



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 for mild language

Classification: JAG Story, Romance (Harm/Mac), Angst

Spoilers: "We the People", "Death Watch", "Boomerang"

Author's Notes: Set mid-fifth season, mainly because I needed the conversation on the ferry to have happened. But this will be complicated enough without adding in Brumby or Renee, so while technically they're still in the picture, we won't be seeing them much. Basically, here's my premise: the show obviously hasn't made a big deal out of Diane Schonke past the episode "Death Watch", but our hero's not the type to swear revenge on someone without a pretty good reason. So for now, I've decided that unless Diane is still in the back of his mind, Harm has absolutely no other excuse for NOT being with Mac. Therefore, in the interest of all shippers with a sense of realism, we're going to deal with the unfortunate Lt. Schonke. If you're here for the plot, bug out now, because it's taking a backseat to character insight. Deal with it. There will be many, many flashbacks here; I thought of doing a separate piece on Harm and Diane, but decided to kill two birds with one stone. Here goes nothing ...

"Each time I took a step forward, I looked back to see if you were still there. Finally, I reached the water, and then there was nothing left to do but jump ... and I couldn't. So I've been standing here, at the water's edge, for so long now ... I want to take that last step, but I'm afraid that the next time I look back, you'll be gone ..."

2314 EST

Somewhere in Washington, D.C.

"So we lost the battle. It's not like they're going to win the war."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. If all you've got is stupid clichés, keep your mouth shut. And it's not just one battle. If Antonio gets convicted, our entire base of operations in the District is in trouble. Who the hell's going to keep up the delivery schedule at the Navy Yard? You? Jesus." The older man scowled and lit his cigarette before speaking again. "How'd they nail Antonio, anyway?"

"Some JAG colonel busted him during an investigation. I don't know what kind of evidence they've got, but according to him, this Marine was a one-woman Rambo."

"She was working alone? Only good news I've heard all day. Maybe we can get to her before the trial starts."

His companion hesitated. "Look, if you gotta kill her, make someone else do it, all right? Last time I didn't sleep for ages."

"I keep telling you, buddy, lose the conscience. It's a major liability in this business."

0628 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

Harm straightened his uniform and stifled a yawn as he entered the deserted bullpen. Tossing his cover and briefcase onto his desk, he immediately headed for the admiral's open door.

"Reporting as ordered, sir. I got here as fast as I could."

"Do you normally sleep through twelve rings, Mr. Rabb, or were you trying to ignore your phone?"

He winced. "Sorry, sir. I was working on my opening for the Denniston court-martial until about 0200."

Admiral Chegvidden's stern countenance barely softened. "The sleep would've served you better, since you're about to hand Denniston off to Lieutenant Roberts. Have a seat."

Harm stepped into the office and pulled up short, seeing Mac and Clayton Webb already seated and looking perfectly composed. "You morning people," he muttered under his breath. His partner didn't even crack a smile. Something was definitely going on.

"Commander, are you familiar with Colonel Mackenzie's investigation of Petty Officer Second Class Antonio Diaz?"

"Somewhat, sir. Drug trafficking, right? There was a cocaine ring working out of the Navy Yard, and the colonel discovered evidence to implicate Petty Officer Diaz."

"Looks like I got more than I bargained for," Mac said quietly.

Webb took over. "This group isn't just into street drugs. They've apparently branched out into weapons smuggling. We've been keeping an eye on their overseas business for a while now, but the colonel here dealt them a pretty substantial blow. They're not happy about it, and these aren't the type of people to forgive and forget."

Comprehending, Harm's expression faded from surprise into concern. "Sounds like we need to get you out of sight for a while," he suggested to Mac, then turned back to Webb. "What exactly are we dealing with?"

"As far as we know, there are five or six major players in this area, led by a man named Trent. He's a former Defense Intelligence agent, so he knows a thing or two about how we operate, and he's got a reputation for being ruthless. I'm sure he'd like nothing more than to make sure Colonel Mackenzie's evidence and testimony never make it to Diaz's court-martial."

To her credit, Mac didn't flinch at the knowledge that someone was very likely out to kill her. "Webb's going to pull off some bureaucratic magic so that I can disappear for a while, until the FBI and NCIS can get a hold of Trent. I'm going to ... go undercover, I guess. I get the feeling we were waiting for you before getting into the details."

"I'll do whatever you need," he promised immediately. "Actually, Admiral, my caseload's not too bad right now - "

"I'm ahead of you, Commander. I would certainly like to send you along to watch your partner's back, but on Mr. Webb's advice, I'm not going to make it an order." The JAG leaned back in his chair. "He'd like you to listen to the plan first before you make up your mind."

Harm frowned. "Sir, my mind is made up. If Mac needs me, I'm there. Why in the world would I say no?"

"This isn't like a typical undercover case," Webb replied, looking a little hesitant. "And it affects you. We've decided to give Mac a real identity, not a fake one. It will make the paper trail a lot cleaner, so she should be harder to track. But it won't be easy." Slowly he handed her a file, and she stared at the name in disbelief.

"You've got to be kidding," she said in a low voice.

The CIA agent shook his head grimly. "If I had a better idea, believe me, you would have heard it by now."

"Mac, what's wrong?" Harm asked, almost afraid of the answer. "Who is it?"

She met his eyes, wishing there was some way to lessen this blow. "Lieutenant Diane Schonke."

In the span of eight seconds, his handsome features changed from shock to pain to a tightly-controlled mask of non-emotion. He looked as though he didn't trust himself to respond.

Admiral Chegwidden looked from one officer to the other, studying their reactions. "Seems like I should know that name," he said cautiously.

Harm stared straight forward as he answered. "Sir, four years ago, a few weeks after you came to JAG Headquarters, I investigated the lieutenant's murder along with Commander Krennick and Lieutenant Austin."

"The crypto from the *Seahawk*. I remember now. You and the victim were close, as I recall?"

"Yes, sir. Friends from the Academy."

"I see." Their commanding officer shook his head. "I don't think I'm following this, Webb. Is it really worth all this effort to make Mac into this lieutenant just because she was a friend of the commander's?"

"I take it you didn't see any photos of the crime scene four years ago, Admiral."

"I see dozens of files, Webb. I don't even remember the ones I saw last week."

"You'd remember this one, sir." Mac took the photo out of the file in her hand and held it up without a word. The admiral was a man who rarely let anything surprise him, but his eyes went wide as he saw the uncanny resemblance between the two women. His head swung toward Harm, who hadn't moved.

"I suppose this explains your reaction upon meeting Colonel Mackenzie, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked at the younger man with a mixture of sympathy and puzzlement. "You could have said something, Commander."

"To what purpose, sir?"

"I suppose you're right." He sighed. "Webb, are you really going to bureaucratically bring this poor girl back to life?"

"It won't be difficult, Admiral. There are official records for Lieutenant Schonke all the way up to her death in 1996. All we have to do is erase that, and account for the last four years, which I've already got a start on. We'll draw up change-of-station orders for Commander Rabb to be transferred to the Judge Advocate's office at Miramar, and he'll move out to California with his 'wife', Diane, who left the Navy in 1997 to be with her husband. I can take care of those records in no time."

Mac just looked at him, and he shifted uncomfortably. "It's the most plausible story," he defended. "I don't think they'd still just be dating after all this time, do you?"

Admiral Chegwidden folded his arms. "'Friends from the Academy', Commander?"

Harm spoke stiffly, still not meeting their gazes. "Very close friends, sir."

Mac laid a hand on his arm, not knowing what else to do. "If you don't want to do this, just say the word. We'll work something else out."

"No. If this is the best way, it's the best way. I won't let my feelings compromise your safety."

"Harm, this is asking a lot of you. To pretend that she's still alive - "

"I said I'd handle it. It'll be all right." He turned back to Webb. "So we're going to Miramar?"

"There's a flight tomorrow morning. We're hoping to nail Trent during the next big delivery, so it shouldn't be more than a couple of weeks. If you two can get packed and get your stories worked out by 0700 tomorrow, we'll have everything on this end figured out. Your new C.O. won't know this is a cover, so you'll actually have to do some work out there."

"Got to be a piece of cake compared to this place." Harm tried to smile, but it was forced. "We'll be ready. Admiral, if you'll excuse me ..." He barely waited to be dismissed before striding toward the door.

As soon as he was gone, Mac whirled on Webb. "I can't do it, Clay. He's been trying for four years not to see her every time he looks at me. How can I put him through this?"

"I know, but it's by far the best cover we could come up with. You'll work out of your home, so you won't have to keep up the act twenty-four-seven. Lieutenant Roberts served with Schonke as well, and I've already asked him to help you with some details." He sighed.

"None of us wants to make this any harder on Harm than it has to be, and don't forget that it will be hard for you, too. But if anybody can get through it, you two can."

Reluctantly, she gathered the contents of Diane Schonke's file and rose from her seat. "All right. Sir, with your permission, I've got some studying to do."

"Both of you should take today to prepare. I'll come up with a story to tell the staff. Good luck, Colonel. Webb will keep me posted. Dismissed." She was halfway to the door before he spoke again. "And Mac?"

She paused. "Sir?"

"Don't let him shut you out."

"Understood, sir."

When she approached his office, Harm was standing at the window, a folder forgotten in his hand. "Are you sure about this?" she asked softly.

He turned, startled, then offered an unconvincing shrug. "It's been four years, Mac. I'm not saying it'll be easy. But our lives rarely are, aren't they?"

"I suppose. The admiral told us to take the day off. Webb filled Bud in on the plan, and he's going to help me out."

"The main thing you have to fix is your hair," he said matter-of-factly. "Hers was a little darker, and she kept it curled most of the time. More like yours used to be, when you first came to JAG. Other than that ... maybe Harriet can loan you some Navy stuff. That USMC sweatshirt you like so much is going to have to stay at home."

Mac watched him, wondering just what was happening in his head right then. "You know, there might be an upside to this," she pointed out carefully. "You've told me how she died, but nothing about how she lived. Maybe after all this is over, you'll be able to remember more of the good things than the bad."

"Maybe," he echoed. "I'll come by tonight, okay? To tell you some of those good things."

"Sure. I'll see you then."

"Damn, you look good in that uniform."

He turned around to see Diane standing in the archway of the Naval History library, a mischievous smile lighting her face. Unable to repress his own smile, he raised an eyebrow and tapped the new stripe on the shoulder-board of his dress whites. "Hey, you're supposed to give me the respect due an officer, Cadet."

"In that case ..." She snapped to attention, but her eyes still danced. *"Damn, you look good in that uniform, sir."*

"Much better." Harm grinned, and the friends hugged briefly. "I can't believe I'm finally done with this place. You think you can survive a whole year down here without us?"

"Without Keeter's sorry ass? Absolutely."

Jack Keeter had just wandered over from the graduation reception, and he punched Diane in the arm. "Watch what you say to us, Di. We're gonna outrank you for the rest of your life."

"Maybe, maybe not. But when you're forty and ancient, I'll still be thirty-nine. When do you guys leave for flight school?"

"Not for a couple of weeks, but I'm going home with my mom and Frank for a while. We have to be out of the dorms by Sunday." Harm gazed at her, unsure what to say. For the past two years, they'd been inseparable, and now ... what? Now he was an officer, and the dreams he'd harbored all his life were about to become reality. And he'd learn firsthand about the sacrifices they would all have to make for the good of the service - like saying goodbye to their closest friends.

Sensing his hesitation, Keeter cleared his throat. "I'm going to head back to the big bash. I'll catch you two later."

Diane glanced down at her feet, also uncertain. "We'll still be able to keep in touch. The Navy's big, but not that big."

"Of course. I'll even learn how to write decent letters." He forced a smile. "Who knows? There aren't that many carriers out there, and they all need crypto officers. Maybe we'll end up on the same cruise sometime."

"Yeah, you never know." Impulsively she reached up to hug him again, and this time he wasn't so quick to pull away. "Your dad would be proud of you today," she whispered in his ear. "I know I am."

She stepped back and gave him a crisp salute, which he returned. "Good luck, Ensign Rabb."

1946 EST Georgetown

Mac studied her freshly-dyed hair in the mirror with a frown. "I don't know. It looks awfully dark."

"It'll lighten up after you wash it a couple of times." Harriet handed her a T-shirt with the USS *Seahawk* crest emblazoned on it. "Want me to help you curl it?"

"Sure, thanks." She took a seat and flipped through Diane Schonke's Navy records. "She was a good sailor," she mused absently.

"Very good, ma'am." Bud came out of the kitchen with a mug of coffee. "The enlisted women would go to her for advice more than anyone else, because she never flaunted

her stripes. She just wanted to get the job done.”

“But she had a sense of humor. She must have, if she and Harm stayed close for so long. And I seem to remember a certain lieutenant telling me she was ‘a lot more fun’ than me.” At that, Bud turned red and fumbled for a response. “Relax, Bud. I didn’t hurt you for saying it then, and I’m not going to now.”

“Well, ma’am, in that case, I think you should work on being ... less of a Marine. Just for your cover, I mean,” he added hastily. “It’s just that Lieutenant Schonke was pretty different depending on whether she was on duty or off. After hours, she was the outgoing type. I almost never saw her without a smile.”

Mac nodded. “You said my voice is different. Do you think I can work on that?”

“I guess so. Hers was a little higher.”

She attempted to raise her pitch without sounding like a chipmunk. “Like this?”

“Almost, ma’am. But a little bit lighter, like you’re smiling.”

“Are you implying that I don’t smile, Lieutenant?”

A loud *thud* sounded from the doorway, and the three of them turned to see Harm standing there, rapidly going white with shock. The bag he’d brought had fallen from his hand as he stared at his partner. Recovering quickly, he struggled to speak. “The, ah, door was open,” he said lamely.

Suddenly Mac felt like a monster. The hair, the voice, the damned *Seahawk* T-shirt ... he must have felt as if he’d stepped into the Twilight Zone. “God, Harm, I’m sorry - ”

“No, it’s okay. I ... I’m just going to get some air.” He rushed out of the apartment. She started after him, but Harriet laid a hand on her arm.

“Let me try, ma’am.”

“You’re right. At this point, I’d just make things worse.” Leaning forward, she rested her head on her folded arms wearily. “Why am I doing this to him, Bud?”

“You’re not doing it to him, ma’am. He’s doing it for you.”

Harriet found him sitting on the front steps, his face buried in his hands. When she touched his shoulder, he looked up, and his ice-blue eyes glistened. “She’s got the voice down pretty well. Guess I wasn’t quite ready for it.”

The junior officer sat down beside him. “You don’t have to go, sir,” she said gently.

“Yes, I do. For a lot of reasons. I just didn’t expect it to hurt this much, after all this time.” Harm shook his head, and for the first time, she began to get a glimpse of the pain that had been driving him for so long. “I was doing pretty well for a while there, but now ... she’ll be Mac one moment and Diane the next. How am I going to keep from losing all sense of reality?”

"She's never going to be Diane," Harriet said firmly. "Not really. It's not about a look or a voice, Harm. You know that. It's about who's looking back at you. If it starts to get overwhelming, maybe you can keep yourself grounded by talking to Mac about it. Five minutes of talking about JAG, or your lives now, ought to make it clear enough. She'll know how to help. She always does."

"Kinda like Di," he replied softly. But he gave her a halfhearted smile and stood up. "I'll be fine, Harriet. Thanks."

They went upstairs, where Mac and Bud waited uneasily. Harriet took her husband's arm. "I think it's time for us to get going," she suggested.

"Thank you for all your help," Mac told the couple as they made their way to the door. "We'll be in touch as soon as Webb says it's safe." Then it was just her and Harm, and before she could think of a way to begin, he was already speaking.

"I'm sorry for running off like that. I promise not to freak out again."

"Don't be sorry. I can't imagine how strange this must be."

He picked up the bag he'd dropped earlier. "I brought some things for you to look at - pictures and stuff. And this." Withdrawing a small box from his pocket, he handed it to her. She opened it and removed a woman's class ring, inscribed with the words *United States Naval Academy*.

"This was hers?"

He nodded. "Her parents wanted me to have it. Will it fit you?"

She removed her Marine Corps OCS ring and slid the other one on, feeling very surreal. "Am I supposed to say 'Go Navy' now?" she asked, trying to keep some good humor.

"Hey, Marines go the Academy too. Just don't 'Semper fi' anyone."

Mac read the date on the side of the ring. "1986. She was older than me."

"But younger than me, by a year. Keeter and I never let her forget it, either."

Surprised, she looked up. She'd forgotten that Jack Keeter had been Harm's roommate at Annapolis. "Keeter knew Diane, too?"

"Sure. She helped us out in physics, and we kept the would-be Romeos away from her. The three of us were pretty tight."

"He never said anything about me looking like her when I met him."

He shrugged a little. "At the time, we had bigger problems to worry about. Also, he already knew, because I called him a couple of days after I met you. I don't think he'd ever heard me in such a total panic before. I thought I was losing my mind."

"You did an awfully good job of hiding it."

"I have a lot of practice." His eyes were distant, but he quickly shook it off, taking out a well-worn photo album. The partners sat down on the couch and prepared to step into the past.

Mac couldn't help smiling at the first picture. A twenty-year-old Harmon Rabb was flashing his famous grin at the camera, standing on the beach with an equally-young Jack Keeter. The two classmates were wearing swimsuits and dragging Diane Schonke toward the water, fully clothed but laughing hysterically. They all looked so happy and carefree - even Harm, though she knew he'd had his share of struggles, even at that young age.

Seeing the picture, he smiled as well. "We eventually threw her in, but she got us back later. We got back to our room, and our clothes had mysteriously disappeared. If you messed with Di, you always ended up paying for it somehow." They paged through the pictures for a while, and she observed that Harm was beginning to relax. Remembering seemed less difficult now, as he recalled stories of all-night study sessions and pick-up softball games.

In one photo, Diane was sitting on Harm's shoulders, trying to reach a kite that had become entangled in a tree branch. The next page showed them lying on the ground in a jumbled heap of arms and legs, while Keeter howled in the background. "Sure, he could laugh," Harm grumbled good-naturedly. "He's not the one who bruised the hell out of his six. I was trying to catch her before she hit the ground, so of course she landed on me, and ... well, the results are obvious."

"Wasn't it awkward?"

"Well, it hurt to sit down for a while, but other than that - "

"I meant Keeter. The three of you always hung out, but if you and Diane were dating ..."

"We weren't." Mac glanced over at him, surprised. "Not at the Academy. We were the best of friends, but that was it. The rules on that kind of thing are a little sketchy, and besides, neither of us was ready for that. All I knew was that I cared about her, and that the Navy was about to send us off in very different directions. So we stayed in touch, but I didn't really see her much for a long time."

"How long?" she asked. In response, he turned the next page.

This picture was more recent. In it, Diane stood behind Harm, who was seated on a porch swing, with her arms draped around his neck. His smile had lost some of its usual brilliance, and his dark, tousled hair stood out against paler skin. "Where is this?"

"Pennsylvania, on my grandmother's farm. I think she probably took the picture."

The date stamped in the corner read 'Aug 1991' - six years after his graduation from Annapolis. Mac looked closer, noticing a bandage on his left wrist and fading bruises on the side of his face. At that point, the pieces started to fall into place.

"This was after your crash."

He nodded ruefully. "Didn't know there were levels to this, did you? I have painful

memories on top of other painful memories.”

She reached over and touched his hand. “Tell me.”

Waking up had become an experience to dread over the past few days. There was always a brief, blissful moment before reality set in, where he could pretend he was at home, or back on the carrier, or any place other than this miserable hospital. Then the dull ache would creep into his consciousness, reminding him of what had happened, and he would realize anew just what a mess he’d made of his life.

This time was different, somehow. He could feel the presence of another person in the room, even before he opened his eyes. His mother had been there almost as soon as they’d transferred him over to the mainland: she’d been strong for him from the beginning, but he sometimes heard her weeping quietly when she thought he was asleep. But as he dragged his eyes open and managed to focus, he recognized the person standing by his bed.

“Di?”

“Hi, jet-jock,” Diane said softly. “How are you doing?”

Right then, it was all he could do not to burst into tears. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to see anyone in my life,” he answered honestly, and she bent down to embrace him. After a moment, she slid into a chair. “What are you doing here?”

“My cruise on the Cape St. George is over - we got in last night.” She looked over his battered body, knowing that the injuries were the least of his worries, and shook her head. “Christ, Harm, what happened?”

“Whatever you heard is true. Mace is dead, because I screwed the pooch.”

“No way is it that simple. We crypto kids hear stuff, you know. The crew chiefs all say you’re the best damn pilot on the Seahawk. There must have been some kind of glitch, or - ”

“There wasn’t, all right? It was me. I couldn’t see right, and I came in low. Presto, ramp strike, end of story.” Bitterness echoed in his voice, but all his friend could hear was the guilt. She tried another approach.

“When are they going to let you out of here?”

“When I can stand up without falling on my face. Probably another few days, maybe a week. I don’t know when they’ll let me go back on duty. Grandma Sarah insisted I come stay with her, so I guess I’m going to Pennsylvania after the inquiry.”

“Think she’s got room for one more?” He turned to face her, but she was serious. “I’ve got six weeks until I have to report back to Norfolk, and if I hang around, they’ll just find additional duties for me.”

“Di - ”

"You shouldn't have to do this alone, Harm. Let me help you."

Their eyes met and locked. "Thank you," he whispered.

Just then, a doctor stepped into the room. "Lieutenant Rabb? Could I have a moment?"

"Sure." Diane moved to leave, but he grabbed her arm. "Don't go," he said simply. "What is it, doc?"

The doctor hesitated. "It's about your eyes."

The two friends shared a glance, and she silently slipped her hand into his.

**1934 PST
Officer Housing
Miramar MCAS, California**

Mac looked around their new home approvingly. The small brick house wasn't exactly luxurious, but it was nicely furnished, and there was something to be said for living on the coast. As she loaded her clothes into the dresser, Harm came into the bedroom and tossed her something. "Here, got you a present."

She unfolded the blue T-shirt and read the lettering. "Cleveland Indians?"

"Di was a big fan, even though they were always lousy. I always tried to get her to convert to the Orioles, but she said you had to stay loyal to your hometown team." He started to unpack his own bags, but the doorbell soon interrupted them. "Guess it's showtime. You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she replied, taking a deep breath. Together, they went to answer the door.

A thirty-ish man in Marine BDUs and a woman in a civilian dress stood on the other side. The oak leaves on the man's collar identified him as a major, and a pair of wings gleamed on his chest. "Just wanted to welcome you to Miramar, Commander. I'm Mark Hendricks, and this is my wife, Julie. We live across the street."

"Good to meet you, Mark. I'm Harm, and this is my wife, Diane."

He'd said it without hesitation, Mac observed. Good for him. "It's a pleasure," she said sweetly as they all shook hands. "Please, come in. We're still unpacking the few things we had time to bring, so it's a bit of a mess."

"Don't worry," Julie Hendricks commented. "When Mark got his orders here, we had about thirty-six hours to pack. I don't think everything got here until six months later."

Mac found them some cold drinks, and the two couples sat down in the living room. "I hear you're a pretty good stick, Harm. Were you hoping to give us Hornet drivers a run for our

money, or what?"

"Well, they don't call it Fightertown for nothing." Harm shrugged with a smile. "No, I just go where they send me. Apparently the Judge Advocate out here was in the market for an XO, and I wasn't about to turn down a chance to come home for a while."

"You grew up out here?"

"Just down the street, in La Jolla." He casually put an arm around Mac, and she tried not to react. "Finally I get to show this Midwest girl what real living is."

"He says that now, but I'm thinking earthquakes," she deadpanned.

"So what do you do, Diane?" Julie inquired.

"I'm a Navy reservist, and I'm thinking about going back to school for my master's degree in linguistics."

"Wow. How long were you active?"

"Eleven years, in cryptology." She smiled up at her 'husband', playing up their cozy roles. "We eventually decided that seeing each other three months out of the year wasn't good enough, and ... well, true love 1, Navy 0."

A strange expression flickered across his face as she said it, but was quickly gone. Oblivious, Julie continued. "Well, we'd love to have you in the officers' wives club. You could give us some real perspective on things."

"I'd love to," Mac said cheerfully, still wondering what she'd done to cause Harm's reaction.

"Well, we should get going. Just wanted to say welcome, and if you need anything, you know where to find us."

After the Hendrickses had left, Harm dropped his arm from her shoulders. "That went pretty well, I think."

"Yeah, they're nice enough." She turned to face him directly. "What's wrong?"

"Other than the obvious?"

"Good point. But yes, other than the obvious. Something I said must have hurt. What was it?"

He sighed. "Nothing, really. Just hearing you give them that line about true love winning over the Navy ... I wondered if it would have ever worked out that way. The day she died, we were supposed to meet and talk about the future. We'd been more or less on a break from each other, because neither of us was ready to make the sacrifices necessary for us to be together. She loved her job, and I was learning to love mine - and we both felt compelled to perform our duties. Could we have ever made it work?"

"Would it have made things easier if you knew? One way or the other?"

"I don't know. Probably not. I don't know if anything would have made it easier." Harm sighed and drew a weary hand over his eyes. "No matter what would or wouldn't have happened between us ... she shouldn't have died, Mac. It was a stupid, senseless act by a desperate man, and the only reason she's gone is because she was doing her part as an officer. The Navy is my life, but there was a time in there when I honestly hated it."

"What made you stop feeling that way?"

"Well, among other things ... you showed up."

Surprised, both by the statement and by its sincerity, Mac smiled at him. "Come on, husband of mine. We still have to determine the sleeping arrangements here."

A hint of his humor broke through the shadows. "I don't snore, and I don't steal the covers. Is that enough to save me from exile to the couch?"

"I don't know. Your legs alone might take up the whole bed. Then again, you're the one who actually has to go to work tomorrow, and I think you've got a good eight inches on that couch." She hesitated. "Renee probably wouldn't be too thrilled to hear we're sharing a bed."

"She'd probably take it better than Mic would."

"True. But does it really matter what they think? Especially if they're never going to know?"

"That's the spirit. I call left side."

"Come on, Harm. You're almost there."

He glared at her and concentrated on finishing those last few steps without limping. When he finally reached the porch of the old farmhouse, he all but collapsed into a chair. "This is humiliating," he said through clenched teeth, bending to adjust the brace on his right knee. "Three weeks ago I could do eight miles in an hour. Now I can't even walk to the barn and back."

"Three weeks ago you hadn't ejected sixty feet above the deck. You're doing great. You'll be running me into the ground in no time." Diane sat down beside him and helped him with the uncooperative brace. "Where's Grandma Sarah?"

"She went into town for groceries. I think we're eating her out of house and home."

"Bullshit," she said sharply, earning a startled glance. "She's had to beg you just to eat anything at all. I didn't think you could possibly get any more twig-like, but once again you've proven me wrong."

"Thanks for the sympathy."

"You don't want sympathy. I know you, Harm. You're finding new ways to blame yourself even as we speak, but the truth is, there was nothing you could have done. The CAG said so, the board of inquiry said so, and I doubt they're all wrong."

"Really?" He swung around to face her, anguish glimmering beneath the sullen expression. "I didn't just suddenly go night-blind at that moment, did I? Maybe there were signs, and I missed them. Maybe I should have gotten my eyes checked after I got sick last year."

"And maybe lightning will strike, and maybe I'm Marilyn Monroe," she returned calmly. "Maybes won't help you make sense of all this. Mace knew the risks, just like we all do. I'm not trying to tell you to get over it - you have to do that in your own time. But you're still here, and you owe it to him to get back into your life."

"How do you suggest I do that?" he asked bitterly. "I've known since I was nine years old that I wanted to be an aviator. Flying's the only thing I've ever wanted to do, and I worked my six off to make it happen. If I can't do that ... what's left?"

"What's left? Everything in the world. You're only twenty-seven, and you're smart. Really smart. I proofed all your papers in school, remember? You can do anything." She reached out and turned his face toward her, continuing quietly. "Your life doesn't belong to the Navy, your father, or anyone else. This is your choice."

"It's not my choice! My choice was stolen from me before I even knew it!" Violently, he wrenched himself away from her and stalked toward the barn. After only a few yards, his weakened knee buckled, and he grabbed onto the railing for support. "Damn it!"

Diane watched silently, wanting to run to him but keeping her distance. She would do whatever it took to help him, but only if he truly wanted her help. As much as she hated to see him in pain, it was the only way.

A couple of minutes passed before he spoke, haltingly. "I'm sorry, Di. I just don't know what to do ..."

Without a word, she went to him and locked an arm around his waist, assisting him back to the chair. He rested his head against her shoulder, and she felt a few scattered tears fall on her shirt. "You're not alone, Harm," she said softly, stroking his dark hair. "You have people who love you. That's all that matters."

0149 PST
Officer Housing
Miramar MCAS, California

Mac slowly came awake with the realization that she wasn't in her own bed in Georgetown. As memory returned, she glanced over at her friend's sleeping form. Harm lay on his side facing her, his arm tucked up around the pillow. The faint tension that had been lingering in his expressive eyes still seemed to have a hold on him, even as he slept. Then again, perhaps it was just the awkwardness of being in bed with her. She certainly wasn't faring any better. After Australia, things had been somewhat strained between them. Neither ever spoke of what had been said on the ferry, but it was clear that they'd both found ways to

hurt each other.

And yet, when this happened, he was there. Everyone had given him numerous opportunities to refuse, but he'd stayed by her, choosing to battle his own personal hell to help her. In all her life, no one had ever made such a sacrifice for her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered aloud, unconsciously reaching out to brush back his hair. "I wish you didn't have to do this."

He stirred slightly, and she pulled back. "Di?" he murmured, disoriented. Then, waking fully, he focused on his partner's face and realized what he'd said. "Sorry, Mac," he offered weakly. "I just ..."

"Were you dreaming about her?" she asked softly.

He dropped his head and nodded. "Not much of a surprise, is it?"

"I suppose not. What did you see?"

"Just the past. The same way it's been since this whole thing started." He leaned up on one elbow and spoke in a way that seemed more suited to trading secrets around a campfire. "This time we were back on the farm, like I was telling you about. She was trying to tell me that life wasn't as bad as I thought, but I wasn't hearing much of it. It was a long time before she finally got through."

"She finally convinced you that there was more to life than flying Tomcats?"

A shadow fell across his face as he shrugged. "Guess it didn't quite take." He looked away for a moment, then met her gaze again. "Do you resent me for going back to flying when I did?"

Caught off-guard, she didn't reply for a moment. "Of course not. You spent half your life training to be an aviator, and you were given a second chance to do what you love. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't support that?" As he continued to watch her, her resolve faltered. "I didn't resent you for leaving. I think I resented the fact that it seemed like such an easy choice for you."

"Did you really think it was easy? Mac, it took me weeks to make that decision, and even after it was made I almost took it back. There was nothing easy about leaving JAG. Believe me."

"I know, but ... " She sighed, unsure how to explain. "Harm, how do you see yourself? I mean, if I met you today, would you say 'I'm a lawyer', or 'I'm a pilot'?"

"Why does it have to be one or the other? They're both part of who I am. I don't know how to separate the different parts of my life like that. I can't tell you I'm happier in the courtroom than in the air, or the other way around. They're too different to hold up next to each other. Just like ..."

He trailed off, hesitating. "Like what?" she asked gently, right before it became clear. "You were going to say like me and Diane, weren't you?"

His head jerked up in surprise. "Where did that come from?"

"I know you, sailor. I'm right, aren't I?"

Harm surrendered. "You usually are," he admitted. "I didn't choose you as a friend to be some kind of substitute, Mac. You don't need to be compared to anyone. The things I loved about her and the things ..."

This time, she didn't dare finish his sentence. The silence hung in the air for a moment as their minds raced. "You're a different person," he continued, somewhat awkwardly. "But you're no less amazing."

"Thank you," she said honestly. "I know you mean that."

He looked away. "We'd better get some sleep. I have to work tomorrow."

"Right," she echoed uncertainly. "Good night."

After he'd fallen asleep, Mac stared at the ceiling for an eternity, wondering if she'd imagined the tenderness in his eyes and voice - or if she'd imagined the way that sentence was supposed to end. ... *the things I love about you* ... Immediately the jaded, cynical part of her started sending out warning signals. She couldn't let herself take that road, not now. Harmon Rabb had built walls around himself, more than anyone she'd ever known. She'd run headlong into one of them on a ferry in Sydney Harbor, and the bruises had yet to completely fade. This was hardly the time to begin picking up speed for another try.

Then again, now that she was learning just why those walls were there, maybe she'd be able to find their weakness. On that faint note of hope, she left herself sleep.

He'd been pushing himself, and he knew it. His knee would probably be killing him in the morning, but this was something he simply had to do. Ever since he'd returned to the old farm, he'd wanted to climb that ridge and watch the stars, like he'd done as a child. This was the first night he'd felt ready to do it.

"Here, let me help." Diane tightened her supporting arm as he lowered himself to the ground, then flopped down next to him. "You did great, but you're going to regret it later."

"It's worth it. Look."

They leaned back to gaze up at the midnight sky, and she couldn't hold back a gasp of wonder. "Wow," she breathed. "They're not even this bright from the middle of the Atlantic."

"Deck lights get in the way. Out here, there's no light - we're miles from the nearest major city." Harm had to smile at the expression of childlike delight on her face. "Finally. After all this time, I found something that impresses you."

She turned and faced him directly. "Harmon, you've been impressing me from the

moment we met. Haven't you noticed?"

A little startled by her uncharacteristic candor, he glanced up. Brown eyes met blue, and there was a spark of something ... different there. She lifted her gaze back to the stars, breaking the spell. "Have you thought any more about what you'll do when you go back on active duty?" she asked quietly.

"Some. The only thing I know for sure is that I'm changing my designator." He shifted his leg slightly: it was already beginning to ache. "Technically, I could stay with the squadron as an admin officer, or go into operational support, but - I don't want to. I think being that close to it all, watching everyone else do what I did ..." He shook his head, the pain still lingering in his eyes. "Maybe someday. But right now, I want to get as far away from the flight deck as possible."

Diane nodded, but her heart was breaking for her dear friend. His lifelong dream, and look what it had done to him. "You could always try for crypto," she suggested, trying for some levity.

Harm smiled ruefully. "Right. Me, who practically failed first-year French, and whose idea of higher-level math is doing intercept coordinates in his head. Face it, there aren't too many places to start over, as a full lieutenant, that won't bring my career to a screeching halt."

Out of the air, an idea occurred to her. "What about law school?"

He gave a short laugh, disbelief and disdain written across his features. "Give me a break, Di. Me, as a JAG? What's wrong with that picture?"

"Absolutely nothing. You'd be fantastic."

"At what, shuffling paper? JAGs aren't like us. They come in with their bar exams and their quickie commissions, and they think looking up statutes all day makes them qualified to tell line officers what they can and can't do. Half of them have never even done a tour at sea."

"Well, you have, and that's why you'll be better than them. You know what it's like."

"Right. And what in the world would make you think that I could stand up in a courtroom and try a case? I almost freaked out at my own inquiry!"

"That's because it was you in the spotlight," she maintained. "Remember when Danny Wright was going to be expelled for cheating on that physics exam? He kept telling everyone that he didn't do it, but no one believed him except you. And by the time you were done, even the commandant believed you. You saved his career, Harm. I know you think you're strictly a fighter, but there are other battles to fight. Battles for truth, for people like Danny. Truth is a vulnerable thing sometimes. Defending that ... there is no more honorable service."

He just looked at her for a moment, entranced by the fire that had suddenly possessed her. "Maybe **you** should have been a lawyer," he said finally.

"You're stalling. Will you at least think about it?"

"All right. Only for you, though."

**1714 PST
Recreational Area
Miramar MCAS**

"... and so I'm just about to drop to one knee, and this corporal comes running up to us to tell me all hell's breaking loose in the enlisted mess. The look on Julie's face was - "

" - total shell-shock," Julie finished for her husband. "Of course, he had to go straighten it out, so I told him I'd wait. When he finally came back, two hours later, there was spaghetti sauce all over his uniform!"

The cluster of officers and families shared a laugh. Sitting at the picnic table, Harm wrapped a snug arm around Mac's waist, and she completed the picture by placing a light kiss on his cheek. So far, so good. The first week had gone relatively well. Harm had carried out his usual JAG duties, even winning a couple of cases he'd picked up in mid-stream. Mac had stayed in the house as much as possible without raising suspicion. This weekend cookout was a little public for her taste, but making an appearance was the right move.

And they'd been doing surprisingly well at their roles - so well that she had to wonder what was happening in her partner's mind. For him, it was only partly a role, and partly a vivid memory. In nearly four years, she'd seen him through some of the most difficult times of his life - and hers - but she'd never seem him quite like this. He was less guarded, less sarcastic. And openly caring toward her: that surprised her most of all. It hadn't just been in public, either. Occasionally, while making dinner or watching TV, he'd catch her hand or stroke her hair, almost without realizing it. She couldn't imagine him acting this way with Renee or Jordan, but as much as she wanted to believe it was real, she knew better. Was this the man he'd been all those years ago, with Diane? Would he ever truly allow himself to feel like that again?

"Your turn, Harm and Di," Mark called out good-naturedly, snapping her back to the present. "Fess up. Most memorable or embarrassing moment together."

"Aw, terrific," Harm groaned, winking at her. "What do you think, hon? Should we tell them how we met?"

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" she asked innocently. "You do have to see these people again."

"Oh, what the hell. You only live once. I was finishing my second class year at the Academy ..."

Everyone settled in to hear the story, including his 'wife', who hadn't heard it herself.

"We thought we had this prank planned out better than D-Day. There were five of us, and somehow I got elected to climb up the side of the girls' dorm. I was supposed to get up to the third-floor balcony, which connected to an open lounge, and sneak down to let the other

guys in. My Spiderman impression was apparently lousy, or at least my timing was. When I hauled myself over the balcony railing, I came face to face with a female plebe who'd come out with her Mag-Lite to investigate the noise. Luckily she didn't whack me right there. I lied through my teeth, saying I was trying to sneak in to see my girlfriend, and begged her not to turn me in. But I think the shaving cream cans clinking around in my backpack gave me away."

"No, dear," Mac broke in, deciding to jump in and fake it. "The look of pure guilt gave you away."

There were chuckles all around as he continued. "Anyway, this girl told me that hall checks were coming up, and if I didn't want to get busted, I'd hide in this closet for a few minutes. Being the idiot that I am, I climbed in. She wedged the door shut and left me there until reveille the next morning, at which point my partners in crime were long gone." By now, he was grinning. "When she finally came back to let me out, she told me in no uncertain terms that the next time we planned a prank, we'd better damn well include her."

As the laughter subsided, she turned to him, and that inexplicable expression was back. For a moment, she wasn't sure who he was really seeing, and it jarred her.

"I'm going to go grab a soda," she told him, awkwardly disengaging herself from his hold. "Want anything?"

He shook his head. "Hurry back," he replied with a smile.

Lost in thought as she wandered over to the cooler, an unfamiliar voice made her freeze. "I know you, don't I?"

As calmly as possible, she faced the speaker, a thirty-ish man in a 48th infantry T-shirt. "I'm sorry?"

"You look incredibly familiar. Were you in Bosnia?"

Was this a test, or simply horrible luck? She didn't think she'd seen him before, but ... Mac fixed a pleasant smile in place. "Sorry, I was Navy. Maybe we crossed paths at the Academy?"

The man shook his head, apparently determined to get to the bottom of this. "No, that isn't it. You're Navy?"

"Used to be. Diane Rabb, but back then I was Lieutenant Diane Schonke."

"I could have sworn you were a Marine. Swear to God, you look just like this major. God, what was her name? Mackenzie, that's it."

Mac's mind kicked into panic mode, but she instantly formed a new plan. "Oh, of course. My husband used to work with a Major Mackenzie, and people always used to tease us about looking like twins. I wonder where she ended up." She raised her voice. "Honey, whatever happened to that partner you had? Sarah Mackenzie?"

Harm answered smoothly, coming over to join them. "I think they assigned her

overseas. Italy, maybe. Do you know her?"

The man shrugged a little, appearing to doubt his memory, and soon moved off. Harm lowered his voice. "Think he's on to us?"

"Not really, but who knows? Anybody could have heard that." She shivered a little. "Let's hope Webb's tricks with the records department worked. I mentioned Diane's name, so if anyone looks, it should check out."

"Yeah, it should." He studied her, concerned. "You want to get out of here?"

"If you don't think it's too much of a problem."

"Absolutely not. Let's go home." Protectively, he put his arm around her again, and they started over to say their goodbyes to the others.

Once they were back in the house, Harm put in a call to Webb, reporting their close call. Mac made a bowl of popcorn and curled up in a corner of the sofa. "How are things in Washington?" she asked when he'd hung up.

"Same as always. Apparently Bud beat Singer on a reckless endangerment, and she's been sulking." He took a seat next to her and began massaging her feet. "Feeling better now?"

"Mmm... as long as you keep that up."

"But if I have to keep this up, how am I supposed to get any of that popcorn?"

In response, she tossed a few kernels at him, and he did his best to catch them in his mouth. After watching him miss far more than he caught, Mac stifled her giggles and fed him a few pieces herself. She willed herself not to be swayed by his nearness, but the sensation of his lips against her fingers was more than she could take. Fortunately, they were out of popcorn.

As nonchalantly as she could manage, she swung her feet to the floor and began cleaning up the wayward kernels on the carpet. "I had a good time today, regardless of that creepy guy."

"I did, too. I'm not used to the whole neighborhood-family thing. But it's kind of nice." A distant smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I'm thinking about that time we went running, and those little kids roped us into a race. Remember? We went tearing across the park, each with a six-year-old riding piggyback, and I almost wiped out that biker ..." The smile vanished as he realized that she wasn't sharing the memory. "Oh, Christ," he breathed. "That wasn't you, was it?"

Mac shook her head silently, and his face fell. "Now I'm really losing it," he said, sounding overwhelmed. "I'm starting to mix up memories of you with memories of her."

"It's all right," she began uncertainly.

"No, it's not! How could it be all right? For either of us?" Harm sprang to his feet, pushing his hands through his short hair. "I'm sorry, Mac. I'm trying ..."

"*You're sorry?*" she repeated, her voice trembling. "Do you know how much it's killing me to put you through this? It's like I'm watching your heart break over and over again, and I know it's my fault, but I don't know how to make it right!"

"It's not your fault." He turned back to face her, and the raw pain in his eyes was almost blinding. "I know we have to do it. I'd do anything to keep you safe. But there's so much I can't make myself understand. No matter what I do, I'll never know what it would have been like if she'd lived. I'll never know if anything I said or did could have ever made a difference. And worst of all ..." His voice dropped so low that she barely heard his next words. "I honestly don't know if I'm falling for Sarah Mackenzie or trying to hold on to Diane Schonke."

She stared at him, trying to put the implications of that confession out of her mind. Right now, he was the one who needed support. "Harm, you can do this," she said softly. "We can do this. It'll only be a little while longer, and then we can get out of this nightmare."

"I don't know if I can this time," he whispered. "Mac, I was so close to - to being able to let go. I didn't see her in you anymore. I swear I didn't. It's just ... I never did say goodbye. And all this is making me realize that I still don't know how to do that."

She wanted desperately to take him in her arms and soothe it all away, but she knew she was the last person who could help him right now. Every word from her only added to the tangled, twisted world he faced. Like so many others, this was a storm he would have to weather alone.

Shaking his head, he grabbed his jacket. "I need to get out of here for a while. Will you be okay on your own?"

"I'm a Marine." She offered an empty smile. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know. Somewhere I can think straight, if such a place exists. I'll try not to be gone too long, but ..." He forced himself to meet her gaze. "Please don't be hurt if I sleep on the couch tonight."

Blinking back tears, she nodded understanding. Then he was gone, and she collapsed onto the sofa, a pillow muffling her sobs. The unfairness of life was suddenly brutally apparent to her. The most amazing man she'd ever known wanted to love her, but couldn't. Was there anything as tragic as that?

He sat on the bed, watching her pack her duffel bag with a distinct feeling of loss. "Are you sure you have to leave tonight?" he asked, sounding very much like a pleading child.

Diane shook her head with a smile. "If I want to avoid being declared UA, I do. Besides, you don't need me hanging around. You've got law school to prep for and a Stearman

to tinker with.”

“I know which one of those options sounds more appealing.” He rolled his eyes, but he didn’t feel like smiling. Having her there had become one of the constants in his currently tumultuous life. Their relationship had changed over the past few weeks. Neither had spoken of it, but then again, they’d started to communicate without speaking. It felt so right, fighting with her over the remote, or attempting to cook dinner together, or falling asleep in the hammock with her head on his chest ...

He wasn’t sure when it had happened, but somewhere between here and that first day in the hospital, he’d stopped seeing her as the spunky cadet he and Keeter had adopted as their little sister. As he sat there, trying to figure out how to say goodbye, he knew beyond a doubt that he loved her.

“I guess that’s it.” She zipped up the bag and turned to face him. Seeing the sadness there, her face crumpled. “This is like Annapolis all over again,” she said softly. “It sucked then, and it sucks now.”

“Yeah, it does.” He tried to stay positive. “Look, I’ll be at Georgetown for three years, and D.C.’s not that far from Norfolk. It won’t have to be another six years before we get together again.”

“No, just another six months until I’m back in port.” She sighed, standing up to wrap her arms around his neck. “I’m proud of you,” she told him. “You’re going to do great things.”

“I can’t let you go like this,” he whispered. “There are so many things I want to tell you - you’ve been so incredible through this whole thing ...”

“I think the phrase is ‘thank you’,” she suggested with a small smile.

“That doesn’t begin to cover it. But it’ll have to do.”

“You’re more than welcome.” She brushed her lips against his cheek. “Take care of yourself, Harm. I’ll see you soon.”

And he stood in the front door as she walked toward her car, not looking back. Sarah Rabb came up behind her grandson and saw the conflict in his handsome features. “Seize the moment, dear,” she suggested quietly.

“It’s too late, Grandma.”

“How’s that? She’s still here, isn’t she?” The old woman swatted him on the arm. “Get out there, Harmon. You’ll hate yourself if you don’t.”

Drawing a long, shaky breath, he charged out onto the porch. “Diane, wait.”

She turned slightly, a little puzzled. “Harm, I - ”

The rest was lost as he enfolded her in his arms and kissed her deeply. He felt her body melt against him as she surrendered to the kiss. Finally, they separated, and took a moment to catch their breath. “That’s what I wanted to tell you,” he said simply, praying he

hadn't just destroyed their friendship forever.

She stared at him, taken aback, until she found her voice. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Because I was terrified of what you'd say back."

"Then let me enlighten you." And she pulled his head back down to hers. The second kiss was desperate, hungry, because they knew how long it would have to last them. When it was over, her eyes were shining. "This is going to be the longest six months of my life."

2132 PST
Miramar MCAS

After walking aimlessly along the shore for twenty minutes, attempting to clear his mind, Harm stopped on a small pier and leaned on the rail. The moonlight reflected off the calm, dark sea, and for a moment he let himself imagine that he was back on the deck of the *Patrick Henry*. For a while, everything had been so simple. He'd been flying again, and loving every minute of it. It wasn't as if he'd been able to get back the life he'd had eight years ago: that wasn't possible, and it wasn't really what he wanted. But for a few months, he'd been able to escape the whirlwind that was JAG Headquarters and examine the course of his life.

And for four years, the course of his life had been intertwined with that of Sarah Mackenzie. Saying goodbye to her had been harder than she'd ever know, but in some way, it had been a relief. He couldn't deny that the attraction between them had grown, but sometimes he still felt as though being with her was a betrayal of Diane's memory - as if her appearance was all that mattered. He'd needed that time away to figure out just why Mac was so important to him, and he'd found his answer. He'd realized it the day he found himself missing their courtroom battles. There was nothing of Diane in her fierce cross-examinations and passionate closings.

But he'd returned to find that the rules of engagement had changed. As they struggled to regain their friendship, he'd begun to question himself. The way she carried her new rank and position distanced her even more from the woman he'd loved all those years ago, but there were other complications. When they'd taken on that fateful case in Australia, Diane had been the furthest thing from his mind. Until ...

He couldn't explain it, even now. But when he saw Mac on the beach with Mic Brumby, laughing and letting herself have fun for the first time in ages, all the memories came flooding back. For a split-second, she'd reminded him of Diane more than ever. So when she'd confronted him on the ferry, the hurt was still too fresh to ignore - and in speaking his heart, he'd hurt her, too, and sent her straight into another's arms.

He still held out a sliver of hope that he could somehow make this right. When Webb had first explained this little operation, he'd hoped that maybe facing his ghosts head-on would help him resolve whatever it was he felt. But he'd underestimated the hold Diane still had on him. Seeing the way things might have been only reinforced his guilt. If he'd asked her to marry him, maybe she would have agreed to leave the Navy, or find a post on land. It might not have been the perfect 'happily ever after', but at least she'd still be alive ...

A shrill beeping from his cell phone pierced his reverie. Harm cursed silently and

pulled the phone from his pocket. "Rabb."

"Trouble," Webb's tense voice reported. "We've lost Trent, and there's a good possibility he's heading your way. That guy Mac talked to must've been one of his."

"Hold on," Harm instructed, instantly alert. "What do you mean, you've lost him?"

"We had his right-hand man tailed, but they gave us the slip somewhere. His 'company' leases a Learjet, which left a private hangar at Dulles a few hours ago. We don't have any solid reports as to where they're going, but my gut says take cover."

"Terrific. Okay, we can be out of here inside of an hour. I'll go get Mac, and - "

"Wait a minute. She's not with you?"

The feeling of dread gnawing at his stomach suddenly increased. "She's at home. Did you - ?"

"I just called there. No one answered."

"Oh, Jesus," he breathed. "Call you back." And he took off at a sprint toward officer housing.

Same time Officer Housing

The first sensation to penetrate the gray haze that clouded her mind was the feel of the ropes that cut into her wrists. Mac shook off the lingering effects of the unknown drug and assessed her situation as calmly as possible. She was bound to a chair in the basement of their house - when had she started thinking of this place as their house? - and being watched by a surly-looking man with a Beretta. Not altogether promising.

"Hey," he called up the stairs, never taking his eyes off her. "She's awake."

Going against her Marine training, she let all of the fear she felt show through in her expression. Maybe they'd underestimate her. "What's going on?" she stammered. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I think you know, Colonel." Another man appeared on the stairs, studying her with a smirk that could only be described as wicked. She recognized him immediately from the profile Webb had shown them: this was Harlan Trent. "I have to admit, this was an ingenious way to hide."

"I'm not a colonel," she protested vainly, her voice trembling. "I was a lieutenant. Please, I don't know what you're talking about. There's been a mistake - "

"There certainly has. But it was yours." He folded his arms and grew deadly serious. "This Lieutenant Schonke of yours was an excellent cover. The thing is, we do our homework. When I checked with the poor girl's mother, the look on her face told me everything I needed

to know.”

Conceding, Mac dropped the helpless-female act and met his gaze unflinchingly. “So now what?”

“Now I find out what you know. And what your partner knows. And then I decide how much fun I’m going to have with both of you.”

“He doesn’t know anything,” she claimed, a little too fast. “He’s only trying to help me - ”

Trent lifted an eyebrow at her reaction. “He knows enough,” he replied. “He knows why you’re here. That’s more than enough reason to get rid of him. No loose ends, Colonel Mackenzie. You know how it works.”

She stared straight ahead, trying not to panic. Harm might be home any minute, and he’d be walking unarmed and distracted into a trap. What the hell was this guy’s plan, anyway? What motive did he have for keeping her alive even this long? “You having fun yet, Trent?” she challenged.

“Oh, I’m having a blast. What’s the matter, can’t figure out why you’re still here? I’ll clue you in. I need to know how much of our little organization has been compromised. I need to know who you’ve told, and what you’ve told them.”

“Everyone and everything,” she replied without missing a beat.

“Ah, that’s right, you’re the big, bad Marine, aren’t you? All you’ll give me is name, rank and serial number. There goes my grand plan.” Trent fixed her with a cold glare that almost - *almost* - made her look away. “Guess I’ll just have to get what I need out of your boy-toy.”

Mac froze, but forced her voice to remain neutral. “Just because he’s a squid doesn’t mean you can break him.”

“Ordinarily, I’d say you’re right. But the good commander isn’t really at his best right now, is he?” He leaned in close, and she battled the instinct to recoil in disgust. “I told you, we do our homework. Rabb has plenty of weaknesses, and I’ve got two of them right here. His dead sweetheart, and his lovely partner. A pretty powerful combination, I think.”

On any other day, in any other place, she would have looked him right in the eye and told him to bring it on. But she’d never seen Harm as lost and unsure as he’d been that night. If she’s pulled him into this nightmare only to get him killed ...

“Anyway, time’s a-wasting. Say goodnight, Colonel.”

As the needle jabbed into her arm once again, her last conscious thought was a fervent prayer that Harm would either come home with a SWAT team or not at all.

His heart pounding, Harm crept silently along the side of the house. There was no sign of forced entry, but he wasn’t about to walk in the front door and give any waiting attackers a

free shot. Remembering the loose window frame in the bedroom, he slid the blade of his pocketknife under the latch and eased the window up. It was relatively simple to climb through and close it again. He quickly retrieved his sidearm from the desk drawer, loaded it, and stealthily moved down the hall.

Trent's hired goons were appropriately menacing, but not very observant. Harm easily got the drop on one, cuffing him with the butt of his gun. The other was a little more alert, but in the wrong direction. He suffered the same fate. Collecting their weapons, the commander heard voices coming up from the basement.

"Did you hear something?"

"Uh, not really, boss."

"Well, I did. Check it out, will you?"

Harm flattened himself against the wall, lying in wait for his next adversary. When a hand with a gun appeared around the corner, he roughly yanked the attached arm back and drove his knee into the man's midsection. As the goon doubled over, he felled him with a vicious right hook.

Three up, three down. *You picked a bad time to screw with me, guys.* He took a calculated risk and faked the other man's voice. "Piece of cake, boss."

"Good. Drag him down here, and we'll sort this whole thing out."

It was dark in the basement, and he didn't know how many more people might be down there. But there was no other choice. If Mac was down there ... *Please, God, let her still be alive ...*

"Looking for me?"

Trent whirled and brought his weapon up at the same time, coming face to face with a service pistol held by a very determined naval officer. "Well, hello, Commander Rabb. This isn't the way you were supposed to make your entrance."

"Sorry. I'll read my script next time."

"No matter. I still have the trump card."

Harm's voice hardened. "Where is she, Trent?"

"'She' who? Colonel Mackenzie, or your little girlfriend?" The other man laughed, an ominous sound. "Doesn't matter. They both share the same fate. I always did like a thirty-eight." Reaching up with one hand, he clicked on the dusty light bulb, and in an instant, Harmon Rabb's world shattered.

Mac lay on the floor behind Trent, a crimson stain spreading across her white shirt. Seeing her transported him back to that awful day on the Norfolk docks, when he'd unzipped the body bag to reveal the lifeless face of the woman he'd loved. He dimly heard Meg Austin's

voice in his head, as he'd stumbled back, feeling sick ...

"Sir - Harm, are you all right? Harm?"

But he couldn't afford to get caught up in the past. His features were a mask, but his eyes flashed as he slowly asked, "Is she alive?"

"For now. But you'll have to go through me to get to her." The arms dealer kept his pistol trained on him, wary of how he might react. "If you want to help her, you'll put down your gun and tell me what information she passed to the DIA."

"Like you'd let us live even if I did," Harm spat out, his gaze fixed on Mac's body.

"Suit yourself. We can stand here as long as you want, while she bleeds to death. Your move, hotshot."

Conflicting thoughts raged in his mind, so intensely that he wanted to scream. At last, seeing no other option, he slowly lowered his weapon. "I don't have much choice, do I?" he mumbled, defeated.

Trent smile. "Wise move."

But in that split-second of complacency, Harm whipped his gun back up and fired. He knew he couldn't fully beat the other man's reflexes, but he hoped desperately for a shred of luck ...

Both weapons discharged at the same time. He barely felt the bullet sear through his upper left arm: he was focused on his own bullet, which struck Trent square in the chest. Not wasting a second, he rushed past the incapacitated criminal and fell to his knees by his partner's side.

"Please, God," he choked out, gathering her motionless form in his arms. "Not her ..."
His fingers fumbled for a pulse, and he was surprised to find it strong and steady. Not comprehending, he searched for injuries, and found none.

It was a mind game, he realized. The bastard had found out how Diane died and used it against him. Hot tears stung his eyes as a new kind of relief washed over him. She was all right. She wasn't being taken from him like so many others in his life. At that moment, all the chaos and anguish of the past week was released, and he wept quietly, the tears falling into her dark hair.

Mac came to consciousness slowly, with the inexplicable feeling that she was safe. As awareness returned, she realized that someone warm and familiar was cradling her protectively - Harm. She began to feel his shoulders shaking with silent sobs, and she struggled to open her eyes.

"Harm?" she questioned, but it came out a whisper.

"It's okay, Sarah," he answered haltingly, not bothering to hide the tears streaming down his face. "It's over."

Sarah?

She looked around, taking in the situation. "He wanted to use us against each other ... he was going to - " Seeing the very real blood soaking his sleeve, she sat straight up with a gasp. "Harm, you're hurt!"

"It's not bad. I just ... can I just hold you for a minute?"

At this, her eyes brimmed with tears as well. "Any time, flyboy."

They clung to each other for a few minutes, saying nothing, each simply taking comfort in the other's presence. Finally they rose from the floor, still holding on to each other, and called base security. An ambulance took Trent away, while his three friends rode to the brig with ice packs in hand. A medic cleaned and bandaged Harm's wound - the bullet had gone clean through - and the officer in charge took their statements. When all was said and done, and the last of the MPs was leaving, Webb dashed through the door, looking as harried as either of them had ever seen him. "You two okay?" he asked without preamble.

Mac looked up at Harm. His eyes were still tinged with red, and she could feel his weariness through their entwined hands. But there was also a sense of calm that hadn't been there before. "Yeah," she replied. "Took you long enough, Webb."

"Hey, it's hard to get a jet off the ground at midnight, even in D.C. But now that I'm here, I might as well stay and debrief you, right?"

"Tomorrow, Clay," Harm said quietly. "I can guarantee you that we won't forget any of this before then."

Webb looked from one officer to the other, noticed how close they stood, and decided not to question. "All right. I'll call in the morning. And I'll make the arrangements for you to rejoin your lives."

As he left them, the intelligence agent just shook his head. It didn't take advanced sociology training to figure out that Mic Brumby and Renee Peterson were history. With his luck, the admiral would end up blaming it all on him and his schemes. Oh, well, all part of the job. No rest for the wicked, and all that.

When Mac finished showering off the fake blood, she came into the bedroom to find Harm sitting on the bed in the exact same place she'd left him fifteen minutes before. She hesitated. "You still with me, sailor?"

"Hmm? Sure. I, um, didn't -- I mean ..." He surrendered, looking embarrassed. "I think I didn't want to let you out of my sight, and this was about as close as I could get without getting decked."

"How do you know I would've decked you?" she queried with a sly smile. Before he could respond to that, she tugged at the buttons of his ruined shirt. "Let me help you with that. I'm sure your arm's being uncooperative."

"That's one way of putting it," he said ruefully, allowing her to slip the shirt off. When she stood up to throw it out, he caught her hand, stalling the motion. "Mac ..."

She could tell he was struggling with something, and sat down beside him on the bed, keeping her hand in his. "Earlier you called me Sarah," she pointed out gently. "I kind of liked it."

Smiling a little, he started over. "Sarah, there's something I want to say, but I'm probably going to trip over my words a few times. Can you be patient with me while I sort this out?"

"Of course," she said softly, a flicker of hope beginning to glow.

"This whole week has been hell, but it's helped me understand a lot of things. I've been holding onto my guilt over what happened to Diane for so long that I thought it was all I had left of her. But that's not the way it is. The things I've been remembering, they're the good things, like you said. For the first time, I feel like I can move forward without betraying some part of her. So that's what I want to do - move forward. And I want to start by being completely and totally honest with you."

He was facing her directly now, holding both of her hands and gazing straight through to her soul. "When I thought I might lose you tonight, I was more scared than I think I've ever been. And it wasn't just because of the way I lost Diane. It was because I couldn't stand the idea of my life without you. You are so incredible, Sarah. You're strong, and brilliant, and funny, and beautiful ... and yes, she was all of those things, but not in the same way. I don't know why it took something like this to make me see it, but I know now that she isn't the reason I feel this way about you. I tried to say this before, but something wouldn't let me finish. So I'm going to say it now. The things I loved about her and the things I love about you are very different."

There. He'd actually done it. He'd used the word 'love'. As she attempted to get a hold of her emotions, he reached out and captured her lips with his in the sweetest, most tender kiss she could have ever imagined. "What do you say?" he asked lightly. "Will you help me finish what we started here? Learning how to move forward?"

She nodded silently, and leaned forward to kiss him again. Together they lay back on the bed, instinctively curling up around each other, and settled in to sleep. As she reached over to turn off the lamp, she slipped Diane's ring off her finger and placed it in the box on the table. "Thank you," she whispered, almost inaudibly, and reveled in the feel of his arms around her. For the first time in what seemed like forever, the coming day held endless promise.

December 13, 1995

Harm -

Well, here I am, back in the Med. The Seahawk's a pretty good billet, even if the CAG is even stiffer than you described him. But hey, I don't report to him. I catch myself stopping on the flight deck a lot, watching the jets trap, and it makes me miss you even more. Why couldn't we have both been assigned to the same carrier, just once? Oh, wait, they call that fraternization. Never mind. Heard you got nominated for a Distinguished Flying Cross for your little adventure out here. I wish I'd been on board just a couple of months earlier to see **that** go down. When I said you'd get to help people by being a JAG, that wasn't what I had in mind. But I'm glad to see how well you're doing.

I hope you really do understand why I suggested we take a break from each other. Believe me, it was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I still believe it was the right choice. You're just getting a new career on track, and I've got at least two more tours at sea before I'm eligible for any stateside posts. And the truth is, I like it here. You understand that better than anyone. Seeing each other for a couple weeks at a time worked while you were in school, but now that you're TDY all the time, and we keep missing each other by inches ... sometimes the hello isn't worth the goodbye. Does that make sense?

I think I'm using this cruise as a measure of how well we do without each other. You'll be able to live your life in D.C. without anything complicated to hold you back, and I'll be able to decide what I want for my career. When it's over, in four more months, maybe we'll both have a clearer picture of what we want. I have to admit, though, that right now, with your picture on my desk and the catapult going off over my head ... it's awfully hard to picture the future without you.

So, one step at a time, and we'll deal with that future when it gets here. Take care of yourself, Harm. I'll be back before you know it.

Love always, Diane.

1845 EST

Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia

Harm gazed out at the unending rows of gray stone markers and rechecked the directions in his hand. He hadn't returned to this place since the funeral: perhaps staying away had been part of his denial of the fact that she was here at all. Today, though, acceptance came a little more easily. And there was one last thing he wanted to do for her.

Finding the site, he laid the lilies he'd brought in front of the headstone and traced his fingers over the name. Kneeling in the cool grass, he took a deep breath and began.

"Hey, Di," he said softly. "It's me. I'm sorry I haven't come before this. I guess I wasn't ready. It's not like I think you're actually here or anything, but I needed to talk to you, and this seemed as good a place as any. Tomorrow's your birthday, you know. Thirty-five. Can you believe that? Myself, I'm rapidly approaching the top of the proverbial hill. I picked up commander a couple of months ago, and I realized I was the same age and rank as the professors we used to make fun of. Go figure.

"A lot's happened since - since we last talked. I got my eyes fixed, and I went back on active flight status last year. It was amazing - I even ended up with another one of those DFCs you liked so much. But it's a job for the young, and I missed my life in Washington. I never expected to feel like I belonged at JAG the way I did on the carrier, but somewhere along the road, that's exactly what happened. And in a sense, I have you to thank for that."

He sighed. "I'm finally starting to get past the what-ifs. I can think about you without being crushed by my guilt. Some of it is because I know Hobarth is dead. Did you even know that he was the one who shot you? All for a stupid disciplinary report? I went crazy when I found out - I almost killed him myself. But I had someone there watching out for me, someone who got me through it. She's gotten me through more difficult times than she even knows. And that's what I came here to tell you.

"Her name is Sarah. Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie. Would you believe I fell for a Marine? She's my partner at JAG, and has been for most of the past four years. I guess I always knew she was special, but ... God, Di, she looks so much like you that it's scary. For a long time, that's all I could see, and I know it wasn't fair to either of you, but I couldn't help it. But that's over now. I know that I love her for who she is, and I know that I want to be with her for the rest of my life.

"I know you'll understand. Hell, if you could, you'd probably smack me upside the head for not figuring it out earlier. But I had to come, so you'd hear it from me. I loved you, Diane, and you'll always be with me. But it's time for me to let go."

**** THE END ****