, she had thought falling into their arms, she was home.

Seven raised her ocular implant. "I have discovered that being in regular contact is not the same as being in someone's company," she said focusing her clear blue eyes on Janeway.

"Sometimes, that's the way things are, Seven," Janeway responded.

Seven looked at Janeway. A hurt look flitted across her eyes.

Janeway stopped herself from comforting the younger woman. She looked into her coffee cup, and told herself that this was how it needed to be. Not wanting to give further indulgence to her complex feelings for Seven, Janeway changed the subject. "Phoebe will be here shortly."

Seven smiled.

Janeway's jaw almost hit the ground. She gaped.

Seven's smile faded. "What is it, Kathryn?"

Janeway closed her mouth. "You smiled," she replied leaning against the counter for support. "I've never seen you smile like that."

Seven inclined her head. "It is an activity I have mastered during my time on Chakotay's home planet, Dorvan V." A look of puzzlement crossed her face. "It seems that it is a mandatory requirement for a newly married couple to display signs of happiness at all times during their stay." She looked at Janeway. "Chakotay suggested that smiling would achieve this."

Dragging her eyes from Seven's mouth, Janeway swallowed hard. "Is that so," she replied slowly. Heartbeat increasing and mouth suddenly dry, she licked her lips quickly. "The Mayan wedding was beautiful," she squeezed out. "Chakotay's sister, Sekaya, did a wonderful job during the ceremony."

Seven's blue eyes regarded Janeway. "Yes," she responded, folding her hands in her lap. Janeway watched the thumb of Seven's exoskeleton left hand rub absentmindedly over the thumb of her right. Janeway raised her brow. Such affectations were new to the ex Borg. Seven's humanity was proceeding at warp speed, she realized.

"Chakotay was initially concerned, that the enactment of a traditional ceremony would not be a success, but it was, as I suspected."

Janeway nodded. Chakotay's home planet of Dorvan V was remote and located on the border of Federation and Cardassian space, too remote a location for many of their former crew to attend. What better location for a traditional wedding, Seven had told her at the time, than Chakotay's ancestral home on Earth.

Janeway recalled the ancient Mayan ceremonial wedding held at the Azulik, a fifteen villa retreat in central America. The place carried the concept of rustic luxury to the maximum. That day, Janeway felt increasingly ill when Chakotay showed her the lounge beds and hand-carved wooden soaking tubs, telling her that the wedding night would be honored by nothing more than a canopy of celestial stars, and hundreds of candle lights. How she managed to get through the day, Janeway would never know. She had never seen Chakotay or Seven look so happy. That day, as she watched the ceremony unfold, Janeway had felt fifty feet outside her body. She recalled the garden palapa festooned with multi-colored

streamers and flowering garlands, and when Seven appeared and moved toward the altar, Janeway lost her breath. Even now, the memory was exceptionally vivid - Seven making her way toward the table altar, dressed in the traditional ceremonial white embroidered huipil, looking absolutely stunning.

As Janeway watched Chakotay's sister, Sekaya, wed the couple inside a circle of friends and family, she knew that she would have to deliberately remove herself from Seven's life - slowly, tactically.

"How is Icheb?" Janeway asked.

"He is well," Seven responded her eyes warming. "Icheb and Chakotay have developed a strong relationship, and under his counsel, Icheb has decided to join Starfleet Academy." Seven added with some pride, "The Department Heads of Astrophysics were impressed with the high-resolution gravimetric sensor array he designed." She looked at Janeway. "As you know, Kathryn, Icheb has an aptitude for astrophysics." She bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment. "It was, after all, your recognition of his aptitude when he increased the ship's long-range scanner resolution. You allowed the technology to be developed by providing him a permanent post within Astrometrics." She smiled faintly. "Kathryn, you seem to show extraordinary ability when it comes to developing ex drones from the Borg collective."

"Indeed," Janeway replied warmed by Seven's evolving sense of humor. She smiled, pleased that the young Brunali had found his niche in life, after such a difficult start. Although she tried, Janeway would never fully understand how his parents could deliberately modify their child's genome so that at birth he would produce a pathogen designed to attack cybernetic organisms such as the Borg.

"How is the development of the medical tricorder going?" Janeway asked feeling as always great pride that the ex Borg's exceptional abilities had been readily recognized by Starfleet Command.

Upon Voyager's return, Starfleet had enlisted Seven immediately, and placed her in the nurturing hands of the Federation's 'think tank' along with the Doctor. Janeway was aware that as a result of the Dominion War, a depletion of raw talent meant that Seven's 'Borgness' was to a great degree overlooked. Similarly, the Doctor's sentience was readily granted to ensure that the Federation had complete developmental control of the medical tricorder.

"Development is progressing well," Seven replied.

"And the Infinity Modulator?"

Currently, Seven was developing a technology that could be used against the Borg. The Infinity Modulator, developed from the technology that Admiral Janeway brought aboard Voyager was designed to fire unique modulated shots that make adapting impossible.

"The I-Mod also is going well, Kathryn," Seven responded. "The design is almost complete." She raised her ocular implant. "However, there is much discussion within the development group

regarding how the weapon should be displayed."

Janeway could see the amusement in Seven's eyes.

"Specifically around whether the firing mode energy beam should be purple or blue in color."

Fully aware that when it came to Seven's intelligence, she left many of her peers within the elite Federation group stumped, Janeway smiled then said with a note of amusement, "That should keep your colleagues busy for a while."

Seven smiled back.

Janeway's heart thudded. Seeing Seven smile sent a bolt of desire up her spine. Needing some fresh air, she picked up her cup. "Let's go out onto the balcony."

Seven nodded.

On the balcony, Janeway breathed in air deeply, and stared out at the landscape. How am I ever going to get through this? she asked herself. Now is the time to begin to put some distance between us, she told herself. Squaring her shoulders, Janeway turned to face Seven, but she wasn't there. Confused, she placed her cup on the table, then re-entered the balcony doors to her living space. To her surprise, Seven was sitting at her piano.

"Seven?" Janeway said approaching the younger woman.

"Kathryn," Seven replied, making room on the early Victorian rosewood two-seater stool. "Join me."

"It hasn't been tuned in some years, Seven." Janeway said taking a seat.

"That is correct," Seven responded. "I am aware of that fact."

"Are you now?" Janeway replied raising her brow.

"Yes," Seven answered. "I have evaluated the condition of the piano."

"It just needs a little tuning," Janeway said as she positioned herself, ensuring no physical contact.

Seven raised her ocular implant. "It requires more than a little tuning, Kathryn." She looked at Janeway. "I have noted previously that it requires restringing, and the soundboard needs repair. However," she added lowering the lid. "This Steinway is beautiful." She ran her hand over the case. The original ivory and marquetry are in excellent condition."

Janeway watched Seven's fingers caress the Gothic decal.

"It has been in my family for generations," Janeway said. "But I'm afraid, Seven," she eyed the younger woman, "here, it is strictly a furniture piece." She sighed. "It hasn't been played for such a long time." She pinched her nose reflexively. "I should return it to the farmhouse, but Mom won't have it." Janeway smiled faintly. "My grandfather bequeathed it to me."

"Did your grandfather play?" Seven asked, her hands now resting in her lap.

Janeway nodded. "Yes. Often," she replied. "When I was young, he loved to play this piano." She remembered how as a child she would sit on this very stool alongside him, luxuriating in the closeness.

"Did you have favorite composer or piece of work?"

Janeway thought for a moment. "Yes," she replied. "He used to play one composition often." She frowned trying to remember. "Lakme, I think it was." Her frown cleared "Yes. He loved Lakme by Delibes."

Seven looked into Janeway's eyes then nodded. "I shall remember that."

Wondering why, Janeway looked at blonde for a long moment. Suddenly aware that she was staring, she cleared her throat. "Thank you for reminding me that it requires some attention. It's something I intend to rectify soon."

"When you do, I will play for you."

Surprised, Janeway looked at Seven. "I didn't realize you played."

"Music," Seven replied running a hand lightly over the lid of piano, "has intriguing mathematical properties." She looked at Janeway. "I learned to play proficiently aboard Voyager using holodeck simulations, but did not play skillfully until my recent trip to Dorvan V." Returning her hand to her lap, she added, "Although it was a honeymoon period; a time of rest and relaxation, there were times when I-

Janeway filled in, "Needed to be efficient?"

Seven inclined her head slightly. Her eyes warmed as she gazed at Janeway. "Yes."

That's my beautiful ex Borg, Janeway thought her heart swelling with pride. Efficient as ever.

"Kathryn, Chakotay and I will be having a dinner party this Saturday evening."

The moment broken, Janeway stood. "I think I might have something already scheduled," she replied. Like sticking an isometric hypospray in your eye, her inner voice said, as she moved toward the balcony. She stared out at the view. Right now, the last thing she needed was to spend time with Chakotay and Seven at their love nest.

"I have checked your schedule," Seven responded moving off the seat. "You are free." She stood behind Janeway. Stance erect, she clasped her hands behind her back.

"I see," Janeway replied. Keeping her eyes fixed on the Golden Gate Bridge, she tried to think of a way out.

As if sensing this, Seven moved closer to Janeway. "Sekaya, B'Elanna, Tuvok and T'Pol have all accepted our invitation. Unfortunately, the Doctor has a prior engagement."

"Probably because it's rather short notice," Janeway said, frantically thinking of a reason not to go, but coming up blank.

"Yes," Seven replied. "In this case, impromptu would be a more appropriate term."

Realizing this was another one of Seven's experiments; Chakotay and a subsequent romantic relationship being one of the others, Janeway sighed then turned. "Seven, I-"

"Kathryn," Seven interrupted. "I require your attendance." She looked at Janeway. "It is important to me. Please."

Janeway's stomach fluttered. She groaned inwardly. Why, she asked herself, does that one word from her mouth bring me almost to my knees. Never able to refuse Seven much, Janeway nodded slowly. "I'll attend."

"Excellent." Seven responded.

Janeway warmed when a look of pleasure passed over the younger woman's face.

The comm system sounded.

"That will be Phoebe," Seven said.

"Yes," Janeway replied. She made her way toward the entrance.

"I am intrigued," Seven said coming up behind Janeway "as to whether I can also persuade Phoebe to make herself available to attend our dinner party."

Janeway's hand froze over the console, a feeling of ill ease passed over her. Evidently, Seven was very aware that her ex Captain was unable to resist her pleas. Touching the console, Janeway granted Phoebe access.

"Seven," Phoebe, the tall, curvaceous red head squealed when the entrance doors slid open. Quickly, she moved passed her older sister, and hugged the six foot blonde. "It's great to see you."

"What about me?" Janeway asked. She had been on tour and hadn't seen her sister in over a

month.

Letting go of Seven, Phoebe laughed, she reached for her sister. "Of course I missed you, sis. Don't I always." She pinched Janeway's cheek lightly. Whenever, her sister could, she would tease Janeway and today was no exception.

Janeway caught Seven's eyes; they were filled with amusement.

"How are you?" Janeway asked making her way to the kitchen.

"Fine," Phoebe replied following.

"I thought Mom might come?"

Phoebe shook her head. "She's busy," she replied. "She has George doing some work around the farmhouse." Phoebe took a seat at the breakfast bar. She patted the one next to her for Seven to sit on. "It is no longer," she bracketed her fingers, "suspicion on my part. There is definitely romance in the air."

Janeway smiled. She poured a cup of coffee for her sister. Recently her mother had engaged the services of a carpenter for some general repairs to the farmhouse. She hoped they were becoming close. Since her father's death some years ago, her mother had never been involved with anyone. Gretchen was still a very attractive woman, and had received many offers over the years, but never once had she let anyone in. Maybe George will have more luck, she thought.

"Seven, anything for you?"

Seven shook her head. "No thank you, Kathryn."

Phoebe shook out her long red hair. "Seven," she drawled lifting up her coffee mug. "How's lover boy?"

Seven's blue eyes twinkled. "He is well thank you, Phoebe."

"Just well, Seven?" Phoebe asked her tone lingering. "I was hoping he would be," she raised her eyebrows, "exhausted."

Seven looked at the younger Janeway curiously. "On the contrary, Phoebe. Our schedule ensured that there was more than sufficient time to regen...relax."

"That wasn't what I meant, Seven," Phoebe responded. She looked pointedly at Kathryn then smiled. "For someone with an eidetic memory, surely you can remember our conversation before you left on your honeymoon?"

Seven stared blankly at Phoebe for a moment then blushed heavily.

Janeway cringed. She couldn't stand having Seven and Phoebe around each other too much. Seven was an easy target for Phoebe, and as much as the ex Borg was her sister's match in every way and more, when it came to teasing, especially about Chakotay, Janeway found it torture. The idea of her younger sister arriving at Seven and Chakotay's along with B'Elanna, who had become firm friends with the ex Borg since her split from Tom, was almost too much for her.

"Seven and Chakotay are having a dinner party on Saturday," Janeway said pouring herself a fresh mug of coffee. "She wants to know if you're available."

Phoebe smiled. "Ready for visitors already," she asked. "I thought he would be too busy keeping a beauty like you tied to the bed." She winked. "And I mean that literally."

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. "Can you make it?" she asked, desperate to change the subject.

"No," Phoebe replied.

Janeway sighed inwardly with relief.

"I have a serious of ink brush drawings accepted for exhibition by the Cardassian Institute of Art."

Janeway gaped. "You're kidding?"

Phoebe grinned. "Nope."

"That's wonderful news, Phoebe," Seven said with genuine warmth.

Janeway laughed with delight.

"It seems that my art work has become very popular since your return."

Janeway's laughter disappeared. "This is intolerable," she said frowning.

Phoebe looked at her sister. "Kathryn, I'm teasing. The Institute has shown interest in my work for some time."

Janeway smiled in relief. Her sister had real talent, and she hated the idea that Voyager's return, and subsequent notoriety would influence the Institute to exhibit Phoebe's work.

"It's wonderful news, Phoebe," Janeway said. Reaching out, she patted her sister's hand. "I'm delighted for you."

"I concur with Kathryn," Seven told Phoebe. "It would be unacceptable if your work was shown only as a dividend of Voyager's return."

Phoebe smiled affectionately at Seven. "I'm glad you concur." She put her coffee mug down.

"Now, Katie," she said carefully. "Since I can't make it to the dinner party, there is a space available." She looked at Janeway. "It would seem the perfect time for you to take a date."

Eyes widening, Janeway looked at her sister.

"Date?" Seven repeated with a note of surprise.

"It's about time, Seven." Phoebe responded. "Underneath all that Captaincy, there lurks an extremely hot blooded female."

Janeway shook her head. "No."

"Yes," Phoebe replied.

"Phoebe," Janeway said, injecting a command tone in her voice. "This topic, as I've explained to you before, is not open to discussion."

"Aw, c'mon, Katie," Phoebe responded, her tone rising to the challenge. "I'm not asking you to engage in a life long commitment with anyone." She looked at Seven. "What's the story when she was in the Delta Quadrant? Did she have a love interest?"

Looking suddenly intrigued, Seven looked from Phoebe to Janeway then nodded.

"Who?" Phoebe asked with delight.

"No one," Janeway replied quickly.

"Jaffen," Seven replied.

Janeway gritted her teeth.

Eyes wide, Phoebe asked Seven, "Who is Jaffen?"

Seven didn't hesitate. "Jaffen," she replied, "is a Norvalian who worked at the main power distribution center on Quarra." Seven looked at Janeway then raised her ocular implant. "Employee number 1326." She looked at Phoebe. "Kathryn lived with him on Quarra, an M-class planet located in the Delta Quadrant."

Looking astounded, Phoebe stared at her sister, "You *lived* with someone in the Delta Quadrant?"

Janeway nodded. "Yes, but only for a short while."

"Wow," Phoebe said throwing up her hands.

Janeway glared at Seven for a moment then looked at her sister. "Phoebe, our memories had

been altered. At the time, I had no recollection of my past whatsoever."

"Who knew that a little thing like zapping your memory was the best way to get you to commit. Let's send a comm to all your exes." Phoebe laughed. "You," she stared at Janeway incredulously, "living with someone. Wow."

Smiling faintly, Janeway raised an elegant finger in the air. "It was passionate, I'll give you that. But," dropping her hand, she sighed. "Nothing happened."

Seven looked at Janeway in surprise.

"Spill the beans, Katie," Phoebe said leaning forward.

Janeway knew there was no way around this subject. "For three months," she said looking at her sister. "I lived a completely different life. I didn't have an inkling about anything unusual until Chakotay infiltrated the plant and informed me that I was the captain of a starship and that the crew's memories had been altered to provide forced labor." She looked at Seven. "Chakotay arrived on Quarra just when I moved in with Jaffen. And," she clicked her tongue as she remembered the tall, dark, handsome Norvalian. "Once I suspected that I had another identity my priorities changed. My need to find out the truth took precedence." Memories flooded Janeway. "Up until that time, I really had no idea." She smiled. "It took Chakotay quite a bit of effort to convince me. But even though I had a hard time believing him, something inside me switched off."

"To Jaffen you mean?" Phoebe asked.

Janeway nodded. "And once I returned to Voyager, and my memory was restored, my full focus was then on my crew and the ship."

What she didn't tell them was on her return to Voyager, she had stood on the bridge, and feeling invigorated, commanded Lieutenant Paris to engage warp speed. It wasn't until the six foot blonde ex Borg swept through the bridge doors a few minutes later to report for duty that Janeway realized immediately why she had switched off from Jaffen. The woman striding toward her station was not Annika Hansen, the Efficiency Monitor on Quarra, who carried no emotional resonance for Janeway, but Seven of Nine did, and everything she felt for the Norvalian simply slipped away.

Sipping here coffee, Janeway recalled the emotional tidal wave she felt that day for a woman who stood at her console, keying in commands, completely oblivious to her epiphany. She recalled standing on the bridge, watching Seven's elegant fingers fly over her console and wanting to rush to her, wrap her arms around her slim waist, and kiss her until she begged for air. The urge, Janeway recalled, was almost irresistible.

Janeway paled as she remembered how hard the gravity of the situation hit her, forcing her to find her command chair before her legs buckled. Nails digging into her palms, she had tried to stop her fingers tingling, ashamed that it signified something she could never ignore - extreme attraction, and left her in no doubt that she was bone-crushingly, nerve-tingingly attracted to the

younger woman.

Sitting in her command chair, Janeway was stunned by the overwhelming emotional outpouring. She had never experienced anything like it. Not with any of her first crushes, or her first love Justin, and definitely not with Mark. Fingers trying to burrow deep into the arms of the chair, the reality of the situation hit her; she was in love. The realization was astonishing, and the knowledge almost crushed her.

Janeway placed a hand on her abdomen in an attempt to settle the sudden nausea. She looked at Seven. Even now, it was untenable to think that she could be anything more than a mentor to this woman who had not only been a member of her crew, but was a very young woman in the throes of discovering her humanity, her individuality; herself.

Janeway recalled almost bursting a blood vessel at the breach in the unwritten protocol when she had thought that Chakotay had pursued a member of her crew, only to be told by a very red faced first officer that it was Seven who initiated the romance.

"Katie, come back," Phoebe said clicking her fingers.

"What?"

"I said are you telling me you never slept with him?" Phoebe asked with a note of astonishment.

Janeway's eyes narrowed. "This matter is closed, Phoebe."

Phoebe swallowed some coffee then looked at Janeway for a long moment. "This time, sis," she replied raising her eyebrows.

Relieved Janeway sipped her coffee, aware that her sister would, when it came to it, respect her need for privacy. Surreptitiously, she looked at Seven. The ex Borg looked disappointed.

"Seven," Phoebe said slipping off her stool. "I can't wait to hear about your honeymoon." She took Seven's hand and led her into the living space. "Tell me all about it. I want to hear everything. And please, don't leave any details out. When I say everything, I mean everything."

Aware of how literal Seven would take her sister's comment, Janeway swallowed. This conversation would be unbearable. Picking up her credit wallet, she headed for the doors. "I forgot I needed some groceries," she yelled. "I'll be back soon."

Janeway heard a baffled comment from Seven as the doors slid closed behind her, "Why does she not replicate what she needs here?"

#### ***Chapter 4***

"B'Elanna," Janeway said when the half-Klingon entered her apartment. "Are you all right?" She asked, noting how pale she looked.

Dressed casually in black, and her dark hair in a pony tail, B'Elanna waved a hand as she

followed Janeway into the kitchen. "Yes, fine. Tom and his mother collected Miral." She looked at Janeway. "Can you believe it?" she asked. "At his age, fighting off everything in the Delta Quadrant and the guy brings his mother with him." She pulled out a seat, and looked around. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"Wine?" Janeway replied.

"Maybe something stronger," B'Elanna said showing Janeway two bottles of blood wine she had brought.

It was obvious to Janeway that too many late nights had pooled dark circles under the younger woman's eyes. Trying not to show her concern too much, she said gently, "Remember we have the dinner party tonight."

"I've had one helluva day, Kathryn."

"All right, B'Elanna. Just the one though."

The ridge on B'Elanna's forehead rose. "Can you believe him?" she asked. "Tonight he told me that our love life was always lacking. He told me he felt frustrated." Her eyes narrowed. "And here I am feeling guilty." She shook her head. "Men don't really do guilt do they?" she added rhetorically. "No, they do the big things like murder or running out on their wives."

"That's the y chromosome for you," Janeway said handing B'Elanna a small glass of wine.

"Do you know something?" B'Elanna asked Janeway. "I believed that my father wouldn't leave me. I believed that my husband wouldn't walk out on me." She slurped down the glass of wine then wiped a hand over her mouth. "It's obvious that blind faith isn't my strong point."

Aware that B'Elanna had an unhappy childhood, and that her parents had fought so much that her father left, Janeway worried that her ex chief engineer was somehow blaming herself for the recent break up with Tom. But, as Janeway knew, the relationship had never been an easy one. She recalled Seven's comment aboard Voyager about the couple when they announced their intentions to marry. 'Given the volatile nature of their relationship, one might have predicted homicide rather than matrimony'.

B'Elanna held out her glass for more wine. "Do you know what that the 'mother in law' from hell said to me?"

Janeway shook her head, and refilled B'Elanna's glass.

"You'll get over it." B'Elanna said then drained her glass. "I said oh sure, a year of therapy, some heavy duty drugs, and I'll be brand new."

Unable to hide her concern, Janeway frowned. "How are you coping with Miral?"

"I'd like to say we've settled into a routine, that I've got everything strategically planned. But with the split, we're affected," B'Elanna said. She laughed. "I had to peel her off me like Titanium leg wax when Tom came for her today."

Janeway hesitated when B'Elanna reached for the bottle, and poured another glass of wine.

"I can't believe the strange world I've entered. I might have been lost in the Delta Quadrant, but being a working mother beats the hell out of that." She looked at Janeway, "Right now, my one ambition is to go for twenty minutes without having to pick something up of the floor. And," she paused as she gulped down her third glass. "I'd like nothing better than to soak in a tub for a while." She laughed. "My horizons are shrinking." She poured more wine. "I love my daughter, Kathryn, more than anything, but right now, motherhood to me means feeling tired all the time." She huffed. "I think I'm doing a terrible job." Tears rolled down her face.

Janeway took the glass from B'Elanna's hands and placing it aside, stood in front of the half-Klingon. "B'Elanna," she said taking her in her arms. "Without a doubt, I know that you are a damn fine mother."

\* \* \*

Janeway stood at the entrance to Chakotay and Seven's house with B'Elanna. She was dreading tonight, but Seven had commed her twice this week; first to confirm that she was attending and the second to ensure that she wouldn't back out. Seven, Janeway was beginning to realize, was very astute when it came to second guessing her.

"Kathryn, B'Elanna. Welcome," Chakotay said when the entrance door slid open. "Come in." He stood aside. "It's wonderful to see you both."

"And you, Chakotay," Janeway replied as the doors slid closed behind her and B'Elanna. She looked around then raised her eyebrows. The apartment was practically palatial. Not bad, she thought. Starfleet certainly was treating them well.

"Here," B'Elanna said pushing a bottle of wine into his hands.

"Thank you," Chakotay replied then led the way into the lounge.

"Seven is busy preparing the food." His dark eyes looked at Janeway. "She is aware that Welsh rabbit stew is your favorite, so she has made a change." He raised an eyebrow. "As you both know, I'm a vegetarian, so she has adapted the recipe."

B'Elanna tutted. "How do you adapt rabbit stew?" she said. "No rabbit means no stew."

Chakotay frowned. "She's cooking a vegetarian option."

B'Elanna gave Janeway a look that could only be described as envious. "So she's cooking your favorite meal, and adapting it for Chakotay." She shrugged. "Who knew?"

Wanting to snap B'Elanna's mouth shut, Janeway gave her a force ten look.

Ignoring Janeway, B'Elanna continued, "Maybe I should have tried those tactics with Tom?" She threw the words over her shoulder as she made her way toward the kitchen, "It might have kept him in my bed."

Chakotay touched his tattoo over his left eye. "Is B'Elanna drunk?"

Janeway held up her hands. "It's a difficult time for her, Chakotay."

"Is Miral with Tom tonight?"

"Yes," Janeway responded placing her hand on her midsection. "He picked her up this afternoon." She looked pensive. "It's clear she's struggling with the separation."

Chakotay nodded. "Well, it's good that she's here with friends."

"Yes," Janeway replied. He is right, she thought. This is exactly where B'Elanna needs to be.

Although the half-Klingon and ex Borg had gotten off to a rocky start when Seven first came aboard Voyager, there was no doubt that they were firm friends now. Seven, B'Elanna had informed Janeway recently, was an exceptional friend.

"Come, Kathryn, let me get you a drink." Chakotay said. "Seven has purchased Aldebaran whiskey."

Janeway raised her eyebrows.

"No synthehol where you're concerned," he added looking at her.

"And you?" Janeway asked unable to shake the niggling feeling. There was something odd about the way her former first officer was looking at her. Aware that Chakotay preferred to avoid alcohol, in order to stay in control, but on occasion indulged with Antarian cider, Janeway asked, "Won't you join me?"

Chakotay shook his head.

Watching him pour the green whiskey, Janeway made a mental note to ensure that given the company, and that Alderbaran whiskey was twice as strong as ordinary whiskey, she would monitor her intake.

"Seven has been working on the recipe that your mother gave her," he said holding the glass out to her. "As you know, for her, it is very important that you enjoy it."

Aware that it was a traditionalist recipe, but positive that Seven would do a wonderful job, Janeway smiled. "She hasn't let us down yet, has she?"

Chakotay's dark eyes assessed Janeway for a moment. "No, Kathryn. She hasn't. She's always challenged you, hasn't she?"

Picking up that his look and reply were more than suggestive, Janeway looked at Chakotay curiously. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean, Kathryn," Chakotay answered coming closer. "Is that Seven is intelligent, strong-willed, and independent. She thinks for herself." He looked at her. "Never afraid to speak out if something seems obtuse or doesn't make sense to her. You have always recognized that. You have always recognized that, in the end, it's only character that matters."

Feeling increasingly uneasy, Janeway looked at Chakotay, unsure if he was offering praise or criticism. Eyeing his dark features, her gut told her it was the latter.

"You have always encouraged her human personality to grow-"

"Chakotay," Janeway interrupted. "Where are you going with this?"

Her ex first officer's eyes narrowed. "Where I'm going Kathryn is-"

"Kathryn," Chakotay's sister Sekaya said with great warmth as she walked through the sliding lounge doors.

Left with the uncomfortable feeling that he was about to tell her to back off, Janeway tore her eyes from Chakotay, and smiled at Sekaya.

"It's wonderful to see you." Sekaya said standing in front of her.

"And you," Janeway responded to Chakotay's younger sister.

Janeway looked the younger woman over and noted, not for the first time that she was exceptionally beautiful. Sekaya was dark like her brother, and of similar height, but unlike him, she was bald with elaborate symmetrical tattoos on both sides of her face. Her baldness was symbolic, Chakotay had told her on his wedding day, representational of being the spiritual leader of their people. It suits her, adds to her striking looks, Janeway thought.

Trusting her gut that Chakotay was about to tell her that now Seven was married, her 'mentoring' role was no longer required, Janeway forced a smile as icy steel shot through her.

"Would you like a glass of water?" Chakotay asked his sister.

Sekaya smiled. "Yes, thank you."

The comm system buzzed.

"That must be Tuvok and his wife," Chakotay said. He smiled. "If you'll excuse me."

Janeway nodded. Feeling very uneasy, she sipped her whiskey.

"How are you, Kathryn?" Sekaya asked moving closer to Janeway.

Janeway swallowed her whiskey. "Good," she replied. "And you?"

"Excellent," Sekaya replied then smiled. "You must find it difficult."

"What?"

"The amount of attention that you receive."

Janeway blinked then looked at the younger woman curiously.

Sekaya quoted, "Coffee, the finest organic suspension ever devised. I beat the Borg with it."

Janeway laughed amused that Sekaya would know this.

Tuvok and T'Pel entered the room. Janeway took a deep breath, excusing herself, she approached them. She hadn't seen Tuvok since the night of the wedding. Tuvok had tried to reach her, but she just wasn't ready for the conversation he wanted to have and doubted that she ever would be. But tonight there would be no running, Tuvok, she could see from the arc of his eyebrow, and the way he looked at her, had something on his mind.

"Tuvok," she said placing her hand on his arm and squeezing it gently. "I'm glad you could make it old friend. T'Pel," she added smiling widely at Tuvok's wife, "how wonderful to see you."

"Kathryn," T'Pel responded. "You are well, I trust?"

"Couldn't be better."

Looking from Tuvok to T'Pel, Janeway remembered that when she found Tuvok in the Delta Quadrant, she had told him that she had spoken to T'Pel and that his wife was worried. She was quickly corrected by Tuvok that worry is an emotion that Vulcan's do not experience. However, he admitted, he did miss his wife and family.

Miss them, Janeway thought as she looked at T'Pel with great affection. They have been married for more than sixty years. They must have been devastated to be parted from each other. But through all that, Janeway knew that Tuvok's maturity, wisdom and Vulcan equanimity had served him, and ultimately the crew of Voyager well. She was aware that although Tuvok had lived long, he had also lived well and because of that many of the crew turned to him for advice, and counsel as she had. But it was with B'Elanna and Seven that Tuvok had the most intense relationship. His calm, logical demeanor had always been a comfort to Seven, and there was no doubt that B'Elanna's journey would have been a much tougher one without Tuvok's constant

reassurance that 'one's volatile instincts' could be contained.

"Kathryn, it is good to see you," Tuvok said inclining his head.

Janeway picked up the subtle note of sarcasm in the Vulcan's tone. Color rose in her cheeks. "And you, Tuvok," she replied. Knowing that she had been less than a good friend to him recently, she smiled then added, "We'll catch-up soon, I promise."

"Perhaps," Tuvok said then raised an eyebrow. "However, it is now apparent to me that patience and Kathryn Janeway go hand in hand."

Janeway's color deepened. She half-grinned at her ex security officer. It would appear, she realized, that she had a lot of making up to do.

Seven entered the room and Janeway's heart sped up. She looked beautiful. Her blonde hair was down, and she was wearing a black, low cut dress. She was stunning.

"Kathryn," Seven said as she approached. "Is your refreshment adequate?"

Janeway cleared her throat and raised her glass. "More than adequate."

"Excellent," B'Elanna said behind Seven staggering slightly. "You'll be happy now that your captain's all right."

Ignoring B'Elanna, Seven approached Tuvok and T'Pol. "It is good to see you both," she said warmly. She looked at Tuvok affectionately. "The food is ready."

"Let's eat," Chakotay said, leading the way to the dining room.

In the dining room, B'Elanna was guided by Chakotay to the seat next to Janeway.

"I brought a bottle of Klingon blood wine," B'Elanna said, as she scraped her chair out, and sat down.

"I am aware of that," Seven replied raising her ocular implant in concern. "However, given that it is stronger than Kathryn's whiskey I think something a little less," she hesitated, "potent would be sufficient."

B'Elanna scowled.

"What would you like?" Seven asked.

Janeway watched B'Elanna swallow when she caught the expression on Tuvok's face. "Beer," B'Elanna replied quietly. "Beer is fine."

Janeway smiled slightly, it seemed she and B'Elanna were the only ones who enjoyed alcohol at

this table.

"The food smells wonderful, Seven," Sekaya said when Seven returned.

Evidently pleased, Seven inclined her head. "Thank you. This is a recipe that Kathryn's mother, Gretchen, cooked when we," she looked at Janeway warmly, "visited her farmhouse in Indiana."

"Hey, Seven," B'Elanna said slurring slightly. "Have you told everyone about our trip?" She waved a hand. "How you and Kathryn spent the afternoon arguing about the old farm equipment." She grinned at the rest of the table. "They argued on Voyager." She waved a finger between Janeway and Seven. "A lot."

Janeway's pulse picked up speed when Seven blushed.

"We visited Gretchen's farm recently. It's a beautiful place," B'Elanna told everyone. "We've been a few times now and love it more each time." She looked at Janeway. "Once, the captain was working on some obsolete farm machinery. Was it a twenty-first century potato digger?"

Janeway smiled at B'Elanna still referring to her as her captain. "It was a corn planter."

"Oh" B'Elanna replied. She shook her head. "Gretchen actually owns this primitive equipment," she said in disbelief. "And it was filled with..." She looked at Janeway.

"Seed and fertilizer."

B'Elanna nodded. "Kathryn asked if we wanted to come along for the ride. I think she wanted to impress on us the values of the traditionalist way." B'Elanna laughed.

Janeway shook her head. "I'm not a traditionalist." She smiled warmly at B'Elanna. "But sometimes, I like to escape modernity."

"Gretchen," B'Elanna said to the table. "Insisted that we get out of our 'city clothes' and wear some strange looking outfit."

"Dungarees," Janeway interjected.

B'Elanna nodded. "That day after planting only two acres the machine broke down." She looked at Janeway as if her knuckles dragged across the floor. "Kathryn got out this archaic toolbox and crawled underneath the planter." She chuckled. "She used a..." Looking completely flummoxed, B'Elanna asked, "What was that thing?"

"Jack," Janeway offered.

"Yes, jack on one side," B'Elanna said. "And she asked Seven if she would hold the other side." She laughed. "Just as well, Seven's Borg enhanced strength allowed for that. The whole time Kathryn was under there, utilizing these strange traditionalist tools, she was telling us how great

it was to be back home." B'Elanna shook her head. "Well when I looked at Seven, I've never seen a person look so out of place in my entire life. The most cybernetically enhanced human on the planet, was wearing dungarees that were too short, with mud smeared over her face from the machinery. Seeing Seven being nothing more than a farm hand, was a strange sight indeed."

Chakotay laughed, and the rest of the table followed.

Smiling, Janeway picked up her glass and thought that maybe the evening wouldn't be too difficult after all.

\* \* \*

"Thank you, Seven," Janeway said, following Seven into the kitchen with empty dessert dishes for the replicator. "Dinner tonight was fabulous. Your culinary skills are coming along beautifully. And I--"

"Remain still," Seven said moving into Janeway's personal space.

The move unexpected, Janeway's heart pounded. During all their time on Voyager and their friendship Seven never willingly moved into her or anyone else's personal space. Holding the plates in her hands, she stood perfectly still. Her mouth opened then slowly closed as the blonde peered at her.

"It appears there is an eyelash on your cheek," Seven said. Her warm breath whispered across Janeway's face as her finger brushed across her cheek.

Frozen, hands out, breathing heavily, pupils fully dilated, Janeway's groin immediately clenched at the contact. Afraid that her body might launch into orbit with the unexpected and intimate contact, she held her breath.

Remaining still, finger mid-air, the forgotten eyelash clinging to the tip, Seven gazed at Janeway.

Color rising, Janeway tried to say something, but her voice disappeared when amazing blue eyes focused on hers.

Their eyes locked.

Face close, Janeway could feel Seven's breath wash lightly over her. Unable to help herself, she focused on the burgeoning, full, moist pink lips that she ached to kiss. Lost, Janeway watched Seven lean closer, just as the sound of laughter filtered from the dining room.

The moment broken, Seven blinked. A look of confusion crossed her face. She dropped her hand.

Heart pounding with anticipation and excitement, Janeway cleared her throat.

Seven stepped back. Her face tightened when B'Elanna walked into the room.

"Time to move from baby beer onto the big stuff," B'Elanna said. Focusing on Seven, she asked, "How about some wine, Seven?"

Looking perplexed, Seven shook her head.

Putting the dishes down, Janeway stepped in. "B'Elanna," she said approaching her friend. "I think you've had more than enough."

"No way, Kathryn," B'Elanna replied then hiccupped. "The party's just starting."

Un-nerved by the ache of desire she was experiencing, and desperate to escape, Janeway replied, "It's time to leave."

B'Elanna looked at Seven "Do you want me to go?" she asked with a note of vulnerability.

Seven responded immediately, "Of course not, B'Elanna,"

Smiling, B'Elanna clasped her hands together. "Okay, then let's crack open some of that wine you've been hiding from me."

"B'Elanna," Janeway said. Her voice firm, she raised a hand in a no nonsense manner. "We're leaving." She turned to Seven. "We need our coats."

Looking slightly dazed, Seven nodded then left the room.

"This evening isn't over, Kathryn," B'Elanna threw over her shoulder as she left the kitchen following Seven. "If we're not having wine here, we'll be having wine at yours."

Sighing heavily, Janeway placed a hand on her hip and pinched her nose. She needed to get out of here. She needed to think about what had just happened.

"Kathryn," Chakotay said entering the kitchen. "B'Elanna said you're leaving?"

"Yes," Janeway replied then smiled faintly. "I think B'Elanna's had a little too much to drink." She shook her head.

Picking up the dessert dishes that she had brought in, Chakotay moved over to the replicator and punched in a set of commands.

Janeway watched the dishes disappear, and wished that option was available to her.

"Did you and Seven have a chance to catch up?"

Janeway's head snapped back, at the slight menace in Chakotay's tone. She frowned slightly. "In what way?"

Chakotay punched fresh instructions into replicator console, and grinned at her. "I mean has she mentioned that we are trying for a baby yet?"

Stunned, the words echoing around her head, Janeway felt the room move in and out. The moment took on a surreal quality. She stared at Chakotay. "A baby," she uttered.

"Yes," Chakotay said his dark eyes shining.

Janeway's world shifted as Chakotay grinned at her. At her best she always presented a calm, collected persona. Whenever she found herself in an uncomfortable situation, she always applied her intellect to master it. But right at this moment, she could not stop her jaw from falling open. Blood was pumping through her veins so fast she thought her head might blow off. Open mouthed, she stared at Chakotay.

"I take it that's a no then?"

Janeway quickly closed her mouth. "No." She squared her shoulders. Placing a hand on her abdomen, she added, "Not yet."

Holding a cup of steaming tea, Chakotay looked at Janeway.

Lifting her chin, Janeway said with a calmness she didn't feel. "I'm sure your wife will tell her friends when she's ready."

Chakotay looked at Janeway for a long moment. "I'll take this through to Sekaya."

Janeway nodded. Reeling, she stared after Chakotay. Her Starfleet training told her that she had just suffered a serious and very deliberate tactical blow from her ex first officer. She moved to lean against the kitchen counter. Hands grasping the counter, she leaned on it for support, and tried to organize her thoughts.

"Tuvok," she whispered, when the Vulcan entered the room which at this moment seemed busier than the drydock on Earth's McKinley Station.

"Kathryn," Tuvok replied approaching her. "I have in my possession information that Admiral Janeway requested I give to you." He held out a PADD. "On reflection, I realize that I should have insisted that we meet before now to ensure that this information was given to you in line with Admiral Janeway's wishes."

Distracted by the devastating news that Seven and Chakotay were considering a family, and that Chakotay obviously had his suspicions about her feelings for Seven, Janeway stared at the PADD. Somehow, it had never entered her mind that Seven would want children.

Janeway suddenly recalled how fond the younger woman was of Naomi Wildman, and also the Borg children that came aboard the last year of Voyager's time in the Delta Quadrant. She

thought about how close she was to Icheb and now Miral who was her goddaughter. Janeway suddenly saw images of Seven holding a baby in her arms, and Chakotay standing with her. Clutching the counter, the image almost broke her.

"Kathryn," Tuvok said looking at her. "Is everything all right?"

Unable to speak, Janeway nodded. "Yes," she managed eventually then tried to smile. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Happy," she said releasing the counter.

"Kathryn," Tuvok said looking at Janeway intently. "Smiling is considered a symptom of happiness. However," the Vulcan inclined his head, "I have learned not to assume that your smile signifies happiness."

Janeway's smile faded. "This is why you have been so keen to meet up?" she asked looking at the PADD. The news that Seven and Chakotay were planning for a child was still ricocheting around her brain but, somehow, she pushed her command mask protectively into place.

Tuvok nodded then frowned. "That, and the fact that I am concerned about your welfare."

"There is no need to be concerned, Tuvok," Janeway responded sharply. She took the PADD from his outstretched hand. "What is it?" she asked with a note of impatience.

Tuvok raised his eyebrows. "I have not viewed the data."

Looking at the PADD, Janeway placed a hand on her hip. "Obviously, she didn't think interfering in my life the first time around was enough!"

"Kathryn?" Tuvok replied.

Even with her command mask firmly in place, Janeway was aware that Tuvok's Vulcan senses were picking up that she was extremely alarmed.

"Kathryn, I consider that the communication from the Admiral to be extremely important to your future. I have no doubt she will try to convey to you her-"

The doors slid open and B'Elanna walked into the room. She had consumed only three beers, under Seven's careful eye, and not the six she had pushed for. She was still intoxicated.

"Ready?" she asked Janeway. Trying to place her arms in her coat, she lurched forward then tripped over her own foot.

Throwing the PADD down, Janeway rushed toward B'Elanna, "Tuvok," she said. "Quickly."

Tuvok took B'Elanna's arm, and together they led her to a seat at the kitchen table.

Janeway looked at her old friend, "We'll continue this conversation another time."

"Very well, Kathryn," Tuvok said. He gently squeezed B'Elanna's shoulder reassuringly before moving toward the PADD. He picked up the PADD then approached Janeway.

"However, I urge you to take this PADD and view Admiral Janeway's communication."

Wanting to make light of the situation but her humor temporarily gone, Janeway accepted the PADD.

"I have prepared a room for B'Elanna," Seven said entering the kitchen. "She should stay here tonight."

Not looking at Seven, Janeway replied "Good idea." She smiled at her woozy ex chief engineer, and tucking the PADD under her arm added, "I'll say goodnight."

"You do not have to leave, Kathryn," Seven responded slipping her arm through B'Elanna's and helping her stand. "I have prepared a room for you also."

"I do have to go," Janeway replied. They made eye contact. "Yes, I really must go now."

### *Chapter 5*

"Admiral Paris," Janeway said walking into the palatial office of one of Starfleet's most senior officers, and one of her oldest and dearest family friends.

Admiral Owen Paris's office was located in the Communications Research Center at Starfleet Headquarters adjacent to the Pathfinder lab and its facilities which were instrumental in communicating with Voyager while in the Delta Quadrant.

"Kathryn," Admiral Paris said coming around his desk to meet her. "How lovely to see you," He looked at her. "How's your current assignment going with the Bureau of Planetary Treaties?"

"Well. I've been touring the provinces as a Federation Diplomat," Janeway replied, as Admiral Paris took her in his arms, and gave her a firm hug.

Early in her career, Janeway had served under Admiral Paris's command aboard the USS Al-Batani as a science officer during its participation in the Arias Expedition. She recalled that he was a demanding taskmaster. He would often lecture his crew about the Prime Directive, which was one of his leading principles of space exploration. Subsequently, a principle she later embraced.

"How has the touring been?" the Admiral asked as he led her across the room and to a high back chair facing his desk.

"It doesn't change," Janeway said warmly to her old mentor. Taking a seat, she glanced at the flags of Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets behind his desk. She noticed among the items on his desk, a holo-image of the family including his son Tom, B'Elanna and Miral.

"Kathryn, I'm so glad you initiated this meeting," he said. "I've been meaning to schedule it. I have good news." He took his seat across from her.

"Before you start, Admiral, I'm here to request some time off."

"What?" Admiral said looking at her in astonishment.

"Admiral," Janeway said. "Owen, I need a leave of absence."

"Kathryn, of course, you do. You've spent seven years in deep-space. It is to be expected. How much," he asked. "A couple of weeks?" He looked at her. "A month?"

Janeway shook her head. "Six months."

Admiral Paris gaped at her. "What do you intend to do for six months?"

Janeway frowned slightly. Not prepared to discuss why she needed the time at this moment, she said gently, "Owen, I just need it."

"Kathryn, now is not the time."

Janeway shook her head. "Owen, I need this."

"You are about to be offered an Admiralty."

"Janeway shook her head. "I'm not ready."

Admiral Paris stared at Janeway for a long moment. "Kathryn, do you realize how rare it is in the history of Starfleet to promote a Captain directly to the post of Rear Admiral?" He leaned back in his chair. "You have the opportunity to climb through the ranks fast. I suggest you grab it with both hands."

Watching Admiral Paris, Janeway knew that getting an extended leave of absence was not going to be an easy task. As they wrangled, she was forced to remember how stubborn her old mentor could be.

"Kathryn," Admiral Owen said eventually, almost wearily. He stood and walked around his desk then perched on the edge. "Do you know the reason for this promotion?"

Janeway half smiled. "I can take a guess."

The Admiral shook his head. "It is not only because of the wealth of data and technology you brought back, Kathryn." He smiled. "It's because you embody all that is exemplary about Starfleet officers." He looked at her intently. "You are an intelligent, thoughtful, perspicacious individual. Who is sensitive to the feelings of others, but tough when it's required."

Aware that these types of compliments, were unusual if practically unheard of from Admiral Paris, Janeway looked at him in surprise.

The Admiral sighed. "It has not gone unnoticed, Kathryn that during your years in the Delta Quadrant your ability to keep your crew's morale high as you worked to bring them home was exceptional." He added. "Your dedication and diplomacy has earned you respect and recognition as one of the best Starfleet captains, and that is why you are being promoted."

Janeway's head was suddenly giddy. But aware how much of a smooth diplomatic operator the Admiral was, she held her ground. She stood. "Owen," she said, smoothing down her tunic. "I'm not ready for a desk job."

Admiral Paris looked at Janeway. "You may be right." He studied her thoughtfully. "There is a brand new Prometheus-class vessel named the USS Titan," he said slowly. "That will carry a crew complement of 350. It is designed for extended missions." He smiled and his eyes twinkled. "Deep space exploration." He pushed himself off the desk. "We need to get back on an exploration standing after the Dominion War, and who better to captain such a ship than you?" He laughed. "The ship will be ready to sail in six months." He led Janeway to the door. "It could be yours if you want it." He took her hands as the doors slid open. "All I ask is that you think about it. If you're not ready for a desk job, as you say, then this may be exactly what you need, Kathryn."

Making her way from Admiral Owen's office, Janeway stopped at the entrance to the transporter room. It had been over a week since the dinner party. Since, she had been holed up at her mother's farm in Indiana.

Needing some familiar ground and comfort, Janeway turned around and left Starfleet Headquarters. Taking a shuttle, she headed for the Japanese Gardens housed in the grounds of the Academy.

In the gardens, Janeway headed for a familiar place, the central lake. She walked through an arbor then another, and felt an immediate and recognizable sense of tranquility at the familiar sight. She was pleased to see that in the last eight years, the gardens hadn't really changed, and as she strolled, she took deep comfort in naming the variety of trees and flowers surrounding her.

Eventually, Janeway stopped at a bridge and stared out across the distance to the Golden Gate Bridge. Soon, her attention was caught by a crane strolling along the black-pebbled shore. She smiled faintly then returned to look at the bridge. From her apartment, the bridge was a familiar sight, and since her return, she took strength from the fact that during the Dominion War, the bridge was almost destroyed, but it had been rebuilt just as she would rebuild her life. To new beginnings, she told herself as the crane strolled past.

Janeway thought back over the last week, to the farm and her time with her mother. The weekend of the dinner party, the following day she had cleared her schedule, packed a bag, and headed straight for Indiana.

Janeway knew that her unexpected visit and lack of willingness to explain what she was doing there concerned her mother tremendously. Several times in the first week, her mother had tried to engage her in a conversation deeper than the day's weather forecast. Eventually, one evening, she insisted that Janeway sit on the porch and talk about their lives.

The redhead smiled as she remembered that night. She had to admit, that she loved being with her mother, and had missed her desperately while in the Delta Quadrant.

Yesterday, mostly out of frustration, Janeway knew, her mother insisted that they take a walk along a farm track that Janeway hadn't visited since her teenage years.

Remembering, Janeway's smile widened.

\* \* \*

"Do you see this, Kathryn?" Gretchen asked her daughter as she came to a standstill at the end of an overgrown path.

"What?" Janeway asked looking out at the field before them.

Gretchen spread her hands. "This," the older Janeway replied smiling.

"What?" Janeway looked all around her in confusion.

"The land."

Frowning, Janeway looked at her mother then said with a note of amusement. "Yes, of course, I see it." She couldn't resist. "Mom, it's all around us."

"This," Gretchen responded turning in full circle. "Is yours."

"What?" the younger Janeway asked for the second time. She looked at her mother, and was reminded that although they shared the same eye coloring and bone structure, she didn't inherit the height. She was a good few inches shorter than her mother.

"Kathryn, as a child you used to tell me that when grew up, you would buy this land and live right here." Gretchen smiled. "You took that view from your father, of course." She looked around her. "He wanted to build here. He thought the view was better." She pointed. "But, you wanted to build near the creek, didn't you?"

Not knowing how she should feel, but touched and slightly exasperated that her mother should make such a grandiose gesture, Janeway looked at Gretchen. "Mom, it was a child's wish."

"Kathryn, a child's wish is very important," Gretchen replied, taking her daughter's hand. "At this moment in time you, my darling, have no idea what being a mother truly involves."

A look of pain crossed Janeway's face. By the looks of it, she thought. I'll never know what it will be like to share my dreams with a child. She looked out across the land that her father adored, and felt an unfamiliar longing for a time that had now passed; a time when she rode down here on his shoulders and shared his dreams for this land with her.

"Somehow, I think the time has passed me by, Mom," Janeway said with a note of regret.

Gretchen looked at her daughter then shook her head. "Don't be so sure. I prefer to think of it as an unknown at this moment in time." She touched her daughter's cheek. "As scientists, we like nothing better than to use our intellect to rationalize things by weighing probabilities, but even we have no real idea what the future holds."

Sucking in air, Janeway looked around her. "You have no idea how much I've missed this." She looked tenderly at her mother. "Every morning for seven years, I woke to a holograph of this place by my bedside. Next to it was an image of you, Dad, Phoebe, the dogs, and Mark, of course." Janeway mustered a smile then shook her head slightly. "I never realized that the order was significant before." She frowned. "Poor old Hobbes, he always did come last."

Gretchen squeezed Janeway's hand.

Looking at her mother, Janeway saw deep compassion and love in her eyes, she shared, "Some days, the homesickness was," she hesitated, "overwhelming."

Tears glistened in Gretchen's eyes. "Come here, darling." She folded her arms around her daughter. "I cannot imagine how hard it must have been keeping up a positive front for all those years. Reinforcing, each day that you as captain would find a way home. Allaying fears that somehow you would get your crew back to Federation space in their life time. I know you, Katie," she sighed. "I know how you would have held your own doubt at bay during your duty shift, but on your own, alone - at night - doubts would have haunted you. What a truly exceptional individual you are, my darling child."

Janeway pressed her forehead into her mother's shoulder. Ever since she could remember, her relationship with her mother had been particularly close. She had always enjoyed talking with her, discussing issues of math - as a Starfleet theoretical mathematician; it was her mother's specialist subject - as well as everyday issues of life.

Janeway breathed in. The familiar smell of her mother's morning dew fragrance triggered memories of how deeply isolated she had felt throughout her tenure in the Delta Quadrant. Burying her head, Janeway realized that no matter how hard she tried to replicate this comforting smell with her mother's holoprogram aboard Voyager, she never got it exactly right. She caught a deep sob. How could she, she realized, it was unique.

"Let it out, darling." Gretchen whispered.

Janeway tried to laugh. "I'm a starship captain, Mom," she said trying to gather some resolve.

Stroking Janeway's hair, Gretchen laughed lightly. "So, when did that stop you finding comfort

in my arms?"

Janeway braced herself to pull away. "I can't. You don't understand."

Loosening the embrace, but not letting go, Gretchen looked at Janeway. "I know I don't, Katie. But I want to." Her eyes carried great sadness. "Do you know the only thing that kept me sane during your time in the Delta Quadrant?"

Surprised at the depth of emotion in her mother's eyes, Janeway shook her head.

"It was buying this piece of land for you." Gretchen touched Janeway's face. "I bought it in the hope that one day you would return and build the house you always said you wanted down by the creek. I bought it when Starfleet told me I shouldn't continue to hope. That in all likelihood Voyager was lost and would never return." She breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly. "The wonderful thing about life is that it teaches you the natural order of things. As an adult, somehow, you can come to terms with the loss of your partner, however heartbreaking that might be, but the loss of a child - never."

Gretchen's voice held a note of despair. "Starfleet wanted me to let you go, Katie. Put you in a box. Pack you away. But, as your mother, that could never happen. From the moment you were born, I realized that your life depended on me. From the moment I held you in my arms, I loved you." Gretchen swallowed. "I was being asked to let go of my love for you, Katie." Her grip tightened reflexively. "There was no way I could ever do that." She shook her head. "That's what having a child does to you, darling. I love you. I am committed to you, and because of that I will never give up hope."

Janeway struggled to control her emotions. "I love you too, Mom," she whispered.

"Do you remember coming down here with your Father, Katie?"

Janeway nodded.

"He shared his dreams with you of what he intended to do with this land when he retired. He wanted to build it the traditional way, using traditional carpentry skills." Gretchen laughed lightly. "When you were young, you couldn't understand why your father would want to use Neolithic tools, as you called them, tools and material that would take any project months to complete. He didn't care. It was his dream." She shook her head. "But, somehow, he never got around to actually buying the land."

Gretchen smiled as tears pooled in Janeway's eyes. She placed her daughter's head back on her shoulder, and leaned her cheek gently against it. "Boy, did he catch your imagination with this place though. Even from a young age, you were filled with ideas about what you and your father were going to do. You even sketched out drawings of how the place should look, to supplement his ideas. Do you remember?"

Unable to speak, Janeway nodded.

"No matter the design of the house, you wanted a wrap-around porch." Gretchen lifted Janeway's head. "I want you to come home," she said looking at her daughter. "I want you take some time out from Starfleet. It is important that you re-establish your roots, Katie. You've been gone for too long. You need to find yourself, darling. Start here. Build the house of your dreams." She swept hair from Janeway's face. "Katie, trust me, career is not and will never be as important as family."

Janeway said nothing.

"Share with me," Gretchen said rubbing her daughter's back. "Please darling. Tell me what's wrong."

Janeway couldn't control herself. Pressing her forehead into the warm shoulder of her mother's protective hold, fat tears rolled down her face. Surprised, she half sobbed.

"Talk to me, Katie. Please."

Trying to get a grip on herself, Janeway breathed in deeply a few times. "Do you think it's that simple, Mom?"

"Yes, I do, Katie. I think it's time you came home."

"Each and every day, all I could think about was getting us home." Janeway said her head still resting on her mother's shoulder. "I thought getting Voyager home would stop the homesickness. But," A sob broke free. Unable to continue, she shook her head.

Gretchen finished. "But it hasn't," she soothed. "Has it?"

"No," Janeway muffled.

Rubbing her daughter's back, Gretchen replied softly, "You're still homesick for something." Eyes widening, the older woman's hand slowed. She caught her breath then slowly released it. "No. Not something," she whispered. "You're homesick for someone."

Unable to stop herself, Janeway's control broke, she sobbed uncontrollably.

"Come home, Katie. Let me help you."

\* \* \*

Brought back by the sounds of the birds in the garden, Janeway smiled faintly. And so the decision was made. And here she was about to embark on building a home.

Janeway looked around her and remembered how as a cadet, she loved wandering through these gardens and how Boothby worked these grounds, and in particular these gardens. Her smile broadened as she remembered the gnarly old Academy grounds man. Aware that she hadn't

thought of him in a long time, her eyes warmed at the memories. She recalled how much of an interest he took in the careers of many of the students and in particular hers. Janeway knew she would be forever thankful to him. Although tough on her, he also had a gentle side. She grinned when she remembered his habit of giving her fresh roses for her quarters.

The grin slipped away, replaced with a frown when she recalled Species 8472's elaborate simulation of Boothby during their extensive intelligence gathering exercise against the Federation, while Voyager was in the Delta Quadrant. Even though the being wasn't the real Boothby, the encounter left Janeway deeply saddened - it had felt like a reunion with her old mentor.

From the bridge, Janeway admired the view along the waterway, and down to the lotus blossom. Pleased that the gardens were quiet, she watched fish swim for a while before making her way to the shoin; the central structure and gathering place where she hoped she would find time alone to contemplate her meeting with Admiral Paris.

"I'm sorry," Janeway said turning quickly to leave the shoin to the cadet and a teacher who were in the middle of a conversation.

"Kathryn?"

Janeway turned back, and immediately recognized Chakotay's sister. "Sekaya," she said, surprised.

Sekaya smiled at Janeway. "Kathryn. How nice to see you again."

"And you," Janeway responded. "I'll leave you two alone."

"No," Sekaya replied hurriedly. "I...It would be nice to catch up." She turned to the student and making it clear that the meeting was over, patted the first year cadet on the shoulder.

Janeway recognized from the shape of the flat ears that the cadet was Huanni; a species that was even more empathetic than Betazoids.

"If you need me," Sekaya told the cadet reassuringly. "You know where to reach me."

The cadet nodded at Sekaya. Leaving, she dipped her head at Janeway, her purple eyes showing recognition and admiration as she passed.

Janeway smiled at the cadet.

"Kathryn," Sekaya said with a note of pleasure. "Please join me." She moved along the seat, creating a space.

Janeway hesitated.

"Please," Sekaya repeated. Gently, she patted the wooden slats. "I'm here on duty," Looking at Janeway through long dark eyelashes, she added, "And it would be nice to chat with a friend."

Nodding, Janeway moved to sit next to Sekaya. "I didn't realize that you worked for the Academy."

"Yes, more and more." Sekaya responded looking at Janeway. "But in truth, I am here to spend time with Chakotay." She looked off into the distance, "I have missed him so much, particularly since our father's death." She smiled. "Starfleet believe that since I had a relationship with a Haunni, it is only I who can understand how difficult they can be."

Janeway smiled, She knew that the Huanni were an emotional race. It in no way compromised their intelligence or skills, which were considerable, but they were as open in their emotions as Vulcans were closed. "Yes, I understand what you mean," She surprised herself by saying. "I also miss my father terribly."

Sekaya looked at Janeway, deep warmth filled her dark eyes. She stood and held out both hands. "Captain Kathryn Janeway, I love these gardens and whenever I can, I come here. Would you care to join me on a tour around this beautiful place?"

Janeway looked up at Sekaya. Chakotay had told her much about his life and his family but very little about his sister, other than that she was a spirit guide for the tribe. Even at the meal with Seven and Chakotay, Sekaya had listened more than talked that evening. Janeway had to admit she was intrigued. She smiled. "I would love to." Taking the younger woman's hands in hers, she allowed Sekaya to gently pull her up noticing, not for the first time, her distinct cheekbones, and that her eyes were the color of rare ebony wood.

"Chisen-Kaiyushiki," Sekaya said as they strolled along.

Janeway smiled. "Japanese for wet garden with promenade and this particular garden emulates the type of stroll garden built by Japanese feudal lords during the 18th and 19th Century."

Sekaya nudged Janeway then laughed. "Why am I not surprised that you probably know the full history of this garden?"

Surprised at Sekaya's playfulness, Janeway smiled. Bowing her head in remembrance of Boothby, she replied, "I had a good teacher once."

The taller woman folded her arm through Janeway's. "Fancy sampling some of the beautiful tea in the tea garden?"

Janeway smiled, and remembering Admiral Janeway's liking for tea, shook her head. "I'm strictly a coffee drinker."

"I know," Sekaya said then smiled teasingly. "Captain Janeway: coffee, black." Her eyes sparkled. "It's well known that coffee manufacturers want you to endorse their product."

Aware that every shred of her private life now seemed to be public property, Janeway's eyes narrowed. "They have tried," she replied.

Sekaya looked at Janeway for a moment. "I hear you're a bit of a pool shark," she said changing the subject smoothly. "If you're free, maybe a game of pool, and some light refreshment would appeal?"

Maybe some whiskey and a darkened room would suit me better, Janeway thought. She looked into gentle, dark eyes, and considered for the briefest moment accepting Sekaya's offer. But Sekaya was reputed to be an exceptionally gifted counselor, and as a spiritual leader for her people, her skills would have been honed over the years.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, Janeway shook her head. In need of some privacy, she said. "I'm sorry, Sekaya, any other day, I would be delighted to join you, but today is," she hesitated. "Can you accept that today is not a good day for me?"

"Of course, Kathryn," Sekaya replied. "A rain check is more than acceptable." She looked at Janeway. "I have tickets for Aktuh and Maylota at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles tomorrow night."

Janeway shook her head in refusal.

"Barak-Kadan is performing."

Janeway smiled, it had been years since she had attended an opera and even longer since she had seen that particular production or the renowned singer.

"The theater manager is a friend of mine, so there is no need for it to be too public an attendance."

Not surprised that Sekaya had picked up on her aversion to public scrutiny, Janeway laughed. "How can I refuse such an offer?"

"Good, it's a date then?"

Janeway looked at Sekaya in surprise.

"I mean a purely social date, Kathryn."

Lighten up. She's offering a hand of friendship. Don't read too much into it, Janeway told herself. But as she looked at the dark eyed beauty, something in the way Sekaya returned her gaze made Janeway doubt that 'purely social' was what this woman had in mind.

"Tomorrow evening?"

Amused, and if she would ever admit a little flattered, Janeway tilted her head, and nodded. "Tomorrow evening it is."

### ***Chapter 6***

"Thank you, Sekaya," Janeway said warmly to her companion as they left the Pavilion, and headed down the stairs. "That was," she hesitated, "wonderful." And to her surprise, she meant it. "It has been quite some time since I've enjoyed a production as much as the one we have just seen."

Sekaya wrapped her evening shawl around herself. "You're welcome, Kathryn," she replied as they walked down the stairs.

Janeway smiled at the dark eyed woman.

"I had hoped you would enjoy tonight," Sekaya said. "Aktuh and Maylota is a favorite of mine, and I'm delighted that you've enjoyed it as much as I have." Reaching the bottom stair, she placed her hand on Janeway's arm. "Now, can I entice you to a light evening supper?" She looked down the street. "I know a wonderful restaurant not far from here."

Sekaya had, the few times Janeway had met her, worn traditional Mayan clothing of a huipil; a garment worn as a shirt, usually worn over trousers then tied with a woven belt, but tonight she wore a knee length, high-necked, black dress which showed off her striking figure. Her only adornment was an intricate, but stunning obsidian necklace that seemed to illuminate the elaborate tattoos on her head, and make Janeway very aware that her companion was an extraordinarily beautiful woman.

Janeway knew that as a Mayan Shaman, Sekaya would have tattoos over her body. From what she understood, tradition had it that her tattoos would be strategically positioned to allow the gods and their helpers to use her body as a vessel to provide the power of healing and spiritual wisdom.

Janeway smiled. "I-

"Captain Janeway."

Janeway turned around when she heard her name being called. Her smile widened when she saw the Doctor and a petite blonde heading towards her at a pace that didn't seem to suit the small blonde; she was panting, and hanging on as the Doctor marched along.

"Kathryn," the Doctor called out as he approached. "How wonderful to see you." He stopped in front of her. "I didn't know that you were an Aktuh and Maylota fan." He beamed. "We were just talking about you, weren't we, Lana?" He turned to his very young companion who was trying to catch her breath.

"Yes," she panted.

"Indeed," Janeway replied with some amusement.

"This," he said to the small blonde, "is Captain Kathryn Janeway." He looked from the blonde to Sekaya, "I was just telling Lana that the great Q himself couldn't believe how a scrawny little bipedal specimen like Captain Janeway could refuse such a brilliant, handsome and dashing omnipotent entity like him."

Janeway caught the surprised look on Sekaya's face, and swallowed her laughter. She had forgotten how abrupt the Doctor appeared to the uninitiated.

"Thank you for the wonderful introduction, Doctor." Janeway responded. Her eyes twinkling, she smiled at the blonde. "Nice to meet you, Lana."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," the small blonde replied.

Janeway groaned internally. Ma'am or sir were titles she abhorred. Captain was her preferred salutation.

"Dr Zimmerman talks about you a lot. Don't you Joe?" Lana looked up at the Doctor in adoration.

"Is that so, Joe?" Janeway replied drawing out his name. "So you've taken a name, Doctor Zimmerman?" she added in a teasing tone.

"Yes," the Doctor replied, and to Janeway's surprise he shuffled his feet slightly.

"Nothing like taking the name of your creator, is there, Joe?" Janeway stated, enjoying the Doctor's sense of bashfulness for a moment.

The Doctor raised his brows. "In your case, Kathryn," he said dipping his head, "God doesn't quite have the same aesthetic ring as Captain Kathryn Janeway."

Sekaya chuckled.

Janeway smiled at her companion. "Doctor Zimmerman. Joe. You remember Sekaya?"

"Yes, the Doctor replied smiling at Sekaya. "Seven and Chakotay's ceremony was," he raised his chin, "very moving."

So moving, Janeway's inner voice quipped. You wouldn't get out of your bed for four days afterward.

Janeway shut the voice down.

"Sekaya bowed her head slightly. "Thank you, Joe." She looked at Lana and smiled warmly. "Nice to meet you."

Lana responded with a big toothy grin. "You too."

A group of people gathered a short distance from them. Lana turned around when they called out. "That's our friends, Joe. We'd better go."

"You run along, Lana. I'll catch up with you."

"Okay," she replied then winked. "We've got a big night ahead, Joe." She looked at the Captain and Sekaya. "Nice to meet you folks."

They both nodded in response.

The Doctor watched Lana for a moment then turned to Janeway and Sekaya. "She is the healthiest member of her species I have ever seen."

"But, she's human," Sekaya responded.

"Exactly," the Doctor replied.

Janeway chuckled. "Nice to see your humor is coming along, Doctor."

"Yes, now we are here on Earth, it's proving a valuable tool." He swept a finger over each eyebrow and jutted out his chin. "Lana still finds it hard to believe that I started life as a standard Emergency Medical Holoprogram."

Aware that some things never change, particularly the Doctor's ego, Janeway replied. "Good for Lana."

The Doctor looked at Janeway with great affection. "Was it not you, Kathryn, who encouraged me to utilize my sense of humor?"

"If I recall correctly," Janeway replied raising her brow. "It was Seven that I encouraged."

"Yes, well," the Doctor said. "I seem to recall that you and Seven were in sickbay at the time."

"Ah, I see." Janeway responded with a wry note. "You overheard?"

"Yes, of course, Kathryn." He frowned. "I'm a Doctor, not an eavesdropper."

Janeway placed a hand on his shoulder. "Well Doctor," she said warmly. "Whatever the circumstances, nice to know you took the advice to heart." She looked at Sekaya. "We have a light supper that's calling our name. It was nice seeing you again, Joe."

"Let's not leave it so long, Kathryn."

Janeway looked at the Doctor, understanding that he still needed her time, she replied, "I won't,"

she promised. "So long, Joe."

Heading for the restaurant, Sekaya said with a combined note of disbelief and amusement, "So that is the indefatigable doctor that my brother speaks about?"

"Yes," Janeway replied then smiled. "That *is* Dr. Joe Zimmerman."

The weather biting, they walked quickly to the restaurant. Sekaya raised an eyebrow. "I take it the crew enjoyed spending time with the Doctor."

"Some thought the brig preferable," Janeway replied.

Sekaya laughed. Slipping her hand through the arm of Janeway's coat, she asked gently, "Tell me about him."

"He's unique."

"Like you?" Sekaya replied.

"No. Not like me." Janeway frowned. "I am not unique."

"Well, let's see," Sekaya replied playfully. "What do I know about you? I know that you have studied chromolinguistics, American Sign Language and the gestural idioms of the Leyron." She smiled. "That's a plus given my heritage."

"Glad I did it now," Janeway said walking along.

"Me too," Sekaya replied. "Let me see. What else?" she said eyes twinkling. "You were a brilliant science officer before being promoted to captain. You helped Seven of Nine, an ex Borg drone, and now my sister-in-law, reclaim her individuality and humanity. You helped Dr. Joe Zimmerman through many difficulties, even advocating his status as a sentient, living being. You-"

Janeway held up her hand. "Enough," she said. "I can see you've done your homework."

"What is there not to know about you, Kathryn?" Sekaya replied, her dark eyes shone with unusual warmth. "You are without doubt the most famous Terran in the Alpha and possibly the Delta Quadrant. That is what makes you unique. But that is not what interests me." She eyed Janeway and added thoughtfully. "You are a warm, sensitive, and very beautiful woman who exudes an unmistakable sensuality."

Surprised, Janeway stopped dead and looked at the dark eyed woman.

Sekaya, smiled then nudged Janeway to move along. "You are a fascinating woman, Kathryn Janeway, and that's what interests me."

*Chapter 7*

"George, can you bring up the hammer." Janeway shouted down to the carpenter.

"Okay, give me a few minutes," he hollered up.

Sweat dripping down her brow, Janeway stopped and breathed in deeply. Wiping her face with the tail of her shirt, she took in the view. It had been three months since she had started working on the house. Advances in molecular manufacturing meant the production of ultra strong, ultra light building materials which facilitated rapid construction ensured that the tools that she was now utilizing died out in the early part of the 22nd century.

Janeway surveyed the site, and had to admit it was incredible how far she and George had come using simple traditionalist tools. The design of the house had been pretty straight forward in her mind, but since her mother had enlisted Seven's help, the house had taken on a life of its own. Somehow over the months, Janeway's strategy of removing herself from Seven's life tactically wasn't going as smoothly as anticipated.

Janeway thought that the new bride would, with the demands of a husband, job, and planning for a family, have very little time for her. She had hoped Seven's involvement was just an initial show of enthusiasm as Phoebe's had been, and would wane after the designs were drafted. But the opposite seemed to be in play. Seven was involved - very involved in every aspect of the materializing house. So much so, that George now instinctively looked to her for instruction.

It seemed that the ex Borg's precise vision, detailed instructions and her desire to honor the architectural character and heritage of the traditionalist way appealed not only to the carpenter, but to Janeway's immediate family.

It was becoming clear, as the weeks progressed, that Janeway was falling into the role of nothing more than a hired hand, but after seven years in command, the position suited her just fine.

The redhead tipped her Stetson and looked around her. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her shorts, and admired their work. She was pleased that the foundation was laid, the external and interior frameworks were up, and now they were working on the roof. As much as Janeway hated to admit it, her mother and Phoebe were correct. Seven's emerging vision was vastly superior to hers.

Reaching for some water, Janeway took a swig. Her eyes lighted when she saw Gretchen and Seven walk down the long path. She frowned when George dropped the hammer he was about to pass up to her and quickly walked out to meet them.

Janeway shook her head. It was clear she wasn't the only one smitten. A budding relationship was definitely happening between her mother and George. She smiled approvingly at her mother's appreciative look as George approached them.

Janeway's eyes absorbed Seven. The blonde looked divine out of her Starfleet uniform and in casual clothes. Her hair was hanging loose. She bit her bottom lip and watched Seven's hair wisp around her shoulders as she conversed with Gretchen.

Janeway swallowed, and tried to shake off the growing heat. She poured water over the back of her neck and rubbed it, then watched her mother and Seven approach. It was unexpected, how firmly a bond of friendship was forming between them. More and more, it appeared that Seven was adopting Gretchen's traditionalist lifestyle, particularly the cooking side. She thought back to a recent conversation with Phoebe, where they along with Seven had gone for a swim in the creek nearby.

\* \* \*

Janeway laughed as she pulled herself out of the cool water. Making her way to the picnic spread, she sat and rested on her hands. Letting her head fall back, she soaked up the hot sun, loving the feel of it on her skin.

Phoebe stretched out on the grass beside her. "Do you want any more?"

Janeway shook her head. "I couldn't eat another thing." She looked at her sister. "Thank you."

Phoebe shook her head. "Thank Seven."

Janeway turned her head and watched Seven pull out of the water. Her eyes feasted as the blonde walked towards them. Unable to help herself, she sucked in her breath, fully appreciating the skimpy outfit that Phoebe had replicated when Seven explained she hadn't known that their picnic involved swimming.

Janeway knew she should disapprove. But right now, every sinew was focused on not letting her tongue hang out at the sight of Seven in the smallest outfit possible.

Seven's combadge beeped. Quickly, she covered the ground and reached for it.

Watching Seven, Janeway's fingers tingled. Ignoring the sensation, she flexed them.

Raising her ocular implant Seven looked at her combadge then at Janeway. "It's Chakotay," she said, answering it.

Janeway watched her walk away.

"What do you think of Mom and George's romance?"

Kathryn forced herself to look out at the beautiful landscape. The creek tinkled in her ears. "I'm delighted for Mom, Phoebe," she responded. Eyes involuntarily drawn back to Seven, she noted that her hair was wet and slicked back, and how the water on her skin sparkled in the sun. Unable to take her eyes off the sleek figure, she added quietly, "I couldn't be happier for her."

"Do you miss Dad?"

Surprised at the question, Kathryn looked at her sister. Seeing the vulnerability in her eyes, she

whispered, "Yes."

"Do you think he's still with us?"

Kathryn's heart went out to Phoebe. She shrugged. Before her time in the Delta Quadrant, as a scientist, she was affixed to proof. After her tenure, and many profound experiences, she had come to realise that the more she thought she knew, the less she actually did. She offered the only answer she could. "I don't know, maybe." She smiled encouragingly. "I hope so."

Phoebe nodded. "Don't you think it's slightly odd that Seven doesn't discuss Chakotay much?"

"What do you mean?" Kathryn asked, her gaze returning to Seven.

Phoebe frowned. "I mean recently. Well, since you've started on the house. She doesn't talk about him much." She looked at Kathryn. "Maybe he's lost his shine."

Dragging her eyes from Seven, Kathryn focused on her sister. "Of course she talks about him."

"Whenever I ask after him, she usually gives cursory answers." Phoebe looked at Kathryn. "She spends a great deal of time here." She raised an eyebrow. "It doesn't seem that she wants to be around her new husband much." She shrugged. "Do you know that he is pushing for them to have a baby?"

Kathryn swallowed. She nodded.

Phoebe looked out across the creek. "I delivered a painting that Seven admired to their house, a few weeks ago. It was a gift." She shrugged. "No big deal." She frowned. "We hung it then she showed me round their place." She looked at Kathryn. "It's pretty top grade."

Kathryn nodded. "Starfleet is doing everything they can to keep Seven."

"Do you know that Chakotay has created a nursery?" she asked. "It's filled with baby things." She frowned. "And when Seven took me in there she seemed uncomfortable." She sighed. "Maybe she's not ready." She eyed Janeway. "Maybe she's waiting on a better offer."

Kathryn frowned. "Phoebe if Seven hasn't discussed it then neither should we." She eyed her sister. "Chakotay is a professor at the Daystrom Institute Archaeological Council. It is a prestigious post. He'll have to work extremely hard to prove himself. The first few terms in that kind of post are demanding, and it is expected that he will travel extensively."

Phoebe unclasped her hair and let it fall. She ran her hands through her shoulder length red hair. Kathryn was reminded of how much a woman her little sister truly had become.

"I see," Phoebe said unconvincingly. "Hubby's working away from home so much that of course Seven will want to spend all of her free time here." She eyed Kathryn. "with you."

Feeling uneasy at the direction of the conversation, Kathryn said slowly, "I don't think you should be focusing solely on Seven." Her eyes narrowed. "Since her split from Tom, B'Elanna also spends a lot of time here with Miral. They are great friends." She looked over at Seven, whose six foot frame sent thrills down her spine. "It is only natural that she would want to be," she tried to stop herself, "with her collective."

"With her collective," Phoebe said. She smiled wickedly. "Of course, she-"

Kathryn eyed her sister apprehensively and was surprised when she abruptly stopped. She watched Phoebe bite her bottom lip. Kathryn looked away and smiled inwardly, fully aware that her mother had warned her younger sister to stay out of her business.

Lying back, Kathryn closed her eyes.

After a few moments, Phoebe asked, "How's things going?"

Kathryn shrugged. "Not bad."

"How's things with Sekaya?"

Opening her eyes, Kathryn looked over at Phoebe, and frowned. "Why?"

Phoebe laughed. "I'm not prying." She held up her hands. "I'm interested that's all." She looked at Kathryn curiously. "Seriously, if I'm honest, I'm still coming to terms with the fact that you haven't had a sexual liaison in years."

Eyebrows shooting up, Kathryn eyed her sister. "How do you come to that conclusion?"

"No *big* reason," Phoebe's replied. Her eyebrow quirked and she drew in a breath. "Just a lot of little ones."

Kathryn frowned.

Phoebe shrugged then laughed. "Kathryn, I know you," she said as if she had the answer to every question. "You're a starship captain. Your first love is your ship." She looked at Seven who was deep in conversation. "Or it used to be."

Kathryn looked at her sharply. "What do you mean?"

Phoebe plucked out then chewed on a blade of grass. "Nothing," she responded. "Tell me. I really want to know how's it going with Sekaya?"

"We're friends, Pheeb," Kathryn replied frowning. "How do you expect it to be going?"

Chewing on the blade, Phoebe looked at Kathryn. "You don't look much like friends from where I'm sitting."

Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose. "Pick another view then."

"Does Seven know that she's interested in you?"

"There's nothing for Seven to know," Kathryn said her tone firm.

Phoebe laughed. "Katie you might be able to strike fear in everyone with that austere voice of yours, but not me."

Exasperated, Kathryn looked over and eyed her younger sister. "It has nothing to do with Seven."

Phoebe frowned. She looked at Kathryn as if her head had just flipped open and her brain had fallen out. "Really?"

Kathryn held her breath, and waited for her younger sister to continue. When Phoebe focused on Seven, Janeway felt anger stir within her. "Phoebe," she said sitting up. "I have a lot on my mind at the moment, and right now your innuendo is starting to grate on my nerves."

Phoebe pulled out more grass. "Okay, another change of subject. What are your plans once the house is complete?"

Kathryn folded her arms around her knees. "I'll return to duty."

"In what capacity?"

Kathryn chewed on her bottom lip. "Not sure." She looked at her sister. "Starfleet is pushing me to either accept an Admiralty or take command of the most technologically advanced ship designed for an extended mission."

"Deep space exploration?"

Kathryn nodded.

Phoebe let out a low whistle. "What a choice. What are you thinking?"

Kathryn looked up at the sky. "I'm not ready for an admin role." Her thoughts turned to Admiral Janeway and she grimaced. "Somehow, I don't think it will suit me."

"So, you'll be going out to deep space?"

Janeway placed a hand on her stomach, and felt it flutter, as she watched Seven. "Possibly."

"Does Seven know?"

Janeway rolled her eyes. "Phoebe," she said looking at the redhead. "No, she doesn't know, and

why the hell should she?" she added losing patience with her younger sibling.  
"I haven't made a decision about anything yet."

Phoebe stared at her sister. "Katie, I'm beginning to think you're losing your mind," she said. "Do you seriously think for one moment that you could take command of a ship and take it out to deep space without it having a serious, and I mean fucking serious impact on Seven?"

Janeway looked at her sister, and growled lightly. "I don't want to discuss this, Phoebe."

Phoebe bit her bottom lip. "I'm sorry, Kathryn. I can't keep quiet anymore." She looked at Seven. "It's her isn't it?"

"What?" Janeway asked sharply.

"It's Seven," Phoebe said nodding. "She's the one."

Picking up a glass of water, Janeway lifted it to her mouth. "What do you mean?" she asked before drinking from it.

"I mean you want her?"

Kathryn spat out the water. Agog, she stared at Phoebe.

"C'mon Katie. It's a good day for a confession," Phoebe said eyeing her sister. "You must be dying inside." She shook her head. "Tell me it's not true. Tell me you've had at least one fuck in the last eight years."

Dumbstruck, Kathryn stared at her younger sibling

"You haven't have you?" Phoebe looked at Seven. "Because the only person you want to do it with is her." She looked at Kathryn. "You want to hold those beautiful amazing breasts in your hands and fuck her senseless."

Stunned, Kathryn's mouth opened then closed then opened again.

"What?" Phoebe said. "You couldn't look more surprised if I'd just asked you to walk on water." She frowned. "Do you think I don't see the way you look at her?"

Dazed, Kathryn struggled to say something, but her throat closed up.

"Is it a slow burn, Kathryn?" Phoebe asked. "I know you're not the type to fall in love quickly." She looked Seven over. "I can see why she caught your attention."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Kathryn eventually managed.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." Phoebe shook her head. "Don't you want a little

more out of this life?"

Eyes narrowing to slits, Kathryn wiped her mouth. "Everyone wants a little more, Phoebe."

Phoebe studied her. "Don't you know that your life will forever be on hold if you leave?" She shook her head. "Lucky for you I've just come out of a messy relationship." She stood. "And I don't want to dangle my feet in another." She gathered her stuff. "So, it's whatever you say big sister." She looked over at Seven before pointedly looking at Kathryn. "But I tell you now. If you do choose to go, you'd better have a serious think about what you might be leaving behind."

\* \* \*

Brought back by the yapping of the red setter puppy, George had bought recently, Janeway decided to come off the roof, and greet the new arrivals, and the voraciously affectionate little pup that had wormed its way into her heart. As she moved toward the step ladder perched at the end of the framework, she caught her foot on the roof decking. Twisting to loosen her trapped boot, she lost her balance, and fell to the ground.

\* \* \*

Janeway opened her eyes. She was in her room in her mother's house, flat on her back. Seven stood over her, frowning.

"Seven," she whispered. "What happened?"

"You took a fall. Twenty-two feet to be exact," Gretchen said looking over Seven's shoulder. "Seven ran her medical tricorder over you." She smiled in relief. "Fortunately, she carries a compact medikit with her," Gretchen said. "And as good planning would have it, as well as a medical tricorder, her medikit has a hypospray, a dermal regenerator along with a trauma kit." She looked at Seven with pride. "Fortunately, a shot of cordrazine and a quick scan with the dermal regenerator has sorted you out." She smiled. "Thankfully, there will be no lasting damage."

"No broken bones?" Janeway asked.

"No, Kathryn," Seven replied.

Janeway smiled up at Seven, and watched the tension around the young woman's eyes fade.

"No broken bones, but you'll be stiff for the next few days if we don't do something about it," Gretchen said. She held out a small bottle to Seven. "I suggest you give her a much needed back rub to ensure there's no lasting aches or pains."

Frowning, Seven gingerly took the bottle and examined it.

Gretchen bent over Janeway. "Come with me, Kathryn. We need to remove a few items of clothing."

Confused, Janeway raised her brow. "But," she said standing slowly with the aid of her mother. Her back creaked as she straightened. "I'm fine."

"No arguments, Kathryn," Gretchen said taking her arm. "It may be old practice, but a good back rub is exactly what you need, and I don't have time. I'm preparing tonight's evening meal." She smiled mischievously at her daughter as she maneuvered her into the bathroom. "You always loved a back rub when you were little. So, I'm sure you'll forgive me."

\* \* \*

Seven opened the bottle of oil that Gretchen had given her, and holding it over Janeway's back, poured a generous amount down her spine. Placing the bottle on the bedside cabinet, she slowly climbed onto the bed and carefully positioned herself. Straddling Janeway's hips, she placed her hands close together at the base of Janeway's spine

"Seven," Janeway said over her shoulder. "You don't need to do this."

Ignoring her, Seven began stroking her back firmly and steadily.

To her dismay, Janeway nipples hardened immediately, and a strong visual image of Seven taking one of her fat ready nipples into her mouth and sucking on it filled her head. Janeway's groin tensed. Embarrassed, she coughed lightly then fidgeted.

"Remain still," Seven ordered.

To cover her discomfort Janeway said the first thing that came into her head, "How's Chakotay?"

Without pause, Seven ran her hands up Janeway's back, and replied as she distributed the pressure. "Chakotay is functioning within normal parameters."

Janeway's head snapped up. She threw Seven a sharp look over her shoulder.

Eyes sparkling, Seven nodded graciously. "He is fine, Kathryn."

Janeway lips twitched. Feeling her center of gravity return, she placed her head back on her hands and said sardonically, "Your humor is moving along remarkably fast these days."

Seven's strong fingers fanned out in a circular arc. "I have the Doctor to thank for that."

Desperate not to focus on those hands, Janeway asked throatily, "How so?"

"Lesson number six: Beguiling Banter."

Pressing her head into her hands, Janeway muffled her laughter.

Seven fingers embraced the side of Janeway's body, grazing slightly over the underside of her

breasts as they glided over her back in sensual strokes. Janeway trembled. Inflamed, she sucked in her breath. Trying not to lose control, she exhaled then whispered, "And you, Seven," she asked breathily. "How are you?"

Kneading the tight muscles around Janeway's shoulders, Seven applied pressure strokes. The feel of Seven's probing fingers as she steadily pummeled her flesh was driving Janeway crazy. Heart racing and desperate for distraction, she repeated, "You?" her voice high. She coughed to clear her throat. "How are you?"

"Kathryn," Seven said, her fingertips, thumb pads and heels digging deep into the tight tension spots. "In order to benefit from this, you must be quiet."

Suitably chastised, Janeway tried to concentrate on anything else but what Seven was doing to her,

After a few minutes of agonizing pleasure, Janeway bit into her hand when Seven's weight moved lower. Seconds later, she felt the cover slip down past the base of her spine, and felt hands feather over the fleshy area of her buttocks.

Janeway whispered, "Seven, stop. Please."

Seven paused then removed her hands from Janeway's backside. Carefully, she lifted her weight and moved off of Janeway. "I am sorry... Kathryn," she whispered with a note of bewilderment. Slowly she positioned herself mid-way down the bed.

Flustered, Janeway quickly rose and turning pulled the cover that she had been laying on with her. She looked at Seven. Her eyes widened when she saw how flushed and vulnerable the younger woman looked. Janeway's breath caught, she is so beautiful. A sudden urge to abandon every principle she had ever lived by and pull Seven into her arms, rode over her. Pull yourself together, soldier, she chastised.

Eyes down and head low, Seven whispered, "I apologize, Kathryn."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," Janeway responded clasping the cover to her breasts, and recognizing that there was no way that she could deny that what had just passed between them was anything but sexual, she sighed heavily. "I shouldn't have allowed this."

Confusion crossing her face, Seven bent her head further.

Aware that Seven had the sexual knowledge of tens of thousands of species, but in reality very limited experience, Janeway sat up. "Seven, its okay. I-"

Seven lifted her head and looked at Janeway. "You will remain my friend?" she asked a worried look crossing her face.

"Of course," Janeway replied. Hands gripping her cover, she added, "Of course, I'll remain your

friend. Why would you think otherwise?"

Seven responded immediately, "When you discovered that the Doctor was encouraging me to explore romantic relationships with lesson plans relating to human romance you distanced yourself from me," she stated, eyes wide. "And over the course of the last five years there have been instances when I have displeased you." She looked at Janeway intently. "And you have removed your friendship to some degree."

Janeway was astounded. Was that how Seven saw it? That their friendship was a bargaining tool to be manipulated whenever Seven displeased her in some way? There was no doubt that there had been several incidents where she was forced to back off from Seven in order to hide her feelings. Oh God, how young, Janeway thought. How young and naïve she truly is!

Wanting to comfort her, Janeway reached out and took Seven's chin gently in the palm of her hand. "Seven," she whispered. "Please understand that your friendship is very important to me." The most important thing in the universe in fact, her inner voice chirped. "And under no circumstances will I ever allow anything to jeopardize it."

Seven pulled her chin out of Janeway's hand. "I am unsure," she responded, face downcast.

Aware that Seven was feeling vulnerable and wanting to reach out and connect with her, Janeway whispered, "Please believe me, Seven...Annika."

Seven drew in her breath, and looked at Janeway in surprise.

"Your friendship is invaluable to me," Janeway said, injecting every ounce of sincerity she could. She clasped the cover firmly, and slid across the bed toward the ex Borg. "It will never be threatened," she said reaching her. "And I-" Janeway stopped when Seven looked at her sharply. Befuddled, she frowned when Seven's nostrils flared.

Seven breathed in deeply. She looked at Janeway. "You are aroused."

Eyes widening, Janeway picked up on the faint scent of her arousal. Horrified, that her excitement was so evident, and aware that Seven's Borg enhanced olfactory senses had picked up on it easily, Janeway quickly drew her thighs together. Dumbstruck, she paled, opening her mouth only to close it slowly as pale blue eyes appraised her.

"Your skin temperature has increased as has your respiratory rhythm." The blonde said, studying Janeway closely. Moving her face to within a few inches of hers, Seven's eyes widened with interest. "And the blood flow to your ear lobes and lips has also increased."

Swallowing hard, Janeway closed her eyes briefly, and hoped that by some miracle the ground would open up and swallow her. Aware that the younger woman was waiting for an explanation, she blushed deeply.

Blinking several times, Janeway moved her head back, and tried to remember how the hell she

gotten into this situation. Hot damn, her inner voice quipped. Does it matter?

Janeway bit down on her bottom lip. Not sure how appropriate this conversation was, but aware that the Seven was no longer under her command and carried the full status of friend, she cleared her throat then swallowed hard. She said slowly, "Seven." Her mind blanked. "Seven...I." She struggled for some sort of explanation. "Seven, she murmured, "It has been a long time."

"Explain?" Seven requested in her no-need-to-embellish way.

Fully aware that Seven was confused, and that it was necessary to share this, Janeway pinched her nose and thought that, right now, she would gladly trade another seven years in the Delta Quadrant for the klaxon sound of a red alert.

Leaning back slightly, Janeway gripped the cover to her breasts. "Seven what I mean is," her hand clasped then unclasped the cover, and her pulse began to throb in her neck. When Seven cocked her head and observed her, Janeway's blush deepened. "What I mean is that during my time in the Delta Quadrant," she closed her eyes. You fool, she told herself. How the hell did you let this happen? "I can't," she whispered. Opening her eyes, she made to slip off the bed.

"Kathryn," Seven said grasping Janeway's arm, stopping her. "Please."

Hesitating, Janeway looked into Seven's eyes then crumbled. "Seven, what is it that you want to know?"

Seven eyes widened. "I am uncertain," she responded looking at Janeway with confusion. "At first," she stated, "all I wished to do when I touched you was to provide some relief for your discomfort and relax you as Gretchen had instructed." Her eyes completely expressive, implored Janeway. "However, as I stimulated your skin," she frowned slightly. "I too became stimulated and there was a growing need," she pressed her Borg hand to her lower abdomen, "to provide pleasure." She looked at Janeway. "But, I am unsure," she added guiltily, "what type of pleasure I wished to provide?"

Let me help you, baby, Janeway inner voice piped up, wonderful, beautiful, magical pleasure is what you wanted to provide. A strong visual image of Seven bucking underneath her forced Janeway to close her eyes briefly and dislodge the very inappropriate image from her mind. Disturbed by the images, and feeling the beginnings of a headache, Janeway rubbed her forehead.

"Kathryn, are you all right?" Seven asked still holding her arm.

"Yes," Janeway replied trying to keep the tremor from her voice.

Dropping the hand that held Janeway's arm along with a bombshell question, Seven asked, "Did you engage in sexual activity with Michael Sullivan?"

Stunned, Janeway stared at Seven then reflexively shook her head. "No," she replied slowly,

wondering how long that had been a burning question. "It never progressed that far."

Intrigue crossed Seven's face. "Clarify?"

Janeway's eyes widened. C'mon Katie! Her inner voice quipped. You've faced off every known threat there was in the Delta Quadrant to get your crew home. How difficult can this be?

"We did not..." Janeway's voice drifted off. Prude, her inner voice called out. C'mon tell her the truth. "We never made love," she finished quickly.

Seven's head snapped back. She looked at Janeway in astonishment. She raised her ocular implant. "That must have been difficult, Kathryn." Her eyes widened. "It has come to my attention that when one becomes an established human adult and engages in sexual activity then it is often such a pleasurable liaison that one will pursue it even if a romantic relationship or need for procreation does not necessarily follow."

Janeway fought the urge to ask, and in your case, Seven? Is it so pleasurable for you? Her heart clenched as it always did at the idea of Seven sharing anything intimate with Chakotay. Not wanting to think about it, she focused her mind on what type of conversations Seven had been engaging in recently, and more importantly with whom.

Seven confirmed the source. "B'Elanna," she stated matter-of-factly, "has confided on several occasions that she does not know how you continue to keep your sexual liaisons so discreet."

B'Elanna! Janeway frowned disapprovingly. Since splitting with Tom, B'Elanna had dated several times. Janeway was fully aware of how devastated her ex chief engineer was when she and Tom separated, and there was no doubt in her mind that, right now, whatever sexual activity B'Elanna was engaging in, it was clear that Seven was being kept fully up-to-date.

Appearing to warm to the subject, Seven continued, "In fact, she herself has stated on more than one occasion that she would like as she says to take a leaf from your book," Seven's blue eyes lighted with inquisitiveness. "Except of course the time you spent with the hologram Sullivan." Seven lowered her eyes. "B'Elanna thought that was a lack of discretion on your part."

"Is that a fact," Janeway replied. She gritted teeth. Desperately wanting to drop the whole subject, but knowing that Seven needed to hear this, she swallowed then closing her eyes briefly said with forced patience, "It isn't that I have been discreet," she sucked in air. "It is in fact that I..." Feeling extremely uncomfortable and losing her nerve, Janeway looked away. Deciding that the best course of action was to be truthful but to keep the conversation as short as possible, she finished, "Is it enough for now to tell you that for me it is never just about sex. There must always be," Janeway's voice rose an octave when Seven moved her head closer and studied her face intently, "a strong emotional connection."

Eyes wide with new understanding, Seven nodded. Drawing back, she looked at Janeway. "And for the seven years in the Delta Quadrant?"

Janeway smiled faintly, and wondered if it was possible to be this exposed and miserable at the same time. "And for those seven years," she eventually offered with all seriousness, "my command was my only focus."

Seven pushed. "And since your return to Earth?"

Janeway realized, gloomily, that yes it was possible to be this exposed and miserable at the same time. She looked at the bedroom door, and wondered fleetingly if she would be able to make it out the door faster than Seven could bring her down.

"Kathryn?" Seven said expectantly.

Looking at the younger woman, Janeway realized that Seven was obviously having these type of conversations with B'Elanna, and would expect the same from her other 'close' friend. She chastised herself for ever placing herself in that category. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head, then exhaled and whispered, "No one."

Eyes wide with this revelation, Seven stared at Janeway. "Captain Janeway," she said using a formality that she slipped into on occasion, "B'Elanna will indeed be surprised to discover that you have not engaged in any sexual activity over the last eight years." Straight-backed, she gave Janeway a look that could only be described as smug. "And I will take great pleasure in informing her that not all women as she states colloquially need a good f--"

"Seven!" Janeway spluttered. Looking at the ex Borg with new eyes, she was suddenly aware that Seven's transition back to humanity was happening much faster than she realized. Reaching out, she grabbed the younger woman's arm and fought the urge to forbid her from discussing this with anyone. "I would appreciate," she said carefully, "that this and all other conversations we share are kept private." Seven looked crestfallen. "B'Elanna," Janeway added, "is not known for her tact." She patted Seven's arm and finished furtively, "as you are."

"Indeed," Seven remarked. A pleased look crossed her face. She nodded. "I concur." Her eyes took on an introspective look. "It is certainly a pastime of B'Elanna Torres to discuss intimate details of not only her own personal life, but that of close associates, and friends."

Seven cocked her head as if understanding for the first time that B'Elanna's need to gossip meant that her own life would also be exposed and up for discussion. "In fact," she elaborated her brow furrowing, "she has a tendency to speak openly and pass comment on each individual she encounters."

I bet she does, Janeway thought, then blushed at the field day B'Elanna would have at the encounter that she had just shared with Seven.

Seven looked at Janeway curiously. "B'Elanna has more than once mentioned that she considers that you would indeed be a formidable lover."

Knowing exactly why B'Elanna thought that, Janeway sighed. She ran a hand through her dark

red hair then pinched her nose. She thought back to the Fair Haven holodeck program, where she had altered Tom Paris's holocharacter Michael Sullivan from a simple, married man to an extremely virile, well-endowed and unattached man. Her lips twitched at how well-endowed. She had always suspected that Tom had shared with B'Elanna - and given her need to gossip - the entire ship, that when he accessed the Fair Haven program to repair it after a storm, he discovered that it wasn't only the intellectual abilities of Michael's matrix that were upgraded.

Janeway exhaled. Although she had never engaged in anything other than the romance of the relationship, she never quashed the rumors that Voyager's captain had been involved in an intense sexual relationship. She more than anyone understood the saying "as goes the captain so goes the ship". The gossip regarding her sexual prowess only seemed to enhance her status among the crew.

Janeway frowned, aware that no matter how hard she tried to convince herself to sleep with Michael, her intellectual barometer couldn't get over the 'small' fact that he was made of photons and force fields and could be altered at her whim. She remembered when she confessed to the Doctor that she had become romantically involved, and the response she gave him when he asked what had happened. "Oh you know the story, girl meets boy. Girl modifies boy's sub-routines." What she didn't tell him was that in the end, the only thing she allowed herself to indulge in was the simple pleasure of being 'romanced'.

"Kathryn, what would lead B'Elanna to think that you were sexually active with Jaffen also?"

Janeway inhaled deeply then rubbed her forehead. "Just a simple misunderstanding."

"Kathryn," Seven said hesitating for a moment. "What happened just now between us is-"

"A physical response," Janeway interrupted.

Seven looked at her for a long moment.

"It was just a physical response, Seven. Nothing more."

"Because you have not," Seven struggled, "had physical contact for such an extended period of time."

"Exactly," Janeway replied huskily. "I don't need give you a physiology lesson, I'm sure," she said her voice suddenly clear and firm. "But the short of it is that it is perfectly normal for that kind of touch to evoke," she swallowed, "that kind of reaction."

Janeway knew her explanation was pushing it to the extreme, but what else could she do? Regardless of what she felt for Seven, even if she was racked and stretched, she would never admit her attraction - her love - to this woman.

"Oh," Seven responded with what seemed a note of disappointment.

Relieved that Seven seemed to be sold on her rationale, Janeway's next step was closure. "Seven, can we hold off discussing this until later? I'd like to get dressed." She stood and careful to ensure that the cover revealed nothing, wrapped it tightly. "That is, if you need to discuss it later?" She looked pointedly at the blonde making it clear that for her the matter was closed.

Seven looked at her steadily. Janeway could see that she was uncertain how to interpret their interaction. She watched Seven's mind turn over the logic of her argument that anyone would respond in that way to that type of physical contact, if they hadn't been touched in a long time. It was perfectly plausible that Janeway's reaction was, as she had said, nothing more than a physiological response. Just as well, the subtleties of lying were irrelevant to the Borg, Janeway thought, or she would be in deep trouble.

Seven whispered. "Of course." She stood and with a note of vulnerability added, "If you do not need me, I shall assist Gretchen with preparing the evening meal."

"Good idea," Janeway replied with forced lightness, knowing that her mother always encouraged Seven to dine with them when Chakotay was traveling. "She always loves it when you help her."

Seven nodded then quickly exited the room.

Alone, Janeway flopped on the bed. Hands covering her face, she whispered, "What have you done?" She had expected that by building a home, it would force her to separate from Seven, but instead, it was bringing them closer together.

Her body on fire and unable to focus, Janeway rolled off the bed and headed for the bathroom. There she reached into a cabinet and removed a neural blocker.

The outpouring of love and desire from Janeway the day that Seven swept on to the bridge, and took her position at the console, had never dulled, never diminished. From that day onward, Janeway was incapable of putting back what had been released. She had obviously coped before by never facing her true feelings. Instead she had used her command training and her fear, the same deep fear that had eventually forced her out of her bed after Justin and her father had died. But now even her command training and fear could not be relied on. In order to control her spiraling desire around the younger woman, Janeway was forced to use a neural blocker when her need for the ex Borg grew too strong.

Filling the hypospray, Janeway placed it against her neck. Pressing it into her skin, she looked at her reflection. How long, she thought wearily. How long am I going to have to continue with this?

Feeling a slight buzz from the neural blocker then the familiar dulling of her arousal, Janeway stepped into the shower in preparation for the evening ahead.

### ***Chapter 8***

"Thank you for inviting me this weekend," Janeway said reaching for her wine glass.

"Accompanying you to your ancestral home has been nothing short of spectacular, Sekaya."

Lifting her glass of chilled water, Sekaya smiled. "You're more than welcome, Kathryn," she said. Sipping her water, she looked at Janeway. "What have you enjoyed?"

"Everything." Janeway said. "This trip to central America will stay with me for a long time to come." She sipped her wine. "Hiking in the Yucatán jungle yesterday was worth the trip alone. But cave-diving today, was nothing short of exceptional."

Janeway thought back to how much she had enjoyed this weekend. The highlight was when Sekaya arranged for them to go cave-diving. The Yucatán Peninsula is Earth's best cave-diving area. Resting entirely on limestone, the porous stone sucks up water like a sponge.

Before the dive, Sekaya explained to Janeway the significance of the caves. That the Maya, who inhabited the land for thousands of years, believed these openings to be the gateways to the underworld, and where the spirit beings dwelled. Shamans in the past explored the caves and underground rivers, but over time they had filled with water. As they prepared to dive, she told Janeway that they would find remnants of their drawings on the walls, as well as offerings of precious stones, animal and human bones in the caves.

Janeway loved diving, particularly cave-diving, and had done so frequently on Mars. Cave-diving was different from open water diving. In the ocean, you could always come up if there's a problem. In caves you couldn't. Usually, there was only one way in and one way out, and for that reason, the diver depended heavily and was required to trust fully their guide.

Sekaya, as it turned out, was a fantastic guide. She was familiar with the caves and laid down some of the lines with the directional markers that would guide them out.

Sitting at the kitchen counter, watching Sekaya cook, Janeway still found it difficult to put into words the experience this morning; overwhelming and breathtaking didn't adequately describe it. Swimming through the caves there were stalactites, stalagmites, soda straws, bacon strips, and columns both massive and tiny. Eventually, they came to a place where the salt water mixed with the freshwater created a fog light effect. It was there that Janeway could see why, with such a trance-inducing place, the Maya believed their gods lived there.

Drinking her wine, Janeway smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed herself so much or felt so exhilarated. Diving, today, was exactly what she had needed. The sense of awe in the magical aquatic world was so overwhelming. At some points she had almost forgotten to breathe. Feeling completely relaxed, and wanting to explore Sekaya's culture a little more, she said, "Once, Chakotay took me on a vision quest to help Voyager out of danger."

Preparing their evening meal, Sekaya looked sharply at Janeway then frowned. "Did he cut you to induce the vision?"

Janeway looked at her in surprise. "No, he used an akoonah to induce the vision."

Sekaya's brow rose. "He was being gentle."

Tonight, Sekaya had promised to cook a traditional meal known as pepian; a thick, spicy soup with tomatoes, onions, chilies, and ground pumpkin seeds. Tortillas and black beans were also being served with the meal.

"How so?" Janeway asked popping a black bean into her mouth.

"Usually, our people achieve visionary state through the practice of bloodletting. After fasting, we cut ourselves. Sometimes we pierce our tongues or," Sekaya said looking at Janeway, "our genitals."

Janeway choked on the bean.

"Are you all right?"

Janeway nodded. Swallowing, she picked up her glass, and gulped some wine. "Yes," she replied hoarsely. "I didn't realize bloodletting was still part of your tradition."

Sekaya nodded. "We bleed into a ceremonial bowl. Then let the blood burn, allowing the vision serpent to appear in the smoke. "

Coughing lightly, Janeway nodded. "I see."

"We believe," Sekaya said amusement crossing her eyes as she quirked an eyebrow. "That our gods gave their own blood during creation. As such, the favor must be returned."

"Indeed," Janeway replied draining her glass.

"Does it come as a shock?"

Janeway shook her head. "No, of course not," she replied. She was fully aware that although the Maya were remembered for their spiritual practice of human sacrifice and bloodletting, they were also a civilization who discovered the mathematical concept of zero, and whose astronomers mapped the heavens with pinpoint accuracy, more than fifteen hundred years ago.

Sekaya grinned.

Deciding to say what was on her mind Janeway refilled her glass and looked at Sekaya. She smiled wickedly. "Although I have to admit, I wonder what my reaction would have been if, during the ceremony, my first officer said he required a little of my blood and asked that I drop my pants."

Sekaya laughed. "I'm sure you would have allowed protocol to guide you, Kathryn."

Janeway looked at Sekaya in surprise, understanding that although they had only known each other for some months, already this woman had great insight into her. She swirled the wine in

her glass contemplatively unsure of how she felt about sharing personal time with someone who, given her teachings, had cultivated skills well beyond her grasp. "Somehow," she said. "I think I should have remembered that bloodletting was still part of your culture."

Sekaya smiled. "Don't be surprised. As you know Native Americans encompass several hundred distinct cultures as different from each other as the Spanish, Germans or the English were of old. It is difficult to know each culture. I still can't believe that so many diverse cultures agreed to settle on Dorvan V," Pride crossing her eyes, she shrugged then looked at Janeway. "But they did."

Although educated as a scientist, Janeway was first and foremost a Starfleet command officer trained for battle. She knew that if it hadn't been for her time in the Delta Quadrant, where she was in contact with diverse and often sensitive cultures, she would never truly see or understand the depth or complexity of the woman who stood before her. She realized that it was only her long tenure that allowed her to truly comprehend individuals like Sekaya. "Yes, they did," she responded raising her glass. "And here you are."

Sekaya nodded and toasting Janeway's glass with her own looked into her eyes. "Yes, here I am."

Over the last five months, Janeway had devoted much of her time to building the house, and during that time, Sekaya had continued to work at Starfleet Headquarters. The ship nearing completion, Admiral Paris was now putting her under pressure to accept the command position aboard the USS Titan. The geographic proximity of Sekaya at Starfleet Headquarters meant they met up often, usually indulging in theater with evening meals. Although, Janeway was fully aware of what Sekaya wanted, the younger woman had never pushed, and for that she was grateful. This was the first time they had spent a few days together.

Janeway watched Sekaya's long, elegant fingers roll out the tortillas flats. Heat shot straight to her crotch. Unable to help herself, she wondered what the younger woman's touch would feel like against her naked skin. Sipping her wine, Janeway pushed the image out of her mind. There was no denying, even to herself now, that she was seriously attracted to Sekaya, and increasingly so. Who wouldn't be, her inner voice whispered as she watched Sekaya place the bread on a side plate, she was stunning.

But Janeway was hesitant. Right now, she didn't think she was ready to engage in anything more than a friendship. However, since her encounter with Seven, her sexual energy was off the grid. Unfortunately, the neural blocker was not designed to eliminate arousal as endorphins released into the system had to dissipate and be re-absorbed naturally.

This meant that her arousal was only ever dampened or more accurately delayed. The side effect, if it wasn't handled carefully, Janeway was warned by the Doctor when she requested the treatment aboard Voyager would be profound. Sexual attraction, he told her, was caused by the release of dopamine, norepineprine and phenylethylamine. Working in unison the three endorphins created a feeling of euphoria when aroused. If blocked for any length of time the outcome would result in an increasingly insatiable sexual appetite along with an increase in anxiety.

Janeway remembered the Doctor jutting his chin, and raising his brow when he told her that rubbing the ears of a Ferengi would begin to appeal to her if she didn't ensure some form of release soon after using the neural blocker. Fortunately, he had affirmed, release didn't always need be of a sexual nature. He explained that the tension and anxieties of getting the ship and crew home, along with the rigorous exercise regime she maintained and some self induced relief would sufficiently substitute.

Janeway recalled halting the conversation, when the Doctor picked up a PADD and ran through the inventory of the ship's extra curricular accouterments, showing her a display of 'gratification aids' that would sufficiently service her needs.

Janeway's attention was brought back when Sekaya's pink tongue peaked out as she focused on plating up the dish. Her inner voice quipped, but you're not on the ship now, are you? It almost drawled with a note of delight. It's clear from the signals that Sekaya is sending you she wants to take your friendship to a different level. Janeway almost grimaced, as she tried to push her inner voice away. No ship, no crew means no distractions, means no outlet, her inner voice continued. You're using the neural blocker too often. Now indulge before you explode.

A hot wave of desire rushed through Janeway. Burning up, she acknowledged finally that she wanted nothing more than to escalate their friendship into a sexual one, but she was uncertain. What would it mean? Her feelings for Seven were still so convoluted and so very much alive. To lead this woman on or to expect her to standby as she worked through her emotions was too much to ask, surely?

Holding two plates, Sekaya looked at Janeway and smiled. "I'm famished, let's eat."

Regardless, Janeway told herself as she picked up the side plates and made her way to the dining table, tonight she would rein in this increasingly explosive and exponential sexual desire. She smiled, aware that she was more than capable of doing so. She had packed a hypospray with at least six shots of neural blocker.

Settling on the sofa, after dinner, Sekaya turned toward Janeway and resting her silky, naked head on her palm said, "Tell me about your relationships, Kathryn?"

Janeway raised her brow, and wondered if, from the look in Sekaya's eyes, she should make her excuses and get the neural blocker right now. She resisted. The after-effects tended to leave her in a slight stupor. Aboard Voyager, she had always been careful when she used it. Only in her quarters when it was an absolute must. She smiled faintly as she recalled Seven's deep concern when she made an excuse to retire early, blaming her lethargy on the fall.

"I want to know everything about you, Kathryn Janeway."

Sekaya's sensual tone headed straight to Janeway's mid-section. She breathed in deeply when her nipples hardened. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, she began to formulate an excuse for an early night, as she had the previous evening.

"

"Tell me," Sekaya whispered.

Feeling an overwhelming surge of wetness flow from between her thighs, Janeway spoke quickly. "Prior to the Delta Quadrant, I was involved, engaged, actually, to Mark Johnson." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "But he married a co-worker." She looked at Sekaya. "Who could blame him," Stiffly, she reached for her coffee cup. "There was a high probability that he would never see me again."

"How did you feel when you discovered he had married?"

Her nipples taunt, Janeway stopped herself from gripping the cup. She drank her coffee slowly. Focus, she told herself. "Surprisingly, not that bad," she replied. Uncomfortable with the increasing moisture, she crossed her legs. "I think deep down I've always known that our relationship veered more towards friendship than," she hesitated, "passion." Her color deepened as she revealed. "Hobbes always needed companionship. For that reason, I wasn't surprised at all."

"You forgave him?"

Janeway didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"I was deeply in love once," Sekaya told Janeway. "To Astall. She belonged to the Haunni."

Janeway nodded, that much she did know.

"We were married."

Janeway looked at her in surprise. That she didn't.

"We wanted to keep the marriage as low key as possible. Inter-species coupling can be difficult." She frowned. "And it was made all the more difficult because of the sensitivity of her species and the spirituality of mine." She looked at Janeway. "We wanted to give the marriage a chance, but it was difficult." She smiled. "However, no matter what the difficulties, it was love and there was absolutely nothing we could do about it."

"What happened?"

"She was killed." Sekaya said, her eyes darkening. "We agreed that she would stay close to me. She didn't want to leave Starfleet, and I needed to be on Dorvan V. She was a soldier, admin didn't suit her. The only work available at the rank of lieutenant was commanding a crew to clear gravitic mines in the Beloti Sector in the DMZ."

Gaining more control over her libido, Janeway reached out for Sekaya's hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry," she said knowing only too well how many lives had been taken clearing the mines left from years of terrorist attacks between the Cardassian and Federation colonists in the

Demilitarized Zone.

"Thank you, Kathryn." Sekaya replied. "It has been a long time, years in fact, since I've felt even remotely interested in having another relationship." She looked at Janeway intently then bit her bottom lip. "That is it until now."

Janeway caught her breath. The look of smoldering need in Sekaya's eyes, she was sure could melt the hull of any Starfleet ship. She cleared her throat. Her nipples were starting to hurt. Wanting to end the evening quickly, she changed the subject to something neutral. "I'm interested in your tattoos. They are so different from Chakotay's. Tell me about them."

Sekaya lifted her glass of chilled water then focused on Janeway for a long moment, as if deciding whether or not to tell her.

As Janeway sipped her coffee, she realized that it might be forbidden for Sekaya to share this information. Waiting for a response, she noted not for the first time, the younger woman's shapely eyebrows and lengthy dark eyelashes. She briefly wondered what Sekaya would look like if her hair follicles were stimulated and allowed to grow. She envisaged a long, flowing dark mane. Janeway raised her brow and smiled inwardly, suddenly aware that Sekaya was such a beautiful woman, it made no difference.

"As a Shaman, I am a healer, a curandero," Sekaya finally said. She sipped some water. "And, as you know, I practice with herbal medicine. But I also need powers to bargain with the unknown forces that govern human destiny." She paused and watched Janeway's reaction.

Janeway schooled her features, to show an impartial standpoint.

"As a K'ulahaw, a divine leader," Sekaya continued. "I am able to travel between the material and spiritual worlds by opening a portal using the itz of the sky." She put her glass down on the low table in front of them. "The tattoos on each temple," she said touching the side of her head, "are the paws of a huddling jaguar ready to pounce. My back carries its head and body, and my hips its hind legs."

Janeway's eyes widened at the strong visual image of a huddling, sleek black cat.

"This allows me to transform into an anthropomorphic jaguar and travel between the worlds."

"I see." Janeway said recognizing the design on Sekaya's temples clearly now as intricate paws. "Was it painful?"

"Very," Sekaya said. Leaning closer to Janeway, she added, "As a Shaman, I must endure the traditional methods with no anesthesia. The tauter outlines the design with ink then scratches the images into the skin."

"Janeway tried not to wince. "You must have suffered a great deal of pain."

Sekaya nodded. "I was chosen as a Shaman young. The selected artists were extremely skillful, but they used pointed rocks and turtle bones to create the designs. Because there was such intricacy and much pain, the work was done little by little. It was difficult. My body is carved liberally and symbolically, and it took many days and nights." She closed her eyes briefly. "In the heat and with the pain, it is inevitable that one will become sick as the work starts to fester, but to complain even a little would be seen as a sign of weakness."

Janeway's eyes shone with deep respect. She was in awe of the amazing courage it must have taken a very young Sekaya to withstand the onslaught of constant pain for days, and not make a sound even through her sickness. She recalled Chakotay telling her aboard Voyager that the gutsier a tribal member is when receiving their tattoos, the stronger their spirit is considered to be. He also confided over one of their regular evening meals, that when getting his tribal tattoo, had the tauter not stopped when he did, he would have cried out as he could no longer cope with the pain.

Surprised at her own inquisitiveness, Janeway ventured. "What other symbolic tattoos do you have?"

"A serpent."

Intrigued, Janeway looked at the dark eyed woman.

"Its tail circles my left breast, and its head descends and feeds in my genitals."

"Oh," Janeway responded then swallowed.

Holding Janeway's gaze, Sekaya added, "In search of rain water and new life."

Janeway's groin clenched almost painfully at the sensual image of this beautiful woman in bed, naked, with the full symbolism of her tattoos revealed.

Seduction hanging heavily in the air, Janeway closed her eyes and wondered what the hell to say or do next. I wonder if she's bald everywhere, her inner voice queried. Quickly, Janeway strangled her little voice before it drew a conclusion.

"Kathryn," Sekaya whispered.

Her breathing shallow, Janeway opened her eyes. Her desire going into over-drive she tried to rein it in by asking Sekaya a question that would bring her past into the present. "Have you had lovers since Astall?"

"Yes," Sekaya responded. Looking at Janeway, deep pain showed in her eyes. "But I am a woman, with sexual desires that need satisfying." She studied Janeway for a moment then frowned. "Is it not so for you?"

Good God, am I the only person I know who's having a little bit of trouble with celibacy?

Janeway thought.

A light of understanding registered in Sekaya's eyes as she searched Janeway's face.

Suddenly flushed, but refusing not to meet Sekaya's gaze, Janeway said in way of explanation, "I had Voyager and the crew to think about."

"I see," Sekaya said quietly. Eyes shining with a new brightness, she looked at Janeway. "And now?" she asked gently, folding red hair behind Janeway's ear.

"Now?" Janeway replied hoarsely. She cleared her throat. "Now, I don't have a ship or crew to think about." She cringed, and hoped that it wasn't too apparent that she wanted to tear the clothes from Sekaya and taste every inch of that wonderful symbolic body of hers.

Sekaya smiled. "Good." She leaned in and kissed Janeway on the lips. "That is wonderful news," she whispered. She brushed her lips lightly against Janeway's. "I've wanted to kiss you for such a long time now," she said breathing into Janeway's mouth. "I've wanted you since I first saw you." She ran her tongue along the redhead's bottom lip. "Yesterday," she added. "When I took you to the Temple of Kulkulkan for the gathering of the spring equinox, I would have taken you on the steps of the temple if it hadn't been for the crowd."

Janeway groaned. Her mouth electrified, she pulsed everywhere. A deluge of emotions swept through her when Sekaya deepened the kiss. Frightened that she would unhinge and lose complete control, she pulled back. "Sekaya," she said thickly. "Please enough." She breathed in deeply. "Right now, I don't know what I can give you."

Sekaya looked at Janeway with a mixture of hunger and tenderness. "I'm not asking for anything other than to spend time with you. I don't want to own you, Kathryn." She lifted her brow. "Nothing is truly owned except the courage and conviction of one's heart." She half-smiled, and placing a hand seductively over Janeway's left breast added, "Listen to your heart, Kathryn."

Janeway shook her head. "It has been a long time." she replied. Removing Sekaya's hand, she stood. Her knees wobbled. Placing a hand on her abdomen, she steadied herself. "And right now, I feel like some gauche cadet." She frowned. "I lack practice." She closed her eyes briefly. "Serious practice," she whispered.

With resolve, Janeway turned toward the door that would lead to her room, and the neural blocker. "Particularly with women," she said moving toward the door. "I have no experience with women."

Sekaya stood. Moving gracefully, she stopped Janeway as the doors slid open to her room. "For that I am grateful, Kathryn." Taking Janeway's hand, she led her into her own bedroom. "Very grateful."

### ***Chapter 9***

"Katie, I'm not arguing with you anymore." Gretchen said. "I'm tired of trying to convince you that you're making the wrong decision." She shook her head. "I just wish that you would accept

the Admiralty. At least that would mean you were here."

"Mom," Janeway said putting down her tools after fixing the corn planter. "I don't want to argue either." She grabbed a rag cloth and cleaned off the oil from her hands. "But I've accepted the position." She looked at her mother. "I'm going."

Gretchen held out her hands. "Katie, is there nothing I can say to change your mind?"

"It's where I belong, Mom."

"This is where you belong," Gretchen said coming closer. "I can't understand why you want to go back to an uncharted part of the galaxy. Not knowing what dangers you're going to face, and for God knows how long."

Janeway teased. "To seek out new worlds and explore space. Boldly go etcetera," she smiled. "You know the rest."

"Stubborn." Gretchen shook her head. "Just like your father." She looked at her daughter intently. "After seven years in the wilderness, who in their right mind would choose to go back?"

"Mom, the ship is a starship captain's dream. It's a wonderful opportunity."

Gretchen shook her head. "That's not why, Katie. I know you."

Yes you do, Janeway thought. Relinquishing, she gave her mother some of the truth. "I am the most experienced captain Starfleet has for this type of mission. The Dominion War has-

Her mother interrupted. "I know," she said with a note of pain, "wiped out so many." She frowned. "Starfleet has been putting pressure on you?" Her eyes narrowed. "Owen Paris has been putting pressure on you."

"I know what it's like out there." Janeway shrugged. "Who else would they send?"

"Someone else," Gretchen said. "Anyone else, but you." Reaching out, she squeezed Janeway's shoulder. "I couldn't bear it if you didn't come back, Katie." Her tone pleading, she added, "Don't put me through this a second time."

"I don't intend to get the crew or ship stranded this time, Mom."  
Gretchen shook her head. "You can't predict anything in un-chartered space."

"Wormholes, spacial rifts, new technologies," Janeway offered to ease the worry in her mother's eyes. "If it comes to it, I'll find a way back, even if I have to get out and push."

Gretchen smiled a little then looked at her daughter. "This time around, you could have chosen to settle down, Katie."

Janeway blew out her breath.

"Does Seven know?"

Nodding, Janeway thought back to the last time she had seen Seven. Three weeks ago, to celebrate the completion of the house, she had thrown a party and many of her ex-crew from Voyager were among the guests. The party was trailing off when Chakotay approached to tell her that he couldn't locate Seven. After checking that she hadn't taken a shuttle or transported out, they cleared the house of the last of the guests, and split up to search the grounds and surrounding fields which over the months Seven had come to know well. Chakotay told her grudgingly that Seven hadn't quite been herself recently. Janeway didn't pursue it with him. Whatever their friendship had been aboard Voyager, it was clearly over now.

Janeway returned to her house that she had searched an hour earlier, and found Seven drunk, fully dressed and soaking in her newly finished luxurious and completely indulgent bath tub. She would have found it amusing had it not been for the stricken look on Seven's face.

Janeway was brought back when her mother pulled her into her arms. "Oh, Kathryn," she whispered, hugging her. "All those years in the Delta Quadrant," and still you're no wiser to how you feel." She stroked her hair. "You're running away."

Janeway pulled out of her mother's arms, and began putting the tools away. "It's time to go, Mom."

Slowly Gretchen nodded, and said as if resigned, "Phoebe is joining us for lunch tomorrow."

"Good," Janeway said. She didn't look up when the barn door clicked behind Gretchen.

Breathing in deeply, Janeway braced herself against the workbench and thought back to the last time she had seen Seven.

\* \* \*

"Join me, Kathryn," Seven said waving a hand that held her drink. She took a drink then smacked her lips together. "It is tasty." She clicked her tongue. "Very tasty."

Janeway hid a smile at the uncharacteristic behavior, and watched the submerged sleek body in her bathtub as the hazy steam rose.

"Kathryn," Seven hiccupped. "I do not understand."

Trying to ignore the way the red summer dress clung to the blonde and to her breasts in particular, Janeway reached for a bath towel and replied carefully, gently, "Understand what?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Seven asked, sounding miserable.

Janeway took a breath and approached the tub. "Tell you what?"

"Why didn't you tell me that you have been appointed the commanding officer of the USS Titan?"

Janeway swallowed. She frowned. "That information is classified."

Seven arched her ocular implant. "Suffice to say, it is now no longer classified, Kathryn." Janeway didn't pursue how Seven found out. From the look on her face, right now, it wasn't a burning issue. She held out the large, soft, white towel. "Let's get you out of there, and we can discuss it."

Seven sunk further into the bathtub. Her brow knitted together, and such a look of desolation crossed her eyes, it forced Janeway to catch her breath.

"I will not comply," Seven whispered. "It is irrelevant what you want." Soaking in the hot water, she eyed Janeway. "I am no longer under your command, Captain Kathryn Janeway." She took another drink, and smacked her lips again. "Like you, I can do as I please."

Knowing that she couldn't physically get Seven out of the tub, Janeway tried another tack. "Seven," she said folding her arms together. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you." She sat on the edge of the tub. "I was waiting for the right time."

"It appears that the right time, Kathryn," Seven said looking up at her, her eyes filled with hurt, and her tone unforgiving, "was overhearing Commander Vargas tell Admiral Paris that he was more than delighted to be your adjunct aboard the USS Titan for a three year tenure in the Beta Quadrant."

Janeway looked down at the younger woman and was stunned to see tears brimming. She closed her eyes briefly. Of course, she thought. Seven's Borg-enhanced hearing meant that not much would be out of earshot. Her heart hammered against her rib cage. In all the time she had known Seven she had never seen her display this type of emotion. Shaken to the core, she fought the urge to throw herself into the tub, and promise Seven anything.

Gritting her teeth, Janeway reined in her emotions and held onto her composure. Aware that the younger woman was drinking a concoction that she didn't recognize, she whispered, "I thought synthehol didn't agree with you?"

Seven squinted at Janeway. "Correct. I have consumed synthehol on two occasions." She hiccupped. "My Borg implants are not designed to process it." She drained her glass then held it out to Janeway. "That is why I am imbibing the real thing."

"Oh Seven," Janeway said taking the glass, knowing only too well that the younger woman would have a horrible time tomorrow. She smelled the glass. Flummoxed, she asked, "What was it?"

Chateau of D'Yquem mixed with Kentucky bourbon." She frowned. "Correction, it is more like

an abundance of Kentucky bourbon." She hiccupped again. "I would like another."

Janeway placed the glass aside. "Can I explain?"

"You want to state your intention, now?" Seven said tears spilling. "How far did you intend to let this deception progress?" The hurt in Seven's eyes palpable, she added as her voice hitched, "Did you intend to tell me via a subspace relay transmitter once you were in deep space?"

Instinctively, Janeway leaned forward and wiped away the tears running down Seven's cheeks. "I'm sorry," she murmured, and wondered if Seven was aware she was crying. She stroked the younger woman's face. "So sorry."

Tears flowing, cheeks flushed, Seven sucked in air. Closing her eyes, her bottom lip began to quiver.

Rubbing her thumb across the starburst implant on Seven's cheek then along her jaw soothingly, Janeway fingers itched to journey down the long, beautiful lean neck, and beyond. She bit her bottom lip lightly, fully aware that she could never confess that a recent visit from B'Elanna almost broke her heart when she played the holo-imager showing her, Seven, Miral and Chakotay on a beach.

Sitting in her newly finished kitchen, Janeway watched Seven and Chakotay play in the sand with Miral. It hit her hard. So very hard, that this newly married couple would soon have their own family. Drinking coffee, she watched Chakotay's arm move around Seven's waist, as she held Miral on her hip, and it almost broke her.

Wandering around her house later that evening, Janeway realized that building the house was nothing more than a charade. Moving from room to room, she understood how misguided it all had been. Somehow she had built a home for a life that would never exist, and for a woman she could never have.

That night, sitting out on the front porch drinking whiskey and watching the evening sky, Janeway knew that to keep her sanity, she would have to get the hell out of Seven's life, but to do that she would need to convince the younger woman that her career was all that mattered, and that Seven didn't belong in her life anymore.

Opening her eyes, Seven asked uncertainly, "Do you not care for me?"

Involuntarily, Janeway's thumb moved up and caught Seven's quivering bottom lip. Unable to stop herself, she stroked it sensuously as she stared into brimming eyes. "Deeply," she whispered.

The touch electric, Seven's eyes widened, and Janeway's body responded. "I'm so very sorry, Seven," she said withdrawing her hand quickly. "Is it enough to say that I've handled this badly and that I owe you a full explanation?"

Eyes wide, Seven touched then stroked her bottom lip.

Janeway's groin contracted. She groaned inwardly. Don't do that, Seven, she thought. Please.

Seven closed her eyes again. As if relishing the touch, her fingers continued to stroke her bottom lip. "Proceed," she said quietly.

Janeway took a deep breath. Now is the time for closure, her inner voice explained. It's time to let her go. Time will heal her pain. In a few years, she will have a family and you will be nothing but a warm and distant memory.

Standing, Janeway pinched her nose and gave the performance of her life. Pacing, she told Seven that her career meant everything to her. She told her that she knew it was a character flaw, but all anyone needed to do was look at her track record, even her romantic relationships never stood a chance. Building the house, she told an increasingly crestfallen Seven, ultimately proved to her that she was a starship captain who missed being in uniform, having a crew and a ship to command. Space, she finally told a desolate Seven, was her true home.

When Chakotay arrived, Janeway wouldn't have been surprised if he had presented her with the much acclaimed and coveted Elithium Sphere award for her performance.

"Seven," he said making his way into the room quickly. "What is going on?"

"We're celebrating," Seven said standing. She wobbled slightly. "Kathryn has accepted a new appointment," she told him, her tone flat. "It appears," she added taking the towel that Janeway handed her. "That Kathryn has found what truly matters in her life," misery poured from her eyes, "being a Starfleet Captain." Her eyes never left Janeway, "She is the newly appointed commanding officer serving aboard the USS Titan." Seven breathed in deeply. "It is a prototype ship from the new generation of Prometheus-class ships driven from the technology introduced by Admiral Janeway aboard Voyager."

Taking the towel from Seven and wrapping it around her. Chakotay beamed. "Congratulations, Kathryn," he said helping his wife out of the tub. "I think you've made the right decision."

Janeway's eyes narrowed. I bet you do, you arrogant son of a bitch. "Thank you, Chakotay," she responded, her command mask falling. "I'm sure it is."

Leading an inebriated Seven towards the door, he looked over his shoulder. His cold eyes said it all. "Oh it is, Kathryn. It is."

### ***Chapter 10***

Residue oil completely removed from her hands, Janeway left her mother's farm house, and wearily headed home. Walking, she realized that today would be the last full day she would spend with her mother for some time. Approaching her house, she found it difficult to shake off the gnawing guilt of Gretchen's devastation at her decision to return to space.

At home, Janeway replicated a fat measure of whiskey. It was early evening. Drinking slowly, she studied the now familiar schematics of the USS Titan, where for the last three weeks she had practically been living aboard. She took pride in the fact that not only did she know every section intimately, but that her core crew was, at this moment, in intensive training familiarizing themselves with the ship and their duties in order to be ready and ship-shape for active duty in one month's time.

Janeway was now focused on the finishing stages of the ship's quality assessments at Utopia Planetia. She was pushing hard to ensure that there were no delays with departure. Thankfully, the engineers didn't take their duties lightly and were putting in the extra shifts. Although the engineers were familiar with many technologies, this ship was completely off their spatial grid. It combined Borg technology along with a new shielding system that incorporated all the advancements that Starfleet made in her counterpart's timeline such as auto-modulating, meta-phasic shielding, regenerative, multi-spatial technology, and ablative armor technology which would replicate a layer of armor over the surface of the ship when activated.

Janeway smiled ruefully, aware that with this ship, if required, she would kick some serious butt in the Beta Quadrant.

Deep in study, Janeway almost dropped her glass when the comm system alerted her that someone was at the door. Moving toward the front entrance, she recalled her mother and Seven wanting her to maintain as many traditional features as possible within her home, the archaic doorbell being one of them, but Janeway had refused. She had agreed that the façade of the house would be completely traditional, but she needed her comforts, and that meant modern conveniences.

Opening the door, Janeway said in surprise, "Seven!"

"Kathryn," the blonde replied inclining her head.

"Come in," Janeway said opening the screen door. "Please."

Seven stepped over the threshold.

Janeway moved through the house and returned to the spacious library where she was working. She had quickly come to love this room. The high ceiling to floor mahogany shelving housed one of her greatest passions - real books. The smell of her eclectic collection, some of which, and often most treasured, were broken-backed and jacketless, was achingly familiar, and something that she had dearly missed aboard Voyager. Her latest indulgence was the purchase of a series of memoirs from the American Civil War period, and novels dating from the mid 17th and early 18th centuries that included her favorite authors such as Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, and Emily Bronte. She made a mental note to pack a selection before her departure.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked noting that Seven seemed anxious, and aware that she should be concerned, but she was thrilled to see her. Since the night of her housewarming, Seven hadn't more than cursorily responded to any of her communications. Janeway couldn't blame her,

she knew, she had hurt the younger woman deeply. The tension in Seven's eyes this evening made that clear.

"No thank you."

"How have you been?"

"Well."

"It is a pity you weren't here this morning, "B'Elanna stopped by with Miral," Janeway said. "It seems that she and Tom are in the throes of reconciliation."

"I am aware of that, Kathryn." Seven replied stiffly. She raised her ocular implant. "B'Elanna has already informed me that Tom Paris is filled with remorse regarding his recent behavior."

"Yes," Janeway replied, noting the lack of approval in Seven's tone. "You don't approve?"

"How can I approve, Kathryn," Seven said eyes narrowing as she looked at Janeway. "He abandoned her."

Janeway inclined her head. At a loss as to how to respond to what was clearly a pointed comment regarding her own departure soon, she retrieved her glass of whiskey.

"I am aware that the USS Titan is on schedule."

The ice chinked in her glass as Janeway swirled the whiskey. She nodded. Aware that she would be commanding a ship that would be cut off from Federation space, and if she were lucky might return in three years, if at all, she looked at the blonde and unable to bear the thought of an acrimonious parting, asked softly. "Have you forgiven me?"

The hurt in Seven's eyes suddenly shone through. She looked at Janeway for a long moment. "No," she replied, as she placed the PADD she was holding on the antique desk. She looked at the strewn PADDs Janeway had been reviewing earlier. "I apologize if my visit is inconvenient," she said curtly. "But I can assure you, Kathryn, it is necessary."

Feeling as if she had been slapped hard, but having to accept that it may take Seven some time to forgive her for what she thought was a betrayal of trust, Janeway felt an overwhelming wave of sadness wash over her. She sipped her whiskey. "How so" she asked leaning against the edge of her desk.

"Tuvok visited my office this afternoon." Seven replied.

Seven had obviously come straight here after her shift, Janeway realized. She was still in uniform.

Fingers locking together behind her back, standing erect, Seven continued. "He told me that

Admiral Janeway had requested that you view this after your return from the Delta Quadrant." Her head indicated toward the PADD she had placed on the desk.

Blinking, Janeway remembered the PADD that Tuvok had given her the night of Seven and Chakotay's dinner party. Unsure of the significance, she looked at the younger woman. "Yes," she replied. "Tuvok did give me a PADD that had a comm from Admiral Janeway."

Seven's face tensed. "Have you viewed it?"

Beginning to feel uneasy, Janeway straightened. "No," she replied. She wasn't sure even where it was, probably buried in a box in her house in San Francisco. "I haven't."

"Why?"

Janeway shrugged. She drank from her glass. "I have a lot going on at the moment, Seven," she replied. "I will view it at some point." Maybe sometime in the next millennium, her inner voice offered.

"Kathryn," Seven said. "Admiral Janeway expressly asked that you view this on your return from the Delta Quadrant." She looked at the PADD. "From what I understand, Tuvok has more than adequately conveyed to you the importance of her communication." Her ocular implant rose as she focused on Janeway. "Why do you resist?"

"Seven," Janeway replied unsure of whether to feel annoyed or still pleased at the visit. "I am aware that Tuvok wants me to view the Admiral's comm, but like I said I will view it in my own time."

Picking up the PADD and moving toward the library console, Seven lightly keyed in a few commands. Suddenly a holo-image of Admiral Janeway in all her finery seated behind her desk at Starfleet Headquarters sparkled into life on her viewscreen.

With her drink, Janeway moved to the low, soft sofa that was a blissful haven for her when she read. "Popcorn?" she asked sitting.

Clearly not amused, Seven looked at her. "Kathryn, this is important."

"How important?" Janeway asked stretching her arm out across the sofa. "We have returned from the Delta Quadrant sixteen years ahead of schedule with twenty-six years worth of future technology in our holsters." She lifted an elegant finger. "We committed a temporal incursion of the greatest magnitude." She felt the whiskey kick- in. "And there's no Federation Department of Temporal Investigations on our ass six hundred years from the future." She swirled the whiskey in her glass "Admiral Janeway is in the past," she murmured before draining it. "Where she belongs."

Seven touched the console and the Admiral sprang into life.

"Kathryn," the silver head woman said. Uncannily, her slate gray eyes looked directly at Janeway and bore holes into her. "I take it if you are watching this segment then Tuvok has been forced to use me as the last resort."

Janeway breathed in deeply. Please. Enough with the dramatics, she thought. Pushing herself out of her sofa, she headed for the replicator.

Seven froze the viewscreen.

"Refreshment?" Janeway asked over her shoulder.

Seven shook her head.

Janeway punched in a few commands and a fat whiskey materialized. Returning to the sofa, she sipped it.

Admiral Janeway's voice filled the room again. "I'm sorry I've had to do this, Katie. But you're stubborn." She smiled. "We're stubborn."

Not in the mood for the Admiral, Janeway sighed inwardly. If you say so, she thought.

"I asked Tuvok, to make a copy of the PADD he was to give to you, and view it if you still refused." Admiral Janeway said clasping her hands together. "Trust me, Katie. He has taken the appropriate action." She straightened. "As you know, I would never have done this lightly, but I'll be damned if I let you return to space without a fight."

Intrigued that she had been second-guessed, Janeway lifted her glass to her mouth and wondered what was coming next.

"How are you, Seven?"

Janeway's hand froze. The glass never touched her lips. The hairs on the back of her neck crackled.

Standing, her golden hair catching the deliberate muted light of the room, Seven glanced at Janeway. She raised her ocular implant, but apparently unable to hold back, responded to the viewscreen, "Well, Admiral."

The room closed in on Janeway when she suddenly realized that the Admiral might be about to cut off all her exits. Her heart began to hammer when a sudden feeling of dread filled her at what her counterpart's comm might hold. She might have second-guessed that she would return to space, Janeway reasoned, but she wouldn't confess. She stared at the viewscreen. She wouldn't dare. She's desperate, her inner voice alerted. You should never have underestimated her.

Grimacing, Janeway remembered her counterpart aboard Voyager ogling Seven. Then, her emotions were so raw at discovering Seven and Chakotay together in a smoldering clinch that to

see an older version of herself hungry and in such need made her queasy. If she was honest, the craving she saw in the Admiral's eyes right now made her stomach turn.

The Admiral smiled. "I asked Tuvok to ensure that if all else failed that he bring you and Seven together to hear this." She added with a note of sorrow, "You forced my hand, Katie."

Janeway groaned. Putting her glass down on the low table in front of her, she leaned forward and placed her head in her hands. How could he, she thought. Figuratively, she shook her fist at the Admiral. Damn you. She whispered, "Stop it, Seven."

Seven looked at Janeway.

Admiral Janeway raised her chin. "Love is the sweetest of all downfalls, Katie. And as you are no doubt realizing," she added challengingly, almost menacingly. "I am prepared to go to any lengths."

"Now," Janeway said looking up sharply. "Stop it, now."

"Don't stop it, Seven," Admiral Janeway said.

Seven's head snapped back in surprise.

Janeway slammed the table with her fist. "Stop the comm," she shouted. "Now!"

Seven fingers flew across the console.

Admiral Janeway's image froze.

Standing, her chest heaving, Janeway glared at the viewscreen. "How dare you," she shouted. "How dare you salve your conscious in my timeline!"

"Kathryn," Seven said alarmed. "What is happening here?"

"What is happening," Janeway said pointing a finger at the suspended image. "Is that she is trying to make her wrongs, my rights."

Seven seemed perplexed. She studied Janeway for a long moment then said gently, "That is a logical course of action is it not?" She raised her brow. "After all, your counterpart spent many years planning every outcome. Surely she is best positioned to judge what wrongs should be put to right."

Gritting her teeth, the redhead replied, "Not on my watch, Seven." She stared at the Admiral. "On my watch, I'm the one in charge of my destiny."

Seven looked from the Admiral to Janeway. "Judging from what we have just seen," she said tilting her head. "I think you should reconsider your position."

"I want you to erase the comm."

"No."

Janeway breathed in deeply. "Seven, I know you don't understand why at this precise moment, but Admiral Janeway is dangerous." She looked at the blonde. "And for that reason, I am asking you to trust me and erase the comm."

Seven looked at Janeway steadily, and repeated, "No."

Janeway's eyes narrowed. "Seven, I am your," she stopped the words 'commanding officer' coming out of her mouth. "Friend." She moved to stand in front of the ex Borg. Breathing heavily, she looked at her. "Believe me when I tell you that it would be better for everyone if you erased it."

"Why is she dangerous?" Seven asked. "She gave her life to return your crew home. That does not seem the action of someone who intends to damage us?" Her eyes narrowed. "In fact, her actions demonstrated quite the contrary aboard Voyager. They show that she cared."

"What? Unlike me?" she asked outraged. "Is that what you are trying to imply?"

"Not imply, Kathryn."

"Seven, erase it," Janeway said her anger rising.

Shaking her head, Seven eyed Janeway coldly. "No," she replied. Brow furrowing, she jutted out her chin. "Admiral Janeway has shown exceptional courage. She has gone to great lengths to ensure that her communication is heard. I will not erase it."

Janeway tried to push past Seven. "Then I will."

Seven seized Janeway's arms.

Chest heaving, Janeway sucked in air and glared at the blonde. "Erase it. Dammit!"

"Compose yourself, Kathryn," Seven said, holding Janeway. "We must view the comm."

Janeway looked at Seven darkly, inhaling deeply, she gritted her teeth. "No."

"Then I will view it on my own."

"No," Janeway repeated.

"Kathryn," Seven replied releasing the redhead. "I have already uploaded the data to ensure its safety, should something happen to the PADD."

Janeway's shoulders sank. The Admiral she knew would have been aware that once passed to Seven, given her cautionary nature, the information would be viewed somehow. She half smiled. She had been completely outwitted. Touché, she thought. Turning, she left the room and moved out to the porch.

Seven followed.

Years of desire, lust, need, want, frustration, anger, had been held in a box, tightly sealed and pushed away into the recesses of Janeway's mind and heart. To be glimpsed at briefly during her darkest moments, but if they were forced to be unveiled this evening in front of Seven, she knew they would rush out together, and the blonde would experience the worst of it. All those emotions would amalgamate into one - desperation, and she could never have that.

"Then go home and watch it, Seven," Janeway said looking out. The house, built on a high embankment, provided the most spectacular and panoramic views with its wrap-around porch. She loved this particular view of the meandering creek below, where wood ducks, green and great blue herons could be seen going about their daily routine. She breathed in deeply, and absorbed the natural beauty of the landscape.

"What could Admiral Janeway want to communicate to make you react this way, Kathryn?" Seven asked. She frowned then repeated her words slowly. "Love is the sweetest of all downfalls, Katie." Her brow lifted. "Are you in love?"

Sucking in her breath, Janeway wished that somehow she could throttle Admiral Janeway.

Seven frowned. She moved closer. "In love with whom?"

Janeway held her breath, as she looked at the blonde.

Seven's eyes narrowed. "Chakotay?"

Surprised, Janeway felt laughter bubble inside her. She looked at Seven and the laughter erupted. Soon, she found she couldn't stop. Swaying, she reached for the balustrade and clung to it as the laughter poured out.

"Please, Kathryn," Seven said eventually when Janeway didn't stop. "You're becoming hysterical."

The look of unease in Seven's eyes, forced Janeway to gulp in air and calm herself. "I'm sorry, Seven," she said straightening.

"What is so amusing?" Seven asked her face somber.

Janeway shook her head, and forced down another bout of laughter. "You wouldn't understand."

"Are you in love with Chakotay?" Seven asked frowning.

"No," Janeway responded seriously. She looked at the blonde. "I can promise you that I am not nor have I ever been in love with your husband."

Relief followed quickly by intrigue flashed across Seven's eyes. "Then who are you in love with?"

At a loss for words, her mouth suddenly dry, Janeway stared at Seven.

Waiting, Seven stared back. "Come," she said eventually holding out her hand. "I believe Admiral Janeway wants to answer that question."

Knowing that she could no longer hide Seven from the truth, Janeway took the blonde's hand and together they returned to the library.

Releasing Janeway's hand, Seven touched the console.

Feeling the loss of warmth immediately, Janeway rubbed her empty hand.

The Admiral stared out at them. "Seven," she said. "You are fully aware that in my timeline your counterpart died in the arms of her husband Chakotay."

Janeway nervously watched the blonde nod.

"In his arms, she confessed something." The Admiral shifted slightly in her chair. "In my timeline, your counterpart, shortly after she married, encouraged that we spend much of our leisure time, when we could, together." She raised her brow. "Often our discussions turned to the nature of love." She paused. "Unfortunately, I didn't fully understand why then. Mistakenly, I dismissed the discussions, assuming they were not anything of significance."

The Admiral's eyes suddenly filled with deep sorrow as she looked out at them. "Suffice to say, and you know why, Kathryn, I began putting distance between us." Her voice grew huskier when she added, "It was an extreme miscalculation on my part." She cleared her throat. "Over time her behavior became unpredictable. She seemed increasingly frustrated and discontent and began asking to be assigned to more and more away missions." The Admiral breathed in deeply. "Looking back I see clearly that there was more than one occasion where she tried to tell me what was wrong and how her feelings had," she paused, "changed." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Seven, so sorry for not listening." Her eyes sparkled. "Forgive me."

Engrossed, Seven responded. "I forgive you, Admiral."

Janeway caught her bottom lip and recalled the night that she and Chakotay went in search of Seven. He told her then that she had not been herself recently. Finding her drunk, soaking in her bathtub fully clothed was certainly uncharacteristic. Janeway wondered if there was any correlation with the timing of Seven's behavior and her counterpart's.

The Admiral straightened her dress tunic. "In his arms, dying, she told Chakotay that her feelings for him were as a result of a rush of emotions due to the removal of the cortical inhibitor. She informed him that she cared for him, but that she was not," she paused again, "in love with him."

Janeway swallowed convulsively. Stunned by the announcement, she looked at Seven and watched the younger woman's head snap back at the declaration. She was further surprised when Seven glanced at her then quickly averted her eyes.

"In his arms, she told him that there was a letter she had recently written which would explain everything." The Admiral's eyes glittered and tears brimmed. "She requested that he give it to me once he had read it." Tears fell and her voice dropped. The pain was clear. "I never did receive the letter," she told them. "Chakotay withheld it."

Seven's face hardened.

"My assumption, if you are both watching this, is that your Seven, Kathryn, married Chakotay." She shook her head, and wiping her tears away, added with a lifetime of regret, "Oh Katie, if only."

Janeway's brow furrowed.

"It wasn't until," The Admiral added with a note of irony, "Chakotay knew he was dying that he told me the truth and gave me the letter." She looked at her hands. They trembled slightly. Janeway knew that the Admiral would have been deeply moved at the alternate Seven's method of communication. She obviously knew her fondness for parchment and pen.

"In your timeline, Seven," the Admiral continued. "Once aboard Voyager, I intend to give Chakotay the letter that your counterpart wrote." She breathed in. "If you are watching this, then I can only assume he has done nothing with it."

Seven staggered slightly. She leaned back against the book shelves, and whispered, "He married me knowing that my feelings for him were nothing more than transitory."

"Seven," Janeway said. "She might not have delivered it. This was recorded in her own timeline."

Seven looked at Janeway and replied almost haughtily as she straightened, "This is Admiral Janeway we are talking about, Kathryn. Of course, she gave it to him."

The irony and sheer illogicality of such a statement coming from Seven forced Janeway to quirk an eyebrow.

"Seven," the Admiral said, emotions swamping her tone. "I read your letter. It was beautiful."

Seven gazed at the viewscreen. Her face softened.

"Chakotay is a complex man," the Admiral said. "Some would say difficult. His background spans two cultures, and he has one foot in each, belonging to both, yet to neither." She looked out at them. "His people believe that his nature is contrary." She sighed. "But he is a good man. You know that, Katie, better than anyone. He served well as your first officer." She frowned. "But because of his contrary nature, he had a difficult childhood and, as you both know, his father never forgave him for embracing 24th Century technology nor for joining Starfleet. He saw it as a betrayal, and Chakotay carried that guilt with him to the end."

Watching the viewscreen, Janeway's eyes narrowed. Her stomach fluttered. Why the pep talk on Chakotay, she wondered.

The Admiral paused then inhaled deeply. "As you know, when the Cardassians began attacking his people, he left Starfleet and joined the Maquis." She raised her brow. "The reason I am telling you this is that Chakotay, in my timeline, at the end recognized how selfish he had been. He wasn't proud of who he had become." She paused. "When he joined the Maquis, his people were being annihilated. Although that is not the case now, fear can strike deep in a person's heart, and set off a chain of emotions that to an observer may appear irrational." She drew in her breath. "Seven," she said, her voice lowering, gentling.

Seven responded to the viewscreen. "Yes Admiral?"

"I want you to know that Chakotay in your timeline is doing what he misguidedly thinks is the right thing. He wants his people to survive. He wants to remove any future threat to them." She stopped, her eyes glittered again. "His way of ensuring that is through his bloodline, through his children."

"Breeding," Seven said. "'Breed children that would be part Borg.'" She stared at the Admiral. "He wants to create the most genetically and cybernetically enhanced human beings in existence."

"I know you will find it in your heart to forgive him, Seven, as I have." The Admiral whispered, "He knows not what he does." She cleared her throat.

Well, well, Janeway thought. Who would have thought that you would be willing to take the high moral ground, and ask for Chakotay to be forgiven?

"This," the Admiral continued as she looked around her office, "This is my life, Katie." She grasped her hands together and looked out at them. "Now, all I have left are my memories." She closed her eyes, and murmured, "Which only allow me to wallow in the ashes of what my life could have been?" Sadness seeped from her eyes when she opened them. "Don't let it be you, Katie." Her eyes implored. "A life filled with lost emotions. A life unfulfilled."

Janeway stared at the Admiral in surprise. Am I really that dramatic? she thought. She decided that she wouldn't pack any Gothic novels on this trip.

Eyes wide, Seven stepped closer to the viewscreen.

"Funny, how it's only when your heart is breaking that you wonder what good your life has been?" She shook her head then half smiled. "Sometimes, the loneliness is so acute when you realize that you have nothing." She exhaled then raised her brow. "This is your life, Katie. Let me die believing that you made the right choice. That you didn't let it pass you by."

Shocked, Janeway stared at the viewscreen. She nodded. Oh, you'll die alright, she thought. Her eyes narrowed. Once I cut those puppet strings you've been using to control me.

Her attention drawn to Seven, Janeway caught her breath. She watched an intimacy unfold as the blonde stared intently at the Admiral. Feeling queasy, she made her way back out to the porch.

Following Janeway some moments later, Seven stood behind her. "The communication has ended, Kathryn."

Janeway could feel Seven's eyes burn into her back. "I'm sure as far as the Admiral is concerned, that's a matter of opinion," she replied sarcastically.

Suddenly tired, Janeway stared out across the landscape, eyeing the wildflowers that she had loved her entire life, the twinleaf, hepatica, dutchman's breeches, bloodroot and anemones. Feeling numb, she turned to look at the blonde. "Aren't you angry?"

Seven looked at Janeway. "At what?" she replied. "At Admiral Janeway revealing my counterpart's emotional state?" she asked cautiously. "Or at Chakotay for exploiting me?"

Anger suddenly raging through her bloodstream, Janeway gritted her teeth, she replied,

"All of the above!" Placing a hand on her abdomen, she focused on calming down.

Seven moved closer. "No, I am not angry."

Janeway frowned. "But Seven, such deception?"

Seven nodded. "I am aware of that, however, Chakotay's plan has failed."

"Failed!" Janeway responded in disbelief. She placed her hands on her hips. "A Talaxian soufflé when it doesn't rise can be described as having failed." She glared at Seven. "Marrying under false pretences," she added angrily as she eyed the blonde, "deserves a worthier declaration than that!"

"If the Talaxian soufflé was made by Neelix," Seven responded dryly raising her ocular implant, "then failure would be inevitable."

"Why, since you're taking it so well," Janeway responded throwing up her arms. "I imagine you'll be discussing this minor blip with Chakotay tomorrow over breakfast in bed!"

"I can assure you that we will never engage in that activity again, Kathryn." Seven looked at Janeway, "The marriage is over. In truth it was over before it began."

The image of Seven tucked up in bed with Chakotay naked made Janeway want to vomit. She growled.

"Are you angry?"

"Yes, Seven," Janeway replied with a veracity that surprised her. "I'm very angry."

"Why?" Seven asked studying Janeway carefully.

"Why?" Janeway said in disbelief. She placed her hands on her head. "The subterfuge is why, Seven." Her eyes glowed. "Not happy with what she has already done my counterpart is again reaching into my timeline and manipulating it. Janeway gripped the balustrade and seethed. "My alternate self has allowed you to go through a sham of a marriage to a man that wants to breed a whole new generation of cybernetically enhanced children to future-proof his tribe." She held up her hands, and began pacing. "From the first day on the job, I swore I would never get caught up in this type of God-forsaken paradox. The future is the past, the past is the future." She pinched her nose. "It all gives me a headache." She stopped pacing.

Seven moved closer.

Janeway gritted her teeth. "God, I hate temporal mechanics," she said. "All of this could have been easily avoided had she simply told me. But no," she added her voice rising. "That would have been far too easy for our little strategist." Her eyes narrowed. "She required all the components; intrigue, drama, mystery." She laughed irreverently. "What the hell else would we expect her do with her time after she'd lost the woman she loved, and-"

Janeway stopped when Seven touched her arm.

"Kathryn."

"What!"

The calmness in Seven's eyes forced Janeway's anger to fade quickly. She turned and looked out. There was still some heat left in the evening sky.

"Had Admiral Janeway told you, would you have listened?"

Janeway nodded. "Of course," she replied almost sneering. "I would have listened had she told me about Chakotay."

"What would you have done?"

"I would have confronted Chakotay and told him that I knew about his master plan."

"Would you have told me?"

Janeway hesitated. "I would have told you what you needed to know."

"I see," Seven replied. "What if Chakotay denied everything, and threatened to expose the Admiral." She added carefully, "By making her feelings sound nefarious for my counterpart."

"I would have found a way." Janeway's temper rose again. "But I wasn't given the choice to tell him about the Admiral's feelings, was I?"

"My cortical inhibitor had just been removed," Seven said lifting her brow. "The range of emotions I was experiencing was new and extreme."

Janeway nodded, remembering Seven and Chakotay's hot embrace in what seemed now a lifetime ago.

"Admiral Janeway understood that timing would be vital if Chakotay chose to ignore the letter," Seven continued. "She recognized that there was always a possibility you would have forged a closer bond between Chakotay and I had you attempted to expose his true agenda or interfere in our relationship while aboard Voyager. The Admiral knew that my feelings were nothing more than adolescent for Chakotay and given the appropriate amount of time would dissipate."

The words 'adolescent' ricocheted around Janeway's brain. Focusing on the blonde, she breathed in deeply.

Seven looked at Janeway intently. "You said she lost the woman she loved?"

Blindsided, Janeway blinked. "Did I?"

"Yes," Seven replied watching Janeway. "However, nowhere in her comm did the Admiral mention that she loved."

Placing a hand on her abdomen, Janeway replied, "Didn't she?"

"No," Seven said softly. "She only apologized for not listening to my counterpart's attempt at expressing hers."

Oh boy, Janeway thought. "Are you sure?" she asked frowning.

"Yes."

The ground swayed. Janeway gripped the balustrade. The Admiral had deliberately avoided telling Seven how she felt, knowing that if she set the trap with that damned swan song at the end of her comm it would make Janeway angry enough to fall into it. Janeway wondered if she'd ever

come out from under her counterpart's shadow. You really are a clever old dog, aren't you Admiral, she thought,

Hearing the water flow through the creek, Janeway turned to face it. She said quietly, "I think you should go home."

Several moments passed before Seven responded. "I could leave." The hairs on Janeway's neck prickled when Seven came up close behind her. "But for the last four years, three-hundred days, sixteen hours, thirteen minutes and four seconds, I have been home."

Pressing against the porch, Janeway whispered. "I can't."

"I believe in you, Kathryn," Seven said standing inches away from her.

"I can't."

"Please."

Janeway knees wobbled at Seven's plea. She braced herself against the wooden frame. She was terrified. She wanted Seven so much she knew that regardless of her training, she wouldn't be able to control herself; control her overwhelming desire, as she had that night with Sekaya.

Insides shaking, Janeway shook her head. She didn't want Seven to see her this way. She had been pumping doses of neural blocker into her system so regularly now that it had become routine. Her sexual appetite was unappeasable without it. But, aware that once aboard the USS Titan she wouldn't need it, she had, over the last three weeks, reduced the dosage. Right now, hormones raging, she wished she hadn't.

Trying to rein in her desire, hands shaking, Janeway's gripped the balustrade. That weekend with Sekaya, nothing happened. They didn't make love. In the bedroom, stripping her, Sekaya had asked Janeway what she wanted. Immediately, an image of Seven filled her lust clogged mind, and it stopped her dead in her tracks. Using every inch of resolve, and all her command training, she had pushed Sekaya away.

As a confused Sekaya stared up at her, Janeway knew that she couldn't allow this woman to get caught in the middle of her complex, murky world, and her need for release. She cared too much for her. Staring at the dark-eyed intriguing woman, Janeway knew she would never be able to give her what she deserved - her love or her heart - because they irrevocably and without doubt belonged to someone else. Making an excuse, she left Sekaya, and in her own room, pumped her system full of drugs.

Janeway knew she had hurt Sekaya, and confused her with her reaction, but ever since, she had ensured that their friendship remained strictly platonic.

Seven whispered her name.

Janeway's throat convulsed. She swallowed. She was explosive. Her fingers digging into the wood, she tried to hold on. She couldn't unleash what was burning inside her. Seven would have no experience of this. God, Janeway realized. Neither did she.

"How do I know what you feel for me isn't," she hesitated. "Adolescent?"

"You know," Seven responded, her breath whispering over Janeway's neck.

Janeway groaned. Her fingers screamed out in pain as they embedded into the wood. "Seven, please."

"Kathryn." Seven said pulling Janeway into her.

Janeway moaned

"Kathryn...I." Seven sighed

Somewhere it registered in Janeway's brain that Seven never sighed.

"I...wish I could find adequate words to tell you this is correct."

"Right," Janeway responded, trying to keep control. She gritted her teeth and pulled out of Seven's embrace. "You mean that this is right."

"Yes," Seven allowed. She frowned. "You do not like being vulnerable."

Janeway's eyes lighted. She looked out and down to the creek, and tried to find something to ground her. "No." She shook her head.

Seven arched her ocular implant. "This makes you vulnerable," she continued slowly as if analyzing her words.

Seven leaned in. Janeway felt her breasts press lightly into her back. She whispered in her ear, "I need you, Kathryn. This drone cannot survive without you."

Janeway's lungs emptied. She recalled Seven telling her aboard Voyager when she had made the decision to sever her from the collective that she couldn't survive without them. Now, she realized Seven was telling her something profound - that she couldn't survive without her.

Feeling light headed, Janeway inhaled deeply. Her groin throbbed. Her nipples prodded through her shirt like stakes when Seven's hot breath continued to caress her. Think, Katie girl. C'mon think! Janeway told herself. She almost swallowed her tongue when Seven pressed her breasts seductively into her back. Don't let go! Janeway told herself. For God's sake, don't let go!

"I can't Seven."

Seven moaned and Janeway shuddered. "I do not think your brain is the organ you should be paying cognizance to at this precise moment, Kathryn."

The ex Borg's hot breath lingered just long enough for her words to penetrate Janeway's psyche. She froze suddenly aware that her hips were thrusting into Seven.

"Seven," she whispered. "I can't." She swallowed. "I've been using a neural blocker for some time now."

Seven paused. "Neural blocker?"

Janeway nodded.

"Explain?"

"To inhibit my," Janeway closed her eyes, "sex drive."

When Seven's breath washed over Janeway's neck, her knees buckled. She held onto the balustrade for dear life.

"How long?"

"Long enough."

"Let me help you."

"I'm afraid that if you touch me, my response will be extreme." Janeway exhaled. Right now she was too raw to confess any more about the amount of sexual release she would require to stabilize her sex drive. She had heavily abused the neural blocker subsequently any sexual contact would be exceptionally intense and prolonged. "We can't," she said trying to pull away. She whispered, "I can't be sure that I will be able to control myself."

Seven leaned into Janeway. "I do not want you to have control, Kathryn." She whispered. "I adore you." She kissed the nape of her neck. "I want you."

Janeway's brain shorted. An irrepressible, mind-boggling hormone rush shot through her body. On fire, her face tight, pupils dilated, she turned to face the blonde with a half starved expression.

Seven stared at Janeway intently for a moment. "I love you, Kathryn," she said. Placing her hands gently on the redhead's face, she whispered, "Please, let go."

The touch of Seven's mouth was electric. The shocked sensation of the moist lips and probing tongue drove Janeway to kiss back frantically. Unable to control herself, she pushed her hands into the blonde's hair, and ripped out the bun. Running her fingers through beautiful, lush locks, she kissed and explored the mouth that she hungered for to the core.

Letting out a low animal sound, Seven grabbed Janeway. Spinning around, she moved quickly.

Pushed up against the wall, Janeway found herself crushed between the softness of Seven's breasts, and the hard wooden exterior of her new home.

They kissed desperately, deeply, frantically, teeth gnashing.

Using her Borg hand, Seven quickly shredded Janeway's shirt. Encasing her breasts with both hands, she moaned, "Kathryn," repeatedly into her mouth.

Kissing her hungrily, Janeway felt her shorts being tugged at then heard the material give way as Seven shredded them also. Surprised by the younger woman's show of aggression, but knowing at this moment it was exactly what she needed, she moaned as Seven worked her tongue into her mouth.

Pressed up against the wood, her hot, burning skin exposed to its roughness, Seven tore off Janeway's underwear and, as if savoring her, slowly caressed everywhere. "The desire to be with you," Seven whispered. "And the need inside me is incalculable." Sucking on Janeway's bottom lip, she moaned. "I want you so much, Kathryn. More than is possible."

"Yes," Janeway murmured. Completely naked, except for her boots, she let go of the last shred of control. Desperate to feel Seven's flesh, she ripped, pulled, then pushed the Starfleet top up over their chins, and over Seven's head. Her head swam at the realization that she was about to touch those wonderful, beautiful, luscious full breasts that had tortured and teased her for so many long years. Finally, those full heavy perfect breasts would be in her hands. Releasing them from the bonds of incarceration, Janeway groaned as they fell free. Feeling their full weight, she caressed them adoringly before pinching each rock hard nipple.

Flushed, Seven moaned. Grabbing Janeway's hips, she pressed into her.

Her need incomprehensible, Janeway thought her head would blast off if she didn't find release. She pulled her mouth away. "I love you, Seven. Please help me!"

Their faces inches apart, Seven's eyes lost their haze as she focused on Janeway.

A lump formed in Janeway's throat. The look of unveiled, raw desperation for her words to be true forced her to confirm. "I love you so very much."

Closing her eyes, and exhaling, Seven rested her head gently against Janeway's.

The redhead groaned. "Please, Seven. I'm on fire!"

Seven's mouth quickly found Janeway's. As if starved, she suckled, licked, and nipped the soft skin, until Janeway opened her mouth fully and succumbed completely. Rapidly, her mind clouded with lust. Instantly every sensation was unbearable. Needing to come so bad she found

herself frantically humping against the blonde.

Janeway moaned. "Please."

"Please what, Kathryn?" Seven whispered.

Desperately craving release with this woman, Janeway wanted to cry, scream ball up her fists and pound them on the floor. Instead, panting, she murmured, "Please."

"Tell me."

Janeway couldn't stop the words. "Fuck me."

Seven groaned.

Her orgasm hammering for release, Janeway hips refused to still. Helplessly, she watched Seven's nostrils flair at the shockingly strong aroma of her arousal. Janeway watched the younger woman's face harden, and something poured out of those blue eyes that she had never seen before: complete and absolute craving.

Janeway needed Seven's touch more than she needed to breathe. Dazedly, spreading her hands over Seven's shoulders, she grasped them, feeling the muscles underneath. She gritted her teeth. "Fuck me. Please!"

Somewhere, it registered in Janeway's psyche that Seven's entire body was shaking.

Not breaking eye contact, Seven's fingers moved down Janeway's stomach, through the thatch of tight curls, and slipped between Janeway's inner lips then thrust into her. Janeway almost shrieked with delight. That's my beautiful girl, she thought dazedly, as she pumped her hips and rode Seven's hand like her life depended on it. Give me exactly what I ask for.

Janeway's head and back thumped off the wood. The force and the tempo of Seven pushing into her deep, drove the air from her lungs. Looking down, she couldn't quite take in the sight of the copious amount of fluid running out of her, down Seven's hand and off her elbow.

The noise of Seven's fingers as they fucked her with long deep strokes sent Janeway over the edge. "Agggghhhhhh," she moaned when her inner muscles contracted as her orgasm advanced. Her eyes glazed then closed when her climax ripped through her. She felt Seven's arm wrapped around her waist and hold her up as the intensity of her orgasm took hold and almost caused her to black out.

Whimpering, Janeway's orgasm eventually faded, but it didn't diminish her need in the slightest. She pressed on. Hips rolling, inner muscles still contracting, she rode the blonde's fingers. "Don't stop," she whispered. "Please, Seven...Annika Don't stop."

Breathing hard, Seven whispered. "Tell me who you want?"

"You," Janeway responded, her mouth watering. "Only you?"

Thrusting into Janeway, Seven began grunting in rhythm.

When the come poured out of her and down her thighs as the second, third and fourth orgasm tore through her body, Janeway's mind shattered.

Seven slowed. Barely conscious of her surroundings, but desperately needing to stay filled, needing to keep this woman inside her, like she had needed nothing else in her life before, Janeway whispered, "Again."

Resting her head against Janeway's, breathing heavily, Seven gazed into heavy slate gray eyes and tried to catch her breath.

"Please," Janeway gasped, her body dripping with sweat.

Repositioning, Seven spread her feet. Keeping her fingers inside Janeway, she hitched her up then kissed her hungrily. "Put your legs around me," she said thickly, her face masked with lust.

Hurriedly, Janeway did as she was told, and wound her legs around the tall, sleek, half-naked ex Borg.

Pressing Janeway back against the wood, and supporting her weight easily, Seven looked deeply into her eyes and began thrusting. This time, her thumb slid over Janeway's clit.

Immediately, Janeway felt another outrageous orgasm build. "Oh, God," she panted. Nothing should feel this good, she thought through the haze, as she rocked her hips. She arched her back as the pressure built.

Leaning forward, Seven caught a nipple.

Groaning, Janeway's eyes rolled back.

Driving into her, Seven sucked the nipple then most of Janeway's breast into her mouth. The air filled with the sounds and smells of their lovemaking, their groaning and incoherent babbling. Sweat dripped from Janeway to mingle with her juices on the floor beneath her. Swinging to meet the thrusts, Janeway gasped for air as another mind shattering orgasm took hold, followed by another then another, and another.

Seven eventually slowed. Reduced to a quivering mass, Janeway slumped against her. She knew Seven's fingers must be cramping by now, but until this woman swallowed her whole, she didn't think she would ever be satisfied. "Stay inside me," she whispered.

Not moving a muscle, Seven held her.

The edge had been lifted off her desire, but years of being in the desert without this woman meant it was far from sated. After a few moments, Janeway whispered. "I want to taste you." She lifted her head and stared into deep blue eyes. "Feel you come in my mouth."

Seven groaned. Her legs wobbled. She tried to hold onto Janeway, but couldn't.

Gently, Janeway slid out of the blonde's arms. Legs weak, she turned Seven around and pressed her against the wooden frame. "Let me taste you," she whispered.

Dropping to her knees, onto the dark stains of her own juice and sweat, Janeway slipped her hands into Seven's uniform pants and pulled them down slowly over her hips. She buried her head into Seven's saturated dark briefs, and breathed in deeply. Home, she thought hungrily as her nose pushed into the dampness. She smells like home.

Seven's head lolled back and fingers dug into the wall. "Kathryn," she whispered as Janeway slipped her underwear down.

Janeway held back a smile when Seven's legs almost slipped from under her when she nibbled lightly on her inner thigh.

Seven braced herself against the wall.

"Spread your legs for me."

Hurriedly, Seven kicked off her pants and briefs then slowly parted her thighs.

Hungrily, Janeway watched Seven trustingly splay her legs. Her eyebrows rose as the smattering of light blonde hair revealed delicate, fully open, engorged slick pink lips that were oh so very wet. Janeway swallowed when she saw that her clit was fully out from under its hood. Eyes widening, she watched Seven ooze. Feeling like a wolf about to attack its prey, she held back from licking her own lips. Moving closer, her mouth watering, she breathed in deeply. Her breath whispering over the short curls, she murmured, "Tell me who you want?"

Seven moaned.

"Tell me?"

"You," Seven strangled out.

"What else?"

"I." Seven swallowed. "I want you to fuck me...Kathryn."

Hearing the same anguish mixed with want and desperation that had wrung the same words from her earlier, Janeway groaned. Wishing that her arms were long enough to hold Seven's breasts, as she licked her all the way back to the Delta Quadrant, she said huskily, "Give me your hands."

Seven held out her hands, Janeway took them and kissed each upturned palm lovingly before entwining her fingers through them.

"Hurry," Seven said thickly.

Looking up at what was now, and had always been, the center of her universe, Janeway gave into the overriding lust thrumming within her. Her face descended into the heat.

The younger woman jerked then let out a shuddering moan when Janeway sucked her clit into her mouth. Her hands gripped Janeway's fingers, strangling them.

Janeway yelped.

Seven quickly dropped Janeway's hands and pressed hers into the wood. She shuddered. "Please."

Stretching out her fingers a few times to let the blood flow back, Janeway placed them on Seven's hips. This time, she let her tongue glide down then up Seven's open and engorged pink lips, and fought the urge to take the prize between them.

Seven cried out as Janeway sucked each lip clean. Slowly, she slipped her tongue into the folds and sucked every piece of flesh into her mouth, except her clit, until there was nothing left to taste.

"Kathryn," Seven whimpered, her hips thrusting.

Knowing that Seven was being driven crazy, Janeway's tongue pushed deep inside her, followed quickly by her fingers as she licked her way to her prize.

Seven's head snapped, and her body began to spasm.

Thrusting into Seven, Janeway sucked her clit fully into her mouth. And almost smiled when Seven's internal muscles tried to hold onto her fingers as they slid out. Using the base of her tongue she allowed Seven to work it. Moaning, Seven's human hand slipped through Janeway's hair and held her head tight as she worked her clit over her tongue. Her other hand dug into the wooden frame as her hips bucked.

Her mouth full and fingers thrusting deep inside the tight confines of Seven, Janeway's eyes popped open when she heard a slow strangling cry. The sound of wood creaking then snapping reverberated around her as Seven thrust forward and a feral scream ripped from her mouth.

Gasping for breath, Janeway dropped to the wooden floor when Seven eventually released her. Breathing heavily, her mouth and cheeks coated, she looked down to see rivulets of the blonde's juices running down between her breasts. Wiping her mouth, she watched the tall frame slide down the woodwork.

Moving into Seven, Janeway felt strong arms fold around her. They held her for a long time.

"So that is what I was missing," Seven eventually murmured in Janeway's hair.

Pulling her head up, Janeway's mouth gaped when Seven laughed softly. Stunned, she stared at her. "I have never heard you laugh before."

Seven raised her ocular implant and looked at Janeway in surprise. "Nor have I."

Kissing her gently, lovingly, Janeway realized with a smile, that Seven's lips were softer than silk.

Eventually, Seven whispered. "This is our time," Kathryn." Slowly, she moved. Standing, she reached down and helped Janeway up. "This is where we begin."

"Begin?"

"Yes," Seven replied looking at Janeway possessively as she stood in front of her. "Together," she said. "This is where we begin our lives together." She raised her ocular implant and appraised the redhead's naked form.

"I couldn't agree more," Janeway replied, smiling.

"I recommend that we retire to bed, Kathryn."

Janeway raised her brow. "Would you now?" She added mischievously, "Shouldn't we discussing our being together?"

"Not tonight."

"I see," Janeway responded teasingly. "Why is that?"

Taking Janeway's hand, Seven answered as she moved quickly, graciously through the house to the main bedroom. "Tonight I want more." There, she pressed Janeway onto the bed, and covering her body with her own sleek frame, whispered hungrily into her mouth as the doors slid closed behind them, "So much more."

**The End**

---