



A Question Unanswered

Part II: Of Faith and Trust

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: Drama, romance (Mac/Harm)

Spoilers: Sheesh, just about everything. Specifically, a VERY important reference to "Death Watch" - if you don't know about THE kiss, you're basically screwed from the start. Also "People vs. Mac", "Touch and Go", and "Boomerang". And if you're really sharp/obsessive, there's a reference to "Wilderness of Mirrors". Don't look too hard, though; it has absolutely no bearing on the story.

Disclaimer: The usual - I don't own the characters, except Kara Donnell, Scott Fairfield, Captain Andrew Halloway, Lisa Jensen (formerly Halloway), and Commander Brian Jensen. If anyone cares.

Author's Notes: You REALLY ought to read Part I first, or this won't make much sense. No, I'm serious - it was forty-some pages long, and this one's shaping up to be even longer. I honestly didn't mean for it to get this long. Don't say I didn't warn you. But if you insist on making life difficult, here's the Cliffs Notes version of where we are now:

Harm and Mac investigated a flight test mishap with the help of two civilian engineers (Kara Donnell and Scott Fairfield). It got nasty when they figured out that the pilot (Captain Halloway) was lying about the incident, and eventually it became clear that Halloway had orchestrated the whole thing as revenge on another pilot. Unfortunately, this didn't become clear until after Harm had gotten himself rather badly roughed up. But hey, he's our hero, after all. He can take it. Right?

Finally, a warning: If the vaguely-shipper aspects of Part I got on your nerves, better get out now, 'cause baby, I'm just getting warmed up ...

Six days following the end of Part I ...

1605 EST
Medical Center
NAS Patuxent River, Maryland

There were three hundred fifty-four tiles in the ceiling above his bed. Actually, there were only three hundred twenty-eight full tiles, but Harmon Rabb, Jr. had spent enough time staring at them to dredge up some high-school geometry for the partial tiles. There was no place in the world so boring as a hospital. Even prisoners got to see the light of day occasionally. When Bud had brought him a laptop to start his reports, he'd never been so happy to see a computer in his life.

It had been most of a week since the events that had put him in this annoying bed, but every time the urge to complain got too strong, he reminded himself how lucky he'd really been. The mysterious sabotage of the Phoenix prototype aircraft had been caused by one vengeful, deluded pilot, and when Harm had gotten too close to the truth, he'd met up with

the business end of a Marine utility knife. And that had only been the beginning of the night from hell.

Now, Captain Halloway was rightfully locked up, Mac and the civilians were safe, and he could finally breathe easier. Figuratively speaking - there was nothing easy about breathing with forty-two stitches just under his rib cage.

"Hello, Commander."

"Admiral, good afternoon." Harm instinctively sat up straighter, and his shoulder quickly made him regret the effort.

Admiral Chegwidden shook his head. "At ease, for God's sake. I wouldn't want to be responsible for any more stitches."

"Force of habit, sir. I wasn't expecting you. Did you come out with Mac?"

"I drove her, so that she could bring you and your car back at the same time. She's taking care of your discharge papers, so we should be all set to go in a few minutes."

"Music to my ears, Admiral."

The JAG studied his senior attorney for a moment. He knew the Navy doctors were good at their jobs, but he couldn't get that chilling first night in the ICU out of his mind. Some of Harm's color had returned, and as he drummed his fingers impatiently on the table, he did look well enough to leave the hospital. It would be some time, though, before he was the same charming hotshot they all knew. A.J. watched him for a moment, noting the faint expression of pain and fatigue that seemed to have settled permanently into his blue eyes, and wondered if that part of him would ever return completely.

"How are you feeling, Harm?" the admiral asked honestly.

"Fine, sir -" But he was promptly cut off.

"I'm not interested in your default response. There is no conceivable way to be 'fine' after what happened to you. Give it to me straight."

Harm hesitated. "I'm all right, considering. I mean, I can't move my left arm, and it hurts to laugh, but I can deal with that. What's getting to me is this perpetual feeling of..."

"Weakness?"

He glanced up and nodded. "Something like that. I thought getting back on my feet would be easier than this, but I finally convinced myself that I'm not twenty anymore. It was kind of a tough realization."

"What was -- the fact that you're fast approaching forty?" The older man shrugged. "It's not that bad. Age doesn't seem to mean as much as it used to."

"Of course not, sir, but it makes a guy wonder what happened to his life."

There was an unfamiliar note in his voice, something that sounded very much like defeat. A.J. hadn't heard that from him in all the years they'd served together. In fact, he'd heard it exactly once before; when he'd represented a twenty-eight-year-old fighter jockey at an inquiry into his deadly Tomcat ramp strike. Then-Lieutenant Rabb had gotten through that, and now-Commander Rabb would get through this as well.

"Commander, I'm going to tell you something you probably don't need to be told, but stay with me a second. You have absolutely no cause to be disappointed in yourself. You have achieved more than some flag officers I can think of. You've been helping people in the air and in the courtroom for as long as I've known you. Besides that, you're extremely loyal to your friends, you have a godson who adores you ... I don't see how anyone could ever question your choices." He stopped, realizing that his officer was looking at him with a sense of disbelief. "What? Doesn't your mother ever tell you she's proud of you?"

"Yes, she does." Harm was seeing his C.O. in a somewhat new light. "But I've never heard it from you before."

"Well, it's not exactly the type of thing I'm likely to bring up at staff call. Then again, it was probably ill-advised to wait until you were three inches from an early visit to Arlington." Suddenly uncomfortable, he shook his head. "Hell, son, you knew already. Didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, I think I did." Despite the awkwardness of the exchange, he was touched. "And I'm grateful."

"But that wasn't what you were looking for, was it?" There was no hiding from the admiral. "How's Renee taking all this?"

"She's still shooting in Chicago. I, um, downplayed this whole thing when I talked to her. She thinks I just separated my shoulder." Embarrassed, he looked away.

"You're going to have a hard time explaining those scars."

"I'll tell her when she gets back next week. She still doesn't really understand how a lawyer can get into these situations, anyway. I just didn't want her to freak out and jump on the next plane."

A.J. didn't ask why he would tell such a bald-faced lie to his girlfriend of more than a year. It wouldn't have done any good. At that moment, Mac appeared in the doorway, looking cheerful in a soft coral-colored sweater.

"Hey, sailor, you ready to ditch this place?"

"Am I ever." Harm stood up cautiously, with her at his elbow, offering silent support. The half-dozen steps to the wheelchair were simple enough, but the concerted effort they required was irritating. "I've been counting the minutes."

"Colonel, did you need someone to walk your dog this week?"

"Thank you, sir, but my neighbor's taking care of Jingo."

The soon-to-be-ex-patient turned to look at her as he settled into the chair. "Mac, you really don't have to stay with me. I'll make do somehow."

"Sure you will. You can't even button your shirt. Besides, the doctors wouldn't sign you out until I promised not to let you out of my sight." The graceful Marine laid her hand on his good arm. "This isn't like spraining your ankle, Harm. It's going to take time, and it's going to be tough."

A look passed between them, and he immediately surrendered. "I hate making trouble for you," he offered lamely.

"Since when?" She gave a short laugh and grasped the handles of the wheelchair. "Hold on. I'm not much of a pilot."

Admiral Chegwidden watched his officers with an exasperated smile. He'd never figure those two out. They never seemed to be content unless they were hassling each other in one way or another. He just hoped they could get through this week without coming to blows.

1838 EST
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

Mac pushed the elevator gates open with one hand, keeping her other arm locked firmly around her partner's waist. Harm had slept through most of the two-hour drive back to D.C. -- he was still on some pretty strong medication -- and he hadn't been too steady on his feet when they reached his building. She unlocked the door to his apartment and helped him over to the couch, deftly yanking off his shoes and placing a pillow under his arm before he could even blink. "Do you want some tea?"

"Sure. Thanks." He looked around the living room briefly. It had been nearly two weeks since he'd left for Pax River, but everything seemed perfectly in order. His mail was piled neatly on the desk, there were fresh groceries on the counter, and Mac's duffel bag was on the floor in the corner. "You're awfully well prepared."

"Well, I had a couple days to get ready." She filled the kettle and turned the burner on, reaching for a pair of well-used USS *Seahawk* mugs. "You should have seen the training the docs gave me. I know how to change the bandages, and rewrap your shoulder, and check for infection ... I'm a regular Florence Nightingale now. Ask me anything."

"Okay. Can you make these stitches stop itching?"

"Sorry, can't do miracles." Mac handed him a mug and took a seat in the chair across from him. "I know you're going to be climbing the walls, but don't push yourself. The admiral's got your caseload cleared, so you don't have to worry about that."

"What about *your* caseload?"

"I'll get back in the game on Monday. You can't keep me that busy."

He raised an eyebrow. "Normally I'd take that as a challenge, but I'm too tired."

She had left herself wide open for that one, she had to admit. The fact that he hadn't made a red-light-worthy comment about it spoke volumes about his current state of mind. "Do you need anything? Pain pills, a book, something to eat?"

He shook his head. "I don't deserve you, you know that?"

"Harm, I know we're long past keeping score, but you did save my six last week. This is the least I could do." She squeezed his hand, and through that brief connection, she could almost feel the weariness that penetrated his entire body. "You're going to crash pretty soon, aren't you? Let's get you to bed."

"I'll just sleep here ... you can have the bed."

He just didn't want to move, she could see. "Not a chance, flyboy. I'm not here to be a guest, and you're not going to help yourself any by crunching yourself up onto this little couch. It's only twenty feet. Come on."

Taking his arm, she guided him over to the bedroom area and helped him out of the sling that protected his injured shoulder. He didn't resist as she gently pulled his shirt over his head, revealing an impressive array of bandages. When she hesitated slightly over the waistband of his sweats, he gave her the faintest hint of a smile. "I can handle this part one-handed." And he slipped out of the sweatpants, leaving her to smirk at the red and blue stars on his boxers. "Hey, shut up. I like these."

"Typical." She pulled the blanket up over him and ruffled his hair. "Listen, if you need anything, just yell. Don't worry about what time it is."

"Okay. Thanks, Mac."

"Good night."

Within seconds, he was fast asleep. She lingered in the doorway for a moment, watching his chest rise and fall in perfect rhythm. It was strange to see him like this. Through everything that had brought them to this point, Harm's determination had given him strength. He'd battled to the last on sheer willpower, and now that willpower seemed to be waning. She knew he'd get it back -- he wasn't a quitter by any stretch of the imagination. But these next few days would be difficult for them both.

From across the apartment, her cell phone rang, and she hurried to answer it before it could disturb him. "Mackenzie. Mic, hi. Didn't you get my message? Well, we only got back a little while ago. I was about to call you ... He's all right, I guess -- still pretty wiped out. He's asleep already ... Mic, don't start. He's my best friend, and he's in absolutely no condition to be alone right now ... I'm not interested in your opinion. This is my decision, and either you live with it, or I hang up the phone ... All right, apology accepted. Really, Mic, don't do that jealous thing. I'll see you for lunch on Monday, okay? ... I love you, too. Good night."

She hit 'end' and tossed the phone into her purse. Why were the two most important people in her life constantly at each other's throats? *Because they're both too proud to admit how alike they can be -- strong-willed to a fault*, her mind replied. They could also be very different, though. Mic tried so hard to please her, but often as not, his charms came across as forced. Harm, on the other hand, spoke his mind; it was just that sometimes she didn't want to hear what he had to say. Neither of them could figure out why she put up with the other one,

and keeping them out of each other's line of fire was rapidly becoming the primary challenge of her life.

Stretching out on the couch, she opened her briefcase and started preparing for her Monday morning hearing. It was barely eight o'clock, and she didn't particularly want to think about the ever-jealous Mic Brumby any longer. With a quick glance over toward the darkened bedroom, she dove back into the JAG world.

Harm had half-awakened when the phone rang, and even through a drug-induced fog, he knew that this was a conversation he didn't need to hear. Mac's tone was unmistakable, though, and he again regretted the sacrifices she'd made for him ... and was making still. What made her so loyal? *The same thing that makes you so loyal to her*, came the instant response. *The same thing that made you shoot the man that threatened her. Whatever that is.*

Lacking the energy to continue this philosophical discussion with himself, he allowed sleep to overtake him again.

0930 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Admiral on deck!"

"As you were," answered Admiral Chegwidden as he strode into the conference room. The officers relaxed and took their seats for the weekly staff call. "First things first. Colonel Mackenzie, welcome back. I trust you haven't been spoiled by all that time away."

"It's a relief to be back, sir."

"Don't speak too soon. Your friend Holloway is already on the docket." The commanding officer held up a file. "I'm assuming that everyone is familiar with the report filed by the colonel and Commander Rabb following their investigation at NAS Patuxent River, correct?" There was a chorus of 'yes sir's from around the table. "Good, because the Pentagon wants this done yesterday. The publicity is going to be intense, due to the nature of the Phoenix program, and no one's looking forward to telling ZNN exactly how a pilot could come this close to destroying the project without being noticed. Lieutenant Roberts, you're prosecuting."

Bud Roberts glanced up, startled, as the file came sliding down the table toward him. "Aye, sir."

"Colonel Mackenzie will second chair, but she'll have to stay behind the table because of her involvement in the case. Everything has got to go precisely by the book, or the press will eat us alive. Lieutenant Singer, it is your unfortunate duty to defend Captain Holloway."

Mac quickly masked her disappointment as the ambitious young lieutenant perked up. "I will do my best, sir."

"I don't doubt it. As difficult as it sounds, all of you will have to ignore the personal aspects of this case. When you are in that courtroom, Commander Rabb is not your friend and

coworker. He is the prosecution's chief witness and the victim of an attempted murder. You know the drill -- 'avoid even the appearance of impropriety.' Court date has been set for a week from Wednesday. That is all."

As the lawyers rose to leave, the admiral spoke up, almost as an afterthought. "Oh, and Colonel?"

Mac paused. "Sir?"

"Give the commander our best. I hope he will be able to return to duty soon."

"Thank you, Admiral. I'll pass that along."

At the door, everyone went his or her separate ways. Bud was waiting in Mac's office when she arrived. "Ma'am, I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"Don't sell yourself short. It's an important case, sure, but the admiral wouldn't give it to you if he didn't have complete confidence in you. Besides, it should be airtight. We've got all kinds of evidence."

"As long as you're there to back me up, ma'am."

"Always, Bud." She smiled and opened the top file on her desk.

The lieutenant hesitated. "Colonel? I hate to pry, but I heard the admiral reporting to the SecNav last week, and he said that Commander Rabb had been in critical condition. Nobody's been telling us much, and I wondered if he really ... I mean, was it that close?"

Memories rushed through her mind; seeing him collapse, holding his motionless body, trying to wash his blood from her hands, waiting through that endless night. "Yeah, it was," she said softly. "We almost lost him, Bud."

The young man paled, but he nodded solemnly. "We're going to nail that bastard."

Mac watched him go and knew immediately that he meant it. She'd never heard even the mildest curse from him before, but Harm was his mentor and friend, and he took that very seriously. This case had instantly polarized the entire office -- the defendant had gone after one of their own. Singer would have very few allies. Actually, the chief of staff reflected, that probably didn't bother her in the slightest.

At the end of the day, she gathered up the stack of get-well cards and gifts that had accumulated on her partner's desk and headed out to the parking lot. On the drive to Harm's apartment, she thought about the charges against Hallway: falsification of records, obstruction of justice, attempted destruction of government property, two counts of assault, attempted murder. When faced with such a list, adding 'conduct unbecoming' seemed almost redundant.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," she joked as she entered the apartment, setting down her briefcase and cover on the counter. Harm looked up from his book and smiled.

"How was your day, dear?" he called back good-naturedly from the couch.

"Not too bad. I wrapped up the Grayson appeal this afternoon. Here, Harriet made us some brownies."

"Have I mentioned lately that I love Harriet?"

"You're such a sucker." Mac disappeared into the bathroom and emerged in jeans and a Corps T-shirt. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now that I have some company."

She studied him for a moment. "The shoulder's not bothering you?"

"Well..."

"You didn't take the Vicodin, did you?"

He avoided her gaze. "I have to get off that stuff," he replied defensively.

"Not like that. The dose isn't that high, anyway. What are you proving by being in pain?" Without waiting for an answer, she scooped up the pills, poured a glass of water, and handed them to him. "This is not a request."

Shaking his head, he acquiesced. "You Marines have a terrific bedside manner."

"Hey, if you were a Marine, I'd have you doing push-ups already."

Over bowls of pasta for dinner, she told him about the Hallaway trial. He listened intently, his face expressionless, but she knew he wanted desperately to be back on the job. Especially now. "I guess I should be happy Singer's on the case," she finished. "At least that way I don't have to worry about getting too sympathetic to the defense. But I can't say I trust her."

"Me either." Harm reached for one of Harriet's brownies. "Bud will be fine. I'm glad you'll be with him, though."

"Yeah, he's pretty nervous. But at least this time we don't have to wonder about whether the suspect is guilty or not. We know exactly what happened."

"Mm-hmm. Guess I've got a goal now. I need to be back in the office next week."

"No, you don't -"

"Relax, Mac, I'll take it slow. I'll come in part-time if I have to. But I want to be there to help you prep, and I definitely want to be there for the start of the trial. You know you're not going to change my mind."

"I'm not trying to hold you back, Harm. I just worry about you going too fast, that's all." She got up to clear the table. "I can't wait to see you try and get into your uniform with one arm."

"Sadist. Hey, could you help me get out of these bandages? I could really use a shower."

"Sure, just give me a minute."

By the time she'd cleared the dishes away, he'd worked his way out of the sling and was struggling with his shirt. She shook her head in amusement and did it for him. Continuing, she removed the thick gauze encircling his lower torso, being as gentle as possible with the adhesive on his bare skin. The bandage fell away, and she was abruptly confronted with a jagged row of ugly black stitches. She drew a sharp breath: she hadn't actually seen the scar before. She hid her horror by moving behind him to work on his shoulder, but that was little better. As she stared at the bruise that surrounded the deep wound, her hand started to tremble.

He felt her hesitation, and turned. "Mac?"

"I -- I'm sorry. I guess reality just hit me all of a sudden. I mean, I know what happened. I was there. But I can't get used to the fact that you - almost ..."

Without a word, he wrapped his uninjured arm around her and drew her close, somewhat surprised but ready to comfort her. "I'm okay," he whispered. "I'm right here, and I'm getting better. Thanks to you. Don't think about almosts."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't remember that night." She pulled back from his feeble embrace. "Harm, I was terrified. It still scares me to think about it. And that's the honest-to-God truth."

It wasn't easy for her to admit that, he knew. "I remember a little. Mainly I remember being fairly terrified myself. I felt like everything was closing in, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to make it back to help you. When I saw him with that gun ..." He shook his head. "We both got lucky, huh?"

"Well, our luck seems to improve when we stick together."

"No argument here." Suddenly realizing how close they stood, he let his hand fall from her arm. "Guess I ought to take that shower."

"Go ahead. I'll iron my uniform for tomorrow."

And she did, meticulously pressing the gig lines into her blouse and hoping the simple task would take her mind off of the memory of that night. It wasn't only the anguish of waiting: it was the awareness that had resulted, forcing her to confront the myriad of emotions that the very name Harmon Rabb evoked. What would she have done if he had died that night? What would she have felt if she were never to see that gorgeous smile again?

Not now, she told herself. Now he had to heal, and any other questions would have to wait. She turned off the iron and set about affixing her ribbons to her jacket.

0328 EST
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

The couch was actually comfortable, she'd discovered. It was her third night sleeping on it, and she was thinking seriously about getting one like it for her own apartment. Not that she typically had guests to put up on the couch. Still, she was rapidly becoming comfortable at Harm's place.

It was somewhat of a surprise, then, when Mac awoke in the middle of the night with no clear idea why. Something just didn't feel right, and instinctively she rose to check on her friend.

Her instincts were on target. He was flushed, and his skin glistened with sweat. His breathing was labored as he moved restlessly under the sheets. Somehow she must have heard him from across the loft, and now she sat down beside him on the bed, placing her hand on his forehead. "Harm," she called softly.

His eyes fluttered, but didn't focus entirely. "Mac?" he asked, his voice small, almost childlike.

"You're running a fever, flyboy. Don't worry -- the doctors said this might happen. Your body's just getting adjusted to all that new blood. It's wreaking havoc on your immune system. How are you feeling?"

"Miserable," he answered, the word slurring slightly. "Help."

"Just a second. I'll be right back." She returned with a damp facecloth and smoothed it over his burning skin. "Better?"

"Yeah ..."

She smiled sympathetically. "I wish I could do more, but they warned me about mixing meds. You're going to have to tough it out. You think you can get back to sleep?"

"No problem ..." He was barely conscious as it was. "Mac?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay here for a while... okay?"

"Sure." She continued stroking his face and chest with the cool cloth, hoping the small offering would help in some intangible way. As he slipped back into a troubled sleep, she reached for the phone on the bedside table and dialed. "Tiner, this is Colonel Mackenzie. I hope you get this message before the admiral gets in. I'm not going to be in to work this morning - Commander Rabb's running a pretty high fever. It's not serious, but I have to keep an eye on him and make sure it doesn't get worse. I hope to be in by 1300, but I'm not in court at all today, so it shouldn't be a problem. If the admiral is upset, I'll take the heat. He can reach me at the commander's apartment. Thanks, Tiner."

When Harm shakes this off, she thought, he's going to be royally pissed off that his medical condition has been part of the JAG rumor list. Almost as she hung up, though, he was stirring again, trapped in the throes of some nightmare. "No," he moaned weakly. "Please ... don't go ..."

"Harm, it's okay. You're safe." She climbed onto the bed next to him and laid her hand against his cheek, but her touch didn't seem to soothe him.

"Don't leave ..."

Wondering what he was seeing, she brushed his dark hair back tenderly. "I'm not leaving," she reassured him.

"... love you."

She froze instantly, unsure whether to believe what she'd just heard. "Harm," she said slowly, "who are you talking to?"

He didn't seem to hear, lost in a fever-induced world. When she pulled her hand away, however, his body tensed. "Sarah?" he murmured listlessly.

Relaxing a little, she squeezed his hand. "I'm right here," she answered softly. "Rest now, okay?"

At last he appeared to sleep peacefully, and she was left to contemplate what had just occurred. He hadn't been speaking to her, she reasoned. He couldn't have been. He'd simply recognized her voice, that was all. Saying 'don't leave' -- that could have been directed at anyone, from his father to any one of a string of ex-girlfriends.

Diane. It must have been Diane he'd seen. He'd heard Mac's voice, and somehow his mind had mixed up the nearly-identical-looking women. For all she knew, he did it all the time. Well, maybe not. According to Bud, and Harm himself, she was nothing like the murdered lieutenant; but how could she ever know for sure what he saw when he looked at her?

Harmon Rabb was not one to wear his emotions on his sleeve. Certainly she'd never been able to read his feelings for her. But he'd never denied loving Diane, and she'd been taken from him. Maybe the unanswered questions still haunted him.

But he called me Sarah...?

She forced the nagging uncertainties to the back of her mind. He was sick and hurting, and he didn't know what he was saying. That was all there was to it. "Good night," she whispered, and went back to the couch for a few more hours of sleep.

When her internal clock told her it was 0900, she wasn't entirely certain whether or not she'd ever fallen asleep. With a muted curse, she rolled to her feet and returned to the bedroom. Harm looked as if he wouldn't wake up for hours, but to her relief, the fever had diminished. Maybe she'd make it to work today after all.

A ten-minute shower eased some of her tension, and she felt nearly human as she brushed her damp hair and buttoned her blouse. The sound of a key in the lock alerted her; there was only time for her to wonder which drawer Harm kept his sidearm in before the door opened, and then she was face to face with Renee Peterson.

Recovering quickly, Mac spoke first. "Renee, hi. I thought Harm wasn't expecting you back until the end of the week."

The other woman looked stunned. "Apparently not," she replied with as much composure as she could muster, and Mac realized what she must have been thinking.

"I take it he didn't tell you that I'd be staying with him. Listen, it isn't what it looks like. I'm just here until he gets back on his feet, but now that you're back, I'm sure he'd want you to stay." The words tumbled out of her mouth as she rushed to explain.

Renee looked at her as if she'd sprouted wings. "I think I've missed something. Does he really need a babysitter for a separated shoulder?"

Mac stared at her. *Oh, God. She doesn't know. Damn it, Harm.* "I think I understand now," she said quietly. "You might want to sit down for this."

"What are you talking about? What's going on? Is Harm all right?"

"He is now, but -- Renee, he didn't tell you everything. When we were down at Pax River, Harm didn't just pull a muscle. He was stabbed. He's going to be fine, but he was badly hurt."

The color drained from her face, but to her credit, the often-flighty film director remained calm. "Stabbed ... how bad was it? Was his life in danger?"

Mac nodded silently, and Renee caught her breath. Without speaking, she moved to the bedroom, and was confronted with a completely unexpected sight. For the first time, the woman inside the Marine felt sorry for Renee. As his partner, Mac had been with him through pain and sickness, grief and rage, and even a little madness. Renee might be his girlfriend, but she only knew his strength, the flawless image he projected to the world. It was clear at that moment that she was not prepared to see him as anything less than perfect.

Renee took a step toward the bed, where Harm still slept, unaware of her presence. The heavy bandages were visible, as was the fading bruise at his temple. "Jesus," she breathed, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"I'm sure he didn't want to worry you," Mac offered helplessly. "There wasn't much you could do at the time, and ..."

"I could have been with him. I thought he'd want that. I don't understand." The shock in her expression was quickly changing into hurt. "Then again, he had you, didn't he?"

Caught off-guard, Mac only looked away. Renee shook her head. "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. I should be grateful that he has such a good friend. But I'm a woman -- I can't help being jealous sometimes."

"I understand," she lied easily. "I think I should get to JAG. When he wakes up, tell him I'll be back later."

"I will. Thank you, Mac. I know you're trying to help."

How do you know that? she wondered, but nodded with a half-hearted smile. Grabbing her uniform jacket, she hurried out the door just as Harm stirred and opened his eyes. "Mac?" he called faintly.

"She went to work, Harm. It's me."

He blinked and squinted up at her. "Renee. You're home early."

"We wrapped last night." She watched, controlling her reactions carefully, as he struggled to sit up.

"I guess I have some explaining to do, huh?"

"Well, Mac covered it pretty well, but she couldn't quite come up with a justification." The cold exterior melted. "For God's sake, Harm, how could you keep this from me? You could have died! How did this happen?"

"The civilians we were working with were in danger. Renee, they were practically kids. I couldn't abandon them. By the time anyone could have reached you, it was over."

"So you decided to lie to me for a week and a half?"

"Would you have believed me this time, or would I have needed a note from the surgeon?" he shot back, anger rising. It cooled quickly as she shrunk back, stung. "Wait, I didn't mean that. You're right, and I'm sorry. Of course I should have told you. I guess -- I thought I was protecting you."

"Why do I need to be protected? Because I don't live in the same world of 'truth, justice, and the American way' that you do?" She shook her head. "I know I wasn't very supportive in the beginning, but I am trying to understand, and I need some help. I can accept the fact that you don't need me behind you at every turn. I'm not sure you really need anyone. But I'm starting to wonder if you even want me there."

"Don't say that." He pushed himself up from the bed, uncertain of how to explain. "Your support is important to me."

"If that were true, you would have called me and asked me to come home. I'd be here taking care of you instead of --"

"Instead of Mac," he finished quietly. "Is that the problem?"

"No, it isn't. You and me, we're the problem. We're good together when we talk about music or basketball, but when it comes to us, we don't communicate. God knows I've tried, but I think I learned more about what makes you tick from that one conversation with your mother than I ever have from you." Her eyes were still bright with tears, but Renee Peterson was nothing if not proud. "I want to be with you, Harm. I honestly do. But I can't keep knocking on the door and waiting for you to decide to let me in."

He stared at her, unable to deny anything she'd said. It was true that he had wanted Mac there, not her. It was true that he held back when he was with her. But damn it ... "I've been trying to let you in. I've been trying to tell you about who and what I am since day one. You didn't want to hear it. The dress whites and the DFCs don't define me. If you really want to be with me, you have to accept the fact that I am unfailingly committed to my duty. When someone needs my help, I give it, and it doesn't matter when or where. If it means I have to risk my life, I do it. That's not easy to live with, for anyone. But it's who I am. Are you sure you can live with it?"

For a long moment, she didn't reply. "I thought I was," she said finally. "After all this ... I'm not as sure anymore."

He nodded slowly -- it was hardly an unexpected response. "So what do we do now?"

"I need to think about some things." Distressed, she fumbled for her keys. "I'll call you in a few days, okay?"

"Okay." They didn't move to embrace or kiss. She exited hastily, leaving him to contemplate the effects of what he'd just set in motion. "Slick, Rabb," he muttered to himself. "When a woman's mad at you, whip out the 'duty and honor' line. Beautiful." On the other hand, he'd meant it. They'd been together for close to a year, and she still couldn't see. Was this relationship even worth saving?

1824 EST

Same location

The first thing Mac heard when she opened the door was a few clumsy notes of guitar melody. Sitting in the windowsill, Harm stopped playing when she came in, offering a rueful grin. "This isn't easy with a screwed-up shoulder," he commented, awkwardly setting the guitar down on a chair.

She studied him intently. "You want to talk about this morning?"

"What's to talk about?"

"Nice try. I might have bought that, except for two things. One, even with the aforementioned screwed-up shoulder, I could tell what you were playing when I walked in." He winced, knowing he was caught - the song had been 'Walk Away, Renee'. "And two, I saw her face when she first saw you today. Harm, I know I have no room to talk, but this is a hell of a way to keep up a relationship. How could you do that to her?"

"I don't know, Mac. I just couldn't deal with it." He gazed out the window, his expression unreadable. "All I did was postpone the inevitable, anyway. She finally has to accept everything about me, like it or not. Unfortunately, that now includes dishonesty. Let's talk about something else, okay?"

"Whatever you say." She took off her jacket and kicked her shoes away. "You're obviously feeling better."

"I am, thanks. I just wish I could use my damned arm. But I'm willing to make an attempt at dinner. You up for Mexican?"

"Always. Here, you're going to need help. Let me get out of this." Inside of thirty seconds, she was out of her uniform and into her favorite jeans. Harm was already searching through the refrigerator. He emerged with a wrapped, half-eaten Beltway Burger in his hand and a disapproving look. "You're corrupting me, Marine."

"Is it working?"

"Never. I'm a pillar of strength." He dropped the macho demeanor and rolled his eyes. "Right. Especially now. I might even be able to run a whole mile by Christmas."

"You'll get there. Have faith." Mac ducked into the cupboard and pulled out a saucepan.

"How's everything at JAG?"

"Busy, as usual. It's awfully dull without our resident smartass, of course." She reached around him as he cautiously sliced vegetables one-handed. "Seriously, everyone's been asking about you."

"I suppose they're wondering when I'll get off my six and come back to work."

"Of course not. They know what happened. No one expects you to be invincible, and after ..."

He raised an eyebrow. "After what exactly?"

She hesitated. "Bud was working on his evidence list, and Harriet accidentally saw some pictures -- ah, pictures that the investigators took of your injuries. Just before they took you into surgery. They're pretty bad."

"I bet. How does Harriet always stumble onto these things?"

"I don't know, but she was a mess. Within half an hour the whole bullpen was talking about them. They thought you were brave before, but now you're the stuff of legends."

"Of course, because I set such a great example. Refusing treatment so that I could walk into a hostile situation unprepared. They'll be teaching that tactic at the Academy next year for sure."

"I hope you have a better version of that when you get up on the stand next week."

"I always do, don't I?" He flashed a smile, nearly back to its usual brilliance. She smiled back.

"You are definitely getting better. Last night you were practically delirious. Pain meds and fevers apparently don't mix."

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you kept that part to yourself. Truth is, I don't really remember much. Did I say anything?"

Startled, she glanced up. "What?"

"I've been told that I talk in my sleep. Did I say anything stupid?"

"Not that I can recall." *You just said 'I love you' to some mystery woman, that's all.* She busied herself with the tortillas. "Less than a week to trial. I'm still not sure I should be at the table at all for this one. I mean, I was a witness, too. Doesn't that suggest bias?"

"You were only a witness to half the charges. The most significant one is the attempted murder, and that's my territory."

"Don't remind me. Bud's got Kara Donnell scheduled to come up on Monday to go over her testimony."

At that, he brightened. "How's Kara doing?"

"Pretty well, I think. The Phoenix program is more or less back on track, so she's busy, but she doesn't seem too worried about being away for a while."

"Any word on Scott?"

She shook her head. "He's just gone. I told Bud not to bother trying too hard to subpoena him. He wouldn't add much to the case, and it'll ruin his life. I think Kara's in the process of denying that she even knew him."

"It has to hurt, knowing that he was involved. No matter what his intentions were." Harm sighed. "Poor kid."

"Kara? Come on, you promised you'd stop calling her a kid. You'd trust her with your plane, but you still insist on playing big brother."

"I can't help it. Just looking at her reminds me how old I am."

"Harm! You're a little young to be having a mid-life crisis, aren't you?"

"Give me a break, all right? Aren't I allowed a little time to reflect after a near-death experience?"

He'd said it cavalierly, but the tone didn't dull the sharp edge of those words. "Stop saying that," she said softly. "How can you be so casual about it?"

"I'm not, I guess. I'm just finding it easier to deal with that way." Setting the plates on the table, he sat down with a troubled expression. "I've had way too much time to think lately, and I've started to wonder where half my life went. I don't regret the choices I've made, but ..." He shook his head. "Why the hell am I wasting my time on someone who doesn't want me for who I am?"

Mac didn't know how to answer. She'd been asking that same question ever since Renee had come into the picture, but she'd always told herself that he knew what he was doing, that there must be something special that others didn't see. "You don't really see it that way."

"Maybe not, but you sure do. And I'm starting to wonder why I didn't listen to you."

"Me? Since when do I get veto power over your love life?"

"Aw, come on, Mac. You don't like a single thing about Renee. You've been trying to figure out what I see in her for months. Admit it."

Damn. Busted. "Maybe," she allowed. "What *do* you see in her, anyway?"

A distant look came into his eyes. "I don't know anymore," he mused quietly. "Maybe a break from the chaos that is my life. The calm at the center of the storm. But that's part of the problem. It's not just her, when you think about it. I have a history of relationships with women who have nothing in common with me. Renee, Jordan, Bobbi, Annie ... " He smirked humorlessly. "I don't have dates, I have distractions. Maybe that's all I was to them, too - a distraction from the rest of their lives. We pretend it doesn't matter, but at the end of the day, we're both living a mutually-accepted lie. And I don't want to do that anymore. Life's too short to be with someone who doesn't really know you."

Taken aback by his uncharacteristic candor, she considered what he'd said. Did Mic really know her? Before she could respond, Harm rolled his eyes, and she could see that his moment of self-pity was over. "Christ. I'm out of the game for a little while, and all of a sudden I'm a fortune cookie. Why do you put up with me, ninja-girl?"

There was only one answer in her mind. "Because I do like you for who you are," she replied honestly, and was rewarded with a genuine smile.

"Thanks, Mac," he said, surprised and flattered. "That means a lot. And it's entirely mutual."

Their eyes locked, and after a minute, she tore her gaze away. "The fajitas are getting cold. Let's eat."

Hallmark moments, indeed.

1106 EST Same location

Harm hated sleeping this late. It was bad enough that the miniscule effort he'd been putting forth each day seemed to tire him out by ten p.m., but the pain medication tended to keep him out cold until mid-morning. *That's it. No more drugs. Nobody needs twelve hours of sleep*, he grouched silently as he struggled into his jeans. Damned shoulder. Taking fifteen minutes just to get dressed was a curse.

Reaching for a shirt he'd left hanging on the chair, he caught sight of Mac's duffel bag, packed neatly and sitting on the couch. *That's right -- it's Friday. She's going home tonight*. In just a week, he'd gotten accustomed to having her around. Despite the laundry-list of long-term girlfriends, he'd never really shared his home with anyone, since sharing a cabin with Tuna on the Patrick Henry hardly qualified. He was surprised to discover that he liked it. It felt good to have someone else there, even as a glorified nursemaid.

"Not just someone," he reflected aloud. Her. Everything he'd said the night before was true, but he'd wanted to say more. The person who knew him better than anyone else in the world was right in front of him, and still he was afraid to even think about the possibility of ... Perhaps it was for the best that she would be leaving tonight.

He pulled on the shirt, not even attempting to button it, and slowly worked his way into the sling. It was a difficult procedure to perform one-handed. When he'd finally gotten it in place, he fell back onto the bed in exasperation -- and promptly swore at the pain that shot through his shoulder. Maybe just one more day on the pills.

There was a knock at the door, and he frowned. He'd had a few visitors, but none in the middle of the day. Someone taking an early lunch? Trying not to grimace, he climbed to his feet and went to the door. The person behind it was, to say the least, a surprise.

"Hi," said Mic Brumby, with a somewhat strained smile. "Hope I'm not disturbing you."

"My schedule's pretty open at the moment." Harm stepped back and ushered the other man in. "If you're looking for Mac, I'm sure she's at the office -"

"I'm sure she is, too." Mic studied him briefly. "She wasn't kidding. You look like hell, Harm."

He relaxed a little, but still wondered what was going on. "Well, I'm glad I look better than I feel. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"I doubt you can. But I'm fine, thanks." The Australian took a seat on the couch, and Harm settled uneasily into the chair. The two men had made no secret of their rivalry: it had been obvious from the moment they'd met. Lately, though, they'd been operating under an awkward truce, for Mac's benefit. And neither one would dare admit to the other -- or anyone else -- that their competitive nature was in any way related to her.

"You're heading back into the fray on Monday?"

"That's the plan," Harm replied. "And you can have your fiancée back tonight. I really am sorry about all this, Mic. I told her she didn't have to stay this long, but she's been a lifesaver."

"It's all right. I know better than to get in her way when a friend is in trouble." He smiled, but it didn't last. "She's been worried sick about you, mate. You know that, right?"

"Yeah. Can you convince her to stop? I'm fine -- well, no, I'm not. But I will be." Harm offered a half-shrug, and decided to cut to the chase. "What's on your mind, mate?"

"To be honest, I don't really know why I'm here. I suppose you're the only one I could think of to ask. I just feel like Sarah's been a world away lately, and not just because she hasn't been home. I wonder if this whole affair has hit her hard."

Harm raised an eyebrow at his choice of words. "Have you talked to her about it?"

"Not much, really. She hasn't wanted to. I can't even ask about the case without her changing the subject as fast as she can. Does she seem that way to you?"

He paused, but there was no reason to mislead him. "Actually, we've been talking about the case every night. She seemed okay with it ... but I guess she could be putting on a front, trying to protect me."

"Protect you? I doubt it. You've been with her a lot more than I have lately, and God knows she'll open up to you. If she's holding something back ... will you talk to her?"

This was all too weird. "No offense, Mic, but what's with all this sudden faith in my friendship with Mac?"

"Aw, be honest, mate. I'm stubborn, but I'm not bloody stupid. I'm never going to understand what you two have, and I'm not selfish enough to try and change it." He smiled ruefully, but there was pain behind his dark eyes. "I know you think I hate you, and I wouldn't be surprised if you hate me. But the truth is, I don't envy your gold wings or your court record. I *do* envy the way Sarah trusts you above anyone else. I can't compete with that -- I don't even know where to start. I love her, and I really believe that someday she'll be able to trust me that way. I just don't want to push too hard."

Harm said nothing for a moment, more than a little taken aback. To come here and ask for his help, as if the suspicion hadn't even entered his mind ... Then again, there was nothing he wanted more than for Mac to be happy. If this would give her that happiness, even for a little while, maybe it was worth it. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try," he answered.

A look of relief came into Mic's eyes. "Thank you," he said quietly. "You're a good friend."

Harm hesitated, but honesty seemed to be the language of the day. "You should know that there are things she keeps from me, too. Sometimes I have no idea what's happening in her head."

"Women, eh? God bless 'em." Mic's voice was light, but his gratitude was clear.

"Right. At least yours is still speaking to you." The words were out of his mouth before he even realized it.

"Renee's mad?"

"With just cause. I kinda glossed over the life-or-death part of our adventure."

Mic winced. "Ouch. I have to admit, I never really understood about you and her."

"Don't start. Mac's said it all already." He rolled his eyes, and both men smiled. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"You mean, why are we getting along? Can't say I know. I think I'll just enjoy it while it lasts. At any rate, I'd best be going." With a firm Australian handshake, he headed for the door. "I'm sure you'll be back on your feet in no time. Take care of yourself, Harm."

"You too, Mic."

When he'd gone, Harm just sat there for a few minutes, amazed at the surrealism of it all. They had somehow inadvertently admitted their insecurities and found a bizarre peace. Certainly not what he'd expected when he woke up that morning. Did this mean that he was finally coming to terms with Mic marrying his partner? No, definitely not. Mic wasn't a bad guy -- he now understood that more than ever -- but just the mental image of Sarah Mackenzie walking down the aisle was enough to twist his stomach into a knot. *Why? You know damn well why. But you can't -- or won't -- do anything about it.*

Determined to clear his mind, he retrieved his briefcase and went to the window seat to continue catching up on reports ...

When Mac arrived a few hours later, he was still there, a file open but ignored on his lap. She wasn't sure if he was asleep or simply lost in thought. "Hey, sailor," she ventured, and he jumped, startled.

"Damn it. I didn't think it was possible to sleep this much." He tossed the file aside. "You're back early."

"Just lucky today. How're you doing?"

"Pretty good." He wasn't about to tell her he hadn't taken the medication. "Anything interesting happen at the office?"

"Not unless you count Tiner accidentally walking into the ladies' room. He claimed he was distracted by something or other, but you should have heard Carolyn yell." With a grin, she went into the bedroom to change, continuing. "Well, this is the end of the line. You can go back to living like an adult tomorrow. Got any requests for our last evening?"

"Low maintenance," he answered. "Chinese?"

"Works for me."

An hour later, they were stretched out on opposite ends of the couch, white takeout cartons in hand. "Kind of a flashback, huh? That first night at Pax River?"

"Right, the day before it all went to hell."

"Did you ever give me back the shirt I lent you?"

She shot him an odd look. "Yeah, Harm. You promptly bled all over it. Remember?"

"Oh," he said lamely. "I was wondering what happened to that shirt. Never mind."

Mac reached for a fortune cookie on the table, and yelped as her leg brushed his bare foot. "Yow! Your feet are cold." At that, a mischievous glint came into his eye, and he inched closer with the intent of placing said foot squarely on her back. She squirmed free and fixed him with a mock-glare. "Don't think that I won't take advantage of your less-than-perfect health."

"All right, all right, no sneak attacks. Promise." At his pleading look, she relented and sat back down next to him. What an irresistible little kid Harmon Rabb must have been ...

She pushed his long legs over. "You're too tall for your own good."

"You're telling me. I did three tours on carriers. What's your fortune?"

Breaking open the cookie, she read aloud solemnly. "'A rival from the past is no longer a concern.'"

He pretended to carefully ponder the meaning. "Singer? She doesn't really qualify."

"I was thinking Kate Pike."

That caused him to turn and face her. "You'd consider Kate a rival?"

"I would have, if she'd stayed. She's got a reputation as a good investigator. But who believes those fortunes, anyway? One time I got one that said I'd soon see the Great Pyramids. I think it was a couple of years ago, and so far, no pyramids."

Conscious of the slight topic shift, Harm didn't reply right away. "Mac, I'm sorry," he said suddenly. "I should have told you about me and Kate."

"Why? It's none of my business. Unless you have a history of -" *sleeping with your partners*, she almost said. Where had *that* come from?

Fortunately, he hadn't noticed. "That's not what I meant. I should have told you two years ago, before your Article 32. Mac, she was a junior officer. In the UCMJ, that's the same as you and Farrow."

"It's not the same at all. You were both officers, and you only had half a stripe on her. That's improper, but it's not fraternization. And you were with her for what, a weekend? I was with John for weeks. He was my commanding officer. And no matter how hard I tried to forget it, I was still married."

"We've been through all that. By that point, your 'marriage' was nothing but a piece of paper. The point is, we're both human, and I wish I'd thought to remind you of that. Maybe it would have made things a little easier."

"Harm, I know you didn't judge me. But still ... thanks." She leaned back, thinking. "There's a weird irony here, you know? I mean, this whole incident happened because of a failed relationship."

"I hadn't thought of that. Halloway's wife, and that other pilot ..." He shook his head. "What do you suppose the real story on them is?"

"I don't know, but for one thing, it wasn't just a typical affair. They've been married for three years."

"Really? Didn't expect that."

"Me either, but it's probably good for the case. Bud's meeting with them on Tuesday." An unreadable expression flickered across her features. "I wonder if they're happy."

Harm watched her for a moment, remembering his earlier visitor. "Are *you* happy?"

"Now?" She forced a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. It's been a strange couple of weeks, and ..." Aw, *hell*. Why bother with an excuse? She'd see right through it in no time. "Mic stopped by today."

"Oh, Lord. If he was rude, I'm sorry -"

"No, it's fine. We actually had our first civil conversation in months. He's worried about you, says you won't talk to him about the case. Is everything okay?"

Mac was set back a step. Mic and Harm, calling an honest-to-God cease-fire? She must have been awfully transparent to set this in motion. "Sure," she responded with a shrug. "Like you said, a strange couple of weeks."

He nodded, unconvinced. "So which is it? You don't want to talk about the case, or you don't want to talk about what happened at Pax?"

"What do you think?" she fired back. Instantly she regretted the harsh tone. "I'm sorry. I just don't know how to explain it to him without -- without reliving it. It's not that I was afraid, at least not of Halloway. But afterward ..." Abruptly, she turned away. "Harm, when they took you away, I didn't know if I'd ever see you alive again, and it was one of the darkest moments of my life. I've had nightmares about it, even -- I see you, bleeding to death in my arms ... Mic won't understand that. He doesn't understand us. If I try to tell him what happened, I'm afraid I'll fall apart, and he'll see what it did to me, and ..." She trailed off, uncertain. "He won't understand," she repeated.

There was a long silence as both partners' minds whirled. What exactly had she just said? "I guess I wouldn't blame him," he said finally. "Sometimes I don't understand us, either."

Then the moment was gone, and she tried to dismiss it. "I'll talk to him. Really. It'll be fine."

"All right." It wasn't so much that he accepted her answer: rather, he seemed to draw back from pursuing the topic. "Could I ask one more favor, before you go?"

"Of course."

He offered an apologetic half-smile. "Do my uniform for Monday?"

She understood - there was no way he would be able to get his service-dress squared away one-handed. "Starting to miss your flight suit?"

"Don't tempt me. I might wear it."

"That would go over well. I'll do your jacket, but I should warn you: the admiral might get used to it and start holding you to Marine standards." Hearing him snicker, she went into the bedroom and retrieved his class-A jacket. Taking a seat on the bed, she set to work affixing the two immaculate rows of ribbons over the left breast pocket. She paused briefly on one: the Distinguished Flying Cross, with second award. It was exactly the size and shape of the others, with nothing to highlight its significance, yet it was one of the highest honors the military could give. And this man had two. Amazing.

She picked up his wings next. They were heavier than she'd expected; maybe symbolically carrying the weight of a naval aviator's responsibility. She'd made more than her share of jokes about pilots' egos, but the truth was, not too many people could do what those men and women did every day.

What the hell's gotten into me? she thought abruptly. All of a sudden I'm going teenage-groupie over my best friend? Deftly, she fastened the wings over the ribbons and held up the jacket for inspection.

"Looks good." Harm stood in the entryway, giving her work a once-over. Gesturing, he added, "Hard to believe I didn't wear those for almost five years."

Mac blinked, wondering if she'd heard correctly. "You didn't wear your *wings*? I never knew that."

"Yeah, well, call it a prolonged identity crisis. Nobody at JAG even knew I was a pilot until the case on the Seahawk." While she tried to imagine Harm as 'just another lawyer', he shook his head. "Not that putting the wings back on solved much of anything, but it was a start. Sometimes I think I'm still trying to figure myself out." He met her gaze. "But I'm getting there, Mac. I really am."

He meant it, she knew. He'd never really been the secure, well-adjusted person everyone saw in him, but he was closer to it now than ever before. All she said, though, was, "You're all set. I'll be here at 0730 Monday to pick you up, okay?"

"I'll be ready."

"Yeah, right." She flashed a smirk, then rose to collect her bags. "And I'll take you over to Bethesda after work to get the first set of stitches out."

"Mac -"

"Don't even think about it. I'm going with you, and that's the way it has to be. You sure as hell can't drive yourself."

"Okay, okay."

Then they were standing at the door, neither one moving to open it. A strange thought struck her. This didn't feel like going home. It felt like *leaving* home. Had she really gotten that used to being there with him?

"I should get going," she began, pulling her duffel onto her shoulder. "You'll call if you need anything?"

"Yes, ma'am." An inexplicable expression of amusement came into his warm blue eyes. "I think I'm going to miss you, ninja-girl."

Impulsively, she reached up to hug him, not knowing what to say. After a moment, he returned the embrace. "Thank you, Mac. For everything."

"You're more than welcome." She disengaged herself carefully and opened the door. "Have a good weekend."

"See you Monday."

Harm watched her leave with a distinct sense of loss. He wandered back into the living room and sank into the couch, noting that the pillow smelled vaguely of her shampoo. *This is bizarre*. He'd never felt lonely in his own apartment before. It occurred to him that he could call Renee, but that idea quickly died. He'd finally come to the conclusion that they really had nothing to say to each other. When she reached that same inevitable conclusion, she'd call, and another failed relationship would go into the books. The feeling was painfully familiar.

He reached for the stereo remote and clicked on the radio. The song instantly took him back to that bar outside the Pax River gates, approximately an hour and a half before his life had begun to flash before his eyes. Remembering how Mac had leaned close to him as they danced, he couldn't repress a wistful smile. Simpler times ... they'd been just as complicated as ever, of course, but they seemed simpler now. Softly, he started to sing along.

"... it's hard to tell the nighttime from the day
You're losing all your highs and lows
Ain't it funny how the feeling goes away -
Desperado ..."

0725 EST **Same location**

On Monday morning, Mac knocked loudly on her partner's door. "Up and at 'em, middle!"

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" came the immediate response. "It's open, Mac."

She let herself in, and was slightly surprised to find Harm standing at the kitchen counter, eating an apple. His uniform was in perfect order, the recruiting-poster image tarnished only by the sling. "Morning," he said between bites. "Want some breakfast?"

"Not the kind you serve. I'm hoping for a doughnut at work." She shook her head, impressed. "I have to admit, I expected you to be half-awake and fumbling with your buttons."

"I said I'd be ready, didn't I?" He conveniently neglected to mention that he'd gotten up at six to make sure.

"Yeah, you did." She studied him. "Are you, sailor?"

In reality, his shoulder ached, and he was already tired. But he couldn't stare at those walls any longer. It was time to rejoin his life. "Yep," he said, tossing the apple core in the trash and reaching for his cover. "Let's go."

They didn't talk much on the way. His weekend had been dull, and hers had been uncomfortable. Conversations with Mic had been somewhat stilted, but she'd managed to tell him a little about the case. Progress, perhaps.

She followed a step behind Harm as he strode up to the building, touching off a salute to the guard who opened the door for them. Gunnery Sergeant Galindez was the first to see the pair as they rounded the corner into JAG Ops.

"Attention on deck!"

The dozen or so men and women in the bullpen snapped to attention. Harm glanced behind him: usually only the admiral received such treatment. Both he and Mac technically merited it, but neither was much for formality. "Mac, did you forget to tell me about another promotion?"

"No such luck, Commander. I think it's for you."

"Welcome back, sir." Gunny spoke for all of them. "We're all glad to see you."

Harm was surprised and touched by the display of respect. "Thank you, everyone," he said quietly. "As you were."

As the staff members went about their duties, he headed to his office, gratified to see that it was not yet overflowing with paperwork. He put his cover on the file cabinet and temporarily wondered what Mac had done with his briefcase. This one-handed thing was hard to get used to. At least he could still write -- and salute.

"Here you are, sir." Harriet set the case down on his desk, beaming. "If you don't mind me saying so, things just haven't been the same without you."

"Thanks, Harriet. Believe it or not, I missed this place."

"Bud's around here somewhere. He had to go find -"

"Commander!" Bud Roberts entered, his hand outstretched. The senior officer took it with a smile. "Welcome back, sir. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, Bud, thanks. How's pre-trial going?"

"Fairly well, I think. We've got witnesses to interview today and tomorrow. The colonel's been keeping you up to speed?"

"She has. Come on, it's almost time for staff call."

The officers went into the conference room, where the rest of the legal crew was slowly gathering. Harm accepted well-wishes from Carolyn Imes and Alan Mattoni and took his seat at the table. Within moments, Mac sat down beside him. "Ready to go back into the hurricane?" she asked sardonically.

"You bet. It feels like I've been gone for a lot more than three weeks."

"Well, it wasn't exactly a typical TDY," Carolyn said sympathetically.

Lieutenant Lauren Singer walked in then, and immediately the room seemed to cool. She noticed it, lowering her gaze and sliding into her chair. "Welcome back, Commander," she said tentatively.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

There was an odd silence, and she spoke again. "Sir, before all this starts, I feel I should tell you that despite my role in the Halloway case, I would never want to set myself against you in any way. I'm sure I can't imagine what you've been through, and I just want you to know that you have my deepest regrets."

"You're only his lawyer, Lieutenant," he replied, raising an eyebrow. "You didn't give him the knife."

"Yes, sir. That said, I hope you understand that I won't be able to pull any punches. It's certainly not personal, but the charges are very serious, and with all the attention the case has _"

"I'm aware of the rules of engagement, Lieutenant." His expression was placid, but his voice had taken on a frosty tone that the others had come to recognize as a warning signal. If Harmon Rabb was shouting at you, you had a chance. But when he spoke in that low, dangerous tone, it was time to take cover. "I trust that you are, as well."

Singer didn't visibly react, but she seemed to shrink back imperceptibly. Mac watched, torn between amusement and worry. Harm had won that round, but it was clear that there would be more. With Singer, you never quite knew when the other shoe was going to drop.

"Admiral on deck!" Mattoni called suddenly, and the room leaped to its feet. Harm swayed ever so slightly, and Mac surreptitiously slipped a steadying hand onto his arm, hoping that no one had noticed. He stared straight ahead, but some of the color had drained from his face. For the first time, she wondered if maybe he wasn't ready to return to duty.

"Take your seats, folks. This won't take long." A.J. Chegwidden took his place at the head of the table, and everyone relaxed. "First off, whoever tried to get rid of Rabb needs to come up with a Plan B." There were chuckles all around. "Welcome back, Commander."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, on to the new cases. Imes, DDO ..."

When the meeting ended, Mac waited for the others to file out, then went to Harm. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," he answered easily. "Just got up too fast, that's all. Occupational hazard around here."

"You're sure?"

"I'm not helpless, Mac."

"I know -- I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

With a hint of a smile, he went back to his office to start the research assigned by the admiral. Mac did the same, pushing her concern to the back of her mind. If he survived the weekend without landing back in the hospital, navigating JAG shouldn't be a problem.

She hadn't even reached her desk when a mild crash sounded from down the hall. With a certain amount of panic, she dashed to Harm's door.

He was kneeling to collect a stack of books that had fallen to the floor. The embarrassed grin wavered when he recognized the fear in her eyes. "Knocked them over with the sling," he explained. "Mac, please don't worry so much."

She nodded, feeling the eyes of the bullpen on her, and walked rapidly back to her office. This was shaping up to be a long, unusual day ...

Harm turned away from his computer a couple of hours later, squeezing his eyes shut. How could anyone stare at the thing all day and not get a headache? It couldn't be helped, of course. The admiral wasn't about to give him any cases yet, so he was relegated to sifting through case law for some overwhelmed staff judge advocate out at Oceana. Not exactly glamorous work, but then again, he wasn't sure he could handle anything more right now.

"Harm."

He glanced up. Renee stood in the doorway, looking more uncertain than he'd ever seen her. *Here we go.* "Hi," he said simply. "Come on in."

She closed the door behind her and stepped closer, but didn't sit. "How are you doing?" she inquired neutrally.

"All right. It's my first day back. How about you?"

"I'm okay." She twisted her hands in front of her. "I wanted to tell you -- that is, I've been thinking -- damn it ..."

He watched her struggle impassively. "Do you really want to do this now? Here?"

"I have to. Otherwise I'll never get through it. I'll start thinking about how good you look, how good you feel ... what a kind, decent man you really are ..." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "And I'll try to convince myself that we could somehow make this work. But I never had a chance, did I?"

"I'm sorry, Renee," he said honestly, coming around the desk to stand near her. "I never should have let this happen. I guess I thought that somehow this time would be different."

"Don't be sorry. And don't ever believe that any of this was a waste. I don't." She offered a small, heartbreaking smile. "No regrets, all right?"

"No regrets," he echoed in a dull voice. "Is this it?"

"I think so. Goodbye, Harm." She reached up to brush a last kiss against his cheek. "I think I'm more sad for you than I am for myself," she whispered. "You have such a good heart, but you're afraid to use it."

She hurried out of his office just as Mac was going to the copier. "Renee?"

The other woman paused just long enough for her to see the tears. "Take care of him, Mac," she said softly. "He needs someone, and I think it might be you."

Shocked, Mac barely registered her words. She looked back at Harm's office, and through the blinds, she could see him at his desk, his head in his hand.

"Ma'am, is the commander in -"

"Not now, Bud." She tilted her head toward the outer doors, where Renee was stepping into the elevator and swiping uselessly at her eyes. Bud's jaw dropped.

"Did they just ... ? How could she do that to him now, after everything he -"

"Bud, it's not her fault." Neither of them could believe she'd said it, but it was true. They silently returned to their own offices, leaving their friend alone with his thoughts.

Lauren Singer had also seen Renee leave, and as she entered the bullpen, a number of questions rose in her mind. With the biggest trial of her career only forty-eight hours away, though, she quickly brushed them aside and focused on the task at hand. "Lieutenant Sims, I'm looking for some precedent on an emotional distress defense. Could you dig up some case history for me?"

"Aye, ma'am. I'll get right on it." Harriet left for the library, and Singer took a moment to organize her thoughts. She'd be visiting her client in about an hour, and she needed to -

"Excuse me?" A young woman was standing in front of the Gunny's currently-vacant desk. A visitor's tag was clipped to her stylish civilian blouse. "I'm looking for Commander Rabb. Could you help me out?"

Singer sized her up coolly. *One woman walks out, another walks in. Incredible.* Why wasn't anyone else around to deal with visitors, anyway? "I'm sorry, do you have an appointment?"

"Not until thirteen hundred. I guess I'm a little early." She checked her watch with an easy smile. "I'm Kara Donnell, from NavAir. He's expecting me."

"I see." *I'll just bet he is.* "Ma'am, there's only one visitor on the commander's schedule today, and it's one of the engineers from NAS Patuxent River."

Kara's smile disappeared. She knew when she was being handled. "Do I need to introduce myself again, Lieutenant, or is it possible that you don't know where Naval Air Systems Command is based?"

Singer leaned forward with a patronizing tone. "Look, ma'am, a lot of people come around looking for the commander. A lot of them are attractive young women. But as far as I know, none of them has ever passed herself off as a naval engineer. So if you wouldn't mind -"

"Oh, I mind, all right." Kara pulled out her base ID and held it in front of her. "Lieutenant, I didn't assume that you're not a lawyer. Why do you assume that I couldn't possibly be an engineer?" She leaned in even closer to the now-flustered Singer. "Is it because I'm a civilian, or because I'm even younger than you are?"

The two women stared each other down for a few seconds before Harm appeared in the doorway. It didn't take long to grasp the situation.

"You causing trouble already, Kara?"

The smile returned immediately, this time genuine. "Same as always. Hi, Harm."

"Hi, yourself. There a problem here, Ms. Singer?"

Singer recovered quickly. "No, sir," she replied tightly. "Your appointment is here."

"So I've noticed. Come on in, Kara." He held open the door to his office, leaving the determined young officer to wonder how she'd been outmaneuvered.

"Wow," Kara said once they were alone. "Is that stick up her ass a permanent fixture?"

"Seems that way." At that, she smirked, but he was serious. "It gets worse. She's lead counsel for the defense."

"You're kidding. So much for feminist solidarity. She'll probably try to burn me alive on the stand." The engineer didn't seem too concerned, and remembered her fearlessness at the hangar that night. "You look good, Commander. How are you holding up?"

How many times could he answer that question in one day? "Every day's a little better, thanks. They keeping you busy down at Flight Systems?"

"You'd better believe it. We've completed about three-quarters of the test matrix, so the Phoenix is in pretty good shape. As long as the new Congress decides we still need it. I love politics."

You're in Washington, Kar. Everything is politics."

"Don't remind me. I just want to see Halloway get his."

"You're not alone. Did you get the final tech analysis report on the auxiliary power unit?"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I've got it all sorted in my head. I mean, I could use a hand, but Aux Power's a little under-staffed right now." Her lips twisted wryly, but it was clear that she wasn't amused. Scott Fairfield had known the Phoenix systems backwards and forwards, but his mistakes were not likely to be forgiven anytime soon - not by the Navy, and certainly not by the girl he'd called his best friend. Harm felt for her: despite the hardships he'd encountered throughout his career, he'd never been so utterly let down by a friend as she had.

"The other thing is, the VOQ screwed up my reservation," she continued. "I checked with all the local Qs. I even tried to bunk with the zoomies out at Andrews, but no dice. So now I have to find myself a hotel in D.C. What are the odds of my per diem covering *that*?"

"If you're desperate, I've got a couch you can borrow." Mac entered the office, followed by Bud. Kara brightened.

"Colonel, good to see you. Are you serious about letting me crash on your couch?"

"It's yours if you want it. It's at least as comfortable as the beds at the Q, and it's decidedly below the per diem rate." Besides, although it was strange to admit, she missed having company. "Bud, this is Kara Donnell from NavAir Flight Systems. Kara, Lieutenant Bud Roberts, lead prosecutor."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Roberts." Kara extended a hand to him. "Are you people half as good in the courtroom as you are at field investigations?"

Bud shook her hand, not sure how to answer. "I guess we'll find out, ma'am. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions about the technical side of your testimony."

"I'm at your service, Lieutenant. Lead on." A few steps from the door, she paused to offer a grateful smile. "Thanks again, Mac. I owe you forever."

"No problem. I'll catch up to you two in a minute." Mac waited until she and Bud were heading for the conference room before turning to Harm. "You okay?"

"You know, I'm getting really sick of that question ..." Upon seeing her expression, he understood. "You saw Renee, didn't you." She nodded, and he gave a half-shrug. "Well, it's not like I didn't know it was coming."

"That doesn't mean it's not supposed to hurt," she pointed out quietly.

"I'll be fine. I have plenty of experience with breaking up."

"That's what I'm worried about."

He glanced up sharply. "Go interview your witness, all right?"

She was faintly surprised by his demeanor. After everything they'd talked about over the past week, she hadn't expected him to shut her out again. Would she never understand this man?

Then again, it was his life, not hers.

"All right. See you in a while."

1848 EST
Mac's Apartment
Georgetown

"Mac, I can't thank you enough for putting me up. You won't get in trouble, will you?"

Kara had changed out of her business clothes even faster than Mac had gotten out of her uniform. The colonel blinked, impressed. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I was a dancer, remember? Masters of the quick-change. Besides, nobody can write me up for having a ribbon crooked or anything."

"Lucky you. Nah, I won't be in trouble. Technically, I'm not even on the prosecuting team. I'm just there to help Bud out." She crossed the apartment, heading for the kitchen. "I'd offer to repay you for our night out at Pax, but since we all know how *that* turned out, maybe we should just stay in. How's spaghetti sound?"

"Fantastic. Are you sure I can't help?"

"Just keep me company. It's been ages since I had some decent girl talk with anyone over the age of twelve."

Kara folded herself up on the couch with a grin. "A Marine and an engineer having girl talk. Do we shatter the stereotypes, or what?"

"Damn straight."

"So tell me about the husband-to-be. Have you set a date? Can we talk dresses and flowers?"

"Not yet." Mac remembered their last real conversation, in the Pax River emergency room, and wondered if the topic would resurface. Certainly her relationship with Harm hadn't become any clearer since then -- just the opposite. She didn't particularly want to get into it, though. "His name's Mic, short for Michael. We met while he was part of an exchange program with the Royal Australian Navy, but he lives up here now. It's been a somewhat complicated relationship."

"Aren't they all," the younger woman commented, rolling her eyes skyward. "The last guy I dated kept getting pissed off when I couldn't tell him what I was doing at work. Like they just stamp it 'classified' for the fun of it. Your guy's okay with that?"

"Usually," she fibbed. Their style of communication was definitely unique. "Although the time I had both the CIA and the KGB at my door threw him for a loop."

Kara whistled. "And here I thought our little adventure was different. Never knew lawyers' lives were so exciting."

"It was different, all right. Just look at Harm."

"Good point. How's he really doing? He didn't look nearly as ready to take on the world as I remember him."

"Well, you caught him at a bad time. He broke up with his girlfriend about fifteen minutes before you showed up."

"You're kidding. Man, my timing sucks. What's the story, or is it private?"

"Once again, complicated. He'll be okay, eventually. He always is." Mac located a jar of spaghetti sauce and tried not to think about Harm for just a few minutes. It was a futile attempt. She'd taken him over to Bethesda that afternoon, to have his stitches removed. The doctor had warned that it would hurt, as he stood over the examining table with something that resembled a pair of wire-cutters. Harm had nodded impassively, and she'd tentatively slipped her hand into his for support. As he lay there, staring intently at the ceiling, his hand had tightened with each snip. Her fingers still ached from his unconscious effort to ward off the pain. All in all, not a great day to be Harmon Rabb. She hoped he was doing all right.

There was a knock at the door, and Kara sprang up. "You get that. I'll keep an eye on the pasta." Mac handed over the spoon and opened the door, wondering who would be coming by on a Monday evening.

Mic stood there, sharply dressed in a dark gray suit. His smile wavered as he realized that she was in sweatpants, and her mind raced. "Oh, no. We had plans, didn't we?"

"Only since before you left. Did you really forget?" He stepped inside and immediately noticed the bags on the floor. "Got company, love?"

Kara appeared in the doorway, looking somewhat guilty. "Hi, I'm Kara. You must be Mic."

He took in the young woman's oversized football jersey and faded jeans without comment. "That's me. How many little sisters do you *have*, Sarah?"

"Actually, Kara's from NavAir. She's one of the primary witnesses in the Halloway trial."

"And I was just leaving," Kara added hastily, sensing the awkwardness between the couple. "I'll get out of your hair for a while."

"You don't have to -"

"It's no problem. I know my way around. I'll just run out to Beltway Burgers." She scuffed her shoes on and grabbed her keys. "Be back later."

The just looked at each other for a minute after she'd gone. "How long is she here for?" he asked finally.

"Just for the trial -- maybe a week. She couldn't get a room, and after the way she helped Harm figure out Halloway's game ..." Mac shrugged. "It seemed like the least I could do. I'm sorry I ruined your plans. I wasn't thinking."

"Well, between taking care of your partner and running a witness hotel, I can see where it might be hard to fit in anything else." He tried to keep his voice light, but she knew what he was saying.

"Mic, I really am sorry. This whole thing is just making me a little crazy. Can I make it up to you when this is all over?"

"I don't know, love," he said quietly. "Is it ever going to be over? Really over? Or is it just going to turn directly into the next crisis?" He shook his head. "It's not your fault, Sarah -- I know that. Things were going so well for a while. No big adventures, just normal investigations and trials. I guess I got used to the peace and quiet. Now this happens, and suddenly I'm on the outside looking in again. I mean, I can handle you being gone every so often; I really can. But if you can't talk to me even when you're here ... Jesus, Sarah, what are we doing? Killing time?"

Taken aback, she waited a moment before answering. "I know I'm not easy to be with," she began slowly. "It's hard for me to open up about some things. But it doesn't mean I'm not trying, and it certainly doesn't mean that I don't love you."

"Then prove it." He took a seat, gazing up at her intently. "Tell me what happened at Pax River. And not just the version you put in your report. Tell me what it was that scared you so badly."

She sank onto the couch, feeling it all wash over her again. "You know what it was," she said softly. "It was seeing my closest friend in the world three inches from dying. It was a

six-hour wait in a plastic hospital chair, not knowing if I'd helped kill him by letting him play hero. It was going back to my room and seeing all the blood everywhere ..." Shaking off the horrific images, she turned on him with blazing eyes. "Did you think that wouldn't affect me, just because I'm a Marine? Did you think I could go right back to business as usual?"

After a pause, Mic replied honestly. "No, I didn't. But you seemed to be trying awfully hard to convince everyone otherwise."

That stopped her in her tracks. "I was, wasn't I?" At a loss for words, she only shook her head helplessly. "It isn't that I don't want you to know what I feel. But it's not like we've ever done a great job of communicating. I just knew you wouldn't understand -"

"For God's sake, Sarah, give me some credit. I've gotten past the stage where I go into jealous fits because you care about someone besides me. I know what Harm means to you. Of course it upset you that his life was in danger. Hell, I could tell that much when you called me the next day. I just -- I wish you didn't feel like you have to hide so much from me. I wish you could trust me."

"I'm trying, Mic. I don't know what else to say." There was nothing she hated more than being unsure, but that was precisely where she was. How could he possibly know what Harm meant to her, when she herself still wasn't sure? How could she wear Mic's ring when she couldn't face him with her fears?

"I'm sorry, love," he said suddenly. "I didn't come here to yell at you. I know you've had a rough go of it lately. Just forget it, all right? Let's get dinner and start this night over."

His eyes were pleading -- he knew something was wrong. She sighed. "I'm just not up to it right now. Tomorrow, maybe?"

The gap between them had just widened, and they both knew it. It hadn't been intentional, but it had happened all the same.

"Okay," he acquiesced, his eyes wounded. "I guess I can wait."

Again, she heard. He could wait again. "I'm sorry," she whispered, raising a hand to his cheek. "I just have to get through this. I need to work some things out on my own. Everything will be fine. I promise. We're going to be fine."

As he leaned in to kiss her, she closed her eyes. She didn't want to watch him leave; she knew his doubts were as strong as hers. When the door was finally closed, she leaned against it, wishing desperately for some bolt of inspiration to help her figure out her life.

After a few minutes, there was a faint knock at the door. Kara stepped inside, holding two pints of ice cream. "I thought you could use some real comfort food," she said easily, going to the kitchen for a pair of spoons. "Let's forget about men for a while, okay?"

"Sounds good to me."

If only it were that simple.

1410 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Excuse me, sir?"

Harm glanced up from his computer to see Bud standing in the doorway. "What's up, Bud?"

"Commander Jensen and his wife are in the conference room. We're going over their statements, and I thought you -"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Bud, in a legal capacity, I'm not supposed to get near this one. You know that."

"Yes, sir. But I think you might want to hear this. As an ... interested observer, maybe."

"Whatever you say." It had to be more interesting than the latest enlisted fitness reports. More to the point, he was curious to know what Halloway's ex-wife had to say about him. Did his vengeful streak have any basis in reality?

Harm followed the junior attorney into the conference room and introduced himself to the couple. Commander Brian Jensen shook his hand, and the two pilots chatted briefly about the Phoenix aircraft. Lisa Jensen sat silently beside her husband, looking uncomfortable but attempting to disguise it. As Harm took a seat against the wall, separating himself from the people at the table, Brian Jensen began.

"I know what your first question is. It'd be my first question if I were in your shoes. Everyone's been saying that Drew did all of this because of Lisa and me. I'm sure in his mind, I stole her away from him. Maybe he even told you we were having an affair before their divorce. That isn't true. The truth is, I considered myself a good friend to both of them. When they started having problems, I tried to be there for them. Until Lisa finally got up the courage to leave him, that's all it was. I swear that on my wings." Jensen shook his head. "Drew is an amazing pilot. He always has been. But when he finished his last carrier tour and started flying at Pax, things started to change. Maybe he couldn't adapt to being away from the action. I don't know. He turned into a real risk-taker, even for a test pilot. We worried about him -- a lot of people did, but nobody saw it as much and Lisa and me. We both tried to talk to him, get him to see what he was doing, but he wouldn't listen. He thought we were betraying him, but we honestly wanted to help him. Finally it became clear that nothing either of us did would do any good. So Lisa left. It wasn't until I stopped seeing her every day that I realized how much I needed her."

He exchanged a glance with his wife before continuing. "I wish I'd known that things were this bad. I wish I could have seen some tiny part of this coming. But like always, Drew wasn't going to let anybody see what was really going on in his head. It's hard to believe that he would actually want to kill me ... but I guess I can't deny it, after everything that's happened."

Bud spoke up. "The defense is likely to claim emotional distress. Temporary insanity would be rejected immediately, because there was documented planning involved with the crimes. Between the falsified test report and the missing data ... My point is, emotional distress can't stand up based solely on things that happened four years ago. If that were the case, he wouldn't have waited until now to commit the acts in question. Can you think of any specific

events during the past few weeks that would lead you to believe that Captain Halloway was under any unusual stress?"

The commander looked at him calmly. "We're test pilots, Lieutenant. Stress is part of the job. I thought he'd learned to deal with it. Apparently I was wrong."

"Commander, at this point, the details of your relationship with your wife are basically your word against his." Mac leaned forward, arms on the table. "Now, I'll take your credibility over his just about any day, but it'll help to have two voices against one. Mrs. Jensen, will you verify the fact that you never had an affair while still married to Andrew Halloway?"

Lisa Jensen nodded, not looking at her. "I loved him, Colonel," she said softly. "I didn't really want to leave him at first. I thought maybe it would scare him into letting me in, but eventually I realized that I was no different from anyone else to him. I was angry. I'd expected to have more time with him when he left sea duty, and instead things got worse. We still couldn't get through to each other. I thought I'd wasted fifteen years being married to someone I barely knew."

Mac's heart skipped a beat, remembering what Harm had said only a few days before. She stole a glance in his direction, but he was watching the troubled woman finish her story. When Lisa's eyes met his, her voice faltered, and she looked away.

"Would you like me to leave, Mrs. Jensen?" Harm asked gently. "I won't be offended."

"I'm sorry. It's just that seeing you reminds me of the awful things he did. I thought I couldn't help him, so I left. And because of that -- because I ran away, he hurt you, and he tried to hurt Brian ..."

"Ma'am, you did what you could. Your ex-husband has a serious problem, but it was never your responsibility to know that. None of the dozens of people he worked with every day saw this coming. How could you be expected to see it?" Harm rose and moved next to her. "I don't want to see him burn for what he did to me. But I do want to make sure he can never do it to anyone else, especially you and your husband. I know it must be hard, but you have to help us convict him. For his own good as much as anyone else's."

She nodded slowly, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "I understand, Commander," she said quietly. "I'll do what I have to."

After finishing the Jensen's statements, Mac ducked into her partner's office. "Do you believe them?" she asked bluntly.

Harm met her gaze unflinchingly. "You know I do. And you do, too."

"You're right, I do." She shrugged, looking rueful. "Maybe it's because we're both painfully aware of the disasters inherent in miscommunication."

He didn't respond to that. "Are you ready for opening tomorrow?"

"We're ready."

"Get him, Mac."

"We will, Harm. I promise."

0910 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Prosecution, call your first witness."

"Thank you, Your Honor." Bud Roberts stood up from the table. "The government calls Kara Donnell."

Kara took her seat in the witness chair and laid her hand on the Bible. Dressed in a forest-green blazer and skirt, her hair pulled back in an immaculate braid, she looked every bit the professional she was. Even her appearance was carefully planned: despite her twenty-three years, she was not going to be seen as a helpless victim.

"Please state your full name and duty station for the record."

"Kara Lynn Donnell. I'm a civilian engineer assigned to the Flight Systems Division, Naval Air Systems Command, NAS Patuxent River."

Bud walked her through the entire investigation, starting with the discovery of the malfunctioning data recorders. Kara explained the function of the auxiliary power unit with a familiar tone that made the technical details accessible. *She knows exactly what she's doing*, Mac thought with satisfaction and a touch of pride. No doubt Bud appreciated having a model witness.

As they moved on to the events of that fateful night, her demeanor changed slightly. She still spoke dispassionately, but it was clear that the ordeal had affected her. "... that's when he drew his weapon and told us that he knew we had the FAA records. I accused him of selling out his country, and he attacked me with some kind of taser. I don't know what it was, but suddenly I couldn't feel my arms or legs."

"How long did this effect last?"

"It was several minutes before I could stand up, and then only with Commander Rabb's help."

"So Commander Rabb helped you escape?"

"Yes, while Colonel Mackenzie distracted Captain Halloway." Kara was careful to keep her focus away from the defendant, but she knew that Halloway's eyes were fixed on her.

"What was the commander's condition at that point?"

"Objection," called Singer airily. "The witness is hardly a medical expert."

"I'm asking for a layman's opinion, Your Honor. The medical reports are already in evidence."

Admiral Morris nodded. "Overruled. But the members will view this opinion in the appropriate context."

"Thank you, sir." Bud turned back to the witness chair. "Ms. Donnell, in your view, how did the commander look?"

"Terrible," she answered honestly. "He was bleeding badly, and very pale. I was afraid he might pass out at any moment."

"Did you know the source of his injuries?"

"I had a pretty good idea."

"Objection! Was the witness present during the alleged attack?"

"The captain had made a comment earlier which led me to suspect him," Kara said calmly, before Bud could even respond. "He said, 'Even a guy like Commander Rabb would have a hard time defending against a knife.'"

Singer fell silent as the damaging words sank in. Mac hid a smile. This cross-examination was going to be interesting.

"Did the defendant ever deny responsibility for the sabotage of the aircraft?"

"Actually, he seemed fairly proud of it."

"Objection!"

"You'll get your chance, counselor," the judge warned.

While Singer fumed, Bud wrapped up his questioning. "Ms. Donnell, once again, in your opinion, did Captain Halloway appear to be under any undue stress at any time prior to the events of March 24th?"

Kara shook her head. "Not that I could see. He said something about knowing what the stakes were."

"If you had to describe his demeanor during that night, what word would you use?"

She paused, but Mac knew she was ready to answer. "Cold."

Bud nodded toward the defense. "Your witness." He took his seat, trying not to show his relief. *One down, three to go.*

Singer stood up, fixing Kara with a saccharine smile that fooled precisely no one. She was circling for a kill. "Ms. Donnell, you've stated that your partner in this investigation, Scott Fairfield, was with you on the night in question. To your knowledge, has Mr. Fairfield been called to testify before this court-martial?"

The younger woman was prepared for what was to come, but her eyes narrowed slightly. "No, I don't think he has."

"Why not? If he was a witness, why not call him to corroborate your story?"

"Objection. The government's legal strategy has no relevance to this witness's testimony."

"I'll rephrase," Singer continued smoothly. "Have you seen or heard from Mr. Fairfield since the night in question?"

"No, I haven't."

"Did the Navy release him because of his complicity in this matter?"

"They don't usually tell us those things."

"I see." Singer walked the length of the jury box thoughtfully. "How old are you, Ms. Donnell?"

Kara kept her voice even. "Twenty-three."

"And you've been working at NavAir for two years?"

"That's correct."

"Who was the first person you met at NAS Patuxent River?"

"Scott Fairfield. He happened to be my neighbor."

"You consider him a close friend?"

"I did."

"Until you discovered that he'd been lying to you, and to the Navy?"

"Objection!" Bud protested. "Is Mr. Fairfield on trial here?"

"Goes to the witness's credibility, sir."

Morris considered. "I'll allow it, but watch your step."

"Thank you, Your Honor." Singer looked at Kara with something resembling pity. "This isn't an attack on you, Kara. But you're twenty-three years old, barely two years out of college. You trusted someone whom you thought was a friend, and he lied to you. How can we be expected to trust your judgment?"

The accusation hung in the air as Bud fumbled for a way to object. But instead of stammering like a flustered girl, Kara met the challenge. "Have you flown in a Herc lately, Lieutenant?"

Caught off guard, Singer wasn't sure how to reply. "What does that -"

"It's just a question. Have you flown in a Navy-variant C-130H transport within the past year?"

It seemed innocent enough. "Yes, I have."

"Then you've already trusted my judgment." She stared down the attorney with a steely gaze. "I was on the team that oversaw the engine refit on the H-series. I don't get paid to play with dolls, Ms. Singer. The Navy trusts me with its equipment, but more importantly, it trusts me with your life. Do you still want to question my judgment?"

Way to go, civvie, Mac cheered silently.

Singer closed her mouth, at a loss. "No further questions."

"The witness is excused. We'll reconvene after lunch, and the government will call its next witness."

Kara rose and brushed past her with, not contempt, but grace. In the hallway, she sat down on a bench beside the next witness. "How did it go?" Harm asked.

"Not bad. I nailed her at the end." She couldn't repress a satisfied smile. "They're all warmed up for you, Harm. Bring it home."

Two Marines escorted Halloway out of the courtroom, and for the first time in three weeks, predator and prey were face to face. The captain looked at Harm's sling, then down at his own bandaged arm. "An eye for an eye, eh, Commander?"

Harm merely returned the scornful glance. "Not even close. *Sir.*"

1232 EST
Same location

Bud Roberts was nervous. He was about to call his superior officer, his friend, his son's godfather, to the stand. In doing so, he would open him up to whatever verbal assaults Lauren Singer had concocted. Would there ever be another examination with such direct personal consequences?

Of course, there was no other option.

"The government calls Commander Harmon Rabb."

The courtroom doors opened, and the tall, handsome lawyer strode into the room. He was determined, confident, but not cocky. The attitude he projected was clear: this man was the embodiment of integrity.

Bud took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. "Do you swear that the testimony that you are about to give shall be the truth?"

"I do."

"Please state your full name, rank, and duty station for the record."

"Commander Harmon David Rabb, Junior. JAG Headquarters, Falls Church, Virginia."

At the back of the courtroom, Admiral Chegwidden quietly took a seat. His presence didn't escape Bud's notice. *Here goes nothing ...*

"Commander, how did you discover that Captain Halloway's account of the flight was inaccurate?"

"I had mentioned to Ms. Donnell that the captain initiated the engine restart at forty-five thousand feet. She explained how a restart at that altitude is impossible. We retrieved the local FAA radar records to determine whether the aircraft descended in order to perform the restart. Since that never happened, we concluded that Captain Halloway had misled us, and that the engine never failed at all."

"What did you do next?"

"We agreed to find our partners and meet back at the test hangar to inspect the auxiliary power unit."

"At midnight?"

Harm saw Bud tense involuntarily, as if he couldn't believe that he himself had asked such a skeptical question. A hint of a wry grin crept into his eyes, trying to convince the junior officer to relax. "I didn't know what Halloway was up to. I thought time might be important."

"But you didn't get back to the hangar, did you, sir?"

"Not right away. I was on my way to find Colonel Mackenzie when I was attacked." He said it calmly, as if it had been nothing more than a scratch. There was no need for drama; reality would have just as strong an impact.

"Did you get a look at your assailant?"

"Just his body. It was dark, and there was blood in my eyes. I couldn't see his face."

"Can you describe what you saw?"

"He was a little shorter than me, and broader. He was wearing a dark gray flight suit."

"Was the defendant wearing a similar flight suit when you saw him later?"

"Yes, he was."

"What happened after the attack, sir?"

"He ran away. After a few minutes, I got up and found Colonel Mackenzie at the Visiting Officers' Quarters. She helped me clean up a little, and we went back to the hangar."

"Why did you go back?"

"I thought Ka- Ms. Donnell and Mr. Fairfield might be in danger if Captain Halloway knew we suspected him."

"So you were convinced that the defendant was the one who attacked you?"

"Objection. Calls for speculation."

"I believe that was clear from the question," the judge pointed out. "Overruled."

"Yes. I did think it was him." Harm leveled his gaze on Halloway and his lawyer. "I still do."

"Do you have any additional reason to suspect him?"

"Something he said," he replied, unwittingly echoing Kara. "When he was threatening the colonel, it led me to believe that he thought I was dead. I don't see why he would think that unless he'd done it himself."

"What did he say to her?"

"He cocked his weapon and said, 'Get ready to join your partner, Colonel.'"

"He was preparing to shoot Colonel Mackenzie."

"Yes."

"And that's when you fired."

"Yes."

"Do you believe there was any other option?"

He stared straight ahead. "None."

Bud nodded solemnly. "Thank you, Commander. Nothing further."

Almost before he could sit down, Singer was out of her chair. "Commander Rabb, directly following the attack, were you unconscious?"

Mildly surprised, Harm took a moment to respond. "I don't think so."

"But you're not sure. You took a blow to the head, among other wounds. You testified that you didn't get up for a few minutes. May we assume that it was because you couldn't?"

Score one for Singer, Mac thought grudgingly. Forcing him to admit weakness.

"It took me a while to pull myself together, yes."

"And when you 'pulled yourself together', you didn't call security, or a medical team. You went to Colonel Mackenzie. Why?"

He offered a half-shrug. "I'll admit that in retrospect it doesn't sound like a great idea."

"No, sir, it doesn't. It sounds like a break in standard operating procedure. Especially in light of your condition at the time." From that charge, she suddenly turned about-face with a sympathetic smile. "Then again, perhaps that's part of the reason. You weren't really thinking straight, were you?"

Harm would not be so easily baited. "I was thinking just fine."

"I'm not doubting your word, sir, but the fact remains that you were badly injured. You lost consciousness almost immediately after firing on the defendant, didn't you?"

"So I'm told."

"Then isn't it possible that these injuries affected your analysis of the situation? You're a strong man, Commander, but considering the blood loss and the obvious pain, couldn't your judgment have been just a little clouded?"

Without so much as a blink, he answered. "I was clear-headed enough not to miss."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Singer returned, allowing her frustration to slip through.

Bud was on his feet instantly. "Objection! Badgering the witness?"

"Counselor ..."

"I apologize, Your Honor. Commander -"

"Look," Harm broke in. "I may have been half-dead, but that man was aiming a gun at my partner. I did what I had to do. I don't expect you would understand, Lieutenant."

"I don't suppose I could, sir. I've never worked so closely with someone for as long as ... how long have you been together?"

Mac felt a jolt at the word 'together'. What was Singer up to? She told herself to calm down -- Harm could handle it.

"Off and on, five years."

"Five years. I bet you get to know somebody pretty well in that time."

"I'd like to think so."

"When you saw the colonel in the hangar, were you afraid for her safety?"

Harm's gaze flicked over to Mac. "Very much."

"You wanted to protect her?"

"Of course I did."

"Of course you did. Despite the fact that she is a trained Marine, you wanted to protect her, because you care about her."

Suddenly, he could sense the rough waters ahead, but there was no way out. "Was that a question?"

"It is now." And with that, she went for the kill. "Commander, are you in love with Colonel Mackenzie?"

Murmurs filled the room. Mac's heart hit the floor, along with Bud's jaw. This could destroy *everything*.

Harm was frozen in place, stunned. "What?" he whispered. Right then, Singer knew she had him.

Bud recovered quickly. "Objection! This can't possibly be relevant!"

"I think an improper relationship between the investigators could be extremely relevant to the mishandling of this case," she came back smoothly, never taking her piercing eyes off the witness. "I'll clarify, sir: are you now, or have you ever been, engaged in a relationship with Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie?"

Hearing her choice of words, he regained some of his composure. On this, he had nothing to hide. Right? Mac saw the cool demeanor return, but she couldn't shut out the shocking image of his unconcealed fear.

"No, I have not," he stated firmly. "The colonel is a friend - my best friend. But that is all."

"You're under oath, Commander," Singer replied haughtily. "She spent quite a bit of time in your room that first night, didn't she?"

How the hell did she know that? "We got dinner and discussed the investigation."

"Until 0030?"

Harm flashed back to their long talk ... her wearing that shirt of his to keep warm ... that hug, when she went to leave, that seemed to last longer than expected ... And although he'd technically done nothing wrong, he was trapped. "Your source is exaggerating," he said in a tight voice. "But yes, we were talking."

"You went out the following night. Do you often see each other outside of your duties?"

"Since when is that illegal?" He was getting defensive, and Mac was terrified of what might happen next. It didn't matter that they hadn't done anything: the allegations alone could be disastrous. The UCMJ was a strange creature when it came to appearances. She ducked her head, silently praying for it all to be over.

"How can you expect the members to believe you, sir? You had a female officer from your own chain of command in your room for hours. You took her to a bar the following night -"

"With the other members of the investigation team!"

"- which seems to fit an established pattern of off-duty socializing -"

"Objection! Who's on trial here?"

"Sustained! Watch your step, counselor."

The room was in quiet confusion, but Singer would not be deterred. She simply raised her voice and carried out her accusation. "- so I find it very hard to believe that this case was foremost on your mind. Can you tell this court in all honesty that you feel nothing but friendship for her? Are you telling us that you shot her assailant in defense of a *partner*?"

From her seat behind the prosecution, Kara could see Harm struggle for words. In less than a second, she made a decision. She rose from her chair and took a step toward the door -- and collapsed into the aisle.

The confusion exploded into chaos. Singer swung around, thrown off her stride. Admiral Chegwidden was at the young woman's side in an instant, helping her up as he had two weeks before. Harm had leapt out of his chair, only to sit down again, uncertain. Morris banged his gavel, shattering the air and calling an immediate silence.

"Order! Ms. Donnell, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, Your Honor." Kara lifted her eyes, embarrassed and apologetic. "The doctors told me I have residual nerve damage from the -- the weapon that was used on me. Occasionally my legs give out. I'm so sorry to disrupt the proceedings."

Singer was livid. "Sir! This is obviously a ploy to distract the members from -"

"Lieutenant!" the judge hissed. "You are on extremely thin ice right now. You have taken a ninety-degree turn off your original line of defense, and accused two of your superiors of a very serious offense -- one that, as far as I can see, has no corroborating evidence. I suggest you rethink your objection very carefully." Chastised, she didn't speak. "You may continue when the court is properly in order."

Kara offered a faint but grateful smile, and Admiral Chegwidden escorted her out of the courtroom, catching the ambitious young lieutenant's eye as he went. His stony features left no room for debate: when this session was over, she would answer to him.

Mac had to marvel at the way Kara had single-handedly rescued Harm -- and possibly her -- from a tricky situation, and simultaneously turned the focus back to Halloway and his crimes. Was it lucky timing, or a very convincing performance?

Harm met Singer's gaze, now fully prepared to answer. "I did defend my partner. That's what I've been trained to do."

But she still refused to give up her goal. Turning back to her somewhat-bewildered witness, she calmly took her final, desperate shot. "I don't buy the 'duty-and-honor' line, Commander Rabb, but it's not up to me. The members will have to decide for themselves. So I guess I have only one more question to help them make that decision.

"Have you ever acted on any feelings you may have had for Colonel Mackenzie, even for a moment? For instance, have you ever kissed her?"

Mac's head whipped up. *Oh, no.*

"Your Honor -" But Bud was waved off.

"I want to hear this," Morris said quietly.

Harm's ice-blue eyes fell on his partner and friend, knowing they shared the same thought, and begging her to understand. After an endless moment, he answered.

"No."

At that word, another tattered shred of hope tore loose from her soul.

Also at that word, Lauren Singer knew she'd lost him. Harmon Rabb had bent many rules in his time, but he held truth up above all other virtues. He'd sworn to honor it that day, and so if he said it didn't happen, it must not have happened. She suspected that he would do just about anything for Sarah Mackenzie, but he would not lie. And he certainly would not do it under oath.

She'd taken a calculated risk, and she'd crossed the line. And there was no doubt in her mind that she would pay a severe price for it.

"No further questions," she said softly.

A bizarre silence hung in the air for a second. Admiral Morris quickly broke it. "Mr. Roberts, any redirect?"

"Just one, Your Honor." With deadly calm, Bud stood in front of Harm. "Commander, I just want to stress this for the record. Did any interpersonal issues compromise your judgment or objectivity at any time during your investigation?"

"No."

"Thank you. That's all I have."

"The witness is excused, and we will be in recess until 0900 tomorrow."

With a sharp crack of the gavel, life went on. As Harm passed the table, he forced himself to look up at Mac. "I'm sorry," he whispered simply.

She didn't know exactly what he meant, but the hard, cynical part of her mind told her that he'd only confirmed what she'd feared all along. When he'd looked at her that night on the dock, when he'd let himself go for the briefest of moments and met her lips with his, it wasn't her that he'd seen. It was the memory of a vibrant young lieutenant whose life had been cut brutally short.

Still, another part of her mind wasn't ready to surrender.

Mac stood up from the table and strode for the door. This nightmare had barely begun.

Directly following

For the first time in recent memory, Harm wanted nothing more than to shut his office door and curl into a ball under his desk. The fallout from his testimony was going to be staggering, but a conduct review was the least of his concerns just then. What had he just done? In the strictest sense, he'd just committed perjury. True, it was fairly harmless, but in saving their case and protecting their careers, he'd hurt someone that he'd willingly give his life for.

When he reached his office, though, Kara was sitting in his chair. "The admiral told me to wait here for you. He wants all of us in his office exactly five minutes after court lets out. You've got about three and half of them left."

He stood in front of her, arms crossed. "Thank you for bailing me out in there. Now that I've said that -- don't ever do it again. Drama tricks have no place in a court of law."

"Don't get hypocritical on me. I heard about your free-fire incident. And why are you so sure it was a drama trick?"

"Because I've seen your schemes, and you're far too smart to do that by accident. Did the admiral buy it?"

"I don't know. He didn't call me on it, anyway. Probably because he's secretly as glad as you are that I did it. She had you, Commander. You were a deer in headlights up there. But that's not the only reason I did it." Kara leaned forward, her expression intense. "Maybe this time wasn't real, but yesterday morning was. My legs went out in the shower, and I almost bashed my head on the tile. It doesn't happen as much anymore, but ... He hurt us, Harm. These things don't just go away. I wasn't about to let the real drama queen of this thing make them forget that."

"Officers, report. You know who you are." The JAG's voice rang through the bullpen. They exchanged a glance, and headed out.

Admiral Chegwidden stood in front of the assembled line: Kara, Harm, Mac, Bud, and Singer. All, even the civilian, stood at rigid attention, their eyes burning into the back wall. "That," he said, his voice carefully controlled, "was the biggest God-damned circus I have ever seen in a courtroom. It was a disgrace to everyone present."

To her credit, Singer spoke up. "Sir, I take full responsibility -"

"You're damned right you do." He loomed over her, inches from her face. "Lieutenant, right now I'd like to rip those insignia right off your sleeves. You clearly feel no loyalty to the JAG Corps or anyone in it. You attacked two of your own, with no regard for the consequences. And with regard to furthering your case, it barely registered on the radar. Can you give me any reason not to reassign you to the staff judge advocate in Iceland?"

"No excuse, sir. My conduct today was entirely without justification. I thought I could introduce some doubt, but I ... I didn't realize how far I'd gone until it was too late." She stared ahead, head held high. "I apologize to the prosecution, to Ms. Donnell, and especially to Commander Rabb."

"Well put, Ms. Singer. I almost believe you mean that. Folks, if you'd care to accept the defense's apology, feel free to stand at ease and tell her so."

Four gazes held fast, unmoving. "That's what I thought." The admiral turned to Kara. "You're not on the stand, Ms. Donnell, but I'd appreciate it if you'd answer me honestly, since I have the feeling the prosecution will be asking you the same thing tomorrow morning. During the investigation, did you witness any exchange between my officers, no matter how insignificant, that could be interpreted as improper?"

She didn't hesitate. "No, sir."

"Thank you." He folded his arms. "So what are we going to do about this?"

"Sir, I think I should recuse myself from the prosecution team," Mac began.

"I think that goes without saying, Colonel. When you reconvene, you will do so, and the lieutenant will offer a full apology to the court. Everything else will be dealt with after the verdict. That includes a preliminary inquiry into the alleged improper conduct of Commander Rabb and Colonel Mackenzie, as well as any disciplinary action against Lieutenant Singer. Roberts, Donnell, I suggest you keep your heads down so as not to get caught in the crossfire. Be advised, people," he added in a low, dangerous voice. "None of today's events will be forgotten. I am merely trying to postpone the inevitable repercussions. Dismissed."

"Aye-aye, sir." As one, they turned crisply and headed for the door.

"Not you, Commander. You stay."

Harm paused, turned back, and resumed the position of attention. When the door closed, the admiral looked at him. "Have a seat, Mr. Rabb." He sat as well, but rather than moving to his desk, he took the chair next to his officer. "Hell of a day, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I get the impression you're waiting for a lecture of some type."

"I didn't exactly distinguish myself on the stand, Admiral."

"Commander, unless you said something other than the complete truth up there, you have no problem with me." He studied the younger man, searching for any answers behind the stiff facade. "But there's a possibility that this could get ugly, given the circumstances of the colonel's prior Article 32. If there is anything you're not telling us, anything that will look bad to a review board -- even something long past ..."

"Sir," Harm broke in, his expression troubled but clear. "We didn't do anything."

"I know. I'm just glad to hear you say it." The admiral sighed. "Or maybe I'm not glad. I don't know. Look, I'm not speaking as your C.O. right now, all right? I know damn well that nothing could have compromised your investigation, but that little scene today could give some people doubts. The tension in there was obvious, and not just to me. I think you need to talk to her, Harm. If you can do that, there's got to be a way to work things out. You can't pretend forever that there's nothing there."

"I was doing pretty well at it until this came along." Harm tried to say it lightly, but the bitterness echoed. "It's not that simple, Admiral. I don't think either of us really knows what we want ..."

"It's never 'that simple'. And if you sit on the sidelines any longer, you'll run out of time. So you'd better figure out what you want real soon." The older man leaned forward and spoke sincerely. "I'm not trying to push you in one direction or the other. I'm not in your shoes, but I'd like to think I know you both fairly well. So I'm going to tell you something, and you can interpret it however you want, but don't ever tell Mac I said this. When I found her at the hospital that night, she looked like her world had ended. She cried her Marine heart out for you, and more than that, she let me see her do it. From the moment they let her in to see you, she never left your side, even after they promised her that you were going to be all right. She held your hand for two straight days, and the reason you didn't know that is because she'd let go whenever you woke up. And then, as soon as she knew you were asleep again, and she thought Kara and I were gone, she'd go back to holding your hand and waiting. So if you think you're the only one who's afraid to face feelings ... well, like I said. Take it as you will."

Harm looked at him wordlessly, shocked and torn. The admiral rose from his chair. "Whatever you decide, I'll do what I can to make this review go away. I owe you both that much. Go home, Commander, and think it through. Dismissed."

At last he found his voice. "Aye-aye, sir. Thank you."

As soon as he emerged from the inner office, lost in a whirlwind of thoughts, Singer was at his elbow. "Sir, I honestly do want to apologize - "

"Not now, Lieutenant."

"But sir, I never meant to -"

He spun on his heel to face her. "I couldn't possibly care less what you meant. What you *did* was unconscionable. Stay very far away from me right now, Lieutenant. I don't think I could take getting stabbed in the back again."

He stalked into his office. Turning to Mac, Singer attempted to start over. "Colonel -"

"Out of my sight, Lieutenant," the chief of staff said icily.

Singer looked around the bullpen and saw nothing but cold, hostile stares. Her betrayal had been far deeper than she'd thought. With as much dignity as she could summon, she rushed out of the room.

Harm had grabbed his cover and was nearly to the door when Mac caught up with him. "Harm - ?"

"I'll call you later. I promise. I just have to get out of here." He didn't meet her gaze.

"Let me give you a ride."

"I'll get a cab."

She seized his arm. "Don't shut me out, Harm. Not now."

Looking up, she was startled to see the depth of uncertainty in his eyes. "Give me time, Mac," he said softly. "Please."

Not knowing what else to do, she let him go. She was still standing there in the entryway, wondering exactly when everything had gone to hell, when Mic approached.

"Lose something, love?"

Or someone, maybe. "No, I just -- what are you doing here, Mic?"

"Wanted to see if I could cash in on that dinner raincheck." He flashed a grin, but it failed to charm her. "Bad day in court?"

"The worst."

"How bad could it be? The bloke's guilty as sin, isn't he?"

"That's the least of our problems. It's too hard to explain."

"Well, try me." He was doing his best to be a good listener, she noticed. But that had never really been the problem. She hesitated.

"Mic, I can't."

"Can't, or won't?" His jovial expression began to unravel. "Sarah, we promised to be open with each other. We have to be."

"This one is different. If I tell you, you'll wish I hadn't." She turned away, moving out of the doorway into the courtyard.

"Damn it, Sarah! If this is how it's going to be, why the hell are you still wearing that ring?"

Neither of them could believe he'd said it, but it made a bizarre sort of sense. Mac stared hard at him, then reached tentatively to take the ring off her finger. His eyes widened, and he rushed to her.

"Christ, love, I didn't really mean that. I'm so sorry. I just -- if you can't even tell me what happened in the bloody courtroom ... I need to know where we stand, on more than just an official level. What can I say or do to help you let me in?"

She steeled herself for battle. "All right, you asked for it. Singer ambushed Harm in court today. She accused him of having an improper relationship. With me."

Mic didn't say anything for a moment. Finally he mumbled, "Was she wrong?"

I should have expected that. Still, she couldn't keep the indignation out of her voice. "You beg and plead for my trust, and still you have to ask me that question?"

"I know. I'm being a hypocrite, and I'm sorry. Sometimes I just can't help it. I know you would never do that -- to me or to him. But as certain as I am that you'd never actually be unfaithful to me ... I wonder if you've been entirely faithful to yourself." The admission was

clearly painful for him, and it killed her to see the anguish she'd caused. "I've always had this funny feeling that I walked into the middle of something when I first gave you that ring, that maybe there was something unfinished between you and him. And I've always been afraid that I'd never be able to overcome that. I don't blame either of you for it -- God knows you've been trying to get past it for long enough. But I don't think you've gotten there yet, and now I'm not sure you ever will. Tell me, Sarah, and please don't spare my feelings. Are you sure about how you feel? Are you ever going to be able to look at him without wondering what could have been?"

In the end, that was really what it came down to. And she found that she couldn't deny it. Tears pricked at her eyes, but she held them in check. "He's my best friend, Mic."

"I know." He offered a weak, miserable smile. "I think that was my biggest mistake. I tried to be everything for you, but I don't think I ever tried hard enough to be your friend."

"Mic, I don't want to say goodbye just yet. I'm so confused ..."

"Let me help." He gently slipped the ring off her finger, but didn't let go of her hand. "I'll keep this for a while. After you've had it out with that equally-confused partner of yours -- if you still want it, it's yours. And I'll never question you again."

She read the defeat in his eyes. "You're not holding out much hope, are you?"

He lifted her hand to his lips. "I've been hoping for a year now. I don't have that much hope left."

She reached up to kiss him softly. "You're a good man, Mic Brumby," she whispered into his ear. "I wish I could give you everything you deserve."

Harriet was in Bud's office, looking for a file, when she happened to glance out the window. In the courtyard below, Mic was walking away, and the colonel was moving back toward the building. Neither looked particularly happy, and when Mac reached for the door, it was clear that her ring finger was bare. Harriet clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the involuntary gasp. "Bud," she asked slowly, "what happened in court today?"

Her husband only shook his head tiredly. "You don't want to know."

1905 EST
Mac's Apartment
Georgetown

Kara handed her host a steaming mug of hot chocolate and sat down in the overstuffed chair. "Did you find him?"

Mac nodded. "At the Wall, like always. I don't think he knows of any other place to go." Shadows fell across her face as she remembered. "I couldn't go up to him. He was just sitting there on a bench, staring at nothing. I've never seen him look so completely lost."

"So what now?"

"I don't know. He said he needed time, but I think time is in limited supply. I just -- I don't have a clue where to start. If we couldn't figure ourselves out in five years, how are we supposed to magically make it work now?"

The young civilian shrugged sympathetically. "I don't know, Mac. Maybe this is just the kind of push you two need. When you talked before, when he wasn't ready to let go - how long ago was that?"

An image she'd rather forget; an image that seemed to be burned into her memory. "A little over a year."

"You can do a lot of thinking in a year," she pointed out. "Maybe he's ready now."

Mac pondered that for a moment. What was it that had gotten to him today? Why was he suddenly afraid to face her? Impulsively, she grabbed her keys. "I don't care if he's ready or not. Don't wait up -- I'm not coming back until he talks to me."

"Go get 'em, Marine."

She opened the door ... and stopped dead to avoid a collision with the person standing there. Surprised, she gathered herself and spoke casually. "Kara, you've got a visitor."

Kara glanced up and froze. Mac continued, addressing the anxious young man on her doorstep. "You know, you look amazingly like Scott Fairfield. But if you were, I'd have to subpoena you. So it's a good thing I can tell you're not him." And she slipped out the door, leaving the two engineers to stare awkwardly at each other.

"What are you doing here, Scott?" Kara asked bluntly, standing in the doorway.

"I wanted to see you. I thought it would be easier here than at Pax."

"I don't know why. Here there are no witnesses, in case I decide to give you the ass-kicking you so richly deserve."

"Go ahead. I won't stop you. But at least talk to me first, okay?" She made no move to let him in. "Come on, Kar, if you were going to slam the door in my face, you would have done it already."

Grudgingly, she let him in, distrust still glimmering in her hazel eyes. "Are you going to tell me where you've been hiding out?"

"Wasn't planning on it. You can't have people thinking that you're still associating with me in any way."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, James Bond, give it up. Did they charge you with anything?"

"They gave me a deal. A good, but very quiet deal." Scott jammed his hands in his pockets, studying the floor. "The obstruction charge was dropped, and they let me go with an administrative separation. Or whatever they call it for civilians. Basically, the Navy never wants to see my face again. They're extremely serious about that. If I'm ever going to work in the industry again, it'll have to be three states away from anything even remotely classified."

He said it nonchalantly, as if his entire life hadn't changed that night. She knew better, of course. "What are you going to do?"

"I think I'm going to go back to Ohio. I know some people in IT, and I used to be decent at computer hardware. I'll be one of those tech geeks we used to make fun of, but hey, it's a living. Maybe I'll eventually get out of this hole I've dug for myself. But what about you? Is the trial going all right?"

"It's kinda hard to explain. This prissy little defense attorney tried to question my competence, but I don't think she made too many friends doing it. Now I'll probably be recalled to defend Harm and Mac against this ridiculous impropriety charge. I'm really glad I'm not a lawyer. It seems like insinuations are as good as facts."

"Well, maybe I can help you and the facts fight back." He drew a small notebook from his pocket and handed it to her. "I know you were out of the loop on some of the aux-power issues, so this is everything I have on the problems with the bleed-air lines. It's just my notes -- they took everything else -- but maybe it'll help if the defense tries to get you on the details the second time around."

"How'd you know I'd be worried about that?"

"I know you, remember?" He paused, looking uncomfortable. "Look, I should go, and I don't think anybody should know I was here. I just wanted to make sure you're okay. I won't bother you again."

He turned to leave, but she spoke up suddenly. "Scott ... I'm still mad at you, but I don't hate you. I never did."

There was a hint of relief in his expression, and he responded with quiet honesty. "I really was trying to protect you, Kar. Given the chance, obviously I'd do things differently ... but if he'd aimed that gun at you, I'd have stepped in front of it without thinking twice."

As she reeled from the impact of that statement, he kissed her forehead delicately, and then was gone. Kara stood there for a good five minutes, wondering if the notebook in her hand would be the last she ever saw of Scott Fairfield. He'd been a loyal friend in nearly every way, and from the sound of his parting words, she'd meant something to him. But ... what exactly? And why was she just now hearing about it?

There was a strong possibility that she'd never know. Eventually she closed the door and opened the little book. "Hope your night goes better than mine, Mac," she mused, half to herself. "Where the hell is that ice cream?"

1953 EST
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

When Harm shoved open the elevator gates, the first thing he saw was Mac, sitting against the door of his apartment. He noted her oversized sweater and leggings. "At least you didn't come straight from work."

"I've only been here for half an hour." She got to her feet. "Are you ready to talk about today?"

"Mac, I'm sorry -"

"You said that already. I want to know exactly what it is that you're sorry for."

Without a word, he unlocked the door and ushered her in. She waited patiently as he unfastened the sling from his now semi-functional arm, and slowly took off his jacket. Facing her squarely, he began with no preamble. "I'm sorry for the way I answered Singer's last question. I couldn't see any other way out, but I wish I hadn't had to do it. I wouldn't blame you for being disappointed in me."

"I'm not disappointed." *Great, start out with a lie.* "It was an unfair question. Besides, from a certain point of view, what you said was true. Wasn't it?"

"Not really." It seemed like a simple admission, but right then it made all the difference in the world. This wasn't going to be just another frustrating round of cryptic riddles. It was clear that he truly wanted to try. "I won't deny that I was a mess that night at Norfolk. But even if I wasn't entirely sure at the time ... I know now. Even if it didn't keep me from continuing to screw things up."

A hundred questions flew through her mind, but she, like him, wasn't quite ready to bare her soul. "Are you saying you lied on the stand?"

"Don't judge me, Mac. You weren't the one being attacked for having feelings."

"It might as well have been me. We have to face this, Harm. We're in this together, so we've got to stop hiding." Taking a deep breath, she plunged ahead. "If you remember, I kissed you back."

He glanced down. "I remember," he said quietly.

"And I'm not sorry I did. I knew what I was doing, but I was prepared to accept the fact that you didn't. And for most of three years, we've left it at that. Are you telling me now that you kissed me, your partner, and not Diane, the woman you loved?"

Pain flickered across his features, but it wasn't the name that brought it to light. "Is that what you really believed? That I was so desperate to hold on to Diane that I could fool myself into thinking she was standing in front of me?" He drew a weary hand across his brow. "Then again, why not? I didn't give you much reason to believe otherwise. I didn't know what to do, Mac. I've been thinking about this all day, and I still don't know what to say."

"Just tell me the truth, Harm. All of it. Please."

"All right. I'll do my best, but it won't make any sense." He closed his eyes briefly, and began with a steady voice. "That night, when I told you about Diane ... I was wrong about a lot of things. She and I, we had a very long, very strange relationship. We never knew exactly where we were headed, but when she was gone, I think I lost some of my direction, my purpose. Everything in my life just seemed so unfair. I needed to strike back somehow; I needed to restore some tiny bit of justice to my world, even if I couldn't bring her back. At least, that's what I thought it was. But that wasn't all, and I didn't realize it until just recently. See, I didn't hate everything about my life, because I had you. You were so amazing,

but for so long I didn't know if I was seeing the real you, or trying to pretend you were her. I did know that every step I took toward you put me farther away from her, and that scared me. Unfair or not, what happened to her kept me going for a long time, and I wasn't sure how to move on. I think that's why I went over the edge to find her killer -- some weird sense of guilt for letting her go. But when you got me through that night, I knew what had really kept me going, and I'm finally starting to understand." He touched her arm, and for the first time, he was holding nothing back. "I loved Diane, but she wasn't the one I kissed. I kissed my partner, my friend, the person who saved my life that night. I kissed you, Sarah. And I'm not sorry either."

She'd always done her best to never be caught speechless by anything this man did or said. This time, she failed. After opening and closing her mouth a few times, she finally managed to say, "Harm, it's been three years ... why, on the ferry -- why did you say you weren't ready to let go?"

"Not of her. I ..." He trailed off, hesitating, and she slipped her hand down to catch his.

"Don't stop now, flyboy," she said softly. "You're hitting your stride."

He sighed. "Maybe I wasn't ready to let go of myself. I'm lousy at letting people in. You know that. I let circumstances control my actions, and I guess I expected it to get easier. But other people wandered in and out of our lives, and everything just got more and more complicated. None of it makes sense now, but I was still afraid. It just seemed so sudden, and Mic seemed to mean something to you, and -- no, those are excuses. The truth is, I was sure that once I let myself fall for you completely, there'd be no going back. After everything we've been to each other, if you realized it was a mistake, that you needed somebody more secure ... I knew I wouldn't be able to take it. So I decided not knowing was better than getting hurt. I took the coward's way out, and watched Mic walk right in. And then I knew it was over."

She heard the slight catch in his voice, and realized anew what he must have felt, seeing her with Mic for the first time. All he'd said was 'Not yet,' but that hadn't been enough to keep her from welcoming Mic's advances with open arms. Had she really been that desperate?

He was still confessing, the words tripping over each other as he struggled to explain. "And I know that he's been good to you -- he's been things I could never be. If he's the one, I won't stand in your way. I want you to be happy. But I had to finally say all this, so we can put it behind us, and you won't have to wonder anymore --"

"Harm," she interrupted gently. "I don't want to put it behind us." He raised his head, surprised, and she lifted their clasped hands to show him where the ring had been.

Comprehension flooded his handsome features. "Did this happen just now?" he asked in a low voice, not quite daring to believe.

"A few hours ago. He already knows." She tightened her hand around his. "It was a mistake to accept that ring in the first place. I don't know why I thought I needed someone that badly. Maybe, in a way, I wanted to scare you into facing your ghosts. If so, it obviously backfired. As time went on, you started to step back from me as well, and I thought I must have misunderstood you. And all the while, Mic was trying so hard to be perfect ..." She shook her head, and forced him to meet her gaze. "But I know I couldn't have gone through with it, because once I started being honest with myself, I realized that I was still thinking about somebody else."

They stared deep into each other for a measureless time, terrified of breaking the spell. That last ember of hope was glowing brighter now, but it seemed as if any wrong word could extinguish it for good. With more confidence than she felt, she spoke again. "I think we've pretty well covered the past. All that's left is to figure out where we stand right now. Regardless of the outside world, we have to keep being honest with each other. Okay?"

"Be careful what you wish for." It wasn't a joke. Nothing could be more serious, as they stood only inches from each other. But this chance was not to be wasted. "I know what I need to say. I've been trying to say it for a long time -- I just never had the courage." He reached up with his left hand to brush her cheek, and any lingering pain that the movement caused was ignored. And with the next few words, he changed everything.

"I'm in love with you, Sarah. I can't remember what life was like before I loved you. You save me from the world, from myself. You're strong when I'm not -- you're all I need to feel good about who I am. I know I've been hard to understand, but I swear to you that when I look at you, I don't see anyone else. All I see is a brilliant, beautiful Marine who happens to be my dearest friend. I don't know how I ever survived without you. If you'll let me, I think I could love you for the rest of my life."

For a moment, she held very still, making certain that she wasn't dreaming. Despite all his earlier clumsiness, he had delivered a simple, touching statement that went far beyond anything she'd ever expected. "Wow," she breathed, unable to say more.

"Did I go overboard on the honesty?" His smile was tinged with nervousness: he'd laid his heart out in front of her, and so far, his only response was a 'wow'. She corrected that immediately.

"It was perfect."

"Not too much too fast?"

"Too fast?" She offered a shaky laugh, eyes shining. "Harm, I think part of me has loved you ever since day one. I just can't believe we finally got here. Is this real?"

"Only one way to find out." Closing the last distance between them, he enfolded her in his arms and lowered his lips to hers in the most tender kiss she'd ever experienced. She felt herself melting into him; this was heaven, as pure as it could be. "Feels real to me," he murmured against her cheek. "What about you?"

"If not, I'm never going back to reality again," she whispered, and kissed him again, more powerfully. Without releasing each other, they sank onto the couch, and she reached up to wrap her arms around his neck. One arm bumped his not-yet-healed shoulder, and he tried to stifle a cry of pain, bringing them sharply back to reality. "I'm sorry," she gasped, but it was clear that the moment was gone.

His gaze locked with hers, and a terrible realization struck them both. "We can't do this, can't we?" he said in a flat, defeated voice. "After what happened in court today, there's going to be an inquiry. With all the press on this case, even the admiral can't prevent it. If anyone were to find out that we're -- together ..."

"Our days as the JAG super squad would be over before we could blink," she finished, a sense of dread overtaking her. "Our careers might be on the line."

“Even worse. Singer could get some of the charges kicked, and Hallaway might go free.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “What fantastic timing we have. After all it took to get us to this point ... Damn it, Harm, I’m not letting you go now. Not after what you just told me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he agreed, pulling her close so that her head rested against his chest. “I’ve spent far too long denying this. I’m not going to put it off a second longer than I have to. But for now, it’s going to have to stay our secret. As far as the Navy’s concerned, nothing’s changed, and no one can know differently. Once all this dies down, we’ll figure something out. I don’t care if I have to transfer, or - ”

“Don’t say it,” she begged. “There’s got to be another way.”

“I hope so.” He stroked her chestnut-colored hair, in awe of the sudden detour his life had just taken. No, not a detour; this had been the path he’d chosen all along. There was simply one more obstacle to overcome.

She twisted around to look at him. “I should probably go,” she said reluctantly.

“Probably. Who knows, Singer may have spies out there.” It was a fairly unconvincing argument, since neither had made an attempt to disengage from each other’s arms. “God, I wish you could stay.”

With a hint of mischief, she raised her eyebrows. “Sailor, if we did what you’re thinking, it would probably kill a man in your condition.”

“Not what I meant, but thanks for the mental image.” He flashed a quick grin, but sobered quickly. “I just want you to be here. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow and have to wonder whether all of this has been a dream. In the morning, we’ll have to go back to pretending, and I want to delay that as long as possible.”

“Hang on. I’ve got an idea.” She vanished into the bedroom, and appeared moments later in his well-worn Annapolis sweatshirt. With a smile, she tossed her sweater at him. “Keep this for me. This way, we’ll have something of each other’s, so we’ll know it wasn’t a dream. At least it’ll get us through the night.”

“I never would have guessed. You’re a hopeless romantic.”

“When I want to be.” She leaned down, closer than absolutely necessary, to pick up her purse. “Just to warn you: I’ll probably sleep in this tonight. Whether or not it’s *all* I sleep in ... that’s still up for debate.”

“I think the mental images alone might kill me.” As she moved to the door, he caught her wrist for one last kiss. “We’re going to be okay, Sarah. I promise.”

“I love you, Harm.”

“I love you, too.”

As the door closed behind her, he just stood there, her sweater in his hand. After five long years, their fates had changed in mere minutes. An hour ago, they’d never uttered those words to each other. A day earlier, they’d never thought they could ever say them. Now, he

couldn't wait to say them every chance he got. There was only one hurdle left to clear. If only it weren't so damned high.

0912 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"I understand the defense has a statement to make?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Singer rose and spoke in a carefully-controlled voice. "I would like to apologize to the court for my behavior yesterday. I pursued an unsupported line of questioning, and I make no excuses for my actions. It is my hope that the members are not affected by my lack of judgment."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Is the government prepared to continue with its witnesses?"

"Yes, sir, but before doing so, I would like to recuse myself from the case." Mac stood and faced the judge squarely. "I believe that my presence on the prosecution may be detrimental in light of ... recent accusations."

"I'm not surprised. By all means, Colonel, step down. Lieutenant Roberts, call your next witness."

As she moved from the table to the gallery, she didn't meet Harm's gaze from across the aisle. Bud raised his voice. "The government recalls Kara Donnell."

The scene repeated the one from the previous day. The civilian engineer took her place on the stand and waited patiently for the questions that she knew were coming.

"Ms. Donnell, over the course of the investigation, you had the opportunity to observe Commander Rabb and Lieutenant Colonel Mackenzie on duty. How would you describe their working relationship?"

"Efficient and professional," Kara responded calmly. "I was very impressed with their abilities."

"Do you happen to know if they went to a bar on the night in question?"

She smiled. "I invited them. The four of us got acquainted, and talked about the investigation. It was there that Commander Rabb and I started to put some of the pieces together, and decided to go back and check the radar records."

"In your opinion -- with no evidence to support any impropriety -- could any interpersonal issues have influenced the actions of Commander Rabb or Colonel Mackenzie?"

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "They saved my life, Lieutenant, and they got the job done. In my opinion, the commander and the colonel don't allow themselves to be influenced by *anything*."

"Thank you, ma'am." Bud stepped back, and a subdued Singer rose from her chair.

"Ms. Donnell, I'd like to return to the testimony you gave yesterday, regarding the auxiliary power unit on the Phoenix prototype. Would you repeat for the members what the teardown revealed about the unit?"

Unsure what to expect but ready for anything, Kara answered cautiously. "The unit doesn't just restart the engine. It also draws bleed air from the compressor to drive the electrical controls. They found the lines underpressurized, so that if the unit were to be activated in flight, there wouldn't be sufficient power to operate both the engine and the electricals. Commander Jensen would have been at point-nine-eight Mach with a bad engine and malfunctioning cockpit control."

"Is this the type of glitch that could bring down an aircraft?"

"Not ordinarily. In most cases, the stored air would make up the difference in a matter of seconds. But that only works if the stored air bottle is charged. This time, it wasn't. Captain Halloway discharged it during his flight, and reset the sensors to cover it up."

"Can you prove that?" Singer demanded tensely, unprepared for the accusation. "We have no evidence that the defendant willfully acted to sabotage the aircraft. Even if this were an act of sabotage, how could it go unnoticed by the maintenance crew?"

"It didn't. The test flights were intended to be consecutive, and the air bottle is charged for multiple starts. It wasn't on the normal preflight checklist, but I looked up the maintenance report last night." *Thank you, Scott.* "The defendant performed the last cockpit check after his flight. He simulated testing the stored air, but when they checked last week, it came up empty."

"Why hasn't this report been brought into evidence?"

"It's public record, Lieutenant," Kara said innocently. "I assumed you'd seen it."

Singer had nowhere to go, and she knew it. Bud clamped down on his surprise fast enough to add, "Your Honor, the government will enter the maintenance report as soon as we have gone over it and submitted it to the defense for review."

Harm smiled inwardly. Kara might just get this guy convicted all by herself. As she stepped down from the stand, Gunnery Sergeant Galindez appeared silently at his shoulder, handing him a note. Harm read it, then wordlessly passed it across the aisle to his partner. Together, they stood and followed the Gunny out of the courtroom. As the door swung closed, Bud's fading voice could be heard. "The government calls Lisa Jensen ..."

"Hope she's okay up there," Mac said under her breath as they strode back through the bullpen.

"She'll be fine. Why would the admiral yank us out of court like that?"

"I think we're about to find out." They stood outside the admiral's door for a moment after Gunny left, acutely aware of the activity all around them. "Your sweatshirt was very comfortable," she continued quietly, without changing her voice or expression.

He raised an eyebrow. Tiner wasn't at his desk, and the rest of the staff was out of earshot. "You'll forgive me if I didn't actually sleep in your sweater," he deadpanned. "But it smelled awfully good."

"We can do this, sailor. Really."

"I know."

"Enter!" came the order from within the office.

With a deep breath, both officers went in and stood at attention in front of their commander's desk. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

"Have a seat, both of you." Admiral Chegwidden leaned back in his chair and looked from one to the other. They waited, their faces unreadable. "Commander, did you follow up on the matter we discussed yesterday?"

Harm kept his expression neutral. "I did, sir. Thank you for your advice."

"Then is there anything you'd care to tell me?"

Startled, he hesitated. This was exactly what they'd been afraid of. Less than two hours into the day, and already they were on the defensive.

Mac decided to speak up. "You don't have to talk around me, sir. The commander and I ... we worked a lot of things out last night."

"All the more reason for you to come clean with me," returned the admiral. "Look, I know there's the threat of an inquiry hanging over your heads, but I did say I'd help if I could. What more do I have to do to earn your trust?"

Harm lowered his gaze. "You earned it a long time ago, sir. I'm sorry for forgetting that." He exchanged a glance with Mac -- *here we go* -- and she reached over and took his hand.

The JAG nodded fractionally, neither approving nor disapproving. "May I assume that you both are approaching this with the intention of seeing it through? No jilted fiances calling at all hours? There will be no more what-ifs, wave-offs, or anything else that might disrupt the order of this office?"

"Sir, we didn't come to this decision lightly," Harm began, but trailed off uncertainly. Mac quickly took over.

"Admiral, now that we've finally figured out how to be honest to each other -- and ourselves -- it's only reinforced what I think I've known all along." She met Harm's eyes and spoke with absolute sincerity. "He's everything that's good about my life. I'd be lost without him."

And with that, there was no denying the connection between them. His gaze never left her as he answered. "As usual, sir, she said it better than I could. But it's how I feel, too."

The admiral let out a long-held breath. "You know, I wasn't sure I'd ever hear the two of you admit that. But in spite of the awkward situation ... I'm glad. And because of that, I did come up with one way out of this fix. I'm just not sure you're going to go for it."

"At this point, sir, I think we'll listen to just about anything," Harm said, a hint of anxiety creeping into his voice.

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." He folded his hands on the desk. "It seems to me that if you go public with your relationship, now or any time in the near future, the presumption will be that you were involved before and lied about it. That would lead to a mistrial or an appeal, neither of which are very good options. There's no telling when it would finally be safe for you to be together publicly. So you can't deny it outright. Given that, I don't think you should deny it at all. Instead, we convince the powers that be that your relationship was not improper."

"Sir, we're in the same command," Mac pointed out. "How could any relationship be proper?"

"If it was sanctioned officially but quietly, for some extenuating circumstance. Like, for instance, if you two were married."

Both heads swung toward him in complete astonishment, and he lifted a hand to forestall their protests. "I know, but let me finish. If we were to be a little creative with the date on the marriage certificate, you could admit to the relationship under the explanation that you were already married at the time. It would create a *lot* of new questions -" This was accompanied by a wry smile. "- but I can take whatever heat comes down for allowing any deception to take place. We'll get some assistance from Webb on a decent cover story for why it had to be kept secret. It shouldn't be too hard: he's good with loose ends. I'm sure you won't have any problems explaining it to the staff, although one or both of the Roberts clan might hyperventilate from shock. Here's the major obstacle. Commander, you would basically have to admit to perjury, and that is not something to dismiss. Especially since everything you said was technically true. But all of us here know that nothing between you two disrupted the investigation, and I'm convinced that the convening authority would be willing to offer minimal punishment. Whether that sacrifice is worth it ... that's up to you." A.J. sighed. "It's the cleanest solution I can see, in terms of the Navy. In terms of your personal lives, on the other hand, it's a little like hitting a fly with a sledgehammer. I wouldn't have even brought it up if I didn't believe you belonged together, but it's not my call. I know we can make it work. The question is, do you want to?"

The two officers stared at each other, and their reactions had very little to do with the fact that a two-star admiral had just suggested a total circumvention of the very laws he was duty-bound to uphold. Mac was in a daze. Just twelve hours ago, she'd thought her life had changed dramatically, but compared to this ... The concept was too much to grasp. Could she actually be considering this, after the train wreck that had been her life recently? She watched Harm's silent inner struggle, and she knew that this hard-fought 'happily ever after' was just that; a fantasy. He'd only now learned how to let her in this close. To ask him for more -- a promise of forever, and a surrender of his strongest ideals -- it was too much, even if someday ...

At last she found her voice. "Admiral, thank you for being so understanding, and helpful, but we can't -- I mean, I wouldn't want to --"

"I would," Harm said softly.

Stunned, she just looked at him for a moment, wondering if she could possibly have heard him right. "What?" she whispered.

But she could read it in his eyes: he was utterly serious. Harmon Rabb, flyboy extraordinaire, whose smile could light up the District and whose tortured soul had locked itself away for so long, sat there willing to give her that forever.

"You heard me," he said simply. "Sir, if you don't mind, I think we need to talk about this."

"Yes, I think you do." The admiral was nearly as surprised as Mac at Harm's admission, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he got up and headed for the door, pausing to rest a hand on her shoulder. "Take whatever time you need. Just remember that the longer you wait, the harder it will be to make everything fit. As soon as Halloway's verdict comes down, the questions are going to start. Whatever you decide, you'll have to be ready with some answers."

When he'd gone, she at last put words to her disbelief. "You'd do that? You'd let everyone believe you lied on the stand?"

"In context, it's practically nothing compared to a fraternization charge. If the only consequence of this is a mark on my record, I think it's worth it."

"It's *not* the only consequence! Harm, do you even realize what you're saying? You're saying - "

"That I love you," he finished gently, "and that I want to spend my life with you. Did you think everything I said last night was just for dramatic effect? Sarah, I do want to marry you. Maybe this isn't the way I pictured it, but I don't care. I especially don't care who believes I lied, because the way I see it, I did lie. I told them that we weren't involved, but that's never been true, not since the first day I saw you. There's always been something there, something we couldn't figure out until now. Sure, we've had some hard times, but you've always been important to me, and now I really know what that means. If this is our chance, then I want to take it."

She didn't respond right away, and he offered a nervous half-smile. "What are you thinking? Do I have to get down on one knee?"

Shaking her head, she willed herself not to fall into his beautiful, earnest eyes. "There's so much we've never talked about," she started, spreading her hands hopelessly. "How we see our careers, our families ... God, I've never even met your mother ..."

"There'll be time for all that," he assured her, reaching up to brush a stray lock of hair back from her face. "We understand each other. That's all that matters. The rest will take care of itself."

The tears threatened to overflow, but she forced them back. She wanted this so badly: she'd hoped against overwhelming odds that he'd say those things to her. And yet ... "Harm, I can't do it," she begged, wishing she could erase the look of hurt that he tried so valiantly to hide. "I made the mistake of rushing into this once, and it almost destroyed me. I know that this time is different, I really do, but ... don't you see, it's because this is so important that I'm afraid of doing something terribly wrong. It's just too fast."

He nodded, looking away. "I understand," he said bleakly. "There has to be another way."

She could feel the walls going back up around him, and in desperation she fell into his arms, burying her head in his chest. "I love you so much," she told him tearfully. "Please just let me think about it, all right?"

"Hey, it's okay. I can be patient. I promise," he murmured into her hair. "Just don't expect me to like it."

At that, she had to smile. "If they could see you now. The only person more commitment-phobic than me is suddenly ready to give up his freedom for good."

"That's not how I see it, and you know it."

She did know it, and that made all the difference. Still, this Marine did nothing on impulse, and she wasn't about to start with the highest stakes imaginable. "I just need some time. That's all."

With a light kiss on her forehead, he stood up. "We should let the admiral have his office back."

And they went out into their separate offices, both doing their best to conceal a tumult of emotions. Harm closed his blinds and all but collapsed into his chair. He knew instinctively that he would do whatever was necessary to be with her, and he also knew that, given the chance, he'd marry Sarah Mackenzie in a heartbeat. But after everything he'd put her through, he couldn't blame her for being less than certain. Damn it, why couldn't he have come to his senses before this whole thing began?

There was a soft knock at his door, and Kara stuck her head in. "You okay?" she asked simply.

"Yeah. Court in recess?"

"Prosecution just rested -- Mrs. Jensen did pretty well. Defense is up after lunch. Can I come in?"

He only waved a hand. She took a seat on the corner of his desk, propping her feet on the other chair.

"You know, some people put their feet on the floor and their six in the chair."

"I like being unconventional." That got her the smile she'd been aiming for. "Why did you two get pulled out of court?"

"Would you believe me if I said it was classified?"

"I've got clearance. You might as well 'fess up, Harm. When Mac left for your place last night, she said she wasn't coming home until you talked to her. Did you?"

"It's complicated right now, Kar."

“‘Complicated’ seems to be the only word I can get out of either of you these days. Have you ever had an uncomplicated day in your life?” She shook her head. “I just want to see this work out for you. After all this, you deserve a shot at being happy.”

“So do you.” She frowned, not comprehending. “Mac told me Scott showed up last night. You want to talk about it?”

“Not much to talk about. I just have lousy taste in men.” The young woman tried to shrug it off, but he knew better. Surrendering, she sighed. “He was trying to protect me. I know that now, but I still don’t understand.”

“People do strange things for love sometimes.”

“You really think that’s what it was?”

“Yeah, I do. At the very least, he does.” He laid a hand on her arm. “I know it hurts. I also know that if you can do everything I’ve seen you do, you can do just about anything. You’re going to be fine, Kar.”

“I know. But thanks.” Her lips twisted in a familiar smirk. “Why couldn’t you be ten years younger and not head over heels for your partner?”

“Kara ...”

“Kidding, kidding. Do you have a younger brother, maybe?”

“Actually, yes, but you can’t have him.”

“Damn. Come on, why not?”

“He’s in Chechnya, flying helicopters for the Russian Army.”

“You’re kidding. How did -”

“Long story.” Harm showed her a picture of the brothers, smiling out at the camera with identical grins. She studied it for a moment.

“He’s cute. Are you sure I can’t have him?”

“Get out of my office, would you?”

With a smile, she slid off his desk and went for the door. “See you back in court.”

He only shook his head. That girl had a remarkable knack for making him feel better without him even realizing it.

Harm desperately wanted to talk to Mac. After the admiral's unorthodox proposal yesterday, he'd left her alone to make her decision. In court they'd sat on opposite sides of the room, and at the end of the day, they'd only locked gazes for the shortest of moments. It had been enough, though, to reassure him that her feelings hadn't changed, and that was the only thing that had kept him sane.

Half a dozen times he'd picked up the phone to call her that night, just to hear her voice. Each time, he'd forced himself to stop. *Get a grip*, he told himself. *You're going to smother her. She needs to do this on her own.*

Now the jury was back, and he wondered if time had run out. Singer's defense had been brief: she knew as well as anyone that her client would be useless on the stand. Bud had delivered one of the most impassioned closings his mentor had ever seen. The younger officer seemed to have such contempt for Halloway, and Harm wondered if it was due to his and Mac's involvement. After all, Bud had been nearly as protective of him as Mac had when he returned to duty. Of course, there was no question that Halloway had committed these crimes. All that remained to be seen was whether the members believed the case had been mishandled, and whether they intended to use the sentence to punish the investigators. It was a very real possibility, he had to admit. Stranger things had certainly happened in that courtroom.

So he took a seat in the gallery, his service dress no longer marred by the sling. It felt like forever since he'd really used his left arm, but the last of his wounds was nearly healed. It was time to begin anew ... one way or the other.

Kara slid into the seat beside him, and Mac followed her. They exchanged a quick look, across the civilian's line of sight, and he offered a somewhat tense smile. There was something to be said for presenting a united front. As the jury filed into the box, Kara slipped one hand into his, and the other into Mac's. "Close as you're going to get for the moment," she whispered, her voice nearly inaudible. Both were amused, but didn't object. "Cross your fingers."

"Have the members reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor." The foreman handed over a slip of paper, and Admiral Morris read it silently.

"The defendant will rise. Captain Andrew Halloway, on the charge of attempted murder, this court finds you guilty ..."

Harm closed his eyes, listening to the litany of "guiltys" with a profound sense of relief. He squeezed Kara's hand, and in turn saw her squeeze Mac's. If the situation hadn't been so serious, he would have laughed at the grade-school action, like passing notes in class. They weren't out of the woods yet, though. Sentencing was still a sizable question mark. The jury had presented its findings, and now it was in Morris's hands. Unconsciously, he held his breath as the judge addressed the court at large.

"This seems to be a case of deep significance with regard to the way we conduct business. There have been many fingers pointed in here over the past few days, and many of them were in fact justified. There should be checks in place such that one man cannot do this kind of damage to a program. I think we all agree on that. But I believe it has been proven conclusively that Captain Halloway did willfully perform these acts, and I also believe that no amount of questionable conduct on the part of the investigators could alter that fact.

Therefore, all charges stand, and I will leave any sort of conduct review up to the appropriate command authority.

"Andrew Halloway, you are hereby sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment, to be served at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. At the end of this time you shall be dishonorably discharged from the United States Navy, with forfeiture of all rank and privileges. We are adjourned."

Halloway stared straight ahead, unflinching, but his attorney could see the thinly-veiled rage. "We can appeal the sentence," she said tentatively, but he shook his head.

"Don't bother."

Singer didn't argue -- this guy was giving her the creeps. Out in the hall, she could see the rest of the JAG crew talking, along with Kara and the Jensens, and she wondered if she'd ever be able to atone for what she'd set in motion. Squaring her shoulders, she strode toward the door.

"Well, as much as I'd love to hang around, the powers that be want my six back at NavAir as soon as this wraps. So I guess this is goodbye again." Kara reached up, and Harm embraced her warmly. "Keep in touch, all right?"

"I'll look you up next time I'm in the neighborhood," he promised. "Take care, civvie. Don't cause any more trouble."

"You know me." She turned to Mac, and Singer saw an opportunity to talk to the commander.

"Sir, I ..."

She trailed off, for two very different reasons. The first was the way his face darkened at the very sound of her voice. The second was the commotion that had started just behind him.

While being escorted back to the brig, Halloway had managed to get the drop on the Marine guards. Wrists handcuffed, he somehow made a grab for one guard's sidearm.

"Gun!!"

Harm heard the cry and the shot, milliseconds before something slammed into him, knocking him to the ground.

Mac dove for Kara, and the two women ended up in a tangled heap on the floor. Halloway had gotten only one shot off before the guards tackled him: and then it was over, as quickly as it had begun.

Kara pulled herself to a sitting position. "I think that's two I owe you now," she said, too stunned to say more.

"Who was he aiming at?" Mac twisted around, and an icy hand gripped her heart. "Oh, God. Harm!"

A few yards away, Harm winced as his weakened shoulder protested the sharp impact with the floor. He looked up into the eyes of his unlikely savior, only inches away. "This is a hell of a way to get back on my good side, Lieutenant."

Lauren Singer just stared back at him, as the full weight of what she'd done sank in. Then, hastily, she scrambled off him and offered him a hand up, which he accepted. "I'd settle for a second chance, sir," she answered softly. "I know I'm the JAG Mata Hari, but -"

"You're not the first person to make a mistake, Lauren. Just think it through next time. And hang in there."

He shook her hand, and nothing more needed to be said. Soon, Mac pushed her way through the panicked crowd, her face white with terror. At seeing Harm unhurt, relief flooded through her. She wanted to run to him, but the locale prevented such a display. So she stood at arm's length, and spoke as evenly as possible. "You okay, squid?"

"Yeah. You?" His eyes held the same caution.

"Yeah. Was he going for -"

"Sir, take a look at this." Bud, who'd been near the back of the throng, was examining a neat bullet hole in the plaster wall. It wasn't far from the place where Harm had stood only moments before.

"There's your answer," he mused, wondering idly if they could tack another couple of years onto the man's sentence. "If they try to charge our budget for this one, I'll do a repeat performance on the courtroom ceiling."

"He *was* aiming at you." Mac fought to keep her voice from trembling. "How did he miss?"

He turned toward Singer, but the lieutenant was already halfway down the hall. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She followed his gaze, and her eyes went wide. "You're kidding."

The chaos had subsided, and people were beginning to go back to their duties. If it had happened just slightly differently, though ... A matter of inches. Again. How many times had it been that close -- and how many more times would it be before time ran out?

Right then, something clicked in Sarah Mackenzie's mind. "We need to talk," she said abruptly, grabbing his arm and hauling him through the bullpen into his office.

Watching the door swing shut and the blinds snap closed, Harriet shook her head. "Wonder what he did this time," she muttered to Gunny, who only shrugged.

Harm didn't object to the treatment. He stood in the center of the office, waiting for her to explain. It didn't take long.

"I want to do it."

"Good for you. What exactly is it that you want to do?"

"Get married. To you." His surprise was evident, but she was already rushing ahead. "And don't tell me I'm doing this on impulse, because I'm not. I've been thinking about it practically nonstop since yesterday, and even before that -- hell, I might have been thinking about it the first time I saw you smile. And I can't sit around and be indecisive anymore, because next time the shooter might not miss, or the paramedics might be too late ..." Her voice broke, and she battled fiercely to maintain control. "The point is, nobody else has ever made me feel as safe, and happy, and respected, and ... loved as you do. I don't want to waste that. I want us to be together, and all this other stuff can take a backseat. Is that okay with you?"

She was so focused on delivering her speech that she hadn't noticed the surprise transforming itself into elation. "It's way past 'okay'," he answered, taking her into his arms. "Sarah, I will worship you."

"I don't need to be worshipped. I just want you to keep saying that."

"What? Sarah?" He said it softly, his lips brushing her ear, and her name had never sounded so wonderful.

"Just like that. Out there, on duty, I can be Mac, but with you, alone ... I want to be Sarah."

"No complaints from me." Claspng her hand in both of his, he knelt in front of her. "Marry me, Sarah?"

"Yes, I will." Her eyes were shining as she leaned down to kiss him tenderly. "I wasn't sure you'd ever say those words."

"I still can't believe I did." Keeping her close, he reached up to tap the speaker on the phone. "Tiner, is the admiral available?"

"Hold on, sir, I'll check." There was a pause on the speaker, and they could almost hear the yeoman's frown. "Um, Commander, did you have a meeting scheduled?"

"No. Is there a problem?"

"No, sir. It's just that I think he's been expecting you. And Colonel Mackenzie."

"In that case, we won't keep him waiting. Thank you, Tiner." Harm struck the button before either of them could let the excitement creep through. They climbed to their feet, and he stopped suddenly. "I just thought of something."

She froze, afraid that it was all about to come crashing down. "What?"

"I'm about to marry into the Corps."

The tension evaporated, and she dissolved into giggles, smacking him on the undamaged shoulder. "Jerk! Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry, couldn't help it. Let's go."

With the best poker faces of their careers, the pair walked through the bullpen, nodded to Tiner, and entered the admiral's office.

"Commander, Colonel. Something on your mind?" the JAG inquired placidly.

"Admiral, we've thought about your suggestion, and we'd like to take you up on it."

"Really."

"Yes, sir."

For the first time in quite a while, A.J. Chegwiddden broke into a genuine smile in the presence of his officers. "Okay, Webb, pay up."

"I have to admit, you know your people." Clayton Webb stood off to the side, arms crossed. "It's not that I had any doubts about you two," he corrected defensively. "I just didn't call it for today. Your C.O., on the other hand, was convinced."

"I'll be damned. For once, the spook has bad intel." Harm shook Webb's hand. "You here to help with the cover story?"

"Actually, I might be using more of my State Department skills on this one. You can legitimize anything if you bury it in enough paperwork."

"Before we get into that," the admiral jumped in, "are you ready to do this today? As in now?"

Mac looked down at their entwined hands, unable to recall how they'd gotten that way. "As soon as possible, sir."

"In that case, I have a phone call to make." A.J. dialed quickly. "Yes, Commander Henderson, please." He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "I didn't think to ask. Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant," Harm answered immediately, then glanced over, hesitating.

"Technically Catholic, sir, but they'd just send me directly to hell at this point. Let's go with Harm on the tiebreaker."

As the admiral conferred with the chaplain, Harm turned to her. "Our first compromise," he said with a smile.

"That wasn't a compromise. It was me surrendering."

"Well, now it's our first disagreement."

"Oh, for God's sake." Webb rolled his eyes. "Please tell me you two, of all people, aren't going to turn into the stereotypical married couple."

"I don't think there's much chance of that, Clay."

"Good. Want to hear the official story so far? Here's what I've got. You two numbskulls woke up and figured out that you were crazy for each other six weeks ago, during the whole fiasco at Parris Island."

"Will the term 'numbskulls' be in your reports?" Mac interjected innocently.

"Hey, don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Anyway, it was necessary to keep the whole thing under wraps because of the highly classified nature of the assignment, since you had to keep working together. The details are irrelevant -- we can work them out later. Believe me, when I'm done with this, there'll be so many levels of clearance involved that even the career bureaucrats will be going cross-eyed. By that time, everyone will see that there's no problem with you two, and it'll all blow over." Webb folded his arms with a satisfied smirk. "And you'll owe me for the rest of your natural lives."

"We'll handle it. Thank you, Clay."

"My pleasure. Sometimes there are perks to my job." He wandered over to help A.J. prepare the marriage certificate, leaving the couple in relative privacy.

"Last chance to back out," Harm offered lightly.

"Don't even think it, sailor." Mac squeezed his hand. "You know, we haven't talked about where we're going to live."

"We don't have to decide that right now -"

"I want to move in with you," she broke in quietly. "At least for now. There's more room, and you worked so hard to fix it up. I mean, if that's all right?"

"Of course it is. I got so used to having you there last week that lately it's been feeling empty."

"We were pretty good together, weren't we?"

"We *are* pretty good together," he corrected with a smile. "Can you believe all this?"

"Actually, I can. I guess I've never seen us in the traditional sense, even in marriage. Besides, it'll make for an entertaining story to tell our grandkids."

"Highly edited, I hope."

"Undoubtedly."

The admiral's speaker buzzed. "Sir, there's a Commander Henderson here to see you." Tiner's voice was tinged with suspicion.

"Send him in, Tiner," the JAG replied easily, ignoring it.

The chaplain was a middle-aged man with a kindly demeanor. "You're lucky I trust you, A.J.," he commented as he closed the door behind him. "Five-minute weddings aren't really my style."

"This is worth it, Dan. Promise." A.J. grasped his hand and introduced his officers. "I'd like you to meet Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie and Commander Harmon Rabb."

"Good to finally meet you two. The admiral's probably told me more about you than he'd care to admit. Shall we get started?"

They made an interesting picture, standing there in service dress, facing each other with hands joined, in the center of the office. Each spoke the words with no hesitation, eyes never leaving the other's face.

"I, Sarah, take you, Harmon ..."

"I, Harmon, take you, Sarah ..."

"...to be my husband ..."

"...to be my wife ..."

"...from this day forward ..."

"...forsaking all others ..."

"...in sickness and in health ..."

"...for richer or poorer ..."

"...better or worse ..."

"...for as long as we both shall live."

The chaplain was smiling broadly as he finished. "By the grace of our Lord, and the power vested in me by the United States Navy, I hereby pronounce you husband and wife. Commander, I think you know what to do."

And suddenly, there they were. Harm took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, effectively closing the book on their tumultuous past and moving them into a brilliant new future.

Their friends watched silently, understanding just how long this moment had been in coming. After a few seconds, Webb cleared his throat with a knowing look. "Okay, break it up. Man of God present."

They broke the kiss, faintly embarrassed but still beaming with the promise of things to come. A.J. shook his head. "May I ask when you plan on sharing the good news with the staff?"

"Soon, sir. Not today, but ... soon."

"Very good. Congratulations to you both." He shook Harm's hand firmly and kissed Mac's cheek, with Webb following suit. "Be happy together," the admiral said sincerely. "You deserve it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Lucky for you that it's Friday, or you wouldn't get a honeymoon at all. As it is, I can't spare you next week, and if you both suddenly took leave, it would probably raise some eyebrows."

"It's all right, sir," Mac ventured, reveling in the feel of her new husband's arm at her waist. "Right now I think we'll be content to stay in town and work some things out."

"With the emphasis on the 'right now' part," Harm jumped in. "As soon as we get a chance, I'm taking you someplace warm."

"Well, you know what they say about Marines on the beach." It was a lousy pun, but she didn't care. In her entire life, she'd never felt so ... free.

"Take the rest of the day. I expect you'd be useless if you hung around here."

"Aye, sir. Thank you for everything, Admiral."

As they headed for the door, their expressions became carefully neutral, as if they'd merely finished a briefing. A.J. imagined that he could see an imperceptible change in their bearing, though. Things were definitely going to be different from here on out.

He turned to Clayton Webb when they were alone in the room. "Not quite what you expected when you came in this morning, Webb?"

The agent shook his head. "Score one for the good guys," he answered simply. "On all counts. I've got to get back and give some friends at the Bureau a kick in the pants. Keep me posted on the goings-on around here, all right? I'd hate to miss out on Bud Roberts keeling over from shock when this whole thing goes public."

"Hell, if it wouldn't set such a bad example, I'd set up a camera."

In her office, Mac was having a hard time keeping a straight face as she stacked the files on her desk with characteristic efficiency. There was a light knock on the door, and Harm stepped inside without waiting to be invited. He closed the door behind him and immediately broke into a dazzling grin. "Any plans for this weekend, Colonel?" he asked disarmingly.

"Oh, I'm pretty booked up. I have to make up for a lot of lost time."

Moving closer to her, he grew serious. "I don't look at it as lost time," he said softly. "Just ... time to find ourselves, and to learn how to do this right."

"I like that thought." With a smile, she leaned over to brush her lips against his jawline: it *did* feel right. "I think I'd like to get started on moving my stuff in this weekend. There's not that much, and I don't want to drag it out. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. As long as we schedule in some time that doesn't involve boxes and bubble wrap."

Unable to help herself, she lifted an eyebrow. "And just what would you like to do with said time, flyboy?"

"Any number of things ... but first, I want to buy you a ring."

The idea was thrilling. True, they'd already exchanged the vows and signed their names, and so far nothing had come along to shatter this dream. But she realized that she wanted that small token, wanted something she could hold on to, in a way that didn't really make sense. Then again, sense seemed to be overrated lately. "I think I have some free time right about now," she commented. "What do you say?"

"I say, I'll run home and change, and pick you up at your place in half an hour."

"Deal." Impulsively, she reached up and pulled his head down to hers in a passionate, mind-altering kiss. "Just 'cause I can," she explained with an impish look.

Harm blinked a few times, reeling from the impact. "You make it hard for a guy to leave," he said finally.

"That's the plan. Go on, get going. We shouldn't leave at the same time, anyway."

"Yes, ma'am." His hand was on the doorknob before he paused. "God, I love you."

As she opened her mouth to respond, he was already out the door. Once again, he'd gotten the last word. She'd have to learn his secrets.

Mac closed her briefcase, retrieved her cover, and glanced around the office one final time for the week. Surreal as it all seemed, she had more confidence now than she could ever remember. This time, it was their turn.

1936 EST
North of Union Station
Washington, D.C.

Later that evening, Mac curled up on Harm's couch -- their couch? -- while he cleared the dinner plates. Her gaze kept straying to the interlocking rings on her left hand. They'd immediately felt right, but she was still getting accustomed to seeing them there. Even stranger to her eyes was the simple gold band on Harm's finger, a gentle reminder that as much as she was his, he was hers. She marveled at the thought.

"So we've got a little over forty-eight hours to turn this into our place." He wandered over to the couch and pulled her into his arms. "What do you think, Marine? Can it be done?"

"With my strategic planning and your SUV, no problem." She settled against him, laying her head on his chest. "I'm an expert at packing boxes. The only thing I'm worried about is trying to share that tiny closet. It doesn't even look big enough for all our uniforms."

"Oh, ye of little faith. There's tons of room in there. And if there isn't, I'll knock out a wall or something."

"You'll knock yourself out trying." She twisted around to look at him. "Are you sure you're up to this? I know a lot has happened in the last week, but the fact is, you're not that long out of the hospital. Moving me in might not be the brightest idea."

"I'll be fine. I'll just give you all the heavy boxes." With his characteristic smile, he brushed her soft hair back from her face. "If anything was ever too good to be true, this is it."

"I'm with you. I keep pinching myself every ten minutes. I mean, in almost five years, we barely touched the concept, and suddenly in two days, here we are. It doesn't seem real."

"I don't know. I think it's perfect. You wouldn't want to be predictable, would you?" He stopped short, his eyes wide. "Oh, Christ. My mother is going to kill me. She's been trying to get me to let her come out here ever since I got hurt, and now ..." Shaking his head, he tightened his hold on her. "Maybe now I'll let her come. Once she's done yelling at me, she's going to love you. They both will. I've already told them so much about you, they probably already do."

"I can't wait to meet them. I haven't had a real family in so long, I think I'm out of practice."

"You have one now, Sarah."

She shook her head, with a strange, faraway expression. "Family. I don't know if I can get used to it."

Harm hesitated. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No!" she exclaimed, jerking upright. "God, no. It just seems like -- well, all those things I thought we should talk about are still there, unsaid."

"Such as? You know everything important that's ever happened to me. You know every inch of my kitchen. You know how I voted last year. You even know my favorite basketball team. What haven't we covered?"

"The future."

He understood immediately. "Career-wise, or ... us-wise?"

"Both. Although I don't think there will be too many surprises on the career front. We're not exactly the type to jump ship at the twenty-year mark."

"It's a good thing, considering I'll hit my twenty years in September." She just looked at him, surprised, but he held up his Academy ring. "I put on a uniform at seventeen, remember?"

"Wow. Twenty years. Bet you didn't imagine any of this when you first got to Annapolis."

"Are you kidding? Some of this I didn't even imagine when I got to work this morning." The teasing manner quickly faded. "Or maybe I did, but didn't want to get my hopes up. I've never been as completely content with my life as I am right now. However the Navy decides to deal with us, I'll take it with a smile. After all, they let me find you in the first place."

"I had no idea you could be such a sap."

She expected him to retort, but instead he leaned over and silenced her with a sweet, simple kiss. After allowing herself a moment to enjoy its effects, she gave him a mock glare. "You're not playing fair."

"If not, get used to it, because I have no intention of playing fair." He lifted her left hand in order to study her rings. "I don't want us to have to take these off on Monday," he said thoughtfully. "You think we could be ready to tell everybody by then?"

"I think so. I don't want to be sneaking around, driving separately and such. And I don't want to hide after hours, either. We should be able to go out to dinner or a movie without wondering who might see us."

"What a concept. Going on a date with my wife."

It sounded wonderful the way he said it; so natural, with such honest love in his voice. It gave her the courage she needed to bring up the subject she'd been thinking about this whole time. "Okay, before we got sidetracked, there was something in particular I wanted to talk about," she began tentatively.

He glanced up inquiringly. "Anything."

"I mean, I want to talk about it, but I don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you, so if you don't -"

"Sweetheart," he broke in calmly. "Just say it."

She took a deep breath. "Harm, I want a baby," she said softly. "And not just to satisfy my biological clock. I want to have *your* baby. I want us to be that perfect family that I see in my dreams, the one neither of us got to have. I think that's when I first started to realize how much I loved you; when I started picturing my children with your eyes, your smile ..."

"I thought I was the only one who did that," he replied gently, stroking her cheek with one finger. "Were you really afraid I wouldn't want that as much as you do? Sarah, I can't wait to have a child. More than that, I can't wait for *us* to have a child. Okay, maybe not right away -- I think the admiral would kill us -- but I sure as hell don't want to wait three years, either. Once we get used to being just us, together, I swear to you that we'll make good on that promise."

Swiping a single tear away, she sighed. "Oh, flyboy, sometimes you say the sweetest things."

"Only to you, ninja-girl." He swept her into his lap and proceeded to kiss her again, with more conviction. She wrapped her arms around his neck, melding her lips to his with increasing urgency. After a split-second of feeling self-conscious, she banished the thought. This was her *husband*, for God's sake. She was entitled to be attracted to him ... okay, *really* attracted ... damn, this man was good with his hands ...

When they finally broke the kiss, both were staring at each other with equal parts apprehension and desire. *This* was one thing they hadn't exactly covered yet. "Should we take this someplace more, ah, appropriate?" he suggested quietly.

"I suppose we could probably use the practice," she quipped, trying not to sound breathless.

"And it is our wedding night, after all."

"Are you sure? I mean, I want to -- good Lord, I really want to. But you're still kind of recovering, and ..."

"I'm all right. Granted, it may not be the most athletic endeavor on record, but ..." He gazed deep into her dark eyes. "I need you, Sarah," he said huskily. "Please tell me you've dreamed about this as much as I have."

"Oh, I think that's a pretty safe bet," she answered lightly, running her fingers up his spine.

For a moment, he hesitated. "You're not exactly seeing me at my best," he confessed. "I lost a little weight in the hospital, and the scars ..."

"Harm, in my mind, you will always be the most gorgeous man ever to wear a uniform. I don't care about scars." She trailed delicate kisses from his jaw down to his shoulder. "Make love to me," she whispered.

He allowed her to take his hand and lead him into the bedroom. There, she gently pushed him down to sit on the edge of the bed, and slipped off her top in one fluid motion. Hearing his breath catch slightly, she knelt down in front of him and began to unfasten his shirt, button by agonizing button.

He pulled her up onto the bed and into his arms. "Do you have any idea how stunningly beautiful you are?"

She blushed faintly, knowing just how serious he was. "Are you nervous?"

"Actually, no. I thought I would be, but it just feels so right ... Are you?"

"No," she said honestly. "I'm getting used to dreams becoming reality."

... Later, as they lay there, still holding each other as if their lifeline might snap at any moment, only two thoughts crossed her mind. One was that after all this time, life was finally, blissfully perfect. The other was that perhaps they might not get as much accomplished this weekend as they'd thought.

(Epilogue ...)

0814 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Bud Roberts stood in the doorway of his office on Monday morning, skimming through the contents of his inbox. He'd just won arguably the biggest case of his young career, and he was more than ready for things to return to normal for a while. How did the commander and the colonel deal with that kind of pressure nearly every week? He'd needed practically the entire weekend just to decompress.

Actually, he'd tried to call Commander Rabb Saturday night, wondering if he might want to go out and get a drink or something. There had been no answer, and Bud hadn't wanted to push it. Harm's last few weeks had obviously been a roller coaster, and now that the case was finally over, the junior officer wouldn't blame him for needing some time to himself. He and Colonel Mackenzie had been acting ... well, *different* last week.

As he made a few mental notes about the upcoming Greene appeal, Harm came striding across the bullpen. "Morning, Bud," he called pleasantly.

Bud frowned and checked his watch, puzzled. "Sir, you're, um, early?"

"Oh, come on, Lieutenant. Occasionally I do get here in time for staff call." The commander sauntered past the counter, idly flipping the bagel in his hand. "Maybe I'm trying to start the summer off right. Did you ever think of that?"

"It's not even close to being summer yet," pointed out Mac, leaning against her own door with one eyebrow raised challengingly.

Harm's grin, already out of character for a Monday morning, grew even wider. Bud watched them, a little lost. As much as he always admired his mentor's intensity, seeing him so flat-out cheerful was bizarre.

"Am I wearing my whites? Then it's summer. Case closed. Got a minute to go over the Daniels deposition?"

"Only if you feed me," Mac answered, just as cheerfully. Harm tossed her the bagel, and they disappeared into his office.

Bud just shook his head. "I think I'm in the Twilight Zone," he muttered to no one. His wife came in, heading for the fax machine, and he quickly pulled her aside. "Harriet, did you ever get a hold of the colonel yesterday?"

Harriet shook her head. She'd wanted to see how Mac was doing, since so far there had been no mention of Mic or the missing ring. "I tried twice. The second time, I didn't even get her answering machine. Isn't she here yet?"

Bud gestured toward Harm's office. "It's weird. They were both here when I got in, and they're -- I don't know. It's kinda like it was right before the commander left, except ... different. They're talking, and joking, and they're actually relaxed around each other. You think something happened this weekend?"

Suddenly the fax in her hand became a lesser issue. "I don't know. But give me a half hour, and I'll find out."

Just as Bud's door closed, Harm's opened, and the partners' voices could be heard. " ... so if we have the officer of the watch saying he didn't actually see the bag change hands -"

"- it's no better than secondhand info," Mac finished. "Hearsay, anyone?"

"And all that's left is the possession charge -"

"Dicey, but we might be able to get a class-B misdemeanor -"

"- four weeks restricted duty -"

"- half month's pay."

"And that's the ballgame." They slapped hands triumphantly. "We get more done before ten a.m. than most JAGs do all day."

"Don't get cocky, Navy," Mac warned as she stepped out, a twinkle in her eye. Harriet seized the opportunity and followed her to her office.

"How was your weekend, ma'am?"

"It was nice, Harriet, thanks. Yours?"

"Fine, ma'am. I called you yesterday, to see if ..." The petite lieutenant hesitated. "I just wondered if you wanted to talk about the ring you're not wearing."

Mac surprised her by smiling. "It's all right," she said. "Better than all right, in fact. I just figured out what I really wanted."

"Then I guess I'm happy for you." Confused, Harriet happened to drop her gaze to the attorney's left hand. Her jaw dropped. "Holy ... Colonel, with all due respect, what the hell's going on?"

Mac's smile turned coy. "I'll explain everything, Harriet. That's a promise. But right now, it's time for staff call."

And she walked past, heading for the conference room and tossing a sideways glance in the direction of Harm's office. Harriet's eyes narrowed as a suspicion crept into her mind. *Could they - ?* She planted herself in front of the commander's door, just in time for him to nearly run her over.

"Sorry, Harriet." He moved to step around her, but she held her ground. "Ah, Lieutenant, I have to -"

"Sir," she interrupted resolutely, "would you please show me your left hand?"

Realizing he was caught, Harm offered a sheepish smile and held out his hand. Harriet's eyes grew huge, and she opened and closed her mouth several times, vainly trying to get out any words at all.

"It's not a trick. Harriet, I swear we'll make it up to you two. But I really have to run." He squeezed her shoulder briefly and hurried for the conference room.

At long last, the flustered Harriet found her voice.

"*BUD!!!!*"

*** THE END ***