



Crosswind

Rating: PG-13 (minor language)

Classification: action/drama, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: Season 9

Disclaimer: Are these characters mine? Only if I can pick them like an elementary-school kickball team: I'll take Harm, then Sturgis, then Jen ... otherwise, nope, not mine. Also, don't believe much of anything you read here with regard to the ROEs for domestic combat air patrols; I'm making educated guesses at best. Likewise, I made up the airports here, because I don't want to choose real ones and have someone who's flown out of there write in to say that I've screwed it up. Lastly, the GAA is completely made up, and I definitely don't want to imply that any private pilots' advocacy group would let the jerk in this story represent them. It's creative license and nothing more.

Author's Notes: When the defendant in the story waives his Article 32 hearing, it's not as farfetched as it sounds; one of the real-life Air Force pilots whose story became the episode "Friendly Fire" did just that. The concept for the plot comes out of my new hobby; I'm about 1/3 finished with my private pilot training, so I finally have a bit of a clue about general aviation aircraft. However, I currently have no intention of approaching a major metropolitan area as a private pilot, partially because of the potential for this kind of 'excitement' ...

Finally, big thanks to lobsterdoc, for allowing me to borrow a simply terrific metaphor she thought up for Mac and Webb. And for just generally being cool.

We were once told that the aeroplane had "abolished frontiers." Actually it is only since the aeroplane became a serious weapon that frontiers have become definitely impassable. — George Orwell

0925 EST

Approximately 8500 feet above central Maryland

"Now *this* is the life ... there's nothing like boring holes in the sky to make a guy feel like a vital component of our national security."

His personal call sign was Cowboy, but his flight's sign that day was Taxi Two. Cowboy was piloting the second F-14 in a two-ship formation, flying standard combat air patrol over the metropolitan area surrounding the nation's capital. From his backseat, Wildman smirked. "What, you'd rather be somewhere where they shoot at you?"

"At least we'd be accomplishing something."

"Deterrence is something," the older aviator informed him. "You think the Soviets refrained from nuking us because they didn't feel like pressing the button, or because we had B-52s and Trident boats?"

"Yeah, yeah." Cowboy considered pointing out the fact that old Khrushchev had never sent his boys off to kamikaze an airliner, but he figured that would only prove Wildman's point.

The voice over the intercom suddenly switched from jokingly paternal to businesslike. "C, I've got a pop-up on the scope. Heading one-seven-three, forty-five hundred feet and crawling along."

"Light aircraft?"

"Probably, but his transponder's not squawking as such. Probably a newbie who expected better visibility, and now can't find his way home 'cause he's not instrument-rated." Wildman gave a snort of disgust. "These weekend warriors think they're all-stars and just take off, thinking the weather'll magically get better. There's a reason they call 'em 'visual flight rules,' geniuses ..."

The cloud ceiling had been dropping for most of an hour, and even Cowboy had to admit that he was glad to have instruments on a day like this. He toggled his radio to call his flight lead. "One, this is Two. You see we've got company?"

"That's affirm, Two," the response came back. "We've been trying to raise him on radio, but he doesn't appear to be listening in. We'll go suggest to him that he might want to change course. You guys hang back and keep doing your thing."

"Roger, wilco." Cowboy switched back to his cockpit intercom. "Boots is gonna go give our visitor a wake-up call. What're the odds on this poor dumbass pissing his pants when he gets his own personal flyby?"

"This ought to be good."

Following their wingman's lead, Taxi Two descended about three thousand feet, then continued on their patrol while keeping an eye on the proceedings. Taxi One slowed to the F-14's lowest possible cruise speed, riding the aircraft just barely on the sunny side of stalling as it approached the smaller aircraft, apparently a Cessna, from above and behind.

"Here comes the 'oh, shit' moment ..." Wildman said under his breath as the lumbering Tomcat swept by the little Cessna, then wagged its wings in the standard signal for 'Follow me.'

In response, however, the Cessna veered off to the right for a moment, as if startled out of his cruise flight. Then he stabilized, continuing on his previous path. From a distance, Cowboy frowned, knowing that his RIO was doing likewise.

"Wild, put us on 121.5, will ya?"

Wildman complied, tweaking the radio, and both men listened to Taxi One's unanswered calls on the civil emergency frequency. "Three-Seven-Six Whiskey, you are entering restricted airspace. You have been intercepted and are instructed to follow us to the nearest airport. If you do not comply or respond with your intentions, we are authorized to prevent your entry into this airspace. Please respond." The Cessna continued silently on course. Cowboy felt the back of his neck start to prickle. "Hey," he asked quietly, "you don't think -- "

"No," the other man replied, a little too firmly. "Can't do much damage to anything with a Cessna, even intentionally. He's lost. That's all." He keyed his mike. "Depot, this is Taxi Two, reporting an unknown light aircraft entering the restricted area and not responding to radio calls. Request confirmation of rules of engagement."

The voice of a controller at NAS Patuxent River responded. "Stand by, Taxi."

As Cowboy banked his jet around for another look through the thickening haze, his wingman circled the area in order to buzz the Cessna a little more threateningly. Taxi One maneuvered to a head-on approach, positioning himself just slightly above the small craft and looking for all the world as though he wanted to play a game of aerial chicken.

"Don't go too nuts on him, Boots," Wildman murmured. Sure enough, Taxi One raced toward the Cessna and skimmed just over the top of it. The Cessna instinctively nosed over into a dive, causing both spectators to smirk. "Have a nice day," Cowboy drawled, touching off a sarcastic salute.

But rather than leveling off, the Cessna staggered slightly, one wing drooping noticeably lower than the other. From above and away, Wildman watched with concern. "Hey, get that wing up, buddy, or you're gonna -- "

At that moment, the Cessna fell into a spin.

"Aww, *shit*," Cowboy breathed. "Is he gonna get out of that?"

"Doesn't have a lot of altitude to spare," Wildman replied tersely. "Come on, buddy, pull it out."

Over the emergency frequency, they could hear Boots anxiously repeating, "Right rudder, Three-Seven-Six! Full aileron and full right rudder ..."

It was a refrain he continued up until the moment that wing snapped off like a child's toy, and the small plane's dizzying plunge ended in a blossom of orange flame.

1342 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Ma'am, have you seen Commander Rabb around?"

Midway to her office, Mac turned. "I think he and Sturgis are wrapping up in court," she answered, crossing to where Bud stood with a file in his hand. "What do you need?"

Bud gestured to the file with a look of surrender. "The admiral gave me an aviation mishap case, and there are some acronyms in this report that are just making my head spin. I was hoping the commander could toss me a clue."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Bud? The admiral might've given you this case to show that Harm isn't the only person at Headquarters who's qualified to do an aviation

JAGMAN.” The lieutenant’s expression clearly conveyed that he hadn’t thought of it that way, and Mac took the file from him. “Let me see. I’ve picked up a few things after all this time.”

“Okay ...” Bud pointed at a jumble of letters on the page. “Ner-if-sud?”

Mac blinked; sure enough, the narrative had used *NRIFSD* as if it were a commonly accepted word rather than a bizarre alphabetical jumble. Just when she thought she’d heard it all. “Well ... um, IF is usually ‘in-flight’ ...”

“Much like myself.” Harm had entered the bullpen without either officer’s notice, and both jumped a little as he peered over their shoulders. “Non-Recoverable In-Flight Shutdown,” he translated easily.

“Shutdown of what, exactly?”

“It’s an engine-related term. They could’ve just said ‘the motor conked out,’ but it doesn’t sound as impressive.” He flashed a smile, continuing on toward the break room.

Damn. Mac shook her head as Bud scribbled down the term. Before she could come up with a suitable comment to toss in her partner’s direction, Jennifer Coates approached.

“Ma’am, the admiral would like to see you and Commander Rabb in his office.”

Mac nodded and walked over to duck her head into the break room. “Hey, Eddie Rickenbacker, the boss beckons.”

Harm immediately set the coffeepot down and drained the inch or so he’d already poured into his mug. “This is the abuse I take for trying to be helpful ...”

The senior lawyers entered Admiral Chegwiddden’s office and came to attention in front of his desk before he could wave them toward the chairs. “At ease. There was an incident a few hours ago that we need to get a handle on ASAP. On the northeast border of the D.C. Air Defense ID Zone, two patrolling F-14s from Pax River intercepted a general aviation craft and attempted to direct it out of the area. Somehow, the pilot lost control of the aircraft and crashed north of the city. By the time they put the fire out, there wasn’t much left.”

Both officers paused a moment, immediately understanding the potential implications of his statement. “The patrol didn’t engage the aircraft, did it, sir?” Harm asked.

“Negative -- they both landed with all weapons accounted for. But we need to find out whether something they did caused that pilot to crash, and we need to do it rapidly, because the odds are good that some Maryland resident who was out for a stroll is now going to try to tell everyone in the world that he saw the U.S. Navy shoot down a damned Cessna.”

Mac pressed her lips together, allowing herself a second of resignation. “It had to happen eventually, didn’t it?” she said, not directing the remark at anyone. “We’ve been running these patrols for two and a half years. Sooner or later, a mistake had to happen.”

Harm glanced over at her sharply. “The question is, whose mistake? The GA aircraft was somewhere it wasn’t supposed to be. That much is inarguable.”

"You're not really thinking that someone was intending to crash a Cessna into a government building, are you?"

"Like you said -- the patrols and the ADIZ have been in effect for over two years, and anyone with a license knows it. An incursion into this airspace either suggests a very disoriented pilot or an intentional act."

"Most of those Cessnas hardly weigh any more than your SUV does."

The sometime aviator's expression was somber as he replied. "But it burned when it hit the ground. An aircraft that's loaded with fuel, even one of that size, is a pretty good weapon."

"Well, before you get your theories too set in stone, how about investigating the crash?" the admiral suggested, handing over a file. "NTSB hasn't moved the wreckage yet, so you can take a look at it in place. The F-14 aircrews who were involved are back at Pax, waiting for you to get down there and interview them. FAA says they'll make their records and their controllers available - just call Washington Center to work it out. I don't need to remind you that this could get ugly, but I will anyway. Equal parts fast and thorough. Dismissed."

"Aye-aye, sir." As soon as they had closed the admiral's door behind them, Harm turned to Mac. "You take the pilots, I'll take the crash site?"

"But what if they use big words like 'Non-Recoverable In-Flight Shutdown'?" Mac asked, using her best damsel-in-distress voice.

"Cute. I'll meet you in Ops down at Pax and we can compare notes." Harm checked his watch. "Damn it. I said I'd pick Mattie up from school today, and that's clearly not going to happen. Jen -- "

"I'll take care of it, sir," the petty officer replied promptly.

"Thank you. There's leftover chili in my fridge if you girls want it for dinner. I'll be home as soon as I can, but it'll probably be late." Harm flashed a grateful smile at her on his way out the door, leaving Mac to wonder where along the line her friend had turned into such a ... well, a parent.

1523 EST
Central Maryland
Approximately 15 NM from Washington, D.C.

The scorch marks stood out black and angry against grass that had just begun to wake up from the winter. Harm put on a pair of latex gloves offered by the National Transportation Safety Board team and watched the investigators fan out around the area.

"Do we have an ID on the pilot yet?" he asked the nearest team member, who shook his head.

"We're assuming he took off from someplace within the local radius, so he wasn't required to file a flight plan." The young man shrugged. "I'm sure somebody'll come up with some information soon."

Harm wasn't quite so optimistic, but he nodded and moved closer to the mangled wreckage, bending to examine the pieces of the tail assembly. "Anything to suggest that this was a mechanical failure?"

"Not so far."

"It'd be nice to know how experienced the pilot was."

"Already circling the wagons, Commander?"

The question came from a new voice, one whose tone immediately put him on his guard. Harm straightened and faced the voice's owner, a stocky man in a well-made suit. "I'm sorry?"

"You want to know if the pilot was inexperienced and got himself into trouble, so the Navy will be off the hook for harassing him."

Harm narrowed his eyes. "I didn't catch your name, Mr. --?"

"Paul Martinez," the man supplied smoothly, extending a hand. "I represent the General Aviation Association's interests in Washington."

A lobbyist, Harm decided, calmly ignoring the proffered hand. A lawyer for a private pilots' group, paid to do battle on the Hill on their behalf. Normally he considered all fellow pilots to be friends of a sort, but that clearly wasn't to be the case here. "Harmon Rabb, Navy JAG," he replied. "And with no disrespect intended toward the deceased, this plane was entering restricted airspace. The patrol was obligated to intercept."

"An intercept doesn't normally end in a crash, Commander Rabb." Martinez folded his arms over his broad chest. "When a Cessna going 95 knots meets up with an F-14 going three times that speed, who bears more responsibility for the consequences?"

"I think that's what we're all here to find out," Harm replied, his voice cool. "If you'll excuse me, there are some other aspects of the investigation I need to follow up on."

He moved away from the area and pulled out his cell phone, dialing a familiar number.

Same time NAS Patuxent River, Maryland

Alone in the conference room, Mac flipped her phone open. "Mackenzie."

"Hey, it's me." Identifying himself in any form was unnecessary, as their phones had caller-ID, but it was still the standard conversation opener. "Got a picture of how all this happened yet?"

"More or less. I just wrapped up talking to the wingman, who watched the whole thing. The incident pilot will be here in a few minutes." She relayed the description Cowboy had given, from the first reported contact through the flyby that had preceded the Cessna's fatal spin. "I'm not sure what to think yet. Obviously they had to act to prevent the airspace incursion, but a head-on close pass seems more aggressive than necessary."

"Well, I don't have anything but bad news," Harm replied. "No ID on the pilot as yet, no immediate signs of equipment failure, and the GAA's hired gun just showed up to pick a fight with us."

"Lovely. You headed down here?"

"As soon as I get some contact info from the NTSB on the plane's originating airport, assuming they can find it. We're going to have to do some hunting to figure out where he was headed and why."

"All right. See you in a while." Mac closed her phone and set it aside. The wing commander's office had provided her with personnel files on the four aviators involved in the incident, and this seemed like a good time to familiarize herself with the record of the pilot in question.

Lieutenant Commander Mark Walken, call sign Boots, had eight years and nearly a thousand hours in F-14s. He'd flown over Kosovo and Afghanistan and had the Meritorious Service Medals to show for it. His records indicated responsible, if not particularly conservative flying. That didn't do much to rule out the possibility of him choosing this morning to have a lapse in judgment.

She'd just finished reading his evaluations from primary flight training when a knock sounded at the door. "Enter."

The aviator matched his file photo: tall, fair, and slightly built, though with an air of gravity the photo hadn't conveyed. He came to attention only a step inside the doorway. "Lieutenant Commander Walken reporting as ordered, ma'am."

"At ease, Commander. Close the hatch and have a seat." Mac turned on her tape recorder as he complied. "You're aware that even though this is a preliminary investigation, your Article 31 rights still apply?"

"Yes, ma'am." Walken sat ramrod straight in his chair. "I'll tell you anything you want to know if it'll help figure this thing out."

"Good answer. Let's start with your description of the incident." "Ma'am, we'd been on patrol for about an hour and a half with no unexpected contacts. When this one popped up, my RIO, Lieutenant Kane, reported that its transponder was only reporting intermittently. We hailed the aircraft on all standard and emergency channels, informing him that he was entering the D.C. ADIZ and that we were authorized to intervene. There was no response. I performed a standard intercept and wagged my wings per the regs, but he continued on course. We were getting a little desperate, ma'am -- we were awfully close to the capital, and this guy was giving us every indication that he didn't want to play ball. So I set up to do a head-on run right at him, with two hundred feet of separation."

"Is that acceptable per the rules of engagement?" Mac asked.

"The standard ROEs call for us to fire a 20-mm warning burst near any craft that ignores repeated directives. But we didn't want to do that over a populated area without express permission from our command. Ma'am, nobody's been in quite this situation before. In the past, whenever someone's wandered into restricted airspace, they've always cooperated with the intercept. This time, he didn't."

Mac noted that nothing he'd said added up to a 'yes' to her question. "And what happened when you performed this head-on flyby?"

Walken glanced down at the table for a moment. "The Cessna dove to avoid me, like I'd expected, even though I made sure to leave plenty of vertical clearance. But once I'd passed over top of him, he didn't level off. I couldn't see his immediate action, but when I came around, his left wing was dropping, and he went into a spin. From that altitude, I guess it was unrecoverable."

Mac leaned forward. "And you don't think your jetwash had anything to do with the Cessna's loss of control?"

The commander's eyes widened. "No, ma'am. I've done my share of close-range tactical flying."

"With other jets," she pressed. "This was a much smaller, lighter aircraft. Are you positive the flyby didn't disturb his airflow enough to affect his stability?"

"Ma'am, I guess I can't say anything like that for sure, but it's my belief that my maneuver shouldn't have affected him."

"And at the time, you didn't see a better option."

"To tell the truth, ma'am, I still don't see much of one."

"Well, how about waiting for ROE confirmation, Commander?" Mac kept her voice level, but she knew her skepticism was peeking through the cracks. "What made it so critical to confront the Cessna in that moment? You weren't yet over the border into the District."

Walken's jaw tightened. "With all due respect, ma'am, the miles go by pretty fast up there. And we don't measure by the D.C. city limits -- we measure by airspace restrictions. By our rules, one point within that area is as important as another, whether it's a corner newsstand or the Oval Office. I sincerely regret what happened, but that aircraft breached the airspace, and that alone defined our response."

As good as it sounded, Mac was well aware that the issue wasn't nearly that black and white. "All right. We'll take your statement and those of your flightmates and develop our report to the convening authority."

"We, ma'am?"

"My partner, Commander Rabb, should be walking through that door any minute now. He's been out at the crash site."

Upon hearing the name, Walken seemed to relax slightly. "Glad to hear it, ma'am. No offense intended, but I think a lot of aircrews would just as soon have Commander Rabb handling their case."

The Marine's eyes narrowed. "Be careful what you wish for, Commander. If he believes you performed within the scope of your duties, he'll be your strongest advocate, but if he finds that you screwed up, he'll rip you to shreds."

The pilot tensed. "Understood, ma'am."

"That's all I have for now. We'll give you a call if we need anything further. You're dismissed."

Walken rose, came to attention, and headed for the door. On his way out, he passed Harm, who'd just begun to approach the room. The younger man read his name tag, then immediately averted his gaze and offered a brief "sir" as he hurried out.

Harm frowned as he moved into the room and set his briefcase down on the table. "That guy would've looked more comfortable if I'd had the plague. You spreading nasty rumors about me, or what?"

Mac shrugged. "I just gave him fair warning that you'd be his best friend if he was in the right and his worst enemy if he was in the wrong."

"Oh."

She fixed a penetrating stare on him. "Make sure you don't make a liar out of me," she said, lowering her voice.

"Hey, I didn't hang over your shoulder during the interviews, did I? I'll keep my biases to myself. Until this goes to Article 32, that is."

"You think it will?"

Harm waved a hand, sitting down heavily in the chair Walken had just vacated. "An airplane crashed, and a pilot died. Regardless of the circumstances, that pilot has a mother somewhere who's going to miss him, or her, and the Navy's going to have to do better than an apology. If nothing else, I expect that my new pal Mr. Martinez and the GAA will have something to say about it."

"Yeah, I'm starting to come to that same conclusion. Maybes don't exactly work in Commander Walken's favor." Mac opened up her notebook and the files she'd accumulated over the course of the afternoon. "All right, let's see what we've got."

The following day
1421 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"Got something for you."

Mac looked up as Harm stepped into her office, a CD-ROM in his hand. "What's that?"

"Simulations from the guys down at NAVAIR." Harm handed her the disc, and she obligingly inserted it into her computer. After a moment, a new window appeared on her screen, showing a representation of two familiar aircraft shapes taking up positions on either side of the screen. "It's computational fluid dynamics. They modeled a head-on flyby of an F-14 passing over the top of a Cessna 152, with vertical clearance and closure speed corresponding to the numbers Walken and his RIO reported. Hit 'play.'"

She did so, and the wire-frame F-14 zoomed toward the wire-frame Cessna, trailing a multicolored swirl behind it. "That's the air displacement according to the reported conditions -- wake turbulence, if you'd prefer." Harm pointed at the large eddies spiraling off from the fighter's wings and tails. "I've tweaked it around some, messing with the clearance distance and closure speed in case our aircrew's memories are a little foggy. They all end up looking basically like this."

Mac watched the animation loop through a few times, studying the green and yellow swirls as they separated from the F-14 and brushed over the high wing of the Cessna. "It looks like he lost a little lift, but that's about it. Right?"

"Right. And given the fact that he was already diving to avoid the F-14, that shouldn't have affected him all that much."

"It sure seems like it shouldn't have put him into a spin, at the very least. I mean, if the F-14 passed directly over top of him, both wings should have been affected equally."

But Harm's expression didn't convey satisfaction. "That brings us to the bad news. This version shows an offset of five meters." He clicked through a few menus, moving the model F-14 to one side, and hit 'play' again. This time, the F-14's fuselage didn't pass directly over the Cessna's fuselage; instead, it passed over the left wing, which promptly began to dip.

"Damn it," Mac said quietly. "I was really hoping he couldn't have caused the crash."

"We don't know that he did," Harm pointed out. "All we know is that it's a decent possibility."

"Excuse me, Colonel, Commander." Jen Coates stood in the doorway. "The admiral would like to see you both in his office. He says some new information just came in."

The senior lawyers exchanged a glance, then headed for their CO's office without a word.

"Have a seat," Admiral Chegwidden instructed before they'd even crossed the threshold. "What's the status of your investigation?"

Mac glanced over to Harm, who indicated that she could speak for both of them. "Sir, we still have to write up a formal report, but we believe there is cause for an Article 32 hearing."

"Charges?"

"The possible candidates are Article 92, failure to obey an order or regulation; 109, destruction of property not US military; 110, improper hazarding of vessel; and 119, manslaughter. I think we'd recommend 92 and 110 at the minimum to COMNAVAIRLANT, but more likely all four."

Chegwidden shifted his gaze from one officer to the other. "You're on board with this, Commander?"

"Reluctantly, sir. I don't fully believe that this rises to the level of culpable negligence, which is what the greater charges require, but an Article 32 is the way to find out."

"Glad to hear it, because you were probably going to get all four whether you wanted them or not. I just got a call from Pax - apparently an airport manager at Monroe County in Maryland saw the news report on the crash last night and called to find out if the mystery pilot was one of their locals. He gave them a name, which got them some dental records, which got them a match. And then the fun begins." The admiral clicked on the TV.

On the screen, Paul Martinez was already holding up an enlarged photograph of a thirtyish man, standing by the propeller of a small plane with a smile. "This is Daniel Bailey. Take a good look at his face," Martinez said, leaning into a ZNN microphone. "He was killed yesterday by the U.S. military for the supposed crime of exercising his right to share the sky. A mistake, they'll claim, made because Mr. Bailey strayed near restricted airspace. We say the real mistake is in allowing the Navy and Air Force, under the guise of national security, to become an airborne Gestapo!"

Mac winced as the admiral shut off the TV. "Nice. The public outrage can only get worse now that they can put a name and a face to the wreckage."

"You can see why AIRLANT would want a swift hearing with no indications of wrist-slapping."

Harm was still quietly seething at the gall of Martinez. "That swaggering suit wants people to think we knock planes out of the sky to get our kicks? I mean, the general aviation community has clashed with us over these restrictions ever since they were implemented, but Christ ..."

"I won't argue that this guy's a blowhard, but look at it from his side," Mac countered. "The military and Homeland Security are viewing all aircraft as potential threats."

"Well, we haven't exactly ruled that out in this case, have we?"

The admiral cocked an eyebrow. "Don't say that too loudly outside this room, Commander. We all know how well blaming the victim usually goes over."

"Sir, I'd like to request permission to continue investigating the flight." Harm remained resolute. "If you were to assign me to defend Commander Walken, I could fold it into my research of his defense."

"With your friend Martinez on the warpath, I can hardly assign you to prosecute," the admiral commented dryly. "Colonel, any problem representing the government?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Commander, you can have a fair bit of rope. Don't hang yourself or your client with it." Chegwiddden handed him a file. "You're not the only person interested in Mr. Bailey right now. FBI and DHS are already looking rather carefully at his records. Their principal agents are listed in here; you are hereby requested to share any pertinent information gained with them."

The unusual choice of words didn't escape Harm's notice. "'Requested,' sir?"

The JAG folded his hands with a placid expression. "Non-DOD agencies don't exactly have the authority to make it an order. I do, but I won't unless or until I receive complaints from either agency. After all, your client's defense is your first priority. Besides, unless I'm mistaken, aren't you technically a member of the general aviation community yourself?"

"I have an instrument rating and a number of type ratings from the FAA, so yes, sir."

"Then I suspect there will be some aspects of your research that might be hindered by an agent tagging along."

Harm smothered a grin. The old SEAL could be pretty damn crafty when he chose to be. "Understood, sir."

"Go to it, then. Colonel, get on the phone with the Atlantic Fleet and set up the hearing. That'll be all."

Mac was already shaking her head as they stepped out into the bullpen. "I'm going to pretend I didn't just hear my CO give my opposing counsel pointers."

Harm pasted on his best 'who, me?' face. "I didn't hear anything about courtroom tactics. All I heard was a suggestion to poke around a few regional airports and not advertise my military affiliation while doing so. If there's nothing to dig up, you don't have anything to worry about."

"Uh huh. But like he said, Butch -- don't hang yourself."

The nickname gave him a moment's pause; it had been a while since they'd been comfortable enough around each other for such things. In response, he simply flashed a smile and quoted the movie in a drawl. "Sundance, I have vision, and the rest of the world wears bifocals.' "

2013 EST
North of Union Station

"Why can't you teach me?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm not a certified flight instructor, so it wouldn't be particularly legal." Harm hung his dishtowel on a hook and came over to the living room. "And for another, I don't want to pass on any of my bad habits. If you ended up flying like me, I'd be dead of a heart attack within days."

From her place on the couch, Mattie rolled her eyes at him. "Whatever. But I can take lessons?"

"Let's just concentrate on the ground-school part for the moment. You have to be sixteen to solo, and you have a few months left until then."

"Yeah, but when that day rolls around, wouldn't you rather have me flying, where you can come along and keep an eye on me, than driving the D.C. streets with all the jerks and psychos?" The teenager batted her eyelashes innocently at her guardian.

"Nice work -- now you've got me more worried about the jerks and psychos." Harm sat down next to her. "Your homework done?"

She gave him a smile that was half tolerant and half exasperated. "It's done. It was done when you asked before dinner, and barring some weird shift in the universe, it's still done."

"Sorry. Something's bugging me about the patrol intercept case, and I guess I'm a little distracted."

Mattie turned more squarely toward him and tucked her legs up under her. "What is it that's bugging you?"

"I wish I knew. I just have this feeling that the civilian pilot who was killed wasn't just disoriented and inexperienced. I'm going to go out to his home airport tomorrow and see if I can get a better idea of who he was, but even though nothing so far suggests any kind of criminal intent, I can't shake the idea that the airspace incursion was intentional."

"Seems like the fact that he ignored all the directions and warnings, which everyone's supposed to recognize and follow, kinda makes your case."

"Yeah, but Mac's going to make the argument that he could have been incapacitated somehow. It's thin, but if there's enough doubt in the patrol's justification for acting, the charges start to look a lot more plausible."

"Good thing you're so good at your job, then." Mattie picked up her book and stretched her legs out across his lap. Harm responded by tickling her feet, which elicited first a shriek, then a glare.

"What? You give me that opportunity, and then you're surprised when I take it?"

Mattie opened her mouth to respond, but the distinctive chime of his cell phone interrupted them. Harm stood up to grab it off the desk. "Rabb."

"Sir, this is Commander Walken. I'm sorry to disturb you off-duty."

"Not a problem, Commander. What do you need?"

Well, sir, I got the formal notification of charges this afternoon, and I've been thinking about my options. I mean, the Navy wants to do this quickly, and once my name is publicly released, I have to figure I'll want it over with as soon as possible, too. So I'm thinking about waiving my right to an Article 32."

Harm leaned on the edge of the desk, caught off-guard. "You realize that means you'd face all four of the charges at court-martial, instead of an Article 32 that might knock down the heavier ones."

"I do, sir, but tell me straight up -- how likely is that?"

The attorney sighed. "They'll have to prove recklessness and/or negligence to make a case on manslaughter and destruction of non-military property. I think that's a stretch, based on the standing ROEs. But it's a substantial risk, and as your advocate, I don't recommend taking it. I can defend you from the press, if that's what you're worried about."

"Not if they camp out on my lawn and stick cameras in my daughter's face, sir. I've seen it happen, and I want to keep all that away from my family as much as possible. Also, one of the advantages to an Article 32 is that the judge can hand out non-judicial punishment, right?"

"That's right."

"And non-judicial punishment isn't really going to happen in a case like this, is it?"

Harm rubbed the bridge of his nose, beginning to resign himself to the fact that he needed to start prepping for a court-martial sooner rather than later. "Not with manslaughter on the charge sheet, no. But the fact remains that those charges might not stand up to an Article 32, so you're still putting an awful lot of faith in that jury of your peers."

"And you, sir. I guess I just trust them and you more than I would a judge who's never been on the line. I don't want this to get shut away behind closed doors. I won't cause trouble, but I want my day."

"All right. We'll enter that into the record on Monday morning."

"Thank you. Sorry again for interrupting your evening."

"Actually, I'd just as soon have the prep time, so I'm glad you didn't wait. See you in Falls Church on Monday." Harm clicked the phone off and stared at it for a moment.

From the couch, Mattie was studying him. "Do any of your cases ever go exactly the way you expect them to?" she asked, only partially teasing.

He shook his head tiredly. "I can't even remember."

**1026 EST
Monroe County Airport
Central Maryland**

"Monroe County traffic, Navy Four-One-Eight is five to the west, inbound to land on Runway Three-Two."

The Stearman performed a flawless approach pattern and eased onto the runway with the grace that only a truly classic airplane could achieve. He hadn't been lying when he'd said he didn't want to pass on any of his bad habits, Harm reasoned as he taxied up to the fuel stand. Between arrested Tomcat landings and the tail-dragging Stearman, he'd all but forgotten how to do a traditional landing flare.

Every airport has 'airport bums': pilots, often older and retired, who can't seem to find any place they'd rather be. This little airport, despite consisting only of a squat brick terminal and a dozen single-plane hangars, was no different. The radio operator and the three old-timers sitting around the lounge all gazed at the vintage biplane admiringly as Harm entered.

"Now *that* is a fine-looking aircraft," remarked a man in a Carhartt jacket. "You do the work on her yourself?"

"As much as I can." Harm signed the airport register, purposely scrawling his name so it would be unreadable. "She's high-maintenance, but she's worth it."

"Aren't they all," the radio operator said with a chuckle. "Hell of a paint job, too. You've got the old Navy markings and everything."

"Yeah, she was my dad's, back when he was flying off flattops. Of course, these days, it seems like the markings might just keep me from getting shot down by the patrols around here."

It was as if he'd flipped a switch. Four faces instantly darkened. "That kid, Bailey, was one of ours," the Carhartt man said quietly.

Harm furrowed his brow in a convincing display of disbelief. "You're kidding."

"I was his CFI, about three years ago."

"Damn. I'm sorry -- I shouldn't have shot off my mouth. I guess you guys probably aren't buying the story that he was doing something threatening or whatever, then?"

Carhartt snorted derisively. "Danny? Not on your life. He was as conservative as it gets. Matter of fact, I didn't expect him to even go up that day, with the iffy visibility and all -- I thought he just came in to work on his plane."

Harm wished he could write this down without being glaringly obvious. Fortunately, his memory was pretty good. "So you were here when he took off that day?" he asked, trying to sound more awed than curious. "That's got to be weird."

"Didn't realize just how weird at the time, but yep. He came through here kinda early and said something about needing to dewinterize the Cessna. Next I saw, he was taxiing out, and that was that. I don't even know if he called in his departure."

"He didn't," the radio operator tossed in. At Harm's surprised look, he added, "He usually did, but it's not like we were busy that day. He was probably still messing with his radio when he took the runway. Or maybe it was on the blink, since the Navy jetjocks swear they couldn't raise him."

Harm shook his head, hoping to appear appropriately bewildered. "What makes a guy fly into restricted airspace and ignore an intercept? I mean, it's not like he was suicidal or anything, right?"

"No," Carhartt said, in a tone that left no room for debate. "Danny was no screw-up. I flew Thuds for the Air Force way back when, so it's not like I want to pin this on the Navy guys ... but I gotta think they chased him around a little and got him all turned around. A goof-off that went bad."

"S'pose that makes the most sense." Harm leaned on the counter and let his gaze wander over the bulletin board, where a hangar layout was posted with the names of the occupants. On the back row of squares, second from the end, one square was marked *BAILEY*. Filing that location away, he straightened up. "Anyway, I'm going to take a walk around and stretch my legs before heading back -- the Stearman's hangared at Blacksburg."

"You mind if we take a look at her in the meantime?" asked one of the previously quiet men, a bit of a gleam in his eye.

Harm smiled and waved a hand. Sarah apparently made for a decent distraction. "Be my guest. Sorry to hear about your friend, but it was good talking with you gentlemen."

Taking his leave of them, he stepped out the side door of the building and strolled between the two rows of hangars. As he did, he pulled out his cell phone and mimed making a call. "Hi, honey," he said, for the benefit of the men he'd just left. "I'm going to head back in a few minutes here ... did you need anything at the store?"

When he was comfortably out of earshot, he put away the phone and glanced back. The first few hangars blocked any view from the terminal, so he was relatively safe from being spotted. Approaching the door of Bailey's hangar, he found the side door unlocked -- maybe things were more laid-back around here? In any case, it was a bonus for him, as he'd been entertaining thoughts of picking the lock.

Harm slipped into the darkened hangar and pulled the door closed behind him, withdrawing his pocket flashlight from inside his jacket. He didn't dare touch anything directly - the FBI would likely be in here combing around before long - and nothing he might discover would ever in his wildest dreams be admissible in court. But maybe there was something here that might lead him in a productive direction, and that would be worth this amateur cloak-and-dagger act.

Even after pulling out every trick in his short CIA handbook, though, there was nothing that looked out of the ordinary. After five minutes, he decided he'd better move on before the airport bums could wonder about him. *Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*, he told himself as he ambled casually back toward the fuel stand. Still, Daniel Bailey was looking less and less like a threat with every passing day.

With a nod toward Carhartt and the gang, Harm preflighted Sarah and climbed back into the cockpit, pulling his headset back on.

"Monroe County UNICOM, Navy Four-One-Eight requesting an advisory."

"Navy Four-One-Eight, the pattern is clear. Winds out of 260 at five knots. Come back and see us sometime."

"Will do. Monroe traffic, Four-One-Eight is taking the active, departing Runway 32."

Harm taxied onto the runway and advanced the throttle. A few seconds later, he was climbing, unaware that while four gazes had watched his arrival, five were now watching his departure.

1506 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Mac followed Harm into his office without waiting for an invitation or an objection. "He just *had* to go straight to court-martial, didn't he?"

Harm spread his hands, sitting down at his desk. "I informed him of the risks, believe me. It's his call. He wants a speedy trial, which is in the government's best interest as well, so that ought to make some kind of good faith statement."

She cocked her head. "You asking for a deal?"

"I'm dangling my feet in the water."

"In that case, three years and loss of benefits upon discharge."

Harm gave a short laugh. "Brig time for pursuing a threat in accordance with his duties? I don't think so. How about dropping manslaughter and destruction of property in exchange for a guilty plea on the other two?"

"You mean the lesser two? That's not dangling your feet in the water -- that's going fishing." Mac let the usual posturing drop for a moment. "You should know that I've spoken to Daniel Bailey's mother, and she categorically denies that he could have had any malicious intent. She also says that he was excited about proposing to his girlfriend -- he was going to do it at the Memorial Day celebration on the Mall. That doesn't really suggest suicidal to me. I don't want to call a grieving mother to the stand, but I will if I have to." She moved back toward the door. "Just keep it in mind."

"Fair enough." When she'd gone, Harm leaned back in his chair and opened up his email. After scrolling through the usual intra-office announcements and two polite requests from Harriet to please turn in his most recent travel voucher, he came upon one with no visible sender's address. Frowning, he checked for potentially unsafe attachments and found none, so he gave in to curiosity and opened it.

You would do well to stop your inquiries into Mr. Bailey's last flight. In the end, you will find nothing, desecrate the memory of the dead, and bring more scrutiny upon yourself.

Harm sat up straighter. The message had been obliquely worded, but he knew when he was being threatened. Surprise rapidly gave way to anger, and it only took him thirty seconds on Google to find the phone number he needed.

"Martinez and Associates," answered a receptionist.

"Mr. Martinez, please. This is Commander Harmon Rabb."

"I'll see if he's available -- "

"You do that. And when you do, let him know that if he decides *not* to make himself available, my next call goes to the FBI." He counted silently to twenty before the GAA's lawyer picked up.

"You didn't strike me as the kind of guy to resort to empty threats, Commander."

"I'm a big proponent of 'an eye for an eye.' Besides, if the threat was empty, why'd you take the call?"

Martinez ignored the second question. "What do you mean, an eye for an eye?"

Harm's voice was cold and deliberate. "I don't react well to threats, and I definitely don't make investigative decisions based on career security. That much would be clear to anyone who's ever glanced at my record. So if you were aiming to get me to back off on this for personal reasons, you unequivocally blew it."

"Hey, what is this? You're accusing me of something?"

"What, you're going to tell me that it wasn't you who sent that polite, anonymous warning email about Bailey?"

Martinez gave a humorless chuckle. "Think about it, Rabb. Why would I do anything under the radar like that? The press is the best weapon I've got."

"Yeah, your 'airborne Gestapo' line was especially well-received in my office." But Harm had to admit that the other man's argument made sense. "Did you happen to tell anyone else I was on this case?"

"Why would I? Look, my case isn't the same as yours. You're looking at one incident - I'm looking at overall policy. If somebody's trying to shake you off, then that's a bad situation, but don't get in my face and accuse me of something just because we don't play by the same rules."

Harm took a deep breath and forced himself to throttle back. "You're right -- that was out of line. I don't have evidence, so I'll take you at your word. But emails can be traced to a certain extent, so you'd better hope it doesn't point me back to you."

"It won't. Good afternoon, Commander."

The click was loud enough to suggest that the phone hadn't been gently set down. Harm smacked his own handset down on the base, his mind running on half a dozen frequencies at once. Martinez's cause did have something to gain by running him off, but not much. And as oily as the man could be, this didn't seem like his style. Who, then? His name would be publicly connected with the case as soon as the trial started, but until then, the only people who were aware of his involvement were government personnel: Navy, FBI, DHS, and NTSB. And that made it an entirely different matter.

He hit the 'forward' key, then went over to Bud's office and knocked on the open door. "Got a minute, Bud?"

The lieutenant looked up from his desk. "Sure, sir."

"Can you help me find the originating point of an anonymous email?"

"Um, sort of, sir. I can pretty easily find out the IP address of the computer it came from, but matching that to a location is trickier. I can talk to the IT guys, though. You got an email with no name?"

"No address, even. I forwarded it to you, so it should be in your inbox."

Bud checked, and his eyes went wide as he read the text. "Sir, you might want to talk to security about this."

"If it keeps up, I will. Right now, it's nothing. In fact, keep it to yourself, will you?"

"Aye, sir, but -- "

"Thanks."

0921 EST
Same location

"Is the government prepared for opening statements?"

"We are, Your Honor." Mac rose from her chair and faced the jury box. "For the past two and a half years, we've lived in a changed world. Most of us in this room took the oath and put on a uniform long before September 11th, and since then we've had to adapt our mindset and our duties. Combat air patrols are part of that change, and they play an important role in our newly-formed vision of homeland security. No one who lived through that day can dispute their necessity. However, patrols are designed to protect not only our center of government, but its citizens as well.

"On the morning of March 24th, the patrol led by Lieutenant Commander Walken failed in that duty. More than that, the commander took actions that amounted to an attack on a civilian. The plane was small and posed little to no real threat, but Commander Walken chose to see it as one, and he took it down, as surely as if he'd fired a missile at it. The maneuver he performed was not one listed as acceptable in his rules of engagement, but he did it anyway.

"His action did not save anyone from a terrorist attack; instead, it killed a young man with hopes for the future and something to contribute. Such an egregious act cannot be written off as simply a mistake. Hold our officers accountable for their decisions and their actions. If we can't do that, then all our new security will come at far too high a price."

As Mac took her seat, Harm rose from his, not wanting the members to have any more time than necessary to take her statement to heart.

"If it were as simple as the government suggests to identify threats, we wouldn't have a need for such security measures in the first place. Unfortunately, as we've discovered, it isn't anywhere near that simple. Colonel Mackenzie suggested that standing ROEs for Operation Noble Eagle did not compel Commander Walken's actions - we believe otherwise. In fact, his maneuver did not even approach the limits of the ROEs, because he did not engage the unidentified aircraft. He simply made a warning pass, which cannot be conclusively linked to the other pilot's loss of control.

"We don't *know* why the unidentified aircraft crashed, which only serves to point out just how much we still don't know about its flight. Even now, long after the fact, we don't know why it strayed into the Washington Air Defense ID Zone. We don't have any reason to assume malicious intent, but we certainly can't dismiss the possibility, even in hindsight. What we *do* know is that the aircraft refused to answer repeated radio calls or obey the FAA-mandated intercept procedures. We also know that within minutes, it could have reached nearly any point in the District.

"Those are facts, and they are the only facts Commander Walken had available at the time. We've all seen what has happened in the past when potential threats go unchallenged. If you convict this man, you will be sending a message to all patrol aviators that they will be blamed if an incident occurs -- and a message to those who might plot against us that we are not willing to do what it takes to maintain an unwavering defense. Please don't allow this tragedy to lead into an even greater one."

On the whole, the jurors gave little indication that either argument had moved them. Harm had been reading people in this job for some time, though, and he formed his initial opinions as he sat down at the defense table. He'd taken the first round, but barely, and his assertion that the mystery aircraft had rightly been considered a threat could easily backfire on him if the members judged it to be in any way exaggerated. This was going to be a battle.

Mac's first witness was Walken's wingman, Lieutenant Harper. The young man gave an earnest, detailed account of the patrol up through the encounter with the Cessna, being careful to keep his tone as neutral as possible. She hadn't called him to be neutral, though, and Harm knew it. He just wasn't sure quite how much she had up her sleeve.

"Your RIO, Lieutenant Commander Hicks, made a comment just before Commander Walken made his close pass, didn't he?"

"Only over the intercom, ma'am -- not on an open channel."

"What did he say, Lieutenant?"

Cowboy glanced down at the floor. "He just said something like, 'Don't be too rough on him.' That was all."

"Meaning that he felt Commander Walken's maneuver might be too extreme?"

"Objection," Harm spoke up. "Counsel can't honestly expect the lieutenant to know the motivation for his RIO's comment."

"Sustained," the judge agreed. "Colonel, if you want to know what Commander Hicks was thinking, you'll have to call him to the stand himself."

"I'll shift directions, Your Honor." Mac turned back to the aviator, who was looking increasingly uncomfortable on the stand. "Flying CAP over the States -- it's not the most exciting duty a pilot can pull, is it?"

Cowboy drew himself up taller in the chair. "Ma'am, it's true that we're not putting bombs on targets. But we take our responsibility very seriously."

"Because you're defending the country from terrorism."

"From whatever threats we may face, ma'am. We can't expect that the next threat will look exactly like the last."

"I see." Mac took a few small, measured steps across the room. "You train and train, and you constantly study the rules of engagement, all so that if and when a threat appears, you'll be ready to face it without hesitation. You're trained to act. Is that accurate?"

"When necessary, ma'am," Harper said firmly, aware of her general intention.

"But it's left to you to determine necessity, isn't it?"

"Ma'am, the ROEs are clear on what constitutes a threat. This contact had met all of the specified criteria."

"But the ROEs don't specify a close pass when intercept procedures fail, do they?"

"No, ma'am. Boots -- Commander Walken -- improvised that one because he didn't want to fire unnecessarily."

On that last word, Mac wheeled back toward the witness box, eyebrows raised. "If the aircraft was a threat, how could firing be unnecessary?"

Harper blinked rapidly, realizing that he'd backed himself into a corner. "Ma'am, we couldn't be completely sure, but -- "

"In truth, Lieutenant, did you really believe that this was a threat? Or did you just think it was a lost pilot who might be fun to mess with?"

"Argumentative," Harm pointed out calmly.

"Proceed with caution, Colonel." The judge delivered this line rather pointedly toward Mac, who nodded once in acknowledgement.

"Lieutenant, is it your opinion that Commander Walken's action was justified because you collectively viewed the aircraft as a threat?"

"I would call it a *potential* threat, ma'am."

Mac regarded him with a curious expression. "Does that distinction get hard to make when you've been staring at nothing but empty sky for weeks on end?"

Harm didn't like the direction that question was taking. "Objection! Is counsel testifying?"

"I'll rephrase. Lieutenant, you had a discussion about the monotony of your current duty with Commander Hicks just before the incident, correct?"

Slightly flustered, Harper took a moment to frame his reply. "Ma'am, I made a couple of smart-alecky comments that I probably shouldn't have made, and Commander Hicks correctly reminded me that our patrols serve an important purpose. That's all it was."

Mac stepped toward him. "Have you ever heard your fellow squadron members express similar sentiments before?"

"On occasion, ma'am, but it doesn't mean anything. It's just -- you know, guys talking, letting off some steam."

"But this time it wasn't really just talk, Lieutenant. This time, it was disrupted by something that had to be dealt with, and based on the tone of the comments you and Commander Hicks related in your depositions, I'm not convinced that this patrol was entirely in the proper mindset to deal with this threat, real or imagined. Can you truthfully say that your judgment was supported by the necessary level of vigilance?"

"Ma'am, I didn't make the call!"

Only a second later, the young aviator realized that his defensive protest had sounding fairly damning toward his wingman. But it couldn't be retracted. Mac nodded, a hint of empathy in her dark eyes. "No, you didn't," she agreed. "So I have to ask you this, Lieutenant. Bearing in mind that hindsight is twenty-twenty, do you believe that, had you been the flight leader, you would have taken the same action?"

Harper struggled for a moment, looking toward Walken at the defense table. Finally, he raised his gaze to the prosecutor. "Ma'am, I honestly don't know, but ... no. I don't think I would have."

"Your witness." Mac turned back toward her table and slid gracefully into her seat.

Harm didn't rush to approach the witness; he didn't want to give the impression that Mac's questions had rattled him at all. They had, of course, but he was used to that. During her examination, he'd recalled an entry from Harper's file, and it quickly became the basis for his cross.

"Lieutenant Harper, I noticed in your personnel file that you flew your first tour at sea under then-Captain Thomas Boone in the Med. Is that right?"

Harper blinked, thrown off by the topic shift but grateful for it all the same. "Yes, sir. Best in the business."

"I tend to agree. The CAG had a couple of sayings that he was always spouting, aphorisms about what aviators do. You remember any of them that might pertain to this situation?"

With that, Harper regained some of his bearing. "Yes, sir. Whenever anyone would suggest that our alert level was low, CAG would get this look on his face like he was disgusted with the whole lot of us. And he'd say, 'You nuggets don't get it. You oughta be on full alert when you're flying over Oklahoma.'"

Harm smiled; he remembered hearing that exact phrase more than once, most memorably in another courtroom an ocean away. "Does that accurately portray what you've learned about your flying duties since then?"

"Absolutely, sir. We don't trivialize any contact, no matter what dumb things we might complain about sometimes. It's part of staying loose, not getting tunnel vision. These past couple of years have demonstrated that we can't afford to focus on one kind of threat at the expense of others."

"All right. You said you don't think you would have taken the same action Commander Walken did, but you're not sure. Why are you uncertain?"

The younger officer gave a half-shrug. "Maybe because he has more experience than me, sir. He's been in combat and I haven't, so if he thought it was the right move to make, I'm not going to contradict him."

"Lastly, Lieutenant: from your vantage point, do you believe the commander's maneuver is what caused the civilian pilot to lose control of his aircraft?"

"If it did, sir, he wasn't a very good pilot."

Harm braced for an objection, but heard none. As he returned to his seat, Mac stood up to redirect. "Not being a very good pilot isn't sufficient reason to label a contact threatening, is it?"

"No, ma'am, but like I said, this contact fit the criteria."

"Which were?"

"His presence in a restricted area and his lack of response to both radio and visual directives."

Mac spread her hands wide. "Did it occur to you to wonder if the pilot perhaps had a medical emergency? Carbon monoxide poisoning is a danger on poorly maintained aircraft and could have caused a lack of awareness."

"Ma'am, this pilot didn't appear to be disabled. He had control of the aircraft up until he went into the spin."

"Then it stands to reason that said spin was probably caused by an outside influence, doesn't it?" she asked simply. Before Harm could raise an objection about the witness's qualification to answer the question, she abruptly shook her head. "You don't have to answer that. I have no further questions."

The judge lifted his gavel. "Court will recess for one hour for lunch. We will resume at 1230."

After taking a few minutes to reassure his client that no, Colonel Mackenzie hadn't just killed his case, Harm headed back to his office. He only had a chance to sit down and retrieve one voicemail message, from the Washington Air Traffic Control Center in regards to the traffic on the day of the incident, before his courtroom foe appeared in the doorway.

"On full alert flying over Oklahoma, huh?"

Harm shrugged. "Boone used to say that kind of thing all the time. He pulled that particular one out against Krennick at his own hearing. I don't know if she really bought into it, but then, she wasn't the one he needed to convince."

Mac held up two Styrofoam containers. "I got us sandwiches, if you're willing to spend lunch with the enemy."

A smile instantly came to his lips without stopping to ask his brain for permission. "Trying to get back on my good side after twisting my client's wingman into knots this morning?"

"I wasn't that hard on him."

"The kid's gonna need a compass just to find the door, Mac."

"I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment." She turned toward the hallway. "I'll be outside on the terrace."

"I'll be there in just a sec." Harm glanced at his computer screen and saw three new email messages: one from Sturgis about another case; one from Mattie, apparently making use of her school's computer lab on her lunch hour; and one with no visible sender address.

He scanned Sturgis's message and filed it for later, replied briefly to Mattie with sympathy toward her clique-related plight and a gentle reminder that she might spend her school time more profitably by working on actual schoolwork ... and let his mouse hover over the 'next' button for a moment. Bud and the IT department had only been able to track the last anonymous message back as far as a computer in an Arlington coffeehouse. He'd considered going over there to check out the clientele, but eventually decided that wasting his time on such pursuits was probably just what the mystery emailer wanted.

He hit 'delete' and stood up, heading for the terrace.

Mac looked up as her partner stepped out onto the small terrace that adjoined their building. "It's finally getting nice out, isn't it?" she commented as he approached the table she'd chosen.

"And not a moment too soon." Exceptions to the uniform rules had been made for this area; seeing that Mac had taken off her Class A jacket and folded it over an empty chair, Harm chose to do the same.

After they'd started eating their lunch, Mac's gaze snagged on a spot of color peeking out from his jacket pocket, and she reached over to pull out a red hair scrunchie. Harm immediately groaned and slumped over in his chair. "That just figures. Her favorite one. She's going to kill me."

The idea of finding a teenager's ponytail holder in her alpha-male partner's pocket struck Mac as both incredibly endearing and somehow difficult to witness. He'd changed over the past few months, had grown in ways that she couldn't share. As hard as the past year had

been on their friendship, it warmed her to see him doing so well. Still, there was a nasty irony in the idea that the new turn of his life -- one that she'd championed -- seemed to, in some ways, be leaving her behind.

At that moment, however, she simply tossed him a disbelieving look. "I don't know which is stranger -- the fact that Mattie has a 'favorite' scrunchie, or the fact that you know which one it is."

"I know because she got mad at me for losing it." Harm waved a hand in his now-famous 'who the hell knows with teenagers' gesture, tucking the band of fabric back into his pocket. "She handed it to me sometime after her game last week, and I knew I put it somewhere ... She needs it this weekend for the tournament, so at least now I don't have to go buy her another one of the same color."

"The whole team has matching scrunchies?"

"And sports bras, or so I'm told -- I don't touch that one with a ten-foot pole. Apparently it's a league rule that they match, even though they barely show. One of the girls' moms sewed all these scrunchie-things for the whole team, and Mattie was not looking forward to telling the coach she'd lost hers."

Mac shook her head. "The things you never thought about when you signed up for this job, huh?"

"Hey, you were a major player in that whole deal yourself." Harm's expression grew thoughtful. "I don't thank you enough for that."

"You don't need to be continuously grateful."

"Maybe not, but I am."

Something about that concept put her slightly off-balance. She wasn't sure she really wanted to explore the reasons why, but she allowed the first comment that sprang to mind to cross her lips anyway. "We never used to be able to do this during a contentious trial, did we?"

"Leave the case in the courtroom, you mean?"

"Something like that."

Harm thought about the idea for a moment, looking less than confident in his reasoning. Cautiously, he suggested, "Maybe we've finally gotten comfortable with where we are."

On the surface, it seemed like the right answer, but it struck her as wrong. Without thinking about the possible ramifications, she replied, "Have we?"

When she heard her own voice, and the note of wistfulness that had traitorously crept in, she was immediately deluged with second thoughts. He studied her more carefully, having picked up on her tone but wary of going too far to investigate it. "You sound like that's not a positive step."

"No, it is. In a way, I mean ..." Seeing no other way to explain herself, Mac shoved her pride out of the way and charged ahead. "Can I ask you something? A few weeks ago, when I

was taking out my frustrations on everyone in sight, you said something -- about me being afraid that you were losing interest in me.”

Harm’s features seemed to cool, but the iron shield she’d half-expected to slam into place never appeared. “I’d hoped that we were going to try to forget about that conversation - both sides of it.”

“I think that depends on how much of it was based in truth.”

He paused, looking down at his sandwich for lack of a better focal point. When he spoke again, his voice was slightly more guarded. “Assuming that Webb’s still in the picture, I’m not sure how you want me to respond to that.”

This wasn’t exactly the way she’d planned on breaking the news, but it was as good an opportunity as she was likely to get. “That’s a reasonable assumption, I’ll admit, but not an accurate one.”

That caused him to look up. “Really?” he asked, not quite neutrally.

“Really.” She wasn’t required to justify that relationship to him, she knew, but somehow she felt compelled to try. “We had a strong connection for a while, but I should have realized earlier that what connected us was our pain. He was my bandage, I think; maybe I was his as well. But you don’t wear a bandage forever.”

Harm gazed at her. His eyes displayed no judgment; they showed little emotion at all. “We never do manage to get ourselves to the same place at the right time, do we?”

It was as honest a statement as could be made about their relationship, but it pricked at her heart all the same. It confirmed for her that no possible confession could magically bring him within her reach. Right now, he was unattainable -- even more so this time, not because of some other woman, but because of a fifteen-year-old girl. “I know,” she said, offering a halfhearted, apologetic smile. “Mattie’s your focus, and I understand that -- ”

“No. I mean, yes, of course she is, but not to the total exclusion of other things.” His brow creased as he struggled to come up with a way to word his response. “Just because I have her doesn’t mean ... I mean, obviously she’s a big factor in -- shit, what exactly am I trying to say here?”

Mac would have been amused by his frustration if her internal alarm hadn’t chimed at that moment. “Court resumes in ten minutes.” She moved to gather up the remains of her lunch, but he reached out and stilled her arm.

“We really ought to continue this.”

“I thought you’d be grateful for getting an easy out.” She regretted her reply as soon as it was out, but he didn’t react to it, choosing instead to keep that intense gaze trained on her until she relented. “Are you free for dinner?”

“I promised Mattie I’d help her with her chemistry homework tonight. She goes to bed at 2130 -- what about getting coffee after that?”

She nodded, feeling a slight flutter in her stomach at the prospect. Somehow she knew that this conversation wouldn't take the path of previous attempts. "Charley's?" she suggested, giving the name of a coffee shop located approximately halfway between his apartment and hers.

"2145." Harm stood up and shrugged into his uniform jacket. Mac did likewise, and they symbolically put a hold on the personal conversation as they each fastened their buttons. "Your next witness is shaky."

"You wish. Let's get back in there."

1957 EST North of Union Station

"Chemistry is so not my subject."

"That makes two of us." Harm stood up from the couch and stretched as Mattie closed her textbook. They'd battled through a page of balancing equations, and he was starting to go a little cross-eyed. "If you're thinking about majoring in aeronautics, though, you can't escape it completely."

Mattie shot him a long-suffering look, pulling her blond curls into a ponytail and yanking her recently-located favorite scrunchie off her wrist with her teeth. Once that maneuver had been completed, she asked, "How does chemistry figure into aeronautics?"

"Propulsion, mainly. Aviation fuel is made up of all sorts of different hydrocarbons. When you're talking about engines, there's an ideal ratio of fuel to air that gets you the best performance, based on the conditions. So the next time you're deconstructing octane or something, just pretend it's av-gas or JP-8."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Right. That's going to make it much easier, I'm sure."

"Hey, it's the best I can do." Harm wandered over to the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Behind him, a slightly wicked gleam came into Mattie's eye, and she picked up her notebook.

"I guess that's one of the things that's sort of interesting about chemistry. We had a demonstration the other day -- the teacher showed us how it takes the perfect circumstances for certain things to combine. Like, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you throw these two compounds together and they do nothing, or the reaction gets all nasty ... but when you get the exact right temperature and pressure, they form something much stronger than what they were before. That's kinda cool to watch." She looked up with an innocent smile as her guardian turned around suspiciously. "You're meeting Mac tonight, didn't you say?"

Harm leaned back against the counter and fixed an exasperated stare on her. "That was just about as subtle as throwing a rock at my head."

"You're calling *me* obvious? Ever since you guys came back from Jen's promotion party, I can tell when Mac's on the phone, because your voice totally changes." Mattie looked pleased with her own powers of deduction.

He pointed his water bottle at her, caught somewhere between defensiveness and sheepish admission. "You think you know all about it, but you don't ..."

The phone rang then, and Mattie continued to look smugly at him as he walked over to answer it. "Hello?"

"You're not a very good listener, Commander Rabb."

Harm's blood chilled at the unfamiliar, accented voice. "Who is this?" he asked, knowing it was likely a futile question.

"I've asked you twice now to discontinue your efforts to investigate Daniel Bailey's flight. Was my meaning unclear?"

He turned away from Mattie, lowering his voice. "I ignored the first message and deleted the second. I don't cave to random warnings, especially when there's something big at stake."

"I don't think you realize just how right you are about that."

This was starting to sound downright ominous, and he didn't like it at all. "You want to tell me what this is about, or are we just going to keep up this posturing for a while?"

There was a pause, and the calm, almost melodic voice changed tack entirely. "Your daughter's a lovely girl. When you're ignoring warnings of this degree, you should perhaps tell her to stay away from windows."

Seized by sudden terror, Harm spun, seeing Mattie standing near the window that faced the alley. "*MATTIE! Get down!*"

Startled, Mattie started to turn, and he dove toward her, knocking her to the floor in the same instant that the window shattered.

Mattie screamed and clutched at him as glass rained down over them. He'd managed to shield her body fairly well with his own, but he had no way of knowing what, if anything, was coming next.

After a few seconds of hearing nothing beyond his own ragged breathing and Mattie's quiet gasps, he raised his head and surveyed the area. No Molotov cocktails or anything similar appeared to have come through the window; that was the good news. The bad news was the telltale mark on the far wall, the one he recognized even from the floor as a bullet.

He scrambled to his knees. "Mats? You okay?" he demanded, attempting to check her over with trembling hands. She nodded mutely, tears slipping from her eyes, and he pulled her into his arms, the magnitude of what could have happened cascading over him. "Honey, I'm so sorry ... It's okay. I swear to God, it's going to be okay ..."

When Jennifer Coates came flying through the door a few seconds later, she found them huddled together on the floor, Mattie's head buried in her guardian's chest as he murmured disjointed reassurances into her hair. "Sir," Jen gasped, taking in the scene and immediately reaching for the phone where it had fallen. "I heard the shot. I'm calling the police -- "

"No." The authority in that one word caused her to freeze in mid-motion. Harm slowly shook his head, his gaze turning to steel as he climbed to his feet. "This needs to go to the FBI, and I'll call them. You and Mattie need to go pack a bag. Take enough clothes for a week, and Mattie, take your bookbag."

"What?" Mattie pulled back.

"You girls can't stay here. If they know where I am, it won't take them long to find out about your place, assuming they don't already know. You have fifteen minutes to pack. I'll leave here right now, and if they're fearless enough to still be out there, they'll follow me. Wait exactly fifteen minutes -- not a second less -- and then head for the Marine barracks at 8th and I. I'll call them and set things up for you to stay there."

Mattie grabbed at his arm, halting when he winced. Jen frowned. "Sir, you're bleeding. Can't we all go together, so you can get that looked at?"

"It's nothing major, and staying together is exactly what I want to avoid. This is about the Walken case. I got us into this by ignoring the threats -- "

"Threats??"

"-- and I'll be damned if I put either of you in any more danger." Harm crossed the apartment and removed his sidearm from its lockbox, stuffing an extra clip into his jeans pocket. Mattie's eyes were huge as she watched him, and Jen's features reflected her conflict.

"Sir, if someone's after you, you can't just go out there on your own!"

Harm shook his head. "If they'd wanted to kill me tonight, we wouldn't be talking right now. But I think they decided that it would be too conspicuous. I just can't guarantee that they won't change their minds." His gut wrenched at the look in his young ward's eyes, and he drew an unsteady breath. "You'll have a guard take you to school tomorrow, and I'll call you as soon as we get the situation stabilized. I don't know how this is going to go, but the FBI and Homeland Security will know what to do. It'll be fine. I promise."

Mattie's tears escaped once again, the sudden enormity of the situation too much for her. "H-harm, I love you," she blurted out, reaching toward him.

He immediately pulled her into a crushing embrace. "Sweetheart, I love you, too," he breathed, kissing her cheek. "Go on. I'll talk to you as soon as can."

Jen took her roommate back to their apartment, and Harm put on a jacket to conceal the pistol stuck in his belt. He grabbed his cell phone and his car keys and headed down to his car, halfway daring the shooter to show his face. *You want me?* he silently challenged the encroaching darkness. *Go ahead and follow me. Just see what I'll do to someone who takes shots at my little girl.*

No cars seemed to be in pursuit, though, which didn't surprise him. If they stuck around, they ran the risk of getting caught. When he'd convinced himself that there was no one to try and lose, he got out his cell phone. The first call went to his Homeland Security contact, to attempt a trace on the call to his apartment. The second went to the Marine Barracks. The third went to Sarah Mackenzie.

2041 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Mac's senses were humming as she showed her ID to the guard and strode into Headquarters. When she'd first picked up the phone and heard Harm's voice, she'd immediately braced for some change to their plans. But she hadn't been prepared for the undercurrent of anger and determination in his voice. Instantly she agreed to meet him at the office, knowing that something much larger than their talk was at stake.

As she approached the glass double doors into the deserted Ops bullpen, she could see him sitting on Harriet's desk, cleaning blood away from a cut on his forearm. His back was partially turned to her, showing a number of small tears in his shirt. She pushed through the doors, calling his name, but he didn't look up, taking a roll of gauze out of the open first-aid kit on the desk.

"Harm?" she tried again, moving into his field of view as he attempted to wrap the gauze around his arm with his other hand. He fumbled it, and she noticed his hand trembling ever so slightly. The sight stopped her cold. In all their experiences together, this man's hands had been as steady as a rock. He was an aviator, for God's sake. What in the world could have shaken him so badly?

"Let me do that," she said firmly, taking the gauze away from him and wrapping his arm with the efficiency only a Marine could possess. "Tell me what's going on."

His gaze was hooded as he finally spoke. "A few days ago, I got an anonymous email warning me to stop looking into Bailey's flight. I ignored it, and I didn't even read the second one. Tonight someone called, told me to keep my daughter away from the window, and then promptly shot it out."

Mac jerked back to stare at him, suddenly comprehending. He'd been shot at before, but this time the target had been Mattie, and that changed everything. "Good lord," she whispered. "She's okay?" At his nod, she began to consider the implications of his words. "Someone's been threatening you?"

He stiffened. "Don't start, all right? I already can't believe what an idiot I was. I was operating like usual, like there was no one but myself to worry about. I didn't think it was serious, and it never even occurred to me that they might try to use Mattie ..." He looked up at her, the anguish in his eyes almost blinding. "Jesus Christ, Mac, how could I have been so stupid? She could have been killed tonight, and it would have been my fault."

"No, it wouldn't." Mac finished with his arm and touched his shoulder. "It would have been the fault of the person who fired that bullet. Not yours. But Mattie's fine, and she's safe now, right?"

Harm nodded again. "I sent her and Jen to 8th and I. DHS is trying to trace the call, but it had to have been a cell phone, probably under a false name and address ... God *damn* it!"

Rearing up off the desk, he picked up the nearest item -- it turned out to be a stapler -- and hurled it against the far wall. Torn between directing his fury at the nameless adversary and at himself, he started to pace restlessly.

Mac watched him, witnessing a new facet of her partner. Outright anger wasn't typical of him; he was far more likely to react with a sarcastic comment than with a shout. Even when pushed to his limits, his anger had always been controlled, though sometimes just barely. Tonight was different. She'd never seen him so unfocused, with so much desperate energy and no clear place to direct it. *They tried to hurt his child*, she realized, but soon corrected herself. *They tried to hurt someone he loves*.

The words, and the memory of having said something similar not so long ago, echoed in her mind, and she began to fully understand a few things she'd thought were beyond her reach.

"Harm, we need to come up with a plan here," she began, gently but with urgency. "Being a recognized authority on dispassionate plans, I suggest we start by thinking about who could have sent those emails."

Harm glanced up, then returned his gaze to the floor as he nodded. "The first one came from a public computer at a café -- I didn't get around to checking into it any further. I don't know about the second one."

"Well, today was the first day of the trial. If the emails started a few days ago, the person must have already known you were on the case."

"Government types and the locals at Bailey's home airport are the only people I've talked to about the case, and in the second case, I didn't identify myself."

Mac spread her hands. "It still sounds like we may need to look into the airport locals a little."

"It wasn't any of them. Not any of the ones I met, anyway."

"How do you know?"

He hesitated before answering. "Because the voice on the phone tonight had an accent."

That caused her to pause, a strange, twisted sensation beginning to take hold. "Middle Eastern?"

"I wouldn't swear to it, but it could have been."

Persian music and the scent of sandalwood wound their way into her brain. She heard the ring of her own phone, and the deceptively smooth Iranian voice on the other end.

"The music speaks to you, doesn't it, Sarah?"

Violently, she slammed a mental door shut. Sadik had inflicted his damage and had paid dearly for it. He was nothing now -- little more than an Agency casefile and an ugly memory. She had to concentrate on the present if she was to be of any use to her friend.

"That doesn't rule out the possibility of someone working with your mystery caller, or just mentioning you to another person. Obviously it wasn't just an accident that Bailey wandered into restricted airspace, or there would be no reason to try and chase you off right

now. Isn't it possible that if something bigger is going on, someone else at the airport might be involved?"

Harm stopped his pacing and went still for a moment. "Mac, I went into Bailey's hangar," she said, still turning over all the possibilities. "I wasn't there long enough to find much, but what if someone else was there? Someone might have seen me."

Mac closed the first-aid kit and replaced it in the cabinet. "In any case, we should get a list of people who rent hangars at Monroe County. And if we don't know who's involved, walking into the terminal and asking nicely might not be the best way to go."

"My lock-picking skills could use the workout." Harm grabbed his jacket off a nearby chair. "You don't have to come along, Mac. There's a strong chance that this'll technically involve some breaking and entering."

"Yeah, I do. For one thing, I think the world at large would be better off if I got behind the wheel instead of you at the moment."

There was more she wanted to say, but this probably wasn't the time. However, in a display of perception unexpected at a time like this, he somehow noticed. "There's something else," he said, the phrase hanging halfway between statement and question.

"There is. I know I shouldn't go here right now, but ..." She swallowed and looked him in the eye. "When everything first went to hell in Paraguay -- when you found out that I was missing -- I know it's not the same thing at all, but is this ...?"

"How I acted? What it felt like?" At her silent nod, he looked away again, his voice low. "I guess it was."

In a way, that only confirmed something she'd already known, but in another sense, it spoke volumes about his mindset and feelings. Had something changed between them? Or was she simply comprehending more than the actual spoken words now?

"I told Clayton Webb that I shot Sadik because he hurt someone I love," she stated quietly, the thought seemingly rising out of nowhere. "It took both of us a while to realize that I wasn't talking about him. I know we've got a lot still to figure out, but after how far we've come, can you really tell me not to go?"

He met her gaze, and entire soliloquies passed between them in the span of a few seconds. "Thank you," he said at last. "Let's get moving."

**2214 EST
Monroe County Airport
Central Maryland**

Mac climbed down out of the Lexus and reached under the seat for the flashlight Harm kept there. "It never occurred to me that airports might actually close for the night."

"Small ones do. Fortunately for us." Harm climbed easily over the aluminum gate that separated the parking lot from the hangar area. "Something's telling me to go check out Bailey's hangar again."

"The FBI and their comrades have been all over it already. I was going to enter their report into evidence."

"But that was before we had reason to believe that someone besides Bailey is involved. Just humor me for a minute, all right?"

Trusting him, and seeing very little chance that someone would come along and call the cops on them, Mac shrugged and followed him along the double row of hangars. Each side was its own long, stark building, divided on the inside by thin metal walls and punctuated at regular intervals by plane-sized mechanized doors. All of those doors were closed at this late hour, but the smaller door into Bailey's hangar had been opened and subsequently marked off with yellow police tape.

Mac ducked under the tape and turned on her flashlight. "They've practically cleaned this place out ..." Her train of thought was forgotten as something unexpected assaulted her senses. "Ugh. What's that smell?"

Harm stepped in behind her. "What smell?"

"Come over here -- it's stronger by the wall." They moved closer to the dividing wall, and Harm immediately jerked back.

"God. It smells like something crawled in here and died. Raccoon or something?"

But Mac's suspicions had been awakened, and she stepped up to the wall. "This wall separates this hangar from the one next to it. Let's get into that one."

Harm paused, and by the dim light of their flashlights, she could see the moment when he came to the same conclusion she had. "All right. If I get charged with unlawful entry, you're representing me."

With her at his back, he left Bailey's hangar and approached the door of the adjoining one. The lock was a standard home doorknob lock; not even a deadbolt. The aircraft door was more securely locked, of course, but still ... "Trusting neighborhood," he muttered, extending his pocketknife and going to work on the lock.

Within five minutes, the lock sprang open with an audible click, and as soon as they stepped inside, the smell attacked them with greater intensity. Neither of them particularly wanted to continue, but they knew it was inevitable. In one corner, Harm spotted a large plastic container, maybe five feet by two feet, of the type often used to store Christmas decorations. He reached into his pockets and put on his flying gloves before taking a deep breath and opening the lid.

The body inside was decidedly not a raccoon, and by all evidence, it had been there for a few days. Discolored and distended, the face was a nightmarish sight, but something about it looked familiar to both officers, even in this state.

When Mac spoke, her voice wavered as she attempted to avoid taking a deep breath in. "Daniel Bailey?"

Harm nodded, looking every bit as shell-shocked as she felt. "Which brings up an interesting question. If Bailey didn't fly and crash that day ..."

"... Who *did*?"

It took only a few minutes to alert Homeland Security, and before long there were agents from the FBI and the Department of Transportation in every corner of the hangar. "Entry wound is consistent with a nine-millimeter at close range," commented the medical examiner, rising from his crouch near the body and stripping off his gloves. "I'd say he's been in here about eight days."

"That fits with the locals' account of having seen him the morning of the incident," Harm confirmed. "So he comes in to work on his plane, and someone kills him and takes the aircraft?"

"But it wasn't just the plane that was positively identified," Mac pointed out. "There were dental records matched to Bailey as well. Somebody went to the trouble of making it look like Bailey was flying that plane, which means the crash in some way must have been deliberate."

"How do you figure?"

"Dental records are a standard tool to ID the dead. Whoever was flying that plane knew he was going to die."

"Well, that just makes me feel all warm and fuzzy." The FBI's special agent in charge, a gruff-looking type by the name of Gillson, approached with a grim expression. "One of our guys just woke up the airport manager. He'll be here in five to open up the terminal and show us his records, including contact info for whoever rented out this hangar. He's also willing to be a little flexible with tonight's timeline and say that he allowed you access earlier to investigate the smell."

That was progress, as well as some welcome news, but Harm acknowledged it with barely a nod, his mind still spinning rapidly. "Suicide attackers usually want their cause to be known," he thought aloud. "If you're going to take a Cessna and aim it at a building, why make the effort to frame someone else for it, someone with no visible agenda?"

"Because it's part of a larger plan," Mac suggested. "The pilot must have known he'd be intercepted. Maybe that was the point?"

"If he wanted to mess with the patrol, he picked a lousy method. He was flying one of the slowest, lightest planes available. There was no way he could have taken down an F-14, other than possibly ramming it head-on, which never would have happened because of the fighters' better maneuverability. And based on my understanding of the situation, despite Commander Walken's unorthodox choice of deterring tactics, nothing of the sort was imminent."

Mac didn't respond right away, something else clicking into place in her mind. "I think we're looking at this the wrong way," she theorized, her eyes getting that distant focus that her partner recognized from years of detangling convoluted investigations. "We're assuming that whatever happened didn't go according to plan. What if it did?"

"All he accomplished was turning an airplane and himself into a crater."

"That's not all. The other result of all this is Walken's court-martial and the increased scrutiny on the patrol procedures. AIRLANT's even considering an ROE change as a result of the public backlash. Say there's a group of people involved -- at least two or three. One takes the plane and 'wanders' into the ADIZ, knowing he'll be intercepted by the patrol. He stages a confrontation that makes the patrol look culpable in hopes of making future patrols relax their standards and think twice before taking action."

Harm nodded, picking up her thread. "Then at some later date, the remaining conspirators take another aircraft and wander into the ADIZ, and the hesitation of the patrol gives them enough time to do some real damage."

Gillson looked between the two of them, dubious. "You're saying that someone deliberately crashed that plane and killed himself on nothing but the hope that his buddies would be able to use the effects to stage a real attack?"

"Martyrdom once removed."

"Well, I'd love to be able to lock down the airspace to prevent that, but we have this pesky little thing called freedom that tends to get in the way."

"We're not suggesting that," Mac said. "Not on this amount of evidence. But we should be prepared for the possibility. Let us talk to our superiors about stepping up the patrols. In the meantime, you can track down the airport locals and get a better handle on what, if anything, the patrols need to be specifically prepared for."

"Boss," called one of the other agents, catching Gillson's attention. "Manager's here."

The trio hustled down to the terminal and entered as the airport manager was opening up his file cabinet. "That hangar was almost never open," he recalled as he skimmed through the folders. "It was rented out, oh, seven or eight months ago, for a twin-engine Comanche. Young guy, Asian, I think."

Asian? The mental image Mac had been forming was decidedly not Asian -- of course, in truth, her mental picture looked essentially like Sadik. "There's no airplane in there now."

"Maybe they moved it as part of the next phase," Harm guessed.

"Here it is." The manager pulled out a brown folder and handed them the contract inside. "Paid a year's rent up front, even though we only require six months. The name on here is William Han."

"Probably an alias," Gillson said, examining the photocopied driver's license and pilot's certificate. "We'll check out both the name and the address, though. And the discovery of Bailey's body isn't going public just yet. Let's see if we can get these guys to relax a little and let down their guard."

"This might get you farther." Harm picked up another sheet of paper. "The registration number of the aircraft. You did actually see it at some point, right? It does actually exist?"

"Oh, it exists," the manager replied. "I did see it way back at the beginning."

"They could easily paint over the tail number with a new one," Mac pointed out.

"Yeah, but no reputable aircraft detailer would do it. They'd have to do it on their own, and they'd have to do it someplace where no one would notice that the plane rolled in with one number and out with another." Harm leaned on the counter, trying to work through all the possibilities. "Or maybe they've really got balls and left it as is."

"So we're looking for a Comanche with either this tail number or a bad paint job?" Gillson shrugged and waved an agent over. "Get on the phone with the FAA. It'll take a lot of database diving, but maybe some ATC somewhere has had contact with ..." He glanced down at the sheet. "November Five-Two-Nine-Zero-Eight."

The frenetic activity, so incongruous with the darkened, quiet runway, began to taper off as agents received their assignments and set out to complete them. Standing by themselves in the terminal, Mac and Harm looked at each other, knowing that their usefulness had diminished.

"Think we can talk about amending the charges against Walken in the morning?"

Mac gave a short laugh. "Yeah, I'd say that's a good possibility. It'd be nice to have some concrete evidence that the pilot intended to kill himself, though. I wouldn't contest if you moved for a continuance in hopes of straightening that out before proceeding."

"AIRLANT will love that. More people with TV cameras accusing the Navy of stalling."

"They're already going to hate us before we even get that far. I can see it now. 'Admiral, with all due respect, that plan you have to amend the rules of engagement to allow light aircraft more benefit of the doubt? We think you should ditch it. In fact, we think you should go the other way entirely.' We're going to have boot prints on our asses."

"Then maybe I should go it alone. Seeing as I already have something of a reputation for stirring things up."

"That's why you need me. To vouch for you." Mac stretched her arms high above her head and rolled her neck to loosen complaining muscles. "Are you going to stay over at the Barracks with Mattie and Jen while all this is going on?"

Harm had been effectively avoiding any thoughts along those lines for the past hour or so, but that option wasn't going to be available for much longer. "I guess I can't exactly go home, can I?"

"Considering the fact that someone out there still wants to shut you up, I'd advise against it. Since the FBI's planning on keeping it quiet that they've found Bailey's body, the killers might not realize we're investigating in that direction. Problem is, if they think you're still the only one who suspects, they'll still be after you."

He nodded, having come to the same conclusion. "As much as it kills me, I think I'd better stay away from Mattie while this is playing itself out. She's just too tempting a target for them. I guess I'll go to Andrews." He checked his watch and cursed softly. "Then again, at this point I might as well just go rack out at work for a couple of hours and be the first one in the office in the morning. It'd be just as safe, and it'd net me a little more sleep."

"On the couch in the lounge?"

Harm shrugged. "It's not like it's never been done before, and I've slept in worse places."

"Whatever you say."

They exchanged cell phone numbers with Gillson and headed back toward Falls Church. When they arrived at JAG, Harm got his overnight bag out of the back of the Lexus and offered his thanks to Mac as she moved toward her Corvette. The guard didn't give him any trouble when he signed in on the after-hours log; any SP who had been stationed at JAG for any length of time knew that the senior attorneys tended to come and go at odd hours.

After hanging his spare uniform up in his office -- all he had was a set of khakis, so he'd just have to face the music for not following the uniform policy -- he trudged down the hall to the small lounge that was so rarely used. Opening the door, he jumped, then raised an eyebrow.

"And what's going on here?"

Mac smiled up at him, tossing her Nikes toward her own duffel and stretching out across one of the couches. "If it's good enough for the Navy, it's good enough for the Marines."

"Mac, come on. I don't need a bodyguard, and you're just going to wake up stiff and regret this."

"That's just too bad for me." She let the smile fade and spoke earnestly. "It's been a pretty terrible night. In my experience, being alone usually just reinforces terrible nights, because you're stuck focusing on whatever was terrible about them. So like it or not, you've got a roommate."

Harm shook his head, trying not to think about the last time they'd shared a room. "Thanks," he said quietly. "Again."

"Least I could do," she responded in kind. "Get some sleep."

**0715 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia**

Morning came entirely too soon, but both officers were able to make themselves presentable in time for the first arrivals of the day. Fortunately, the title of 'first in' was usually split between Mac and the admiral, and his routine didn't change today.

Entering the bullpen, Chegvidden immediately looked at Harm askance. "Two questions," he said, ever direct.

"Why am I early and what am I doing out of Class As?" the younger man guessed.

"Very good. Talk, Commander."

They explained the events of the previous night in tag-team, and watched their CO's expression grow progressively darker. The admiral had an unexpected soft spot for Mattie, despite the attitude she'd given him during their first meeting, and the idea that someone had taken a shot at her was rapidly eroding any optimism he'd had for the coming day.

"I'll get the continuance for you. You get on the phone with the AIRLANT homeland defense command. Maybe there's not much to be done without more evidence, but we can at least inform them of the potential threat."

They obeyed, and as expected, the results were less than satisfactory. The public relations debacle caused by the crash had been substantial, and there had apparently been significant pressure from Congress and the White House to make changes in the patrol procedure. The one-star in charge of the D.C. area defense had reacted with disbelief to the JAGs' pleas to step up security, demanding evidence that the previous airspace incursion was a prelude to a later attack. They had none, so all they received in response was a slightly patronizing pledge to continue the prescribed flights with all due vigilance.

"I think he saw us as questioning the competence of his patrols," Mac opined, sitting back in her chair and reassembling the pen she'd unconsciously demolished during the phone call.

"Guess I can't blame him, since we sort of were." Harm rubbed his eyes and checked his watch. "Mattie's lunch break should have just started. I need to check in with her."

"Want me to leave?"

"This is your office, and it'll be a short call, anyway." He took out his cell phone and pressed a memory key before putting the phone to his ear. "It's me, Mats. Everything's okay right now. I'm at work. We found out a fair bit last night, so the FBI's out tracking down some things. If we're lucky, all this will be over soon. I know, honey. I wish it didn't have to be like this. Make sure you don't leave the building until the guard actually comes into the office to get you, all right?"

Mac tried not to listen in, but it was difficult to ignore the emotions that ran underneath her friend's voice. When he finished with a heartfelt "I love you," she couldn't suppress a twinge of irrational envy. She'd never heard those words from him before; he'd certainly never said them to any previous girlfriends within her earshot, and she rarely heard him speak to his mother or grandmother. She'd often wondered if he had ever, or would ever, let go of his carefully-honed control enough to say them to anyone. Somehow she'd thought, in a self-absorbed sort of way, that if he ever did, it would indisputably be with her.

But Mattie hadn't mounted her assault in quite the same way. She'd never stood toe to toe with him and essentially dared him to care. She'd simply trusted him, and in so doing had opened him up, as if by secret passageway.

As Mac recalled their aborted conversation on the terrace the day before, she wondered if the young girl might have lit the path for her.

"Mattie doing okay?" she asked gently as he put away his phone.

He shrugged. "Her school's practically a fortress. She just worries about me, mostly. I can never seem to stop her from doing that."

"Loving someone can get kind of tricky that way."

"I'm starting to realize that." It was a moment before he looked up, but when he did, there was little question that the potential double meaning hadn't been lost on him. "Are we relegated to waiting for word from Gillson and company?"

Mac looked down at her phone and saw the new-message light blinking. "Looks like someone called while we were fighting the good fight with AIRLANT. Cross your fingers." She played the message on speakerphone.

"Progress," Gillson reported tersely. "Assuming you have an STU, get on it and call our office." The message ended with an abrupt click.

Mac quirked an eyebrow. "Let's not keep our federal friends waiting."

JAG Headquarters required secure communications on a very infrequent basis. The sole 'vault' room in the building was, predictably, located in the basement, and was little more than a small conference room with a secure computer and a secure telephone unit.

When they connected with the Bureau, Gillson wasted no words. "No lead on the plane yet, but the driver's license on file at the airport, while fake, does have a legit address. My guys went and found out that our guy's been long gone from there for a few months, but they got enough out of the landlord to track him to a new place. Said new place is a gold mine. All sorts of aircraft manuals and aviation charts, marked with positions in a language that has yet to ring any bells with us. And the *piece de resistance*: shipping cartons from a mail-order gun and knife company. Since we took most of their stuff, it's not too likely that they'll be hanging out there in the near future, but we've got a couple of agents watching it, just in case. So it's good news and bad news. The good news is, now we've got physical evidence of a plot. The bad news is ... no clue on where or when."

"Have you scanned in any of the charts you seized?" Harm asked. "We'd like to take a look."

They could hear the agent's wry chuckle clearly but faintly, as if he'd pulled the phone away. After a moment, he returned with only a hint of amusement in his voice. "You don't really think that I can just email this stuff over like a cookie recipe, do you? This is about as hot as anything in this building right now."

"And we helped you get it, if you'll recall," Mac pointed out smoothly. "We're sitting right next to a SIPRnet-enabled computer."

"Colonel, there's a point at which we need to close the loop down to law-enforcement only, and we just hit it. I appreciate the fact that Commander Rabb has a personal stake in this -- "

"I'm not sure you entirely do, Special Agent." Harm cut off the platitude with a cool tone. "When you have a moment like I had last night -- when you feel the absolute terror that accompanies the realization that your job almost got someone you love killed -- come talk to me. Until then, I strongly suggest that you give me the benefit of the doubt."

There was a pause on the line. "If the two of you didn't have such a rep for getting results, this would absolutely not happen," Gillson said, resignation clear in his voice. "Give me your address."

Mac looked it up in the vault's logbook and relayed it. Within a few moments, a series of PDF files began to appear on the computer screen. While she waited for the decryption to complete, Harm asked, "Get anything on the origin of the call to my place last night?"

"As expected, it was a mobile phone, purchased online with the same fake name from the airport, William Han. We'll get the signal triangulated if it's used again, but prior events suggest that they won't be that stupid."

"It's Indonesian," Mac said without preamble, breaking into the conversation. As Harm turned, she pointed to a scrawled note in the corner of the map filling the screen.

That caught Gillson off-guard. "You read Indonesian?"

"Not much. I spent a couple of months in and around there, though, and I exchange letters with a little girl in Aceh. This looks a lot like the little notes she puts on her letters."

"The airport manager did ID our guy as Asian, and the alias fits," Gillson admitted. "Jemaah Islamiya, maybe, or even connected to Abu Sayyaf?"

Harm glanced down at the phone. "Have either of those groups operated in the U.S. before?"

"Typically they leave that to their big brothers in al Qaeda. But our guy or guys may have gone 'off the reservation,' as it were. Colonel, thank you for justifying my procedural breach in such short order. We'll get this stuff translated and start focusing on our Indonesian watch list, see if anybody interesting came into the country around the same time as our mystery man bought his plane."

"It's a start, but it doesn't get us any closer to finding him or the plane. And for all we know, the one posing as Han was the one who crashed last week." Harm stood up from the table and started a slow pace around the cramped room, lacing his fingers behind his head as he pondered.

"FAA's got no record of that tail number transiting any controlled airspace in the past twelve months. We tracked down the guy who sold it, but he's got nothing."

"These maps cover half the East Coast," Mac commented, still glued to the screen. "There are dozens of potential flight plans marked. Public places, government buildings -- plenty of things that a good-sized twin-engine airplane could hurt. How are we going to narrow it down?"

Gillson's voice was grim. "Better yet, how are we going to come up with a time frame?"

Harm stopped in mid-step, turning back to gaze intently at an unremarkable point on the wall. "We have the number for the cell phone they used, right?"

"Sure, but like I said, if they're smart, they're not gonna use it again."

"Well, on the off chance that ego overrules intelligence, which seems to happen fairly often ... what if I called him?"

Mac twisted in her chair to shoot him an incredulous look. Gillson's frown was audible over the line. "And said what? 'We're on to you, so give it up?'"

"No. He approached me one-on-one, so I do the same. I tell him their scare tactic worked, and that I'm willing to deal to protect Mattie. I bluff that the FBI and DHS are closer to them than they think, but I can try to keep the heat off for a while if I know more about when and where they're planning on striking."

"They're not gonna fall for that. Terrorists generally don't relate all that well to parental fears."

"Maybe not, but they knew enough to hit me there. We might get some info out of it, and if I can keep him talking long enough, we might get a fix on his location."

Mac was shaking her head. "That'll only bring their focus back onto you and Mattie even more, and it might spook them into doing something before we can get to them."

"Well, they're already going to figure out that time's running out when they see what we've done to their apartment," Gillson suggested.

"And there's no way I get on the phone until Mattie's back at the Barracks with a half-dozen Marines around her," Harm declared. "Once that's done, I go back to my place so all signs point to me doing this on my own, and make the call. If the phone's out of service, we keep going like we're going and hope for a break. If not ..." He shrugged. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?"

Again, there was a pause on the other end of the secure line. "Stand by. I need to run this by a few people."

When the agent put them on hold, Mac folded her arms and gazed at her partner, looking distinctly not amused. "You make it incredibly hard for someone to watch your back, you realize that?"

"I know the Marines enjoy a challenge."

Before long, Gillson was back. "All right, Commander, you've got yourself a deal. But there are going to be a few ground rules, so listen up ..."

1516 EST
North of Union Station

Harm opened the door to his apartment and found Mac already inside, setting up the recording unit the Bureau had provided. She'd arrived separately, in jogging clothes and a baseball cap, in case Harm's mystery caller was once again watching the building. "I drank your last Diet Coke," she said matter-of-factly, tossing her head in the direction of an empty bottle on the counter.

"I'll live." Harm threw his keys on the table, trying not to look at the damaged window frame now patched up with a plastic tarp. "We set?"

"Yeah. I'm going to stay on my cell with Gillson while you make the call. If it goes to voicemail, they'll be able to start tracing when the voicemail is accessed from that number. Have you heard from Mattie yet?"

"Should be any minute now. School got out about half an hour ago." No sooner had the words left his mouth than his cell phone signaled, and he lifted it to his ear. "Hi, Mats."

"What's going on?" Mattie asked immediately. "They said to call you as soon as I got back here."

"We've got some more information on the guys, so we're going to try something here and hope it draws them out."

Mattie didn't respond for a moment, and when her voice returned, it was less certain. "Are you doing something dumb?"

"Hopefully not, but ... kinda, yeah."

She sighed, nearly successful in keeping the waver out of her voice. "Love you."

"Love you too, honey. I'll call you the second this is over." He clicked the phone off and raked a hand through his hair. Squaring his shoulders, he looked up at Mac. "All right. Get Gillson on the line, and get me the number."

She did, and he picked up his home phone to press the buttons. Both officers tried not to hold their breath as the mechanical ring sounded once, twice, three times. "At least it's still in service," Mac said under her breath.

At last, an automated voice clicked in. "The cellular customer you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please leave a message."

At the beep, Harm put whatever acting skills he had into play. "You know who this is. I'm calling to tell you that I give. I'll do whatever you want as long as you leave my family out of it. There are people on your trail, but I might be able to distract them, send them in another direction, if you just ..." He allowed a note of desperation to seep into his voice. "Just tell me what it is I'm supposed to do now, all right? Don't leave me wondering whether or not my little girl is in danger. I'm begging you. Tell me what I have to do, and I'll do it."

He hung up, turning back to Mac with a helpless shrug. "I guess all we can do now is wait."

Mac nodded, signing off with Gillson and putting her own phone down. "Mattie's so lucky," she said softly.

"Because I keep her life so exciting?" he replied sardonically.

"Because she has someone like you to love her."

Harm gave her a sideways glance, his expression unreadable. "I told you once that you had someone who'll always love you," he said, his voice almost too low to be heard.

"And I said the same." Mac glanced down at the phone in her hand, shaking her head. "So how did everything end up such a mess, both then and now?"

"Because we lead the world's most complicated lives, I guess." After a moment's hesitation, he decided to continue with his original thought. "None of that has changed the fact that I meant it then, and I still mean it now."

"So do I." She swallowed hard and met his gaze. "When all this is over, do you think ... I don't know -- a nice dinner somewhere, no work talk ...?"

A sense of warmth, of relief and completion, suddenly flowed through his veins, of a magnitude he hadn't felt since Mattie had stepped into his arms on Christmas Eve. With a nod, he quietly answered, "I'd like that."

Mac looked relieved as well, though there was still a hint of uncertainty in her features. "I know I can't just horn in on your time with Mattie, so -- "

"Mattie likes you, and she's been on my case about you for weeks now. Fifteen-year-old girls have a remarkable capacity for romanticism." He smiled. "Besides, she could really use someone like you in her life."

Something about that concept seemed to strike her wrong, and she looked away, an edge creeping into her voice. "So she can learn from my mistakes?"

Harm heard the ringing self-doubt, knowing that he bore some share of the responsibility for it. "She's a smart girl. She knows that none of us are perfect." Instinctively, he stepped forward and caught her chin in his hand, persuading her to look up at him. "I know I won't have her forever, and I want to give her so much -- more than I have, really -- while I still can. Mostly, I want her to see a strong woman who's overcome every obstacle life has thrown at her. She understands a lot of what you've had to face, and she admires you for it. And even though I know I can't understand many aspects of it -- both then and now -- so do I."

She stared up at him, drawing long-buried truths out of his eyes. "There's so much I wish I'd said and done differently in Paraguay," she whispered.

"You're not the only one. But it's over. None of it can hurt us anymore unless we let it."

Making a conscious decision, she leaned up and kissed him. It began gently, almost tentatively, as if she wasn't quite sure how he'd react. Upon finding him a willing participant, though, she drank him in as if he alone could save her from a lifetime of thirst.

Her phone's strident ring instantly severed their connection, bringing the current situation sharply back into focus. Resignedly, he stepped back as she answered the call.

"It's Gillson," she reported, keeping the phone pressed to her ear. "We may be in business. The service provider just notified the Bureau that the voicemail's been accessed."

"Guess curiosity may have killed the cat after all."

"Only if they actually call us and play ball for a little while. I'm going to stay on the line with Gillson. You ready?"

"Don't have much choice now." Harm steeled himself for the possible conversation to come.

Another few minutes passed before his phone rang, making him jump. Mac immediately switched on the recorder and spoke in a hushed voice to Gillson. When she signaled to him, shortly after the second ring, he seized the phone. "Hello?"

"What a pleasant surprise, Commander," greeted the voice that had echoed in his mind for most of the past twenty-four hours. "To be frank, I still wasn't sure whether or not you were taking me seriously."

"Well, you found the right bargaining chip, so congratulations." Harm didn't mask his disdain; he might as well sound natural. "Your move now. What's the deal?"

"Before we get into that, I'm interested to hear more about these 'people' you say are 'on my trail.' Have you been telling tales, Commander?"

"Did you think I was the only one interested in Bailey's flight? I don't control the FBI or Homeland Security. All I can do is recommend to the Navy where to put their patrols, or where not to put them."

"And you have enough influence to make that happen? Pardon me if I sound skeptical."

"Hey, I'm the best option you've got, aren't I? I'm the only Navy person pushing this, because to defend the pilot, I have to prove that Bailey's flight posed a threat. If I stand up in court and say that I no longer believe that to be true, public opinion will demand that the patrols be toned down. That's what you've wanted all along, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. And you're willing to do this simply to receive my assurances that we will not harm the girl?"

Harm closed his eyes. "You must not have children. If you did, you'd understand."

Mac held up a notepad, on which she'd written *Keep going -- they've got the signal and are narrowing the area.*

"That may be, but as I understand it, this child isn't strictly yours, is she?"

"What does that matter? I'm willing to do whatever I have to do to protect her. Isn't that enough?"

"I'm not sure it is." The voice took on a less pleasant tone. "If I have cause to believe that you're playing cowboy, looking for a way to stop us yourself, I won't hesitate to take out my displeasure on the girl. If that matters to you, you'll toe the line."

"How am I supposed to do that if I don't even know where the line is?"

There was a pause, and then the voice suddenly turned icy. "I've changed my mind. You could have been useful, possibly, but waiting to see how successful your tactics will be doesn't interest me. More can be accomplished by swift action than by a more perfect deception. Good day, Commander."

"Wait, what -- " The line went dead before Harm could get another word in. He whirled back to Mac. "What the hell just happened? Did he figure out we were tracing him?"

Mac shook her head helplessly even as she listened to her own phone and scanned a local area map. "They've got him pinpointed to somewhere in this radius, heading northeast." She drew a circle around the area, maybe fifteen square miles in total. "Agents are heading out to canvas the area."

"He said 'more can be accomplished by swift action.'" Harm looked at the map, and at the general area northeast of the region in question. His nerves going cold, he stabbed at a small symbol with his finger. "Duncan Regional Airport. They know we're coming. Whatever they're going to do, they're doing it *right now*."

"Shit," Mac breathed. "Gillson, you hear that?" She waited a moment, then nodded. "Got it. See you there." She snatched up her keys from the table and strode toward the door. "They're calling the airport, but it'll take time to get a team there to lock it down. How fast can we get there?"

Harm looked at the map again, glad they'd had their sidearms ready. "Half an hour, minimum. We'd better move."

During the drive, they stayed in contact with Gillson, who assured them that Pax River had been notified of the emergent threat and that their backup patrol was being launched to supplement the patrol already airborne. That only solved half the problem, though; they still had no idea where the plane might be headed.

As they approached the airport, they came upon a pair of unmarked cars blocking the entrance. Harm and Mac flashed their IDs to the agent who came up to the window.

"We've got a team moving in on the hangars right now," the man reported. "Special Agent Gillson says you're cleared in, but hang back, and the vehicle has to stay here."

Harm exchanged a look with his partner, then threw the Lexus in park and swung himself out of the seat. Mac was only a half-step behind him as they jogged up to the tarmac.

A burst of semiautomatic fire crashed through the tense quiet, followed by another, and a number of unintelligible shouts. The Comanche they'd been trying to find suddenly appeared, taxiing at a barely-controlled speed toward the end of the runway. Two figures were inside, one leaning out the right-side door and firing an assault rifle at the agents taking aim.

"They're going to get off the ground," Mac realized, watching the speed with which the twin-engine plane outdistanced the running agents. "Unless they've turned on their transponder for some reason, nobody will be able to track them once they're out of sight -- the patrols will have to acquire them visually."

Harm scanned the immediate area, and his eyes quickly fell upon a possible solution.

"Unless someone *else* can keep them in sight and guide the patrols in."

He sprinted toward a Cirrus SR-22 sitting near the fuel stand. As the Comanche accelerated to takeoff speed and lifted off the runway, he climbed into the Cirrus and noted with relief that the keys were inside. Going through the most cursory preflight checklist conceivable -- checking fuel and oil pressure only -- he was only slightly surprised when the passenger side door opened and Mac jumped inside.

"You might need a spotter," she said simply, reaching for a headset and seatbelt.

Flashing a short-lived glance at her that he hoped conveyed gratitude, Harm primed the engine, shouted "Clear!", and turned the key, bringing the propeller to life. Mac kept her eyes trained on the rapidly-climbing Comanche as Harm performed a high-speed taxi toward the end of the active runway.

On a guess that the radio was set to the local traffic frequency, he pressed the button. "Duncan Regional, if anybody's reading me, I'm going to follow that Comanche as best I can and report position to Navy patrol aircraft. Switching over to 243.0."

Understanding, Mac reached for the radio dial and turned it to the military's emergency frequency just as the nose of the Cirrus lifted off the ground. She glanced up at the placard bearing the airplane's tail number before activating the radio. "Navy ADIZ patrol, this is Cirrus Eight-Two-Five Romeo -- Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie on comm, Commander Harmon Rabb at the controls," she reported. "We're tracking your bandit visually from Duncan Regional, currently on a heading of ..." She scanned the instrument panel for the heading indicator, and Harm tapped the correct dial. "One-three-eight. Do you read?"

After a moment, the reply came back. "Roger, Eight-Two-Five Romeo, this is Mustang Flight Lead. We're coming your way. Keep us up to date."

"Will do."

As they leveled out at a relatively low altitude of three thousand feet, Harm looked over at his co-pilot. "I'm not sure coming along was the brightest move you've ever made," he commented casually. "Our track record as a flying team is pretty uninspiring."

"Is that your way of saying that you're not rated for this kind of aircraft?" she tossed back at him.

Despite the situation, he allowed himself a short chuckle. "I flew for the Agency, Mac. I'm rated in just about everything with wings."

"So I figured. This is a pretty swanky plane, though, so we'd better try our best to get it back to its rightful owner in one piece." Mac continued to follow the Comanche with her gaze. "Are we actually gaining on them?"

"Yeah. Our one engine happens to be slightly higher-performance than their two."

"So ... what happens when we catch up?"

"I was hoping you'd have thought of something."

Mac shook her head and pulled her sidearm out of her belt. Without moving her eyes from the air in front of them, she reached over and took Harm's as well. "Hopefully the cavalry will show up before then."

"That doesn't entirely solve the problem. We're already over a semi-populated area -- taking them down might incur casualties on the ground. The only other solution I can see is trying to steer them toward an airstrip somewhere, where there'd at least be a decently-sized open space."

"Think we can do that?"

Harm shrugged as best he could with one hand on the throttle and the other on the control stick. "Put on your shoulder harness and cross your fingers."

Mac decided that one out of two wasn't bad, as she needed her fingers free to toggle the radio. "Mustang Flight, are you reading our transponder yet?"

"Roger that, Eight-Two-Five -- you just popped up. How far are you from our friends?"

"Less than a mile and closing, Mustang," Harm broke in. "Got any bright ideas on how to dissuade them from dive-bombing anyone?"

"We've gotten clearance to herd them toward Andrews airspace. If they're smart, they'll realize we won't let them reach their objective and give up. If they insist on pressing the issue, we have unequivocal orders to take them out before they cross into the ADIZ."

"Understood. I'd sure like to put a dent in their fuel reserves, though."

"Well, with our 20-mm cannon, we'd probably take out more of the wing than they can spare in the process. Don't really want to risk crashing them into a subdivision out here."

Harm shot a glance over at his partner. "I suppose we could always give it a try with our, ah, armament."

Mac spared a half-second to look over at him with a distinct expression of disbelief. "Back up, flyboy. You want me to do *what*?"

"Hit a rapidly-moving target from an equally rapidly-moving vehicle, and hope they don't shoot back?" he answered truthfully.

"I'd have to open the door!"

"If you'd like, you can take the controls while I do it."

"No, let's stick to our strengths. You fly, I'll shoot." Mac accepted the plan quickly, insane as it was. "What am I aiming for?"

"The midpoint of either wing -- that's where the fuel tanks are. Wait until the Mustangs show up. That ought to distract them, and we won't have to worry about keeping them in visual range after that point."

"Eight-Two-Five, Mustang Lead. We're inbound, set to buzz you in less than a minute."

"Harm!" Mac's warning shout was accompanied by a burst of gunfire. The Comanche's passenger was leaning out the open door, aiming his weapon back at them. Harm immediately nosed the plane over, and Mac grabbed for the panel in front of her. "Level us out!"

"We'll be a better target!"

"So will they!"

As Harm continued to protest, the telltale roar of four F100 jet engines swept by overhead. Seeing the opportunity, he did as Mac asked, and she threw the Cirrus's door open, taking aim at the wing of the Comanche above them. She squeezed off three shots; two of them hit home.

Clear light-blue aviation fuel streamed out of the Comanche's right wing as Mac pulled her door shut again. "Holy *shit*," she exclaimed, adrenaline temporarily limiting her vocabulary.

"I'll say. You would've made a good turret gunner, Marine." Harm eased off the throttle and dropped back from the Comanche as the two Tomcats circled around for another pass. The fighters' proximity caused the twin-engine to bank away from them, closer to the necessary heading for Andrews. "Good start, Mustang -- let's keep it going."

Mac punched a few buttons on the aircraft's GPS monitor, trying to get it to show her their distance from Andrews airspace. "I'm not sure, but I think we've got about twenty-five miles to go."

"Statute or nautical miles?"

"I have no idea." She ducked instinctively as gunfire issued from the Comanche again. Harm swung over to hang out on the Comanche's left wing, trying to get away from the right-seat passenger doing the shooting.

"This had better get us over open ground soon, or ..."

"Or?"

"Or our tombstones are going to read something like 'E for effort.'"

"Eight-Two-Five, Mustang Lead," came the radio call from the Tomcat. "At present speed, this maneuver will get us to Andrews in about eight minutes. If you want to call it a maneuver."

"Dogfighting in a damn prop-job is what I call freaking nuts," Harm grouched back. "Want to take a shot at their left wing, Sundance?"

"Why the hell not, at this point? The seatbelts appear to work well enough." Mac switched to his gun and put her hand on the door handle. "Ready when you are."

Harm put them into a steep climb, allowing Mac to aim downward at the Comanche. Again she took three shots; again two found their mark. "How much fuel capacity does that thing have?" she asked, slamming the door shut for the second and, she hoped, final time.

"With two engines, it chugs fuel pretty fast. Come on, guys, face facts," he murmured to the other plane. "You'll never make the city now. Just call it a day."

Mac glanced up, a chilling thought beginning to surface. "If they're willing to die the way their colleague did, we may not be able to stop them from just pointing the nose at the ground and going for it."

"Maybe not, but we're almost over Andrews, so if the Tomcats have to shoot at them, at least they can aim toward the runway." Harm had to bank sharply as the Comanche's maneuvers became more aggressive. "Uh oh."

"Not something I want to hear right now," Mac replied through clenched teeth.

"They've figured out that they can't make their objective, and I think they're looking to take out whatever they can. Probably by way of a midair collision."

"And the Tomcats are too maneuverable for them to hit, so ..."

"Yeah. That leaves us."

Mustang Lead came to the same conclusion, and his voice crackled through their headsets. "Eight-Two-Five, thanks for the help, but I think it's time for you to get out of here."

"Understood, Mustang Lead." Harm scanned the ground below and located the wide, welcoming gray strip that was the main runway of Andrews Air Force Base. "Andrews Approach Control, this is Cirrus Eight-Two-Five Romeo, requesting a straight-in approach."

"Eight-Two-Five, you are cleared straight-in for Runway One-Eight Right."

He turned toward the runway, hoping to leave the bizarre aerial ballet behind with the Tomcats, who were swooping back and forth around the disconcerted Comanche like circling vultures. Before he could get very far into his mental landing checklist, however, a shout from Mac snapped his head around.

He'd reduced power in preparation for landing, and the resulting speed change had allowed the Comanche to gain on them. From behind, it barreled toward them with focused, deranged intent.

The next few events occurred almost simultaneously. Harm shoved the throttle in all the way to the panel and yanked them up into a climb, just as the Comanche's tail disintegrated under a barrage of fire from both Tomcats' 20-millimeter cannons. Mac twisted around in her seat and followed the rudderless aircraft as it began to fall out of the sky, its collision course effectively terminated.

A little surprised to still be airworthy, Harm called the tower back. "Ah, Andrews Approach, we're going around for another try at this whole landing thing," he remarked unnecessarily.

"Copy that, Eight-Two-Five. Recommend you change to One-Eight Left, as One-Eight Right is now ... obstructed."

Mac watched the Comanche impact the ground in semi-controlled fashion and snap its left landing gear, skidding for a few seconds before stopping against a taxiway sign near the end of Runway One-Eight Right. "Think they survived that?"

Harm looked. "Probably. Doubt they'll be running too far, though."

The Cirrus's second landing attempt was entirely ordinary, a fact for which both occupants were grateful. Turning off the runway onto the taxiway, Harm clicked the radio on one last time. "Mustang Lead, are you landing at Andrews?"

"Negative, Eight-Two-Five -- our mom's got the porch light on for us back at Pax."

"Then make sure the debriefer gets your names right, because we're gonna need to know where to send the medals and the Scotch."

"Our pleasure, Eight-Two-Five. Talk to you then."

Harm shut down the plane's electrical equipment, cut the power, and pulled off his headset. Mac pulled off her own, and for a moment they just looked at each other, without words.

"Just another day at the office?" Mac offered shakily.

His tone matched hers. "Yeah. Something like that."

As they slowly climbed out of the plane, emergency vehicles swarmed around the crumpled Comanche. From the rapid, efficient pace of the medics, it was clear that at least one of the occupants had indeed survived the crash.

Special Agent Gillson ambled up to the pair with a look of exaggerated -- but not entirely false -- exasperation. "You two through tying us into knots yet?" he demanded.

"I sure as hell hope so." Harm accepted the proffered hand and shook it firmly. "What do you know so far?"

"They didn't have explosives in the plane -- just their own private arsenal. From their original heading and the writing on the maps, on which we just got the translation back, all indications are that they were heading for the Georgetown campus."

"Any reason why?" Mac asked.

"Given the firearms and the time of the intended attack ... it's a good bet that they were planning to essentially strafe the crowd at the school's commencement ceremony in the football stadium."

"Their graduation is tonight?"

"Just started less than an hour ago." Gillson shook his head. "They could have aimed for any one of a dozen large events over the next few days. Baseball games, concerts in the park ... This would've been the biggest crowd, though. With what they had, they could've rained bullets down on a couple thousand people, then crashed the plane into the stands."

"And they staged the patrol fiasco just to weaken the air defense response. Bizarrely creative." Mac's dark eyes swept over the stretchers being loaded into the ambulance. "Think we'll get anything out of them about who they might have been working with, if anyone?"

"Once they get back on solid food, you mean? You can damn well bet we'll try." Gillson nodded toward them and took his leave, turning to direct the agents and airmen securing the area.

Harm started to speak, but a young voice from the direction of the Base Operations building seized his attention.

"Would you let go? All I want is to walk a hundred yards that way. You want to watch me do it? I promise to walk *really* slow."

The officers turned to see Mattie Grace attempting to tug away from an Air Force security policeman. Seeing her brought home the realization that this madness had finally ended, and Harm had to swallow before calling out, "Mattie!"

Mattie paused, and the SP released her arm, seeing that she did in fact have a reason to be there. Immediately she took off at a sprint, finally knocking into Harm with the force of a tornado. "Hi," she mumbled into his shirt.

"Hi, yourself," he said softly, his hand catching in her thick curls. "You escape from the Marines? 'Cause if you did, I'll be both very impressed and fairly pissed off."

"They were getting updates from the FBI team, since the threat was local. I whined until they caved in and brought me over." The sentence ended in a small snuffle. "You'd better be done with all this freaky stuff for a while, you got that?"

"Loud and clear," he reassured her, holding her tightly.

Mac watched the warm scene, easing back to allow them their moment together. Despite Harm's earlier assertions that she and Mattie weren't competitors for his attention, she remembered enough of her time as a teenager to be wary of crossing any of the girl's boundaries. Before she could turn toward the Ops building, though, she felt a hand on her arm, and she glanced back to see Mattie looking at her with an expression of guarded hope.

"Um, Mac -- you want to come back home with us? Maybe get some takeout, watch a brainless movie on TV and de-stress after all this?"

Surprised, Mac kept a close hold on her pleasure at having been asked. "If that's what you both want," she hedged, eyes flicking toward Mattie's guardian.

Harm only rolled his eyes toward the teen with a smile. "Mats, I think we can handle this without your admittedly well-intentioned matchmaking, thank you."

"I haven't seen any evidence of that so far," Mattie tossed back, plunking a hand down on her hip.

He cocked an eyebrow at her, clearly hearing the challenge. Mac had barely a second to wonder what his response would be before the question was answered in unexpected fashion.

The kiss seemed to come out of nowhere, catching her defenseless and leaving no room for debate.

Drawing back at last, he refrained from shooting a 'so there' look at an astounded but delighted Mattie. "I think that's only the beginning of what we want," he replied quietly, "but it'll do for the moment. What do you say?"

Standing there, with his strong arm at her back and a host of new possibilities opening up in front of her, it occurred to Sarah Mackenzie that she might have just found the nebulous bliss she'd sought for so long. "Lead the way," she said simply.

As they started toward the Ops building to finish any necessary debriefing with Gillson's team, Mattie was already pulling out her cell phone, punching buttons rapidly.

"Jen? It's me. Yeah, it's all over. I don't know, I didn't really get the whole story -- but listen. You are *not* going to believe what just happened ..."

Monday morning
0931 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

"I understand that the parties have come to an agreement?"

"We have, Your Honor." Mac stood up at her table. "Given the new information that has surfaced about the threat posed by the mishap aircraft, the convening authority has agreed not to pursue Articles 92, 109, and 119. The remaining charge is Article 110, improper hazarding of vessel. To this charge, the government recommends a moderate sentence."

"What is the defense's response?"

Harm rose from his table as well, followed by Lieutenant Commander Walken. "Defense agrees to plead guilty to Article 110, sir. With regard to sentencing, the defendant would like to make a statement." He gestured to Walken, who addressed the judge with a raised chin and solemn gaze.

"Your Honor, the knowledge that the aircraft I pursued was in fact a threat to our security has lifted a weight from my mind. It confirms for me that my instincts were correct about the pilot's actions. However, I recognize that it does not change the fact that the actions I took in response were not appropriate. I fully understand that my maneuver was aggressive, did not aid in stabilizing the situation, and, had the situation been different, could potentially have resulted in an innocent civilian's death. All I can do at this point is take responsibility for my error in judgment and ask that the court accept my assurance that I will not allow something like this to take place in the future."

The judge nodded. "Very well. Given the circumstances, unusual though they may be, I accept counsel's recommendation. Lieutenant Commander Mark Walken, you are hereby sentenced to forfeiture of a half-month's pay for five months. A record of these proceedings will be permanently entered into your file, and pending an informal review with your squadron commander, your flight status will be restored. We are adjourned."

As the gavel banged, Walken turned to Harm and clasped his hand with a grateful smile. "Sir, I've heard of going to great lengths for a client, but this really takes the prize."

"Wish I could say it was all for your benefit, Commander."

"That's all right, sir. I'll take it." The pilot turned to acknowledge Mac. "Thank you for being open to this agreement, ma'am."

"Compromise is part of the job. Especially with Commander Rabb around." Mac's eyes twinkled. "Good luck, Commander."

Walken came to attention, then did a flawless about-face and left the courtroom. When he'd gone, Mac glanced over at her once-and-future opposing counsel, her expression still amused. "You know the rumors have already started, right?"

Harm pretended not to comprehend. "Rumors?"

"They're not too terribly wild at the moment, but I think it's safe to say that Mattie gave Jen an after-action report on our weekend, and Jen hasn't entirely been able to keep it to herself in the office."

"Ah. Those kinds of rumors." He flashed a knowing grin. "I may have gotten wind of a few of those."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"I don't see why it should."

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she wasn't sure how to explain herself. "I guess I want to make sure that kind of thing isn't putting any pressure on you -- us -- to act a certain way, or not ..."

"Are you afraid that I somehow let myself get peer-pressured into dating my best friend?"

"It's not that I doubt this," she hurried to say. "Well ... maybe that's not quite accurate. What I mean is -- I'm not really accustomed to having things work out well. Doubt is kind of in my nature."

"I guess I know what you mean," Harm admitted. "In a way, having that in common could turn out to be helpful to both of us ... What do you say to us working together on kicking those kinds of doubts out the door for good?"

The sincerity in his voice, and the quiet determination, chipped away at such doubts right from the start. She sent a brief prayer of thanks heavenward for whatever divine shove had pushed them to this exact moment. "Sounds like a pretty good idea," she agreed.

He held out a hand toward the door, and they left the room as they so often had and now always would: together.

*** THE END ***