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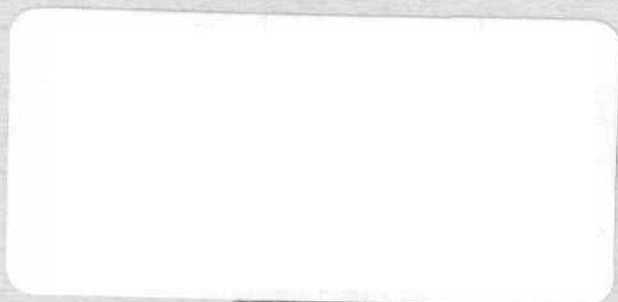


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**J.M.
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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-671-88342-9

First Pocket Books printing March 1995

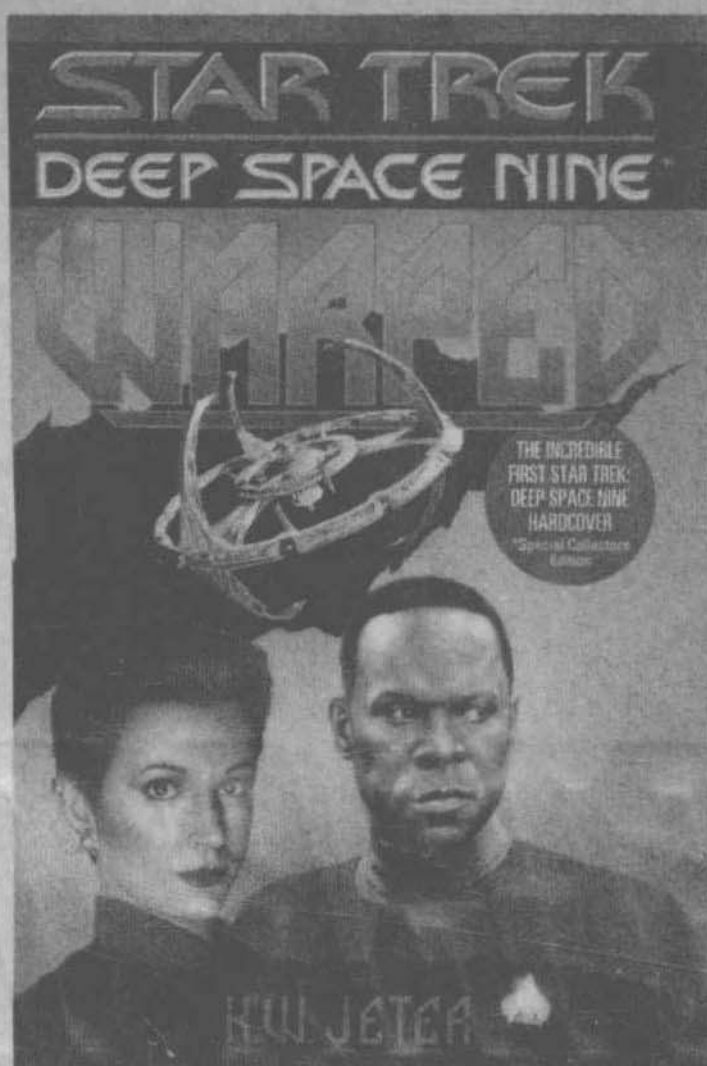
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\$5.50 U.S.
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An unspeakable evil invades
Deep Space Nine™...

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"HARD ABOUT!"
ADMIRAL KIRK SHOUTED.
"RETURN FIRE ON MY ORDER!"

"Fire, Admiral? On *Recovery*?" First Officer Pulver of the *U.S.S. Paladin* questioned. "But our own people are on that ship!"

"I know," Admiral Kirk said grimly. "We simply have no choice." He turned back to the view-screen.

"Mr. Sandover!" he said to the weapons officer. "You heard me! Prepare to fire!"

And twin beams of energy shot out toward the ship carrying two of James T. Kirk's closest friends. . . .

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For Kathy, with love and gratitude

Acknowledgments

Let's get right down to it: this book exists because of my collaborator, the divine Kathleen O'Malley. Kathy wrote a huge portion of the first draft *and* provided emotional hand-holding for me during a very difficult year. (And, since we live on opposite coasts, we have the phone bills to prove it!) For those of you that don't know, Kath is an author in her own right; run, don't walk, to your nearest bookstore and pick up copies of her two collaborations with Ann Crispin, the *Starbridge* books *Silent Dances* and *Silent Songs*. (And while you're at it, buy the rest of the *Starbridge* series, too.)

Thanks, Kath. I couldn't have done it without you.

The next person that deserves long-distance hugs and kisses is editor Kevin Ryan, who has been incredibly kind and incredibly patient in waiting for this book. Thanks, Kev. I won't forget it.

I'd also like to thank every STAR TREK fan who read *The Lost Years* and who is now holding this book. Without you, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to write about some of my favorite characters and their continuing adventures in the *Lost Years* series. . . .

Prologue

“YOU’RE REALLY going through with it, sir?”

Admiral James T. Kirk turned away from his office window and its sweeping view of the San Francisco Bay; above the choppy, leaden water, dark clouds sailed swiftly in an ever-changing panorama.

Kirk released a silent sigh and faced his questioner. Beneath his trimmed golden brown beard, Lieutenant Commander Kevin Riley still had enough of an Irish baby-face to give the appearance of a man much younger than the thirty-odd years Kirk knew him to be. People often underestimated Riley because of it. But when Kirk looked at his aide, he could see the hard-won maturity etched around his blue eyes and the corners of his mouth.

Over the past year and a half, Riley, likewise, had come to know Kirk. Maybe not as well as Leonard McCoy or Mr. Spock had . . . but well enough. They’d watched each other change as they worked together at

Starfleet Headquarters. For Riley, the changes had meant real growth, a burgeoning strength of character, but for Kirk . . . the adjustments had not nearly been so positive.

"You don't think I should do it?" Kirk asked his aide. Not that another opinion would make a difference at this point—he had made his decision, and nothing could shake him. But over the past several months, he had come to value Riley's input; a friendship and trust had developed between the two.

"Now, that's a true Irish answer, Admiral," the younger man said with a slight smile. "A question for a question. I know you, sir. Once your mind is made up . . ."

Kirk shook his head, wanting Riley to believe he wasn't shrugging him off. "I respect your opinion, Kevin. You should know that by now."

Riley glanced shyly away as if embarrassed by Kirk's high regard, and the unexpected use of his first name.

"Tell me," Kirk insisted quietly. "You don't think I should do this? When you, more than anyone at Starfleet, knows what's happening to me here? You've watched this *job*, this 'exciting opportunity' they promised me dwindle into nothing but a bureaucrat's dream. You've seen the work—the *paperwork*—pile up and up until we've both been buried under it. You, even more than my *wife*—" He paused abruptly, his voice catching on the last word.

It had been two months since his one-year marriage contract had expired. Two months since Admiral Lori Ciana had stoutly refused to renew that contract. Two months since she had moved out of his home, his life, his bed.

Kirk swallowed, gritted his teeth, then nodded at his own error. "—that is, my *ex-wife* . . . even more

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than Lori, *you've* watched what they've done to me. It's been more than six months since I've been out of this office. Six months since I've done something, *anything*, even remotely worthwhile. And a year since . . . I've been in space. . . ."

He paused, that phrase almost whispered, and left it hanging there between them. He smiled at Riley conspiratorially. "Do you remember, Kevin? What it was like? Six months . . . on the *Enterprise*?" He couldn't help himself. His voice dropped into an almost reverential hush when he mouthed her name.

"I remember," Riley murmured.

Kirk turned back toward the view of the windswept sky. "In a year we might've discovered two new class-M planets, mapped a couple of solar systems, contacted two or three alien races. Spock would've found time to translate four new languages, improve five computer programs, write two new ones, and author half a dozen scientific papers. And Bones . . . Bones would've discovered a handful of vaccines, isolated a bunch of unknown organisms . . . and found a dozen new ways to get under Spock's skin." He was smiling now, in spite of his melancholy, until he turned back and caught sight of his aide's pitying expression.

Damn, Jim thought disgustedly, as Kevin lowered his eyes to spare him. *I must sound like the ancient mariner! But the only albatross around my neck is this job.* "Don't you miss it at all, Kevin? Don't you miss working in space?"

"I don't know, sir," Riley admitted honestly. "For a long time I thought I'd never go back. But lately . . . maybe because I've been working with you . . . I find myself wondering. . . . Are you sure it's really *space* you miss so much, Admiral, or is it the *responsibility*? All those people under your command, a million decisions to make a day—you thrived on that, sir. It

was the responsibility I couldn't handle for a long time. But now . . . I think maybe . . . yes. I guess I do miss it. The responsibility of working in space."

Kirk pointed a finger at him as if his aide had just pinpointed the problem. "And that's where we're going, Riley. Into space. You and I. We've done our bit for God and country. We've written enough reports and refitted enough ships to satisfy anyone." He'd even had to oversee the refitting of the *Enterprise*. He'd done it, too, knowing all the while he was refitting her for another captain—Will Decker. "We deserve a better assignment. And today, I'm going to tell Admiral Nogura just that. Let the chips go ahead and fall."

Jim could see both admiration and fear warring in Riley's eyes. A confrontation with the old man, the most powerful figure in Starfleet, was quite the calculated risk. Kirk could very well have to live with whatever ultimatum he delivered. But did that matter any longer? *I've lost Lori. I've lost the Enterprise. Lost Bones, Spock, and the only work I ever cared about. What else have I got to lose?*

Just Starfleet. He remembered the day, almost two years before, when he'd been on leave at his mother Winona's home in Iowa, and Nogura had come, determined to talk him into the admiralty. Jim had been just as determined not to give up the *Enterprise*.

"*Make your pitch,*" he'd told the old man. "*I'll go ahead and refuse the promotion . . . and if you want to, you can drum me out of the Fleet. But I won't be kicked upstairs.*"

And Nogura, his tone as smooth and brittle as glass, had said quietly, "*God knows, I don't want you to resign if I can help it. But I can't stop you from leaving the Fleet.*"

It might very well come to that; having to resign, to walk away from his years in Starfleet, to become . . .

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what? A commercial pilot hauling cargo and passengers? Captain of a crew of thirty on the border patrol?

No matter; he could not envision what his future might be without Starfleet. But he had seen what it was in the Fleet, without a ship, without the exhilaration of being in space—and *that* future he could live with no longer.

Perhaps he could not reclaim the *Enterprise*—but at the very least, he would force Nogura to make good his promise that Kirk would be a diplomatic trouble-shooter, not a deskbound bureaucrat . . .

Or he would resign.

“Wish me luck,” he said softly, and strode toward the exit.

“Admiral!” the younger man called after him.

Kirk paused in the doorway, knowing that, whatever Riley might say, he would not be swayed.

“Just make sure he knows, sir,” Riley said firmly, “that this decision . . . goes for both of us.”

Kirk blinked, taken aback.

“I’m not willing to spend my life pushing anyone else’s papers, sir . . . with all due respect.”

Kirk gave his aide a questioning glance; but Riley’s gaze was unwavering, his jaw set with a determination that matched the admiral’s. Jim did not smile, but his expression warmed with admiration and gratitude. He nodded, and headed silently for the staircase that would lead him to the lion’s den.

The short flight up wasn’t so brief that Jim didn’t have time to remember in vivid, exasperating detail every warning both Spock and McCoy had given him about allowing Nogura to promote him.

His first day as a new admiral at Starfleet Headquarters, he’d reported to Nogura’s office and discovered McCoy there, chewing out the Starfleet head. McCoy’s voice had been carried clear out into the corridor:

"... he doesn't belong here. I told you, and every one of your damnable psychiatrists told you ... but you don't care, do you? You don't care about what's best for him, you only care about what's best for you."

Kirk had been furious at the doctor; now he remembered the incident with painful gratitude for his friend's concern. McCoy had been right; and now Jim didn't know if he'd ever forgive the old man for the way he'd manipulated both Kirk and Lori to get exactly what he wanted out of them. In his head, Kirk knew that to Nogura, Starfleet was worth *any* price, but in his heart, Jim felt too used to be able to sympathize with his superior's priorities.

He entered Nogura's aide's office, fully prepared to bully the young Vulcan male into gaining admittance into the old man's well-protected lair. But the aide caught him up short.

"Admiral Kirk," the Vulcan said smoothly. "Admiral Nogura is waiting for you, sir." Efficiently the tall, slender aide moved around the desk and opened the connecting door into the senior officer's quarters.

Kirk tried not to feel nonplussed—a reaction he'd had much too often to suit him since working for Nogura—and entered the admiral's spacious office warily.

Behind his desk, Nogura rose, smiling. The head of Starfleet was silver-haired, golden-skinned, diminutive; yet despite his unprepossessing appearance and demeanor, the small, elderly man radiated power, presence, unshakable calm.

As Jim entered, Nogura moved around his desk to greet his subordinate. "All those years with Spock must've given you a dose of telepathy, Jim," the admiral said pleasantly. "I just called down to your office to find you were already on your way up. I wish the rest of my officers were able to anticipate my needs as well as you do."

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Kirk said nothing, sensing Nogura's flawless timing was again at work. How often, in the last year, had he tried to argue for better assignments, only to have the old man head him off at the pass? *Not this time, Admiral.*

"Jim, do you realize it's been over a year since you've been in space?" Nogura's deep-set black eyes furrowed in concern even as Kirk had to keep from grinding his teeth out loud. "Too long, way too long for a man like you. I know you, Jim, you're not happy planetbound." The aged admiral shook his head as if it were somehow *Kirk's* fault for not bringing the subject up sooner.

"That's exactly why I was coming to see you, sir," Kirk interjected. "It *has* been a year. . . ."

"A very productive year, I must say," Nogura reminded him. "Your work on those starship refittings has changed the very shape of the fleet. Just wait till you see the *Enterprise* again, you won't recognize her. Our engineers tell me the expected efficiency of the new designs . . ."

"Thank you . . . sir . . ." Kirk interrupted bluntly. "Those are kind words . . . but they're no longer enough. This job hasn't turned out to be what I expected."

"And that's my fault completely, Jim, I know," the admiral agreed, too willingly. "But Starfleet needed your expertise. No one else could've given us your knowledge, your ideas. I don't know if you'll ever really understand how much your work this past year and a half has meant to Starfleet."

Is this what they tell all paper pushers? Kirk wondered bitterly. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to let the old man talk him into any more bureaucratic exercises. He deserved better. "I was *supposed* to be using my expertise as a troubleshooter. . . ."

"That's what I promised you, and that's what you'll