

by Jot

Thankyou to Elem for the wonderful beta. The story is much better for her impeccable editing and suggestions.

The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once. - Albert Einstein

Stardate 2378 - USS Voyager, Alpha Quadrant

Kathryn Janeway stared at the screen. She couldn't believe it. After nearly six interminable weeks of debriefings, Admiral Blake had suddenly informed her that she was free to begin her leave.

And her mother wasn't home.

Opening a comm. link, she left a message. "Mom, I'm coming home. My shuttle leaves in about thirty minutes, so I guess I'll be in Indiana..." she glanced at her clock, "...at around 1500. I'll see you soon. Love you."

It seemed incomprehensible that now that she was about to go home, there would be no one there to greet her.

The debriefings had ended without warning, and though she'd spoken to Gretchen the previous evening, there had been no indication that she would be free any time soon so her mother had organized an outing with friends for the day.

Of course, Kathryn could probably track her down and contact her, but at the moment, it seemed too...difficult.

A lot had happened in the last four hours.

She'd made her final scheduled media appearance, been assured that no disciplinary or legal action would be taken against her or any of her crew, was thanked for her cooperation by the review board, received notification of her promotion to admiral on her return from leave and got pregnant. Again.

She looked around her quarters. All her belongings were packed and ready for logistics to transport them home.

Home. It didn't seem possible.

A rush of memories and emotions washed over her until she was jolted out of her musings by a gentle knock on the door. A very young ensign had arrived to take her things.

"Come in." She motioned towards the storage containers. "They're all yours."

"Yes, ma'am."

He brought in his antigrav unit and began to carefully stack the boxes.

"They'll be sent straight to my mother's home?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see to it myself."

"Thank you," she noticed the small flat container he was about to pick up. "Oh, I'll take that one."

Standing back, she waited until he finished and then smiled as he did everything but snap his heels in an old-fashioned salute before he left. He reminded her of Harry Kim at DS9 all those years ago.

She looked around the bare room before moving to the sofa.

Alone, with her carry luggage and twenty minutes pregnant.

Janeway was willing to bet that not many people could knowingly say that about themselves. She smiled to herself and wondered how the hell she was going to explain that little detail to her mother and the thought of Phoebe's reaction almost made her laugh out loud.

Now that she was free to leave the ship, she felt more than a little reluctant to go. Sitting on her sofa, she ran her hand over the fabric of the seat and then pulled the box onto her lap and leaned back into the familiar feel of the cushions.

Twenty minutes pregnant. Home in the Alpha Quadrant. All the crew free and about to re-start their lives. Tuvok reunited with his family and a cure for his illness in progress. Chakotay and Seven together.

Oh well, four out of five wasn't bad.

She looked down at the container she'd taken from the young ensign. The outside of the box was as familiar as the back of her hand. She'd examined it minutely many times in the last two years. Inside was one item of clothing. A blue t-shirt, standard Starfleet issue, extra large. Holding it up to her face, she inhaled, but the scent had long gone. With a practiced hand, she folded it carefully and put it back in the box, then replaced the lid.

Putting the container on the sofa next to her and then her carryon on top, she closed her eyes and once more savored the feeling of being home.

Home and twenty-five minutes pregnant.

Smiling to herself again, she wondered if it were too soon to have cravings or morning sickness. Laughing, she almost looked forward to both. The baby would have been just over a year old if she'd been able to have it during their journey home. But that had been out of the question for so many reasons, hence the baby had been 'postponed'. A bit like her life, really - up until now.

For the umpteenth time, she reflected on where it had all gone wrong for them. That damned slipstream attempt had somehow caused her whole life to be turned upside down. Her mind wandered back to their final dinner together before the test.

Stardate: 2375 USS Voyager, Delta Quadrant

"Dinner plans?"

"Nothing special. Date with a replicator."

"Cancel it, that's an order."

"Aye, Captain."

She wasn't sure if it was the uncertainty of what they were to undertake the next day or the prospect

of actually succeeding, but Janeway didn't want Chakotay to leave after dinner. When they'd finished their meal and she'd told him of her decision to go ahead and he'd started to take his leave but she'd stopped him with an offer of dessert - one that she knew he loved and couldn't resist.

She certainly hadn't meant for him to stay the night or that they would finally pull down the barriers and declare their love for each other.

All it had taken was his reaction when she cupped his face with her hand. He'd grasped her fingers and kissed her palm and with her face so close, he'd simply kept going. He always was good at tactics, Janeway reflected at the time.

The first time they made love, they didn't make it to the bedroom, the second time they made it as far as the wall by her bedroom door.

They made love for the last time in the early hours of the morning and as they lay in each other's arms, she whispered promises to him that whatever happened, she wouldn't go back. He was stuck with her whether they were in the Delta or Alpha Quadrants. No more pretending.

It was the happiest she could remember being in five years and she was filled with confidence when they started the slipstream experiment. Whatever the outcome, they would face it together.

He'd risen first, to get an early start on the systems checks on the Delta Flyer but insisted that she stay in bed for a little longer.

"Do you know how long I've loved you and how much?" He whispered softly into her ear as he kissed her before climbing out of bed.

"I have some idea." Kathryn made a humming noise and then looked up as he straightened up, "You're going to the shuttle bay like that?"

Chakotay was wearing only his boxers. "I can't find my clothes. I have no idea what happened to them but I'm pretty sure I was wearing pants when I came for dinner last night." he leaned down and kissed her softly again, "I'm transporting to my quarters."

"If I find them, I'll put them somewhere safe. You'll have to come back for them."

"Thanks." Another kiss.

She grabbed his hand.

"Everything changes from this point onwards, Chakotay, I promise. We won't go back to the way things were."

"I've waited for this for so long, Kathryn. I'm glad I did. I couldn't be happier." Chakotay picked up the few items of clothing that he could find.

"Good. Make sure you do a thorough check on that shuttle, Chakotay, I've got plans for tonight so I need you to come home safely to Voyager. Oh, and don't forget to wear pants."

"Aye, Captain." He smiled and turned to go.

"Hey," she called to him. He stopped and looked back at her, "I'm not the Captain in here."

"I'll say." he gave her a saucy wink and tapped the badge on his jacket hanging over his arm,

"Computer, transport Commander Chakotay to his quarters."

"Acknowledged."

And he was gone in a blue shimmer.

Kathryn stretched lazily and with a happy smile, dropped her head back to the pillow.

Her eyes snapped open. She realized that she must have dozed after Chakotay had gone and glancing at the clock, she was relieved to know it had only been for an hour. It still gave her thirty minutes to shower, have a cup of coffee and toast in the Mess Hall and get to the bridge. It was going to be a big day.

Swinging her legs off the side of the bed, she smiled at the state of her bedroom. She couldn't see the rest of her quarters from where she was sitting, but she was pretty sure it looked much the same. Plenty of time to clean up tomorrow, she thought to herself. Standing up, she moved to the dresser and wardrobe and got out some clean clothes before making her way to the bathroom. As she walked past the bed, something snagged her foot and her arms instinctively went out to break her fall. All she achieved was to crack her wrist solidly on the side table as she fell awkwardly onto the bed.

Pain radiated up her arm and dropping her clothes, she cradled her wrist and examined the damage. Hopefully not broken but it hurt like a bitch. She tried to pick up her clothes and make another attempt at getting to the shower before hissing with pain and using only one hand. It seemed that she would miss out on the coffee and have to make a call into Sick Bay instead. Damn. As she started towards the bathroom again, she warily eyed the floor to see what had caused the fall.

Chakotay's t-shirt. She'd promised herself to make him pay for that later. Despite the throbbing of her wrist, she smiled to herself at the prospect and prepared for her shower.

"Doctor," Kathryn strode quickly into the Sick Bay, pleased that apart from the Doctor, it was empty.

"Good morning, Captain...oh dear, what have you done to yourself?"

The Doctor immediately started scanning the wrist Janeway had cradled in her other hand.

"Just a quick fix, please, Doctor. I'm due on the bridge in a few minutes," She was all business as she hopped onto a biobed and sat still to allow him to diagnose the problem.

"Hmm, a nasty sprain, Captain, but I can..."

The chance to scan his most elusive patient was an opportunity not to be wasted and as he did so, his eyebrows shot past - Kathryn thought cruelly to herself - where his hairline should have been.

The look told her everything.

He quietly administered treatment, wisely keeping any comments to himself.

"I expect you to keep my...clumsiness to yourself." She followed the order with a glare that was nearly as stern as her tone, and then hopped down off the biobed and adjusted her sleeve.

"Of course, Captain," his quiet, sincere tone reassured her, "I know you're busy now, but would you please spare me ten minutes before you retire this evening?"

"Doctor, it's only a sprain."

"I need to speak to you about another matter."

"But..." there was something in his manner that gave her pause.

"Tuvok to Janeway. Captain, final checks have now commenced."

"On my way, Tuvok. Janeway out." she was already on her way out the doors, but she turned and added, "I'll be back as soon as I can, Doctor." And she was gone.

"Report."

Janeway strode onto the Bridge and straight to her chair, anxious to get this mission underway. She listened carefully to each update and at the completion of the last one, that of Engineering, she looked to Tuvok.

"Let's get this show on the road, Commander."

"Aye, Captain."

Despite the resultant activity on the Bridge, Tom noticed the Captain wince and rub her arm as she checked the computer at her station.

"Are you all right, Captain?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Mister Paris," at his concerned appearance she added, "I knocked my wrist this morning, but the Doctor has taken care of the worst of it."

The message from the Delta Flyer made them get back to business.

"Chakotay to Voyager. We're ready."

Kathryn smiled.

Janeway gave herself a few seconds of reflection. She'd failed again to find the crew a quicker way home. A few beats of disappointment was all she allowed herself before she had to get back to her job. Again.

"Tuvok, begin organizing any necessary repairs," she rubbed her wrist as it began to ache, "Seven start analyzing the data. Let's see if we can salvage something useful." Janeway stood and turned toward the turbolift doors. "I'll be in Sick Bay seeing to my wrist."

"Your wrist, Captain? Are you injured?"

Seven moved to stand beside Tuvok.

"I injured it this morning? I'm sure I mentioned it." She *knew* she had.

"You did not." Seven stated.

When Kathryn looked at Tuvok, he had that expression he got when he was about to contradict her. She saved him the trouble. "Ah, well. I must've forgotten to mention it." She moved up the steps. "You have the bridge, Tuvok."

Except she definitely *had* mentioned it. Seven made a joke about it just after Chakotay's call had come through. It was a very bad joke and it had provoked a few lighthearted comments on the Bridge, but it had significantly reduced the tension everyone had been feeling. Grateful to Seven at the time; Kathryn had been delighted that her protégé had made another small step in her journey to humanity.

But no one remembered it. Especially not Seven.

Strange.

It had been long day and she never did make it to Sick Bay. There'd been the tricky matter of getting the Flyer back on board and then a number of issues had arisen all over the ship. The senior staff had been scattered throughout Voyager to help and she hadn't seen Chakotay since the morning or had a chance to speak to him.

There would be quite a bit of emotional fallout due to her failure to get the crew considerably closer to home and she had no doubt that Chakotay was already working on it. The crew would be disappointed but, sadly, she reflected, they'd had to endure it before. Not that it had been their worst day in the Delta Quadrant, but the failure of the attempt had been quite a blow - especially for Harry.

Kathryn had left the young man in the Mess Hall listening to a message from a future that wouldn't happen. She smiled to herself when she thought that she was no longer alone in her assertion that time paradoxes gave you headaches.

She nodded to a passing crewmember as she walked back to her quarters. Despite the less than successful result, they'd taken a few years off their journey; not what she had hoped for, certainly, but she'd take that over the ship being destroyed any time.

As she approached the turbolift, her combadge chirped.

"Torres to Janeway".

"Go ahead, B'Elanna."

"Sorry Captain, but we could use another pair of hands down here. I've got a series of cascading failures across the board and I don't have enough qualified people to cover them."

"I'm on my way."

"Thank you, Captain. Torres out."

Glancing at the clock in the turbolift, Janeway sighed. Tonight was now this morning.

"Janeway to Chakotay."

"Chakotay here."

"Chakotay, I'm going to be stuck in engineering. Probably for hours, I'm sorry."

There was a pause before Chakotay answered. *"Yes, ma'am. Do you want me to adjust the shift schedules for tomorrow?"*

"No, I was just letting you know."

Another pause, this one longer than the first. *"Um, yes, thank you Captain,"* yet another pause, *"Chakotay out."*

What the hell's the matter with him? thought Kathryn but there was no time to dwell on the matter. The turbolift deposited her in Engineering and the sound of alarms and Klingon swearing drove all but the immediate tasks from her mind.

What had started out as a long day was made interminable after the call from Torres.

The slipstream attempt had caused more than a few issues throughout the ship and her Chief Engineer had even asked for Seven's help. Things must be bad, reflected Kathryn wryly.

Chakotay's reaction to her call had been odd but she tried to put it out of her mind.

After the many hours it took to get the most critical problems addressed, Torres ordered everyone in Engineering to the Mess Hall for some 'herbal tea and a debrief'. Once they'd been relieved by the next shift they trooped out of Engineering. Though she was exhausted, Janeway had enjoyed her time helping out and was particularly delighted in the humorous and ongoing argument between B'Elanna and Seven about - of all things - Ensign Kim's breakfast the previous morning.

B'Elanna had started telling Joe Carey about Harry somehow getting a piece of Tom's scrambled egg in his eye. Seven contradicted her by saying it was some kind of vegetable. Sue Nicoletti agreed with Seven and said that it was tomato, which prompted Seven to point out to one and all that a tomato was a fruit. The discussion degenerated into an argument about what had hit Harry in the eye and when yet another variation was introduced, each person was called upon to corroborate someone else's story.

Kathryn didn't bother commenting when someone piped up, "B'Elanna you had toast like the Captain."

B'Elanna hadn't disagreed, which was odd as Kathryn hadn't made it to breakfast at all because she'd slept in for the first time in over five years, been to Sick Bay to have her wrist seen to and then recorded her message to Starfleet. She began putting together Chakotay's odd reaction to her comm. call the previous night with the current discussion and a horrible possibility grew in her mind.

Finally, amid catcalls and shouting, B'Elanna had contacted Tom for the 'definitive answer'. The group waited expectantly for Tom who, looking somewhat suspicious at the strange question, responded that he'd only had fruit due to big mission nerves.

The whole group had been stunned into silence at his reply until Seven had insisted that “tomato was a fruit” and the whole group roared with laughter, apparently not noticing or caring that their argument hadn’t really been settled.

Once the uproar had settled down, B’Elanna thanked them all for their efforts and suggested they get some sleep. After much shuffling of chairs and ‘good nights’, only Janeway, Paris and Torres were left in the Mess Hall.

“Well done, B’Elanna.”

Torres had completely forgotten that the captain was even present and straightened in her seat. “Captain, we should have most of the repairs finished by...”

“I don’t mean the repairs to the ship, Lieutenant. That was some damned fine morale repair.”

Torres didn’t even pretend not to understand. “Seven helped.”

“She does make an excellent straight man.”

Torres smiled. “The straightest.”

Tom suggested that it was time B’Elanna went to bed, but had noticed Janeway’s rather sad look.

“Captain,” Tom whispered beside her, careful not to alert B’Elanna, who was picking up some PADDs, “are you all right? You just seem a little...” he trailed off, not sure how to suggest to his superior officer that she looked dreadful.

She touched his arm, appreciating the question and the discreet manner in which it was asked. “Thank you, Tom. I’m fine.” Janeway even managed a smile. “I just realized that I forgot to get the Doctor to check my wrist.”

Tom looked serious. “You hurt your wrist?”

Now she was really concerned, because she definitely remembered Tom asking her about her wrist just before they got underway with the mission.

Kathryn blanched and then regained her composure.

Tom noticed her reaction and actually took her hand. “*Ma’am?*” His question barely above a whisper.

“Honestly, Tom, everything is fine.”

Tom gave her a hard glance and then a slight nod to assign assent. “Then we’ll see you in the morning, Captain.”

As she watched the couple leave, Kathryn was getting more than a feeling that something was seriously amiss. Thankfully, it didn’t seem to be affecting the workings or safety of the ship or crew, just her own perceptions.

Kathryn still hadn’t made it back to her cabin by the time her shift was due to start. She showered and changed her uniform using the small bathroom adjoining her Ready Room.

As she took her seat on the Bridge, she leaned across to her first officer. “I’m sorry about last night, Chakotay.”

"That's okay, you just surprised me."

"You were surprised that I let you know I was going to be late?"

"Late for what?"

Her shocked reply was only half formed when Harry announced that he had detected another vessel approaching.

It turned out to be only a trading vessel, but the moment was lost. Chakotay retired to his office and Kathryn was left on the bridge with a very bad feeling about things.

More than thirty-six hours after the slipstream attempt, Kathryn at last returned to her quarters. Her wrist was throbbing and her head was pounding but after finally delivering Harry his message, working in Engineering for hours, listening to the disturbing arguments in the Mess Hall, having the weird discussions with Chakotay she'd come to a horrible - if not conclusion - then worrying hypothesis of what may have transpired in the last two days.

Opening her door, the disarray of her living room struck her. Usually she was a tidy person, but the result of the dinner, late night and oversleeping was plainly visible.

Dessert bowls were still on the table, empty wine glasses by the sofa and her discarded clothing still trailed towards the bedroom. Not that they'd quite made it to the bed. She smiled to herself there was no way she was ever going to look at the back of the sofa the same way again. However, it was hard to ignore the overwhelming feeling of loss the scene also evoked.

Something had seriously screwed with her...the...a...timeline. Going by the differing breakfast memories there had to be at least six different...*whatevers*. God only knew what had happened in Chakotay's 'reality', but if his chilly evasiveness was any guide, they must've had one of their spectacular fights and gauging from his demeanor, it probably was her fault.

After cleaning up the living room, Kathryn picked up her blouse from the back of the sofa and made her way to the sleeping area. She stopped at the door, taking in the total upheaval in the room. The bed was a disaster, the odor of the previous evening's activities still hung in the air and his damned t-shirt - the one she'd tripped on - was still by the side of the bed. Now she felt tired, but she didn't want to change and remake the bed. It seemed to be almost a desecration to think about it.

Anger bubbled up inside her. Of all the experiences that only she 'remembered', why the hell did it have to be this one?

Kathryn sat on the side of the bed; feelings of utter desolation almost overwhelmed her. In five years, she had never felt as alone and isolated as she did at that moment.

Without any further cleaning up, she splashed some water on her face and then left her quarters to wander around the ship and try to spot differences. She was tempted to talk herself out of the conclusion she'd reached but above everything else, she knew that Chakotay wouldn't just withdraw from her if he'd had a change of heart.

The uneasy feeling was growing and it needed to be settled. Problems needed to be faced before they could be addressed. "Janeway to Sick Bay."

"Yes, Captain," the Doctor must have heard something in her voice, *"are you all right?"*

"Yes...no. Is anyone with you?"

"No, ma'am. It's very quiet here at the moment."

Kathryn could tell he was on alert but she was thankful for his apparent reticence in asking anymore questions. "Good, I'm on my way."

To anyone else, with maybe the exception of Commander Chakotay, the Captain appeared her usual calm, collected self as she entered Sick Bay. To the Doctor she appeared worried and maybe a little agitated.

"Captain, is your wrist still bothering you?"

Kathryn stopped in mid-stride and went still. The Doctor was the first member of her staff that remembered about her sprained wrist.

"My wrist?" the question was no more than a whisper.

"Captain are you...yes, your wrist. You sprained it in the morning before the mission." He gently took her arm and guided her to his office. "You do remember that I asked you to come back and see me?" he looked steadily at her, "I wanted to discuss something important with you."

She didn't answer but absentmindedly rubbed her wrist, concentrating on whatever was bothering her. "Doctor, this is important. Have you noticed that people have...forgotten incidents in the last twenty four hours?"

"Forgotten?"

She explained the strange argument in the Mess Hall and then the conversation that was really bothering her. "I spoke to Chakotay a little while ago and he...didn't remember...something that happened...last night. Or this morning, or rather the night before last," she rubbed her temple, "whenever the hell it was, anyway."

The Doctor couldn't remember ever seeing her this, well, distressed wasn't really the word. And he knew exactly what the 'something' was that Chakotay had forgotten must be.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I haven't really seen anyone. The crew have been very busy." He gave her a sharp look. "How long is it since you've slept?"

Her voice was shaky when she next spoke, ignoring his question. "I think there's been some...temporal mistake," she whispered, as if saying out loud would be an admission of something terrible, "we seem to be slightly out of step with the rest of the crew."

"How so?"

"Well, no one on the bridge remembered my wrist injury, even though I mentioned it because it made me late."

The Doctor looked pensive. "Curious."

They were both silent, contemplating her rather worrying theory until Kathryn turned and sat on one of the biobeds.

The Doctor took a step towards her. "Captain, I have some...more...rather...extraordinary news."

Kathryn looked up at the tone of the Doctor's voice.

"Something definitely happened the other night between you and Chakotay," he paused and she opened her mouth to respond, but before she could form the words, he continued. "Captain, Kathryn...you're pregnant."

"I...but...I..." She stared disbelievingly at the hologram before her shoulders slumped and she muttered a heartfelt, "*Oh, crap!*"

Kathryn seemed profoundly stunned by the news and the Doctor thought it fortunate that she was already seated. He ordered the computer to erect the privacy screen and waited patiently while she digested the news, watching her work through the shock.

"My god, Doctor. How the hell could this happen?" she finally whispered.

"Well, when a beautiful starship captain meets a handsome first officer..."

The Doctor realized without finishing that his attempt at a humorous answer to relieve the tension was a bad idea. Rather than snap at him to express her displeasure, all that issued from Janeway was a small noise like a sob.

"One time," Kathryn almost moaned, "one damned time. What are the odds?"

"In your case, about fifteen hundred and..."

"It was a rhetorical question, Doctor."

There was no heat in her reply. It was almost an automatic response to the Doctor's programmed nature to reply to any question where possible. The Doctor reflected that he really needed to work on that.

"Captain, I'm sorry," he leaned against the biobed where she was sitting so forlornly, "unfortunately, you missed your latest booster. If you remember, your physical was scheduled for about four weeks ago."

Their normal game of cat and mouse, as he reminded her and she hedged and avoided, had seemed funny at the time. Almost a ritual that they both enjoyed. In the last five years, it had become almost a morale-building scenario for the crew, as bets were exchanged on how long their Captain could avoid him and hold out. Neither had realized that it would come back to haunt them later.

At any other time, the doctor would've sounded insufferably smug uttering such a comment, but this time, his tone was full of compassion. In over five years, he had never seen his captain look so defeated.

Kathryn's shoulders sagged and she stared at her hands in her lap. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"I've done some research since you came by this morning..."

"You've known since this morning?"

"Not when you first presented, but my tri-corder..."

"It's not important." She waved their digression aside.

"Oh, yes, well. When I realized that you were pregnant, I double-checked the booster batch that you both had, or at least Chakotay had. It checked out fine but when I realized who the...er, father was...a little investigation revealed that the cure for the virus we acquired from the Vidiians effectively neutralized the treatment but only with each other, not with other...partners."

"This can't be happening. This *can't* be happening."

"Captain...*Kathryn*," the Doctor said softly, "you have a number of options."

Janeway raised her sad eyes to him and replied softly, but with a hint of sarcasm, "You really think so?"

The Doctor was a little taken aback by the desolate tone and Janeway closed her eyes and dropped her head into her hands when she noticed his reaction.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. I seem to be taking it out on you." She sat up straight and rubbed her temple.

The Doctor watched his captain closely as she attempted to work through this news. Initially she had seemed to shut down, as though the information had simply overwhelmed her. The Doctor thought that was unlikely, knowing Janeway all his 'life', he had confidence in her amazing coping abilities. This latest event, however, would test her resilience.

Finally, though he could practically see her mind start working, analyzing and after a minute or two, she took a deep breath and looked at him. "What are my options, Doctor?"

"Well, as I see it, you have four."

"*Four?*"

"Termination, surrogacy, carry it to full-term yourself or stasis,"

"I...I hadn't considered stasis. Is that even possible?"

"Well, yes. Although there would be some limitations about viability."

"For the..."

"For you, Captain."

"But it wouldn't hurt the b... er, fetus?"

"No, barring any equipment malfunctions or whatever, it would be viable for perhaps a decade."

The Captain rubbed her temple again, and smiled weakly at the Doctor. "I'll admit that I thought my only option was to terminate," she looked at the Doctor closely but saw no expressions of judgment or criticism. "There is no way I could run the ship while pregnant and I feel uncomfortable about surrogacy. I mean, how the hell would I find someone and how could I be sure that that woman was doing it for the right reasons - whatever they are?"

"Captain, you don't need to decide right now. Why don't you sleep on it for a few days?"

"I don't think that's going to help."

"Have you considered talking to Commander Chakotay?"

"And say what?" Janeway snapped, "it's a pity you're not speaking to me now because in another time you actually liked me?"

"Kathryn, Chakotay is your best friend. He would understand." The Doctor was now using her first name. They were way past ranks in his book. Probably hers too.

"Really? Because I don't really understand. Do you?"

"I only want to help you, Kathryn..."

"I know and I'm sorry, Doctor. This whole situation is having a bad affect on my sense of humor."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "It's a stressful time, but you really don't have to decide now."

"Yes, I do." Janeway straightened her shoulders and all traces of doubt slid from her face.

"Termination."

"Kathryn, are you sure?"

"The only other appropriate option is stasis but, as captain, I can't use my authority to misuse ship's resources, so..."

"Please, Kathryn, stasis requires negligible power. There would be no negative impact to the ship or crew."

"But..."

"If that is your only concern, then I promise that if in the case of an emergency we should need the power or equipment, I will do what is necessary."

"This is all academic anyway, Doctor. We've got at least another thirty years ahead of us before we get home. Even with modern medical technology, I'll be over seventy and passed..."

"Or, we could find a wormhole tomorrow and be home within days," he interrupted.

Kathryn stood up and began pacing around the Doctor's office. She seemed suddenly to visibly relax and he knew she had made her decision.

"How long for you to get the stasis equipment ready?"

"I can do the procedure tomorrow, although as Mister Paris is scheduled for duty here, we could..."

"I'll take care of that. How long will...it take?"

"Only about thirty minutes. If we schedule for the end of your shift you can immediately return to your quarters."

"Fine, Let's do it." Kathryn stated towards the door and then stopped and faced the Doctor. "Thank you for helping me through all this, Doctor, I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

"I hope I'm always able to help you, Kathryn."

She smiled, not minding or caring about his familiarity and standing tall, she drew herself to her full height, turned and walked out the door of Sick Bay with her usual determined clip.

It was after damage reports were coming in after Voyager had escaped another 'shoot first, don't ask any questions' alien attack that Janeway found herself torn between listening to the list of reports and wanting specific information about Sick Bay. Managing to tamp down her instinct to contact the Doctor, she did her duty and it was actually a few hours before she made it to Sick Bay to check for herself.

Once she entered, her emotions were mixed. Janeway somewhat patiently waited until the last of the injured crewman were treated and released by the Doctor. Now she felt guilty for worrying about her own issues when the crew's safety demanded to take precedence over her own.

The Doctor's final patient hopped down from the biobed, rolling down his sleeve.

"Are you all right, Crewman Jacobs?"

"Yes, thank you, Captain. It was just a cut on my hand."

"Well, that's..." Kathryn looked uncharacteristically bothered by the minor injury, "please, take care, Chris."

"I will ma'am, thank you." Jacobs smiled at her.

"Dismissed." Kathryn touched the crewman's arm and returned his smile.

The Doctor watched the Captain closely. He could tell she was grappling with some kind of issue and felt that he needed to put her mind at ease about at least one issue that would be bothering her.

"Everything is fine here, Captain," the Doctor said, "all injuries have been treated and none were serious. All crew have returned to duty or their quarters."

"Did Sick Bay sustain any damage?" She knew that Torres' reports didn't include any details about it.

"Everything is fine. The er, stasis apparatus is still functioning perfectly."

Janeway nodded, accepting his report. "I'm concerned that it's interfering with the normal running of Sick Bay."

"Well, you shouldn't. It *doesn't*. Everything is *fine*."

"Doctor, we can't waste valuable resources for my personal..."

The Doctor didn't let her finish.

"We can and we will," he snapped. It had been a long time since anyone had taken that tone with her, "this baby is a member of Voyager's crew and as such, it is my responsibility to keep it alive. It is *not* a waste."

"But it's just..."

"If you call it a 'bundle of cells' Kathryn, I will move up your annual exam by six months."

The Doctor looked at his Captain to check if he had pushed too hard but she was silent and stony faced. He realized that the Captain was not used to getting or expecting what she saw as special favors.

"Captain...*Kathryn*, this baby is not endangering the crew or taking up any resources that should be used elsewhere. While that is the case, I will do everything in my power to ensure its survival. We would do the same for any other member of the crew, would we not?"

Janeway stood before him in her classic stance; one hand on her hip and one rubbing her forehead.

"*Fine.*"

The Doctor relaxed.

"I must say, Kathryn, that after the beating the ship has just taken, for the baby to have survived it surely must be a chip off the old Janeway block."

Janeway smiled weakly, "*Old Janeway?*"

"Merely a figure of speech, Kathryn." he ventured, again confident. "I'm saying that the little chip here shows every sign of being a fighter like its mother."

"Right."

Thereafter, if there was any disturbance, battle or system failure, she would contact him as soon as she was alone and merely ask, "Chip?"

His reply would be a simple, "*Fine.*"

Despite her best intentions, the safety of Chip was still on her mind more than she thought appropriate.

It had only been a matter of weeks after the 'other time', as Janeway and Doctor referred to it among themselves, that Tom Paris had taken it upon himself to directly disobey her orders on the ocean planet. Putting him in the brig had been one of the most difficult decisions she had had to make. He was a member of her senior staff and, more importantly, one of the few friends she considered she had on board.

The Bridge was a much duller place without Paris at the helm and she had missed his wisecracking as much as his piloting skills. Thirty days without at least his friendly presence was almost as hard on her, especially as Chakotay was now quite cool around her.

The other huge impact was that her carefully fostered professional relationship with B'Elanna was also fairly severely dented by Paris' punishment. Torres had been professional, but only talked to Kathryn about ship's business. That behavior had been positively warm, however, when compared to the Chief Engineer's reaction after Janeway had authorized the Doctor to enlist the help of the holographic Crell Moset to help Torres during the incident with the parasitic life form.

Even when B'Elanna was well and Tom back at work, both officers were distant and standoffish. She felt the loss of their friendships keenly. This, of course, was why Captains were not supposed to

make friends with subordinates and meant to stay aloof. Contemplating another thirty years of being alone and friendless was enough to send her to her quarters after her shift to cry over the discarded t-shirt which was the only tangible evidence that for one night she was happy in the Delta Quadrant. She hoped that the one night would be able to sustain to for the future thousands of nights in front of her.

Of all the damn people she had needed to tell, Janeway couldn't believe she had had to explain Chip to Kashyk. The slimy bastard was insufferable enough.

Kashyk's thugs had discovered the small stasis pod the Doctor had made and were about to examine it when the Doctor managed to stall them. The memory of his frantic call still made her blood run cold.

And so it was necessary to tell Kashyk. Mercifully, he had ordered his men to leave the stasis equipment alone, but she did have to endure his taunts and innuendo when he was told that the crew were unaware of Chip's existence.

Kashyk had put two and two together and had made a few cryptic comments to Chakotay but he had missed their meaning. Kashyk had certainly delighted in her reactions and when he had left her on the bridge, Janeway didn't think her legs would support her if she tried to stand.

Both she and the Doctor were attached to the mere bundle of cells that was Chip but the shock of realization of how much Chip's safety really mattered to her was unnerving.

So much for captainly detachment.

Any hope she might have initially clung to that Chakotay might have been tempted to renew their earlier friendship was dashed due to her own behavior during the Equinox fiasco. It was hard to know what was more vexing - the betrayal of Captain Ransom and his crew or her own demented, totally inexplicable performance. The disappointment she felt in herself was almost an all-encompassing guilt.

After talking to Tuvok, she hadn't relieved herself of duty. He had been reserved with her, even for him and she felt his disapproval keenly.

Chakotay arrived at her quarters with the salad.

Except that he was still hardly speaking to her these days and they'd all barely survived the single greatest lapse of judgment she'd ever made, it could almost be considered like old times. Reconciled as she was to those times never returning, she felt yet another stab of remorse for what she'd lost. It was practically unbearable and it was her fault. *Again.*

It was obvious to her that he had joined her now so that they could appear as a united front for the crew at tonight's potluck. He was doing it for the crew, not because he wanted her company. Kathryn felt ashamed not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours.

Gone was the Chakotay who used to be so comfortable around her. The only person with her was her First Officer.

He stood perfectly still while she nervously replicated the croutons. He didn't even look at her. Not able to stand their alienation any more, she spoke. "I'm sorry, Chakotay."

"Captain?" He never seemed to call her 'Kathryn' anymore.

"I've put myself on report, Chakotay. It'll go through the next data stream. But I just wanted to apologize to you... for everything."

He didn't reply, but seemed to search her face as if looking for something. Kathryn wasn't sure if he'd found it when he finally spoke. "Shall we join the others?"

"Of course."

Although the Doctor often subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, tried to get her to consider Chip's future should she be killed in action, it wasn't until their encounter with Unimatrix Zero that she gave it serious consideration. It was a situation that she just didn't want to contemplate. Not that she was worried particularly about her own safety, she had been a Starfleet officer and indeed in command long enough not to be under any misapprehension about the inherent dangers of her job - the job that had cost her the life of her father and two fiancées. No, it wasn't the perils of her profession that made her pause, it was trying to get her head around what would be best for Chip.

Would Chakotay accept 'their' baby though he hadn't even been involved in the creation (from his point of view). And, if not Chakotay, then who would be the best person? Her sister and mother were almost a lifetime away. Technically, Chip was only a 'bundle of cells', not even at the fetus stage. If she 'left' Chip to Chakotay, the implications of him having another partner who would be also Chip's mother made her feel surprisingly jealous, which was so bizarre it made her head hurt.

In a twist of logic that even staggered her, she deemed that assuming they were still in contact with the Alpha Quadrant that Phoebe should decide. The Doctor had been vaguely disapproving, but finally agreed on the condition that Janeway at least compose a letter to her sister explaining the situation.

She remained reticent. "Some of it still confuses me, so I'm not sure I could do it justice."

However, before she left on the mission to the Borg cube to plant the virus, she left a message to Phoebe as well as several others, with the Doctor. In those last few minutes on the Bridge, she had desperately needed contact with Chakotay and the fact that he had taken her hand had comforted her. It seemed important that if that was the last time she ever saw him, that they should at least part as friends.

While on the cube, she was aware that Voyager had taken quite a beating but just before the Doctor sedated her to repair their damage after their rescue, he put her mind at rest by leaning over to her and whispering, "Voyager and *all* the crew are fine."

Relief coursed through her as she lost consciousness.

At the time, she thought that the handholding was a show of affection but when she next awoke, alone, she realized it was merely wishful thinking.

When the time ship Relativity had enlisted Seven and then herself in the mission to repair Voyager's timeline, Kathryn hadn't wasted any time in asking the question she most wanted answered. Finding a moment to ask Ducane without Seven or Nine present had been difficult but the opportunity finally presented itself when Seven had gone to their medical bay to be checked for ill effects of her recent incursions in time.

Ducane had tried to forestall her, holding up his hand and trying to stop her asking the question.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he really did look like he regretted being the one to withhold the information. "I know you have questions arising from the slipstream attempt, but there is..."

"Why does everyone seem to have a different version? Why am I the only one who remembers my...circumstances?"

"It was the most satisfactory..."

"Satisfactory?!" A few heads turned in their direction, "Are you kidding me?"

"There was a 99.97% resolution of the..."

"It's that 0.03% that is my concern, Commander."

"Captain, I surely don't have to remind you of the temporal prime directive."

"The timeline will blow up if Chakotay remembered the same night as me?" Janeway hissed.

Ducane really did look sympathetic, but Kathryn knew in that instant that she wasn't going to get what she was looking for at this time.

"Captain, we couldn't risk the consequences of not restoring the, er, situation at that time. I really am sorry."

"Can you at least tell me..." she didn't finish the question. Ducane was resolute.

It was only a matter of minutes later when she found herself back on Voyager.

In just on two years, she had only allowed herself to indulge in the nostalgia a few times. Only on these occasions had Janeway permitted the grief at her loss to surface.

The last time was after that bastard Teero had violated her crew's minds. And what was worse, the minds of her two closest friends. When Chakotay had ordered Tuvok to kill her she had nearly been sick. Not for fear of losing her life, but her fear for the two men's minds if she had been killed. No amount of Vulcan logic would help Tuvok recover and even if Chakotay didn't love her anymore, she was sure his soul couldn't take such a trauma.

When all the crew had been restored back to the real selves, Tom had organized his latest holodeck amusement and she was cheered somewhat by the Maquis and Starfleet crews mingling and sitting together. But Chakotay hadn't wanted to sit with her, in fact he hadn't even escorted her. Janeway had finally sat with Tuvok to watch the lobster people meet their fate.

Kathryn had trembled all the way through the movie.

There was no question of her being afraid of Tuvok or even Chakotay, but it wasn't until the lights were lowered and she put on the silly spectacles that she felt the full impact.

The moment that Tuvok had pointed and fired that damned phaser at her kept replaying in her mind. Deep down, she knew that neither of them would knowingly harm her, but she was equally sure it would be a few days before she was nightmare free. Maybe even a week or two.

It was pathetic really, she reflected bitterly.

Once her crew had been released from Teero's tormented and tormenting clutches and some degree of normality restored, all she wanted to do was be embraced by Chakotay. The memory of his arms around her, how safe and protected she felt was from a one-off occasion. Hell, for everyone else it never even happened at all. Not for the first, or probably the last, time on this voyage of the damned did she curse her luck in life.

Of all the experiences for her to have 'kept' and everyone else, or more importantly, Chakotay to have lost, it had to be the one time that she'd decided to put herself first and open herself to a relationship with her first officer. It was like a huge cosmic joke.

After a while she had suspected Q of being responsible, except, whatever else he was, he wasn't cruel and also she really did think he liked her and she just couldn't see him hurting her this badly.

When the lobster people had been dispatched, Kathryn dragged herself back to her quarters. Although more tired than she could remember being for quite some time, she knew she wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

Even while awake, she kept seeing Chakotay handing Tuvok the weapon. The scene replayed in her mind over and over. She had experienced some incredible and difficult situations in her life but the two men she loved most calmly discussing killing her was truly shocking and she felt as though part of her soul had died.

As she made her way into her bedroom she didn't bother calling for lights.

She had invited Chakotay to her quarters for coffee after the movie but he had declined. She knew why - he was feeling guilty about the whole Teero fiasco.

She had even tried teasing him, telling him that they would use his rations if it made him feel better. That, at least, had raised a small dimpled smile, but he'd still turned her down, citing exhaustion. She was willing to bet he wouldn't be sleeping any better than her.

It was ironic. She had never needed or wanted comforting before that damned slipstream trial but ever since that night with Chakotay, she didn't so much want, as crave it. Nothing would seem quite so dire, she was sure, as long as she was in his arms again.

Pathetic. She was completely pathetic.

Kathryn put the box containing the t-shirt back into her dresser before she cried all over it. Again.

She had rationed her access to the box - as a birthday treat or when things seemed particularly bleak. It was after the Equinox incident that she realized that she had irreparably damaged her friendship with Chakotay and they had never really recovered. She had never discovered what she'd said or done in his time at the dinner before the test, but the Equinox sealed her fate.

When Q left his offspring on Voyager, Kathryn actually almost chased him every time he appeared. If anyone could tell her why and what had happened, it was him. Only, for once, he seemed uncomfortable with her questions. He evaded and changed the subject every time he appeared - even the time in the bathtub - but when Q Junior was pardoned by the Continuum, she really pressed him for some answers.

"I'm sorry, Kathy, but I can't interfere." He did seem quite sincere about it.

"It seems such a minor detail..." Kathryn couldn't believe that she'd reached the point where she was practically begging for Q's help.

"You'll just have to believe me when I say that it's for the best. In this case the Time Cops got it right."

"I can't believe that the damned universe will completely unravel if I'm happy." Kathryn almost pleaded, "Q can you at least tell me something about the...divergence?"

Q didn't immediately make some flippant reply and actually seemed to give the question serious consideration. He sighed and without any hint of smugness, "I'll try, but I can't promise..."

"What happened in Chakotay's version?"

"You fought," Q seeing the dismay in her face, clarified, "Actually, it wasn't that bad."

"Then *please*, tell me."

"You said was that you would never consider any kind of personal relationship in the Delta Quadrant."

"That's it?"

"You said that you needed to pull away. No more dinners or shore leaves together." Q nodded. "It was really more a timing thing."

"You're telling me."

"On his part, I mean. He was more disappointed than angry." Q considered for a few seconds. "The anger came a little bit later."

"Then why..." she didn't finish the sentence. All this time she thought she had said something totally unforgivable. She hadn't, but still he'd totally withdrawn.

"He was a bit confused and then angry by your behavior after the test. You were the one who insisted on distance and then you were behaving like the conversation hadn't happened. Your actions made him a bit...upset with you. Chuckles," at her angry glare, he amended, "*Chakotay* felt there was no hope, so he attempted to move on. After a while he felt he was successful."

"Is he happy?"

"Kathy."

"It's important to me, Q." she whispered.

"Kathy," Q leaned down and kissed Janeway on the forehead, "I've already said too much."

He disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

It was nothing but it was everything. There was no doubt that she was relieved she hadn't said something totally unforgivable.

When she had returned to the ship after Quarra, there had been a niggling worry about something but she just couldn't put her finger on what it was.

Chakotay was very understanding and had made lighthearted jokes with her as she sat in Sick Bay with about twenty other crew waiting for the formal 'all clear' from the Doctor.

"I know, you've forgotten to repay the rations you borrowed." he smiled at her, leaning casually against the bio bed she was sitting on, with his arms crossed.

"I owe you some rations?" she squinted at him as if trying to recall.

"Well, no, but it was worth a try."

"Oh, you," she swatted him playfully on the arm, "I can't remember - why do I keep you around?"

"Spare rations and keeping Paris under control."

"Right, perhaps you should be...*Chip!*"

"What?"

Kathryn initially looked around the Sick Bay surroundings with a slightly panicked expression, as if the thing she sought would be in the immediate area. Then her expression changed and she looked down at her hands, but when she didn't offer anything else, he gave her shoulder a nudge.

"Kathryn," he said softly, "have you lost a data chip?"

"No, sorry. Just remembered something. Like leaving the bath running kind of thing."

"Oh, I see. Do you need my help in any way?"

Janeway looked at him with the strangest expression he had ever seen. Finally, she gave him a sad shake of her head and assured him as best as she was able.

"Thank you, Chakotay, but it won't be necessary," she patted his arm, "but I appreciate the thought."

He came looking for her, of course. Janeway had wandered off from the main group of the crew who were supposed to be finding edible plants to top up their ever dwindling food stores.

The planet had been a treasure trove of delicious fruits and vegetables and the teams were enjoying themselves enormously. Her group showed every indication of turning the chore into a type of picnic feast and she figured that they would have a lot more fun if she wasn't around.

When the Doctor arrived, she was just about to eat one of the pieces of fruit she had collected.

"You know I'm supposed to report those people who don't follow the away mission protocols about wandering off to the Captain."

She looked up, smiling and made room for him to sit down. "Yes, well, she's a petty martinet and there's talk of her being a little unhinged, so let's keep this between ourselves."

He halted in mid sit and looked alarmed and upset. "Captain, surely no one..."

"No, sorry. I just assume that's what they'd say." He raised an eyebrow at her reply. "And Doctor, I thought we'd agreed that you would continue calling me 'Kathryn' when we're off duty?"

"Sorry, Kathryn. Force of habit."

She rubbed her forehead, "No, I'm sorry, Doctor," she absently peeled the fruit, "I was just brooding about how long it is since he called me that. He's avoided me since Quarra."

Though it had only been just over a week since they left Quarra, Janeway had spent a sizable amount of her free time wondering what would've happened if Chakotay had been one of the workers instead of being on the away mission with Neelix and Harry. Would she still have had a relationship with Jaffen? Her attraction to Chakotay had been almost instantaneous and she'd agreed to help him despite her usual cautious nature. The thought of four weeks of living with Chakotay was tantalizing. In her weaker fantasy moments, which she quietly admitted to herself that she was having more and more of, she hoped that her first officer's standoffishness was due to jealousy of her 'relationship' with Jaffen.

"I know we've discussed this before, but why don't you tell him?"

She smiled sadly. "I don't know anymore. Maybe I should. It's a hell of a risk though...for both of us."

"I don't recall you being risk averse in the past, Kathryn." The Doctor gently chided.

"Maybe I should just get some more benamite crystals and try the whole thing again."

"Well, that's one way of tackling the problem, I guess," he smiled knowing that she wasn't planning to approach Chakotay. "It will work out, Kathryn."

"I hope so. I just can't see how though." She motioned the half eaten fruit at him, "This tastes far too good to be in anyway nutritious. It would only be improved by caffeine."

The Doctor knew that this signaled that their 'dangerous' conversation was finished and that they would now be talking about 'safe' topics.

Stardate 2378 - USS Voyager, Alpha Quadrant

Chakotay hurried down the empty corridors of Voyager. His emotions were swirling around inside of him. He was worried about Kathryn.

Their return had been remarkably trouble free. The debriefings had been conducted on board the ship and it had been a long six weeks. As each of the crew had finished their required sessions, they had been allowed to return to their homes and loved ones. Now, with only himself and the Captain remaining, he had received some... news. He wasn't sure if it was good or bad.

He had been given the captaincy of Voyager. And Janeway was taking indefinite leave.

As far as he was concerned, this could only mean one thing. Kathryn Janeway had made some deal with Starfleet and had probably sacrificed herself or her career to ensure everyone's wellbeing.

Shaking his head as he hurried down the corridor towards her quarters, he couldn't believe he'd missed the signs. They must have been there, but he'd been so bound up in his own and the Maquis' good fortune that he hadn't stopped to question anything.

It was all there. She had been calm and cool, and since they'd arrived home, they hadn't had dinner together alone. Before everyone else had left the ship, they'd dined together but with Seven or Tom and B'Elanna or even the Doctor present.

Seven had left over a week ago but Kathryn had always found an excuse to avoid his invitations. The previous night she had declined, citing an appointment with the Doctor.

His step faltered and he leaned against the wall outside her quarters. The thought that she was seriously ill hadn't occurred to him until now but it certainly was a possibility. Was she sick - was that why she was so subdued since their return? Chakotay felt nauseous even considering it.

Collecting himself, he stood up straight and had the computer announce his presence, hoping that she hadn't already left the ship. If she was in trouble, of whatever kind, he wanted to help.

The door slid open and he saw her sitting on her couch.

Janeway couldn't believe it when the Admiral told her about Seven and Chakotay. It had all been proven sickeningly true since then, of course. She'd even overheard someone in the mess hall tell a crewmate about Chakotay saying to Seven that he would always want to be within transporter distance of her when they reached Earth. He still hadn't said anything to her about the relationship though.

"Ancient legends!" she said bitterly to herself, as she carelessly threw personal belongings into a transport container to be sent home. "Damn things aren't worth the paper they're written on."

With a start, she realized that not only was she talking to herself, but her aphorisms didn't work. "Bah!" Kathryn closed the lid of the box with undue force.

It felt good. She wanted to hit something.

Once, two years ago, she had done something selfish and it hadn't worked out. Time to try again.

The main object of her thoughts suddenly appeared at her open door.

Chakotay stormed into her quarters.

"Kathryn, I just got the news."

Janeway's head snapped up and her expression was of shock.

"How?"

"Admiral Hillock just informed me of my next assignment." He sat heavily on the sofa next to her. "What have you done? Why are you on indefinite leave?"

Her expression went from shock to relief, which made him even more suspicious. "I'll be taking some time off, Chakotay. Is that so surprising?"

"Frankly? Yes."

"Well, I am. I promise I haven't made any deals." Janeway made an effort to gather her carry-on together and pulled it all on to her lap. "So, was there anything else?"

"I was thinking of asking you out to dinner, but when I was told about Voyager's captaincy, I thought I'd have to strangle you first."

"Dinner?"

"Well, yes. I'm single and you're single and assuming you haven't made a deal that will put you in New Zealand..."

"No deal. Honestly. Dinner? I thought you were with Seven?" There. She'd said it and it was finally out in the open.

"Kathryn, please. I'm hoping the whole saga will be the only embarrassing blunder of mid-life crisis."

Janeway blinked at him. Chakotay could practically see the wheels turning in her head.

"There is something wrong," he prompted when she seemed to drift off into one of her pre-bombshell trances, "you may as well tell me now."

She didn't say anything, just stared at him with an expression that made him feel...interrogated.

"Please, Kathryn. What is it?"

"Well, I'm not sure I can easily explain, but I can tell you a story. A recent Star Fleet legend."

It was more a question or a request for permission to proceed. She looked up and saw the small smile on his face and he nodded. Her gaze returned to her hands that were holding onto the box. Taking a deep breath, she began.

"There was once a woman warrior who needed the help of another warrior to help protect her ship. The man was wise and handsome and a very good cook. Though the woman was sometimes foolish and once even certifiably demented, the man stood by her, protected her and her ship, quickly becoming the woman warrior's most trusted friend and advisor.

"She fell in love with the warrior but didn't ever tell him, because of rules she thought important at the time. Until one day, about five years into their journey, they were faced with a mission that was very dangerous. The woman decided to tell her warrior how she felt about him and finally declared her love. She didn't want to live without at least telling him the truth. Her heart was joyous, as at that time, he still loved her too. They spent the night together which was the most wonderful, mind-blowing night she had ever experienced.

"The next day, they embarked upon their mission but not before they had...*anyway*." She smiled to herself and then cleared her throat and continued with the story.

"During the mission - due to some temporal SNAFU - time took divergent paths for the woman and her warrior. Only the woman had memories their life changing evening, while her warrior had a completely different experience, one that involved them arguing, him being very disappointed in her

once again and deciding that he would never share anything meaningful with her. He decided to move on.

"It took the woman some time to discover what had happened but the dreadful truth was finally confirmed by the temporal police some months later. The unhelpful bastards."

Chakotay laughed quietly at this little aside. He was completely shocked by the story, so achingly familiar, yet still new. Her dig at, he assumed Captain Branxton, allowed him to pull himself together. Her story was fantastic, but there was never any thought in his head of disbelieving her.

He watched her closely; she was so immersed in her tale that she didn't notice his humor or reaction. She plowed on with her narrative, still staring at her hands.

All pretense of her telling him a story was now gone. The details so long kept hidden and repressed were now being openly shared.

"Anyway, as devastating as it was to find out that there were quite a few versions of events resulting from the time reset, none of which coincided with the woman warrior's, it was nothing compared to the bombshell that the Doctor dropped. Having to go to Sick Bay to have an injured wrist seen to, of course led to the Doctor scanning her."

Janeway took a deep breath and one hand finally let go of the box on her lap long enough to absently swipe away a tear. Suddenly, tension once more gripped Chakotay. Had the Doctor discovered a dreadful illness?

"A baby. She was going to have a baby. Absolutely the best news she could ask for, at the worst possible time."

Chakotay was so relieved that she wasn't ill that he managed only one word in reply. "Kathryn." He sat forward and smiled at her but her eyes were firmly fixed on the box on her lap.

"There was no way she could have a baby while they were still so far from home. Unable to ensure the safety of adults, there was no possibility of adding a baby to the mix. She decided with the help of the Doctor to keep the fetus in stasis and until today, it has remained there the whole time."

The story finished, the pair sat in silence for some time. Janeway's eyes were still cast downwards, not venturing towards his. Not wanting to see his reaction.

Finally, it was Chakotay who broke the quiet.

"Was that really a story?"

"No, but it made it easier to tell."

Chakotay reached across and took her hand. They sat quietly for a few minutes. It was Chakotay who finally spoke again.

"So, is that a yes or a no to the dinner question?"

Janeway's eyes snapped up. She felt hope for the first time in over two years.

"That's quite a story, Kathryn," Janeway looked up and into Chakotay's eyes, relief coursing through her at the simple look of trust she saw there. "That's a lot to take in."

"Tell me about it." Janeway sighed, "I am sorry Chakotay. It wasn't until today that I have had the courage to... share this with you. I won't exclude you from any part of Chip's life if that's what you want."

"Chip?"

"That's kind of a nickname that we - the Doctor and I - came up with." she shrugged. "It's shorthand for 'is the baby all right'."

"Wait...you said that until today Chip remained in stasis."

"Yes, well," Kathryn glanced at him almost shyly, "you're the first to know - we're about ninety minutes pregnant."

Chakotay sat and stared at her for a long moment. He swallowed but that was the only reaction that Kathryn could see until she looked into his eyes. Something magical shone in their depths as he stuttered an astonished, "We?"

Nodding, she confirmed what he'd already surmised but added slightly hesitantly. "If you want to be."

"Want to be?! Kathryn, that's amazing. I'm... I don't know, happy doesn't even begin... I'm ecstatic, thrilled, over the moon..."

Relief washed over Kathryn; the terrible tension that had been her constant companion for the last two years, slowly dissipated. Her hand drifted down to rest over her belly; the thought of that tiny being growing inside her suddenly seemed more real and more incredible than she ever could have imagined.

She looked up at Chakotay again and his beaming smile warmed her heart.

"So celebratory...dinner?"

Kathryn opened her mouth to reply but was interrupted by an incoming high priority comm call.

"Kathryn? Where the hell are you? It's 3.05. You said you'd be home by now in the message."

Kathryn knew she'd said about 1500 but her mother, and indeed herself, had waited seven years and it was time she was in Indiana - in so many ways.

"Hi Mom, sorry I got a bit tied up. I'll be there shortly."

"How shortly?"

Kathryn looked up at Chakotay. "Can I invite you to dinner with my mother instead?"

"Absolutely."

"Great," she resumed her conversation with her mother, "Mom, I'm on my way now. I'm bringing Chakotay."

"Perfect."

Kathryn had to agree.

- End -