

A Pocket Full of Lies (Star Trek: Voyager)

By Kirsten Beyer



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An original novel set in the universe of *Star Trek: Voyager* from *New York Times* bestselling author Kirsten Beyer—and the sequel to *Atonement* and *Acts of Contrition*!

The Full Circle Fleet has resumed its unprecedented explorations of the Delta Quadrant and former Borg space. Commander Liam O'Donnell of the *U.S.S. Demeter* makes a promising first contact with the Nihydron—humanoid aliens that are collectors of history. They rarely interact with the species they study but have created a massive database of numerous races, inhabited planets, and the current geopolitical landscape of a large swath of the quadrant. When an exchange of data is proposed via a formal meeting, the Nihydron representatives are visibly shaken when Admiral Kathryn Janeway greets them. For almost a century, two local species—the Rilnar and the Zahl—have fought for control of the nearby planet Sormana, with both sides claiming it as their ancestral homeworld. The shocking part is that for the last several years, the Rilnar have been steadily gaining ground, thanks to the tactics of their current commanding officer: a human woman, who appears to be none other than Kathryn Janeway herself...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kirsten Beyer is the *New York Times* bestselling author of many *Star Trek: Voyager* novels, including *A Pocket Full of Lies, Acts of Contrition, Protectors, The Eternal Tide, Children of the Storm, Unworthy, Full Circle,* and *String Theory: Fusion*. She is also an actor for theater, movies, television, and commercials. She lives with her family in Los Angeles.

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1

STARSHIP GALEN

What were his exact words?" Seven demanded of Ensign Icheb.

The newly minted young officer paled, highlighting the irregular red blotches burning his cheeks. "Commander O'Donnell said that I should not set foot in Lieutenant Elkins's engine room again without a direct order from Commander Torres or Admiral Janeway."

The Doctor lowered his head to hide his amusement.

"And did you report this to Commander Torres?" Seven continued, simultaneously shooting the Doctor a warning glance.

"Not yet," Icheb admitted.

"You should do so at once," Seven suggested.

"I was assigned to assist the commander. I do not believe she will find this evidence of my obvious inadequacy helpful," Icheb countered.

"Commander Torres is fine, Icheb," the Doctor interjected. "I was with her a few hours ago. She is understandably exhausted, but not yet buckling under the stress of the inevitable sleep-deprivation the next several days will bring."

"And she did order you to evaluate and rate the current operational efficiency of each fleet vessel's engineering department," Seven added. "She should know how those under her command are responding to your input."

"They're not the problem, Seven," Icheb insisted.

Seven took the padd that rested on the table next to Icheb's untouched breakfast plate and read silently for a few moments. When the Doctor had joined Seven and Icheb in Galen's small mess hall for an early breakfast

they'd had the room to themselves. The entrance of Lieutenants Benoit and Velth signaled that alpha shift was about to begin.

Icheb glanced toward Galen's chief engineer, Benoit, who nodded in greeting toward the ensign.

Seven sighed, returning the padd to the table. "While it is true that Lieutenant Elkins might find strict adherence to Starfleet protocols tiresome, the inefficiencies you have highlighted here are all accurate." As she continued, the Doctor reached for the padd and began to peruse it. "Regulations apply to everyone, whether they believe they know better or not. Lieutenant Elkins's compliance is mandatory, not optional. And Commander O'Donnell should not prioritize placating the egos of those he supervises above requiring them to perform their duties appropriately."

"Six hundred nineteen?" the Doctor gasped.

Icheb's and Seven's heads instantly turned in unison toward the Galen's holographic chief medical officer.

"You cited Elkins for six hundred nineteen violations?" the Doctor asked.

"Each violation contains a citation to the applicable regulation," Icheb noted.

"I see that," the Doctor said. "But Icheb, surely the years you just spent at Starfleet Academy acquainted you with the chasm that exists between humans and perfection. Did it not occur to you to prioritize your findings and perhaps present Chief Elkins with a series of more manageable recommendations?"

"While onerous, the requirements Starfleet places on engineers to constantly monitor every system under their purview are both necessary and attainable," Icheb replied. "Your Chief Benoit is proof of that. I found only twenty-six violations in his department and he accepted his review without question."

"Galen is even smaller than Demeter," the Doctor reminded the ensign, "and she hasn't seen near the action in recent months that Commander O'Donnell's ship has. Never mind the fact that Chief Benoit has access to dozens of highly specialized holographic engineers who are programmed to perform their duties to regulation specs and to do so without the need for rest or the inclination to complain when a task is mind-numbingly boring."

"Be that as it may," Seven said, "Icheb is performing an essential duty, and he should not be reprimanded for the failings of others."

"Seven, do you want Icheb to succeed at his first assignment with the fleet?" the Doctor asked.

Seven appeared momentarily stricken. "Of course I do."

"And have you heard him refer obliquely and directly to his perceived failures up to this point? He didn't ask us to meet him this morning to lie to him, or worse, to shift the blame for the challenges he is now facing onto others. He knows he is not living up to his or B'Elanna's expectations. Our job is to help him find a way to do that."

Seven sat back. "What do you suggest?"

"For Icheb to be able to perform his duties effectively, he must gain the confidence of those he will interact

with on a daily basis. Otherwise, his ability to function as Commander Torres's personal aide will be severely limited." Turning toward Icheb with sincere compassion, the Doctor continued, "I know it is difficult. We could talk continuously for days and barely scratch the surface of the challenges I have faced over the years in establishing realistic expectations of our fellow officers and developing mutually respectful and productive relationships. But you don't have time for that. Commander Torres has just given birth. She needs you to function as her eyes and ears for the next several weeks as she recovers and sees to the needs of her family. Your job is to make her life easier and worry-free, not to nit-pick her subordinates into defiance."

"But—" Seven began.

"And you," the Doctor continued, "do our young friend here no favors in suggesting that he is not, at least in part, responsible for creating discord. Being right is important. But that's not the only thing being asked of him anymore. He also needs to be sensitive to the feelings of his compatriots and to the reality that none of them are going to be willing to submit to the overly officious will of a green ensign. Learning does not end when one graduates, Icheb. The coursework changes, but the process continues."

"You are suggesting that I lower my expectations?" Icheb asked. "They are no more than I demand of myself."

"I am suggesting that you not use your abilities, or Seven's, as the only means of measuring performance. You were both raised by the Borg, a species that believed perfection was attainable. Those you are now supervising in Commander Torres's stead were not." After giving this a moment to sink in the Doctor asked, "How many of the violations you presented to Lieutenant Elkins would you consider critical to ship operations?"

Icheb looked to Seven before replying, "Twenty-three."

"The magnetic constrictor retuning . . ." Seven suggested.

"Twenty-two," Icheb allowed.

"Take a revised evaluation directly to Commander O'Donnell as soon as possible, highlighting only critical suggestions for improvement. Apologize for wasting Chief Elkins's valuable time and ask that the commander pass along your recommendations."

"And if Commander O'Donnell refuses?" Seven asked.

"He won't," the Doctor replied. "He's not questioning your position or authority, nor is he blindly defending his officer. He's testing you. This is how you pass that test."

"Is it your intention to give Icheb the same series of instructions in social skills you provided to me when I first came to Voyager?" Seven asked.

The Doctor's program paused momentarily as it attempted to access memories that no longer existed. The immediate chagrin on Seven's face indicated that this lapse had not gone unnoticed.

"Forgive me," Seven said quickly. "I was referring to a series of interactions that began on stardate 51652.3. You were attempting to assist me—"

"It's all right, Seven," the Doctor interrupted. Much as he was growing to treasure Seven's attempts to provide him with the data about their early years together that had been purged from his matrix in order to simultaneously rid it of a Seriareen consciousness determined to steal his holomatrix, this was not the time. "Icheb needs to get to work, and you have a meeting aboard the Vesta to attend, don't you?"

"I do."

"I believe the Doctor's suggestions are valid," Icheb said as he rose from his seat and collected his full dish of fresh fruit and utensils. "Thank you both."

"You are always welcome," Seven said. "Report back to me when you have spoken to Commander O'Donnell."

"I will," Icheb promised.

Seven followed Icheb with her eyes as he hurried toward the replicator to recycle his breakfast.

"He's going to be fine, Seven. It will take him some time to adjust. But he'll get the hang of it. You did."

"It is still difficult to watch someone for whom you care deeply struggle."

"Don't try to take it away from him," the Doctor suggested.

Seven turned back to face him. "I won't."

As they rose to begin their duties, the Doctor asked, "Did the social lessons you referred to actually help you become better acclimated to your life aboard Voyager?"

"They were extremely tiresome," Seven replied honestly. "And yes, they did."

The Doctor smiled. He could not help but believe that no matter how much data he had lost when Xolani had attacked his program, nothing essential had been taken from him.

VOYAGER

Lieutenant Nancy Conlon was impatient for this meeting to end. Counselor Hugh Cambridge was the last officer required to sign off on her complete recovery from the incident of a few weeks prior that had left her briefly dead and temporarily comatose. Cambridge and the Doctor had done exemplary work. She was more than ready to return to engineering and get on with the rest of her life.

Cambridge sat opposite her in a deep black chair, his long legs crossed at the knee with one swinging idly as he perused her updated medical records. He spoke without lifting his eyes from the padd. "I see you have already resumed your normal exercise regimen."

"The Doctor was concerned about some early motor weakness, but it has improved in the last several days," Conlon reported.

"And the headaches?"

"Gone. And I don't miss them."

Cambridge nodded as he continued to read.

"What's this about bananas?"

"Banana pancakes. B'Elanna introduced me to them a few months back and ever since I woke up I've been craving them. I was begging for them long before the Doctor rescinded my dietary restrictions. Even increasing my potassium supplements didn't help. Lieutenant Neol took pity on me and snuck me a serving. The Doctor was not pleased."

Cambridge chuckled. "I bet he wasn't." Finally setting the padd aside, the counselor looked up at his patient and said, "Which just leaves the most important question."

"Nothing," Conlon said simply.

"Still?"

Conlon shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. The last thing I remember, I was in the main holodeck, reviewing the most recent access logs. The next thing I knew, Harry and B'Elanna were arguing over my bed."

Cambridge shook his head. "Obviously we have no baseline for a case like this. You are the only person on record who has ever survived Seriareen possession and the expulsion of that essence."

"All I had to do was die."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Given the alternative, no. Besides, I'm in good company: Lieutenant Kim, Admiral Janeway. The dead don't often stay that way on this ship, do they?"

"Some do," Cambridge replied. Conlon detected a faint note of genuine regret from him. "Of course your death took place under medical supervision. You were revived the moment the Doctor could confirm that Xolani had left your body."

"Isn't it a good thing that I don't remember? Yes, the idea of it is traumatic to think about, but it's almost like it happened to somebody else."

"Except that it didn't. You and I have talked at some length about how your refusal to fully process some of your past experiences left you nearly paralyzed in the face of overwhelming tragedy."

"And I agreed with you and decided to do that work here."

"I would have thought this incident might have set you back a bit, perhaps created a certain amount of anxiety at the reality of your own vulnerability."

"I know how lucky I am, Counselor. I've come to really love my life here on Voyager and the people I serve with. I'm trying to stay focused on the positive things that fall within my control."

"A good strategy," Cambridge agreed. "But, and this is a big but, I would not be the least bit surprised if in the future your subconscious finds ways to force this trauma into your conscious mind. I want to see you on a weekly basis, just to check in. I want to hear about any unusual dreams, anxiety, anything at all that just feels off. It's possible you may live the rest of your life without the memory of a few days that anyone would be glad to forget. It's just too early for me to believe that will happen."

"Works for me," Conlon agreed.

"Very well, Lieutenant," Cambridge said, rising from his chair. "It's time for you to get back to work."

Conlon smiled in genuine relief. "Yes, it is, sir."

STARSHIP VESTA

Captain Regina Farkas stared across the table at Commander Liam O'Donnell, Demeter's captain and one of the Federation's most accomplished botanical geneticists. His hair had begun its retreat from his forehead years earlier and the dark brown tufts left above his ears and circling the back of his head were generously flecked with gray. His eyes, however, danced merrily when they met hers. He seemed to be in a good mood. This was rare in Farkas's experience, but enjoyable. It lent an air of youth and vitality to O'Donnell.

"Commander, you asked for this meeting," Admiral Janeway reminded him from her place at the head of the table. Captain Chakotay was seated at the admiral's right hand, the Galen's Commander Clarissa Glenn at her left.

"I did," O'Donnell agreed. "I was hoping Seven would join us before we began."

On cue, the doors to the Vesta's large briefing room slid open and Seven entered.

"I apologize for my tardiness," the statuesque mission specialist said, moving briskly to the empty chair beside O'Donnell.

"It's all right," Janeway assured Seven. "We're just getting started."

"If you would turn your attention to the data now appearing on your personal screens," O'Donnell began as the small interfaces imbedded in front of each seat at the conference table were activated—a design standard to the Vesta-class ships—"you will find a list of several species that were added to our database during our most recent visit to New Talax."

"Ambassador Neelix has been busy," Farkas noted.

"Thankfully for us, he takes his role as the Federation's ambassador to the Delta Quadrant quite seriously," the admiral said.

"And Neelix has no qualms about seeking far and wide for new trading partners," Chakotay added. "His latest report offers intelligence on several species tens of thousands of light years from New Talax."

"Has he made contact with these species?" Seven asked.

"Not so far. But he offers his trademark hospitality to everyone who comes in range of New Talax and as a

result, he hears all sorts of fascinating rumors."

"I'm intrigued by several entries here," O'Donnell said, refocusing their attention, "but the one I'm most curious about are the Nihydron. They're referenced in Voyager's database, although apparently you never made contact with them during your first visit."

Admiral Janeway was already cross-referencing the entry on her personal screen. "They were grouped with a few other species, including the Rilnar, Zahl, Krenim and the Mawasi whose territory fell within an area of disputed space."

"It's almost hard to believe we managed to avoid getting ourselves into the middle of that," Chakotay quipped.

Admiral Janeway shot him a good-natured smirk as O'Donnell asked, "Did the Borg ever run across them?"

"Species 1184," Seven replied. "The Nihydron are humanoids with well-developed frontal lobes. They did not make particularly good drones."

"I like them already," Glenn said.

"According to Neelix's report, they don't have a homeworld, but operate from a number of small, well-hidden bases. The reputation they have gained for possessing critical data that covers vast swaths of the Delta Quadrant suggests that they have developed some form of propulsion similar to our slipstream drives."

"It's also possible that they, like some of their neighbors, have discovered ways to effectively utilize the Seriareen's subspace tunnels," Chakotay suggested.

"Either way, they are extensive data collectors," O'Donnell continued. "Neelix suggested that they would likely have the best information available on any new developments in the several sectors they explore."

"Those sectors fall very near the borders of the next area of former Borg space we're scheduled to investigate," Janeway observed.

"It is doubtful the Nihydron will freely share any intelligence they have gained," Seven said.

"Why?" Farkas asked.

"Like many collectors, they prize the accumulation of data for their own purposes. They are excellent at evading detection when it suits them, one of many reasons their entire species was not completely assimilated."

"Perhaps," Farkas agreed, "but our fleet just spent months exploring the Confederacy of the Worlds of the First Quadrant and making inroads with the Devore, the Turei, the Vaadwaur, and the Voth, collecting a great deal of useful intelligence of our own." She caught an approving glance from O'Donnell. Clearly, they were already thinking along similar lines.

"They also might be curious to know what became of the Borg," Chakotay interjected. "Now that the Confederacy and the former Kinara allies have learned the fate of the Collective and of the Caeliar, some of them are likely sharing that information. We'd be offering the Nihydron direct access to the original source."

"I'm inclined to agree," Janeway said. "But this is a first contact with which we will need to proceed very carefully."

"How so?" Farkas asked.

"If four fleet vessels enter their territory at once, we could be perceived as a threat," Janeway replied. "Depending upon their capabilities, the Nihydron could make it very difficult for us to find them. I don't want to waste a lot of time on this."

"What do you suggest, Admiral?" Chakotay asked.

Janeway locked eyes with O'Donnell. "This was your idea, Commander. The entire fleet will accompany you to the borders of Nihydron territory, but I think I'll send Demeter in first to attempt to draw them out."

Uncertainty flashed briefly across O'Donnell's face. He quickly squared his shoulders, obviously accepting the admiral's challenge.

"How best might we do that?" O'Donnell asked.

"I'm sure you'll think of something, Commander," Janeway replied. "With Captain Chakotay's permission, I'd like Counselor Cambridge to join you as a first-contact specialist."

"I think we can spare him for a bit," Chakotay agreed.

"Training wheels, Admiral?" O'Donnell asked pointedly.

"Additional resources," Janeway clarified.

Farkas sat back in her chair, crossing her arms and grinning at O'Donnell's discomfort. Traditionally, a mission like this would be handled by one of the fleet's larger ships: the Vesta or Voyager. Demeter's function with the exploratory group was to collect samples of unique botanical life-forms, to consult with species requiring their expertise, and to provide "home-grown" food when possible to supplement the fleet's replicated fare. O'Donnell had already expanded on those parameters, as when the fleet had encountered the Children of the Storm, and occasionally because it suited the commander's personal whims. Farkas knew O'Donnell was astute, but nursed a propensity toward rashness. He was also the last man anyone would call a "people person." It obviously hadn't taken Admiral Janeway long to realize this. Clearly, she intended to push the commander to hone his diplomatic skills to match his technical abilities.

"Very well, Admiral," O'Donnell said, "I'll need two hours to confer with Commander Fife before we depart."

Janeway nodded, signaling that the briefing had ended. "You should treat the Nihydron with the same delicacy you reserve for your most temperamental botanical specimens," she suggested.

"Don't worry," O'Donnell said. "I'm not planning on kidnapping their commanding officer, at least not right away."

"This should be interesting," Chakotay offered.

"I assume we'll be monitoring Demeter's communications," Farkas asked of Janeway.

The admiral nodded. "Just in case. Commander O'Donnell will do us all proud." With a sharp nod she departed, leaving the rest of the fleet's commanding officers to their own devices. O'Donnell started to follow her out, but paused as Farkas said, "The earliest Demeter might make contact would be nineteen hundred hours. Psilakis will have Vesta's bridge."

"Lieutenant Kim has Voyager's third watch tonight," Chakotay noted.

"I was planning to turn in a little early, but in this case . . ." Glenn began, smiling broadly at Commander O'Donnell.

"My ready room, eighteen forty-five," Farkas offered, winking at Demeter's captain, "And bring your own popcorn."

O'Donnell considered his fellow captains, sighed deeply, and shook his head, leaving the briefing room without further comment.

• • •

The moment the doors to the briefing room slid open, Ensign Icheb straightened his posture, shifting his weight from the bulkhead where it had rested while he waited.

Admiral Janeway's face shifted from concern to surprise the moment she saw him. "Ensign," she said warmly.

"Good morning, Admiral," Icheb greeted her, keeping his eyes forward.

Janeway paused momentarily. "At ease, Icheb."

He complied, widening his stance while still refusing to meet her eyes.

"What brings you to the Vesta this morning?" Janeway inquired.

"I have a report to present to Commander O'Donnell before I begin my efficiency evaluation of Lieutenant Bryce and Vesta's engineering department."

"Excellent," Janeway said. "I know Commander Torres was pleased when you were assigned to assist her. I am too. It's wonderful to have you with us again."

"Thank you, Admiral."

Janeway started to say more, but turned as O'Donnell stormed out of the briefing room. He barely took note of either of them as he passed until Icheb called out, "A moment, please, Commander."

O'Donnell halted and turning back only slightly, nodded to Icheb.

"Carry on," Janeway said, and departed down the hall in the opposite direction.

Icheb moved toward O'Donnell, who resumed walking, forcing the ensign to quicken his steps to keep pace.

"I have revised my efficiency report for Lieutenant Elkins, Commander, and with your permission would like to present it to him," Icheb said.

O'Donnell did not reply, nor did he look at Icheb, but he did extend a hand and accept the padd Icheb offered. As both stopped to wait for the turbolift, he perused the new report quickly.

The doors to the lift slid open. O'Donnell stepped in, handing the padd back to Icheb.

"May I—" Icheb began.

"Try again," O'Donnell said as the doors slid shut.

Deflated, but not defeated, Icheb allowed his shoulders to sag.

Try again? Icheb had been so certain that the Doctor's advice would prove helpful in resolving this situation. After serious consideration he had actually shortened the list to include only nineteen areas of concern. Where had he gone wrong?

As no immediate answer was forthcoming, Icheb lifted his chin, swallowed his embarrassment, and made his way to Vesta's engine room.

VOYAGER

Lieutenant Harry Kim, Voyager's chief of security, caught up with Lieutenant Conlon just before she reached the doors to main engineering. "Lieutenant," he greeted her crisply.

"Lieutenant," she snapped back.

"Back on duty?"

"Good as new," she replied with a smile.

Kim quickly checked the hall and as they were alone, stepped into her personal space. Conlon held her ground, gazing mischievously into his eyes. Their lips had almost touched when Conlon said, "Why aren't you on the bridge, Lieutenant?"

"I got a call from Neol," Kim replied hungrily. "It sounded urgent."

"Why?" Conlon demanded, stepping back and immediately shifting gears. "What's the problem?"

The doors to engineering slid open and two of Conlon's ensigns stepped through them, their uniforms covered in a thick, viscous fluid. Looking past them, Conlon noted that the engine room was a flurry of tense activity.

"Lieutenant Conlon," Ensign Mirk said with relief. "Please tell me you're back on duty."

"I am. Why are you two covered in lubricant?" Conlon asked.

"Ensign Icheb," Ensign Worlin replied through gritted teeth.

"Get cleaned up and back here as soon as possible," Conlon ordered. "And try not to track too much of that down the hall. That's freshly replicated floor covering you're walking on."

"Yes, sir," they replied in miserable unison.

Conlon spared a knowing glance toward Kim. "Whatever this is, I'll handle it," she assured him.

"I think you're going to have your hands full today."

"Shall we pick up where we left off a little later?" she asked.

"I have Tom's watch for the first half of beta shift," Kim replied. "I get four whole hours to myself before taking command during gamma shift."

Conlon nodded, obviously disappointed. "Oh, well in that case . . ."

"Go," Kim ordered. He watched her return to her engine room with a frustrated sigh.

. . .

The number of bodies present suggested to Conlon that most of gamma shift had stayed on after hours. Two panels of deck plating lay near the entrance, along with several large coils of conduit. A variety of standard tools were scattered on every work surface. A large case of new isolinear chips lay open and within reach of Ensign Amiri, whose head was buried beneath the main diagnostic terminal. The air was thick with sweat and a faint tinge of plasma. Ensign Charvet stood on a portable lift taking readings from the magnetic constrictors near the top of the warp core. Lieutenant Saracen was analyzing a set of benamite crystals, newly removed from the slipstream portion of the assembly.

It looked like half of engineering was in the process of being repaired or replaced.

Conlon found Lieutenant Neol, one of her slipstream specialists, on his hands and knees about to enter an access port behind the secondary data terminals.

"Neol," Conlon said, bending down and keeping her voice low.

The officer jerked his head back. It impacted the edge of the portal with a soft thud.

"Ow," Neol said.

"Careful," Conlon ordered as she helped to guide him safely back. When he was seated before her, gingerly rubbing his pale blue scalp, Conlon said, "I appreciate you assuming command in my absence, but there's a difference between taking initiative and destroying engineering."

"It's not my fault," Neol pleaded. Grabbing a padd from a nearby stack he called up a file and handed the device to Conlon. "Four days ago Ensign Icheb presented us with his efficiency evaluation. He found three hundred sixty-six protocol violations and ordered us to begin rectifying them immediately."

"On whose authority?" Conlon demanded.

"Commander Torres's, I presumed," Neol admitted.

Conlon reviewed the padd quickly, noting that more than half of the issues Icheb had cited could only be safely addressed when a ship was docked at a space station or port. A handful related to standard repairs and maintenance Conlon already had on her to-do list. The rest were, at best, minor infractions.

Shaking her head, Conlon extended a hand to help Neol to his feet. Lifting her voice she called out, "Engineers, attention."

The room quickly fell silent.

"Finish your scans, note your readings, and then put this room back in working order immediately. No one, I repeat, no one is to continue on any projects designed to improve our efficiency rating. I'm back, and effective immediately, you will take orders only from me. Understood?"

Conlon's ears stung from the loud whoops and cheers that greeted her announcement.

Users Review

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