

Once Spoken

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Summary: Once spoken, words and revelations couldn't be taken back. And some shouldn't also.

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Author's Note: So this started out as a short, sexy one shot that was inspired by a scene from a German TV show. And then I somehow got carried away and it turned into a story that probably could be even longer, but for several reasons I felt that it was best to stop where I did. Hope you think so, too.

If you find mistakes, I'll be happy to let you have them - at least then they'll be gone from my story ;)

Public appearances definitely didn't count as Kathryn Janeway's favorite part of her job. But ever since she had brought home her ship, the USS Voyager, and her crew from their long, involuntary journey through the Delta Quadrant ten months ago, interviews, press conferences and talk shows unfortunately were part of her new responsibilities - those of a highly regarded Starfleet officer and newly promoted Admiral.

And so week after week, it was just another program, another presenter, another studio. The only constant were the questions. Always the same stupid, boring questions, varying, maybe, but in essence still the same. She felt like a hamster in a wheel; running and running, ever onward, never stopping, never arriving. And here she thought she had left that feeling behind in the Delta Quadrant. Instead, it had only gotten worse.

Now she was once again sitting in a studio, cameras and spotlights aimed at her, an expectant crowd waiting for her to answer questions she had lost count of having given answers to already before.

Her host, who had introduced herself as Isabel Longard, obviously was *the* celebrity show host, and everyone had to be eternally grateful to be invited to her show. It didn't have anything to do with generosity that Janeway would have willingly and thankfully given up her hour in front of the camera for *anyone* else.

"Do you miss the Delta Quadrant sometimes?" Janeway sighed inwardly. Leave it to journalists to ask questions like this one over and over again. How to answer it diplomatically enough? One the one side, she was supposed to be over the moon to be back; on the other she should of course be able to value the time she had, and the chances to explore. So often she had given an answer, but never had it felt quite right. She could only do her best.

"In some way I guess I do, yes," she so answered, trying to remain just that bit unspecific, "We spent seven years of our lives there. I miss my crew of course, I miss working with them. We've become... a family, a big team. When you're on your own for so long, you grow closer, and everyone relies on the other. We weren't just colleagues anymore, we were friends. We *are* friends. And I also miss the journey as such. We saw so many new things, new planets and phenomena, and we met so many new species. Hadn't there been that bitter aftertaste of having the decision whether we wanted to explore all that taken from us, it really would have been a great adventure."

"So, if you could change the events that stranded you in the Delta Quadrant - would you do it?"

"I..." Voyager's former captain stopped herself before she could answer. Surprisingly enough, that was a new one. That no one had ever dared to ask before, because it was clearly pushing the highly regarded Admiral into a difficult position.

Would she? Would she change her decisions, maybe not even pursue the Maquis ship into the Badlands, but instead think of another way to catch them? Would she turn back in time before she would rob her crew of the chance to talk to and see their loved ones? Would she prevent them from facing a journey which, as they first predicted, no one of them would see the end of because they all would have, in the best of all possible cases, died of old age by then?

"No." A murmur went through the audience, some of them shocked, some of them surprised, some of them impressed. "We all may have lost seven years out there; seven years in which we couldn't see our families and friends at home, seven years in which life here went on without us. But in my opinion, we have gained much more than we have lost. Friendships, new crewmembers, new alliances, knowledge. Seven of Nine and the Borg children. And, of course, the Maquis. Maybe they would still be pursued, maybe they would be dead if it hadn't been for this incident that brought us together. Children like Miral, the daughter of Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres, would never have been born. Yes, seven years are a long time, and we'll never get them back. But I know that not a single member of my crew has any regrets."

Cheering and clapping noises sounded from a small group among the audience; some former Voyager crewmembers had assembled and now loudly supported their captain's words. Janeway smiled and nodded her thanks to them.

"Admiral, is there a particular time, place or event you like to remember?" Isabel went on, not being distracted by the noisy spectators.

"There are many of them," the older woman chuckled, as if she thought of the question as odd and not to be taken serious.

"What is the first thing that comes to your mind?" There were a thousand things, literally, but most of them were not meant for the public ear. Starfleet had made it clear to Voyager's crew that their experiences and adventures were not to be shared with anyone unless this information got a 'security clearance'. Curiously enough, when she thought of what was cleared to be told, there was this one thing Janeway would have expected to always remain a big secret, as she could have sworn that Starfleet would be afraid of a mass panic the story could cause.

"We had this one encounter with a species that had reconstructed San Francisco Bay, Starfleet Command and the Academy grounds. They thought they had to expect in invasion by humankind and were planning a preemptive strike. We were able to convince them that we didn't have any hostile motives at all and then... we spend some time *at home*. It was a success, in many ways."

"And personally?" Janeway smiled mildly, a hint of an innocent gleam in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" Now the host's smile matched her guest's; however, the one Isabel showed was a bit more... predatory.

"What moment do you like to remember personally, not as captain of Voyager, or as Starfleet officer, but as you, Kathryn Janeway, the woman and the human being?"

Kathryn's smile turned secretive now; oh, she had a good idea what the answer to that question would have to be, in all truth. The most peaceful and memorable and happiest time she experienced throughout the whole journey - New Earth. But of course she couldn't reveal anything about it; it was one of those things she wisely kept to herself, because it would arise too many speculations once it was out in the open. This was just too private.

Or at least it was supposed to be.

"New Earth?" the host echoed confused, and Janeway was startled to hear it from someone else. Only a few selected people knew of this nick name, and even fewer - apart from her crew of course - that she had spent several weeks on this planet. Together with Chakotay. So how could that host possibly...

"It seems as if this answers my next question about romance for the captain," Isabel exclaimed cheerfully; her year-long experience telling her that she had found a juicy truth, just what she'd been looking for.

And it dawned on Janeway that she'd made a terrible mistake.

Chakotay had only half-heartedly listened to the interview. He knew Kathryn had to go to them, but that didn't mean he had to like it. Not only was *she* exposed every single time, as well as she ever formulated her answers; it was the whole crew who was affected by it. But Starfleet Command wanted her to go to these appearances, since she was the fleet's shiny new toy, the hero who had returned her crew, someone to polish Starfleet's image after more than one failure in the past years.

He hated it. And he knew Kathryn hated it, too. How often had he been there to calm her down after another nagging interviewer had tested her patience and composure - and manners? He had stopped counting.

So he still tuned in to be prepared for her call that would surely come - if she wouldn't just show up at his door step right away - but didn't pay that much attention. Right now, he rather concentrated on his newest carving project - a crib for the twins B'Elanna was expecting. The sounds of his work on the wood muted most of the interview anyways.

Except for one thing.

New Earth. Despite the noise he was producing, he nevertheless heard it, even though it was but a whisper that seemed to accidentally roll from her tongue when she breathed out.

"*What is New Earth?*" Longard was her name he thought to remember, asked again after she hadn't gotten an answer to her first attempt to squeeze out whatever gossip there was to learn. And gossip it would be indeed. If people ever found out that he and Kathryn had spend several weeks alone on a planet, without hope of ever leaving... the rumor mill would certainly catch fire by going so fast then.

But that wasn't the only thing on his mind. It was the fact that her first reaction, her first thought at the host's question had been New Earth. It was what she remembered. Seven years traveling, and so many things they had seen and explored - but it was New Earth she thought of first.

His heart missed a beat.

And then another.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered how many heartbeats a person could actually miss, how much the organ could lose its rhythm before he would pass out, if not die. It was until he realized that his heart was beating so fast that he only felt one every three or four.

Close to eight years since he'd met her, almost as long since he had fallen in love with her, and over five years since he had spent those few wonderful weeks with her he was, to the day, sure could have been their beginning - and his body and soul still went crazy at the sheer possibility of them being together, having a future, even after everything that had happened.

He knew he shouldn't get his hopes up; after all it probably was nothing more than a fond memory, but never anything she would consider continuing or reactivating. And yet he couldn't help it; he would never forget that she had said it. That she still remembered. And that she liked to remember it.

Kathryn did her best to get the host away from the topic, all the while keeping a rather emotionless façade; but Chakotay knew her well enough to see past it, see the hint of panic as she desperately tried to keep New Earth and their time there a secret. Of course no one was supposed to know it, no one except the admiralty who had read the reports, and naturally Voyager's crew.

Nothing is as old as yesterday's news, they said, and he hoped that it would be true for Kathryn's revelation as well. That no one would pursue the topic, her words, and ask more questions than would be good for anyone of them.

He trusted their crew, but what if someone gave in to the pressure and nuisance Chakotay knew journalists could be?

Luckily, the show's time was up before Longard could dig any deeper. He watched as they said their goodbyes, his best friend's and former captain's expression perfectly friendly and polite, but bitter for those who had known her long enough to see beneath the surface.

The expected call came shortly after the show's end - one point three minutes afterwards to be exact. She probably had skipped any pleasantries and just taken off, walking quickly and straight back to her dressing room to make the call.

"*Chakotay*," she greeted him when he activated the comm. line, "*are you free this evening?*" For a moment he wondered if she knew that he had seen it. If she knew that he would want to talk about it - and if she was ready for it. He hoped so.

"Of course. Do you want to come over?"

"*Yes, please. I'll be there in about an hour.*" With that, the comm. line closed again.

Hadn't he already known that her happiness wouldn't be his house guest this evening, the hardened lines on her forehead would have been a sure giveaway. Lucky for him, he knew exactly how to lift her mood - a coffee, some wine for later, and a few funny stories from the Academy where he was teaching a group of mostly clever, but sometimes clumsy students anthropology usually did the trick. And so it did this time as well, much to his relief. Within not even twenty minutes, she was laughing and joking with him, and sharing a few stories from her occasional work as guest tutor and her normal, obviously not-so-boring 'job' as admiral.

Kathryn was lounging on the couch while he was sitting in one of the oversized armchairs - he remembered that picture all too well from their shared evenings on Voyager. All those evenings he held so dearly in his heart, the hours when he was alone with her, just talking, discussing, even arguing while having a pleasant dinner, a good glass of wine he always had some hidden stock of, and each other's company.

He had treasured these moments, just like he treasured their friendship he was incredibly relieved they had found again. The last two, maybe three years hadn't been exactly the best for their relationship; for the closeness and deep friendship they had developed over the years. The pressure to get home, the enemies and the hardships they encountered took a heavy toll on their bond and strained it - almost beyond the bearable.

If he added to that his relationship with Seven, which, when he looked back now, must have appeared like one of the strangest things that had ever happened to both him and Kathryn, it wasn't a wonder they'd drifted apart. The former Borg drone been her protégé of sorts, after all. Even though they had never talked about it, never openly named it, there had been this unspoken agreement that they meant a lot more to each other than they'd been able to admit while on the ship. And that this was a path they could maybe chose one day to go, no matter what.

It had been a silent promise that proved to be hard to keep when they both struggled with loneliness - and temptations. So when Seven had approached him with clear unprofessional interest, he fell for it. He knew what had happened to them in the older Janeway's timeline. And perhaps it would have been the same for them, in another future, in a future where they didn't return when they had. Perhaps he would have even married the Ex-Borg.

But their return to the Alpha Quadrant had changed a lot, and his whole assessment of the situation and their relationship had been among these things. Separation came not as a surprise, but a mutual agreement only one month after their return. Now that Seven resided with her aunt, he visited her occasionally... just like he did with many others from the crew. Other than that, this chapter was done.

"Chakotay?" He looked up at her from where his eyes had unfocussed stared onto the coffee table. Kathryn smiled at him questioningly, and continued when she was sure she had his attention, "You look like you were just back in the Delta Quadrant with your thoughts."

"I kind of was," he chuckled, and when he saw her hand lying on his armrest, he covered it with his own. "I was just thinking that I'm happy how things have turned out, and to have our friendship back."

"Me too, Chakotay, me too." That was his chance. A good starting point to carefully approach the subject of what had happened earlier that day; of what she had revealed, not to the talk show audience and the press, but to him; to them.

"So the-

Luck wasn't on his side. Before he had the chance to get any further, he was interrupted when his comm. console beeped. Excusing himself, Chakotay went over and opened the channel, only to face B'Elanna.

"*Chakotay*," she greeted, not keeping herself with pleasantries, "*watch the news, you're going to want to see this.*" The Half-Klingon looked far too concerned for his taste, and since he knew that Tom and B'Elanna also watched Kathryn's interviews and were aware that she usually was at Chakotay's home afterwards, he immediately assumed that this had something to do with the talk show.

"B'Elanna, good to see you. What happened?" Voyager's former chief engineer shifted her gaze to Janeway just as Chakotay looked to his side.

"*Kathryn*," she began, addressing the woman she still considered her captain the way she'd been asked to by her when they had returned to the Alpha Quadrant, "*I'm afraid the press liked your slip of the tongue a bit too much.*"

Janeway had actually waited for that to happen. If Voyager's captain had a fond memory of a place or event the public didn't know about, it had to be a sensation. She should have known from the moment she had said it that they would greedily, like vultures, attack it. But part of her had nevertheless hoped that they would let her off the hook. Just this once.

"Thanks, B, we'll check the news." As soon as the screen went blank, Chakotay opened the news channel.

"... *Voyager's former captain just another secret of many that are still kept from us. But this time, it's personal and finally seems to answer the question whether there was romance for the heroic Kathryn Janeway...*," it blared from the speakers, and Kathryn rubbed her temples with her fingertips, feeling a headache coming up.

"Guess I'm not made for the press," she murmured darkly and returned to her seat, sitting down heavily on the couch and taking another sip of wine. "Or maybe I am."

"Kathryn..." He shut down the console, followed her and then fell down into the cushions beside her. "Tomorrow this will be old news. You know how it is. The press might pursue it a few more days, but in the end, everyone will lose interest. There is so much other... gossip to keep them occupied. Don't worry about it."

He saw her breathe in deeply and release the breath through pursed lips, a technique he knew she used to calm herself down; one that also worked very well. Then she folded her hands in her lap and nodded.

"You're right. And it's not like I've seen that happen often enough." She went silent then for a few moments; but he sensed that she hadn't finished yet. "We only have to make sure to not give them any reason to bring their attention back to us." She felt the man next to her shift uncomfortably even before she ended the sentence.

"Chakotay?"

"About that..."

"Chakotay?" she tried again, confused.

"I just think it would be good to at least... if we..." Self-confidence was suddenly a mere breeze, fleeting and perishable, and just out of reach. Unconsciously he pulled his earlobe, a dead giveaway that he was nervous. She couldn't help but smile, though it looked a bit helpless.

"Chakotay, what is it? What do you want to say?"

"New Earth?" She had no idea a smile could vanish so fast. Kathryn couldn't believe her ears; couldn't believe he was actually bringing this up where she had sought shelter from the proverbial storm in his home.

"That was a stupid thing to say; I could... myself..." she gave back, anger coating her voice; anger about herself and the host.

"But... did you mean it?"

"Mean what?" Chakotay had to suppress a frustrated groan. Not that he would have expected her to make it easy for him. Or the both of them, for that matter.

"Well... your response to the host's question. The one place and time you remember most?"

"What does it matter? What do you want to hear now?"

"An answer would be a good start, I guess," he tried to joke; something she didn't find amusing at all.

"It did enough damage already; there's nothing else to say about that," she harshly dismissed him, making it clear that she didn't want to talk about it. Which didn't mean that Chakotay was giving up. This was the closest they'd ever gotten to a personal conversation - *that* kind - since... Actually they'd never had this kind of talk because they'd always avoided it on *Voyager* and danced around it since their return from the Delta Quadrant for several reasons - most notably his not lasting relationship with Seven and her brief liaison with some... high-ranking-whatever.

"Oh, but I think there is. This is long overdue." Furiously she shook her head and rose from her seat.

"I think it's best for me to go." Before he even knew what was happening, she was already up and out of the room, grabbing her coat from the hanger in the small entrance area of the cabin and was in the process of pulling it on when Chakotay finally joined her.

"You can't just leave like that, Kathryn!"

"Why not?" she shot back while angrily fumbling with the buttons of her jacket, trying to close them.

"Don't you think you owe me at least an explanation?" He still stood in the doorway, keeping a careful and instinctive distance to her; wisely so, as she suddenly, the button-closing-task abandoned, whirled around with flying arms. She would have hit him had he stood closer.

"An explanation, Chakotay? What's there to explain?! This stupid host made me say things I didn't mean to say. And everyone heard it. That's it."

"This is not about what she made you say, it's the fact that... Dammit, Kathryn, she may have made you say something you... we... wanted to keep a secret, but it was still your answer! Why are you denying it? We're back home. You don't have a reason to--"

"Stop right there," she hissed, and out of confusion at her interruption he shut up. Calmer, she continued, "This is neither the place nor the time, Chakotay. And it will never come. We should accept that."

"You can't be serious." Now his voice was deadly quiet; she saw the fire raging in his eyes, how his quickened breathing pumped through his chest.

"I am. We missed our moment. I'm sorry, but... we should keep the memory and move on." With that, for her everything was said. When he replied after a few seconds, she had already turned to leave.

"This is unacceptable." It was the only warning she got. Before she knew what was happening, she found her back to the door she had just wanted to open and his body pressed against hers. His kiss was everything but gentle or careful; it was hard and bruising, and she winced in protest as she tried to push him away. She knew that she didn't have a chance, but pounded her fists against his chest nevertheless. Finally, he let go, but kept his steel-hard grip on her, pinning her against the wood of the door.

His face was barely a millimeter away from hers, and she felt the heat radiating from him, felt his breath on her face, on her lips - how it burned on skin raw from his kiss.

"How dare you," she said tonelessly, still shocked from his voracious attack that was so absolutely not him.

"I love you, Kathryn. I have loved you for so many years. I had thought those feelings were futile, that they were long gone, that we both had moved on. Your statement proved otherwise. And I want you. I want you to stay here, I want you in my bed to make love to you the whole night, I want you in my life to share every joy and sorrow, I want you to be at my side till the day I die and even longer," he replied just as toneless, his voice devoid of emotion where his words were so full of them. With every one of those words her heart beat faster and when he ended his little speech, she felt that even his hold on her wouldn't be able to keep her upright anymore.

It was a truth she had always tried to avoid because she knew she would never be able to fight her feelings anymore as soon as it was out in the open, loudly spoken. And now, she was just as helpless as she had always known she would be. Hanging in his arms, clinging to his body; torn between giving in and refusing, between listening to her heart and... what? She had no reason anymore to strive any longer what she had wanted for more than half a decade.

So she did the only thing she could still think of doing - she leaned forward to capture his lips. And found him backing away, just out of reach. Again and again she tried, and all she got was now and then a brush of lips, but never the fullness of his on hers.

"Don't play with me, Kathryn. I can't take it anymore," Chakotay suddenly murmured in between their little game of tag, making her halt in her tries. Instead she opened her eyes and stared into his dark ones, boring past pretence and denial, past walls protecting feelings that had never hoped to see the light of day again. And it was just what he saw as well.

This time, when her tongue snuck out and hesitantly, almost shyly nudged his upper lip, licking lightly along the full cushion while her gaze still held his, he let her. Let her touch and learn his taste and feel on her own accord, before meeting her tongue with his, allowing a slow exploration where there had been rampant passion before. Their eyes closed again in the same moment, their noses sliding past the other one's when the small space between their faces was erased from existence.

And then their mouths pressed together in the most desperate, but also most loving of kisses. Tongues danced and caressed, traveled to explore the unknown, touched and tasted and sought out what they were finally granted after years and years of yearning.

When she whimpered this time, it wasn't from protest or even pain; except maybe the pain of loss, a loss she had made herself stand and accept. The gentle sounds from her throat instead told of surrender, of falling into his seduction and his love.

They were a tangled mess of limbs and sheets when the rising sun found them in Chakotay's bed the next morning, after an exhausting night. A life changing night, in the most positive of ways.

Kathryn woke to a warm, muscular body next to her, and even though it was the first time they had been together like this, it still felt so familiar. How his arms held her protectively enclosed, how his lips rested on her neck like a never-ending tender kiss, how his legs had caught one of hers between them, as if he never wanted to let her go again.

After all, that was what he had promised the evening before.

When she had left the studio, rushing out in anger, she had just wanted to talk to a friend. Like she always did; like it was their new tradition after their evenings together on Voyager were now the past. She had needed someone to calm her down, and she knew that there was no one else who was able to do that except him. It had always been like this; even on Voyager. She remembered all the times when she was furious because of some stupid, thick-headed or sleazy - or all of that together - official of another planet they hoped to get supplies from, and how it had always been him to bring her down from her rage. Even though he might not have known it, as she was careful not to show him what effect exactly he had on her every time. What good he did her.

Her anger from the evening before had been directed at the talk show host just as it had been at herself. She hated that she had lost control; that she had revealed a secret Chakotay and she had once sworn to keep just that - a secret. No matter what. The time they had had there, the feelings they had admitted to harbor, the closeness they'd shared... maybe they had never been physically intimate back then, but surely had there been a mental intimacy that had come close to turning into more.

When they'd first met all those years ago, she had immediately been drawn to this man who was then said to be a terrorist, whom she chased so he could be brought to justice. He was as fascinating as he was mysterious, with a sometimes fierce, but sometimes also so gentle soul beneath that handsome face, and the curiosity of the explorer in her had recognized that there was more to him than met the eye - or was written in Starfleet's reports. Two years into their journey, two years without contact to home and loved ones, she had been more than ready to find comfort in the embrace of a man she had learned to trust and feel for so much where there were never supposed to be feelings of any kind to begin with.

But things had changed when they returned from New Earth. Her fear that the decision to pursue a romance with her first officer would prove to be the wrong one, just as she had been taught to think from the day she started her career, and this certainty that she would never be able to step back once she was in his arms had made her pull away from him. Of course she had felt how their friendship was suffering, and by no means had she been happy about it. How many times had she sat in her quarters, lain in her bed and regretted that the rift between them was widening with every passing day? She had stopped counting.

All she knew was that the moment she allowed the sparks to light the fire, they'd both burn. She couldn't let that happen, for both their sake.

She would lie if she said their return to Earth hadn't at least shortly brought back contemplations about their relationship and where it could lead now that the burden of command was taken from her. Where it could have led - hadn't Chakotay been with Seven then. She had closed this chapter then, put an end to the story, understanding her defeat by fate. Chakotay was a friend, nothing more. Even when he had ended his relationship with the former Borg drone she hadn't allowed her heart to fall back into its longing for this man she still named her best friend.

But that she would ever lie together in bed with him, after a night of love-making...

Kathryn was brought back to the here and now when the man beside her stirred. Indeed he used the position of his lips against her skin to shower her neck and shoulder with kisses before he turned her around and claimed her mouth. Willingly she responded, her arms pulling him closer yet.

"Good morning," he said after they broke apart - and before he buried his face in the crook of her neck to caress her with tongue and lips. Her reply to his greeting was more a moan than anything else, and she sighed when his hands began to roam her body. He had memorized every single sensitive spot he had found the night before, and it didn't take long for her desire to reach dimensions that were almost unbearable.

Contrary to their thorough explorations they'd committed themselves to during the night, there was not much of a foreplay this time. He covered her body with his and entered her easily, their movements age-old and reactions to each other like practiced a hundred times.

Just before they reached their heights Chakotay rolled them around to have her sit in his lap when they came together, and he stayed inside her even when she fell down to rest the length of her upper body on his.

"That's another way to say 'good morning'," she remarked, as playful as breathless.

"Well, I have to make up for a few years, haven't I?"

"Is that a promise?"

"A promise and a hope."

"You know..." she started while letting her hand glide up and down his arm, enjoying how the soft hair there tickled her fingers, "Somehow my plan won't work anymore now. Keeping a low profile and not giving them a chance to gossip about things that aren't there."

"I'm sure we can manage to avoid being seen in... compromising positions. And no one can blame us for being friends. Don't worry, we can keep this a secret." He would have done anything to prevent her from leaving his side again, fleeing the beast that called itself press. If it meant to only have her in his arms when they were alone and safe in his or her house, he would-

"What if I don't want that?" A bucket of ice water poured over his head would have been enjoyable, compared to what he felt in that moment. He might have promised her to never let her go, but he loved her too much to not obey her every wish as long as it made *her* happy.

"Kathryn, I... if that's what you want... but maybe we..." Chakotay trailed off; whatever could he have said anyways? This was like New Earth all over again; only worse. Because this time he had gotten a taste of this sweet, addictive feeling of being with her. Losing it would kill him.

Meanwhile, the woman beside him had the smile on her lips die. Him, of all people, she would have believed to be glad that their relationship wasn't going to be a secret. That she wanted it out in the open. That... *Oh*.

"Chakotay," she whispered, and the sudden quietness in her voice had him look into her eyes again where he had turned away before, "no secrets. I want us to be *us*. Everywhere. At every time." She hardly suppressed a grin when she watched her words sink in; but when his eyes widened and relief filled his face, it elicited a laugh from her. He stole that laugh from her lips when he outright assaulted her with an enthusiastic, passionate kiss, taking her breath away.

"I love you, Kathryn Janeway."

"And I love you, Chakotay." Cupping her cheek, he caressed her face, and she leaned into the touch; one she had missed for so long.

"You have no idea how great it feels to finally hear these words from you." There was the most adorable, almost goofy smile on his face, and she laughed quietly.

"Oh, but I think I do. Feels the same to me," Kathryn winked. "So how are we going to face the press? I've seen love die under the fierce gaze of the public." Her expression was a thoughtful one - while Chakotay's heart fluttered again at her usage of the word 'love'.

"But ours won't," he assured her, his eyes, his voice, his whole body language so full of affection that she felt this tell-tale tingling in her stomach as well. "We went through so much in these seven years. We can do this. Together."

On an impulse, she pulled his head close and kissed him gently. Then she nodded slightly, her forehead resting against his.

"Yes. Together."

END