



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13

Classification: JAG story, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Need to Know"

Author's Notes: This is set in season eight, but conveniently ignores Webb's posting to South America and just about everything else that happened that season. This is the Webb that I used to know and like, not the unrecognizable one who showed up in the end-of-season episode arc. Also, one personal note: Celli, dear, there's a quick, obscure shout-out to one of your stories near the beginning. Nobody else will spot it, most likely, but what the hell. This is what happens when you get a basic idea for a story and decide to work the details out along the way. I don't recommend it as a strategy, in case you were wondering.

Many thanks to Valerie for straightening me out in a few places.

2053 EST

Somewhere in Washington D.C.

It was cold.

That was the first thought to enter his consciousness, and for a while, it was not accompanied by any others. His face was pressed against something cold, rough, and wet. Concrete. How exactly had he come to be lying on concrete?

As he rolled onto his side, pain blossomed behind his eyes, and he squeezed them shut until it receded. Gingerly, he pushed himself up from the ground and tried to identify his surroundings.

It was an alley, not remarkable in the slightest. Apparently it had rained recently. Not that he remembered it. A quick check confirmed that he had no injuries beyond a few scrapes and bruises, and the throbbing headache was fading to the level of an annoyance rather than an obstacle. His wallet was gone, too - not a major shock. He racked his brain for some memory of what had happened. The idea that someone had gotten the drop on him that effectively was galling, but if he'd been mugged, shouldn't he be bleeding somewhere? He didn't feel like he'd taken a blow to the head, and he was fairly knowledgeable in that regard. Rather, he only felt ... tired. Tired, and disoriented as all hell.

With no money and no ID, there weren't many options available to him, so he struggled to his feet and lurched in the direction of the street. Squinting against the harsh streetlight, he

looked up at the sign. Colorado Avenue. If he walked down a few blocks and cut over, Union Station would have to be that way.

Pulling his damp jacket tightly around his body, he readied himself and started walking.

When he reached his apartment, fatigue weighed so heavily on him that he turned the doorknob and walked in without wondering why it wasn't locked.

Mac leaped up from the couch, her features paralyzed by a strange expression. Shock, confusion, and - relief? "Oh, God," she whispered. "Are you really there, or am I - "

"Mac?" His voice sounded rough and unsteady. "What, what're you doing here?"

"Me? Jesus Christ, Harm, where have you been?"

Her weight seemed to be balanced on the balls of her feet, as if she were just barely holding herself back from a full sprint in his direction. He tried once again to recall the past few hours, but received only a stab of pain in reply. "I don't know," he admitted. "I think I got jumped, or something ... Did we have plans?"

Mac rocked back, startled. "After all this, you're making jokes?" He could only stare back at her, dazed and wary, and her shock seemed to grow stronger. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Uh ... the Leary court-martial was wrapping up, and you said we should go over the Wilkins depositions, and I got in my car to go home ..." He looked at her helplessly. "Did I lose a whole day?"

A tear glistened in the corner of her eye, but she spoke with a hard-fought calm. "Harm, that was five weeks ago. No one's seen or heard from you since. You just disappeared. Not even Webb had a trace - God, we've been going crazy ..."

She broke off immediately as her partner swayed on his feet. Within seconds, she was at his side, guiding him to the couch.

"Damn it, I'm sorry - you're a mess. Let me help, okay?" He barely responded as she tugged off his jacket and shoes and wrapped a blanket snugly around him. "Just relax. We'll figure all this out later. The important thing is that you're here."

He raised his eyes to her face with the ghost of a grateful smile, trusting her implicitly. Everything would work itself out in time. He leaned forward to rest his head on her shoulder, and her arms automatically went around him. By the time she had finished a brief, silent prayer of thanks for his return, his body had relaxed in sleep, and she eased him back onto the couch while blinking away her tears.

Mac's cell phone was sitting on the kitchen counter. She picked it up on her way to the bedroom, hoping to keep from disturbing him. As she pressed the numbers, she sank down on the bed, overwhelmed.

"Sir, it's me." Her voice threatened to crack on the next words. "He's home."

A.J. Chegwiddden hadn't needed to hear anything else. He reached for his car keys in the same motion with which he hung up the phone, and in twenty minutes, he was knocking quietly on his senior attorney's door.

Mac ushered him in, and he saw the change in her at once. The past few weeks had drained her more than she'd ever admit: they'd all been half-sick with fear, but the colonel had retreated so deep into herself that it seemed as if little more than a shell remained. Now, though the dark rings under her eyes still stood out, the eyes themselves held some life for the first time since their hideous vigil began.

"He's asleep," she told him, gesturing toward the couch. "He just showed up here, looking like a zombie. I don't think he's hurt, but he doesn't remember anything after leaving JAG that night."

A.J. frowned. "And no head trauma?"

"Not that I can see, but something was obviously wrong. He was barely keeping himself upright, and - well, look at him."

The admiral moved to the couch, careful to guard himself against any emotional release. He'd never been the most optimistic person in the world. People like Bud and Harriet had hung their hopes on every phone call, hoping to hear that their friend was safe; A.J. had dreaded the shrill ringing, partially expecting a summons to identify the commander's body. But the eventuality for which he'd tried to prepare never came, and he found himself unprepared for this other, better option.

As he studied the motionless form sprawled out across the couch, he realized that Mac was too close, too affected by the situation to view it objectively. Otherwise, she would have immediately suspected the same thing that he now did.

A.J. knelt down and pressed his fingers to Harm's neck, locating a pulse. A little fast for a sleeping man, but not alarming. Still, there was a sunken, hollow look to his features that set off warning bells in the older man's mind.

"What are you trying to find, sir?" Mac asked warily as he began to unbutton Harm's shirt. Harm didn't stir as A.J. examined his arms.

He found what he was looking for on the inside of Harm's upper right arm: a series of small, barely detectable needle marks along the vein. The discovery deeply saddened him. Whatever it was that had happened to Harmon Rabb, it was something that would not easily fade away.

He moved aside to show Mac, and watched her face change from stunned realization to desperate anger. "Admiral, there is no way he did this to himself. No way. I mean, he hates needles, for one thing - "

"Mac," A.J. interrupted calmly. "Did I say anything like that? Did I even make allowances for that possibility?"

She began to relax. "So you don't think he could have - " The words seemed to stick in her throat. " - taken drugs, either?"

"I know for a fact that he didn't. Take this." He picked up a pen from the coffee table and held it out to her. "Pretend you're going to stick yourself with it."

Looking unconvinced, she lifted the 'needle' in her right hand toward her left arm. Then it hit her. "He's right-handed. He wouldn't have put it into his right arm."

"Not willingly. The tracks are high, so they're hard to see, and this was a small-gauge needle. This was done with a fair amount of care."

"By whom, though?" Mac ran her fingers along her friend's arm, uncomprehending. Like most pilots, Harm had always had well-developed arms, but he'd clearly lost some muscle tone. Everything about him seemed a little thinner, a little weaker. What had these people, whoever they were, done to him? "Sir, should we think about taking him to Bethesda?"

The distance in the admiral's gaze suggested that his thoughts were a few steps ahead of hers. "I don't know. If he was left somewhere because his captors were finished with him, then sure. But if he escaped from somewhere, they may be out looking for him. Maybe we need to find a more secure location before we try to do much else."

"Webb?"

"That's my vote." A.J. stood up and moved into the kitchen, pulling out his cell phone. As he dialed, he watched Mac rebutton Harm's shirt and absently stroke his dark hair, which obviously hadn't been cut in the past few weeks. The tenderness in her gaze was heartwarming, but it was also a reminder of how hard this was going to be on all of them.

The admiral lifted the phone to his ear. "Webb, we've got Rabb back," he reported as soon as the other man picked up. "Somebody drugged the hell out of him, so we don't know yet what happened to him. But in the name of vigilance, I think we ought to find him a safehouse and a doctor, preferably in that order."

Clayton Webb didn't hesitate. "I'll have a car ready in ten minutes. Where are you?"

"His apartment. Colonel Mackenzie's here, too."

"Probably just as well. See you in twenty."

A.J. clicked off the phone and raised his voice. "Better try and get him on his feet, Mac."

Mac nodded and leaned down to gently shake her partner's shoulder. "Harm, I need you to wake up," she said into his ear. "Come on, sailor, get the lead out. We've got places to go."

Harm winced at the noise and dragged his eyes only partway open. "Tired," he mumbled, shifting away from her.

"That wasn't a request, Mr. Rabb," A.J. pointed out with stern calm, leaning in.

To their surprise, he jerked back, throwing a hand up to shield his face. In a deadened, barely recognizable voice, he recited, "Rabb, Harmon Kenneth Junior, commander, United States Navy ..."

"Harm. Harm!" Mac seized his hands, trying to get through to him. "It's us. It's okay."

He blinked, coming fully awake and looking between the two of them with recognition. "Yeah," he said vaguely, not seeing the stricken looks of his colleagues. "Um, what's going on?"

"We're getting out of here," A.J. informed him, unnerved by how little of the officer he knew seemed to be present in this man. "In case you're in any danger. Do you keep a bag packed around here?"

"In the closet." Harm pushed himself into a sitting position as the admiral went to retrieve the bag. "Mac?" he asked tentatively. "Why would I be in any danger?"

Mac clamped down on the wordless cry that fought to escape her lips. How could he not realize that only a moment ago, he'd been in some other world, cowering from an unknown captor? "Harm, you've been through something awful, and right now you're just going to have to trust us to help you, all right?"

He responded by dropping his head into his hands. "Might as well ... I can't even think straight."

A.J. returned with a standard-issue duffel, choosing not to remark upon the identical one that lay near Mac's purse. If she'd been spending her time here, that was her business and entirely unimportant now. "How are your sea legs, Commander?"

"Only one way to find out, sir." Harm carefully stood up, with Mac hovering at his elbow. With an uneven stride, he made his way toward the door and into the hallway.

The elevator had jammed sometime during the night, so it was a laborious trek down the stairs at the end of the hall. Harm clutched the railing tightly, his pallor worsening as they descended. "You okay?" Mac asked, worried.

He nodded. "I'm just gonna be sick, that's all."

She tightened her hand on his arm, trying not to react. *He's pulled nine Gs without blinking, and now he's getting dizzy on a single flight of stairs. Something is really not right.*

By the time they reached the street, Webb was already pulling up in a Navigator. "Never pegged you for the SUV type," A.J. commented by way of greeting.

"That's the point, isn't it?" Webb remained expressionless as he sized up Harm's appearance. "Let's get moving."

A.J. grabbed his own sea bag from his car and climbed into the passenger seat. As soon as Harm had hauled himself into one of the rear seats, he immediately yanked the shoulder belt behind him so that he could put his head down between his knees.

"Where're we going?" came his muffled voice after they'd gotten on the road.

"Hello to you, too," Webb called back. "We're going to an Agency safehouse. That's about as much as you need to know."

The commander gave a hollow chuckle, his face still hidden. "Don't know where I've been, so why should I know where I'm going?"

They drove for about an hour and a half, and between the darkness and the twisting back roads, even A.J. had managed to lose his sense of direction. Harm had fallen silent, still slumped over in his seat, and Mac watched him studiously, turning possibilities over in her mind. When they turned abruptly onto a rough dirt road, he groaned. "Webb, you're killing me here."

"It's the only road in. Sorry."

"Well, get it over with fast." A hard jolt rattled the vehicle, and his body tensed as if he'd been given an electric shock.

They came upon an older house, set back in the northern Virginia woods. No sooner had Webb put the vehicle in park than Harm flung himself out the door, managing only a few steps before collapsing in a heap.

Mac flew to him, wrapping her arms around his shaking shoulders. "It's okay," she soothed. "It's over. We're here."

His reply came out as a ragged whisper. "Mac, what the hell's wrong with me?"

"Withdrawal," she said simply, unwilling to keep anything from him. "Someone's been shooting you up with something. We don't know what yet. It's probably going to be pretty bad for a little while - it lowers your pain threshold. But you're going to get through it, got that?"

"Yeah ..." He turned his head toward her. "You sound like you know what you're talking about."

She gave a small, solemn shrug. "I don't know much about drugs, but I have some experience with dependency. Can you stand up?"

"Think so."

Mac locked an arm firmly around his waist and helped him toward the house's front door, where the other men were waiting along with a middle-aged blond woman. She motioned the group in without a word, and they stepped into a spacious living room that seemed to have both old elegance and a modern sensibility.

"What have you got for me, Mr. Webb?" the woman asked with an arched eyebrow.

Webb gestured. "Doctor Ellen Sandburg, meet Commander Harmon Rabb, Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, and Admiral A.J. Chegwiddden from the Navy Judge Advocate General's office. I don't need to tell you which one is your patient."

"Ever the smartass. Commander, there's a sofa over there calling your name."

"Yes, ma'am," Harm agreed wearily, heading directly for it.

"Call me Ellen, all of you. And you might as well make yourselves at home."

"A.J., Mac, and Harm," A.J. elaborated. "You're with the CIA?"

"On a part-time basis. I have a practice down the road in town, and when people like Clayton here have a need for me, I'm available." Ellen wasted no time in reaching for a small kit on the table. Moving over to Harm, she withdrew a hypodermic needle, causing him to recoil. "Easy. I'm not giving you anything. I just need to get a blood sample so we can start to figure this out, all right?"

Harm nodded silently, closing his eyes and digging his fingers into the sofa's armrest as she slid the needle into his arm.

"All set. I won't even give you a dose of methadone yet, although it would probably calm the withdrawal symptoms. But I want to hold off until I know just what you've got in you."

"I don't want any more drugs," he insisted, eyes still shut. "Not even helpful ones. I need to be able to think - I have to remember, somehow."

"What do you remember, Harm?" the doctor asked gently. "Do you have memories of someone sticking you with a needle?"

"Maybe ... I think so, but it's so damn fuzzy." He grimaced, drawing a hand over his eyes.

"Then don't force anything. Give yourself a chance to recover a little first. Do you think you could eat anything?"

"No" was the forceful answer.

"Okay, but I'm going to insist that you drink something, because everything about you is screaming 'dehydration' right now." Ellen jerked her head toward Webb, who went to the refrigerator and returned with a bottle of electrolyte water. A.J. noted the agent's uncharacteristic obedience with interest, but said nothing.

After Harm had managed to choke down half the bottle, Ellen nodded approvingly and stood up. "All right. We all might as well try and salvage part of a night's sleep. There are two rooms down here, and I'm hereby claiming them for Harm and myself, so the rest of you can schlep yourselves up the stairs. I trust that you've all made arrangements to explain your absence from duty tomorrow?"

Mac exchanged a guilty look with her CO, who pulled out his cell phone. "Commander Turner," he said after the line clicked in. "I apologize for calling so late, but I need you to take over as acting JAG indefinitely, starting tomorrow. Colonel Mackenzie and I are going to be working on an outside issue. I can't give you specifics right now, and you can't under any circumstances repeat this, but it has to do with Commander Rabb ... I had a feeling you'd say something like that, but I need you right where you are. We've got it covered, at least for the moment. I'll be in touch."

Meanwhile, Mac had helped Harm to his feet and into the nearest bedroom. He sat down on the bed and reached down to untie his shoes, but after a moment of trying unsuccessfully to keep his hands steady, he gave up and kicked the shoes off.

Mac watched him sink back in frustrated surrender. "Maybe you should reconsider taking the methadone," she suggested quietly.

"No. I need to get my head clear, even if the rest of me stages a revolt." He curled up on the bed, looking very much like a small child. "It just keeps getting worse by the minute, you know?"

"I know, she told him. "But that won't continue forever. Pretty soon it will start to get better, even."

He didn't answer, and she went over to sit next to him, smoothing her hand over the taut muscles of his back in slow circles, until he at last fell into a tortured sleep.

Upstairs, A.J. dropped his bag on the bed and turned to face Webb, standing in the doorway. "Thanks for setting all this up on short notice."

"Not a problem. I stopped keeping score a long time ago." Webb's gray eyes flickered with a hint of dark amusement. "Can't figure out why I'm being this helpful, can you?"

"I'm okay with leaving that a mystery, actually." The admiral folded his arms. "However, I am curious to know how Dr. Sandburg managed to become the only person I've ever seen you obey without question."

"She did it by leaving her son's graduation ceremony to come up here and pull a bullet out of me, once upon a time. Any more questions?"

"Not at the moment. Wait, check that," he amended, just as Webb turned to leave. "One more. Whoever did this had some good resources and a fair bit of time. Are you telling me that you don't have any leads whatsoever on who that might have been?"

The agent's expression flickered for a moment, but he gave a minute shake of his head. "We'll start on that in the morning," he said simply. "Get some sleep."

Mac spent most of the next few hours staring up at the ceiling of her room. For the past five weeks, she'd dedicated a fair number of her waking moments to replaying the days before Harm's disappearance in her mind. She'd forced herself to analyze everything he'd said or done, hoping against hope that it would provide some clue as to what had happened. In some of her darkest moments, she'd actually considered the possibility that he'd purposely vanished. Although those moments never lasted long, they'd planted a seed of doubt in her mind that had only been uprooted a few short hours ago.

Ellen had been keeping watch over him through the night: Mac had heard the doctor's soft footfalls every hour on the dot. At 0400, though, she only heard the footsteps into his room, not the ones returning, and she immediately swung herself out of bed to investigate.

She found Harm still asleep, a blanket drawn tightly around him, and Ellen readying a needle nearby. Mac hurried into the room with a flare of panic. "He said he didn't want anything!" she hissed, as quietly as possible.

Unruffled, Ellen laid the syringe down on the table. "I know he did. But I've already run some basic tests on the blood I drew earlier, and there are things in there that I haven't seen outside of a textbook. At the very least, he needs a strong course of antibiotics, because his immune system is severely depressed."

Mac relented. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so - "

"Protective?" Ellen smiled.

"I was going to say paranoid."

"No, you're probably got a very good reason to be paranoid. He's obviously been through quite an ordeal, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned about such a specific loss of memory. It suggests one of two things: trauma to either the hippocampus or a very localized section of the frontal lobe of the brain, or else something so psychologically damaging that he's actually preventing himself from accessing those memories."

"But he wants to remember," Mac pointed out.

Ellen gave a noncommittal shrug. "Sometimes the human body's instincts for self-preservation override what the mind wants. At any rate, I'd like to get an MRI, to have a better idea of the blood flow and activity in that region, but since that doesn't seem feasible at the moment, I'll settle for the equipment I've got. The symptoms are all wrong for a neurological event like a closed-head injury, though. The brain doesn't store memories that linearly. I guess I'm going to concentrate primarily on figuring out this mystery drug for the moment. With any luck, his memory will improve as he works that out of his system."

"Luck has been in short supply lately," Mac murmured, tucking her arms around herself.

"That can't be entirely true. You've got him back now, and that's what you wanted, right?" The older woman tucked a lock of silvery blonde hair behind her ear and reached down to blot the cold sweat from her patient's face. "Harm, I'm sorry to do this, but I have to wake you up, okay? Just for a minute, so I can give you something and make sure you haven't deteriorated. That's all."

Harm stirred minutely, looking up at her with heavy-lidded eyes. When his gaze fell on the table where the syringe and glass bottle rested, though, he reacted instinctively, pushing back the covers and lurching away from her. "No!" he cried, backing himself against the wall with a glazed look in his eyes. "No more ..."

Mac fought to hold her ground. As much as she ached to run to him, it would be a foolish action at this point. Ellen simply held out an open hand, keeping her voice level. "You're safe here," she said quietly. "You aren't back there anymore, and I'm not going to hurt you like they did. All right?"

Even as she spoke, he was beginning to relax, his shoulders slumping as he realized where he was. "Sorry, doc," he whispered, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "Something about that just felt a little too familiar."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left that stuff in plain sight like that." Ellen looked apologetic as she switched on a small lamp. "It sounded like you were remembering something about the injections. Can you identify what was familiar? The bed? The darkness?"

"Maybe - both. There was a bed, but it had restraints. My arms were pinned." Harm lifted his gaze and noticed Mac's presence for the first time. Instantly an expression of shame flickered across his features as he realized what she'd seen, and he lowered his head again.

"Did you see the face of anyone who was there?"

"I don't know." Frustration crept into his voice, and this time Mac was compelled to speak up.

"Give yourself a break, sailor. You don't have to solve this all in one night."

"Yes, I do - I need to remember as soon as possible. I don't know why, but it's important." He shivered slightly, and then jerked upright as a flash of illumination struck. "Wait. I do know why."

"You do?"

"Because they wanted to know something. They wanted some kind of information from me, and I don't know whether or not I gave it to them."

A.J. stepped into the room then, followed by Webb. "Everything okay down here?"

"Yes, sir - at least, as okay as it was before." Harm looked from one man to the other, then at Mac. "Now this is an interesting pajama party."

"Well, at least the sarcasm center of your brain isn't scrambled." Webb leaned against the doorframe. "What's all the excitement about?"

"He's remembering a little," Mac informed him.

"About being held, or what?"

"Just that they wanted information from him."

"He can speak for himself, thanks," Harm broke in, rolling his eyes despite the obvious weakness in his voice. He stood up unsteadily and started to pace the room, attempting to clear his thoughts. "It's familiar somehow, what they did. Like when I was taken prisoner in China, maybe. But not quite like that, because this time there was no deception. They just kept talking, asking ... It's like - I can hear their voices, but I can't make out the words."

Ellen studied his pallor critically, her suspicion growing. "Were you out in the rain last night?"

"Um ... yeah, probably. The ground was wet when I woke up."

"Where was that, by the way?" Webb asked.

"An alley off Colorado, and no, I don't know how I got there or how long I was out. Guys, you're messing up my train of thought, such as it is."

"Harm, if you feel at all like you look, you should lie down," Ellen suggested.

"In a minute," he insisted vaguely, even as he raised a hand to his temple with a grimace. "There were two men - no, three. I remember their voices - I can almost hear them speaking ..."

A.J. lunged forward and caught the younger man as he swayed, then crumpled soundlessly in mid-sentence. Webb moved to assist, and together they eased their friend's limp body back onto the bed. "Is he running a fever?" A.J. asked with a frown.

"He certainly is now. Lying out in the driving rain will do that to you, even if you were healthy before, and he definitely wasn't." Ellen retrieved the needle she'd prepared earlier and slid it expertly into Harm's vein. "If we're lucky, we can head off a case of pneumonia, since God knows he's got enough else to deal with. But now I'm wondering if the illness might be contributing to his memory problems." She stood up abruptly. "Everybody out. Let him rest for a while."

Dutifully, Webb and A.J. followed her out into the living room. Mac lingered until they were all out of sight, then bent quickly to press a kiss to her partner's still lips before hurrying after the others.

"Since we're all up," the admiral began, fixing his gaze on Webb, "why don't we go over the list again?"

'The list' referred to a tally of names they had collected after Harm's disappearance, names of anyone who might have ever had a motive against the commander. Unsurprisingly, it was a long list. But they'd been over it a dozen times, and so had the D.C. police and the FBI, until the point at which the authorities had surrendered to the overwhelming odds.

Harm had left JAG Headquarters that fateful night and dropped off the face of the earth. No one had seen his SUV at any time afterward, and his bank account and credit cards had gone untouched.

"This is starting to sound less and less like an act motivated by revenge," Mac stated, taking a seat on the couch. "I think we have to consider the possibility that the people who did this aren't going to show up on any list. I also think we need to start looking hard at what kind of information Harm could have had that would be worth all this."

Webb glanced over to find A.J. staring fixedly at him with a grim expression. "You think I know who did this, don't you?" the agent asked in annoyed disbelief. "You think I've been holding out on you because of some Agency party line."

"It would hardly be the first time," A.J. remarked coolly, drawing himself up straighter.

"Hey, he's my friend, too, all right? I've been working on this a hell of a lot more than either you or my directors realize." Webb stalked across the room before continuing in a lower voice. "That said, there is something that you should know - "

"Like what?" Mac demanded, instantly wary.

Webb sighed. "After the near-disaster with the dirty nuke incident, and considering the extent to which I stuck my neck out during the Angel Shark investigation, you can understand why inter-agency cooperation with the Navy would have to be approached with a fair amount of prudence on my part. Harm felt he owed me, so he offered to help if I needed anything from his end on an unofficial basis. Eventually I cashed in on that favor."

"Keep talking," A.J. instructed, his voice taut.

"I asked him to keep his eyes open for anything interesting related to the theft of recycled DoD computers from the Defense Logistics Agency's local facility. Since the case went through your office, I'll assume you remember that a Petty Officer Randall Hicks confessed to stealing a half-dozen old laptops with the intent of selling them."

"Hicks is in Leavenworth," Mac said uncertainly.

"And I appreciate you putting him there. The problem is, other people may have had access to those computers before the DLA and NCIS recovered them, and it's come to our attention that some of them may not have been thoroughly reformatted before they went missing."

"Meaning that someone could have gotten sensitive information off of them?" A.J. inferred. Webb nodded grimly.

"It would have taken a sophisticated setup to recover that kind of data, but it's theoretically possible. So we had to track down who'd been assigned those computers in order to find out what kind of information might have been compromised."

"What's this 'we' stuff? How'd you get involved in a Defense issue like this?"

"Think about it, Admiral. In what area do the CIA, FBI, INS and DoD now collaborate?"

A.J. rocked back as he understood. "Homeland security."

"We have a winner."

"I still don't see what this has to do with Harm," Mac interjected. "What information would he have, and how would anyone connect him to this?"

"He defended Hicks - rather unhappily, as you know, but he did meet with the man on several occasions. If Hicks had given him any details that were protected under client confidentiality, he'd look like a prime target to any buyers who didn't get everything they paid for."

"So what does Hicks say? You have talked to him about his buyers, right? Self-incrimination doesn't apply once you've already been convicted."

"True, but he could face new charges for conspiracy or treason, and he knows it. Nonetheless, I leaned on him harder than I care to discuss, and still got nothing. He never met the buyers - he thought he was just fencing hardware. Pretty impressive display of selective naïveté, I'd say."

"So you're stuck on the question of who Hicks was doing business with," A.J. concluded. "Is that accurate?"

"I wouldn't say 'stuck,'" Webb corrected. "I've had analysts going back over every inch of his life. Anyone he served with or met over the past couple of years is on a list. Just because we haven't got a lead yet doesn't mean we're done looking."

"Whose computers were they?" Mac asked suddenly.

"Hmm?"

"You said the computers Hicks took might have had sensitive information on them, and then you threw out a random homeland security reference without explaining it. If we knew what kind of information we were dealing with, we might have a better idea of who would be interested in it."

Webb rubbed the bridge of his nose. "They were assigned to the U.S. officers in the Foreign Military Liaison office at the Pentagon."

"Any specific country?"

"Among others, Israel."

A.J. uttered a soft curse. "The users of those computers had access to information regarding the Israeli military?"

"More specifically, information regarding scheduled joint exercises with the U.S. IAF pilots train over here on a regular basis. See how homeland security gets involved?"

"How would the buyers have known what was on the computers before they purchased them?"

"That's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question."

"Hold on." Mac broke into the brainstorming session, standing up. "Let's back up a minute so I can get this straight. You found out that there was a possible security breach when the computers were stolen, so you asked Harm to look into it while he defended the Hicks case. Then, when Harm disappeared, you started investigating the possible buyers, thinking that they might have abducted him in hopes of getting more information from him. And for five weeks, you've been working on all this without saying word one to us?"

Belatedly, Webb recognized the dangerous flash in her eyes, and he took a step backward. "There was a reason for that, you know."

"I'm sure there was." Mac glanced briefly at her CO. "Do I have your permission, sir?"

"I defer to your judgment, Colonel," A.J. answered, deadpan.

"Wait, what - "

Webb didn't get a chance to finish his question before Mac's right hook sent him sprawling onto the couch. Neither A.J. nor Ellen said a word as he pulled himself into a sitting position, one hand pressed to his jaw.

"Decent punch."

"I pulled it a little." Mac walked away from him, to the other side of the room.

"First the admiral, then Galindez, now you. And to think all Rabb ever did was pull a gun on me."

"What was your reason, Webb?" A.J. asked bluntly. "Why didn't you at least tell us about the connection to the Hicks case?"

"Look, if Harm tripped some kind of red flag that let these guys know he was poking around, there's a good chance that someone else could, too. And these particular bad guys have clearly demonstrated that they don't mess around." Webb looked away. "One person had already gotten into trouble because of this. I wasn't willing to risk anyone else."

"Don't you think we should have gotten an opportunity to decide that for ourselves?" Mac asked pointedly.

"Mac, you don't have the contact network that I do. It was a mistake to ask Harm to help, in retrospect. Having another JAG digging around would have only put you in danger."

"I would have risked it," she asserted, her voice quiet and deadly earnest. "If it meant getting him out of there even a minute earlier, I would have done it."

Webb's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I know you would've." Mac just looked at him for a moment, then abruptly turned and went upstairs. Ellen moved to the kitchen and retrieved an ice pack, which she silently handed to Webb. A.J. stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes before finally addressing the agent.

"Okay, let's keep our eyes on the road ahead. Our best shot at making progress is to figure out a way to help Harm start remembering without pushing him past his limits."

He recognized her touch before he fully came awake, and it served to ease his ravaged mind. The voices he'd heard for so long, alternately cajoling and demanding as he'd struggled to maintain his grip on what was real - those voices now mocked him in his sleep with wordless taunts. Feeling her cool fingers along the side of his face, though, helped to quiet the voices for a time.

"Hey," she said with a gentle smile, as soon as he opened his eyes.

"Hey," Harm replied, fighting back a wave of vertigo. He couldn't decide if he was burning up or freezing cold, but he did know that it was a truly miserable sensation. Everything ached, and the simple motion of turning his head was a monumental effort. "What, uh ..."

"You fainted," Mac explained sympathetically. "A couple of hours ago. Ellen thinks the drugs depressed your immune system, and she's trying to keep you from developing pneumonia."

"Oh." He couldn't find the energy to be embarrassed about having keeled over in front of all of them. "Anything else going on?"

She debated briefly on how much to tell him. "Webb thinks that the people who took you might have had some connection to the Hicks case. Do you remember it? The not-quite-reconditioned computers stolen from DLA?"

"Kind of ... yeah, I remember." Memory of the additional investigating he'd done for Webb returned at that point, and it occurred to him that Mac probably wasn't too happy with him for keeping that from her. But he didn't have the strength for the kind of apology she deserved, so he let it pass. "Hicks - he was in way over his head."

"Did he ever tell you anything about what might have been recoverable from those computers?"

"I don't think he knew. How would anyone know, unless they'd actually used them?"

Focused on managing his pain, he didn't notice when Mac's hand stilled on his arm. He'd just unknowingly taken their case to an entirely new level. To recognize the worth of the data contained on those hard drives, someone would have had to know exactly where they'd come from. No garden-variety terrorist would have knowledge of what computers had been assigned where. That kind of record - serial numbers of the machines, most likely - would have had to come from someone within the Department of Defense.

She took his hand in both of hers, feeling it tremble as he silently battled the worsening effects of withdrawal. "Harm, you said you could hear their voices, even though you couldn't make out the words."

He tensed. "Yeah?"

"Were they American?"

Harm stared at the wall for a while, concentrating. "One was," he said finally, and the answer surprised both of them. "The other two weren't. I didn't recognize their accents, but they weren't American."

"Is it possible that they were Middle Eastern?" Mac asked quietly.

"I don't know - " He broke off as the tremors overtook his entire body without warning. Shaking uncontrollably, he wrapped his arms around himself, and a barely-suppressed moan escaped his lips.

Mac immediately slid onto the bed and gathered him into her arms, holding him as tightly as she could in an attempt to dampen the trembling. "Hang in there, flyboy," she murmured, cursing her helplessness. "It'll be over soon."

"Wouldn't ... bet on it," he ground out, through gritted teeth. But his muscles slowly began to slacken, and he looked up at her with anguished, pleading eyes. "It's driving me

insane, Mac,” he said, and his voice held more desperation than she’d ever heard from him before. “It’s like - everything that happened is so close, but it’s still out of reach.”

“Don’t force it. It’ll come back in time.”

“What if we don’t have that kind of time?” Still faintly shivering, he tried to rise. “Wait. I just heard it. There was one thing they kept asking about, over and over ... it sounded like ... ‘balcony?’”

“They wanted to know something about a balcony?”

“No - it was a word that sounded like that. They talked about it like it was some kind of event. Falcon something ... Falcon Ink? God, nothing makes any sense ...”

“Maybe it’s a code name or something. Don’t be frustrated. This is something to go on, at least.” She stroked his sweat-dampened hair. “Would it be all right if I went out and talked to Webb and the admiral for a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

“You really don’t mind?”

“I’m not going to fall apart if you leave me alone for a while. Just go.”

Reluctantly, she stood up, squeezing his hand once before moving to the door. On her way out, she passed Ellen, who stepped into the room with a travel thermos in hand.

“This is just some tomato soup,” the doctor explained, sliding into the chair next to the bed. “And before you say you don’t want it, remember that it’s either this or I stick an IV in you.”

“I’d probably end up pulling it out the next time I start that shaking thing,” Harm pointed out, mainly for the sake of argument.

“If it got that bad, I’d have to seriously think about restraining you, and given your recent experiences, I’d assume you’d rather avoid that.” Ellen helped him into a sitting position, and he accepted the bottle from her.

After a couple of swallows, he smiled a little. “This is a nostalgia trip. My mom used to make me tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches when I was a kid. It used to be my favorite thing to eat.” The smile faded. “I can remember where I spent my ninth birthday, and yet I can’t remember where I was twenty-four hours ago.”

“It’s a function of pharmacology. It has nothing to do with you personally. I’ve been researching like crazy for the last hour or so, and I’m starting to get a picture of what it was they used on you. Aside from a serious amount of downers, there was an additional element that depressed the hippocampus region of your brain, inhibiting the formation of neural pathways. Basically, it tried to prevent new information from making the transition from working memory into long-term memory.”

Harm felt his hand beginning to tremble again, and he set the soup container down on the table. "So you're saying that I haven't covered those memories up somehow - instead they're not even there?"

"Not exactly," Ellen said. "I think the snatches and pieces you're recalling have proven that the drug isn't perfect. Some of those memories are still there, but I can't promise you that you'll ever have a completely clear picture of the last few weeks. Along with being the lowest form of scum in the medical world, the developers of this drug weren't the most well-funded bunch. They did their research at some shady lab somewhere in South America, and their benefactors started selling off the results to all sorts of less-than-reputable types. Since there's little to no data out there regarding the actual observed effects, our best course of action is to heal the body and hope that the mind follows suit."

"Terrific." He shuddered under a sudden chill. "Meanwhile, for all I know, someone's plotting an attack somewhere, and I don't know if I helped them do it."

"That's Clayton's department, not mine. But you don't strike me as the type to surrender much of anything, irrespective of the method of coercion." The doctor watched in empathy as her patient fought against a new, more severe attack of tremors. "Do you want me to go get Mac?"

"No." The word was uttered quietly, but she could hear the intended force behind it. "The less of this she sees, the better."

"I understand that you want to protect her," Ellen said reasonably. "But based on what little I've seen, I don't think any of this is going to hurt her nearly as much as all that time she spent not knowing."

"Not now," he insisted, purposely leaving that comment alone. "I'm okay. I just - want this to be over."

"Like I said, there's not a lot of research out there on this stuff, but the level of the body's attenuation to the drug should be correlated with the amount of time you were addicted."

"I hate that word," Harm murmured, drained of strength.

"Addiction? It doesn't imply willingness. I was only trying to say that the withdrawal symptoms should peak soon, so hopefully we're headed for an upswing." She readjusted his blanket as the tremors subsided again.

"Thanks, doc. For being around, I mean. This is a hell of an on-call job."

"You're pretty easy. I've had to patch up people who honestly made me question my Hippocratic oath. Comparatively, this is the good kind of case."



Mac entered the living room, finding Webb and A.J. huddled around Webb's laptop computer. The sun had finally risen, and rays of light filtered through the trees surrounding the house, playing across the windowpanes. They'd all gone their separate ways after the confrontation earlier, and after some showers and changes of clothes, some of the tension had dissipated.

A.J. tossed his officer a wrapped apple Danish. "How's he doing?"

Mac caught her airborne breakfast against her chest. "Hanging on. It's rough, but he gave us something to work with. We just need to figure out what 'Falcon Ink' means."

"Falcon Ink?" Webb's eyebrows lifted. "I'm not aware of any operation with that designation. Are we still focusing on connections to foreign militaries, including but not limited to the Israelis?"

"Unless you've got a stronger lead, I'd say so."

"The F-16," A.J. said suddenly. "Also known as the Fighting Falcon. That could be the reference. Half the air forces in the world fly it."

"Is the IAF one of them?"

"Probably, since we share just about everything with them. How fast can we confirm that?"

"Wait one." Mac ducked back into Harm's room for a moment, studiously ignoring how weak he looked. "Pop quiz, flyboy. The Israeli Air Force flies F-16s - true or false?"

"True," Harm replied, tiredly but promptly. "They fly more of them than any other country but us. Why?"

"Tell you in a little while. Thank you ..." She went back to the others, peeling back the wrapper of her Danish. "Bingo. We need to find someone who would have knowledge of joint U.S./Israeli exercises involving F-16s, and it needs to be someone outside the FML office itself. If those computers were to be at all useful, they'd have to be in the hands of someone who knew exactly what they contained. That means we have to suspect the designated users themselves."

The admiral's face twitched at the realization that a Pentagon office could be housing a traitor, but he didn't comment on it. "That kind of thing usually takes place at Nellis Air Force Base out in Nevada. I don't have any blue-suit contacts out there, but they'd have to coordinate with NAS Fallon, and I'm fairly certain that I can get a hold of someone out *there* who will play ball."

He retrieved his cell phone and wandered into another room to begin harassing whatever unlucky operations officer happened to answer the phone.

Mac glanced at the bruise on Webb's cheekbone. "That was stupid of me," she said simply. "I apologize."

"It's all right. I knew where it was coming from."

She cast a strange look at him, a mixture of wistfulness and resignation in her dark eyes. "Did you?" she asked simply.

Webb leaned back in his chair, beginning to see the outlines of a larger picture. "Maybe not *exactly* where it was coming from," he allowed. "You don't owe me an answer to this, but did something happen between the two of you before Harm went missing?"

Mac's voice was subdued, distant. "You could say that." She stared down at her hands, twisting the empty wrapper. "I told you before that we'd agreed to get dinner that night, to discuss a case. I didn't mention the phone call that came an hour after I left work."

"I'm listening."

"He called to ask if we could postpone our working dinner and go out to a real dinner." Every detail of that conversation had since been seared into her memory, and all of them rushed back en masse as she recalled.

"Deep Blue? Isn't that the new seafood place over on K?"

"It is indeed. I'm told they do the best sushi in the District." She could hear his wry smile as she searched for a response, and with a laugh in his voice, he spoke again. "Relax, Marine. I won't make you eat anything raw."

"It's not that," she said hastily, her mind racing. "I'm just, ah, trying to figure out what made you come up with this idea on the spur of the moment."

His voice softened, drawing her in closer even through the phone. "I figured we deserved a break from everything that's been thrown at us lately, and with your permission, I'd like to spend mine taking you out for some seafood. Good sushi is just a fringe benefit."

The words 'taking you out' echoed in her head, and she knew he hadn't used them by accident. "You're proposing a significant change to our status quo," she said cautiously. "I'm not objecting to it, but I want to make sure we don't have different expectations for this."

"In that case, how about letting those expectations be our discussion topic at dinner?"

It was a reasonable suggestion, and the idea of actually going on an honest-to-God date with him had sparked something powerful within her that she'd long tried to bury. Still, after all their false starts and hesitations in the past ... "Why now, Harm?"

There was a momentary pause before he responded. "I don't have a good answer for that, Mac. I guess I've been questioning a lot of my choices lately, and I've reached the point where I'd rather take the risk - I'd rather try and fail than never try."

"Well, that's romantic." Mac winced at the sarcasm and the ensuing silence. "Wait, I'm sorry. That sounded awful."

"If you don't want - "

"No, I do. I really do. Apparently, I want it enough that it's overloading my sense of propriety." She offered a shaky laugh and rushed ahead before she could make another misstep. "Pick me up in an hour?"

"I'll be there."

"Harm, seriously. Thanks for having the courage to ask."

"Thank you for saying yes. See you in an hour."

She laid the phone carefully on the table, still not quite sure if this surreal moment had actually occurred somewhere other than in her imagination. Then, hurriedly, she scrambled for her closet to find a dress.

"And then he never showed up?"

Mac looked down at the wrapper in her hands, finding it shredded into small pieces. "I called his cell phone at 2015, then his apartment five minutes later. I called JAG at 2050 to see if something urgent had come up, then his cell phone again. Finally, I called his apartment back at 2253 and just laid into his answering machine. I was sure he'd changed his mind somehow, and I was furious at him for jerking me around. I accused him of being a spineless son of a bitch who couldn't be bothered to give a moment's consideration to anyone besides himself."

Webb grimaced. "Ouch."

"The next day, I kept waiting for him to breeze into the office with some slick apology. I was primed and ready to throw him out on his ass, too. When he never reported in, the admiral started getting pissed, and I started to realize that something had to be wrong. I got a severe attack of guilt over the message I'd left, so I went over to his place after Taps, hoping to either find him or erase the tape. When I got there, it hadn't been played yet, and I played it myself just to hear how ugly I sounded ... and then I saw a florist's bag on the counter with the receipt still attached." She swiped at the lone tear that escaped from the corner of her eye. "Wherever he was, he'd gone there with two red roses, and I know him too well to believe that they were for anyone but me."

Webb could only shake his head. "Mac, you can't feel guilty for being angry. You didn't know that something like this was even possible."

"I should have. I should have immediately realized that he's never out of contact like that. His trail went cold because I was at home feeling sorry for myself instead of out tracing his path. For all we know, I could have done something to stop all this - "

"Like what?" Webb asked honestly.

"I don't know, but something! Something that would have spared him from this hell -- God, I don't even know if he remembers what he was going to do that night ..."

Webb shrugged. "Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. But either way, he hasn't lost the six years that got you two to this point. Once all this is over, what's to stop you from having that conversation?"

She gave a short, humorless laugh. "Nothing, except a long history of missed opportunities." Quickly, she stood up and moved to get a drink from the kitchen. "It's all right. It's not important now, anyway. Right now we've got more critical things to take care of."

The agent wasn't at all convinced by her sudden composure, but there was little he could do about it at that point. Ellen appeared in the hallway then, motioning to Mac.

"He's having a rough time right now. I think he's trying to ask for you."

Mac immediately hurried into the room, where Harm was tossing fitfully, his labored breathing punctuated by unintelligible moans. "The fever's peaking, and it's hitting him hard," Ellen explained. "He's not really with it, but having you nearby might calm him a little."

"Worth a try." Mac took the cold compress from her and laid it against Harm's burning skin. "Hey, sailor," she said gently, looking for a sign of comprehension from him.

His eyes fluttered briefly, but didn't fully open. A word that sounded like "help" issued from his lips.

"I'm trying," she promised, making an attempt to still his restless motions. "But I need you to help me, too. I need you to fight through this so that you can come back and be everything that I've always depended on you to be. I know it sounds weak and clingy and all sorts of un-Marine-like things, but I need you, so much more than you realize ..."

"No," he mumbled, writhing under her guiding hands. "Mac ... help ..."

"If this persists, I may have to restrain or sedate him," Ellen warned, pulling Mac out of his blind reach.

"Like they did? Not while I'm around."

"He could hurt you or himself."

"For once, I'm stronger than he is. I can handle it. If he breaks something of mine in the process, then so be it." Mac resumed her post by the bed, forcing back her despair at seeing her strong, amazing partner reduced to this. "Harm, I'm right here," she promised, clutching his hand even as it spasmed and flailed. "I'm not going anywhere until you're through this, all right? Come on, Harm -- you asked me once to wait as long as it takes, and I'm telling you right now that I'm going to do just that. I don't have any choice, really, because so much of my world is you ..."

Her arm wrenched painfully as he thrashed, and Ellen stepped in with a needle ready, prepared for the younger woman's protests. "It's only a sedative. He's in pain, Mac. What is there to gain by prolonging it?"

Mac sighed angrily, frustrated and worried. "What kind of inhuman bastards --"

"You'll get them. For now, just keep trying to get through to him while I administer this."

Mac gripped his arm tighter, holding on for her life, or maybe for his. "I meant what I just said," she vowed, almost defiantly. "You were coming to me that night, and it doesn't matter whether or not you remember that, because I do. So I'm going to be here waiting until you come back to me, because I've been in love with you for so long that I couldn't go back even if I wanted to. If you need something to hold onto, hold onto that."

Harm gave no sign that he'd heard or comprehended any of her words, but some of the tension in his frame began to abate, and Ellen took the opportunity to inject him with the sedative. Almost immediately, the frantic motions faded away, and after a minute, he looked up at her with an unfocused gaze. "Mac?"

"Still here," she assured him, dropping a quick kiss on his forehead. Gratitude shone in his eyes for a long moment before he surrendered to oblivion again.

"For what it's worth," Ellen said kindly, "you can trust me not to repeat any of that."

"I wouldn't care if you did," Mac replied, surprising her. "Keeping that secret has caused us both far more pain than it was worth. I guess I can look at this as a dress rehearsal for when I tell him for real, when he's able to respond one way or the other."

"You never know. Some of it might have registered this time around." Ellen checked his pulse and respiration as A.J. stepped into the room.

"Just got off the phone with the wing commander at Fallon," he reported tersely. "Want to come get the scoop?"

Mac looked down at Harm as she smoothed the compress over his face. "I'm sorry, sir. I promised not to leave. Would you and Webb mind coming in here?"

A.J. didn't blink. He turned toward the hallway and snapped his fingers, motioning Webb over. The agent appeared a moment later.

"Okay. First off, 'Falcon Ink' was close, but not quite. Falcon *Link*, on the other hand, set off their radar big time. It's an air combat exercise held every year at Nellis, for allied air forces to test interoperability requirements. This year's exercise starts the day after tomorrow."

"And the Israelis are participating?"

"They are," he confirmed. "I've notified Nellis of the threat, and they've elevated their force protection level accordingly, but until we know something more specific, all they can do is be vigilant."

"Then we need to get more specific in the next forty-eight hours," Webb said grimly. "I'd vote for taking a look at the personnel in the FML office. If we can get service records on them, especially those with access to the Israelis' information, we might be able to track some probable suspects."

"Pictures," Mac suggested. "Harm might recognize the people who took him if he got a look at their faces before the drug had time to take effect."

A.J. moved toward the door. "Let's get on the phone with BuPers."

About four hours passed before Harm pried his eyes open again. He was greeted by a Marine with a tired smile. "Hi, there," she said, setting aside the book in her hand. "How are you feeling?"

He looked up at her, his gaze clearer than it had been for some time. "Like I got run over by a truck," he answered in a barely-audible voice. "But ... somehow that's an improvement."

"The fever's come down substantially in the last couple of hours. You may finally be on the upswing." Mac watched him lift his hand about six inches off the bed, experimenting. It took a concentrated effort, but his hand didn't tremble. "Hey, that's impressive."

Harm gave her a look of mild exasperation. "Our standards are pretty low right now, aren't they?"

"Trust me, compared to where we were a few hours ago, this is good. It really is."

He looked at her intently. "You were in here, talking to me," he recalled, uncertainly. "You said you'd stay ... didn't you?"

"Yeah, sailor, I did," she told him quietly. "You heard me?"

"Kind of ... It's not exactly clear. But - thanks." Gingerly, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. "Where are we on figuring this thing out?"

"Good news and bad news. We've got a time limit now: the Falcon Link exercise is scheduled to start in a little under two days."

Harm hesitated. "My brain's still not firing on all cylinders. That's the bad news, right?"

"Yes. The good news is that Nellis has been alerted to step up security, and we're narrowing down a list of possible suspects from within the Pentagon FML office."

"Because they had access to the computers?"

"Right." Mac watched him for a moment. "We were hoping to show you pictures of the possibles, in case you got a glimpse of your captors early on. Would that be okay?"

Doubt flickered in his eyes, but only for a split-second. "Sure," he said resolutely. "Whatever will get us closer to some answers."

"All right. I'll go get Webb's computer."

Getting Webb's computer automatically brought Webb and A.J. along as well. Ellen hovered in the doorway behind the trio, keeping an eye on her patient. "You're looking better, Commander," remarked A.J.

"Thank you, sir. How many suspects do we have?"

"Six people had duties with the IAF and had access to all the computers in question." Webb opened his laptop and set it on the bedside table. "Two of them were TDY out of the country on the date you were taken. One is female, and you said you remembered only males. But before we get into the final three, have you been able to remember anything that happened after you left JAG that night? Whether they took you from your apartment, or jumped you somewhere else?"

Harm was silent for a moment, attempting to capture some small scrap of a memory. "What about the clothes you were wearing?" Mac asked abruptly. "Do you know if you were wearing them that night, too?"

A.J. picked up the dirty shirt Harm had discarded earlier in favor of a T-shirt and sweatpants. "These don't look like they've been worn for five weeks straight. Besides, does that even tell us anything?"

"I don't know. But they're his clothes. I recognize them." Mac took the shirt from him and held it out toward Harm. "You were wearing this the night we made crab cakes at your place."

"After the Burkhardt court-martial." Harm nodded. "You're right. They are my clothes."

"Is it possible that they were in your sea bag, in your car? Could they have gotten them that way?"

Harm didn't respond for a moment, his gaze suddenly distant. "I did have my sea bag," he stated, almost to himself. "I had a few sets of clothes, and sometimes, if I had enough water, I tried to wash them. There was one set that was dirtier than the rest - because I was wearing them when they took me."

The others exchanged looks of surprise at the details beginning to emerge. "There must have been an altercation of some sort," A.J. suggested, trying to draw him out further.

Webb turned the computer around. "Anything familiar about any of these three men?"

Harm stared at the three service photos - and the image of one smiling, neatly-uniformed officer triggered a voice in the recesses of his mind.

"I'm so sorry, sir ... I usually have much better reflexes than that ..."

He inhaled sharply, startling Mac. "He ran into me," he said, the pieces falling into place. "I was stopping for a red light, and he rear-ended me. We pulled off into a parking lot to trade insurance information, and he and his friend blindsided me."

"One of these guys?"

Harm pointed to the middle picture. "That one."

"Army First Lieutenant James Lauchler," Webb read off the screen, calling up the correct profile. "He's an information specialist in the FML office, handling software coordination between various countries. You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes." Harm's eyes darkened, but his gaze never left the picture, as if he were trying to use it to force more memories to the surface.

"I'll get some agents to track him down. Given the timing of the exercise, it's fairly likely that he's already left for Nevada, but if that's the case, we'll track him through airport security." Webb quickly exited, cell phone already in hand.

"If they've already left for Nellis, there's probably no reason for us to stay out of sight any longer," A.J. pointed out. "We'd probably get more accomplished at JAG than we can here with just a laptop."

Mac looked over at her partner. "What do you think, sailor? You feel up to the trip?"

Harm nodded, determined. "I've been missing out on my own life for far too long already. Doc? What do you say?"

From the doorway, Ellen shrugged. "On the condition that you check into Bethesda when this is over, and at the very least get some blood work and an MRI. I don't see that there's anything more I can give you that you can't get by simply taking it easy."

"Thank you." Sincerity rang in his weakened voice. "You've been a godsend."

"My pleasure. Good luck."

A.J. withdrew his cell phone once again and hit the first memory button. "Commander Turner. I trust nothing catastrophic occurred today? ... Good. We've had a change of plans. Make sure everyone leaves promptly at the end of the duty day. Order them home if you have to, but clear everyone out except yourself and Lieutenants Roberts and Sims. We're going to be using Headquarters as a center of operations for a while ... You'd assume correctly. Yes -- we've got him. He's going to be all right, but there's a long story involved, and we're still piecing some of it together. Go ahead and let the lieutenants know, so that we don't shock the hell out of them. We'll be there in about an hour and a half."

The ride back into the D.C. area was a little more comfortable than the ride out had been, but there was still an undercurrent of tension. So many questions still hung in the air, the most pressing ones related to when, how, and even if an attack might take place.

Harm kept the picture of Lieutenant Lauchler in his mind's eye, playing back the tiny scrap of the man's voice that his memory still retained. There had to be something else, something that would unlock the fragments of memory that hovered just out of reach.

"I'm sorry, sir ... I'm sorry, sir ..."

He'd heard that voice say far more than just those words - damn it, why couldn't he remember?

"We're all just freakin' pawns here, aren't we?"

He jerked upright, the sudden realization accompanied by a sensation that resembled a jolt of electricity. "Jesus," he breathed.

Mac and A.J. both swiveled to look at him, but kept silent, not wanting to disturb his focus.

"They didn't drop me in that alley," Harm continued, certainty strengthening his voice. "I got there on my own."

"You escaped?" Webb asked from the driver's seat.

"No ... maybe. Kind of. I don't know." Harm's gaze burned into a tiny spot on the seat in front of him, but his mind was somewhere else entirely. "After they jumped me, I almost never saw this guy Lauchler. It was always the other two who were doing the interrogating. Then at some point, not that long ago, they stopped coming."

"Maybe they'd given up," Mac suggested.

"No. At least, there must have still been something planned. Because once those two were gone, Lauchler came back."

"I gotta hand it to you, Commander," the younger man said, an odd combination of apathy and bitterness in his voice. "Whether you know something about what's on those hard drives or not, you're a hard son of bitch to crack. They figured they had plenty of time to work on you, but they put all their money on getting something out of you, and it bit them in the ass."

Through a drug-induced stupor that had become all too familiar, Harm squinted up at him. "'They,' or 'we'?"

His captor chuckled humorlessly. "Yeah, we're all just freakin' pawns here, aren't we? Nah, I might be chummy with those guys for the moment, but trust me, I'm not in this to follow Allah's will." He shook his head. "They told me to kill you, y'know that? Screw it, I say. I like being able to sleep at night, thanks. I got stuff I want to accomplish, and I'm willing to go a long way to do it. But personally putting a bullet in somebody's head is something I'd rather avoid. So even if you can manage to haul your junkie ass out of here and string together a whole sentence for somebody, it'll still be too late to put a dent in the plan, and if you can't ... well, that's the breaks. But at least I won't have to watch you die."

There was a dull clang as a deadbolt slid into place, and Lauchler's voice echoed from the other side of the door. "Good luck, sir ..."

Returning sharply to the present, Harm looked up at Mac, still trying to fit the pieces together. "Some time after that, I started to realize that they were really gone, and I started trying to break out. I think maybe I eventually knocked a hole in the wall next to the bolt. But I just kept getting more and more disoriented the further I went, and I was so tired ..."

"The drugs wore off," A.J. theorized. "Do you remember anything about the location? If you made it to Colorado Avenue on your own, they must have been holding you somewhere in the District."

"I'm sorry, sir - right now my head's pounding enough as it is." Harm slumped forward, putting his head in his hands.

"So Lauchler doesn't share his cohorts' ideology, but he's willing to work with them in order to mess with the IAF. That's a weird one." Webb kept his eyes trained on the road as he considered the new information. "He basically said that they were counting on information from you, and they didn't get it."

"I'd feel a lot more relieved if it didn't sound like they had a plan B in mind." Harm didn't look up as he spoke. "Lauchler may not be too crazy about looking somebody in the eye and pulling the trigger, but that doesn't mean he won't kill. And his buddies are a total X factor."

"Well, we've got a little time yet," Mac reassured him. "Falcon Link kicks off at noon tomorrow our time. We'll find him by then."

Sturgis was as good as his word: when they pulled into the JAG parking lot, only his car and the Roberts minivan were left. As the foursome entered the building, Harm leaned on Mac for support, gazing around at the halls that had been a part of his daily life for so many years. He was more aware of the passage of time now than he'd been at first, and it struck him anew how much time he'd lost.

Harriet was the only person in the bullpen when the elevator doors opened. She'd picked little A.J. up from day care earlier, after Sturgis had informed her and Bud of the new development, and was settling him at an empty desk with a coloring book when she looked up and saw her son's godfather for the first time in five weeks.

Her blue eyes immediately filled with tears as she stared, almost afraid to believe he was really there. "Commander," she whispered, and then all pretense of decorum was cast aside as she rushed to embrace him.

Mac released his arm and stepped back with a small smile. Harm returned the hug with gratitude: Harriet had always been the sunshine of this place, and it had been a while since he'd seen any sunshine. "Careful, Harriet," he said quietly. "I don't want to knock you over."

Her voice was slightly muffled by his shoulder. "Ask me if I give a damn right now." After a moment, she drew back, but kept her arm locked around him, sensing his weakness. "God, Harm, what happened?"

"Let's save the explanation for the full group," A.J. suggested.

"Yes, sir - Bud and Commander Turner are in your office." Harriet allowed Mac to take over again as Harm's makeshift crutch, and the group moved toward the admiral's inner office.

Both Sturgis and Bud leaped up from their chairs, hurrying to greet their friend almost before he came through the door. "You have no idea how good it is to see you, pal," Sturgis told Harm sincerely, pumping his hand.

"Same here, sir," Bud agreed, with eyes that were suspiciously bright.

"It's pretty good to be seen," Harm acknowledged, letting Mac guide him toward the small couch that sat in the back corner of the office. "If it's okay with all of you, I'm just going to start with the abridged version of what happened."

As he gingerly slid onto the couch, the three officers nodded silently, beginning to get a clearer picture of his condition.

"Okay." He spoke dispassionately, his voice seemingly numb to the weight of the words. "I was attacked and held by an Army lieutenant and two associates who are most likely terrorists. The drugs they gave me affected my memory, but I know that they were trying to get information from me regarding an international combat exercise that starts day after tomorrow. We've come here to consolidate the information I have with what Webb's colleagues have come up with in the last few hours, and try to figure out the plan in the time we have left."

Sensing that this was as far as Harm intended to go for the moment, Webb took over and began to fill Sturgis and Bud in on the details they'd learned thus far. Harriet stood back from them, tears slipping from her eyes at the knowledge - more than that, the very image - of what had been inflicted upon one of the strongest people she'd ever known.

"Sir," she asked, her expression betraying the fact that her mouth and brain weren't entirely functioning as a single unit, "a-are you all right? I mean, do you need anything? Can I ..."

Understanding her desire to help, Harm gave her a wan smile. "Thanks, Harriet. I've been in good hands, though. And trust me when I say that this depressing apparition you see before you is a damn sight better than what I looked like about twenty-odd hours ago."

"It's only skin deep, sir. Looking like hell, that is."

"I only wish." But he looked up at her with relatively clear eyes. "Actually, there is something you can do for me. It took us a long time to come to the conclusion that there probably isn't anyone hunting me down, so we've been keeping pretty quiet for the past day or so. Now that I'm, ah, back ... would you please look in my Rolodex under Burnett and call my mother to tell her I haven't in fact gotten myself killed?"

Harriet's angelic features seemed to take on a glow from within. "I think that's a call that I'll enjoy making."

With a sure stride, she moved through the bullpen into his office, focusing on a particular box and trying not to dwell on why the commander's belongings had been packed up. At the admiral's quiet request, they'd begun the packing job in preparation for Commander Turner to move in - less a week ago, she recalled, when their friend's disappearance was thirty days old and hope was dimming. She'd done some of the work, along with Tiner and Coates, but no one had ever actually finished the job. There were still a few things that they'd been putting off until the last possible minute: the pictures on his desk, and the model airplanes that sat patiently on the shelf awaiting their missing pilot. But the walls were heartbreakingly bare.

And his Rolodex wasn't in the box with the rest of his desk supplies, which was perplexing and upsetting. She was sure she'd put it in that box, but then, Tiner had been in here again after she'd left, and he easily could have made his own adjustments to the packing system. He always seemed to be doing things like that.

A little angry at herself for not being able to shut off her tears, Harriet swiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand and sat down in the commander's chair to compose herself. When Mac approached the doorway, she started to rise guiltily, then gave up on the effort and slumped back.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't figure out why I'm still crying now that we've got him back."

"If I had to guess," Mac replied, stepping into the room, "I'd say that it might be because you weren't letting yourself cry about it at all until just now. You and Bud always managed to keep believing that he'd be back somehow. I never told you how much I admired you for that."

Harriet heard the compliment, but only as a distant echo compared to the subtext of the words. "You didn't honestly believe that he was dead, did you?"

"Never for very long. But the idea was always back there, waiting for something to knock down my guard so that it could sneak in again. So I've had plenty of opportunities to use up my reservoir of tears." Mac made a show of squaring her shoulders. "Now that he's back, I don't need to cry over him. It'd only embarrass the hell out of him, anyway."

"How bad is the memory loss?"

"It seems to be confined to things that happened while he was receiving the drugs - the Agency doctor said they partially blocked the transmission of new information into long-term memory. Some of it's there, just buried under psychological scar tissue, and some of it is simply not there to be recovered. I'm trying to look at it as a blessing in disguise. If he had to forget something, it might as well be the time he spent being tortured for information."

"There is that, I guess." Harriet reached into a box sitting beside the desk and finally came up with the Rolodex. "This figures. I'll be okay, ma'am. All of this will. I know you'll take care of him."

Mac caught her off-guard by not objecting on principle to the choice of words. "That's exactly my intention."

Back inside the admiral's office, Webb's phone rang. He listened to the voice on the other end for a few seconds, then offered a curt "thanks" and hung up, heading immediately for the laptop he'd set up on the wide oak desk.

“Lauchler’s on a security tape from Baltimore-Washington International,” he reported, fingers already flying over the keyboard. “But he didn’t board a plane. He was there to meet an arriving flight. They’re sending over some images from the tape, in case we can identify his friends.”

“More conspirators?” A.J. frowned. “What would they be doing in Washington?”

“Hopefully not looking for me.” Harm climbed to his feet and leaned on the desk to examine the computer screen. Webb called up the grainy video images and clicked slowly through them.

Near the baggage claim area, two men approached Lauchler in stop-motion. They didn’t shake hands, but instead merely turned toward the exit, finally showing their faces to the camera. Harm stiffened, but some part of him had been expecting this. “They’re the ones who interrogated me.”

Bud’s head snapped toward him. “Why would they come back here?”

Harm gave him a bleak look. “Plan B?” he suggested grimly.

Understanding, Webb dove for his phone. “Get somebody checking the passenger manifests for any flights from Nevada or southern California to BWI in the past twelve hours. Check them against terror suspects and any known aliases.”

“No face recognition software?” Sturgis inquired.

Webb looked mildly insulted. “You think we haven’t been working on that already? How do you think we found Lauchler so fast?”

“Sorry.”

“Did they go out to Nevada with the intention of going ahead with their original plan?” A.J. wondered aloud. “Or had they gone somewhere else entirely?”

Harm studied the men captured on the screen, hoping to force some further information to emerge. But the few scraps of memory he conjured up were mostly echoes of pure mental anguish, and it took all his willpower to face them and continue on.

“They must have gone to Nellis,” Sturgis asserted. “If they were willing to spend weeks trying to extract information from Harm, they’re obviously very committed to their target.”

“Then we’re back to the same question. Why come back here?”

“Because I lied,” was the quiet response.

All four men turned to stare at Harm, making his way back to the couch with an expression of surprise equal to theirs. “They wanted a way to get at their targets before the exercise started. They were insistent on hitting them today, for some reason, so they kept asking me what the procedure was - whether the jets would be arriving at Nellis today or tomorrow. I didn’t know, but I guessed that they wouldn’t be making the long trip right before starting the exercise. So I said they’d be arriving tomorrow, and hoped like hell that I was lying.”

"You must have been," Sturgis asserted. "They wouldn't have come back unless their target was compromised. So either the IAF jets are already there and somehow out of reach, or else they haven't arrived yet."

"They've got to be there already. You can't fly in from halfway around the world and jump right into an exercise."

"Well, we know how to find out, don't we?" A.J. picked up the phone to call Nellis once again.

As he did so, Mac re-entered the office, having been listening from the doorway for a few minutes. "Why today?" she pointed out. "Is the date somehow important?"

"April 29th?" Bud moved toward Tiner's desk and sat down at the computer. "I can do a quick search and check it out."

"A Muslim holiday?" Webb suggested.

"Or maybe a Jewish one." Harm shrugged, battling to keep a lid on his surging emotions. On the one hand, he'd managed to come up with some important details, for which he was grateful. But the idea that there was still so much out there, out of reach, was frustrating him beyond belief. "Or it could be something personally important to one of these guys, in which case we'll never get it."

"Got it," Bud reported from Tiner's desk with impeccable timing. "Today is Yom Ha Shoah."

Shoah. Harm knew he should recognize that word. An old history lesson floated back to him. "The Holocaust?"

Bud nodded solemnly. "It's a day of remembrance."

"The National Holocaust Museum," Harriet suddenly put in from the post she'd taken up next to her husband. "I think I read in the paper that there's a ceremony this evening at the museum."

"At sundown," confirmed A.J. as he hung up the phone. "That's where the visiting IAF contingent is right now. Along with a sizable group of Jewish USAF pilots, and a crowd of a few hundred - maybe thousand - other attendees."

The chilling realization struck all of them at essentially the same moment. The target hadn't changed. They wouldn't get the jets this way, but they'd get the pilots, and they'd make their desired impact by bringing countless civilians into the crossfire.

"It's 1925," Sturgis said, his voice taut. "The sun will be going down soon."

A.J. spun on his heel and headed for his office safe. "Make your calls," he directed Webb, who was already dialing his contact at the Department of Homeland Security. Among other items, the large safe contained the admiral's assigned sidearm, another nine-millimeter that he'd purchased himself, a holster, and spare ammunition. He stuck the Glock into his belt and handed the Navy-issue weapon and holster to Mac. He glanced questioningly at Webb, but the agent patted his side, indicating that he was already covered.

Harm pushed himself to his feet. "Do you have another weapon in there, sir?"

A.J. immediately shook his head. "Bad idea, Commander. Not only are you not physically up to the task, but if these guys see you, they might panic and do something stupid."

He was right, but ... "Something more stupid than what they're already planning? Sir, I can't just sit here and wait. I've been helpless for too long."

Before their CO could respond, Sturgis spoke up. "What if Commander Rabb and I took another vehicle, sir? We could sit across the street and stay in contact over cell phones in case we're needed."

Harm got the distinct feeling that he was being slightly patronized, but he wasn't in a position to raise a serious objection. At least he'd be on the scene.

A.J. sighed. "All right, do what you need to do. But let's get moving."

2011 EDT
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
Washington, D.C.

Around the quietly imposing stone façade of the building's east side, a crowd of some sixteen hundred people had gathered, many holding unlit candles in preparation for the departure of the fading sunlight. As the trio made its way along the outskirts of the crowd, some part of Mac's brain registered the fact that this was a remarkably well-behaved group. Gatherings of this size were usually quite a bit more chaotic, but here, people were either talking quietly to each other or simply waiting for the event to begin. A function of the group's composition, she supposed: mostly older people and families. The relative calm would likely come in handy when - she didn't dare say 'if' - the attackers were caught in the area.

Webb quickly located a colleague, an FBI agent in plain clothes, and made his way over. "What's the status?"

"Two extra units from DCPD just started quietly combing the crowd for our suspects," the agent reported. "Bomb squad's on the scene, and a special-threat team is on its way from Quantico. If we get even a sniff of something, TSA's ready to lock down the airports, the train stations and the Metro."

"Good start. Special Agent Dale Connors, meet Rear Admiral A.J. Chegwiddden and Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie," Webb introduced. "They're joining the team whether DHS likes it or not."

Connors nodded curtly to each of them. "Normally I'd pitch the expected fit, but right now, the more eyes we have, the better."

"Where is the Israeli Air Force contingent?" Mac asked.

Connors pointed off to the side of the as-yet-empty stage, where a group of officers in IAF khaki and USAF blue stood. "They've been notified of the threat, but they're not leaving. They argued that suddenly disappearing would tip off the suspects and possibly destabilize the situation further."

"Not a bad argument, but it's a hell of a risk," Webb pointed out.

"We've got rooftop snipers triangulating on the entrances to their position. Traffic on 14th Street is an issue - the crowd's already caused a major backup, but we're closing off the surrounding blocks just as soon as we can clear them."

"This is a well-coordinated response, Special Agent," A.J. commented. "Especially considering the amount of warning we didn't have."

Connors, a fortyish man with eight years of anti-terrorism experience, merely looked back at him without reaction. "If this thing goes south, Admiral, a 'well-coordinated response' won't mean much. All the covert presence in the world can't change the fact that we don't know what kind of attack to expect."

The others nodded in grim agreement with his assessment. Mac pulled out her cell phone and called to check in with Sturgis.

"Hey, it's me. They're shutting down 14th as soon as they can clear the traffic."

"That could be a while," Sturgis replied, watching the long line of brake lights stretching down the block from behind the wheel of his own car. "We've got a parking spot on the street about a block and a half away, so we're going to keep it. Best we can do."

"How did you find a parking space on 14th Street?"

"Well, we're probably going to get fined or towed for parking in a fire lane, that's how. But we're in a good spot to check out the vehicles in the area." Sturgis glanced over at Harm, who was intently studying the driver of each passing car in the side mirror, daring his abductors to appear. "Now would be a good time to have one of those walkie-talkie phones."

"Well, just keep the line open," Mac suggested. "I won't hang up unless the admiral and I get separated or something."

"Fair enough."

Harm suddenly tensed. Sturgis followed his gaze across the street, where a young man was walking in their direction, away from the museum. He wore a baseball cap pulled low, and he walked with a slouch that belied his military background, but Harm was instantly certain that he was looking at James Lauchler.

"Stop him," he said urgently. "Doesn't matter how, but hold him up before he gets too far away from the crowd."

Despite the minor drawback that he was currently unarmed, Sturgis didn't hesitate. He grabbed a hardbound book out of the backseat, jumped out of the car, and hurried across the street.

"Excuse me, sir!"

Lauchler barely glanced up at the voice, and so he was caught off-guard when Sturgis stepped right into his path, brandishing the book. "Tell me, sir, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?"

The young man pulled back with a mild sneer of contempt. "Man, did you ever pick the wrong corner, pal." He chuckled a thumb over his shoulder at the crowd. "That there is half the Jewish population of D.C."

He moved to step around, but Sturgis reached out a hand. "This won't take but a moment of your time, sir - "

"I said lay off, pal."

"Might want to listen to him, Lauchler," Harm said from behind him. "When all this is over, you'll probably need a little divine help."

Lauchler jerked around, reaching toward his hip. Without a second thought, Sturgis did the same. "You don't want to do that," he bluffed smoothly. "Guns draw attention awfully fast, and there are a lot more cops around than you think there are."

After a moment of indecision, Lauchler lowered his hands to his sides, and Sturgis did the same. The young man turned fully to stare at his onetime captive. "You pulled it off," he stated, with a hint of grudging admiration. "That's pretty frickin' inhuman."

"Yeah, sorry about that whole not dying thing." Harm was channeling just about all of his energy into masking his weakness, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sturgis shift the cell phone in his pocket slightly, and he recited a silent prayer that Mac would hear anything that followed. "What are you walking away from, Lieutenant? Didn't sign on for martyrdom like your friends did?"

Lauchler's lips twisted in an ominous smile. "I think they can handle it on their own. Aren't you going to call somebody over here to read me my rights?"

"We're not an official part of the detail. We're here on our own time. That doesn't mean we won't shoot your ass if you try anything dumb."

"Whatever you say, guys. It's not going to change anything that's about to happen." The soldier shrugged. "We're far enough away over here, anyway."

Sturgis narrowed his eyes. "You think so?"

"Hey, I might work a desk these days, but I do know my way around an RPG."

Come on, keep talking, numbskull, Harm inwardly goaded him. "Did you really think that you were just going to be able to waltz onto Nellis Air Force Base and plug some jets with a grenade launcher?"

"Wouldn't have needed to actually get on base. We had a spot all picked out on the final approach vector from outside the gates, and besides, I've got an ID, don't I? But what the

hell does it matter now? This is a much easier mark - a better one, in my book. While it doesn't have the artistic value of fighter jets exploding on final, it has its own style."

"Killing noncombatants has a style to it? I'm assuming you learned that from terror training 101 and not from ROTC."

Lauchler shook his head. "You don't get it, do you? I'm not one of those bastards. They just *think* I'm with them."

Sturgis scoffed. "If you think you're doing some unauthorized undercover work, you're in for a nasty surprise when you meet up with the UCMJ. You sure as hell act like you want people to die today."

"Oh, I do. It's the only way we have left to wake this country up."

The two commanders exchanged a look of disbelief, and Lauchler rolled his eyes. "Do I really have to spell it out here? A remembrance of the Holocaust: a galvanizing event that shocked and appalled the world. After the war, Americans and their allies stood side by side with the Jews and facilitated the creation of a Jewish state. By now, everyone over here has become completely desensitized to the plight of Israel. We talk about peace and decry the suicide bombers, but we don't *help*. The only way the United States will ever put its military power behind Israel will be if something happens to link our suffering to theirs." His gaze was slightly unfocused, and he spoke with an oddly detached voice. "Isn't it obvious? When the next anti-Israeli attack occurs here, on our soil, we'll finally have to respond. Only then will Israelis have a chance to someday know a life without fear."

Harm heard the explanation, but he wasn't convinced he'd heard it correctly. "So the deaths of Israelis and Americans together will ultimately help Israel?"

"It took Pearl Harbor to bring us into the Second World War, didn't it?" Lauchler's eyes hardened. "Sometimes it takes a galvanizing event to set in motion the events that will change the world for the better. Today's victims will be tomorrow's heroes."

Oh, he is really off his rocker. Harm knew he shouldn't waste his breath, but he couldn't *not* respond. "And that makes your cause just? If you help two fundamentalists fire an RPG launcher at a group of people, what's the difference between you and them?"

"Look, don't waste your breath, all right? I don't expect you to get on board with this. Years from now, people will look back on this as the day that bound America and Israel together. But right now, you'd better decide what the hell we're doing standing here."

Mac's phone had been attached to her ear for a good ten minutes. It was a convenient prop: while she scanned the crowd, she pretended every so often to keep up her half of an imaginary conversation, hoping to keep from attracting attention.

When she heard a scuffling sound and the slam of a car door over the line, the phone became far more than a mere prop. She turned up the volume, all her muscles coiled to spring.

As soon as she heard Harm identify Lauchler, she covered the speaker and leaned over to the admiral. "Get a couple of cops moving down 14th to set up a net to the south - but not too close. Harm and Sturgis have got Lauchler held up, but he's armed and they're not."

A.J. immediately found a nearby officer and described the situation, while Mac continued to listen. "Come on," she whispered, fingers tightening around the small plastic phone. "Give us some clue. A direction. Anything."

Then came the mention of a grenade launcher, and even as she relayed it to Webb, her mind was churning. Where would one hide a grenade launcher in the middle of downtown Washington? A van? A nearby building?

The buzz among the assembled people increased to a more noticeable level as motion became visible near the stage. The sun had all but disappeared from view. Mac had to step back from her position on the crowd's outskirts due to the noise. She pressed a finger to her other ear, straining to hear the muffled conversation being picked up by Sturgis's phone.

As Lauchler rambled in rather grandiose terms about binding Americans and Israelis together in blood, she felt her skin go cold. The man honestly believed he would be helping Jews everywhere by killing dozens or hundreds today. He'd joined forces with two men whose aims he despised in order to fulfill his twisted vision. This was a whole new definition of insanity.

Then Mac heard her partner speak again.

["So, to accomplish the end goal, you had to give your collaborators exactly what they wanted."]

["It was unavoidable,"] Lauchler replied. ["They're too shortsighted to recognize what they're setting in motion."]

["What about what *you* want?"] Harm asked.

["What?"]

["These guys are everything you hate. They want to wipe Israel off the map. Are you just going to walk away now and hope the police will get them, or do you want to make damn sure they meet their maker tonight?"]

That's it, flyboy, Mac cheered silently. Keep him going.

There was a pause, and she imagined Lauchler hesitating. ["What do you want me to do, wait for them to fire and then just walk into the room and blow them away?"]

A room. "They're in a building," Mac hissed to Webb.

["That's right, you don't like getting your hands dirty."] There was an audible undertone of hostility in Harm's voice. ["Wonder how I could've forgotten that?"]

There was another pause, and then Sturgis spoke again. ["What if we did it instead? I sure as hell don't want to take the chance of those bastards going free. Tell us which door to open, and I'll take them out myself."]

Lauchler snorted. ["So you can try to stop them from carrying out the plan? I don't think so."]

["Oh, like we'd be able to do that by now? We're a little short on time - if we go right now, we'll be lucky just to catch them. This whole thing could go nuts at any minute."]

Harm's voice took over again. ["This is your only shot at getting back some control in this situation. It was your plan at the beginning, remember? You're the one who made sure those computers didn't reformat properly, and you're the one who arranged to recover the information on them. But somewhere along the line, those two barbarians started to force their priorities on you. That's why you said that stuff about being a pawn, isn't it? You can stop being a pawn right now, Lauchler - if you tell us how to get them, we'll go do it. Take control back."]

Mac drew in a shallow breath and held it. This guy was just unbalanced enough to buy that logic. Assuming he didn't see right through the closing-argument performance.

After a moment, she heard Lauchler say, "The Danfield building. Apartment 604."

With that, her Marine training once again asserted itself. She fired the address over to Special Agent Connors, who immediately radioed the snipers to shift their focus to the Danfield Building across the street. The team of SWAT officers sweeping that area was quickly instructed to head for the sixth floor. Mac made her way toward Harm and Sturgis, one hand on the sidearm at her waist. A.J. fell into step beside her without a word.

"Okay," Sturgis said simply. His voice was level, but his eyes flicked over to something over his friend's shoulder. *Please let that mean that Mac heard, and that they're moving in,* Harm prayed.

"So what now?" Lauchler demanded, still uncomfortable and wary. "You go one way, I go the other, and we're just supposed to hope that nobody pulls a gun as soon as we all turn our backs?"

Harm kept his focus on the lieutenant, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sturgis relax ever so slightly, and through a steadily increasing headache, he felt the first glimmer of hope. "Something like that, I guess."

Then there was a soft click, and Lauchler froze as the cool barrel of a gun jabbed into his neck. "Actually, not quite like that," A.J. corrected, steel in his tone. "Nothing like that at all, in fact."

Harm quickly relieved the man of his weapon as a pair of plainclothes policemen approached from the positions they'd taken up on the corner. One produced a set of handcuffs and put them to work. Lauchler swore and ranted but didn't struggle. The other cop listened to a transmission on his radio earpiece.

"We're going to hold here for a few minutes until the area is secured," Cop Two told the four lawyers.

Or until the area goes up in flames, Harm added mentally. Afraid to look in the direction of the museum for fear of witnessing a horror, he glanced back at Sturgis. "You always keep a Bible in your backseat?"

Sturgis, the quintessential son of a preacher man, gave a short, humorless chuckle and turned the book to display its cover: the latest John Grisham novel.

"Nice touch."

"Just thinking on my feet."

They waited in tense silence, each cursing their current helplessness and dreading the recognizable report of a grenade launcher that could still come at any time.

Please ...

Cop Two put a hand to his earpiece, frowning, and for a moment, all breathing stopped on that small patch of sidewalk. Then, his expression cleared. "We're secure. Two down, no friendly casualties."

Mac sagged, feeling a greater relief than any she could recall. For the first time in twenty-four hours, there were no burning questions left to be answered. She secured her weapon and smiled at her CO, opening her mouth to speak - but was interrupted by a request from the first cop to her partner.

"Sir, I'll take that, if it's all the same to you."

Harm didn't appear to have heard. He still had Lauchler's gun, and almost unconsciously, he lifted it toward the handcuffed lieutenant.

"Commander!" A.J. called sharply. "Whatever it is you're thinking about doing, don't."

"It would save the taxpayers a lot of time and money." Harm's voice was cold, but his hand trembled.

"They'd end up spending it all on your therapy bill," Mac said carefully, reaching toward him. "It's over. We stopped them because you were able to show us where to look. That's enough."

"It's *not* enough!" He pressed a hand to his head, as if trying to banish a voice from his mind. "It doesn't give me back the five weeks of my life they took from me. It doesn't erase the things they did, or repair all the holes in my mind ..."

"Neither will this." She closed her hand around the barrel of the gun and gently lowered it. "They didn't change *you*. You're too strong for that. If you really wanted to pull that trigger, you would have done it by now."

Silently, Harm allowed her to take the gun out of his hand and give it to the officer. Right away, both Mac and Sturgis seized his arms as he staggered, adrenaline drained at last.

"Okay, sailor, you're benched," Mac suggested lightly. "Sturgis, where's your car?"

"Right down here."

"All right. If anybody needs us for a debrief, that's where we'll be."

The two of them walked their friend back to the car. Sturgis unlocked the passenger door and watched to make sure Harm could get in under his own power, then headed back to the small but growing huddle of officers and agents.

Mac reclined the seat and left the door open, sitting down on the curb next to the car. Harm leaned back and closed his eyes. "Sorry about back there. I'm not sure I've got a handle on everything just yet."

"It's okay. It's not like I didn't have thoughts about exacting some punishment on him either." She took his hand in both of hers, rubbing small circles with her thumbs. "Not only because of what he tried to do here, but because of what he did to you. I don't care what bizarre motives he had, or how much the other guys compelled him to do - he inflicted a kind of suffering on a fellow officer that we wouldn't even use on a declared enemy. We're going to make damn sure that he pays for it. The others, too."

"I know." He opened his eyes, and something beyond the windshield softened his gaze. "Hey, take a look."

She turned her head and saw hundreds of tiny points of light, expanding as more candles were lit. "They came together to remember an atrocity, and to hope that such things have been left to the past," she mused. "They don't even know how close they came to becoming part of another one."

"Guess we must have done something right, then."

"Yeah, I'd say we did."

Three days later

1712 EDT

Bethesda Naval Hospital

Bethesda, MD

Mac leaned on the hood of her car, waiting for Harm to emerge from the building. When he did, she recognized a certainty to his step that had been long absent, and it lifted her spirits as well. They'd kept him overnight for testing after their adventurous evening, and the attending physician had strongly recommended that he spend a couple more days in intensive counseling sessions to work on the remaining gaps in his memory and the aftereffects of his imprisonment. Surprisingly, he hadn't resisted, and from the looks of things, it had been a smart decision.

"Good day?" she asked as he approached. In response, he flashed a familiar smile.

"Good enough that I'm coming back to duty on Monday. As long as I have an office to come back to."

"Trust me, that will be all taken care of."

"How about you?"

"How was my day?" She shrugged, wondering how best to describe it. "Webb's been in on the interrogations. Apparently Lauchler's friends are Syrian nationals who had quite the vendetta against the IAF. It goes back to an incident a few years ago in which some of their relatives were killed in a bombing raid. When Lauchler got the word out that he had Israeli information to deal, they were on him right away."

She decided not to say more for the time being, but Harm sensed her hesitation. "Something else happen?"

"Yeah, actually. They, ah, found your car."

He rocked back and forth on his feet, but otherwise didn't immediately react to that information. "Where?"

"One of the terrorists gave up the location of the warehouse where they kept you. FBI went in this morning to secure evidence. They haven't moved the car yet, but other than the bumper, it's fine."

He studied the pavement for a moment, hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans. "Got any place to be for the next little while?"

"Harm, are you sure?"

"Yes." The response came a little too quickly and forcefully, and he offered a rueful half-smile. "No. But I think I need to see the place, just to make sure that the few bits and pieces I have floating around in my head are real. If that makes any sense. I think it'll help me figure out whether I'm not I'm really getting past it all."

Mac had her doubts about this exercise, but she trusted him enough not to question further. "Okay, then. Hop in."

They drove into the city in near-silence. Mac felt that she should probably say something, just on principle, but nothing suitable came to mind. What exactly was the etiquette for returning a person to the scene of their imprisonment? Platitudes like "it'll be all right" and "I'll be right there with you" would be useless: he knew them to be true and didn't need to be patronized by having them articulated.

As they drew closer to the area, she sensed Harm beginning to tense up. Maybe he wouldn't have been able to locate the place on a map, but it had a hold on him, regardless.

Mac put the Corvette in park near a cinder-block structure, the type of building that might have once housed some kind of industrial work. Too small to be much of a warehouse, too plain to have been one of the District's uniformly high-powered office buildings. Harm's gaze swept over it, his expression betraying nothing. With only the briefest hesitation, he opened the car door.

"Coming with me?" he asked.

"That's entirely up to you," she replied.

"Then you're coming," he said, and this time the promptness of his reply didn't faze either of them. "I'd rather you see it now, so I don't have to try to describe it later."

"All right." They both climbed out of the car and started toward a pair of FBI agents standing near the door.

The men turned at their approach and correctly deduced their identities. "Commander, Colonel," one agent greeted them. "We're continuing to keep this area restricted for evidence gathering, just in case, so I'll have to ask you to wear gloves if you're going inside."

"May we borrow some?" Mac asked.

The agent promptly handed each of them a pair of latex gloves. "We're finished with your vehicle, Commander, and also with the items we identified as being from your bag. You can go ahead and take them home. If you come across anything additional that belongs to you, let one of us know, and we'll tag it to be returned to you." He held up a familiar set of keys.

Harm accepted them with a nod of gratitude. "Thank you." Then he lifted his chin and opened the door.

There was a faint mustiness hovering in the air inside the building. The three-story structure consisted mainly of one large, open room, with a few small rooms walled off on the sides. Harm's Lexus sat quietly off to one side, half-covered by a tarp, near a receiving dock door.

Harm looked at the row of identical side rooms and chose a door without hesitating. Mac followed him inside, and her stomach lurched at the sight of the dirty cot, tiny spatters of blood staining the threadbare mattress. Handcuffs dangled ominously from the sides and foot of the cot. In one corner of the room, a Navy-issue sea bag sat, its contents obviously ransacked more than once.

This was where they kept him. Where they held him down, pumped drug after drug into his body, and demanded information that he never really had.

"Do you remember much of it?" she asked him.

His eyes at that moment reflected the recent calm of the sea just after a powerful storm. "I remember enough." He gestured at the handcuffs. "They only used those while they were doing the injections. I could move the rest of the time. I tried to keep moving, doing push-ups and whatever I could, until the drugs got too bad for me to focus."

"You focused on getting out, though."

Harm stepped toward the door and showed her the chewed-up doorframe. Just around the plate where the bolt was to slide into place, the frame had been painstakingly deformed one strike at a time, allowing the bolt to slip free.

Mac leaned in to study the damage. "It looks like somebody took a chisel to it."

Harm held up his belt buckle, two corners noticeably flattened. "I don't have a good grasp on how long it took, but it was a while. Hours, at least."

She shook her head, amazed all over again. "Nice work, sailor."

His response was not quite a smile, but rather a look of acceptance. This place held no further secrets from him. They gathered up his few belongings and moved out into the main room again. Harm crossed the floor to pull the tarp off his SUV, then opened a door and began to hunt around in the backseat.

"Something missing?" Mac inquired.

"I don't know ... just a minute." Reaching under the seats, he came up with something that stole his partner's breath.

Two roses, long since dried, cracked petals still clinging to their blossoms. From his expression, she could see that his memory on this particular point was crystal-clear.

"I guess it's a little late for these," he said, offering a half-smile.

Mac stepped forward to trace the fragile petals with cautious fingers. "I didn't think you remembered anything about that night - about where you were going, or why."

"I didn't, at first. But after a while, I started to remember - feelings, mostly ... things that had helped me hold on when I thought I might be losing my grip."

Her heart quickened as she recognized the sincerity in his words. "What kinds of things?" she whispered.

"You," he said simply. "Just you. I swear to God, Mac, all I wanted was to get back to my life and find you somehow."

Blinking back tears, she took the roses out of his hand and laid them carefully on the seat. In the same motion, she reached for his hand, clutching it to her as if he might vanish again at any moment. "That's pretty much what I kept hoping for, too," she admitted.

Her response seemed to clear away some of the clouds that had been darkening his features. He stepped closer, still not quite relaxed. "Do you think there's a way we can get back to where we were the night all this started?" he asked quietly. "Not to ignore everything that's happened, but - in terms of us?"

"I guess that depends on where exactly we were," she answered, reasonably confident now but still seeking confirmation. "That night, I was excited about the prospect of beginning something new with my best friend in the world. I still am. What about you?"

He didn't reply right away, simply watching her with a faintly awed expression.

"Harm?"

"Sorry. I was just thinking." He shook his head, almost in disbelief. "Five weeks ago, I was already convinced that I was in love with you, and the only thing left to do was to prove it to you. I guess I thought that was the way I'd always feel - I didn't realize that something so

certain could actually change. But after everything that's happened, and the way you've been here ... honest to God, I think I love you even more now than I did then."

With that simple, sincere confession, the last wall crumbled, and Sarah Mackenzie wept from the sheer force of its release. She fell against him, and his arms instinctively tightened around her as large teardrops soaked into his shirt.

"Hey," he said lamely, somewhat taken aback. "That, um, doesn't sound like the happy reaction I was hoping for."

"No, it's mostly happy," she sniffled against his chest. "It's mostly ecstatic, actually. It's just - that was the most wonderful, amazing thing I ever could have hoped to hear cross your lips, and I almost lost you before you had a chance to say it!"

"I know," he whispered, his breath brushing her ear, and if she'd chosen that moment to look up, she would have found his eyes as bright as hers. "But that's over, and I don't want to dwell on it. I want ... ah, hell. Mac, I'm not in any shape to promise you much of anything right now - what I mean is, things are probably going to be tough while I work through this. I don't want to ask for too much from you. I don't want things to be less than equal between us, but I don't want to wait any longer, either."

"We won't," she promised, lifting her head to meet his gaze. "We've always been able to lean on each other in the past. If there are times when you have to lean more, then do it. I want you to, because I love you, too. I guess ... I guess I want you to need me."

"I do. More than anything."

With a silent cry of joy, she smiled up at him. "Likewise," she said softly. "So let's not look back anymore. Not today. Let's start something instead."

His agreement was provided in the form of a deep, longing kiss that set her spinning.

"Lead the way."

*** THE END ***