



Graphic by [Steph](#)

**Rating: R for sexual content and language**

Classification: Vignette, Romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Adrift," "Tribunal," "Defending His Honor"

Disclaimer: If I owned the characters, they'd already be doing this on screen. Well, maybe not in an 8 p.m. time slot, but you get the picture.

Author's Notes: This is ALL Sharon's fault. I made the mistake of telling her I had an idea for a story based on a line from "Defending His Honor," and she immediately started sending smut vibes my way. Shar, if it wasn't for you, I'd be doing my EE homework right now. Whether that's a good thing or not ... well, the jury's still out on that one. For the purposes of this story, try to forget what you know about "In Country," the episode that followed "DHH," because if this story had happened, "sharing body heat" would've had a whole new meaning...

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*"What's so funny?"*

*"The thought of you with a wife."*

*"Hey, it could happen."*

*-Harm and Mac, "Defending His Honor"*

**2313 EDT**

**North of Union Station**

I don't know when exactly it was that she fell asleep. But I'm glad she did.

It tells me that she's comfortable here, that she doesn't feel the need to keep her guard up at all times. She's only stayed here once before, under the pretext of watching my back during the madness with Palmer and Webb, and I suspect that she barely closed her eyes that night. God, am I lucky Jordan never found out about that. Things are different now, of course. We're different - different to everyone, perhaps, except each other. I'm quite certain that a year ago, she would never have allowed herself to fall asleep on my couch, her long skirt swirling delicately around her folded legs. She would have avoided it at all costs, less because of any discomfort with me than because of all the bizarre circumstances churning around us. She was getting married. Jordan had just died. I was about to leave for carrier quals and, although I

didn't know it at the time, I was hours away from single-handedly throwing our lives into a tailspin. I hate hindsight.

Now, though, it feels as if we're almost back to that extraordinary place we were in three years ago, the one I was such a moron to leave behind. It's not entirely as if we've gone back in time, of course: I'm not sure I'd appreciate it as much if that were the case. We're older, and yes, a little wiser, and every time I wonder if we're any closer to figuring things out, I see some kind of sign that reassures me. Like the most important person in my world sleeping peacefully on my couch.

Maybe I'm reading too much into this. She's probably exhausted after the week we had. If defending Captain Sebring had been difficult for me, prosecuting him must have been a nightmare for her. As we walked out of the courtroom this afternoon, something compelled me to ask her to dinner. It had begun as a friendly offer: comfortable, like the evenings we'd recently spent discussing cases over dinner here. Somehow, though, without any real conscious effort from either of us, it metamorphosed into something else entirely. Before I knew it, I'd made reservations for Palio's, and she'd announced her intention to go home and change before we 'went out.' Somehow Harriet overheard that last part -- I'm convinced she's got radar for that kind of thing. Regardless, we had an amazing evening, and I don't think either of us really wanted to say goodbye as we reached the parking lot of the restaurant.

I managed to delay the inevitable by inviting her back to my place, ostensibly to talk about the appeal that we'd just been assigned. Dinner had gone so well that we hadn't talked about work at all, but I was still terrified that she'd see my offer as exactly what it was: a ploy to extend the evening. We've both been so cautious about this relationship lately ... but if she saw through me, she didn't let on. We simply talked about the case and relaxed for a while. I offered to drive her home when she started to look tired, but I'm not sure she wanted it all to end, either. Her counteroffer involved coffee, and I got up to make a pot, relaying something about Webb's latest report from Russia. By the time I returned to the living room with her mug, she was already asleep.

I've been sitting here watching her for the last fifteen minutes, trying to decide what to do. I don't want to wake her up, because she'll insist on driving herself home, and not only do I worry about her safety, I also want her to stay. I'm not too proud to admit that to myself anymore. But she can't stay curled up like that all night. She'll end up hurting in the morning, and I want her lingering memories of tonight to be nothing but good.

I'm sure this is a bad idea, but once again, I can't help it. I'm so tired of listening to that warning voice in the back of my brain that keeps pulling me away from her. This time, I'm going to bend one of those carefully-crafted rules, and if I don't end up getting decked for it, maybe I'll start to rethink my outlook.

Slowly, I stand up and cross over to her, bending down to slip one arm under her knees and the other under her neck. I'm trying not to think about what she might do if she wakes up right now, but she barely stirs as I lift her into my arms. My back offers a twinge of protest as I straighten up -- stupid fucking ejection seats -- but the feeling of having her this close overpowers any pain that might have resulted from the effort. As gently as possible, I move toward the bedroom and lay her down on the bed, drawing the covers up to her waist. I wish to God I didn't have to let go, but I know I can't stay: she might not kill me for putting her in bed, but I'm fairly sure that if she awoke to find me there with her, I'd be on the receiving end of a karate chop. One step at a time.

I wonder who the hell I think I'm kidding with that assertion. One step at a time? Sure, one step forward, five steps back. At least, that's how it's been for most of the past three years.

Maybe it won't be like that anymore. Maybe after all this insanity, fate has decided we're owed a little happiness. With that hope in mind, I release her carefully, and she turns ever so slightly, burying her head further into the pillow. Seeing her like this is almost enough to undo me completely. How can someone so strong, so luminous, be so incredibly delicate?

As a faint smile plays across her lips, I have to force myself to move back, out of the room. I don't know what's going to happen when she wakes up, but right now, this feels right. She belongs here, and I'm the biggest fool on this earth to have denied that for so long. I find myself recalling that brief moment in my office, when she looked at me with a flicker of amusement and tried to picture me with a wife. I have trouble picturing it myself sometimes, but when I'm totally honest with myself, I can do it. Someone to confide in, someone to go through life with ... someone to hold onto at midnight without the slightest hint of doubt about what will happen in the morning...

It *could* happen. But not without her.

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I'm not used to waking up without knowing where I am.

My internal clock is telling me that it's almost one a.m., and I'm not in my own bed. I'm in someone's bed, apparently, but it isn't mine. I'm sure of that. This isn't standard operating procedure for me, but I'm not going to panic. There's something familiar about the scent of this pillow, and I inhale deeply, simultaneously enjoying it and trying to identify it. Almost immediately it brings to mind images of courtroom battles and intense investigations, gold wings and heart-stopping smiles...

Oh, Christ -- what am I doing in Harm's *bed*?

Only a second passes before I realize that I'm alone, and that I'm still wearing the clothes I'd spent half an hour choosing before our dinner. Thank God. If I'd done something as outrageous as seducing my best friend, I'd like to think I would have at least remembered it. I must have fallen asleep. I hope that didn't hurt his feelings. We'd been talking about work at the time, mostly because both of us realized just how far we'd come in just a few hours, and we were both afraid to push our luck. At least, I think that's what it was. I've been trying to tell myself that I'm okay with our current situation, that I'm not in a hurry to define our relationship, but that isn't true. I've always wanted more from him, even when I was doing everything in my power not to let him affect me. Now, for the first time, I'm beginning to see that he really does want the same things, and that he might actually want them badly enough to let go of his fears at last.

But if I fell asleep in the living room ... did he carry me in here?

The idea sends a flutter of warmth straight through my body, all the way to my fingers, toes, and other significant parts that I'm not willing to consider at the moment. I'm not usually comfortable with allowing someone else to take care of me. I don't like to be babied, but somehow I know that it wouldn't be like that with him. I wouldn't have to surrender anything of myself to be with him - I just know it. He's probably the only person in my life who would have permission to carry me anywhere. I only wish I'd been at least halfway awake when he'd

done it, just to feel his powerful arms around me, to lay my cheek against his chest and feel the rhythm of his heart.

It's already late. I guess I might as well stay. Obviously Harm doesn't mind, or I wouldn't be here. But there's no harm in checking on him, is there?

Slowly, I stand up from the bed and feel my way down the steps. The only light is jutting through the blinds in dim, jagged spikes, falling from the stark streetlight outside the window. It's hardly enough to help me navigate the apartment, but I don't want to wake him if he's asleep. And I know this place pretty well after all this time --

*\*thunk\**

Owww. Okay, maybe I don't know it so well. My foot apparently just came into contact with the coffee table. I can hear Harm jerk awake -- damn it -- and in an instant, he's turned on the lamp near his head. "Mac?" he asks instinctively, his voice roughened by sleep but tinged with concern. "You all right?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that." I sink into the chair across from the couch as he pulls himself partially upright, leaning on one elbow. "Sorry about falling asleep on you, too."

"Don't worry about it. You could use the rest." He's wearing only a T-shirt and boxers, and although I've seen him in less, I'm having trouble remembering why I wandered out here. Actually, I'm having trouble remembering anything besides my name, rank, and serial number. This is just too strange an experience. Why do things feel different now? "Is everything okay?"

"Well, I have to say that I'm not accustomed to waking up somewhere different from the place I fell asleep."

He looks almost embarrassed at being found out. "You're not heavy," he points out softly. "If you'd stayed on the couch with your legs all tucked up like that, you would've been one pissed-off Marine in the morning."

"So you figured that the couch was good enough for you, but not me? Even though you're seven inches taller?" I try to keep my expression stern as I cross my arms over my chest, but I know he can read the gratitude in my eyes.

He only shrugs. "Chivalry isn't dead yet."

"Right."

He swings his feet to the floor and stands up, moving toward the closet. "Now that you're awake, do you want something more comfortable to sleep in? I've got about five million T-shirts you could borrow..."

I'm not listening, though: something on the couch has caught my attention. I reach underneath the tangled blanket and come up with a heating pad, the kind my grandmother used to use when her back would --

"Harm!"

He reappears, bewildered by the note of accusation in my voice. "What?"

Undaunted, I hold the evidence out toward him. "Your back's been bothering you again, and not only did you carry me across the apartment -- "

"It's only thirty feet."

" -- but you thought you could sleep on this couch all night?"

"Mac, for Christ's sake. I'm not crippled. It just acts up on me every so often. Three punch-outs will do that to you."

He holds out a well-worn USS Seahawk T-shirt as a peace offering, his eyes innocently asking forgiveness, and I know I can't possibly stay annoyed for long. "You're masochistic," I inform him, snatching the shirt out of his hand and heading toward the bathroom to change. "Chivalry will get you only so far, and then it'll get you permanently assigned to a wheelchair."

"Lighten up, ninja-girl. I'm just feeling my age, that's all."

Midway through the motion of pulling his shirt over my head, I have to smile at the use of the nickname. Ninja-girl. It's been a long, long time since he last let that one slip. I have to stop and consider my options for moment. Do I leave my bra on? I hate sleeping in it, and it's not as if the T-shirt is see-through or anything. Shit, why do I sound like I'm trying to justify something here? With a swift snap, I unhook the irritating garment and toss it in the pile with my skirt and top. "Your age?" I echo, returning to the living room and analyzing his reaction. The Harm-sized shirt hits me just above the knees, and I know he has at least a fleeting appreciation for my legs. They are awfully nice legs, after all. "You're not over the hill yet, sailor."

"I'm within shouting distance of it, though." His gaze flicks over my attire briefly, but he's always been a master at shielding his emotions. Sometimes I hate that part of him, but I'm aware that nothing and no one can change it.

Maybe, though, just this once, I can find my way under that shield. I've been letting my guard down around him lately, and if he understands that at all, he should be able to respond in kind. "Harm," I begin slowly, "about what I said earlier this week..."

"You said a lot of things," he counters lightly, but after seeing my meaning, he relents. "You mean the part about not being able to picture me with a wife?"

"That's the one. But that isn't exactly what I said. I said I was *trying* to picture it, not that I couldn't. As it so happens, I *can* picture it. It just wasn't easy."

"Nothing with me ever is, is it?" he says quietly, glancing away.

"Nothing easy is really worth having," I assert calmly before realizing that my mouth is running on a faster frequency than my brain. He offers a brief, rueful smile, his eyes still fixed on a point off to my left.

"Is that why we always seem to insist on doing everything the hard way?"

Oh, Lord. Am I really in the right frame of mind to follow this discussion the way it seems to be heading? Then again, if I back off, am I willing to take the risk of never having a night this

perfect again? "What have we been doing the hard way?" I ask softly, trying to keep my voice normal.

"Think about it, Mac. Think about where we were a year ago. You can't tell me that the path we've taken to get here was really the shortest distance between two points."

Where we were a year ago. A year ago, we were standing on the admiral's porch, acknowledging a flood of mistakes and simultaneously refusing to correct them. We were both clinging stubbornly to the roles we'd created, and it almost destroyed us both. My voice almost inaudible, I reply, "The shortest path isn't always the right one." He doesn't respond, turning slightly away from me, and without another thought I reach out to grasp his arm. "Why won't you look at me? Are you afraid of something?"

He looks down at my hand and answers. "I'm afraid of myself. I'm afraid of doing something wrong by you and losing everything we've worked so hard to build over the last few months."

"Do you really think that's going to happen?" I ask, stepping closer as the conflict rages in his handsome features. "Do you really think we want different things?"

His voice is so quiet, but at last he offers a reply. "Not anymore."

This is the point of no return, isn't it? My hyper-analytical brain is screaming at me to back off, warning me that we could be on the verge of blowing everything we have to pieces. But I can't live with the idea that what we have now is all we'll ever have. If he wants this, I want him to reach for it, and it might as well be now.

"Then for once in our lives, let's get on the same wavelength about this. Show me how you feel."

For about ten seconds, I'm paralyzed with fear as I await his answer. After all this time, all the scars we've inflicted on each other, I can't imagine where we'll go if this crumbles before our eyes.

Then, the most amazing thing happens, something I haven't dared to imagine for a long, long time. He turns fully toward me, and I witness the shield actually falling away from his soul. His eyes are burning with a depth of emotion I've never seen, and I have to fight to keep a sob from escaping. I can read him, utterly and completely now, and I can see that Harmon Rabb, Jr. is hopelessly in love.

"How's this?" he asks in a low, husky voice.

The sound causes me to physically grab for the counter in order to support myself. "I think we're on the same wavelength now," I whisper, unable to coax any further thought from my scrambled brain.

But he doesn't intend to leave it at that. The dam has burst now, and I know that once this man dedicates himself to something, he won't allow himself to fail. As he reaches for me, I realize that I've become one of his obsessions. Maybe I always have been -- God knows he's always been one of mine.

When his strong arms close around me, and his lips descend over mine, I'm overtaken by a sensation I'm ill-equipped to describe. I've been hovering on the brink of surrender for so long now that I just don't know what I'm supposed to do next. It feels like -- like coming home, like

seeing the dawn break, like a hundred other trite metaphors that fail to fully capture the moment. I feel tears swelling behind closed lids, and before long a stray droplet works its way free of the barrier.

He notices immediately, reaching up to brush it away as he's done more than once in the past. But it isn't a farewell gesture this time. I know that, simply by opening my eyes; and as if that weren't enough, he stuns me yet again -- this time with his words.

"I love you more than I thought I could love anyone," he breathes into my ear, his warm voice carrying not a trace of hesitation. "And yet I seem to make you cry more than anyone. I wish I understood that."

Good Lord above ... he said it.

I'm not sure I believe that he actually said it. For a second, I wonder if my mind somehow conjured up those words in his voice, but that possibility is vanquished when I pull back to stare at him, too shocked even to cry.

Harm offers a tentative laugh. "Are you that surprised that I love you?"

"I'm surprised that you admitted it," I fire back reflexively, my ability to organize thoughts temporarily disabled. He could easily have been offended by this, but he isn't -- he knows it's true as well as I do. "Would you be surprised if I said that I love you, too?"

"I'm not sure," he says honestly, and I hear a slight catch in his voice. God, is it possible that he really doesn't know? Is that why he's been holding back? Maybe I'm better at hiding my feelings than I thought...

I reach up to catch his chin in my hand -- I want there to be no room for misinterpretation on this. "I do, you know," I tell him simply, and a brilliant, beautiful light dawns behind his expressive eyes. "I'm not sure, but I think maybe I always have."

"Me, too," he agrees, shaking his head in amazement. "Then how did we turn this into such a ...a cluster-fuck?"

I have to laugh out loud at his colorful choice of words: otherwise, I'll probably cry for all the lost chances we can't get back. But none of that matters right now. He's here, I'm here, and for the first time, there's absolutely nothing standing between us.

"Forget all that," I say in a voice so firm that the suggestion comes out sounding like a command. He lifts an eyebrow, and draws me closer.

"Yes, ma'am."

Then his lips are upon me again, gently yet insistently trailing a path down to the nape of my neck, and I feel myself coming undone in his hands. This is heavenly ... but a small, evil voice in the back of my mind is suggesting that it might not be such a bad idea to wrest a certain measure of control away from him. He's always so damned determined to maintain the upper hand in everything, but this is one area in which I might have more power than he thinks.

Slowly I slide one knee up along the inside of his leg, just far enough, and almost immediately I receive the desired reaction. He stiffens, and the low moan that escapes his throat is muffled

by my shoulder. I smile in muted triumph: not only does he love me, but right now he really, truly wants me. Of course, having said that, I have to admit that I want him, too. I've wanted him before, in many ways, but right now I want him so badly that my center already aches with the blissful agony of anticipation. If he should stop and try to pull some kind of Boy Scout 'we should wait' crap, I think I might just take out his legs and pin him down, because I'm convinced that I won't be able to go on with life until I feel him within me.

His arms crush my body to his, and through the thin layers of cotton that separate us, I feel the evidence of his blinding lust straining impatiently against my stomach. The part of me that craves that particular contact, though, is much lower -- if only he weren't so damn tall...

He breaks off his assault on my neck, taking a moment to slow his ragged breathing. "This isn't exactly how I pictured this," he confesses, making no motion to pull away. "Is it all right?"

All right? Is he joking? "This is a fine time to ask, flyboy."

"I meant, it's been a long time since either of us has, you know..."

"Been with someone? Yeah, it has. But I hear it's like riding a bicycle."

He shoots me a dirty look. "Are you on anything?"

This is too much fun. "Like what? Hallucinogens?"

"Maaaac."

The desperate, passion-clouded look in his eyes is incredibly endearing, but I can't hold out any longer, either. "Yes, I'm on the pill. Don't worry so much."

He responds by swiftly sliding his hands down to my hips and lifting me into the air. My legs instinctively close around his waist, and at last we come into contact in that perfect place. The brief jolt of electricity that results is enough to make me clutch handfuls of his shirt. Effortlessly, he moves toward the bedroom, and I have only a second to wonder whether his back is likely to complain before we reach the bed.

"Funny ... I'm getting a serious case of déjà vu out of this," he says with a slight smirk, kneeling down to deposit me easily onto the edge of the bed. "How many times am I going to have to carry you in here?"

I lock my ankles around him and yank him forward so that he topples over top of me, and voila -- another point for me. "Shut up, sailor."

He rolls onto his side and slides a hand up along the inside of my thigh, and I'm almost embarrassed about the fact that he's going to find me drenched and trembling. Will he understand how much this means to me? I know this isn't just another conquest for him, but God, if he knew how many times I've woken with his name on my lips...

The thought ceases abruptly as I feel a gentle pressure through my already-damp cotton panties, and instinctively I close my eyes against the ripples of desire that are building. Neither of us has removed a single piece of clothing, but I'm so desperate to feel his touch anywhere and everywhere that I immediately sit up and pull the T-shirt over my head. No

sooner has it hit the floor than he takes one breast into his mouth, and my entire body draws taut.

"Clothing is overrated," I say when my brain finally kicks in.

"Downright irritating, sometimes," he mumbles in response, and we pull each other back to a standing position, hands tangling as we struggle to remove the rest of our clothes without breaking contact. At last, his shirt is flung towards the corner, and my panties are tangled with his boxers on the floor -- and suddenly the person I'm closest to in the world is standing in front of me, body and soul bared to me in a way I'd hardly dared to envision before tonight. I'm almost surprised at the way he looks to me: I'd half-expected the Adonis that haunted my fantasies, but instead he looks more ... real, I suppose. He's no longer the 'stickboy' I used to tease him about, and his body bears a number of small, fading scars that attest to all the bizarre encounters we've had over the past few years. But this reality is far better than any dream I've ever had, and I can almost forget the fact that for the first time, I'm bared to him as well.

Within moments, though, I notice that he's staring at me with an expression I don't entirely recognize. It looks like ... awe, maybe, or perhaps wonder. "I knew you were beautiful," he says quietly, "but..."

He trails off, and I realize that my face must be betraying the swirling emotions battling in my mind. "You really don't know, do you?" he asks, shaking his head.

"Don't know what?"

"You honestly don't realize how amazingly beautiful you are."

Oh, Jesus, this might just be the most perfect moment of my life. "No one who I really believed ever told me," I whisper.

Tenderly, he reaches out to pull me back onto the bed. "Believe it now," he murmurs into my ear, and with that, I'm certain that I'd do absolutely anything to keep him here with me like this. He sits back against the pile of pillows and draws me in so that I'm reclining against him, his powerful arms and legs encircling me. Slowly, he slides his hand down my body, starting at the base of my neck and moving all the way down to --

Involuntarily I suck in a sharp breath as his palm grazes against my clit, and I have to fight to keep a moan from escaping. He notices, and I imagine I can hear him smile as he suggests, "Relax. The walls are thick, and I don't have that many neighbors."

"Well, why didn't you say so -- ohhh!" Another rush of warmth flows over me as he probes gently, first with one long finger, then with two. His other hand is kneading my breast, rolling and stroking in perfect rhythm, and all the while he's lining small, light kisses up and down my neck. I'd like to make a comment about his incredible talent for multitasking, but the sensory overload has turned me into a shuddering, gasping mess. I can't believe this feels so good, so fast. How did I ever manage to survive so long without this man? "God, Harm, if you keep this up, I'm going to -- mmm..."

"That's the idea," he replies in a low voice, and I realize through my haze that all this is rather one-sided at the moment. Harmon Rabb, who could probably get just about any woman in Washington with little more than a smile, is pleasuring me, and he's completely ignoring his own desires to do it. Will wonders never fucking cease?

"Oh, oh, oh..." Where in the name of all that's holy did he learn to do that with his hand? His thumb is flicking against my clit while his fingers thrust in and out, and my hips are bucking into his hand without any direction whatsoever from me. I've lost any control I once had over my body, but even as the release is building, I fight it, terrified that I might never feel this way again.

"Let it come," he says quietly but firmly. "We're nowhere close to being finished here."

With that gentle directive, I'm lost. The sheer joy of being here at last, coupled with the excruciating bliss of his ministrations, sends me tumbling into oblivion, and I can't help crying out as everything swirls crazily around me. After a few moments to regain my equilibrium -- damn it, that's the second time tonight my timing's gone haywire -- I twist around in his arms and just stare at him with an expression that probably resembles complete and total adoration.

He's not smug or the least bit arrogant about the fact that he just got a Marine lieutenant colonel off literally single-handed. Instead, his eyes are smoldering with the kind of passion I always knew he was capable of. "Poor thing," I say sympathetically, reaching down to grasp his manhood as he inhales sharply. "You've been neglected."

"Are you kidding? Watching you, listening to you ... feeling you move ... I think it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen." He captures my lips again, just for a second, before continuing. "Having said that, I don't know if I can take much more of this without -- "

"Say no more." I still haven't entirely come down off my last high, but that doesn't mean I'm not ready to move ahead. Especially this -- I think I've longed to know what this felt like for years. As gracefully as I can manage, I shift around so that I'm straddling him, and carefully, I guide him into me.

His body trembles ever so slightly when we're joined at last, and I sense that he's trying to keep his emotions in check. Part of me wants to be disappointed that after all this, he's still holding back from me, but I know I can't expect him to surrender so much control in one night. It simply isn't in his nature. Still, I lean down to kiss his jawline and whisper teasingly, "Relax. The walls are thick, or so I've been told."

At that, he smiles, and nudges his hips upward, eliciting a gasp of surprise and pleasure from both of us. As we move together, I see still more of his emotional barriers crumbling, and the resulting satisfaction is almost as intense as the physical ecstasy we're driving toward. His thrusts grow harder and faster almost unconsciously, and before long I fall forward against him, unable to hold myself up. Christ, if what's happening now is any indication, this is going to be the most mind-blowing orgasm of my life. How can we possibly be getting this so right?

He draws me in close, and we cling to each other fiercely, urging each other onward. A harsh groan issues from his lips, and he manages to say, "This isn't going to -- last much longer if -- "

"Me either," I break in, attempting to control my breathing and failing spectacularly. "Don't even *think* about letting up now."

In response, he crushes me against his chest with another devastating thrust, and suddenly my body simply surrenders. The sound that reverberates off the walls must have come from me -- it sounds like a scream, but it's unlike any scream I've ever heard. As my inner muscles clench in sweet, agonizing release, the tremors drive him to his own climax, and I feel him shudder beneath me as cascading waves of heat course through my veins.

Harm is the first to break the silence, but only after allowing himself a few minutes to slow his panting, erratic breaths. "God," he says, sounding utterly overwhelmed. I'd make fun of his lack of eloquence, if I thought I could string together a coherent sentence myself. But I don't, so I won't. He turns my face toward him and offers a slow, deep kiss that just seems to sum everything up so perfectly. We move apart, not because either of us wants to, but because my legs are beginning to voice a protest. The sense of loss is acute, but as I roll to the side, I'm careful not to break contact completely. God help me, I don't ever want to break contact again if I can help it.

All right, Marine, engage your brain and come up with something to say. Otherwise, the silence will scratch and claw away at this fantastic, wonderful thing that just happened, and soon there will be nothing left but the awkwardness. Come on, damn it, I just need to say *something*, anything.

"That was ... nice."

Oh, nice going...

"Yeah," he agrees, sounding every bit as shell-shocked as I feel. "We should do it again sometime."

For some reason, that remark hits me just right, and I instantly dissolve into giggles. Harm blinks, a little bewildered: he probably wasn't aware that I was capable of giggling. "It wasn't that funny," he objects, embarrassed but smiling.

"No, you're right," I manage to say, still trying to control the bubbling laughter. "We should definitely do it again sometime ... How about now?"

He snorts in amusement, and we're both lost. I swear, I will never understand my life. I just had incredible sex with my partner, best friend and object of my fantasies, and we're both cracking up. Somehow, this makes sense, and I know instinctively that if we can laugh right now, then all this is going to work out just fine. At the moment, though, I just want to concentrate on how great I feel.

The laughter soon fades into a more comfortable silence, but it doesn't last long. He's staring up at the ceiling as he delivers this next comment, and it takes a moment to register in my mind. "Sarah," he asks almost reverently, "have I told you I love you yet?"

It's the 'Sarah' that gets me. It's not that I've accustomed myself to the 'I love you' part, either; but somehow hearing him say my name that way just means so much.

"Not quite like that, you haven't," I whisper in reply, blinking back tears again. I don't want to cry right now, so I forestall it by rolling back toward him and ensnaring him in a heated embrace. "Tell me that it's always going to be like this for us," I beg him quietly. "That we're not going to let anyone or anything get between us again now that we're here."

"Consider it a promise," he replies solemnly, sealing it with a meaningful kiss. "Whatever it takes, and wherever it leads."

"Good."

My internal clock chooses this moment to remind me that it's 0152, and I suddenly realize how exhausted I am. This week has been such a pain. If only we could have skipped straight to

tonight. If only we could have skipped straight to tonight from all those weeks and months and years ago ... But as inviting as the concept is, I know it never would have worked. There are no shortcuts to the kind of things I want for myself, and for him. We needed all this -- we needed time to make our mistakes and live our lives, and time to finally discover our own truths. Only now, after all that madness, can we understand what's right for us. And now, finally, I truly do understand.

I reach up to adjust my pillow, and Harm pushes himself up to a sitting position. "I guess I'd better go back to my rightful place on the couch now..." he suggests teasingly, just before I yank him down again.

"Get back here, flyboy," I mumble into the pillow. He settles in beside me, and I snuggle into his side, drawing one arm tight around his chest. With his free hand, he pulls the covers up, surrounding me with pure, unadulterated comfort. This has got to be heaven. Never in my life have I gone to bed -- in any sense -- feeling so loved.

I'm drifting toward sleep by the time I hear and feel his warm voice again. "Good night, Mac," he murmurs, softer than any words I've ever heard.

"Night, baby," I respond drowsily, feeling far too secure to question myself for that little slip. Marines don't call people 'baby', for Christ's sake. But I just can't find the energy to care right now. As I fall back to sleep once again, the last thought in my mind is a blissful one: soon, very soon, I'm going to have damn near everything I've ever wanted.

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I can't believe it took me so long to fall asleep.

It's not that I wasn't comfortable -- I've never been quite so comfortable in my life. And it's certainly not that I wasn't tired -- I was very, very tired. In fact, I think I'm more motivated than ever to get back in better shape. But it still took me forever to actually fall asleep. After everything that had just happened, after six years of tension were washed away in mere minutes, how could I be expected to sleep? Who could possibly sleep after hearing 'Night, baby' in the sexiest voice ever created?

Not that I blame her for being able to do it so quickly. She's the one who was so tired to begin with. And to be honest, she's the practical one. We've got plenty of time now for exploring this new -- what exactly is this? Jesus, why can't I be a man and just tell it like it is? Starting over ... we've got plenty of time now for exploring this new love, and at two in the morning, we'd really be better off asleep. But I keep waking up every so often, just to convince myself that she's real, and that she's still here. Every time, I lean over to kiss her, and not once has she even stirred. I'm beginning to get the feeling that my Marine could sleep through a tornado if she's comfortable enough.

This time, it's not my neurotic tendencies working overtime that are waking me up. This time, it's the phone. I fumble for it on the third ring or so, faintly aware that there's sunlight streaming through the blinds. "Rabb," I answer, hoping I sound more alert than I feel.

Apparently I don't. "Sleeping in this weekend, Commander?"

"A-admiral," I stutter, pulling myself out of bed as carefully as possible to keep from disturbing Mac. "Um, something like that, sir." The clock reads 8:34 as I grope around for my discarded boxers. What the hell is the admiral calling about on a Saturday morning?

"Sorry to disturb you," Admiral Chegwidden continues, not sounding the slightest bit sorry. "I was hoping you could help me track down Colonel Mackenzie. She's not answering either her home phone or her cell. I thought she might be out running, but usually she takes her cell phone with her..."

Her cell phone is probably in her purse, under my coffee table, but I definitely don't want to tell our commanding officer that. I steal a glance over at her, still peaceful and stunningly beautiful under the tangled sheets, and rake a hand through my hair in total helplessness. How am I going to get out of this? The relationship's one night old, and already it's complicated. "Is it an emergency, sir?"

"No, I just wanted her input on something before I brought it up with the CNO. To be honest, though, I am starting to worry a little. It's not like her to be out of contact without telling anyone. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

Terrific. If I let him get any more wound up, he'll end up calling 911 or something, and I'll be dead by sundown. Guess there aren't too many choices left. "Sir, ah, the colonel is here, actually," I begin tentatively, inwardly cringing.

There is a pause on the line. "You mean 'here' as in your apartment?"

"Yes, sir, but she's asleep at the moment." Oh, shit. That was brilliant. "What I mean, sir, is that Mac and I were discussing the new intel report until late last night, and when she fell asleep, I just decided she should stay the night. So she wouldn't have to drive home, I mean."

That is the truth, isn't it? Or is a lie of omission still a lie? Good lord, I haven't tripped over my words this badly since high school. The admiral's tone is calm, but very suspicious. There's no way he's going to believe that we were simply discussing reports on a Friday night. "You and your partner do this often?"

"No, sir. This was the first time." I decide to shut my mouth before I can stick my foot any further into it. Way to sound guilty, hotshot.

I can almost see Admiral Chegwidden's eyes narrowing as he asks carefully, "Is there anything else I should know, Mr. Rabb?"

I choose to play innocent, even though that tactic never works for me. "About what, sir?" Please, Admiral, just let it drop. At least for today. I swear I'll never get written up again. Just don't make us confront all this at once.

There is a sharp sigh of disapproval on the other end. "Never mind. My meeting's not until 1300, anyway. Have the colonel call me on my cell when she's ... available."

There is a God. "Yes, sir. I'll give her the message."

"You two are going to be the death of me," he mutters, almost to himself. "Have a good weekend, Commander."

I certainly intend to. "Thank you, sir. Goodbye."

I briefly consider waking her up to tell her just how much we're going to have to be on our guard from now on, but I quickly discard the idea. It'll keep until she's had some coffee ... and besides, waking up naked in my bed might be enough of a Twilight-Zone moment as it is.

Tossing the phone toward the chair, I slide back into bed, and at last Mac stirs slightly. Her eyes open halfway, and only a split-second passes before she orients herself and offers a slow, sleepy smile. "Hey," she murmurs in a velvety voice. "Was that the phone?"

"Don't worry about it," I assure her, snaking my arms back around her and reveling in the feel of her smooth, flawless skin. For the life of me, I can't imagine how I survived all this time without her, but I swear on everything holy that I'll never, ever let that happen again.

"Who's worried?" she says vaguely, already slipping back into sleep. After a moment, I realize just how right she is. I'm *not* worried. The admiral's wrath and the various official complexities that surely await us on Monday just don't scare me right now. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm where I want to be, and the rest of it will just have to work itself out. So what if it'll be hard sometimes? Anything can happen. We're living proof of that.

I lean down to brush a tender kiss across her temple and close my eyes, content at last. I still don't know when exactly it was that she fell asleep that first time. But God, am I glad she did.

\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*