In a Hundred Lifetimes
by MiaCooper

Summary

A temporal paradox gives Janeway the chance to reassess the choices she’s made and those she’s going to make, even when the future seems inevitable.

Notes

Written for the J/C Cutthroat Fiction competition, Alpha group, Round 2. My prompt was “a good old-fashioned time loop” and for bonus points, only one character was able to remember.

Thanks to Helen8462 for her always insightful help with brainstorming ideas and plot points and technobabble, for the tireless beta, for her friendship and encouragement, and for providing a killer line that helped me shape the ending.

(I'll post one part per day until this is all up. Hope you'll bear with me, and enjoy it.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
“For two people who started off as enemies, it seems we get to know each other pretty well. So I’ve been wondering … just how close do we get?”

“Let’s just say there are some barriers we never cross.”

My question, and Chakotay’s reply, echo in my head as I leave Engineering. There was a world of unspoken feeling buried in his response; so many layers of emotion that my first instinct – always the scientist, always seeking truth – was to press further. Dig deeper.

And yet there was warning, too, in the very vagueness of that answer. *Here be dragons*, I muse as I move along the corridor.

In the end, maybe I didn’t really want to know.

He’ll be initiating the pulse in a few minutes; enough time, barely, to get back to the bridge where this crazy time-tripping day began. Yet my steps slow as I reach the turbolift.

Maybe I do want to know, after all.

Raising my chin, I wait for the doors to close and pronounce clearly, “Astrometrics.”

I almost don’t make it back in time. Hurrying to my chair, I glance to my left and find the grizzled head of Aaron Cavit, bent over the console between us. For a moment I picture a different man in the first officer’s chair – taller, broader, darker hair – and I have to bite my lip against a wave of sadness.

In a matter of days, Aaron Cavit will be dead. And I’m still struggling with the knowledge that there’s nothing I can do to change that fact.

“Ensign?” I address Kim, dragging my gaze deliberately away from Cavit.

“Chakotay should be initiating the pulse in ten seconds,” Kim responds. “Five, four, three, two …”

The world turns white.
In the space between chaos and shape there was another chance.
— Jeanette Winterson

_Voyager_ jolts hard enough to toss Cavit to the deck, and I grab my armrests just in time to prevent a similar fate. The ship is still shuddering as my XO climbs back to his seat.

“What was that?” I’m already calling up readings on the console. Readings that make no sense.

“Unknown,” Ensign Kim calls from the Ops station. “Warp and impulse engines are off-line. Some kind of anomalous energy field is surrounding the ship.”

There’s something familiar about the off-the-wall sensor information I’m getting. A pattern I’ve seen before, perhaps.

“Sir?” Kim raises his voice. “I’m afraid I don’t know you …”

My neck tightens. I could swear I’ve heard Ensign Kim say those exact same words before.

“Captain,” hisses Cavit beside me. I turn in the direction he’s looking and immediately jump to my feet.

There’s a man standing on my bridge, looking around in confusion. A man who doesn’t belong here.

Apprehension snaps along my spine, and I bark out, “Take him into custody.”

Lieutenant Andrews steps up with his phaser at the ready, two other security officers flanking him quickly.

“How did you get aboard this ship?” I demand, moving to the upper level.

And the Maquis terrorist in a Starfleet command uniform stares at me, and in a tone of soft bewilderment he asks, “Kathryn?”

Wait a minute.

He’s not a stranger. I know this man, and I don’t just mean from his intelligence file.

“I didn’t realise we were on a first-name basis,” I growl automatically, but my voice trails off as I continue to stare at him.

Chakotay.

_In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself astray…_ The voice in my head is so clear, and it’s his voice.

Shaking it off, I step up close to him, cataloguing his slight intake of breath and the way his pupils widen.
“Captain,” he says quietly, “I know this is hard to believe, but I think I’ve somehow been thrown seven years into Voyager’s past –”

I know this. Deep in my bones I know it, and I don’t understand how.

It frightens me, and I break his locked gaze and nod to my security team. “Take him to the brig.”

Chakotay doesn’t protest as two of my officers usher him into the turbolift. As the doors close I meet his eyes again, and the expression in them makes me frown.

I glance down to the command level, where Commander Cavit stands by his chair.

“Captain,” he says, “we have to consider the possibility that there are other members of the Maquis aboard. Internal sensors are off-line.”

I nod. “Organise security teams to run a deck-by-deck search. I’ll deal with our friend in the brig shortly. In the meantime, Ensign Kim, let’s figure out what’s happened to my ship.”

“Aye, Captain.” Kim turns dutifully to his console and I move over to stand beside him, but I’m not concentrating on the readings displayed on the panel.

I’m trying to understand why the Maquis captain looked at me with the kind of deep, abiding affection that only happens when you’ve known and cared about a person for a very long time.

But I’ve never met the man before in my life.

I’ve only been in my ready room for five minutes when the door chimes.

“Enter.”

Lieutenant Stadi steps into my office. “Captain, I’m sorry to bother you.”

“What is it?”

She comes close to my desk and I can see that she’s twisting her hands together, face pale. “It’s the strangest thing,” she says. “I’m picking up mind-chatter from all over the ship, but –”

“But what?”

“I don’t recognise some of the people I’m hearing.”

I’ve learned to take Veronica Stadi’s instincts seriously. “Could it be the Maquis?”

“Possibly. Some of the thought patterns are slightly aggressive.” She shrugs. “I’m not sensing any malicious intent. More … a sense of alertness, of being ready to fight or flee.”

“Can you tell where they’re coming from?”
Stadi frowns, concentrating. “Engineering, I think. It’s hard to be sure.”

I tap my combadge. “Commander Cavit, please come to my ready room. And bring a security team with you.”

Cavit appears a moment later with Foster and Molina in tow.

“Stadi, I want you to make your way down to Engineering. Report back to me at regular intervals. If you pick up anything else, let me know immediately.”

She nods, leading the security officers through the auxiliary door into the corridor, and I wave Cavit to a seat.

“Stadi says she’s picking up thought patterns from people she doesn’t believe are on our crew,” I explain.

“Are we under attack?”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine how –”

“Captain!” Crewman Foster rushes back through the door without requesting entry. “Lieutenant Stadi just disappeared.”

“Explain.” I’m already on my feet, following Foster into the corridor. Molina is standing by the bulkhead, tricorder in hand. Stadi is nowhere to be seen.

“She was ahead of us,” Foster explains. “When she moved past that bulkhead there was some kind of disturbance, like a ripple in mid-air. She just vanished.”

*My helmsman disappeared when she tried to walk down that corridor.*

Pressing a hand to my forehead, I try to shake off the unsettling feeling of hearing my own voice in my head, speaking words I don’t recall ever saying. “Scan the perimeter. Don’t let anybody go past that section. Commander,” I nod to Cavit, “let’s get back to the bridge. I need to know what the hell is going on on my ship.”

“It’s some kind of spatial anomaly.” Kim has the lateral sensors online and we’re staring at an image he’s projecting on the main viewer: malevolent brown clouds roiling with purple slashes of lightning. “It’s putting out terajoules of neutronic energy, but sensors can’t penetrate it. There’s no way the Maquis could have done this, Captain.”

“Then why is that man on my ship?” I mutter. Straightening, I address Cavit. “Commander, I’m going to the brig to question our visitor. You have the bridge –”

The turbolift swishes open, and Chakotay steps out – alone, unrestrained and still in Starfleet uniform.

“Where are my officers?” I demand.
“We passed through a temporal barrier, and they disappeared.” The Maquis captain looks faintly amused.

His cavalier attitude ratchets my apprehension into anger. “If you have an explanation for this, Mr Chakotay –”

“I do,” he cuts in. His head tilts to one side as he studies me, and my back stiffens further at the familiarity in that gaze. “Are you willing to hear me out?”

“My ready room,” I order, brushing past him.

Andrews moves to follow but I hold up a hand to stay him. Protocol would dictate that I have a security officer accompany us, but something inside me, something soft and insistent, is telling me that I’m safe alone with this man.

And in case that inner voice is lying, I have a phaser.

It’s relatively easy to believe his preposterous story of a gravimetric surge that time-shattered my ship. I can even accept his assertion that he’s from seven years in my future. Who could make up a tale like that?

He won’t tell me anything of substance, deflecting my questions with an ease that irritates me irrationally. He quotes the temporal prime directive repeatedly until I’m forced to accept that he isn’t going to budge.

What isn’t so easy to accept is that he knows me. He knows things about me, personal things that only those closest to me would know. The way he speaks to me is so familiar – we’re friends, he says. He stands so close, his eyes warm as I scan the hypospray he’s handed me, his mouth quirking into a smile as I question him suspiciously. His gaze continually drifts toward my lips when I speak. He uses my given name, speaks it as though it’s something familiar and precious to him.

Friends. I can’t help wondering if the nature of that friendship is one more thing he isn’t telling the whole truth about.

The hypospray does contain some kind of chroniton-based serum, just as he claims – and just as, somehow, I knew it would. “What are you planning to do with this?”

“It allows me to move into areas of the ship that are existing in other timeframes,” he explains, then hesitates. “If you’ll inject yourself with it, you could come with me.”

I raise my eyebrows. “On the other hand, you could be attempting to kidnap me.”

“To what end?”

“How should I know? Maybe you’ve concocted some kind of plot to take over the ship.”

A dimple appears briefly in his cheek. “Me and my army of Maquis rebels from the future, you mean?”
I place the hypospray on my desk and lean against the edge of it, crossing my arms. “All right, Mr Chakotay, you seem to have this all figured out. What’s your plan?”

“We need to get to the astrometrics lab. It has temporal sensors we can use to –”

I scoff. “And you were doing so well. There is no astrometrics lab on Voyager.” I tap my combadge. “Security to the ready room. Our guest will be returning to the brig.”

I straighten to move away from my desk, and a brown hand shoots out and circles my wrist. “What do you think you’re –”

“Sorry, Kathryn,” he says grimly, pulling me in close. My back is pressed to his chest, his arm around my waist, immobilising me. He grabs the hypospray and empties it into my neck.

“Let go of me!”

“We don’t have time for this,” he mutters as he drags me toward the auxiliary access door. “If you’d just trust me…”

“Trust you!” I start to struggle in earnest and the arm tightens around me. I can feel his breath against my hair.

My ready room door slides open to admit the security team just as Chakotay wrestles me out into the corridor. “I don’t want to hurt you,” the terrorist insists, wincing as my boot heel connects with his shin. “Please, Kathryn.”

Maybe it’s the way he says it – pleading, desperate – or the way he’s holding me; firmly, yes, but carefully, as though he knows I bruise easily. Maybe it’s the inexplicable, unshakeable knowledge rooted deep inside me that despite his actions, this man would never hurt me.

I cease my struggles, and as Lieutenant Andrews rushes toward us I order him to stand down. Then there’s the strangest feeling – cold so intense it feels as though my heart skips a beat – and Chakotay eases his hold on me.

Andrews stops dead and I can see him staring directly at me, face creased in bewilderment. He taps his badge. “Andrews to the bridge. I need help here.”


Chakotay says, “He can’t hear you.”

I feel the warmth of his breath against my cheek and the rumble of the words in his chest, and I barely suppress a shiver.

“We’ve moved into a different timeframe,” he continues. “The proof is right down that corridor, Kathryn. You just have to trust me.”

Those words. Those words are familiar, and so is the feeling that I can trust him. Still, contrariness prompts me to retort, “How am I supposed to trust you when you just attacked me?”

His arms drop immediately and I step back, turning to look into his face. He looks dismayed. “Did I
“hurt you?”

“I’m tougher than I look,” I answer, but there’s no bite to my tone.

“I’ve never met anyone tougher,” he says, and that dimple appears again.

I force myself to look away, gesturing to Andrews and Cavit, who’s appeared from the bridge. They’re barely three metres away but it’s clear they can’t see or hear us. “If I understand this correctly, now that I’m inoculated I can pass through these temporal barriers at will.”

“You can.”

“Then I guess I don’t need you anymore.”

I move to push past him and he steps into my path. His hand is on my upper arm, holding me. “Without me,” he says, “you’ll be walking into a future you know nothing about.”

_A future you know nothing about._

I can no longer ignore it: this sense of unsettling familiarity. I stare at him, hard.

“What is it?” he frowns at me.

“You said the ship was in a state of temporal flux,” I answer. “Is it possible that this anomaly has created a paradox?”

“What kind of paradox?”

“A time loop.”

“I haven’t experienced that kind of phenomenon.” He raises his eyebrows. “But you’re the quantum physicist.”

“That doesn’t make me an expert in time paradoxes.”

“No,” he answers with a rueful smile, “but you’ve experienced more than your share of temporal incidents. Or at least you will.”

He grins, and I roll my eyes.

“Why do you ask?” he goes on.

“Because ever since the first time you stepped onto my bridge, I’ve had the feeling that it wasn’t the first time at all. I’ve been experiencing déjà vu – things you’ve said and done, things that have happened. The only explanation I can come up with is that somehow, I’ve been here before.”

He looks at me thoughtfully. “A few years ago you had an experience that prompted you to re-evaluate your belief that everything has a scientific explanation. Maybe this is another of those experiences.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Or maybe there’s a perfectly sound, _scientific_ explanation for it after all,” I reply smartly.
Chakotay smiles. “You’ve never been one to let a mystery lie, Kathryn. But asking questions isn’t the only way to get the answers you want. Sometimes you just have to live in the moment.”

“A soldier and a philosopher,” I comment dryly. “Your intelligence file doesn’t do you justice.”

His answering laugh makes me feel irritatingly warm inside.

“Well, Mr Chakotay, I can’t promise not to ask you questions, but I suggest we start trying to put my ship back together.”

Still grinning, he gestures for me to precede him down the corridor.

The young woman with the strawberry-blonde hair stares at me with tears in her eyes. “Captain,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry, I don’t recognise you,” I check her collar, “Lieutenant.”

“It’s me –”

“Naomi Wildman,” I interrupt her, suddenly sure. “Your mother is Ensign Samantha Wildman.”

I can feel Chakotay turning to stare at me. “How did you know that?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter. My gaze drifts to the dark-haired commander beside Lieutenant Wildman. “Your name is Icheb.”

“That’s right,” he says. He’s staring at me too, and at Chakotay. Staring in disbelief and wonder, as if we’re some kind of apparition.

“Something tells me you weren’t expecting to see us,” Chakotay offers.

“You both died seventeen years ago,” Wildman answers starkly.

“How?” I ask. “What year is this?”

“Captain,” Chakotay murmurs. “I think we should respect the temporal prime directive.”

“Yes,” I force myself to say. “You’re right, of course.”

Chakotay addresses Icheb, “We haven’t risen from the grave. The ship’s been fractured into different timeframes.”

“Thirty-seven, to be exact,” Wildman replies, and at my curious glance, adds, “We’ve had seventeen years to upgrade the sensors.”

“A chrono-kinetic surge impacted the warp core,” Icheb explains. “It shattered the space-time continuum throughout the ship.”
“If we can get to the focal point of the surge, maybe we can counteract it,” I suggest.

Wildman is shaking her head. “That section was completely destroyed. If we could find Seven –”

“Seven?”

“She’s likely to be in the cargo bay, if anywhere,” Chakotay chimes in.

I want to ask why, and who this Seven is, but Chakotay’s constant reminders about the temporal prime directive are fresh in my mind. “Lead on, then, Mr Chakotay.”

“Commander,” Icheb calls as we move toward the door.

Commander? I give Chakotay a hard look which he ignores, turning to Icheb with raised eyebrows.

“I just wanted you to know that I never told Neelix where you kept your cider.”

Chakotay sends him a smile. Just as we reach the door, I glance back at Naomi Wildman. She’s biting her lip, staring after the pair of us with an expression of open longing.

We died seventeen years ago in her timeline. She must have been only a child, and she still looks as though she misses us every day.

I wonder what she would do differently if she had the chance.

I wonder what happened to us. How did we die? Why were we – Chakotay and I – together when it happened? Why does this Maquis rebel I’m duty-bound to arrest wear a Starfleet uniform and call me his friend?

“Commander?” I ask Chakotay pointedly as we walk side by side along the corridor.

His hand strays upward to tug his ear.

“It’s your provisional rank,” I add, nodding toward the insignia on his collar. “How did that come about – that you joined Starfleet again? How did those two officers know you?”

He stays silent.

“Mr Chakotay, if you expect me to trust you, I’m going to need at least some answers.”

“Fine.” He sighs, halting to face me. “I’m going to be your first officer.”

I narrow my eyes. “How, exactly, does that come to pass?”

I can see him choosing his words very carefully. “My ship will be sacrificed to protect Voyager from an enemy, and you’ll take my people aboard. Due to certain … circumstances … we’ll be forced to blend our crews.”

“I can’t imagine any circumstance under which that could happen.”
“That’s because the circumstances are unimaginable.” His eyes are serious as he looks down at me. “But we’ll come through it and we’ll thrive, because we have a captain we’d follow to the ends of the universe.”

The intensity in his voice makes me blink.

“You told me you’re from seven years in my future,” I go on slowly. “If that’s true, and you’re my first officer, what happens to Commander Cavit?”

He just looks at me, eyes sad.

I take the blow on the chin. “How many others?” I demand. “How many of my crew are dead in your time?”

“There will be casualties,” he admits, gesturing to me to continue walking. We step into the turbolift. “But we’ll gain new crewmen as well.”

“Like those two officers in Astrometrics?” I think about the young lieutenant. “Naomi Wildman, the daughter of my science officer?”

“Yes. And Icheb – we rescued him from the Borg a couple of years ago.”

“The Borg?”

“He’s not the only one.” The turbolift stops and we step out, the cargo bay doors opening on our approach.

I stop dead. Fear tightens my spine at the sight before me: the dim green glow of luminescence, the alien technology, and –

“What’s happened to this vessel?” demands an imposing cybernetic figure, halting in front of us.

“Maybe you’d better fill me in,” I address Chakotay tightly.

“Captain, meet Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero-One,” he introduces us. “You rescued her from the Borg four years ago – my timeframe, of course.”

“Are you telling me Voyager’s cargo bay has become a Borg regeneration chamber?” I glare at him. “And I allowed this to happen?”

“It looks like this section exists in the timeframe when you forged a temporary alliance with the Borg,” Chakotay says reluctantly.

“Your discourse is irrelevant,” declares the drone before I can respond to that unfathomable statement. “We must return this vessel to its original timeframe.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Chakotay asks her.

“Bio-neural circuitry,” I blurt. A memory I can’t possibly own floods over me. “We need to inoculate the gelpacks throughout the ship with that chroniton-infused serum you used on me, then use the warp core to initiate a chroniton pulse.”
Both Chakotay and Seven of Nine turn to look at me.

“Your plan is acceptable,” the drone approves.

“Thanks,” I mutter with only mild sarcasm. I can’t wait to get out of here. “Mr Chakotay, shall we?”

“However,” Seven of Nine rolls right over me, “administering the serum would be more efficient with more drones. We could assimilate you into a small collective –”

“No thanks,” I cut in. “I’d prefer your nanoprobes to stay right where they are.”

Grasping Chakotay by the elbow, I hustle him out of the cargo bay.

Over the next few hours we encounter macroscopic germs, comatose crewmen in the corridors, a monochromatic holodeck program featuring a flamboyant villain who seems to be in love with me – a fact that Chakotay finds terribly amusing – and a holographic doctor who inadvertently lets slip more than the temporal prime directive would allow. Including the fact that my ship is stranded half a galaxy away from home.

It’s only after we visit the transporter room, where a belligerent half-Klingon woman in Maquis leathers accuses me of destroying our only way home from the Delta quadrant, that I can’t hold my silence any longer.

“She said it was my fault,” I burst out. “What did she mean by that?”

“B’Elanna was angry,” Chakotay demurs. “From her perspective, we’ve only just been stranded.”

“Because of me,” I insist. “She was right, wasn’t she? I made that decision.”

“You made it for the right reasons.”

“To save the Ocampa.”

He stops, staring at me. “Yes. How could you know that?”

“Remember my theory about being caught in a temporal loop?” I raise an eyebrow at him. “The evidence is becoming overwhelming.”

“Then why are you the only person who seems to be experiencing it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you remember anything else?”

I frown, staring at the deck. Then it comes to me.

“I lent you my copy of Inferno,” I exclaim. “My fiancé gave me that book and it’s precious to me. I’d never lend it to anyone.”
A fascinating array of expressions flits across his features, too quickly to analyse them.

“Why would I do that?” I ask, softer, stepping closer to him. He shifts on his feet and, thinking he’s dodging away from me, I place a hand flat on his chest.

He sucks in a breath and colour flushes into his face. A tingle shivers along my spine and I step back, my hand falling away.

“We should keep moving,” he mutters, and this time when he sidles away from me, I let him go.

I can feel him glancing at me as we stand in the turbolift heading for deck two, but I’m preoccupied with thoughts I have no desire to share, so I ignore him.

This man is a stranger – no matter how familiar, how known he seems – and more than that, he’s supposed to have been my prisoner. Yet somehow he and I will end up serving together for at least the next seven years, thrown together by circumstance but eventually, it seems, growing close enough that I will lend him one of my most prized possessions.

A possession I was given by Mark, no less. The man I’ve loved for years now, the man I’m going to marry. I can’t imagine letting that go. Letting Mark go.

Evidently, sometime in the near or distant future, I will do exactly that. Mark’s place in my life will apparently be filled by my unexpected first officer. At least, to some degree.

And it makes me wonder… just how close do we get?

I can’t do this. I can’t let this happen.

Tuvok’s heart-wrenching farewell as he dies from radiation sickness leaves me shaken to the core, but it’s not only that. All I’ve seen during this strange trip around my future is destruction and danger and, yes, death.

Things only get worse when Chakotay breaks the news about the occupants of Engineering: a Cardassian spy and her companions of a Delta quadrant race named the Kazon. That explains the aggression Lieutenant Stadi was sensing, in any case. Still…

“This Seska was a member of your crew,” I ask, arching a tart eyebrow at him, “and you had no idea she was Cardassian?”

He looks so angry and ashamed that for a moment I’m sorry, but all he does is tighten his lips. I catch myself looking at them, wishing he’d smile instead, the way he seems to do whenever he thinks I don’t know he’s watching me. The stray thought makes me grit my teeth. Chakotay’s lips are the last thing I should be noticing right now.

Still, I can’t help letting my gaze drift to those lips again and again as we walk toward Sickbay,
outlining our plan to inoculate crew members from various timeframes to help us overpower Seska. For the first time, Chakotay reluctantly agrees that the work will go faster if we split up.

I have every intention of taking advantage of this freedom from my over-protective future first officer. I’m going to find out as much as I can about life on my stranded starship, temporal prime directive be damned. With that in mind, I volunteer to administer the serum to the crewmen in the mess hall and Astrometrics, but Chakotay is, unfortunately, wise to my tactics. He shakes his head.

“Sorry, Captain. I think it would be best for you to limit your exposure to the later timeframes. I suggest you inoculate the crewmen on the bridge and in the transporter room. I’ll take the rest of the ship.”

“You want me to inoculate a pair of Maquis who have fresh reason to distrust me?” I ask him dubiously.

“B’Elanna and Ayala won’t hurt you.”

He seems very sure of it, but I’m unconvinced.

“All right,” he concedes. “Tell B’Elanna if she harms a hair on your head, I’ll publicly remind her of what happened that time she and Henley had too many drinks on Nivoch.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Do I want to hear this story?”

He chuckles. “Let’s hope you never have to. Ready to go?”

I tighten the buckles on the odd over-the-shoulder contraption the EMH has replicated to enable us to carry the hyposprays full of chroniton serum.

“Ready.”

The plan is executed perfectly, and Seska and her Kazon allies are quickly vanquished and stashed in a Jeffries tube. Seska’s murderous glare as she narrows her eyes at me brings a shiver to my spine.

“She really doesn’t like me,” I mutter so that only Chakotay can hear.

He winces. “She wasn’t your favourite person, either.”

“Wasn’t,” I repeat. “What happened to her?”

“Let’s just say she’s no longer a problem,” he shuts me down firmly.

I stare at him for a moment longer, then turn to face my assembled crewmen and the Borg and Maquis who’ve assisted us.

“We should all return to our sections,” I announce. “As soon as Chakotay initiates the warp pulse he should find himself back in his original timeframe. He’ll have a few seconds to reverse the deflector polarity to counteract the gravimetric surge. If all goes as planned, the ship should return to temporal sync at the moment it encountered the anomaly, and none of us should have any memory of what’s
happened here.”

Even as I speak, I’m wondering if that’s true. I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve experienced these events before. It’s more than just déjà vu. But there are other priorities right now.

They disperse, and I’m left alone with the man who will soon become my first officer, and my friend. And I have to know. Even though, if everything goes as it’s supposed to, I won’t remember his answer.

“Mind if I ask you a question?”

He looks at me warily as we move over toward the warp core. “Only if I won’t have to break the temporal prime directive to answer it.”

I lean against the console, casting my eyes downward. “Maybe just a little.”

He stands next to me and I look up to see him incline his head.

“I understand the circumstances that led to us blending our crews,” I begin. “But considering you and I started off as enemies, it seems we get to know each other pretty well over the years. You told me we’re friends.”

He nods, dark eyes softening.

I take a breath. “So I can’t help wondering … is that all we are to each other? Friends?”

A hundred different expressions flit across his face. “Isn’t that enough?” he hedges.

I bite my lip. “That’s not an answer.”

Chakotay reads my eyes for a moment longer, then reaches carefully for my hand. I let him take it. His fingers feel warm and strong and unnervingly right, wrapped around mine.

“Don’t assume,” he says carefully, “that our friendship isn’t enough for me. It’s the most important, most meaningful thing in my life.”

“I sense a but coming.”

“But,” he allows, “there are some barriers we’ve never outwardly acknowledged, let alone crossed.”

He’s trying to hide it, but I see the regret in his eyes as he speaks. And then I have a mental flash of the two of us, standing in this very same spot, my hand in his just as it is now, and that same regret rising in my own chest.

I pull my hand from his and offer him a smile I hope isn’t slipping. “Well, Commander. I guess I’ll see you in the future.”

He smiles back at me. “Count on it.”

I can feel him turning to watch me as I walk away, but I force myself not to look back.
My steps are heavy as I approach the turbolift that will return me to my bridge. Faces drift across my mind’s eye – Tuvok, dying in pain; B’Elanna Torres, so angry with me that she could barely hold herself in check; Chakotay, warning me not to ask questions he can’t answer.

And the open sorrow on the vulnerable, pretty face of Lieutenant Naomi Wildman.

I step into the empty turbolift. “Deck one.”

The ‘lift starts to move.

Maybe there are some questions I shouldn’t hope to answer. Maybe it’s better to leave the future unknown.

You both died. Seventeen years ago.

I can’t believe that our deaths could have resulted in a future that was best for that young woman or the rest of this crew. And if I can avoid that fate for all of us, I’ll do it. Temporal prime directive be damned.

“Computer, halt turbolift,” I order, then after hesitating briefly, “Deck eight. Astrometrics.”
“Tell me how it happened.”

Naomi bites her lip, her eyes shifting over toward Icheb. “I’m not supposed to –”

“If it makes you feel any better,” I interrupt, “consider it an order.”

Icheb is frowning, but as Naomi gazes at him pleadingly he nods, then moves away, clearly not wanting to be associated with this breach of Starfleet directives.

I perch on the edge of the astrometrics platform and wave her to sit beside me.

“Seventeen years ago,” Naomi begins, “a version of you from the future appeared on Voyager. She was from a timeframe after Voyager had made it home, but she said that it had taken twenty-three years for them to reach Earth.”

“Wait,” I cut in, pressing my fingers to my temple. “A future version of me?”

“Yes, from 2404,” Naomi replies. “In her timeline, Voyager had returned to Earth ten years earlier. But many of the crew had died along the way, and Admiral Janeway couldn’t live with that. She’d discovered a way to bring us home earlier.”

“Clearly, it didn’t work,” I note, “or you wouldn’t be here now.”

“No.” Naomi looks at her hands. “It involved taking Voyager though a Borg transwarp hub.”

I can’t help the small sound of alarm that escapes me.

“The crew came up with a plan to fool the Borg queen. The admiral would allow herself to be assimilated and in doing so, she’d infect the Borg with a neurolytic pathogen. The Borg queen was supposed to lose control of the Collective, allowing Voyager to explode the hub and ride the shockwaves all the way into the Alpha quadrant.”

“What went wrong?” I ask faintly.

“It took some time to figure that out,” admits Naomi. “But Seven and Icheb finally realised that the admiral was suffering from a neurological condition. It wasn’t life-threatening, but it required her to have regular hexadrin injections. She’d had one administered just before she left on her final mission. Unfortunately, the increased level of hexadrin in her synaptic pathways interacted badly with the pathogen. It took far longer than she’d planned to disable the Collective.”

I’m trying not to imagine how that would have felt: assimilation at the hands of the Borg queen herself, knowing that she’d failed in her last, desperate mission … “Then what happened?”

“The queen diverted three cubes to chase Voyager through one of the hub’s conduits. We managed to destroy the hub, but we were forced to escape through an aperture that led back to the Delta quadrant. We were caught in the tail end of the shockwave and suffered extensive damage.”

She has tears in her eyes.
“What else?”

“You were fatally injured during the shockwave’s impact,” she says softly. “You died, along with four other members of the crew, including Commander Chakotay and … and my mother.”

“Oh, Naomi,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

“We’re still twenty thousand light years from the Alpha quadrant,” she says, swallowing hard. “Captain Kim is considering finding a planet to settle –”

“Captain Kim?”

“Yes.” She gives me a sad smile. “With you and Commander Chakotay gone, Tuvok stepped up to the captain’s chair, but it wasn’t long before his condition degenerated too far for him to retain command…”

“His condition?” Oh God, what now?

For the first time, Naomi hesitates. “Captain, maybe I shouldn’t be telling you all of this.”

My head is in my hands. “No. Go on, please.”

“Well, after Tuvok stepped down, Commander Paris became captain, but he and Commander Torres were killed on an away mission a year later. Since then, Harry has been the captain. We’ve lost so many people…” She sighs. “I’ve always wanted to be in Starfleet, ever since I was a little girl, but Captain, this isn’t the way I’d have wanted things to turn out.”

“No,” I answer faintly. “Me, either.”

She touches my wrist, drawing my attention. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” she says, urgency colouring her voice. “You can change it. You can make it all okay.”

“How?”

Naomi’s eyes are fever-bright. “All you have to do is remember.”
How do you go back to being strangers with someone who has seen your soul?
— Nikita Gill

“Mr Kim, report!”

Commander Cavit hauls himself up from the floor, tapping into the console between our chairs. The ship’s shuddering seems to be easing now, but internal systems are fluctuating and the sensor information I’m seeing doesn’t make any sense.

“Unknown, Captain.” Kim sounds apprehensive. He’s so green, so eager to prove himself. I want to reassure him that I know he’s going to become one of my best people, but –

The passing thought causes me to frown. How do I know that? I only met Ensign Kim a week ago…

“Warp and impulse engines are off-line,” Kim continues. “There’s an anomalous energy surge surrounding the ship.”

“Get me external sensors,” I order. “I want to know –”

“Sir?” Ensign Kim’s voice interrupts me. “I’m afraid I don’t know you.”

A prickle tightens the back of my neck and I rise. Somehow, inexplicably, I know exactly what I’m going to see as I turn to face the rear of the bridge.

The tattooed Maquis stands bewildered, hands resting at his sides. There are scorch marks on his uniform – his Starfleet uniform, command red, no less – and his hair is tousled. A feeling swells inside me as I look at him. Warmth, familiarity, joy.

Chakotay.

It unnerves me, and I snap, “Take him into custody.”

At the sound of my voice, Chakotay’s whole body swivels in my direction. His gaze wanders over my face, my hair.

“Kathryn?”

“I don’t believe I’ve given you permission to use my first name,” I retort, stepping to the upper level as Andrews and Molina point their phasers at him.

Except that somehow, sometime, I must have. Because my name sounds so easy, so right, on his lips.

“Captain,” he says, recovering his wits somewhat, “I think I’ve somehow ended up –”

“How did you know I was going to say that?”
I feel a slight movement of air at my back and Chakotay’s eyes shift toward a point over my right shoulder. Cavit has stepped up beside me.

“Captain,” murmurs my first officer, “what’s going on here?”

“I don’t know.” It’s the answer to both of their questions. “But I intend to find out. Mr Chakotay, please join me in my ready room. Commander,” I nod to Cavit, “you’re with me.”

The Maquis rebel stands at ease. I rest a hip against my desk, watching as Aaron Cavit scans him.

Cavit nods at me, closing the tricorder. “No concealed weapons, Captain.”

“I’m not here to hurt anybody.” Chakotay’s voice is soft. “Or to take control of your ship.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Cavit demands. “How did you get aboard without being detected? How many other Maquis are on board?”

“Commander.” I raise a hand to silence him, turning back to the Maquis. “Mr Chakotay, you have to understand our suspicions. Our internal sensors are off-line, and we have no way to confirm what you’re saying.”

“The sensors are off-line because this ship was struck by a gravimetric surge. It was emitted by a spatial rift Voyager encountered in my timeframe.”

“Your timeframe?” snorts Cavit.

“Yes,” Chakotay answers patiently. “Seven years in your future.”

“Captain, this is preposterous,” Cavit protests.

“Maybe.” I straighten up, studying Chakotay. “But I believe him.”

“Captain?” Cavit’s face is turning red.

“At ease, Commander,” I warn him. “Mr Chakotay’s story is too preposterous, as you say, to be a lie.” Turning back to Chakotay, I encourage, “Tell me more about this spatial anomaly.”

“I want it noted in the log that I object,” Cavit yelps. “He’s a traitor and a terrorist. He should be in the brig.”

I’ve had enough. “Consider it noted, and return to the bridge. Dismissed, Mr Cavit.”

Cavit’s fists clench, but he turns on his heel and storms out of my ready room. When I look back at Chakotay, I see his eyes are sparkling with amusement.

“Something funny?”
“I was just thinking about how many times over the years I’ve watched you face down bullies twice your size, just like that.”

I harden my glare at him, but it only makes him grin more widely.

“Sorry, Kathryn, that doesn’t work on me. I’ve had seven years to inure myself to it.”

“That’s Captain to you,” I snap smartly, only relaxing slightly at his chastened look. “Mr Chakotay, you may think you know me, but that doesn’t mean you can disrespect my rank.”

“It won’t happen again,” he promises, then tilts his head to the side. “Earlier, you seemed to predict what I was going to say, about being from your future. How did you know that?”

I hesitate before speaking again. “I’m not sure. I just feel as if this has all happened before. You appearing on my bridge in that uniform. Telling me you’re from a different time. Speaking to me as though we’re on intimate terms.”

I regret my choice of words immediately as his eyes widen.

“In any case,” I hasten on, “we don’t have time to wonder about that right now. We need to put this ship back together.”

Chakotay’s eyes narrow. “Put the ship back together?”

“Yes, it’s been fractured into thirty-seven different timeframes …” I trail off, frowning. “How did I know that?”

He moves closer and I find myself looking up into his face, into his gentle, dark eyes. My fingers itch to reach up and smooth back the locks of hair that have fallen over his forehead. Discomfited, I retreat, and he stays in place, obviously sensing my unease.

“You said you’re from a timeframe seven years in my future,” I stumble on through the awkward moment, “so it’s possible that there’s another kind of temporal paradox going on here. Something that explains how I’m sensing things I shouldn’t know. As though I’ve learned them before.”

“A time loop?”

“Maybe.”

“Then why are you the only one affected?”

“That’s another question I’m afraid I can’t answer.”

He looks thoughtful. “Maybe there’s a way to find out.”

“How?”

“In my timeframe, there’s a crewman aboard Voyager who knows a lot about temporal mechanics. If we can locate her —”

“The Borg drone,” I interrupt. “Seven of Nine.”
Chakotay looks at me. “Okay,” he says finally. “I’m starting to buy into this time loop theory. So, Captain, how would you suggest we proceed?”

The answer is there, I know it, but when I try to grasp it, it floats away. I frown in frustration.

“It’s all right,” says Chakotay, and I realise he’s been watching me. “We’ll figure it out, Captain. We always do.”

Before I can respond, my ready room door chimes. “Enter,” I call.

Lieutenant Stadi steps into the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Captain, but there’s something I think you should know.”

I wave her closer; to her credit, she only gives my Maquis companion a brief, suspicious glance before she continues, “I’ve been picking up emotions from various parts of the ship, and I think some of them are coming from people who aren’t members of the crew, Captain, particularly in Engineering. If I had to guess, I’d say some of them are from an alien race I’ve never encountered.”

I give Chakotay a sharp look. “What do you know about this?”

“Nothing,” he says, then adds carefully, “but if the ship exists in various timeframes, they could be from a race I recognise.”

There are so many questions I want to ask after that intriguing statement, but there are more pressing issues at hand. Tapping my combadge, I order a security team to the ready room then turn to Stadi. “Lieutenant, I want you to assess the situation in Engineering and report back on your findings. Don’t engage any hostiles if you can avoid it.”

“Yes, Captain.” Stadi nods to Foster and Molina to follow her through the auxiliary door. And I’m suddenly gripped by an urgent need to stop her.

“Wait,” I call, hurrying after them. “That bulkhead, right there. Scan it.”

Stadi flips open her tricorder. “I’m detecting a temporal displacement signature,” she informs me.

I reach over and pluck the tricorder out of her hand, then toss it past the bulkhead. There’s a strange ripple in mid-air and the device disappears.

“What –” gasps Stadi.

Chakotay gives me another penetrating look, then steps forward. “Captain, if you’ll allow me?”

I nod, and he moves in the direction of the ripple. It shimmers again and he vanishes. Moments later, he reappears.

I fix him with a stare. “Would you care to explain?”

I’ve sent Stadi and the security team back to the bridge and called Commander Cavit to rejoin us in
the ready room. Cavit moves reluctantly when I wave him to the upper level, eschewing the long couch in favour of stiffly resting his behind against the railing. I notice that he’s wearing a phaser. I can’t really blame him, though I’ve long since left mine on my desk.

Why I’m inclined to trust Chakotay is as much a mystery as my strange foreknowledge of the temporal displacement field in the corridor, or my ability to predict events just before they unfold. For now, I’m trying to stave off the inevitable headache with a very strong black coffee.

“When I woke up after the surge hit me, I was in Sickbay,” Chakotay explains, sipping the tea I’ve ordered him from the replicator. “The Doctor told me that I’d been transported there in a state of temporal flux. He’d injected me with a chroniton-infused serum to bring me back into sync. Captain, I suspect that serum has given me the ability to travel between timeframes.”

“Dr Fitzgerald keeps chroniton serum in his sickbay?” Cavit interrupts.

“Not Dr Fitzgerald,” Chakotay replies warily.

“Who, then?”

Chakotay glances at me sidelong. “The Emergency Medical Hologram. He hasn’t adopted a name.”

“The hologram?” Cavit snorts. “Where is the chief medical officer?”

“He’s dead,” I realise aloud.

The shock on Cavit’s face makes me regret not curbing my tongue; he and Fitzgerald were friends. Are friends. I shake my head. This is confusing enough without getting my tenses mixed up.

“Mr Chakotay, I’d like you to return to Sickbay and bring some of that serum back to my ready room.”

Cavit is still pale, but rouses himself to object. “He can’t wander unescorted around the ship –”

“It seems to me he’s the only one who can,” I reply. I nod to Chakotay, who exits quickly through the corridor, then turn back to my first officer. “Aaron, I understand your concerns, but I don’t believe Mr Chakotay has any hostile intent. You’re going to have to trust my judgement on this.”

“Aye, Captain,” mutters Commander Cavit.

A headache is whispering warmly at my temples and I press my fingertips against the persistent throb of it as another cup of coffee materialises in my replicator. I’ve already exceeded my personal quota of caffeine today, but this is no time to worry about self-enforced limitations.

Except, a little voice insists as my gaze falls on the photograph of Mark that I keep on my desk, it’s exactly the time.

That picture is making my conscience twinge, and I can’t push it aside. A few hours ago, Mark and I were bantering about Molly’s pregnancy and making promises to set a wedding date after my
mission to the Badlands. Then the man I was sent to capture walked onto my bridge and acted as though he’d known me for years. And, against all rational sense, I know it’s true. We’re colleagues and we’re friends, and deep in my bones, I know we’re more than that.

How does it come about that we’re thrown together? How do I know, somehow, that seven years into my future I won’t be settled on Earth, happily married to Mark? That Chakotay will be the most important person in my life?

How far do I let him in?

Just how close do we get?

My eyes are still fixed on the photo when Chakotay returns to the ready room. He stands two steps inside the door, silent. I clear my throat, hoping my voice will come out steady.

“Did you bring the serum?”

He moves closer, holding up a hypospray. “May I?”

Standing, I step around the desk and tilt my head, and he presses the hypo to my neck. A faint chill spirals through my body and I shiver. Chakotay places a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you all right, Kathr- uh, Captain?”

I step briskly away from his touch. “Fine. Let’s get started.”

We move into the corridor behind the ready room and I stop short in front of the bulkhead where we detected the temporal displacement signature.

“Mr Chakotay, it occurs to me that you know a great deal more about the things we might encounter as we pass into different time periods. Maybe you should give me a head’s up.”

His fingers stray to his earlobe and I smother a smile. He does that when he’s nervous – We’ve been acquainted for less than two hours. I’ve never had the time to notice such a thing.

“Captain,” he’s saying, “I’m pretty sure the temporal prime directive applies in this situation. The less you know about your future, the better.”

“Most days I’d agree with you, but it appears I already have some foreknowledge of things I should know nothing about. So why don’t you fill me in?”

“Oh what, exactly?” he asks, wary.

“To begin with,” I take in a deep breath, “how is it that you become my first officer?”

“I never told you that.”

“And yet it’s the truth, isn’t it?” I fold my arms, glancing pointedly at the insignia on his collar. “Provisional rank, commander. Nobody on my ship holds a higher rank except me. It stands to reason that I’m the one who commissioned you.”
“You are,” he agrees.

“Why?”

I can see him choosing his words carefully. “You and I found ourselves in a nearly untenable situation, and our best chance of survival was to work together and combine our crews. I’ve served as your exec for the past seven years.”

“In the Delta quadrant,” I interject. My eyes widen at the import of my own statement. “Oh, God. That’s it, isn’t it? Somehow we end up stranded on the opposite side of the galaxy, trying to find our way home. People have died. Cavit, Stadi … Tuvok…”

“Captain.” He’s holding my arms, voice gentle but insistent. “Tuvok is fine. He’s your security chief.”

“But he died,” I whisper. “He died of radiation poisoning, in the mess hall. He said it had been an honour to serve with me.”

Chakotay is shaking his head. “That never happened. I swear to you, Kathryn, in my time, Tuvok is alive and well.”

My focus sharpens on him. “And that’s another thing. You call me Kathryn.”

“Yes,” he says cautiously. “You asked me to. Or rather, you will ask me to, about eighteen months from now.”

“Why?”

“Because …” He sighs, fingers straying to tug his earlobe. I can see him deciding what to tell me, and I see the moment he thinks, the hell with it. He faces me fully, dark eyes penetrating. “Because for a few months, you and I are the only two people living on a planet, believing we’re unable to leave. You ask me to call you Kathryn, and we become… friends.”

“Friends?” Oh, the depth of unexplained subtext in that seemingly innocuous word. “We spend months alone on a deserted planet like Adam and Eve, and we become friends?”

Chakotay rubs a hand through his hair. “It’s … complicated.”

Mark’s face appears in my mind’s eye, and I know – I just know – that my loyalty to him is the reason Chakotay describes us as friends. And I understand it. Eighteen months from now, I won’t have allowed myself to give up hope.

But seven years from now?

“Seven years,” I murmur, barely aware I’m speaking aloud. “I can’t believe he’d have waited for me.”

Chakotay shifts on his feet, drawing my attention.

“He doesn’t, does he?”

There’s that ear tug again. “Kathryn …”
“It’s all right.” I draw myself straight, refusing to let the hollow feeling rise in my chest. “It’s not as though it’s a surprise. He and I have talked about –” I stop abruptly.

What the hell am I doing, confiding in this stranger who’s already seen into my soul?

I harden my voice. “We should go. If you’ll lead on, Mr Chakotay?”

He holds my eyes a moment longer, his speaking tender volumes. “Aye, Captain,” he says softly, and we step into the future.

“Captain!”

The young woman’s eyes are wide, and her fingers twitch, fumbling briefly for support on the console behind her, before she obviously recalls herself. She straightens, clasping her hands behind her back.

“Lieutenant,” I reply, then the name comes to me, “Wildman, isn’t it?”

She nods, swallowing hard. I turn my gaze to the tall dark-haired man at her side.

“Icheb?”

Chakotay stares at me. “How did you know their names?”

“Either I’ve somehow developed precognition,” I answer dryly, “or that temporal loop theory is looking more and more likely.”

He presses his lips together, glancing back at the pair standing before the astrometrics display. “I take it you’re surprised to see us,” he addresses them.

“Of course they are,” I say. “From their perspective, we’ve been dead for seventeen years.”

Chakotay goes still.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” I brush it off. “What matters is that we need to bring this ship back into temporal sync with Chakotay’s timeframe.”

“Right,” Wildman offers hastily, stepping forward. “The temporal shattering effect was caused by a chrono-kinetic surge that impacted the warp core. Icheb and I have determined that we’re dealing with thirty-seven different time periods.”

I send Chakotay a pointed glance. “Just as I said.”

“So how do we fix it?” he asks, smiling faintly at me.

“If we can get to the section of the ship that exists in Chakotay’s timeframe –”
Lieutenant Wildman shakes her head. “That section was impacted by the surge. It’s been completely obliterated.” She sighs. “Too bad Seven isn’t here. She’d know what to do.”

“We were on our way to find her,” Chakotay explains. “Astrometrics seemed a logical place.”

“She’s in the cargo bay.”

Three pairs of eyes turn toward me, one amused, two inquisitive.

I shrug. “I can’t explain it, but somehow I seem to be experiencing some kind of temporal loop phenomenon. I don’t know if it’s related to the chrono-kinetic event.”

Naomi has a look in her eye that I recognise; I’ve seen it in the mirror often enough. “Fascinating,” she murmurs. “Captain, maybe I can investigate your situation from here. Do you know how many times you’ve experienced this time period before?”

I shake my head. “All I know is that I have knowledge of people and situations that I shouldn’t. But my condition can’t be a priority right now.” I turn to Chakotay. “Shall we?”

“Captain, wait,” Wildman pleads. “I could modify the temporal sensors to scan you. It will only take a few minutes.”

“All right,” I acquiesce, and the young lieutenant leads me over to a console.

As she taps into the display, I watch Chakotay and Icheb moving to the other side of the room, talking quietly. Icheb says something and Chakotay laughs and claps him on the shoulder.

“Antarian cider,” I murmur. “Icheb knows where he keeps it.”

“Captain?”

“Never mind.” I study my young companion. “It’s Naomi, isn’t it? Your mother is Ensign Samantha Wildman, my science officer.”

“She was,” Naomi says. “Neelix once told me you’d been planning to promote her to lieutenant, but then…”

She breaks off, her mouth clamped shut.

“She died,” I finish softly. “In the same attack that killed Chakotay and me.”

“Yes,” Naomi whispers.

“I’m so sorry.”

She tries to smile at me. “There was nothing you could have done.”

“Wasn’t there?” A memory I can’t possibly have flashes across my mind – Naomi, telling me how I’d died and taken four other crewmen with me. “It was my fault we were in that Borg transwarp conduit. My fault the assimilation virus failed.” I can feel my fingers trembling and I clench them into fists. “It’s my fault you’re in this godforsaken quadrant at all.”
“Don’t think like that, Captain.”

“How can I not?” From the corner of my eye I catch Chakotay glancing our way as my voice rises, and tamp it down with effort. “I can’t explain how I know these things, Naomi, but somehow I do. And I can’t help wondering if there’s a reason for it. What if I could use what I know to make different decisions, save the people who’ve died because of me? What if I could change our fate?”

Naomi finishes modifying the sensors and turns to face me, clasping her hands behind her back. “Which fate are you referring to, Captain?” she asks quietly. “The one where you decide not to chase Chakotay’s ship into the Badlands, and he and all his people probably end up dead? The one where the Kazon annihilate the Ocampa and we never meet Kes, or Neelix, or any of the other crewmen who’ve become my family? Because I don’t think I like the idea of that fate.”

I stare at her, listening hard.

“But,” she whispers, her head bending closer to mine, “the fate where you and Commander Chakotay and my mother die … that’s a fate I would change in a heartbeat.”

“Captain.”

I startle at Chakotay’s voice; I hadn’t even noticed him approaching. He’s watching me closely, and I wonder if I look as pale as I feel. Naomi certainly does.

“Are you ready to keep moving?” he asks me.

Naomi quickly snatches up a tricorder and aims it at me. “I’ll only be a few minutes, Commander.”

“Make it quick, Lieutenant.” He fixes Naomi with a look. “And I’m sure I don’t have to remind you about the temporal prime directive.”

She reddens. “Uh, no sir.”

“Good.” His pointed glance encompasses me as well, and I feel almost as chastised as Naomi clearly does. Irritated, I glare back at him. The corners of his mouth twitch.

“If you’ll excuse us, Mr Chakotay,” I offer frostily.

“Of course, Captain.” His smile blooms as he steps away, throwing over his shoulder, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

The moment he’s out of earshot I lean in close to Naomi Wildman again. “The hell with the temporal prime directive. Tell me about the day I died.”

I’m still preoccupied with Naomi Wildman’s tale of doom and destruction as Chakotay and I leave the astrometrics lab. Thus distracted, I barely flinch when we enter the cargo bay and find it full of Borg. Seven of Nine decides that our best course of action is to return to Sickbay and replicate enough chroniton serum to inoculate every gelpack on the ship, and without questioning her I follow Chakotay silently out of the bay.
The Emergency Medical Hologram – whose forehead seems permanently etched in a very exasperated, very human scowl – designs us a pair of harnesses to carry our precious cargo. Chakotay and I buckle them on and make our way through deck five, injecting serum into the gelpack nodes. When we’re finished we take the turbolift up one deck.

We begin in what should be a cargo bay – at least, it’s a cargo bay on my Voyager – but is instead some kind of garden. Chakotay takes it in stride, but I can’t help staring at the towering stands of greenery and exotic blooms.

And then a pixie appears from behind a stack.

“Captain,” she exclaims, her elfin face lighting up. “I’m so happy to see you. What’s happened to Voyager?”

I’m about to ask who she is when Chakotay exclaims, “Kes!”

“You know this woman?” I ask him.

“Yes.” He strides over to the pixie, clasping her hands. “I thought I’d never see you again,” he says to her.

Her smile encompasses us both and makes me feel instantly at ease. “You’re from a different timeframe,” she says. “Both of you.”

“How did you know that?”

Kes turns back to me. “I sensed it.”

“You – sensed it?”

“Captain,” Chakotay breaks in, “Kes is Ocampan. Her species has telepathic abilities.”

“Ocampan,” I repeat. “Your people are the ones –”

“The ones you saved,” she says. “Or rather, the ones you will save.” She releases Chakotay’s hands and steps closer to me. “Captain, I know you’re having doubts about the choices you’ll make. But I want you to know that your decisions have brought life to so many people. You shouldn’t doubt yourself.”

Her eyes are so wide and so earnest that I find myself wanting to believe her.

“Kes, do you sense anything more about what’s happening here?”

“You mean the time loop you’re experiencing?” Kes smiles at my obvious surprise. “I’m aware that it’s happening, Captain, but unfortunately that’s as much as I know. I can’t tell you how, or why you’re the only one who remembers events from one loop to the next. I’m sorry.”

“Well, at least you’ve confirmed that I’m not crazy,” I answer wryly.

Chakotay straightens from injecting the gelpack node. “Captain, we should keep moving. There’s a lot of ship to cover.” He smiles down at Kes. “It was good to see you again.”
“And it was nice to meet you,” I add.

“Captain,” Kes calls as we reach the exit. “Please don’t be discouraged by the future you’ll see. I just wanted you to know that every decision you’ve made has been for the right reasons.”

“She blames me for stranding Voyager in the Delta quadrant.”

I’m still shaken by the encounter with the small, ferocious Maquis in the transporter room, and Chakotay rests a hand on my shoulder. “B’Elanna was angry.”

“But she was right.” I turn to face him. “I made the decision, didn’t I? I trapped them all here, so far from home.”

“Remember what Kes told you?” Chakotay says firmly. “You made that decision for the right reasons. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

“In this case, I’m second-guessing a decision I haven’t made yet.” My steps slow as we enter the turbolift and call for deck three. “Can I ask you something?”

“If I say no, will it stop you?”

I can hear the strain beneath his light tone, but I push on. “How many died when Voyager was brought to the Delta quadrant? How many have died since?”

“We’ve suffered casualties,” he replies carefully. “But we’ve gained crewmen as well. And despite what you might think, the people on this ship are happy. Our lives may be uncertain, but they’re good lives. We’ve seen things no other humans have seen, met alien races we never dreamed existed.” He turns to me, voice softening. “And we have each other.”

My heart trips into double speed. “Are you talking about the crew,” I venture, “or you and me?”

I watch him struggle to respond, but just as he appears to find the right words, the turbolift doors open.

“Saved by the bell,” I mutter, as Chakotay almost races out into the corridor.

“Wait.”

Chakotay stops just outside the doors to Engineering and looks at me inquiringly.

“Lieutenant Stadi told me she sensed aggression from whomever is in this room,” I tell him, frowning at the closed doors. “And I know she was right. The people in here are our enemy.”

“You’re remembering something from a previous time loop?”
“Yes.” I close my eyes to concentrate. “A Delta quadrant race, and –” My eyes snap open. “A Cardassian. She was a member of your crew. A spy.”

“Seska,” Chakotay growls.

I watch his darkening expression. “Want to tell me about her?”

“Not particularly.”

“I see.”

“What I will tell you is if she’s in there, you’re right about her meaning us harm. We’re going to need backup.”

Commander Cavit is, if possible, even more suspicious of Chakotay when we return to the bridge, despite the obvious fact that I’m unharmed. Still, he complies with my orders to inoculate himself with the serum, and seems to relax a little when I dispense it to Harry Kim and Veronica Stadi as well.

When we’ve gathered enough of my present and future crew from various sections of the ship, Chakotay outlines the plan while I watch the assembled faces. The cautious optimism from Kim and Stadi, who are rightly wary of taking orders from the man they’d expected to be hunting. The open devotion from Kes and the Talaxian, Neelix, who keeps stealing glances at her. The scowling attentiveness from the two Maquis, Torres and Ayala. The calm professionalism of the seven-years-older Tom Paris, who from my perspective is fresh out of prison and all cocky bravado. I can’t help a surge of pride as I look at them. These people are in my charge, and soon to become my family.

Maybe Kes was right, after all. Maybe everything Chakotay has been trying to tell me is true, and my decision to maroon this ship so far from home was – is – the right thing to do.

The taking of Engineering runs like clockwork. Seska and her accomplices are quickly subdued and the crew dispersed to their stations, and all that’s left is for me to return to the bridge so Chakotay can ready himself to activate the chroniton surge.

And yet I linger.

“Mind if I ask you a question?”

“Another one?” His lips turn up in the smile that’s been giving me butterflies all day. “I hope I won’t have to break the temporal prime directive to answer it.”

“Maybe just a little.” I lean against the warp core controls, noting that he settles beside me, close enough to touch. “I’ve been wondering – is Naomi Wildman the only child born on Voyager?”

“So far, yes.”

“Why is that?”
He blinks. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean – seven years, Chakotay. Seven years you’ve been away from home, on a ship with a hundred and fifty people you see every day. Surely in all that time there must have been some relationships formed that are stable enough to consider bringing a child into the family.”

“There are a few,” he admits. “But – and I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, Kathryn – Voyager isn’t exactly a safe haven. We never know from one day to the next if we’re going to be welcomed or shot at.”

“You’re implying that everyone on this ship lives on the knife-edge of fear every day.” I stare at him. “I’m not sure there is a right way to take that.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Chakotay tugs his ear. “Besides, I suspect part of the crew’s reticence to pair off is my fault.”

“Your fault?”

“When we’d been in this quadrant for six months or so, I caught a couple kissing in the turbolift. I wasn’t prepared for it, and I … overreacted. Unfortunately, Tom Paris witnessed it, and I suspect he also overheard the conversation I had with you about it afterward on the bridge.”

“Why was that unfortunate?”

“Two reasons,” he answers. “One, I was strongly negative about the idea of fraternisation and I suggested you and I institute a policy to govern it. Two, Paris is the ship’s gossip.”

I blink at him. “Are you suggesting that Paris let it be known that you wouldn’t approve of people pairing off, so they didn’t? For seven years?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds pretty ridiculous,” he admits. “But this crew looks up to us – you and me. And frankly, Kathryn,” his voice begins to rise, “they’ve seen us both living lives of almost complete celibacy, and I think they believe that we expect the same of them.”

By the time he finishes, his shoulders are taut with agitation and his fist is clenched at his side. I can’t help staring at him. This is the most worked up I’ve seen him get today. And this man is supposed to a fighter so fearsome that Starfleet sent its newest ship to capture him.

There are so many things I want to unpick from the tangle of information he’s just given me, but one is forefront.

“It’s been seven years,” I say slowly. “I know Mark wouldn’t wait that long for me, and – and I think by then, I’d have stopped waiting for him.”

I look at him for some kind of reaction – confirmation, perhaps – and he looks back with gentle, sympathetic eyes. So it’s true. I take in a breath.

“You said I was celibate,” I affirm. “Why?”

“Kathryn, I can’t answer that for you.”

“What about you, then?” I’m trying not to analyse why it’s suddenly so important that I know. “Why
are you single? I mean, you’re obviously intelligent, kind … attractive,” I tail off with a blush.

“Haven’t you found the right person?”

Chakotay glances away, and when he turns back it’s with a spark in his eyes that’s almost challenging. “I have found the right person,” he says, his voice soft and emphatic. “She’s the only person for me, and I’m single because even though we can’t be together, I can’t stand the thought of being with anyone else.”

And I know, deep in my bones, that he means me. I’m that person. I’m the one for him.

My pulse speeds up and my hands prickle. I can’t help my gaze falling on his lips, and he feels suddenly so close. Too close, and yet much too far away. I feel my body lean almost imperceptibly toward him, instinct rushing me headlong onto a path I know rationally I shouldn’t follow. But then, as though he knows it so much better than I, he takes the smallest step back.

“Kathryn, I have to initiate the pulse,” he says quietly.

“Of course.” I swallow, then offer him a weak half-grin. “And I should learn not to push for answers to the questions I shouldn’t be asking.”

“Well, if by some miracle you remember this conversation in, say, seven years,” he smiles wryly, “ask me that question again.”

I match his smile with my own, and offer him my hand. “To the future, then. It’s been a pleasure getting to know you, Chakotay.”

“You, too,” he says softly.

He releases my hand and I walk quickly out of Engineering. In the turbolift, I call for the bridge.

The ‘lift begins to move, and I think about all the other questions I haven’t been given the answers to on this long, strange day. I think about all the decisions I’ve learned I will make, the outcomes of my choices, and the ones that can still be changed.

The people I can still save.

Interlude

“I won’t change my decision to strand Voyager in the Delta quadrant,” I tell the sombre-faced lieutenant. “But I want to change your past, Naomi. I can’t bear the idea of the crew losing its entire leadership within a few years, or of you growing up without your mother.”

Icheb has given up his pretence of ignoring us. Behind him, the colossal astrometrics screen displays a course that meanders through strange and distant stars.

“If there’s some way I could preserve my memory of what happens when my future self takes us through that Borg hub, maybe I could change it.”

Naomi exchanges a glance with Icheb. “There might be a way,” she offers haltingly.

“Tell me.”

“I told you about Captain Tuvok’s neurological condition,” Naomi begins slowly. “Well, his main symptoms were a loss of emotional control and an inability to form and retain memories. The Doctor started working on a treatment designed to reinforce Tuvok’s memory engrams. It worked – Tuvok began remembering things he’d forgotten – but because of the damage his neural pathways had already suffered, he was unable to distinguish the old memories from recent events. It caused him too much emotional distress, so the Doctor stopped the treatments.”

“But I’m not suffering from a neurological disease,” I murmur. “At least, not yet. Could this treatment be adapted to help me keep memories I’ve recently formed?”

Icheb approaches us, grave-faced. “Captain, you are most likely unaware that my species has a talent for genetic manipulation, and that I’ve always had an interest in neurogenetics. I followed the Doctor’s research on this treatment, and I believe it could be modified for such a purpose with relative ease.” He pauses. “Forgive me, but I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out that what you are proposing is directly contrary to Starfleet’s General Order 157.”

“That depends on your interpretation,” I reply. “But your point is taken. Consider yourselves – both of you – under orders to assist me with this mission.”

Icheb nods. “I’ll need a moment to modify the treatment protocol to ensure its compatibility with your neural pathways.”

He moves to a console and I follow, peering over his shoulder.

“The treatment is based on the theory that a temporal differential stimulus can be applied to the memory engrams, reinforcing their capacity to store and recall memories,” Icheb explains. “The Doctor and I discovered that it can be targeted to different memory types or time periods. In your case, I will direct the treatment toward retention of memories you’ve formed over the past twenty-four hours.”

“How long will the effect last?”

“Unfortunately, that’s difficult to determine precisely. Multiple treatments proved to exponentially strengthen memory recall. In your case, with a single treatment, the imprint should last for several
days to a week. Your actual recall of today’s events may eventually seem unclear and dream-like, but you’ll have time to record the knowledge in a log for later reference.”

He taps into the console and sends a command to the replicator. A hypospray materialises, and I walk over to retrieve it.

“Are there any possible side effects I should be aware of?” I ask as I hand the hypospray to Icheb.

“Not unless you come into direct contact with a concentrated field of neutrino particles,” Naomi smiles. “Or a black hole.”

“Both unlikely scenarios,” I offer dryly, tilting my head.

“Are you absolutely sure you want to do this, Captain?” Icheb asks, face grave. “Changing your future could have unforeseen effects.”

“I’ll live with it,” I reply.

Icheb depresses the hypospray and its contents seep coldly into my jugular vein. For a moment I feel woozy, and Naomi steadies me with a gentle hand on my elbow.

Straightening, I smile at the them both. “See you in the future.”

“I look forward to it,” Naomi says softly, and as I stride toward the doors, she calls after me, “and thank you, Captain.”

I cast one last look at them both before I leave this future that will never be, and return to my bridge.
Love
Has a way of wilting
Or blossoming
At the strangest,
Most unpredictable hour.
— Suzy Kassem

I clutch the arms of my command chair as Voyager yaws and shudders. Beside me, Commander Cavit picks himself up from the floor, and I have to hide a smirk at his disgruntled expression.

“Ensign Kim, report,” I call.

“Some kind of anomalous energy is surrounding the ship,” Kim replies.

“Source?”

“Unknown, Captain.” Anxiety is clear in his voice. “It’s knocked the engines off-line. External sensors just went down too.”

I tap into the console beside my chair. There’s a strange familiarity to the energy signature displayed on my screen. Something I’ve seen before …

I hear Kim raise his voice from the rear of the bridge. “Sir, I’m afraid I don’t know you…”

And as I rise from my chair, I know exactly who I’m going to see when I turn around.

I feel Cavit rush to his feet beside me. A hiss escapes him as he stares at the Maquis rebel on my bridge, wearing command red and a bewildered expression.

“What is that terrorist doing here?” Cavit snarls.

Barely hearing him, I move toward the upper level. My heart is pounding, but not with fear.

“Hello, Chakotay.”

His gaze wanders over my hair, my face. “Kathryn?”

A smile twitches the corners of my lips, unbidden. “Welcome to the bridge.”

“Captain!” The strident voice of my first officer abruptly reminds me that Chakotay and I are not the only two people here. I feel Cavit adopt a protective stance to my right, his shoulder in front of mine. “Take this man into custody,” he barks at a security officer.


“Captain,” barks Cavit. “What’s the meaning of this?”
I sidestep him and mount the stairs to stand in front of Chakotay. The certainty, the familiarity I’d felt upon seeing him ebbs slightly, but I can’t show indecision in front of my crew. “Mr Chakotay, Mr Cavit, would you step into my ready room?”

Cavit squares up to Chakotay, fists clenched at his sides and antagonism radiating from every pore. In contrast, the so-called terrorist eyes him calmly, fingers loose and shoulders relaxed.

“Take it easy, Aaron.” I move close, interposing my body between them. My back is almost pressed to Chakotay’s chest; my neck tingles at the soft wash of his breath. My stomach tightens. Every cell in my body is hyper-aware.

But I can’t think about that now.

I fix my stare on Cavit’s face until eventually, with a curl of his lip, he steps back. Grateful for the opportunity to get away from Chakotay and his unexpected, unprecedented effect on me, I immediately move to sit behind my desk.

“The instant we lost control of Voyager’s systems,” I begin, addressing Chakotay, “I somehow knew you were going to step off that turbolift. How did you get here?”

He looks at me silently for a time, then says cautiously, “I’m not sure how much I should tell you, Captain. The temporal prime directive would seem to apply in this situation.”

“You’re from the future,” I deduce immediately. “A future in which you’re a Starfleet officer again.”

“Yes.” He gives a slight smile. “Harry Kim had no idea who I was – I guess that was my first clue.”

“And from your perspective, he should have,” I muse. “Because you’ve been his commanding officer for seven years.”

“How did you know that?” Chakotay stares at me.

“I don’t know,” I mutter.

“Captain, this is preposterous,” blusters Cavit. “You can’t possibly believe there’s any future in which this insurgent regains a Starfleet commission.”

“But apparently there is,” I answer sharply. I turn back to Chakotay. “Clearly there’s some kind of temporal anomaly affecting this ship. What happened?”

He hesitates. “In my time, Voyager encountered a spatial rift that emitted a gravimetric displacement surge. It impacted the warp core, and because I was standing next to the core at the time I got hit as well. The Doctor told me my body was in a state of temporal flux when I arrived in Sickbay. From what I can gather, the same thing has happened to Voyager.”

“It’s been fractured into thirty-seven different timeframes,” I utter, half to myself.

Both Chakotay and Cavit stare at me.
“The Doctor injected you with a chroniton-infused serum,” I continue. “That’s why you’re able to move between the different time periods.”

“That would be my guess.” Chakotay studies me. “How do you know all this?”

“Because I remember going through this before.” I frown. “I believe we’re stuck in a temporal loop.”

“So why don’t we all remember it?” Cavit demands.

“I can’t explain that yet.”

Aaron Cavit opens his mouth, presumably to question further, but I hold up a hand again to silence him. “We don’t have time for this. Mr Chakotay, I want you to return to Sickbay. Replicate enough of the serum to inoculate three people and bring it back to my ready room. If we’re going to put Voyager back together, we’re going to need help.”

“Captain,” Cavit splutters, “you can’t allow this terrorist to roam freely about the ship!”

“Can you suggest an alternative plan, Commander?” I snap. “Because it seems Mr Chakotay is the only person able to cross those temporal barriers.”

“And you trust him?”

I rise from my seat, diminishing Cavit’s height advantage. “Chakotay has had ample opportunity to cause us harm, if that was his intention. Is it, Mr Chakotay?” I don’t bother to look his way, holding Cavit’s incredulous stare.

In a soft, emphatic tone, Chakotay replies: “I’d rather die than hurt you.”

His answer almost makes me falter, but I manage to keep my eyes fixed on my first officer’s and my voice steady. “Then I believe you have an assignment. Please return as quickly as possible.”

Cavit watches Chakotay exit then turns back to me, deliberately calming his voice. “Captain, I’d be remiss in my duty if I didn’t point out that your actions are contrary to our primary mission. That Maquis should be locked up in the brig, not wandering unescorted around the ship.”

“I’ll note your objections in the log, Mr Cavit. However, I don’t see that I have much of a choice.” I retake my seat. “If it will help alleviate your concerns, I intend to have you and one other crew member inoculated with this serum. I’d suggest Lieutenant Stadi. Her telepathic abilities should give us an advantage in any uncertain situations.”

“I assume that means you intend to use the serum yourself?” Cavit waits for my nod, then continues, “Then I’m forced to object again, Captain. You shouldn’t put yourself in harm’s way. Let me assign a security officer to inject with the serum instead.”

“Denied,” I answer smartly. “This is my ship, Mr Cavit, and if anyone is going to figure out how to put it back together, it’s going to be me. Now, if there’s nothing else, I’d like you to bring Stadi to the ready room.”
“All right,” I announce once the three of us have been inoculated, “I suggest that Mr Chakotay take
the lead in this operation, since he has more knowledge of what we might encounter. Chakotay, you
mentioned a crewman with skills that might be helpful?”

He nods. “The two places on Voyager where she spends most of her time are cargo bay two and the
astrometrics lab. I suggest we try Astrometrics first.”

“Astrometrics?” Stadi asks. “We have a stellar cartography lab, but –”

“We updated it a few years back,” Chakotay answers.

“We?” Stadi repeats, eyebrows raised.

“Lieutenant, I understand you have many questions,” I cut in, “but I suggest we keep them to a
minimum to avoid breaching the temporal prime directive. Understood?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Good. Lead the way, Mr Chakotay.”

“Captain,” Cavit mutters, holding my arm as Stadi follows Chakotay onto the bridge, “I don’t
understand your reasoning. Under normal circumstances you’d never allow this man to lead you.”

“These are hardly normal circumstances, Aaron. And I’m not letting him lead me. I’m simply
acknowledging his greater familiarity with situations we’re likely to run into. He is from the future,
after all.”

“Not a future I could ever imagine,” Cavit mumbles under his breath.

I choose to ignore his comment, and his scowl, as the four of us step onto the turbolift.

“She’s got a pulse,” I murmur, my fingers against the throat of the unconscious crewman lying on the
desk.

“May I?” Chakotay indicates the tricorder Veronica Stadi has found on the deck, and at my nod she
releases it to him. “I’m detecting an active neurogenic field,” he says. “This could be the time aliens
invaded our dreams. Or the day the telepathic pitcher plant put us all into comas.”

“The what?” I stare at him.

He flashes me a quick smile. “Don’t worry, we came through it. Both times.”

He offers me a hand and I take it, rising to my feet. My fingers tingle and I let go of his hand quickly,
rubbing my fingers against my trousers.

“We should keep moving.” I find I can’t quite meet his eyes. “You said we were going to the
astrometrics lab?”
Chakotay nods, falling into step with me as we follow Cavit and Stadi along the corridor. “It has temporal sensors that should help us map the different time periods on the ship. Maybe while we’re there, we can also figure out why time is repeating.”

“Naomi Wildman,” I blurt abruptly.

“What?” Chakotay stops.

“The lieutenant. Twenty-something, strawberry-blonde hair. Little spikes on her forehead, like a Ktarian.”

“How can you possibly know about Naomi?” Chakotay wonders. “From your point of view, she hasn’t been born yet. And in mine she’s only a child.”

“But I can picture her, as clear as I can see you right now.”

“Maybe you met her in a previous life.” He smiles.

“In a previous time loop,” I correct. “And something tells me we’ve experienced more than one.”

“Do you have any idea how many we’ve been through?”

“No,” I admit. “I just have this feeling that some things change each time we go through them, but other things…” Slowing my steps, I can’t help looking up into his eyes, and my breath sticks in the back of my throat. “Some things are always the same,” I finish in a murmur.

His lips part and my gaze drops to them, my hand lifting to touch his chest. The instant I make contact he sucks in a breath. Startled, both by his reaction and mine, I drop my hand as if he’s burned me.

“We need to keep moving,” I mutter, and he nods as though he doesn’t trust himself to speak.

We enter Astrometrics, and for a moment I’m dazzled by the size of the screen before me and its display of unfamiliar stars. Then a young woman’s voice breathes “Captain,” and I turn my attention to the two Starfleet officers standing in front of the platform.


---

*You both died. Seventeen years ago.*

I’d cut off Naomi’s explanation for their surprise at seeing us, immediately asking her to activate the temporal sensors and scan the interior of the ship. On the astrometrics display, I recognise stardates set months or years into my future: stardate 49630 in Sickbay, 54418 on deck two, 50028 in Engineering …

“Engineering,” I remark sharply. “There’s someone there – she wants the ship. She has allies…” I rub my temples, concentrating.

A face enters my mind: long hair, malevolent green eyes, the greyish- scaled markings of a
Cardassian.

“Seska.”

The effect on Chakotay is immediate. All the gentle humour leaches from his eyes. His body stiffens, his stance instantly combative. Menace rolls off him in waves.

Now, this is the Maquis warrior I was sent to hunt down.

I can feel I’m staring at him, but I can’t help it. My heart is thumping at the abrupt and startling change in his demeanour, but – I realise it with a jolt – I’m not afraid of him. I’m turned on. Very turned on.

Horrified, praying I’m not blushing outwardly as well as in, I clear my throat. “There’s one advantage to my remembering the events of previous time loops – I can remember now what we need to do to counteract the temporal shattering effect. Chakotay, Cavit, Stadi – we’ll need to go to Sickbay and replicate enough of the chroniton serum to inject every gelpack cluster on the ship.”

“For what purpose?” Cavit’s tone is surly.

“We’ll need to generate a chroniton field throughout the ship to force Voyager back into temporal sync. The bio-neural circuitry will act as a conductor for the field, but we’ll have to use the warp core to generate the chroniton pulse. Which means we need to take back Engineering.”

Stadi has a look of intense concentration on her face. “Captain, I think there are at least ten hostiles in Engineering. We might need help if we’re going to overpower them. They are heavily armed.”

“All right,” I agree. “Stadi, Cavit, I want you two to make your way to the Jeffries tube behind the upper engineering level. Scout the situation, and scan for the space-time distortions. See if you can access the weapons locker on deck ten without crossing any temporal barriers. If we can get phasers this will be a lot easier.”

“Understood,” Stadi replies.

Cavit is still scowling. “May I ask what you intend to do, Captain?”

“We need more manpower,” I reply. “Chakotay and I will return to the bridge and use some of the serum to inoculate a few of the crew.”

My first officer doesn’t look happy.

“Problem, Mr Cavit?” I ask sharply.

“No ma’am,” he answers, sullen.

“Then you’re dismissed.”

Cavit marches down the corridor with Stadi in tow, and I turn back to Chakotay, keeping my expression as impassive as I can.

“Let’s go, Mr Chakotay. We can start on deck one.”
Halfway into the turbolift ride, I realise that bringing Chakotay back onto the bridge probably isn’t the wisest of moves and divert him to deck two instead. I explain the situation to the bridge crew, select Andrews, Molina and Kim for inoculation and order them to rendezvous with Cavit and Stadi on deck ten. Andrews in particular questions me – politely, but he’s taking his security duties very seriously – about Chakotay’s part in the ship’s predicament and whether there are more Maquis on board. By the time I’ve convinced him Chakotay’s intentions are good, a headache is beginning to encroach.

There’s a gelpack node in the corridor outside the briefing room. I need to inject it, but first I need a few minutes’ peace and quiet. I take the opportunity to escape into the conference room. There’s a replicator in there; I could use a coffee –

Silhouetted against the stars in the darkened room is a woman I’ve never seen before.

Except, as she turns toward me, there’s something hauntingly familiar about her. Smooth hair in a chin-length bob, white as snow; a straight back; a cup of fragrant tea in her rather elegant hand.

She reminds me of my mother.

Except that my mother was never in Starfleet, and this woman is wearing a uniform I recognise as ‘fleet through and through, despite its never-before-seen design. Admirals’ bars wink on her collar.

“Who the hell are you?”

The woman steps closer, out of the shadows, and looks me up and down. A smile twitches the corner of her mouth.

“A apparently,” she drawls, “I’m you.”

“You’re the admiral,” I breathe, once shock has released its strangle-hold on my voice. “You’re the one – Naomi Wildman told me about you. You’re here to bring Voyager home.”

“Then you know what happens,” my doppelganger deduces. She cocks her head. “What are you doing here? Clearly, you’re not the Captain Janeway who just rallied her stalwart crew into defying my orders. You’re younger, and your hair…” she smiles, “I can’t tell you how much I regretted cutting it. Chakotay looked like I’d kicked him.”

I can’t even begin to respond to that, so I ignore it. “The ship has been shattered into thirty-seven different timeframes, thanks to an encounter with a spatial anomaly. I’m from a time just before Voyager apparently gets dragged into the Delta quadrant.”

For a moment her supercilious expression slips, and I read devastation in her eyes. She looks away.

“What is it?”

“You have no idea what’s ahead of you,” she says softly. “You have no idea what I’ve seen, what
I’ve had to do … I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.” She laughs, bitterly. “Even if my worst enemy has always been myself.”

“So you’ve come back to change your history, temporal prime directive be damned.”

“That’s right.” The admiral eases into a chair, eyes fixed on mine. “Are you judging me, Captain?”

I open my mouth to offer a scathing retort – and stop.

I want to change your past, Naomi … Consider yourselves under orders to assist me …

Changing your future could have unforeseen effects.

I’ll live with it.

She isn’t the only version of me who’d bend space and time to protect her people. To get what she wants.

“I have no right to judge you,” I concede, sinking into the chair beside her. “So why don’t you tell me what was so terrible about your life that you’d give up everything to change it?”

She looks at me steadily. “Are you sure you want to know? Your slightly older counterpart didn’t want to listen. At least not at first.”

I incline my head. “I’m curious. Obviously, you got back to Earth, got a promotion. Things can’t have been that bad for you.”

I know I’m goading her, and she rises to the bait, eyes flashing fury. “You have no idea what it was like. It took us twenty-three years to get home. Twenty-three years. I lost so many of my crew – I wished I’d died along with them. Cavit, Stadi, Carey … Seven … And Tuvok, locked up in a padded room scribbling mad nonsense … Chakotay …” She sucks in a breath abruptly.

“What about him?” I ask quietly, knowing somehow, from the way she said his name, that the loss of him was the tipping point.

The admiral links her fingers in her lap and stares at them. “You have no idea what’s coming,” she repeats. “It was hard, so hard… And Chakotay was the only person I could always count on. But I ruined that, too.”

She lifts her gaze and I almost recoil from the pain in it.

“I pushed him away,” she says, softly. “Again and again, until one day – long after most people would have – he gave up. He gave up on me. And it’s terribly selfish of me, considering all the lives I lost, but he’s the one that haunts me. He’s the reason I came back.”

She gives me a few moments’ silence to absorb that, then speaks again.

“I remember this day, you know. The day the ship was fractured into different timeframes. Chakotay never would tell me what happened to him that day, but I knew … I knew it was important to him. Now I see it was because he’d spent the day with you.” She smiles faintly. “We had dinner together that night, and it was the last time I can remember things being right between us. After that it seemed like we were as splintered as the ship, and the cracks just kept getting wider.”
“Until finally,” I murmur, “there were some chasms you couldn’t bridge. Some barriers you couldn’t cross.”

“I suppose so.” She sighs. “I wish there was some way you could change that. But I know that once the timeline is reset, you won’t remember this.”

I straighten in my chair. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

The admiral frowns at me. “Explain.”

“There’s something you don’t know about what’s happening today. We’re stuck in a temporal loop.”

She stares.

“And,” I continue, “I’m the only one who seems to remember anything from one loop to the next.”

I can almost see her mind working. “A causality loop?”

“That would be my guess.” I lean forward. “I think that somehow, whatever Chakotay did, or does, to reset the timeline actually causes the repeating time loop. From what I can remember – and it’s getting clearer every time we experience this day – he’ll use the warp core to initiate a chroniton pulse just before the gravimetric surge hits the ship. I think the pulse is actually attracting the surge and causing a schism in the space-time continuum. That’s why Voyager ends up split into thirty-seven time periods, and that’s why we’re stuck in this time loop.”

“The same way that the collision between the Enterprise and the Bozeman caused a space-time rupture,” she muses. “How do we fix it?”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too. Each time we experience this day Chakotay and I have used a chroniton serum to inoculate the bio-neural circuitry, on the theory that when the gravimetric surge hits our deflector dish, its energy will dissipate throughout the ship via the gelpacks and force Voyager back into temporal sync. From what I’ve gathered, that energy surge is composed of chronitons and neutrinos.”

“So if you flood the ship’s systems with anti-neutrinos just before the surge –”

“– it should neutralise the temporal displacement effect and stop the time loop from repeating,” I finish for her, mischief creeping into my voice as I add, “It’s nice to know I don’t lose my wits over the years, Admiral.”

She gives me the first genuine smile I’ve seen from her, but it fades quickly. “We always were competent at theoretical science, Captain. But I’ve learned over the years that some things are far more important, and it’s those skills we’re lacking.”

Impulsively, I reach for her hands. She jolts when I take them, as though she hasn’t been touched in so long that it’s alien to her.

“I’m not going to try to change your mind about reversing your history,” I tell her earnestly. “But I think you should know that your plan fails.”

All the brittle humour drains from her eyes. “What are you talking about?”
“The transwarp hub,” I explain. “You’re going to convince the Captain Janeway of this timeframe to send you off to be assimilated. Your plan is to destroy the Borg and their hub with your neurolytic pathogen and send Voyager home through one of the conduits. It won’t work.”

“How do you know all this?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

“Naomi Wildman,” I remind her. “She exists in a time period twenty-four years in my future. She told me about the day you came to the ship. How the pathogen was disseminated too slowly, and the Borg queen defeated you. How Captain Janeway and Chakotay died that day, and Voyager still ended up in the Delta quadrant, crippled and without its command team.”

Her face is the colour of weak milk.

“But I can help you change that,” I urge. “You have a neurological disorder that you control with regular hexadrin injections. That’s what interferes with the assimilation virus. All you need to do is remember not to take your injection before you go on your final mission.”

“How am I supposed to remember that?” she whispers. “If you’re right, as soon as you reset the time loop I won’t remember anything that’s happened here today.”

“No, you won’t,” I agree. “But I will.”

“You were gone quite a while.”

Chakotay’s voice startles me as I step out of the turbolift on deck two.

“Oh. Yes. I, uh, I had some business to take care of.”

He raises his eyebrows but doesn’t comment further. “I’ve inoculated two crew members I found in the mess hall – Tom Paris and Neelix – and I’ve taken care of the gelpack nodes on decks two and three. We should head straight to deck four.”

“Your Maquis crewmates,” I remember suddenly. “They’re in the transporter room.”

Chakotay shakes his head. “If you don’t mind me saying, Captain, this is getting a little unnerving.”

“What?”

“You predicting what’s going to happen all the time,” he explains. “Which of the Maquis are you referring to?”

“A big dark man – Aroya?”

“Ayala.”

“Yes. And the half-Klingon woman.”

“B’Elanna Torres.” He smiles.
“She’s important to you,” I deduce. I refuse to pay any attention to the small, hard kernel of envy that lodges in my gut.

“Yes, she is,” he says without further explanation. “You said they were Maquis. How did you know?”

“Because they’re not in uniform. I think they’re from a time period shortly after I stranded us all out here.”

“Hey.” He takes my arm to make me face him, his eyes gentle. “Would you stop saying things like that? I’ve spent seven years watching you beat yourself up over a decision you know, deep in your bones, was the right one.”

“Apparently that’s something that never changes,” I mutter, then at his enquiring look, “never mind. Let’s keep moving.”

He falls into step beside me.

“You were going to tell me something,” I recall. “About B’Elanna Torres. A story.”

“I was?”

“Yes, in a previous loop…” I frown, concentrating. “It had something to do with her getting drunk on a planet somewhere in the Badlands.”

Chakotay’s face lights up in a wide, wicked grin. “Nivoch?”

“That’s it.”

He starts to chuckle.

“All right,” I demand, “you have to tell me this story now.”

Injecting the remaining gelpacks and inoculating the rest of our chosen crew takes another couple of hours, and by the time Chakotay and I rendezvous with the others on deck ten, I’m in dire need of caffeine. I’m tired and headachey, and far too preoccupied with the information my older self divulged to me.

Especially about Chakotay. And about Chakotay and me.

Mark sent me a Dear John letter about four years into the journey, when we’d established contact with Starfleet, she’d told me. But in my heart I’d said goodbye to him long before then. It’s hard to hold onto a memory when your soulmate is right there by your side.

The things she told me. About arguments and away missions and laughing long into the night; about bathtubs and borrowed books and a story she knew by heart. About almosts and maybes and promises and denials, and about all the time she wasted, believing she couldn’t accept what he offered.
Don’t make the same mistake, she’d urged me, grey eyes drilling into mine. Don’t spend your life regretting the choices you make. Don’t end up like me.

Chakotay is silent beside me as we lead our motley group toward the upper level of Engineering. But I am so aware of his presence he might as well be shouting.

“Captain.” Veronica Stadi falls into step with us, startling me even though her voice is pitched low. “Could I have a word with you, please?”

“If you’ll give us a moment, Mr Chakotay?”

Chakotay falls back politely as Stadi bends her head to mine.

“I thought you should know that I’m sensing an extreme level of aggression from Commander Cavit,” Stadi whispers. “He’s incensed that you’re working so closely with Chakotay, and he doesn’t trust the Maquis.” She glances over her shoulder at the Borg drone at the rear of the group. “Or Seven of Nine, for that matter.”

I steal a glance at my first officer, who’s walking close to Andrews and Molina, face set, talking to them quietly. “Thank you, Lieutenant,” I murmur.

We stop at the Jeffries tube just outside the upper engineering station, and I open a storage locker, pulling out a tricorder. Scanning in the direction of Engineering, I hold up a hand for silence.

“I’m reading one Cardassian life sign, and about a dozen of a species this tricorder is registering as Kazon,” I pronounce. “I assume you’re familiar with them, Mr Chakotay?”

“Unfortunately.” He moves up beside me. “It’s a shame we haven’t been able to find any weapons within the temporal barrier surrounding Engineering, but at least we have the element of surprise.”

“You seem to know this Seska quite well,” I offer blandly, reading the answering flash of chagrin in his eyes. “How do you suggest we proceed?”

But before Chakotay can answer, there’s a rush of movement behind me. I turn and come face-to-muzzle with the business end of a phaser. Above it, Cavit’s eyes are livid.

“I’m assuming command of this vessel under Starfleet Order 104, section B, paragraph 1-A,” announces Cavit. “Captain Janeway, you are relieved.”

“What?”

“Take them both to the brig,” Cavit orders, jerking his head at Andrews.

I draw myself up. “Stand down, Commander, and put that weapon away. Right. Now.”

The phaser remains pointed directly at my chest. “You’re personally acquainted with this man,” he growls, indicating Chakotay. “I’ve watched the way you behave around him for hours, and there’s no other explanation for it. The two of you are lovers, and you, Captain, are a Maquis collaborator!”

“That’s ridiculous,” I snarl. “And this is mutiny. Lieutenant Andrews, disarm him.”
Andrews hesitates, glancing between Cavit and me with a desperate expression.

“Now, Mr Andrews,” I repeat, just as Cavit barks, “Don’t just stand there, arrest them!”

I feel Chakotay tense beside me, and I reach out quickly to put my hand on his arm. Aaron Cavit’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth, but he doesn’t get the chance to speak. He’s barely drawn breath when there’s the crunching sound of a piece of conduit smacking into the back of his head, and Cavit crumples to the deck.

Behind him, Veronica Stadi grips the pipe in both hands, her expression wavering between sheepish and stunned. “S-sorry, Captain,” she mumbles. “I couldn’t think of any other way to stop him.”

I hear a soft snort of laughter and flick Chakotay a quelling glare. “That’s quite alright, Lieutenant. Very quick thinking.” I nod at Andrews and Molina. “Escort the commander back to the bridge, please, and keep him under guard. We’ll take it from here.”

Even three men down, we make quick work of Seska and her friends, immobilising them and ushering them into a Jeffries tube. I make a short speech thanking this group of near-strangers for pulling together, send them off to their various timeframes, and walk slowly toward the warp core, where Chakotay waits in readiness.

He smiles as I approach. “You always did know how to inspire loyalty in your people.”

“Apparently, not everybody feels that way,” I remark. “You do realise that when I get back to the bridge I’ll have to deal with a mutinous first officer with a very sore head.”


“Never got to meet her? Is that what you were going to say?”

“Yes,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

I lower my gaze to the floor. “I know.”

“Kathryn?”

“Yes?”

He waits until I look up at him to continue. “I can’t help wondering,” he says softly, “what Cavit saw to make him believe we were lovers.”

A flush washes up from my throat and into my cheeks. “I think that’s supposed to be my line,” I mutter.

“What do you mean?”

I lean a hip against the console, tracing patterns with my fingers on its surface to avoid meeting his eyes. “I mean, I’ve asked you a question in every previous time loop, but I don’t need to ask you this
time. I already know the answer.”

“What question?” He shifts closer, ducking his head to try to catch my gaze. “Is it about us?”

“Yes,” I almost whisper, finally looking up into his face. “Because I know what Cavit saw between us. It’s been evident to me from the moment you stepped onto my bridge.”

Chakotay’s chest is rising and falling quickly, his gaze riveted to mine.

“You know – probably better than I do – that there are some lines we’ve never crossed.” I swallow hard, placing a trembling hand on his chest. “But this is a moment out of time, Chakotay. Don’t you think we deserve to step over those barriers just once? Just for this one moment?”

And before he can answer, I take that last step that brings my body almost flush against his, rise up on my toes and fit my lips to his.

I wasn’t expecting this.

It’s one thing to feel that instant fizz and thrill of overpowering attraction, rare as it is; even rarer to find a genuine admiration and enjoyment in being with a person. But to find the two together is immeasurably precious. Almost magical. So incredible, in fact, that for the brief moment in which I can still form rational thought, I mourn for the woman I’m going to become.

Because how cruel, how devastating it must be to sit beside this man every single day, to long every minute of my life just to reach out a hand and accept what he offers, when my head is telling me it’s the one thing I can’t have.

But then Chakotay presses closer, his arm winding around my waist and his tongue sliding along my lower lip, and all I can do is exist entirely in this one, perfect moment.

Heat is spiralling between us, winding me higher, stealing my breath and prickling my skin. My hands grip onto his jacket. My hips mould mindlessly to his. I feel his fingers weave into my hair, his other arm holding me close, and I pull my mouth away from his to tip my head back, gasping for air.

His lips find my throat and I can’t stop the groan that bubbles up from my chest. I want him, I want him more than my next breath – but it’s as though the sound I make breaks him out of the cocoon of desire we’ve woven around us.

Chakotay eases back, loosening his hands on me, and at my disappointed sigh he huffs out a chuckle. I open my eyes and find him watching me with a mixture of humour, affection and oh, so much want.

“That was …”

“Unexpected?” I quirk a smile at him, still fighting to control my breathing.

“You could say that.” He grins at me, wide and unabashed. “In the best possible way.”

I can’t help laughing, and by silent, mutual agreement our hands fall to our sides and we stand there,
inches apart, smiling into each other’s eyes.

“Well, Captain,” he says eventually, gently, “as much as I’d like to stand around here all day, I have work to do.”

“Yes, you do.” I step back and offer him my hand; the gesture seems ridiculously formal after that kiss – *that kiss* – but strangely right, and he takes it in his own.

“See you in the future, Kathryn,” he says.

“Until then,” I reply, “Chakotay.”

Chakotay isn’t the only one with work to do.

I make my way quickly to deck eight. I’ll only have a few minutes to do what needs to be done in order to stop these time loops from occurring, but it’ll be enough. It should be enough.

Just outside the science lab is the main bio-neural circuitry node. There’s a temporal distortion between the node and the lab; unfortunate, because I won’t be able to bring the quantum flux modulator I need for this job through the barrier. I cast about for inspiration and spot an engineering kit attached to the wall. It contains devices for monitoring EPS power flow and a range of safety tools, including a plasma fire extinguisher.

Perfect.

I drain the charge from the plasma extinguisher and fit it into the node housing. The tricky part is going to be modifying the tool into a conduit to flood the bio-neural gelpacks with anti-neutrinos, but after a couple of minutes’ cursing and muttering, I’ve done it. This time when Chakotay initiates the chroniton surge, the anti-neutrinos will counteract the looping effect and everything should return to normal. Chakotay will be the only one who remembers what happened here today, and he’ll only remember the most recent loop.

At least, he'll be the only one who's supposed to remember. But I have other plans.

I check the chrono I’ve synchronised with the timeframe in Engineering and bite my lip. It’s going to be tight, but I can still make it.

The console beside the circuitry node chirrups at me: my job here is done.

Closing off the anti-neutrino flow, I hurry down the corridor to Astrometrics.
“We’ve done this before,” I explain to the young officers in Astrometrics. “You telling me how I die, me deciding to change it, you giving me the neural reinforcement treatment. We’ve been through it four times. You don’t remember it, but I do. And I know why.”

Naomi Wildman is hanging on my every word. Beside her, Icheb shifts his feet uncomfortably.

“That serum – the one you adapted from the treatment Tuvok was taking in your timeline – you’ve injected me with it three times. Icheb, you said it was designed on a temporal phase differential protocol, and that repeated use would strengthen the memory engrams it was designed to target. Well, it worked. Each time we’ve been through a time loop I’ve remembered more, because each time the memories I gain over those several hours have ingrained themselves deeper into my neural pathways.”

“Time loop?” Naomi wrinkles her forehead.

“Yes –” I take a breath, realising I’ve rushed in too quickly. No wonder they’re struggling to catch up.

They don’t have the memories I have.

“The period of time between the gravimetric surge striking the ship and Chakotay initiating the chroniton pulse to counter it – we’ve been stuck in a repeating causality loop. None of you remember. If it wasn’t for the neural treatment I wouldn’t remember either, and we’d be stuck in this loop forever.” I can’t help a wry smile. “I guess you could say that my breaking the temporal prime directive is what’s going to set time right again.”

“The neural reinforcement serum is creating a temporal loop?” Naomi looks bewildered.

“No,” Icheb breaks in. “The interaction between the treatment protocol and the chroniton-infused serum we’ve all been injected with – that’s why the captain remembers the events of the previous time loops. Something else is causing the loops themselves.”

“That’s right,” I beam at him. “It’s the chroniton field pulse Chakotay is about to send out from the warp core. It attracts the gravimetric surge from the spatial anomaly and throws us all into a temporal paradox just as it splits the ship into multiple timeframes. But don’t worry – I’ve sent an anti-neutrino pulse through the gelpacks which should counteract the time loops.”

Icheb looks relieved. Naomi still looks confused.

“I’m here because I need your help,” I continue. “As soon as Chakotay initiates that pulse, time will reset. We’ll all be thrown back to our respective timeframes. I’ll be back on my bridge in 2371, and the events of my day will unfold in an entirely different way. What I need from you is another shot of that neural differential treatment. I need to be sure that I remember. At least long enough to do what I have to do.”

“What are you planning to do?” Naomi’s eyes are wide.

“I’m going to take a leaf out of my future self’s book,” I reply, “and make sure your history never
I step off the turbolift onto my bridge.

Aaron Cavit stands from his chair, turning toward me with a malevolent glare. Lieutenant Andrews is planted in front of him, his stance stiffening as Cavit takes a step in my direction.

“It’s all right, Lieutenant.” I raise my chin as I descend to the command level, easing into my seat. Cavit doesn’t take his eyes off me as he sits down again.

“Sixty seconds to the chroniton pulse,” Harry Kim announces from Ops.

Cavit leans in a fraction. “I knew I was right about you, Janeway.”

I fix him with the kind of stare that sends greater men than him running for the hills. “Excuse me, Commander?”

“I suspected you were a traitor all along. Sleeping with the enemy. And I was right.” He sits back, mouth twisted bitterly. “It churns my gut that I won’t remember what happened here today, but you won’t get away with it. Starfleet will find out one way or the other, and then you’ll be facing a court-martial.”

I fight down the urge to bite back at him – *don’t be so sure I’ll be the one up on charges* – but hold my tongue. There’s no point. As he said, he’ll have no memory of today’s events. And in a matter of days he’ll be dead.

I turn my face to the viewscreen.

“Thirty seconds,” says Kim.

Stadi sits quietly at the helm, hands poised on the controls, waiting. She’ll be dead soon, too. I bite my lip. If only I could have changed their fate – but I had to make a choice. I just hope I won’t regret it –

*Don’t spend your life regretting the choices you make,* my older self had pleaded with me. *Don’t end up like me.*

There’s nothing I can do to change the almosts and the maybes of the coming seven years. But if this works as it’s supposed to, everything after that is going to change. Decisions, failures, self-recriminations. Half-truths and legends and wordless conversations.

Most of all, I’m going to take a lesson from the admiral. Those bulwarks she built around her heart with bricks of fear and guilt and loneliness – I’m going to let them crumble. And I know just which barriers I’m going to tear down first.

“Ten seconds.”

On my ready room desk there’s a picture of Mark. I call the image into my mind and hold it there,
closing my eyes.

*I’m sorry, Mark. I’m so sorry.*

“Five … four …”

My thoughts are ordered, my breathing deep and even. My path is clear.

“… two, one …”

Silvery light envelops the bridge and I gasp, momentarily nauseated. The ship shudders and then goes still. The light fades.

I open my eyes to the unhurried beeping of consoles and the soft bustle of crew moving between stations. Everything looks … exactly as it should.

“Captain?” Beside me, Aaron Cavit’s brow is furrowed in concern. “Are you all right?”

“Report, Mr Kim,” I croak, still dizzy.

“Uh, all stations report normal, Captain.”

“Run an external scan. Are you detecting any anomalies?”

“No, ma’am,” he says, bewildered. “Begging your pardon, but should I be?”

I tap into the console beside my chair just to be sure, but Kim is right. There’s no spatial anomaly or temporal rift. There’s nothing out of place.

Except for me.

Because I remember everything.
And I’d choose you; in a hundred lifetimes, in a hundred worlds, in any version of reality, I’d find you and I’d choose you.
— Kiersten White

Computer to Captain Janeway.

I stop short in the act of recalibrating my chronically recalcitrant replicator. That’s a new one.

“Janeway here,” I answer, somewhat awkwardly; I talk to Voyager all the time, but she’s never initiated a dialogue with me before. “Go ahead.”

A priority message for your eyes only has been flagged on your personal console.

“Who’s it from?”

The sender is identified as Captain Janeway.

“What? Computer, are you malfunctioning?” Tossing a stembolt aside, I push up to my feet.

Negative.

“Okay then.” I sit at my desk, pushing aside the stack of crew evaluation padds I’ve been kidding myself I’ll read when I turn in tonight. “Activate console and display message.”

Please state your security code.

Stranger and stranger. “Janeway pi one one zero.”

Code accepted. Message displayed.

The console comes to life, and my face appears on screen. Younger, to be sure, hair in the prim bun I used to wear, expression earnest as my image leans forward.

I don’t remember making this log.

And then she – the younger me – begins to speak.

The ship shakes beneath my feet and I grip the railing behind the command level. This must be it.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ensign Kim replies from my chair. “Main power is being rerouted to the deflector dish.”
“Who gave that order?”

But I already know, and before anybody can answer me, the lights go out.

“Damage report, Mr Kim.”

“The deflector’s been burnt out,” he answers, “but we’re okay. No other damage.”

“Continue on our previous heading, Mr Paris. One quarter impulse.”

Kim vacates my chair for me, and just as I settle into it I hear the turbolift doors behind me slide open, and Chakotay steps onto the bridge. For a moment I expect to see a strange harness strapped across his chest, scorch marks on his uniform, but the image flickers and disappears, like a dream. Or a memory I never should have had.

“Do you mind telling me why B’Elanna burned out the deflector dish?” I demand as Chakotay walks down to stand in front of me.

“Actually, I ordered her to do it.” His hands settle on his hips as though he’s standing his ground, preparing for me to fire up at him. But his eyes are lit with a different kind of heat.

“Why?”

“Trust me,” he answers, “it was better than the alternative.”

“Which was what?”

“I can’t tell you,” Chakotay says. His eyes are alive, and dark with secrets. “Temporal prime directive.”

And he holds out a hand, smile broadening.

“Repairs are underway, and there’s nothing to worry about,” he declares. “So what do you say we finish our dinner?”

I’m trying so hard to hide the shine I know must be evident in my expression, and even harder not to look at his lips. Those lips that my own, years-younger self just told me I kissed.

The memory of that kiss is vague and hazy. All these years I’ve thought it was a stray fantasy, the faint recollection of a waking dream or the manifestation of my own repressed desires. And yet I remember the first time we met on my bridge – tension boiling between us as I stepped up to him – and the way my gaze had strayed to his lips. I remember my spine tingling with a bolt of want so searing it frightened me. I’d brushed it aside, named it simply a side-effect of the charged situation, but given what I know now …

Was that really the first time we met?

I take his hand and let him tug me to my feet.

“Lead on then, Commander.” I pitch my voice low so that my sultry tone reaches only his ears. The slight widening of his eyes is gratifying in the extreme.
He keeps hold of my hand as we leave the bridge, and for the first time in memory, I don’t pull away.

“We’ve been down this road before.”

“Have we?” I widen my eyes, knowing my guileless act doesn’t fool him for a second.

“You wanting answers to questions you shouldn’t ask.”

“But something did happen.” I lean toward him, all pretense of innocence dropped. “You know it did, Chakotay.”

He sips his cider, gaze sharpening as he assesses me, but stays silent.

“All right,” I rest an elbow on the back of the couch between us, “let’s try this. A few months before your ship was pulled into the Delta quadrant, you and your crew took a rest stop on a planet called Nivoch. While you were off scouting for new warp coils, the others went to a seedy little bar to blow off some steam.”

His forehead creases.

“B’Elanna and Mariah Henley got into a friendly rivalry over how many shots of Risian brandy they could drink.” I savour the increasing surprise on his face as I continue. “Of course B’Elanna, being half-Klingon, believed she could metabolise the alcohol far more easily than a full human, but she didn’t know Mariah had pre-loaded with an anti-intoxicant hypospray.”

He stares.

“Seventeen shots later, B’Elanna was so tanked that she challenged whomever would take her on to a bat’leth match. She managed to goad a Rigellian tourist into a fight, but then security arrived and arrested her, at which point she vomited all over herself, passed out, and woke up three hours later in a holding cell with a mammoth headache.”

“Kathryn –”

I hold up a hand to silence him. “In punishment, you denied her a detox hypospray and confined her to sewer maintenance for three days.” I smirk. “But she didn’t mind that, because she was so humiliated she preferred to avoid her crewmates until the next topic of gossip came along.”

“I never told you that story,” Chakotay says. “At least, not –” He stops abruptly.

“Actually, you did.” I sip from my glass, a smile curling my lips. “Seven years ago, or a few hours ago, depending on your perspective.”

Chakotay puts down his glass. “But you shouldn’t be able to remember that,” he says slowly. “I set the chroniton pulse and stopped the time displacement. It never happened.”
“I don’t remember it,” I admit. “At least, not clearly. But the woman you met today – the Kathryn Janeway of seven years ago – she remembered. She remembered for long enough to record a log, and I watched that log today.”

“How?”

“That spatial rift threw the ship into a time loop, and I was the only one who remembered what happened between one loop and the next because…” I trail off, realising that this is all completely irrelevant, and shake my head. “It doesn’t matter now. What matters is that the log I left myself … well, it’s made me re-evaluate a lot of the choices I’ve made over the past seven years. The opportunities I’ve turned down.” I reach for his hand and try not to notice that my own is trembling. “The barriers I haven’t crossed.”

Chakotay inhales sharply. His fingers close around mine, warm and protective, and my heart trips into double speed.

“Except,” I murmur, “there aren’t as many barriers as I thought there were. Are there?”

His gaze flickers to my mouth, and he licks his lips.

“There’s just one thing I have to know …” My body sways toward him as though pulled by a magnet.

“What’s that?” His voice is as husky as my own.

“If this is even better than I remember,” I whisper, and I kiss him.

Static leaps between us, humming along my skin and inflaming every nerve-ending. Chakotay’s hands are hot and sure as they stroke upward along my arms, one cradling my face, the other curving behind my neck. And Chakotay’s lips…

I’d never been kissed like that before, my younger self had emphasised on that fateful personal log, a flush tinting her cheeks as her mouth twitched in an involuntary smile. Envy had stabbed me in the stomach, and my heart had pounded as she went on to describe the sensation of his mouth moving softly over hers, his hands holding her firm and steady. I’m not one to wax poetic, but by the time she finished talking my pulse was racing and my breath coming in gulps.

Second-hand memory, however, is nothing compared to this increasingly urgent reality.

I had no plans for tonight beyond kissing him and seeing where it took us, but I realise – as his fingers tug at the fastening of my jacket and his mouth finds my throat and I throw back my head and moan – that one kiss is rapidly stampeding us toward a conclusion I really should have predicted.

“Chakotay,” I choke out as his lips latch onto the pulse point that drives me weak-kneed with want. “Chakotay, wait…”

He goes still, then heaves in a breath as he moves carefully back from me.
“Kathryn, I’m sorry.” His voice is gruff, and he can’t meet my eyes. “I shouldn’t have – I didn’t mean to –” Pushing himself to his feet, he mutters, “I’ll go.”

I’m instantly upright, planted in front of him with my hands on my hips.

“The hell you will, mister.”

He stares at me in surprise.

“I didn’t mean I wanted you to stop,” I explain in a calmer tone. “I just wanted to slow down a little.”

“Slow down?” Chakotay raises his eyebrows. “Seven years wasn’t slow enough for you?”

“Well, from where you’re standing it’s been less than seven hours,” I retort, and then I can’t help grinning.

He smiles back at me. “Far too long.”

I reach out a tentative hand and he takes it immediately. “I just thought that maybe we should talk about this,” I clarify, hesitant. “This must seem like a pretty surprising about-face.”

Chakotay shrugs. “If this had happened yesterday I’d probably have marched you straight down to Sickbay for a DNA scan, but…” his smirk widens, “I met a Kathryn Janeway today who gave me hope that this might not be impossible after all.”

“The way I hear it,” my tone is dry, “she wasn’t taking impossible for an answer.”

We smile at each other.

“That log,” I continue, sobering, “hearing her talk about you, the way she trusted you instantly, and how each time you went through a loop she learned more about you, and about us … it was a revelation. But it was also a reality check, Chakotay. Because she’d known you for the space of a day. Her feelings for you should have been far more complicated than mine, but they were really quite simple.”

His hands squeeze mine gently. His dark eyes are filled with tenderness, and beneath it, something much more ardent.

“It seems I’ve loved you since before I even met you,” I whisper. “My younger self told me to stop wasting time and make the choice I’ve always known I should make. And who am I to ignore my own adv-”

Chakotay cuts me off, his lips hot and urgent on mine as his hands close over my waist. He backs me up against the bulkhead, tongue sweeping into my mouth as I moan half in protest and half in thrilled capitulation. But as he starts to strip the uniform from me and his fingers map the curves and plains of my body, I decide words aren’t really necessary, anyway.
Epilogue - Endgame

Chapter Notes

This is the end, folks. Thank you all so much for coming along on this ride, and I hope you've enjoyed it. I appreciate the kudos and comments more than I can say! <3

I’ve come to bring Voyager home.

I release the breath I didn’t know I’d been holding, and instantly the questions rush in. She’s here – why now? Haven’t I changed her history? Will her plan work this time?

I give the admiral permission to come aboard, nodding to Chakotay to accompany me to the transporter room. She materialises on the pad. Without consciously realising it I reach for Chakotay’s hand.

And she sees. Her grey gaze sweeps over us – shoulder to shoulder, hands clasped; together – and she blinks. Her eyes glisten, and I feel an answering lump in my throat.

“Welcome aboard, Admiral,” I offer, and Chakotay holds out his other hand to help her down from the pad. For a long moment she stares up into his face, and I wonder if she’s ever going to let go.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says, and even though she’s looking at him, I know she’s addressing me. “You’re wondering why I’m here. Why I came back to change a future you’ve done all you can to ensure.”

Chakotay glances between us, frowning. “Is there something I should know about?”

And my older self and I answer in unison, “Temporal prime directive.”

Chakotay tugs his ear.

“Would you give us a moment, please, Commander?” I ask him.

He nods. “Call me if you need anything, Captain.”

As the doors close behind him, the admiral smiles wistfully. “I miss that, you know. The way he’d call me Captain, but he was really saying Kathryn.”

I sit down on the transporter pad and pat the space beside me, waiting until she obliges. Her hands twist in her lap and behind her immobile features I can tell she’s struggling for control.

And then I understand.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Her chin jerks back and she gives a shuddering exhale.
“How?”

“How?” she replies tonelessly. “About three years from now. It was so pointless –” she catches her breath. “A mining tool malfunctioned and a piece of flying debris pierced him through the heart. He made it back to the ship, but there was nothing the Doctor could do. He died in my arms.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, tears clouding my eyes, but when she turns to face me, hers are dry.

“Chakotay wasn’t the only one I lost,” she says. “It took another sixteen years to make it back to Earth, and I lost twenty-two crew. The Borg queen never would let Seven go – she captured her, and four other officers, and assimilated them all. Tom and B’Elanna, Samantha Wildman, Tal Celes. All drones now. Naomi and Miral both grew up without their parents. And then there’s Tuvok.”

Nausea grips me in a wave that rises from my toes. The very future Naomi Wildman had warned my younger self about – so much heartbreak, so much death – had come to pass.

Not again. Not if I can help it.

“But you’re here now.” I grip her hand – hers feels bonier, frailer than my own. “You’ve come back to change that future. And we both know exactly how to make it work. Don’t we?”

“Yes,” she answers, straightening as she musters the faintest of smiles. “We do.”

““We did it,” I breathe.

A flotilla of Starfleet vessels dots the starscape ahead of us, and behind them, the planet we’ve been striving to reach for the past seven years.

We’re home.

Chakotay strides down from the upper level of the bridge, taking his position at my left shoulder as Ensign Kim’s voice quavers, “We’re being hailed.”

A short, stunned exchange with Admiral Paris, a call from Sickbay that sends my helmsman scurrying, and all is silent again. Joy wells up inside me and I have to blink back tears.

Beside me, Chakotay takes my hand in his. It’s rare he dares to do so on the bridge; our relationship – months or years in the making, depending on your perspective – is something we’ve kept private, although I’m sure it’s no secret. I curl my fingers around his and smile at the vision of Earth, glowing blue-green on the viewscreen.

“Thanks for your help, Admiral Janeway,” I whisper, almost under my breath.

“And to Captain Janeway, as well,” Chakotay says. “Both versions of her.”

I squeeze his hand, then tip my head toward the helm. “If you’d be so kind, Commander?”
“It would be my honour, Captain.”

Chakotay slips into Tom’s vacated seat, and I move up behind him, my hand on his shoulder.

“Take us home,” I command.

Voyager slides smoothly into motion, and Chakotay grins up at me over his shoulder. He pitches his voice low so only I can hear him. “You did it, Kathryn,” he murmurs, then smirks. “Temporal prime directive be damned.”

I bite my lip against the laughter I can’t suppress. “We did it, Chakotay. You and me and all of us.”

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you, too.” My smile widens. “But if you crash my ship on the home stretch, I’ll toss you into the brig and hand you over to Starfleet in chains. It was my original mission, after all.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He’s still grinning when he turns back to the helm.

I let the lives that could have been drift through my memory. The regrets and failures and uncrossed barriers; truths and promises and nights in each other’s arms. Whether I acted on it or not, in every lifetime, every timeline, every version of reality: he was always my choice.

This is the way it’s supposed to be.

End Notes

Due to widely differing accounts of where Voyager’s airponics bay is actually located, I’ve gone with Deck 4 because it works best for my purposes, and to keep it consistent with my other time loop story, In Momento Temporis.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!